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Uncle Henry's Houseboat

by CHICK WESTON

Everybody maintained that Uncle Henry was eccentric. He was certainly considered to be the black sheep of the family. He had run away from home at the age of fifteen, had been a Jack-of-all-trades, finally spending several years in the Merchant Navy. On his return home he started a business venture which prospered, then sold out and bought a vast stretch of land, partly a swamp, down by the river. He kept on saying that he would some day drain the swamp and open up that area, but he never found the money, and Uncle Henry's «Township» became a standing joke which his brother — my father — did not enjoy.

Then came the war, and the miracle occurred—the Defence Authorities requisitioned a large part of the land for an Air Force Base and Aerodrome and reclaimed the whole area. After the war the civilian authorities took over the base and established a large airport. The remainder of the land was eagerly bought up by industrialists and speculators and Uncle Henry found himself a rich man.

He had married rather late in life and as his wife died a couple of years later, my brother and I became two very spoilt nephews. Finally my brother angered Uncle Henry by constantly criticising his way of life, and since I fully approved of his eccentricities, we grew very close together. Uncle Henry had bought a small cottage on the river and a lovely houseboat, and here I spent many happy holidays, swimming, fishing and exploring the countryside.

In the year in which I finished my University studies Uncle Henry set off on a long world cruise, but invited me to spend my last vacation, before starting work, down at the cottage. So it happened that I duly arrived there one hot summer afternoon with a trailer attached to my small car, laden with books, portable radio, and a vast supply of everything that I would need for a couple of weeks on the river. I had already decided that I would live on the houseboat and travel around on the river. My only regret was that I had no friend to accompany me, but as I was used to spending long periods by myself and knew quite a few families living at various places along the river, this did not worry me unduly.

Having arrived at the cottage I was informed by the housekeeper that the boat had just been overhauled at the marine workshops and was ready there for me. After seeing the workshop manager I drove my car down to the pier and started loading my gear on board. Due to the abnormally dry summer the river was rather low and it was quite a job getting down onto the deck. On account of the heat I had changed into my swimming shorts and was struggling with a couple of cases when I heard a voice behind me:

«Hello. You must be Donald Benson. Can I lend you a hand?»

I looked up and saw a slightly freckled smiling face looking down at me. The speaker was about my own age, fair haired and fairly powerfully built. He wore only a pair of shorts and sandshoes. His skin, deeply bronzed by the sun, glistened with sweat.

«Yes, sure!», I replied, «It's mighty hot, and with the river so low, it's quite a job getting all this gear aboard. By the way, how did you know I was Donald Benson?»

«Oh that. Your Uncle Henry told me you were coming down here and asked me to get the boat fixed up as you would be using it whilst he was away. By the way, I'm Robby Bloomfield. I ran short of funds and so have to work a while to save up enough to finish my varsity studies. I came down here about three months ago and got this job working for the marine repair outfit.»

«That's great—we must get to know each other a bit during my stay here. I can do with company, so when you are free, come along and join me on the river.»

«Gosh, that would be great — where are you actually heading for?»

«For the first couple of days I am going across to the other side—over to Dead End Creek. It's nice and quiet there and I can fish, swim and sunbathe undisturbed. Then I shall probably do a trip up the river calling at various places on the way to see old friends.»

«You see, I work weekends at the boathouse to try and get a bit more cash, but I take Mondays off—I was wondering whether you would still be there on Monday.»

«Yes, I reckon so—I plan to go up the river about Wednesday.»

By now most of the gear was loaded, so he said he had to get back to work. I thanked him and as he turned away, he called out: «Bye for now—don't be surprised if you see me before Monday!» Then he winked, waved his hand and was gone.

I felt strangely elated, and began to wonder whether his final remark had an inner significance—I hoped so!!

An hour later, having taken my car back to Uncle Henry's house and parked it in the garage, I gently slipped the houseboat from the pier and headed across to Dead End Creek. There I anchored, went below and stowed all my gear properly. By now it was late afternoon, so I had a quick swim, and then prepared a light supper. An interesting symphony concert was being broadcast that evening, so I decided to take my little radio up on the upper deck and relax there whilst listening to the concert.

I should explain the layout of the boat. Up forward there was a small bridge house, raised slightly above deck level. Behind this steps led down to the cabin which had three bunks, a folding table and some cupboards. This led into a shower-cum-toilet on the one side and a kitchenette on the other. On the roof of the cabin was an enclosed area surrounded by a two foot high railing with a bench on two sides. As the railing to deck area was covered by canvas, it was possible to have complete privacy when spread out on this deck space.

As I was gathering my radio, rug, cigarettes, etc. I felt something bump against the side of the boat—I listened for a moment, then went up on deck just in time to see Robby clambering over the side from a small out-board motor-boat. He was neatly attired in a white T shirt, light Khaki jeans and sandals.

«Hi there! Surprised to see me?»

«Yes I am, but also delighted. I was just going onto the upper deck to lie there and listen to the symphony concert that is being broadcast. You can lend me a hand taking the radio, etc. up there, and we might as well take up a couple of bottles of beer.»

It was a fairly hot still night under the stars, and we lay there listening to the music without doing much talking. I was a bit puzzled though by a feeling that Robby had something on his mind, for I noticed that I broke into his private thoughts several times when I spoke to him after a brief silence. Still I said

nothing as he was still a stranger and I thought I had no right to ask him what was on his mind—he could always tell me if he felt so disposed.

The concert ended at about 10.30, and I suggested that we might have a swim. We took everything below to the cabin, then stripped and a minute later were in the cool water. We stayed in for quite a while, ducking each other and generally fooling around. Then we clambered back on deck and realised that we had forgotten to bring up a towel, so we rubbed off most of the water and went below. I gave him a towel and we started drying ourselves.

I was more than curious, and when one is in that mood, one takes risks. In as casual a voice as I could muster I said:

«Robby, are you Jewish?»

«No. Why do you ask? Oh! I see what you mean! That was done for health reasons, or so I was told. You know, they say that the chief advantage of circumcision is that it gives one a clear head for business! It has not helped me yet! But, on this subject, you must be in great demand by the girls!»

«I don't waste it on them! And as far as that goes, you know they say the pot should not call the kettle black!»

I moved over towards him, saw him smile, and he said in a soft voice: «Well?» «O.K.» I said.

It was a full hour later when he lifted himself off the bunk, stretched and said: «Well, it is time I got back. I have to work tomorrow.»

He dressed in silence, and when he was ready, he turned to me. He had a peculiar look on his face—it was taut, as if he did not want to say what he was going to say.

«Well, you have had your fun. Do you reckon it was worth 20 bucks?»

«What is that? Listen, I don't buy that. Now get off this boat before I chuck you off.»

«Is that so? I think you should reconsider that— — — I am waiting!»

Something in my face must have made him realise that I was in a dangerous mood, for he suddenly turned round and disappeared up on deck without another word, climbed into the little boat in which he had come and in a moment was away, heading back for the other shore.

I was shaking with rage. It was not the fact that he had asked for money. It was that I had not expected it from him, and the shock was too great. He had seemed such a decent genuine sort of a person. Then I thought back over the events of the evening and realised that his pre-occupation must have been connected with what had just happened between us.

I went on deck and smoked endless cigarettes, finally going below to turn in for a very unhappy restless night. I was certain that he would not use blackmail as was implied in his last remark.

The next day was a miserable one for me and I seriously considered leaving right away for my trip up the river. Finally I decided to stay where I was—it was unlikely that I would see him again until I returned to the other side.

I tried to keep myself occupied during the day, but found it most difficult to keep my mind from dwelling on the unpleasant events of the previous evening. In the evening I went up on deck with my radio and tried to concentrate on the play being produced. From time to time I would get up and pace around, and I was certainly smoking far more than normally.

Suddenly, at about half past eight, I saw a small rowing boat in midstream. A figure in the boat stood up, undressed and dived into the water. There was

not much light from the moon, but as I strained to see what was happening, I saw the figure swimming towards the houseboat. I could not make out anything further, and the boat in midstream did not appear to have any other occupant—it was drifting very slowly down stream.

The swimmer approached the houseboat, and as he came alongside I was astounded to see that it was Robby. He pulled himself on deck, looked up at me and gasped out in an almost hysterical voice: «Donald, for God's sake help me! Please help me! I've killed a man—the police will probably be after me soon. Please help me.»

All the fury over what had happened the night before vanished as I looked at his face, yet I wondered whether he had tried to blackmail somebody else and that in the end he had killed that man. Then I dismissed this thought.

«Robby, what the hell happened? Why did you undress in that boat out there and come over here like this—all naked.»

«I pinched one of the rowing boats along the river, rowed into midstream, then stripped and left a note saying that I was going to commit suicide.»

«You bloody fool, Robby. I don't know what has been going on, but there is something fishy about all this—and what happened last night, but ...»

«I know, I know. I can explain all that—it is all mixed up—last night and tonight—but it is not what you probably think. I've just been a bloody fool.»

«Look here, Robby, you get below and dry yourself. I am going to start straightening things out. First of all I must get that boat back and get your clothes. Now, don't argue—you get below and wait for me, damn you!»

I stripped, dived in and swam slowly towards the rowing boat which was still driving along slowly. I knew it was going to be quite a long swim back and so took it quietly. I eventually reached the boat, climbed in and seeing the name of the owner on the back seat, rowed it back to his landing stage. Then I took the clothes lying on the seat, tied them in a bundle, slung them over my shoulder, lowered myself into the water, and started the long swim back to the houseboat. I was pretty exhausted when I got back and not in a very happy frame of mind.

When I got into the cabin, I threw the bundle of clothes on the deck at Robby's feet, picked up a towel and dried myself vigorously. Robby's clothes were soaked, so I got two pairs of shorts from the cupboard, put one on myself and handed him the other pair. All this time we had not exchanged a word, for whilst I was drying myself he had just sat there staring into space and nervously smoking a cigarette.

«Well, Robby, let me hear what you have to say—I want the truth, and nothing else. Then, we'll see what happens next.»

«Donald, I don't know what you must think of me. When you came to get the boat yesterday I liked you immediately, as I thought I would from all your Uncle Henry had told me about you. Then, last night—I know you must despise me for that, but I was desperate. Now this happens, and the only person to whom I feel I can turn is yourself. Oh, Hell, what a bloody mess I have made of everything.»

I poured out two brandies, passed one to Robby, and suggested that he should tell me the whole story from the start.

«It started six or seven months ago. I was at varsity then, happily studying for an engineering degree. When my parents were killed in a motor smash a couple of years ago there was enough money to see me through university

and something to get myself established afterwards. Then one night, having had a couple of drinks I did something I had not done for a long time—I went out looking for... well, you know what. In the park I saw someone sitting and when I had passed him and looked around, he got up and followed me. He caught up with me and we got chatting. Well, to cut a long story short, I told him all about myself and my studies and we ended up by going to his room—a rather dingy place. We went to bed—it was awful—he was coarse and brutal, and when it was over, he pulled a gun on me and demanded whatever money I had and my cigarette case. I was terrified and gave him the few dollars I had and the case and bolted.

«Two days later I got a letter from him demanding more money as the price of his silence. If I had not been a damn fool I would have ignored the letter and I am certain he would have done nothing, but I gave him what he demanded. This just went on until I had no more funds left and as I told you yesterday I came down here to earn more. Yes, I came to earn enough to go back to varsity, but actually there would never have been enough to satisfy him and save up for myself. That is why I also worked over the weekends at the boat-house—for that bastard! Then two days ago he turned up here—he came down to the pier just after you had left and demanded that I had to give him at least 100 dollars this evening. I told him it was impossible. He suggested that I steal it, or steal and sell some equipment. He said he would come back to get it this evening. Well, I could not steal it. I came out to see you, at first thinking I could discuss the matter with you; then I felt that I could not do that, and finally when we had our «fun» after that swim, I decided to ask you for some money—use his tactics, but I felt so ashamed that I bolted when I saw your face following my demand.

«Instead of going back to the boarding house after work this evening I phoned and said I would be working late and actually did carry on working. Then he came along and asked for the money. I could stand it no more and let him have it. I have done a fair amount of boxing and I beat the daylight out of him. He hardly hit back at all—just stood there at first as if not realising that I was no longer just a frightened boy. Then he hit out once or twice but I ducked away and tore into him. Suddenly he fell back and hit his head on an iron bar, uttered a gurgling sound and lay still—all twisted up. I was sure he was dead, so I just picked up my jacket and fled... and here I am.»

I went over to where he sat, put my arm around his shoulder.

«Robby, you've been a damn fool, but you cannot be sure he is dead. As for what happened last night, forget it—I was terribly hurt at the time, but I don't hold it against you now. I am only sorry that you did not tell me the full story then, but it is no use crying over spilt milk. Now what do we do? My idea is this... I thought about it whilst swimming back to the boat. I think we will head up stream at first light, then listen in to the news at 6 a.m. They always give local regional news after the main world news—we shall then know the worst, for the police patrol the pier area occasionally at night. If the man is not dead, it will depend on what he says. If he is dead, we shall decide on our next action. How does that strike you?»

«It looks, Donald, as if you are just like your Uncle Henry. You seem to be able to think logically at all times. I wish I could do that. Yes, I suppose that is best, but it is going to be a hell of a long night. I won't be able to sleep a wink.»

«Let us go up on deck and talk.»

We settled down on deck and to keep from thinking about the events of the evening, I started telling him a bit about myself, about my childhood, my days at school, my first discovery of being «different» and of some of my little adventures. He occasionally asked questions, and finally told me of his own life. As we talked I could feel the tension going out of him, and he became more and more relaxed. The night was very warm, and after a long time I became drowsy and finally fell asleep. I woke suddenly when I felt someone nudging me—it was Robby. The first light of a new day told me that it must be about five o'clock and time to be moving.

«Come along, let us have a quick swim and then get moving.»

«Sure, Donald, I can do with that swim. Gosh, but you slept soundly. I dozed occasionally but could not really sleep.»

A few minutes later we were back in the cabin, feeling greatly refreshed from a brisk swim. We put on a pair of shorts, and whilst I started the motor and headed the boat up-stream, Robby busied himself making some coffee. He brought it up to the bridgehouse, put it on a small map table, then placed his arm around my waist, gave a squeeze, and said in a soft voice:

«Donald, if ever I get out of this mess, and even if I don't, you've got yourself a friend for life. I mean that... not just saying it...»

«I need a good friend, and I reckon we'll sort this thing out together. Just keep your chin up and go and fetch the radio—it is almost six o'clock.»

As the news started, he became pale and tense once more. Then came the local news. We both started as the announcer said.

«The escaped lifer, Joe MacGill, who escaped from the State Penitentiary almost a year ago, was recaptured last night under strange circumstances. The police, whilst patrolling the pier area came across his unconscious body. He had been badly beaten up. He was taken to the local hospital under guard and when he regained consciousness he said that he was hoping to get a boat to get up the river when he was attacked by two men—he did not know who they were. He tried to fight them off but they were too powerful. His condition is not serious—concussion, two broken ribs and several teeth knocked out. He is being returned to the Penitentiary today. The police are now investigating his possible connection with a number of robberies which took place in the area recently.»

I looked at Robby. He was sobbing quietly, and as I put my arm around his shoulder, he fell on his knees and threw his arms around my waist. I lifted him up, pulled his chin up, but words did not come easily. The relief in that moment was too great.

To break the tension, I finally said:

«Hell, I think we need some breakfast, friend-for-life.»

«Thanks for saying that. I was just going to try and say 'Thank you'. I won't try and say it now, but I shall try and say it in deeds from now on. I meant what I said when I told you that you've got yourself a friend for life. After all we talked about, I know we have a lot in common, and if at times I am not the easiest of people to get along with, you just knock some sense into me.»

«Right now, we have to think of getting you back to the workshops. It's Saturday, so I just suggest that you tell them at the boathouse that you cannot work this weekend. You don't need those extra dollars for that bastard any

more, and I reckon we can have a wonderful time cementing our friendship. What a pity you cannot claim the reward for capturing that fellow, but I think silence, in this case, is golden.»

Well, it was a wonderful weekend—the most wonderful I had ever spent. Late on the Sunday night as we lay together in the bunk, I turned to him:

«Well, it was a damned strange beginning, but if it continues at this rate, it is going to be worth all the misery and doubts and fears.»

«You know, Donald, it is only in adversity one gets to know one's real friends—I found mine. What do you think Uncle Henry would say if he knew?»

«He would give us his blessing. I'm not joking—he knows about me, of that I am sure. When he sees us together he'll know the situation. Maybe he even hoped we would meet and that is why he told you so much about me. Tired?»

«A bit.» «Too tired?» «Never, you lovable old bastard!»

D R E A M L I F E

I am a dreamer. Fantasy plays an important part in the life of every man. The extent and color of his dreams depend on the richness of his background and imagination. Yet one's talent for fantasy is the only human ability which is not improved by constant exercise. The too-great use of fantasy ruins its delicate mechanism, and leaves one without any possibility of a physical fulfillment for the dreams. It is like looking at nude pictures—see too many of them and all effect is dissipated. One turns through extraordinary collections that would make an ordinary man's hair stand on end, but the eye remains dull, and the only comment is «Ah, yes—and do you have any more?» A collection of fifty pictures is fine, and each one becomes a treasure; a collection of a thousand will shatter the little machine of dreams, and send its owner spiralling downward in an emptiness of frigidity and impotence, yet aching with an ever-increasing hunger for more, more, more. When the fragile mechanism of fantasy lies broken, not even one wisp of dream arises from it; and in the midst of the most remarkable situations, one can only sigh that he has done this—or seen it—too many times before. In anticipation and retrospect lie the only pleasures left in life.

(From an unpublished novel)

by John McAndrews