



June 26, 2017

I think that I'll forever be haunted by the image you see above. I know the story behind it...

Getting an Irish wolfhound puppy is usually cause for celebration. It's a life-changing occasion. Shortly, they take over your lives and fill places in your heart you never knew were empty. They inspire you to be the person they say you are.

For centuries they've inspired the Irish, too. Wolfhounds were big and bold enough to pluck knights from saddles, but the Irish saw far more — companions who were as intelligent, soulful and quixotic as the Irish themselves.

It's why there's a wolfhound image on the celebrated Gundestrup cauldron and other golden artifacts, on Irish postage stamps, the old sixpence coin, the label of Tullamore Dew Whiskey and every piece of Belleek pottery fired in Ireland.

How do these mythic creatures resemble the hounds sprawled across my floor like shaggy mastadons?

Let me tell you a story...

One night a year ago to the sound of rain and thunder, a first-time mother struggled to save her three unborn babies. The first was a breech and she and the girl nearly died. Torturously, a boy and then another girl came. And Luna was done.

When I heard that Luna was having her first litter I knew I was all in because Luna is different even in a breed that stands out. Dark, elegant and athletic, there's a wildness in Luna, a knowing, old-soul quality deep in her black eyes. It was like hearing that Diana, the Greek goddess of the hunt, was having offspring. I know Luna because my Oona is her kid sister. They're strikingly similar, except Luna got the fuller dose of otherworldly self-reliance. And Oona will never have puppies.

And now, the trio born to Luna that traumatic night will likely be her only babies.

Those who knew Luna's maverick ways were surprised that she was such a fiercely tender mother for so many weeks — until the puppy's teeth came in. Then the solitary goddess of the hunt was back.

The big aunts and grandmother wolfhounds hovered at the fence and doted on the babies, but Luna hung apart, aloof.

Then I showed up. I talked with Luna when I went to Tampa for Oisin. I thanked her. I praised her beautiful puppies. She gave me silent, sideways glances, sizing me up. The room was full of people and Luna's pack of Amazons, but she lingered with me a long, long while. It's the way of things in a breeder's home — puppies one day go away. Luna knew I was the one taking one of her puppies.

At 4 a.m. the next day before I hit the road, the breeder and I lost track of the boy. We found him, a tiny, huddled figure, touching noses through the fence with a looming, dark shape. Luna was saying goodbye to Oisin, her only son.

What does a mother tell a child she'll never see again? Be brave? I love you? Does she tell him a part of her will always be with him? I just don't know. But, the breeder says Luna grieved for days.

Meanwhile, another Amazon waited for Oisin on the other side of a 12-hour drive. Oona and I are deeply bonded. Some nights she lays all 160-pounds of herself in my lap with her whopping, shaggy head tucked under my chin. When we sit across the room and our eyes meet, we smile. We're devoted to one another in ways I've never bonded with another dog.

And here I was bringing another wolfhound home. I was afraid she'd see him as competition.

She did.

One sniff and she knew there was another dog. One glance out the door and she knew the situation. She demanded to go meet him then and there. Oona glowered down at the puppy like a

thunderhead. Oona the pirate queen and her tiny usurper. It was an electric moment that I'd dreaded.

Then they twined necks for the longest time and inhaled each other deeply.

Oona slowly raised her head and sighed. In her eye was a faraway look and a hint of resignation. She was forever changed. Because in Oisín she'd smelled family, blood of her blood. In a heartbeat, Oona the pirate queen became a relentless protector and mentor.

In the next months, Oisín walked on Oona, gnawed on her ears, bit her behind and swung from her tail. She tolerated it with a simmering affection deep in her eyes. He was a little devil, but he was her little devil, Oona's own nephew.

A year later, Oisín is taller than Oona — more than three feet at the shoulders — and still loves to tug on his saintly aunt's beard. And every night they sleep now with their paws touching and entwined.

Every dog has a story. Every dog is a spark from the fire...

I just wish I could tell Luna that the torch has been passed. And her only son is *very* loved.