

THE BOY WHO DISAPPEARED

Part 1 of Switchers



Wendy Milton

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Second Edition

WENDY MILTON
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ONE

Rodney Rowbottom rolled over and looked at the clock. He groaned. It said Wednesday, and he'd been dreaming that it was Saturday and he didn't have to go to school! Rats! He pulled the quilt over his head and wondered whether his mother would let him stay at home if he said he was sick. He'd managed to get away with it a few times, but his father, to whom his mother communicated his every sneeze, was getting suspicious.

Eleven-year-old Rodney lived in Frogmore, an ordinary country town. He lived in a modest, two-storey house in Cane Toad Crescent, an ordinary street. He attended Frogmore Primary, an ordinary school. He had two ordinary parents. He *looked* like a perfectly ordinary boy. Why, then, was something extraordinary happening to him?

Rodney's mother was a small, neat woman with auburn hair and soft, brown eyes. When she was worried she brushed her hair away from her face. She was doing it now as she knocked on Rodney's bedroom door.

'Breakfast's ready, Roddles. You'll have to get up now, darling, or you'll be late for school. Are you awake, Roddles?'

Rodney stuck his head out from under the quilt. 'Coming.' Why did his mother have to call him *Roddles*? It was downright embarrassing, particularly when they had visitors. He dragged himself into the bathroom. A pale, skinny, red-headed boy with blue eyes and freckles stared back at him.

'How'd you get those?' he said to his reflection. His father didn't have freckles, nor did his mother. His father's eyes were greyish green ('hazel', his mother called them), while his mother's were brown. His father had black hair. His mother's hair, while it had a rusty glow, wasn't carrot-like like his own.

Rodney's father went to work early and got home late. Sometimes Rodney didn't see him for days. When he was small, Rodney would talk to his father while they dug scraps into the compost heap. Now, the only time they talked was when his father wanted to question him about his grades.

'One cackleberry or two, darling?'

Rodney could see his mother was concerned. 'Just one, please, Mum.' His mother called eggs cackleberries because it used to make him laugh. He tried to laugh now, for her sake.

Rodney knew his low grades were a disappointment to his father.

'I don't know whose brain he's inherited, but it isn't mine,' Mr Rowbottom had said to his wife when he was looking at Rodney's term report. 'I was *dux* of my primary school.'

'How very nice for you, dear,' Mrs Rowbottom had replied. Mrs Rowbottom didn't care how well her son did at school, provided he was happy. Something told her he wasn't. 'Perhaps you should have a talk with him,' she'd told her husband. 'There might be something you could do.'

'Can't put it there if it isn't there already,' Mr Rowbottom had growled. 'It's his genes, and he got those from *your* side.'

Rodney ate enough breakfast to satisfy his mother, kissed her and left. When he rounded the corner, he stopped in the bus shelter to change into his joggers. Every morning it was the same. Ben Houlihan would be waiting for him nearer the school. Ben was a beefy boy with mean, piggy little eyes. He wanted to beat Rodney up, but so far Rodney had been too fast for him.

As Rodney drew level with the Anzac Memorial Park, he heard Ben's grating voice. 'Hey, carrot top! Hang on . . . I'd like a chat.'

Rodney's adrenalin surged. He started to run, sucking cold air into his lungs. His blood pumped. He glanced over his shoulder. Only Ben and Razza Radford were behind him. That meant Billy Hinchcliffe would be

in front. Sure enough, Billy emerged from behind a tree ahead of him. Rodney dodged and sidestepped. Then he streaked past Billy, arriving at the school gates minutes ahead of his pursuers.

'Nerd!' yelled Ben, his face red and shiny with exertion.

'Yob!' countered Rodney, who wasn't even pink.

There were teachers nearby, so he was safe. Unfortunately, one of them was the principal. Mr Pearson was short, balding and tyrannical. He had eyes that could pierce metal. 'Rowbottom!' he thundered. 'How many times have I told you not to run in the playground? And you're out of uniform *again!* Get rid of those shoes and report to my office. If I'm not there, wait in the corridor.'

'Yes, sir,' mumbled Rodney.

Ben was laughing.

'And as for you, Houlihan,' yelled Mr Pearson, 'tuck your shirt in and comb your hair. You're a disgrace. Look at your tie! Your shoes are filthy! I want you in my office in half an hour looking as if you're proud to wear your uniform.'

'Yes, sir,' growled Ben. He glanced at Mr Trouncer and Miss Finchley, who were standing behind the principal, and whispered in Billy's Hinchcliffe's ear.

'You're not going to *dob*, are you?' said Billy. Billy was fat, pink-cheeked and cherubic. He probably would

have behaved like a cherub but for Ben. Ben was his hero.

'Why not? Trouncer hates me an' Finchley's always pickin' on me. Stuck-up cow!'

Miss Finchley wasn't stuck up. She was nice. She reminded Rodney of one of the Dresden shepherdesses in his mother's china collection. She was dainty and pretty. He suspected she had an aversion to Ben, however, which she did her best to conceal.

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Rodney waited outside Mr Pearson's office. No one gave him a second glance. He was used to that. Only this horribly extraordinary thing was drawing attention to him . . . attention he could well do without!

The principal appeared at his door and ordered Rodney inside. 'I've sent a letter to your parents, Rowbottom,' (Rodney's head was bowed and his hands clasped – it was always best to look contrite) 'on the subject of your fading.' Rodney's heart skipped a beat. Now his father would know! Mr Pearson leaned forward, his face flushed and his bloodshot eyes boring into Rodney's. 'I want it to stop, Rowbottom. Do you understand? I want it to *stop!*'

'Yes, sir.' Rodney dragged his eyes away and looked at his shoes.

'Now, go back to class.'

'Yes, sir.'

Rodney didn't know *why* he was fading. The first time it happened, girls near him had screamed. Miss Finchley had blinked and cleaned her glasses. Ben had thrown a pen at him to see if it would go straight through. It only lasted a few seconds, then he'd returned to normal.

The next day there had been complaints. Parents said Rodney might have something contagious. Miss Finchley, summoned to Mr Pearson's office, was forced to admit that something strange *had* happened. Perhaps Rodney was ill? Mr Pearson had made it quite clear that Miss Finchley was *not* to talk to parents.

As Miss Finchley was leaving his office, the phone rang. 'I assure you, Mrs Chuddeley,' she'd heard the principal say, 'there is no need for Rodney to be quarantined. If a child feels faint, we call the school doctor and . . . Fading? . . . With all due respect, Mrs Chuddeley, that is *ridiculous!* . . . Yes, of course I will . . . I *know* Charmaine is not a fanciful girl . . . but . . . but . . . yes, I will, but . . . *Mrs Chuddeley!* You are entitled to your opinion, but *I* am principal of this school. In the interests of sanity, I suggest you have Charmaine's eyes tested. Perhaps her glasses need changing.'

Mrs Chuddeley had been incensed. She'd dashed off a letter of complaint to the Board of Education and demanded that the school doctor examine Rodney. Rodney was pinched, poked, prodded and pronounced to be a perfectly healthy three-dimensional boy. 'They've

got rampaging imaginitis,' snorted the doctor, 'including that Chuddeley woman and your Miss . . .?'

'Finchley,' said Mr Pearson. But he knew Miss Finchley had seen *something*.

Then it happened again. This time, parents rang the local newspaper – or *newsletter*, to be precise. When the editor of the newsletter arrived at the school, the principal called Miss Finchley to his office.

'Allow me, Miss Finchley, to introduce you to Mr Nesbitt. Mr Nesbitt writes, edits and distributes his own somewhat ambitiously named *Frogmore Times*, and he's here because he's heard a rumour that Rodney Rowbottom fades.'

Miss Finchley smiled and extended her hand. 'You've had a wasted journey, Mr Nesbitt. Children have vivid imaginations, I'm afraid. Rodney is a perfectly normal boy.'

Mr Nesbitt, not to be cheated out of a story, wrote an article about tall tales told by children. 'One of the boys at Frogmore Primary fades, according to his classmates. Is our fader practising to be the invisible man?' Fortunately, Rodney's name wasn't mentioned.

Rodney's partial disappearances seemed only to occur in Miss Finchley's class. Whenever she heard gasps or exclamations, Miss Finchley would turn to the whiteboard and write, giving Rodney time to recover. 'Do you think he's been exposed to radioactivity?' she asked Mr Trouncer. 'His father works in that high-security

place outside town where they experiment on animals and plants.'

Mr Trouncer was scornful. 'Fading, my foot! Don't be daft!' Miss Finchley was angry and didn't talk to Mr Trouncer for the rest of the day.

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Parents soon tired of the story, and Rodney's classmates were frustrated. Why wouldn't anyone believe them? Several kept mobiles under their desks, hoping to photograph Rodney in mid-fade.

'Why don't you do it again?' said Charmaine Chuddeley. 'I want to take a picture for my mother.'

'Don't know what you're talking about,' said Rodney.

If they weren't goading him, they were laughing at him. Mr Middleton had explained how the moon influenced Earth's tides, making the oceans ebb and flow. When he said the moon made the tides wax and wane, Ben's hand shot into the air. 'Like Rodney, sir? We'll hafta call him "Moony".' This gave rise to laughter.

'They should call you "Loony",' said Rodney.

'*Enough!*' shouted Mr Middleton. 'Open your textbooks to page forty-two. There's an exercise on equations. See if you can beat me to the solution. Ready, set, go!'

Mr Middleton, who prided himself on the speed with which he could calculate, would sometimes challenge his class to a race. He'd ask someone to pick a number, then he'd dictate a string of calculations, like 'multiply by eight, divide by two, subtract twenty-five, multiply by ten . . .' He'd write his answer on a piece of paper. Whoever came closest to beating him could leave before the bell.