

UNDERGRADUATE

Going Home Again

by REBECCA O'BRIEN '06

THE FINAL project for my fall semester writing course freshman year was an autobiographical narrative in the style of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. Glad to be free of the standard research and inflexible style of typical papers, I set to work on the piece: a chronicle of our annual car trip to my grandparents' house, told from my perspective as a 12-year-old, peppered with musings on the passage of time within my close-knit family. I probed my memory for images that could encapsulate my childhood, capture an emotion, scent, or sight, and interspersed the tale with references to superficial family troubles.

I wrote thoughtfully and conscientiously, and handed in the result quite pleased by my artful candor and the disclosure of an intimate, treasured history. But the lukewarm feedback I received wasn't what I had hoped for. My preceptor said that I had "captured Faulkner's rhythms," but my work was marred by a conspicuous "absence of any moral profundity." It's great if your family is really that happy, he said, but you won't get Quentin Compson. And you won't get an A.

It was as if my family was simply too normal, and no omission of proper punctuation, no infusion of preadolescent angst, could disguise the fundamental domestic stability that had buttressed me in even my most tempestuous child-

hood moments. We ate our vegetables, we laughed at the dinner table, we played catch with tangerines until one split against the wall or our upstairs neighbors called to complain. Our car rides—like our vacations, meals, and evenings—were overwhelmingly pleasant and cheery. Our conversations were lively and intellectual. Even our arguments were seldom, and generally civil. Projecting the entropic decline of the Compson family onto my own idyllic home life seemed absurd. Like my paper, my life lacked an underlying moral dilemma; there was no unanswered scandal or seething turmoil tucked away.

FROM THE MOMENT we first enter the Yard as incoming freshmen, we have the sense that this new world will be the

stage on which our lives play out for the next four years. Somewhat sheltered from outside intrusions, it is here that we will solidify our adulthood, while the backdrop—our previous lives—will remain constant. Sometimes, though, the real change takes place at home. For me, as for many others, a family crisis during college signified the real coming of age.

I went to Harvard like many other freshmen: confident of the sustained nourishment and health of my family, with the impression that, while parents and siblings might change as individuals, the essential dynamic that constitutes "home" would never be lost. In truth, as I acclimated to Harvard, I found it was hard to go home for visits, but the point was that home was there, solid and constant, even while I renegotiated my relationship to the family.

I was still learning how to face my parents as an adult when, having just made it through my first difficult New England winter, a cold front swept in. In an unexpected visit on Easter Sunday, my father told me he was leaving our family, and that a new one was already underway. We were walking along the Charles, the trees were just scarcely brushed with lime green, the air was still crisp, and with a pained voice tempered by exhausted resignation, he told me about the divorce that I had never predicted, the cleft in my



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future that I had never anticipated. With one swift delivery, he had changed the narrative of my adult life and brought me face to face with the glaring reality of my idyllic youth. I felt aged and detached, not angry, but miserably aware of my parents' humanity.

Suddenly my childhood was redefined with carefully placed asterisks. Things were explained in hindsight. There was some tragedy tucked into the folds of my past. There was more background noise on those car trips than Pete Seeger's crooning on the radio. I didn't think of the grade on my paper, but I thought about the car trip, and I thought about the "absence of moral profundity." I was rereading and rewriting my own history, with much more gravity and sadness than I ever could have asked for.

The first thing I heard in my head when my father told me was the opening of *Anna Karenina*, which I was reading for a course on Russian literature. Since then, the only way for me to grasp the pain of my father's departure has been to intellectualize it, to place my grief in the context of reading and writing. My experience with the realities of divorce, the cleaving of a family, could only be represented on the page.

It seemed that all my emotions made more sense, were easier to cope with and understand, when viewed through the lens of literature and the craft of writing. I thought again of the families I knew in literature—Lear and Cordelia, Anna and Seretzha, the Swede and Merry—and how authors chose to represent underlying turmoil, drastic changes, and crises in their works. But apart from the comfort I found

in the distraction of a book, I also sought to define my feelings and make sense of the emotional topsy-turvy of my life. Life made sense in chapters and scattered references, in carefully crafted sentences and preordained structures. Were there patterns, problems, and themes I could pick apart and deconstruct? How could I read this? I also wondered how I would construct some great book on my life. Would I introduce the reality of my youth from the beginning, or would I give the reader the same experience I had of living a life, or a story, only to find a surprise ending that lent new meaning to the previous pages?

Art became not a substitute for emotion, but a way to rationalize it. I went about my studies with a newfound intensity: I had greater personal stakes in my work, but also found work the ideal means of alleviating, or at least forgetting, my pain. Not only did I understand why grief was such a good catalyst for creativity, but why creativity was the best antidote to grief. And the more I thought back on my youth, seeking hints and signs, looking for a way to explain it to myself and to a reader, the more I realized that I was not a different person for the new chapter of my life. The story had developed, my formative years were still my formative years. I had not been rewritten, no, not even revised, but maybe tainted in retrospect.

FRESHMAN YEAR, if anything, means finding new ways of thinking and processing emotion, partly because Harvard students often find themselves coping with great changes at home that reverberate

through their experiences at school. Divorce is only one such event, and it is not rare. And beyond the death of marriages, there are real deaths.

"Divorce happens a lot—statistically, marriages that have lasted tend to break apart, if they're going to, when the parents are in their late forties, early fifties," says Elizabeth Studley Nathans, the dean of freshmen. "And it's particularly hard when parents don't tell the students until they have arrived at Harvard. There are always complications—they vary depending on different families, but it's always lousy."

Nathans is only too well prepared to help students navigate the uncertain waters of divorced family life. Years ago, she personally witnessed the effects of divorce on two undergraduates—her own children, the youngest of whom had just entered his first year of college. "It was very hard for them, and it remains hard," Nathans says. "In retrospect, many students feel like it was building up all along—I know it was true for my kids."

Freshman advisers are trained to help students cope with life changes such as divorce, Nathans says. "The proctors learn about things that might complicate a student's situation. We just try to be as sensitive as we can to individual circumstances, to make sure that we can be there for the students. There are so many stresses put on students by [divorced] parents seeking to establish relationships with both the student and the college. In some ways, it's analogous to losing a parent."

Everybody finds different ways of coping with divorce, but Nathans tells me that I exhibited some pretty classic manifestations of post-divorce stress. For about a week, I alternated between manic studying and quiet sobs. Then I drank myself



The senior marshals, looking ahead to Commencement 2004, are: (clockwise from top left) Liz Drummond of Quincy House and Winchester, Massachusetts; Shira Sivan Simon of Leverett House and West Des Moines, Iowa; John Paul M. Fox of Mather House and Needham, Massachusetts; Zachary A. Corker of Mather House and Holualoa, Hawaii; Katie Zacarian of Dunster House and Amherst, Massachusetts; First Marshal Shaka Joaquin Doyle Bahadu of Dunster House and Detroit; Benita Liao of Cabot House and Douglaston, New York; and Jessica Tang of Adams House and Pearland, Texas.

silly the next Saturday night and wound up in the infirmary. (“I remember hearing about that,” Nathans says with a knowing smile.) And then, having exorcized my demons, I began the long recovery process, with a little help from Tolstoy.

WHILE MANY FAMILY MEMBERS feared I would not be able to complete the semester, or would struggle academically under the circumstances, I finished the year with near-perfect grades. It was when I had nothing to do that I felt the most pain, so I set up camp in the library and worked consistently for the last month of school. But academic endeavors were not my only recourse. Whenever a memory of my father, or my family, would pierce me, I found a network of new friends by my side. Although my grade-school friends tried to console me, I found it easier to talk to my college friends about my father: unlike those old friends, my new friends had no context, no concept of who my father was, no idea of my home. It was to my friends at school that I cried; I confronted my parents and friends from home with a straight face.

Although I didn’t realize it until late in freshman year, many of my friends and acquaintances here had experienced similar loss in their first months at the College. Around this same time, grandparents start to fade—this year alone, four of my block-mates have experienced such a loss, or near loss. Several of my friends freshman year were coping with the anxiety caused by seriously ill parents. We may feel that our world here is completely isolated, but perhaps this detachment makes dealing with outside pain all the more difficult. The knowledge that there were many other freshmen experiencing their own family traumas was a great source of comfort.

Looking around me, I realized that many of my peers were shouldering the responsibilities of family life. For me, news of the divorce (more than the events and circumstances of the split) marked a sharp divide between life before and life after. I was suddenly aware of adult pains that cannot be erased. I also took on the role of an absentee grown-up in the family, supporting my mother and sister through the initial stages of recovery. In my case, it seemed that my sister and I were more mature than our parents, who were quickly enmeshed in

legal skirmishes. Apart from literature and music, this was how I grappled with the shock of change at home.

It is a somewhat paradoxical imposition of adulthood: we leave the house only to find ourselves laden with familial troubles, we assume new roles as participating adults in the family we had always counted on to support us. Moreover, I was struck by how my friends, many of them not yet 20 years old, were infinitely more capable of understanding and comforting me than any adult I encountered. It wasn’t that they had the right vocabulary, or all the right answers. If they didn’t understand my circumstances, they understood that the biggest lesson of freshman year, of college in general, is that we are not just students, but new participants in the economy of adult feelings and real-life events, and while we will still sometimes need to fall back into the arms of whatever familiarity is left at home, it is now our duty to bolster ourselves.

What all college students can relate to is the quiet shift in one’s relationship to the family, the barely perceptible change in dynamic between child and parent that takes place even without household upheaval. It was my father himself who tied this change to literature, only a few weeks before he broke the news of the divorce. I

The newest Rhodes: Shazrene Mohamed ’04, from Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, is Harvard’s seventh Rhodes Scholarship winner for 2004 (see “The Rhodes Roster,” March–April, page 79). Her concentration combines astronomy, astrophysics, and math; she plans to work toward a Ph.D. in astrophysics at Oxford.



JONATHAN SHAW

was home for the weekend in late March. My father and I were sharing Greek food in the kitchen, standing around the counter, much to my mother’s chagrin. My sullen mood was not lost on my father, who offered me the following aphorism: “I know it’s hard to come back here. Thomas Wolfe had it right when he said, ‘You can’t go home again.’” With that, he dispatched the remainder of his sandwich in one gulp. Of course, it was another few weeks until I realized how right he was. But even before he changed the family, the family had changed for me—it was true that I’d felt oddly out of joint since the first weeks of college. Now, a year into my first year of adulthood, I can go home again, not as a girl somewhere between the ages of Jane Eyre and Elizabeth Bennett, but as a woman with new responsibilities, and a new perspective. ▽

*Berta Greenwald Ledeccky Undergraduate Fellow
Rebecca O’Brien ’06 prefers Tolstoy to Thomas Wolfe or William Faulkner.*

SPORTS

The Swinging Lingmans

Two siblings who aren’t rivals but fellow warriors

IN COLLEGE TENNIS, there are no mixed doubles: athletes play only against their own sex. Still, the men’s and women’s teams root for each other, and two Harvard players take this mutual support to its biological extreme. They are senior David Lingman and his sister, junior Susanna Lingman, who play at number one and number two, respectively, for the

Crimson tennis squads. “He watches all my home matches and I see all of his at home,” says Susanna. “We talk after every match, whether away or at home. Dave is the person I’m closest to in the world. He knows every aspect of my life.”

The siblings share many similarities, including strong, supple bodies: they are gazelles, not draft horses. (Think James