

HIP

Curly's annual Thanksgiving aboard the *Gravy Boat* was, as always, a mixture of warmth, gratitude, and structural uncertainty. The liveboards of the Red Bay Marina looked forward to it the way others might anticipate a NASCAR pileup, equal parts dread and delight.

Curly, self-proclaimed "Marine Carpenter of Fortune," had spent the week refitting his galley table, which now doubled as a transom cover. "It's modular," he said proudly, thumping it with a palm. "Just don't cut the turkey too close to the hinge."

By late afternoon, the dock had turned festive. Captain Lila, retired tugboat pilot and reigning queen of marina gossip, arrived balancing a casserole of 'mystery stuffing'. "Don't ask," she warned, "but it does involve oysters and a misunderstanding at Publix."



First Mate Rico from Slip B9 brought a deep-fried turkey, still hissing from the fryer perched precariously in his skiff tied up aft. "Oil's reusable," he announced, before tripping on the transom ladder and baptizing the stern in peanut gravy.

The marina cat, Old Rudder, slinked aboard with proprietary authority and claimed the best seat, a warm coil of rope near the galley. Curly, in his element, wore his favorite cap and a shirt that read, *If It Floats, I Can Fix It*. He ladled thick gravy from a saucepan so enormous it required its own berth. "Boat's named *Gravy Boat* for a reason," he reminded all.

Dinner began when the sun dipped below the pines and the river turned to gold. Plates clattered, laughter echoed off hulls, and the unmistakable scent of diesel mingled with cranberry sauce. Salty Tom, the marina philosopher, raised a plastic cup of boxed wine and toasted "to staying afloat, spiritually and otherwise."

But nothing at Curly's gatherings stayed level for long. Mid-meal, *Gravy Boat* listed ten degrees to starboard when Rico's chair leg punched through a soft patch of decking. "Adds character!" Curly bellowed, wedging a spare chart weight under the leg.

Dessert was an improvised pumpkin pie baked in a skillet, shared by flashlight after the inverter gave up the ghost. Lila tried to start a singalong, but her sloshy version of "*Anchors Aweigh*" slid into "*Sweet Caroline*" which all knew but none could start, or finish, in the same key.

As the tide rose, Curly stood astern with his coffee mug, actually a small paint can, watching the reflections of mast lights tremble on the dark water. "You know," he said, "boats and people aren't so different. Takes a lot of patching to keep 'em shipshape." The others nodded, half from sentiment and half from turkey-induced inertia.

By midnight, the guests had wandered back to their own boats, leaving Curly alone with the lapping water and the clink of dishes. He smiled, tightened the line on his bow, "Same time next year, if she's afloat, and if I am."

Gravy Boat creaked softly in reply, as if in agreement.

- STORY, PHOTOS: EDITOR

