

Moving Tigers

Bob Franklin



Affirm_{press}



Bob Franklin is an acclaimed stand-up comic, writer, actor and director. He has had roles in *The Librarians*, *Thank God You're Here*, *The Last Confession of Alexander Pearce* and *Bad Eggs*. In 2012 he published the highly regarded collection of short stories *Under Stones*. *Moving Tigers* is his first novel.

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Probably to a shark, about the
funniest thing there is, is a wounded
seal trying to swim to shore,
because just where does he
think he's going?

Back when I was on reception at Foster Kennedy, some of the advertising whiz-kids were always sharing printouts of Jack Handey's 'Deep Thoughts' around the office and that's the one that has always stayed with me. It's often popped into my head at pivotal moments in my life, and I thought of it again half an hour ago as I watched my rucksack trundle off down the conveyor belt and disappear behind the curtain.

It was accompanied, as is also often the case at times like these, by Mum's voice saying, 'Jeannie, Jeannie, Jeannie, what are you doing now?'

Fucked if I know, Mother, to be honest. And Andy's attitude since signing up for the venture has hardly been encouraging.

Typical scene played out in front of the English soccer highlights:

Me: (*entering room*) 'Look at these great torches I picked up from Army Surplus for those "quite frequent blackouts".'

Andy: (*prising the cap off another bottle of Löwenbräu*) 'See the number 10 for Ipswich. That's Billy's kid. Remember Billy, who I came over with to play for Moorabbin? That's his boy, playing in the Coca-Cola League now. Hey, what beers have they got in Nepal?'

Me: (*leaving room*) 'There's no beer in Nepal.'

Andy: (*running after me in horror*) 'There's what!?''

Me: (*highly amused but finally taking pity on the lost, pathetic mess in front of me*) 'Relax. You can probably get a Tuborg up the top of Everest these days. Haven't you even looked at the Lonely Planet?'

I sometimes think Andy's sole reason for accompanying me is because he doesn't want to fend for himself for a month. At some deeper level, though, I hope he realises that he needs to stretch his horizons beyond plastering walls and drinking beer while watching live soccer and *Seinfeld* repeats.

I don't think he even gets any joy out of the football anymore. (Or the *Seinfeld* repeats for that matter.) Seems to just grimly hang on to the habit, bitterly grumbling away to himself. He really hasn't been the same since missing that bloody penalty in the big State League decider years ago. His 'last shot at glory in a semi-pro career of near misses', the sports eulogists might have it.

I'm hoping that maybe, just maybe during this trip, we can both rediscover the man I first met laying his plaster-spattered sheets out on the lobby floor of GS Spyrou Ltd. Cheerful and chirpy (despite relationship woes that would soon become all too apparent) he was a refreshing change to the slimy insurance clerks and weaselly accountants sidling past the receptionist's desk where I had the misfortune to be temping at the time. Then he turned on his dusty, white-flecked little transistor already tuned to Triple R.

'What's wrong with Fox or Triple M?' I asked him. 'What are you, some kind of commie faggot?'

'I know all the words to "Going Underground" by The Jam if that answers your question,' he replied, before posing a question of his own, to wit: 'What's a nasty girl like you doing in a nice place like this?'

'Drifting aimlessly,' said I. It was a journey he decided to take with me at some juncture.

What did he see in me back then, apart from a shared empathy with community radio? I presume, judging by his soon-to-be ex, I was just his type. Yes, that's right, a sporty tomboy with a whole raft of self-esteem issues. We had a good laugh together, though, and he wasn't laughing much with Leigh.

Ah, yes, those sneaky lunchtime drinks at the Irish Times that quickly graduated to after-work drinks. Andy snorting into his pint of Kilkenney, froth flying like filthy confetti.

Leigh eventually sprung us stumbling arm in arm down Market Street. Andy had told her he was working late. 'To be fair,' he qualified to me later, 'I had succeeded in getting you plastered.'

Hardly the ideal way to end a relationship, though Andy remarked at the time that it could have dragged on indefinitely if she hadn't 'discovered' us. He just couldn't see himself ever breaking it off. 'I'm like George in *Seinfeld*,' he morosely observed.

But we were free now to fan the spark between us with our alcoholic breath into a substantial hedonistic blaze. Weekends were a blur of bands at the Central Club, the Corner, the Espy, movies at the Astor, Sunday sessions at the Standard.

It was almost half a year before we heard that Leigh had taken a late night swim off a beach in Ceduna and never come back.

Andy wasn't invited to the memorial service in Adelaide. We didn't really talk much about it. I had sporadic bad dreams, though, and they usually featured sharks the size of road trains. I don't know what Andy's dreams were like.

Things were a little weird for a while but we hung in there and eventually we got back on track. Andy bought an old worker's cottage in Cheltenham that we renovated together (or, more accurately, that Andy renovated while I occasionally carried things and held things and rolled countless joints: there are a lot of wonky surfaces in our house that I must take responsibility for). I had a good dope dealer; Andy had a reliable source of coke and pills. We'd kick back in the evenings watching the cricket, playing cards or spinning some vinyl. We had a ball, an absolute ball.

Somewhere along the line, though, we started to lose the spark.

(In a moment of uncomfortable symbolism, when I went back for another temping stint at Spyrou's three years after the first one I noticed that cracks had started appearing in the walls. It also illustrates why Andy doesn't get as much work as other plasterers.)

Would kids have made a difference for us? Should we have thrown a child or two into the void that lazily opened between us? If we had, how would I

have achieved so much in my life? How would I have managed to compile two half-arsed teaching degrees and a couple of Mickey Mouse certificates from Creative Writing courses run by third-rate unis?

Because as I sit here now that's pretty much all I've got to show for nearly forty years on the planet.

I don't even co-own the mortgage on the house. Maybe that's why Andy's less than enthused about Nepal. With demand for his services in something of a spiral, it's hardly the ideal time to be spending money on a month-long sojourn abroad. I couldn't have predicted that when I booked the trip all those months ago, could I? We'll just have to be careful with our spending when we're there, that's all.

Anyway, I badgered him into coming because there are more important things than money. Well, that and the fact that I wasn't crazy about the idea of travelling by myself in a country where travel sites advise 'a high degree of caution'. Most tourists go all misty-eyed at the mere mention of Nepal, but the hostilities between the authorities and the Maoists are still simmering away in the background. With the shonky governments and the shonky rebels, the patriarchy and the caste system (and the odd beggar who'll put a curse on you if you don't cough up, according to a recent *Good Weekend* article) you're better off just thinking about the mountains.

Whatever the wisdom of it, we're an hour or so from boarding that plane. Dosed up on malaria tablets, rucksacks packed with appropriately discreet apparel, hand sanitiser, diarrhoea preventatives, sleeping bag liners, torches, hiking boots etc. etc. all checked in, nothing to do but walk through the gate. Writing all this down is at least helping me to maintain the illusion of control.

Andy's got a beer in front of him, despite complaining about being dehydrated after the day's labours. He went off to work this morning as if it was just another day. While I was running around in a last-minute panic he just hopped in the ute and drove off, tapping the steering wheel to 'Crown of Thorns', possibly deeming the song an appropriate celebration of his own martyrdom in agreeing to escort me on this trying endeavour.

He likes to wallow in the blues these days rather than pumping up The Jam. He even bought a harmonica a while back and has been threatening for months now to go down to the Nighthawk for their Monday Night Blues Jam. But he's yet to carry out the threat. I dare say they've managed to get by up there without the two plodding riffs he's mastered thus far.

I told him he should go easy on the beer. He said, 'I'm on holiday.' (Instructively, one of the first things he packed for the trip was a mini football, as if he thinks

he can just show the kids some skills and it'll be job done. International language, innit?)

I've got a cup of tea. I'm going to try having a break from alcohol.

Andy may be affecting nonchalance but I think he's really as wound up as I am. He was watching the A-League game last night and someone scored a penalty. When the commentator said it was a good penalty Andy started shouting at the telly. On and on he went until I told him to calm down. He then yelled, 'Fuck off!' at the top of his voice and walked out. It actually shook me up a bit. When I went out to the kitchen, he was standing up the far end of the yard, facing the back fence.

The scenario repeated itself in an unpleasant dream a few hours later. I was telling Andy I was leaving but he wouldn't turn away from the fence. On and on it went. I knew I was going to miss the plane if he didn't turn around. Then he swivelled really quickly and it jolted me awake.

I'm going to put the journal away now and dip into Cate Kennedy's short stories, wherein characters experience personal epiphanies within a few sentences and I don't have to trudge through hundreds of pages for the revelation.