

MARTIN  
**AMIS**



**DEAD BABIES**

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## MARTIN AMIS

Martin Amis is the author of fourteen novels, the memoir *Experience*, two collections of stories and six collections of non-fiction. He lives in New York.

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MARTIN AMIS

# Dead Babies

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*For Julie*

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Not only are all characters and scenes in this book entirely fictitious; most of the technical, medical and psychological data are too. My working maxim here has been as follows: I may not know much about science but I know what I like.

*London,*  
October 1974

M.A.

... and so even when [the satirist] presents a vision of the future, his business is not prophecy, just as his subject is not tomorrow ... it is today.

MENIPPUS

## MAIN CHARACTERS

### *The Appleseeders*

THE HON. QUENTIN VILLIERS: tall, blond, elegant, urbane.

ANDY ADORNO: tall, dark, rowdy, aggressive.

GILES COLDSTREAM: smallish, fair, rich, anxious.

KEITH WHITEHEAD: very tiny, very fat – court dwarf to Appleseed Rectory.

THE HON. CELIA VILLIERS: robust, mousy, straightforward, wife to Quentin.

DIANA PARRY: dark, angular, shrewish, girlfriend to Andy.

### *The Americans*

MARVELL BUZHARDT: small, hairy, authoritative, Jewish.

SKIP MARSHALL: tall, sallow, slow-talking, Southern.

ROXEANNE SMITH: full-formed, red-haired, American.

### *Others*

LUCY LITTLE JOHN: silver-haired, jovial, a golden-hearted whore.

JOHNNY: a practical joker.



## PART ONE: FRIDAY

### 1: LET'S GO

There were five bedrooms.

*In the master-suite, on knees and elbows, Giles Coldstream was creeping round the floor in search of the telephone, both hands pressed tightly over his mouth. The curling green cord eventually led him to a heap of spent gin bottles beneath his desk. With his left palm still flat over his lips Giles tugged at the wire, hobbled into a crouch, and dialled two digits.*

*'Get me Dr Wallman. Quickly. Dr Sir Gerald Wall—'*

*— But even as he spoke, a tooth the shape and hue of a potato-chip sopped over his tongue and fell with a hollow rattle into the bakelite receiver.*

*'Please, quickly.'*

*'What number do you want?' asked a female voice.*

*'Please. I'm — they're all—'*

*And now, in strips, like an unstrung necklace or rippling piano keys, they began to cascade from his mouth.*

*'What number do you want?' the voice repeated.*

*Giles dropped the telephone. His hands fidgeted frenetically inside his mouth — trying to keep them there, trying to put them back. His face went glossy with tears as a bubble of blood welled from his lips.*

*'My teeth,' he said. 'Somebody please help me. They're all gone.'*

The bedroom across the passage was not, perhaps, as grand as Giles's, but it was spacious and well-appointed, commanding a decent view of the village street and the soft rise of the hills

beyond. At the table recessed into the alcove of its bay windows sat The Honourable Quentin Villiers, blond and lean in a pair of snakeskin sexters, coolly shrouded by a dome of dust-speckled light from his angle-lamp which in turn threw charcoal shadows along the room behind him, half disguising the naked body of a girl asleep on the bed. Diderot's *Le Neveu de Rameau* nestled on his golden thighs. Quentin closed the book, extinguished his cigarette and took a white pill from the snap-open box on the table. He flicked it into the air, throwing his head back to catch the bright cylinder in his mouth. He gave his saliva time to wash the taste away.

The Hon Quentin Villiers stood up. Through the partly-drawn curtains he watched the village road turning grey in the tranquil dawn. His reflection began to melt from the window-pane, the wavy fair hair, the thin mouth, the abnormally bright green eyes. When he switched off the lamp the rest of the room seemed to lighten.

'Darling, darling, wake up,' said Quentin, massaging his wife back to consciousness. 'It's me ... It's me.'

Celia Villiers stirred and blinked, her face flexing with recognition. Quentin carefully folded back the sheet and gazed with reverence at her breasts, caressing her throat with imperceptible fingertips.

'I love you,' he whispered.

'Thank you. I love you too.'

After a few minutes Quentin rolled over on to his back. Celia's brown-maned head disappeared in its slow, sacramental journey down his chest. Then, with an expression of exaggerated calm, Quentin turned to gaze at the ceiling as she wettened his stomach with her tears.

The third and smallest of the first-floor bedrooms was separated from the one we have just left only by a slim sandwich of plaster

and hardboard. Accordingly, the sound of the Villierses' love-making came through the partition with reasonably high fidelity, waking Diana Parry, the lighter sleeper of the adjacent pair.

Having resumed consciousness – a state she seemed never to be very far from – Diana propped herself up on her elbow and stared with an involuntary pang at the back of Andy Adorno's head, coated with hair no less dark and shiny than her own, and at his broad, gipsyishly birth-marked shoulders. While Celia's yodels of appreciation increased in volume and frequency, Diana began to enumerate the blackheads between Andy's shoulder-blades. Diana did this in a hostile spirit, because Andy had not made love to her the night before. The noises from the other room became more jarred and ambiguous. It was always a frightening, rather inhuman sound, Diana thought.

Still asleep, Andy rolled over, causing a smell of moist towels, Andy's smell, to glide up the bed. Diana noted with transient satisfaction that his face was the colour of vanilla and his breathing stertorous. She lifted the top sheet to look at Andy's whisky-paunch. It swelled and subsided peacefully.

Diana dropped the sheet back into place. Andy had had a coltish, alcoholic erection. Diana sneered at him.

Climbing cautiously from the bed, she picked up her cerise silk kaftan and cuboid vanity-case. She stepped over a broken guitar and weaved between the drum-set and microphone stand. Next door, in the bathroom, she positioned the case on the closed lavatory seat and drew a basinful of water. With hands like stiff little flippers she started to wash her face.

The second-floor bedroom was as yet unoccupied and so need not detain us long. A conventionally low-ceilinged attic, it had a derelict and melancholy air for all the recent work that had clearly gone into its reclamation. The two single beds had been pushed together beneath the small window and made up with fresh double

sheets. On the bedside table stood a bottle of Malvern Water, and *three* glasses. As a kind of token, a large turquoise-haired gonk rested against the pillows, its limbs spastically askew, its mouth fixed in a mad, idiot leer.

In the fifth and final ‘bedroom’ – actually a fetid nine-by-nine box situate between the garage and the boiler-cupboard – Keith Whitehead lay on sandpaper blankets farting like a wizard.

Let’s go.

Whitehead is an almost preposterously unattractive young man – practically, for instance, a dwarf. Whenever people want to say something nice about his appearance they usually come up with ‘You’ve got quite nice colouring’, a reference to his dark eyebrows and thin yellow hair. That granted, nothing remained to be praised about his unappetizing person – the sparse straw mat atop a squashed and petulant mask of acne; the dour, bulgy little torso and repulsively truncated limbs; the numb, cadaverous texture of the whole.

The more clothes you took off him, the more traumatic the spectacle became. His (equally fat but better proportioned) sister went into hysterics when she once surprised him in the bath. As he entered the Wimbledon Municipal Swimming Pool two teenage girls spontaneously vomited into the shallow end (on being questioned, they said it was the quiffs on the nipples of Keith’s D-cup breasts that had done the trick – Whitehead was subsequently banned from the baths). At school physical check-ups, doctors habitually refused to lay a finger on him, and the P.T. master threatened to hand in his notice should Keith ever set foot in his gymnasium again. As if in reply to these bodily shortcomings, Keith’s nature is one utterly lacking in wit, generosity and charm. Whitehead is, moreover, keenly appreciative of this state of affairs, well aware that by almost anyone’s standards he would be better off dead.

He reviewed it now, as he extracted himself from the blankets and sat rocking on the bunk in his pungent pyjamas, waking for the hundredth time in this house full of tall and affluent people. Keith was hungry; his stomach was rumbling so loudly that he kept yelling at it to shut up. It was eight o'clock. Probably the others weren't up yet and the kitchen would be his. He got to his feet and, after some consideration, put on his dressing-gown, a tweedy brown horror that his parents had bought him the minute they were sure he wasn't going to grow out of it. Mr and Mrs Whitehead had allowed for, indeed banked on, their son growing a few more inches; this had turned out to be a needless precaution, and the heavy material now swilled amply in his wake. But Keith was hungry, and he was even more appalled by his clothes, grubby little items that he knew he was too fat for, than he was appalled by the risk of being found short-arsing round the house without his high-heeled boots on. In slippers, then, Keith Whitehead opened his 'bedroom' door and crept across the garage into the house.

## 2: ROUTINE

And so when Giles Coldstream came into the kitchen Whitehead was already there. They looked at each other in momentary alarm. Keith sat flushed and breathless at the table, having just finished beating up The Mandarin, Celia's bronchitic Persian cat.

'Hello,' said Giles, struck not for the first time by the relative adequacy of Whitehead's teeth.

'Hi,' Keith gasped.

Giles sat down carefully next to Keith at the table and looked into his face for a few seconds; then he looked away. 'I had my really heavy recurring dream last night, actually,' said Giles. Giles said this with some surprise; he had never mentioned his dreams to anyone before. Why, then, had he told little Keith? It wasn't as if the morning so far had been anything but humdrumly routine. Giles had simply woken, sent his tongue slithering like a fish round his mouth, checked off his teeth in the bedside shaving-mirror, and raced across the room to the huge, shuddering fridge where his early-morning jug of Bloody Mary awaited him. Giles decided that he should have drunk more before venturing downstairs. Sobriety always made him indiscreet.

'What happened?' asked Keith. '... In your recurring dream?'

'Oh. All my teeth fell out again.'

Whitehead frowned pleasantly. 'I believe that's to do with fear of sexual failure. It's a sex dream – when all your teeth fall out.'

'No, it isn't,' grumbled Giles. 'Not with me.'

'What's it about with you then?'

'It's about all my teeth falling out.'

'Ah. How do you know?'

'Because that's all they ever do.'

‘What?’

‘Fall out.’

Giles got up and walked across the kitchen to the draining-board, which he clutched with both hands. He glazed over.

‘Oh. I see,’ said Keith.

Giles shivered briefly. ‘But let’s just not ever talk about it,’ he said. ‘Ever again. If that’s all right by you.’

Keith shrugged. ‘Fine,’ he said. ‘Fine by me.’

The electric kettle began to come to the boil. Giles slowly backed away as the steam condensed on his arm.

‘Ah. There goes my coffee,’ said Keith Whitehead.

Keith had been rinsing out a coffee cup when The Mandarin prowled grandly up to him. Whitehead sighed as he heard its friendly miaow. He knew that all The Mandarin was thinking about was Jellymeat Kat. Disdainfully Keith polished the mug with a dishcloth. He was fucked if he was going to feed Celia’s pet.

It was then that The Mandarin made her terrible mistake. With a chesty purr she nosed in under Keith’s tweed truss and started to flow in figure-eight patterns round his feet, sending wispy fur tickling up his legs.

Whitehead’s armpits came to life. ‘Right,’ he said.

Gently trapping The Mandarin between his thick white calves, Keith looped the dishcloth and held its end under the running tap. Next, he parted his gown, The Mandarin peered up at him with moist, affectionate eyes, and Keith caught her a good one right on the nose. From then on it was a scramble. As The Mandarin slithered out in terror from the tweed wigwam, Keith pivoted, kicked her into the corner, and came in with his waterlogged rag swinging. Two minutes later, having clouted and dribbled The Mandarin round the kitchen, Keith hoisted her out of the door on the end of his slipper, too winded to continue.

\*

‘Are you going to have anything, Giles?’ asked Keith.

Giles played with the idea of having a lightly-boiled egg. The idea did not attract him. He was off solids at the moment. ‘No, what I came down for, actually, was a *lime*.’ Giles intended, rather, to use this fruit in the preparation of some gin-rickies, a new drink he had read about.

Keith was going to have something. He thought it likely that he would die if he did not. He hadn’t eaten for three days and the timpanist inside his stomach grew more importunate by the second.

‘There’s a lot of bacon,’ Keith coaxed. ‘It says on the packet that it’s due to go bad tomorrow, so we might as well finish it. Want any?’

Giles started back, as if from a physical threat. *Bacon* was one of the foods he disapproved of most – not only for its toughness but also for its texture: those little knots of gristle and hide which could so easily be mistaken for escaping crowns, caps, bridges, or (who knows?) actual teeth. No. Giles liked to know what was going on in his mouth, thank you. We’re sorry, but Giles had swallowed a cap or two in his time and wasn’t about to let it happen again. (Once, stranded in Blackfriars on a rainy March afternoon, ravenous and without his credit cards, Giles had stolen into Trims, a healthfood cafeteria, where it took him an hour and three-quarters to eat an almond rissole, sorting and grading each item with his tongue before letting it pass down his throat.)

‘No I *won’t*,’ he said. ‘No, I really don’t feel like anything.’

‘Well, I’d better have some then,’ Keith said fatly.

‘Now where would one find ... a *lime*.’

‘I’m not sure.’ Whitehead peeled five strips of bacon on to the grill. ‘Giles – have you any idea who’s supposed to be coming for the weekend?’

‘No. I didn’t know anyone was coming. Besides, what day is it today?’

‘It’s Friday. Yes,’ Keith went on, ‘some friends of Quentin’s. American, I believe. And also ... Lucy Littlejohn.’

Giles was under the dresser, burrowing among the wooden boxes. ‘Oh, really?’

‘Apparently,’ said Keith. ‘I don’t know anything about the Americans. Do you, do you know Lucy Littlejohn?’

‘Mm, a bit,’ Giles muttered.

Keith jabbed at the bacon with a fork. ‘I hear she’s ... Quentin and Andy tell me –’

‘Look, here’s The Mandarin!’ said Giles, turning on his haunches and running a hand along the Persian’s arched, silvery back. ‘How are *you*, Mandarin? Have you fed her, Keith?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oh. No, you’ve *been* fed, Mandarin. Yes, Keith’s already *fed* you.’

Whitehead shifted his weight from one foot to the other. ‘Because Quentin and Andy say Lucy’s really something. She’s really ... quite a nympho.’

‘What do you mean exactly?’

Keith coughed. ‘Just that she’ll fuck anyone.’

‘Ooh, I don’t know about “anyone”,’ said Giles, dubiously, having fucked her himself.

‘Andy’s fucked her, Quentin’s fucked her—’

‘– *I’ve* fucked her,’ Giles weighed in.

‘Brian Hall and all that lot have fucked her.’

‘Bob Henderson and all that lot have fucked her,’ said Giles. ‘Yes, I suppose she does fuck quite a lot of people. Cy Harling and all that lot have fucked her.’

Whitehead, who had hardly fucked anyone, hadn’t fucked her, and it was his dream to do so this very weekend. Thus, he said abruptly, ‘I hear she’s got some sort of venereal thing’ – a wheeze of his to put Giles off fucking her himself.

‘Is that so?’ Giles asked mildly, his head still invisible beneath the dresser. Normally this intelligence would have caused him

considerable retrospective alarm. But he found that he was losing interest in sex these days.

‘So they say,’ said Keith.

‘Well,’ asked Giles, straightening up, ‘who hasn’t nowadays?’

At length, Giles found his lime and Keith cooked his bacon. As they shuffled past each other Giles halted on his way to the door and looked the tiny Whitehead up and down.

‘Hey,’ Giles pointed out ingenuously, nodding his head, ‘you’re really a lot smaller without your boots on.’ Giles looked him up and down again, seemingly impressed by his own powers of observation. ‘Fatter, too. You know, I never really realized,’ he said, as if telling Keith something he would be intrigued and grateful to learn, ‘just how small and fat you actually were.’

When Giles was gone Keith smacked his plate down on the table, kicked the attentive Mandarin, closed his eyes, and, lips flapping, let out a long, frowzy sigh.

### 3: SOUNDS FUNNY

Celia sat up suddenly in bed, hugged her knees to her breasts, tilted her head to one side, and asked, 'What shall we do with them when they arrive?'

Quentin Villiers rearranged the sheets to cover the lower half of his body. He did this rather fussily, but his voice remained genial and melodious. 'I should prefer to wait and see what sort of state they're in. They'll have been driving all night and will doubtless be racked with amphetamines.'

'I think I'll make them a cooked breakfast,' said Celia.

'A cooked breakfast? A "cooked" *breakfast*? My sweet, sometimes you are too deliciously *outré*. Eating a cooked breakfast – it would be like going to bed in pyjamas or reading an English novel.'

'Darling, you're not to tease me.'

'Well, my dearest, *really*. No. I rather thought a picnic. It might amuse them ...' Quentin opened a hand towards the light that was gathering behind the bedroom curtains. 'It promises to be a fine day and, besides, I should like some air myself.'

Celia flopped back to her husband's side and nuzzled his neck with her large bruised lips. 'You've been up all night, haven't you?'

Quentin released a mouthful of smoke and nodded slowly.

'What doing?'

'Cultivating the life of the mind.'

'You hardly ever sleep now, do you?'

Quentin drew in a mouthful of smoke and shook his head slowly. 'I do try to avoid it. It bores me so.'

'Quentin?'

'Celia.'

'Is it true that the three of them have scenes together?'

‘Naturally. Why, haven’t you ever joined in a threesome – or what I believe they call “a troy”?’

‘Never,’ said Celia. ‘Not even in my dissolute days. Have you?’

‘No, I haven’t either, curiously enough. They’re sure to try to enlist us, by the way.’

‘But we won’t, will we,’ said Celia, cuddling nearer.

Whether through regret or impatience, Quentin concealed a sigh in an emission of cigarette smoke. ‘Of course not,’ he said.

‘Will the others?’

‘An excellent question.’ He arranged the pillows behind his head to still greater advantage. ‘Andy most assuredly would, if given the ghost of a chance. Diana, I’m undecided about. I don’t think Giles could really be bothered to. Little Keith would probably be prepared to be unseamed by Marvell and Skip if he thought that might win him an opportunity to make Roxeanne his own, which, again, I’d have thought it wouldn’t. Roxeanne is fairly “catholic” in her tastes, but in Keith’s rather unsavoury case ...?’ Quentin flapped a limp wrist.

‘What about that character Lucy Littlejohn?’

‘Character? My sweet, you talk as if she were forty-five. She’s a colourful personality but she’s hardly a character.’

‘She’s an old flame of yours, isn’t she?’

‘A spark, a mere cinder,’ protested Quentin.

Celia relaxed and the moment passed. ‘It sounds funny, doesn’t it, darling,’ she said, ‘two men and one girl? Two girls and one man seems more on the cards ... but. What do the three of them *do*?’

‘They do most of it on a chair, I rather gather. Marvell – the little one – sits on Skip’s – the big one’s – lap, thereby impaling himself, and then Roxeanne impales herself *front*-ways on Marvell’s lap, so that she may kiss them both in turn. Frightfully eventful for Marvell, one imagines.’

‘Mm.’

‘There are some rather baroque variations, what they call *soixante-neuf et six*, but that’s the main theme,’ Quentin gave one

of his rare yawns. ‘They’re terribly straightforward about it all. You can ask them for details when they come.’

‘Mm. It does sound funny, though, doesn’t it?’

‘Yes,’ said Quentin, ‘I suppose it does.’

Next door, Andy Adorno peeled back his adhesive eyelids and focused with some degree of reluctance on Diana, who was lying on her face, facing him, the cerise kaftan resting here and there on her perennially olive skin. She turned a page of her magazine and glanced at him. Andy closed his eyes again. The taste of dusty stone steps which lay coiled round his senses was augmented by a noisome wave of eau-de-cologne.

‘Jesus fuckin Christ,’ he murmured.

Diana turned a page. She said, ‘There’s some coffee and toast I’ve brought you.’

Andy correctly guessed that these nutriments were intended to moisten his mouth and sweeten his breath. Out of the corner of one of his narrow red eyes he looked at Diana again, noting the tactful make-up and the vigorously brushed black hair, through which Diana now ran a hand as she turned another page.

‘What’s with the glamour?’ he asked.

‘Just had a wash.’

Andy sat up a few inches, his dark face creased with remorse. He said, ‘Jesus ... Coffee.’ He sighed. ‘And I suppose you want me to fuck you now, don’t you?’

She passed him the cup, shaking her head.

‘That’s good. Cos I,’ said Andy, putting his mug on the bedside-table and sitting up, ‘feel like *shit!*’ He juggled his face between stiff-fingered hands. Then he turned to her and added in a softer voice, ‘And anyway, I never do what I don’t want to do. O.K.?’

‘O.K.’

‘Aw, my fuckin *head!*’ roared Andy, as he sprang from the bed and stumbled out of the room. Diana heard him battering violently on the bathroom door. ‘*Christ!* Who’s *in* there?’

Keith tensed on the lavatory seat. He had been on it for fifteen minutes, soggy with constipation. ‘It’s Keith.’

‘Keith! Don’t you *dare* use this bathroom again.’ Andy wriggled with impatience. ‘Now move your arse!’

Keith’s buttocks, by way of response, gave a loud yell as a pint of air rushed out between them. Both he and Andy gasped with fright.

Why, this dreadful shout from Whitehead’s rear was heard by everyone in the house, by Giles as he squeezed lime-juice into a frosted glass, by Celia as she marshalled her cosmetics, by Quentin Villiers as he zipped up his faded denim shirt, and by Diana as she lay on her bed, staring at the wall with cold, unblinking eyes.