

SHORT STORY SUBMISSION: Broken Rules by Lynn Leonard

"It must be Monday. Here comes Carl with his light blue shirt and his dark blue tie with the gold stripes!" Carl could hear them now. He had a rule not to let this get under his skin. It was one of the few times that they actually bothered to noticed him. He knotted and unknotted his Monday tie five times. The day would go well. Wasn't it guaranteed? All the proprieties had been observed. Carl liked order. Carl liked consistency. Carl liked his rules.

He pulled into company parking. Doreen's Kia was now squatting two rows from the main TechnoTool entrance. "She's here for less than six weeks and already she's parking like a supervisor. That has to be breaking a company rule or two," Carl noted. "Yep, she's got it going on with the Boss, for sure, " he mourned, "Delightful Doreen is out of my reach." Carl had thought he felt the heat between them. Doreen was always "busy" whenever he worked up the nerve to ask her to lunch or to go to the movies. As he trudged from his seven year old Corolla to the distant entrance, Carl repeated his mantra in time with his strides, "I can't let this bother me. I can't let this bother me. I can't let this bother me."

In his cubicle, Carl found a Post-It on his computer screen summoning him to Boss Lumberg's office. "What now," he fussed, but he let it go. Carl had a rule not to borrow trouble.

"Sit, Carl, sit, sit", a broadly beaming Lumberg greeted him cordially. The Boss was one of those people who smile with both rows of teeth. "I have a favor to ask you."

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"All those big white teeth," Carl mused as his mind dived into a vision of a huge, smooth, sinuous shark shaking a naked Doreen in his powerful jaws. Her red hair undulated in the clear, green sea water like a beautiful blood stain.

"Carl, Carl, are you with me here?" Lumberg's voice was sharp with impatience.

Carl surfaced from his marine reverie. "A favor, now he's friendly. Could this day be getting worse?" Aloud Carl responded, "Sure, Mr. Lumberg, what do you need?"

"You know the new girl, Doreen? She seems to be having a little trouble keeping up with her paper work. Carl, I wonder if you would be the good doobie that we all know you are and help her out, you know, take up some of her slack?" the Boss cajoled, his shark grin widening, his shark teeth glinting. "I

"Sure, Mr. Lumberg, sure, glad to help out. When would you like Doreen and me to get together about this?" Carl asked maybe too quickly, maybe too eagerly. Maybe, Carl hoped, all was not lost, after all.

"No need for that, Carl. I have all of her paper work right here. You can just take it right out to your desk and work on it after you get your own work done. I consider this a personal favor, I really do, Darryl, I mean Carl."

"I just bet you do, you son of a bitch. Maybe she could get her work done if she didn't spend so much time in your office doing God only knows what. All that must be breaking rules! She is so pretty and so out of reach except for jerks like Lumberg who make the big bucks. This day did get much worse." seethed Carl to himself. "What can Carl do? It is Carl's rule to be a good employee. It is Carl's rule to do what he is told. It's been like this from the time Carl was a little boy. It's Carl's rule not to let things like this bother him. Carl will just have to do it."

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Carl forced a thin smile onto his reddening face and replied, "Sure, Mr. Lumberg, just hand over those papers and I'll get right on it this afternoon." He spun to go while he could still hold that smile frozen on his lips. From the time he was a little boy, it was Carl's most important rule to not let anyone else see exactly how Carl felt. He had learned not to bother. After all, who really cared?

"Carl, would you ask Doreen to step in here, please? I have a few things I need to discuss with her."

Doreen was waiting just outside the door as Carl left. She swept by him on a cloud of jasmine and roses. A bump of her buttocks shut the door firmly behind her. There was silence then Carl could hear them laughing as he slunk away.

Late that afternoon, Carl hissed under his breath, "I can't let this bother me. I can't let this bother me. I can't let this bother me," as he finished his own work and began to tackle the pile of Doreen's undone assignments. He was still buried at five o'clock when Lumberg and Doreen left. Carl watched out of the office window as Lumberg shoveled Doreen into his BMer Boxster and put the top down. He felt physical pain when he saw her slim, pale fingers entangled in the tight gray-brown curls at the back of

"Why so late?" both Phil and Gary inquired on their separate ways out past his desk piled with

"That looks like newbie work to me, Carl. What's up?" Gary asked with sympathy. "You're kidding me! Doreen's work! What a nerve, he gets all the fun and you do all the work. I don't believe he's screwing you like this. For that matter, I don't believe he's doing the same thing to the Delicious Doreen, either. What a waste! It's amazing how much handsomer and charming a big wallet makes a man, eh?"

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Carl would remember that Gary took the time to sympathize. He made it a rule to remember people who were nice to him. There was nothing nice to remember for Doreen and the rest in the office including Phil and especially, Mr. Lumberg. As he inputted Doreen's work, Carl became angrier and more resentful in an overwhelming and global way. All the years of feeling ignored, of never getting what he wanted or what he thought he deserved, of his feeling put upon, of his not letting things bother him, of his swallowing the sharp metal shards of hurt and anger, of, most importantly, never allowing himself to show how he really felt----all these swelled up into a hot, red, acid ball of molten misery in his stomach. Carl had to vomit it out. Carl knew what Carl had to do. He had to show them how he really felt.

"We're speaking with Gary Spivak, one of the few survivors of the office shooting rampage at TechnoTool Industries here in Suburban Industrial Park outside of Dayton, Ohio. What can you tell us about Carl Bellman, the alleged shooter who ended the slaughter by taking his own life?" The reporter had ignored Gary's state of emotional shock. He had sequestered Gary from para-medical personnel. Now he jabbed his microphone close to Gary's ashy, blood spattered face and hoped the man would speak loudly enough for him to get a killer sound bite that the Network in New York would pick up.

"Carl was always such a quiet man. He kept to himself. I never saw him get angry at anything or anybody. I don't understand why he did this. I don't understand any of it. Why am I still alive? He just walked right by me, gave me the sweetest smile. Then he went into Mr. Lumberg's office and shot him and Doreen. Then he came out onto the floor and killed Phil and so many others. Dead. Dead. I don't understand. What kind of rules does a man like that live by???"