

One of the inviolable rules of American citizenship is that every homeowner is required to have at least one pet. The only exceptions are if you are allergic to fur, feathers, or fish scales, or if your last name is Trump. Even then you are expected to keep house plants and watch kitten videos on YouTube.

Since our only allergy is to work, we have always made it a point to have multiple critters in the house. Way back when Geoff was single he was careful to keep the insects fed, but Pat cured him of that (although he still sometimes lets a mosquito bite him, just for old times' sake). Nowadays we have a cat named Magic and a dog named Sherlock (as in "No sh*t, Sherlock!").

If you're familiar with young cats, you won't be surprised to hear that Magic terrorizes not only the house, not only the back yard, but the entire neighborhood. On his first day at home he climbed to the top of a tree and proceeded to mew piteously until Geoff clambered nearly as high, at which point Magic decided to use him as a ladder (hanging on with his needle-sharp kitten claws) and scamper back to ground level, where he then proceeded to calmly clean himself while occasionally checking out the hapless human above. Geoff remained trapped for several hours until Pat came home and pointed out that if he let go of the branch he was holding, he would fall onto the roof, slide over the eaves, and land gently in a lawn chair, at which point she would happily bring him a gin & tonic. Geoff closed his eyes and did so; things worked out exactly as predicted except for the "gently" part. Extricating his punctured, shingle-scraped, bruised body from the remains of the chair, Geoff vowed that he would never again try to rescue the kitten—a promise he kept for three entire days, until Magic decided it would be fun to hide in a rose bush.

Eighteen months later, the cute little kitten has grown into a handsome tomcat who loves to roam. We never know where he goes, only that he will reliably return for dinner. But since he doesn't entirely trust his people to have a successful hunting session at the grocery store, he covers his bases by bringing along a captive lizard. He proudly places the reptile on the floor and begins to play with his newfound toy until one of us notices it. We reward him with a shriek and (unless Geoff is the shrieker) a standardized ritual of "Geoff, the cat has another lizard!" One of us then picks up the annoyed animal (the warm-blooded one) while Geoff retrieves the other (cold-blooded). Except that the lizard, freed from its tormentor, invariably decides to hide, so Geoff has to crawl under the piano, grope under the couch, and utter some choice swear words when he bangs his head on the coffee table. Eventually he manages to corral the thing and return it to some bushes where it can safely hide. The cat then sits for 10–15 minutes, staring at the place where Geoff secreted the prize, until eventually his little kitty brain forgets why he was there and he comes inside. At that point he discovers his catnip mouse, or his stuffed bear, or a discarded wine cork, and all is forgiven until his tummy reminds him of why he returned home in the first place.

Sherlock, on the other paw, is a different story. Most dogs live simple lives: sitting loyally at their masters' feet, playing fetch, hanging their heads out car windows, and becoming hyperactive at the sound of the word "walk". Not so for Sherlock. We think he's half long-haired Dachshund, half Tibetan Spaniel. The mix works well; he's an unusually good-looking dog who regularly draws attention from strangers. Children ask if they can pet him, the staffers at the boarding kennel adore and pamper him, and (needless to say) Harvey Weinstein isn't allowed anywhere near him.

When we brought Sherlock home, the kitten was already well established in the household. Since Magic was fearless (and well armed) but Sherlock was much bigger, they quickly developed a happy working relationship. As we mentioned last year, they discovered the game of "tag" and play together endlessly; when they tire out they snuggle together on the couch. However, Sherlock quickly noticed that Magic isn't a particularly affectionate to humans. He then concluded that we *needed* a cuddly animal, and appointed himself Official Kuenning Household Lap Dog. That would be great except he's a bit large for the assignment. It's not quite like having a German Shepherd on your lap, but he tends to droop over the side and weighs quite a bit more than your average Pekinese. Once he has settled in, he's quite reluctant to let his chosen pillow get up and move around. The end result is that Geoff, as the least popular resting place, has been unanimously elected the Official Kuenning Household Wine Purer, and does any other duty that requires getting up from the couch. Fortunately, that's a task for which he is well qualified.

But Sherlock has other official duties as well. In particular, his Tibetan Spaniel side was bred to be a temple guardian, and he is thoroughly determined to execute that duty just as efficiently as his little doggie brain will allow. So he barks when somebody rings the doorbell (Note to UPS: could you just knock?). He barks when somebody knocks on the door (Note to UPS: never mind). He barks when the mail carrier walks by. He barks when the neighbor fires up a leaf blower, or turns on music, or closes a car door. When the air conditioner starts up he not only barks, he charges that fearful compressor so that he can scare it out of the yard—and when it shuts off, he charges it again for having the nerve to suddenly go silent. Oddly he doesn't bark at the moon, perhaps because it never makes noise. But airplanes are at serious risk of being pulled right from the sky, if only he could leap just a *little bit* higher. (With his stubby Dachshund legs, he's somewhat altitude-challenged.)

Since he's a shelter rescue, Sherlock has a checkered history. It's clear that his original owner never taught him the game of "fetch." When he first arrived home, we would toss a dog toy across the back yard, and half the time he would stand there just looking at us, as if to say, "Why did you throw that perfectly good rubber ball away?" The rest of the time he would amble over and hover over the object, obviously thinking that it needed protection from anybody so cruel as to make it fly through the air and land on the ground with a thud.

But we were persistent, and today we are proud to say that Sherlock has figured out the idea of chasing things. (That might be partly because the cat knocked him a good one upside the head and yowled, "Look, dummy! You'll never catch anything if you don't run after it!") So now when Geoff comes home, Sherlock drops a stuffed pheasant at his feet. (That's the plush-toy kind, folks. Sherlock hasn't yet learned to cook!) Then the game begins. Geoff grabs for the bird, and Sherlock jumps away. Geoff runs through the house, trying to get the toy. Eventually he gets a hand on it and they engage in a tug-of-war, with the dog growling viciously and shaking the bird in an attempt to grab it back. Geoff tries to throw it down the hallway, misses, and knocks over a vase on a living-room bookshelf; Sherlock, having charged down the hall in happy anticipation, runs back and tries to retrieve the lost item before Geoff does. Then he runs in circles through the house, with Geoff chasing him, deliriously repeating the whole ritual. He clearly loves the game (especially the part where Geoff slips and does a pratfall), but he seems to be a bit out of shape because after about three rounds, he carries the bird into the kitchen, deposits it on his doggie bed, and heads for the water bowl.

Someday we'll manage to train him to actually fetch the bird and drop it at Geoff's feet.

Oh, you wanted some family news? Xandie, the Official Kuenning Household College Student, spent last spring studying abroad in Salzburg, Austria, where her daily trip to school involved (as she put it in her blog) "walking up a mountain, down a mountain, through a mountain, and over a bridge." Geoff took advantage of spring break to meet her for a wonderful vacation on Cyprus, where (this is true) his GPS first gave directions in German and later instructed him to turn left on "lambda epsilon mu kappa alpha delta omicron zeta" street. A bit after that, Pat and her sister visited Xandie in Salzburg so they could take the "Sound of Music" tour, which was also wonderful. As a family we visited Puerto Rico in the summer, when it still existed, which makes it all the harder for us to watch that beautiful American island being left without help after the hurricane. In early December, Pat and Geoff celebrated their (ack!) 25th anniversary. And next spring Xandie will do her first co-op for Northeastern, traveling to Jodhpur, India to work with the Institute for Philanthropy and Humanitarian Development (<https://iphindia.com>), which works to educate girls and empower women in rural communities.

Needless to say, Geoff is making spring-break plans, and Pat and her sister have already invested in travel guides. The cat and dog, sadly, will have to stay home.

The kennel staffers are ecstatic.

Love,

Geoff Pat Xandie



The Humans



The Superhumans (Plus Pheasant)