

## The Buck Stops Here

Ethan Coen

A man in a bar told me about his Uncle Andy who had lived and, several years ago, died on Michigan's Upper Peninsula. On a winter night, with a cord of firewood in the back of his pickup, he was driving home on a lightly travelled rural road (the U.P. has no other kind). As he made a turn, his lights raked a magnificent eight-point buck standing on the center-line. Uncle Andy braked, skidded; the beast perhaps also tried to evade—or didn't, depending on whether there is truth to the cliché about deer in headlights. At any rate, evasive maneuvers proved insufficient, or perhaps mutually defeating, and the encounter ended with impact. The huge animal flew over the hood, crashed through the windshield, and landed squarely against Uncle Andy—not, however, killing him, but its enormous dead weight did pin him to his seat, and the impact stalled out the truck. Uncle Andy sat in the suddenly quiet vehicle as its headlights slowly yellowed and dimmed, with two hundred pounds of dead deer across his chest and his right hand trembling inches from the ignition key, which, turned, would have restored heat to the cab. He froze to death.

When I heard the story, I couldn't help tracing past its punch line. It would have been a long, cold night as Uncle Andy sat with his face flecked by the touch and wet of the odd eddying flake of snow, his field of vision largely occluded by the deer hulk cooling in his lap, his ears tuned for the hiss of oncoming tires but receiving only the delicate forest sounds that emerged from the snowfall quiet. No doubt he speculated about the frequency of traffic as he noted the symptoms of advancing hypothermia and thought, perhaps, about the larger questions.

One pictures the tableau that greeted his discoverer the next day: four stiff legs canted up out of the truck's windshield like a naval gun battery, their outline softened by a night's worth of snow; Uncle Andy inside, his right arm stretched over the carcass, bare chapped hand extended toward the steering column, eyes wide, eyebrows and lashes frosted, icicle suspended from the tip of his nose. It is a picture so precisely composed that the person who first stumbled on it might have looked around for a small marker giving the work's title, year, and media: "Serendipity," 1989 (steel, chrome, white-tailed deer, Uncle Andy). This raises the question of the artist's identity, but of course we all know it, and that he doesn't sign.

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The picture contains its own history. Past and present imply each other, giving us the perspective of a being for whom time holds no mysteries. The squeal of brakes and the spatter of glass are simultaneous with the lofty silence that follows. The future is there, too: the bootcrunch and bark of workers hoisting away the deer with the whine of a wrecker's hydraulic lift, and then the snap of Uncle Andy's bones as his body is forced

into a configuration that will permit its extraction from the cab. He is carted away, limbs twisted and fingers bent to claws, grinning as he stares at the ceiling of the ambulance, his nose-icicle now riding at the horizontal.

I sat at the bar with these thoughts; the story's narrator, sitting next to me, had lapsed into a Marlow-like reflective silence. Perhaps he was brooding about his own figurative white-tailed buck, out there even now, placidly cropping the sawgrass, biding the days that separated it and him from their fated convergence. His parka (the bar was in a small town in Wisconsin, and the season was winter) rested high, so that the teeth of its open zipper touched his chin; he was gazing down at the two calloused hands crowded round his shot glass. A loud "Last call!" did not disturb his stare.

I went out into the parking lot, where six or seven vehicles remained, most of them with engines rumbling but empty as ghost ships, their owners indoors waiting for the cars to warm. I set my own car to idling, got the scraper off the dash, worked briefly on the windshield, then went back inside. The man I had been talking to—his name was Coombs—was as I had left him, a hillock of Gore-Tex hunched over a whiskey. The jukebox had been unplugged. The half-dozen remaining customers, all of them men, sat scattered in the quiet, each staring at a point in space. At the bar, Coombs began to weep.