The Dirt in the Blue Jar

by Hridoy Kundu

When my grandmother died, she left me a jar of dirt.

Not money. Not the wedding ring my cousins had already begun quietly assigning to themselves. Not the painted wooden chest beneath the upstairs window.

Dirt.

The jar was cobalt blue, small enough to close my hand around. Rust had bitten into the lid. Across the glass, on a strip of yellowing masking tape, Grandma Elise had written:

DO NOT THROW AWAY.

That sounded like her.

Grandma washed aluminum foil. She kept buttons in coffee tins and bread bags inside other bread bags. Once, when I threw away a yogurt container, she retrieved it from the trash, washed it, and returned it to the cupboard without speaking to me.

So I assumed the dirt was something else she had decided was useful.

I carried it toward the back door.

Then I noticed something folded beneath the jar.

Three thin sheets of paper.

The handwriting was not Grandma's.

At the top was a name I knew from the family tree she kept in her kitchen drawer.

Johann Keller, 1931.

My great-great-grandfather.

The letter began in German. Beneath each paragraph, Grandma had penciled a translation.

Elise, when you are old enough to understand why the jar matters, your mother will give it to you.

I sat at the kitchen table.

Outside, North Dakota wind bent the cottonwoods behind the house. Grandma's dish towel still hung from the oven handle, one corner dusted with flour.

I kept reading.

Johann had been born in a German settlement north of Odessa. His family had lived there for generations. German was spoken at the table and in church. Russian was used when business required it. His mother kept sauerkraut in a crock below the house and saved seed from one harvest for the next. Wheat grew in black soil so rich, Johann wrote, that his mother could crumble it between two fingers and judge whether it was too dry to plant.

By the time Johann was eight, families were leaving.

A cousin had written from Dakota that there was land there and that the soil was dark.

The morning the Kellers departed, Johann's mother returned to the garden after everyone else had loaded the wagon.

She carried a spoon.

Johann thought she had forgotten something.

Instead, she knelt beside the onions and pushed the spoon into the ground.

One scoop.

She poured the earth into a blue medicine bottle and screwed the lid tight.

At the port they carried bedding, clothes, a German Bible, and packets of seed tucked into a coat lining.

Johann carried the jar.

Mother said we were not stealing the earth, he wrote. *We were taking enough to remember where our feet had been.*

I turned the blue glass in my hands.

The dirt inside was nearly black.

* * *

My mother arrived an hour later with cardboard boxes and a roll of packing tape.

I handed her the letter.

She read the first line.

"I know."

"You know?"

"Of course."

“You knew Grandma kept dirt from the old country in a medicine jar?”

“Yes.”

“That seems like something somebody could have mentioned.”

Mom smiled.

“Your grandmother tried.”

“She told me about cabbage.”

“She told you about everything.”

“She never said, ‘There is ancestral soil hidden in the kitchen.’”

Mom picked up the jar.

“She probably thought you weren’t listening.”

That irritated me because it was true.

Grandma had talked while she cooked.

Her father had spoken German until he went to school. Her mother could stretch strudel dough thin enough to see the tablecloth through it. Somebody’s uncle kept sauerkraut in a crock downstairs. Somebody else’s name had been shortened by a teacher who found the original inconvenient.

I had heard hundreds of these stories.

I had treated them like the clock ticking above Grandma’s stove: always there, therefore not worth noticing.

“Did Grandma give this to you?” I asked.

Mom stopped turning the jar.

“Once.”

“What did you do with it?”

“I gave it back.”

I laughed.

She didn’t.

“Why?”

"I was twenty-three."

"That doesn't explain anything."

"It explained plenty at twenty-three."

She set the jar down.

"When I was little, your great-grandfather still spoke German when he got angry. I hated it."

"Why?"

"Because nobody else's grandfather sounded like that."

She peeled a loose strip of masking tape from the table and wound it around one finger.

"I hated explaining my last name. I hated bringing friends home when Grandma had sauerkraut cooking. I wanted people to walk into our house and smell nothing."

I had never heard her say that.

"So when your grandmother gave me this," she said, touching the jar, "I thought, why would I want dirt from a place I'd never seen?"

"What did she say?"

"Nothing."

"That doesn't sound like Grandma."

"She kept it all those years and gave it to you instead."

That sounded exactly like Grandma.

* * *

The second page of Johann's letter described Dakota.

His mother cried when she stepped from the train.

Johann had thought she was frightened.

Years later she told him the truth.

The land looked too familiar.

Grass rolled toward the horizon. Wind pressed against everything. When Johann's father dug the first furrow, the soil came up almost black.

That spring, Johann's mother opened the blue jar.

She did not empty it.

She added to it.

One spoonful of Dakota soil.

Johann remembered asking why.

She told me that if we carried only the place we had lost, there would be no room for the place that took us in.

After that, the jar traveled.

Johann carried it to the farm where he raised wheat and added soil of his own.

Years later his daughter Clara took it with her when she married. A pinch from the garden beside her first house joined what was already there.

My grandfather kept the tradition after returning from military service and settling outside Bismarck.

Then the jar reached Grandma Elise and her vegetable garden.

I unscrewed the lid.

The dirt smelled damp and mineral.

Somehow that was enough.

Grandma's kitchen returned to me: chopped dill on a cutting board, bread cooling beneath a towel, vinegar steaming from the pickle pot.

I screwed the lid back on.

* * *

For the next few months, the jar sat on my apartment windowsill.

I began calling Mom.

At first I wanted facts.

Which village had Johann come from?

She wasn't sure.

What year had the family left?

She gave me two possibilities.

Soon the questions changed.

What did Grandma put in the dumplings?

Did she use dill in the potatoes or parsley?

What was the German expression Grandpa used when somebody left a door open?

How did Grandma know when strudel dough was thin enough?

Mom knew some answers.

For others, she went silent.

"I should know that," she'd say.

We discovered that there were things neither of us knew.

That was worse than I expected.

One afternoon Mom called me instead.

"I remembered the bread."

"What bread?"

"The onion one. You were asking about Grandma's recipes."

I hadn't asked about the bread.

But I found a notebook and wrote down everything she remembered.

* * *

In October, I drove back to Grandma's house before the new owners moved in.

The garden had gone brown with frost. Tomato cages leaned against the garage. Dry dill stalks rattled beside the fence.

I brought the jar and one of Grandma's teaspoons.

The ground resisted at first.

Then the spoon broke through.

I lifted a small mound of black soil.

Grandma had already added dirt from this garden years earlier. There was no reason to add more.

But Grandma had also owned seventeen nearly identical plastic containers because throwing away useful things made no sense to her.

I poured the spoonful into the jar.

The new soil disappeared into the old.

As I tightened the lid, a dry dill head beside me broke in the wind.

Seeds scattered across my coat and into the open jar.

I picked most of them out.

A few remained.

I left them there.

* * *

The following spring, Mom came to visit my apartment.

She found the blue jar on the windowsill.

Beside it stood two small pots.

Green dill crowded from each one.

“You planted some?”

“I bought seeds.”

She narrowed her eyes.

“So those aren’t ancestral Russian dill?”

“No.”

“Good. That seemed botanically suspicious.”

I laughed.

She rubbed one of the leaves between her fingers and smelled it.

For a moment neither of us spoke.

Then she said, “Your grandmother put too much of this in everything.”

“You put it in the potatoes last week.”

“Not that much.”

“You used half the package.”

She ignored me.

Before Mom left, I handed her one of the pots.

She stared at it.

“I killed a cactus once.”

“Then try not to kill Grandma’s dill.”

Mom looked down at the plant.

Then she carried it home.

That evening I replaced the masking tape on the blue jar. Grandma's original label had begun curling away from the glass.

I considered writing everything down.

RUSSIA. DAKOTA. JOHANN. CLARA. GRANDPA. ELISE.

But Grandma had fit her instructions into four words.

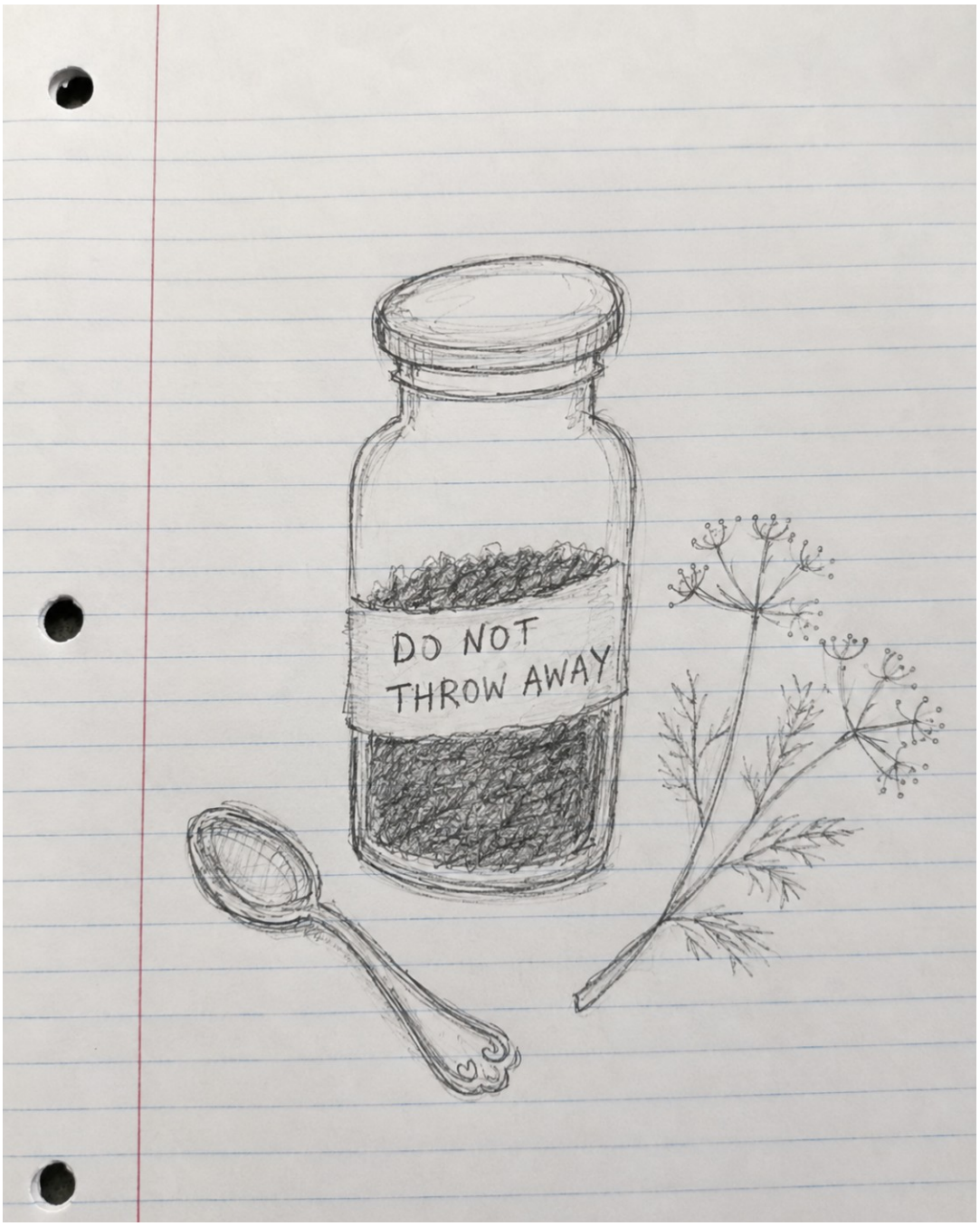
I could almost hear her objecting to the waste of tape.

So I copied the original:

DO NOT THROW AWAY.

Then, underneath it, I added two words of my own.

ADD SOMETHING.


DO NOT
THROW AWAY