The fantastically funny

# TERRY PRATCHETT

Sir Terry Pratchett (yes, he's a real-life knight!) is one of the world's funniest and most popular writers. He has written over fifty brilliant books for children and adults, and is perhaps best known for his Discworld® series – all about a world that happens to be carried on the back of a giant turtle floating through space. He is the winner of multiple prizes, including the Carnegie Medal for his young adult book *The Amazing Maurice and his Educated Rodents*. His books have been translated into thirty-eight languages, and have sold more than eighty million copies worldwide (but who's counting?). He died in March 2015.

For more information about Sir Terry and his books, please visit www.**terrypratchett**.co.uk

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# JOHNNY and the BOMB

A JOHNNY MAXWELL STORY

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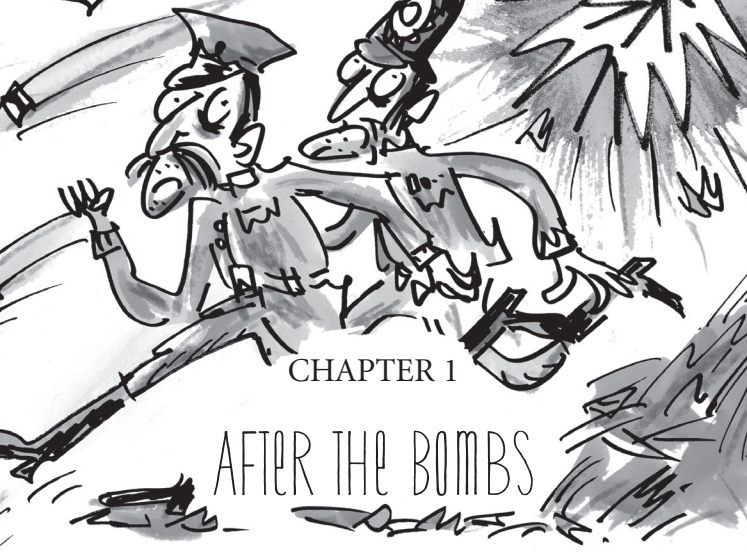

# CHAPTER 1

## AFTER THE BOMBS

It was nine o'clock in the evening, in Blackbury High Street.

It was dark, with occasional light from the full moon behind streamers of worn-out cloud. The wind was from the south-west and there had been another thunderstorm, which freshened the air and made the cobbles slippery.

A policeman moved, very slowly and sedately, along the street.

Here and there, if someone was very close, they might have seen the faintest line of light around a blacked-out window. From within came the quiet sounds of people living their lives – the muffled notes of a piano as someone practised scales, over and over again, and the murmur and occasional burst of laughter from the wireless.

Some of the shop windows had sandbags piled in front of them. A poster outside one shop urged people to Dig For Victory, as if it were some kind of turnip.

On the horizon, in the direction of Slate, the thin beams of searchlights tried to pry bombers out of the clouds.

The policeman turned the corner, and walked up the next street, his boots seeming very loud in the stillness.

The beat took him up as far as the Methodist chapel, and in theory would then take him down Paradise Street, but it didn't do that tonight because there was no Paradise Street any more. Not since last night.

There was a lorry parked by the chapel. Light leaked out from the tarpaulin that covered the back.

He banged on it.

'You can't park that 'ere, gents,' he said. 'I fine you one mug of tea and we shall say no more about it, eh?'

The tarpaulin was pushed back and a soldier jumped out. There was a brief vision of the interior – a warm tent of orange light, with a few soldiers sitting around a little stove, and the air thick with cigarette smoke.

The soldier grinned.

'Gi'us a mug and a wad for the sergeant,' he said to someone in the lorry.

A tin mug of scalding black tea and a brick-thick sandwich were handed out.

'Much obliged,' said the policeman, taking them. He leaned against the lorry. 'How's it going, then?' he said. 'Haven't heard a bang.'

'It's a 25-pounder,' said the soldier. 'Went right down through the cellar floor. You lot took a real pounding last night, eh? Want a look?'

'Is it safe?'

''Course not,' said the soldier cheerfully. 'That's why we're here, right? Come on.' He pinched out his cigarette and put it behind his ear.

'I thought you lot'd be guarding it,' said the policeman.

'It's two in the morning and it's been pissing down,' said the soldier. 'Who's going to steal an unexploded bomb?'

'Yes, but . . .' The sergeant looked in the direction of the ruined street.

There was the sound of bricks sliding.

'Someone is, by the sound of it,' he said.

'What? We've got warning signs up!' said the soldier. 'We only knocked off for a brew-up! Oi!'

Their boots crunched on the rubble that had been strewn across the road.

'It *is* safe, isn't it?' said the sergeant.

'Not if someone drops a dirty great heap of bricks on it, no! Oi! You!'

The moon came out from behind the clouds.

They could make out a figure at the other end of what remained of the street, near the wall of the pickle factory.

The sergeant skidded to a halt.

'Oh, no,' he whispered. 'It's Mrs Tachyon.'

The soldier stared at the small figure that was dragging some sort of cart through the rubble.

'Who's she?'

'Let's just take it quietly, shall we?' said the policeman, grabbing his arm.

He shone his torch and set his face into a sort of mad friendly grin.

'That you, Mrs Tachyon?' he said. 'It's me, Sergeant Bourke. Bit chilly to be out at this time of night, eh? Got a nice warm cell back at the station, yes? I daresay there could be a big hot mug of cocoa for you if you just come along with me, how about that?'

'Can't she read all them warning signs? Is she mental?' said the soldier, under his breath. 'She's right by the house with the bomb in the cellar!'

'Yes . . . no . . . she's just different,' said the sergeant. 'Bit . . . touched.' He raised his voice. 'You just stay where you are, love, and we'll come and get you. Don't want you hurting yourself on all this junk, do we?'

'Here, has she been looting?' said the soldier. 'She could get shot for that, pinching stuff from bombed-out houses!'

'No one's going to shoot Mrs Tachyon,' said the sergeant. 'We *know* her, see? She was in the cells the other night.'

'What'd she done?'

'Nothing. We let her kip in a spare cell in the station if it's a nippy night. I gave her a tanner and a pair of ole boots what belong to me mum only yesterday. Well, look at her. She's old enough to be your granny, poor old biddy.'

Mrs Tachyon stood and watched them owlishly as they walked, very cautiously, towards her.

The soldier saw a wizened little woman wearing what looked like a party dress with layers of other clothes on top, and a woolly hat with a bobble on it. She was pushing a wire cart on wheels. It had a metal label on it.

'Tes-co,' he said. 'What's that?'

'Dunno where she gets half her stuff,' muttered the sergeant.

The trolley seemed to be full of black bags. But there were other things, which glittered in the moonlight.

'I know where she got *that* stuff,' muttered the soldier. 'That's been pinched from the pickle factory!'

'Oh, half the town was in there this morning,' said the sergeant. 'A few jars of gherkins won't hurt.'

'Yeah, but you can't have this sort of thing. 'Ere, you! Missus! You just let me have a look at—'

He reached towards the trolley.

Some sort of demon, all teeth and glowing eyes, erupted from it and clawed the skin off the back of his hand.

'Blast! 'Ere, help me get hold of—'

But the sergeant had backed away. 'That's Guilty, that is,' he said. 'I should come away if I was you!'

Mrs Tachyon cackled.

'Thunderbirds Are Go!' she chortled. 'Wot, no bananas? That's what you think, my old dollypot!'

She hauled the trolley round and trotted off, dragging it behind her.

'Hey, don't go in *there*—' the soldier shouted.

The old woman hauled the trolley over a pile of bricks. A piece of wall collapsed behind her.

The last brick hit something far below, which went *boink*.

The soldier and the policeman froze in mid-run.

The moon went behind a cloud again.

In the darkness, there was a ticking sound. It was far off, and a bit muffled, but in that pool of silence both men heard it all the way up their spines.

The sergeant's foot, which had been in the air, came down slowly.

'How long've you got if it starts to tick?' he whispered.

There was no one there. The soldier was accelerating away.

The policeman ran after him and was halfway up

the ruins of Paradise Street before the world behind him suddenly became full of excitement.

It was nine o'clock in the evening, in Blackbury High Street.

In the window of the electrical shop, nine TVs showed the same picture. Nine televisions projected their flickering screens at the empty air.

A newspaper blew along the deserted pavement until it wrapped around the stalks in an ornamental flowerbed. The wind caught an empty lager can and bowled it across the pavement until it hit a drain.

The High Street was what Blackbury District Council called a Pedestrian Precinct and Amenity Area, although no one was quite sure what the amenities were, or even what an amenity *was*. Perhaps it was the benches, cunningly designed so that people wouldn't sit on them for too long and make the place untidy. Or maybe it was the flowerbeds, which sprouted a regular crop of the hardy perennial Crisp Packet. It couldn't have been the ornamental trees. They'd looked quite big and leafy on the original drawings a few years ago, but what with cutbacks and one thing and another, no one had actually got around to planting any.

The sodium lights made the night cold as ice.

The newspaper blew on again, and wrapped itself around a yellow litter bin in the shape of a fat dog with its mouth open.

Something landed in an alleyway and groaned.

'Tick tick tick! Tickety Boo! Ow! National . . . Health . . . Service . . .'

The interesting thing about worrying about things, thought Johnny Maxwell, was the way there was always something new to worry about.

His friend Kirsty said it was because he was a natural worrier, but that was because she didn't worry about *anything*. She got angry instead, and did things about it, whatever *it* was. He really envied the way she decided what *it* was and knew exactly what to do about *it* almost instantly. Currently she was saving the planet most evenings, and foxes at weekends.

Johnny just worried. Usually they were the same old worries – school, money, whether you could get AIDS from watching television, and so on. But occasionally one would come out of nowhere like a Christmas Number One and knock all the others down a whole division.

Right now, it was his mind.

'It's not exactly the same as being ill,' said Yo-less, who'd read all the way through his mother's medical encyclopedia.

'It's not being ill at all. If lots of bad things have happened to you it's healthy to be depressed,' said Johnny. 'That's sense, isn't it? What with the business going down the drain, and Dad pushing

off, and Mum just sitting around smoking all the time and everything. I mean, going around smiling and saying, "Oh, it's not so bad" – that *would* be mental.'

'That's right,' said Yo-less, who'd read a bit about psychology as well.

'My gran went mental,' said Bigmac. 'She— ow!'

'Sorry,' said Yo-less. 'I wasn't looking where I put my foot but, fair's fair, you weren't either.'

'It's just dreams,' said Johnny. 'It's nothing mad.'

Although, he had to admit, it was dreams during the day too. Dreams so real that they filled his eyes and ears.

The planes . . .

The bombs . . .

And the fossil fly. Why that? There'd be these nightmares, and in the middle of it, there'd be the fly. It was a tiny one, in a piece of amber. He'd saved up for it and done a science project on it. But it wasn't even scary-looking. It was just a fly from millions of years ago. Why was *that* in a nightmare?

Huh. *School teachers?* Why couldn't they be like they were supposed to be and just chuck things at you if you weren't paying attention? Instead, they all seemed to have been worrying about him and sending notes home and getting him to see a specialist, although the specialist wasn't too bad and at least it got him out of maths.

One of the notes had said he was 'disturbed'.

Well, who wasn't disturbed? He hadn't shown it to his mum. Things were bad enough as it was.

'You getting on all right at your grandad's?' said Yo-less.

'It's not too bad. Grandad does the housework most of the time anyway. He's good at fried bread. And Surprise Surprise.'

'What's that?'

'You know that stall on the market that sells tins that've got the labels off?'

'Yes?'

'Well, he buys loads of those. And you've got to eat them once they're opened.'

'Yuk.'

'Oh, pineapple and meatballs isn't too bad.'

They walked on through the evening street.

The thing about all of us, Johnny thought, the *sad* thing is that we're not very good. Actually that's not the worst part. The worst part is we're not even much good at being not much good.

Take Yo-less. When you looked at Yo-less you might think he had possibilities. He was black. Technically. But he never said 'Yo', and only said 'check it out' in the supermarket, and the only person he ever called a mother was his mother. Yo-less said it was racial stereotyping to say all black kids acted like that but, however you looked at it, Yo-less had been born with a defective cool. *Trainspotters* were cooler than Yo-less. If you gave

Yo-less a baseball cap he'd put it on the right way round. That's how, well, *yo-less* Yo-less was. Sometimes he actually wore a tie.

Now, Bigmac . . . Bigmac *was* good. He was good at maths. Sort of. It made the teachers wild. You could show Bigmac some sort of horrible equation and he'd say 'x=2.75' and he'd be right. But he never knew *why*. 'It's just what it is,' he'd say. And that was *no* good. Knowing the answers wasn't what maths was about. Maths was about showing how you worked them out, even if you got them wrong. Bigmac was also a skinhead. Bigmac and Bazza and Skazz were the last three skinheads in Blackbury. At least, the last three who weren't someone's dad. And he had LOVE and HAT on his knuckles, but only in biro because when he'd gone to get tattooed he fainted. And he bred tropical fish.

As for Wobbler . . . Wobbler wasn't even a nerd. He *wanted* to be a nerd but they wouldn't let him join. He had a Nerd Pride badge and he messed around with computers. What Wobbler wanted was to be a kid in milk-bottle-bottom glasses and a deformed anorak, who could write amazing software and be a millionaire by the time he was twenty, but he'd probably settle for just being someone whose computer didn't keep smelling of burning plastic every time he touched it.

And as for Johnny . . .

. . . if you go mad, do you know you've gone mad?

If you don't, how do you know you're *not* mad?

'It wasn't a bad film,' Wobbler was saying. They'd been to Screen W at the Blackbury Odeon. They generally went to see any film that promised to have laser beams in it somewhere.

'But you can't travel in time without messing things up,' said Yo-less.

'That's the whole point,' said Bigmac. 'That's what you *want* to do. I wouldn't mind joining the police if they were *time* police. You'd go back and say, "Hey, are you Adolf Hitler?" and when he said, "Achtung, that's me, ja" . . . *Kablooeee!* With the pump-action shotgun. End of problem.'

'Yes, but supposing you accidentally shot your own grandfather,' said Yo-less patiently.

'I wouldn't. He doesn't look a bit like Adolf Hitler.'

'Anyway, you're not that good a shot,' said Wobbler. 'You got kicked out of the Paintball Club, didn't you?'

'Only 'cos they were jealous that they hadn't thought of a paintball hand grenade before I showed them how.'

'It was a *tin* of *paint*, Bigmac. A two-litre tin.'

'Well, yeah, but in *contex*' it was a hand grenade.'

'They said you might at least have loosened the lid a bit. Sean Stevens needed stitches.'

'I didn't mean *actually* shooting your *actual* grandfather,' said Yo-less loudly. 'I mean messing

things up so maybe you're not actually born or your time machine never gets invented. Like in that film where the robot is sent back to kill the mother of the boy who's going to beat the robots when he grows up.'

'Good one, that,' said Bigmac, strafing the silent shops with an invisible machine gun.

'But if he never got born how did they know he'd existed?' said Yo-less. 'Didn't make any sense to me.'

'How come you're such an expert?' said Wobbler.

'Well, I've got three shelves of *Star Trek* videos,' said Yo-less.

'Anorak alert!'

'Nerd!'

'Trainspotter!'

'*Anyway*,' said Yo-less, 'if you changed things, maybe you'd end up not going back in time, and there you would be, back in time, I mean, except you never went in the first place, so you wouldn't be able to come back on account of not having gone. *Or*, even if you could get back, you'd get back to another time, like a sort of parallel dimension, because if the thing you changed hadn't happened then you wouldn't've gone, so you could only come back to somewhere you never went. And there you'd be – stuck.'

They tried to work this out.

'Huh, you'd have to be mad even to understand time travel,' said Wobbler eventually.

'Job opportunity for you there, Johnny,' said Bigmac.

'*Bigmac*,' said Yo-less, in a warning voice.

'It's all right,' said Johnny. 'The doctor said I just worry about things too much.'

'What kind of loony tests did you have?' said Bigmac. 'Big needles and electric shocks and that?'

'No, Bigmac,' sighed Johnny. 'They don't do that. They just ask you questions.'

'What, like "are you a loony?"'

'It'd be sound to go a *long* way back in time,' said Wobbler. 'Back to the dinosaurs. No chance of killing your grandad then, unless he's *really* old. Dinosaurs'd be all right.'

'Great!' said Bigmac. 'Then I could wipe 'em out with my plasma rifle! Oh, yes!'

'Yeah,' said Wobbler, rolling his eyes. 'That'd explain a lot. Why did the dinosaurs die out sixty-five million years ago? Because Bigmac couldn't get there any earlier.'

'But you haven't *got* a plasma rifle,' said Johnny.

'If Wobbler can have a time machine, then I can have a plasma rifle.'

'Oh, all right.'

'And a rocket launcher.'

A time machine, thought Johnny. That *would* be something. You could get your life exactly as you wanted it. If something nasty turned up, you could just go back and make sure that it didn't. You could

go wherever you wanted and nothing bad would ever have to happen.

Around him, the boys' conversation, as their conversations did, took on its own peculiar style.

'Anyway, no one's proved the dinosaurs *did* die out.'

'Oh, yeah, right, sure, they're still around, are they?'

'I mean, p'raps they only come out at night, or are camouflaged or something . . .'

'A brick-finished stegosaurus? A bright red Number 9 brontosaurus?'

'Hey, neat idea. They'd go around pretending to be a bus, right, and people could get on – but they wouldn't get off again. Oooo-Eee-Oooo . . .'

'Nah. False noses. False noses and beards. Then just when people aren't expecting it – UNK! Nothing on the pavement but a pair of shoes and a really big bloke in a mac, shuffling away . . .'

Paradise Street, thought Johnny. Paradise Street was on his mind a lot, these days. Especially at night.

I bet if you asked the people *there* if time travel was a good idea they'd say yes. I mean, no one knows what happened to the dinosaurs, but we know what happened to Paradise Street.

I wish I could go back to Paradise Street.

Something hissed.

They looked around. There was an alleyway

between the charity clothes shop and the video library. The hissing came from there, except now it had changed into a snarl.

It wasn't at all pleasant. It went right into his ears and right through Johnny's modern brain and right down into the memories built into his very bones. When an early ape had cautiously got down out of its tree and wobbled awkwardly along the ground, trying out this new 'standing upright' idea all the younger apes were talking about, this was exactly the kind of snarl it hated to hear.

It said to every muscle in the body: run away and climb something. And possibly throw down some coconuts too.

'There's something in the alley,' said Wobbler, looking around in case there were any trees handy.

'A werewolf?' said Bigmac.

Wobbler stopped. 'Why should it be a werewolf?' he said.

'I saw this film, *Curse of the Revenge of the Werewolf*,' said Bigmac, 'and someone heard a snarl like that and went into a dark alley, and next thing, he was lying there with all his special effects spilling out on the pavement.'

'Huh,' quavered Wobbler. 'There's no such things as werewolves.'

'You go and tell it, then.'

Johnny stepped forward.

There was a shopping trolley lying on its side just

inside the alley, but that wasn't unusual. Herds of shopping trolleys roamed the streets of Blackbury. While he'd never seen one actually moving, he sometimes suspected that they trundled off as soon as his back was turned.

Bulging carrier bags and black plastic dustbin liners lay around it, and there was a number of jars. One of them had broken open, and there was a smell of vinegar.

One of the bundles was wearing trainers.

You didn't see that very often.

A terrible monster pulled itself over the top of the trolley and spat at Johnny.

It was white, but with bits of brown and black as well. It was scrawny. It had three and a half legs but only one ear. Its face was a mask of absolute, determined evil. Its teeth were jagged and yellow, its breath as nasty as a pepper spray.

Johnny knew it well. So did practically everyone else in Blackbury.

'Hello, Guilty,' he said, taking care to keep his hands by his sides.

If Guilty was here, and the shopping trolley was here . . .

He looked down at the bundle with the trainers.

'I think something's happened to Mrs Tachyon,' he said.

The others hurried up.

It only looked like a bundle, because Mrs

Tachyon tended to wear everything she owned, all at once. This was a woolly hat, about twelve jerseys and a pink ra-ra skirt, then bare pipe-cleaner legs down to several pairs of football socks and the huge trainers.

'Is that *blood*?' said Wobbler.

'Ur,' said Bigmac. 'Yuk.'

'I think she's alive,' said Johnny. 'I'm sure I heard a groan.'

'Er . . . I know first aid,' said Yo-less uncertainly. 'Kiss of life and stuff.'

'Kiss of life? *Mrs Tachyon?* Yuk,' said Bigmac.

Yo-less looked very worried. What seemed simple when you did it in a nice warm hall with the instructor watching seemed a lot more complicated in an alleyway, especially with all the woolly jumpers involved. Whoever invented first aid hadn't had Mrs Tachyon in mind.

Yo-less knelt down gingerly. He patted Mrs Tachyon vaguely, and something fell out of one of her many pockets. It was fish and chips, wrapped in a piece of newspaper.

'She's always eating chips,' said Bigmac. 'My brother says she picks thrown-away papers out of the bin to see if there's any chips still in 'em. Yuk.'

'Er . . .' said Yo-less desperately, as he tried to find a way of administering first aid without actually touching anything.

Finally Johnny came to his rescue and said, 'I know how to dial 999.'

Yo-less sagged with relief. 'Yes, yes, that's right,' he said. 'I'm pretty sure you mustn't move people, on account of breaking bones.'

'Or the crust,' said Wobbler.