

EYE OF THE WOLF

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*This is for Violet Katherine Henderson.
Welcome to our world; we have been waiting for you.*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The Bates Battlefield is located in Hot Springs County, Wyoming, three miles from the border of Fremont County. For the purposes of this story, I have placed the site of the battlefield in Fremont County.

The Indian thought of the wolf as “an animal who moved like liquid across the plains, silent, without effort, but with purpose. He was alert to the smallest changes in his world. He could see very far—‘two looks away.’”

—OF WOLVES AND MEN BY BARRY LOPEZ

“We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes—something known only to her and to the mountain.”

—A SAND COUNTY ALMANAC BY ALDO LEOPOLD

The place where crying begins,

The thi'aya,

The thi'aya.

When I see the thi'aya,

I begin to lament.

—ARAPAHO SONG

THE CALL HAD come at precisely two minutes after nine this morning, everything about it marked with urgency, even the way the black plastic phone seemed to shudder with each ring. Father John Aloysius O'Malley, the Jesuit pastor of St. Francis Mission on the Wind River Reservation, could still feel the knot of dread that had tightened in his chest as his hand shot across the desk for the receiver. There were so many emergency calls—*Father, there's been an accident! Father, could you get over to the hospital? Father, we need help*—that he'd developed a sixth sense, like an invisible antenna capable of detecting the type of call even before he'd picked up the phone.

"Father John," he'd said, the usual greeting, but he'd hurried it, he remembered, anxious to hear what had happened.

And on the other end, the calm, deliberate voice of Nathan Owens, the Episcopal priest at St. Aiden's Mission in Ethete. "I think I've got

something for you, John,” he’d said. “Could you come over as soon as possible?”

Now Father John squinted into the sun exploding off the snow and aimed the front wheels of the ancient Toyota pickup into the tracks that marked the Blue Sky Highway. It had snowed during the night, a late gasp of winter that intruded into spring after a week of clear skies and sunshine and wild grasses sprouting green in the fields. Now the gray sagebrush poked out of the snow that blanketed the ground as far as he could see. The feeling of snow still hung in the air. Intermittent bursts of warmth from the vents punctuated the music of *Il Trovatore* blasting from the tape player on the seat beside him and barely cut through the cold that crept past the windows and into the cab. It was the first Monday in April, the Moon of Ice Breaking in the River in the way that the Arapahos marked the passing time.

Small houses began flashing past—gray one-story here, tan bi-level over there. He was on the outskirts of Ethete, the humped foothills of the Wind River Mountains, lined with snow, in the distance to the west. He knew the roads that crisscrossed the reservation by heart. He’d spent the last nine years at St. Francis Mission, almost the entire decade of his forties and three years longer than the Jesuits usually left a man on assignment. Not a day went by that he didn’t listen for the phone call that would send him on to some other place. The call would have its own peculiar sound, he thought. He would sense it.

He didn’t want the call to come. He was at home here, a fact that still took him by surprise when he thought about it. He, the tall, red-headed priest from Boston, descended from a long line of redheaded Irishmen, at home in the vast openness of the Wyoming plains with brown-skinned Arapahos, the blood of warriors coursing through their veins. He’d never imagined himself a mission priest. He’d been on an academic track, teaching American history at a Jesuit prep school with a doctorate and a university position ahead. Instead there had been the year spent at Grace House becoming a recovering alcoholic, followed by the search for a job with a Jesuit superior willing to

take a gamble, or maybe just desperate for help. Finally, the call had come: a position available on an Indian reservation. Did he want the job? He'd flown into the Riverton airport, still wobbly on his feet with his newfound sobriety.

The center of Ethete was ahead—a stoplight swinging over the junction of two roads with a gas station and convenience store on the southwest corner. Father John began easing on the brake, then took a right into the grounds of St. Aiden's, and wound around the narrow, circular road past a series of small buildings, past the hundred-year-old log-cabin church rooted in the earth and the snow. He parked in front of the cream-colored residence and turned off the tape player, the melody still running through his head as he hurried up the sidewalk.

They were similar, the two missions, he thought, knocking on the front door and glancing around. One Episcopalian, the other Catholic, separated by thirty miles, both with a circle of dormitories, schools, and cookhouses that had metamorphosed into offices, museums, and meeting halls. St. Aiden's had come first, but Father John Roberts, the Episcopal priest who founded the mission, had welcomed the Jesuits in 1884 when they built St. Francis close to Arapaho settlements in the eastern part of the reservation. "Now the Indians are surrounded by Christianity," he'd said.

The door squealed open, and a small woman peered upward, sending him a look of expectation. She was that indeterminate age—somewhere between fifty and seventy—and everything about her looked soft, from the gray color of her hair to the milky blue eyes and the tiny lines cushioned in the folds of her face.

"Come in, Father," she said, backing into a small entry and pulling the door with her. "Nathan's waiting in the study." She tossed her head toward the closed door on the left, then started down a narrow hallway toward the kitchen in back.

"How do you like your coffee?" she called over one shoulder. He could see the edge of the dark cabinets beyond her, the small table still littered with what looked like the plates and mugs from breakfast. The

sharp aromas of bacon and fresh coffee mingled in the air. Somewhere in the house, a washing machine was rumbling.

"A little milk. Thanks." He rolled his jacket into a bulky ball and set it on the chair in the corner, then balanced his cowboy hat on top. Before he could rap on the door, it swung inward. Filling up the opening was the large figure of Nathan Owens, dressed in blue jeans and a denim shirt that strained across his barrel chest. The man's round, puffy face was marked by a prominent nose and flushed cheeks beneath the thin strands of fading brown hair combed back from his forehead. He was in his seventies, he'd once confided to Father John, beyond the age of retirement, a fact that he hoped would continue to escape the Episcopal powers-that-be. He liked working on the reservation, even though he hadn't wanted the assignment here twenty years ago—another fact that he'd confided. A Philadelphia WASP on an Indian reservation? The Lord works in strange ways.

"He brought me from Boston," Father John had said, and they'd both laughed.

Now Father Nathan motioned him into a cramped study, not unlike his own. Papers spilled over the surface of the desk and onto the chair pulled close to one side. "Have a seat," the other priest said, scooping another pile of papers from the upholstered chair against a bookcase crammed with books stacked on one another.

Father John dropped onto the chair as the Episcopal priest swung his girth around the desk and settled into a swivel chair. "I appreciate your coming, John," he said, shoveling his fingers through his thin hair before patting it back into place.

"What's going on?"

Father Nathan raised a fleshy hand, fingers outstretched. His wife was coming through the door, holding out two coffee mugs like offerings.

"Don't worry about me," she said, handing one mug to Father John. She smiled at him. "The priest's wife sees nothing and tells nothing." She pushed aside a stack of papers and set the other mug on the desk.

"Thank you, dear." Nathan waited until the woman had retraced her steps and closed the door behind her. "I don't want Hilda worrying

about this," he said. "It'll only upset her. She knows there's something I wanted to talk over with you. That's all."

Father John sipped at his coffee. It was fresh and hot. He could feel the burning strand of liquid dropping into his chest.

"I'm going to cut to the chase, John," Father Nathan was saying. "A very disturbing call came in late Saturday night. The minute I answered the phone, a voice on the other end—if you can call it a voice—said, 'Listen carefully and pay attention.' I tell you, a chill ran through me. I hit the record button on instinct." The man paused, his gaze fastened on the phone next to his untouched mug of coffee.

"You'd better hear this," he said, jamming a fleshy finger on one of the buttons.

There was a half-second of whirring, followed by a clicking noise, then . . .

"This is for the Indian priest."

The voice of a machine, Father John thought, a monotone, high-pitched and rapid. And inhuman. The voice of a robot or an alien in a B movie. Father John shifted forward, set his mug on the desk, and dipped his head toward the phone, not taking his eyes from the tiny microphone spilling out the words:

Once they fell in heat.

Revenge is sweet

And cold.

Bodies in the snow.

Frozen enemy of old

Dead in the gorge

Attacks no more.

The whirring continued for a moment followed by silence. The walls seemed to close in; the cold of the dead gripped the room.

"Well, what do you make of it?" Nathan sat back in his chair, one hand resting against the base of the phone.

Father John looked away. The tinny, mechanical voice, the clipped words were still in his head. *Bodies in the snow. Dead in the gorge.* A distorted, soulless voice. The voice of evil.

"It's very disturbing." He brought his gaze back to the man watching him from the other side of the desk.

"I would say frightening. The caller went to a lot of trouble to disguise the voice. Could be either a man or a woman." Then Father Nathan heaved himself to his feet, walked across the study, and stared out the window that framed a slice of the mission grounds. "I can tell you, I haven't gotten much sleep since that call came. Keep thinking that out there in the snow, some poor soul . . ." He turned back to Father John. "No," he corrected himself. "The caller said 'bodies.'"

Father Nathan lumbered back and sank into the chair, like a bear moving into his cave. He set his elbows on the desk and made a fist that he knocked against the palm of his other hand. "I must've played that tape a couple dozen times yesterday. I'm out of my depth, John. If the message is supposed to be a code that the caller thought I'd understand, well . . ." He threw up both hands in a gesture of surrender. "I don't get it. Enemy of old? Dead bodies in a gorge? Sometime around 2:00 a.m. this morning, I reached two conclusions. Either the call is a sick joke that somebody wanted to play on the mission priest, or I wasn't the priest who was supposed to get the message. The caller could have dialed the wrong mission. Makes sense, doesn't it? You're the one people hereabouts call the Indian priest. You're the one who used to be a history professor."

"I taught American history in a prep school," Father John said, shaking his head. He was always mistaken for the history professor he might have been.

"A historian nonetheless." The other priest waved away the clarification and shot a glance toward the window. "The caller wants the bodies found and figured you'd make sense of the message. I believe it was intended for you."

Now Father John got to his feet and walked to the window. It looked

peaceful outside, the snow covering the ground and tracing the roofs of the old buildings, white flakes drifting like ash off the branches of the cottonwoods. Nathan's first conclusion could be right, he was thinking. The message was nothing more than a sick joke. He might even believe it, if it weren't for the voice, the soulless voice. *This is for the Indian priest.*

He turned back.

The other priest was slumped in his chair, staring at some point across the room, and for an instant, Father John had the sense that he was in the presence of an old man, weighted down by the long years and, now, consumed with an indefinable dread.

"Someone could have been killed," Father John said. His voice was soft, the voice of the confessional, of a counselor. "Perhaps, as you say, more than one person."

Father Nathan was quiet a moment. Then he said, "I was about to call the Wind River Police, but what will I tell them? A crank call about bodies in the snow? They'd fill out a report and file it with a hundred other vague reports. Nothing about the message makes sense. Bodies? Where are they? Enemies and attacks? What are we talking about?"

Father John let a beat pass while he chased the shadow of an idea forming at the edge of his mind. "Possibly about an Indian battle," he said. "The bodies could be on one of the old battlefields."

"How many battlefields are there?" The other priest seemed to be warming to the idea.

Father John walked over and dropped back into his chair. "Hundreds," he said. "The war on the plains lasted almost forty years." He ran his tongue over his lips. His mouth felt as dry as sand. *Hundreds of battle sites.* It would be like uncovering a pebble in the snow. But there were clues. The caller had imbedded clues in the message.

He let another moment pass before he said, "I'd like to take the message to the elders."

The other priest was nodding. "Yes, yes," he said, thumbing through a folder. He pulled out a sheet and handed it across the desk to Father

John. The telephone message was scrawled in black ink across the page. "I wrote down the words," Nathan said. "I also copied the tape." He rummaged through the center drawer. "You still keep that player in the pickup for your operas?"

Father John nodded.

"Good." Nathan handed him the tape. "It'll help if the elders hear the message. The voice will send chills down their spines."

Father John got to his feet and started for the door.

"John . . ."

He turned back.

Father Nathan gripped the armrests and began leveraging himself upright, his massive chest leaning over the desk. "I don't like the logic of where this might be going," he said. "If some crackpot gets his jollies from killing people and leaving the bodies on an old battlefield, there's no telling how many people might end up dead."

2

THE REDBRICK SENIOR citizens center stood in a snow-covered field off Seventeen-Mile Road, a deserted look about it except for the three pickups parked at various angles in front, as if they'd fallen out of the sky with the snow. Father John pulled in alongside one of the vehicles and hit the off button on the tape player. He'd been playing and replaying the message all the way from St. Aiden's, searching for the hidden meaning. Where was the meaning? Each time the tape started—*This is for the Indian priest*—he'd felt the same sense of foreboding. He couldn't get used to the voice. It always sounded different—the endless changeability of evil.

He took the tape player, slammed out into the crisp air, and made his way up the sidewalk, his boots kicking up fantails of white powder. A wedge of snow at the edge of the sloped roof threatened to drop onto the little mounds bunched against the building. He yanked open the front door and stepped into a large, open room, redolent of fresh coffee

and hot fry bread. The round tables inside the door were vacant, metal chairs tilted on the front legs and pushed against the table edges, but two elders, Ethan Red Bull and Max Whiteman, sat hunched over Styrofoam cups at a table near the window in back. A gray-haired woman leaned into the door from the kitchen on the right and gave him a welcoming wave with a dishcloth as he started around the vacant tables.

"Help yourself to coffee, Father," Ethan called out. Both men had shifted in his direction, dark eyes watching him approach. They tossed their heads in unison toward the metal coffeepot and stack of Styrofoam cups on a cart pushed against the side wall, and Father John walked over, poured himself a cup of coffee, and—cup in one hand, tape player in the other—headed back to the elders.

Max Whiteman nudged a vacant chair away from the table with his boot. "Take a load off your feet," he said.

Father John set the coffee mug and player on the table, shrugged out of his jacket, and tossed it onto an adjacent table along with his cowboy hat. Then he took the chair between the two old men. It was hard to tell who was older, Max or Ethan. Both in their eighties, ranchers with cowboy hats perched on white heads and the outdoors etched in brown faces, brought up on stories told by their grandfathers of the days when Arapahos had lived free on the plains, warriors in feathered headdresses thundering across the empty spaces after the buffalo, protecting the villages from enemies.

"How are you, grandfathers?" Father John said, using the term of respect for men who had reached the fourth hill of life. From the top of the fourth hill, they could see great distances, which in the Arapaho Way, accounted for the wisdom of the elders.

"*Hi'zeti*." Max shrugged. He was a stocky, compact man with eyes like narrow, black slits in a round, pudgy face, and a large head that sat directly between his shoulders. He had on a dark plaid shirt with the small bronze buffalo of his bolo tie riding halfway down the hump of his chest. "We're a couple of tough old buzzards," he went on, nodding at the man across the table. "Ain't that right?"