

## **Obituary**

By Lois-Ann Yamanaka

English class, we got Mr. Harvey. Jerome looks at me and puts his middle finger on the desk to our worst teacher, because Mr. Harvey says for the fiftieth time this year:

*"No one will want to give you a job. You sound uneducated. You will be looked down upon. You're speaking a low class form of good Standard English. Continue, and you'll go nowhere in life. Listen, students, I'm telling you the truth like no one else will. Because they don't know how to say it to you. I do. Speak Standard English. DO NOT speak pidgin. You will only be hurting yourselves."*

I tell Jerry, "No make f-you finger to Mr. Harvey. We gotta try talk the way he say. No more dis and dat and wuz and cuz 'cause we only hurting ourselves."

I don't tell anyone, not even Jerry, how ashamed I am of pidgin English. Ashamed of my mother and father, the food we eat, chicken luau with can spinach and tripe stew. The place we live, down the house lots in the Hicks Homes that all look alike except for the angle of the house from the street. The car we drive, my father's brown Land Rover without the back window. The clothes we wear, sometime we have to wear the same pants in the same week and the same shoes until it breaks. Don't have no choice.

Ashamed of my aunties and my uncles at baby luaus, yakudoshis, and mochi pounding parties. "Eh, bradda Larry, bring me on nada Primo, brah. One cold one fo' real kine. I rey-day, I rey-day, no woray, brah. Uncap that sucka and come home to uncle stevie." I love my uncle Steven, though, and the cracker jacks he brings for me every time he visits my mother. One for me and one for my sister, Calhoon. But I'm so shame. Ashame too of all my cousins, the way they talk and act dumb, like how they like Kikaida Man and "Ho, brah, you seen Kikaida Man kick rainbow Man's ass in front Hon Sport at the Hilo shopping Center? Ho, brah and I betchu Godzilla kick King Kong's ass too. Betchu ten dollas, brah, two fur balls kicking ass in downtown Metropolis, nah, downtown Hilo brah."

And my grandma. Her whole house smells like mothballs, not just in the closets but in every drawer too. And her pots look a million years old with dents all over. Grandma must know every recipe with mustard cabbage in it. She can quote from the Bible for everything for everything you do in one day. Walks everywhere she goes downtown Kaunakakai, sucks fish eyes and eats the parsley from our plates at Midnight Inn.

And nobody looks or talks like a haole. Or eats like a haole. Nobody says nothing the way Mr. Harvey tells us to practice in class.

Sometimes I secretly wish to be a haole. That my name could be Betty Smith or Annie Anderson or Debbie Cole, wife of Dennis Cole who lives at 2222 Maple Street with a white station wagon with wood panel on the side, a dog named Spot, a cat named Kitty, and I wear white gloves. Dennis wears a hat to work. There's a coatrack as soon as you open the front door and we all wear shoes inside the house.

*"Now lets all practice our Standard English,"* Mr. Harvey says. *"You will all stand up and tell me your name, and what you would like to be when you grow up. Please use complete sentences."* Mr. Harvey taps Melvin Spencer on his shoulders. Melvin stands up slowly and pulls a Portagee torture of wedged pants and BVDs out of his ass.

"Ma name is Mal-vin Spenca." Melvin has a very Portagee accent. Before he begins his next sentence, he does nervous things like a move his ankles side to side so that his heels slide out of his slippers. He looks at the ceiling and rolls his eyes. "I am, I mean, I wanna. I like. No, try wait. I going be. No, try wait. I will work on my Gramma Spenca's pig farm when I grow up cuz she said I can drive the slop truck. Tank you."

No one laughs at Melvin. Otherwise he'll catch you on the way home from school and shove your head in the slop drum. Melvin sits down. He blinks his eyes hard a couple of times, then rubs his face with two hands.

Jerry stands up very, very slowly and holds on to the edge of his desk "my name is Jerome." His voice, weak and shivering, his fingers white. "I in. okay, wait. I stay in. no, try wait. Okay, try wait. I stay. I stay real nervous." His face changes and he acts as if he has to use the bathroom. He looks out the window to the eucalyptus trees beyond the schoolyard.

Jerry continues, "I am going be one concert piano-ist when I get big. Tank you."

I'm next. Panic hits me like a rock dropped in a hollow oil drum.

Mr. Harvey walks up to my desk, his face red and puffy like a pink marshmallow or a bust-up boxer. He has red hair and always wears white double-knit pants with pastel-colored golf shirts. He walks like Walter Matthau. Mr. Harvey taps my desk with a red pen.

The muscles in my face start twitching and pulling uncontrollably.

My eyes begin darting back and forth. And my lips, my lips-

*I'm waiting,* Mr. Harvey says.

Jerry looks at me. He smiles weakly, his face twitching and pulling too. He looks at Mr. Harvey, then looks at me as if to say, "just get it over with."

"*Cut the crap,*" Mr. Harvey spits. "Stop playing these goddamn plantation games. Now c'mon. We've got our outlines to finish today."

Mr. Harvey's ears get red, his whole face like fire with his red hairs and red face.

"My name Lovey. When I grow up pretty son, I going be what I like be and nobody better say nothing about it or I kill um."

"OH REALLY," he says. *"Not the way you talk. You see that was terrible. All of you were terrible and we will have to practice and practice our Standard English until we are perfect little Americans. And I'll tell you something, you can all keep your heads on your desks for the rest of the year for all I care. You see, you need me more than I need you. And do you know what the worst part is, class? We're not only going to have to work on your usage, but pronunciations and inflections too. Jee-zus Christ! For the life of me, it'll take us a god-damn lifetime."*

"See," Jerry whispers, "now you the one made Mr. Harvey all mad with us, we all going get it from him, stupid"

I want to tell Jerry about being a concert pianist, yeah, right. Good luck. How will he ever do it? Might as well drive the slop truck if you cannot talk straight or sound good and all the haoles talk circles around you. Might as well blend in like all the locals do.

Mr. Harvey walks past my desk. *"C'mon, lovey. Start your outline. You too, Jerome."* Sometimes I think that Mr. Harvey doesn't mean to be mean to us. He really wants us to be Americans, like my kotonk cousins from Santa Ana, he'd probably think they talked real straight.

But I can't talk the way he wants me to. I cannot make it sound his way, unless I'm playing pretend-talk-haoles. I can make my words straight, that's pretty easy if I concentrate real hard. But the sound, the sound from my mouth, if I let it rip right out the lips, my words will always come out like home.