

Tuesday tidbits

A lot has gone on this past week. I think I'll stick to the unabashedly good to start with.

Katja has started eating solid food! We're doing something called Baby Led Weaning, which means that she is eating what we are, or at least trying it. I find the whole process quite amusing. She makes funny faces when she tries something new. She hasn't really loved anything yet, though I didn't really expect her to. She does, however, like applesauce and Cream of Wheat for one reason – they are extremely messy! SHE took great joy in spreading them all over her face, arms, and the tray of her high chair. We took a shower when she was done. I'm not sure she actually ate any of it. Nyx thinks this is a wonderful change, because when Katja is done, Nyx gets to clean up. Even if I veto that, Katja rather likes throwing things, so the dog gets a lot of extra treats.

Nyx had a tumor removed last week. They did get all of it, which is good. I'm hoping that's the end of the cancer story where Nyx is concerned, but we'll have to keep a closer eye on her from here on out. Whenever the words "dog" and "cancer" are in the same sentence, I worry, because Ace seemed healthy, limped a little, and then we had two weeks before he had to be put down. Nyx is only four, very healthy, and I'm hoping everything goes smoothly. I do wish, however, that she would stop licking at the t-shirt she's wearing. It's not bad during the day, but at night it's incredibly annoying and keeps us awake. She may have to wear the Cone of Shame tonight so we can get some sleep.

The weather here has been gorgeous lately. I spent much of the weekend working on the yard, bringing some order to a lot of chaos. It was very satisfying.

A new breed

The [Indie Ink Writing Challenge](#) is back, and this week was rather pleasant for me to write. The stupendous [Supermaren](#) answered a challenge from me, and my challenge this week came from [xtinabosco](#). The challenge is at the end.

We were going to get a rescue Great Dane, but my husband really wanted a puppy. I put the word out to all of the rescue groups I knew of, kept an eye on several websites, and figured it would be a long wait. I saw an ad for Great Dane puppies, no papers, for \$700, which was ridiculous. It was a backyard breeder. I mostly avoid these like the plague, but I was pretty sure she would not be able to sell all of the puppies for that amount. I sent an email saying that if she couldn't sell all of the puppies, we would be willing to buy one for \$250, since that was about what we expected to spend on a rescue. A few weeks later I got an email saying "I'll sell a puppy to you, but it has to be now and you have to promise to love it and take good care of it."

We promised, of course. I've worked enough with dogs in my life and we'd done enough research that we figured we had a handle on taking good care of a puppy, even a giant breed, and love was not a question. I'm a sucker for puppies, and I was pretty sure I'd love it by the time we got it home.

When we got to the house, we saw the sire and dam in the backyard. They were both rescues (though I'm not sure from where, since most rescue agencies I've dealt with make sure the animals are fixed before finding new owners) and the dam was not very fond of people, especially since she had puppies

to protect. Both parents looked very nice, possibly even show quality. The mother was blue and the father was harlequin, white with markings.

The puppies, at five weeks old, were already being fed dog food soaked in water. Not only that, the dog food was Purina. Giant breed dogs need low protein food to start with because otherwise their bones grow faster than their tendons can keep up with and they end up bowlegged, which can do serious damage. The first puppy we were drawn to was a merle male, the only male in the litter. He was white with grey markings and quite friendly, but he was already spoken for. We wandered around a bit, talking to the breeder and watching the puppies. We liked the look of one of them but it seemed very worried about people and not very comfortable, which, in a puppy that young, was a bit worrisome.

Our final decision had more to do with the puppy's choice than ours. A little dark female with white markings started playing with Xander's shoelaces and would not let go. She was having an absolute blast, and she had no fear of anything. She was outgoing, bounced on all of her littermates, and seemed comfortable and happy. We chose her partly because she was so friendly.

We took her home, switched her food, took her to the vet, and started training immediately. She did beautifully. She is now three and a half years old, a beautiful girl with a glossy coat, and we do love her. We named her Nyx after a goddess of the night because of her coloring. I wasn't sure about working with a Great Dane, but she has been the easiest dog I have ever trained, and she lives up to the sobriquet of "Gentle Giant". I am now hooked on the breed. My first love in dog terms will always be English Bull Terriers, but Great Danes are definitely in my future.

My challenge this week was “Write about a memory of something red. Or black or blue. But don’t use the name of the color in your piece.” Nyx is a black dog with white markings on her toes and chest.

New dog tricks

At three years old, Nyx is learning to play fetch. It isn’t something we taught her, exactly; she just figured out that if she dropped a toy in a lap it was more likely to get thrown than if she tried to get us to play with her and take the toy. The funniest thing about this development, though, is that since she was a puppy she has played fetch with herself. She’ll pick up a toy, shake it and run around with it, and then she flings it as hard as she can. As soon as she lets go, she’s chasing it. I have no idea where she learned that particular habit, but it amuses me no end. I don’t know why or when she decided that her version of solitary fetch just wasn’t enough anymore.

She also spent a lot of time emulating the cats while she was little, so she shares some habits with them. If I hold out my hand, my cat will walk under it and keep turning so I’m petting her without doing anything. She’s done that since we got her, and it’s something I’ve seen with other cats, too. Nyx picked up on that, and she’s tall enough that if I just hold my hand out at my side, parallel to the floor, Nyx will walk under it and then turn in circles so I’m petting her.

None of this has to do with the animals not getting enough attention. Most evenings my cat curls up either on my lap or behind my head, and Nyx gets attention pretty much constantly.

When we're settled in the evening, reading or watching television, she has her head on one lap and, often as not, her back end on another lap. She thinks she is a lap dog, but at 120 pounds she's a little too big to manage it comfortably. We joke about who gets the head end, since the other end is sometimes not as pleasant.

We've been doing some clicker training with Nyx, and it's really interesting to watch her try to figure out what we want. One of the fun things for me is to decide what I want her to do and then click the behaviour. I'm not luring her or trying to teach her, just catching what she does and seeing if she'll do what I want. It's a game, and she seems as amused by it as I am. When the clicker comes out, she's at attention. That probably has a lot to do with the fact that clicker=treats, but as long as we're both having fun, that's fine with me. Clicker training has been much more interesting than even basic treat-based training because I'm asking Nyx to use her brain, to figure things out, and she likes that. I really enjoy watching her figure out the pieces and work her way through things.

I like having animals around for the most part. Sometimes they drive me batty, but I like the companionship. On cold nights, the warmth is nice, too.

[Puppies, bread, and adoption](#)

The past few weeks have been a little hectic.

We took care of a four month old puppy for two weeks. He's a smart puppy and eager to learn, but his home life is very different than ours, so the adjustment was a little rough. Our dog rings a bell to go out. He rang the bell to go out when he

was bored and sometimes when he actually needed to, but apparently when he was really desperate he'd forget about the bell. Not my favorite thing to deal with. He didn't mean to, and if he'd been with us longer I think the accidents would have stopped, but it reminded me why we wait a while between puppies before the memory fades enough that "cute" overwhelms the memory of "no no please don't pee there!"

He picked things up fast, though. We taught him to shake. It was pretty funny. Nyx knows how to shake and does it on command, no problem, so I put her to my right, angled, and the puppy to my left. I had already worked with the puppy for a little while the night before, so he had some idea what I was asking. They both settled into a sit, and since there were treats involved they were very attentive.

Nyx has always been trained on her own. I said, "Nyx, shake!" and she did, so she got a treat. I said, "Mikie, shake!" and Nyx, having never really heard me ask another dog to do anything, reached out her paw for my hand and it landed on Mikie's head. Mikie shook, too, and got a treat, and I had to work to not crack up too much. I tried again. Same result – Nyx's rather large paw on Mikie's relatively small head.

I decided that if I were not directly looking at her, Nyx might do better. I put the dogs facing each other, 180 degrees from each other. I asked Nyx to shake, which she did perfectly. I turned around, bent over, and asked Mikie to shake, and I felt Nyx's paw land solidly on my rear end. I couldn't stop laughing for a long time. Her timing was perfect, very responsive, very good, except that I wasn't talking to her.

She did figure it out eventually, and she responded only to commands with her name preceding them. Mikie got it, too. It was an interesting exercise for me, too, because in the past when I've had two dogs they have already known that their name associates with commands, and I don't remember specifically

having to teach it.

After those two weeks, I am quite supportive of Xander's assertion that we do not get another dog until we have a bigger house. Nyx is pretty laid back, but she takes up a fair amount of room. A puppy, which is what Xander wants, takes up a lot of space, not as much just in bulk but in energy and attention. Right now, a laid back dog is just fine with me.

Another thing that has been going on is that we have decided to start pursuing adoption. We both want a child, and we can't have one biologically without rather impressive medical intervention. We're not willing to go that route. I thought I was okay with just being someone associated with other peoples' kids, but we ended up deciding that we really do want a baby of our own. We've asked friends and family to keep an ear out and pass our names along if they know of anyone who is pregnant and healthy and does not want to keep the child. It feels rather odd asking that question, but it is worth asking. We are looking into adoption agencies, too, though. It will work out eventually.

I've been baking a lot of bread and reading a lot lately. I'm trying not to worry about all of the various pieces that I have no control over right now. We are visiting with family over the holidays, which is good, and it means that there are a lot of people who like eating my bread. Somehow that's comforting. I can't do much, but I can make food that people like to eat. It's also really nice to have the time to read a book in a day, even if it is basically fluff, silly sci-fi/fantasy. I haven't gotten to do that in a long time.

I hope you have a wonderful and peaceful holiday filled with good food and people you care about. Thanksgiving is by far our favorite holiday. Food, family, friends, and no pressure to get anyone anything – perfect!

A peaceful day

Today was mostly a quiet day. Not a lot of talking, and we mostly talked about the food we were cooking. I cleaned house because it was bugging me, and I enjoyed the work. We cooked. I made bread. Xander made pudding. Yesterday he made butternut squash soup, very simple and perfect. I read a lot, played Plants vs. Zombies, played with the dogs (we have an extra dog in the house for a couple of weeks), and relaxed.

I don't have very many quiet days. Work is not very noisy, but there is always the sound of people doing their jobs, so there is a constant background of sound. We went to a party this weekend. The reason for the party was great – the engagement of two dear friends. I'm not very good at groups of people, though. I'm an aerobatic pilot, I used to do technical diving, I've worked with kids, I like playing with computers, I work in housing, we have a Great Dane, we both sing – it isn't that I have nothing to talk about. I'm happy just existing, people watching, and I am not good at jumping into conversations. It was very loud there, too. Maybe I'm getting old. I don't know. I never really liked loud parties or big groups of people, though, so maybe that tendency is coming out more now.

Today was very peaceful. I needed that. There are days that we are both busy with our own things and we don't need to talk much. It's a good kind of silence. If there's something to say, we say it, but days like today there wasn't much reason to talk. Just enjoying each others' company was a very good, fulfilling thing.

We're going to watch The Simpsons now and then I'm going to go to bed. It's a little early, but I am happily weary, and tomorrow I will wake up to a clean kitchen, food ready to take

for lunches, and a good day ahead of me. I guess I just need these quiet, useful days to recharge, to feel at home in my skin again.

What gives you peace? I'm guessing that cleaning the kitchen doesn't do it for everyone.

Mending

I have a few pieces of clothing that I really like which have begun to fall apart. The cuffs on one shirt have worn almost through and the elbows and the last bit of the seam on the back of another have gotten very thin. I decided it was time to fix them this weekend. I turned the cuffs up and stitched them, chopped off the sleeves on the second shirt and made them half length instead of full length, and took the seam in the back, split it, and made the shirt kind of have tails. They aren't perfect, but at least I can wear them again without worrying that they look too odd.

The thin spots are rather reflective of life right now. I look like I'm doing fine, mostly, but there are places where I'm just worn so thin that it wouldn't take much to punch a hole and show the ragged edges. I have a day off today which is being spent sleeping in a bit, watching a movie while mending, doing dishes and laundry, baking bread, going on a hike, and going to a Zumba class this evening. It sounds like a lot for a day off, but it's all part of mending me in some ways. Making the house nice helps me feel comfortable and relaxed. Baking bread is a very centering activity. Sleeping, of course, is always good. Hiking with Xander and Nyx gets me away from everything and unhitches my brain from the hamster wheel. Zumba, while I'm a little nervous about it, sounds like

fun, and a dear friend is teaching the class.

I'm putting patches on the thin parts of myself, trying to make sure that nothing rips too badly. I'm becoming a patchwork of joy stitched over holes made by pain, peace covering grief, kindness covering old hurts. I suppose that's not a bad thing. I always rather liked patchwork dolls and patchwork quilts, things put together from pieces that wouldn't make anything by themselves. It still isn't easy some days. I am very lucky to have Xander, who is so good to me on so many levels and who can make me laugh anytime, good friends who accept who I am, joyful or quiet or talkative or broken, a family who tries hard to be good to each other, and a dog and two cats who are very odd but very good to be near. With patches like those, I think my thin spots won't rip too badly.

Teaching the dog Russian

Nyx is under the impression that "go away" means the same thing as "lie down". She may have some reason for this, since the only time we say "go away" is when she's standing in front of the television. This wouldn't be an issue if she were a Jack Russell Terrier or if our television were higher up. Unfortunately for our viewing pleasure, she's 34 inches at the shoulder (about – I don't remember exactly what it was when we measured her) and the television is on a coffee table. When she's trying to be close to us, she stands directly between the couch and the television and looks longingly at the much-too-small space on the couch where she would really like to be. That's when "Go away!" is uttered. If she promptly curls up on the floor, she doesn't get squirted; if she continues to stand and look lost, we squirt her and she moves.

We've had a few issues with what words we use to train her. When she was very little, we were trying to teach her "Down" (lie down) and "Off" (don't jump on people – all paws on the floor, please!). This worked well as long as no one else was around, but people who are not dog people did not understand the distinction and used the two words interchangeably. This confused the dog. We eventually gave up. "Down" and "Off" are now interchangeable. Both mean "get your feet back on the floor!" and the command for "lie down" is in Russian. It works beautifully, and people don't get confused.

I've never taught a dog commands in another language, but it helps keep her from being confused, and that helps a lot.

Insomnia

Every once in a while I have a bad night. Lately I mostly just wake up and can't go back to sleep rather than waking up terrified or upset, but it takes its toll. This morning I woke up about 4 AM. I was planning to wake up around 6 to get some things done, so two hours before was not the best time to wake up. I don't get all the way back to sleep. I decided to rest, in any case, so that the remainder of the day wouldn't end up being a complete loss.

As I lay curled up, trying to sleep by counting backwards from 100 (I can tell I'm getting tired when I have to start over, and it tends to keep my brain from going on the usual hamster wheel of what I ought to be doing instead), Nyx got up, shook herself, grumbled a little, and settled down with her head on the bed next to me. I stopped counting and started petting her head, and she fell asleep. My husband was sound asleep on the other side of the bed. Between the two of them breathing

peacefully and the relative quiet of the world outside, it wasn't a particularly bad thing to be awake and not doing anything.

I drifted in and out of half asleep, I think, never quite getting all the way back, but when I finally got up this morning I didn't feel like I had lost rest time. I don't feel completely exhausted. Weary, yes, but not badly so. Maybe sometimes I just need to be awake when there isn't anything going on so I can let myself just be. So much of my life is moving and thinking and organizing and trying to get things done that I forget that there is silence and quiet and a complete lack of stress if I can only let myself find it.

I've been pushing hard just to try to get back to normal (normal for me!) for a few months. I think I am almost there, and I think it is perhaps time to admit that I am pushing a little too hard. I would like to be able to feel like I am moving to the rhythm of my life instead of running desperately on a treadmill that is set just a bit faster than I can go. Some of the stress is easing, most days, and sometimes I can move into a space and time where there is nothing wrong with simply existing, but I have to get through this month before everything really lets up and I can relax.

I think it's time to start making bread again. It is one of those activities that I can only do when there is extra time, and it is important to me to be able to do it well. Perhaps I will block out time this weekend to do that and end up with the house smelling like fresh bread, which always makes me happy.

Maybe, if I find more peace during my waking hours, I won't wake up looking for it.

Scattered

I usually have some clue what I'm going to write about, but today I don't.

I've been sick off and on for a while now. It's probably the stress beginning to tell. Much of it will be removed by the end of August, but until then I will just keep moving forward and keep trying to stay healthy. I'm not very good at it. I know I push too hard. I have slept 10 or 11 hours every night this week (although the morning that Nyx woke me up at 4:00 AM wasn't quite as restful) and I am still tired. I'm on antibiotics, and whatever it is seems to be clearing up slowly, but even today I had a fever spike rather unexpectedly.

I've been pushing somewhat hard for over a year and a half now, and the past year has been unrelenting. It's my choice, but it hasn't been an easy one.

I know I'm being cryptic. I'm sorry. I just can't explain a lot of what's going on. Suffice it to say that my job, while challenging and interesting, can also be tiring, and, on top of that, foster children can need so much that I come home drained. We don't live with any of them. I think good foster parents have to have an amazing amount of patience, because I couldn't do what they do. I make jokes about not getting bitten or kicked in a while, but they aren't very funny jokes.

I get to spend some time with kids in stable, strong families with intelligent and loving parents. Sometimes I forget how good it is to just be able to hang out with kids without having to actively work with them or keep an eye on them or make sure they aren't doing things they shouldn't. It's a whole different level of awareness, working with kids who are so damaged, and it can be exhausting. Our friends' kids are a relief, a balm to what is sometimes a very weary existence.

I think I am still grieving a little, too. Scratch that. I know I am. Friends of ours recently told us that they are expecting. I was, and am, very happy for them, but on the way home I cried. I wanted to be able to raise our child with Xander. Mostly it's ok. If I get enough sleep, enough exercise, enough down time, it sinks into the background and doesn't bug me. Once in a while, though, if I am particularly vulnerable and something triggers it, the feelings are there again, raw and sad. My response? We stopped and got good chocolate, and I am eating my share a little bit at a time.

Monday I have completely off. I may not do anything interesting with the time. I may spend the day on the couch. If I feel really motivated, I'll take Nyx out for a nice long walk. If not, though, I'm not going to feel bad about it – she'll share the couch with me all day quite happily.

The last year has worn me down. I am tired even when I have had enough sleep. I feel like I used to be better at things than I am now. I know that my attention is too fractured at the moment to do as well as I have in the past, and I am very glad I'm not trying to take classes right now, because I think I'd fail them.

Next week is a short week. The week after that I am actually taking some time off. I'm trying hard to make it through August, to have enough money set aside so we don't have to worry about money for Australia whether or not a certain job market improves. My job is stable, and I'm happy there. I'm learning a lot.

It's just a few more months. I just have to keep moving, and if I get too tired, I'll skip a day, one way or another. I've been pushing too hard for too long and I think I can't do it for much longer. I don't have to, though. We're almost there.

Canine Good Citizenship test

For those of you who aren't serious dog people, the American Kennel Club has a [Canine Good Citizenship program](#) (also referred to as the CGC). If you want your dog to be certified, you and your dog have to pass the Canine Good Citizenship test. There are ten items on the test: accepting a friendly stranger, sitting politely for petting, appearance and grooming, out for a walk (walking on a loose lead), walking through a crowd, sit and down on command and staying in place, coming when called, reaction to another dog, reaction to distraction, and supervised separation. If you want your dog to be a therapy dog (the ones who visit people in hospitals and who get to have kids read to them in libraries), you have to have the CGC certification. We would like to have Nyx certified as a therapy dog. She has a very good temperament and she enjoys learning. She's already a fairly well-behaved dog, but it would be fun, I think, to be able to pass that test.

Nyx and I spent over an hour this weekend working on very basic obedience. She went through an entire bag of treats, which made it much more fun for her, and she did really well, especially considering that I was changing something that was, for her, pretty basic. We've always used a harness for her. It clips in the front so when she pulls she can't get her front shoulders into it, which was extremely helpful when she was younger and much more bouncy. She walks fairly well on a leash now, so it isn't quite as big a deal, other than that she is comfortable in it and knows what to expect. The CGC test requires that the dog wear only a soft collar, so we had to start over, at least to some extent. She didn't feel her usual pull at the chest when she decided to go explore, so she had

to learn to pay attention to the collar. The fact that I had treats certainly helped!

I grew up with English Bull Terriers ([Spuds McKenzie](#) and the [Target dog](#) are both examples of the breed). I love them dearly. I thought every other breed of dog looked weird for much of my life. They are fairly smart and, though it's probably anthropomorphizing, as far as I'm concerned they smile and they have a sense of humor. They are also some of the most stubborn dogs around. I had one dog trainer who said, "There's no such thing as a stubborn dog, just one that you haven't figured out how to inspire yet." I laughed out loud. She was rather offended, but, when asked, said she had never worked with English Bull Terriers. If they get bored with training, it just won't work. You don't see them in the obedience ring nearly as often as, say, a Border Collie or a German Shepherd because it takes a certain type of person to be willing to work through obedience with English Bull Terriers.

My last dog, Ace, was no star at training – he became a reasonably well trained dog, but he took a lot of hard work. It didn't help that I didn't get him until he was two. He had a lot of bad habits to undo and he didn't really see the point. Why work for treats when there were quail running around in the back yard?

Nyx has been a joy. She responds well and consistently to treat training, she seems to enjoy the work, and, when she's nervous, she's pretty clear about it. If I don't pay attention to the fact that she's nervous, she makes it very clear by putting her paws on my shoulders. She is generally not allowed to do that at all unless she is invited, but as a way of expressing nerves, it certainly makes her point. In general, though, she is a fairly calm and happy dog. We've started learning clicker training, which is challenging for me, too. Since it involves treats, she seems to be taking it as a challenge, so it is going well, even though we have only just

begun.

We decided when Nyx was fairly young that we'd see if she could get through the training. I've been too busy to do the needed work, but I decided to carve out time because we both, dog and human, enjoy it so much. I think the biggest hurdle will be the supervised separation. She does not like being left. She's crate trained and has no issue with that, but while we're walking she wants all of her people to be in full view at all times. I am going to try to rope in a few friends to help work on this once I have her at least somewhat desensitized. To start she'll go into a sit/stay and I'll walk around a corner and immediately walk back. Eventually, once I've increased the time, I'll have someone else hold the leash. I'm pretty sure we can get there, but it will be a new kind of challenge for both of us, so I will need to make sure to do it on days when I'm feeling very patient and she isn't tired.

I'm really enjoying having a dog this eager to learn. It's really fun. I'm not sure how much of it is the breed, since she is our first Great Dane, but whatever it is, I'm looking forward to training sessions. She will learn fairly quickly that the new collar means a chance for a lot of treats, which will certainly help. When we train it isn't just work, either – she gets breaks and sometimes just runs in circles like a horse on a lunge line. We taught her that when she was very small, and she loves it. Never fails to make me laugh, too.

We're lucky to have such a sweet-tempered dog, and I'm looking forward to seeing how far we can go with this.