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Opening Extract from...

The Deception Artist

Written by Fayette Fox

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Part I

The End of Normal

Scar

Rain slides down the car window, making blurry paths where the street lights shine through. Mom and I baked chocolate chip cookies, but I'm not allowed any, even though I want, I want. I can have one afterwards if I'm good. I hope I will be good.

'Poor kid,' Dad says at the wheel. 'Do you know if they were friends?'

'Well, they shared a room for a few days,' Mom says.

'How old was he?' Dad asks.

'Twelve,' Mom says quietly. 'Same as Brice.'

'God, it's awful. He had leukaemia or something, right?'

'Yeah.' Mom nods.

I peer through the wet as we pass the new house at the end of our street. Brice and I played there, back when it was just planks of wood. Now it has walls and a roof. The house is all done but no one lives there yet. My finger follows a raindrop sliding down the window. My chest feels tight and I've had math-test belly for days.

'Poor kid,' Dad says.

'So, let's keep this to ourselves,' Mom says. 'The staff haven't told him and Brenda said it's our call.'

Dad honks the horn, swerving. 'Goddamn lousy driver!'

Mom puts her hand on his leg. 'Do you agree?' she asks after a moment.

'Sure – I said it was awful.'

'No,' Mom says. 'That we shouldn't tell Brice.'

'Tell Brice what?' I ask.

We pass a smear of shops and restaurants. It's raining harder now. There's a drought and the ground is thirsty. I usually love the sound of rain hitting the car, but today it makes me feel alone in the back seat.

'That the kid died,' Dad says. 'Oh, learn to fucking drive!'

'Neil!' Mom shouts.

'What kid?' I ask.

'What's-his-name… Oliver,' Dad says. I gasp. Oliver was the bald boy with freckles, in the bed next to Brice's. When we came to visit yesterday, he told us that he missed his dog and couldn't wait to go home. People go to the hospital to get all better. Plus, you're not supposed to die until you're old.

'Jesus, Neil,' Mom says. 'Now she's just going to tell Brice.'

'No, she won't,' Dad says. He looks at me in the rear-view mirror. 'Hey, Ivy, you can keep a secret, can't you?'

In the hospital parking lot, I open my Rainbow Brite umbrella. Like the cookies, rain is a special treat that I can't enjoy right now. Hopping over puddles in my ladybug boots, I pass a woman helping an old man with a walker. I follow my parents through the automatic doors and blink hard in the fluorescent lights. It smells like lemons and bleach. People in white coats drift across the shiny floor like moths. In the elevator I tug the sleeves of my magic red sweater.

'Well, hello there, Ivy,' says Brenda, the nurse at the counter. She has brown skin and a woolly helmet of hair.

'Hi,' I say. Mom nudges me. 'Do you want a cookie?'

Brenda thanks me and takes a bite, 'Mmm! Did you help your Momma bake these?'

'Uh-huh,' I say. Mom let me hold the electric mixer, mashing sugar and butter. Afterwards I got to lick the beaters.

'When did you find the time?' Brenda asks Mom. 'Didn't you just leave here five minutes ago?'

Mom smiles. 'You're sweet, but really they were super-easy.' When she turns to me her face is flat. 'Ivy, go say hello to your brother, but remember what we talked about in the car. We'll be there in a few minutes.'

'So, how's Brice doing?' Dad asks Brenda. He puts his hand on Mom's shoulder and she pushes me on.

Heading down the hall with my basket of goodies, I pass kids lying in bed, wearing hospital gowns. Some look pale and have tubes up their noses. I wonder how sick they really are. I offer cookies to doctors and nurses, but not the kids because Dad said we don't know what's wrong with them and cookies might make them worse.

I take a deep breath and burst into my brother's room.

'Aloha, Brice!' I say. He's pale too, and his mouth is tight, eyes small. The other bed is neatly made.

'Aloha.' Brice squeezes out the word. This is practice for when we go on vacation to Hawaii. The other day the Big News was our trip, but now the news is Brice. My best friend Jenny went a hundred years ago, back when we were in kindergarten. My family's going over Easter but now it's only November. We have to wait so long the island might melt first from burning lava. I want to talk about Oliver but that would be bad.

'I drew you a picture,' I say, pulling it out of my backpack. I look back at the other bed and shiver.

'Is that me surfing?'

I nod. 'And that's a sea monster. Want a cookie?'

He shakes his head and my eyes go wide. This is the first time in the history of forever that Brice has turned down a treat. It is scarier than the tube in his arm, which is called an Ivy Drip, which is what I'd be if I melted. I ask if his stomach still hurts a lot.

'Super a lot.'

'How much on a scale of one to ten?' I ask.

'Eight. But now my ten is way worse than your ten.'

'Can I see again?'

Brice smiles and carefully pulls the blankets away, showing dark train tracks across his stomach. This is where they opened him up and took out his appendix. I imagine what happened when Mom and Dad rushed Brice to the hospital and Grandma stayed with me. I picture doctors in white coats racing around, with Brice screaming on the operating table until they gave him a shot to make him go to sleep.

'Doctor, this is the worst case of appendicitis I've ever seen.'

'Me too, Nurse. Stethoscope, please.'

'Stethoscope. Can we save him?'

'We've got to do our best. He's so young. Knee-hammer. He has so much to live for.'

'Doctor, why can't we save all the kids?'

Mom and Dad come in, all smiles and kisses. Mom tucks Brice in and hands him his homework. Mrs Stanton's sixth-grade class is doing a unit on castles, which are actual real buildings in England and not just in fairytales.

'Do you know what happened to Oliver?' Brice asks them. I open my mouth and quickly close it again.

'Who?' Dad asks.

'Oliver.' Brice points to the empty bed.

'Oh,' Mom says. 'He got to go home, honey.'

'That's good.' Brice settles back. 'He really missed his dog.'

I swallow and Dad starts talking about castles. He tells us about dungeons, and crenels, which are stone slits for shooting arrows.

'Like in *Robin Hood* with the foxes,' he says.

'I don't like that movie any more,' Brice says, pushing his floppy hair off his forehead.

'Sure you do. Everyone likes Disney.'

'When they're, like, Ivy's age.'

'Hey!' I cross my arms.

'What?' Brice says. 'It's okay to like cartoons when you're eight.'

Dad continues, talking about moats. Later tonight I'll be back home and Brice will still be here. My brother is beside me saying something about drawbridges, but I feel like he's already far away.

'So long, Ivy,' Brenda says as we're leaving. 'You be extra-good and do as you're told.'

I nod.

'Your folks have a lot on their minds and need you to be mature right now.'

I look down at my rain boots.

Outside it's dark and raining harder. In the big, empty back seat, I take off my magic red sweater and breathe deeply. I nibble my cookie, trying to make it last the whole way home.

Everything is Tropical

If I had a candy store, I'd organise everything by colour, with Hot Tamales, cherry Runts and Tootsie Pops and just the red M&Ms all in one big jar. *I'll have one scoop from the red jar, and two from the blue, please.* Jenny is fiddling with the friendship bracelet I made her, while we watch the Sweet Stuff lady weigh our treats. Jenny's a little taller than me, even though I'm two months older. If I call her hair dirty blonde she yells, 'It's not dirty!' Today she's wearing a baggy Care Bear T-shirt and a cloth headband. She never takes off her friendship bracelet, not even in the shower. Months and months from now, that band of knotted string will fall off naturally like a snake losing its skin. Then she'll make a wish and I'll make her a new one.

Jenny and I are by ourselves at Red Hill Shopping Center. It's okay because we can walk here without crossing any big streets. Mom's with Brice at the hospital and Dad probably has to work late again. He said we can all go visit Brice tomorrow. Maybe tomorrow Brice will be all better and we can just visit him at home.

Jenny makes me dig the emergency quarter out of my shoe, but we still don't have enough. We put back the jawbreakers, like explorers throwing the heaviest things overboard from a hot air balloon.

Jenny hands me a tiny lollipop as we leave Sweet Stuff. 'Bring more money next time, Dum-Dum,' she says. Outside, we sit by the fountain, munching our candy. I get everything with peanuts because Jenny doesn't like them.

There's a sailor boy statue in the fountain, riding a half-barrel boat. He points into the distance, his collar blowing in the sea breeze. A real little boy jumps up and down, begging his mom for a penny. He squeals, throwing it into the fountain. If he tells her what he wished for then it won't come true.

I ask Jenny what she thinks the statue's looking at.

Jenny shrugs. 'The parking lot?'

'Or maybe a tropical island,' I say. She looks at me blankly. 'You know, like Hawaii.'

'Hawaii's way too far away. You couldn't even see it with a telescope.'

We walk past the shoe repair store and Muffin Mania.

'Wanna come over some time and watch *DuckTales*?' I ask. It's a new cartoon and we like it even though there aren't enough girl characters. Maybe afterwards we can play dress-up as princesses or fairies or fairy princesses, or else pretend to be cat sisters.

'Okay, but let's watch it at my house,' Jenny says. 'Your TV's kinda dumb.'

'What's wrong with our TV?'

'No cable, no remote.' Jenny counts the problems on her fingers. 'And since it's the *only* one you've got, it's pretty small.' Jenny's house has a TV in every room except the bathrooms. She decorated her very own set with butterfly stickers. If I think about it, I want what she has. But I hadn't really thought about it before now. 'If we're lucky,' she continues, 'there'll be an after-school special on and we can watch that instead.'

I nod, but I'd rather watch *DuckTales.*

We wander through the make-up section of the drug store, down to our last few gummy worms. Jenny shows me which lip glosses her big sister Natasha likes.

'Which one do you think Brice would like?' Jenny asks.

I laugh. 'Brice doesn't wear make-up!'

'Nooo, on a *girl*.'

'How would I know?'

Jenny rolls her eyes and plays with the blush brushes. After a minute I ask, 'Is it really true the people wear flowers around their necks?'

'What people?'

'In Hawaii.'

'Yeah, and coconuts on their boobies.'

'No way!'

Jenny nods. 'But anyways, is your family even going any more?'

'Sure, why not?'

'You know, because Brice is sick, sick, sickity-sick.'

'Oh.' I go quiet, touching the eyeshadow. It's hard to imagine not going after Mom and Dad promised we would. I suddenly picture Brice in his hospital bed on the beach, with Oliver's empty bed getting covered by the rising tide. I try to shake it off. 'Well, Brice will be all better by the time we go.' I hope this is the truth. We don't buy anything because the lip glosses are too expensive and besides, we're out of money.

'Hey, I've got an idea!' Jenny says once we're outside. I let her blindfold me with her cloth headband and spin me around. She leads me by the arm. I trust her, but it's scary not being able to see. The sun glows red through my eyelids and when we walk in the shade it flickers dark. Red black red black. Red.

A bell jingles. The air changes and I smell sawdust. A bird squawks. Jenny takes off my blindfold and I gasp, blinking hard. A fish with yellow and black stripes swims by. It's an underwater party for neon-blue fish, with a shy orange fish hiding in a sea anemone.

'It's beautiful!' I say.

'Snorkelling is just like this,' she says, pressing her nose against the glass. We're in the Red Hill Pet Store, but I bet

it would look the same if we'd been magically teleported to Hawaii. The fish tank is a tropical ocean and I imagine I'm shrinking to become a tiny sea fairy, riding the seahorse's back. *I hold on tight as we explore the seaweed jungle. Giddy-up! And off we go through the bubbles. I find a giant shell and lean in for a closer look. There's a crab inside! Ahhhhhh! I scream to my seahorse. Let's get out of here! We start to zip away when I feel something jabbing me.*

'Hellooo!' Jenny is poking my arm. 'Hey, E.T., where'd you go?'

'Ow. Cut it out.'

'You weirdo. I kept repeating your name and you just stared at the fish like I didn't exist. Even Mortimer knows his own name.' Mortimer is Jenny's amazing circus cat. I grin and tell Jenny about my make-believe. Maybe we can act it out together some time with costumes from my dress-up chest.

'A sea fairy?' She folds her arms. The hamsters and parrots are all staring at me too. 'That's kind of babyish.'