



CHAPTER TWO

SCIENTIFIC OBSERVATIONS ON THE ADULT WORLD

When I arrived home I went upstairs, dropped the book on my bedroom table and forgot all about it. I thought I might do some homework, but it was hard to concentrate because Peaches and Melchior were arguing. They were always arguing. You might describe it as the only pastime they truly had in common. I supposed they hadn't wanted to miss the opportunity to disagree about something while I was out of the house.

I concluded that they hadn't heard me come in. I thought about going downstairs to ask what it was they were arguing about, but they wouldn't have told me. Adults do not normally share this kind of information with their children. They think they cannot handle it. But I believe that not knowing is worse.

I couldn't make out what they were talking about, because Peaches and Melchior tended to argue in voices low enough to pretend that they were not arguing. But then one word floated out from among the jumble of syllables and whispers and exclamations. It was as if that word was lit up with neon lights and hung with ringing

bells, so clear was it above the other murmurings.

That word was “divorce”.

Technically, Peaches and Melchior couldn't get a divorce, because they were not actually married. Melchior had been married briefly once before, when he was twenty-one years old, and it had all ended after a year. He had vowed after that never to marry again. Anyway, he said, it was the twenty-first century – who needed a piece of paper to prove that two people loved one another? Peaches pretended that she didn't care, but I had a suspicion that she did, really. She would have been too proud to say anything, though.

But they still used the word “divorce” as a shorthand for splitting up once and for all. My parents getting divorced was my greatest fear, even greater than my second greatest, which was having to make a speech in public. According to a series of opinion polls, this is the thing that most people in Britain are most terrified of, even more than death.

When I heard the word “divorce”, I started thinking about the subject, furiously and compulsively.

I wondered who I would have to live with, and who I would like to live with. I hoped that nobody would ask me to choose, because it would be impossible to make up my mind. I wondered whether Melchior would move back to London if they got divorced. He had never wanted to come to Hedgecombe in the first place.

I knew for a fact that it had been my mother's idea to move to Hedgecombe, because I had heard an argument between them shortly before we left London. I heard it

through their bedroom door on a Sunday at the end of summer. It had gone something like this.

"I understand what you're saying, Marie-France," Melchior said. "You've repeated it enough times. What worries me is the effect that all this is going to have on our son."

My mother's real name is Marie-France. We only call her Peaches because it's her nickname from back in America where she was born – at the Peachtree Plaza Hotel in Atlanta, Georgia, on 17 February 1974. Her mother was a cleaner there. She was born Marie-France Decoudraux. Her family were originally Creoles from New Orleans.

Then Peaches interrupted Melchior. She interrupts people frequently, especially when they're about to make a good point.

"You should have thought of that before. What about the effect on me? Have you considered that at all? You always get your own way. We've been living in this tiny house for ten years, all because of you. It's all about you, isn't it? You, you, you. I don't even like London. I never have. It's too big and it stinks. We could get a huge place elsewhere, with a garden and chickens and fresh air. I could have some space and quiet at last to finish my book. But you don't care about my book. All you care about is your experiments."

"That's unfair," said Melchior. "It's just that Strato—"

Strato is me. Strato Nyman. I was named after a Greek philosopher of science, Strato of Lampsacus, who Melchior is a particular aficionado of. Or perhaps my parents didn't want me to be the only one in the family without a totally random name.

Peaches interrupted Melchior again.

"Now we're going to have a real-life experiment, Melchior. It's called 'moving house'. It's called 'leaving London'. It's called 'living in the countryside'. Anyway, I don't care what you think – not any more. It's all decided. There's no point in talking about it."

At that point, Melchior took a very deep breath.

"But what about Strato? He'll have to leave his school and his friends. Whatever I've done – and I'm truly, truly sorry that I—"

"It's too late to say you're sorry. Don't try and say you're sorry."

"To tell you the truth, I'm sick of apologizing anyway. But can we just talk about Strato? Just for a moment?"

"Strato's on your conscience, not mine," replied Peaches. "A change will do him good. Being stuck at that special school with all those weirdos is not doing him any favours."

"They're not weirdos. Neither is Strato."

"Putting him in an ordinary school might help him develop his social skills," Peaches continued. "He's far too shy. And it would be nice if he could run around in the open, in fields and woods, among the trees and flowers."

"Strato doesn't like running. And he doesn't like trees. Or flowers. Or chickens."

"He'd better learn to, then."

"How can you be so ... negligent?" asked Melchior.

"Negligent", incidentally, means "neglectful" or "careless".

"I'm *not* negligent," retorted Peaches. "No one loves

Strato more than I do. Certainly not you, standing there on your moral high ground looking down your big nose at me.”

Melchior doesn't have a big nose. It is more what I would describe as “Roman”. A formidable nose, I would term it. Noble.

Peaches, still in full flood, continued.

“If you were so moral, you wouldn't have – well, let's not go there. Not again. I want the best for him. I just don't think the best for him is us staying here – especially since, if we do stay here, there almost certainly isn't going to be an us.”

Then they had gone quiet and I slipped away in case they came out and caught me listening in.

Self-evidently, Peaches had won the argument, because we moved to Hedgecombe not long afterwards.

She usually does win arguments. She is very good at them.

I did like trees and flowers, whatever Melchior said. I just thought they were a bit boring compared with computers and books and physics. I didn't much like chickens though. But I thought I could get used to them.

I hadn't so much been worried about leaving London as saddened that Melchior had to leave his job and move to a smaller, less prestigious establishment. In London he had been at the heart of his field, surrounded by the most up-to-date, state-of-the-art equipment.

He had even worked on dark matter projects. He had been very highly valued in the scientific community. I wasn't sure what he was doing after we moved

to Hedgecombe. I was sure that it was pretty important though. All the same, I knew we had less money. We'd had to sell the car and buy an older one, Peaches did all her shopping in sales and charity shops instead of posh boutiques, and Melchior had started buying a much cheaper brand of whisky for himself.

It didn't help that Peaches' job as a part-time writer – by “part-time” I mean “unpublished” – meant there wasn't much money coming in on her side, although her friend Dorothea Beckwith-Hinds, who worked in publishing, had apparently offered her some kind of deal for her first book. Peaches was now absolutely obsessed with finishing it and didn't believe she could do it anywhere but in a remote part of the countryside.

She wouldn't tell me what the book was about. But when I learned how to be invisible, I found out the secret.

Only I wish sometimes that I hadn't.

However bad that particular argument in London had been, this one was worse, because they used the D-word. The thoughts started to chase one another around my head. If I stayed with Peaches, and Melchior moved to London, would I have to travel back and forth between them on the train by myself? And who would cook for me if I ended up living with Melchior? He is a bloody terrible cook – his spaghetti bolognese is the worst I have ever tasted. Most of all, was it my fault? And if it was, what had I done wrong?

The word “divorce” continued sliding painfully around my head like a handful of tin tacks. I didn't like it. I hoped that hearing the word didn't mean what I

thought it might. I could still hear Peaches and Melchior going at it downstairs. Their rows could be very protracted. The record was 48 minutes.

Exact measurement is very important when you are trying to calculate things scientifically, and sometimes I undertook research on Peaches' and Melchior's rows. The average length of a row was 17.3 minutes, the average intensity 3.5 on a scale of 1–5. This particular argument was about a 4 or even a 4.5.

Just to distract myself, I put down my homework and picked up the book that the weird gigantic man with the ginger whiskers had given me. I studied the reflective panel on the jacket. I held it up to my face. It was peculiar how the whole of my face seemed to fit in it, even close up, though it was very small. This was counter-intuitive. And the image was so clear – it was like a genuine glass mirror instead of what it must have been, perhaps some variety of tinfoil.

I turned to the page after the title page. There was nothing on it. I turned to the next page. Nothing. The one after that was the same. It turned out, in fact, that there were no words at all in the book except those on the title page: "How To Be Invisible".

It struck me as peculiar, to put it mildly. Why had the strange, stooping man in the shop recommended a book to me that only had four words in it? Why would he want to pretend it was a "classic" and then give it to me for free? What sort of book was printed with only a title page? Was it some kind of arcane bibliophilic joke?

A "bibliophile", incidentally, is "someone who loves books".

The noise from downstairs was getting louder. It was reaching a force 5 argument on the Strato Nyman Scale, a level of intensity that I have only come across once or twice. I tried to concentrate on the book – not that there was anything in particular to concentrate on. Not only no words, but no page numbers, no acknowledgements, no copyright notice. The paper itself was thick and yellowish, and it had a very distinctive smell – something like walnuts. But the tract was obviously worthless. I decided to get rid of it.

I took very careful aim at the litter bin in the corner of my room, which is just next to the full-length mirror by my wardrobe, a good three metres away, and threw the book in a looping arc. It just caught the lip of the bin, teetered and then fell the wrong way, open, onto the floor. I sighed and made my way over to it.

It was only when I bent down to pick it up, ready to drop it in the bin, that I noticed the reflection of the open book in the mirror. It was then that I realized I'd been wrong. I obviously hadn't checked all the pages. There was some writing in it after all. I could see it quite clearly in the mirror.

I picked up the book, curious now to see what it said. A book with only one page of story printed in it was in some ways even more peculiar than a book with none at all.

But when I looked at the page there was nothing there.

Once I'd got over my puzzlement, I did what any scientifically minded person would do. I decided to repeat the experiment in order to confirm my observations.

I placed the book back in front of the mirror once more. Sure enough, the words appeared again. I was too far away to read them properly – they were in quite small type – so I had to get down on my knees and put the book right up close to the glass.

There was something else odd about the words. They appeared the right way around in their reflection. Which meant that if the words really were on the page and somehow only readable in a mirror, they were printed the wrong way around.

It was most peculiar. I thought I had made an astonishing discovery that Melchior would be absolutely fascinated by. I was sure he would be able to explain it – my father can explain more or less anything – but this would challenge even his formidable intellectual faculties. Perhaps he would have to take the book to his laboratory and perform experiments on it. Perhaps he would even take me with him – something he never did, always fobbing me off by saying that I would find it “boring”.

I squinted at the letters. They kept swimming in and out of view – I didn't know if there was something wrong with the book, or something wrong with the mirror, or something wrong with my eyes. The print was faded and the typeface was a bit strange – rather wiggly and old-fashioned. Gradually I began to make the words out. Not that I was very much the wiser after I had.

I copied it down, just so I could remember what it said – the letters in the mirror seemed shaky and unstable, like the pictures on a faulty television set, and I

feared they might disappear. Here it is, word for word:

To you who remain under the shadow of nonage

*That which matters
Is not of matter made.
Words hide paper.
Paper conceals space.
All is emptiness.
And all things forever
From that emptiness
Spring.*

I couldn't make any sense of it.

I turned the page – nothing. And then nothing, and nothing and nothing. This was the only page on which anything was written and ... as I looked, that page also became blank. The words just disappeared in front of my eyes.

At that moment, the door opened and I dropped the book. My mother was standing there. She had a funny look on her face. Her eyes were red as if she had been crying.

"Strato," she said. "Come downstairs, please. Your father and I want to talk to you."

I forgot about the book then. I went downstairs and sat on the sofa, and my mother and father sat down opposite me. They seemed very grave and upset. I was sure they were about to tell me that they were going to separate.

Then my father said, "Is there something you want to tell us?"

I said, "I don't think so."

Then Peaches said, "Are you sure?"

And I said, "What's this about?"

Then my mother and father looked at each other, and my father looked at me with his pained, troubled, watery-blue eyes, and said, "Strato. We know that you have been playing truant."

I didn't say anything.

"We're not angry with you," said Peaches.

"We just want you to tell us why," said Melchior.

I remained silent.

"Is it because you are unhappy at school?" said Peaches.

I shook my head.

"Is it because you don't like it here in Hedgecombe?" asked Melchior – somewhat hopefully, I thought.

But I shook my head again.

"What is it then?" said Peaches.

I refused to say anything. Eventually, this annoyed them, so they sent me to bed and made me keep the light off as a punishment. So I couldn't investigate the curious matter of my new book any further. Instead I stared at the ceiling for a long time, watching spots form in front of my eyes, and wondering where they came from.

Then after about two hours and ten minutes, I fell asleep.



CHAPTER THREE

THE MYSTERY OF THE MAGIC ATOM

I chose not to tell Melchior or Peaches the reason I was truanting because I couldn't see the point and I didn't want them to worry about me.

I was sure they felt guilty about taking me away from London, and I didn't want them to feel any worse than they probably already did. They seemed to have a lot on their minds anyway. Peaches would lock herself away in her room for hours on end, writing her mysterious book, and Melchior was spending more and more time in the research lab. They seemed not to have any time to talk to one another, let alone to me.

But the reason I was playing truant was, as they had suspected, because I didn't like my new school, Whitecross Court Academy.

The reason I didn't like my school was that I was being bullied by a boy called Lloyd Archibald Turnbull, a red-faced boy with short, heavily gelled hair and a left arm that had been damaged in a car accident and which he was unable to use.

He had started making my life difficult as soon as I

arrived at Whitecross Court. Until the day when I learned how to be invisible, I had no idea what I could do about it.

I suppose I have to admit I was prime meat for a bully. I was an outsider. I was from London. I had a silly name. I was shy, which some people interpret as being arrogant or aloof.

On top of all that, I was black. I *am* black. That is to say, I have skin that is conventionally described as “black” even though in actual fact it is dark brown.

I’m not culturally black. Other black children in London sometimes called me a “coconut”: black on the outside and white on the inside. My parents don’t eat West Indian food. I don’t listen to music by black people any more often than any other kind of music. I don’t use black street slang either (though a lot of white kids I knew in London did). The only thing “black” about me is that I just happen to have skin that is darker than that of Caucasians.

“Caucasian”, incidentally, is a technical term for “white people”.

I prefer the word “Caucasian” to “white” because, obviously, white people aren’t actually white – their skin doesn’t reflect all colours of the spectrum – any more than “black” people are actually black – their skin doesn’t absorb all colours of the spectrum.

Peaches is “black” too, but you can hardly tell at all from the way she looks, since her skin is almost the same colour as my father’s, and he is just an everyday English Caucasian. The term other black people used to describe her skin in the old country – that’s what she calls the United States – was “high yellor”. She straightens her

hair, so that conceals her ethnicity even more.

But my skin is dark enough for some people think I am going to assault them just because I happen to have my hood up, and my nostrils are slightly flared and I have somewhat nappy hair.

I just wanted to be who I was. I just felt ordinary. Or I had done until I came to Hedgecombe.

Being ordinary stopped being possible as soon as we came to live here, partly because I appeared to be the only black child in the town whereas in South London everyone was mixed up together – black, Asian, Chinese, Middle Eastern, you name it.

As a consequence, people here sometimes looked at me in a peculiar manner when I walked into a shop or when I was out with my mother and father. It was as if they believed I was adopted, or had somehow forcibly abducted my parents.

Peaches really is my blood mother. She is very pretty, with eyes the size and colour of pale-purple grapes. She stands very tall, and has a puzzled, quizzical expression much of the time, as if she is trying to work something important out. My father sometimes says she's "away with the fairies" and I think I know what this means. I think this means that she's a flake.

Bullies can be quite clever. Not all of them – the ones that just smack you round the head because they don't like the look of your face are not clever at all. But Lloyd Archibald Turnbull had a special talent for bullying.

I had never seen him hit anybody – although he was easily capable of it since he had built up his good arm

to the extent that it was taut and muscled like a weight-lifter's and could clearly pack a hefty punch.

If you were not watching closely you might think that he was not a bully at all. He had a nice face really – open, with a slight smile always playing at the edge of his lips, and bright blue eyes set above cheeks as red as crab apples. But maybe faces can't really tell you much about the way people are. Shakespeare said that "one may smile, and smile, and be a villain", and he knew what he was talking about.

This is an example of the way Lloyd Archibald Turnbull operated. Three days after starting at Whitecross Court, I had been sitting down to school lunch. The food was vegetarian lasagne, which was of indifferent quality but edible enough, although a little heavy on the salt. (I try to stay health conscious, and sodium chloride, over a lifetime, can raise your blood pressure to hazardous levels.)

I was sitting on my own. I didn't mind. I am the sort of person who quite likes his own company and nobody knew me yet, so why should they want to sit with me? I wouldn't have wanted to if I'd been there for some time and somebody new suddenly arrived. I would have expected a newcomer to try and fit in and bide their time until people got used to them.

That was what I'd been doing that lunchtime – biding my time, quite happily sitting there reading my copy of *A Game of Thrones*. I was loving it. It was better even than *The Lord of the Rings*, my previous all-time favourite book. It was more grown up – full of real full-on violence and also quite sexy.

From time to time I tentatively glanced up at the other children, who more or less ignored me except for one girl of about my age with round pink-rimmed glasses, shiny black hair, translucent skin and a mole on her neck. She caught my eye for a moment, then looked away again.

Lloyd Archibald Turnbull was sitting with some friends at the next table. I knew who he was because he was in my class and he often got himself into trouble by misbehaving. To my great surprise, he gestured as if to call me over. Then he called out. Nothing rude, just my name, "Strato – hey, Strato." Although I would just as soon have sat by myself, I didn't want to be impolite, so I went rather nervously over to join him.

Lloyd Turnbull didn't say anything. He just waved for me to sit down on the only empty chair. The other chairs around him were occupied by his friends, who were all talking loudly and laughing with one another. I didn't know their names, but I sat down with them just as he had requested.

I tried not to look at his damaged arm, which was not actually that spectacular, just a little skinny and slack-looking. I had heard that his nerves had been damaged in the car accident, but that there was hope they could be repaired in the not too distant future, since medical technology was moving so fast. His other arm – the big one, cabled with veins and sculpted with muscles – was much more interesting, since it was so out of proportion to the one on the other side of his body.

I'd imagined that, as he'd asked me over, he would talk to me. But, on the contrary – he completely ignored me. So did everyone else at the table. I just