THE GRANDFATHER

My father's father was never liked very much. He was respected because he had worked his way up in life. We, his grandchildren, were afraid of him when we were small. He hardly ever spoke to us, and if he did, it was usually to tell us to be quiet. We didn't like him because he was tight-fisted with his money. Most of the time when he came to our house he had nothing in his pockets for us; only rarely would he bring a nickel's worth of candy. He usually came on Fridays, on his way to or back from the commodity exchange. Then he would sit in the living room, in a creaking, black leather jacket he wouldn't take off, hardly saying a thing, being served coffee by my mother, who couldn't stand him because he had once refused to lend my father money when he was young and wanted to go into business for himself. However, my mother was good at pretending, so she would entertain the old man with small talk. When she asked him a question, though, he never replied with more than a few words. This infuriated my mother, and after each visit she complained bitterly at the dinner table. Sometimes she would get carried away and bring up the old grudge, at which point my father, who had been listening in silence, would tell her to be quiet and forget about the past. My mother never forgot, and never forgave.

In his early sixties my grandfather decided to retire. He sold the farm and the business, and went to live in a house in the village. Although he was a hypochondriac, his health had been good except for a low blood pressure condition, which was responsible, so he said, for his permanent state of depression. The doctor had suggested a glass of wine or spirits a day as a tonic, but my grandfather happened to be a teetotaller. He might have been saved by liquor,

only his principles didn't allow it. He had also been convinced that he would die before his wife, which didn't happen.

After retiring he continued in his familiar, set ways. He would still come into town on Fridays to go to the exchange. The state of the market, the conditions that affected it, and the projection of new developments were the topics that really interested him, and about which he could and would talk at some length. It was more than an interest in money: in this way, the old man must have felt in control of at least part of reality. Even his first stroke didn't interfere with his usual pattern. He was no longer allowed to drive his car, so he would take his bike and ride to the highway, where he would stand by a tree and stick out his thumb, imitating a gesture he had seen many times before, but never acknowledged. Invariably, one of his colleagues would give him a ride to the exchange. Eventually even the bike ride became too much. And, although he had always been absent minded, he now gave the impression of not being aware of your presence at all. When he spoke, it was clear that he was living in the past. One night he was found downstairs lighting matches, one after another. Someone had to look after him now. My father spent a lot of time with him and told us that, although he had lucid moments, he now behaved like a child. On one occasion they were about to go for a walk around the village -- one of his old habits -- but when it came to putting on his coat, he sat down on the floor and refused to go. At this time, during one of his lucid moments, my father told him that he had to go into the hospital. To go to the hospital in town meant to him that he was going to die. This is where he had gone to visit those who had died before him. Yet he did not object, but said, clearly, that if his time had come, he had better go. From this moment on

he seemed eager to have it over with. Although his body was healthy and strong, and although the man in the bed beside him was recovering very well from a similar condition, he surrendered himself to his illness, and died a few months later.

We, his grandchildren, had to go to his funeral. I was fourteen or fifteen, and it was my first. We all went to my grandfather's house in the village. My father told me to go into the room where the open coffin had been placed on a table and say goodbye to my grandfather. Afraid, but curious at the same time, I obeyed. The plump, bald face was ravaged and hardly recognizable, its roundness distorted by the sagging jaw. The odor in the room was oppressive. Shaken by this confrontation with death, but without any strong feeling of pity or sorrow for my grandfather, I went back into the living room where we waited until it was time to go. The custom was to carry the coffin through the streets to the centre of the village, where the cemetery occupies all sides of a man-made hill erected in the time of the great floods. At the top of this hill stands the church. The pall bearers came and we left the house, forming a procession in pairs behind the coffin. Three times we walked the circular path leading through the graveyard and around the church, to ward off the evil spirits. All this time the bells in the tower were tolling. It was a bleak, windy day. The trees lining the path were leafless, and their bare, wet limbs stood black against the sky. The crows that live in the bell tower flew about aimlessly, croaking harshly. The chill of the damp winter day went to the marrow. We left the coffin at the graveside and went into the church where the old man had gone every Sunday, with his wife following a few paces behind. But the cold that was outside had pervaded everything within. There was no consolation. Even

grief had frozen.

After the service we returned to the graveside. Few words were spoken. The coffin was not lowered in our presence, because there was water at the bottom of the grave. Following the burial there was a reception for the mourners in the village hall. Everyone was ravenously hungry and eager for the hot coffee and liquor. Almost immediately people started talking, exchanging the latest local news. I remember being disgusted by this at the time, not so much, I realize now, because of my grandfather, but because I felt they were desecrating the majesty of death. At one point, I couldn't stand the animated noise of these conversations any longer and left the hall. The building was right beside the cemetery. As I closed the door, I could hear a dull, thudding sound, at regular intervals. Then I understood. The gravediggers were filling in the grave, throwing shovelfuls of earth onto the dead man's coffin. Finally I cried.

Haijo Jan Westra