Mary Stolz

CEZANNE PINTO

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Cezanne Pinto

A Memoir

with Related Readings

Glencoe McGraw-Hill

New York, New York Columbus, Ohio Woodland Hills, California Peoria, Illinois

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Cover Art *Cowboy and Cattle*, William Henry David, Koerner, 1923, eMotion

Glencoe/McGraw-Hill

A Division of The McGraw-Hill Companies

Send all inquiries to:
Glencoe/McGraw-Hill
8787 Orion Place
Columbus, OH 43240

ISBN 0-07-823070-5
Printed in the United States of America
2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 026 04 03 02 01

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Chapter One

In 1860, WHEN I RAN from the plantation in Virginia, I decided to be twelve years old. Could've been anywhere from nine to fourteen, but as Frederick Douglass, that great man, said, you might as well ask a horse how old he is as a slave.

Twelve sounded all right to me, then. Now my beaky nose is pushing the ninety mark (or past it, who knows?) and one day follows another day like one boxcar coupled to another boxcar, all of them back of an engine going nowhere. This is an observation, not a complaint. I have had a life crammed with love, labor, exhilaration, rage, pain, pleasure.

And now?

Now I say, "Enough!"

I'll be fine on this siding the rest of the way, and will use up the time filling a school notebook with recollections of how it felt to be me . . .

I will tell you about my mother.

We slave children were obliged to call our mothers "Mammy." "Mother," even "Mama"—those were white words, and in front of white folks we said "Mammy" or got whipped.

But my mother said to call her "Mam" when we were alone. Years later I learned that English queens are addressed as "Ma'am." *There's* something to think about.

Mam was queenly.

African queenly.

Quiet and quick as a slim dark cat, she had the wonderful gait all slave women developed early from carrying bundles atop their heads. She was cook in the Big House of the plantation where I was born. It was called Gloriana, after an English queen.

The state of Virginia was named for the same queen, which is the sort of unimportant interesting fact that I enjoy knowing.

* * *

Looking back, I realize that like many of those Dixieland domains, Gloriana was showy and shoddy. The horses were excellent, and well tended, but the plantation carriages were fancy rigs with peeling paint, and the Big House was like a once elegant woman turned sloven. The Clayburns—master and mistress and daughters three—were indolent lords of their manor. Though the place was *stuffed* with black house servants, headed by a self-important butler named Herkimer, nothing was well taken care of . . . their fancy, furbelowed clothes not really clean, silver and brass not properly polished, crystal chandeliers and glasses faintly smeary.

As Mam said, why keep a place well, or care about it, for people who didn't know what well kept or cared for was?— not for furniture, for chandeliers, or for breathing, suffering human beings.

Outside was a different matter.

Stables and barns, corn and tobacco fields, orchards, and the slave quarter were run by a white overseer, name of Blade. He was known as a man who could "handle" us. *Us* being the breathing, suffering human beings at his mercy. Deaf to pleas or pity, suspicious that we might know a moment of peace, even—unlikely as that might be—of pleasure, if he relaxed the scrutiny of his blue, pale, angry eyes, Blade drove us to exhaustion, drove many to run, to escape the absolute rule of his blacksnake whip.

Some of us, defeated in spirit and body, knocked at Death's door, and were kindly taken in.

Blade cheated Clayburn left, right, all around the barn. We knew that, and it was the only thing about him any of us commended. We didn't like "Ol' Massa," but that was just practice for how we felt about Blade, whose vicious ways were surely among the reasons Ol' Massa fell on hard times, so that he took to selling slaves. (Sometimes he hired them out to neighbors. A sort of nineteenth-century rent-a-slave deal.) One year he sold several, including my mother, to a cattleman from Texas. Mam fetched a good price, being known as the best cook for miles in any direction.

She *begged*, got on her *knees*—not a woman to be brought to her knees any other way—to have me bought along with her. Except for my older sister, who'd been sold to a slave trader years before, I was all

the child she had. Gone too, so long before I couldn't call to mind his face, was the man who was my father.

But no—the Texas cattleman said he only needed ranch hands and a cook, he had too many useless slave children already, and besides, I had a look in my eye he didn't rightly take to.

I recall how Clayburn told the Texan, "That there boy's daddy was mean as a badger. Made a reg'lar habit of runnin' off. Even my overseer, Blade, couldn't flog him into shape. Finally sent him to a slave breaker, and damned if he didn't beat the breaker up and run off again. Sent the patty-rollers after him, but they never catched sight of even his shadder."

Clayburn was not a well-spoken man, in any sense.

Patty-rollers? Well, how could you know? I'll *tell* you, though. Patty-rollers (patrollers) were slave hunters, slave thrashers, slave entrappers. They prowled by night looking for runaways that they'd return, in leg irons and neck collars, to their owners. Patty-rollers stopped honest black folk coming late from church or a visit to a relative a few miles off, because we were not supposed to be out of our own slave quarters after dark.

When possible, these dread sentries took free black men and women, those who had proper passes to prove they were not slaves, and sold them "down the river."

Down the Mississippi.

There, in Deep South states, no one listened to a black person explaining how he was "free"—"See, *looka yere!* He had this paper *proving* how he was a free man." They'd laugh at his claim, tear up the pass, and it was back into bondage for him, who had maybe risked death to escape it.

Not so many women as men escaped Southern fields and manor houses, because of not wanting either to leave their children or to take them on risk-ridden flights. Some took the mighty chance, and Harriet Tubman—the great, the glorious, and defiant, heroic, matchless Harriet, called "Moses" by her people—led many a man, woman, and child to freedom.

Out of the Egypt of Dixie into the Promised Land.

My father was sold to Clayburn by his first master because of this habit he had of escaping. Until that last time, they always caught

him. Brought him "home" in irons. He might have been a difficult property to dispose of, but he was an ideal slave—huge and strong, young and illiterate. He was intelligent, too, but the seller hadn't warned Clayburn of that.

Cupid, the blacksmith, told me how Ol' Massa had said to Blade, "I snapped up this here new one at a bargain, but he's surly and got the devil's own temper. I'm relyin' on you to knock him into shape."

Blade had knocked many an unruly bargain into shape, but not one like my father. However, what Blade couldn't do, one look at Mam achieved. She slowed him to a walk, kept him enslaved, in all senses, for years.

"How we was in love in love in love," she'd tell me. "I was sixteen, thereabouts, and purty as a pitcher iffen I do say so. And your daddy, Deucy, your daddy was such a man—such a man—like no man in the worl' else. The secon' I clapped eyes on him, my heart lep' into his han' like a baby rabbit 'n' nestled dere snug as snug. We had a broomstick weddin', and we was happy. For a while we was happy, for a while, for a while, for sometime while . . ."

Mam had a way of repeating a phrases so that it sounded like a clock chiming, a bell pealing—or tolling . . .

They were wed, my pretty mother, my big strong intelligent unread unmanageable father.

When slaves married?

The couple jumped over a broomstick.

That completed the ceremony.

"When y'all done cleared this yere broomstick, y'all married," the white preacher, the overseer, now and then the master, would say. "Now get back to work."

You think I exaggerate? I do not exaggerate. I state a fact.

I tell you further, a slave could not defend his family against beatings, auctions, shameful behavior on the part of owners. When such things happened—and they happened all the time, all the time—a slave man had three choices. To stand by and do nothing, to fight and get flogged, to run away. A slave had no more legal standing than a—a horse, as Frederick Douglass put it again and again.

Mam told me how when Sister was sold to the slave trader, my daddy knocked Blade senseless one night and ran off to the North, to New York State, where he got a job in a shipyard. Then he staked all—his freedom, his life—to return weeks later to the quarter. Tried to coax Mam to come along with him, run to the North. I was too little to take along and she wouldn't leave me. He went on by himself.

He said he'd work to buy her freedom, and mine, but we never heard from him again. I try to believe he made it to freedom but he couldn't earn enough money to buy us. I don't want to think of other ends he might have met, other ways he was kept from coming for us.

And Mam. My mother. I hope she found something to live for, after the war was over, maybe even found a measure of happiness.

I'll tell now how I got my name, Cezanne Pinto.

First, I should explain that my slave name was Deucy. They called us things like that. And of course, we were expected to take the master's last name. Deucy Clayburn, that's what I had to answer to if stopped by a white person wanting to know what I was doing, why I was doing it, and if I knew what was good for me I'd wipe that look off my face.

Guess I had something of my father in me that the Texan didn't cotton to.

My father always said his name was William, plain William. Wouldn't answer to any other. The only way Blade could get him to work—and they needed him for a thousand hard jobs that no one else could do—was to call him William. Mam told me how they'd *hear* the overseer grit his teeth as he forced himself to say, "All right, *William!* Get that there mule harnessed up and get out in the woods and start haulin'!"

A mulish fellow, my father. I am proud of him, proud of him . . .

Back to Cezanne Pinto.

Two things I've done well in my life. Understand horses, teach them gently. Understand children, teach them gently too.

Horses were first in my life. Teaching came after I'd scrambled my way into an education a long time later.

From the time I was a little fellow, I worked in the stables, usually sleeping in a box stall to keep a restless horse easy. I had the gift.

Could gentle down, comfort, calm the most wayward, ornery piece of horseflesh on the plantation, and I grew up loving them more than anything in the world except Mam.

Clayburn had a stable master, name of Stebbins, a crude fellow, fond of the bottle, but not altogether a brute like Blade. Secretly (he hoped it was a secret, but *we* knew) Stebbins was afraid of horses. It made him a bad handler, apt to turn out head-shy, hardmouth, spooky mounts. I was just—goodness knows—maybe six or seven, when he came to me, all smiles and whisky breath.

"Deucy," he said, rubbing my head roughly, "I cain't he'p noticin' that yore right handy aroun' the barn, you sho' got a way with horsh flesh. Blast their hides. So this yere is what Ah'm settlin' to do. Gonna larn you all Ah know. *Oversee* you. Unnerstan' what Ah'm saying', eh, eh?" He leaned forward, squinting into my face, as if to make sure I comprehended spoken words.

"Yessuh, I unnerstan's," I said, adding, "Massa." You had to "Massa" all white men, but just one would do for such as Stebbins. With Clayburn or Blade it had to be repeated. A lot.

"Good, good," he went on, swaying a little. "Larn you every las' thing Ah know 'bout the stupid, ornery beasts—trainin' 'em up, ridin', teach 'em obedience, stan' to be mounted, behave their stupid selves an' so on an' forth. Watcha say to that, eh, eh, eh? Real ol' break for a nigger boy, eh, *eh?*"

"Yes*suh*!" said I, happy at the prospect before me.

It is interesting to note how the inward blaze of fury and hatred that the word, on a white person's tongue, causes me to feel now and has for so many years, wasn't a spark then. A term used so frequently, casually, even sometimes, I imagine, without intent to shame, I accepted as descriptive. A kitten was a cat, a colt was a horse, a black person a nigger.

Long time changing . . . and so far to go.

Well.

That young, I began, in addition to exercising the horses—from the start there wasn't a one I couldn't ride—to break and train them under the "supervision" of Stebbins. We had horses for the plow and the carriages, we had saddle horses, hunters, ponies for children. I loved them all—the bright and biddable animals, and those that were

nearly unteachable, having been early discouraged by Stebbins's handling.

Most of all, I loved that little filly Shenandoah, mine to bring up from the day she was born.

Of course, along with the other stable hands, I took care of tack, shined boots, groomed the animals, mucked out, kept the barouche, the two gigs, and the big carriage reasonably clean. And I was not spared a turn in the fields, usually just to take water out to the tobacco rows for the pickers to splash on their faces, drink from their hands.

One day I shall remember, always remember . . .

I'd gone out, lugging the bucket, trying not to splash, and came upon a field boss standing over an old man who was on his hands and knees between rows.

"What's the trouble, Uncle?" the boss was saying, without harshness, without concern. "Why ain't you workin' your share?"

The old man didn't stir, except to move his head unhurriedly from side to side. "Man say whass de trubbl, whass de trubble. Trubble enuff, sar, trubble enuff, nuttin' but trubble by day 'n' by night. I gwine dead dis night, git away from dis yere, go t' Jesus."

The field boss lifted his whip, let if fall to his side, and walked off shrugging. I sprinkled water on the old man's neck, cupped some in my hand and held it to his mouth, but he couldn't drink. He did die. That night, as he said he would.

"How did he know, Mam?" I asked, frightened. "How'd he know fer sure dat he dead dis night?"

Mam couldn't tell me.

Where the best horses were concerned, I took on jobs that Stebbins gradually relinquished as he "taught me all he knew."

I also helped Cupid, the blacksmith, till I became pretty good at shoeing a horse myself, provided it would stand still for a child. Cupid was not a bright man, but I was happy in his large, slow company, in his bright open forge. He had a harmonica that he kept hidden there. Taught me to play it. Old airs. Jubilee airs. Gospel airs. That most beautiful of American folk tunes, "Shenandoah." I learned to play them all on Cupid's little harmonica.

"Jes' don' do it roun' any a *dem*," he'd say, indicating everyone

outside the forge, where he worked and lived. Only there did he feel safe, from owners, overseers, stable masters, even other slaves.

Clanging away in his fiery forge, Cupid used to sing a song he'd brought with him from Africa. He was a first-generation slave and would never speak of the trip over. His song, almost lost in the clang and clangor of the forge, went like this:

De ba-na co-ba, ge-ne me, ge-ne me, ge-ne me!
De ba-na co-ba, ge-ne me, ge-ne me, ge-ne me!
Ben d'nu-li, nu-li, nu-li, ben d'le . . .

He said it meant, in the tongue of his ancestors, "My soul need sumpin' dat's new, dat's new . . ."

"What new t'ing your soul need, Cupid?" I asked, only once.

He slapped his hands against his mouth, then said, "Doan wan' no new t'ing, no *way* atall. Jes' need de ol' way back. Wanna be back *dar*. Wish so *bad* Ah was back dar still. Gib my life up to be back on my own lan' fer a hour. Talk my own tongue fer a hour. Gib my life fer a hour—fer a *minute* of home . . ."

I never asked about the song again because the cureless longing in his voice made me hurt, and I didn't want to hurt.

Besides, those were good years for me. Because of Mam and Cupid. Because of the horses. In *spite* of everything else. After Mam was gone, and I moved through my days bone-bruised by loss, Cupid and the horse kept me sane.

Our ancestors communicated with drums. Over rivers and bush, across vast stretches of veldt, they told one another news of joy and mourning, birth and death, told gossip, sent warnings and greetings throbbing through miles of African air. When we came—when we were *brought*—to this country, to the slave world of the New World, the drums were taken from us, for fear of . . . us.

Oh, true, true . . . hedged round with power and terror were the planters, the slaveholders, of the South.

Fearful that we would speak among ourselves across the miles, on drums, in a language they couldn't understand. That we would scheme, plot uprisings. That within their very sight and hearing, under their very noses, we would build ourselves strong enough to topple them.

So the drums had to go.

So the grapevine had to come.

I recall the Big House lament: "Ah *just* cain't under*stand!* How do they *do* it? They learn what all's happened miles away before we heah a breath of it ourselves! Somethin' must be done! It must be stopped! It's right dangerous!"

It *was* dangerous.

We were dangerous.

They tried to hack down the knotty branches of the grapevine, rend its roots, wrench them from the earth. But it flourished.

We had a saying in the quarter: "Dere's a word you kin tell to de grapevine dat de grapevine doan tell back."

When I was very little, hearing that "de grapevine" had told some secret thing to us in the quarter, I went to where the purple scuppernongs were climbing as though in a great cage, and sat listening for a long time before I went and asked Mam if the grapes only spoke to special people and who were they?

She laughed, and pulled me close, and explained that it was messages that flew from mouth to ear and that we called it the grapevine because the grapes were dark, and white ears couldn't hear dark voices.

Well.

The dark fruit of the grapevine whispered of slave revolts in Caribbean islands, where black people were masters now. The grapes spoke of an Underground Railroad running to states and territories in this country where slaves could throw their chains away and walk off free. All of us children, and plenty of grown-ups too uninformed to think otherwise, pictured the great snorting Freedom Train speeding through a tunnel deep in the ground, whistle screaming, smoke pouring from its stacks in glorious billowing clouds, till at length it roared up out of the earth to spill us, like the children of Israel, into the sunlight of the Promised Land.

From the first arrival of the first slave ship on these shores, thousands upon thousands of us ran toward liberty, not sure where to find it, knowing we could die without reaching it.

The plantation masters and their wives and children tried to overhear the tidings of the grapevine. They sent black spies among us . . .

persons willing, for preference or pay, to prove false to any loyalty. But the grapevine never told, and master and mistress learned, too late, what it had been saying.

What it had foretold.

So.

The night before she was to go in the wagon to Texas, Mam and I stayed up late in our corner of the cabin in the quarter, eating a couple of biscuits she'd taken from their table. No candle, of course. We sat together in the dark, whispering.

"You call to min' ol' Magna?" Mam said.

"Course."

Magna was a lame field hand who one day escaped on a cow, rode away bareback in broad morning light. Magna was pretty old, likewise the cow. They didn't go after her.

I recall Clayburn and Blade sitting on a paddock fence, joking their fool heads off about it.

"Greatest darky escape in a coon's age!" Blade sputtered, tobacco juice dribbling down his chin. "Crippled crone forks spavined mount and *away they go!*"

Clayburn slapped his skinny thigh, laughing till I thought he'd fall off the fence. "Where all will they *get* to, do you reckon?"

"Wal, now . . ." Blade chewed, spat, grinned. "Mind, she's got a right good seat on a cow, has old Magna." This sent them into another gale of high spirits. "Might could make it—oh, what say to Georgia, eh?"

"Think so? Or could drown in the Dismal Swamp afore she got there."

"Wouldn't surprise me none. Old bones and new, anythin' it kin get, that there swamp'll take."

They sat in a while longer, chuckling at the good joke, then went off shaking their heads.

That they imagined an escaping slave would head south, I attribute to stupidity and an inability to think above the Mason-Dixon line.

Of course Magna did not ride her cow toward Georgia, or toward the Dismal Swamp. Of course she headed north, for a free state. I like to think she reached a haven, had some fetterless peace for what years were left her. I want to believe that the cow made it too, and ended her days safely grazing.

Probably that's not what happened.

But *maybe*.

I like to believe a lot of things that might have been, so as not to dwell too much on things that were and are and no doubt will be.

So, there's Mam and me in the cabin in the dark, whispering to each other, crying some, trying to say good-bye without believing that's what it was. But it was. I didn't know where in Texas they took her, and though years later, after the war, I went to Texas trying to find her, I never saw my mother again.

"When you gits a li'l older, son, you run fum dis place, hear?" she said, rocking me in her arms. "Get 'way fum dis place whar I won't be no more."

I must've been under eight at that time, because I was still wearing the tow-cloth singlet that slave children were given after they were two or three years old. Before that, we went naked, no matter the weather.

Tow-cloth? A coarse, itchy cotton made into a one-piece garment that came below our knees. After the age of eight, boys were given short pants, girls a long dress tied with string at the waist. We got new garments at the once-a-year issue day. Only grown-ups had shoes.

"Run whar to, Mam?" I asked timidly.

"Nort', lak your daddy. Pennsylvany, New Yawk, Canady. One a dem places whar freedom's at. Whar freedom, freedom, freedom's at."

"But, *Mam*," I whispered, "Cupid say dey's a ribber a t'ousan' mile wide 'tween here 'n' de Nort'. He say nobody *nebber* made it to de Nort'. Thass slave talk, 'bout freedom, Cupid say. He say dey's no sich t'ing as black-skin freedom."

"Deucy! You know pore Cupid's stupid."

"I likes him," I said stubbornly. "He larn me to play de *har*monica. Less me work de bellows. Cupid a *good* man. An' gentle wit' de horses. Not like Stebbins."

"Nobody say stupid cain't be good. Jes' doan you lissen to de lies. Dat pore fool b'lieve what *anyone* tell him."

"He say he hear 'bout dat ribber right fum Blade hisself."

"You b'lieve what Blade tell we 'bout *anyt'ing*? How you t'ink your daddy made it t' New Yawk City, an' den back again dat time he cum back, axin' we t' go 'long wit' him? T'ink your daddy could *swim* a t'ousan' mile? T'ink he had a *boat* t' *sail* a t'ousan' mile? Doan you

ebber, not ebber in your life, *lissen* t' Blade or any odder one a dem. Liars! Dey is *all* a *dem liars!* Say t'ings t' keep we skeert t' run. Well, your daddy warn't skeert, and doan you be, too, heah?"

"Den whyn't *we* run, you an' me? Run now, dis night. Get on up and hightail outa yere dis *minute*. Mam! Less you and me hightail to whar freedom's at." My voice was rising. "Dat way you cain't go t' Texas—"

"Hush!" she said. "Hush, my chile, my beloved, b*eloved* chile."

I'll remember it—how she put her hand on my mouth, how her voice hoarsened as she spoke.

"Deucy, lissen. I'se too ol', too tired, an' t' tell de pity-fill trut', too skeert t' hightail it outa here, an' you is jes' too yong, see? I'd be skeert fer de two of we, los' in swampses and woodses. Hongry. Maybe cotched 'n' took back in chains 'n' sol' south—sol' down t' Natchez or New Orleens," she said, and shivered. Even to name those cities put fear in our voices.

She stopped and sighed as deep a sigh as ever I had heard, before she went on.

"Your daddy say dat up north jes' 'bout all a body see is white faces. I jes' could not stan' t' be in such a worl' a whiteness. Mought be I'd *like* t' be strong 'n' brave—like your daddy, like Magna, like Missus Tubman, but I ain't. Jes' ain't. Jes' ain't. Thass sumpin' you gotta understan', and *a*xcept. I'se a weak womans."

"No you ain't, Mam. *You* is a queen!"

I could feel her smiling in the dark. "Kitchen queen, Thass all." She rocked me back and forth. "One t'ing I always done, tol' you de trut', and I jes' done dat—tol' you a sad pity-fill trut'."

"Den I'se gwine run by mysel' t'morra," I said. "I doan wanna be yere when you'se . . . when you ain't . . . I'll 'scape t'morra, my ownsel'."

"No! No, no, no, no, *no!* You too yong t' mak' your way. You'se a baby still. Wait a bit, den you *run*. An' not on no cow. Take some hoss dat cottons t' you, lak dat little pinto filly yore so sot on. Wait till yore old 'nough t' run an' she's old 'nuff t' be rid, den go by night and doan stop till yore on free soil."

"Steal a *hoss*, Mam?" I said. Just a boy, understand, and used to obeying any white person that gave an order. It was sure one of them wasn't going to order me to swipe a horse and hightail it for freedom.

"Won't be stealing, no*how*," said Mam, hard-voiced. "You an' me an' your daddy and a t'ousan t'ousan' folks now called away paid a

t'ousan' t'ousan' time fer any hoss you mought ride offen on. She be *your own hoss*, a gif' fum we. You take her, when de time come."

For a while we were quiet, she holding me close, now and then kissing my head.

All at once she said, "You get shed of dis yere Deucy name, too, hear? Slave name. Bad as Cupid. When you go, tak unto you a good, homemade by your ownsel' name. Doan even take William, atter your daddy. A name for yoursel' alone, yoursel' alone."

"How I do dat, Mam?" I asked shakily.

Too much was being crowded on me there in the dark that night before I was to lose her forever. I was hungry, lonely in advance of being without Mam, terrified at being told I must run away on a horse belonging to Ol' Massa. "I doan know how to tak unto mysel' no name."

"We'll study on it right now, de two a we, see, see?"

Well, then.

What the Clayburns knew of the world beyond their pale, their own acres and desires, was meager. They'd have known the names of John Brown and Nat Turner, of Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth. These people were threats. But they'd not have heard mentioned Jean Baptiste Pointe Du Sable (*there's* a mighty name for you!) of Chicago.

Of Chicago? He *founded* the town.

There now—that's something you didn't know.

Jean Baptiste Point Du Sable was born on the island of Haiti, in the mid-eighteenth century. His mother was a slave, his father a rich white Frenchman who sent this boy of his to Paris to be *educated*. Think of it! Consider it carefully! There he was, half white, half black, by all odds fated to spend his life chopping in the canebrakes.

But!

He happened to have a white father who—think of it!—*loved him*.

It's kept me frowning and laughing all my years, to realize how luck plays dice with our lives.

Well, lucky Jean Baptiste—after countless adventures that Mam told of to keep me from crying in the night when I was hungry, or cold, or scared of Blade—landed in what later became the state of Illinois, where he founded a trading post and married a Potawatomi Indian woman. His business flourished, and his marriage was happy.