

**Narissa's Note:** Please excuse the drivel that follows. I wrote it in a dentist's office while waiting for my sister to get her teeth cleaned. (All except the brilliant finish, in which a Hebrew hero socks it to the Forces of Evil. That was Brian's idea.)

Dear Friends,

Brian and I were recently up at the North Pole having a mocha latte with Big Red. Things seemed kind of quiet, even though the Holiday Season was in full swing. With characteristic *gaucherie*, we asked our host what the problem was.

"Well," St. Nick sighed, "the elves caught wind of this computer boom in California. And they started kicking up a ruckus about benefits and unionization. Company profit shares and whatnot. They were like, why should I stay up here in the back of beyond, cranking out Nintendo games when I have a degree in cyberelectronics, or polymer analysis, or whatever? And they're right, you know. Why would an educated elf want to stay here--with no company bennies but the annual reindeer-chili cookoff--when he could have stock options and \$60,000 a year working in Sunnyvale? Hell, even the down-and-out elves are doing better down there working as office temps."

I asked what we could do to help.

"Anything!" Santa cried. His little red-robed jelly-belly shook with despair. "I have no elves left. The corporate computer giants have destroyed Christmas."

So Brian and I set to work making toys. At the end of the day, we stepped back and surveyed our crisply-wrapped handiwork. Brian's tally: 80,000 rubber slugs, 30,000 howling coyote dolls, 40,000 video games featuring a coyote researcher that gets chased by angry ranchers. My tally: 60,000 Shaman Barbies, 40,000 How To Cook With Bugs Tasty-tots Kitchen Sets, and--just for suicidal teens--50,000 albums of "Scotland's Best Unrequited Love Ballads."

Santa seemed a little dazed, but we just put that down to amazement over our marvelous efficiency. With a moan, he wearily suggested we load up the sleigh for a test run.

When we got to the reindeer barn, however, we discovered that news of the August UPS strike had finally gotten to the North Pole. The reindeer were all fired up about the teamsters and decided to show their solidarity by refusing to move another Christmas present until their own demands were met. A partial list of demands was handed to Santa by two cloven-hoofed intermediaries: a new Jacuzzi spa for the paddock, investment in livestock mutual funds, evenings off to spend quality time with the does and fawns and to catch *Baywatch* reruns.

Santa stalked out in fury. "I can't meet these demands!" he shouted. "Cripes, what do they expect from a corporation who's sole income is all the eggnog and cookies you can eat on Christmas Eve?"

In a stroke of genius, Brian hitched up his two research assistants, plus six captive coyotes, to the sleigh. After a bout of howling (Brian's assistants tried to bite a nonviolently protesting reindeer), we were off!

All was going well when, suddenly, towering clouds piled over the sleigh. Thunder growled. A terrifying apparition--Howard Stern dressed as Roma Downey from *Touched by an Angel*--appeared and cried, "Turn back!"

Then, in a flash (well, more of a sputter and backfire), a beat up old 1974 Chevy station wagon full of fresh, white socks crept past our sleigh and made an erratic bee-line towards Howie. "Take that, you sick goy schmuck," yelled Hanukkah Harry as he fired a tube sock out the window. The sock expanded and swallowed the apparition's head. Clawing at his cotton-covered face, Howard Stern slowly faded back into the clouds and we were free to continue our journey.

\*\*\*\*\*

This has definitely been a year for changes of all sorts. The past twelve months have featured career shifts, travel and even a major earthquake (figurative, not literal). Over the past month I (Brian) have been thinking again and again of William Butler Yeats' symbolic gyres; as in a Yeatsian gyre we have traveled in a large circle and returned to our starting point, except that things seem completely different now. We are at a new level that will hopefully prove to be higher than the place we were at this time last year.

So, what happened this year? During the winter and early spring I continued working for Fleet Bank's legal department while waiting and waiting and waiting to hear from graduate schools. Narissa made progress on her novel and other projects from our chilly hide-away in Little Compton, Rhode Island. In the end I was accepted into three of the four schools I applied to, and I chose to accept the offer from University of California, Berkeley.

In April we made our first major trip of the year in order to spend Passover with my family, then within a week of returning to Rhode Island we were off to the west coast to get a preview of what we would be in for later in the year. We were there just long enough to fall in love with the multitudinous traffic jams and challenging housing market before we headed out of the Bay Area to visit my study site (near Redding, CA) and Point Reyes National Seashore.

When we returned from California, we had a few weeks to prepare for our much-anticipated trip to England and Scotland and to move out of our winter home. We threw all of our belongings into various corners of Narissa's parents' house, and then we were off. Scotland and Cornwall were simply beautiful, and my friend Lisa and her parents made us feel like members of their family when we visited them in Kent. The three-week-long trip flew by much faster than we thought possible, and soon we were boarding our plane to return to the States.

Upon our return we had a quick week to shift gears and shove all of our personal belongings into our vehicles for our journey westward. We visited friends in Northern Virginia and Boulder, Colorado, and we had an unexpectedly long visit with my family in St. Louis when Narissa's transmission gave out in Indiana and had to be replaced. (Luckily the truck was still covered by warranty).

California has taken some getting used to. The traffic jams, unchanging weather, and earthquake risks, not to mention the high cost of living, have been an adjustment. Narissa took a job with Recreational Equipment, Inc. (better known as REI), and I promptly got involved with my research and classes. Occasionally our time off would coincide, and we would go camping or hiking in the area.

Then the earthquake I mentioned earlier struck. During the first week in December, Narissa's mother was diagnosed with glioblastoma, a particularly severe type of brain cancer. I'll let Narissa give the details, but the end result is that we are in Rhode Island for the holidays again, and things are very different this time....

\*\*\*\*\*

As Brian said, this Autumn has been a sad one. This summer, my parents took over the care of my two thirteen-year-old cousins, Scott and Zachary. My parents came to love the laughter these kids brought into the house. The family routine was somewhat jolted by the sad death of long-time family friend and neighbor, Tim Boudewyns. He passed away on Thanksgiving Day.

A few days later, lightning struck: my mother, Ariel, was diagnosed with brain cancer.

In the space of a week, our lives were turned upside-down. I finished up my work at REI, jumped on a plane, and came home to Rhode Island. I dropped my job search, put my writing aside, and became family accountant/chef/moral support specialist.

The first great hurdle was getting my mother through surgery. The cancer has invaded both speech and visual centers. Her surgeon feared she might come out of the operation with little sight and little or no cognitive ability to speak. Thank goodness, she came out of it strong and full of life. (Piss and vinegar, as she says.) She has a large blind spot in each eye and has some trouble finding words, but she is very much her old hilarious, beloved self.

95% of the visible tumor was removed and she will undergo radiation therapy five days a week for six or seven weeks. While this is a tough disease with no known cure, we hope my mother is one of the lucky few with many good years ahead of her.

At the moment, the whole family is together and Brian is visiting. We refuse to let these recent blows destroy the spirit of the season. We will continue as we always have--together, in laughter and love.

Brain cancer is no laughing matter, but what else can you do? Back when I first tore my shoulder at work, a customer stared at my bound arm and made a stupid joke. He immediately clapped a hand to his forehead

and said, "I'm sorry. You must be in terrible pain. I shouldn't laugh." My response was, "Laugh all you want. Hell, I am."

To all of you who have sent your support, gifts, and prayers--thank you. In this time of need we are deeply aware that you are among our greatest blessings.

When you think of us--laugh. Laugh with your family and friends and love them and embrace the beauty of this wide, wonderful world we live in.--Hell, we are. And we plan to, for many good winters to come.

(For those wishing to send a sympathy gift, we would appreciate a donation to The Jimmy Fund, Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, 1309 Beacon St., Brookline MA 02146. (617) 632-2901. So many of you have sent delicious cookies and chocolates already that we are having a hard time rolling out to radiation therapy!!! Best wishes and love to you all.)

Slugs and Kisses,

Narissa Willever  
5 Bayside Ave.  
Portsmouth, RI 02871-3907  
(401) 683-5189  
NKWillever@aol.com

Brian Mitchell  
561 Oakland Ave, #307  
Oakland, CA 94611  
(510) 658-6460  
BrianMitch@aol.com  
bmitchel@nature.berkeley.edu