



# 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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Grove Press  
*New York*



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Jacket design by Kelly Winton

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*Printed in the United States of America*

First Grove Atlantic hardcover edition: April 2024

This book was set in 12.5-point Granjon by Alpha Design & Composition of Pittsfield, NH.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data is available for this title.

ISBN 978-0-8021-6293-9

eISBN 978-0-8021-6295-3

Grove Press

an imprint of Grove Atlantic

154 West 14th Street

New York, NY 10011

Distributed by Publishers Group West

[groveatlantic.com](http://groveatlantic.com)

*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 sleepwalker 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.



• *the Greenstone Fair*

LARK WAS GONE when I woke. Clean sunlight shifted on the ceiling, ravens murmured in the eaves. For the first time in weeks I couldn't hear waves hitting shore.

Like always I stepped outside first to see what the lake was thinking.

It's called a lake because it is not salt, but this corpus is a fearsome sea and if you live in its reach you should know at all times what it's up to.

For now a calm day beckoned, the sky washed clean.

You enjoy these days when they come. They are not what the lake is known for. The year after we moved in a cloud gathered on the surface and rose in a column twenty thousand feet high. It was opaque and grainy and stayed there all summer like a pillar of smoke. That season two freighters went down in separate storms—a domestic carrying taconite and a Russian loaded with coal. People blamed the dark cloud because in both cases it shredded before an arriving storm only to reconstitute after, like a sated monster at rest. It was also true that by this time many satellites had been taken out by rival nations or obsolescence, so ships using GPS often found themselves blind in a gale, but the scowling cloud was hard to ignore. A belief took hold that the lake was sentient and easily annoyed.

But not today. I took a quick stroll to the shore where a bit of homebuilt seawall slumped over the water. An otter poked up its round head, flashed sharp teeth, and rolled under. The lake was dark and flat. It was a blackboard to the end of sight, and any story might be written on its surface.

Back at the house I scouted the fridge. Breakfast for the boarder was up to me. We had a dozen fresh eggs—a luxury—also bread, jam, a bag of greenish oranges. I poured beans in the grinder and stood turning the handle. There's no way to do this quietly. When I glanced up Kellan was standing by the table giving me dubious looks.

My impulse was to laugh. Those startled eyes! He looked like a bagged fowl released into daylight.

He said, “Is Lark here, or just you?”

I told him she’d gone to the shop. He looked like he wanted to go there too. “People your size make me nervous.”

It wasn’t an unusual response. I tapped grounds into a filter and nodded at a chair. Something about Kellan felt familiar, not his face but his frame and bearing. Scrawny-aggressive. Pants held up by knotted twine. I said, “I’m not dangerous, most days.”

He sat, swallowed, still looked anxious. This was never to change. He was terribly narrow front to back, by which I mean he was a ribbon. The neck of his T-shirt was a stretched mouth and his gingery hair grew thickest on the bony ridge of his skull. I had a great-grandmother who gauged the health of her poultry by their spiky red combs and he was robust by this measure. His other bird feature was the claw hand that looked pulled from a forge and rubbed to a waxy shine.

I set about frying eggs. “You’re a welcome arrival,” I said, to put him at ease. “That book you brought, twenty years she’s looked for it.”

He nodded but said nothing, transfixed by the sight of breakfast taking shape before him. Mouth open, eyes narrow, he tilted stoveward. It didn’t seem unlikely his good hand would dart out and seize the spattering pan. Given this rapt audience I tilted up the cast-iron and basted and peppered with all the flair I could manage. I was a little proud of my sunny-side eggs and slid them with slices of fried toast onto a stoneware plate.

Kellan ate like a man falling forward, a pileup of elbows and tendons. Even his wrists were concave. My throat lumped a little, watching him. Most of us knew how it was to be hungry. Frequently we’d been *close enough to care*, as the song says, though the only person I knew who’d actually starved to death was my great-uncle Norman who did it on purpose, another story. This young man wrapped his claw around the oval plate and leaned down as though it might pop out some legs and zigzag away. I broke more eggs. Eventually he leaned back and rubbed his face and squinted out at the sun.

“Where to from here?” I asked. What was it I recognized about this Kellan? I couldn’t have told you—not yet.

He didn't answer at first, then murmured "farm" and "Ontario" with gaze averted. I must have seemed nosy and in fact I was. I mentioned the Molly Thorn book again—how hard Lark had looked for it, how happy it made her to have got a copy at last.

"Um," he replied.

"Where did you find it, if I may ask?"

"Mm."

His reserve didn't surprise me, nor the fact he'd been more forthcoming with Lark the previous day. Knots untied themselves at her approach. Then I happened to glance out the kitchen window. Kellan's massive auto leaned into the grass like the lethargic rhinos of old.

"Haven't seen wheels like that in a while," I remarked.

At which Kellan's head bobbed up. You could see he was proud of his daft huge car.

"Ford Ranchero."

"What a survivor. Lark says you need repairs."

And this was the thing that got him talking—not easily, he still looked away from my eyes as though I'd struck him recently, but he did narrate in chirpy bursts how he'd found the antique Ford in a salvage yard only a week ago. It had a new head gasket and did not leak oil, though acceleration left behind inky blue clouds that took a long time to disperse. After two days the front end began to knock. Intermittently at first. Now it banged all the time like something trying to get out. An old man in Wisconsin diagnosed a corrupt ball joint. Maybe more than one. Kellan wondered was there a mechanic in Icebridge.

"Everyone in town's a mechanic. Your problem is going to be parts."

"Lark said you might know where to find them." How easily he said her name, Lark, like he'd trusted her for years.

I told him Greenstone was the place. No guarantees of course but generally you find what you need in Greenstone. If you don't find it, someone will make it or try to make it. How I love that town. I could tell you stories but not right now.

Kellan fell quiet, asked for more coffee, went to the window and drank it watching the street. He peered back and forth, leaned close to the glass and

gazed into the sky. An early spring day with watery sun. I fried one more egg and laid it across a slice of bread, ate it while wiping down the counter. Kellan suggested we take the Ranchero for a drive so I could hear the noises it made.

“I’m no mechanic,” I said.

“You said everyone is.”

“Everyone else.”

The car started after a series of complaints. It was a handsome tumbledown brute. It had rough ocean-colored paint through which smooth continents rose up and peninsulas and islands of hardened putty. Once it had been nicely kept. These old cars remember smoother roads than I do.

We took a short ride to demonstrate the issue. To say the Ranchero knocked is polite. It pummeled. It dragged a nightstick across the bars. Kellan shouted over the racket while I craned around to see what we were leaving on the blacktop. There was no chance of him driving on to Canada. It also had a broken window, so a bunch of loose papers in the back took flight and flapped all around like somebody’s wits. I grabbed at the air until my fingers got hold of one. A tattered sheet covered with drawings of faces. They were not caricatures or cartoons but fast portraits. All the faces were different, but their expressions shared a certain exasperation. Nonplussed. When we pulled back in behind the house the papers settled to rest. Kellan eased into the yard and shut off the engine. I helped him gather the drawings.

“These are good,” I said—I’m no judge but anyone could see their humor, stubbornness, life. They held your eye. They seemed to lean out from the page as if meeting you partway.

Kellan allowed he made the drawings to put him at ease. Plainly they also embarrassed him, and he shuffled them up in a pile and tied them with a twist of string from the glovebox. Then he asked could I drive him down to Greenstone in my less-derelict car to look for parts.

I didn’t really want to at first. It was Saturday, and my band Red Dog had a gig later. On playing days, I liked doing things for Lark or working on the sailboat in the shed a block up the street. More later about the boat, which actually needed some hardware—chain plates, turnbuckles, a good marine-grade compass. All of which might be found on a lucky day in Greenstone.

Besides, it was nearly planting season—I could visit the seed merchant. Also the Fair can be hard to navigate your first time or two. Also I liked Kellan. His plucky doomed optimism, his drawing habit and rooster hair.

“Let’s go then,” I said.

•

We drove southwest on the expressway. The term is residual—a level road once, now it’s seamed and holed, with shoulders of pavement sagging into the ditch. There’s a spot where two flash floods in a month blew out a culvert, then a third came down and tore away sixty feet of blacktop plus the rubbly subgrade beneath it. Though technically it’s a state highway, the state first ignored our complaints, then told us they were “seeking to allocate funds,” then promised to repair the break but never did. That’s what you get for living up here. None of the major families reside on the shore. Some still vacation nearby, but these are not people who travel by car. You might see their helos whacking past on long weekends. Sometimes they fly low for an intimate glimpse of citizens on the ground. I used to wave but they never waved back. After more than a year a pair of loggers, a basement contractor, and a retired mining engineer showed up with their skidders and chainsaws and a cement truck with rotating drum and rebuilt the missing section with pine logs and concrete. They also arranged for forty linear yards of black-market culvert, which arrived in the dead of night and was lying in the ditch at sunrise. These adults set the world right again in thirty-six hours asking nothing in return. I will say you don’t want to hit that stretch doing more than twenty-five.

Kellan relaxed, underway. From being loathe to mention family he began describing them in bright vignettes. His restless uncle Vern who designed a plan to fabricate roofing shingles from urban sewage, arid climates recommended. The cousin who disappeared for two weeks and returned hairless and speaking in holy tongues. A mutinous six-year-old niece who filled her stomach with classroom air and burped the Pledge of Allegiance. I kept laughing while he talked. Not everything he said was funny but he was funny saying it.

I began to understand what was familiar about Kellan. He had a kid-brother quality. You wanted to take care of him. He didn't talk about his hand but wasn't self-conscious about it either. It wasn't really a hand anymore. He couldn't hold a fork with it or a pen, though later I would see him successfully clamp a large paintbrush in it, swiping back and forth. Sometimes while talking he'd reach up with the claw and scratch the side of his head. It looked great for that. I tried not to ask questions that would pin him down. Given his gaunt frame and the way he looked around as if for ghosts or grim authorities, I assumed he was a squalid or fledgling man who'd signed for the usual six-year term and found conditions unbearable. But then he suddenly volunteered that he was trained in microbiology, specializing in food science.

"A teacher singled me out. An aptitude for chemistry is what she said. Wanted me to design dietary supplements. For the astronauts, that's what got me. Astronauts! That's where I thought synthetic proteins might take me."

At this, my breath caught. As far as I knew, there hadn't been a space program since it had failed—decades ago—to return a profit for investors. But I was wrong! The final frontier still beckoned! I asked him about it.

"Ha, no." Seeing my excitement, he gently informed me *astronaut* was the prevailing idiom for the sixteen or so families who ran coastal economies and owned mineral rights and satellite clusters and news factories and prisons and most clean water and such shipping as remained.

I tried not to show my disappointment, but what a letdown! *Bummer city* as great-uncle Norman moaned in his long twilight. And sure, of course Lark and I had media once—internet, TV, the vivid suspect world delivered secondhand, ready always to predict our moods and sell us better ones—but we were early abandoners. A great many idioms got past us.

Obviously, Kellan went on, the way to prosper was to work for the astronauts. You wanted to be needed. You shot for indispensable—indispensable was the goal—but then for all his aptitude Kellan never met an astronaut, never achieved this fabled career path. He did get a position on the line manufacturing freeze-dried entrées for their bull terriers but breathed some bad fumes in an industrial fire and got real sick, so they let him go. The topic shut him down, and we traveled the last few miles in silence.