

The Book of Phoebe



Mary-Ann Tirone Smith

THE BOOK OF PHOEBE

Doubleday & Company, Inc., Garden City, New York
1985

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Designed by Laurence Alexander

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Smith, Mary-Ann Tirone, 1944–

The book of Phoebe.

I. Title.

PS3569.M537736B6 1985 813'.54

ISBN: 0-385-19673-3

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 84-13715

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

FIRST EDITION

The Book of Phoebe

This book is for Tyler, with love

PART ONE

Chapter One

I didn't have an abortion for two reasons—both people. First, my mother. My mother aborted what would have been my brother or sister. She didn't want to know which, naturally, so that she could continue to think of the child as an inconsequential, microscopic fishie. I wished I knew what it was even though I understood my mother's frame of mind exactly. My own state of mind at the time was feverish, teenage curiosity.

Second, an emotionally disturbed, not quite middle-aged man named Tyrus. By emotionally disturbed, I mean crazy. Nuts. Cuckoo. Not so crazy that you couldn't carry on a conversation with him. You could,

and if you were lucky, fifty percent of it would make sense. Tyrus was an even bigger reason for my not having an abortion than my mother. I loved Tyrus, and he more than loved me; he depended on me, but I betrayed him.

When I didn't have an abortion, I was nineteen and a senior at Yale. Consequently, it wasn't such an easy or *de rigueur* decision, but because of that non-brother or -sister, and that insane Tyrus, I wanted my personal little fishie to become a human being. At the same time, I also wanted to graduate not more than six months late from Yale. I can be a selfish person. I wanted to have a baby whom I had no plans for, and still graduate just one semester later than my class. In addition, I didn't want a single person to know I was pregnant or to know about my giving birth, particularly little fishie's father, who had turned out to be a real shit-heel. My grandmother calls people "shit-heel" a lot. She is one of those rare personalities able to eclectically and successfully mix the old with the new, the genteel with the gauche. Instead of honking her horn, she sticks her head out the window and shouts "Fore!" Someday Grandmother will come up against a jaywalker who knows nothing about golf, and splatter him.

Anyway, since my embryo was not quite a baby, the father, as far as I'm concerned, was not quite a father, and the shit-heel, believe me, didn't deserve to be the father of even an embryo. Even a little fishie.

I pulled it off. I have pulled off great things since I was a kid—a gifted kid.

God, was I a gifted kid; and it was so nice to go to Yale and be a gifted college student among a thousand

others equally and sometimes more gifted. At Yale, when you compute the slugging average of each player on both teams after a ball game in your head, nobody bats an eyelash. I enjoyed, for the first time, not being a freak. No one believes this, but in public school it is just as tough on a kid to be gifted as it is to have some other handicap, like cerebral palsy. You're different; hence, weird; hence, made fun of; hence, miserable. When I was a kid, I felt like I had the plague. Anyway, that one contented period of my life with all my fellow freaks at Yale ended abruptly when I finally and foolishly fell in love enough to . . . well . . . to fuck.

Don't be offended. That's the way we Yalies talk. Nobody at Yale has sexual intercourse. They'd laugh you right out of New Haven if you dared to refer to fucking as sexual intercourse. That's like calling tailgating picnicking.

I fell out of love just as fast, but not so fast that I was able to undo what had been done. About three weeks after I'd had an IUD inserted, I got tremendous pelvic pains, and went to the gynecologist who had put it in.

He said, "Oh my! The little devil is hanging half out of your cervix. You ejected it." This from a doctor at Yale.

I said, "Doc, don't tell me I ejected it. It ejected itself. Now give me the essentials. Has the goddamn thing been working?"

"Of course it hasn't been working. You ejected it. I gave you specific instructions to feel inside your vagina for anything unusual."

"When you told me that, Doctor, I didn't have the

heart to disappoint you and tell you I usually don't go around feeling inside my vagina. I've never felt inside my vagina before, so I didn't know what unusual type thing I should be feeling for. The essentials, Doc. Could I be pregnant?"

"How often have you had sexual intercourse since I saw you last?" (The Yale doc, as you can see, has not been laughed out of New Haven yet, but someone'll do it. Soon, I hope.)

"I've been averaging three times a day."

He finally looked up from between my legs. Men will never know the extreme wonder of holding a conversation with a disembodied head floating above a sheet between their knees, level with their belly. "Miss Desmond, when did you say your last period was?"

"Three and a half weeks ago."

He got up off his little stool, threw the IUD at the wastebasket, and missed by a foot. It lay on the waxed linoleum, bloody and disgusting. "Make another appointment for a pregnancy test. The lab isn't open today. I'll talk to you in my office."

He walked out shaking his head. I sat up and continued to stare at the repulsive IUD. It looked like a part from a Milton Bradley board game. The nurse came in, spotting it right away. She winked at me and said, "Doctor is so careless." Then she scooped it up with all his other crap.

"Doctor," I said, "is an inconsiderate slob, Nurse, and if I were you, I'd put that sickening thing into the next cup of coffee you will no doubt be serving him."

She told me to get dressed. I wonder why nurses are the last females on earth to liberate themselves.

"Doctor" was writing on his prescription pad and began speaking to me without looking up. I become rather annoyed when being addressed by a bald scalp, but even men get to hold conversations with the tops of doctors' heads. However, that's American medicine. Or, as Agatha Christie would put it, there it is.

"You've got a little infection in there, Miss Desmond, caused by the IUD piercing your cervix. Take this antibiotic, and don't have intercourse for a month. You'll have to go on the pill. Some of us girls just aren't made for IUDs now, are we?"

Obviously not, Doc. "Perhaps," I suggested, "my boyfriend could use condoms."

He didn't look up. "Many men don't receive the full pleasure of intercourse using condoms, Miss Desmond."

I said, "Many women don't feel the full pleasure of intercourse with infectious IUDs hanging out of their cervixes."

He ripped off the prescription. "Good luck, Miss Desmond," he smiled.

I never went back to him. I took a home pregnancy test and the penicillin. When I told old Shit-heel the story, before I could even get to the pregnancy part, he interrupted me and said, "I think, Phoebe, our relationship is becoming too intense, perhaps."

What's wrong with intense, I wondered, when it comes to fucking all day and all night? He also told me that we needed to expand our perspectives, get in touch with our innermost emotions, develop new frames of reference. In short, we should date others. The phone rang, too. I recognized Wendy Gurnée's silky voice ask-

ing for him. Apparently, Shit-heel had been able to expand his perspectives, get in touch with his innermost emotions, and develop new frames in the six hours since I'd last seen him.

Falling immediately out of love with him, I looked into his sly hazel eyes for the last time, and I will go to the grave knowing that he'll never know he had a baby.

Chapter Two

Since my mother is half the reason I didn't have an abortion, a further look into my background is essential. My grandmother can shed more light on my genes than I. When I was ten, prior to my meeting Tyrus, I overheard my grandmother say to my Great-aunt Virginia, "Phoebe's just like Ma, isn't she, Ginnie?"

And Great-aunt Virginia said, "How the hell would I know?"

Grandmother forgets that Great-aunt Virginia was a year old when their mother died. My great-grandmother had a baby every other spring for twenty-four years, Virginia the last. Then she died. She died of hav-

ing babies. I cornered my grandmother and asked her why she'd said that. Here is the story in Grandmother's words taken from my journal, dated Easter Day 1973. I have the conversation written down verbatim because, as I explained, I am gifted and can recall a conversation of up to forty-nine minutes. At ten I was only up to half an hour. I will precede the entry with a bit about Grandmother herself.

She has ash-blond hair, golfs eighteen holes a day, drives a Silver Cloud, and used to say to my sister when she was a baby, "Don't come near Grandmother, darling. Grandmother has on a pair of twenty-dollar stockings. Baby might run Grandmother's stockings."

Then she would hand Maribeth, my sister, an entire bag of Oreo cookies to keep her the hell away. But don't let me give you the wrong impression, either. She's not rich. The way she got the Silver Cloud was like this; when her youngest kid left home, she sold her big old Victorian house with the wraparound porch—an "in" kind of house these days—and consequently, got her price. Then she bought a small condo near the club. With the leftover money, she got the car. My grandfather never even knew anything about it until she told him it was moving day, and he didn't mind at all. He watches a lot of TV, and she just kept giving him papers to sign during "General Hospital." Wisely, she had the movers leave his La-Z-Boy and his Sony till the last minute, so he only missed one show. Here is that journal excerpt.

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"You see, Phoebe," Grandmother explained, "Great-grandmother was what you'd have to call, I guess, bitter. In those days Catholics weren't allowed to practice birth control, so—"

"Excuse me, Grandmother, they still aren't."

"Oh. I thought they changed that when they told us there was no such thing as St. Christopher. Well, never mind. I've passed that stage in my life, thank God. Where was I? Oh yes. Your great-grandmother went to confession one day, and told the priest that the doctor told her that it would kill her to have another baby, and that her husband was going to have to start practicing birth control. Now, in those days, there was only one method of birth control, and it was rather . . . uh . . . primitive."

"You mean baggies?"

"Phoebe, really. I swear this sex education business in our schools today is going to ruin our youth. Of course, they're all ruined anyway, so what's the difference? I have told your mother repeatedly that if she would only send you to St. Timothy's Academy, you wouldn't be hearing all this . . ."

"So what happened then, Grandmother?"

"To whom? Oh. Well, as I was saying, the priest told her that she was disgusting, and that to even consider such a filthy thing was a mortal sin. He told her to live like brother and sister with her husband, and if you had known my father, Phoebe, you would realize that there was about as much chance of getting him to agree to that as there is getting Uncle Edmond to quit hiding under the head table at all our weddings and barking."

"Don't get into Uncle Edmond, Grandmother. What did she do about it?"

"She had more babies. Three more. And the last one was Aunt Virginia. Ginny ripped her to pieces, so she

suffered from infection for a year until she died. And when she lay there dying . . .”

“You don’t seem too terribly broken up about all this, Grandmother.”

“Phoebe, dear, when you have eleven brothers and sisters, your mother is a stranger. Your Great-aunt Gert was my mother, God rest her soul.”

“Did she die of having babies?”

“No. She ran off with a Cuban musician and we haven’t seen her since. Or him. Cubans were very big when I was a girl. Now, Phoebe, do you want to hear what happened or not?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Well, she was dying, and everyone wanted to send for a priest. But, of course, she wouldn’t hear of it. She said, *‘Le prêtre est mon assassin.’* (The great-grandparents were Canadians.) But just the same, the priest came because he always knew when a member of his flock was on the way out. That’s what they pay priests for, Phoebe. He pushed us all aside and paraded right into her bedroom. God, when I think back. She was forty-one and looked a hundred. Get my bag, Phoebe, so I can freshen up my lips. Then the priest said (I’ll give you this in English), ‘Margaret, I’ve come to hear your confession.’ And Ma said, ‘All right, Father, but first I must tell you something.’ Lord, how our ears perked up.

“‘What is it, my daughter?’ the priest asked. So your great-grandmother said, ‘Father, at dawn on this day I saw a vision. A holy vision.’ He asked her what kind of a holy vision, and she said, ‘I saw, sitting at the foot of my bed, right where you are now, the Blessed Virgin, all in blue, and holding a white rose.’

“Well, Phoebe, you can imagine what we all thought—that she’d gone completely mad. Then the priest asked,