



Debbie and Tony Curtis rehearse an emotional scene for "The Rat Race," her most recent film.

my life has just begun (Continued)

Williams suggested I join her dancing classes, I eagerly accepted. But my progress was too slow to suit me.

One afternoon, in a fit of temper, I yanked off my ballet slippers, threw them into the corner, and stormed out of the studio. Once outside, I plunked down on the curb, right smack on Hollywood Boulevard. I was so mad I was purple.

Camille followed me a couple of minutes later. "Frannie," she said softly (my real name is Mary Frances), "there's no reason for you to get upset. Those are difficult exercises."

"Well, it doesn't look difficult when you do it!" I shot back.

"But I've been at it since I was seven years old," she explained patiently.

Neither reason nor persuasion could get me to go back to class till Camille had shown me the steps right on the sidewalk and let me try them out, to the amazement of a dozen bystanders. Only after I felt I had mastered them adequately did I go back.

FORTUNATELY, neither Carrie nor Todd is like me in another respect—not yet!

When I'm described by reporters as the typical girl next door and everybody's kid sister, I often wonder how they would have reacted if they had ever heard me cuss like a trooper as a kid.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not proud of it. Most of the time I didn't even understand the meaning of the words I used!

I learned them from an uncle who used to be in the Coast Guard. He and my younger brother Bill and I would sit in the back yard and hold cussing contests. In the process, I picked up a few dillies, which I used in class.

However, even California's grammar schools weren't progressive enough to accept such language, so Mother was frequently called into the principal's office to explain my behavior. Of course, Mother didn't condone it. But she feared that if she made a big issue out of it, the effect might be the opposite of what she wanted. She was probably right.

My mother took the same attitude with other imagined and real vices. Smoking and drinking, in particular.

When I came home from school one afternoon, I told Mom that I had watched one of the girls smoke a cigarette behind the gym.

It didn't take a psychiatrist to figure out what was going through my mind.

"If you want to smoke or do anything else, I'd rather you did it at home," she insisted. So I lit a cigarette in front of her and coughed for two days. I've never liked smoking since—which has proved a handicap only once so far.

In "The Rat Race," I play a young woman who's been around. I wear a coarse blonde wig, talk tough, and smoke cigarettes. To be able to do it convincingly, I started to practice three months before the picture went into production.

It almost killed me. I felt sick to my stomach; I burned my eyelashes, my hair, and my fingers; but I kept at it till I could do it like a chain-smoker. And I stopped the day the movie was finished!

Similarly, my parents didn't object when I asked for my first drink at the age of 16. I didn't care for the taste of it and, except for an occasional glass of wine, I've stayed away from liquor ever since.

Because my parents' attitude has worked so well with me, I'm taking the same approach with Carrie and Todd.

Like when we drove to Palm Springs recently. Because I'm always worried about automobile accidents, I got special safety belts for the children which allow them a certain amount of freedom to move around. Yet when I put them on the children for the first time, there was a more than mild protest from both Todd and Carrie.

As long as they kept their belts on, I didn't care what their dialogue was like. But when Todd tried to tear his off, I pulled over to the side of the road, stopped the car, and whacked him where it does the most good.

Just as my outcries made no difference to my mother when I was a child, Todd's loud wails got little sympathy from me. He had to be taught a lesson, and if this was the only way to teach it, I had no choice.

I realize that it will be far more difficult for me to raise my youngsters on my own than if they had a father to discipline them, too. That's why I can't afford to be lax in matters that really count.

(Hollywood wonders if there's a "new Debbie," worldly and hard. Only Debbie herself can answer that, and she does in next week's installment of her frank story.)

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