

HOW TO ACE COLLEGE ENTRANCE EXAMS

PAGE 120

DRAMA IN REAL LIFE

TRAPPED IN A WELL

PAGE 114

"IF ONLY I HADN'T SMOKED"

PAGE 61



September 1994 \$2.25 Reader's Digest

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Tormented for Learning	<i>The Wall Street Journal</i>	49
Is There Gold in Your Back Yard?	<i>Michael Bowker</i>	54
So You Think You Want to Smoke	<i>William Ecenbarger</i>	61
A Girl, a Seal and the Sea	<i>Per Ola & Emily d'Aulaire</i>	68
The United States of Tonelli	<i>From the book</i>	73
Nelson Mandela's Greatest Challenge	<i>Walter E. Williams</i>	78
Why the Space Station Doesn't Fly	<i>Newsweek</i>	85
Kiss Bad Breath Good-Bye	<i>Mary Murray</i>	89
Heroes for Today	<i>Idaho Spokesman-Review, et al.</i>	94
My Link to Paradise	<i>New York Times</i>	97
Take Charge of Your Day		
"Time Tactics of Very Successful People"		101
Our Tax System vs. the American Family	<i>Pictograph</i>	105
When the Heart Misfires	<i>Pamela Patrick Novotny</i>	106
"Get This Scum Out of Here"	<i>Chicago Tribune</i>	111
Trapped in a Well	<i>Drama in Real Life</i>	114
How to Ace the College Entrance Exams		
	<i>Edwin & Sally Kiester</i>	120
All I Ever Wanted	<i>Country Living</i>	127
"Who Am I?"	<i>Daily Press</i>	131
Just Two for Breakfast	<i>Yankee</i>	137
What Health Care Crisis?	<i>Commentary</i>	141
Crime & Punishment (U.S.A.)		
	<i>Ft. Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel, et al.</i>	149
How to Steer Clear of Highway Hazards	<i>Health</i>	157
Stranger on the Escalator		
	<i>Philadelphia Inquirer Magazine</i>	167
Let's Hear It in English	<i>The American Legion</i>	177
BOOK SECTION } Major League Dad.	<i>From the book</i>	181
	<i>Flowers for Charlie, 9</i>	
	<i>Can These Pills Make You Live Longer? 19</i>	
	<i>The Man Who Hated Kids, 33</i>	
Word Power, 15	Humor in Uniform, 31	Laughter, 59
Life in These United States, 83	The Verbal Edge, 99	Tales Out of School, 113
News From the World of Medicine, 129	Personal Glimpses, 139	Day's Work, 145
Picturesque Speech, 153	Points to Ponder, 161	Quotable Quotes, 171

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THE CENTER FOR
THE STUDY OF
TOBACCO AND SOCIETY

So You Think You Want to Smoke

The stories of four who did

BY WILLIAM ECENBARGER

Janet Sackman, 63, HICKSVILLE, N.Y.

I often wonder what my life would be like if I hadn't gone to the beach that afternoon when I was 14. I was walking along the sand in a gorgeous new bathing suit, relaxing after a swim, when a well-dressed man stopped me. "Excuse me, Miss," he said. "I think you could be a model." And he handed me a business card.

"Wow! Thanks!" I said.

Later, I showed my mother the card. "He was joking," she said.

You're wrong, I thought. I was already five-foot-nine and had long blond hair, perfect teeth and a good

figure. I sneaked out and called the number on the card.

It turned out to be a real modeling agency, and they hired me. Within three years I hit the big time—live network TV. Oh, was it exciting! I'd wear a blue evening gown on Perry Como's "Chesterfield Supper Club." The announcer would take a puff on a cigarette and suavely declare, "Chesterfield leaves *no* unpleasant aftertaste." Then I'd kiss him and say in my smooth-as-silk voice, "You know, he's right!"

I also became a Lucky Strike cover girl, smiling from a million magazines. There I was on a snowy mountain, holding ski poles and a cigarette as

the wind blew my golden hair, urging people to "smoke a Lucky to feel your level best." Of course the mountain was just a painted backdrop, and I couldn't ski. I didn't even smoke.

But during this same photo session, a tobacco executive drew me aside. "It would be good if you learned to smoke," he said earnestly, "so you'll know how to hold a cigarette and puff on it." He didn't pressure, but at 17, I was eager to be a grown woman. It wasn't long before I bought a pack.

The first drag was awful—like sucking on a burning rope. But I was determined to master this proof of sophistication, and each time I tried I found it a little easier.

What I didn't understand was that

I was creating an artificial need for nicotine in my body, so that when I smoked I felt a great relief—which I interpreted as pleasure. Soon, I was smoking more than a pack a day.

Eventually I quit modeling to raise a family. But I didn't stop smoking. Every time I tried, I'd get jittery. So I'd say, "Well, maybe tomorrow."

In 1983, now 51 and the mother of four, I began having a terrible earache. Finally the doctors found the cause: throat cancer. "We might not have to remove the entire larynx," they assured me.

When I woke up after surgery, I was shivering and desperately needed a blanket. I opened my mouth to call the nurse. No sound came out. My voice was gone.

It took me a year to learn "esophageal speech." I draw air into my esophagus and literally belch out the words. My new voice has no inflection. I laugh soundlessly, and when I cry I shed silent tears. Once, when I answered the phone, the caller said, "What are you, some kind of robot?"

My breathing is different too. I inhale and exhale through a stoma, a nickel-size hole in my throat. Sometimes it whistles.

I thought I had paid an awful price for smoking, but at least I was alive—and completely off cigarettes. But in 1990 the doctors found cancer in my right lung.

In the hospital I wondered, *Why*

I draw air into my esophagus and literally belch out the words. I laugh soundlessly, and when I cry I shed silent tears.

Smoke a **Lucky** to feel your **LEVEL** best!

Smoking the Lucky's makes you feel like a winner. You know—when you feel your best, you're a winner.



L.B. & F.K. - Lucky Strike Means Fine Tobacco

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me? And I thought, *Maybe it's punishment for the modeling. Think how many it convinced to smoke.* I vowed that if I survived, I would begin speaking *against* smoking.

The surgery was terribly painful. I still hurt most of the time. I try not to think about dying of cancer, but I know the odds.

One night recently, I happened upon three teen-age girls waiting for a bus. Their cigarettes glowed like fireflies. "Ladies," I said, "let me introduce myself." My croaking voice startled them.

"I smoked at your age," I said. "Maybe you don't care what's going to happen when you're 40. I know I didn't. I just wanted to be cool and glamorous, like the women in the ads. But those ads are only meant to manipulate you. I know—I used to make them."

I told them about my modeling career, and the cancer. Then I pushed back my collar and said, "Look, here's my stoma where I breathe. See how glamorous I am now?"

I left them saucer-eyed. I don't know if they understood or not. Young people have to make up their own minds. I just hope it doesn't take them as long as it took me.

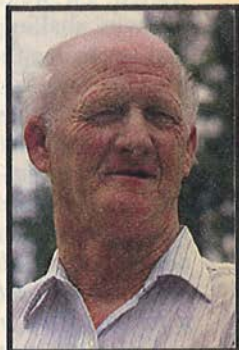
Jack Fortenberry, 56, CALERA, ALA.

When I was a kid my heroes were cowboys. I looked up to them the way boys admire ballplayers today. I wanted to be tough, like them.

They smoked, so I smoked—a couple of packs a day for 40 years. It made me feel like the Marlboro Man.

My cigarettes never seemed to bother me. I worked out, stayed in shape. I delivered for a soft-drink

“Today, when I look in the mirror, I see a guy with no teeth and a 15-inch scar from his chest around to his back.”



company. I could carry 360 pounds of syrup tanks up two flights of stairs in a single trip.

We had a nice life. I made good money. I loved Bernice and our two boys. Our biggest dream was to buy a motor home when I retired, and tour the West.

One afternoon I was driving my truck and felt a stab in the middle of my back. I pulled over and realized tears were rolling down my cheeks from the pain.

The doctor said something in my right lung was pinching a nerve. He ordered X rays. The next day, Bernice had to break the news. "You have lung cancer," she said, sobbing. "They need to operate right away."

Two days later I was wheeled into surgery. The tumor was inoperable,

so they just sewed me up again.

After a month or so I went for radiation treatment—five days a week for seven weeks. It made me unbelievably tired. On the way home Bernice would have to pull the car off the road so I could vomit.

They gave me morphine for the pain from the surgery, and when I finally came off it, the nightmares started. I'd wake up scared out of my wits, shaking, sweating. Bernice had to change the bed eight or nine times a day.

One of the first walks I took was out to the mailbox. It's only a hundred yards, but I had to sit down halfway. The birds were singing and the smell of honeysuckle filled the air. I thought, *The world is such a beautiful place; why did I have to ruin it for myself by smoking?*

I had to quit work. Insurance didn't pay for everything, and money is tight. There won't be any traveling out West.

I'm angry with myself for smoking, but I'm also angry with the tobacco companies. I saw a couple of cigarette executives on TV the other day, and they had the gall to say there's no proof that smoking is bad for you. I'm proof.

A few weeks after I came home from the hospital, I felt a loose tooth. I stuck my finger up there, and the tooth dropped into my lap. The cancer had caused a blood disorder that was making my teeth fall out. In a few days, I had only three left.

Today, when I look in the mirror I am shocked by what I see. A

guy with no teeth, a 15-inch scar from his chest around to his back, struggling to walk, face scrunched up in pain. And then I realize what I want to do. I want to have my picture blown up and plastered all over the world on giant billboards. Because now, you see, I'm the *real* Marlboro Man.

Trudy Grover, 52, VISTA, CALIF.

In one of my fondest childhood memories, my grandmother is serving me tea in a delicate, hand-painted china cup, one of eight on a shelf in her dining room. Then she hugs me and says, "Trudy, someday these will be yours."

About this same time, when I was in first grade, I'd see a certain woman walking past my school. She was tall and beautiful, stylish, with perfect makeup and long, red fingernails. And between two of those fingers she held a cigarette. I never knew her name, but for years she remained my idol.

One night when my parents were out, I opened the kitchen drawer where Dad kept his Camels. I lit one. It didn't taste good, but it made me feel like that elegant lady.

My parents were furious when they smelled cigarettes on me, and I was punished. But that only made me more determined. By age 13 I was smoking a pack a day.

Dad had given up on me, but Mom was still on my case. "Don't come crying to me if you get sick,"

SO YOU THINK YOU WANT TO SMOKE

she said. But at that age you couldn't tell me anything.

At 16 I moved out of the house. I loved the feeling of taking care of myself. I had my own apartment, worked as a waitress and made decent tips. And I always had a pack of Marlboros in my pocket.

One day when I was about 35, I was running back and forth between tables and suddenly couldn't catch my breath. It was like somebody was holding me underwater. I told myself I was just getting older.

Then, seven years later, at 42, I was diagnosed with emphysema—a lung disease that starves you of oxygen. I knew it was caused by cigarettes, but I kept right on smoking.

Waitressing was getting more difficult, though. Some days I'd leave work because I couldn't breathe.

One morning I was serving a table full of smokers; I started gasping, put down my tray and walked out. Later I called in and said I was through. I was through smoking too.

The doctor put me on an oxygen tank, an ugly thing with green rubber tubes running into my nose. I refused to go outside the house with it. "Isn't there anything else?" I begged. The doctor said, "Trudy, if you don't use it, don't expect to be around much longer."

You never hear about one of the worst effects of emphysema. In the struggle to breathe, you can lose control of your bladder. The first time it happened, I was driving to a friend's house. I pulled over and cried in shame.

In 1992, huffing and puffing, I went for my checkup. The doctor said, "Your tests are discouraging. Unless we take drastic measures, you'll be gone in six months. Your only option is a lung transplant."

I was stunned. So it had come to this. Someone else's lung—someone who probably hadn't smoked.

I had the operation on Easter 1993. It was rough. For six weeks, I was drifting in and out of consciousness on a respirator. At one point I heard my doctors talking.

"Is she still alive?"

"No, she's gone."

Inside, I was screaming, *No! I'm still here! Don't pull the plug!* But of course I wasn't really screaming. I couldn't move a muscle; they had me immobilized with

33 You never hear about one of the worst effects of emphysema. 33



PHOTO: © DAVE GATLEY

drugs. The terror was indescribable.

Now, a year and a half after the transplant, I take 23 pills a day. My pillbox is bigger than my billfold.

To pay bills, I was forced to sell my home and possessions. And one day, I made the saddest journey of my life: back to my mother's house.

"Mom," I said, averting my eyes, "I'm broke. Will you take me in?"

"Sure, honey," she said. I had been my own person from the time I was 16, and now I was begging my 73-year-old mother to take care of me again. I couldn't help crying.

I still hadn't finished paying my hospital bills. My last things of any commercial value were those eight teacups my grandmother had left me. I had no choice. Half hoping no one would respond, I ran an ad.

When the buyer came, I set the cups on Mom's dining-room table. I wondered which of them my grandmother had poured our tea into on that crisp afternoon so many years before. I finally told the man he could only have six.

He wrote me a check. And as he walked out the door, I felt I had betrayed the trust my grandmother placed in me as a little girl.

I still have the two remaining cups. They're all that's left of a life that went up in smoke.

Loren Kaehn, 69, ROCHESTER, MINN.

I don't want to live like this anymore, flat on my back in our guest room, tied to an oxygen machine,

surrounded by a shelf full of drugs, a wheelchair and a portable toilet. I keep shifting my position to relieve my festering bedsores.

I stare at the ceiling. My body is destroyed but my mind is sharp.

I remember being nine years old, hiding behind the bushes in a vacant lot. My buddies and I have picked up a handful of cigarette butts and are removing the tobacco and tamping it into homemade pipes. We light up and pretend to like it.

It is so easy now to see the irony of smoking: Kids do it to be like adults, who smoke but wish they didn't. These kids grow up to be adults who wish *they* weren't addicted, and they end up being unwilling models for *their* kids. A thousand years from now, people will still be smoking—unless kids see this terrible irony for themselves.

The memories continue. Now I am a young man, walking past a jewelry store in Minneapolis. I see this pretty woman—slender, about five-foot-five, with silky brown hair. A week later, I go in and pretend I want to buy a watch for my mother. My heart is rattling in my rib cage, but I ask her for a date. She says yes, and before long we are married.

Forty-four years and four babies later, Lola is still with me. Life has been wonderful—great kids, a good real-estate business, time for golf.

Now, when the attacks come, I feel the air getting heavy. Take a deep breath—as deep as you can—and hold it; then try to take another on top of it. That's what emphysema

feels like. You want to reach out and grab handfuls of air, but can't. The panic makes it even harder to breathe.

Lola hears me struggling and rushes in, throws open all the windows, turns on a couple of fans. She rubs my back, talks to me soothingly. And after an hour, I calm down.

Lola has never smoked, and she hates it. I think back to one of our rare disagreements. She tells me she doesn't want to be a widow. "My sister smoked like a chimney and got lung cancer," she says. "How can you do this to yourself?" I tell her, "You don't know how hard it is to quit."

For years I reasoned with myself: "You don't need it. Millions get along fine without it. Why can't you?" The answer, of course, was that those millions had never started.

Now I remember 1979—and I have quit. I've not smoked a cigarette in four weeks. I'm sitting over coffee with a buddy, who is smoking. It smells delicious.

"Give me a drag," I say.

"You sure?"

"One drag can't hurt."

He hands me his cigarette. I inhale deeply. Oh, is it wonderful! As if I've found a lost friend.

In the ensuing years, I will often look back on this moment with a regret so deep my eyes brim with tears. For within an hour I have smoked a whole cigarette, and on the way home I buy an entire pack.

Now it's about a year and a half ago. I'm feeling pretty good, so I drive down to a local restaurant to meet three of my best friends. It's

the last time I ever leave the house.

The kids and grandchildren came over last Christmas, and I joined them in the living room for an hour. That was the last time I was out of this bedroom. I know I will never leave here alive.

About once a day, it hits me: I've ruined Lola's life, too. We were going to open a little furniture-restoring business when the kids were grown. We loved going to garage sales. Now she can't even slip into town without arranging for someone to be here.

If I just hadn't taken that drag back in '79, I might be okay today. I wouldn't be consumed by this guilt. Guilt over the grief I've caused Lola. Guilt for smoking in front of my kids—especially Kathy. She's as hooked on cigarettes as I was. She'll probably smoke at my funeral.

The other day I asked Lola, "Why don't you just let me go?"

"I'm not doing anything to prolong your life," she said softly. "I'm just trying to make you comfortable." Then she cried.

Within reach of me now is a jar containing enough morphine to kill a horse. But I can't do it. When I'm gone, my Social Security benefits stop, and Lola needs the money as long as possible. It's the least I can do for her.

Loren Kaehn died at home on April 8 of emphysema. Among his last words: "I doubt that I'll live to see my story in print, but I hope millions of young people do. If I can leave them one sentence as my legacy, it is this: Don't think it won't happen to you."