

Two Parts Dirt

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A cigarette hangs from her lips; the burnt ash refuses to drop and she squints to protect her pale cornflower blue eyes from the smoke that rises behind her large frame plastic glasses. Wearing polyester pants with a button-up floral print shirt in a coordinating color, her shoulders slightly stooped, she moves with purpose and crosses the narrow kitchen. Feet encased in practical slip-on loafers complete the ensemble and are a required part of being dressed for the day. Hands with long fingers are tipped by sturdy nails that are maintained to a length just long enough to be noticed as feminine and palms filled with the guts of the coffee percolator. She shakes the grinds into an old coffee can on the white counter and taps the stainless steel basket against the metal rim.

"What do you do with that?" her granddaughter asks with her head tipped to one side.

Though she does not care for the smell of freshly brewed coffee, the spent remains have a milder and more pleasant scent to her young nose.

The stoic matriarch does not waste time or effort to turn when she answers, "I mix this with the dirt for the geraniums. It's best to use one part grinds to at least two parts dirt."

Though just less than 10 years old, the young girl who swings her feet while sitting at the red and white kitchen table knows very well what geraniums are and that they line the main sidewalk leading to the front door. They are planted in the spring in dirt that is tender, rich in color and turned with an odd silver spoon. The flowers are an expected part of the scenery upon arriving at the house of her mother's mother, just as the porch with the painted cement floor, the clothes line just outside the side door, and the skeleton key that was kept hidden in the dirt in case of an emergency.

A child can count on things at their grandparents' house; skinny bottles of flavored sodas lined up on the top shelf in the refrigerator on a cardboard liner, two pairs of eyeglasses on the kitchen table along with a pile of scrap paper and a pencil, volumes upon volumes of National Geographic magazines lining the bookshelves and a paperback book nearby. A woman who can crochet and knit, and may seem a bit too serious to children, always had just a touch of whimsy. She created stuffed animals from yarn, had small wooden toys on the window ledges that could be collapsed by pushing up from underneath, and though she gave the impression that she was not exactly affectionate, a kiss hello and goodbye was always given to her grandchildren.

The memory is like a snapshot. One brief exchange between the woman and her grand-daughter and the rest escapes like steam after a summer rain. However, the young girl has grown to have a family of her own and faithfully makes sure at least one geranium is planted in front of her home and tells her sons they are best planted in soil that has a ratio of one part coffee grinds to at least two parts dirt.