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Opening extract from

Because You'll Never Meet Me

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chapter one
THE LASER BEAM

Dear Fellow Hermit,

My name is Oliver, but most people who meet me end up calling me Ollie. I guess you don't really have to, though, because odds are you'll never meet me.

I can never travel to wherever you are, because a big part of what makes me a hermit is the fact that I'm deathly allergic to electricity. This is kind of massively incapacitating, but hey—everyone has problems, right?

I think never being able to meet me is sort of a shame, because I'm not *too* boring. I can juggle forks like nobody's business, for starters. I'm also pretty great at kanji calligraphy, and I can whittle a piece of pine into anything—well, anything made of pine. Dr. Auburn-Stache (I swear that's his real name) is impressed by how quickly I can list every bone in the human body, from the distal phalanx of my ugliest toe all the way up to the frontal bone above my

eyes. I've read more books than I've got hairs on my head, and I am just months away from mastering the glockenspiel. (In case you didn't know, the glockenspiel is like the metallic, cooler older brother of the xylophone.) I know what you're thinking, but you'd be surprised how living alone in the woods can warm a person to the delights of glockenspieling.

But beyond all that stuff, the most interesting thing about me is that I'm lovesick.

I don't mean all that poetical nonsense about feeling the urge to carve a girl's name into notebooks and desks and trees. I'm not talking moonlit serenades, either, because even my wheezing *cat* is a better singer than I am.

I mean that if I wanted to be around this girl—Liz, her name is Liz—under normal circumstances, I could die. If I ever wanted to take her out to—I dunno—an *arcade* (isn't that what you call those mystical places that are just wall-to-wall electric games?), the moment I walked into a bleeping basement full of neon lights and racing simulators, I'd collapse and start seizing like there's no tomorrow. Which there might not be, if I hit my head the wrong way.

I don't think that's what most people mean by lovesickness, Fellow Hermit.

If I took this girl out to a movie (and I would love to—what are movies like?), the buzzing of the projector behind us would make my eyelids twitch. The shrill screeching of phones in other people's pockets would drive emerald ice picks into my temples, and the dim lights overhead would burn white and gold in my retinas. Maybe I'd even swallow my tongue.

But I read somewhere that people who have epileptic fits can't actually swallow their tongues. They do *bite* their tongues, though;

one time after a big seizure I chomped right through mine, and it took Auburn-Stache, like, seven stitches on the top and five on the bottom to make it heal up afterward. For more than two weeks, I wandered around our cabin saying things like "Waf gongan?" and "Yef, pleef" while Mom just shook her head at me, all exasperated.

Mom's always exasperated. Her face is pretty creased up most of the time, especially around her eyes, even when she's smiling. That's mostly my fault, I think. I would never say anything to her about it, because I think it would upset her that I noticed, and then she might lock herself in the garage again for a day or two, or even longer this time.

Mom's amazing, but she and I have had some pretty bad days lately, days where neither of us really enjoys the winter sunshine. She's watching while I'm writing this by candlelight, and she's probably wondering if you'll even be able to read it. Mom says I've got the handwriting of a drunk doctor. One time I asked Dr. Auburn-Stache if he would consider drinking some moonshine (isn't that what people are supposed to drink out in the woods?) and then write me a sonnet so I could compare our penmanship, but he just snickered behind his goatee and patted me on the shoulder.

But—what was I talking about?

Was I talking about Liz? Probably I was, because that's what it's like when you're lovesick. The first side effect is uncontrollable word-vomit:

When Liz is around, it seems like nothing else is! She smirks and teases me just like she did on the day I met her in the woods, and then I think that maybe I'm going to be okay, maybe I'm *not* losing it after all. Because Liz told me that no one should ever say

his illness before his name. And I told you my name first, Fellow Hermit!

But . . . Liz is hardly ever around anymore, so . . .

Sorry if I wasn't supposed to be talking about her!

Liz's parents are social workers, and she thinks I have some kind of attention deficit disorder because sometimes my thoughts careen away from my brain and I blab, blab, blab.

But tell me about you! What's your deal?

Mom won't say where she plans to send this letter. All she says is that Auburn-Stache knows another kid somewhere out there a couple of years older than me with his own set of bizarre medical issues. What with everything that has happened to me this year, she thought I could use someone to talk to. She thinks I need help, but she's overreacting. It's not like I've stopped *eating*; sometimes a guy just doesn't want tuna sandwiches. That doesn't mean I'm sick. Or at least any sicker than usual, because you can't get much sicker than being allergic to electricity.

About that—I'll try explaining it to you, but if you ask *why* I'm allergic to electricity, I'll just throw my hands up and sigh. I've always been this way. It's the ultimate mystery in my neck of the woods.

It might have something to do with a *top secret* laboratory, though! This is just a hypothesis, and it doesn't *just* come from reading *Frankenstein* in blanket forts during thunderstorms as an impressionable ten-year-old. Half the superhero characters I've read about, from Captain America to the Hulk to Wolverine, got interesting abilities after being test subjects in laboratories.

I think being an experiment sounds way better than being sick, you know?

So here's the working theory: maybe Dr. Auburn-Stache met your parents at a secret, hush-hush laboratory? Maybe the same one where my dad got radiation poisoning!

Because, see, I do have evidence to support my hypothesis. I don't know much about my dad. But I do know he was some sort of doctor or *scientist*, because Mom keeps his lab coat hanging in her wardrobe. One time, when I was seven or something, I snuck into her room to steal her keys from her bureau (sometimes she padlocks us in, but I really wanted to go outside because it was prime cricket-catching season), and she was fast asleep with the faded white coat draped over her like a blanket. I saw that and stopped looking for the keys.

She won't tell me whether I'm right about the lab, or about dad, beyond saying that he was sick before he died. (I guess it wasn't *necessarily* radiation poisoning.) But I am an expert needler, Fellow Hermit. Over the years I've tried all sorts of tactics to get the story out of her. These tactics include but are not limited to

a. leaping out from behind her armchair and screeching: "Who'smydaddyyyy!?"
b. waiting in the dark pantry until she dives in seeking flour, at which point I moan in a low whisper, "What about . . . the laboratory?"
c. moping extensively (it's an act, I swear) with the shiniest damn puppy eyes you've ever *seen*.

Mom is unshakable. Her usual response to all tactics is an eye roll, but every now and then she pats me on the head. When I'm in the pantry, she just shuts the door on me.

So I don't know who my dad was, but I know she misses him. If

she misses him anything like how much I miss Liz, then no wonder she locks the doors.

Maybe you can tell me anything you know about laboratories in your letter, since I went to bug Mom about it again just now, and she told me to sit back down at my desk and try, for the love of pajamas, to stay on topic for once. How? I've never really had to stay on topic before. When it's just you alone in a forest of pine trees for your whole life, there's really no reason not to meander. No one's ever around to tell me to shut up.

I mean, apart from the mailman and a few others, hardly anyone around here has ever even seen me. Liz told me that some people believe my cabin is an urban legend! I wish I could ride to town and show them what's what.

But there's this power line halfway down our long driveway, right, and the orange tendrils of electricity that dangle down from it never let me pass underneath. Those little wisps of tangerine light actually yanked me off my bike once and threw me headfirst into a tree trunk.

What I've got is a bit weirder than an allergy, when you get right down to it. Sometimes it's more like mutual repulsion or something, like when you put two magnets with the same polarization nose-to-nose and they catapult each other across the table. Doesn't that sound almost like something from comics? Compelling, right?

Mom says I'm not explaining myself properly. She frowned at the part I wrote about the lab coat but didn't scratch it out, and then she read about the repulsion stuff and reminded me that my sickness is basically like a tongue: it's hard for most people to swallow.

Epilepsy basically means that the electricity in your brain is

somehow out of whack. A lot of people in the world have this problem, but most people don't have to be hermits because of it.

Having epilepsy means sometimes having seizures—um, shaking fits? I think of it like this: my head gets stuck on something and then the whole rest of me gets stuck, too, and it's like those times when you stutter, but it's not my words—it's all of me. Head to toe, just stuttering. And later I can't remember what I was trying to do or say in the first place. All that's left are throbbing temples, a swollen tongue, lost time, and so much bone-tiredness that I don't want to move ever again.

I've read *tons* of pamphlets on epilepsy. Mom brings them home from the clinic and we go through them together. I've read that some people only develop epilepsy after a nasty head injury, like from a car crash. Others start having seizures as a side effect of a disease or drug abuse.

But some people just have rotten luck. See also: me.

Pamphlets are also how I learned about auras, when I was six or something.

" 'Before having seizures, many people have some sense that a seizure is imminent. This sense is referred to as an aura.' And *imminent* means 'close.' Head up, Ollie. This is important."

"Can't I go outside?"

"Homework first. 'During an aura, sufferers may experience acute sensory dissonance.' "

"Are those *all* real words?"

"It means that many people's senses start going haywire before a seizure, Ollie. They might taste pepper—"

"I'd rather taste ice cream."

"—or smell sulfur. Or maybe they start to see the world

differently. I think you know about that last one." Were we outside in the yard, or inside by the kitchen window? I can't remember. But I remember that Mom squeezed my hand and I squeezed my eyes shut.

For sure I see things differently, Fellow Hermit. I can't look at *anything* electric without seeing blobs of color. It's like my vision measures electric currents on a spectrum or something. If getting blinded by multicolored electric hazes is because of an aura, then I must have an eternal aura. It never goes away. It's downright immortal. *Dracul-aura.*

Mom says I'm almost off topic again and that I should focus. I swear that lately it's just: *Ollie, stop moping! Ollie, eat your tuna sandwiches!*

Focus!

Do people ever tell you to focus? What does that even *mean*? Whenever Mom or Auburn-Stache says "Focus, Oliver!" I try to wrangle my thoughts into the shape of a laser beam. I've seen laser beams on the covers of my favorite sci-fi novels; I've even painted some. I usually paint what my aura shows me when I look at electricity: saffron-slashing walkie-talkies, sunbursts floating out of headlights. Before it knocks me flat, electricity can be really cool to look at.

All the MRI machines I saw, back when Mom and Auburn-Stache still bundled me up in rubber clothes and dragged me to hospitals, were wrapped in scarves of golden light that gave me pounding headaches. X-rays emit rich scarlet ringlets. Fluorescent bulbs exude a silver mist that drifts downward like craft glitter. Power sockets? They spit out blue-white confetti curls. Batteries in use are little twists of bronze radiance that shatter to gray when

they run low. Every single machine gives off its own brand of colorful energy, and my seizures are triggered by all of them: anything and everything electric.

I know this does sound unswallowable. But it's so real to me. It's the reason I'm bored but not boring. Why I'm stuck out here by myself.

At least when Liz used to come by I could act like I was normal, just like she is. I listened to her talk about her school stuff, and it was almost like I was the sort of kid who could go there with her, who could text during class and type essays and later come home on a bus and plop myself in front of a television and eat food from a microwave. (Those sound *magical*, Fellow Hermit.)

But I've never looked directly at a television; that would probably send me tonic-clonic in seconds. Televisions are bursting with inorganic light and organic color, a miasma of noise. I'm told that's all televisions are to anyone. I'm not sure I buy that. (I think I would love cartoons.)

And motor vehicles! Engines are hard for me to see because the smog of energy around them is pitch-dark. I can't tell you what color Mom's truck is; every time I've stood at my bedroom window and watched it pull away, it has been surrounded by a gritty, opaque nebula.

My favorites are all those electrical things that people seem to superglue to themselves, things Liz used to show me: phones, music players, laptops. When they're switched on, their colors bounce off the skin of their users. Phones lend the faces they are pressed against a luminous green sheen. Headphones coat ears in minty residue. But laptops are the best. Fingers on keyboards are traced by trails of light, like long blades of grass.

You may be wondering whether I'm complaining or not. I'm not really sure myself. Mom says the way I see things sounds beautiful. But I'm not sure the sight of rainbow explosions is worth toasting a bunch of my brain cells over. It's not really beautiful when I'm drooling on the floor and rattled with tremors.

What was I saying about laser beams?

I'm going to try to beam my life story to you, as directly as I can manage. So these letters will be my autobiography. You don't have to read them if you don't want to, but I would appreciate it if you could write me your story back. There's enough boredom to drown in around these parts. And please don't tell me that people can drown in an inch of water. I know that. I'm being figurative! I'm just trying to tell you that it's a *lot* of boredom.

Especially now that Liz might never stop by to see me ever again.

I'll tell you about that later because Mom says that good autobiographies are linear, like life. Like, I should tell you about being a toddler before I talk about being a kid.

That's good. I don't think I want to talk about what it feels like when I'm waiting outside in the dusty driveway and Liz doesn't come biking down it, smiling. When she doesn't come biking down it frowning, even. When she doesn't come biking down it at all, and I just stare at the same old jack pines as ever and the same old stumps and breathe the same old smell of emptiness and sap, until it gets dark out.

First I want to make sure you exist. I can't wait to hear from you, Fellow Hermit! I doubt I've ever done half of what you have. I would trade all my glockenspiel skills for a chance to go online. Or to ride a

school bus or feel air conditioning. Are you also hypersensitive to electricity?

Mom says that fifteen double-sided pages are enough to scare anyone away, so I'll stop here at page fourteen.

Write me soon. It's getting boring here. Did I mention that?

~ Ollie Ollie UpandFree

P.S. Here's a teaser to make you want to read my autobiography: I've *died* before.

chapter two

THE PACEMAKER

Oliver:

Firstly, my father has confirmed that your penmanship is atrocious. At least you can spell. I would hate to outmatch you in your own language. How embarrassing that would be for you. I am sick of people deciding that being young means being ineloquent. Yet the idiots who attend school with me are too preoccupied with *gossip* to care about language. I do not expect them to meet my standards, but you needn't be a *Wunderkind* to educate yourself.

I despise other people my age. *Jugendlichen*. Let them rot.

You mentioned Japanese. But the glockenspiel is a German musical instrument. Can't you speak and write *auf Deutsch*? I doubt you are aware, but the glockenspiel has rarely been used in hip-hop music. I pity your ears for never having been graced by Public Enemy.

Secondly, you are correct. We will not be meeting. This has little to do with your deafening personality. I am electric. Exposure to me would floor you.

Doubtless that hyperactive mind of yours is already jumping to outlandish conclusions: "My, is he an android? What sort of monstrosity is he, the son of one of my doctor's old friends? What is he, that he is electric? A reanimated corpse, veins coursing with lightning? Oh boy!"

Calm yourself. This is not science fiction. This is not fun.

For the past five years, my heart has remained pumping only with the assistance of a small apparatus that feeds electric pulses into the lower-left chamber. If I ever met you, the electricity in my rib cage would trigger your seizures. If I shut off my pacemaker to spare you that, my blood flow would weaken. I could go into shock or even cardiac arrest. You could kill me.

Your postscript teaser fails to impress me. I have died also, Oliver UpandFree. (I feel foolish writing that. I will call you Oliver.) Dying was not an enjoyable experience. It's enough to say that I woke from death with an electric heart. You and I will certainly never meet.

And yet I do have a morbid interest in continuing our correspondence. I may have chuckled once while Father read your words to me yesterday evening. If I were sickened by phones, by vehicles and amplifiers, and not merely sickened by my classmates, perhaps I would resort to babbling as well. Not that this excuses you.

I thought I had seen EVERYTHING. But your mother

is right. Your worldview is remarkable. So is your earsplitting enthusiasm. So I do not blame her for hiding in the garage.

I am not certain that I want to share the details of my life with you. I do not trust you, Oliver. I am uncomfortable with spitting every thought I have ever had onto paper. People like you do not realize what power words have. Words are impossible to see. Words can be twisted in so many directions. Some of us are more careful with them.

As for your questions about "secret laboratories," I am not nearly as interested in this subject as you are. Talk about something you know about. If you don't want to be bored, don't bore me. There's nothing fascinating about laboratories, in my experience.

Tell me more about your life. If you must.

Besides. It is more entertaining if I do not speak.

Moritz Farber

P.S. Yes. A man can drown in an inch of water. But in Germany we would call it 2.54 centimeters of water. The metric system is altogether superior.