

Just As I Am

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The boy who sat in the coal camp house kitchen didn't want to go to church with the rest of the family who went there every Sunday morning and night and every Wednesday night to hear the fire-and-brimstone preacher dole out his brand of fear like he was on some kind of inside track with Jesus and helping him poke the fire.

"I ain't going . . . you can't make me," he said. He crossed his arms tightly with both elbows hugging his skinny ribs.

The mother looked at the daddy with her forehead furrowed like the skin of a drying apple.

"I reckon you ain't in charge here," the father said. "As long as you're in my house and I'm drawing a breath you're going to Sunday school and church."

"I ain't going nowhere," the boy said. "That old man is scary. He just keeps repeating himself. I got it a long way back. The Jesus he's talking about ain't like the one I've seen in the color pictures of your Bible—the ones with him carrying a baby lamb under his arm."

"Well, I ain't putting up with no disrespect or sass. You, young man, are going or I'll have you go cut a limb from the cherry tree so I can switch your boney legs," the father said.

Ain't nobody here has heard a word I've said, the boy thought. About all the time, they treat me like I ain't here. He edged toward the kindling box beneath the coal-fired kitchen laundry coal stove. He knew it well, for he had to fill it every night along with lugging buckets of coal from the coal bin out back next to the stinky toilet. While no one was paying attention, he pulled the enameled drawer out, stuck his hand inside and felt the smooth handle of the wedged-shaped Plumb hatchet with the broken tooth on the nail puller. He pulled it out, hiding it behind his back. The mother, father, and three sisters sat at the blue metal table on blue and white speckled vinyl chairs, stirring thick layers of greasy butter and granulated white sugar in their bowls of rough-cut oatmeal and munching on oven-made toast of homemade bread. He walked toward his empty chair.

They'll listen to me now, he thought. He two-fisted the hatchet as he brought it around in front, raising it high above his head and bringing it down swiftly, making a long triangular-shaped cut in the center of the chair seat. Before anyone could react, he made a second cut beside the first. The father was on him quickly, wrestling the hatchet handle from his grip with his powerful hands. The mother and three sisters' mouths were now dropped open, their doe eyes wide and fixed in glassy circles.

"Dadgummit, what is wrong with you boy? You act like you're a right smart touched in the head," he said as, in one swift motion, he pulled his belt from his pant loops and laid the first lick across his backside. Another followed, and then another, until the boy lost count as he twisted and danced in the father's strong grip. Spittle flew from the father's mouth, his bristled face flush with anger.

"That's enough," the mother said. "You've striped him enough." The father stomped over to the kindling box, placing the hatchet atop the splintery sticks and threading the belt back through the loops in his dress pants. The boy slid down in a corner and sat on the flowered linoleum, trying to stop the rivulets of tears with the open palms of both hands.

"No breakfast for you, boy!" the father said. "Get up from your pity perch and get your behind in gear. You quit that crying right now, or I'll really give you something to cry about."

The father returned to the table and then there was nothing but the clicking of their spoons on the sides of the oatmeal bowls and the occasional slurping of hot coffee as the father raised and lowered his ironstone mug. After a few minutes, he arose as he banged it down on the saucer. He stormed out the backdoor, crossing the short stoop in wide strides, and heading toward his car. The boy heard the engine turn over and then catch.

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Soon, they were headed down the winding mountain road toward the *Sanctified Hill Church of Christ in Jesus Name*, a tiny rectangular, sawmill slab box that sat on locust stilts resting on a briar infested flat at the bottom of a steep hill.

The boy sat in the backseat behind the father, who spun the steering wheel left and right as the car wound through the snake-like curves. He thought about jerking his door open and jumping out of the car, but he knew the sides of this road dropped off into steep piles of rocks. He thought about running away from home after church. He'd just wait until everyone was filing out of the church door and make a sly move around to the back of the building and run in a beeline for the ridge top.

"Cat got your tongue, boy?" the father asked from the front seat.

The boy didn't answer. He rolled his eyes toward the headliner and then to the window, where he stared at the trees flying by in a stutter. He thought about escaping after Sunday dinner. He'd gather a few things and quietly slip out the front door, making his way down to the railroad track at the bottom of the hill where he would hobo the coal train and make his way to the Corbin rail yard.

"Somebody in here needs to get on the right side of Jesus," the father said as he tilted his head slightly back toward the boy. "Today would be a great day to walk down the aisle and get saved."

That'll not happen but once in a blue moon, the boy thought. Old timers said that some things wouldn't happen until hell froze over. He liked that saying better, but dared not even think the words. The preacher was scary enough without having to walk the red carpet down the aisle and stand next to him while he palmed his head like a basketball and prayed until feet started shuffling all over the church.

They pulled into the gravel lot at the church and filed out of the car, following the mother like bantam chickens. No one said anything. Their feet sank into the crunching gravel on every step. When they approached the cornerstone of the little church, the father stopped the progression abruptly and lit into his usual recollection about how he and the mother had started the church in their home, after he was converted from

the Methodist to the Church of Christ because some old itinerant tent revival evangelist asked him where in the Bible did it say that sprinkling was allowed and when he searched the good book, he couldn't find hide nor hair of it. This all too familiar story was repeated every time they passed the granite block.

Father is just like the preacher, he thought. Doesn't have a notion that everyone had gotten the story a long time ago.

A verse of *Sweet Hour of Prayer* began wafting out the windows and doorway of the church. The mother led them up the steps, made a nod toward the deacon who stood at the vestibule to welcome everyone to "God's House," as he put it. "Remember, we are all servants, laboring in the vineyard of the Lord," he said, as he always did. The mother strolled down the aisle to the 6th row on the right—their family pew. There was no name on it, but everyone knew who was to sit there. The mother yanked the youngest girl along the narrow space between the pews. They all followed and sat down in a collective sigh. The girls fidgeted, twisting around on the smooth, worn pew, sliding back and forth on their slick dresses until the mother gave them the evil eye, punctuated with one raised checkmark eyebrow.

"Rise and sing hymn number 27 'When We all Get to Heaven.' Let's raise the roof of this church on all four verses, sisters and brothers!" one of the deacons said as he raised his hymnal high with one hand and belted out 'Sing the wondrous love of Jesus,' tilting his head back like a bawling calf when they came to the refrain:

When we all get to heaven,
What a day of rejoicing that will be!
When we all see Jesus,
We'll sing and shout the victory!

The offering was taken and communion passed; the pinches of bread and tiny cups of grape juice were quietly consumed as the body and blood of Christ while one of the Elders proclaimed "Do this in remembrance of Christ as he died on the cross for your sins."

The boy looked at the baptistery with its turquoise water and gaudy mural rising from its surface—the river Jordan done in bright blue with electric green trees along the shore. The sky swirled with white puffs of clouds painted in fluffy round balls. Not like the clouds that formed images of elephants and snowmen in the sky he knew.

None of this seems real, he thought. Not the grape juice being the blood, not the bread the body of Christ, and not the Jordan with fake blue water lined with unnatural green trees . . .

The preacher sat in a huge oak king's chair like the one the boy had imagined King Arthur sat in at the Round Table. At the end of the offertory hymn, the preacher rose and walked to the pulpit. His bushy, overgrown eyebrows arched over his piercing slate gray eyes like a wild patch of weeds.

Seems like the offering ought to come after the sermon, the boy thought. Then, you'd know what you were paying for. A body might not be so excited to slather money in the plate if he'd had the piss scared out of him.

"Say amen and hallelujah!" the preacher said. "I aim to fill this here building with the joy of the Lord this morning, amen." He paused and slowly looked around the room. "'pears to me there's a mighty lot that ain't here this morning. They's found ever excuse known to man to not be here. How can I give them milk, brethren, if they're not here to drink? How can I deliver to them the bread of life, if they're not here to eat? The Bible says 'Go ye therefore into the world and preach the gospel . . . Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth

and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.' Am I in the gospel brethren?" He turned to look at the entourage of deacons and elders seated in a row behind the pulpit.

"You're in the gospel preacher," they said in unison, nodding their heads in approval.

"Well, then, brothers and sisters, who hereabouts is bound and determined to be sent to that eternal lake of fire where there's no escape? Who will be first?" he asked stabbing his stubby finger toward the right side set of pews and then slicing left through the air until the boy saw it stop directly where he sat, gripping the seat with both hands. "Will you be the first?" His voice lingered, trailing off as his fierce eyes bore down upon the boy. "Are you ready? Oh, can you smell the burning flesh, hear the gnashing of teeth, the screams of anguish?" He gasped for air, getting into a sing-song rhythm that filled the church with desperateness and settled over the pews like a heavy quilt. "2nd Thessalonians, Chapter 1, Verse 9 says, 'They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power.' PUNISHED with EVERLASTING destruction . . . SHUT OUT! Forever. They ain't no going back. Once you're there, you'll be punished FOREVER! Am I in the gospel, brethren?"

"Amen, you are with the gospel," the entourage said.

The boy sat up straight, leaning forward as his heart began to pound against his shirt. A line of sweat formed across his narrow forehead.

The preacher continued, "Matthew Chapter 13, Verse 32 says, 'They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' Notice it don't say they will be CONSUMED. It don't say they will DIE. That means to me brethren that this fire will burn the flesh forever and that the damned will shout out and plead to die. But there will be a deaf ear turned toward them. There won't be nobody listening."

"Amen brother," the head elder said.

"You are spot on it," a short, chunky deacon declared from his perch to the right of the preacher.

"A FIREY furnace, hallelujah! Filled with WEeping, hallelujah! GNASHING of teeth, hallelujah!" he shouted as he paced behind the pulpit. He jumped high into the air, spasmodically jerking his legs up and down, dipping his head forward and back. The sermon began to play in the background of the boy's head. It played on as fear crept into him, encasing him in a claustrophobic cocoon.

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When the deacon announced that the hymn of invitation would be "Just As I Am" . . . standing on all six verses, the boy's sweaty palms gripped the hymnal as he waited . . . waited until the middle of the third verse when the harmonic voices swelled from the pews, tugging mightily at his heart:

Just as I am, though tossed about
With many a conflict, many a doubt,
Fightings and fears within, without,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

The boy stepped left into the aisle and walked weak-legged toward the preacher, repeating over and over, "I come, I come, I come . . ." but not knowing for sure what that meant.

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The preacher led the boy to his church office and gingerly closed the door, motioning him to sit in the slatted folding chair across from his desk. The boy sat on the edge of the chair, rocking its back legs off the floor as he dipped forward.

“Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God?” he asked, leaning forward and resting both wrists on the edge of the desk.

“Well, I suppose he is. I’ve heard you say that he is.”

“But do you think he is?”

“Well, I reckon,” the boy said.

“Well then, we’re going to go through that door in a few minutes,” he said, pointing to the wooden door that led to the baptistery. “And I will put you completely under the water in a watery baptism that will allow you to arise and walk in a newness of life—just like when Jesus was buried, but arose from the tomb and went up into heaven. When I bring you up, heaven will open and doves will come down and light on your shoulders and the angels in heaven will rejoice.” The boy let the words settle like when he cleaned leaves from a mountain spring and waited to take a drink.

“Doves,” the boy said. “The kind that coos in the fields?”

“The very same birds of God’s creation,” the preacher said. “I’m going to put a handkerchief over your mouth and let you down backwards and then I’ll bring you back up from the watery grave,” he said.

The preacher arose, took off his suit jacket, and removed his shoes. “Take your shoes off and take out what’s in your pockets,” he directed. When they were finished, the preacher led the boy up the three steps, through the door and down into the freezing water. They faced each other. The preacher cleared his throat.

“This lost lamb has found his way home and the great shepherd welcomes him into his loving arms. In Acts 2:38 the Scripture says ‘Peter said unto them, repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of your sins.’ I now baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.” He gingerly dipped the boy backwards, stumbling as he put him under the turquoise water, held him there, and then brought him up with rivulets of water running out of his hair and down his face. The boy looked around the baptistery through the magnifying water.

Where are the doves? he thought. When the water stopped flowing, he looked again. Where are the doves he said would lite on me? he thought. No doves appeared. All he could see was the electric blue of the Jordan River and the fake trees along its bank, and the cotton ball clouds that didn’t show any shapes he could recognize.

“Does anyone see any doves in here?” he shouted to the congregation. “Does anyone see a dove anywhere?” No one answered. The church was hushed. The boy began to cry. He stood waist deep in the water and sobbed.

“Hallelujah,” said one of the deacons.

“Hallelujah,” the congregation repeated. A cloud slid over the sun and the stained glass church windows faded into dark.