

Reflections of a POW's Wife

MRS. CORMIER: I am not the feminine woman that I was seven years ago, if one defines femininity as sort of passivity and concerned more with home and the running of the home and motherhood. Those were my limits, really, seven years ago. I was terribly interested in—in raising my children and—and running my home. Those are still my primary interests. However I have been forced by circumstances to become quite aggressive, sort of terribly cold. Do you know how long it's been since I kissed a man? It's been a long time. I don't even know if I remember how anymore, and that scares me.

Q. Do you love him?

A. Oh, yes. Very much. In fact, I guess I realize now how much I do. . . .

On the one hand, I—I cannot wait for him to get home. My life is kind of held in abeyance until he arrives, because I want so much to continue it with him. On the other hand, I do feel that this will be a time when a person will come into my life who will pass judgment, and it's kind of scary and I'm kind of nervous about it.

It's just kind of a very scary feeling to think that—let me—let me put it this way. Someone has—has said to me, "Oh, well," you know, "you have a second

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chance, a second marriage." And I don't really, because if this were a second marriage the two of us would be sort of starting out from equal footing and we would both have made a decision to—stick with one another or whatever it may be.

This time I have a man coming into my house, and it is very much my house, I shopped for it and paid for it and fixed it up, took care of the storms and the screens, and it's very much mine; I'll have a man coming in who is very much a stranger, who is biologically the father of my children, but they are my children, I have raised them, I've walked the floor at night with them; he's really not had much of an influence in their lives at all. And now he's kind of coming back in from the assumption that he has a place here, but we're going to have to make a place, for him is really the problem. . . .

For the past seven years, since his helicopter was shot down, Senior M. Sgt. Arthur Cormier, USAF, has been confined to a North Vietnamese POW camp. His wife, Eileen, and their four children, live in Bayshore, Long Island. During their years of waiting for Sgt. Cormier to return, the family has received 36 letters, most limited to a few lines each. In the accompanying interview for NBC's "First Tuesday" (WRC-TV, Feb. 6, 1973), Mrs. Cormier reflects on her feelings about his return.

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And he's bound to come in here and — and realize that we have survived pretty well without him. And I'm sure that he's going to wonder what is his — his role and his place in this family.

Q. What about getting together when he gets out? I understand that the — the government has all sorts of plans made which you feel don't include the family much. Is that it?

A. Well, there are — their plan calls for having the men returned to specified centers in the United States and then ship the families into these centers at government expense to spend the time there, at least the initial rehabilitation period there with the man, which does not allow very much in terms of thinking about a second honeymoon. My husband has mentioned a sec — the possibility of a second hon-

eymoon in his letters, and I'm wondering how he's going to feel about a second honeymoon in the base hospital at Andrews Air Force Base. I — well, the — the idea of the antiseptic and sterility of the place kind of turns me off; and I'm sure it will him.

Q. Your children have grown up in very crucial years without their father. Do you think that can ever be made up, that time lost?

A. No. No, I — I really don't think it can. I think what also cannot be made

up is the fact that they have grown up without him. Their thinking and their actions and the — their value system is all kind of mine. And while I believe very much in my value system, it's — it's not been sort of tempered by another person. And I don't think that that's very good. It's not the way I pictured it when I went down the aisle as a bride; definitely not what I had in mind. . . .

You're talking with a wife who is able to say these things because I have some security that I have a person coming home. But so many of these wives do not have that — that security. And it's so very difficult for them to be able to — to think about this sort of coldly. I guess that some of us are — are able to; we've been able to — to put our feelings aside and sort of talk about it. An awful lot of families are not able to.

Also, you must remember that I'm seven years into this. If you had—if you were in Washington last October to the league meeting, you would have seen all the brand-new families, families whose relative had been shot down in '70 or '71 or '72. It seems incredible that people are still being shot down, but they are. And so really I'm sort of, an old China hand at this. There are so many wives who are not. . . .

Q. When your husband comes back are you afraid that he's going to be treated as the POW freak, with his mother crying every time she looks at him and—and your saying, you know, "We've got our life to continue, and our life to start"?

A. Well, this is one of—of my fears. I am sort of concerned about my role.

No matter which way I play it, I am bound to come out as kind of being the heavy. And if I appear to have managed with a reasonable degree of success, then I will appear to have gone on without him. If I did not manage at all, then it—I will not have risen to the occasion. If the children are well-behaved and present relatively few problems, then I will be the—the sole parent; he will really have not had any involvement. If the children had a tremendous amount of problems, then it would be because I haven't taken care of them. There's this tremendous possibility that I can lose. I can lose on so many counts. He could fall in love with the stewardess on the way back in the plane, because it may be the first round-eyed American girl that he's met.

He's coming back to a situation which is already set. The schedules are there; the lifestyle is there. I'm much older than I was, although he is also, but I'm much more set in my ways. The children are older. And we all have our—our schedules and our routine. And I see that I could lose, and it kind of not only worries me but it kind of angers me too.

One of the previous returnees came home and divorced his wife because she was too liberal. So that's pretty scary. Am I going to be too liberal? Well, Am I going to be too aggressive, too self-possessed, too cold? I don't know.

Q. Do you worry that perhaps he won't measure up to your standards anymore?

A. No. I guess I'm more concerned about my measuring up to his. It—it just sounds so very trite, but I—I keep thinking of how am I going to share anything with him. How is it going to be to have him sharing my life; to have him checking the checkbook and the bank balances? How is it going to be to feel that he's listening in on phone conversations that I have? How will I ever share my closet, my bathroom with him? How—how do I—I share my life with a man who to all intents and purposes at this point is a total stranger and yet is the father of my children and the man with whom I want very much to share? But I don't know about my ability to share anymore. I don't know how I'm going to feel if I am awakened in the middle of some night when he's had a bad dream and decides that I am a Vietcong intruder. I don't know how it would be to have him get very snappy with the children. I don't know how it will be when—when he comes back and says, "What was it all for?" and I don't know what it was for.