

The

SUMMER

We Turned

GREEN



From the author of the 2019 *Sunday Times*
Children's Book of the Year,
THE GIFTED, THE TALENTED AND ME

WILLIAM SUTCLIFFE

BLOOMSBURY

Praise for

The
GIFTED,
the
TALENTED
and Me

‘Probably the funniest and most authentic novel that I’ve read about being an awkward, self-conscious teenage boy since I WAS an awkward, self-conscious teenage boy!’

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‘Great characters, packed with wisdom and reminiscent of Adrian Mole (and there’s no higher praise, let’s face it)’

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Circus of Thieves on the Rampage

Circus of Thieves and the Comeback Caper

The
SUMMER
We Turned
GREEN

A stylized illustration of a person in a dark jacket and trousers, standing and holding a globe of the Earth up to the letter 'E' in the word 'GREEN'. The globe shows continents and oceans.

WILLIAM SUTCLIFFE

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For Saul, Iris and Juno
and for all the school climate strikers

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Summer 2019

The sleeping bag

It starts with a knock at my bedroom door.

Without waiting for an answer, my sister walks in, closing the door behind her as if she doesn't want anyone to hear what she's doing.

Rose never comes into my bedroom. She barely even speaks to me, but I suppose this is normal, since she's four years older and thinks that compared to her seventeen-year-old friends I'm about as interesting as a dust particle, so I have no idea what to say when she appears, says hi, then just stands there smiling at me.

There's a weird silence, because she doesn't seem to know what to say, either.

'What's up?' I ask eventually.

'You all right?' she says.

'Yeah, fine.'

The room goes quiet again. Her eyes slowly pass over

my posters and shelves, and I get the feeling she's trying (and failing) to think of a topic of conversation. Then she says, 'You've got a sleeping bag, haven't you?'

'Yes.'

'Can I borrow it?'

'What for?'

'Sleeping in?' she replies, using the sarcastic statement-as-a-question intonation that drives our parents crazy.

'Are you going somewhere?'

'It's not important where I'm going, I'm just asking if you'll let me borrow it,' she says, with her eyes narrowing into a particular stare she has – the one that makes me wither and obey.

As always, it works, and next thing I know I'm rummaging under my bed, hauling out the sleeping bag and handing it over.

'Thanks, Luke. You're a star,' she says, already heading out of the room.

'When will I get it back?'

'When I've finished with it,' she replies, walking away without a backward glance, which feels much more like the sister I know than the strange, smiley person who walked in.

A few minutes later, I hear the front door open and close. There's no bell ring, just the sound of the clicking latch, followed by footsteps heading outside towards the

street, accompanied by the judder of small, hard wheels trundling over concrete.

I glance at my watch – it’s nearly 9 p.m. – then jump up and look out of the window, just in time to see Rose cross the road and go into the house opposite, wheeling a small suitcase and carrying my badly-rolled-up sleeping bag under one arm.

I head downstairs. Dad is on the sofa in front of the TV, but he isn’t really watching it because he’s got an iPad on his lap, but he isn’t really looking at that because he’s got his phone in his hand, but he doesn’t seem to be looking at that either, because his eyes are closed and his mouth is open and he doesn’t notice me entering the room.

I head for the kitchen and Mum is in her usual spot at the table, gazing intently at her laptop, ‘working’ (browsing Facebook).

‘Where’s Rose gone?’ I say.

‘Nowhere,’ says Mum, not looking up from her screen, which is showing a picture of a cousin she’s always hated sitting beside a swimming pool holding a cocktail. Mum grimaces, mutters the words ‘stupid cow’, and ‘likes’ the picture.

‘Are you sure?’ I ask.

‘How can she afford a holiday in Florida? She only just got divorced!’

‘Er ...’

'That's how she affords it. She just got divorced.'

'Mum ...'

'Took him to the cleaners, and everyone knows she cheated on him first.'

'Do you know that Rose just left the house with a suitcase? I think she went over the road.'

This – finally – gets Mum's attention.

'What?'

'I saw it out the window.'

'When?'

'Just now.'

'Rose?'

'Yes.'

'Over the road?'

'Yes.'

'With a suitcase?'

'Yes.'

Mum springs from the table and charges up the stairs. I hear her open the door of Rose's room, close it again, then thunder back downstairs and charge into the sitting room.

I follow right behind her.

'I wasn't asleep!' says Dad, jolting upright as we walk in, sending his iPad and phone clattering on to the floor.

'Rose has gone,' says Mum.

'What?'

'Rose! She's gone!'

‘Gone where?’

‘I looked in her wardrobe and she’s taken her clothes. We think she’s gone over the road!’ says Mum, with an air of tragic climax that Dad clearly can’t make sense of.

‘Er ...’

‘With her stuff in a suitcase,’ I say, translating Mum’s panic into words Dad might actually understand.

‘Oh!’ says Dad. ‘Right. So ... you’re not saying she’s popped out. You’re saying she’s ...’

‘Gone!’

‘Over the road?’

‘She borrowed my sleeping bag,’ I point out. Dad tends to need things explained to him very slowly, a bit like a small child but without the fun.

‘SHE TOOK YOUR SLEEPING BAG!?’ yells Mum, which is when I realise I should have kept this to myself.

I nod.

‘WHY DIDN’T YOU TELL US!?’

‘I’m telling you now.’

‘After she’s left! Why didn’t you tell us when she took the sleeping bag?’

‘Because she only took it two minutes before she went.’

‘Why did you lend it to her?’ says Dad.

‘Because she asked for it.’

‘That doesn’t mean you just hand over a ... *sleeping bag* ... to a vulnerable teenager,’ says Mum.

'What's vulnerable about her?'

'Everything!'

'She seems very confident to me,' I say.

'She's run away from home!' says Mum. 'You don't give a sleeping bag to a teenager who's on the brink of running away from home!'

'I didn't know she was going to run away.'

'What did you think the sleeping bag was for? A camping trip?'

'You always told me to be generous and share my things. Now I've done it and you're angry with me.'

'Not a *sleeping bag*!'

'That's not what you said. I don't remember you ever saying, "Be generous with your sister and share all your things except your sleeping bag."''

'We're getting off the point,' says Dad, turning back towards Mum. 'You're sure she's actually run away? You think she's not coming back?'

Mum sighs and for a moment her eyes glisten with tears. A heavy silence fills the room, and my parents stare at one another like two people who have just stepped out of a car crash and have no idea what to say or do next.

I should probably explain ...

The end of the world isn't our fault

Why the big drama about a seventeen-year-old girl crossing the road with a suitcase and a sleeping bag? Well, the boring street in the boring suburb where my boring home sits isn't as dull and safe as it used to be, because the house opposite, which used to be even more boring than ours, has become a magnet for every climate protester, anti-capitalist, extinction rebel, outcast and dropout in the country.

How?

Well, to explain this you have to go right back to when I was small. Nobody seems to know exactly when rumblings were first heard about a proposed new runway for the airport near my home. For as long as I can remember the project was on, then off, then on again, and there was always talk of a never-ending round of meetings and consultations that sometimes sent the whole street into a panic about

threats of demolition, and at other times seemed like an endless drone of irrelevant background noise.

Then, roughly a year before the bizarre summer I'm going to tell you about, the project finally got a green light. On a morning that seemed like any other, the postman casually walked his usual route, unnoticed, delivering a small stack of dull-looking brown envelopes which would change the street forever. Twenty letters landed on twenty doormats that day, telling every family who got one that their home was going to be bought from them, whether they wanted to sell or not, then demolished. Ours was spared. All the houses opposite were condemned.

Local outrage ramped up as the row of buildings emptied out and got boarded up, and the story even got some news coverage. Then gradually the abandoned house opposite ours filled up again with squatters: anti-airport protesters, climate activists and, according to my parents, anyone else who thought it might be a laugh to hang out in a derelict house all day instead of going out and getting a job.

There's an old saying: *my enemy's enemy is my friend*. My street is a good test case for this idea, and, so far, it doesn't seem to be true. A more accurate version would appear to be: *my enemy's enemy is even worse than my enemy if he wears strange clothes and looks like he doesn't wash and makes noise late at night*.

Yes, since the protesters moved in over the road, all the nice, boring polite people on my side of the street simply don't know who to hate any more. They don't want their neighbours' houses demolished in order to build an access road to a new cargo terminal, but even more than that, they don't want weirdos waking them up at night with bongo drums, and they certainly don't want their daughters going to visit anti-capitalist communes and deciding they like it there.

That's why the loan of my sleeping bag (which, to be honest, I didn't really think through as I was doing it) was more than a little controversial, and why Mum ended up with tears in her eyes, staring at Dad in stunned silence, just because my sister had crossed the road pulling a suitcase.

'I'm going over there,' says Mum.

'What are you going to say?' asks Dad.

'What do you *think* I'm going to say? I'm going to tell her to come home.'

Dad pulls a sceptical face.

'Do you have a better idea?'

Dad shrugs.

'You're shrugging? How can you shrug at a time like this?'

'I just ... I'm not sure telling her to come home is going to work.'

‘Are you saying we should let her stay?’

‘No,’ says Dad, ‘I just think telling her what she can and can’t do doesn’t seem to be very effective at the moment.’

‘What’s the alternative? Giving up and letting her do whatever she wants?’

‘No ... I ... well, why don’t you give it a try? We can see how it goes.’

‘Thanks for the vote of confidence,’ says Mum, striding to the front door and closing it behind her with a slam.

I head upstairs and pretend to go to bed after Mum leaves, but I’m listening out for the front door, and I hurry down to hear the news as soon as she returns, which is surprisingly soon.

‘Well?’ says Dad, who has jumped up from the sofa to greet Mum in the hallway.

Mum hangs her keys on the hook behind the door and slowly turns back towards us. Her face is pale, and the tip of her nose has gone white, which is what happens when she’s trying to pretend she’s not angry.

She looks at us as if we are far away and barely recognisable, takes a deep breath, then says, ‘It didn’t go well.’

‘What happened?’ says Dad.

‘Well ... she’s in a very determined mood. I tried to take things gently, and I told her that I admire her open-mindedness, and I think it’s good she’s making friends with people from other walks of life, and that she can visit them

as often as she likes, but for her own safety she has to spend her nights at home with us.'

'And ... ?'

'She just asked what I meant by "other walks of life", and I tried to explain, but for some reason she didn't like what I said and I got a long lecture about why I'm a snob, and how ignorant and blind I am for having no clue about who the climate protesters are, and what they're trying to achieve, and how they're the only people facing up to the most serious crisis the human race has ever faced. I tried to tell her I wasn't talking about the end of the human race, I was talking about her coming home for bed, then she went off on one about how I wasn't listening to a word she was saying and how the whole conversation was a perfect illustration of why she has to move out. When I asked her what this meant, she just told me I'm impossible to talk to. Can you believe that? *I'm* the one who's impossible to talk to!'

'So what did you do?' asked Dad.

'I told her she was too young to be there, and it wasn't up to her, and she was coming home whether she liked it or not.'

'And ... ?'

'Well, that's when things got a little heated. Honestly, where did she get that temper from?'

Dad and I avoid eye contact.

‘So ... what’s the upshot?’ says Dad, dodging Mum’s self-answering question. ‘That it *is* up to her.’

‘No! But I can’t physically drag her back! What am I supposed to do? I don’t know what’s happened to her. She’s so *angry*.’

‘About what?’

‘Not sure. It’s either global environmental meltdown or us telling her what to do. She talked a lot about both, but I think the main problem is us.’

‘What have *we* done? The end of the world isn’t our fault.’

‘Well, Rose doesn’t seem to think so.’

‘How can it be *our* fault?’

‘Well, not just us, but people like us.’

‘People *like* us?’

‘Our generation. We’re complacent and selfish apparently, and we’re destroying the planet.’

‘That’s ridiculous.’

‘She does have a point,’ I say. ‘I mean, she’s not wrong, is she?’

Mum and Dad glare at me.

‘We’re not complacent,’ says Dad dismissively.

‘Are you actually doing anything? To stop climate change?’ I ask.

‘We recycle,’ says Dad.

I give him a slow round of applause.

‘The end of the world isn’t the point here,’ says Mum. ‘It’s not our job to save the planet, but it *is* our job to save our daughter.’

‘From what?’ I ask. ‘The people over the road?’

‘Yes!’

‘What is it you think they’re going to do to her?’

‘She’s too young!’ says Dad. ‘You don’t just move out of the family home on a whim one evening, aged seventeen, without even a goodbye.’

‘Who says it was a whim?’ I ask.

‘We should have discussed it,’ says Mum.

‘You think you could have changed her mind?’

‘I could have tried. Why didn’t she talk to us about it?’ says Mum, turning to Dad.

‘Maybe she thought you wouldn’t listen,’ I say. ‘Maybe she thought you’d forbid it. Anyway, how do you know she’s moved out?’

‘You told us yourself,’ says Mum. ‘She took a suitcase.’

‘Haven’t you noticed what day it is?’

Mum and Dad look at one another blankly.

‘Last day of term,’ I say. ‘She waited till the end of the school year, didn’t she? Then she made her move. And she clearly planned it. So maybe this is her version of a summer holiday.’

I watch this idea, which was obvious to me from the

moment I saw her trundle across the road, slowly percolate into my parents' slow-moving brains.

'A summer holiday?' says Mum. 'As in ... a week or two?'

'Or longer. Who knows? She's been hanging out there a lot recently, so she must like it.'

'Has she? Since when? Why didn't you tell us?' says Mum.

'You didn't ask.'

'But she told you?'

'No, she never tells me anything. I just saw it. With my eyes.'

'When?'

'Often. Last few weeks mainly.'

'But ... she can't move in there without even asking us. She's supposed to be looking after you. She promised. We're both working,' says Mum.

If Mum is thinking *this*, of all things, is going to keep Rose at home, she really does live in a dreamworld.

'I don't need looking after,' I say.

'We can't just leave you on your own.'

'Of course you can! I'm thirteen. And Rose is one minute away. I'll be fine.'

'What do you think?' says Mum, turning to Dad. 'Are we going to have to hire some childcare?'

He furrows his brow, pretending to be conflicted for a

few seconds, then says, 'Well, I suppose he should be OK on his own ... if he promises to be responsible.'

'I'll be fine,' I say, trying to stop myself going saucer-eyed with glee at the idea of all the uninterrupted, unobserved, un-nagged hours of free time that are about to fall into my lap. 'As long as there's stuff to eat in the fridge, I can look after myself.'

'You're not to just gorge on snacks all day. You have to have proper meals,' says Mum, attempting to sound stern, though we both know her words are totally pointless.

'Of course,' I reply, attempting to sound sincere.

'Well – OK, then,' says Mum. 'Just for a while. Until we can talk sense into Rose and bring her home.'

'I'll go and have a word with her,' says Dad.

'What do you think that will achieve?' asks Mum.

'We have to try. Maybe there's a different approach.'

'Such as?'

'I don't know. How about we let her stay there tonight, and we leave her to do whatever she wants tomorrow, then after work I pay a visit and try again with something a bit less confrontational? It won't be long before she wants a hot shower and home comforts. She'll be back soon enough.'

'She can come here during the day and have a shower whenever she wants, then just go back,' I point out helpfully.

'It's late. You should go to bed,' says Dad.

'Or maybe I could stop her using the bathroom if you get me a Taser. But that might be a bit of a mixed message.'

'Bed!' says Dad.

I head upstairs, with a smile spreading across my face. Until now I've been strictly forbidden from crossing the road to see what the protesters are up to, but I can't exactly be prevented from going to visit my own sister, can I? Particularly with nobody watching over me every weekday. Besides, as of this evening, thanks to Rose, my parents' ability to stop me doing *anything* suddenly looks a lot shakier.

I've wondered for months about what it is that goes on in there, but up till now I haven't been able to satisfy my curiosity. All I know is that everyone on my side of the road seems to hate the protesters even more than they hate the airport expansion.

Helena, our next-door neighbour, is the one who seems most agitated about the whole thing. Every time I pass her on the street, I hear her complaining to someone about smells, behaviour or noises, and sometimes she goes suddenly quiet as I approach, as if the activities she's discussing are so twisted they can't be mentioned within earshot of a child.

All of which, of course, just makes me more curious.

What goes on in there that upsets Helena so much?

What can a group of seemingly peaceful hippies get up to that makes people like Mum and Dad so frightened of them? How did those people become the enemy?

Soon, I'll be able to find out. The question of why Rose has gone over there is less of a mystery. Obviously it's to annoy our parents.

And it's worked.