

The new addition to the family isn't what was expected



Melissa Favara

Melissa Favara teaches English in Vancouver and lives and writes in North Portland, where she parents Ramona, age 7, hosts a bi-monthly reading series, and counts her husband and her city as the two great loves of her life.

In August, Ramona and I drove to Salem to meet Regis, a fluffy little puppy whose picture we'd spied on a rescue society's website. He would be the yin to our Newfoundland-mix Vera's yang, when we brought her near-toxic level cuteness home eight years ago. I'd been cruising websites looking for a love match for about a year — it's been my husband's family tradition to let the current dog train the next one for a couple of generations — though I was the driver on our effort — almost 40 and not reproducing past young Ramona, seven, I allowed I'd have another dog if not another baby. This little Pyrenees mix looked just about right — used for guarding herds of sheep in Europe, and, it turns out, Texas, the breed characteristics looked like a fit — good with kids, "protective of property and family." Sign me up!

Have you ever bought a used car? Dealers now call them "pre-owned," the language implying that someone has done you a service by getting initial ownership out of the way for you. Language is tricky that way—and it turns out that the descriptor "Protective" has a few different meanings. More on that in a minute.

When Ramona and I peeled ourselves out of our un-air conditioned Volvo and looked around, a bustling volunteer named Mary leapt from her car, leash in hand. And as she did, the guttural bark of a hellhound followed her. She waved, turned, and led from the back seat a gangly white dog who tumbled to the ground as though he were still learning how to navigate his long legs. In the time since the photograph had been posted online, little Regis had gone from a fuzzy twelve-weeker to a five-month-old teenager. But Ramona ran to him, no disillusionment on her excited face. And I looked into the deep, complicated, dark eyes of the dog I had a sinking feeling would be my new best friend and nemesis.

He let Ramona walk him on leash. He licked our hands. He sniffed the other dogs in the dog park, but showed no interest in playing. Somehow, his face, gnawed on and scarred by a wild animal or a barbed wire fence sometime between wandering away from his mother outside Waco and his being rescued, communicated sadness and hope at the same time. Was I anthropomorphizing? Maybe. I taught Ramona that word in the

car back to Portland, the new dog in the back — on the hour trip, we renamed him Charlie, after the gangster Lucky Luciano on account of the scars.

Back at home, we had a week to decide whether to keep him; I made the earliest vet appointment I could, five days later. And we entered the world of rescue raising.

We knew there would be more work with Charlie than with Vera, who came to us with a clean slate. We were committed to taking in a dog that needed us under the theory that we are pretty dog savvy people, had a lot of love to offer, a big house, a good yard, and the best elder canine sister in the world.

Fast forward three days after Charlie's arrival. I've just returned from the fenced dog play area at Normandale Park, and Charlie has just played for the first time! Full-on play bow, rolling with a smaller dog, taking swipes with his front paw—a really good citizen. I pat him, give him a treat, and go upstairs for a short nap, and then I come downstairs again to discover a vast puddle of urine on the antique rug Marshall's mom brought back from India, a steaming pile of poop in the dining room, and my 1950s vintage Pendleton Peter Pan-collar jacket crumpled on the kitchen floor, delicate little bites nibbled all the way around the edges of the collar.

The next day, second helpings of everything — Charlie shows progress: he's sitting by my side of the bed with his chin on the mattress, smiling, tail wag when I wake. When my 20-year-old cousin, who lives in our den, comes home from dishwashing at a brewery, leftovers from the line in hand, Charlie decides they should be his, and snaps harrowingly close to Joe's more tender parts. He cuddles with Ramona on the couch. He snaps at her fingers when she reaches down to retrieve an origami frog she's made and that he found interesting.

And he barks. That flock protection we'd watched admiringly online, where the Pyrenees dog holds off a pack of coyotes with his tremendous voice? Charlie's like that. But he appears to be inspired to protect our house from people walking by on the sidewalk, idling cars, cyclists, skateboarders, the neighbor taking out his trash, the mailman, helicopters, and air. Especially air. He'll go a half an hour

protecting us, loudly, from air, easy.

And yes, he's still here, with Thanksgiving approaching. When he was new, a day before the vet check and two days before we had to decide, I felt a bump on his right shoulder — it felt like a marble of bone affixed to the joint. Though we'd been thinking of possibly not rising to the occasion, when I felt the lump and, being

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me, typed it into Google, only to see the word cancer pop up, my eyes had filled with tears. I'd grown accustomed to his chewed-up face. I felt an unexpected stirring — and I realized that Charlie, though he wasn't the pup I'd bargained for, meant something to me already. Maybe it was because I, too, was feral in a way, as a first generation college student and blue-collar kid who now has a professional job and still feels like I'm learning my manners. When the vet said it was a bonespur and that Charlie made good eye contact and his hips checked out, I signed on the line that was dotted.

We're still experiencing a step forward and two back — he's our problem child. Ramona is never with him unsupervised, I've cleaned up a level-five bad belly incident after Charlie ate a roll of paper towels and defaced pretty much the whole basement floor. But watching him at the dog park run, tail high, smiling, keeps me in the game. Ramona wants him to stay — she coined his nickname, Charlie Boy. And that's just it—at 9 months now, he's a boy — a kid — my kid. My goofy, untrained, feral kid. Wish us luck. We'll keep you posted.

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