

A Good Day to Die

It's not a remarkable story by any measure. It is a common tale. Maybe when you think about it, you will agree that common does not rule out the extraordinary.

The early morning sun of a late spring Sunday was already causing the house to creak and groan as it moved against itself, adjusting to the changing temperature.

I had finished shaving and had claimed one of the several crisp, white rocking chairs lined up along the front porch. Then my pager went off, a mini-explosion of piercing sounds, loud enough to be heard even when aboard the John Deere tractor, clearing brush, or standing next to the air compressor in the shop. On this quiet Sunday morning, the sound was enough to wake the dead.

"Medic 3, first responders, zone two..." That's me; first responder in zone 2 in a not so rural county, clinging to the southern edge of the Edward's Plateau in the Texas Hill Country. I called to my wife and best friend, Buns, but the call was unnecessary since she had already grabbed her omni-present purse, a good two steps ahead of me.

Buns is a great partner. She's not medically trained but I have yet to beat her to the car once those tones have summoned. (Buns is the navigator.)

"What have we got?"

"Female, age seventy-six, possible heart attack, way the hell out Stoneleigh Road," I answered.

"Swell," was all she said. The road in question is winding and dangerous, difficult to follow with its many branches and name changes.

We talked to dispatch en route in the hope of getting clear directions in an area where it seems few can even articulate their own address. Directions the likes of...

"About five and a half miles out Elm Pass Road" would be considered fairly accurate if you ignore the fact that you measure from the beginning of the road, while they may be measuring from the volunteer fire station, or even Uncle Ed's house. Who knows?

"Third brown gate after the big dip, the one with the blue reflector. Gate combination is 1936#" would be considered comparable to GPS coordinates for the big city folks.

So this morning, we were told, "She says it's a mule ranch. It's on the left, 8 to 10 miles out." It was enough to land us right at the gate, which was locked. And the other side looked like a way point for Noah's ark, with goats, chickens, and donkeys.

I tossed the jump kit over the fence. A bad move. The crowd assumed it was feeding time, and quite literally flocked and herded themselves closer in a mad frenzy for food.

With the AED, I was more cautious, hanging its strap over one shoulder, before I mounted the fence. Without further thought, I dropped into the menagerie. On the other side of the corral, a house or workshop clung tenuously to the side of a steep hill; no stairs or walk, just a well worn dirt path more suitable for beast than man.

I saw no other structure of any size, but this one didn't look like it was habitable, other than the single bare bulb, hanging by two white wires where a porch light would have gone, had there been a porch.

The approach was more of a climb, and when I had scratched my way to the door, I huffed, rather than called, "Helloooo. EMS!"

No answer, but then what do you expect from someone having a heart attack? We were in the middle of nowhere, the address was not what you would call precise, and there I stood, banging on the door of what I assumed was a house. I was disappointed not to have gotten an answer, but at the same time, I was relieved that an answer hadn't come in the form of a shotgun!

The wiring for the structure was white, small gauge, two wire Romex, snaking up the side, branching every which way. Is this really a house?

"EMS! Helloooo! Anybody home?" I pushed against the door with my shoulder and fell inside. A wood-burning stove sizzled in the far corner. A threadbare couch commanded the wall. A kitchen clock with rolling cat eyes and swishing tail was fed by one of the many branches of white wire, and two of the bluest eyes I have ever seen, stared up at me from the middle of the floor.

"Ma'am? I'm Scott. I'm a first responder. I'm here to help. Would it be alright if I checked your vital signs?"

"Am I going to die?"

"No, ma'am. Today is not your day." It didn't take a cardiologist to see that. She was alert and breathing easily, clearly not in great pain. And those eyes, well, they just weren't the eyes of someone about to die.

"No, ma'am. I'm going to do a little assessment just to get things ready for when the boys in the box get here. Then you and I are going to stay right where we are. We'll keep holding hands, if it's okay with you."

"Thank-you for coming, Scott. I'm not afraid to die, you know."

"Yes, ma'am, I know."

"I just didn't want to die alone."

And that is a common tale that could be told in a million versions every day. Sometimes we forget that it's healthcare, the way it was meant to be.