



Dec. 18, 2017

It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas....

The song's been stuck in my head the last couple of weeks as I've drifted down the sidewalks of my town's Westside district every night with the world's biggest puppy. Technically, Oisin is nearly two now, a young teen in dog years, but Irish wolfhounds mature slower than smaller dogs. He's full of wide-eyed wonder. One hundred and sixty pounds of wide-eyed wonder...

I try to walk both wolfhounds every day, but Oona pokes and savors every scent on every bush for blocks. So Oisin gets the night shift with me no matter how cold and windy it is. The Christmas lights and storefront decorations have been a welcome sight, oases of warmth and good cheer on our circuitous nightly rounds.

And we're not alone. This surprises me every time we set out when the wind's howling, it's 30 and the stars are twinkling like hard, tiny diamonds in the cold, cold heavens. Westside has come alive with people and laughter, even on the coldest, darkest nights of the year.

It wasn't always so. For years after sundown, Westside and its side streets were dark and silent. Even with the police station right there downtown, there were the occasional muggings and drunken fights. I think of those times when I'm with my big boy between street lights in the alleys and byways. But I figure any lowlife foolish enough to approach me with Oisin at my side deserves what he gets.

And I'm pretty sure he'd get plenty. I've heard stories of other wolfhound companions being accosted — sometimes not so obviously — by strangers with ill intent. Their hounds got between them and the threat and made it startlingly clear that the outcome would be something terrible if that person took....one....more....step.

Oisín is stepping up now. He's (easily) the biggest male in our house, 36 inches at the shoulders. But between him and me, we both know he's terrifically tenderhearted. I think he'd be happy to be a puppy in my lap forever. But he's an Irish wolfhound. His blood carries whispers of battle and the chase. As he matures, I see the gravity in his face as he sets down puppyhood and takes up the mantle of the leader of the pack. My brave young king...

But he can be a puppy a little longer these magical nights. It's a wonderland on our streets — sparking lights, street lamps draped with holly and fir, storefronts dusted with glitter and faux snow. Oisín is all atwitter.

In recent years our city fathers have made the district appealing to small businesses, restaurants and microbreweries, and those in turn make it fun for the public to come out again, even on bitter December evenings.

Oisín and I sail through Dogwood Park, on past the Drama Center and on down Broad towards the [Depot](#), two winter wraiths slipping swiftly past the people on the other side of the windowpanes. They sip their coffee, dine, get their nails done or shop while we dart by in the wind.

I can still remember when the stores closed at noon every

Wednesday, a practice left over from WWII that hung on here and in many small Southern towns for decades after. Closing early was a way to keep folks home, work on Victory gardens and save energy needed for the war effort. The Depot and Westside were bustling during the war, especially with all the soldiers in town on weekends during the [war maneuvers](#).

Patton's army trained in Middle Tennessee because the terrain was remarkably similar to Germany. Other famed divisions polished their skills in the hills and hollows and creeks here. On weekends, the troops flooded small towns like mine, hanging out in restaurants and at the USO canteen, idly lining the sidewalks and striking up friendships with the locals, some who took them into their homes at Christmastime.

But in the decades after the war, our downtown and many others dried up as shopping centers and other attractions were built elsewhere in town. Shrewdly, Cookeville reworked and landscaped the sidewalks, built the Drama Center and Dogwood Park in the old original shopping district, erected an amphitheater for outdoor shows and concerts and sponsored special events downtown like the city Christmas tree and light display in the park.

And gradually the trend reversed. Westside is a happening place again — all through the year now.

For the War generation, Westside was the place to hang out day and night, but those holiday lights took on an urgent poignancy for hundreds of young men — and the towns people who “adopted” them during the maneuvers. The young men watched them fade as they left Cookeville by train in 1944 for England

where they staged for D-Day and the bloody beaches of Normandy. Those lights represented warmth, hospitality and the best of the human spirit.

It's good to see people back on Westside in happier holiday times, strolling the night walkways, pausing at storefronts, going in for a bite or a gift, laughing, sharing warm moments with friends. It's good to see those lights twinkling on a cold dark night.

Oisin is glad to see the people, too. With careful deliberation, he puts aside his shyness and tenderly, gently sniffs the hands of his admirers when they stop to meet him on the cold walkways. My boy is slowly growing into those long legs. He's huge, elegant and ethereal, a dash of primal magic to anyone who encounters him these nights before Christmas.

And then we're off again, me and my boy, weaving and darting in the wind as we vanish into the gloom.