

2013

Baptized in Castle Creek

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Recommended Citation

Lacock, Missy (2013) "Baptized in Castle Creek," *The Oval*: Vol. 6, Article 10.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.umt.edu/oval/vol6/iss1/10>

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BAPTIZED IN CASTLE CREEK

River waited in line at the Town Pump with a gallon of milk and a pregnancy test. She was glad Sister Vera Mae wasn't working today. River imagined her at church with the rest of the Holy New Jerusalem Family, on their knees and chanting the eternal testament after Brother Eilar: "The Lord knoweth the way of the righteous, but the way of the ungodly shall perish." She wondered if they remembered today was her birthday. She hoped they didn't. River's hand felt slick on the cold milk carton, and she pictured bacteria teeming under her palm.

"Can I have the restroom key, Cutter?" River moved to the counter and shoved bills on top of the test, head down.

Cutter's lip was packed with tobacco. "Sure thing."

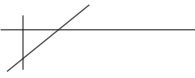
River recognized everyone she passed in the aisles: Jolene Sometimes, Buck Ashley, Sawyer Christmas, Cain Black. It was the first time she'd been to Castle Creek in weeks, and she was relieved people had stopped asking her why she wasn't in church on Sundays.

Barney, Gary, and Wayne yanked beers out of the cooler in their logging gear. "Hey, sweetheart," one called.

"Hiya, fellas." She waved and bolted the restroom door, the test box crushed in her hand. River knew she should pray for their souls, knew she should fast for their deliverance from Babylon, but her hands itched and seared until she could hardly keep from crying out. Winded, she threw her hands under the faucet.

She should take the test now and be done with it. She wondered how she would tell Dale. River looked at the flaking mirror and thought she was pretty. She liked her cotton-blond hair and the curve of her eyes and mouth, but she knew that was vanity and self-love. River remembered the first time she had worn a pair of jeans and lipstick for Dale, how she couldn't





stop staring at herself, how readily she strayed. Satan clutched her too easily.

“Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin,” River chanted, eyes shut tight. Her hands stung, and she washed them again. She imagined a demon crouched behind her on the avocado ceiling. River hurried out, the box still sealed.

“Well, happy birthday, River.” Her Uncle Beau leaned against the counter, buying his weekly lottery ticket. River hid the test behind her skirt. “I wondered if you’d make it to town.”

“Needed some milk.”

Beau hooked her in a side-armed hug. He smelled like cinnamon and alfalfa, and River was surprised how good it felt to be with family. A new wrinkle cleaved Beau’s cheek. “Wish our Quiana could be here for your big twenty-one.” *Quiana*. “How’s your grandpa’s cabin treating you?”

“Just fine.”

“Well, we worry about you way the hell up there.” Beau smacked the scratch ticket against the counter. “Kiss it for luck?”

River tutted. “You know I can’t.”

“Ah, you’re not part of that cult no more,” Beau said. He tweaked her braid fondly, the way he did when she was a kid. “Wish your mama had left, too. You can do whatever the hell you want now. How *is* Dale these days?”

River glanced over her shoulder, afraid. She should tell him that the Family was still the Way, that the Word was truth, that she just hadn’t been strong enough to stay. Instead she whispered, “Cult is an ugly word, Uncle Beau.”

“Is it, now?” His eyes were shrewd, and she was confused.

“Good to see you, Uncle Beau.” River breathed in cinnamon and alfalfa again, thought of Quiana, and stepped into the sunshine.

Castle Creek never changed. The old logging town was pared into Montana mountains as green and buckled as elephant apples. Its townspeople were poor but happy, and most left the Family alone—which was why it stayed in Castle Creek. Female members in long traditional dresses and men in suits prodded grapefruits and pumped gas in peace beside dirty loggers. The city had launched only a few legal cases against the Family, all of which involved Brother Eilar’s anti-medicine Revelation and children with life-threatening ailments. Like Quiana.

“Beau smacked the scratch ticket against the counter. ‘Kiss it for luck?’”



River lobbed the pregnancy test onto her pickup passenger seat and squinted down Main Street. She could barely see the white church at the bend, the blacktop ablaze and steaming. The landscape looked like an enormous, shivering egg yolk. River’s hands hurt. She needed to get out of town.

“River.” Cutter trotted outside, one thumb hooked under a suspender. “Forgot your milk.”

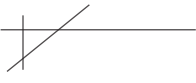
River envisioned germs swathing the container again. She didn’t want it. “Thanks.”

Cutter handed her the carton, looked toward the church, and spit a black stream of tobacco onto the pavement.

The drive up the mountain was hot, and River felt better the farther she drove from Castle Creek. It was evil to find sanctuary away from the Family, but her hands seemed clean now, and she was pleased to go home. Maintaining the isolated cabin she inherited was hard work, and she was happy there.

River draped her hand out the window and enjoyed the smell of pine and the hum from the actual Castle Creek. She wondered if Dale would visit on her birthday. He had been River’s only solace after her little sister died and she abandoned the Family. Dale’s construction company drilled the well east of her cabin, and he kissed her the day they hit groundwater.

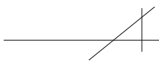




Their love was fierce, but Dale—a heathen and bondservant of Satan—couldn’t understand River’s constant guilt for backsliding. “How can you still believe in a church that lets babies die?” he had said. She doubted again. She was weak.

River’s truck hugged the mountainside, road dust billowing from its tires. No one understood why River had left Castle Creek or why she hadn’t at least moved to the city, but

“She stopped to watch the deer pant, its bones small and sloped and its coat gleaming in the sun.”



the cabin had been her only option. She couldn’t face the Family, and she was afraid to live in the world alone, full of its wickedness and lost souls. Fortunately, River loved her new self-sufficient life, loved

keeping the garden and orchard, loved tending her little flock of chickens. Most of all, River loved knowing she never had to seek Brother Eilar’s permission to leave home or receive visitors—although she rarely did either.

River was thinking about canning season when she turned the bow and saw a deer caught in the cattle guard. She stopped to watch the deer pant, its bones small and sloped and its coat gleaming in the sun. It was moon-eyed and frightened. River knew the deer wouldn’t survive two broken legs and needed to be put down, but her shovel leaned against the shed fifteen miles up the mountain, and she never carried a gun.

“Pretty thing,” River said.

Castle Creek rushed beside them. It wasn’t gelatin or smooth like the wide piece running beside River’s cabin. Here the creek beat against a massive boulder. The rock looked like it was skimming the cream off milk, like it was being scrubbed with white suds. River imagined the demon squatting on the rock, its eyes black.

The deer wrenched itself away from River with a wounded *wuf*. A slender, pale bone pierced its hide. Blood smeared the steel bars, and it reminded River of the day Sister Minnie

unpinned her dress and climbed naked over the church pews. Her legs were hairy, and her arms had bled from where she clawed herself. Doctors had diagnosed her with schizophrenia years ago, but Brother Eilar said she was being punished for a secret unrighteousness. River had been afraid of Sister Minnie, afraid of the shrieking, the laying-on of hands, the babbling of tongues. She had covered her nose and mouth with her collar, terrified of contracting a demon herself, and chanted with the rest, “Away with you, you cursed ones, into the Eternal Fire prepared for the Devil and His Demons.”

River released the parking brake and crossed the opposite cattle guard with a *clang*. Her hands didn’t feel clean anymore. She met the deer’s brown eyes, thought of Quiana suffering on her little bed, and left the deer trapped by Castle Creek.

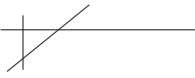
The stick was as white as a yarrow flower. River re-read the instructions for the third time, the milk forgotten on the counter. Sunlight filled the cabin, but River imagined the demon standing in the corner behind her with its mouth agape, maybe wailing, maybe grinning: “She has rebelled against her God. They will fall by the sword; their little ones will be dashed to pieces, and their pregnant women ripped open.”

River slipped the clean test into her apron pocket and plunged her hands into the kitchen wash basin. She scrubbed her hands with the soapbar until her flesh burned, but her skin still crawled. She went for more well water.

The sun felt closer here, and the creek was quiet and moved like a giant, lifting beast. A black barn cat sunned itself by the shed, and River considered fetching a load of firewood. She felt better.

River pumped the well and wondered if her mother had prayed for her today, if she would ever forgive her apostasy, if she had kept Quiana’s room the same—the room of a sweet four-year-old, full of all things purple. She thought of the deer. Impulsively, River dropped the basin and sprinted into a June-berry bush. She fished out the pregnancy test.





Two minutes later, River hauled the basin into the kitchen, sloshing water onto the plank flooring. She set the capped stick on the counter without looking at it and soaked her hands. She knew they were still soiled. They stank and were full of slime. River grabbed a wire dish scrubber and started scraping her skin, scouring every crevice of her palms, of her fingers, of her nails. The basin filled with blood.

A car door slammed.

River froze and relief surged through her. Dale had come. Loving an unbeliever was unrighteous, but at least it was love. Love on her birthday.

River knew the knock well. Her cabin door opened. It was Brother Eilar.

“The Lord sent me to minister to you,” he said, as he had many times before. “Happy birthday, dear Sister River.” River saw the demon stooped beside him, saw the skeletal body, saw the blanched belly. Brother Eilar saw nothing except River’s bloody hands.

“Now, River,” he henpecked, his voice like a trumpet. He could have been good-looking except his lips were too bulbous and shiny. “You always wash too hard.” Brother Eilar jerked a dishtowel from its rack and wrapped it around her hands. His tongue was white with plaque. “The Family sends its blessings and prays for your deliverance. They miss you.” He said the same thing every time. He touched her throat, and his voice changed. “I miss you.”

River was afraid of the demon, of the roaring in her ears.

“Did you know there’s a deer wedged in the guard by the crik?” Brother Eilar spotted the milk and broke the seal. “Had to cut its throat.” He drank straight from the carton. River heard milk swill over his teeth.

Quiana, Quiana, Quiana.

Brother Eilar left the milk on the counter and played with River’s hair, her dress buttons. She remembered him praying over Quiana’s small body, pouring oil into Quiana’s fine hair,

preaching, “It was God’s will,” at Quiana’s gravesite. His hand moved down. River hated him and knew she would burn in the Lake of Fire for it. The demon swelled and sucked the sunlight from the room.

“My hands are dirty, Brother. I’m dirty.” River tried to reach the soap, but, as always, his grip was like a clamp.

“Sister, you know the Way: “The soul that sinneth, it shall die,” Brother Eilar chanted. His eyes were potent. She was afraid. “You can’t be cleansed by worldly things. You must be judged.”

“Save me!” River said to him, to the demon, to the woods, to her dead baby sister. “I’m scared.”

“Doubt is from Satan,” said Brother Eilar, said the demon. “Now pray.” He had the authority of Heaven and forced River to her knees. He clutched the back of her head, and River knew she would always suffer by Castle Creek. On the counter, a symbol blossomed on the white stick and the milk spoiled in the sun.

