

New Fiction by Brian Conlon: Gretchen the Dog



Gretchen had been a fighter pilot. I mean, she wasn't actually, but she barked at the planes—loud. She was originally assigned to patrol the base, but was too good, wouldn't let anyone in or out. She didn't trust photos, birth dates, bar codes, any of that.

Rather than lose her to civilian life, her trainer, Dale—who had grown accustomed to her feathered face, sharp tongue, tri-toned chest fluff, the whole deal—convinced Calbert, the squadron's star pilot, to take the ninety-pound German shepherd up on a training mission. Strapped in like a mental patient, she took to flying like a duck-billed platypus to electroshock therapy. The fistful of liver treats Dale served upon landing sealed the deal. Gretchen had found her calling.

But her calling meant she had seen some things. Some things Calbert had seen too. Things that were barely visible from their altitude, things that maybe were just implied by what they saw before and what they saw after. Seven years later—a metal plate for her, a couple reconstructive surgeries for him—Calbert and Gretchen returned to civilian life in San Francisco, heroes.

Finding a Coit Tower full of feigned interest and superficial attaboys, Calbert stopped talking about it, any of it, to anyone besides Gretchen. And Gretchen had heard it all before, had witnessed it, so had little to offer other than a lick here, a sniff there.

Calbert's family proved proud but unhelpful.

His gamer brother told him to open a dog-aviation-themed sandwich shop and pet spa with his friend HoagieHound73—a TikTok baker and dog-stylist who specialized in jet-shaped hoagie rolls and updos for Yorkies.

His mother said he should become an island-hopping private pilot for people who owned islands they could all visit.

His father suggested that he become a stewardess or a monk.

He thanked them for their suggestions and all the tiny flags they placed in his boyhood room while he was gone, and slid by.

He slid by so far that he was lying on the corner of a dead-end street, having just snapped a newly planted trident maple by means of excessive leaning when the city found him, his ribs just as visible as Gretchen's, his drooping head unable to support the weight of his standard-issue VA trucker hat.

That's how Gretchen came to us, her backstory relayed with bated breath by the multi-gendered staff of *Pets Oasis*, a city-subsidized way station for pets of the addicted or otherwise addled. The staff didn't know whether to treat Gretchen with reverence, pity, or shame. War, they all agreed, was not cool, not even a little, but dogs fighting in wars, surviving wars, flying in fighter jets, was undeniable.

Gretchen was not mad, just disappointed. Lying down towards the back of her assigned den, paws tucked, resigned that the smells she longed for—jet fuel, Calbert's body odor, military grade body wash—were not walking through that door. I was. I needed to keep the peace between Alex, my surprisingly angsty six-year-old son, and Stacey, my less surprisingly exuberant four-year-old daughter, who, since their mother died last year, could agree on just one thing: gee, a dog would be nice.

Alex and Stacey weren't sure how to approach a hero dog, fluffy and foreboding, like a giant talking teddy bear from the eighties. The attendant said not to worry, that Gretchen hadn't bitten anyone the whole time, and that was tied for the record for least amount of biting they had ever witnessed. I laughed, but they said it wasn't a joke, all dogs bite these days; they are getting ready for something, evolutionarily, they said.

I approached with an open palm. "Palm closed, palm closed," screeched the attendant. Gretchen sniffed and then turned her head, as if to say, *Who's next?* The kids followed, and though they stayed further away, she sniffed harder, searching for something objectionable. She didn't seem to find it. But we had found her.

Despite tacitly agreeing to exchange her cell for our suburban colonial, she didn't like us at first, couldn't stand the way we smelled, or that we didn't smell enough, that we didn't check IDs upon entry, that we appeared to only command her (weakly) and not anybody else. She wasn't hostile, but she kept her distance, respectfully declining to do as we asked and rarely letting me or the kids get in more than an ear scratch here, a butt rub there, without a treat in hand.

About a month after Gretchen joined us, sirens interrupted her afternoon nap, her fluff-insulated face alerted by ears that would have pierced the fog if it sank any lower. From the window behind our second-floor sectional, Gretchen keenly observed the comings and goings of the gas company, fire department, and toddlers who loved fire trucks, her tail wagging, sensing something interesting, finally.

The doorbell rang. She hurried down, untrimmed claws clattering on each step, barking with an urgency we had not yet witnessed. I grabbed her collar as I opened the door. She

was pulling, but not hard.

"Please control your dog," the gas inspector said. He was a dowdy man whose mustache wax and suspenders told me that the protractor hanging from his belt was his favorite piece of modern technology.

"I'm holding her," I said, "she's friendly, just barky."

"There's been a leak. I need to check your system, sir." I ushered him inside, still holding Gretchen.

"Please control your animal, sir," he said.

"Gretchen, stop," I said. The way she was pulling now, I wondered if lard was keeping his mustache in place.

"Gretchen?" he said, as if it were impossible for a dog to have the same name as his grandmother.

"Not our choice. She's a rescue."

"We at the gas company believe in animal rights," he said, like from a script he just remembered.

I pointed him to the garage meter, holding Gretchen until he went inside.

When free, Gretchen returned to her perch upstairs where Alex and Stacey were watching cartoon bear kids playing baseball to please their bear grandpa. I told them that Bugs Bunny does a great one, and they told me they didn't like real baseball. "We're just watching a show," said Alex.

The inspector opened the garage door, and Gretchen beat me down the stairs with sharp barks and tail wags. Stopping in the doorway, he said, "Control your animal, sir." I reached for her collar, but she ducked me and scrambled up a step, still barking.

"Lock her up, sir," he said. "Now!" he snapped, seeming

genuinely afraid.

I finally grab Gretchen and lead her upstairs. There's no way to lock her up inside. The doors all have handles she can jump up and bounce open. I bribe her into the backyard with some jerky. When I close the door, she looks and barks at me like, *What the hell, man?* I ignore it. "She's outside," I say, returning to the inspector.

"Good. Keep it that way. You know, we at the gas company know our rights too," he says, and flashes a badge.

"I'm sorry," I say, not sure what the badge says or how I've impinged on his rights. "She's just excited."

He goes on to inspect our house with a beeping gauge my kids ask me if I can stop. I tell them no, but if they want to play catch we can go outside with Gretchen.

"We're watching TV . . . nicely," says Stacey, holding Alex's hand just long enough for Alex to give her a look and remove it.

Gretchen barks more insistently. I go out to the second-floor balcony, quick to close the door. She sits, allowing me to scratch her head and then mine.

I crack the door and call down, "You still there? Hello?" No one answers. I look down at Gretchen's face. She's still sitting, a short wag leaks into her tail. I let her in. We hear the garage door open again.

She's too fast. She's bellowing at the inspector, same bark just louder, faster. He holds what seems to be a different gauge in front of him like a fencing foil, shaking.

"Control it, now," he says.

"Sorry, she's friendly, just barks," I say, trying to reach her collar.

"I'm warning you," he says. I can't get her collar. She's ducking and jumping around.

The inspector suddenly moves towards her. He reaches out with what I understand too late to be a taser and zaps her in her still-visible ribs. She collapses on the step, moaning. He zaps her again.

"What the hell?" I say.

"I warned you."

She's shaking on the floor, curled up, making herself as small as possible. "She's a hero, veteran," I say, leaning over her. The kids are at the top of the stairs. Another trauma to add to the list.

"Jesus, you could have killed me with your attack dog," says the inspector.

"Not attack dog. She has a metal plate in her head; *you* could have killed *her!*" I'm not actually sure about the science. "Go," I say. He does.

Gretchen looks up at me and the kids, whimpering, shivering. The kids are now petting her, kissing her face, asking me what happened, is she going to be okay. *I don't know* is what I believe but what I say is, "The man got scared and hurt Gretchen. She'll be okay." I hug them, forming an impenetrable wall of arms around Gretchen. As I say it, this "she'll be okay" sounds hollow and familiar, but I can't pinpoint why. Later, after the kids are in bed, Gretchen curled up at my feet for the first time, I remember: It's the same thing I said to them before their mom's surgery, when I also didn't know, when I also didn't help, couldn't help.

The taser incident flipped an emotional switch in Gretchen, and in us too. She let us care for her after that, pet

sessions could last minutes without rejoinder, and she even listened to us sometimes. It was as if we proved our mettle to her, worthy of joining her pack. The kids wanted me to take pictures of them together, and told their teachers, friends, other dogs they saw, everyone, about their new hero dog Gretchen. It gave me something to talk about with them too, something distracting, but not just a distraction, something real.

Physically, the fallout was less positive. Gretchen declined food for a few days after. Even when her appetite returned, putting on the pounds was no easy task. She circled our small backyard for hours, seemingly knowing exactly how to burn each extra calorie we provided. Her only distraction was when a plane passed overhead. She would stop, sit, and point her nose at attention. A salute, I thought.

Her most evident joy came from walking the neighborhood, stopping and sniffing at her leisure. The only non-residential monument we passed regularly was a meetinghouse for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; the name etched in large marble letters over the arched entrance. Under that, in small raised metallic letters, removable, it read "Visitors Welcome." Occupying five residential lots, the lawn was immaculate despite a decade-long water shortage which had left the rest of the neighborhood lawns yellowed or artificial. Each tree and shrub was shaped and trimmed meticulously.

As we turned the corner one day, I noticed an older woman who had just parked her Buick in a 45-degree angle spot reserved for churchgoers. She appeared church-ready: powder blue dress, pearls dangling around her queenly, jutting collarbones. Rather than go inside, she followed us to the corner and stopped. I looked back several times. She just stood there watching us.

Under her gaze, I noticed signs I'd never seen before reminding "all God's children" to "be respectful," because

“the Lord is watching,” and “violators will be prosecuted here, up there, everywhere.” I also noticed, for the first time, several dog droppings on the lawn. They seemed to appear out of nowhere, like mushrooms or children’s boots after a bout of rain.

At the next corner, I hear an air horn. It’s the woman, blowing it at us. “Excuse me,” she calls out after the sound dies down. Gretchen barks once and pulls towards her. “Yes,” I say, about halfway back up the block.

The woman doesn’t move. I notice that her hair is molded in the same shape as one of the shrubs and is as wind resistant. I wonder if that’s intentional.

She points to the ground. “Please pick up after your dog,” she says. “Oh,” I say, “she didn’t do that, sorry.” She didn’t. I would have noticed. “Come see,” she says.

I come close enough to the old woman for Gretchen to sniff her.

“That wasn’t her.”

The old lady looks like she wants to rub both our noses in it.

“The other day I heard incessant barking in the afternoon. That wasn’t her either, I suppose? You know, there are city ordinances in SF, noise, waste.”

“Sorry, she was locked out for a bit. ...About the lawn, I swear...”

“Lying to old ladies in a house of God no less,” she says, still outside. “Jesus would just pick it up.”

“If that matters to you, go for it,” I say, immediately regretting it. It’s something my wife would have said, something I would have not wanted her to say. Take the L and move on, I would have told her. She wouldn’t have.

"In this dress, with these shoes, you want *me* to pick up your dog's refuse?" she says.

I look down at her sneakers and smile at the word *refuse*.

She just stares at me, mistaking my smile for guilt.

"Okay, for the record, Gretchen didn't do any of this," I say, reaching down with a bagged, L-shaped hand to pick up some other dog's "refuse." "Gretchen? I'm Gretchen," says the old lady.

"So is she."

"What a great name!" she says, brightening like a flickering bulb. "I've never met a dog named Gretchen before."

As I tie off the bag, my Gretchen sits and she scratches her behind the ears. "What about all the rest?" she says, alluding to the other droppings of various sizes and ages.

"You really think she did all that?"

"As a dog returneth to his vomit, so a fool returneth to his folly."

I pull Gretchen away.

"You have a blessed evening," she says to Gretchen, not me.

After that, whenever I see Gretchen the woman, she asks me if she can pet Gretchen the dog. I always agree. She acts like we're indirect friends through a mutual acquaintance. One time, I hear her say to Gretchen, "You know, I used to not like dogs. But you're not a dog, are you? You're a Gretchen." Gretchen looks up at her, panting with upturned lips that resemble a smile. I smile too, thinking I might prefer dogs to Gretchens, and if both, so much the better.

Stacey has an idea. "Let's take Gretchen when we fly to Grandma's!" When Alex actually agrees, I can't say no.

Apparently, Gretchen has emeritus service dog status from her time in the Air Force. Even during his slide, Calbert had kept the multicolored stars-and-stripes-emblazoned stamped document. We show it to the veterinarian, who doesn't know what it is but is so impressed that she takes a picture with her phone and posts it on her office's Instagram.

Gretchen can't contain her glee as we arrive at SFO—the sounds, the smells, the tail alternately whipping each kid in the backseat—she's the happiest she's been in the few months we've known her. Once inside, we show her paperwork to airport security. They thank her for her service and ask Stacey if she is going to ride her to Chicago.

The TSA agents are less friendly. I try to explain her metal plate to the lady with the wand. She asks me to open Gretchen's mouth. I point her to a highlighted sentence on page three of her discharge, noting her metal plate. She says anyone could have written that. I point to the U.S. Air Force Seal. She says her little cousin has one of those he puts on all his coloring books.

"You'll have to go in the back room," she says. The room feels like what would happen if a doctor and a travel agent shared a WeWork—maps, latex gloves, a garbage marked "biohazard," another marked "soft drinks, etc." I pet Gretchen's head, scratching around the edges where I think the metal plate may be, though I can't actually feel it.

The TSA room guy is wearing a pin that has a diagonal line drawn across the word "terrorism." He's squat and tan like a rotisserie squab. Gretchen licks her lips and sniffs his khakis.

"Hey there, girl," he says. "I understand we have a metal detector problem." I hand him the paperwork. His eyes widen.

"Oh my god, Gretch!" he says, and gives her a hug. I'm confused. The kids are unfazed; why wouldn't this guy know Gretchen? "We served together. I was a spotter. She used to hate it when I gave the no-go," he says.

"I've heard she was something," I say.

"Best team we had, insepa . . ." he stops himself. "Say hi to Cal if you see him. Civilian life can be, well, you see."

"Will do," I say. He pats her head and sends us on our way.

At the gate, Gretchen drags me to the nearest window to bark at the planes as they land, take off, idle. I can tell that the barks are joyful, but I don't think others can. I overhear the woman at the nearest check-in desk calling security. The kids see my struggle and attempt to calm her, repeating "Good girl!" She keeps barking.

Security shows up. They say they can't have a big dog barking like that, scaring everyone. "Her tail is wagging," I say. They can't hear me over the barking, point to their ears. She stops barking, just stops. It feels like a miracle, but security says it doesn't matter, that she is too erratic to fly. I tell them she was a fighter pilot, or was owned by one, and flew all the time, on dangerous, important missions. I show them the paperwork and try to describe the TSA guy. I say he was short, bald, should have had a goatee, but didn't. They say that describes too many people here. They work for the airline, not TSA, not the airport.

"It's a matter of customer satisfaction," they say finally. "And a barking ninety-pound German shepherd, that's not going to win us any service awards."

The kids are hanging onto their respective stuffed animals, looking up at us, still hopeful.

I try again. In the moment, it feels like if I can get

Gretchen on this plane, with my smiling kids, on their way to see Grandma, it can all be okay again, to them I can be the hero everyone keeps telling me Gretchen is.

"Have a heart," I say, "if she disrupts boarding you can kick us off."

"We can't take that risk. Viral videos. Now's the time. We can get you a hotel voucher for tonight."

"We live here," I say.

"Staycation, dog friendly, biscuits at the front desk, bones in the room." I pull Gretchen hard away from the window. She pulls back and barks. "Sorry kids," I say.

Alex says, "Mom would have never let this happen."

Stacey senses that doesn't help. "It's okay, Dad, don't be sad," she says. They boop Gretchen's nose with their stuffed animals. The barking stops.

Back home, I decide to take Gretchen and the kids for a walk. No one is really into the idea. I can't even get a tail wag from Gretchen. We reach the church corner, the kids a half block ahead on their bikes. We see Gretchen the woman. I'm not in the mood, but my Gretchen pulls towards her.

"Gretchen!" says Gretchen, opening her arms wide and bending at the waist. My Gretchen turns around, hoping to have her butt scratched the way she has trained the other Gretchen to.

"You know, I was just thinking about you," says Gretchen, looking up. "The Church is having an event, for the homeless, unhoused, people with nowhere to live."

"Oh, you know, we're not members."

"I know that. We thought it'd be nice for people to bring

pets, make it real homey for them.”

“And you want Gretchen?”

“Well, yes, who wouldn’t?” She pauses, continuing to scratch. “I have a plus one and, well, my daughter says that if the church wants to help people it should just turn itself into a shelter and be done with it.”

Gretchen the dog looks up at me doe-eyed, ears peeled back. I cave.

Gretchen and I arrive at the LDS Cares event slightly late, which I think of as on time, but is the latest anyone shows up. The sloped chapel is stuffed with smiling faces, dogs hovering around a podium in front of an enclosed area where the choir might sit, but which now contains only three men and a few cat carriers. The men are noticeably clean-cut, possibly for the first time since they could grow facial hair.

Gretchen greets us by petting Gretchen, “Who’s a good girl?” she asks. Gretchen’s tail answers that she is.

“Glad you could make it!” she says, cheerily noting our relative tardiness.

She leads us down the aisle. The sea of smiling faces parts in her wake, as my Gretchen is sniffing around plates of mayo-drenched sliders. Suddenly, she stops sniffing and bolts. I’d have lost my arm if I hadn’t lost my grip first. She nearly bowls over Gretchen, who somehow doesn’t seem surprised. She runs straight for the pulpit, starts wagging like crazy, barking for someone to open the thick wooden door behind which the three guests of honor sit. Two seem frightened and move to higher ground. The third’s buzz-cut-topped head darts around, keying in on the bark. He can’t see her over the top of the wooden barrier. As I rush to get ahold of Gretchen, he swings

the door open.

Gretchen is all over him, licking his face, rolling around in the open doorway. He's hugging her, kissing the side of her nose. Her reaction is unmistakable: pure love.

"It's him, right?" I say to Gretchen when she catches up.

She smiles a surprise checkmate. "The real owner," she says.

We wait until Gretchen and Calbert finally get up; she's still wagging so hard I'm worried she'll displace her hips. She licks my hand then returns to him, placing her face in his hands. "I'm Calbert," he says, extending his arm to shake mine. His grip is strong but cordial. "So you're the one who has been taking care of Gretch?" She sits at his side.

I nod and start to think about the look on my kids' faces when they wake up the next morning and Gretchen isn't there. I dream up a therapy session with a thirty-five-year-old Stacey or thirty-seven-year-old Alex, theorizing why they've never been in a serious relationship: "One day we were playing in the backyard, the next day she was gone forever, been really hard to trust people after that." I can't tell whether they're talking about their mom or Gretchen. I try to hold it together.

"And you're back on your feet?" I cough up.

"Yeah, she tackles pretty hard, but not that hard." His eyes crinkle.

"I found Calbert volunteering at the soup kitchen I've been serving at for forty-five years. You ever serve, really serve?" asks Gretchen.

"Does tennis count?" I say. No one laughs.

"So we were prepping meatballs, and he mentioned how his dog used to love them, how the city took her away, how they flew

together to keep us, all of us, free, how there was a giant German shepherd-sized hole in his heart where she used to be. And then he told me her name and I knew, I just knew I had to bring them back together.”

“She’s a kind lady,” says Calbert, kissing Gretchen the dog again.

“And so you have a place and everything?” I say, fishing for something I don’t want to catch.

“Not exactly. I’ve been staying with Ms. Gretchen a couple weeks, just until the mission.”

“Mission?” I hope he’s re-enlisting.

“Yeah...that’s...maybe you didn’t read the program, that’s what this is for, to raise money for the Philippines mission,” says Calbert.

“Oh, great!” I say, a little too enthusiastically. “I’ve always wanted to go,” I lie. “Gretchen and I went once, long flight, short trip, didn’t touch down, can’t say much more.” He pauses to stroke Gretchen’s chin. “I think this one will be better.”

“Of course it will,” says Gretchen.

“Well, I’m happy for you, man,” I say. “She can hang with you, can bring her by before you leave too.” “Thanks bud,” he says.

I turn around, grab a couple sliders, try to scrape off gobs of mayo with a toothpick, and duck into a pew towards the back. More people are sitting now, smiling, sober faces, teeth sticky with fake marshmallows from the hot chocolate station, lips glistening with mayo.

A young bishop takes the pulpit. He looks like a movie star or pro wrestler stuffed into his little brother’s dress shirt. He smiles the easy smile of someone who knows they look younger

than they are. He talks about what an impactful experience his Philippines mission was, what an honor it was to spread the word to those less fortunate, to build the Church, not literally, but to fill it, to bring them to Christ.

He tells us that the highlight was when he and his fellow missionaries spontaneously took a bus hundreds of miles to a neighboring village that was just hit by a stray cluster bomb. The citizens thanked them, loved them, insisted they didn't even know the terrorists were around, but after learning, really learning, of Christ's sacrifice, forgave both them and the bombers. He holds up a piece of pottery he says was a gift from the villagers who claimed it survived the bombing from a house that was now rubble.

I can see Gretchen's head over the divider; it gets a two-handed rub from Calbert, whose head is down and seems to dip deeper when the bishop mentions the bombing.

"We're going to try something new this mission, something that we're very excited about, something that was suggested by the lovely Sister Gretchen DeMille, whose steadying hand has guided our Church since before I was born," says the bishop, extending an open palm towards Gretchen.

"As Joseph Smith taught, beasts, or pets as we might call them, have spirits too, and more than that, they can save. The money we've raised here tonight will help pay for our missionaries' treasured pets to join them in service."

My gut churns anew with anxiety over what I will tell my kids. The truth isn't bad, but it won't make them feel better.

"And these brave, kind souls, are no ordinary fresh-faced missionaries. They bring their lived experience and newfound passion for Christ with them on their mission, a genuine mission, right Major Calbert Hernandez?"

Calbert stands up and salutes the bishop. Everyone laughs.

“Different kind of mission, but just as important... more. We have a genuine American hero in our midst, two really, if you include his dog, Gretchen. Yes, Gretchen, how serendipitous is that?” There is a collective “aw” which I choose not to participate in.

The speech ends with a call to bid on various Utah ski trips. I’ve had enough. This is good, I try to tell myself, it’s what’s best, I try to convince myself. I get up. Gretchen the woman stops me before I can reach Gretchen the dog.

“I hope there’s no hard feelings,” she says and hands me paperwork. I quickly understand it to be a renunciation of ownership for Gretchen the dog.

“You know the kids love her,” I say.

“Kids? Right . . . the thing about kids is they’ll outlive their memories. My daughter, she doesn’t even remember how much I loved her when she was little. Find another dog maybe, a puppy you can train from the start, manners, honesty,” she says.

Rather than respond, I walk away towards a circle of people shaking Calbert’s hand and rubbing Gretchen’s chin. I overhear the adulation they were maybe entitled to but had never received. I calm. Calbert sees me, breaks his handshake, and steps outside the circle.

“I just want to say, you know, thanks. You’ve obviously taken good care of her,” he says.

“My family, yeah. I’ll sign,” I say, raising the paperwork and lowering my voice, “but, I mean, do you believe all this?”

“I don’t know, man. When Gretchen told me about the mission, I was having withdrawals, pain worse than anything that happened over there, and what kept me going was the thought of getting back, to one of those places, where, well, you know what we

did.”

“I don’t, but I know what you’re saying,” I say. Gretchen sits by my side, as she had done before, when she was my dog, expecting a scratch. I give it to her.

“Good, that’s good. Most people don’t.” He signals down to Gretchen. “Going back together, man, to do good. ...If that’s not a sign I don’t know...sign me up for my own planet I guess.”

I shake his hand again. Kneeling, I give Gretchen a full-on hug, burying my head in her fur.

I find the human Gretchen and stick the signed papers back in her hand.

“You know, she really didn’t poop,” I say.

She looks me straight in the eye, in her house of worship. “You’re full of shit,” she says.

On the dark, dog-less walk home, I look around the familiar streets, in the neighborhood my wife and I decided to buy our first home, to raise our family, and feel estranged, like none of it is for me anymore. Then I take a conscious breath. The clean, cool air composes me.

I think about Alex and Stacey deep in innocent sleep, at my home, our home, where we lived together, where we had years together, where, even now, after her, hundreds, if not thousands of needy dogs would love to live with us, roam free and safe, loved. Our home where we’d never be bombed, or be asked to bomb, where we could host Grandma, watch TV nicely, and treat our next pet, whoever they might be, with the kindness and dignity the hero Gretchen deserved; where I would wait patiently—a few months, a few years, a decade tops—to return to the church for the only thing that could draw me back: a very special service in honor of the late Gretchen

DeMille.