Teresa Grøtan:
Swallowed by the Sea

Before we burn down

Where:
California, US

Who:
Hazel van Ummersen (13)
Miko Vergun (16)
Isaac Vergun (15)

Pam Vergun, their mum
Julia Olson, lawyer

What's happening:
Hazel, Miko and Isaac file a lawsuit against the American government for knowingly overlooking the dangers of climate change. On a visit in California the kids barely escape the biggest forest fire in the state's history.

Population, USA: 323 million
Population, California: 39 million

Carbon emissions per capita: 16 tonnes

– We can do something to make a change, even though we're kids. And we *are* doing something.

Joined by five other teens, thirteen-year-old Hazel van Ummersen is about to head out from Oregon to California to visit schools and teach other kids and teens about climate change. It's Friday afternoon, and ahead of them they've got a 12-hour drive each way as well as a busy weekend with little time for sleep. That in no way hampers the mood in the minibus shared by the six teens, two of their parents, and me, an author from Norway.

Hazel is one of the 21 kids who have filed a lawsuit against the American government. The trial started in October 2018. By then, the young plaintiffs, aged 10–21, have already been through two rounds the District Court in Oregon, where most of them live. *Juliana v. U.S.* is the first ever climate trial that brings the government to court.

Can kids really force President Trump to change his course?

I've been allowed to join them on their California trip to get an understanding of why these kids choose to spend all their spare time on fighting for the climate, instead of playing football or being on their phones or hanging out with friends – basically, stuff that most kids consider fun.

The kids demand that the United States drastically cut back on their climate emissions. The average American emits 16 tonnes of carbon dioxide every year. The kids demand that the

United States at least cut back to meet the international average at four tonnes a year per capita. This weekend they're visiting two Californian schools. Maybe they'll inspire more young people to become climate activists?

The plan was to start driving as soon as the kids finished school on Friday, but it ended up taking quite a bit of time before we finally hit the road. The sun is low, and Isaac Vergun (15) is playing a few chords on his ukulele. His mom, Pam, has a PC in her lap and a phone in her hand, rushing to make the final arrangements for the trip.

Equality before the law

Hazel, Isaac and the other young activists are all part of the organisation Our Children's Trust, started by the environment lawyer Julia Olson. Before we left for California, I met with her to learn a bit more about the lawsuit, and what it might entail. Our Children's Trust has its base in a big, blue wooden house. I was in the fall, in October, and the crowns of the trees in the street were all fiery red.

– In my twenty years as a lawyer, I've never felt more certain about winning a case! The evidence is unmistakable, and the law is on our side, said Julia Olsen.

The plaintiffs' problem is not the contents of the case, but rather the fact that President Trump does everything that he can to stop the case from ever reaching the court. To begin with, he had the support of a number of American fossil fuel companies, but they've all withdrawn from the case.

Julia told me that Our Children's Trust also supports kids and youth in other countries. When the Norwegian organisation Nature and Youth took the Norwegian government to court to stop them from drilling for oil in the Arctic, Our Children's Trust provided legal assistance.

– To me, these cases are a question of fairness – equality before the law should also apply to youth and future generations, Julia explained.

She told me that if Our Children's Trust wins this case, the United States will have to almost entirely stop using fossil fuels – oil, coal and gas, that is – within the next 25 to 30 years. It will mean drastic changes for American politics, economy and business.

While listening to Julia, I was wondering: Could this really end up happening? Could young people, even before they earn the right to vote, make such an impact? And would it be possible for the USA – the land of oil and cars and consumption – to change its course this drastically?

Julia insisted that it was possible. Most of the technology and alternative sources of energy already exist. Sure, it will take some time to develop passenger aircrafts that run on solar energy, but smaller solar-run planes already exist. The first one to travel around the earth did so in 2016. There's being done research on making fuel for huge container ships from algae. A change of course will also mean new jobs within companies that focus on green energy sources, Julia explained.

Six happy kids

Now, sitting in a minibus with six happy kids and thinking of that conversation with Julia Olson, I feel excited. I must admit that I've felt pretty beat down at times, while on my travels. Sometimes it has been hard to see what can be done, or, honestly: to see if there's

anything that can be done. And I've asked myself: Who's going to take on this battle for a better future?

For Hazel, the interest in fighting for the environment started four years ago, when she was nine years old. She needed to kill some time before school started up after the summer, and her mom sent her on a summer camp. Neither she nor Hazel knew much about the camp before she left.

– We talked about the climate, made t-shirts, played games, and also learned how to speak from a stage, Hazel tells me.

That last part lead to her being invited to hold appeals, which in turn lead to Julia Olson asking her whether she wanted to be one of the plaintiffs.

Hazel was never in doubt.
– It's a question of what you decide to think about, and what you decide is less important. And it's a question of deciding how to live based on what you know, she says.

All the kids have to witness in court. Hazel knows what she's going to talk about.

– I'm going to talk about forest fires. Last summer, my dad woke up because he couldn't breathe as smoke filled our house. He's got asthma, and he got so ill that he had to wear a mask indoors, and couldn't leave the house for days. I also had to wear a mask outdoors.

Hazel grows eager.
– We used to have a short fire season, but now it lasts for four months. There's never enough snow during winter anymore, so the ground grows too dry. What we're experiencing now, isn't forest fires. It's climate change.

We've passed the border between Oregon and California. Hazel looks out at the afternoon, as it slowly becomes evening. Green pines turn into black silhouettes on the hills. Soon, only the huge roadside billboards will light up the sky.

Besides Hazel sits Miko Vergun (16), who's also a plaintiff. To Miko, the fight for the environment is all about fairness. She was adopted from the Marshall Islands in the Pacific when she was only a few days old. She hasn't been back since, but she still feels strongly connected to her place of birth.

– It's not fair that I get to grow up in the wealthy United States, while the people on the Marshall Islands stay poor, and have to live with the consequences of climate change caused by the US and Europe, she says.

Miko has decided to study psychology when she finishes high school, for a very specific reason: She wants to help people who've been forced to leave their homes, countries and cultures because of climate change.

In arriving in a new country they might not only have left everything they own behind, but they may also feel like they loose their culture. That can be a very difficult and painful experience.

The Marshall Islands is Kiribati's neighbour in the Pacific, and the two small, low-lying island nations share a destiny. Maybe Miko will meet some of the youth I met in Kiribati, one day in the future?

Life and freedom

At 2:30 AM we finally reach Sacramento. The tired bunch of kids only get four and a half hours of sleep before they must get up and prepare for the work as climate ambassadors.

Miko sits down in a corner with her phone. Eyes on the phone camera, she uses an eyeliner to draw a broad, winged line along her lashes on each eyelid.

– At times I wish I was just a normal teenager. It's exhausting. But I can never take a break, she says.

Before joining the lawsuit and taking up climate activism, she used to be so shy that she hardly dared saying anything at all in front of others. Now she's ready for the stage.

Miko tells the school kids about the greenhouse effect and the atmosphere, about photosynthesis and the importance of trees, she talks of extreme weather, of how the ice melts and the seas rise, and about how Disneyland, Florida will be under water by 2100 if we don't act now. And she talks about the Marshall Islands, where she was born, and how they will be swallowed by the sea.

Some of the 30-or-so young kids in the audience twitch impatiently in their seats, but others listen in wide-eyed shock, mouths hanging open.

It's Isaac's turn to speak. 15 years old, he's got short dreads, black-rimmed glasses and red sneakers. Like his sister Miko, he's adopted, but he was born in the US.

Someone in the audience asks him why he travels around to talk about climate change.

– I don't always listen to the grown-ups. They've got their own plans, and can't always be trusted. When I see kids doing something, I'm more willing to do something myself. That's why I do this, he replies.

Later, the school kids practice teaching others about climate change. Isaac quietly slips out, and sits down on a low concrete wall, feeling the heat of the sun on his tired face.

– Being part of this lawsuit gives me hope, he says. – It used to be more of a family thing, I didn't know any young people who were climate activists.

He never used to tell anyone what he was doing, and never shared climate-related content on Facebook or Instagram. He was afraid that no-one would understand. And true enough, some people have reacted badly, and some papers have claimed that the kids were brain-washed. But it has gotten better. And being anonymous is not an option anymore, media from all over the world get in touch to hear about the lawsuit and the youth that lead it.

In the assembly room, the Californian kids are making posters. They write down different answers to the question: "How can we make the grown-ups take an active interest?" Answers: "Educate them", "Hunger strike", "Puppy eyes", "We have to show them that we care".

The kids' lawsuit invokes something called The Public Trust Doctrine, as well as the American Constitution. The Public Trust Doctrine states that the government of the country has the responsibility for the nature, on behalf of the citizens. By not doing enough to stop the climate change, the government is violating this legal principle. The kids also believe that the government is violating their constitutional right to life, freedom and property.

Golden Hills

The next morning, after yet another short night of sleep, the kids are tired. During lunch-break Miko is trying to catch up on some homework in maths. If it wasn't for the fact that she and the others have been absent from school quite a lot because of their activism, we would've stayed in California for one more night instead of starting the long drive back to Oregon late in the afternoon on Sunday. But that's what we'll have to do.

The low sunlight wraps the hills in a soft, golden glow. Pam, who's joined both as a parent and as an organizer, talks about the expression "The Golden Hills of California". It hints both to the beautiful afternoon light and to the actual gold in California.

– It's not beautiful! It's ugly, it's climate change! Miko shouts angrily at her mom from the back seat.

None of us grown-ups replies.

The last five years, California has faced the most severe draught in the history of the state. Several millions of trees have dried up. It's probably the driest period in 1200 years, and according to scientists it is mostly due to human-caused global warming. Last summer, the drought was finally relieved by some rain. Now it's autumn, and back to being dry.

The golden afternoon shifts to dark evening. The wind's increasing in strength. I'm driving, and strong gusts of wind makes driving the minibus uncomfortable.

We stop at a gas station. Pam fills the tank, and when she's back inside the minibus she's not able to close the door, because the wind is so strong. Isaac laughs as he films his mom struggling with the door.

The wind is strangely warm.

Finally, we reach the border to Oregon.

California on fire

The next day, we wake up to the news: California's on fire. Because of the hot, eastern desert winds, the flames reach an extreme strength. The winds throw the flames across the highway. With an intensity that no-one has ever seen before, the flames eat their way from the forests to the fields, to the gardens, to the animals, and to the people.

It burns for three weeks. And when it stops burning in the north, it starts in the south, and as 2017 comes to a close, huge parts of California is turned to ashes.

It's the biggest and deadliest forest fire in the history of California. The death rates are closing in on 50, more than a hundred people are injured, hundreds of thousands have been evacuated, and more than 11 000 buildings have burnt down. The economic toll of the fire will be at least 180 billion USD.

We grown-ups are shocked to learn of the fire, of how big it is, and how narrowly we escaped it. But Isaac, Miko and Hazel just shrug their shoulders. Like, what else did we grown-ups expect?

“You have to be smarter than we have been”

Where: Massachusetts, USA

Who: Elizabeth Kolbert, journalist and author

What: Elizabeth Kolbert is one of the world’s leading climate journalist. Her book *The Sixth Extinction* is counted as one of the most important non-fictional books of the past 100 years.

What has shocked you the most in your work as a climate journalist?
The fact that the world is losing so many species. It’s very frightening. I can give you an example from my own garden: In the summer, me and my sons used to capture a few butterfly caterpillars, to feed them and watch them pupate into chrysalides and then turn into monarch butterflies. But the last few years we haven’t been able to find a single caterpillar! And this isn’t a random story, it’s scientifically proven that the monarch butterflies has grown more and more rare. This is just one example, everyone who pays attention can observe how species disappear both on land and in the sea.

What is your opinion on the term “climate justice”?
It’s a fact that the people who are the least to blame for climate change, will be the ones to suffer the most from it. It is down to us, who are wealthy, to use less fossil fuels. But we don’t feel like it. And we’d rather not say out loud that we think it’s ok to not give a shit about the poor, or about future generations, even though that’s in fact what we do when we don’t cut back on fossil fuels. That’s the main reason for why we have so many people who deny that climate change is man-made: they know that they can’t say all of this, and then it’s easier to deny that human activities affect the climate.

What do you tell people that deny climate change?
If it wasn’t for humans, the world would now likely be entering a colder period. All evidence points toward the fact that humans have caused global warming. Basic science tells us that carbon dioxide is a greenhouse gas, and that letting out a lot of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere will cause the Earth to heat up. If you still believe that humans have nothing to do with climate change, it’s your responsibility to prove it.

What’s the greatest challenge today?
That might be to not give up. To all young people I want to say: I’m really sorry about what my generation leave you with. You’ll have to be way smarter than we have been.