

So What Are You, Anyway?

Lawrence Hill

Carole settles in Seat 12A, beside the window, puts her doll on a vacant seat and snaps open her purse. She holds up a mirror. She looks into her own dark eyes. She examines her handful of freckles, which are tiny ink spots dotting her cheeks. She checks for pimples, but finds none. Only the clear complexion that her father sometimes calls "milk milk milk milk chocolate" as he burrows into her neck with kisses.

This is yours, I believe." A big man with a sunburnt face is holding her doll upside down.

"May I have her please?" Carole says.

He turns the doll right side up. "A black doll! I never saw such a thing!"

"Her name's Amy. May I have her please?"

"Henry Norton!" cries the man's wife. "Give that doll back this instant!"

Carole tucks the doll close to the window.

The man sits beside Carole. The woman takes the aisles seat. "Don't mind him," the woman says, leaning towards Carole. "By the way, I'm Betty Norton, and he's my husband, Henry."

The man next to Carole hogs the armrest. His feet sprawl onto her side. And he keeps looking at her.

The stewardess passes by, checking seat belts. "Everything okay?"

"May I go to the bathroom?" Carole asks.

"Do you think you could wait? We're about to take off."

"Okay."

Carole looks out the window, sees the Toronto airport buildings fall behind and wonders if her parents are watching. Say goodbye, she instructs Amy, waving the doll's hand, say goodbye to Mom and Dad. The engines charge to life. Her seat hums. They taxi down the runway. "She feels a hollowness in her stomach when they lift into

the air. Her ears plug and stay that way until the plane levels out over pillows of cotton. They burn as bright as the sun. So that is what the other side of the clouds look like!

"Excuse me. Excuse me!" The man is talking to her. "You can go to the bathroom now, you know."

"No, that's all right," Carole says.

"Traveling all alone, are you?"

Carole swallows with difficulty.

"Where do you live?" he asks.

"Don Mills."

"Oh, really?" he says. "Were you born there?"

"Yes."

"And your parents?"

"My mother was born in Chicago and my father was born in Tuscan."

"And you're going to visit your grandparents?"

She nods.

"And your parents let you travel alone!"

"It's only an airplane ride! And I'm a big girl."

The man lowers the back of his seat, chuckling. He whispers to his wife. "No!" Carole hears her whisper back, "You ask her!"

Carole yawns, holds Amy's hand and goes to sleep. The clinking of silverware wakens her, but she hears the man and woman talking about her, so she keeps her eyes shut.

"I don't know, Henry," says the woman. "Don't ask me. Ask her."

"I'm kind of curious," he says. "Aren't you?"

Carole can't make out the woman's answer. But then she hears her say:

"I just can't see. It's not fair to children. I don't mind them mixed, but the world isn't ready for it. They're neither one thing nor the other, Henry, wake that child and see if she wants to eat."

When the man taps her shoulder, Carole opens her eyes. "I have to go to the bathroom," she says.

"But they're going to serve the meal," the man says.

"Henry! If she wants out, let her out. She's only a child."

Carole grimaces. She is definitely not a child. She is a young lady! She can identify Drambuie, Kahlua, and Grand Marnier by smell!

Once in the aisle, Carole realizes she has forgotten Amy.

Henry Norton hands her the doll. "There you go. And don't fall out of the plane, now. There's a big hole down by the toilet."

"There is not!" Carole says. "There isn't any such thing!" She heads down the aisle with an eye out just in case there is a hole, after all.

Coming out of the toilet, Carole finds the stewardess. "Excuse me, miss. Could I sit somewhere else?"

"The woman frowns, "Why?"

"I don't like the window."

"Is that it? Is that the only reason?"

"Well...yes."

"I'm sorry, but we don't have time to move you now. We're serving a meal. Ask me later, if you like."

After Carole has eaten and had her tray taken and had been served a hot face towel, the man says: "What are you, anyway? My wife and I were wondering."

Carole blinks, sees the man's clear blue eyes and drops her head. "What do you mean?" she says.

"You know, what are you? What race?"

Carole's mouth drops. Race? What is that? She doesn't understand. Yet she senses that the man is asking a bad question. It is as if he is asking her something dirty, or touching her in a bad place. She wishes her Mom and Dad were there. They could tell what "race" meant.

"That doll of yours is back," Henry Norton says. "That 's a Negro doll. That's race. Negro. What's your race?"

The question still confuses her.

"Put it this way," the man says. "What is your father?"

The question baffles her. What is her father? He is her Dad! He is her Dad and every Sunday morning he makes pancakes for the whole family and lets Carole pour hot syrup on them and afterwards he sits her on his lap and tells stories.

Mrs. Norton leans towards Carole. "Say you had a colouring book. What colour would you make your Dad?"

"I never use just one colour." "Okay. What colour would you make his face?"

"Brown."

"And your mother?"

Carole imagines a blank page. What would she put in her mother's face? She has to put something in there. She can't leave it blank. "I don't know."

"Sure you do," Mrs. Norton says. "How would you colour your mother's face?"

"Yellow."

Carole sees Mr. and Mrs. Norton look at each other.

"Is your mother Chinese?" Mrs. Norton asks.

"No."

"Are you sure you'd colour her yellow?"

"No."

"What else might you colour her?"

What else? Carole feels ashamed at her stupidity. A tear races down her cheek. "Red," she says finally.

"Red! You can't colour a face red! Is your mother white? Is she like me? Her face! Is it the same colour as mine?"

"Yes."

"And your father's brown?"

Carole nods.

"When you say brown, do you mean he is a Negro?"

"Yes." Of course her father is a Negro. If Mrs. Norton wanted to know all along if her Dad was a Negro, why didn't she just ask?

"So you're mixed?" Mrs. Norton says. "You're a mulatto!"

Carole's lip quivers. What is a mulatto? Why do they keep asking her what she is? She isn't anything!

"So is that it? You're a mulatto? You know what a mulatto is, don't you? Haven't your parents taught you that word?"

Approaching with a cart of juice, the stewardess looks up and smiles at Carole. That gives her a rush of courage.

"Leave me alone!" she screams at Mrs. Norton.

Passengers stare. The stewardess spills a drink. Mrs. Norton sits back hard in her seat, her hands raised, fingers spread. Carole sees people watching.

"Why do you keep asking me if my Dad is Negro? Yes, he's Negro! Okay? OKAY? Negro Negro Negro!"

"Calm down," Mrs. Norton says, reaching over.

"Don't touch her," the stewardess says.

"Who are these people?" someone says from across the aisle. "Imagine, talking to a child like that, and in 1970!"

One woman sitting in front of Carole stands up and turns around.

"Would you like to come and sit with me, little girl?"

"No!" Carole shouts. "I don't like all these questions. She keeps asking me how I would colour my parents in a colouring book! Why do you keep asking me that?"

Mrs. Norton pleads with Carole to stop.

"How would you like it if that happened to you?" Carole says.
"So what are you, anyway? What are your parents? How would you colour them? Well, I don't care! I don't even care!"

"How would you like to come and sit with me?" the stewardess says smiling. "I'll make you a special drink. Have you ever had a Shirley Temple?"

Carole nods enthusiastically. Already she feels better. Clutching Amy, she passes by the Nortons, who swing their legs to let her out.

"My God," Carole hears Mrs. Norton tell her husband, "talk about sensitive."