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Every Irish wolfhound has a story. Every wolfhound has his quirky charm. But even in a breed known for being “different,” Oisín is touched with a gentle strangeness.

He’s a teenager now, and I don’t see it so much when he’s rocketing through the house and yard, wild-eyed with juvenile hormones. I see it growing in the lulls. More and more I wonder, could he be a *Cú Sidhe*, a fairy hound of the *Tuatha de Danann*?

It’s loopy speculation, I know. But Irish wolfhounds have their way with you, fascinating us, leaving us grasping to explain the things they do. I think this is how it’s always been all the way back to the early Gaels of Ireland and Scotland, who treasured their war dogs, hunting companions and friends of the hearth.

Heroic hounds with a touch of the mystic, the giant wolf dogs insinuated themselves into Celtic legends and myths. In the tales they sound like humans, only more so, powerful, elegant and discerning. Such magnificent creatures could not be of this world alone.

### **"With horror, with lofty deed"**

The Lebor Gabala Erenn, a medieval Irish text also known as the Book of Invasions, tells of the coming of the Tuatha de Danann, a magical people who came from four cities far to the north. With them they brought three days and nights of darkness. They landed in Connacht "with horror, with lofty deed." They burned their ships so there'd be no turning back. The smoke and mist filled the neighboring lands with "their cloud of mighty combat of specters."

"The truth was not known beneath the sky of stars whether they were of heaven or of earth."

Of course, they brought their hounds, some red, some green, a few white, but mostly dark and all as big as a calf and fearsome.

In their years in Ireland, the Tuatha de Danann fought a series of epic battles, the final ones being against the Milesians, Celts from the Iberian Peninsula. They were defeated and faded away into the holy hills, wells and megalithic mounds of ancient Ireland. So they never truly went away, but became "The Gentry," "The Good Folk," the fairies of the Irish, proud, beautiful and capricious. Some nights they trooped from their hollow hills on horseback with their hounds and took captive those unlucky enough to be out and in their path. Sometimes they passed by as a powerful wind in the night.

## "The Host is riding..."

W.B. Yeats wrote of them,

“[The Host](#) is riding from Knocknarea,

And over the grave of Clooth-na-bare;

Caolte tossing his burning hair

And Niamh calling Away come away...”

Peg and I clambered up [Knocknarea](#) a few years ago. It’s a strange knobby hill you see out of the corner of your eye from almost everywhere in County Sligo. At its windswept top overlooking the sea is a huge pile of stones said to be the burial mound of Queen Maeve. Legend says she was buried standing upright in full armor, waiting for the day when the West of Ireland needs her again. You can’t scratch the dirt in Ireland without stirring up uncanny legends.

### A ritual landscape

Sprawling out to the east in the shadow of Knocknarea is [Carrowmore](#), one of Ireland’s four major passage grave complexes, an arrangement of megaliths across a grassy plain where the ashes of the dead were deposited beneath the stones beginning around 4,000 BC.

And on the eastern horizon from there rises a low line of mountains dotted with more megaliths aligned in a mystical geometry with Carrowmore and Knockaera. For miles around as far as you can see, you’re looking across a ritual landscape and you begin to get a gut sense of what they mean when they

describe Ireland as “the holy isle.” The land itself feels old and alive.

Whatever was going on in Ireland in the Bronze Age, we can only guess. The Celts used no written language. All we have are the stones and the pagan myths first written down by early medieval Irish monks ages after the actual events. And the monks had an agenda: to wean the Irish from their pagan past.

It was the monks who gave us the tales of the Tuatha de Danann, so who knows for sure what they were in the original oral tradition. But they lived on outside the church in the Irish folk beliefs in fairies, not the Tinkerbell-Disney version, but as otherworldly beings of a terrible beauty who haunted ring forts and barrow graves and whose eerie music some said they heard coming from inside the hollow hills late at night.

And we have their fairy hounds, the Cu Sidhe, who like their masters slipped back and forth through the Veil to walk in Ireland again and stir up mischief. Fairy hounds were said to be messengers of death. Whoever saw one — usually late at night at some lonesome crossroad — would die shortly afterwards. They were guardians of the Otherworld and, in some older tales, guides to help the newly departed make their way Over There.

Whoever the early Irish were, then, they and their huge hounds certainly made a lasting impression, one that sidestepped the church and morphed into the folk traditions of the Emerald Isle.

### **Clues on our couch**

But some of us can look on the couch beside us for clues.

Because Irish wolfhounds are the descendants of the hounds behind the myths, ancient war hounds living in a modern world. Which brings me back to my original question: Is my Oisín a fairy hound?

I even ask because he's highly sensitive and shy for a dog as big as a pony. He's terrifically sweet and has a smile like the sun bursting through the clouds. But he studies the world sideways, as if he doesn't quite know what to think because maybe he's just not from here at all.

Between bouts of juvenile hormones, in the stillness, I see in his eyes a growing determination. Slyly, gently, but unstoppably, he's attaching himself to me, sliding our other wolfhound, his Aunt Oona, aside. And this is a feat because Oona is a force and she's fiercely bonded with me. Yet we look up and there he is, grinning hugely between us. He's like a hound on a mission.

Oisín is already 36 inches tall at the shoulders and darned if he's not still growing *up* as well as out. He just wants to be one of the pack but his otherness sets the boy apart. He glides over the other dogs like a weather front.

Whatever this sweet boy is becoming, he has my full attention. In truth, I don't expect him to one day drag me to his home through the Veil. But again, I would not be surprised. It's just the kind of spell Irish wolfhounds weave on us. Every one of them, they have a strange magic that keeps us wondering.