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It was a breeder's nightmare. A college friend set out to raise Irish wolfhounds and Scottish deerhounds, separately, of course. But, the wily deerhound male had his way and what my friend got was a litter of 14 gargantuan lurchers. She showed them to me. My god, the sleek little black things had forearms like clubs. Saaaay, would I like one?

I said, sure, it might be... interesting? I was all about my

Gaelic heritage. And, you know, over the years I'd owned a dog or two. A big one might be...fun?

And then I started reading. Deerhound are shaggy guided missiles, a greyhound on steroids. Pairs of them chased down ridiculously big stags in the Scottish Highlands. Ranchers in the American West turned them loose to snuff out entire populations of wolves and coyotes. Wolfhounds are even brawnier than deerhounds, and nearly as fast. They plucked knights off horses and snipped heads off crazed Celtic warriors in their chariots.

I battened down the hatches. Into my home and onto my couch was coming a mighty hound old. We named him Cuchulain and it turned out he was all that, a wild rover, a Gaelic Hercules. Otherwise, he was nothing like I expected. Cuchulain was so much more...

It's not that Cuchulain didn't live up to Irish mythology. He was the original long-legged beastie, a modern-day Hound of the Baskervilles, big as a pony, able to snatch cantaloupes off the top of the refrigerator and spot crumbs of cheese from a mile away.

But medieval warfare and vaulting on stags just weren't his thing. I began to tumble to this one day on a friend's farm when young Cuchulain decided to charge a herd of milk cows because he was, after all, a ferocious carnivore and they were cows. Well, the girls shuffled together, closed ranks and... casually ignored my giant black

puppy. He stood frowning in a whirl of dust, went back up the hill and charged again. They sent out a couple of calves and he skittered back to me.

The whole sighthound thing was a bit overrated, too. On our college campus walking one day, I spotted a possum cavorting at the edge of a lawn. Cuchulain's nose was thrust root-deep into the grass on the trail of a peanut that the squirrels carted away last week. I braced because this possum was pretty conspicuous for a marsupial trespassing in the middle of town. Here we go. Rocket Dawg is about to ignite. But, no, Cuchulain keep rooting around for that peanut. The possum did everything but do cartwheels with sparklers clutched in its toes. My sighthound never glanced up.

Once he walked past an elephant at a festival. Cuchulain stayed snout deep in clover, trailing a stray Frito. I gawked as the 15,000-pound pachyderm lumbered and creaked by. Cuchulain stayed oblivious. He was going to *get* that Frito.

Not to say that Cuchulain didn't have grit. For fun, he fished disposable razors from the trash and crunched them up. And then pretended someone else must have left all the little bits of plastic and twisted metal lying around. Him? Why no, he was just lounging before supper. Will there be truffles? Would someone kindly fetch him his dinner jacket?

And he could be a brawler. He hated vets. Muzzled, braced on the table by my 6'5" son, an equally hefty vet tech and me, he'd lie suspiciously still until the doc came in with that needle. Then, in a heartbeat, we three were shucked off and smacked against the wall. Cuchulain spat off the muzzle and coolly eyed the vet. He got his vaccinations from a country vet after that, a guy used to major livestock. He snuck around the corner, jabbed Cuchulain and ran.

Mostly, Cuchulain lived to ramble and stop traffic. It wasn't a good walk without at least one car screeching to a halt and circling around for a second, slower look. We fielded the inevitable questions with good humor. "Taking your horse for a walk, are ya?" "Where's your saddle, mister?" Or, "Who's leading who there?" Obviously he was leading me. Through bushes. Chin-first across the turf. Down through the brambles.

One day a carload of frat brothers rolled by, cackling at my dog in derision. Cuchulain's hackles went up. I knew that look. I knew what the brothers didn't. He could catch that car. And I'd seen him munch metal. I wrapped my arms around a stop sign, thereby saving the boys of Alpha Beta Pi from Bigga Dogga Eatya.

Squirrels were the only thing that seemed to tickle his hunt drive. Squirrels were demented and evil, we both agreed. Opinions were mixed on whether we should whiz

down the sidewalk and see how high up that tree we could scramble. Pretty high, it turned out, despite the dead weight of me on the end of the leash.

A squirrel waited in a bush one day until we were going down a set of stairs. Then it shot out. And Cuchulain shot off. I could see where this was going, so I tucked my head and...rolled end over end down the sidewalk.

Cuchulain was gentleman enough to come back and see if he needed to drive the car home.

In short, Cuchulain was an altogether different sort of dog than I'd ever known or imagined. It was as if he'd gotten a primal boost from the mix of both giant breeds. He had tremendous will, a wicked sense of humor and was keenly self-aware. We shared a joke one night. I was playing the name game to increase his working vocabulary. He'd become that sort of friend. I talked to him constantly and knew he understood.

The wind howled outside. I said, "wind," and made a whistling sound. He rubbernecked all around the room to find the source. Then a look crept into his eye and he grinned as if to say, "Well du-uh, you got me." Every time I whistled after that, he shot me a look and smirked.

Big sighthounds usually live just six or seven years, but Cuchulain did things on his own terms. He was in my yard at age 12, his black face shot through with white,

buffeted by the fall breeze, squinting half-blind at the sharp September light, but as if by sheer will, my ancient friend was still standing. Until a day or so later when he couldn't anymore.

We sat with him for three days and nights, giving him water, rocking him, trying to convince him to eat. And then I called the vet. Because of how Cuchulain had changed our lives, we now had another deerhound, Gracie, and our first full-blooded wolfhound, Finn. Cuchulain was surrounded by his own kind.

An hour later, Finn suddenly sprang up and bayed eerily and melodically. The deerhound added her voice. And from the circle of my arms, Cuchulain called back, rattling the walls. The salute to the chieftain was still rolling out when the vet turned into our driveway.

And mighty Cuchulain slept.