

Nikita the Donkey

Lida Dykstra

Translation: Laura Watkinson

Iwan did not have many friends. In the tumble-down mountain village where he lived, there were only a few boys of his own age. They were nearly all big louts who helped their fathers on the land or pushed the blacksmith's bellows up and down for a few coins a day, with their chests bare and sweaty.

Iwan was more of a thinker. He loved sitting on the porch and daydreaming. He wondered where the wind came from or why the moon was sometimes round and then sometimes as thin as a piece of peel.

He knew that his father thought he was a dope. His father was a hard man. But maybe that was what it took to survive in the eternal cold, with just a small field and crops that regularly failed.

Iwan got along much better with his grandfather, a mild man who always made time for him. But his best friend of all was perhaps Nikita, a donkey who was almost thirty years old.

Twice a day, Iwan took peelings and a bunch of thistles to the donkey, who lived in a draughty shed behind the house. Iwan didn't understand how Nikita managed not to scratch his soft nose on the prickles, but the donkey always chewed happily away on the dry green plants with his yellow teeth.

And so the days went by in the poor little village.

Until one morning, the donkey shed was empty! Iwan was so shocked that he dropped the thistles. Where was Nikita?

Right then, he heard a sorrowful braying somewhere nearby.

Iwan ran to where the sound was coming from. At the bottom of the old well, he could see the donkey far beneath him. The well was no longer in use, as Iwan's father had had a rainwater tank built a few years before.

Iwan ran home and sounded the alarm. He really hoped Nikita hadn't broken any bones.

When they heard Iwan's shouts, his father and two neighbours came running. Iwan raced into the shed to fetch a strong rope. If enough men helped, he was sure they could pull Nikita from the well.

But when, puffing and panting, he got back to the well with his rope, he saw that his father and the neighbours had brought shovels and a wheelbarrow full of soil. Without looking up, the men began to shovel mud onto the donkey.

'What on earth are you doing?' Iwan shrieked. 'Nikita's still alive. We have to rescue him!'

'No need,' grunted his father, throwing another shovelful of soil into the well. 'I wanted to fill in this well anyway. And that old worn-out donkey isn't worth anything. It's weak and lame. I was planning to buy a younger one at the market next week. So we might as well just bury this old nag now.'

Nikita gave a sad heehaw. It sounded strangely hollow, coming up out of the well.

Tears filled Iwan's eyes. He couldn't believe his father could be so cruel. He was going to bury that poor old donkey alive! What could Iwan do? There was no way he could take on those grown-up men.

Just then, his grandfather came shuffling out of his house, with his pipe in the corner of his mouth, as usual.

'Grandpa! You have to help me!' Iwan ran crying to the old man and told him his story.

'Well, well,' said Grandpa a few times. Nothing more.

Iwan grabbed Grandpa's wrinkled hand and tried to pull him along. 'Come on, Grandpa. You have to help me. Hurry!'

'What do you want me to do, lad?' his grandfather asked calmly. 'Your father's made a decision. There's no way I can change his mind.'

'But you don't agree, do you? You don't think poor Nikita should be killed!'

'Hmm, Nikita's old,' said his grandfather after a moment that seemed to last for hours.

'Yes, but so what? You're old too.'

Grandpa smiled. 'What I actually mean is... if you're old, you're often wise too,' he said. 'Come on, we'll walk to the well and see how far the men have got. I have a pretty good idea of how donkeys work. People always say they're stupid creatures. But that's not true, lad. They're tough and they're clever. I suspect you're in for a surprise.'

Painfully slowly, Grandpa ambled over to the men, who were still shovelling away. Iwan sadly went with him.

'How are you getting on, men?' asked Grandpa, with a glint in his eye.

Iwan peered anxiously into the well. He was scared of what he might see.

But whatever he had been expecting, it wasn't what he actually saw.

Instead of the donkey being half buried or completely covered with soil, he was standing quite a bit higher than before. Whenever a fresh load of soil came down, he made sure it landed on his back or his hindquarters and then he neatly shook it off.

So the ground beneath his hoofs was, of course, getting higher.

Iwan's father was furious. 'Blast it! Keep shovelling!' he said to the others.

The soil flew into the well at double-quick speed.

But much to Iwan's delight, the result was that the donkey rose faster and faster until he finally jumped out of the well, hoofs clattering.

'Stupid animal,' was all that Iwan's father said, as he wiped the sweat from his forehead with a big red handkerchief.

'I wouldn't say that,' said Grandpa. 'That old donkey's outsmarted the three of you.'

'Well, at least the well's filled in,' said Iwan's father. 'No one else can fall down there now. Good work, men. If there's ever anything I can do to help you in return, let me know.'

Muttering contentedly and chuckling a bit too, the neighbours left.

'And what's going to happen to Nikita now?' Iwan asked, feeling worried.

'I'm too tired to kill him,' said his father. 'We'll see about that tomorrow.'

'I'll buy him off you for a hundred roubles,' said Grandpa calmly. 'Then you'll have a nice sum to put towards a new donkey.'

'Sold!' barked Iwan's father. 'But it's a foolish deal. That beast's ancient.'

'Ah, we old animals have to stick up for one another sometimes,' Grandpa said quietly, sucking on his pipe. 'Don't you agree, Iwan?'

All Iwan could do was nod happily.

The Memory Book

Lida Dykstra

Translation: Laura Watkinson

There was something wrong with Grandpa Piet. I first noticed it about a year ago. When he told me I could fetch a chocolate bar from his fridge, I found his wallet between the cheese and a tub of butter.

‘Ah, it must have happened when I was putting the shopping away,’ Grandpa said casually. ‘I hadn’t even noticed it was missing.’

We both laughed, and Grandpa put his wallet back in his pocket.

A couple of months later, something else strange happened. Grandpa was taking his dog for a walk. He followed his usual route through the village: out of the door, past the school playground (I waved when I saw him), across the zebra crossing and then back home along the other side of the canal.

But this time he lost his way in front of the doctor’s house. He couldn’t remember where he needed to go or where he’d come from. Luckily, Mrs Hoekstra was just coming out of the doctor’s. She lived in Grandpa’s street and she walked home with him.

Then she called my mum and dad. My dad is Grandpa’s son. We live in the same village as Grandpa, but in the new part.

That afternoon, when we went over to Grandpa’s house, he was pretty grumpy. ‘Stop making such a fuss,’ he said. ‘I’m an old man. And old men forget things sometimes. Who’s going to make a cup of tea? Piet, why don’t you grab the biscuit tin and help yourself to a chocolate-chip cookie?’

I nodded and did as Grandpa said. But, like Mum and Dad, I was worried. Grandpa really had started behaving differently. He forgot names and words. Or he couldn’t remember how his coffee machine worked.

‘You have to promise me that you’ll make a doctor’s appointment,’ said Mum. ‘There could be something wrong with you. A vitamin deficiency or something.’

‘Stop nagging,’ Grandpa grumbled again. ‘I’m fine. The doctor’s already busy enough.’

‘Go and see him, just to stop us nagging,’ said Dad with a laugh. ‘Do you want me to come with you?’

‘There’s no need,’ said Grandpa, pouting.

‘It’s no trouble,’ said Dad. ‘And it just so happens that I have the day off tomorrow.’

I looked at him in surprise. That wasn’t true. Dad had said earlier that he needed to go to a meeting in The Hague tomorrow.

That was a while ago now. A lot more has become clear since then, after Grandpa did a whole series of tests. The specialist told us that Grandpa has Alzheimer’s disease. And that there’s no medicine for it.

‘My head’s like a sieve,’ Grandpa said gloomily when I went round to see him. ‘And the holes are gradually getting bigger and bigger until it’ll be just one big hole up there in my bonce. Oh, blast it! Where have I left my glasses this time? Piet, can you find them?’

After searching all over, I finally found his glasses in the washbasin in the downstairs toilet.

‘Really? In the loo?’ said Grandpa when I gave him the glasses. ‘No idea how they got there. It’s like they grew legs and walked.’

I realized he was going to forget more and more. First his glasses. Then what day of the week it was, and finally... I gave a deep sigh.

Grandpa knew me well. 'What's wrong?' he asked quietly.

As I looked into Grandpa's kind blue eyes, I felt like crying. 'I was just wondering... If you keep forgetting more and more, are you going to forget me one day too, Grandpa?'

I could see that it upset him. He took a slightly grubby handkerchief out of his pocket and dabbed his eyes.

'There's no avoiding that, I'm afraid,' he said. 'It's awful. I don't want to forget everything and everyone. You and your father and mother. Your grandma. Even though she died ten years ago, I still think about her every day. About all the good times we had together. If only I could hold on to my memories.'

Suddenly I thought of something. 'But you can, can't you? Grandpa, what if we make a book together? A memory book? We'll write down everything that you're not allowed to and don't want to forget. Stories about when you were little. Stories about Grandma. What food you like best. The jokes you always make.'

Grandpa's eyes lit up. 'Everyone's birthdays. A map with all the shops I like to go to.'

'And we can stick in photographs of all the important people,' I said. 'And write their names next to them.'

'What a great plan,' said Grandpa. 'I'd like to start right away, but my handwriting's so shaky.'

'I'll help you,' I said. 'I can bring my tablet here. And if you tell me what you want to say, I'll type it. And then I'll print it out later at home. We can stick it all in a big scrapbook.'

'What a great plan!' said Grandpa again. For the first time in ages, he had some colour in his cheeks. 'Before you go, I'll give you some money for a scrapbook. But, um... it has to be in Frisian, of course. Can you write Frisian?'

'I'll learn,' I said enthusiastically. 'Speaking Frisian isn't hard. So I should manage to write it okay too.'

Grandpa nodded. 'You're right. You're clever enough.'

In the months that followed, I went round to Grandpa's house about three times a week to work on his big memory book. It turned out beautifully, even though I do say so myself. Grandpa told me a load of stories I'd never heard before. About the day he took part in the Eleven Cities ice-skating race. About when he first met Grandma, at a village festival. And about when his mum sewed him a baby outfit with the material from a flour sack, because there weren't any baby clothes to buy just after the war.

Sometimes we cried a bit when we were working together on the memory book. But we had a lot of fun too. My Frisian got better and better. When I didn't know a word, I looked it up in Grandpa's dictionary, and I made sure I spelled it right.

When the book was full, I stuck a selfie of me and Grandpa in the front.

And Grandpa wrote at the end, in his wobbly handwriting:

This memory book was made by Big Piet and his grandson, Little Piet (who you're never allowed to forget, Big Piet).

And he never did. Even when he couldn't remember my name anymore, he patted my hand when I sat on his bed, and he looked really happy.

The memory book was always on his bedside table.