

WHAT GOES UP ...

a short play by Ken Kaye

Two characters

Ellen, 56, divorced 27 years ago

Daniel, 56, her ex-husband

[Note: as an option, air traffic control can be written into the script, to be read into a microphone off stage]

Stage: Two chairs side by side, facing the audience: the interior of Daniel's single-engine plane, en route from Boston to Chicago. Sunny. Ellen is wearing designer jeans, leather boots, a light pullover with a second one draped over her shoulders, a stylish pair of sunglasses. Daniel not stylish. Both wearing pilot headsets.

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Scene 1 (*of three, divided by gaps of a few seconds without exits or set changes*). *Background engine noise.*

DANIEL

Can you hear me?

ELLEN

Loud and clear.

DANIEL

Very good, you've got the lingo! For the next few minutes, I need to listen closely to Traffic Control. Your job is to hold this chart open in your lap for me. Once they clear us direct, we can talk and I'll tell you how it all works, if you're interested.

ELLEN

That's okay. I'll just enjoy the flight.

He is busy as the plane climbs through a thin scattered layer of clouds and he sets it on course.

DANIEL

(*responding to controller*) Level at six thousand. I have the eastbound traffic passing south of me. Niner Delta Romeo.

ELLEN

(*pause—two full seconds*) It was a wonderful visit, wasn't it?

DANIEL

(*responding to controller*) Climbing to eight thousand; Niner Delta Romeo. Did I say you could talk?

She pops her hand over her mouth.

Just kidding. You can talk, but stop whenever you hear a controller's voice. Yes, it was great. Especially since we'd skipped our own Commencement, thirty-four years ago.

ELLEN

You know, I always regretted that.

DANIEL

Skipping Commencement, or what we did instead?

ELLEN

Missing it. I don't regret marrying you, Daniel. And now we've finally had our Commencement.

DANIEL

He looked good in his robe with the hood and his earring, didn't he?

ELLEN

He looks great! I *like* the earring. They were cute together.

DANIEL

You know what impressed me? How relaxed he was about her meeting us.

ELLEN

Why shouldn't he be?

DANIEL

I don't know, divorced parents? Introducing both of us to her at the same time. He might find it awkward. I know he was as surprised as I was, that you'd cancel your return flight in favor of this adventure.

ELLEN

Well, I've never had an invitation to fly in a small plane before. The United flight is no treat.

DANIEL

And Bill was okay with it?

ELLEN

Yeah, he's flown in a friend's plane, he was glad I took the opportunity. What was Jason asking you, back at the airport?

DANIEL

If I was sure the weather was going to be fine and he wasn't risking the loss of both his parents.

ELLEN

And you told him ...?

DANIEL

I told him there was no chance of losing us. That's a good thing about airplane crashes. The pilot rarely lives to be accountable to anybody afterward. So he can promise anything.

ELLEN

Oh, how reassuring, Daniel! For God's sake.

DANIEL

See this red button on the back of my yoke? I squeeze it when I want the controller to hear me. You have one too, see? Don't touch it now, but that's how you could call for help in an emergency.

ELLEN

Yeah, right.

DANIEL

In case I get a heart attack and you need to land the plane.

ELLEN

Fat chance! If you're about to have a heart attack make sure you damn well land at the nearest airport *first*.

DANIEL

Would you like a tour of the cockpit?

ELLEN

(After shaking her head, thinking “Men!”) Okay, tell me what all the dials and gadgets do.

DANIEL

Airspeed, Pitch-and-bank, Altitude. This one shows our course and direction, and that one’s vertical speed. As I pull back on my yoke and turn a little to the right, this shows the pitch and the bank, this one confirms that we’re climbing at a gentle rate, and we’re heading five degrees north of my course. So I just gently roll back and ... there.¹

ELLEN

Oh.

DANIEL

Are you ready to take the controls?

ELLEN

No way.

DANIEL

Go ahead. Nothing can happen.

ELLEN

(ambivalent) What do I do?

DANIEL

Don’t worry about the instruments, just look out there. Now, see what happens when you turn the yoke to the left—to the right—push it forward—pull it back. Now you just keep the horizon level, and that big cloud in the distance, straight ahead of us.

ELLEN

I’m not flying into a cloud!

DANIEL

Don’t worry, it’s about fifty miles, your turn’ll be done before then.

ELLEN

My turn’s over now.

DANIEL

Nah, you’ve just started. See, it only takes small movements to raise or lower the nose, or roll to either side. Don’t grip it so tightly. *(taps her fingers and she loosens them a little)*
It’s easy, like a car, right?

ELLEN

Cars don’t go up and down. I can’t do this.

¹ Both their bodies move opposite to the direction of the yoke.

DANIEL

Sure you can. Don't overcorrect. Start easing off on the yoke before reaching the altitude you want. Look here, you're at eight thousand two hundred. We have to stay at eight thousand. Oops, now you're too low. See, you need to ...

ELLEN

All right, enough. That was fun. Take over!.

DANIEL

Don't you want to fly it awhile?

ELLEN

No. I can't keep it from going up and down.

DANIEL

Sure you can. You were just overcorrecting. You ...

ELLEN

Daniel! You fly it!

She takes her hands off the yoke, and the nose drops suddenly fifteen degrees.²

DANIEL

Okay (*correcting*). You have to give yourself a chance to ...

ELLEN

No I don't. It was fun, all right!? Thank you! Enough.

DANIEL

Okay, but watch me. I'm just holding it lightly with two fingers. I see the horizon has fallen, so just a gentle push and ...

ELLEN

Uh huh, fine.

DANIEL

And there we are, back to level flight.

ELLEN

Okay, okay.

Brief blackout, engine noise increase and cessation indicate the passage of time.

Scene 2. *When light and background engine noise return, Ellen is looking out her side window.*

So that's the Hudson?

DANIEL

It is. You might feel a little bump when we pass through these puffy clouds, just a minute or two at a time. That's all clouds are, really: unstable air. It's the air mass rippling across the Adirondacks.

² (They suddenly lean back, fifteen degrees.)

ELLEN

You sound like the Discovery Channel.
Did you always want to do this?

DANIEL

I took it up for business as much as anything. I've got customers in Wisconsin, Missouri, Michigan. Then it just became a passion.

ELLEN

How fast are we going?

DANIEL

About a hundred and eighty miles an hour.

ELLEN

Wow.

DANIEL

Those are the Finger Lakes. See where they get their name?

ELLEN

Yep. Does Sally sometimes take the wheel—the yoke?

DANIEL

Never been in the plane. She's afraid of small planes.

ELLEN

Oh. So did she not come because you were flying yourself? She could have flown commercial.

DANIEL

Jason didn't tell you?

ELLEN

What?

DANIEL

We're, uh, separated.

ELLEN

Oh, Daniel, I'm so sorry. No, he hasn't said a word about it. (*pauses*)
Are you in counseling?

He shakes his head.

You just, mutually, ...

DANIEL

She woke up one day and decided she didn't want to be married any more. I guess she waited until the girls were almost out of the nest.

ELLEN

I am sorry.

DANIEL

What goes up must come down.

ELLEN

Huh?

DANIEL

An aircraft in flight, like a baseball, or a bird is always in the process of falling out of the sky. The only question is when and where it will go to ground.

Ellen doesn't enjoy that picture. They sit in their own thoughts for awhile.

ELLEN

I hear you've been a great Dad to your girls.

DANIEL

Did Jason say that? Yeah, I'm an okay father.

ELLEN

You've got more Commencements ahead of you

Blackout, engine noise increase and cessation indicate the passage of time.

Scene 3. *Light and sound return.*

DANIEL

Want to try again? (*pointing to her yoke*)

ELLEN

No, thanks. Been there, done that.

DANIEL

You did fine. Ten more minutes and you'd have got it.

ELLEN

I need a more patient teacher.

DANIEL

You needed to be more patient with yourself.

ELLEN

(*patting him on the leg*) Never mind.

She pauses several seconds, thinking.

You know, I got over whatever bad feelings I had a long, long time ago. I think of you as a good fr... (*BUMP*) what was that?

DANIEL

Nothing, just a little bump in the air.

ELLEN

It felt like we ran over something.

DANIEL

We're just hitting some thermals from the sun warming the earth. Nothing to be concerned about.

*(BUMP) They sit in their own thoughts for awhile,
punctuated by two more bumps.*

ELLEN

(gamely suppressing her concern) You know what occurred to me when they were awarding the degrees the other day? Did you ever think of going back and finishing law school?

(BUMP)

DANIEL

Strange question.

ELLEN

I always thought you could've made something of yourself. Something on your own, I mean. If we'd stayed together—God forbid!—but I always thought, if we'd stayed together you probably wouldn't have gone into your Dad's business.

DANIEL

Thank you very much. Here I thought I did make something of myself. It's a five times bigger business since Dad retired.

(BUMP)

ELLEN

Now don't be touchy, I didn't mean you haven't done very well. But when you were in law school you wanted to be a professor, didn't you, or a judge?

DANIEL

What about yourself? You never used your Master's degree.

(BUMP)

ELLEN

Oh, excuse me. Is volunteer work less worthy of respect than paid work?

DANIEL

I didn't say that. Are you trying to pick a fight with me?

(BUMP)

ELLEN

I'm not the one picking a fight.

DANIEL

(joking) Now I remember why I left you.

ELLEN

You didn't!! I left you!

DANIEL

(to Air Traffic) Confirming, I have the traffic. Niner Delta Romeo.
(points at a plane passing above in the opposite direction) Lear jet.

ELLEN

I don't like this turbulence.

DANIEL

This isn't turbulence. This is just light chop. (*BUMP*) Okay, light to moderate.

ELLEN

This is when they tell the flight attendants to stop serving and everybody go back to your seats.

DANIEL

No-o-o, it isn't. Trust me, I've been in turbulence. Your head would be hitting the ceiling. But okay, stop serving drinks and tell the passengers to go back to their seats.

He grins at her, but she isn't amused. They fly for awhile without speaking.

ELLEN

Don't take it out on Sally.

DANIEL

Say again?

ELLEN

There was a lot of bitterness, of course, we were different people and you've grown a lot. It's not the same situation at all.

(BUMP)

DANIEL

What are you talking about?

ELLEN

Come on. You know.

DANIEL

Actually, I don't.

ELLEN

You know you pulled some stunts with Jason after the divorce, changing visitations at the last minute and stuff. All water over the dam, forgotten really, but I'm just saying, with Sally, it'll be easier for all of you if ...

DANIEL

Ellen, what are you talking about? I never did anything like that.

ELLEN

Like hell you didn't. Anyway, I'm sure you won't, now. If we hadn't been so immature when we married, we wouldn't have wound up being divorced.

DANIEL

Speak for yourself. Only one of us was immature.

ELLEN

Hah!

DANIEL

Change of subject, okay? From here you can see parts of three Great Lakes. Look way back to your right, you can still see the corner of Lake Ontario. That's Lake Huron up ahead on the right, and this is Lake Erie on my side.

(BUMP)

ELLEN

I'm not looking anywhere but straight ahead. Do you have a barf bag?

He reaches behind her seat and hands her a small package. She keeps it in her lap. Neither speaks, for an uncomfortable time.

Do you think they're serious about each other?

DANIEL

They'd both be crazy not to be. She's a sweetheart.

ELLEN

I just hope he dates other people this year. Who are more at his level.

DANIEL

You sound a little snobbish, Mom.

ELLEN

I am snobbish. It's taken me years to get comfortable with that fact. I was slumming when I fell for you.

DANIEL

Fuck you.

ELLEN

I'm teasing, Daniel. *(pats his leg again)*

(Pause) As a matter of fact, you're the one who was always judging me. But look, it's hardly a perfect match. He's an MBA. She has what? Two years of chef school?

DANIEL

I can't believe you're saying this. You're jealous of Melissa, aren't you? Of her youth, and having her life ahead of her ...

ELLEN

That's preposterous, Dan. You think I'd trade places with her? I wouldn't mind being twenty-six again with what I know now, but I wouldn't want to be naïve and self-absorbed.

DANIEL

She's neither naïve *nor* self-absorbed.

ELLEN

You wouldn't see it. *(upset; takes a breath)*

Wow. You can still manage to bring out the bitch in me.

DANIEL

I'd forgotten how much there was to bring out.

ELLEN

Fuck you! (*Whacks him with the package in her lap.*)

DANIEL

Hey!

Her blow made him push his yoke left and forward. The plane begins a slow roll to the left, descending. He deliberately jerks it back to the right, pitching up more sharply than necessary.

DANIEL

Asshole! You trying to goddamn kill us?

ELLEN

Ooh! (*Afraid momentarily, then realizes he did it on purpose.*)
You're the asshole.

Silence, other than the engine's drone. Daniel looks out the left window to hide his involuntary grin. How ridiculous, he thinks, elbow to elbow in a space smaller than a closet, calling each other names again, after all these years.

Now she is shaking. In rage? Crying? He looks at her face. She, too, is laughing:

Oh, God. No wonder Sally's dumping you.

DANIEL

You bitch! That's it—get out of my airplane. (*pretends to reach across her for the door handle*)

(*to Air Traffic Control*) Sorry sir, say again? (*giggling*) Copy, looking for the traffic. Niner Delta Romeo.

Barely gets his finger off the talk button before they both break into hysterical laughter, back now in the adolescent silliness and freedom where they first came together in college.

DANIEL

Look for the goddamn traffic, Ellen, will you?

She peers in the direction he pointed, lifting her sunglasses to wipe tears from her face.

ELLEN

Take me back to my husband, you jerk.

DANIEL

The poor bastard.

Their laughter echoes, over the roar of the engine, across the sky.

End of Play