

Sometimes happiness comes from accepting the roll of the dice



Melissa Favara

Melissa Favara teaches English in Vancouver and lives and writes in North Portland, where she parents Ramona, age 6, hosts a bi-monthly reading series, and counts her husband and her city as the two great loves of her life.

I don't believe in soul mates. At least, not in theory: I think of my life, my reality, as the one that won out among many possible realities that could be entirely different if I'd made one infinitely small decision otherwise.

As it happens, I decided to work on a creative nonfiction essay about Raymond Chandler at the Aalto Lounge in April of 2003, and Marshall, my husband of nine years now, happened to walk by my table, happening to wear a jacket identical to one I'd given to Goodwill the year before, which I'd happened to buy at another Goodwill on the coast during a last-minute trip with my then-roommate in 1998, so I said hello.

One decade later, I can't imagine not being here in North Portland, in our house, getting ready to put Ramona to bed with her best friend Jascha, who's spending the night, whose father, Eric, I happened to meet one day when I was three months pregnant and kind of sick to my stomach in February 2006, because we were both letting our dogs off-leash in the park across the street — he and his partner had just had a baby, too, and we spoke of hanging out sometime.

That meeting led to Jill, best friend Jascha's mom, dropping off a bag of diaper covers and onesies a few months later, which led to a baby-care swap in 2007, which led to a friendship so strong between Ramona and Jascha that today, six years later, in the car back from an adventure in Longview, Wash., while we looked after Jascha so his mom could go to a yoga conference while his dad was touring with his band, Jascha said, "I think Ramona is my sister. We have had 1,000 fights but we are still best friends." Right on, sweet Jascha. Our trip to Longview had in mind the finding of a new friend, which didn't work out exactly, but more on that in a minute.

We have a dog. The dog, Vera, is an essential member of our family. We got her when she was a baby, about a year before we had our human baby, Ramona, and right after I moved back to Portland after finishing graduate school in Pennsylvania.

The dog is absolutely lovely; we often say, when people ask us whether Ramona is our only child, "No, we also have a Newfoundland mix." Because that's how we feel: Vera is Ramona's Fur Sister, her protector and bestie and best beast and homegirl. Sometimes when I have insomnia, I worry that Vera may indeed be mortal — at eight years old, though still sprightly and leaping, she's going gray in the muzzle. We want to open our home to another dog while Vera is still vital—she'd enjoy leading a pack, and we want her to train the addition in the art of Being Our Dog.

How we acquired Vera is a love story. We wanted a dog, and after I came home from graduate school in May of '05, a year into being married, we started looking. We met an adult Rott/Lab I wanted but Marshall thought lacking personality, a mastiff he liked but I felt skittish about. Then, Marshall spied a notice in the Oregonian about a litter of Newfoundland mix puppies, and we were off to Woodland, Wash., to check them out.

If you know anything at all about getting a dog, you will know immediately that in getting our Beloved Vera, we did everything wrong. While the family who sold her to us were not running a puppy mill, they were the definition of backyard breeders — selling their dog's litter without shots or deworming or anything that should have been included in her steep-ish price. It was a beautiful day in late July. We drove my old Dodge Dart up winding roads to a sprawling house whose yard tipped toward a wooded valley; the mom on the scene was hugely, glowingly pregnant, and children and puppies seemed to be spilling out in a joyful tumble everywhere. I crouched at the end of the yard and called, "Here, pup!"; the entire litter looked at me like I was crazy, except for the black one with the white star on her chest, who ran over, climbed into my lap, and gazed wisely at me with old-soul eyes, and that, as they say, was that. The then-anonymous puppy — destined to be named after Vera Katz — and I both knew. And Marshall did, too.

In choosing a friend for Vera and ourselves, this time we're seeking a rescue dog, and probably a young grownup a year or two old who needs a second shot. We're a family of late bloomers ourselves, and it seems only fair. So far, I've been tempted by an all-American pound dog at the Humane Society, but Marshall wasn't feeling it. And Ramona liked an elderly Pekingese out in Cowlitz County, when we traveled to Longview with her and Jascha partying in the back seat to explore the Cowlitz Humane Society's adoption event this weekend, but we don't want to have our hearts broken so soon.

This next dog, wherever he or she is, comes with higher stakes, entering, as it will, a family with more members and a more challenging set of competing schedules. Marshall and I have both been known to be impulsive, and we've been lucky so far, choosing each other, choosing to have Ramona, choosing Vera among all the other options. I'll never know what going down a different corridor would have been like. If I'd chosen to write across the street at the Belmont Inn that distant evening, whom I might have married instead, if anyone at all, what specific joys might have been different if Vera had blown me off in favor of her siblings and we'd kept looking.

But I think that one of the keys to approaching happiness is regarding the way your own dice happened to roll as inevitable to the extent that's possible: because there's no evidence to the contrary, and what's waiting for you behind that door marked What If? Which is not to say that, once we are presented with options, we don't exercise some control over our fates. We will take our time and wait until we know the new canine family member when we see him or her. Then we'll go all in, and we'll make it work even when it takes work, as we are in the habit of doing with each other in our family. And eventually, it will seem as though it couldn't have happened any other way.

Tonka

By Shon B.

Earth is a ground, it is
Unquestionable. It is strong and
Can grow without human touch.
The love she is giving
Us is her movement toward
Your perfection.

Downtown Portland

By Nivi

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Look up to the sky
Cloud after cloud after cloud
Surreal and perfect is all



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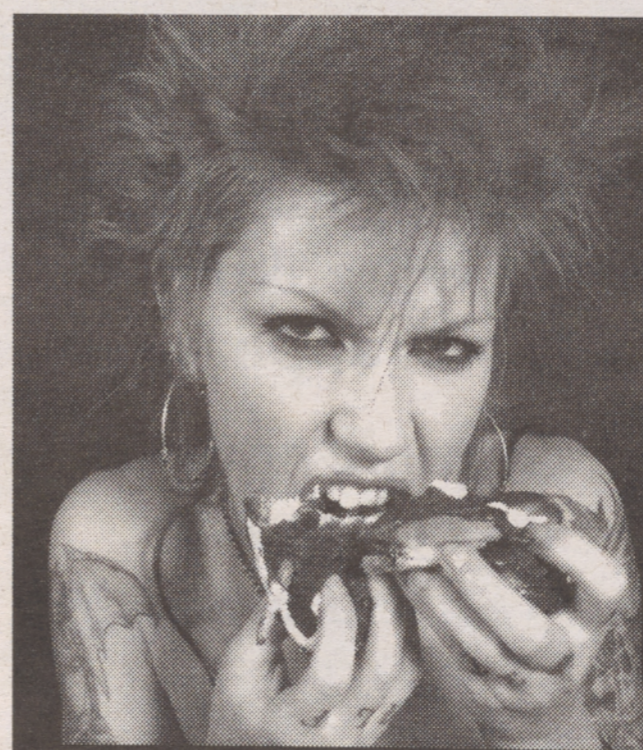


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