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The Vanishing Hours of Eden Blake

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Introduction

On the nights the city forgets, a quiet moves in that isn't really quiet. It has a texture—thin, papery, a hush made of electric things. Streetlights hold their breath and the billboards along Vale Avenue flicker through slogans too quickly, as if they, too, are losing their place in the sequence. Radios hiss. Elevators stall between floors and then start again with a shiver. By morning, coffee tastes a little metallic, and people sit on stoops or subway benches trying to stitch together a strip of lost time, like seamstresses fingering a thread that has already burned away.

Eden Blake knows the language of lost time. At thirty-six, she has spent most of her waking hours in brightly lit rooms teaching the mechanics of memory to students and residents—how recall is a reconstruction; how the brain is not a vault but a stage where scenes are rehearsed, revised, dressed in different lighting until the props no longer match the script. She learned those metaphors from mentors and then felt them rearrange to fit the shape of her own history. In the mirror each morning, there is a moment between toothbrush and eyeliner when her face feels almost miscast, the role too tight at the temples. She looks at herself as at a stranger she recognizes from somewhere. The feeling fades when she starts to move through tasks, but it never completely leaves.

News anchors have developed a measured way of talking about the phenomenon, their voices always softened at the edges. There are graphics. There are helpline numbers. There is the word temporary, which does too much work. Something else does the real labor: the city's habit of explaining itself away. You can call it stress, seasonal affective disorder, a byproduct of the new transit tunnels cutting vibrations through bedrock, a social contagion of anecdote. If you need a slogan, there's one printed on bus wraps now: Forward Together, a ribbon threading through a skyline of glass. The mayor has announced pilot programs for urban renewal and public health. People nod and go back to their mornings with faint headaches and recurring dreams that are mostly silence.

On the morning after the second recurrence, Eden rides a bus along the river and catalogs. The scientist in her cannot stop. She keeps a steady list in a blackout notebook, her handwriting cloistered and small: Missing hours occur on the same night in staggered blocks—midnight to one, one to two—sometimes a whole hour, sometimes two; in clusters of neighborhoods but across incomes; no clear predictor variables. Smell reported: ozone. Taste: bitter, metallic. Auditory cue: static or a thin high tone. She adds a star by the last one. That sound has crept into her apartment at odd intervals, feathering out of her radio when it's off, seeping from the old intercom on the wall like a draft.

Beneath the list-making lives something less articulate. Eden's own past is a room with blown fuses in one wing. She has its floor plan memorized—childhood on the south side by the park, a mother who collected mirrors and wiped them with vinegar until they startled with clarity, a father who wore a stainless-steel watch he wound every night—but when she walks down those hallways, certain doors will not open. She accepted that for years the way a person accepts a limp: as an inconvenience to be worked around. Now the limp has begun to ache. It is not only the city's hours that are thinning. She has stopped trusting the seams in her own days. She wakes with ink smudges on her palm she cannot explain, a half-remembered smell like summer lightning in her kitchen, a bruise she knows should mean something.

The city adapts the way cities do, with small superstitions that become practice. Bartenders set wind-up clocks behind their taps and tell the time twice: before and after the gap. Office managers send company-wide emails reminding staff to back up hard drives, then delete the emails before lunch. A woman on Eden's block tapes paper over her mirrors on the appointed night, then rips the paper off in the morning with an audible sigh. On message boards and in a basement near the old stadium, people gather to speak in halting present tense about am hours that have become an emptied shape. Eden goes to one of these meetings, not as a clinician but as someone trying to hear if her own missing spaces ring the same.

She listens to a dockworker describe waking up with gravel in his shoes and no recollection of leaving his bed. She listens to a public defender whose client swears she never left her apartment and cannot name who filmed her looking into a convenience-store camera at one thirty-three in the morning. "It sounded like the TV when we were kids," someone says of the moment before everything went soft. "Like when the station cut to bars and that noise." Eden closes her eyes and can almost taste tin. When she opens them, the room spins around a whiteboard with a hand-drawn clock that keeps sliding off true, the marker lines a degree to the left of where they should be. She writes nothing on her pad. She only feels the low-run hum in her molars and thinks: This is design, not decay.

On the third recurrence, the rain smells like a blown transformer. The sidewalks sweat under a sky with a bruise at its center. Eden tries to anchor the evening to something ordinary: a bowl of noodles, a shower, the ritual of making the apartment into a space that promises continuity. She checks that the deadbolt slides smooth. She turns off the radio and then back on and then off again when the frequency ghosts. She places her father's old textbooks—ones he left behind with penciled marginalia—into a neat stack as if order could be prophylactic. The mirror above her sink throws back two Edens a breath out of sync; for a heartbeat she and her reflection cannot agree on who will blink first.

She remembers standing barefoot on cool tile. She remembers the forward-leaning

hum of the building, the kind you only notice when you try to be absolutely still. She decides to take a walk because staying inside feels like waiting for a test to start. On the street, traffic is light, the river sowing low mist along the pilings. A digital billboard glitches and reboots; for an instant the screen shows only a blue field that makes her think of hospital gowns and the metallic click of a watch crown being pulled to set the time. When she turns back toward home, it is later than she expects—always later, as if the darkness eats minutes like a child eating around the edges of a cookie.

Her apartment door is locked. Inside smells faintly of ozone and lemon cleaner, a combination she tries not to decode. Lights behave. The radio stays dead. She puts her hands on the kitchen counter to steady herself and feels something under her right palm that doesn't belong. It is cool leather first, then metal. Eden looks down.

The wristwatch rests by the sink, its face turned up, its band unbuckled as if someone with her hands placed it there carefully and stepped away. She does not own a watch. This one is a simple thing—white dial, black numerals, a nick near the four—and achingly familiar in a way that tightens her throat. The second hand is frozen. The minute and hour hands meet at the same place they do in all the stories being told on basement couches and message boards and morning news programs. They point to the missing hour. Eden lifts the watch to her ear and hears, impossibly, a faint thread of static where a tick should be. She has no memory of how it came to be in her kitchen. She does not yet know whether it has found her or she has been carrying it all along.

CHAPTER ONE: The Voicemail Timestamp

The wristwatch sat on the marble countertop like a small, dead animal. Eden didn't touch it again. Instead, she backed away until her calves hit the edge of the sofa, her eyes fixed on the frozen hands. It was exactly 1:14 a.m. according to the dial—the dead center of last night's missing hour. In the sterile light of her kitchen, the nick on the glass near the four-o'clock marker looked like a jagged tooth. She felt a phantom weight on her own wrist, a phantom itch of leather, though she hadn't worn a watch in years. She preferred the digital certainty of her phone, a device that updated itself via satellite, supposedly immune to the drifts and stutters of human perception.

She reached for that phone now, her fingers trembling slightly as she swiped to wake the screen. It was 7:42 a.m. The morning sun was beginning to cut through the city's persistent haze, casting long, pale fingers across the hardwood floor. There were no notifications on the lock screen, no frantic texts from Theo, no alerts from the university. She went to her call log, expecting to see a blank space where the previous night had been. Instead, she found a single entry from 1:22 a.m.

It was an outgoing call to her own voicemail.

The duration was forty-eight seconds. Eden stared at the red font, the color her phone used to denote a missed connection or a redirected call. Her heart performed a slow, heavy roll in her chest. She hadn't used her voicemail in months; like most people her age, she viewed it as a graveyard for spam and accidental pocket-dials. But she had called herself. In the middle of an hour she couldn't remember, while the rest of the city was presumably staring into the middle distance or standing barefoot on cold pavement, she had reached out to her own digital shadow.

She pressed the phone to her ear. The automated voice of the carrier felt offensively cheerful, a robotic lilt that grated against the silence of the apartment. *You have... one... new... voice message.* Eden closed her eyes, bracing herself against the refrigerator. She expected static. She expected the ozone-hiss that people described in the basement support groups. She expected the sound of a woman lost in the fog.

What she heard was a rhythmic, wet sound—breathing. It was heavy, ragged, the kind of respiration that comes after a long run or a moment of intense terror. After five seconds, a voice broke through. It was her voice, but the cadence was wrong. It was clipped, urgent, whispered in a register so low it sounded like it was being squeezed out of a throat constricted by wire.

“Don't look at the mirrors, Eden. Not today. You left it under the floorboard in the

closet, the one with the split grain. They think it's a glitch, but it's a harvest. Remember the smell of the vinegar. Remember the blue field. If you wake up and the watch is there, don't go to the lab. Go to the station. Ask for the—"

The audio dissolved into a harsh, mechanical screech. It wasn't the sound of a bad connection; it was the sound of a file being shredded in real-time. The screeching lasted for another ten seconds, a digital scream that made Eden pull the phone away from her ear until the line finally went dead with a soft, final *click*.

She stood paralyzed, the phone still hovering inches from her face. The smell of ozone she had detected earlier seemed to sharpen, mingling with the mundane scent of her morning coffee. She looked down at her right hand. Against the pale skin of her palm, a dark smudge caught the light. It wasn't just a bruise. There was a smear of ink—thick, black, permanent—trailing from the base of her thumb to the center of her lifeline. It looked like a fragment of a word, or perhaps a signature that had been cut short. When she rubbed it, the skin remained stained, the ink having already settled deep into the pores.

The mention of the floorboard sent a chill through her that felt physical, a needle of ice sliding down her spine. She lived in a pre-war apartment where the floors groaned under the weight of even the lightest footfall. The closet in her bedroom was a cramped, dark space filled with coats she rarely wore and boxes of research papers she couldn't bring herself to organize. She moved toward it now, her movements stiff and mechanical.

She knelt on the dusty floor, pushing aside a row of heels. She knew the floorboard the voice had described. It was near the back left corner, a piece of oak with a distinctive Y-shaped crack in the grain. She had noticed it when she first moved in three years ago and had promptly forgotten it. Now, as she hooked her fingernails into the seam, the wood gave way with a startlingly easy pop. It hadn't been nailed down in a long time.

Underneath, in the shallow, dusty joist space, lay a small glass vial and a crumpled piece of paper. The vial was empty, save for a faint, iridescent residue on the bottom—a shimmering film that caught the light like oil on water. The paper was a receipt from a local pharmacy, dated three days ago. On the back, in her own hurried scrawl, were four numbers: *0415*.

Eden sat back on her heels, the receipt fluttering in her hand. April 15th was her birthday, but the numbers felt like more than a date. They felt like a code, a key to a door she wasn't sure she wanted to open. Her mind, usually so adept at categorizing data and identifying neural patterns, was spinning in useless circles. She was a memory researcher. She knew how the brain could manufacture false narratives to fill a vacuum. Confabulation, they called it. The mind hated a hole; it would stuff the

empty space with rags and cardboard just to keep the structure from collapsing.

But her phone didn't have an imagination. The voicemail was a digital fact, a timestamped record of a person who occupied her body during a time that had been erased from her consciousness.

She stood up and walked to the bathroom, her hand reaching for the light switch. As she began to turn the handle, the warning from the recording echoed in her mind: *Don't look at the mirrors, Eden. Not today.*

She froze. The bathroom door was slightly ajar, and she could see the edge of the vanity mirror reflecting a sliver of the tiled wall. It was an irrational command, the kind of superstition the people in the support groups whispered about. Yet, her hand dropped from the doorknob. The fear wasn't based on logic; it was a visceral, animal reaction, a scent of danger that bypassed the prefrontal cortex entirely.

Returning to the kitchen, she picked up the watch. The metal was unnaturally cold. As she turned it over, she saw an engraving on the back casing, nearly worn smooth by time. It wasn't a name. It was a series of concentric circles, a labyrinthine pattern that looked remarkably like a simplified diagram of a human brain. Beneath the symbol was a single word in a font so small she had to squint to read it: *ASTERION*.

The name didn't register at first, but it left a bitter, metallic taste in the back of her throat. She set the watch down and looked at her hand again. The ink smudge, the bruise blooming on her forearm, the frozen clock—they were all physical anchors in a world that was becoming increasingly fluid.

She realized then that she was being watched. Not by a person, but by the city itself. Through the window, the digital billboard across the street had changed. It no longer showed the Mayor's "Forward Together" slogan. Instead, it was a solid field of blue, the exact shade of the hospital gowns she remembered from a childhood she had spent twenty years trying to forget. The blue light spilled into her kitchen, washing over the marble, the watch, and her stained palm, turning everything a bruised, electric hue.

Eden grabbed her coat and her bag, shoving the watch and the vial into her pocket. She couldn't stay in the apartment. The walls felt like they were vibrating at a frequency she could almost hear—a thin, high tone that set her teeth on edge. She needed to go to the lab, but the voice on the phone had warned her against it. *Go to the station*, it had said.

She stepped out into the hallway, the heavy door clicking shut behind her. As she walked toward the elevator, she passed her neighbor, an elderly man named Mr. Henderson who spent his mornings reading the paper in the lobby. He looked up as

she passed, his eyes milky and unfocused.

"Did you hear it last night, Ms. Blake?" he asked, his voice trembling. "The hum? It sounded like bees. Thousands of them, right behind the wallpaper."

"I didn't hear anything, Mr. Henderson," Eden lied, her voice steady despite the hammering in her chest.

"I looked in the mirror," he whispered, leaning forward as if sharing a dirty secret. "Just for a second. I didn't see myself. I saw a girl I haven't thought of since 1954. She was crying, and her face was made of static."

Eden didn't stop. She pushed through the lobby doors and out into the morning air. The city was waking up, the streets filling with people who were all carefully avoiding each other's eyes, all moving with a synchronized, brittle urgency. Everyone was pretending that the missing hour was just a quirk of the weather, a collective lapse in attention.

She reached the subway entrance and descended into the heat and the smell of ozone. On the platform, a transit worker was scrubbing graffiti off a pillar. It wasn't the usual sprawling tags; someone had painted a series of clocks, dozens of them, all without hands.

Eden pulled her phone out one last time to delete the voicemail. She didn't want the evidence of her own fractured mind following her. But when she opened the app, the message was already gone. In its place was a new notification, a text from an unknown number that had arrived while she was in the elevator.

It was a photo. It showed a grainy, high-angle shot of a woman standing on a pier, looking out over the river. The woman was wearing Eden's coat. She was holding a leather-bound notebook Eden recognized as her own. The timestamp at the bottom of the image read: *01:44 A.M.*

Eden looked up, scanning the crowded platform, her breath coming in short, sharp bursts. The woman in the photo was her, but she had no memory of the river. She had no memory of the pier. And she certainly had no memory of who had been standing behind her, close enough to take the picture.

The train roared into the station, a wall of wind and sound that drowned out the world. As the doors slid open, Eden caught her reflection in the dark glass of the subway car. For a split second, she didn't see herself. She saw the girl Mr. Henderson had described—a face made of gray static and ancient tears—before the image resolved back into her own frightened features.

She stepped into the car, the doors hissing shut behind her like a final, mocking breath. The journey had begun, but she was no longer sure who was driving. All she knew was that the ink on her hand was starting to itch, and the frozen watch in her pocket was beginning to hum.

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