Earrings

“So how you feeling?”

I didn’t ask, “How you doing?” I knew how he was doing.

He was dying.

I had stopped by to see Laz because I was about the only male friend he had and he didn’t want his female friends to see him in his deteriorated condition. To have a woman around now just reminded him of what he couldn’t do. The biggest ladies’ man I’d ever known and he wouldn’t have been able to get it up even if the Burleson triplets were there shaking their booties at him.

It worked when they did it before, but that was four years ago, before the cancer. Now he looked like he was in hell, even though he was still alive.

The women wanted to visit but he asked me to spread the word—no visitors. Actually, it wasn’t them he didn’t want to see; it was the look they gave him, the pity they felt.

He had always liked to deal with the ladies, and boy, could he. Laz, who had hooked up with more women than I knew, did not do it on looks. He was tall and gaunt with a bad complexion, crooked teeth, and hair that would not conform to anything a stylist tried to do with it. Big, uneven ears stuck out like sails in the wind. He had switched to contacts as a teen to avoid the noticeably thick glasses he wore as a child. There wasn’t much he could do with the rest of what God had given him.

Maybe to make up for his appearances, God gave Las the gift of talk. He could spin a yarn, tell a joke, crack a quip, or quote just about any writer. He was charming in his awkwardness.

Las believed in the law of averages. He got smacked a lot, but he also got what he wanted a lot. The first time I saw him sidle up to a woman in a bar and ask, “So how do you feel about blow jobs?” I wasn’t surprised when she gave him a shocked look, tossed her drink in his face, and walked away. I *was* surprised, after he dried off, when I heard him ask another woman the same question.

“Why do you persist in asking that obnoxious question when you more often than not get a drink thrown in your face?” I asked as I drove him home later.

He laughed. “It usually works. Most often, I end up going home with them.”

“Yeah, right.”

He shrugged. “You’d be surprised. There are a lot of women just like me, I just have to identify them. They want to decide who they’re going home with. They don’t want to sit in a bar making small talk. And word has gotten around that I return the favor. I want my knob polished so I do a little muff diving. Women talk among themselves and before you know it, all you have to do is lick your lips and you’re headed out the door with your latest conquest.”

“Conquest? That seems cold.”

“Most of them see me as a conquest, too. I don’t mind, why should they?”

“It seems callous. Haven’t you ever been in love?”

“Love is for chumps. I can’t imagine waking up next to the same woman every day for the rest of my life.”

“I disagree. I see sex as being the culmination of love—a soul exchange.”

“Oh, geez.” Laz never understood my romantic side. “How did we ever become friends?”

He stared at me a moment, and appeared to remember I had been married to Eve for fourteen years.

“I mean, it’s okay if one woman is all a man wants,” he assured me. “If you’re happy with Eve more power to you. But you shouldn’t expect similar devotion to one woman from me. I’m not you.”

“For which Eve, you, and I are all grateful.” I turned away from my driving and smiled at him. I didn’t want to debate his morals.

He chortled.”What do you mean Eve is grateful I”m not you? I'll bet you if Eve went home with me tonight you wouldn't be able to find her tomorrow. Once they’ve dined on steak they don’t like to go back to hamburger.”

“That, my friend, is one bet I will never make. I know better than to bet against you with any women, even my ever-loving wife. You convinced me with Meghan, the television reporter. She called you a Neanderthal asshole when you asked her for a blowjob. Then, a week later I come to your house and there you and Meghan are, sitting there on your deck, drinking Irish coffee in bathrobes. You even got her to flash me to prove she was naked underneath the robe. How’d you get her to do it?”

“I could tell you but it’s too powerful a tool to be in the hands of an amateur. The earth might tilt out of it’s orbit.”

“Trust me, I’m not going to use it.” I thought for a moment, then added, “Well, maybe with Eve.”

That was several years ago, before the cancer took hold, before the radiation cost him his strength and the chemo his unruly hair. Before all of them conspired to rob him of his ability to get it up. Now I sat by his bed several times a week, the bed where he’d had so many one night stands, including the legendary night with the triplets, who agreed to let him video the event for posterity.

“Bill, will you do me a favor?”” Laz’s voice seemed distant; I was remembering the tape he had so proudly shown me, saying, “Until now, that threesome I had with a mother and her daughter while both their husbands were upstairs was my high point. But watch this video. First time ever three of a kind beat a full house.”

I watched the video in amazement. In one night he had made love to as many women, triplets no less, as I had in my entire life. I knew the Burleson triplets. They were known to pull a lot of stunts, so I wasn’t really surprised. But Meghan, the news reporter. She was so quiet, so sophisticated. How had he seduced her?

His voice roused me from my memories when he again said, “Will you do me a favor?”

“Sure Laz. What do you need?” His head was sweaty on the pillow, and there was pain in his eyes.

“Second drawer of the dresser. Get a wash cloth and wet it with cold water. I want to put it on my forehead.”

“You got it.” I should have noticed his perspiration but I was inexperienced and didn’t really know what I was doing. This was the first time I helped someone die.

I walked to the dresser and opened the top drawer. It was full of earrings, identical earrings, each with he initials “JT” on them. They weren’t fancy; In fact, they looked downright cheap, but someone paid to have all of them engraved with those initials.

Laz was watching me. “No, I said the second drawer. There aren’t any wash cloths in any other drawer.”

“Okay, but what is this crap? There must be five sets of identical earrings in here.”

“Used to be twenty. That’s how many I ordered. You get a better price if you buy them in bulk, and at the time I wasn’t sick.”

“Where’d the others go? And who’s JT?” I closed the drawer, opened the one below it, and got a wash cloth. As I returned from the bathroom, having run cold water over it, I asked, “Well?” I put the cloth on his forehead and ever so briefly saw relief flash across his face.

“It’s my drawer of last resort.”

“What is a drawer of last resort?”

“It’s where I would go when all else failed.”

“When all else what failed?” I was lost. Laz looked at me, bemused. I was glad to see his look of pain replaced by amusement, even if it was at my expense.

“You really are married, aren’t you? You know nothing about seduction.”

“Are you becoming delirious? Because you’re not making sense.”

“Okay, here’s how it worked. If the woman continued to say no, but was so tantalizing I wanted one last try, I used the drawer of last resort. You remember, my mother’s name was Jane Thomas?”

I nodded, finally understanding the initials.

“Normally, if I’d been out with a girl twice and she hadn’t come across, I’d cut my losses and not call again. But if I thought she was the least bit sentimental, I’d give her the old ‘Mother would have liked you’ speech.”

“I don’t like where this is going.”

“Of course you don’t. You’re a nice guy, whereas I’m the devil’s apprentice. First, I’d buy her dinner at the best restaurant in town.”

Laz coughed.

“After a bottle of wine to loosen inhibitions, I’d tell her…”

Laz was convulsed with a coughing spell. After a moment he said, “I’d tell her, ’I wish you had known my mother. She would have liked you.’ I’d pause for a moment for effect, then I’d continue. ‘She died about ten years ago, but on her death bed she told me of her great regret.”

He coughed twice, then said, “It was she hadn’t lived long enough to see me settle down with a good woman.’”

I couldn’t help it; I laughed. I knew his mother, and what she really wanted was another priest, like Laz’s brother.

Laz held up his hand, commanding quiet. He was giving me an insight into his mind he didn’t give to just anyone, so I fell silent to watch and listen.

“I’d done it so often,” he continued, “I could squeeze out a tear and let it trickle down my cheek as I told my prey, ‘Mother told me just before she died, that if I ever met a nice girl, the kind she would have liked, there was something I should do. *Laz,* she said to me, *I don’t have much in this world, just this old pair of earrings your father gave me. He had my initials engraved on them.* Then she pointed to a pair of earrings on her bedside

table. At this point I'd pull from my pocket one of those pair of earrings in the top drawer. I'd hold them out and tell the woman*, my Mother told me, I want her to have my earrings.* And I'd give her a pair."

"And they fell for it?"

"Every time. Every. Single. Time."

"And you did this more than once?"

"Oh, yeah," Laz said. "How many earrings are in the drawer? I started with twenty pair. Really got a good price."

"What happened to the women?"

I'd fuck 'em that night, and usually every night for the next week or so. Then I'd do the old, 'it's not you, it's me' routine, and be on my way. Some of the best fucks I ever had were earring fucks."

"You're a bastard."

Laz smiled, and drifted off to sleep. I took the washcloth from his forehead, cooled it under the faucet, and returned it to his forehead. When the Hospice person arrived, I let myself out and went home to Eve.

Laz died two days later. Very few men attended visitation. On our way out, Eve and I saw Meghan, the evening anchor, on her way in. We hugged; she sobbed. Our cheeks brushed and I noticed her earrings, "JT" engraved on them.

As we got in the car, I sighed loudly. Eve reached over to hug me and I saw she was crying. I knew the tears weren't for Laz; she thought he was a prick, but she knew he had been a good friend to me and she knew his death left a void in my life she wouldn't be able to fill.

I accepted her silent condolences and brushed back her hair, caressing her ear. She was wearing the small diamond earrings I had given her on our first Valentine's Day together.