

Saturday Morning in New Orleans

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I was sleeping in that Saturday morning. It might have been because I had worked the night before, but it might just as easily have been because I am not a morning person. So it was sometime around mid-morning that I felt my husband gently shake my shoulder. “Katie . . . honey . . . Laura needs you. She says her mom is sick.” I woke up as quickly as I could, which was not that quick, and said I would be down in a minute.

Laura’s mom had just retired and moved to New Orleans from Nebraska to be with her daughter and grandkids, and she was renting a house a few blocks away. I knew she hadn’t been feeling well for a few months and was getting worked up for a number of things, including heartburn and anxiety. Laura had told me this just as a way of making conversation, not to get medical advice – having lived in New Orleans for nearly twenty years working for city government, she knew way more people in town than I did and didn’t need my resident-level help with this or anything, really.

I threw on some sweats and flip flops – a look that my husband would describe as “I’ve-given-up-on-life.” I think I brushed my teeth, but I can’t be sure. Downstairs, the front door was open. In contrast to the north, where people have back porches and private backyards, front porches are the norm in the south. People spend their weekends on these porches, playing, swinging, drinking, and chatting with their friends, neighbors, and whoever else might wander by. It was not uncommon for both our door and Laura’s to be open and for our kids to wander freely back and forth between either side of the duplex.

Laura was waiting on the porch in an outfit similar to mine – after twenty years in Nola she had perfected the art of a lazy Saturday.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“I don’t know.” She looked anxious but not panicked. “Bob said she won’t wake up.”

“Did he call 911?” I asked.

“No, he just called me.”

“Ok, well, let’s call 911 and go over there.”

“Really?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said, “better safe than sorry.”

We got in her old Honda and drove the few blocks to her mom’s rental. People in New Orleans drive crappy cars because of the risk of flooding, theft, and car accidents with uninsured fellow New Orleanians, so despite the fact that she was well-established and owned two houses in a nice neighborhood, her car was a beater. The *very* rich drove huge black SUVs, but they weren’t real New Orleanians, they didn’t appreciate living amongst the ruins of history and instead tried to make everything – their cars, their homes, their parks – new and fancy. Laura finished her short call with 911 just as we were pulling up to her mom’s place. We parked illegally on the side of the road, as one does in a third world country with limited law enforcement, and headed up the stairs.

She was dead. I could see it from the doorway of the shotgun house. Lots of homes in New Orleans are this style, which means you can shoot a gun from the front door straight through to the back or, in my case, see someone sitting up dead in a chair in the middle room from the front door. Her face was pale, and not the kind of pale like when one’s hemoglobin has dropped to 7, but the kind of pale when blood hasn’t been pumped to the skin in many minutes. Even Laura could see it. “Mom!” she shouted. We both ran to her, completely ignoring Bob, who was sitting next to her looking helpless.

“Call 911 again,” I told Laura, “tell them we need them *now*. Help me move her to the ground, Bob.” He did, which surprised me, given how feeble he had looked just a second ago.

I don’t remember how she felt, cold or warm - these stories always talk about how the rescuer’s adrenaline kicks in and the skills you have been taught just take over. I don’t remember it that way. I do remember thinking, Oh shit, I have to do CPR for real . . . for the first time.

“Laura, I’m going to start CPR, is that ok?” I asked her – secretly hoping she would say, Nah, my mom is DNR. But of course she didn’t. She was on the phone with 911. I went ahead and started chest compressions.

I will never forget the sound of her ribs crunching. I wince every time I think about it. I will also never forget thinking to myself, I have to do mouth-to-mouth on a dead woman. I don’t remember the feeling of her lips, though I do remember thinking that even though current dogma suggests compressions are the most important part of CPR, I had to do mouth-to-mouth so Laura would know I was doing everything I could.

I don’t think I knew that my efforts weren’t going to work. I wasn’t thinking that far down the road. Laura and Bob sat there and watched me do CPR for what felt like fifteen minutes, though it was probably less than five. It was silent except for the sound of my efforts, until at one point Laura said, “Well at least there’s some color getting back in her face.” She was right, her mom’s face was looking pinker, but she still had no pulse and was not breathing. I looked Laura in the eyes and said, “This is not good, Laura.” It was silent again after that.

Finally EMS arrived, five or six of them. They immediately took over and the silence was replaced with the LUCAS device’s rhythmic compression sounds and the EMS workers’ tasks. I stood with Laura and watched them work, but it was no use. Her mother was dead. She was dead when we had arrived and she was still dead. Laura told me I could go, and although it felt like

the wrong thing to do, she insisted. I guess she didn't need her tenant/sometimes friend/acquaintance there when EMS told her there was no hope. So I gave her a hug and left to walk the few blocks home.

It was early enough on a Saturday morning that no one was out to see a middle-aged woman crying on the streets in a baggy shirt, sweatpants, and flip flops. Even if they had, I doubt they would have given it a second thought. That sort of thing isn't out of the ordinary for this city.