

Companionship

1.

Leslie Sinclair took a small knife from the drawer, and then she heard the whispered word “please.” She looked down at her dough, and the closest of the three unbaked baguettes lifted one of its tapered ends, revealing a small face. When the bread saw that it had Leslie’s attention, it begged her, “Please, not to cut me.” Its tiny mouth opened only slightly, and despite its fear, its voice was soft. “I please you this, yes? Not to slash onto me?”

Leslie stepped back from the marble counter, the unused blade in her still-lifted hand. Her fingers were shaking, not only from the surprise, but also because she had so nearly slit decorative steam vents into what turned out to be a living creature. The bread dough examined her, waiting for her decision. Fearful anticipation formed on its tiny features, and Leslie at once dropped her arm. A shudder of relief rippled down the smooth, creamy white cylinder. “Such a gentle,” it sighed. “You will see what good will be in my thanks, my forever thanks, treasured lady!” Its voice recalled to Leslie a viola she had sometimes heard back at the clinic, though she had never been able to find the musician’s room, roam in solitude as she did through the flickering fluorescent midnight of the overheated halls.

“I’m so very sorry,” she said to the little face, lying there in the teflon baguette mold. “I didn’t mean to frighten you. I didn’t know you were—what you are. I thought you were just regular, like these other two? They are, aren’t they? Just dough? I—I nearly made a terrible mistake.” Her throat tightened at the thought of what she’d nearly done, cutting living flesh, sliding a living creature into a scorching oven. She clawed at her apron, then just pulled it over her head, entangled it with her necklace, stuffed the whole knotted mess in the garbage.

“Now, now, the sadness can pass, yes?” it soothed her. “There is to me no damage, no hurt, say yes?” But Leslie kept seeing that moment from the other’s perspective, and she felt the terror of a giant’s hand lowering a blade towards her own skin. “Please not to be sad,” said the bread dough, which she had measured at 18.5 inches at the end of its last rise, before preheating the oven to 375°. “Friends

excuse,” it said, as if quoting an old axiom, then added, more quietly, “Excuse now, girl-lady, but if I am safe now, I am also so heavy in my eyes.”

Leslie apologized. “You’re tired. It’s late. I should have...”

“Yes,” it sighed sweetly. “So tired, so sleepy tired.” Its long, pale lashes met and intertwined, and it seemed already to be asleep. But then it opened one colorless eye and whispered, “Perhaps, if there is somewhere softer? Cushiony, yes?”

“Of course. May I?” She gestured lifting it from the baking mold.

“Yes, to carry. Here under, and my back-parts.” She did as it instructed. “Oh, like so, very nice,” it cooed and closed its eyes again. It drooped in her hands, draped from palm to palm, like rolled dough, not at all like a snake as she had begun to expect; it did not coil or writhe, seemed to have no muscles at all. She wandered around her garage apartment, worrying where her guest would be most comfortable and safe. She finally laid it across the pillow of her narrow bed.

Instantly asleep, the creature whistled slightly. Leslie centered the pillow on the bed, away from the floor and the chasm between wall and mattress. “Time...” it said from the depths of its doze. It pronounced it: ti-eem-uh. “Time.” Leslie sat on the floor and watched. “Time...”

Its breath was slow and steady. A tiny hair, stuck upright in the pillow case directly in front of its mouth, swayed like a palm tree, over and over with each breath. Leslie leaned carefully in; its breath smelled of lavender. As far as Leslie could see into its open mouth, it was the same creamy-white, elastic material inside as well—bread dough—like its body, its lips, its irises, its long and arching lashes.

Leslie had kneaded and shaped this body, had done everything precisely as she had a hundred times before with a hundred other baguettes. But this evening she endowed it with life, though she never knew when or how. It was her creation, and she felt marvelous at having made this beautiful thing, whatever it was.

She watched it until she fell asleep on the floor next to the bed.

2.

In the morning, her father, a retired police detective, crossed the small yard from the house and let himself into her apartment. “Les? You awake? Decent?”

She ran out to the living room to quiet him then led him into her bedroom and pointed at the pillow. He walked around the bed, examining the sleeping, smiling creature from different angles, as if inspecting a crime scene, squatting, squinting.

“This then is love,” it murmured from within another dream.

“Yeah,” her father said at last. “Yeah. I was afraid of this.”

“You were? You knew this could happen?”

“Not *knew*. Just... thought. You’ve been working hard up here all alone.”

“What do you think I should do, Daddy?”

Her father winced at the question, shuffled uncomfortably out of the bedroom towards the kitchen. “Well, honey, ah...” He opened the refrigerator and peered into its depths. “This kind of stuff gives me the heebie-jeebies is the thing, princess.”

“This kind of stuff? What do you mean?”

“Say, do you remember, you were about four years old, no older, and I took you to a ballet and you, boy oh boy, your eyes just—” The rest of his words were lost in the refrigerator, and Leslie was sorry she had driven him in there with her need for advice. She had pushed him too hard, pushed him away, she scolded herself.

She had been working hard, all alone, but she didn’t see what that had to do with this. After she was discharged from the clinic, it had only required her a few days and nights of sleepless toil before she turned the apartment over his garage into her serene baker’s paradise. She upgraded the oven and arranged anti-bacterial working surfaces; bread molds hanging from ceiling hooks; flours of a dozen different shades and protein grades in labeled air-tight buckets, each with its own scoop; rollers and blades and glazes and rising tubs; terracotta sourdough starter jars; spices and dried-milk powders in tins. While she worked, she listened to the muted speaker-phone, eavesdropped on her father’s calls from the house. He was bored since retirement and would call his old buddies and ask what they were seeing as they drove around town. Sometimes they just left their phones on for him. A young mother described to the two detectives in her home the threats she had been receiving from her estranged husband, and far across town retired Det. Sinclair listened in on his den extension, and unknown to him, his daughter listened in on the

muted speakerphone above the garage twenty yards away, crying at the poor mother's danger, as she measured her baguettes and eyed their rises.

"She throws away a lot of bread," she heard her father tell a doctor at the clinic, a week after she had moved back home. "I see her trash."

"Well, that may be part of her learning process. We should distinguish between obsessive activity and the careful work of a serious young woman. Keep an eye on her, but give her space. See how she is after she starts her job at the bakery."

"You really think that's a good idea, doc? Hair of the dog, and all that?"

Leslie hated that she was *still* causing him discomfort and worry. And she accepted his occasional gift of a store-bought, plastic-wrapped baguette. "You know, it's easier this way," he would say, half-joking.

"Do you have any food in this place?" he said now, leaning into her refrigerator. "I mean, I know your thing, but you have to eat something." He walked back into her bedroom to look again at the guest on her pillow. "Do you want me to get rid of it?" he asked her.

"Girl-host," the creature said, slowly awakening, a shiver coursing down its length. "Your pillow was precisely and kindly—who? Who is this-this? How did he come to be viewing my sleeps? This intrusiveness astounds! Girl-host! This is an unkindness between us! Our first!"

Her father said, "Easy there, slim, I just—"

"Do not sobriquet me to befriend me! I address *her*."

"This is my father," Leslie began, seeing at once the perspective of a new guest with a certain sense of propriety and an understandable fear of new people.

"And this *father* of yours: does he espy onto your guests' slumbertimes often? Do you approve or has he forced trickery on you that you allow his peculiarity?"

"My pec—"

"It is his house, so he has a key. I'm sure he didn't mean to frighten you."

"Hey, you don't need to explain me, Les," her father said, knowing she would defend him nevertheless. "I'm out the door." He stood, waiting for his daughter to take his side.

“Hostess-friend,” said the bread dough. “Are you fully woman or still youth-female to be watch-dogged by this man who grasps keys to this and to the other?”

Leslie hesitated and then explained. “He has a key in case anything happens to me. I haven’t been really well for a long time. He feels better knowing I’m safe.”

“That’s the size of it, slim, so if you don’t like—”

“Again the chummy-chum nickety-name, fat man!”

“Okay. This I don’t need,” said her father, and he left.

“There are two who can say this,” concurred the bread dough when the door clicked. “Answer me the one answer, girl-host: to feel safe because of Big Daddy’s always watching, key-fist—is this feeling of woman or child-girl?”

3.

After her father left, it dozed again, but more fitfully, and again it dreamt of *time*, that viola-voice singing through sleep, though now less joyful, with a new tone of mistrust it hadn’t had even when Leslie nearly slit it open, and now she felt queasy from the mingled guilt: guilt for how her father had been treated, guilt for how her guest had been treated, guilt that she couldn’t see how to fix things for them both.

When they were eleven, her twin sister gleefully told Leslie about dust mites in her bed and in her nose, dying by the thousand each time she sneezed or rolled in her sleep. Leslie stayed awake for two nights, perfectly still on her back, and cried with shame every time her resistance broke and she sneezed, open-mouthed and trembling, onto a bed of soft moss she had placed on a plate next to the bed.

When she was eighteen, she knew that food was soiled as soon as it entered her mouth and bathed in her bacterial saliva. Perfect, beautiful foods—bright peppers and creamy bananas—were mashed and then forced to mix in her belly, to rot together. She would consume only water for two days and then, like a vandal savoring a freshly white-washed wall, begin eating until she made herself ill.

But, thanks to one doctor’s inspired decision, the clinic’s baking course consumed her. She understood that yeast was alive and that she was killing it to make bread, but there she was, eighteen weeks into her residence at the clinic, learning the fine points of baking.

In that clinic kitchen Leslie had met her only friend during her stay. Hiram, twenty-five, was a painter, and had, prior to voluntarily committing himself, made his living as a medical textbook illustrator, drawing fine-lined organs and tumors labeled in beautiful calligraphy, until his heart was stress-fractured. When his girlfriend of eight years left him for a new coast, new job, new men, Hiram's scientific illustrations changed. Her face now appeared on all cross-sections and surgical diagrams. Migraines were illustrated by her temples and her cranium, excavated in layers, her left eye exposed down to the skull. The same, lovingly drawn face appeared above nude bodies split open for surgery on the reproductive system or the thyroid, always the same dark hair, drawn in sassy ponytails or blown to the side by Blakean winds, even in surgery.

"Do you hear the violin at night?" Leslie asked Hiram as she dissolved yeast in 120° water and tried not to think of it as living, doomed.

"Not a violin. It's a viola. A guy up on the fourth floor, in the restricted area. I met him once, when he was still down here, before you came. He was funny. He used to say that he was *Schizo, ma non troppo*."

"The poor man." Leslie's empathy was so pronounced that for an ambitious spell, the head of the clinic considered writing a paper on Leslie S., for her response to the suffering or even the slight discomfort of others was so strong as to be difficult to measure. She was so gifted at putting other's interests ahead of her own that it, if she believed it would make you uncomfortable to be near someone too self-denying, she would put herself first in an effort to relax you.

But it was Hiram, more than any of the doctors, who helped bring Leslie to a dischargeable state. "Just catching our breath," is how he described their task at the clinic, not long before he was removed to the restricted area as well. "We have to get back to this business of treading water next to everyone else until death. We're all just treading water together, far, far out at sea. No land in sight, not a bit. And while the goal, generally, *is*, obviously, to make it back to land, most people don't make it, and that's a fact, but it's considered bad form out there to just stop treading and drown in front of everyone else. It disheartens the others, and then some people

drown who might otherwise have made it to shore. Someday. Even if you're going to drown, you still have responsibilities."

4.

"Did you sleep well?" She hoped her friend was not put out by her father's behavior. She was uncharacteristically angry at him on the creature's behalf. "Would you like to stay on the pillow? Or should I move you?"

"Kindness and care for me! And you are kind, you are? You are not going to make cuts in me today?"

"Oh, no! No, no, oh no, I'm so sorry for that. I didn't *know*."

"Of course, you act only with the cuts because of ignorance."

"Precisely! Ignorance."

"It is so nasty, ignorance."

"Terribly harmful. All the harm I have done in my life, unknowingly. If I could somehow take it back."

"But maybe this you would do in ignorance, too, this taking back."

Leslie looked at her guest, startled. "I, yeah. I hadn't thought of that."

"No. But now enough philosophy hour! I must ask, because you are kind."

"Yes, ask me anything, of course."

"Thank you. Then may I have time?"

"How sweet! You may have all the time you want. But what do you—"

"Oh!" It formed its mouth and eyes into three perfect O's of delight, and it gasped, a sound that reminded Leslie of a child trying to whistle. "All time I want? Truly? Nooooo, maybe you are having a funny at me, this is too cruel. I did not think of you this wicked-wicked poss-bil-ility."

"Not at all! I swear! I wouldn't make fun of you! I'm really so very glad you came, that you're here. What do you want to do?"

"Truly? All the time I want? All? You would do this for me?"

"Of course, but why? What do you need time for?"

"Oh, now you are the comedy maker! Don't be a silly. Where is it?"

"Where is what?"

“The *time*. You must not make secrets of it! You must share!” Its face fell.
“You will share, yes?”

“Of *course* I will share,” Leslie insisted. “I will gladly share my time with you.”

“You are so good, so very, very good,” said the creature, and then it remained very still, and stared at Leslie. It blinked. It swelled itself up and then sighed, deflating again, not shifting its gaze off her. Leslie stared back into its cream-colored eyes. “So very good, you are so very... good,” it repeated, slowly and uncertainly now, began looking around the room. Leslie sensed she was doing something wrong. “I am sorry if multiply asking signifies a rudity,” it said, “but can I have at it *now*?”

“Have at what?”

“Oh, lord baby Jesus, no!” It moved its mouth in silent frustration and finally exclaimed, “The time! The time!”

Leslie felt her stomach roiling with worry that she couldn’t soothe the creature. She ran to her bedside and looked at the clock. “Ten minutes after eleven,” she reported, smiling, petting its cool flesh. “You slept late.”

“Time to *eat*. To *eat*. Time to *eat*.”

“Oh! Of *course*. You poor dear.” She looked around the room, mentally inventoried the kitchen, then congratulated herself for thinking of the tub of fish food next to the empty, sparkling aquarium, a gift from her father that she delayed filling for fear of the day she would have to execute the funereal flush.

(Her father had, after all, sheltered Leslie from news of their dalmatian’s death for three years, or thought he had. “The thing is, honey, Dotz has been chosen for the space program,” he told the eleven-year-old girl looking for her fourteen-year-old dog, which, a day earlier, had been too sick to rise from the heating grate, and which Leslie had spent months comforting. His belly had been bloated tight, warts and running sores along his flanks that never disgusted her. “He fit the profile of a perfect astro-dog candidate.” Her father produced congratulatory correspondence on NASA letterhead. In the weeks to follow he had letters outlining Dotz’s training regime and glowing health reports, photos of white-coated scientists suiting up a vibrant Dotz with a silver helmet and jacket.)

“Maybe you’ll like this,” she said today and placed a flake of fish food on her new friend’s off-white tongue.

It gagged, and the translucent brown ash fluttered to the table. It looked at Leslie with hurt and suspicion. “Why you do this to me?” it cried quietly.

“I’m so sorry. I’ll find something else. I’m sorry.”

“No, no sorry. Enough of your sorry, friend-lady. Only the time, please, please, please,” and a tiny pale-cream tear fell from its eye while Leslie bit her lip until it bled, a habit the clinic staff had rewarded her for breaking.

Its concern with time grew more desperate over the course of that first day, and Leslie felt nauseous for its anxiety. Around two, after a silence of several minutes, during which it examined Leslie nervously and she dug her fingernails into her palms, it began to speak very deliberately, as if dealing with a wily foe. “Please. The time *now* and...” It raised a smooth eyebrow like a dubious negotiator. “...and if you obtain it onto me, I will tell you a great wisdom. Do you hear? *A great wisdom.* Only for you.” Its other eyebrow rose to meet the first, and Leslie heard the deserved rebuke: it felt the need to bargain with her, so badly had she cared for this creature fate had placed in her hands. “Please,” it sang. “I can smell of it. It is here, yes? I can smell of it, even if it is not of the best, most special variety.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“We agree, yes, you will stop saying this? It does nothing for noone never nohow. Who teached you to say the sorry all the time for everything, whether you are culpable or no? Even if you mean to kill me in hunger, girl-lady, to bring me to living one sweet night-time only to dispatch me right quick back to dying—and I do not know why this is your hopes, but I am not meant to know all things—even *this* I ask that you do this without the sorry that mocks insult of us both.”

“I promise you that I do not mean to kill you in hunger.” She tried several other foods: salt, sugar, flour, yeast—all of which were part of its makeup, all of which it allowed to spill off its tongue as it looked down, away, up at the ceiling. She bit her own tongue so as not to apologize. “I’ll find something,” she said as cheerily as she could.

5.

It was shrieking so loudly that Leslie, woken from the floor next to the bed, covered her ears. Her eyes watered, and her glassware sang in sympathy from behind rattling cupboard doors. Rolling pins and scoops swung from their hooks. Cabinets popped open, and the windows shook. Disoriented, Leslie looked for an alarm clock under the bed, tried to pull the smoke detector from the wall.

“Dreams of terror and horror!” it cried, and the glassware continued to vibrate in the relative silence. “Oh, take me up, take me up!” Its eyes were still closed, and it returned to its shrieking.

It calmed down only when in Leslie’s arms, its head propped against her shoulder and its lips gently working against her cheek. Leslie’s neck cramped up almost at once, but after the evening before, which ended in distrust and disappointment, she felt visceral relief to be of undeniable use again.

“Do you dream?” it asked, its eyes still closed. “Ever of such pains?”

“Yes. I had a nightmare tonight as well.”

It opened one eye. “Please, to tell me. I am your friend of yours.”

“Do you really want to hear? If you really—okay. I was in a car? Although it wasn’t a car, really? Not exactly, more like a—”

It sighed deeply. “Leslie, I dream of time. Do you see?”

She stopped yammering about her stupid dream. “I almost apologized just now,” she said with a rueful smile.

“Here then is small favor, and I am suitable thankful. And empridened for you.”

It fell asleep draped around her neck, its lips against her cheek. Leslie feared that if she put it down, it would screech again, so for several hours, she moved slowly around the apartment, trying to find a position in which she could sleep without waking it. She failed, and as dawn approached, she was standing in the kitchen, leaning her back against the marble counter where it had been born. Her eyes ached. And then it pulled its lips from her cheek (leaving a perfectly oval bruise) but, as Leslie braced herself for the noise, it only exclaimed, “You are kind and good! You

have made me wait for long, I do not know why, the food for fishies to test me, but now the waiting is finished all gone, yes? Please, allow me to have at it now.”

It was looking past her, over her shoulder, wide-eyed. She turned around. It was sighing madly at the spice cabinet, flung open during its nightmare noises. And there at the front of the top shelf was thyme. “This?” she asked, lifting the little jar.

“This! It is this! This then! Yes! Finally I have made you convinced that I am good and I need and you trust! Please, to me now. A great wisdom I will give.”

Leslie was wide awake now; the best moments of her life had always come when she felt necessary. “I certainly don’t need a great wisdom, thank you. I’m just so happy we found what you like!” Her hand trembled as she sprinkled a few leaves of the dried thyme onto her friend’s narrow, pale, outstretched tongue, its eyes squeezed shut. Leslie smiled. “Is it delicious?” she asked with a chef’s pride, and she watched her little friend’s face intently.

It opened one eye. “It is good,” it said calmly.

“Good. But, but not great?”

“It is good, friend-lady. We should be happy, one supposes.” Pause. “Is it all you keep? The only variety?”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Yes. Well, ignorance we were talking, yes? Maybe, perhaps, you might...”

“I could go to the farmer’s market. Do you prefer fresh leaves to dried?”

6.

They learned together. The best thyme, the best way to prepare it, the best way to feed it: Leslie was an appreciated chef and a trusted collaborator, and she felt, during these four days of joint work, as happy as she could recall being in years.

After that morning’s discovery, she brought home six varieties from groceries, bodegas, farmers markets. From these six, which it tasted with closed eyes, it selected a fresh Guatemalan thyme, which it called “closely, very closely to perfect lovely.” But even this it ate without the gusto Leslie was hoping for, a vague dissatisfaction in its eyes, though it would not say just what was lacking or what finer thyme it had once known. But Leslie didn’t lose hope, uncharacteristically, and even more

uncharacteristically, she encouraged her friend to hang in there, they'd crack this problem. She pulled the leaves from the stem for it, but at that sight, it shook its head and looked stricken, though it would not speak. "No problem, no problem," Leslie insisted. "Do you like music?" she tried, hoping the right atmosphere might carry them all the way to perfect lovely. Her friend only sighed.

Over four days, they learned that the best available thyme had to be purchased every second day for maximum freshness, and it was most delectable when kept slightly cool, refrigerated in small batches in air-tight, glass canisters, then allowed to return to approximately fifty degrees before serving. The leaves *did* have to be picked off the stem, as it turned out, but not while her friend was watching, and then rolled into tight pellets with a drop of water to bind them, each pellet placed on the tongue with a tiny eyebrow tweezer, as her guest was repelled by the sight of human flesh touching its food and especially approaching its mouth. Leslie did keep several jars of dried thyme on-hand, in case of any difficulty with the distant farmers market, but that was decidedly a last resort, and her guest would eat it with such grief that Leslie would have trouble sleeping after.

Music was not helpful, but atmosphere was important. Her friend, smacking its colorless lips at the pyramid of stacked pellets set before it on a plain white plate, said, "May I ask, friend-chef, if you are able personally to happy eat where you face the hideousest terrors?"

The question puzzled Leslie, but then she thought of the terror she used to feel simply from the act of eating at all, one of the causes of her long stay at the clinic. "Of course not," she said. "What do you fear?"

"I would be so happy, here, with you, my friend Leslie—" it had never used her name before "—sharing of a meal, breaking the fast as the closest companions break, but you maintain, still, that devil hell firebox, and I must ask, why this is why? Are you surprised it trembles me?"

The oven. She began to say that she would never ever put her friend in the oven, but she stopped herself, and tried to see the kitchen from its perspective. You are the guest of someone who keeps—in the guestroom, for example—a torture chamber, which you were destined to experience until your host's last-minute change

of heart. Now, despite your host's statements of goodwill, the torture chamber still waits, unused and ready... Leslie made a call. The oven was under warranty. It would be gone that same day.

"Done, my friend," she said, tweezering a thyme-pellet onto its tongue, dry and smooth. "Done."

"You are finest! Sing to the world! Girl-host is finest!"

"Why, thank you. You know, I don't even know your name!"

It rolled the thyme from side to side on its tongue and smiled at her. "Why do you insist to name me?" it replied.

"I liked when you called me Leslie just now."

"But I did not do this."

"You did. I think? You can always do that, because we're friends."

It blinked and smiled weakly, nodded just once, and Leslie knew she was forcing some uncomfortable intimacy on a sensibility too delicate to voice resistance.

"Girl-lady, I promised you of a great wisdom."

"I remember. I am eager to hear anything you would like to share with me."

"Yes. And I am eager to share anything you like to hear shared. But there is, first, before wisdom can able to be shared, other matters. To make us all conducive for wisdom-listening. Example, there is the noisome buzz-buzz and click-tick, yes?" It took some time before Leslie realized that it meant the clocks in her bedroom and kitchen and the stove-top wind-up timer. "Dispatch! Away with diabolicals like this!" it announced in its imperious manner. It saw her doubtful expression, and it softened at once, spoke slowly and archly: "Host-friend, these tickety nasties are, we will say, *conductive* but not *conducive*, hey yes?" and it grinned and wheezed at Leslie to share the pleasure of its word-play. "Ah! Yes! I see your eyeballs! We have made another agree, and this feels so nice, yes? All the friends agrees." Leslie threw the clocks in the trash can outside. They were cheap, she didn't really need them, and the gesture made her guest so ecstatic that she couldn't resist its pleasure, so she dismissed her doubts as selfish. When she returned, it said, "Take me up, and we will celebrate our happy understanding." Its fondness for her, its gratitude for her little sacrifice pleased her enormously. She lifted her guest to relax around her neck, and it moved

its face closer, to kiss her cheek. “Only one other remains. The small one, which clings to you in fear, and which makes me shake heebie-jeebie when you pet me sweet and I would rather be giving of myself to that happiness of your kindness.” She threw out her cheap wristwatch, gladly, in exchange for this feeling.

7.

One morning, leaving for the farmers market, she noticed that her friend was already awake, though it had lately been sleeping until at least noon. And so she placed it on the sofa in front of the television, on a cushion with its lower jaw on the remote control’s channel button. “Will you be comfortable?”

“Yes, I am thinking it will make delight, girl-lady. You make the power on button, and then off you go thyming.”

But when she hurried back, two hours later, she found her father standing outside her door, hesitating with his key. “The hell’s going on in there, Les?” he demanded. They entered and found her guest weeping copiously, shrieking its ear-ripping cry of torment. There were pale-cream, malodorous stains on the ceiling and high on the walls. “Extinguish it! Extinguish it! At once!” it hissed. Leslie turned off the television and stood confused and immeasurably sad in the silence that followed, embarrassed in front of her father (whom she had told she was so happy), and also embarrassed to be embarrassed in front of him.

“It’s just a TV,” her father said, and she was amazed how furious she was at his unthinking comment.

“Just TV?” mimicked her guest, precisely what she wished she had said. “Just TV? Narcotic for idiots who cannot bear living!”

“Wait, what?” her father stammered, looking to Leslie for support.

“It goes. Girl-lady, it *goes*. It cannot be here with me more.”

“Not just off? Or unplugged?” demanded her father. “You sure about this guy, Les? Hey, I bought her that TV, slim.”

It ignored him and spoke only to her: “Why do you fight me, girl-lady? If you want your dead picture hate machine and not me who loves the happiness of your company, then this is saddest day for me that ever comes since you maked me.”

Leslie closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and said, “Daddy, will you please take the TV back to the house with you?”

“And the key,” said her friend, still looking only at Leslie. “He should not have his burgling key to our together-home.”

“Slim, now you’re out of line here—”

“Girl-lady, I beseech your heart.”

Leslie spoke quickly now. “Daddy, maybe just for now, to show—”

“Suit yourself.” Her father laid the key on the counter, hoisted the television and left, muttering, “Shabby.”

“Girl-hostess, girl-hostess, answer splickety-quick: how do you feel?”

“Feel?”

“This moment now: how? You have stepped up gigantic striders today! Do you not feel it? You are your own woman! Personal! Political! Free!”

It was right. She had asked her father to treat her as an adult who could take care of herself, decide for herself, and she felt just like it said—like her own person, free, maybe even a little “political.” “Thank you,” she said. “You’ve been—”

“Ho, no! If you make me credit, then you do nothing, only make swaps of Big Daddy for me. It’s you! It’s you! It’s you!”

8.

“I push you hard,” it whispered late one drowsy evening, after she had again eaten only raw fruit and vegetables, as it had advised her for health and weight management (and kindness to its own sensitivity about seeing her ingest flesh or yeast). It was draped over her head, crowning her at the top of the pillow, its tail in one ear, its mouth next to the other. “I push you hard,” it repeated, the sound of the clinic transported to the blue night of her bedroom, and she thought of Hiram, endlessly dreaming of his surgical model, banishing himself to the clinic’s ever tighter restrictions for help keeping a hold on himself.

She had thought it was asleep. “I push you hard, I know this,” it sighed. She smiled at its nurturing understanding, its acknowledgment of her efforts. “I push you hard, because I love you so!” it said, laughing, and she realized it was quoting.

Leslie sat up in a hurry, looked down at the beast, which smirked up at her. “Yes, she comes today, when you were dillying in fields of thyme. Mama come to visit, and she and I speak while you shopping. She tells all about you as a girl. Stories of delight for me!”

It imitated her mother’s voice badly, its accent and syntax undisguisable: “ ‘I don’t know what you want me say, dear dear.’ Always she is like this, this running away from you when dropping word-bombs on your feet?”

Leslie lay down again, put her head on the pillow, felt her friend slide into the protective covering of her spread hair. That was precisely what her mother was like: running away from you and attacking you when you tried to talk to her. In one chat her guest had managed to see her mother’s essence: drifting in to visit Leslie when Leslie wasn’t there, making herself at home precisely because she wasn’t there, revealing Leslie’s secrets without a thought of discretion, but revealing nothing of herself, and sounding vaguely irritable whenever she was expected to offer up an opinion, support, love, anything, *as if she hadn’t sacrificed enough already, for heaven’s sake.*

Her mother had come to visit only once at the clinic, just a few days before her discharge. “So that’s all done now, they tell me out front. That’s a relief, Lezzie, and no kidding. For you, too, I’m sure. I’ve been telling everyone you’ve been hiking in the Andes. Do you feel comfortable talking about the Andes, if we all have a lunch together, you and me and some of my ladies?”

“What stories did she tell you about me?” Leslie asked her guest, but it had fallen asleep, wound up in strands of Leslie’s hair. The phone rang, and she knew it would be her mother.

“Yes, dear, I met your little friend. I don’t know what you want me to say,” her mother said. “It *happens*, Lezzie. Something not dissimilar happened to your father once, before I knew him.”

“Really? The same thing happened to him? He hasn’t said a thing about it.”

“Now, don’t put words in my mouth. I didn’t say the *same* thing. *Similar*, I said. I don’t recall the details of it. I’m not a little walking book like you seem to want me to be. Go ask your favorite parent, if his experience matters so much.”

“I didn’t mean that, I don’t want you to be a little walking book. I’m sorry if I said anything to make you—”

“It hardly matters, dear. My feelings aren’t the issue here, I suppose. What are you going to do with your guest?”

“I don’t know. I feel so much lighter, really so much happier since—”

“How did you find it? Where did it come from?”

“I think I made it.”

“Sweetest, what were you doing immediately before it appeared?” Leslie had been obsessing about a detail of the baking process, worrying over the humidity inside the oven, as she had once worried about the growth of her fingernails, or the number of hairs on her knuckles. “In other words, Lezzie, you were...”

“Thinking about myself,” she answered the old catechism.

“Exactly. And that’s why this has happened, dear.”

“And is that so bad?” Leslie tried.

“Do you really want me to answer that? Do you really need me to?”

Leslie only nodded, shifted the receiver to her other ear, but then heard her friend’s voice from the bedroom. “Girl-host! Put me on the talker.” Leslie set the creature next to the speaker-phone. “No, upside downside,” it said. She lay it on its back, its tiny lower jaw hinging up and down at the mic. “Judy, you to listen to me.”

“Oh, hello, you darling thing,” Leslie’s mother purred from the speaker.

“No, Judy, stop right now there, this is not now for sweet talk.”

“But you and I became friends today, didn’t we, dear?”

“No, not this, Judy. I only see inside you, and you make our Leslie so sad, like you have nunny vocation to do this. So I am here to stop this, yes? Enough.”

“What is this? Leslie, make it stop talking to me like that.”

“Mom, I—” She looked down at her friend, its belly exposed, its lower jaw flapping in her defense, this small, totally vulnerable creature working so hard on Leslie’s behalf : her creation was now her protector. “No, Mom. I happen to agree. I think we should just catch our breath, and maybe, let’s just wait a bit. I’ll call you when I’m feeling good about... talking to you. I’m tired of how we are together.”

“Oh. I see.”

“Mom.”

“Tired of how I give birth to you and take you to ballet class and stop you from overeating and tell you the truth when nobody else will. Tired of all that. Has it ever occurred to you, Leslie Sinclair, that other people might feel—”

“Good bye-bye, Judy!” It flung itself onto the button, cutting the line.

Leslie was crying, but said, “Thank you, again,” and carried her friend back to bed, turned out the lights until only the window’s faintest glow shaped objects and faces. She lay down with it next to her on the pillow, draped her hair over it, as it lately preferred. “Thank you,” she said again.

“Thank *you*,” it replied.

She’d had a beautiful boyfriend once, in a summer when her worst habits had ebbed just as her looks had peaked. Improbably and fortuitously relaxed, she had without any effort won the attentions of a boy home from the army. He was strong and quiet, laughed easily, and won her sister’s approval as a “hunk.” But Leslie’s father was certain the boy was going to break his daughter’s heart. “Have you cheated on her yet?” he asked him when Leslie was upstairs primping, well within accidental earshot. Her father was not threatening about it, he just understood that this was how it was going to be. And so, “Just be gentle about it,” he requested, not hearing the boy’s denials, “and I’ll try to explain things to her from this end.”

9.

When Leslie awoke on the floor, with no way of knowing any longer what time it was, the phone was ringing. Her friend was up on the pillow, in a bright sunbeam coming through the window, still smiling in slumber. It was obviously late in the morning. She answered the phone, whispering. It was the baker who had agreed to employ Leslie as an apprentice in an arrangement worked out by the clinic. “You not coming in? On your first day? Really?”

“I’m so sorry. I forgot to call. I don’t, I can’t follow through on our plan.”

“Huh. Great. Thanks for the heads-up. I have to tell the clinic, you know.”

“I understand. I apologize. Circumstances just, they’ve changed around me. I can’t bake anymore.”

She hung up, wiped the sleep from her eyes, draped her sleeping friend around her neck, and headed into the kitchen to prepare the thyme pellets and the juices designed “to make a sweepy cleanse” of her system. There was a banging on the door, and Leslie looked down to make sure her friend hadn’t been woken.

“Came by to meet your new pal,” Viv said, entering with their father. “See what all the excitement’s about. Daddy-O’s quite concerned. But what else is new?”

“Very funny,” said their father, but he was laughing, as always when Viv made merciless fun of him.

Leslie and her twin sister Viv were fraternal but looked extremely similar, at least as children. The physical distinctions between them, quite minor in themselves, nevertheless counted only in Viv’s favor. Viv’s eyes flashed blue; Leslie’s were a dull hazel. Viv’s nose was slightly smaller and infinitesimally straighter. Skin quality, hair sheen and bounce, length of eyelashes, the tint of facial fuzz, the shade and alignment of teeth: side by side, by age fifteen, the two girls resembled before and after pictures from the brochure of a masterly plastic surgeon. Life’s contingencies then regularly approved and extended nature’s starting favors: a tendency to insomnia and the resulting shadows, a reasonably well-set broken nose, a nail fungus, an occasional sty, a scar from the sparkling kiss of a figure skate’s toe, a worry line, a growing allergy to cosmetics: only Leslie suffered while Viv’s advantages continued to accrue. “My eastern sky at sunset,” their mother called Leslie.

Viv looked at the sleeping dough hanging over her sister’s shoulders. “Cute, cute,” she said. “But did he really make you throw out the television? Are you insane?” Viv, who worked in the art department of an ad agency, was unsurprisingly troubled by such an act. She took off her coat, revealing a pink t-shirt tight across her breasts that read: WHEN YOU WERE VISITING YOUR MOM, I BLEW YOUR BOYFRIEND.

“O, for tuna! O, for tuna!” In Viv’s most successful ad, innumerable battallions of black-capped animated cats goose-stepped past a reviewing stand, atop which stood a giant, stone-faced tuna, dressed in the drab overcoat and fedora of a late Soviet premier. “O, for tuna!” the cats chanted to the martial music of *O Fortuna* from the *Carmina Burana*. The sky darkened with diving bombers, each flown by a

leather-helmeted cat, his whiskers blown back, his body shaking from the force of the machine cannons he fired at scattering mice. “O, for tuna! O, for tuna! Bring us at once our Toona-Bytz!” sang the cats as ground forces threw mice up against bullet-riddled walls, a few would-be escapees shot before reaching their romanesque arches in the baseboards.

“I’ve known guys like this,” Viv said, leaning in close to examine the sleeping face. “First it’s one thing, then another, then you can’t get them off the couch, they won’t work, they’re useless. Don’t get used. Not by some junkie or jackass like this.”

“Well now, the thing is, of course, Leslie says she’s happy,” said their father dubiously, while Leslie smiled along at the relentless intrusion, kept rolling pellets, stacking them into a pyramid on the plate, as if working in a factory to produce armaments for a besieged but plucky nation.

“How’s your work going, Viv?” Leslie tried to deflect attention from herself.

“It’s a funny coincidence, timing,” said Viv, picking up one of the pellets, rolling it between her fingers, sniffing it, looking at the space where the oven had been, opening the refrigerator, empty but for a few fruits and vegetables, bottled water, and a dozen canisters of thyme leaves, each labeled with country of origin and date of purchase. “Funny coincidence, because I just met a guy, not my type, but I wanted to set him up with you, now you’re out of the bat-cave and ready for life.”

Leslie finished arranging the thyme and went to the fridge for her fruit. She felt an agitation she could hardly identify as Viv watched her every move. “I am ready for life,” she said softly. “My life.” Leslie could feel Viv waiting for the accustomed admiration, appreciation, gratitude, mild envy, all of which Leslie had for so long produced, living, it sometimes felt, only to feed Viv’s appetites. *Thank you for the second-choice boy, you look beautiful, how is your glamorous work...*

“Something’s not right here,” Viv went on, starting to light a cigarette until Leslie stopped her. “Les, you’re getting messed around.”

“Please, Viv, just this once, let me be. Please?”

“Can’t do it, sister. You’re getting used.” She poked the sleeping guest, still draped around Leslie’s neck, and Leslie stepped back, shocked and stung by her sister’s aggression. “Easy, Leslie, take it easy. It’s just that I have certain applicable

experience here that you just, honestly, just don't. I know guys like this. Parasitical. This is not what you need, *especially* right now. You need to get out and have some fun on somebody else's dime. Slut it up a little."

Leslie's reply leapt out of her mouth before she knew what was happening. She was able to whisper her words to protect her friend's sleep, but that was the only control she could place on herself, and even then it was a stage whisper, a scream with the volume turned down, and she at first didn't recognize this agitation in herself, couldn't have said that this was *anger*, a long-lost friend, pouring out of her, burning everything in her path and making Leslie feel clean at last. "You're *jealous*, Viv," she said. "I see that now. Finally. I see all kinds of things I didn't see before."

"And you see me jealous? Of your little, your little *thing*? That's rich."

"Jealous of serenity and simple affection and understanding and my—*my*—ability to just be, without any of the ludicrous trappings you drape around yourself." Anger made her articulate, too, and she was incongruously smiling.

"Calm it down, girls," said their father. "This reminds me of the time you were four or five, and—"

"Oh, why don't you just scurry home, Dad, and listen to your police scanner, you sweaty old bastard, I got this one," said Viv, eyeing Leslie. "As always, I'll tell her what you don't have the trouser luggage to say."

"I have a better idea, Viv," Leslie snapped. "I want both of you out of my home, *now*." Her sister and father were wordless. Leslie opened the door. "*Now*."

10.

"She said that I am a *thing*. It is maddening, not?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't know you were awake."

"I made pretend slumber to hear. This is intolerable, that she is making meddles in what is between us, as to say you are not a grown-up girl-lady, girl-lady."

"I suppose."

"No supposing: fact-facting. She is treating of you like a helpless goof-puppy. Does she not make you filled with fury and raging heats?"

"I don't really get angry. I never have. It's just not in me."

“*Girl-lady*, hey-ho! Don’t kidder the kidder. Recall, please, that I hearded you. She treats you like a goof-puppy, so you must make angry at once or she will dance you into your burial grave, and so you do! You flare with lovely fires!”

“I suppose I did get angry, didn’t I?” Leslie asked with an approaching smile.

“I hearded you! You were a whirlingwind of furious rages! Splendido!”

Leslie began to laugh, quietly at first, then with real passion, and at the end, her eyes were streaming. She wasn’t sure if it was from the laughter—her first uncontrolled laughter in years—or from guilt, or if her body were somehow flushing something out of itself. When she calmed down, her friend was lying on her stomach looking up at her. She said, “You know, you promised me of a great wisdom once.”

“And you are nearly ready to learn, I believe, nearly ready.”

“Why not now?” She felt her anger begin to simmer back again, like the last beach licks of a departing tide.

“*Nearly* ready. Patience and trust, yes.”

“Yes. Okay.” She breathed deeply, watched the creature rise and fall with her breath. “What am I supposed to do with you?”

“Explain.”

“Will you tell me your name?”

“Name me as you whim, host-friend, it is not of import.”

“Why did you come to me? Did you choose me?”

“We all choose, but usually not when we are thinking we choose.”

“What does that mean?”

“*Girl-lady*, you are hurting your eyes, in the dark, all the wandering around and zippity-zipping your knees into table legs, hey? Maybe just sit tight, like I am sitting tight. Maybe just smile at the sky and say we are here now and no more.”

“I don’t know what to do with myself anymore. I was going to be a baker.”

“And now you do not wish this.”

“Because of you. Before you I was going to learn how to be a happy baker.”

“And I come, and now you are not happy. You want me to go away and leave you happy.”

“No, no, it’s just that I—”

“May I say, girl-host? May I? I say this: I am your responsibility-bility. Responsi. Bility. And this is painful, to have a speronsbility. But also of good fortune; many wish for it. And you have one. This cannot change once it is begunned. I am your responsibilibility.”

“Why?”

“Who else’s, if not yours?”

“But I didn’t ask for this. I didn’t invite you.”

“Are you sure?”

“What does *that* mean?”

“What is it mattering, girl-host? I am helpless! Helpless without you! Sing!” And it sang a haunting melody, seemingly composed for this occasion, and Leslie stopped wondering what she must still do to prepare herself for great wisdom, and instead simply absorbed the beautiful sounds flowing out of the small mouth in front of her. She fell asleep, happy, to a wordless song that was nevertheless plainly about affection and calm and the slow process of opening oneself to another soul’s investigations and learning the secret ways into that soul in return.

She fell asleep thinking that life could provide many forms of love, many more than most people realized or boasted of, and while it had long been obvious that she was not destined to taste romantic love or maternal love, still she had been given—or perhaps had made for herself—*this* opportunity for love, with its sacrifices and mysteries and, yes, thrills, and she would give herself over to it, all of herself, as she had long felt she could do for someone, given an elusive chance. This was to be her chance.

11.

Leslie returned home with arms full of groceries and a heart buoyant with plans, another rare and wonderful sensation, hardly known since girlhood. That memory of the feeling from years before made the current one all the sweeter. “I have our thyme,” she said as she came in, keys and bags and door to close and shoes to kick off and inspired ideas for the two of them falling out of her mouth: “But also

it's so beautiful out, so I was thinking that today, after you eat, we might show you the world, if you're ready. I know I'm ready, and I think maybe a park? Unless squirrels worry you, but I'll be there the whole time, so I'm thinking that we—" She noticed something strange as it looked up at her from the couch. "Did you always have that mark on your cheek?" she asked, and it responded by yelping a squeaky "Thymethymethymethyme!" but with a different accent, and from behind her she recognized her original guest's voice: "Girl-host! I have made friend for us!"

Leslie turned. Her original friend was lying on the kitchen floor in the space where the oven had been. She turned back and looked at the second visitor on the couch. "Thymethymethymethyme!" it barked.

"You can do this? Make more?"

"Oh, girl-lady, I can only do it the one time only, it makes my sides hurt too much much. And look how far I flew! I am far over here! Where the fire-hell-box was before times. To lift, girl-lady, to lift at once, please."

It winced when she picked it up, and she saw the quivering slash up its side, cream-pale inside and out, but jagged and tender. "You poor, poor thing. Do you want me to put you next to your new friend?"

"No! Oh, ho-ho, no, this would not be safe for me, in my condition. The temptation to destroy me would be so strong for her. No, place me on soft chair number one."

"You said *her*," she said, laying her friend on the chair. "So are you a him?"

It sighed with pain and exasperation. "If this is what you want me be, girl-lady. Yes, fine, I am your man for your job."

She fed them both thyme, but the female didn't speak, only ate as hungrily as a baby, twice as much as her creator. For the rest of the day, Leslie sat and tried to listen and learn without demanding anything for herself, but unavoidably felt like a third wheel, as the two cylinders eyed each other from across the room and sang, viola-sweet, crooned their duet only to each other, the only words of which were—repeated for hypnotizing hours—*thyme* and—very occasionally, unpredictably, sometimes after several minutes, but always in perfect unison between the two singers—*love*.

That night was the closest Leslie came to ending the whole thing, giving her friend and his friend to a zoo or a bakery. She asked herself why she didn't agree with her sister. What *was* she getting out of this, and what would it cost her to end it? As she brooded, the soft and soothing voice rose from the couch: "You are very beautiful, lady-host, lost in your thinkings like a painted saint."

"Thanks."

"Many more beautiful than your sister. You must know this but keep it your secret from her because of your kindness, I am suspecting. You are too kind to tell her the truth, with how important her delusions feel to her."

Although, what great happiness awaited if her guests left? If she surrendered her tattered notion of love? There was no joy and wonder that her friend had destroyed, no great vistas left unexplored because of this friendship. To be brutally honest with herself, she had to admit that anything interesting, any change that she truly appreciated—any *improvement*, which the clinic had not delivered—had come to her solely by having him around. Her head was full of the advice of others—sister, parents, staff-members. All of their voices hooted with the same confidence and condescension, and she longed to hear some certainty in her own voice, like a viola, or an ear-piercing shriek.

"You are a kind and worthy girl-lady."

"Am I? You know this?"

"Oh I do, I know so much."

"Thank you."

"It is the sleep time, girl-lady. And you have a tired face so splotchy. Take the bed all for you alone tonight. Place me on the cushion, next to the other, and I will be fine-fine. She will not harm of me now; I have a secret."

12.

Leslie slept well, better than she had in months, and when she walked into the living room in the morning, she was ready to share him with his new friend who was, after all, more like him than Leslie could ever hope to be. She was ready to re-define love yet again so that the definition might still include her.

And then she saw the loaves everywhere. They covered the couch and the chair, littered the floor, hung from lamps and curtain rods, the blades of the ceiling fan, slung over doorknobs like neckties, coating the coatrack like scarves.

She stopped at her bedroom's threshold. "Here is she that I spoked of!" announced her first friend from within a pile of them somewhere over near the couch. And, at once, all of them—easily hundreds—sang a swelling chorale, hundreds of violas in intricate and swooning harmony, sliding from one note to the next but always together, chords smeared in bright lines, and Leslie took a step back, her eyes wide from the thunder of heavenly sound, the thudding blood in her head making lights float across her vision, and she breathed deeply to steady her balance and she swam in the clouds of lavender and powdered sugar.

They all stopped at the same instant, silence pouring into the room like water filling a car plunged into a deep, dark lake. She didn't dare take a step forward, for fear of crushing one, for fear of being tempted to escape. "Friend-friend," came the one familiar voice, muffled. "You know what must comes now, I suspect."

She did know. The demand was, of course, extreme, but Leslie decided very quickly with hardly a real argument to be made against it. There would be a problem of money, as she still lived on an allowance from her father, and thyme would not be cheap in these quantities. Once she began, there would be no respite for herself, no "life" as her sister imagined it, unless Leslie re-defined herself as the person who did this and only this. Once that definition was made, however, if she could make it, well, then *everything* would be for her, this *would* be a life, and all the love that would come from all of these creatures would be for her. Her sacrifice would prove to be no sacrifice at all, if she truly believed she was meant to do this. In a certain light, it was almost selfish to accept. If she could do it, make the definitions.

And so she took care of them, in their increasing numbers. She moved them into organized rows, covered every surface in her apartment except for a series of paths connecting bathroom to kitchen, bedroom to front door. She rotated them on schedules so they all tasted the comforts of the bed and chair and couch, and all shared the burden of sleeping on the floor, the table, the fan, the doorknobs. She paid for deliveries from the farmers market with money kept in a bag hung by the

door, and she rolled thyme pellets by the thousands with great dexterity and speed. She slept on a mat in the kitchen for ten minutes every six or seven hours and for four good hours at night, unless there were nightmares.

Nightmares were contagious, and when they spread, the noise was excruciating beyond description even to her father back at the main house, even to neighbors, so for Leslie, woken in the midst of the storm, it was as painful as anything she'd ever known. She lost some hearing, and often—in the frenzy of daytime and feeding—did not realize that dried blood caked her ears. Still, she was proud of how quickly she could quiet them in a crisis, dispel terrors, ease them back to rest or singing, even when she was woken from deepest sleep.

Her work consumed her, and moments of weakness—when she might consider asking for help, or giving them away—were rare, and she forgave herself for them. She was too busy not to forgive herself; she couldn't afford to wallow in shame, and so she admitted that what she did was difficult, and that for all its rewards, she would not deny herself the occasional fantasy of being released from it, and in return she spoke to them individually, came to know them, and many of them said that they loved her, and many others said that they saw her fulfilling a destiny created by powers beyond any of their imagining.

One day, Viv brought a new boyfriend to look at them, left him alone with Leslie and her crowd. He sat among them, studied their faces, petted them, watched Leslie move easily around the rooms with thyme and tweezers. After several minutes, one of them called to him: "New man! Lend your ears!" and then, when he brought the creature close, it whispered something to him that made him laugh ecstatically and nod eagerly, and he said, "I know. Holy hell, I know."

When Viv returned, she asked him, "Well? You ever see anything like this?"

"No," he admitted. "Or, not exactly. Something similar, but not this."

"What the hell kind of exterminator are you, then?"

And Leslie was not angry to learn what Viv had been planning, just shook her head and smiled, went back to her work.

"Leslie," the man said, standing up, stepping carefully to the door, smiling at the creatures who hung from the coatrack, reaching up to touch them in farewell. "I

think you're lucky to have these here. Don't get talked into doing something you'll regret."

"You pussy!" Viv shouted at him. "If you don't get rid of them, that's the end of my sister's chances for a normal life. You do this or we're finished, Tom."

He just shook his head and said, "No." And he left, Viv chasing after him.

13.

Leslie awoke on the floor, far from her mat, in the middle of them. Several were sleeping on her, and one, lying on her chest, had its face close to hers, though she could barely see it in the murk. "Is it day or night?" she asked. "It's very dark."

"We could not tolerate all the shine, the glow. So those little sunbulbs had to go. Too much showing, not enough seeing, yes?"

"Oh." There was a little light from around the curtains, just enough that she could see that all the lightbulbs in the lamps and the ceiling were broken, tidy holes punched through them, filaments yanked out and left to dangle. "I would have taken them out for you." She looked at the little face in the gray shadows. It blinked at her. "Are you my first?" she asked.

"Am I your first?"

"I mean, my original friend. Were you the first?"

"Let us say that I am. I am!"

"I'm so tired," Leslie said. "I don't think I can open my eyes."

"So do not. You are almost there, I am thinking. Almost."

"Almost where?"

"This greatness! I know what you are craving so long for, so long craving. We know you, Leslie. Know you know you."

Her eyes fluttered shut and open again. "You called me by my name."

"Leslie! Leslie! Leslie!" Several of them were waking up, and they began to sing, alternating her name, *thyme*, and *love*.

"Have I done right by you?" she asked. "You, in particular, I mean."

"So well by me. So well. We thank you. Sleep a little, my love-friend."

She dozed the very moment it encouraged her, and when she awoke again, the room was even darker. There were several more on her, across her forehead and neck and chin, across her lips, and she recognized the sensation of her first friend burrowing under her hair and pressing against the top of her head, its mouth close to her ear. “Who loves Leslie most?” they sang, like one thousand wet fingers circling one thousand crystal glasses. “Who loves Leslie most?” They tickled her arms under her sleeves and her legs inside her pants.

“What are you doing?” she asked, a little frightened, worried about pinching or breaking one if she moved any part of her body.

“You are almost there,” her first friend (or the one who claimed to be her first friend) whispered in her ear. “Almost there, almost there.” They lay across her face, rolled down from her forehead and closed her eyes. A tail tickled the rim of her nostril, and she thought she might sneeze. “I’m so ti—” she said, and one tumbled into her opened mouth. She was afraid she might accidentally bite it, so she kept her mouth open, tried not to gag as it slid farther down, pressed itself past her tongue, filled that narrow space.