

**My Grandmother Sends Her
Regards and Apologises**

Fredrik Backman is a Swedish blogger, columnist and author. His debut novel *A Man Called Ove* was a number 1 bestseller across Scandinavia and has sold over one million copies worldwide. *My Grandmother Sends Her Regards and Apologises*, Fredrik's second novel, also went straight to number 1 in Sweden on publication in 2014.

FREDRIK BACKMAN

My Grandmother Sends Her Regards and Apologises

Translated from the Swedish
by Henning Koch



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1

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*To the monkey and the frog. For an eternity of ten
thousand tales.*



1



TOBACCO

Every seven-year-old deserves a superhero. That's just how it is.

Anyone who doesn't agree needs their head examined.

That's what Elsa's granny says, at least.

Elsa is seven, going on eight. She knows she isn't especially good at being seven. She knows she's different. Her headmaster says she needs to 'fall into line' in order to achieve 'a better fit with her peers'. Other adults describe her as 'very grown-up for her age.' Elsa knows this is just another way of saying 'massively annoying for her age,' because they only tend to say this when she corrects them for mispronouncing 'déjà vu' or not being able to tell the difference between 'me' and 'I' at the end of a sentence. Smart-arses usually can't, hence the 'grown-up for her age' comment, generally said with a strained smile at her parents. As if she has a mental impairment, as if Elsa has shown them up by not being totally thick just because she's seven. And that's why she doesn't have any friends except Granny. Because all the other seven-year-olds in her school are as idiotic as seven-year-olds tend to be, but Elsa is different.

She shouldn't take any notice of what those muppets think, says Granny. Because all the best people are different – look at superheroes. After all, if superpowers were normal everyone would have them.

Granny is seventy-seven years old, going on seventy-eight. She's not very good at it either. You can tell she's old because

her face looks like newspaper stuffed into wet shoes, but no one ever accuses Granny of being grown-up for her age. 'Perky,' people sometimes say to Elsa's mum, looking either fairly worried or fairly angry as Mum sighs and asks how much she owes for the damages. Or when Granny's smoking at the hospital sets the fire alarm off and she starts ranting and raving about how 'everything *has to be* so bloody politically correct these days!' when the security guards make her extinguish her cigarette. Or that time she made a snowman in Britt-Marie and Kent's garden right under their balcony and dressed it up in grown-up clothes so it looked as if a person had fallen from the roof. Or that time those prim men wearing spectacles started ringing all the doorbells and wanted to talk about God and Jesus and heaven, and Granny stood on her balcony with her dressing gown flapping open, shooting at them with her paintball gun, and Britt-Marie couldn't quite decide if she was most annoyed about the paintball-gun thing or the not-wearing-anything-under-the-dressing-gown thing, but she reported both to the police just to be on the safe side.

Those are the times, Elsa supposes, that people find Granny perky for her age.

They also say that Granny is mad, but in actual fact she's a genius. It's just that she's a bit of a crackpot at the same time. She used to be a doctor, and she won prizes and journalists wrote articles about her and she went to all the most terrible places in the world when everyone else was getting out. She saved lives and fought evil everywhere on earth. As superheroes do.

But one day someone decided she was too old to save lives, even if Elsa quite strongly suspects what they really meant by 'too old' was 'too crazy.' Granny refers to this person as 'Society' and says it's only because everything has to be so bloody politically correct nowadays that she's no longer allowed to make incisions in people. And that it was really mainly about Society getting so bleeding fussy about the smoking ban in the operating theatres, and who could work under those sorts of conditions?

So now she's mainly at home driving Britt-Marie and Mum round the bend. Britt-Marie lives one floor down from Granny. And really Britt-Marie also lives one floor down from Elsa's mum, because Elsa's mum lives next door to Elsa's granny. And Elsa obviously also lives next door to Granny, because Elsa lives with her mum. Except every other weekend, when she lives with Dad and Lisette. And of course George is also Granny's neighbour, because he lives with Mum. It's a bit all over the place.

But anyway, to get back to the point: life-saving and driving people nuts are Granny's superpowers. Which perhaps makes her a bit of a *dysfunctional* superhero. Elsa knows this because she looked up 'dysfunctional' on Wikipedia. People of Granny's age describe Wikipedia as 'an encyclopaedia, but on the net!' Encyclopaedias are what Elsa describes as 'Wikipedia, but analogue.' Elsa has checked 'dysfunctional' in both places and it means that something is not functioning quite as it's supposed to. Which is one of Elsa's favourite things about her granny.

But maybe not today. Because it's half past one in the morning and Elsa is fairly tired and would really like to go back to bed. Except that's not going to happen, because Granny's been throwing turds at a policeman.

It's a little complicated.

Elsa looks around the little rectangular room and yawns listlessly and so widely that she looks like she's trying to swallow her own head.

'I *did* tell you not to climb the fence,' she mutters, checking her watch.

Granny doesn't answer. Elsa takes off her Gryffindor scarf and puts it in her lap. She was born on Boxing Day seven years ago (almost eight). The same day some German scientists recorded the strongest ever emission of gamma radiation from a magnetar over the Earth. Admittedly Elsa doesn't know what a magnetar is, but it's some kind of neutron star. And it sounds

a little like ‘Megatron,’ which is the name of the evil one in *Transformers*, which is what simpletons who don’t read enough quality literature call ‘a children’s programme.’ In actual fact the *Transformers* are robots, but if you look at it academically they could also be counted as superheroes. Elsa is very keen on both *Transformers* and neutron stars and she imagines that an ‘emission of gamma radiation’ would look a bit like that time Granny spilled Fanta on Elsa’s iPhone and tried to dry it out in the toaster. And Granny says it makes Elsa special to have been born on a day like that. And being special is the best way of being different.

Granny is busy distributing small heaps of tobacco all over the wooden table in front of her and rolling them into rustling cigarette papers.

‘I said I told you not to climb the fence!’

Granny makes a snorting sound and searches the pockets of her much too large overcoat for a lighter. She doesn’t seem to be taking any of this very seriously, mainly because she never seems to take anything seriously. Except when she wants to smoke and can’t find a lighter.

‘It was a tiny little fence, for God’s sake!’ she says breezily. ‘It’s nothing to get worked up about.’

‘Don’t you “for God’s sake” me! You’re the one who threw shit at the police.’

‘Stop fussing. You sound like your mother. Do you have a lighter?’

‘I’m seven!’

‘How long are you going to use that as an excuse?’

‘Until I’m not seven any more?’

Granny mumbles something that sounds like ‘Not a crime to ask, is it?’ and continues riffling through her pockets.

‘I don’t think you can smoke in here, actually,’ Elsa informs her, sounding calmer now and fingering the long rip in the Gryffindor scarf.

‘Course you can smoke. We’ll just open a window.’

Elsa looks sceptically at the windows.

'I don't think they're the sort of windows that open.'

'Why not?'

'They've got bars on them.'

Granny glares with dissatisfaction at the windows. And then at Elsa.

'So now you can't even smoke at the police station. Jesus. It's like being in 1984.'

Elsa yawns again. 'Can I borrow your phone?'

'What for?'

'To check something.'

'Where?'

'Online.'

'You invest too much time on that internet stuff.'

'You mean spend.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'What I mean is, you don't use "invest" in that way. You wouldn't go round saying, "I invested two hours in reading *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*", would you?'

Granny just rolls her eyes and hands her the phone. 'Did you ever hear about the girl who blew up because she did too much thinking?'

The policeman who shuffles into the room looks very, very tired.

'I want to call my lawyer,' Granny demands at once.

'I want to call my mum!' Elsa demands at once.

'In that case I want to call my lawyer first!' Granny insists.

The policeman sits down opposite them and fidgets with a little pile of papers.

'Your mother is on her way,' he says to Elsa, with a sigh.

Granny makes the sort of dramatic gasp that only Granny knows how to do.

'Why did you call *her*? Are you mad?' she protests, as if the policeman just told her he was going to leave Elsa in the forest to be raised by a pack of wolves. 'She'll be bloody livid!'

'We have to call the child's legal guardian,' the policeman explains calmly.

'I am also the child's legal guardian! I am the child's *grandmother!*' Granny fumes, rising slightly out of her chair and shaking her unlit cigarette menacingly.

'It's half past one in the morning. Someone has to take care of the child.'

'Yes, me! *I'm* taking care of the child!' she splutters.

The policeman makes a fairly strained attempt to gesture amicably across the interrogation room.

'And how do you feel it's going so far?'

Granny looks slightly offended.

'Well . . . everything was going just fine until you started chasing me.'

'You broke into a zoo.'

'It was a *tiny little* fence—'

'There's no such thing as a "tiny" burglary.'

Granny shrugs and makes a brushing movement over the table, as if she thinks they've stretched this out long enough. The policeman notices the cigarette and eyes it dubiously.

'Oh, come on! I can smoke in here, can't I?'

He shakes his head sternly. Granny leans forward, looks him deep in the eyes and smiles.

'Can't you make an exception? Not even for little old me?'

Elsa gives Granny a little shove in the side and switches to their secret language. Because Granny and Elsa have a secret language, as all grannies must have with their grandchildren, because by law that's a requirement, says Granny. Or at least it should be.

'Drop it Granny. It's, like, illegal to flirt with policemen.'

'Says who?'

'Well, the police for starters!' Elsa replies.

'The police are supposed to be there for the sake of the *citizens*,' Granny hisses. 'I pay my taxes, you know.'

The policeman looks at them as you do when a seven-year-old and a seventy-seven-year-old start arguing in a secret language in a police station in the middle of the night. Then Granny's eyelashes tremble alluringly at him as she once again

points pleadingly at her cigarette, but when he shakes his head, Granny leans back in the chair and exclaims in normal language:

‘I mean, this political correctness! It’s worse than apartheid for smokers in this bloody country nowadays!’

‘How do you spell that?’ asks Elsa.

‘What?’ Granny sighs as you do when precisely the whole world is against you, even though you pay tax.

‘That *apartight* thing,’ says Elsa.

‘A-p-p-a-r-t-e-j-d,’ Granny spells.

Elsa immediately Googles it on Granny’s phone. It takes her a few attempts – Granny’s always been a rubbish speller. Meanwhile the policeman explains that they’ve decided to let them go, but Granny will be called in at a later date to explain the burglary and ‘other aggravations’.

‘What aggravations?’

‘Driving illegally, to begin with.’

‘What do you mean, illegally? That’s my car! I don’t need permission to drive my own car, do I?’

‘No,’ replies the policeman patiently, ‘But you need a driving licence.’

Granny throws out her arms in exasperation. She’s just launched into another rant about this being a Big Brother society when Elsa whacks the phone sharply against the table.

‘It’s got NOTHING to do with that apartheid thing!!! You compared not being able to smoke with apartheid and it’s not the same thing at all. It’s not even CLOSE!’

Granny waves her hand resignedly.

‘I meant it was . . . you know, more or less like that—’

‘It isn’t at all!’

‘It was a metaphor, for God’s sake—’

‘A bloody crap metaphor!’

‘How would you know?’

‘WIKIPEDIA!’

Granny turns in defeat to the policeman. ‘Do your children carry on like this?’ The policeman looks uncomfortable.

‘We . . . don’t let the children surf the net unsupervised . . .’

Granny stretches out her arms towards Elsa, a gesture that seems to say ‘You see!’ Elsa just shakes her head and crosses her arms very hard.

‘Granny, just say sorry for throwing turds at the police, and we can go home,’ she snorts in the secret language, though still very expressly upset about that whole apartheid thing.

‘Sorry,’ says Granny in the secret language.

‘To the police, not me, you muppet.’

‘There’ll be no apologising to fascists here. I pay my taxes. And *you’re* the muppet.’ Granny sulks.

‘Takes one to know one.’

Then they both sit with their arms crossed, demonstratively looking away from each other until Granny nods at the policeman and says in normal language:

‘Would you be kind enough to let my spoilt granddaughter know that if she takes this attitude she’s quite welcome to walk home?’

‘Tell *her* I’m going home with Mum and *she’s* the one who can walk!’ Elsa replies at once.

‘Tell HER she can—’

The policeman stands up without a word, walks out of the room and closes the door behind him, as if intending to go into another room and bury his head in a large, soft cushion and yell as loud as he can.

‘Now look what you did,’ says Granny.

‘Look what YOU did!’

Eventually a heavysset policewoman with piercing green eyes comes in instead. It doesn’t seem to be the first time she’s run into Granny, because she smiles in that tired way so typical of people who know Granny, and says: ‘You have to stop doing this, we also have real criminals to worry about.’ Granny just mumbles, ‘Why don’t *you* stop doing this?’ And then they’re allowed to go home.

Standing on the pavement waiting for her mother, Elsa fingers the rip in her scarf. It goes right through the Gryffindor emblem.

She tries as hard as she can not to cry, but doesn't make much of a success of it.

'Ah come on, your mum can mend that,' says Granny, trying to be cheerful, giving her a little punch on the shoulder.

Elsa looks up anxiously.

'And, you know . . . we can tell your mum the scarf got torn when you were trying to stop me climbing the fence to get to the monkeys.'

Elsa nods and runs her fingers over the scarf again. It didn't get torn when Granny was climbing the fence. It got torn at school when three older girls who hate Elsa without Elsa really understanding why got hold of her outside the canteen and hit her and tore her scarf and threw it down the toilet. Their jeers are still echoing round Elsa's head. Granny notices the look in her eyes and leans forward before whispering in their secret language:

'One day we'll take those losers at your school to Miamas and throw them to the lions!'

Elsa dries her eyes with the back of her hand and smiles faintly.

'I'm not stupid, Granny,' she whispers. 'I know you did all that stuff tonight to make me forget about what happened at school.'

Granny kicks at some gravel and clears her throat.

'I didn't want you to remember this day because of the scarf. So I thought instead you could remember it as the day your Granny broke into a zoo—'

'And escaped from a hospital,' Elsa says with a grin.

'And escaped from a hospital,' says Granny with a grin.

'And threw turds at the police.'

'Actually it was soil! Or mainly soil, anyway.'

'Changing memories is a good superpower, I suppose.'

Granny shrugs.

'If you can't get rid of the bad you have to top it up with more goody stuff.'

'That's not a word.'

‘I know.’

‘Thanks Granny,’ says Elsa and leans her head against her arm.

And then Granny just nods and whispers: ‘We’re knights of the kingdom of Miamas, we have to do our duty.’

Because all seven-year-olds deserve superheroes.

And anyone who doesn’t agree needs their head examined.