

## **Moving Beyond the Pain**

### *Still Life with Rice*

by Helie Lee

Simon and Schuster

1996

*Review by Andrea Lee (Winter 1997 issue)*

We all have photos of the past, memories pressed between plastic. Faces from a distant time stare back at us, their features painted with feeling, but they are unable to conjure up the intensity of real life. The past is still life. It's silent, often black and white, unattainable for those who can't remember the motion embedded within the frame. For Helie Lee, an Americanized young woman frustrated with her family's cultural restrictions, the unknown past is a burden. She is caught between two competing identities: "I've always hated being Oriental/Asian. I hide my face and camouflage my eyes, but not my mother or grandmother. They are both the same, so proud and certain of their identity. They annoyingly intimidate me, yet at the same time, their stubborn loyal spirit draws me toward them. The more I attempt to figure out these two women, the more confused I become as to who I am and where I belong." Helie is skeptical of her cultural worth. She measures herself against her Western peers rather than her heroic family members who seem backward and old fashioned to her Americanized eyes. In turn, Helie's family views her as "rotten fruit", unmarried at the age of 25 and tainted by American culture. It is at this point in her life that Helie finally begins unraveling her family history.

Still Life with Rice is the story of Helie Lee's grandmother, Hongyong Baek, a woman of incredible resilience, who survived the tumultuous times of the Japanese occupation and the separation of North and South Korea. Hongyong grew to womanhood in an era of hanboks and supreme male dominance. The female identity was suppressed, hidden, or flattened, but Hongyong refused to accept the socially imposed limitations that rose to choke her. She married according to her parents' wishes, but her husband was unequal to her enterprising spirit. His weakness highlights her strength.

As Japanese interference in their everyday lives heightens, the family emigrates to China, and there, Hongyong's inventiveness brings the family great prosperity, but all is not well beneath the surface: in Hongyong's own body, the political climate of their new home, or in her marriage.

Hongyong's physical condition worsens, forcing her to seek the assistance of the city's foreign hospital. When Western medicine fails her, Hongyong learns ch'iryo, the ancient practice of beating the area around the heart to improve circulation. Hongyong is told: "Western medicine only weakens the problem to make the ill believe that they are cured." This is a central theme of the novel, and a lesson that all Korean-Americans must learn. Western culture cannot feed the Korean soul. Health and healing are achieved through

ch'iryo, the voluntary acceptance of pain. This summarizes the Korean experience. Only by learning about the intense suffering of the past, can Korean-Americans move forward into health and happiness. Family loss cannot be denied. The beatings must be embraced, the pain shared across time, uniting the hearts of the older and younger generations. An understanding must be reached; children must understand the source of their elders' seemingly stifling expectations, hopes, and dreams. Helie must peel back the layers of meaning beneath the expectations. She must look past her grandmother's words: "Soon you be too old, fall off the tree. No man want rotten fruit for wife" and decipher the meaning behind the cryptic comments: "Of all my grandchildren [Helie] reminds me the most of myself. She has the same stubborn, spunky streak. There is no place in the world that she cannot go. I just wish she would get married, not because I think she needs a husband to take care of her. God only knows, it is the women in our family who support the husbands. I do not want her to miss out on love and the rewards of bearing children."

Generational, cultural, and lingual barriers hinder Helie's relationship with her grandmother. At first, each can only judge what they see of one another. With naive contempt, Helie watches her grandmother cut up grass from the backyard to make soup. Little does she realize that there is a painful wisdom in her grandmother's actions. Only later, does Helie understand the source of her eccentric behaviors: during war and famine, her grandmother's will to survive sustained many weaker individuals who would have faltered. Hongyong's grass soup is a part of her past, a marker of her triumph over famine and family disintegration.

Although at the end of the novel, we discover that Helie Lee has been narrating her grandmother's story, we know little of Helie herself. She is the prototypical 1.5 Korean-American, absorbed into Western culture, uncomfortable with her Korean heritage. In a moment of clarity, however, we realize that we are all Helie Lee, scarred products of our family history. By discovering the source of these threads of pain that knit her together, Helie wants to move forward and proudly claim her place as a woman with a past and a future in the Korean community. This is the journey to understanding that all Korean-Americans must make. A bridge must be constructed between the past and the present. The stillness of photographs must be translated into motion. Hongyong Baek's voice, as she painfully retells her life story, shatters the silence, granting her granddaughter freedom from her Westernized perceptions of self. Finally, she may accept the cultural legacy that awaits her: "the emptiness and chaos I once felt is now filled with the past I rejected and future I will passionately embrace. I no longer desire to be a 'rotten fruit'."

Still Life with Rice imbues the past with meaning. Its images are pungent. The scents of family sorrow and racial rediscovery will linger.