

A NAVRITTO STORY

# The Countdown That Didn't *Stop at Zero.*

✦ NAVRITTO STORIES · THRILLERS & SUSPENSE

# The Countdown That Didn't Stop at Zero

Written & illustrated by Navritto.

© 2026 Navritto Solutions Private Limited. All rights reserved. This story and its illustrations are original works and may not be reproduced or redistributed without permission.

First edition, 2026 · Published by Navritto Solutions Private Limited · navritto.com
CIN U62090HR2026PTC145030
Read online and download more books at navritto.com/stories



Every New Year's Eve the whole town folds itself into the square beneath the old clock tower, close enough that you breathe the person in front of you. The bunting lights sway on their wires, and every face in the cold tips up toward the same bright dial, the way a field turns to the sun.

The clock has kept our time for a hundred winters and has never once been wrong. That is the thing everyone says, stamping their feet against the frost. I used to think it was a comfort. I think about it differently now.



At a minute to twelve the talking thinned to nothing, and the whole square began to count — out loud, together, our breath going up in one slow cloud. Ten. Nine. Eight. The hands climbed toward the top of the dial, gold and certain.

Three. Two. One. A thousand of us threw our arms up at once. The hands met at the top, and the year was supposed to end there, clean, the way it always had.



But the long hand did not stop at the top. It passed it. It kept going — down, and around, as if zero were only another number on the way to somewhere else — and the roar of the crowd simply stopped, mid-shout, every open mouth held like a photograph.

The confetti hung where it had been thrown, not falling, each piece a small still flake against the dark. The man beside me was frozen with his hands apart; his scarf had lifted in a gust that was no longer blowing. Nothing moved in the whole square. Nothing but me.



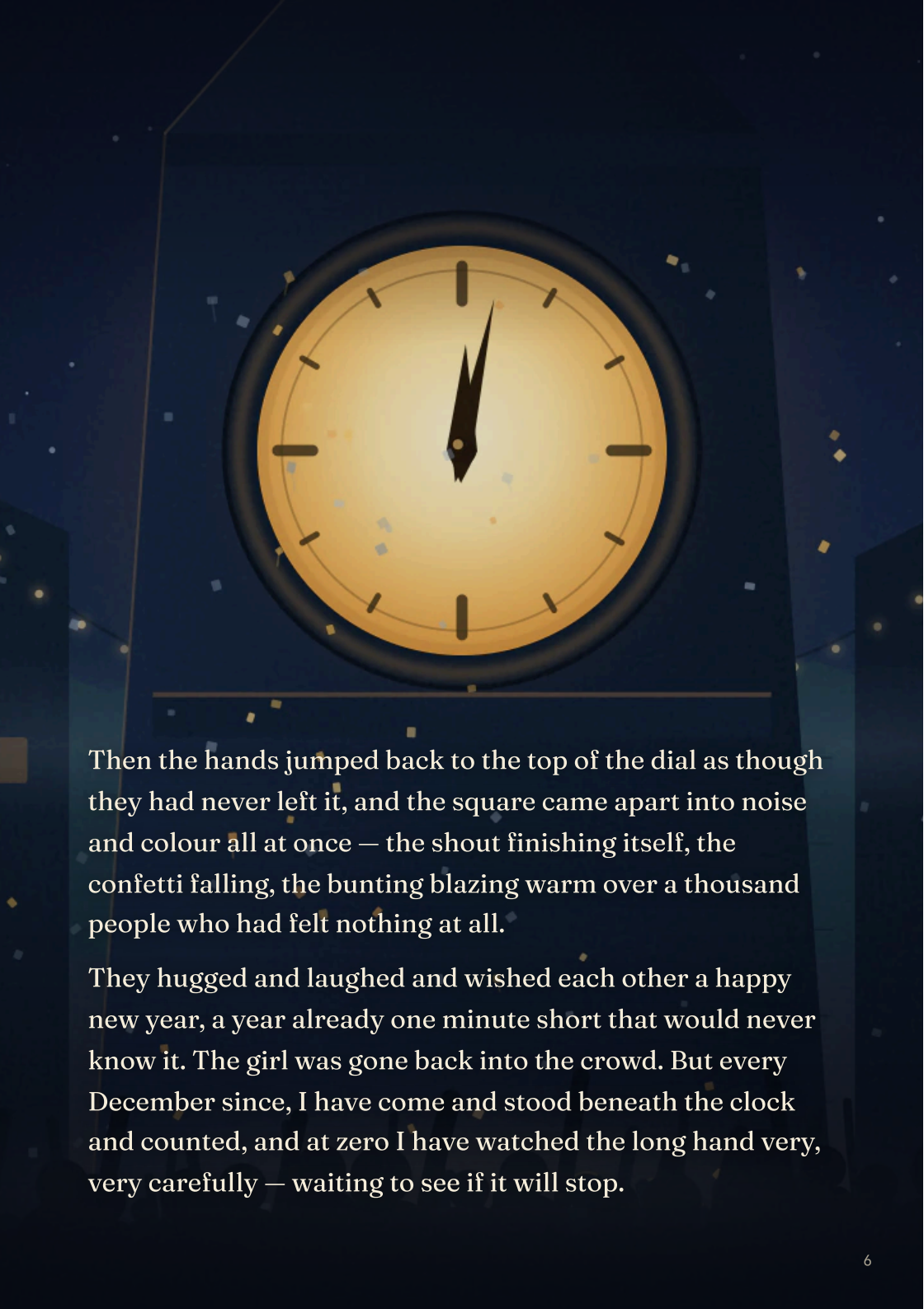
I don't know how long I stood there, afraid to breathe, listening to a silence so complete I could hear the blood moving in my own ears. Then I took a step, and the frozen crowd did not turn, and I understood that whatever had caught them had, for some reason, let me go.

So I walked. Between the still shoulders, under the enormous drooping hands of the clock, past faces stopped in the middle of their joy. It felt like trespassing inside a photograph of my own town — and the minute the clock was spending was not a minute anyone else would ever get to keep.



I was halfway across the square when I saw that one other shape was moving. A girl about my age, turning slowly on the spot with her chin lifted, the way you do when you cannot believe where you are standing. We found each other in all that stillness and simply stood together, two small living things under a clock the size of a house.

She said she came every year, and had always wondered whether anyone else noticed. I asked what we were meant to do with a minute that belonged to no one. She said she didn't think we were meant to do anything — only that we were the ones awake to see it.



Then the hands jumped back to the top of the dial as though they had never left it, and the square came apart into noise and colour all at once — the shout finishing itself, the confetti falling, the bunting blazing warm over a thousand people who had felt nothing at all.

They hugged and laughed and wished each other a happy new year, a year already one minute short that would never know it. The girl was gone back into the crowd. But every December since, I have come and stood beneath the clock and counted, and at zero I have watched the long hand very, very carefully — waiting to see if it will stop.

✦ THE END

Thank you for reading a Navritto Story. Find more illustrated stories — free to read and download — at **navritto.com/stories**.