
A NAVRITTO STORY
The House That Wasn't *There Yesterday.*

✦ NAVRITTO STORIES · MYSTERY & THE STRANGE

The House That Wasn't There Yesterday

Written & illustrated by Navritto.

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I have lived on Linden Row my whole life, and I could draw it with my eyes shut — every porch, every crooked mailbox, every dog that barks at the wrong things. On Halloween I know it better still, because I count the houses as I go, the way you count stairs in the dark.

That year I was thirteen, too old for a costume, Theo said — and out anyway, because Theo was eight, and someone had to hold the bag.



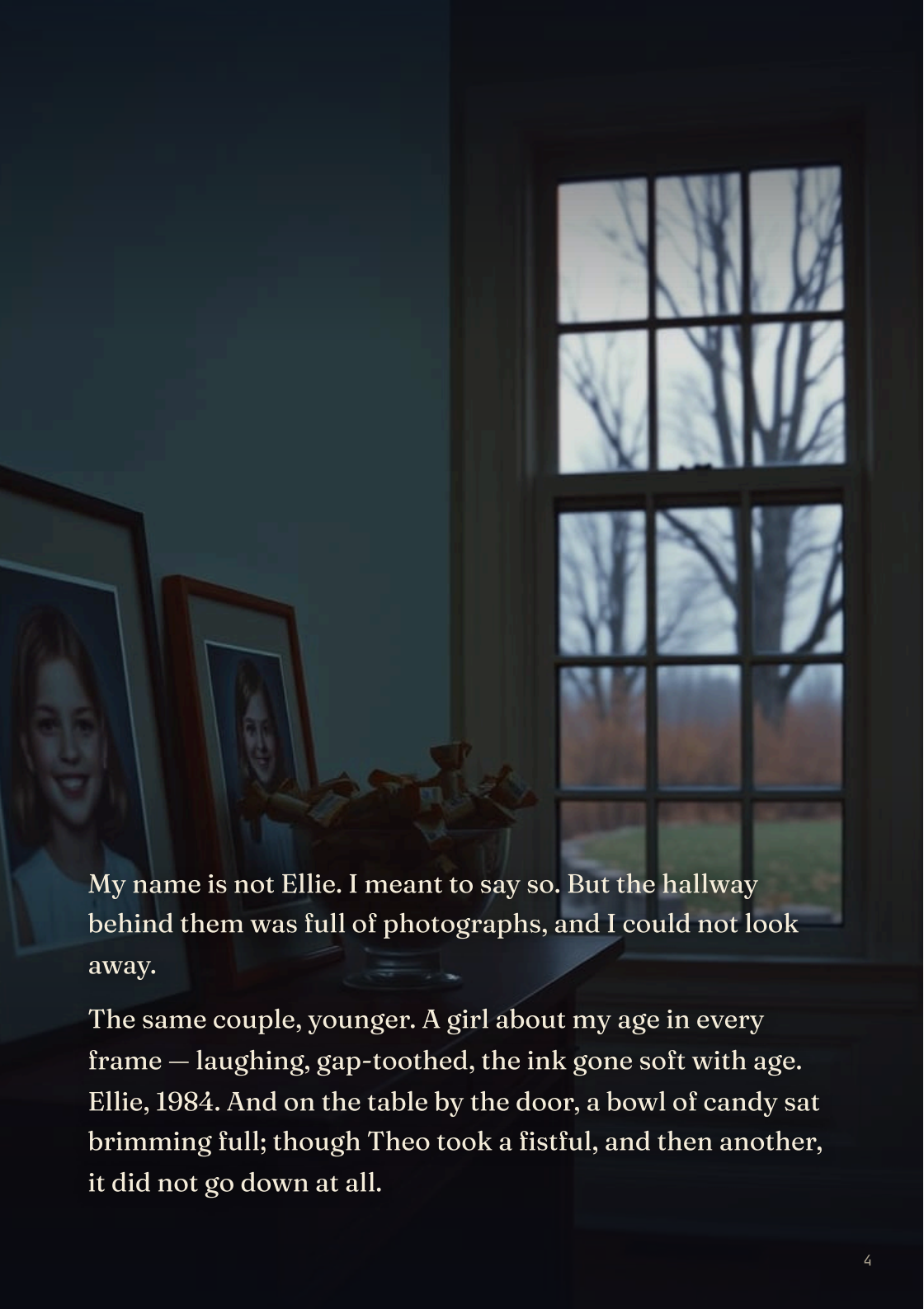
Between number twelve and number sixteen there has only ever been a hedge — a long, dark, well-kept hedge the Harpers never let grow wild.

That night there was a house. Number fourteen, warm and gold, breathing light into the fog, as if it had always stood there and I had simply forgotten how to see it.



Theo was up the path before I could stop him. The door opened on a smell of cinnamon and old wood, and a couple stood in the glow — dressed for a colder decade, kind in the way of people who have waited a long time for the doorbell to ring.

“There she is,” the woman said softly, and pressed a full-size chocolate bar into Theo's bag. Then she looked at me and smiled. “Ellie. You came.”



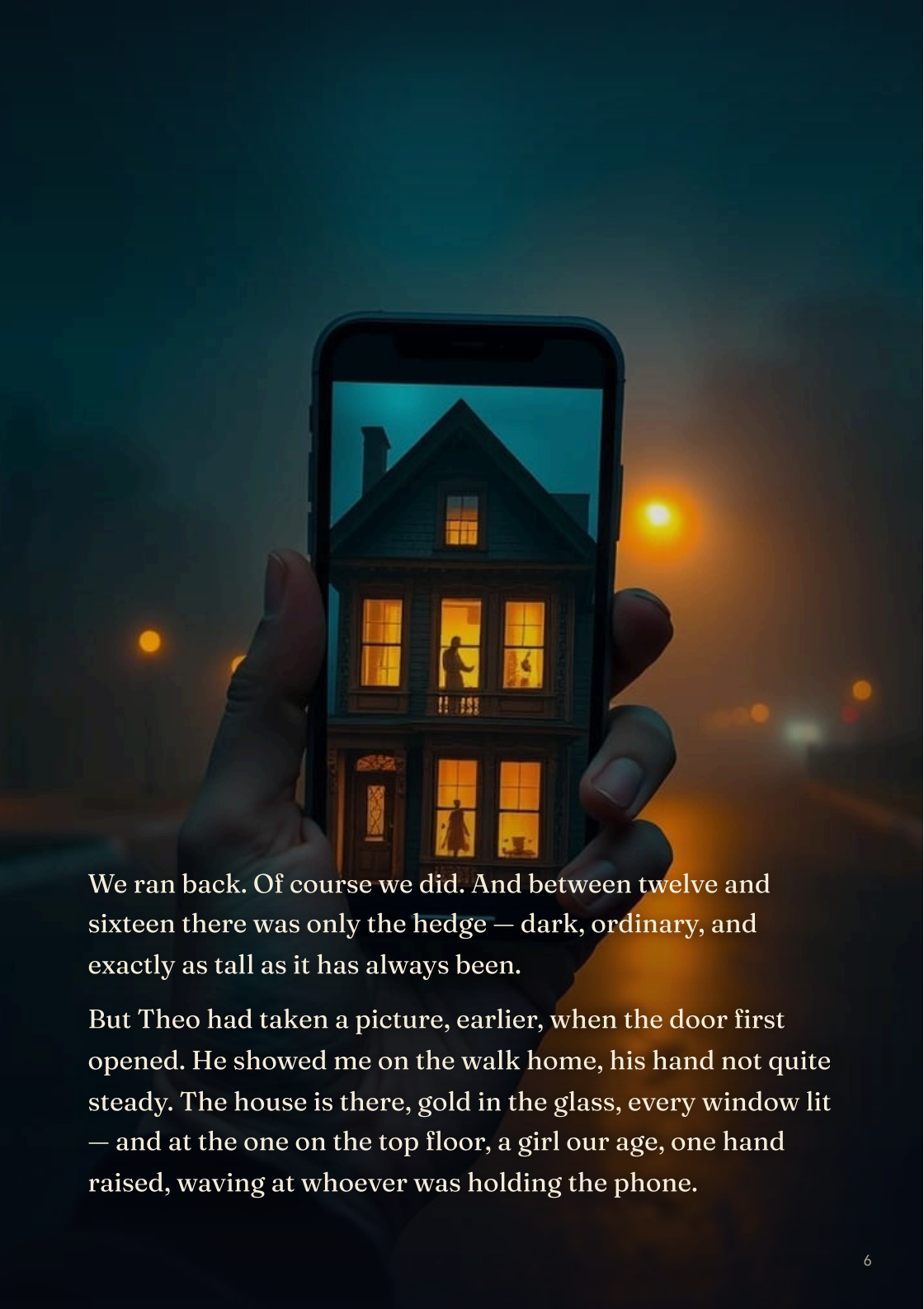
My name is not Ellie. I meant to say so. But the hallway behind them was full of photographs, and I could not look away.

The same couple, younger. A girl about my age in every frame — laughing, gap-toothed, the ink gone soft with age. Ellie, 1984. And on the table by the door, a bowl of candy sat brimming full; though Theo took a fistful, and then another, it did not go down at all.



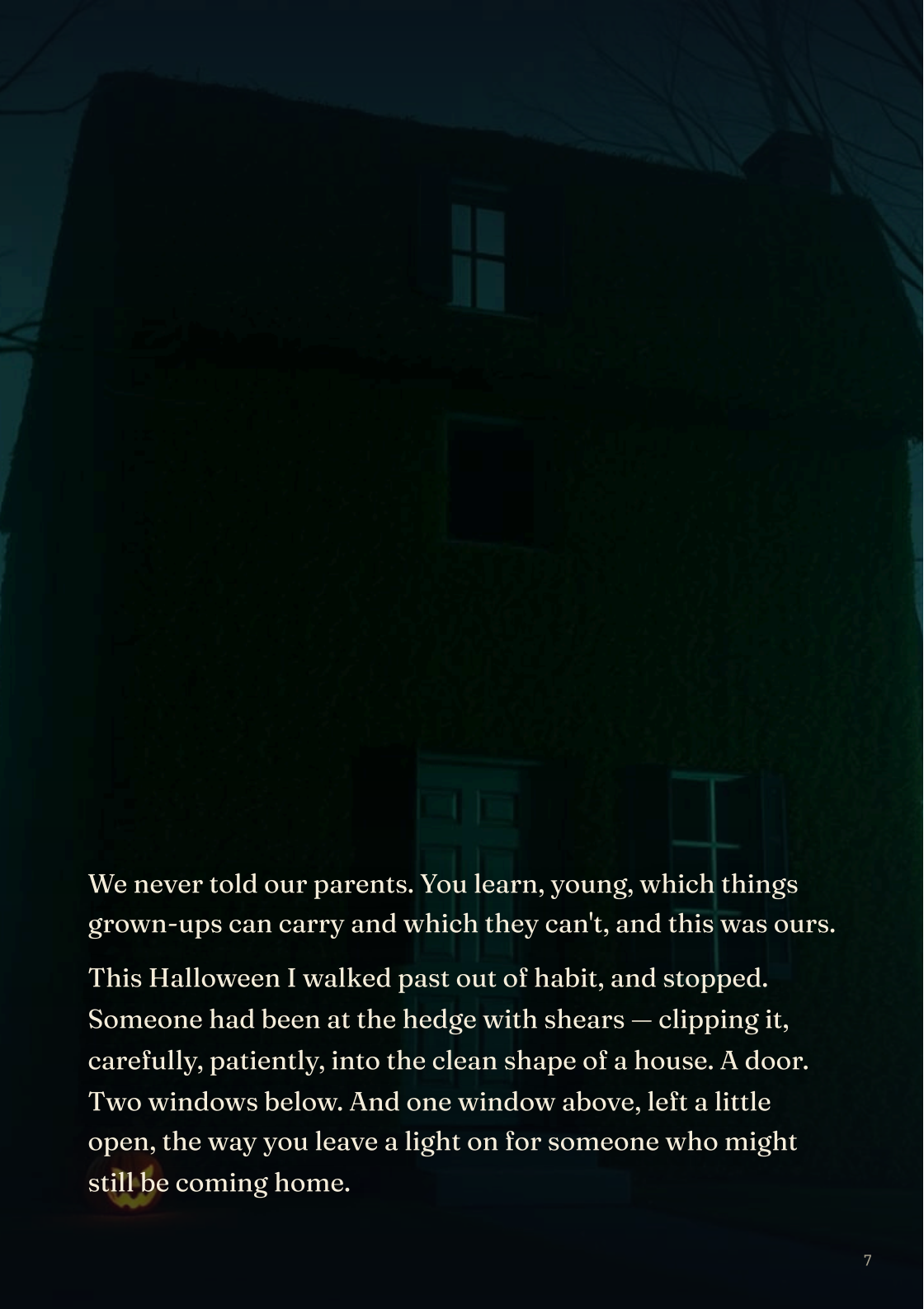
We said our thank-yous and left. On his own porch next door, old Mr. Osei was watching the street the way he always does, and I asked him — just to hear something ordinary — how long number fourteen had been lived in.

He didn't laugh. He looked at the hedge a long moment. “Fourteen burned down in the winter of '84,” he said. “Whole family got out but the girl. They never did find her. Nobody rebuilt. That hedge is the Harpers being kind, so the gap doesn't stare at you.”



We ran back. Of course we did. And between twelve and sixteen there was only the hedge — dark, ordinary, and exactly as tall as it has always been.

But Theo had taken a picture, earlier, when the door first opened. He showed me on the walk home, his hand not quite steady. The house is there, gold in the glass, every window lit — and at the one on the top floor, a girl our age, one hand raised, waving at whoever was holding the phone.



We never told our parents. You learn, young, which things grown-ups can carry and which they can't, and this was ours.

This Halloween I walked past out of habit, and stopped. Someone had been at the hedge with shears — clipping it, carefully, patiently, into the clean shape of a house. A door. Two windows below. And one window above, left a little open, the way you leave a light on for someone who might still be coming home.

✦ THE END

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