



passager

REFUGEES

We are all refugees rising out of the volcano.
We are all molten lava still warm
from the maker's womb.
We flow black red gold brown and white
streaming out of the earth.

Winged once, we knew earth
from a great height,
knew the vagaries of wind,
the seamless sky, the tops of trees.
We dream flight sometimes
as slaves dream freedom.
As children we practice
what we later forget.

We are all refugees.
We are all blood rivers.
Don't listen to the strong men
with weak heart strings
who know only the business
of making money, who know
war's strategy:
divide and conquer.
We are forever rivers,
we flow
into under around
as refugees
who run and reappear.
We refuse
to disappear.

DANCING THE CSÁRDÁS IN THE LAUNDROMAT • *Dave Roth*

a Marrsville story

I'd never seen anything like it. Not in here anyways. I was just coming in with a couple loads myself when the Rachlin woman showed up. I know her from the news maybe a year or so ago. Hard to forget. But I'd never seen her in here. She was walking through the parking lot and calling out to nobody I could see.

Frances? Frances wait! she says. Where are you going?

And then she stops like she's expecting the air to answer. She's not looking at me so I just go about my business and then she says, But you shouldn't be here. You can do it at home.

And she stops again. I'm looking round and I don't see nobody but the taxi driver. He's leaning on his cab smoking and he's seeing this too and looking over his shoulder at me. I just shrug.

Then Mrs. Rachlin says, It's not safe, honey. Come home, please.

She seems pretty upset and she don't look right. Her sneakers are untied and no socks on. Hard to tell if she has a dress or just a nightgown under her overcoat. She's shaking her head like she's disgusted and walking toward me.

That's when the taxi driver steps in front of her and says, Excuse me, madam, you are

okay?

The taxi driver's a good sized man, but she almost walks right into him like she don't see him. She's looking past him saying, I'm fine. Frances!

The taxi driver says, Madam, look at me, please.

What? she sort of snaps, but she stops and looks up.

He's being perfectly nice and all, but she's agitated.

He asks real calm, Who are you talking to? My daughter. Frances!

And the taxi driver looks at me again and I just shake my head cause nobody just walked into the laundromat before me. There's just one person and it's the old man who hustles spare change by telling people he needs money for his medicine. I'm pretty sure his medicine mostly comes in pints and I'm positive his name ain't Frances.

The taxi driver looks back at Mrs. Rachlin and anybody could see she's off. Truth told, I'd be off too if I lost a child. Specially the way she did. Ugly business. And then the murder trial and all. Makes me a little crazy just thinking about it.

Then the taxi driver asks, Do you live close?

In Marrsville? she says, like the name don't taste right in her mouth. No, my daughter does. Look, I have to go before she starts her load.

Mrs. Rachlin tries to step around the taxi driver, but he just slide steps and cuts her off.

Is someone home? he says. Your husband maybe?

My husband?

Don't you think maybe you should call? he says.

I don't need him, she says. I can take care of my own daughter. Excuse me –

Yes, I am sure you can, he says. Still, you should let someone know your daughter she is here. It isn't right she is here, no?

No, it isn't. She should be home. We shouldn't have let her move out. I didn't want her to. I told Gabe she's too young. But he –

So you should tell him – Gabe. Your husband, yes?

Yes, she says.

Just so he knows. Tell him. You have a phone?

Why are you doing this?

I am a father, he says. It is a good idea. He takes out his phone and he hands it to her. Here, he says, call him.

If I call you'll leave me alone?

Of course, he says.

Okay, fine.

Mrs. Rachlin punches at the phone with

her finger while she's still talking to the taxi driver saying, What a waste of time. You're such a strange man – Gabe, you're home . . . I'm fine, but I only have a minute. I'm at the laundromat and Frances just walked . . . Of course it's her. I spoke to her. I'm trying to get her to come home. It may take me a while. I just wanted to let you know . . . No, don't . . . I have to go . . . No, I can handle it. Bye. She holds the phone out to the taxi driver and says, There. Happy?

Yes, good, he says. That was a good idea.

Now, if you don't mind, she says, my daughter –

I'll go in with you, the taxi driver says, and he flicks away his cigarette. Do you mind?

Free country, she says.

I just don't want you to think I am up to something, he says. Not you would think an old man is up to something.

And the two of them walk toward the laundromat. I open the door and hold it and swap looks with the taxi driver. Thank you, he says to me.

You're strange, she says to him.

My Dora says this too, he tells her.

Mrs. Rachlin walks away from him and says, Frances?

Only now she's looking around like us and seeing there's nobody but the old beggar hunched up in a chair in the corner.

Sweetie? she says. And she has her arms

out and like she might fall to her knees any second. And it's like a spell is broken and she's looking like she's lost and she cries. It's a cry that starts down in her feet and works its way up through her body like a sickness and her mouth opens before any sound comes out and when it does even the beggar's eyes open.

The taxi driver goes over to her and asks in a voice so soft I almost can't hear, Madam, why are you crying?

And she says even softer, Frances.

I can maybe help? he says.

She sucks in air like it might be the last breath she ever takes.

Here, use my handkerchief, he says. Please.

She takes the handkerchief and she balls it up in her fist and she says, She's so willful. Just like her father. I could just spit.

And the taxi driver says – like she's just making conversation – he says, My granddaughter, she can be like this. She and her father, my son, they are like the cats and dogs. I have to tell my son, it is not just her. You can't *csárdás* alone.

Chardosh? Mrs. Rachlin says, and she turns to the taxi driver. What?

What do you say? Tango I think.

Two to tango? she says.

Yes, yes! he says, like she's just solved a riddle. *Csárdás* is like that, he says. Like life this dance. It starts slow then goes very fast and no two people dance the same.

And the taxi driver puts his hands on his hips and he hops from one leg to the other. You have seen this? he asks.

No, she says, and she's looking now like he's the crazy person. She says, I have no idea –

But he takes her hand and says, Come. I show you.

She pulls away. Oh no, please, she says.

Try it, please. I think it helps, he says, and looks at her like it'll break his heart if she don't.

No, I'm not a dancer, she says.

Not a problem. It is easy dance. Anyone can do.

And then he takes her hand and puts it on his shoulder and they stand side by side and he puts his other arm round her waist and starts teaching her steps to this thing called the chardosh or some such. It looked like something you'd see at a barn dance. Not that I ever been to one.

On one foot, he says, and the other. See? Easy.

Look, this is silly, she says, but she's moving her feet.

Try. On one foot and then other foot.

You are so strange, she says.

You try now, he says.

And Mrs. Rachlin looks at her feet and tries to pick up the steps and she's clumsy but she's trying. I never seen nothing like it. Even the old beggar sits up in his chair and he looks at them then looks at me and

I think maybe he thinks he's seeing things. Odds are he is, and no telling exactly what. Meanwhile the taxi driver and Mrs. Rachlin start bouncing around the laundromat like a couple of country bumpkins. He's calling out moves and she's not looking for Frances anymore, she's watching her feet doing things they've never done before.

And sometimes you kick your heel up like this, he says. Or maybe you cross your feet like this. Try.

Oh my, she says, and she's working it out.

Good. That's it, he says. Now bring your left hand to my shoulder so you face me. Good. And we spin.

Careful, she squeals. Oh geez.

Don't worry, I have you. I can even lift you like this.

Oh no, that's –

But he has her in the air and back on the floor before she can finish her sentence. And he's on to the next thing.

And then you step again, he says. One foot and the other. Very good. You learn quick. So I teach some more.

Oh, I don't know, she says.

But he don't stop, not even for a second.

Turn around, he says. Good. Because sometimes you dance with your backs to each other. That's right. And it's like you are not together at all. Like a big fight. And the music is fast and your arms crossed like you

will never again look eye to eye. And then you turn, yes, and you come together. All is forgiven, you see?

Yes, she says, but she's thinking about it like maybe she doesn't.

And the music is quick mostly, he says, but sometimes, sometimes it is slow, a little sad. And you move slow, like this. You see? Good. Because there is sadness in life too, yes?

Yes, she says. Yes there is.

But the sadness, it is part of the dance. Very important part.

And just then Mrs. Rachlin gets serious, like she just remembered something she had to do and I think to myself why'd he have to go and start talking about sad stuff? And Mrs. Rachlin says, Can we stop please?

Of course. Of course. You are okay?

Yes, just tired, she says. What you were saying about sadness.

Yes, yes. Very important, he says. The music teaches that without sadness, without the cry of one lonely violin, how can we know the joy when the happy music comes back?

I have to sit down, she says.

There. By the window, he says. We sit.

And they sit down on a bench by the door.

The weight of it, she says. The sadness. It just feels so . . . like this . . . I'm just so tired.

This is a deep sadness. The lowest notes of the violin. What sadness could this be, madam?

Mrs. Rachlin looks at him and it's like she's seeing a vision or something beautiful, which is weird cause the taxi driver's by no means beautiful. He's just a graying man with a walrus moustache and a gut to match.

And she says, Do you know how it feels when someone you love is taken away? Stolen. And you can never have her back. And it's like you're always staring into a hole so deep and black.

Yes, yes, I know this, the taxi driver says.

Well, there's something worse, she says. And she's looking him in the eye now and says, When you forget. When you lose her again. Only slowly. One little piece at a time. You think you can close your eyes and you'll see her. But she's not there. Not really. Do you know what I mean?

Yes, yes. *Emlékek*. Memories. We want to hold them in our arms. But *emlékek*, they are like holding water.

Like water, she says, and she's looking at her hands.

We can't have what they were, he says, only who they were to us. This, I think, this is right. And, you see, you cannot lose what you never had. You never had her. Only who she was to you, and that you cannot lose.

Oh, but you can, she says. Every day something else is gone.

Gone from your mind, maybe. The mind is very messy. You can't always trust it. But not

gone from here. The heart remembers.

When he says that she puts her hand on his chest and she laughs. Just one puff, Ha! and then covers her mouth like she passed gas.

I'm sorry, she says, I don't mean to laugh. I'm not laughing at you.

I don't mind, he says. It's good to laugh.

You're sweet, she says. And that's a very sweet thought. But to lose her – her laugh, the smell of her hair, her hug – the hummingbird – my god, her first hummingbird – the wonder in her eyes. Gray-green I think, but I'm not sure anymore – do you see what I mean? That's very sad, don't you think?

And Mrs. Rachlin's crying again. Not sobbing or anything but leaking tears.

I think, he says – then the taxi driver stops talking and looks at her like he just figured out that what he thinks really don't matter all that much. Then he says, Yes, you are right. He takes his handkerchief from her and dabs her cheeks, and says, When you say like this, it is very sad. But the song is not over. The guitars and the cimbalom and the hurdy-gurdy come back and the violin is not alone anymore. It smiles again brighter because now it knows. It knows what it did not know. What it could not know before it was alone and then not alone.

Hmm, she says, and she has this look like this is something she'd really like to believe. I don't know, she says. Then it's like she can't

think about it anymore, like it's a problem that's stumped her. I'm so tired, she says. If I could just sleep.

Madam, if you would like to use my shoulder.

Oh, thank you.

You rest, madam.

And just like that she puts her head down on his shoulder and she closes her eyes and it's like the demon leaves her. And the taxi driver's still as can be, just moving his eyes to glance at the front door now and then. And it's quiet except for the low rumble of the machines and the buzz of the lights. And the old beggar in the corner is looking like he can't figure out if he's asleep or awake.

Then without opening her eyes Mrs. Rachlin says, You haven't always been a taxi driver, have you?

No, madam, not always.

Please, call me Maggie, she says.

And you will please call me Kedves.

Kedves. What did you do before?

I have many lives, he says. In Hungary before the revolution I am a professor. Very smart. Very handsome. You can believe this?

Of course. You're still very handsome, she says.

Haha! And when I come to this country I am handsome but suddenly not so smart I guess. Mostly I am doing roofs. The shingles, sometimes the tar. Very hard work. But good

business. Then I get old and I drive a taxi just so I don't drive my Dora crazy.

I was a teacher too, she says.

You were?

Middle school.

But you stopped?

Her eyes still closed, her head still on his shoulder, her face tightens up again, but just for a second and she says, Yes. It was too hard. Seeing the children every day. All those beautiful children.

I understand, says the taxi driver.

And then she says, I think you do, Kedves. You're kind and smart and an excellent dancer.

Haha! You must be careful, Maggie. To God's ears it is a very small difference between flatteries and lies.

Yes, well God and I have not been on speaking terms for a while. I doubt he's listening. What was it you called the dance? Chardosh. Is that right?

Yes. *Csárdás*. You want to learn another part?

No, no. Not right now. I just need to sit here.

Just then a man comes through the door looking like he'd been asleep up until not too many minutes ago and got dressed in a hurry.

Maggie? he says.

Mrs. Rachlin lifts her head off the taxi driver's shoulder cool as can be and says, Oh Gabe, you're here. You didn't need to come.

Come on, hon, let's go home. It's late.

Is it? she says.

The Mr. is standing over her with his hands in his coat pockets and he sighs a sigh that drops his shoulders. Are you alright? he asks, by which he must mean is she cut or have any broken bones cause anybody can see she's anything but alright.

Better now, she says. I've been talking to Kedves.

You must be the husband, the taxi driver says, and extends his hand like he's making a new friend.

The Mr. shakes the taxi driver's hand with a look like he thinks he's the butt of a joke.

You two know each other? he says.

We just met, Mrs. Rachlin says, like making friends in a laundromat at midnight is the most natural thing in the world. He's been so sweet, she says. It was his idea to call you. I didn't want to bother you.

Thank you, Kedves, the Mr. says. I appreciate your help. I'd like to give you something for your trouble.

Oh please, the taxi driver says, no trouble. I am doing laundry myself. Maggie and I, we have a nice talk. She misses Frances very much.

We both do, says the Mr.

Yes, of course, the taxi driver says. Your Frances, she came here?

As soon as I hear it, I'm thinking maybe he should've stopped at *of course*. A darkness

sets on Mrs. Rachlin again. Her face goes long and gray. Her voice sounds like she swallowed herself.

She should have come home, she says.

Maggie, we need to go, the Mr. says. Kedves, thank you for your help.

Mr. Rachlin takes Mrs. Rachlin's arm, but she don't budge.

She says, The dryer at her apartment was broken.

Maggie, come on, he says. Let's go now.

I told her she could come home any time she needed anything. But Gabe wanted her to grow up and she was so bullheaded.

Maggie, don't. Please. The Mr.'s *please* ain't a request. It's all business and he makes sure she hears by squeezing and tugging her arm. It works.

I'm sorry, she says in her natural voice. Kedves, thank you. Sorry to bother you.

You did not bother me, he says. I have done nothing but talk too much. Dora says this is my favorite thing.

Dora's a lucky woman, she says.

Haha! She should hear you say so.

Maggie, let's go home, the Mr. says.

Yes. Okay. Okay. Goodbye, Kedves.

Goodbye, Maggie. Remember the *csárdás*. The fast part. It is coming.

The taxi driver watches the Rachlins walk across the lot. At one point she pulls away from her husband, folds her arms across her

chest and starts doing some of the taxi driver's bouncy steps. Mr. Rachlin takes hold of her shoulders and steers her toward their car. The taxi driver keeps watching. He don't look at me til they back out. I just smile a little smile meaning to say I thought he done a good thing. He tries to smile back but it never really takes shape. I think he's still hearing that one lonely violin.

A QUIET PRESENCE

Think about the special silence of a highway at night.
Imagine a light snow falling: you can hear the silence
accumulating. It's the arrival of a quiet presence.
All the truckers are asleep in their cabs, St. Christophers clutched
to their chins, their knees tucked up toward their hairy chests
that rise and fall with the faint sound of a semi shifting
in the distance, or the slip of snow packing itself
onto the uplifted arms of a Saguaro cactus, or the silence
of a thought that creates a world where none was before. Imagine
this quiet presence as some mute saint, who does nothing
but watch the breath of the living with an endless longing. Suppose
he remembers when he traveled the roads from Rome to Gaul.
As he walked, he saw manors and moats, and peasants with hoes.
Further along, villages grew into towns
which swelled into cities that rose in the sky
higher than steeples. Vehicles appeared
that moved on their own. The large ones carried "goods"
as well as people. He liked that very much. Now at night
he sees them parked along the roadsides, and feels like waking
the drivers and telling them how much he loves them and
how grateful he is that they still wear his medal, even though
he's been fired from the job he was stuck in for 1700 years. So
he watches and sighs; remains quiet as the truckers turn
in the silence of his lingering gaze.

Jesse Arthur Stone



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