



TRAVELER TAJ TERPENING

## Readers Write TEMPTATION

**LAST NIGHT I PICKED UP A HALF-smoked cigarette in the street and walked along twirling it in my fingers, trying to think where I could get a light. Then I threw the butt into the bushes. It was a triumph.**

This is my life: I feel triumphant when I don't bring home cigarette butts I've found by the curb. I feel triumphant every time I drive a car without smoking. I am no longer a person. I am a nonsmoker. Every ounce of my energy — physical, intellectual, emotional, spiritual — is devoted to not smoking. My thoughts all lead to the fact that I can't smoke. People talk to me, and their words become little cigarettes in my head. I can't concentrate long enough to study or even to make a pot of coffee. So I dance around, pick up dog hair, sing, check my e-mail.

I bore myself with this whole non-smoking bit. I can only imagine the effect I must have on others: *How are you?* I am not smoking. *How's your work?* I am not smoking. *What are you doing for the*

*holidays?* What the fuck do you think I'm doing? I am not fucking smoking. Merry Christmas.

My head is foggy, but my lungs are clear. I am determined to prevail. In the meantime, best keep your distance.

*Deirdre Mahoney  
Oakland, California*

**I HAVE A GOOD LIFE. MY PARTNER IS** loving, thoughtful, and earns enough as a business executive that I can stay home with our two children. We live in an upscale neighborhood with hundred-year-old trees and superb schools.

But every time I'm running errands and driving a northbound freeway, I think about continuing on to San Francisco. There I could write full time. I could come and go as I pleased. I could *sleep*. I could sit in a coffeehouse and talk about the future, possibilities, ideas. The grown-ups in my life now talk only about interest rates, remodeling, and investment portfolios.

I dream about driving north until I'm

on the doorstep of City Lights bookstore. I probably could never actually do it. But I am tempted.

*P.L.  
South Pasadena, California*

**I DIDN'T STEAL AS A CHILD, EVEN** though I was poor and hungry and had reason to. No, the temptation arose only after I had plenty of money. Then I began to pocket lipstick, earrings, inexpensive drugstore items. I even tried to get away with not paying for subways or tram tickets.

I was unhappily married and desperately lonely. Our two children fought constantly. My mother lived next door, and I resented her emotional dependency. But it wasn't my marriage that caused my crimes, because after I was divorced, I continued to steal. Did I secretly want to be caught? Was it a rebellion of sorts? Was it because my father had raised me to question whether I really needed something before buying it, and I unconsciously

believed I didn't need anything as frivolous as lipstick?

During a stay in Germany, I visited a psychic in Munich who told me I was a rosebud about to bloom, and that something soon would happen to reorient my life significantly.

The next day, as I entered the subway, I intentionally punched only one space on my strip of tickets instead of three. They rarely checked the tickets, but as soon as the train started moving, a conductor headed right toward me. I apologized and said it had been a mistake; I was from the U.S. and didn't know the fares. He took me off the train at the next stop and let me go.

I got on a tram, and, thinking that surely I wouldn't be randomly checked again, I stamped my ticket in a space that previously had been stamped. Again, a conductor discovered what I'd done. I explained that it had been an accident. I was leaving the country soon to return to the U.S. and didn't even need the extra tickets. It truly made no sense for me to try to cheat the system. He told me to get off the tram and fined me sixty deutsche marks. If I didn't want to pay, he said, I could go to the main office and plead my case there.

At the main office the punitive fee was waived, and I was allowed to pay the correct fare. But my inability to overcome my compulsion left me shaken. I swore to myself that I would never cheat or steal again. I still don't understand what caused me to do it, but I have kept my word.

*Name Withheld*

**IN THE SEVENTIES MY HUSBAND AND** I built a house in the northern Maine woods, giving up electricity, running water, and other creature comforts in exchange for what we considered to be a more pure life. Several years later, we re-joined society, got jobs, and started driving our kids to band and soccer practice, but we kept our property in the woods and returned there every summer. Our kids called it the "free world." We swam in the river, gathered raspberries, cooked over a campfire, hiked in the forest, and watched for moose and bears. The only sounds were the wind in the tall pines and coyotes howling.

The children grew up and scattered. When the marriage ended after twenty-six years, I retreated to the cabin for an entire summer and drew strength from hard work and endless hiking. Alone in that silent place, I realized I could manage this new single life. I ended up spending time there every summer.

One August I arrived to find that someone had bought the land on either side of our property. Within sight of our cabin, they built a bunkhouse and other buildings for their new summer bear-hunting business. A loud generator ran, chain saws ripped into trees, and pickup trucks and all-terrain vehicles roared about. Men cursed and yelled and tossed beer cans on the ground. To attract bears, they dumped rotting garbage and barrels of "bear mash" — a fetid-smelling, doughy brew. After training the bears to come to these spots, the "hunters" waited for the first day of bear season, then hid behind a blind and killed the unsuspecting animals.

Paradise lost. I fumed. I wrote bitter

letters to my ex-husband and kids saying that we should sell the property. I had bad dreams about intruders trying to break into my house. I hiked farther and farther from the cabin in search of silence. And then came the idea: burn their buildings down. A friend told me he knew a couple of guys who, in the middle of winter when the snow was deep, would snowshoe in, splash around some gas, and light a match.

It went against everything I stood for. I was a pacifist, a student of Buddhism, a healthcare practitioner whose first aim was always to do no harm. But burning down their camp would solve everything. No one would be hurt, and my paradise would be restored.

I kept my friend's phone number and thought often about calling to tell him to have it done. I knew it was terrible even to consider it, but the vision of the hunting camp going up in flames gave me comfort. Each time I went there and saw their compound and the mess they'd made of that beautiful spot, I thought,

**R**EADERS WRITE asks readers to address subjects on which they're the only authorities. Topics are intentionally broad in order to give room for expression. Writing style isn't as important as thoughtfulness and sincerity.

Because of space limitations, we're unable to print all the submissions we receive. We edit pieces, often quite heavily, but contributors have the opportunity to approve or disapprove of editorial changes prior to publication. (If you don't want to be contacted regarding the editing of your work, please let us know.)

We publish only nonfiction in Readers Write. Feel free to submit your work under "Name Withheld" if it allows you to be more honest, but be sure to include your mailing address so we can give you a complimentary six-month subscription if we use your work, as a way of saying thanks. Occasionally we will choose not to publish an author's name, or will use only a first name and last initial. While we don't question the truthfulness of the writing, we must be sensitive to considerations of libel or invasion of privacy. If you've already changed the names of the people involved, please say so.

Send your typed, double-spaced submissions to Readers Write, The Sun, 107 North Roberson Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27516. If you cannot type, please print clearly. We're sorry, but we can't respond to or return your work, so don't send your only copy unless you don't want it back. Because we must wait until the last minute to make our final selections, we are unable to answer questions regarding the status of submissions. If your work is going to appear, you'll hear from us prior to publication.

UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
Help	September 1	February 2007
Good Friends	October 1	March 2007
Praying	November 1	April 2007
Too Close For Comfort	December 1	May 2007
The Bedroom	January 1	June 2007
Guns	February 1	July 2007

*I will do it!*

But I ended up moving across the country, and I stopped spending time at the cabin. Two years ago I heard that the bear hunters had sold their land to a family with six children who planned to live there year-round. Recently I phoned the wife, who turned out to be a kindred spirit — a Taoist and environmentalist. They are restoring the buildings and the land, installing solar panels and a composting toilet, and opening up their clearing with a handsaw. The serenity of that spot suits them, as it always did me. I will go back there soon.

I'm relieved I didn't give in to the temptation to destroy what I didn't like.

*Nancy Moore  
Bellingham, Washington*

#### **WHEN I WAS TWENTY, MY FRIEND**

Jack and I traveled cross-country on a shoestring budget. We stayed with relatives or slept in our car, except for one night when we splurged and got a room at the YMCA in San Francisco. The clerk told us we would be sharing the room with a man who'd been there several weeks. Though we never saw our roommate, I immediately noticed his milk crate full of gay porn magazines. I wanted badly to look at them, but Jack was straight and didn't know I was attracted to men. I'd told no one, and barely admitted it to myself.

In the morning, as we headed downstairs to check out, I told Jack I'd forgotten something, and I dashed up to the room to steal one of the magazines. I knelt in front of the crate, but I was suddenly too scared to take one. I couldn't bring myself even to turn a single page.

*Nathan Long  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*

**I MOVED TO THE AFRICAN NATION OF** Mali to be with my fiancé, a French civil servant who'd been assigned there in lieu of military duty. One friend I made there, Raquelle, was the wife of another civil servant, and sometimes I'd shop with her at the one store in the country that sold imported goods and foods. Raquelle would walk up and down the aisles, putting items in her basket — and in her pockets. She explained that the goods in her pock-

ets were already paid for because stores jacked up their costs with a "theft tax." She didn't believe in capitalism.

When her husband embraced the Malian culture by taking two new wives, Raquelle moved back to France, but her principles stuck with me.

One day at the import store, I saw some bottled cinnamon: an American brand with a red top. Though I could buy raw cinnamon in the central market, something about that familiar glass bottle called to me. Tightly sealed, shiny, and tidy, it brought me back to my childhood and whispered of care and contentment. But it was beyond my meager means, so I headed for the cash register. Then I turned back and slipped the bottle into my purse.

I have no recollection of using that cinnamon to make something delicious. I'm left with only the miserable memory of how I succumbed to temptation.

*Myrina D. McCullough  
Washington, D.C.*

#### **ONE OF MY FIRST ASSIGNMENTS AS A**

newly ordained priest was to hear confessions at a local boys' high school. I was nervous when the first young man entered the confessional and whispered, "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. I had impure thoughts."

Relieved that the sin was something I could handle, I assured him that having sexual thoughts was a normal part of adolescence, but that he should not act upon them.

"Did you entertain these thoughts?" I asked.

"No, Father," he said. "They entertained me."

*Kenny Moore  
Totowa, New Jersey*

**I WAS HAPPILY MARRIED AND THE** father of an infant son when she walked into our office for a job interview: a beautiful, petite blonde in a pale blue suit and matching pillbox hat. I prayed she would be hired, even though I loved my wife and felt ashamed of my powerful attraction to this stranger.

Sure enough, Raylene was hired, and I was assigned the task of teaching her the fundamentals of the job. She was quick to

catch on and had a good sense of humor. I liked her even more.

Raylene and I rode the same bus home each afternoon, and on the way to the bus stop we shared stories about work and our lives. She was married to Cody, who also worked for our company but not in the office, and they had a young daughter. She was unhappy in the marriage because of Cody's excessive drinking. One day she confided that Cody had come home drunk the night before and had insisted on having sex. She'd refused him because when he was drunk he could never climax and always wore her out trying. To retaliate, he'd found her diaphragm and cut it up with his jackknife. "What should I do now?" she asked.

I didn't know how to respond. My wife didn't use a diaphragm, and I had never even seen one. "Get a new one, I guess," I told Raylene.

One day at the end of our shift, it was raining so hard Raylene and I took off our shoes and socks to walk to the bus stop. "My God, you have such sexy feet!" she said. I wondered if she would think the rest of me was sexy.

At the office Christmas party Raylene caught me standing under the mistletoe, and she planted a kiss full on my lips. The feelings I had for her came to a peak after that. I had erotic dreams and fantasies about her, but I never contemplated acting on my feelings.

Years passed. Raylene divorced Cody and had a few flings with other men at the company. Eventually she married one of them. Because husbands and wives were not allowed to work in the same office together, Raylene left. I lost touch with her for several years. Then I ran into her and her husband at a local mall. She was still as ravishing as ever. We discovered that we both had an interest in writing. She and a friend were forming a writing group, and they invited me to join. The three of us took turns hosting meetings. At my house, my wife prepared snacks for us. She liked Raylene. Then Raylene's friend died, leaving just the two of us. We found other members, but it never felt the same, and the group disbanded.

Before long, my wife died, and Raylene and I talked less. She was still married, and I felt self-conscious calling her



RYAN FOX

now that I was single.

One day Raylene called me, crying. Her husband had been diagnosed with lung cancer. I sympathized but immediately started thinking that if he died, I was not going to let Raylene get away. I wondered, though, whether she was even interested in me. It turned out to be moot, because Jeff made a full recovery.

Raylene, Jeff, and I are all seventy-seven years old now, and we're good friends. She was never my lover, and I suspect probably never wanted to be. She was, and still is, my temptation.

*William G.  
Phoenix, Arizona*

**AT THE END OF A LONG DAY, I SLAPPED** my seven-year-old son across his face so hard that I left a mark. He'd been arguing with me for more than an hour, and I was desperate to shut him up. Immediately I was stunned by my violent outburst. I'd spanked my children a few times before, but never anything like this.

The next day his day-care provider reported me to Child Protective Services, and rightly so. It was both humiliating and humbling. I agreed to attend parenting classes and family therapy.

Since then I've become more aware of my frustration over being a single mom. I've also realized that my children act out

to get my attention. Divorce has been hard on them. They didn't choose this life or the pain and frustration they've experienced because their parents split up.

We're learning to talk and heal and support one another; not to judge; to be patient, kind, honest. I'm ashamed to admit, though, that I'm still tempted to take the easy way out. Hitting is quicker than working things through. I've succumbed a few times, but I've never hit my son that hard again. It takes every bit of strength I have to control my impulses.

*Name Withheld*

**MY HUSBAND IS NOT A DANCER, AND** he knows how much I love to dance, so he has agreed to let me go dancing with someone else. The young man who will be my partner shakes my husband's hand and promises that there will never be more to our relationship than dancing. After all, he's a devout Christian, and I'm a happily married woman.

Yet when we dance, I feel an unacknowledged sexual current. I ride this temptation across the dance floor, keeping it just barely under control. We move as one, our long hair flying behind us. Once, as my partner expertly whirls me across the floor, his soft lips and beard brush the back of my neck. Or do they? Rumors circulate that we are having a passionate affair.

One night my husband comes to watch, as if to prove by his presence that the rumors are untrue. He surely can see the sensual energy flowing between his wife and this other man, but he says nothing. I think he likes to watch, knowing he will be the one to take me home.

*Name Withheld*

*(end of excerpt)*