



THE LIVEABOARDS

by Ali Shapiro

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I move onto the boat the same summer Wynn Boyd gets drunk and drowns. Kelley tells me the story: Fell in right next to the dock, poor fucker. Happened just before you showed up. Found him floating right there. He points past the edge of the parking lot to the shallow lip of the bay, the sunlight purpling the oil-stained surface of the water, a couple of ducklings preening their slick coats. Good man, old Boyd, Kelley says, dragging on his cigarette, letting the smoke seep out through the gaps in his teeth.

Kelley is no particular age. Every day he wears brown Dickies work pants flecked with paint in various marine shades: white, off-white, the occasional royal blue. When it's hot he goes shirtless, and I marvel at the way his skin fits him, mostly still tight over his muscles like a boy's but weathered and freckled and beginning to slacken over his belly and on the insides of his arms. When it's cooler he throws on a flannel hunting jacket and doesn't zip it up.

There's a dog that always follows him, a sinewy white pit bull, all hulk and shoulder. No name, he says when I ask, the dog sniffing my outstretched hand, Don't even know where the bitch came from. But every night he lifts her in his arms to carry her over the gunwale, onto his boat.

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My slip is next to Wynn Boyd's empty Chris Craft, her hatches propped open like yawning mouths. My boat is much smaller than Boyd's and in much worse shape, though I don't know how much worse until it rains—

just once, but hard and long enough to soak the berth through my leaky foredeck. Gonna have to seal that up before winter, Kelley says.

I know, I say. Thanks a lot, I know. The pit bull leans against Kelley's legs and he scratches her absentmindedly behind one ear, murmuring something low that makes her wag. He's looking out at the water and I follow his gaze to a black barge towered with cargo. The barge is already out of sight when its wake reaches us, churning up seaweed and chunks of styrofoam from under the dock.

Then Kelley turns and looks at me. He squints, like he's trying to read fine print or remember a dream. I can feel myself starting to blush, but Kelley doesn't blink. What? I say finally. He shakes his head. Just trying to figure out what you're doing here, honey, he says.

The liveboards are mostly men, and they're always around. The fishermen waiting for the salmon to run, the out-of-work riggers, the retirees, the drunks—someone is always in the parking lot, smoking a cigarette or drying out musty life vests or working on one of the ancient trucks that never seem to start more than once in a row. The men like to leer and tease and I like playing along, most of the time. But what Kelley does is something else—serious, calm. He just looks.

I learn the boat as I fix it, learn the names of its parts as they break: bowsprit, seacock, thru-hull fitting. This leads to tools and the names for tools: chuck, jab, stamp, punch. Fighting words. Me in one corner of the ring and in the other, water. I learn to taste what seeps into the bilge: fresh means a leak from above, salt from below.

The foredeck is dirty work, layer upon layer of fiberglass and endless heavy coats of epoxy, the cans labeled with skulls and crossbones, stuff you don't want on your skin or in your lungs. I know because one day Kelley sees me sanding and says, You got a fuckin' death wish, honey? Then he ducks into the shop and brings me out a respirator mask.

Kelley's boat never leaves the dock, either. You can tell from the hull, hula-skirted with algae, riding low in the water, outboard up and strung with debris. Those boats, our boats, tucked in among the yachts the retirees take on day trips, yachts with names like *Vitamin Sea* and *Seas the Day*. But the liveboards all have women's names, or they have no names, even

though it's unlucky. Kelley's boat is one of the nameless. Same as the dog, he says. Then shrugs and cracks a grin: Don't matter, though. Old girl still comes when I call.

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Sometimes I think I know exactly what I'm doing here. I love the water; I love the boats. I love *my* boat, its strange convertible spaces, the hinged back of the couch that folds up and suspends from the ceiling to make a spare bunk, the table that sinks down into its surrounding cushions to become another couch. I love the way everything talks to the water, the teak fixtures sealed with oil, the shelves gated with twine to keep things from falling off in rough seas. I even love the huge, hulking engines, hidden under a pair of heavy doors in the stern deck: my boat's rusty innards, its reeking diesel heart.

Other times, though, I'm not so sure. It isn't New York City, where I grew up, where my family still lives, where all my friends moved after college, their neighbors sober, their apartments impervious to rain. It isn't

beautiful, either, not if you know how much piss and paint and soap and grease gets dumped into the water, not if you never go sailing. There must have been something I wanted—to leave, mostly. Something new, something strange. Or maybe just to be alone, though I don't know why, or for how long, and sometimes I worry I won't know how to get out of it—that someday, suddenly, I'll belong.

-v-

Wynn Boyd's boat is named *Louisa*, calligraphied in black across the transom and burned into a driftwood sign hanging over the cockpit. Sometimes Kelley sits on Boyd's boat and watches me work until he can't stand it anymore, has to grab the tool out of my amateur hands and do the job right. Other times he disappears into Boyd's cabin and stays there for a while, reemerges a little drunker than when he went down.

We don't talk much, except about boats, and except for once when he asked where I was from and if I planned to go back there any time soon.

New York, I answered. And someday, yes.

You got folks there? he asked.

Uh huh, I told him. They'll never leave.

They like you being out here like this?

Like what?

Alone, Kelley said, then added: With the likes of me.

I wanted to know how old he was, but he clammed up fast when I started asking questions. I went back to sanding. He smoked a cigarette and watched. Soon enough he wandered down into Boyd's cabin, and came back up a little while later reeking of whiskey. I watched him run his hands over the surface of the driftwood sign, gently, curiously, like he was reading Braille. He swayed a little. He looked almost reverent.

So who's Louisa? I asked. Boyd's wife? Girlfriend?

Kelley laughed, a short bark that quickly turned into a cough. Fuck if I know, he said. Fuck if old Boyd knew, either.

By August my deck is almost done, sloppy but waterproof, my cut-offs stiff with splattered epoxy, my hands cracking from solvents and sun. The sky is a smooth blue bowl. Days, weeks on end of shirtless weather. All my work seems like a ridiculous precaution. It's hard to believe it will ever rain.

Today there's a sign taped to the gate, with a picture of an old man in Carhartt coveralls drifting in a ghostly Photoshop haze over the bay: *WYNN BOYD MEMORIAL PARTY, C-DOCK, 6PM*, it says, and underneath: *BRING FOOD*. By mid-afternoon someone has crossed out *FOOD* and written *BEER*, and by evening someone else has crossed out *BEER* and written *WHISKEY*.

The party is gathered in the parking lot, around a bonfire of two-by-fours and old oars, the plastic picnic table bowing under cases and cases of beer. All the men are there, about twenty of them, plus a smattering of girlfriends and ex-wives and other visitors. The same picture of Boyd in his coveralls is taped to the backs of some folding chairs no one is sitting on. A parked truck blasts country radio through its open windows. Some geese hover around the fringes of the fire, bobbing their long necks and hissing, every so often darting closer to snatch up a stray potato chip.

I scan the crowd for Kelley and find him gutting a huge fish, his knife clenched in his teeth, his hands vanished into the silver belly. I watch as he

yanks out a fistful of entrails and tosses them onto the fire. Then he spit-cleans the knife on his shirt and uses it to stab a beer can, which he drains in one long swig. He sits down on a cooler by the picnic table. I sit next to him on the bench.

Hey, I say.

He grunts.

Nice fish, I say. Your catch?

He shakes his head and crushes the empty can between his big palms. Just the knife man, he says.

We sit in silence for a moment. I watch an empty Budweiser box curl then blacken in the fire. The sun is already sinking over the bay, the days shorter and shorter. Behind us, someone is talking about rain.

So where's the dog? I ask Kelley.

Ran away.

I look at him. Really?

Yeah. Stupid bitch. He reaches for another beer.

Are you... okay? I ask.

You my fuckin' headshrink or something?

No, I just—

Wynn Boyd, Kelley cuts me off, Now *there's* a good man. Just couldn't keep his balance, the unlucky sonofabitch. Hey! Ron! You remember old Wynn Boyd or what?

Ron, on the other side of the fire, doesn't hear him, or doesn't answer. Fuckin' Wynn Boyd, Kelley mumbles, to me or to no one. He never quite slurs, but the edges of his words get softened, rounded off. A real good man, he repeats. Bad drunk, but a good man. Me, I'm the opposite. He sighs. You remember that, honey.

Maybe she'll come back, I say. You could leave food out, maybe.

There's something in the way Kelley's looking at me now, his eyes glazed and heavy but a new curl in his top lip, almost a smirk. He empties the rest of the beer into his mouth, then settles his gaze back on me.

What, I say.

Kelley! Ron calls from across the fire, You gonna put that fuckin' fish on the flames or what?

Come back to my boat, Kelley says, his voice low and flat.

I say, What?

Cook your own fuckin' fish! he yells, still looking at me. Then he says it again: Come back to my boat. In that strange, flat voice.

I imagine his body, his weathered skin, his mouth, the taste of beer and cigarettes, his hands on me, his hands on the driftwood sign, his hands in the belly of the fish. I almost want it—or at least, there's something here I think I almost want. I imagine him lifting me in his arms like he did with the dog, that tenderness of purpose, of careful work. To take this man, and make him not lonely. To be here to do something other than gluing up a shitty old boat. But he's staring into the fire now, a new beer in his hand, and I don't think he really even wants it. What he looks like he wants is to be left alone.

Those geese are naaasty! a visiting girlfriend squeals. Then there's a crash—something thrown—and the geese scatter, honking wildly. The crowd honks back, laughing and whistling. Kelley doesn't move. He just sits there, holding the beer, staring into the fire.

I slip out of the party, back to the dock. Inside, I lay in my berth and watch the sky through the hatch, just that one small square, framed and hung there over the boat like a snapshot, until I fall asleep.

More and more, I wonder about this life. I'm in it, but it has nothing to do with me. I think about this thing that Kelley said once, back when I first met him. I was wandering around the parking lot, waiting for someone I recognized to show up so I could borrow a screwdriver. I had just dropped my last one in the water. If someone came along with a strong enough magnet they could drag up a lifetime's worth of screwdrivers from under my boat.

I saw a guy walking along C-dock towards the gate, and positioned myself to intercept him. No shirt, trailed by a dog. Empty beer can crushed in one fist. He was no one I knew. Hey! I called out as he approached. He jerked his head *hello*. He didn't say anything until he had reached me and checked me out, head to toe and back again. Slowly. Then he said, So?

I explained: I was resealing my foredeck, needed to get the hardware off, had dropped my screwdriver—

You live here? he interrupted.

Yeah. I pointed to my boat.

He squinted. On that thing?

Yeah, I said. I was proud, smiling. I didn't know anything about boats.

And you're glassing the deck? Kelley said.

Trying to. Kind of learning as I go. But I dropped—

Your screwdriver. Huh.

I didn't like him. He smelled like beer and resin and wet dog. I started to backpedal my way out of the conversation: Yeah, but it's okay, really, because—

I'd say you're pretty *screwed*, he said, and his face cracked open into a grin.

I liked him, then.

C'mere, I'll let you into the shop, he said, and I followed him, and the dog followed us, to the doublewide next to the marina's main entrance. He dug out two screwdrivers from an enormous toolbox—In case you drop one—and I thanked him, and turned to go.

So you like livin' here? he asked. I had one hand on the door of the trailer.

I love it, I said, turning to face him. Being on the water. Being around all the boats. It's beautiful. Yeah.

He squinted. I shuffled my feet. How do *you* like it? I asked.

Kelley laughed sharply. This place is a fuckin' trailer park, honey, he said.

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