PAUL THEROUX

CHARLIE HOGLE'S EARRING

There is something athletic, something physical, in the way the most successful people reach decisions. The businessmen who plot take-overs, the upstarts who become board chairmen, the masterminds of conglomerates – they are often jocks who regard more thoughtful men as cookie-pushers, and who shoulder their way into offices and hug their allies and muscle in on deals. They move like swaggerers and snatchers, using their elbows when their money fails. And when they are in command they are puppet-masters.

Everett Horton, our number two, prized his football photograph (Yale '51) as much as he did his autographed portrait of the President. Here was another of him, posed with a Russian diplomat, each in white shorts, holding a tennis racket and shaking hands across a tennis net. And others: Horton golfing, Horton fishing, Horton sailing. Horton had interesting ears – slightly swollen, and gristlier than the average, and they did not match: 'Wrestling,' someone said. It seemed innocent vanity that Horton thought of himself as a man of action. I suppose he was a man of action. He worked hard. He succeeded where Ambassador Noyes often failed.

Erroll Jeeps used to say: 'Watch out for Horton's body English.'

He could have sent me a memo, or phoned me, or we might have had lunch. But he had not become minister by sending memos. He was a hugger, a hand-shaker, a back-slapper – body English – and when something important came up he tore downstairs and interrupted whatever I was doing and said, 'You're the only one around here who can straighten this out. You've been in the Far East, not in Washington, among the cookie-pushers!'

Today he hugged me. His sweet-whiskey fragrance of aftershave lotion stung my eyes. A file folder was tucked under his arm.

'Is that the problem?'

'That's his file,' Horton said.

I tried to catch a glimpse of the name, but he tossed the file onto a chair and kicked my office door shut.

'Let me tell you about it. That'll be quicker than reading this crap.' He sat on the edge of my desk and swung one heavy thigh over the other.

‘Do you know Charlie Hogle from C and R?’

‘I saw him once at your house – that reception you gave for me. I don’t go down to the telex room.’

‘You let your pyoon do it, eh?’ It was the Malay word for office lackey, and he was mocking me with it. He said, ‘You should get around more – you’d be amazed at some of the things you find.’

‘In the telex room?’

‘Especially there,’ Horton said. ‘This fellow Hogle – very gifted, they say, if you can describe a telex operator in that way. Very personable. Highly efficient, if a bit invisible. He’s been here almost three years. No trouble, no scandal, nothing.’ Horton stopped talking. He stared at me. ‘I was down there this morning. What do I find?’ Horton watched me again, giving me the same dramatic scrutiny as before. He wanted my full attention and a little pause.

I said, ‘I give up – what did you find?’

‘Hogle. With an earring.’ Horton sighed, slid off the desktop, and threw himself into a chair. He was remarkably agile for such a big man.

I said, ‘An earring?’

‘Right. One of those gold … loops? Don’t make me describe it.’ Horton suddenly seemed cross. ‘I don’t know anything about earrings.’

‘Was he wearing it?’

‘What a dumb question! Of course he was.’

‘I thought you were going to tell me that he stole it – that you found it on him.’

‘He’s got a hole in his ear for it.’

I said, ‘So he’s had his ear pierced.’

‘Can you imagine? A special hole in his ear!’

I said, ‘What exactly is wrong, coach?’

He had encouraged us to use this ridiculous word for him. I had so far refrained from

it, and though I felt like a jackass using it today, it seemed to have the right effect. It calmed him. He smiled at me.

‘Let’s put it at its simplest. Let’s be charitable. Let’s not mock him,’ Horton said. ‘An earring is against regulations.’

‘Which ones?’

‘Dress regulations. The book. It’s as if he’s wearing a skirt.’

‘But he’s not wearing a skirt. It’s jewelry. Is there a subsection for that?’

‘Sure! In Muslim countries, Third World countries –’

‘This is England, coach.’

‘And he’s a guy! And he’s got this thing hanging off his ear!’

‘You’re not going to get him on a technicality,’ I said. ‘All you can do is ask him to remove it. “Would you mind taking off that earring, Mr Hogle?”’

Horton did not smile. He began lecturing me. He said, ‘You act as if there’s nothing wrong. Did you know there’s no law against lesbianism in this country? Do you know why? Because Queen Victoria refused to believe that women indulged in that sort of behavior!’

‘Hogle’s earring is hardly in that category,’ I said.

‘Bull! It’s precisely in that category. That’s how serious a violation it is. It’s unthinkable for a man to turn up at work wearing an earring, so there’s no legislation, nothing in the rulebook for earrings per se. But there’s a paragraph on Improper Dress –’

‘That covers lewd or suggestive clothes.’

‘What about Inappropriate Accessories?’

‘Religious or racial taboos. Cowhide presents in Hindu countries, pigskin suitcases in Muslim countries, the New York Philharmonic touring Israel and playing Wagner.’

‘What has Wagner got to do with Accessories?’

‘You know what I mean. Earrings don’t figure.’

‘There’s something,’ Horton said. He came over to me and jerked my shoulder, giving me a hug. ‘It doesn’t matter.’ He grinned. He was a big man. He hugged me sideways as we stood shoulder to shoulder. ‘There’s always something – just find it.’

‘Why me?’ I said. ‘You could do it more easily.’

His eyes became narrow and dark as he said, ‘I’ll tell you why I can’t.’ He looked at the door suspiciously, as if he were about to bark at it. Then he made an ugly disgusted face and whispered, ‘When I saw Hogle with that thing in his ear, and the hole, and the implications, I felt sick to my stomach.’ He glanced darkly at the door again. ‘He’s a nice clean-cut guy. I’d lay into him – I’d lose my temper. I know I would, and I want to spare him that. You’ll be more rational. You know about these nutty customs. You’ve been in the Far East.’

‘Doesn’t Hogle have a personnel officer?’

Horton gave me a disdainful look. His expression said I was letting him down, I was a coward, a weakling.

He said, ‘You don’t want to do this, do you?’

‘What I want is of no importance,’ I said. ‘I do what I’m told.’

‘Excellent!’ he said. Horton stood up straight. The muddy green was gone from his eyes; he was smiling. ‘Now get down there and tell Hogle to divest himself.’

I said, ‘That’s his file, right?’

‘Ignore the file for now. When you’ve settled this problem, stick a memo in here and hand it back to me. I also want to know why he’s wearing it – that’s important. And, by the way, this is strictly confidential, this whole matter – everything I’ve said.’

I made a move toward the file.

‘You don’t really need that,’ he said.

‘Maybe not,’ I said. ‘But I think I’ll take it home and blow on it.’

I had thought, Why me? But of course Horton was testing me as much as he was gunning for Hogle. He was trying to discover where my sympathies were: Would I give him an argument, or would I obey? Perhaps I was a latent earring-wearer? Horton’s own reaction seemed to me extraordinary. He felt sick to his stomach. That may have been an exaggeration, but the fear that he would lose his temper was almost unbelievable in someone whose temper was always in check. Everett Horton – he

wanted to be called ‘coach’! – was a man of action. I could not understand his reticence now, unless I was right in assuming that I was the real subject of the inquiry.

I was new here – less than four months on the job. I had to play ball. And I must admit I was curious.

The file was thin. Charlie Hogle had come to us from the Army under a program we called Lateral Entry. He had been in the communications unit of the Signal Corps, running a C and R office in Frankfurt. He was twenty-nine, not married, a graduate – German major – of the University of Northern Iowa in Cedar Falls. He had been born and raised in nearby Waterloo, Iowa. His annual job evaluations from the State Department fault-finders were very good. In fact, one suggested – as a black mark – that Hogle had experienced ‘no negative situations.’ In other words, he was such a happy fellow he might prove to be a problem. I did not buy that naive analysis. Hogle was a well-adjusted, middle-level technician with a good record, and after looking through this worthy man’s file I regretted what I had been ordered to do.

Lunch with him was out: it was both too businesslike and too friendly. Anyway, I hated lunch as unnecessary and time-wasting. Lunch is the ritual meal that makes fat people fat. And dinner was out – too formal. I kept telling myself that this was a small matter. I could send for him. I pictured poor Hogle, clutching his silly earring, cowering in my office, awkward in his chair.

There was only one possibility left – a drink after work. That made it less official, less intimidating, and if I got bored I could plead a previous engagement and go home.

I met him at a large overdecorated pub called the Audley, on the corner of Mount and Audley Streets, not far from the Embassy. Hogle, whom I spotted as American from fifty feet away, was tall even by the generous standards of the Midwest. He was good-looking, with a smooth polite face and clear blue eyes. His blond eyelashes made him look completely frank and unsecretive. His hands were nervous, but his face was innocent and still. His voice had the plain splintery cadences of an Iowa Lutheran being truthful. I took him to be a muscular Christian.

‘I kind of like these English beers,’ he was saying now. (Earlier we had talked about his Sunday school teaching.) ‘They’re a little flat, but they don’t swell you up or make you drunk, like lager. Back home –’

As he spoke, I glanced at his earring. It was a small gold hoop, as Horton had said, but Horton had made it seem like junk jewelry, rather vulgar and obvious – and embarrassing to the onlooker. I was surprised to find it a lovely earring. And it was hardly noticeable – too small to be a pirate’s, too simple for a transvestite. I thought it suited him. It was the sort of detail that makes some paintings remarkable; it gave his face position and focus – and an undeniable beauty. It was the size, and it had the

charm, of Shakespeare's raffish earring in the painting in the National Portrait Gallery.

Charlie Hogle was still talking about beer. His favorite was the Colorado Coors brand, because it was made from –

This was ridiculous. We were getting nowhere. I said, 'Is that an earring you're wearing?'

His fingers went for it. 'Yes,' he said. 'What do you think of it?'

'Very nice,' I said. He smiled. I said, 'And unusual.'

'It cost me twenty-two pounds. That's almost fifty bucks, but it included getting my ear pierced. I figure it was worth it, don't you?'

Was he trying to draw me?

'You've just,' I said, 'got the one?'

'One earring's enough!'

I said, 'I'm not sure –'

'You think I should have two? Don't you think that'd be pushing it a little?'

'Actually,' I said, and hated my tone of voice and dreaded what was coming, 'I was wondering whether one earring might be pushing it, never mind two.'

'You said it was nice.' He looked at me closely, and sniffed. He was an honest fellow for whom a contradiction was a bad smell. 'What do you mean, "One earring might be pushing it"?'

'It is very nice,' I said. 'And so are those split skirts the secretaries have started to wear. But I wouldn't be very happy about your wearing a split skirt, Mr Hogle.'

He smiled. He was not threatened: he saw a joke where I had intended a warning. He said, 'I'm not wearing a split skirt, sir.'

'Yes,' I said. 'But you are wearing an earring.'

'Is that the same as wearing a skirt?'

'Not exactly, but it's the same kind of thing.'

‘What – illegal?’

‘Inappropriate,’ I said. This was Horton’s line, and its illogicality was hideously apparent to me as I parroted it. ‘Like coming to work in your bathing suit, or dyeing your hair green, or –’

I couldn’t go on. Hogle was, quite rightly, smiling at the stupidity of my argument. And now I saw that Horton’s objection was really a form of abuse.

Hogle said, ‘I know those things are silly and inappropriate. I wouldn’t come to work dressed like a slob. I’m no punk. I don’t have green hair.’

‘Yes, I know.’

‘I’ve got a pretty clean record, sir. I got a commendation from the Consul in Frankfurt for hanging on and keeping the telex room open during a Red Army Faction riot. I’m not bragging, sir. I’m just saying I take my job seriously.’

‘Yes, it’s mentioned in your file. I know about it.’

‘You’ve been looking in my file,’ he said. His face became sad, and his attention slackened. He had let go of his earring. ‘I get it – my ass is in a crack.’

‘Not yet.’

‘Sir, I could have bought a cheaper earring – one of those silver dangly ones. Instead I saved up. I bought a nice one. You said so yourself.’

‘I also said it’s rather unusual.’

‘There’s nothing wrong with “unusual,” is there?’

‘Some people think so.’

He looked at me, with his lips compressed. He had now seen the purpose of this innocent drink. I had led him here on a false pretext; I had deceived him. His eyes went cold.

He said, ‘Mr Horton, the minister. It’s him, isn’t it?’

‘It’s the regulations,’ I said lamely.

‘He was staring at me the other day, like the second louies used to stare at me when I

was in the Army. Even though he was about fifty feet away I could feel his eyes pressing on my neck. You can tell when something's wrong.' Hogle shook his head in a heavy rueful way. 'I thought he used to like me. Now he's yanked my file and sent you to nail me down.'

Hogle was completely correct. But I could not admit it without putting Horton into a vulnerable position and exposing him as petty and spiteful. After all, Horton's was the only objection to the earring. But Horton was boss.

I said, 'Everyone thinks that it would be better if you dispensed with your earring.'

'I still don't understand why.'

'It's contrary to dress regulations. Isn't that obvious?'

He touched the earring, as if for luck. He said, 'Maybe they should change the regulations.'

'Do you think it's likely they will?'

He made a glum face and said no.

'Be a sport,' I said. 'I'm telling you this for your own good. Get rid of that thing and save yourself a headache.'

Hogle had been staring at his glass of beer. Without moving his head, he turned his eyes on me and said, 'I don't want to seem uncooperative, sir, but I paid good money for this earring. And I had a hole punched in my ear. And I like it, and it's not hurting anyone. So – no way am I going to get rid of it.'

'What if we take disciplinary action?'

'That's up to you, sir.'

'You could be suspended on half-pay. What do you say to that?'

'I wouldn't like it much,' Hogle said.

'Mr Hogle,' I said, 'does that earring represent anything? I mean, is it a sort of symbol?'

'Not any more than your tie clip is a symbol. You don't see many tie clips these days – and I think yours is neat. I think this earring is neat. That's the only reason. Don't you think that's a pretty good reason?'

I wished he would not ask me these questions. They were traps; they incriminated me; they tore me in two. I said, ‘What I think doesn’t matter. I’m an employee. So are you. What you think doesn’t matter either. There is nothing personal about this; there’s no question about opinion or tolerance or flexibility. It’s strictly regulations.’

Hogle replied in a sort of wounded whisper. ‘I’d like to see the regulations, sir,’ he said. ‘I’d like to see in black and white which rule I’ve broken.’

‘It’s a very general regulation concerning appropriate dress,’ I said. ‘And we can make it stick. We’re going to give you a few days to decide which is more important to you – your earring or your job.’

I had lapsed into ‘we’ – it is hard to use it and not seem cold and bullying; it can be a terrifying pronoun. And yet I had hoped this meeting would be friendly. It was, from my point of view, disastrously cold. His resentment made me officious; my officiousness made him stubborn. In the end I had simply pulled rank on him, used the scowling ‘we,’ and given him a crude choice. Then I left him. He looked isolated and lonely at the table in the pub, and that saddened me, because he was handsome and intelligent and young and a very hard worker. His earring distinguished him and made him look like a prince.

The next day I went to Horton’s office. Seeing me, he rushed out and gave me a playful shove. He then helped me into the office with a hug, all the while saying, ‘Get in here and tell me what a great success you’ve been in the telex room.’

I hated this fooling. I said, ‘I’ve had a talk with Hogle.’

‘With what result?’

‘He’s thinking about it.’

‘You mean, it’s not settled? You let him think about it?’

I freed myself from his grasp. I said, ‘Yes.’

‘It’s not a thinking matter,’ Horton said. ‘It’s an order – didn’t you tell him that?’

‘I didn’t want to throw my weight around. You said yourself there’s no point making an issue out of it if it can be settled quietly.’

Horton gaped at this. He became theatrical, imitating shock and incredulity with his exaggerated squint, and there was something of an actressy whine in his voice when he said, ‘So he’s still down there, wearing that thing on his ear?’

I let him rant a bit more. Then I said, ‘I didn’t want to put pressure on him. If he hasn’t got the sense to see that our displeasure matters, then he’s hardly any use to us.’

‘That’s a point – I don’t want any passengers in this Embassy, and I certainly won’t put up with freaks.’ Horton’s phone was ringing; it had the effect of sobering him and making him snappish. ‘I’ll expect that file back by the end of the week – and I want a happy conclusion. Remember, if you can’t get this chappie’ – Horton wiggled his head on the word – ‘to remove his earring, you can hardly expect me to have much faith in your powers of persuasion.’

‘I’d like to drop the whole damned thing,’ I said.

Horton paused, and he peered at me with interest in spite of his nagging phone. ‘And why is that?’

‘I don’t see the importance of it,’ I said.

‘It is very important,’ he said. ‘And of course I’m interested in your technique. You see, in this Embassy one is constantly trying to point out that there is a sensible, productive way of doing things – and there is the British way. Tactful persuasion is such an asset, whether one is dealing with a misunderstood aspect of NATO or an infraction of the dress regulations by a serving officer – I mean, Hogle’s earring. I hate even the word.’

‘I’ll do it,’ I said. ‘But my heart isn’t in it.’

‘That is precisely why I want you to do it,’ Horton said. ‘If nothing else, this should teach you that feelings have nothing to do with this job. Now, please, get it over with. It’s starting to make me sick.’

I chose the pub carefully. It was in Earl’s Court and notoriously male; but at six-thirty it was empty and could easily have been mistaken for the haunt of darts players and polite locals with wives and dogs. Hogle was late. Waiting there, I thought that he might not turn up at all, just to teach me a lesson. But he came with an excuse and an apology. He had been telexing an urgent cable. Only he had clearance to work with classified material after hours, and the duty officer – Yorty, a newcomer – had no idea how to use a telex machine. So Hogle had worked late. As an ex-Army man he understood many of the military cables, and he had security clearance, and he was willing; I knew from his file that he didn’t make mistakes. His obedience had never been questioned – that is, until Horton spotted the earring. I began to see why this detail worried Horton so much: Hogle, in such a ticklish job, had to be absolutely reliable.

He said, ‘I’ve been thinking over what you told me.’

He looked tired – paler than he had three days ago. It was not the extra work, I was sure – he was worrying, not sleeping well. Perhaps he had already decided to resign on a point of principle, for in spite of his wilted posture and ashen skin, his expression was full of tenacity. I suppose it was his eyes. They were narrow, as though wounded, and hot, and seemed to say No surrender.

I said, ‘Don’t say anything.’

He had been staring into the middle distance. Now he looked closely at me. He winced, but he kept his gaze on me.

I said, ‘I’ve managed to prevail. I took it to the highest possible level. I think everyone understands now.’

‘What do you mean, “understands”?’ There was a hint of anxiety in his voice.

‘Your earring,’ I said.

‘What’s there to understand?’

‘You’ve got nothing to worry about. We don’t persecute people for their beliefs anymore. If that were the case I wouldn’t be in the Foreign Service.’

‘Wearing an earring,’ Hogle said. ‘Is that a belief?’

‘It depends on how naive you are,’ I said. ‘But be glad it doesn’t matter. Be glad you live in a free society, where you can dress any way you like, and where you can choose your friends, whether they’re British or American, white or black, female or male –’

Hogle became very attentive.

I said, ‘I’m grateful to you. It’s people like you who break down barriers and increase our self-awareness.’

‘I don’t want to break down any barriers,’ he said. ‘I’m not even sure what self-awareness is all about.’

‘It’s about earrings,’ I said. ‘The other day I told you your earring was nice. I was being insincere. May I call you Charlie?’

‘Sure.’

‘Charlie, I think your earring is fantastic.’

His hand went to his ear. He looked wary. He did not let go of the earring or his earlobe. He sat fixedly with his fingers making this plucking gesture on his ear.

‘It’s a very handsome accessory,’ I said. His fingers tightened. ‘A real enhancement.’ They moved again. ‘An elegant statement –’

I thought he was going to yank his ear off. His hand was trembling, still covering the earring. He said, ‘I’m not making a statement.’

‘Take it easy,’ I said, giving him the sort of blanket assurance of no danger that convinces people – and rightly – that they’re in a tight spot. ‘You’ve got absolutely nothing to worry about!’ He looked very worried. ‘You can relax with me.’ I ordered him a drink and told him there was no point in discussing the earring.

‘To be perfectly honest,’ I said, ‘I rather like your earring.’

‘I’m certainly not making any kind of statement,’ Hogle said. The word worried him. It had implications of being unerasable and hinted of hot water. ‘I got the idea from one of the delivery men – an English guy. He wasn’t making any statement. It looked neat, that’s all.’

‘It looks more than neat,’ I said. ‘It has a certain mystery. I think that’s its real charm.’

He winced at this, and how he was pinching his earlobe. He lowered his eyes. He did not look up again.

‘I feel funny,’ he said.

‘Be glad you work with people who say yes instead of no.’

I gave him a friendly punch on the shoulder, the sort of body English Horton would have approved. It made me feel uncomfortable and mannered and overhearty. It amazed me then to realize that Horton was always punching and hugging and digging in the ribs. Hogle was unresponsive, not to say wooden. His eyes darted sideways.

The night’s clients had started to arrive in the pub – men in leather jackets, with close-cropped hair, and heavy chains around their necks, and tattooed thumbs, and sunglasses. Some were bald, some devilishly bearded; one wore crimson shoes; another had an enormous black dog on a leather strap. All of them wore earrings.

‘Have another drink,’ I said.

Hogle stood up. ‘I have to go.’

‘What’s the hurry?’

He was breathing hard. A man encased in tight black leather was hovering near us and staring at Hogle. The man had silver chains with thick links looped around his boots and they clanked as he came closer.

‘No hurry,’ Hogle said. Now he was reassuring me in the way that I had reassured him earlier, giving me hollow guarantees as he backed away. ‘Hey, I had a good time.’ He stepped past the clanking man, whose leather, I swear, oinked and squeaked. ‘No kidding. It’s just that’ – he looked around – ‘I told this friend of mine, this girl I know, that I’d – I don’t know, I’d give her a call.’ He looked desperate. ‘Hey, thanks a lot. I really appreciate everything you’ve done!’

Then he left, and then I removed my earring. That was easy enough to do – just a matter of unscrewing the little plunger and putting the foolish thing into my pocket. And I hurried out of the pub, hearing just behind me clanks and squeaks of reproach.

In my report for Charlie Hogle’s file I recorded the earring incident as a minor infraction – Inappropriate Dress. I left it vague. What was the point in explaining? I noted the two meetings; I described Hogle as ‘compliant’ and ‘reasonable.’ There was no innuendo in my report. I spared him any indignity. It sounded no worse than if he had come to work without a necktie.

Indeed, it was no worse than if he had come to work without a necktie. I had had no objection to the earring, nor had any of Hogle’s co-workers in the telex room. Horton had made it an issue; Horton was minister, so Horton was obeyed. And Hogle did not wear his earring again.

‘It’s for his own good,’ Horton said later, and he squeezed my arm. I was the team member who had just played well; he was the coach. He was proud of me and pleased with himself. He was beaming. ‘I feel a thousand times better, too! That really annoyed me – that kid’s earring. I used to go down to the telex room a lot. I realized I was staying away – couldn’t stand to look at it!’

‘Aren’t you being a little melodramatic?’

‘I’m completely serious,’ he said. ‘That situation was making me sick. I mean sick. I got so mad the first time I saw that thing on his ear’ – Horton turned away and paused – ‘I got so mad I actually threw up. Puked! That’s how angry I was.’

‘You must have been very angry,’ I said.

‘Couldn’t help it. We can’t have that sort of thing –’ He didn’t finish the sentence. He shook his head from side to side and then said, ‘You were too easy on him in your report. That kid had a problem. Incredible. I took him for a clean, stand-up guy!’

I said, ‘He may have feelings of which he’s unaware. It’s not that uncommon.’

‘No,’ Horton said. ‘I’ll keep an eye on him.’

‘Fine,’ I said. ‘Anyway, everyone’s safe now, coach.’

He smiled and smacked my arm and sent me back to my office.

In the following weeks I saw scores of young men Hogle’s age wearing earrings. They were English, and all sorts, and I was ashamed that I had been a success. It was not merely that I had succeeded by deceiving Hogle, but that I had made him think there was something dangerous and deviant in this trinket decorating his ear. And he never knew just how handsome that trinket made him. Hogle would be all right. But after what he had told me, I was not so sure about Horton.