



Adventures with Orla

The Christmas Nativity

By Kate McGrath



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Orla was stretched out on the couch, belly up as usual, taking her afternoon nap while Laddie was also sleeping, curled up in the recliner chair on the other side of the room. Orla and Laddie are Golden Retrievers, with big brown eyes and soft golden fur.

Orla is seven years old and Laddie is a one year old “pup” as his humans call him. Both dogs live in a small town up in New Hampshire – not too far from Lynnfield.



While the dogs were warm and cozy inside the house, the wind was beginning to blow outside – swirling and twirling the leaves on the ground up into the air – like a tornado of color. The wind was strong enough to pull any remaining leaves that hung delicately on the trees right off their branches.

Tiny snowflakes had begun falling from the sky, dusting the ground with specks of white. They glistened in the sun as if God had sprinkled the earth with glitter.

This was Orla's favorite time of year, where the time between the seasons of fall and winter seemed so special. Orla knew there was something important about this season. It was as if the air held a certain hope and wonder ... it was beautiful!



“THUMP!”

Orla’s ears twitched at the sound. “It’s probably Maxwell the cat,” she thought. “Nothing to be afraid of,” she told herself.

Maxwell is a tan, black and brown tabby cat who lives with Orla and Laddie. He is an old cat, but still playful – jumping off of something, onto something, across something or over something (usually his humans at four o’clock in the morning!) He could fly through the air with ease, though always managed to land with a loud “THUMP!”

Orla repositioned herself on the couch, turning her body so that she was shaped like a crescent moon – her belly half showing and her legs dangling off the side of the couch.

“Swoosh ... CRASH!!!!”



“What was that?” Laddie asked as he lifted his head from his paw and looked around the room – half awake, half still thinking of the dream he was having. Orla was now wide awake, stretching her body with her two front paws on the floor. She arched her back and stretched her hind legs before hopping them onto the floor as well.

“I’ll go see,” said Orla. Laddie stayed in the chair, lowering his head back onto his paw. “Okay,” said Laddie. “I’ll stay here.”



As Orla walked toward the dining room – which is where the noise came from, she saw Maxwell the cat run quickly down the hallway into the kitchen. “That silly cat!” she thought. “He’s always getting into something.”

Orla peered into the dining room. She could see that the cat had successfully managed to knock a box of Christmas decorations off the table. The box had fallen with just enough force that it landed upside down. Amazingly, nothing fell out!

Orla’s curiosity sparked. She could tell there was something special in that box. Orla walked slowly toward the box, her curiosity leading the way. One paw in front of the other – slowly, carefully, and with purpose.

. Her eyes looking over every inch of it. Her nose wiggled and her eyes sparkled with wonder. Her tail even began to wag – faster and faster Now Orla was standing over the box that had fallen... *swoosh, swoosh, swoosh.*

“Good thing I’m here,” thought Orla.

She pushed the box with her nose, tipping it on its side. Orla could see that there were Christmas decorations wrapped in pieces of newspaper. “What are these?” thought Orla. Though just as Orla got her nose into the box, she heard a car pull up into the driveway.

“Bark!, Bark!, Bark!, Bark!”

“Gotta find a toy!” said Laddie with a lot of excitement!

Orla and Laddie’s human Kate had just come home and oh boy were Orla and Laddie happy to see her! Both could hear Kate as she walked up the front stairs and turned the key to unlock the door.

“Oh boy, I’m so excited!” thought Laddie.

“I can’t wait to give Kate a hug,” thought Orla.

As Kate walked into the house, Orla and Laddie were both barking – excited and happily awaiting some attention!

“Oh, my two favorite dogs!” said Kate. “I’m so happy to see you both,” she continued.

Out of the corner of Kate’s eye, she could see that one of the boxes with Christmas decorations had fallen and was laying on it’s side.

“Uh oh – what happened?” asked Kate. “I hope nothing broke!” she said.

Kate and her family were getting ready for Christmas, which was only ten days away. Although most of the Christmas decorations were up, Kate was looking for a special Christmas decoration that she put up each year – her grandmother’s nativity set. For some reason though, she hadn’t found it yet. Kate was hoping that one of the boxes on the dining room table held what she was looking for.

Kate let Laddie and Orla outside to “do their business,” and back in again to feed them their dinner. Laddie’s belly was very full after eating and he was getting tired. All of the excitement from earlier also made him feel tired – enough so that he found his way back to the chair in the family room, curled up and fell asleep.

Orla’s curiosity however kept her awake. She wondered what was wrapped in all of the newspaper in that box Maxwell pushed off the table.

It was getting chilly in the house, so Kate made some hot chocolate. The warmth of the hot chocolate made her feel warm and cozy, ready to do some more Christmas decorating.

Kate walked into the dining room and picked up the box that had fallen. Taking the newspaper-wrapped Christmas decorations out of the box. One by one she placed them gently on the table. Kate was hopeful to find her Grandmother’s nativity!

Orla's black and brown wet nose could be seen just reaching the top of the dining room table – her eyes seen just beyond her snout. Orla's eyes were wide and bright with wonder!

“Orla – do you want to help?” asked Kate.

Orla's tail wagged and wiggled with excitement and joy!
“Woof!”

“I take that as a yes!” said Kate to Orla. “Okay, well, you have to sit. I'll show you the decorations as I unwrap them, okay?”

“Woof!” said Orla – which was her way of saying, “okay!”

“Okay,” said Kate in reply.

Kate took the first decoration – still carefully wrapped in newspaper. As Kate unwrapped the decoration, a small metal hook-shaped rod fell out and onto the floor. It hit the floor with a soft *cling*.

Orla backed away as the rod fell. But then she went back over to sniff it once it landed. “Oops,” said Kate. “That’s the Shepherd’s staff. And here is the Shepherd.”

Orla sniffed the figurine Kate held in her hand. “You see, the Shepherds are the ones who gather the sheep. They keep their sheep safe – like God keeps us safe.”

Kate placed the shepherd figurine down. She searched through the box to find the wooden stable. “Here it is,” said Kate as she pulled the stable out of the box. She placed the stable in the center of the dining room table. “Look at this, Orla,” said Kate. “This is the stable which is where the Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus figurines are placed.”

Kate picked up the Shepherd figurine and placed it next to the stable.

“Okay, let’s see what else is here,” said Kate.

Orla’s eye brows lifted and tilted with curiosity as Kate spoke.

“The Three Wise Men!” Kate exclaimed. Orla, see – these are the Three Wise Men. They are the three Kings who brought gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the baby Jesus. They followed a twinkling star to Bethlehem. Like them, we follow Christ, who is the light – the shining star – in darkness.”

Kate put the Three Wise Men at a distance from the stable, telling Orla that the Three Wise Men are still on their way to Bethlehem. “We celebrate the coming of the Three Wise Men – the Three Kings – on Epiphany, which is in January.”



As Kate unwrapped another figurine, Orla sniffed the newspaper and what Kate held in her hands. “This is the Angel. The Angel is the one who announced the great joy of Jesus’ birth. Like the Angel, we can share with others the joy of Jesus’ birth and what it means for us.”

Kate placed the Angel next to the Shepherd so that they both faced towards the stable.



There were three more figurines in the box, all still wrapped in newspaper. Kate unwrapped the two taller figurines. “Orla, this is Mary – Jesus’ mother. And this is Joseph – Jesus’ earthly father. Both Mary and Joseph opened their hearts to receive Jesus. Like Mary and Joseph, we can open our hearts. When we open our hearts to let Jesus in, we know love.

Kate placed Mary and Joseph inside the stable, right in the middle!



Orla looked up at Kate, her eyes wide with wonder.

“This figurine,” said Kate, as she held it for Orla to see, “will stay wrapped until Christmas day. Then, on Christmas day, we will unwrap it and place it where it belongs – resting in the tiny manger.”

Kate explained to Orla that the wrapped figurine is the baby Jesus. “Jesus is why we celebrate Christmas. We remember Jesus’ birth at Christmas and we celebrate that he is with us always!”

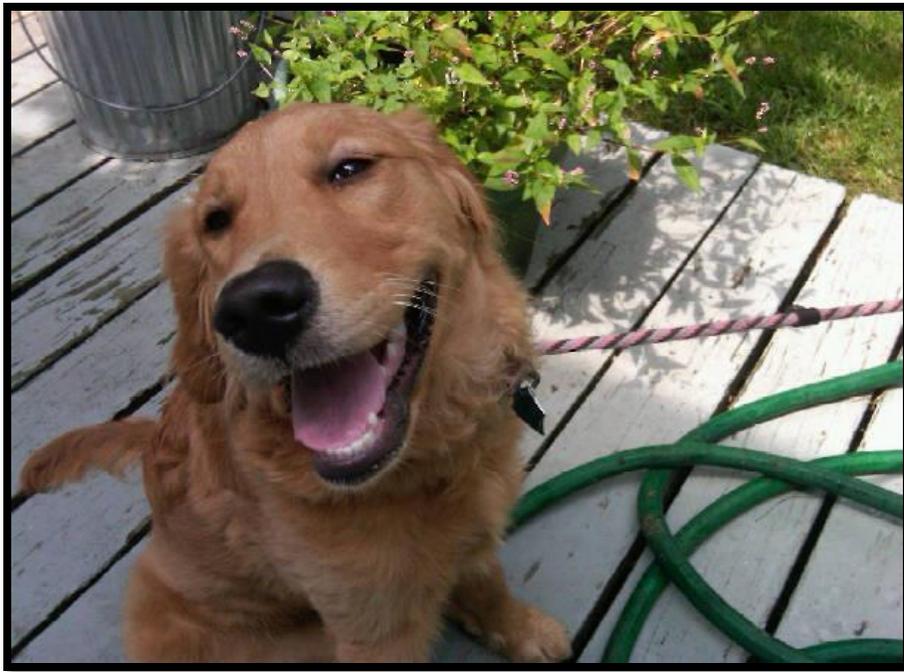


After all of the figurines had been placed in their proper spot, Kate and Orla looked at the Nativity scene.

Looking at the scene, Kate imagined what it must have been like the night Jesus was born. Although it's hard to know exactly what Mary and Joseph felt that night, or what the shepherds felt – Kate imagined that everyone must have been feeling very happy.

Orla knew that what happened on the night Jesus was born was very special – and that this will always be her favorite time of year!

About Orla



Orla is an eight-year-old Golden Retriever. She and Kate have been a registered Animal Assisted Pet Therapy team for the past seven years, visiting patients in hospitals, nursing homes and hospices. Kate and Orla love visiting patients and families in trauma and dementia units and working with newly bereaved families.

Orla has also brought much joy and distraction to college students studying for mid-terms and final exams at local colleges. Her sweet and gentle personality are noticeable, although she has a playful side to her as well. She has a history of eating things she is not supposed to and has a stubborn streak that sometimes gets the better of her.

Orla has been a gift to her humans and has brought joy and humor to their lives for eight wonderful years.

Her claim to fame is giving hugs, so if you see Orla around OLA, ask her for a hug!