

COMING DOWN

By Janet Colson

THE PLAYWRGHT SPEAKS: *I can see the influence of Thornton Wilder's The Long Christmas Dinner in the way I approached the timing of the play, but I wasn't thinking about that when I wrote it. Setting Coming Down on a plane allowed me to condense time and compress the trajectory of a relationship into ten minutes, from takeoff to landing. In the play I wanted to explore the dynamics of potential, possibility, rejection, and disappointment – and where the space between fantasy and reality are a matter of perspective. The play was performed at Goddard College as part of the Take Ten play festival. (Spacing is playwright's own.)*

Coming Down

A short play by janet ehrlich colson

Biggie Pollack – 40's, black, award-winning poet

Karen – 40's, white, not very successful actress and aspiring writer

On a Boeing 737 in seats 23 D and F (the aisle seat and the window seat on the right side of the plane). Karen enters, puts her carry-on in an overhead bin gets into the aisle seat, 23 D and buckles up. Biggie comes in shortly thereafter, finds his seat, 23 D, puts down his carry-on and checks his ticket.

Biggie: Hi.

Karen: Hi.

Biggie: Are you 23 D?

Karen: Oh, I thought I was in 23 F. Am I in the wrong seat?

Biggie: That's fine. I can sit by the window.

Karen: Oh, no. I like sitting by the window. Sorry about that.

She moves over to the window seat. Biggie pulls a magazine out of his carry-on and then pushes it under the seat in front of him and buckles up. He opens his magazine, then closes it, unbuckles and takes off his jacket.

Biggie: I'm Biggie, how are you doing?

Karen: Karen. Nice to meet you.

They shake hands. Make eye contact. There is a palpable connection between them. He breaks it and buckles up again.

Biggie: Going to L.A.?

Karen: Yeah, I live there.

Biggie: I'm sorry.

Karen: It's not that bad.

Biggie: I'm sure it's fine. It's just what people say.

Karen: Is it?

Biggie: About L.A.? Yeah.

Karen: You're right. Where's home for you?

Biggie: Upstate New York.

Karen: You're lucky. It's pretty there.

Biggie: It is.

Karen: O'Hare's inhuman.

Biggie: Really?

Karen: I hate it.

Biggie: Yeah, it's pretty bad.

Pause. They sit there. She tightens her seatbelt.

Karen: What's in L.A.?

Biggie: A writer's conference.

Karen: You're a writer?

Biggie: Yes. A poet.

Karen: Very cool. I love to write, but I wouldn't call myself a writer.

Biggie: What would you call yourself?

Karen: Besides Karen? Well, I'm an actress, sort of, not very successful, and I teach Pilates, and I'm a mom.

Biggie: Have I seen you in anything?

Karen: Probably not. I haven't done anything big, just small stuff. I'm in a White Castle commercial right now, but it's regional, so you wouldn't have seen it.

Biggie: And you teach –

Karen: Pilates. You know. Like yoga, but you don't have to act like you enjoy it.

Biggie: So why do you do it?

Karen: It's a good workout.

Biggie: How many kids?

Karen: A boy and a girl. 7 and 9. You?

Biggie: Two girls and a boy, 4, 5 and 8.

Karen: Wow. The boy's the oldest?

Biggie: No, he's in the middle.

Karen: Oh.

Silence

Biggie: I'm going through a divorce right now.

Karen: That's gotta be hard.

Biggie: Yeah.

Silence

Karen: So what are you doing at the conference?

Biggie: I came out with a new book. They did an article about me. You can see it if you want in the magazine.

Karen looks at the magazine.

Karen: Wow, this is amazing. Biggie Pollack. Award-winning poet. You're the real deal! You must be so excited.

Biggie: Thanks. It's nice.

Karen: (*Reading*) Parabolas. Promises. The pestle-scarred cornfields. (*She looks out window*) We're flying over some of those now.

Biggie. Yeah.

Karen: I like to write on planes.

Biggie: Why is that?

Karen: Last words, I guess? Because we could die at any second. Sorry. That wasn't a good thing to say right now.

Biggie: It's okay. It'd be quick. And what would you be writing in your final moments?

Karen: It's stupid. I'm not a real writer.

Biggie: It isn't stupid. What is it?

Karen: A memoir about my hair.

Biggie: That's what you'd be writing if the plane went down?

Karen: That's what I'm working on, but if we went down, I'd rather be asleep.

Biggie: Why your hair?

Karen: There's a lot to say. (*Beat*) It's actually about mental illness.

Biggie: So it's not about your hair.

Karen: Not...exactly. It's kind of personal.

Biggie: What other kinds of stories are there?

Karen: Well, I'm not sure I'm ready to tell you about it.

Biggie: You don't want to get personal?

Karen: I don't know. Maybe. We do have four hours, right?

Biggie: Unless we come crashing down any minute.

Karen: Yeah, sorry about that.

Biggie: I'm not. It makes you want to go for it, right?

Karen: Right. Like we should do something that we've never done before.

Biggie: What, like the mile high club?

Karen: No. No, I just thought we could tell each other anything. You know, like truth or dare, but just the truth part. I wasn't thinking about – I mean. I wasn't thinking that. Isn't that illegal?

Biggie: Sorry, I misunderstood. God. Sorry.

Karen: No, that's – that's an interesting idea. But I don't want to get arrested.

Biggie: Nor do I. I have a conference to get to.

Karen: And I have to get home to my kids. (*Beat*). Sorry. Buzzkill.

Biggie: It's fine.

Karen: Lucky we don't have anyone in the seat between us.

Biggie: For sure.

Karen: So, what can I tell you?

Biggie: Anything you want. The sky's the limit.

Karen: All right. Fine. I've never been with a black man.

Biggie: Have you ever been with a black woman?

Karen: No.

Biggie: I'm messing with you.

Karen: Got it. I have an urge to - lick your cheekbone.

Biggie: Why is that?

Karen: Um. I find you very attractive?

Biggie: Because I'm black?

Karen: No.

Biggie: No?

Karen: I don't know. That's part of it, I guess. I don't know. It's more than the color of your skin. Maybe the texture? Or the pattern of your facial hair. I just - I'd like to taste your sweat.

Biggie: What else would you like to do?

Karen: Kiss you with your clothes off.

Biggie: You want to be a writer? You gotta give me more than that.

Karen: Your turn.

Biggie: Not my genre.

Karen: No fair. What would you have me do?

Biggie: We could work with the licking theme.

Karen: I'm pretty good at it.

Biggie: I bet you are.

Silence

Biggie: Do you want to dance?

Karen: What? Where – here?

Biggie: Yeah, let's dance.

Karen: Won't we get in trouble?

Biggie: Nah, we gotta stretch our legs. Besides, I'm a famous poet.

Karen: You ride coach.

Biggie: Screw you. Are we dancing?

Karen: Yeah...okay.

They get up. Biggie kicks the carry on out of the way. Suddenly the parameters of the plane no longer exist. They could be in a dance hall. They start out in a traditional ballroom dance position and take a few steps. Biggie definitely leads. A fox trot or a tango. Swing. He spins Karen, dips her. Hovers for a moment. They come close to kissing, but they don't. Biggie brings Karen up to standing. She catches her breath.

Karen: I think I like you.

They look at each other in the eye. Still holding hands.

Biggie: I like you too, Karen.

A few more dance steps.

Karen: I think I more than like you.

He puts a little space between them

Biggie: You're married.

Karen: Technically so are you.

He drops her hands. They do a few dance moves but don't touch each other.

Biggie: I've moved out.

Karen: How's that going?

Biggie takes a step back. Karen takes a step towards him. They do a few moves, bobbing their heads around each other, the alligator clap.

Biggie: It's okay. I'm seeing some other people.

Karen takes a step back, they do the move where you bend your knees and raise one arm, bent over your head and shake it and something like the Egyptian. Mirror each other. He doesn't move towards her.

Karen: Like plural people?

Biggie: Like plural people.

Karen: Oh.

Almost a lull. They dance in place to fill the time. Their own minimalistic moves.

Biggie: Not at the same time.

Karen: I didn't think that.

Karen's dancing becomes more self-consciously white. Biggie's moves are more repetitive and lacking enthusiasm. He creates a little more physical distance on each exchange.

Karen: Do you want to dance with these other women on an airplane? They're women, right?

Biggie: Yes, they're women.

Karen: How many?

Biggie: Three or four, I guess.

Karen: You guess?

Biggie: Three.

Karen: Would that include me?

Biggie: No.

A couple more moves, Karen does the hammer. Biggie does a half-hearted running man. Then Karen stops.

Karen: Why not?

He's still doing the running man. But more assertively.

Biggie: You're married.

Karen: The aisles are too narrow for this. I'm going back to my seat.

Biggie: I'm not ready to settle back down. See you in a few.

Karen: Fine. Catch you later.

She gets back to her seat. Buckles herself in. Biggie does some dance moves circling around her seat backwards without looking at her then lands back in the seat next to her (could be an ironic moonwalk). Sits down. Karen's a bit frosty. Biggie is, too, when it comes down to it.

Biggie: Hey. Sorry I was gone for a while.

Karen: Hey. No worries.

Silence.

Biggie: Sorry. I'm a little distracted.

Karen: Don't worry about it.

Silence.

Biggie: Did you finish the article?

It takes her a half second to realize what he's talking about.

Karen: No, I didn't have a chance.

Biggie: You can keep it.

Karen. Oh. Okay, thanks.

She pulls out her journal and begins writing.

Biggie: Working on your memoir?

Karen: Nope. A poem.

Biggie: You write poems?

Karen: Not really. I don't know what I'm doing.

Biggie: You could take a class.

Karen: You're right. I could.

Biggie: I teach.

Karen: Of course you do.

Biggie: What do you mean of course I do?

Karen: Where do you teach?

Biggie: A couple of places. University of Connecticut. City College New York. SUNY.

Karen: You're busy.

Biggie: Too busy.

Karen: That's great.

Biggie: Why? Why is it great?

Karen: Because you're doing it.

Biggie: You have to.

Karen: Do I?

Biggie: If that's what you want.

Karen: I'm not sure what I want.

Biggie: You gotta figure that out.

Karen: Why are you telling me what I gotta do?

Biggie: I'm not. (*Beat*). Look Karen, I like you. But I'm really not available.

Karen: I got that. I'm not either.

She keeps writing.

Biggie: Looks like we're landing.

He buckles up.

Karen: I thought we just took off.

She puts away her journal.

Biggie: It's going to take a while to get cleared to come down.

Beat

Karen: So, what's your new book about?

Biggie: It's personal.

Karen: Sounds promising.

Biggie: You want to play a game of Scrabble? We have time.

Karen: That's okay. You'd just beat me.

Biggie: Probably. I'm pretty good at it.

Karen: I bet you are.

Biggie: I'll just play myself.

Karen: Sounds good.

Silence. Karen looks out the window.

Biggie: We're here.

Karen: Uh-huh.

Biggie unbuckles his seatbelt.

Biggie: Karen, I'm sorry.

She looks at him.

Karen: Why are you apologizing? You don't owe me anything.

Biggie: Well, take care.

Karen: You, too, Biggie Pollack.

Biggie stands up. Gets his bag.

Karen: You know you're going to be standing there a while before you can get off.

Biggie: I know. You're going to be sitting there for a while, too.

Karen: Yeah, I know.

Silence.

Karen: Can I ask you something?

Biggie: What about?

Karen: Is my hair okay?

Biggie: Yeah, it's fine.

Karen: Thanks.

She looks back out the window. He looks towards the front of the aircraft and waits for them to open the door.

End

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Janet Colson is a playwright/director/pole dancer in Lansing, Michigan. Her hybrid piece, Storycatcher, is pending publication in the upcoming issue of The Champagne Room. She is a collaborator for Ixion Wheel's rUSt, a theatre piece that has been postponed due to coronavirus. Janet has just completed ZA-92, a short play about putting on a show during a zombie apocalypse. She is currently working on a play about coming out in quarantine. Janet received her MFA in creative writing at Goddard College last June.*