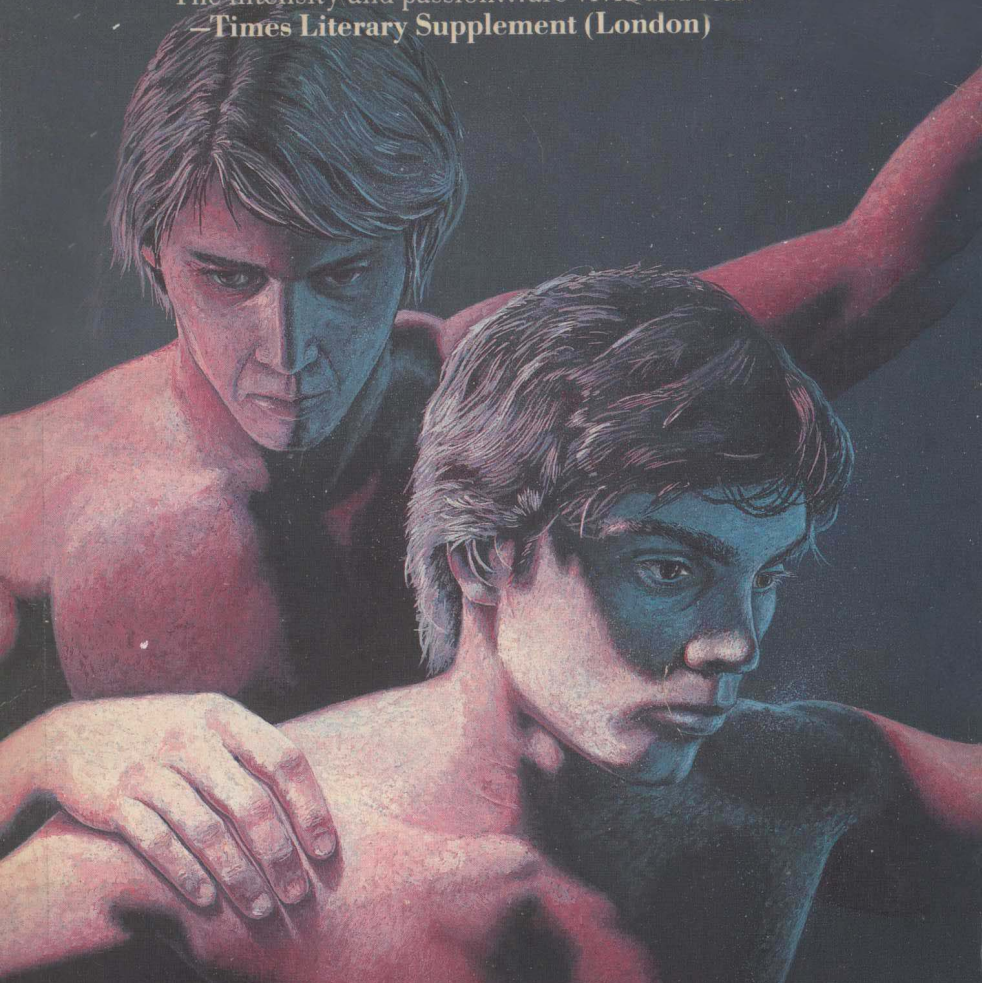


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DANCE  
— ON MY —  
GRAVE  
AIDAN CHAMBERS

DANCE ON MY GRAVE

江苏工业学院图书馆  
藏书章

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

*Breaktime*

*Seal Secret*

# DANCE ON MY GRAVE AIDAN CHAMBERS

A Life and a Death  
in Four Parts  
One Hundred and Seventeen Bits  
Six Running Reports  
and Two Press Clippings  
with a few jokes  
a puzzle or three  
some footnotes  
and a fiasco now and then  
to help the story along



Harper & Row, Publishers  
New York, Cambridge, Philadelphia, San Francisco  
London, Mexico City, São Paulo, Singapore, Sydney

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First PERENNIAL LIBRARY edition published 1986.

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### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Chambers, Aidan.

Dance on my grave.

"Perennial Library."

[1. Homosexuality—Fiction. 2. Death—Fiction]

I. Title.

PZ7.C3557Dan 1986 [Fic] 85-48258

ISBN 0-06-091310-X (pbk.)

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86 87 88 89 90 MPC 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# GRAVE DAMAGE

## *Youth charged*

A sixteen-year-old youth appeared at Southend juvenile court yesterday charged with interfering with a grave. Further charges of wilful damage were brought.

## *Police trap*

Inspector Harry White, prosecuting, said that complaints had been received from Mrs Myra Gorman that the grave of her son, Barry, 18, had been damaged soon after his funeral. Mrs Gorman claimed she had reason to believe this would happen again.

Following Mrs Gorman's complaint, a police constable was put on duty in the cemetery at night. On the second night, the accused was caught and arrested while performing what Inspector White described as 'strange antics on the deceased boy's grave'.

## *Unbalanced mind*

The youth refused to say anything in his own defence or to explain his actions. He sat silent and unmoved throughout the hearing.

Mr C. H. Pinchbeck, chairman of the court, told the accused, 'This is one of the most unpleasant cases I have ever dealt with. I cannot believe you were in your right mind.'

The case was adjourned until a social inquiry report could be prepared.



# Part One

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We are what we pretend to be,  
so we must be careful what we pretend to be.

*Kurt Vonnegut*





1/I must be mad.

I should have known it all the time.

If your hobby is death, you must be mad.

Don't get me wrong. Mad I may be. Crazy I am not.

I am not a weirdo, not some kind of psycho who goes around murdering people.

I have no interest in dead bodies. What interests me is Death. Capital D.

Dead bodies scare me. They do terrible things to me.

*Correction:* One dead body did terrible things to me.

About which I am telling you now.

If you want to know about it, that is. If you do not want to read about Death, and if you do not want to read about a dead body that I knew when it was alive and still a he, and if you do not want to read about the things that happened to he and me before he became it, and about how he became it, you had better stop right here. Now.

2/The beach, that first day, was a morgue of sweating bodies laid out on slabs of towels. Sea and sand at sunny Southend.

We had lived in this Londoners' playground at the mouth of the Thames for seventeen months, my father, my mother and me, and I was still not used to a town whose trade was trippers.

There was talent about, bared to the imagination.

*Correction:* I could not get used to a town whose trade was strippers.

But school holiday was three weeks away yet, so mostly the bodies were old. Pensioned. White skin, oat-mealed flesh.

I had things on my mind. Oatmealed bodies were an awful distraction, talented strippers too few to be distraction enough. Anyway, the few fetching females there were had eyes only for he-men with inflatable muscles and micro-wave tans. They took a positive pleasure in ignoring a sixteen-year-old unstripped stripling still convalescing from acne. And I couldn't have cared less about them, because what I wanted was to get away somewhere where I could think.

There was only one way left to go. I didn't want to sit at home plugged into my stereo just to keep Mother at bay. And I certainly wasn't going in to school, now that I'd finished my exams, until that afternoon when Osborn wanted to see me. So the only way to go now was seaward. Cool. Unpeopled. What Barry (he who became it) called 'the escape route'.

Just off shore Spike Woods' fourteen-foot sailing dinghy, *Tumble*, was poppling about among the other small craft moored at their buoys. Spike had been daft enough to leave his mainsail furled to the boom. A wonder it hadn't been pinched. Everything movable was eventually half-inched from the beach. Even boats sometimes.

Good old happy-go-lucky Spike was in school that day with exams still to sit. I had crewed for him once or twice, cack-handedly. He only took me out, I think, because for some reason he thought I was good for a laugh. And I liked him because he is one of those people you never have to worry about. He's always in trouble at school because he won't wear anything but raggy jeans and a scruffy shirt. Sometimes I think his blood must be laced with anti-freeze because he wears the same outfit summer and winter, no matter how cold the weather gets. But there are other kids who dress worse than he does and who don't get into as much bother. I think he does

because he is one of those kids who exude sex. His flesh is somehow more fleshy than other people's. Girls take one look at him and tremble at the sight. In the right mood I tremble a bit myself. On Spike a crummy shirt and well-worn jeans only serve to emphasize his sexiness. I think he knows it too. He certainly takes advantage of everything going. And that just gets adults, especially teachers, even more riled. He'd been up in front of the Head five times that summer term already, ostensibly because of the way he was dressed. And this was apart from daily skirmishes with the more totalitarian and sex-starved members of staff. But nothing and no one ever manage to improve Spike's sartorial neglect or diminish by one ohm his biological glow.

Well, that day last June Spike was sweating it out in the exam room. And I didn't think he'd mind if I helped myself to his *Tumble* and gave myself a free sail while I did my thinking. I'd never single-handed anything more than a beach cushion before, but what the hell, I thought, it couldn't be that difficult. The weather was calm—a steady breeze not strong enough to blow a castaway ice-cream wrapper along the prom, the sun bright and hot, the sea no more than chuckling. The tide was on the flood but the water was still shallow enough for me to wade out to *Tumble* if I went now. What harm could I do?

3/By eleven o'clock on that bright Thursday morning I was away, the breeze kissing my cheek and bellying the mainsail in a gentle, pretty curve above my head. Romantic. Just like the picture on the Southend holiday brochure. The Resort for all Seasons. And the season for all resorts (thinking of the stripped salamandrian beach-folk).

I quickly decided single-handed sailing was a doddle. Maybe I should get a dinghy of my own. I lounged back complacent against the transom, stretched my legs so the sun could dry my wet jeans. Master of the con, captain of the lonesome bridge, I steadied the thrusting bow on a point just seaward of the pierhead and let myself be carried slap-and-splash against the tide towards the level horizon.

Not that the horizon meant freedom and empty space, for the sea before me was all Thames estuary. But everyone had warned me what a treacherous tideway it was, a trap of confused currents and looming inattentive cargo boats. As safe for an incompetently handled sailing dinghy as an urban motorway at rush hour is for a kid on a tricycle. But I would turn back, I promised myself, before life got too hairy. All I wanted was a chance to sit back and think for a while. Alone.

4/If you only want the what-happens-next Bits of this tale, please skip from here to Bit 5. If you want to know what I was so keen to think about out there on the briny, apart from the question of my fascination with Death, read on.

What I needed to think about was this:

Should I leave school this summer and find a job? Or should I stay on?

If I left school, what job could I do?

If I stayed on, what subjects should I study? And what job would those subjects qualify me for when I am eighteen?

Or should I go to university at eighteen? And if so, why?

I was in two minds about everything. Which my stupefied arithmetic says made me therefore in fourteen

minds all at once. Painful. (Maths is my worst subject of all. I am even better at French; i.e. hopeless.)

The people who had a say in these earth-shattering conundrums and were helping to keep me in fourteen minds were:

my father (naturally)

my mother (God bless her)

my Headmaster (if reminded of my existence, which disaster I and he tried to avoid)

my so-called tutorial teacher (Ms Tyke)

the careers officer (a man with a catalogue for a mind)

my English teacher (Jim Osborn, better known as Ozzy, of whom more later)

my aunt Ethel (she thought I ought to 'go in for a cook' because when I was eight I stayed with her for the first and only time, and helped her bake me a gingerbread man by putting in currants for the eyes, nose and mouth, a task I accomplished with such success that ever since she has regarded me as a culinary genius)

the television (okay, so it isn't a person, despite the fact that my father talks to it all the time. But it keeps showing programmes about how this job and that job will be redundant soon, usually just after I have made a firm decision that that job would be just right for me).

That's the end of the official list of careers-advising experts. But there's a whole army of unofficial advisers who get in on the act. For instance, there's our milkman, who pressed me for obscure reasons I never understood to go into waste disposal. And then there's my dentist who suggested once that with teeth like mine I could have a wonderful future as a male model and would I like him to help me on in that direction. I never quite trusted him with a drill after that.

In fact, one of the things I was thinking as I floated down the river in *Tumble* was that when it came to my

career everyone I met seemed to think s/he was an expert who knew better than I possibly could know myself just what I should and should not do with my life. I even formulated a useful scientific principle out of this experience. I freely offer it to everyone who finds him/herself in a similar predicament. Thus: The confidence with which all and sundry foist their careers advice on to you varies in inverse proportion to the adviser's own success in his/her chosen occupation.

Or, as my father puts it: Them as says most knows least.

One thing I had decided. I would take a summer job.

*Correction:* My father had decided for me that I should take a summer job. He had made this decision with one sentence: 'You're not sponging off me and your mother all summer, so you can get off your duff and earn yourself a few quid.' My father has an endearing manner when roused, a charmingly elegant way of showing what he means, not unlike a sledgehammer wielded by an irritable Irish navvy. So between this day in late June and the fatal August morning when my exam results would no doubt confirm my lack of qualification for any job whatsoever, I had to find a congenial, paid pastime.

But what? I couldn't stand the usual temporary summer holiday jobs available to the likes of me in a seaside town, such as deck-chair attendant, or donkey-minder on the sands, or counter-hand on a jellied eel stall along the Golden Mile. (The Golden Mile is a stretch of tatty and tacky seafront esplanade east of the pier that passes for Southend's attempt at gaiety and tourist pleasance.) That sort of slavery I could do without.

5/Thus was my mind preoccupied as I cruised wantonly

on the opaque Thames. (*Sea and sand* at sunny Southend? I ask you! Mud and metabolic liquefaction washed away by daily doses of tidal North Sea salt more likely.) The sun stiffened my jeans as the Thames water's monosodium glutamates dried out. I felt like I was wearing paralysed treacle.

I slipped my jeans off, treading them into the bottom of the boat. Underneath I had on only a pair of red jockey briefs with fetching white trim, but who was around to get excited?

I had spent so much time messing about on the beach this year—I even revised for the exams there—that for the first time in my life I was tanned all over, something I was secretly proud about. (*Correction*: I was tanned *almost* all over.) Of course this is nothing exceptional in a macho-spa like Southend. (Being tanned I mean. Or, come to think of it, being proud of it too.) But my normal skin colour till then had been somewhat on the pale side of chickenbreast white, so I used to keep all but my extremities hidden from the public gaze. I even used to wear a track suit for gym class if I could get away with it so as to avoid unseemly comments about my spectral hue. A favourite quip bellowed across the changing room was 'Hey, Dracula did a good job on you last night.' For a while after I arrived in Southend I was widely known as the Bleach Boy and it was rumoured that I was hooked on Domestos.

Having juggled with tiller, mainsheet and jib sheet while removing my jeans, I thought I should check my sailing condition. Maybe my (to be honest) very few marine excursions crewing for the succulent Spike had already taught me some of the precautions necessary for sea-going survival. Like knowing at all times what your own boat, other people's boats, the weather and the sea are all doing. Or maybe some unconscious premonition



of approaching calamity was already blinking a warning in my head. Whatever, I looked around.

Ahead, all was well. Sun crinkling on gentle waves. Very few other craft about and none near me.

But behind: Big Trouble. And fast approaching. A heavy black curtain was being drawn across the sky. I had never seen a cloud as menacing. It was a monstrous tumescence. A Thing from Outaspace.

In the one double-take glance I allowed myself before my body splintered in panic, I saw too that the sea beneath the cloud was shining an aggressive gun-metal bright, and that a leading edge of angry waves was churning over white, as if the monster had teeth and was snapping at the tide.

My nerves fused. I did, though, know enough about Southend weather to realize that the space between the snapping waves and the black cloud would be filled with a pretty feisty wind. Also that this unwelcome gust would arrive like a rocket-powered wall of expanded polystyrene—soft and warm to the touch but a knockout just the same.

Not only had my father raised me from an early age to act on the principle that a man must face what a man would rather run away from, but it also seemed obvious at that moment even to my addled brain that safety lay in pointing Spike's little boat into the coming wind, rather than being blown along by it. Therefore, what now looked to me like my frail and inadequate vessel had to be turned to face the gathering tempest fast. There was also the question of whether Spike's beloved *Tumble* was a suitable sparring partner for the rusting iron stanchions that support Southend's famous pier (all of one and a third miles long) among which we were likely to get tangled if the wind took hold of us and carried us away.

Of course if we were lucky enough to avoid that fate, a