

# Just Labs<sup>®</sup>

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A Celebration of the Labrador Retriever



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# Labrador Curiosities

By Paula Piatt  
Illustration by Tom Goldsmith

## Dearly Departed

We sit and reminisce, laughing about her quirks, the days spent in the field, the evenings on the couch. We've got photos and videos, and the memories are slowly filling the hole left in our home when we lost Finn. We knew the cancer would eventually take her, and although you never have enough time, we did get the opportunity to process that.

But Riley has no idea what happened to her friend, her playmate, and her adopted big sister. Finn is just...gone.

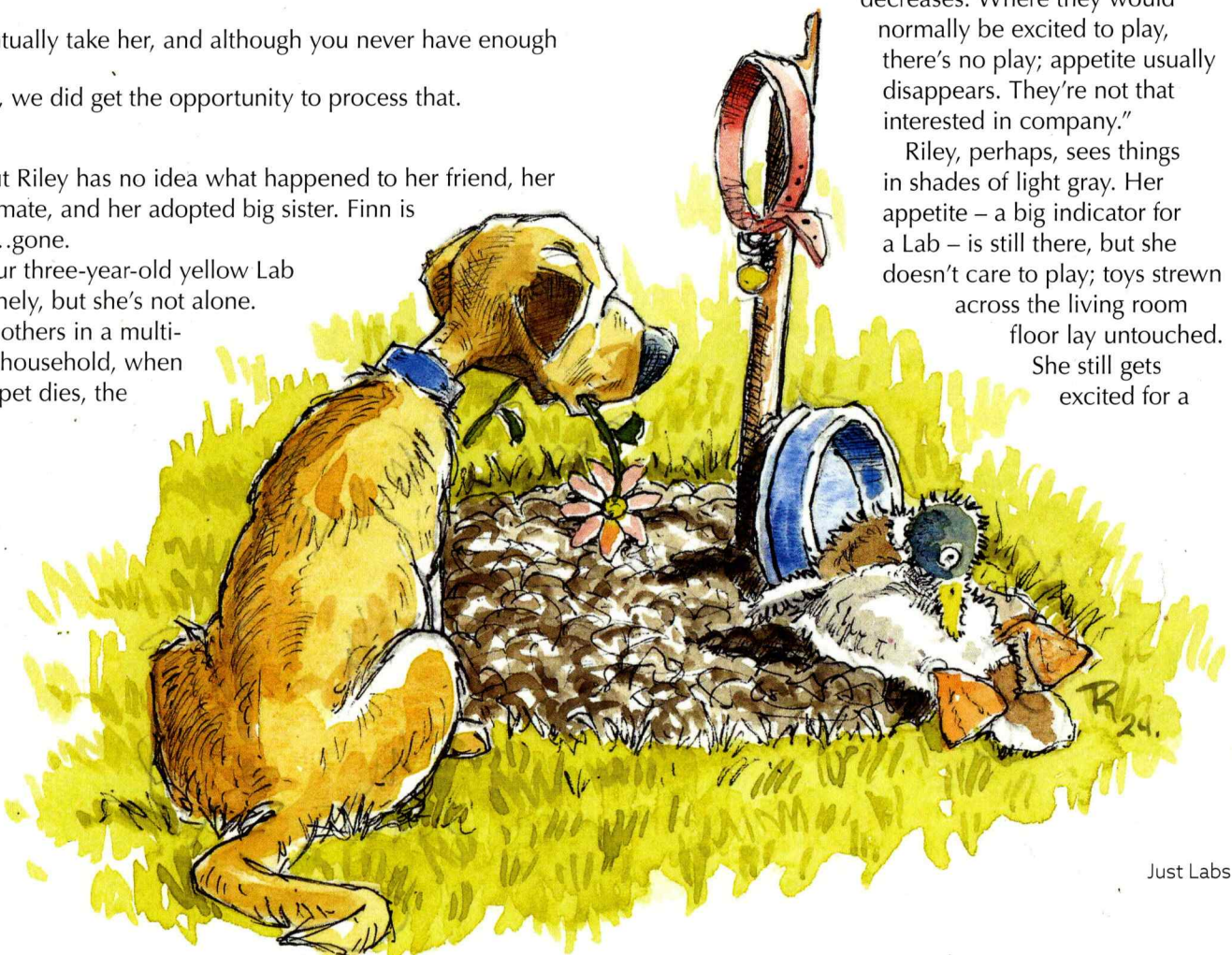
Our three-year-old yellow Lab is lonely, but she's not alone. Like others in a multi-pup household, when one pet dies, the

remaining pet can feel the grief of losing a friend. Behavior changes can be profound – or they can be non-existent. It all depends on the dog.

"Some dogs don't really care for each other," admits Dr. Nicholas Dodman, noted veterinary behaviorist, professor emeritus at Tufts University, and president and co-founder of the Center for Canine Behavior Studies. Some dogs, however, are closely bonded, and the sudden loss of that friendship can hit hard. "Life turns gray, they lose

interest in things, their activity level decreases. Where they would normally be excited to play, there's no play; appetite usually disappears. They're not that interested in company."

Riley, perhaps, sees things in shades of light gray. Her appetite – a big indicator for a Lab – is still there, but she doesn't care to play; toys strewn across the living room floor lay untouched. She still gets excited for a





ride in the car, maybe more out of habit than anything else. And while all Labs are comfortable on the couch, her “just lying around” seems different. The signs are classic.

A 2022 study at Italy’s University of Milan set out to quantify the emotions and behaviors of dogs that have lost their canine friend. With little documented evidence to go on, researchers turned to owner surveys. Most commonly, the remaining dog sought affection from its owner. They were also lethargic, more fearful, they ate less and vocalized more. About half the dogs sought out the deceased animal’s spot to lay in.

The study was able to make some connections – if the two dogs shared items or activities, there was more likely to be behavioral changes for the surviving pet, especially a reduction in the level of activity. As well, the duration of the relationship between the two dogs positively correlated with lower energy, playing less, and sleeping more.

A common suggestion is that the surviving pet be allowed to see his companion after it has passed. The Milan study, and others, have shown no difference in behavior when that was allowed to happen. And we really don’t know enough about dog cognition to know if it means anything to them. “It’s always very contentious as to whether you should or you shouldn’t [let them see the body],” Dr. Dodman says. “Either way can lead to stress and anxiety.”

Science aside, anecdotally, we know our dogs feel the loss of a companion – whether Riley misses Finn or she’s just upset that her regular routine is disrupted is still up in the air. Her age, says Dr. Dodman, likely has an impact.

“I think, like humans, younger dogs are much more resilient. So a puppy can bounce right back,” he says. There’s a certain age, however, where they’re very sensitive to that kind of stress, likely two to three years old. “In that age group, it would be a bit more stressful if you use the human situation as an analogy, but then an older dog might be a little bit more resilient.”

The perfect storm awaited – Finn was the only housemate Riley had known, they played together constantly (with Finn initiating 95 percent of the interaction), and, at three years old, Riley was ripe for a letdown.

Too, Steve and I grieve. Each of our dogs has been different; Finn was our “happy” dog. Ready with a smile or a playful growl, there wasn’t much that knocked her bubbly personality down. We’re missing that, and Riley picks up on it.

“Dogs are expert body language readers, and they do pick up on their owners’ body language,” says Dr. Dodman. “And I think they pick up on their owners’ sadness or gladness.” As hard as it may be, putting on a happy face will likely help your dog through the rough spots. He suggests the “jolly routine,” popularized by renowned canine behaviorist William Campbell.

“Be happy in your house, act it up, put on a happy face,” says Dr. Dodman, describing the routine where owners act relaxed and happy, and speak to the dog that way. “If everyone else is jolly, the dog may think, ‘Well, they’re all happy, maybe I’ve got nothing to worry about.’”

Every little bit helps, but expect your Lab to be looking and feeling sad if there was a close bond. How long the grief lasts is as individual as the dog; there’s no general rule.

It will likely eventually resolve, but don’t let your pup figure it out on his own. Give him lots of exercise with walks in new places, regular games at home, or even get back into some obedience training; plan some socialization, such as play dates with other dogs or a trip to the dog park; and, in extreme cases, if you are ready for the next step, bring a new puppy into the house.

“They could be sad for a few days, maybe a week, but if it persists longer than that, you’ve moved into a different gear,” Dr. Dodman says, referring to his own rule of thumb for pet grief. “In that case, I would say you have to be working gung-ho, full time [to help the dog] for maybe as much as a month or two. By then it should have lifted.

“If you’ve tried all those things, sometimes it is necessary to use anti-depressants,” says Dr. Dodman, although that is not his first choice; give all the other options a chance.

Riley’s not there yet – after four weeks we’ve seen flashes of the rambunctious three-year-old. And the puppy will definitely lift her spirits, because honestly, there’s little doubt that there will be a puppy. So we can sit, laughing about her quirks, the days spent in the field, and the evenings on the couch. 🐾



PAULA PIATT lives in the Northern Tier of Pennsylvania with husband Steve and their two Labrador retrievers Finn and Riley, where they hunt and enjoy the outdoors. An award-winning outdoor writer, she is an active member of the Pennsylvania Outdoor Writers Association and serves as the group’s executive director.