

THE CLOCKMAKERS' SECRET

Silas and Vera grew up listening to their father talk about his unusual clocks. He worked as a clockmaker, and his workshop was always filled with quiet ticking and the smell of wood and metal. To them, he was a kind, gentle man who liked to explain how things worked and tell stories, which made the evenings feel warm and magical. Sometimes, he would show his kids a small round clock made of dark wood and say that these clocks were special. When they asked why, he only smiled and told them that one day, when they were older, they would understand everything.

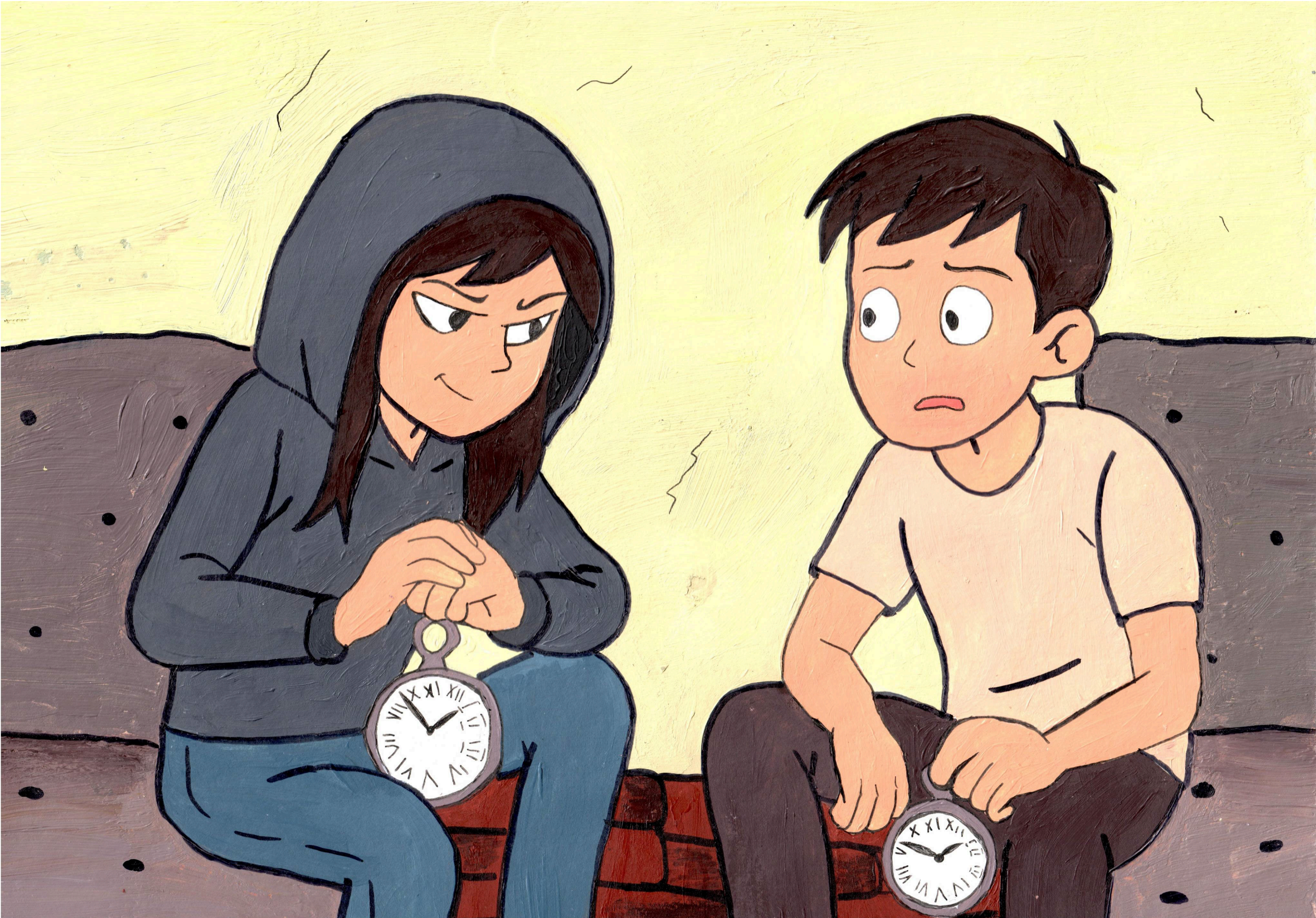
But that day never came. Before Silas and Vera were old enough to learn the truth, their father became very sick and passed away. After his death, the house felt empty and too quiet. The clocks on the walls kept ticking as always, but the sound no longer felt friendly. It reminded them of the questions they never got to ask and the answers they would never hear again. A few months later, when the twins turned eighteen, they

decided to clean their dad's house attic, a place they had avoided, because it reminded them of their dear father.

The attic was dusty and cold, and weak sunlight came through a small window. While moving old boxes, they found a wooden chest. Inside it, there were their father's letters, folded and tied with an old string. As they read the letters one by one, they began to understand that their father was not seen as normal by the people in town. Many had thought he was strange and even dangerous. Some said he could stop time. Others were afraid of his clocks and believed they were cursed.



Silas and Vera knew their father had never wanted to harm anyone. In the bottom of the chest, they found the clocks he had promised to explain the purpose of, years ago. When they pushed a button on one of the two clocks, something unbelievable happened. Time around them stopped.



The world froze for one full hour and then started again as if nothing had happened. After each use, the clocks needed three hours before they could stop time again. At first, Silas and Vera were excited. But soon, their ideas changed. Silas began to feel that this power was far too dangerous and should be destroyed, while Vera felt the opposite and started thinking of ways to use the clocks to her advantage. The townspeople did not know anything about time manipulation. Silas and Vera now faced a problem much bigger than the clocks themselves. Vera became a threat, and Silas was trying to stop her, but the whole town saw them as a danger to their community. But at first, they were seen as teenagers with a great deal of power in their hands. At the start, there was too much pressure on both of them, and they had to keep this secret while using it for good. However, the secret didn't last long...

Vera was walking around the park. It was getting dark, and a strong wind was picking up. All of a sudden, the girl looked down and saw a wallet, and she also saw a boy running to a shelter to try to avoid the wind. She realized the wallet was his. Vera chased after the boy, trying to get his attention to give him his wallet back. After she finally caught up with him, she said, 'Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you, I just wanted to ask if this was your wallet.'



'Oh yeah, it is, and who may I thank for finding it?' he smiled back.

'My name is Vera, and yours?'

'I'm Jacob, and maybe as a thank you, I could invite you for a coffee?' he said with a lisp.

All of a sudden, the wind calmed down.

'I'd love to!' she smiled.

'Alright then, Friday at 8 pm, near the Park Cafe?'

'Sure, that would be amazing!'

He smiled and ran off.

After a few successful dates, Vera and Jacob became an inseparable couple. They became so close that they basically hung out every day. On the first year of their anniversary, they decided to exchange gifts. Vera gifted Jacob's wallet a tracker, and it was a pretty funny present but his gift made Vera very confused, as it was a thrifted watch. She thought he had found out her secret, but she did her best to stay calm and quiet. Jacob looked at her and asked, 'What's wrong, don't you like it? '

'No, I love it but it just reminded me of something. '

'What happened?'

Vera went on to tell him about her deep secret and left him shocked. Jacob couldn't comprehend what he had just heard, so he ran away from Vera. The girl started worrying that Jacob would look at her differently. She ran after him like the first time they met but he was significantly faster. Vera didn't give up and chased Jacob down to his apartment. He locked his door, and the girl started banging on the door, expecting to open it but no luck. She broke down and started crying, thinking it was all over. After a while, Jacob opened his front door, saw Vera all miserable, and let her in. He felt really sorry for her and for how he had made her feel.





After settling things with Jacob, Vera decided it was time to leave and go back to her home to catch up with her brother. On her way home, to her surprise, she noticed that a lot of townspeople were huddled in groups and murmuring to each other with anxious faces. However, she shrugged it off and continued to make her way to her house. As soon as she walked through the door, she saw Silas in the living room, talking on his phone with a concerned expression. As she was taking off her coat and outdoor boots, Silas ended his conversation and approached her in an alarmed manner.

‘Where have you been, Vera? I’ve been worried sick!’ Silas exclaimed.

‘I was... busy. Why are you asking?’ Vera replied.

‘Remember our father’s clock? Well, it’s gone, and the whole town is getting suspicious. People are saying that they’ve lost the sense of time. I think that it has something to do with us.’

‘So you mean... the clock’s missing?’

Vera felt a sickening feeling brewing in her stomach, as if somebody had just punched the air out of her. Suddenly, she remembered the events of today, when Jacob gifted her the clock. She started browsing through her purse, looking for it, and noticed it was no longer there.

'Vera, what are you doing?' Silas questioned, with a frown on his face. Vera sighed and decided it was time to explain to her brother what she had been doing for the past year.

'You see, I met this friend a little over a year ago, Jacob. We've been going out together and today was our first anniversary, so we gifted each other presents. To my surprise, he got me a clock, but I can't seem to find it anymore,' she said, whilst rummaging further in her purse, 'And you know what... I think it may have been our father's.'



'You're joking, right?' her brother raised his voice angrily, 'You mean to tell me you've been meeting up with this strange person for over a year, without having the thought to tell me, and now you believe he may have stolen our father's possession?' Silas, in disbelief, sits down on the living room sofa and holds his head in despair.

'No, no, no... this can't be... Vera, you've messed everything up!'

Vera immediately denied this. Jacob wasn't that type of person, she tried to persuade herself. Before Vera could say another word, Silas spontaneously stood up and made to leave the house.

'Silas, where on earth are you going?' Vera worryingly asked.

'I'm going to find Jacob.'

Silas ran out of the house without his jacket. The chill evening air didn't bother him, as if it were nothing to his overheated body. Vera ran after him, shouting her brother's name, but he didn't stop. Silas had only one thought: if their secret fell into the wrong hands, then life as they knew it was over. The city looked different. The streetlights flickered in a strange rhythm, and people's shadows grew unnaturally long. The air seemed to thicken, turning into a dusty fog.



"Silas, stop! You don't know him!" Vera shouted, grabbing his sleeve at the entrance to Jacob's house.

"Exactly! I don't know him. But how did he 'find' our watch in the thrift store? Father hid it for a reason."

They burst into the apartment. A strange, growing humming could be heard inside—the sound of his father's watch. In the living room, Jacob stood by the window, clutching his watch. His face was impassive. "Stop pretending!" Silas shouted. "Give me the watch before I call the police."

Jacob froze, seeing Vera behind his brother. He realized they were twins; they were family. "So, you're in this together," he hissed. "A family of thieves has returned for their loot. Get out! I won't let you steal our family heirloom again." Silas stared at him incredulously. "What are you talking about? Our father made this watch!" "Your father was a homeless charlatan!" Jacob screamed. "He stole it from my house. He was a sorcerer who cursed the mechanism to serve only himself. Your entire 'happy' life was built on stolen time — my family's time!"

"No... he was a good man..." Vera shook her head. "A good man?" Jacob laughed. "Now his soul is trapped in a time bubble he created to evade justice. He's stuck in an eternal 'now.' I'll get him out of there so he can answer for every stolen moment. I'll have my revenge."

Before Silas could move, Jacob abruptly pressed his thumb on the central button. The air shook. There was a click, and Jacob froze in place, as if in a trance, surrounded by a shimmering light. "He's gone there," Vera whispered. "He's weak here, but in that world, he can destroy Dad. Take the watch — we'll go after him."



"Listen to me! We can't use this! How many times have I told you it's dangerous?" Silas shook his head in displeasure; he'd always known these mechanical devices were dangerous. But would he let his sister touch them? Never!

"But you want to know the truth, don't you?" Vera asked. Confidence and excitement were evident in her eyes. "Come on... What's your answer?"



Silas looked at the watch in Jacob's hands. It seemed colder than before, its surface reflecting the faint light of the room. Jacob stood frozen in the strange shimmer, unmoving, trapped between seconds. The air felt tense, as if time itself was waiting for Silas to decide.

"Come on," Vera said, her voice quieter now but full of urgency. "Take it. We have to go after him. If Jacob reaches Dad first, we might lose him forever again!"

Silas didn't answer immediately. His mind raced with everything Jacob had said. A thief. A sorcerer. Stolen time. None of it sounded like the father he remembered - the gentle man who fixed clocks and told stories in the evenings. But the doubt had already crept in.

"What's your answer?" Vera asked again.

"Okay," he said at last.

Relief spread across Vera's face as Silas took the watch and placed it in his palm. For a moment, she even smiled, certain that they were about to step into the mysterious world their father had hidden for so long. But Silas didn't press the button. Instead, he stared at the watch for a long second... and then suddenly lifted it high and slammed it against the ground.

CRACK.

The glass shattered. Gears jumped loose and scattered across the floor. The faint ticking stopped instantly. Vera gasped in shock. The strange shimmering light around Jacob flickered and disappeared. He blinked, suddenly unfrozen, staring at the broken watch in disbelief.

"What have you done?" he shouted.

Vera looked from the shattered pieces to Silas, her voice rising with anger.

"That was our only way to reach him! We could've talked to Dad again!"

Jacob stepped forward, furious. "You fool! Now I'll never enter that world again. I'll never make him answer for what he did!"

Silas stood still, breathing slowly. Surprisingly, he felt calm.



"I know," he said quietly.

They both stared at him.

"I'm tired of all this," Silas continued.

"Maybe the truth is complicated. Maybe Dad made mistakes. But chasing him through time won't fix anything. He's gone... and I just want to live in peace."

Vera shook her head in disbelief.

"You're just giving up."

"Maybe," Silas replied. "Or maybe I'm finally letting him rest."

Furious, Vera turned and stormed out of the house, the door slamming behind her. Silas glared at Jacob one last time before following her. Soon, the room was silent again. The ticking had stopped, and with it, the strange pull of the past. For the first time in years, time finally felt like it didn't belong to anyone.

STORY TEAMS

Kaunas "Ausros" Gymnasium



Marijampolė Rygiškių Jonas Gymnasium



Klaipėda "Vėtrungės" Gymnasium



Šilutė district Žemaičių Naumiestis Gymnasium



Vilnius "Sostinės" Gymnasium



WHAT THE FOREST KEEPS

In a small village, hidden between deep forests and narrow paths, there lived a boy named Thomas. The people in the village were kind and peaceful; however, there was always a strange feeling in the air, something no one wanted to talk about. Long ago, the people of the village used to tell old stories about witches, flying brooms, and



voices that whispered in the forest at night . But as time passed, people forgot these stories, as if they were only fairy tales meant to scare children.

Thomas was very curious and brave—sometimes even too much. He always asked lots of questions, and the adults sometimes didn't know how to answer him. His mother used to joke that her son had more thoughts in his head than there were stars in the sky. His father used to say that one day his son would become a great explorer if only he stopped being interested in everything that was forbidden.

Even though Thomas's parents loved their son, their life was not easy. They worked in a nearby town and often came back home late, when Thomas was already asleep. He wished his parents could spend more time with him and hoped for a day when they would go for a walk together, play with him, or at least eat dinner as a family. Sometimes he watched their car lights disappear down the road and hoped they would return earlier the next day.