

ONE MORNING

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One Morning, by Jessica Hagy

‘Before’ and ‘Chapter 1’

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Before

Millions of years ago, the Appalachians are as high as the Alps. Water changes that. It dissolves exposed stones, rinses soil down hills, gouges valleys with river currents. The things that live on the mountains die and sink into peat bogs. As a hundred thousand human lifetimes pass, water condenses and falls, flows and freezes, thaws and evaporates, is consumed and expelled. It flattens peaks and fills valleys with the fallen silt.

In the foggy spring of 1829, a man named James Gour surveys a seven-hundred-acre plot of sacred land deep in Penn's Woods and declares it a farm. The soil beneath his feet, soil that once kissed clouds, is tilled even further under. Fathoms below his sharp till, ancient life has turned to flammable stone and waits to be exhumed.

The Pennsylvania Railroad pries open a station in 1842 on land the Gour family had wrestled into orchards. The locomotives stabled at the station gobble coal and belch black clouds. The water cycle spins faster now, accelerated by the heat and vapor expelled by the trains.

A mining company buys the rest of the Gour farm as 1854 begins. A town springs up, the charming Gour

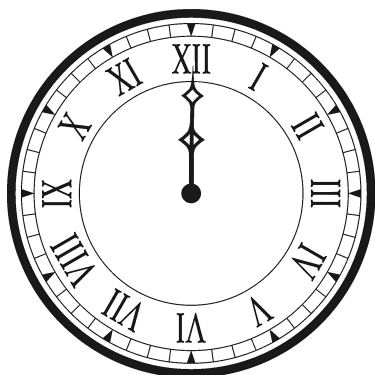
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Borough: mushroom circles of little wooden houses around the train station and the mine entrances. Men proudly wear streaks of black in the creases of their faces, under their nails, deep in their lungs. Those men dig deep caverns far below the water table to harvest the coal crop, planted millions of years ago. Massive pumps continuously exert themselves to keep the water from flooding the mines. When the coal seams are depleted, the pumps and men retire. As soon as the pumps are silent, the water invades. Below Gour Borough, acidic lakes slosh where the coal had been. That water breaks down all the bedrock it can lick. It leeches heavy metals from the mines and carries them out, back up to the undark surface. The water has found a new way to weaken the mountains.

By 1917, all the mines are officially abandoned. The companies that clawed out the coal have legally evaporated and no person can be coerced into claiming ownership or responsibility. So water lays claims to everything, as it always has. The town remains above the flooded caverns and its dwindling population drinks water weighted with mine-runoff and the long history of collapsing mountains, dissolving stones, and lapping tongues.

The Morning of December 1, 2016

Gour Borough, Pennsylvania



Midnight: Helena

She's stitching yak fur to a yeti mask. Intense work on an impossible deadline: the kind of commissions that pay the most, the most satisfying work she does. She was offered a reality show once, but her introversion convinced her to turn it down. Besides, she thought, who really wants to watch a show about theatrical taxidermy? Ever since she saw her father skin a deer that dangled and dripped from a beam in the garage, she's been under the spell of skins as artistic media: how they define and contain all manner of characters.

It's the biggest project she's had in a while; it'll pay the bills (hers and her sister's) for at least a year. *Tech millionaires and their fetishes*, she assumes. But this one,

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this one's odd. The anonymous client specifically requested this have three antlers, just like the local yeti-type legend: The Old Man of the Woods. Helena wonders if the client might be local. And it has to be delivered first thing the next morning, at the drop-shipping place out by the parkway.

She sits under a mantel covered in dusty trophies. *Crypto-Taxidermy Grand Champion* (for the unicorn made from a white baby goat's hide and a narwhal's horn). *First place, Mythical Beasts* (for the griffin she composited from the shells of a lynx and a falcon). A Technical Academy Award for costume engineering (for a dozen elegantly eerie silicon and mother-of-pearl mermaid tails), a *Lifetime Achievement* (for all the rest). She makes the imaginary seem real, alive, possible.

The magnifying glass helps her thread each strand of fur onto the skin. No glue, all hand-tied knots. She cuts no corners. At the edge of the rooms the costume hangs on a human mannequin. A true hair suit of tailored camel leather. The zippers are so deeply hidden they look and feel like old scars.

Her sister, Agnes, is calling. Again. Helena ties a tight knot and reluctantly answers. She has to. Eight years ago, her niece, her sister's daughter, disappeared. Since then, her sister has drifted further and further from reality and

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functionality. Helena never says anything when her sister calls. She just breathes into the phone and listens.

She idly strokes strands of yak hair as her sister imparts another theory. This time it's about some massive eagle that swooped down and stole her daughter away to a nest at the top of the world, where the girl still lives, nestled happily between feathers and cat collars and clouds where she lives as a lookout, a goddess on a mountaintop. *But I know that's not true*, her sister sighs.

And because her sister never asks anything of her, never says, *And how are you?* or, *Are you seeing anyone?* Helena never has to tell her about the married man who arranges dates once a month, entertains her but keeps his distance, asks so little of her, who she keeps around purely out of habit. The guy with the outer shell of roughness and brashness and cruelty, who nonetheless grins and blushes when her shadow slinks over him.

She's been seeing him for ten years. She thinks that ten years sounds like less of a milestone than a decade. She's never loved him, but she knows her feelings are reciprocated. He's her hobby. She's his. That's plenty. Actually, it's more than she requires or even likes. She has too much work to do, too much love to put into the skins and pelts and glass-eyed faces to really care for his damp, fleshy one.

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He admires her work. He keeps a raven of hers under glass in his study. *A raven for my writing desk*. He's specified in his will that she gets to stuff him once he dies. She told him she'd mount him with a diaper with a bow and arrow and pigeon wings: an elderly, corpulent cupid, and gift him to a museum. He very much liked the idea. She thinks of him, not quite fondly, while her sister rambles.

She says goodnight when her sister has said all she called to say. Helena worries, sometimes, that her sister won't be able to maintain her coping mechanisms forever, that any day now, she'll slide down the wrong side of the sanity curve. There haven't been any leads in the case for years. She worries that if Amanda is ever found (and she knows, that after this long, it's probably a body they're looking for), her sister will lose her sustaining daydreams.

The yak hair is wiry and hard to work with: brittle and stiff. But it looks perfect. The yeti costume is almost complete, just a few more details: file the fingernails of carved cow horn, burnish the waxed-goat leather calluses under the toes. She'll add the antlers last, the crowning details.

She hasn't set a big fire in a long time. She's been trying to behave herself. She's never been caught. She's almost fifty, and never once has she even been a suspect. But she feels the urge constantly. It's an itch in her throat, a sweaty tingle between her fingers. She thinks about how

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lovely a plume of smoke would look under the low, drizzling clouds.

She works faster. She's earned a flame or two, she thinks, admiring her own handiwork. The antlers are anchored into place with thick sinew, and then sewn around the edges with grey silk. A ten-point buck donated them to this strange cause. She hopes the client respects her work enough not to ruin it completely, at least not right away.

The mask looked somber before the antlers were attached. And now, with them, it's menacing. *A superbly affective creation*, she smirks. She fits the mask onto the mannequin. She aches to photograph this one, even though she signed an NDA promising not to ever share the existence of this commission.

She puts away her tools and materials. She's twitchy to incinerate, to collect her accelerants and her matches, to listen to timber crackle and burn. The first fire she set, she was only seven. She burned down her grandmother's tool shed. It was glorious. When the insurance check didn't bounce, she stopped feeling guilty.

Should she? Of course not. No. Does she want to? Absolutely. But where? Nowhere people are, it has to be out in the woods and weeds, somewhere near her sister's house. Every other house in that valley is boarded up. The population of Gour Borough has halved in the last

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decade and there are dozens of abandoned places to torch. Maybe someone's long lost cousin can collect insurance. She knows just the place. She's been day-dreaming about it for months.

Down near foamy Turtle Creek, on the road recently zoned unsafe due to mudslide risk. Where the electricity is off, and the unused sidewalks sprout weeds from every crack. She'd been hiking near there, foraging for moss for her projects, when she saw the place. There's a crooked barn, a black barn, just waiting for her: three stories of luscious kindling.

It's maybe five miles from her workshop. Maybe. All back roads. Very little traffic. The deer-path is at the top of the hill. She can park there, sneak down to the property, splash some gas around. This is not a spur of the moment burn. No, this will take planning. She wants to do it right, to do it carefully. The opposite of a wild fire: a controlled demolition.

She's giddy now, just thinking about it. She'll go tonight, pitch a neon-blue tent near the property like she belongs there. A reconnaissance mission. She'll go, look around, let the excitement build. She hasn't looked forward to something so much in quite a while.

She's never told anyone about her fires. Never. Not once. Should she tell him? They're meeting for lunch. She

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could. He wouldn't say a word. If he did, she could call his wife. She decides against it. She'll take no risks with her precious, splendid flames.

Daydreaming must run in my family, she mutters as she remembers the deadline. She still has a lot to do before the yeti's ready to ship. She has a coffin-sized crate waiting to hold it in her garage. She has her camera in her cabinet. And she has a full gas can. And some rags. And her trusty silver lighter. She happily snorts and sews more yak hairs into place.

It's almost finished. The more details she embeds in a figure, the more alive it seems. She knows her work is done if she feels pity when she looks into its eyes. The reflections in the brown, murky glass make the eyes of the mask look like the yeti is recalling painful moments from childhood. Perfect. She pats the mask on the forehead, soothing its emanating anxiety.

She went down to the stream that runs red with iron runoff and smells sulfury like a bad omelet, and brought back just enough dark, coppery stain to make the tips of the fur look roughly lived in. She rubs it in, staining both the fur and her fingertips. She knows, based on the pages of details in the client's instructions, that this is a suit needs to look as real, as wild, as possible. She handles her work with the respect of a mortician.

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The suit was made for someone only five foot two. The yeti looks juvenile at this height, even with the extra foot of antlers. Usually she gets instructions on these kinds of jobs about the sex the costume needs to project, but not with this commission. Maybe it's not a fetish object? Maybe it's for a bored housewife who wants to scare the hell out of her neighbors.

She lays a hand on the shoulder of the yeti. She feels more empathy and appreciation for the creatures she assembles than for the people she knows. She gulps back a tear for the melancholy yeti. This is why she could never do a television show. She has trouble being around skins with souls inside them, unable to feel they're as real as the characters she creates herself.

Anyway, buddy. Time to go to your new home, she says as she wheels the costume down her hallway. Her home isn't decorated as much as it is simply full of her work. The living room is her sewing workshop and photography studio. The kitchen is used for mixing dyes and tanning leathers. The oven holds a box of assorted lizard skins. The pantry's full of leathers in every shade of clay. She doesn't cook.

The spare bedroom's a hoard of feathers, buckets of glass eyes, and piles of fur scraps: a walk-in-at-your-own-risk closet. In her bedroom, a stuffed badger sits by the window, reading *Playboy* through a monocle. He wears a

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tartan vest and a gold watch chain. There's a Canada goose reading over his shoulder: beak open, tongue lecherously out. Her stuffed animals stand in for friends.

The pine crate's lined with pillows of cedar chips: protective and aromatic. Any box takes on the aura of a coffin as soon as a human-sized costume goes inside, and she doesn't mind the imagery. She places the costume in carefully, folds the gnarled hands over the chest, and places more cedar pillows over the top. Her commissions are destined for other homes: to her, wounded creatures that are lovingly rehabilitated and then released back into ungente wilderness.

She raises the hammer to nail the wooden box shut, and then sets it down gently. She can't wake the neighbors. It's the middle of the night and the architect who put this house together was stingy with insulation. Like so many houses in Gour Borough, hers is too close to an abandoned mine land (AML) to ever sell or bother fixing up. Her liability of a house is cold year round, and tilts to the east thanks to its sinking foundation. She'll finish in the morning, once she hears a few alarm clocks chirp.

Maybe just a candle? Maybe just a little flame? Yes. Just a bit. Just a little. Then try to steal some sleep. She fumbles for a jar of wax, sets it on her bedside, and lights it. She feels relieved. She wants more. She can go, she

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thinks. No one will know. She shakes her head. No, not tonight. It's too late.

But the candle is so beautiful. Stop. It's been sleeting out there for days. It would take forever to start anything. All the wood is wet and slick. The badger looks over his monocle judgmentally. He's why she never brings that man into her bedroom. She'd have to throw a towel over the badger and the goose.

Despite silently scolding herself not to, she decides to go before dawn. She thinks of her favorite fires. Backyard sheds. Abandoned strip malls. The dock that fell right into the lake. The abandoned duplex down the street from her sister's house. Her secret hobby has caused over seven million in recoupable damages.

She has a car just like ten thousand other cars. A little sedan: gray, rusty and unassuming. Bought used after its first owner defaulted on the payments. An angular, rusty Toyota Celica, so long out of warranty it's hard to find parts for the thing. No feisty bumper stickers. It runs, but not quickly. She'll drive below the speed limit and use her signals. She's never been pulled over.

She has tidily bobbed, graying hair and unpainted fingernails. She wears roomy, unloud clothing, sensible shoes: the aura of an accountant rather than the artist she is. She is unnoticeable in the way that women become when menopause begins and catcalling quiets. She blends

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into the background of any place she visits. She knows she was right to decline the television show.

She shuts off all the lights. Blows out the candle and watches the red wick blacken. Leaves the crooked screen door dangling open behind her as she hops to her car. Opens the Toyota with the quiet of the key, not the beep of the fob. In the trunk: clean rags, the gas can. In her purse: a silver lighter, full of fluid. She is always prepared.

She tries to start the engine. Nothing. She growls and huffs. The universe is telling her not to burn down that barn. She hasn't changed the oil in three years, a fact she doesn't even consider as an issue while she curses the vehicle. Her skills lie in the creation, not maintenance, of inhabitable objects.

In the passenger seat is a bag of findings, pieces and parts she picked up at the Goodwill. She's not afraid of many people, but the Goodwill proprietor gives her shivers. *Helly, I've got some great toad skins for you. Toad skins and some arm-lookin' bones. Child-sized ulnas. You'll love 'em.* Helena doesn't know how that woman sources her odds and ends. Doesn't want to: the backstories of real people hold less potential for her than the backstories of lush, tanned leathers. She grabs the bag and shuffles back up to her porch.

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Helena lives on the side of a steep hill with nicer views of what's left of downtown Gour Borough than her property taxes suggest. Down the street is an unsanitary butcher shop. Up it is a dim tavern where unwise decisions get made with regularity and resolve. She had her parking spot-sized lawn paved over five years ago, so she didn't have to mow it anymore, and it's already cracked in half and home to dormant goldenrod as tall as she is. She reaches into the bag and the edge of a toad skin, dry and sharp as an X-Acto blade, slices her hand open.

She growls and huffs again. Bleeding, she stomps inside, wraps her hand in rags. She knows how to take care of herself: silently and without a fuss. Instead of whimpering she wrinkles her nose. The stoic, quiet, self-sufficient child who can look after herself and her siblings—she's been that kid for almost fifty years. Blood is soaking through the rags and dripping onto her knee. It's a sharp, deep gash. She sees the bright side: She's worked with less-pliable leather. It's just another dermal seam to knit into invisibility.

She runs her right hand under hot, tea-colored water from the tap, purses her lips but does not shout. A two-inch gash in the meat of her palm, a new line for a palm reader to interpret. *Your pain line, it's deep and jagged, doesn't quite connect your index finger to your thumb. It says you have terrible taste in automobiles and men.*

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She selects a roll of slick black silk and a dusty bottle of whisky from an overflowing cabinet over her sink. She finds just the right antique silver needle, a sharp little dagger. She sterilizes the needle in the whisky. Gulps the polluted shot. Threads the silk. Pours and gulps another mouthful. She begins to close the seam.

An expensive cosmetic surgeon would have made twelve stitches, close enough together for the cut to heal flat. She knits her flesh together with twenty even lines. She knows she would have done an even more meticulous job if she'd been able to sew with her dominant hand. She feels strangely warm.

She dabs a bit of ointment—expired four years ago: but you build with the blocks you have—on her work and finishes it with a fabric scrap. She hears the tavern regulars shouting and stumbling down the street. Somebody knocks over a garbage can and glass shatters on pavement. Somebody else musically combines a belch and a cackle. They've seen better days, but they still love their nights. She smiles with her lips together. The badger and his monocle are not amused.

She ponders the bag of frog skins and yellow bones. She doesn't think about the silence in her house, about the lack of contacts in her phone, about her missing niece, about the way her knees creak when she walks upstairs, about the fire she didn't get to start in the sleet.

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She needs work to do, or she'll really have to burn something down.

Having no work left to occupy her, she navigates her piles of art supplies through her house, sits outside on her front steps. She pokes through the plastic bag of dead things she paid seven dollars for. She's not sure if she got a deal or a swindling. The frog skins are tough and brittle, potentially useful but not in a way she can identify yet. The narrow bones, bones she sincerely hopes are not human, are barely the weight of pens in her hand. Those fragile things don't call out a purpose to her either.

She spins a bone in her fingers like a tiny baton. She points it at the dribbling sky. She stretches her feet. Her head feels heavy now. Her eyes are tired. If she was a prayerful person, she might have prayed for something then. But she never learned how to ask for what she wanted from anybody on any plane of existence. Her wounded hand is throbbing.

A mask. A mask to filter smoke. That's what she'll make. A mask like a medieval plague doctor: a long, beaklike filter to keep particulate out of her lungs. It will be frightening and elegant. Oh, yes, and big, flat glass lenses for the eyes. She smiles. Thinking about work is much less difficult than thinking about the rest of her life.

She listens to the sounds of the neighborhood. The joking smokers outside the tavern, the sound of cars driv-

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ing past on the main road at the top of the hill, the furnaces humming up and down the street, the white noise of the endless sleet. She imagines it wouldn't take much to ignite the entire, crumbling avenue, once the clouds slither away. Every neighbor would get an insurance check: eventually, hopefully.

She didn't take anything for the swelling: doesn't have any gulpable medicine (other than whisky) in the house. Her skin presses taut against the bandage. She peels it away, and lets her stitches breathe in the damp night air. She turns the skins over and over in her hands, feeling for where she would carve a seam, where she would affix and strap, which skin should fit alongside her eyes and which edges would align best with her forehead.

The toads, when alive, secreted a buttery poison from their skins to deter predators. Mystics from long-decimated societies once licked such skins to get closer to God. Traces of it transfer from their skins to hers, into her blood through her cut. She begins to see images forming in the illuminated rain around the streetlights: animals, landscapes, vegetables, faces: the shapes a functional imagination can pluck from clouds and folded ink blots. Her breath is cool and foreign in her mouth. She wiggles her toes. They feel webbed inside her ugly, sensible shoes.

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She sees the universe for what it is: a slag-pile of jagged, unintended consequences, grinding each other into the past. She feels her own atoms spin in their orbits, and she giggles—she has not giggled in almost nine years, not since Amanda disappeared. She hears her own breath and it sounds like the punch line to the greatest joke ever told. She is laughing so hard she slips down three porch steps, scraping along the wet concrete.

The patio she lands on begins to wobble. The world is going soft all around her. No angles can stay right. The air is now chowder-thick. She imagines herself as a flame: an honest thing that laps up fuel without greed or regret. There's a wading pool full of dirt and broken Christmas lights left up for three years on the property across the street. She sees those details as perfect in their context, that they're as much part of the town as she is. Why change when you're perfectly acceptable where you are?

And yet, there's so much she never was. She's suddenly sad that she never grew any feathers. She wonders why there are no black owls, purple alligators, or spiders big as dogs. She mourns those things that never existed and promises to make them from the skins of things that did. When she dies she wants everything she owns to be burned and the ashes compressed with absurd technology into a diamond her sister can pawn.

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She takes her lighter from her pocket and flicks it awake. The little flame winks at her, and she winks back at her intermittent pet. Her hand is throbbing, but now the heartbeat of her swollen thumb and the heartbeat she hears between her ears are out of tune.

She rests her head on the rusty iron railing of her front stairs. She understands that it is there to help her, that it was installed there thirty years before precisely for the purpose of supporting her skull at this very moment. She knows she is where she belongs, where the universe has placed her. She hopes her niece is somewhere well-insulated and cozy.

She makes a loose fist with her throbbing hand, straining her stitches. Orange plasma oozes out and she thinks of mosquitoes trapped in amber and dinosaurs drowned in tar. The clouds are moving fast above her head, commuting to work in faraway fields and forests. She coughs from laughing at the idea that clouds are as honest and free as fire.

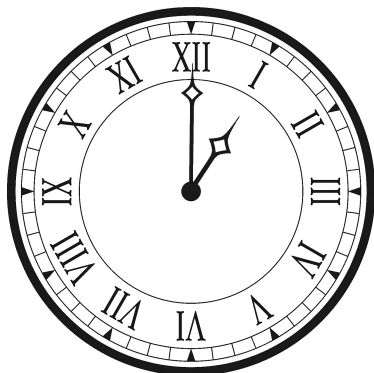
She closes her eyes and lets a warm sensation spread out from her spine and she wonders if this is what it's like to be wise. She does not feel her immune system raging against the mischievous poison or her blood cells popping inside her veins. She does not feel herself aging and dying, cell by cell. Her nerves do not register the heavy

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metals lodged in her bones and teeth, souvenirs from a childhood spent frolicking in foamy, opaque streams.

She hopes the little antlered yeti isn't frightened, lying there in her garage. She silently promises it that, soon, it will be just where it belongs, just like she is. Some soul will climb inside it, and its skins will contain life again. She hopes a theatrical woman will wear it to terrorize a Peeping Tom away from every window he walks past.

Her body defeats the toxin without her knowledge or permission, dissolving it with the chemistry of immunity. The unreal colors behind her eyes fade and the world she sees begins to solidify and lose its hallucinogenic sparkle. As her heartbeat settles, she climbs back inside her crooked house, shakes the metallic dew from her hair, and decides to rebandage her dominant hand.



One in the morning: Ruth

Ruth thinks that the farm where they've been imprisoned is somewhere in Pennsylvania. She is correct. They're in Gour Borough, population five hundred eighty (give or take), a plot of land that commerce sampled decades ago then spat out. Ruth is from a place she can't remember the name of anymore. She's thirteen. Her fellow captive, Amanda, is sixteen. They could easily be mistaken for eight- or nine-year-olds. Ruth, barely a teenager, weighs only seventy-seven pounds. Neither one has seen a newspaper or a television show or the inside of a book since they were taken. Ruth has forgotten how to read.

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