



A FURRY HOME COMPANION

Who is the head of the household? Sometimes it's the humble house cat who watches over the place when you're out. One feline owner discovers how his own cat helped him see his home in a whole new way.

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Current scientific theory favors the notion that cats, once feral hunters, domesticated themselves. I'm not a scientist, but one thing I can say is that our cat domesticated *us*. It's fair to say my wife and I were certainly *aware* of our home in the couple of years we lived together before deciding to get a cat. But *aware* in the sense of *vaguely aware, kinda heard of*. We were familiar with our home in the way you can be familiar with the plot of a movie you dozed through one night on TV. We saw our apartment every day, of course, but we failed to notice much about it (apart from a few quirks with the plumbing that were all too difficult not to notice, unfortunately).

The arrival of Phoebe, a mackerel-striped tabby with a little brown nose and greener eyes than Kim Novak, a few days before Christmas changed all of that forever. For a start, the instant we opened the cat carrier, she squeezed herself behind a large and fully stocked bookcase. Safely ensconced there, she refused to come out. For the next two weeks, our home felt haunted. Every evening we'd put fresh food and water out for Phoebe and retire to bed, having failed quite miserably to coax her from her hiding place. Each morning though, we'd awake to find just a few crumbs left behind and a telltale trail of hairs all around the lounge.



At that point we became intensely aware of our home. We scrutinized furniture for the slightest cat scratches. The faintest sounds found us jumping from room to room in the hope of catching a glimpse of Phoebe. Eventually she emerged and began making her presence felt about the place, at first tentatively, and then quite tenaciously. Having hidden from us for so long, she now preferred to keep us in clear sight. She followed us into different rooms and liked to give our ankles a disobliging swipe whenever we opened the front door to leave the apartment.

Upon returning, we'd usually find her waiting on the hall mat with a somewhat accusatory

expression, as if she'd waited all that time on the same spot for us to come home. And home we came because we had to for Phoebe's sake, since she never left the building. But, in fact, we longed to be at home. Because home was where Phoebe was.

Our apartment has become much more homey now that we have a feline who demands food and affection and savages rugs on an almost hourly basis. Our apartment genuinely feels more lived-in. Not only do we both spend more time here, but Phoebe—in treating it like her own personal hotel by wrecking carpets and hiding bathroom towels—has made us appreciate it as never before. Salvador Dalí once argued that

the future of architecture lay in making soft and hairy homes. So perhaps all anyone needs is a cat: Certainly our home has never felt softer or been hairier since Phoebe came to live with us. And now we can't imagine it any other way. ○ ○

Travis Elborough's most recent book, London Bridge in America: The Tall Story of a Transatlantic Crossing, was published by Jonathan Cape in 2013.