

A CAUTIONARY TALE



by Virginia Cross

I lay all the blame at the feet of that boat show.

At the start it was innocent enough. We were contemplating the repowering of *Mandy*, our custom 1982 Bristol Channel Cutter 28, from its original stinky, 12 horsepower, hand-cranked Volvo to something with more "oomph" and a nifty push-button starter.

We have been together for four years, and it has not been easy to keep her maintained in the manner to which she had become accustomed. This quest for a new engine for *Mandy* was a genuine move on our part to show we were in the relationship for the long haul.

We browsed the cleverly arranged booths inside the show and gathered leaflets, business cards and freebies in our plastic sacks. We giggled guardedly at the overzealous salesmen and spent the necessary time pouring over the shiny new diesel engines, mounted conveniently at eye level.

Good! The hard work was done. Time to head outside, look at boats, and have some fun. The sunshine felt good after the crowded confines of the interior halls, and a fresh ocean breeze relaxed our jumbled minds. We moved easily from one new boat to another and somehow got separated. As I looked around for my husband, I found myself next to a strong and fast-

looking catamaran. It seemed so inviting as six people in front of me boarded all at once with apparent ease. I spotted Richard chatting on another boat some distance away and naturally joined my jolly group aboard the *Cat*, which, I discovered later, was designed in Australia and making its push into mainstream American markets. It was a decision made without very much thought, definitely without any inkling of the consequences.

The cockpit (more the size of a bullpen) inspired casual elegance, with a choice of steering stations, no less. The forward trampoline between hulls promised hours of happy yoga exercise on its sturdy footing, and Philip, a sales rep

with a dazzling smile, clasped my hands (as though he had been waiting for me all morning) and promised to answer any questions I might have. I drifted on a rose-colored cloud under the hard dodger into the living area complete with a large table and an inviting U-shaped lounging settee. Visions of canapés at cocktail hour with large groups of friends swam before my eyes. This was cruising in comfort, indeed.

Two sets of stairs lured me down below. One into the galley hull . . . ooool! There was so much storage and so

many culinary conveniences! The other stairs led to a head roomy enough to walk across and onwards to the berths. As I look at the whole tawdry affair in hindsight, this was the moment of my downfall. I passed by two of my fellow "lookers," and we exchanged dreamy smiles. Then I caught sight of it. The most delicious, triple-wide, deeply snugly, irresistible berth ever. My mind flew in six directions at once. I was smitten. I had to show all this wonder to Richard.

Several days later, after a flurry of feverish calls to Philip, we headed out to a nearby marina to see a 2-year-old, slightly smaller model of the same boat. In the heat of our new passion we figured we could just afford the asking price if we sold our BCC, our house and furniture, one of our children and possibly the dog.

The owner greeted us eagerly and explained all he had done with the boat, its upgrades and nuances. We looked around, imagining ourselves in his place and enjoying the idea of all that extra space. I moved on down below while Richard talked anchors with the owner and Philip. I perused the not-quite-as-impressive galley on this smaller version. The head showed a troublesome damp/mold problem, and as I moved along the hull to peer into the double berth and appease my hunger for its seductive promise, the invasive "head smell" followed me.

Before I remounted the stairs to deck level, my eye caught sight of a porthole to starboard. It appeared to be somehow misaligned and worn despite the tender years of the boat. I scanned the ceiling and walls and something made me reach out and knock sharply on the wall next to me. Plastic, flimsy, hollow plastic — everywhere I looked. What had we been thinking? I longed to be back in *Mandy's* cozy saloon surrounded by the solid vertical grain fir, bronze portholes and bookcases. Our wooden Home Depot toilet seat atop a wag-bag bucket was not the most comfortable place on the boat, but our head was odorless and bone dry.

We shook hands with the owner of the catamaran, bid goodbye to Philip, and headed over to the dry dock in time to watch *Mandy* placed back into the water with her new coats of anti-foul paint. The mechanical elevator hoisted her high into the air and my heart leaped as we were treated to the gorgeous shape of her generous hull. The sun glinted on her sparkling wooden mast, and she seemed to shiver in anticipation of being back in the water.

I looked over at Richard and saw by his slight smile that he shared my thankful realization that this was the real thing, and we were glad to be home with the one we loved.