

Quitting

by Jack Swenson

I'm older than you, a lot older, but I will outlive you, I said, because I don't smoke and you do. She was leaning at the kitchen sink coughing. When she finished spitting, she said, without turning, How long did you smoke? Twenty years, I said. And how long did you drink? she asked. Twenty-five years, I said. Well, thirty-five actually. I was a self-proclaimed teetotaler the last ten, but I cheated. As you know very well, I said.

I asked her: What's your point? She turned and gave me the evil eye. If you outlive me, she said, it won't be because I smoke but because of what you put me through when you quit. I had to admit she had a point. I was awful. I went crazy. I complained and complained. Everything smelled bad, I said. My hands and feet were cold. I got dizzy. My stomach was upset and I had a pain in my chest. I had a bad heart and cancer, I told her, which may have been true, but she with her fancy medical training didn't believe me.

And now? she asked. Do you have heart trouble? Lung or stomach cancer? Well, no, not at the moment, I said. That's what I mean. I quit and now I'm better. My heart got better. My cancer is in remission.

My wife went into our den, sat down, put her feet up, and hid behind the newspaper. I sat down on the couch across from her. You should quit, I said. If I could do it, so can you.

She put down the newspaper and looked me in the eye. I'm a married woman, she said. I have no desire to live.

