

Good as New

By Andrew Taylor-Troutman

Dusk bit into the horizon, its teeth marks caught a dust trail rising from a lonely country road. Forest Hillside, age seventeen, was gunning his Kawasaki Ninja, an electric blue crotch rocket. What happened next wasn't his fault. He'd made that sharp curve a hundred times before on his way home from his shift at the register of the Dollar General.

It was the brakes that failed.

The motorcycle jumped the road and T-boned a massive oak tree, smashing both bike and boy.

Doug Smathers was the first to arrive on the scene, pattering around the same curve in the opposite direction in his beat-up Chevy truck. Doug was against cell phones as a matter of principle, seeing as a landline had served him just fine in his sixty-three years at the same house. Doug did know CPR from decades of service on the volunteer fire department. Previous tragedies had also taught him to recognize when resuscitation was of no use.

That night, it fell to Sheriff Marshall Pickens to knock on Mary Hillside's doublewide. Marshall heard shuffling footsteps approaching the door and he removed his hat. He'd known Mary since the first grade. And he'd wanted to be a cop for as long as he could remember.

But he'd never wanted to be the bearer of such news.

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Two weeks after Forest's accident, Marshall saw the little white cross at the foot of that particular oak tree. He pulled the squad car over and got out to inspect it. Just a couple of sawed-off two-by-fours slapped with a little paint, the initials "F.H." carved into the horizontal beam. It reminded Marshall of something a lovesick teenager might carve into a tree.

He removed his hat—sadly, a familiar gesture these days—and stood before the makeshift cross, thinking of the Mary he'd grown up with, the girl he'd known before she'd become a Hillside. He recalled how that sorry excuse for a husband would run off for weeks and leave Mary to mind their only child. Marshall grunted in disgust.

Years ago, Mary Jones wore twin pigtails and would jump rope singing *Miss Mary Mack, Mack, Mack, all dressed in black, black, black.*

Marshall's mind wandered back to the funeral service. Mrs. Mary, mother Mary, all dressed in black. The preacher had been long-winded, a bit of a showboat. Marshall was not the praying type, though he was a regular at the Free Will Baptist Church. Sitting in the back pew, he preferred to keep his head up and his eyes open. Still, he was sorry for the boy and sorrier still for his poor mother. A few lines from the funeral prayer came to him as if on the sudden breeze: *Eternal rest grant unto him, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon him.* Birds in the trees above suddenly burst into song.

And that's when it happened.

There was a tingling in his right knee, the one he'd torn playing football in high school. He called it his "trick knee" and it'd given him trouble for the past twenty years. But now the tingles melted into a warmth that slowly coated his kneecap like molasses, then seeped deep into the bone.

That was weird.

Marshall scratched his head. All was quiet. Then he heard three short bursts of song from a lone bird. *Tsee-see-see*. Marshall put his hat back on and spun on his heel.

It wasn't until he was halfway back to his squad car that he realized his knee was swinging as effortlessly as a well-oiled gate.

The sheriff halted in the middle of the field. He started walking again in disbelief. There was no more pop, no more pain. He looked around to make sure no one was watching. Just him and the birds. He jogged a few tentative steps. His knee felt as good as before his injury. Better even. Marshall took a cautious jump. The knee worked like a loaded spring. Good as new.

Sheriff Marshall Pickens, thirty-eight years old, began jumping up and down like an excited little boy.

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Down at the police station the next morning, Tyree Boswell had his feet up on the desk when he heard the sound of loud footsteps in the hall.

"I caught you," laughed Marshall, strutting into the room. "I'll have you keep them feet on the floor."

"Yessir," replied Tyree, blushing. Then he cocked his head to the side. "Hey, Sheriff? What's gotten into you?"

"Whaddaya mean?"

"I dunno. You look as happy as a tick on a fat dog."

Now it was Marshall's turn to blush.

"Um, well, it's a fine day is all."

Without turning in the swivel chair, Tyree could hear the cold rain coming down on the window pane. He was about to say something about it being a fine day for a duck when his boss fixed him with a look.

"Tyree, don't you have reports to file?"

"Yessir!"

Marshall faked a limp over to his office. He closed the door and leaned heavily against it. He shook his head. He'd have to be more careful. How could he ever explain?

Even though Marshall kept his secret, word about the healing power at the foot of the oak tree still sputtered out into the community like exhaust from Doug Smathers' old Chevy.

Alan Jones—Mary's Daddy and Forest's Papaw—had a twenty-year smoker's cough suddenly disappear while praying before the little white cross. The next day Pudge Wilson, Alan's best friend, walked all the way back to his car before he'd realized that his back had straightened for the first time in a decade and a half. Millie Seymour felt her sinuses clear like an eraser over the blackboard in her first-grade classroom, the same one in which she'd taught little Forest almost a decade ago. Millie would later tell a news reporter that she felt the healing power like a warm compress.

But before the story broke all over the country, Millie talked her mother into making the trek to the little white cross at the foot of the tree. Mama's body was riddled with cancer. Then, there was not even a trace.

That Sunday, Mama Seymour stood up in the Free Will Baptist Church.

"I tell you," she declared, "it's a miracle! A healing miracle!"

While the rest of the congregation murmured excitedly, Marshall slid down in his pew. His knee still felt great, but he knew that any news—good, bad, or miraculous—meant more work for the sheriff's office.

Sure enough, when Marshall and Tyree pulled up in the squad car that Tuesday morning, the grassy field off the dirt road was as packed as the Wal-Mart on a Black Friday.

Tyree whistled, "I'll be a son of a..."

"Hush! You see that?"

A young girl with leg braces slowly stood up from her wheelchair. The deputy's mouth hung open like a torn screen door on one hinge.

By early evening, news helicopters circled overhead. Reporters interviewed people who'd been cured of everything from colds to cataracts to cancer. Beside the oak tree, there was a growing pile of discarded walkers, wheelchairs, and rollators.

It seemed the State was always the last to know, so Marshall had to call the Governor's Office to request backup. He'd assigned off-duty officers to direct traffic and keep an eye on things.

He'd told them, "Boys, this right here is uncharted territory. No telling what might happen."

Tyree had spoken for all of them: "Sir, we'll donate our time if we have to. I mean, this is a dadgum *miracle*."

By the weekend, traffic was backed up eighteen miles into the next county. Marshall ate Tums like Halloween candy and took phone calls from the CIA. Senators and congressmen wanted to visit. He'd even heard rumors that the Pope was coming all the way from the Vatican.

The Pope!

But then the healings stopped.

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Doug Smathers drove off the road and eased into the muddy field, careful not to wake his sleeping father. Doug brought the old truck to a shuddering halt. At the town's barber shop, they said the healings had stopped for a month of Sundays. The crowds had kept coming, some from as far as London. They said a few had flown in from countries that used to be Communist and still had them long names. But all that was weeks ago.

Now, a tower of leftover medical equipment remained in the muddied field crisscrossed with tire tracks and strewn with soda bottles, candy wrappers, and Bible tracts.

Doug scratched his bald spot before donning his trusty Atlanta Braves baseball cap.

"Papa? Papa, come on now."

As Doug gently shook the old man next to him in the cab, the ancient eyes opened and immediately glittered with fear.

"It's OK, Papa," Doug whispered. "Papa, you alright. It's me, Dougie."

"Wh-wh-wh-wh-who?" The old man's dry, cracked lips quivered.

"It's Dougie. You know, your son."

Doug had signed his Papa out of the Pleasant Shade Rehab and Assisted Living Center against the advice of the staff, including Bernice Myrtle. And Bernice was the only nurse Doug trusted.

"They say the miracles is all dried up," Bernice had argued. "Why you gotta put your Papa through the trip?"

Doug had shrugged helplessly. How could he ever explain?

Doug had scoffed at the rumors about the miraculous healings. One evening on the nightly news, Doug had seen that no-count father of the dead boy claiming that "the Lawd Ah-mighty" had given him the power to prophesy anyone's future...for a small fee, of course.

The camera panned to a dozen preachers hollering atop of everything from apple crates to shiny golden platforms.

“The hell with *them*,” Doug had said, clicking off the TV.

His father had no idea where he was in the world. He didn’t even know his own son. Yet Papa stayed alive. Whether it was from heroic effort or plain stubbornness, Doug couldn’t say. He just knew Papa’s heart kept pumping like the pistons of the old diesel engine the two of them had built way back when Doug was just a boy, the summer after his Mama died. It was an image of that very same diesel that appeared to Doug last night in his sleep.

In the dream, Doug had walked up to the truck and jerked open the hood. The engine was rusted and riddled with holes like Swiss cheese. But then he’d heard Papa’s voice—his old voice, the one that was full of gravel like the riverbed: “Give it a try, my Dougie! Ay Lord, give it a good rip, my boy!” So, he’d climbed into the cab and turned the key.

The engine had roared to life.

Doug knew it was just a dream. He knew the healings had stopped. He knew the trip out to the oak tree would be hard on Papa. But now they’d made it and, taking Papa’s frail hands in his, Doug whispered, “Papa, let’s give it a try. Just one good try.”

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Marshall happened to drive past and recognized Doug Smathers’ truck in the field. Out of curiosity, he idled on the shoulder of the road, right in the curve where the Hillside boy’s brakes had failed. Marshall saw Doug come around to the passenger door and lift his old man from the cab, cradling him against his chest like an overgrown baby. Marshall had known Mr. Smathers when he was as tough as nails yet honest as the day is long. What happened to that good man was a damn shame.

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After he set Papa on his feet, Doug was careful to keep his left arm around Papa’s waist.

“There it is, Papa.”

Some of the white paint had worn away from the cross, as devotees had rubbed the beams in futile hope that the old magic would return. Scattered across the ground were bouquets of dead flowers, plastic angels, and a few muddied pictures of Jesus. Doug tried, but he just couldn’t pray out loud. His mouth was like a dried-out creek bottom.

Driving back to Pleasant Shade about a half hour later, Doug replayed everything that happened next.

How he’d been standing there, mute and dumb as a board.

How he’d felt the tears rising in his chest.

How he’d had to look away from the cross.

How, as he was gazing up into the old oak tree, he’d seen the leaves sway in a sudden breeze.

How the unseen birds had burst into song.

How a violent shudder had passed through Papa.

“Papa? Papa! You OK?”

How Papa’s eyes had a light in them.

And how the old man spoke.

“Ay Lord, there you are. My son, my Dougie.”

Doug had felt a warmth spread from his own face down his shoulders and melt into his chest. In a faraway voice, he’d heard himself whisper.

“Papa, it’s so good to see you again.”

Driving back, Doug rolled the window down in his truck. He looked over at Papa, now fast asleep, a trickle of drool starting down his chin. And Doug remembered how, there at the oak tree, Papa had flashed just one smile before the light of recognition disappeared as if a window had been slammed shut.

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Marshall had come running across the field when he'd heard Doug shouting, "Come back, Papa! Come back!"

But the Sheriff didn't need to perform CPR after all. It turned out that Mr. Smathers hadn't died. He was just as he usually was. Confused but otherwise fine.

But Doug looked like he'd seen a ghost.

After helping the old man into the truck, all that was left for Marshall to do was wave goodbye as dust bit into the far horizon. Marshall would remember that haunted look in Doug's eyes whenever he flexed his old trick knee, which, until the day he died, still felt good as new.

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