

Cause and Effect

Hannah Fudge.

He stared out across the barren land, trying to make sense of the chaos below.

The world was turned upside down. In front of him, what used to be his hometown, filled with vast meadows, and vital fir trees, was nothing but charred rubble, and the broken forms of the foliage – the forest – he grew up in. Smoke and dirt hung in the air like a cloud of despair, nearly choking him with its clogging presence. There were small fires, still eating away at whatever was left unharmed, sending its deadly toxins into the already cloud covered sky. His eyes flickered across the destroyed landscape, looking for any signs of life, something to prove there had once been a land filled with beauty and light in this exact spot. He was looking for something – anything – that could give him hope, because surely – surely – there had to be something. But the harder he looked, the more the black pit in his chest consumed him, filling him with an emotion so black, so hopeless, it was a miracle he didn't bury himself in this field of garbage, and wait for the weight to crush him.

Tears streaked down his face, leaving trails of grime on his pale cheeks, as he turned away. He couldn't look at it any longer. He wouldn't. Even if he didn't want to leave, wanted to give up and crawl into a hole, he knew he had a job to do. Hate filled him unexpectedly, swelling inside him until it was ready to burst out of his chest. He cried out, an angry yell, filled with the promise of revenge, as he ran from the depressing scene. He stumbled over the remains of a house, breaking the weak planks of wood as he barrelled over the debris haphazardly. He brought up short, mute horror setting itself in his already weary heart. Looking down slowly, slowly, his eyes made out every detail of the wreckage under his feet in sharp, precise detail. He could see every crack in

every piece of wood, every piece of dust and dirt that swirled around his head as though magnified.

He fell to his knees, all hate, all emotion draining from him like it was never there, leaving a blank, empty shell. He sat, uncomprehending and unknowing, staring at the pale, lifeless body in front of him.

Her dark hair was splayed around her face, grimy, and matted, nearly covering her feminine features. Her pale, smooth cheeks, marred by blood and soot. Her soft lips, split and dry. Her open eyes, blue as the sea, and unseeing. He knew all this, knew all her features without looking, without thinking about it. He also knew what he was seeing was no longer his sister.

"Olive?" his voice was soft, and sand paper dry. He swallowed, found it didn't help, and gave up. He knew she wouldn't respond, no matter how many times he said her name, no matter how many times he shook her or screamed at her to wake up. His twin was gone, the very person who shared half his soul, was gone.

He forced himself to stand, even though his legs were numb, even though his eyes stung, because he couldn't blink them. He turned, listless and lifeless, and left his destroyed home, his destroyed mind, behind.

It took over an hour to leave the claws of destruction, to once again return to the perfectly intact gravel road that he had been traveling on only an hour earlier. To his left and to his right were healthy maple, green alders, and fir trees, all staring back at him silently, accusingly, as if to ask why he got to make it out alive when his sister, and his home, didn't. It was eerie, sending goose flesh up his arms and neck. The sky above him was iron grey, blanketed in a cloud cover. He wrapped his arms around himself, stared down at his feet as he walked slowly, uncaring. He still felt nothing inside, as if his heart had taken too much, had endured too much hate, and anguish.

He didn't mind. He knew if – when – he gained the ability to feel and care again, he certainly would crawl into a hole, and never come back out.

He threw himself at the trunk of a tree on the roadside, pulled his legs to his chest, and dropped his face to his knees. He didn't want to see anymore, see the world around him okay and unharmed, when everything wasn't supposed to be.

If you were to ask him later, he wouldn't have been able to tell you how long he sat there, oblivious to the world around him, as his ragged breathing evened out, and his heart could once again be heard over the rushing in his ears. He only knew the day had ended, and night had crawled slowly over the earth around him. He didn't understand this, didn't understand how the light could still turn into night, how the trees were still alive, how the air was still breathable, when his sister was dead. He felt bitterness towards everything, everything that got to live. It was unfair, and he didn't think he could stand another minute of being surrounded by things his dead sister would never again get to experience.

Angry tears traced down his cheeks. His whole body ached, as though it had been put through the ringer, and spat back out again. Even his mind hurt, from the weight of grief. He knew he wouldn't be able to sleep – especially not here, where cold was beginning to seep into the ground and tree trunk beneath him – it simply wouldn't happen. His brain was whirring with thoughts, with dark, hungry anger, and he knew there was no possible way for them to shut off, but without warning, with gradual slowness, his eyelids grew heavy, and he was swaying in the deep waters of unconsciousness.

He awoke.

Well, he thought he awoke. But he was no longer sitting, stiff and cold, at the base of a tree. He was light, as though he was floating, and bright, white, sunlight bathed him in a warm, safe cocoon. He opened his eyes, blinked in his new surroundings.

He was sitting in a swing. The swing-set was nondescript, just five metal poles connected, with two chains hanging from the top. All around him, grain, and long, healthy grasses stirred in the faint breeze. The field seemed to stretch on forever, promising life and beauty. In the distance, he could make out a vast, glittering lake, the color of lapis lazuli.

He breathed in the clean air, marvelling at how much beauty a place could hold. He could, even if just for a moment, forget about his muddled feelings, about the revenge he needed to seek for the destruction of his home, and the death of his sister. But the serenity was short lived. Hatred filled him once again, threatening to bring down the dream world around him.

Suddenly there was a girl. She stood not ten feet in front of him, looking towards the lake. Her chocolate brown hair flowed around her shoulders, shiny and silky in the sun's glow. She wore a dress that fell just above her knees, deep purple, and inlaid with black lace.

His breath stopped in his throat. It was too good to be true- this couldn't actually be happening. He knew that. He knew not to trust anything that was too good, and yet... And yet, he couldn't stop himself from hoping, couldn't douse the feeling of excitement that had risen inside him. And sure enough, as the girl turned, he saw the pale, perfect face of his sister staring back at him. He wanted to run to her, to embrace her, and make sure she wasn't just some trick of the mind, but something held him back. What if this wasn't his sister? What if this was simply a manifestation of his grief? Or worse- some cruel joke the cosmos had thought up? He knew he wouldn't survive if she wasn't real. He knew this time, his heart would shatter, into a million pieces, and blow with the wind across the lake below. And really- would it be so wrong if he

never had to find out whether or not she was real? If he could live out his life in bliss with his twin sister, even if she was only a fake?

So he stayed where he was, sitting in the swing, gripping the two chains so hard, his knuckles had turned white. He waited for the girl to do something – anything – but all she did was stand there, staring at him with vacant eyes.

"Olive?" he asked, voice tentative, scared.

His heart leapt at the response. She smiled, ever so softly, like she used to do when she corrected him on something he'd done wrong.

"Hello, brother," she answered. He didn't like the ring in her voice, didn't like that note of resigned grimness.

His questions came tumbling out, all at once, because he didn't know how long he had with her.

"Olive, what happened to the valley? Where's mum and aunt Lucette? Are they okay? Who did this? And who-"

He stopped mid-sentence. He couldn't say it, couldn't say "who killed you?" because that would make it real, and he couldn't chance that when maybe – just maybe – his sister really was alive and well, standing next to him right now.

She shook her head softly. "I can't tell you, brother. That's not why I'm here."

"You..." his throat clogged up, and he choked out his next words. "You can't tell me? But why, Olive? Didn't you see who did it? I have to go after them, I have to-"

Olive was shaking her head again, and a sinking began in his stomach, a feeling of hope disappearing once again. "No. You can't. You have to understand, dear brother, that I died for a reason."

Something inside him burst free, swallowing him in emotion. "No!" he cried, and stood from the swing. He ran to her, and was angry to find tears in his eyes once again. "You're not dead! You can't be! You're right!"

His words ended abruptly, as his hands slid through her shoulders. His palms tingled, as he looked down and saw that his wrists were cut off at her shoulders. He watched as her form flickered, like the screen of a projector, for just a moment, but it was enough.

"You're not real." His voice was no more than a whisper. He bowed his head. "How can you not be real?"

Olive gave him a sympathetic look. "It's okay, brother. It really is. The pain has stopped. You needn't worry about me any longer."

"How?" he asked, as the tingling in his hands extended to his shoulders. How could he possibly stop worrying about her? She was his sister – his twin, no less – she was the one he always took care of, always looked after. She was his other half. Olive would always be there, in his mind, no matter what distractions came his way.

"Let me show you," she said, and stepped away from him. His hands fell to his side, just as the disconcerting tingling began to subside.

He heard her footsteps retreat towards the swing-set. He couldn't make himself look up, make himself follow her. She wasn't real, after all. What was the point in chasing after a false hope, when he could be looking for the people who were responsible for his real sister's death?

But he felt her eyes on him, boring into his soul. He turned, saw the swing-set had vanished. In its place stood a wooden door, plain and standing on its own, as though there was an invisible wall supporting it. He looked towards his sister. No, he had to remind himself. Not his sister. She

was just a copy, just a replica that looked and spoke like she did. The lake behind him reflected in Olive's eyes, the exact same lapis lazuli.

"Are you coming?" she asked.

He followed her, and together, they walked through the threshold.

He was back home.

But this time, the valley wasn't destroyed, wasn't a shadow of what it used to be. It was in bloom, the whole place alight with life, and the fruits of spring. The cornfields aunt Lucette tended to were swaying in the wind, and Penelope and Spitfire, the two horses that roomed the valley freely, stood munching on a patch of grass, not twenty feet away. And to their left, at the top of the hill, the home the four of them shared. It was small, made from simple oak, and never kept heat well enough in the winter. Clothes was strung across the line, flapping in the gusty breeze. The sun's hot force beat down on the earth mercilessly.

He turned to Olive. "Why are here?"

She didn't look at him. "Watch," was all she said.

He followed her gaze, saw she was looking vacantly at the edge of the forest, as though she already knew what was going to happen. As they watched, a fox appeared out of the shadows. It was slinking along the edge of the tree line, like it wanted to keep to the dark. A movement caught his eye. There was another animal in the woods. It was a rabbit, its coat a light brown with the coming season. The fox hunted the rabbit, totally unaware of its audience. The rabbit munched on some weeds at the base of a tree. Suddenly the fox pounced. He didn't have time to call a warning, or even jump in shock and surprise, before the fox was carrying the rabbit off in its bloody maw.

He turned back to Olive. She was still monotonous, standing there with no expression. She turned towards the house, and he saw there were now two people standing outside, just in front of the door.

One was a little boy, around the age of seven, with tousled brown hair, and wide, blue eyes. The other was a woman, around thirty, with golden blonde hair, and the same bright blue eyes. The little boy seemed in a hurry, and even upset. He tugged on the woman's hand.

"Mama," the boy said, his voice urgent. "We have to help the rabbit! The fox just took it and carried it away!"

The woman smiled softly, and she could have been the mirror image of Olive. "Son, the rabbit is dead. There's no helping it now," she said softly, as one would when explaining something to a child.

"But Mama," he protested. "It shouldn't have died. There has to be a way to save it."

The woman - Mama - shook her head, and bent down to look him in the eye. "Honey, everything has to die. It's just the way things are. When that fox takes the rabbit back home, it'll feed its babies. Understand? The rabbit is dead, but it will help the foxes to live."

The little boy looked troubled. "So it's going to help the fox? But that doesn't seem fair."

"Life – and death – often isn't, little one," she ruffled his hair fondly. "But you do understand, right? Because the rabbit died, the foxes babies will get to live."

He nodded seriously. "I guess that's alright. As long as it was for a good cause."

The woman smiled, and stood. The two figures evaporated, like pollen in the wind.

"You understood back then," Olive said, and he turned back to look at her, his mind whirring.

"But that was different," he said, and he felt so much like he had when he was child, when he refused to believe the rabbit had died. "That was a rabbit. You're a human being. I can't just let it go. Someone murdered you."

She shook her head. "While that may be true, I have seen where your obsession with revenge will lead you. It is not a bright future."

"No matter," he said, stubborn. "I will not let your death go unpunished."

Olive said nothing for a moment, while he stared at her accusingly, daring her to contradict his statement again. She swept her arm across the air, and another door appeared, this one no different from the last.

"Everything must die, brother. And stay dead. It is the way of the world."

He was in the valley once again, only this time, they weren't alone.

And the newcomers weren't the little boy, or his mother. They were three strangers, all dressed oddly, and brandishing torches. The sky was cloudy overhead. He and Olive stood, watched as the men walked past the cornfield aunt Lucette had laboured over relentlessly, and brushed their torches across the healthy plants. Fire erupted instantaneously, billowing into the sky in a cloud of black and orange. Penelope and Spitfire whinnied and neighed loudly, jumping back on their haunches. One of the men pulled something from his pocket, some kind of weapon, and with a mind-shaking blast, Penelope dropped to the group, unmoving. Spitfire wasn't far behind.

He was surprised to find tears in his eyes. He didn't want to watch this, didn't want to see as his home and his friends were killed. But he couldn't look away. He wouldn't. This was what had happened. These were the men that ended his life in so many ways, other than the most merciful. He was rooted to the spot, unwilling and unable to tear his gaze away.

They set the house alight. Olive came rushing from the front door, and came face to face with the three jeering men. Anger blazed in her eyes, fighting for dominance with the reflection of the bright flames. There was yelling, then she was trying hit one of them. With another deafening boom, even heard over the crackling of the fire, Olive fell to the ground, a lifeless heap.

The men left, leaving destruction and the broken, bleeding earth behind, as though they felt no remorse. It looked like a battlefield, spattered with bodies of the dead, both human and animal. The fire continued to spread, until it fizzled out once it reached the forest, from the wetness of a prior rainfall.

"I remember mum and aunt Lucette left to pick grapes. They should be home by now. They're probably wondering where you are." There was no emotion in Olive's voice.

"I'm going to kill them," her brother said, his voice low with seething. "I'm going to burn them alive."

She shook her head, and he was relieved to see the tiniest spark of anger ignite in her eyes. "No, brother. I didn't show you to send you after them. I showed you because I am the rabbit."

He blinked, surprised. "The rabbit?"

"Yes. The rabbit. I have died, and our home has died. But it won't stay dead. It will grow back, into life once again. I have shown you this because I cannot let you pursue the path you want to take. You cannot go after the men who killed me. It will destroy you, consume you until there is nothing left. I have seen it. I see a lot now. I don't want that life for my brother."

"But... But you're not the rabbit. You're my sister. You deserved better." He felt weary. He didn't want to be having this argument with Olive, and yet, he was beginning to feel the anger drain away from him, slowly but surely.

"You have to understand. I did deserve better, yes, but this is how it is. This is what happened. You have to know that, even though me and our home are dead, we will both live on, and someday, we will both once again, be beautiful."

He blinked away tears. "What are you saying? I can't do what you're asking, Olive."

She stared ahead, not looking at him, but not looking at the scene before them either. It was as though she was in her own world, a place vast, and filled with stars. "Cause and effect, big brother. For something to be built, something first has to fall. It is the law of nature. You cannot change that. What I'm saying, Jacob, is that you have to let it go. You have to let my death go."

With a start, he awoke.

He could tell it was real this time.

There was no feeling of weightlessness, no cloud over his emotions. He could think clearly.

He blinked, pulling himself back into his corporeal self. Every inch of his body still ached.

Questions lobbed themselves into his mind, refusing to let go. Surely that couldn't have been real. It was just a dream, after all. Yes, as he looked around, saw the familiar gravel road, and the green fir trees in front and behind him, the sun overhead, he knew for a fact that he hadn't actually experienced his journey in his body.

But he had experienced it. Of that he was sure. Whether or not it was just a manifestation of his own mind, or something that went beyond the natural, he knew that, to him – and to his own mind – it had been very real indeed. He wanted to believe Olive had actually spoken to him beyond the grave, had come to console him and make him move on, but the idea that ghosts did exist – that they could influence your dreams, no less – was something he couldn't even begin to

understand. It was too much. Too big. He didn't want to think about it while his grief over Olive's death and their home was still fresh in his heart.

With a sigh, he stumbled to his feet, hearing the cracking of his bones, and feeling the screaming of his back muscles. He knew mum and aunt Lucette would be in the valley, anguished over the damage and wondering where he was. He would go back, and he would console them. He would tell them of his dream, and hope they understood.

He would make sure they understood.