

Strawberry Lane

Harry Blackburn

Brief Synopsis

Strawberry Lane is an epistolary novel set in 2007, England. The story follows Quinn, a young man ravaged by the sudden death of his twin brother, Charlie. He returns to his family home where, before long, he is forced to face a turbulent new reality. As the year progresses, Quinn must traverse the stages of his grief as they begin to manifest within the four seasons.

Exploring themes of loss and family through the lens of magic realism, this work combines prose and prose-poetry.

In a dream gone by, there is an oak tree. Its leaves are green. Its blood is white.

We are ten years old. I stand on the ground. You stand leagues above me, teetering on an outstretched branch. Reaching. All smiles and brittle bones and raised heels. Reaching, forever. Determined fingers, clawing at the heavens. Dislodging the stars.

In the dream, they fall like summer rain. A cascade of light. They shower you as you perch atop the oak tree. As they reach me, they dissipate, fizzling out in great rockets of spark and flame. You tell me it feels like floating in space. I tell you it feels like going to war. Your hands begin to curl. They begin to wrap. They begin to grasp.

Finally, contact.

Your cries ripple through the endless field. I go to shout, but the sound becomes dry in my mouth. You hoist yourself onto the highest branch, clambering to the zenith. My heartbeat slows.

It stops beating altogether.

And then, lift. On daring legs, you push yourself to stand. Your hand lifts. Your arms float in mid-air. They soar. And then, you look down at me. And I look up at you. And for just one moment, the oak tree is beneath us. I clap until my skin runs raw. I cheer until my throat catches fire. From here, we can see the whole universe.

You tremble with excitement and your wings begin to burn. The branch beneath you falters. *Crack. Crack. Crack.* And I remember your eyes, as wide as fear. A lifetime in a second. The world within an atom. The branch gives way entirely. The earth is ripped from beneath my shoes.

Freefall.

And for the first time in my life, I think about death. I hope it feels like a late-night drive. I hope you can see the lights on the motorway. I hope you're asleep in the backseat.

Branch upon branch breaks beneath your body. Falling. Catching. The sound of bark against skin. Wildly flailing limbs. As you near the bottom, you catch on a low-hanging branch, arms outstretched. You grasp at the wood until your fingers are bloodied. You heave yourself up to it, press your body against it. You take a breath. And then, you drop. And you land on your feet. You land in the grass.

And you laugh. And you wheeze. And I can't see you through my tears. And you wrap your arms around me. And you tell me it's alright.

In the dream, we lay side by side. A breeze rides in from the seafront, rolls over the sheepfold, catches in the canopy. We laugh as spots of warm rain start to fall. We hold out our tongues.

Nothing bad has happened to you.

Part One

Spring

March 3rd, 2007.

You were alive when I first saw the strange blue light. This much I know to be true. The old church bell sounded at midnight and you were still alive.

That was the spring Grandma came to stay and Grandad wasn't with her. She arrived in mid-March and I was relegated to the bottom of your bunk-bed, and when I complained to Mum all she said was that Grandma would be leaving soon. That she was only here for a few days, love. But days turned to weeks, and weeks turned to months, and by that point Grandma had bought her own sheets for my bed, and my wardrobe was filled with her clothes, and she spent most of her time holed up in my room.

Despondent. That's the word we were looking for. The word we couldn't quite find at the time. I found it recently in a book, and I thought of you. The one set in Japan about the young runaway and the old man who can talk to cats. It means to be sad from a loss of hope.

Each morning we would leave for school and, on the days when Grandma got out of bed, she would sit at the dining room table, jigsaw puzzle sprawled across the oak surface. And when we returned in the afternoon she was still sitting there, and not a single piece would be in place.

Anyway, the evening before the blue light appeared was the same evening we asked why Grandad hadn't come with her. Some film droned on in the background and you asked if Grandma and Grandad were having a fight and Dad nearly choked on his food. Grandma looked to us, and then to Mum, and then back towards the TV. Mum was silent for a long time. When she finally spoke, all she said was that Grandad wouldn't be visiting any more. And Mum cried,

and so did you and Dad. I was too young then to understand, and it was years before we spoke about it again.

That night, I dreamt of him – of Grandad. He was trapped in a labyrinth. We stood at the entrance, you and I, and shouted for him, but he couldn't hear us. And he wandered for what felt like an eternity. I woke up crying. The church bell was sounding. Your breath still made the mattress rise and fall above me. And that's when I saw it.

The strange blue light.

It shone faintly through the curtains, a ghostly, incorporeal ball of fire. Small, at first, but it grew, and grew, and grew, until the whole room was bathed in sapphire. Your room was the ocean, and we were drowning.

At first, I lay there motionless. This was nothing but a stray dream. But no matter how much I willed it to go, the strange blue light was unmoving.

It beckoned to me, whispering in a language I couldn't decipher, and before I knew it, I was tiptoeing across the bedroom floor, careful not to wake you. I drew back the curtains and opened the window, and the ball of light thanked me. It shrunk to the size of a football and floated through the opening and out the bedroom door.

I followed it down the corridor and through the house, and when we reached the living room it stopped. Grandma lay on the sofa, asleep, and the TV stopped its regular thronging and began to spit out static, showing nothing but a grainy storm of black, white and grey. The ball of light hovered above her for a moment, but she didn't wake. She tossed and turned on the sofa in the throes of a bad dream. And so, the strange blue light moved forward, through the kitchen and out the back door.



It soared across the garden, and I soared across behind it, up to the little path beyond the flower beds. The first breath of summer hung in the air. The strange space between seasons. It lingered there for a moment before starting down the path, beckoning me to follow. But I could no longer hear it, so I stayed where I was. And then, as fast as it had appeared, it vanished. Gone, like the lyrics to a hymn you can't quite remember. I carried myself back to bed and I fell asleep. I dreamt of the labyrinth.

The next day I told everyone. They nodded, and they smiled, and they laughed. Yes, love, Mum said, that sounds just wonderful.

Of course, they didn't believe me. And I've been meaning to tell you, because I know that you will.

But that was a long time ago now.

Grandma didn't leave until August that year, and you died a few years later, and I still have that dream about the labyrinth.