

A U S T R A L I A ' S L E A D I N G
S T O R Y T E L L E R



FRANK MOORHOUSE



**FUTILITY
AND OTHER
ANIMALS**

FUTILITY AND OTHER ANIMALS

*All characters in this book are
entirely fictitious, and no reference
is intended to any living person.*

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Frank Moorhouse was born in Nowra, New South Wales. He has lived for many years in the Sydney suburb of Balmain, a place he has affectionately fictionalised in his writing. He has worked as a journalist in Sydney and as an editor of a number of country newspapers.

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Also by Frank Moorhouse in this series:

The Everlasting Secret Family
The Americans, Baby
The Electrical Experience
Conference-ville
Tales of Mystery and Romance
Forty-Seventeen

Other titles by the author:

Days of Wine and Rage
Room Service
State of the Art
A Steele Rudd Selection

For W. S. and J and T who meant so much to me.

*The central dilemma is that of giving birth,
of creating new life.*

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The Story of the Knife

"THE KNIFE was in the duffle coat—with the methedrine and *Herzog*."

"Shit."

"Someone might have taken it by mistake. They might return it."

"Oh yes."

"I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault." She stood before him, contrite, perhaps a little frightened. Her youth showed when she faced him defensively.

"All things pass," he said. "That's folk fatalism. Perhaps the time of the knife is over." The time of the knife. She did that to him. Twenty-year-olds were always saying things like that. The knife was stolen. There was nothing portentous about that. In fact the duffle coat was stolen—the knife just happened to be in it.

She had moved over to the refrigerator and taken out a flagon of dry white and was pouring a glass.

"You want some?"

"No, I'll have a scotch—with two ice cubes."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not blaming you. It doesn't matter."

She went about getting him the scotch, running water on the ice tray to free the ice.

Then without previous hint, quite unpredictably, she said: "Roger, I think our time together is finished. I think

it's time I moved out."

Well.

He first thought to argue against it and hold her. Then he let go to a feeling of resignation which was stronger. She was probably right. It probably was finished. If she *felt* it was over then perhaps ipso facto it was. It wouldn't shatter him. But weren't twenty-year-olds too much. They always *knew* and they acted so biblically as though life was a series of mystically revealed events. A time for every purpose. They woke on a morning and were able to feel and believe that from *that* day "things would be different" or something. Anne, he thought, Anne, when you're twenty-eight you'll be sure of different things. You'll be sure that life is confusing, you'll be sure that you can't be certain, and you'll know that life doesn't change but goes on in eccentrically undulating cycles. He caught sight of his thinking and was embarrassed by it.

She put the scotch in front of him.

"If that's the way you feel, Anne."

She sat opposite him on the other side of the table.

"I've been ignoring signs, Roger. I think our feelings have changed. It's almost as if the knife marked something—symbolically. It was a symbolic thing."

Twenty-year-olds were *too much*.

His indifference left him without a reply. Now that they were living in the city their affair was certainly flatter. But pleasant. At the cabin where there had been fantasies, it had been a digression from their mainstream, a suspension from routine, and other things.

It was cold living in the cabin above the gorge. Perry had left a portagas stove but the gas had all but gone and they were conserving it.

"I could light a fire in the middle of the room. Underneath the matting it's cement."

"You'll smoke us out," she said. She was painting, an army blanket around her shoulders. She had on his navy blue polo neck jumper he used for sailing. Her knees were

drawn up to form an easel.

He drank from his glass of claret. He dipped his finger in the claret and wrote her name on the table. He dipped his finger again and sucked it. He liked sucking. Sucking nipples. Sucking her fingers. Sucking cocks? No, not that. He couldn't come at that.

"I'm going to buy a knife tomorrow," he announced.

"Great."

Her sweet typical reaction. Why did she think it was "great"—as though she was expecting him to buy a knife?

"Do you really think it's 'great'?"

"Yes, I want you to have a knife."

He smiled. Oh, the sweetness of it. He moved over to her and kissed her hair. He knelt and hugged her hunched knees.

"It's a man's-thing," she said, her hand on his face. "You're my man—down here anyway. I just want you to have a knife."

"I'm not buying a sheath knife."

"You'll know what sort of knife to buy."

He rested his head on her feet. Times such as these, when she spoke with female authority, when she acted with such sure emotional touch—these times made him swell as a man. Her touchings, her words, her movements, the way she handled food, the way she cut an onion, the way she painted, and the way she washed herself.

Was he playing with manhood or something? Or was she playing with womanhood? Or was it just a part of the thing they had going between them? How could she know, at her age, what she did to him? She'd had a kid but that was a mistake and it did not make her a woman. She was just twenty. She was playing it by ear and it was all so right. But perhaps it was his private fetish. Should you tell the other person that they were catering for a fetish? Was a secret pleasure dishonest? But Christ, feeling this way wasn't a fetish. This was the way he should feel. Like man, it's the real thing. It's the real bit, man. Like you wouldn't want to know.

Next day they walked the four miles to the store along the track to where it met the bourgeois asphalt of the town.

He told the girl in the shop that he wanted a knife with one long blade, a short blade, a can opener, a needle, a pair of tweezers, a screw driver, and a bone handle.

She handed him one to look at.

"No—I'd like to look at that one," he said, pointing to a black bone-handled knife. She handed it to him. He opened up its implements—fanned out like a sun god. He half knew then that this was the one. Anne stood silently while he compared it.

The black bone-handled one had everything except the screwdriver. But it was the one.

"I'll take it," he said to the shop girl.

Anne came up against him. "It's a splendid knife," she said, and ran her finger along its body. She picked it up and held it against her face before the assistant wrapped it. "It's a knife for all seasons—a knife for the backwoods."

The shop girl looked at her.

"I'll skin animals," he said, "and defend you and cut ropes and carve wood."

The shop girl looked away.

Outside he unwrapped the knife. "It's a good knife."

"Yes, yes, yes," she said, putting her head against him as they walked away from the town, off the bourgeois asphalt and along the track which became wilder and then tenuously reached the cabin.

He made a strap for the knife. He found a leather strap hanging from an army water bottle in the shed behind the cabin. He cut a length from it which included a buckle at one end. The leather had dried but he rubbed it with oil. On one side it was finished and on the other rough. The oil he rubbed into it gave it back some suppleness. He tapered the free end and bevelled the edges. He used steel wool to clean the rust from the buckle until it was a dull, smooth metal gleam. He oiled the buckle. Giving the strap another application of oil he hung it in the shed until the afternoon.

In the afternoon the leather was alive. It had regained its

full suppleness and a sheen. He slapped it on his thigh. Threading the strap through the lanyard loop of the knife he then buckled the strap through his belt. It hung about eight inches.

He went into the cabin.

"Look."

"Oh fine—it looks so fine."

She came over to him and handled the knife.

"When I'm down here I'll wear it out like this. In the city, I'll put it in my pocket."

"Yes, wear it all the time—in the city too—it should go with you everywhere."

Next day he carved her name in a tree.

"It doesn't hurt the tree does it?" she asked.

"A tree doesn't mind being cut with a real knife for a real reason."

He first cut away the bark to reach the wood of the bole—thigh white.

He carved: "Roger and Anne loved in this place". He felt that the phrasing "loved in this place" carried the correct interpretation of their affair—more a passionate affection limited in time than a deep important love. He hoped Anne understood it that way.

One day they went to the shoreline and with the sea swirling around their legs they prised oysters on the sea-pocket rocks, snatching them between the onrush and retreat of the sea, eating them from the knife blade. The knife hung from its strap around his wrist, the leather strap dark wet from the sea.

"God", he said, wiping his face with a dripping hand, "oysters—the sea—and you."

"And the knife," she said smiling. They kissed with the knife caught between them, hard against their chests and the sea surging around their knees, cold and uniting.

They drank wine that night with some methedrine until they both burned brightly.

"You don't talk about everlasting love," she said, "and that's what I like about the way we are."

"Don't you believe in everlasting love?" he asked. He was always intrigued by the way she catalogued herself.

"No I don't—do you?"

"I don't know, Anne—I think probably some people can have everlasting love."

"Really passionate everlasting love?"

"Everlasting in the sense that it is sexually and in every other way alive—and goes on for years."

"How many people do you know who have it," she asked disbelievingly.

"Perhaps one or two couples—that's among my friends—but then, my friends are not prone to everlasting love. Not that they don't try."

He saw some who had tried and failed—Sean, Robyn, and Jimmy and Jeanette, Anderson and Sally and saw them in frozen stances of pain or anger or disillusion.

"Love lasts for as long as it's there—and it's too fragile and vulnerable to last for long," she said, "and I'd hate for us to pretend. I think that's sick—when people pretend."

He doodled mentally. "What's wrong with pretended love in the absence of anything better?" he asked her and himself. He was playing with her.

"I should hate that."

"In the case of compassion, isn't it better to pretend to compassion than to express your indifference?"

"No, *non*, no, it would be better to be true to your feelings."

"Even to appear cruel?"

"Yes. Because it wouldn't be as cruel as the pretence."

"But sometimes you can be so neurotic that your true feelings—the way you want to feel—can't get through—when you're all hung up. Why not act the way you want to feel, until the hang-up passes."

"Once love is gone it never comes back."

"What about when you're angry—you mightn't feel loving then but love hasn't gone. Or when you feel hopeless—that passes and love comes back."

"Real love is always there and it never goes away."

They sat thinking in the fast methedrine silence.

"I don't want you ever to be false to me," she said, "and I don't think that we are neurotic."

He didn't usually talk like this about these things. The methedrine allowed him—his words breaking out like fowls through a broken fence.

They listened to the lute music, sitting cross-legged facing each other, with the methedrine singing through them.

"Soothe me," he said.

He lay his head on her lap. She put her hand down his shirt and rubbed his back.

"Come to bed," she said, "where I can properly soothe you."

They moved over to the bed in the corner of the cabin. The lantern burned a soft temple light. They undressed each other and stood naked, their hands touching each other. They kissed. Naked, he held her breasts and she took his penis in both her hands, holding his testicles tight. He became submissive to her touch. She responded, pulling him down gently to the bed, leading him by his swelling penis. In the lantern light the logs of the cabin wall rippled up to the roof. She held him tight in a kiss. He moved his head down to her breasts. She stroked him—pressed him against her breasts—nuzzled his hair. Then they petted in an erotic calm.

Then she whispered: "Give me your knife". He did not hear her clearly and shifted his head. "Give me your knife," she whispered. With an erotic trembling he reached across to his clothes beside the bed and unstrapped the knife from the belt and gave it to her.

In the lantern light he watched her strap it around her naked neck. The black bone handle of the heavy knife hung down between her young heavy breasts. She looked up at him, holding out her arms to him. She took him to her, pulling him over on to her, the knife coming hard against her skin pressing hard into her breasts. They rolled hard with the knife between them, clamped in a kiss. He felt the bucking and rearing of desire. They writhed and he felt

the pleasure of the knife hurting. Swept by her deft sexuality. The knife like another penis. Her penis? Or did he have two? Or was it their penis? They rolled with the rearing desire.

Then he pulled back away from her, looking at the black leather strap and the black bone knife hanging from her neck against the soft white skin. The knife had left its imprint on her breast. She was his girl with his knife strapped to her. In the flickering of the lantern he grew dominant. He moved to her aware suddenly of how much bigger he was than she. She stared at him, her hands on his thighs, and then lay back wide, the knife lying against her body. He reached down touching her breasts and touching the knife. He pushed down on the knife tenderly hurting her, and then came down on her, entering her. She was his woman and the knife she had strapped to herself was his knife. She was his sexual liege, she lay back and wrapped her arms and legs around him in a gesture of total surrender.

"Have me," she said, laying there wide, the knife biting into her.

Later he went to piss. He stood cold, shivering in the winter damp grass. The knife was in his awareness but he did not bother with it intellectually. It had played a part in a wondrous pleasure. He went back into the cabin, wiping his wet feet on the blanket. He huffed out the lantern.

Crawling in beside her he again felt the knife between her breasts, as he held to her for warmth. They both lay electrically awake but unspeaking, the methedrine humming through the wires of their minds. They remained embraced throughout the night. He felt the knife during the night but did not wonder about it. They slept and made love again sometime early in the morning, sometime before dawn. They slept some more. She took the knife off sometime after that. In the morning when the sun was up the knife was beside them on the floor.

When he rose he strapped it back onto his belt.

That day they built an outdoor fire from stones and an old iron grid, carrying sand from the beach for the fire bed.

On Friday they went to a party in the city. A packed, three-storey terrace house. People they both knew. In jeans, drinking from bottles of beer and in one room the clandestine sweetness of pot. The constant, heavy rock beat. He moved restlessly from room to hallway to stairs to room. He knew that she was in the front room, or at least that was where he sensed she was. He wanted to talk to her but he resisted. They had not come to the party to do that. He imagined her talking in her tough guarded manner. The heavy, constant rock beat followed him from room to room. They were from another place and he felt it. They had detached themselves from the city for a while and re-entry was not a simple matter. He felt a distance from the city. Perhaps it was the distance he enjoyed in a mild sort of way. He was not alien. It was that the experiences and the tempo of their life at the cabin would not mesh with the wild agitation of the party. They were disengaged. They had been living alone and their social reflexes were slower and they weren't ready to change back yet.

Sally Fith came to him as he stood in the hall. Before, in the city, he had wanted now and then to get off with her. They sat down together in the hall.

She asked him about the life down at the cabin.

"It's a good life," he said, "but I'm frightened to say how good or to talk about it for fear the gods will take it from me." People stepped over them and around them and he felt as if they were sitting undiscovered while people passed by looking for them.

"Painting?"

"No—I've done a little sketching now and then. Essentially I'm doing nothing. I went there to do essentially nothing."

"Money?"

"Haven't bothered to calculate—we're still eating. Anne looks after all that."

"Is she hung up about the baby?"

"She doesn't talk about it. It's gone—finished. I think she'd talked it all out of herself before she met me."

"Anderson's around somewhere," Sally said tiredly.

"So what? He's finished with her. Is he finished with you?"

She gave her bitter wry smile. "Ex-husbands never finish with you. And Anderson always keeps sniffing around his old bitches."

He wanted Sally at times but she frightened him. She was older and had an analytical toughness. She wasn't aware she frightened him and therefore could not ease him nor could she turn the fear to a sexual excitement.

He felt his knife.

"Look at my knife," he said to her, pulling it from his pocket by the strap.

"A knife?"

"Yes, for hunting and carving."

"You don't hunt."

"I don't carve either—except I carved our names on a tree. In a heart with an arrow through it."

"How romantic."

He tossed the knife in his hand with short tosses.

"Are you and Anne having a serious thing?"

"Not really . . . not in the 'I am in love' sense but perhaps in other ways."

"The old ambiguity—you 'love' her in *your own way*—your private definition. But of course she thinks you 'love' her in *her way*."

He tightened. "No it's not like that—it's all understood. We understand the situation." He was uncomfortable. He didn't like to talk about his life in this analytical way. "Perhaps sometimes—I'm speaking hypothetically, not about Anne and me—sometimes ambiguity might be useful. Perhaps it's needed sometimes so that two people can get what they want from an affair."

"Roger! You're capable of the most miraculous rationalisations."

"I wasn't speaking about Anne and me. We understand each other."

"It'll be the first relationship in the world where both