

# My Raging Grandma

By Carolyn Pogue

## Part I: Too Much to Think About

### Monday

Grandma usually comes to visit at Easter, but last year she came in February. It was because of the war in Iraq.

The war hadn't even started yet, but everyone was talking about it. One morning I went into the kitchen. The radio was playing softly. Mom was staring out the window, still as a statue. When I touched her elbow she jumped.

"You startled me, Andrea Jane," she said. She smiled, even though there were tears on the edges of her eyes. "I was just thinking about other mothers and other daughters in faraway places."

"Iraq?" I asked.

She nodded. You couldn't turn on the television or radio or surf the Net or go to school or church or anywhere without hearing *somebody* say *something* about it. It was like a fog. Fear fog. I hate that.

"It will be better when Grandma's here," I said. Grandma is my dad's mother. She lives in Victoria, British Columbia, where there are amazing things like killer whales, sea otters, totem poles—and Raging Grannies. That's a peace group.

When I was six years old, Grandma came for her regular visit. On Sunday after church she took forever talking to people during coffee hour. At home she said, "I'd like to stay on an extra week. Would that be alright?"

Mom said, "Of course! We love having you."

Dad took off his glasses and rubbed his forehead. Grandma kept right on talking. "We're going to start a Raging Grannies group right here in town," she said.

Mom smiled. Dad didn't.



"You remember I'm working for the city now, don't you?" he asked. "A low profile might be best. Just for now, I mean."

Then Grandma took off *her* glasses and leaned forward. That's when Mom took my hand and asked me to walk to the corner store with her.

When we came back, Grandma was phoning names in our church directory. Dad was on his way to the photocopy place with song lyrics from *The Raging Grannies Songbook*. That was the start of the Raging Grannies group here. The Grannies dress up in old-fashioned granny costumes and sing hilarious songs about peace, human rights, poverty, and the environment.

After only one week the Grannies performed at a demonstration against factory farms. Factory farms are where animals are jammed together in cages. Environmentalists say rivers get polluted if they are near these factory farms because there are too many animals in one place.

When Grandma got on the bus to go back to Victoria, Dad said, "Congratulations on not getting arrested, Mom!"

"What a thing to say to your old mother!" she said, and kissed him on his bald spot.

Ever since, each time she comes to visit, Grandma always saves some time to meet with the Raging Grannies. Whenever they have a gig, I go along to cheer for them. I guess she'll meet with them again this time, but with all the homework I have to do, I don't know how much time I'll have to spend with Grandma. And with the war and everything, it's hard to concentrate. Things are more complicated now.

Mom interrupted my thoughts. "Are you alright?" she asked.

"Fine, Mom," I said.

But was I fine? My best friend Erica has a brother who wants to join the military. She's afraid if he does, he'll have to fight. At school, a girl named Jessica tells everyone we have to fight evil.

"We should bomb Iraq before Iraq bombs us," she says.

Fatima is in our class, too. Her grandma still lives in Iraq. She never says much at all these days.

Our teacher, Mr. Adams, reminded me today that I have an assignment due about Flag Day. I haven't even started the research.

On top of all that, at Sunday school last week, Andrew had a black eye. When I asked him what happened, he said a kid at his school hit him and called him a sissy.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because I said war is a stupid way to solve a problem. He said fighting was fun and hit me."

"Blessed are the peacemakers," our Sunday school teacher wrote on the flipchart. Ms. Powell said we were going to scrap our regular lesson and just talk about peacemakers. She asked us to name all the peacemakers we could think of.

Andrew said, "Jesus."

I said, "Gandhi," because I saw the movie once.

But then we ran out of names. So, on top of everything, Ms. Powell gave us Sunday school homework! She asked each of us to bring the name of a peacemaker next week.

It feels like there's too much to think about. Mom staring out windows. Dad nervous about his mother's visit. War. Homework. What I'd really like to do is take a good book, hide under the covers with a flashlight, and read. Adults get on my nerves sometimes.

## **Part II: Grandma Arrives**

### **Tuesday**

There was so much snow in Roger's Pass through the Rockies that Grandma's bus was late.

"We pulled over and waited for the snow ploughs to clear a path," Grandma said. "I passed out song sheets and got people singing."

Dad laughed. "Some of your revolutionary songs, Mom?"

Grandma laughed, too. "Nothing too scary. Just a few anti-war tunes."

Dad rolled his eyes and we drove home. By the time we arrived, there were nine phone messages on the answering machine for Grandma.

Grandma only comes twice a year, so she's got lots to do when she's here. If she isn't having an adventure with me or my parents, she's with friends she's met at church or the wild women in the Raging Grannies. Some of these are the same people.

I went up to my room to think about my Flag Day assignment. I stared at the red and white maple leaf flag on my bulletin board. What could I say about it? We weren't like the Americans, always saluting it or having it burned by people who were mad at them. We didn't have it on teabags like the British. It wasn't full of symbols, like the provincial



flag of Alberta. What could I say about two bars and a leaf? When Mom called me for dinner I wasn't much further ahead.

While we were having dessert, Grandma took an envelope from her purse. Inside was a thick silver chain and three little boxes.

"This chain belonged to my mother," she said. "It's time to pass it on."

Each small blue box contained a silver symbol to hang on the chain—a cross, a maple leaf, and a dove.

"Symbols of peace, Andrea Jane, for these troubled times," she said.

I threaded the dove on the chain first. I know about this symbol. I've seen it around the church all my life. It's on the United Church crest. It's in pictures of Jesus' baptism and Noah's Ark, and on stained-glass windows.

I know the cross, too. Who doesn't? It stands for Jesus, peacemaker. But the maple leaf? I know there's one on the church crest, but how is it a symbol of peace?

"For Canada," Grandma said, "and in honour of Lester Pearson."

What was she talking about?

"Aren't they teaching peace at school these days?" Grandma asked.

And that's how I got two pieces of homework done at the same time. Because Grandma stood up and made a little speech:

"Lester Pearson was a P.K.—a preacher's kid. His Dad was a Methodist minister. Methodists are one of the ancestors of the United Church."

I nodded, pretending I already knew that. I was waiting for the maple leaf, something I could use for my Flag Day assignment.

"He was given the Nobel Peace Prize in 1957," Grandma continued. "Pearson was the very first person to think of having soldiers keep the peace instead of just kill people. The idea was tried out in Egypt and it worked! Later, he became the prime minister."

She looked at me to see if I already knew the prime ministers of Canada. I nodded again. Well, I sort of remember them.

"He helped Canada get our very own flag, the one we have now. Every year on February 15th, we celebrate Flag Day to remember him and to think about Canada as a nation that works for peace!" finished Grandma.

Mom and Dad clapped and cheered and gave Grandma a standing ovation. Grandma laughed and stood up to bow. I ran to get my notebook and a pen.

In bed that night, I thanked God for grandmothers. Things were looking up, I thought. But then I thought again. What would happen if there *was* war in Iraq? What about my

friend Fatima, whose grandma lives in Iraq? What would Canada do? If Erica's brother did join the military, would he have to fight?

### **Part III: The Demonstration**

#### **Friday, Valentine's Day**

"Happy Valentine's Day," Mom said.

She had set the breakfast table with a red tablecloth and put red cinnamon heart candies beside the cranberry juice jug. Mom held up the newspaper. She had circled an article and drawn big red hearts around it.

"Worldwide peace demonstration" the headline read.

"This is history in the making!" said Grandma, "and we're part of it!" She gave Mom and me a big hug.

"The demonstration is tomorrow, the 15th. What a great way to celebrate Flag Day!" said Mom, putting cereal bowls on the table.

Grandma sat down and poured granola into her bowl. "This is just the beginning, Andrea Jane. From now on, when the drums of war begin to beat, you will also hear the drums of peace!"

Mom started making a list. "I need some blue paint and bristol board for the signs. What else?"

Dad came in and poured coffee. "I may be late tonight," he said. "We have to finalize the security plans with the mayor. Extra police. Barricades. Checking the parade route again."

"It will be a peaceful demonstration against war," Grandma said. "I don't think there will be any violence."

Dad just nodded.

I went to school wondering what in the world was going to happen next. Erica was waiting for me.

"My brother signed up for the army," she said.



I could see she was scared, and I didn't know what to say, so I just gave her a hug. Then I reached into my pack and took out my homework.

"I wrote about peacekeepers for my Flag Day presentation," I said. "I think I'll dedicate it to your brother." Erica smiled. "He'll be all right," I added. I hoped I was right.

## **Saturday, Flag Day**

Saturday, February 15, dawned clear and cold. We left for the demonstration right after breakfast, walking because Mom said it would be impossible for us to find a parking space. It looked as though the whole city was streaming downtown for the demonstration. Giant puppet heads towered over the crowds. Colourful banners danced brightly against the prairie blue sky. People of all ages carried banners and signs. Even babies waved peace flags. Dogs wore rainbow bandanas or coats with messages: "Throw bones, not bombs!"

The Raging Grannies met near a stop sign at the edge of the park and led the parade. Other peace groups like Women in Black and Project Ploughshares walked along, enjoying the cold, crisp day and waving to the reporters and television cameras.

I found Erica and her parents. They carried red and white Canadian flags and blue and white United Nations flags.

"I checked the Internet before we left," Erica said. "There are already pictures of demonstrations like this in India, China, Spain, Italy, and England! There are millions of people on the streets!"

"We may or may not stop *this* war," her mom said, "but we are making history! There have never been so many nations against the whole idea of war."

It felt like a party as we walked along through the winter streets, a colourful parade of Canadians keeping warm by moving together for peace. I saw Fatima and Andrew marching with their families, and Mr. Adams too! The police Dad had helped organize were watching everything. Some walked along with us; some stood still stopping traffic. When a stranger standing on the sidewalk started to swear at the marchers, the police quietly took him aside and calmed him down.

The parade ended in another park where university students and adults made speeches. Everyone cheered for them, but I think the loudest cheers went up when the Raging Grannies got on the stage. Even with winter coats and mitts, the Raging Grannies managed to look just as outrageous as they always do when they sing. Thousands of people went quiet to listen. I felt proud when Grandma raised her umbrella to start:

### **We Could Have Raged All Night**

We could have raged all night  
We could have raged all night  
And still have raged some more.  
So many things to change,

A world to re-arrange,  
End poverty and war!  
When children go to bed so hungry  
We know darn well it isn't right...

*Reprinted with permission of the Raging Grannies.*

When we got home, I felt happy and relieved. For one day, the fog of fear had disappeared. And today, like every day when I watch Grandma perform, I remembered the millions of children and adults working for peace around the world. We checked the Internet and watched the six o'clock news and found out there were protests everywhere. The broadcaster said that at least 20 million children and adults were on the streets. We saw demonstrators in Iqaluit and Antarctica!

"It's a beginning," Grandma said.

That night I massaged Grandma's tired feet. "I have one last thing to do this week," I told her. "I have to take the name of a peacemaker to my Sunday school class tomorrow. I'd planned on Lester Pearson, but I've changed my mind."

Grandma waited.

"I've decided to make it a Show and Tell presentation. I've decided to present my Raging Granny," I said.

"Anything for you, Peace Child," she said.

## **The End**

### **About the Author**

Carolyn Pogue is a writer and editor living in Calgary, Alberta.

### **Activity Ideas**

After you have read "My Raging Grandma," you, your family, or your church group might want to try one or more of these activities:

- If you have a Raging Granny in your community, invite her to speak to your Sunday school class or congregation.
- Find out more about the Raging Grannies. Visit [www.ottawagrants.net](http://www.ottawagrants.net) or see their book *Off Our Rockers and into Trouble* by Alison Acker and Betty Brightwell (Horsdal and Schubart, 2004).
- Discuss what you think it was like for Fatima to hear people talk about the war while her grandmother was living in Iraq. What might you say to someone in that situation?
- What poem do you think Andrea Jane could have written for Flag Day? Learn about Flag Day by writing to Heritage Canada, Ottawa, or by going to [www.heritagecanada.gc.ca](http://www.heritagecanada.gc.ca). (Hint: If you write them an actual letter, they may send you a poster, game, or information.)

- Would you like to send a postcard to a peacekeeper? Go to [www.forces.gc.ca](http://www.forces.gc.ca). Click the button for English or French. It will take you to another page. Click the button marked "Write to the Troops." It will tell you where to send your postcard. Just address it to "Any Sailor," "Any Soldier," or "Any Air Force Member." Many of the troops who receive postcards send letters and postcards back.
- Read *Take Action! A Guide to Active Citizenship* by Marc and Craig Kielburger (John Wiley and Sons, 2002).