

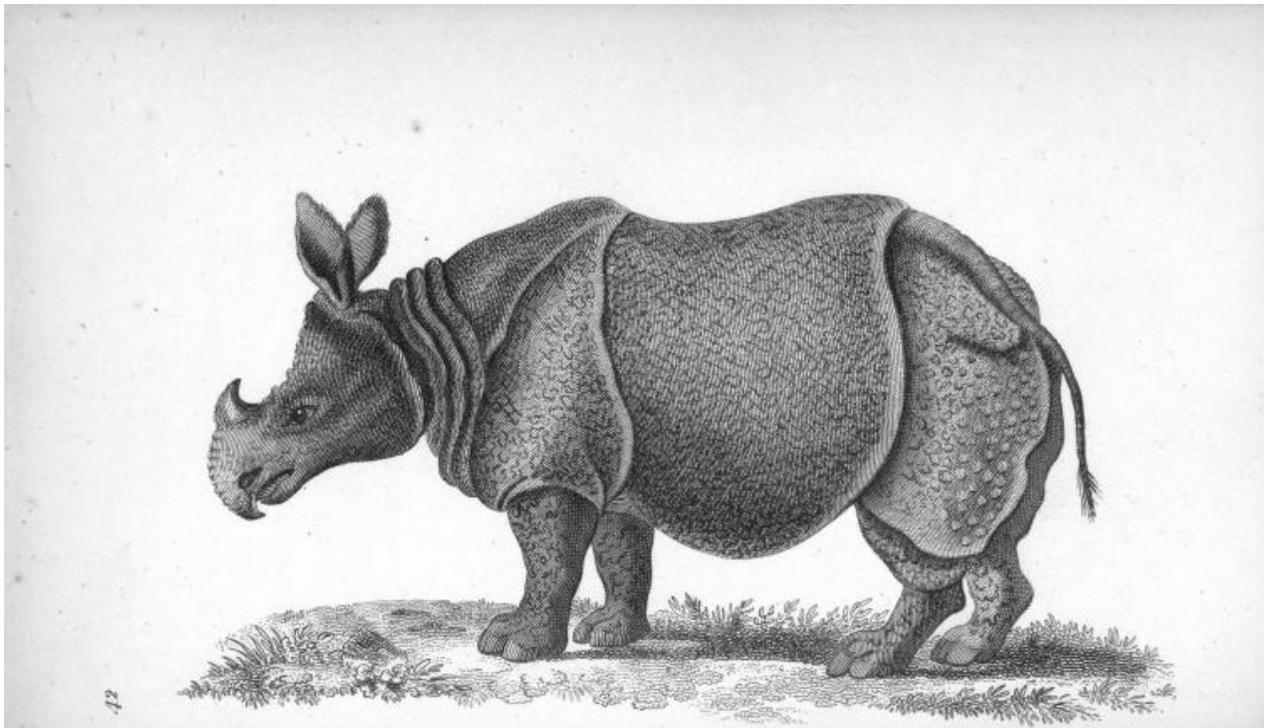
Corner Bar Magazine

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Page 1 – TRADING POST by B. L. Daniels. Mr. Daniels is a writer of horror and strange fiction. He resides in Connecticut with his wife, children, and numerous cats.

Page 15 – THE FIRST EVER MEETING OF THE LADIES' SHOOTER SOCIETY PRESIDENCY by Bobbi Parry. Ms Parry has had work published in *The Ampersand Review* and *Greenprints*. She has an MFA from Louisiana State University, where her thesis, a novel, won the Robert Penn Warren Thesis Award. She currently lives in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where she works as a middle school librarian.

Page 18 – CONE OF SHAME by A. Elizabeth Herting. Ms Herting, of Centennial, CO, writes, "I am an aspiring freelance writer and busy mother of three living in colorful Colorado and have had stories featured in *Dark Fire Fiction*, *Bewildering Stories*, *Friday Fiction*, *Peacock Journal*, *50-Word Stories*, *New Realm*, *Speculative 66* and *Under the Bed*. I also recently completed a novel called **Wet Birds Don't Fly at Night** that I am hoping to find a home for one day. More at <https://sites.google.com/site/aehertingwriter>."



“TRADING POST”

by B. L. DANIELS

The trailer’s silver door squeaked on its hinges, and Alex was greeted by sounds of chicken sizzling in the pan and the rhythmic knocking of his mother’s knife against the cutting board as it diced a bundle of carrots. “Oh man, you got chicken?”

“You really need to oil that door—it’s driving me crazy,” she shouted over the hiss of the skillet.

“Yeah mom,” Alex rolled his eyes. “I’ll fix it tomorrow afternoon. I need to grab a few things from the shop, but I keep forgetting.”

She shook her head, pulling red hair back into a ponytail as she bustled about the tiny counter. “It’s alright, I know you’ve had more important things to think about this week. Supper’s almost ready, go get washed up. I don’t want to smell a gas station while we eat. And tell your sister to get out here too!”

The smell of fried chicken was intoxicating, especially after a hard day’s work. Alex greedily eyed the golden brown legs and thighs as he sat down and tucked the tablecloth away under his jeans.

“Jesse, no books at the table,” his mother scolded as she set a bowl of vegetables down on the table.

“But mom, I want to read about Sam the Puppy,” the little girl said, eagerly flip-

ping through the pages.

“No!”

“Fine, I didn’t want to read it anyway!” the book hit the floor with a thump. Alex ignored the conflict as he tore into a chicken leg. It was tender and just the right amount of salty, and he savored every bit of the crisp batter like it was the first time he’d ever tasted it.

“Was Mr. Flannery happy with his truck?” his mother asked.

“I still have a little more work to do on it, and I don’t know if Mr. Flannery can actually be happy,” Alex wiped the grease from his mouth with a towel, “can you pass me some of those carrots, they look delicious. This chicken is great.”

“Thanks dear, Sally had an extra hen, and I figured it was worth the effort, what with you helping everyone out. You deserve it.” the carrots dropped onto his plate like steaming orange coins as she spooned them from the bowl.

“Is Mr. Flannery going to get things for the Mongos?”

“Jesse!” The table shook as their mother slammed her hand down, the plates seeming to jump from fright along with the children, “don’t ever use that word. Who taught you that word?”

The little girl recoiled, “I’m sorry!”

Penny said it. She said when Mr. Flannery goes on his trips he drives to the city to get food and things for the Mongos. I'm sorry. Does he?"

Alex watched his mother re-tie her ponytail, her red hair flailing back over her neck as she exhaled. "I'm sorry I yelled Jesse, but that's a very mean word. Please don't use it. I don't care if Penny or any of your other friends say it, I don't want you to say it."

"Why is it bad? Is it like the F-word?"

Alex watched the napkins judder as another long exhale swept like a breeze across the table, "It's a bad word because it's something mean people say about the unfortunate. It's a name they use when they think someone is stupid. So please don't say it."

"Everyone in town says it," Alex said, "Can I have that last piece?"

"Don't start with me Alex," he felt the glare but refused to meet her eye to eye, "it's fine, take it. I made it for you."

"I'm not trying to pick a fight Mom, I'm just saying, it's the word everyone uses. Even John and Mr. Flannery say it."

"I don't care what Mr. Flannery says,"

"What about John, don't you care what he says?"

Alex's mother paused, "John shouldn't be saying that either," she sighed.

"OK, well, then what is she supposed to call them?" he finally looked up, and could see his mother's face getting flushed. Her lips were pressed tight; a thermometer gauging her rising anger.

"I don't know. Let's see," she took a

purposeful sip of water from her glass, "they live up in the hills beyond the fences, right? I guess she can just call them the Hill People."

"I like that, the Hill People," Jesse smiled and squirmed in her seat, "I'm going to tell Sally I made that up. Mom, is it OK if I tell Sally I made up the name Hill People?"

"Yes, it's fine."

"They're not people," Alex said.

"Something happened to them and they don't look or sound like us, that doesn't mean they aren't human beings," Mom replied.

"Mr. Flannery told me and Sam it was radiation. He said the government was testing out there before everything happened, and told them to leave, but they wouldn't, so eventually that's what turned them into the Mong-, the 'M-word',"

"Mongos?" Jesse squeaked with laughter.

Alex and his sister were pinned back into their chairs by their mother's gaze. "You listen to me. I know that old man thinks he knows everything because he was some big shot before things got this way, but he does NOT know everything. He says that word because he's scared. Him and all the rest of the people in this town use that word because it makes them feel like they have some control over what's going on, but the truth is they don't. If those people were stupid, then don't you think Mr. Flannery or John, or Mr. Tucker would have figured out a plan by now to change things? They haven't, and they won't.

That's why everyone is biting their fingernails and whispering and praying you'll get that goddamned truck fixed so that he can drive to the city tomorrow morning!"

Alex watched the wetness emerge in his mother's eyes, "It's tough enough raising the two of you here in this place by myself, without your father," tears and mascara stains wet the napkin as she dabbed her eyes, "all these people should just count their blessings that he taught you to use his tools while he was still able to."

"Mom, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have brought this up," Alex stood up to hug his mother, but she was already on her feet and turning towards the kitchen.

"No, it's fine. Just sit. Finish the chicken. You can have the rest of my piece too. I'm not hungry anymore, but I'm going to get even more upset if it goes to waste."

The half-eaten meat plopped onto his plate, and the room was silent except for the faint sound of chewing. Alex finished the chicken to avoid upsetting his mother any further. It tasted much blander than it had only minutes ago.

"Boy, hey boy! Is my damn truck fixed yet?"

The old man's voice echoed off the rippled tin walls of the garage. "Hey, am I talking to myself?" The tip of his cane clicked on the cement slab as he made his way over to the young mechanic.

Alex felt a sharp poke as Flannery's cane found its way in between his ribs. He

leapt back, dropping his socket wrench and nearly smacking his head on the underside of the old Ford's hood.

"Sorry Mr. Flannery, I didn't hear you come in," the boy half shouted as he removed a scuffed up pair of oversized headphones.

"Well, that's obvious. Wearing those stupid things is going to get you into hot water one of these days, or at the very least, make you deaf and dumb," Flannery's eyebrows rose over the top of his glasses as he peered into the engine compartment.

"I just need to tighten up a few belts and it'll be ready to go—maybe another half hour?" Alex asked.

"OK boy, I'll give you an hour, but it'd better be done when I get back. You know what I have to do today...and you know they aren't patient."

Alex' pursed his lips as he looked back at the pickup, "Yeah. I know. I'll make sure it's done in time." The headphone cups sealed over his ears as he leaned back into the engine compartment.

"Alright then, I'll let you get back to your work," Flannery nodded; his cane drawing a small trail on the sandy concrete as he turned for the door.

The truck's engine roared as Flannery sped down the trail out of town. Alex coughed as dust filled his lungs; tiny particles burning his chest. He stood amongst the crowd of townsfolk, watching the vehicle disappear over the burning horizon

until he could barely make it out. He was startled by the grip of a powerful hand squeezing his shoulder.

“Good work Alex,” the tall man affirmed with a shake of his arm, “your dad would be really proud of you.”

“Thanks, John. I’m just trying to help.”

A smile crept onto the big man’s face, looking out of place on his dirty, sun-scorched skin, “And you are. Lord knows there’s plenty to be done around this place to keep things fixed up and running. We’re lucky you inherited your old man’s knack with a wrench, otherwise we’d probably find ourselves in a bind more often than we already do. Like today, if you hadn’t gotten that old jalopy up and running, well, I don’t really want to think about what might have happened.”

Alex forced a smile. He wasn’t as handy as his father, but faking it meant everyone slept a little easier at night, and that was his contribution.

“Hey John, I gotta go change and clean up. My mom gets pissed if I come home smelling like the garage.”

“Well we don’t want that. OK, head on out kid. I’ll see you bright and early.”

The sun rose over the mesas like a fiery beacon, chasing away creatures that roamed the nighttime sands, shunning them back into crevices and under rocks. As light sliced across the rooftops and broke through windows, the sound of voices roused Alex from his sleep. He sat up and

peered through the dusty porthole; John and many of the others were already awake and gathered near the main gate. He couldn’t make out their words, but he could tell something wasn’t right by the tone of their muffled discussion. Sally confirmed this when her bony arm pointed straight at the window of their trailer. Alex scrambled out of his cot and grabbed his clothes from a heap on the floor, pulling them on as he made his way outside to see what was happening.

“Something’s wrong, I know it.” Sally began gnawing her already worn fingernails, “He’s always back by now, something’s not right!”

“Now hang on Sally, don’t go off the deep end just yet,” John placed a hand on her shoulder while he unclipped an old walkie-talkie from his belt. “Evan, you there? Evan Flannery, this is John, over.”

“What’s happening - is something up?” Alex asked the big man as he broke from his short jog over.

The walkie hissed with static, “Yeah, Flannery’s not back yet. He’s never been this late before on a run.”

“You haven’t heard from him at all?” Alex asked.

“No, and it’s making me a little tense,” John held the hissing black box up to his face again, “Evan, come in. It’s John, are you there? If so, speak up! Over.”

Alex watched John pace away from the group towards the the barbed wire fence that crawled the town’s perimeter. The whispers became a din as more of the townspeople emerged from their homes to

investigate the commotion.

“It’s bad, this is very bad, I can feel it,” Sally frowned, her paper skin pulling tight over her face, “something happened to him. Maybe they arrested him?”

Alex watched as people’s eyes darted, and their conversations grew louder. He knew firsthand the schoolteacher had a unique capacity to make any bad situation worse, “Now hang on Mrs. McCormack. We don’t know what happened, so let’s just wait and see. There’s time.”

“Don’t tell me to hang on, Alex!” her eyes grew into giant blue marbles, “Don’t try to placate me, I know something happened to Evan!”

John trotted back at the sound of their argument, “Whoa, whoa, hang on Sally,

there’s no need to raise your voice at Alex, he’s just trying to help.”

“Just trying to patronize me is more like it John, and I don’t appreciate it. I know that...”

“JOHN! JOHN! This is Evan. You there, John? Come in.” The walkie-talkie crackled to life.

“Jesus Christ, Evan, there you are. You had everyone here on the edge of their seats. What’s going on?” the crowd calmed at the sound of the old man’s voice over the radio.

“Nothing good, John; we got trouble.”

John shot a glance at the group, “Hold on a second Evan,” and distanced himself out of earshot.

Alex watched John pace back and forth



like a caged animal while he spoke into the radio, until he finally waved Alex over.

“What’s up?” Alex said

“It’s bad. Here, talk to Mr. Flannery,” John handed over the walkie.

“Uh, hey Mr. Flannery, it’s Alex. What’s happening? Over?”

The walkie was silent for a moment, then sprung to life “Alex? OK, good. Thank god. There’s something wrong with my truck. It’s busted.”

“Busted how?”

“Dammit kid, I don’t know. I was a lawyer, not a mechanic. It just broke down. I was driving and heard a weird sound and all of a sudden the gas wasn’t doing anything and I could barely steer the damn thing.”

Possibilities washed into his mind like flood water. *Was I rushing, and didn’t reinstall the belt correctly? Did I make a mistake and not see or hear it? Maybe I was distracted. Shit, maybe the old man WAS right about my headphones.*

Alex felt an ache in the pit of his stomach as he looked up at John. “I think the timing belt broke.”

“OK, Mr. Flannery are you still there? I think the timing belt is messed up. If so, that’s bad, it means the truck isn’t drive-able. Where are you? Over.”

“Oh, crap,” the old man’s voice punched through the tiny speaker, “I’m about 100 yards from the city gate. Is John still there? Hand him the radio.”

Alex saw the distinct look of fear on John’s face, but the big man pursed his lips, fighting back against it as he took the

radio. “Yeah Evan, I’m still here. Have you talked to any of them?”

“Yeah, I asked them for help, but they’re giving me the typical runaround. Obviously they aren’t going to let me go inside, but they’re saying it’s gonna be almost two days before they can have a mechanic from inside come out here to look. They’re spinning some bullshit about protocols and needing to procure a suit and protective gear for the guy. You know how they are.”

“Yeah, did you explain our situation to them?”

“I tried, but it fell on deaf ears. They’re still ‘unaware’ of any issue, and it’s too far to tow, basically told me to sleep in the truck until they can get someone out here.”

“That’s not good.”

“I know John, I don’t want to spook you, but you may want to go back to your place and get your revolver.”

“That’s not good,” John repeated, as he pointed to the large dust cloud on the trail being kicked up by the wheels of a huge wooden cart. “Alex, go back there, tell your mother and sister to get in the house and lock the doors. Then come find me. Don’t say anything to anyone. I don’t want to start a panic.”

The walkie-talkie crackled once again “John, you there? Alex? What’s going on?” Flannery’s voice was desperate.

John slowly raised the walkie-talkie to his mouth, “Evan, it’s too late. They’re here.”

Alex ran towards the trailer, his lungs burning from the unexpected rush of cool morning air. A quick glimpse over his shoulder revealed misshapen silhouettes approaching down the trail, and from the looks of it, there were more than a couple. "Mom! MOM!" the silver door slammed.

"Alex, what's wrong with you? Are you trying to break the door off its hinges?" drips of grease fell from her spatula as she pointed it at him, "I'm making eggs if you want any."

"You gotta get Jesse and get out of here, there's no time for food or anything else."

"I'm not even dressed, what's gotten into you?"

"It's the Mongos!"

She scowled "Alex, I thought we went over this last night,"

"No, I'm sorry, whatever, they're here! And Mr. Flannery isn't. We have nothing for them."

The metal spatula clattered as it bounced off the counter onto the floor, "Oh my God. Jesse, JESSE!" his mother navigated the trailer with a swiftness Alex had never seen. "Baby, where are you? Come here!"

"Mommy, what is it?" Jesse rubbed her eyes and yawned, "I'm tired."

"I know baby, we just need to go for a walk, OK?"

"Why? I don't want to go out yet."

Alex saw the panic'd frustration in his mother's face, "Baby, let's take Mr. Mouse outside to see the sunshine. I think he'd like that."

"OK, I guess," Jesse sighed and grabbed her stuffed toy.

Alex grabbed his backpack from his bedpost and dumped it on the floor, then tossed in a few bottles of water from his dresser.

"Mom, I'm going to pack some things, for the walk."

"Bring Sam The Puppy!" Jesse said.

Alex snatched the book and stuffed it into the bag on his way to the kitchen. The smell of eggs and burning oil permeated the air, and he turned off the stove before ransacking the small cubicle fridge for any food he could find. As he finished stuffing oranges into the bag, he jumped as a loud knock rapped on the door.

"Alex, it's John!" a muffled voice shouted from outside. "Open the door, I need your help!"

Alex swung the door open to find John holding a box of scrap metal under one arm.

"What do you need me to do?" Alex fiddled with the zipper as he struggled to close the bag.

"I have an idea. Dunno if it will work, but it's the best I can come up with right now. I need you to get to your garage as fast as you can. You gotta have spare parts laying around there, right?"

"Yeah, some, but it's mostly junk."

John frowned, "well, hopefully they won't know the difference. Just box up whatever you can carry and meet me by the fence. Are your mother and sister in there?"

"Yeah, we're here John. What the hell is going on?" Alex felt his mother press

against him in the doorway, her hands cupped over the little girl's ears. "Where's Evan? Alex is scaring the hell out of me. He's got us ready to run."

"No!" John shook his head "Nobody run. They'll know something's up. I'm telling everyone to just come out to the gate like usual. Bring whatever you can carry for them, and we'll just treat it like any other time. It's the only way we stand a chance."

"You sure that's a good idea? Alex asked.

"Kid, I don't have time to stand here and talk, but you need to trust me. There's too many of us, and if we run, they're going to chase us, and that's their land out there. They know it, and a bunch of panicked townspeople scrambling out into the desert? We won't even last through the night with those things hunting us. You gotta trust me. We're smarter than them, that's our only advantage. Just please, collect some stuff and meet me by the gate. I have to go knock on other doors."

"OK John, we'll be there," Alex tensed at his mother's words.

"Thanks Lara, collect what you can and I'll see you over near the gate in a few minutes," the trailer bobbed as John hopped off the step and headed next door.

Scrap metal clanked and jangled in oil-stained cardboard as Alex hefted boxes onto the gray plastic work cart. Heavier than they looked, he hoped the rusty scrap

and plastic tubing would be enough to satisfy them. He tucked his dad's old socket wrench into the pocket of his jeans and covered it with his shirt. He had no intentions of parting with it if he didn't have to, but the shiny silver tool was the type of object that could mean the difference between another peaceful month and an ugly situation. He hated everything about this plan, but John was in charge, and he didn't have a better one. Plus, it was his fault they were in this mess to begin with **damn headphones** so the least he could do was try his best to fix things. Otherwise, there might not be anything left in town to repair.

Alex's arms burned as he dragged the cart behind him, the overburdened plastic wheels sinking into the sand as it passed the threshold of the tin garage. The ground hissed as he pulled it, leaving a trail of uniform grooves. A mass of shadows converged by the front gate. The sun blasted his eyes, and he squinted until they were slits, but he thought he saw one of the shadows getting closer.

"Alex, here, let me help," Tony shouted. Sweat stains soaked the armpits of the man's gray tee shirt, even in the cool morning air. Alex watched as he lifted his shirt and used it as a rag, his belly flopping over his belt as he wiped his face and palms, further drenching the fabric before he grabbed the cart handle. "John told me to come help you," he panted.

"Thanks, Mr. McPheerson," Alex said as the cart began to move a little easier, "this thing wasn't getting anywhere."

“Yeah, we could see that, and they’re almost at the gate. Figured you could use a hand.” Tony replied.

“Did everyone else find things to offer?” Alex asked.

“Yeah, but not much. Some clothes, kitchen utensils, boxes of magazines. Sally brought her last chicken. I think that bird and these auto parts are gonna be the only things they care about. The Mongos don’t strike me as big readers.”

“I hope you’re right for all our sakes.”

“OPEN GATE!” a booming voice echoed across the entrance of the town.

“Awww, damnit! They’re here,” Tony grunted and Alex felt the cart slide faster. He dug the toes of his shoes into the sand and pushed off, his calves burning with each step.

“OPEN GATE NOW!” a terrible rasp came again, this time with even more force.

Alex heaved a sigh as they reached their destination, and he stepped forward into the small crowd that had gathered, belongings in hand. As he made his way toward the front of the group, he saw John hunched over, fumbling with the padlock as two huge creatures looked down at him from the other side of the barbed-wire.

“LET IN!” A large hand grasped the edge of the gate; thick fingers capped with jagged black nails wrapping around the metal post and heaving it forward. For all his size, John stumbled back from the force.

“OK, it’s unlocked. Come in,” John said, wiping the dust from his jeans.

The creature grunted, and stomped its way past him. “Looli, get cart. Bring cart

here!” it shouted.

Alex watched as the other Mongo lined in front of the old wooden horse cart, its wheels bound with rusted metal patches, and a menagerie of things found and taken tied to its sides and piled under a ratty wool blanket. Old cans and hubcaps played a hollow metal song as the female lifted the wooden handles, and began pulling. Her legs engaged; two tree trunks digging and uprooting in the thick sand, and her muscular, leathery arms swelling as she wheeled the vehicle through the gate. She grimaced as the wheels sank into a deep patch of sand, a harelip exposing rotten yellow teeth.

There were only two, which wasn’t unusual, since there was no need for any more of them to come down from wherever they lived out in the hills. They stood at least three heads taller than John, the biggest person in the town, and Alex had seen what they were capable of when they first arrived to demand their treasures. It would have taken ten townspeople, maybe twelve, to pull in that cart, but these things barely broke a sweat across their crooked brows.

“Where is old man?” the creature stepped forward, brushing a rope of greasy black hair over his shoulder.

John hesitated, stuttering as he spoke, “He’s not here. He’s sick. We’ve brought you things.”

“Old man sick? No care,” the giant sneered, yellowed canines flashing as his lips receded across the rough, chiseled topography of his face. “You all sick. Land make you sick because you weak,” he

reached down, fingering the opening of a small leather pouch that dangling from the frayed rope that masqueraded as a belt, and produced a small clump of yellow earth. The sneer became a smile and the tainted soil crumbled as he rubbed it between his thumb and finger. John coughed as the dust cascaded over him, coating him like wretched powder makeup. "You see? Land no want you. Make you sick for what you did to it, to us, now we take, until you not here anymore."

Alex stepped forward as John doubled over in a coughing fit, but a hand quickly motioned him to stop. "We didn't do this to you, and we can't leave. Please, just take what we've brought you," he said as he regained his breath.

"No. Get old man. We trade with him and his cart." the Mongo's hand hit John's chest with a thud, sending him wheeling back onto the ground, "get him now or you get hurt."

"Chicken, I smell chicken!" a high pitched, squealing voice came from the cart and Alex watched as the mass beneath the wool blanket suddenly began to pitch and roll, and another creature emerged from beneath. This one had wild tufts of long gray hair growing patchwork from her skull, and as she inched forward towards the edge of the cart, her spindly arms tossed away the blanket revealing a bulbous green belly, the skin stretched tight and hard, dark veins spider webbed their way up under a burlap sack that barely covered her full, drooping breasts.

"Mumma, stay in cart!" the creature

turned and shouted at the voluminous Mongo as she tried to climb down. One of her legs was shriveled, and imprisoned in a makeshift brace. It was a crude thing; leather straps pinned with old screws on what appeared to be an old fire extinguisher frame. *Did they make that? Are they capable of making things?* Alex wondered as he watched the creature try kick and flail its way off the cart.

"Joki, bring me chicken, I hear it, I smell it," Mumma said.

The huge Mongo obliged, stomping over to Sally and snatching up the old wire cage containing her prized hen. The animal cawed and flapped its wings in a panic as he carried it back towards the cart.

Alex watched Mumma's eyes widen, and her belly seemed to move as she began drooling. Her fingers and arms stretched and wavered like two gnarled tree limbs blowing in the wind as she watched the cage coming closer. Finally, she snatched it from him, and the animal screeched as her hand punched through the flimsy wire door, extracting it from the carrier.

"Aaaah," Sally let out a small cry and recoiled as Mumma began her meal. Alex was paralyzed, and his ears were filled with the sound of the animal's final scream as its head was torn off, spraying a gout of blood, coating the witch's bloated stomach. He watched the chickens feet twitch and kick; a lingering nervous reaction, as she shoved it's torso into her mouth, the sound of innards and crunching bones were barely audible over her pleased grunts. Gore caked feathers ejected from her mouth with

a heavy cough, and she drooled blood down across the old sack, adding new blotches to the already soaked fibers creating a tapestry of past meals.

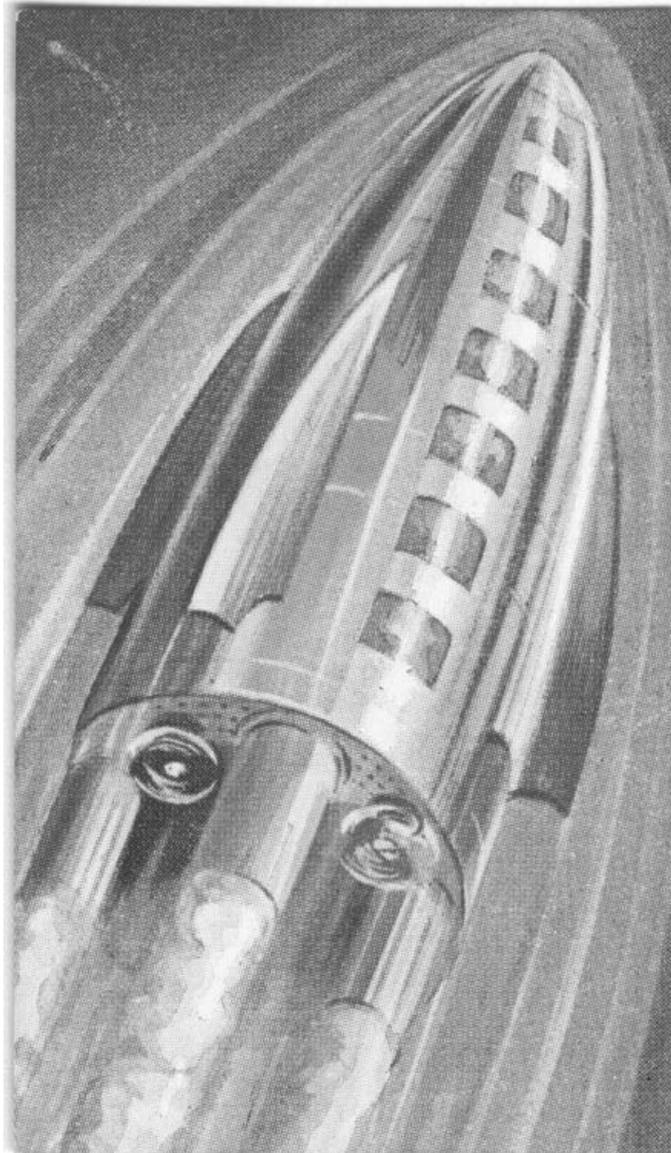
“Mumma, I want the head,” Looli looked on, licking her lips.

“Bah! Head is last, best part,” tiny bits of chicken spattered as she spoke, “Haha!” Mumma waved the animals severed head at Looli to taunt her, and the female Mongo growled, her harelip creating a chasm across her face.

“You and Joki take this,” the gnawed

remains soared from the cart, the chicken’s final flight ending as it landed in the sand with a soft thump.

Looli was immediately upon it, her eyes wide as she snatched the dusty carcass and removed one of its legs with a snap of her teeth. Mumma laughed and smeared her belly with chicken blood. Alex just barely made out her stomach stretching and contorting as her hands ran in playful circles, spreading the drying gore. “Joki! More chickens, I’m still hungry!” Mumma snapped.



“Mumma still hungry. Bring more chickens,” a chipped black fingernail stopped a few inches from John’s face.

“I...I don’t have anymore, that was my last one,” Sally said, barely getting the words out as she dried her face.

“I’m sorry, we don’t have anymore. That was the last one,” John stepped back slightly, unsure of what reaction this new information would bring.

“Mumma, no more chickens,” Joki said. Alex could see the creature was growing impatient, and he began fidgeting with a sharpened bone that was nested between his rags and belt; some sort of tool, or a weapon?

“Still hungry! No chickens?” Mumma’s eyes prowled and her fingers curled, then a bony digit struck out at Sally, “bring me chicken lady! Still hungry!”

Sally’s shriek pierced the air like a pin as Joki’s massive hand swept down, clasp around her leg and throwing her to the ground. The townsfolk erupted into cries and gasps as the teacher wailed; her fingers clawing and scratching at the sand, leaving tiny trails as the brute dragged her towards the cart. Mumma gyrated and bounced, her tongue flopping out, face still wet with blood and feathers sticking to the corners of her mouth.

“Help! For God’s sake, please someone help me!” Sally screamed. Alex watched as her body twisted and flopped like a wet towel, she began tearing at her own leg, trying to free herself like an animal caught in a trap. Her struggling was nothing to the Mongo—the buzzing of an irritating fly. He

watched the crowd, paralyzed with fear, and preparing themselves to witness Sally suffer the same fate as her chicken. John’s hand had slipped under the back of his red flannel shirt, but Alex knew the big man hesitated to draw the gun.

Alex’ gaze locked with Sally, her eyes radiating the primal fear of being eaten alive, and anger at her friends and neighbors failure to help. He looked back at his mother, whose hands were wrapped around his sister’s face, shielding her eyes. He felt the roughhewn metal against his fingertips as he tightened his grip on the wrench and lunged forward.

“Hey!” Alex shouted as he closed distance on Joki.

Time seemed to slow down as Alex approached the hulk, and his body moved of its own will, a strange autopilot driving him forward. He heard his mother and John screaming for him to stop, but they sounded miles away. There was a look of confusion on Joki’s face as he caught sight of Alex, and the massive silver wrench swinging at his face.

Alex remembered his father teaching him to chop wood. When the axe swung just right, it pierced and crushed the bark, and his father would laugh as Alex struggled to pull the blade from the flesh of the tree. “You don’t know your own strength, kiddo!” he’d laugh as he helped him pry it out.

The head of the wrench had crushed Joki’s eye, and a soft mass oozed like squashed fruit from the shattered socket. Sally hit the ground, and the creature

touched the split and leaking orbit, nudging the dangling eyeball with a playful tap. He collapsed, brains emerging from his cracked skull as the fall dislodged the wrench.

“Run!” John screamed, “Run and get into your homes!”

Alex reached down and grabbed Sally in the ensuing panic, clutching onto her and raising her to her feet. He looked up and saw John running towards them, then felt Sally suddenly ripped from his arms. He wheeled around to see Sally caught in Looli’s grasp, her eyes wild. The creature separated Sally’s leg from her groin, then her torso, like a frustrated little girl breaking a doll. Blood sprayed across the ground in a massive torrent. A hemorrhagic painting, crimson in the desert sun. Looli’s face parted as she roared, tossing Sally’s amputated leg to the ground.

“Kill them Looli! Kill for what they did to brother!” Mumma wailed and rolled in the cart, strings of spit exploding from her mouth as she urged her daughter and watched the red stain growing under her son’s fractured skull.

Alex scrambled, and heard John yelling to him, but the words became muffled static as Looli crashed into him. In the moment of impact, time slowed once more, and the surrounding screams were muted by the sound of air being bashed from his lungs. His mind wandered in what seemed like minutes. *Is this what it feels like to be hit by a car? Am I about to die? Where’s mom?* He snapped back into consciousness as she thrust her full weight down on his spine,

crushing his body into the packed sand. His scalp stung as her nails dug in, pulling his head back by a snatched tuft of hair. Grains of sand made his eyes water, and as he blinked to clear them, a watery blur appeared a few feet away.

Alex’ ears rung as the pistol clapped. The tension in his neck released like a cut rope sending his face crashing back into the ground, and he felt a warm sensation grow across the back of his shirt as his lungs refilled. The high pitched whine continued as powerful arms pulled him up from the ground, and he saw John’s mouth moving; no words. He looked down and saw Looli’s body lying in a crumpled heap. The back of her skull bloomed like a pink flower; the kind Alex picked off cactus for Mom. The ringing slowly subsided, and was replaced by the sounds of howling and snapping wood.

Mumma was in a frenzy. Nothing was left of what might have passed for human, replaced by an animal ferocity that writhed and tore at the cart. Lurching under her own weight, her arms strained to rip boards from its side and hurl them in a futile attempt at vengeance. She screamed and clawed at the air, reaching for anything to kill as she looked on the bodies of her fallen children.

“John. John, are you there?” the walkie-talkie sprang to life. “John, are you there? It’s Evan. Over.”

John unclipped the radio from his belt, “Oh my God. Evan. Yeah, I’m here. What’s happening?”

“I finally had some good luck. Met a

guy out here, a scavenger. He's had a run in with the Mongo's before. He took a shine to me and offered a ride with as much as I could fit in his truck when I explained our predicament to him. We're en route, so try to stall them. Do whatever you can, and tell them I'll be there soon to trade."

"It's too late Evan." John said.

"What do you mean too late? John, what happened?" Flannery's voice buzzed from the plastic box.

"You all dead!" Mumma shrieked.

"What?" John turned and faced the old witch.

"You all dead," Mumma snarled at him.

"No, you're the dead ones! This is your fault! You killed our animals and then tried to eat her. That's what you tried to do and this is what happened. We killed you! You're all dead!" people began to re-emerge from their homes as John's shouting carried over the still air, "maybe we should just kill you too!"

Mumma recoiled, wrapping her arms around her belly, "you take and take, you never belong here. Others in big town make you stay, to keep taking from us. We take back what never belong to you, and when you don't have that, we take some of you, since you all dead anyway."

"Shut up!" John's face burned red as he screamed, "Shut the hell up!"

"You all dead and nothing you can do," Mumma laughed, "You kill my babies, but something you don't know," Alex shuddered as a wide grin slithered across her face, jagged teeth unsheathing from behind

her lips.

"What don't we know?" the words seethed from John's mouth in a hushed tone.

"We not the trading cart," Mumma hissed. Alex heard John gasp, and the sound of the walkie talkie hitting the ground. He looked up and saw a dust cloud expanding on the horizon. Another cart, pulled by a group of massive figures, slowly making their way down the trail towards the town gates.

The black box chirped as it lay in the sand, "John. Are you there John? What the hell is happening? Is anybody there? Over."



“THE FIRST EVER MEETING OF THE LADIES’ SHOOTER SOCIETY PRESIDENCY”

by BOBBI PARRY

The 9mm Sig Sauer was a custom job, with light pink accents added around the grip and trigger. Marley’s lip curled. An aluminum frame, of course—because what lady could lift a heavy pistol? Marley stopped herself. Nothing wrong with an alloy. Just she loved her steel frame Colt. “You’re like a stick,” Angela said not long ago, “Just stuck in mud. Wherever you land that’s just where you stay.” Angela made a lot of comments like that, and they all seared into Marley’s brain. Another reason they hadn’t worked out.

Marley left the Sig on the counter while she reran the monthly sales report. White thermal paper curled out of the machine, still with the same damn error message, three times now: *These dates do not exist*. She’d triple checked everything, found no problems. Not to mention the end date was the day she and Angela had stopped talking. Marley let the cursed strip of paper waft into the trash. Outside, exhaust blackened snow managed a faint glimmer beneath the bright winter sun, but did not melt. It was too cold.

A white SUV swung into the nearest parking space. Right on time. Carrie in her fuschia puffy coat climbed out, a candy colored beetle, venturing confidently from its shiny cocoon. Marley stayed thinking

this thought until the door chime ground out a long, scraping buzz as the door swung closed behind Carrie.

Of course she zeroed in on the Sig. “Look at this.” She tested its balance. “So nice and light.”

“Special order.” Marley’s words dropped heavily like she was trying to interrupt something. She snatched the gun and stowed it beneath the counter. Carrie gave a lady-like snort and pulled her baby-blue iPad out of her baby-blue purse, signaling the beginning of their event planning as dually elected co-presidents of the Lady Shooters’ Society. Never mind that Marley was the one who founded the club, and managed the store and range where they met.

“I know you want the party here,” Carrie tapped her screen with a manicured finger. “But I just don’t think it’s—enough.”

Marley grimaced. *Speak up*, Angela would say. *You let little things get to you when you should just speak up*. Frustration scraped through Marley like a snow plow, pushing everything else off, and she didn’t even realize the door buzzed again until Carrie touched her arm.

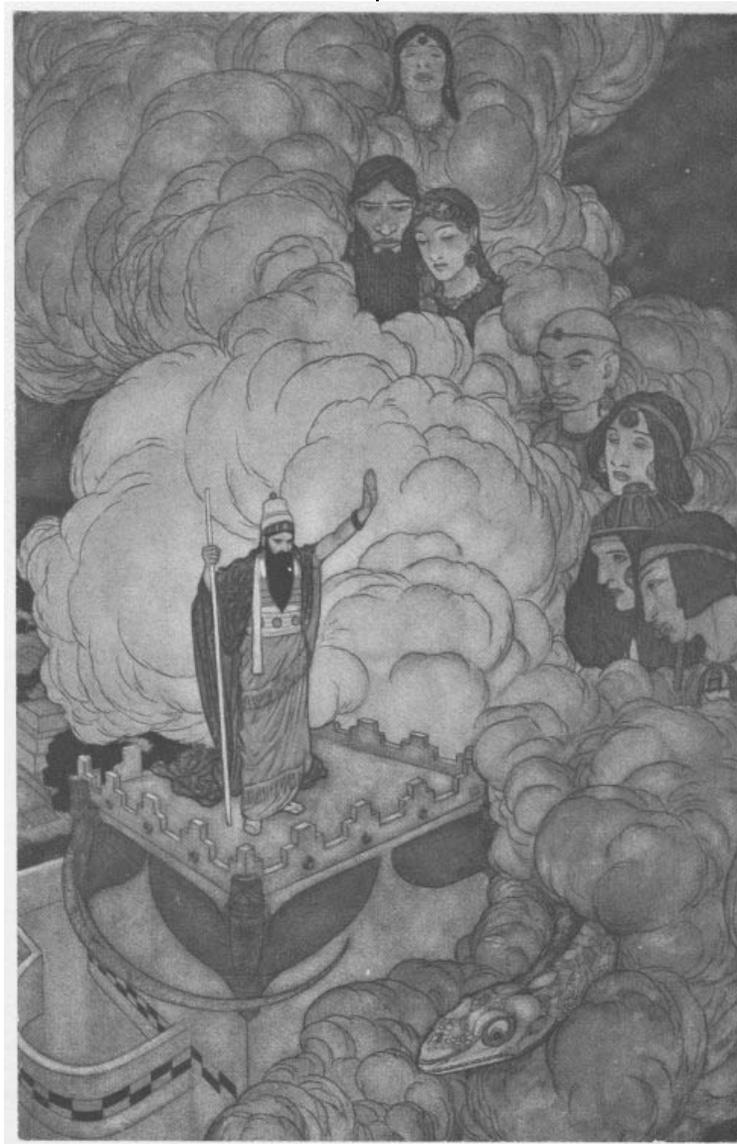
A man, standing there, the black door frame perfectly outlining him like he was a

picture on a wall. Watching them. Had he come through parking lot? From which direction? Angela's thirteen-year-old son had been really into these books called manga, and Marley was struck by how much he reminded her of one of the central characters, milky white skin and hair a cascading set of spikes. His lips were narrow, top and bottom making a single, scowling line.

"Where is it?" His voice came low but still echoed. He seemed determined to stay in that pose, weight on his front foot,

shoulder angled towards them, as if about to charge. In the manga books—which she'd devoured, while Angela laughed—the man was a lost soul of sorts, a time traveler on an endless quest. Sisyphean, the narrator called it.

"Where is what?" Marley was a little surprised to hear a quaver in Carrie's voice around the last syllable, and even more so when Carrie sidled shakily past the display case to join her behind the counter. How could you be threatened by someone so—Marley searched for the word—interesting?



Out of the corner of her eye, she watched Carrie's well-maintained claws move steadily through the shadows beneath the counter, towards the gun. She wanted to—what? Escalate?

The man broke stance to close the distance between them. Marley noticed the perfect architecture of his hair. His smooth, unbothered skin. The same fascination she'd felt with Angela at first—her skin, hair, eyes!—but simpler. Less needy. Like falling in love with an idea.

"Where is it?" He was almost to them.

Beneath the counter, Carrie's fingers closed around the pistol. It wouldn't be loaded. It had just returned from the shop. Still, Marley had a vision of a bullet blazing through the thin plywood of the counter's front panel, burrowing in the man's abdomen with spray of red. She palmed the top of Carrie's hand, pushing the gun back down into the shelf, and held steady, angled her forearm so slightly to put pressure around Carrie's index finger. No movement near the trigger. Carrie's entire body tensed to a brittle cord but her hand stayed put. Marley matched her tone to the man's. "Sir we've got a gun underneath the counter. You need to leave."

The man's arms floated limply upwards. The individual slackline of each muscle pulled taut then tauter until all conorted with a rush of violent energy. The store's counter and displays began to vibrate with what felt like life. Carrie's purse jumped and strained then leapt off the counter and spilled. The low shrieking sound near her ear, Marley realized, was

Carrie.

Then everything stopped. The man's arms folded, birdlike, back to his sides. "This must be the wrong timeline," he said, and left.

The door buzzed into the silence. Carrie released the gun.

"That was a time-traveler!" Marley stopped herself from shouting. Carrie slunk to retrieve her fallen purse. Her movement oozed a liquid resignation. She didn't want to talk about what just happened, didn't care what Marley had been thinking. She wanted to leave.

As her adrenaline dropped, Marley became aware of the tangle of sensations it left behind: the faint thrill—completely inexcusable—at how Carrie favored one hand ever so slightly, the collapse of realizing no one would ever believe her about this. And finally, overwhelmingly, the swooping motion of being lifted to a better view of things, of the bright strange field of possibilities that opened up as she found her place in the background noise in a much bigger universe. ❖

“CONE OF SHAME”

by A. Elizabeth Herting

Buddy just knew he was in trouble. Big, big trouble. His Alpha had roused him from his nice warm bed early in the morning, luring him out into the cold with a slice of mouth-watering bacon. Bacon was Buddy’s number one, absolute favorite thing in the whole wide world, except for his Alpha, of course. He wolfed down the bacon, not realizing until it was too late that he had been led straight into the contraption, the door slamming shut hard behind him and sealing his fate.

Usually, he loved riding in the contraption. He would stick his head out as far as his Alpha would allow, basking in the glory of the wind blowing through his long, golden hair. Today was different, Buddy could just tell. His Alpha always got that tone in his voice when they were going to the place that shall not be named. The place that reeked of strange smells, fear, and others of his kind in distress, their voices raised together in indignation. Buddy would be poked and prodded, strangers fussing over him and making him eat strange, bitter-tasting things. His Alpha would stay nearby so he always knew that it would be all right, but he hated it just the same.

This time was the worst, the absolute worst. Buddy had recently hurt himself, getting caught in a patch of painful weeds as

he was chasing the bushy-tailed creature across the park. The bushy-tail managed to escape, but Buddy was left with a deep cut. His Alpha was clearly worried about him, giving him extra scraps and propping him up on the couch. Buddy should have known something was up, he was hardly ever allowed on that couch! Then, the very next day, the trip to that horrid place. Boy, was he ever in trouble.

Now, as the contraption delivered them home, Buddy could only pray that no one would see him in such an undignified state. He could feel the edges of it securely in place around his neck, its large white walls surrounding him. It gave him a strange tunnel-like vision, rendering him helpless to attack from both sides, for all he could do was look ahead. In the neighborhood, his peers would shake their heads and whimper whenever they saw one of their kind trapped inside of such a device. Buddy walked the long path dejectedly, hanging his head down as low as it would go, his Alpha encouraging him each step of the way. He didn’t know what he had done to deserve such a punishment, for surely, that is what the Cone meant. They all knew what it was, dreaded the mere mention of its hideous name—The Cone of Shame.

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Buddy curled up on the couch, but it was impossible to get comfortable. The Cone inhibited his every movement, limiting his ability to stretch out. His Alpha tried to console him, but it was no use. Buddy was well and truly miserable.

His Alpha gave up and walked into the kitchen, Buddy perking up his head as he began to smell the tantalizing aroma of steak sizzling away. He sat up and got into his most appealing begging stance, straining to see his Alpha through the frustrating barrier. Steak was his absolute, most favorite thing in the whole, wide world. Well, besides bacon and his Alpha, that is.

His Alpha padded over to the couch, carrying the freshly-cooked steak in his mouth as Buddy waited anxiously. Buddy knew that he must always wait until his Alpha told him to take the treat, he must sit completely still until that very moment in order to get his reward. His Alpha gently placed the steak onto the couch next to Buddy, then gave him a single loud bark to signal that Buddy was allowed to eat. Buddy slowly reached out and grasped the steak in his left hand, carefully ripping off a portion with his right one. He dropped it inside of the cone and into his eager mouth, chewing and groaning in sheer pleasure. His Alpha was pleased, barking at him and nuzzling Buddy with his long, wet nose. Buddy was relieved to see his Alpha's tail wagging and knew that he had been a Very Good Boy. His Alpha jumped up into his lap as Buddy finished the treat, finally managing to lay down with the Cone in a way that was bearable. He could feel his

Alpha checking his wound, rewrapping the new bandage with his snout as Buddy settled in, sleep beginning to overtake him.

It would be OK, Buddy thought, my Alpha knows what's best. Maybe tomorrow the Cone of Shame would come off and maybe, just maybe, there would be bacon. With that pleasant thought floating through his mind, Buddy drifted off into sleep. He dreamed of bushy-tailed creatures, running as fast as his two legs would take him as his Alpha lovingly licked his hand, comforting him in his slumber.

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Bob curled up in his easy chair, reaching over to lap up a taste of his finest single malt scotch. This had been such a long day and it was only Anubisday, the week was barely halfway over. Really, he thought as he lapped at the scotch, what else could possibly go wrong? He knew that his eldest pup had done something to the vehicle, the left side passenger ski was wobbly, totally pulled out of alignment. His boss was being a real bitch at work, making him fetch her presentations and always taking credit for his ideas. Then to top it all off, the human went and hurt his arm again, setting Bob back a hefty 200 bones at the vet's office and causing him to miss an entire day of work.

Buddy began twitching in his sleep as Bob went over to nuzzle his long, silky hair. How nice it must be to be a human, he mused, without a single care in the world. Canine-beings in this day and age were so busy, rushing through their days, caught up in the cat race of life. His wife was always

telling him how much he spoiled Buddy, that he needed to be more firm, but Bob never listened. Humans were dog's best friend after all and if Bob were being completely honest with himself, he would admit to being just a little bit jealous of Buddy. He would gladly trade places with Buddy if he could.

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Bob sighed and checked on Buddy one last time before turning in. The human was sprawled out on the couch snoring loudly. Even though he knew that his wife would be furious that the human was on the couch again, Bob left him there anyway,

feeling sorry that the poor guy would be forced to suffer another day wearing the Cone of Shame. Hopefully, the wound would heal enough that Bob could trust him not to fuss at it, but until then, the Cone must stay.

Bob pressed the light off with his nose, making a quick stop in the hydrant-room before giving Buddy one final lick good-night. He was human-tired and he had a big day at the kennel tomorrow. After all, he thought as he turned around three times before settling in next to his sleeping wife, a dog's work is never done. ❖

END TRANSMISSION