

# RCR BOAT STORIES

## RUNNER UP



### Paul Heath – boat story

One late February evening I met Josh, a man I would never have invited into my home had we met anywhere but the towpath. He was on the boat beside me which he rented from his friend. He used to be a drug dealer and was now a cook, he had a facial tattoo and a colossal bulldog called Sergeant.

The previous week I had been in a home I would never have been invited into. But, because their new partner was friends with mine, I found myself playing hide and seek with a group of celebrities in the mansion of a pop star.

Hiding in a cupboard with an actress and a supermodel I was tongue tied and uncomfortable, but with Josh I felt at ease. Sergeant, despite appearances, was a gentle and loving creature, and his owner seemed the same. He brought me leftover food from the kitchen, I helped him chop wood for his fire. We weathered the cold evenings with drink, stories and laughter.

Then, he got kicked off his boat after a disagreement with his friend. Next week, he lost his job at the pub after a fight with the chef. He had places where he could sleep, but they didn't allow dogs, so I offered to keep Sergeant overnight when I could. He was an affectionate hulk, and I was happy for the company and the warmth. But Josh would be late to collect him and reluctant to leave when he did. Once, he didn't turn up at all, and was unreachable for two days, eventually turning up and apologetically explaining he'd been arrested for smoking a spliff on the King's Road.

Later, I would think of all the warning signs I missed. But I didn't miss them. I overrode them, because living on the canals had changed me. In the two years I'd been on my boat I had been towed, repaired, jump started and re-tied. I'd been given advice, forbearance, and even a windlass, all by fellow boaters who just happened to be nearby. Here in the water we helped each other. It wasn't selflessness, but solidarity. We were vulnerable to the elements and to each other, and when money was less useful than friends, the only rational course was kindness.

So, when I went away for the weekend, I let Josh have the keys to my boat thinking he could have a few nights of peace to get his life together. But on my way home, I got a text:

'Mate, I'm sorry. Some people from my past caught up with me, put me in a position I really didn't want to be in, and I had to take that £400 you hid in the cupboard. I wish I never saw it but I did. I'm sorry, I'll pay you back I promise. Keys are on the roof.'

I was shocked, and completely undone. He'd robbed me...but apologised? I told him that money was my salary, which I needed to live on. He apologised some more. My friends were sympathetic, but gently shook their heads at my foolish trust.

I didn't call the police. I was embarrassed, and hoped Josh would make good on his word. But when I next heard from him he was in Birmingham. My hopes faded, my shame grew.

Then, my partner was invited back to the pop star's mansion. Over dinner they exchanged stories and laughter. When asked how I was doing, she said I was struggling, and told my sorry tale. Later, when she got home, she found an envelope had been slipped into her bag. It was addressed to me. It contained a note signed 'From the Universe'...and £400.

That envelope not only repaid my debts, but undid the knot of regret and embarrassment. With cautious relief, I carried on helping and hoping to be helped in return.

Soon enough, I was knocking on the boat next door. I had been mugged at knifepoint and needed to call the police. The couple indoors looked out at me. I was a stranger wanting to come into their home. But we were boaters, so they invited me in and put the kettle on.

**Paul Heath**

