

BARKING UP THE WRONG TREE:
A Pit Bull Takes On the Grand Seducer, Pepé Le Pew
By Richard Taylor
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(Illustration by Jamie Tucker)

After my eldest daughter Sky decided to return to college, she moved back home with her strawberry blond, adorably ugly pit bull pup in heat, Mars.

All I knew about pit bulls was that they were supposed to be vicious killers, though I'd always loved the hilarious *New Yorker* cartoons of George Booth's twitchy, snaggle-clawed, crazed-looking pit bulls who had become a kind of *New Yorker* mascot. The *New Yorker* even sells umbrellas and t-shirts decorated with the animals. Booth's unnamed cartoon pit bulls typically stand frazzled on the edge of hopelessly unravelling domestic scenes, witnesses to bizarre human foibles. One of my favourite Booth cartoons shows a man at a typewriter in a dumpy house filled with dogs, and his wife says, "Write about dogs!"



Even though Mars wears a hot pink collar and a diaper when she's in heat, people are scared shitless when they first meet her. "Is that a pit bull?" they ask, assuming she is one of those killer dogs. When someone visits our house, Mars leaps up to lick them all over. "Mars get down," we say as we restrain her. "She's a little intense. But she's really friendly."

We'd recently put down our collie, Shadow who had been a prince - loyal, affectionate and gentle-souled, though he never took crap from animals or humans. He had coifed, over-the-top big hair of an eighties pop star, and a long nose you just had to grab and shake affectionately, because he looked forward to it. So we were happy to have another dog in our life, even if our Staffordshire mix pit bull has a blunt nose you would never dream of shaking. Mars has a poon the size and shape of a certain tattooed celebrity

actress's lips. She has the shaved down demeanour of a skinhead biker, the claws of a small grizzly, the muscles of a steroid-gulping weight lifter, but instead of a six-pack, she has a ten-pack of gnarly pink teats.

Soon, we discovered pit bulls are the most affectionate, sucky dogs on the planet. Right from the start we began a missionary trip on friends and strangers about how sweet and cuddly pit bulls are, even though Mars has the eye contact of a welding torch, and she's probably capable of pulling about two thousand pounds. With her jaws clamped on a rope she can hang indefinitely. No doubt we could teach her to do one-leg push-ups.

Years ago these tough dogs were bred and trained as vermin hunters, guard dogs, herders, then as blood-sport fighters. These days they've been dealt a bad rap because of high profile media cases where pit bulls have injured or killed children or other dogs. Some pit bulls are still abused in illegal dogfights. But in previous decades, the media latched onto and designated other breeds as killers, such as German shepherds, Doberman pinschers and Rottweillers. Although I've never read of them in the paper, I'm sure there are cases where people have been hounded by psychotic poodles, gummed to death by bucktoothed Shih Tzus, and molested by runty Paris Hilton-type Chihuahuas.

Any dog can go off the deep end. It's just a matter of how they're trained by the human owners who control their canine destinies.

Once Mars got through her shittiest-new-college-roommate stage - and we replaced curtains, wooden sculptures, belts, TV remotes, screen doors, purses, hairbrushes, bras, shoes, socks, and books - her intensity mellowed so that when anyone in our house was alone reading, watching TV or working at the computer, she will leap up into their lap and keep them company for hours.



Mug shot of Mars.

When my wife Dale had her second

bunion removed, we got a temporary handicap parking sticker for our car. There's something incredibly empowering about driving around in a car with a handicap parking sticker and a pit bull riding shotgun in the passenger seat. One day while I was going the speed limit, an impatient idiot roared passed and gave me the finger. At the next intersection we both arrived at the red light side by side. I lowered the electric window enough for Mars to jam her cinder-block head out to stare down the redneck guy, and I yelled, "She really likes to eat testicles."



During the day in our backyard, Mars will lay out for hours on our lawn chair in the sun like some diva thug, cocking both ears and keeping an eye out between the vines on the fence for any action with dogs, squirrels or cats that might make the mistake of infiltrating our yard. When I open the door she springs back into the house and transforms from guard dog to lap dog.

One night I opened the door and, as usual, Mars exploded outside. A couple of minutes later I heard barking and Mars bulleting around the yard, which wasn't unusual because she often raced between the lawn furniture and hurled herself at the tall wooden fence in pursuit of some internal demon or another. But this time it was different. She had taken the fight out of her mind and was actually chasing something real.

I looked out to find a cheeky black-and-white rodent running rampant around our backyard. But something wasn't right.

Mars, the would-be canine biker with attitude, was on the defensive, being chased by that *Looney Tunes* cartoon French Romeo, Pepé Le Pew. Our invincible little pit bull was being pursued by this real-life skunk that seemed to have the same qualities of his cartoon Doppelgänger: a charming fucker, the ultimate romantic, but essentially a serial rapist.

The whole backyard reeked with a chemical meltdown of pheromones. Mars, who had taken direct frontal sprays, was foaming at the mouth, bug-eyed from skunk stink, coughing up phlegm while Pepé scuttled around

trying to beat a hasty retreat realizing, after Mars' attempted counterattacks, that he'd chosen the wrong female to spoon.

"Perhaps, she eez not ze one."

I looked on in horror as the black-and-white sexual predator escaped under an impossibly narrow space between the ground and the back gate, then watched as Mars continued to huff and puff and foam from the mouth.

Sky rushed to the corner store to buy three big cans of tomato juice. In the driveway we hosed down our compromised pit bull and doused her with the juice. As she shivered, she looked a cross between Steven King's blood-drenched Carrie and a vampire hound from hell.

But she still stunk like skunk.

The next day my youngest daughter Quinn and I drove Mars to my friend Larry's private lake to try and exorcise the remnants of Pepé Le Pew from Mars's fur by immersion. Larry's lake is a perfect spot to let a pit bull run and swim free. Although Larry's aquatically-challenged Portuguese water dog, like Pepé Le Pew, won't even put a paw into the lake, Mars couldn't get enough water. I tossed a stick into the lake about thirty times, then I swam out into the middle of the bay with Mars beside me, her webbed feet and powerful legs torpedoing her body through the water.

But even immersion couldn't erase the stain of love left on Mars by that deviant skunk.

Back home on the Internet we learned that water actually increases the stink. So we found something that more or less works - hydrogen peroxide, baking soda and liquid soap. We wrestled Mars into a bathroom and locked the door. With her sharp claws, furtive eyes and gnashing teeth, it was a little like having a shark in the bathtub. We washed, lathered and rinsed her over and over again. Then with feminine douche, we swabbed around her eyes and muzzle where she had taken a direct spray from Pepé.

The deviant's amorous scent soon began to dissipate from her coat.

Before Mars was sprayed by Pepé, I always used to love the subtle whiff of skunk in the air.

Now the hint of rancid garlic and burnt rubber permeates our house and haunts our dreams. Whenever Mars and I walk at night in the park behind our home, she seems wary about confronting Pepé's advances again. Aside from the nightmare of deskunking Mars, I also have feelings of vulnerability, like when you think you are alone in an underground parking garage and hear heavy breathing coming from the deep shadows.

Mars seems to have recovered better than me. She sleeps around in the house with her head on the pillow beside whomever she chooses to snuggle up with; her front paws under her chin and her hind legs elongated like a frog doing yoga. When she's cold or wants to feel extra secure, she'll nose up the blankets and actually work her way under covers to the bottom of the bed - because she's one tough, badass pit bull.

