

11-15-2018

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Recommended Citation

Fernandez, Kā'ai S. (2018) "Brown Coats Cannot be Bought With Names," *Mānoa Horizons*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 32.

Available at: <https://kahualike.manoa.hawaii.edu/horizons/vol3/iss1/32>

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Brown Coats Cannot be Bought With Names

KĀ'AI S. FERNANDEZ

ENG 386 (Fairy Tales & Adaptations)

Mentor: Dr. Perkinson

Artist Statement

My short story, a fairy tale if I may, attempts to take a critical look the name of a person and the use of titles, and how both can affect not only an individual's identity, but also a community's identity. By its use of titles and names, I wanted to focus on the importance of titles, and the dangers that come with these titles. The dangers of titles as they become so important to a person that they consume them, the person becomes the title and their name becomes secondary, seemingly forgotten. When a person takes on a title, they are expected to take on certain traits. A King is expected to be brave and serious, as the title demands, no matter if the person under the title is cowardly and goofy. And as these titles grow more and more commonplace, it begins to dehumanize people. The longer a person has a title, the less human they become to others; President Jan simply became The President, Dr. Aukai becomes Doctor. People stop seeing the traits of the individual and start to only see the shared trait of the title which many people wear. When society starts to value titles over names, people see the title first, and judge each other by these titles, rather than caring about the name and story which that name carries.

Maybe this makes us uncaring of the individual, because we see them as their title, one of the mean Kings, one of the many Solders and Builders, one of the many, and not an individual, not a person to care for or help, just a title. In this story, this is done by names representing the identity of the person; as names are traded for titles, people become unable to recognize each other as they see only the traits of titles and not the individual.

The main character of my story is named Dano, and not after Dano from Hawaii 5-0, but after my Uncle Dano. I've never seen Hawaii 5-0, never knew there was a character named Dano on the show. Besides my Uncle, I've never known anyone named Dano, which is why I gave my character the name, because I thought it was unique, yet similar to other names, like Dan; it would show the unique, yet commonality. It turns out, I have an Uncle Daniel, because my Uncle Dano's birth name is not Dano, but Daniel. This was a man I had known my whole life, who was a part of my family, and yet, I never knew his real name, his birth name, and it makes me wonder, who is that person? What I knew was a nickname, a title, one of his many titles. Because to me, he is fun loving Uncle Dano, to his employees, he is a strict Boss, to his parents, he is their kind son, Daniel. What was a title to some, was a name to others.



I'm currently a junior and am majoring in English with a minor in philosophy. I plan on pursuing a master's degree in composition and rhetoric, though creative writing will always be a passion of mine. I was born and raised on the Big Island in Āhualoa, and so have a great love of nature and solitude. This story was brought about original as a short, two page extra credit assignment, but I ended up getting lost somewhere along the way as I was writing, and it grew into more than just an extra credit assignment; it turned into a story about names, of titles, and of values, things which are always topical no matter a person's background or age.

Mānoa Horizons, Vol. 3, 2018, pp. 157–160
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And so, to help highlight the individual nature of names vs. titles in my fairy tale, the story is set in a first person perspective instead of the traditional third person perspective; the use of first person is meant to encourage the reader to see the world from a more personal view. This fairy tale is meant to show an individual's perspective on not just the importance of identity, but also what happens when that identity is taken or sold away.

It must have been magic. It must have been. Why else would the letter feel like lead in my hands? Why else would it tremble in my grip, crinkling around my fingers like wrinkles? If not magic, how else could I know what it said, even though I couldn't read? Maybe the stamp of the little ass which lay fat on the letter's bottom was the source of the magic that moved my Father to tears. The King's stamp. A new, official stamp for a new, official King. Maybe it was the stamp, maybe it was because all the other young Men in the village got their letters, one by one, till I was the last one in the village without gray in my hair. It'll be a village of Gray Heirs soon.

Dano, my Father said, sitting on the only stool we owned. Dano, come here.

I was already here. I was already standing so close. Close enough to smell the salt and mud in his skin. I was already standing next to his hunched form, like he was always praying for the lord to save—save what?

Dano, he said, when?

Tonight, I answered. The others left quick, I should follow.

Be afraid, Father said. Promise me you will never be brave.

Father, why do you ask this?

Promise me you will run if you must. No sacrifice, no honor.

Father, please, I said. My eyes hurt as I stared at his feet. I must go soon.

He sagged more. His skin hung from his bones like a coat, a hand-me-down from life, too large for him now that Mother had died and Sherry had left.

Take the ax and red cape, Dano. The army will have nothing for you.

Mother gave them to Sherry, Father, remember?

Than take the small scythe, Father said, and the white hat.

We sold them for a place to bury Mother, I said. Remember? And he said, No, I don't. Then take the pickax and brown coat. You will need them. The army will have nothing for you.

Nothing for me? Need them? What do you mean Father?

The army will have nothing for you, he said. He didn't look at me, never really looked at anyone, except Mother. Not me or Sherry, not even the cat we had when I was a kid. The army, he started, had nothing for me when I was young. I wouldn't buy a position, I was saving what I had. My Mother gave me the coat. It used to be white.

It's brown now.

It is.

Is it magic?

My Father's brow bowed and his frown folded on itself. Magic is not for us, Dano. Important people get magic. We're peasants.

But the coat, I said, grabbing the thick garment from the table, it used to be white. The color changed.

There's mud in war, Dano. Mud and shit, from horses and humans. It covered me. It covered my coat. Years it covered me and the coat, it won't leave. I looked like the ground, so the enemy didn't see me. That's how I survived.

Oh...

So don't be brave Dano. Play dead if you need to, I did many times. Just don't die.

Okay Father, I said.

I pulled the coat over my body. It was thick and itchy. I didn't even know what it was made of, Father never let anyone wear it before. The pickax was by the door, I could reach it from here. The pickax was mostly rusted. Father's Father had been the last one to use it.

Dano, Father said, did I ever tell you how you got your name, Dano? Did I?

I must leave soon, Father, the sun will set soon, and he said, soon is not now. Did I tell you?

No Father, you did not.

Do you know my name?, he asked. His hands reached to mine. His fingernails were rusted with stone and gravel. There was sap I used to close a cut when he fell. Red and brown.

No, Father, I don't.

We sold our names. Me and your Mother. Mine for Sherry and this table. Your Mother's for Dano and this stool. We sold ours, we were happy too. His hands held mine tighter. The other Boys, he said, the army has nothing for them but titles and ranks. They will sell. They're too young to know what it's like to not have a name.

But that's how you get land Father. People with gold have titles. The King has a title.

You are Dano, he said. Not my Son. You can sell your name, but not for gold, not for titles. Know your name. Know its worth. Do not settle.

Father, I must leave now.

Then go, and help those you can, who see brown, but don't be brave, he said, and I said, I will be back, Father.

No, you won't. Promise Dano, your name.

I promise, Father.

I didn't look back when I walked out the door, dirt coat hugging me, pickax perched on my shoulder. I didn't look back when I crossed the first river or the second or the third. I was told each river had a troll, but I saw none. An Old Man by the road said the fighting armies had killed them in the crossfire. The Old Man said magic wasn't what it used to be when he was a kid.

I didn't look back when night awoke and the wolves sung. A Grandmother who had lost her house said they used to howl. She sold her house to a girl who made wolves sing. The Grandmother said Heroes weren't what they used to be.

I didn't look back when I passed a little cabin, and I didn't look back when the sun cracked the horizon. I didn't see anyone by the cabin or the horizon.

I could see smoke, over a hill covered in dead bushes. As I got closer to the hill, a man stopped me. He was dressed in a black cape and red gloves.

I'm the Rose Thief, he said.

A thief? I asked.

Yes, a thief.

I've never had a thief tell me that before. You sound like a terrible thief.

His face was smooth like opals and his eyes were glossy. No fire, no smolder. Nothing.

I'm not here to steal your gold, he said, and I said, Good, because I don't have any.

I'm here for you, for help. The fighting, from the Old King and the New King, they burnt my rose bushes when they fought,

No, I said. He stopped and looked and stared and stared and his eyes dulled. Weak.

Can you read? I asked. Can you read this letter? I held the letter up, its color like three-day-old snow.

No, I can't read.

I'm sorry, I need to go to the army. The stamp on the letter, it's from the New King. I need to go soon, or they'll come for my Father.

But the army burned my roses, he said. They're all I had, all I loved. They were magic.

What's your name, I asked, and he said, the Rose Thief.

No, I said, name.

I am the Rose Thief.

That is not a name.

I sold my name. Sold it for these red gloves. Look, red like roses, and white, can't you see? Light orange and yellow too. The gloves, they look so much like roses that I once lost them in a bush. They cost me a lot, my name was long. A family name. It started with a V.

They look red, I said, and gloves aren't a name and neither is Rose Thief. I'm sorry, I can't help you. With that, I started to walk up and over the hill, stepping over burnt rose bushes.

I saw the New King's army. There were more people there

than I had ever seen before. The green grass under their feet had turned to dirt, mud and shit. I saw smoke and banners, armor and swords, and horses. I had never seen a horse before.

I walked to the army when a man in white and red clothes stopped me. Halt, he said, Who are you?

I got this letter, I said, holding the crippled paper. I'm here to fight, I think.

He didn't look at the paper, he stopped looking at me. Good, the man said, follow me.

I'm the Recruiter. What's your name? You still have a name, right?

Dano, I said.

Good name, different. That will get you something nice. You'll be a Guard. You'll get armor and a sword.

I don't want Guard for a name, I said. The Recruiter looked over his shoulder at me as we walked past the tents and buzzing Soldiers.

But Guards don't fight much, the Recruiter said, it's a good name, and I said, it's not a name.

What?

I won't sell my name for Guard. I won't sell my name yet, not for that and not to you.

Then maybe for Cook, the Cooks doesn't fight at all. You'll wear white, he said, better than that brown coat, and a pan is better than that pickax.

No, I won't sell my name for white. I didn't sell it for red.

The Recruiter stopped. He turned to face me, his feet sliding in the mud and shit. I assumed it was mud and shit, but it all looked the same brown to me.

Don't test me, the Recruiter said. Soldier is the last thing I'll offer. You should have taken the Guard, you would have served the General's Daughter.

Does the General's Daughter have a name? I asked.

Her name is the General's Daughter. It is a nice name with nice things.

That is not a name, I said, and I will not buy Soldier, and he said, fine, the army has nothing for you. You will fight on the front lines. You will fight in your shit brown coat and with your pickax. And with that, he left.

I walked to the front of the army, or, I thought it was the front. I saw many Cooks, all in white. I saw several Guards, spinning their swords and spears like windmills. I mostly saw Soldiers, all wearing breastplates with little red asses on them. A man, covered in so much brown I wasn't sure if he was wearing clothes or the ground, came up to me.

You don't look like you've been here long, he said. Where did you come from?

From over the hill with the burnt roses, I said, and then the man seemed to light up, as if his brain was on fire.

Have you seen my Wife? She has a red scarf. I was separated from her when we got here.

What's her name?

Wife.

Wife is not a name, I said.

But it's all I know her as.

Well, what's your name? Does she know it?

It was Husband, but I had to sell that, and they only gave me Builder for it. They said that's all I get for a title and not a name. And I said, Those aren't names.

They're all I remember.

I'm sorry then, I haven't seen your Wife.

Well, then, what are you? The Builder asked, a new Builder maybe?

No, I'm Dano. It's my name.

The Builder might have said something after that, but I didn't hear it. I heard the horn instead. I saw people run left and right, then back to the left. The General's Daughter, in a red cape on her white horse, cried for order and commanded formation. Guards this way, Soldiers to the front.

She said nothing of Builders or Cooks as her axe waved in the air.

And I saw them, the Old King's army, filled with Guards and Soldiers, marching our way. And suddenly, formations were formed, and I was at the front with Soldiers and Cooks

and Builders. Next to me was the same Builder as before. We looked at each other.

Don't be brave, I said.

What?

Don't be brave, and after this war, we'll buy some letters, and you can build a name, and so can your Wife after we find her.

What are you talking about?, he asked.

Ready! Brace!, came a shout, They will be upon us soon!
For the New King!

I looked back, past the roses and bridges, past the wolves and the cabin, past the night and the day, and thought of a stool and a table. The Builder watched me. I don't want to die, he said, the army only gave me a hammer. I wiped his tears with the brown paper, it blended with my coat now. It could be worse, I said, the army had nothing for me.

I'm scared, a mud covered Cook with a red scarf next to me said, a pan in her hand.

That's fine, I said, my Father said that it's good to be afraid.

I wonder what had cost Mother and Father more: our names or the furniture?