



July 4, 2017

Just when Finn stepped up to become the leader of the band, I'm not certain. He was rarely assertive. He kept to the edge of things, quietly observing. But wolfhounds seem to know when.

In the ever-changing makeup of our household, someone needed to say it for all the rescues and fosters, for the new arrivals and the old giants in our house: We're here. Our rag-tag clan matters. We are not alone. We belong...

Finn never barked. Now and then he woofed, but mostly he bayed, plaintively. He had a melodic yodel. He was a baritone and he belted it out from the heart. He towered over the other dogs, but he was respectful and took care where he stepped as they wound around his legs like traffic circling the Chrysler Building. He liked a tender touch and returned it, except when he affectionately head-butted me immobile into a chair.

When he stepped out and gave the secret signal, the others swapped eager glances and took their places, jittering. His head went back and out it came: "ARWROOO, roooo roooo rooooo, AWROOO." That mournful refrain was joined full on by a chorus of yips, yowls and ragged baying that rattled the walls. Next door, the neighbor's dogs joined in. It jumped to the boxers across the street and up and down the block, the song of their people moving out like a ripple in a pond, with an Irish wolfhound at its shaggy epicenter. They did this two or three times a day. Ours was a *musical* household.

I do know Finn was songleader on our aged deerhound's last day, in his final minutes before the vet arrived as he lay crumpled in my lap eating bits of cheese from my hand and looking out the screen door as leaves sailed through the hazy light of Indian

Summer.

Cuchulain hadn't stood for three days. He'd stopped eating all but the cheese. The other dogs were behind a baby gate to give Cuchulain his space, but Finn stepped up to the barricade. Cheese cubes were my deerhound's favorite treat but, across the barrier, Finn gave him something far more.

In his first few months with us, that same baby gate had kept Finn apart from Cuchulain and our deerhound Gracie, who nipped him the first time she ever met him. So much for maternal instincts and the protection of the puppy license. The little white furball was lunch.

Tiny, gangly Finn scared the bejeebers out of me, going to that gate again and again to touch noses with the giants. Relentlessly, day after day, he crept shyly over and wore them down with earnest cuteness. Finally one day, Gracie shrugged, gave a play bow and when I opened the gate, she raced with him up and down the hall, the raisin-eyed gray lady and the fearless puppy a fifth her size.

Cuchulain was indifferent as long as the little guy stayed away from his stuff. It was his only rule as chief of the house and he enforced it. The puppy grew up. Cuchulain turned ancient. And then he lay dying. He was the first dog to die in my arms and I tried to keep the household quiet for him.

Finn had other ideas. He called together the McMillan choir for a special session. Gracie pressed in at his shoulder. Sully and all the others crowded in at their feet. And they blasted the cobwebs away.

And from my lap, with a sound of regret but in celebration, Cuchulain bayed back, his head pressed back, humming against my chest. Their primal salute to the chieftain was still rolling out

when the vet pulled into our driveway and soon, mighty Cuchulain slept.

The revolving door kept turning. Gracie left us, three more rescues joined us — Gilda, Memphis and Bentley — then my daughter moved out again and only Bentley stayed. Finally came wolfhounds Oona and Oisin. And they all found their place in the family song session. Finn made them all feel at home.

Not long ago, just a few weeks short of his tenth birthday, Finn himself left us, too, passing in my arms at the vet's office away from the rest of his pack, too worn out by age and illness to sing one more song. There was a pall on our household for weeks.

Finn was special in so very many ways. I've just realized another of them — the family singing sessions are over. Without our old boy, the others still bark, yes, but only at other dogs outside the window. Along with his sweet voice, the leader of the band took the song of his people with him. It's looking now like this is one band that just won't be getting back together again.

I do believe this, though: He's waiting for me over there. He's leading a bigger band now and when next I hear that voice belting it out, it'll be by my Finn, welcoming me to a new home. A wolfhound always seems to know when and how...