

Lester

by Jonathan Harrell

Richard bounds up the stairs to his apartment. He can't wait to get home to his new kitty. He found the poor cat right outside of his building just a few days ago, and already they've become fast friends. He hasn't seen any "Lost Pet" notices stapled to telephone poles, either. He'll have to remember to get a paper this Sunday. There might be a notice in there. He's afraid to think that maybe he'll get to keep Lester, and saying it aloud might jinx it. That's what Richard named the cat. Lester.

He gets to the third-floor landing, and sees his super, Dimarco, smoking a cigarette. Richard knows you're not supposed to smoke in the stairway, it's in the rules. But he doesn't want to say anything to Dimarco because Dimarco is a mean man.

"Hey, dummy." Dimarco has spotted Richard, and it looks like he wants to talk to him. "Where the hell you been?"

"I been at work, Mr. Dimarco. I work Fridays, remember?" Richard shuffles his feet beside the much bigger man.

"I wouldn't call what you do 'work,' kid. You bag groceries for a livin'. Not 'work.'" As per usual, Dimarco cannot pass up an opportunity to degrade young Richard. "Anyway, I know you ain't smart enough to get a real job." Richard's eyes begin to water.

"Okay, Mr. Dimarco. I'll see you later." Richard turns, but is stopped before he can move further up the stairs.

"Actually, dummy, I've been waiting to talk to you. You got a pet in your apartment?" His eyes narrow.

Richard can feel his face growing hot. He knows he's a terrible liar, his mother always told him so. But if he were to tell Dimarco the truth, then he would take Lester, and Richard would never get to see Lester ever again. He would have to be sneaky, like a mouse.

"That's against the rules, Mr. Dimarco. You're not supposed to have pets." Richard pauses, and then adds under his breath, "not supposed to smoke in the stairwell, neither."

"I know you're not supposed to have pets, you moron! The old Chavez lady in 408 says that she heard something jumpin' around in your apartment. She said it sounded like stuff was breakin'. I checked the locks, and it don't look like nobody broke in or nothing, so I figure, maybe little Richie here got a dog, like last time."

Richard is confused for a moment. He thinks to himself that maybe Lester broke something up there. If so, he's a bad kitty. But Dimarco thinks that a dog did it, so that's alright, because there ain't a dog. Lester's a cat. Maybe, he thinks, he'll get away with it this time.

"I don't got a dog. I promise!" He stands up straight and holds his hand up, palm out, to illustrate the seriousness of his oath.

"Well, tell ya what. Why don't I just have a little look to make sure. Okay?" Dimarco pulls a large ring of keys off of his belt and flips through them until he finds the one that will unlock Richard's apartment. "Let's go, kid." He turns and begins to lumber up the steps, his stench trailing behind him.

Richard hangs his head, because he knows that he is caught again. If Dimarco finds another pet in this building, he will evict Richard just as he promised. Richard labors after the super,

head spinning with possible outcomes. He thinks that maybe if Dimarco could just meet Lester, maybe he would like Lester enough to let him stay. No, he thinks, that will never work. Dimarco don't like anybody.

He thinks as hard as he can until they reach the fourth floor. Dimarco is practically whistling, knowing that his least-favorite tenant will soon be out on the street with the animals that he loves so much. Stupid retard, he thinks. Serves him right.

They reach apartment 406, and Dimarco reaches for the doorknob, key in hand. An idea suddenly hits Richard. Maybe honesty will work. Everybody says so, so it's worth a try, right?

Richard gently grabs the super's wrist. "Mr. Dimarco? I don't got a dog." He clears his throat and his eyes drop to his shoes. "I got a cat. I found him two days ago, and I couldn't let him stay outside. It was cold, and he needed a place to stay."

Dimarco puts his hands on his hips. "Oh, really?"

"Yes, sir. But you'll see, he's beautiful! He's orange and black and white and..."

"You mean he's a calico, dummy."

Richard doesn't know what that word means, but that isn't the word he was looking for. "Anyways, you'll love him! I been at work all day, so he's hungry, I know. You can feed him if you want to. I don't mind."

"Feed him?" Dimarco laughs. "Kick his ass right out in the street, is what I'll do. And you are next." He pokes his finger into Richard's bony chest to illustrate the point.

Richard is deflated. That's it, then, he thinks. I'll never get to see Lester again. And he was such a good kitty.

Dimarco opens the apartment door and pushes it open hard. Sitting there on the kitchen table, is Lester.

"Bad Lester!" Richard exclaims. "You get off that table!"

Dimarco screams.

Lester, the 400 pound Bengal tiger, leaps off of the table and onto the superintendent.

Richard stops scolding Lester, and thinks that with Mr. Dimarco gone, maybe this time nobody will take his pet away.

