

Doing sixty

A story by [Jeff Kunkel](#) in the [October 21, 1998](#) issue

I was doing 60 and thinking about my boss, who's been on my ass lately, when the doe bounded out of the cedars and onto the highway. The red Jeep ahead of me caught her rear end just as she was about to jump clear of our lane and she tumbled, legs every which way, across the other lane and into a wide ditch. I'm a salesman on commission and when I'm on the road, I don't stop for anything except a gas gauge on E, a customer, or a motel at the end of the day. But something told me to stop now.

I got out of my car and walked to the Jeep. A young woman gripped the steering wheel with both hands and stared through her windshield as if she was still doing 60. I tapped on her window with my knuckle and she jerked her stare at me. "Are you all right?" I shouted. She looked at me like I was some kind of madman and tore off, throwing gravel behind her and cutting onto the highway, right in front of a Buick. The driver laid on his horn and veered into the left lane, just missing her rear end. I thought, "Better luck than the doe." An 18-wheeler roared by and the driver, a guy with a big head and huge arms, looked down at me like, "Hey, what's a guy in a suit doing on the side of the road between a swamp and a hayfield?"

I crossed the highway and saw the doe lying on her belly in the ditch, head held high, eyes and ears fixed on me like radar. I thought, "Maybe she's just stunned." I walked toward her, slowly, and stopped when she threw her head back and tried to stand, but she couldn't get off her belly. Oh Jesus! Her back legs lay beneath her like broken branches, useless, the bones white, moist, glistening in the sun where they had broken through her hide. For several minutes she fought to find her back legs, eyes wild, like the woman's in the Jeep. Her bright pink tongue hung out of the side of her mouth and slapped her in the face each time she jerked her body. I didn't know what to do, so I did what I always do when I'm unsure--I got out of there, eager to hit the gas and throw some gravel behind me.

When I got to my car, I opened the trunk and checked my traveling gear: suitcase, raincoat, umbrella, spare tire, jack, and of course, my three-ring product binders. I

sell frozen fish to anybody with a deep fryer, which is most any greasy spoon, roadside diner or restaurant in Wisconsin. Friday Night Fish Fries are big around here, even though the pope got liberal a while back and let his people eat meat on Friday.

I was about to close the trunk when I heard a dog barking. A big black-and-white collie ran toward me along the gravel shoulder. He caught the doe's scent, forgot about me, and went for her. I pulled off my suit coat, grabbed the jack handle and ran across the highway. The collie had her by the throat and threw his head from side to side, shaking the life out of her. Anger flowed into my chest and arms, and I ran right at that dog, waving the jack handle above my head like a tomahawk, yelling, "Get off her! Get away!"

He stayed on her until I was a step away, then let go and came for me like a wolf. I swung at him so hard that the jack handle whooshed through the air, but the dog ducked it, circled me and clamped onto my leg. I yelled, turned, swung again and busted his back. Down he went, yelping. I thought, "I have to kill him now." So I clenched my teeth and slammed him across the head. His eyes rolled back into his skull like white marbles, and I watched his legs stiffen and quiver. "What have I done?" I wondered, dizzy. My legs went out from under me and I sank to the grass.

I set the jack handle next to me and looked at the doe. During my fight with the dog, she had pulled herself a few feet through the grass with her front legs, but now she lay still, sizing me up. Her tongue was inside her mouth and she looked less afraid, composed almost, as if she had pulled herself together for the final act. I'm not the kind of guy who talks to animals but I told her, "I have to kill you, you know."

Her rabbit ears twitched and she blew a spray of blood from her black nostrils. Her ears twitched again and she looked down the road. A man walked toward us in the ditch, an old man with a body stronger and more trim than mine. He wore brown coveralls, work boots and a cap. I thought, "He must have pulled over like me," but I couldn't see his car anywhere. The man was about to speak to me but paused when he saw the dog lying next to me. He asked, "What happened to my dog?"

I stiffened. "He came for me."

"You killed him then?"

"He damn near took my leg off." Scared of what he might do, I picked up the jack handle and put it in my lap, making sure he saw my move. Kneeling next to his dog, he stroked the bloody fur with his thick hand, minus a forefinger.

"You was a good dog," he said. Turning to me, he added, "But he never could keep his teeth to hisself." The man stood, looked down at me and said, "Let me look at that leg of yours." Kneeling next to me, he slid two thick fingers from each hand into the small tear in my pants and ripped it open to see the bite. This guy smelled like a barn! "We'll let Mama look at it," he said as he pointed toward a white farmhouse down the road, half-hidden by a spruce windbreak.

Looking at the doe, he asked, "You hit her?"

"No. The car ahead of me hit her. I stopped to . . . I just stopped." He nodded.

"You ain't going nowhere, beautiful," he said to her. The doe lay on her white belly, watching us. He turned to me and said, "She's done for."

"I know."

Another 18-wheeler roared by, and the tail wind flattened the long grass around us and tossed my hair. The doe didn't move, didn't blink. The farmer stood, reached into a coverall pocket, and took out a bone-handled jackknife. When he clicked open the blade, the doe opened her mouth, curled her tongue, and bawled like a lamb, which shook me up, because I was sure that a deer wouldn't make any sound--that they took it all without complaining.

The farmer stood still, puzzled. "I killed a lot of animals in my day," he said, "but only when they trusted me. She don't trust me." He held out his knife to me. "She knows you stopped for her," he added. He laid the knife in my open palm and I thought, "I don't do things like this. I make money, get laid, stay out of trouble and move on. That's what I do."

"She could have picked a better man to trust," I said, looking at the knife.

"She don't care how good you been," he said. "She just wants you to be good now."

"Is the knife sharp?"

He laughed, from the belly. "A dull knife don't do nobody any good."

When I looked at the doe, she stopped bawling. I wondered, "How is it that my look quiets her?" Closing my hand around the bone handle, I crawled toward her on my hands and knees. She watched me without moving, without fear, until I was so close that I could smell her blood and see the blue slits at the center of her brown eyes. Once, when I was a boy, I watched my grandpa slaughter a lamb with a knife, but I couldn't remember how he did it. All I could remember is the blood, the bawling, and the look in the old man's eyes as the lamb slumped to the ground between his legs. Without taking my eyes off the doe, I asked the farmer, "What do I do?"

"See that white patch on her throat?"

"Yeah."

"Stick her there and cut across." She held her head firm as I stuck the knife into her neck to the bone handle and cut. Warm blood spurted across my hand and flowed like a stream down her neck. The blue slits in her eyes flashed open, searching for light as if she were bounding through the night woods on four good legs. A moment later, she laid her head on the grass like a lamb, gently, right between my knees! I touched her ears and stroked her neck, the coarse hair rising between my fingers. Her eyes never closed.

I wiped the blade against the ground and folded it back into the bone handle. The farmer walked to my side, took his knife and said, "You done good." He put his hands under my arms and hoisted me to my feet. Grabbing the doe's front legs, he pulled her toward the highway, her neck and head dragging along the ground. Hobbling alongside, I lifted her front quarters off the ground. Glancing for traffic, I saw the red Jeep parked on the gravel shoulder, not far from us. The woman watched us through her rear-view mirror. I couldn't blame her for keeping her distance. God knows, I've looked at a lot of life through my rear-view mirror. I waved to her with one hand, and she clicked on her left blinker, eased the Jeep onto the highway and was gone.

We dragged the doe across Highway 57--leaving a ribbon of blood across the concrete lanes--and into the cedars. The farmer turned to leave, but I said, "Hold up." I broke off a cedar branch and laid it across her body, cedar scent covering her like perfume. Crossing the highway again, the farmer and I walked to his dog. "Sorry I killed him," I said.

"Some things can't be helped," he answered. He bent down and gathered his dog in his arms, and together we walked to his house.

The farmer laid his dog on the front lawn, helped me up the front porch stairs, and sat me on a long, soft swing. A short, white-haired woman appeared behind the screen door and glanced at me, her husband, her dog. The farmer said, "We had ourselves a little accident out on the highway. Can you get some hot water and a washcloth?" She nodded and disappeared from the door without saying a word.

I pulled my keys from my pocket and asked, "You mind getting my car?" He took the keys and walked toward the highway. The woman, holding a small pot of hot water in one hand, a white washcloth in the other, backed through the screen door, which banged shut behind her. She wore a powder-blue house dress, stained white apron, and nylons that sagged around her thick ankles. "I'm Ruth," she said.

Without giving her my name, I said, "Your dog got hold of my leg." She knelt in front of me on the painted wood floor, dipped her washcloth in the pot, and wrung it out. I held the tear open and twisted my leg so that she could see the wound. She tucked her hand and the washcloth through the tear and scrubbed my calf, which made me wince. Reaching inside her apron pocket, she pulled out a farm-sized bottle of red iodine and dabbed the wound, which stung like hell.

"You lay down and rest," she said. I wanted to say, "I gotta go, lady. I got calls to make," but before I could protest, her white, fleshy hands guided me onto my back, and it felt good to lie down for a minute.

I woke up on the porch, alone, covered by a red, white and blue afghan. My car was parked under a tree, out of the sun. I heard the sound of a shovel working dirt, so I got up and walked around the side of the house. Beneath a towering lilac bursting with purple blooms, the farmer was finishing a grave. His coveralls lay in a pile on the grass beside him, and the top of his head was capless, bald as a baby's, beaded with sweat. I walked up to him and said nothing--a real feat for a salesman.

Sinking the blade of the shovel into the dirt mound, he folded his hands and said, "God, give this here dog a rabbit to chase around heaven and he'll be the happiest dog up there." I broke off a lilac branch, each bloom so sweet that I could smell it at arm's length, and lay the branch on the grave. He lifted his nose to the air like his dog and sniffed. "Smell that?" he asked.

"I smell lilac," I said.

"I smell potatoes frying in Mama's kitchen. She set an extra plate for you." I wanted to say, "No thanks, not for me. I gotta go," which is what I always say when kindness comes too close. I leave in a hurry and look at it in my rear-view mirror.

"Lamb chops too, this thick," he said, holding his middle finger an inch from his thumb, watching me. "Cut them chops myself."

I washed the blood off my hands and stayed for dinner, since I'd already missed my afternoon calls, and since I hadn't had a home-cooked meal in ages. I was afraid they would get nosy and ask me about my life, but the only questions they asked were, "Another chop or two?" "More potatoes?" "You'll have a piece of Mama's rhubarb pie, then?"

After dinner I got in my car and drove down the gravel drive, watching the old couple in my rear-view mirror. They stood hip to hip on their porch and waved at me. Back on the highway, I goosed her to 60, but that felt too fast, so I slowed to 50, rolled down my window, and looked into the dark woods.