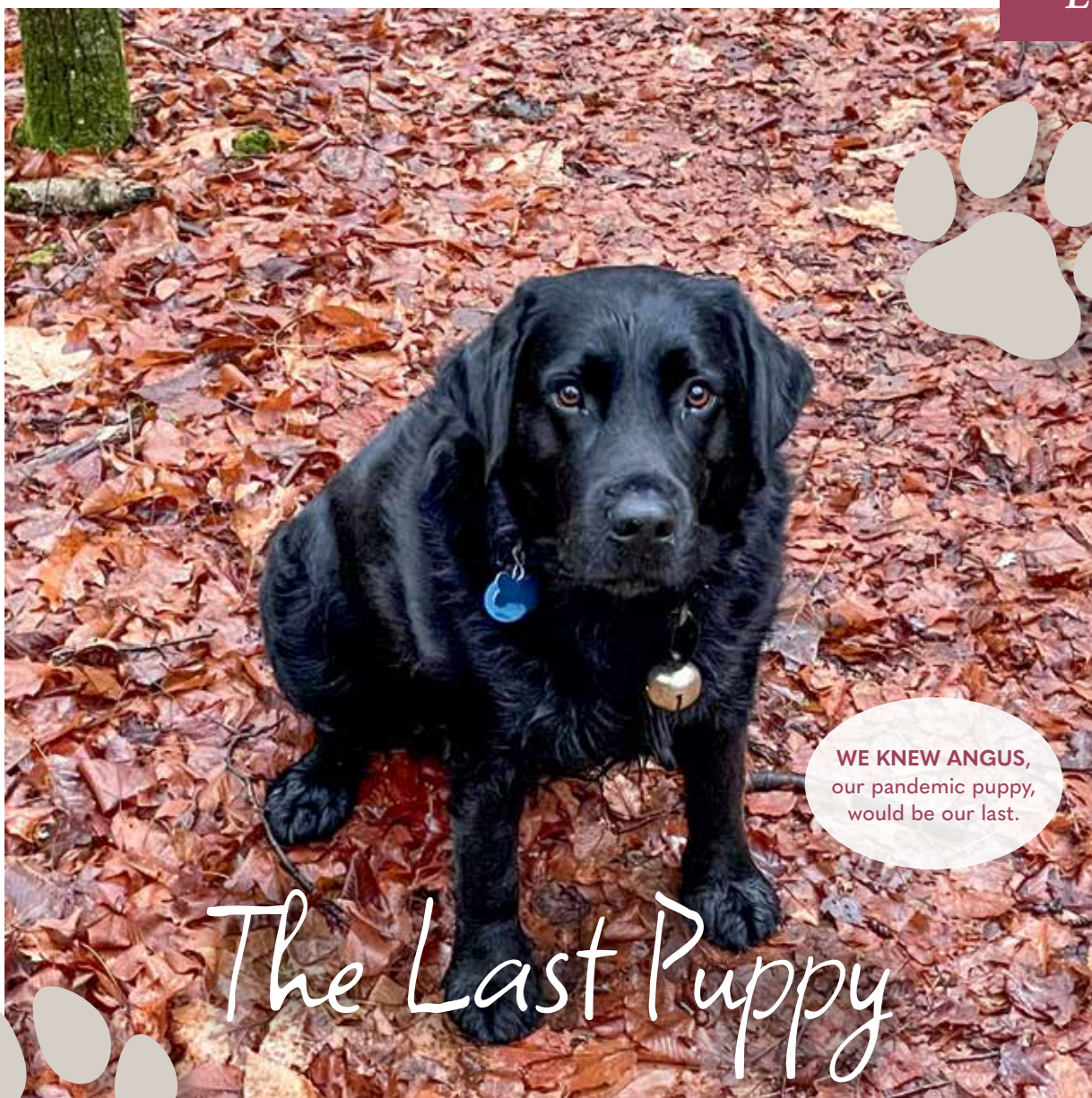




WE KNEW ANGUS,
our pandemic puppy,
would be our last.

The Last Puppy

Thinking about endings is a
chance for a new beginning

BY JANET REYNOLDS
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Like many people, we got a pandemic puppy. We already had a wonderful black lab called Echo, who was 8. Now one of Echo's great aunts was having a litter and I was itching for another dog.

I had two dogs when my husband, Peter, and I first met. Oscar and Maddy saw us through our courtship, our wedding 44 years ago, and the birth of two of our three children before dying at 15 and 13 respectively.

Over time, we had other dogs, but we hadn't had two dogs at the same time in decades. At 67, I wanted that experience one more time. I knew the door was closing on the energy needed to raise a puppy and — let's get real — our ages were



“Thinking about something as the last doesn’t have to mean or imply an end.”

becoming a factor for another reason. While no one knows when they will die, by the time you’re in your late 60s recognizing that the runway is shorter is impossible to ignore, and no one wants to leave behind a beloved animal for someone else to manage.

Now Peter is a dog fan, but he is not the member in this duo who feels as if his life is a little less than without a canine companion. He likes them fine once they arrive, but I’ve been the driver behind every dog we’ve had. As my 40th birthday neared, for instance, and we had been dogless for six years, I announced over dinner one night that my gift to myself would be a new golden retriever puppy. The announcement was met with squeals from our three children and by stunned silence from Peter. Another time, I collaborated — connived? — with my best friend, whose husband was the breeder of Echo and our earlier black lab, Sophie, to “give” me the puppy who became Sophie. How, I said innocently to Peter as I informed him of the upcoming arrival, could I refuse a gift from Betsy? A variation on the same strategy occurred with Echo, who joined our family during a time of extreme distress with one of our adult children’s mental health. Echo, I told Peter, was going to heal us all. He was joining our household, full stop.

Fast forward to the pandemic, when I learned that Betsy’s husband was breeding another litter, possibly his last. “Wouldn’t it be great to get a puppy?” I said, bracing myself for the list of reasons why it would not be great. I listened to Peter’s expected lackadaisical response and then decided drastic times called for drastic measures. “I want to have two dogs one more time in this lifetime,” I said. “This would be the last puppy.”

The ploy worked. We have now had Angus for five years, and he continues to bring me and Peter, with whom he spends at least an hour every day in the woods running and hiking, all the expected joy and wonder. Angus also helped mend our broken hearts at Echo’s passing a few years ago.

But Angus’s gift goes far beyond his winsome eyes and en-

thusiasm for virtually everything life throws his way. While I anticipated joy from watching his antics, what I did not expect was how Angus has helped me realize and appreciate life moments that have absolutely nothing to do with him. Realizing that Angus is the “last” has elided into other parts of my life, and that, as I enter what we can all agree is the last phase, is an unexpected gift.

As a society, we are quite good — or at least better — at firsts. First word, first kiss, first job — the list is almost endless and mostly limited by our imagination and lack of wonder as we travel the world around us. We mark these moments — take photos, create celebrations, note them in our journals.

We are less good with lasts. Even the phrases associated with the word — last gasp, last straw, dead last — imply our lack of interest in considering potential endings.

But thinking about something as the last doesn’t have to mean or imply an end. Instead, it can be a reminder to live in the here and now.

Thanks to social media, we are bombarded daily with reminders to be mindful, to live in the moment. How many of us, however, actually do it? How many of us take the time to appreciate what is happening to us as it actually happens? Mostly what happens as we scroll and see the Instagram or TikTok mindfulness reminders is a second of thinking, *Yes I should do that. I will do that*, and then the next black lab puppy reel shows up and the thought evaporates.

Angus changed that for me. I’m not saying I’m always aware, but taking the time to appreciate that certain events, from something as simple as a tasty dinner with Peter by the fire as we watch *The NewsHour* to the more obviously momentous, such as our granddaughter’s graduation, could be the last time I participate in them has helped make me more appreciative on a daily basis.

Thinking about lasts even helps me with life’s potentially annoying moments. No one likes writing a check for a new furnace but somehow thinking it’s the last time I’ll do it makes it a little less painful. Car shopping recently was a



ECHO AND ANGUS remind us that knowing something may be the last can make us slow down, savor the moment and hold it a little closer.

different experience as well. Why not get the new car instead of our usual used one if this is going to be the last car I get? As one of Peter's older British cousins said of their thoughts when we discussed this concept, "This will see us out."

While my children accuse me of being morbid — here's Mom talking about her death again — my life is so much

richer for having this idea percolating in my daily thoughts. And so I try to take a moment to sit back and appreciate — the cup of coffee, that laugh with Peter, that workout at the gym. And if I start to lose track of this idea, Angus is happy to remind me — each and every time he sticks his nose under my hands and forces me to give his ears a good rub. ■