

## MARK MILLER

### OUT-FOXED

Whistled up from the sedge  
above the red-chafed  
bank of the creek  
he appears, sniffing the crisp air.

Hungry for the pinking metal shriek  
of a trapped hare,  
he quick-pads and skirts the slope  
before stopping fifty metres from us,  
his sun-spotted, reddish head raised  
in curious surveillance.

Impatient, my brother-in-law lifts  
his grey barrel and aims:  
with the click of his gun's cocked trigger  
the fox is gone.

## GLENN CHAPMAN

### THE HATE MACHINE

Forgive me, for whatever it is I'm guilty of, for I am a poor bystander to modern life.

Anyone watching me now would swear that I was passively sitting at my desk preparing life proposals for the thousands of tax-dodging businessmen, and other professionals, who utilise the life insurance services of our company. And don't think for a minute that I don't know exactly what they're up to: supposedly investing huge chunks of money on their own lives so that their fat middle-aged wives will be able to collect on their deaths, when they know damned well that years before they die they're going to get rid of the old wives and marry their young, sexy, yet sophisticated secretaries. The life proposals will therefore be declared void, refunds will be made out and of course, your average Mr

Exek will have avoided paying tax on half a million bucks for a good fifteen years. It's enough to make anyone think that my job as a life insurance officer is a complete waste of time. And it would be, if not for that one in a million life-holder who actually collapses before he makes it to the altar for the second time, or who keeps the policy alive for the benefit of his new wife, and then dies. These are D Days. I live for those moments of lightning gold when the miniature world of mortals ceases to be and a loved one — for they are all extremely loved — departs for . . . WHO KNOWS WHAT? When it's time for the company to pay up, I get goose pimples all over, just from being near that quintessence of existential profundity.

Maybe it really began all those years ago when I was an innocent boy, who knew nothing about the world and its ways, but who nonetheless possessed an odd instinct here and a semblance of cry-baby emotion there. Aunt Elsie had stumbled upon me at the back of her wood-heap, playing with the hair on a broken doll's head. You see, I was doing all sorts of things with it: curling, combing, plaiting, parting, twisting, and generally styling. I didn't realise it then, of course, but I was having the time of my life. However, apparently I was not supposed to be having the time of my life. Aunt Elsie rudely interrupted my aesthetic bliss by snatching the doll's head out of my hands and shrieking something about how if it wasn't enough that all the men in the family had to be gamblers and drinkers, we were now going to be cursed with a useless little poofta-sissy.

After that day, I never touched a doll's head again. I was determined to measure up to the gamblers and drinkers if it was the last thing I did.

As a child of eight, nine, ten, eleven, there was not a lot to live for or be happy about, apart from some of the shows on TV. Right now, sitting at my desk in the New Business and Old Claims Department, I would sincerely love to be able to say that I came from a broken home and that this was the root of my morbid misery. I would love to say that my mother had left me, and my two sisters, with father, so she could run off with her army boyfriend when he was transferred from Puckapunyal to Townsville, and that there was a procession of lady friends through our house, but father could never quite seem to hold on to any of them for long, due to the fact that we couldn't stand their dirty-nappy kids or the fact that father was actually nicer to them than he ever was to us. I'd then like to be able to shrug all this off and say that it was no big deal; I coped. It was humdrum ordinary — a cliché, if you'd care to bring it up, or absolutely nothing if you didn't. I'd like to be able to say all this, but it'd be an awful lie, for my mother always sacrificed her own happiness and worked herself into the ground so that her children might flourish. She provided great stability in a household otherwise dumbfounded by

father's dithering alcoholism. I simply cannot blame my family background for my obsession with the Big D.

At school I had a friend called Sebastian. It was through Sebastian that I witnessed my very first D Day, if only at a distance. Every Monday morning Sebastian would run up to me in the playground, relating all the details of his weekend visit to Paula's farm. Paula was a girl in our class, her parents were friends with Sebastian's, and everybody knew that Sebastian loved Paula. Sebastian had such fun at Paula's on the weekends, playing cricket and softball, riding the horses and minibikes, and feeding the pigs. At night, Paula and her older sister would read to Sebastian and his younger brother, and the four of them would watch horror movies on TV, while the adults partied on.

Sebastian always vehemently denied being Paula's boyfriend, but I knew better. I could see it in his eyes. Not that it worried me. I was just a little annoyed with the way he wanted the best of both worlds. He wanted to be Paula's boyfriend and not have to admit it at an age when it was uncool for little boys to like girls.

One Monday, instead of having Sebastian greet me with the latest news of his weekend jollies, another boy rushed up to tell me that Paula and her sister had been involved in a car accident. Paula had been killed. I was immediately in a state of shock. My blood was pounding through my limbs and I couldn't seem to catch my breath. Paula was gone, she wouldn't be coming back. This senseless tragedy was beyond the scope of my feeble imaginative powers.

But simultaneously, although I would never admit it, I realised I was also in a state of ecstasy. At last! Something exciting was happening. I was the friend of this girl's boyfriend, and as pathetic as that sounds, I relished the newly acquired status it brought me. I had hardly known Paula but now it was easy to pretend that we had been very close. People started coming up to me, asking me for details and I gladly supplied them, fully aware that I was creating them during the telling.

The Big D had plucked a lovely little girl from obscurity and had made her one of his own. In the process, he had made my acquaintance and managed to impress me greatly. I longed to meet Him again — oh, if only to alleviate the nothingness of my life.

Unfortunately, whole years slowly crawled by, with me on the edge of my seat anticipating His next move. I learnt a new trick of concentrating my death-wish onto the people I hated, in the desperate hope that the Big D would heed my signal and act accordingly. This precious ability to wish people dead, while knowing that wishing was futile, was the only vindication of my life.

Okay, I admit that the ideal would've been to join the Boy Scouts and help old ladies across the streets. I should have gone to Sunday School and actually believed all the good things in the Bible. As it was, I only ever went to Sunday School when father belted the living daylights out of me in order to get me there. But can I blame him for this, when his Sunday morning hang-overs surely must have taken their toll on his nerves? Learning about God would've been pointless because I secretly worshipped the Big D, and He didn't have a Bible.

It was just too bad that I had to wait seven years for our next chance encounter.

George was Aunt Elsie's best friend's son, and had just come home from school in Sydney for the long break until uni started again. The moment he arrived home, his mother, who needed a constant supply of valium just to make it through the day, began nagging him to find a job. George did not want to find a job. Aunt Elsie, being the peace-making saint that she was, intervened by suggesting that George and I go for a two-week fishing trip to the South Coast. I readily agreed.

George was by far the smartest person I'd ever met. He seemed to know the answer to every possible question you could ever ask. And as he was totally possessed by counter-culture films and books, he had that knack of making you think that if he didn't know the answer, then the question simply wasn't worth asking. He always had the last word and got his own way in everything. When he told me he'd been dealing in drugs at his school and had managed to talk his way out of an expulsion when caught, I was convinced that I was dealing with a person of superior calibre.

After a while, just judging by his general conversation, I could tell that George was nearly as smitten with the Big D as I was. However, unlike me, George directed his death-wish towards himself and not others. He was always casually mentioning how he pulled out the razor blades every morning and looked in the mirror, wondering if he had the guts to do it. Old age and its accompanying ugliness and inertia terrified him. He claimed that life wasn't worth living after you reached twenty-one. By that time anyone with any brains would surely kill himself. This depressed me, because I'd always been hoping, against all evidence to the contrary, that life would suddenly improve once I hit twenty-one. I'd obviously missed out on the rapturous joys of youth that George had savoured so intensely. Nonetheless pushing this aside, I was thrilled to be near someone who was living so close to the edge. This holiday would be perfect.

I imagined it as a sort of vicarious honeymoon between the Big D and myself.

Aunt Elsie had planned for us to go fishing and snorkling, and to play golf and go for hikes. However, on arrival at the beach-house, George informed me that those activities were simply out of the question. He had come to this dump of a holiday-house to get away from his nagging mother and to catch up on some sleep. I suspect George thought he had intimidated me and thwarted my plans for a nice, constructive holiday. Nothing could have been further from the truth. George didn't really know me. I was more happy to sit around and watch him deteriorate, with a constant supply of variegated pills by his side, which he did not hesitate to pop whenever he felt the urge. I somehow knew that the Big D was going to put on an extravaganza just for me. It was only a matter of time.

One afternoon I arrived back from the beach to find a note on my bed: "Thanks for the trip, couldn't dig the quicksand any longer — G." My bones were so full of adrenalin I thought they were going to snap. The Big D had finally done it! After all this time he had faithfully rewarded my loyalty. And this time I was all alone. The details, the drama of the situation were all mine . . . .

But first, I had to find the body. I checked all through the deep ivy that covered the side garden. It would've been so mythically organic to find George lying out there, but he could not be found. The possibilities seemed unlimited. Perhaps he had drowned himself, which would've demonstrated that he, for one, actually was not afraid of Virginia Woolf. Or maybe he'd overdosed in the bush, or had thrown himself off a nearby cliff.

That night I sat in the old rocking chair, rocking to and fro, looking out over the bay, hearing the waves belt down on the sand and rocks. It suddenly dawned on me that George had taken his back-pack; he had decided to travel far away to do the deed. He wanted to lend it an air of mystery. What would happen to him? A gang of bikies would pick him up, torture him, kill him by means of decapitation. I had it in my head that they would force George to tell them where he had been staying before killing him. They would bring back the head to our beach-house, open the back door, come down the passage, spot me and bowl the red tangled ball towards me as if I were a row of ten pins. That's where the dream began, and ended. George's shoulder length hair would be wrapped around his head like the string inside a baseball. The Big D had favoured me so completely, I would be numbed to any treatment the sick, sadistic bokie gang might've cared to unleash on me. My life's journey would be finished. It would be time to consummate the marriage.

With sugar plum images of this type pervading my soul, it was impossible to go to bed. The variations on the one intractable theme kept

pelting into my consciousness. I stayed up all night, and all day, and then the next night.

The two weeks regrettably drew to an end, and I returned home. Although I had not slept for nearly a week, I was the happiest I'd ever been in my life.

You can imagine my spiritual devastation, my bodily annihilation when mother informed me as I stepped off the bus that George had merely hitch-hiked to Sydney and was staying with friends.

“He rang up a couple of days ago, so you wouldn't worry about him, dear.”

It was unforgivable. There was no mercy. The Big D had seemingly deserted me, yet why, why, when He knew the taster he had once offered had hooked me years ago? I could not live through this kind of disappointment again. I would not take any more chances . . . .

That's when I made the most important decision of my life; I aimed to be able to one day work in a place like this. At first, I used to worry about maintaining some sort of a carefully cultivated equilibrium. In the name of sound balance, I used to prise myself from my desk and attend social gatherings. I lived in my own one bedroom flat and invited work-mates over for dinner on the weekends.

Now, I don't bother. I sleep here at night, in the compactors, close to all the files of the Big D's future recruits. I can't say how close this makes me feel to Him, knowing that I'm almost a junior partner by lavishing so much care on the details of the departed. I make sure the fat wives, or even the new wives, are properly set up and I gently console the children. While reminding the deceased's siblings that life goes on, and that it doesn't pay to get too depressed thinking you're going to be next, I subtly suggest that maybe it's time to take out some life cover for themselves. The Big D is proud of me, I'm sure. My life has purpose. I am needed. The happiest person alive, humbly contributing all to the world that could be expected of one innocent bystander.

I can only sit back and wait for the day when the Big D will come to claim his own special policy maker, who has never let Him down.