
A NAVRITTO STORY
The Girl in the *Group Photo.*

✦ NAVRITTO STORIES · THRILLERS & SUSPENSE

The Girl in the Group Photo

Written & illustrated by Navritto.

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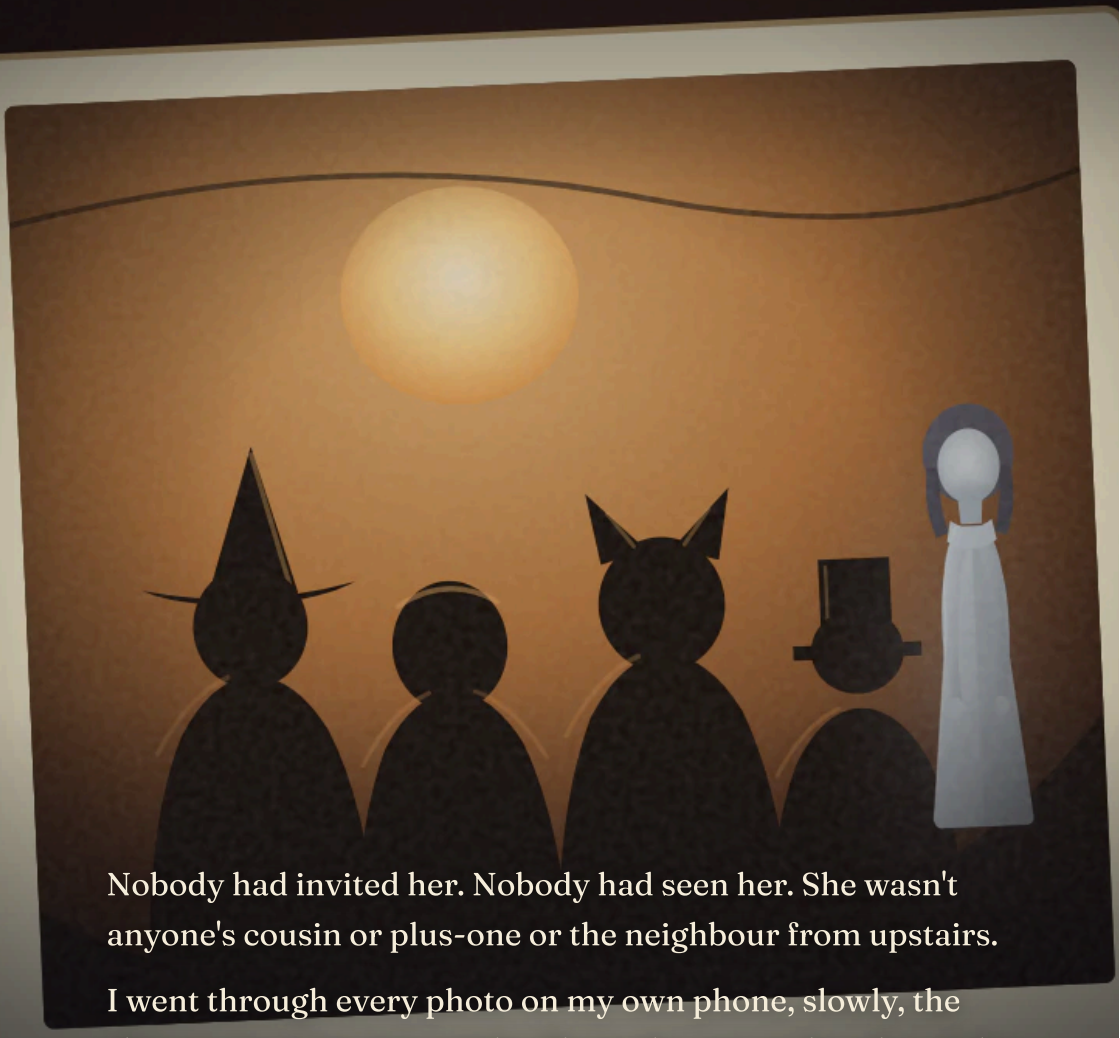
Mina throws the best Halloween party in the grade, and this year twenty of us crammed into her basement — a graveyard of fake cobwebs and real sweat, a cheap strobe, somebody's playlist too loud. We took a hundred photos. That's the thing about my friends: we document everything.

I didn't think about the pictures again until the group chat lit up the next morning, and Mina asked, in the flat way people type when they're trying to sound calm: Who is that?



At first I thought she meant a blurry guest. But it was the same girl in picture after picture — a little apart from the rest of us, her costume a decade or two out of fashion, pale, and smiling. Smiling in all of them.

We counted twenty guests. We could name all twenty. She made twenty-one.



Nobody had invited her. Nobody had seen her. She wasn't anyone's cousin or plus-one or the neighbour from upstairs.

I went through every photo on my own phone, slowly, the skin on my arms going tight. There she was at the edge of the first one, taken at eight o'clock. There she was in the next. Always at the edge. Always looking right at whoever held the camera.



It was Mina's grandmother who knew her. She was visiting, and she picked up the phone the way older people do, holding it too far away — and then she stopped holding it far away.

“That's the Dunmore girl,” she said quietly. She went and found an old album, and there, in a brittle photograph from a Halloween party in 1971, was the same girl, the same costume, the same smile. “She went to a party like yours,” Mina's grandmother said. “And she never came home from it.”



So we laid the night's photos out in order, by their time stamps, the way you'd lay out evidence.

Eight o'clock, she's a shape at the far wall. Nine, she's nearer. Ten, nearer still — between two of us now, close enough to touch, and no one in the photo has noticed. Eleven. By the picture taken just before midnight she filled half the frame, and we were small and bright and oblivious behind her.



The last photo anyone remembers taking was at 11:58. In it there is no party at all. There is only her, up close, filling the frame edge to edge, her soft pale face tilted — as if she has finally reached the camera and is deciding what to do with it.

None of us took a picture after that. We checked. We all checked.



Here is the part I haven't told the group chat. This morning — a whole year later — a new photo appeared in that album on my phone, in the Halloween folder, time-stamped for a party I have not had yet.

It's Mina's basement, the cobwebs, the strobe, all of us a year older and laughing. And standing in the middle of us — not at the edge anymore — one hand half-raised in a wave, is the Dunmore girl, waiting, it seems, for the night to catch up to the picture.

✦ THE END

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