



Nov, 16, 2017

My girl Oona is away on her bi-annual retreat at the luxury

spa. She's having her nails done. Minions are fussing over her, attending to her every whim around the clock and popping her treats. Oona, the queen, is *in* her element.

She's also in heat. She coolly breezed out of our shellshocked household yesterday morning, leaving Oisin gnawing the baseboards. Even Sully and Little Bentley were on edge — and they're *neutered*. The used-to-be guys had no reason whatsoever to go all squinty-eyed and grin like that when she sailed through the room in a cloud of hormones. Maybe nobody told them they were off the men's team.

Poor Oisin. He's already been madly in love with his aunt since the day he joined us 19 months ago and she decided she wouldn't eat him after all. He smelled like family. She did, too. Now, she smells like soooo much more to our giant, gangly teenager. He may not be entirely sure *what* yet. Like most males in the giant breeds, he's maturing mentally much slower than the girls. But we didn't give him the chance to figure things out all on his own. We got Oona out of there the moment she went nuclear.

Oona likes to surprise everyone. She's not precisely on a six-month cycle. She's seen us watching the calendar and figured it'd be oh so much more fun to slap on the fishnet stockings and ruby red lipstick weeks ahead of schedule. "My, are you all making such a fuss over 'lil 'ol *me*?" My girl loves the drama.

She's just a quarter-mile down the road at the boarding kennel but still, we were all miserable the first time we

boarded her early last summer. Before, all the males in the house were just that in name alone. Snipped, every last one of them. But last summer, Oisin was old enough — just barely — to be a threat. Since there's no such thing as barely pregnant, we sent her away for a week and all suffered in her absence.

Oona's my heart hound. Before her, I never knew a human and non-human could bond so completely. But there we were, her gone for a week, her first time away from us ever. It felt grim, oppressive, like I'd lost her. And the look of amazement and joy she gave me every day when I visited her only made it that much more heartbreaking to drag myself away from her day after day.

Back home, Oisin paced from the door to the window, trying to see where she'd gone. The center of his world was taken away.

And we're planning on putting ourselves through this hell at last one more time. Why? Wouldn't it be so much easier just to have her neutered? Or have Oisin snipped? It would, but we won't. Because Oona isn't four years old yet and nature hasn't finished growing her yet.

Not surprisingly, Irish wolfhounds take a long time to fully mature. And those hormones Oona is wafting all through the house are there for reasons other than to make all the boys *really* like her. They affect vigorous, healthy growth, too.

I'm not anti-neutering. I'm well aware that the push in recent

decades to spay and neuter dogs has kept untold numbers of puppies from being unwanted, abandoned or put down in shelters. There are far too many irresponsible people with dogs out there. But for the *responsible* owner, it's a choice and it needs to be an informed choice.

Despite the benefits from neutering, there are negatives, too. In the pro column, altered pets obviously won't get testicular, uterine or ovarian cancers or infections if those organs are removed.

But there's an increased risk of some cancers like osteosarcoma in neutered males. Such males also have a greater chance of getting prostate cancer and transitional cell carcinoma of the bladder.

Females who are spayed suffer a higher rate of urinary incontinence and a higher risk of bladder infections.

You can find further information [here](#).

We've weighed the pros and cons. We knew neutering before the age of four for either Oona or Oisin was out of the question. We felt our wolfhounds, like all giant breeds, need to be fully mature before — or if — they're neutered.

We'll never neuter our boy, Oisin. The health benefits from staying intact far outweigh the minimal risks. The increased chance for males of osteosarcoma — an often fatal bone cancer and the bane of Irish wolfhounds — was the clincher.

For Oona, it was a mixed bag. Pyometra — a serious and

sometimes life-threatening infection of the uterus — has been our biggest worry, and the odds get higher with age. That plus the reduced odds of several kinds of cancers if you neuter a female means we'll likely neuter our girl — after the age of four.

So, it's the spa again this week for Oona. That's getting a little easier, too. Yesterday morning she marched in, high-fived the staff, and swished right on back with her new friends with barely a look back.