

JESSICA WESTHEAD

## EVERYONE HERE IS SO FRIENDLY

You arrive, and right away they offer to take your coat. When you give it to them, they bow! You are not used to this kind of treatment. At home, people shoved you aside, called you mean names like Wiglet.

When you babysat the neighbours' kids, they made you play Dog, which meant that you had to get down on all fours, and the kids tied a skipping rope around your neck. They yanked on the rope and yelled, "Bark!" You coughed because the rope was too tight, and they said you had to be punished and go in the doghouse, AKA their parents' closet. You wanted these kids to get the best possible start in life so you crawled in, and they locked the door. You sat back on your haunches, whimpered. They were going to get a bad report for this. You tried to make them behave so they would get a good report, but now that wasn't possible.

But everyone here is so friendly. When you're not looking, they take your face in their hands and admire it from all angles, and steal kisses from your knuckles, which people at home used to say looked like bratwurst casings. They call you on the phone and ask, "Are you available? Can you come out and play?" They invite you to their parties, like this one.

By the time you show up, they have already blown up all of the balloons, except they have saved one big red one for you to personally inflate so you can feel like a part of the action. This is a relief because the party is a potluck but nobody told you, so you didn't bring anything to contribute. You feel like a fool, showing up empty-handed. They say, "It's okay, we have too much potato salad, anyway." You say, "Whoa, how did you know I was going to bring potato salad?" They wink: "We know all of your secrets." You blush the shade of pink that people at home said was the colour of canned ham. But here they place their small, cool hands on your shoulders and say, "Your secrets are beautiful, and so are you."

At home, you had dreams about the end of the world. A tsunami, a cyclone. You had to save all of your friends, so you tried to rally everyone to flee the city, or take shelter in a basement. A few of them listened to you at first, but they soon became bored with your plans and broke away into

survivor splinter groups. You couldn't even command attention when the world was ending.

The party looks like a lot of fun. People are jumping up and down, spilling drinks, giving each other makeovers. You've been told that the idea is for the guests to feel liberated, as if they have just escaped from a miserable totalitarian regime.

You watch from the sidelines, as usual, beside the chips-and-dips table. They come over and try to make conversation with you, to increase your comfort level. They ask you, "What kind of dip is this?" And you say, "How am I supposed to know? I'm the one who didn't bring anything, remember?" They smile and nod and go away.

You regret your choice of outfit. Everyone here is dressed informally whereas you are wearing clothes that you thought would be airy and cool and right out of the pages of a magazine, but they're sticking to you in all the wrong places, and the elastic cuffs are too tight and make you feel squishy. Thanks for the heads-up about the dress code, folks, you think.

They come back over, clasp their hands together. "Are you having a good time?" You nod and say, "Yes." They ask, "Can we get you anything?" You shake your head and say, "No." They go away again.

You scoop some dip with enough force to break the chip. You leave the broken-off part to soften and disintegrate in the bowl.

You overhear a conversation that goes like this:

"It's so much freer here, don't you think?"

"Oh, I agree. Everyone here is so friendly, and open. Have you been to Vienna? The Viennese are like monsters compared to the people here."

You ball your hands into fists, shove the fists between your knees to trap them before they can strike someone.

You decide to see what it's like on the other side of the room. Maybe there's a warmer feeling over there. Maybe some people will make a space for you in their dialogue. You would especially like it if someone inquired, "And who are you?" But everyone here already assumes a certain degree of familiarity with you, although you haven't been properly introduced to anyone. They believe that you're one way, but you're really another.

Or hey, you could check out the kitchen. Cut up some carrots, microwave some hors d'oeuvres, put some more chips into bowls. Or even just helpfully open the fridge for beer seekers.

While they're grabbing a cold one, you could point to one of the host's humorous magnets, roll your eyes and guffaw. Give me something to *do*, already, you think.

When the party is over, you're surprised to find yourself still here. You thought you would've left by now. But if you close your eyes and think about it, you don't even remember getting up to use the bathroom.

They come over to you, and their lipstick is only a faint ring around their mouths now. They say, "The guests thought you were wonderful! Would you like to take the leftovers with you?" You say, "Sure, what the hell."

They wrap up pinwheel sandwiches, pigs-in-a-blanket, pita triangles that have started to dry out and curl up at the edges. Hummus with a crust forming on top. You leave with their ribbon-tied parcel nestled under your arm.

On the way to your hotel in the taxi they called for you, the leftovers are heavy on your lap. You chuck them out the window, and the cab driver claps his hands against the steering wheel and says that's the best throw he's ever seen.

The next day, they order you breakfast in bed and tell you that the room service is on them, and no arguments now. You eat the toast soldiers they have lovingly cut and buttered for you, and read in the paper about how successful the party was because of your attendance. There is also a coupon for the exact digital camera that you have wanted for nearly a year now.

You cut out the coupon and take it to the camera store, where the owner tells you to put your coupon away; your money and your promotional discounts are no good here. He gives you the camera.

You wander around and take photos of empty landscapes, empty pop cans, your wavering reflection in various canals with your new camera stuck to your cheek like a shiny cyborg appendage.

You heard this place is famous for something but you can't remember what it is, and you don't know who to ask. The day gets cloudier and you get hungrier, but you only want to eat the special dish that this place is known for—you're stubborn that way. Then again, maybe the special renowned-for thing isn't even food; maybe it's a statue, or a dance.

You plop yourself onto a park bench, and a tour bus goes by and everyone on the bus stares at you, their faces mashed against the windows. The tour guide announces, "Look who we have here!" And you wave because at home you always waved at tour buses, for a laugh, and maybe one

confused rider would flutter his or her fingers back at you, and then somebody on the street would push you onto the ground and kick you and say, “Who do you think you are?”

But here, the whole busload waves at you enthusiastically, a mass frantic flapping that must really hurt their shoulders, and you look away and quickly lower your own hand. With your head down, you review the photos you took. You erase most of them, and you wonder what else to do with your time, how to make the most of your wide-open day.

**Jessica Westhead**'s first novel, [\*Pulpy & Midge\*](#), was published by Coach House Books in 2007, and her short-story collection, [\*And Also Sharks\*](#), will be published by Cormorant Books in spring 2011. She didn't used to like parties as much as she does now.