
BECAUSE YOU'LL NEVER MEET ME

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BLOOMSBURY

NEW YORK LONDON NEW DELHI SYDNEY

For my sister
and all the things that make us

Contents

Chapter One: The Laser Beam
Chapter Two: The Pacemaker
Chapter Three: The Computer
Chapter Four: The Fountain
Chapter Five: The Power Line
Chapter Six: The Words
Chapter Seven: The Cabin
Chapter Eight: The Goggles
Chapter Nine: The Woods
Chapter Ten: The Piercings
Chapter Eleven: The Puddles
Chapter Twelve: The Books
Chapter Thirteen: The Book Light
Chapter Fourteen: The Cigarette
Chapter Fifteen: The Living Room
Chapter Sixteen: The Outfit
Chapter Seventeen: The Fence
Chapter Eighteen: The Dead Mouse
Chapter Nineteen: The Phone
Chapter Twenty: The Cat
Chapter Twenty-One: The Fishbowl
Chapter Twenty-Two: The Deer Blind
Chapter Twenty-Three: The Cane
Chapter Twenty-Four: The Music
Chapter Twenty-Five: The Rose-Colored Spectacles
Chapter Twenty-Six: The Coat
Chapter Twenty-Seven: The Chamber
Chapter Twenty-Eight: The Needles
Chapter Twenty-Nine: The Womble
Chapter Thirty: The Blackberries
Chapter Thirty-One: The Hands
Chapter Thirty-Two: The Confetti
Chapter Thirty-Three: The Microphone
Chapter Thirty-Four: The Doorway

Acknowledgments

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 Dr. 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 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 doesn't *just* come from reading *Frankenstein* in blanket forts during thunderstorms as a 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 tell 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 the 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-Stack 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-Stack 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 a bad thing for 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 even 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 on 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, the 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 is 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.

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.

Chapter Three

The Computer

Well, riddle me this, riddle me that! Do you read comics? Wait. Let me rephrase that: Marvel or DC? Also, you didn't tell me whether you like cartoons.

Way to write a letter and tell me almost nothing about yourself, although I guess I'm impressed by your refusal to reveal your tragic past! Now I *really* want to know your thoughts on laboratories. But at least you know I exist!

So you're German? What's that like? I've read a lot of history books, and a lot of fairy tales. Germans are featured in both, and not always nicely, but you probably already know that. Are all Germans as stuffy as you? No offense, but reading what you wrote felt a little like I was *conversing* with a Victorian gentleman, by Jove! Do you read Oscar Wilde? He was Victorian, but, like, the *exact* opposite of you! He was way less *reserved*, by gum!

I think language *is* pretty awesome, so we already have something in common! But don't you think English is the greatest? Sometimes I just sit here at my desk and chortle because *but* and *butt* sound the same. The other day I was just snickering about it in bed, and Mom got all wide-eyed because she started coughing and she thought maybe I was hysterical again, but—*butt!*—sometimes I need something to laugh at.

Oh! I looked up "*Jugendlichen*." So that's German for "teenagers," huh? Well, say what you want. I would *kill* (not actually, because I'm not a psychopath) to know more idiotic teenagers. I want to be one of them!

And Auburn-Stache says you're sixteen. You've got two years on me! I'm not your age, so you can't despise me yet.

Despite your depressing response to my awesome I-Died-Once teaser, I'll attach Part One of my autobiography. This way Mom can keep believing that writing to you is helping me focus, helping me get better, and stopping me from standing in the driveway all day.

Here goes:

The Linear Autobiography of Oliver Paulot, the Powerless Boy PART ONE: SCREAMING

When I was born, I was born screaming. It was the same for almost everyone I've ever heard of; if you weren't born screaming, then you were probably born with too much optimism.

But my scream made even the most jaded night nurses in the natal center cover their ears. The old doctor at the bedside nearly dropped me. Auburn-Stache told me that old doctor probably wanted to holler at me to "put a sock in it," but that's usually frowned upon. Besides, I bet the socks of a full-time doctor are even less sanitary than the socks of teenage boys, if Auburn-Stache's grubby feet are anything to go by.

Mom was quiet. She claims that I was making enough commotion for both of us.

The old doctor pulled a penlight from his lab coat and aimed it down my throat. The beam shot past my empty gums and into the center of me, and finally I stopped screaming.

The room exhaled....

And I had my first seizure.

Last time I asked Mom about it, it was a snowy afternoon and we were both biding time by firelight in the living room.

“The day I was born—what was it like?” I tucked my calligraphy brush behind my ear.

She put down the heavy tapestry she was cross-stitching, letting it drape across her legs. To me it looked like the most violent quilt known to man. Mom is always making things; she gets as bored as I do. This was her seventh tapestry or something, and it depicted a pretty gory stag-hunting scene. She jabbed her needle into the arm of the couch. It was still trailing the red thread she was using to sew the eviscerated innards of the unfortunate stag.

“You’ve read about childbirth. *Tch.*”

Sometimes Mom makes a slight clucking sound near the front of her teeth. It’s her type of sniggering. I used to wonder if it was something everyone did. Now I know it’s a family habit.

“I was a *huge* pain in the vagina, I bet.”

“Ollie.” In the half-light, the lines of her face seemed deeper.

“It’s a medical term, Mom.” I rolled my eyes. “What else do you want me to call it?”

“Most people wouldn’t call it anything. Most people have *tact.*”

I held my arms wide apart to illustrate the vast nothingness outside our cabin. “Wherefore, Mother? *Wherefore?*”

“Yes. Fine. You were a *huge* pain. Like I was splitting in two.”

“Nuclear fission!”

“I don’t know about that. But putting you on this earth was the most painful thing I have ever done. Since you asked.”

“Sorry.”

“*Tch.* I don’t think what I felt compared in any way to what you felt during that first seizure.” She grimaced. “Your face was so red. It looked as though you might burst.”

“Nuclear explosion.” I stood up and stretched.

“*Implosion.* You stayed in one piece. But something was collapsing and burning under your skin, inside your skull. You know how it feels better than I do.”

I shrugged. I’ve had enough seizures that I can’t imagine the shock of the first one.

“You were so small,” she said, picking up her needle again. “No wonder it killed you.”

Anytime I was conscious, I was seizing. They were all worried about my brain cells because seizures burn them up pretty rapidly. I was sedated and stuck in an incubator while Mom was on bed rest.

Last spring I asked Auburn-Stache for his side of the story. We were on the back porch early on a warm evening, and he was taking my blood pressure by the pinkish light of sunset over the tree line.

“Tell me about when I was a baby, Auburn-Stache.”

“What? Yet again?”

“Yeppers.”

“Sometimes, Ollie, you sound unnervingly like a five-year-old.”

“You mean right now, or when I stamp my feet and demand ice cream?”

He smirked and adjusted his glasses. The armband tightened on my upper arm. “Ice cream is serious business, kiddo. It renders us all five, as you well know.”

“Once more with feeling, Auburn-Stache.”

~~“Tch.” He raised a mocking eyebrow. The armband released. “You were weeks early, or I’d have been there. Already you couldn’t stay put!”~~

Auburn-Stache had been friends with my dad ever since they both worked together (at the mysterious laboratory no one likes to talk about?), and Mom called him the moment she went in labor. She probably screamed at him, like anyone being split in two would. He was working as an on-call physician a few counties away. He jokes that he got out of work and on the road so fast that he left his previous patient on the table with two limbs too few. Very funny, Auburn-Stache.

“I couldn’t stop thinking about the penlight. It left the faintest trail of hives on your skin! ‘Aha!’ He re-created his moment of epiphany, standing up from the lawn chair with his finger in the air. “Photosensitive epilepsy!”

“Sit down, you kook.”

He knew that flashing lights sometimes cause seizures. Many people’s auras are triggered by cycles or patterns of lights or images. Auburn-Stache bugged the hell out of the old doctor until he agreed to put me in a dark room. But I was still in an incubator, so I still got sick. I got so sick that I flatlined. Auburn-Stache resuscitated me.

“But I never got around to actually placing the defibrillator paddles on your chest and back! The moment I held them near your diaphragm, the shock of their proximity alone somehow restarted your heart”—he clapped his hands—“and set you to seizing again.”

“Man, sounds like it was a party!”

“It would have been rather exciting for me, had you not been in pain.” His face went unusually still. “You should not think I’m so terrible as that, Ollie.”

I couldn’t think of what to say. The fireflies were beginning to hover around above the grass when he said, “But you aren’t entirely wrong. There are all kinds of adventures in the world. In that moment when you woke back up, the paddle was repelled from you. It was as if you had an electric charge of your own.”

He had me released into his care, and then he bundled me up in rubber hospital gear and wheeled Mom and me out to his Impala while the hospital staff looked on without much hope, all teary eyes. (Artistic license, okay?)

I bet that car could have killed me all over again. Even the tiny lights that come on when the door opens could have done me in! Even the FM radio. Even automatic window switches!

I don’t know what he and Mom talked about while he drove out of town. Maybe they talked about my dad. Once we were past the last gas station, on the brink of the forests where tourists liked to go camping, he pulled me out of the car and laid me in the ferns.

But I still trembled, so he tore off his jacket and his phone and left them behind. He carried me deep into the woods, Mom following behind him. He asked her to wait in the car, but that just wouldn’t be like her. I bet she looked comical, stumbling over branches in a hospital gown.

At some point under the trees somewhere, the seizing stopped. I opened my eyes.

Mom told me later that Auburn-Stache laughed then—with joy, or relief, or the sort of mad gleam that doctors and scientists get swept up in when they solve a puzzle. But Mom didn’t laugh.

“I knew then that there were things you would always be powerless to change about your life.” She spoke softly. “And that I couldn’t protect you from all of them.”

Bleak, Mom. Bleak.

You can await Part Two with bated breath! I can leave out some of the finer details of my toddling

years, like every time Mom burped me or the time I decided to pee on our blue Persian cat, Dorian Gray. I can be mysterious, too, all right.

As much as I like mystery stories, it's hard to solve them when you're stranded in northern Michigan. The only Watson candidate I have is a cat who still resents me. I've read a lot of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie and a ton of *Case Closed*, but I'm no detective. I don't have a pip for one thing. I think that's required.

Here are the clues you've given me, Moritz Farber:

1. You have a pacemaker. Oh, and the name of your lower-left heart chamber is actually your left ventricle, or your *ventriculus cordis sinister*. You may win at languages, but *you* didn't spend four months handcrafting a life-size model skeleton complete with clay organs, Styrofoam lungs, and hand-spun alveoli!

2. You can't read by yourself. Your father had to read my letter to you. But this paper was typed on a computer in, yes, *real good* English. So although electricity is no problem for you, there's something wrong with your eyes. But in that case, clue #3 seems strange....

3. What the heck do you mean, you've "seen EVERYTHING"? Why was that part of your letter typed in capital letters? To me, capitalizing things doesn't come across as italicizing. It looked like you were SHOUTING AT ME! ANGRILY!

4. People have said cruel things to you in the past. This one is speculation. I mean, you hate your peers. But not just because they're idiots, because I think idiots are probably nice people sometimes. If it's about abusing language, I don't have to go to school to know that words can really suck, even when they aren't insults. I'll do my best, Moritz Farber, not to slash at you with them. OR WRITE ABOUT YOU IN AGGRESSIVE CAPITAL LETTERS.

5. You typed your letter, so I know you have a computer. Don't even get me started on what a bottomless sense of emptiness I get when I hear about the Internet, a weird electric Neverland where everyone giggles at cats and updates myyouface pages or something. I mean, when I read manuals for old Internet browsers, it feels like I'm reading a really bland cyberpunk novel, and half the time I end up falling asleep and waking up with newsprint on my face.

Part of me wants to ask you all about it, but what would be the point? I try to be optimistic! It doesn't do me much good to hear about things I can never have.

But anyhow. I want to tell you about the first time I saw a computer, because it was also the first time I ever saw Liz.

* * *

It was at Junkyard Joe's, many years ago. Joe's trailer is the only place within a few miles of ours. The cars in his yard are the only safe ones I've ever seen—dead, scattered across the lawn like rusted bones in some mechanical elephant graveyard. I used to sneak away to crawl between them.

The little girl on Joe's porch didn't see me crouching behind an old pickup truck, spying on her. It was Liz, but I didn't know that yet. She was sitting at the lopsided picnic table and biting her lip, poking away at what would now seem like a massive brick of a thing, oblivious to the strips of verdant energy that gathered around her fingertips whenever she pressed the keys. The white light of the screen was reflected in her eyes. It made me think she was staring at the moon.

Did the screen reflect her like she reflected it?

I knew that if I got closer to her, my stomach would knot. Veins in my temples would bulge. My hands would convulse and fall and hit my head on the wooden steps.

But maybe seeing whatever she saw on that screen would have been worth a seizure.

Thanks for writing me back. The boredom's already shallower! I even got my lazy butt out of bed and went downstairs for a couple of hours to dig out the English-German dictionary, so Mom'll be singing your praises soon. You know, when she gets out of bed herself.

I'll leave the rest to you, Moritz. (Can I call you Mo?) And I've written way too much again, so I guess I'll save the questions about laboratories for later, but I hope you can start to trust me. I don't know why you think I would ever want to say anything cruel to you.

I mean, I've already given you lots to make fun of me for. If I'm ever an asshole to you, I hereby give you the right to call me a "catpisser"!

Don't tell me this isn't a *little* fun.

~ Ollie

Chapter Four

The Fountain

You are a difficult tic to ignore, Oliver. I cannot despise you. Yet.

I am no Oscar Wilde and no Mo. I *am* an expert in oral storytelling. I have listened to hundreds of books. Dozens of authors and readers. Yet I have rarely heard a voice quite like yours.

My father has a strong Schwäbisch accent. He is not the best reader. His voice is like gravel. When he speaks, I must lean in close to find what he means within what he says. Before he knew me, I doubt he spoke to anyone. Now he tries to be heard. For my sake. During his reading yesterday evening, I heard you. On the fifth-floor apartment balcony overlooking the cars driving across Kreiszig's noisy *Freibrücke*, I discovered something about you. Something you are unaware of:

Even if you are powerless, your words are not.

You are a natural storyteller, Oliver. That may be *why* I do not trust you—your sincerity is implausible. You and I are very different. Yet you made me understand something of what it means to be you. Most people aren't capable of making me feel anything. Let alone sympathy.

Most people would have been angry after my last letter. I was condescending. I mocked you outright. But you respond by telling me exactly who you are. You offer me new insults to use against you? It seems cruel to withhold my story when you are incapable of doing so. It is as if I am avoiding a puppy for fear of it drooling on me.

And your detective skills are not entirely wretched. You are right about my eyes.

I doubt I can be as endearing about it as you are. But let me tell you who I am.

I am Moritz Farber. I was born listening.

I was born without eyes. Do not ask if I am blind. I have never been blind. But I was born with no eyeballs in my sockets. While I doubt I wailed as loudly as you did, others have since screamed bloody murder at the sight of me.

Oliver, you should be grateful you were raised in a cabin and not a laboratory. I spent my earliest years in a testing facility. I do not intend to talk about it. Needle me as much as you like. I have felt worse. I have felt actual needles.

Yet I have also thought this: at least scientists could bear the sight of me.

You have never seen an eyeless boy. Perhaps not even in all those comics and books that occupy your time. Imagine you are looking at your dear Liz. Imagine that above her button nose and her sunshine smile there are no eyes reflecting a computer screen. Imagine that there is nothingness there—just skin. No expression whatsoever. Imagine this. Can you say you love her still?

I have no eyes, no eyelids. No eyebrows. I grow my dark hair long in the front so that my fringe hides the worst of it.

But there is nothingness on my face. Who would not scream?

I do not say “*tch!*” like you and your mother do. That would be irritating.

Sometimes I click my tongue against the roof of my mouth when I wish to see anything with greater clarity: If I am curious about the pores in someone's nose. The dust in the cobblestones outside. Anything minuscule requires this extra effort on my part. A focused click and, yes. I can see EVERYTHING.

Such clicks are usually unnecessary. My surroundings create enough sound waves to see by. This ~~the only advantage of living around other people.~~ Kreiszig is a city of bustle. Of bodies and movement and clatter. No one can see what I see in the morning fruit and bread markets, where people haggle and stack and chop and banter. The noisier an area is, the clearer it is to me.

During school I can see well enough to avoid those who might be looking for me. See hiding places that others miss. Empty closets and classrooms. I can duck beneath tables when familiar footsteps trudge closer, scraping against the floor. At least my nothingness gives me warning.

* * *

Surely you have read about echolocation. You seem to have read about everything else. Surely you have read about whales using echolocation to find one another in the dark depths of the sea. About dolphins using sound waves to communicate with one another across great distances.

I see with my ears. My brain uses sound waves to determine the shapes of objects and barriers in my vicinity. How a bat might by using sonar. I can “see” how far away things are, can see what they look like by the way my ears interpret sound bending around them. I am not the first person to accomplish this. I *am* the only person, so far as I know, to have been able to do this from birth, and with more clarity of sight than a person with flawless vision.

My ears are so sensitive that I can tell individual eyelashes from one another when someone blinks. Because I can hear the sound of eyelids closing.

Imagine what I see at hip-hop concerts, Oliver. I always have the best view at any venue. At the summer festivals in the park, when the bass pounds hardest through the speakers, woofers, and amplifiers, I can see the droplets of sweat on thirty thousand people at once. I can see right into the performers’ teeth. The hair follicles on their chins and the lines in their fingers as they clutch microphones. Darkness and light have no bearing on my sight. Darkness has no sound.

But color is silent also. I do not envy you the colors you have seen. Color is an alien concept to me. Probably much as the Internet is to you.

* * *

Many of the scientists at the facility thought my oversensitivity should be wreaking havoc on my brain. Certainly, they speculated, if I can hear eyes shutting and bones creaking and hairs sliding against one another, I should be incapable of processing the ceaseless input. How can I sleep over the sound of my own blood flowing in my veins? They believed I should be clutching my head. Wincing and whimpering in an anechoic chamber. A soundless room.

One thing about having no eyes, Oliver, is that you can never close them.

Yet I have never known anything else. I don’t have to ignore the sound of water in pipes. Or wind in stairwells. Or a slightly squeaky nostril when someone speaks to me. My brain adapted. It labors on my behalf. This is something you can understand, Anatomy Expert.

If I whimper now, it is because of what I am. I have seen, if not everything, enough to despise myself and the rest of the world, if not yet you.

Many otherwise intelligent people severely underestimate the human brain. May all those scientists forever scratch their heads. I have no patience for their antics. They can rot.

Of greater concern to me is the chronic weakness of my heart. But that is a story best left untold. Leave it be. Needling won’t reveal it.

I am not a fellow hermit, Oliver. If only.

For the past year I have been enrolled at Bernholdt-Regen Hauptschule, attending public school for the first time in my life. I did not want to attend any school at all. But Father came home early from work with brochures one evening. Brochures he had been collecting in the hopes that I would at least have some excitement when he presented them to me.

The schools in those brochures. As if we could afford half of them. But Father is proud. I could not say that. Not while he was sitting before me, grease on his uniform. A hopeful smile on his lips. He has tried so hard to raise me well. No one asked him to. Still, he has tried.

I have not even taken the required assessment that would allow me to pick from decent schools. To say nothing of procuring a letter of recommendation. There *are* some schools suitable for the likes of me. I chose Bernholdt-Regen because it was nearby.

I chose it because I deserve nothing better. Because I have reasons to whimper and reasons to despise myself.

Father was pleased that I made any decision at all. He believes *Hauptschule* might raise my awareness of the world. Discourage some of my alleged “antisocial” habits. I do not know why he believes I need *more* awareness. I see 360 degrees at once even at nighttime. And he’s one to murmur and mumble about antisocial habits.

My teachers have been informed that I suffer from a cardiovascular disease, photosensitivity, and severe reading impairment. They don’t precisely understand. Sometimes they speak loudly to me. Move desks and chairs out of my path as if they think I will deliberately stumble over any piece of furniture foolish enough to get in my way. They think I am blind.

I am *not* blind. I have never been blind.

It is fair to say I have a reading impairment. Echolocation does not allow me to see the contents of screens or most books. Flat surfaces are impenetrable to me.

Father suggested I feign blindness at school. To raise fewer questions. To make it easier to belong. But I loathe the notion of using a cane when I don’t need one. To pretend to be blind, for the sake of fitting in with people—with *children*—who have no interest in me in the first place? What a repulsive idea. I’m nothing like them. They can rot.

For almost as long as I have lived, I have worn opaque goggles in public. I am told they are black. On the left side I wound shoelaces around the strap to make it thicker. To obscure a pitted scar directly behind my ear. I’ve been told the goggles make me look like a Gothic owl. But they obscure my eyelessness enough to discourage the shrieking of strangers.

I can recall the exact moment I became aware of what I am to strangers.

I was just shy of six. I had begged my nanny to take me into the bakery one morning. The smells that were wafting out into the street drew me in. I was sniffing the egg tarts and custards nearest the window. The ovens in the back were hot, filled with croissants and sandwiches. The room was sweltering. There was a little boy around my age standing beside the *Brötchen*. Watching me. Wagging his tongue at me from the opposite side of the room. He winked at me and snorted into his hand. What good fun it would be to “outwink” him!

I was an imbecile.

I was happy to remove my goggles in the heat of the room. The boy screamed and screamed. His father clenched his cracked, floury fists and hollered at the nanny. She nodded. Dragged me away in silence. Pulled me close to her side. Placed a hand over the upper half of my face to spare the world the sight of me. All the while I was clicking, clicking, and seeing too much in all directions as the boy’s father tried to console his stricken child. With his apron he wiped the wash of tears and the dribble of snot that slipped down the boy’s lip.

Here is an adage you must know: *The eyes are the windows to the soul.*

I can see so much of others. But no one can see into me. On some primitive level, this makes ~~seem like I do not have a soul. Perhaps I don't. If I am less than human somehow, I don't expect~~ humanity from others. And do not doubt that I am less. I *know* that I was created as much as born. There is nothing comforting about it, Oliver.

I have pondered this too much. My peers at this worthless school don't even consider the state of their souls; they are too preoccupied with pop music. With eyeliner and sport.

You talk about being lonely and unwell in a cabin in the woods, even though you put on a great show of being cheerful. Your personality is as colorful as your vision. You really should be grateful.

There is nothing so lonely as being surrounded by people. I waste my days in a massive pool of bodies that, for the most part, cannot be bothered with the "disabled" boy in goggles.

For the most part.

There is a boy named Lenz Monk who has taken to tormenting me. Today I was on the second floor leaning over what must be the last drinking fountain in Saxony (of course Bernholdt-Regen would maintain something so unhygienic), focused on the filthy grime on the mouth of the faucet. Lenz, passing behind me, kicked the back of my knees. Of course my legs folded. Of course water shot into my face. Perhaps if I had not been so fixated on the gunk, I would have heard the swish of Lenz's pants as he aimed his kick.

Instead I came up dripping. At least this time he did not leave me bleeding.

I did not turn to look at him. I do not need to turn to see. I only walked away. Lenz does not taunt. He merely grants his bruises and watches in silence. Last week he slammed a door on my fingers. I heard the door as it fell and I could have moved my hand, but Lenz does not stop until I whimper. If I whimper sooner, he leaves me sooner. If his first attack succeeds, he is satisfied.

I am typing with my left hand only today, because the skin on its knuckles is unbroken.

The number of times Lenz has done his best to shove me against walls or bathroom stalls is concrete. Lenz often tries to pull away my goggles. To pull them taut and snap them back into my face. He walks the same street home that I do, toward Ostzig on the city's east side. Often I must hide behind a kiosk outside the train station where smokers gather. They don't look at me while I listen, trying with all my might not to cough on their smoke and waiting for the drag-scrape of Lenz's feet to pass by.

He waits for me to whimper.

Eventually he will catch hold of me again. Once he squeezed my throat until I could all but hear the bruises forming beneath my skin, could hear the blood vessels creaking under his fists. I had to wear a scarf so that Father would not wor—

Why should I stain your simple ears, Oliver? You can be spared such things.

Appreciate your isolation. Public school is true torture.

There is something I have been considering since you first began writing to me. I have never heard you speak. Yet I imagine that you chitter and chatter like birds and traffic in the morning. I imagine you are a very noisy person.

The noisier someone is, the more I can see. Perhaps you could help me see something that I have never seen before. Perhaps I could see the world with your optimism?

But I will never meet you.

I have exposed enough of myself for the time being. I await Part Two. Not with bated breath, but with gracious anticipation. I still don't comprehend why, precisely, you are so fixated on this Liz O

yours. It seems she is mistreating you.

~~Excuse my caution. I am not used to such abrasive honesty.~~

Moritz

P.S. To address your curiosity, specifically:

1. Marvel or DC: I could not care less. I do not listen to comics.

2. Cartoons: They are irritating. Bangs and explosions. Some people do enjoy them.

3. Oscar Wilde: I have listened to the audiobooks of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Why is he so verbose? Who has that much to say? Apart from you?

4. Computers and the Internet: I prefer the radio. Flat surfaces frustrate me.

I never learned Braille. I am not blind. But I learned the shapes of letters long ago. I learned my keyboard home keys early on as well. When I am typing to you, my computer dictates what I am writing back to me in a robotic voice. It is not lovely to listen to. It is like tone-deaf Daft Punk.

Chapter Five

The Power Line

I didn't think you were being rude to me in your first letter, although I'm sort of annoyed that you're slandering Liz in your second one. Look, I may whine about her a bit, but when I LINEARLY got around to telling you more about her, I think you'll get it. It's not like Liz *asked* me to shut down. I mean, none of this is her fault. She's not the one who made me like this.

As for whether I could still love her if she had no eyes: for that I have to take more extreme measures.

Please follow these instructions:

1. Stack the pages of this letter neatly.
2. Roll the pages up into a cylinder.
3. Smack yourself over the head with it.
4. Repeat.

You complete ass. Of all the stupid—sorry, stoopid—things to say. You think that Liz would lose her soul if she lost her eyes? She could look like anything, so long as she was being Liz. I mean, come on, Moritz. What you look like isn't who you are.

If Liz wouldn't be soulless without eyes, neither are you.

Haven't you ever fallen for anyone? I mean, I know fewer people than I've got phalanges, and I've found someone I can't stop thinking about. But you haven't? I find that really hard to believe. Look closer. What are you ... *blind*?

Also! What. The hell. You've been holding out on me, Mo! You've got no eyeballs? And instead you wear goggles and you've somehow developed bat vision? Um, okay. I understand you can't read comics, but please try to get your ears on *Daredevil*. Don't you get it? You see like a bat? You're bilingual? You're more than halfway to being a superhero already!

And whatever happened to you growing up (needling you about the lab again), you aren't *subhuman*. I mean, look at the X-Men. Rogue can't even touch people without killing them! And Beast is freakin' *blue*. So you have no eyes? At least your eyes aren't flesh-burning lasers! But if they were, you'd still be worth knowing.

As far as echolocation goes, when I was nine or so I went through a pretty sizable dolphin obsession. We have a small fishpond a few acres away from our cabin that I've hiked to before. But there are, surprisingly, no dolphins in it. (Why couldn't I be a hermit at a beach house? I'll never see the ocean....)

Here's what I've learned about echolocation: dolphins can click at frequencies so high that most people can't hear them. Most humans can hear sounds as low as 20 hertz, which doesn't sound like anything but feels a bit like being underwater with pressure on your ears, and as high as 20,000 hertz, which is probably like ALL CAPS, if ALL CAPS were a seriously pissed-off teakettle. But there have been a few documented cases where scuba divers swimming with dolphins could feel vibrations in the water. And here's the weird part:

Some people felt some emotion in the vibrations. They could sense if the dolphins were happy, or sad, or scared that a boat was gonna come and make tuna of them. These dolphins were sending their feelings into the world. What if I could see sound waves instead of electricity? What color would dolphin feelings be?

(Liz said this was the “girliest” question I’ve ever asked. I know that cowboys are manly, but why And somehow dolphin noises are ... girly? Who writes these rules?)

Anyhow, maybe the reason people avoid you is because the emotions your brain sends out when you click are kind of ... negative emotions? Clicking is a nervous habit. And you do it more when you’re worried about this kid who follows you home. Is he what folks call a “bully”? Is there a German word for that? I checked the German dictionary, and it said *Tyrann*, which sounds like *tyrannosaurus*. But he sounds less like an awesome tyrannosaurus and more like a loser. Maybe you’re clicking unhappiness at people, and they’re sending it right back in echoes.

I hope this doesn’t sound dumb. What I’m getting at is some people can be really terrible. But you have to work harder not to let it faze you, because if you let them make you feel that way, you’re just adding to the mess of unhappiness in the air.

I don’t understand why you’re so self-conscious. You seem pretty cool to me, even if you are kind of stuffy. I’m wondering what could have happened to make you despise Moritz Farber. Moritz Farber is not even a little boring.

Like I said, you’ve got all the makings of a comic book superhero! If people give you shit for being pretty cool, stand up and peel your goggles off and scare them away. Laugh maniacally and send happy dolphin-waves—

Actually, I mean it. I think you *should* try pulling the goggles off sometime. Have you ever done that? If you’re so ugly (shut up and hit yourself over the head with the rolled-up pages again), you can send them running for the hills! Maybe then you won’t have to whimper anymore. Lenz won’t stop if you don’t stop him.

What are you so afraid of? I can’t even ride a bike down my driveway, but you can do anything. Anything you want, wherever you want!

In fact, your Magic Brain Vision (henceforth called MBV) makes my allergies look pathetic on a number of fronts. So I’ll try to get to the good parts of my story. I’ll try to hurry and get to Liz, to stop you from “talking smack,” as kids say.

I’m going to rush my earliest years. I want to get to when I was old enough to read, old enough to wonder why the heck I couldn’t handle batteries, old enough to stop peeing on household pets. Since you trust my storytelling so much (which is one of the coolest compliments—stories are everything to me), I think I’ll tell you three stories from when I was a little kid. Three memories of three accidents that really stick out in my mind. Three’s okay, but I kind of wish it were five. Because you know who was really *was* a good storyteller? Shakespeare. He wrote plays in five acts.

Focus, Ollie.

The Linear Autobiography of Oliver Paulot, the Powerless Boy PART TWO: EARLY DAYS, IN THREE ACCIDENTS

1. The Fire

Mom used the money from my father’s life insurance to buy our cabin in the woods. The cabin was shaped like a triangle; apparently it’s part of some sort of ancient worldwide tradition to let your rooftop trail all the way down to the grass. The almighty A-frame! There’s moss and ivy creeping up the roof from the ground, and sometimes it gets mildewy in the peak of the house, where my bedroom makes up the top floor, and it starts to smell a little like pond scum and cedar. Downstairs, there

Mom's bedroom, the kitchen, the living room, and the bathroom, all paneled in dark wood that Mom calls "too seventies to abide." Maybe that's why she hangs tapestries and quilts and paintings on every surface. There's a porch in the back, and one in the front with an awning that doesn't really offer enough shade in the summertime.

The cabin is on the outskirts of Rochdale, Michigan, hours away from where Auburn-Stache lives. My whole life long, he's come to check up on me at least twice a month. He's a kook, but I suppose I love him or something.

Anyhow, one of my weirdest memories begins with one of those checkups.

I've never seen Dr. Auburn-Stache drive. He's too careful about my allergies. So he parks the brown smudge of his latest Impala at the end of the two-mile-long driveway. (That's some nonsense number of kilometers. I'm just saying that our driveway is more like a long, thin dirt road.) Then he buzzes and flits to the house with a suitcase in hand. He doesn't wear a lab coat, which is kind of disappointing. He wears paisley dress shirts and corduroy pants. For a long time I thought this was how men dressed, but Mom smirks and says Auburn-Stache is "quirky."

Usually I get a standard physical check from him, but he has to be creative about some things. For years I've had this sort of awkward, deflated Mohawk haircut. Not by choice. By the hand of Auburn-Stache! Whenever he gives me a physical, he has to look into my ears and nose and mouth without penlight. (You remember how penlights and I don't get along.)

So he has this wacky old apparatus that's like a small adjustable gas lantern with a pane of magnifying glass in front of it, and a funnel attached to that. He holds that against the side of my head whenever he wants to check my ears for infections. (It's his makeshift otoscope.) He says having his hands on the sides of my head is a fire hazard, but I think he just likes to make me look like a rooster.

He used to sit me on his knee out on the front porch, where the light is better. One time when I was pretty little, Dr. Auburn-Stache pressed his otoscope against the side of my head and I didn't feel like sitting still anymore. So I wriggled away and somehow knocked the otoscope onto the wooden porch and the lantern shattered. There was a sudden burst of heat as the doormat went up in flames, and then the nearest potted plant, and then the wreath on the open door, and then the carpet in the breezeway. I remember feeling like the fire had a mind of its own, sort of like electricity—like it was out to get me.

Good thing Dr. Auburn-Stache is always so twitchy, because he bundled me up and flitted and buzzed away from the porch. He deposited me on a stump pretty far away from the cabin and told me to "Stay!" like I was the drooling puppy you compared me to.

I think he was going back to rescue Mom, who'd been inside making tea. She needed no rescuing. She strode right out through the fiery doorway and onto the porch with Dorian Gray pinched under her arm, both of them looking more annoyed than anything else. He was clawing her up pretty good. On the lawn, she thrust the cat into Auburn-Stache's arms before sprinting to the garage to call the fire department.

I sat there on the stump, just blinking, watching the flames lick the brick chimney. The roof was catching fire by the time we heard the sirens. I wish I could describe what it looked like. The fire engine, I mean. I thought Mom's car was gritty, but that was before that diesel engine. I could feel the humming electricity even in the soles of my feet, even when it wasn't within sight. I could feel the thing coming like an electric stampede of red weight and light at my temples, and that must have shown on my face because Auburn-Stache lifted me up into his arms and jogged me away from it as he pulled up. Dorian Gray was meowing like nobody's business, and Auburn-Stache's chest rose and fell like running was the last thing Englishmen in paisley were used to.

There was Mom, staring at our house going up in flames, watching smoke and ash pour from the haven she'd set up for herself and her kid, and she still looked at least halfway exasperated about it all.

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