Mrs. Tanaya of Tokyo

~ She Is Too Busy Grubbing for Food & Worrying About Her Family to Think About the Future...

BY DARRELL BERRIGAN

THE TANAYA FAMILY—a carpenter, his wife and son—live in the northeastern corner of Tokyo, in a vast area of rolling, war-burned desolation. They are squatters on a rich man's land, which the owner has surrounded with a high wooden fence. Its wood would easily build twenty houses better than the Tanaya "house." Mr. Tanaya, who earns the average 2,000 yen a month at his carpentry work, is also the watchman of the rich man's land and therefore squats rent free among the rubble and the weeds.

Even a carpenter these days finds it hard to build a neat house with the material available. Nevertheless, the Tanaya home has a character of its own. The little

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building rests against a clump of bushy fig trees. The roof is of rusted corrugated tin salvaged from the wreckage of the old city. The same tin forms the back walls of the house, the little pantry addition at the end, and the roof of the wall-less lean-to kitchen at the side. There is a certain pathetic vanity in Mr. Tanaya's use of scarce money and material to build a tiny entrance hall with a real tile roof and a sliding glass door, the whole just large enough to hold the shoes of two visitors. The little Tanaya house (Mr. Tanaya has a neat wooden nameplate over the door) is no better and no worse than those of other average citizens in Tokyo. And life in it is similar to that lived in other shacks scattered over the desolated area of the city.

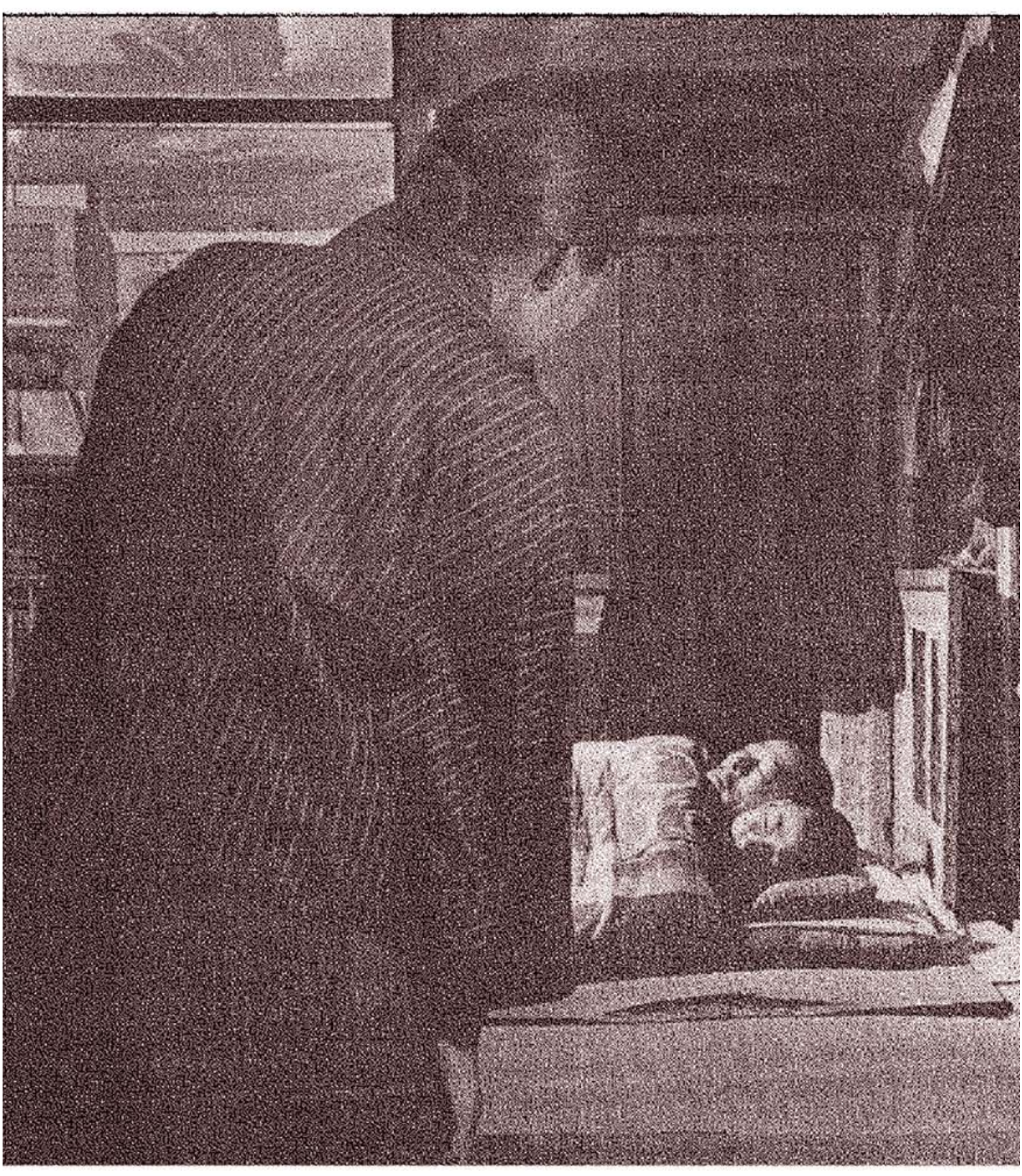
At 5 A.M., Kin Tanaya crawls out from under the thick quilts

spread on the floor beside her husband and son, and steps directly into her wooden sandals. She draws a pan of water at the pump and, placing it on the bench at the side of the house, where the paper screens look out into the garden, washes vigorously in the cold water.

Mrs. Tanaya is not a handsome woman but neither is she ugly. Her face is round, her skin browned by nature, the sun, and the wind. Her teeth are large and uneven, and one of them is half gone. Because of this and for politeness' sake, when Mrs. Tanaya smiles she puts her hand over her mouth. Her hair is black and coarse and she pulls it straight back, tying it in a knot over her neck and holding it there with a simple comb. Today she wears her *mompe*, the ugly pantaloons invented during the war to save cloth, along with a worn blouse. Her legs are bare, as they have been for many years. So, being 40 years old, a plain woman, and poor to boot, Mrs. Tanaya spends little time with her toilet.

Mrs. Tanaya is luckier than most women. There was once a grove of trees near the house and the charred remains of the grove are now used to kindle her fire. Thus she has heat even when the charcoal ration doesn't come, which happens all too frequently. She cooks the day's rice supply in the morning, about three bowls apiece for each of them. These days the fine white Japanese rice is mixed with wheat, barley, American corn meal, or Irish or sweet potatoes to make it go further.

When the rice and potato mixture is cooked and the sour bean soup is boiling



At 5 a.m. Mrs. Tanaya rises, washes, cooks the day's rice, then wakes her fami family

on one of the little terra-cotta braziers, Mrs. Tanaya steps to the door of the bedroom-dining-living room and awakens her husband and their young son with the announcement that breakfast is ready. While the two men are washing, she fills two tin lunch

washing, she fills two tin lunch boxes with the rice mixture, puts in a spoonful of greens from her garden, and sets them aside for the men to take to work and school.

Mitsuhiro, the 13-year-old son, sleepily folds the beds and stores them in the closets built into the back wall. After the men have eaten, they leave, saying simply. "We are going," and getting the simple answer, "Then go." Mrs. Tanaya washes the dishes. She fills one bowl with rice and another with soup, and places them on a tiny "god shelf" in the living room. Then she claps her hands to invoke the spirit of Buddha, clapping and bowing three times in the direction of the food. As anyone knows, it is useless to pray to a god who has not been awakened by clapping.

Despite her thrice-weekly devotions, Mrs. Tanaya is not a religious woman in the formal sense. In the old days, when she had a fine house with four rooms and a little garden with rocks and bushes and flowers, Mrs. Tanaya would place flowers with unadulterated rice and sake and bean soup and gleaming white radish on the god shelf. But now the house and the Buddha are burned, along with the tree, and there is no figure of the "Great Lord" in her house.

"This house," she will tell a visitor, "is too small to hold Buddha. It is enough to have religion in the mind." As casually as she worships Buddha, she worships Shinto gods. "Now we are always thinking about the family and how to eat," she says, "and we have no time to think about the gods. I thought the *Tenno* (the emperor) was a descendant of a god because I learned so. Now I cannot believe that. Society has changed, and I follow society."

So Mrs. Tanaya wastes little time with Buddha or the other gods. It is a clear day; she has the washing to do. and her beloved garden needs weeding and cultivating. The washing would not tax even a weaker woman than Mrs.

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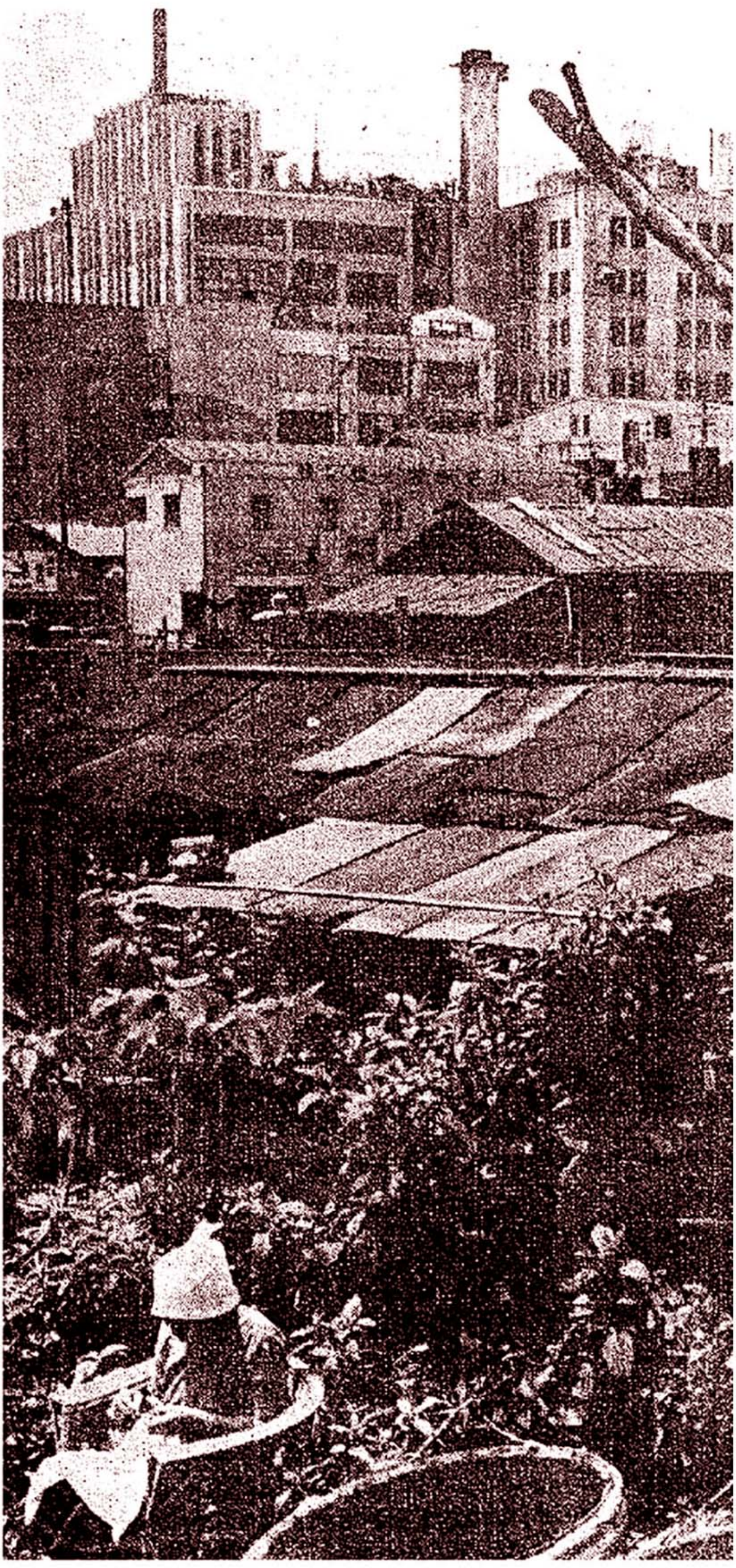

Home is now a scrap-tin hut, but the shattered trees are a blessing. They can be used for fuel.

Tanaya, for these days she wears her clothes as long and as little as possible. There is not much soap and what there is is bad. When the tattered wash is on the line, Mrs. Tanaya takes up her hoe and walks to her garden, a patch about three blocks distant, where the taro, egg plant, corn, and radish are half grown in the ash-colored earth and the sweet potatoes are just making a struggling start.

While she works, kneeling in the burned earth, Mrs. Tanaya thinks of her family and their struggles. For instance, what is one to do about elder daughter Shige, who is 24 and an elementary school teacher? She has married a poor carpenter. That is, she is living with him, but "the marriage is not yet registered," as Mrs. Tanaya will frankly tell you. Marriages cost money and in these times who has the money for or the faith in ceremony? One has to worry, too, about Teruko, the 20-year-old

"secondary" daughter, who lives with Mrs. Tanaya's eldest sister at Fukushima. Teruko works in a bank and the pitfalls are great for a young working girl. These are days of low morals and the young people are not as they were.

But digging in the earth, picking bugs off the young plants, or pouring the stinking fertilizer from her own privy onto the rows, Mrs. Tanaya finds it hard to consider these as real problems. One must accept such things and concentrate one's worries on the growth of the only son, Mitsuhiro.

Mitsuhiro has grown as strong as any of her plants, stronger maybe, although he is small, like most Japanese boys. But he is shyer than most and, like his mother, has almost no friends. Thinking of Mitsuhiro she warms with pride in his young strength and then grows cold with fear for him, for it is so hard to feed her family these days.

What really worries Mrs. Tanaya is not how little food she has today but whether she will have any tomorrow. She had several thousand yen saved when the war ended, but since then the family has drawn all of it out of the bank to pay for food. Mr. Tanaya's salary of 2,000 yen doesn't go far, although it sounds like a lot and is twenty times, in yen, his salary before the war. He pays an income tax of 4,000 yen a year now. Until last year he called himself a contractor and consequently paid a "business tax" which brought his total taxes to 5,000 yen. Now he has dropped the title and is merely a carpenter, and richer in the bargain.

The Tanayas don't save money any more. Expenses are heavy. Mrs. Tanaya spends about 1,500 yen a month for dried fish, rationed foods, pickled seaweed, and other foods. Then there are the incidental expenses. Electricity costs only about 19 yen a month, including the 5 yen radio tax. That is not too bad. But a family, even in these hard days of peace, must pay

"social fees." If a relation dies they must give at least 100 yen; if the deceased is an old and good friend, then 50 yen are required, and 20 for an "average friend." The same is true of weddings, which fortunately are rarely celebrated since the peace.

Mrs. Tanaya could not pay the 220 yen a *sho* demanded by black marketeers for rice even if it were available. So, when the ration fails to come, as it often does, she goes to her home, borrows money from her father, who, like most farmers, is prospering now, and buys rice at the farm. This has to be smuggled into Tokyo, hidden in her rucksack and baggage.

On her last trip it took two days of standing in line to get a ticket. She stood up in the train for the entire ten hours, squeezed between other determined women and men going to the country for the same purpose. As she came back past the police, her back bent under the heavy knapsack, her damp hands clutching her *furoshiki* (carrying kerchief), and her face a study in innocence, she was very much frightened. She has been afraid to go again because too many people have been caught.

Mrs. Tanaya eats her noon meal hurriedly, puts the bowls on their shelf, and walks outside. Today is ration day. The store where distributions are made is just outside the high wooden fence. When the puffing, charcoal-burning truck arrives loaded with flour sacks, she quickly draws on a clean cotton skirt and blouse, slips into her best *geta*, and clops away to join the other women.

Mrs. Tanaya falls in behind Mrs. Okuno, a lady who lives with her three children in a tin hut within the Tanaya enclosure. An American woman would feel right at home in the conversations that run up and down a Japanese ration line—that is, once the formalities are over. First they bow low and address their preliminary remarks to the ground.

"How are you?"

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"How are you?"

"It is a long time since the last time."

"A long time."

"How is your honorable husband?"

"Ha! Thank you very much. he is well, through you." And so on, until every one in both families has been asked after and the assurance given that they are well through the grace of the asker—even though some of them may be on the point of death. When the honorable family is disposed of, the two stand erect again to talk of less honorable things face to face. Food is the main subject of discussion. Each tells the other "secret" ways of obtaining rice, although both have told each other the same things many times before. Then there are the rumors of food shortages, rising prices, new ways of eating strange American foods, and especially what to do with corn meal, which doesn't taste good raw or fried or baked.

There is a lot of talk about

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Americans. To the Japanese women and their husbands, the conquerors are a puzzling combination of good and bad. But they often thank their gods for "Marshal" MacArthur, who seems to spend all his time doing things for the Japanese people. They will never forget the months of April and May when there was no ration and women like Mrs. Tanaya were cooking all kinds of weeds from their gardens in an effort to fill the stomachs of their families. Then MacArthur sent food, some of it strange, but all of it edible—although some of the women did unwittingly use hard cakes of dehydrated soup for soap. Since then, "Marshal" MacArthur has saved them many times with American foods, and they are relying on his benevolence to carry them through the hard months ahead.

After leaving the corn meal in the house, she walks down the lane toward the high buildings and the dirty, swarming black market

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Mitsuhiro, obeying an old tradition, bows to his mother before leaving for school

stalls that grow at their feet.

In the market there are hundreds of Japanese wives: toothy women wearing soiled *mompe*. loose blouses over unbound breasts, and noisy *geta* on bare feet. There is little haggling in the stinking lanes of canvas and wooden shops. The Japanese woman is resigned. She is resigned to democracy, as she was resigned to dictatorship. She is resigned to troubled peace as she was to war. She is resigned to poor housing, bad food, and high prices. Fate has made it so. All one can hope for is an extra slice of radish or a larger piece of fish if the vendor is nice.

At last Mrs. Tanaya returns to a fish stall where a price within her budget had been quoted by the insolent vendor. She brushes the flies from three pieces of fish, watches the vendor weigh them, and pays his price—50 yen each.

From the market, Mrs. Tanaya walks to the street that leads through the canyon of high buildings. The sidewalks there are lined with shiny new wooden stalls selling wooden clogs, cheap toys, kitchen ware, and oddments interesting to people with a fatter pocketbook than Mrs. Tanaya's. In one of the windows of a department store is a manikin wearing a fine kimono of orange and green,

Tanaya couldn't buy it, even if the government permitted the sale of such fineries. She has not had a new dress in ten years, although she has been able to get army shirts and pants for her son and husband through the rationing system. Mrs. Tanaya's wardrobe includes five summer dresses, fragile and patched now, ten winter dresses, mostly kimonos, two pairs of straw sandals or *zori*, and six pairs of worn *geta*. She needs undergarments badly, but she's not interested in new dresses. So she stops briefly in front of the window and walks quickly home with her dreams in her head and her fish in her hand.

At home, she blows up the fire and puts the dried sweet potatoes on to boil. There is no rice for dinner, ever, these days. Tonight there are plums pickled in brine, greens from the garden, and broiled fish with the potatoes.

A neighbor comes to sit with Mr. Tanaya after dinner. They talk politics while Mrs. Tanaya washes the dishes. No woman ever drops into her home for a cup of tea, and a chat. For, like most country-born women, Mrs. Tanaya does not consider this city her home. Her home is the little village where she was born, where her husband was born, and where her ancestors have lived and died for centuries.

Her husband, however, has many friends. They come in the evenings to drink tea and discuss politics and the problems of existence. This evening the tenor of their talk is pessimistic. Mrs. Tanaya doesn't like to hear such talk because it depresses her. She is glad when her husband's guest has drunk his tea and gone home.

Mitsuhiro plays the radio softly, listening to the American Armed Forces Radio. Mr. and Mrs. Tanaya find American music hard to understand, but Mitsuhiro and his sisters are fond of it. Sometimes Mrs. Tanaya is irritated by the noisy American jazz bands, but she feels, like most Japanese mothers, that, if her children are to live in this new world, they must

understand such things. But when she is alone and the radio emits what she calls "jagga jagga music," she turns it off.

Tonight Mr. and Mrs. Tanaya discuss the new house they are going to build. For the thousandth time Mr. Tanaya tells his wife how lucky they are to have the little pile of lumber, now outside the house waiting for Mr. Tanaya to use it. The house, Mrs. Tanaya says, as she always does at the end of such a conversation, will, she hopes, be beautiful and pleasing to her husband.

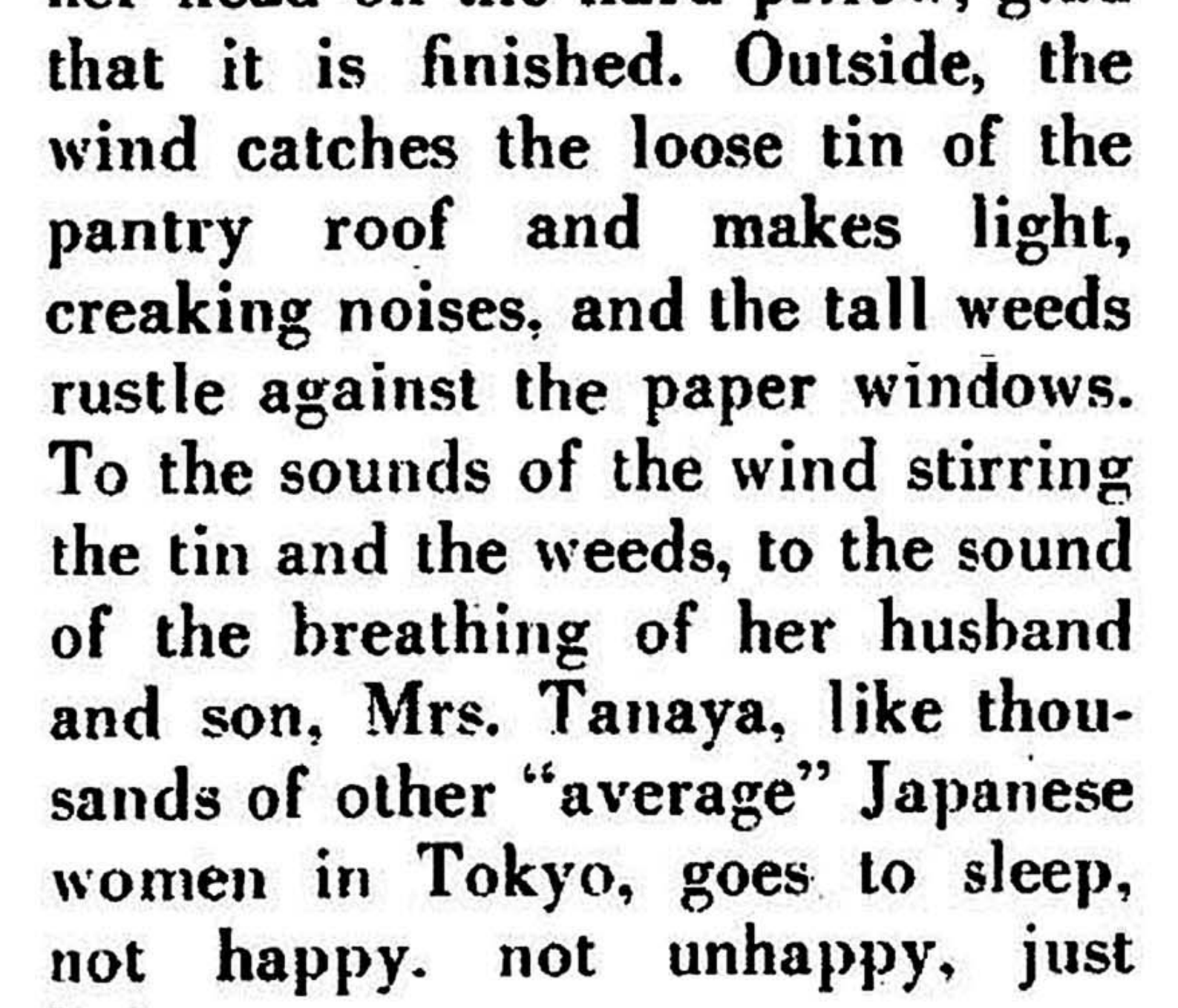
Mrs. Tanaya spends most of her income for food like this black-market melon

Then she announces that the bath is ready. Mr. Tanaya always grumbles about being first, for he can't sit and soak as long as he would like. But Mrs. Tanaya insists on the ancient order in this matter. The eldest person is always first, then the sons, then the wife, and the young daughters. The Tanayas are able to bathe only twice a week, and they enjoy it fully. When Mr. Tanaya has soaped himself with the hard, latherless Japanese soap and washed himself off with a basin of water poured on frugally by his wife, he steps into the bath and sinks up to his ears in the scalding water. When at last Mr. Tanaya comes out, it is Mitsuhiro's turn. As Mrs. Tanaya helps her husband into bed, puts the ash tray at his head and lights his cigarette butt, she calls to Mitsuhiro to warn him against wasting water.

When the boy has finished and is tucked into his *futong*, Mrs. Tanaya undresses and, holding the wet washcloth modestly in front of her, steps into the bath. She

washes herself and then climbs into the high tub, sighing deeply at the only luxury that still remains to her little family. At last, hearing her husband's snores in the next room, she reluctantly pulls herself out of the bath, dries herself, and slips into bed herself.

Her day is finished and she rests her head on the hard pillow, glad that it is finished. Outside, the wind catches the loose tin of the pantry roof and makes light, creaking noises, and the tall weeds rustle against the paper windows. To the sounds of the wind stirring the tin and the weeds, to the sound of the breathing of her husband and son, Mrs. Tanaya, like thousands of other "average" Japanese women in Tokyo, goes to sleep, not happy. not unhappy, just living.



At their rice, soup, and radish breakfast, the Tanayas eat noisily but talk little

Photographs By JOHN DOMINIS