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Opening Extract from...

The Loop

Written by Nicholas Evans

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Nicholas EVANS

The Loop

sphere

SPHERE

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and in memory of my father,
Tony Evans

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Everything the Power of the World
does is done in a circle. The sky is
round and I have heard that the earth
is round like a ball and so are all the stars.
The wind, in its greatest power, whirls.
Birds make their nests in circles,
for theirs is the same religion as ours.
The sun comes forth and goes down
again in a circle. The moon does the
same and both are round. Even the
seasons form a great circle in their
changing and always come back again
to where they were. The life of a man
is a circle from childhood to childhood.
And so it is in everything where power moves.

BLACK ELK, Oglala Sioux
(1863–1950)

SUMMER

1

The scent of slaughter, some believe, can linger in a place for years. They say it lodges in the soil and is slowly sucked through coiling roots so that in time all that grows there, from the smallest lichen to the tallest tree, bears testimony.

Perhaps, as he moved silently down through the forest on that late afternoon, his summer-sleek back brushing lower limbs of pine and fir, the wolf sensed it. And perhaps this vestige of a rumor in his nostrils, that here a hundred years ago so many of his kind were killed, should have made him turn away.

Yet on and down he went.

He had set out the previous evening, leaving the others in the high country where even now, in July, there lingered spring flowers and patches of tired snow in gullies shy of the sun. He had headed north along a high ridge then turned east, following one of the winding rocky canyons that funneled the

snowmelt down from the divide to the valleys and plains below. He had kept high, shunning the trails, especially those that ran along the water, where sometimes in this season there were humans. Even through the night, wherever it was possible, he had stayed below the timberline, edging the shadows, in a trot so effortless that his paws seemed to bounce without touching the ground. It was as though his journey had some special purpose.

When the sun rose, he stopped to drink, then found a shaded nook high among the sliprock and slept through the heat of the day.

Now, in this final descent to the valley, the going was more difficult. The forest floor was steep and tangled with blowdown, like tinder in some epic fireplace, and the wolf had to weave his way carefully among it. Sometimes he would double back and find a better route so as not to puncture the silence with the telltale snap of a dead branch. Here and there, the sun broke through the trees to make pools of vivid green foliage and these the wolf would always skirt.

He was a prime four-year-old, the alpha of the pack. He was long in the leg and almost a pure black, with just the faintest haze of gray along his flanks and at his throat and muzzle. Now and again he would pause and lower his head to sniff a bush or a tuft of grass, then lift his leg and make his mark, reclaiming this long-lost place as his own. At other times he would stop and tilt his nose to the air and his eyes would narrow and shine yellow as he read the scented messages that wafted on thermals from the valley below.

Once while doing this, he smelled something closer at hand and he turned his head and saw two white-tailed deer, mother and fawn, no more than a dozen yards away, frozen in a shaft of sunlight, watching him. He stared at them, connecting in an ancient communion that even the fawn understood. And for a long moment, all that moved were the

spores and insects that spiraled and glinted above the deers' heads. Then, as if deer and insect were of equal consequence to a wolf, he looked away and again assessed the air.

From a mile and a half away came the mingled smells of the valley. Of cattle, dogs, the acrid tang of man's machines. And though he must have known, without ever being taught, the peril of such things, yet on again he went and down, the deer following him with inscrutable black eyes until he was lost among the trees.

The valley which the wolf was now entering ran some ten miles due east in a widening, glacial scoop toward the town of Hope. Its sides were ridged and thick with pine and, viewed from above, seemed to reach out like yearning arms to the great sunbleached plains that stretched from the town's eastern edge to the horizon and countless more beyond.

At its widest, from ridge to ridge, the valley was almost four miles wide. It was hardly perfect grazing land, though many had made a living from it and one or two grown rich. There was too much sage and too much rock and whenever the pasture seemed about to roll, some coulee or creek, choked with scrub and boulders, would gouge through and cut it off. Halfway down the valley, several of these creeks converged and formed the river which wound its way through stands of cottonwood to Hope and on from there to the Missouri.

All of this could be surveyed from where the wolf now stood. He was on a limestone crag that jutted from the trees like the prow of a fossilized ship. Below it, the land fell away sharply in a wedge-shaped scar of tumbled rock and, below that, both mountain and forest gave way grudgingly to pasture. A straggle of black cows and calves were grazing lazily at their shadows and beyond them, at the foot of the meadow, stood a small ranch house.

It had been built on elevated ground above the bend of a creek whose banks bristled with willow and chokecherry.

There were barns to one side and white-fenced corrals. The house itself was of clapboard, freshly painted a deep oxblood. Along its southern side ran a porch that now, as the sun elbowed into the mountains, was bathed in a last throw of golden light. The windows along the porch had been opened wide and net curtains stirred in what passed for a breeze.

From somewhere inside floated the babble of a radio and maybe it was this that made it hard for whoever was at home to hear the crying of the baby. The dark blue buggy on the porch rocked a little and a pair of pink arms stretched craving for attention from its rim. But no one came. And at last, distracted by the play of sunlight on his hands and forearms, the baby gave up and began to coo instead.

The only one who heard was the wolf.

Kathy and Clyde Hicks had lived out here in the red house for nearly two years now and, if Kathy were honest with herself (which, on the whole, she preferred not to be, because mostly you couldn't do anything about it, so why give yourself a hard time?), she hated it.

Well, hate was maybe too big a word. The summers were okay. But even then, you always had the feeling that you were too far away from civilization; too exposed. The winters didn't bear thinking about.

They'd moved up here two years ago, right after they got married. Kathy had hoped having the baby might change how she felt about the place and in a way it had. At least she had someone to talk to when Clyde was out working the ranch, even though the conversation, as yet, was kind of one-way.

She was twenty-three and sometimes she wished she'd waited a few years to get married, instead of doing it straight out of college. She had a degree in agri-business management from Montana State in Bozeman and the only use she'd ever made of it was the three days a week she spent shuffling her

daddy's paperwork around down at the main ranch house.

Kathy still thought of her parents' place as home and often got into trouble with Clyde for calling it that. It was only a couple of miles down the road, but whenever she'd spent the day there and got in the car to come back up here, she would feel something turn inside her that wasn't quite an ache, more a sort of dull regret. She would quickly push it aside by jabbering to the baby in the back or by finding some country music on the car radio, turning it up real loud and singing along.

She had her favorite station on now and as she stood at the sink shucking the corn and looking out at the dogs sleeping in the sun by the barns, she started to feel better. They were playing that number she liked, by the Canadian woman with the ball-breaker voice, telling her man how good it felt when he 'cranked her tractor'. It always made Kathy laugh.

God, really, she should count her blessings. Clyde was as fine a husband as any woman could hope for. Though not the richest (and, okay, maybe not the brightest either), he'd been, by a long way, the best-looking guy at college. When he'd proposed, on graduation day, Kathy's friends had been sick with envy. And now he'd given her a beautiful, healthy baby. And even if this place was at the back end of nowhere, it was still a place of their own. There were plenty of folk her age in Hope who'd give their right arms for it. Plus, she was tall, had great hair and even though she hadn't quite got her figure back after having the baby, she still knew her looks could crank any tractor she chose.

Self-esteem had never been a problem for Kathy. She was Buck Calder's daughter and around these parts that was about as big a thing to be as there was. Her daddy's ranch was one of the largest spreads this side of Helena and Kathy had grown up feeling like the local princess. One of the few things she didn't like about being married was giving up her name. She had

even suggested to Clyde that she might do what those big-shot career women did nowadays and go double-barreled, call herself Kathy Calder Hicks. Clyde had said fine, whatever, but she could see he wasn't keen on the idea and so as not to hurt him she'd settled for plain old Kathy Hicks.

She looked up at the clock. It was getting on for six. Clyde and her daddy were down in the hay fields, fixing some irrigation, and they were all coming over for supper around seven. Her mom was due any minute with a pie she'd baked for dessert. Kathy cleared the mess out of the sink and put the corn into a pan on the stove. She wiped her hands on her apron and turned the radio down. All she had left to do was peel the potatoes and, when they were done, Buck Junior out there on the porch would no doubt be hollering for his feed and she'd do that then get him all bathed and brushed up nice and smart for his grandpa.

The cows in the top meadow looked up as one when the wolf came out from the trees. He stopped where the grass began, as if to give them the chance to inspect him. They had never before seen such a creature. Perhaps they placed him as some larger, darker kind of coyote. Coyotes were only a real danger when a calf was freshly born. Perhaps he seemed more like one of the ranch dogs who wandered among them sometimes and the only time you had to pay heed to them was when they snapped at your heels to make you go some place you'd rather not.

In return the wolf barely graced them with a glance. All his senses were locked on something else, something down at the house, and he lowered his head and started down the meadow toward it. He moved more slowly now, with greater caution, not skirting the cattle but passing right through them. But so clear was his disinterest that none moved away and all soon went back to their grazing.

As the sun slid behind the mountains, a line of shadow came creeping across the grass in front of the house and up and onto the porch, like a rising tide, so that first the wheels and then the base of the baby's buggy were engulfed and the oxblood wall behind it congealed to a darker red.

The wolf by now was at the foot of the meadow and here he stopped by the fence where Clyde had rigged up a pipe and an old enamel bathtub to water the cattle if the creek dried up. A pair of magpies broke from the willow scrub down by the creek and came up toward him in a series of fluttering swoops, scolding him, as if they knew his business here and didn't much care for it. The wolf ignored them. But from the shelter of his buggy, now only some twenty yards away, the baby did a passable imitation of the birds, shrieked with delight at how it sounded then did several encores. Inside the house a phone started to ring.

It was Kathy's mother. She said the pie had burned but not to worry because she had something else in the freezer that they could microwave.

'Oh and Luke says he'll come, if that's okay.'

'Of course it's okay.'

Luke, Kathy's brother, had just turned eighteen. He was sweet with the baby whenever she bumped into him down at the ranch, but he and Clyde didn't get along too well and since she'd been married, Luke hadn't been up here to the house more than a couple of times. As kids, they had never really been close. But then no one was close to Luke. Except, of course, their mom. She was the only one, in the end, who could handle his stutter.

Kathy had always been too impatient. Even when she was old enough to know better, she couldn't help finishing his sentences for him when he blocked. Since he'd graduated from high school, a couple of months ago, she'd hardly seen

him. He was getting to be more of a loner than ever, it seemed to Kathy, always off on his own in the wilderness with only that funny-looking horse of his for company.

Anyway, he was coming to supper and that was fine.

Her mother asked how the baby was and Kathy said he was just great and that she'd better get off the phone because it was coming up toward his feed time and she still had things to do.

It was just as she hung up that the dogs started barking.

Normally, she wouldn't have given this a second thought. The dogs were forever hollering and taking off after some varmint or other, But there was something about the noise they were making now that made her look out of the window.

Maddie, the old collie, had her tail tucked under her and was slinking off around the side of the barn, muttering over her shoulder. Prince, the yellow Labrador that Kathy's father had given her when they first moved up here, was pacing to and fro with his hackles up. His ears alternately pricked and flattened as if he were unsure of himself and he punctuated his barking with worried little whines. His eyes were fixed on something beyond the house, something up toward the meadow.

Kathy frowned. She'd better go see what was spooking them. The pan in which she was cooking the corn started to hiss and she went over to the stove and turned down the heat. When she came out through the kitchen screen door and stepped down into the yard there was no sign of the collie. Prince seemed relieved to see her.

'Hey you, what's going on here?'

The dog started to come toward her, then seemed to change his mind. Perhaps her presence gave him that little extra courage he'd been lacking, for now he took off in full cry around the side of the house, kicking up the dust as he went.

It was only then that the thought struck her. The baby. There was something on the porch, getting at the baby. She started to run. It must be a bear. Or a mountain lion. God, how could she have been so dumb?

As she came around the corner of the house, Kathy saw, directly below the porch, what at first she took for a big, black dog, a German Shepherd maybe. It turned to face the Labrador's charge.

'Get out of here! Git!'

The animal glanced at her and she felt the yellow flash of his eyes upon her and knew in that instant this was no dog.

Prince had skidded to a halt before the wolf and had lowered himself, his front paws splayed so that his chest was just inches from the ground. He had his teeth bared and was snarling and barking but with such timid bravado that it seemed he might at any moment roll over and submit. The wolf stood very still, but somehow at the same time seemed to make himself bigger so that he towered over the dog. His tail was bushy and raised high. Slowly, he curled back his lips and snarled and his long incisors showed white.

Then, in a single lunge, he had his jaws on the Labrador's throat and swung him off his feet and through the air as if he were no heavier than a jackrabbit. The dog yelped and Kathy had a sudden image in her head of the wolf having already done the same with her baby and she screamed and jumped onto the end of the porch.

The buggy was at the far end and it seemed like a hundred miles away as she ran toward it.

Oh God, please. Don't let him be dead. Please don't let him be dead.

She couldn't tell whether the buggy had been disturbed, but even through the dog's shrieking, she knew her baby inside was silent and the thought of what she would find made her sob.

When she got there she hardly dared look. But she forced herself and saw the child staring up at her, his face breaking into a gummy grin, and she cried out and reached down and snatched him up. She did it with such sudden violence that the child began to cry and she held him to her so hard that he cried even louder. She turned, pressing her back to the wall, and looked down from the porch.

The wolf was standing with his head lowered over the Labrador. Kathy could see right away that the dog was dead. His hind legs gave a final twitch, just like they did in his dreams when he slept in front of the fire. His throat had been torn out and his belly gaped like a gutted fish. The bleached grass under him rivered red. Kathy screamed again and the wolf started, as if he'd forgotten she was there. He stared right at her and she could see the glisten of blood on his face.

'Get out of here! Go on! Get out!'

She looked around for something to throw at him but there was no need. The wolf was already running off and within moments he was ducking under the fence and loping up among the cattle who had all quit their grazing to watch the spectacle below. At the top of the meadow he stopped and looked back to where Kathy still stood over the dead dog, clutching her baby and crying. Then he turned and vanished into the shadow of the forest.