

# Heartbeat

Kelsey Allan

If I press one ear against the carpeted floor, I can hear my downstairs neighbor's heartbeat.

I discovered this by accident two weeks ago when I dropped my cell phone behind my bed and tried to crawl beneath the low frame to rescue it. I flattened myself against the floor, ignoring the way my skirt slid around my waist as I inched forward, stopping only when I heard a vibrant drumming from below.

At first I thought my phone was receiving a call. But my own heartbeat hummed and began to vibrate along the same rhythm, and I knew, then, that I was hearing another human heart. I knew right away that it was Martha's. I ruled out her scrawny husband, Todd, because he'd always struck me as hollow. He must carry a heart between his ribs—how else can he go on griping about his grown children's failures or continue persuading Martha to take out the trash, if he hasn't got a vessel pumping that rancid blood? His heart must look like a spoiled grape-tomato: small, wrinkled, more yellow than red. Nothing like Martha's plump heart. I imagine that hers resembles a full-sized and award-winning fruit. The kind of spectacular red vision you see sporting a ribbon at the county fair. The kind that, when it's sliced open, spurts juice and seeds everywhere because it's so ripe.

Lying there on the floor I decided that such a rich sound could emanate only from a rich heart. I could not divert myself from listening, even to retrieve my phone, so I dozed on the ground with my head beneath the bedframe and my legs sticking out from under it.

My neck ached when I woke the next morning. The buttons on my blouse strained against my chest. But my body has adjusted now because I've slept in the same position ever since.

In fact, I haven't moved from this spot—except when I dash to the kitchen for food and when I have to pee. Even so, I eat every meal lying on the floor. And I try to pee only at regular intervals. I don't bother dressing: though I have managed to peel the skirt from my sweaty thighs and the shirt from my torso, it's too much hassle to attempt the whole process again.

I've brushed my teeth just once in the past two weeks. I tried it the morning after the heartbeat began. The echo throbbed in my ears until I couldn't

stand the distance, so I spit the toothpaste from my mouth and I returned to the floor. Although my unbrushed teeth feel mossy now with leftover food, at least I know I'm not missing much.

I like to be as close as I can be, with Martha home so often. She no longer works, and neither do I, I guess. It's hard to hold a job and not show up for fourteen days. But how could I possibly focus with Martha's distant heartbeat pulsing in my ears?

Two nights ago I lost patience with my dense bedroom carpet. The cadence that once seemed vibrant had gone dull. I retrieved a steak knife from the kitchen, slicing open one square-foot of carpet and peeling it up from the plywood below. When I placed my ear in this open square I could hear Martha's heart. It thrummed as if I stood beside her with my head on her pillowy chest. As if, like a doctor, I listened to her warm and fleshy heart with a cold and sterile stethoscope. Never mind the unyielding surface or the splinters in my cheek.

Each night I hear the heart's steady strokes as Martha reads alone in bed, waiting for Todd to bathe and undress and join her. I hear the rhythm accelerate as Todd opens the bathroom door, a sleepy grin on his face. I hear Martha's muscles seize—clenching themselves and pooling blood—as Todd situates himself between the sheets. I hear the heartbeat settle again and slow its pace as Martha rests her head in the crook of Todd's right shoulder, and I know that she must love her husband even if he carries a rotten-grape-tomato heart.

I don't know how they came together. Martha's doughy limbs dwarf Todd's narrow bones. She received almost twice the education that he did. And she attends church alone most Sundays because Todd scorns religion. So do I, actually. But this morning I raise myself from the floor and I go to my closet for a dress. I slip it over my head, reach my arms through the sleeves, and step into a pair of sandals. I take the stairs slowly as I follow Martha's easy heartbeat out my front door.

We've talked many times before today, but although I can no longer endure listening through the bare floorboards, I'm not sure I can handle conversation. Now that I've heard the blood coursing through her body, any spoken word seems too intimate.

So I follow Martha to church from about twenty feet behind. She pauses sometimes to catch her breath, her heavy chest rising in time with her heartbeat, her pudgy fingers gripping her back. I want to spread my own fingers over her spine to help steady her exhalations. I want to trace her voluminous curves with the flat of my hand—learn every crevice and ridge like a valley or hill. Instead I watch and I wait and I follow when she starts to walk again. We

arrive just as the preacher takes the pulpit, and I sit three rows behind Martha in the small chapel.

She once told me that she brought her children to church when they were young. Now her labored pulse tells me that she misses their presence beside her. She misses clutching their hands and wiping their noses and passing them snacks when they whined. She never cared that the girl turned out to be gay or that neither boy saved himself for marriage. She only cared to have her children with her on the pew. And for a long time, she did. She had them every Sunday while they lived at home—but children grow up. One by one, the kids left for school in different towns, different states. Now it's just Martha and Todd. However deeply Martha loves him, Todd can't be much of a companion. After all, he's still lying in bed while I'm here at church with his wife.

When the sermon ends I stand, training my eyes on Martha. She turns as if she can hear my heartbeat as well. As if the now-quivering organ—which seems to have jumped to my throat—has finally matched her volume. Seeing me, Martha tilts her head to the side. She continues to watch me while she shakes hands with fellow church-goers.

I want to run. I want to hide under my bed where I can listen, alone, to her pulse. But I do not move as Martha approaches me. Her heartbeat quickens, probably with the realization that she will have to squeeze her corpulent body between the pews yet again. This panic, though, fails to deter her. She grabs one of the pews and uses its leverage for momentum, and I can see her as a gymnast. Forget the lithe young bodies of Olympic athletes: she is round and she is supple, a pearly, rolling mass of skin on the balance beam.

“Luisa,” she says, gasping for breath. “I’ve never seen you here before.” Her nose wrinkles just slightly when she reaches me. I’m sure I must stink after two weeks without a shower.

“This is my first time,” I say, raising my voice over the heartbeat. Martha steps back an inch and I realize that I must have shouted.

“Did you enjoy the sermon?”

I nod, thinking not of the preacher but of Martha’s blood and the magnetic, pulsing way it moved during the service. The way it still moves, really, because here I am standing beside the woman and I cannot ignore her raving heart. I wonder again if she can hear mine, too, or if I only imagined her ears perking up after the closing prayer.

“I like to get breakfast from a café across the street.” Martha points it out through the open door. Over the heads of the other people I can see a sign for a small restaurant.

“I forgot my purse. I didn’t even have change for the collection plate.”

“No matter.” Martha hooks her arm through mine.

As we cross the quiet road I try to time my steps with her pulse. But her feet break tempo on several occasions, and she remains oblivious to her own heartbeat. I cringe at the syncopated rhythm.

We sit outside at a wrought-iron table where I can see my reflection in the restaurant window. I survey my knotted hair—my raw, red cheeks—but I do not dwell on my wild appearance. Instead I focus on how, when I lean back in my seat, it wobbles on irregular legs. I focus on keeping my neck and head still while shifting my weight forward and back, forward and back, in time with Martha’s breathing.

She pats my hand across the table. “Do you like beignets?”

“What’s a beignet?”

“You don’t know what—? Well, that settles it.” She gives her menu as well as mine to the approaching waiter. “Two plates of beignets, please. And two coffees.” The waiter nods and scratches the order onto a notepad. “They’re like doughnuts,” Martha tells me when he leaves. “But better.”

I push my chair legs forward and back, forward and back. Martha does not see the swaying seat. She only looks at me. “What made you come to church this morning?”

I consider total honesty: *I came to church this morning not to worship God but to worship your pulse—each divine, shuddering breath from between your ribs—the organ’s metallic flavor sprawling on my tongue as if I have already pressed a serrated knife against your meaty heart.*

Instead I say, truthfully enough, “It felt right.”

“Will you come again?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did you ever go to church as a child?”

“Once or twice with friends,” I say, pausing, thinking of how I might turn the conversation back toward Martha. “And you? Were you raised a Christian?”

“My parents instilled good values in me, but I really found the Lord when I lost my first baby.”

“I’m sorry.” I expect her pulse to falter and her breath to hitch in her throat. I listen, count each beat, try to predict the rise and fall and plateau of her heart. I will revive the grieving organ when it slows.

Martha nods. “There was nothing anyone could do. Anyway, Rhiannon is with God now.” The beat remains steady, almost more so than before: she is anchored by her grief.

The waiter returns. He places a chipped mug and a platter of golden, square doughnuts before me. I try to waft their warm scent toward my nose, but instead I inhale powdered sugar. I splutter and cough and only manage to clear my throat with a sip of coffee. I watch Martha take a massive bite, coating her upper lip in crystalline sugar, then I pick up a beignet for myself. The pastry's perfect shape collapses between my teeth like a punctured vessel.

Martha eats all four of her beignets before I can finish two. I take a few more bites, lick my fingers, and wipe my hands on my napkin, thinking of Martha's plump tomato-heart: so much more substance to it than an air-filled pastry. So much more tang, I imagine, in the blood-red seeds and the sticky juice. If my teeth punctured her heart, Martha would not deflate. "I can't eat anymore," I say. "Maybe I'll take them with me."

Martha beckons for the waiter to bring a box. I pack up the pastries and she settles the bill. Then we stand and walk toward home.

After one block, Martha grasps my left hand between both of hers. "Luisa," she says. The pulsing of her heart becomes more erratic, perhaps because she's afraid to say what she wants.

"Yes?"

"Can we talk?"

"About what?" I say, though I half-believe already that she will confess to hearing my heart as well. I feel myself smile.

"I am concerned," she says.

"Concerned about what?"

"About you, Luisa. I think you know why."

"Because I don't go to church?"

A full-throated laugh escapes Martha's mouth. The aftershock rattles my teeth. "Go to church or don't," Martha says. "There are other ways to be Christian."

"Then why are you concerned?"

She stops walking and nods toward a bench on the sidewalk. I sit beside her, my hand still clasped in her grip, my own heart panicking at her heart's violent cadence.

"What is it?"

"We all go through that phase," Martha continues. "I know it's hard to ignore."

"What is?" I wonder how she could know that I've been listening. Or is there something else? *That phase*, I think to myself. I try to see Martha as a girl my age, just out of school and living alone, lying on the carpeted floor to hear

her neighbor's heart. She would never have fit under the bed.

"But you have to forget, or the obsession will ruin your life." She lets go of my hand. Her voice sounds tinny, like it's far away, and her heartbeat grows louder. "Not to mention my life, too."

"How do you—?"

Martha stands. I know she wants me to forget, but her heart is all that I hear now. I see her lips moving, her head shaking, her feet backing away. I press my hands against my ears to shut out the roaring. It only makes things worse. She walks toward home while I try to stay put on the bench. *Just till she's out of range*, I tell myself, already craving her sweet tomato-heart, the juice and the seeds.

Before she rounds the next corner I lift myself from the bench. I follow her path and time my feet with her pulse. Though she says that my listening will ruin us both, I think that not listening will do more harm than good.