

THE LOVE BOAT

By Chuck Hustmyre

"Aren't you excited?" Lucy asked, clapping her hands, then rubbing them together, giddy, like a teenager.

Dan put his arm around her as they walked up the gangway toward the deck. "Sure I am, honey." And he was, he just didn't like to act goofy in public. Ten days on a boat alone with Lucy. Alone that is, if you didn't count the other thousand or so passengers, but that was all right, this was going to be the best vacation ever.

Once they found their cabin, he was glad he'd paid the extra three hundred for one with a porthole. They unpacked and got comfortable, very comfortable.

An hour or so later Dan was ready for a drink, maybe a run at the casino. He was feeling lucky. Besides, this trip was costing him a bundle, wouldn't hurt to win a little bit back from the cruise line.

He checked his watch, it was just past three in the afternoon. It would be another three hours before they cleared the mouth of the river and got out into the Gulf. No sense

going up on deck to look at the muddy Mississippi River.

Coming out of the tiny bathroom, buttoning up his pants.

"How 'bout checking out the casino?"

Lucy was lying on her back on the double bed, looking up at the ceiling. "I wanna go up on deck, look around some."

"Nothing out there but the river and the swamp. By dark we'll be out in the ocean. We can eat dinner on deck, let that salt air invigorate us." He grinned.

She got up, still naked, and looked out the small port hole at the river. Dan got a good look at her. Man, she was a sight! It made him think how lucky he was he could arrange this little trip. Lucky his job required a lot of travel. Lucky his wife was so trusting.

She hadn't batted an eye when he told her he was going to Honduras for two weeks. "Sorry, hon, no phones on the site but I'll call as soon as the job's over and we get back to civilization." He made sure he sounded mad. Even told her he was kind of thinking about getting into another line of work. Said he was sick of the travel, sick of the primitive living conditions in the field. Natural gas exploration, at least the field work, was a young man's game. He was thinking about a desk job.

She said she wasn't happy about it, but it was his job, and she understood. When he got back maybe they could get away for

a long weekend. That Karen, what a trooper.

He'd need a long weekend to rest up from this trip. Lucy turned her head and looked at him, the grin still on his face. "I think you're invigorated enough. You don't need any salt air."

* * *

Not much of a crowd in the casino. Still early, most people were still probably trying to get their sea legs. Dan cashed a hundred-dollar bill. He was carrying around a big plastic cup, half-full of chips. "I feel like a little black jack."

Lucy snuggled up next to him as they walked toward the table.

He was lucky. First hand, Dan stayed on thirteen. Dealer was showing a five. The dealer took a hit, jack. He turned 'em over, an eight underneath.

Two more hands and he was up sixty. Betting conservative, twenty bucks a hand. Just loosening up, getting warm. Two more hands, one he busted, the other he won. Lucy was hanging on to him, standing at his side, occasionally whispering naughty things in his ear.

That's when it happened. Lucy was on his right and he felt someone slap him on the left shoulder. "Dan! What the hell are you doing here?"

He recognized the voice before he even moved his head, then felt a huge ball of ice drop through his bowels. William Ratman. Dan turned, unsure what he to say. Now wishing Lucy was a thousand miles away.

The look on William's face told him everything. He wasn't even looking at Dan. Instead William was staring at Lucy. They had kind of gotten dressed-up to come upstairs. Not feeling like shorts and a T-shirt, Dan had put on a golf shirt with a collar, khakis, and topsiders. Lucy a little more dressed, or less, depending on how you wanted to look at it. White cotton summer dress, split way up the side, low neck, lots of skin.

With his right elbow he tried to nudge Lucy away, but she kept her hands perched on his left shoulder. "Will," he said, trying his hardest to sound happy to see his old neighbor, "been a while, what six months."

William pried his eyes away from Lucy. "Little over a year. How's my house doing?"

Dan turned back to the table and scooped up his chips, throwing them in the plastic cup. Lucy dropped her hands as he stood up. He saw her mouth open, but glared at her, willing her to keep quiet. Turning back to William, cup of chips in his hand. "Oh, the house is fine. I see Peggy coming and going. Boys are outside all the time playing." Cup in one hand, Dan clapped an arm around William's shoulders, forcefully turning

him away from the table. "Let's go get a drink."

Turning toward the bar, he saw William glance over his shoulder one last time at Lucy, who thankfully stayed at the table. William asked, "Peggy seeing anybody?"

"No, not that I know of. Karen talks to her more than me." Rushing toward the bar. "You say it's been a year since you two got divorced?"

"Little over that now," William answered. "I can't believe I ran into you on a cruise."

"Me neither," Dan said, meaning it.

"What are you doing on a cruise?"

They grabbed a couple seats at the bar. The bartender was down at the other end waiting on an old couple. Dan signaled to him, then saw him nod his head. "It's a work thing," Dan said.

William wrinkled his forehead. "Work. You exploring for natural gas in the casino of a cruise ship?"

Dan forced a laugh. "No. The new boss took a bunch of us on a cruise. Calls it a working vacation. We spend a few hours a day in meetings, then the rest of the time is ours."

As the bartender walked up, Dan saw William turn his head to look at the table where Lucy was still standing. Dan looked at the bartender. "Bud." William still looking at Lucy. Dan thumped him on the arm. "What you want to drink?"

William looked back. "Bud's fine." The bartender walked

away. Then William asked, "Karen with you?"

Dan shaking his head. "No wives. Boss said we couldn't get any work done."

Nodding in the general direction of Lucy, William asked, "Who's the girl?"

Dan shrugged his shoulders. "Some barfly I guess. Started hanging on me soon as I won my first hand."

"Pretty nice for a barfly."

Dan shrugged again. "Tell you the truth, I think she might be a hooker."

William looked surprised. "No."

Dan needed to change the subject. "What about you? You with anybody?" The bartender dropped off their two beers. "I got this," Dan said, then signed the chit.

As the bartender left, William answered, "I'm by myself. Just wanted to get away." He winked at Dan. "Maybe I'll find a barfly."

What the hell did that wink mean?

* * *

"You told him I was a hooker!" Lucy shouted.

Dan put a finger to his lips. "Ssshhh. Somebody will hear you."

Lucy paced around the small cabin. Dan sat on the love seat against the wall. "You think I care if people hear me."

But she said it lower.

"I had to act like I didn't know you," he said. "You had your arm around me. What was I supposed to say?"

Lucy shook her head. "He's not even your neighbor anymore. You said he moved out a year ago."

"Yeah, he moved out, not his wife and kids," he said. "Karen talks to her all the time. That bastard'll spill the beans sure as I'm standing here."

"So what're you gonna do?"

Dan thought about for a minute. "We can't go out."

"What?"

"It'll be fun," he said. "Ten days alone. We'll order room service, stay in bed the whole time if we want."

Lucy folded her arms across her ample bosom. "I didn't come on this boat to spend the whole time in the damn cabin."

"I thought you wanted to spend time alone. The cruise was your idea, remember."

"Yeah the cruise was my idea. Sitting in a cabin for ten days isn't a cruise. We coulda stayed home, rented a motel room for that. I want to see some sights, have fun."

"You want Karen to find out about us?" he asked. "She's your friend."

Her face hardened. "Yeah, but she's your wife. I'm not the one who swore to be faithful to her."

Ouch! "What're you trying to say? You saying this is all one sided; I'm the only one doing anything wrong?"

Lucy's face softened a little. "No, that's not what I'm saying." Uncrossing her arms then sitting on the edge of the bed. "What makes you so sure this guy'll tell her?"

Dan ran his fingers through his hair. "'Bout two years ago, there was a guy down the street, three or four houses down, William sees him out one night with some girl. I think they were at a restaurant. Now this guy's married and the girl's not his wife. Anyway, next day William comes over to my house spends an hour telling me about it. Speculating about who she was, how long they've been seeing each other, where they do it. I'm telling you Will's a big mouth. He gossips worse than a woman."

Lucy looked mad. "So because your ex-neighbor is on the boat, I've got to stay locked up in the cabin for the next ten days?"

"It's not going to be that bad, honey. We can go out. You like to exercise, you can go to the gym, maybe do a little shopping, get some sun. I'll go out some, get a drink, go to the casino. We just can't go out together."

She looked at him, head tilted slightly to the side. A questioning look. "Great. We get out of town, go on a cruise to be together, now we can't be seen together. This is just

like back home." She pounded her small fist on the bed. "I'm tired of sneaking around. You got it all figured out. You get to go out drinking and gambling by yourself and you want me here at night. You wanna have your cake and eat it too. Well that's not gonna happen."

Dan didn't know what to say, so he didn't say anything, afraid whatever he said would sound stupid.

"Don't you have anything to say?" she shouted at him.

He realized he should have said something. "Honey, you knew when we started this--"

"I knew what?" She cut him off. "That I was always going to be the other woman. You know she called me last week and told me about your trip."

No, he didn't know that. "What'd she say?"

She stared at him for a few seconds before answering. Then shifted her weight, leaning over to one side, sticking her arm down to brace herself. "She said you were going out of town for two weeks, someplace in the jungle with no phones. She was worried about you. Asked if I'd like to get together this coming weekend. Go out to dinner and a movie."

Dan felt a small knot of fear forming in his stomach. Something about the calm, matter-of-fact way she was telling him. Almost like she was dragging it out on purpose to make him nervous. "What did you tell her?"

"I said I was going out of town myself to visit my sister."

"Did she say anything? You think she suspects?"

Again a slight pause, then she said, "I don't think so, no."

The knot was starting to grow. "You don't think so?"

"When are you going to tell her?" she asked. "Six months of sneaking around is about all I can take."

He wondered what she was really saying. Was she giving him a choice, divorce his wife or lose his girlfriend? He didn't want to lose Lucy but there was no way he was gonna divorce Karen. That just wasn't an option.

His job with the gas company paid pretty good but it was nothing like the kind of money his wife had. Karen's dad had been loaded and when he died he left over two million dollars to his little girl.

He felt a stab of guilt at the thought that popped into his head, but he still had it. He'd read somewhere that fifty thousand people a year died in traffic accidents, why the hell couldn't Karen be one of them? Something to think about.

He got up and walked over to the bed, sitting down next to Lucy. He put his arm around her and gave her a kiss on the cheek, knowing he had to calm her down. "Time's just not right yet, hon. But soon, I promise."

* * *

"I'm getting off this boat," Lucy said as Dan walked in through the cabin door. She was lying on the bed, the ship's itinerary spread out in front of her.

"What're you talking about?" he asked, coming into the cabin, throwing his key, money and wallet on the small dresser, noticing he was a little dizzy as he walked.

She turned to look at him. "You said you were going up to the casino for an hour." She looked at her watch but he got the feeling she knew exactly what time it was all ready. "It's been over three hours."

Three hours. He hadn't been keeping track of the time, but he knew he'd lost a bundle. "Aw, come on, babe." Sliding onto the bed next to Lucy. "Let's have some fun."

Waving her hand in front of her nose. "You're drunk again," she said. "You can forget the lovey dovey stuff." Looking back at the itinerary on the bed. "We dock in about two hours, I'm getting off and going shopping."

"What am I supposed to do?"

Looking back at him. "I don't care. Sleep it off."

* * *

It was ten o'clock when Lucy got back on board. He'd fallen asleep after she left, but then he woke up and went back to the casino. He kept himself under control a little better. Not hitting the booze so hard and this time he actually won a

hundred. He'd gotten back to their cabin a few minutes before she walked in. This time he was more or less sober.

"Now it's my turn," he said, looking at his watch. "I've been waiting for you."

She tossed her key on the dresser and went into the bathroom. "What'd you do while I was gone?" she asked, leaving the door open so she could hear him.

"Just hung around. I even took a nap."

"You go back to the casino?"

"For a little while. This time I won."

"Oh, yeah?" A little interest in her voice. "How much?"

"Not much, hundred or so."

She flushed the toilet then washed her hands. "I saw your friend."

"William?"

"Yeah."

"Where?"

"In town?"

She came out of the bathroom. "He said hello to me, like he knew me."

"Did he ask you anything about me?"

She shook her head. "No, nothing about you."

"See, I was right. If we'd have gone together, he would have seen us."

Sitting down on the edge of the bed, she started taking her shoes off. "I don't care, I'm not staying cooped up in this room any longer. In the morning I'm going to the health club then I'm spending all day at the pool."

"What if he sees you again?"

"I don't care. He knows I'm a passenger on this ship, what do I care if he sees me."

"He might ask questions. Try to find out if we're together."

She shrugged her shoulders.

* * *

The next morning she did just what she said she was going to do, she went to the pool. An hour after she left, Dan put on his swim trunks. Looking at himself in the mirror, at his gut hanging over the front of his bathing suit, he decided to wear a T-shirt. He didn't want to get too much sun.

Up on deck, he was sitting in one of those long reclining chairs, across the pool from Lucy. They couldn't be seen together but that didn't mean they couldn't both be at the pool at the same time. The waiter came by and he ordered a drink, then looked at his watch. Nine-thirty in the morning. "Better make that a Bloody Mary," he told the boy. "Heavy on the Vodka."

She was lying on her stomach in the sun. A spectacular red

string bikini on. Her face was turned to the left, eyes closed. Dan saw a couple guys openly staring at her. Somehow he had to make up with her. This was crazy. The sexiest woman on the ship and she was all his, but he couldn't even be seen with her. He had to do something.

Dan heard the gate clank shut. He glanced over. There was that damn William, the cause of all these problems. Great, just what I need, Dan thought. Now he'd have to spend the morning chatting with his ex-neighbor.

He saw William looking around. A big glass of orange juice in one hand, a fat paperback in the other. William made eye contact with him and waved, really a kind of waving motion with his book. Dan nodded back, now knowing William was going to walk over and plop himself down next to him. Tell him all about his boring life.

But he didn't. He went around the pool the other way. Dan watching as William stopped next to Lucy, saying something to her, Dan not catching it. Lucy said something back to him then William sat down in the chair next to her.

A little while later, Lucy rolled over onto her back, turning herself to make sure she got evenly done on both sides. The two of them started chatting. Dan couldn't quite make out what they were saying. Then William took his shirt off. Trying to show off his trim physique.

Dan waved to the waiter and ordered another Bloody Mary. Sure, easy for a guy like William to be nice and trim. He worked in an office. Probably had a gym in the same building. Easy to work out when you sat in an office all day and talked on the phone. Guy should try really working for a living. Exploring for natural gas was hard work. Man does that all day he doesn't need to go to the gym. That's real work.

Dan looked at his stomach, covered up by the T-shirt but still hanging over the front of his shorts. Back in high school his wrestling coach made them weigh in every day. Used to make Dan do all kinds of crazy stuff to stay under 168 pounds. Last time he'd stepped onto a scale he'd been just a shade over 200. Probably up around 210 now. Being honest with himself, he didn't think the extra forty pounds was added muscle.

After his third Bloody Mary he switched to scotch. Eleven o'clock was a reasonable time to have a drink. By one o'clock his arms and legs were red. He was also seeing red. Lucy and his ex-neighbor were still over there, talking away like old friends.

He couldn't take it anymore. At two o'clock he left. Went back to the cabin. Gonna take a shower and go to the casino.

* * *

He woke up when he heard a key in the lock. He had just put his head down for a second, he must have fallen asleep. The

door opened and Lucy walked in. Dan looked at the clock, 5:25 PM.

Lifting his head off the pillow. "Where the hell have you been?" he snapped.

"You know exactly where I've been, you were spying on me all day," she said, walking into the bathroom.

"What did you and William talk about?"

From the bathroom he heard her say, "You."

He sat up. "What?"

"I'm kidding." He heard her put the toilet seat down.

"He's nice, but I think he believed you when you told him I was a prostitute. He was trying to pick up on me all day."

* * *

"Dan, are you sure?" Lucy asked him. Sitting on the bed next to him, her hand resting on his thigh. "It's so...dangerous."

He put his arm around her. She seemed kind of turned on by the idea, their earlier arguments all forgotten. Seeing a new side to her now. If this went well, maybe something else they could do later on would allow them to be together and be rich.

The clock said 9:15 PM. He felt clear headed, the booze he'd had all gone from his system. "We've got five days left on this cruise. I don't want to waste 'em."

"Me either," she said, pressing him back onto the bed and

kissing him.

* * *

He got dressed and made the call at ten o'clock. Glancing at Lucy as the phone rang. She was bent over, pulling a pair of khaki shorts over her French-cut silk panties.

William answered on the second ring. "Hello."

"Will, Dan. How you doing?"

"Fine, Dan, how 'bout you?"

"I'm doing great. Listen, remember that barfly we saw a few days ago in the casino?"

"Yeah."

"I ran into her a little while ago. She asked about you?"

"Yeah," William said, an edge of excitement creeping into his voice. "I was with her at the pool today. You were right across from us."

"Really?" Dan said. "I saw you talking to a girl; I didn't know that was her." Thinking fast now. "That would explain what she said."

"What'd she say?" William asked.

Dan forced a laugh. "Buddy, I think you may be in for a very hot second half of the cruise. Stuff she said, it was kinda embarrassing for me to hear a woman talk like that."

"Really?" William really interested now. "Come on, what'd she say? I asked her for her room number but she wouldn't give

it to me."

"Way she was talking I think you're gonna be able to move into her room."

"What'd she say?" Desperation in his voice now.

"Meet me at the back, the poop deck, whatever they call that deck back there, in a half hour. I'll stop by the bar and grab us a couple beers. You're gonna need something to cool you off when you hear this."

"Sure, I'll meet you, but just tell me--"

Dan hung up the phone. Lucy was slipping a shirt on, no bra underneath. She asked, "Is he coming?"

"Oh, yeah. He's dying to know what you said."

She made kind of a frown. "I don't know, he seemed like kind of a nice guy."

"Don't get cold feet on me now, baby." He stood up and hugged her. "I been working on an idea for when we get home. Something that'll fix all our problems. No more sneaking around."

She looked up at him, a hopeful look on her face.

"Really?"

He nodded. "Really."

Standing in front of the tiny dresser, Dan slipped his wallet and cash, the bills folded and held together by a gold-colored money clip, into his pockets. He opened the top drawer

and pulled out a pistol. It was blue steel, Beretta .25 semi-auto, just a little bigger than the palm of his hand.

"What's that thing?" Lucy said.

Dan tucked the gun into the front of his waistband and pulled his shirt-tail down over it. "Nothing."

"Don't tell me nothing," she said, voice rising. "I can see it's a gun."

He turned to face her. "Then why'd you ask?"

"What are you gonna do with that?"

"It's like an insurance policy."

She folded her arms across her chest. "What are you talking about?"

He reached out and put his hands on her shoulders. "You hope you don't have to use it, but it's there just in case."

Turning away from him, Lucy said, "You know I don't like guns."

* * *

Dan got there ten minutes early. He'd stopped in at the bar and ordered three beers. Two for him and one for William.

Standing on the mid-level deck at the back of ship, he polished off the first beer. With one hand he kept hitching up his shorts; the Beretta felt like it weighed a ton, like his pants were going to fall down to his knees. Sure someone was going to notice he was carrying a gun, he kept looking around to

see if anyone was staring at him, but there was no one there, he was alone.

The empty beer bottle he tossed over the side, watching it as it tumbled down and disappeared into the darkness. Not seeing it splash into the foamy water of the ship's wake and definitely not hearing it over the hum of the engines.

There weren't many people out this time of night, and those who were either hung out on the top deck, the one directly above him, or on the main deck below him. For some reason the middle deck wasn't popular. It gave him an idea.

Dan was halfway through his second bottle when William showed up. He handed his old neighbor the unopened beer. William took a sip then asked Dan why all the mystery.

Dan was leaning against the railing, beer in his left hand, left elbow propped on the top rail. William about four feet away, leaning back against the rail, both of his elbows resting on it. Glancing down he saw that William's feet were about a foot and half away from the railing.

Dan reached into the back pocket of his shorts and pulled out the small envelope he'd gotten from the purser's office. He'd put a five dollar casino chip in it to give it some weight and had Lucy write William's name on the front.

"I think she likes you," Dan said. "She asked me to give you this."

William's face brightened. "Really?"

"I swear," Dan said, holding the envelope out to William.

As William reached for it, Dan let the envelope slip from his fingers. "I got it," Dan said, as he stooped over and set his beer bottle on the deck.

Suddenly, he lunged forward and wrapped both arms around William's legs.

William shouted, "What the hell--"

He lifted, driving his old neighbor backward, then up and over the rail.

As he went over, William managed to grab the top of the rail with one hand. For a second, Dan saw only his fingers, the knuckles bone white against the dark teak, William trying desperately to hold on, all of his weight hanging by that one hand.

Dan looked over and saw William's face, stark white, shining against the dark ocean. He slammed his fist down on the fingers, felt the bones crunch, then saw the hand let go. Leaning out over the rail, it wasn't like the beer bottle, he saw William fall, heard him screaming--hoped no else did--saw him splash as he hit the water. Making a plume of white foam that rose above the surface.

Dan stood on his toes, hands on the top rail, leaning out, his belly hanging over, looking down at the water to see if

William surfaced behind the fast moving ship.

That's when he felt his feet come out from under him. Feeling them slip backward, he tightened his grip to keep his balance but he couldn't do it. Head first over the rail, he felt himself plunging down. Seeing his feet in the air, one topsider missing, the ship going past him in slow motion. Seeing Lucy's face looking over the rail at him.

* * *

Lucy had everything packed several hours before the ship docked. She got off first, the captain granting her that privilege, understanding how upset she was.

The night before he'd told her that the Coast Guard search had turned up nothing. After two days neither of the two missing men had been found.

The morning she'd reported Dan missing, the captain had asked if he'd been drinking. "Yes, he'd had a lot to drink, but he wasn't the sort to fall off of a ship."

How about the other man that was missing, had she known him? Yes, she'd told the captain. Her boyfriend had introduced them. "His name was Will, William something, I can't remember," she said.

Ratman, the captain told her. Yes, she said, Ratman was the last name. Dan had told her they'd once been neighbors. The captain asked if the two men were mad at each other? Could

they have gotten into a fight? "Not that I know of," Lucy had told him. "They had a drink together in the casino." She paused, then tilted her head to the side, trying for the thoughtful look. "But later on Dan told me you couldn't trust the guy. Something must've happened between them back when they were neighbors."

She got off the ship, then found her bags. She traveled light, just one suitcase, one garment bag, plus a makeup case. She'd already made arrangements to have Dan's bags shipped to his house so she didn't have to lug them around.

She was standing at the curb, her bags stacked beside her, when Karen walked up. "Are you okay," Dan's widow asked.

Lucy nodded. "I'm fine."

Karen said her car was parked a few spaces down, then led Lucy to it. It was a brand new, candy apple red Mustang convertible, with the top down. Karen helped Lucy put her bags in the trunk. They got in the car; Karen started it but didn't pull out into traffic.

Feeling an awkward silence, Lucy said, "Nice car."

"Thanks, I just bought it. Kind of an impulse buy."

Lucy smiled, saying, "I love the color."

"Was it terrible?" Karen asked, concern in her voice.

Lucy looked at her and smiled. "It was a whole lot worse for Dan than it was for me."

Karen looked like she was about to cry. "I feel awful about what you had to go through."

Lucy looked at her. "No divorce, no settlement. It's all yours, just like it should be."

"Ours," Karen said, then leaned over and kissed her on the lips.

THE END