
A NAVRITTO STORY
The Guest Who Leaves at 11:59.

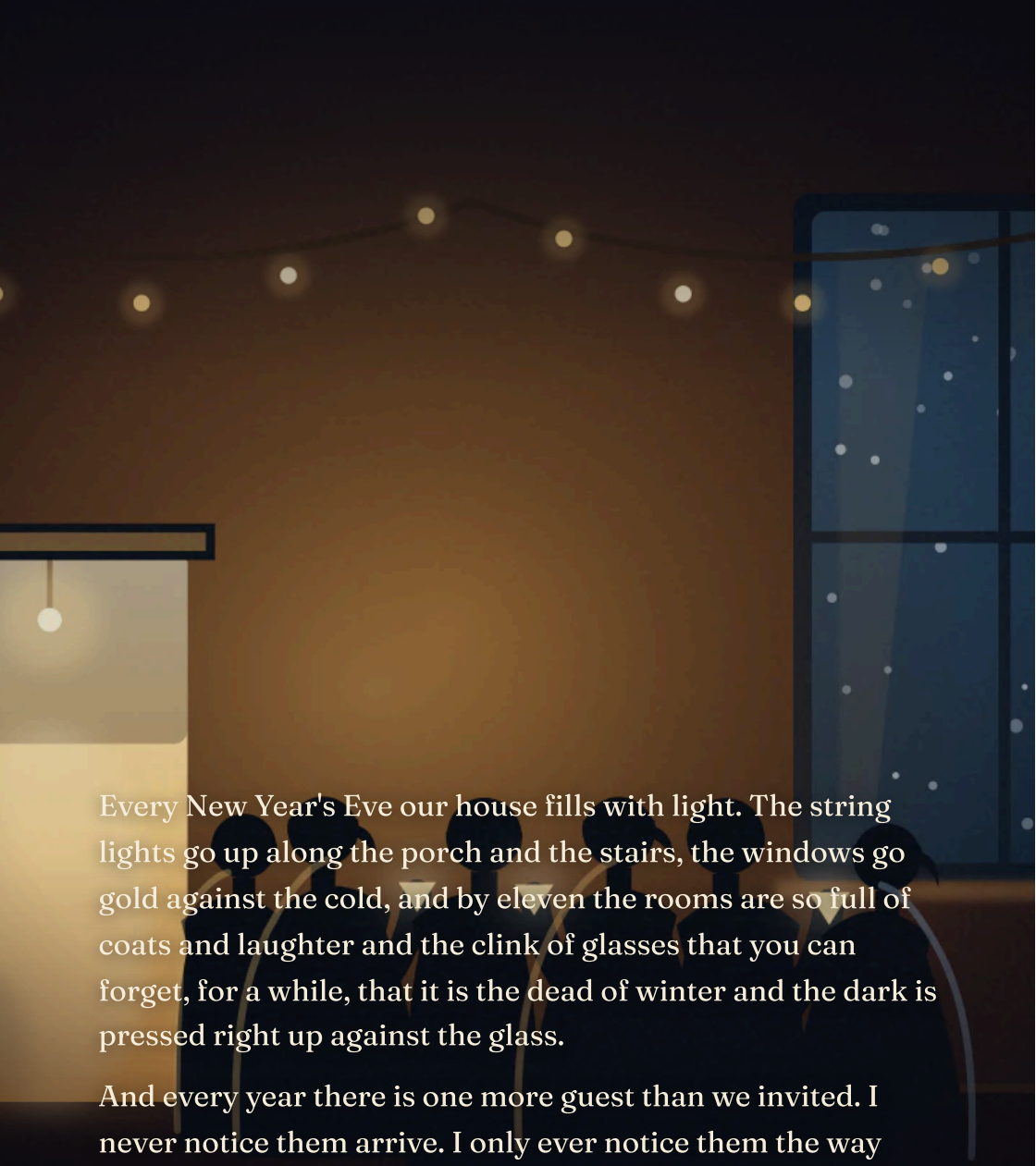
✦ NAVRITTO STORIES · MYSTERY & THE STRANGE

The Guest Who Leaves at 11:59

Written & illustrated by Navritto.

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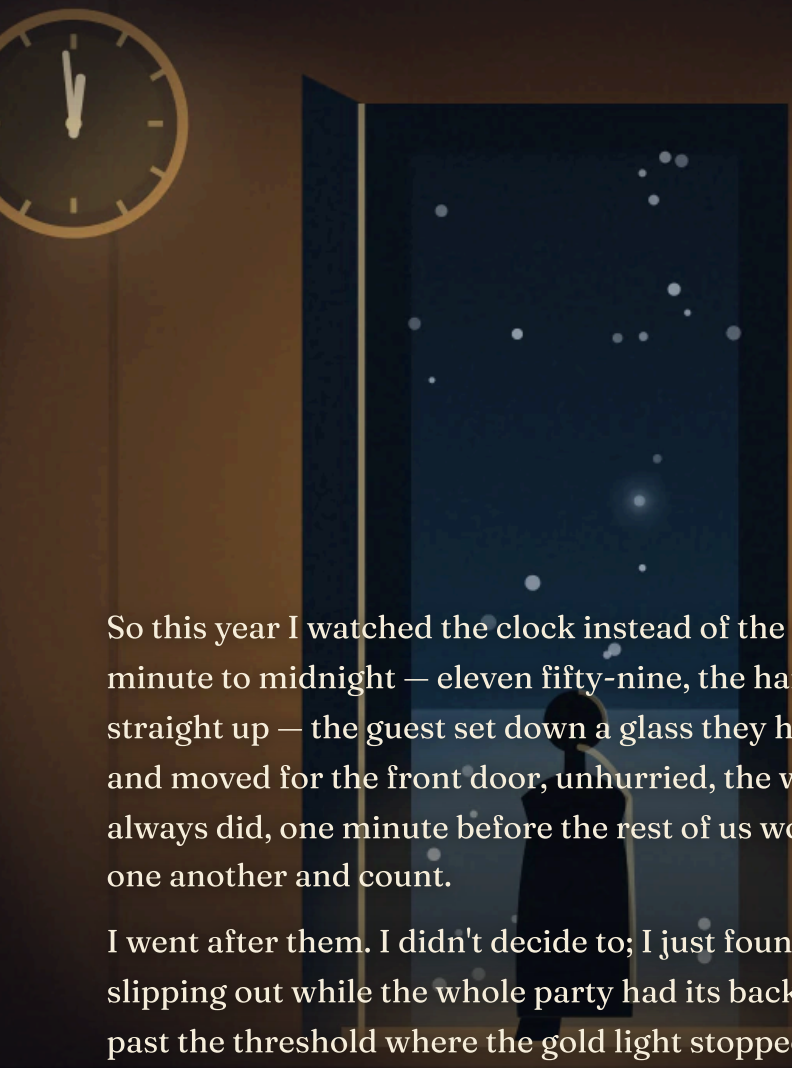
Every New Year's Eve our house fills with light. The string lights go up along the porch and the stairs, the windows go gold against the cold, and by eleven the rooms are so full of coats and laughter and the clink of glasses that you can forget, for a while, that it is the dead of winter and the dark is pressed right up against the glass.

And every year there is one more guest than we invited. I never notice them arrive. I only ever notice them the way you notice a draught — a quiet figure at the edge of the warmth, turned a little away, never quite part of the circle. Each year I promise myself I will go and ask who they are. Each year I forget, until they are gone.



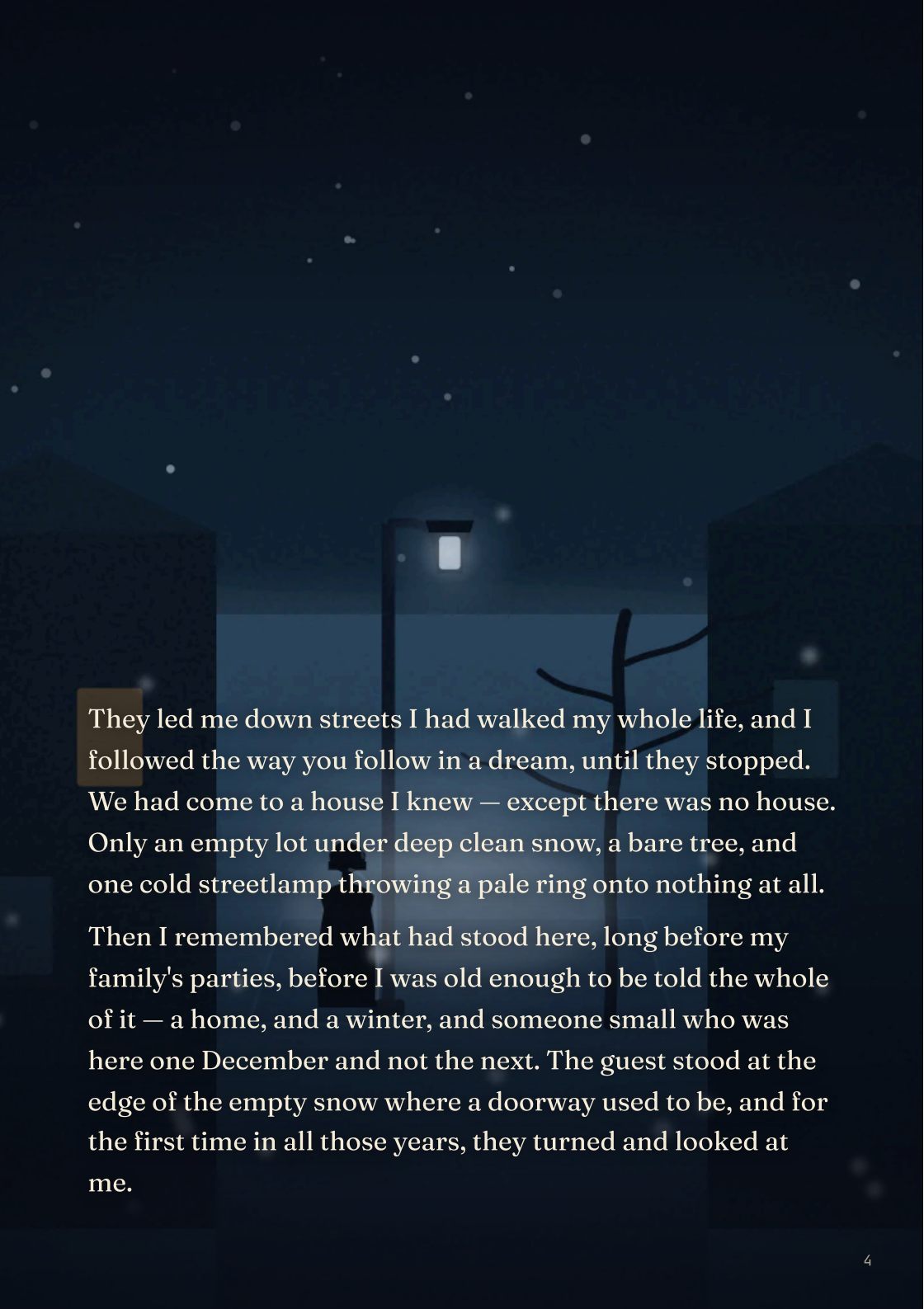
It was the photographs that finally made me look. They hang up the stairwell, years of our parties, a little crooked and warm under a brass picture-light — my family growing older frame by frame, the same faces laughing at a camera none of us remembers holding.

And in the corner of nearly every one, soft and out of focus, stands the same person. Never in the middle. Never a day older. The same still shape at the edge of the gold, year after year after year — and in not a single photograph is anyone standing near them, or looking their way, or seeming to know they are there at all.



So this year I watched the clock instead of the room. At one minute to midnight — eleven fifty-nine, the hands almost straight up — the guest set down a glass they had never filled and moved for the front door, unhurried, the way they always did, one minute before the rest of us would turn to one another and count.

I went after them. I didn't decide to; I just found myself slipping out while the whole party had its back to me, out past the threshold where the gold light stopped, into a cold that took my breath. Behind me the doorway narrowed to a warm seam and then I was in the snow, following a figure who left no footprints at all.



They led me down streets I had walked my whole life, and I followed the way you follow in a dream, until they stopped. We had come to a house I knew — except there was no house. Only an empty lot under deep clean snow, a bare tree, and one cold streetlamp throwing a pale ring onto nothing at all.

Then I remembered what had stood here, long before my family's parties, before I was old enough to be told the whole of it — a home, and a winter, and someone small who was here one December and not the next. The guest stood at the edge of the empty snow where a doorway used to be, and for the first time in all those years, they turned and looked at me.



We stood together in the falling snow, the two of us, and far off behind us my party still burned — a small warm window hung in all that dark, the only gold for miles. I did not feel afraid. I felt the way you feel when a thing you have half-known for years finally says its own name.

They had been coming to warm themselves at our light. Year after year, slipping in where it was bright and slipping out again at 11:59 — because midnight was the one moment that had never been theirs to keep. Whatever had happened in that lost house, it had happened before the year could turn. They had never, not once, got to see a new year begin.



So I stayed. I let the countdown happen without me — let the bright rooms cheer behind their glass — and I waited in the cold beside the guest for the one minute the world owed them. When the first bell rang out over the rooftops and the sky bloomed gold, I felt them go very still, the way you go still when something you had given up on finally arrives.

For one minute — the minute that had always been missing — someone was there to watch the year turn with them. Then the last spark faded, and the snow came down on an empty street, and I walked home alone. But every New Year since, at 11:59, I leave my own warm party and step out into the dark, just in case there is someone out there who has not yet seen their year begin. There usually is.

✦ THE END

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