

EVADING BELIEVERS

1920

and many weep for sheer acceptance, and more
refuse to weep for all acceptance

An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow Les Murray

He sat at his desk surrounded by a disorder of paper. Tiny piles skewed at odd angles to his vision moving towards a verge of books and a hillock of manuscripts. To one side of the desk, defining the only region of order was a bundle of palm leaf *suttas*, polished dark red planks sandwiching a concertina of parchment scriptures pillowed in the silk sheathes that wrapped them while not in use.

Paraffin lamps, glass cones piecing coloured cupolas, pooled shadows and ochre light about the border of papers. They stood either side of the desk, sentinels to the sheaf of paper before him upon which he scraped his thoughts. The neat spider script wove words through the grid of faint blue lines on the page, filling the space with a careful transcription of the thoughts and language of others in his refined schoolmaster English. He teetered on the edge of someone else's ideas and absorbed them through his pen.

The desk nestled into a bay window that opened the room to the intrusion of night. Moonlight dappled on the leaves filtering the shadows across the porch and sifting the sound of the river as the tide turning raced itself to the sea, purling past the rocks and the piers of the nearby wharf in a gliss of water notes. The trees leaned into the skeletal light and shouldered the faint breath of night air stirring his sight from his work, out past the silhouette of English shrubs huddling in the lawn; out across the paddocks of Chartley and Blackwood Hills, names of English order among the straggling eucalypts and black wattle sheltering against the intrusion of ordered orchards of apple and pear, standing like the battalions of stunted Cornishmen who worked the nearby goldmines of Beaconsfield.

Frank looked along the rambling gravel lane that adamantly rejected any attempt to force it into a straight line, up towards the house a half mile away on Blackwood Hills where Mr Worthy, retired rabbitier and his wife Rose, lived. But the drift of thought startled as he caught a flicker of flame gnawing at the outline of the Worthy house. As he watched, the flame crystallised into a pure aureole about the building, exultant against the dark.

He sprang from his chair and strode towards the porch tearing at his coat as he swung open the door, flailing his arms into the sleeves as he crunched along the gravelled lane toward the flames now gathering the house into its enormity. It was probably too late and probably nothing he could do but he moved with determination towards the beacon.

As he approached, heaving with exertion, he was startled to see Will Worthy standing on the veranda gazing into the flames, the light shuddering about his motionless form. He leapt up the front steps, grabbed his shoulder and jerked his face into view. Staring into Will's features cragged by years of leathery sun he saw despair etched in his eyes and sensed his rancid breath of beer and sherry.

The flames plundered the beams and rafters showering the sky with a volley of sparks attended by the groan and crack of detonating timber. He dragged Will from the searing heat scorching the side of his face and drying the skin so his eyelid rasped across the cornea. They stumbled away from the inferno to halt and watch from the margin where cool silence met the gusts of heat.

The enraged fire had bared the internal frame and writhed about the intestines of timber soaring into the ceiling and exploding roofing iron into twisted shards that slewed through the flames and stabbed the seething bed of ash. They stood together in silence watching the blazing roar berate the dark, waiting for the flames to eventually wither in the gathering dew dawn and for the damp cold to creep upon them and shudder their skin.

It was over quicker than ever imaginable and it was only then that words entered the moment as the sprinkling of anxious neighbours gathered to farewell the smouldering ashes and to cluster about the stone faced Mr Worthy tempting him with words to break the skin of his thoughts. But he remained impassive, his round stump of a body rooted beneath his weathered face, a wisp of thinning hair flitting in the occasional gust of morning air.

Frank moved to one side to allow the local farm hands and orchard workers to assume the stage. They had gathered like moths drawn to the flame fretting the outline of the Worthy house but Frank was an outsider and he found their speech coarse and untried as though they mouthed words only when compelled. And speech when it arrived, thickened around their tongues as their hands thickened about the scythes and shovels that were forever in their grasp. He listened to the questions that nagged the mute form of Will Worthy. He heard the words grow into sentences that pieced a pattern of horror and tragedy, how he had escaped the furnace leaving his wife to bargain with the flames. It was only then that he noticed on the edge of people a young girl, thin and fragile, beginning to draw attention from Will.

He was unnerved to realise she must have been there at the umbral edge from when he first arrived but her presence was like a thought discarded. Frank had been swept up in sadness for Will Worthy. Even his name seemed a parody. He knew very little about him or his wife Rose, the thorn in his side, a belligerent melon chested woman with arms like fence posts. Her hair had been lank and unkempt and her jowls jostled incessant opinions expressed against the silence of Mr Worthy. He had been a labourer and rabbitier most of his life moving from property to property before settling in Rowella on the banks of the Tamar.

Tamar, Frank thought. England imposed on a new land old as earth. The early English settlers had craved familiar names to tame the coarse and unaccustomed. Launceston on the Tamar in the county of Cornwall, reassuring as England and as remote as this land. In a perverse concession to Southern Hemisphere inversion they had named the Tasmanian counties in reverse order to England so those in the south appeared in the north and vice-versa; a parody of place, mocked even by things earnestly desired. The words of text entered his mind unbidden, "Sorrowful is desire; the sadness of yearning is without joy." And sorrowful the face of Mr Worthy, though the sorrow of the unnamed, unknown girl had now begun to enter the puzzle of his thought.

Mr Worthy was supposed to have retired but had still plied his trade in the district, maintaining a few runs on nearby orchards anxious about rabbits barking the young trees. He was often seen ambling into the dawn mists down along the fence lines, the scrapes and burrows, to the traps with their serrated jaws clenched about the leg of a rabbit crouched in shivering fear, ears flattened along its body or squealing with fright when approached. He would watch him quickly grip the rabbit by the neck and release it by jamming his foot down on the spring, freeing the jaws. Then with a quick flick he would snap the neck and toss it to one side to convulse and jerk while he quietly reset the trap, standing once more on the spring and setting the catch to hold the jaws open against the ground. He would cover the gaping mouth of the trap with torn brown paper and sprinkle soil lightly over the evidence. Then tossing the rabbit into a sugar bag he would sling the swag of carcasses over his shoulder and move to the next trap.

He would return home before breakfast, spill the corpses on the ground and begin the task of skinning the flesh. He deftly slit the skin on the hind legs and dragged the skin over the back, tearing it from the flesh like a bandage from a wound leaving the carcass naked and steaming in the frosted air melding with the mist smoking from his nostrils. He would stretch the skins onto wire hoops and peg them in the ground to dry and stiffen in the heat of day. Left in rows like grey headstones in an ordered cemetery of skins.

Steeped in death, the faint gamey stench of skun rabbit pervaded Will's skin and clung to his clothes. Frank was repulsed by the trapper's trade and blamed this for the barrier to anything more than a nodding recognition of his neighbour. He found the methodical killing and indifference to the suffering animals, difficult to fathom. As a boy in Norfolk he, with some others, had once trapped a rabbit on the common near the manse. The others were elated but the atrocity oscillated within him for days.

He remembered too the smoked rabbiters that entered the flint-knapped church each Sunday, filing to their 'place' at the back of the church to stand in awkward silence through the service after their week working the vast barren warrens with their dogs and nets. Again, the distinctive gamey smell of rabbit. Ignorance wrapped in death.

But the horror was in the hands of others now with the need to control events more than he cared and he straggled home along the gravel lane not thinking beyond one foot after the other.

The Constable, Peter Harper, came to arrest Will Worthy and took him to the police lock-up behind the courthouse in Beaconsfield. He remained quiet and unresponsive and though he was dutifully brought breakfast, when the Constable returned some hours later to take him out for exercise his food was untouched. "I'm not eating," Will said sitting passively on the bed pulling on his pipe, the guttural gurgle of spittle accompanying each inward draw. "You could leave me all day and it wouldn't trouble me," he added, in a flat tone of unconcern.

At lunch time the Constable returned to the cell but when he drew back the bolt he saw Will "hanging from the bar of the window his leather belt round his neck and tied to a towel fixed to the bar." His feet barely touched the kapok mattress and his face craned towards the ceiling. Harper quickly unbuckled the belt and lowered Will to the bed. He

was still warm but there was no pulse and he sent for the doctor. Even when Dr Shone, the district doctor, arrived some 20 minutes later he was still warm but when he turned him could see clearly the “deeply indented mark round the front of the neck” from the strap that had hanged him, the mark slowly turning to a mottled welt.

Beaconsfield Tragedy:

Inquest on William James Worthy

With a stage melodramatic effect the climax to the appalling and sensational tragedy at Blackwood Hill was reached on Sunday afternoon, by the deliberate suicide of the chief actor of the drama, the veritable villain of the piece.

*The setting of the gruesome play lay throughout in the quietude of the Beaconsfield district – well-known orchard country, along side the flowing waters of the River Tamar, and some thirty miles or so from the hub of Northern Tasmania – the central depot – Launceston. Ten miles from Beaconsfield was situated a substantially built eleven room house constructed of stone, which lay in one of the most delightful positions imaginable. It faced the river and was on the summit of a headland commanding an extensive view of the countryside. The layout of the grounds was in taste and keeping with the truly delightful and elevated situation of Blackwood House. **Daily Telegraph**, Tuesday January 27, 1920.*

Frank read the account in the newspaper spread before him on the kitchen table, a cup of tea anchored in his hand. The reporter had been round pestering everyone for an opinion, a short young man who darted rather than walked. He held his pad and pencil as a sign of office and his zeal extended beyond simple reportage to literary pretensions in his pieces. The landscape struck most who ventured down the river, the unusual quiet of light, the pastel shades altering without sound to paint a constant reinvention of water and fields. So while the sensation of human happening stirred wide-eyed excitement the landscape always drew you back into the awe of earth and water. You had to shake your head to allow the entry of violence and death.

For Frank the increasingly detailed descriptions bruised his spirit. To the district, ignited with the sensation reported in the *Telegraph*, it was exhilaration, confirmation of their existence in a land barely peopled, an opportunity to thunder judgement at a sky that simply clouded or cleared of its own accord. This place astonished him constantly with its shift of light and altered mood, but into its midst had come this foul intrusion, a worm in the apple of Eden.

Will and Rose had gone in a buggy to the Exeter Hotel and then on to Patmore’s Hotel in Beaconsfield steadily drinking their way through the afternoon and evening. A few days before Will Worthy had gone into Launceston to pick up from the train station the young 10 year old girl, Alma Lee, who of course was called Doris. It was as though each carefully endowed name needed modification in childhood to align with their peers. She had come in from Pioneer near Gladstone in the north east, from a household bulging with offspring, discarded to skivvy for her aunt Rose. Now she accompanied the Worthys on their pub pilgrimage, helping to carefully store the bottles of beer and flagons of cheap sherry for the homeward journey.

Frank paused in his newspaper reading to ponder another idiot circularity. The mining town of Gladstone, named of course after the grand old man of British politics, was paired in geographic rivalry with another mining entity, the ennobled Tory, Disraeli, Lord Beaconsfield – Whig tin Vs Tory gold. It was of course a deliberate jest plucked

from the Gladstone bag of imperial political squalor but he couldn't help being bemused by the banality of such constant English fabrications. Like the way local people spoke about "Home" when they meant England even though they had never been there and were unlikely to ever venture.

What happened when the Worthys returned home that Saturday evening would forever be fogged by liquor, but Frank was appalled when he read Will's arrest was for the rape of the tiny Doris, a thin reed bent to suffer monstrous desire. It was witnessed or suspected by the bellicose Rose who was erased by a shotgun blast that spread gobs of blood and brain in a rainbow across the room. Remington No.4 shot according to Dr Shone at the inquest, to give evidential certainty. The rest was merely tidying up. The house fired with finality, incinerating the evidence. He wondered if Will Worthy had bludgeoned death enough to make murder easy? Or violated the fragile Doris with the same anaesthetised ease with which he despatched a rabbit. They were unnerving thoughts, detached from feeling.

It was as though contrasts and contradictions turned like turmoil wherever he looked, mocked and parodied like Will Worthy and his offensively unworthy name and actions. It wouldn't lift, this tempest of absurdity. He rose slowly from the kitchen table, knelt before the fuel stove and opened the door with a quick flick to avoid the metallic heat. He arranged the coals and added billets of wood to the debris of ashes to feed the fire. Closed and banked down he was able to leave the house. His home, named by its previous Anglo-Indian owner, was called "Bhatkawa", meaning 'I am satisfied', a kind of 'Dunroamin' in some Indian dialect, another of those quirks of self-mocking humour he now found less amusing.

He opened the garden gate and strode along the row of Monterey pines planted as a windbreak for the orchards. They were peculiar trees, the way they gathered any faint breeze into a whine of air and in a gale wound themselves into lanyards of limbs and roared rebellion. He turned into Clarke's road then climbed the stile to the path leading to Waterton Hall along the dam wall edged in native grass and reeds curled and trailing fingers along the surface. He was visiting his neighbour Brady, laird of Waterton and Warden or mayor of the local council. 'Warden' seemed more parody given the penal origins of the colony. It totally evaded the pomp of ancient titles like 'Warden of the Cinque Ports' but here again were affectations that simply ridiculed.

Brady didn't have the stature to match his pretensions. Of average height, he was balding and conscious of it, grateful for the ubiquity of men's hats that allowed him to cover his vanity. He greeted Frank at the front door with hearty enthusiasm, an open smile and firm handshake and lead him through the house to the downstairs study whose wide French doors opened onto a porch perched on a promontory that descended precipitously to the river edge and a shingled cove sheltering a small boat shed. The tall crammed bookshelves and their statement of learning lent silent testimony to the substantial importance of an oak desk, with its tooled leather inlay, that dominated the room. Even the ornate leather armchairs intended for productive leisure, never frivolity, were clearly subordinate to the desk and its sober statement of industry.

"Pleased to see you Frank! Seat and tea in that order," he declared with expansive gusto. In the ritual of their meetings it was Frank who poured the tea, a rattle of tannin into fine china, wafer thin and brittle like the English ladies for whom they were intended.

When he took a cup to drink though, he grasped it with the hands of a lover without the restraint of a crooked little finger tethered in refined space. It was appropriate he should pour. The tea came from 'Lignus', his eponymous plantation in the hills near Galle in Ceylon, the hill mists sealed with lead in tin tea canisters and released only when water scalded the black broken orange pekoe leaves.

Brady, despite his pretensions, deferred to the 'Cambridge man' and admired Frank's craft laboriously translating the Buddhist Canon for the Pali Text Society in London. In an apple orchard in Tasmania? It amused people in that remote corner of antipodean life to have the incongruity of a scholar in the midst of their flowering apple orchards. And the follower of a 'pagan' faith as well. People accepted it nevertheless as he inhabited his own solitary order. "Remember", Frank would say, "When one or more of you are gathered in My name there will be discord and dissension." They were never sure whether to be amused or offended when he deliberately misquoted scripture.

"Not competing for souls, eh?" Brady had once said, to which he had replied, "Collect souls? Collect unicorns if you wish. But when you open your hands to examine your treasure you will find nothing." He always left unfathomable, contrarian riddles that teased their certainties.

"I say, what about Worthy!" Brady blurted out as he had all along intended but delayed for the rituals of preparation, introduction and beginning. "The district is abuzz! Very newsworthy!" he continued, adding the practiced pun as punctuation. But while puns were usually exchanged like poker chips in a game, Frank for once remained silent.

"Well he saved us all a lot of bother really, hanging himself," Brady added. "Saved us the trial. Appalling crime. Like Judas, he at least had the decency to hang himself for his sin."

Frank could not even rouse himself to feel vaguely bemused by Brady's pomposity. "There is no sin. No crime. There is only hunger", he said with uncharacteristic gravity. He saw before him the crushed and fractured innocence of Doris, diminished and ignored in the actions of everyone. And he saw the sad absence of feeling in Will Worthy, the immense weight of his action, the bewildered shame, and the inevitability of it beyond his knowing or intention.

Brady could only dredge up a religious formula. "But Man is born of original sin." Then added, with a superior man's smirk. "Sin is the foundation of all living. Some of it very nice too," and guffawed.

There was in Brady an emphatic arrogance that denied him a glimpse of his own absurdity but it was this that intrigued Frank, the vulnerability he detected, the uncertainty that elicited his compassion, for the sadness he saw in him.

"What is it, this sin of such originality?" Frank said quietly. "To know? Tasting the Tree of Knowledge? A crime that leaves us naked to ourselves, alone in our knowing, seeing the pain of ourselves and others, the suffering and death. It makes us hunger for connection, for some Eden in the imagination."

The conversation was veering into discomfort, urging Brady to shift in his chair and reach for his cup cradled in a saucer on the edge of the low deal table. Frank paused to stoke his pipe, poking at the crusts of tobacco before flaring a match and drawing the flame into gusts of smoke. The substance of conversation had been extinguished and turned to the prose of crop prices and shipping costs.

Outside the summer heat that shimmered off stones and released the pungent eucalyptus of leaves, would soon give way to the advent of autumn and the flock of apples to be mustered and sorted in the packing sheds. There would be a quickening of people in the district as the itinerant pickers and their families gathered to the task of stripping the trees of the burden of fruit. Before the trees shook free from autumn leaves and retreated into winter.

As Frank walked home, the pall began to lift. He saw all the contradictions and rivalled contrasts in a jangle of dissonant notes that occasionally spun melodies out of disharmony. The horrific mockery of the unworthy Mr Worthy only made more grisly the hell he inhabited, a hell he visited on the silent Doris forever abused in the want of affection. And the desire by Brady for social pinnacles had only increased the man's thirst like salt water. All the needless suffering bent him to the contemplation of gravel beneath his feet and the tessellated patterns of stone and pebbles that were pure accidents of splendour.

He opened the garden gate once more wanting to return to his study, to his latest work, a translation of the *Udana* and *Itivuttaka*.¹ In his study sheltering in the bay window on the rim of the world he could sense both the small and large: the flowing Pali script on *Ola* leaves, each letter a small sculptured sound; or the exclamations of the *Arahant* - 'The world is burning!'² - people aflame with the fires of desire, aversion, and delusion.

He felt the metaphors arguing with actuality. He stood and turned from words to wander from his work down to the bench he had installed in the front yard, carefully aligned to the angles of sight that most caught his breath. He sat perched with one leg swung about the other and watched the tide bulge into the reach of Ruffins Bay filling the tidal flats to self satisfied satiation. He remembered Brady's earnest questions about religion and faith, more earnest because he had neither. "What do you believe? What is your faith?"

He just could not manage the liquored words made to make spirits soar but answered quietly in the only way he could. "My faith is to live and die without regret," but he immediately recoiled within, troubled by words that seemed so trite.

He could not begin to explain the awful intrusion of the pain and anguish of others. As he had aged the conscious awareness of the aching of others became even more acute and troubled his usual equanimity. That was why 'regret' was his most carefully chosen word. To 'regret' he could not take away the distress of others would have been to desire to become someone other than himself. He could observe the pain of others; he could even enjoy the humour that often, paradoxically, accompanied it; even the monstrous and bizarre could appal and amuse him, but he could not regret the inability to take it away. It was what it was to be human and he could not make gods of men, he was relieved to realise. And 'those that see clearly, let go,'³ without regret.

The glazed surface of the water barely stirred except for the occasional waft of star flecked light. The summer twilight stretched endlessly into evening and even the air held a heat that brushed the skin, a rare treat before the cool bristled the skin to attention. The changing of the year happened in its own time. The autumn rows of apple and pear altered to amber and littered the ground with a crunch of gilt leaves. Air filled with faint wood smoke and the hearth beckoned intimacy and warmth, a chair before the fire, and the pleasure of endless stray thoughts.

Then in spring he would again venture to the garden bench as the river drew its breath across the water in a gust of apple blossom so sweet the water trembled and ‘abandoned becoming.’⁴ Or he would walk along the paths through Richmond Hill till he reached a curve commanding a view of the river and stand as the dawn muscled over the hump back hills of the east Tamar puddling the river with the mauve of morning light before day stirred the surface.

At that point the river was caught by the jutting jaw of Longreach like a hushed lake and only when the river tide turned, and the water powered itself towards the sea did it become obvious that it was a river. Then the tide slumped ten feet as though some mighty Archimedes had arisen from his bath to announce the eureka of the day, the marvel of morning and the stirring of bird calls. He drew in the breath of a new day, the melancholy of sweet air.

Frank Lee Woodard was a renowned Pali scholar and translator of Buddhist scriptures who lived in Rowella, Tasmania from 1919 to 1952; Charles Bothwell Brady was a significant orchardist at Waterton Hall, Warden of Beaconsfield and friend of Woodward. The story of Will Worthy is unfortunately true, and the newspaper reports are actual.

¹ “Verses of uplift”, in *Minor Anthologies of the Pali Canon*, volume II, translated by Frank Lee Woodward, 1935, Pali Text Society.

“As it was said”, in *Minor Anthologies of the Pali Canon*, volume II, translated by F. L. Woodward, 1935, PTS. From the *Sutta Pitika’s Khuddaka Nikaya*.

² *Udana* 3.10 *Loka Sutta* (Surveying the World).

³ The refrain from the Book of Ones in the *Itivuttaka* (*This was said by the Buddha*).

⁴ From the *Udana*