

Death and the Schoolboy

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Chapter 1 – Johnny

Johnny Jenkinson sniffed and wiped a tear away from his cheek. He hated his new school and most of all, Toby Brown and his gang. They were two years older than Johnny and loved nothing better than to tease and torment the younger children. And, of course, being a new pupil and small for his age, Johnny was the perfect target for their pranks. This time it had been a dunking in the school toilets. The time before that, a lunchtime ‘wedgie’ in the middle of the dining hall and the time before that, a sound beating behind the Gymnasium. Johnny had told his teachers, but they didn’t understand. They just said it was nothing serious and told Toby not to play so rough, which just made things worse for poor Johnny.

His parents didn’t understand either. Johnny’s father, a computer salesman just patted him on the head when he came home from work and said: “Boys will be boys.” His mother was more sympathetic, but she couldn’t really understand what he was going through either. After all, she had been the prettiest and most popular girl at school in her day, so never suffered the unwanted attentions of the school bully and his gang. So, after a while, Johnny just stopped telling them and suffered in silence.

As he tucked his ripped shirt back into his trousers and started to comb his messed-up hair, Johnny shivered. The dunking in the toilet had been particularly frightening. A few more moments and he could have drowned. It was only when one of Toby’s gang had got scared and shouted, “C’mon Toby, let him go or we’ll be in real trouble,” that he’d been released. Johnny didn’t know why Toby disliked him so much, but there was something in his eyes which made Johnny feel very small indeed.

It hadn’t always been like this. In Johnny’s last school, in the country, he’d had lots of friends to play with and bullies were unknown. In fact, until he moved to the city he’d thought bullies were made-up things, like ghosts, werewolves and bogeymen. If only Dad hadn’t got that new job, he’d still be in the countryside, where life was so much better.

As Johnny sat miserably against the wall of the cubicle, lost in thoughts of his old life and friends, the school bell rang, signalling the end of another awful day. Long after

the sounds of the departing schoolchildren had died away, Johnny rose from his hiding place and slowly made his way home.

I need a friend, he thought.

Chapter 2 – Eddie

Far away, in a place not marked on any map, sat a small, thin figure, dressed all in black. He was sitting on a hill, watching a small herd of sheep and lazily knotting a blade of grass between his fingers. His fingers were extremely bony, with large knuckles and pale skin stretched tightly over them. Both the hill he was sitting on and the blade of grass were a dull grey colour. In fact, everything around him was grey. The clouds were grey, the sky was grey, even the sheep were grey. As the sun broke briefly through the clouds, it too was grey and looked more like the moon than the sun.

This place is so dull. Nothing ever happens here, thought the figure to himself and standing up, moved over to the sheep, which were happily munching away on the grey grass. Although the sheep were munching it, they weren't actually eating the grass. Being skeletons, they couldn't. No matter how fast or how much they ate, the grass just kept falling out of them. Stretching out a bony hand, he gently stroked the nearest sheep.

"Hello Gretel," he said. "You're enjoying that aren't you?" The sheep looked up at him and gave a small, contented belch, even though she shouldn't have been able to. "Good girl," said the bony figure and sat down again with a sigh.

Being the youngest Death was no fun, thought Eddie. It was all work, work, work. Tend the sheep, tend the souls, tend the garden. There was no one his own age to play with. There wasn't even a school where he could learn new things. Instead, it was just the same, boring routine, day after day after day.

"Eddie Death, what you need is a friend," he said out loud, the emptiness around him echoing his voice over and over. No sooner were the words out of his mouth, than a bell began to ring mournfully in the distance. It came from the old railway station at the bottom of the hill.

"Come along Eddie," shouted a voice from further up the hill. "Time for work and don't forget your sickle this time."

"Yes, Mum," replied Eddie and standing up, he produced a small silver sickle from his inside pocket. Rubbing the handle thoughtfully, he suddenly had an idea. As he began walking down the hill towards the train station, he smiled to himself. Eddie, you're a genius! You need a friend and that's exactly what you're going to get.

Chapter 3 – The Accident

“Bye love,” came the call from Johnny’s mother. “And try to have a good day at school, won’t you?” She was upstairs doing her hair and didn’t see Johnny walk glumly out of the front door.

Today was ‘Road Safety Day’, which always meant some particularly unpleasant humiliation from Toby Brown and his gang. PC Thompson would come around and make sure that everyone’s bike was safe for the road. Of course, Toby would ensure that Johnny’s bike had a buckled wheel, or loose handlebars, which would mean a telling off from PC Thompson in front of the entire school. That would be followed by a private lecture from the headmaster, for bringing the good name of the school into disrepute and usually finished up with a beating from Toby and his gang on the way home. As he buckled up his bike helmet, Johnny thought about not taking the bike, but sighed, as he realised that he would get into just as much trouble for not bringing it, as he would if he did.

As he cycled slowly towards the school, Johnny had a feeling of impending doom. Something about the day felt wrong. The sun was shining, and it wasn’t windy, yet it felt cold, almost wintry. As he cycled along the pavement, the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. Something definitely wasn’t right. Stopping his bike, Johnny got off and carefully checked the tyres, gears, brakes and handlebars. Nothing was wrong. Everything was tight and properly adjusted, just like when he’d checked the night before.

“Johnny, you’re being silly,” he said to himself, and after taking several deep breaths to calm his nerves, he jumped back in the saddle and set off again.

As he turned the corner, he stared in horror. There, waiting for him, was Toby Brown and his gang, all on brand-new mountain bikes.

“Get him!” yelled Toby and as one, the gang began to cycle towards him. Johnny rode his bike off the pavement and began to pedal furiously along the road, narrowly avoiding the oncoming bullies. He glanced behind him just in time to see Toby and the gang turn their bikes around and renew the chase. Johnny’s breath came in short, sharp gasps, as he struggled to keep ahead of the gang. He’d never pedalled so fast before and his legs ached as they churned around and around and around. Another quick glance behind told him that Toby and his gang were gaining on him. It was only a matter of time before they caught Johnny and started hitting him. And this time, Johnny knew, there would be no mercy from the older boy. You didn’t run away from Toby Brown and get away with it that was for sure.

With grim determination, he continued pedalling, knowing that his only chance was to reach the safety of the school gates before the gang caught him. One final glance behind showed that Toby was only six bike lengths behind him and catching up fast. With a last frantic effort, he rounded the corner by the school entrance, the edge of his pedal scraping the tarmac. Then, a loud bang, a sickening thump and Johnny knew no more.

Chapter 4 – Realisation

When Johnny woke up, he saw that he was lying down next to his bike. A small crowd of people had gathered around him and there was a lot of hushed talking going on. Someone was crying, a strange strangled sound in amongst all of the mumbling. In the distance, he could hear an ambulance siren wailing.

“It’s okay, I’m alright,” he said picking himself up off the ground. “I just skidded, that’s all,” but no-one seemed to notice. “Hey! I’m not hurt,” he said in a louder voice, but again no-one seemed to take any notice. “What’s going on!” shouted Johnny. “Why aren’t you listening to me? I’m okay!” But again, the crowd ignored him.

Johnny looked down at himself. That’s odd, he thought, I don’t seem to be hurt at all. I don’t have any cuts or bruises. Not even my clothes are torn. With a growing sense of unease, Johnny glanced around again. What he saw made tears well up in his eyes and a lump appear in his throat. He gasped in shock.

On the ground was his bike, the frame almost completely bent in half and next to that lay a small, crumpled figure wearing the same clothes as him. There was blood on the ground and what looked like a bone sticking out from the trouser leg. His bike helmet was broken in two. A car was parked at an odd angle to the road. It had a big dent in the front. Steam was coming from the radiator and a man was being comforted by several of the passers-by.

“I didn’t even see him,” the man said. “He just came out of nowhere. I didn’t have time to stop.”

The man began sobbing and someone put an arm around him, saying “There, there. It wasn’t your fault. It was just an awful accident, that’s all.”

With a growing sense of panic, Johnny stared again at the crowd of people. There, in the middle of the group, looking pale and frightened, were Toby Brown and his gang. They were just staring at the body on the ground and shaking. None of them seemed much like bullies anymore, just very small and very frightened children. Seeing them like this scared Johnny so much that he started yelling at them. “I’m not dead. Look at me, I’m not dead!”

“Oh yes you are,” said a voice behind him. Turning around in surprise, Johnny noticed for the first time, a small, thin child, dressed in black jeans and wearing a long black coat. Johnny couldn’t see his face because the hood of the coat was pulled up, but it was obvious that the child could see him.

“You can see me!” cried Johnny in relief.

“Yes,” said the child, “but no-one else can. All they can see is your body lying down there on the road.”

“But... but,” said Johnny, trying to speak against the rising fear which now threatened to engulf him.

“No buts,” said the child. “It’s all over. There’s nothing for you to be afraid of now. No bullies, no beatings, no nothing. Come on. Let’s play!”

And with that, Eddie Death, for that was who he was, grabbed hold of Johnny's hand and pulled him clear of the crowd.

What was strange for Johnny was that as soon as Eddie touched his hand, all of his fear and anxiety left him. It was as if a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders. For the first time in ages, Johnny smiled, a wide and open smile of real happiness.

"Okay, let's play," he said and together they ran off, laughing down the road.

Chapter 5 - Waiting for the Ghost Train

“So, what happens now?” said Johnny. They’d been running for what seemed like hours and had long since passed the edge of the town, running now in the glorious countryside of Johnny’s upbringing.

“We go up,” said Eddie, and with a mischievous grin, pulled Johnny’s hand skyward. In a moment, they were off the ground and running in the air. Johnny couldn’t believe it.

“This is amazing,” he shouted above the roar of the rushing wind in his ears.

“Yes, it is, isn’t it?” said Eddie, pulling them into an even steeper climb. Within minutes they were high above the clouds, running in the bluest of skies, with the sun beating down on their backs. “I always like this bit. It’s so much fun,” Eddie said. Then, pointing to a cloud far higher than the ones they’d already passed through, he shouted to Johnny, “What does that remind you of?”

Johnny stared at the cloud for a moment, then replied: “It looks a bit like a train station, I think. There’s the clock tower and that long bit either side of it looks like it must be the platform.”

“Spot on!” cried Eddie above the roar of the wind. “That’s where we’re going. To the Station in the Sky. We’ve got a Ghost Train to catch!”

As they neared the cloud, it became clear that it was indeed a train station. What any passing aircraft pilot would have made of it is anyone’s guess, but they would have probably needed a strong cup of tea and a lie down once they’d landed. For hanging in the air before them, defying all of the laws of gravity and several others besides, was a huge train station, made entirely out of dark grey, almost black stone.

As Johnny and Eddie arrived on the platform, Johnny noticed that they were not alone. All around them were people. Most were old, some incredibly so, but among them were also children of varying ages. The one thing that everyone had in common was that they were all smiling. In one corner, a group of children were playing, laughing freely as they did handstands and told each other jokes. Further down the platform, a group of grown-ups were staring at themselves and each other, as if in disbelief.

One of them spotted Johnny and detached himself from the group. He waved as he wandered over and clapping Johnny on the back as if he were an old friend, said: “Do you know, I’ve been waiting seven years for this day? Back there I was so ill. I couldn’t walk, and I couldn’t talk. I couldn’t do anything for myself but lie in that awful hospital bed and wait for the end. The doctors tried their best, but they couldn’t cure me. The pain was terrible. And then today, a new doctor came to see me. Dressed all in black he was. I knew then that my time was up, and I thanked him for coming to take me. Now, look at me! I’m just like I was before the illness. All the pain has gone, and I know this is only the beginning. I’m going to keep on getting better and better. I just know it!” And with that, he slapped Johnny on the back again and strode cheerfully across the platform to rejoin his group.

“This is the best part of the day,” said Eddie, smiling at Johnny. “All of their pain, suffering and confusion has gone. Now, they’re just quietly waiting for the next part of their journey to begin.”

“Talking of waiting, my legs ache from all that running. Why don’t we sit down in the waiting room?” said Johnny, pointing towards a large, grey door, not far from where they were standing.

“No!” said Eddie with alarm. “You can’t go in there. If you do, you’ll never come back out again. You see those two figures in black by the door?”

Johnny peered closer and sure enough, the door was framed by two huge figures, dressed in jet-black robes darker than the darkest night. Johnny shivered, as he continued to watch them. There was something distinctly sinister about the way that they were standing, and they looked as if they could do very unpleasant things to a person without worrying about it in the slightest.

Eddie turned to Johnny and said in a hushed voice: “Everyone comes here when they die. It’s the rules. Those people who know that they’ve led good lives, or at least think they have, stand outside and wait for the Ghost Train. But there are people who know that they’ve led very bad lives and they stay in the waiting room. For them, the Ghost Train is a terrifying thing. The figures by the door are Deaths like me. In fact, the one on the right is Uncle Fergus. Normally he breeds rabbits, but today he’s on guard duty. While he’ll quite happily let anyone in, and believe me, some good souls do go in, if they try to get out again, well, let’s just say that it’s better to look away.”

All the time that Eddie had been talking, Johnny had the feeling that the train station was moving and as Eddie finished speaking, there was a small, but definite lurch, as if something had collided with it.

“Ah, we’ve arrived,” said Eddie with a toothy grin. “Quick, there’s something I want to show you.”

And without waiting for a reply, he grabbed Johnny’s sleeve and led him off the platform towards the station entrance.