

The transformation of Greta Thunberg

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Greta Thunberg has made the ultimate sacrifice for the Guardian. She's allowed us to turn her into a human oil spillage. The treacly black stuff is dripping from her hair, down her nose, past her cheeks on to her neck and shoulders.

Down, down, down it drips. By the time we speak on Zoom, a day later, she has just about got herself cleaned up. Has she ever been covered in oil before? (It's actually a mixture of non-toxic finger paint and olive oil.) "No," she says. This is a typical Thunberg answer – short, factual, to the point. She never likes to waste her words. How did it feel? "It felt better than I thought it would feel. I had a ribbon on my hair to not get my hair black, but then it spilt through the ribbon so my hair was completely black. It was very difficult to get off." I suggest that she sues the Guardian. "Yes," she says. Thunberg isn't smiling.

We talk first thing on a Sunday. Look at Thunberg and she seems little changed – still elfin-like and earnest; still quoting the climate science with fastidious politeness; and still with that curious mix of pessimism (we're doomed if we don't act) and optimism (we can avert catastrophe if we do). But, as she relaxes, I begin to discover that this is a very different Thunberg from the one she presented to the public in 2018. While she has done much to change our perspective of the world, the world has done much to change her – and, she says, for the better. Despite the climate crisis deepening by the day, Greta Thunberg has learned how to be happy.

Like the rest of us she has retreated from the world over the past year and a half, but she has used her time to good effect – to grow up. Thunberg is now 18 years old and campaigning as ferociously as ever, while living in her own apartment (where she is speaking from), hanging out with friends and having

fun. She is turning into the kind of young woman that neither she nor her parents could have ever envisaged.

At home in Stockholm, she says, she goes unnoticed. “Fortunately I live in Sweden, which is very good because people aren’t interested in ‘celebrities’. When I do get stopped, it’s mostly tourists and people from abroad.”

Her father, Svante, talking to me from the family home, tells a funny story about the time he and Greta attended a climate exhibition in the Swedish capital. “She was the main part of the exhibition. There was a big picture of her taken in North Dakota, hanging in the middle of the hallway, five metres tall. No one came up to her. When we left, someone came up with an iPad. I thought, ‘OK, maybe someone wants an autograph’ and the woman said, ‘Excuse me, we’re doing a survey for the museum.’ That sums up how people treat her in Stockholm. They’re not very impressed, and I think that’s good for her. No one really gives a damn.”

Locals may not give a damn, but I discover later on that plenty of other people do – sometimes in a way that has threatened the safety of Thunberg and her family. Three years ago Greta Tintin Eleonora Ernman Thunberg was an unknown 15-year-old terrified that we were destroying the planet and furious that adults were letting it happen. Her fury was particularly directed at those with power. She decided to take unilateral action, and tweeted her plan. “We kids most often don’t do what you tell us to do. We do as you do. And since you grownups don’t give a damn about my future, I won’t either. My name is Greta and I’m in ninth grade. And I am school striking for the climate until election day.” She didn’t expect anyone to take notice. Thunberg had spent her short lifetime not being noticed. She was small, rarely spoke and described herself as “that girl in the back who never said anything”.

Thunberg spent the first day sitting cross-legged on her own outside the Swedish parliament alongside a sign made from wood scrap that read “Skolstrejk för klimatet” (“School strike for climate”). Although she was striking, she still treated it as a regular school day – she rode to the Riksdag on her bike, took out her books and studied till the end of the school day. The next week a few others joined her – fellow students, teachers and parents – and her campaign began to attract media interest. In September 2018 she began a regular Friday strike,

calling it Fridays for Future, encouraging other students to join her. By March 2019, her protest had spread to more than 70 countries. On 20 September 2019, 4 million people joined a school strike across 161 countries – the largest climate demonstration in history.

Within a year, Thunberg had become one of the most famous people on Earth. Since then she has been nominated twice for the Nobel peace prize, addressed the UN and been thanked by the pope. Liberal world leaders suck up to her to show their people they take the climate crisis seriously, right-wing populist leaders mock her to show that they don't. November's Cop26 climate conference in Glasgow is due to be attended by more than 200 nations, and will be one of the largest gatherings of world leaders in history. But many people only want to hear from one person – the autistic teenager with the pigtails.

Perhaps the biggest change in Thunberg is her faith in people. When she started out, she didn't have any. "I didn't think young people cared about climate because all the young people I knew were like, 'Oh yeah, the climate is important, but I don't want to do anything about it.' But it turned out many young people around the world actually care. A lot! And they are very ready to do something about it. I'm very glad I was proven wrong."

She talks about the activists she has met, and how they have inspired her. For the first time in her life, she was meeting people who shared her passion – or obsession. I had met one of her fellow Fridays for Future activists a couple of weeks ago – Vanessa Nakate, Uganda's first school striker. Thunberg's face lights up when I mention her. "Vanessa is an incredible person." She draws such strength from people like Nakate, she says, because they are taking greater risks than she has ever had to.

"Some places are much harder to be an activist in than others. I look up to them so much. They give me the hope and inspiration to carry on." She pauses. "Of course, I might be naive because I'm very young." She pauses again. "But I think naivety and childishness are sometimes a good thing." The great thing about youth, she says, is you're not blinded by realpolitik and the assumption of compromise. "I do think older people make things more complicated than they actually are."

Is there a sense of solidarity between fellow activists? “Definitely. We have daily contact. We don’t just campaign together, we are also friends. My best friends are within the climate movement.” I ask if she could ever be friends with a climate denier. “Erm, yeaaaah,” she says uncertainly. “I mean in one way we’re all climate deniers because we’re not acting as if it is a crisis. I don’t know. It depends on the situation.” So there’s hope for your friendship with Donald Trump? She lets out a hiccup of laughter. “Well, I don’t think we would enjoy each other’s company that much. We have very different interests.” In 2019, when Thunberg was crowned Time magazine’s person of the year, Trump tweeted: “So ridiculous. Greta must work on her Anger Management problem, then go to a good old fashioned movie with a friend! Chill Greta, Chill!” Eleven months later, with Trump demanding a recount, having lost the election to Joe Biden, Thunberg coolly tweeted: “So ridiculous. Donald must work on his Anger Management problem, then go to a good old fashioned movie with a friend! Chill Donald, Chill!”

She is still thinking about the question of befriending a climate denier. The funny thing is, she says, she used to be in denial herself. “When I first heard about it, I didn’t think it was real because if it was real, people would do something about it. It didn’t add up to me.”

Then, aged eight, she was shown a film of an armada of plastic assailing our oceans. She couldn’t get it out of her head. She started to read about it, and became more and more terrified. She was exceptionally bright, with a photographic memory, but was also withdrawn and quiet. And she was becoming more so.

At the age of 11 she fell into a deep depression and stopped eating and talking. Why does she think she was so unhappy? “One of the reasons was I couldn’t wrap my head around the fact that people didn’t seem to care about anything, that everyone just cared about themselves rather than everything that was happening with the world. And being an oversensitive child with autism, it was definitely something I thought about a lot, and it made me sad.” Was it also because she had been bullied at school? “Yeah, to some extent.”

I ask if she literally stopped talking. “I spoke to my parents, my sister and a bit to my teacher,” she says. Why did she stop? “I don’t know. I just couldn’t.”

Svante and the opera singer Malena Ernman have two children: Greta and her sister, Beata, who is three years younger. When Greta was born, Malena's career was taking off, so Svante – who had trained as an actor – stayed at home to look after the children. By the time they started school, Malena was touring internationally. Svante started a production company and looked after her work. But when Greta fell ill, he became a stay-at-home dad again, monitoring everything she ate (“Five pieces of gnocchi in two hours”) and her dramatic weight loss, and talking her through her fears. That was when he discovered that so much of it was rooted in the climate crisis.

It amuses him when he reads that it was he and Malena who turned her into a climate activist. Svante says that Malena was an activist but she campaigned for refugees (and they had refugees living with them) rather than the environment. The only aspiration he had for Greta back then was for her to get better. As for himself, he knew little about the climate crisis, wasn't convinced by what he did know and just wanted to get a nice big car – an SUV or pick-up truck. Over time, Greta changed his mind.

“The way she got us interested was a bit by force. She hijacked us. She started turning off lights. She cut the electricity bill in half.” He laughs. “She'd say, ‘Why have you got the lights on in this room, you're not even in here?’ and I'd say, ‘Because we live in a country where it's dark all the time and it makes me feel nice’ and she'd say, ‘Why? It doesn't make any sense.’ Of course, she was right.”

Did he get pissed off with her? “Oh hell, yeah. She can be very, very, very annoying. But because we were in this crisis we had to react, so we became aware and began to do stuff for the environment, but not because we wanted to save the environment; we did it to save our child.”

At the time, Beata had also been diagnosed with neurodevelopmental disorders, and the family was imploding. Malena and Svante wrote a book about this period, with the Bergmanesque title *Scenes from the Heart*. It was published on 23 August 2018, three days after Greta's first school strike. Svante says the timing couldn't have been worse. “It was a hell of a nuisance when she decided to do the strike because it left us in a tricky situation.” Why? “It was obvious everyone would say you've written this book and she's going on school strike as

a PR stunt. But she had made up her mind she was going on strike, so we thought the only thing we could do was give every cent away. All our earnings from the book went to charity.”

In the book, Malena describes how the 11-year-old Greta was “slowly disappearing into some kind of darkness and, little by little, bit by bit, she seemed to stop functioning. She stopped playing the piano. She stopped laughing. She stopped talking ... She stopped eating.” They were, she concluded, “burned-out people on a burned-out planet”. An updated version of the book was published last year in the UK, retitled *Our House Is on Fire: Scenes of a Family and a Planet in Crisis*, this time with contributions from the girls, and the whole family credited as authors. Malena explained why she had felt compelled to write it in the first place. “Because we felt like shit. I felt like shit. Svante felt like shit. The children felt like shit. The planet felt like shit. Even the dog felt like shit,” she wrote. Svante says hardly anybody bought either version of the book because they decided not to promote it.

I ask Thunberg how important her family’s support has been. “In the beginning they didn’t like the idea of me skipping school, but then they helped more, arranging trips. My dad even followed me on some.” They made huge sacrifices for you, I say. “Yep. They changed their lifestyles. My mum stopped flying, and by doing that she stopped her international career, and I really appreciate it.”

Does she feel guilty about stymying her mother’s career? She seems surprised by the question. “It was her choice. I didn’t make her do anything. I just provided her with the information to base her decision on.” At times like this you can see how unyielding she is – while it’s the source of her strength, you can imagine just how tough it may have been for her parents. “Of course, you could argue one person’s career is not more important than the climate, but to her it was a very big thing,” she says.

Thunberg was at home with her father for a year. By the time she was ready to return to school (initially a specialist autism school, then grammar school), she had been diagnosed with Asperger’s, obsessive compulsive disorder and selective mutism. Thunberg says the diagnosis came as a relief. “When I felt the most sad, I didn’t know that I had autism. I just thought, I don’t want to be like

this. The diagnosis was almost only positive for me. It helped me get the support I needed and made me understand why I was like this.”

She describes her autism as her superpower. I ask why. “A lot of people with autism have a special interest that they can sit and do for an eternity without getting bored. It’s a very useful thing sometimes. Autism can be something that holds you back, but if you get to the right circumstance, if you are around the right people, if you get the adaptations that you need and you feel you have a purpose, then it can be something you can use for good. And I think that I’m doing that now.” Thunberg has not just become the world’s best-known climate change activist, but also its best-known autism activist.

As she tells her story, I can’t help thinking of it as some kind of parable – the girl who was ignored, or worse, by her peers who becomes the face of a global movement for young people.

Her rhetoric is as beautiful as it is brutal. Again, she thanks her autism for the bluntness of her language. In a thunderous speech at the UN climate action summit in 2019, she told the great and the good: “This is all wrong. I shouldn’t be standing here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to us young people for hope. How dare you? You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words.” It was an extraordinary sight – the schoolgirl rebuking the world’s leaders in the language of a furious parent. And the very people she was condemning gave her a standing ovation.

There was a frightening intensity to the speech. You couldn’t help wondering what it was taking out of Thunberg. Does she feel she has missed out on her teens? “No, definitely not. I don’t have an urge to party or drink alcohol or do whatever teens normally do. I enjoy much more doing this and being a nerd!” I ask what she does to relax. “I listen to music, and podcasts. But I do other things. I do embroidery like I’m doing now.” I hadn’t even noticed that she was stitching away while chatting. Can I see what she’s making? “No, because it’s a surprise for somebody,” she says.

Actually, she says, she’s got loads of hobbies. “I also do a lot of jigsaw puzzles. The biggest was 3,000 pieces, but that didn’t fit on the table so it was very complicated to finish. And I also spend time with my two dogs [a golden retriever

and black labrador] and talk lots to friends. We are very silly. Maybe people have an idea that climate activists are serious, but that's not the case." She hiccups another giggle.

Do you really speak to your climate activist friends every day? "Yes, many times a day." Do you have parties? "Since we are spread all over the world it's hard to do that, but we have Zoom calls and movie nights online and lots of chats where we just spam each other."

Wow, I say, so, really, you're just a bunch of jokers? A little crease spreads across her lips. I think she's smiling. "Yes, we discuss very important topics like mousse and baby carrots, and bread. Sometimes we have very heated discussions." About chocolate mousse? "No!" she says, appalled. "The animals." Do you discuss whether moose are in danger of extinction? "No! I don't know if I want to say this. We joke we are a moose cult." Why? "It's a very long story. And then we have these internal jokes, like the poem about the baby carrot." At this point, I have to admit to her that she's lost me. But she's on a roll. "It's Henrik Ibsen. You can Google it. We sometimes have discussions where we just write 'babycarrot, babycarrot, babycarrot'." (I do Google it later, and discover it's a source of contention whether Ibsen actually wrote the 11-word poem Dear Babycarrot.)

That's bonkers, I say. She nods, happily. I love seeing her like this. It feels a privilege to be let into her private world, however briefly. Lots of people would think you don't have the time or the inclination to mess around, I say. "I think we mess around a bit too much. I may make us sound like idiots now, but that's what we do."

I drag her away from the world of moose and baby carrots to discuss Cop26. How optimistic is she that the conference can achieve anything? "I am not. Nothing has changed from previous years really. The leaders will say we'll do this and we'll do this, and we will put our forces together and achieve this, and then they will do nothing. Maybe some symbolic things and creative accounting and things that don't really have a big impact. We can have as many Cops as we want, but nothing real will come out of it."

What does she think about the fact that Boris Johnson says climate is his priority while at the same time supporting new coalmines in Cumbria and the Cambo oil fields off the coast of Shetland? “It’s hypocritical to talk about saving the climate as long as you’re still expanding fossil fuel infrastructure.” She says she can’t think of a single politician who has impressed her. “Nobody has surprised me.” What about, say, New Zealand prime minister Jacinda Ardern, who said that the climate crisis was a matter of “life or death” at the June launch of her new roadmap to control global heating? She looks sceptical. “It’s funny that people believe Jacinda Ardern and people like that are climate leaders. That just tells you how little people know about the climate crisis.” Why? “Obviously the emissions haven’t fallen. It goes without saying that these people are not doing anything.” In April, it was revealed that New Zealand’s greenhouse-gas emissions had increased by 2% in 2019.

Little has been seen of Thunberg during the pandemic. In May a short film conceived by her examined how people’s land use, agricultural practices and exploitation of animals create the perfect conditions for diseases to spill over from animals to humans, making pandemics ever more likely. The Friday strikes became virtual as live activism was put on hold. The enforced break was necessary, her father says. She had done so much and travelled so far (twice crossing the Atlantic by boat in 2019 to attend conferences, and journeying through America and Canada to witness the impact of climate change) that she was exhausted. “The pandemic has been a complete tragedy for everyone, of course, but being stuck here in Sweden for a year and a half has been good for Greta,” Svante says. “She definitely needed a break after all the madness she’s been through.”

However, the last thing Thunberg herself wanted was a break – the climate wouldn’t wait for her and, anyway, she was on a high. After all those years of struggle, she had finally found her purpose.

It’s astonishing how many people see you as some kind of secular saint, I say. “No!” she says adamantly. She sounds shocked, almost angry at the suggestion. Do you find yourself getting bigheaded? “No, it’s very important not to. But I think it’s an exaggeration saying many people treat me as a saint. More people treat me like something very, very bad. There are people who laugh as soon as they hear my name.” Why? “Because they have already decided what they think

of me and nothing they hear will change that point of view because it's such a filter bubble. And they just hear fake stories about me, and people who mock me. So it's two extremes."

When people mock you, what are they mocking? "Oh, 'The climate goblin is forcing you to stop eating meat', which I have never said. They just do it to make fun of me and other climate activists." Does that hurt you? "Noooooah," she says sweetly. "I understand that everybody has their own sense of humour. Me, personally, it doesn't hurt, but if it affects my family or other activists, then it's a different thing."

And has it affected your family? "Yes. If there are people standing outside your house filming you through the window and then trying to break in, of course that affects the family. And constantly having rumours spread about you that you're manipulating your child, of course that affects you." Again, she says that the rumours about herself don't bother her. Such as? "According to some, I'm an evil, manipulative child who takes advantage of everyone I meet. Others say I'm a helpless child who has been exploited. Some say I'm a communist; some say I'm an extreme capitalist; some say I'm an agent for India, or Russia, or the US ..." She could go on. How is she an extreme capitalist? She shrugs. "I don't know."

Svante is not so quick to shrug it off, though. She has had to deal with more than rumours, he says. "There have been lots of death threats, and one man has been sentenced in court in Sweden. As a parent you'd be a fool not to worry about that." Does it scare him? "Of course. There are a lot of crazy people out there. Now, though, her being 18, she's an adult, she makes her own decisions; she can decide everything and she just wants to live like a normal person. Her being a public figure is not a place where you necessarily want to be."

Thunberg is not alone in receiving threats. Climate activists are being targeted around the world. This month, the campaign group Global Witness revealed that more than 220 activists who work to protect the environment and land rights were murdered last year – a record number.

As well as her enemies, there are the Greta groupies to cope with. While the locals let her get on with her life in Stockholm, some international fans have

been more intrusive, Svante says. “When we came back from North America, she couldn’t stay at home because people kept showing up. They travelled from various countries and came knocking on the door, and that was a bit of a problem.” It got so bad that he and Greta moved out of the family home into another apartment.

Just a few weeks ago, she left home permanently to live by herself. Could he imagine when Greta was struggling most that at 18 she would be living independently? “The main thing I’m concerned about is my children being well, and the fact that Greta is now living by herself, coping by herself, travelling by herself is amazing,” he says.

Thunberg is enjoying the new freedoms of adult life. Yesterday she went on a demo that had nothing to do with climate – a protest against the violence in Afghanistan. She thinks she may go to university next year, but nothing has been finalised. Career-wise she always tells Svante she’d love to do something that’s nothing to do with climate, because it would mean that the crisis has been averted. But they both know it’s a fantasy. In the meantime, she is back striking in the real world, on Fridays, alongside millions of others.

I sense that what she’s really looking forward to is spending quality time with her friends at Cop26, tearing a strip off the heads of state for failing the world’s young yet again, and chatting nonsense about moose cults and baby carrots. I ask if she was friendly with any young people before she became an activist. “No,” she says baldly. Would you say until three years ago you didn’t have any friends? “I had friends, but I didn’t have friends my own age. I was a good friend with my teacher, and I had friends when I was younger. Then I didn’t. So it was a strange feeling to have always been the quiet person in the back that nobody really noticed, to becoming someone lots of people actually listen to.”

Hers is a remarkable story. Not just the fantastical stuff – the little girl who conquered the world. But the smaller, more personal story, the one she’d doubtless tell us doesn’t matter – the lost little girl who learned how to belong. This is the one that really moves me.

When she didn’t have friends, did she want them? “I think I did, but I didn’t have the courage to get friends,” she says. “Now, when I have got many friends, I

really see the value of friendship. Apart from the climate, almost nothing else matters. In your life, fame and your career don't matter at all when you compare them with friendship."

Thunberg says she has met like-minded people – in every way. "In the Fridays for Future movement, so many people are like me. Many have autism, and they are very inclusive and welcoming." She believes the reason that so many autistic people have become climate activists is because they cannot avert their gaze – they have a compulsion to tell the truth as they see it. "I know lots of people who have been depressed, and then they have joined the climate movement or Fridays for Future and have found a purpose in life and found friendship and a community that they are welcome in." So the best thing that has come out of your activism has been friendship? "Yes," she says. And now there is no mistaking her smile. "Definitely. I am very happy now."