

By DAVID J. JEFFERSON

I GREW UP IN LOS ANGELES'S SAN FERNANDO Valley—the quintessential American suburb, built on the postwar fantasies of men like my father, a GI who'd trained in the California desert to fight Rommel and never forgot the first time he saw orange trees and swimming pools. For \$500 down, you could buy a ranch house in one of the Valley's new tract developments and start a family—maybe even live out your dreams of Hollywood stardom. Such was the life that Joseph Jefferson hoped to create when he moved to California to study acting and married a fellow student. But Dad found acting to be a cruel mistress: he wound up spending more time tending bar than in front of the cameras. It was no way to support his wife and two kids, and his marriage was a shambles. So he found another mistress: my mom.

They met at an actors' hangout called the Masquers club, and fell in love while Dad was starring as Jesus in a Passion play. Mom had helped him land the role, having been featured a season earlier as the Woman at the Well, whom Jesus saves from a life of serial divorce and adultery (cue the ironic guffaw). Behind the scenes, the man who spent his nights carrying a cross on his back was angling for a divorce himself. And those weren't easy to get in 1960, even in Hollywood. To begin with, his wife didn't want to give him one, and even if she had she would have needed to prove “fault”—adultery, abandonment, neglect, commission of a felony. So my dad and mom moved to Las Vegas for a few months, where they lived in an apartment house populated by card sharks and showgirls while awaiting the end of Dad's marriage under Nevada's lax divorce laws. On Sept. 5, 1960, they drove to a small town in the middle of the Nevada desert called Tonopah and got married by the justice of the peace.

After moving back to Los Angeles, my actor parents set off on their new life together as if nothing had ever happened. But, of course, it had. At age 4 I discovered I wasn't an only child when my dad's kids, who'd been living in Florida, came to stay with us for a year. My mom says I refused to hug her the entire time—but I remember sobbing just the same when they left. My sister and brother had it worse: they grew up without a father, and never got to develop much of a relationship with him.

Ignorant of the picket fences around our tract homes, divorce was a constant intruder in the San Fernando Valley of my youth. Although I grew up a few blocks from the “Brady Bunch” house, the similarity between that TV family's tract-rancher and the ones where my friends and I lived pretty much ended at the front door. In the real Valley of the 1970s, families weren't coming together. They were coming apart. We were the “Divorce Generation,” latchkey kids raised with after-school specials about broken families and “Kramer vs. Kramer,” the 1979 best-picture winner that left kids worrying that their parents would be the next to divorce. Our parents couldn't seem to make marriage stick, and neither could our pop icons: Sonny and Cher, Farrah Fawcett and Lee Majors, the saccharine Swedes from Abba, all splitsville.

The change had begun in the '60s as the myth of the nuclear family exploded, and my generation was caught in the fallout. The women's rights movement had opened workplace doors to our mothers—more than half of all American women were employed



NOT 'THE BRADY BUNCH': David Selig with his mother and sisters in 1978. Selig's parents had split up the previous year, when he was 13.

in the late '70s, compared with just 38 percent in 1960—and that, in turn, made divorce a viable option for many wives who would have stayed in lousy marriages for economic reasons. Then in 1969, the year I entered kindergarten, Gov. Ronald Reagan signed California's “no fault” divorce law, allowing couples to unilaterally end a marriage by simply declaring “irreconcilable differences.”

Not since Henry VIII's breakup with the pope has divorce received such a boost: by the time my friends and I entered our senior year at Ulysses S. Grant High School, divorce rates had soared to their highest level ever, with 5.3 per 1,000 people getting divorced each year, more than double the rate in the 1950s. Just as we were old enough to wed, experts were predicting that nearly one in two marriages would end in divorce.

It's been more than a quarter century since the Grant High class of '82 donned tuxes and taffeta and danced to Styx's “Come Sail Away” at the senior prom, and nearly four decades have passed since no-fault divorce laws began spreading across the country. In our parents' generation, marriage was still the most powerful social force. In ours, it was divorce. My 44-year-old classmates and I have watched divorce morph from something shocking, even shameful, into a routine fact of American life.

But while it may be a common occurrence, divorce remains a profound experience for those who've lived through it. Researchers have churned out all sorts of depressing statistics about the impact of divorce. Each year, about 1 million children

watch their parents split, triple the number in the '50s. These children are twice as likely as their peers to get divorced themselves and more likely to have mental-health problems, studies show. While divorce rates have been dropping—off from their 1981 peak to just 3.6 per 1,000 people in 2006—marriage has also declined sharply, falling to 7.3 per 1,000 people in 2006 from 10.6 in 1970. Sociologists decry a growing “marriage gap” in which the well educated and better paid are staying married, while the poor are still getting divorced (people with college degrees are half as likely to be divorced or separated as their less-educated peers). And the younger you marry, the more likely you are to get divorced.

Yet all these statistics fail to show the very personal impact of divorce on the individual, or how those effects can change over a lifetime as children of divorce start families of their own. When we were growing up, divorce loomed as the ultimate threat to innocence, but what were my peers' feelings about it now that they were adults? What I wanted to know was how divorce had affected our class president and Miss Congeniality, the stoners and the valedictorian. Did it leave them with emotional scars that never healed, or did they go on to lead “normal” lives? Did they wind up in divorce court, or did they achieve the domestic bliss their parents had sought in suburbia? I decided to open my yearbook, pick up the phone and find out. These are their stories—or at least their side of their stories, since each breakup is perceived so differently by every family member.

Grant High School was built in 1959 to educate the first wave of the Valley's baby boomers; by the time I arrived in 1978 the school had more than 3,000 students. With its low-slung buildings and long hallways of orange-painted lockers, it's the kind of campus you've seen in a hundred movies—think “Fast Times at Ridgemont High.” My best friend at Grant was Chris Kohnhorst, who, like me, was editor of the student paper, the *Odyssey*. I'd met Chris in fifth grade, when we bonded over our identical “Fat Albert” lunchboxes. He was the first kid I can remember encountering whose parents were divorced. His mother was a teacher and his father was an actor (to this day I rib him about his dad's guest appearance on “The Bionic Woman”). They'd separated in 1970, when Chris was in first grade. “The rift that split them eventually split up three children as well, as my older brother went to live with my father during high school and my younger sister and I stayed with our mom,” Chris says. (Along with new divorce laws, custody rulings changed in the '70s and '80s—no longer was it de facto that kids would stay with their mothers—and that led to a whole new round of conflict in broken families.)

In seventh grade, Chris and I entered junior high and took an ancient-history class taught by his mother. We called her Mrs. Kohnhorst, though we wouldn't call her that for long: during the semester she married another divorced teacher and became Mrs. Hannum. Chris kept his father's last name and tried to avoid discussing the new family arrangement. Simple things, like filling out enrollment cards, “became opportunities to feel stigmatized,” he says. “Whom would I list as my father—my dad or my mother's

new husband? Would it be an insult to my dad if I wrote down my stepfather's name?”

SHAME AND ISOLATION. THOSE WERE FAMILIAR feelings to many of our friends. When Josh Gruenberg's parents separated for a time in 1977 and his mother left the house, he didn't tell anyone—not even his best friend, whose parents were divorced themselves. “I tried to keep it a secret from him because I was so embarrassed,” says Josh, whose father was an English teacher at Grant and divorced Josh's mother several years later. “It had to do with this idea that we were the perfect family, and I didn't want that to fall apart.”

David Selig was also watching his parents' marriage blow up that year, but he didn't talk about it with his friends, either. On the surface, the Seligs seemed like a typical middle-class family. His dad worked in the sandblasting business, coached the T-ball team and took David to Indian Guides, a father-and-son group where members were called “chiefs” and “braves.” But under the

surface, there was friction at home. “I don't think I ever recall it being a harmonious family unit,” says David, who has two sisters and became our senior class president. “My father was very strict, very stubborn and extremely set in his ways. He lost his patience quickly. My mother was just the opposite, very lenient, easygoing and always supportive.” The couple separated in the months before David's 13th birthday, but managed to stand together on the temple altar at his bar mitzvah. In that sense, David was better off than Robbie Hyatt, who wound up having not one, but two bar mitzvah parties, one for each camp of the family. “I was very close with my mom's dad, because we lived with him after my mom got divorced. He had never been bar mitzva-hed, so I had him get bar mitzva-hed with me. And my dad went ballistic,” Robbie tells me. “It was a huge deal. This family-balance thing is nasty.”

As their parents remarried, my classmates were left to negotiate the thicket of resentments that crop up between



FUTURE VALEDICTORIAN: Bonnie Pollack as a young girl. Her recent divorce was devastating.

Once considered shocking and shameful, divorce has become a routine fact of American life in recent decades.

spouses and their exes, children and their stepparents. Laurie Gelardi's folks split when she was 3, and within a few years they'd married other people. From the outset, her relationship with her father's new wife was fraught. The way she saw it, her stepmother “didn't really care for him having a child from a previous marriage,” says Laurie, who spent summers with them in San Francisco, where her dad was a Teamster. The rift worsened after her father

and stepmother had a child, and Laurie felt she could never get any alone-time with her dad. "When I was about 13, I had a pretty big conflict with his wife one day when he was at work," she says. "I basically told him, 'I don't want to be with her, I don't come here to see her, and I don't want to come here anymore if you're going to make me stay with her while you're working.' And he said 'Fine.' That was probably the one and only time we had a serious conversation about the situation." Things weren't much better with Laurie's stepfather (it was her mom's third husband; her second had died when Laurie was 5). "I wasn't very accepting of having another man in my life as my father," Laurie says. "I don't think I recognized it at the time, but I was really fearful of my mom being hurt again."

As they witnessed their parents' pain, many of my friends took on emotional burdens well beyond their years. "When my father's second marriage collapsed, I was a 15-year-old high-school freshman who was forced to become a crisis counselor, sitting in the front seat of his car for endless hours listening to him and trying to keep him from completely breaking down," my buddy Chris Kohnhorst recalls. He may have been helping his dad, but Chris was doing damage to himself, encasing his own emotions in a dispassionate shell. "That outward calm expression has led me to be labeled as 'cold' and 'uninspiring,' and has at times hampered my ability to succeed both in my professional and personal life," says Chris, who decided to study psychology in college largely because of these impromptu therapy sessions with his dad.

Such are the scars of growing up too fast—something many of my classmates were doing in the '70s. As newly single mothers went to work to support their families, children were being left to fend for themselves. "We were latchkey kids," says Elyse Oliver, whose mom took a job at Hanna-Barbera studios, painting animated characters for shows like "The Flintstones" to provide for Elyse and her sister. "We had the little necklace with the key on it and we'd walk home from school, let ourselves in and take care of ourselves until she came home about 6 or 7. We'd do chores and cook dinner. I remember making drinks for her," Elyse says. The rest of the girls who lived on her block—the "Martha Street Gang," they called themselves—didn't come from broken homes. "It was, like, 'Eww, your parents are divorced,'" recalls Elyse, whose parents split when she was 5, and whose last name at the time was Croen. By the time she was 13, her mother had been through three marriages: the first two ended in divorce, and her third husband died of a heart attack within a year, the day before Father's Day.

Like so many kids of divorce, Elyse dealt with the instability at home by acting out. At the age of 9, she was smoking. At 13, she was having sex. "My boyfriend at the time went up to my mom and said, 'Hey, we want to have sex, can you put her on the pill?'" Her mother agreed. At least Elyse was getting birth control: a good friend at the time, another child of divorce, had a baby at 15 and gave it up for adoption. The sexual revolution was in full swing in 1977, but Elyse believes her behavior had more to do with her parents' divorce and her father's death when she was

11. "I think I had a problem because I didn't have my dad around. So I was looking for love that wasn't there," Elyse says. She settled for whatever love she could get, putting up with her boyfriend's cheating for five years, then moving from one relationship to the next. "The same night I broke up with my first boyfriend, I met my next. I was never alone; I mean, there's something wrong with that."

BUT MY GENERATION WAS TRAINED IN THE ART OF having to move from relationship to relationship. It begins when the judge determines custody and the children start shuttling between parents. Deborah Cronin was one of those kids you started seeing on airplanes in the '70s, flying by themselves. "I remember the stewardess took really good care of us and made sure we got to the right gates," says Deborah, whose mother sent the 5-year-old and her 4-year-old sister, Kimberly, to stay with their father in New Hampshire for the summer. That was the beginning of Deborah's bicoastal childhood. When she was in sixth grade, her mother moved to California and sent Deborah and her sister to live with their father and his new wife for a year while she looked for work. "I loved being with my father. But it was hard for my sister, as she was very close to my mom and missed her very much," Deborah says. By high school, she was bouncing between her mother's and father's for a year at a time. "It was difficult to go back and forth, saying goodbye to one parent and hello to another. At the airport there was always lots of crying." She may have had equal time with both parents, but there was a price: "At times I felt like a loner," she says.

Of course, not everyone in the Divorce Generation was a loner. Like some strange antimatter, divorce drew some students together, allow-



DIVORCE CLIQUE: Ruth Kreusch, Lisa Cohen and Tonju Francois bonded over their broken homes

Kohnhorst routinely played crisis counselor to his divorced father, a role he says forced him to suppress his own feelings.

ing them to bond over their common wounds. One of the best-loved cliques at Grant was the trio of Lisa Cohen, Tonju Francois and Ruth Kreusch, the water girls for the football team. Smart, sexy and sassy, they were our "Charlie's Angels" with a multicultural twist, thanks to the busing program that was taking urban students to Grant and shaking up the school's reputation as a preserve for bubble-headed "Valley Girls." "Lisa was the Jewish-American princess from the Valley, I was the black American princess from South Central and Ruth was the Mexican-American princess from the barrio," says Tonju, who was voted Miss Congeniality. Both Tonju's and Lisa's parents had recently divorced, and Ruth was looking to escape the verbal battlefield at home. "I really thank God that I had some good friends that I

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COURTESY OF TONJU FRANCOIS

could kind of escape with and just not be surrounded by what was going on at home," Ruth says.

"Most of my friends had divorced parents, and the ones that weren't should have been divorced," says Lisa, whose father's new apartment became a refuge for the girls. An engineer, he worked long hours, and that gave Lisa a lot of freedom. "Probably too much freedom," she says now. "I was dealing with some emotional fallout from the divorce without really realizing it, and I acted out in some ways. My grades took a big dive. Fortunately, I was able to ride on test scores and things like that to get myself into college, so I didn't completely sabotage my future."

The future. How full of promise it seemed to us that senior year in 1982. Stepping to the podium at graduation to give a valedictory address, I plagiarized FDR and delivered a treacherous speech about our "rendezvous with destiny." It was time to forge our own path, to break away from our parents' failed attempts at idyllic domesticity and set things right. Some of us would succeed. Some would not. But none would achieve the impossible: we couldn't escape our pasts.

That was apparent as we gathered at Grant last month to pose for photographs for this story. Most of us hadn't set foot on campus since graduation, and we marveled at how much the place looked like we remembered it. We said the same about one another—though inside, I'm sure everyone was thinking what I was: "Do I look as middle-aged as they do?" "This is our 'Big Chill' moment," my friend Michael Rothman joked.

Some people thought if they made it through high school without their parents' divorcing, they might somehow be immune to it once they went out into the world. But as Michael—who now goes by "Mic"—discovered, that was not true. "It just didn't seem like it would happen in my family," Mic says. But it did. One day when he was visiting home from college, his mother confided in him that her marriage was failing. "Their marriage was what people call 'good enough'—but in fact it wasn't good enough," he says. Mic found himself in one of those good-enough marriages himself, when his wife of several years announced a year and a half ago that she wanted a divorce. The revelation was as shocking to Mic as his mother's had been. "They say marriages break up over money and sex," Mic says. "The ironic part is that we made a lot of money and had a lot of sex. And we still broke up." Mic signed the divorce papers several months ago, and his 6-year-old daughter splits her time between her parents. "Obviously when we told her that Mom was moving out, she was not happy with that. But young children adapt more easily," he says. "One day I was taking her and her little friend to school and they were having a discussion in the back seat about divorce and what it meant. It was unbelievable in my mind." Mic didn't bounce back as quickly as his daughter seems to have. Over mojitos one night, he tells me how he's been talking a lot with our friend David Selig's mom, divorcée to divorcée. He says it's tough being back on the market at 44. Mic took up long-distance running to clear his head during the darkest days of the divorce, dropped 20 pounds, and is now more fit than when he and David won citywide honors for doubles tennis at Grant. But it's not hard to see he'd

trade the six-pack abs and single life to have a good relationship.

BECOMING SUDDENLY SINGLE IN MIDDLE AGE WASN'T part of the plan for my fellow valedictorian Bonnie Pollock. Her childhood was unscarred by divorce—her parents just celebrated their 50th anniversary—and she approached marriage with the same levelheadedness that had made her a star pupil. She met her husband when they were both doctoral students in psychology, but waited to get married until she was 33. "We knew we were very compatible. We shared the same values, we knew each other well, and we communicated very well compared to many couples I have known," she says.

It turns out that students of psychology are as fragile as the rest of us. For more than two years the couple had been trying to adopt a child from Kazakhstan, and finally the moment was about to arrive. That's when Bonnie says her husband told her he couldn't go through with it, and wasn't sure he was in love with her anymore.

The legal part of the breakup was civil: the couple opted for what's called a "collaborative divorce" (a method in which lawyers for each party, often in conjunction with other consultants such as financial advisers and psychologists, work as a team with the couple to craft a settlement). The psychological fallout for Bonnie wasn't so manageable. "My best friend, my lover, my companion was gone. The baby was gone. My career was gone, because I had willingly taken myself off the high-powered career track of an organizational psychologist," Bonnie says. "I was 40 and I had no role, I had no place, I had no identity. And it ripped me to the core." Her mother helped pick up the pieces, moving to Oakland, Calif., for a short time to live with Bonnie, while her dad held down the fort in Reno. She nagged Bonnie to take hip-hop dance classes to restore her social life, and



SPLIT SQUAD: Laurie Gelardi's parents were both remarried by the time she was 10

While some children felt isolated by their parents' divorce, others forged bonds based on their shared struggles.

her friend Barbara, who had been her maid of honor, nudged her to date again and re-establish her career. It's taken three and a half years, but Bonnie has managed to start over. "I'm a stronger person and I'm certainly a wiser person because of this," she says. "But I'm also a more jaded person, and that's the really ugly side effect."

Another ugly side effect, according to the research, is that divorce can be passed from generation to generation, like some kind of genetic defect, with children of divorce becoming divorcés themselves. Some of my classmates fell into this category. Tonju Francois, our Miss Congeniality, married when she was 28 and got divorced six years later, in part, she says, because her husband didn't want to have kids (he already had children from a previous marriage). "I loved being married, and it devastated me when it

COURTESY OF LAURIE GELARDI

ended," she says. Elyse Oliver got married when she was 25 and divorced four years later. "I guess I just didn't know what to do in a relationship," she says. Now remarried, Elyse says she's determined not to let her 15-year-old daughter act out in the same ways she did: no sex before marriage, and don't even think of living with a boyfriend if you want me to pay for a wedding, she warns.

Other classmates chose to avoid marriage altogether. When she was 26, Deborah Cronin had a daughter, Sharayah, but didn't think marriage with the girl's father was the right thing for her. "I didn't want to get divorced like my parents did," she says. So she left him in Lake Tahoe when her daughter was a year old and moved back to the Valley to be closer to her family. She got a job as a secretary and as a single mom was living a life similar to her mother's. "I began to understand my mom in a way I hadn't before," she says. Smiling at her daughter, who's now 17, Deborah adds, "My mother did a very good job in raising me."

Despite the dire predictions, a surprising number of Grant alums wound up in solid marriages. My buddy Chris made good on his high-school promise to let me be best man at his wedding—I gave him my "Fat Albert" lunchbox as a wedding present—and 15 years later he's still happily married, and living with his wife and two daughters near Houston, where he works for a company that conducts pharmaceutical clinical trials. "My life since my parents' divorce has been shaped to a tremendous degree by the goal of avoiding divorce as an adult at all costs," says Chris, whose parents both died of cancer within months of one another in 2001.

In many ways, the urge to stay married is stronger in my classmates' generation than the urge to get divorced was in my parents'. Perhaps this was a backlash to divorce; maybe it was the result of reaching marrying age just as President Reagan's New Conservatism was shaping the social order. Whatever the cause, my married classmates seem more clear-eyed than their '50s forebears. "Every honest couple will tell you that it's hard sometimes," says Josh Gruenberg, who had been embarrassed as a child when his parents separated. He became a lawyer and now lives in San Diego with his wife and three kids (his parents divorced in 1992). "You have to compromise, and it takes work," says Ruth Kreusch, once part of the water-girls trio. Now an intellectual-property paralegal, she has been married for nearly 17 years and has three kids (her parents finally separated five years ago, "but they're friends," she says). Class president David Selig, who became a wealth-management adviser, says divorce isn't as prominent in his social circle now as it was when he was growing up—though his circle is admittedly smaller, since he's become much less social than he was in high school. "My wife and I would rather spend time with each other and our five rescue dogs than just about anybody else," says David, who's been with his wife for 18 years. The couple decided early on not to have children, but he says that decision had nothing to do with his having grown up in a divorced family.

Others in our class wound up marrying much later in life than their parents did (that's in line with the research, which shows that children of divorce tend to marry either later than their peers, or much earlier, in their teens). The twice-bar-mitzvahed Robbie Hyatt, who's now a lawyer and also runs a martial-arts school in the Valley, didn't wed until he was 37, a year after his son was born. Lisa Cohen, another one of the water girls, waited until she was 35, after she'd become a medical psychologist. "This generation grew up with such a massive culture of divorce that I think there was an effort to make better choices about who we married," says Lisa, whose parents wed in their 20s. "I was pretty clear on the fact that I didn't just want to marry someone for how good he looked on paper or how crazy in love we were," says Lisa, who has two children, ages 7 and 4. "And I found someone who has great character. He's true-blue. He is committed to our family."

Both Laurie Gelardi and I would marry our respective partners if lesbians and gays were allowed to in the state of California; instead we have domestic partnerships. Laurie, now a neonatal intensive-care nurse, has been with her partner for 15 years and they have two children (when Laurie told her mother she was gay, her mom blamed herself, saying it was because Laurie had grown

up without her father; Laurie assured her that wasn't the case). I've been with my partner, Jeff, for the past seven years. Though my own parents have been married 47 years, it took me until my late 30s to find a healthy relationship that stuck, probably because I never really believed a union could last without turning ugly.

Is that the cynicism of the Divorce Generation speaking? Maybe. But it's surprising how the right partner can break through the cynicism. In my case, it happened when Jeff reassured me, "Don't worry. The other shoe isn't going to drop." Jeff knows a thing or two about shoes dropping, being a child of divorce himself.

Despite the complications and the collateral damage, my friends from Grant High's class of '82 seem to agree that the divorces in their lives—both their parents' and their own—were

probably for the best. Most don't think ill of their folks for having split up. "As a child I felt like I was a victim of my circumstances, a victim of the divorce," says Deborah Cronin of her bi-coastal childhood. "But as an adult I learned that my parents were just two people who met each other, fell in love, had children, and it didn't work out. They were 18 and 19 years old when they met. They were young kids having kids." It seems that along with the crow's feet and expanding waistlines of middle age, my classmates and I have acquired an acceptance of our parents and their life choices. Some of us have even found healing. "My parents were good people," Tonju Francois told me recently. "And good people get divorced, too." If I've learned anything from my walk down memory lane, it's that the Divorce Generation has grown up.

With TEMMA EHRENFELD



HAPPIER TIMES: Mic Rothman (right), with his father and brother. His parents divorced, and his own marriage just ended.