

From: Nomads at Large: Narissa Willever and Brian Mitchell

*5 Bayside Ave Portsmouth, RI 02871 (401) 683-5189 * 561 Oakland Ave #307 Oakland, CA 94611 (510)

658-6460* E-mail: nkvillever@aol.com and bmitchel@nature.berkeley.edu

1998-1999

SHEIK, RATTLE AND ROLL: SPRING FEVER HITS THE CARAVAN!!



This year's NOMADS NEWSLETTER is dedicated to Ariel Scott Willever, 1946-1998.

No one knew how to laugh harder.

In 1997: 1) In a mad leap into the jet-set lifestyle, we battled annoying airlines, drunken trans-continental party animals, and shattered fly-wheels, finally arriving at our new home in California via Atlanta and Great Britain. 2) Brian settled into his new role as "Coyote Boy" at the University of California, Berkeley. At REI, Narissa sampled the varied bouquets of sweaty feet, played volleyball with 30 lb. boxes, and lectured customers on the wonder of pit-zips. 3) We both experienced the true meaning of "Road Rage", which the people of San Francisco Bay have raised to an art. 4) Narissa returned to Rhode Island to help at home, infiltrate the secretive world of "The Medical Establishment", get to the bottom of the mysterious alien chocolate abductions (you don't think we actually ATE all the stuff you sent, did you??), and experience the often psychedelic existence of the chronically sleep-deprived. 5) Brian continued the Adventures of Coyote Boy, daring poison oak, feral pigs, and Dye Creek "pulled pork" in the name of Science.

#

Dear Gluttons for Punishment:

#

Flowers are blooming, birdies are chirping, cute little fuzzy things are stirring, and not-so-cute big fuzzy things are demolishing cars in Yosemite. Ah, yes--it's spring again, and we are back to give you an account of our curious lives. This NOMADS NEWSLETTER comes to you after the lengthiest production time ever: at our last count, we have been working on this thing since November. Unlike some wines and cheeses, this newsletter does not improve with age. It just gets longer. With that in mind, we give you the news since we last churned something out:

---North Pole, December 1998

In a joint meeting of the Elf Senate and the House of Reindeer, the North Pole's legislative branch today voted 364 to 1 to open an impeachment probe against Saint Nick. The single "neigh" vote came from Rudolph, who has always been something of a brown-noser despite appearances to the contrary. The vote followed allegations detailed in the recently released North Starr report, posted to the Internet last week at <http://www.hotsex.com/interspecies/santa-claus/>.

Mr. Starr was originally selected to investigate charges that Saint Nick went whitewater rafting somewhere in Arkansas when he was supposed to be out delivering toys. After 3 years and \$20 million in expenses, this brilliant investigator claimed that there are no whitewater rafting rivers in Arkansas, so the charges were undoubtedly false. Mr. Starr, who once said that, "our society should be purged of the perverts who provide the media with pornographic material while pretending it has some redeeming social value under the public's 'right to know'," quickly redirected his investigation to focus on allegations of sexual misconduct by Santa Claus. The North Starr report describes an illicit relationship between Santa Claus and a former Red and White House elf intern named Monique Lewdinski, and explicitly details numerous incidents. These incidents are of course too revolting and scandalous to be repeated in a newspaper of this caliber. Our readers are certainly uninterested in such filth, but if they have distant acquaintances who might read drivels like this the Internet site http://www.hotsex.com/interspecies/santa_claus/ has details of the chocolate cigar incident, video clips demonstrating why elves don't need knee-pads, and even sound clips of the encounter that led to the frosting-stained dress.

When cornered for a comment about Monique Lewdinsky, Santa Claus would only say, "Ho, ho, ho."

Three months after the Red and White House impeachment probe, we are still amazed that Santa squeezed through this veritable chimney of ruin--a bit less jolly and badly smirched by the soot of scandal, but with an acquittal gift-wrapped by the Senate. Our life this past year has been similar: sometimes sordid, often laughable, barely believable. We have seesawed between despair and elation, experienced blessings and betrayals, and apparently come through it with our heads no less securely screwed on than before. (Okay, so that one is still up for argument.)

As you all know, we had to take up the bi-coastal lifestyle in December of '97 so that Narissa could be with her mom. You all have an angel in heaven, now: Ariel

From: Nomads at Large: Narissa Willever and Brian Mitchell

passed away on Thanksgiving, exactly one year from the day she was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer.

Here are our stories.

DR. WILLEVER IS NOT IN; SHE IS DIRECTING A SWORD FIGHT

A few of you have asked how the writing has gone this past year, and I answered that it didn't. Well, that's not entirely true. I actually did some rather striking (if not prolific) work on the novel this year, as evidenced by the rather bizarre chapters I recently unearthed. I just didn't remember any of them, since they were written in waiting rooms, airports, and ICUs. Now that I think about it, I should have gotten a contract to write for "ER".

The first few months back home were a blur of hospital visits, paper shuffling, and hare-brained tax preparation. We headed up to Maine in January, just in time to weather the Great Ice Storm with Kate Petrie. It certainly made us appreciate the comforts of modern life--though I must say, candlelight makes even going to the toilet seem sort of romantic. We took advantage of the situation by hiking/slipping/skating around the ice-bound park and having a mega-feast with all the perishable food. (The stove at Headquarters was working, so we didn't have to roast the turkey over votive candles.)

In February, I visited Brian and we finally GOT ENGAGED! Yes, as in "to be married". We plan to make things official in the year 2000, when every other wacko is planning something. (We didn't want to be left out.) Then, at the end of March, my family headed to California for a National Brain Tumor Foundation symposium. I thought a lot about brains (weird--thinking about the thing that thinks), made some wonderful new friends, and finally got to see San Fran as a tourist.

Come April, I loaded up my truck again and my mom and I embarked on what came to be known as the "Thelma-and-Louise-Without-a-Cliff-Trip". (For those of you who do not know the movie, Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis play Thelma and Louise, two gals who journey cross-country pursued by the law. They end their adventures by driving off a cliff, which my mother and I did not see as a mature way of coping with adversity.) My mother spent the whole trip with her eyes wide open--watching the scenery roll past, noting the weather for me, and copying street signs to teach herself to read and write again. The highlight of the trip was a four-day stay with friends in Colorado. We had a blast exploring the Front Range and driving round and round the Garden of the Gods at Colorado Springs. The rest of the trip through Colorado was the smelliest experience I have ever had. We were constantly expecting a sign that said, "Welcome To POOPLAND! We Hope You'll 'Stink' Around Awhile."--Seriously, though, is there a manure season in eastern Colorado, or does it

From: Nomads at Large: Narissa Willever and Brian Mitchell

always smell like that?--We segued seamlessly from the Olfactory Extravaganza into Weather from Hell. We were (quite literally) chased from Kansas to Georgia by tornadoes. We'd listen to the radio to see how fast the twisters were coming at us, then I'd just drive just a little faster until we hit a break in the clouds. It was fantastic--finally, we could open the windows without choking on cattle-induced toxic fog and we whooped and hollered and veered around hailstones for fourteen hours at a stretch.

We met my grandparents in Dalton, GA, carpet-manufacturing capital of the world, where my mother and I parted company. I spent a lovely Passover with Brian's family in his parents' new house, then headed up-coast to visit friends, and then home.

The summer and fall went by with visits to California every few months. In October, Brian and I spent a few days in Yosemite, hiking and taking in the sights. We were amazed to be snowed on our first day, getting chased back down the mountains by a very early storm that closed the passes.

Halloween was scarier than usual--my mother suffered another seizure and was put in the hospital, but we made the best of it by throwing a big ol' party. (My, how the hospital staff hated us. We were always the loudest room on the block. We even took over the ICU.) I visited Providence's spooky "Water Fire" celebration down by the river, we all pigged out on candy, and Cousin Betsy made her unforgettable appearance as Monica Lewinski. (Blue dress, cigar, and all.)

Brian came to RI for Thanksgiving. By then, we knew that my mother did not have much time left in the world. On Thanksgiving Day, she passed away just after the family finished dinner. She always knew how to time her entrances and exits.

All through this year, family and friends have guided and supported us. The number of new recipients of the NOMADS NEWSLETTER is proof that adversity can draw people together. It has been my joy to get to know some of you better, and to know others for the first time. You have been tender, caring, goofy, wise, strong, and beautiful. My special thanks to other members of the "Cancer Club". It is a dubious distinction to hold, but you all carry it with aplomb. Your bravery and humble grace continue to inspire me.

New Year's offered me a chance to catch up with friends in Virginia and play hours of "telephone" with our beautiful niece, Maxine. Brian regaled me with stories of his Rodeo New Year's, and I'm not sure which of us had a better time. (His celebration was certainly more original.) Then, it was off to California a few days later to have shoulder surgery. I opted to stay awake through the whole procedure, which turned out to be absolutely fascinating. A malfunction with the saline pump shot huge volumes of water into my joint, down my arm, and all over the floor, the upshot being that--aside from inducing hallucinations that I was Flipper—I was given a crystal-clear video view of the inside of my shoulder! Interestingly enough, I am recovering in

From: Nomads at Large: Narissa Willever and Brian Mitchell

record time, though I'm not sure if it has to do with the saline deluge or Mrs. Ippolito's fervent prayers throughout the surgery.

With the changing seasons comes a chance for me to begin anew. I look back on the months of failed job searches, miserable California weather, and my injury at REI, and I can't help thinking it all happened for a reason. When I was feeling low, one of you told me, "Sometimes these things are meant to happen." As it was, my only regret when I left California was that I could not bring Brian along, and that separation actually led us to a greater appreciation for each other. Even the injured shoulder became a blessing, forcing me to go to California every few months. (And now the insurance company says it will pay for all the airfare!! That wasn't a joke, by the way. Sometimes fairytales DO come true.) My muse is gradually returning; the creative area of my brain is rusty, but at least the gears are no longer stuck. And now several fantastic job opportunities have come up--more this month than in the past three years. I'm keeping my fingers crossed; and maybe I should ask Mrs. Ippolito to pray again. I'm not sure a saline flood would help on this one.

THE GREAT COYOTE CAPER

I suggest tenderizing the meat first (coyote is pretty stringy), then marinating overnight in garlic before baking with the capers at 350 degrees for 38.5 minutes. What? Oh, I'm sorry; I thought this was a cookbook. I'll start over.

The last many months have seen me attempting to juggle (in order of importance): class-work, research, and "everything else". "Everything else" is, of course, those things I do in my spare time, like breathe, eat, and sleep. Sometimes minor details like getting engaged and flying to the East Coast intrude, but I assure you that these events are rarities and would never take priority over the all-important classes and research. I know that many of you think my priorities are out of whack, and I promise to devote more time to my research as soon as I finish my classes.

Narissa hit most of the important highlights from the past year in her section. Other great moments included starting our very own Vermont B&B on wheels ("Bed" being the floor of the minivan and "Breakfast" being corn chips – but the view sure was great), making a snow coyote in Lassen National Forest, seeing my niece for the first time, taking a long walk in Muir Woods with Narissa's parents, spending time in San Francisco, Dye Creek, and Lassen with my parents, and watching wild sea otters foraging near Monterey.

Other big events lately have included spending a month in beautiful Logan, Utah over the summer of 1998 recording coyote howls (plus a foray up to Yellowstone with my friend Todd); briefly attempting to insert some sanity into California's loony politics (I failed, and the good voters banned my coyote-trapping technique in the same election

From: Nomads at Large: Narissa Willever and Brian Mitchell

that made selling horsemeat for human consumption illegal); and playing a major role in planning the first Bay Area Conservation Biology Symposium. I have occasionally gotten out to my field site to help out with my research (which, thanks to the selfless dedication of Eveline, Corey, Lee, and Anthony, pretty much happens whether I am there or not). We now have over 20 radio-collared coyotes and are trying to learn as much as we can while attempting to keep jerks with large guns and small brains from shooting the animals (so far the jerks are winning).

Much of my time since coming out to California has been spent on classes, some of them good and some of them spectacularly bad (anyone up for two required courses about the differences between transdisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and multidisciplinary hypotheses? I didn't think so). However, I'm starting to see the light at the end of the tunnel, since next semester marks the end of my coursework and the much-dreaded Oral Exam, after which (assuming I pass) I "Advance to Candidacy" and my priorities become simplified to: research first, THEN "everything else".

Love,

Narissa & Brian