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Caroline's World

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Statement of Purpose:

"Caroline's World" is a short story that considers class and race in contemporary United States. The main character, Caroline, struggles with issues of identity while maintaining a façade of perfection in her insulated, idyllic, suburban world.

Caroline's World

Caroline Reinberg sailed gracefully out of Dr. Reno's office, relief written on each tiny line of her mildly enhanced 65 year old face. Dr. Reno had just given her a clean bill of health. Caroline felt as if she had just been given a new start in life. Things couldn't be better. She was a healthy, contented and affluent wife, mother, and grandmother who still turned heads when she walked into a room. The long straight dark brown hair with its few strands of silver, her svelte figure, and her flawless skin all combined to keep Caroline Reinberg one of the most beautiful people in Blue Lake, Illinois. Caroline was living the ultimate American dream: going from having nothing to having everything.

Caroline stopped at the reception desk to sign the check-out and insurance paperwork and to bestow her blessings on Amanda, Dr. Reno's receptionist of ten years. Amanda was on the phone but Caroline saw, with some discomfort, that Amanda had a new assistant. Amanda had been alone when Caroline had arrived and checked in this morning. Now, Caroline's perfectly shaped eyebrows lifted a fraction as she observed the new girl sitting nervously beside Amanda. Predictably, the nametag on the girl's breast pocket indicated her name was "LaToya." Caroline wondered why these names always had to sound so ... *French*.

Caroline hesitated, waiting for the more familiar Amanda to put down her phone. Just as LaToya's hand reached out with the necessary sheets of paper for Caroline's signature, Caroline looked down at an imaginary itch on her right ankle and then at an invisible piece of lint on the left sleeve of her immaculate white linen shirt.

"Excuse me," the new employee's voice was uncertain and shaky. "Mrs. Reinberg, would you please sign here?"

The itch evaporated and Caroline looked up and forced her lips to spread out over her teeth. She took the papers from LaToya's neatly manicured brown hand and said, "Thank you." She told herself that her hesitation was only because she was more familiar with Amanda than this new person. Caroline had nothing against people of a different background. She was, after all, an open-minded individual. She and David had sent money to foundations that helped less fortunate people and had contributed generously at church to missionaries' trips to South America and Africa. Besides, another patient, Mrs. Robinson, was sitting there in the waiting room, watching the whole episode intently, so Caroline put on her most liberal look and smiled rather patronizingly at LaToya as she signed and handed back the papers.

"You must be new here?" she asked the young woman. It was both a question and a statement.

"Yes, Ma'am. Just started last week." LaToya's voice seemed stronger and more confident now, and she ventured a smile that, for a moment, made her look pretty and not just pleasant. Perhaps the young woman was sensing or hoping for her first real connection with a patient. The more senior receptionist, Amanda, observed the scene as she continued her pretense of listening to a speaker on the other end of the imaginary phone call. She had devised this method on Monday when it became clear to her that Dr. Reno's patients would rather deal with her than with the new black assistant. Since Monday, these patients had reluctantly dealt with LaToya since they did not want to be late for whatever important society meetings or appointments they had scheduled for the rest of the day.

Caroline wondered why Dr. Reno would want to bring in someone like LaToya. It had to be bad for the business. She knew that Dr. Smith, the male physician on the next street, would not be so adventurous as to employ someone like LaToya. Wasn't Dr. Reno worried about losing patients to Dr. Smith? Caroline toyed briefly with the idea of getting Dr. Smith's number from David later that day. David and Dr. Smith played golf together occasionally. Nonsense Caroline, she chided herself. There was nothing wrong with LaToya being there. People were people, no matter their background. She knew that.

In a kinder frame of mind, Caroline said something to LaToya about having a nice day, nodded at Amanda who seemed to be concentrating too much on this exchange and too little on her phone call, and turned to leave the office. Nodding briefly at Mrs. Robinson as she walked past, Caroline left the office. Before she turned the ignition of her bright red Corvette, she put her heavily ringed hand into her Gucci purse. She located her phone, flipped it on, and hit the speed-dial button.

"David, it's me, darling." Caroline paused as she heard her husband asking his business partner to excuse him for a minute.

"So how did it go?" His voice was confident and still had the ability to excite her, after 42 years of marriage. They'd been through a lot together – holding on to each other in the midst of their families' turbulent reception to their relationship. David's family had hoped that their only son would end up with a good Jewish girl. And Caroline's family wanted nothing to do with her when she had started dating the Jewish boy she had met at a club. When they had timidly told their families they wanted to get married, they had both been virtually banished from home. Somehow, the young couple had scaled those initial difficulties.

When David and Caroline moved to the exclusive community of Blue Lake 20 years ago, they'd been faced with new challenges, but again, they had overcome and made their way securely into the exclusive circles of the Blue Lake elite. Caroline had never returned home; she had never even allowed herself to think about it. Blue Lake was home to them now. After the news of her father's death, she had insisted that her mother come and live with them but her mother had been stubborn, saying that Blue Lake would not feel like home. Mother had agreed to visit a few times but always returned to what she considered home. When her mother had died last year, Caroline was sad but thankful that she and David had been in Paris and did not make it back in time for the funeral.

Caroline knew the confidence in David's voice was because he had not bought into her grave self-diagnosis. During this recent period, the entire membership of their country club had heard that she had been feeling ill. Mild panic had begun to spread throughout the tight-knit community of Blue Lake because the rumor was that Caroline Reinberg, the life of every tea party and the most sparkling cocktail party attendee, might have some kind of bone cancer. When Caroline had first started feeling less than healthy, she had become suspicious. She had broadcast her own self-diagnosis before making her appointment at Dr. Reno's office for a full check-up. She told everyone at the club and at church that

she feared she had some rare form of bone cancer. She was convinced that these pains in her limbs must be symptoms of the disease.

Ever since she had watched *Love Story*, starring Ryan O'Neil and Ali MacGraw, Caroline had always suspected – or even perhaps secretly hoped – that she would come down with some life threatening disease. What a sad but dramatic way to go. The attention and the drama were extremely appealing to Caroline's diva soul. The whole town, she was convinced, would rally round the Reinbergs during this tragedy. David would take time off his busy schedule and nurse her back to a tenuous state of bed-ridden glamour. Her body would waste away but her beauty would remain, becoming more delicate and waif-like, she imagined.

But the idea became less glamorous and appealing as her appointment with Dr. Reno drew nearer. Caroline became more anxious and her heart beat a little faster as she read more about the disease, and as reality descended on her. Each morning as she sat reading her morning papers in the library at home, her eyes would come to rest on the photos of her 15 year old grandson, Third. Everybody called their only grandchild "Third" because he was the third generation of Reinbergs to be named David William Reinberg. It was such a good solid name: "David William Reinberg III" but somehow they had gotten into the habit of just calling him "Third." She must get the family back to calling him David William – much more befitting, she felt. Third would soon transition from boy to man and the name "Mr. Third Reinberg" would not be appropriate.

Caroline caressed her cell phone as if she was holding David's hand and told him what he knew already, "I'm fine. Dr. Reno says it might be slight arthritis. She recommends exercise. That's all."

"That's wonderful, darling. I told you not to worry." He listened attentively for a few more minutes to the wife he had loved for most of his life, and then told her they would celebrate her good health tonight over dinner. He would make reservations at their favorite Italian restaurant for 6:00pm.

Caroline smiled as she replaced her phone in her purse. She drove slowly through the familiar streets of the neat suburb, scolding herself for the morbid self-diagnosis and even the fact that she had once found it appealing. She really should find other means of drama. She was now in no hurry to discover any disease in herself. She wanted to stay around and enjoy the good life she and David had earned – and spend as much time as possible with David, David Jr. and his wife Lori, and of course, Third.

A red and yellow placard caught Caroline's eye as she came to a "Stop" sign in the middle of the quaint area Blue Lake called "downtown." She looked over and recognized the name of the dance studio that Dr. Reno had recommended to her – "The Dance Floor." She was to contact the owner, one Kit Adams, to schedule an appointment for dance class. Dr. Reno had told her that taking a dance class would be great for exercise. It would stretch those aching aging bones. Caroline had planned to call The Dance Floor later but since she was here, and a parking spot had just opened up right ahead of her, she pulled over and walked towards the building.

As she approached the glass entry door, she heard the pounding of loud music and looked around to see if one of those "bad" kids with loud rock or rap music was driving down the road. Some of these younger kids in the neighborhood were constantly driving around in their parents' convertibles, mostly with the tops down, blasting that terrible rap music that she had heard was so degrading.

No bad kids with bad music in sight, so Caroline turned back to open the door of the dance studio and was almost thrown back by the sight and sound of the reception area. The loud music was pulsing from what must be a dance room to the right of the reception desk. A slim black man in green leotards and a yellow and orange t-shirt dripping with sweat looked over and beckoned to her. He tossed his heavy black dreadlocks behind his shoulders and asked, "What can I do for you, pretty lady?"

Caroline pulled in her stomach and raised her head so that her nose was now pointing straight up towards the red, gold, and green wall clock behind the man's head. He looked like a reggae singer, Caroline thought. Even though the man was taller than her, she somehow managed to look down at him through her professionally applied eyelashes. In the affected British accent she had acquired from the annual trips she and David had made to Europe over the last 15 years, Caroline responded haughtily, "I am here to see Kit Adams. Will you please get him for me." She dismissed him to proceed on his errand by glancing around at the bright colorful room.

A wiry hand with long fingers reached out to Caroline and she looked back to see "Mr. Reggae" smile and say brightly, "Kit Adams at your service."

Caroline's mind reeled. She now wished she had not acted on instinct by stopping here. She should have called the number on the card that Dr. Reno had given her. She reluctantly placed the tip of her fingers in the reggae man's hand, very briefly, like royalty.

"Dr. Reno recommended you to me. I'm considering the option of taking dance class, just as a way of getting exercise. I guess I was thinking of something a little more, umm..." she searched for the appropriate word, "...classical."

Kit Adams threw his head back, dreadlocks flying all around him, and roared with laughter. "'Classical' huh?" The laughter subsided but the amusement remained in his eyes. "What do you mean by classical?"

"Well you know, I was thinking of a cross between ballet and yoga." Kit Adams' eyes widened and Caroline suspected that he was struggling to contain more laughter. She continued quickly, "You understand, I'm just looking for something more dignified than that." She pointed towards the room from which the loud music was seeping.

"Well, Ms....?" He paused to allow her to provide her name.

"MRS. Caroline Reinberg," she provided, hoping that he had heard of THE Reinbergs of Blue Lake.

"Ah, Mrs. Reinberg." One eyebrow rose a fraction and Caroline wondered if it was because he had indeed heard of the Reinberg empire or ... She didn't have much time to speculate as Kit Adams continued, "I highly recommend a beginner's hip hop class for you. It's fun and many of the ladies are taking it and loving it."

"Is that rap?" Caroline asked, puzzled.

Kit Adams laughed again. Caroline was mildly annoyed. Did this reggae man think she was his comedic entertainment for the afternoon? He interrupted her seething thoughts by answering her question.

"Well it's a contemporary form of dance that works your muscles and keeps exercise fun. We would start slowly and you'll discover that you'll love it. I guarantee it."

"It's not that I don't like rap, Mr. Adams," Caroline tried to explain. "It's just that I do not understand it, nor care to. The circles in which I move do not really listen to rap music so you'll understand if I decline your offer and look for something more appropriate. So sorry to have wasted your time."

"Hey. Don't hurry off so fast, Mrs. Reinberg. We do have some slower, more ...umm... 'dignified' classes but I just thought that a trim woman such as yourself would be more interested in something exciting. Here's our brochure. We've only been open 2 months and we are hoping to continue building our clientele so we'd love to have you, whether you decide on modern dance or hip-hop, alright?" His appeal was gentle and pleasant but all Caroline wanted to do was escape from here.

"I'll think about it," Caroline said as she took the brochure and almost ran out of the studio.

As she pulled her red Corvette out of the parking space, she dabbed at the light perspiration on her brow. The day was cool so the perspiration must be from her bewilderment at the things she was discovering today. Blue Lake was certainly changing. First LaToya in Dr. Reno's office; now this individual, Reggae Man, and the so-called "Dance Floor" right in the middle of the community's lovely expensive downtown area! "How did they make their way all the way up here anyway?" Caroline wondered.

It seemed as if the town was being infiltrated, as if the quality of people in Blue Lake was dropping somehow. Perhaps she and David might have to consider moving further North to Green Fields. Again, Caroline reasoned within herself – it was not that she did not want to be around these people. After all, she was a liberal and a democrat, and certainly considered all people equal. She searched her mind for the reason why she was so worried. She wondered about the impact of all this on Blue Lake's property values, which had been very high up till now and convinced herself that her discomfort was not because of the people – the LaToyas and the Kit Adams. She was simply thinking in practical terms.

Satisfied with her self-analysis, Caroline pulled into one of the four garages at home and went upstairs to rest and prepare for her evening with David.

Across town, LaToya Johnson walked to the bus stop to catch the bus that would take her to the train station. This new commute between home and work was tedious – an hour and a half on the Metra train. By the time she got home each evening, her mama had tucked LaToya's five year old daughter, Nina, warmly into bed. LaToya had to make do with watching Nina sleep, the disappointment of not seeing her mother throughout the day wiped off her smooth round face. LaToya knew that this would be worth it in the end. She had found the perfect job that paid better than any she had dreamed of getting and she knew that, if she saved a little each pay period, one day, she would be able to move herself, Mama, and Nina to a different neighborhood. Maybe not to a place like Blue Lake; but somewhere better than where they were now. She smiled to herself and sat on the bench to wait for the #98 bus.

When she had seen the advertisement in the *Tribune* for this job, she had circled it and called the number immediately, knowing that it was probably a long shot. The interview with Dr. Reno herself had gone unexpectedly well and she had grabbed the job offer as soon as it was made. She wondered why Dr. Reno had chosen her – there had been 3 other young women who had been in the reception area waiting for their turns to go in for their interviews. LaToya had been sure that they were more likely to get the job because they were white. But she had gotten the job. Her Mama told her the evening the phone rang with the good news that God was still a miracle worker.

Watching for the tardy bus, LaToya hardly noticed the black Mercedes that pulled up to the curb. When she did, she hoped some old white man did not think she was a hooker or something. She looked down at her neat black pants and blue shirt. No, she could not possibly be mistaken for a lady of easy virtue. Her straightened black hair was pulled back into a pony tail and the only make up she wore was a hint of bronze lipstick. In spite of herself, she looked across at the car and was surprised to see one of Dr. Reno's patients in the passenger seat – Mrs. Reinberg from this morning. LaToya remembered her name immediately. She was one of the more memorable patients she had met since she had started work. Mrs. Reinberg motioned for her to come over to the car and LaToya did so without hesitation. She

admired this beautiful elegant woman. She smiled cautiously and approached the car. She stooped a little to see who was driving and noted briefly the attractive older man in the driver's seat.

"LaToya. Right?" Mrs. Reinberg said. "Mr. Reinberg and I were wondering if you needed a ride somewhere?"

"Hello, Mrs. Reinberg," LaToya nodded politely at the man who responded pleasantly. "Well, I'm going to the Metra station. The bus seems to be running late. I wouldn't mind a ride if you're headed in that direction."

"Sure," Mr. Reinberg said and motioned for her to get in behind his wife.

The backseat of the Mercedes fit LaToya as if it was made for her. She settled in and thought it would be a quiet ride. These rich folks liked to be nice to people like her once in a while but she knew their type. They rarely wanted to know much about the people towards whom they were sometimes charitable. But it turned out to be anything but a quiet ride. Mrs. Reinberg, trying to be polite, LaToya was sure, asked her where the Metra train took her. To the Southside, LaToya told them; as if they didn't know, she thought to herself. Mr. Reinberg did most of the talking after that, mostly asking questions about her home, her family and her new job.

When they pulled up in front of the station, LaToya thanked the couple and walked towards the terminal to buy her ticket. She shook her head and wondered why she had not asked them about themselves too. Why did it have to be the rich people asking all the questions? If she could, she would have asked Mrs. Reinberg a little about herself. She absently wondered why Mrs. Reinberg had been so quiet for most of the trip. The "bougie" snobbishness was probably kicking in, LaToya chuckled to herself as she walked towards the train. She forgot about the Reinbergs and prayed that Nina would not fall asleep until she reached home.

"Interesting girl. How does a girl like that bring up a daughter in that place?" David looked over at Caroline, hoping she would elaborate or at least say something about this. For some reason David knew this was important, to get Caroline to talk about this. Just as she opened her mouth to say something, the waiter asked them to follow him to their table so the moment was lost.

David and Caroline returned home after 11pm that night. They had lingered after dinner and then gone to the private beach area that was open only to residents of Blue Lake. Sitting on a bench overlooking the serene lake, they had reminisced about old times but Caroline had resisted being drawn back into a discussion about LaToya. This had turned out to be a very interesting day, she thought, as she climbed the staircase to the master suite. She put her purse down and slipped out of her black high heel sandals. Going into her mirrored dressing room, she took off her long brown and gray flowing wig and scratched her scalp beneath one of the graying cornrows on her head. She carefully placed the wig on its stand. Before she went into the bathroom, she examined the thin lines on her face. Good skin. Only in these her twilight years had she begun to appreciate her skin. David had always loved it, describing it as "coffee with cream and lots of sugar."

Caroline sank into one of the plush rocking chairs in the sitting area of the suite and sipped the herb tea she had brought upstairs with her. David was taking a shower so she had time to reflect on her day. Thoughts of LaToya and Kit Adams returned. She made a mental note to call Dr. Reno's office to ask for the addresses of other dance studios. But something deep in her soul was curious about the hip-hop class. Maybe she would try. Her mind turned to the image of the young black woman they had dropped off at the Metra station. She thought about how this brave young mother was bringing up her child there on the Southside of Chicago; about how Kit and LaToya were both striding into a new world, unashamed and unhindered about who they were. When her father had virtually disowned her for marrying "that white boy" Caroline had promised herself she would never return. But today she was

reminded that even though she had left that world years ago, life went on there – vibrantly, producing people like Kit Adams and LaToya. She knew she would probably never go back there, but perhaps it was finally time to allow herself to once again think of it as home.