

Staggers

Say that again, he says to her. It sounds like *ryegrass sadness*. But she repeats it as *ryegrass staggers*. Jimmy and Anna stand side by side at the fence, looking across it to a horse called Gulliver and the man beside him in the paddock. Jimmy spotted Anna leaning on the fence a few moments earlier, was drawn to the shape she made, the way the air seemed to form itself around her. The horse wanders as though lost, as though it has awoken some place that should be familiar but is instead strange in a way it cannot understand. The horse trembles, circles, stumbles. "They call it ryegrass staggers," Anna is explaining. Some sheep in the neighbouring paddock, too, have taken to stumbling, like they are drunk. The cause is a fungus in the grass. It is why the man in the paddock has come here, to study the animals.

Anna's parents, old friends of Jimmy's mother, own the farm, about 120 hectares a couple hours from Wellington. They took Jimmy on for part of the summer as a favour. Anna has just completed her second year at university, veterinary science, study she put off after leaving school to work on the farm full-time. When the animals started to exhibit symptoms, she mentioned it to the man in the paddock, a professor who split his time between the university and a crown research institute. His name is Mac, which sounds to Jimmy nothing like the name of a professor. Nor does Mac look like any professor Jimmy might imagine, in his jeans, his work shirt and gloves, his ball-cap. Mac looks younger than Jimmy imagines a professor should be; Jimmy would have thought him a work hand. Mac calls Jimmy 'mate', what Jimmy's father used to call him, which annoys Jimmy almost as much as Mac's familiar way with Anna, the way Mac touches her back lightly when he speaks with her, the way she laughs at the things Mac says.

Mac glances at Jimmy, touches the brim of his hat. He handles the horse easily. When the horse rebels, Mac backs off. "Staggers makes them angry," Anna explains. "I guess it's like any injury with animals." She is involved in the research project now – investigating the long-term effect of staggers on the animals' circulatory systems, the muscles of their hearts. Her name, she explains to Jimmy, might be on the paper when it appears in a journal. Her face is flushed.

As they watch Mac with the horse, Jimmy risks sidelong glances at Anna. It is unusually hot even for February, and right now, late afternoon, she wears shorts. Her legs are long, smooth. At 27 she has five years on Jimmy, which explains in part why he feels foolish around her, as though he is trying always to catch up with something she is saying – even though he has his degree – and not just when she uses words like *endophytes* and *alkaloid toxicosis* in conversations with Mac. Jimmy wonders if she knows this. He takes another glance, sees her catch him, an expression he can't read tugging at her eyes. He looks away.

"Can those animals be cured?" he asks, to ask something.

"Probably," Anna says. "Unless they go off and drown themselves trying to get a drink." Her father nearly got himself killed trying to drag a confused sheep from a creek.

Jimmy arrived at the farm a month before. "Sweet accent," Anna had said. He enjoyed that but, on reflection, changed his mind. It was too much like something to say to a kid, and her noticing the way he spoke only made him feel stranger, feel like a stranger in his own country, which is how he is trying to think of New Zealand. He and his mother returned to New Zealand, where he was born, only a few months before from New York, where Jimmy had just completed university – 'college' as they called it there. He is trying to remember not to call it that.

He moved to America when he was nine years old, and he sounds like an American, can hear it in his own ears now that he is here. Everything he says seems loud to him, so he tries not to say too much. He does not, too, want to reveal how little he knows about farms and horses. It is strange to be on a farm, near a small town with only a couple of dairies, the monthly dance at the RSA, advertised in the community paper just this week. He lived close to central Wellington before his parents' divorce; in New York, he rode the subway to school, can still feel the vibrations of the wheels when he closes his eyes and thinks about the city, though more and more when he closes his eyes he thinks of Anna, the shape of her breasts beneath her shirt, the tenor of her voice, the way she holds her dirty blond hair in a ponytail and how it makes him feel on the occasions she lets it cascade to her shoulders.

Is Anna encouraging him? It happened just now. He'd stopped only for a second at that fence, on the pretext of asking her a question to which he already knew the answer. When she responded, he turned to walk away – he could think of no reason to stay – but she took his arm and pointed to the horse, started the conversation. It seemed to him that her hand had lingered on his arm. Does it mean anything? He tries to see around his desire. It spreads like the paddocks to the horizon.

That evening, after dinner, Anna invites him to join her on the swinging bench on the porch. He pretends to look at his watch, then sits. She smells of something familiar—lavender. Jimmy is suddenly acutely aware he hasn't showered. They sit in silence for awhile. Anna takes sips from a glass of white wine, moves the chair gently with her toes, bare against the boards. She doesn't ask him if he wants a glass; she knows he doesn't drink. "Not even a beer, mate?" Mac asks at the dinner table—Mac is staying at the farm a few days a week during the study. Mac looks at Anna then, as though something were understood.

Anna sips her wine. Jimmy stares at the stars as they swing.

"Can you see many stars in New York?" she asks after a while.

“No,” he says. “The lights are on 24/7.”

“What’s it like?”

“It’s all right,” he says. “Crowded. Nothing like here.”

It is an easy answer. He can’t figure out what she is asking. There was New York before the towers and there is New York after, though everyone walks around pretending it is the same place. There was America before the war and America in it, and trying to put the two together, trying to superimpose one on top of the other, makes Jimmy’s head hurt.

Anna wants to talk about America. She says she’s met some friendly Americans, but overall it seems to her like they don’t think much about other people. Jimmy doesn’t like to talk about this. He doesn’t want his difference to be the thing between them. Jimmy hates the way he has been asked, several times since he’s returned to New Zealand, to explain America and by just about anyone: the man at the petrol station, the girl pouring his flat white. He is generally taken for an American. Some people ask if he is Canadian, but Jimmy suspects those people think they are being kind.

Because he doesn’t want Anna to get up and go to bed, he tries to work out how to explain what even he himself is still trying to sort out. America has been injured. They are angry. That’s all they can feel, that and being afraid, and it is hard to think about anything else when you’re hurt, and easier to feel anger than grief, easier to look out than in. He thinks about all the New Yorkers, all the tourists – himself among them – taking the E train from Port Authority station to walk the fenced-in path that circled the perimeter of Ground Zero, all trying in their minds to put back into that hole what had been taken away. Walls had been covered with photographs and flyers posted by those looking for fathers, mothers, wives, children. He’d been shocked to see an old man – he must have been in his 70s – kicking the wall, screaming at a photograph of a young woman. Jimmy can’t say it all quite this way. He says, “It’s not really about thinking. More about feeling.”

Anna nods, continues to push the swing. She tilts the wineglass over her mouth then says goodnight, it has been a long day, touches him on the cheek before walking inside. Jimmy knows she thinks all those things in America are why he and his mother have come back. It’s not. His mother for a long time had talked of returning but put it off. Jimmy knows she feels free finally to return because his father, still in Wellington, has died. He died young – only 50. She’d always said the drinking would kill him, but in the end he had a ‘cardiac arrest’, the technical term his mother had used to tell Jimmy the news, as if from a distance, as if she truly couldn’t feel anything for his father, not even grief, as though that would mean giving in to injury in some way.

Jimmy had been nervous about returning; it got worse and worse on the flight. It seemed a cruel joke that the Wellington weather had them circling the airport for a long time, circling but not arriving, like his own anxieties were keeping them aloft as he looked through the clouds at a city he was not sure he remembered. Not long after arriving, Jimmy stopped at the deli on Dixon Street, ordered a bagel

with cream cheese and smoked salmon. As he ate, it occurred to him he was already trying to recreate New York. He couldn’t finish the meal, walked out and around the corner, up Cuba Street, watched a street performer play his guitar. He knew he was stalling, and gradually he made his way along routes his feet seemed to know, back to his old neighbourhood. Jimmy walked tighter and tighter circles around his old street, not ready at first to make the turn that would take him past the house. When he did stand before it, the old bungalow, still green and white, looked shabbier than in his memory, the section tiny, though he recalled it as expansive. Jimmy stood before it awhile. There was nothing there. He wanted there to be something, felt that something about himself, who he was, had been locked in that house, but the man who could help him, who could answer his questions, had just died and, anyway, had moved from there years ago.

Jimmy sits for a few minutes on the swing after Anna leaves, inhaling her lavender scent as it dissipates in the muggy air. He dreams about her that night. She wears a dress with a plunging neckline. He struggles to keep his eyes on her face. They stand on a deck overlooking the farm on one side, a city – he can’t say which – on the other. They dance, spinning around the deck, the stars moving above them as they circle the floor. It’s old-fashioned dancing; they stand half an arm’s length from one another, in the perfect ballroom posture Jimmy learned when he’d taken dance lessons at university to please a girlfriend who it turned out couldn’t be pleased. He wants to hold Anna closer, to feel her body against his but simultaneously fears she will break off the dance when she notices he has not had a chance to bathe. He wakes in a sweat, dizzy, filled with desire.

All morning as he moves from one chore to another, he thinks about the RSA, musters his courage. He holds Anna back as they enter the house for lunch, asks her, “Do you dance?” She agrees to go. Jimmy feels unsteady then, realizes he hasn’t prepared for the possibility she might say yes.

He spends the rest of the week largely avoiding Anna. It’s awkward, like they’ve started a conversation they can’t finish, like he has revealed something important about himself and they’ve been interrupted before she can respond. Or that every word now has to be chosen carefully if the conversation is to continue. But all week his thoughts return to Saturday. He rifles through the clothes he’s brought, tries to imagine what she might wear so he won’t be too casual or too overdressed in comparison, so it won’t appear he gave it any thought at all.

On Thursday, Mac returns to the farm. More tests on the horse, on the sheep, all of which have been segregated from the other animals. Mac is wiry, but muscular in the arms and shoulders. Jimmy notices this walking behind him, helping him to carry equipment to one of the paddocks when Mac asks. Later, they stand in the kitchen. Mac is drinking a beer; Jimmy sips an L&P.

“Good to be back?” Mac asks.

“Yeah.”

“Be a bit strange, I reckon.”

Jimmy shrugs. Mac pulls on his beer, a bottle of Speight's, one of the beers Jimmy's father used to drink, though in cans. Jimmy remembers the cans overflowing the rubbish bin. Rubbish bin. When he remembers his childhood, he realizes, it is often the Kiwi term, not the American one – trash can – that comes to mind, as though objects in one world, not just what they are called, are different from in the other.

Now that he is here, Jimmy is forced to remember things about his childhood that he hasn't wanted to think about in a long time. It can happen anytime. Mac wipes his mouth with the back of his hand as he leaves the room. Jimmy recalls the way his father did the same, standing in their old kitchen. His father wiped his mouth with his right hand, then whipped it across his mother's face, an extension of the same motion, as if an extension of the same thought. It wasn't the first time, but it was the first time Jimmy saw it up close instead of hearing it from another room at night, while he was meant to be sleeping. He was eight years old. His mother didn't cry. She leaned against the kitchen bench, holding a dish towel to her face. When he and his mother left that house a year or so later – to a friend's place in Auckland for six months and then to New York, where his mother's parents lived, where she was from – she spoke in a flat voice, early in the morning, as though there were no hurry. But she drove fast for a long time, overtaking cars, pressing her horn.

On Saturday, all Saturday, Jimmy has trouble concentrating. He keeps picturing Anna in a skirt, the excuse to touch her. He worries about the conversations they will have. Usually he shaves carelessly in the shower, but this time he holds his face close to the mirror above the basin, careful to avoid nicks. He combs his hair, hopes he hasn't gone overboard on the aftershave he received at Christmas from his mother. He presses a dark blue shirt with an iron.

Then Jimmy sits on the edge of the bed, looking at the clock. At nearly six – they are to have dinner first – he heads to Anna's room, knocks on her bedroom door. When there is no response, he walks downstairs to the lounge, through the kitchen.

Then he hears voices from the deck. Anna is sitting on the swing, still in work clothes – jeans this time – beside Mac.

Anna looks up at him. Mac has his arm around her, his fingers grazing the bare skin of her arm. She has her hand on Mac's knee. Her hair is mussed, her lips swollen with pleasure, her eyes the eyes of someone who has been woken mid-dream. She seems confused to see Jimmy in that dream, almost not to see him, then takes him in all at once: his khakis, his pressed shirt, his scent. Her eyes widen. "Oh, God. I'm sorry."

"Going for the 'A'?" Jimmy asks.

He hears Anna's quick intake of breath. He wants to hurt her. It surprises him.

Mac stands. "Easy, mate."

"Jimmy ..." Anna begins, but Jimmy has already entered the house. He walks a circuit around the lounge, into the kitchen. He opens the fridge, takes two of Mac's beers. Jimmy downs one quickly as he walks, the other in his hand. He

finds himself at the fence, where he stands drinking the second beer more slowly.

Jimmy can feel it now, the alcohol, a dizziness to give in to. Gulliver still wanders his paddock, the sheep theirs. Poor, stupid animals. Jimmy stares at them – still trembling, unable to get any bearings, circling, it seems to Jimmy, as though searching for a certain piece of ground, for a simple way back to where they are.