

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

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

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

ALL RIGHT,  
SETTLE DOWN,  
NOW.



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



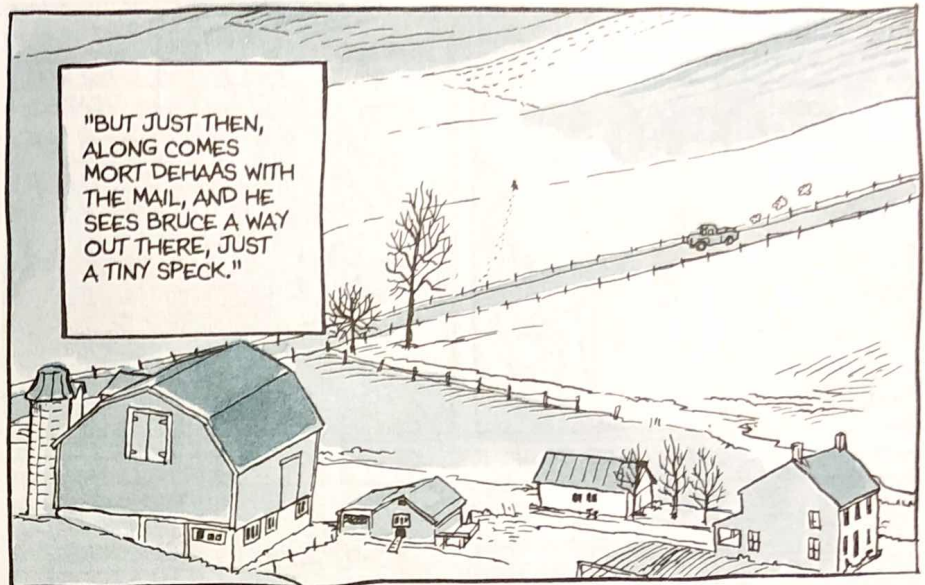
"HE WAS LITTLER THAN YOU, JOHN, NO  
MORE THAN THREE. IT WAS SPRINGTIME."



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



"BUT JUST THEN,  
ALONG COMES  
MORT DEHAAS WITH  
THE MAIL, AND HE  
SEES BRUCE A WAY  
OUT THERE, JUST  
A TINY SPECK."



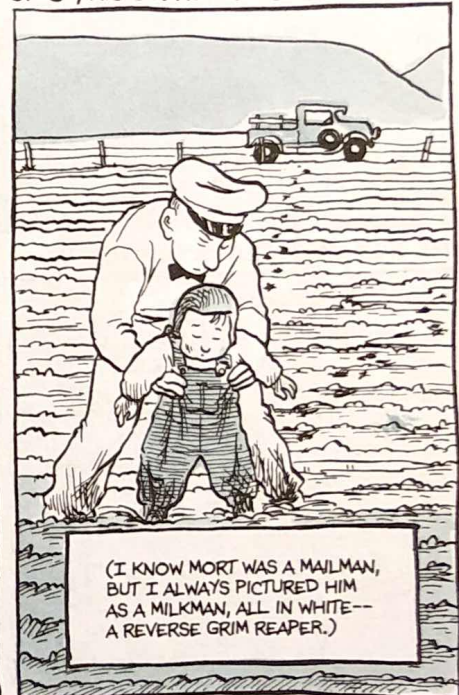
WHAT IF THE  
MAILMAN DIDN'T  
SEE HIM?

WOULD HE  
OF DIED?



WELL, I DON'T  
KNOW, DEARS. BUT MORT  
COMMENCED TO WALK OUT  
ACROST THE MUDDY FIELD TO  
WHERE BRUCE WAS.

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



(I KNOW MORT WAS A MAILMAN,  
BUT I ALWAYS PICTURED HIM  
AS A MILKMAN, ALL IN WHITE--  
A REVERSE GRIM REAPER.)



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



AND HERE THE STORY REACHED ITS BIZARRE, GRIMMSIAN CLIMAX.



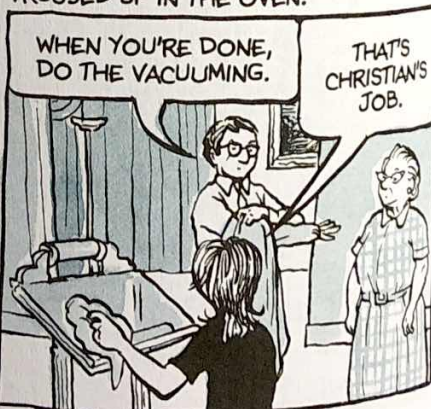
SHE WAS REFERRING, OF COURSE, TO A COOK-STOVE.

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

THE TALE WAS ENDLESSLY COMPELLING.



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



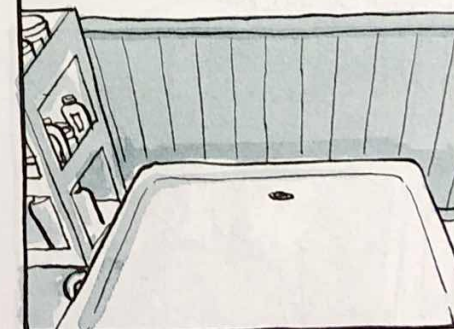
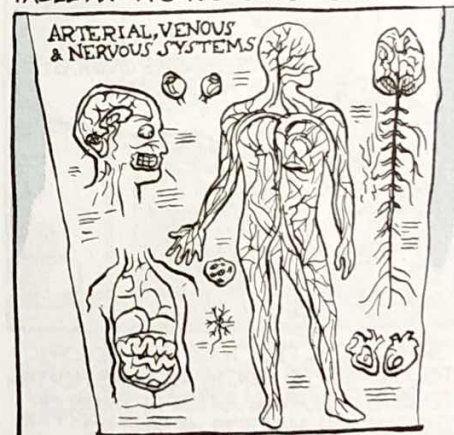
THOUGH THE WAY GRAMMY HELPED HIM TIE HIS SURGICAL GOWN IN BACK WAS EVOCATIVE.



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



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



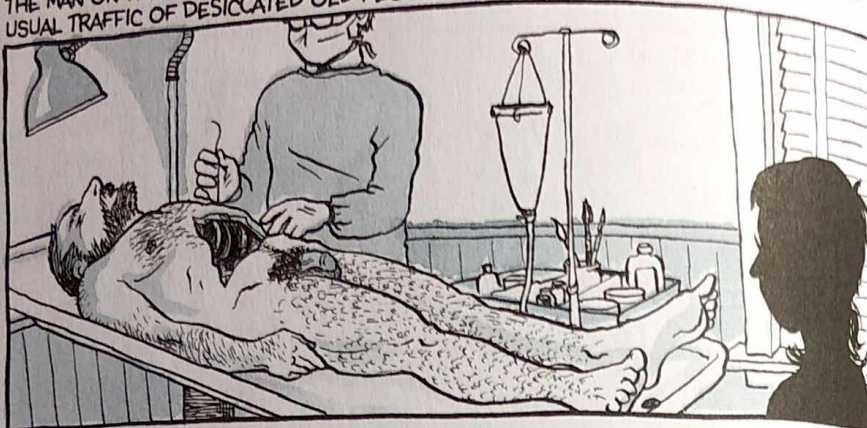
I DIDN'T NORMALLY SEE THE BODIES BEFORE THEY WERE DRESSED AND IN A CASKET.



BUT ONE DAY DAD CALLED ME BACK THERE.



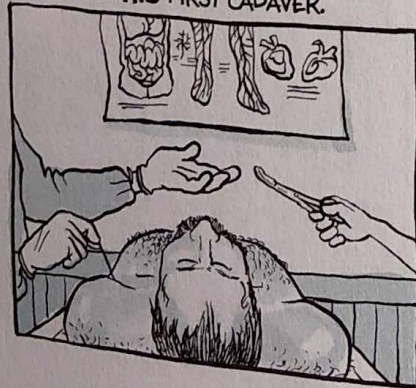
THE MAN ON THE PREP TABLE WAS BEARDED AND FLESHY, JARRINGLY UNLIKE DAD'S USUAL TRAFFIC OF DESICCATED OLD PEOPLE.



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



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



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



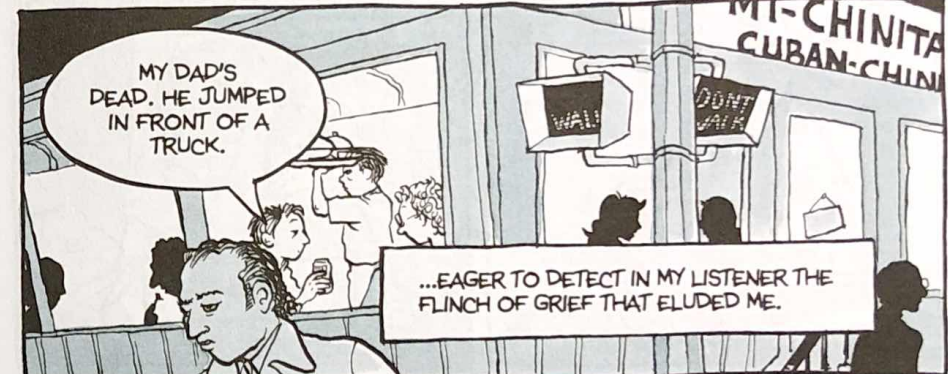
OR MAYBE HE FELT THAT HE'D BECOME TOO INURED TO DEATH, AND WAS HOPING TO ELICIT FROM ME AN EXPRESSION OF THE NATURAL HORROR HE WAS NO LONGER CAPABLE OF.



OR MAYBE HE JUST NEEDED THE SCISSORS. I HAVE MADE USE OF THE FORMER TECHNIQUE MYSELF, HOWEVER, THIS ATTEMPT TO ACCESS EMOTION VICARIOUSLY.



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



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



EVEN WHEN IT WAS DAD HIMSELF ON THE PREP TABLE.





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



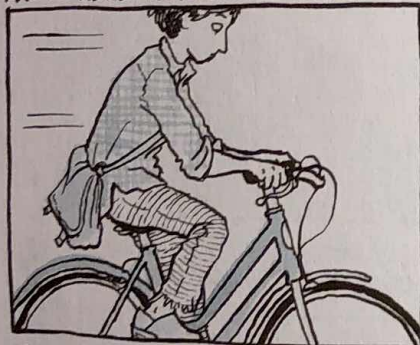
I HAVE TO GO HOME. MY FATHER GOT HIT BY A TRUCK.



OH MY GOD. IS HE OKAY?

UMM...

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

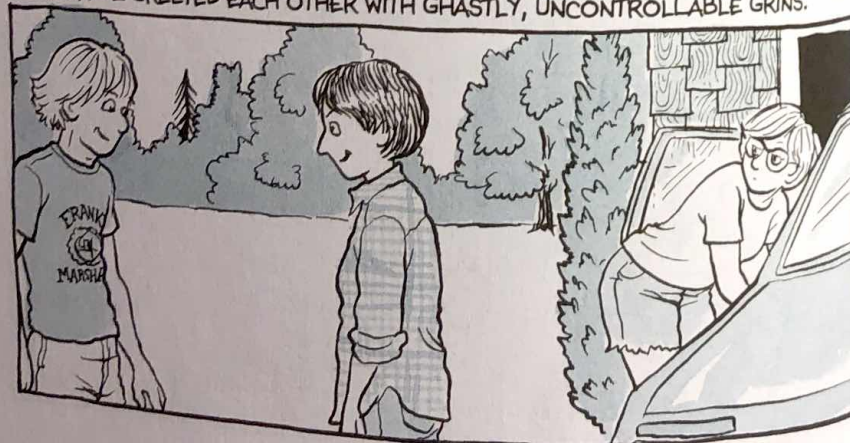


AS I TOLD MY GIRLFRIEND WHAT HAD HAPPENED, I CRIED QUITE GENUINELY FOR ABOUT TWO MINUTES.

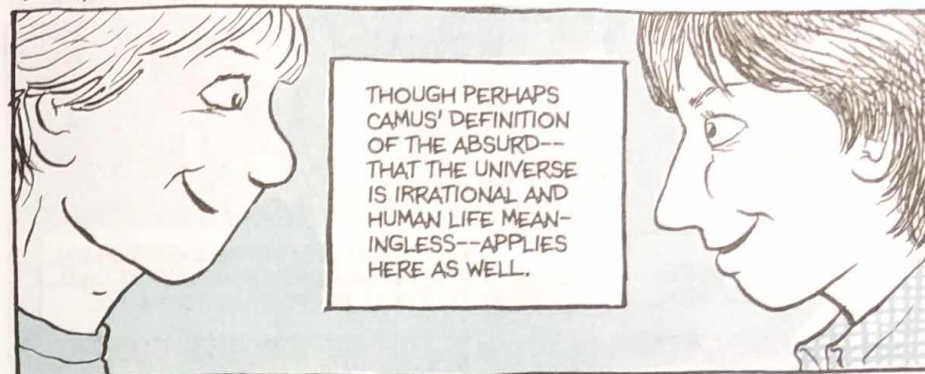


THAT WAS ALL.

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



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



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

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



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

longing for death.

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

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

BUT I SUSPECT MY FATHER OF BEING A HAPHAZARD SCHOLAR.



BECHDEL! PUT THAT GODDAMN BOOK DOWN. WE'RE GOING OUT.

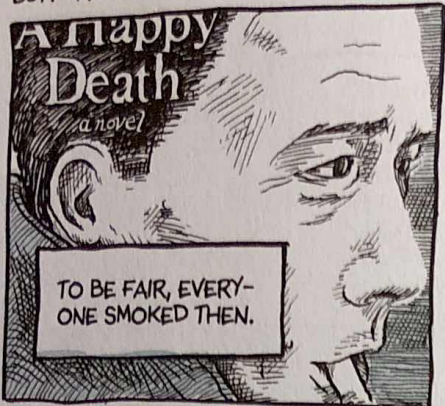
A SNAPSHOT OF HIM IN A FRAT BROTHER'S SPORTS CAR REMINDS ME OF CARTIER-BRESSON'S PHOTOS OF CAMUS.





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

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



TO BE FAIR, EVERYONE SMOKED THEN.



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

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



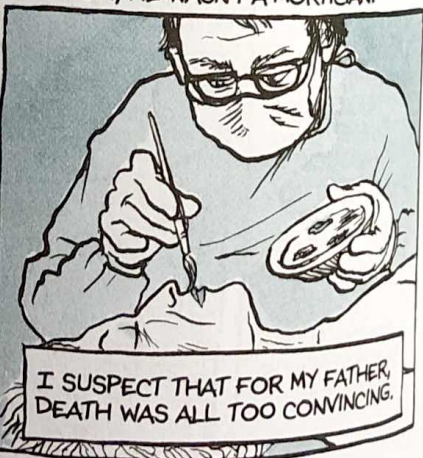
IN JANUARY OF 1960, THE SPORTS CAR HE WAS RIDING IN CAROMED OFF ONE PLANE TREE AND WRAPPED AROUND ANOTHER.

MY PARENTS WERE STILL IN EUROPE.

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

BUT THEN, HE WASN'T A MORTICIAN.

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



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

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

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

OTHER TIMES, HE WAS DESPAIRING.

*Claude M. Bechdel Funeral Home*  
Telephone 717-962-1727  
Becht Street, Pinnsylvania 16122

*Dorothy E. Bechdel* *Bruce A. Bechdel*

Sunday 9-24-77

Dear Al-

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

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



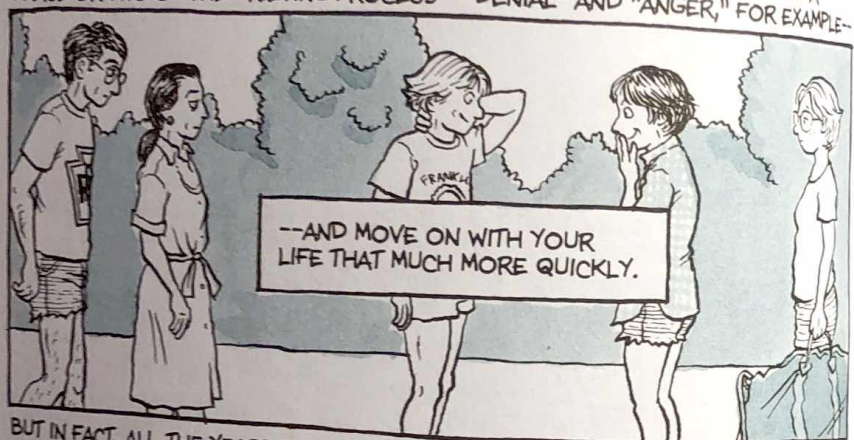
BUT YOU WOULD THINK THAT LONG NIGHTS EMPLOYED IN THIS SCUTWORK OF THE FLESH WOULD MAKE ANYONE RECONSIDER THE LOGIC OF NOT POSTPONING THE INEVITABLE.



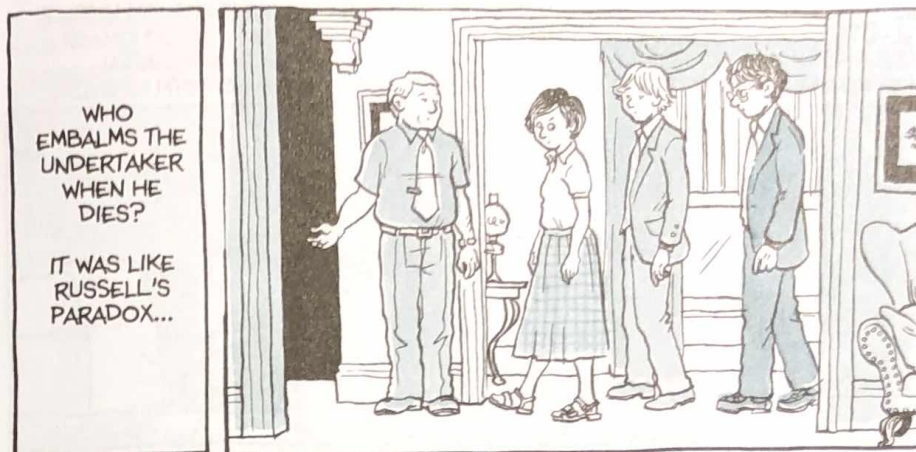
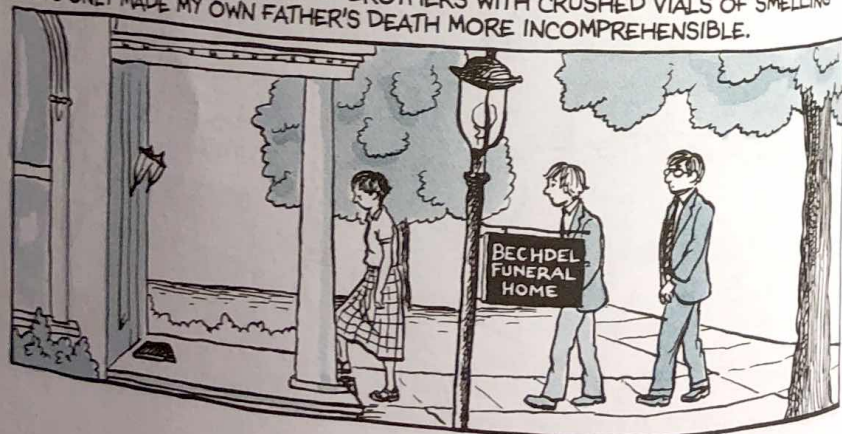
YOU WOULD ALSO THINK THAT A CHILDHOOD SPENT IN SUCH CLOSE PROXIMITY TO THE WORKADAY INCIDENTALS OF DEATH WOULD BE GOOD PREPARATION.



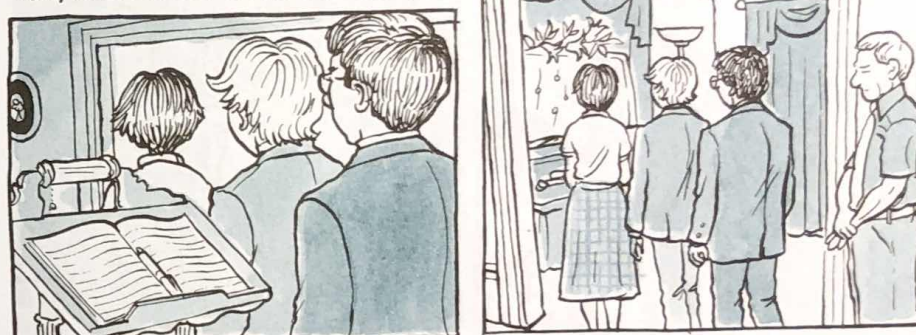
THAT WHEN SOMEONE YOU KNEW ACTUALLY DIED, MAYBE YOU'D GET TO SKIP A PHASE OR TWO OF THE GRIEVING PROCESS--"DENIAL" AND "ANGER," FOR EXAMPLE--



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



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

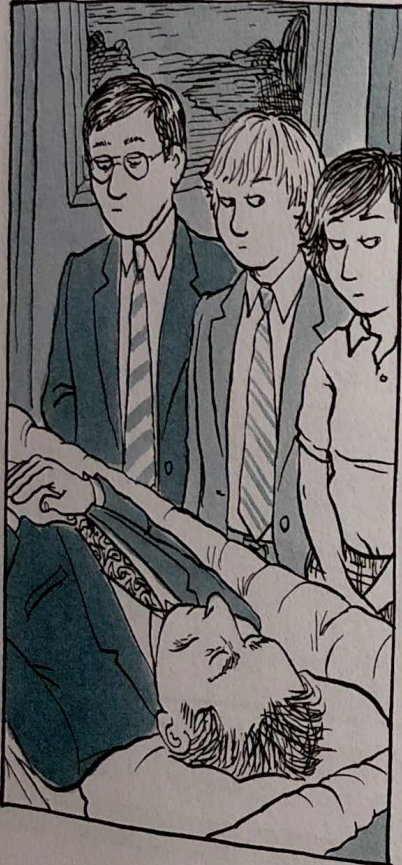




HIS WIRY HAIR, WHICH HE HAD DAILY TAKEN GREAT PAINS TO STYLE, WAS BRUSHED STRAIGHT UP ON END AND REVEALED A SURPRISINGLY RECEDED HAIRLINE.



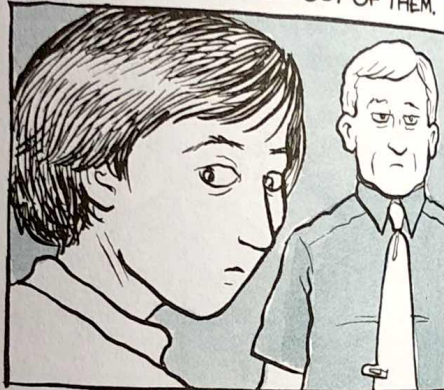
DRY-EYED AND SHEEPISH, MY BROTHERS AND I LOOKED FOR AS LONG AS WE SENSED IT WAS APPROPRIATE.



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



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



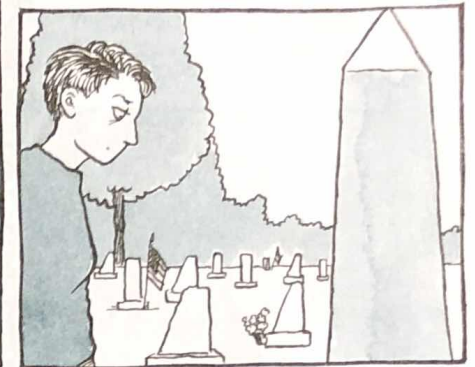
THE SOLE EMOTION I COULD MUSTER WAS IRRITATION, WHEN THE PINCH-FUNERAL DIRECTOR LAID HIS HAND ON MY ARM CONSOLINGLY.



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



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



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



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



AGAIN, THERE WAS SOME FLEETING CONSOLATION IN THE SHEER VIOLENCE OF MY GESTURE.



