

FICTION

GRIEF

Caroline Hau

Mrs. Jia had seen her husband operate the grinder many times. She knew what had to be done.

Pouring the steaming beans into the receptacle, she adjusted the axle of the two table-sized grindstones which were stacked together on a slab -- monstrous stones that crushed and ground and yet seemed immovable. Taking firm hold of the wooden pole that projected from one of the stones, Mrs. Jia began to push. Rotating the grindstones had not seemed so difficult at first. But the night was oppressively warm, humid, and, as the moonrays pierced through the indigo clouds heavy with rain, Mrs. Jia felt the wooden pole was getting harder and harder to push after each turn. Her heavy breathing turned into muted pants. Dark patches appeared under the armpits and on the upper front and back of her old shirt. Mrs. Jia's arm muscles tightened, and she felt a slight strain on her back. But she continued to work, pausing only to wipe the sweat from her eyes.

When she saw that the beans were ground enough, she collected the dregs in large flour bags, and squeezed and pounded them to extract the fluid. The sight of the milky white soya juice flowing out of the grinder, trickling from the bags, gave her some satisfaction. Mrs. Jia's arms throbbed with each pounding. After a while, the rhythm of her hands began to echo in her mind like some tribal drum, relentless, emptying the brain of all thoughts and sensations except the pounding of her bags. Though her body trembled from sheer strain, the pain meant nothing to her.

Mrs. Jia finished grinding the day's quota of yellow beans earlier than she had expected. The little ones were not asleep yet. She sat down and shared her supper with them. She ate quickly, sparingly. She had to ration the food for each meal. The children always seemed to be hungry, even after they had finished their supper. Mrs. Jia did not mind that she could only eat twice, once in the morning, once at night. She was not going to starve, and she would do anything for the little ones. She still had so many things to

do this evening, and work invariably took her mind off her stomach. Her appetite had not been good anyway.

When the eldest asked her about father, Mrs. Jia carefully put down the pitcher of water and told him that his papa had some important business to take care of so he could not come home today. No, she did not know when he would finish his work, but she was sure that he would come home right away after he took care of things.

He said not to worry, Mrs. Jia said.

There was still time to scrub the floor and wash some of the day's laundry after Mrs. Jia had set away a plate of food for the little one's papa, just in case. Afterwards, she tucked the little ones to bed and went to the kitchen.

Mrs. Jia cooked the soya amid the whistling steam of kettles and cauldrons. She made soya milk, *tao-hue* and dried bean curd. While the *tao-hue* curdled on the pan and the bean curd nestled beneath a heavy rock, Mrs. Jia poured soya milk into whiskey bottles. It made a tinkling sound. There was plenty to sell in the morning.

Everything was now wrapped and packed in the baskets.

Mrs. Jia scrubbed the dirt and sweat of a night's work from her body. It felt good to settle down on the rocking chair in the living room. The stillness of the night wrapped itself like a blanket about her. She saw today's newspaper on the little table in front of her, proclaiming another Japanese victory. The lulling motion of the chair gave her a sense of ease, so that even the headline meant nothing to her.

Her husband's pipe lay beside the newspaper. Mrs. Jia looked at it for a long time. She saw smoke curling from the receptacle. She saw her husband's callused fingers absently rub the stem. She smelled burnt tobacco. She heard smacking lips and nails tapping against the body of the pipe in unconscious rhythm.

Mrs. Jia smiled, then suddenly leaned over and picked up the pipe. It smelled very faintly of burnt tobacco. She touched the length of it, then rubbed her fingerprints from the receptacle with her shirt.

Where was he right now?

The rocking motion quickened. Mrs. Jia found herself still staring at the pipe.

Everything had happened so suddenly. One moment, out of the corner of her eye, Mrs. Jia saw the bare back of her husband in the courtyard, glistening in the moonlight, and she heard the friction of the grindstones like crunching gravel at each rotating motion. Mrs. Jia was waiting for the beans to boil, and steam had clouded the kitchen when she noticed her husband beside her, hair plas-

tered to his skull, leathery in the lamplight, small black eyes dripping sweat, and lips pressed thin and white as soya milk.

I must go, he said to her. They need men to dig some more ditches.

Mrs. Jia ran to look out the kitchen to the courtyard. She saw *them*, smoking cigarettes, braying at something which one of *them* was saying, a jabber of vowels which meant nothing to her. Beside *them* the grinder stood silent, immobile, and half the day's quota of soya juice stained the earth. And above, the slivers of *their* bayonets glinted in the evening light.

Do not worry, she heard her husband say. Take care of things until I return.

Mrs. Jia had stood by the kitchen door until they had all gone, until the dark patches on her husband's shirt blended into the shadows. Then she stepped into the courtyard, picked up the overturned pail, scraped the beans out of the grindstones and into the pail.

She started all over again.

For Mrs. Jia it had suddenly seemed important to move around, to work. The rhythmic monotony and the dulled pain produced nothingness. And every night, Mrs. Jia would wait for the intoxicating numbness to soothe her temples and hot dry eyes. In her mind, she often saw the monolithic grey stones of the grinder oozing milk-white juice from their crevice.

Mrs. Jia ceased rocking. She replaced the pipe in its position and, feeling the weight of her limbs, walked to the bedroom.

"Tao-hue, tao-kua, tao-hu!"

"Tao-hue, tao-kua, tao-hu!"

The baskets of bean curd danced at the ends of the bamboo pole slung over Mrs. Jia's shoulder, while the cauldron of tao-hue jiggled in her hand. Mrs. Jia walked toward the row of houses which stood facing the plaza.

She felt light-hearted. The weight of her merchandise had lessened considerably since early morning. In a way, she had *them* to thank for the brisk business. Nobody was eating rice any more.

Of course her husband had his regular customers, but Mrs. Jia decided to venture beyond the usual route for new buyers. With luck, she would sell everything by noon. Mrs. Jia was already thinking about what she was going to buy at the market later. Maybe fruit for the little ones--the youngest was sickly--or a few yards of cloth...and, yes, tobacco for her husband.

Halfway to the plaza, Mrs. Jia seemed to stumble. She saw one of *them* standing near the entrance, bayonet glinting. It was too late to turn back. Mrs. Jia could not see what he looked like (not that she had any desire to find out), but she saw him stiffen at her

approach, a slight tensing of her back which almost immediately unwound. Mrs. Jia was alone in this section of the place.

She was glad that she looked inconspicuous in a straw hat, loose blue shirt and a skirt which revealed a pair of her husband's oldest trousers at the calves. Yet when she came to stand some distance before him, seeing waxed boots, ironed khaki trousers and the point of the bayonet, she could not even swallow.

The harsh sounds he uttered she did not understand. For one hideous moment, she thought he wanted her to come closer or that he wanted her bean curd. Her hand clenched around the bamboo pole.

It was a sign of dismissal, after all. A brusque wave of his hand, and she crept away to the nearest house.

She found she had to sit down beside the gutter. She was breathing hard. There was no relief. A knot had formed within her when she made her obeisance. She could see her husband's shirt stains, then her mind went blank. Her eyes burned. She wanted to hurt and claw, do something violent to ease the pain of her hot, dry eyes and the knot in her stomach. The smell of the bean curd in their waxed paper nauseated her. Soon she was retching near the gutter, but nothing came out. Her stomach was empty.

It was almost noon when Mrs. Jia, wan and weary, stopped by her neighbor's. The ground burned her feet. Things swam before her eyes, and everywhere she went, she heard people say they wished rain would finally fall. But last night's indigo clouds had disappeared.

Mrs. Ong promised to buy the last batch of bean curd from Mrs. Jia. At the woman's insistence, Mrs. Jia accepted a cup of substitute coffee in the kitchen. Mrs. Ong, fat and greasy, chattered away about the humid weather. But there was a hurried, whispered exchange between the two women about certain rumors of men running to San Pablo and Lucena, of attacks and resistance. Mrs. Jia had no idea where the woman got her information.

Mrs. Ong said that another neighbor, Mrs. Li's husband, had just been taken away for questioning.

They think he is passing information, Mrs. Ong whispered.

"Where is Anna right now?" asked Mrs. Jia.

"She is with me, upstairs. She is beside herself with worry. She would not eat anything."

"Does she cry all the time?" asked Mrs. Jia.

"Yes, of course, who would not? After all, if you ask me, I do not think it is a mild affair, do you?"

"My husband," said Mrs. Jia, "my husband has gone to dig some more ditches."

Mrs. Ong said yes, oh, but did she know that Ah-lo's bakery had been shut down? They say...

Mrs. Ong stopped. Mrs. Jia looked up and saw a woman whose hair hung in strands about her face contorted like some tribal dance mask. Her eyes were streaming.

Mrs. Jia backed away and allowed Mrs. Ong to take charge. The woman who looked like a mask had a dry, rasping cough. Mrs. Ong cooed as to a child, and Mrs. Jia realized that the coughs were sobs. She could not understand what Mrs. Ong was saying.

It occurred to Mrs. Jia that the woman was Mrs. Li. But this woman could not have been Mrs. Li, it was all a big mistake like a plot in the opera Mrs. Jia once saw as a child. The beauty who sang with the lute turned out to be Old Man Wang's son in rice powder. And so, Mrs. Jia knew that Mrs. Li was a dry, middle-aged woman who would remain untouched by any calamity, for hadn't she lived through an older war in the Teng Mountains that the elders called home an ocean away from this open city, and had she not laughed at hunger and men who skulked in shadows with knives?

Seeing the crying woman frightened Mrs. Jia. She did not know what to do, for it had tightened the knot in her stomach, the knot she had sought to loosen through nothingness. Hers was a different kind of pain. It scalded her bowels and burned her eyes, but it would not come out. Mrs. Jia could not find words of consolation for Mrs. Li.

She had never brought herself to examine the pain within. She had never been one to lose hope, and she was not going to lose it now. But it was not enough to merely set away some food each night, only to let the little ones finish it in the morning.

Mrs. Jia was tired of it all--the constant waiting, the empty space on the bed, the lies that she fed the little ones.

She stumbled out of Mrs. Ong's house and like a blind sought her courtyard. The sight of the grinder standing immovable awoke in her a vision of its crevice bleeding milk-white soya. She wanted to see the juice flow, as she had seen many times.

She held the pole with shaking hands and pushed. The grating sound was there. But the crevice was dry. There were no steaming beans to crush and ground. Mrs. Jia realized her foolishness. She let go of the pole and sank to the earth, leaning against the grinder until her cheek touched its gray hardness. It was hot. But Mrs. Jia felt no pain. She waited for the pain in her eyes to subside.