

The Heart

by Gary Moshimer

My wife and I were looking for a "fixer-upper." We were strange that way. We were leaving a rental which had cat tunnels built into the walls.

One villa we toured had a heartbeat. In the basement, in place of a well pump, was a heart made of fibrous roots which had grown through the stone foundation. According to the realtor, the heart started when the tree was struck by lightning. The owner had then attached the roots to the pipes, but had gone mad from the beating, yet did not want to mess with the heart. "This is the kind of challenge we've been looking for," I said. "A place with heart."

But the heart was failing. The water pressure was low; the siding went from blue to gray, and the windows were cloudy. The beating within the walls was irregular, and the wife and I had matching palpitations. We had dizzy spells and broke into cold sweats.

Our friend Dr. George was a heart surgeon and too excited for words. He hugged the monstrosity, which thumped his skinny body across the room. He listened with his stethoscope. He took measurements and water pressures and declared that the fibrous ventricles were not coordinated. He would have to use shock, and most likely open heart surgery to unclog the roots. He brought his team, all sworn to secrecy, and they operated, doing bypasses with roots from a fallen tree. They shocked it to a regular rhythm, and Dr. George cried, hugging the heart once more. Our water pressure was forceful and then some.

Dr. George wanted to stay with his patient, so much so that his wife left him. We built a little room around the heart with a cot and bookshelves. The doctor wanted to devote his life to the study of this plant heart; he wanted to keep it all to himself, which was fine by us. He didn't bother us; he came and went by the old cellar door. We'd hear it squeak at all hours. He'd write into the night and then go for fast food.

When his wife filed for divorce he went over the edge. He told me the heart was growing new roots, that it sensed his presence and was reaching out to him. He said his heartbeat had long ago matched that of the heart, and they were as one. I would find him wrapped in the roots, enjoying the beat with his eyes closed. "I was meant to be a heart," he told me, laughing, but I was worried. Night after night he sank deeper into its hold. One night in May he worried about the forecast of severe thunderstorms. His clothes were on the floor. He was totally entangled in the roots, his pale arms resembling roots themselves. His ribs were part of the fibrous tissue, beating in unison. His mouth and eyes still worked, and he instructed me on using the electrodes if it came to that.

We lost power, and I was shining my flashlight on the doctor when the big tree was struck. A blue ball of lightning came through the heart and the doctor. They were still. I placed the electrodes and zapped them. Their heartbeats resumed. "That was awesome," the doctor said.

I wanted to call 911, but the doctor said no, that they would extricate him with axes, thus killing both him and the heart. "I'm happy like this," he said. "my wife is gone. I have no children."

For a while I brought him water, but soon his mouth was overgrown. I watched his eyes, where tears of joy or sorrow welled, until they were gone as well.

Then I just stayed up nights and listened to the beating in the walls.

