

THE TWILIGHT ZONE

Episode 503: "NIGHTMARE AT 20,000 FEET"

By

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ACT ONE

FADE IN

on an AIRPLANE CABIN, one dark and stormy night in the early 1960s. Airplane and crowd NOISE drowns out much of the conversation between the passengers getting on the plane and the blonde, clipboard-carrying STEWARDESS who checks their boarding passes. A uniformed policeman, possibly a sheriff, enters and the stewardess sees that he's wearing a gun on his hip, so he shows her his badge as well as his boarding pass.

STEWARDESS

All right. Fine. Enjoy your flight.

The policeman heads for his seat. One passenger later, an attractive couple enter. This is BOB and JULIA WILSON. Bob gives the plane an apprehensive look while showing their passes to the stewardess. She clears them to go through.

There's no assigned seating so Julia, leading the way, points out a couple of likely seats to Bob.

JULIA

Those all right?

BOB

Yeah. Be fine.

(off Julia's coat)

Here, give me that.

Bob stows their coats in the overhead bin. Bob and Julia start to sit -- Julia on the aisle, Bob by the window.

JULIA

(suddenly concerned)

Do you want me to sit next to the window?

BOB

(reassuring)

No.

They sit.

BOB

I'm fine. I can sit--

Bob sees that he's seated by the auxiliary exit and tenses up.

JULIA

Honey, what is it? The emergency window? You want to move?

BOB

No, no, no. Doesn't matter. What's the difference where I sit? It's not the seat. It's the airplane.

Bob takes out a pack of cigarettes and starts to light up. Julia notices the non-smoking sign is lit.

JULIA

Honey, don't smoke that now. Wait till the plane takes off.

BOB

(puts the cigarette away)

I'm not acting much like a cured man, am I?

JULIA

Honey, you are cured. Doctor Martin wouldn't let you fly if you weren't, would he?

BOB

I suppose not.

JULIA

(takes his arm)

I mean if you weren't well, Doctor Martin just wouldn't let you fly all the way back home. It's just that simple.

BOB

Well, you make it sound simple, anyway.

JULIA

It is, Bob.

BOB

Yeah. Here I am hogging the whole stage and you're so tired. I've missed you... these last six months.

Bob kisses Julia. They hold hands.

JULIA

It's all over now, Bob. And mama's taking you home.

Julia steals a kiss.

BOB

It must have been awful for you. Taking care of the kids. Bearing the full responsibility.

JULIA

Well, everything is still intact.

BOB

Except me.

The FLIGHT ENGINEER gets ready to shut the cabin door.

JULIA

Now, Bob, I'm not going to let --

The loud THUMP of the cabin door slamming shut startles Bob.

FLIGHT ENGINEER

(on the phone to the cockpit)

Cabin door secured.

JULIA

(off Bob's jumpiness)

What?

BOB

Just a little... abject cowardice, that's all. I'm gonna be all right. Had a teensy weensy breakdown. Now, I'm cured. Understanding -- it's wonderful.

(MORE)

BOB (CONT'D)

It isn't the airplane at
all. Overtension and overanxiety due
to underconfidence.

The cabin lights dim as the stewardess makes a final walk
down the aisle before take-off.

STEWARDESS

(to Bob)

Seat belt, sir.

A very nervous Bob buckles himself. He glances around
uncertainly, turns on the little lights above his seat,
offers a smile to Julia, and tries to stay calm.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

Portrait of a frightened man: Mr.
Robert Wilson, thirty-seven, husband,
father, and salesman on sick leave.
Mr. Wilson has just been discharged
from a sanitarium where he spent the
last six months recovering from a
nervous breakdown, the onset of which
took place on an evening not
dissimilar to this one, on an airliner
very much like the one in which Mr.
Wilson is about to be flown home...

A FAST PAN to the omniscient NARRATOR, in suit and tie,
standing beneath an airport direction sign that reads:

"TERMINAL --->"

NARRATOR

...the difference being that, on
that evening half a year ago, Mr.
Wilson's flight was terminated by
the onslaught of his mental breakdown.
Tonight, he's traveling all the way
to his appointed destination which,
contrary to Mr. Wilson's plan, happens
to be in the darkest corner of the
Twilight Zone.

FADE OUT

FADE IN

on the unlit NO SMOKING and FASTEN SEAT BELT signs at the front of the airplane's CABIN. The seat belt sign pops on just as the stewardess enters through the cockpit door just beneath them. She closes the door behind her and smiles at a few of the passengers, working her way up the aisle, eyeing everyone carefully.

STEWARDESS
(to a passenger)
Fasten your seat belt, sir.

The stewardess approaches Bob and Julia.

STEWARDESS
(to a Bob)
Fasten your seat belt, sir.

Bob starts to fasten his seat belt.

CUT TO:

The PLANE flying through dark storm clouds -- lots of wind and rain and lightning and THUNDER.

CUT TO:

The CABIN where Bob tries to fasten Julia's seat belt while she sleeps, only to wake her.

BOB
Sorry, darling. Go back to sleep.

JULIA
I shouldn't've taken that sleeping pill. I should stay awake with you.

BOB
No, no, I don't want you to, sweetheart. Go back to sleep. I'm all right.

JULIA

Can't you sleep?

BOB

I will. Don't worry about me.

JULIA

Okay.

Julia pulls her jacket over her and nods off while Bob turns to his newspaper. He glances out the window which directly overlooks the wing of the plane. It's dark and rainy but two prop engines are clearly visible. As Bob continues to stare, he spots something besides wind-swept rainwater moving on the wing. It looks like the figure of a man. An ape-like man skulking slowly across the wing. The wind ought to have blown this creature away, but it easily stands upright, unaffected by the weather or the airspeed.

Bob is wild-eyed in disbelief. He turns to Julia twice, but she's asleep. He looks out the window. The creature squats and seems to be staring back at him, sort of taking an interest in Bob, the way a man might take an interest in an animal locked up in a cage at the zoo. An alarmed Bob starts looking around for the stewardess. She's nowhere to be seen.

Bob frantically pushes the button above his seat to summon her. He stops only to check that the creature on the wing is still there. It is. It watches Bob with curiosity. The stewardess enters the cabin and Bob beckons to her.

BOB

Here. Quickly!

STEWARDESS

May I help you?

BOB

There's a man out there!

STEWARDESS

What?

BOB

Look, look, he's crawling on--

Bob turns back to the window. The creature is gone. Bob's eyes widen. He stares out the window for a long moment and then, turns apologetically to the stewardess just as Julia wakes up.

BOB

Sorry. It must have been...

JULIA

Bob? What is it?

STEWARDESS

(to Julia)

Oh, it's nothing, Mrs. Wilson.

(to Bob)

Can I get you anything?

BOB

A glass of water.

STEWARDESS

Surely.

The stewardess departs. Julia rubs her eyes. Bob stares out the window and tries to come to grips with what he's just seen.

JULIA

Something wrong?

BOB

No. I-I thought I saw something out there.

JULIA

What?

Bob realizes he can't tell her. She'll think he's cracking up. He shakes his head.

BOB

Nothing.

Bob closes the window's curtain to block his view of the wing.

BOB

I guess I need a little sleep.

JULIA
Are you all right?

BOB
Yeah, fine.

JULIA
(checks her watch)
Don't you think you ought to take a
sleeping pill now?

BOB
(rubs his eyes)
Yeah, I-I'll take one of those, uh...

Julia digs the pills out of her purse as the stewardess arrives with a paper cup of water. Bob lets out his breath, trying to compose himself.

STEWARDESS
Here you are.

BOB
Thank you.

STEWARDESS
You're welcome. Can I get you a
blanket?

BOB
No.
(to Julia)
Honey?

Julia hands Bob the sleeping pills.

JULIA
(to the stewardess)
Oh, no thanks.

The stewardess leaves. Bob swallows the pill and the entire cup of water.

CUT TO:

The PLANE flying through dark storm clouds -- more wind and rain and lightning and THUNDER.

CUT TO:

The airplane's CABIN, a little later, where Julia is ready to go back to sleep.

JULIA

You'll be all right now?

BOB

Yeah, fine.

JULIA

Will you wake me if you need me?

BOB

I will.

Julia shuts her eyes and dozes off. Bob takes a deep breath and shuts his eyes. But they don't stay shut. The thing on the wing is still bothering him. He glances at Julia. Seeing that she's asleep, Bob hesitantly lifts his hand to the window curtain. But he immediately lowers it, afraid of what he might see on the other side. After a long moment, he comes to a decision. Very slowly, he reaches for the curtain. Abruptly, he whips the curtain away to reveal THE CREATURE'S HIDEOUS FACE pressed against the glass, staring at Bob curiously. Bob freaks. He shuts his eyes, rears his head back, opens his mouth, and starts whispering to himself.

BOB

It isn't there. It isn't there.

Bob opens his eyes but does not look at the window.

BOB

(weakly, to Julia)

Honey? Would you wake up, honey?

But she's fast asleep. Bob sees the creature hasn't moved. Panicking, Bob sees the stewardess.

BOB

(gestures to the stewardess)

Quickly!

While Bob turns to the stewardess, the creature nonchalantly flies straight up and out of view. The

stewardess arrives just as Bob turns back to the window.

STEWARDESS

Yes, Mr. Wilson?

Bob doesn't respond. He's staring out the window at the empty wing.

STEWARDESS

Can I help you, Mr. Wilson?

Bob tries to regain his composure.

BOB

Are we going into a storm?

STEWARDESS

(smiles)

Just a small one. Nothing to worry about.

The stewardess walks off. Bob shuts his eyes and tries to get a grip.

BOB

(to Julia)

Honey? Would you wake up please, honey?

As he says this, the creature flies down to the wing and lands just behind one of the engines. Bob sees it as it lands and their eyes meet. Bob watches and winces as the creature saunters forward, sits casually astride an engine, and pokes curiously at the rapidly spinning propellers with its fingers.

The creature backs away from the propellers and begins to pry up a cowling plate that covers the engine. Bob stares in horror as the creature easily pulls up the metal plate to reveal the hot, glowing engine underneath. As it does so, the creature shoots Bob a glance.

FADE OUT

on a terrified Bob mouthing the word "No."

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

FADE IN

on the PLANE flying through dark storm clouds -- still more wind and rain and lightning and THUNDER.

CUT TO:

Bob trying to awaken Julia.

BOB
Honey... Julia, wake up.

Julia awakes with a start.

JULIA
What?

Bob turns to the window just in time to see the creature take off into the air. Julia, of course, fails to see anything.

JULIA
What are you looking at? Bob? Is it the storm? Does it bother you?

BOB
No. Honey, you remember what I told you before about seeing something outside?

JULIA
Yes.

BOB
Julia, there's a man out there.

Julia gives Bob a blank, uncomprehending look. THUNDER roars.

BOB
I-I don't mean a man, I mean... I don't know what I mean. I mean, maybe a... what'd they call them during the war? You know, the p-pilots? Gremlins! Gremlins. You remember the stories of the...

Julia just stares at him.

BOB

Julia, don't look at me like that.

JULIA

Bob...

BOB

I am not imagining it. I'm not
imagining it. He's out there.

Julia glances at the window.

BOB

Don't look. He's not there now. He...

(realizes all too well how
crazy this sounds)

He jumps away whenever anyone might
see him. Except me. Honey, he's there.
I realize what this sounds like. Do
I look insane?

JULIA

No, darling, no.

BOB

I know I had a mental breakdown. I
know I had it in an airplane. I know
it looks to you as if the same thing's
happening again, but it isn't. I'm
sure it isn't. Look, the reason I'm
telling you this... isn't just to
worry you. You notice I didn't tell
you before.

JULIA

Well, I want you to tell me.

BOB

I didn't tell you before because I
wasn't sure whether it was real or
not. But I am sure now. It is real.
There's a man out there. Or a ... a
gremlin, or... whatever it...

(almost laughs)

(MORE)

BOB (CONT'D)

If I described him to you, you'd really think I was gone.

JULIA

(already thinks he's gone)
No, darling, it's all right. It's all right.

BOB

Julia, I know your intentions are good. I know you love me. And sympathize with me. But don't patronize me. I am not insane.

JULIA

Did I say --?

BOB

Does it have to be said? It's in your face, in your--Look, for the last time, that creature's out there. And the reason I'm telling you is, he's starting to tamper with one of the engines. Look, look. Look. Think anything you want. Think I belong in a straitjacket, if it pleases you.

JULIA

If it pleases me!?

BOB

No, no, I-I-I-I didn't mean that. What I mean is, whatever you think of me--that I'm losing my mind, anything -- all I'm asking you to do is to tell the pilots what I've said. Ask them to keep an eye on the wings. If they see nothing... All right. All right, then I'll... commit myself. But if they do...

Julia tries very hard not to look at Bob as if he were a madman.

BOB

Won't you even allow the possibility--?

JULIA

I'll tell them.

BOB

I know it's asking a lot. I-- I-i-
it's like asking you to... advertise
your marriage to a lunatic.

JULIA

No, I'll tell them. You just sit
tight and I'll go tell them.

Julia unbuckles her seat, rises, heads down the aisle to the cockpit door, and urgently KNOCKS. The stewardess rushes to her from the rear of the plane.

STEWARDESS

Mrs. Wilson, what's the problem? May
I help you?

JULIA

Oh-oh, yes, my husband wants to see
the flight engineer.

STEWARDESS

All right, if you'll stay right here,
I'll have him see you.

JULIA

Oh, thank you, it's very important.

Still in his seat, Bob glances out the window just as the gremlin lands on the wing.

JULIA

(to the stewardess)

Hurry, please.

Bob watches the creature as it reaches to pry up the cowling plate again.

BOB

(to Julia)

Hurry! Hurry!

The flight engineer stands talking with Julia at the cockpit door. He rushes over to Bob. Julia follows.

BOB
(to the flight engineer)
He's out there!

FLIGHT ENGINEER
What's going on?

BOB
He's pulling up one of the cowling
plates.

FLIGHT ENGINEER
He?

BOB
Didn't my wife--? There's a man out
there!

FLIGHT ENGINEER
Listen, keep your voice down.

BOB
I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I-I-I--

FLIGHT ENGINEER
I don't know what's going on here.

BOB
Will you look?

FLIGHT ENGINEER
Mr. Wilson, I'm warning you.

BOB
Will you please look? In the name of --

Bob, Julia and the flight engineer all peer out the window at the empty wing. The cowling plate appears untouched. A long pause.

FLIGHT ENGINEER
Well?

BOB
Oh, now wait a minute. I saw him
pull that plate up....

Julia and the flight engineer just look at Bob with blank

stares.

BOB

(insistent)

I said, I saw him pull that plate
up.

FLIGHT ENGINEER

Mr. Wilson, please. All right, you
saw him, but there are other people
aboard. We mustn't alarm them.

BOB

(surprised)

You mean you've seen him too?

FLIGHT ENGINEER

Of course we have. But we don't want
to frighten the passengers. You can
understand that?

BOB

Of course...

(bob suddenly realizes he's
being humored)

I understand.

FLIGHT ENGINEER

Now, the thing we gotta remember...

BOB

(darkly)

You can stop now.

JULIA

Bob!

FLIGHT ENGINEER

Sir...

BOB

Get out of here.

FLIGHT ENGINEER

Mr. Wilson...

BOB

I said, you can stop.

JULIA
Honey, what is it?

BOB
(turns away from them)
I won't say another word. I'll see
us crash first.

JULIA
Bob!

FLIGHT ENGINEER
Mr. Wilson, try to understand our
position.

JULIA
Honey, I'll be right back.

Julia and the flight engineer head to the back of the
plane, leaving Bob to bang his fists into his temples.

BOB
(whispers to himself)
He did pull it up. He did.

In the rear of the cabin, the flight engineer hands Julia
some pills--sedatives. Meanwhile, Bob watches as, once
again, the gremlin pulls up the cowling plate. Bob looks
back at Julia, realizes he can't say anything, and pounds
his fist into his chair. Julia starts to walk back down the
aisle to Bob. Bob turns back to the window to see the
gremlin, on cue, playfully stick out its arms and fly away.
Julia sits down next to Bob.

JULIA
Honey, I was going to tell them when
you--

BOB
Were you?

Julia hands Bob the sedative and a cup of water.

BOB
For me?

JULIA
Please, Bob.

Bob puts the pill in his mouth and drinks the water.

JULIA

You'll sleep--you'll sleep now,
darling. Hm?

BOB

Sure.

The two of them lean back in their chairs and an uneasy silence ensues. Bob closes his eyes. A deeply concerned Julia gazes at him. The flight engineer makes his way down the aisle and confers with the stewardess.

FLIGHT ENGINEER

Oh, boy.

STEWARDESS

What'd you do? Get his wife to give
him one of those pills?

FLIGHT ENGINEER

He'll be out for hours.

STEWARDESS

Well, I hope so, the way the storm's
coming up.

FLIGHT ENGINEER

Don't worry, Betty, everything's
fine.

STEWARDESS

I hope so.

The stewardess heads for the rear. The flight engineer heads for the cockpit. Julia sleeps. Bob sleeps. Ah, but he only appears to sleep. He opens his eyes and looks out the window.

Nothing. He puts his hand to his mouth and removes the unswallowed sedative from his cheek -- just as the gremlin flies down to the wing.

Bob reacts by throwing the sedative on the floor in disgust.

The gremlin immediately pries up the cowling plate and

starts tinkering with the engine. Bob looks around the cabin helplessly. Suddenly, his eye falls on the holstered gun of the policeman, who sleeps in an aisle seat, a few rows behind Bob.

Bob formulates a plan. He unbuckles his seat belt, rises, and slowly walks down the aisle toward the sleeping policeman, clearly intending to steal the gun. But before Bob can reach the seat, the policeman shifts his arm, covering the holster. Bob backs off, turns, and pulls out his pack of cigarettes. The policeman moves his arm off the gun and Bob makes his move. Pretending to drop the cigarettes in the aisle next to the policeman, Bob kneels down and recovers the pack, then gently lifts the gun out of the holster, and hides it in his jacket.

Quickly returning to his seat, Bob draws the gun, and then stops. The gremlin continues its interminable sabotage operation on the engine. Bob realizes he can't shoot through the plane window. He sees the auxiliary exit handle and knows he must open the door to get a clear shot. He pockets the weapon and buckles himself in. He is about to draw the gun when he thinks of Julia's safety.

BOB

Honey? Honey, would you get me a glass of water, please?

Julia wakes up with a start, surprised to find Bob wide awake.

BOB

A glass of water. Please? Hurry.

Without a word, a confused Julia heads for the rear of the plane and talks with the stewardess. Seeing that she's safely in the rear of the plane, Bob draws the gun, releases its safety catch, removes the plastic guard from the auxiliary exit handle, takes one last look around, notes the location of the gremlin--still leaning over the engine--and, steeling himself, releases the emergency door.

The door flies off instantly and Bob is nearly sucked out, his seat belt barely securing him to the plane. Julia, the stewardess, and everybody else in the cabin start SCREAMING.

Bob, in excruciating pain--half in his seat and halfway out the door--is pressed against the outside of the airplane by the tremendous wind, trying to get a two-fisted grip on the gun and bring it to bear on the gremlin. The startled creature stands a few feet away and starts walking toward Bob. Slowly, Bob struggles to aim the weapon. The creature is closing in. With a Herculean effort, Bob aims and fires, emptying the gun into the gremlin. It topples backward onto the wing.

After the sixth shot, Bob lets go of the gun and SCREAMS.

CUT TO:

The inside of the nearly empty CABIN, sometime later that night. All is quiet. The policeman puts his hat on. A peaceful, smiling Bob, straitjacketed and strapped to a stretcher, is carried down the aisle and out of the plane by two attendants.

CUT TO:

An airport RUNWAY at night, seconds later. The plane is on the ground. The storm is over. The policeman silently leads the stretcher-bearers and Julia off the plane to a waiting ambulance and police car. The police RADIO chatters. The flight engineer and the stewardess watch the preparations to load Bob into the ambulance.

FLIGHT ENGINEER

(to the stewardess)

Nuttiest way of trying to commit
suicide I've ever heard of.

Julia stands over the stretcher, comforting Bob.

JULIA

(to Bob)

It's all right now, darling.

A triumphant Bob struggles to sit upright.

BOB

I know. But I'm the only one who
does know... right now.

Tired but happy, Bob lies back down. The attendants lift

him into the ambulance.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

The flight of Mr. Robert Wilson has ended now, a flight not only from point A to point B, but also from the fear of recurring mental breakdown. Mr. Wilson has that fear no longer...

Slow PAN from the ambulance to the plane's wing, where the pried-up cowling plate is plainly visible.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

...though, for the moment, he is, as he has said, alone in this assurance. Happily, his conviction will not remain isolated too much longer, for happily, tangible manifestation is very often left as evidence of trespass, even from so intangible a quarter as the Twilight Zone.

FADE OUT