

The  
**GIFTED,**  
the  
**TALENTED**  
and Me



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## Because we can

‘COME DOWNSTAIRS, EVERYONE! FAMILY MEETING!’

Even though I was mildly curious about why Dad was back from work so early, and what a ‘family meeting’ might involve, I stayed put in my room.

‘PIZZA!’ he added. ‘Last one down gets the Hawaiian!’

Doors slammed, footsteps thundered down the staircase and I leaped up. After a brief tussle with Ethan in the kitchen doorway, during which Freya somehow managed to crawl between our legs and get the first slice, we all assembled around the table, eating straight from takeaway boxes spread over a layer of drawings, uncompleted homework, unopened letters and unread magazines.

Ethan, who was seventeen and hadn’t worn any colour except black for the last three years, announced through a

mouthful of pizza, 'I don't mind who gets custody, but I'm not moving out of my bedroom.'

'Custody?' said Mum.

'Yeah. I'm not leaving, and I'm not going anywhere at the weekends.'

'You've got the wrong end of the stick, love,' said Mum. 'We're not getting divorced.'

'Oh,' said Ethan. 'So what's all this about a family meeting?'

Freya, who lived in a seven-year-old's fantasy universe populated exclusively by fairies, unicorns and cats, temporarily tuned in to reality and began to cry. 'You're getting divorced?'

Mum jumped out of her chair, dashed around the table and lifted Freya into her arms. 'We're not getting divorced. You mustn't worry.'

'But Ethan said you are!'

'Ethan's wrong.'

'How do I know you're telling the truth?' said Freya. 'How do I know you're not just saying that to protect me?'

'Ethan!' snapped Mum. 'Look what you've done. Tell Freya you made it up.'

'I didn't make it up.'

'You did! Nobody said anything about divorce until you piped up.'

'I worked it out for myself.'

'INCORRECTLY! WE'RE NOT GETTING A DIVORCE!'

'Why not?' said Ethan.

'What?' replied Mum. 'You're asking me why we're *not* getting a divorce?'

'If you can't even think of an answer, maybe we should be worried,' said Ethan.

'STOP!' said Dad. 'Rewind. Stay calm. There's no divorce. I called this meeting because we have something to tell you.'

'Trial separation?' said Ethan.

'No. It's good news.'

This shut everyone up. The idea of good news hadn't occurred to us.

'I sold my company,' said Dad, leaning back in his chair, with a grin spreading across his face.

Ethan, Freya and I stared at him blankly.

'You have a company?' I said.

'Yes! Of course I do! What do you think I've been doing every day for the last six years?'

I shrugged.

'Well, until last week I had a company. But now I've sold it!'

He beamed at us, waiting for a response. None of us had any idea what he was talking about, or why he was making

such a performance of this fantastically dull information. Freya, losing interest in the entire conversation, pulled a notebook from her pocket and began to draw.

‘For a lot of money,’ he added.

Ethan’s eyes rose from his pizza.

‘When you say a lot ... are you saying ...?’

‘We’re rich!’ said Mum, leaping up with Freya still in her arms and beginning to dance around the kitchen. ‘We’re rich! We’re rich! Goodbye, Stevenage! Goodbye, cramped, boxy little house! It’s going to be a whole new life! Nobody believed he could do it, but he did! He made it! We’re rich!’

‘How rich?’ said Ethan.

‘Comfortable,’ said Dad.

‘Stinking,’ said Mum.

‘Not stinking,’ said Dad. ‘Mildly smelly.’

‘Can I have a new phone?’ said Ethan.

The only clue this might have been about to happen was Dad’s job. Or lack of one. When Freya was still a baby, he walked out on whatever it was he was doing back then – something that involved wearing a tie and getting home after I was in bed – and installed himself in the shed at the bottom of our garden. He spent months on end squirrelling around down there, dressed like he’d just

crawled out of a skip (which, in fact, he often had), and from this point on, when people asked him what he did for a living, he said he was an 'entrepreneur'. If he was trying to sound interesting, he sometimes said 'inventor'.

He was always coming and going with random bits of machinery, then occasionally he'd turn up in the kitchen wearing a suit, and we'd all be kind of, 'Whoa! Who are you? How did *you* get into the house?' But after making fun of him for looking like an employable adult, none of us ever remembered to ask him where he was going.

One of those meetings must have generated a source of serious money, because at some point he stopped tinkering in the shed, upgraded his wardrobe from skip-diver to blind-man-stumbling-out-of-a-jumble-sale and went off to work in a warehouse somewhere. Or maybe it was an office. I never thought of asking him. He was just my dad, going out to work like everyone else's dad. What this actually involved didn't seem important. As long as he showed up at breakfast and weekends, and drove me where I needed to go, it didn't occur to me to wonder what he did all day.

Then there was a week when he flew off to America, carrying brand-new luggage and a floppy suit bag I'd never seen before. This time I remembered to ask what he was up to, but he just said 'meetings'. There was something in the way Mum wished him luck as he set off that did seem

odd – the way she said it, like she genuinely meant it – but a couple of minutes later I forgot all about the whole thing.

It was just after he got home from America that our first-ever family meeting was called.

‘Hang on,’ I said, interrupting Mum’s celebration dance. ‘What do you mean goodbye, Stevenage?’

‘You don’t think we’re going to stay here, do you?’ said Mum. ‘Rich people don’t live in Stevenage. They live in London! Dad’s sold his company, I’ve handed in my notice at work, and we can finally get out of this dump and move to London!’

‘But I like Stevenage,’ I said.

‘The only people who like Stevenage are people who’ve never been anywhere else,’ said Ethan.

‘I’ve been to the same places as you.’

‘No, you haven’t. And you’ve barely read a book in your life. Your idea of culture is ten-pin bowling.’

‘What’s that got to do with liking Stevenage?’

‘See? Ignorant.’

I looked across at Mum for support, hoping she’d take my side, but it looked like she hadn’t even heard. Her expression reminded me of the thing you see in cartoons when people’s eyeballs turn into dollar signs.



‘So we’re moving?’ I asked.

‘Yes!’ said Mum. ‘As soon as we can! To a place I’ve been dreaming of all my life. There are beautiful Victorian houses, and it’s in London but it’s near an enormous park, and even though it’s expensive, it’s filled with artists and musicians and publishers and creative people. It’s called ...’ her voice dipped to a reverential whisper ‘... Hampstead.’

‘That’s where we’re going to live?’ said Ethan.

‘Yes, and there’s an amazing school where the artists and musicians and publishers send their children. It’s called the North London Academy for the Gifted and Talented. I’ve been in touch already, and we have places for all three of you. Freya, you’ll be able to do as much painting as you like, taught by real artists. Ethan, you’ll be able to concentrate on your music and maybe start a band. And Sam, you’ll ... er ... you’ll have a lovely time and meet lots of interesting new friends.’

‘I don’t want new friends. I like the friends I’ve got,’ I said.

‘Your friends are very nice, I know, but there’s a much more exciting world out there. You’re going to love it.’

‘Are you saying my friends are boring?’

‘No! They’re sweet kids.’

‘*Sweet kids!*? I’m fifteen, not five!’

'I'm talking about being stuck here, in Stevenage! It's this town that's boring! London's a global metropolis. The whole world is there. It's going to be fantastic!'

'You always say it's noisy and polluted.'

'Do I?'

'Yes! And dirty and crowded.'

'Well, we'll get used to that. Once you're a proper Londoner you hardly notice those things.'

'And what is an academy for the gifted and talented, anyway? Why can't we just go to a normal school?'

'I'll show you the website. It's a holistic educational environment that fosters creativity and engagement with the performing arts.'

'Sounds like a nightmare,' I said.

Mum reached across the table, took my hand and stared into my eyes. 'Open your mind, Sam. Mainstream education is restrictive and conformist and obsessed with pointless targets and tests. This is an amazing opportunity to break free of all that nonsense and have your true self fostered and nourished! Even if you don't take to it straight away, in time you're going to find new depths you never realised you had.'

'I don't want to find new depths. I like the ones I've got already.'

'Those aren't depths,' said Ethan. 'They're shallows.'

‘Wearing black, watching boring films and playing the guitar doesn’t make you deep, Ethan.’

‘Actually, it does,’ he replied.

I rolled my eyes at him, while privately wondering if he might in fact be right.

‘Is this really, definitely happening?’ he said to Dad, sounding more excited than I had ever heard him.

‘Yes,’ Dad replied.

‘You promise?’

‘Yes!’

Ethan’s face broke into an enormous grin. He leaned back in his chair, let out a long, ecstatic sigh and said, ‘I can’t believe it! This is like getting out of jail halfway through your sentence.’

‘If it’s a school for the gifted and talented,’ I said, ‘shouldn’t there be some kind of test to check that you actually are? Because I’m not.’

‘Of course you are,’ said Mum. ‘You just haven’t quite hit your stride.’

‘We made a donation,’ said Dad.

‘How do you know everyone else didn’t make a donation?’ I asked.

‘Don’t be so cynical,’ said Mum. ‘I’ve been watching for years how you kids are over-tested and crushed with stress and how uncreative the whole system is, and I’ve got you

out. This is going to set you free to find out who you really are! I don't want you to just be moulded into three more cogs in the capitalist machine. I want you to be unique and different and unafraid!

'WOO HOO!' yelled Ethan. 'Go, Mum!'

'Dad's a cog in the capitalist machine,' I said. 'He seems to quite like it. So are you.'

'Not any more!' she said. 'I never have to look at another spreadsheet again! That job's been eating me alive, but now I'll be free to concentrate on being there for the three of you.'

'Being where?' said Ethan.

'Wherever you need me.'

'Everyone's going to be so much happier,' said Dad.

I was unconvinced that increased parental surveillance was necessarily such good news. Judging by the look on Ethan's face, so was he.

'And while you're at school, I'll have time to pursue my own interests,' said Mum. 'I'm going to buy a kiln and take up pottery!'

Nobody had an answer to this.

'It's going to be great,' said Dad. 'Not the pottery – the whole thing. But also the pottery. That'll be excellent. Home-made pots! Wow!'

Freya held up a drawing of a puppy, a unicorn and a

kitten sitting on a cloud under a double rainbow. 'Is this what Hampstead looks like?' she asked.

'Kind of,' said Dad.

'Can I go now? Have we finished?' said Ethan, typing something into his phone as he walked out of the room.

Lost in a dream about our new life, Mum stared through the window towards where the horizon would have been if Stevenage had one.

'Dad? Do we really have to move?' I asked.

'I've worked for this all my life,' he said. 'Everything's going to be so much better from now on.'

'But all my friends are here. Why do we have to go to London?'

'Because we can. London's an amazing city. Whatever it is you're interested in – anything from anywhere in the world – it's there.'

'What I'm interested in is Stevenage.'

'Why are you being so negative?'

'Why are you sending me to a school for weirdos?'

'It's not a school for weirdos. It's somewhere we think you'll all be happy. We're trying to protect you. I've made some real money for the first time in my life, and this is what money's for, more than anything else. To protect your children.'

'From what? Reality?'

'I'll show you the school website. It looks amazing.'

'For Freya and Ethan.'

'For all of you! You're going to like it.'

'You reckon?'

'Yes! You'll be fine. Once you get used to it.'

This was deeply unconvincing.

'We're going to be so happy!' said Mum, seeming to snap out of her daydream, but the look in her eye was far, far away, as if our cramped kitchen, our thin-walled house and the whole town we were living in had already ceased to exist.

## **Goodbye, Stevenage!**

Mum spent the next few weeks driving to and from the dump as if gripped by an extended back-to-front version of a manic shopping spree. Going out and buying loads of stuff would have been the obvious reaction to our family windfall, but true to Mum's habit of always doing what you least expect, she chose to celebrate getting rich by throwing away everything she could get her hands on. It was like getting burgled in slow motion.

As our house gradually emptied, Ethan, Freya and I twigged that the only way to hang on to any possessions was to hide them.

By the day the removal van came, we had hardly any furniture and had to watch TV standing up. We only still had the TV because as she was setting off for a charity shop I'd blocked the door and refused to move, while

she gave a long speech that included lots of words like ‘capitalist’, ‘brain rot’, ‘imagination’ and ‘creativity’. I counter-attacked with an even longer and more impassioned speech, making heavy use of ‘stealing from your own child’, ‘video games as a vibrant art form’ and ‘help with my anxiety about moving house’. It was the last one that swung it. Naked emotional blackmail laced with mental-health buzzwords was always the best way to get Mum onside.

As we drove away for the last time, following behind our strangely small removal van, Mum rolled down her window and whooped like she was on some chick-flick drive through the California desert. An old bloke at the bus stop almost fell off his mobility scooter. People don’t usually whoop in Stevenage.

‘Goodbye forever, Stevenage!’ she yelled out of the window.

‘Forever?’ I asked.

‘YES!’

‘I thought you said I could come back and see my friends.’

She shot Dad a guilty look, which I spotted in the rear-view mirror.

‘I saw that!’ I said.

‘Saw what?’



'That look!'

'What look?'

'The one you gave Dad.'

'I didn't do anything.'

'When can I come back and see my friends?'

'Soon.'

'That's what you say when you mean never.'

'It means soon. After we've settled in. You'll make new friends before you know it.'

'I'm too old for new friends.'

'You're fifteen!'

'You don't go around trying to make new friends when you're fifteen. It's tragic.'

'I'm over forty! What do you think I'm going to do? You think I don't need a social life?' said Mum.

'That's different.'

'Why is it different? Listen – nobody is ever too old for new friends.'

'Except maybe the Queen,' said Dad.

'Your friends aren't really friends, anyway,' said Ethan.  
'They're just people you grew up with.'

'That's what friends are! As you'd know if you had any!'

'So all the best people in the world happen to live within half a mile of our cul-de-sac in Stevenage?'

'I never said they're the best people in the world! They're just my friends.'

'Let's not argue,' said Mum. 'We're starting a new life! It's going to be fantastic!'

'I don't want a new life. I want my old life,' I said.

'That's a perfectly natural reaction at your age.'

'What's my age got to do with it?'

'Well, I've been reading about this, and during puberty boys often have the urge to cling on to aspects of childhood they know they're about to leave behind.'

I buried my face in my hands. 'Oh, my God, I can't believe you just said that.'

'What's puberty?' asked Freya.

'It's a change the body goes through at Sam's age.'

'STOP!'

'When you become a teenager, the body changes shape and you begin to grow extra hair in new places ...'

'STOP STOP STOP!'

'I'll explain later. I think Sam's feeling uncomfortable. Finding your parents embarrassing is part of it.'

'YOU DON'T SAY!'

'Extra hair?' said Freya.

'Is anyone hungry?' said Dad. 'Shall we stop for a coffee? Who wants a snack? Snack anyone? I'd love a Danish.'

'They're called pubes,' said Ethan.

'ETHAN!' snapped Mum and Dad.

For most of the remainder of the journey, Freya muttered 'pubes pubes pubes' to herself.

Our new house was somehow both really posh and a bit of a dump. Mum was so proud of it you'd think she'd built it herself. She led us from room to room, detailing complicated plans about how she was going to rip up the carpets and 'strip the place back', even though it didn't seem like there was anything to strip back, and the only thing I liked was the carpets. I thought I heard her refer to the rotten-looking shed at the bottom of the garden as her 'studio', but I couldn't be sure, because I was too busy staring out of the window at the strangeness of this new place to listen to her.

Right outside, a middle-aged guy in a pair of expensive-looking ripped jeans and bright red trainers was getting into a Mercedes, while a woman in a BMW was hovering behind his parking space with her hazards flashing, blocking the road. Behind her a man in a convertible was frantically sounding his horn and shouting insults. Over the road, a team of skinny guys in filthy clothes were carrying bucket after bucket of rubble out of the basement of an enormous house and dumping it in a skip.

So this was Hampstead. No puppies, unicorns, kittens or rainbows were visible. I hadn't even walked down my new

street yet, but I already sensed this was a place where rich people got very stressed about parking. Compared to the quiet little cul-de-sac of modern houses I'd come from, this felt like another universe. Back home, there were always kids playing out on the street. Here, you'd get mown down in seconds.

Mum quickly set about filling the house with new furniture that turned out to be older than our old furniture, which had been bought new but had got old. Our new stuff was all properly old. 'Vintage' was the word she kept using, which I think must mean crappy.

Ethan took the room in the attic and painted it black. Given his choice of clothes, this worked as a form of camouflage, rendering him almost invisible.

I got the bedroom directly underneath him, which looked out over a row of tiny gardens towards the jumbled brick edifice that made up the back walls of the houses on the next block. People stacked upon people stacked upon people. Everywhere you looked.

If London really was where rich people came, the question I had was – why? Why why why?

Dad left the house every morning wearing a suit, which made me think he must have got some kind of job, but I never got round to asking him what it was. Everyone else

spent the last month of the summer holidays nesting and decorating and sanding floors and putting up curtains, but I did precisely nothing to improve the state of my room. I managed to unpack – just – and that was about it. I didn't move any furniture, or get any shelves, or paint anything, or even put up so much as a poster. I thought if I didn't properly move in, this house where I didn't want to be wouldn't really count as my home.

Messages carried on popping up on my phone from my Stevenage friends, but they were all about things I'd missed, or plans I'd never take part in, so after a while, when I realised that every time my phone pinged I felt a lonely, echoing twang in my chest, I switched off the notifications and stopped looking.

Now that I was utterly friendless, I had long, empty hours to fill, and chucking a tennis ball around my empty bedroom was the pastime I came up with. If you're bored enough, this can kill most of an afternoon relatively painlessly. It was also the only activity that allowed me to stop thinking about the clock ticking ever closer to the day when I would have to start at the North London Academy for Exactly the Kind of People I Instinctively Hated. Starting at any new school was frightening. The thought of my first day at this one filled me with blood-curdling terror.

Only by attempting to catch a hundred in a row with

my left hand, or throw ten perfect corner-ricochets, or some other random challenge, could I stop my mind turning endlessly back to the awful thought of the inexorable approach of the new term.

Everyone in the family had a different way of complaining about the ball-throwing noise:

Dad – shouting.

Ethan – physical violence.

Freya – stealing the tennis ball.

Mum – telling me I seemed withdrawn and asking if I wanted to talk about my feelings.

I never took up the talk-about-my-feelings offer. Eventually, Mum resorted to trying to talk to me about why I wouldn't talk about my feelings, followed by literally begging me to make some kind of effort to be happy.

I told her I was trying, but we both knew this was a lie. I was sulking, and, quite frankly, I had every right to sulk.

When the begging failed to work, Mum told me to pull myself together and stop being self-indulgent.

I informed her there was nothing self-indulgent about being depressed when your whole life has been stolen away from you by your social-climbing parents.

She told me that kind of ludicrous and unfair exaggeration was more or less a definition of the word self-indulgent.

I told her that was two words.

We then argued about hyphens for a while, until I stormed upstairs, slammed the door and set about making as much noise as I could with my tennis ball.

On the last Sunday of the summer holidays, over dinner, Mum announced that she'd decided to start writing a blog about creative parenting. She asked if we'd like to hear her first piece, and before anyone had time to ask what she was talking about, she cleared her throat, raised her iPad and began to read.

'The theme is motherhood and creative rebirth,' she said. 'This post is called "The Journey Begins."'

'Can I have a sick bowl?' asked Ethan.

'You don't have to listen if you don't want to.'

'OK, then my journey begins like this,' he replied, walking out of the room and heading upstairs.

Mum looked back at her screen and began to read. *'Is a life without change a life worth living? How can you nurture creativity in yourself and your children in a rushed-off-your-feet lifestyle? Is it possible in today's world to truly be yourself while also being there for your children? These are the questions I hope to answer in this blog.'*

*'My family and I have just moved to London. That's hubby and me, and our three inspiring children: F\_\_\_, seven and*

*already a burgeoning artist; E\_\_\_, seventeen, a highly talented musician; and S\_\_\_, fifteen, a little stranded between the twin states of childhood and adolescence ...'*

'WHAT!? Is that all you can say about me? What do you mean stranded?'

'It's not a bad thing. And I haven't used your name.'

'Did you call me "hubby"? Please tell me you didn't say "hubby".'

'I ... I'm not going to write this by committee!'

'Artist, musician and ... *stranded*. What's that supposed to mean?' I said.

'Just that you're in transition. We're all in transition. We're starting a new life.'

'Who is this *for*, exactly?' asked Dad.

'Oh, that's a really encouraging thing to say. You don't think anyone's going to read it, do you?'

'No! Yes! I mean – I'm sure they will. Loads of them. I'm just interested to know who. So I can picture them.'

'I haven't even finished two paragraphs and already you're all picking holes in it! Freya's the only one who's actually listened.'

'Do I have to listen to any more?' asked Freya.

'Right! That's it!' Mum slammed the iPad cover shut. 'Negative negative negative. That's all I get from you lot, isn't it?'



An ashamed silence filled the room, as if everyone apart from Mum had simultaneously let out a silent but toxic fart.

‘Sorry, Mummy,’ said Freya. ‘Can you read some more, please?’

Mum gestured with an open palm towards Freya, raising her eyebrows at me and Dad as if to say, ‘Why do you both have worse manners than a seven-year-old?’

Neither of us had an explanation.

‘What I cook for you merits your attention, but not what I write, is that it?’

‘No,’ we said.

At this point, Ethan reappeared in the kitchen. ‘I’m hungry,’ he said.

‘Is that something you’re telling me or your father?’ asked Mum.

‘Er ...’

‘We’ve just eaten dinner!’ said Dad.

‘Well, I’m hungry again.’

‘You know what?’ said Mum. ‘Be hungry. It won’t kill you. Or make yourself some food. I’m going upstairs to finish my blog.’

‘Is this your blog about how to be a good mum?’ asked Ethan pointedly as the door slammed behind her.

An edgy silence fell.

'That was tactless,' Dad said to Ethan.

'What did I say?'

'Why is Mummy angry?' asked Freya.

'You mustn't worry,' said Dad. 'She's just a bit ...'

More silence.

'A bit what?' I asked.

'Mental?' offered Ethan.

'She's on a creative journey,' said Dad. 'She's ... I think ... maybe she's just happy.'

'I don't think it's that,' I said.

'Happy people don't stamp off in a huff,' said Freya.

'Happy people brush their hair a lot and have picnics.'

'I'm sure we'll go on a picnic soon,' said Dad.

Freya looked sceptical.

'I hate picnics,' said Ethan, gazing forlornly into the fridge.

'This is a big change for all of us,' said Dad. 'We have to be understanding with each other.'

'THERE'S NOTHING TO EAT!' wailed Ethan.