

Excerpt from *A Baton for Phoebe*

And to think it had all been going so well: the third and fourth legs running at a coordinated peak speed, the opponents not even at their heels, victory just around the final bend, the extension of the third runner's arm, the flexing of the anchor's triceps, the down-slap of the baton into the meat of the palm... It was then that the troubles began. Because what was slapped into the palm, what should have been and until then always had been a baton, turned out as a matter of undeniable and untimely fact to be a hissing stick of dynamite. The spectators, privy to the empirical reality that batons do not spew out sparks no matter how swift the runner, needed no announcement that something was amiss. The auditorium erupted into what only a moral degenerate or an exulted leader might call 'a lively terror,' but what most anyone else would characterize as a disorderly exodus of mass trampling and shrieking. For Phoebe, however, who was angling around the curve into the final stretch, the warm slender rod she clutched and pumped at her side was no more (and no less) than a baton; it certainly was no ignited fuse traveling down towards a bundle of ammonium nitrate. In her monomaniacal focus, Phoebe saw nothing of the hysteria in the stands. She alone was oblivious to the live explosive: an unfortunate and cynical circumstance, but not a tragic one, for though the dynamite did detonate, the explosion did not kill her.

After a brief bout of unconsciousness during the routine emergency procedures, Phoebe came to and found herself staring up through a fluorescent glare at the hairy chin

of a nurse who was wheeling her down a hospital hallway. Not the entire chin was hairy, just a small patch on the left flabby underside between two red creases that were likely caused by fits of seated narcolepsy.

“What’s happened to me?”

The nurse did not flinch or break her pace.

“How’d I get here?” The fluorescent lamps on the ceiling were long and blinding, and where one ended the next began. Miffed at the nurse’s impassivity, Phoebe reached up and plucked a black curly hair from the hairy knoll on the nurse’s chin that from here onwards shall be referred to as ‘The Patch.’

The nurse yanked back on the bed rail, jarring Phoebe to a halt. “You wicked Delilah!” The nurse bounced her fingertips against The Patch and winced. “How dare you try rob me of my strength!”

Phoebe flicked the hair from her fingertip. “It’s an unseemly patch of hair, better suited for a groin than a chin.”

“You mangled hussy, it’s not a patch!” The nurse shut her eyes and, inhaling slowly, rolled the remaining hairs between her thumb and forefinger. When she spoke, it was with the nostalgia of a refugee. “It is the area formerly known as The Patch.”

Phoebe frowned. “Did you say I’m mangled?”

The nurse picked up her pace and chortled, throwing forth her shoulders for extra effect. “To start with, you’re missing your right hand.”

Phoebe tried to bolt up but her chest was clamped down by a belt of faded leather. She stared at the bandaged mass at the end of her right arm. “I have to finish the race. I need my hand for the relay. My hand...”

The nurse went for the unoriginal, again chortling and again throwing forth her shoulders for the extra effect. “The good news is you’ve still got your left hand. That one’s not a bloody stump.”

Phoebre dropped her head back onto the pillow and stared at the ceiling. “I’ll have to practice my handoff with my left hand,” she murmured. She looked again at the nurse. “What’s my name?”

“You don’t know your name?” the nurse said with surprise.

“No. And it seems neither do you.”

“Of course I do.” The nurse hesitated. “Your name is Phoebre.”

“*Phoebre?* I know it’s not Phoebre.”

“Oh yes it *is*.” The nurse sang out the last word. “It is *too*.”

“Where did you come up with Phoebre?”

The nurse paused, now more confused than surprised. “Well it’s in the... but you...”

OMNISCIENT NARRATOR (*stepping in for the save*): All right, let’s drop the name ‘Phoebre.’ We’ll find another one. Get back to it. (*steps out, satisfied with this rare show of omnipotent potential*)

A gaunt young doctor carrying a dual-chamber cage strode past them, nodding at the nurse as she clipped by. In one chamber was a heap of dead mice, in the other a muzzled monkey. “Where am I?” said the girl formerly known as Phoebre to the nurse with the area on her chin formerly known as The Patch, “and where are you taking me?”

“To heaven, darling.” The nurse outlined a halo over her white cap and sneered. “I am your intermediary between the earthly and metaphysical planes. This is your transitory tunnel, which—”

“Tell me now where you’re taking me!”

The nurse emitted a laugh that closely resembled a whinny. In fact, it was so close that we may safely say ‘The nurse whinnied’ without sabotaging our efforts at lexical precision. “No mumbo-jumbo for you, eh? All chemicals and neurotransmitters in your material world?” The nurse clucked. “You’ve got it all figured out, don’t you? Well, I too can be a material girl: *Ooh, heaven is a place on earth—*” The nurse broke from the song and pursed her face into a taut mask of severity. “Fine then! We’re going to do a little surgery.”

“To do what?”

“To remove your left hand.” The nurse made an abrupt ninety-degree turn and pushed the girl formerly known as Phoebe through a pair of swinging doors into the center of an operating room. Lounging surgeons hopped up to their feet and nonchalantly extended their arms as assistants dressed them in aprons; masks were placed solemnly over mouths; gloves snapped gleefully above heads. Then out came the tools: glinting scissors, curved knives, hacksaws, reciprocal saws, a shotgun for emergencies. Next we have the lights poised over the operating table like cobras recoiling to strike, their heads circular, triangular, oval, globular. And then the crime investigators, blowing at their coffee in trench coat huddles, no, that’s later, there are none of them now. The bandaged girl is in the center of the room, the surgeons with the tools are gazing over her, above the surgeons the lights are gazing upon them all, above the lights, who knows, these are

mysteries beyond our means, there is enough at our feet to keep us busy for the rest of our life, or lives, however you wish it, friend. The bandaged girl lies recumbent, waiting, a surgeon goes for the buttons on her shirt, what deft fingers, he's already unbuttoned the top two, is this sexual deviation, a medic's twisted fantasy, an adult flick, *Let's Play Doctor*, *Debbie Does Herr Doktor*, no, calm yourself, let them do their job, this is protocol for heart transplantation. See, there's the heart, throbbing in ice. And yet—heart transplantation—you balk. You should, as does the girl. The talk about removing her left hand was bad enough, but to remove her heart, that's going too far, or maybe just too fast, for with some clever coaxing the surgeons might have stolen her heart, especially the tanned assistant with the aquiline nose, but to remove it, this she cannot tolerate, who could? As to how much she might tolerate we can only conjecture, perhaps three buttons, maybe four, certainly no more than second base, of course with the human creature nothing is certain, we all have the homerun in us, even the rare grand slam (to pun on our words for the wise or, better yet, for the unwise, the wise have words enough). The moral? Remember the capriciousness of the human creature. Remember and you will ward off scores of shocks and sorrows that will later prove to be small yet significant victories of your past. In those victories you may take hope—that carrot-stick of the desperate—to help you endure the countless other shocks and sorrows of your future that you will fail to fend off.

So we have digressed again but they are mere digressions upon digressions, we digressed after the first sentence when the baton turned into dynamite. It's turtles all the way down, an absurd maze without center, no hope of escape, even the Minotaur has absconded with the yarn. To be blunt and modern: there shall be no homecoming.

Accept the digressions, enjoy the corners, and ‘let go,’ to use a vacuous phrase that reeks of mothballs and navel fluff. No, forget that, forgive me, never let go, hang on by your teeth, shake the tiger by the neck. If we are to let go at all, let us go back to our young bandaged girl, for her shocks and sorrows are indeed great this day, or at least greater than ours.

“No heart transplantation!” The surgeon tears his mask off and flings it to the polished floor. He stomps on it three times, flips it the bird, and then steps back to kick it across the room. But he does not kick it. Instead he drops his scalpel and, bobbing his head like a chicken, he exits the room, pinching his nostrils with his left hand and tickling his testicles with his right. Why? No one knows. As we said, we are dealing with the human creature: expect nothing and everything. The stoics are not indifferent; they are merely well-prepared.

“So what now?” another surgeon says.

“Remove her left hand,” the nurse says.

“No,” the girl says. “I want my right hand reattached—if it’s missing that is.”

The surgeon smiles and pats her on the left hand. “There, there. Whether it’s missing you or not isn’t for us to say. Always beware of the pathetic fallacy, the cruel, crawling foam. As for this pretty little hand, we’re removing it so we can attach it to your right wrist.”

“You and the nurse should consider dating,” the girl says. The surgeon blushes; the nurse applies blush. “I want both of my hands. I have a relay to finish.”

“So what you want is a handjob?” the nurse says, eyeing the surgeon.

“Yes, yes, she does,” the surgeon says, his underlip quivering. He presses his ear to his left shoulder and pirouettes on his left leg. “Yes,” he whispers hoarsely, “she does.”

“Or,” the nurse says, her lips twitching, “is there a different sort of job to be done?”

By now our story has degenerated to the level of twelve-year-old buffoonery, perhaps with some teenage pretenses of wit. It could get worse, or better, depending on your pleasures and sensibilities. Because once the images are planted before the mind, they tend to travel down the spinal chord to the visceral south where anything goes, and comes we might add. There we tap into the primal grit of the human creature, into the dangerous den where lust and lechery become bedmates. One cannot deny that the characters bear responsibility for their gutter passions: to deny anyone free will is not only vicious mendacity, but also a gross insult, a slur on the dignity of life. Clearly the surgeon and the nurse had initiated the flirtatious insinuations, had demonstrated their readiness and commitment to harvest the fields, to pluck the peach, to part the melon. As readers we now sense the predominant salaciousness of the one wielding the wheel, the potter’s greasy hand directing the spinning clay. But don’t be too sure. Just as we bring our lust to our characters, so too do our characters bring their lust to us. The lesson: no one is immune. The sophomoric pervert is strong within us, perverting us all. There is no shame in such pleasure so long as it abides by the golden rule: do no harm. Offend, disturb, condemn, outrage, but harm not thy neighbor. And heed not the solemn and severe who mutter about decency and fret about decorum, for he who smelled it dealt it and those who spurn it yearn it.

“I’m tired of being in a hospital,” says the girl, the one whom we inductively assume will prove to be the story’s heroine. She would go on to say more, but cannot.

Why?

“Because I said so,” says the omniscient narrator.

“And he’s the director,” says the author, who cannot lay claims to omniscience despite his superior executive rank.

“The master is modest,” says the narrator, who inwardly revels over the infinite wisdom accorded him by an adjective.

“I know what I know and I know what I don’t know,” says the author, trying to Socratically compensate for his inferior epistemological position.

“Let’s get out of this damn hospital.”

“Right, it’s going nowhere.”

“Where shall we go?”

“You expect me to know?”

“You’re the author aren’t you?”

“It doesn’t mean I know what I’m doing.”

“Then I’ll decide.”

“I should hope so.”

“It’s your job, not mine.”

“It’s debatable.”

“Are you keeping track?”

“Keeping track?”

“You heard me, keeping track.”

“Of what?”

“Of who’s who.”

“Who’s who?”

“That’s what I’m wondering.”

“I don’t follow.”

“That’s exactly it. Who’s the author and who’s the narrator?”

“Oh... I can’t say I’m sure.”

“Are you telling me you don’t know who you are?”

“Neither do you.”

“Just because I jump off a cliff it doesn’t mean you should.”

“If you don’t know who you are, how are you going to jump?”

“I can still jump, but it might be you.”

“Homicide!”

“Fifty percent chance of it. Equal chance it’d be suicide. Either way unintentional.”

“How can it be unintentional if you willfully jump?”

“The jump is intentional, but the homicide or suicide would be unintentional.”

“No. Say you think you’re me. If you jump and you’re right, then it’s intentional homicide. If you’re wrong, it’s accidental suicide with the intent of homicide.”

“Of course that means nothing now.”

“It means I’m sharper than you.”

“Or that I’m sharper than you. You don’t know if you’re you or me.”

“We should probably return to the story.”

“To be honest, it’s a bogus tale.”

“Fatuous rubbish.”

“At least we’re agreed on something.”

“Good thing, since we don’t know who we are.”

[End of Excerpt]

*At the time of writing, neither the author nor the narrator had read *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, although they did at a third party’s urging read the play during the editing process and to their chagrin found that their work was not nearly as groundbreaking as they had imagined.