

My Wife, My Love

by Jack Swenson

Kate and I both quit smoking that winter. We stuck it out for two months. Kate said next time she was going to use the patch. One afternoon, Kate and the neighbor lady had a conversation over the fence. Kate reported that Florence was moving out. Florence said her husband Donald had brought one of his girlfriends over to the house. Her cat had told her, Florence said.

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That evening when Kate got home from work, I told her that I thought that most people would be relieved once the war got started. Kate gave me a look that said, "Speak for yourself." The next morning, before I got up, I lay in bed watching one of our cats play a game that she played every morning. The cat, a calico, first chased the other cats off the bed, then, immensely pleased with herself, she lay down on top of the comforter and began to chase her tail.

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Whenever I put one over on my wife, she gives me a look, then curls her fingers and scratches the air. She's reminding me of something she told me a while ago when she was miffed at something I said or did. When I died, she said, she was going to have me cremated and put my ashes in the cats' litter box. Kate has a mean streak. I don't think she'd really do it, but I wouldn't put it past her. I told her to go ahead. I don't mind, I said. Dead is dead. Who cares what happens to the remains?

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Kate is sitting on a futon in a back bedroom looking at a picture and crying. The picture is of her mother who died of breast cancer when my wife was a teenager. Eventually she sits up and wipes her eyes. "She was a good woman," she says. "Look," I say, "Your sister is going to be fine." I'm not at all sure she will be fine, but what else can I say? That night in bed I lay there listening to Kate sawing wood. I feel sorry for Kate, and I feel sorry for her sister. Tessa just got rid of her worthless husband and now this. And Kate, her

mother's gone, and Tessa is her only sister. I take a deep breath, get up, put on my robe, go outside on the deck in back of the house and have a cigarette. One of these days I'm going to quit, I tell myself, but so far I haven't. There is no moon. The sky is black. The smoke calms me down; it makes me feel better. Maybe I won't quit smoking. That's the trouble with quitting anything, I think: there's always a price to pay.

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It was raining a bit outside; the deck was wet. My wife pointed to a corner near the door to the porch. There was an opossum with three tiny babies on her back. The babies had black eyes and looked liked mice. "Aren't they cute?" Kate asked. I grinned. We stood there watching. I put my arm around Kate and gave her a hug. I kissed her hair. "You put out some cat food for them, I see," I said.

