

My

Pretty

Pony

MY PRETTY PONY

Stephen King

The old man sat in the barn doorway in the smell of apples, rocking, wanting not to want to smoke not because of the doctor but because now his heart fluttered all the time. He watched that stupid son of a bitch Osgood do a fast count with his head against the tree and watched him turn and catch Clivey out and laugh, his mouth open wide enough so the old man could observe how his teeth were already rotting in his head and imagine how the kid's breath would smell: like the back part of a wet cellar. Although the whelp couldn't be more than eleven.

The old man watched Osgood laugh his gaspy hee-hawing laugh. The boy laughed so hard he finally had to lean over and put his hands on his knees, so hard the others came out of their hiding places to see what it was, and when they saw, they laughed, too. They all stood around in the morning sun and laughed at his grandson and the old man forgot how much he wanted a smoke. What he wanted now was to see if Clivey would cry. He found he was more curious on this subject than on any other which had engaged his attention over the last several months, including the subject of his own fast-approaching death.

"Caught im out!" the others chanted, laughing. "Caught im, caught im, caught im out!"

Clivey only stood there, stolid as a chunk of rock in a farmer's field, waiting for the razzing to be over so the game could go on with him as it and the embarrassment beginning to be behind him. After awhile the game did. Then it was noontime and the other boys went home. The old man watched to see how much lunch Clivey would eat. It turned out to be not much. Clivey just poked at his potatoes, made his corn and his peas change places, and fed little scraps of meat to the dog under the table. The old man watched it all, interested, answering when the others talked to him, but not much listening to their mouths or his own. His mind was on the boy.

When the pie was done he wanted what he couldn't have and so excused himself to take a nap and paused halfway up the stairs

because now his heart felt like a fan with a playing card caught in it, and he stood there with his head down, waiting to see if this was the final one (there had been two before), and when it wasn't he went on up and took off all but his underdrawers and lay down on the crisp white coverlet. A rectangular label of sun lay across his scrawny chest; it was cut into three sections by dark strokes of shadow that were the window laths. He put his hands behind his head, drowsing and listening. After awhile he thought he heard the boy crying in his own room down the hall and he thought, I ought to take care of that.

He slept an hour, and when he got up the woman was asleep beside him in her slip, and so he took his clothes out into the hallway to dress before going down.

Clivey was outside, sitting on the steps and throwing a stick for the dog, who fetched with more will than the boy tossed. The dog (he had no name, he was just the dog) seemed puzzled.

The old man hailed the boy and told him to take a walk up to the orchard with him and so the boy did.

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The old man's name was George Banning. He was the boy's grandfather, and it was from him that Clive Banning learned the importance of having a pretty pony in your life. You had to have one of those even if you were allergic to horses, because without a pretty pony you could have six clocks in every room and so many watches on each wrist you couldn't raise your arms and still you'd never know what time it was.

The instruction (George Banning didn't give advice, only instruction) had taken place on the day Clive got caught out by that idiot Alden Osgood while playing hide and seek. By that time Clive's Grandpa seemed older than God, which probably meant about seventy-two. The Banning homestead was in the town of Troy, New York, which in 1961 was just starting to learn how not to be the country.

The instruction took place in the West Orchard.

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His grandfather was standing coatless in a blizzard that was not late snow but early apple blossoms in a high warm wind; Grandpa was wearing his biballs with a collared shirt beneath, a shirt that looked as if it had once been green but was now faded to a no-account olive by dozens or hundreds of washings, and beneath the collared shirt was the round top of a cotton undershirt (the kind with the straps, of course; in those days they made the other kind, but a man like Grandpa would be a strap-undershirt man to the end), and this shirt was clean but the color of old ivory instead of its original white because Gramma's motto, often spoken and stitched into a living-room sampler as well (presumably for those rare times when the woman herself was not there to dispense what wisdom needed dispensing), was this: Use it, use it, never lose it! Break it in! Wear it out! Keep it safe or do without! There were apple blossoms caught in Grandpa's long hair, still only half white, and the boy thought the old man was beautiful in the trees.

He had seen Grandpa watching them as they went about their game earlier that day. Watching him. Grandpa had been sitting in his rocker at the entrance to the barn. One of the boards squeaked every time Grandpa rocked, and there he sat, a book facedown in his lap, his hands folded atop it, there he sat rocking amid the dim sweet smells of hay and apples and cider. It was this game that caused his Grandpa to offer Clive Banning instruction on the subject of time, and how it was slippery, and how a man had to fight to hold it in his hands almost all the while; the pony was pretty but it had a wicked heart. If you didn't keep a close eye on that pretty pony, it would jump the fence and be out of sight and you'd have to take your rope bridle and go after it, a trip that was apt to tire you all the way to your bones even if it was short.

Grandpa began his instruction by saying that Alden Osgood had cheated. He was supposed to hide his eyes against the dead elm by the chopping block for a full minute, which he would time by counting

to sixty. This would give Clivey (so Grandpa had always called him, and he hadn't minded, although he was thinking he would have to fight any boy or man who called him that once he was past the age of twelve) and the others a fair chance to hide. Clivey had still been looking for a place when Alden Osgood got to sixty, turned around, and "caught him out" as he was trying to squirm—as a last resort—behind a pile of apple crates stacked haphazardly beside the press-shed, where the machine that squeezed the blems into cider bulked in the dimness like an engine of torture.

"It wasn't fair," Grandpa said. "You didn't do no bitching about it and that was right, because a natural man never does no bitching—they call it bitching because it ain't for men or even boys smart enough to know better and brave enough to do better. Just the same, it wasn't fair. I can say that now because you didn't say it then."

Apple blossoms blowing in the old man's hair. One caught in the dent below his Adam's apple, caught there like a jewel that was pretty simply because some things were and couldn't help it, but was gorgeous because it lacked duration: in a few seconds it would be brushed impatiently away and left on the ground where it would become perfectly anonymous among its fellows.

He told Grandpa that Alden had counted to sixty, just as the rules said he must, not knowing why he wanted to argue the side of the boy who had, after all, shamed him by not even having to find him but had simply "caught him out." Alden—who sometimes slapped like a girl when he was mad—had needed only to turn, see him, then casually put his hand on the dead tree and chant the mystic and unquestioned formula of elimination: "I-see-Clive, my gool-one-two-three!"

Maybe he only argued Alden's case so he and Grandpa wouldn't have to go back yet, so he could watch Grandpa's steel hair blow back in the blizzard of blossoms, so he could admire that transient jewel caught in the hollow at the base of the old man's throat.

“Sure he did,” Grandpa said. “Sure he counted to sixty. Now looka this, Clivey! And let it mark your mind!”

There were real pockets in Grandpa’s overalls—five of them, counting the kangaroo-like pouch in the bib—but beside the hip pockets there were things that only looked like pockets. They were really slits, made so you could reach through to the pants you were wearing underneath (in those days the idea of not wearing pants underneath would not have seemed scandalous, only laughable—the behavior of someone who was A Little Soft in the Attic). Grandpa was wearing the inevitable pair of blue-jeans beneath his overalls. “Jew-pants,” he called them matter-of-factly, a term that all the farmers Clive knew used. Levi’s were either “Jew-pants” or simply “Joozers.”

He reached through the right-hand slit in his overalls, fumbled at some length in the right-hand pocket of the denim trousers beneath, and at last brought out a tarnished silver pocket watch which he put in the boy’s unprepared hand. The weight of the watch was so sudden, the ticking beneath its metal skin so lively, that he came within an ace of dropping it.

He looked at Grandpa, his brown eyes wide.

“You ain’t gonna drop it,” said Grandpa, “and if you did you probably wouldn’t stop it—it’s been dropped before, even stepped on once in some damned beerjoint in Utica, and it never stopped yet. And if it did stop, it’d be your loss, not mine, because it’s yours now.”

“What?” He wanted to say he didn’t understand but couldn’t finish because he thought he did.

“I’m giving it to you,” Grandpa said. “Always meant to, but I’ll be damned if I’m gonna put it in my will. It’d cost more for the damn law-rights than that thing’s worth.”

“Grandpa ... I ... Jesus!”

Grandpa laughed until he started to cough. He doubled over, coughing and laughing, his face going a plum-purple color. Some of Clive's joy and wonder were lost in concern. He remembered his mother telling him again and again on their way up here that he was not to tire Grandpa out because Grandpa was ill. When Clive had asked him two days before—cautiously—what had made him sick, George Banning had replied with a single mysterious word. It was only on the night after their talk in the orchard, as he was drifting off to sleep with the pocket watch curled warmly in his hand, that Clive realized the word Grandpa had spoken, "ticka," referred not to some dangerous poison-bug but to Grandpa's heart. The doctor had made him stop smoking and said if he tried anything too strenuous, like shovelling snow or trying to hoe the garden, he would end up playing a harp. The boy knew well enough what that meant.

"You ain't gonna drop it, and if you did you probably wouldn't stop it," Grandpa had said, but the boy was old enough to know that it would stop someday, that people and watches both stopped someday.

He stood, waiting to see if Grandpa was going to stop, but at last his coughing and laughter eased off and he stood up straight again, wiping a runner of snot from his nose with his left hand and then flicking it casually away.

"You're a goddam funny kid, Clivey," he said. "I got sixteen grandchildren, and there's only two of em that I think is gonna amount to duckshit, and you ain't one of em—although you're on the runner-up list—but you're the only one that can make me laugh until my balls ache."

"I didn't mean to make your balls ache," Clive said, and that sent Grandpa off again, although this time he was able to get his laughter under control before the coughing started.

"Loop the chain over your knuckles a time or two, if it'll make you feel easier," Grandpa said. "If you feel easier in your mind, maybe you'll pay attention a little better."

He did as Grandpa suggested and did feel better. He looked at the watch in his palm, mesmerized by the lively feel of its mechanism, by the sunstar on its crystal, by the second hand which turned in its own small circle. But it was still Grandpa's pocket watch: of this he was quite sure. Then, as he had this thought, an apple blossom went skating across the crystal and was gone. This happened in less than a second, but it changed everything. After the blossom, it was true. It was his watch, forever... or at least until one of them stopped running and couldn't be fixed and had to be thrown away.

"All right," Grandpa said. "You see the second hand going around all by its ownself?"

"Yes."

"Good. Keep your eye on it. When it gets up to the top, you holler 'Go!' at me. Understand?"

He nodded.

"Okay. When it gets there, you just let her go, Gallagher."

Clive frowned down at the watch with the deep seriousness of a mathematician approaching the conclusion of a crucial equation. He already understood what Grandpa wanted to show him, and he was bright enough to understand that proof was only a formality... but one that must be shown just the same. It was a rite, like not being able to leave church until the minister said the benediction, even though all the songs on the board had been sung and the sermon was finally, mercifully, over.

When the second hand stood straight up at twelve on its own separate little dial (Mine, he marvelled. That's my second hand on my watch), he hollered "Go!" at the top of his lungs, and Grandpa began to count with the greasy speed of an auctioneer selling dubious goods, trying to get rid of them at top prices before his hypnotized audience can wake up and realize it has not just been bilked but outraged.

“One-two-thre’, fo’-fi’-six, sev’-ay-nine, ten-‘leven,” Grandpa chanted, the gnarly blotches on his cheeks and the big purple veins on his nose beginning to stand out again in his excitement. He finished in a triumphant hoarse shout: “Fiffynine-sixxy!” As he said this last, the second hand of the pocket watch was just crossing the seventh dark line, marking thirty-five seconds.

“How long?” Grandpa asked, panting and rubbing at his chest with his hand.

Clive told him, looking at Grandpa with undisguised admiration. “That was fast counting, Grandpa!”

Grandpa flapped the hand with which he had been rubbing his chest in a get out! gesture, but he smiled. “Didn’t count half as fast as that Osgood brat,” he said. “I heard that little sucker count twenty-seven, and the next thing I knew he was up somewhere around forty-one.” Grandpa fixed him with his eyes, a dark autumnal blue utterly unlike Clive’s Mediterranean brown ones. He put one of his gnarled hands on Clive’s shoulder. It was knotted with arthritis, but the boy felt the live strength that still slumbered in there like wires in a machine that’s turned off. “You remember one thing, Clivey. Time ain’t got nothing to do with how fast you can count.”

Clive nodded slowly. He didn’t understand completely, but he thought he felt the shadow of understanding, like the shadow of a cloud passing slowly across a meadow.

Grandpa reached into the pouch pocket in the bib of his overalls and brought out a pack of unfiltered Kools. Apparently Grandpa hadn’t stopped smoking after all, dicky heart or not. Still, it seemed to the boy as if maybe Grandpa had cut down drastically, because that pack of Kools looked as if it had done hard travelling; it had escaped the fate of most packs, torn open after breakfast and tossed empty into the gutter at three, a crushed ball. Grandpa rummaged, brought out a cigarette almost as bent as the pack from which it had come. He stuck it in the corner of his mouth, replaced the pack in the bib, and brought out a wooden match which he snapped alight with one

practiced flick of his old man's thick yellow thumbnail. Clive watched with the fascination of a child who watches a magician produce a fan of cards from an empty hand. The flick of the thumb was always interesting, but the amazing thing was that the match did not go out. In spite of the high wind which steadily combed this hilltop, Grandpa cupped the small flame with an assurance that could afford to be leisurely. He lit his smoke and then was actually shaking the match, as if he had negated the wind by simple will. Clive looked closely at the cigarette and saw no black scorch-marks trailing up the white paper from the glowing tip. His eyes had not deceived him, then; Grandpa had taken his light from a straight flame, like a man who takes a light from a candle in a closed room. It was sorcery, pure and simple.

Grandpa removed the cigarette from his mouth and put his thumb and forefinger in, looking for a moment like a man who means to whistle for his dog, or a taxi. Instead he brought them out again wet and pressed them against the match-head. The boy needed no explanation; the only thing Grandpa and his friends out here in the country feared more than sudden freezes was fire. Grandpa dropped the match and ground it under his boot. When he looked up and saw the boy staring at him, he misinterpreted the subject of his fascination.

"I know I ain't supposed to," he said, "and I ain't gonna tell you to lie or even ask you to. If Gramma asks you right out—'Was that old man smokin up there?'—you go on and tell her I was. I don't need a kid to lie for me." He didn't smile, but his shrewd, side-slanted eyes made Clive feel part of a conspiracy that seemed amiable and sinless. "But then, if Gramma asks me right out if you took the Savior's name in vain when I gave you that watch, I'd look her right in the eye and say, 'No'm. He said thanks as pretty as could be and that was all he done.' "

Now Clive was the one to burst out laughing, and the old man grinned, revealing his few remaining teeth.

“Course, if she don’t ask neither of us nothing, I guess we don’t have to volunteer nothing... do we, Clivey? Does that seem fair?”

“Yes,” Clive said. He wasn’t a good-looking boy and never became the sort of man women exactly consider handsome, but as he smiled in complete understanding of the old man’s rhetorical sleight-of-hand, he was beautiful, at least for a moment, and Grandpa ruffled his hair.

“You’re a good boy, Clivey.”

“Thank you, sir,”

His grandfather stood ruminating, his Kool burning with unnatural rapidity (the tobacco was dry, and although he puffed seldom, the greedy hilltop wind smoked the cigarette ceaselessly), and Clive thought the old man had said everything he had to say. He was sorry. He loved to hear Grandpa talk. The things Grandpa said continually amazed him because they almost always made sense. His mother, his father, Gramma, Uncle Don—they all said things he was supposed to take to heart, but they rarely made sense. Handsome is as handsome does, for instance—what did that mean?

He had a sister, Patty, who was six years older. He understood her but didn’t care because most of what she said out loud was stupid. The rest was communicated in vicious little pinches. The worst of these she called “Peter-Pinches.” She told him that, if he ever told about the Peter-Pinches, she’d murdalize him. Patty was always talking about people she was going to murdalize; she had a hit-list to rival Murder, Incorporated. It made you want to laugh ... until you took a good look at her thin, grim face, that was. When you saw what was really there, you lost your desire to laugh. Clive did, anyway. And you had to be careful of her—she sounded stupid but was far from it.

“I don’t want dates,” she had announced at supper one night not long ago—around the time that boys traditionally invited girls to either the Spring Dance at the country club or to the prom at the high school, in

fact. “I don’t care if I never have a date.” And she had looked at them with wide-eyed defiance from above her plate of steaming meat and vegetables.

Clive had looked at the still and somehow spooky face of his sister peering through the steam and remembered something that had happened two months before, when there had still been snow on the ground. He’d come along the upstairs hallway in his bare feet so she hadn’t heard him, and he had looked into the bathroom because the door was open—he hadn’t had the slightest idea old Pukey Patty was in there. What he saw had frozen him dead in his tracks. If she had turned her head even a little to the left, she would have seen him.

She didn’t, though. She had been too preoccupied with her inspection of herself. She had been standing there as naked as one of the slinky babes in Foxy Brannigan’s well-thumbed Model Delights, her bath towel lying puddled around her feet. She was no slinky babe, though—Clive knew it, and she knew it too, from the look of her. Tears were rolling down her pimply cheeks. They were big tears and there were a lot of them, but she never made a sound. At last Clive had regained enough of his sense of self-preservation to tiptoe away, and he had never said a word to anyone about the incident, least of all to Patty herself. He didn’t know if she would have been mad about her kid brother seeing her bareass, but he had a good idea about how she’d react to the idea that he had seen her bawling (even that weird boohoo-less bawling she’d been doing); for that she would have murdered him for sure.

“I think boys are dumb and most of them smell like gone-over cottage cheese,” she had said on that spring night. She stuck a forkful of roast beef into her mouth. “If a boy ever asked me for a date, I’d laugh.”

“You’ll change your mind about that, Punkin,” Dad said, chewing his roast beef and not looking up from the book beside his plate. Mom had given up trying to get him to stop reading at the table.

“No I won’t,” Patty said, and Clive knew she wouldn’t. When Patty said things she most always meant them. That was something Clive understood about her that his parents didn’t. He wasn’t sure she meant it—you know, really—about murdering him if he tattled on her about the Peter-Pinches, but he wasn’t going to take chances. Even if she didn’t actually kill him, she would find some spectacular yet untraceable way to hurt him, that was for sure. Besides, sometimes the Peter-Pinches weren’t really pinches at all; they were more like the way Patty sometimes stroked her little half-breed poodle, Brandy, and he knew she was doing it because he was bad, but he had a secret he certainly did not intend to tell her: these other Peter-Pinches, the stroking ones, actually felt sort of good.

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When Grandpa opened his mouth, Clive thought he would say Time to go back t’the house, Clivey, but instead he told the boy: “I’m going to tell you something, if you want to hear it. Won’t take long. You want to hear it, Clivey?”

“Yes, sir!”

“You really do, don’t you?” Grandpa said in a bemused voice.

“Yes, sir.”

“Sometimes I think I ought to steal you from your folks and keep you around forever. Sometimes I think if I had you on hand most the time, I’d live forever, goddam bad heart or not.”

He removed the Kool from his mouth, dropped it to the ground, and stamped it to death under one workboot, revolving the heel back and forth and then covering the butt with the dirt his heel had loosened just to be sure. When he looked up at Clive again, it was with eyes that gleamed.

“I stopped giving advice a long time ago,” he said. “Thirty years or more, I guess. I stopped when I noticed only fools gave it and only

fools took it. Instruction, now... instruction's a different thing. A smart man will give a little from time to time, and a smart man—or boy—will take a little from time to time.”

Clive said nothing, only looked at his grandfather with close concentration.

“There are three kinds of time,” Grandpa said, “and while all of them are real, only one is really real. You want to make sure you know them all and can always tell them apart. Do you understand that?”

“No, sir.”

Grandpa nodded. “If you'd said ‘Yes, sir,’ I would have swatted the seat of your pants and taken you back to the farm.”

Clive looked down at the smeared results of Grandpa's cigarette, face hot with blush, proud.

“When a fellow is only a sprat, like you, time is long. Take a for-instance. When May comes, you think school's never gonna let out, that mid-month June will just never come. Ain't that pretty much how it is?”

Clive thought of that last weight of drowsy, chalk-smelling schooldays and nodded.

“And when mid-month June finally does come and Teacher gives you your report card and lets you go free, it seems like school's never gonna let back in. Ain't that pretty much right, too?”

Clive thought of that highway of days and nodded so hard his neck actually popped. “Boy, it sure is! I mean, sir.” Those days. All those days, stretching away across the plains of June and July and over the unimaginable horizon of August. So many days, so many dawns, so many noon lunches of bologna sandwiches with mustard and raw chopped onion and giant glasses of milk while his mom sat silently in the living room with her bottomless glass of wine, watching the soap

operas on the TV; so many depthless afternoons when sweat grew in the short hedge of your crewcut and then ran down your cheeks, afternoons when the moment you noticed that your blob of a shadow had grown a boy always came as a surprise, so many endless twilights with the sweat cooling away to nothing but a smell like aftershave on your cheeks and forearms while you played tag or red rover or capture the flag; sounds of bike chains, slots clicking neatly into oiled cogs, smells of honeysuckle and cooling asphalt and green leaves and cut grass, sounds of the slap of baseball cards being laid out on some kid's front walk, solemn and portentous trades which changed the faces of both leagues, councils that went on in the slow shady axial tilt of a July evening until the call of "Cliiiiive! Sup-per!" put an end to that business; and that call was always as expected and yet as shocking as the noon blob that had, by three or so, become a black boy-shape running in the street beside him—and that boy stapled to his heels had actually become a man by five or so, albeit an extraordinarily skinny one; velvet evenings of television, the occasional rattle of pages as his father read one book after another (he never tired of them; words, words, words, his dad never tired of them, and Clive had meant once to ask him how that could be but lost his nerve), his mother getting up once in a while and going into the kitchen, followed only by his sister's worried, angry eyes and his own simply curious ones; the soft clink as Mom replenished the glass which was never empty after eleven in the morning or so (and their father never looking up from his book, although Clive had an idea he heard it all and knew it all, although Patty had called him a stupid liar and had given him a Peter-Pinch that hurt all day long the one time he had dared to tell her that); the sound of mosquitoes whining against the screens, always so much louder, it seemed, after the sun had gone down; the decree of bedtime, so unfair and unavoidable, all arguments lost before they were begun; his father's brusque kiss, smelling of tobacco, his mother's softer, both sugary and sour with the smell of wine; the sound of his sister telling Mom she ought to go to bed after Dad had gone down to the corner tavern to drink a couple of beers and watch the wrestling matches on the television over the bar; his mom telling Patty to mind her own p's and q's, a conversational pattern that was

upsetting in its content but somehow soothing in its predictability; fireflies gleaming in the gloom; a car horn, distant, as he drifted into sleep's long, dark channel; then the next day, which seemed the same but wasn't, not quite. Summer. That was summer. And it did not just seem long; it was long.

Grandpa, watching him closely, seemed to read all this in the boy's brown eyes, to know all the words for all the things the boy never could have found a way to tell, things that could not escape him because his mouth could never articulate the language of his heart. And then Grandpa nodded, as if he wanted to confirm this very idea, and suddenly Clive was terrified that Grandpa would spoil everything by saying something soft and soothing and meaningless. Sure, he would say. I know all about it, Clivey—I was a boy once myself, you know.

But he didn't, and Clive understood he had been stupid to fear the possibility even for a moment. Worse, faithless. Because this was Grandpa, and Grandpa never talked meaningless shit like other grownups so often did. Instead of speaking softly and soothingly, he spoke with the dry finality of a judge pronouncing a harsh sentence for a capital crime.

"All that changes," he said.

Clive looked up at him, a little apprehensive at the idea but very much liking the wild way the old man's hair blew around his head. He thought Grandpa looked the way the church-preacher would if he really knew the truth about God instead of just guessing. "Time does? Are you sure?"

"Yes. When you get to a certain age—right around fourteen, I think, mostly when the two halves of the human race go on and make the mistake of discovering each other—time starts to be real time. The real real time. It ain't long like it was or short like it gets to be. It does, you know. But for most of your life it's mostly the real real time. You know what that is, Clivey?"

“No, sir.”

“Then take instruction: real real time is your pretty pony. Say it: ‘My pretty pony.’ “

Feeling dumb, wondering if Grandpa was having him on for some reason (“trying to get your goat,” as Uncle Don would have said), Clive said what he wanted him to say. He waited for the old man to laugh, to say, “Boy, I really got your goat that time, Clivey!” But Grandpa only nodded matter-of-factly, in a way that took all the dumb out of it.

“My pretty pony. Those are three words you’ll never forget if you’re as smart’s I think y’might be. My pretty pony. That’s the truth of time.”

Grandpa took the battered package of cigarettes from his pocket, considered it briefly, then put it back.

“From the time you’re fourteen until, oh, I’m gonna say until you’re sixty or so, most time is my-pretty-pony time. There’s times when it goes back to being long like it was when you were a kid, but those ain’t good times anymore. You’d give your soul for some my-pretty-pony time then, let alone short time. If you was to tell Gramma what I’m gonna tell you now, Clivey, she’d call me a blasphemer and wouldn’t bring me no hot-water bottle for a week. Maybe two.”

Nevertheless, Grandpa’s lips twisted into a bitter and unregenerate jag.

“If I was to tell it to that Reverend Chadband the wife sets such a store by, he’d trot out the one about how we see through a glass darkly or that old chestnut about how God works in mysterious ways His wonders to perform, but I’ll tell you what I think, Clivey. I think God must be one mean old son of a bitch to make the only long times a grownup has the times when he is hurt bad, like with crushed ribs or stove-in guts or something like that. A God like that, why, He makes a kid who sticks pins in flies look like that saint who was so good the birds’d come and roost all over him. I think about how long

them weeks were after the hayrick turned turtle on me, and I wonder why God wanted to make living, thinking creatures in the first place. If He needed something to piss on, why couldn't He have just made Him some sumac bushes and left it at that? Or what about poor old Johnny Brinkmayer, who went so slow with the bone cancer last year."

Clive hardly heard that last, although he remembered later, on their ride back to the city, that Johnny Brinkmayer, who had owned what his mother and father called the grocery store and what Grandpa and Gramma still both called "the Mercantile," was the only man Grandpa went to see of an evening... and the only man who came to see Grandpa of an evening. On the long ride back to town it came to Clive that Johnny Brinkmayer, whom he remembered only vaguely as a man with a very large wart on his forehead and a way of hitching at his crotch as he walked, must have been Grandpa's only real friend. The fact that Gramma tended to turn up her nose when Brinkmayer's name was mentioned—and often complained about the way the man had smelled—only reinforced the idea.

Such reflections could not have come now, anyway, because Clive was waiting breathlessly for God to strike Grandpa dead. Surely He would for such a blasphemy. No one could get away with calling God the Father Almighty a mean old son of a bitch, or suggest that the Being who made the universe was no better than a mean third-grader who got his kicks sticking pins into flies.

Clive took a nervous step away from the figure in the bib overalls, who had ceased being his Grandpa and had become instead a lightning rod. Any moment now a bolt would come out of the blue sky, sizzling his Grandpa dead as doggy-doo and turning the apple trees into torches that would signal the old man's damnation to all and sundry. The apple blossoms blowing through the air would be turned into something like the bits of char that went floating up from the incinerator in their backyard when his father burned the week's worth of newspapers on late Sunday afternoons.

Nothing happened.

Clive waited, his dreadful surety eroding, and when a robin twittered cheerily somewhere nearby (as if Grandpa had said nothing more awful than kiss-my-foot), he knew no lightning was going to come. And at the moment of that realization, a small but fundamental change took place in Clive Banning's life. His Grandpa's unpunished blasphemy would not make him a criminal or a bad boy, or even such a small thing as a "problem child" (a phrase that had only recently come into vogue). Yet the true north of belief shifted just a little in Clive's mind, and the way he listened to his Grandpa changed at once. Before, he had listened to the old man. Now he attended him.

"Times when you're hurt go on forever, seems like," Grandpa was saying. "Believe me, Clivey—a week of being hurt makes the best summer vacation you ever had when you was a kid seem like a weekend. Hell, makes it seem like a Sat'dy mornin! When I think of the seven months Johnny lay there with that... that thing that was inside him, inside him and eating on his guts ... Jesus, I ain't got no business talkin this way to a kid. Your Gramma's right. I got the sense of a chicken."

Grandpa brooded down at his shoes for a moment. At last he looked up and shook his head, not darkly, but with brisk, almost humorous dismissiveness.

"Ain't a bit of that matters. I said I was gonna give you instruction, and instead I stand here howlin like a woe-dog. You know what a woe-dog is, Clivey?"

The boy shook his head.

"Never mind; that's for another day." Of course there had never been another, because the next time he saw Grandpa, Grandpa was in a box, and Clive supposed that was an important part of the instruction Grandpa had to give that day. The fact that the old man didn't know he was giving it made it no less important. "Old men are like old trains in a switchin yard, Clivey—too many damned tracks. So they loop the damned roundhouse five times before they ever get in."

“That’s all right, Grandpa.”

“What I mean is that every time I drive for the point, I go someplace else.”

“I know, but those someplace elses are pretty interesting.”

Grandpa smiled. “If you’re a bullshit artist, Clivey, you are a damned good one.”

Clive smiled back, and the darkness of Johnny Brinkmayer’s memory seemed to lift from his Grandpa. When he spoke again, his voice was more businesslike.

“Anyway! Never mind that swill. Having long time in pain is just a little extra the Lord throws in. You know how a man will save up Raleigh coupons and trade em in for something like a brass barometer to hang in his den or a new set of steak knives, Clivey?”

Clive nodded.

“Well, that’s what pain-time is like ... only it’s more of a booby prize than a real one, I guess you’d have to say. Main thing is, when you get old, regular time—my-pretty-pony time—changes to short time. It’s like when you were a kid, only turned around.”

“Backwards.”

“Yep.”

The idea that time went fast when you got old was beyond the ability of the boy’s emotions to grasp, but he was bright enough to admit the concept. He knew that if one end of a seesaw went up, the other had to go down. What Grandpa was talking about, he reasoned, must be the same idea: balance and counterbalance. All right; it’s a point of view, Clive’s own father might have said.

Grandpa took the packet of Kools from the kangaroo pouch again, and this time he carefully extracted a cigarette—not just the last one

in the packet but the last one the boy would ever see him smoke. The old man crumpled the package and stowed it back in the place from which it had come. He lit this last cigarette as he had the other, with the same effortless ease. He did not ignore the hilltop wind; he seemed somehow to negate it.

“When does it happen, Grandpa?”

“I can’t exactly tell you that, n it don’t happen all at once,” Grandpa said, wetting the match as he had its predecessor. “It kinda creeps up, like a cat stalking a squirrel. Finally you notice. And when you do notice, it ain’t no more fair than the way the Osgood boy counted his numbers was fair.”

“Well then, what happens? How do you notice?”

Grandpa tapped a roll of ash from his cigarette without taking it from his mouth. He did it with his thumb, knocking on the cigarette the way a man may rap a low knock on a table. The boy never forgot that small sound.

“I think what you notice first must be different for everyone,” the old man said, “but for me it started when I was forty-something. I don’t remember exactly how old I was, but you want to bet I remember where I was ... in Davis Drug. You know it?”

Clive nodded. His father almost always took him and his sister in there for ice-cream sodas when they were visiting Grandpa and Gramma. His father called them the VanChockstraw Triplets because their orders never varied: their father always had vanilla, Patty chocolate, Clive strawberry. And his father would sit between them and read while they slowly ingested the cold sweet treats. Patty was right when she said you could get away with anything when their father was reading, which was most of the time, but when he put his book away and looked around, you wanted to sit up and put on your prettiest manners, or you were apt to get clouted.

“Well, I was in there,” Grandpa resumed, his eyes far off, studying a cloud that looked like a soldier blowing on a bugle moving swiftly across the spring sky, “to get some medicine for your Gramma’s arthritis. We’d had rain for a week and it was hurting her like all get-out. And all at once I seen a new store display. Would have been hard to miss. Took up most of one whole aisle, it did. There were masks and cutout decorations of black cats and witches on brooms and things like that, and there were those cardboard punkins they used to sell. They came in a bag with an elastic inside. The idea was, a kid would punch the punkin out of the cardboard and then give his mom an afternoon of peace coloring it in and maybe playing the games on the back. When it was done you hung it on your door for a decoration, or, if the kid’s family was too poor to buy him a store mask or too dumb to help him make a costume out of what was around the house, why, you could staple that elastic onto the thing and the kid would wear it. Used to be a lot of kids walking around town with paper bags in their hands and those punkin masks from Davis Drug on their faces come Halloween night, Clivey! And, of course, he had his candy out. Was always that penny-candy counter up there by the soda fountain, you know the one I mean—”

Clive smiled. He knew, all right.

“—but this was different. This was penny candy by the job lot. All that truck like wax bottles and candy corn and root-beer barrels and licorice whips.

“And I thought that old man Davis—there really was a fella named Davis who ran the place back then, it was his father that opened her up right around 1910—had slipped a cog or two. Holy hell, I’m thinkin to myself, Frank Davis has got his trick-or-treat out before the goddam summer’s even over. It crossed my mind to go up to the prescription counter where he was n tell him just that, and then a part of me says, Whoa up a second, George—you’re the one who’s slipped a cog or two. And that wasn’t so far wrong, Clivey, because it wasn’t still summer, and I knew it just as well as I know we’re standin here. See, that’s what I want you to understand—that I knew better.

“Wasn’t I already on the lookout for apple pickers from around town, and hadn’t I already put in an order for five hundred handbills to get put up over the border in Canada? And didn’t I already have my eye on this fella named Tim Warburton who’d come down from Schenectady lookin for work? He had a way about him, looked honest, and I thought he’d make a good foreman during picking time. Hadn’t I been meaning to ask him the very next day, and didn’t he know I was gonna ask because he’d let on he’d be getting his hair cut at such-and-such a place at such-and-such a time? I thought to myself, Suds n body, George, ain’t you a little young to be going senile? Yeah, old Frank’s got his Halloween candy out a little early, but summer? That’s gone by, me fine bucko.

“I knew that just fine, but for a second, Clivey—or maybe it was a whole row of seconds—it seemed like summer, or like it had to be summer, because it was just being summer. Get what I mean? It didn’t take me long to get September set down straight again in my head, but until I did I felt ... you know, I felt...” He frowned, then reluctantly brought out a word he knew but would not have used in conversation with another farmer, lest he be accused (if only in the other fellow’s mind) of being high-flown. “I felt dismayed. That’s the only goddam way I know how to put it. Dismayed. And that’s how it was the first time.”

He looked at the boy, who only looked back at him, not even nodding, so deep in concentration was he. Grandpa nodded for both of them and knocked another roll of ash off his cigarette with the side of his thumb. The boy believed Grandpa was so lost in thought that the wind was smoking practically all of this one for him.

“It was like steppin up to the bathroom mirror meanin to do no more’n shave and seein that first gray hair in your head. You get that, Clivey?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. And after that first time, it started to happen with all the holidays. You’d think they was puttin the stuff out too early, and

sometimes you'd even say so to someone, although you always stayed careful to make it sound like you thought the shopkeepers were greedy. That something was wrong with them, not you. You get that?"

"Yes."

"Because," Grandpa said, "a greedy shopkeeper was something a man could understand—and something some men even admired, although I was never one of them. 'So-and-so keeps himself a sharp practice,' they'd say, as if sharp practice, like that butcher fella Radwick that used to always stick his thumb on the scales when he could get away with it, like that was just a honey of a way to be. I never felt that way, but I could understand it. Saying something that made you sound like you had gone over funny in the head, though ... that was a different kettle of beans. So you'd just say something like 'By God, they'll have the tinsel and the angel's hair out before the hay's in the barn next year,' and whoever you said it to would say that was nothing but the Gospel truth, but it wasn't the Gospel truth, and when I hunker right down and study her, Clivey, I know they are putting all those things out pretty near the same time every year.

"Then somethin else happened to me. This might have been five years later, might have been seven. I think I must've been right round fifty, one side or the other. Anyhow, I got called on jury duty. Damn pain in the ass, but I went. The bailiff swore me up, asked me if I'd do my duty so help me God, and I said I will, just as if I hadn't spent all my life doin my duty about one thing n another so help me God. Then he got out his pen and asked for my address, and I gave it to him neat as you'd like. Then he asked how old I was, and I opened my mouth all primed to say thirty-seven."

Grandpa threw back his head and laughed at the cloud that looked like a soldier. That cloud, the bugle part now grown as long as a trombone, had gotten itself halfway from one horizon to the other.

"Why did you want to say that, Grandpa?" Clive thought he had followed everything up to this pretty well, but here was a thicket.

“I wanted to say it because it was the first thing to come into my mind! Hell! Anyhow, I knew it was wrong and so I stopped for a second. I don’t think that bailiff or anyone else in the courtroom noticed—seemed like most of em was either asleep or on the doze—and, even if they’d been as wide awake as the fella who just got Widow Brown’s broomstick rammed up his buttsky, I don’t know as anyone would have made anything of it. Wasn’t no more than how, sometimes, a man trying to hit a tricky pitch will kinda take a double pump before he swings. But, shit! Askin a man how damn old he is ain’t like throwin no spitball. I felt like an ijit. Seemed like for that one second I didn’t know how old I was if I wasn’t thirty-seven. Seemed for a second there like it could have been seven or seventeen or seventy-seven. Then I got it and I said forty-eight or fifty-one or whatever-the-frig. But to lose track of your age, even for a second ... shoo!”

Grandpa dropped his cigarette, brought his heel down upon it, and began the ritual of first murdalizing and then burying it.

“But that’s just the beginning, Clivey me son,” he went on, and, although he spoke only in the Irish vernacular he sometimes affected, the boy thought, I wish I was your son. Yours instead of his. “After a bit, it lets go of first, hits second, and before you know it, time has got itself into high gear and you’re cruising, the way folks do on the turnpike these days, goin so fast their cars blow the leaves right off’n the trees in the fall.”

“What do you mean?”

“Way the seasons change is the worst,” the old man said moodily, as if he hadn’t heard the boy. “Different seasons stop bein different seasons. Seems like Mother has no more’n got the boots n mittens n scarves down from the attic before it’s mud season, and you’d think a man’d be glad to see mud season gone—shit, I always was—but you ain’t s’glad t’see it go when it seems like the mud’s gone before you done pushed the tractor out of the first jellypot it got stuck in. Then it seems like you no more’n clapped your summer straw on for

the first band concert of the year when the poplars start showing their chemises.”

Grandpa looked at him then, an eyebrow raised ironically, as if expecting the boy to ask for an explanation, but Clive smiled, delighted by this—he knew what a chemise was, all right, because it was sometimes all that his mother wore until five in the afternoon or so, at least when his father was out on the road, selling appliances and kitchenware and a little insurance when he could. When his father went out on the road his mother got down to the serious drinking, and that was drinking sometimes too serious to allow her to get dressed until the sun was getting ready to go down. Then sometimes she went out, leaving him in Patty’s care while she went to visit a sick friend. Once he said to Patty, “Ma’s friends get sick more when Dad’s on the road, d’ja notice?” And Patty laughed until tears ran down her face and she said Oh yes, she had noticed, she most certainly had.

What Grandpa said reminded him of how, once the days finally began to slope down toward school again, the poplars changed somehow. When the wind blew, their undersides turned up exactly the color of his mother’s prettiest chemise, a silver color which was as surprisingly sad as it was lovely: a color that signified the end of what you had believed must be forever.

“Then,” Grandpa continued, “you start to lose track of things in your own mind. Not too much—it ain’t being senile, like old man Hayden down the road, thank God—but it’s still a suckardly thing, the way you lose track. It ain’t like forgetting things; that’d be one thing. No, you remember em but you get em in all the wrong places. Like how I was so sure I broke my arm just after our boy Billy got killed in that road accident in ‘58. That was a suckardly thing, too. That’s one I could task that Reverend Chadband with. Billy, he was followin a gravel truck, doin no more than twenty mile an hour, when a chunk of stone no bigger’n the dial of that pocket watch I gave you fell off the back of the truck, hit the road, bounced up, and smashed the windshield of our Ford. Glass went in Billy’s eyes and the doc said

he would have been blinded in one of em or maybe even in both if he'd lived, but he didn't live—he went off the road and hit a 'lectric pole. It fell down atop the car and he got fried just the same as any mad dog killer that ever rode Old Sparky at Sing Sing. And him the worst thing he ever did in his life maybe playing sick to keep from hoeing beans when we still kep the garden.

“But I was saying how sure I was I broke my goddam arm after—I swore up n down I could remember goin to his funeral with that arm still in the sling! Sarah had to show me the family Bible first and the insurance papers on my arm second before I could believe she had it the right way around; it had been two whole months before, and by the time we buried Billy away, the sling was off. She called me an old fool and I felt like putting one up on the side of her head I was s'mad, but I was mad because I was embarrassed, and at least I had the sense to know that n leave her alone. She was only mad because she don't like to think about Bill. He was the apple of her eye, he was.”

“Boy!” Clive said.

“It ain't goin soft; it's more like when you go down to New York City and there are these fellas on the street corners with nutshells and a beebie under one of em, and they bet you can't tell which nutshell the beebie's under, and you're sure you can, but they shuffle em so goddam fast they fool you every time. You just lose track. You can't seem to help it.”

He sighed, looking around, as if to remember where exactly it was that they were. His face had a momentary look of utter helplessness that disgusted the boy as much as it frightened him. He didn't want to feel that way, but couldn't help it. It was as if Grandpa had pulled open a bandage to show the boy a sore which was a symptom of something awful. Something like leprosy.

“Seems like spring started last week,” Grandpa said, “but the blossoms'll be gone tomorrow if the wind keeps up its head, and damn if it don't look like it's gonna. A man can't keep his train of

thought when things go as fast as that. A man can't say, Whoa up a minute or two, old hoss, while I get my bearings! There's no one to say it to. It's like being in a cart that's got no driver, if you take my drift. So what do you make of it, Clivey?"

"Well," the boy said, "you're right about one thing, Grandpa—it sounds like an ijit of some kind must've made up the whole thing."

He didn't mean it to be funny, but Grandpa laughed until his face went that alarming shade of purple again, and this time he not only had to lean over and put his hands on the knees of his overalls but then had to sling an arm around the boy's neck to keep from falling down. They both would have gone tumbling if Grandpa's coughing and wheezing hadn't eased just at the moment when the boy felt sure the blood must come bursting out of that face, which was swollen purple with hilarity.

"Ain't you a jeezer!" Grandpa said, pulling back at last. "Ain't you a one!"

"Grandpa? Are you all right? Maybe we ought to—"

"Shit, no, I ain't all right. I've had me two heart attacks in the last two years, and if I live another two years no one'll be any more surprised than me. But it ain't no news to the human race, boy. All I ever set out to say was that old or young, fast time or slow time, you can walk a straight line if you remember that pony. Because when you count and say 'my pretty pony' between each number, time can't be nothing but time. You do that, I'm telling you you got the sucker stabled. You can't count all the time—that ain't God's plan. I'll go down the primrose lane with that little oily-faced pissant Chadband that far, anyway. But you got to remember that you don't own time; it's time that owns you. It goes along outside you at the same speed every second of every day. It don't care a piss-hole in the snow for you, but that don't matter if you got a pretty pony. If you got a pretty pony, Clivey, you got the bastard right where its dingle dangles and never mind all the Alden Osgoods in the world."

He bent toward Clive Banning.

“Do you understand that?”

“No, sir.”

“I know you don’t. Will you remember it?”

“Yes, sir.”

Grandpa Banning’s eyes studied him so long the boy became uncomfortable and fidgety. At last he nodded. “Yeah, I think you will. Goddam if I don’t.”

The boy said nothing. In truth, he could think of nothing to say.

“You have taken instruction,” Grandpa said.

“I didn’t take any instruction if I didn’t understand!” Clive cried in a frustrated anger so real and so complete it startled him. “I didn’t!”

“Fuck understanding,” the old man said calmly. He slung his arm around the boy’s neck again and drew him close—drew him close for the last time before Gramma would find him dead as a stone in bed a month later. She just woke up and there was Grandpa and Grandpa’s pony had kicked down Grandpa’s fences and gone over all the hills of the world.

Wicked heart, wicked heart. Pretty, but with a wicked heart.

“Understanding and instruction are cousins that don’t kiss,” Grandpa said that day among the apple trees.

“Then what is instruction?”

“Remembrance,” the old man said serenely. “Can you remember that pony?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What name does it keep?”

The boy paused.

“Time... I guess.”

“Good. And what color is it?”

The boy thought longer this time. He opened his mind like an iris in the dark. “I don’t know,” he said at last

“Me, neither,” the old man said, releasing him. “I don’t think it has one, and I don’t think it matters. What matters is, will you know it?”

“Yes, sir,” the boy said at once.

A glittering, feverish eye fastened the boy’s mind and heart like a staple.

“How?”

“It’ll be pretty,” Clive Banning said with absolute certainty.

Grandpa smiled. “So!” he said. “Clivey has taken a bit of instruction, and that makes him wiser and me more blessed ... or the other way around. D’you want a slice of peach pie, boy?”

“Yes, sir!”

“Then what are we doin up here? Let’s go get her!”

They did.

And Clive Banning never forgot the name, which was time, and the color, which was none, and the look, which was not ugly or beautiful... but only pretty. Nor did he ever forget her nature, which was wicked, or what his Grandpa said on the way down, words almost thrown away, lost in the wind: having a pony to ride was

better than having no pony at all, no matter how the weather of its heart might lie.