

The Hour the World Forgot

Iris stared at the ceiling, her eyes wide open. She could not sleep, not now. Not after her teacher had told Iris she needed a story idea by tomorrow. “Write a creative fictional story. Anything you want, as long as it’s original. Use your imagination!” Mrs. Taylor had announced to the class.

“Easy for her to say,” Iris thought. Mrs. Taylor wasn’t the one up at 2:58 a.m. stressing over the assignment. Her teacher was really sweet and Iris loved her, but she had no idea what to write. She sat on her bed for several hours, and still she didn’t know what to write about. Dragons? Too cliché. Romance? Cringe. Talking animals? Nope. Fairies? Definitely not.

Just as Iris was about to head downstairs for a break, or even a midnight snack, a loud BANG from the street shattered the silence. She jumped a little. Half frightened and half curious, she pulled back her curtain, frowning. A trash can had fallen over, but the trash was frozen mid-air, like someone had hit pause on the world. Iris blinked and rubbed her eyes, hoping she was just imagining things. Nope, the trash was actually floating in the air. She quietly ran down the stairs and was about to head out the front door when she noticed the leaking faucet.

Well, technically the faucet wasn’t leaking anymore, since the water droplet was now levitating a few inches above the sink, looking like a crystal. The kitchen clock read 3:00 a.m., but the thing was, the second hand on the clock was no longer moving. She ran out the front door to make sure the garbage was really floating in the air.

As Iris stepped outside, the cold air wrapped around her like a warning. The street was completely still, too still. Sure enough, the garbage was really floating. She then noticed that a car in the middle of the road had its headlights on, frozen mid-turn. The driver’s face was locked in place with one hand hovering just above the steering wheel. Not even a blink. Iris’s heart thudded in her chest. She took a shaky step forward, her slippers brushing against the pavement. The air felt thick like she was underwater. Even the wind had stopped. No rustling trees. No hum of electrical wire above the street on Vine Road. Just silence. “Hello?” she called softly, though she wasn’t sure who she expected to answer. Her voice sounded muffled, swallowed by the quiet.

The street stretched out before her; it was empty, frozen, and completely still. Her breath came out in small white clouds. She turned in a slow circle, half-expecting something to jump out. That’s when she saw movement. At first, she thought she was hallucinating, yet she saw a figure walking at the very end of the street. Not frozen, not paused. Moving! Iris’s stomach dropped. “Hey!” she called, trying to sound braver than she felt, but her shout came out as a shaky whisper. The figure turned. It was a boy, about her age, with dark hair that glowed faintly in the moonlight. He blinked at her, surprised. “You can move,” he said quietly as he walked towards Iris. “So can you,” Iris replied in shock. “What’s going on? Why is everything...like...like this?” She stuttered. The boy glanced around and motioned for her to follow. “Not here. It’s not safe to talk out in the open.” Iris hesitated. “Not safe? From what?” But the boy was already walking away before she could even get his name.

Against her better judgment, Iris followed closely behind. Her curiosity had officially won over her fear. They walked in silence until they reached the playground. It just so happened to be her middle school's playground, Turn of River Middle School. The swings were frozen mid-sway, and the merry-go-round was stopped halfway through a turn. The boy stepped over a patch of frost and sat on one of the benches, motioning for her to join him. "This is the Secret Hour," he said finally. "The hour the world forgot. It happens every night for exactly sixty minutes, between 3 a.m. and 4 a.m. Time stops for everyone... except for a few of us." Iris frowned. "A few of us? What do you mean?" He looked at her carefully. "We're called the Awakened. No one knows exactly why this happens. Some say it's a glitch in time, others think it's magic, but every now and then, someone new wakes up during the hour. Like you." Iris tried to take it all in.

"So everyone else is just frozen?" she questioned as he nodded. "Completely! The world goes quiet. You can explore, but you have to be careful. There are... Others that move during the hour," he said in a deep tone. Iris choked on her words. "Other things?" The boy stood up and motioned for her to follow again. "Come on. I'll show you."

They walked behind the playground and down a narrow path that led to the old library. It looked different—older, somehow. The windows shimmered faintly, and strange symbols glowed along the walls. The boy pressed his hand against a door in the back, and it creaked open with an eerie sound. Inside, the air smelled like old paper and rain. Shelves lined the walls, but the books weren't normal. Some of them floated slightly above their shelves, with their pages actually turning by themselves. Others had glowing titles that changed when Iris blinked. "What is this place?" she whispered. "The Time Vault," the boy said. "It only exists during the Secret Hour. It's where lost stories and forgotten moments in time go. You can read anything here, there are books about people like us and the Others, but if you take something with you when the hour ends..." He trailed off, his expression darkening. "What happens?" Iris asked. He met her eyes. "You'll never feel the same way again."

Before Iris could respond, a low hum filled the air. The lights flickered, and shadows began to move across the walls. Dozens of whispering voices rose from the shelves—soft, echoing words that seemed to form her name. "Iris...Iris...Iris..." The boy grabbed her hand. "We have to go. The hour's ending!"

They ran out of the library, back through the still streets, as the frozen world began to stir again. The headlights blinked, the faucet dripped, and the clock in Iris's kitchen started ticking once more. When she looked at the time, it still read 3:00 a.m. The boy was gone. Only one thing remained. A single glowing bookmark appeared in her pocket with words written in silver ink: *See you next hour.* She definitely had her story idea now, but this was more than some typical school story.

Iris ran up the stairs, hoping not to wake her parents up. There is no way she could possibly sleep for the next 3 1/2 hours. So she sat at her desk, typing everything that happened in the past one hour. Iris couldn't even control her own hands, they were moving at lightning speed, not missing a single detail. At first, her fingers shook. But the more she wrote, the faster her

words came spilling out through her fingers. She wrote about everything—the frozen trash, the still air, the boy, the Time Vault, the shadows, *everything*. Her mind kept racing. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw the boy's face and heard the echo of those whispering voices in the library.

By 3:30, the glow had faded. The bookmark looked completely normal now, just a strip of paper, but Iris knew better.

When her alarm buzzed at 6:30, she was still typing. She had nearly six full pages done and a hundred questions she couldn't answer.

At school, Iris moved like she was half-awake, her head still caught between two worlds. She could barely focus through math and science. Every clock she passed made her uneasy. What if one froze again? What if she froze this time? She didn't tell anyone, not even her best friend. Who would believe her?

The rest of the day went by in a blur, and soon, it was time for her last period, ELA. Mrs. Taylor stood by her desk, her usual friendly smile perfectly in place. "Alright, everyone," she said. "I hope you all have turned in your draft essay."

When the bell rang, everyone rushed out of the classroom. Everyone except Iris. "Iris?" Mrs. Taylor said sweetly. "Could I have a quick word with you before you go?" Iris stopped. "Sure." Mrs. Taylor waited until the room was empty before speaking again.

"I was reading through your outline." She paused. "It's... very interesting. The Secret Hour, the boy, the frozen time. Where exactly did you come up with all that?" Iris hesitated. "It just came to me," she said carefully. Mrs. Taylor's smile didn't fade, but her eyes sharpened. "Just came to you? Not from... experience?" Iris blinked. "What do you mean?" Mrs. Taylor leaned closer, lowering her voice. "You see, Iris, I've taught for a long time, and every few years, one of my students writes about them. The Awakened." Iris froze. Her mouth went dry. "How do you know about that?" Mrs. Taylor sighed softly, like she had been waiting for this question. "Because, my dear, the Secret Hour isn't as secret as you think."

Her shadow on the wall stretched strangely, even though the light above them wasn't moving. It grew taller, twisting along the floor like spilled ink. It reminded her of the shadows creeping along the walls in the Time Vault.

"I was once one of them too," she said quietly. "Until I borrowed something from the Time Vault for too long." Iris took a step back, but Mrs. Taylor didn't move closer. Her expression stayed kind, too kind. "Tell me," she said softly, "did the boy tell you about The Others?" Iris's pulse quickened. "He mentioned... things that move during the hour." Mrs. Taylor nodded slowly. "Yes. The ones who can't leave it. They envy the Awakened, the ones who still belong to time."

Suddenly Iris didn't like her favorite teacher as much. She no longer felt safe around her. The teacher that Iris thought of as a friend, was now turning against her.

Her heart pounded so hard she thought it might echo through the empty classroom. The clock above the whiteboard had frozen again, exactly 3:00 a.m. It was 3:00 p.m. a few seconds

ago and now the world around her shimmered faintly, the way it had that first night. Mrs. Taylor was gone. The door stood half-open, the hallway beyond dim and silent.

The bookmark Iris clutched in her hands was glowing silver in the still air. Iris reread the words again: You're not the only one awake this time. She was surprised that the words changed, but she should have known anything is possible in this mysterious world.

She turned toward the hallway, gripping onto the bookmark tight. The school, usually buzzing with noise and laughter, was now silent. Lockers stood open mid-slam, paper airplanes hung frozen midair. She walked carefully, her footsteps sounding too loud in the quiet. "Hello?" she whispered. No answer. Only the hum of time that wasn't really moving.

Then she heard footsteps. Soft, deliberate ones, echoing down the corridor. Iris spun around, ready to attack. However, it was only the boy from the night before. He stepped into view, the same faint glow around him. Relief washed over her. "You came back," she said, trying to keep her voice steady. He nodded. "I had to. The hour's changing. Something's not right."

"What do you mean? You are always telling me bits and parts of the whole story! You're being so confusing. I need you to explain!" Iris yelled, frustrated. She didn't mean to take out all of her anger on the boy. He was also a kid her age, probably as confused as she was. Nevertheless, she demanded answers. "You haven't even told me your name! How can I trust you?"

"I will tell you everything once you calm down." The boy responded politely. Iris took a deep breath to make his lips start moving again. "My name is Leo, and I'm here to help. The Others weren't always monsters. They were like us once—Awakened. But they decided to disobey the rules and steal items from The Vault. Every time you do that, the hours will claim your memories, your voice, and your reflection, leaving nothing behind that was ever human." "Hi Leo! My name is Iris and I'm sorry for snapping at you." She replied, sounding awfully positive. "That makes a lot of sense. So... What's your plan?" Iris's question caught him off guard, but he managed to answer. "My plan," he whispered, "is to end the Secret Hour once and for all." Iris blinked. "End it? Can you even do that?"

Leo hesitated. "Not alone. The Time Vault holds a core. It is something that keeps the hour alive. A kind of heartbeat for the still world. If we can find it and destroy it before the hour resets, maybe everything will go back to normal."

Iris wasn't sure she liked the word *destroy* or the chances of this working. However, she didn't want to live the rest of her life wondering when time would freeze again, or whether her teacher would vanish into shadows once more. "Then we'd better hurry," she said.

They moved through the school, following the pulsing energy that seemed to vibrate under the floorboards, brushing the walls, growing stronger as they went. Leo's eyes narrowed. "It's here, I can feel it. The core is near." When they reached the school's library, the air shimmered, the walls seemed alive, and Iris understood why. This place had always been different. The hour's heartbeat was strongest here, and the core must be somewhere inside.

The walls were lined with glowing symbols again, and the air shimmered faintly. Books drifted lazily through the air, pages fluttering as if whispering to one another. At the center of the

room stood the same table from before, though now something rested on it—a glass sphere, filled with swirling silver light.

“The core,” Leo breathed. “It’s beautiful,” Iris said softly. But the moment she stepped closer, the whispers started again. They grew louder this time, clearer. The voices weren’t random—they were hers. She heard her own laughter, her own cries, and then the sound of her typing in the middle of the night. “It’s showing you your memories,” Leo said. “It wants you to stay.”

The light inside the sphere pulsed brighter. The shadows that crept along the walls began to take form, stretching and reaching. “We have to do it now!” Leo shouted. “What do I do?” she asked.

“Touch the book mark to the sphere,” he said, his voice shaking. “The bookmark’s from the Vault—it’s the only thing that can break the link.” Iris almost forgot that she was still holding on to the bookmark. She was about to put it on the Core when the whispering grew louder until it filled her head. “Stay,” the voices pleaded. “Stay where time is safe. Stay where no one forgets you.” Her hands trembled. The light was hypnotic, warm, almost comforting. For a moment, Iris felt herself slipping, wanting to listen.

“Iris!” Leo’s shout cut through the noise. “Don’t let it take you!” She closed her eyes and slammed the bookmark against the sphere. There was a blinding flash of silver light, followed by a low, rumbling sound that seemed to shake the air itself. The whispers turned into screams, then vanished all at once. The light from the sphere dimmed, flickered, and finally went out.

When Iris opened her eyes, she was sitting in her classroom again. The clock on the wall ticked normally. Students chattered, pencils scratched paper, and Mrs. Taylor was handing back assignments with her usual calm smile. Iris looked around wildly, half expecting to see Leo, but he wasn’t there. Everything looked perfectly ordinary. Iris assumed that everything was back to normal—no more shadows, no more Others, and no more demonic Mrs. Taylor.

Except the bookmark. It was still in her hand, no longer glowing but heavier somehow, like it remembered what had happened. She tucked it into her notebook just as Mrs. Taylor approached. “Wonderful work on your story, Iris,” she said warmly. “Very imaginative!” “Thanks,” Iris replied quietly. Although Mrs. Taylor seemed like her past self, she couldn’t unsee what she was before.

As Mrs. Taylor turned to walk away, Iris caught a glimpse of her reflection in the window. The teacher’s shadow lingered half a second longer than her body did—stretching, moving on its own before snapping back into place. Iris blinked and looked again. Everything appeared normal.

Mrs. Taylor clapped her hands to get the attention of the class. “I would like everybody to welcome our new student, Leo!” Iris’ face turned pale in shock.

When the clock struck three the next morning, the bookmark on her desk began to glow again, soft silver light spilling across the room, followed by a faint whisper that made her sit bolt upright in bed. “You are now set free. The hour will miss you.”