

The Bureau of Lost Earrings

Sometimes the earrings catch on her clothes as she undresses. Sometimes they work themselves out over the course of hours and slip soundlessly onto her shoulder or a carpeted floor.

She wears only the dangly kinds with curves of wire that slide into the tiny perforations in her earlobes. The losses aren't frequent. But by the time Hilary's sixtieth birthday approaches, her jewelry box—though perhaps that's too generous a term for the wooden container that once held exotic tea—is home to a sizeable collection of mateless earrings.

I. Combat

Hilary was sixteen when she and Tanya Shoenberg took the T into Boston one spring afternoon. They walked into a hole-in-the-wall place at the edge of the Combat Zone where the owner would pierce your ears for the price of a pair of earrings. He looked them up and down. He probably thought they were prostitutes, notwithstanding their ordinary suburban clothes, because why else would a couple of teenage girls be down on this part of Washington Street? This was 1974, the year the Combat Zone received its official designation as Boston's adult entertainment district.

The piercer was almost as old as Hilary's dad. His hair hung past his shoulders and a peace sign flashed at the open neck of his shirt. They had nothing to fear from him, Hilary thought, although she also thought maybe they were being a little naïve.

Somehow she had been elected to go first. Her palms began to sweat when the guy came out with the piercing gun. That's what he called it. Then he added, It's better than

the needle. Cleaner, nicer alignment. You'll be happy, you'll see. Just leave the starter studs in for six weeks so the holes won't close up.

He said all this while swabbing Hilary's lobes with alcohol and marking the spots with a pen.

Okay now, the man said, just hold still.

There was the shock of the pop and the pinch and it was over.

The only set of studs Hilary ever owned was that starter set. As soon as she took them out she went to the Chestnut Hill Mall and bought herself a pair of silver teardrops with a fake green gem glistening in the ovate center of each drop.

II. Teardrop

She lost and found one of the teardrops twice before losing it for good in the sheets of Johnson Perkins III's bed. He was her first serious boyfriend and he shared the bottom floor of a house in the Back Bay with three other B.U. students. Hilary was a high school senior spending every weekend with her college boyfriend. There wasn't a thing her parents wanted to do about it. They had their own messes: a marriage on the rocks and a thirteen-year-old boy who was nothing but trouble. They were happy to believe Hilary's stories about study groups at Tanya's and Sunday afternoon research sessions at the public library.

She loved Johnson, who was called J.J. because Johnson was too pussy of a name, and he loved her. At least that's what it felt like when he burrowed under his blood-red satin sheets and ate her out or took her to The Rat to hear Third Rail or sat with his arm around her on the gross couch in the living room while his roommates sucked on a bong shaped like a naked woman. It felt like he loved her right up until his graduation when, instead of inviting her to dinner with his parents, he told her she'd have to be sure to be *outta here*, meaning the house, before Friday night when his parents arrived. And, he

said, maybe it would be better if we don't see each other anymore.

She very nearly threw the remaining teardrop earring into a sewer drain at the corner of Marlborough Street and Mass. Ave. on her way home.

III. Two Turtle Doves

Hilary's mom bought her the nesting turtle dove earrings the year she graduated college. By then, Noah had been an inpatient at McLean for more than a year. Hilary visited her brother every few months but their mother hadn't seen him since the day they dropped him off.

Of course I love him, her mother had said as they pulled away.

Of course you do, Hilary had answered, without taking her eyes off the road.

Her mother handed her the tiny box at breakfast the morning Hilary arrived back at her mom's apartment, a dismal way station while she looked for her own place.

Just a little something I thought you might like, her mother said, aligning her butter knife with her spoon.

Each silver turtle dove perched on its nest of red glass. Why red nests, Hilary could never figure. Maybe because silver and red were festive holiday colors. More mysterious was her mother's thinking. Turtle doves conjured Christmas and, good secular Jews that they were, they often exchanged gifts around the Christ-child's birthday with a heavy sense of irony. But this was the middle of June.

Thanks, Ma, Hilary said, and threaded the wires through her ears.

Her mother smiled and reached under her chair.

And this, she said.

She handed Hilary a box covered with silver filigree of a most hideous gaudiness, flowers and vines twining around each other, interrupted by small nests where silver birds perched.

Your grandmother kept her jewelry in it. Maybe you can find a use for it.

IV. Menagerie

The turtle doves, founding members of an earring menagerie ten years in the making that included snakes, cats, monkeys, butterflies, and even horses, hung on until Noah's funeral.

Hilary hadn't worn the turtle doves in a long time but she remembered them as she packed the black silk blouse and pleated wool skirt, remembered the shy pride her mother had taken in presenting them along with the eggs and bacon that morning.

Were the turtle doves too festive for such a somber occasion? Hilary studied herself in the steamed mirror of her mother's bathroom on the morning of the funeral. She decided no. Her brother wouldn't mind a little festivity.

On the plane home after the funeral she supported her elbow on the armrest and leaned her head against her hand. She stared out the scratched porthole. Cold air trickled up from the crevice between armrest and window. The plane seemed in a hurry to return her to the two little girls and the husband waiting in Albuquerque. Hilary's fingers ached to tickle her girls' chubby bellies and comb themselves through the feathery silk of their hair. Combing her own hair as if in preparation, watching the Midwest unroll below the plane, she felt the absence of the right-side turtle dove.

Reflexively she checked her left ear. The other dove remained, a singleton now.

V. Doubles

The first time her husband bought her jewelry they'd already been married for ten years. He had a good excuse: cash flow. There had always seemed to be something more important to buy for birthdays and anniversaries, like a new washing machine or replacement roof tiles.

Doug the engineer was so proud of himself when he handed her the two indistinguishable boxes, both embossed with the name of a fancy jewelry store. Hilary opened one to reveal gold rectangles etched with her initials. She opened the second and found identical gold rectangles bearing identical initials.

Now it won't be a big deal if you lose one, Doug said. You've got backup. He plucked an earring from one of the boxes and held it up to her ear.

Hilary covered his hand with her own and guided it back down to the table. For a moment, they both stared at the hunk of gold that fairly screamed *expensive* and *suburban matron*.

Thank you, was all she could think of to say. How could someone who had shared her bed and her life for ten years choose a style of jewelry so utterly at odds with who she was? She'd have to lose three of the earrings to put both pairs out of commission.

VI. Studly

If one were to have an affair with a married man, it probably would be best not to wear earrings at all. What if one snagged on your lover's sleeve and he accidentally brought it home and incriminated himself?

Probably it also was best not to give a gift of earrings to your lover, but Hilary couldn't stop herself. Matthew was eight years younger than she and wore an adorable diamond stud. She loved to lick around it and bite his lobe playfully as if to chew off the gem. When they had been sneaking around for six months she presented him with a single emerald the same shape as his diamond but more raucous and demanding of attention. She could tell the minute he opened the box that he'd find some excuse not to wear it.

When Matthew broke off the affair, he gave her back the emerald stud in a gesture of misguided goodwill. I'm sure you could use the money, he said.

Who the fuck was he to know whether she and Doug needed money, even if they did have one college tuition to pay and another on the way? She laid the stud to rest with the turtle dove, the four gold initialed rectangles, and a lonesome horse, the last surviving member of the menagerie.

VII. All Is Lost

To be accurate, not everything was lost. The moving company mislaid only two of fifty-three boxes, one containing kitchen utensils and the other containing Hilary's collection of scarves and her grandmother's jewelry box. She was unsure which loss was more upsetting: the box or the earrings it had contained.

Look at it this way, Tanya said. Now you get to start over.

Who wants to start over at forty-nine? Hilary whined.

She and Tanya Shoenberg had rediscovered each other when Hilary moved back to Boston after her divorce from Doug became final. Now the house in Albuquerque was sold, the proceeds divided, and Hilary felt just like her mother.

Tanya said nothing but a few days later presented her with an empty tea box.

To start your new collection, she said, and handed Hilary a second, smaller box. Inside was another pair of earrings. Red orbs hung from gold chains like fat pinpoints of blood.

Red jade is the stone of life-force energy, Tanya read from the slip of paper folded inside the box. Wear it to overcome the fear that holds you back.

Hilary removed from her ears the only pair of earrings that hadn't been lost in the move because she had been wearing them, an utterly ordinary pair of department store silver hoops, and replaced them with Tanya's gift. The weight of the jade tugged at her earlobes, which she had noticed recently were slackening along with the rest of her skin. The bloody orbs swung merrily on their gold chains and tapped her neck when she

moved her head.

She wore the earrings non-stop from that moment until the day, four years later, when she graduated from nursing school.

VIII. Addiction

You need different expectations when you change careers in your early fifties, Hilary said to Clem, her first serious boyfriend since the divorce. She still couldn't believe it—*boyfriend, serious*—at her age, which would be fifty-five in a few months. Contrary to popular wisdom, the mirror did seem to lie. She hadn't looked so vibrant in years.

Clem was a pharmacist at the hospital and he wasn't even fifty yet.

I seem to have a thing for younger men, she'd confided to Tanya.

She'd had to assure Clem after a few dates that she was no Nurse Jackie: she was already divorced and certainly wasn't a pill-popper like the tragic fictional nurse on the hit TV show.

Everybody's addicted to something, Clem had said.

Earrings. For me, it's earrings.

Clem must not have believed her because he never bought her any. That was fine with Hilary, who found that men's ideas of what jewelry she should own always missed the mark. When she landed the job at Brigham and Women's, she went on an earring-buying spree. She quickly began losing them, like expensive new sunglasses that disappear days after you buy them.

IX. Curlicue

Tanya caught divorce from Hilary like a contagious disease with a long incubation period. Luckily it happened after Hilary finished nursing school. She'd had no time for anyone but herself during those years of mad studying among kids half her age. But the

timing was still lousy, because Tanya needed a place to stay and Clem had just asked Hilary to cohabit. That's what Clem called it when he popped the question, grinning behind his salt-and-pepper beard.

Hilary suspected several of her earrings had succumbed to the sandpaper ministrations of that beard. One morning, noticing the absence of one of her favorites, a simple twist of silver with a delicate curlicue at the end, she began turning upside down every location in her apartment where he had nuzzled her, starting at the kitchen counter—unfolding and examining each page of the *Globe*, holding up the dish towels by their corners—and moving to the living room, denuding the couch of its cushions and conducting a grid-patterned search of the rug.

Clem was at work but Hilary had the day off. She yanked the sheets from the bed—still her bed, still her apartment, not yet officially cohabited. She shook the sheets, listening for the tell-tale plink of metal on hardwood. Then the pillows. Then she got down on her hands and knees and sighted under the bed across an expanse of floor that could have used a vacuuming. She ran her hand between the headboard and the mattress.

Goddamnit, she said to no one, wondering why this loss was annoying her so much.

She and Tanya and Clem were all grownups. They ought to be able to work something out. Instead Hilary felt like she was sixteen again, cradling her friend's emotions in one hand while stroking her boyfriend's ego with the other. It was ridiculous, the way you lived the long arc of a life expecting to come to some pinnacle of wisdom and found yourself trudging up the same slopes again and again. She thought of Tanya, who no longer looked like the Tanya who'd accompanied her to the Combat Zone all those years ago, soon to be out on her own and, if you were being honest, seeming much worse for wear than Hilary did. Poor Tanya. Poor Clem. Such a sweet bear of a man. But was he the bear she wanted to spend the rest of her life with? Because that's

what this would mean, *cohabitating*. How much time did either of them have left? Twenty years, maybe, or thirty if they were lucky. This choice carried a weight that the decision to marry Doug at twenty-eight never had, nor had her invitations to various men to join her in bed for a night or a year, nor even switching careers late in life, because a career, after all, was only a career, while a relationship was—

Hilary tipped her head back. The single silver curlicue brushed her neck. She reached up, worked it from her ear, and laid it on the bedside table.

X. Bennington

Why Vermont?

Clem's jaw quivers behind his beard. Hilary thinks he's trying not to cry.

She shrugs. Bennington's a college town. We like college towns. Hilary doesn't need to say Tanya's name; of course Clem knows the other half of the *we* she is referencing.

Just that morning, beginning what she hopes will be the last apartment-packing job she ever does, she found the other curlicue earring at the bottom of a handbag she hardly ever uses. The rediscovery doesn't excite her as much as it once might have.

Later, when Clem leaves for the last time, his absence doesn't upset her as much as it once might have.

This time, she won't entrust the earring box to the moving company. It will ride in the car between her and Tanya. Hilary opens the box now and surveys the jumbled glitter. She'll keep all of these, but she'll certainly buy another pair or two up in Bennington. She doesn't yet own the pair she wants to die in.

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