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**Opening Extract from...**

## **My Grandmother Sends Her Regards and Apologies**

Written by Fredrik Backman

Translated by Henning Koch

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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.

## 2



### MONKEY

Mum picked them up at the police station. You could tell that she was very angry, but she was controlled and full of composure and never even raised her voice, because Mum is everything Elsa's granny is not. Elsa fell asleep almost before she'd fastened her seat belt. By the time they were on the motorway, she was already in Miamas.

Miamas is Elsa and Granny's secret kingdom. It is one of six kingdoms in the Land-of-Almost-Awake. Granny came up with it when Elsa was small and Mum and Dad had just got divorced and Elsa was afraid of sleeping because she'd read on the internet about children who died in their sleep. Granny is good at coming up with things. So when Dad moved out of the flat and everyone was upset and tired, Elsa sneaked out of the front door every night and scampered across the landing in her bare feet into Granny's flat, and then she and Granny crawled into the big wardrobe that never stopped growing, and then they half-closed their eyes and set off.

Because you don't need to close your eyes to get to the Land-of-Almost-Awake. That's the whole point of it, sort of thing. You only need to be *almost* asleep. And in those last few seconds when your eyes are closing, when the mists come rolling in across the boundary between what you think and what you just know, that's when you set off. You ride into the Land-of-Almost-Awake on the back of cloud animals, because that's the only way of getting there. The cloud animals come in through

Granny's balcony door and pick her and Elsa up, and then they fly higher and higher and higher until Elsa sees all the magical creatures that live in the Land-of-Almost-Awake: the enphants and regretters and the Noween and wurses and snow-angels and princes and princesses and knights. The cloud animals soar over the endless dark forests, where Wolfheart and all the other monsters live, then they sweep down through the blindingly bright colours and soft winds to the city gates of the kingdom of Miamas.

It's difficult to say for sure whether Granny is a bit odd because she's spent too much time in Miamas, or Miamas is a bit odd because Granny's spent too much time there. But this is the source of all of Granny's amazing, monstrous, magical fairy tales.

Granny says that the kingdom has been called Miamas for an eternity of at least ten thousand fairy tales, but Elsa knows that Granny made this up because Elsa couldn't say 'pyjamas' when she was small and used to say 'mjasas' instead. Except of course Granny insists that she never made up a bloody thing and Miamas and the other five kingdoms in the Land-of-Almost-Awake are not only real, but actually far *more* real than the world we're in now, where 'everyone is an economist and drinks lactose-free milk and makes a right carry-on.' Granny isn't particularly good at living in the real world. There are too many rules. She cheats when she plays Monopoly and drives Renault in the bus lane and steals those yellow carrier bags from IKEA and won't stand behind the line when she's at the conveyor belt at the airport. And when she goes to the toilet she leaves the door open.

But she does tell the very best fairy tales ever, and for that Elsa can forgive quite a few character defects.

All fairy tales that are worth something come from Miamas, says Granny. The other five kingdoms in the Land-of-Almost-Awake are busy doing other things: Mirevas is the kingdom where they

stand guard over dreams, Miploris is the kingdom where they store all sorrow, Mimovas is where music comes from, Miaudacas is where courage comes from and Mibatalos is the kingdom where the bravest warriors, who fought against the fearsome shadows in the War-Without-End, were raised.

But Miamas is Granny and Elsa's favourite kingdom, because there storytelling is considered the noblest profession of all. The currency there is imagination; instead of buying something with coins you buy it with a good story. Libraries aren't known as libraries but as 'banks' and every fairy tale is worth a fortune. Granny spends millions every night: tales full of dragons and trolls and kings and queens and witches. And shadows. Because all imaginary worlds have to have terrible enemies, and in the Land-of-Almost-Awake the enemies are the shadows, because the shadows want to kill the imagination. And if we're going to talk about shadows, we must mention Wolfheart. He was the one who defeated the shadows in the War-Without-End. He was the first and greatest superhero Elsa ever heard about.

Elsa was knighted in Miamas; she gets to ride cloud animals and have her own sword. She hasn't once been afraid to fall asleep since Granny started taking her there each night. Because in Miamas no one says girls can't be knights, and the mountains reach up to the sky, and the campfires never go out, and no one tries to shred your Gryffindor scarf.

Of course, Granny also says that no one in Miamas closes the door when they go to the toilet. An open-door policy is more or less legally enforceable in every situation across the Land-of-Almost-Awake. But Elsa is pretty sure she is describing another version of the truth there. That's what Granny calls lies: 'Other versions of the truth.' So when Elsa wakes up in a chair in Granny's room at the hospital the next morning, Granny is on the toilet with the door open, while Elsa's mum is in the hall, and Granny is in the midst of telling another version of the truth. It's not going all that well. The real truth, after all, is that



Granny escaped from hospital last night and Elsa sneaked out of the flat while Mum and George were sleeping, and they went to the zoo together in Renault, and Granny climbed the fence. Elsa quietly admits to herself that it now seems a little irresponsible to have done all this with a seven-year-old in the middle of the night.

Granny, whose clothes are lying in a pile on the floor and still very literally smelling a bit monkey-ish, is claiming that when she was climbing the fence by the monkey cage and the guard shouted at her, she thought he could have been a 'lethal rapist', and *this* was why she started throwing muck at him and the police. Mum shakes her head in a very controlled way and says Granny is making all this up. Granny doesn't like it when people say that things are made up, and reminds Mum she prefers the less derogatory term 'reality-challenged'. Mum clearly disagrees but controls herself. Because she is everything that Granny isn't.

'This is one of the worst things you've done,' Mum calls out grimly towards the toilet.

'I find that very, very unlikely, my dear daughter,' Granny answers from within, unconcerned.

Mum responds by methodically running through all the trouble Granny has caused. Granny says the only reason she's getting so worked up is that she doesn't have a sense of humour. And then Mum says Granny should stop behaving like an irresponsible child. And then Granny says: 'Do you know where pirates park their cars?' And when Mum doesn't answer, Granny yells from the toilet, 'In a gAAARRRage!' Mum just sighs, massages her temples and closes the toilet door. This makes Granny really, really, really angry because she doesn't like feeling enclosed when she's on the toilet.

She's been in hospital for two weeks now, but absconds almost every day and picks up Elsa and they have ice cream or go to the flat when Mum isn't home and make a soap-sud slide on the landing. Or break into zoos. Basically whatever appeals to her, whenever. But Granny doesn't consider this to

be an ‘escape’ in the proper sense of the word, because she believes there has to be some basic aspect of challenge to the whole thing if it’s to count as an escape – a dragon or a series of traps or at least a wall and a respectably sized moat, and so on. Mum and the hospital staff don’t quite agree with her on this point.

A nurse comes into the room and quietly asks for a moment of Mum’s time. She gives Mum a piece of paper and Mum writes something on it and returns it, and then the nurse leaves. Granny has had nine different nurses since she was admitted. Seven of these she refused to cooperate with, and two refused to cooperate with her, one of them because Granny said he had a ‘nice arse’. Granny insists it was a compliment to his arse, not to him, and he shouldn’t make such a fuss about it. Then Mum told Elsa to put on her headphones, but Elsa still heard their argument about the difference between ‘sexual harassment’ and ‘basic appreciation of a perfectly splendid arse’.

They argue a lot, Mum and Granny. They’ve been arguing for as long as Elsa can remember. About everything. If Granny is a dysfunctional superhero, then Mum is very much a fully operational one. Their interaction is a bit like Cyclops and Wolverine in *X-Men*, Elsa often thinks, and whenever she has those types of thoughts she wishes she had someone around who could understand what she means. People around Elsa don’t read enough quality literature and certainly don’t understand that *X-Men* comics count as precisely that. To such philistines Elsa would explain, very slowly, that X-Men are indeed superheroes, but first and foremost they are mutants, and there is a certain academic difference. Anyway, without putting too fine a point on it, she would sum it up by saying that Granny and Mum’s superhero powers are in direct opposition. As if Spider-Man, one of Elsa’s favourite superheroes, had an antagonist called Slip-Up Man whose superpower was that he couldn’t even climb onto a bench. But in a good way.

Basically, Mum is orderly and Granny is chaotic. Elsa once read that ‘Chaos is God’s neighbour’, but Mum said if Chaos

had moved onto God's landing it was only because Chaos couldn't put up with living next door to Granny any more.

Mum has files and calendars for everything and her telephone plays a little jingle fifteen minutes before she has a meeting. Granny writes down things she needs to remember directly on the wall. And not only when she's at home, but on any wall, wherever she is. It's not a perfect system, because in order to remember a particular task she needs to be in exactly the same place where she wrote it down. When Elsa pointed out this flaw, Granny replied indignantly that 'There's still a smaller risk of me losing a kitchen wall than your mother losing that poxy telephone!' But then Elsa pointed out that Mum never lost anything. And then Granny rolled her eyes and sighed: 'No, no, but your mother is the exception, of course. It only applies to . . . you know . . . people who aren't perfect.'

Perfection is Mum's superpower. She's not as much fun as Granny, but on the other hand she always knows where Elsa's Gryffindor scarf is. 'Nothing is ever really gone until your mum can't find it,' Mum often whispers into Elsa's ear when she's wrapping it round her neck.

Elsa's mum is the boss. 'Not just a job, but a lifestyle,' Granny often snorts. Mum is not someone you go with, she's someone you follow. Whereas Elsa's granny is more the type you're dodging rather than following, and she never found a scarf in her life.

Granny doesn't like bosses, which is a particular problem at this hospital, because Mum is even more of a boss here. Because she is the boss here.

'You're overreacting, Ulrika, good God!' Granny calls out through the toilet door just as another nurse comes in and Mum again writes on a bit of paper and mentions some numbers. Mum gives her a controlled smile; the nurse smiles back nervously. And then things go silent inside the toilet for a long while and Mum suddenly looks anxious, as one does when things go quiet around Granny for too long. And then she sniffs the air

and pulls the door open. Granny is sitting naked on the toilet seat with her legs comfortably crossed. She waves her smouldering cigarette at Mum.

‘Hello? A little privacy, perhaps?’

Mum massages her temples again, takes a deep breath and rests her hand on her belly. Granny nods intently at her, waving her cigarette at the bump.

‘You know stress isn’t good for my new grandchild. Remember you’re worrying for two now!’

‘I’m not the one who seems to have forgotten,’ replies Mum curtly.

‘Touché,’ Granny mumbles and inhales deeply.

(That’s one of those words Elsa understands without even having to know what it means.)

‘Does it not occur to you how dangerous that is for the baby, not to mention Elsa?’ she says, pointing at the cigarette.

‘Don’t make such a fuss! People have been smoking since the dawn of time and there have been perfectly healthy babies born the whole way through. Your generation forgets that humanity has lived for thousands of years without allergy tests and crap like that before you showed up and started thinking you were so important. When we were living in caves, do you think they used to put mammoth skins through a ninety-degree machine-wash programme?’

‘Did they have cigarettes back then?’ asks Elsa.

Granny says, ‘Don’t you start.’ Mum puts her hand on her belly. Elsa is unsure if she’s doing it because Halfie is kicking in there or because she wants to cover her-his ears. Mum is Halfie’s mum but George is Halfie’s dad, so Halfie is Elsa’s half-sibling. Or she-he will be, anyway. She-he will be a proper full-sized human; a half-sibling, but not in any way half a person, Elsa has been promised. She had a couple of confused days until she understood the difference. ‘Considering how smart you are, you can certainly be a bit of a thickie sometimes,’ Granny burst out when Elsa asked her about it. And then they bickered for nearly three hours, which was almost a new bickering record for them.

‘I only wanted to show her the monkeys, Ulrika,’ mumbles Granny as she extinguishes the cigarette in the sink.

‘I don’t have the energy for this . . .’ Mum answers with resignation, although she’s absolutely controlled about it, and then goes into the corridor to sign a piece of paper covered in numbers.

Granny really did want to show Elsa the monkeys. They’d been arguing on the phone the night before about whether there was a certain type of monkey that slept standing up. Granny was wrong, of course, because it said on Wikipedia and everything. And then Elsa had mentioned the scarf and what had happened at school, which was when Granny decided that they were going to the zoo, and Elsa sneaked out while Mum and George were sleeping.

Mum disappears down the corridor, her head buried in her phone, while Elsa climbs into Granny’s bed so they can play Monopoly. Granny steals money from the bank and, when Elsa catches her out, also steals the car so she can skip town. After a while Mum comes back looking tired and tells Elsa they have to go home now, because Granny has to rest. And Elsa hugs Granny for a long, long, long time.

‘When are you coming home?’ asks Elsa.

‘Probably tomorrow!’ Granny promises chirpily.

Because that is what she always says. And then she pushes the hair out of Elsa’s eyes and when Mum disappears into the corridor again, Granny suddenly looks very serious and says in their secret language: ‘I have an important assignment for you.’

Elsa nods, because Granny always gives her assignments in the secret language, only spoken by initiates of the Land-of-Almost-Awake. Elsa always gets them done. Because that is what a knight of Miamas has to do. Anything except buying cigarettes or frying meat, which is where Elsa draws the line. Because they make her feel sick. Even knights have to have certain principles.

Granny reaches down next to the bed and picks up a big plastic bag from the floor. There are no cigarettes or meat in it. Just sweets.

‘You have to give the chocolate to Our Friend.’

It takes a few seconds before Elsa understands exactly what friend she is referring to. And she stares at Granny with alarm.

‘Have you gone MAD? You want me to DIE?’

Granny rolls her eyes.

‘Don’t faff about. Are you telling me a knight of Miamas is too scared to complete a quest?’

Elsa gives her an offended glare.

‘That’s very mature of you to threaten me with that.’

‘Very mature of you to say “mature”.’

Elsa snatches up the plastic bag. It’s full of small, crinkly packets of Daim chocolate. Granny says, ‘It’s important that you remove the wrapper from each piece. Otherwise he gets cross.’

Elsa peers sulkily into the bag.

‘He doesn’t know me, though . . .’

Granny snorts so loudly that it sounds as if she’s blowing her nose.

‘Course he knows! Good God. Just tell him your granny sends her regards and apologises.’

Elsa raises her eyebrows.

‘Apologises for what?’

‘For not bringing him any sweets for days and days,’ Granny replies, as if this was the most natural thing in the world.

Elsa looks into the bag again.

‘It’s irresponsible to send out your only grandchild on a mission like this, Granny. It’s insane. He could actually kill me.’

‘Stop faffing about.’

‘Stop faffing about yourself!’

Granny grins; Elsa can’t help but grin back. Granny lowers her voice.

‘You have to give Our Friend the chocolate secretly. Britt-Marie mustn’t see. Wait till they have that residents’ meeting tomorrow evening and then sneak over to him.’

Elsa nods, though she’s terrified of Our Friend and still thinks it’s pretty irresponsible to send a seven-year-old on such a perilous

mission. But Granny grabs her fingers and squeezes them in her hands like she always does, and it's difficult to be afraid when someone does that. They hug again.

'See you, oh proud knight of Miamas,' Granny whispers in her ear.

Granny never says 'goodbye', only 'see you'.

While Elsa is putting on her jacket in the hall she hears Mum and Granny talking about 'the treatment'. And then Mum tells Elsa to listen to her headphones. And that's what Elsa does. She put the headphones on her wish list last Christmas and was very particular about Mum and Granny splitting the cost, because it was only fair.

Whenever Mum and Granny start arguing, Elsa turns up the volume and pretends they're both actresses in a silent movie. Elsa is the sort of child who learned early in life that it's easier to make your way if you get to choose your own soundtrack.

The last thing she hears is Granny asking when she can pick up Renault at the police station. Renault is Granny's car. Granny says she won it in a game of poker. It obviously should be 'a' Renault, but Elsa learned that the car was a Renault when she was small, before she understood that there were also other cars with the same name. So she still says 'Renault' as if it's a name.

And it's a very suitable name, because Granny's Renault is old and rusty and French and when you change gears it makes an ungodly racket, like an old Frenchman with a cough. Elsa knows that because sometimes when Granny is driving Renault while smoking and eating a kebab, she only has her knees to steer with, and then she stamps on the clutch and shouts 'NOW!' and then Elsa has to change gear.

Elsa misses doing that.

Mum tells Granny that she won't be able to go and pick up Renault. Granny protests that it's actually her car; Mum just reminds her that it's illegal to drive without a licence. And then Granny calls Mum 'young lady' and tells her she's

got driving licences in six countries. Mum asks in a restrained voice if one of these countries happens to be the one they live in, after which Granny goes into a sulk while a nurse takes some blood from her.

Elsa waits by the lift. She doesn't like needles, irrespective of whether they're being stuck into her own arm or Granny's. She sits reading *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* on the iPad for about the twelfth time. It's the Harry Potter book she likes the least; that's why she's read it so few times.

Only when Mum comes to get her and they're about to go down to the car does Elsa remember that she's left her Gryffindor scarf in the hall outside Granny's room. So she runs back.

Granny is sitting on the edge of the bed with her back against the door, talking on the phone. She doesn't see her, and Elsa realises Granny is talking to her lawyer, because she's instructing him about what sort of beer she wants the next time he comes to the hospital. Elsa knows that the lawyer smuggles in the beer in large encyclopaedias. Granny says she needs them for her 'research', but in fact they are hollowed out inside with beer-bottle-shaped slots. Elsa takes her scarf from the hook and is just about to call out to Granny when she hears her voice fill with emotion as she says, into the telephone:

'She's my grandchild, Marcel. May the heavens bless her little head. I've never met such a good and clever girl. The responsibility must be left to her. She's the only one who can make the right decision.'

There's silence for a moment. And then Granny goes on determinedly:

'I KNOW she's only a child, Marcel! But she's a damn sight smarter than all the other fools put together! And this is my will and you're my lawyer. Just do what I say.'

Elsa stands in the hall holding her breath. And only when Granny says, 'Because I don't WANT TO tell her yet! Because all seven-year-olds deserve superheroes!' – only then does Elsa turn round to quietly slip away, her Gryffindor scarf damp with tears.



And the last thing she hears Granny say on the telephone is:  
'I don't want Elsa to know that I am going to die because all seven-year-olds deserve superheroes, Marcel. And one of their superpowers ought to be that they can't get cancer.'