

White Spirit



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CATE KENNEDY

Cate Kennedy was born in the town of Louth in the county of Lincolnshire, England in 1963. As a child, her family moved to Australia, where she still lives today. Throughout her childhood, her family travelled to and lived in many different places within both Australia and the United Kingdom. She studied literature at Canberra College of Advanced Education and the Australian National University, and then worked several jobs before becoming a successful fiction writer, including working as a community arts worker in rural Victoria. For two years she also lived in Central Mexico, where she worked as a volunteer and taught literacy to illiterate communities. Her writing is often inspired by her political observations of society's weaknesses and the struggles faced by low-income or impoverished communities, largely based on experiences she has had working adjacent to these communities. "Habit," her award-winning short story was inspired by flaws and dangers she saw in the Australian Customs Service, which she also briefly worked for. She is primarily a short-story writer, and has had two short story collections published: *Dark Roots* (2006) [Like a House on Fire](#) (2012). She has also written poetry and nonfiction, and her sole novel, *The World Beneath* (2019) was shortlisted for and won several awards. She currently lives on a farm in Victoria, Australia and teaches at several colleges in addition to writing.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Public housing in Australia, such as the centre depicted in the short story, is run by the government and consists of about 7 million different housing buildings throughout the country. Australian public housing emerged largely out of labor movements following World War II. In Australia, there are two main types of housing estates: big high-rise apartment complexes in cities and estate-type housing on blocks of land in suburbs and more rural areas. Australia is also home to many asylum seekers from different countries. In the early 2010s, when "White Spirit" was published, Australia experienced significant political controversy when the Prime Minister at the time tried to reduce the number of refugees allowed into the country by refusing to accept any refugees who traveled by boat (Given that Australia is surrounded entirely by water, this act would have cut down accepted refugees to a tiny number).

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Cate Kennedy has published two short story collections: *Dark Roots* and [Like a House on Fire](#). "White Spirit" was first published

in the latter. She has also published four collections of poetry, *Joyflight*, *Crucible and Other Poems*, *The Taste of River Water*, and *Signs of Other Fires*, which she wrote in response to her experiences living and working in Central Mexico. Much of her work is realistic fiction, concerned with societal and political issues based on Kennedy's own life and work experience. Other notable contemporary Australian short story writers are Tony Birch, Nam Le, Patrick Holland, and Karen Hitchcock. Kennedy has also spoken about being inspired by the short story writer, Alice Munro. "White Spirit" itself, and its themes of racism and white ignorance, can be compared to many other short story writers, some of whom are American (and who wrote about American race concerns specifically), such as Flannery O'Connor and James Baldwin. The story's concern with immigrant and refugee experiences of discrimination and inequality can be compared to some of the writer Jhumpa Lahiri's work, though Lahiri's stories are typically told through the eyes of the immigrants while "White Spirit" looks through the prism of a white protagonist's realization of her own and her colleagues biased outlook toward a refugee community.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** White Spirit
- **When Written:** 2012
- **Where Written:** Australia
- **When Published:** 2012
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary fiction
- **Genre:** Short story
- **Setting:** A public housing centre in an unnamed Australian suburb
- **Climax:** The narrator realizes she has failed the community and moves to leave the mural celebration event
- **Antagonist:** The story's antagonist is not one singular character, but rather systemic appropriation and exploitation of nonwhite people by the white people in power.
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Desert Island Book. Cate Kennedy says if she were stranded on a desert island and could only have one book, it would be Harper Lee's [To Kill a Mockingbird](#).



PLOT SUMMARY

In modern-day Australia, an unnamed female narrator works for a public housing centre that houses refugees and

immigrants of a multitude of different ethnic backgrounds. The narrator's centre has won a grant allowing the narrator to commission two artists to design a **mural** celebrating the centre's residents. As the story begins, she stands in the centre's gym with the artist couple—Mandy and Jake—who are in the midst of painting the mural, which needs to be completed in time for the opening celebration event in just a few days. As she talks to Mandy and Jake, the narrator privately feels awkward and embarrassed about the way the mural is going so far. While it was intended to be a collaborative project between the artists and the community living in the centre, it has not gone according to plan. None of the residents have come to help paint the mural and have instead avoided both the artists and the entire gym entirely while the painting has been going on. The narrator points out to the artists that the kids depicted in it should be holding a soccer ball rather than a basketball, because that's the kid's preferred sport. The artists say they will paint over the mistake but the narrator still leaves them feeling weary of how the project is going.

The narrator goes to get cash (using her own money, rather than the centre's) for supplies for the women's fabric-painting class she runs at the centre. When she gets to her car, she sees a parking inspector who is about to give her a ticket. She pleads with him, and mentions her class of refugee women as an excuse to get out of the ticket. Later, at her class, she asks the women in her class if they would help paint the mural, but they don't want to. The narrator then asks if they will attend the mural opening on Friday and wear their traditional dresses at the event. The women in the class say yes to the former but no to the latter, and seem uncomfortable about the question.

The next day, the mural is almost complete: it shows a big row of people from all different ethnicities and races with their arms around each other, smiling. The narrator tells the artists it looks great but privately thinks it looks nothing like real life. A man from the company Pro-Guard comes to inspect the mural's wall surface and help select an **anti-graffiti sealant that will protect** the art from any damage. The man recommends the sealant called "white spirit," which will both prevent any attempted graffiti from sticking and also make it easy to wipe away any graffiti that does get onto the surface. The narrator works with Mandy and Jake apply both coats of the sealant together, working late into the night on the day before the opening event.

At the opening event, the minister—a local political figure—praises the mural for its authenticity and collaborative design, both of which the narrator knows are not true. The narrator feels increasingly ashamed as the event goes on and she observes the residents, who are all avoiding getting near the mural, which inaccurately represents the actual community. As the event is happening, the centre manager privately asks the narrator to get rid of some empty paint solvent tins, as he's worried the teenage residents might take them and get high

sniffing them. The narrator, feeling upset, moves to leave the event, giving the camera she is supposed to take pictures of the events with to Jameela, a woman in her fabric painting class, who stands with two other women in the class, Nahir and Mawiya. Just as the narrator is about to go, she is stopped by Jameela, who calls her back to take a picture with the whole class. The narrator, despite how bad she is feeling, smiles for the photo.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Narrator – The narrator is an unnamed white woman who works for a public housing centre in Australia. The narrator is portrayed in the story as being both well-intentioned and at times biased and ignorant. She writes the grant to fund the **mural** meant to celebrate the centre's residents, and oversees its creation, including hiring the artists to paint it. However, by the time the story begins and increasingly throughout the story, she experiences a crisis of conscience as she realizes the flaws of the mural. She has a close relationship with the women in her fabric-painting class but they are the only residents of the centre she seems to know personally. She works hard and even to spend her own money on materials for the women in her class, but she also can be misguided in her efforts to celebrate the diversity of the community, which sometimes leads to a self-aggrandizing celebration of the white leadership and organization behind the centre rather than the residents themselves. By the end of the story, the narrator's growth has made clear to her both the mural's weaknesses, and the way that those flaws expose the deeper problems with the centre's leadership and her society more broadly.

Mandy – Mandy is one of the two white artists working on the **mural**, along with her boyfriend Jake. While Mandy seems generally to be nice and hardworking, the story shows how such traits are not enough to overcome her ignorance about and lack of ability or will to connect with the community she is representing in the mural.

Jake – Jake is the other white artist working on the **mural**, along with his girlfriend Mandy. Like Mandy, he seems like a friendly person who is uninterested in or unaware of the work necessary to connect to and understand the people he is representing in the mural, or the necessity of making such connections before engaging in the sort of work he is doing.

Minister – The minister is a local Australian political figure who the **mural** is intended to impress. What he thinks of the mural seems to be the chief concern of the centre's leaders regarding whether or not the mural is considered a success or lack thereof. The minister comments positively on the authenticity of the mural and the collaborative process used to create it, without ever checking to see if his observations are accurate or

with actually getting to know the community living in the centre. He is more eager to praise the mural in bland idealistic terms than in actually creating a society truly based on those ideals.

Parking Inspector – The parking inspector tries to give the narrator a ticket when she is overdue in her parking spot. She successfully manages to talk him out of it by commenting about how she has parked in this spot to buy supplies for the refugee women in her fabric painting class—by using her “goodness” to give herself a get-out-of-ticket free card. Little information is given about the parking inspector, but the narrator assumes based on his job and appearance that he too was once an immigrant living at the centre.

Jameela – Jameela is one of the women in the narrator’s fabric-painting class. She is kind to the narrator and patient with the narrator’s requests regarding the women in the class’s attendance at the unveiling of the mural, even as she firmly says no to some of those requests. She is the person who calls the narrator back to take a photo with the whole class near the end of the story, when the narrator is about to abandon the mural celebration.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Pro-Guard Representative – A man from the company Pro-Guard who comes to sell an anti-graffiti sealant called **white spirit** to protect the **mural**. He is primarily concerned with treating the mural as a commodity to be protected from damages and with selling a product to the narrator.

Centre Manager – The centre manager is the narrator’s boss. Like the minister, he shows little interest in actually getting to know the communities who live at the centre and instead seems mostly concerned with making the institution itself look good—sometimes with negative consequences for the residents.

Nahir – Nahir is one of the women in the narrator’s fabric-painting class. She points out one of the artists, Mandy, and notes how her appearance (her piercings, specifically) stick out.

The Other Residents – The other residents of the public housing centre include: the children living in the complex, some of whom are shown playing soccer and others shown playing basketball; the other women in the narrator’s fabric painting class; and the Vietnamese women shown serving food to guests at the opening celebration.

black and white.



MULTICULTURALISM, AUTHENTICITY, AND APPROPRIATION

In her short story “White Spirit,” set in modern-day Australia, Cate Kennedy shows the limits of multiculturalism, specifically when these efforts toward diversity are spearheaded by the white people who hold the power in that society. The story focuses on an unnamed, white, Australian narrator who works for a public housing centre and oversees a grant to commission a **mural** at the centre depicting the different, mostly nonwhite refugee communities living there. As the story goes on, she begins to feel ashamed about the hypocrisy of the mural project, as she comes to see that it celebrates diversity while disregarding the needs of the actual residents. Through the lens of a narrator who realizes her own complicity in existing white power structures, Kennedy reveals how white-led calls for diversity—even if well intended—can appropriate the identities of the non-white peoples intended to be authentically represented.

Kennedy first shows the white capacity for cultural appropriation when the artists hired to work on the mural demonstrate a lack of knowledge about the people they are depicting. When the narrator points out that the kids portrayed in the mural should be holding a soccer ball, instead of the basketball that the artists—Mandy and Jake—had painted, the artists are surprised by this information. They say that this information was “not in [their] brief,” revealing that they don’t know the community they’re depicting in any deep way at all. Mandy then immediately shows a further lack of understanding about the resident community as she tells Jake that “the African kids” play soccer. The artists are either not able or not interested enough to distinguish between the different ethnic groups in the centre, seeing them instead as a homogeneous whole. The residents, accordingly, avoid the artists, even as the narrator recalls how, in Mandy and Jake’s interview, they had expressed interest in getting to know the community during the job and talked about making a “celebration of diversity.” The narrator sees that even if Mandy and Jake’s good intentions of working within the community were heartfelt, in practice they are hollow.

The hypocrisy of the mural and its planning becomes more evident as the residents’ actual behavior differs from the story the mural tells about them. While the mural shows an image of a seamlessly-integrated and happy coalition, the actual residents stand mostly divided by ethnic difference. Further, the residents avoid the mural being painted to celebrate them: the kids who usually play basketball in the gym after school avoid the area entirely now that Mandy and Jake are there. When the narrator asks the resident women in her fabric-painting class if they would want to contribute to painting, they too refuse. That the community isn’t interested in participating



THEMES

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in the creation of the mural hints that it is being imposed on the residents—that it is speaking for them, not to them. The narrator also notices differences between how the women in her class are represented in the mural—wearing “traditional” dresses copied from images in library books—versus how the women actually dress, in typical Australian clothing such as “pastel windcheaters” (i.e. windbreakers). The mural is supposed to be an authentic representation of the residents, but it conceals the reality of the community members’ experiences.

In fact, the white characters in the story often fail to recognize how their efforts to celebrate diversity are ultimately self-serving. At the event celebrating the mural, the minister (a local government official) praises the mural’s authenticity, mistakenly believing that the “community...had a hand in creating” the art. The problem with the minister’s faulty assumption isn’t just that it’s wrong; it’s that it’s also *lazy*. The minister’s assumption is what he *wants* to believe; he never makes an effort to find out if it’s true or not. Meanwhile, he willfully ignores the actual community’s actions at the event, ignoring that the residents “carefully distance themselves” from the image in the mural. While the mural is ostensibly meant to celebrate the residents, the minister’s behavior makes clear that it instead allows the white people in power to congratulate themselves on their goodness while simultaneously ignoring those they are supposed to be helping.

Right before taking a staged photo with the organizers and residents, the centre manager asks the narrator to get rid of some empty solvent tins left from the mural project, fearing that kids who live in the centre may “sniff them” to get high. The centre manager wants to create a smiling, positive image out of the mural event, while privately thinking disrespectfully of the communities being celebrated. The narrator leaves this interaction with the centre manager angry and disappointed as she realizes that he just wants an image of “local colour,” an image of multiculturalism no matter how inauthentic and fabricated it is in actuality. She then thinks about the solvent itself—called **white spirit**—which she has been told will be able to clean any graffiti from the mural. She realizes, bitterly, that “no matter what gets scrawled there, whatever message of denial or contradiction” the white spirit will be used to wipe away and ignore it in favor of a white-led positive message.

“White Spirit” shows how often attempts at diversity can be used as manipulative tools that, rather than meeting the needs of the actual people who make up that diversity, ultimately uphold power structures already in place. More specifically, in a white-dominated culture, the story shows how “diversity” is twisted to make the white people feel good about themselves, while the “diverse” people are concealed and ignored behind the false image.



RACISM AND PREJUDICE

Throughout “White Spirit,” the narrator, other staff at the public housing centre, and the **mural** artists benefit from their whiteness and even at times make prejudiced and racist assumptions about the mostly nonwhite refugees they work for. While the white organizers at the centre intend to create a positive living environment and community for the residents, in actuality they often are patronizing and unhelpful to the mostly nonwhite centre residents. In this way, the story demonstrates the pervasive nature of racism and prejudice, and how these sorts of intolerance can emerge from well-intentioned individuals and out of what may seem initially like “nice” behavior.

While the white artists’ and organizers’ words about the nonwhite refugees may initially seem kind, the story shows how in practice they are often patronizing and disrespectful. When the narrator suggests that someone may graffiti over the mural, the artist, Mandy, is quick to deny that this would ever happen, claiming that “nobody will graffiti anything they feel a sense of ownership and inclusion about.” While the idea behind Mandy’s statement is superficially kind, in reality, it reveals her willful ignorance about the residents, who have not given any indication they feel ownership or inclusion about the mural. Further, Mandy’s statement shifts the blame to the residents. Mandy’s belief that the residents will and should feel a sense of “ownership and inclusion” toward the mural seems founded solely on the fact that she thinks they should. This circular logic would mean that, should any resident end up putting graffiti on the mural, Mandy will assume there is something wrong with the resident, not the mural.

Even the narrator, who clearly has a more intimate relationship with the people living in the complex than the artists and other staff, acts in prejudiced ways. Like Mandy and Jake, the narrator makes willfully ignorant assumptions about what the residents want. She assumes that the workers will like a mural that shows “their community’s diversity” and is initially surprised when the residents choose not to participate in painting. But the story makes clear that the narrator’s perspective on the residents is not always accurate. She tries to encourage the women in her fabric-painting class to come to the mural opening in their “traditional dresses” because “the minister would love to see [it].” The narrator’s suggestion is met with “charged awkwardness” and a no. Rather than respecting the women’s autonomy, the narrator has attempted to make them into prop displays of diversity. Through the flawed narrator, the story shows how racist and prejudiced thinking can manifest in a multitude of ways.

Another way that the story shows a less overt manifestation of racism and prejudice is through the mural itself, which initially seems to display a positive image of the community but is really an example of a patronizing and homogenizing form of racism. The mural’s final product depicts “a rainbow of faces” in which

everyone is standing “‘We Are the World’ style with arms round each other, grinning.” The mural suggests a community that is effortlessly integrated, in which ethnic and racial distinction is not a divider. But in trying to promote an ostensibly positive image of integration, the mural’s design diminishes the different community members, erasing their individualism as well as the reality of their experience. It makes them into a symbol of uncomplicated integration that benefits white perception of the work the centre is supposed to be doing.

Moreover, it’s clear that the mural has design elements intended to make it more palatable for white viewers. By noting that the “Anglo” (white) faces are “judiciously” present next to the nonwhite faces, the narrator makes clear that the mural works to make white people feel included in this image of diversity. Despite the fact that the mural is, in theory, meant to be for nonwhite members of the community, the narrator’s observation gives away the fact that its *real* purpose is to make white people feel good about themselves. Finally, by referencing “We Are the World” (a 1985 charity song intended to raise money for famine relief in Africa) in her description, the narrator indicates that the mural, like the song, is something that promotes an outright message of unity and togetherness. However, she complicates this message by reflecting that “in real life” it would take “several simultaneous translators” to get everyone to laugh at the same time, as well as “a fair whack of fairy dust”—the narrator’s sardonic commentary shows that the mural’s homogenous depiction of the community is not authentic, but rather a patronizing fairytale which, despite its superficial positivity, perpetuates racist erasure of individual identity among the nonwhite community members.

The story deftly reveals the many ways that subtle forms of racism can manifest. The narrator, the artists, the centre staff, and the local political minister all *believe* they are doing good, kind work to help the nonwhite residents in the community. But through the narrator’s internal monologue and eventual realization about how these efforts are actually impacting the residents of the centre, “White Spirit” shows how a whitewashed, patronizing, artificial image of integration can actually do racist harm.



SELFISHNESS, SELFLESSNESS, AND CONNECTION

“White Spirit” shows the ways that the white character’s good intentions often, through lack of effort or understanding, end up serving selfish ends. In addition, the story suggests that many of the characters may not, perhaps without even realizing it, actually have authentic good intentions. Rather, many of the characters seem to “perform” what might be described as a guise of selflessness in order to actually achieve selfish ends. The story drives this point home through the narrator’s arc in the story, in which she comes to see the falseness of the selfless guise, even in herself,

and, further, to recognize the ways in which her actual selflessness has allowed her to make a real connection with the women from the centre who come to her fabric-painting class.

The false selflessness that so many of the white character’s display is evident in the **mural** artists, Mandy and Jake. The artists say they want to connect with the community, using their art for selfless purposes, but their actions say otherwise. The narrator remembers how, in their interview for the mural painting job, Mandy and Jake had said they wanted to meet and collaborate with the community and insisted that they did this kind of work because of the “rich sense of connection...achieved working alongside the very people you were depicting.” However, in practice, they remain distant from the community they are depicting. None of the people living in the complex go near them, and Mandy and Jake themselves make no effort to reach out and foster this connection they supposedly want. The only time Mandy and Jake are shown interacting with the community they represent in the mural is at the end of the story, after the art is already finished. At the celebratory event, they approach a group of resident teenagers and try talking to them, but the narrator notes that Mandy looks “self conscious” and that the teenage boys avoid eye contact. The lack of effort on Mandy and Jake’s part to include or connect to the community suggests that Mandy and Jake’s interest in doing the mural had more to do with furthering their careers or taking on a paid job than in truly trying to do something selfless and collaborative with the community.

Like the mural artists, the narrator herself struggles to truly connect with the community. The narrator does have good intentions about supporting the people living in the complex, especially the women in her fabric painting class who she knows more personally. But she also uses the women in her class and trades on her “goodness” when it is convenient for her to do so. When she is about to get a parking ticket, she gets out of it by telling the parking inspector that she was buying stuff for the “group of refugee women” in her class. The narrator comments that she hates “trotting that out” and admits to herself that it’s a white lie. But almost immediately she justifies the lie, thinking to herself: “this is my money we’re talking about, my free time, my goodwill.” Here, the narrator believes the lie—and the way she used the women’s refugee status as an excuse for her convenience—is acceptable because of the importance of her own needs. In the moment, her selfish impulse overtakes her better intentions.

The narrator and the artist’s self-serving actions (which operate under the guise of selflessness) stand in contrast to the actions of several of the residents in the complex, who behave in more truly selfless ways. When the narrator tries to convince the women in her fabric painting class to come to the celebration for the mural, they agree to come, even though they are obviously wary of or disinterested in the project. Their willingness to come seems to be founded on wanting to do

something for the narrator, not because of any benefit to themselves. Later, when the narrator sees the women in her class at the event, they acknowledge her in a way that the narrator recognizes as the “smiles of the truly dutiful, the truly kind.” Kennedy’s use of the word “truly” here is key, as it establishes a difference between the empty, ultimately selfish “kindness” that the mural represents and the real selflessness of the women showing up to the event even when they may not care about or even like the mural.

Accordingly, the narrator has her only moment of true selfless connection through her relationships with these same women in her fabric painting class. At the end of the story, as the narrator, upset and disappointed by the mural she now understands is an expression of control rather than celebration or the centre residents, tries to leave the event, Jameela from her fabric painting class stops her to take a photo with them. While the narrator is frustrated and “drained of energy,” when the women in her class call her back for the photo, she joins them. In this moment, she smiles, and it’s not clear if she is smiling for the women or with them. That lack of clarity is intended—the narrator is doing both, she is doing something to help uplift the women, and she is in turn uplifted by them. In this way, the story presents a hopeful end, as the narrator has a moment of connecting with the community in an authentic way that the mural project, and the other people behind it, did not.

“White Spirit” portrays a narrator who does ostensibly altruistic, charitable work for the public good to show how easily selfless intentions can slip into selfish actions. By showing how the narrator’s own perception of the mural and the work the centre does changes over the course of the story, “White Spirit” shows how real selfless decisions may not always be the easiest to make. Ultimately, the story ends with a hopeful but ambiguous ending. The narrator does connect with the women in her class, but it seems as though she is the exception to the rule. The narrator has done real work to foster a relationship with her class, but the same cannot be said of the rest of the white power characters. The story makes clear that true, authentic connection across groups is possible, but that it is also rare and takes work to achieve.



BUREAUCRACY AND SYSTEMIC INEQUALITY

The narrator’s desire to be kind and helpful is often thwarted by the bureaucratic structure of her job, placing her in a ladder of systemic inequality which limits every individual’s ability to support other people. While the work of the centre is intended to be altruistic, its mere existence is indicative of a system of economic inequality which leads to an inherited scarcity of and competition for resources. The **mural**’s very existence comes out of the bureaucracy of the centre (and, by extension, the local government), which creates a system based on competition, economic scarcity, and

commodification of people and resources.

Throughout the story, the characters deal with financial limitations and struggles of varying degrees of difficulty. The cycles of systemic inequality divide every person into different economic classes. The artists, Mandy and Jake, have to apply to sell themselves as the best artists for the job (even though, it becomes clear, they may not be) in order to gain a paid job. Even with the grant funding, the narrator spends her own money on the centre’s projects, knowing that going through the process of getting the money can be a hassle and that it’s often “easier if [she] just pays for it.” Additionally, it’s clear that even the grant funding is not a hefty amount, as by the end of the project, the narrator is counting the remaining grant money in the account, and sees that there is only enough left to buy “snacks at the opening.”

Still, the narrator sees how even with her financial frustrations, she has class privilege that many others do not possess. When she is getting a parking ticket, she observes the inspector giving her the ticket and makes an assumption that he probably used to live at the centre himself, assuming based on her understanding of class division in Australia that it’s likely that someone in his job is a refugee or first generation immigrant. Similarly, she reflects on the “demands of getting by” that the entire community of two thousand who lives in the housing complex struggle with—while the narrator sees her own life as a bureaucratic struggle, she recognizes how her life is still in many ways easier—because of her whiteness, by her economic class—than the lives of those living in the complex.

The center’s bureaucracy—and the society-wide, systemic scarcity of resources—creates a situation in which the centre, which purportedly exists to serve its residents, in practice prioritizes its own funding and sustained existence above the actual needs of its residents. The grant used to fund the mural is itself shown to be a commodity. The narrator gets the grant approved by proposing the mural as a good investment, and when she imagines the event celebrating the mural, she pictures “community workers from other centres” coming to the opening to “marvel and envy, and apply for their own grants.” The narrator’s observation indicates the competitive nature of the centre’s very existence and the overall societal scarcity of financial resources. Ironically, the centre must work against other centres in order to succeed in its own goals.

But while the centre competes with other institutions to win funding and sustain its own existence, it ignores and overrides the material needs of its residents. While the mural is being painted in the gym, the kids who live in the centre are unable to do what they actually want to do—play basketball. And the mural itself makes use of grant funds that the residents of the centre would rather use for other purposes, like purchasing pool tables (as the narrator recalls). But the centre does not want to actualize residents’ desires as much as it wants to justify its own existence, which it does through commissioning

the mural that, while ostensibly celebrating diversity, actually just celebrates the centre through a homogenized presentation of the centre's residents that is designed to appease the white bureaucracy in which the centre is embedded.

In all, "White Spirit" portrays a modern Australian society in which systemic socioeconomic inequality—and the way that inequality is expressed through bureaucratic structures—makes it difficult for people to really support one another, or even to really understand each other. The centre, ostensibly, is supposed to exist for its residents. But the story shows how limited resources, the need to make the centre "look good" in order to keep those resources flowing, and the desire of the centre staff to personally be successful, actually creates a misalignment between the centre's goals and the needs of the residents, such that the residents' needs and desires are always ignored and pushed to the bottom.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE SEALANT AND WHITE SPIRIT

In "White Spirit," the anti-graffiti sealant used to protect the **mural** from potential damage is called Armour All, and the product that the center can use to remove any graffiti applied above the sealant is called white spirit. The white spirit, of course, gives the story its title, which is a signal of its symbolic importance. The narrator purchases the sealant from a representative for the company Pro-Guard, who is, above all else, a salesman who treats the mural not as a piece of art, or as a celebration of diversity, but instead as an asset—revealing the true value of the mural to the centre. Further, the sealant and white spirit give the white leaders of the center a way to ensure that their mural about diversity will always look just as they want it to. In other words, it is another way that white power structures can celebrate "diversity" while ensuring that only they can control the actual message about diversity, and a symbol for how whiteness can actually quash or hinder true diversity by forcing every instance of multiculturalism or diversity to remain in a certain, artificial image that appeals to white viewers. The use of the sealant and white spirit shows that for the white people in charge of the centre, the artificial, positive image of diversity is more important than the actual reality and needs of the community.



THE MURAL

The mural, like the anti graffiti sealant, represents the distortion of the reality of the diverse community in a public housing centre by the white leaders of

that centre. The narrator commissions two artists to paint the mural, which they are supposed to do collaboratively with the community. However, in practice, they end up never interacting with the community, and painting a good-looking mural from images in reference books that does not in any way capture the reality of the residents lives. The mural represents how the white leaders want diversity to function—easily, prettily, and in a way that makes the white people in charge look good—as opposed to the reality of life, which is messier and more difficult, and requires real work to build connections across different communities.





QUOTES


Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Read How You Want edition of *Like a House on Fire* published in 2013.

White Spirit Quotes

☞ The residents of this estate took a few surreptitious looks at this pair when they first arrived, and have chosen to stay out of their way since. We'll have to invite some in specially, over the next couple days, for the photo documentation we need. Some casual shots of the artists chatting and interacting with residents, facilitating important interchange. Community ownership. An appreciation of process. It's all there in the grant evaluation forms.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), The Other Residents, Jake, Mandy

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 171

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs at the beginning of the story, as the narrator watches the artists, Mandy and Jake, paint the mural. The narrator has noticed how separate the artists are from the community, which makes her think about how she can obscure that rift through some strategic photography. The narrator's inner monologue, then, makes clear that the mural's message of collaboration across diverse lines is false, on the one hand, but must be presented as true to the powers at the centre and who funded the grant. She knows that any collaboration will not happen naturally and that instead she'll have to ask residents to come and essentially pose with the mural and artists, all for photo

documentation. The narrator, here, is strategizing about how to use the residents as props to fulfill a fabricated appearance of authentic diversity. Additionally, the underlying theme of bureaucracy is established here, as the narrator knows that she has to make the mural appear a certain, positive way, so that the centre's use of its grant can be considered a success.

While the mural project was intended to be a communal experience for the centre residents to participate in making, the narrator knows that this collaboration has not happened and that it is unlikely to happen. Furthermore, while Mandy and Jake had applied for the job by suggesting they were eager to connect with the community and celebrate the diversity of its many cultural groups, in practice they are doing no such thing—in fact, their presence is unwelcome to the people who comprise the community. Here, the narrator sees the gap between what the mural project was supposed to achieve—intercultural exchange, collaboration, and celebration—and what it actually is doing—pushing the residents of the centre away from their space (the gym) and distorting their images into a commodity to be used by the centre to tell the story it wants to be seen..

☛ She gestures to the mural, where her partner's painting in the figures of three women. They're prominent, next to the four laughing Eritrean children who are posing with a basketball.



"Should that be a soccer ball?" I say, half to myself.


"Sorry?"

"Should those kids be holding a soccer ball instead? They've actually formed a whole team; they play on the oval on a Sunday afternoon. I think soccer's more their thing."

I might be wrong. They might be Somalis.

Related Characters: Mandy, Narrator (speaker), The Other Residents, Jake

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 172

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator corrects a mistake in the mural—Mandy and Jake have painted some of the resident

children holding a basketball, when really the children prefer soccer. But just as soon after she has made this comment, she displays her own limits, as she can't remember if the kids she is thinking of are Eritrean or Somali. This passage indicates the pervasive nature of white appropriation and misunderstanding of nonwhite people. Mandy and Jake have put minimal effort into actually understanding the different communities they are representing, instead relying entirely on old photos, library books, and the centre's documents to construct the images of the residents. This is ironic, given that they had applied for the position ostensibly to get to know the people they would be depicting. Instead, they are constructing an image based off of vague ideas of real people, and not on experience. But the artists are not the only ones with a misguided understanding of the centre's residents; the narrator, too, has limited (and sometimes completely incorrect) knowledge of the people who live on the estate.

In this way, the passage introduces the narrator's primary flaw and internal struggle throughout the story. While she has a much better knowledge of the different centre residents than Mandy, Jake, or even the Centre Manager or the Minister, she too has flaws. She, too, acts in ways that are self-centred and, at times, racist. She is disappointed and befuddled by the artists' inability to connect with the centre residents, but she herself is similarly separated from the community. She is relatively close with the women in her fabric-painting class, who she knows more personally, but she'll admit time and again throughout the story how little she actually knows about most of the people living in the centre. The difference between the narrator and the other white characters is that she's just a bit more aware of her flaws—and feels more guilty about them—than the other white characters.

☛ "Look, I'm buying stuff for a class. For a group of refugee women." I hate trotting that out, and in any case technically it's a bit of a white lie now, but this is my money we're talking about, my free time, my goodwill.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), The Other Residents, Parking Inspector

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 175

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator references her work with the

refugee women in her fabric-painting class as an excuse to try to get out of a ticket. The narrator has just gone to the store to use her own money to buy supplies for the women—an actually selfless act. But she then turns around and uses her own goodness—and the women—to benefit herself by getting out of having to pay for a ticket. She does not try and argue with the parking inspector about being wrongfully ticketed; rather, she almost invokes his sympathy by making herself appear as a good person, someone who deserves to have the rules broken for her. In this moment, she acts selfishly, turning the real relationship she has with the women into her class into a prop she can use to benefit herself. Furthermore, she frames what she is doing with the class as something charitable rather than collaborative, painting the women in her class as people worthy of the inspector's pity, rather than full, rounded people on equal standing to her and him. The passage shows how racist, appropriative behavior can occur even from generally well-intentioned characters when it can benefit them.

Moreover, the narrator shows a divide within herself—she both feels guilty using the women in her class as a self-serving excuse while also believing that she is entitled to these “benefits” that come from her job because of the way that the job takes advantage of *her* (she often pays for her class materials out of her pocket). The blurry line between the narrator's selflessness and her selfishness will continue to be an important thread in the story, as she feels both disappointment as the mural fails to authentically unite the centre residents and willfully ignorant indignation about why this is the case.

“Because, you know, you can wear national costume, if you like. Your traditional dresses? That would be wonderful. The minister would love to see that.”

Their faces grow wary and apologetic with unsayable things. The room is stiff with a charged awkwardness, with languages I can't speak.

“No. But we come.”

Related Characters: The Other Residents, Nahir , Jameela , Narrator (speaker), Minister

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 177

Explanation and Analysis



In this passage, the narrator tries to cajole the women in her


fabric painting class to wear their culturally traditional dresses to the mural opening event. Here, the narrator's own willingness to use the residents for her own benefit is once again visible. She has actual, invested relationships with the women in her class, but here she has another moment of trying to turn them into props. The mural shows the women in traditional dress, even though they don't typically wear such clothes. But the narrator, in an effort to create an event that tells the story that the center wants it to, asks the women to look like the women in the mural, rather than like themselves. She is trying to persuade them to dress in this way because she knows, if they do, the message of diversity shown in the mural will seem more authentic to the minister which, in turn, will make the center look good. This once again confirms that the mural itself, while ostensibly a celebration of the community living on the estate, is really intended to please the minister and prove the centre's value to the white power structure. Moreover, the narrator shows her inner conflict and hypocrisy again—she knows the women in her class and cares about them, but is also capable of dehumanizing them, turning them into symbols of a false diversity.

However, the moment is complicated when the women in her class are given voice and refuse her offer, saying a kind but clear “no.” While the narrator, the centre manager, the minister, and the artists, are trying to use the women as objects, the women refuse to let this happen, standing up for their autonomy. Additionally, the language barrier between the women and the narrator is what allows them, in that moment, to have a certain kind of power. They can have their own private thoughts about the mural and they do not have to share those with the narrator; they can share or withhold as much as they like. Even so, they choose to do something selfless—agreeing to come to the opening event, even though they may not want to—as a way to support the narrator. This is one of the few instances of true selflessness in the story, and it's worth noting that the narrator is the recipient of the kindness, rather than the giver.

“It's a rainbow of faces now, the mural, a melting pot. A few Anglo faces are placed judiciously next to Laotian and Eritrean, Vietnamese alongside Salvadoran and Iraqi and Aboriginal, all standing ‘We Are the World’ style with arms round each other, grinning as if the photographer's somehow cracked a joke they all find mutually hilarious, something that in real life would involve several simultaneous translators and a fair whack of fairy dust.”

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), The Other Residents

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 178

Explanation and Analysis



In this passage, the narrator describes the nearly-finished mural, which has become a sunny picture telling a story of easy and seamless integration. The image created shows people of all sorts of different cultural backgrounds smiling with their arms around one another, which the narrator likens to the 1985 charity song intended to raise money for famine relief in Africa, “We Are the World.” By comparing the image to the charity single, which is known for being somewhat gimmicky, the narrator makes clear that the mural, while positive and pretty, is ultimately artificial and false. She highlights the mural’s inauthenticity when she comments that what it depicts—an ethnically diverse group of people who speak multiple different languages all laughing at the same thing—could not happen in real life.

This passage also deepens the symbolic meaning of the mural. The mural symbolizes white appropriation of other cultures, and it’s clear that while the mural may look nice, it is not actually doing something nice for the community that it depicts looking so happy. In reality, no one in the community has come to assist the making of the mural. This white audience is even included within the image, as the narrator notes a couple of “Anglo faces” that are “judiciously” next to the others. The word “judiciously” makes clear that the white people in the mural are a strategy, telling the anticipated white audience (specifically the minister) that diversity can and should always still include white people. The mural is designed by and for white people in order to tell a fiction that allows a white audience to feel good about itself.

“They won’t graffiti it,” interjects Mandy, who’s listening. She’s walking along past each big smiling face, giving each eye a realistic twinkle. “Nobody will graffiti anything they feel a sense of ownership and inclusion about.”

Related Characters: Narrator, Mandy (speaker), Pro-Guard Representative, Jake, The Other Residents

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 180

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mandy, one of the artists, argues that they don’t have to worry about the mural being graffitied because the community living at the centre will feel the image belongs to and was made for them. Mandy’s statement once again shows the willful ignorance of the white characters in the story. Mandy’s comment is not only illogical—it presumes that the people living at the centre feel included in the making of the mural, which they have given no evidence they do—it is also disparaging toward this same community. She makes the statement as if she knows the people living in the centre and their feelings personally, when she has actually spent no time getting to know any of them. Furthermore, she insists that it would be nonsensical and even morally wrong for anyone to damage the mural, since it is meant to be something the community owns. This suggests that, were someone to graffiti the mural, she would not seek to understand why or reflect on the way that the mural was imposed on the community, but rather blame the person who did the graffiti as ungrateful for the gift of the mural. Mandy turns her own laziness and ignorance into a kind of moral self-protection, in which her generous sentiments define the world, even though they aren’t accompanied by any kind of action.

Finally, this passage confirms the mural as a symbol in the story. As Mandy paints the people in the mural to be smiling happily, she says something untrue and not based in reality about their actual experiences. Mandy says that she is creating something the community will feel belongs to them, but really she is just making something that will belong to the white people—and this message will be preserved in perpetuity with the sealant they eventually apply to the wall.

“I’ve never been here on the estate this late at night. As I splash the sealant on I listen to cars revving and residents shouting, doors slamming, a quick blooping siren as the police pull someone over, the thumping woofers of passing car stereos. And through it all, I hear a babel of voices; every language group we’re so proud of, calling and greeting, arguing and yelling, nearly two thousand people I couldn’t name and who have no use for me. Who glance at me, leaving in my car every afternoon, and look away again, busy with the demands of getting by.”

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Mandy, Jake, The Other Residents

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 181

Explanation and Analysis


This passage portrays the narrator on the centre's estate late at night, applying the sealant to the mural with Mandy and Jake before the mural's opening event the next day. As she paints, she reflects on the fact that while she spends much of her time at the centre, she has never been there in the nighttime. In a way, it is as if this is the first time the narrator is truly seeing the centre residents as complete people, because she is seeing them at a private time, a time when they are not there doing the structured activities she and the other centre staff members have organized. Instead of seeing the women in her fabric painting class or the kids who play in the gym after school, the narrator hears the thousands of people at the estate all talking together, having private lives which she cannot access. She cannot even understand much of what they say, because several different languages are being spoken.

This passage also enforces the theme of bureaucracy and systemic inequality, as the narrator recalls how harried most of the community living at the centre is. While the narrator works to create a mural celebrating the people living there, she knows, in this moment, that such a display of diversity is not actually what people in such a lower class position in society need—they have immediate material needs and stresses occupying their minds. Yet as the narrator realizes this, she continues to apply a damage-preventing sealant to this mural, ensuring that its false story will be protected.

“Such a positive message,” the minister is saying, “and I understand the community itself had a hand in creating it. Marvellous.”

Related Characters: Narrator, Minister (speaker), Mandy, Jake, The Other Residents

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 



Page Number: 182

Explanation and Analysis

This quote takes place at the opening event for the mural, as the government minister praises the mural to the narrator. Only about a tenth of the centre's residents have shown up at the event, and the residents who are there are working to intentionally avoid being close to the mural, but the minister here either ignores or doesn't notice these signs of failure, instead complimenting the “positive message” of the mural. The minister has been the person the narrator and centre manager have been most concerned with impressing—in many ways, the mural has essentially been for *him* and not for the community at the centre. This moment shows that the mural has achieved this goal; the minister thinks the mural has something nice to say and he chooses to believe that the community it depicts helped make it, even though there is no evidence this is true. That the minister lazily assumes that the mural tells exactly the story he is hoping to hear because it's true, rather than tailored to him, shows the way that the white Australian characters in the story are primarily concerned not with actual diversity, or actual diverse people other than themselves, but instead with making themselves feel good about themselves.

He's beckoning to the minister, grinning glancing up at the mural to find a good place to stand in front of. “I've noticed those empty solvent tins out by the bins,” he murmurs in passing. “Can you dispose of them somewhere else, where the kids from round here won't find them and sniff them? Ta.”

Related Characters: Narrator, Centre Manager (speaker), Minister, The Other Residents

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 184

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the centre manager asks the narrator to throw out some of the empty sealant containers because he thinks that some of the kids living at the centre may try and “sniff them” to get high if they are left out in the open. This moment occurs at the same time the centre manager is asking the narrator to gather the Turkish women from her fabric painting class for a staged photo in front of the mural with the minister. Once again, it's clear that the centre manager only wants to create something that *looks* like easy,



positive diversity, rather than actually listening to the people who live at the centre.

Additionally, this moment shows some of the pervasive racism and prejudice that exists within the white staff at the centre. While the centre manager wants to use certain residents at the centre for a photo, trying to show that the community is integrated and happy, he also makes a prejudiced assumption about the teenagers at the centre, suggesting that they would use the empty solvent tins as drugs. In this moment, it's clear that even if some of their intentions are good, the white staff at the centre (including the manager and the narrator) still have some racist, biased thoughts about the community. This moment is made all the more ironic as the manager tries to stage a photo while saying something degrading about the community he wants to celebrate.

☛ Local colour is what he wants. A multicultural coup. Boxes ticked. Oh, here's our vision alright, I think bitterly, sealed and impervious and safeguarded. And no matter what gets scrawled there, whatever message or denial or contradiction, you can just wipe it away. With white spirit.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Centre Manager, Minister, The Other Residents

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 184

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is the climax of the story, as the narrator walks away from the centre manager enraged at what she now sees as exploitation of the community living on the estate. She admits now to herself fully that the manager and the minister and even she herself have created an image that is at best a lie and at worst insulting to the people it depicts. The people who live at the centre have, in the mural, been transformed into an empty, artificially positive message of multiculturalism and diversity. Their actual lives have turned into colors in a painting: one-dimensional. Moreover, the narrator now sees her own complicity within the bureaucratic system she works in. She has protected the mural from any future changes by the community. Any graffiti, any messages of dissent, or any additional artwork that the community may add to the wall, will be wiped away by the white spirit solvent. Whatever the community may

actually feel or wish to say about the mural will not be heard, because the false message of the mural will always be preserved.

Here, the double meaning of “white spirit” is made abundantly clear. The solvent is a metaphorical representation of the actions of all the white characters in the story. Throughout the story, the actual nonwhite, diverse people living at the centre have had their real interests and personhoods quashed by the interests of the white staff and artists; they have been used by the whites in power to tell a story that celebrates not the actual residents, but rather those whites in power. In the climax of the story, the narrator finally has an emotional reaction to this, seeing the ways her good intentions have hurt the very people she was supposed to protect and support.

☛ I stand there in the middle in my jeans and black top, a dowdy, sad sparrow among peacocks. Then, as Jameela raises the camera I feel two arms on either side of me, stretching tentatively round my waist, drawing me tighter, and in spite of everything, I smile.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), The Other Residents, Nahir, Jameela

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 184

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the final moment in the story, the narrator has an actual moment of selflessness and connection as she takes a picture with the women in her fabric painting class. While the narrator is about to leave the event, embittered and ashamed of the failure of the mural and her own complicity in it, she is stopped by Jameela and the other women in her class, who ask her to take a picture with them. The narrator behaves in a selfless way in this instance, going to take a picture with the women even though she, in that moment, was about to leave.

A deeper significance of this moment is that Jameela, not the narrator or another white centre staff member, holds the camera. Quite literally, the picture being taken is coming from Jameela's point of view. Throughout the story, the perspective of the actual residents living in the centre has been ignored. The mural came entirely out of a white viewpoint—the narrator and centre manager proposed the mural, Mandy and Jake designed it, and the minister was the primary person viewing it. Here, Jameela, one of the only

named nonwhite characters in the story, gets to have her own point of view at the forefront. *Jameela* is the one who invites the narrator to take a picture with the rest of the women. Rather than the narrator inserting herself into the image (as happened with the white faces in the mural or the photo the centre manager and minister are taking at the same time), the narrator is allowed to be included in the picture because Jameela and the other characters in her

fabric class want her to be there. This is the singular moment of true connection in the story, and it happens because the narrator, in spite of her own flaws, has nevertheless developed real relationships with the women in her class. Here, that connection finally amounts to something, as the women in her class want her to be part of the story the photo they take tells.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

WHITE SPIRIT

On a Tuesday afternoon in an unnamed Australian suburb, the narrator talks with Mandy and Jake, two artists she has commissioned to design a **mural** for the public housing centre she works for. The mural will go up on a wall in the centre's gym and will depict the community who lives at the centre. The narrator observes that Mandy's fashion choices stick out from the way the residents of the community dress. The narrator also remembers that she needs to take photos of the artists working with the residents to create the painting as evidence for the mural's grant funding.

The narrator points out that Mandy and Jake have made a mistake in the **mural**, inaccurately painting four children with a basketball instead of a soccer ball—soccer is the sport they actually play. Mandy and Jake are surprised by this information but agree to paint over the basketball design, turning it into a soccer ball. However, they also decide to leave the basketball singlets (i.e., jerseys) in the painting as is.

The narrator reflects back on Mandy and Jake's interview for the job. At the time, the two had described similar artwork they had done for past jobs and had spoken of their desire to work collaboratively with the resident community, saying they wanted to celebrate the diversity of the different cultural groups at the centre. While this is what they said in their interview, the narrator notes that in actuality they are very removed from the residents of the centre, who avoid the gym while they paint in it. The narrator herself feels awkward being around them, like something in their plan for the mural has gone wrong.

It's immediately clear that the mural project is not going according to plan. The mural is supposed to depict the community of people who live in the centre—and be a product of interaction between the artists and that community—but the community is notably absent from the creation of the piece, so much so that the narrator is coming up with ways to stage photos, making it appear as though the artists and the community are actually working together in order to fulfill the terms of the grant that funds the mural. The narrator also sees the differences between the residents of the centre and the artists, and understands that this difference is the reason why the two groups are not sharing the same space.



While Mandy and Jake are supposed to be painting an authentic representation of the community, they reveal their lack of actual experience with the people living in the centre. Their knowledge of the resident community comes entirely from documents they received from the centre staff, old photos of past centre events, and library books. The artists have not actually gotten to know the people living at the centre at all. Further, while the narrator corrects their mistake about the basketball here and Mandy and Jake agree to make the change, they remain largely unconcerned about inaccuracies in general, as they decide not to change the basketball jerseys. The artist's commitment to accurate representation only goes so far.



The narrator notes the difference between what Mandy and Jake said they would do during the mural project, and what they are actually doing. They had said they wanted to foster actual relationships with the people living at the centre, but they are not putting in the effort to do so. Whether the artists' initial statements were heartfelt or cynical, in practice it doesn't change much. The outcome is that they primarily benefited themselves—they landed a job—by saying the “right” things about this “multicultural” project. The narrator's sense of the mural as having gone illustrates her own burgeoning sense of guilt at the way the mural project is failing to represent the residents in the way it is supposed to.



The narrator confirms with Mandy and Jake that the mural will be finished by Thursday. She thinks again that she will have to get some of the elementary school children to come paint some of the mural—all for the chance to get a photo of the residents working alongside the artists. She worries, though, that she will have to bribe the children to get them to help paint without causing all sorts of chaos and trouble.

The narrator here shows that, at this point, the mural's message of diversity, inclusion, and collaboration, is more important to her than its actually being any of those things. She is concerned with the opening event on Friday being a success and with their being evidence that residents of the centre participated, even if that participation was forced. She also here has a moment of prejudice as she assumes that she will have to bribe the children at the centre to not make a mess when painting, suggesting that she believes they will behave in a chaotic way, even though she has not yet even asked them to help paint.



The narrator goes to her office to get money to buy material for the women's fabric-painting class that she leads at the centre. She grabs her own money even though she is supposed to use the centre's for this cost, deciding it is just easier for her to pay out of pocket instead of going through the complicated process of requesting money from the centre.

The narrator's justification for using her own money on her class, rather than the centre's funding, shows the way that the obstacles put in place by bureaucracy actually harm those they are supposed to benefit: she's supposed to be able to use the centre's money, but the centre puts so many controls in place to make sure the money is used properly that it is easier for her to use her own. At the same time, she does use her own money, showing some selflessness toward this class that she runs.



The narrator next drives to the store to get supplies for the fabric-painting class. On her way out of the store, she sees a parking inspector who is about to give her a ticket. She pleads with him to not do so on the grounds that she's only two minutes late. When he is unsympathetic, she tells him that "I'm buying stuff for a class. For a group of refugee women." She thinks to herself that she hates "trotting that out," but then justifies to herself that she had to do it to protect her own money. The inspector does end up letting her off and, as he walks away, the narrator thinks to herself that, based on his job and how he looks, he likely grew up in the centre himself.

This scene captures the way that white characters can simultaneously be acting in a way that is selfless and selfish, trying to build multicultural understanding while benefitting personally from that effort in ways that are low-key racist. Here the narrator is selflessly using her own money for the materials for her painting class, but as soon as it is more convenient for her, she shows off her "goodness" and uses the refugee women in her class in order to force sympathy from the parking inspector in order to get out of a ticket. In suggesting this to the inspector, the narrator also implies that the women in her class are pitiable people, dehumanizing them. The narrator even recognizes that what she's doing is wrong, but justifies it based on her own needs, when of course that is an insufficient argument for using and demeaning another. Finally, the narrator makes an assumption about the inspector himself based on his job and appearance. This final assumption both further highlights the narrator's own tendency to make biased assumptions and indicates the systemic inequality that permeates Australian society. The narrator makes this assumption about the inspector because she knows that many people who grow up in the centre end up in predictable socioeconomic situations as they get older—that society is fundamentally unequal and leaves people stuck within their class differences.



Later, at her fabric painting class, the narrator asks the women in her class if they would like to help paint the **mural**, as she and the artists had initially intended (and hoped) would happen. The women in her class say no. One woman, Nahir, comments on Mandy's tongue piercing, making the rest of the class laugh. The narrator wonders why the experience of making the mural has differed so much from what she pictured, and considers that she might not have done enough research into the actual wants of the community before commissioning the mural. She also worries that Mandy and Jake's appearances may be pushing the rest of the community away.

The women in the narrator's fabric painting class are some of the only residents she has a real connection to, which is made clear by the fact that she actually knows and refers to some of them by name. Still, she feels obligated to try and convince them to participate in the mural for the sake of appearances, even though they have not shown interested in doing so. Nahir's comment about Mandy's tongue piercing seems to indicate how visibly different the artists are from the rest of community at the centre, and how unwelcome and alienating their sudden presence at the estate is. When the white Australians in charge at the center think of "diversity" they think of themselves as "normal" and the residents as being diverse. But the residents' reaction to the "different" artists makes clear that the white sense of being normal is itself a racist construct that reduces all those who are non-white to the primary status of being something other than white.



The narrator asks if the women in her class will still attend the **mural's** opening on Friday and the women agree. Then, the narrator suggests they could all wear traditional dresses from their cultures, saying that the minister (a local politician attending the mural opening) would like to see them dressed up in their national costumes. The women grow uncomfortable at this request, and refuse, but reiterate that they will come to the event. The narrator feels awkward about her role in this exchange. Then as she looks around her class, at the women of various different ethnic and geographic backgrounds, working next to each other in the class she thinks about how the centre manager would want her to take a photo. Though she does also note that the women are not yet sharing tables with people from different backgrounds than their own.

The narrator once again pushes the women in her class to come to the mural opening, even though they don't want to help paint it. The women agree to do this, but then the narrator pushes it further, making clear that her real agenda is not to try and include the women in her class, but rather to make them participate in just the right way to impress the minister to see. Once again, the narrator trying to use the women rather than try to understand what they want and need. The women's kind but firm refusal shows that while they do care about the narrator and seem to want to be supportive to her, they also see when they are being made into props and refuse to let this happen. The narrator has another moment of feeling embarrassed by the entire mural project but still can't help, but then immediately thinks about the women in her class as an image that may impress her boss (the centre manager) or the minister. That the women in her class also don't mix across ethnic lines, though, underlines again how complicated multicultural interaction is, and how the white character's idea of "diversity"—in which there are white people and other people—is in fact hopelessly simplistic.



The narrator reflects how different the women in her class are from the way they are being represented by Mandy and Jake on the mural in the gym. In the mural, the women are represented wearing culturally traditional dresses painted from how such clothes are depicted in library books. In reality, the women in her class wear pastel windcheaters (i.e., windbreakers). The narrator then turns back to ironing pillows cases flat so they will be ready for the women to apply painted patterns to them.

The difference between the images of the residents being presented by the mural and the way the residents actually dress shows that the supposed authenticity of the mural is actually a fabrication, not based in reality. Moreover, the narrator, in the actual work she is doing in the class, is actually doing more work for the community ostensibly being celebrated in the mural than the artists in the gym are. The narrator is actually meeting their material needs by doing this ironing work, by actually supporting and serving the women, rather than creating a piece of art they do not want that does not truthfully represent them.



By Wednesday afternoon, Mandy and Jake have still not completed the **mural**, which they have created mostly by referencing pictures in library books and photos from a centre barbecue that took place last year. The narrator observes the half-finished mural, which depicts people of multiple different ethnic, racial, geographic, and cultural backgrounds all smiling with their arms around each other. She thinks about how far this image of an integrated community is from reality; in real life, each of the people in the mural speak different languages and tend to live separately from each other within the centre.

The centre manager and the artists feel excited about the **mural** and about showing the work to the minister at the event's opening on Friday. The narrator reflects that the mural, while not authentic to actual experience, does *look* nice, and knows that the minister and other white viewers will think it is beautiful. Mandy comments that the narrator looks sad, but the narrator lies and says she's fine. Mandy shows a tiny spot of the wall they left for kids living at the centre to paint in, and the narrator remembers that she will have to pick out a few kids to do it. The narrator thinks to herself that she may have to bribe the kids with chocolate to do the work and to ensure that they do a good job and don't "wreck it."

Mandy and Jake have still not connected with the community or gotten any residents to help paint. Despite the fact that they said they wanted to create bonds with the community, they seem unbothered with designing the mural entirely based on paste images and overly simple ideas about diversity and harmony, rather than capturing real people and real complexity. The mural, consequently, has become an attractive but entirely false image that is profoundly untrue to what the actual experience is of the people living on the centre's estate.



The centre manager and the artists are happy with the mural, even though no one in the community has come to help make it. The narrator by this point understands that even though the mural is not a truthful depiction of the community, its actual purpose is not to tell an accurate story, but rather to make the minister (and the other white centre staff members) feel good about themselves and their role in the pretty story they are telling. Accordingly, the artists have only left a small sliver of a spot for the residents to help paint. Their concern is with meeting a deadline and making the mural look a certain way and not with working to actually involve the community. While the narrator seems to be the only staff member at the centre to be able to understand the true nature of the mural—that it's built to obscure rather than reveal the truth of diversity in the centre—the narrator is herself a flawed character, with her own prejudiced or racist thoughts. Here those flaws are on display as the narrator assumes she will have to bribe the children of the center not just to come and paint, but to not ruin the mural when they do. The conception of "diverse" children as unruly is a typical racist trope.



The narrator's coworker shows up to tell her a man is waiting to meet her in her office. The man is a representative a company called Pro-Guard. He's come to help her pick out **an anti-graffiti sealant** to protect the mural. He monologues for a while about the various products she could choose and eventually goes to inspect the wall in the gym with the mural on it. The narrator eventually stops him from talking and asks for an easy sealant she can apply herself that will prevent any damages to the wall if someone does graffiti it. Mandy comments that no one will graffiti the wall, arguing that the community will feel a sense of ownership over the mural and that, consequently, they will not want to wreck it.

The narrator finds the man from Pro-Guard both boring and overwhelming. He talks for a long time about the different products she could purchase and she omits relating most of what he says because she finds it so grueling to listen to. The interaction shows the monotony of the mural project, and its true nature. While the mural is meant to be a work of art, it's actually a commodity which must be protected. And the protection is not just from time or the elements—it's from graffiti. The narrator's request means that she privately understands that the mural may not be well-received by the community. But rather than do something to make the mural something the community does value, the narrator is only empowered to protect it from the community it is supposed to be celebrating, which is just another indication that the mural was never really for that community in the first place. Meanwhile, Mandy's comment that the community will feel that the mural belongs to and represents them shows her willful ignorance about both the community and the mural. She is, willfully or ignorantly, misrepresenting the feelings of a community she knows nothing about in order to protect her sense that she is doing something good, that she herself is good.



The Pro-Guard representative recommends the sealant Armour-All to prevent any graffiti, saying that it will just take two coats, painted twelve hours apart to finish, and that any graffiti that does go up on the mural could then be removed by **white spirit**, a paint thinner. The narrator agrees to purchase Armour-All and adds up the limited funds she still has remaining from the grant to spend on the opening. She thinks of the food they will have at the celebration, which will be largely catered by various cultural groups living within the centre.

The sealant and the white spirit paint solvent become important symbols in the story; both are used as protective measures to the ensure that the message of the mural—no matter how it is actually received by those it is supposedly representing—will be protected. The white spirit solvent, then, becomes a an extremely aptly named metaphor for how the intentions and feelings of the white people working at the centre will always be valued above the actual desires of the centre residents. Finally, this section show the frustrating financial limitations and bureaucracy of the narrator's job at the centre, as she worries about the lack of money they even have to make the event happen. Because of these financial limitations the will actually require the labor of the people it is ostensibly celebrating; ironically, they will need to cater the event, even as the mural is supposed to be honoring them.



The narrator goes to try and get a couple kids from the class to add a small bit to the **mural** before they paint the **sealant** over it. Mandy and Jake agree to help the narrator apply the sealant. The narrator reflects on how the two artists are kind people but continues to feel saddened and confused by the way that the entire mural-creation process has felt so awkward.

The narrator is still stuck trying to convince people to help, even though no one has shown interest in doing so. Mandy and Jake's kindness and willingness to help the narrator with the sealant, even as their work on the mural has been disruptive and alienating to the community, shows that niceness is not enough, and in fact can go hand in hand with harmful, prejudiced, or appropriative actions.



The narrator, Jake, and Mandy stay up until Midnight on Thursday applying the second coat of the **sealant**. The narrator feels lightheaded and tired as they work on it and thinks about how she has never been at the centre's estate this late at night. She listens to the sound of all the cars, sirens, doors-slamming, music, and voices of people living at the centre, most of whom, she admits, speak languages she cannot understand and are people who don't even know who she is, nor she them. She thinks of all these people, who have no time to even think about her because they are "busy with the demands of getting by."

This scene portrays levels of systemic inequality at the center. The narrator, to do her job, has to work late into the night at the centre—the needs of the centre impose themselves on her life, and she must do what she has to do in order to look good and perform her job, even if what is asked of her is unfair. But in being at the center late at night, and hearing all the noises of the lives being lived there, and while the narrator has her own frustrations and exhaustions, she reflects in this moment on how much greater the demands of living are for the people living at the centre.



At the event unveiling the mural the next evening, the minister praises the celebration and the mural. The narrator is unsurprised. The minister continues, expressing admiration for the authenticity of the mural, about the way the entire event spreads a positive message, and he further praises the fact that the community worked on making the mural. The narrator knows that none of this is true and that the minister has no real evidence to confirm its truth either.

The minister's approval and praise of the mural has been the goal of the celebration event all along, but now the narrator is jaded about the minister's admiration. The narrator knows that minister's compliments are empty; he has no way of knowing if the mural is actually authentic or if the residents actually participated in making it, which they did not, but he also shows no interest in investigating his assumption. He sees the happy story he wants to see; and doing so makes life easy for him. Further, he doesn't actually interact with the residents either. For the minister, the primary audience for the mural, the actual residents are not as important as the simple, easy message of diversity that they symbolize to him. The centre's mural uses the residents in order to make itself look and feel good. The minister uses this entire event to make himself look and feel good.



A group of teenagers approach the **mural** and the narrator remembers how these same kids had wanted to purchase pool tables, not the mural, with the grant money. She has a moment of understanding about why they would want that instead, and watches Mandy and Jake approach the group. The narrator notes how self-conscious Mandy looks as she speaks to them. The narrator starts to feel an itching feeling in her eyes and a tight feeling in her throat, but assures herself it's probably just from residual chemicals in the air from the paint **sealant**, and not from tears.

The narrator tries to see from the perspective of the teenagers at the estate. At other points in the story, she has been dismissive or even insulting of the kids living at the centre, but here she finally understands why something fun like pool tables would have been a better use of the grant money than an unwanted and inaccurate mural. She sees how the centre could have listened to its residents, could have actively put the residents first. As she watches Mandy and Jake try to talk to these same teenagers, she has an emotional reaction, seeing how awkward the interaction is and how self-conscious Mandy appears. Yet the narrator is not yet willing to admit the full extent of her sadness, and blames the itching feeling behind her eyes on the sealant's chemicals. Still, her denial of the source of her tears can be seen as being metaphorically accurate—the need for the sealant symbolizes what's wrong with the mural, and so in fact it is what's pushing her toward tears.



The minister praises the narrator's use of the grant money, calling it a success. Meanwhile, the narrator notices some Vietnamese women residents of the centre serving guests food, and wonders how they feel about the **mural** and if they feel it represents them. Then she turns to look at the women in her fabric-painting class who smile and kindly wave to her.

The minister sees the grant money as a successful investment in this mural. It is a shallow and false way to think about a mural meant to portray the diversity of the residents; but, then, the mural itself is itself shallow. The white minister's praise of the mural and its representation of positive, uncomplicated diversity contrasts with the actual nonwhite residents at the event. Some of these residents are performing labor for the white guests. Their feelings have not been prioritized or uplifted. Instead, their bodies have been used to help make the event feel like a success to the white people in attendance.



The narrator's eyes begin to feel itchier and her throat more constricted (which she continues to blame on the **sealant**) as she observes how the divided community of different groups all manage to look like one group now, as all of them, she notices, work to avoid being close to the mural. She sees their efforts to distance themselves from the mural as a sign of their dignity, as she imagines they reject the artificial positivity of the mural which does not accurately represent them at all.

The narrator continues to fight off and deny her emotional reaction, unwilling to yet admit the depth of her sadness. She notices the other residents and constructs a different narrative around them than the story the mural tells. She sees their refusal to go near the mural as a resistance to the mural's patronizing message. She cannot know for sure if her assumption about the residents' feelings is correct, but she is making more of an effort to see from their perspective than she has up until now, or than any other white character in the story has at any time.



The narrator thanks the minister and goes to leave the event, when the centre manager approaches her and gives her a camera to take photos of the event. Then he also asks her to get rid of the empty solvent cans from the Armour-All, suggesting that kids living in the centre might try and sniff them to get high.

The centre manager's comment shows that beneath the good intentions and positive message of the mural is actual a patronizing, degrading, and even racist view about the community living in the centre. The centre manager wants certain images of diversity to come out of the event so that it looks like the community is happy and being celebrated. But he also suggests to the narrator, another white person, that the kids living at the estate may use any opportunity to get high, showing both that he does not actually believe these teenage residents are enjoying the event as well as how little he thinks of them.



The centre manager then asks the narrator to gather some of the Turkish women in her fabric painting class to come be in a photo shoot in front of the **mural**. The narrator bitterly realizes that the centre manager just wants to create an image of positive diversity, but does not actually care for what the residents really want and think, for who they really are. She thinks about how the entire mural has whitewashed the community and how if anyone in the community tried to graffiti the mural to contradict what the mural actually represents, it would just be wiped away—figuratively and literally—with the **white spirit**.

In the climax of the story, the narrator sees the hypocrisy in the centre manager's desire to take a happy, staged photo while he also degrades the people living at the centre. His prejudice and hypocrisy pushes her toward finally admitting that the mural does not actually serve the community. She also sees the metaphor in the solvent, as she understands that any of the community's actual feelings about the mural (if they tried to graffiti it) could easily be quashed by white spirit, much in the same way that the force of the white people working on the mural managed to override the actual desires and feelings of the nonwhite people living at the centre.



The narrator leaves the centre manager and walks over to the women in her class. She hands Jameela the camera, despite the fact that this is against the centre's rules regarding its property. She tells Jameela to take photos of anything she wants at the event, which Jameela seems to be surprised by.

The narrator chooses to leave the event, finally extricating herself from the patronizing harm of the mural. In giving Jameela the camera and asking her to take pictures, the narrator prioritizes Jameela's point of view on the event—how Jameela sees the community from her perspective—above her own point of view. Jameela's surprise at being given the camera reveals how undervalued the point of view of the residents of the centre usually is, and shows a transformation within the narrator from trying to control the behavior of the residents to giving up this control and letting them tell their own stories. That giving the camera to a resident is against centre policies makes clear that the centre has no intention of giving up such control.



The narrator turns to leave Jameela and thinks to herself how tired she is as she remembers that she has to get rid of the paint solvent cans, which she will take back to her own suburb and throw out in her own trash can.

The narrator's reflection on the labor she must continue to do shows how demanding her job is and reveals that even though the narrator herself has benefited from her whiteness, she too exists on a lower rung of the ladder of systemic inequality in which she has to focus on her own "demands of getting by."



Just as the narrator is about to leave the gym, Jameela calls her name and runs after her. She leads the narrator back to the rest of her class, who are ready to take a picture together, with her. The narrator stands next to the women in her class, who seem genuinely excited to take a photo together. She thinks about how different and downcast she looks from the rest of them but find herself in the group, with two of the women's arms around her, and "in spite of everything," she smiles.

Jameela's invitation for the narrator to join the the picture of the class shows the first real moment of connection in the story, and serves as a kind of redemptive moment for the narrator. This time, Jameela and the other women in the class are deciding what this image should look like and they are allowing the narrator to be part of it, rather than the reverse. Despite the narrator's flaws, she has put in the time to actually get to know these women; and it is that connection which results in their insistence that she be in the picture. The fact that the narrator smiles in the picture, even as she is feeling worn out and sad, is a moment of true selflessness on her part, as she lets go of her own self-pity and bitterness to support the women in her class. At the same time, it is a moment in which the women themselves are supporting the narrator. She is not only smiling for them. They are also giving her a reason to smile. The story ends on this hopeful moment of true connection across ethnic and racial boundaries; this picture captures an actual portrait that celebrates diversity. Yet this happy ending is not complete. The narrator and these women have made a real connection—such connection is possible—but it is also limited, and it is not clear that anyone else in the story will do the work to make such connections themselves.





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