



Dec. 23, 2017

'Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house, not a creature was stirring....except four dogs lustily howling their lungs out. The walls were rocking with Christmas cheer. It was our Christmas present from Oona....

Finn used to be the song leader of our pack. He was a beautiful Irish tenor and he called the shots. Whenever he felt like it — at last four times a day — he'd belt one out and all the other dogs in the house would blend their voices in the song of their people.

But one of the many precious things Finn took [when he left us last May](#) was his music. Sure, Sully still barks at leaves invading our driveway, Bentley patrols the fence line barking at the gang of vicious chihuahuas next door and Oona still growls hellishly at Oisin when he bites her butt for the fifth time in five minutes just to get a rise.

But choir practice ended with Finn.

Big, affable Finn was loved by everyone. The largest male in the house, he was the obvious choice for pack leader and he slid into the role gently, with good humor and open paws to all newcomers. Even Hurricane Oona, who took the house by storm at 13 weeks old and later, her rambunctious nephew, Oisin.

And that's the point of a group howl, really. When dogs sing together it's their way of saying "I'm here, I belong." This dog may rub that dog the wrong way, one may tic another off by taking a bone or the best spot on the couch, but when they sing, all grievances are forgotten. They bark, howl, yip and moan with all

their hearts. All ears are shaken up but all hearts are healed. It's a joyful family function.

Oisin is huge now. He has been for some time. But he's still by nature a sweet, gentle, shy boy. His blood, his hormones, his very bones whisper that he must step up and lead the pack. Tentatively, he's trying. Oona is even stepping aside to let him. It's the natural way. She has his back, but still, the brave little guy needs a boost.

Thank god for hormones, huh. When Oona went into heat this fall, Oisin was mature enough to go bonkers this time around. Howling mad, in fact. He found his big boy voice. Before we kenneled Oona for a week, she primly lolled on the couch while the nephew she'd mentored since he was 13 weeks old stood at the barrier, barking indignantly, howling, lost. It finally got to Oona and she howled back. It was heartbreaking. And very, very loud, like an artillery barrage. In stereo.

He used that deep, booming bark a lot while she was gone like he was insistent on finding her. We kept checking because it used to be that the only girl in the bunch made the trees shimmy and shake when she barked. Oisin had grown up. And now he had very definite opinions about a great many things.

When Oona returned from exile, it took a few days for things to settle back into their usual chaotic routine in McMillan's House 'O Fur. Then, I came home one day last week and I heard it, the pack song, rattling the foundations. There was Sully's bark, Bentley's yipping and Oisin's booming bark. And Oona, revving things up with her baying straight from the soul just like Finn used to. ArROOOO, ROOOO, ROOOO.....And then the party really started rocking .

They ran their course and then Oona cut it off. I let the ringing in my ears stop and then went inside where four dogs were gathered,

grinning at me, spent. The band was back together again.

Oisin studies Oona carefully. He follows her lead. Any day now I expect that he'll see what Oona saw —that our fractured pack needed to sing, to close ranks, to bond again. And then Oisin will take his place as song leader of the pack.

I'm pretty sure on that day I'll hear a fifth voice, too, an Irish tenor baying his approval from over the hills and far away...