

The Westernization of Mrs Jones (2001) by Crystal Arbogast

The smell of popcorn strayed into the bedroom, targeting my nostrils as I relaxed on fluffed up pillows, flicking through T.V channels. As usual, over twenty-five stations on cable, and I end up with the same thing at this time, a re-run of M.A.S.H.

5 My husband entered with our nightly snack, and grabbed for one of his pillows, which I had snatched earlier. Seeing my reluctance at moving, he said, "Come on, give it up. If you need another pillow, go buy one."

As he settled himself on the other side of the bed, I mumbled something in reference to kings and their castles. This prompted a reply. "While you're on that subject, guess who I got a letter from today."

10 "Who?" I asked. I could see that he really wanted me to be held in suspense for a while. It was the way he slowly chewed his popcorn. Then, he tossed another kernel into the air, trying to catch it in his open mouth.

15 "Well," I said, while attempting to beat some air into my flattened pillows, "I haven't the faintest. And, I really don't feel like guessing. So, if you're going to tell me, then tell me."

"Ken Jones," came the reply.

Ken Jones. It's amazing how a name can awaken sleeping memories.

"Really? Did he mention Rosita? I mean, are they still together?"

"Sure."

20 An envelope was tossed onto my stomach, and I looked at the return address.

"There isn't a base around this city, is there?"

"Nope. He's out."

"Really? I took him for a lifer. I mean, he really didn't seem to be suited for anything else but the military. So, what's he doing now?"

25 "Read the letter. I think you'll be surprised."

A kiss landed on my forehead, the usual goodnight signal. I picked up the letter, and my thoughts wandered back to fifteen years before.

30 My husband had been an Airman, and was assigned to a base in Germany during his last year of duty. We lived in a village outside of Wiesbaden. The apartment we rented was small and cramped, but we were together. That is, except for the weeks, and sometimes months, which he spent on the road. Communication squadrons were always on the move, especially those based in central Europe.

35 As a result of being left alone frequently, American wives had to adapt quickly, and learn how to manage on their own in a foreign economy. A camaraderie had developed between the wives in our building, and when Ken Jones moved in, a conspiracy developed.

40 Ken had latched onto my husband in basic training. He had been one of the more colourful characters in the many "boot camp" stories I had been subjected to. I had made up my mind that I had not missed much. This decision became concrete after I actually met him. I remembered the day he had shown up at the apartment.

"Rick, old buddy!" After a few good-natured macho slaps, I was introduced.

"Ken, this is my wife, Stacy."

"Glad to meet you, Stace. Gee, bud, I bet you get kinda nervous leaving a good-looking thing like that all alone, huh?"

45 As Ken surveyed my body, revulsion led my retreat into our kitchenette, where I politely excused myself. While I cleaned up a few glasses and made coffee, Ken's voice trailed in from the front room.

50 "Yep, I picked me up a little babe while I was in the Philippines. Works like a dog, keeps her mouth shut, and let me tell you something else. All those things they say about Asian women and sex ... it's true! I'll tell you, old buddy, she can ..."

"Ken, that's okay. Spare me the details."

I had detected the uneasiness in Rick's voice.

55 "Why don't you bring your wife up to dinner tonight? Our wives can get to know each other. Stacy's been here long enough to make her way around. She can help your wife out while we're on the road."

Later on, Ken was again at our door. A small doll-like girl, with long black hair, was at his side. I took an instant liking to her, a feeling quite opposite to which I held for her husband.

60 She did not speak much at all during the meal, but had seemed eager to help me with the dishes. Alone in the kitchenette, I had done most of the talking. I was able, however, to learn a little about her family. It became obvious that they were very poor, and that she missed them.

The guys were sent to Holland the next week. Ken came up to the apartment early the morning of their departure.

65 "Hey, Stace, I wanted to ask a favour of you."

I felt naked as his eyes found my chest, and stayed there.

"I was wondering," he continued, "if you would mind picking up our mail and maybe some groceries while I'm gone. Rick says that you make a couple trips a week to the base."

70 "Sure, Ken. I'll be glad to show Rosita around. The girls and ..."

"No ... see, Rosita's kind of timid, and well, she's not exactly a liberated woman. Know what I mean?"

My eyes immediately glared back into his smug grin.

75 "No, I don't know what you mean, Ken. What does learning to get around and pick up your mail have to do with being liberated? And, why do you say liberated the way you do?"

Rick had picked up his bags and hurried to the door.

"I'm sure Stacy won't mind."

His eyes pleaded with me as he spoke. "I'll be down in a minute, Ken."

80 The familiar grin spread across his face. "Sure, old buddy. I'll be waiting downstairs. Don't be too long. I took care of my woman last night."

As Ken stomped down the stairway, Rick closed the door.

"Rick, I hate him! I absolutely loathe him!"

85 Before I could say another word, Rick kissed me. Realizing that he was leaving again, I forgot about the swamp creature, and hung onto my husband.

That same day, I had made up my mind that I would ignore Ken's request. I took Rosita into town, and onto the base. I taught her how to buy the bus tickets, and how to stamp them once she boarded. I was amazed at her enthusiasm. She began to talk more, and smile more.

90 When the housemeister made his weekly visit to the building, I informed Rosita that it was his job to inspect the furnace, and sweep down the stairs.

He never succeeded in sweeping down our stairway, so the women did the job. He clanged and banged away in the furnace room, as if he were accomplishing something. Then, he would beg for "cigaretten". I told Rosita to avoid him.

95 All of the women in the building eventually adopted Ken's quiet wife. She seemed surprised that the majority of us were continuing our education on base. Janie Scott, who lived on the third floor, was a law student. She amazed Rosita with the facts on divorce. I personally suspect she did this on purpose. She had met Ken also.

100 Sue, from across the hall, majored in business. She was also near to giving birth to her second child. It was Sue who pushed Rosita toward the idea of going to school.

105 One morning, as we made our way to the bus stop, a strange sight emerged from one of the neighbouring apartment buildings. A small, round woman, dressed in a housecoat and house slippers, stepped out onto the sidewalk. She was leading a straggly, mixed-bred pup by a tattered rope, which was tied around his neck. The

rope, however, was caught up and around the dog's hind leg. This caused the animal to hop along on three legs. The woman trailing behind seemed oblivious to the situation.

110 A big smile spread across her face when she saw Rosita and myself. As we moved closer, she started a conversation.

"Hello, me Kim. I live here. Where you live?"

As I pointed in the direction of my apartment building, she continued.

"Your husbands' Air Force?"

115 As we nodded our heads, she said, "My husbands Army. No good GI. You come over sometime. I teach you cook Korean."

Rosita visited Kim a few times a week. After a while, my friends and I noticed a kind of slang appearing in Rosita's speech. It was kind of cute. She also had begun to talk more freely as time went by. She enjoyed our company, but she was especially close to Kim.

120 "Kim say American men like to treat their Asian women like something in movie," she had said to me one day in the downstairs laundry room.

"Really?"

"Yeah, but she say we come a long way, baby."

I had laughed at the remark, and said, "Do you intend to take up smoking, also?"

125 Unfamiliar with the cigarette commercial, she was visually puzzled by my question.

"Never mind," I had said. "So, what do you plan to do, Rosita?"

"I go to school. I want to make big money, someday."

"That's good, but what will Ken say? Doesn't he want to start a family?"

130 "Ken good man," she had said. "I give him babies, but I get what I want. Never be poor again. Help my family."

135 We had six weeks with Rosita. When the men returned home, Ken had not noticed the change in his wife, at first. Then, one evening, Ken appeared at our door, again. I eavesdropped to bits and pieces of the conversation while he visited with Rick.

"She's been gone all day! She mumbled something this morning about going to the base, school or something. She walks in after six. When I ask her about supper, she shoves a beer at my face and tells me to relax! Then, she tells me that I'm acting like a no good GI! Where'd she get this stuff?"

140 The vision of Kim in her housecoat came to my mind, and I had to stifle a giggle.

I had always wondered about the outcome of that year, and the result of our influence on Rosita.

145 When Rick's tour of duty was over, I said good-bye to my comrades. I still correspond with Janie and Sue. I lost track of everyone else, although I still consider them my friends. I admit I had worried about our pupil for a while. Then, she began to fade away into the gray fog of forgetfulness as we got on to our own lives.

150 I opened the envelope. I was surprised to read about the four kids, three girls and a boy. Oh well, maybe he won't turn out like his Dad. Then, I smiled as I read on. "Well, old buddy. I've got to go. Rosita's got her own business and she gets home late. I've got to get some supper on. It's my turn tonight."

Still smiling, I folded the letter and placed it on the night table. As my husband snored softly, I reached for the remote, pausing as a late-night commercial caught my eye. Six Asian babes, as Ken would have called them, all lined up for inspection.

"Hello. Would you like to correspond with beautiful, single Filipino girls?"

155 "There are many beautiful girls waiting, just for you ..."

The Westernization of Mrs Jones – Questions

1. What was the life of Stacy and her husband like in Germany? Stacy said, "The apartment we rented was small and cramped, but we were together". What do these words tell you about their relationship?
2. What "special relationship" did the wives of American officers have?
3. What was Stacy's attitude to Ken Jones? Why do you think she immediately felt sympathy for his wife?
4. How do you think Ken and Rosita came to be married? Did they love each other?
5. Why didn't Ken want Stacy to show Rosita around the city?
6. In what way was Rosita different from American wives?
7. In what ways does Kim influence Rosita? Why did the author choose a Korean woman to influence Rosita?
8. How does Rosita change through the story? Is Stacy satisfied to see this change?
9. What did Stacy learn from Ken's letter? What do you imagine the relationship between Ken and Rosita will be like fifteen years after the letter?
10. What is the significance of the last lines of the story? Why does the author finish it with the late-night commercial?
11. What do you understand by the word "westernization"? Do you think westernization did Rosita good?
12. What can you say about the setting in this story?
13. What can you say about exposition in this story?
14. What can you say about the denouement in this story?
15. What can you say about the different characters in this story?