

# GARDEN & GUN



Illustration by John Cuneo

BY BRONWEN DICKEY | DEC 2011/JAN 2012 |

## Licked to Death by a Pit Bull

### And other tales of a faithful family dog

In the beginning, there was Angel.

I met her in the mountains of upstate South Carolina back in the winter of 2008—she belonged to some friends of mine—and the minute she trotted out to greet me, I felt certain that things would not go well. Her head looked like an anvil, for starters; it was framed by a wide jaw and lupine, almond-shaped eyes. Her silky black fur stretched over at least fifty pounds of muscle—she had the kind of physique you’d expect to see on a panther, not a pet. All the better to chase me down and devour me with, of course, because Angel was some kind of demon dog. You could tell just by looking at her. Angel was pure pit bull.

As it turned out, Angel wasn’t much of a fighter; she was more of a leaner. Astonishingly obedient. A bit on the needy side, if you want to know the truth. When the time came for her to chase the horses back into their corral, she did her job like an old pro, with precision and care, but most of the time she seemed more interested in soaking up human affection, however she could get it.

So when the time came last year for my husband, Sean, and me to give our imperious, grumpy little pug some company, I started doing research on pit bulls, a breed I had always been taught to fear and revile. (Was I insane? Aren't they bred for blood? Don't they turn on their owners, and maul children without the slightest provocation? Don't they have locking jaws?!)

Well, no. And no, and no, and no, and no (no dog has locking jaws, by the way, and a pit bull's bite is weaker than, say, a German shepherd's). There is no real DNA profile for the "pit-bull-type dog"; it's at best a catchall term for what is pretty much a mutt all around, but I was shocked to learn that the American bulldog-terrier mix was actually once cherished as a national icon, the canine embodiment of loyalty and courage and rock-solid temperament. The kind of dog you could always count on, and the kind you could trust with any job, from cutting cattle to search and rescue to, yes, babysitting. Petey, the Little Rascals' sidekick from Our Gang? He was a pit bull. The RCA Victrola dog? A pit bull. The Buster Brown mascot? Pit bull. Sergeant Stubby, the most highly decorated dog in World War I? Pit bull. Portraits of pits draped in the American flag graced some of the most famous wartime recruitment posters. Even Theodore Roosevelt and Helen Keller adored the breed.

When I told friends what I learned, they hemmed and hawed as though I were considering the acquisition of a Bengal tiger. One politely told me that she "assumed certain things about people who owned pit bulls." My mother, well versed in the child-mauling-locking-jaw spiel, claimed I had a death wish. But the scales had fallen from my eyes. If a pit bull had been good enough for Helen Keller, then—what the hell?—I figured one was damn well good enough for us. So we decided to take our chances with the most notorious dog breed in America. And we had no trouble at all finding one, because all our shelters in North Carolina seemed to be overflowing with them.

"Pits have a hard time here," one of the shelter volunteers told us, "because people are so scared of them. They're surrendered all the time in the worst possible shape—sick, starved, beaten, tortured, you name it. And we have to put a lot of them down, which is such a shame, because they make excellent family dogs."

We selected a young tan-and-white female with a red nose and honey-colored eyes who bounded over to us like a gazelle the first time we met her. Sean and I had recently returned from New Orleans and the Saints had just won the Super Bowl; our new addition, an underdog if there ever was one, looked elegant yet tough, refined yet scrappy. What could we do but name her Nola?

In the first few months after bringing Nola home, she consistently surprised us in every way. Our "junkyard dog," she of dubious lineage and dangerous reputation, was more elaborate with her affection than any canine either of us had ever owned—more than all those retrievers, spaniels, hounds, terriers, and shepherds put together. If we were in any danger at all, it was the danger of having our faces licked off, the danger of drowning in slobber.

Wherever one of us went, Nola trundled alongside, and wherever we reclined together, Nola wedged between us like a balloon at a seventh-grade dance, curling into a bizarre contortion that we now call the "pit ball." She dutifully checked the perimeter of whatever room we happened to be in. She groomed us and nuzzled us and rolled onto her side to spoon when we watched movies. Since we could never seem to peel her off of us, I joked that we might as well put a bonnet on her and start pushing her around in a stroller. (When I was at home alone at night,

however, I didn't exactly mind having a pit bull at my side. Potential intruders didn't need to know that she was a love sponge.)

Every time I looked at Nola, she dished her ears forward, cocked her head appraisingly, and furrowed her brow in a way that let me know gears were turning back there, trying desperately to figure out what I wanted her to do. If I took her out for a hilly three-mile trail run, she pushed herself to the limit, racing ahead like some kind of spotted bullet. If I felt under the weather, she was content resting her head in the crook of my arm while I read a book. She picked up new commands and solved puzzle toys in minutes (thanks for nothing, Kong!), so our main challenge, if you can call it that, was keeping her from being bored. To paraphrase the late animal behaviorist and pit bull advocate Vicki Hearne, it was as though we weren't so much training Nola as we were reminding her of something.