

I Am Going to Destroy My Dead Mother

By Christina Feinroth



Abstract

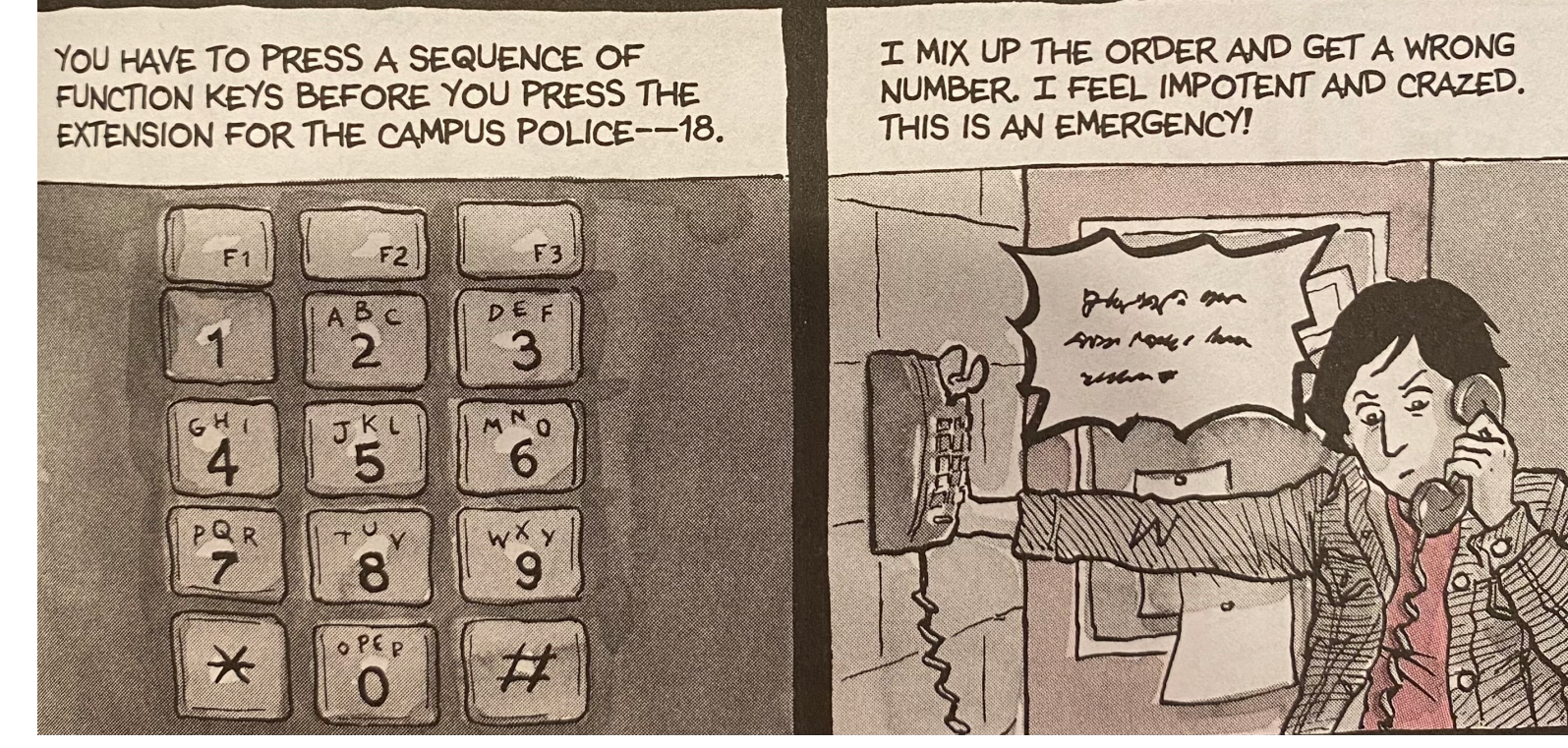
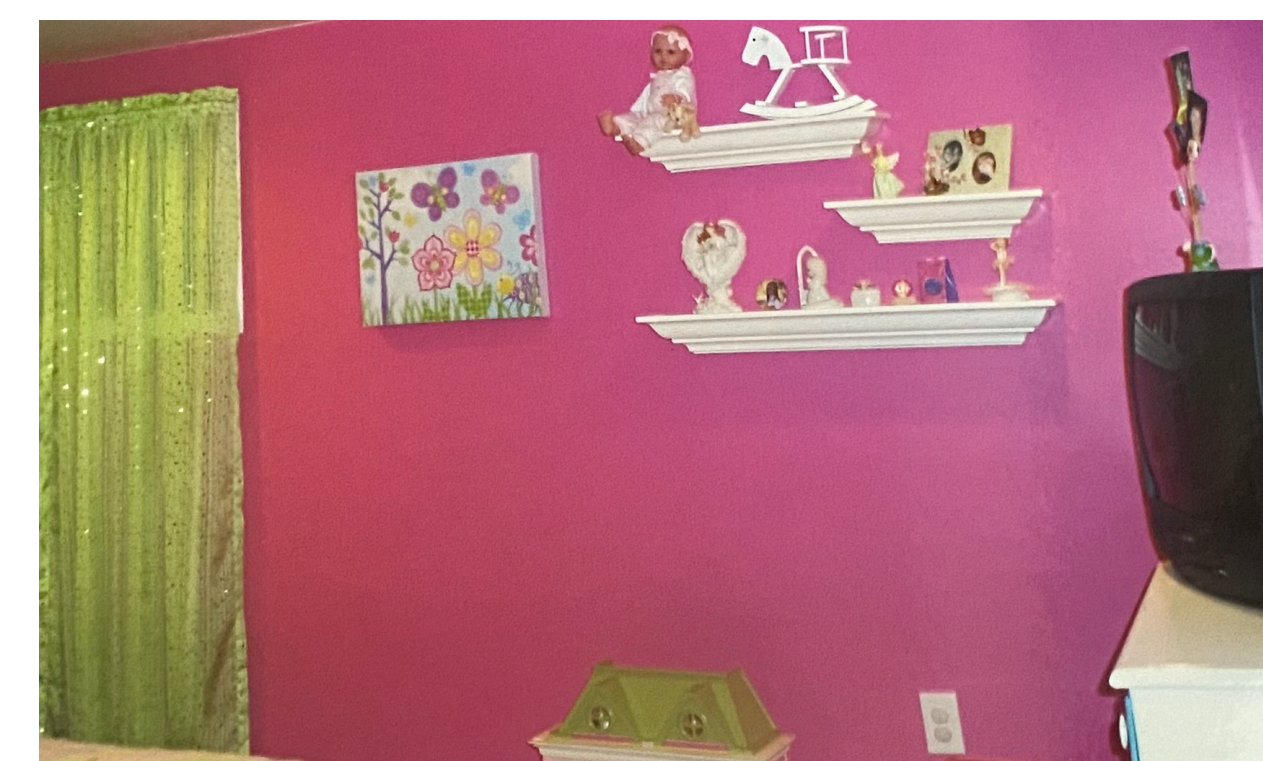
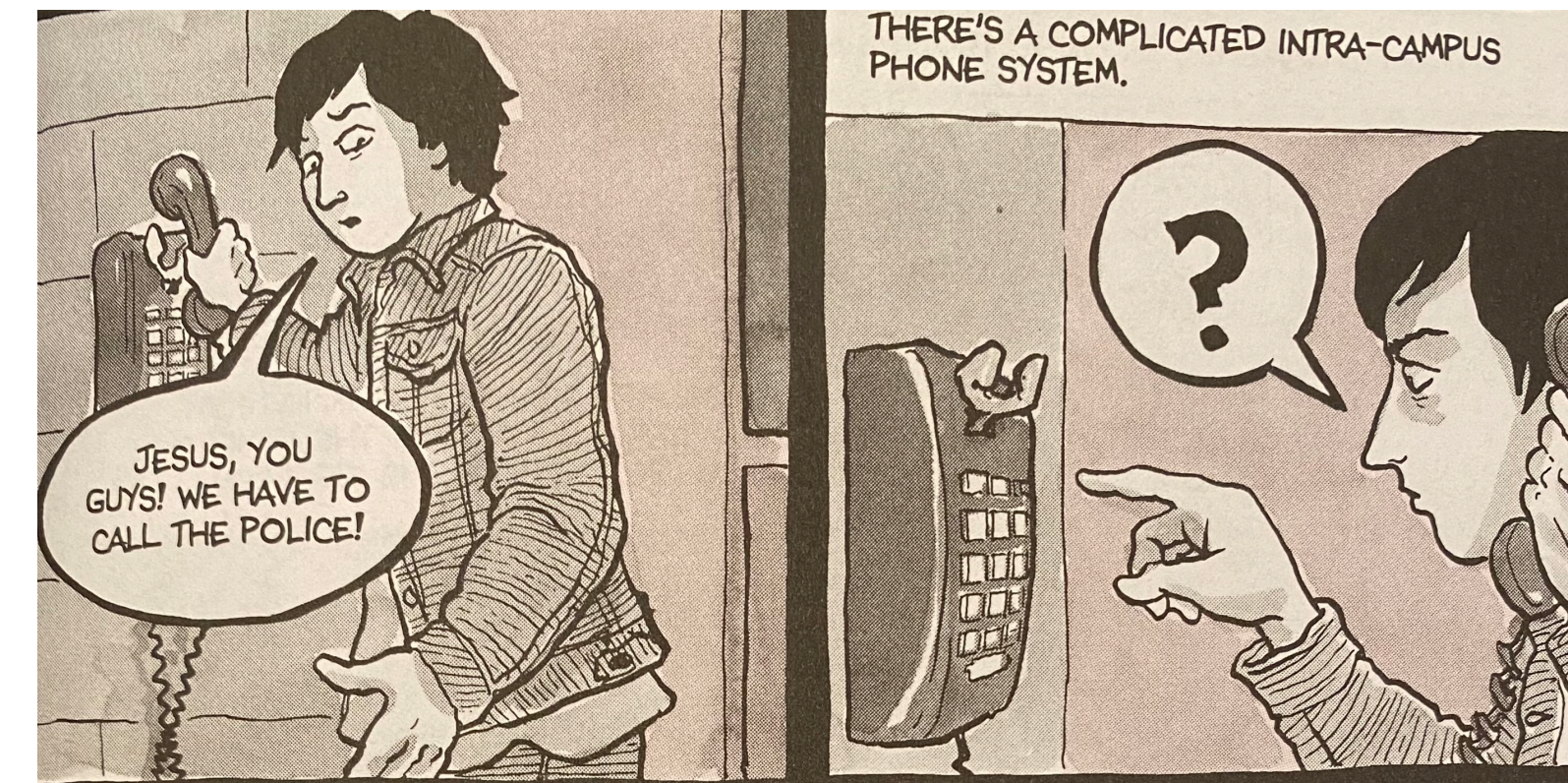
In 2012, Alison Bechdel published her graphic memoir, *Are You My Mother*. This autotheoretical text explores psychoanalytic concepts in conjunction with Bechdel's lived experiences. In the memoir, Bechdel trudges through the muddiness of her tumultuous relationship with her mother and applies the theories of Sigmund Freud, D.W. Winnicott, Jacques Lacan, and other psychoanalysts to make sense of that relationship. This autotheoretical project takes a similar approach, utilizing Bechdel and the psychoanalytic theories within *Are You My Mother* to shed light on the effects of parental loss during early childhood, as well as the consequences of this loss throughout adulthood. While Bechdel's mother is very much alive, her traumatic experiences with her mother mirror the experiences of the loss of a parent during childhood. This project argues that unhealthy attachments to parents can look similar among both neglected children and children who have lost their parents. To corroborate this, I employ personal anecdotes regarding the loss of my own mother and childhood traumas, which also serve as a structural means to bridge that gap between Bechdel and myself. This autotheoretical lens is crucial, as it demonstrates what happens when one applies psychoanalytic and literary theory to the self, and also mirrors the format of Bechdel's book. This project argues that whether a mother is alive or dead, the experiences of daughterhood can often be traumatic and exceptionally similar among all daughters. It also aims to push the boundaries of what literature and literary theory can look like.

Transitional Objects: I Can't Get Rid of My Stuffed Rabbit:

- **Transitional Objects:** "a sequence of events that starts with the newborn infant's fist-in-mouth activities, and, leads eventually on to an attachment to a teddy, a doll, or a soft toy, or to a hard toy" (Winnicott 2).
- These toys are used by the child as tools to make attachments to the external world (Winnicott 2).
- **Winnicott + a boy who had a stuffed rabbit as his *non* transitional object:** "It could be described as a *comforter*, but it never had the true quality of a transitional object. It was never, as a true transitional object would have been, more important than the mother..." (Winnicott 9).
- **Bechdel on Mr. Beezum:** "It always calms me to look at him. He's not me, but he's not not-me, either" (Bechdel 114-115).
- We are not looking to be comforted by our stuffies when we reach for Bunny (my transitional object) or Mr. Beezum; we are searching for our mothers.

My Mother Has a Shattered Mirror and I Will Fix it:

- Mother as "the first mirror" of oneself
- True vs. false self – Bechdel steals her mother's blush to fit into the binary her mother desires
- Bechdel: "Maybe the mother manages to be a mirror only part of the time. In such "tantalizing" cases, some babies learn to withdraw their own needs when the mother's are evident," (233).
- Bechdel and I are building structures for our mothers to survive in.
- "Oh my god, you're a ghost of your mother."
- But if I am a ghost of another person, then I am denying myself my individuality.



Destroying My Mother: A Conclusion:

- Winnicott: "The Use of an Object and Relating through Identifications" – to relate to an object, "the subject destroys the object...and then... 'object survives destruction by the subject'...the subject says to the object... 'I destroyed you.' 'I love you'" (120).
- The subject must destroy the object to use it, which allows the subject to perceive the object as a sharer of reality (Winnicott 121-122).
- Bechdel destroys her mother by writing *Are You My Mother*. She accepts that she and her mother are not one—she allows herself to be an individual.

I cannot represent my mother. I cannot pass myself off as her. I am not her, and in recognizing our differences, I am destroying her.

Recurring Dreams and Childhood Trauma:

- Bechdel's telephone nightmare corresponds with my recurring childhood nightmare of being stuck in a room where the television off and the lights will not turn on
 - "The buttons are sticky and unresponsive. I punch them furiously over and over again" (Bechdel 121).
 - Lack of control, protection, and adult assistance
- *Delusion and Dream:* Freud says, "The childhood impression, stirred, becomes active, so that it begins to show activity, though it does not appear in consciousness, but remains unconscious" (207).
- *The Interpretation of Dreams:* Freud writes that dreams have at their "disposal the earliest impressions of our childhood and [bring] to light details from this period of life, which, again, seem trivial to us, and which in waking life were believed to have been long forgotten" (Freud 71).

