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I'm shameless. I admit it. I'm in love with a giant. And she has a beard.

Through the years I've loved a lot of dogs: King, a German shepherd, my constant companion when I was 13; Finn, my first wolfhound; Gracie, my sweet-as-honey Scottish deerhound girl. But I've never been *in* love with a dog. Not until now.

Oona makes my heart race. When we're in the same room, our eyes often meet and we smile. When we're apart, *I'm* the one who gets separation anxiety. She's an Irish wolfhound, steady as a rock. She's sure of her place in my world.

When I walk into a dark room, I know right where she is. Her tail beats against the floor with enthusiasm. Try finding love like that in a romance novel.

Sure, she's a pirate and an opportunist. She goes through my pockets with abandon. She knows there's usually cheese there. To negotiate with her. Again, she's a 170-pound wolfhound. My girl does nothing she doesn't absolutely want to do. Cheese is the great persuader.

I admire her. I've admired her since she was 13 weeks old, a spritely slip of a thing, all fire and ice. She walked right in and took charge of a household of adult males. Unflappable and eternally poised, that's my Oona.

She not only inspires me, she moves me to extravagant shows of affection. But, I wonder, should I get her a dozen roses or... a new bone? This is strange, new territory for me.

But I do know this: I'm not alone. Being proudly and loudly in love with your dog is becoming the new norm. It's said that the Millennial Generation is wholeheartedly a dog-loving segment of society. They're marrying later and having children later still. Dogs are stand-ins to hone their parenting skills and they take it very seriously.

Or so the theory goes. It's a broad generalization, of course.

But I do see an awful lot of people in their 20's and 30's with dogs and doting on them. If the dog-as-a-trial run theory is right, I think an odd thing happened along the way. Dogs stopped being proxy babies and became the dearest of friends.

Only, it's not just Millennials, it's happening in all age groups in all walks of life. Sixty-five percent of all households in America now own dogs. In my teens in the 1960s, dogs who lived indoors with their humans were rare. Today, 80 percent of canines in the U.S. live under their owners' roofs. How we view dogs has seen a sea change.

In poll after poll of pet owners, up to 90% say dogs are not mere pets, but family members. Americans this year are expected to spend \$60 billion on their pets, a figure that's skyrocketed in recent years. Driving that surge is a hot new buzz word, the "humanization" of dogs, that is, dogs getting food, accessories, medical treatment, beds, day care and more that are just as good as what humans get.

Because we love them. But why so much so now? Dogs haven't changed. But maybe we are. We're increasingly stressed and alienated. But, again, dogs haven't changed. They represent abiding virtues like loyalty, patience, compassion and joy.

I see in Oona what so many dog owners are seeing. Unwavering companionship and a compelling challenge to be the person she sees in me. She's my touchstone, my north star. The love of a dog is making me a more genuine human.

Oona insists on it.