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In old photos from the 1920's and '30's you'll see them, fashionable women in furs and stockings and smart little feathered hats, teetering on heels, weighing maybe 90 pounds soaking wet. And there the tiny little fashionistas are, leashed to four or five Irish wolfhounds, walking down the streets of London or Dublin. Like, "DAHLINK! AIIIIII the right people are doing it. You simply must get yourself four or five, too!"

And all I can think is one squirrel, one wayward cat, one little dog who sees this entourage and skitters away — and The Duchess is toast.

And then I think, no, five burly men are hovering just off camera with butterfly nets to snatch her ladyship when the hounds scatter like fireworks gone wrong and she goes airborne. They won't try to stop the dogs, of course. A wolfhound charges and you step aside fast and hope that tail doesn't take you out on the way by.

I've been pulled off porches. I've rolled down the sidewalk like a wheel of cheese. I've been wrapped around trees. I've been pulled through brambles like slaw through a grater. All by one Irish wolfhound who made his mind up that he was going to get that squirrel.

I'm on my fifth gentle giant now. The potential for mayhem is very much in my thoughts because Oisín is one year old and the poor little guy could just very much use a visit from the Brain Fairy. He's gone hormonal. His whiskers are always bristling. His eyes are alarmingly wild. He's never still. And luckily, he's 140 pounds of muscle and...he's just getting started. He's also begun to notice squirrels. My life is complete.

It's true, many people live with Irish wolfhounds and rarely get maimed. A wolfhound would never intentionally hurt you. They're loving, restrained, keenly aware of their size and, for a dog the size of a calf, surprisingly nimble. For instance, Oisín just jumped over our easy chair. We're not sure why. I don't think he is either. But my point is, nothing got broken. Okay, we're still waiting for the rest of that tail

to lash by. I'll get back to you....

They're some of the sweetest-natured dogs on the planet, but today's Irish wolfhound has all the bulk and sinew that his ancestors had when they yanked knights off horses and caused chariots to come crashing to the ground. They're still as powerful as their kin, who brought down stag and cleaned out wolf packs. Big. Brawny. Independent. They treat you like an equal. It has its drawbacks.

Oona, Oisin's aunt, presses her huge paw on my chest at night, pins me to the couch and gives me big, sloppy kisses. Another wolfhound might shake her off but I am going nowhere. Daddy's girl is firm on this. I don't mind until she pokes me in the eye with that snout.

Oisin studies everything Auntie Oona does. So he gives Dad kisses, too. Standing on my knees. Dad takes lots of vitamins. Dad also squeaks and makes funny gurgling noises.

I've developed catlike reflexes and... acquaintances are used to seeing fresh scars. So, if you're thinking of getting a wolfhound or living with your first one and notice they're getting rather large, some tips to avoid becoming collateral damage:

- Don't kiss your wolfhound on the top of the head or lean directly over them. It's a good way to get a black eye or dentures when they rear their head back.

- Watch that tail, for your sake and for theirs. A wolfhound's tail is thick, muscular and long. They can crack it like a whip. When they're excited, they can clean off tabletops and swat you in some unfortunate places. They can hurt themselves, too, slapping that tail up against sharp corners. Many wolfhound owners pad such corners and remove obstacles when possible, especially near doorways where their wolfhounds excitedly greet them.

— Know your dog before leash walks. We did considerable socialization with ours from the day we brought them home, plenty of walks around town and on the local college campus. They're normally gentle on the leash. Around small dogs or in areas where there are squirrels, though, I'm always ready to loop the slack part of the leash over their chest for extra restraint. Just in case. If yours does tend to tug on the leash, a harness will give you more control.

When I walk Oona with Oisin now, I put her in a harness because my canny girl waits until I'm distracted with Oisin's antics to go exploring in another direction. Smart, independent hounds always need close attention. Especially around traffic. Always be sure you're the one in control.

— Beware the thunder paw. Wolfhounds once slapped their prey with a front paw to cripple or addle it before closing in. Now they just do it to be sure you're paying attention. After one of those, you will be.

Irish wolfhounds are the most tender, devoted dogs I know. They're also the largest. Help them not hurt you. Stay on your toes.