

# HIGH- LIGHTS

*A short story featuring Amelia from*

**NOTES FROM BOSTON**

*by*

**A.M. LEIBOWITZ**

*and Shaunna from*

**Hiding Behind The Couch**

*by*

**DEBBIE MCGOWAN**

# HIGHLIGHTS

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A.M. LEIBOWITZ

and

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## Highlights

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# HIGHLIGHTS

*The one where Notes from Boston's Amelia Roberts takes a much-needed vacation to England and runs into Shaunna Hennessy from Hiding Behind The Couch—a fortuitous meeting for both.*

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A QUIET AFTERNOON AT *Young at Heart* hairdressing salon. Hayley—Shaunna's boss/salon owner—chats away to her client while Shaunna perches with phone in hand on the high stool next to the counter. Her attention flits between the murmured conversation, a text interchange with BFF Adele and watching for her "two o'clock" to arrive—a new client—*Amelia Roberts*, according to the diary; she's the only other appointment this afternoon.

The door opens, and a dark-haired woman, curvy but tiny in stature, steps in. She's not alone, but one of her companions says something in a clearly American accent to the effect of "we'll just be out shopping while you're pampered." The dark-haired woman looks around, maybe a little unsure about proper etiquette.

*Gotta be her.* Shaunna smiles and slides down off her stool. "Hiya. Amelia?"

"Yes, that's me. I have an appointment?"

"You sure do! I'm Shaunna. I'll be tending to you today. Come in, make yourself comfy and we can chat about what you want—get to know each other a bit." Shaunna gestures Amelia toward the

three chairs—two empty—in front of the mirrors that span the wall to their right.

Standing side by side confirms what Shaunna noticed when Amelia arrived; Shaunna's a couple of inches taller but otherwise they're the same build—"womanly," her mum used to call it, or "hot as all get out," according to Andy. She hears his words in her head, a sexy, low murmur that makes her smile then blush and laugh a little when she realises Amelia's watching her in the mirror. "Sorry. I was miles away." She gestures again to the chair—"Have a seat"—and pulls the other chair closer before sitting herself, catching a glimpse of her reflection. *Could I be any redder? Oh, the joys of being a ginger.* "So what can I do for you today? Actually, never mind that for now—would you like a cup of tea before we get started?"

"Ooh, you serve tea to your clients?" Amelia grins, but her smile slips sideways. "Um...I suppose my American is showing, huh?" She eyes the gorgeous woman up and down. Shaunna's older than she is, but Amelia can't tell by how much. Around her friend Izzy's age, maybe mid-to-late thirties? Regardless, she's gorgeous. Amelia's not sure if she's actually getting a hetero vibe or if it's more a cultural difference, but she's pretty sure flirting won't lead anywhere other than a good cut-and-colour. Still, the view is awfully nice, and it's definitely a pleasant change from being around the men all the time.

"Only the ones we like," Shaunna says with a cheeky wink. "We're pretty informal here, aren't we, Hayles?"

"Absoludely!" Hayley confirms, then to her client, "Is that all right for you?" From the shelf, she collects a black-handled mirror shaped like a paddle and holds it behind the woman's head so she can see the shape of her new bob cut. The woman nods, all smiles, and clasps Hayley's hand over her shoulder. She's still gushing thanks as she leaves five minutes later.

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"I'll pud the keddle on," Hayley says heading back through the salon to the storeroom.

"Hayley's the boss," Shaunna explains once she and Amelia are alone.

"She seems nice," Amelia remarks.

"She is. So...you've been here five minutes already, not that there's any rush, hun, but...should we talk about your hair? Which is beautiful, by the way. Talk about making my job easy."

"Well...my friends are getting married, and I thought while I was on vacation I'd get something new." Amelia gestures to her long, wavy hair. "I need to keep it longer so I can put it up for work. But maybe more style, less just-got-out-of-bed? Maybe highlights?"

"Remember when bedhead was all the rage? I miss that trend." Shaunna sighs nostalgically and blows at the one stray curl that's escaped the clip securing the rest of her hair which, this morning, was less just-got-out-of-bed than just-been-dragged-backwards-through-a-hedge. "Okay. Mind if I take a look?" She waits for consent and then wheels her chair around to Amelia's side, lifting a section of her hair. It's healthy, midway down her back, with a natural curl that's much looser than Shaunna's, and the colour of dark chocolate. *Hershey's Kisses...must be the accent.* She tried them once, way back, and couldn't make up her mind if she liked them, although she'd eaten the entire bagful trying to figure it out so thought she probably did.

"Yeah, highlights would be stunning on you. With the right level of lightness, they'll really show off your complexion and make your eyes pop—oh!" She grimaces, no idea if that translates. "I mean, it'll accentuate the blue."

"Great. I figured that's what you meant." Amelia smiles, seeming more at ease now. "I'm completely in your hands." *And was that flirting?*

“She’ll look after you, sweedie.” Hayley reappears with two mugs, which she deposits on the trolley next to Amelia, digging in her pocket and pulling out a handful of sugar sachets and a teaspoon. She drops those onto the trolley too. “I’ll be out back,” she says and rolls her eyes. “Paperwork, ack.”

Shaunna smiles in sympathy. “Thanks, Hayles, and good luck!” Hayley gives her a withering glance and disappears through the storeroom door.

“Help yourself,” Shaunna invites, giving Amelia first choice on the drinks before picking up the other, which, coincidentally, is the mug Shaunna usually chooses for herself anyway. “You said your friends are getting married?” She sips casually, never sure how questions like her next will be received, but years of living with a bi guy...well, she’s heard it all before. Amelia’s not giving off a homophobe vibe, though—quite the opposite—so Shaunna just asks. “The two women who were here earlier?”

Amelia laughs. “Oh, no. Those two are straight as arrows. Uhm...” She flushes, though it delights her to think of Marlie and Nia as a couple. She wonders if she should explain the relationship between her friends—and their boyfriends. Clearly Shaunna doesn’t have a problem with same-gender couples, but polyamorous relationships? That’s always anyone’s guess. She decides to play it safe. “It’s my friend Nate and his boyfriend. They’ve always wanted one of those really fabulous events.”

“And they’re getting married here?” Shaunna looks incredulous.

“Back home in Boston. This was a girls’ week to visit my friend’s cousin.”

“Cool. It’s weird, isn’t it? When you live somewhere, you don’t really pay attention to the touristy type stuff, but there’s quite a lot to see and do around here. And you’re stuck in a stuffy salon for the afternoon...” Taking another quick mouthful of

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tea, Shaunna leaves her mug, reluctantly, and begins preparing what she'll need for Amelia's highlights. No pressure ever in this salon—a big part of why she's always loved working here—they just subtly move clients along, more often than not without them consciously realising. Hairdressing by stealth, her friends call it; she can guess exactly which one came up with that description.

But stealth mode's not working today. Amelia is pensive, tracking Shaunna's prep, yet not at the same time. It sounded like there was a lot more to Amelia's hesitance in mentioning her friends who were getting married, like she wants to share but is worried what Shaunna will think. They'll be spending a good chunk of the afternoon together; time to throw out another lifeline.

"My ex and his boyfriend are getting married...at some point. It's a bit complicated."

Amelia is startled by this revelation, and yet somehow not. Relationships among her friends have always been complex too. She nods, thinking what to say next. "This was more or less my friend Marlie's idea. She thought we could use a break from the men. They have been ridiculous while planning this wedding, bickering over the littlest nonsense." She laughs and rolls her eyes. "Better them than me, I guess. Last I knew, we'd left Marlie's boyfriend arguing about napkins with his...uh, his..." She falters.

"Go on," Shaunna says. "I'm listening."

Amelia bites her lip and peers at Shaunna. "No judgement?"

"None at all."

Nodding, Amelia says, "Okay, well..." Deep breath. "Marlie and my other friend, Nia, their boyfriends are...boyfriends. And Marlie's guy, Trevor, has an occasional partner too. That's who he was snipping at about the napkins. Jamie's got a bit of a stubborn streak on top of thinking Trevor has absolutely no sense of style. Which, to be fair, he really doesn't. Just ask Jamie's boyfriend."

And...oh, dear god. This is like trying to explain a spider web. I like your word, complicated.”

“Wow, you can say that again.” Shaunna laughs, relieved to meet someone else with a whole mess of relationship stuff going on, because hadn’t she been there two years ago, when she and Ade... Well, if she’s honest, they ganged up on Kris “for his own good” and in the process spun their very own spider web. Tattered, weather-beaten, still hanging in there. But Amelia won’t want to hear about all that nonsense.

“That’s men for you.” Shaunna isn’t sure where to go from here, wishing to neither pry nor discourage Amelia from sharing or venting or whatever she needs—along with her highlights. “Tell you what. Let’s get you in foils—give us something else to think about for a while? How does that sound?”

While Shaunna applies the chemicals to her hair and wraps it in foil strips, Amelia finishes her tea. It’s cooled a bit, but it’s still good. She thinks the stereotype of the tea being better on this side of the ocean might really be true. Something Shaunna said tugs at the corner of her mind.

“You said your ex and his boyfriend? Is he— Oh, I probably shouldn’t be asking that. I’m sorry.” And she knows better anyway. A woman whose ex is now with a man isn’t that unusual in her group of friends and definitely doesn’t mean he’s gay. Izzy was married to a woman too, and now he only has eyes for Nate.

She slightly changes the subject. “Do you miss being with him?”

“Yes,” Shaunna answers right away, no need to think; she’s done plenty of that already. “And yes, he’s bi if that’s what you were asking. Not confused—or not about that. We split up after he had an affair, but not because I kicked him out. Sure, I wish he hadn’t cheated on me. I wish he’d told me, like he did when he met Ade, but by then it was different. We weren’t a couple anymore. I think

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that's where his confusion lies—he loves me, and he loves Ade, but he's so fixed on the idea of monogamy he can't see how he can have both. Or *could* have had both before..." Shaunna squeezes her eyes shut. "See the poster over there?" She points blindly to her left and loosens the tension on the section of hair she's holding just enough she can feel Amelia's head turn.

Amelia's eyebrows shoot up. It's not the sort of thing she would typically see while in a stylist's chair. She's not exactly sure what to say, although it really does nothing to mute her appreciation for Shaunna's beauty. "It's...nice?" she tries, knowing she's blushing. She hopes Shaunna doesn't think she's being rude; she simply doesn't have the right words, nor does she know what she's expected to say. Everything in her head sounds like either oversharing or not enough.

"Is that him?" She's managed to unstick her tongue enough to get back to the conversation they were having. She still hasn't taken her eyes off the poster, though, and something tells her she already knows the answer to her question is no.

Shaunna stifles a giggle at their matching pink faces. "For the record, I so didn't want a picture of me all naked and massively pregnant in here. It was taken for a magazine feature. Kris—my ex—is an actor, as is Ade. Their PR woman thought the feature might stop the press hounding them...us. Would you believe Hayley emailed the photographer and paid God knows how much for that photo? Seriously, it's like Athena porn caught in a time warp. So...anyway, that's Andy—the guy I'm with now, who's all free love and hippie surfer dude but also really competitive? He's an oddment. A sexy one, though, or I think so.

"Oh, and he does that guy thing, you know? Sees me talking to an attractive woman and gets one of those daft grins on his face, like I could just turn it on. He doesn't get that we're not all like him. He's totally open to new experiences—he even says he's okay

with us having an open relationship, with one really, really major exception.”

“Your ex?”

“Bingo! I think it just makes me want it more. But that’s enough about me...unless you want me to keep talking?”

“Ugh, I feel you on that ‘guy thing.’ I have a friend, a woman, I sometimes hook up with. The men are one hundred percent not invited for that.” She sighs. It’s reminded her of the main reasons—both of them—why she needed this vacation. “I also very much feel you about wanting it more when it feels off-limits. Sounds a lot like what I’ve got going on.” She closes her eyes.

“Have you ever gotten together with the same guy your...partner? person-thing? was also seeing?”

“Err...not knowingly?” Shaunna hedges. After all, lack of communication about teenage sex was how Charlie—wearing her PR hat—talked her into doing the magazine feature in the first place. Who knew what those boys were doing when they weren’t doing her? But Shaunna can get quite militant about it when she’s on a roll, and now is not the time. Or maybe it is *always* the time—for women and girls, at least. “Is that what’s going on with you right now?” she asks, then adds, in case Amelia is merely curious, “If I’m prying, tell me to shut up.”

Amelia sighs for the thousandth time, this one more out of relief. Finally, someone entirely not invested in the outcome who she can talk to without worrying it will find its way back to anyone she knows.

“More or less,” she admits. She figures anyone with a naked picture on their salon wall isn’t likely to judge her or even comment on her various partners, so she forges ahead. “It didn’t start off on purpose. My friend Mack and I have this relationship where we tell each other everything, and then we have sex. He’s aromantic,

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so it's not going anywhere else, and I'm good with that. But then we both started hooking up with a mutual friend— I think I'm getting ahead of myself.

"I spent the night with a casual friend. It was fun. Then Mack spent the night with him after meeting up in a bar. That would've been the end of it, but we both kind of...kept doing it. Meeting up with him, I mean. And, well, it's become a problem, but not probably for the reasons you might think."

"Hmm..." Shaunna's second-guessing what Amelia expects her to think. "I'm not sure I think anything, but...from experience? I'd probably guess..." She shakes her head and laughs. "Sorry. I don't know, honestly. I mean, when the three of us were living together, Kris was the only one who had a problem with it, and I'm pretty sure it had more to do with all the times he'd fended off people telling him he was just greedy. I tell you, if Ade was bi too, it would've saved... No, actually, that's stupid. I love Ade to bits, but we're way too much alike. All I'm getting at is if all three of us had two lovers each, it would have been more fair? D'you know what? I should shut up and let you talk. We're about done with the lightener, by the way."

"Okay." Amelia thinks for a moment how to respond. "Well, really, it would've been fine. Mack and I have been best friends for years. He's known all along he doesn't want a romantic relationship, and I assumed I didn't either, until I met Jomari. JoJo is everything I've ever wanted in a partner but didn't realize. He's warm and sweet and we have so much in common..." Amelia trails off, knowing her face must be crimson. She's never said it out loud before, but here she is, about to reveal it all to a complete stranger in another country. "Uh...and there, as I'm sure you can see, is the problem. Mack might not be in love with JoJo—but I am."

She sits up a little straighter. "I said it, and the world didn't end. I'm in love." Her shoulders slump. "But I have no idea what to do now."

"Well...*right* now?" Shaunna swiftly secures the last piece of foil, intervening before Amelia's mood nosedives through the floor. "I propose another cuppa while Mr. Schwarzkopf works his magic." She thumbs at the storeroom door. "There's a packet of chocolate digestives in there with our name on it. That is, if you eat biscuits—oh, they're something else, aren't they? Cookies. Chocolate digestives are delish, especially when you dip 'em in your tea, and...that's all the advice I'm giving. Dunk your digestives. I could also tell you a story about a friend of mine who fell in love when he was seventeen and didn't realise for twenty years. Imagine that! So you're not doing so badly, and of course, we could all see he was in love, so maybe JoJo already knows?"

Amelia smiles. "Chocolate anything sounds awesome right now. And someone who was in love for twenty years and didn't know? That's...wow. Well, I sure hope there's time for that story." She slides off her chair. "Honestly, JoJo knows. I think he's been waiting for me to say it. How we're going to make it work with Mack between us is anyone's guess. But at least I know I can tell JoJo the truth, the thing I've been too chicken to say." She wonders if being real with both of them will make it easier. Hiding didn't seem to do anything other than make all of them miserable. If only she knew a way they could all have what they needed. Maybe in time.

Any further talk about their "unconventional" love lives is put on hold when Hayley re-joins them. "Oh! Tea and bic-bics? Don't mind if I do!" She leaves Shaunna little choice, but perhaps it's for the best. Hayley's wonderful, but she has her limits, not to mention it's virtually impossible to talk over the shower's spray as Shaunna rinses the bleach from Amelia's hair. As for the dryer—a pneumatic drill couldn't be any more intrusive, but at last silence

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reigns once more. It's the moment of truth, those few seconds when, even after all these years, Shaunna's so nervous her hands shake. *God, I hope she likes it.*

Amelia stares at her reflection so long she's afraid Shaunna will think she hates it. It's exactly the opposite. Her hair is shorter than it was, but not so much she can't still throw it in a ponytail for work. Now, though, the soft chestnut waves frame her round face. The highlights accentuate the natural shades of her hair, and the strands almost glow as she turns her head back and forth in an effort to see it all. She lets out a tiny gasp and reaches up, but she doesn't want to touch it and ruin anything, so she drops her hand.

"Oh," she says. "It's amazing. Thank you."

"You're very welcome." *Phew!* Shaunna conceals her relief with a smile that's genuine enough but a little beyond her control. Funny how some clients have this effect on her—not so much that they're more important than the rest, but she feels a connection here, an affinity. Likeminded women brought together by chance.

They're finishing their second cup of tea and the biscuits when the door opens, and Amelia pauses mid-laugh to wave to her friends. She loves the way Marlie's jaw drops, and Amelia shakes her head just a little to make her wavy hair sway.

Marlie turns to Nia. "I knew I should've made an appointment too! That right there is pure hair magic."

Nia shrugs. "I think your cousin would understand if you wanted to come back here. Also, she freaking told you that already, but you didn't listen." Nia steps closer to Amelia. "Your friend know anyone with that skill who can take care of afro-texture hair?"

"Ask her yourself," Amelia says. Turning to Shaunna, she says, "These are my friends, Marlie and Nia. Guys, this is Shaunna, worker of hair miracles."

“Lovely to meet you.” Shaunna smiles at the newcomers, and Amelia is struck again by how beautiful she is. And by how it’s too bad she’s all the way on another continent usually.

On the other hand, there is social media. Amelia notes that Marlie is, in fact, pulling out her phone, likely to schedule her own appointment. Which means another trip here, something for which Amelia isn’t sorry in the least. She feels a bit bad for Nia, though she knows her friend has a stylist back home practically on speed-dial.

“So,” Amelia says, trying to be casual. “Shaunna, maybe I can find you online? You know, stay in touch.” She allows one teeny, tiny almost-wink, even though she’s positive Shaunna’s not interested.

“Fab!” Shaunna doesn’t need asking twice. She whips out her phone too. “Okay...” *Yay for social media.* Amelia is gorgeous and fun, and yes, Shaunna’s nose; she’ll hold her hands up if pressed. But she also wants to hear all about the wedding. She wants to see how things pan out for Amelia and her guys. More than anything, she hopes she’s made a new friend.

The End

# ABOUT A.M. LEIBOWITZ

A.M. Leibowitz is a queer spouse, parent, feminist, and book-lover falling somewhere on the Geek-Nerd Spectrum. They keep warm through the long, cold western New York winters by writing about life, relationships, hope, and happy-for-now endings. Their published fiction includes several novels as well as a number of short works, and their stories have been included in anthologies from Supposed Crimes, Witty Bard, and Mischief Corner Books. In between noveling and editing, they blog coffee-fueled, quirky commentary on faith, culture, writing, books, and their family.

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# ABOUT DEBBIE MCGOWAN

Debbie McGowan is an author and publisher based in a semi-rural corner of Lancashire, England. She writes character-driven, realist fiction, celebrating life, love and relationships. A working class girl, she ‘ran away’ to London at seventeen, was homeless, unemployed and then homeless again, interspersed with animal rights activism (all legal, honest ;) and volunteer work as a mental health advocate. At twenty-five, she went back to college to study social science—tough with two toddlers, but they had a ‘stay at home’ dad, so it worked itself out. These days, the toddlers are young women (much to their chagrin), and Debbie teaches undergraduate students, writes novels and runs an independent publishing company, occasionally grabbing an hour of sleep where she can.

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