The fantastically funny

TERRY PRATCHETT



JOHNNY and the DEAD

A JOHNNY MAXWELL STORY

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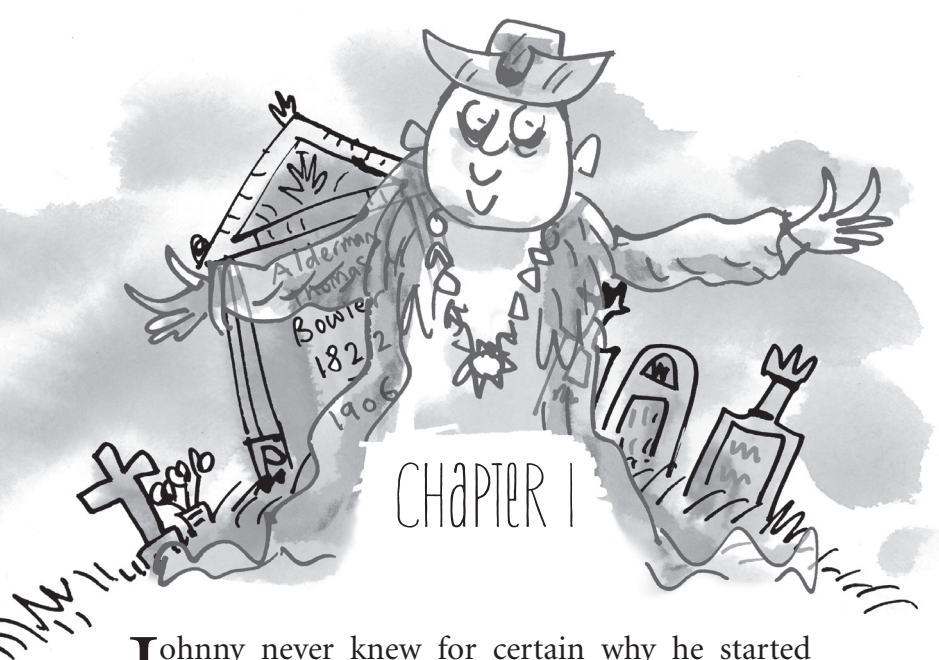
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CHAPTER 1

Johnny never knew for certain why he started seeing the dead.

The Alderman said it was probably because he was too lazy not to.

Most people's minds don't let them see things that might upset them, he said. The Alderman said he should know if anyone did, because he'd spent his whole life (1822–1906) not seeing things.

Wobbler Johnson, who was technically Johnny's best friend, said it was because he was mental.

But Yo-less, who read medical books, said it was probably because he couldn't focus his mind like normal people. Normal people just ignored almost everything that was going on around them, so that they could concentrate on important things like, well, getting up, going to the lavatory and getting on

with their lives. Whereas Johnny just opened his eyes in the morning and the whole universe hit him in the face.

Wobbler said this sounded like 'mental' to him.

Whatever it was called, what it *meant* was this. Johnny saw things other people didn't.

Like the dead people hanging around in the cemetery.

The Alderman – at least, the *old* Alderman – was a bit snobby about most of the rest of the dead, even about Mr Vicenti, who had a huge black marble grave with angels and a photograph of Mr Vicenti (1897–1958) looking not at all dead behind a little window. The Alderman said Mr Vicenti had been a Capo de Monte in the Mafia. Mr Vicenti told Johnny that, on the contrary, he had spent his entire life being a wholesale novelty salesman, amateur escapologist and children's entertainer, which in a number of important respects was as exactly like not being in the Mafia as it was possible to get.

But all this was later. After he'd got to know the dead a lot better. After the raising of the ghost of the Ford Capri.

Johnny really discovered the cemetery after he'd started living at Grandad's. This was Phase Three of Trying Times, after the shouting, which had been

bad, and the Being Sensible About Things (which had been worse; people are better at shouting). Now his dad was getting a new job somewhere on the other side of the country. There was a vague feeling that it might all work out, now that people had stopped trying to be sensible. On the whole, he tried not to think about it.

He'd started using the path along the canal instead of going home on the bus, and found that if you climbed over the place where the wall had fallen down, and then went around behind the crematorium, you could cut off half the journey.

The graves went right up to the canal's edge.

It was one of those old cemeteries you got owls and foxes in and sometimes, in the Sunday papers, people going on about Our Victorian Heritage, although they didn't go on about this one because it was the wrong kind of heritage, being too far from London.

Wobbler said it was spooky and sometimes went home the long way, but Johnny was disappointed that it wasn't spookier. Once you sort of put out of your mind what it *was* – once you forgot about all the skeletons underground, grinning away in the dark – it was quite friendly. Birds sang. All the traffic sounded a long way off. It was peaceful.

He'd had to check a few things, though. Some of

the older graves had big stone boxes on top, and in the wilder parts these had cracked and even fallen open. He'd had a look inside, just in case.

It had been sort of disappointing to find nothing there.

And then there were the mausoleums. These were much bigger and had doors in, like little houses. They looked a bit like allotment sheds with extra angels. The angels were generally more lifelike than you'd expect, especially one near the entrance who looked as though he'd just remembered that he should have gone to the toilet before he left heaven.

The two boys walked through the cemetery now, kicking up the drifts of fallen leaves.

'It's Halloween next week,' said Wobbler. 'I'm having a disco. You have to come as something horrible. Don't bother to find a disguise.'

'Thanks,' said Johnny.

'You notice how there's a lot more Halloween stuff in the shops these days?' said Wobbler.

'It's because of Bonfire Night,' said Johnny. 'Too many people were blowing themselves up with fireworks, so they invented Halloween, where you just wear masks and stuff.'

'Mrs Nugent says all that sort of thing is tampering with the occult,' said Wobbler. Mrs Nugent was the Johnsons' next-door neighbour,

and known to be unreasonable on subjects like Madonna played at full volume at 3 a.m.

'Probably it is,' said Johnny.

'She says witches are abroad on Halloween,' said Wobbler.

'What?' Johnny's forehead wrinkled. 'Like . . . Majorca and places?'

'Suppose so,' said Wobbler.

'Makes . . . sense, I suppose. They probably get special out-of-season bargains, being old ladies,' said Johnny. 'My aunt can go anywhere on the buses for almost nothing and she's not even a witch.'

'Don't see why Mrs Nugent is worried, then,' said Wobbler. 'It ort to be a lot safer round here, with all the witches on holiday.'

They passed a very ornate mausoleum, which even had little stained-glass windows. It was hard to imagine who'd want to see in, but then, it was even harder to imagine who'd want to look out.

'Shouldn't like to be on the same plane as 'em,' said Wobbler, who'd been thinking hard. 'Just think, p'raps you can only afford to go on holiday in the autumn, and you get on the plane, and there's all these old witches going abroad.'

'Singing "Here we go, here we go, here we go"?' said Johnny.

'And "Viva a spanner"?'

'But I bet you'd get really *good* service in the hotel,' said Johnny.

'Yeah.'

'Funny, really,' said Johnny.

'What?'

'I saw a thing in a book once,' said Johnny, 'about these people in Mexico or somewhere, where they all go down to the cemetery for a big fiesta at Halloween every year. Like, they don't see why people should be left out of things just because they're dead.'

'Yuk. A picnic? In the actual cemetery?'

'Yes.'

'Reckon you'd get green glowing hands pushing up through the earth and nicking the sarnies?'

'Don't think so. Anyway . . . they don't eat sarnies in Mexico. They eat tort . . . something.'

'Tortoises.'

'Yeah?'

'I bet,' said Wobbler, looking around, 'I bet . . . I bet you wouldn't dare knock on one of those doors. I bet you'd hear dead people lurchin' about inside.'

'Why do they lurch?'

Wobbler thought about this.

'They always lurch,' he said. 'Dunno why. I've seen them in videos. And they can push their way through walls.'

'Why?' said Johnny.

'Why what?'

'Why push their way through walls? I mean . . . living people can't do that. Why should dead people do it?'

Wobbler's mother was very easy-going in the matter of videos. According to him, he was allowed to watch ones which even people aged a hundred had to watch with their parents.

'Don't know,' he said. 'They're usually very angry about something.'

'Being dead, you mean?'

'Probably,' said Wobbler. 'It can't be much of a life.'

Johnny thought about this that evening, after meeting the Alderman. The only dead people he had known had been Mr Page, who'd died in hospital of something, and his great-grandmother, who'd been ninety-six and had just generally died. Neither of them had been particularly angry people. His great-grandmother had been a bit confused about things, but never angry. He'd visited her in Sunshine Acres, where she watched a lot of television and waited for the next meal to turn up. And Mr Page had walked around quietly, the only man in the street still at home in the middle of the day.

They didn't seem the sort of people who would get up after being dead just to dance with Michael Jackson. And the only thing his great-grandmother would have pushed her way through walls for would be a television that she could watch without having to fight fifteen other old ladies for the remote control.

It seemed to Johnny that a lot of people were getting things all wrong. He said this to Wobbler. Wobbler disagreed.

'lt's prob'ly all different from a dead point of view,' he said.

Now they were walking along West Avenue. The cemetery was laid out like a town, with streets. They weren't named very originally – North Drive and South Walk joined West Avenue, for example, at a little gravelled area with seats in. A kind of city centre. But the silence of the big Victorian mausoleums made the place look as though it was having the longest early-closing day in the world.

'My dad says this is all going to be built on,' said Wobbler. 'He said the Council sold it to some big company for fivepence because it was costing so much to keep it going.'

'What, all of it?' said Johnny.

'That's what he said,' said Wobbler. Even he looked a bit uncertain. 'He said it was a scandal.'

'Even the bit with the poplar trees?'

'All of it,' said Wobbler. 'It's going to be offices or something.'

Johnny looked at the cemetery. It was the only open space for miles.

'I'd have given them at least a pound,' he said.

'Yes, but you wouldn't have been able to build things on it,' said Wobbler. 'That's the important thing.'

'I wouldn't want to build anything on it. I'd have given them a pound just to leave it as it is.'

'Yes,' said Wobbler, the voice of reason, 'but people have got to work somewhere. We Need Jobs.'

'I bet the people here won't be very happy about it,' said Johnny. 'If they knew.'

'I think they get moved somewhere else,' said Wobbler. 'It's got to be something like that. Otherwise you'd never dare dig your garden.'

Johnny looked up at the nearest tomb. It was one of the ones that looked like a shed built of marble. Bronze lettering over the door said:

ALDERMAN THOMAS BOWLER
1822-1906
Pro Bono Publico