



Lover Boy

by Suzanne Kehm

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Denny knew in the same way he knew most things – as vague notions that slid in and out of a fog -- that the baby would have been a little sweet one, breathing and warm, barely troubling the crook of his arm. Before he and Violet got married, Denny'd bought a tiny baseball mitt at Reliance Hardware and walked back out onto the hot sidewalk feeling so good it was almost freaky. His friend Lowell had come with him. In the store, Shit-Grin Lowell had grabbed the mitt away and dry-humped it. "Should'a worn it on your dick," he said to Denny. Lowell could be a jackass, but that day, Denny couldn't work himself up to being pissed. It was like Lowell was giddy too, drunk by association, a sheepish, sober drunk that wasn't from beer. It was from Denny's news -- the bun was already in the oven.

Three months later, after Violet lost the baby, Denny wouldn't move that mitt from the front seat of the Crown Vic, and he almost punched Lowell for trying to jack around with it again. With the five small fingers pointing straight up, it was Denny's own personal eternal flame. Violet didn't get pregnant again, and that was a shame, because a baby might have tipped up the slide his life seemed take when he got married. A baby might have made Denny turn into the guy he'd always secretly thought he was capable of becoming.

When Denny tried to figure out how what staled things, it always came down to Violet, and her hangdog face, her disappointed looks following him around every minute of the day, reminding him what he already suspected – that he was an ignorant bastard from nowhere Nebraska and he'd never change. Guys like him held to the notion that the world was a mystery best left alone. But women like Violet believed in improvement. It was a simple calculation for her, and all it ever came to was: nothing was good enough. Not even Violet herself, Denny realized, watching her frown at herself in the mirror. She found trouble everywhere, and somehow "they" were supposed to try to solve it. If it wasn't the sick old drunk who lived next door, it was the ice melting at the North Pole. She didn't have a baby to save, so she tried to save the whole damn world – correction – she tried to get Denny to want to save it. If Denny even so much as suggested she might want to mind her own business, might want to relax for Christ sake, she'd choke up and get misty-eyed, and whatever needed doing, it was his fault it wasn't happening. What Violet needed was somebody to tell people what was what, and not end up looking like an ass. What Violet wanted was somebody who could act like Jesus.

"News flash!" Denny'd say to her, "Denny Lund ain't that guy."

Since Violet counted him in every time there was work to do, it was no surprise she volunteered the two of them to set up the Rec Hall for Mindy Masters' wedding. Every damn time he turned around, there was Violet, adjusting. Pinching her mouth into that same tired smile, she'd move his folding chairs around half an inch so he'd know he hadn't gotten them right, or laugh to Mindy's mom, like, "Oh, Denny's party challenged!" like it was cute, "ha ha!" or some kind of shit like that, ha ha. Violet noticed every smallest thing. Something in her eyes made him feel guilty, and he could not figure out what for, so he made up his mind to stop trying to figure it out. That's why he went over to the Branding Iron in the first place, so he could forget about it in peace. Before they could make him start being lousy at stringing crepe paper, he ducked out the back door and went over to shoot some pool. And that's the day Sabrina walked in and changed everything -- the day he figured out he didn't have to keep living like that.

The place was full. Everybody's relatives were in town for the wedding, and Denny was on his second beer when this tall dark-skinned woman walked in with some of the town girls, and flashed her try-me eyes and her long black hair around the bar

like she'd just been elected queen. She had. The thing was, there wasn't a flicker of competition for a girl like her anywhere in the county, let alone in the Branding Iron. She was a knockout, and it took about five flat seconds to get the buzz around the bar that she was a friend of Mindy's sister, and she drove up from Omaha for the wedding.

Over by the bar, Bobby Kranz looked at her and nearly dropped his load. He sucked in his huge fucking huge gut like he thought he might get a second look. Lowell saw him do it, and him and Denny had a quiet laugh about it across the pool table. Then Denny leaned over and sunk four stripes in a row, as if women like that one came around every day. He knew it was just a matter of time until she flashed those dark eyes to the back of the bar. And when she did, he was ready. All six foot two of him stood up and faced her at exactly the moment she discovered him, and there was that unmistakable click, a key in a lock, and for the rest of the afternoon, her eyes were there every time he looked up, and he figured he could bide his time.

Later on, when Denny and Violet sat four pews behind her at church, Denny noticed she'd rolled up her hair. That whole shiny sheet was balled into a complicated braided bud on top of her long brown neck, and it gave Denny enough to contemplate until the reception. Once they got there, Violet started doing Jello shots, getting stupid, so it was a no brainer for Denny to get pissed off and tell her to catch a ride home with one of her Jello buddies -- that was a good one. Sabrina was waiting by the Crown Vic. He drove her all around Pinakeck County that night, and then across the river into the canyon. Sitting on that hill high above the river under the stars, he found out he could talk to Sabrina about anything. He tried not to sound like one of those whiney son-of-a-bitch husbands. He tried to state the facts, just as they were.

"I'm glad you're married," Sabrina said, looking straight ahead to where the moon met the tops of the hills across the river. "You seem like a really nice guy and everything," she said, "I'm actually glad you've got someone to take care of you at home."

Her voice was quiet, like she wished she could try marriage herself.

"At the moment, I'm not looking for a commitment," she said.

Denny reached out and found the back of that smooth brown stalk of her neck, nice and gentle, like a big brother, instead of a cheater. She leaned into his hand, rolling her head from side to side, letting him knead her scalp. And then there he was. Him sitting there, kneading, not believing it, her hair falling, undoing and loosening, and this hill, this moon, this astonishing woman, he tried to memorize them all, get his head around the whole thing, but at the same time he didn't give a flying fuck because it was all like something magic, and it was changing him, right there, giving him another chance. He almost laughed out loud thinking of the time Violet came home from church and told him Christ was inside him, that she could actually feel it, right there at the kitchen table. Now, he got it.

"I want to concentrate on my career, anyway," Sabrina said, her head moving under his fingers. She turned to him through a tangle of hair. "I just got a new job at city hall," she said, all eyes. "I got to start behaving myself in Omaha, working at city hall." Moonlight glinted from her teeth. "So," she lifted one shoulder, "that's why I came to the wedding way out here in the middle of nowhere. Girls have to have a little fun." She twisted and nipped at his fingers, and he wrapped his hand around and touched them to her mouth, and then pressed them, and his hands reached for her shoulders and it seemed like a dream. It was a dream like a movie, where he saw himself laying her down like a princess on satin.

"Maybe I can help with that fun part," he said, and kissed her as sweetly. He wanted the kiss to be as sweet as if she were an angel, and he thought, he knew she must feel it too, until he heard her gasp. The little explosion of her breath propelled him

away from her. He laid his head on the arm and whispered, "Sorry."

"For what?" she said, unbuttoning.

He sat up. "You're so beautiful," he said, and grasped his knees. "The last thing I want to be tonight is some smartass, and that was a smartass remark." When she didn't answer, he looked back, and from there, even with the glow of her skin, her shoulders bare, he'd had enough scrapes with Violet to know he should cover his butt. He lay back down beside her so that he could run his fingers over her moonlit profile, and let her know he was sincere. And the thing was, he was! It was true. God damn! It was true what couldn't be put into words, how this night, this fragile moment deserved better than smartass. He could feel it, his life was changing forever, but how could a thing like that be said?

He tried to tell her, and it made him just on the edge of irritated, how she'd gone deaf to what he was trying to say to her, closing off his words with her mouth. So he told himself that there was more than one way to communicate anyway. Then Sabrina shut him up for good, hauled him over the top of her and made him forget. Once she got through to him, he just gave up.

When he got home, he thought he might be able to slip in the front door, no muss, no fuss, but that night, good old Violet had stayed up. As soon as he was inside, a lamp went on and there she was, sitting cross-legged in the middle of the couch, facing him. He put one hand up and leaned against the doorframe. "You still drunk?" he said, and slid his other hand into his back pocket. Her back was straight and her big blue dress balled up all around her. There were smears of black under her eyes. She looked so pathetic and forlorn, if it was any other night, he would've thought she was cute.

"I never was drunk," she said, and for the first time, when her sad sack eyes turned into a pointing finger, Denny had a reason for the guilt, and he brushed the seat of his jeans just to make sure there wasn't grass still stuck to his butt.

"Where did you go?" she said.

"Drove around," Denny said. He looked sideways at her as he crossed the room toward the kitchen, to get a drink, to wash down the taste in his mouth.

"Where?"

"Nowhere. God, you are so suspicious. I needed some time." He leaned backwards against the sink and talked to her out in the living room. "Violet, you know, I've been thinking, maybe you're right. Sometimes I just can't take it around here."

"Take what?"

"You know, this crap, these weddings, all the meaningless shit. It's all the same, you know? It's like, if we missed this wedding, it wouldn't matter because the next one's going to be a carbon copy. So who cares after while? It's like no one around here ever cares about any real stuff, like ..."

"Like what?"

"Like global warming -- for example... that ice and shit." Silence. "You know."

"That Sabrina chick must have been fired up about global warming too. No one knew where she went."

Denny stared at the floor and it came to him that he could make things different now. "Maybe ... hey Vi," he said, "maybe if we should go somewhere else. Move. Like, to Omaha. Maybe we could get you pregnant."

"Maybe Sabrina could get pregnant right here in Reliance."

Fuck it. "Shit Violet. Sabrina who? Yeah. That's it. I took good old Sabrina out and ... sure, she let a total stranger just roll her over and dig in. Shit." He moved toward the bedroom door. "God, you wear me out, Vi. Come on. Let's go to bed."

"I'm not sleepy."

The back of her head didn't move. He stood with his hand on the doorknob for a long time. She was holding her chin up steady on her stiff neck, not moving, and some of her hair had slipped out from the hairdo she spent an hour putting together. He took a few steps toward her cute little defiant chin and he thought, Christ he was a shit, and suddenly he felt so tired. He stood behind her, looking down at the top of her head. "Here," he said. He cupped his hand under the escaped strings of her ruined hairdo and let them lay across his palm. "You're such a good girl, Vi," he said, and felt his eyes filling. She was such a good girl. He didn't deserve her. She should have better than Denny Lund.

It was one of those days when the hot seemed to be showing off. With the interior of the Crown Victoria already suffocating, Denny Lund leaned forward to turn on the radio and felt his shirt peeling off the leatherette. The car was a total piece of crap, but he had it running pretty good now. Violet's dad gave it to them as a wedding present, and Violet was plenty pissed when he took off with it, but she wouldn't have been able to keep it running anyway. He lifted his elbow and took a quick look. His shirt was black, and even though he had both front windows rolled all the way down, there were dark crescents under his armpits. By the time he got to work, he was going to look like a total jerk.

He'd been driving along thinking about that motorcycle. On a day like this, if he had the bike, he would just ride the fuck out of town. He took a long look west, to where the horizon sucked up the six moving lanes of Dodge Street. God it would be great to be on that bike, blowing past all these jerks! Keep right on going, straight west. Send Lowell a goddamn postcard from California! That would take the smirk off of him. Lowell called Denny shortly after Denny left Reliance. He wanted to make sure Denny heard about the bankroll Violet got from her dad. The whole town was talking about it. Denny could've bought a hell of a bike, Lowell said, if he'd stuck it out. Denny could've had a Harley.

Lowell was so stupid he thought Violet might take Denny back, after all the water under the bridge. You couldn't expect a guy like Lowell to have a clue about women. Guys like Lowell didn't have the kind of feelings that pushed Denny over the edge. What started fermenting the first night he met Sabrina didn't quit until after her car broke down last winter. She had been on her way to meet him at this place they found in Rock County, The Drop Inn, halfway between Omaha and Reliance, and Denny brought his tools and bought the parts and stood out there on the pavement under the motel lights in the freezing cold and fixed it for her. Didn't charge her a dime. Still made him smile to think about how grateful she was. All credit to Violet there, who had always said if you want to be happy you've got to give somebody else a hand. That's when he made up his mind.

Thank God Violet was preoccupied with her dad at the hospital that whole time he got his plan figured out. Too bad he ended up having to take off right after the funeral and everything, but in the end, it was a lot easier on Violet that he made a

clean break. The next thing you knew, she'd turn up pregnant or something, and then he'd be a goner. No way Denny Lund would leave a child. So he took off in the middle of the night, cut the dramatics, pinched off the tears and lies and stories before they got ugly. He left for both of them. Their marriage needed it and he was the one with the guts to pull it off. It was a job for a guy. Guys always got the shit jobs.

Once he got to Omaha and found a dive to live in, he got up his nerve and dropped by city hall. Ha! Sabrina took one look at him and knocked over a cup of coffee and ruined everything on the top of her desk. All those important papers for her important job, but she got over it, that night, she got over it, and it was a hard for Denny, watching her from the bed in her apartment, watching her giggle out to the kitchen, toss her black hair over her shoulder, break eggs in a pan, watch her make him ravenous, surprisingly hard for him in that moment, how it was, seeing Sabrina there, with his supper. It put him so much in mind of his own Violet, that for a moment, it hurt -- it physically hurt to be watching her.

He slammed on his brakes. Two girls in a mint green Corolla cut him off, laughing and ducking like they gave a shit. As soon as they pulled their little stunt, they tucked in so the Vic was practically up their ass, and their bare arms waved out the windows for him. Son of a bitch, he wanted out of this traffic. Moo! He couldn't believe he was stuck in with all these people, everybody locking him in, forcing him to tear along like he had someplace to go when all he wanted was to poke along like that night before the sports banquet when Lowell got Athlete of the Year. It took him half an hour to drive ten miles down county road P-59 that night, but by the time he walked into the school lunch room, he could stand to let people pound him on the back for his woosy sportsmanship certificate.

How had he gotten himself into this? What was it with all these green lights? Usually, when he was running late, he couldn't get a green light to save his ass, and now, when he had all the damn time in the world, he was using up every single piece of good luck he'd be likely to have for the next six months. Hot as it was, he pulled off his cap, wiped his forehead with his fingers and glanced into the rear view. Any more, his hair looked like an idiot when he wore caps. Damn heat. It should be raining. It should be misting and clouds. It should be dark.

He reached for a pair of sunglasses hooked to the visor, and when he jerked them down, a couple of receipts knocked loose and fluttered past. One landed in the baseball mitt on the passenger seat next to a folded sheet of yellow paper. Denny lit up a cigarette. He forced himself to keep driving, to leave the yellow paper alone, to resist picking it up and unfolding with one hand, reading it one more time.

In the parking lot he picked it up with two fingers barely pressing, so lightly, and so carefully folding it, and sliding it into a back pocket as he ground his cigarette into the pavement, and feeling it there, burning through his jeans. Then he headed in. His co-worker, Marlin, a dude with a practically terminal case of happy, was pleased as punch to see him. As usual. "Hey, big guy," Marlin said, clapping him on the back. "Up for some golf later on?" Denny arched and pulled to release the grip of the sweaty shirt Marlin had just stuck onto him. "Great day for it!" Marlin was a retired schoolteacher.

"Nah," Denny said, "not my thing."

"Shoot," Marlin said. He clasped his hands and straightened his arms, which struck Denny as extra hairy hanging out of his yellow shirt. It was one of those nylon shirts, the kind that gets fuzz balls all over it, and it was missing a button. Marlin's ass swayed back and forth like he was messing with a club. "It's not hard. Why don't you two come over sometime? I'll fire up the old barbeque, show you some stuff?" He did a practice swing.

"Yeah," Denny said, "better get these returns put away." He pointed toward a tower

of crap that had been mounting for the past week, then walked off with Marlin still calling from behind his back, "Day like this gets a guy in the mood for summer, you know?"

Two hours later, when no one was watching, Denny casually picked up the desk phone and dialed a number. He held the receiver for a minute, before he dropped it bank on its cradle, without having raised it to his ear.

"Hey, I wasn't kiddin' about that barbeque."

Denny cringed. Even at Sears you gotta watch your back.

"We should set up a day," Marlin insisted. "Is there any time that'd work better for you guys?"

"Not really."

"Well hey, great then. How 'bout Sunday?"

"Yeah, well Marlin, I've got some stuff going and, ah... we're not ... me and Sabrina split."

"What? You let that gorgeous woman get away? Good lookin' kid like you? Man I thought the two of you ...," Marlin's head tipped, and Denny turned away.

"Hey, sorry, guy," Marlin said.

"Oh no, man, shit no. It was a mutual thing. You know. It was getting old..."

"Yeah." Marlin leaned over and let his arms rest on the counter for a minute or two. Then he bounced up and faced Denny again. "Well hey! Just you then! Come on over and me and ma will fix you up with the best burger you ever had, and I can show you some putting. I got a little green right off my patio. You're going to be a bachelor, you better learn how to play golf."

"Yeah. Hey, I got to take a break, okay?" Without waiting for Marlin to answer, he pushed past and headed out of the parts department. He kept thinking he shouldn't have called that morning, before he had his head together. Before a call like that, there was still hope. But the second he heard her voice, "City of Omaha Planning, how may I help you?" he knew. He was nobody but Denny goddamn Lund, and he might as well be dead.

He poked his head into the employee lunchroom. Three clerks were sitting around talking, and a guy who worked in shoes, reading a book. The book guy looked up and nodded. Denny stepped back into the hall and let the door swing shut. In the men's room there was nowhere to go but into one of the stalls. Once inside, he dropped his jeans around his ankles and sat down. Someone came in, and Denny waited, holding his breath, until piss hit the porcelain. If any big fat son-of-a-bitch came in and took a dump in one of the other stalls, he was going to go out in the parking lot and suck an exhaust pipe.

The toilet flushed.

He forced himself to sit still with his elbows on his knees and his chin cupped in his hands for what seemed like five minutes before he reached down, found his jeans pocket, and slid out the yellow paper. He held it to his nose for a second before he unfolded it, painfully slowly, half trying to make the reading of it last, and half testing himself to see if he could keep from ripping it to shreds and flushing it. It was as if he hated it and needed it at the same time. It was proof he deserved to be pissed

and, okay, pissed and hurt, god dammit, reason for the prayer blowing up inside of him: Oh God please, God Violet; my Violet, Baby, it erupted, my sweet little flower who would never do something like this to me. My Baby.

Denny,

Well you beautiful boy, it's been a blast! But we both knew this was for fun – time to get on with my life. Even so, it's crazy how hard this is for me. I'm serious! But you know, we're about two different things, so hanging out any longer would start to be a real waste of time. I don't want us to end up thinking each other is a pain in the ass. But just so you know, big guy, I won't even dare to hope for another fine helping of choo-choo anywhere close to the one you dished up for me. (I think I can, buddy – thanks for giving it all to me!)

Sabrina

Denny folded up the note. He was determined to make it through the rest of the afternoon without reading it again. He was going to steer clear of the telephone, too. If he made it through the rest of the day, he told himself he'd stop for beers on the way home. He'd get there early and grab that stool at the end of the bar, swing it around and watch the people on the street, going in, going out walking from the light post on the corner, crossing the street, to those dumb cement sidewalks that covered the whole damn block in front of City Hall, just like he'd been doing for weeks, even before he got the note.

The bartender knew his name. There was more respect at that bar than he'd ever gotten from a woman, the way the bartender held the bottle up to the light, the way he picked up the white cloth and polished the glass off before it was good enough to set up in front of Denny. Then there'd be the quick nod between the two men that said it all. After all that, it was no wonder that first cold wash in his throat felt like communion, like the goddamn blood of Christ. Christ inside him. He snickered suddenly, and wiped his wrist across his nose. Still, he'd give his left nut to see Lowell about now. Lowell would make him remember who he was supposed to be, what he was before he started turning into this freaking freak, sitting alone in bars getting drunk, sitting on the pisser getting religion.

A few minutes later, he walked back to the department, his jaw set. Marlin was behind the desk at the foot of a ladder, starting to put away the backlog of returns. Denny watched him a moment, then took a breath. "Hey," he said, "Marlin, are you in any kind of mood to go drink some beers tonight?"

All at once Marlin stopped moving.

Denny had to wait for an answer forever, wait there like some pimply freshman, some stupid pimply geek boy who just got balls, just walked up to the homecoming queen and asked her to prom.

Finally Marlin turned around. He stood there staring at Denny with three cardboard boxes of oil filters under his arm, as stunned as if Denny'd come up and kissed him on his goddamn mouth.

"I'll buy," Denny said, warmth burning up from his throat to his cheeks.

Marlin's trance broke. "Shoot guy! Should 'a spoke sooner." Mercifully, he turned his back on Denny's pathetic blush and walked off a few steps to put the boxes on a shelf. "Taco Tuesday," he said over his shoulder. "You know," he gave Denny an

eyebrow, “the wife.”

Denny nodded, knowing full well the thing to do would be go help Marlin but he couldn't seem to move. He couldn't seem to get over the fact that even pathetic Marlin was turning him down! Pressure plugged his nose and tightened his cheeks, closing down his ability to even breathe. To his horror, he apprehended that the thing choking him was tears, and he had three hours to hold on before it was time to clock out. If he let go, he was afraid the flood would be worse than when he lost the baby, and that alone suggested to him that he was lost, crying over Marlin, the last of him giving up, hopeless. If there was a Christ inside him then, He was weeping.

Seconds later, he heard footsteps, and Marlin grabbed his elbow.

“Hey!” Marlin said, so close Denny smelled the stale coffee on his breath. “How 'bout you come along?” He backed away. “Jump in! Me and Shirley'll drop you off on our way back?”

“Nuhhaa,” Denny managed to mutter .

“You'd be helping us out,” Marlin cooed. He stuck two small boxes under one arm and climbed the ladder. “We got our grandson tonight, and he's a handful! What say?”

Denny staggered backwards, choking. “That's not my...Geez man, you don't have to....”

“Oh come on. You got to eat anyway. It's right on the way.” Marlin grinned and rubbed his palm over his stomach. “Oh man, those burritos!” He groaned, and winked, “You could hurt yourself!”

Denny lifted tried to answer. He lifted his face. It must have been the water in his eyes that made Marlin's yellow shirt break up into rays. Under the fluorescents, Marlin morphed into a sun, the edges of his round schoolteacher's body erased in shimmer, the whole bright center of him circled in pulsing white rings. Denny squinted upwards into the blaze and felt the dark scaffolding of his old self slip and give way entirely. Radiance stung his eyes and he squeezed them shut, but there was no escape from the growing feeling of that light, from the tenderness in it, and that in that moment, though there was nothing left of him, he felt held by it, his face held, so he could not turn away. “I guess I wouldn't mind that,” he croaked at last, and when pudgy Marlin finally swam back into full focus, Denny could see that he was pleased.

Suzanne Kehm is a proud member of the Board of Directors for the acclaimed “Backwaters Press,” headquartered in Omaha, Nebraska. She received an Individual Artist Fellowship from the (amazing!) Nebraska Arts Council and her work has appeared in the following spectacular little journals, with credit to their remarkable, hardworking editors: “The Montreal Review,” “The Battered Suitcase,” “Thumbnail,” and “The Platte Valley Review.” She is grateful for the residency provided by The Kimmel Harding Nelson Center for the Arts. It got her pistons firing. Forever she lives in the hope that John Neihardt and Black Elk weren't making it up when they quoted an eagle who proclaimed, “Hold fast...there is more! There is more!”

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