Fun Home

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ALISON BECHDEL

Alison Bechdel was born in Lock Haven, Pennsylvania and grew up in the small town of Beech Creek, Pennsylvania. She lived in an old Gothic Revival house with her father Bruce, her mother Helen, and her two younger brothers Christian and John. Bechdel's family was Roman Catholic. Her mother was a teacher and community theater actress, and her father, an army veteran, was an 11th grade English teacher who also worked part-time running a funeral home that he inherited from his father. As a kid, Bechdel and her brothers helped out at the funeral home, which they called the "Fun Home." After leaving high school a year early, Bechdel attended Simon's Rock College from 1977 to 1979, at which time she transferred to Oberlin College and subsequently graduated with a degree in art history and studio arts in 1981. At college, Bechdel also met her first girlfriend and, at the age of 19, Bechdel came out of the closet to her parents as a lesbian. That same year, Alison's father Bruce died, likely from a suicide. After graduating from college, Bechdel moved to Manhattan, applied to art schools, got rejected, and ended up working many office jobs in the publishing industry. In June of 1983, a friend sent one of Bechdel's drawings to a magazine called *WomaNews*, and Bechdel's long-running comic strip *Dykes To Watch Out For* was born. During this time, Bechdel moved to St. Paul, Minnesota, and the strip evolved into a series of stories centering on a group of lesbian characters. In 1990 Bechdel became a full-time cartoonist and later moved to a house near Burlington, Vermont. In February of 2004 Bechdel married Amy Rubin, her longtime partner, in San Francisco, but the California Supreme Court later vacated their marriage. They separated in 2006, the same year that Bechdel's best-selling graphic memoir about her relationship with her father, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, was released. In 2008 Bechdel suspended working on her comic strip *Dykes To Watch Out For* to work on a graphic memoir about her mother, which was released in 2012 with the title *Are You My Mother?* In 2014 Bechdel was granted a MacArthur "Genius" Award. Bechdel married Holly Rae Taylor in 2015.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Homosexuality in the United States wasn't formally studied or academically discussed until the 1948 publication of Alfred Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, which claimed that about 10% of men and about 5% of women exhibited homosexual tendencies at some point in their lives. Even after that, homosexual relations remained illegal in most states in the United States, and gay rights didn't become a prominent public issue until the civil rights movement of the late 1960's, when the Gay Liberation movement developed after the Stonewall Riots, a protest of police brutality toward the LGBT community in the summer of 1969. In *Funhome*, Alison visits New York with Bruce a few weeks after this incident. In the 1970's, many gay people moved to cities like San Francisco. There, Harvey Milk became the first openly gay man to be elected to a public office, but in 1978 he was assassinated. In the 1980's through the 1990's, the LGBT community was devastated by the AIDS crisis, which was largely ignored by the Reagan administration. In 2008 California became the first state to deem gay marriages constitutional, and in the landmark Supreme Court decision *Obergefell v. Hodges* in 2015, gay marriage became nationally recognized as lawful in the United States.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Like *Fun Home*, a number of graphic memoirs have achieved widespread success in the 21st century. *Persepolis*, written by Marjane Satrapi and published in 2000, is a coming-of-age graphic memoir set in Iran during and after the Islamic Revolution. *Smile* by Raina Telgemeir is a graphic memoir based on her childhood and adolescence. *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* by Roz Chast, *Blankets* by Craig Thompson, and *Stitches* by David Small are all popular graphic memoirs, and Bechdel's own follow-up to *Fun Home*, *Are You My Mother?*, is also in this genre. *Maus* by Art Spiegelman, while not a strict memoir, is inspired by Spiegelman's interviews with his father about his father's experiences as a Holocaust survivor, and given the complicated relationship between Spiegelman and his father in Maus, that book can be seen as a possible influence on *Fun Home*. Throughout *Fun Home*, Bechdel also alludes to and quotes from many, many literary works, including *A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man* and *Ulysses* by James Joyce, *A Happy Death* and *The Myth of Sisyphus* by Albert Camus, *The Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James, *Flying* by Kate Millett, *Earthly Paradise* by Colette, *Remembrance of Things Past* (or *In Search of Lost Time*) by Marcel Proust, *The Taming of the Shrew* by Shakespeare, *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Far Side of Paradise* by Arthur Mizener, *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger, *The Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame, *The Nude: A Study In Ideal Form* by Kenneth Clark, *Baby and Child Care* by Dr. Benjamin Spock, and the poem "Sunday Morning" by Wallace Stevens.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic

- **When Written:** From 1998-2005
- **When Published:** June 8th, 2006
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Graphic Memoir
- **Setting:** Beech Creek, Pennsylvania; Oberlin, Ohio; Greenwich Village, Manhattan; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania;
- **Climax:** Alison and Bruce have their one and only somewhat frank conversation about both of their sexualities, shortly before Bruce's death.
- **Antagonist:** Bruce Bechdel
- **Point of View:** Alison Bechdel, looking back on her memories.

EXTRA CREDIT

Broadway: The musical 'Fun Home' adapted from this graphic memoir won the Tony Award for best musical in 2015.

Film Criticism: The 'Bechdel test,' which tests whether a movie or any other narrative has a moment in which more than two female characters with names speak to each other about any topic other than men, was created by Alison Bechdel in her comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*.

PLOT SUMMARY

Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic is a graphic memoir by Alison Bechdel tracing her journey from young girl to young adult as she comes to grips with her own lesbian sexuality, her father Bruce's (most likely) suicide, and his secret homosexuality or bisexuality that he kept hidden throughout his life while having affairs with underage boys.

The memoir starts with Alison as a young girl, playing with her father, who she compares to both **Daedalus,** the genius inventor of Greek myth, and **Icarus**, Daedulus's son who flew too close to the sun on wings designed by his father and plummeted to his death. Alison details Bruce's obsession with restoring the family's old **Gothic Revival house**, which Alison believes was largely motivated by his desire to keep up the appearance of being a good Christian family man even as he was also secretly sleeping with some of his male teenage students. Alison then reveals that Bruce killed himself while she was in college, and though he lived through most of her childhood, she and the rest of the family felt his absence long before he was physically gone.

Alison then delves into the details surrounding Bruce's death—though there's no concrete proof that he killed himself, the circumstances preceding the incident (like Alison coming out as a lesbian a few months earlier as well as Helen, Alison's mother, filing for a divorce just two weeks before his death) make Alison relatively certain his death was a suicide. Alison gives a brief biography of her father, noting that he was born, lived, died, and was buried all within a two-mile radius in the town of Beech Creek, Pennsylvania. Alison notes that when Bruce was in the army during World War II he got stationed in Europe. There, he courted Helen by exchanging letters with her. Eventually Helen moved to Europe to marry Bruce, but their time there was short-lived, as the couple had to return home to Beech Creek after the death of Bruce's father. Upon their return to the U.S., Bruce inherited the Bechdel family-run funeral home. Shortly after this time, Alison and her brother Christian were born, and Bruce and Helen purchased the Gothic Revival house.

As kids, Alison and her brothers had to do chores in the funeral home, which they nicknamed the "Fun Home." As the nickname implies, their interaction with the Fun Home gave them a desensitized and often "cavalier" attitude towards death. Alison's Grandma lived in the same building as the funeral home, and Alison and her brothers would often stay over and force Grandma to tell the same story over and over, about a toddler-aged Bruce getting stuck in the mud and being rescued by a mailman. Later, while standing over Bruce's grave, Alison has trouble believing her father is really down there, though she knows deep down that he's "stuck in the mud…" permanently.

Alison then wonders about how her own coming out of the closet might have impacted Bruce's suicide. Four months before, after realizing she was a lesbian by reading about homosexuals in a library book, Alison had written her parents a letter in which she came out. Alison notes how books were just as important to Bruce's intellectual development as her own, and she delves into his youthful obsession with F. Scott Fitzgerald. Alison also compares Bruce to Marcel Proust in the way they intermingled their lives with fiction in order to conceal their homosexual proclivities, as well as their mutual obsession with the beauty of flowers.

As a kid, Alison viewed her father as a "sissy" and sought to fill in for the masculine presence she felt her family was missing. Thus, Bruce and Alison constantly engaged in "a war of cross-purposes," where Alison tried to express her masculinity through Bruce and Bruce tried to express his femininity through Alison. Alison then narrates an impactful incident when Bruce took the kids as well as his young helper (and presumably lover) Roy on a trip up to the family cabin. There, the group toured a construction site where Alison saw a calendar tacked to the wall featuring a photo of a nude woman, causing her to then request to be called "Albert" instead of Alison by her brothers. Later, Alison discovers a photograph from this trip that Bruce had clearly taken of Roy, shirtless, lying in bed, which she examines closely.

Shortly before Bruce's death, Alison narrates that she had an eerie dream in which the two of them try to view a sunset but Bruce, lagging behind, misses it. At Bruce's funeral, Alison

becomes irritable and wishes she could speak the truth about Bruce's death, but instead keeps quiet. Alison wonders what might have happened if Bruce had been able to escape Beech Creek and live someplace else. She discusses the landscape around Beech Creek, which is both naturally beautiful and industrially polluted. As a young girl, Alison decided to write a poem about nature, and Bruce added a stanza onto it. Later, in a similar incident, Alison was drawing in a coloring book when Bruce got upset that she was using the wrong color, causing him to take over and shade it in for her.

Alison's mother Helen was equally obsessive in her own artistic pursuits, which mostly concerned her acting in community theater plays. The house, then, felt to Alison like an artists' colony, with each member of the family compulsively absorbed in his or her own pursuits. Alison discusses the evolution of her O.C.D., which entered her diary first in the form of self-doubt, such that she would write, "I think" between each declarative statement. It then got so bad that she would scribble "I think" over each entry, causing Helen to take Alison's diary away until Alison decided to break her compulsions, which she eventually did.

As an adult, Alison learns that when she was thirteen Bruce's secret almost surfaced when he offered a young boy a beer while searching for the boy's older brother who was (most likely) Bruce's lover. This proved to be a chaotic summer in the Bechdel household: all at the same time, Helen was working on her Master's thesis and playing Lady Bracknell in a local production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*; Alison got her first period and decided to keep it a secret; Beech Creek was swamped with a horde of seventeen-year-cicadas; and, nationally, the Nixon/Watergate scandal was coming to a head. Then, a freak storm blew down old trees in the Bechdels' yard, and rain through a window soaked Helen's thesis the night before it was due. Eventually, everything worked out: Bruce didn't have to go to jail and only had to see a therapist for six months (who he may have later slept with), the play was well received, Helen's thesis was accepted, Nixon resigned, and Alison finally told Helen about her period. Alison recounts an incident where she and her friend Beth dressed in boys' clothes, which Alison loved though it was short-lived. Also, Alison notes that her diary entries became more and more untrustworthy, until she eventually stopped writing in it at all.

Alison recounts a time when Bruce took Alison and her brothers to New York for the bicentennial of the United States. The weekend turned out to be "gay" all around: the family went to the ballet, saw homosexuals in Greenwich Village, and went to see the musical *A Chorus Line*. The next morning, Alison's brother John wandered off, got spoken to by a creepy man (who seemed likely to be a sexual predator), and managed to escape back to the apartment where they were staying. That night, Bruce went off into the city by himself while the kids slept.

Alison wonders what would have happened if Bruce hadn't died in 1980. But, because of the AIDS epidemic, Alison also doesn't think Bruce would have made it much longer than he did. Alison remembers that, as a young girl, Bruce's return home always signaled the end of her fun time with Helen and Christian. As a teenager, Alison was reluctant to bond with Bruce, but when she became a student in his high school English class, the two ended up bonding over an interest in literature. Later though, when Alison was at college, Bruce's overbearing interest in her classes lead Alison to swear off English permanently. However, Alison eventually enrolled in a semester-long course on Bruce's favorite book, *Ulysses*, and she uses that book and Homer's *Odyssey* as a reference while narrating her own sexual quest towards fulfillment and understanding.

Alison falls behind reading *Ulysses* because she's so obsessed with reading lesbian literature and exploring her relationship with Joan, her first girlfriend. Alison notes that this is when she decided to come out of the closet to her parents, which caused Helen in response to tell her the secret of Bruce's affairs and sexuality. One time before her father's death when she returned home from college, Alison tries to connect with her father about being gay. On the way to a movie, Bruce is honest with Alison about dressing in girls' clothes and wanting to be a girl as a young boy, and Alison reminds him about how she used to dress like a boy. However, Bruce ends up confessing more about his feelings and sexuality than Alison does, so Alison ends up feeling like *she* is the parent during the exchange. After the movie, Bruce tries to take Alison to a gay bar, but they aren't allowed in because Alison is underage. Alison notes that she and her father were close, but "not close enough," and they never discussed their sexuality again before Bruce's death. Alison then delves into the publication history of *Ulysses*, which was supported by three lesbian women who ended up seeing none of the profits. Alison ends the story with an image of her jumping off a diving board into a pool as a young girl, with Bruce there to catch her. Alison narrates that Icarus—and Bruce—did hurtle into the sea, but Bruce "was there to catch" Alison when she leapt.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Alison Bechdel – The author and protagonist of *Fun Home*, Alison traces her life from childhood into early adulthood, centering her reflections on the circumstances surrounding her father Bruce's death as well as the progression of her understanding of her own lesbian sexuality and inclination toward masculinity. Throughout the graphic memoir, Alison is open and up front about her desires to dress and act like boys, and she also details how the pressure of her non-conformity to social expectations leads her to develop many strange compulsive behaviors as a child, including rituals, superstitions,

and a proclivity for autobiography. Alison's journey into self-recording begins with a simple, truthful childhood diary that over time transforms into a much less reliable teenage document that hides as much or more than it captures, and continues through the writing of *Fun Home*. Through the book's construction and its dozens of literary allusions, Alison brings the reader inside her point-of-view by showing how she often uses literary, mythical, or historical references in order to frame and contextualize her life. After Alison leaves her home and goes to Oberlin college, she begins to explore her sexuality openly, coming out of the closet to her parents, becoming a part of the gay campus community at her college, and beginning a transformative relationship with Joan, her first girlfriend. Alison's story within the book, then, is one of a difficult but ultimately successful growing up, in which Alison becomes aware and accepting of who she is.

Bruce Bechdel – Alison's father, a provincial English teacher and World War II veteran who loves literature and surface aesthetics of all kinds. Bruce is extremely feminine in Alison's view, as he's obsessed with flowers and artificial, surface-level beauty of all kinds, which is acted out in his obsession with restoring the **Bechdel family's old Victorian house**. As a part-time job, Bruce also runs the funeral home that he inherited from his father. He is cold and often absent as a father, and sometimes full of rage. He and Alison do connect during the later part of Alison's teenage years through her love of books. The novel centers on Alison's relationship to Bruce, and the possible causes that led to Bruce's (most likely) suicidal death, including aspects of him that Alison did not know of as a child: his hidden homosexuality or bisexuality and a string of affairs he carried on with teenage boys (many of them his students) throughout his marriage to Alison's mother, Helen. In a way, Bruce's story can be seen as the opposite of Alison's. While she eventually explored and expressed her sexuality and identity openly, Bruce never did. Instead he built walls around himself to behind which to hide or imprison himself, and seems alternately to be lost behind those walls or bursting out in various monstrous ways—but he never seems at ease with who he is.

Helen Bechdel – Alison's mother, Helen reminds Alison of a character out of a Henry James book in that she is an idealistic young woman who becomes entrapped and dragged down by the negative influence of Bruce and his deceitful surface-level charms. Helen dreams of being an actress. She and Bruce meet during a college production of *The Taming of the Shrew*, and after college Helen moves to New York for a couple of years to pursue acting. But eventually, after a prolonged correspondence through letters, Helen decides to move to Europe while Bruce is in the army to marry him, and their return to Bruce's hometown of Beech Creek a few years later puts an end to Helen's dream of Broadway. While raising three kids in Beech Creek, Helen continues to act in community theater productions, throwing herself into them so thoroughly that she learns all the lines, not just her own. But there is also a sense in the book that Helen throws herself into these roles in part to escape the actual facts of her life, and it is eventually revealed that she knew of Bruce's affairs and just never acknowledged them.

Joan – Alison's first girlfriend whom she meets at Oberlin. Joan is a poet, feminist, and activist, and has one glass eye because when she was young a boy shot it out with a defective toy arrow. She is dating Alison at the time of Bruce's death, and Helen gifts her a book of Wallace Stevens poems from Bruce's library shortly after his death.

Roy – One of Bruce's English students, he also serves as a babysitter for the Bechdel children and helps out around the **house**. In college, Alison finds out that Bruce was having an affair with Roy, and she later discovers a photograph of Roy in his underwear that Bruce must have taken on a family vacation.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Bill – Another of Bruce's young helpers he was likely having an affair with. Bill tries to teach the Bechdel kids how to shoot a gun when he accompanies them on a trip to the family's Bullpen.

John Bechdel – Alison's youngest brother, who greets Alison with a strange mutual grin the night after Bruce's death.

Christian Bechdel – Alison's eldest brother.

Grammy – Bruce's mother who lives in the front part of the funeral home. She has a thick country accent, and the Bechdel children's favorite story is her rendition of the time Bruce got stuck in the mud as a very young boy and was rescued by the mailman.

Grandfather – Bruce's father, who dies while Bruce and Helen are in Europe, causing the couple to return home so Bruce can take over the funeral home business.

Beth Gryglewicz – Alison's childhood best friend. Once, Beth tries to convince Alison to go to the football game, but instead Alison convinces her to dress up in Bruce's clothes and they go around the neighborhood pretending to be old-school con artists.

Dr. Nancy Gryglewicz – Beth's mom, who invites the Bechdel children to stay at her house for two days while Helen works on her thesis.

Dr. Gryglewicze – Dr. Nancy Gryglewicz's husband, also a doctor, who is family friends with the Bechdels.

Elly – Helen's good friend and ex-roommate who lives in Greenwich Village in New York City. The Bechdels usually stay at her apartment when they visit the city.

Truck Driver – The driver of the Sunbeam Bread truck that hits and kills Bruce.

Tammi – One of Alison's childhood friends.

Ruth – One of Bruce's sisters who lives very close to Alison's family.

Sue – Another of Bruce's sisters who lives down the street from Alison's family.

Mort DeHaas – The mailman who pulls Bruce out of the mud as a toddler in Grammy's story.

Female Trucker – The woman who Alison sees wearing men's clothing when Bruce takes her to a luncheonette in Philadelphia when Alison is four or five. The young Alison is entranced by the trucker.

Mark Walsh – The seventeen-year-old from a nearby town who gets Bruce in trouble for offering a him beer while looking for Mark's brother, Dave Walsh.

Dave Walsh – The brother of Mark Walsh, who calls the police on Bruce and also most likely has engaged in some sort of sexual relationship with Bruce.

Jack – One of the actors in Helen's production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* who chats with Bruce at the Bechdel's Labor Day after-party.

Professor Avery – The professor who teaches Alison *Ulysses*.

Uncle Fred – Bruce's brother.

Richard and Tom – A gay couple. They are friends of Elly's who Alison meets in Greenwich Village.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

GENDER IDENTITY AND COMING OF AGE

Fun Home is a graphic memoir in which Alison Bechdel describes her childhood and early adulthood. It's the story of her growing up, her coming of age. More specifically, *Fun Home* is the story of Alison's coming of age while grappling with her lesbian gender identity and the way that identity differs from the expectations imposed on her by society. As she grows up, Alison feels a constant and growing shame that is centered around her discomfort in the world and with her own female body. When she is four or five years old at a restaurant with her father Bruce, Alison admires a butch-looking woman wearing male clothing. When Alison's father angrily asks if that's what Alison wants to look like, Alison becomes ashamed and lies, telling him "no." As she goes through puberty, Alison finds her budding breasts "painful" and "itchy," and she does her best to ignore the existence of her periods. She similarly feels ashamed when she feels attracted to a picture of a nude female pin-up model. Alison's persistent shame and discomfort leads her to develop a variety of compulsive, OCD-like behaviors. However, when she eventually gets to college, particularly at Oberlin, which offers a very different community that is more open to different ways of being, Alison herself becomes more open both with herself and others about her gender identity. She is then able to explore her sexuality in honest, public relationships, to reclaim herself as and for herself within the wider world.

As a child, Alison's father Bruce plays the role of society's enforcer, attempting to make his daughter act more girlish and dress more ladylike. But what the memoir makes clear from the outset (though the child Alison does not realize it) is that her father's strong desire for his daughter to act like a typical girl is driven not just by "conservative" principles but also by the fact that, like his daughter, Bruce's own gender identity is "non-standard" and he has a need to vicariously express his own femininity through her. Through the juxtaposition of Bruce and Alison's narratives, *Fun Home* depicts two distinctly different coming-of-age stories about people dealing with homosexuality and genderqueer identity. While both stories begin and develop the same way—with lies, shame, self-deceit, and secret bouts of self-fulfillment (like dressing up in the opposite gender's clothing), the way Alison and Bruce deal with their gender identity in adulthood is opposite: Alison is open about hers, while Bruce keeps his secret. This results in Alison leading a more honest, self-fulfilling life, which helps her improve upon or minimize many of her compulsions, or at least allows her to deal with them in a more open and honest way (as *Fun Home* itself is an open and honest example of Alison's compulsion for autobiography). Bruce, though, never escapes from his own obsessive and self-destructive tendencies, ranging from his constant and domineering decorating of **the family's old Gothic mansion**, to his erratic but frequent outbursts of rage, to the string of illicit affairs he develops with some of his male high school English students, to his eventual (probable) suicide.

Fun Home doesn't provide easy answers. While the book is clear that living a closed life that hides the reality of one's gender identity is profoundly damaging, it is also clear that the effort to live an open life consistent with one's internal self is also scary and fraught when such a life runs counter to the expectations of society. And the book shows how such expectations are not just widespread but *everywhere*, affecting even those damaged by them. For example, even as a young girl suffering under her father's efforts to force her to be something she's not, Alison wants her father to be something *he* isn't. Alison describes herself, a tomboyish girl, as trying to compensate for something "unmanly" in her father in "a war of cross-purposes." Further, the book grapples with the complicated intersection of gender and biological sex. After all, had Bruce not hidden his gender

identity and married Alison's mother, Alison herself would not exist. For Alison to live, Bruce *had* to have repressed his sexuality. Her life depended on his suffering, capturing the sometimes intractable tension between sexual nature and gender identity. The book offers no solutions to such issues, but in capturing them in their complexity it provides honesty nonetheless.

REPRESSION VS. OPENNESS

Throughout *Fun Home*, Alison Bechdel's exploration into her own lesbian sexuality is juxtaposed with her father Bruce's repressed gay or bisexual orientation. While this contrast between openness and repression in the book is specifically related to sexuality and gender-identity, the book is also a powerful portrayal of the impact of repression more generally, the way that shame can drive a person to hide that shame, and then how hiding that shame can in turn create complicated and self-destructive behaviors.

The memoir traces the development and impact of repression primarily through Alison as she grows up. As a young child she begins to become aware of the way that she is different – for instance her attraction to the butch lesbian she sees in a restaurant as a five year old, and her father's disapproval of that attraction. This recognition of difference leads to shame and a denial of her true self: she lies to her father and says that she does not want to look like the lesbian in the restaurant. Later, Alison develops compulsive habits that could be classified under the umbrella of OCD, likely due to "repressed hostility," leading her to create rituals around dressing and undressing, passing through doorways, and avoiding certain numbers. She also compulsively begins to write daily journal entries in a diary (even as her journal entries turn over time from truthful to obscure to inaccurate, mirroring her repressed state). Such obsessive behavior betrays a need to control the world in some way, a need driven by the sense that the world that has forced her into repressing herself is so far beyond her control. But the obsessive rituals – such as Alison's need to pass through a doorway in just the right way or else to try again – are themselves out of control.

While Alison's story traces the development of such obsessive behaviors, they are just as evident in her equally repressed father. In the book Alison describes her father's constant decorating of the **family house** using a metaphor that excellently captures the dynamic of repression and obsession: she sees her father as being both **Daedalus and the Minotaur** – both the Greek designer who created the inescapable labyrinth to house the terrible monster, and the monster itself. In this way of seeing things, the obsessive behaviors are a desperate way to hide and control the monster a person sees within him or herself, but they never eliminate that person's sense that he or she really is at heart a monster. And so even as the behaviors offer control, they are also a prison (and the "monster" can still sometimes escape, as both Bruce's rages and affairs with some of his male teenage students attest).

When Alison goes to college, she finds an environment that allows her to see herself as something other than a monster. At Oberlin, she explores her sexuality in-depth, first intellectually, delving into books on the subject, then socially, joining her college's "Gay Union" and becoming a part of the gay and lesbian campus community, and finally physically, when she begins a relationship with Joan, her first girlfriend. Alison eventually eliminates her final repression, and writes a letter to her parents in which she comes out of the closet as a lesbian. Although neither of her parents is fully supportive, Alison's honesty and openness do cause Helen, her mother, to come clean about Bruce's secret homosexual proclivities. So, though Alison coming out of the closet doesn't lead to the parental acceptance she is surely seeking, it does grant her more openness and honesty about her parents' relationship and her father's repressed sexuality. And Alison, in turn, reflects that honesty in *Fun Home* itself, making her story and the story of her family open to the world.

FICTION AND REALITY

In *Fun Home*, the Bechdel family constantly, and perhaps compulsively, engages with fiction. But Alison, Bruce, and Helen each engage with fiction in different ways. These differences in the characters' relationships to fiction don't end with their interactions with books and plays. Rather, those differences are suggestive about the three characters' different relationships to *reality*, to the ways that they understand, escape, or try to shift or hide the real world around them.

The number and degree of literary references in *Fun Home* is astounding, and these references are not simply one off quotes. As the writer of her memoir, Alison weaves into the fabric of her book references to the myth of **Daedulus and Icarus**, Daedulus and the Minotaur, to F. Scott Fitzgerald and *The Great Gatsby*, and to James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*. She examines how the world around her is similar and different from the events and characters in these stories, and uses those similarities and differences to tease out an understanding of her father, mother, and the world, working out her understanding of reality through its relation to fiction and literature.

In college, for instance, Alison realizes that she is a lesbian while reading a book in the library, not through any physical experience. It may seem strange that Alison would come to engage with fiction in this way, since as a child she wrote her own type of "fiction" in the form of her diary, which was defined as much by what it obscured or left out as what it truthfully included, and which was further marked by Alison's disbelief in

any kind of objective truth as symbolized by her obsessive inclusion of "she thinks" before (or even on top of) any statement. In the diary, Alison used fiction as an evasion, as a way to hide or deny truth or reality. What's important to note, though, is that as an adult, when Alison has come to terms with who she is as a lesbian, she nonetheless remains somewhat skeptical of "objective truth," a stance that isn't so surprising given that as an adult she learns the reality of what she only sensed as a child: that her family life was built upon secrets and evasions: her father's sexuality and his string of homosexual affairs. In *Fun Home*, Alison is up front that she doesn't and can't know if her father actually did or didn't kill himself, whether coming out did or didn't play a role in his death, if her father was gay or bisexual, or even during the brief single moment when she and her father discussed their sexuality which of them was playing the "parent." Understanding her life in its comparison to fiction gives Alison a way not to come to definitive answers, but to frame questions and understand the *possibilities* of reality. It allows her to grapple with the fact that she can't know the absolute "truth" of her father, but she can still build an understanding of him. And, similarly, she can build an understanding of herself.

In contrast to Alison's use of fiction and literature to understand reality, Helen seems to use fiction to escape it. Helen's behavior is exemplified in how she prepares for her performances as an actress in local theater productions. She throws herself completely into the roles, learning not just her own lines but everyone else's as well. This perfectionist tendency pervades all throughout Helen's life, causing her to sometimes act neglectfully towards her family. Further, though, as the book progresses it starts to seem clear that Helen's devotion to her theater roles is at least partially driven by the fact that, through theater and the chance to inhabit someone else, Helen can ignore and therefore live with the reality that her husband is cheating on her with underage men, rather than do something in reality to try to change it or address it. And, further still, the book suggests that Helen is playing even her own life as a kind of role, acting the part of the happy wife to a good family man as if it were true.

Bruce treads the blurriest line between reality and fiction, so much so that Alison once compares him to a poor-man's Jay Gatsby: Bruce imagines himself as an important aristocrat overseeing his estate, and so he decorates the **Bechdel family house** in order to project the (fictional) fanciful image he has of himself. In turn, this causes other people to perceive Bruce as a good, upstanding, if a bit eccentric heterosexual family man, while in reality he is erratic, rage-filled, and cheats on his wife with underage men who are often his students. So, Bruce comes to represent the fine line between fiction and lies, which, in Alison's view, is all about presentation—Bruce puts himself forward as something he is not, and thus he steps over the line so that his Good Husband And Father mask becomes a suffocating, shame-shielding lie that invades every part of his life, including the design of his house.

Complicating this a bit, however, is the reality that throughout Alison's life, an engagement with fiction is what ultimately brings she and Bruce closer together than at any other point in their relationship. Alison enrolling in Bruce's English class in high school leads to the discovery that she loves the same kinds of books he does, and later, their exchange of homosexual works of literature near the end of Bruce's life (he gives her Colette's autobiography, and she gives him *Flying* by Kate Millett) leads to their only frank, if dissatisfying, real-life exchange about their respective sexualities. So even as Bruce is constantly engaged in an effort to turn reality into a kind of fiction (or, perhaps, to assert a fiction as reality), fiction serves as a bridge, however meager, of truth and connection between him and his daughter.

The treatment of reality and fiction in *Fun Home*, then, is complex. For Alison, there exists a clear separation between the two, but accessing that universal truth is nearly impossible since Alison acknowledges that memory is imperfect and she can only speak to her own perceptions. While Bruce continually uses fiction to consciously hide the truth, Alison is always cognizant (sometimes to the point of compulsion) of pointing out that her perception of reality isn't necessarily the exact truth, though it's as truthful as she can account for. Alison, then, uses fiction as a framework by which to come to grips with her parents and herself, Helen uses it to escape from her own reality, and Bruce uses it as a false mask to hide his reality from the outside world. In all of these cases, fiction does not, and can not, change reality—and one can argue that Bruce's tragedy is that he believes it can. (Which is also interesting in that one can argue that this same misperception leads to the tragedy of Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby* – and so even in its themes about fiction, *Fun Home* is entwined with other works of fiction.)

DEATH AND THE TRAGICOMIC

The subtitle of *Fun Home* – *"A Family Tragicomic"* – captures a number of aspects of the book. First, it captures the fact that the story of Bruce in the memoir is a tragedy told in the format of a graphic novel – a comic. The book is, literally, a "tragicomic." On a deeper level, it evokes the way that the memoir treats death as both tragically life-alternating and as comedic, in the sense that even terrible events can come to seem absurdly and ridiculously humorous.

Bruce's premature death, and likely suicide, hangs heavily over the book's narrative, while the phrase "Fun Home" is the Bechdel children's not-entirely-ironic nickname for the family-run funeral home that Bruce inherits from his father. Alison and her siblings goof around in and even sleep over at the funeral home, causing them to have a far more casual and cavalier attitude toward death than most children. By the end of the

book, Alison's relationship toward death in *Fun Home* seems to be two-fold: though Alison is more cognizant of (and therefore desensitized to) the realities of death in a general sense because of the family-run "fun home," when a death occurs close to her, it is even more difficult to process than usual because she is so used to treating death casually that she represses her initial feelings of grief and only lets them out after a long time has passed (and perhaps she is even still dealing with them while writing and drawing this memoir). Further, Alison's experience sheds light on the fact that death is inherently absurd and incomprehensible, which makes it harder rather than easier to comprehend when it finally strikes close to home. After returning home in the wake of her father's death, Alison and her brother John greet each other with wide, horrible grins, embodying how they're incapable of showing or perhaps even feeling the typical sadness associated with losing a parent.

Alison also suggests that, as a mortician, Bruce is even more in tune with the cold realities of death, as it is his job to embalm the bodies when they arrive at the funeral home. In regard to Bruce, Alison doubts the veracity of a famous Albert Camus quote from *The Myth of Sisyphus* stating that we all live as if we don't know we're going to die. In fact, Alison believes Bruce may have been all too familiar with death, and his proximity to it could have tempted him to cause his own.

But *Fun Home* isn't solely a book about the Bechdel's funeral home. It's also a book about their life, with a particular focus on the old **Gothic Revival house** that her father obsessively renovates and decorates. This house is itself something of a circus "fun house," in the way it's labyrinthine corridors and mirror-filled decorations often cause visitors to get lost. And the term "fun house" also applies to the home in the way the structure is itself an embodiment of the internal walls and illusions that Bruce has built up to hide the homosexual identity that he finds shameful. Late in the book, Alison describes Bruce's life of sexual shame, his obsessive hiding of his "erotic truth," as being a kind of death. Seen in this way, the family home also functions as a kind of funeral home for Bruce and the family that exists around the lie hiding his inner truth. Even as they lived a real life in that house, it was a life marked in part by an absence or kind of death at its center, and so as both life and death the story of her family and her father that Bechdel tells is neither just tragic nor comic. It's both.

ARTIFICE

Bruce Bechdel is obsessed with keeping up appearances so that the outside world perceives him as something different than he really is. The first chapter of *Fun Home* is named "Old father, old artificer" (a quote from Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*), and in it Alison details her father's obsessive focus on restoring the family's home to the point that she calls him "a Daedalus of décor." Indeed, just as **Daedalus** in the Greek myth created a labyrinth to encase the Minotaur from which "escape was impossible," Bruce's relentless restoration of the **family's old Gothic Revival house** is correspondingly tyrannical and entrapping, so that visitors of the house often get lost amidst its many mirrors and endless corridors. Further, Alison believes that her father intentionally designs her house's labyrinthine layout, full of mirrors, statues, and distractions of all kinds, in order to "conceal" what he sees as his profound shame – his homosexuality. Similarly, Bruce is obsessed with his own manicured appearance, and a stray comment from one of his kids at breakfast about his wardrobe can send him scurrying back to his room to change.

Bruce's penchant for artifice causes Alison to develop distaste for any sort of "ornament" because it obscures function and, worse than that, glitzy decorations seem to Alison to be a kind of lie. Building on this, Alison believes her father uses his "skillful artifice" to not only hide the truth about himself, but to actively make himself appear to be something he's not. Just as Bruce uses bronzer to make his skin appear more perfect than it really is, he uses his family and flashy home to make himself appear to be an ideal father and husband, while in reality he cheats on his wife, neglects his kids, and has affairs with teenage boys who are sometimes his students.

Though the Bechdels really do live together in their museum-like house all through Alison's childhood, it is clear to her from an early age that something real and vital is missing from the household, which Alison decides is "an elasticity, a margin for error." In other words: because Alison's father only makes it *seem* like he is a loyal husband and father, the artificial household lacks the presence of true warmth, trust, and closeness, and any "error" feels as if it might make the whole thing come crashing down. Alison describes a moment when she and her brothers are sitting in front of a Christmas tree with Bruce watching as "a sort of still life with children," which, in many ways, is how Bruce always treats his family – as if they are props for Bruce to place around the house, intended to lend him an air of (false) authenticity.

Bruce gives Alison the surface of what a father can provide, but none of the depth beneath it, so that Alison feels the pain of Bruce's absence long before he passes away. Bruce's death, too, is in itself an example of substance giving way to a shinier, but entirely artificial narrative—friends and family who attend Bruce's funeral lament him as "a good man" because he appeared to be, whereas Alison and her family know that Bruce's hidden reality was far more complex and unpleasant than he had constructed it to seem.

To Alison, artifice, when used to deceive others, is indistinguishable from a lie. And Alison uses her art – of which *Fun Home* is a product – for an opposite purpose: to reveal the truth. The way that Alison constantly interrupts her own narrative to make clear that it is just her own subjective

understanding of what happened, subject to her own limited knowledge and the failures of memory, reinforces her belief in truth rather than artifice. By cutting into her narrative she never allows it to become artifice, to create the illusion of an impossible objective truth—rather, she ensures that *Fun Home* tells her experience, *her* truth.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE BECHDEL FAMILY HOME

The design of the Bechdels' old, Gothic Revival house that Bruce is obsessed with restoring and furnishing itself becomes a symbol for the artificial way that Bruce constructs his life. Alison compares the house to the mythical labyrinth **Daedalus built to entrap the Minotaur**, and in that comparison her father serves as both Daedalus (the designer) and the Minotaur (the monster lurking within). In Alison's view, Bruce's labyrinthine design is constructed to "make things appear to be what they were not," or in other words, make Bruce seem like a heterosexual, loyal family man on the surface when, deep down, that was far from the truth.

Within the home, the library serves as the epicenter of the house's artificiality, and so it symbolically represents the epitome of Bruce's own artifice. In the library, Bruce imagines himself as "a nineteenth century aristocrat overseeing his estate from behind the leather-topped mahogany and brass second-empire desk," designing the rest of the space with that in mind. But Bruce also uses the room to flirt with and charm his high school students, including Roy, who he would then have affairs with. The room allowed Bruce to lean into his affectations so thoroughly that "for all practical purposes" it became real, and Bruce saw himself as the put-together family man fantasy he projected to the world.

DAEDALUS, ICARUS, AND THE MINOTAUR

Alison uses two Greek myths involving Daedalus as allegories for what life is like growing up with Bruce as a father. The first myth is that of Daedulus and the Minotaur, in which Daedulus was the master inventor who created the labyrinth in order to imprison the monstrous Minotaur. In *Fun Home*, though, Bruce plays the part of both Daedulus *and* the Minotaur. As Daedulus, he functions as the architect of the intricate, labyrinthine **Gothic Rivival home** in which the Bechdels live and which he is always decorating and renovating. But he is also a Daedulus in the sense that he has built up an artificial picture of himself as a perfect family man and father, when in fact he is hiding what he seems to consider a kind of monster within: his homosexuality or bisexuality. And that "hidden monster," that Minotaur, sometimes erupts out of the carefully crafted labyrinth, whether through his secret affairs or through his erratic but not infrequent rages that terrify his family.

The second myth, that of Daedalus and Icarus, bookends the narrative of *Fun Home*. Though the myth is a narrative about a parent and child, Bruce again in many ways plays both roles in the tragic narrative. Just as Icarus flies too close to the sun and plummets to his death because of his father's miscalculation, Bruce has a similarly tragic premature end, though it is likely one he architects himself. At the same time, the final illustration of the book depicts Alison jumping off a diving board into Bruce's arms, and through that image Alison seems to imply that because Bruce served both roles in the Icarus/Daedalus narrative, Bruce's physical presence through Alison's childhood and adolescence, though often hurtful and erratic, might have helped prevent *her* from flying too close to the sun and plummeting prematurely as he did. Perhaps Alison inherited her father's compulsive, erratic Daedalus-like drive and ingenuity, but Bruce's fall may have made her able to put those traits to far less self-destructive purposes than he did (such as the creation of this graphic memoir).

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Mariner Books edition of *Fun Home* published in 2007.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ My father could spin garbage… into gold. He could transfigure a room with the smallest offhand flourish… he was an alchemist of appearance, a savant of surface, a Daedalus of decor.

Related Characters: Alison Bechdel (speaker), Bruce Bechdel

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is situated near the very beginning of the graphic memoir, in the midst of Alison introducing Bruce's obsession with restoring the family's Gothic revival house. Here, Alison Bechdel first hints at the sinister elements hidden

beneath Bruce's obsession; at first, Alison stating that Bruce could "spin garbage… into gold" seems as if it might be a compliment, but then her reference to him as a "savant of surface" suggests, rightfully, that Bruce was far more concerned with making things *appear* to be beautiful, artificially, than the truth of how they were beneath the surface. In this way, Bruce was a master craftsman, but his end product always ended up feeling shallow or even like a kind of trick, more gilded than golden, to use Alison's analogy.

❝ Sometimes, when things were going well, I think my father actually enjoyed having a family. Or at least, the air of authenticity we lent to his exhibit. Sort of like a still life with children.

Related Characters: Alison Bechdel (speaker), Helen Bechdel, Christian Bechdel, John Bechdel, Bruce Bechdel

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Alison Bechdel has delved into the more ominous side of Bruce's obsessive behaviors, in that he acted like a tyrant toward the rest of the family and didn't listen to any of their preferences. Here, Alison extends this idea, implying (and later overtly stating) that Bruce sees his family more as objects than flesh-and-blood human beings: he wishes his children (and perhaps even his wife) were more like furniture for him to place around and order about as he likes. Also, Alison implies here that Bruce mainly enjoyed having a family for the artificial reason that having one made it appear that he was a "normal" family man, while also serving to hide his homosexual proclivities and secret affairs with teenage boys.

❝ I developed a contempt for useless ornament… If anything, they obscured function. They were embellishments in the worst sense. They were lies. My father…used his skillful artifice not to make things, but to make things appear to be what they were not. That is to say, impeccable.

Related Characters: Alison Bechdel (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Alison Bechdel narrates the fundamental differences between her and her father—mainly, that he was obsessed with "ornament" and appearance, and, in reaction to this, Alison grew to hate embellishments of all kinds and became attracted to the purely functional. Alison's idea that ornaments, at least in the way Bruce uses them, are indistinguishable from lies stems from the fact that he uses such ornaments to camouflage his true self, and to give people the idea that he's a loyal father and husband when in reality he's nothing of the sort. While at this time the young Alison has no idea of her father's darker behavior – his affairs with teenage boys – she is still somehow aware that her father is somehow living a lie, and that her family life is therefore also a kind of lie. Given this context, it's not hard to see why Alison became disgusted by useless ornament and tried to steer towards items that were devoid of artificiality, and purely meant as functional.

❝ …his absence resonated retroactively, echoing back through all the time I knew him. Maybe it was the converse of the way amputees feel pain in a missing limb. He really was there all those years, a flesh-and-blood presence… But I ached as if he were already gone.

Related Characters: Alison Bechdel (speaker), Bruce Bechdel

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs on the final page of Chapter 1, entitled "Old Father, Old Artificer," after Alison has enumerated her father Bruce's negative and also positive qualities. Here she explains a strange juxtaposition that she will come back to in the very last lines of her memoir: though Bruce didn't kill himself until Alison was in college (and after most of her formative years), throughout her childhood Alison already felt her father's absence because parts of Bruce's personality were always absent, probably because of his deep internal repression of his own queer sexuality.

In a way, Alison explains here the absurdly "tragicomic"

aspects of Bruce's death—it is almost comical in an ironic, absurd way, in that Bruce in certain ways lived his life as if he were already dead, cutting off certain parts of himself and strangling himself internally. However, when Bruce does eventually die, Alison has an extremely tough time processing the tragedy of his death, in some ways *because* of his repression and resulting "absence." His death is difficult for her to grasp because she never really got to know him in the first place.

Chapter 2 Quotes

It was somewhere during those early years that I began confusing us with *The Addams Family*...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.

Related Characters: Alison Bechdel (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is located a handful of pages into Chapter 2, after Alison has provided some details about the events surrounding Bruce's (most likely) suicide and then delved into Bruce and Helen's courtship, marriage in Europe, and ultimate return to Beech Creek, Pennsylvania after the death of Bruce's father forced him to take over the family-run funeral home in his small hometown.

In this quote, Alison indicates the beginnings of her fascination (and confusion) with the differences and similarities between reality and fiction. As a young kid, even before she could read, Alison sees her own family reflected in that of *The Addams Family*, but not in the distorted, subversive, somewhat satirical way the writers and illustrators of the television show intended—instead, she saw her own family reflected *accurately* in the distortions of the Addams family, which captures the oddness of her family. This is also the first time that she describes seeing her family in somewhat fictional terms, the first (but not last) time that she sees them as both characters and as family members.

Joan drove home with me and we arrived that evening. My little brother John and I greeted each other with ghastly, uncontrollable grins.

Related Characters: Alison Bechdel (speaker), Bruce Bechdel, Joan, John Bechdel

Related Themes:

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs as Alison returns home from college after getting news of Bruce's death. This moment highlights Alison's absurd tragic *and* comic reactions to Bruce's death—his death is tragic and abrupt, but her reaction to it (and John's as well) is to grin as if something hilarious has just happened. This is not a traditional reaction to a father's death, and though Alison at first seems to deal with Bruce's passing better than most would, the truly tragic part is that Alison treating her father's death lightly and not letting her grief spill over immediately causes Alison to repress her feelings of grief and remain viscerally angry about Bruce's death for years afterward. In fact, it could be argued that writing/drawing this graphic memoir (nearly two decades after Bruce's death) is Alison's way of processing the event and finally letting her repressed feelings out, as she is finally open about her complex feelings about his death rather than suppressing them with a horrible grin.

You would also think that a childhood spent in such close proximity to the workaday 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... 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.

Related Characters: Alison Bechdel (speaker), Bruce Bechdel

Related Themes:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Alison has delved into the circumstances surrounding Bruce's death and also explained how she and her brothers would have to help out around the "Fun Home" (funeral home), including an

incident when Bruce once made Alison enter the back room while he was tidying up a gruesome nude male corpse.

Alison states that she repressed her initial feelings of shock at seeing this dead body, and perhaps she was still repressing this initial shock when dealing with Bruce's death. Here she notes the irony of her proximity to death—though she and her brothers have a "cavalier" attitude towards it, when a death occurs close to them, they have an elongated, drawn-out grieving process. It's almost as if their proximity and cavalier attitude toward death makes it impossible for them to actually deal with the profundity and tragedy of death when it happens to them. They only know how to deal with it as a detached absurdity.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ My father's death was a queer business—queer in every sense of that multivalent word…but most compellingly at the time, his death was bound up for me with the one definition conspicuously missing from our mammoth Webster's.

Related Characters: Alison Bechdel (speaker), Bruce Bechdel

Related Themes:

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs at the very beginning of Chapter 3, right before Alison juxtaposes her own epiphany that she is a lesbian with the revelation of her father's hidden, long-term homosexual affairs. Here, Alison learns more from what is left out of the dictionary than what it actually says, teaching her a valuable lesson about omission (and a lack of openness) that Bruce embodies. Also, this section implies that if the dictionary, which is purported to be an empirical, factual document, can leave out fundamentally important definitions, individual human beings (like Bruce) can omit or repress even more. In this quote, Alison notes that the most important definition of the word is missing, just as Alison must confront what she's been ignoring or missing and finally acknowledge and explore her own queer gender identity.

❝ I'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.

Related Characters: Alison Bechdel (speaker), Helen Bechdel, Bruce Bechdel

Related Themes:

Page Number: 58-59

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Alison has come out of the closet to her parents in a letter and, soon afterward, her mother Helen has finally revealed Bruce's long-hidden secret (his homosexual affairs with teenage boys). This revelation, coming on the heels of revealing her own true self to her parents, makes Alison feel as if she's been "upstaged" and gone from being the "protagonist" in her own story to "comic relief" in her parents' story.

Note how, even when referring to herself and real events, Alison uses the terminology of fiction (upstaged, protagonist, tragedy) to contextualize the situation and give the audience and herself a clearer sense of exactly how she felt. Even in purely real situations, Alison uses fiction as a way to understand reality.

❝ The line that dad drew between reality and fiction was indeed a blurry one. To understand this, one had only to enter his library… And if my father liked to imagine himself as a nineteenth century aristocrat overseeing his estate from behind the leather-topped mahogany and brass second-empire desk… 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… and becomes, for all practical purposes, real.

Related Characters: Alison Bechdel (speaker), Bruce Bechdel

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 59-60

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Alison has come out of the closet as a lesbian and her mother Helen has finally revealed the truth about Bruce's secret string of homosexual affairs with teenage boys. Alison pinpoints how her father uses his fictional persona "as a nineteenth century aristocrat…" not only to obscure the truth, but even to seduce teenage boys

by making them buy into a "pretense" so detailed that it feels real to them. The artificiality of Bruce's library, then, is not a placid kind of artificiality (like perhaps a plastic pink flamingo on a front lawn might be), but instead a sinister kind of artificiality, because it tricks many of those viewing it into believing the artifice is real, and thus becomes a kind of lie or deceptive trick. The complicating factor in Bruce's artifice is that he himself seemed to buy into his own fictional illusions, at least on the surface.

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. And living with it took a toll on the rest of us.

Related Characters: Alison Bechdel (speaker), Helen Bechdel, Bruce Bechdel

Related Themes:

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Alison details Bruce's youthful obsession with the writer F. Scott Fitzgerald, as well as Fitzgerald's part in Bruce's courtship of Helen (she gifted him a Fitzgerald biography, and he often wrote to her about the author). Alison indicates that Bruce's obsession with Fitzgerald wasn't solely based on the author's prose, but it was also wrapped up in the myth of Fitzgerald as a man and how he used his real life experience to influence his work.

Later, Bruce's fictional persona as an artful "aristocrat" stuck in Beech Creek, Pennsylvania seems influenced by his ideas about Fitzgerald. However, as Alison notes with her last sentence in this quote, while Bruce was happy to intermingle his fictional persona in his everyday life, the rest of the family suffered the consequences as Bruce often shirked his real-life responsibilities to fulfill his fantasies. At the time the "toll" on Alison and her brothers was a sense of her father being absent, of their being a hole or emptiness or lie at the center of their lives. Though of course the toll was in fact even greater than that, as Bruce's fantasies also involved his seduction of teenage boys.

I employ these allusions… 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.

Related Characters: Alison Bechdel (speaker), Bruce Bechdel

Related Themes:

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Alison has explained the arc of Bruce and Helen's courtship and eventual marriage, largely using literary frameworks (like the Henry James novel *Washington Square* and later Shakespeare's play *The Taming of the Shrew*) to understand their relationship dynamic. Alison overtly expresses here that she often confuses or blurs the line between fiction and reality in regard to her parents, or perhaps even that she never connected to them very well in reality, so she began to attempt to understand them through fiction, and thus began to see them more as fictional characters than real people.

My parents met, I eventually extracted from my mother, in a performance of *The Taming of the Shrew*… It's a troubling play, of course. The willful Katherine's spirit is broken by the mercenary, domineering Petruchio… 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.

Related Characters: Alison Bechdel (speaker), Helen Bechdel, Bruce Bechdel

Related Themes:

Page Number: 69-70

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Alison has detailed Bruce and Helen's early days together. Here, after much prodding, she finally learns how her mother and father met. In a fitting coincidence, Bruce and Helen met during a production of *The Taming of the Shrew*, and sadly the reality of their relationship came to imitate the fictional model presented in Shakespeare's play. Given their relationship's beginning,

it's no wonder that Alison begins to see her parents more in fictional terms than as real people, as Bruce largely sucked the enthusiasm and vitality out of Helen in the same way Petruchio does to Katherine in the play.

❝ My realization at nineteen that I was a lesbian came about in a manner consistent with my bookish upbringing. A revelation not of the flesh, but of the mind.

Related Characters: Alison Bechdel (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs when Alison is at college at Oberlin and finally discovers—or at least suspects—that she may be a lesbian. Rather than discovering this through physical feelings or real-world actions, Alison discovers her queer sexuality by reading about other lesbians in a book, when she has the epiphany that perhaps she might be like the women she is reading about. Given the written word's impact on her life, it makes sense that Alison's realization about her gender identity and sexuality occurred in college, away from her family, in a library with the help of a book. Some of the most important discoveries of Alison's life happen with her eyes glued to a book, and her coming-of-age revelation that she is a lesbian is no exception.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ Proust would have intense, emotional friendships with fashionable women… but it was young, often straight, men with whom he fell in love. He would also fictionalize real people in his life by transposing their gender—the narrator's lover Albertine, for example, is often read as a portrait of Proust's beloved chauffeur/secretary, Alfred.

Related Characters: Alison Bechdel (speaker), Bruce Bechdel

Related Themes:

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Alison has detailed her childhood feelings that Bruce wasn't nearly manly enough, largely thanks to his obsession with flowers, which Alison compares to Proust's floral obsession in *Remembrance of Things Past*. Just as Proust used his fiction to express his homosexual feelings in the guise of heterosexual characters, Bruce used his fictional persona (as a kind of pseudo-aristocrat) to seduce young men and boys while also keeping some kind of cognitive dissonance about his morality and status as a good husband and father. Both Proust and Bruce use different types of fiction in order to not be open about their gender identity but still express how they feel, albeit surreptitiously.

❝ I sensed a chink in my family's armor, an undefended gap in the circle of our wagons which cried out, it seemed to me, for some plain, two-fisted sinew.

Related Characters: Alison Bechdel (speaker), Bruce Bechdel

Related Themes:

Page Number: 95

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is located immediately after Alison compares Bruce to the author Marcel Proust, in that they both, in her view, exhibited "sissy" behavior. So, as a child Alison tried to compensate for her father's lack of masculinity by minimizing her femininity and trying to be as masculine as possible.

This circular relationship captures the way that Alison grew up in opposition to her father and yet was profoundly affected by him. It also captures how complicated gender identity and societal expectations about gender identity can be. Here Alison, who will grow up to be a lesbian, sees her father as being not manly enough. In other words, Alison sees the world according to gendered expectations – men should be tough and strong – even as she is beginning to have the sense that she doesn't fit into the gendered expectations of girls.

❝ In an act of prestidigitation typical of the way my father juggled his public appearance and private reality, the evidence is simultaneously hidden and revealed.

Related Characters: Alison Bechdel (speaker), Roy, Bruce Bechdel

Related Themes:

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs near the midpoint of *Fun Home*, on the only two-page illustration of the graphic memoir, which is an illustration of Alison's hands holding a photograph that Bruce took of Roy, presumably one of his lovers, wearing just his underwear while on a family vacation on which Helen wasn't present. Alison notes that Bruce blotted out the date on the photo, yet kept it in the envelope that held the family photos for this vacation. He tried to hide the evidence, but did so in a haphazard way. Though Bruce clearly didn't consciously want to get caught in a homosexual affair, it is obvious that he didn't try as hard as he possibly could to hide the evidence. Perhaps, subconsciously, Bruce was beginning to tire of repressing himself and yearned to be out in the open—why else would he keep this picture in the envelope with the rest of the family pictures? Further, why would Bruce even take this picture in the first place if he didn't, at least on some level, yearn to be forced out into the open with his sexuality?

❝ As the man showed us around, it seemed imperative that he not know I was a girl… "John! C'mere! … Call me Albert instead of Alison." My brother ignored me. But looking back, my stratagem strikes me as a precocious feat of Proustian transposition…

Related Characters: Alison Bechdel (speaker), John Bechdel, Bruce Bechdel

Related Themes:

Page Number: 113

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is situated in the midst of a family vacation without Helen but with Bruce's young helper (and presumably lover), Bill, to the family's cabin out in the mountains. Alison and her siblings were given a tour of a gigantic crane and construction site by a construction worker, and in this masculine-dominated space, which included a calendar tacked to the wall featuring nude women, Alison wanted to be identified as a man rather than a woman. Alison narrates that her sudden assumption of this fictional persona was a "feat of Proustian transposition" because Proust allegedly translated his feelings for his homosexual lover, Albert, into his fictional narrator's heterosexual feelings for the female character Albertine. Alison, by wanting to be seen as a boy after feeling attracted to the pictures of the nude women, is in a sense trying to make her feelings "normal." If she is a boy, then attraction to nude women makes sense. She is trying to "transpose" herself to hide the "abnormality" of her feelings.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ Our sun rose over Bald Eagle Mountain's hazy blue flank. And it set behind the strip mine-pocked plateau… with similar perversity, the sparkling creek that coursed down from the plateau and through our town was crystal clear precisely because it was polluted… wading in this fishless creek and swooning at the salmon sky, I learned firsthand that most elemental of all ironies… that, as Wallace Stevens put it in my mom's favorite poem, "Death is the mother of beauty."

Related Characters: Alison Bechdel (speaker), Helen Bechdel

Related Themes:

Page Number: 128-129

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs soon after Alison's description of the history of Beech Creek, as well as the way that Bechdels have tended to not leave their hometown. Though the "crystal clear" creek appears to be beautiful, Alison acknowledges that it is an artificial kind of beauty, caused by human pollution's negative impact on nature. The sky, too, sparkled beautifully at sunset largely because of the fumes from the paper mill nearby. Alison deepens her understanding of this phenomenon by comparing the beauty of her surrounding lifeless nature to the famous Wallace Stevens line, "Death is the mother of beauty." And indeed, this ironic reality caused Alison, too, to be moved to write poetry as a young girl. Reality is often the prompting for someone to write fiction, which is why the line between the two can be so blurry.

❝ …The most arresting thing about the tape is its evidence of both my parents at work, intent and separate… It's childish, perhaps, to grudge them the sustenance of their creative solitude. But it was *all* that sustained them, and thus was all-consuming. From their example, I learned quickly to feed myself.

Related Characters: Alison Bechdel (speaker), Helen Bechdel, Bruce Bechdel

Related Themes:

Page Number: 133-134

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Alison has discovered a home-recorded cassette tape featuring the voices of both of her parents: Helen used it to rehearse lines for a play, while Bruce used it to prepare an audio guide to a museum run by the Beech Creek county historical society. This moment is a perfect example of the fundamental flaw in Helen and Bruce's creative pursuits: their obsessions left little time for other passions, especially the passion that can be felt in close-knit families. Yes, all of the Bechdels had creative internal (and often fictional) lives, but, as Alison says, that is *all* they had, and so the Bechdel children began to seek emotional and creative sustenance from their own internal passions rather than from real people, including their parents. This led the Bechdel house to feel more like an artists' colony than a real family to Alison, with each member of the family engaged in their own creative pursuits.

❝ ...I had to kiss each of my stuffed animals—and not just in a perfunctory way. Then I'd bring one of the three bears to bed with me, alternating nightly between mother, father, and baby... I should point out that no one had kissed me good night in years.

Related Characters: Alison Bechdel (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 137

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Alison has explained that because her parents were so engaged in artistic pursuits (Helen with acting and piano and Bruce with books, his affairs, and his obsessive house restoration), the household felt more like an artists' colony than a family home. So, Alison sought not only creative fulfillment in imaginative fictions, but, as can be clearly seen from this anecdote, she also craved the intimacy and love she wasn't getting from her parents. It wasn't just that nobody kissed Alison goodnight for years—neither of her parents probably even knew that Alison *wanted* to be kissed goodnight, because they were so focused on their creative endeavors that they weren't paying very much attention to the emotional realities of their kids. Alison, here with our bears, is playing out the kind of loving family (albeit in a compulsive way) that she doesn't get from her own parents.

❝ ...How did I know that the things I was writing were absolutely, objectively true? My simple, declarative sentences began to strike me as hubristic at best, utter lies at worst. All I could speak for were my own perceptions, and perhaps not even those.

Related Characters: Alison Bechdel (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 141

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Alison details her descent into obsessive-compulsive tendencies, largely thanks (or so she reads in a book) to "repressed hostility." One of her OCD tendencies is to write in a personal journal every day, but her compulsion for truthfully reporting the facts of her day gives way to a different kind of compulsion—the compulsion for empirical truth. Alison has an internal crisis in that she begins to believe her own perceptions may not—and cannot be proved to be—one hundred percent empirically true. After all, we all can only speak for our own perceptions. Thus Alison began to add the phrase "I think" to any sentence that purported to be factually accurate, giving her recounting of her life a distinctly fictional bent. In this mindset, nothing anybody writes as nonfiction should be perceived as wholly, empirically true, and the line between reality and fiction becomes blurred to Alison in that all memories or experiences are filtered through a mind's lens, filled with subconscious biases and personal preferences.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ This juxtaposition of the last days of childhood with those of Nixon and the end of that larger, national innocence may seem trite. But it was one of many heavy-handed plot devices to befall my family during those strange, hot months.

Related Characters: Alison Bechdel (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 155

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs near the beginning of chapter 6, right after Alison sets up that the summer of 1974 was a pivotal, dramatic summer for the Bechdel family—Helen was at top stress levels because she was working on her Master's degree thesis and performing in an Oscar Wilde play, while Bruce had to go to court to defend a charge of offering alcohol to a minor, while Alison received her first period. Here, Alison describing this summer as filled with "heavy-handed plot devices" indicates that her memories of this summer, like her perceptions of her parents in general, seem more fictional to her than real.

Though these signifiers, like a plague of cicadas swarming the town of Beech Creek, would be considered plot devices or symbols in a fictional work, in real life they're simply real-life events, perhaps even coincidences, that don't really foreshadow anything. But, in Alison's view, they serve as "plot devices" in the dramatic Bechdel family narrative, blurring the line between whether she sees her family history as fictional or real.

❝ In a photo taken a week before the play opened, she's literally holding herself together. But in her publicity shot as Lady Bracknell, she's a Victorian dominatrix to rival Wilde himself.

Related Characters: Alison Bechdel (speaker), Helen Bechdel

Related Themes:

Page Number: 164

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs during the same summer that Alison gets her period, the Watergate scandal sweeps the nation, Bruce has to go to court, and Helen is working on her Master's thesis and playing the female lead in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The juxtaposition of the two photos Alison describes illustrates how Helen utilizes fiction as a positive—if escapist—force in her own life. In reality, Helen is a nervous wreck, looking gaunt, exhausted, and diminished. But in her publicity shot as Lady Bracknell, she is confident, elegant, and even powerful. When acting as someone else, Helen is able to feel, and perhaps even become (at least for a little while) confident and in control of her life, while in reality her husband cheats on her and her various responsibilities are running her ragged.

❝ I had recently discovered some of Dad's old clothes. Putting on the formal shirt with its studs and cufflinks was a nearly mystical pleasure, like finding myself fluent in a language I'd never been taught. It felt too good to actually be good.

Related Characters: Alison Bechdel (speaker), Bruce Bechdel

Related Themes:

Page Number: 182

Explanation and Analysis

This quote happens after the crazy summer of 1974 has mostly calmed down for the Bechdel family—Helen's thesis has passed muster, Bruce has been acquitted of his charge (though he has to go to counseling for six months), and the literal storm that hit the Bechdel home has passed. When Alison one day talks her friend Beth into dressing up in Bruce's clothes, she feels the natural pleasure of doing something that makes her feel internally fulfilled. However, she doesn't acknowledge this feeling to her friend Beth or even to herself in her diary, instead choosing to repress it. Alison is partially able to justify this to herself at the time, perhaps, because Alison asked Beth to do this in the guise of a fictional scenario in which they both pretended to be con men. While taking on this fictional persona, Alison is able to walk around looking how she wants to look, and she enjoys it, but like most fictions it is over far too soon, and it does little more than satisfy her masculine-craving feelings for a brief while.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ We grew closer after I went away to college. Books—the ones assigned for my English class—continued to serve as our currency.

Related Characters: Alison Bechdel (speaker), Bruce Bechdel

Related Themes:

Page Number: 200

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Alison has quickly explored her associations with her father, from early childhood (when he was a fun-killing presence) to her teenage years when they bonded over books after Alison enrolled in Bruce's high school English course. Fiction brings Bruce and Alison together, and they grow even closer once they are physically separated in reality. The tragic irony of Bruce and Alison's relationship is that the father and daughter were really quite similar—both were bookish and struggling with society's (and their family's) expectations that went against their queer gender identities. However, they only really ever got to explore one half of their possible connection, the fictional half, as Bruce was unwilling or unable to open up with his daughter about his own sexuality and internal battle with repression and compulsion until near the very end of his life.

> It was not… a triumphal return. Home, as I had known it, was gone. Some crucial part of the structure seemed to be missing, like in dreams I would have later where termites had eaten through all the floor joists.

Related Characters: Alison Bechdel (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 215-216

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs soon after Alison has come out of the closet to her parents as a lesbian, upon her first return home. Because the family's construction is largely artificial (and Bruce's feelings about his family largely self-serving), when Alison returns home she feels that home as she once knew it is gone, disintegrated, unreachable, and she'll never get it back. This idea of the family being artificial is mirrored in her dream about termites eating through the structural support in the family home's floors. Though the floorboards are still there (and the Bechdel family home is still standing), the foundation of the family has crumbled, and thus there is nothing for the relationships to be built upon besides wood that will fail if too much pressure is put on it.

> What if Icarus hadn't hurtled into the sea? What if he'd inherited his father's inventive bent? What might he have wrought? He did hurtle into the sea, of course. But in the tricky reverse narration that impels our entwined stories, he was there to catch me when I leapt.

Related Characters: Alison Bechdel (speaker), Bruce Bechdel

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 231-232

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is scattered over the last couple of pages of the memoir and it is Alison's final narration before the book's end. She circles back to the beginning of the book, when she compared Bruce to both Icarus and Daedalus, both the one who (metaphorically) plummeted from the sky and also the one who designed the faulty wings (in this case, metaphorically, his ultimately fatal repression).

However, here Alison complicates this idea, as she *also* compares herself to both Icarus and Daedalus. In doing so, she seems to imply that because Bruce fell—and because Alison witnessed Bruce fall—she herself didn't have to suffer the same mistakes he did. Bruce suffered from both of the negative aspects of Icarus and Daedalus—he flew too close to the sun, and also was culpable in designing the contraption that launched him there. Alison, too, could be considered a master architect—a graphic memoir, after all, is made up of drawings and words of Alison's own construction. However, rather than falling, Alison is able to soar thanks to her father, and this book is itself a testament that Alison inherited her father's inventive bent and put it to far better, and certainly more open and honest, use than he ever did.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1: OLD FATHER, OLD ARTIFICER

The graphic memoir *Fun Home* starts with the adult Alison Bechdel narrating over images of her childhood. The first panel shows Alison approaching her father Bruce, who is lying on the floor and puts his feet in the middle of her chest to launch her in the air for a game of "airplane." Alison says the discomfort caused by the pressure to her stomach was well worth the rare physical contact with her father and the feeling of soaring through the air. In the circus, Alison notes, acrobatics where one person lies on the floor are called "Icarian Games." However, though **Icarus** met his tragic end by ignoring advice from his father, in Alison's case it is her father, and not her, who is destined "to plummet from the sky."

Right off the bat, Alison Bechdel begins her graphic memoir by using a fictional framework to understand her reality. In this case, Alison uses the Greek myth of Icarus as a way to understand her relationship with her father. (In this myth, Daedalus and his son Icarus are imprisoned in a tower and Daedalus constructs wings for them to fly away with. He warns Icarus not to fly too close to the sun, as it will melt the wings, but Icarus flies too high anyway, and falls into the sea and dies.) Yet Alison's reality diverges from the narrative arc of the myth—rather than Alison being the one to plummet from the sky and die, it is her father who metaphorically falls to his (actual) death. (It should also be noted that the chapter title comes from Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, which also deals with the Icarus myth and plays an important role later in the book.)

But, before Bruce plummets, he gets a lot done, and his greatest achievement results from his obsession with restoring the Bechdel family's **big, old house**. As a kid, Alison gets embarrassed when other kids think she's rich or unusual in any way because of the house's size. As an adult, she knows her family wasn't rich, but she now realizes that they *were* quite unusual. The lavish decorations of the house were not purchased, but a product of her father's craftiness.

Even as a child, Alison disliked the artificial illusion that her family was rich or grandiose in some way, which was largely caused by Bruce's design of the family's Gothic mansion. Alison also picks up on the compulsive, obsessive behaviors Bruce exhibits in designing the house.

Bruce salvages trash, redecorates rooms, and is obsessed with everything looking perfect. Alison calls him an "alchemist of appearance, a savant of surface, a Daedalus of decor." Alison adds that her father had another side of him to pair with Icarus—**Daedalus**, the inventor and mad scientist who designed his son Icarus's wings and the famous labyrinth that, in Greek myth, trapped the Minotaur. Bruce designs the house without care for the rest of his family's opinions, putting pink flower wallpaper in Alison's room against her will.

In the same way that Daedalus designed the labyrinth to encase the Minotaur, Alison and her family are all entrapped by Bruce's obsessions, which in turn we later find out are likely driven by his own repressed sexuality. Rather than designing the house to accurately reflect his family's preferences, Bruce designs the house artificially according to how he thinks it should *look so people will perceive him as grandiose.*

The Bechdel family's **gothic revival house** was built in her small Pennsylvania town's wealthiest period, during the lumber boom in 1867, then slowly deteriorated. However, over the eighteen years after the Bechdels' bought it, Bruce makes it his mission to restore the house to its former glory. Alison says Bruce's restoration of the house could have been a romantic story, like when Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed fix up an old house in the movie *It's A Wonderful Life*. However, in that movie Jimmy Stewart rarely gets angry and yells, which isn't the case at Alison's house.

Again, Alison uses fiction—in this case the film It's A Wonderful Life*—as a framework by which to understand her life. But, she complicates the analogy by noting that the reality of her family—and her father Bruce's anger—was far less fanciful and occasional in reality than in the fictional film. Implicitly, Bechdel is stating that reality is more complex and layered than fiction—but the line between the two can also be very unclear.*

Like **Daedalus**, Bruce is indifferent to the human (or familial) cost of his projects. Alison notes how Daedalus betrayed the king of Crete by making the queen a cow disguise so that she could seduce a white bull, which led to the queen giving birth to the half-bull, half-man Minotaur. And then Daedalus made his greatest creation to house the monster—the labyrinth, in which passages and rooms open endlessly into one another, making escape impossible. And then there were the famous wings Daedulus invented—Alison wonders if Daedalus was truly grief-stricken when his son Icarus fell into the sea, or simply disappointed by the design failure.

Alison again uses a fictional myth as a way to understand her father's behavior, and, further, by comparing the Bechdel family home to Daedalus's labyrinth, Alison hints at the darker secret of the home: that its design was meant to hide, and even repress, Bruce's secret homosexuality and illicit affairs with underage boys.

When things are good, Alison believes Bruce enjoys having a family—or at least the image of it, as she narrates under an image of kids beneath a Christmas tree, "a sort of still life with children." Bruce considers Alison and her brothers to be free labor and an extension of himself. So, Alison feels more like she is raised by Martha Stewart than Jimmy Stewart. Bruce treats Alison's mother Helen the same way, asking her opinion but usually ignoring it. They are all powerless to Bruce's whims, and Alison feels that Bruce likes his furniture better than his kids because the furniture is perfect whereas his kids are not.

By comparing the scene to a "still life with children" Alison implies the artificial, even two-dimensional, nature of her childhood, in that her family was more an artificial construction than a loving family. Bruce treating his children like furniture is an example of his tendency to prefer easier fiction to the complexity of reality—he'd rather have his children be entirely controllable, like furniture, than actual people.

Alison's preference for the "purely functional" emerges when she's young, in stark juxtaposition to Bruce's love for lavish decoration. Alison has contempt for functionless ornament because she sees it as the worst kind of embellishments—as "lies." Alison, looking back as the author, believes that Bruce used his talent for artifice to make things appear to be what they are not, the same way that Bruce himself appeared to be an ideal father and husband, while secretly having sex with underage boys.

Here Alison reflects that, throughout his life, Bruce used artifice in the form of his "family man" image in order to conceal his reality and even deceive others, like the high school boys he ultimately seduced.

Alison says that it's tempting to view her family as a sham in retrospect, yet they really did live in that **house**. However, there was something fundamental missing, "an elasticity, a margin for error." Even when Alison and her brothers were young children, Bruce would blow up if the slightest part of their home were out of place. An idle remark about his appearance could result in a full-on breakdown, so Helen made a rule that no one could mention how Bruce looked, good or bad. Alison adds that physical affection was a rarity in her family. One time she tried to kiss her father, and ended up kissing his knuckles before rushing from the room in embarrassment.

Again Alison homes in on the artificial construction of her family. Because Bruce isn't a truly loving father, Alison, her siblings and her mother are forced to walk on eggshells around him and interact with him as if he were their lord or master rather than their father or husband. Additionally, the fact that the Alison and her siblings were disallowed from honestly telling their dad how he looked is indicative of the repressive nature of the entire household.

Alison says her embarrassment is a smaller-scale version of Bruce's more formidable "self-loathing," and that his shame inhabited and pervaded the entire **house**. In fact, the house's design was expressly intended to hide that shame. Over an image of Bruce shattering a glass during dinner, Alison narrates that it was always impossible to be sure if the **Minotaur** was lurking close by. Worse, the constant tension was increased by the many pleasant moments when Alison's father was normal, like when he read her bedtime stories or sang songs.

The difficulty with painting her childhood as entirely two-dimensional and artificial is that Alison did share truly compassionate moments with her father, and perhaps this is part of the reason she is so obsessed with the line between fiction and reality—as a kid, Alison was never sure which version of her father was the real one.

Although Alison is aware of Bruce's many flaws, she can't sustain much anger at him. Over images of her father washing her in a bathtub with a cup, Alison narrates that her mother Helen must have bathed her hundreds of times, but it's her father rinsing her with the purple cup that she remembers most clearly. Alison is unsure whether Bruce is a good father, and though she wants to say that at least he stuck around, of course, he didn't. Though Bruce didn't kill himself until Alison was nearly twenty, she felt his absence long before he was dead.

Why do we recall certain memories with total clarity and forget others entirely? Alison is unsure, and she focuses on memory's inability to be truly accurate throughout the rest of the memoir. The juxtaposition between Bruce's physical presence and his mental absence straddles the line between fiction and reality, between artifice and truth: though Bruce was physically present, he wasn't really ever there *for Alison.*

CHAPTER 2: A HAPPY DEATH

Alison says that her father's death was "his consummate artifice, his masterstroke," because it was impossible to prove whether or not his death was suicide or an accident. There is, however, suggestive circumstantial evidence, like the fact that Helen asked Bruce for a divorce two weeks before his death, and also how Bruce had been reading and leaving around the house a copy of Albert Camus's first novel, *A Happy Death*. Bruce left no suicide note, but in the book he highlighted one line: "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." Alison believes that quote to be an epitaph suitable to her parents' marriage.

Bruce's death exemplifies how blurry the line between reality and fiction can be—there is no way to ever know for certain whether his death was intentional or an accident; the empirical truth, as Alison continually points out, is inaccessible. The Camus quote further alludes to a cynical view of relationships that sadly applies to Bruce and Helen's marriage—Bruce deceived her in courting her by omitting his homosexual tendencies, but "to her advantage" because she fell in love, whereas right before Bruce's death, Helen's acknowledgement of Bruce's true deceptions were to her disadvantage.

At the same time, Alison notes that *before* his death, the family couldn't have perceived Bruce reading *A Happy Death* as a sign of desperation, because her dad was always reading something. For instance, five days before his death, Bruce also left a comment in a bird watching book he was reading—was that a sign that he was thinking of committing suicide? Then Alison wonders if maybe he just didn't notice the truck that hit him because he was thinking about the divorce, before commenting that she doesn't believe her dad's death was an accident. The night after she returned home from college after his death, Alison and her mother discussed it, with Helen saying that she believes Bruce's death was intentional. Bruce's headstone is an obelisk, a shape Bruce was obsessed with because he saw it as symbolizing life.

The title of Camus's book, A Happy Death, *relates directly to the subtitle of* Fun Home, *"A Family Tragicomic." Alison Bechdel notes that, despite the Camus title, there is nothing particularly happy about the death in the book, just as the death of Bruce—though treated with absurd humor at times—is more ironic than truly funny, more tragic in its inevitability than it was surprising. Again, the irony of having a shape that Bruce believed symbolized life become his headstone that literally symbolizes his death is far more ironic than laugh-out-loud funny, shading more toward the tragic side of the "tragicomic."*

Alison then notes that her father's grave, the location where he died, Alison's childhood **home**, and the farm where Bruce was born all exist within a radius of one and a half miles. Many of Bruce's relatives displayed the same provincialism as Bruce did. Still, Alison is puzzled why her decorative-arts-obsessed father and aspiring actress mother decided to live in Beech Creek.

The geographic proximity of everything in Bruce's life only adds to the overall feeling of claustrophobia, repression, and inescapability present in Alison's childhood and her portrayal of her father.

When Helen and Bruce were young, Helen flew to Europe to marry Bruce while he was in the army. They lived in West Germany for almost a year before Bruce's father had a heart attack and Bruce had to return home to run the family business: a funeral home. Alison was born shortly after her parents returned to the U.S. After living at the funeral home for a short time, the Bechdels moved to a farmhouse and Alison's brother Christian was born. Bruce began teaching high school English while working at the funeral home part-time. By the time the Bechdels moved to the **gothic revival house** and Alison's youngest brother John was born, "Europe had disappeared" from her parents' horizon entirely.

The death of Bruce's father is the event that triggers the end of the youthful honeymoon period of Bruce and Helen's relationship. While Bruce coming home to run a funeral home forces him to face death in a literal way, this event also metaphorically signals the death of the passion between Bruce and Helen. Later, both of Alison's parents seek passion out in other aspects of their lives, like Bruce's passion for house restoration, but this personal passion is far lonelier than the love of a symbiotic relationship, or family, can be.

During this time, Alison begins to confuse her family with The Addams Family. She doesn't understand that the cartoon is making fun of suburban conformity, because the lofty ceilings and menacing furnishings of the Addams house mirror the spaces of Alison's own home. Also, Alison, in her first-grade school photo, wearing a black velvet dress her father squeezes her into, and looks eerily similar to Wednesday Addams. Helen bears a striking resemblance to Morticia. But, of course, what makes Alison relate most strongly to The Addams Family is the family funeral home business, and "the cavalier attitude" which she comes to take toward death.

From a young age, Alison has difficulty distinguishing reality from fiction, and this blurring becomes associated with death thanks to Bruce's part-time occupation as funeral home owner and operator. Death, then, perhaps comes to seem less real to Alison, or inherently more absurd, so that when it eventually strikes close to her, she has a particularly tough time dealing with her grief in reality.

Alison and her family called the funeral home the "Fun Home." Alison's Grammy lives in the front of the building, with the business in the back. Bruce is responsible for decorating the interior, so the rooms are hung with dark velvet drapery. Alison and her brothers have chores at the fun home, but they also manage to play and truly have fun there. They ride the folding chair trolley, mess around with the suction cup flags for sticking on the hoods of cars in a procession, and sniff the crushable smelling salt packets. When a new shipment of caskets arrive, the family lifts them with a winch into the showroom on the second floor of the garage.

Here is the heart of the "comic" in the "tragicomic" parts of this book—as children, Alison and her siblings manage to truly have fun in a funeral home. Rather than becoming bogged down in the morbid functions of the various items around the funeral home, the kids are able to see the goofy, fun possibilities of smelling salts and mourner's flags, rather than focusing on the fact that they're intended to help people who have been stricken by grief.

Alison says that though there are never any dead people in the showroom, it still always feels like a mausoleum. The scent of cedar hangs in the air, and velvet drapes muffle any outside sounds. It isn't somewhere you would want to be alone in, yet Alison and her brothers also often sleep over in the front area of the funeral home where her Grammy lives, and it isn't scary.

Their grandma living in a funeral home is a big part of the reason the Bechdel kids become desensitized to death—they see the funeral home more as an actual home then a place in which to congregate for grieving, and so when they're later forced to grieve for Bruce in the "Fun Home" it is somewhat incomprehensible to them.

As kids, Alison and her brothers would sometimes spend the night at Grammy's. At bedtime, they would beg Grammy to tell them the same story over and over: The story of when Bruce, as a boy, got stuck in the mud. She recites: once, when Bruce was no more than three, he wandered off into a neighbors' muddy field, and Bruce got stuck in the mud. Eventually, the neighborhood mailman, Mort DeHaas, came along and spotted Bruce way out there in the field. Alison and her brothers interrupt the story to ask what would have happened if the mailman hadn't seen him. Would he have died? Grammy ignores the questions and finishes the story by saying that the mailman yanked Bruce out of the mud. Bruce's shoes stayed stuck, but Bruce was fine. Alison tells this part of the story over an image of a milkman, not a mailman, lifting toddler-aged Bruce from the mud, and includes a note that she knows the man was a mailman but always pictured him as "a milkman, all in white—a reverse grim reaper."

The Bechdel childrens' fixation on Grammy's story about toddler-aged Bruce is indicative of Alison's fascination with the line between reality and fiction—though they know this story must be true because Grammy has no reason to lie, the image of their fully-grown father being stuck in the mud doesn't fit with the children's image of their father's present reality. Also, Alison visualizing Mort DeHaas as a milkman instead of a mailman indicates memory's ability to be deceiving, and for people to project ideas onto memories that may not actually be true.

After that, Mort DeHaas brought Bruce back to Grammy's kitchen, where she undressed him and then put him in the oven to dry off. Alison notes that she knew her Grammy was referring to a "cook-stove," but all she could envision was the modern burning hot square oven Grammy had now.

Again, Alison picturing a modern oven instead of an old-school cook stove is an example of her youthful preference of fiction to reality, especially when thinking about her father.

The kids found the tale endlessly compelling, begging Grammy to tell it over and over before bed. By day, Alison has difficulty imagining her father naked, helpless, or put in an oven, though Alison notes that the way she once witnessed her Grammy forcefully help Bruce tie his surgical gown was "evocative" for her. In the funeral home, her father worked in the embalming room with the bodies, which Alison normally didn't see before they were dressed and in a casket. But one day, Bruce called her back there to hand him a pair of surgical scissors, and she saw a dead, naked middle-aged man on the table. His genitals were shocking, but what really got Alison's attention was his split-open chest.

Most children never see a dead body, and the visual Alison experienced this day in the Fun Home with her father seems to have shocked and traumatized her. Though the interaction is casual for Bruce, since he deals with dead bodies on a weekly basis, for Alison this interaction is far from casual, and it hangs in her mind for quite some time, causing her to mute or suppress her reactions to grief.

Alison gave her father the scissors without emotion, and she narrates that the exchange felt to her like a test. She wonders if this is how Bruce's own father showed Bruce his first cadaver, or whether Bruce felt like he'd become too used to death and wanted to elicit a reaction from Alison. Alison says that she herself has used this strategy of accessing emotion vicariously—for years after Bruce's death, she would use the opportunity to tell people of his suicide in order to sense in her listener the grief that eluded her. Alison says the emotion she had suppressed for that gaping cadaver felt like it stayed suppressed even when her own father died. When Alison got the phone call about her father's death, she bicycled back to her apartment from work, cried genuinely for about two minutes while hugging her girlfriend Joan, and that was it.

Alison and Bruce's use of tragedy to illicit emotion from others is likely caused by their respectively repressed states. Because Alison represses the feelings that come with Bruce's death (possibly because of her earlier experience with the cadaver), she has difficulty feeling the depth of the tragedy of Bruce's death, so she uses other people to try to feel it vicariously. Though Alison isn't hit with the brunt of her grief right away, the grieving process becomes elongated for her because she is unable to process and work through her grief, instead keeping it as repressed as her emotions were upon seeing her first dead body.

When Alison drove home to Pennsylvania the night of Bruce's death, she and her little brother John "greeted each other with ghastly, uncontrollable grins." Alison says it could be argued that death is inherently absurd in the sense that grinning isn't an inappropriate response. She adds that perhaps Camus's definition of absurd—"that the universe is irrational and human life meaningless" applies to her father's death as well. In college, Alison had to read *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and Bruce offered to lend Alison his copy but she refused. She says she wishes she could say she'd accepted the book, still had it, and he'd underlined a revelatory passage.

John and Alison's eerie greeting indicates the Bechdel siblings' inability to process and deal with their grief—instead, they both repress it, greeting each other with smiles instead of sobs, and not even discussing aloud the tragedy at hand. Also, Alison's desire to learn something about her father's death through his copy of The Myth of Sisyphus indicates the limits of fiction in reality—the book could teach her many things, but the truth about her father's death isn't one of them.

Alison says it's not that she thinks Bruce killed himself because of his existential angst—Camus' conclusion in the book, after all, is that suicide is illogical. However, Alison suspects Bruce of being a lazy scholar. One snapshot of her dad lighting a cigarette in a sports car reminds Alison of old photos of Camus. Alison says it's probably just the cigarette—Camus was rarely pictured without one, and since his lungs were full of holes from tuberculosis, "who was he to cast logical aspersions at suicide." Camus couldn't have lasted much longer if he hadn't died in a car crash at 46, Alison notes. On various occasions, Camus is said to have told friends that dying in a car accident would be idiotic—yet in January 1960, while Alison's parents were still living in Europe, Camus was in a car that crashed into two trees and he died.

The death of Albert Camus in some ways becomes symbolic of the death of Bruce and Helen's relationship—it could be argued that their love for each other—or at least their passion for each other—died when the couple left Europe to return to Beech Creek around the time of Camus's death. Alison imagining her father as looking like Camus is another example of her blurring the line between reality and fiction—though the two figures weren't necessarily that similar, it's possible Alison connected them because of their similarly tragic ends.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus wrote that we all live as if we don't know we're going to die, "But then, he wasn't a mortician." Alison suspects that Bruce was all too enchanted by the idea of death. In the letters Bruce would write Alison at college he sometimes would play the "perfect absurd hero, Sisyphus shouldering his boulder with detached joy" in regard to his job at the funeral home. Other times, Bruce would be despairing and sad about his proximity to early death. Alison has no letters about the suicides Bruce dealt with, but she believes his proximity to suicide might well have impacted his choice to partake in it.

Bruce as a Sisyphus-like figure is another example of Alison using fiction to understand her reality, though in this case Bruce's metaphorical boulders were largely of his own creation. Also, Bruce shares his burden through written letters to his daughter, but he notably omits—or perhaps represses/ignores—any of the suicides he had to deal with. Perhaps they simply hit a little too close to home for Bruce.

Alison says that you would think a childhood spent so close to death might have enabled her to grieve more quickly than others, but, in fact, all those years near graves and bodies only made Bruce's death "more incomprehensible" to Alison. Alison finds the death of her undertaker father impossible and even paradoxical, and she notices that Bruce's hair—well-kempt and styled during his life—looks thin on his lifeless body.

Death is challenging for anyone to process, but Alison and her siblings have an even more difficult time than usual because their proximity and desensitization to death made their go-to stance in regard to death humor and distance. However, in the end Alison does realize that the true nature of Bruce's death is tragic and extremely sad.

Alison is emotionless at the funeral, her sole emotion irritation when the funeral director touches Alison's arm in consolation, causing her to shake it off with violence. This same irritation would overtake Alison for years afterward whenever she visited Bruce's obelisk grave. One time, she found a cheesy armed services flag on top of Bruce's grave, and hurled it into the nearby cornfield. Whether intentional or accidental, Bruce's death was idiotic any way you looked at it, Alison narrates. Over two images of Alison first looking at the grave and then lying down next to it, Alison tells herself that her father is really down there, "Stuck in the mud for good this time."

Again, even at Bruce's funeral Alison can't process or even feel her own sadness. If she were able to grieve and let her repressed feelings out, she might not be so disproportionately angered by the funeral director touching her arm, or the flag stuck on Bruce's grave—instead, years later, Bruce's death is still like an open wound for Alison, one that won't heal until she openly and fully deals with it. Further, perhaps Alison could only process the fact that he was "stuck in the mud for good" through writing, drawing, and sharing this memoir with the world.

CHAPTER 3: THAT OLD CATASTROPHE

Alison begins the chapter by narrating, over an image of the many definitions of 'queer' in a dictionary, that Bruce's death was queer in every sense of the word. His death was strange, suspicious, perhaps even counterfeit. It put her family in a bad position. It left Alison angry, faint, and sometimes drunk. And of course, Bruce's death was bound up with the only definition of 'queer' that was missing from her family's dictionary. Only four months before Bruce's death, Alison had announced to her parents, in a letter, that she was a lesbian. Though her homosexuality was, at that point, hypothetical (and not physically confirmed), she thought it worth sharing with her parents.

Queerness and repression—Alison begins chapter three with these two themes that will pervade the rest of the memoir. By drawing an image of the dictionary itself (and pointing out the missing definition), Alison indicates that omission—and societal repression—is everywhere, and in her family this is especially true in regard to repressed or hidden sexual orientation. Alison also points out the limits of the dictionary, indicating that even things meant to be empirically true can be biased or incomplete.

The news wasn't received as well as Alison had hoped, and after an exchange of difficult letters with her mother, Helen eventually revealed Bruce's homosexual affairs to Alison on the phone. Alison says she felt like she'd been "upstaged" and that the reveal of her own sexuality took on a lesser importance in the shadow of this bombshell about her father. Alison says she had imagined her coming out as emancipation from her parents, but instead it pulled her back into their messed-up lives. And then, with her father's death so soon afterward, Alison couldn't help but assume her coming out partially caused the tragedy. She wonders whether, had she not shared her discovery, Bruce might never have been hit by that truck. Alison wonders why she even told her parents—she hadn't even had sex yet, while her father had been having homosexual sex for years and telling no one.

Even in the midst of a real-life dramatic familial crisis, Alison imagines her life as a fictional narrative and sees her story as being "upstaged" by her father. Here, Alison once more both distances herself from reality and then also tries to understand it from a distance by using fiction as a guiding tool. Additionally, Alison wondering if Bruce's death was caused by her coming out of the closet is an example of how the Bechdel family continually favors repression over openness. Even after opening herself up, Alison wonders if repressing herself might have been the best thing for her family after all—she never even wonders about what might be best for herself.

Alison says the line that Bruce drew between reality and fiction was "blurry." One could tell this by his library—it was designed with velvet drapes, statues of figures like Don Quixote and Mephistopheles, and a big wooden desk. Alison asks, if her father imagined himself "as a Nineteenth-century aristocrat overseeing his estate… did that require such a leap of the imagination?" Alison wonders whether affectation can be so engrossing that it becomes, in effect, real. The library, then, was a fully operational fantasy, with a logic difficult to understand without consulting Bruce himself. When visitors would peruse the library, they'd always ask Bruce whether he'd read all of the books in the massive walnut bookcase. He'd always answer, "Not yet."

The library in the Bechdel house epitomizes the blurry line Bruce treads between reality and fiction—yes the library (and the books) are really there, but Bruce's projection of himself as a learned, scholarly, rich "aristocrat overseeing his estate" was far from the truth. The problem is, Bruce began to act as if it were true, believing it himself on some level, and eventually he would use the library as part of his mystique with which to charm and ultimately seduce young men.

Part of Bruce's routine involved mentoring his more promising high school students—and though Alison notes that the exchange was probably sexual in many cases, no matter what else was going on, books were being read by Bruce's young pupils. Bruce was passionate about many writers, but he was particularly reverent of F. Scott Fitzgerald. Helen had sent Bruce a biography of Fitzgerald when Bruce was in the army, and references to it appeared often in Bruce's letters to Helen at the time. Stories of Fitzgerald and his wife Zelda's outrageous behavior enthralled Bruce, and Alison believes it couldn't have escaped Bruce's notice that during Fitzgerald's stint in the army he began courting Zelda. At this point Bruce's letters grew "lush with Fitzgeraldesque sentiment."

Using great works of fiction as a way to seduce his students in reality is another example of Bruce using fiction to support his own image of himself while confirming the falsity of the presentation. Bruce's obsession with F. Scott Fitzgerald is another example of his inclination to blur reality with fiction—he began to see the similarities between himself and Fitzgerald, and his courting of Helen while in the army may have been in large part caused *by F. Scott Fitzgerald's courtship of Zelda while he was also in the army.*

After reading the biography, Bruce tore through Fitzgerald's stories, seeing himself in various characters. Though Bruce never mentions identifying with the character of Jay Gatsby, Alison says the parallels are unavoidable. Like Gatsby, Bruce fueled his metamorphosis by utilizing the power of illusion. However, Bruce did it on a schoolteacher's salary. Alison says her father looked like Gatsby, or at least like Robert Redford in the 1974 movie of *The Great Gatsby*. Alison says it might seem a gigantic illusion on her part to compare her father to Robert Redford, but she says Bruce was more attractive than photographs of him suggest.

The Bruce/Jay Gatsby comparison is right on the money—like Gatsby, Bruce uses his home (and especially his library) to project an image that is far from the truth; however, while Gatsby uses his image to project wealth and status in his ultimate goal of landing the love of his life, Bruce uses his image to try to maintain his Family Man persona while also seducing young men under the guise of being an older, mentor-like guiding figure.

Alison believes what was so alluring to her father about Fitzgerald's stories "was their inextricability from Fitzgerald's life." Over images of Bruce flirting with one of his high school students, Roy, and offering him sherry, Alison notes that mixing the imaginary with the real was Bruce's stock in trade, which took a toll on the rest of the family. Alison finishes Bruce's flirtation with Roy by having Helen abruptly come into the library to tell Bruce he forgot to pick up John, one of Alison's brothers, from cub scouts.

Bruce's preference of fiction to reality has real costs to the Bechdel family, which Alison shows with this anecdote that includes an illustration of a time that Bruce forgot his responsibility to pick up John that afternoon. Just as Fitzgerald's family paid a cost for his lifestyle and selfishness, the Bechdel family paid for Bruce's.

If Bruce was a Fitzgerald character, Helen stepped right out of a Henry James book, as she was "a vigorous American idealist ensnared by degenerate continental forces"—in Helen's case, the force of Alison's father. Alison notes that in college, Helen played the lead in *The Heiress*, which was based on James's novel *Washington Square*. In the play, a dull but wealthy young woman falls in love with a smooth-talking fortune hunter.

Alison views her mother as a Henry James character in the context of her father being a corrupting villain that Helen the heroine becomes ensnared by. Alison uses a variety of literary sources as a touchstone for her parents' relationship, but in each one Helen plays the protagonist and Bruce plays the villain.

Alison says she uses these allusions to James and Fitzgerald not solely as descriptive devices, but because Alison's parents are most real to her "in fictional terms." She adds that her "cool aesthetic distance itself does more to convey the arctic climate" of the Bechdel household than any singular literary comparison could. Her parents lived largely passionless lives with each other. Alison says there was no story of how they met, and they never used terms of endearment. Bruce rarely even used Helen's name, instead calling her 'You.' In her whole life, Alison witnessed two gestures of affection between them—once Bruce gave Helen a peck on the lips, and another time, as the family was watching TV, Helen put her hand on Bruce's back. Over images of Alison and her brothers sitting on the stairs listening to their parents argue, Alison says those moments of affection were nearly as unnerving as the common state of antagonism between her parents.

Here Alison indicates that the reason she understands her parents best "in fictional terms" is largely because it was difficult to parse the real distance and coldness within the Bechdel house without a narrative framework.Rrather than living through her childhood, it is almost as if Alison has read about her childhood somewhere in a book, and is able to best understand it when re-reading that book in her mind. The lack of physical contact between Alison and her father (and between Bruce and Helen) is another reason that she perhaps understands him best as a character than as a human—their relationship was largely devoid of physical compassion.

Eventually, Alison extracted the tale of how her parents met from Helen. During a college production of Shakespeare's play *The Taming of the Shrew*, Helen played the lead, and Bruce had a bit part. Over an image of Bruce (somewhat eerily) staring at Helen while she is acting, Alison narrates that *The Taming of the Shrew* is about the character of Katherine having her spirit broken by Petruchio. Alison says that her parents must have found the relationship model presented in the play problematic. Over an image of the kids watching Bruce call Helen a bitch and tell her she's the one with the problem, Alison says her parents would likely have been upset at the suggestion that their marriage resembled that play.

Here, the reality of Helen and Bruce's relationship sadly comes to imitate the fiction of The Taming of the Shrew—just as Katherine's spirit is broken by Petruchio, Helen's positive, idealistic spirit is slowly sapped out of her by Bruce throughout their marriage. Helen and Bruce not wanting to acknowledge the resemblance between their own marriage and that of Shakespeare's play is an example of reality and fiction being far more difficult to distinguish than people would like to admit.

Alison says that if *The Taming of the Shrew* foreshadowed her parents' later marriage, Henry James's book *The Portrait of a Lady* runs parallel to their early days together. Just as Helen left America for Europe, Isabel Archer, the book's heroine, leaves America for Europe. Then, after turning down many worthy suitors, Isabel accepts the advances of Gilbert Osmond, a man she is way too good for. After Helen came to Europe to marry Bruce, they went to Paris to visit an army friend of Bruce's. They had a terrible fight on the way, and Helen later learned that the army friend and Bruce had been lovers, "Much like Isabel Archer learns that Gilbert had been having an affair all along with the woman who introduced them."

Henry James's book The Portrait of a Lady becomes a framework by which Alison compares and contrasts Bruce and Helen's early courtship. Though the narrative is fictional, Alison does truly grow to understand her mother more by using the context of James's book.

Just as Isabel remains with Gilbert, Helen, too, "ends up ground in the very mill of the conventional" with Bruce. Over an image of a passport photo taken eight years after this time in Europe, Alison narrates that Helen's face has already gone dull. The photo was taken for a three-week trip on which Alison and her brother Christian came along. The trip was thrilling—Alison talked her parents into buying her hiking boots in Switzerland, and in Cannes she argued for the right to wear swim shorts instead of a girls bathing suit thanks to all the topless women. Alison says that though the travels widened her own scope, she suspected that her parents felt their own freedom dwindling. Alison says that this family trip was perhaps when she decided that she would not have a family, and instead would live out the artist's life that her parents hadn't fully pursued.

Here, Alison brings the framework of The Portrait of a Lady *from her parents' history more closely into her own life. Alison observes that Helen, like the Isabel of the novel, has become faded and conventional, the opposite of what she had originally wished for herself. Further, Alison is able to use the context of the novel as a way to distance herself from this possible future—the book shines a light on her mother's behavior, and in a way it causes Alison to resolve not to make the same mistake as her mother of not fully pursuing her passions.*

Though that is what came to pass, it wasn't in the manner anyone in her family expected. Alison's realization at nineteen that she was a lesbian was in keeping with her bookish upbringing in that it occurred in the library while reading a book. Alison had been having questions since reading the word 'lesbian' in the dictionary at 13, and then, in college, she read a series of *'Word Is Out'* books filled with interviews with homosexual people. Alison tore through books in the library about homosexuality. Over an image of Alison masturbating while reading a book called *Delta of Venus*, she narrates that her "researches were stimulating but solitary." Alison says it became clear that she had to leave the academic world and enter the human testing ground. So, she went to a meeting of Oberlin College's "Gay Union."

Alison's discovery of her gender identity is entrenched in her experiences of fiction and literature—the fact that her epiphany occurs while at the library is symbolic of the way fiction serves as a guiding force all throughout Alison's life. Here, the line between reality and fiction again becomes blurred, as a fictional, intellectual discovery is what prompts Alison to act on her feelings and become self-explorative and open rather than repressed and un-self-examining.

Though Alison was silent during the "Gay Union" meeting, she felt her attendance counted as a public declaration of her lesbianism. She was exhilarated. In that state Alison decided to tell her parents that she was gay. So, Alison came out to her parents via letter. Bruce called after receiving the letter to tell her he believed that "everyone should experiment," but Helen wouldn't come to the phone. A week and a half later, Alison received a disapproving letter from her mother, which upset her. The P.S. instructions told Alison to destroy the letter. To make herself feel better, Alison bought herself the present of a pocketknife, as it seemed to Alison a possession suitable for a young lesbian.

Rather than repress or withhold the discovery of her homosexuality from her parents, Alison decides to share it and be open with them right away. However, her openness doesn't yield her acceptance and openness in return from her parents, at least at first. Instead, in some ways Helen's response can be interpreted as an affront to her own repression. In other words, Alison being so open and honest about her sexuality and gender identity threatened the secrecy and repression of Bruce's, and the sacrifices Helen made to uphold that secrecy.

Back at home, Alison accidentally cut her finger with the knife, and smeared the blood into her journal, pleased at the opportunity to physically put her pain on the page. Alison responded to her mother's letter point by point, with some confusion, and Helen called a few days letter, telling Alison that Bruce had affairs with young men. Helen also told Alison that one time Bruce almost got caught, and he also had an affair with Roy, Alison's childhood babysitter. This revision of Alison's history—a history which, with her own realization about her sexuality, had already undergone hefty revision in her last few months — left Alison dazed. But not quite dazed enough, so she got very drunk after the phone call.

The transmission of Alison's blood onto the page of her journal is as close to the blurry center of the line between reality and fiction, between literature and the present moment, as Alison gets. It doesn't—and cannot—literally transmit the pain she felt in that moment, but it always serves as a reminder of it. Also, Alison's openness about herself in the end yields her openness about her father and her family's past, even if it isn't the kind of openness she was seeking.

Soon, Alison found "an even more potent anesthetic" in the act of diving fully into her new lesbian sexuality and identity. Over an image of Alison in bed with Joan, her first girlfriend, Alison narrates that by midterm she'd ingratiated herself completely. Joan was a poet and "matriarchist." Alison spent most of the rest of the year inside of Joan's bed. This time was also strewn with books. Alison lost her grounding—the dictionary became erotic, and some of her favorite childhood stories were revealed as either propaganda (during a reading of '*The World of Pooh*,' Joan calls Christopher Robins a "total imperialist!") or pornography (like the description of the inside of a peach *in James and the Giant Peach*) when read through this new lens.

Alison describing her experience of exploring her sexuality in college, especially through her physical relationship with Joan, as an "anesthetic" is telling—even while openly exploring her sexuality, Alison seems to imply that her full-on dive into her own sexuality was in some ways a drug-like vice she used to escape from the reality of her mother and father's situation, and to ignore Bruce's past. Additionally, Alison's re-contextualization of childhood literature through this new lens further shows that fiction, and one's reaction to it, can change drastically depending on one's life circumstances.

Alison says she was happy at the distraction of her sexual and political awakening, as the news from home became increasingly unsettling about the erratic behavior of Bruce. Soon after Joan and Alison moved in together for the summer, Alison got a call about her mother's divorce from her father, and two weeks after that the call came about Bruce's fatal "accident." Over the years after Bruce's death, Helen gave away or sold most of Bruce's library. She began immediately after Bruce's funeral, bestowing Joan with a book by Wallace Stevens, an experience that Joan later wrote a poem about.

Giving away Bruce's library is an ironic, and somewhat tragic, way to mourn his death. The center of Bruce's artifice, in Alison's view, is his library and the books within, but the irony there is that the books survive long after Bruce's artificial use for them does. This blurring of reality and fiction continues in Helen's bestowal of a book to Joan, in that this real incident becomes the inspiration for Joan to write a poem.

Helen also told them that "*Sunday Morning*" – a poem about crucifixion by Stevens – is her favorite poem. Alison comments that, in many ways, Helen understood sacrifice fully. Alison wonders if her mother liked that poem because "its juxtaposition of catastrophe with a plush domestic interior" depicts life with Bruce in a nutshell. Alison says her father's death was a catastrophe that had been unfolding slowly for a long time. Alison then adds that the idea that she caused his death by coming out as a lesbian is illogical, because "causality implies connection" and she never felt all that connected to Bruce.

Alison believes that her mother Helen relates to Wallace Stevens's poem "Sunday Morning" because it reminds her of her own life with Bruce—so Helen, too, sometimes uses fiction as a way to understand and (as we'll later see), to escape from her reality.

Over images of Alison asking her father for a check, Alison narrates that there is a scene in *The Great Gatsby* where a drunken party guest is carried away when he discovers that the books in Gatsby's library aren't cardboard fakes. Alison's father's library came to embody the same idea as Gatsby's — "the preference of a fiction to reality." As Bruce reads a book about Zelda Fitzgerald, he asks Alison what she needs the check for, and she responds that she wants to buy some magazines. Over these images, Alison wonders if Fitzgerald's stories would have resonated so strongly with Bruce if the author's life hadn't turned sour. Gatsby croaked in the pool, Zelda ended up in an asylum, and Fitzgerald died of a heart attack at forty-four. Alison counted out their lifespans—Bruce lived the same number of months and weeks, "but Fitzgerald lived three days longer."

Preferring fiction to reality is Bruce's perspective, but, ironically, in some ways Alison's continual use of fiction to contextualize her life is just as all-consuming as Bruce's use of fiction to present an alternative reality of himself. Still, Bruce's use of fiction is far more sinister than Alison's, mostly because he keeps his truth hidden and often uses fiction to deceive others.

Over an image of Alison writing out that check for MAD magazine, she narrates that she's contemplated the idea that Bruce might have timed his death to mimic Fitzgerald's. But, that would only confirm that Bruce's death wasn't Alison's fault and, further, had absolutely nothing to do with her. Over an image from the perspective of a voyeur looking into the **Bechdel family house**, in which Bruce and Alison are in the same room but are trapped in separate windows, Alison finishes the chapter by narrating that she's "reluctant to let go of that last, tenuous bond."

Just as she can never know if Bruce's lifespan being so close to Fitzgerald's was intentional, or whether her coming out caused his death or not, Alison will never know for sure which parts of her father were real, and which were simply presentational. Just as they are forever trapped in separate windows in this illustration, Alison and Bruce will always be separated by the fictional veneer Bruce coated over his life, so she'll never know which parts of him were real.

CHAPTER 4: IN THE SHADOW OF YOUNG GIRLS IN FLOWER

Though Alison has suggested Bruce killed himself, it could also be argued that he accidentally died while gardening, as he was clearing brush from a yard across a road when he jumped back into the path of an oncoming truck "as if he saw a snake." Of all of Bruce's domestic inclinations, Alison disliked Bruce's love of flowers the most, and thought his love of them made him seem like a "sissy." The **Bechdel home** and yard was filled with flowers, vines, and trees of all kinds. Their games of baseball would end prematurely whenever the ball rolled near a patch of weeds and Bruce became obsessed with pulling them out. At the funeral home, Bruce would tweak the arrangements sent in by the florist. Bruce's favorite flower was the lilac, a tragic flower because it invariably began "to fade even before reaching its peak." Alison includes Proust's description of the lilacs bordering Swann's Way in *Remembrance of Things Past*, a book Bruce had begun reading the year before he died.

Alison's view of her father as a "sissy" largely because of his love of flowers shows her own societally-enforced ideas of what male masculinity should look like. So, her coming-of-age is largely influenced by trying to overcompensate for the traditional masculinity she felt her family was missing. Further, flowers and their placement around the Bechdel home come in many ways to symbolize Bruce's artifice: though they appear sweet, fresh and innocent, the flowers are part of the illusion of Bruce's innocence and serve to conceal the shame of his secret that pervades through the house.

Over images of Bruce bringing Alison and her brothers on an illegal flower-stealing trip, Alison narrates that Proust describes Swann's garden in flowery prose, culminating in the narrator seeing a little girl surrounded by flowers in the garden. Over an image of Bruce saying that the most beautiful pink in the world is that of the pink dogwood flower, Alison narrates that The Narrator in Proust's book, failing to distinguish the girl from the flowers, instantly falls in love with her. Alison thinks Marcel Proust might be the only greater pansy than her father.

It is not only Bruce and Proust's love of flowers that makes Alison view them as "pansies," but in this case it is also their respective inabilities to distinguish reality from fiction—just as Bruce can see the beauty in a flower but not in his children, the narrator of Proust's book cannot see the difference between the beauty of flowers and the beauty of a human girl.

Over illustrations of Helen letting Roy into the house, Alison narrates that Proust would have close friendships with women, but it was young men with whom he fell in love. Alison says that Proust would often "fictionalize real people in his life by transposing their gender," just as the narrator's lover Albertine may have been a stand-in for Proust's love for his chauffeur/secretary, Alfred. Though Bruce couldn't afford a chauffeur/secretary, Roy, along with many of Bruce's other high school students, stood in for that role, as Bruce cultivated and groomed the young men much in the same way he did his garden.

Similarly to how Proust hides his homosexual feelings by transposing them onto female characters in his novel, Bruce has romantic physical relationships with men while his marriage to Helen becomes a lot more like a friendship, or even a partnership, than a loving romantic relationship.

Alison, too, admired the masculine beauty of these young men. At an early age Alison "had become a connoisseur of masculinity." Over an image of Bruce fussing with a vase of flowers while Alison, as a young girl, watches a cowboy TV show, Alison narrates that she sensed a chink in her family's armor on the masculinity front. She measured her father against the deer hunters at the gas station, and where her father fell short Alison tried to step in, causing her to dress as a tomboy. Alison counted as an indication of her success the nickname of "Butch" bestowed on her by her older cousins. No one needed to explain to Alison what it meant—Butch was "the opposite of sissy."

Alison's admiration for masculine beauty and the physically imposing cowboy archetype shows how she is just as intolerant of Bruce's feminine-leaning male identity as he is to her masculine-leaning female identity. Bruce naturally tends towards traditionally feminine kinds of beauty (like flowers) and Alison toward masculine ones (like basketball or the nickname "Butch"). Although they are both aware of society's expectations for them, while coming of age they push back against them, and though they're not fully open about it, they both (in some ways at least) act on who they are.

Though Bruce held power over her, Alison repeats that it was clear to her that her father was a "sissy." Proust referred to his homosexual characters as "inverts," and Alison has always been fond of this outdated term which defines "the homosexual as a person whose gender expression is at odds with his or her sex." But in the example of Alison and Bruce, the two of them actually seemed to be inversions of one another. While Alison tried to compensate for something unmanly in Bruce, he attempted to express something feminine through Alison in "a war of cross-purposes." So, Bruce and Alison fought throughout Alison's childhood and adolescence, though they shared common ground in their appreciation of male fashion and masculine beauty.

Alison is a woman who wishes to express her masculinity, whereas Bruce is a man who wants to express his femininity. In both of their cases, their desires are at odds with society's gender expectations. Further, Alison and Bruce try to express this through each other—Alison by trying to make Bruce act or dress more manly, and Bruce by forcing Alison to dress more feminine than she would like. By linking this idea with Proust's definition, Alison implicitly compares her relationship with her father to Proust's relationship with his characters, another example of blending the fictional with the real.

In the only two-page single image spread of the book, Alison narrates over what are presumably her own fingers holding a photograph of Roy, the Bechdel family's yard-work assistant/babysitter, lying on a bed in his underwear. Alison says the photo looks as if it was taken when she was eight, on a vacation with Bruce to the Jersey Shore while Helen was away on a trip. Alison notes that Roy looks beautiful in the picture, and wonders why she isn't more outraged. Alison says she discovered the photo in an envelope that was labeled "Family" in Bruce's handwriting, along with other shots from the same trip. On the borders of all the other photos "Aug 69" is written, but the "69" on the one with Roy is blotted out with a blue magic marker (presumably the same color that Alison colored the background of her illustration with.) Alison narrates that the blotting out is ineffective, and adds that it was typical of the way Bruce "juggled his public appearance and private reality." As usual, "the evidence is simultaneously hidden and revealed."

Mixed in the family photo envelope is this inappropriate picture of Roy, which Alison highlights by illustrating it in a two-page spread. This itself is a good metaphor for the way Bruce attempted to conceal his homosexuality or bisexuality: he tried his hardest to suppress or repress it, and still those around him eventually found out because of his compulsive and sometimes impulsive behavior. If Bruce was really trying to hide his affair from the world, taking a picture of his lover and putting it in the family photo envelope seems an ineffective (and perhaps self-destructive) way to do it. The half-hearted effort to conceal the dates on the pictures is also an example of Bruce trying to layer fiction over his reality—but not trying hard enough for it to fool anyone looking hard enough.

Alison notes that the negatives revealed that the dark, murky photo of Roy in the bed was taken immediately after three bright shots of Alison, Christian, and John playing on the beach. She then narrates that in *Remembrance of Things Past*, Proust uses a sweeping metaphor involving the two directions out of the narrator's house that the narrator's family could go to take a walk—Swann's Way and The Geurmantes Way. At first, the paths are presented as opposites. But, over an image of Bruce driving Roy and his kids to pick up Helen from the city, Alison adds that, at the end of the book, Proust reveals that the two have always converged.

Just as the Geurmantes Way and Swann's Way represent the converging of opposites, Bruce himself represents both the fictional (his image of himself) and the real (his true inner self). Though Bruce tries his best to repress his internal truth from himself and hide it from the world, the truth has a way of sneaking out.

In another memory, Helen is staying in downtown Manhattan with her friend Elly. Roy takes Alison (who is eight) and her brothers for a walk while Bruce goes up to the apartment to get Helen. Alison observes the hot, smelly city in the August heat. She illustrates her memory of a group of people in a large circle in what must have been Washington Square Park. Alison notes that the Stonewall Riots had only occurred a few weeks earlier, and wonders if her nearness to this incident could have been part of the later development of her queer gender identity. Alison acknowledges the absurdity of claiming a connection to that mythologized event, but she still thinks that the city at that time might have perhaps affected her.

Alison's speculation about the impact of her trip to New York at age eight soon after the Stonewall Riots is an example of Alison engaging in a blurring of reality and fiction. It seems unlikely (and perhaps more of a literary conceit than a real-life one) that an event she was unaware of could have shaped her gender identity at such a young age. That said, this also shows how Alison Bechdel believes that gender identity and expectations about gender can form extremely early. This is echoed in the Butch truck driver incident when Alison is four years old.

Either way, Alison says the memory of that afternoon serves as a parallel between Alison and her parents' young adulthood a decade earlier. Alison imagines Bruce taking the bus up from college to visit Helen in the city. She wonders how much Helen's surroundings factored into Bruce's attraction to her. Though Alison has never been inside her mother's old building in New York, she's nostalgic for it as if she'd lived there. Over many visits to the city, Alison grew familiar with the neighborhood. Helen told Alison about a bar called Chumley's that she and Bruce used to frequent. Years later, Alison tries to enter the establishment with a group of lesbian friends and is told by a bouncer that the cover is 15 dollars. Later, Alison realizes the bouncer was refusing her entry because he saw her as an undesirable customer.

Alison's nostalgia for her mother's building is another example of her engagement with the fictional in place of the real. Alison would rather imagine her mother happy, open and free in New York City than confront the current version of Helen, cooped up and dissatisfied in Beech Creek. Additionally, Alison's rejection from Chumley's bar as a young woman in some ways becomes a badge of honor she wears, a confirmation of her outward gender identity that she is certainly not hiding or repressing (though she is being oppressed because of it).

Over images of Alison getting approached by a lesbian in a dance club and receiving a pamphlet instead of an invitation to dance, Alison narrates that she moved to New York City after college expecting a community, but instead found the Village a cold, isolated place. Helen once shared a glimpse of life in the village in the old days, saying that she and her friends would hear lesbians fighting down the street. This causes Alison to take an interest in lesbian pulp fiction from the fifties, learning of bar raids and illegal cross-dressing, and to wonder whether she would have had the guts to be an outward Butch back then.

Just as she immerses herself in lesbian literature while going through a sexual awakening in college, Alison decides to try to understand her mother's true story by delving into fictional and historical literary works. She also contemplates the question of repression vs. openness in the context of history—though Alison is open and upfront about her gender identity in modern times, she wonders if she would have hidden it in the 1950s (just as Bruce did).

Alison notes that the original title of Proust's second volume of *Remembrance of Things Past* literally translates to "*In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*," but the official translation of "*Within a Budding Grove*" shifts the emphasis from the erotic to the botanical. However, Alison also notes that Proust's prose often illustrates the similarities between the body and botany, exemplified by the budding of Alison's breasts at age twelve. Not only did Alison not want to grow breasts, but she was unaware of how much they'd hurt, and also how impact with the flesh could be painful. Once, when asking her father for a custom shirt, he said they would have to measure Alison's "appendages," causing her to drop the subject.

The idea of translation and mistranslation seems to hint at language's possibilities for misinterpretation and omission. Alison's body transforms itself against her will, just as Proust's title is translated against (or without) his will. Alison is as incapable of controlling society's expectations of her as a young girl as she is of stopping her breasts from budding—Alison will later learn that all she can do as a young lesbian coming-of-age is acknowledge how she really feels and do her best to live an open, honest life and not repress herself to make others more comfortable.

When Alison was 10, two years after the vacation with Roy, her father started hanging out with Bill, a new young man who helped out with the yard-work. Bill was the outdoors type and kept a knife at his side. So, instead of going to the beach, Bill and the rest of the family went camping without Helen. The plan was to go out to the Bechdel family's cabin in the forest, called the Bullpen. Alison and Bruce got the key from Uncle Fred, who also gave Bruce a rolled-up paper item to hold for him. While waiting in the car, Alison decided to peep at the poster, despite Bruce telling her not to look at it because it was "dirty," and it turned out to be a calendar with pictures of naked women. Upon seeing the image Alison said she'd felt as if she'd been stripped naked herself.

Bruce telling Alison the poster is "dirty," but then not telling her what the poster depicts or why it should be considered dirty is a good example of Bruce favoring vagueness and not being open when it might be easy to do so. Alison seeing this picture and it making her feel so ashamed is an example of Alison rejecting her own gender identity and feelings while coming of age without consciously realizing why she's doing it—which is, of course, because of society's, and her father's, expectations which run counter to how she feels.

Once they got to the cabin, Alison's brothers discovered the calendar. They were also extremely excited to see gigantic construction equipment used to strip mine parts of the forest. That afternoon, they all drove out to a mine. The gigantic shovel wasn't in operation, but the operator let them inside of it. There, Alison was astonished by what struck her as a bizarre coincidence—on the wall there was a similar pinup calendar. As the operator showed them around the shovel, Alison felt a strong urge not to let the construction worker know she was a girl. She told her brother John to call her "Albert instead of Alison." John ignored her, but looking back Alison's strategy struck her as a "feat of Proustian transposition."

Alison's brothers openly scour the naked woman's body while Alison became ashamed after catching a single peep—an example of how having a heterosexual identity allows for more open exploration of one's sexuality, whereas Alison immediately shoves down her non-heteronormative feelings. This can be seen further in Alison's request to have her brothers call her "Albert" – in the masculine space of the construction site, Alison is more comfortable being identified as a fictional male persona than as herself, just as Proust fictionally hid his homosexual feelings through heterosexual characters.

The next day, Bruce had to go back to town for a funeral, so Bill showed Alison and her brothers how to shoot his .22 caliber gun. None of them could pull the trigger. Disappointed, the kids went to the spring to retrieve cans of soda, where they were shocked to see a gigantic snake in the spring. They ran back to Bill, who grabbed his gun and led the kids back to the snake. Alison was "relieved and somewhat embarrassed" when upon their return the snake was gone. On the drive home, Alison was melancholy, feeling as if she felt she "had failed some unspoken initiation rite…"

In this sequence with Bill, Alison failing to be able to shoot the gun feels to her like she's failed some kind of tribal "initiation rite," though this would more likely be an initiation for boys instead of girls. In this case, her lack of ability to complete a physical task makes her feel metaphorically more like a boy than a man, or, perhaps more accurately, more like a girl than a man, and so the possibility of her growing up to be the masculine being of her dreams seems less possible.

Alison wonders, over an image of Bruce walking across the road with an oncoming truck approaching, what if Bruce really had seen a snake that day? Alison says snakes look like a phallus, "yet a more ancient and universal symbol of the feminine principle would be hard to come by." Alison believes that perhaps what's so unsettling about snakes is this "nonduality." Similarly, the beginning of Alison's honesty also coincided with the end of Bruce's lie. This is because Alison had been lying too, since she was four or five. Bruce had taken her on a business trip to Philadelphia, and in the city, the two of them saw a shorthaired female trucker wearing men's clothing. Alison stared at the trucker, recognizing her "with a surge of joy." Alison says that Bruce recognized her, too, but not in a good way, asking Alison with a sour face if that woman is what Alison wanted to look like. So, Alison lied and said "no." However, "the vision of the truck-driving bulldyke sustained" Alison through many years, just perhaps as it haunted her father.

Snakes can serve as symbols for both femininity and masculinity. Alison is a girl who exhibits masculine qualities, so perhaps she sometimes feels like a snake. Also, Alison speculates that a snake is what might have ended Bruce's life. In an ironic pairing of Bruce and Alison's internal truths, the beginning of Alison's honesty—her coming out of the closet—happens in extremely close proximity to Bruce's death, so it almost feels to Alison like Bruce had to die—and live a repressed life—in order for Alison to live a more open life. The incident with the trucker is Alison's first repression when she comes up against society's (and her father's) expectations of her—this comes full circle when she un-represses herself by openly coming out of the closet to her parents in college.

After Bruce died, an updated translation of Proust was published, and the book was retitled *In Search of Lost Time*. Alison believes that what's lost in this translation is "the complexity of loss itself." In the same box where Alison found the photo of Roy, she also finds a photo of Bruce at about the same age. He's wearing a women's bathing suit. Could it have been a fraternity prank? Maybe, but the picture is more graceful than silly. In another picture, Bruce sunbathes on the roof of his frat house just after he turned twenty-two. Alison wonders if the photographer was Bruce's lover. Next to that image in the book Alison puts a photo of herself on a fire escape at her twenty-first birthday, and notes that "the girl who took this polaroid" was *her* lover. Alison adds that the exterior setting, pained grin, flexible wrists, and even the angle of shadow across her and her father's faces in the two photos is "about as close as a translation can get."

The re-translation of Proust's work from 'Remembrance of Things Past' *to* 'In Search of Lost Time' *is the opposite of what Alison Bechdel is trying to accomplish in* Fun Home. *Alison isn't searching for what's been lost, but rather remembering her past and trying to re-contextualize her coming-of-age with the new information she's received as an adult about her father. Here Alison notes how fiction, even the best of it, can often fall short of representing the complexities and depth of real-life experiences like true loss. The examination of the photos also hints at the inscrutability of the past—though Alison can speculate about who took this photo of her father and why, speculate is all she can do—she can never know for certain.*

CHAPTER 5: THE CANARY-COLORED CARAVAN OF DEATH

Two nights before Bruce's death, Alison dreamed that she was out at the family cabin with him. There was a beautiful sunset visible through the trees, and Alison urged Bruce to follow her up the hill to see it. At first Bruce ignored her, but she raced up the hill, and when Bruce finally got there the sun was gone. Alison says that Bruce possessed a type of radiance (perhaps, Alison notes, because of his excessive sunbathing habit), causing his death to have a "dimming" feeling. Alison's cousin even delayed his annual fireworks show out of respect for Bruce.

This dream almost feels like a foreshadowing literary device—but, since this is a graphic memoir, we must take Alison at face value that this really happened. Dreams, perhaps, are one of the many intersections between fiction and reality. Though Alison couldn't have connected this dream to her father's death before it happened, perhaps she could subconsciously sense a tragedy approaching Bruce.

Alison's numbness, along with all the mourning at Bruce's funeral was making her irritable. She wondered what would happen if she told someone at the funeral the truth—that there's no mystery, and Bruce "killed himself because he was a manic-depressive, closeted fag and he couldn't face living in this small-minded small town one more second." Instead, Alison stays quiet. When Alison wonders how her father's story might have turned out differently, she always thinks that if Bruce had been able to escape Beech Creek, he might not have died so soon.

Rather than openly cut through the artificial, sappy, and misguided sentiment at the funeral, Alison chooses to stay quiet and repress her extreme frustrations, somewhat mirroring how Bruce lived his life (at least on the surface).

Alison wonders if Beech Creek itself exerted some kind of gravitational pull due to its topography. The town is right on the Allegheny front, where the forests of the Allegheny Plateau break out into long ridges and cultivated valleys. "The Appalachian Ridges—many longer than Hadrian's Wall—historically discouraged cultural exchange." Alison's Grammy was a Bechdel even before she married her grandfather. In their town of 800 people, 26 Bechdel families were still listed in the phone book, despite the fact that roads made it easy to navigate around the mountains by the time of Bruce's childhood.

By comparing the topography of her hometown to Hadrian's Wall, Alison implicitly compares Beech Creek to the Roman Empire, again "fictionalizing" the truth and giving Beech Creek an air of importance and grandiosity it might not deserve except in Alison's mind.

By the time Alison was born, one could even drive right across the mountain—Interstate 80 had just been blasted through a ridge close to Beech Creek. Over an image of Bruce and the kids playing cards on the porch, Alison narrates that the mountain deadened any hint of noise from the highway except on particularly hot, dry nights. She notes that the sun would rise over Bald Eagle Mountain each morning and set behind the "strip mine-pocked plateau" with beautiful splendor because of a "pre-clean air act paper mill ten miles away." Similarly, Alison notes, the crystal-clear creek was so clean precisely because pollution from mine runoff left the water too acidic to support life.

Nature can be most beautiful when it's toxic. On the surface, the fish-free river looks beautiful, but the water is acidic and most likely dangerous to all life. This mirrors the Bechdel house itself—it appears to be a lavish, even luxurious home, whereas the reality of living in it is uncomfortable and often frightening. The message: things often aren't as they appear to be, and the line between artifice and reality, beauty and danger, can be tough to distinguish.

In this fishless creek, Alison "learned firsthand that most elemental of all ironies. That, as Wallace Stevens put it... 'Death is the Mother of Beauty.'" Alison was inspired to poetry by the beautiful surroundings, writing a poem about spring at the age of seven. She showed the poem to Bruce, who improvised a second stanza about flowers. Alison added Bruce's lines to the typescript, and illustrated the page with a bright watercolor sunset. In the foreground of the watercolor stands a man staring out at the sunset. Alison notes that she never wrote another poem, and in her illustrating she soon abandoned the practice of using color.

Alison's shift from color to black-and-white in her artwork embodies her love for the purely functional and her dislike of ornament—she prefers simple, honest illustration to anything at all artificial or distracting. Bruce adding his own stanza to Alison's poem mirrors how Bruce's enthusiasm can sometimes overshadow Alison's; rather than simply feeling happy for his daughter, Bruce has to take over and make her art and enthusiasm at least partially his own.

In the Bechdel home there was a huge coloring book of E.H. Shepard's illustrations for *The Wind in the Willows*. Bruce had read Alison bits of the story from the real version of the book, and Alison notes that in one scene the character Mr. Toad buys a caravan. One day, Alison was filling in the caravan with her favorite color, Midnight Blue. Bruce asked Alison what she was doing, since that was the "Canary colored caravan!" and proceeded to shade half of it in yellow and turn Alison's blue half into shadow.

Here Bruce is so obsessed with being true to a fiction that he takes over his daughter's coloring and ruins what could have been a really fun experience for her. Even vicariously, Bruce is meticulous about creating thorough fictions, and he can't see that his obsessiveness about it is daunting and overbearing to his daughter.

Helen's talents were also "daunting." Once, Alison went with Helen to a house where she argued with a man as if she knew him, which Alison later learned was called acting. Helen could also play piano very well, but when Alison one day asked her mother if "Chop-in" wrote chopsticks, Helen replied, "Sho-Pahn. No. Don't bother me now." Several years after Bruce's death, Helen was using an old tape recorder to rehearse for the play *Morning at Seven*. When Helen checked to make sure it was recording properly, she realized she was taping over Bruce's voice as he prepared a guided tour for a local historical museum.

Alison's first exposure to acting is a pure example of the fine line between fiction and reality—Helen and her scene partner know it is only pretend, but a young Alison can't differentiate their play-argument from a real-life one. Also, Helen is often more absorbed in fiction than in the real problems of her daughter, exemplified by the "Chop-in" vs. "Sho-Pahn" question, which Helen could have answered much more attentively if she'd wanted to.

Alison says that it was jarring to hear Bruce speak from beyond the grave, but the most shocking part about the tape was its evidence of both her parents separately absorbed in their work. Over an illustration of a young Alison telling her piano-playing mother that she's hungry and Helen replying that she'll make lunch in 15 minutes, Alison narrates that listening to the tape brings her to an emotional state of familiar resentment. Alison knows that it's childish to begrudge her parents "the sustenance of their creative solitude… but it was *all* that sustained them, and thus was all-consuming." Alison learned from her parents to feed her own creativity, for example by drawing on the walls. Her brothers quickly followed suit, so the **Bechdel home** became a sort of artists' colony. They ate together, but were absorbed in separate pursuits. In this atmosphere, the Bechdel family's creativity became compulsive.

Again, Helen is sometimes more absorbed in her own artistic pursuits than in Alison and her siblings' real-life needs. So, Alison and her siblings begin to seek loving sustenance not from their parents, but from art, which can be satisfying, but sometimes it's in a two-dimensional (or at least lonely) way. Alison doesn't see anything wrong with achieving satisfaction through artistic personal pursuits—her issue is that this is all *her family cares about, leaving little room for compassion or love in their real-life family.*

Alison's real "obsessive-compulsive disorder" first surfaced when she was ten. First it involved counting, like trying to get the bathtub faucet to stop after an even number of drips. She avoided odd numbers and multiples of thirteen, and crossing doorways became tedious since she had to count the number of edges she saw there. She also would continually wipe away invisible substances that hung in doorways. Despite her watchfulness, she encountered odd numbers and multiples of thirteen often, so she created even more rules. If she hadn't successfully navigated a doorway, she could say an incantation, which could be repeated with added hand gestures. If Alison had a good day, she attempted to repeat as much of it as possible the next. If she had a bad day, she would alter her regimen slightly. "Life had become a laborious round of chores," affecting even the order of how she undressed and how she lined up her shoes each night.

These sorts of obsessive compulsions seem to stem from Alison's desire to exert some kind of control over her life, perhaps because she cannot control how she internally feels. This can be seen most clearly when Alison says she would try to recreate the conditions of a good day and change things about herself after a bad one. It's impossible to say exactly what caused these compulsions, but it is possible that they're linked to Alison's repression of her genderqueer sexuality—she can't control how she feels, nor does she feel she can speak openly about it, so she tries to control the outside world through ritualized behaviors.

Every night, Alison had to kiss each of her stuffed animals before bed. Then she'd bring one of the three bears to bed with her, alternating nightly between the mother, father, and baby. Alison then points out that "no one had kissed" *her* goodnight in years. One day, Helen stopped Alison mid-ritual to ask whether Alison felt guilty about something. She asked if Alison had any bad thoughts about herself or Bruce, and Alison said "No" while wondering whether she had. Alison knew her mother had gotten her questions from Dr. Spock, who wrote a book called *Baby and Child Care* that Alison had also spent time browsing. Its section about compulsions came somewhat close to describing Alison's symptoms.

Alison doesn't receive the love and nurturing in real life that she craves, so she seeks to find it with inanimate objects. She doesn't receive any goodnight kisses, so she shares them with her teddy bears. Here Alison knows the difference between reality and fiction, but she seeks in fiction what she cannot find in reality. Then, when Alison tries to understand her compulsions, she tries to learn about it through literature rather than seeking help through her flesh-and-blood family members.

Even so, Spock's book's explanation that compulsions are caused by "repressed hostility" didn't make much sense to Alison. She continued reading, searching for a more concrete answer. Over images of Helen and Bruce arguing while a teen Alison reads *Baby and Child Care*, Alison narrates that she learned about "tics," but these sorts of nervous habits described in the book were only child's play compared to the darker fears that motivated Alison's own rituals. Still, Alison liked reading Dr. Spock. She felt she was "both subject and object," both the educator and the one being educated. Reading the book "was a self-soothing autistic loop." Alison asks if her family was an artists' colony, "could it not be even more accurately described as a mildly autistic colony?"

Here, Alison finds a possible explanation of her compulsive behaviors ("repressed hostility"), though at the time she doesn't fully believe it. Alison feeling like "both subject and object" when reading the Dr. Spock book embodies the difficulty of coming of age in the Bechdel household. In some ways, Alison acted as her own parent, and was forced to educate herself about her internal issues, including her gender identity and repressed frustrations.

Over an image of a small radius encircling the areas where Bruce was born, lived, died, and was buried, Alison narrates that Bruce's life "was a solipsistic circle of self, from autodidact to autocrat to autocide." Alison then addressees her "own compulsive propensity to auto-biography." At some point during her O.C.D. spell, Alison began to keep a diary in a wall calendar given to her by Bruce. Alison's first entry was made on Ash Wednesday, and the first three words are in her father's handwriting.

Bruce is full of contradictions. Though Alison believes he was obsessively focused on himself, he was also obsessive about hiding who he truly was, so no matter how self-absorbed he was, he was never self-fulfilled.

The entries in Alison's diary proceeded blandly at first. She then switched to a date book, which afforded her more space. But in April, the phrase, "*I Think*" started to crop up between many of her comments. Alison says she was going through a kind of crisis of reality—How could she know that the things she was writing about were universally true? Alison believed she could only stand for her own perceptions, and her declarative sentences began to strike her as "hubristic at best, utter lies at worst." The "I Thinks" became stitches between Alison's sentences, and, to strengthen them, she would scribble "I think" over and over until the words became illegible blots. Alison's diary then quickly became as tedious as the rest of her rituals.

Here Alison most overtly explores the differences between fiction and reality, and she spells out how memoir is inherently a blending of reality with a certain kind of fiction. One's own point-of-view, even when recounting real experiences, is always inflected through one's beliefs and biases, so how can we know anything we see is empirically, fully true? Alison comes to the conclusion that she can't, so she adds "I think" to all of her sentences, making what is true and what are simply her perceptions ambiguous. Thus even when Alison knows the truth, she often omits it from her diary or shrouds it with qualifiers.

At that point, Helen seems to have decided that giving Alison more attention might help her, so she began reading to Alison in the bath. But this was "too much, too late." Alison was so consumed with anxiety that she couldn't enjoy the reading and Helen would stop. Meanwhile, things worsened in her diary. To save time, Alison created a shorthand symbol for "I Think" that Alison began drawing right over names and pronouns. Then, Alison realized she could draw the shape over entire entries, which she did.

Diaries are supposed to be a place of pure personal openness and exploration, yet Alison's became more and more indecipherable, mirroring her repressed and anxiety-riddled state. Alison scribbling over the entries serves as a literal symbol for her inability to recount the truth without having anxiety that she isn't being open enough—and ironically, this desire to be fully truthful leads her to often repress or ignore the truth.

"Things were getting fairly illegible by August," when Alison and her brothers went with Bill and Bruce to the Bullpen in the woods. Given how important that event is in Alison's memory, her notes on the event in her diary are surprisingly minimal. There is no mention of the pin-up girl, the strip mine, or Bill's .22 caliber gun—she only wrote, "we saw a snake," with a curvy circumflex scribbled through "we." Alison says that this again exhibits "the troubling gap between word and meaning." At that time, Alison's language skills couldn't properly express the power of the experience.

Words sometimes fail to fully express what the writer intends, and Alison's diary embodies this concept fully. Rather than being an honest non-fiction account of Alison's feelings and experiences, by the time of this trip the diary had fully become a reflection of Alison's repressed state, so the journal entries omit important details at best and total ignore or fictionalize her feelings about important events in her life at worst.

Alison pauses her narrative to comment about how, when driving toward New York City on the highway, the speed at which you're moving erases the details of the landscape itself. She notes how living in the anonymity of a city might have saved Bruce's life, but adds that she can't imagine her father having existed anywhere outside of Beech Creek. While listening to the museum-tour tape that Bruce recorded, Alison is stunned by her father's thick Pennsylvania accent.

Alison imagines a fictional life her father could have led in a city, while acknowledging that his personality would never have let that happen in reality. Also, Alison being surprised by her father's accent is an example of how memory can often turn real people into characters—we emphasize certain parts of their personality while minimizing or ignoring others.

Alison had forgotten her father's accent—by the time Bruce died, Alison had mostly succeeded in ridding herself of her own rural accent. However, Bruce's accent and provincialism was planted deep. In Bruce's letters to Helen during his courtship of her, Bruce wrote fondly about home and made plans to bring Helen to Beech Creek to meet his family. In the family's *Wind in the Willows* Coloring Book, Alison's favorite page was the map. There were distinct parallels between that fictional landscape and the one in Beech Creek. One on top of the other, Alison points out the similarities between the two towns, including that the creek of Beech Creek flowed in the same direction as Ratty's River.

Here Alison notes the similarities between the fictional map in the Wind in the Willows *coloring book and the real landscape her family existed among in Beech Creek. It is almost as if she'd rather live in the world of the coloring book than her own world, just as she tries to rid herself of the indications of her provincialism through dropping her accent.*

The best thing about the *Wind in the Willows* map was its ability to bridge "the symbolic and the real." Though it was a chart, the map also served as an animated picture: if you look closely, you can see "Mr. Toad speeding along in the car he bought after becoming disenchanted with his canary-colored caravan." In September of Alison's O.C.D. year, there was a bad accident on Route 150 in which three people were killed close to where Bruce would die nine years later. It was the first time the "Fun home" hosted three funerals at once, and one of the victims was a distant cousin, a boy Alison's age. Bruce told Alison the boy died from a broken neck. Alison's diary entries from that weekend "are almost completely obscured" with curved "I Think" symbols.

In this section, Alison overtly explores the bridging of the fictional and the real, or the "symbolic and the real" as she puts it. She implicitly compares Mr. Toad's fictional driving with the real tragic car accident that included the death of her distant cousin. Rather than openly explore her feelings about this boy's death, Alison notes that her compulsive "I think" symbols blotted out most of her journal entries from that week. Alison indicates that stress, especially stress induced by death, caused her to repress her feelings even more than usual.

On the Monday after the funeral, the writing in Alison's journal shifted from her handwriting to her mother's. For the next two months, Helen took dictation from Alison until Alison's "penmanship" improved. Slowly, Alison did get better. She set deadlines on her calendar by which she had to abandon her compulsions, one at a time, interspersed with small encouragements like "Don't worry. You're safe." Alison was "as obsessive in giving up the behaviors as" she'd been in pursuing them, but she still felt relief when they were gone. By the end of September, Alison narrated to her mother that she and Bruce watched a beautiful sunset together. Over an image of the father and daughter watching the sunset, Alison says that while Bruce once almost got into a fight with a guest "about whether a particular patch of embroidery was fuchsia or magenta," this sunset left him silent.

Helen focusing on Alison's "penmanship" improving rather than, say, her nearly debilitating compulsions, is another prime example of the Bechdel family's preference of fiction to reality, surface to depth. Rather than overtly dealing with Alison's issues and having her go see a therapist or talk with her parents about her issues, Helen deals with Alison's problems indirectly, solving the handwriting problem and then leaving Alison on her own to deal with her compulsions as if she were an adult. Lastly, Bruce's speechlessness at the sunset is an example of reality's ability to transcend fiction or words—sometimes an experience cannot be fully captured by any sort of art, even this graphic memoir.

CHAPTER 6: THE IDEAL HUSBAND

Over an image of Alison writing in her diary that her dad is going to "a psychiatrist!!" Alison narrates that, the summer when she was 13, Bruce's secret almost surfaced. At breakfast, Bruce was in a jacket and tie, and when he told Alison where he was going, she asked him why. His response was shameful: "I'm bad. Not good like you." This was a busy summer, and Alison is glad she was taking notes, because otherwise she'd find the density and coincidence of all the events implausible. Helen was playing Lady Bracknell in a regional production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the Watergate political scandal was coming to a head, and Alison got her first period. Though the juxtaposition of Alison's last days of childhood with those of Nixon may seem overwrought, Alison narrates that there were many more "heavy-handed plot devices" that would ensnare the Bechdel family during those months.

These "heavy-handed plot devices" that occur in Alison's real life are a perfect example of her using fictional frameworks in order to understand and contextualize her lived experiences. The arc of the real-life Watergate scandal both mirrors and diverges from that of Alison's family—just as Nixon's secrets threaten to become exposed (and ultimately are), Bruce's secret nearly comes out, but he ultimately receives few consequences for his risky behavior, whereas Nixon gets impeached.

Early in the summer, a plague of 17-year-locusts rose from the ground, shed their skins all over the yard, emerged as adults, and "settled down to an orgy" in the old maple trees in the Bechdels' yard, covering the area with loud croaking noises. After a week or two, the cicadas finished laying their eggs and died. This is when Alison got her first period, but she didn't tell her mother, even while they practiced Helen's lines together for many hours. Helen was busy with her master's thesis as well as the play, using the sewing room as her study, and Alison decided there was no rush to tell her, especially since Helen had given Alison a box of sanitary napkins the year before.

Alison spending hours with her mother helping her engage with fiction—in this case Oscar Wilde's play—while suffering and failing to share the real-life event of her first period is another perfect example of the Bechdel family's tendency to prefer fiction to reality, and even to use fiction to escape from or ignore the problems of reality.

Alison believed there was a chance that by ignoring her period, it would go away, even though this wasn't working with her still-budding breasts. At first, Alison's period was a slight secretion, only requiring a little toilet paper, and it went away after a few days and passed unmentioned in Alison's diary. About that time, on a Wednesday afternoon, Alison's best friend Beth's father Dr. Gryzglewicz and stepmother Dr. Nancy Gryzglewicz arrived to take the Bechdel kids away for a few days. Helen was taken aback by the gesture, but agreed to let the kids go so she could focus on her thesis. Alison had trouble remembering to address both parents as "Dr. Gryzglewicz." The visit was "a two-day binge of nonstop play." Alison narrates that it never occurred to her to wonder what Bruce had been up to during their absence, but she later learned "he'd been on a spree of his own."

Alison attempts to ignore her breasts and her period, likely because she doesn't want her coming-of-age to be linked with her becoming more womanly—if anything, she wishes she could become even less curvy and manlier, so ignoring these changes and clinging to her tomboy aesthetic seems to be Alison's best option. Additionally, while Alison and the rest of the kids are engaged in a weekend of pure fiction, Bruce exhibits his worst compulsive behaviors, which he is incapable of stripping from his reality no matter how hard he tries.

Over an image of the police report that Alison looked up 27 years later, Alison narrates that on Thursday at dusk, Bruce had driven over to the next valley to search for a kid he knew named Dave, and to do so he enlisted the help of Mark, Dave's younger brother. On the drive, Bruce offered Mark, who he knew was underage, beer. They never found Dave, who had been home all night, and when Bruce dropped Mark off back at home, Dave recognized the car and called the police. Alison says no police officers came to their house, and in her diary for that week there is no sign anything was amiss. But, Alison notes, by that point the diary had become unreliable, with an "elliptic tone" creeping in. Further, "actual ellipses began riddling the pages," though Alison would use them to indicate hesitation more than omission.

The image of a police report is as real and grounded as Alison can make this story—her own perception of this weekend was filled with play and time away from her parents, while Bruce's weekend, no matter how he tries to spin it, was clearly spent attempting to compulsively fulfill his need to express his homosexuality or bisexuality. Alison's diary at this time reflected her even further repressed state—it had become wholly untrustworthy and no longer even reflected reality, with gaps between incidents and the entries themselves often filtered through a fictional lens of how Alison wants to seem rather than how she truly feels.

On the first day of July, Bruce told Alison that he had to go see a psychiatrist. Later that same day, Helen went to see her thesis advisor and returned home upset that he wanted more revisions. In all activities, Helen held herself to near-perfect standards, but being in a play totally consumed her. She would even learn everyone else's lines along with her own, and worked on her own costumes. Everyone in the family knew not to ask when opening night was, but with *The Importance of Being Earnest*, her anxiety level reached a new peak. In a photo taken a week before the play opened, Helen looks shattered, "But in her publicity shot as Lady Bracknell, she's a Victorian dominatrix to rival Wilde himself."

Helen is more obsessive about learning her lines and performing well in The Importance of Being Earnest *than she is about being an attentive mother and wife. Rather than deal with her reality, Helen prefers to fully escape into fiction. This juxtaposition can be seen by the differences between the two pictures of Helen—in real life, she's a nervous wreck, but as the fictional Lady Bracknell, Helen is confident and powerful.*

Alison loved seeing Helen as the character of Lady Bracknell, and "in a fitting coincidence, Lady Bracknell's first name, Augusta," was Helen's middle name. This was the first time Alison was old enough to run lines with Helen, and, in reading the it, she was surprised at how funny Wilde's play was. So, Alison continued reading on her own, joyously reciting to Bruce the line, "I never travel without my diary. One should always have something sensational to read on the train." At the time, Alison missed all of the covert references to homosexuality present in the play. Now, Alison knows that the week after *The Importance of Being Earnest* first opened, Oscar Wilde's trials began.

Helen's middle name being her character's first name could be construed as a pure coincidence, but Alison pointing it out as a teenager highlights her fascination with the differences and similarities between reality and fiction. Also, the line Alison recites to Bruce from the play about a diary being "sensational" is an example of Alison using fiction to actually reflect upon her real life—her own diary, at this time, had become far more sensational than realistic.

Wilde had just returned from Algiers, where he and Alfred Douglas had been out with some local boys, when Douglas's father delivered an infamous note to Wilde's club accusing him of being a homosexual. Wilde took Douglas to court for libel and lost. Over images of Helen rehearsing the play, Alison narrates that Wilde was then tried for committing indecent acts and sent to prison while "both *The Importance* and *The Ideal Husband* were playing to full houses." In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, "illicit desire is encoded as one character's uncontrollable gluttony." He keeps telling other characters not to eat the cucumber sandwiches because they're meant for Aunt Augusta, even though he keeps eating them. That summer, Helen helped the prop mistress find a recipe for cucumber sandwiches and the Bechdels "ate them all summer."

Oscar Wilde flourished in the fictional landscape (his plays raked in money and audience approval) while in real life he suffered horribly during this time, as his homosexuality ended up getting him thrown in prison. Illicit desire being "encoded as… uncontrollable gluttony" is another example of fiction mirroring reality—under this quote, Alison includes an image of Bruce scarfing down cucumber sandwiches, implying that his own illicit desire was a kind of uncontrollable gluttony.

On the night before the play opened, "the Drs. Gryglewicz" brought Helen a bouquet of lilies. Dr. Nancy Gryglewicz told Helen, "Wilde would bring armloads of these to the actress Lillie Langtry." Helen was taken aback, and ran upstairs to prepare. Years later, Alison learned that The Gryglewizes once propositioned Alison's parents for group sex, a request the Bechdels declined. In the performance, Helen was brilliant and commanded the stage. The play ran for a week, and every actor flubbed a line at least once, except for Helen. The day after the play closed, Alison's period returned in a much stronger way than the first time, and she felt obligated to include the incident in her diary.

Before the production, Helen is unapproachable and nearly a nervous wreck, but onstage, once she's assumed her fictional character of Lady Bracknell, Helen is confident, majestic, and perfect. It seems she is more comfortable in her when playing a fictional role as someone else than in living the "role" of her own life.

When Alison was ten, she obsessed over making sure the "diary entries bore no false witness." But as she aged, "self-disgust" began to cloud Alison's diary, until, in the entry where she first mentions menstruating, the truth became barely decipherable. In an image of her diary, Alison writes that she thinks she "started *Ning* or something. (HAHA)? How Horrid!" She notes that she encoded the word menstruating according to a practice she learned in algebra where you denote "complex or unknown quantities with letters."

Here, when writing about a biological event she is uncomfortable with, Alison's writing mirrors her repressed state. She is unable to even write the word 'period' or 'menstruation,' instead using the code word 'Ning.' Her attitude about it, a mix of sarcastic distance and mock-hilarity, is also totally false—Alison is clearly concerned and upset about getting her period, but she is unable to explore or express, even to herself, how she truly feels.

Alison was so certain of the indecipherability of the word "Ning" that she used it in her diary again three years later to camouflage a different biological event—masturbation. Although she didn't mention masturbation in her diary until she was 16, Alison began doing it soon after her first period. Alison notes that her ability to illustrate her fantasies made her feel powerful, and she began drawing slim, manly bodies that she was both attracted to and wished she herself could appear as. Alison says that despite stumbling across the word "orgasm" in the dictionary, the word never appears in her diary. Alison says that perhaps she was influenced by the gaps in truth that were saturating the country as the Watergate news was revealed. She hardly referenced the scandal in her notes, only referring to it twice very casually.

Again, 'Ning' serves as a way for Alison to hint at the changes her body was going through and her exploration of her sexuality without overtly discussing it, keeping it in the repressed realm of subtext. Also, Alison's inclination to draw what she was attracted to, especially slim male bodies, seems to indicate that internally she was still fixated on exploring her masculinity-centric sexuality, but her repressed feelings rendered her unable to do so in the non-fiction realm of her diary—instead, in her imaginative fictional drawings Alison was able to express her "erotic omnipotence."

Alison mostly ignored the Watergate hearings, but she "began to take notice as the truth wormed its way" out. As the momentum toward Nixon's impeachment built, so did the domestic tension in the Bechdel household. One day in the pool, Alison was building up the nerve to tell her mom about her period when Helen told Alison there was a chance the family might have to move, since Bruce had to go to court in a few days and might lose his job for buying "a beer for a boy who wasn't old enough." Alison asked where the family would go, and Helen told her maybe somewhere in the northeast, like New England. Alison felt that New England offered her "an alluring coherence" that her current life was missing.

Here, Helen gives Alison the illusion of opening up to her by telling her about Bruce's situation, but she leaves the darker truth about Bruce's behavior unsaid. Then, rather than focusing on Bruce's real questionable behavior, Alison hears the news and immediately begins to fantasize about a fictional future where her family's relocation because of this incident makes her life better.

In Alison's diary that night, she remarked upon the exchange with the same phrase she used about her period, "How Horrid!" That phrase strikes Alison as having "a slightly facetious tone" that is somewhat inspired by Oscar Wilde. It appears to embrace the horror while at the last second sidestepping it by laughing at it, like Road Runner in the cartoons with Wile E. Coyote. Though the accusation made her view Bruce a little differently, she was still sympathetic toward her father. Alison narrates that what she didn't know then was that the charge of giving alcohol to the minor was the last of his troubles, and the real accusation underneath was the charge that "dared not speak its name."

Alison highlights the repression and lack of openness present both in her diary and in her parents' words and actions. Her "How Horrid!" note is disingenuous in that she says she's horrified without actually expressing why or delving into her true emotions. Then, she notes that her parents, in claiming to be worried about the underage beer charge, are omitting their true fears that the town might find out about Bruce's affairs with underage boys. The "love that dare not speak its name" is a reference to Wilde's trial, where it was used as a euphemism for homosexuality (with the phrase coming from a poem written by Wilde's lover Lord Alfred Douglas).

Alison can only speculate on the exact nature of Bruce's relations with the brothers (Mark and Dave) in the next valley, but in the end he was exposed by one of the boys just as "Oscar Wilde was condemned…" On the day before Helen's thesis was due, a sudden storm blew up and the Bechdels quickly ran around closing all the windows. However, Alison had forgotten to close the sewing room window, and Helen's thesis paper got soaked.

Even as an adult looking back on this event, Alison uses the case of Oscar Wilde as a framework to understand her father's situation. However, where Oscar Wilde ended up in prison, Bruce's sentence yielded little long-term punishment.

When the storm passed, the family went outside to find the temperature twenty degrees cooler and the two silver maples in the Bechdel yard snapped in half. Two apple trees and an oak were also destroyed. The maples had been sheltering the west side of the **Bechdel house** for more than one hundred years, and their absence left a previously unimaginable void. None of their neighbors had much damage—it was as if the storm had only struck the Bechdels'. Yet the house itself was unharmed, with even the cat making it home dry and unscathed. In that light this incident might have conveyed a tone less of devastation than of "narrow escape." Helen retyped her thesis and it was accepted the next day, while Bruce was only held accountable for the underage liquor charge, and only had to complete six months of therapy. The family didn't have to move.

Alison's imagined future in Boston for the Bechdel family never came to fruition—the literal and metaphorical storm that could have destroyed or moved her family (and their home) became a near-miss, and nothing about the family fundamentally changed. Instead, Bruce stayed repressed and continued his affairs, Helen's thesis was destroyed but she recreated it and continued her escapist tendencies, and while the oak trees, like Alison's opinion of her father, will never return to their same heights, overall the Bechdels' respective repressions never come to light.

Two days after Bruce's court date, Nixon resigned. On Labor Day, the Bechdels hosted a lawn party for the cast and crew of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Alison includes an illustration of her father flirting with Jack, one of the male actors. A few days later, Alison turned 14, and received a subscription to Gentlemen's Quarterly (GQ) magazine from her mom, which she appreciated.

Here, ironically, Helen's fictional escape from reality (the play) seems to turn into Bruce's compulsive escape from reality, as he flirts with one of the actors from the play. This seems to imply that no matter how fully we engage with fiction, our realities don't go away just by ignoring them.

Soon afterward, Beth Gryglewicz, Alison's friend, tried to improve Alison's social skills by getting her to go to a football game with a cute guy. Alison said she didn't like football, to which Beth explained that it's not about the game. Alison suggest that, instead, the two of them could dress up in some of Bruce's fancy dress suits, and Beth agreed. Alison narrates that she took "a nearly mystical pleasure" in putting on a formal shirt with studs and cufflinks. To Alison, "it felt too good to actually be good." Beth went along with it, and they fleshed out a scenario in which they were playing old-school con artists. After playing around in the backyard, Alison narrates that she and Beth "couldn't sustain" the fantasy, and they took off the clothes when Beth complained that it was hot. That night, Alison wrote about the incident in her diary, including a falsehood about having been upset to miss the football game.

Alison internally rejects what seems to come naturally to her. She doesn't want to admit just how much she enjoys dressing in male clothes, and her line that it "felt too good to actually be good" is an example of how Alison immediately represses her non-heteronormative feelings. This can also be seen by Alison's diary—she lies about being sad to miss the football game, while omitting how good putting on men's clothing made her feel. Also, Alison uses a fictional scenario in order to really explore her fantasy of dressing like (and being perceived as) a man—here, fiction allows Alison to get close to her true internal inclinations, though through a lens of make-believe rather than true open exploration.

By this point, Alison's diary had become totally unreliable. For example, in one entry she forced herself to be nonchalant about her interest in men's fashion. Meanwhile, Bruce never mentioned going to the psychiatrist again, though he seemingly continued to do so. Alison narrates that Helen believed Bruce began coming home from psychiatry sessions in "a familiarly manic mood," once urging her to invite his psychiatrist over for dinner. Alison has no way of knowing whether Helen's suspicions were grounded, but she says the irony of Bruce sleeping with his therapist is tempting. In December, Alison finally told Helen that she started getting her period, and Helen asked if Alison "had cramps or anything" and whether she was "okay with the pads?" There's no mention of the incident in Alison's diary. By the end of November, Alison's "earnest daily entries had given way to the implicit lie of the blank page, and weeks at a time are left unrecorded."

Again, even in her diary Alison is unable to be open about her interest in men's clothing, and she represses and omits her feelings. Alison saying that the irony of Bruce having slept with his psychiatrist is "tempting" is an example of her preference of viewing her parents as characters rather than people—she likes the narrative idea of him sleeping with his psychiatrist, but doesn't consider how awful this might have made her mother Helen feel. When Alison finally reveals her period to her mother, their exchange is purely functional. Helen doesn't once ask how Alison feels about this experience, and so Alison never opens up to her mother about it. Finally, Alison's diary becomes fully blank, and she gives up even the illusion of trying to be open and honest.

CHAPTER 7: THE ANTIHERO'S JOURNEY

In 1976, Bruce took Alison and her brothers to New York City to see all the ships gathered for the bicentennial of the founding of the United States. Helen remained in Beech Creek to perform in a local run of the play *You Can't Take It With You*. Bruce and the kids stayed at Helen's friend Elly's apartment in Greenwich Village. This time, at age 15, Alison saw the Village anew: as she observed what appeared to be homosexual men, she began to feel that homosexuality was not only harmless, but actually a positive force. She was as moved by her own open-minded tolerance as she was by the ever-present displays of male fashion and masculine beauty.

Helen prefers to stay in Beech Creek and perform a play rather than accompany her family to New York, a perfect example of her preference of fiction to her family's reality. This trip to New York at age 15 seems to be one of the first times that Alison begins to believe that homosexuality might be not only something to not be ashamed about, but something natural and beautiful that could be celebrated. This is an important moment in her coming-of-age as well as her own internal acceptance.

Alison narrates that the weekend was gay all around, over an image of Baryshnikov at the ballet. Elly took Bruce and Alison to see her friends Richard and Tom, and though no one said so, Alison figured that they were a gay couple. Richard was illustrating a children's filmstrip about Pinocchio—Alison admired his markers. The group somehow got tickets to see *A Chorus Line*, which had just swept the Tony Awards. Alison includes an illustration of herself and Bruce watching a kid on stage say, "One day I looked at myself in the mirror and said, "You're fourteen years old and you're a faggot. What are you going to do with your life?"

The question asked to himself by the boy on stage could also be posed to Alison, a 15-year-old girl struggling with her genderqueer identity. This character in the musical also does something that both Bruce and Alison, up to this point in their lives, are unwilling to do: be upfront and honest about their sexuality, and how it might impact their opportunities.

Alison narrates that she didn't draw a conscious parallel between the musical and her own sexuality, much less to Bruce's. However, the experience left Alison "supple and open to possibility." The next morning, John wandered off, and Alison didn't understand Bruce's concern until Elly explained that there were guys out there who would "prey on young boys." John soon returned on his own—he'd wandered down Christopher Street to look for ships when he noticed a man watching him, so he headed back toward Elly's apartment. The man followed, asking if John liked boats, and instinctively John humored the man until they neared the apartment. When they got close John took off and ran as fast as he could into the building. Allison narrates that she didn't know about the man until years later, or perhaps she had blocked it out.

Elly, unlike Bruce, is totally open and up front with Alison about the dangers John might have run into. Whether Alison repressed the memory of John nearly being picked up by a possible child molesting predator or Bruce and John simply never mentioned it to her, the fact that this incident wasn't a formative, crucial moment of the trip is an example of Bruce's inclination to repress or avoid the scary or complex truth rather than be open with his family about ideas that edge near to concepts he's repressed.

After reprimanding John, Bruce was quick to forgive and took the family to more museums. Shortly after that, Elly left on her own vacation and Bruce and the kids stayed for a few more days. They had a disappointing view of the ships sailing by during the bicentennial, but a great view of the crowd. Similarly, they had a blocked view of the fireworks that night. As the kids got ready for bed, Bruce got ready to go out "for a drink." He told the kids to sleep, which they did despite an extra loud New York City night.

Here Bruce lies to his kids about what he's doing, and his behavior puts them in a potentially dangerous situation. Just a couple of days before, John was nearly picked up by a predator, but Bruce's compulsive behavior causes him to take risks with his family that he otherwise might not take.

When Alison tries to imagine what Bruce's life might have been like if he hadn't died in 1980, she doesn't get far. Alison imagines that if he'd lived during those early years of AIDS, Alison might have lost her father in a more painful, prolonged way. In that scenario, she may have even lost Helen, too. Alison says perhaps she's trying to replace her actual grief about Bruce with imaginary trauma. But Alison wonders if this idea is really so far fetched. After all, the nonfiction AIDS book *And The Band Played On* opens at the bicentennial. Or, perhaps Alison is trying to render her "senseless personal loss meaningful" by connecting it to the common homophobia-driven narrative of injustice surrounding the AIDS crisis.

Alison's speculation that she's perhaps trying to subconsciously replace her actual grief with imaginary trauma seems right—even in her non-fiction graphic memoir, Alison's tendency to prefer to deal with her real issues through fictional frameworks recurs. Alison attempting to connect Bruce's death and repression to the great struggle of the homosexual community in the 80s and 90s seems plausible, but perhaps a bit forced—yes Bruce existed in a largely homophobic climate, but he had many opportunities to come clean to those close to him and never chose to.

Alison is tempted to say that the story of homophobia *is* her father's story. She notes that there's a certain emotional gratification to claiming Bruce as "a tragic victim of homophobia. But that's a problematic line of thought" because, for one, it makes it difficult for Alison to blame Bruce for his own actions. For another, it leads Alison to a peculiar problem with her own identity. If Bruce had "come out" as a young man and never married Helen, where would that leave Alison? Alison consults the dictionary for its definition of a father, which reads "a man who has begotten a child."

Is Bruce responsible for his sexual repression and then subsequent compulsive behaviors? Or is the homophobic climate of Beech Creek to blame? The truth lies somewhere in the middle—Bruce can't be blamed for the unaccepting world he grew up in, but he also could have handled his situation much better. Complicating this, Alison notes that if Bruce had *been more open, he would have been a better person, probably, but he would not have been her father—and thus Alison, and this memoir, wouldn't exist.*

In Alison's earliest memories, Bruce's return home from work always signaled the end of playtime for Helen, Christian and Alison. Bruce didn't have much affection for small kids, but as Alison grew older, Bruce sensed her "potential as an intellectual companion." Bruce attempted to recommend to Alison books like *The Catcher in the Rye*, but Bruce's many years of distance left Alison wary, so she ignored his recommendations. But when Alison ended up in one of Bruce's high school English courses, she found she liked the books Bruce wanted her to read, including *The Catcher in the Rye*. She excelled as a student in his class, making her sometimes feel like only she and Bruce were in the room together.

Bruce never attempts to connect with his daughter on a real, human level, so when, later in her childhood, he tries to connect with her intellectually through literature, Alison senses the artificiality of his attempt at connection and rebuffs him. However, when Alison takes Bruce's English class, for the first time she and her father share a connection through a passion for the same kinds of literature, and the world of fiction ironically brings them closer together than any real-life interest ever did.

This feeling of closeness with her father was novel for Alison. Alison believes that both she and Bruce were starved for attention. They grew even closer when Alison went away to college—the books Alison was assigned for her English class continued to serve as their connective currency. At first, Alison was glad to have Bruce's help with her freshman English class, which often confounded her. She didn't understand why they "couldn't just read books without forcing contorted interpretations on them." Alison wasn't the only student who failed "to grasp the symbolic function of literature," and their teacher often grew frustrated with the class. Their papers came back marked up with red pen, most often with the phrase "WW" for "wrong word."

Alison and Bruce grow closer when she physically moves away from him, another example of how they didn't connect in real life but managed to do so ideologically through fictional literature. However, Alison dislikes the process of analyzing literature through symbolic "contorted interpretations," whereas this kind of fictional interpretation was Bruce's bread-and-butter.

Alison kept trying to please her teacher with essays influenced by coaching from her father. However, now that Alison thinks back on it, she's unsure whether Bruce served as "the vicarious teacher or the vicarious student" in his rants to her. Eventually, Bruce's excitement began to leave no room for Alison's own, and by the end of the year Alison felt suffocated. When she was assigned to read *A Portrait of the Artist As A Young Man*, Bruce tells Alison she had better identify with "every page."

Similarly to how Alison often feels like she has to parent herself growing up, in regard to this English class Alison almost begins to feel that Bruce is enrolled in the course and she is simply an advisor. Bruce's order to Alison to identify with "every page" of the Joyce novel, yet failing to identify or connect with his daughter in real life, is another example of how fiction is often more real to members of the Bechdel family than real life.

The next semester Alison didn't enroll in any English classes, and swore to never take one again. But a year and a half later she was forced to, and settled on a course solely devoted to reading James Joyce's novel *Ulysses*, which was also Bruce's favorite book. Alison's interview to get into the class with Professor Avery also occurred on the same afternoon that she realized in the campus book store that she was a lesbian. Indeed, Alison writes that on that day she embarked "on an odyssey which, consisting as it did in gradual, episodic, and inevitable convergence with" Bruce, was nearly as epic as the odyssey depicted in *Ulysses*.

Here, Alison begins to use The Odyssey *and* Ulysses *as a framework by which to understand her sexual awakening juxtaposed with her father's last months of life. Whether Alison does this for the audience's benefit or for her own is open to interpretation, but the comparison certainly lends itself to certain landmarks, and Alison enrolling in Professor Avery's class could be compared to Telemachus (or Stephen Dedalus) embarking on a journey to search for his father.*

When she was home for Christmas, Alison found Bruce's delight about *Ulysses* a bit off-putting. Bruce gave her the copy he read in college, and told her to read *Dubliners* and especially one of the stories in it: "The Dead". Even so, in a moment of tenderness, Alison asked Bruce's advice about which Joyce work she should read first. He was elated.

Though she's a bit put off initially, Bruce's passion about Joyce endears him somewhat to his daughter, and again serves to connect them, as their interest in reality couldn't.

Ulysses is itself based on *The Odyssey*. Alison notes that the Trojan War, which comprises the elaborate backstory to *The Odyssey*, is often blamed on Helen of Troy, but Paris was equally culpable. Paris—the city—plays a similarly inciting role in Alison's own odyssey when Bruce gave Alison the book *Earthly Paradise*, the autobiography by Colette detailing the lesbian scene of Paris in the 1920s.

Here is another example of an imperfect, yet somewhat fitting, translation—Paris of Troy started the Trojan war, while Paris of France, and especially Colette's book about it, serves as Alison's entryway to accepting her lesbian gender identity.

Alison and Bruce did not discuss *Earthly Paradise*, and Alison added it to her growing stack of lesbian literature. At the same time, 768 pages of *Ulysses* lay there waiting to be read. The class met in Professor Avery's living room. Mr. Avery, who had hurt his back, reclined on the couch and asked the class: "if one of Joyce's themes is paternity, then why is the story about Stephen and Bloom, who are virtual strangers, and not about Stephen's actual, physical father?" One students answered that it is because Bloom is Stephen's "spiritual father." Alison still found literary criticism a suspect activity, and she wonders whether it's necessary to point out every last point of correspondence between *The Odyssey* and *Ulysses*—though without them, she finds the book nearly impossible to understand.

Here, Alison gives one of the starkest indications in the book of how she truly feels about her father: deeply distanced from him. By comparing their relationship to that of Stephen Dedalus and Harold Bloom, Alison implies that Bruce is really more like her spiritual father than actual father, more like the character of a father who never meaningfully crosses paths with her than a flesh-and-blood, true father figure.

But then, Alison also had little patience for Joyce because her "own odyssey was calling." Alison refers to her growing pile of lesbian literature as "sirens" that she couldn't resist while she fell further and further behind in reading *Ulysses*, though she attended class consistently. In class, Alison doodled on her pages while not really paying attention to her teacher and classmates, having no clue what many ideas they discussed were referring to. By the time the term ended, Alison still had two hundred pages of *Ulysses* to read, and, still wrapped up in her lesbian exploration, felt no need to finish it.

Here, Alison's exploration into her gender identity takes precedence over doing a good job in her classes and, by extension, her internal "odyssey" becomes more important to her than the odyssey to connect with her father through their shared love of literature and Joyce (which itself centers around the original Odyssey*).*

At the beginning of the next semester, Alison still hadn't met with Professor Avery for her *Ulysses* oral exam, but she had a more daunting test to face first, a "descent into the underworld" in the form of joining the Gay Union. Alison narrates that Odysseus sailing into Hades couldn't have felt more trepidation than she did entering that room. After a week there, Alison's quest became external, and she began to tell people she was gay. Alison's parents received her coming out letter the same day Alison faked her way through the *Ulysses* exam. Bruce called to talk to Alison but failed to mention his own homosexuality. "Like Stephen and Bloom at the national library," Alison and Bruce's paths crossed, but they did not truly meet.

Alison's personal quest to explore her gender identity finally leaves the realm of the fictional (or two-dimensional) and enters the real world when she attends a Gay Union meeting. This is the first outward step of Alison coming of age and expressing who she truly is inside. She takes the first step of unburdening herself of her repressions by coming out of the closet as a lesbian both to her parents and to her friends—and though this admission doesn't initially bring her closer to her parents, it is the first step to living her life openly.

Three weeks later, Helen told Alison about Bruce's big secret. Though Alison was still striving to understand her own sexuality, this news about her father's sexuality and hidden affairs swamped her own internal struggles. The next day she received a letter from Bruce that left her even more confused. Rather than at last confiding in Alison, Bruce took the approach of assuming that Alison already knew he was gay, though he wrote the letter before Alison had spoken to Helen, so in fact she did not. Alison narrates that Bruce believed she thought he was "queer," and that she believed that he *knew* Alison was queer, too. Alison read the letter as lesbian friends invited her to a concert. Alison chose not to go, and though Alison felt she was "adrift," her course was clear: it lay between the "Scylla" of her peers and the "sucking Charybdis" of her family.

Bruce's letter to Alison is a prime example of his unwillingness – or perhaps inability – to be open and honest with anyone, including his family. He could easily have been totally upfront with his daughter, but instead he skirts around the issue and makes it seem like Alison is the one repressing something—not Bruce. Scylla and Charybdis are two sea monsters Odysseus encounters in The Odyssey, a fitting metaphor as Alison felt "adrift" in waters she had never before encountered—she doesn't know whether to focus on this news about her father, or her own internal sexual awakening.

Over an image of Alison's face near Joan's pelvis, Alison narrates that going toward her peers felt like the safer route. Like Odysseus on the island of the Cyclops, Alison found in Joan a "being of colossal strength and ferocity, to whom the law of man and God meant nothing." Over two illustrations of Alison performing oral sex on Joan, she says she went toward what she feared, yet while Odysseus schemed to escape the Cyclops's cave, Alison found she was content to stay in the cave forever. Joan was a poet, activist, and the closest a human can be to a Cyclops, because a boy with a toy arrow had shot one of her eyes out during Joan's childhood.

Whether or not Alison was totally open about her sexuality throughout her life, the way she illustrates and narrates this section is as confessional as it gets. This is the moment Alison fully pushed away her internal hang-ups and repressions and decided to fully embrace, or at least explore, what she was attracted to. Yet still she uses the framework of The Odyssey to contextualize the event, though it's unclear whether it is for her benefit or the reader's (or both).

Alison's first trip home after coming out of the closet to her parents was not a happy time. Alison felt that the home she had known as a child had disappeared. Some integral aspect of the family structure seemed to be missing. The Bechdels ate in silence, and then John, Christian, and Bruce all left for various solitary activities. When they were alone, Helen took Alison into her confidence, telling Alison tales of Bruce's misdeeds, including how he often cheated on her in New York, got speeding tickets, lied, and shoplifted. "Like Odysseus's faithful Penelope," Helen had kept the Bechdel household going for twenty years with an effectively absent husband. Shocking as this was for Alison to hear, it was the first time Helen spoke to her as an adult, and Alison advised her mother to leave Bruce because she'd done enough.

Though Alison is more open and in touch with herself in college than at any other time throughout her young life, the Bechdel family seems more disconnected than ever. In Alison's coming-of-age and sexual awakening, her awareness of her family's lack of connection is even more acute. Helen takes this opportunity to finally unburden herself to Alison and bring Alison into her confidence, and the two have their first frank in-person discussion about Bruce and his impact on the family as a whole. Alison's coming out of the closet wasn't received as well as she'd hoped, but it did still yield her openness from Helen for the first time.

Each day of vacation, Alison went to the local college library, and though she had a paper to write for a Philosophy of Art class, the "sirens" called once more and she began reading *Flying* by Kate Millett. Alison checked the book out and was "riveted." Alison had been waiting for alone time with her dad, and when she got some she mentioned that the gay group at her college was planning on picketing the movie *Cruising*. When Bruce asked her why, Alison was unprepared to follow it up. Alison dropped the subject, "Partly because of his derision, but mostly because of the fear in his eyes."

Again Alison becomes entranced by literature about her gender identity rather than focusing on the responsibilities of her classes. Then Alison's discussion of the movie Cruising, *meant to bring her closer to her father and perhaps lead to a frank discussion about gender identity or gender politics, leads to silence and a moment of awkwardness between father and daughter. Fiction can only connect people, it seems, if both parties are willing to be honest about their feelings.*

At the end of the week, Bruce and Alison went to go see the movie *Coal Miner's Daughter*. On the way, Alison was determined to try again, and she asked Bruce if he knew what he was doing when he gave her the Colette book. Bruce said it was just a hunch. Bruce then recounted to Alison how he had his first gay experience when he was fourteen, with a farmhand named Norris Johnson, and it was nice. Then, Bruce added there was another boy his senior year of college. Bruce then told Alison that when he was little, he wanted to be a girl and he'd dress up in girls' clothes. Alison, excited, exclaimed that she wanted to be a boy and dressed in boys' clothes. Alison narrates that this exchange wasn't the "sobbing, joyous reunion of Odysseus and Telemachus," but rather it was more like Stephen Dedalus and the sonless Bloom having their late-night cocoa near the end of *Ulysses*.

This exchange is the closest Alison and Bruce ever come to having an open, honest discussion about their respective sexualities. When the father and daughter bond over dressing in the opposite gender's clothing, it is the closest to a give-and-take exchange that the conversation gets. However, Alison also compares their conversation to Bloom and Stephen's late-night chat because, rather than a moment of exchanging acceptance, this is more about Bruce unburdening himself of his guilt, almost like a Christian would to a priest. Alison is hardly able to tell Bruce about her own gender identity and struggle to accept it, just as Bruce doesn't tell Alison why he's repressed his and hidden it all these years.

But, Alison asks: which of Alison and Bruce was the father? Alison notes that she felt "distinctly parent" while listening to Bruce, who spoke as if filled with shame. All too soon they arrived at the theater. In the movie, a character played by Loretta Lynn tells her father that she *will* see him again, but that he dies before she actually can. Alison then says that she saw Bruce one more time before his death, but they never discussed their sexuality again. They had their "Ithaca moment." After the movie, Bruce took Alison to a notorious local nightspot: the front was a topless club, and the back a gay bar. This could have been Bruce and Alison's "Circe chapter, like when Stephen and Bloom drink at the brothel in nighttown," but Alison was denied entry at the door and she and Bruce drove home in mortified silence.

Alison highlights this Loretta Lynn line for a reason: just as Loretta never gets the chance to reconnect with her father, Alison will never get the chance to explain her gender identity to her father, and thus she'll never get his approval— like Loretta Lynn's coalminer father will never know his daughter's success. They nearly get their moment to connect after the movie, but when Bruce and Alison are rejected from the gay bar, their moment of openness ends and they recede to silence. Fiction can be more fulfilling and cathartic than real life.

Alison returned to school and her relationship with Joan. A letter from Bruce followed expressing his excitement at reading the Kate Millett book. In an "unconscious" gesture, Alison had left *Flying* for Bruce just as he had given her the "Trojan horse gift of Colette." At the end of the semester, Joan came home to visit Alison's family. Alison didn't introduce Joan as her girlfriend. Over an image of Alison and Bruce playing "Heart and Soul" together on the piano, Alison narrates that it was the last time she saw her father. On that final evening, a family friend remarked to Joan that Alison and Bruce's close relationship was "really unnatural. Er… I mean, unusual." Alison then narrates that it *was* unusual, and they "were close. But not close enough."

Here Kate Millett's book serves as a connective force between Bruce and Alison, and once more fiction bridges a gap between them that they couldn't in person. Still, they never overtly discuss their sexuality. Though Alison and Bruce appear to be close, and perhaps they were in a way, here Alison notes that despite their similar interests, they weren't close enough in real life to prevent Bruce from (probably) ending his own life. Here Bruce's death is treated as purely tragic: he could have been close to his daughter, and his whole family, but instead he walled himself off to the point that no connection could stop him from ending his life.

In *Ulysses*, there is a scene where Bloom rides with other men, including Stephen's father, to a friend's funeral. One of the men remarks that worst of all is the man who takes his own life, which reminds Bloom of his own father's death. Rudolph Bloom had committed suicide by purposely overdosing, but he left a letter for his son. Bruce left no such note. After Bruce's funeral, Alison's life resumed its course. Grief takes many forms, she says, including the absence of grief, and when Alison told a casual acquaintance of her father's death, she laughed so much that he didn't believe that Bruce had really died. Alison found the fact that her vital, passionate father was decomposing in a grave "ridiculous."

Here, Alison embodies both the tragic and comic aspects of death presented in Fun Home. *On the one hand, Alison finds Bruce's death so absurd it makes her crack up laughing, but on the other hand, Alison yearns for an explanation from her father in the form of a note that she'll never receive. Alison desires the answers that are sometimes available in fiction, as Harold Bloom's father grants him in the form of a suicide note. But reality is often less decipherable than fiction.*

In one of Bruce's courtship letters to Helen, he praised her by comparing her writing to Joyce's, saying it was even better than Joyce's writing aside form Joyce's line "and he asked me with his eyes." Alison narrates that "In a telling mistake," Bruce had credited "the beseeching eyes to Bloom instead of to his wife, Molly." Alison asks how Bruce could have admired Joyce saying "yes" to his own passions and pursuits by writing *Ulysses*, yet said "no" to his own internal life and passions. Alison says a lifetime spent hiding his "erotic truth" might have impacted that. Sexual shame is its own sort of death, and *Ulysses*, too, "was banned" for a long time because people believed it to be obscene.

In Bruce's telling mistake of crediting "beseeching eyes" to a male character rather than a female one, Bruce accidentally admits his own proclivities towards male physical descriptiveness. Here, Alison's question points out that it is far easier to be bold and open in fiction than in real life—just as perhaps it's easier for Alison to write/draw this memoir and publish it rather than talk about her family history with her family itself. Also, Alison notes that repressing his "erotic truth" led to Bruce's death, but it also caused a premature kind of death in life, in that Bruce couldn't express who he was, so it slowly ate away at him on the inside.

The front of Alison's Modern Library Edition of *Ulysses* includes the decision by the judge who lifted the ban in 1933, as well as a letter from Joyce detailing *Ulysses*' publication history, in which he mentions that Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap were "prosecuted for running episodes in their magazine, the *Little Review*." He also acknowledges the risk Sylvia Beach took in publishing a manuscript no one else wanted to put out. Perhaps it's a coincidence that all these women were lesbians, but Alison likes to think, "they went to the mat for this book *because* they were lesbians, because they knew a thing or two about erotic truths."

Alison highlights how multiple lesbian women who "knew a thing or two about erotic truths" were largely responsible for Ulysses' *publication. Here, Alison implies that these women's socially repressed gender identities partially caused their passion for the book, and the publication of the book itself was a major turning point in allowing all types of literature to be published and openly explored, which in turn allowed future readers to be more open with themselves.*

Alison narrates that "erotic truth" is a sweeping concept and she shouldn't pretend to know what Bruce's was. Perhaps her eagerness to claim Bruce as gay in the way that she's gay as opposed to bisexual or any other category is just a way for Alison to keep Bruce to herself, as "a sort of inverted oedipal complex." Alison thinks back to Bruce's letter in which he did and didn't come out to her. In it, he disavows himself as "not a hero," the exact same "disavowal Stephen Dedalus makes at the beginning of *Ulysses*." In the end, James Joyce broke his contract with Beach and sold *Ulysses* to Random House for a nice payday, and he didn't offer to repay her for the financial sacrifices she made for the book.

Alison's statement that she cannot know her father's "erotic truth" is true, partially because he was never fully open with her, which is epitomized in his letter to her. Rather than being real and fully upfront with her, Bruce hides behind his allusion to Stephen Dedalus in Ulysses, *somewhat shirking his responsibility to tell the truth in the same way Joyce shirks his commitment to Beach.*

Beach put on a good face, writing, "A baby belongs to its mother, not to the midwife, doesn't it?" And as long as the book is being compared to children, Alison notes that it fared far better than Joyce's actual children, one of whom went mad, while the other became an alcoholic. Alison supposes that this is consistent with *Ulysses*' "theme that spiritual, not consubstantial, paternity is the important thing." Then Alison wonders what might have happened if **Icarus** hadn't fallen into the sea—what might he have created if he'd inherited Daedalus's inventive capabilities?

Joyce was brilliant as a "parent" in the realm of fiction, but in reality he was much less successful, which was probably in part due to his obsession with his work and his absence as a father. This mirrors Bruce's absences throughout Alison's childhood, but Alison also complicates this with her question about Daedalus and Icarus, implying that she was perhaps able to not sink into a repressive state in part because of witnessing Bruce's (bad) example.

Over an image of an oncoming truck approaching, Alison notes that **Icarus** "did hurtle into the sea, of course." But then, over an image of Alison as a girl jumping off the diving board into the water with Bruce waiting to catch her, Alison narrates that "in the tricky reverse narration" that drives the intertwined stories of she and her father, Bruce "was there to catch" Alison when she leapt.

Again Alison seems to imply that part of the reason she is so accepting of her own gender identity is because of Bruce's presence in her life. In a way, because Alison watched Bruce "plummet," i.e. give in to his internal demons, perhaps she didn't have to directly follow his example and instead was able to ascend (like Daedalus) where Bruce fell.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Koltun, Moe. "*Fun Home*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 20 Apr 2017. Web. 13 Jan 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Koltun, Moe. "*Fun Home*." LitCharts LLC, April 20, 2017. Retrieved January 13, 2021. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/fun-home.

To cite any of the quotes from *Fun Home* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Bechdel, Alison. Fun Home. Mariner Books. 2007.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Bechdel, Alison. Fun Home. Boston: Mariner Books. 2007.