

Half-Wild
and
Other Stories
of
Encounter

EMILY PASKEVICS

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“We are human only in contact,
and conviviality,
with what is not human.”

DAVID ABRAM
The Spell of the Sensuous



“The work is going well,
but it looks like it might be
the end of the world.”

ELIZABETH KOLBERT
The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History

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Predators

Heidi checked her phone. No messages, and one new email from the university's Association for New Alumni—already asking for a donation. She trashed it, then shoved the phone into her back pocket. She still had a few minutes before she had return inside for the rest of her shift at the pub, though she and old Jim Rizzo were keeping an honour system going for the hours she was picking up at Good Folks. She wasn't planning to stay in town for long, so she hadn't officially signed on to payroll.

She lit a cigarette and watched as a sleek black Tesla pulled into the parking lot. People in and around Sadowa mostly drove old vans and oversized pickups, but that wasn't the only reason why the car obviously belonged to an out-of-towner. It was the exacting way in which the driver, invisible behind the deeply-tinted side windows, parked the car between the faded yellow lines. Nobody local cared about those lines. With a smoky sigh, Heidi walked around to the back of the pub without waiting to get a glimpse of the driver.

A chain-link fence bordered the lot behind Good Folks, half-heartedly holding back two hundred acres of mixed-wood

forest. A large sign riddled with shotgun holes dangled at an angle from one of the posts. Notice of Public Meeting, it stated in bold black lettering, Concerning Application for Rezoning & Plan of Subdivision. Heidi didn't examine the fine print underneath—the sign had been put up a couple of months back, around the time she returned to Sadowa after graduating from university. She leaned against her white Toyota Tacoma and finished the cigarette, listening to the fluting song of a hermit thrush somewhere among the trees.

She noticed a coil of animal scat by the rear tire of her truck. Squatting for a closer look, she noted tawny animal fur and bone fragments. Heidi scanned the surrounding concrete, spotting a paw print in the muck of a nearby pothole. By its size, her first thought was *wolf*. But the pack that once lived in the area was long gone, so she settled on *coyote* instead. She tossed her cigarette aside and eyed the shape and width of the pads, then spotted a second track farther away. There was an opening in the fence by the sign where the wire had come unhooked and the fence was all bent out of shape. She walked over and fingered a snagged tuft of grey-white fur.

The back of her neck prickled. Heidi scanned the underbrush beyond the fence—was she being watched? How close wildness was, reaching over fences and pushing up through asphalt that was constantly cracking and splitting, giving way to the relentless weeds and roots. Coyotes, in particular, were circling closer. Earlier that week, Good Folks had hosted a town hall meeting about the recent uptick in coyote encounters.

As she rubbed the fur between her thumb and forefinger, the pub's back door squeaked open and Jim Rizzo appeared on the threshold.

"Mr. Big Shot's just come in—wants whiskey on the rocks. Go ask if he'll have the daily special with that, will you?"

"Got it."

Heidi released the tuft of fur into the wind. Although she hadn't said anything during the coyote discussion during the town hall meeting, she figured she knew more than the average Sadowan. She'd taken first-year ecology at college, where she'd learned that effective coyote management meant balancing out the entire food chain. In other words, if the townsfolk really wanted to get rid of the coyotes, then technically they should bring back the wolves.

Retying her red apron around her waist, Heidi followed her boss back into the dingy pub. She took the drink Jim already prepared at the bar and made her way to the dingy corner where the Tesla driver was seated, typing on his phone. He was the only customer. His earbuds glowed blue in the gloom. Above him hung a crooked whiteboard from the town hall meeting, on which the word COYOTES was scrawled.

"Sorry for the wait," Heidi said.

"No problem," he said, slightly too loudly, without looking up.

"Can I interest you in the daily special?" she asked, setting the drink down before him. "Burger combo. Extra fries."

Her voice came out high pitched, sounding girlish and uncertain. He popped out one of his earbuds.

"Sorry, what was that?" he asked. After she repeated herself about the special, he said: "Sure thing."

Back in the kitchen, Heidi confirmed the order with Jim. They exchanged a knowing glance. The Tesla driver wasn't entirely a stranger, after all. His name was Alonzo Jones, and he represented a big development firm from the city. After the coyote deregulation debate at the town hall, he'd given a presentation about land development in Sadowa. He'd started off with a joke: "Well, if you want to get rid of your coyote problem, why not claim their habitat as your own?" Nobody laughed.

He'd gone on to outline the new subdivision his firm was planning to build in Sadowa, featuring sixty-three residential

units, a shopping plaza, a small kids' park and a smaller, fenced, off-leash area for dogs. He'd projected a slideshow from his MacBook: graphs, budget estimates, and aerial photographs of town boundaries, forested land, and property lines. Sadowa would even get a connection along the commuter bus line into the city, and the town could be rebranded as "Countryside Close to the City." All that was needed for this shiny new future was for the two hundred acres of forested land behind Good Folks to be rezoned for recreational and commercial development.

Heidi had noticed the townsfolk shifting in their seats and giving one another skeptical looks—they hadn't considered Sadowa and its surroundings as a product to be marketed. She herself had just spent four years in the city, so she figured she had a better understanding of how things worked. Anyway, Alonzo Jones certainly seemed to know what he was talking about.

When Heidi returned to his table with his order, Jones looked at her almost familiarly—as though trying to place her. This time, she held his gaze.

"You were here during the meeting, weren't you?" he asked, taking out one of his earbuds again.

"The town hall? Yeah."

Jones unfolded a napkin and spread it over his lap. "So what do you think of the proposal, then?"

She was startled to be asked such a direct question. She recalled from his talk that his firm had already bought a twenty-acre farm at the edge of town, and were in the process of developing a community of luxury country homes. During his presentation, Jones had explained that the new project would be even grander in scale, which would trigger a population boom and a considerable boost to the local economy.

"I guess it will be good for the local economy," Heidi said.

He gave her a smile. "Smart girl."

She flushed, feeling stupidly pleased. She wanted to tell him that she had just finished her degree and was planning on

applying to grad school—just as soon as she made up her mind. But Jones had already put his earbud back in, and was typing busily on his phone again.

The bell clanked above the tavern door as Heidi made her way through the rows of empty tables to the bar. The newcomer seated himself on a barstool, and Heidi drew back when she recognized Nate Malone. The last time she'd seen him was when she'd broken up with him—had she actually said that she was going places and he wasn't?

“Hey, Heidi,” he said with a big smile. “Heard you were back. Wanted to see for myself.”

Nate had broad shoulders now, and a neatly trimmed beard, beneath which his smile was as disarming as ever. Heidi brought him the coke he requested, and they exchanged polite updates about their lives. When she'd left, Nate had been jobless and his main interests were drinking beer and shooting at empty cans with a .22 in his backyard. Now he was working for the Northern Emergency Services, assisting with forest fire evacuations in remote communities. It had been four years—they had both grown up and moved on.



EMILY PASKEVICS is a graduate of the Humber School for Writers. Her work has appeared in several publications, including Vallum Magazine, The Humber Literary Review, and Hart House Review. In 2022 she was a finalist for the Writers Trust of Canada's RBC Bronwen Wallace Award, for her short story "*Wild Girls*." She was also longlisted for the 2019 CBC Short Story Prize for her story "*Little Wild Creatures*." She divides her time between Toronto and Montreal.