

Life Expectancy in a Trunk (depends on traffic)

By David James Keaton

If you drive around long enough, the only relationships you will form outside of family is a healthy hatred for authority figures who claim more than a reasonable share of your road. You will begin to think of every cop, fireman, even paramedic as the same person, a constant obstacle every time you need to drive somewhere fast. Your anger might be considered unreasonable because, much like the minor skirmish you had over that theater armrest on your very first date, the one that resulted in some kid's arm wrapped around his head twice, compound fractures buttering his popcorn red, you simply cannot fucking tolerate anyone asking you to move over.

She'll insist on driving my new car. I'll let her. It'll be a big step for us because we both know my sister can't drive for shit. She's never learned to merge fast enough, and I'll lose my patience like I always do and have to shove her leg down on the accelerator to help her get with the flow of traffic. We will almost crash my first new car ever, a black 2010 Grand Prix, yes; a ridiculously cocky name for a car that sounds like you already won a race before the odometer even registers a single mile. But at 16 years old, I first learned how to drive on a '88 model, and for this reason, it always seemed like a good choice, that and the fact that consumer's guides claimed it packed the biggest trunk. Most important though, I first learned how to merge in that car, a day in school my sister must have skipped.

It'll take two decades for me to start to appreciate my instructor's training by trying to pass it down to my sister. Even longer to regret everything I did to sabotage that man's job and reputation for touching my goddamn knee.

She'll suddenly slam on the brakes, and I'll put a quick hand on the dash to keep my face off the windshield. There will be an animal in the road blocking traffic, and I'll jump out to rescue it like a big brother or father figure is supposed to.

It'll be a woodchuck, I think. After circling it, afraid touch it, I'll run and grab a plastic bag off the side of the road, shake out the garbage, and try to trick it to back up inside. That's when it'll start flopping over and hissing, losing its balance as it snaps at nothing but air. It must have gotten hit, I'll decide, but obviously not hit hard enough to be fatal. Cars will be coming from the other direction, and I'll be running out of ideas fast when a truck pulls up and a bigger man than me gets out.

He's a shuffling, black-bearded, biker-looking monstrosity, and I'll be convinced he's seconds away from bellowing at me for holding up traffic. Instead, he'll take one hard look at what I'm doing and, without a word, step into the oncoming lane to stop the cars with his hand. His presence will be so comforting, I'll half-expect him to casually stop the cars with his shoulder. And when I finally get the critter off the road and he's swaggering past us and back to his truck, he'll clap me on the shoulder and say all wise

and grizzled, “It probably ain’t gonna make it anyway, boy. You know, sometimes you just gotta stop fucking helping.”

My sister will tell me later he looked just like our dad, the last time we saw him a decade ago.

“Hey! You want me to put that thing out of its misery?”

It’s the second cop I’ve seen all year. I’ll glance at my watch. All the anger I’d been saving up for the next firefighter that cut me off in traffic or glorified his job in front of some females will come bubbling up and over the brim.

“Don’t worry about it. Nothing to see here, Officer.”

He’ll hear the disrespect in that last word clear as hell, and I’ll wish he’d have the chance to hear the disdain in my voice whenever I use the word “Sheriff” instead – a technique I picked up from a lifetime of westerns. But it’ll be nasty enough for his forehead to squeeze the top of his sunglasses like a fist, and he’ll actually pull his revolver and show it to me.

“I can take care of it. It ain’t gonna make it anyway, son.”

“How do you know? You can’t see through the bag. Or do those glasses have special powers?”

My sister will snicker, and the cop will turn on his hazard flashers and step out next to us. I’ll hear a collective sigh in the revving engines of the traffic stacked behind him. I’ll wonder why he didn’t move his cruiser ten feet forward and onto the shoulder of the road to let the congestion get by instead of choosing to hit the button that makes his shiny, pretty lights announce his entrance from stage left. But I’ll ask him something else instead.

“If you get to shoot this trash bag, will it be the first time you ever fired that gun?” He will scowl and step into my personal space, something I’ve seen civilians arrested for. He’ll act like his feelings are hurt.

“I was gonna do you a favor.”

I’ll swing the rustling, hissing bag around to my back so he can’t see it.

“I think this particular bag of garbage wants to fight for every breath it can. It doesn’t believe in a garbage-bag afterlife and has decided it doesn’t want to take that chance by letting you shoot it.”

“What is your problem.”

“You know why it sounds like you didn’t use a question mark just now? Because you don’t give a shit about my answer.”

“Move your car and get outta here. If you drop that bag, I’ll cite you for littering.”

“You realize you’re blocking the road, too, right?”

“I said move it. Move it over. Now.”

Fuck you, I don’t say, and my sister will already be alarmed by this exchange. I’ll put the mewling bundle in the trunk, opening and closing it with a practiced speed so no one else can see what’s already stacked in there, then I climb into my car.

Behind the wheel, I’ll spin my tires, but the cop dodges the fishtail of muck easily. I’ll spin them again. No forward progress. The cop will climb into his cruiser,

dialing his cell phone with his thumb as he turns off his hazards. He'll yell out the window, barely concealing his glee as I get back out:

"Tow truck's on the way. I think I'll wait with you."

His hazards will flash back on as he drifts back over the yellow lines. And after ten minutes of leaning on our hoods, I'll try to break the ice.

"Question for you, Sheriff."

"I'm not a Sheriff."

"Have you ever seen that reality show *C.A.T. the Skip Tracer?*"

He won't answer.

"Sheriff, I have to tell ya, between you and me, the guy on that show has got to be, without a doubt, the biggest candy-ass I've ever seen in my life."

The sheriff will cross his arm and twitch his ass on his cruiser to get comfortable. The one good thing I'll say about cops is they're used to getting lectured by civilians.

"Seriously, I almost punched my television last night with all that posing he was doing while his horrifying white-trash family stood behind him trying to act all tough. We have some time right now so I can tell you these things, but I don't know if I can begin to cover everything that makes Cat one of the biggest pussies in history..."

He'll start to look up to the sky for help.

"...but I'll try. For starters, this silly prick *prays* on camera. Before he arrests some crackhead or paraplegic bond jumper – always female mind you; way to pick the tough targets, dude – he does this whole self-righteous power prayer psyche-up that's supposed to impress the viewers. Tell me, you ever pray before you pull over some blue-haired oldster?"

He won't answer.

"See, the only praying I've ever done in my life, and I'm not ashamed to say I've had my share of darkness, heartache, and soul-searching moments, but the absolute *only* time I've ever actually gotten down on my knees and asked for anything...was for this bounty hunter to please get a shotgun blast to the fucking face. Either that or have him try to arrest me. And don't get me wrong, I'm not even trying to be a tough guy here. I'm just saying that it would be so easy to disrupt his weak-ass tactics. First off, he's only armed with pepper spray, right? Hey, you have that on your belt too, don't ya, Sheriff? So all I would need to do is answer my door wearing one of them World War II gas masks. "What are you going to do, now?" I would ask him. "Oh, nothing, eh? Out of ideas already?" And that name. "Skip tracer." Hell, even those words sound lame. When I was a kid, those were two things you should never get caught doing."

My sister will start to smile and take her ear off the trunk to join in. The sheriff will adjust his glasses, a very telling move that would have cost him his hand in poker.

"Come on, am I right though? Simply not opening the door? Doesn't that throw a monkey into the wrench? An exciting pursuit through the trailer park would come to an abrupt end if you simply wouldn't let them in the *door*, wouldn't it? Now, my lawyer friends will correct me if I'm wrong, but I'm thinking that the law treats bounty hunters kind of like vampires. They can't come in unless you invite them!"

He sighs and starts to walk around to my trunk, maybe hearing the thumping and thinking it's much too loud for roadkill, so I step it up.

"And if his shitbag son *did* set foot inside my house? Oops! Trespassing! Shotgun blast to the face. That fuckin' mutt's beautiful ponytail would flutter lazily to

the ground. Of course there's the rest of that bounty hunter's sorry-ass crew to worry about, too. Haven't forgotten about them! Hmm, maybe that wizened, uncle-molester-looking one? I'll just trick him with a six-pack of cheap shit beer in a bear trap. Hey, do you have any uncles in the force?"

He'll lean down and drum some fingers near my taillight as I keep going.

"So, let's say they catch me getting some groceries. What do I do? Well, I get in my car and lock the doors. What are they gonna do? Smash the windows? That's illegal, Jack! You know what happens when you do that? Shotgun blast to the face. Praise Jesus. They'd probably just yell at me in their best, intimidating, made-for-TV voices, and I would begin to read a book. Then they would have to stop filming because it would make for bad television. They would probably turn off the cameras and plead with me to come out, sign a waiver, and please make them look less incompetent. I would then shit on the dashboard and draw pictures on the windshield."

The sheriff will finally take off his sunglasses as I pick up speed.

"I might attempt to draw pictures of Cat and his entire waterhead family. And that wife of his? That fat fuck with the crispy-fried blonde hair? She would probably get out of their S.U.V. and start squawking at me, too. Now, has anyone ever taken a long, hard look at her? Maybe being in law enforcement means you don't have time to take the same long looks at your wife that you do at minor traffic infractions, but has she even taken a long, hard look at herself? That shiny monster looks like someone tried to cram a Thanksgiving ham into a fuckin' three-year-old's mitten. She just smugly wobbles and totters around on those spiked heels barking orders all day. Does that sorry-ass, bulging piece of moose shit honestly think she's hot? Does she honestly think she's intimidating, that's the question. And when there's a situation where there's a chance for her to act like an authority figure, like, say, someone actually *not* wanting that preening circus sideshow of idiots on their front porch or civilians deciding to express their annoyance, she'll immediately start shrieking profanity and threats like the tiresome, white-trash failure she is. Wow, what a professional. I would love for the nearest front-row sidewalk spectator to crack her in the head with a beer bottle while she's saying something smug and sassy for those cameras. Then, as she wipes the blood and beer from her ugly mug and her vision clears, she looks up to see half of her beloved Cat's face and that carefully sprayed, girly-ass hairdo of his come flying across the sky riding a wave of gunfire. Then she'd turn to watch her halfwit son take a crowbar in the teeth because I've somehow managed to sneak up behind him covered in my own shit and laughing uncontrollably while he was babbling into the camera about his killer instincts and heightened senses not allowing anyone to *ever* get the drop on him. Hey, that reminds me. With the glut of reality police shows these days, do you find your senses affected?"

Nothing. But the speaker pinned to his shoulder will crackle static like a string of sneezes. I'll feel him ready to ask me to open my trunk, so I'll bring religion into my bullshit.

"Oh, please, God, if you're really up there, let those noble crimefighters try to arrest me! How would I go about doing that? Can you help me with this? I need to commit a crime in Hawaii, right? Isn't that where these heroes practice their own unique brand of justice? Or is it Candy Land? But how do I get their attention? I'd have to not pay my speeding tickets, right? No, wait, that's far too serious of a crime. They'd never take the case, never risk the chase. I'd have to not pay a *parking* ticket, then wait for a

judge to issue a bench warrant. And then I'd have to concentrate and make myself forget about it for a year or two. Then maybe, just maybe, while I'm playing video games and watching *Midnight Gun*, a fine '80s film that must be considered the bounty hunters' Holy Grail, there would be a knock on my door as he and his vanload of cameras and clowns piled into my peephole. Fuckin' fools. Cat, he talks about how he used to be "a bad guy" himself, and how he now walks the straight-and-narrow. Bad guy, my ass. With those fucking beads he puts on his arms? With that bizarre spray-tan he slathers on himself? With that mind-boggling hair? With his tight-fitting jeans and boots that even homosexuals frown at their television and mutter, "Whoa, that's really gay." And what about his leather jacket with the American flag on the back?"

He won't look to his other shoulder like I hope. But he'll want to.

"Hey, just like that patch on your arm! Notice how they didn't really knit all fifty stars on there because it was too small. I knew a guy who put the American flag on the side of his garage and ran out of room for the stars, too, so I can understand how they had to skimp on the authenticity of yours. But, seriously, our country's flag is one of the least creative things I've ever seen in my life. It's awful. It looks like a 5-year-old designed it, and just used random crayons, the one's that weren't broken. It's a fucking embarrassment. Hey, not for you though, Sheriff. It looks great on your car. Your shoulder not so much though. Makes you look like an astronaut. Hey, do you guys salute the flag like the military does?"

My sister will now have officially stopped worrying about the animal in the trunk, and I'll relax a bit about what else is in there. She'll come over to look at the patch on his arm, and he'll slouch almost imperceptibly, hopefully self-conscious of it for the first time in his life.

"I see what you mean," she'll say. "When I see one of those gigantic American flags flapping over a car dealership, I think that the design looks so silly and weak that I always expect the other side to be blank."

I will be surprised, as you are, at how long the sheriff will let us talk, but I talk real fast. You ever see a cop when it's got nothing to do? It's really quite funny. They're like video game characters on your television screen when you walk away from the controller too long, those animations that the programmers put in there as a gag. A cop will yawn, whistle, bite its lip, pop a piece of gum, scratch its head, blink slow behind those mirrored sunglasses, check the bottom of its feet, then eventually repeat all these movements when it runs out of variations. But don't be disappointed when he doesn't speak, doesn't argue, doesn't call me out on my grandstanding because, much like the newest video games where they've added expensive new effects and voice actors and a third dimension to some of classic villains from the classic games of our childhood, letting them finally speak instead of just squawk and beep somehow gave them less personality and made them even less threatening.

I'll be able to see my sister wants to jump in again, but I'll step in front of her before his spell is broken.

"I forgot, who were we talking about? Firemen? Cops? Oh, yeah, that bounty hunter. Okay, I'm sure he was real bad news back in the day compared to the rest of his neighborhood. But what possible crime did he commit besides crimes against masculinity? Oh, do I dream about that shotgun blast to his face often. Goes without

saying that he gives real bounty hunters a bad name. Hold on, let me check the tires one last time..."

I'll start my car and pull forward, making it obvious that I was never stuck at all. I'll exaggerate a "how about that?" shrug to the cop, let in my sister, and drive away with that cocksucker still locked up from too many things he wished he'd said.

Miles away, I'll find the low road I was looking for. It was flooded the last time I drove through the area, but today it'll be waiting, the old detour sign missing the top screw and hanging upside down and powerless.

On foot, as I drag the black bag deep into the woods, I'll be glad my sister is there to help, even though I can tell by her face she sure isn't. She'll be upset because, when I shake the animal free from the trash, it will be dead, long since suffocated because of the time I wasted pretending to be stuck in the mud. But she won't shed a tear for the bail jumper that rolls out next, ankle bracelet still jammed in his mouth, the light on the LoJack still beeping on his tongue like a pulse, the high-grade rubber strap still buried deep in his carotid artery, neck black where main cables burst under his skin when I tried to use the strap first as motivation, then as a leash, and finally as a shutoff valve.

I'll resist the urge to tell her that every third one of these fuckers I end up burying out here, the instant I lose my temper and their transportation becomes more trouble than my percentage of their bond. I will act like this body is as much of a fluke as the woodchuck I suffocated. And I'll really resist the urge to mourn the loss of another thousand dollars.

But when I see her push down on the dead man's leg to help me squeeze him into his hole, my mouth will stretch wide and proud, and I'll know these two funerals are worth every goddamn penny.

David Keaton's fiction has recently appeared in Six Sentences, Pulp Pusher, Crooked, and he has a short story forthcoming in Big Pulp.