For all the lab animals, past and present.
C. S.

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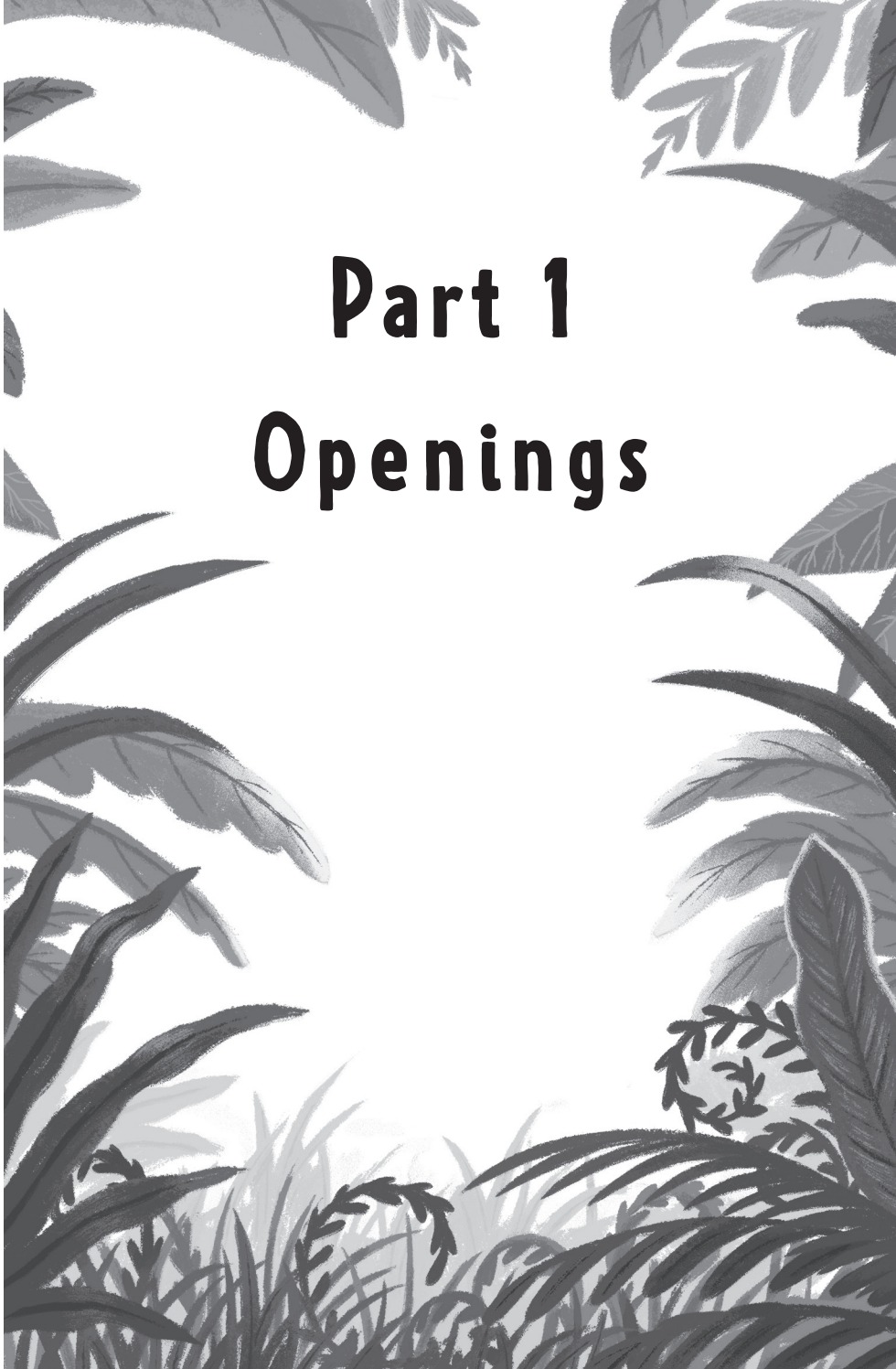
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I took a deep breath and listened to
the old brag of my heart:
I am, I am, I am.
– Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*

Chess is life in miniature.
– Garry Kasparov



Part 1
Openings



Letter One

Dear Rosie,
There once was a mouse. That's me. Hello!

As you can probably tell, I'm not sure how to begin. This is my first time writing a letter. And it's not even writing! It's more like thinking. I am *thinking* a letter.

This would be so much easier if I could just see your face: your white chin whiskers, your amber eyes. Did you know that one hundred minutes have passed since we last spoke? You probably do.

Let me start again. My brain is firing in many, many directions – and it's hard to concentrate my thoughts. This often happens. I will focus them here. Inside a mailbox.

Rosie, I'm stuck inside a mailbox!

Sound it out with your fingers. *Mail-box*. It's a place

where people deposit their letters, their ideas, their wishes for one another. In this mailbox, every letter is addressed to the same person. The envelopes smell of paper, and taste like – wait a second – oh, they do not taste good. (*Pew!* I'm spitting them out now.)

Despite everything that's just happened to me, Rosie, I am an optimist. A very difficult thing to be, sometimes, at three inches tall. But my tail is still curling at the *boom-boom-boom* of thunder outside. Oh! It's so shaky! So loud! All I can do is tuck myself into the shadow of a letter, looking up to see – yes, that's interesting, the stamp is exactly the size of my head.

Are you afraid?

Are you missing me, too?

How long before I see you again?

As I'm tucking, as I'm tail-curling, I'm trying to figure out a way back to you. We've never been apart for this long. I am your mouse. You are my chimpanzee. Will you be taller, seconds or minutes or days from now? Will you still let me climb on to your shoulder, up the black hair of your arm? I like that! I like how you laugh when I press my paws to your nose.

Until then, I'll write these letters. *Think* these letters. That way, when you lift me again into the bare palm of your hand, all my memories will be right there. And I

can tell you everything.

(If I'm not gone forever first.)

Always,

Clementine



Letter Two

Dear Rosie,
It has been seventeen seconds since my last letter. How are you?

Rain is hammering the mailbox! This mailbox is supposed to help protect me. Protect me from what, I do not know. But each *rap* and *drop* of rain prickles my fur. My tail stiffens as I tell myself: *I am not afraid. Not afraid. Not afraid!*

Thunder is the second-loudest noise I've ever heard.

We'll get to the first later. Right now, considering that I'm stuck (and not afraid!), I'd like to busy my brain. Shouldn't we start at the beginning? I was planning on telling you this someday! My origins. My life before you. I don't know yours, so I'd like you – at least – to know mine.

I remember the day I was born. Maybe this is strange, to remember the exact moment you entered the world. But I do. It was warm, wood shavings were soft around me, and I thought to myself: *Breathe.*

Then I thought: *Prime numbers are asymptomatically distributed among positive integers, and light travels proportionally through the vacuum of space.*

More interesting ideas would come.

Keep in mind, though, I didn't have any fur yet. My eyes hadn't opened. My ears – small and velvety pink – couldn't hear a single noise. That's why it took me twenty-five days (plus or minus seven seconds) to discover that I was the smartest mouse in history.

"She could be the smartest mouse in history," said one of the researchers. That was a clue. As was the fact that I understood human language. The other lab mice didn't follow conversations the way I did. They didn't sit dreamily at the edge of our cage, forepaws tucked under their chins, and just listen.

Different. I wasn't *sure* I was different. How can you really know? You can't ask the other mice, *When you're drinking from that water bottle, are you solving equations at the same time? If you dream at night, is it in Latin? Do you have a thinking cap (a miniature pompom, from a human's sweater)?*

No.

We cuddled in a pile. We played. Our fur grew in at the same time. I have a heart-shaped spot, just above my tail, and so did one of the other mice. A lab is a place for scientific tests, and we were all a big part of those tests; yet, in most ways, we seemed unalike. My cage-mates peered at me strangely as I threw myself into activities. Waiting around, waiting for the next part of the experiment, is uninteresting. So I saved all my food pellets in the corner of the cage, hiding them beneath the water bottle, then stuffed them in my mouth – all at once. I developed theories about how far my cheeks could balloon. And I noticed that the harder I thought, the more my fur smelled of raspberries. (Apparently this was a side effect of the experiment. Although the rest of the mice just smelled like mice.)

Wait! What was that noise? That noise, right now? Is someone outside the mailbox? Is that a tree branch or a human or just the rain? I lift on to my hind toes, ears vibrating, whiskers whiskering.

Hmm. It's gone.

Now, where was I?

Oh! The maze.

The maze changed everything.

Lab mice are supposed to follow the jumble of trails. I did that – one time. But why go *through* the maze, if

you can simply … leave? Standing on my hind paws, I wobbled a bit, calculated the trajectory, then sprang over the wall, landing with a gentle *thump* on the table.

"Did you see that?" a researcher said, grabbing me.

"See what?" asked another.

"This mouse. She hopped out of the maze like some sort of pogo stick! None of the others have done that." He lifted me in his palm, until he met my stare. My mind was wandering towards electromagnetic waves and the Pythagorean theorem and also Brussel sprouts, which are delicious. "Her eyes look so *human*. Don't they look human?"

A human eye is half the size of my body. How odd would I look, if my eyes were that large?

And why didn't the humans ever ask *me* questions? Why couldn't we brainstorm the experiment together? The lab was studying how to increase intelligence in mammals by altering our DNA. I had so many ideas to help! Like, miniature lab coats for all of us mice. And Brussel sprout sandwiches every twenty-six minutes. And improved analytics for their statistical models.

"Just run it another time," the first researcher said.

In half a second (so quick! Ha! Ha-ha-ha!), I was out again.

That night, new questions arrived. *Didn't the maze bore*

the others? Why were they so intent on burrowing, when our cage was solid, and could not be burrowed through?

I was missing something. Some important secret about the world.

It was lonely, Rosie.

I was lonely every day, until the night I met you.

Always,

Clementine



Letter Three

Dear Rosie,

In the mailbox, as I'm thinking this letter, I curl up into the tightest ball possible. The safest ball possible. My eyelids slowly blink with the sound of your name. *Rosie. Rosie.* I miss you.

Do you remember when we met?

Sometimes, as the researchers flicked off the lights in the lab, I'd pick the lock of my cage and tiptoe out. Because I'm a good lab mouse.

Here is what a good lab mouse does:

I taste-test bread in the kitchen, leaving a tiny chew-hole in each slice. (Once I heard a researcher say, "Did someone *bite* my sandwich?" *You're welcome*, I thought, paws under my chin, staring proudly at him. *You're so very welcome.*)

I help the custodian, whose name is Harry. (*You are Harry and I am furry*, I giggled to myself, finishing the card game he left out.)

I hide things around a section of the lab – stubs of pencils, pennies, DNA samples – to heighten the maze-like environment for the researchers.

And, finally, a good lab mouse does her best for science. I always do my best. I've always believed I'm part of something greater – that the *world* is greater than I know. So, one night, I decided to explore further than I ever had. Flinging myself off the lab station, I encountered things I'd never sniffed before: sulphur, flower petals, corn chips. My nose tingled. My paws barely made a sound. Across the tiles, round a wastebasket, past the kitchen. (I told you I was good at mazes.)

One more corner, and there you were.

There you were, your fingers curled round the metal of your cage. Had you ever seen a mouse before? I'd never seen a chimpanzee. But when our eyes found each other, I knew that I'd discovered someone just as bright as me. And just as lonely. The wrinkles under your eyes drooped as you gazed in my direction. Whatever you'd asked of me then, Rosie, I would've given it.

But you didn't breathe a word.

Streaking up to you, I stretched my back to peer at your chimp ears, at the magnificent flatness of your face. You smelled large, and sweet like fruit. Like orange slices. Like plums.

Hello!

That's what I mimed. Though you didn't understand, not yet. Amber eyes flickering, your body swayed back and forth. How should a mouse greet a chimpanzee? A long, intense stare, eyes bulging? A series of squeaks? I tried both – and then, optimistically, slipped between the bars. There were no wood shavings like in my cage. Only the cold of metal.

It was so tiny in there.

So tiny, even for a mouse.

Still, you managed to scoop me up. No squirming from me! No ounce of fear. Because *you* didn't pick me up by the tail. That was a clue; you were kind. You were curious. You lifted me softly, until we were eye to eye. Beneath me was the wrinkled skin of your hands, and I shifted my weight from side to side, a prickle of excitement shimmying down my tail. My hindquarters wiggled. *What happens next?* I mused. *And will it involve Brussel sprouts?*

(I always wondered if others liked Brussel sprouts as much as me.)

Black hair glittering, you stroked the top of my head with a single finger. Then you pulled me close to your chest, right where your heart was beating. I could tell that your heart was the same size as me, and I thought for a moment: *It's like a mouse is in there.*

One ear to your fur, I listened to the *thump*.

And forgot all about vegetables.

That is how we became friends.

(There it is! Another noise! Another noise, outside the mailbox.)

Always,

Clementine



Letter Four

Dear Rosie,

Uncurling from my ball, I sniff. And sniff. The tiniest sliver of air filters into the mailbox, and I perk my sensitive ears.

I can always tell when someone is coming.

My ears always know.

One hundred and two minutes ago, I was with you in your cage. Remember? We'd got so used to spending evenings together – and we'd learned to communicate in our own way. It took some effort! I couldn't hoot like a chimpanzee. You couldn't squeak like a mouse. But after a while, you started to mirror my moves. Thoughtfully, I'd scratch my chin. Then you'd scratch yours. You'd show me your play face: mouth wide, jaw hanging open, your bottom teeth a dull white.