

Just As I Am

Regina Williams

I dug at the mound of dirt with my big toe, fuming inside. Old Mrs. Raybourne had told my dad about the skinny-dipping episode at Watson's Creek. Mean old biddy anyway.

Why other kids could get away with stuff I didn't know, not until my mom explained it was because I was a preacher's kid and was expected to behave better than other children. Everybody told on me for everything. Dad was pretty good about it, but a few things he couldn't overlook, and on those occasions when my bottom was burning, I'd shout at him (from a safe distance, of course), "I don't know why you have to be an old preacher for anyway."

Kicking the mound harder, my toe hit a rock and I spent the next few minutes hopping around on one foot. Frustration manifested itself into full blown tears, and I swiped them away with grimy fingers.

A noise behind me startled my heart into a dull thud. I whipped around. Buddy Boomer stood behind me.

"Hey Buddy," I said.

He smiled, nodded and continued toward the house. I shivered in the bright sunlight. Buddy gave me the creeps. He spoke when spoken to, but mostly he sat silently in a chair in the living room after supper. I often wondered if he could smell Mom's cooking and knew exactly when to arrive.

He'd sit there, a silly half-smile on his face. Every time I came into the room, his eyes followed my every move. Gave me the willies. As far as I was concerned, he was a freak of nature. Shoot, his own family hadn't wanted him. They'd traded him to a local farmer for a pig so they could feed the rest of the zillion kids they had. Picking up a rock, I hurled it toward a mud puddle a few yards away. I was sick of being picked on all the time and I was even sicker of being nicer to everybody, Buddy included.

Dad had told me Buddy couldn't help where he came from, no more than I could stop people from telling on me. "So you think about that and be nice to Buddy. He just wants someone to care about him."

I didn't want to be nice to him any more than I wanted to be nice to any of the other freaks and misfits that darkened our door on a daily basis. I had asked Dad once why we

had to put up with weird people.

"You'll understand someday kiddo," he said. "But in the meantime, young lady, you remember that we're all equal in God's eyes."

Yuck. I didn't want them invading our house, much less being even remotely equal, for goodness sakes.

The next afternoon, I was playing on the tire swing hanging from the massive oak tree next to the gravel road that passed in front of our house. The house atop a small hill had a creek trickling lazily along at the bottom where I'd hide from my mother to escape chores.

Turning in circles to see how quick I could make myself dizzy, I caught a glimpse of a man crossing the creek, heading in my direction. Stopping the swing, I watched as the man staggered closer.

Sliding out of the tire, I ran toward the house just as Dad was coming out the door. "Look," I said, pointing downhill. "It's Floyd Munz and he's been in the corn squeezings again. He's sh--uh, two sheets to the wind."

Dad squinted into the setting sun. "Get in the house," he said, "and this time stay there."

I breathed a sigh of relief that he seemed to have missed the bad word that came close to slipping out of my mouth.

"What is it?" Mom said. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Just ol' Floyd coming."

"He drunk?"

"Ain't he always?"

"Stay in this house."

I tried never to miss an opportunity to listen in on a conversation Floyd was part of. I'd never seen a television show, but the kids at school told me of the ones they had seen, but for my money, none of them compared to Floyd's ramblings when he was snookered. I slipped out the back door while Mom's attention was on Floyd.

Sneaking around the small shed at the side of the house, I stood and listened as Floyd approached the porch.

"Floyd," Dad said.

"Lo, Joe. Man, I'm in a bad way."

"I can see that."

"I'm a'gonna die, Joe."

I rolled my eyes. Every time Floyd got drunker than usual, he convinced himself he was going to die and he would come see good ol' Joe and have Dad pray for him.

"We all do sooner or later, Floyd."

Floyd tried to take another step but only managed a precarious lean. He put out a hand, missed the porch railing, tried again and connected. He wiped his sweaty face with the other shaky hand.

"I ain't kidding this time. I know I'm drunk, but I need help."

"I don't know what I can do, Floyd. I've tried before, remember?"

"You-you-you gotta baptize me this time, Joe."

I slapped my hand over my mouth to prevent a giggle from escaping. Whoever heard of baptizing an old drunk? The giggle died, and I lowered my hand. Probably nobody in the county told on Floyd no matter what he did. I shook my head. Life just wasn't fair sometimes.

"Floyd," Dad said, "you go sober up and come back tomorrow. I'd be happy to do it then."

"I'll die tonight," Floyd said, grabbing Dad's shirt. "I won't be here tomorrow."

"Floyd," Dad said, stepping back to avoid the pawing.

"Just as I am without one plea."

I stifled another giggle threatening. Good Lord, he sounded like a stepped on cat.

He stopped singing. "You gotta do it, Joe. You gotta."

Dad tried reasoning with him to discourage the baptizing, but Floyd was having none of it. Dad explained that it was too late to go to the river and the creek was almost dry.

"That's all right. You can baptize me in that there pond," he said, pointing in the general direction. He started singing again.

As Dad led us down to the pond with his worn Bible clasped to his chest, I couldn't help but thinking how compared to some people around here, I was a dad-blamed angel.

Dad was right about one thing though--years later, I did begin to understand why the misfits and weirdoes felt compelled to invade our house and our lives. It was because Dad accepted them just as they were--not how he wanted them to be--but how God had made them. It took me even longer to understand that included me.

I spent that early evening ankle deep in cow manure and mud while a poor country preacher baptized a drunk in the pond. He sang "Just As I Am" the whole time, and as he staggered down the road, his strident notes echoed over the hills.