

THE PARTY

By Pam Munoz Ryan

- (1) It didn't take me long to figure out that I wasn't invited to the party. I got off the bus and saw my friends huddled under the tree where we all stood every morning before the first bell. There were six of us: Theresa, Becky, Barbara, Carol, Kim, and me. I can't even say that we were close friends. We had come from different elementary schools and never fit with the predictable middle school jocks, pops, or nerds. We were flotsam and jetsam¹ that washed under a tree in front of the library and became our own group by simply standing together.
- (2) The circle seemed tighter as I approached; the fluttering of small white envelopes being hastily stuffed into backpacks and binders gave it away. I knew as well as the entire universe that Bridget's party was this weekend. Bridget was one of the pops, the popular ones and the antithesis² of me. She was thin and wore clothes that looked like they came straight from the pages of magazines. She had that hair—red, and cut into a perfect page, smoothed into a bowl around her face, and every shade of shoes to match even her wildest outfits. She had a select group of followers who squealed and hugged each other between every class, as if they hadn't seen each other in years. We all wanted to be like her or them and being invited to her party meant elevation in the school pecking order. To not be invited meant standing in stagnant³ water.
- (3) My stomach churned, and I hoped that Bridget was still holding an envelope with my name on it to be delivered later. But my friends' shuffling feet and

¹ useless objects

² opposite

³ motionless, stale

furtive⁴ glances guaranteed my fate. Their too-eager hellos told me that everyone already knew who was invited and who wasn't.

- (4) "Hi," I responded, but that one word already sounded hollow with disappointment.
- (5) Becky, always the diffuser of uncomfortable moments, said, "Hey, did you get all the algebra homework done?"
- (6) "Everything but the last problem," I mumbled.
- (7) "Here, want to see the answer?" Eagerly, maybe out of guilt, she gratuitously⁵ flipped open her binder before I could tell her it didn't matter.
- (8) I pretended to be interested in her calculations but my head swam with that sinking feeling that there was something wrong with me. That I wasn't worthy.
- (9) Thankfully, the bell rang and I hurried toward English. When I passed the cafeteria, the impending lunch smells followed me, and I felt nauseous by the time I reached class, but I knew it wasn't the aroma of creamed turkey and overcooked green beans. I couldn't concentrate on the short story we were supposed to be reading in class, but I had no trouble attending to the faux⁶ wood grain on my desk and wondering if I could dissolve into it and disappear.
- (10) Why hadn't she invited me? My feet were too big? No. Maybe. My face was broken out? Who wants someone with acne at her party? Why did she invite every person in my group except me? I tried to think of any interactions I'd had with Bridget recently. A few days earlier, we'd been partners during a sixth period project. I was intent on getting the project done and impressing her with the grade we could get, and she was intent on looking at teen magazines. She barely spoke to me except to say, "You're so serious. You know, you should smile more."

⁴ secretive

⁵ freely

⁶ fake

(11) By the end of second period, I had overheard all the details about the party. They were going bowling. It was a sleepover. There was going to be a scavenger hunt⁷. They were renting scary movies and were going to stay up all night. Each time someone mentioned the party, I smiled weakly and nodded.

(12) During third period, Meredith, one of the drama club girls, who wasn't invited and didn't care, asked me if I was going to Bridget's party.

(13) Instead of saying no, I found myself repeating tidbits that I'd heard earlier. "Her dad is taking everyone to IHOP for breakfast. They're taking two big vans so everyone will fit." I said it with authority. As if I was going, too.

(14) Meredith said, "I wish she'd invited me so I could tell her no. She's such a brat. And all that phony hugging. What's that all about anyway?"

(15) Where did Meredith get her confidence? I wondered.

(16) At lunch, I sat with my group at our usual table, and they politely avoided the subject. When Kim got up to take her tray, she said, "I'm going shopping tomorrow after school. Anybody want to come?"

(17) But I knew what they would be shopping for, so I said, "I can't. I'm busy."

(18) Becky hung behind and walked with me to dump our trays.

(19) "I heard Bridget could only invite so many people."

(20) "Whatever," I said. "See you later." I didn't look at Becky. I couldn't look at her because if I saw any pity⁸ or kindness in her eyes, I'd start crying so I pretended to look for something seemingly important in my backpack until she left.

(21) Maybe she didn't invite me because of my hair. It's so long and stringy. Maybe it's my coat. It is pretty ugly compared to some of the other girls' coats. I should have bought another color. But what does it really matter? None of my clothes match. I'm way too tall but there isn't anything I can do about that, and

⁷ a game in which participants have to collect a number of objects

⁸ the feeling of sorrow

she couldn't not invite someone to a party because they were too tall, could she? Maybe I should smile and hug more but I just can't get into hugging people unless I know them really well. Probably if I'd smiled more, I would have been invited.

(22) I hated Bridget. I hated her more for having the ability to make my life miserable. I wanted to go home. I felt sick. As I changed classes, I averted⁹ my eyes from everyone I knew so I wouldn't have to smile. So I wouldn't have to pretend that I was likeable.

(23) By fifth period, the news was out. Three girls that had been invited to the party couldn't go because of the overnight band trip. They rushed up to Bridget to tell her the sad news, and one of them cried, proving what a good friend she was and how much she wanted to go. They gave back their invitations. I passed the crier between classes and saw her injured, yet superior look. After all, she had been invited.

(24) Then the whispers began, like tiny wisps of drifting clouds, about who might be chosen in their places. I walked to sixth period, trailing behind Bridget, hanging back and watching hopeful faces laughing a little too loudly as they passed her. I counted nine girls who smiled and said hello to her on the short walk between classes. They might as well have been saying, "Choose me. Choose me."

(25) After school, Becky found me in the bus lines. Breathlessly, she said, "Bridget asked Barbara at lunch who else she should invite, and Barbara said you. And Kim just told me that she just heard Bridget say she was going to maybe invite you to her party. Call me, okay?" She held up both hands with fingers crossed, then hurried toward her bus.

(26) There was still a chance. But what did Becky mean when she'd said Bridget was *maybe* going to invite me. Was there a condition?

⁹ turned away

(27) Over all the heads, I could see the red hair bobbing toward the bus lines, then stopping. I heard Bridget laughing. She moved to another group, and there was another burst of laughter.

(28) Kids began crunching forward to board the bus.

(29) So what if I don't go to the party. I'm still me whether I go or not. And it's just for one night. So what's the big deal? My thoughts were spinning. Bridget headed toward my line, weaving through the crowd, and it did seem as if she was headed toward me. I pretended to not notice and looked straight ahead at the bus.

(30) I felt a hand on my arm.

(31) I turned my head.

(32) Bridget held out an invitation. "Will you come to my party?"

(33) I looked at the small envelope, relishing¹⁰ the moment. But my mind was a jumble. Now she wanted me to come to her party, but she hadn't wanted me in the beginning. I am an afterthought. I am not on the A list. I'm just filling a space so the vans will be full. I need to smile more.

(34) Take it, I thought. You know you want to go. Take it.

(35) The crowd was moving me now, and I was only a few feet from the bus steps. Bridget moved with me as I inched forward, still offering the invitation. I looked at the envelope. The original name had been scribbled out but my name hadn't even been written in its place. If I didn't take it, I was sure that it would go to someone else.

(36) I put my foot on the first step of the bus, then looked at her.

(37) I hesitated.

(38) Someone from behind me yelled, "Get on the bus!"

(39) I took a deep breath and gave her my answer.

(40) And then, I smiled.

¹⁰ enjoying greatly