

# Jackson Galaxy

By Jeannie Vanasco



**My mom talks** about her cat the way I talk about my mom: “She turns on me on a dime,” she’d say. Or, “Even if she had the whole house to herself, she wouldn’t be happy.” Or: “There’s something wrong with her. She can’t help it. It’s probably chemical.” One day, my mom described a situation with her cat, Brooklyn, using language she’s probably used to summarize her dynamic with me: “I’m not talking to her. She knows I’m mad.”

My mom’s silences — two weeks here, almost six months there, over the five years

since she moved in — amount to a year and a half, at least, and emerge whenever she feels left out. In late 2017, she retired, sold the house she lived in for half a century and left her friends behind. She moved to Baltimore from Ohio with one other cat and two dogs whose ashes she keeps next to her bed. Before moving here, she prided herself on her independence. Now she no longer trusts herself to drive. Neither of us thought through how difficult this arrangement might be. A duplex — she on one side, my partner and I on the other

The truth about cats and daughters.

— would have been ideal, but we couldn’t afford that, so I renovated the basement into an apartment for her. Our house now seems like some psychoanalytic metaphor. Every day I walk over my mom.

“You do know the silent treatment doesn’t work on a cat?” I asked. We were in Brooklyn’s room (a.k.a. my mom’s bedroom). Scratch pads are fastened to the sides of the dresser. Brooklyn’s favorite heated bed sits on the night stand. A cactus-shaped scratcher blocks my mom’s view of the TV (“Because that’s where

Brooklyn prefers it," she has explained), which is fine because only birds and mice appear on its screen. My mom's TV is in her living room. She recently replaced her full bed with a daybed to give Brooklyn more room to run.

"Look at this," she said, pushing up her sleeves. She had fresh scratches on both arms. "I was just reading on the bed and she attacked me." I immediately thought of "Play With Your Cat!" a YouTube playlist created by Jackson Galaxy.

The author of four books on cat behaviorism, Galaxy rose to fame as the host of the Animal Planet docuseries "My Cat From Hell," in which he counsels cat guardians on topics related to cohabitation. On his YouTube channel, he explains "cat mojo," which he defines as "the confidence that cats exhibit when they are at ease in their environment and in touch with their natural instincts." I credit Galaxy for why my bonded pair, Catullus and Kiffawiffick, recently welcomed a third cat, Hildegard, into the household.

"She might be bored," I said.

"You built her the 'catio,'" she said — a pet door in the window that leads to Brooklyn's patio, a screened-in area with platforms and an asphalt roof. "You'd think she'd be happy with that." I thought, Should I expect you to be happy simply because I added an apartment for you? But I didn't say that. Instead I asked if she was playing with Brooklyn regularly. My mom picked up a Galaxy-designed wand toy and waved its feathers in Brooklyn's face. Brooklyn blinked and turned away. "See?" my mom said. "She doesn't like to play." "But that's not how a bird would act," I said, remembering Galaxy's directions from the "Be the Bird" passage in his book "Total Cat Mojo." "A bird would fly away from Brooklyn. You have to be the bird." My mom left the room. "I'm sorry," I said. "I know you're trying."

"She's mean!" she yelled back.

I retreated upstairs and loaded Galaxy's YouTube channel. I tried a video titled "Are You Rewarding Your Cat's Bad Habits?" A Belgian woman asked how to stop her cat from meowing loudly, and Galaxy recommended rewarding the cat's silence. That was what I had been doing with my mom — except her silences could be agonizing. In the weeks after each silence ended, I would spend more time with her, but when my work — or the simple desire to be alone — interfered, her silence returned. It occurred to me that she'd been acting

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like the Belgian cat, wearing me down until I gave her what she wanted.

My mom and I, and human beings in general, are more like cats than we imagine. We're territorial yet social, which inevitably leads to conflict. Galaxy's solutions often come down to "catification," making your home conducive to a cat's needs and wants. His work may seem silly or cute, but he's addressing a serious problem: human resistance to sharing space. Galaxy asks people to compromise.

But while I've more than compromised with my cats, I remain territorial with my mom. Just the other day she came upstairs, unannounced, before I'd had coffee, and I said, "Mom, we've talked about this." But whenever I've wanted to see her first thing in the morning, I've shouted, "Mom?" and walked downstairs before receiving an

answer. No wonder she's felt insecure and lashed out. I'm not excusing her behavior — unlike a cat, she can talk through conflict — but I share some of the blame.

My mom knows she sometimes expects too much of me. "You should do things without me," she said after one silence. "Intellectually, I know that. Emotionally, though, it's hard." Intellectually, I know she resorts to the silent treatment because she's lonely. Emotionally, her silences hurt because they force me to imagine life without her.

When I returned downstairs, my mom had the feathered toy flying like a bird. After Brooklyn caught it, my mom said: "Are you Mommy's good girl? Yes, you are." "So everything's OK now?" I asked. "She's great," my mom said. "She has her moments, but I love her no matter what." ♦

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#### Read Like the Wind By Molly Young

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#### The Structures of Everyday Life

By *Fernand Braudel*, translated by *Miriam Kochan* and revised by *Sian Reynolds*  
Nonfiction, 1981 (originally 1967)

**Where do table forks** come from? When did wallpaper gain popularity? Why did Spanish soldiers of the 17th century scorn beer?\*

If you crave answers to such humble questions, you'll be glad to gallop through Fernand Braudel's study of everyday behaviors and objects from 1400 to 1799. His book covers the whole world, and moves quickly, so if you crave 900 densely footnoted pages on Cimmerian toboggan lore, you'd better look elsewhere. Me, I enjoy soaring like an eagle above global economic, religious, moral and artistic traditions, and then pursuing whatever details invite closer examination.

Braudel's project is to evoke contexts,

and in writing about the slow rhythms of existence — chairs, paper, locks, money, mail, cigarettes, bread — he creates photographic images of life in long-ago Mexico or Istanbul or Paris. This book is, incidentally, a solid option if you wish to adhere to a strict budget in 2023, because it will devour at least three months of reading time.

\*1) Forks come from Venice. 2) Wallpaper gained popularity in the 1700s as a cheap alternative to woven tapestries. 3) Then as now, wine drinkers tended to turn up their noses at beer; one Spanish soldier claimed that beer "always looks to me like the urine of a sick horse."

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