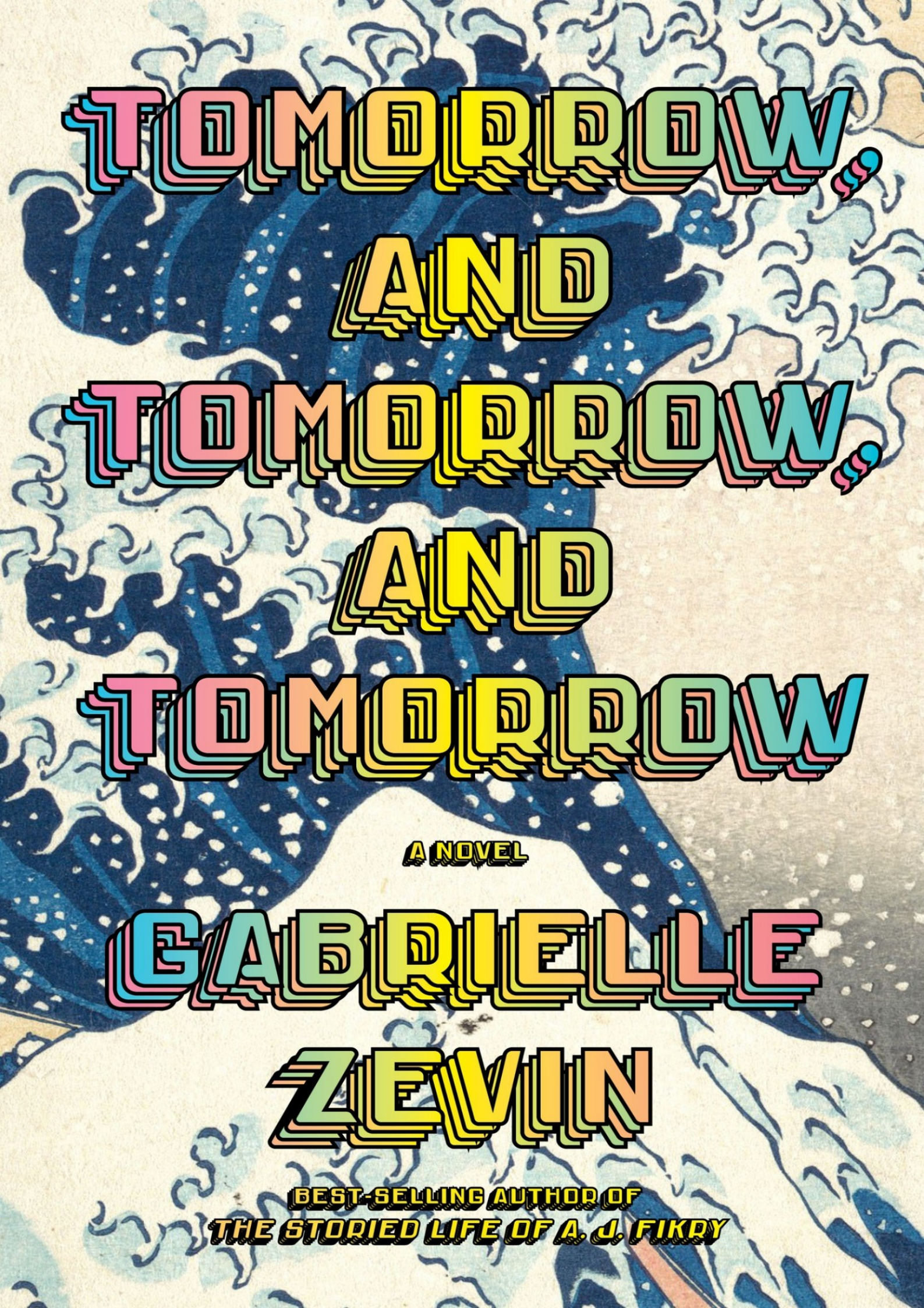
TOMORROW,
AND
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A NOVEL
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TOMORROW,

AND TOMORROW,

AND TOMORROW

GABRIELLE ZEVIN

ALFRED A. KNOPF NEW YORK 2022

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Zevin, Gabrielle, author.
Title: Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow: a novel / Gabrielle Zevin.
Description: New York: Alfred A. Knopf, [2022]
Identifiers: LCCN 2021032441 (print) | LCCN 2021032442 (ebook) | ISBN 9780593321201 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593466490 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9780593321218 (ebook) | ISBN 9781524712228 (export edition)
Classification: LCC PS3626.E95 T66 2022 (print) | LCC PS3626.E95 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2021032441
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2021032442

Ebook ISBN 9780593321218

Cover image: *The Great Wave* (detail) by Katsushika Hokusai. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Cover design by John Gall

ep_prh_6.0_140348895_c0_r0

Again, for H.C.—in work and in play

That Love is all there is,
Is all we know of Love;
It is enough, the freight should be
Proportioned to the groove.

—EMILY DICKINSON

CONTENTS

I

SICK KIDS

1

Before Mazer invented himself as Mazer, he was Samson Mazer, and before he was Samson Mazer, he was Samson Masur—a change of two letters that transformed him from a nice, ostensibly Jewish boy to a Professional Builder of Worlds—and for most of his youth, he was Sam, S.A.M. on the hall of fame of his grandfather's *Donkey Kong* machine, but mainly Sam.

On a late December afternoon, in the waning twentieth century, Sam exited a subway car and found the artery to the escalator clogged by an inert mass of people, who were gaping at a station advertisement. Sam was late. He had a meeting with his academic adviser that he had been postponing for over a month, but that everyone agreed absolutely needed to happen before winter break. Sam didn't care for crowds—being in them, or whatever foolishness they tended to enjoy en masse. But this crowd would not be avoided. He would have to force his way through it if he were to be delivered to the aboveground world.

Sam wore an elephantine navy wool peacoat that he had inherited from his roommate, Marx, who had bought it freshman year from the Army Navy Surplus Store in town. Marx had left it moldering in its plastic shopping bag just short of an entire semester before Sam asked if he might borrow it. That winter had been unrelenting, and it was an April nor'easter (April! What madness, these Massachusetts winters!) that finally wore Sam's pride down enough to ask Marx for the forgotten coat. Sam pretended that he liked the style of it, and Marx said that Sam might as well take it, which is what Sam knew he would say. Like most things purchased from the Army Navy Surplus Store, the coat emanated mold, dust, and the perspiration of dead boys, and Sam tried not to speculate why the garment had been surplussed. But the coat was far warmer than the windbreaker he had brought from California his freshman year. He also believed that the large coat worked to conceal his size. The coat, its ridiculous scale, only made him look smaller and more childlike.

That is to say, Sam Masur at age twenty-one did not have a build for pushing and shoving and so, as much as possible, he weaved through the crowd, feeling somewhat like the doomed amphibian from the video game *Frogger*. He found himself uttering a series of "excuse mes" that he did not mean. A truly magnificent thing about the way the brain was coded, Sam thought, was that it could say

“Excuse me” while meaning “Screw you.” Unless they were unreliable or clearly established as lunatics or scoundrels, characters in novels, movies, and games were meant to be taken at face value—the totality of what they did or what they said. But people—the ordinary, the decent and basically honest—couldn’t get through the day without that one indispensable bit of programming that allowed you to say one thing and mean, feel, even do, another.

“Can’t you go around?” a man in a black and green macramé hat yelled at Sam.

“Excuse me,” Sam said.

“Dammit, I almost had it,” a woman with a baby in a sling muttered as Sam passed in front of her.

“Excuse me,” Sam said.

Occasionally, someone would hastily leave, creating gaps in the crowd. The gaps should have been opportunities of escape for Sam, but somehow, they immediately filled with new humans, hungry for diversion.

He was nearly to the subway’s escalator when he turned back to see what the crowd had been looking at. Sam could imagine reporting the congestion in the train station, and Marx saying, “Weren’t you even curious what it was? There’s a world of people and things, if you can manage to stop being a misanthrope for a second.” Sam didn’t like Marx thinking of him as a misanthrope, even if he was one, and so, he turned. That was when he espied his old comrade, Sadie Green.

It wasn’t as if he hadn’t seen her at all in the intervening years. They had been habitués of science fairs, the Academic Games league, and numerous other competitions (oratory, robotics, creative writing, programming). Because whether you went to a mediocre public high school in the east (Sam), or a fancy private school in the west (Sadie), the Los Angeles smart-kid circuit was the same. They would exchange glances across a room of nerds—sometimes, she’d even smile at him, as if to corroborate their détente—and then she would be swept up in the vulturine circle of attractive, smart kids that always surrounded her. Boys and girls like himself, but wealthier, whiter, and with better glasses and teeth. And he did not want to be one more ugly, nerdy person hovering around Sadie Green. Sometimes, he would make a villain of her and imagine ways that she had slighted him: that time she had turned away from him; that time she had avoided his eyes. But she hadn’t done those things—it would have been almost better if she had.

He had known that she had gone to MIT and had wondered if he might run into her when he got into Harvard. For two and a half years, he had done nothing to force such an occasion. Neither had she.

But there she was: Sadie Green, in the flesh. And to see her almost made him want to cry. It was as if she were a mathematical proof that had eluded him for many years, but all at once, with fresh, well-rested eyes, the proof had a completely obvious solution. *There’s Sadie,* he thought. *Yes.*

He was about to call her name, but then he didn't. He felt overwhelmed by how much time had passed since he and Sadie had last been alone together. How could a person still be as young as he objectively knew himself to be and have had so much time pass? And why was it suddenly so easy to forget that he despised her? Time, Sam thought, was a mystery. But with a second's reflection, he thought better of such sentiment. Time was mathematically explicable; it was the heart—the part of the brain represented by the heart—that was the mystery.

Sadie finished staring at whatever the crowd was staring at, and now she was walking toward the inbound Red Line train.

Sam called her name, "SADIE!" In addition to the rumble of the incoming train, the station was roaring with the usual humanity. A teenage girl played Penguin Cafe Orchestra on a cello for tips. A man with a clipboard asked passersby if they could spare a moment for Muslim refugees in Srebrenica. Adjacent to Sadie was a stand selling six-dollar fruit shakes. The blender had begun to whir, diffusing the scent of citrus and strawberries through the musty, subterranean air, just as Sam had first called her name. "Sadie Green!" he called out again. Still she didn't hear him. He quickened his pace, as much as he could. When he walked quickly, he counterintuitively felt like a person in a three-legged race.

"Sadie! SADIE!" He felt foolish. "SADIE MIRANDA GREEN! YOU HAVE DIED OF DYSENTERY!"

Finally, she turned. She scanned the crowd slowly and when she spotted Sam, the smile spread over her face like a time-lapse video he had once seen in a high school physics class of a rose in bloom. It was beautiful, Sam thought, and perhaps, he worried, a tad ersatz. She walked over to him, still smiling—one dimple on her right cheek, an almost imperceptibly wider gap between the two middle teeth on the top—and he thought that the crowd seemed to part for her, in a way that the world never moved for him.

"It's my sister who died of dysentery, Sam Masur," Sadie said. "I died of exhaustion, following a snakebite."

"And of not wanting to shoot the bison," Sam said.

"It's wasteful. All that meat just rots."

Sadie threw her arms around him. "Sam Masur! I kept hoping I'd run into you."

"I'm in the directory," Sam said.

"Well, maybe I hoped it would be organic," Sadie said. "And now it is."

"What brings you to Harvard Square?" Sam asked.

"Why, the Magic Eye, of course," she said playfully. She gestured in front of her, toward the advertisement. For the first time, Sam registered the 60-by-40-inch poster that had transformed commuters into a zombie horde.

SEE THE WORLD IN A WHOLE NEW WAY.
THIS CHRISTMAS, THE GIFT EVERYONE WANTS IS THE MAGIC EYE.

The imagery on the poster was a psychedelic pattern in Christmas tones of emerald, ruby, and gold. If you stared at the pattern long enough, your brain would trick itself into seeing a hidden 3D image. It was called an autostereogram, and it was easy to make one if you were a modestly skilled programmer. *This?* Sam thought. *The things people find amusing.* He groaned.

"You disapprove?" Sadie said.

"This can be found in any dorm common room on campus."

"Not this particular one, Sam. This one's unique to—"

"Every train station in Boston."

"Maybe the U.S.?" Sadie laughed. "So, Sam, don't you want to see the world with magic eyes?"

"I'm always seeing the world with magic eyes," he said. "I'm exploding with childish wonder."

Sadie pointed toward a boy of about six: "Look how happy he is! He's got it now! Well done!"

"Have you seen it?" Sam asked.

"I didn't see it yet," Sadie admitted. "And now, I really do have to catch this next train, or I'll be late for class."

"Surely, you have another five minutes so that you can see the world with magic eyes," Sam said.

"Maybe next time."

"Come on, Sadie. There'll always be another class. How many times can you look at something and know that everyone around you is seeing the same thing or at the very least that their brains and eyes are responding to the same phenomenon? How much proof do you ever have that we're all in the same world?"

Sadie smiled ruefully and punched Sam lightly on the shoulder. "That was about the most Sam thing you could have said."

"Sam I am."

She sighed as she heard the rumble of her train leaving the station. "If I fail Advanced Topics in Computer Graphics, it's your fault." She repositioned herself so that she was looking at the poster again. "You do it with me, Sam."

"Yes, ma'am." Sam squared his shoulders, and he stared straight ahead. He had not stood this near to Sadie in years.

Directions on the poster said to relax one's eyes and to concentrate on a single point until a secret image emerged. If that didn't work, they suggested coming closer to the poster and then slowly backing up, but there wasn't room for that in the train station. In any case, Sam didn't care what the secret image was. He could

guess that it was a Christmas tree, an angel, a star, though probably not a Star of David, something seasonal, trite, and broadly appealing, something meant to sell more Magic Eye products. Autostereograms had never worked for Sam. He theorized it was something to do with his glasses. The glasses, which corrected a significant myopia, wouldn't let his eyes relax enough for his brain to perceive the illusion. And so, after a respectable amount of time (fifteen seconds), Sam stopped trying to see the secret image and studied Sadie instead.

Her hair was shorter and more fashionable, he guessed, but it was the same mahogany waves that she'd always had. The light freckling on her nose was the same, and her skin was still olive, though she was much paler than when they were kids in California, and her lips were chapped. Her eyes were the same brown, with golden flecks. Anna, his mother, had had similar eyes, and she'd told Sam that coloration like this was called heterochromia. At the time, he had thought it sounded like a disease, something for his mother to potentially die from. Beneath Sadie's eyes were barely perceptible crescents, but then, she'd had these as a kid too. Still, he felt she seemed tired. Sam looked at Sadie, and he thought, *This is what time travel is*. It's looking at a person, and seeing them in the present and the past, concurrently. And that mode of transport only worked with those one had known a significant time.

"I saw it!" she said. Her eyes were bright, and she wore an expression he remembered from when she was eleven.

Sam quickly turned his gaze back to the poster.

"Did you see it?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "I saw it."

Sadie looked at him. "What did you see?"

"It," Sam said. "It was amazingly great. Terribly festive."

"Did you actually see it?" Sadie's lips were twitching upward. Those heterochromic eyes looked at him with mirth.

"Yes, but I don't want to spoil it for anyone else who hasn't." He gestured toward the horde.

"Okay, Sam," Sadie said. "That's thoughtful of you."

He knew she knew that he hadn't seen it. He smiled at her, and she smiled at him.

"Isn't it strange?" Sadie said. "I feel like I never stopped seeing you. I feel like we come down to this T station to stare at this poster every day."

"We grok," Sam said.

"We do grok. And I take back what I said before. That is the Sammest thing you could have said."

"Sammest I Ammest. You're—" As he was speaking, the blender began to whir again.

“What?” she said.

“You’re in the wrong square,” he repeated.

“What’s the ‘wrong square’?”

“You’re in Harvard Square, when you should be in Central Square or Kendall Square. I think I heard you’d gone to MIT.”

“My boyfriend lives around here,” Sadie said, in a way that indicated she had no more she wished to say on that subject. “I wonder why they’re called squares. They’re not really squares, are they?” Another inbound train was approaching. “That’s my train. Again.”

“That’s how trains work,” Sam said.

“It’s true. There’s a train, and a train, and a train.”

“In which case, the only proper thing for us to do right now is have coffee,” Sam said. “Or whatever you drink, if coffee’s too much of a cliché for you. Chai tea. Matcha. Snapple. Champagne. There’s a world with infinite beverage possibilities, right over our heads, you know? All we have to do is ride that escalator and it’s ours for the partaking.”

“I wish I could, but I have to get to class. I’ve done maybe half the reading. The only thing I have going for me is my punctuality and attendance.”

“I doubt that,” Sam said. Sadie was one of the most brilliant people he knew.

She gave Sam another quick hug. “Good running into you.”

She started walking toward the train, and Sam tried to figure out a way to make her stop. If this were a game, he could hit pause. He could restart, say different things, the right ones this time. He could search his inventory for the item that would make Sadie not leave.

They hadn’t even exchanged phone numbers, he thought desperately. His mind cycled through the ways a person could find a person in 1995. In the old days, when Sam was a child, people could be lost forever, but people were not as easily lost as they once were. Increasingly, all you needed was the desire to convert a person from a digital conjecture to the unruly flesh. So, he comforted himself that even though the figure of his old friend was growing smaller and smaller in the train station, the world was trending in the same direction—what, with globalization, the information superhighway, and the like. It would be easy to find Sadie Green. He could guess her email—MIT emails followed the same pattern. He could search the MIT directory online. He could call the Computer Science Department—he was assuming computer science. He could call her parents, Steven Green and Sharyn Friedman-Green, in California.

And yet, he knew himself and he knew he was the type of person that never called anyone, unless he was absolutely certain the advance would be welcomed. His brain was treacherously negative. He would invent that she had been cold toward him, that she hadn’t even had a class that day, that she had simply wanted to

get away from Sam. His brain would insist that if she'd wanted to see him, she would have given him a way to contact her. He would conclude that, to Sadie, Sam represented a painful period of her life, and so, of course, she didn't want to see him again. Or, maybe, as he'd often suspected, he meant nothing to her—he had been a rich girl's good deed. He would dwell on the mention of a boyfriend in Harvard Square. He would track down her number, her email address, her physical address, and he would never use any of them. And so, with a phenomenological heaviness, he realized that this very well could be the last time he ever saw Sadie Green, and he tried to memorize the details of what she looked like, walking away, in a train station, on a bitter cold day in December. Beige cashmere hat, mittens, and scarf. Camel-colored three-quarter-length peacoat, most definitely not from the Army Navy Surplus Store. Blue jeans, quite worn, irregularly fraying bootcut at the bottom. Black sneakers with a white stripe. Cognac leather crossbody messenger bag that was as wide as she was, and overstuffed, the arm of an ecru sweater sticking out the side. Her hair—shiny, lightly damp, just past her shoulder blades. There was no echt Sadie in this view, he decided. She looked indistinguishable from any number of smart, well-maintained college girls in the train station.

On the verge of disappearing, she turned, and she ran back to him. "Sam!" she said. "Do you still game?"

"Yes," Sam answered with too much enthusiasm. "Definitely. All the time."

"Here." She pressed a 3.25-inch disk into his hands. "This is my game. You're probably super busy but give it a play if you have the time. I'd love to know what you think."

She ran back into the train, and Sam trailed after her.

"Wait! Sadie! How do I get in touch with you?"

"My email's on the disk," Sadie said. "In the Readme."

The train doors closed, returning Sadie to her square. Sam looked down at the disk: the title of the game was *Solution*. She had handwritten the label. He would know her handwriting anywhere.

—

When he got back to the apartment later that night, he didn't immediately install *Solution,* though he did set it next to the disk drive of his computer. He found *not playing* Sadie's game to be a great motivator, though, and he worked on his junior paper proposal, which was already a month overdue, and which would have, at that point, waited until after the holidays. His topic, after much wringing of hands, was "Alternative Approaches to the Banach-Tarski Paradox in the Absence of the Axiom of Choice," and as he was quite bored writing the proposal, he actively feared the drudgery that writing the paper would entail. He had begun to suspect that while he

had an obvious aptitude for math, he was not particularly inspired by it. His adviser in the Mathematics Department, Anders Larsson, who would go on to win a Fields Medal, had said as much in that afternoon's meeting. His parting words: "You're incredibly gifted, Sam. But it is worth noting that to be good at something is not quite the same as loving it."

Sam ate takeout Italian food with Marx—Marx over-ordered so that Sam would have leftovers to eat while Marx was out of town. Marx re-extended an invitation to come skiing with him in Telluride over the holidays: "You really should come, and if it's the skiing you're worried about, everyone mostly hangs out in the lodge anyway." Sam rarely had enough money to go home for the holidays, and so these invitations were extended and rejected at regular intervals. After dinner, Sam started the reading for his Moral Reasoning class (the class was studying the philosophy of the young Wittgenstein, the era before he'd decided he was wrong about everything), and Marx organized himself to go away for the break. When Marx was finished packing, he wrote out a holiday card to Sam and left it on his desk, along with a fifty-dollar gift certificate to the brew house. That was when Marx came across the disk.

"What's *Solution*?" Marx asked. He picked up the green disk and held it out to Sam.

"It's my friend's game," Sam said.

"What friend?" Marx said. They had lived together for going on three years, and Marx had rarely known Sam to mention any friends.

"My friend from California."

"Are you going to play it?"

"Eventually. It'll probably suck. I'm only looking at it, as a favor." Sam felt like he was betraying Sadie saying that, but it probably would suck.

"What's it about?" Marx said.

"No idea."

"Cool title, though." Marx sat down at Sam's computer. "I've got a couple of minutes. Should we boot it up?"

"Why not?" Though Sam had been planning to play alone, Marx and he gamed together with some regularity. They favored martial arts video games: *Mortal Kombat, Tekken, Street Fighter*. They also had a Dungeons & Dragons campaign that they picked up from time to time. The campaign, for which Sam was dungeon master, had been going on for over two years. Playing Dungeons & Dragons in a group of two people is a peculiar, intimate experience, and the existence of the campaign was kept a secret from everyone they knew.

Marx put the disk in the machine, and Sam installed it on his hard drive.

Several hours later, Sam and Marx were done with their first playthrough of *Solution*.

“What the hell *was* that?” Marx said. “I’m so late getting to Ajda’s place. She’s going to kill me.” Ajda was Marx’s latest paramour—a five-eleven squash player and occasional model from Turkey, an average résumé for one of Marx’s love interests. “I honestly thought we’d play for five minutes.”

Marx put on his coat—camel colored, like Sadie’s. “Your friend is sick as hell. And maybe, a genius. How do you know him again?”

2

On the day Sadie first met Sam, she had been banished from her older sister Alice's hospital room. Alice was moody in the way of thirteen-year-olds, but she was also moody in the way of people who might be dying of cancer. Their mother, Sharyn, said that Alice should be given a great deal of latitude, that the dual storm fronts of puberty and illness were a lot for one body to grapple with. *A great deal of latitude* meant Sadie should go into the waiting area until Alice was no longer angry with her.

Sadie was not entirely sure what she had done to provoke Alice this time. She had shown Alice a picture in *Teen* magazine of a girl in a red beret and said something to the effect of *You would look good in this hat.* Sadie barely remembered what she had said, but whatever it was, Alice hadn't taken it well, screaming absurdly, *No one wears hats like that in Los Angeles! This is why you don't have any friends, Sadie Green!* Alice had gone into the bathroom and started crying, which sounded like choking, because her nose was congested and her throat was coated in sores. Sharyn, who had been sleeping in the bedside chair, told Alice to calm down, that she would make herself sick. *I'm already sick,* Alice said. At this point, Sadie started crying, too—she knew she didn't have any friends, but it was still mean of Alice to point it out. Sharyn told Sadie to go to the waiting area.

"It's not fair," Sadie had said to her mother. "I didn't *do* anything. She's being completely unreasonable."

"It isn't fair," Sharyn agreed.

In exile, Sadie tried to puzzle out what had happened—she honestly had thought Alice *would* look good in a red hat. But upon reflection, she determined that, by mentioning the hat, Alice must have thought Sadie was saying something about Alice's hair, which had grown thin from the chemotherapy. And if that's what Alice thought, Sadie felt sorry that she had ever mentioned the stupid hat in the first place. She went to knock on Alice's hospital door to apologize. Through the glass panel on her window, Sharyn mouthed, "Come back later. Alice is sleeping."

Around lunchtime, Sadie felt hungry and, thus, somewhat less sorry for Alice and sorrier for herself. It was irritating the way Alice acted like an asshole and Sadie was the one who was punished. As Sadie had repeatedly been told, Alice was sick, but she was not dying. Alice's variety of leukemia had a particularly high remission

rate. She had been responding well to treatment, and she'd probably even be able to start high school, on schedule, in the fall. Alice would only have to be in the hospital for two nights this time, and it was only out of, according to her mother, "an abundance of caution." Sadie liked the phrase "an abundance of caution." It reminded her of a murder of crows, a flock of seagulls, a pack of wolves. She imagined that "caution" was a creature of some kind—maybe, a cross between a Saint Bernard and an elephant. A large, intelligent, friendly animal that could be counted on to defend the Green sisters from threats, existential and otherwise.

A nurse, noticing the unattended, conspicuously healthy eleven-year-old in the waiting room, gave Sadie a vanilla pudding cup. He recognized Sadie as one of the many neglected siblings of sick kids and suggested that she might like to use the game room. There was a Nintendo console, he promised, which was rarely used on weekday afternoons. Sadie and Alice already had a Nintendo, but Sadie had nothing else to do for the next five hours until Sharyn could drive her back home. It was summer, and she had already finished reading *The Phantom Tollbooth* for the second time, which was the only book she'd brought with her that day. If Alice hadn't gotten pissed off, the day would have been filled with their usual activities: watching their favorite morning game shows, *Press That Button!* and *The Price Is Right;* reading *Seventeen* magazine and giving each other personality quizzes; playing *Oregon Trail* or any of the other educational games that had come preloaded on the twenty-pound laptop computer Alice had been given to do her makeup school work; and the myriad casual ways the girls had always found to pass time together. Sadie might not have many friends, but she'd never felt that she needed them: Alice was ne plus ultra. No one was cleverer, more daring, more beautiful, more athletic, more hilarious, more fill-in-the-adjective-of-your-choice than Alice. Even though they insisted Alice would recover, Sadie often found herself imagining a world that didn't have Alice in it. A world that lacked shared jokes and music and sweaters and par-baked brownies and sister skin casually against sister skin, under the blankets, in the darkness, and most of all, lacking Alice, the keeper of the innermost secrets and shames of Sadie's innocent heart. There was no one Sadie loved more than Alice, not her parents, not her grandmother. The world sans Alice was bleak, like a grainy photograph of Neil Armstrong on the moon, and it kept the eleven-year-old up late at night. It would be a relief to escape into the world of Nintendo for a while.

But the game room was not empty. A boy was playing *Super Mario Bros*. Sadie determined he was a sick kid, and not a sibling or a visitor like herself: he was wearing pajamas in the middle of the day, a pair of crutches rested on the floor beside his chair, and his left foot was surrounded by a medieval-looking cage-like contraption. She estimated the boy was her age, eleven, or a little older. He had tangled curly black hair, a puggish nose, glasses, a cartoonishly round head. In

Sadie's art class at school, she had been taught to draw by breaking things down into basic shapes. To depict this boy, she would have needed mainly circles.

She sat on the floor next to him and watched him play. He was skilled—at the end of the level, he could make Mario land at the top of the flagpole, something Sadie had never mastered. Although Sadie liked to be the player, there was a pleasure to watching someone who was a dexterous player—it was like watching a dance. He never looked over at her. Indeed, he didn't seem to notice she was there. He cleared the first boss battle, and the words BUT OUR PRINCESS IS IN ANOTHER CASTLE appeared on the screen. Without looking over at her, he said, "You want to play the rest of this life?"

Sadie shook her head. "No. You're doing really well. I can wait until you're dead."

The boy nodded. He continued to play, and Sadie continued to watch.

"Before. I shouldn't have said that," Sadie apologized. "I mean, in case you are actually dying. This being a children's hospital."

The boy, piloting Mario, climbed up a vine that led to a cloudy, coin-filled area. "This being the world, everyone's dying," he said.

"True," Sadie said.

"But I'm not currently dying."

"That's good."

"Are you dying?" the boy asked.

"No," Sadie said. "Not currently."

"What's wrong with you, then?"

"It's my sister. She's sick."

"What's wrong with her?"

"Dysentery." Sadie didn't feel like invoking cancer, the destroyer of natural conversation.

The boy looked at Sadie as if he were going to ask a follow-up question. But instead, he handed the controller to her. "Here. My thumbs are tired anyway."

Sadie acquitted herself well through the level, powering up Mario and adding another life.

"You're not that bad," the boy said.

"We have a Nintendo at home, but I'm only allowed to play it an hour a week," Sadie said. "But no one pays attention to me anymore, since my sister Al got sick…"

"Dysentery," the boy filled in.

"Yeah. I was supposed to go to Space Camp in Florida this summer, but my parents decided I should stay home to keep Al company." Sadie ground pounded a Goomba, one of the mushroom-like creatures that were abundant in Super Mario. "I feel bad for the Goombas."

“They’re just henchmen,” the boy said.

“But it feels like they’ve gotten mixed up in something that has nothing to do with them.”

“That’s the life of a henchman. Go down that pipe,” the boy instructed. “There’s a bunch of coins down there.”

“I know! I’m getting to it,” Sadie said. “Al seems annoyed with me most of the time, so I don’t know why I couldn’t go to Space Camp. It would have been my first time at overnight camp and my first time flying alone on a plane. It was only going to be for two weeks anyway.” Sadie was nearing the end of the level. “What’s the secret to landing high on the flagpole?”

“Hold down the run button as long as you can, then crouch down and jump just before you’re about to fall,” the boy said.

Sadie/Mario landed on the top of the flagpole. “Hey, it worked. I’m Sadie, by the way.”

“Sam.”

“Your turn.” She returned the controller to him. “What’s wrong with you?” she asked.

“I was in a car accident,” Sam said. “My foot is broken in twenty-seven places.”

“That’s a lot of places,” Sadie said. “Are you exaggerating, or is that the number?”

“It’s the number. I’m very particular about numbers.”

“Me too.”

“But sometimes the number goes up slightly because they have to break other parts of it to reset it,” Sam said. “They might have to cut it off. I can’t stand on it at all. I’ve already had three surgeries and it’s not even a foot. It’s a flesh bag, with bone chips in it.”

“Sounds delicious,” Sadie said. “Sorry, if that was gross. Your description made me think of potato chips. We skip a lot of meals since my sister got sick, and I don’t think anyone would even notice if I starved to death. All I’ve had today is a pudding cup.”

“You’re weird, Sadie,” Sam said, with interest in his voice.

“I know,” Sadie said. “I really hope they don’t have to amputate your foot, Sam. My sister has cancer, by the way.”

“I thought she had dysentery.”

“Well, the cancer treatment gives her dysentery. The dysentery thing’s kind of a joke between us. Do you know that computer game *Oregon Trail*?”

“Possibly.” Sam avoided a direct admission of ignorance.

“It’s probably in the computer lab at your school. It’s, maybe, my favorite game, even though it’s a little boring. It’s about these people in the 1800s, and

they're trying to get from the East Coast to the West Coast, in a wagon, with a couple of oxen, and the goal is to make it so everyone in your party doesn't die. You have to feed them enough, not go too fast, buy the right supplies, stuff like that. But sometimes, someone, or even you, still dies, like of a rattlesnake bite, or starvation, or—"

"Dysentery."

"Yes! Exactly. And this always makes me and Al laugh."

"What *is* dysentery?" Sam asked.

"It's diarrhea," Sadie whispered. "We didn't know at first either."

Sam laughed, but just as abruptly, he stopped laughing. "I'm still laughing," he said. "But it hurts when I laugh."

"I promise not to say anything funny ever again, then," Sadie said, in an odd, emotionless voice.

"Stop! That voice is going to make me laugh even more. What are you even trying to be?"

"A robot."

"A robot sounds like this." Sam did his impression of a robot, which cracked them up all over again.

"You're not supposed to laugh!" Sadie said.

"You're not supposed to *make me* laugh. Do people truly die of dysentery?" Sam asked.

"In the olden days, I guess they did."

"Do you think they put it on people's tombstones?"

"I don't think they put cause of death on tombstones, Sam."

"At the Haunted Mansion at Disneyland, they do. I kind of hope I die of dysentery now. Shall we switch to playing *Duck Hunt*?"

Sadie nodded.

"You'll have to set up the guns. They're right up there." Sadie retrieved the light guns and plugged them into the console. She let Sam shoot first.

"You're fantastically good," she said. "Do you have a Nintendo at home?"

"No," Sam said, "but my grandfather has a *Donkey Kong* machine in his restaurant. He lets me play as much as I want for free. And the thing about games is, if you get good at one game, you can be good at any game. That's what I think. They're all hand-eye coordination and observing patterns."

"I agree. And *what*? Your grandfather owns a *Donkey Kong* machine? That is so cool! I love those old machines. What kind of restaurant is it?"

"It's a pizza place," Sam said.

"*What?* I love pizza! It's my favorite food on earth. Can you eat all the pizza you want for free?"

Sam nodded while expertly annihilating two ducks.

“That’s, like, my dream. You’re living my actual dream. You have to let me go with you, Sam. What’s the name of the restaurant? Maybe I’ve already been to it.”

“Dong and Bong’s New York Style House of Pizza. Dong and Bong are my grandparents’ names. It’s not even funny in Korean. It’s like being called Jack and Jill,” Sam said. “The restaurant is on Wilshire in K-town.”

“What’s K-town?”

“Lady, are you even from Los Angeles? K-town is Koreatown. How do you not know that?” Sam said. “Everyone knows K-town.”

“I know what Koreatown is. I didn’t know people called it K-town.”

“Where do you live anyway?” Sam asked.

“The flats.”

“What are the flats?”

“It’s the flat part of Beverly Hills,” Sadie said. “It’s pretty close to K-town. See, you didn’t know what the flats were! People in L.A. only ever know about the part of town that they live in.”

“I guess you’re right.”

For the rest of the afternoon, Sam and Sadie chatted amiably while slaughtering several generations of virtual ducks. “What did the ducks ever do to us?” Sadie commented.

“Maybe we’re shooting them for digital food. The digital usses will starve without the virtual ducks.”

“Still, I feel bad for the ducks.”

“You feel bad for the Goombas. You basically feel bad for everyone,” Sam said.

“I do,” Sadie said. “I also feel bad for the bison in *Oregon Trail*.”

“Why?” Sam asked.

Sadie’s mother poked her head into the game room: Alice had something she wanted to tell Sadie, which was code for Sadie having been forgiven. “I’ll tell you next time,” Sadie said to Sam, though she didn’t know if there would ever be a next time.

“See you around,” Sam said.

“Who’s your little friend?” Sharyn asked as they were leaving.

“Some boy.” Sadie looked back at Sam, who had already returned his attention to the game. “He was nice.”

On the way to Alice’s room, Sadie thanked the nurse who had told her to use the game room. The nurse smiled at Sadie’s mother—manners were honestly somewhat rare in kids these days. “Was it empty like I said?”

“No, a boy was in there. Sam…” She didn’t know his last name yet.

“You met Sam?” The nurse’s sudden interest made Sadie wonder if she had broken a secret hospital rule by occupying the game room when a sick kid had

wanted to use it. There were so many rules since Alice had gotten cancer.

"Yes," Sadie tried to explain. "We talked and played Nintendo. He didn't seem to mind that I was there."

"Sam, with the curly hair and glasses. That Sam?"

Sadie nodded.

The nurse asked to speak to Sharyn alone, and Sharyn told Sadie to go on ahead to Alice.

When Sadie opened the door to Alice's room, she felt uneasy. "I think I'm in trouble," she announced.

"What did you do now?" Alice said. Sadie explained her theoretical crime. "They *told* you to use it," Alice reasoned, "so, you can't have done anything wrong."

Sadie sat on Alice's bed, and Alice started braiding her hair.

"I bet that's not even why the nurse wanted to speak to Mom," Alice continued. "It could have been about me. Which nurse was it?"

"I don't know."

"Don't worry, kid. If it turns out you *are* in trouble, cry and say your sister has cancer."

"Sorry about the whole hat thing," Sadie said.

"What hat thing? Oh, right. My fault. I don't know what's wrong with me."

"Leukemia, probably," Sadie said.

"Dysentery," Alice corrected.

By the time they were on the drive back home, Sharyn had still not mentioned the game room, and Sadie was reasonably confident that the incident had been forgotten. They were listening to an NPR story about the centenary of the Statue of Liberty, and Sadie was thinking how awful it would be if the Statue of Liberty were an actual woman. How strange it would be to have people inside you. The people would feel like invaders, like a disease, like head lice or cancer. The thought disturbed her, and Sadie was relieved when her mother turned off the radio. "You know that boy you were talking to today?"

Here it is, Sadie thought. "Yes," Sadie said quietly. She noted that they were passing through K-town and she tried to spot Dong and Bong's New York Style House of Pizza. "I'm not in trouble, am I?"

"No. Why would you be in trouble?"

Because lately, Sadie was almost always in trouble. It was impossible to be eleven, with a sick sister, and for people to find your conduct beyond reproach. She was always saying the wrong thing, or being too loud, or demanding too much (time, love, food), even though she had not demanded more than what had been freely given before. "No reason."

“The nurse told me he was in a horrific car accident,” Sharyn continued. “He hasn’t said more than two words to anyone in the six weeks since he was injured. He’s been in terrible pain, and he’ll probably have to be in and out of the hospital for a very long time. It was a big deal that he talked to you.”

“Really? Sam seemed pretty normal to me.”

“They’ve been trying everything to make him open up. Therapists, friends, family. What did you two talk about?”

“I don’t know. Nothing much.” She tried to remember their conversation. “Games, I guess?”

“Well, this is entirely up to you,” Sharyn said. “But the nurse wondered if you might come back tomorrow to talk to Sam again.” Before Sadie had time to respond, Sharyn added, “I know you have to do community service for your Bat Mitzvah next year, and I’m sure this would probably count.”

To allow yourself to play with another person is no small risk. It means allowing yourself to be open, to be exposed, to be hurt. It is the human equivalent of the dog rolling on its back—*I know you won’t hurt me, even though you can*. It is the dog putting its mouth around your hand and never biting down. To play requires trust and love. Many years later, as Sam would controversially say in an interview with the gaming website *Kotaku,* “There is no more intimate act than play, even sex.” The internet responded: no one who had had good sex would ever say that, and there must be something seriously wrong with Sam.

Sadie went to the hospital the next day, and the next day, and the next day, and then whatever days Sam was well enough to play but sick enough to be in the hospital. They would become great playmates. They competed sometimes, but they took their greatest pleasure from copiloting a single player character, passing a keyboard or a controller back and forth between them while discussing the ways they could ease this virtual person’s journey through an inevitably perilous game world. While they gamed, they told each other the stories of their relatively short lives. Eventually, Sadie knew everything about Sam, and Sam, about Sadie. They thought they did, at least. She taught him the programming she’d picked up at school (BASIC, a little Pascal) and he expanded her drawing technique beyond circles and squares (crosshatching, perspective, chiaroscuro). Even at twelve, he was an excellent draftsman.

Since the accident, Sam had begun making intricate, M. C. Escher–style mazes. His psychologist encouraged him, believing that mazes could help Sam deal with his significant physical and emotional pain. She interpreted the mazes as a hopeful indication that Sam was plotting a way beyond his current situation. But the doctor was wrong. Sam’s mazes were always for Sadie. He would slip one into her pocket before she left. “I made this for you,” he’d say. “It’s nothing much. Bring it back next time so I can see the solution.”

Sam would later tell people that these mazes were his first attempts at writing games. “A maze,” he would say, “is a video game distilled to its purest form.” Maybe so, but this was revisionist and self-aggrandizing. The mazes were for Sadie. To design a game is to imagine the person who will eventually play it.

At the end of each visit, Sadie would stealthily present a timesheet to one of the nurses to sign. Most friendships cannot be quantified, but the form provided a log of the exact number of hours Sadie had spent being friends with Sam.

It was several months into Sam and Sadie’s friendship when Sadie’s grandmother, Freda, first broached the subject of whether Sadie was truly doing community service or not. Freda Green often chauffeured Sadie to the hospital to see Sam. She drove a red, American-made convertible, with the top down if weather permitted (in Los Angeles, it usually did) and a silk printed scarf in her hair. She was barely five feet, only an inch taller than the eleven-year-old Sadie, but she was always dressed impeccably in the bespoke clothes she bought in Paris once a year: crisp white blouses, soft gray wool pants, bouclé or cashmere sweaters. She was never without her hexagonal weapon of a leather handbag, her scarlet lipstick, her delicate gold wristwatch, her tuberose-scented perfume, her pearls. Sadie thought she was the most stylish woman in the world. In addition to being Sadie’s grandmother, Freda was also a Los Angeles real estate tycoon, with a reputation for being terrifying and unfailingly scrupulous in business negotiations.

“Mine Sadie,” she said as they drove from the west to the east. “You know I am overjoyed to drive you to the hospital.”

“Thanks, Bubbe. I appreciate it.”

“But, I think, based on what you have told me, that the boy might be more of a friend.”

The waterlogged community service form had been sticking out of her math book, and Sadie tucked it inside. “It was Mom’s idea,” Sadie defended herself. “The nurses and doctors say I’m helping. Last week, his grandfather gave me a hug *and* a slice of mushroom pizza. I don’t see what’s wrong with it.”

“Yes, but the boy doesn’t know about the arrangement, am I right?”

“No,” Sadie said. “It never came up.”

“And do you think there might be a reason you haven’t brought it up?”

“When I’m with Sam, we’re busy,” Sadie said lamely.

“Darling, it may come out later, and it could hurt your friend’s feelings, if he thinks he is a charity to you, and not a genuine friendship.”

“Can’t something be both?” Sadie said.

“Friendship is friendship, and charity is charity,” Freda said. “You know very well that I was in Germany as a child, and you have heard the stories, so I won’t tell them to you again. But I can tell you that the people who give you charity are never your friends. It is not possible to receive charity *from* a friend.”

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