West of Nowhere

KG MacGregor

Lambda Literary Award Winner

Bella Books

2013
Amber Halliday scooted her chair back from the long, boisterous table as the harried waitress cleared their breakfast dishes. Holding her cell phone high above her head, she twisted back and forth. “This is so weird. I can’t get a signal at all. Is anybody else having trouble?”

She’d noticed the No Service message last night but didn’t have time to worry about it, since all anyone had cared about for the past three days was packing up and loading the bus for their five a.m. departure this morning. Gus Holley and his band were kicking off a thirty-four-city tour in the US and Canada, and for the first time ever, she was going along to help sell merchandise. Most of the band had slept the first three hours from Nashville to Louisville, but they were gearing up now to make some music tonight at the Ohio State Fair in Columbus.

Her boyfriend of the past three years, Corey Dobbins, played bass for Gus, and had used his influence to have her join the tour. He even talked Gus into letting her bring along
Skippy, her one-year-old Chihuahua-spaniel mix, so she wouldn’t have to turn him in to the animal shelter. Since the tour was scheduled to last five months, they’d whittled down their possessions and given up their apartment lease, hoping to find a nicer place when they returned to Nashville.

Amber and Corey were part of the second bus, mostly musicians and instrument techs. The other roadies—the stage, sound and lighting crew—traveled a day ahead and were already setting up at the fair.

“Don’t worry about your phone,” Corey said. “Mine’s working. Who would you call anyway? Practically everybody you know is right here at this table.”

“That’s not true. I text with Harmony all the time,” she answered, looking over at the band’s drummer, Wayne. His wife ran the daycare where Amber had worked off and on for the past couple of years.

Wayne turned his phone toward her. “I just got a text from her a few minutes ago. She’s bitching about some woman that always drops her kid off with a loaded diaper.”

“I know exactly who she’s talking about. I told her to save it and put it back on him just before his mother came to pick him up, but Harmony’s like ‘I can’t do that,’ and I’m like, ‘Well, you’re going to get a shitty diaper every day.’ You can’t let people get away with that kind of shit.”

Corey snorted. “Pun intended. Hey, Amber, aren’t we pretty close to where you grew up?”

Amber made a face and shuddered. She’d seen the sign for Shelbyville when they pulled off the interstate to the truck stop. “I guess that explains why the hair’s standing up on the back of my neck. Gives me the creeps just to think about it.”

Several of the guys in their party suddenly stood, dropped a few dollars on the table for the waitress and made their way back out to the bus, but Corey held out his coffee cup for a refill, in no apparent hurry. “Don’t you ever wonder what your folks are up to these days? I get that you had it rough growing up but you don’t even know if they’re still alive.”

“I know all I want to know.”
He handed her his phone. “Seriously, you ought to call since you’re so close.”
She batted his hand away.
“You’re too stubborn for your own good sometimes, Amber.”
“What, you think I should just run over there all smiles with Skippy and say it’s all okay now? I’m sure Mama would just break down and cry, and Daddy would fall all over himself to say how sorry he was.”
“How do you know what they’ll do if you never give them a chance? You haven’t even called home a single time since you left. Not once, Amber. They could be worried sick for all you know.”
“Trust me, they aren’t.”
Corey sighed and pulled his wallet from his hip pocket, drawing a five-dollar bill out for the waitress. He then handed Amber five twenties. “Here, take some of this money. It’s not a good idea for me to carry all of it in one place.”
Her boyfriend had a lot of faults—drinking to excess and a wandering eye chief among them—but he was generous, paying all the rent and household bills, and even giving her a little spending money whenever she was out of work. His propensity to sleep with other women from time to time was something she’d learned to accept, because he always came home to her. Theirs wasn’t the greatest love story of all time—it was probably more habit than love for both of them—but it was dependable.
Through the restaurant’s broad window she saw Wayne tipping his head toward the bus to signal it was time to head out.
“Looks like everybody’s ready to go,” she said.
Corey held his cup as if warming his hands. “I’m going to finish this last cup of coffee. You should go to the bathroom here before we get back on the road because we probably won’t stop between here and Columbus. I’ll meet you back on the bus.”
A full-sized ladies’ room was definitely preferable to the tiny compartment that passed as a lavatory on the bus, especially
since she couldn’t put her makeup on while the bus was jiggling down the road.

Amber leaned over the sink to the mirror, careful not to soak up the water she had splashed all over the counter when washing her hands. With a stiff brush, she untangled the wiry blond curls that cascaded almost to her shoulders and pulled them tight into a bushy ponytail. Her practiced hand then methodically lined her eyes with a slate-gray pencil, giving life to her face for the first time since she’d rolled out of bed at four a.m. Blue eye shadow, creamy blush and red lipstick finished the look and she stepped back to take in her overall appearance.

Her denim miniskirt, stretched out from three days since its last laundring, sagged from her hips. A pair of ribbed tank tops—one red, one black—hugged her slender frame snugly, not quite hiding the outline of her breasts and stiff nipples. Corey teased her about having a chest like a teenage boy, but she always thought a B-cup was plenty. She appreciated the trade-off of not usually having to wear a bra.

Corey made no secret of his preference for voluptuous women. Three or four times a month he slept with Rachelle, who was closer to his age at thirty-two and full-figured. Amber had never really been jealous, but she was relieved when Corey had chosen her and not Rachelle to join the tour.

A woman entered the restroom and, before going into the stall, stopped to pick up several stray paper towels off the floor and stuff them into the wastebasket. By her dress—dark green cargo shorts, a bright yellow T-shirt and sturdy hiking shoes—she wasn’t a truck stop employee straightening up, just a neat freak.

Feeling guilty over the fact that a couple of those errant towels had been hers, Amber took a moment to wipe the excess water off the counter and carefully dispose of the waste. Then she stashed her makeup in her purse and fished out a pack of Marlboro Lights, knowing she’d have time for only a couple of quick puffs before getting back on the bus. It was a nasty habit, one she could barely afford even when she was working, but
she’d found it impossible to quit when surrounded by so many others in the band who smoked.

When she exited the ladies’ room, the first thing she noticed was a busboy separating the tables they had pushed together. Corey was already gone and the bus had moved to the front of the restaurant, which meant her cigarette would have to wait because these guys were obviously itching to get back on the road. As she stepped outside, the bus pulled into traffic and made an immediate right turn down the interstate ramp.

“Oh, very funny!” she yelled. All the guys were probably howling over the sight of her standing in the parking lot. Their trip down to the next exit to turnaround would probably take ten minutes or more, and they’d all have another laugh at her expense when they came back to pick her up.

The August sun was already beating down on the asphalt and Amber turned to look for a shady place to wait. That’s when she spotted Skippy sitting patiently at the corner of the building, his leash tied to her suitcase.

* * *

“Here you go, sweetie. Two eggs over light, hash browns and sausage patties. There’s jelly on the table for your biscuits, and I’ll hit your coffee cup on my next trip.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” Joy Shepard answered graciously, despite having ordered her eggs scrambled with bacon. That party of fourteen had run the poor waitress ragged, and Joy considered herself lucky she was served at all. Fortunately, she wasn’t picky.

Apparently, the crowd at the long table was part of Gus Holley’s band—at least that’s what she’d gathered from the tour bus outside and the excited voices of those around her. Joy had never been much of a country music fan but she knew someone who was, and had sent a couple of photos of the bus via her smart phone. She wasn’t surprised when it chimed with a request for the video chat application she and her nine-year-old goddaughter used.
“That’s Gus Holley!” Madison exclaimed. “Where are you?”
“I’m in Louisville, Kentucky,” she answered, keeping her voice low so she wouldn’t bother those around her. “I don’t think Gus Holley was here. The waitress told me it was just his backup band.”

After dropping Madison at her home in Newport News, Virginia, only a day earlier, Joy was already missing her like crazy. She stood her phone up next to the napkin holder so she could keep eating, and noticed Madison was calling from a kitchen that wasn’t her own.

“Where are you so early in the morning? I thought you’d sleep late on the last day before school starts.”

“Syd dropped me off at Tara’s. We’re supposed to go to the pool.” She made a face at the mention of the six-year-old who lived a couple of blocks down the street. “She wouldn’t let me stay at home by myself. You would have, wouldn’t you?”

“I doubt it, kiddo. I think I’d rather you be with a sitter for a few more years.” Madison was growing up way too fast as it was. It hardly seemed nine years since Joy had held her good friend Carrie Larson’s hand in the delivery room as she gave birth to this beautiful child. When Carrie died two years later from a reaction to anesthesia during hernia surgery, the hospital forms she’d joked about having to sign kicked in, granting Joy and her partner Sydney Koehler the right and responsibility to raise Madison.

It hadn’t worked out that way. Joy had been deployed at sea for much of the next four years, coming home to Norfolk to find Syd not just seeing someone else, but already married to him. While it hadn’t come as a total shock—Syd had long struggled with her sexuality and the challenges they faced as a lesbian couple—it certainly upended life as they knew it. Since the State of Virginia didn’t recognize parental rights for two women, Joy had bent over backward ever since to maintain a cordial relationship in order to keep her place in Madison’s life. That got a lot harder when Joy returned to Oakland, California, to help care for her mother in the last stages of COPD after a lifetime of work in a textile plant.
“I wish I was still with you, Joy. I’m going to ask Syd if she’ll let me come for the whole summer next year.”

It was curious that Syd had never insisted on Madison calling her Mom, not even after the formal adoption. Had it been Joy, it would have been music to her ears.

“Fine by me if you want to come back for that long, but you’ll probably be stuck at home with Grandpa Shep while I’m at work. Sure you wouldn’t rather be playing at the pool with Tara?” Actually, she could have enrolled Madison in a summer camp for outdoor activities and crafts if Syd had given her more notice that she was sending Madison for a whole month. Calling at the last minute left Joy scrambling to extend her vacation time so they could take a cross-country trip back to Newport News in the truck camper.

The waitress refilled Joy’s coffee cup and smiled over her shoulder at the picture of Madison on the small screen. The child’s long hair was kinky brown with gold streaks, as though every other strand had come from each of her parents, her fair-skinned mom from Georgia and her African-American father. Creamy brown skin set off her wide blue eyes, causing everyone to look twice at her extraordinary beauty.

“Syd has a new boyfriend…Mitch Hildebrand. She likes that he’s a lieutenant, so I guess that means he’s supposed to be better than Johnny.”

“Have you met him?”

“Yeah, he stays with us now. All of his stuff is here.”

That probably explained Syd’s sudden change of heart about giving Madison up for four whole weeks instead of two. At least Johnny was out of the picture for good. That marriage had lasted only sixteen months, and he’d made no effort to adopt Madison.

“Do you like him? Is he nice?”

“He’s okay. I just wish Syd had gotten a girlfriend instead of a boyfriend.”

“What difference does that make?”

“Just that she gets all helpless and goofy whenever she’s around guys. You never do stuff like that.”
Joy had to laugh at that. For a kid, Madison had an amazing understanding of what it meant to be gay or lesbian, but the concept of butch and femme was probably too much for her to grasp. “That doesn’t have anything to do with her having a boyfriend or girlfriend. She just likes to be a certain way and I like to be another way. That’s what makes us all so interesting. You wouldn’t want everyone to be the same, would you?”

“I guess not, but I still wish Syd would get a girlfriend...and I wish it was you.”

As much as it hurt to hear Madison’s wish, Joy knew deep down what it really meant was she wanted the two people she loved most to be with her all the time. She and Syd went to great lengths never to say anything negative about the other, but there wasn’t even a spark of love left between them.

“I don’t think that’s going to happen, kiddo. But you’re lucky because you always have two homes where people love you like crazy.” She peeked at her check and dug a couple of ones out of her wallet for a tip. “I need to hit the road so I can get home to Grandpa Shep. Did you call him last night like I said?”

“Yeah. He was grouchy, but he wanted me to come back and push him around till his shoulder got well.”

“I bet he did. The nurses are probably ready to toss him out on the street.”

Her father, wheelchair-bound after losing both legs in an accident over twenty years ago, had suffered a fall from his chair the day after she and Madison left Oakland on their way back to Virginia. With his arm out of commission following surgery to pin his shoulder, he had no way to get around on his own.

“Will you be home tonight? I’ll call you from Kansas.”

“Yeah, but it’s a school night and I have to go to bed at eight thirty.”

“I pick up an hour going west so I’ll be sure to stop at a rest area before it gets too late. Love you.”

“I love you too, Joy.”

She blinked back tears as she walked to the cash register. Madison’s West Coast visit had been bliss, especially the last ten
days, when they had driven across the country together, through the Grand Canyon, Monument Valley and Rocky Mountain National Park. The only thing that had dampened their trip was the knowledge it would end with dropping Madison off in Virginia, followed for Joy by a long, lonely ride home.

“Thank you, ma’am,” Joy said as she collected her change. Breakfast was a lot more fun at a picnic table with Madison, but it was nice once in a while to let someone else do the cooking and cleaning. However, the luxury of a restaurant breakfast had put her an hour behind schedule, which meant a long day of driving to Abilene, where she planned to camp for the night.

The young woman she’d seen in the bathroom—from the Gus Holley group—was standing at the corner of the building, a suitcase and small dog at her side. Her eyes were trained on the overpass nearby as though she were expecting someone. Apparently, she wasn’t part of the band after all, just a woman who’d hitched a ride to Louisville.

Joy had sent a text to her father asking him to call when he got up, and her phone rang as she was getting into her truck. Before she could even say hello, his gravelly voice barked, “How soon can you get here and bust me out of this hellhole?”

“How soon can you get here and bust me out of this hellhole?”

“These jokers won’t let me do jack…they say I can’t get out of bed without the therapist here, but when he comes in, he makes me do everything in bed. I have to piss in a plastic jug, for Christ’s sake, and you don’t even want to know how they make me do the other. The food is pure crap. I ate better on Big John.” That said a lot, because her pop had complained as long as she could remember about the awful chow on the USS John F Kennedy.

“I’m in Louisville right now, Pop. Looks like I’ll get in on Saturday, but that doesn’t leave a lot of time to figure out how we’re going to do this, because I have to be at work first thing Monday morning.”

“Just get me out of here. I’ll figure it out from there.”

Sometimes her father was too independent for his own good. From the day he arrived home from the VA hospital in a
wheelchair, he’d been determined to have a life without limits, and without people fussing over him. Only rarely did he find himself at the mercy of others, and when he did, he bucked like a wild mustang with its first rider.

“If I know you, you’ll try to pull yourself around with a bad shoulder and you’ll make it worse.” Although there was considerable risk to the staff at the rehab center if he stayed there much longer. “I looked at a few of those home health care services online last night. I’ll see if I can line up somebody, but you’ll have to stay where you are till I get it all set up. And whoever I get, you can’t be a jerk and run them off the first day.”

“If it gets me out of this place, I promise to kiss their rosy red butt.”

Her father’s accident would no doubt make all of them miserable for weeks. From what his doctor had said, he’d need a full-time companion to help him around the house, plus twice-weekly visits from a physical therapist. Joy could handle all the duties during the evenings but she’d need to hire someone to cover the hours she was at work. Whatever poor creature took the job would have to put up with her father’s aggravation over his loss of independence, and couldn’t possibly do anything to please him.

“Has anyone been to see you? The guys from the Legion?”

“They got their own problems. Barbara comes every day, though. I probably would have killed somebody by now if she hadn’t been here.”

Joy chuckled at the mention of Barbara Rodgers, a longtime family friend who lived across the street. The loss of her husband Hank in an engine room explosion on the USS *Midway* had brought her close to all the Shepards, especially after the accident that disabled Joy’s father. She was practically family and Joy even wondered if romance might blossom one day between Barbara and her pop now that her mother was gone. It was weird to think about him being with someone else, yet comforting that he might find happiness again.

“I’ll make some calls tonight and see what I can do. Try not to drive everyone there to drink.”
Joy reluctantly acknowledged she’d be tied to the house every night until her father was back to his old self. Though he’d insisted he could manage on his own, she knew that was his pride talking. He’d said the same thing when her mother got sick three years ago, but he was visibly relieved when Joy left the navy to return to Oakland to help him manage her declining health.

A silver lining—if there was such a thing—was that getting her father rehabbed might make the time pass more quickly until Madison’s return for the Christmas holidays.

She turned the ignition and waited to be sure all her gauges were working correctly, a habit from her navy days, when she tested and calibrated her communications equipment before each use. On the busy deck of an aircraft carrier, there was no margin for error.

As she eased from her parking space, she was startled by the sudden appearance of the young woman with the dog waving her down.