

A NAVRITTO STORY

# The Last Train on *Christmas Eve.*

✦ NAVRITTO STORIES · THRILLERS & SUSPENSE

# The Last Train on Christmas Eve

Written & illustrated by Navritto.

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First edition, 2026 · Published by Navritto Solutions Private Limited · navritto.com
CIN U62090HR2026PTC145030
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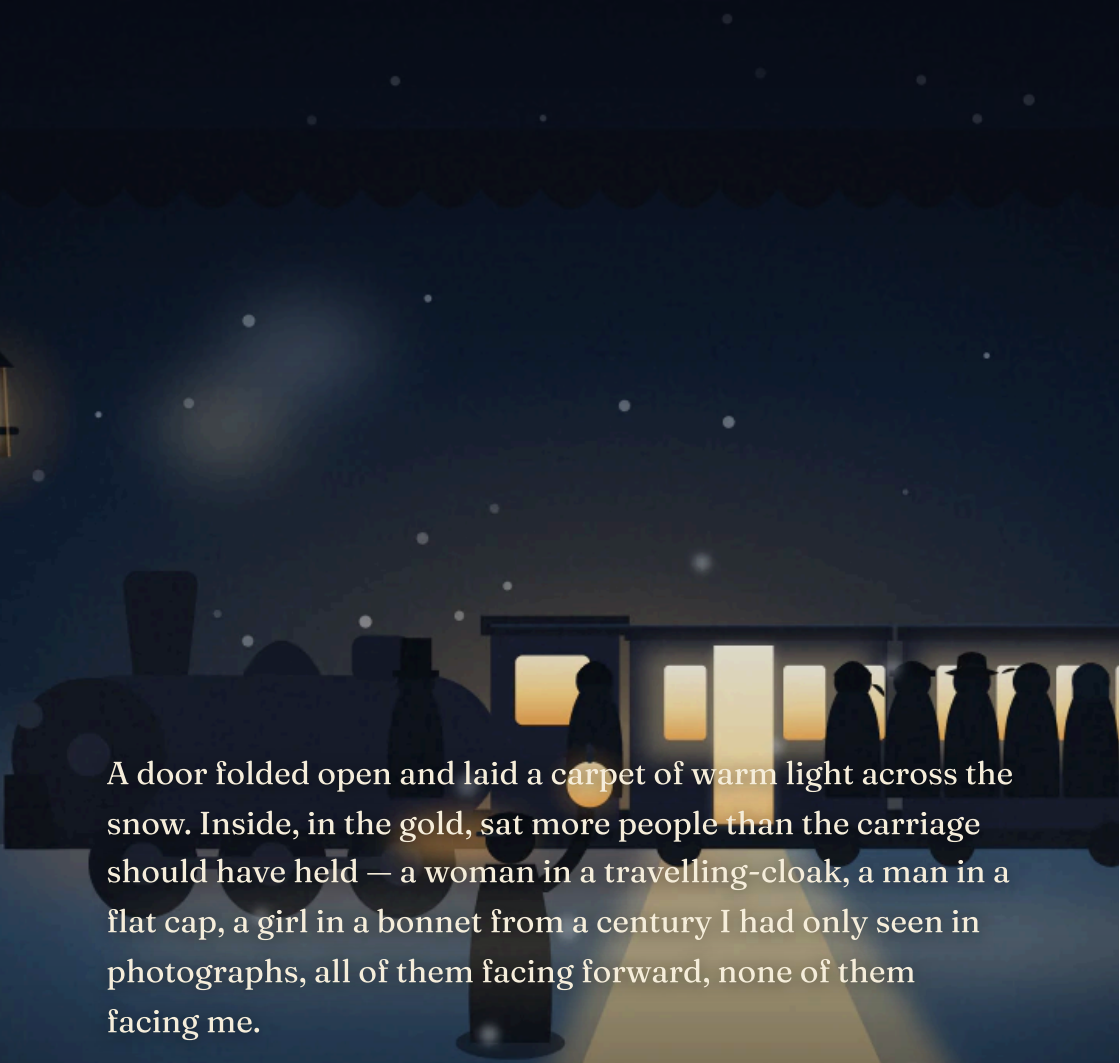
The nine-forty was the last train home, and I watched its tail-lights shrink to nothing while I was still three platforms away, running. After that there was only the snow, and the cold coming up through my shoes, and a station so empty it seemed to be holding its breath.

I should have walked. It was six miles, but I should have walked. Instead I sat under the one gas-lamp still lit on the old platform — the branch had been quiet for years — and watched the snow come down, and told myself a train would come. It was Christmas Eve. Some part of me still believed the night owed me a kindness.



At two minutes to midnight the dark at the far end of the platform turned gold. I heard it before I understood it — the long iron breath of something braking, a bell, the hiss of steam — and then it was there, sliding out of the snow on rails I could have sworn were rusted shut.

It was old. Older than the station, older than the line, every window a warm amber square crowded with the shapes of people, and steam rolling along the platform to pool around my feet. A train like that had no business existing, let alone stopping. But it stopped. For me, it seemed, it stopped.



A door folded open and laid a carpet of warm light across the snow. Inside, in the gold, sat more people than the carriage should have held — a woman in a travelling-cloak, a man in a flat cap, a girl in a bonnet from a century I had only seen in photographs, all of them facing forward, none of them facing me.

A conductor stepped down with a lantern and said the words into the falling snow, gentle as a carol: last call for Hollowmere. I knew the name the way you know a word in a dream. Hollowmere had been taken off the maps before my mother was born — drowned, they said, when they flooded the valley for the reservoir. There is no station at Hollowmere. There is no Hollowmere. And the train was waiting to take me there.



The conductor held out a paper — a long ruled manifest, soft with handling, the ink gone brown with years. He did not ask my name. He only turned the page toward the lamplight so I could find it myself, and I did, near the bottom, in a hand I didn't recognise and somehow couldn't argue with: my name, spelled right, the way only my grandmother ever spelled it.

Beside it, every other column was filled in — the date they had boarded, the date they were expected home. Mine had the first. The space for the second had been ruled through, once, with a single steady line. I understood then that I had not missed my train at all. This was my train. It had simply taken a long time to come for me.



I would like to tell you I was brave. I wasn't. I simply stepped back — one step, then another, off the carpet of light and into the cold — and shook my head, because my voice had gone somewhere I couldn't reach. The conductor looked at me for a long moment, not unkindly, and touched the brim of his cap. No one on a train like that will ever make you board. That, I think, is the one mercy in it.

The door folded shut. The gold narrowed to a line, the line to a single red lamp at the rear, and the red lamp went smaller and smaller into the falling snow until the snow simply closed over it. Then the platform was empty, and quiet, and mine, and I was standing on it alive — which I have not once since taken for granted.



Dawn came grey and still, the way it does after heavy snow, and the first real train of the morning — the ordinary nine-forty, running late — found me on the bench beneath the dead lamp. The guard asked if I'd been there all night, and I said I'd missed my connection, which was true, in its way.

He didn't see what I saw. On the bench beside me, dusted with snow but still faintly warm to the touch, lay a single ticket — one-way, no return, a name on it in my grandmother's hand. I have it still. Every Christmas Eve I think about going back to the old platform at two minutes to midnight, to give it to whoever is waiting there next. I haven't, yet. But the night is long, and the train is patient, and one year I think I will.

✦ THE END

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