

BAT 29167

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Like a giant bat the transatlantic plane flew through the night, using sensitive antennas to find its way. There was no beauty of flight, only a boiling turbulence that obliterated the stars high above and the sea down below. Red, white and green lights sought hopelessly to pierce the murk, blinking on and off. The four straining engines spoke loudly in defiance of the elements as driving rain pelted the plane's aluminum skin.

The wind grew stronger, spewing rain with explosive force against glass and metal. The engines labored a little more and the night grew blacker still. Suddenly the plane lurched, its wings slicing thickly through the heavy air. It righted itself and for a moment more held a steady course, then it shuddered again as if the weight of the air mass had become too great to bear. The pitch of its propellers changed, urgently straining, pounding, seeking to thrust the plane forward and upward.

The storm fought back viciously, changing rain to sleet and hail, pummeling the plane with boiling white ice and seeking to beat it down. Beneath this attack the plane was forced to descend. In the lower air there was relief from the icy blows.

But the storm did not leave it alone for long. Lightning stabbed the sky and shattered the blackness. Suddenly the plane lurched again. It was bathed in a weird light and there seemed to be a ball of fire on its nose. Propellers became whirling wheels of green vapor. What seemed like huge balloons of red, blue and green exploded everywhere in the heavens, and storm clouds took on ever-changing, fiery shapes.

Directly in the center of this beautiful but frightening spectral light the plane flew unharmed. It could now be seen clearly and the name on its side read BERMUDA ATLANTIC TRANSPORT. On its vertical tail fin were the large initials:

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There was nothing soft about this plane or the men flying it. Together they'd made one hundred and twenty-six trips across the South Atlantic—from Portugal to the Cape Verde Islands, on to Trinidad, Puerto Rico, Bermuda and then, if the cargo payload warranted it, to New York.

The red linoleum floor of the flight deck heaved beneath the seats of the crew and the captain said, "A couple more jolts like the last one and we'll end up in the drink for sure." His eyes didn't leave the shaking instrument panel with its blurred figures.

Strapped in the seat to the captain's right was the copilot, his hands, too, on the control yoke trying to keep the plane steady. "I can take jolts better than the fire," he said. "I don't like it. I never did."

"Harmless. If all we had to worry about was St. Elmo's fire we'd be sitting fine."

"I know, but I still don't like it," the copilot said. "But, baby, just as long as the fans keep turning ..." He didn't finish his sentence, nor did he bother to look in the direction of the propellers. There was nothing on the other side of the windows anyway but swirling darkness. The fire—a discharge of electricity combined with sleeting rain—was gone.

"She won't let us down," the captain said confidently. "Not this girl." He patted the leather crash pad above the panel. "We've been going steady too long."

For a moment the propellers bit smoothly into the night air and the plane leveled off. The needles no longer danced crazily on the green dials so the captain took one hand at a time off the control wheel and wiped his palms dry. An airman expected all kinds of weather, but nothing like this, the captain thought, without some briefing before departure. The forecaster in the Cape Verde weather room had prophesied a little light rain, headwinds of forty miles on the nose and Trinidad clear. Nothing out of the ordinary; in fact it was quite a good forecast for the South Atlantic at this time of year. The captain had known weathermen to be wrong before but never so completely wrong as *this* one!

The plane plunged down sickeningly into an air pocket. Two pairs of hands sought urgently to pull the nose up again. Winds screamed through the antennas, propellers groaned and there was a grinding jolt as the plane hit a lower cloud bank before leveling off again.

The captain worked the controls, straining to compensate for the swirling winds. He eyed the gauges, especially the altimeter. On his next trip he'd walk into the Cape Verde weather room and tell that forecaster exactly what he thought of him! But now all he could do was to ride out this storm.

The copilot worked as hard as the captain. He advanced the throttles, keeping all four engines equal in power. "*Fans, keep turning,*" he pleaded, "*keep turning!*" They were burning over two hundred gallons of gasoline an hour. He looked at the gyrocompass, its spinning needle turning in every direction but toward their initial course. He took a second more to check the time on the black-faced panel clock. How much gas was left? And where were they anyway? It was their navigator's job to know, but the copilot was too busy to turn to him now and ask. As close as he could figure it they had fuel for about two more hours.

Suddenly the hail and lightning came on again, beating and burning the aluminum skin.

The captain's legs were numb from working the worn rubber pedals; his eyes were bloodshot from the constant strain of watching the white dancing needles on the

panel; his insides groaned from the beating they were taking on this crazy, bouncing deck; and his arms felt like pieces of lead. But at least the plane was still in the air.

He pushed the nose down as engines screamed and rain whipped the windshield in a thunderous splattering of pellets. Since there was no top to this boiling mess, he'd try below again. His eyes, slits now, remained on the instruments as he ordered his copilot, "Try to raise someone again. If we don't get help soon, we'll be going for a swim."

The copilot shook his head sadly. "No night for swimming," he answered with attempted humor. The radio wires were already overheated from use and their acrid odor filled the deck, more overpowering even than the smell of high-octane gas, hydraulic oil, metal, leather and the sweat of the crew's bodies.

The copilot pressed the receivers against his ears and reached for the microphone. Twisting the dials angrily, he channeled the transmitter to route frequency, all the while knowing it would do no good. The storm static bit into his earphones. He pressed his microphone and began calling:

"MAY DAY, MAY DAY, MAY DAY. This is Aircraft BAT 29167, Aircraft BAT 29167, Aircraft BAT 29167. We've run out of communications and are being swept by hurricane winds. Exact position unknown. Last position taken at 2200 was 11-14 north, 45-10 west. MAY DAY, MAY DAY, MAY DAY. Come in if you hear us. MAY DAY, MAY DAY, MAY DAY ..."

There was nothing in his earphones but static. Finally he twisted in his seat and shot a question at the navigator, who was sitting directly behind the captain. "You got any better idea where we are?"

The navigator met the copilot's eyes. "As close as I can figure it we're going nowhere fast—just around and around."

"Funny," the copilot said bitterly, turning back to his radio and cutting off the switch.

No, not funny at all, the navigator thought. And I didn't mean it to be, either. We've been in jams before but none as bad as this one. Our radio is out so we're deaf as well as blind. Maybe they're answering us but we can't hear them.

He sat strapped to his stool before his navigation table. Beneath the dim light he examined his graph of position reports. There was a steady line of small *x*'s up to the hour 2200, and then the storm had come, masking the stars with a suddenness he'd never seen equaled in all his years of flying. It had been the fastest-dropping curtain in the world. The captain had tried to get on top but because the plane wasn't pressurized, he couldn't go beyond 10,000 feet with safety and it was as thick up there as any other place.

Taped on the navigator's board beside the plotted graph were his other papers, the weather forecast and wind analysis. How could the Cape Verde forecaster have been so far off? he wondered. How could anyone have overlooked the pressures that brewed the swirling, roaring air masses of a hurricane? For that's what they were

flying through; there was no doubt about it. He listened to the beating, blustering winds and rain and wondered what name the U.S. Weather Bureau had given the storm.

A workhorse like their plane was made to ride out even hurricanes but those who guided it needed to know where they were. The navigator looked up at the astrodome of curved Plexiglas above his head. Through it he might have sighted the stars, taking a celestial fix to obtain their exact position. That is, if there were stars to sight. But there were none tonight. And without a radio he couldn't reach the transmitters of other planes and ships to take bearings upon. The failure of the radio was as strange and unpredictable as the storm itself, but such things *did* happen. Either the receiver wasn't functioning or the storm was making reception impossible.

Only loran equipment—long-range navigation equipment—could have helped him now to determine their position on his graph. But the company had decided it was too expensive to install, “unnecessary” was the word they used, pointing out that their planes had flown this route so many times they could almost fly it alone. The company operated on a very stringent economy program, as did most nonscheduled airlines. It had to make every ounce of payload count. The navigator knew their slogan by heart: *Economize. Save money. Save equipment. Save men.* That's why they had no separate radio operator, the job of communications being done by the copilot and the navigator. That's why they were depending upon radio telephone instead of telegraph. That's why they had no loran. That's why they were in such a jam!

Desperately the navigator bent over his board again and studied his plotted graph of position reports. He could make only a stab at figuring out their present position, and every minute he worked, another four miles of space swept by. They'd been in the air sixteen hours and fifteen minutes. He tracked as well as he could the approximate distance covered against fuel remaining and consumed. Finally he put down another small x two hundred miles off the Windward Islands of the Lesser Antilles. That was not close enough but was the best he could do under the circumstances. He decided to keep the information to himself for the time being. No one would have believed him anyway. The spot he had marked was much too far off their scheduled course.

Suddenly the captain asked him, “How much fuel do you figure we have left?”

“Enough for another hour.”

There was a greater rush of air through the ventilators, and they felt the cold touch of the storm.

“Then you'd better tell our passengers what to expect if we don't find some place to land in that time,” the captain said.

“I don't have to,” the navigator replied grimly. “I was with them a while ago. They're sweating it out. One old guy especially. He's had a death-grip on his seat since takeoff, when there wasn't a ripple in the air.”

“Get the life jackets on them anyway. Brief 'em what to do if we ditch.”

“And use your most professional manner,” the copilot joined in, his voice high and strained despite his attempt to be funny. “No dramatics. As the operations manual says, we must instill confidence in the passengers and make ’em believe that the crew knows exactly what’s to be done. Don’t ever let ’em know we’re as scared as they are. It’d never do.”

“That’s enough,” the captain ordered angrily. The soft pink and yellow lights of the flight deck disclosed the beads of perspiration on his forehead. “Stay back there with them,” he told the navigator. “When I flash on the NO SMOKING sign we’ll be headed for the water. Brace yourself and hang on for good then.”

The navigator unbuckled his seat belt and left his stool, the floor heaving beneath his feet. He went as far as the black curtain separating the deck from the crew cabin before turning around. “I—I guess we can’t do anything about our cargo,” he said.

The captain laughed grimly, and when he spoke his eyes were still glued to the instrument panel. “You’ve got a big heart for the company, worrying about our payload when you might be going for a swim yourself.”

“I wasn’t thinking about the freight. It’s the rest....”

“We can’t do anything for sixteen thousand pounds of horses,” the captain said. “They don’t make life jackets that big.”

The navigator parted the curtain. “I guess not,” he answered, “but there’s one horse in particular a lot of people are going to miss. His name is the Black and I guess he’s about the most famous horse in the world....”

NIGHTMARE

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The crew cabin on the other side of the black curtain was small, functional and very noisy since the pounding engines were only a few feet away. A coffee pot and dishes clattered in the galley and a piece of soap slithered in the wash basin. Opposite the galley were two bunks, empty except for strewn uniform caps, ties and jackets. Strapped overhead was a rolled, uninflated life raft and in a compartment beside it were three yellow life jackets.

A door opened into the passenger cabin, where most of the seats had been removed to make room for cargo. There were no smells here of high-octane gasoline or burning radio wires. Instead there were odors of hay, grain, saddle soap and leather. The dome lights beat down garishly on strong wooden box stalls holding four broodmares, eight yearling fillies and a lone black stallion.