

## JOHN HARVARD'S JOURNAL

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.**