

4560 words

WHATEVER HAPPENS NEXT

SIMMS HAD made a deal with his mother. He'd be free for the remainder of the day – half his day was already shot – once he picked three more baskets of tomatoes. At least the end was in sight. He'd helped her all morning with the canning. Wash, cut out bad spots, slice, cook, stuff in jars, boiling water bath. Twenty-four quarts were finished and cooling. And now, just one basket to go. He reached down and grabbed a tomato that, by the way his fingers sank into it, he knew was rotten underneath. Only one thing to do with a rotten tomato. *Splat* against the shed.

"Simmons Perry!" his mother scolded from an open window.

It was a little embarrassing that she didn't need to elaborate. Then again, the satisfying sound of rotten tomato against wood was worth the mild reprimand. He had aimed at a knot in the siding. It was now leaking rotten tomato juice.

"Shall we make that *four* baskets?" she asked.

"No mother," he said with an irritated sigh that was wasted, she being out of earshot.

When the third basket was filled, he brought them all up to the back porch. His mother asked where he was planning to fish.

"Along the Huygens Kill." Too late, he realized his mistake.

"No. It's not safe."

Two weeks before, Bart Hinkle, a boy in his class, had been fishing alone on the stream, when he was grabbed from behind, blindfolded and assaulted. They didn't say in the paper how his clothes had been half ripped off. His mother probably didn't know

everything he'd heard and he only half-believed it himself, because why would anyone do *that*?

He said, "Maybe for a girl..."

"No," she insisted. "You need to know there are bad people in the world who will do awful things." She paused, looked away, and then continued. "Apparently, there is at least one in Cooper's Mill. Your father said he would talk to you about it."

That sounded like a question. Rather than reply that his father hadn't said anything, he told her Ronnie was going with him.

"I'm not so sure that makes it safe, but I suppose your father would think so. Just be careful."

Good. They were done with the whole subject. On the phone, Ronnie said he'd be at least an hour late meeting at the stream, which Simms chose not to tell his mother.

The current of the Huygens Kill drew ripples around Simms' ankles. He wiggled his feet to confuse it and disrupt the ripples. When his jean cuffs slipped into the water he rolled them up with his left hand, holding the fishing pole with his right. The branches of an old walnut tree reached out above him. Its leaves held a hint of yellow that would soon crowd out the green. It was hot for early September. He pulled off his tee shirt and threw it on the ground. The caw-caw of crows was all he heard above the sound of water falling over a small ledge ten feet downstream. Next to him was a hatful of walnuts, still in their green husks. He tossed a stick upstream and tried to hit it with walnuts before it disappeared in the rapids below the ledge. His target practice didn't exactly draw the fish to his hook, but they'd had their chance for what must be an hour now. He threw in another stick and began to reel in.

A sting on his stomach. He knew it was a mosquito before he saw it. He tensed up his stomach muscles to keep it from pulling out. When its tail turned a grayish red, he swatted it, splattering the skin with his own blood. He drew a design with it to scare his mother with later. A noise behind caused him to turn. It was getting on time for Ronnie to show up, but Simms didn't see anyone. Probably a squirrel dropping walnuts. He began to reel in again.

Darkness!! A bag over his head. He pushed it up with his two hands and yelled, “Ron...” The bag was pulled tight with a rope between his teeth that stifled his scream. This wasn’t Ronnie. The taste of corn. *A feedbag*. When he was pulled up and had his arm twisted behind his back, he knew it was a grown-up. He went from angry to scared. He was pushed frontways against a tree. Probably the walnut. If he could break loose and reach the water, he might escape. He got one hand free, but the attacker caught him and mashed his face into the bark. Feed dust filled his eyes. His hands were pulled around the tree and tied together on the other side. When his pants were pulled down, Simms kicked backwards at the assailant. It didn’t seem to matter. The man pressed against Simms and drove at him, attempting to force his way in. Simms squeezed himself shut and concentrated on freeing his hands, trying not to think of what was coming. The man’s hands strained to pull him apart. More thrusting. Then a new pain. A burning.

“No. No. No,” Simms cried, but barely loud enough for the squirrels to hear.

A dull thud behind him. Everything ceased. The attacker backed off. Another thud. Simms stopped kicking and was working to free his hands when the rope in his mouth loosened and the sack was pulled off. He spit out the dust and squinted in the sunlight. He could barely see, but knew it was Ronnie now trying to free his hands. The rope came lose. He rubbed his eyes and, through the mix of tears and dust, saw a man sprawled motionless on the ground, pants to his ankles. An old fence post lay next to him.

“Ronnie,” Simms said, pulling up his pants. “Is he dead?”

“I don’t know,” Ronnie said. “Grab your stuff and let’s get out of here.”

When Ronnie’s mother, Violet, got her new job in bookkeeping at the mill, it meant she could buy a house. He was glad when she agreed to move to Cooper’s Mill, where she would be closer to work, he closer to school, and she wouldn’t have to drive him to Uncle Jeter’s every day to meet the school bus. The only reason they could afford the house was its state of general disrepair. It wasn’t falling down, but it needed work here and there. There was painting to do inside and out. The porch steps tilted. Some

windows required glazing. In agreeing to buy it, she had made it clear that Ronnie would be doing some of the work. Today, she wanted him to fix the chicken house roof that had blown off in a recent big wind, but he wanted to go to his Uncle Jeter's. So he was sitting there thumbing through Sports Illustrated for the tenth time.

"You being fourteen, I know you don't want *me* to help you fix it," his mother said from the kitchen. "Call up Simms."

"He won't want to."

"You two have a fight?"

"*No.*"

"I saw his mother at the Grand Union."

How do mothers keep running into each other?

"Trudy says Simms has taken to moping around all day and night. Not himself. Came home with a scarred-up face."

"He tried to jump a barbed wire fence on his bike."

"Simms is smarter than that."

"Not always, he ain't."

"Isn't," she corrected him. "Keep whatever happened to yourself then. I'm only your mother. But call Simms and get that roof done or you'll have to answer to some soggy hens. Tell him I'll pay him. You two can mope together."

He didn't say anything.

"Whatever happened, at least he didn't get worked over like that Zack Porter."

"Who *cares* about him?" Ronnie said, and got up to go somewhere he couldn't hear his mother.

"*I care,*" she called to him on his way out. "And I'd care a whole lot more if it happened to you."

Ronnie found the claw hammer in the garage and went out to the chicken house. Some of the old tin had blown off. What was left of the roof was bent and twisted like a curtain in a breeze. Good a reason as any to get rid of the dumb cluckers and go to the Grand Union for your eggs. He got the stepladder and climbed up, testing the boards to see if they'd support him. It looked like he'd be able to get the old roof off on his own.

Someone had found Zack Porter lying on the ground along the Huygens Kill. So it said in the Taconic County Times. He wasn't dead, but he wasn't himself and they didn't know if he ever would be.

Most of the rusty nails pulled out. The others broke off. He hammered what remained into the roof boards and threw the old tin down on the ground. It felt good to be working. Doing something. Here came Simms across the lawn on his bike.

"Your mom called me," Simms said with a shrug. He held up the hammer he'd brought with him. "Said you needed some supervision." He didn't say his own mother had overheard the phone conversation and kicked him out of the house.

Ronnie had already decided he couldn't get the new tin up alone without bending a crease in it. Mohawk Lumber had delivered the three-foot wide panels in a neat pile. They each grabbed a panel at an end. Ronnie took his end up the ladder first. He walked up the roof boards while Simms followed him up the ladder, careful not to bend the tin. They squared up the overhang and nailed through the first panel with galvanized roofing nails.

In the middle of nailing it, Ronnie stopped and asked, "You see the Taconic County Times?"

"Yeah."

"You know Zack Porter?"

Simms looked to be sure Mrs. Cassidy wasn't around. "Not exactly. I can't believe they think he's another victim like Bart Hinkle. The Porter farm's on the Dutchtown Road. I might have seen him in town once or twice. The paper only told half the story."

"We tell the other half, I'm in big trouble."

"We're not telling," Simms said.

Ronnie nodded. "Still, I hope he gets better."

"Yeah. But I'm glad you were there."

"Just wish I'd been there sooner."

Simms said, "I don't want to talk about it any more," and started hammering again. "Ever."

Ronnie did want to, but they finished the roof without mentioning it again.

Ronnie's living with his Uncle Jeter last year had been great, but his mother made him come back after her boy friend Al was out of the picture. Actually, Ronnie had been glad to live at home again. It's not that he was a neatness fanatic, but Uncle Jeter didn't care about any kind of order. Maybe that's why his girl friend never came to his place. At first, Ronnie enjoyed not having to put things away. Then he started losing stuff like schoolbooks and clothes. The few times his mother came to clean up his room, it set the rest of his uncle's house in obvious contrast. He realized she shouldn't have to do that. When she offered to drive him to his uncle's on mornings when the weather was bad to meet the Cooper's Mill school bus, he didn't put up a fuss about moving back. That was the one thing he insisted on – he didn't want to go back to school in Tilberg. He could tell his mother was happy about the friends he'd made in Cooper's Mill – especially Simms. Having his mother call his Tilberg friends losers had always annoyed him. But he'd known she was right.

Now that they lived in Cooper's Mill, he didn't see Uncle Jeter so much, but he still bicycled up there sometimes after football practice. By then, his uncle was usually inside having a beer and reading the paper.

"They still haven't caught the guy who messed up Zack Porter," his uncle said one day.

Ronnie grunted and said, "You know him, Uncle Jeter?"

"Some. A bear of a man. Did him a brake job once."

"What was he like?"

"About like anyone, except one man warned me against doing work for him, 'cause he could get ugly. I never saw it. They say he's toned down now, after getting conked. A ball bat – or fence post – can work wonders."

Ronnie didn't laugh. "He married?"

Uncle Jeter looked over his newspaper. "What makes you so all-fire interested?"

Ronnie realized he was being too curious. "I don't know."

"Nah. He never married. And who'd marry him now?"

Ronnie said it was time for him to go. Ever since he and Simms had fixed the chicken house roof – some two months ago now – it seemed like it was best to be doing something – anything. Just sitting around, he couldn't keep his mind off that day on the Huygens Kill. But if he was *doing* something – even football practice – he could think about that.

There was a lot of downhill from Uncle Jeter's to his house on the edge of town. He always coasted as much as possible. His felt his eyes wanting to close. At night, he'd get to sleep alright like he always had. Then, sometime in the middle of the night he'd wake up and lay there thinking, replaying it again and again. He should have aimed for the ribs, not the head. But would that have stopped Zack Porter? What if he'd just screamed? Would Zack have run off? Or wouldn't he have gone after both of them, big as he was, and pounded on them until they were changed forever like *he* was now? Why should he even be worrying about some creepy pervert? If people knew the truth about Zack Porter they'd say he got what he had coming. Still, look at him. He's about half a man now.

Ronnie figured if he were Simms *he* wouldn't want anyone to know he'd been queered either. Or maybe Zack Porter only got in part way. He didn't know and he wasn't going to ask. Just tell me when it's all going to leave me alone.

Simms was shooting baskets in his backyard when a car pulled in the driveway. Strange cars at the house made him nervous. It could be about Zack Porter. He was relieved to see it was his father, who owned the Ford agency in Henrytown and sometimes came home in a different car. He'd probably want to talk, but Simms wasn't in the mood. He didn't want to talk to anyone. He barely made it through a school day.

He stepped aside to let his father back into the garage. He couldn't go frontways like everyone else. He said he got out faster in the morning that way. Simms' next shot was a swisher from the corner.

“Just like your old man,” his father said when he got out of the car.

Simms managed a smile.

“You know I’m disappointed you didn’t go out for football. I hope you’ll give basketball a shot.”

“I’m three inches short of six feet,” Simms said.

“We’re talking Taconic County, not New York City.”

Simms put up another shot. It bounced around and dropped through. “We’ll see.”

His father put his briefcase in his left hand and dribbled the ball out past where the foul line would be. He gave it a good arc, but it bounced off the rim. He stretched his arms inside his suit. “It must be these tight clothes. I’ll go change.”

His father hadn’t shot baskets with him since he was ten and just getting so he could reach the rim regularly. They were worried about him these last couple of weeks. “You talked all summer with Ronnie, Oatey and Foss about going out for football,” his mother said. “Instead you come home from school and mope.” Her favorite new word. Actually, he kind of liked moping. He didn’t want to be around all those guys, crashing into each other – on the field with all the pads on, or in the locker room with nothing on. He didn’t even take a shower after gym class now. Just got dressed while the others were in the shower room. “Girls won’t come within ten feet, you smelling like you ran two marathons,” Foss Baldwin had said last week. “Not that they ever did.” What girl would want him now anyway?

In his mind, Simms knew he was being stupid. He was the same person he’d been before that day on the Huygens Kill. That’s what his mind told him. But that’s not what he felt. Zack Porter pushing at him was the worst anyone had ever done to him. He’d been in a couple fights he could take some blame for. Crashing his bike, he could take the blame for. But he’d never done anything to Zack Porter and look what the son-of-a-bitch had done to him.

He rolled the basketball into the garage and got on his bike to ride to Hoyt’s Sunoco, yelling to his father through the kitchen window that his front tire needed air.

Even though he was only a freshman, Ronnie got a few minutes of playing time at halfback in the Dutchtown game. Football was turning out okay. Too bad Simms hadn't tried out. Ronnie had caught a ton of his perfect spirals in pickup games.

Ronnie had never been crazy about school, and he definitely wasn't a book-learner, but, along with after-school practice, it kept him going all day. It wasn't until after supper that he'd run out of distractions – mind occupiers. Even watching TV, his thoughts would wander. He took to discussing the shows with his mother. She liked that.

Football turned out to be a magnet for girls. That's the only explanation Ronnie had for Maureen Kelly's showing up near his locker every morning. He'd actually already noticed her practicing with the cheerleaders next to the football field. Where else did you get to see so much leg?

He usually sat with Simms at lunch. At least they weren't steering clear of each other any more. Sometimes Foss and Oatey joined them. Maureen had started sitting at the same table with a couple of her friends. The girls would talk about other kids. Simms wanted to hear about football, even though he wasn't playing. Ronnie often said he wished Simms were on the team – Foss and Oatey Duncan agreed – and he should at least start *thinking* about coming out next year. Simms went to all the games. Sometimes he sat next to Mrs. Cassidy in the stands. She thought Ronnie wasn't happy at school and asked Simms about him. He said Ronnie liked school as well as he could. He didn't mention Maureen. That was Ronnie's business.

On the Monday before Thanksgiving, Ronnie and Simms had the lunch table to themselves until Maureen came over with a friend, Cheryl, and sat down. Ronnie and Simms were both acquainted with Cheryl. Maureen took the chair next to Ronnie. Sometimes it bothered him that she always assumed she was entitled to sit next to him. They had never said they were going steady or anything. Other times, he liked that she wanted to sit with him.

Maureen said, "Me and Cheryl wondered if you two wanted to go roller skating in Henrytown during vacation. My mom said she could drive us if we go Friday."

Ronnie didn't really want to go and he didn't think Simms would either. He turned to Simms, letting him answer.

“We’re going with your uncle on Friday,” Simms said, forgetting to include even a trace of regret.

“Oh, right,” Ronnie said. “My uncle’s taking us up to Carneytown.”

The two girls looked disappointed.

“What for?” Maureen asked, annoyed.

“He knows where to find old bottles and tools and stuff,” Ronnie said.

“Who cares about Carney trash?” There was scorn in her voice.

“I do,” Ronnie said. “I’ve got some Carney blood.”

“Yeah?” Maureen said. She picked up her things and stood up. “Maybe that explains a lot. Maybe that’s why you’re so friendly with Simms.” Cheryl stood up too. Maureen said, “Maybe you’re more than just *friends*.”

“What?” Simms said.

Ronnie leapt to his feet and kicked Maureen’s chair out of the way. She jumped back. He would have started swinging if Maureen weren’t a girl. “You just said the dumbest thing in the world.”

“My old man dragged me all over these hills when I was a youngster,” Uncle Jeter told Ronnie and Simms as he pushed on through the mountain laurel. It was a strain to hear his words over the chafing of their coats against the branches. The scrub was as thick as walking crossways through a full-grown field of corn. Here in November, at least it was cool, so they didn’t sweat over the effort. They finally burst out onto an old road with no tire tracks on its covering of dead leaves. Uncle Jeter said it used to be the way to come until a few years ago when some city people bought the land it crossed and closed it off. It was fifty years since anyone had lived in Carneytown.

The walking was easy now. Some low spots were wet where rain had washed out the road and formed a bank on each side. Uncle Jeter pointed out a grove of apple trees where there had been a home place. Simms saw a few apples hanging from the branches.

“This whole hillside was bare at the turn of the century,” Uncle Jeter said and spit. He chewed tobacco when he wasn’t smoking.

Ronnie and Simms both remembered the photographs of treeless hillsides from their local history class.

“Yonder’s a charcoal mound.” Uncle Jeter pointed. It was a mound of dirt covered with fallen leaves and sprouting briars. He said they stacked a huge pile of logs and covered it with dirt before they lit it. It smoldered for days until it was all turned to charcoal, which they used in the iron industry over the mountain in Connecticut.

“So when the trees were gone they had to leave?” Simms wondered.

“That’s about right,” Uncle Jeter answered. “Some held out. The old man was born up here, but he moved off.”

The road dwindled out and seemed to end. They went uphill through some browned-off ferns touched by the frost and came out on a ledge with a western view. The Catskill Mountains formed the horizon. Below them Route 22 snaked through a long valley of farms. Ronnie pointed out the Lyons Mountain fire tower, which was in Dutchtown.

Simms located the Lutheran Church in Cooper’s Mill. Only the steeple was visible. He wondered if it would be blocked off in summer when trees had their leaves.

They continued on through the woods until they came to a pit surrounded by stones. The walls had caved in. It appeared to be a cellar.

“Never been through this one,” Uncle Jeter said as he jumped down in and began turning stones over.

Simms and Ronnie followed him. Ronnie found a rusted-out pot with only the handle and rim remaining. Simms came up with a half-rotted leather harness. The leather wasn’t all there, but they dug around and found a lot of buckles and other hardware.

“That looks like part of an ox yoke,” Uncle Jeter said, picking up an axe head. “I’m beginning to think this was a barn.”

They also found a glass canning jar with the bail almost rusted off and a stainless steel pail, probably for milking a cow. That filled Uncle Jeter’s backpack. Simms told him he could have the harness. Ronnie offered to carry the pail.

On their way out they sat on the ledge again and watched the sky over the Catskills turn pink.

Uncle Jeter said, "Clouds can darken a day, but they sure light up a sunset."

"You still own property up here?" Simms asked.

Uncle Jeter shook his head, kind of disgusted. "None of the old Carneys do." He said people had moved off when the work dried up, thinking they still owned it. Then, over the years, the iron company heirs somehow paid back taxes for all the parcels and took over the land. Three families now owned the whole mountain.

"The old man hated the Baldwins, Everetts and Sedgewicks," he said. "Died hating anyone with that name."

"Can't blame him," Simms said.

"You ever hire a lawyer?" Ronnie asked. "I might've inherited a piece of it too."

"A piece of what? A fraction of a half-acre? There's not even a road. At least they don't mind anyone walking in."

"I'd be bitching at them," Ronnie said. "It's not right."

"A lot of things ain't right," his uncle said. "You can bitch and bitch all you want and pretty soon you turn into one."

A few days later, Simms rode into Tilberg with Ronnie and his uncle, who needed a bag of chicken feed. He sent Simms and Ronnie to the other side of the store for some chain saw oil. Ronnie found the right type and gave Simms a couple to carry. A loud crash came from the end of the aisle. Cans of oil rolled across the floor. Simms remembered passing a pyramid of them stacked up. He walked toward the cans that now littered the floor and picked one up that was rolling towards him. A man kneeled down to gather up the rest.

Another man in overalls standing nearby snickered and said, "You gonna buy all that oil Zack?"

"Wr...wrong oil," was the answer. He went on retrieving the cans.

Zack!! Simms felt Ronnie tense next to him.

"That's the bastard," Ronnie said in a low voice and started forward. He was glad when Simms caught his arm, because he didn't know exactly what he'd do. Simms put

the cans Ronnie had given him on a shelf and placed the one he had picked up next to the cans that remained standing. One by one he began to help restack the others.

“Th... th... thank you,” Zack said. He was even bigger than Ronnie remembered.

“Looks like you got a friend,” the man in overalls said, walking away.

Zack handed Simms more cans to stack up. Simms worked without speaking, too nervous about what to say. Ronnie helped too – silently. When they were done, they all stood looking at their work.

“Even better than what it was,” Simms said.

“Want my card?” Zack asked, reaching into his pocket.

Simms backed away when Zack touched his arm.

“I... I... give it t... to everyone,” Zack said.

Simms took it. “Zack Porter, farmer,” was all that it read. No address or phone number.

Zack held out his hand.

Simms hesitated, then took it. “Simms Perry,” he said. “Student.”

“Mr. Perry sells Ford. Best trucks.”

Simms nodded.

Zack held out a card to Ronnie, who took it and shook his hand. “Ronnie Cassidy, student too.”

“Th... that’s good. Study what?” he asked them both.

Simms looked at Ronnie and shrugged, “Whatever happens next.”

THE END