Your Name: _____

One summer day when I was about ten, I sat on a stoop, chatting with a group of girls my age. We were all in pigtails and shorts and basically just killing time. What were we discussing? It could have been anything—school, our older brothers, an anthill on the ground.

At one point, one of the girls, a second, third, or fourth cousin of mine, gave me a sideways look and said, just a touch hotly, "How come you talk like a white girl?"

The question was pointed, meant as an insult or at least a challenge, but it also came from an earnest place. It held a kernel of something that was confusing for both of us. We seemed to be related but of two different worlds.

"I don't," I said, looking scandalized that she'd even suggest it and mortified by the way the other girls were now staring at me.

But I knew what she was getting at. There was no denying it, even if I just had. I *did* speak differently than some of my relatives, and so did Craig. Our parents had drilled into us the importance of using proper diction, of saying "going" instead of "goin'" and "isn't" instead of "ain't." We were taught to finish off our words. They bought us a dictionary and a full *Encyclopaedia Britannica* set, which lived on a shelf in the stairwell to our apartment, its titles etched in gold. Any time we had a question about a word, or a concept, or some piece of history, they directed us toward those books. Dandy, too, was an influence, meticulously correcting our grammar or admonishing us to enunciate our words when we went over for dinner. The idea was we were to transcend, to get ourselves further. They'd planned for it. They encouraged it. We were expected not just to be smart but to own our smartness—to inhabit it with pride—and this filtered down to how we spoke.

Yet it also could be problematic. Speaking a certain way—the "white" way, as some would have it—was perceived as a betrayal, as being uppity, as somehow denying our culture. Years later, after I'd met and married my husband—a man who is light-skinned to some and dark-skinned to others, who speaks like an Ivy League–educated black Hawaiian raised

by white middle-class Kansans—I'd see this confusion play out on the national stage among whites and blacks alike, the need to situate someone inside his or her ethnicity and the frustration that comes when it can't easily be done. America would bring to Barack Obama the same questions my cousin was unconsciously putting to me that day on the stoop: Are you what you appear to be? Do I trust you or not?

I passed the rest of that day trying to say less to my cousin, feeling put off by her hostility, but also wanting her to see me as genuine—not trying to flaunt some advantage. It was hard to know what to do. All the while, I could hear the trickle of conversation going on between the adults in the kitchen nearby, my parents' laughter ringing easy and loud over the yard. I watched my brother in the flow of a sweaty game with a group of boys on the adjacent street corner. Everyone seemed to fit in, except for me. I look back on the discomfort of that moment now and recognize the more universal challenge of squaring who you are with where you come from and where you want to go. I also realize that I was a long way, still, from finding my voice.

Directions: Answer the following questions in your own words. You do not need to use complete sentences.

1) Make a prediction about who this writer might be: _____
2) For what reasons did this writer's parents teach her and her brother, Craig, the importance of using proper diction and directed them to dictionaries or encyclopedias whenever they had questions?

3) Why was speaking this way "problematic" for the writer?

4) What do you think the writer means in the last line of her story, "I was a long way from finding my voice"?