

Murder or Bust

Evan Keohane

For as long as Doug could remember, he had been killing things. It started small, as most things do. With his father in a near-catatonic state after his time in Okinawa during the Second World War, it was Doug's job to keep pests out of his family home in rural Idaho. He began by catching and picking apart flies and small insects. Then he moved up to cockroaches, before advancing to rats, raccoons and eventually possums. His mother was overjoyed by her son's ability to keep the house free of vermin, but the task itself was reward enough for Doug. Over time, however, the task became more and more mundane. Doug's victims entered of their own free will, and there were only so many places to hide inside the small house. He had become so adept at killing things that when he finally did catch his prey, there was hardly a struggle.

As a teenager, Doug took up hunting. He would spend hours in the nearby forests and attempted to kill anything that moved. This was much better. Animals were harder to find, and had more places to hide in or escape to as well. Things were far more interesting than back at Doug's home. He went after rabbits, hares, foxes, birds and even the odd wild boar. Occasionally he would see wolves or even

bears, and while he wasn't dumb enough to try to hunt them, he did consider it. Over time, however, hunting defenseless animals became more and more mundane. Wild animals were predictable creatures, always relying on their instincts. They would usually just try to run away, rarely fighting back, never making interesting blunders like begging for mercy. Once Doug did catch his prey, they usually weren't that hard to kill either.

Things changed when Doug was sixteen and he discovered an older man in the woods. The man, like Doug, was on his own, and they decided to keep each other company while they hunted. Doug came to a realisation when a large bear wandered dangerously close to the old man. He watched the old man shrink down, slow his breathing and try to remain as quiet as possible while Doug thought to himself:

Is a man not just a very smart animal?

And so, when the bear had moved far enough away, Doug took his shotgun, aimed it at the old man, and fired. The old man screamed, not dead yet, and began to crawl away. The man pleaded with Doug not to kill him. He told Doug about the family waiting for him; a foolish attempt to appeal to Doug's conscience. When that didn't work, the old man tried to appeal to Doug's greed instead, and promised him all the money in his wallet if Doug let him live. Animals did not do this. It was fascinating to behold. Doug cracked open his shotgun and the empty shell flew out. Doug loaded a fresh one, feeling an excitement he had not felt in a very long time; not since he killed his first raccoon using nothing but a Swiss Army Knife. A loud crack rang out through the forest, and the deed was done. Doug realised that hunting animals wouldn't cut it anymore. He had moved on to something greater.

Years later, Doug found himself waiting at the side of a major road in Washington. Fortunately for the local community, he hadn't had much luck murdering people throughout his college years. He had hoped that college would be full of silly, drunk, vulnerable people.

And while it definitely was, they were *always* together in large, noisy crowds. Staying close together for security was something even the dumbest animals did. Doug wanted to hunt real, thinking humans; not animals with degrees. What hadn't helped was a string of high-profile serial killers throughout the decade. The Mansons, Ted Bundy and the Zodiac Killer had left people on edge. It had become harder to convince people to come with you on a nice walk down a dark alleyway, or into the forest late at night. However, despite the seventies being somewhat infamous for grizzly murders, hitchhiking was more popular than ever. People had never been more eager to get into a stranger's car while they were on their own and far from civilization. In the last few years, Doug had managed to get a few high-profile killings under his belt by posing as a hitchhiker. Yet as the decade was drawing to a close, and the Bundys and Gacys of the world were brought to justice, people became less and less welcoming of strange men getting into their cars. Fortunately, right as Doug was considering leaving, an old car pulled up.

The car was an old red sedan. Doug liked red. He thought it was a bit cliché, but it reminded him of blood. Doug particularly liked this shade of red. It was a deep crimson that was not unlike the deoxygenated blood that spilled out from people's veins. He felt as if he could impale the car's occupants on its gaudy, spiked hood ornament and the average passer-by wouldn't be able to tell where blood ended and paint began. He then began to lose himself in thought, coming up with a myriad of imaginative ways to kill his next victim. Should he break off the hood ornament and use it like a dagger? Maybe it would be better to try and run his victim over. Would they get dragged under and crushed by the wheels, or go over the bonnet? Maybe if he did it just right, he could skewer them on the hood ornament as he ran them over. There was also the snub-nosed revolver hidden in his trousers; that was always a good option. Reliable too. Most people didn't survive

getting shot in the head; and the ones who did rarely survived for long. Right as Doug was compiling his top ten favourite ways to kill someone using only a fork, the car's driver rolled down the window and called out to him.

'Where ya goin', son?' said the man, who appeared to be at least five years older than Doug. He didn't sound like he was from around here, or the West Coast in general, but he was the first person in a few hours who had been willing to let a complete stranger into their car, and that was fine with Doug.

'Just down to Portland,' replied Doug, 'meeting family.'

'I'm headed to Eugene myself; hop on in.'

Doug threw his suitcase into the boot of the car. It was empty, but it added to the illusion that he was actually a hitchhiker. Then, he sat in the seat behind the driver. Doug had found his victim. The hard part was over.

That's what Doug thought anyway. Doug and his newfound driver, Sam, had more in common than either of them realised. While their lives differed hugely, they shared one incredibly niche hobby. They were, in fact, *both* serial killers.

Sam was born about half a decade before Doug, in Little Rock, Arkansas. The Great Depression had hit hard and his life was difficult, but he had found a reprieve in superhero comics. The city was scary, and it only seemed to get worse and worse as time went on. And so, the idea that one person could dress up like a bat and single-handedly clean the place up appealed to him. As he grew older, however, he started to notice issues with the comics he adored. None of his favourite heroes dealt with their enemies permanently. They would always hand them over to the police or the asylum, only for them to come back a week later to terrorise innocent people all over again. These people

were supposed to be heroes—*super* heroes—and yet they gave these dangerous individuals seemingly infinite second chances. If someone would just kill these people, no one would have to deal with them ever again. Sam believed it was just a part of the formula. If Batman finally just killed the Joker, or if Superman killed Lex Luthor, there wouldn't be anything to write about for the next issue. The writers could come up with any excuse they wanted, but Sam knew that was the real reason. It was just the way things were. A real superhero would understand that the safety of the many outweighed the lives of a few, and that the best way to get rid of pests was to kill them. Unfortunately, superheroes weren't real.

Things changed when Sam grew up and went out into the world. He didn't go to college, and finding a job proved difficult. But eventually he found work driving taxicabs in the city. Work showed Sam a world that he thought existed only in his comics. The night shift suited him best, and as time went on, he noticed all the unsavoury characters who would come out at night to prey on those who couldn't help themselves. Drug dealers took advantage of people's addictions for profit. Pimps sold women like property to anyone willing to buy. Some men weren't decent enough to even pay for their thrills, and would just grab women off the street. A few people tried to use him as a getaway driver, and typically got angry when he declined. Perfectly decent folks who happened to be extremely drunk were also capable of violence from time to time. After an unhappy customer had landed Sam in the emergency room, he began to keep a small handgun in his glove box for his own safety. One night, though, he had to use it for someone else's. Sam was on his usual route when he had to stop outside a bar. A married couple, who looked to be in their late twenties, were looking for a ride back to their apartment in the city. The man looked as though he had been dragged through a hedge, and it appeared to only partially be the alcohol's fault. His shirt was quite

dirty, with bits of God knows what strewn across the garment's surface; but Sam's attention was drawn to a large stain that trailed down the front, which was presumably vomit. His skin was red and covered in sweat, too. Sam was worried the man might drop dead in his car on the way. His companion didn't seem much healthier. But it didn't look like excess was killing her; it looked like worry. She seemed on edge from the moment she entered the car, entirely due to her husband.

The journey felt like an eternity, although in reality they were only going to the edge of the city. The man, in his inebriated stupor, refused to stop talking. He spoke about all manner of things, none of which were interesting. He felt the need to express his opinions on the names of passing shops, how ugly the people outside were, how ugly their dogs were, how ugly their children were, how, in his opinion, all babies were ugly when you really got down to it; then he took a few potshots at his wife and how ugly she was. His wife, in contrast, only spoke when absolutely necessary and was quick to quieten down again. Her husband still thought she spoke too much despite this, and made this clear to everyone in the car.

Eventually Sam had had enough. He knew the world was host to some nasty people, but he did not think someone could be so utterly repugnant in every regard. His passenger was fat and ugly, yet shallow and superficial. Sam imagined that the man's house must have no mirrors, because if he ever saw his own reflection he would almost certainly critique it until he starved to death; although his rotundity would have drawn out that process quite significantly. While Sam may have personally disliked the man, he did not seem particularly dangerous, and once Sam dumped his passengers at their destination, he could go home and enjoy something more intellectually stimulating, like navel-gazing or watching paint dry. Unfortunately for Sam, the man began to paw at his wife, and became aggressive when she fought back. The man then began to hurl insults at his wife, but it wasn't

long before he pulled his arm back and planted a fist in her eye. Sam thought back to the superhero comics of his youth. By now, someone like Batman would have shown up to save the day. But Sam remembered the one flaw of all those old comics. No matter which hero showed up, they would only offer a temporary fix. The culprit would always be back again next week to terrorise more innocents. It was then that Sam realised he had the opportunity to do something not even Superman could. He reached into his glove box, and in one smooth motion whipped his arm around and shot the man in the head. There was a flash of light, then a loud bang, a spurt of blood and then silence. Sam took a moment to consider what he had done, but before he could form a coherent thought, the woman started screaming. So he shot her as well. She should have been more grateful. Sam soon realised that he couldn't bring his taxi back to the depot covered in blood and missing its passengers. So he drove it to the river, and pushed the car in from behind.

Officially, a taxi driver went mad and committed suicide, taking his passengers along with him. In reality, a taxi driver had seen the truth, and had gone on a crusade against evil. And so, he moved from town to town, culling society as he saw fit. His car, a second-hand sedan he had acquired for free thanks to a bet, became his home. He made a few modifications along the way that made his job easier; made it less likely that he would have to dump this car in the river. His magnum opus, in Sam's opinion, was the paint choice; blood would always blend right in.

Despite there being two murderers sitting in the car, the ride was mostly uneventful. Doug sat in the back, mostly silent, waiting for his moment to strike. Sam sat in the front, also mostly silent, also waiting for his moment to strike. His views had changed somewhat since he began his crusade. Sam could tell, just by looking at Doug, that he was some

loathsome hippie, or perhaps even a communist. Sam had honed in on hitchhikers in the last ten years. Any proud American worth his salt owned one of Detroit's finest automobiles, and it was his duty as a red-blooded American to keep his great country free from devious bad-actors. That's what Captain America had taught him, anyway. Normal people would find the tension unbearable, but Doug and Sam thought the exact opposite. Both had been forced to put on friendly faces for their whole lives, and now, for once, they were both acting 'normally.' They both knew something was up, but they couldn't tell what. Usually Doug's drivers would have tried to strike up a conversation with him by now. Similarly, Sam thought it was weird that Doug hadn't begun lecturing him about the evils of napalm or some other communist gobbledygook by now. The tension was starting to get to Sam. Murder wasn't fun unless he had a moral reason to do so. And so, he lowered his window for some fresh air. This didn't help as much as he wanted, however, so he asked Doug to do the same. The hand crank was old and the window was somewhat difficult to open, but the window, once open, was surprisingly large and allowed a nice, refreshing breeze into the car. Doug was beginning to feel the pressure too. There were no other cars on the road, so he decided to do something a bit risky. He took the revolver from his trousers and pressed it up against the back of Sam's headrest. This was probably a bad idea, but Doug thought something was definitely up with his driver. Right when he was about to pull the trigger, however, the car swerved violently. Doug's arm flew out the window, there was a loud bang, and the pistol jumped out of his hand.

'Woah, Jesus!' exclaimed Sam. 'You okay? I think I blew a gasket or something. We should pull over. There's a clearing in the forest over there.'

Doug didn't quite know what was going on. Had his victim seen through him? Or was his car genuinely breaking down? It was certainly

old, but the ride was smooth. Why did he swerve? Did blowing a head gasket do that? For as much time as Doug had spent in cars, he didn't understand them very well and he couldn't know for sure. Either way, he couldn't lose the initiative.

'Yeah, you're probably right,' replied Doug.

Excellent. That forest is a perfect place to get rid of him, both of them thought simultaneously.

Sam drove the car into a clearing in the forest. He could have stopped right at the side of the road, but he didn't. He kept going further and further into the forest until Doug couldn't see the road beyond the trees anymore. He couldn't even hear the cars passing by. Sam wondered why his victim was allowing him to drive so far away from the road when he could have stopped anywhere. Doug wondered why his victim was taking the car so far out of sight for a bit of simple maintenance. They both considered that this would make killing their respective victims a lot easier, however, and so they carried on.

Finally, Sam stopped the car, popped open the bonnet, and went to look inside, with Doug coming along to help. Doug noticed that the engine, as far as he could tell, looked fine. It was well maintained, and there were no noticeable signs of damage. Sam, however, was giving the car a good look over, seemingly oblivious to his own well-maintained engine. *Surely it was all an act,* Doug thought. There was definitely something wrong with the Good Samaritan who had offered him a ride. How could he not have noticed the gun going off inches from his head? Why did he swerve precisely at that moment? Doug decided to act decisively. He pointed out a funny-looking part of the engine and encouraged Sam to take a look. When Sam's head was fully inside the car, Doug slammed the bonnet down with all his weight. Sam, partially concussed and surprisingly still alive, decided to act decisively as well. In one swift motion he snatched the pointy ornament from his bonnet, and embedded it into Doug's liver.

Doug collapsed from the pain, and would slowly bleed out on the forest floor. Sam, heavily concussed and currently stuck inside a car's engine, would die soon after. No one ever figured out why hitchhikers stopped going missing in the Pacific Northwest, and Doug and Sam's deaths were ruled as a bizarre car accident.