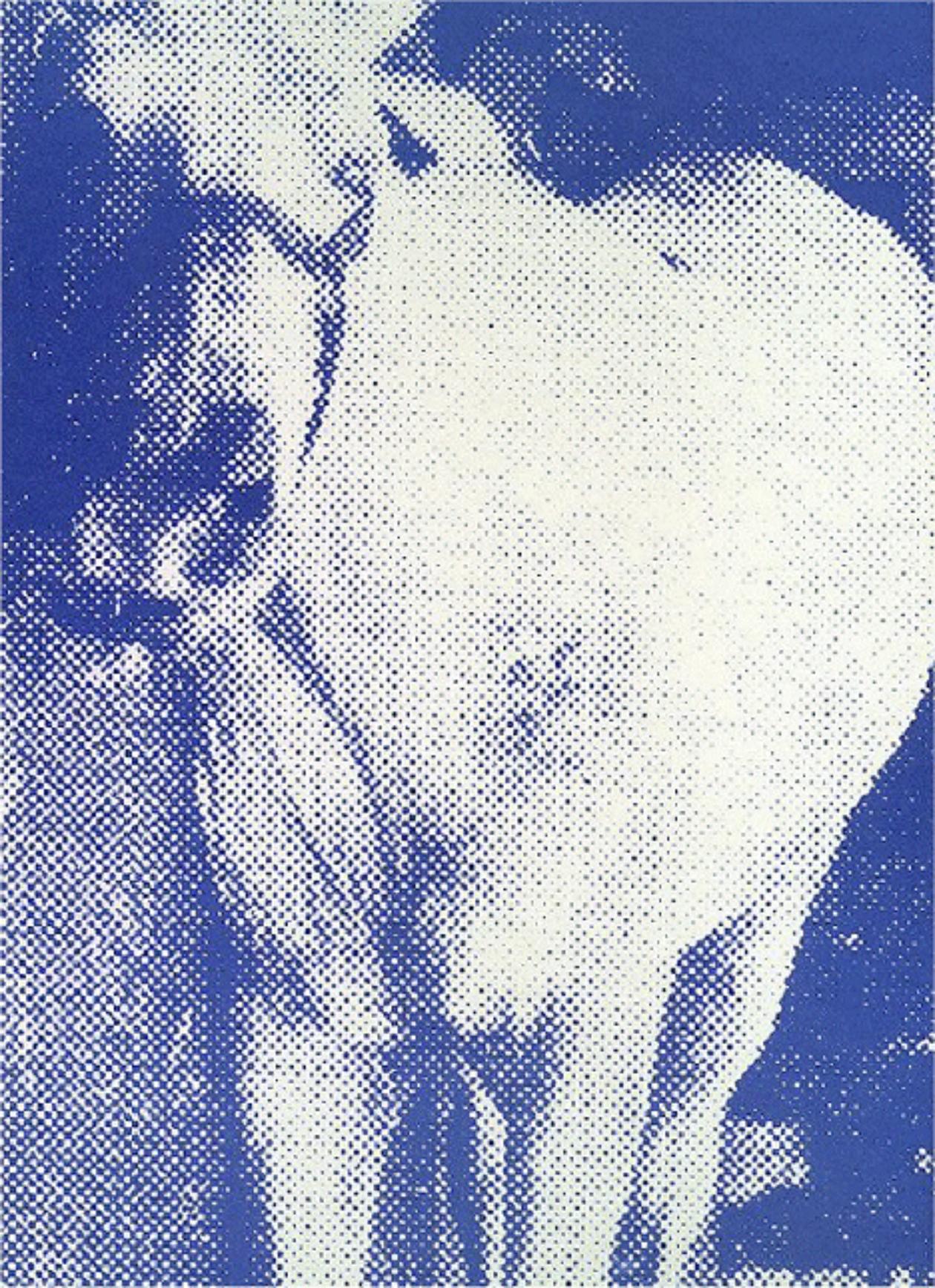


My

Pretty

Pony



MY

***Pretty
Pony***



Time

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 the son of that stupid son-of -a-bitch Osgood do a fast count with his head against the tree and watched when he turned and caught Clivey out and laughed, 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 him count the ritual and then laugh gaspy hee-haws. He 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 to rock and to want to smoke in his wanting to see if Clivey would cry.

"Caught 'im out!" the others chanted, laughing. "Caught 'im, caught'im, caught'im out!" Clivey only stood there, stolidly, waiting for it to be over so the game could go on with him as it and the embarrassment beginning to be behind him. After a while the game did. Then it was time for lunch and the boys went home. He

watched to see how much lunch Clivey would eat. Clivey didn't eat much, just poked things around on his plate and fed a little to the dog under the table. The old man watched it all, interested, talking 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 square of sun lay on his scrawny chest and to either side; it was crossed with dark marks that were window laths. The shadow of the cross was between his nipples. He put his hands behind his head, drowsing and listening. After a while he heard the boy crying in his own room 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.

His Grandpa's name was George Banning, and it was from him that Clive Banning had 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 arm and still you'd never know what time it was.

The instruction (his Grandpa didn't give advice, only instruction) had taken place when he was ten going on eleven. Grandpa seemed older than God--- which probably meant about seventy-two. The instruction was given and taken in the town of Troy, New York, which in 1962 was just starting to learn how not to be the country.

The instruction took place in the West Orchard.

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 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, and don't, for heaven's sake, ever dare to lose it! Keep it up! Use it up! Break it in, and never pout! Do it in 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.

There had been a game of hide-and-seek with some of the boys from down the road earlier that day, a game Grandpa had watched from his rocker on the clean weathered boards at the entrance to the barn. One of the boards squeaked when Grandpa rocked, and there he sat, a book face down 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 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 time; the pony was pretty but the pony had

a wicked heart. If you didn't keep your eye on your 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 sometimes short but was apt to turn your bones into a rack nonetheless.

Grandpa said Arthur 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 thought he would rearrange the teeth of a man-maybe even of a woman-who would call him that past the age of twelve) and the others a fair chance to hide. Clivey had still been looking for a place when Arthur 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 in the angle formed by the barn and the press-shed, where the machine that pressed 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 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."



ain't got

Apple blossoms blowing in the old man's hair. One caught in the hollow at the base of his throat, 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 Arthur *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 simply by turning and "catching him out." All Arthur, who sometimes slapped when he was mad, needed to do was 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 this boy'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! Let it mark your mind!"

There were real pockets in Grandpa's overalls, five in all

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 even have seemed scandalous, only laughable). Grandpa was wearing the inevitable pair of blue-jeans beneath his overalls. "Jew-pants," he culled them matter-of-factly--- a term that all the farmers Banning knew used. "Jew pants" or "Joozers"

He reached through the right-hand slit in his overalls, fumbled in the right-hand pocket of his Joozers, and then 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 inside its metal skin so alive, 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 snap, 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 than the 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 Banning'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 had a "dicky heart." The doctor had made him stop smoking and said if he tried anything too strenuous, like shoveling snow or trying to hoe the garden, he would end up playing a harp . . . or shoveling coal into the furnaces down below, which meant, the boy supposed, that Grandpa could just drop dead.

"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 ticking, 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," Banning 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 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 ticking 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." ""

Banning 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 the 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 marveled. 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 could wake up and realize it was not just bilked but outraged, had been somehow induced to purchase sham for specie.

"One-two-thre' fo'-fi'six-sev' neight-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 thirtyfive seconds.

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

Banning 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 kid," 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 blue utterly unlike Banning's dark brown ones. He put one of his gnarled hands on Banning'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*."

Banning nodded slowly. He didn't understand *completely*, but he felt the *shadow* of understanding, like cloud-shadow 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, dickey 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 traveling; 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. Banning watched with the fascination of a child watching a magician producing 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. Banning 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 flame in a closed room. This was sorcery of some kind.

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. 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. Then he saw the boy staring at him and misinterpreted 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 did. I don't need a kid to lie for me." He didn't smile, but his shrewd, side-slanted eyes made Banning part of a possible 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 ma'am. He said thanks as pretty as could be and that was all that boy done."

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

"Of course, if she don't ask neither of us nothing, I guess we don't have to *volunteer* any information, do we, Clivey? Does that seem fair?"

"Yes," Banning said. He wasn't a good-looking boy then or ever and never became the sort of man women consider handsome, but as he smiled in utter understanding of the balance the old man had struck, he *became* beautiful for a moment, and Grandpa ruffed 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 Banning 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, while he didn't understand all of them, he understood more of what Grandpa said than what all the other adults he knew said when you added them together. His mother, his father, Gramma, Uncle Don-they all said things he was supposed to take to heart, but they rarely made sense to him. Handsome is as handsome does, for instance-what did that *mean*?

He had a sister, Patty, who was nine years older. He understood most of what *she* said 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 turn him into toe jam. Looking at her thin grim face the difference between Banning and his sister was that, while Banning was not handsome, his sister was unlovely-he knew she would. She was unlovely but far from stupid. "I don't want dates," she had announced at supper one night. Banning had peeked in at her once and had seen her standing naked and motionless in front of her mirror. Although large tears were rolling down a face already pocked with pimples, she didn't make a sound. "I think boys are dumb and I don't want dates."

She's getting ready for never being asked, Banning thought.

"You'll change your mind about that, Punkin," Dad said, chewing 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 Banning knew she wouldn't. When Patty said things she most *always* meant them, and that was something Banning understood that his parents didn't. He wasn't sure she meant it--- you *know*, really--- about killing 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 PeterPinches, the stroking ones, actually felt good.

When Grandpa opened his mouth, Banning 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, Clivey?"

"Yes sir!"

"You really do, don't you?" Grandpa said in a bemused voice.

"Yes, sir."

"Sometimes I think I ought to keep you around, Clivey. Just steal you away from your folks and keep you forever. Sometimes I think if I had you on hand most the time, I'd live forever, goddam buck-fever ticker 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, back and forth... and then covering the butt with the dirt his heel had loosened just to be sure. When he looked up at Banning again, it was with eyes that gleamed.

"I stopped giving advice a long time ago," he said.
"Been

thirty years or more since I gave any. 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 takes a little from time to time. That goes for little boys as well, I think."

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

"There are two kinds of time," Grandpa said, "and while both of them are real, only one is *really* real. You want to make sure you know them both 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."

Banning 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 on the square?"

Banning thought of that weight of days 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, and ain't *that* pretty much on the square?"

Banning 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, listening to the soap operas on the radio, 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 smell 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 tilt of a July evening until the call of "*Cliiiiive! Sup per!*" put an end to the business; and that call was always

MY

***Pretty
Pony***

as expected and yet as surprising 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, and 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 eyes and his own 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 Banning 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, when the sun had gone down; the surprise of the bedtime decree, argument lost before it was 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 damned business and leave her alone, a conversational pattern that was upsetting in its content but somehow soothing in its predictability; fireflies gleaming in the dark; a car horn, distant, as he drifted down into sleep, and then would come the next day that seemed like that day but wasn't. Summer. That was summer. And it did not just *seem* long; it *was* long.

Grandpa, watching him closely, seemed to read all of this in the boy's brown eyes, to know all the exact words for the things the boy never could have found a way to tell, things that could not escape him because the mouth of his heart-if there was such a thing-was simply too small. But Grandpa was nodding as if he had managed to say all those things just the same. Banning supposed it was because Grandpa knew them.

He thought Grandpa would say something soft and soothing and meaningless then, something like, Sure, sure. You don't need to say; I was a boy once myself, you know. But this was Grandpa, and Grandpa *never* said things like that, which he knew but, like those drifting summer evening calls to come in for supper, was also a constant surprise.

"All that changes," Grandpa said with the dry finality of a judge pronouncing a harsh sentence for a capital crime. "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 pony. 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), Banning did as the old man asked. He waited for the old man to laugh, to say, "Boy, I really got your goat that time, Clivey!" But Grandpa only nodded in a matter-of-fact 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 like that-my pretty pony time, I mean. There's times when it goes back to being long like it was when you were a kid, but those ain't good times no more.



with

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 ask that Reverend Toddman the wife sets such a store by, *he'd* trot out that old one about how we see through a glass darkly or that 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 grown-up 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 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 hay-rick turned turtle on me, and I wonder why God wanted to make living, thinking creatures. 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 liver cancer last year."

Banning 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 Banning 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 Brickmayer's name was mentioned (had once, in fact, when Banning was in the entryway, hanging up his jacket and thus out of sight, told Grandpa, "That man smells like a nigger") only reinforced the idea.

Such reflections could not have come then, anyway, because Banning was waiting breathlessly for God to strike Grandpa dead. Surely He would for 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 (a word that had just come into vogue that year; "kicks" were something juvenile delinquents got when they were out breaking windows or shooting each other with "zip guns" or doing some vague thing or things with their "debs"---things Banning equated for some

reason with Patty's Peter-Pinches) sticking pins into flies.

Banning 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 bits of char floating up from the incinerator in their backyard when his father burned the week's worth of newspapers on late Sunday afternoons.

Nothing of the sort happened.

He 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. At the moment of that realization, a small but fundamental change took place in Banning's life. His Grandpa's unpunished blasphemy did not make him a criminal or a bad boy, or even such a small thing as a "problem child" (a phrase that had become as much of the language as "kicks" and "zip guns"). Yet the axis of truth shifted just a little in the cosmology that made up Banning's beliefs. Before, he had *listened* to Grandpa; now he *attended* him.

"Times when you're hurt go on forever, seems like," Grandpa was saying. "Yes sirree Bob! 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 morning! I tell you, Clivey, when I think of the seven months Johnny lay there with that . . . *that* thing that was inside him . . . eating on him . . . 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 T stand here howling like a woe-dog that hears a owl at midnight. 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 Banning supposed that was an important part of the instruction Grandpa had to give that day-the fact 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, Cliveytoo 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."

Banning 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 extry 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?"

Banning 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."

"You got it! I should smile and kiss a pig if you ain't."

The idea that time went *fast* when you got old was beyond the ability of Banning's emotion to understand, but he was a bright enough boy who could already do a little algebra, although



how fast

he didn't know that was what it was called--- a boy who understood the basic fact of the word *equation* without knowing he understood: in a world where men and women are made grave by thoughts of graves upon which only words are graven, gravity demands that if one end of a seesaw goes up, the other must go down. To know such a childish fact was not to taste tears (and there was even a dim and blood-sunk part of him that seemed to understand this), but just knowing had impressed Grandpa. He could see that much.

Grandpa took the packet of Kools from the kangaroo pouch again, and this time he carefully extracted a cigarette-not just the last the boy would ever see him smoke, but the last one in the packet. The old man peeked in to make sure this was a true fact, then crumpled the package and stowed it back in the place from which it had come. He lit this last cigarette as he had its predecessor, with the same effortless ease. He did not ignore the hilltop wind; he seemed somehow to *negate* it.

"When does it happen, Grandpa?"

"It don't happen all at once," he said, wetting the match as he had its predecessor. "It kinda creeps up, like a cat trailing a squirrel. Finally you notice. And when you *do* notice, it ain't no more fair'n the way that Osgood boy was countin' his minute this afternoon."

"Grandpa?"

The old man looked at him.

"What is it 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. Banning never forgot that sound.

I think what you notice first must be different for everyone," he 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."

Where?"

"I was in Davis Drug. You know it?"

Banning nodded. His father took him and his sister there for ice-cream sodas sometimes. His father called them the Vanchockstraw Triplets because their orders never varied: their father always had vanilla, Patty chocolate, Banning strawberry. And his father would sit between them and read. Patty was often dumb, but she 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. "I was in there 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. All at once I seen her. This display. Would have been hard to miss. Took up one whole side of the store, it seemed like. 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 her 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 'im 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---"

The boy was nodding.

"But this was different. This was penny candy by the bag by the job lot, you could almost say. All that truck like candy corn and root-beer barrels and niggerbabies."

"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-- was j umpin' the gun more than just a little. Holy hell, I'm thinkin' to myself, Frank Davis must be hard up for business if he's put his trick-or-treat out before the goddam summer's even over. And I thought I'd tell him so, and then a part of me said, You hold on a second, ponyboy. What's the matter with you, anyway? Because it *wasn't* still summer, and I knew it just as well as I know we're standin' here. 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 Filler who had come down from Schenectady, looking 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 time? Of course I knew all that! Good gosh-amighty, the tomatoes! I thought to myself, Shoot, George! What's got into you? Ain't you a

little young to be going senile? Yeah, he's got it out a little early, but summer? It ain't summer by *more'n* a country mile. But for a second, Clivey, it *seemed* like summer, or like it *had* to be summer, because it was just *being* summer. See what I mean? It only took me a second or two to get September straight in my head, but I felt . . . you know, I felt... " He frowned, then reluctantly brought out a word he knew but would not have ordinarily used in conversation because it was a hifalutin word for a farmer. "I felt *dismayed*. That's the only goddam way I know how to put it. Like I slipped a cog. And that was the first time.

He looked at the boy, who only looked back at him, not even nodding, so deep in concentration was he. So 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 all of this one for him.

"It was like steppin' up to the bathroom mirror meanin' to do n'more than shave and seein' the first gray hair in your head. You get that, Clivey?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Seemed like, after that first time, it was the same 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



you

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 all funny in the head . . . 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 rest of the hay's in 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 pert' 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 so help me God. So then he gets out his pen and asks for my address, and I gave it to him pert's you'd like. Then he asks me how old I am, and I opened my mouth 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?" Banning thought he had followed everything up to this pretty well, but now he was lost.

"That's just it! I said it because it was what was in the front of 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 a fella who just got a broomstick rammed up his ass, 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 thirtyseven. 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 murdering 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. Your son 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 Merritt Parkway these days, goin' so fast that a car blows 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 *being* 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 goneshit, 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 than clapped your summer straw on for the first band concert of the summer before 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 Banning only smiled, delighted by this—he knew what a chemise was, all right, because a chemise was sometimes what his mother wore all day long when his father was out on the road, selling (he sold appliances, mostly, but a little insurance when he could—he had a franchise from a company called Amalgamated Life and Property of America). When his father went out on the road, his mom got down to the serious drinking, and that was drinking sometimes too serious to allow her to get dressed in much more, at least until the sun went down, when she would sometimes leave him in Patty's care while she went out 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 said, oh yes, she had noticed, oh my goody-goody-goodness, *yes*.

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 *after* my boy Billy-who would have been your uncle if he'd lived-got killed in that road accident in '58. *That* was a suckardly thing, too. That's one I could task that Reverend Toddman 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 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 both if he'd lived, but instead he went off the road and hit a 'lectric pole, and it fell down and he got fried just the same as any mad dog 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*-Jesus, 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



can

had it the right way round. 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 why I was mad and let 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!" Banning 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 you can't tell which one, and you're sure you can, but they shufe 'em so goddarn 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 was disgusted at his disgust because he understood, a little, at least, what Grandpa was saying, but he couldn't help the disgust. It was as if Grandpa had pulled open a bandage to show the boy a sore which was a symptom of something awful 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 bearin's! There's no one to say it *to*. It's like bein' 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, "it sounds more like time's more an ijit then anyone stuck in it."

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 also had to sling an arm around Banning'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, swollen purple with hilarity.

"Ain't you a jeezer!" Grandpa said, pulling back and hocking a gigantic yellow-green-brown wad of phlegm to one side. "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 bald-headed pissant Toddman 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 pisshole in the snow for you, but it 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 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, you will. Goddam if you won't."

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

"You have taken instruction," Grandpa said.

"I didn't take no instruction if I didn't *understand!*"

Banning 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 Banning'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 things that don't have nothing to do with each other," Grandpa said in the apple trees. "They are cousins who won't kiss."

"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 eye fastened the boy's mind and heart like a staple.

"How?"

"It'll be pretty," 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 doing kicking around up here? Let's go get her!"

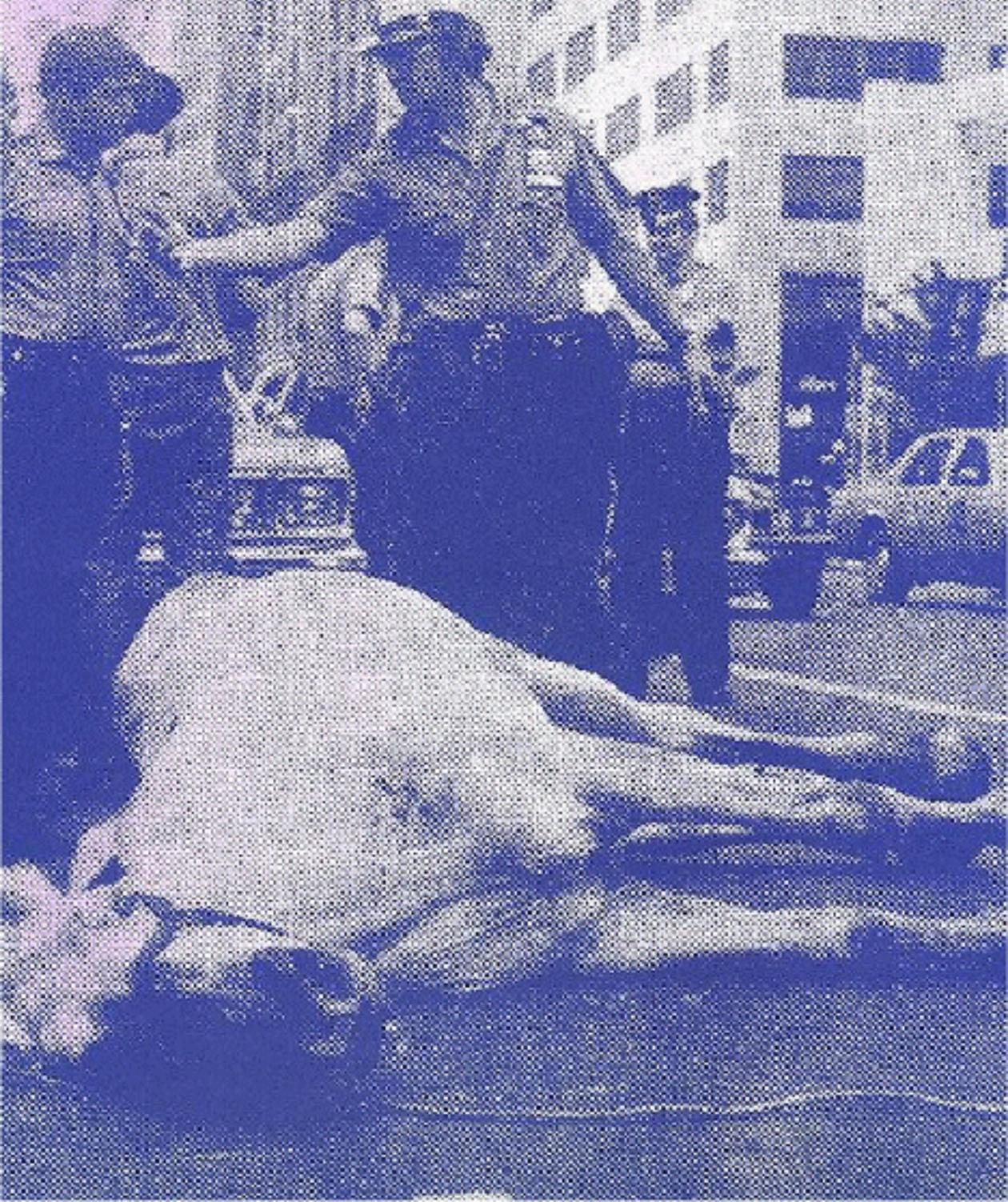
They did.

And Banning never forgot the name, which was time, and the color, which was none, and the look, which was not ugly or beautiful . . . but pretty.

Pretty.

Or its nature, which was wicked.

And never forgot 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.



MY

***Pretty
Pony***

***Stephen
King***

***Barbara
Kruger***

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My

Pretty

Pony

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