

# **Family Fun**

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# California Standard



**T**hey had seldom gotten underway using sails alone. Since they were docked downwind, it was far easier just to putt-putt out and set the sails once they had some maneuvering room in the main harbor, or were safely beyond the breakwater. Until two years ago when Marie's father had given them the boat as a third anniversary present, Larry had never set foot in a sailboat. He'd sneered at them. Chichi toys for snobby posers. And for all Marie's deferential instruction, he was still not entirely comfortable in it. But he'd never let on to that. He had spent four years in the Navy, after all, as a boiler-tender third class on a fleet oiler. One drunken night in Hong Kong — age eighteen — he'd had a fouled USN anchor and the motto "Death Before Dishonor" tattooed on the muscle of his right forearm. So blue water was in his veins.

Larry put down the beer and trudged forward to hoist the jib and main while Vince stowed the motor. There was a crisp westerly breeze. The jib flapped out sharply as Larry wound the halyard fast around the cleat on the mast. He began hauling the mainsail up. Unfortunately, he'd forgotten to release the boom from the short length of wire — the boom-lift — that supported it when not in use. The mainsail bellied taut immediately as he heaved. The boat heeled sharply — the big triangular sail unable to spill its air since the boom was restrained from swinging freely — and dipped beneath the protective rubber bumper lip lining the concrete dock.

"Jesus...!" Larry cried. He had pitched sideways out of his down-haul hunker when the

sail filled, and since he was hanging on to the halyard already, had cranked the sail on up to the top of the mast as he fell back. A chunk of toe-rail disintegrated into splinters, gobbled off by the sharp underside of the dock.

“The boom-lift!” Marie shouted, leaping up from her seat in the cockpit. The abrupt sideways cant of the boat knocked her off her feet. She fell against Vince, scrambled upright and stumbled to reach the boom-lift shackle. “Let go! Lower the sail!” she instructed Larry

He had tried to release the halyard as soon as he’d recovered his balance and realized what was happening. But the track in which the mainsail rose along the mast had gotten rusty or gummy with neglect. The little plastic sliders sewn into the sail were stuck. It wouldn’t drop. Bobbing on the ripples of the harbor, *Stormfalk’s* rail was undergoing a constant nibbling from the dock-bottom.

Larry abandoned the dangling halyard and started scrabbling at the sail itself, trying to drag it down by the armful.

Marie released the shackle.

The boom scythed outward with a clap of billowing Dacron and a creak of tortured hinge. Vince, naive spectator on the starboard cockpit seat, was almost decapitated. The swinging boom caught Larry in the stomach and jackknifed him backwards into the shrouds. He grabbed one just before he toppled between them and overboard onto the dock. The brass eye on the point of the boom gouged a shallow furrow into the taffrail of the cabin cruiser berthed next to them on the other side of the narrow dock. And then for some reason

the mainsail tumbled down.

“God,” Larry muttered, squinting ruefully at the scar they had inflicted on the cruiser. He fingered the raw wound tenderly and wolfed down his jitters with cigarette smoke. But, he thought, there was no reason to volunteer anything, admit responsibility — unless confronted, which seemed unlikely. He darted guilty glances up and down their section of the marina. Luckily no one appeared to have noticed anything out of the ordinary. Marie had dashed below to console Bri, who had banged his head when tumbled. Then she came up and sighed beside Larry over the rasps their own side paint and rail had suffered. That started a brief exchange about whose fault it was. Vince’s presence seemed to cool them.

“Okay,” Larry said, sardonically. “Ready to do it for real this time?” He snatched a can of 3-in-1 oil from the bin under the cockpit seat and squirted some into the track. Then he raised the main once more.

The wind was pushing them against the end of the dock. It came from almost due west, across the breakwater and intervening fingers of the marina, at a forty-five-degree angle to the narrow channel they had to negotiate. Larry took his skipper’s station at the tiller and sent Vince out on the dock to shove them off. Marie assumed a tense, subordinate supervision. Vince tossed the lines aboard, gave the bow a hearty push outward into the channel, grabbed a shroud and swung himself onto the deck. Larry sheeted the jib tight and angled the tiller to his right.

*Stormfalk* lunged forward, instantaneously

responsive. Except that the wind in the forward sail was too much for the rudder to compensate. Gathering headway fast, they surged directly toward the stern of the neighboring sloop.

“Watch it,” Vince warned.

“Put your rudder over!” Marie snapped.

“It is!”

“Slack that jib!” Marie added, lunging for the cam cleat together with Larry.

“It is!”

Vince, tangled in the flailing sheet, was trying to squirm under the jib.

“Fend us off, Vince!” Marie yelled. “Fend us...!”

Vince had managed to clamber forward in time to absorb most of the impact with his outflung arms. Punching at the other boat’s backstay, its transom corner, anything convenient, he deflected *Stormfalk’s* momentum enough to carry her bow out and past the vulnerable rudder. The target rocked and twisted in its moorings as they clattered past, but was undented. The fluttering jib slapped crazily. As Vince kicked a sneakered foot against the dock and sent their bow smartly left, Larry leaned from the cockpit and gave a last defensive nudge to the sloop’s stern.

“Christ,” he sighed as they curled past it. He snubbed the jib sheet taut and wound slack out of the mainsheet on its winch.

“Mind your tiller, honey!” Marie warned. “No, no...!”

Larry had neglected to shift the rudder to check their swinging bow. At the moment he made fast the jib, he was heading diagonally into mid-channel — as he intended, but still turning toward the wind, still drifting left. He had cleated the sheet

too far in, too. The back of the sail, instead of its front, filled with the fresh breeze. As soon as the sail cupped the wind they heeled and boiled ahead, accelerating in a tight left-handed circle that was driving them directly across the narrow arm of water toward the boats berthed opposite.

“Let go that jib!” Marie cried. “Shift the rudder, shift the rudder!”

Before Larry could react she had bounded off her seat and slammed the tiller all the way left, out of his grasp. He was diving to his right for the jib sheet, and wrenched it loose from the quick-release teeth of the cleat.

But *Stormfalk* was a sturdy boat. More than two tons of steam-bent oak, Douglas fir, mahogany, lead ballast and cast-iron keel weighted her classical figure. Once carrying headway, she was hard to stop. And the inlet was much too confined for leisurely corrective maneuvers.

“We’re gonna crash!” Larry moaned. “Here we go again!” He vaulted out of the cockpit and scrambled forward.

With an agonizing inevitability, helpless under forces of wind and inertia that could not, once applied, be easily undone, they hissed through the water, sails flopping, and rammed nose-first into a stately Chris-Craft. Vince waggled his legs off the bow and succeeded in blunting the collision to a degree. Larry arrived an instant too late to contribute his muscle. Marie had shoved the rudder around again, seeing that there was no hope of avoiding some kind of ignominious landing, but had been unable to squeeze them into the cramped void between the two boats in the double berth.