Fun Home
A FAMILY TRAGICOMIC

ALISON BECHDEL
CHAPTER 1

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

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

OOF!

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

IN THE CIRCUS, ACROBATICS WHERE ONE PERSON LIES ON THE FLOOR BALANCING ANOTHER ARE CALLED "ICARIAN GAMES."
CONSIDERING THE FATE OF ICARUS AFTER HE FLOUTED HIS FATHER’S ADVICE AND FLEW SO CLOSE TO THE SUN HIS WINGS MELTED, PERHAPS SOME DARK HUMOR IS INTENDED.

IN OUR PARTICULAR REENACTMENT OF THIS MYTHIC RELATIONSHIP, IT WAS NOT ME BUT MY FATHER WHO WAS TO PLUMMET FROM THE SKY.

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

His greatest achievement, arguably, was his monomaniacal restoration of our old house.

AGAIN!

This rug is filthy. Go get the vacuum cleaner.

And then get me my tack hammer. That strip of molding is loose.
WHEN OTHER CHILDREN CALLED OUR HOUSE A MANSION, I WOULD DEMUR. I RESISTED THE IMPLICATION THAT MY FAMILY WAS RICH, OR UNUSUAL IN ANY WAY.

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

ALISON!

WHAT?

SEND TAMMI HOME. YOU HAVE WORK TO DO.


WASH THESE OLD CURTAINs SO WE CAN PUT UP THE HAND-EMBROIDERED LACE ONES I FOUND IN MRS. STRUMP'S ATTIC.
MY FATHER COULD SPIN GARBAGE...  ...INTO GOLD.

HE COULD TRANSFIGURE A ROOM WITH THE SMALLEST OFF-HAND FLOURISH.

THIS SHOULD GO AT AN ANGLE.

AMAZING.

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

MY ARM'S FALLING OFF.

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

SLIGHTLY PERFECT.
For if my father was Icarus, he
was also Daedalus—that skillful
artificer, that mad scientist who
built the wings for his son and
designed the famous Labyrinth...

This is the wallpaper for my room?

And who answered not to the laws
of society, but to those of his craft.
But I hate pink! I hate flowers!

Tough titty.

Historical restoration wasn't his job.
(Twelfth-grade English)

It was his passion. And I mean passion in every sense of the word.

Our Gothic Revival house had been built during the small Pennsylvania town's one brief moment of wealth, from the lumber industry, in 1867.

But local fortunes had declined steadily from that point, and when my parents bought the place in 1962, it was a shell of its former self.

The shutters and scrollwork were gone. The clapboards had been sheathed with scabrous shingles.
The bare lightbulbs revealed dingy wartime wallpaper and woodwork painted pastel green.

All that was left of the house’s lumber-era glory were the exuberant front porch supports.

But over the next eighteen years, my father would restore the house to its original condition, and then some.

Jesus! This must be the pattern for the original bargeboard!

He would perform, as Daedalus did, dazzling displays of artfulness.
HE WOULD CULTIVATE THE BARREN YARD... ...INTO A LUSH, FLOWERING LANDSCAPE.

HE WOULD MANIPULATE FLAGSTONES THAT WEIGHED HALF A TON... ...AND THE THINNEST, QUIVERING LAYERS OF GOLD LEAF.

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

HELLO, DARLING!

HELLO, DADDY!
But in the movie when Jimmy Stewart comes home one night and starts yelling at everyone...

HOLD IT STRAIGHT.

Tommy, stop that! Janie, haven't you learned that silly tune yet?

One of my brothers.

...it's out of the ordinary.

The needles are sharp!

Goddamn it!

You play it over and over--now stop it! Stop it!

Daedalus, too, was indifferent to the human cost of his projects.

Don't hit me!

He blithely betrayed the king, for example, when the queen asked him to build her a cow disguise so she could seduce the white bull.

George, why must you torture the children?

Kuh-clink!
Indeed, the result of that scheme—a half-bull, half-man monster—inspired Daedalus’s greatest creation yet.

He hid the Minotaur in the labyrinth—a maze of passages and rooms opening endlessly into one another...

...and from which, as stray youths and maidens discovered to their peril...

...escape was impossible.

Then there are those famous wings. Was Daedalus really stricken with grief when Icarus fell into the sea?

Or just disappointed by the design failure?
Sometimes, when things were going well, I think my father actually enjoyed having a family.

And of course, my brothers and I were free labor. Dad considered us extensions of his own body, like precision robot arms.

Put hot, soapy water in the sink and get some clean rags.

Or at least, the air of authenticity we lent to his exhibit. A sort of still life with children.

In this regard, it was like being raised not by Jimmy but by Martha Stewart.

In theory, his arrangement with my mother was more cooperative.

In practice, it was not.

What do you think of this gas chandelier?

Bordello.

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

WHOREHOUSE.

IT'S HIDEOUS.

EH-EH-EH-EH!

PKRGH!

IT LOOKS LIKE SKULLS.

MY BROTHERS AND I Couldn'T COMPETE WITH THE ASTRAL LAMPS AND GIRLANDOLES AND HEPPEWHITE SUITE CHAIRS. THEY WERE PERFECT.

GET YOUR STINKIN' FEET AWAY FROM ME.

ALISON, COME HELP ME HANG THIS MIRROR IN YOUR ROOM.

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

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

HOLD IT HIGHER. DON'T MOVE.

I HATE THIS ROOM.

WHEN I GROW UP, MY HOUSE IS GOING TO BE ALL METAL, LIKE A SUBMARINE.
I WAS SPARTAN TO MY FATHER’S ATHENIAN.  MODERN TO HIS VICTORIAN.

BUTCH TO HIS NELLY.  UTILITARIAN TO HIS AESTHETE.

WHO CARES IF THE NECKLINES DON’T MATCH?

YELLOW TURTLENECK. NOW.

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

IT’S BEAUTIFUL.
I developed a contempt for useless ornament. What function was served by the scrolls, tassels, and bric-a-brac that infested our house?

If anything, they obscured function. They were embellishments in the worst sense.

Pling. Klink.

They were lies.

My father began to seem morally suspect to me long before I knew that he actually had a dark secret.

Incipient yellow lung disease.

Mom says hurry up.

"Bronzing stick."

He used his skillful artifice not to make things, but to make things appear to be what they were not.

Mass will be over before we get there.

That is to say, impeccable.
He appeared to be an ideal husband and father, for example.

But would an ideal husband and father have sex with teenage boys?

It's tempting to suggest, in retrospect, that our family was a sham.

That our house was not a real home at all but the simulacrum of one, a museum.

Yet we really were a family, and we really did live in those period rooms.

I can't find the scissors!

Look in the Chippendale.
STILL, SOMETHING VITAL WAS MISSING.

WELL?

ME, AGE 4

MY BROTHER CHRISTIAN, AGE 3

AN ELASTICITY, A MARGIN FOR ERROR.

HOW DID THIS VASE GET SO CLOSE TO THE EDGE OF THE TABLE?

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

BUT I DIDN'T DO ANYTHING!

BUT AN IDLE REMARK ABOUT MY FATHER'S TIE OVER BREAKFAST COULD SEND HIM INTO A TAILSPIN.

PEACE, MAN.
MY MOTHER ESTABLISHED A RULE.

DON'T CHANGE IT! WE'RE LATE!

ALSO AN ENGLISH TEACHER

NO COMMENTS ON HIS APPEARANCE. IS THAT UNDERSTOOD?

WHAT IF IT'S SOMETHING GOOD?

GOOD, BAD, IT DOESN'T MATTER.

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

WE WERE NOT A PHYSICALLY EXPRESSIVE FAMILY, TO SAY THE LEAST. BUT ONCE I WAS UNACCOUNTABLY MOVED TO KISS MY FATHER GOOD NIGHT.

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

...AS IF HE WERE A BISHOP OR AN ELEGANT LADY, BEFORE RUSHING FROM THE ROOM IN EMBARRASSMENT.
This embarrassment on my part was a tiny scale model of my father's more fully developed self-loathing.

His shame inhabited our house as pervasively and invisibly as the aromatic musk of aging mahogany.

In fact, the meticulous, period interiors were expressly designed to conceal it.

Mirrors, distracting bronzes, multiple doorways. Visitors often got lost upstairs.

Gracious, I almost walked right into this!
My mother, my brothers, and I knew our way around well enough, but it was impossible to tell if the Minotaur lay beyond the next corner.

And the constant tension was heightened by the fact that some encounters could be quite pleasant.

His bursts of kindness were as incandescent as his tantrums were dark.

...and at each pull the elephant’s child’s nose grew longer and longer.

Don’t turn out the hall light.
Although I’m good at enumerating my father’s flaws, it’s hard for me to sustain much anger at him.

I expect this is partly because he’s dead, and partly because the bar is lower for fathers than for mothers.

**In my eyes!**

**Hold still, Dammit!**

My mother must have bathed me hundreds of times, but it’s my father rinsing me off with the purple metal cup that I remember most clearly.

The suffusion of warmth as the hot water sluiced over me...

...the sudden, unbearable cold of its absence.

Was he a good father? I want to say, “At least he stuck around.” But of course, he didn’t.

**Again!**
It’s true that he didn’t kill himself until I was nearly twenty. But 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 steaming off the wallpaper, digging up the dogwoods, polishing the finials...

...smelling of sawdust and sweat and designer cologne.

But I ached as if he were already gone.