



I Cheerfully Refuse

A Novel

"Enger deserves to be mentioned alongside the likes
of Richard Russo and Thomas McGuane."

—*New York Times Book Review*

Leif Enger

Author of *Peace Like a River*

I Cheerfully
Refuse

Also by Leif Enger

Peace Like a River

So Brave, Young, and Handsome

Virgil Wander

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for Robin

- *first do no harm*

HERE AT THE BEGINNING it must be said the End was on everyone's mind.

For example look at my friend Labrino who showed up one gusty spring night. It was moonless and cold, wind droning in the eaves, waves on Superior standing up high and ramming into the seawall. Lark and I lived two blocks off the water and you could feel those waves in the floorboards. Labrino had to bang on the door like a lunatic just to get my attention.

Still, it was good he knocked at all. There were times Labrino was so melancholy he couldn't bring himself to raise his knuckles, and then he might stand motionless on the back step until one of us noticed he was there. It was unnerving enough in the daytime, but once it happened when I couldn't sleep and was prowling the kitchen for leftovers. Three in the morning—just when you want to see a slumping hairy silhouette right outside your house. When the shock wore off I opened the door and told him not to do that anymore.

But this time he knocked, then came in shaking off his coat and settled murmuring into the breakfast nook. I knew Labrino because he owned a tavern on the edge of town, the Lantern, where the band I was in played most weekends. He was lonely and kind and occasionally rude by accident, but above all things he was a worried man. He said, "Now tell me what you make of this comet business."

He meant the Tashi Comet, named for the Tibetan astronomer who spotted an anomaly in the deep-space software. From its

path so far, Mr. Tashi believed it would sweep past Earth in thirteen months. He predicted dazzling beauty visible for weeks. A *sungrazer* he called it, in an article headlined *The Celestial Event of Our Time*.

I admitted to Labrino that I was awfully excited. In fact I'd driven down to the Greenstone Fair and picked up a heavy old set of German binoculars with a tripod mount. Didn't even haggle but paid the asking price. I wanted to be ready.

Labrino said, "These comets never bring luck to a living soul, that's all I know."

"How could you know that? Besides, they don't have to bring luck. They just have to show up once in a while. Think where these comets have been! I've waited my whole life to see one."

He said, "You know what happened the last time Halley's went past?"

"Before my day."

"Oh, I've read about this," said Labrino. Whenever things seemed especially fearsome to him, his great bushy head came forward and his eyes acquired a prophetic glint. "Nineteen eighty-six, a terrible year. Right out of the gate that space shuttle blew up. *Challenger*. Took off from Florida, big crowd, a huge success for a minute or so—then *pow*, that rocket turns to a trail of white smoke. Everybody in the world watching on TV."

I told Labrino I was fairly sure Halley's Comet was not involved in the *Challenger* explosion.

He said, "You know what else happened? Russian nuclear meltdown. One day it's, 'Look, there's the comet!' Next day Chernobyl turns to poison soup. Kills the workers sent to clean it up. Kills everything for a thousand miles. Rivers, wolves, house cats, earthworms to a depth of nineteen inches. Swedish reindeer setting off the Geigers. I wouldn't be so anxious for this if I were you."

I couldn't really blame Labrino. The world was so old and exhausted that many now saw it as a dying great-grand on a surgical table, body decaying from use and neglect, mind fading down to a glow. If Lark were here she would prop him right up and he wouldn't even know it was happening. But she was late getting home from the shop, and I, like a moron, felt annoyed and impatient, also weirdly protective of a traveling space rock, so I said, "It still wasn't the comet's fault."

"I'm not claiming causation," said Labrino, his skin pinking. "I'm saying there are signs and wonders. The minute these comets appear in the heavens, all kinds of calamities start chugging away on Earth."

I opened my mouth, then remembered a few things about my friend. He had a grown son living in a tent on top of a landfill in Seattle. A daughter he'd not heard from in two years. His wife had enough of him long ago, and he was blind in one eye from when he tried to help a man crouched by the road and got beaten unconscious for his trouble. That Labrino was even operative—that he ran a decent tavern and hired live music and employed two bartenders and a cook who made good soup—testified to his grit.

I said, "Is there anything you'd like to hear, Jack?"

He lifted his head. "Yes, that would be nice—I'm sorry, I don't mean to be such awful company. It's just the times. The times are so unfriendly. Play me something, would you, Rainy?"

My name is Rainier, after the western mountain, but most people shorten it to the dominant local weather.

I fetched my bass, a five-string Fender Jazz, and my tiny cube of a practice amp. Labrino was calmed by deep tones. They helped him settle. Sometimes he seemed like a man just barely at the surface with nothing to keep him afloat, but I'd learned across many evenings that he was buoyed by simple progressions.

Nothing jittery or complicated, which I wasn't skilled enough to play in any case. My teacher was a venerable redbeard named Diego who explained the ancient principle "first do no harm" from early bassist Hippocrates: lock into the beat, play the root, don't put the groove at risk. Diego said a clean bass line is barely heard yet gives to each according to their need. If I played well then Labrino saw hillsides, moving water, his wife Eva before she got sick of him. There in the kitchen he relaxed into himself, eyes closed, mouth slightly open, until I feared he might crumple and fall to the floor.

Thankfully Lark arrived before that could happen, gusting into the kitchen like a microburst. Laughing and breathless, her hair shaken loose, she had a paper bag in hand and a secret in her eyes.

"Why, Jack Labrino," she said. "I thought you had forgotten all about us," which pleased him and changed the temperature in there. Right away he dropped his apprehensions and started talking like a regular person, even as she went straight through the kitchen and set her things in the other room. Out of Labrino's sight but not mine, she shed her jacket and sent a sly smile over her shoulder.

I picked up the tempo, increased the volume and landed on a quick straight-eight rhythm, which turned into the beginning of an old pop-chart anthem I knew Labrino liked. He grinned—a wide grin, at which Lark danced back into the kitchen and held out her hand. Labrino took it and got up and followed her lead. She whisked him about, I kept playing, and Labrino kept losing the steps and then finding them again—it was good to see him prance around like a man revived. By the time I brought the tune to a close Labrino was out of breath and scarcely noticed as Lark snagged his coat and lay it over his shoulders. With genuine warmth she thanked him for coming and suggested dinner next

week, then he was out the door and turning back to smile as he went.

"Thanks for getting home when you did," I said in her ear. We'd stepped outside to see him off, his coat whickering in the hard wind.

"You were doing just fine. But you're welcome all the same."

Labrino made it to his car, eased himself into it. It seemed to take a long time for the car to start, the lights to come on. Pulling out he waved, then drove slowly down the street.

I felt my lungs relax. I liked Labrino, wanted him to be all right. But I also really wanted him to go home, and be all right at home.

Lark said, "Sometimes your friends choose you."

She took my hand. Her eyes flared wide then got stealthy, and at the bridge of her nose appeared two upward indents like dashes made by a pencil. It was irresistible, my favorite expression—of all her looks it built the most suspense, and it was just for me.

- *quixotes*

BACK INSIDE Lark picked up the paper bag she'd carried in earlier, holding it close to her chest as though what it contained were embarrassingly lavish. Clearly drawing out the pleasure of reveal she said, "We have a boarder coming tonight. We'll have to get the room ready."

We had a third-floor attic that was sometimes for rent. It wasn't much—a bed in a gable with a half bath. Mostly it lay vacant. Not for lack of travelers—pitted and hazardous as the highway had become, a lot of people were on it. Nearly all were heading north and keeping quiet. So we were careful about our attic. Yet we were also, as Lark liked to whisper in the dark, quixotes, by which she meant not always sensible. Open to the wondrous. Curious in the manner of those lucky so far.

I said, "You seem pleased about this boarder. Somebody we know?"

"It's not who he is. It's what he brought." And she reached in the bag and pulled out—slowly, with glittering eyes—a book, or rather a bound galley, an advance copy produced for reviewers. It was beat-up and wavy with ancient humidity, blue cardstock cover flaking badly. Printed in fading black was its title: *I Cheerfully Refuse*.

"You can't be serious."

Lark laughed. It was her habit when delighted to rise lightly on tiptoe as if forgotten by gravity. *I Cheerfully Refuse* was the personal grail of my bookseller wife, the nearly but never published final offering of the poet, farmer, and some said eremite

Molly Thorn, a woman of the middle twentieth. Molly lived many lives. Essayist, throwback deviser of rhyming verse, chronicler of vanished songbirds, author of a single incendiary novel in which the outlaw protagonist speaks in couplets and occasional quatrains. Lark said she was a cult author before they became the only kind.

"He had this galley copy with him," she said now. "Kellan, I mean, the new boarder. He came in the store with a little stack of titles. What are the chances?"

"How long have you looked for that book?"

"Since I was twelve." By then Lark had read everything else of Molly Thorn's thanks to her mother, a profligate reader and purveyor of impertinent ideas.

"Have you already finished it?"

"Haven't started even." She was up on her toes again. "Rainy?"

"Yes?"

"You want to read it first?"

I hesitated. I wasn't sure I wanted to read it at all.

"I know, me too," she said. "I'm almost afraid to open it."

We went to the attic and put sheets on the bed and two heavy quilts against the draft. Swept the room though it was neat. While we worked Lark told me Kellan was young and scrawny, with concave limbs and a red rooster comb for hair. She said, "You're going to notice his hand."

"His hand."

She described a mottled claw burnt to ruin. Glossy and immobile, it got your attention.

"This Kellan, is he a squelette?"

The term, French for skeleton, was popularized a decade earlier when a dozen Michigan laborers seemed to vanish. It happened at a factory like many others, manufacturing drone

rotors and home-security mines on the west Huron shore—night shift, dirty weather, they stepped out for a smoke and never came back. Ordinary American citizens, filling six-year terms for bread and a bunk under the Employers Are Heroes Act. No one imagined a dozen gaunt ingrates fleeing by water that violent night, bolting an outboard to a patched pontoon and piloting through fifty miles of mountainous waves to the obscurity of Manitoulin, then mainland Ontario where they were discovered by a grandfather with a beret and a crooked walking stick like a wizard's. Their haunted forms rising out of the grass so startled the old Québécois that he hobbled into the fog shouting, "Squelettes! Squelettes!" Since then thousands of such laborers had made similar desperate breaks.

"I didn't ask."

There was a reading lamp up there and we left it on for Kellan. I went downstairs, filled a pitcher with water, and brought it up with a glass to set on a stand beside the bed. Out the gable window the light of a boat shone on the violent sea. Nobody should be out there. Most of the time nobody was. I couldn't see the boat at all, only its light, which pitched queasily and dimmed and vanished and reappeared among the endless swells.

Kellan arrived soon thereafter. It was early still, about nine. We heard his car making sounds of distress long before it pulled in. Big old square precentury Ford. He opened the back and pulled out a child's cardboard suitcase of fading plaid and carried it blinking into our kitchen.

Lark was right about the rooster comb and bony limbs. She had not mentioned his protruding eyes or nervous demeanor. She was also right about the claw. I offered to carry his suitcase upstairs, but he held it to his chest as though I might rob him. He was dinky and frail with a sheen on his brow. He moved as if encountering resistance.

"Have you eaten?" Lark said.

"I'm all right." He was clearly starving but seemed to weigh the meal against the obligation of eating in our company. The road makes introverts. Lark told him: Take these stairs all the way up, they creak like a houseful of spooks but they're safe, the light's on in your room.

And up he went, suitcase in hand, dragging his shadow like chains.

•

I woke in the night. It took me a minute to remember we had a stranger upstairs. A bedspring spoke, a floorboard. The half bath tap went on and off. I heard Kellan paw through his suitcase, then what sounded like the very faintest white noise. Distant static or airflow. This was so quiet and went on so long I stopped hearing it.

"You're awake," Lark whispered.

"Sure. Are you?"

The question was sincere. Lark was a lucid sleeptalker and could listen and respond as though fully alert. Sometimes we had whole conversations while she slept.

She said, "I think so."

We whispered back and forth. There's a pleasant whirr you get when your favorite person wants to stay awake with you but can't. It was three in the morning and we both knew she would go to the shop at seven. She loved the shop. She also loved seven. What she had was built-in.

I said, "Did he tell you where he got that book? Or was he too shy?"

"Not shy," she said. "Enigmatic. Obscure. In subsequent days he'll win renown, but he won't really like it."

I smiled in the dark—Lark had the habit, when very tired, of predicting upshots in the lives of people just met. She never let them hear these yet-to-comes, these subsequents, which were purely for herself and sometimes me.

“But where is he going in the meantime?”

I could see her fading and only asked this to hear her voice again.

“To his uncle’s in Thunder Bay. Oh, Rainy.”

“Yes?”

“Will you help him fix his car? I think he needs a part.”

“Probably more than one.”

I rolled to my side and after a moment felt the warmth of her palm against my back. That’s how she preferred to slip away. I liked it too.

From upstairs came the sound of hollow metal hitting the floor and rolling, coming to rest against the wall. Like a thermos bottle or a bit of plumbing. Then quiet, and we slept.