Satirical piece / An imitation of Jamaica Kincaid’s “A Small Place”:

By Seanna Viechweg

Congratulations. You’ve made it. You made it all the way to South Philly without any trouble. Good for you. But oh shoot! Your commute was nothing to write about, record in your journal, and dramatize for friends over dinner. Don’t worry, you’ll have several more times to go to your placement, eventually, you will come across something.

You know that you’ve found your placement once you see a few Black and Bown kids hanging around a huge building. You pass each student with a cheerful smile on your way in, ignoring their curious stares. You look for the walk-through metal detectors but are surprised to find just a security officer at a desk with a pen and paper to sign in. You explain that you are coming from Haverford College, an elite private liberal arts college, located right on the mainline. After the security officer smiles nicely at you despite the air of arrogance you tend to give off in every room, your host teacher meets you and directs you to the classroom you will be observing.

As you and your host teacher make it through the halls, you pass by other classrooms with doors open, which you take as an invitation to peep your head into a few of them, fascinated by the students in the classrooms! The students here are...just so different. You’ve just never been around so many people who don’t look like you!

Once inside the classroom, instead of sitting among the students as your host teacher does, you sit all the way in the back, avoiding any interaction so you could take notes. You are sitting in on a 10th grade English class, particularly during a discussion about Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby. How exciting! You are ready to cut in on the conversation to show off your extensive knowledge about the history of the roaring 20s.

Except, once you actually start to listen to what the students are saying, you realize they are talking about the American Dream. On the board, the questions “What is the American Dream? Do you believe in the American Dream?” are written in huge letters.

Psh. Who wouldn’t believe in the American Dream? It is one of the many ideals of this country that makes it so so great! You are dumbfounded when you hear a few of the students disagree. One kid even shares a story about his family who immigrated here. He’s arguing that even though they’ve been in the country for years now, they are they still struggling financially. You decide to add to the conversation because obviously, these kids just don’t know any better.

“Maybe, your family should just work harder.” Everyone in the room looks at you. You notice your host teacher’s eyes widen, almost frozen in response to what you’ve just said. You realize there is a shift in the room. You quickly add, “I mean, maybe after a few more years, you might think differently about the American Dream. You know, by then, your family’s situation might change.” You smile your happy-go-lucky smile thinking everything is fine again. Except the room is silent now. After your host teacher tells the students to break up into small groups to answer some more questions about the book, she takes the young man outside the room.

You decide to get up and try to listen to the conversation. But by the time you get to the door, your host teacher and the young man have already come back in, missing out on the opportunity to get some great material for your field notes. Your host teacher asks you to refrain yourself from speaking out during class. You are confused. Why would she not encourage you to add to the conversation? Your voice matters. You go to Haverford College. There is so much that you can teach these kids. If anything, you are doing both her and them a favor. But to be nice, you nod your head saying, “No worries. I understand!” You don’t understand. But you don’t want to get on your host teacher’s bad side. After all, he is the one who fills out your evaluation at the end of your placement.

You continue to sit in on the class for the next hour or so. Sometimes you doze off lightly but other times you pay close attention. You stare at the students. You realize that you have never been in a classroom that is predominantly Black and Brown. You make a mental note to yourself to reflect on this in your field notes later, as you want your education teacher to know just what it is like for you in your field placement, you know, as the minority (for once).

As the class period comes to an end, you get a snapchat from one of your best friends asking what you're up to. You start to tell him that you are observing a class but instead decide to send your best friend a snapchat of you and the students. You ask three or four students to take a photo with you. Despite how awkward the selfie feels, you send it to your best friend with the caption “out here helping the youth” with a winky face emoticon. While you are at it, you also put the snap on your story so that all your friends can see just how great of a guy you are.

Your host teacher wanted to talk about something with you earlier but seems busy with students’ questions. It looks like you could help answer some of the students’ concerns but look at your watch and decide to catch the 3:15 pm train. You leave without saying bye to anyone. You scroll down the hallway patting a few students on the back, even rubbing a kid’s head.

**You catch the 3:15 pm Paoli-Thorndale back to Haverford. You are feeling good like you’ve accomplished something today by observing these kids. You think you are helping them by writing about them, sharing their stories with friends, and speaking out when you believe it is necessary. You look back at your story, with the photo of you and some of the kids.You are smiling that ignorant smile of yours. Completely oblivious.**