



**Alison Bechdel**, a careful archivist of her own life, began keeping a journal when she was ten. Since 1983 she has been chronicling the lives of various characters in the fictionalized *Dykes to Watch Out For* strip, "one of the preeminent oeuvres in the comics genre, period" (*Ms.*). The strip is syndicated in fifty alternative newspapers, translated into many languages, and collected into a book series with a quarter of a million copies in print. Four of her books have won Lambda Literary Awards for humor, and *The Indelible Alison Bechdel* won a Lambda Literary Award in the biography/autobiography category. *Utne* magazine has listed *DTWOF* as "one of the greatest hits of the twentieth century." Bechdel lives near Burlington, Vermont.

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"If David Sedaris could draw, and if *Bleak House* had been a little funnier, you'd have Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*."  
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— **Kirkus Reviews**, starred review

"Stupendous. Alison Bechdel's mesmerizing feat of familial resurrection is a rare, prime example of why graphic novels have taken over the conversation about American literature. The details—visual and verbal, emotional and elusive—are devastatingly captured by an artist in total control of her craft."  
— **Chip Kidd**  
author of *The Cheese Monkeys*

"Brave and forthright and insightful—exactly what Alison Bechdel does best."  
— **Dorothy Allison**  
author of *Bastard Out of Carolina*



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*Fun Home*  
ALISON BECHDEL

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"Alison Bechdel—she's one of the best, one to watch out for." —HARVEY PEKAR

\$19.95

A fresh and brilliantly told memoir from a cult favorite comic artist, marked by gothic twists, a family funeral home, sexual angst, and great books

This breakout book by Alison Bechdel is a darkly funny family tale, pitch-perfectly illustrated with Bechdel's sweetly gothic drawings. Like Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, it's a story exhilaratingly suited to graphic memoir form.

Meet Alison's father, a historic preservation expert and obsessive restorer of the family's Victorian home, a third-generation funeral home director, a high school English teacher, an icily distant parent, and a closeted homosexual who, as it turns out, is involved with his male students and a family babysitter. Through narrative that is alternately heart-breaking and fiercely funny, we are drawn into a daughter's complex yearning for her father. And yet, apart from assigned stints dusting caskets at the family-owned "fun home," as Alison and her brothers call it, the relationship achieves its most intimate expression through the shared code of books. When Alison comes out as homosexual herself in late adolescence, the denouement is swift, graphic—and redemptive.



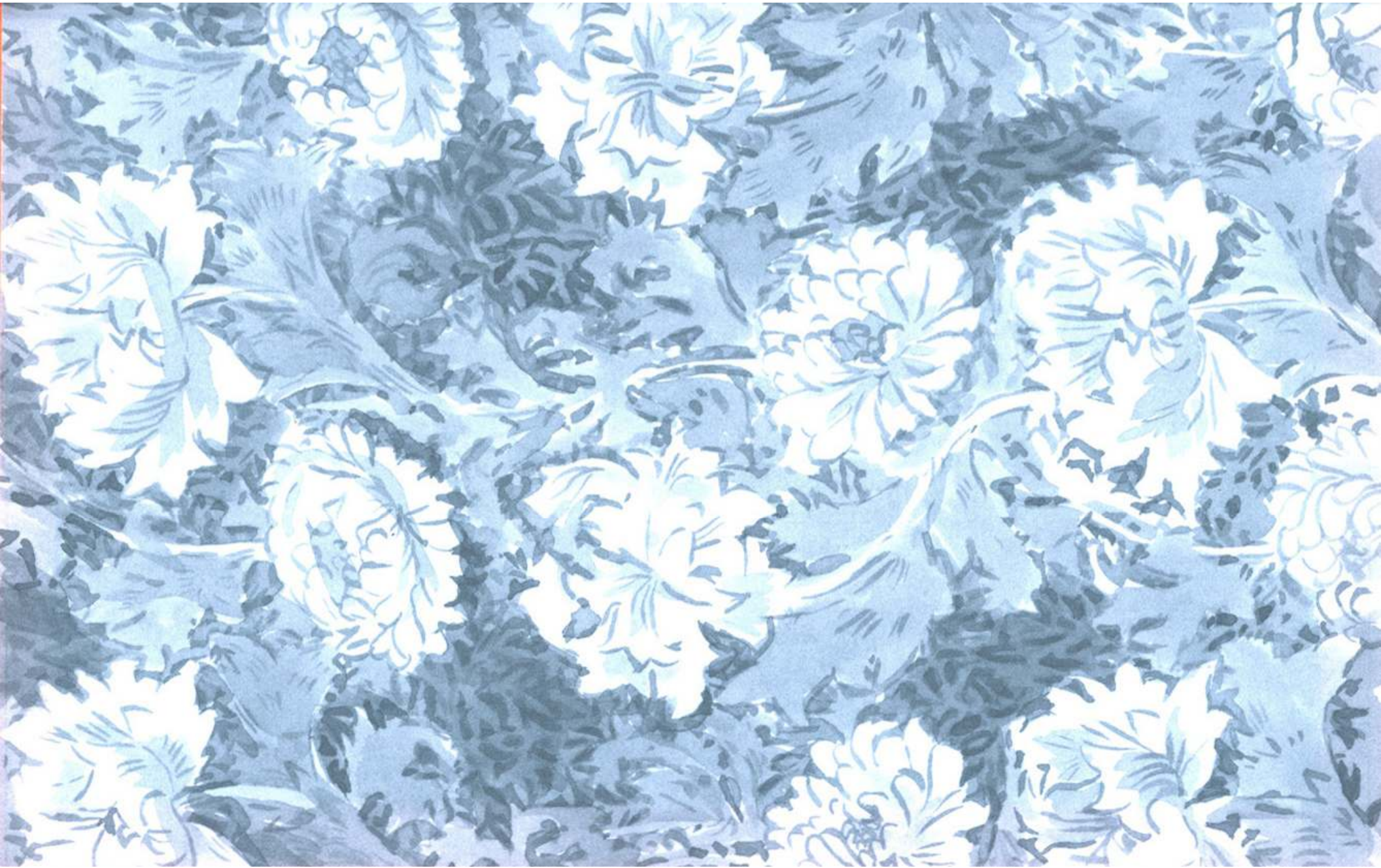
ALISON BECHDEL

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Fun Home  
ALISON BECHDEL

Margaret Miffin



FUN HOME



# Fun Home

A FAMILY TRAGICOMIC

ALISON BECHDEL



HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY  
BOSTON NEW YORK

*FOR MOM, CHRISTIAN, AND JOHN.*

*WE DID HAVE A LOT OF FUN,  
IN SPITE OF EVERYTHING.*

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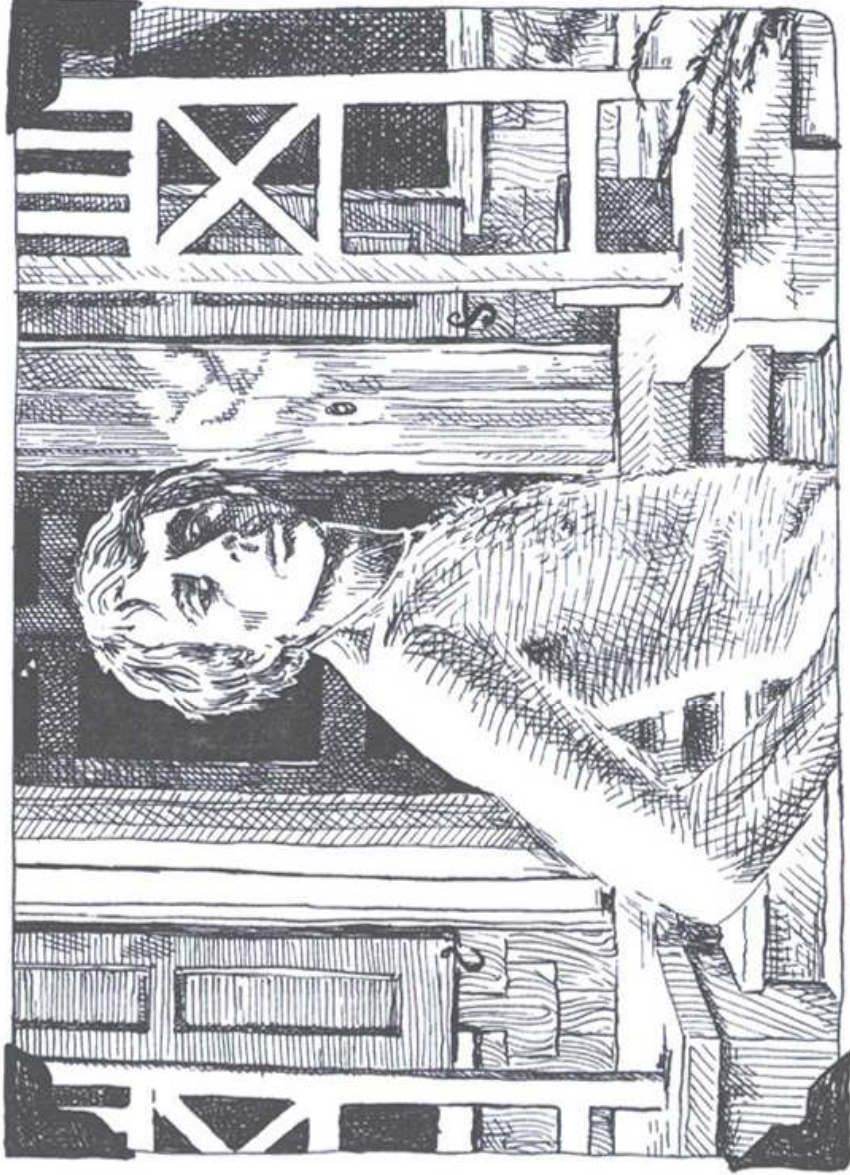
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**CHAPTER 1**



**OLD FATHER, OLD ARTIFICER**



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LIKE MANY FATHERS, MINE COULD OCCASIONALLY BE PREVAILED ON FOR A SPOT OF "AIRPLANE."



AS HE LAUNCHED ME, MY FULL WEIGHT WOULD FALL ON THE PIVOT POINT BETWEEN HIS FEET AND MY STOMACH.



IT WAS A DISCOMFORT WELL WORTH THE RARE PHYSICAL CONTACT, AND CERTAINLY WORTH THE MOMENT OF PERFECT BALANCE WHEN I SOARED ABOVE HIM.



CONSIDERING THE FATE OF ICARUS AFTER HE FLOUTED HIS FATHER'S ADVICE AND FLEW SO CLOSE TO THE SUN HIS WINGS MELTED, PERHAPS SOME DARK HUMOR IS INTENDED.



BUT BEFORE HE DID SO, HE MANAGED TO GET QUITE A LOT DONE.



HIS GREATEST ACHIEVEMENT, ARGUABLY, WAS HIS MONOMANIACAL RESTORATION OF OUR OLD HOUSE.



WHEN OTHER CHILDREN CALLED OUR HOUSE A MANSION, I WOULD DEMUR. I RESENTED THE IMPLICATION THAT MY FAMILY WAS RICH, OR UNUSUAL IN ANY WAY.



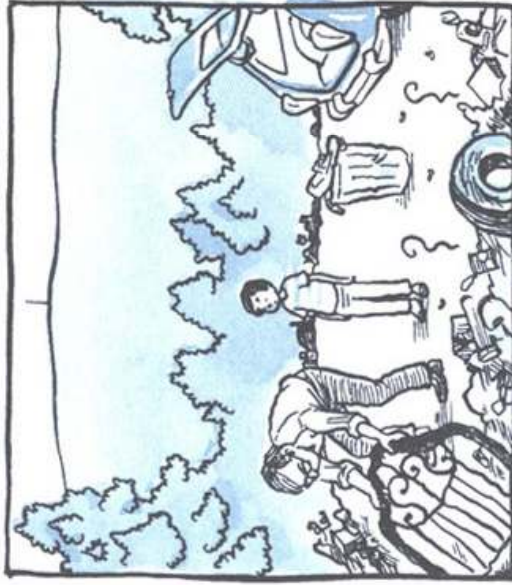
IN FACT, WE WERE UNUSUAL, THOUGH I WOULDN'T APPRECIATE EXACTLY HOW UNUSUAL UNTIL MUCH LATER. BUT WE WERE NOT RICH.



THE GILT CORNICES, THE MARBLE FIREPLACE, THE CRYSTAL CHANDELIERS, THE SHELVES OF CALF-BOUND BOOKS--THESE WERE NOT SO MUCH BOUGHT AS PRODUCED FROM THIN AIR BY MY FATHER'S REMARKABLE LEGERDEMAIN.



MY FATHER COULD SPIN GARBAGE...



...INTO GOLD.



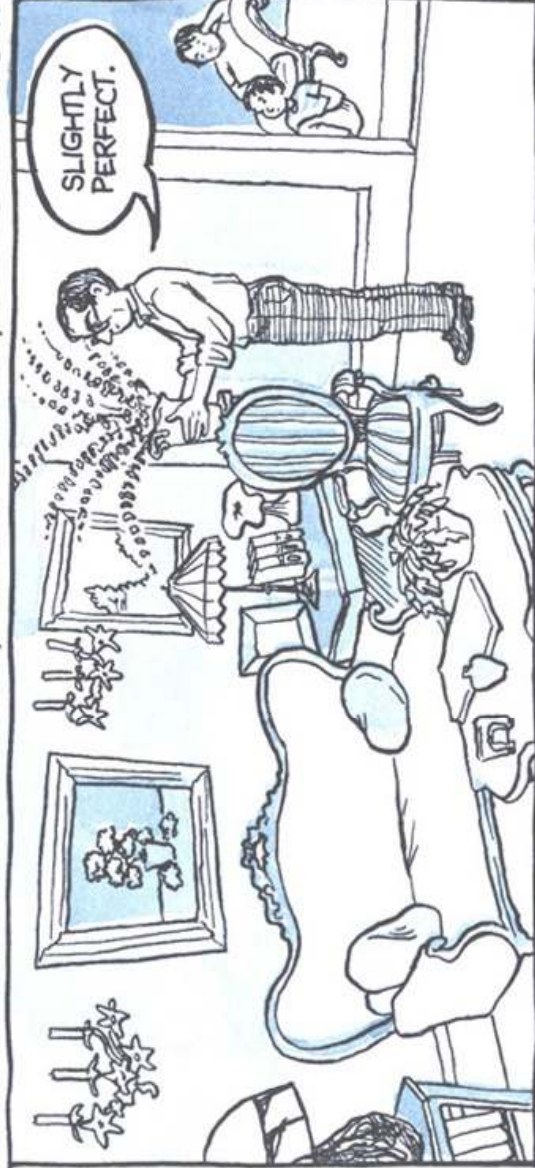
HE COULD TRANSFIGURE A ROOM WITH THE SMALLEST OFFHAND FLOURISH.



HE COULD CONJURE AN ENTIRE, FINISHED PERIOD INTERIOR FROM A PAINT CHIP.



HE WAS AN ALCHEMIST OF APPEARANCE, A SAVANT OF SURFACE, A DAEDALUS OF DECOR.



FOR IF MY FATHER WAS ICARUS, HE WAS ALSO DAEDALUS--THAT SKILLFUL ARTIFICER, THAT MAD SCIENTIST WHO BUILT THE WINGS FOR HIS SON AND DESIGNED THE FAMOUS LABYRINTH...



...AND WHO ANSWERED NOT TO THE LAWS OF SOCIETY, BUT TO THOSE OF HIS CRAFT.



HISTORICAL RESTORATION WASN'T HIS JOB.



IT WAS HIS PASSION. AND I MEAN PASSION IN EVERY SENSE OF THE WORD.

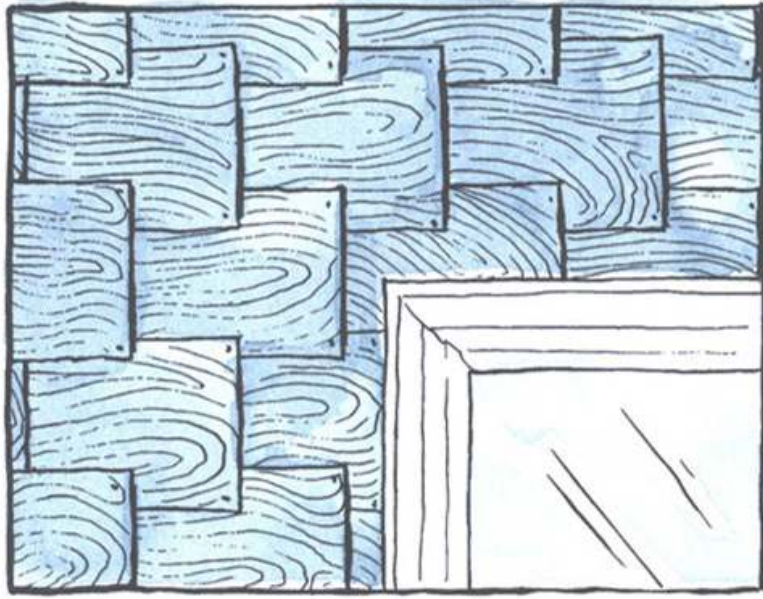




OUR GOTHIC REVIVAL HOUSE HAD BEEN BUILT DURING THE SMALL PENNSYLVANIA TOWN'S ONE BRIEF MOMENT OF WEALTH, FROM THE LUMBER INDUSTRY, IN 1867.

BUT LOCAL FORTUNES HAD DECLINED STEADILY FROM THAT POINT, AND WHEN MY PARENTS BOUGHT THE PLACE IN 1962, IT WAS A SHELL OF ITS FORMER SELF.

THE SHUTTERS AND SCROLLWORK WERE GONE. THE CLAPBOARDS HAD BEEN SHEATHED WITH SCABROUS SHINGLES.



THE BARE LIGHTBULBS REVEALED DINGY WARTIME WALLPAPER AND WOODWORK PAINTED PASTEL GREEN.



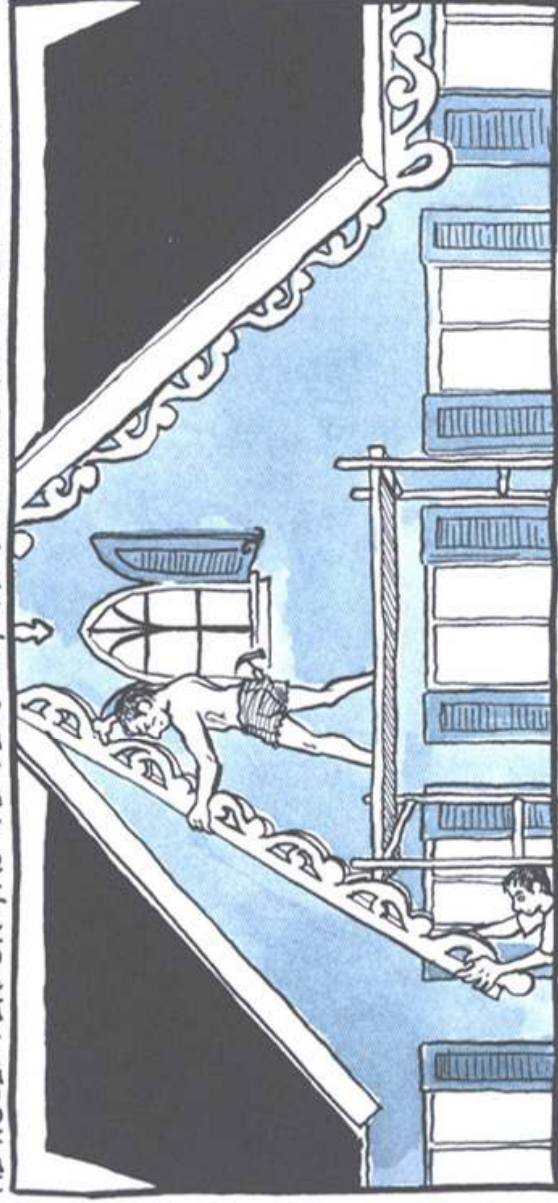
ALL THAT WAS LEFT OF THE HOUSE'S LUMBER-ERA GLORY WERE THE EXUBERANT FRONT PORCH SUPPORTS.



BUT OVER THE NEXT EIGHTEEN YEARS, MY FATHER WOULD RESTORE THE HOUSE TO ITS ORIGINAL CONDITION, AND THEN SOME.

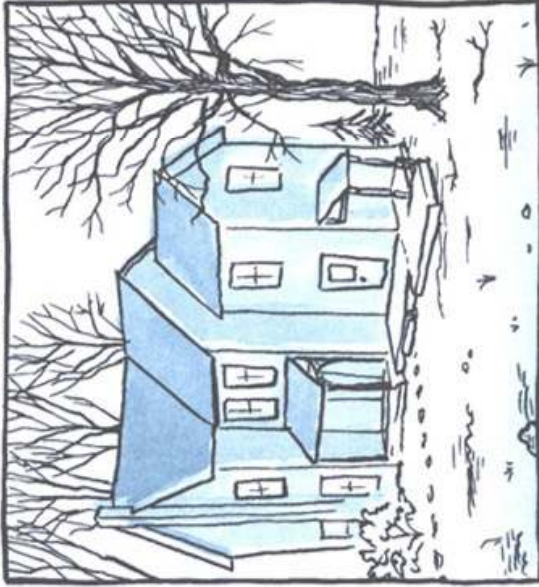


HE WOULD PERFORM, AS DAEDALUS DID, DAZZLING DISPLAYS OF ARTFULNESS.





HE WOULD CULTIVATE THE BARREN YARD...



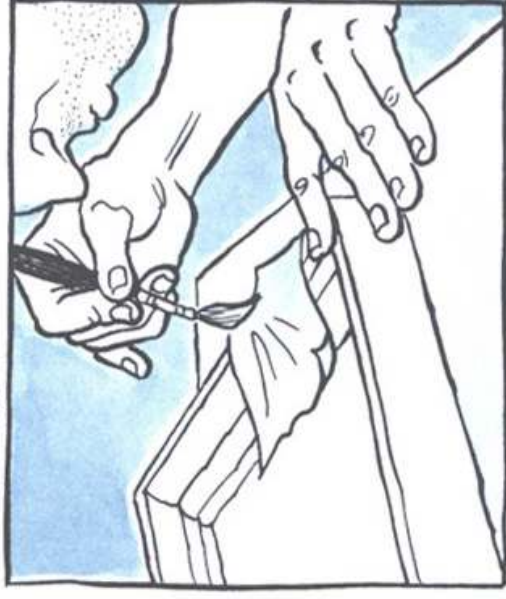
...INTO A LUSH, FLOWERING LANDSCAPE.



HE WOULD MANIPULATE FLAGSTONES THAT WEIGHED HALF A TON...



...AND THE THINNEST, QUIVERING LAYERS OF GOLD LEAF.



IT COULD  
HAVE BEEN  
A ROMANTIC  
STORY, LIKE  
IN IT'S A  
WONDERFUL  
LIFE, WHEN  
JIMMY STEWART  
AND DONNA  
REED FIX UP  
THAT BIG OLD  
HOUSE AND  
RAISE THEIR  
FAMILY THERE.

HELLO, DARLING!



HELLO, DADDY!



BUT IN THE MOVIE WHEN JIMMY STEWART COMES HOME ONE NIGHT AND STARTS YELLING AT EVERYONE....



...IT'S OUT OF THE ORDINARY.



DAEDALUS, TOO, WAS INDIFFERENT TO THE HUMAN COST OF HIS PROJECTS.



HE BLITHELY BETRAYED THE KING, FOR EXAMPLE, WHEN THE QUEEN ASKED HIM TO BUILD HER A COW DISGUISE SO SHE COULD SEDUCE THE WHITE BULL.



INDEED, THE RESULT OF THAT SCHEME--A HALF-BULL, HALF-MAN MONSTER--INSPIRED DAEDALUS'S GREATEST CREATION YET.



HE HID THE MINOTAUR IN THE LABYRINTH--A MAZE OF PASSAGES AND ROOMS OPENING ENDLESSLY INTO ONE ANOTHER...



...AND FROM WHICH, AS STRAY YOUTHS AND MAIDENS DISCOVERED TO THEIR PERIL...



...ESCAPE WAS IMPOSSIBLE.



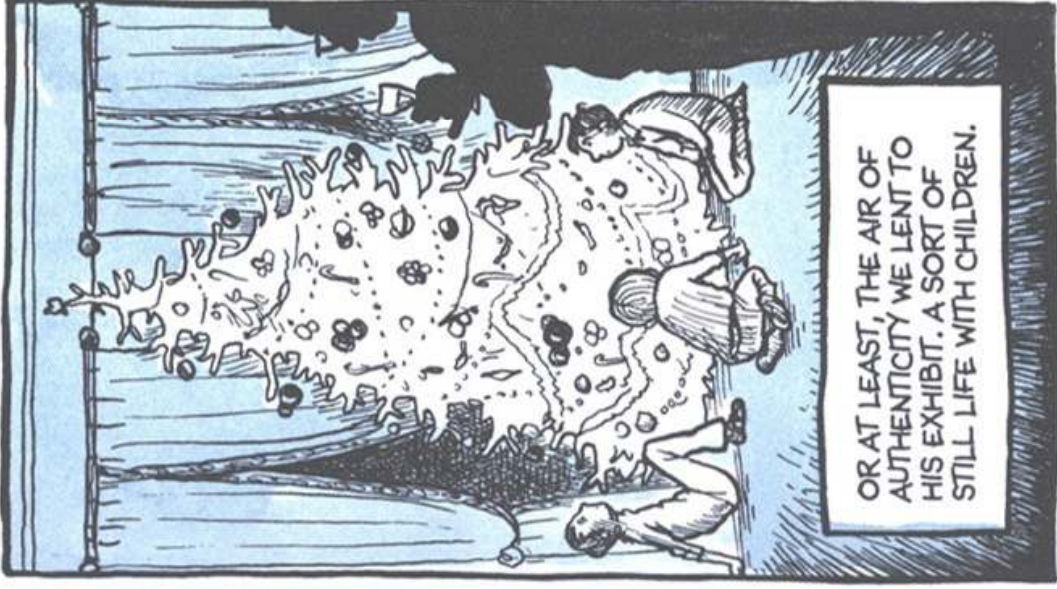
THEN THERE ARE THOSE FAMOUS WINGS. WAS DAEDALUS REALLY STRICKEN WITH GRIEF WHEN ICARUS FELL INTO THE SEA?



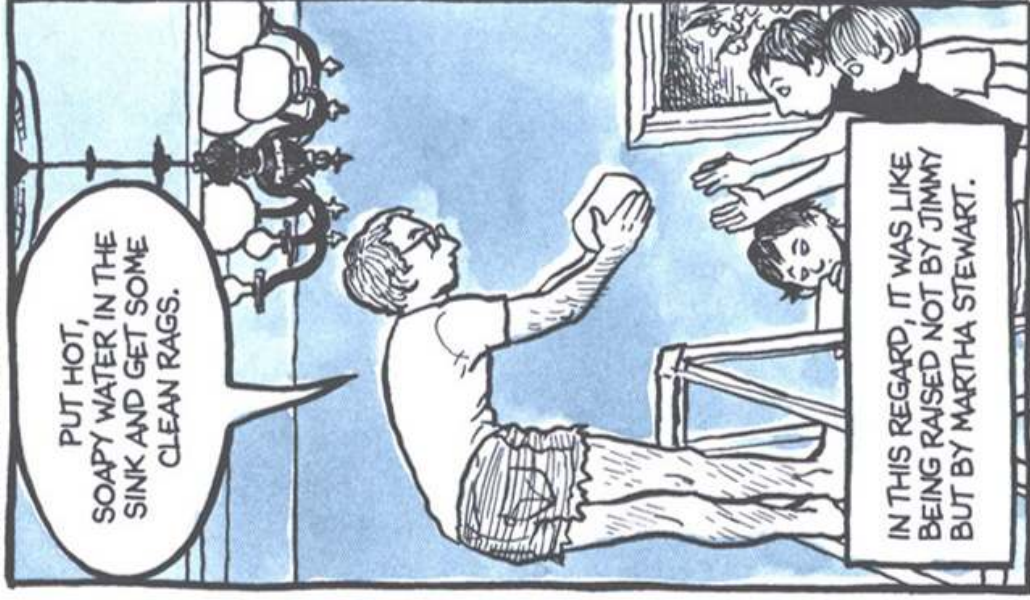
OR JUST DISAPPOINTED BY THE DESIGN FAILURE?



SOMETIMES, WHEN THINGS WERE GOING WELL, I THINK MY FATHER ACTUALLY ENJOYED HAVING A FAMILY.



AND OF COURSE, MY BROTHERS AND I WERE FREE LABOR. DAD CONSIDERED US EXTENSIONS OF HIS OWN BODY, LIKE PRECISION ROBOT ARMS.



IN THEORY, HIS ARRANGEMENT WITH MY MOTHER WAS MORE COOPERATIVE.



IN PRACTICE, IT WAS NOT.



WE EACH RESISTED IN OUR OWN WAYS, BUT IN THE END WE WERE EQUALLY POWERLESS BEFORE MY FATHER'S CURATORIAL ONSLAUGHT.



MY BROTHERS AND I COULDN'T COMPETE WITH THE ASTRAL LAMPS AND GIRANDOLES AND HEPPLEWHITE SUITE CHAIRS. THEY WERE PERFECT.



I GREW TO RESENT THE WAY MY FATHER TREATED HIS FURNITURE LIKE CHILDREN, AND HIS CHILDREN LIKE FURNITURE.

MY OWN DECIDED PREFERENCE FOR THE UNADORNED AND PURELY FUNCTIONAL EMERGED EARLY.



I WAS SPARTAN TO MY FATHER'S ATHENIAN.



MODERN TO HIS VICTORIAN.



BUTCH TO HIS NELLY.



WHO CARES IF THE NECKLINES DON'T MATCH?

YELLOW TURTLENECK. NOW.

UTILITARIAN TO HIS AESTHETE.



WHAT'S THE POINT OF MAKING SOMETHING THAT'S SO HARD TO DUST?

IT'S BEAUTIFUL.

I DEVELOPED A CONTEMPT FOR USE-  
LESS ORNAMENT. WHAT FUNCTION WAS  
SERVED BY THE SCROLLS, TASSELS, AND  
BRIC-A-BRAC THAT INFESTED OUR HOUSE?



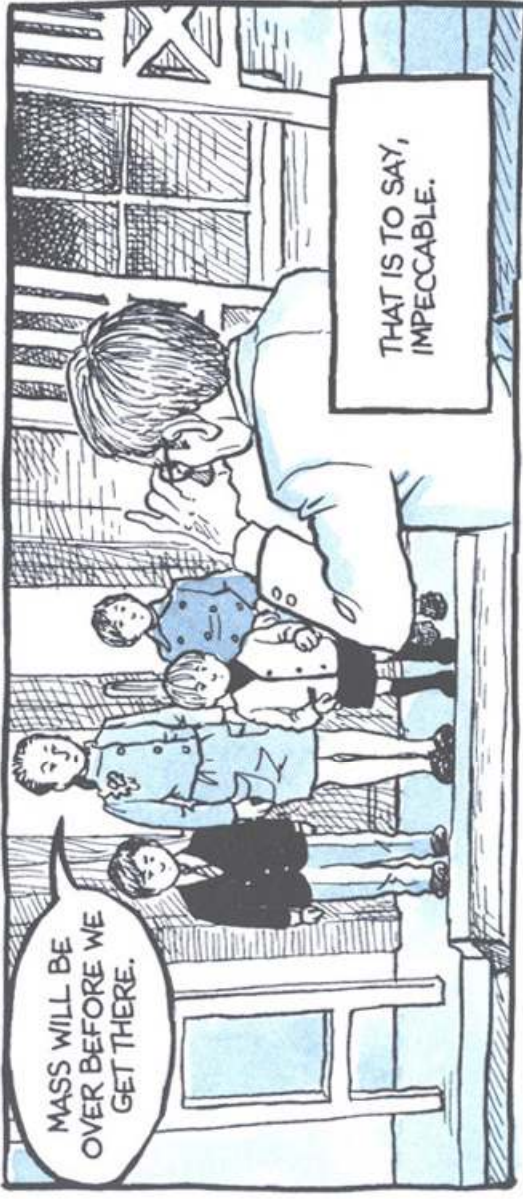
IF ANYTHING, THEY OBSCURED FUNCTION.  
THEY WERE EMBELLISHMENTS IN THE  
WORST SENSE.



MY FATHER BEGAN TO SEEM MORALLY  
SUSPECT TO ME LONG BEFORE I KNEW  
THAT HE ACTUALLY HAD A DARK SECRET.



HE USED HIS SKILLFUL ARTIFICE NOT TO MAKE THINGS, BUT TO MAKE THINGS APPEAR  
TO BE WHAT THEY WERE NOT.



HE APPEARED TO BE AN IDEAL HUSBAND AND FATHER, FOR EXAMPLE.



IT'S TEMPTING TO SUGGEST, IN RETROSPECT, THAT OUR FAMILY WAS A SHAM.



THAT OUR HOUSE WAS NOT A REAL HOME AT ALL BUT THE SIMULACRUM OF ONE, A MUSEUM.



YET WE REALLY WERE A FAMILY, AND WE REALLY DID LIVE IN THOSE PERIOD ROOMS.





STILL, SOMETHING VITAL WAS MISSING.



AN ELASTICITY, A MARGIN FOR ERROR.



BUT I DIDN'T DO ANYTHING!



MOST PEOPLE, I IMAGINE, LEARN TO ACCEPT THAT THEY'RE NOT PERFECT.



PEACE, MAN.





IF WE COULDN'T CRITICIZE MY FATHER, SHOWING AFFECTION FOR HIM WAS AN EVEN DICIER VENTURE.



HAVING LITTLE PRACTICE WITH THE GESTURE, ALL I MANAGED WAS TO GRAB HIS HAND AND BUSS THE KNUCKLES LIGHTLY...

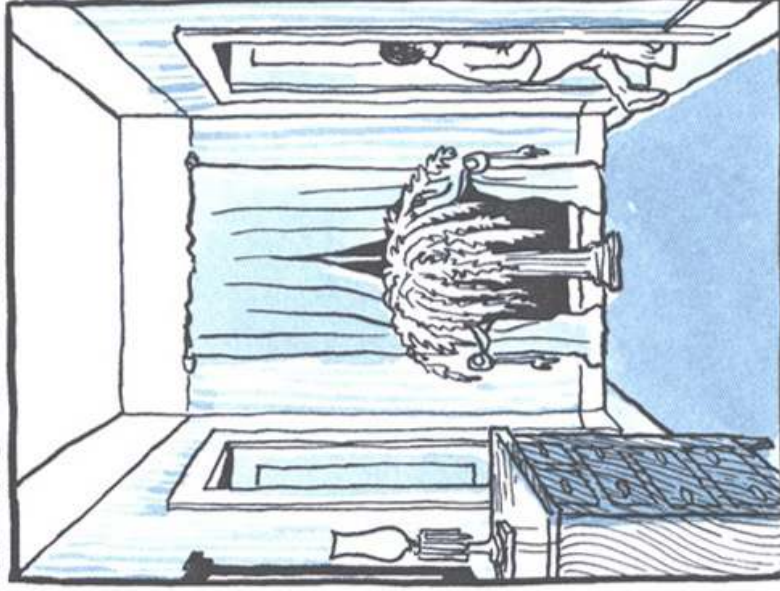
...AS IF HE WERE A BISHOP OR AN ELEGANT LADY, BEFORE RUSHING FROM THE ROOM IN EMBARRASSMENT.



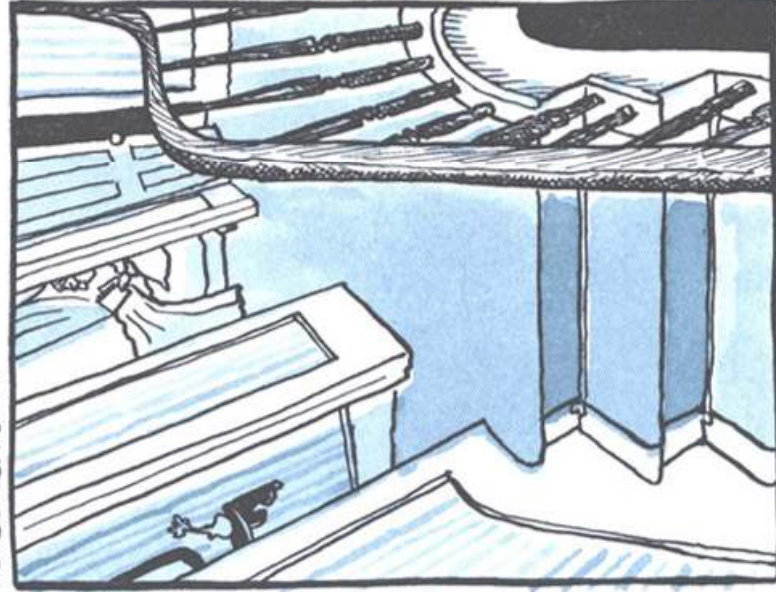
THIS EMBARRASSMENT ON MY PART WAS A TINY SCALE MODEL OF MY FATHER'S MORE FULLY DEVELOPED SELF-LOATHING.



HIS SHAME INHABITED OUR HOUSE AS Pervasively and invisibly as the aromatic musk of aging mahogany.



IN FACT, THE METICULOUS, PERIOD INTERIORS WERE EXPRESSLY DESIGNED TO CONCEAL IT.



MIRRORS, DISTRACTING BRONZES, MULTIPLE DOORWAYS. VISITORS OFTEN GOT LOST UPSTAIRS.



MY MOTHER, MY BROTHERS, AND I KNEW OUR WAY AROUND WELL ENOUGH, BUT IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE TO TELL IF THE MINOTAUR LAY BEYOND THE NEXT CORNER.



AND THE CONSTANT TENSION WAS HEIGHTENED BY THE FACT THAT SOME ENCOUNTERS COULD BE QUITE PLEASANT.

HIS BURSTS OF KINDNESS WERE AS INCANDESCENT AS HIS TANTRUMS WERE DARK.



ALTHOUGH I'M GOOD AT ENUMERATING MY FATHER'S FLAWS, IT'S HARD FOR ME TO SUSTAIN MUCH ANGER AT HIM.



I EXPECT THIS IS PARTLY BECAUSE HE'S DEAD, AND PARTLY BECAUSE THE BAR IS LOWER FOR FATHERS THAN FOR MOTHERS.



MY MOTHER MUST HAVE BATHED ME HUNDREDS OF TIMES. BUT IT'S MY FATHER RINSING ME OFF WITH THE PURPLE METAL CUP THAT I REMEMBER MOST CLEARLY.



...THE SUDDEN, UNBEARABLE COLD OF ITS ABSENCE.



WAS HE A GOOD FATHER? I WANT TO SAY, "AT LEAST HE STUCK AROUND." BUT OF COURSE, HE DIDN'T.



IT'S TRUE THAT HE DIDN'T KILL HIMSELF  
UNTIL I WAS NEARLY TWENTY.



BUT HIS ABSENCE RESONATED RETRO-  
ACTIVELY, ECHOING BACK THROUGH ALL  
THE TIME I KNEW HIM.



MAYBE IT WAS THE CONVERSE OF THE WAY AMPUTEES FEEL PAIN IN A MISSING LIMB.



...SMELLING OF SAWDUST AND SWEAT  
AND DESIGNER COLOGNE.

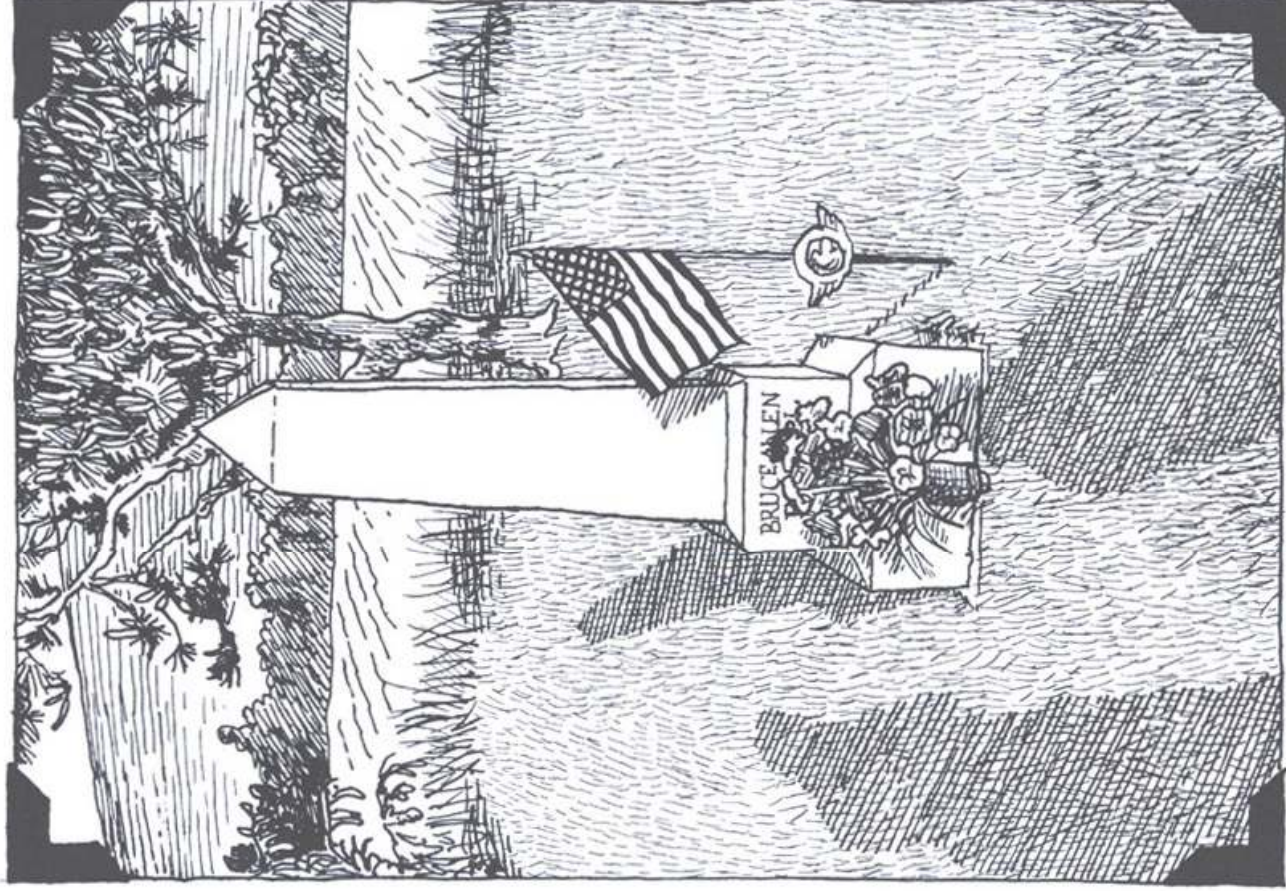


BUT I ACHED AS IF HE WERE ALREADY  
GONE.



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## CHAPTER 2



## A HAPPY DEATH



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THERE'S NO PROOF, ACTUALLY, THAT MY FATHER KILLED HIMSELF.



NO ONE KNEW IT WASN'T AN ACCIDENT.



HIS DEATH WAS QUITE POSSIBLY HIS CONSUMMATE ARTIFICE, HIS MASTERSTROKE.



THERE'S NO PROOF, BUT THERE ARE SOME SUGGESTIVE CIRCUMSTANCES. THE FACT THAT MY MOTHER HAD ASKED HIM FOR A DIVORCE TWO WEEKS BEFORE.



THE COPY OF CAMUS' A HAPPY DEATH THAT HE'D BEEN READING AND LEAVING AROUND THE HOUSE IN WHAT MIGHT BE CONSTRUED AS A DELIBERATE MANNER.



CAMUS' FIRST NOVEL, IT'S ABOUT A CONSUMPTIVE HERO WHO DOES NOT DIE A PARTICULARLY HAPPY DEATH. MY FATHER HAD HIGHLIGHTED ONE LINE.

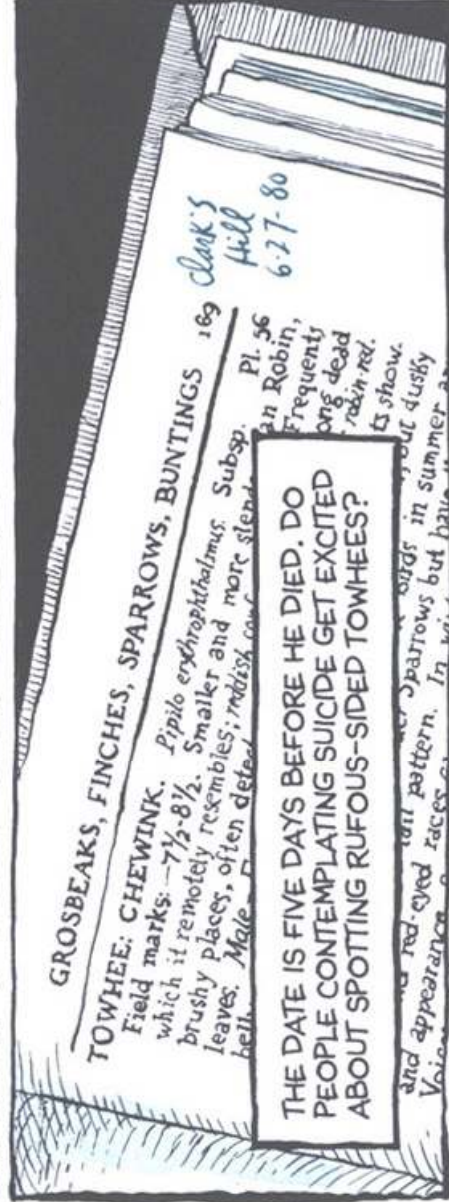
spared him a great deal of torments. He had been unfair: while his imagination and vanity had given her too much importance, his pride had given her too little. He discovered the cruel paradox by which we always deceive ourselves twice about the people we love - first to their advantage, then to their disadvantage. Today he understood that Marthe had been genuine with him - that she had been what she was, and that he owed her a good deal. It was being true to her, and that was the law of life. It was a burst of gratitude he could not express - in the old

A FITTING EPITAPH FOR MY PARENTS' MARRIAGE.

BUT DAD WAS ALWAYS READING SOMETHING. SHOULD WE HAVE BEEN SUSPICIOUS WHEN HE STARTED PLOWING THROUGH PROUST THE YEAR BEFORE?



WAS THAT A SIGN OF DESPERATION? IT'S SAID, AFTER ALL, THAT PEOPLE REACH MIDDLE AGE THE DAY THEY REALIZE THEY'RE NEVER GOING TO READ REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS PAST. DAD ALSO LEFT A MARGINAL NOTATION IN ANOTHER BOOK.



MAYBE HE DIDN'T NOTICE THE TRUCK COMING BECAUSE HE WAS PREOCCUPIED WITH THE DIVORCE. PEOPLE OFTEN HAVE ACCIDENTS WHEN THEY'RE DISTRAUGHT.



BUT THESE ARE JUST QUIBBLES. I DON'T BELIEVE IT WAS AN ACCIDENT.



AFTER I HAD MADE THE FIVE-HOUR DRIVE HOME FROM COLLEGE AND EVERYONE ELSE HAD GONE TO BED, MOM AND I DISCUSSED IT.



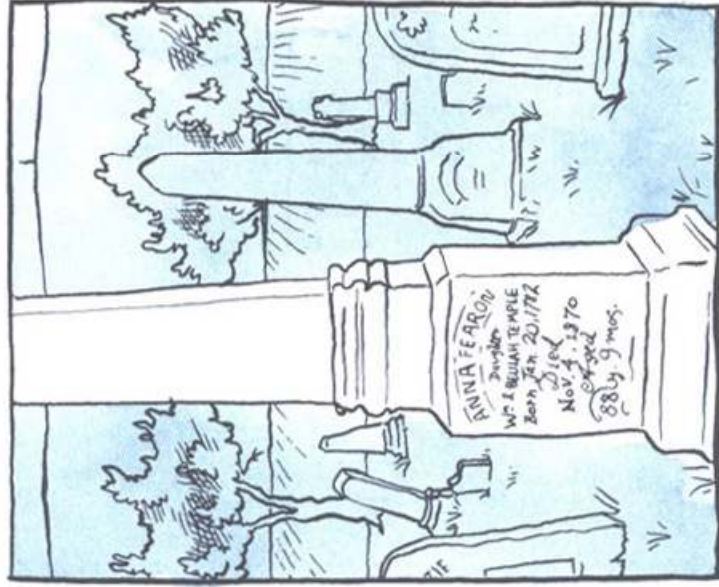
HIS HEADSTONE IS AN OBELISK, A STRIKING ANACHRONISM AMONG THE UNGAINLY GRANITE SLABS IN THE NEW END OF THE CEMETERY.



HE HAD AN OBELISK COLLECTION, IN FACT, AND HIS PRIZE SPECIMEN WAS ONE IN KNEE-HIGH JADE THAT PROPPED OPEN THE DOOR TO HIS LIBRARY.



HIS ULTIMATE OBELISK IS NOT CARVED FROM FLESHY, TRANSLUCENT MARBLE LIKE THE TOMBSTONES IN THE OLD PART OF THE CEMETERY.



MOM COULDN'T CONVINCe THE MONUMENT MAKER TO DO IT.

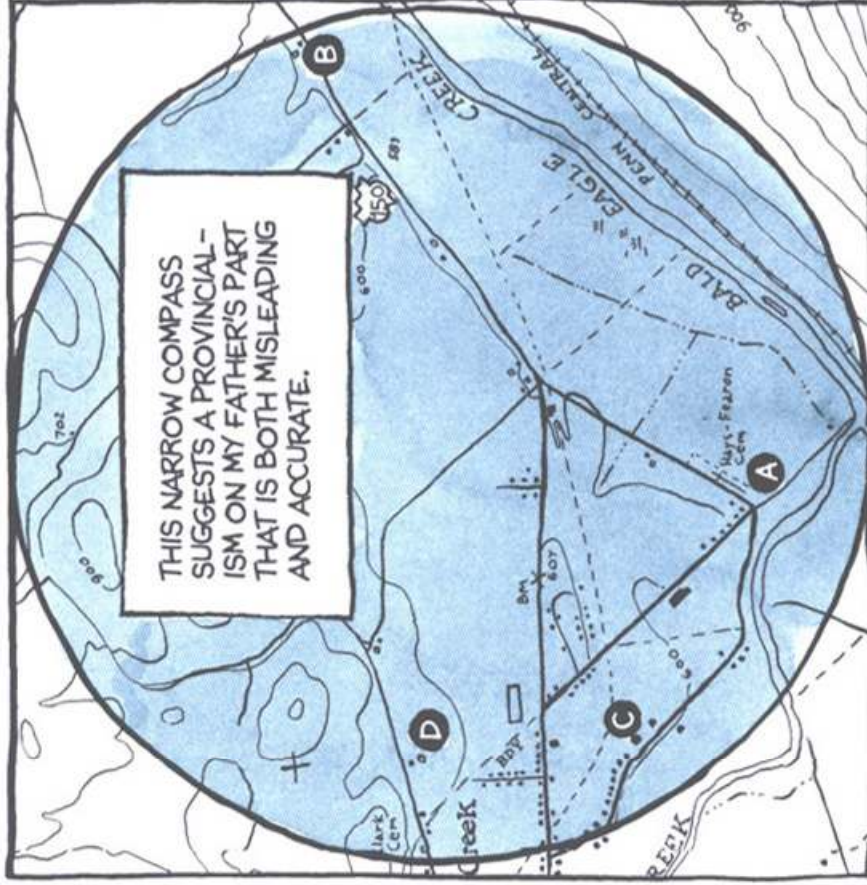


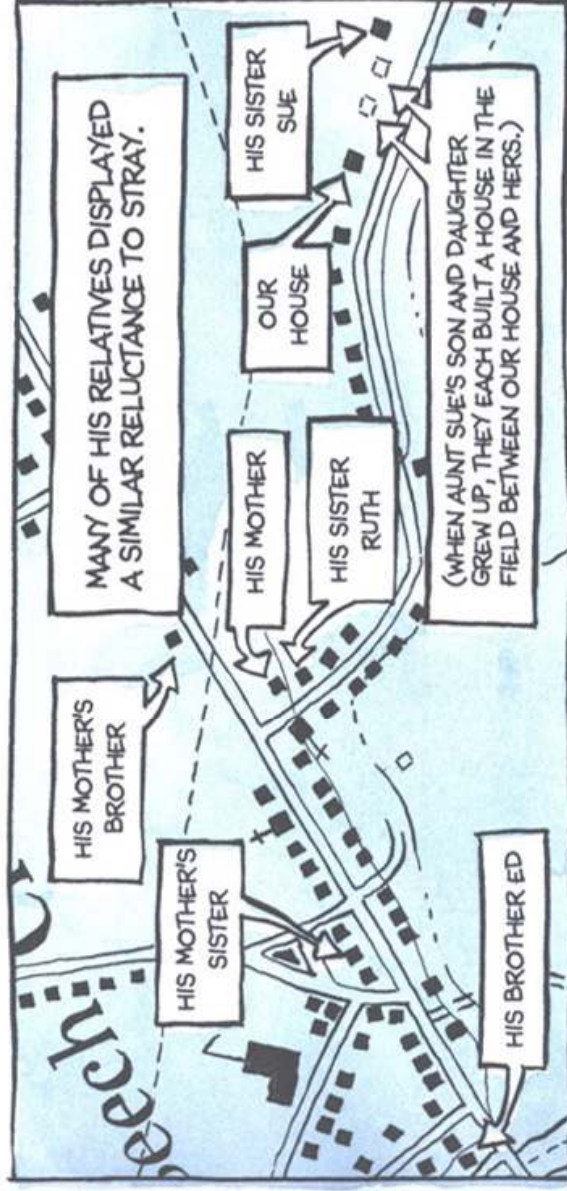
THE GRANITE IS HANDSOME, CRISP... AND, WELL, LIFELESS.



ON A MAP OF MY HOMETOWN, A CIRCLE A MILE AND A HALF IN DIAMETER CIRCUMSCRIBES:

- (A) DAD'S GRAVE,
- (B) THE SPOT ON ROUTE 150 WHERE HE DIED, NEAR AN OLD FARMHOUSE HE WAS RESTORING,
- (C) THE HOUSE WHERE HE AND MY MOTHER RAISED OUR FAMILY, AND
- (D) THE FARM WHERE HE WAS BORN.





BUT IT'S PUZZLING WHY MY URBANE FATHER, WITH HIS UNWHOLESOME INTEREST IN THE DECORATIVE ARTS, REMAINED IN THIS PROVINCIAL HAMLET.

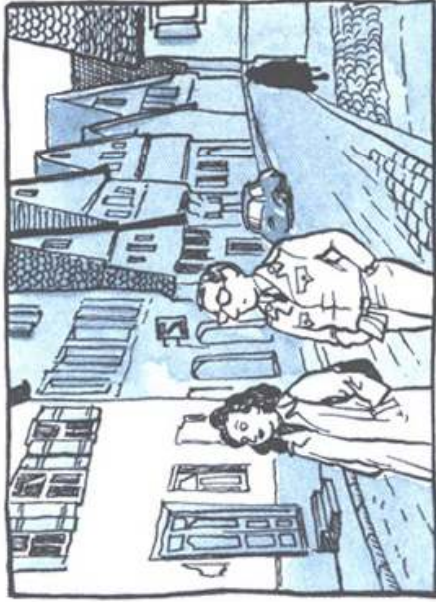
AND WHY MY CULTURED MOTHER, WHO HAD STUDIED ACTING IN NEW YORK CITY, WOULD LIVE THERE CHEEK BY JOWL WITH HIS FAMILY IS MORE PUZZLING STILL.



IT WAS MADE CLEAR THAT MY BROTHERS AND I WOULD NOT REPEAT THEIR MISTAKE.



MY PARENTS HAD IN FACT GOTTEN AS FAR AS EUROPE, WHERE MY FATHER WAS STATIONED IN THE ARMY. MOM FLEW THERE TO MARRY HIM.



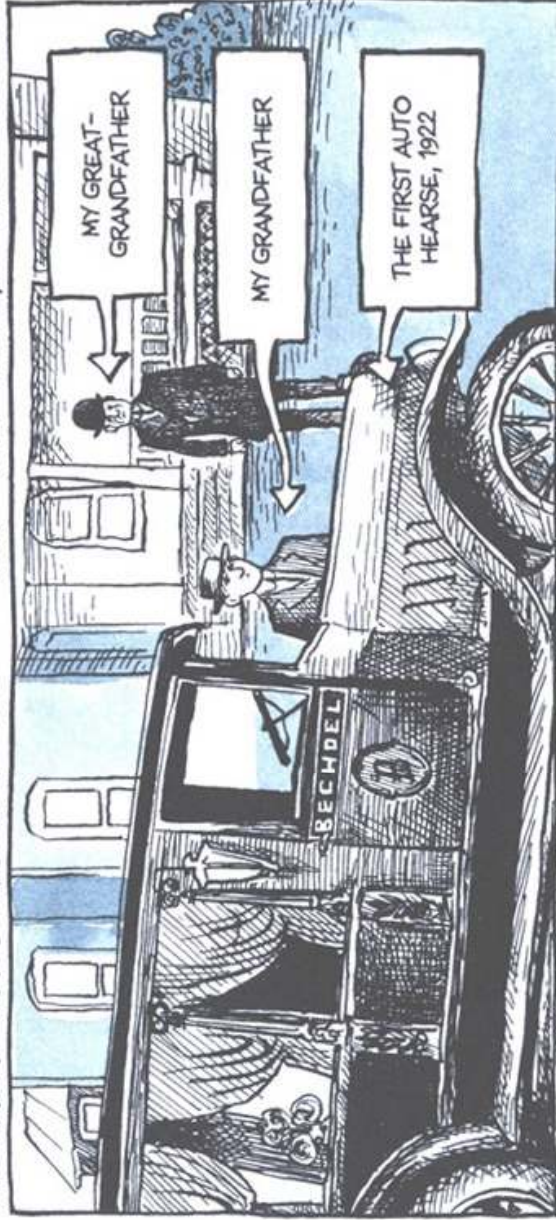
THEY LIVED IN WEST GERMANY FOR ALMOST A YEAR DURING DAD'S SERVICE, IN SOME DEGREE OF EXPATRIATE SPLENDOR.



BUT THEN, THE STORY GOES, MY GRANDFATHER HAD A HEART ATTACK AND DAD HAD TO GO HOME AND RUN THE FAMILY BUSINESS.



THIS WAS A FUNERAL PARLOR BEGUN BY MY GREAT-GRANDFATHER, EDGAR T. BECHDEL.



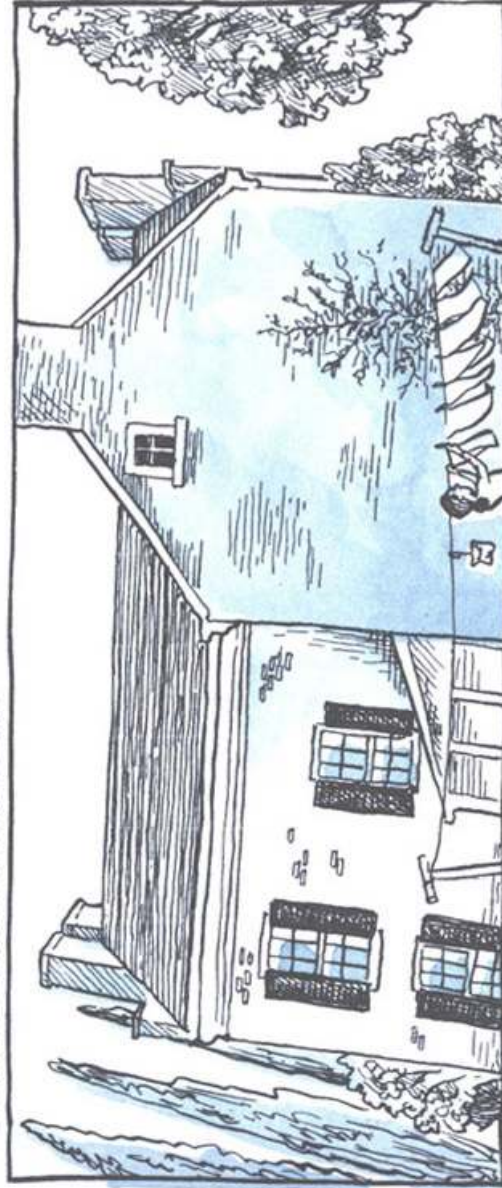
THE CHANGE IN PLANS WAS A CRUEL BLOW. I WAS BORN SOON AFTER THEY GOT BACK.



FOR A SHORT TIME WE ALL LIVED WITH MY GRANDMOTHER AND AILING GRANDFATHER AT THE FUNERAL HOME.



LESS THAN A YEAR LATER, WE MOVED TO A RENTED FEDERAL-STYLE FARMHOUSE AND MY BROTHER CHRISTIAN WAS BORN.

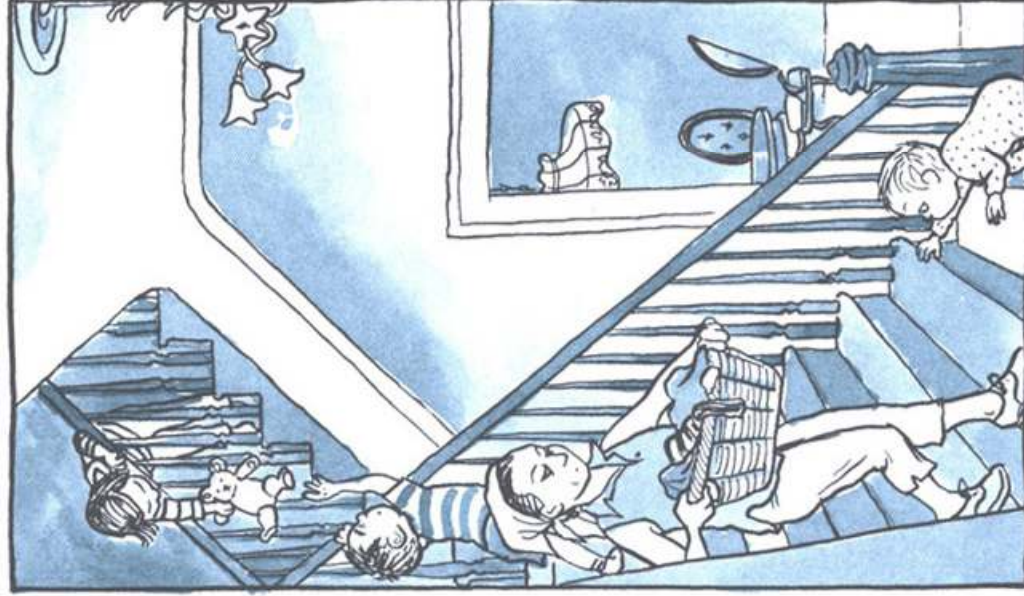


DAD STARTED TEACHING HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH. FUNERAL DIRECTING PROVIDED ONLY A PART-TIME INCOME IN OUR THINLY POPULATED REGION.





BY THE TIME WE MOVED TO THE GOTHIC REVIVAL HOUSE AND JOHN WAS BORN, EUROPE HAD DISAPPEARED FROM MY PARENTS' HORIZON.



IT WAS SOMEWHERE DURING THOSE EARLY YEARS THAT I BEGAN CONFUSING US WITH THE ADDAMS FAMILY.



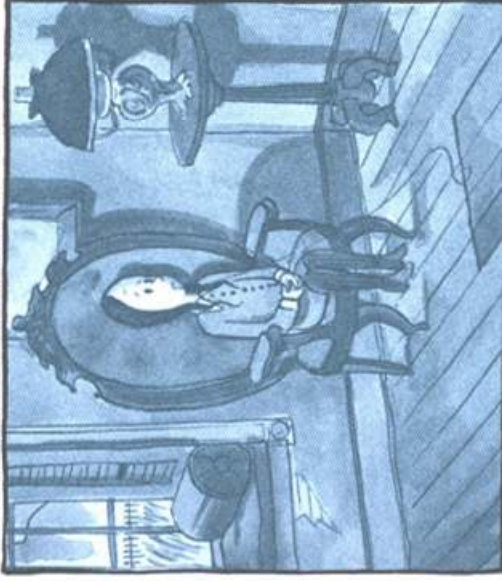
LONG BEFORE I COULD READ, I WOULD PUZZLE OVER A BOOK OF ADDAMS CARTOONS.

THE CAPTIONS ELUDED ME, AS DID THE IRONIC REVERSAL OF SUBURBAN CONFORMITY. HERE WERE THE FAMILIAR DARK, LOFTY CEILINGS, PEELING WALLPAPER, AND MENACING HORSEHAIR FURNISHINGS OF MY OWN HOME.



IN ONE OCCULT AND WORDLESS CARTOON...

...A WORRIED GIRL HAD A STRING RUNNING FROM HER MOUTH TO A TRAP DOOR.



WEARING A BLACK VELVET DRESS MY FATHER HAD WRESTLED ME INTO, I APPEAR TO BE IN MOURNING.



THE LAMP NEXT TO HER LOOKED JUST LIKE MY LAMP. IN FACT, THE GIRL LOOKED JUST LIKE ME.

THE RESEMBLANCE IN MY FIRST-GRADE SCHOOL PHOTO IS EERIE.

MY MOTHER, WITH HER LUXURIANT BLACK HAIR AND PALE SKIN, BORE A MORE THAN PASSING LIKENESS TO MORTICIA.



I TOLD YOU, I'M A VAMPIRE.

MOM, HOW COME YOU NEVER GO OUTSIDE?

AND ON WARM SUMMER NIGHTS, IT WAS NOT UNUSUAL FOR A BAT TO SWOOP THROUGH OUR LIVING ROOM.



BUT WHAT GAVE THE COMPARISON REAL WEIGHT WAS THE FAMILY BUSINESS...



...AND THE CAVALIER ATTITUDE WHICH, INEVITABLY, WE CAME TO TAKE TOWARD IT.



CAN I GET IN?

THE "FUN HOME," AS WE CALLED IT, WAS UP ON MAIN STREET.



MY GRANDMOTHER LIVED IN THE FRONT. THE BUSINESS WAS IN THE BACK.



I REMEMBER SEEING MY GRANDFATHER LAID OUT THERE WHEN I WAS THREE. PEOPLE WERE AMUSED BY WHAT SEEMED TO ME A REASONABLE ENOUGH REQUEST.



MY FATHER HAD BEEN GIVEN A FREE HAND WITH THE INTERIOR DECORATION OF THE VIEWING AREA, AND THE ROOMS WERE HUNG WITH DARK VELVET DRAPERY. THIS ENSURED A SOMBER MOOD ON THE SUNNIEST OF DAYS.

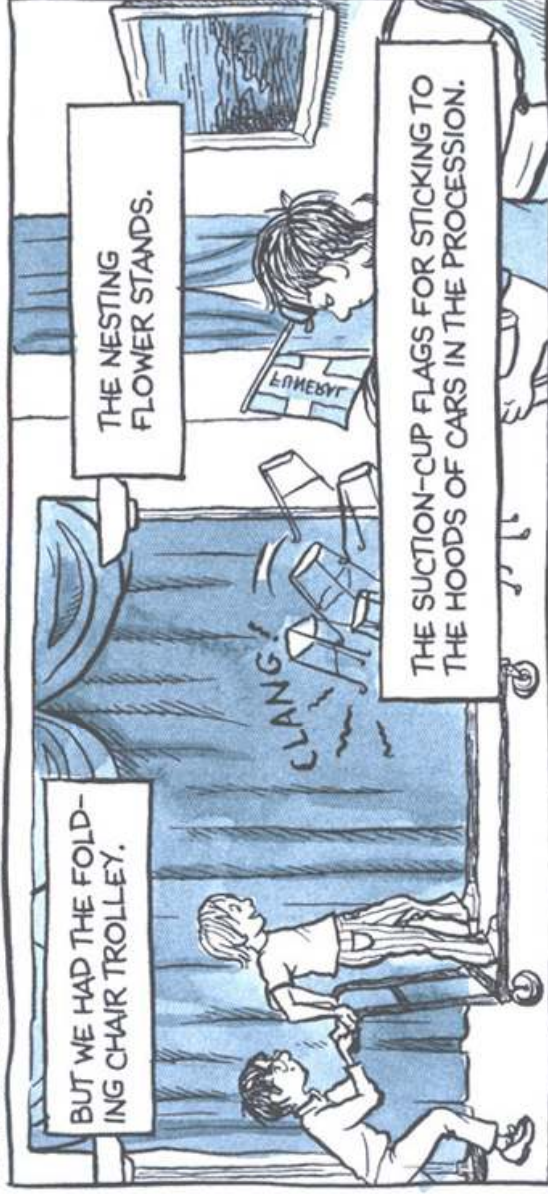


THERE WAS A MINIMUM OF FURNITURE, AND A VAST EXPANSE OF TEXTURED, OLIVE WALL-TO-WALL CARPETING.

MY BROTHERS AND I HAD LOTS OF CHORES AT THE FUN HOME, BUT ALSO MANY INTERESTING OPPORTUNITIES FOR PLAY.



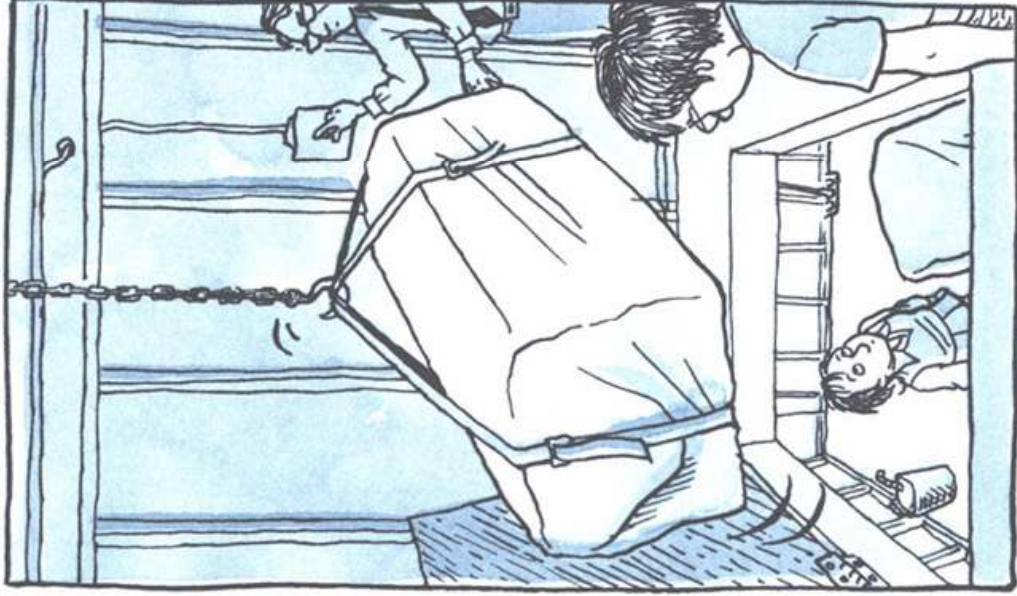
WE WERE STRICTLY FORBIDDEN TO CLIMB INTO THE CASKETS.



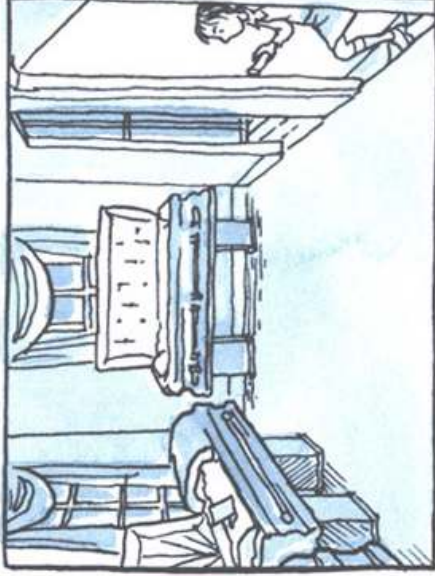
AND THE CRUSHABLE CAPSULES FILLED WITH SMELLING SALTS.



WHEN A NEW SHIPMENT OF CASKETS CAME IN, WE'D LIFT THEM WITH A WINCH TO THE SHOWROOM ON THE SECOND FLOOR OF THE GARAGE.



THOUGH THERE WERE NEVER ANY DEAD PEOPLE IN THE SHOWROOM, IT HAD THE OTHERWORLDLY AMBIENCE OF A MAUSOLEUM.



IT WAS USUALLY AFTER SCHOOL, IN A MELANCHOLY, FADING LIGHT, THAT WE FOUND OURSELVES UP THERE UNWRAPPING CASKETS.

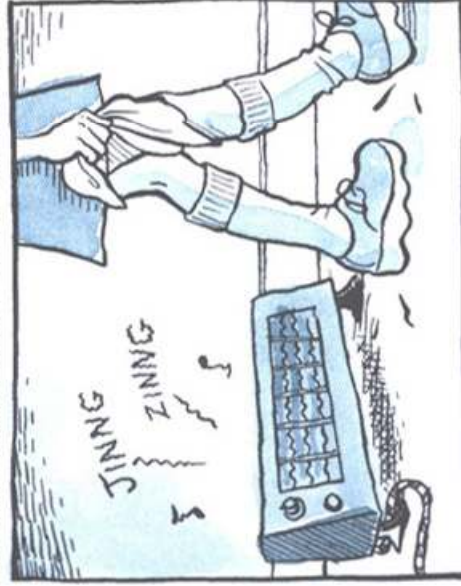


A RICH SCENT OF CEDAR HUNG IN THE AIR.

MORE VELVET DRAPES MUFFLED ANY SOUNDS FROM OUTSIDE AND HEIGHTENED THE SENSATION THAT TIME WAS AT A STANDSTILL.



LIKE A MEDIUM CHANNELING LOST SOULS,  
THE FILAMENT OF A SPACE HEATER  
VIBRATED TUNELESSLY TO OUR FOOTFALLS.



ON THE OTHER HAND, IT WAS NOT  
PARTICULARLY SCARY TO SPEND THE NIGHT  
IN THE FUNERAL HOME PROPER, EVEN  
WHEN WE HAD A DEAD PERSON.



IT WASN'T THE SORT OF PLACE YOU WANTED  
TO BE ALONE IN.



MY BROTHERS AND I OFTEN SLEPT THERE  
WITH MY GRANDMOTHER.



TO QUIET US DOWN, GRAMMY WOULD LET US SWEEP THE CEILING  
WITH THE BEAM OF HER FLASHLIGHT IN SEARCH OF BUGS.



WHEN WE  
SPOTTED ONE,  
SHE WOULD  
DECLARE IT TO  
BE EITHER A  
"PISS-ANT" OR AN  
"ANTIE-MIRE"!--  
A TAXONOMIC  
DIFFERENTIATION  
I WAS NEVER  
CLEAR ON--AND  
SQUASH IT WITH A  
RAG ON THE END  
OF A BROOM.

AFTER THIS, WE WOULD  
BEG HER TO TELL US A  
STORY.

THE STORY, I SHOULD  
SAY, BECAUSE THERE  
WAS ONE TALE THAT  
HELD US IN SUCH  
THRALL THAT THE REST  
OF MY GRANDMOTHER'S  
REPERTOIRE--HER  
STILLBORN TWINS, THE  
TIME MY AUNT HAD  
WORMS--PALED  
BEFORE IT.

TELL US  
THE STORY OF WHEN  
DAD GOT STUCK IN  
THE MUD!

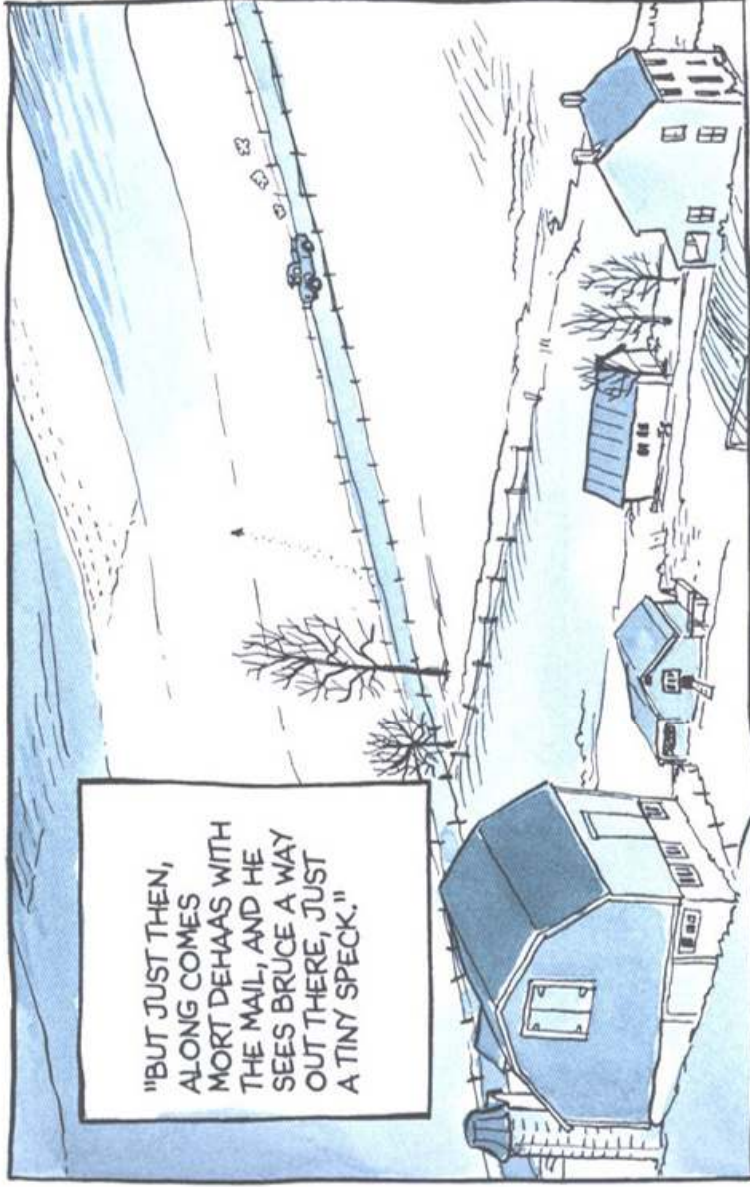
ALL RIGHT.  
SETTLE DOWN,  
NOW.

WUNST UPON A TIME,  
WHEN YOUR DADDY WAS A LITTLE  
BOY, HE WANDERED OFF.

"HE WAS LITTLER THAN YOU, JOHN, NO  
MORE THAN THREE. IT WAS SPRINGTIME."

"THE FIELDS WAS JUST PLOWED, AND BRUCE LIT OUT ACROSS ONE. IT WAS THAT WET,  
PRETTY SOON HE COULDN'T LIFT HIS LITTLE LEGS OUT OF THE MUD!"





"HE GAVE HIM A YANK, AND HE WAS THAT STUCK, HIS OVERSHOES COME OFF!"





"HE BRUNG YOUR DADDY INTO THE KITCHEN IN HIS STOCKING FEET, AND I UNDRESSED HIM RIGHT THERE."



AND HERE THE STORY REACHED ITS BIZARRE, GRIMMSIAN CLIMAX.



SHE WAS REFERRING, OF COURSE, TO A COOK-STOVE.

BUT ALL WE COULD ENVISION WAS THE MODERN OVEN SHE HAD NOW, WITH ITS RED-HOT ELEMENTS.

THE TALE WAS ENDLESSLY COMPELLING.



BY DAY, IT WAS DIFFICULT TO IMAGINE DAD EVER HELPLESS, NAKED, OR TRUSSSED UP IN THE OVEN.



THOUGH THE WAY GRAMMY HELPED HIM  
TIE HIS SURGICAL GOWN IN BACK WAS  
EVOCATIVE.

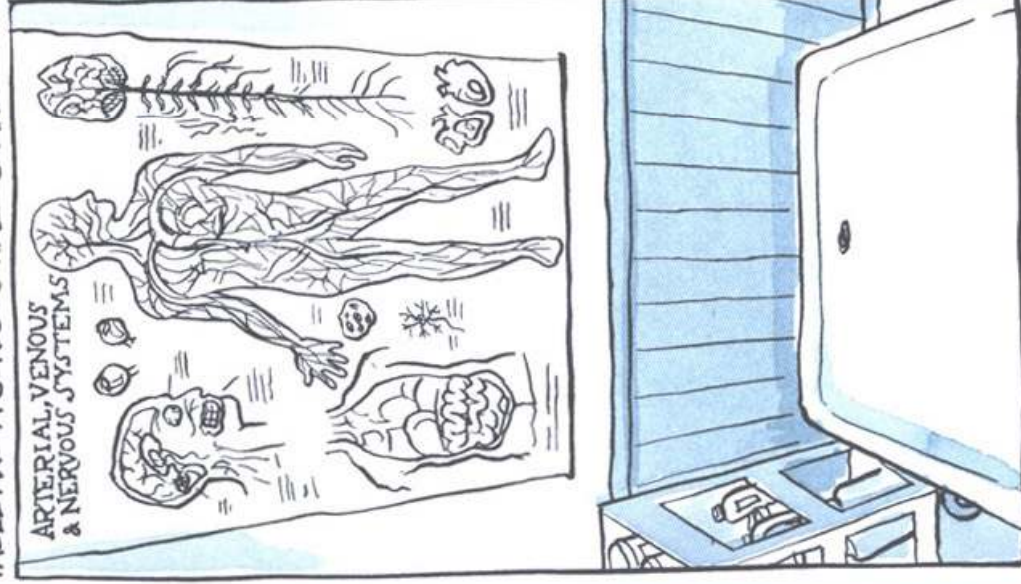
DO IT, OR I'LL GIVE  
YOU SOMETHING TO  
WHINE ABOUT.



DAD WORKED BACK IN THE INNER  
SANCTUM, THE EMBALMING ROOM.



THIS SMELLED OF BACTERICIDAL SOAP  
AND EMBALMING FLUID. IT WAS DOM-  
INATED BY A PORCELAIN ENAMEL PREP  
TABLE AND A CURIOUS WALL CHART.



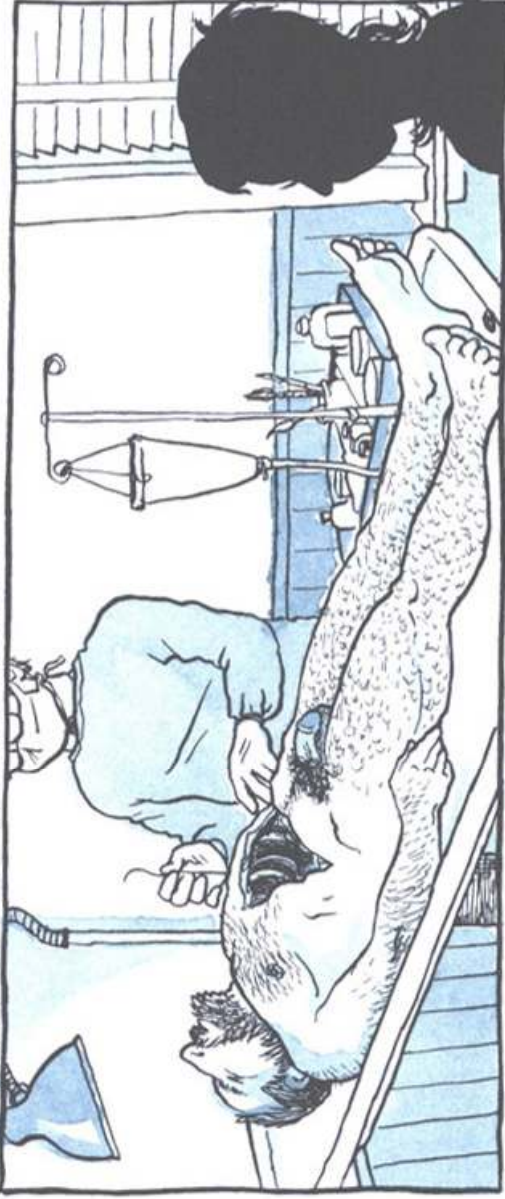
I DIDN'T NORMALLY SEE THE  
BODIES BEFORE THEY WERE  
DRESSED AND IN A CASKET.

ALISON!

BUT ONE DAY DAD  
CALLED ME BACK  
THERE.



THE MAN ON THE PREP TABLE WAS BEARDED AND FLESHY, JARRINGLY UNLIKE DAD'S USUAL TRAFFIC OF DESSICATED OLD PEOPLE.



THE STRANGE PILE OF HIS GENITALS WAS SHOCKING, BUT WHAT REALLY GOT MY ATTENTION WAS HIS CHEST, SPLIT OPEN TO A DARK RED CAVE.



IT FELT LIKE A TEST. MAYBE THIS WAS THE SAME OFFHANDED WAY HIS OWN NOTORIOUSLY COLD FATHER HAD SHOWN HIM **HIS** FIRST CADAVER.



THERE WAS SOME PRACTICAL EXCHANGE WITH MY FATHER DURING WHICH I STUDIOUSLY BETRAYED NO EMOTION.



OR MAYBE HE FELT THAT HE'D BECOME TOO INURED TO DEATH, AND WAS HOPING TO ELICIT FROM ME AN EXPRESSION OF THE NATURAL HORROR HE WAS NO LONGER CAPABLE OF.



OR MAYBE HE JUST NEEDED THE SCISSORS.



I HAVE MADE USE OF THE FORMER TECHNIQUE MYSELF, HOWEVER, THIS ATTEMPT TO ACCESS EMOTION VICARIOUSLY.



FOR YEARS AFTER MY FATHER'S DEATH, WHEN THE SUBJECT OF PARENTS CAME UP IN CONVERSATION I WOULD RELATE THE INFORMATION IN A FLAT, MATTER-OF-FACT TONE...



THE EMOTION I HAD SUPPRESSED FOR THE Gaping CADAVER SEEMED TO STAY SUPPRESSED.



EVEN WHEN IT WAS DAD HIMSELF ON THE PREP TABLE.



I WAS AWAY AT SCHOOL THAT SUMMER, GENERATING BAR CODES FOR ALL THE BOOKS IN THE COLLEGE LIBRARY.

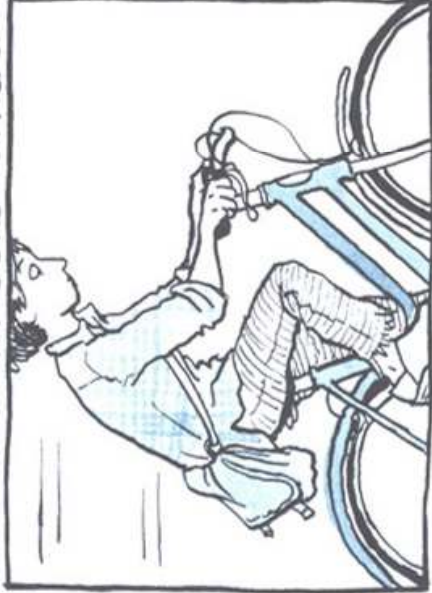


I HAVE TO GO HOME. MY FATHER GOT HIT BY A TRUCK.



UMM...

I BICYCLED BACK TO MY APARTMENT, MARVELING AT THE DISSONANCE BETWEEN THIS APPARENTLY CAREFREE ACTIVITY AND MY NEWLY TRAGIC CIRCUMSTANCES.

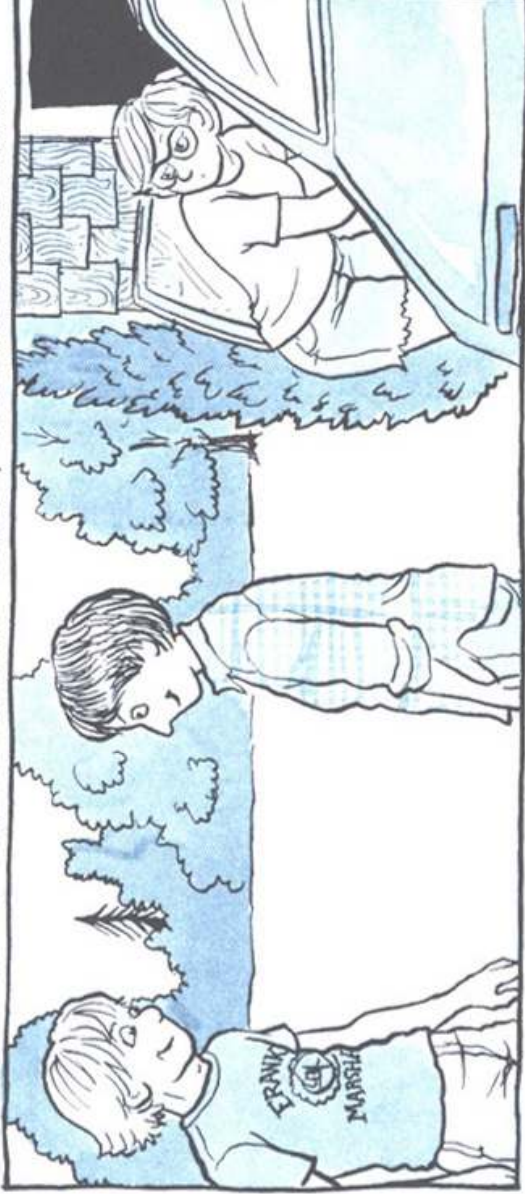


AS I TOLD MY GIRLFRIEND WHAT HAD HAPPENED, I CRIED QUITE GENUINELY FOR ABOUT TWO MINUTES.



THAT WAS ALL.

JOAN DROVE HOME WITH ME AND WE ARRIVED THAT EVENING. MY LITTLE BROTHER JOHN AND I GREETED EACH OTHER WITH GHASTLY, UNCONTROLLABLE GRINS.



IT COULD BE ARGUED THAT DEATH IS INHERENTLY ABSURD, AND THAT GRINNING IS NOT NECESSARILY AN INAPPROPRIATE RESPONSE. I MEAN ABSURD IN THE SENSE OF RIDICULOUS, UNREASONABLE. ONE SECOND A PERSON IS THERE, THE NEXT THEY'RE NOT.



THOUGH PERHAPS CAMUS' DEFINITION OF THE ABSURD-- THAT THE UNIVERSE IS IRRATIONAL AND HUMAN LIFE MEANINGLESS--APPLIES HERE AS WELL.



IN COLLEGE, I NEEDED THE MYTH OF SISYPHUS FOR A CLASS. DAD OFFERED TO SEND ME HIS OLD COPY, BUT I RESISTED HIS INTERFERENCE.



I WISH I COULD SAY I'D ACCEPTED HIS BOOK, THAT I STILL HAD IT, THAT HE'D UNDERLINED ONE PARTICULAR PASSAGE.

longing for death.

The subject of this essay is precisely this relationship between the absurd and suicide, the exact degree to which suicide is a solution to the absurd. The principle can be established that for a man who does not cheat, what he believes to be true must determine his action. Belief in the absurdity of existence must then dictate his conduct. It is legitimate to wonder, clearly and without false pathos, whether a conclusion of this importance requires forsaking as rapidly as possible an incomprehensible condition. I am

IT'S NOT THAT I THINK HE KILLED HIMSELF OUT OF EXISTENTIALIST CONVICTION. FOR ONE THING, IF HE'D READ CAREFULLY, HE WOULD HAVE GOTTEN TO CAMUS' CONCLUSION THAT SUICIDE IS ILLOGICAL.

BUT I SUSPECT MY FATHER OF BEING A HAPHAZARD SCHOLAR.



A SNAPSHOT OF HIM IN A FRAT BROTHER'S SPORTS CAR REMINDS ME OF CARTIER-BRESSON'S PHOTOS OF CAMUS.



MAYBE IT'S JUST THE CIGARETTE. IN EVERY PHOTO I'VE SEEN OF CAMUS, THERE'S A BUTT DANGLING FROM HIS GALLIC LIP.



TO BE FAIR, EVERYONE SMOKED THEN.

BUT CAMUS' LUNGS WERE FULL OF HOLES FROM TUBERCULOSIS. WHO WAS HE TO CAST LOGICAL ASPERSIONS AT SUICIDE?



HE COULDN'T HAVE LASTED MUCH LONGER EVEN IF HE HADN'T DIED IN A CAR CRASH AT FORTY-SIX.

CAMUS WAS KNOWN TO HAVE SAID TO HIS FRIENDS ON VARIOUS OCCASIONS THAT DYING IN A CAR ACCIDENT WOULD BE *UNE MORT IMBÉCILE*.

IN JANUARY OF 1960, THE SPORTS CAR HE WAS RIDING IN CAROMED OFF ONE PLANE TREE AND WRAPPED AROUND ANOTHER.



MY PARENTS WERE STILL IN EUROPE.

CAMUS ALSO SAID, IN THE MYTH OF *SISYPHUS*, THAT WE ALL LIVE AS IF WE DON'T KNOW WE'RE GOING TO DIE.

BUT THEN, HE WASN'T A MORTICIAN.

Yet one will never be sufficiently surprised that everyone lives as if no one "knew." This is because in reality there is no experience of death. Properly speaking, nothing has been experienced but what has been lived and made conscious. Here, it is barely possible to speak of the experience of others' deaths. It is a substitute, and illusion, and it never quite convinces us. That melancholy convention cannot be persuasive. The horror comes in reality from the mathematical aspect of the event. If time



I SUSPECT THAT FOR MY FATHER, DEATH WAS ALL TOO CONVINCING.

IN THE LETTERS HE SENT ME AT COLLEGE, SOMETIMES HE SEEMED THE PERFECT ABSURD HERO, SISYPHUS SHOULDERING HIS BOULDER WITH DETACHED JOY.

The weekend was of little consequence entertainmentwise. I was called at 3:30 AM for Fay Murray's death. That shot that Friday Saturday. Some highlights of my work her yellow lace bikini rose-embroidered panties. Her died red hair after three months of hospitalization her hairdresser and her hairpieces. Her bitter green velvet jumpsuit with gold sequined trim and plunging neckline. Well I did my best with red lips, green eyeshadow, lots of rouge and eyebrow pencil and low and behold there lay Fay. She had lovely flawlessly smooth skin. Everyone was pleased and you would never have guessed she was seventy.

OTHER TIMES, HE WAS DESPAIRING.

*Claude M. Bechtel Funeral Home*

*Telephone 717-932-2727*

*East Coast, Pennsylvania 16912*

*Dorothy E. Bechtel*

*Daughter of Bechtel*

Dear Al-

Sunday 9-24-77

I'm at fun home, tending local tragedy. Beautiful girl, 38, wrapped her car around one of those big trees in the Rupert's front yard. Worked eighteen hours yesterday. Now I'm here fighting off the ghouls - it's bad for my blood pressure.

I DON'T HAVE ANY LETTERS ABOUT THE SUICIDES HE DEALT WITH, LIKE THE LOCAL DOCTOR WHO SHOT HIMSELF A FEW MONTHS BEFORE DAD'S OWN DEATH.





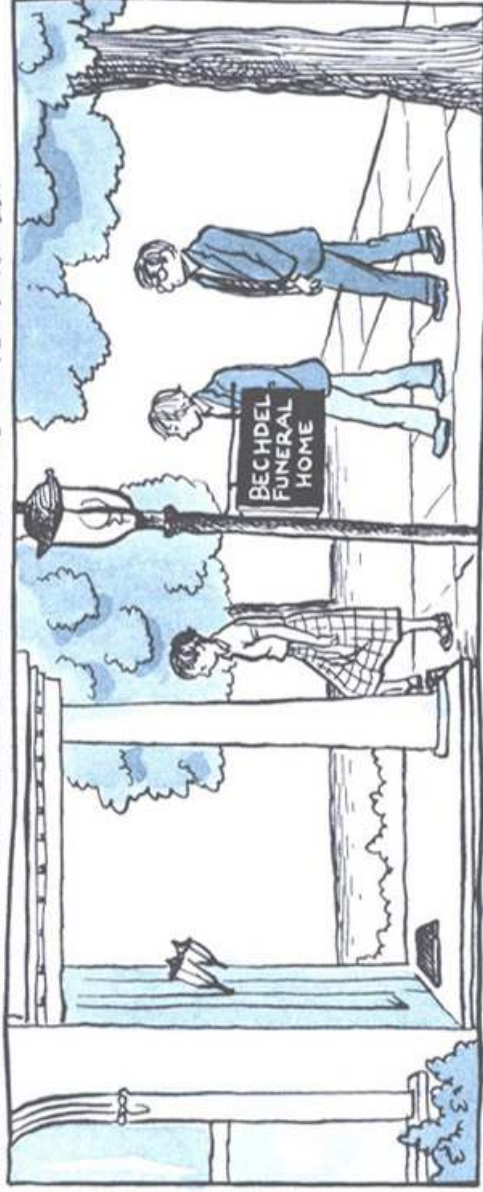
YOU WOULD ALSO THINK THAT A CHILDHOOD SPENT IN SUCH CLOSE PROXIMITY TO THE WORKDAY INCIDENTALS OF DEATH WOULD BE GOOD PREPARATION.



THAT WHEN SOMEONE YOU KNEW ACTUALLY DIED, MAYBE YOU'D GET TO SKIP A PHASE OR TWO OF THE GRIEVING PROCESS--"DENIAL" AND "ANGER," FOR EXAMPLE--

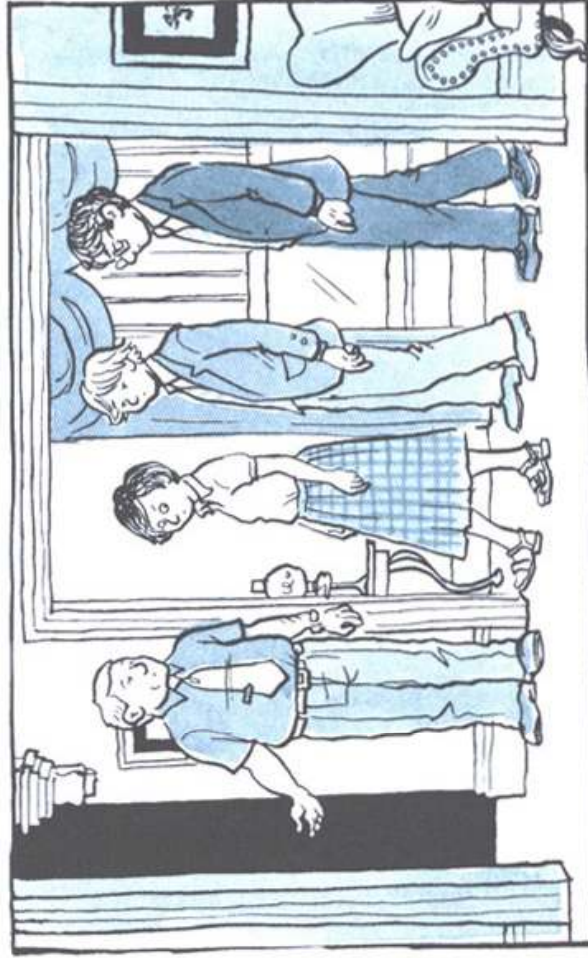


BUT IN FACT, ALL THE YEARS SPENT VISITING GRAVEDIGGERS, JOKING WITH BURIAL-Vault SALESMEN, AND TEASING MY BROTHERS WITH CRUSHED VIALS OF SMELLING SALTS ONLY MADE MY OWN FATHER'S DEATH MORE INCOMPREHENSIBLE.

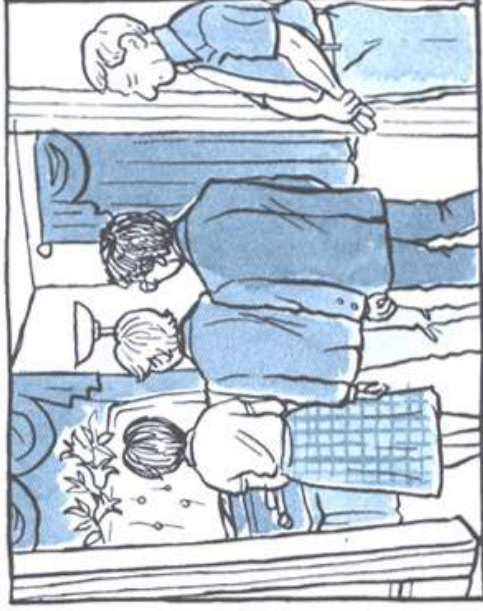


WHO  
EMBALMS THE  
UNDERTAKER  
WHEN HE  
DIES?

IT WAS LIKE  
RUSSELL'S  
PARADOX...



...THE FAMOUS CONUNDRUM OF THE CLEAN-  
SHAVEN BARBER WHOSE SIGN READS, "I  
SHAVE ALL THOSE MEN, AND ONLY THOSE  
MEN, WHO DO NOT SHAVE THEMSELVES."



THE BARBER, EQUALLY UNABLE TO SHAVE  
HIMSELF, AND TO NOT SHAVE HIMSELF, IS  
IMPOSSIBLE.

YET SOMEHOW, THERE HE IS.



MY FATHER COULD HAVE USED A BARBER. HIS FACE WAS ROUGH AND  
DRY, SCRAPED CLEAN WITH NO HELP FROM THE EXPENSIVE LOTIONS  
AND AFTERSHAVES ON THE SILVER TRAY IN HIS BATHROOM AT HOME.

HIS WIRY HAIR, WHICH HE HAD DAILY TAKEN GREAT PAINS TO STYLE, WAS BRUSHED STRAIGHT UP ON END AND REVEALED A SURPRISINGLY RECEDED HAIRLINE.



I WASN'T EVEN SURE IT WAS HIM UNTIL I FOUND THE TINY BLUE TATTOO ON HIS KNUCKLE WHERE HE'D ONCE BEEN ACCIDENTALLY STABBED WITH A PENCIL.



DRY-EYED AND SHEEPISH, MY BROTHERS AND I LOOKED FOR AS LONG AS WE SENSED IT WAS APPROPRIATE.



IF ONLY THEY MADE SMELLING SALTS TO INDUCE GRIEF-STRIKEN SWOONS, RATHER THAN SNAP YOU OUT OF THEM.



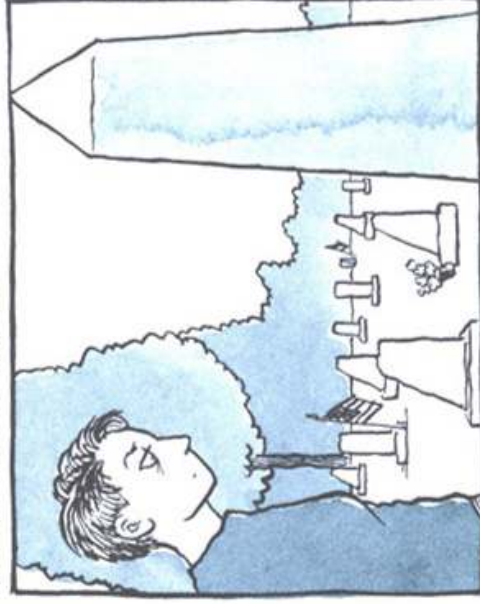
THE SOLE EMOTION I COULD MUSTER WAS IRRITATION, WHEN THE PINCH-FUNERAL DIRECTOR LAID HIS HAND ON MY ARM CONSOLINGLY.



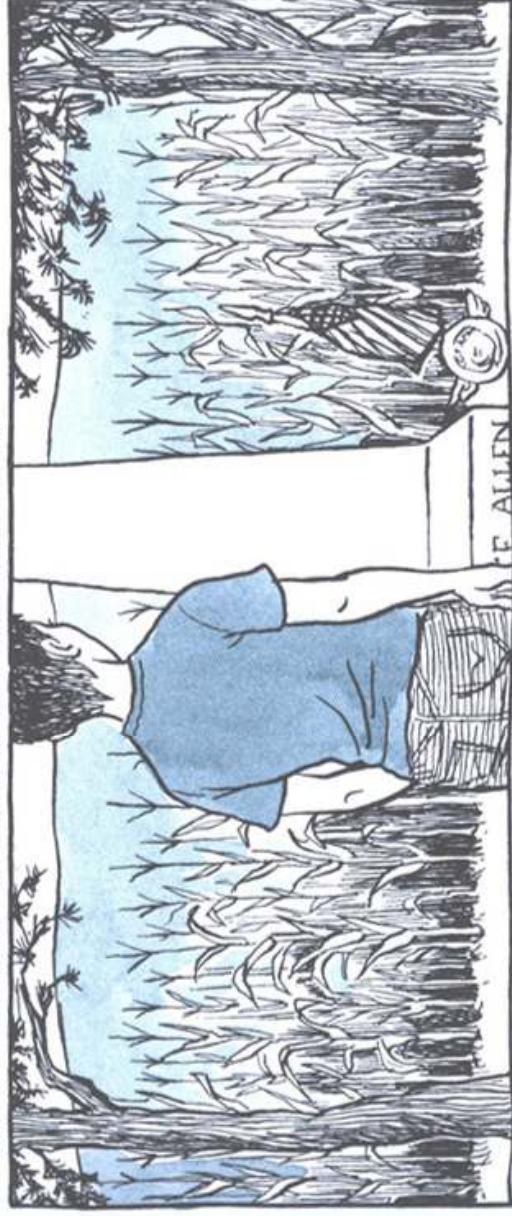
I SHOOK IT OFF WITH A VIOLENCE THAT WAS, IN FACT, RATHER CONSOLING.



THIS SAME IRRITATION WOULD OVERTAKE ME FOR YEARS AFTERWARD WHEN I VISITED DAD'S GRAVE.

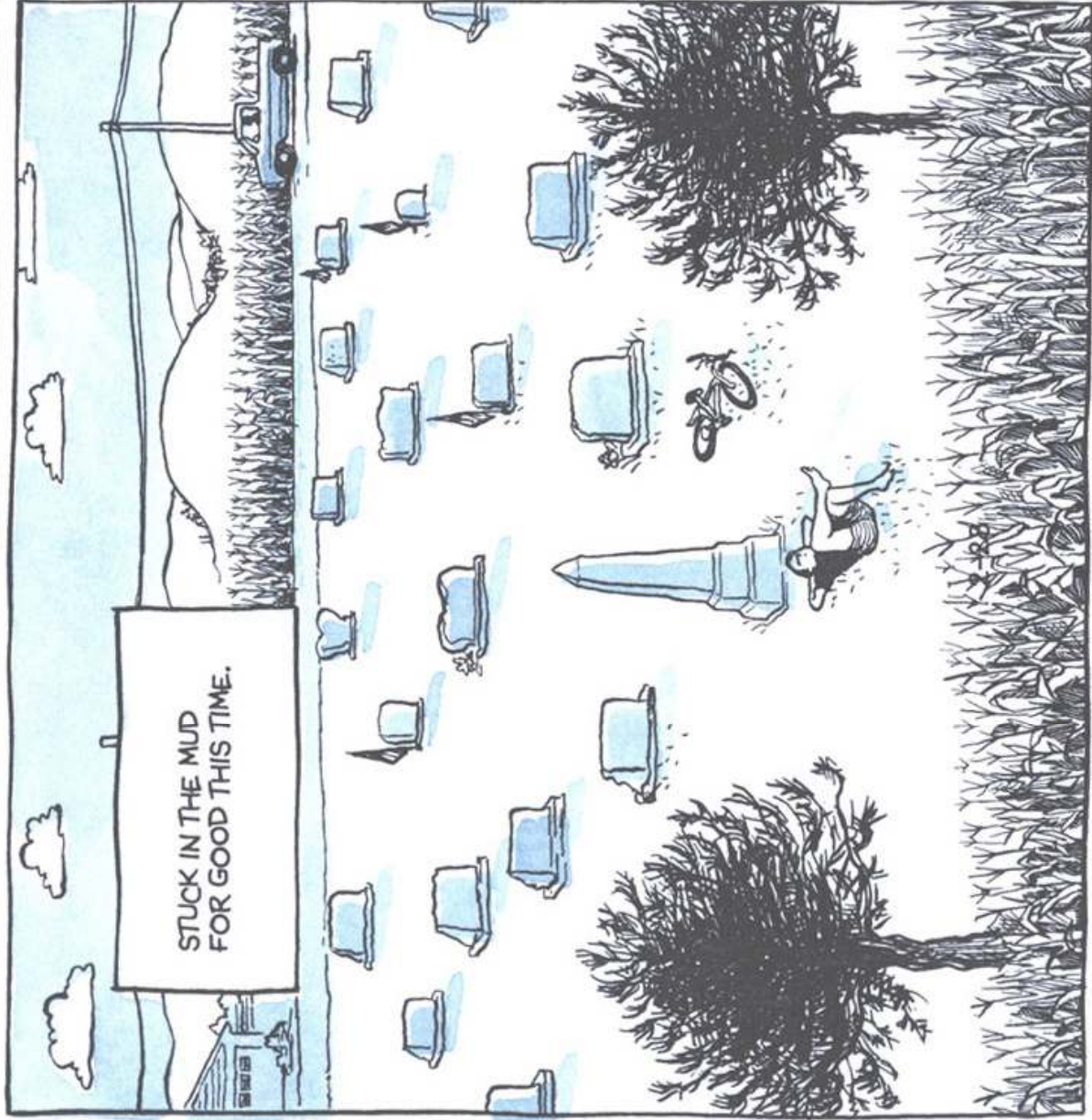


ON ONE OCCASION I FOUND IT DESECRATED WITH A CHEESY FLAG, PLACED THERE BY SOME WELL-MEANING ARMED SERVICES ORGANIZATION.



I JAVELINED THIS, UGLY BRASS HOLDER AND ALL, INTO THE CORNFIELD THAT IMMEDIATELY ADJOINS HIS PLOT AT THE EDGE OF THE CEMETERY.





## CHAPTER 3



**THAT OLD CATASTROPHE**

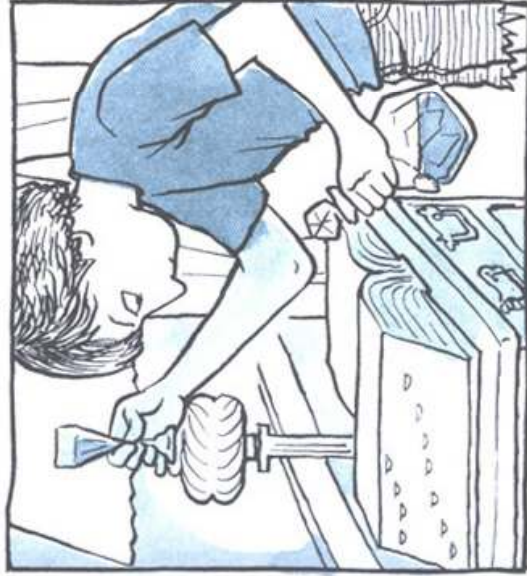
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MY FATHER'S DEATH WAS A QUEER BUSINESS--QUEER IN EVERY SENSE OF THAT MULTI-VALENT WORD.

IT WAS STRANGE, CERTAINLY, IN ITS DEVIATION FROM THE NORMAL COURSE OF THINGS. IT WAS SUSPICIOUS. PERHAPS EVEN COUNTERFEIT.

IT PUT MY FAMILY IN A BAD POSITION, IT THWARTED AND RUINED EACH OF US IN PARTICULAR WAYS.

IT LEFT ME FEELING QUALMISH, FAINT, AND, ON OCCASION, DRUNK.



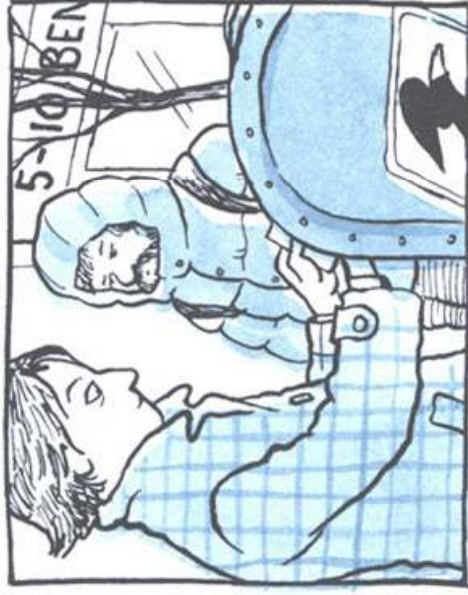
BUT MOST COMPELLINGLY AT THE TIME, HIS DEATH WAS BOUND UP FOR ME WITH THE ONE DEFINITION CONSPICUOUSLY MISSING FROM OUR MAMMOTH WEBSTER'S.



ONLY FOUR MONTHS EARLIER, I HAD MADE AN ANNOUNCEMENT TO MY PARENTS.



BUT IT WAS A HYPOTHESIS SO THOROUGH AND CONVINCING THAT I SAW NO REASON NOT TO SHARE IT IMMEDIATELY.



THEN A PHONE CALL IN WHICH SHE DEALT A STAGGERING BLOW.



MY HOMOSEXUALITY REMAINED AT THAT POINT PURELY THEORETICAL, AN UNTESTED HYPOTHESIS.



THE NEWS WAS NOT RECEIVED AS WELL AS I HAD HOPED. THERE WAS AN EXCHANGE OF DIFFICULT LETTERS WITH MY MOTHER.



IT'D BEEN UPSTAGED, DEMOTED FROM PROTAGONIST IN MY OWN DRAMA TO COMIC RELIEF IN MY PARENTS' TRAGEDY.



I HAD IMAGINED MY CONFESSION AS AN EMANCIPATION FROM MY PARENTS, BUT INSTEAD I WAS PULLED BACK INTO THEIR ORBIT.



AND WITH MY FATHER'S DEATH FOLLOWING SO HARD ON THE HEELS OF THIS DOLEFUL COMING-OUT PARTY, I COULD NOT HELP BUT ASSUME A CAUSE-AND-EFFECT RELATIONSHIP.

IF I HAD NOT FELT COMPELLED TO SHARE MY LITTLE SEXUAL DISCOVERY, PERHAPS THE SEMI WOULD HAVE PASSED WITHOUT INCIDENT FOUR MONTHS LATER.



WHY HAD I TOLD THEM? I HADN'T EVEN HAD SEX WITH ANYONE YET. CONVERSELY, MY FATHER HAD BEEN HAVING SEX WITH MEN FOR YEARS AND NOT TELLING ANYONE.



FOR ANYONE BUT THE LANDED GENTRY TO REFER TO A ROOM IN THEIR HOUSE AS "THE LIBRARY" MIGHT SEEM AFFECTED. BUT THERE REALLY WAS NO OTHER WORD FOR IT.



...DID THAT REQUIRE SUCH A LEAP OF THE IMAGINATION? PERHAPS AFFECTATION CAN BE SO THOROUGHGOING, SO AUTHENTIC IN ITS DETAILS, THAT IT STOPS BEING PRETENSE...



THE LIBRARY WAS A FANTASY, BUT A FULLY OPERATIONAL ONE.



VISITORS ALWAYS ASKED THE SAME QUESTION ABOUT THE MASSIVE WALNUT BOOKCASE.



PART OF DAD'S COUNTRY SQUIRE ROUTINE INVOLVED EDIFYING THE VILLAGERS--HIS MORE PROMISING HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS.



THE PROMISE WAS VERY LIKELY SEXUAL IN SOME CASES, BUT WHATEVER ELSE MIGHT HAVE BEEN GOING ON, BOOKS WERE BEING READ.



DAD WAS PASSIONATE ABOUT MANY WRITERS, BUT HE HAD A PARTICULAR REVERENCE FOR FITZGERALD.



MY MOTHER HAD SENT HIM A BIOGRAPHY OF FITZGERALD BEFORE THEY MARRIED, WHEN DAD WAS IN THE ARMY.

HE'D BEEN DRAFTED AFTER DROPPING OUT OF HIS GRADUATE ENGLISH PROGRAM, OVERWHELMED WITH THE WORKLOAD.

REFERENCES TO THE BIOGRAPHY CRYPT INTO HIS LETTERS TO HER.



*I'm getting deeper into Far Side. He reminds me more of myself, especially the old "emotional bankruptcy."*

THE TALES OF SCOTT AND ZELDA'S DRUNKEN, OUTRAGEOUS BEHAVIOR CAPTIVATED HIM.

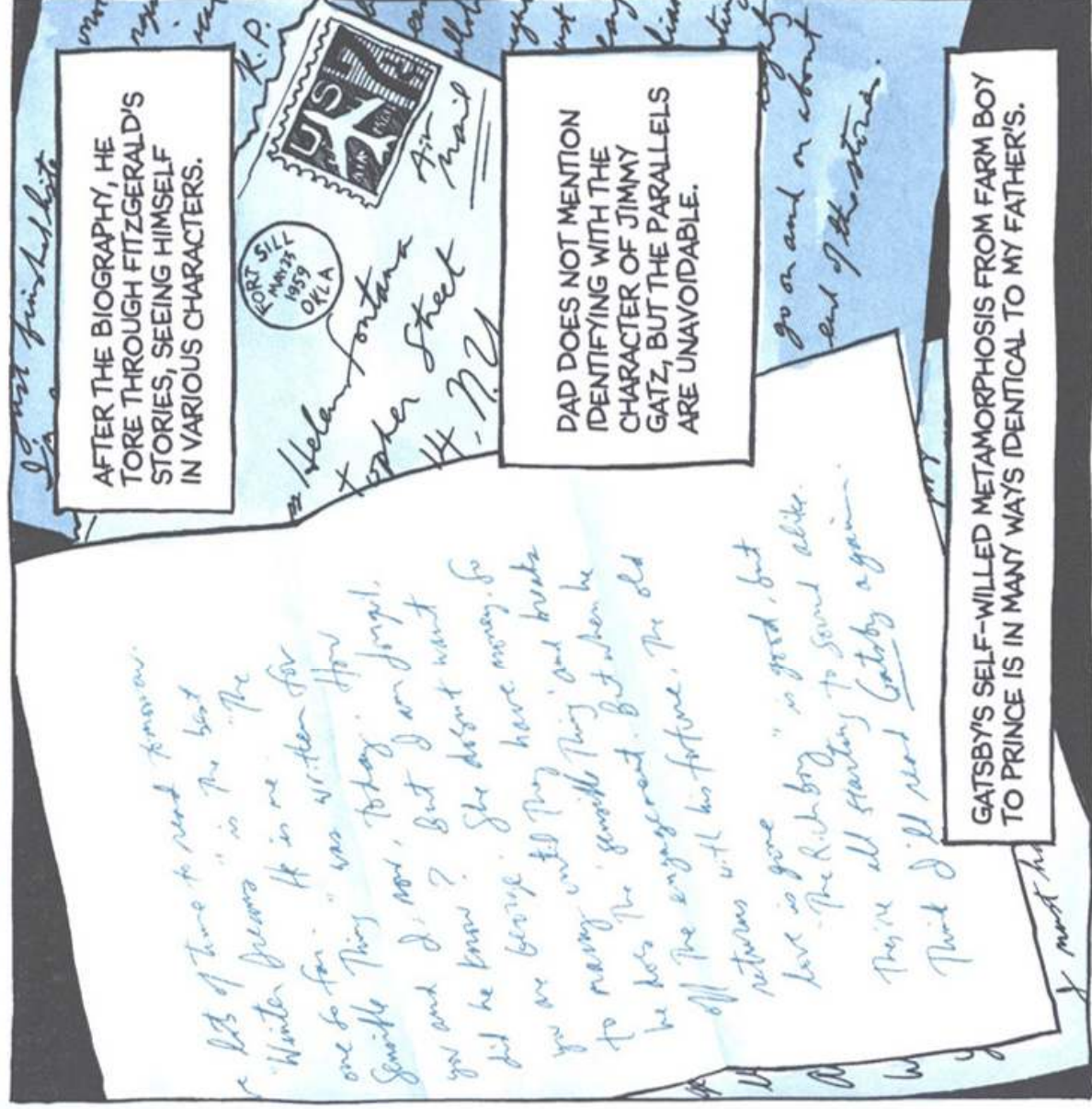
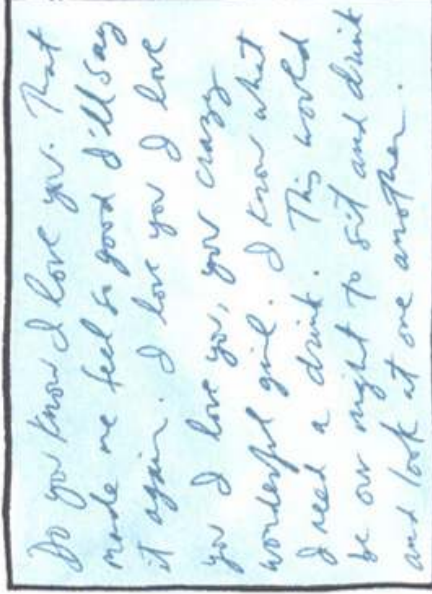
*You did those too. Think of such things? Putting garbage at the Murphy's garden party! They seem pathetic, fabulous, mediocre geniuses. No, not genius but talent. He had some drive that continued even through the tragedy. Poor, poor Zelda.*



IT COULD NOT HAVE ESCAPED MY FATHER'S NOTICE THAT DURING SCOTT'S OWN STINT IN THE ARMY HE WROTE HIS FIRST NOVEL AND BEGAN COURTING ZELDA.



DAD'S LETTERS TO MOM, WHICH HAD NOT BEEN PARTICULARLY DEMONSTRATIVE UP TO THIS POINT, BEGAN TO GROW LUSH WITH FITZGERALDESQUE SENTIMENT.



I got finished bit

more  
my  
in  
K.P.  
you  
not  
day  
line  
sting

KORT VILL  
MAR 23  
1959  
N.Y.C.

Helen Fortuna  
427 Upper Street  
N.Y.C.

Air Mail

DAD DOES NOT MENTION IDENTIFYING WITH THE CHARACTER OF JIMMY GATZ, BUT THE PARALLELS ARE UNAVOIDABLE.

go on and on about end of the story.

a lot of time to read tomorrow.  
Winter follows is the best  
one so far. It is the "The  
Gambler" was written for  
you and I, but I am going  
to marry "Gambler" and breaks  
off the engagement. The old  
returns with his fortune, but  
love is gone "is good, but  
The Libby" to send abbe.  
They're all starting to sound alike.  
Think I'll read Gatsby again.  
I must be

GATSBY'S SELF-WILLED METAMORPHOSIS FROM FARM BOY TO PRINCE IS IN MANY WAYS IDENTICAL TO MY FATHER'S.

LIKE GATSBY, MY FATHER FUELED THIS TRANSFORMATION WITH "THE COLOSSAL VITALITY OF HIS ILLUSION." UNLIKE GATSBY, HE DID IT ON A SCHOOLTEACHER'S SALARY.



MY FATHER EVEN LOOKED LIKE GATSBY, OR AT ANY RATE, LIKE ROBERT REDFORD IN THE 1974 MOVIE.



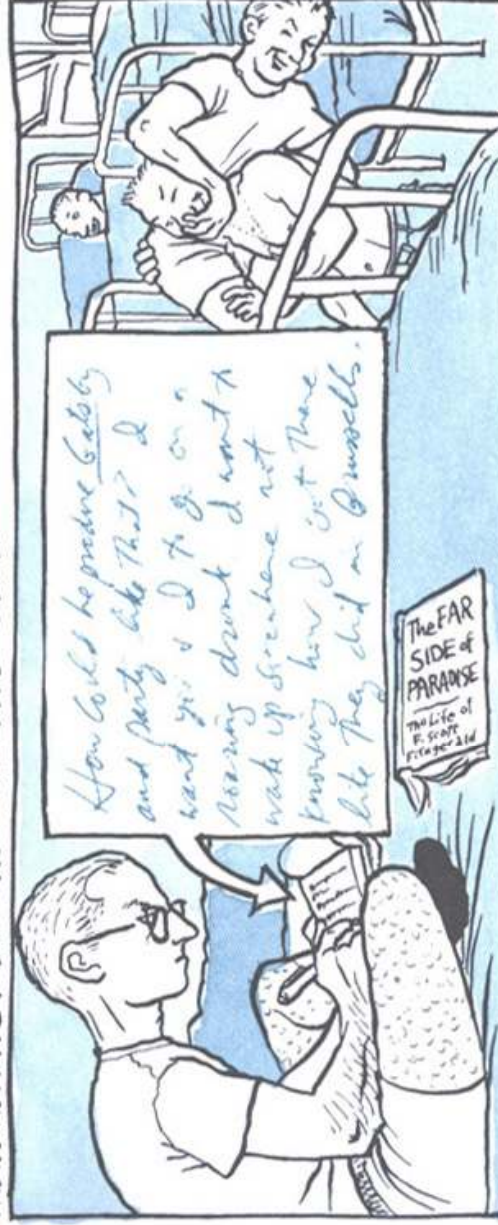
PERHAPS IT SEEMS LIKE A COLOSSAL ILLUSION ON MY PART TO COMPARE MY FATHER TO ROBERT REDFORD.



ZELDA FITZGERALD ALSO HAD A FLUID CHARM, IT WAS SAID, WHICH ELUDED THE STILL CAMERA.



I THINK WHAT WAS SO ALLURING TO MY FATHER ABOUT FITZGERALD'S STORIES WAS THEIR INEXTRICABILITY FROM FITZGERALD'S LIFE.



SUCH A SUSPENSION OF THE IMAGINARY IN THE REAL WAS, AFTER ALL, MY FATHER'S STOCK IN TRADE.





IF MY FATHER WAS A FITZGERALD CHARACTER, MY MOTHER STEPPED RIGHT OUT OF HENRY JAMES--A VIGOROUS AMERICAN IDEALIST ENSNARED BY DEGENERATE CONTINENTAL FORCES.



A PLAIN, DULL, BUT WEALTHY YOUNG WOMAN FALLS IN LOVE WITH THE SMOOTH-TALKING FORTUNE HUNTER, MORRIS TOWNSEND.



IN A TWIST ON THE USUAL HETEROSEXUAL TROPE...



...CATHERINE IS THE LOVER, AND MORRIS, THE BELOVED.



I EMPLOY THESE ALLUSIONS TO JAMES AND FITZGERALD NOT ONLY AS DESCRIPTIVE DEVICES, BUT BECAUSE MY PARENTS ARE MOST REAL TO ME IN FICTIONAL TERMS.



AND PERHAPS MY COOL AESTHETIC DISTANCE ITSELF DOES MORE TO CONVEY THE ARCTIC CLIMATE OF OUR FAMILY THAN ANY PARTICULAR LITERARY COMPARISON.



MY PARENTS SEEMED ALMOST EMBARRASSED BY THE FACT OF THEIR MARRIAGE. THERE WAS NO STORY, FOR EXAMPLE, OF HOW THEY MET.





IN FACT, HE PERVERSELY AVOIDED ADDRESSING MY MOTHER WITH EVEN HER GIVEN NAME.

I WITNESSED ONLY TWO GESTURES OF AFFECTION BETWEEN THEM. ONCE MY FATHER GAVE MY MOTHER A CHASTE PECK BEFORE LEAVING ON A WEEKEND TRIP.



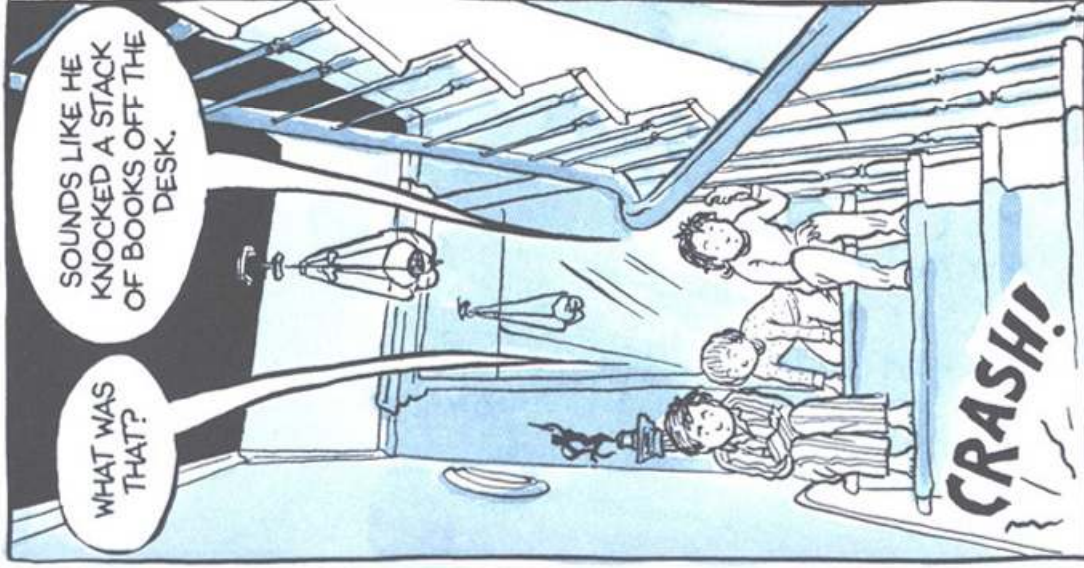
AND ONE TIME MY MOTHER PUT HER HAND ON HIS BACK AS WE WERE WATCHING TV.



THESE STRAY REMENTS IN THE OTHERWISE SEAMLESS FABRIC OF THEIR ANTAGONISM...



...WERE VERY NEARLY AS UNNERVING AS THE ANTAGONISM ITSELF.



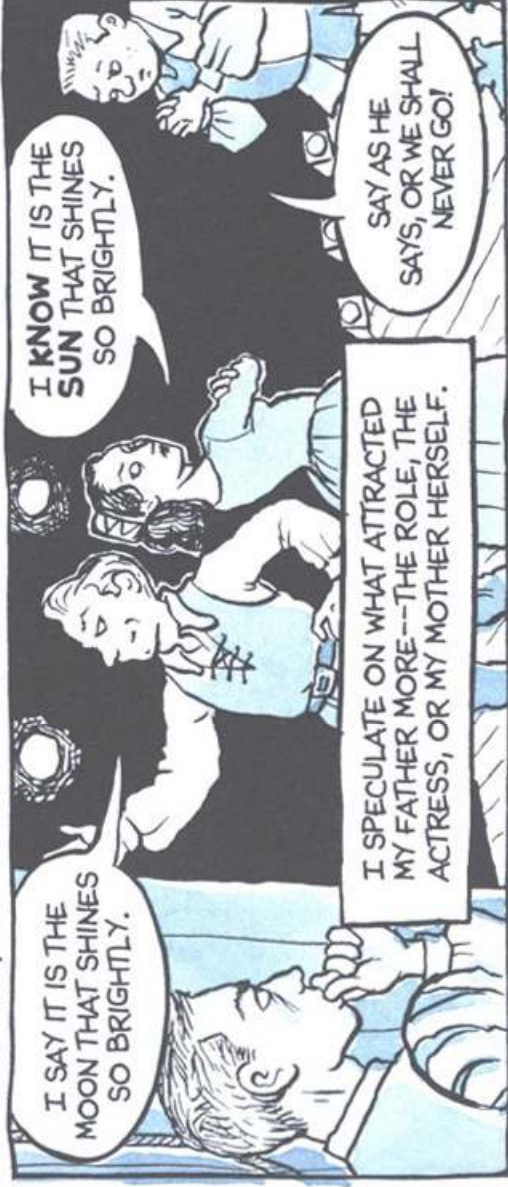
MY PARENTS MET, I EVENTUALLY EXTRACTED FROM MY MOTHER, IN A PERFORMANCE OF *THE TAMING OF THE SHREW*.



IT WAS A COLLEGE PRODUCTION. MY FATHER HAD A BIT PART AS ONE OF THE MEN. MOM PLAYED THE LEAD.



IT'S A TROUBLING PLAY, OF COURSE. THE WILLFUL KATHERINE'S SPIRIT IS BROKEN BY THE MERCENARY, DOMINEERING PETRUCHIO.



I SPECULATE ON WHAT ATTRACTED MY FATHER MORE--THE ROLE, THE ACTRESS, OR MY MOTHER HERSELF.

SAY AS HE SAYS, OR WE SHALL NEVER GO!

EVEN IN THOSE PREFEMINIST DAYS, MY PARENTS MUST HAVE FOUND THIS RELATIONSHIP MODEL TO BE PROBLEMATIC.



THEY WOULD PROBABLY HAVE BEEN APPALLED AT THE SUGGESTION THAT THEIR OWN MARRIAGE WOULD PLAY OUT IN A SIMILAR WAY.



ISABEL ARCHER, THE HEROINE, LEAVES AMERICA FOR EUROPE. SHE'S FILLED WITH HEADY NOTIONS ABOUT LIVING HER LIFE FREE FROM PROVINCIAL CONVENTION AND CONSTRAINT.



ISABEL TURNS DOWN A NUMBER OF WORTHY SUITORS, BUT PERVERSELY ACCEPTS GILBERT OSMOND, A CULTURED, DISSIPATED, AND PENNILESS EUROPEAN ART COLLECTOR.



MY PARENTS MADE A TRIP TO PARIS SOON AFTER THEIR WEDDING, TO VISIT AN ARMY FRIEND OF MY FATHER'S.



LATER, MY MOTHER WOULD LEARN THAT DAD AND HIS FRIEND HAD BEEN LOVERS.



THEY HAD A TERRIBLE FIGHT IN THE CAR.



BUT TOO GOOD FOR HER OWN GOOD,  
ISABEL REMAINS WITH GILBERT...



...AND DESPITE ALL HER YOUTHFUL HOPES  
TO THE CONTRARY, ENDS UP "GROUND IN  
THE VERY MILL OF THE CONVENTIONAL."



IN A PASSPORT PHOTO TAKEN EIGHT YEARS LATER,  
MY MOTHER'S LUMINOUS FACE HAS GONE DULL.



U.S. IMMIGRATION:  
NEW YORK, N. Y. 310  
JUN 29 1967  
ADMITTED UNTIL  
(CLASS)

THIS WAS FOR A THREE-WEEK  
TOUR OF EUROPE ON WHICH  
MY BROTHER CHRISTIAN AND  
I WERE BROUGHT ALONG.

IT WAS A THRILLING TRIP. IN SWITZERLAND I TALKED MY PARENTS INTO BUYING ME HIKING BOOTS.



IN CANNES, I ARGUED COMPELLINGLY FOR THE RIGHT TO EXCHANGE MY TANK SUIT FOR A PAIR OF SHORTS.



SUCH FREEDOM FROM CONVENTION WAS INTOXICATING. BUT WHILE OUR TRAVELS WIDENED MY SCOPE, I SUSPECT MY PARENTS FELT THEIR OWN Dwindling.



PERHAPS THIS WAS WHEN I CEMENTED THE UNSPOKEN COMPACT WITH THEM THAT I WOULD NEVER GET MARRIED, THAT I WOULD CARRY ON TO LIVE THE ARTIST'S LIFE THEY HAD EACH ABDICATED.





THAT IS IN FACT WHAT CAME TO PASS, BUT NOT IN THE WAY ANY OF US HAD EXPECTED.



I'D BEEN HAVING QUALMS SINCE I WAS THIRTEEN... ..WHEN I FIRST LEARNED THE WORD DUE TO ITS ALARMING PROMINENCE IN MY DICTIONARY.



**lesbian**

les-bi-an \ˈlez-bē-ən\ *adj*, *often cap* **L** : of or relating to  
 2 fr. the reputed homosexual band associated with  
 Lesbos1 : of or relating to homosexuality between fe-  
 males  
 les-bi-an-ism \-ə-nīz-əm\ *n* : female homosexuality  
 lese maj-es-ty or lese ma-jes-té \ˈlez-ˈmaj-ə-stiti/ *n* :  
 majesty fr. L *laesā majestas*, lit. injured majesty  
 committed against a sovereign power **b** : an offense

BUT NOW ANOTHER BOOK--A BOOK ABOUT PEOPLE WHO HAD COMPLETELY CAST ASIDE THEIR OWN QUALMS--ELABORATED ON THAT DEFINITION.



THAT FIRST VOLUME LED QUICKLY TO OTHERS.



A FEW DAYS LATER I SCREWED UP MY COURAGE AND BOUGHT ONE.



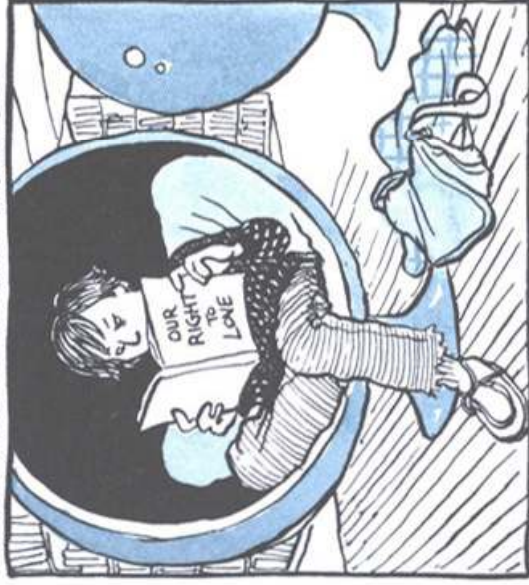
THIS BOOK REFERRED TO OTHER BOOKS, WHICH I SOUGHT OUT IN THE LIBRARY.



ONE DAY IT OCCURRED TO ME THAT I COULD ACTUALLY LOOK UP HOMOSEXUALITY IN THE CARD CATALOG.

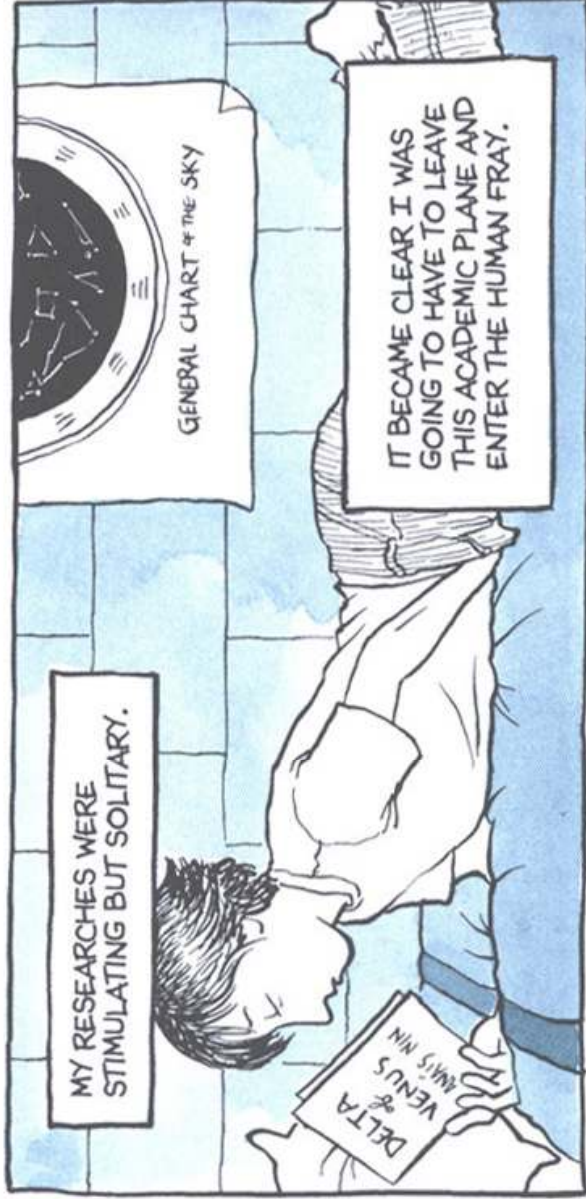


I FOUND A FOUR-FOOT TROVE IN THE STACKS WHICH I QUICKLY RAVISHED.



AND SOON I WAS TROLLING EVEN THE PUBLIC LIBRARY, HEEDLESS OF THE RISKS.





I WENT TO A MEETING OF SOMETHING CALLED THE "GAY UNION," WHICH I OBSERVED IN PETRIFIED SILENCE.



BUT MY MERE PRESENCE, I FELT, HAD AMOUNTED TO A PUBLIC DECLARATION. I LEFT EXHILARATED.



IT WAS IN THAT TREMULOUS STATE THAT I DETERMINED TO TELL MY PARENTS. KEEPING IT FROM THEM HAD STARTED TO SEEM LUDICROUS ANYWAY.



I DID IT VIA LETTER--A REMOTE MEDIUM,  
BUT AS I HAVE EXPLAINED, WE WERE  
THAT SORT OF FAMILY.



MOM WOULDN'T COME TO THE PHONE.



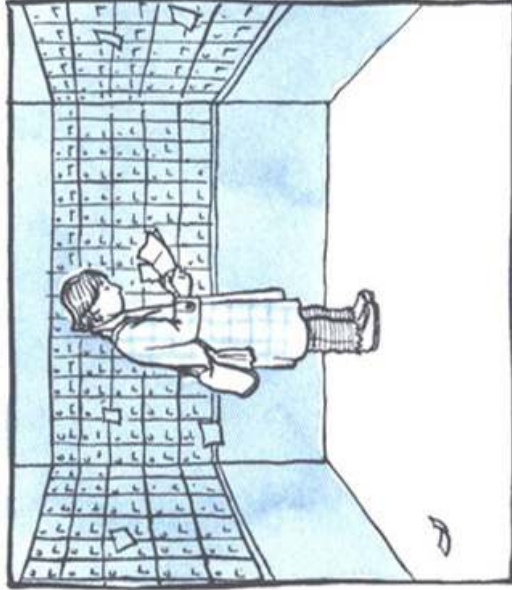
UHH...SHE'S WATCHING  
SOMETHING ON TV. SHE  
WAS PRETTY UPSET.

MY FATHER CALLED AFTER RECEIVING IT.  
HE SEEMED STRANGELY PLEASED TO THINK  
I WAS HAVING SOME KIND OF ORGY.



EVERYONE  
SHOULD  
EXPERIMENT.  
IT'S HEALTHY.

BUT HER RETURN EPISTLE ARRIVED A  
WEEK AND A HALF LATER.



...ignoring. You're talking about... form  
...values, the larger is  
...with me, but I'm not sure  
...see your choice as a threat  
...I imagine that, if in the long run, your choice turns  
...truly hope that this does not happen. There are  
...have faced. I know you have probably absorbed my  
...cynicism regarding Ironic love, but surely the same  
...problems, of dis... and exploitation exist in  
...homosex...

AS DISAPPROVAL GOES, I  
SUPPOSE IT WAS RATHER MILD.

...those who differ  
...family and work, and I  
...both of these.

...I could live with it, but I  
...outlook seems not to  
...and exploitation exist in  
...? And when things go bad,  
...would be few quarters where  
...or understanding  
...which  
...to deal with

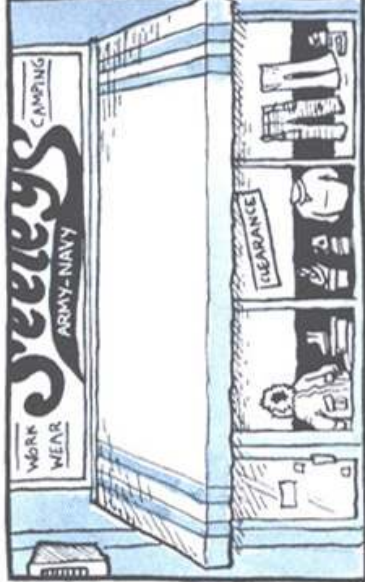
STILL, I WAS DEVASTATED.

When I came home  
arrived

HER P.S. INSTRUCTED ME TO DESTROY THE LETTER.



IN AN ATTEMPT TO SALVE THE WOUND, I BOUGHT MYSELF A PRESENT.



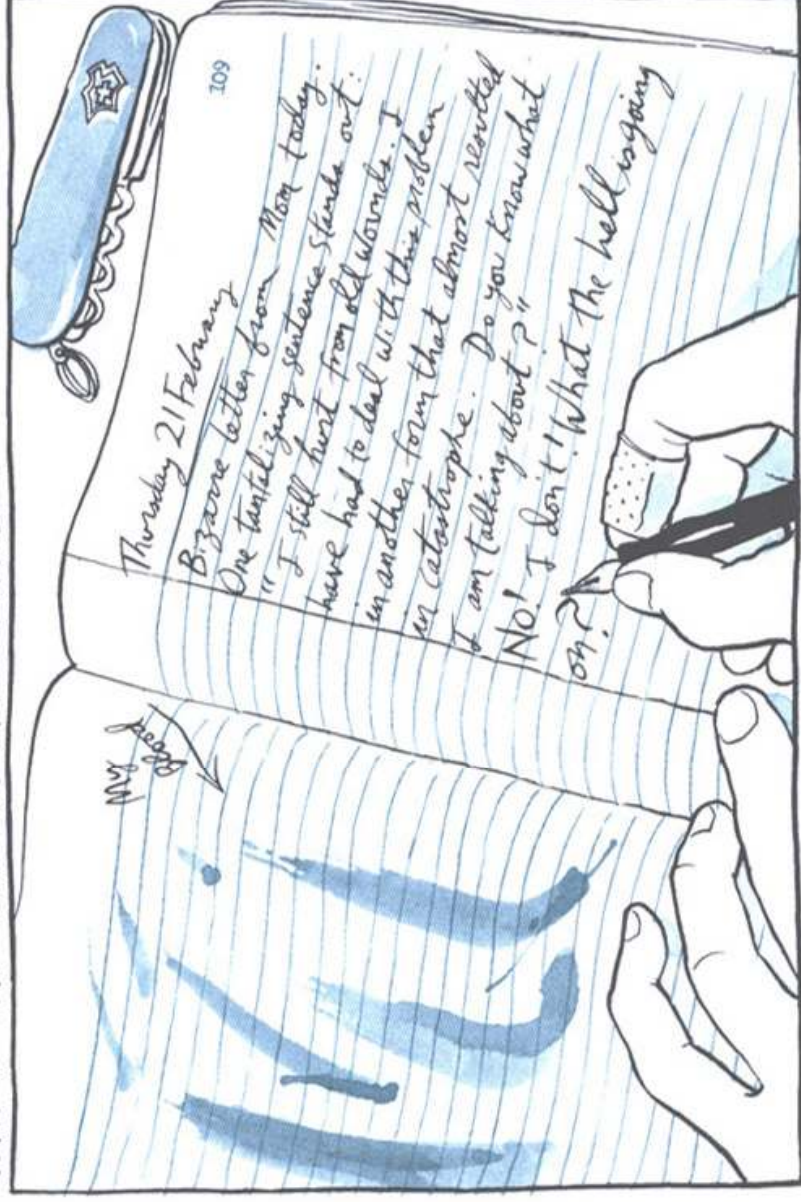
A SYMBOL OF SELF-RELIANCE? AT ANY RATE, IT SEEMED LIKE SOMETHING A LESBIAN WOULD HAVE.



OPENING IT BACK IN MY ROOM, I ACCIDENTALLY CUT MY FINGER.



I SMEARED THE BLOOD INTO MY JOURNAL, PLEASED BY THE OPPORTUNITY TO TRANSMIT MY ANGUISH TO THE PAGE SO LITERALLY.



I RESPONDED TO MY MOTHER'S LETTER POINT BY POINT.



And regarding your third paragraph, no, I have no idea what you're talking about. What catastrophe?

SHE FILLED ME IN A FEW DAYS LATER.



DAD?  
WITH OTHER  
MEN?

AND BOYS. ONE TIME HE ALMOST GOT CAUGHT. AND THEN THERE WAS THE THING WITH ROY.

THIS ABRUPT AND WHOLESALE REVISION OF MY HISTORY--A HISTORY WHICH, I MIGHT ADD, HAD ALREADY BEEN REVISED ONCE IN THE PRECEDING MONTHS--LEFT ME STUPEFIED.



ROY,  
OUR BABY-  
SITTER?!

BUT NOT QUITE STUPEFIED ENOUGH--A CONDITION WHICH I REMEDIED UPON HANGING UP THE PHONE.



PLASTIC TUBING  
AVAILABLE AT ANY  
HARDWARE STORE

SIMPLE MASON JAR

SOON, HOWEVER, I DISCOVERED AN EVEN MORE POTENT ANESTHETIC.



ARCH  
ON  
UNION  
of  
SIAW &  
Y RIGHTS  
Dist. 14

...AND WE NEED PEOPLE  
TO PUT UP FLYERS ABOUT  
OUR CONFERENCE.

THE NOTION THAT MY SORDID PERSONAL LIFE HAD SOME SORT OF LARGER IMPORT WAS STRANGE, BUT SEDUCTIVE.



FEMINISM IS THE THEORY. LESBIANISM IS THE PRACTICE.

AND BY MIDTERM I HAD BEEN SEDUCED COMPLETELY.



JOAN WAS A POET AND A "MATRIARCHIST." I SPENT VERY LITTLE OF THE REMAINING SEMESTER OUTSIDE HER BED.



THIS WAS STREWN WITH BOOKS, HOWEVER, IN WHAT WAS FOR ME A NOVEL FUSION OF WORD AND DEED.

I LOST MY BEARINGS. THE DICTIONARY HAD BECOME EROTIC.



OS-. MOUTH. ORAL, OSCILLATE, OSCULATE, ORIFICE...

INDEX OF INDO-EUROPEAN ROOTS

OH.

SOME OF OUR FAVORITE CHILDHOOD STORIES WERE REVEALED AS PROPAGANDA.



GOD. CHRISTOPHER ROBIN'S A TOTAL IMPERIALIST!

...OTHERS AS PORNOGRAPHY. IN THE HARSH LIGHT OF MY DAWNING FEMINISM, EVERYTHING LOOKED DIFFERENT.



THIS ENTWINED POLITICAL AND SEXUAL AWAKENING WAS A WELCOME DISTRACTION.



SOON AFTER JOAN AND I HAD MOVED IN TOGETHER FOR THE SUMMER, I GOT MOM'S CALL ABOUT THE DIVORCE.



THE NEWS FROM HOME WAS INCREASINGLY UNSETTLING.



AND TWO WEEKS AFTER THAT, THE CALL ABOUT THE ACCIDENT.





OVER THE YEARS, MY MOTHER HAS GIVEN AWAY OR SOLD MOST OF DAD'S LIBRARY.



LATER, JOAN WROTE A POEM ABOUT IT.

You're sitting in the library  
feet up on his desk.  
Your mother comes in  
her face warm and white  
floating gingerly over her  
bathrobe.  
She tells me to choose a book.  
Cloth-bound, grey and turquoise  
heavy in my hand as a turtle shell  
filled with mud.



OUT OF THE HUNDREDS OF BOOKS ON  
THE SHELVES, I DON'T THINK SHE COULD  
HAVE MADE A BETTER CHOICE.





IN MANY WAYS MY MOTHER'S CATHOLICISM WAS MORE FORM THAN CONTENT...

...BUT SACRIFICE WAS A PRINCIPLE THAT SHE GRASPED INSTINCTIVELY.



PERHAPS SHE ALSO LIKED THE POEM BECAUSE ITS JUXTAPOSITION OF CATASTROPHE WITH A PLUSH DOMESTIC INTERIOR IS LIFE WITH MY FATHER IN A NUTSHELL.



THE IDEA  
THAT I  
CAUSED HIS  
DEATH BY  
TELLING MY  
PARENTS  
I WAS A  
LESBIAN IS  
PERHAPS  
ILLOGICAL.

CAUSALITY IMPLIES CONNECTION, CONTACT OF SOME KIND, AND  
HOWEVER CONVINCING THEY MIGHT BE, YOU CAN'T LAY HANDS ON  
A FICTIONAL CHARACTER.



DAD?

THERE'S A SCENE IN THE GREAT GATSBY WHERE A DRUNKEN PARTY GUEST IS CARRIED  
AWAY BY THE DISCOVERY THAT THE VOLUMES IN GATSBY'S LIBRARY ARE NOT CARD-  
BOARD FAKES.



"WHAT THOROUGHNESS, WHAT  
REALISM!" HE EXCLAIMS. "KNEW WHEN  
TO STOP, TOO. DIDN'T CUT THE PAGES!"

WHAT.

MY FATHER'S BOOKS--THE HARDBOUND ONES WITH  
THEIR RAGGED DUST JACKETS, THE PAPERBACKS WITH  
THEIR CREASED SPINES--HAD CLEARLY BEEN READ.

BUT IN A WAY GATSBY'S PRISTINE BOOKS AND MY FATHER'S WORN ONES SIGNIFY THE SAME THING--THE PREFERENCE OF A FICTION TO REALITY.



*Zelda, Scott and Scottie on the Riviera, 1924*

IF FITZGERALD'S OWN LIFE HADN'T TURNED FROM FAIRY TALE TO TRAGEDY, WOULD HIS STORIES OF DISENCHANTMENT HAVE RESONATED SO DEEPLY WITH MY FATHER?



GATSBY IN THE POOL. ZELDA IN THE ASYLUM. SCOTT IN HOLLYWOOD, AN ALCOHOLIC, DYING OF A HEART ATTACK AT FORTY-FOUR.



STRUCK BY THE COINCIDENCE, I COUNTED OUT THEIR LIFESPANS. THE SAME NUMBER OF MONTHS, THE SAME NUMBER OF WEEKS...BUT FITZGERALD LIVED THREE DAYS LONGER.



FOR A WILD MOMENT I ENTERTAINED THE IDEA THAT MY FATHER HAD TIMED HIS DEATH WITH THIS IN MIND, AS SOME SORT OF DERANGED TRIBUTE.



AND I'M RELUCTANT TO LET GO OF THAT LAST, TENUOUS BOND.

