

—A NAVRITTO STORY—



The Wandering *Light.*

+ NAVRITTO STORIES · MYSTERY & THE STRANGE

The Wandering Light

Written & illustrated by Navritto.

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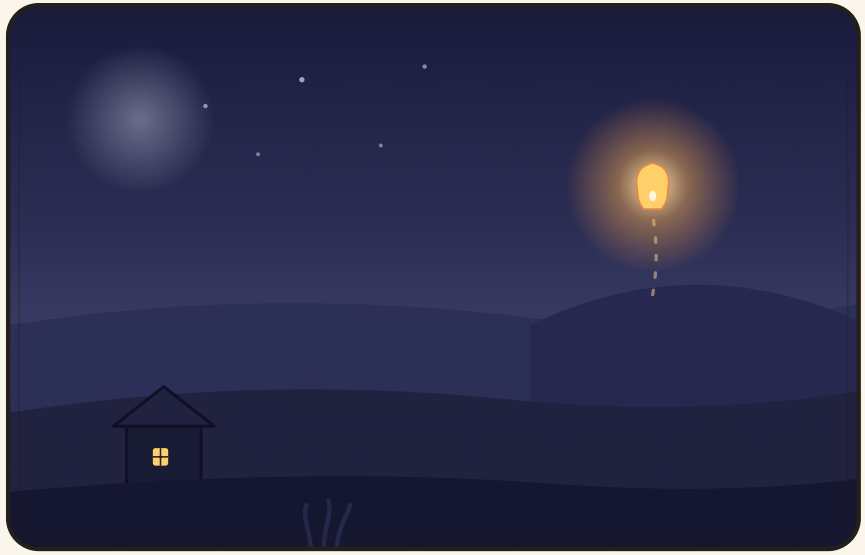
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The village of Marrow sat in a fold of dark hills, and by night it was the quietest place in the world. The lamps went out one by one. The dogs curled up. Above the rooftops the sky turned a deep, cold blue, and the stars came out to keep watch.

Sometimes a star would slip and fall, down and down, and burn out before it touched the hills. That was ordinary. Everyone in Marrow had seen a falling star. Nobody was ever afraid of one.



But on the night this story begins, something happened that was not ordinary at all.

A light appeared on the far hill — one small, warm light, the colour of a candle. And then, slowly, it began to move. Not down, the way a falling star falls. Up. It lifted off the dark hill and floated higher into the cold blue sky, wandering as it went, until it hung among the stars as if it had climbed there.

In every house in Marrow, someone was awake at their window, watching a light rise where no light should.

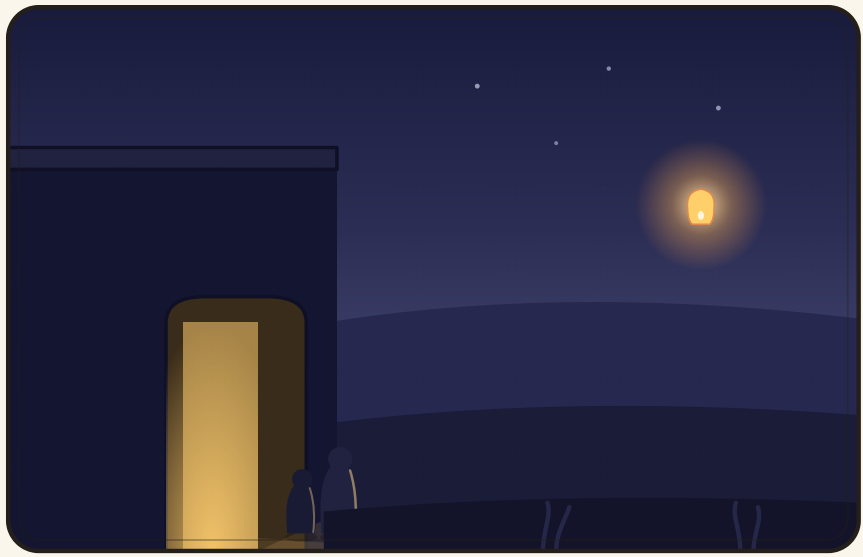


By morning, nobody could talk of anything else. By the next night, the whole village was out in the square, and the square had split in two.

“It is a blessing,” said one half, holding up their torches. “A good sign. We should be glad.”

“It is a curse,” said the other half. “A warning. We should lock our doors.”

They argued about ghosts, and dragons, and the spirits of the hills, and the more they argued, the more frightened everyone became — because no one in Marrow had actually gone to look.



Two children were listening from their doorstep: Isla, who was ten, and her little brother Fen, who was seven. They watched the grown-ups shout, and they watched the light glimmer far away, and Isla frowned.

“Nobody knows what it is,” she whispered, “because nobody has gone to see.”

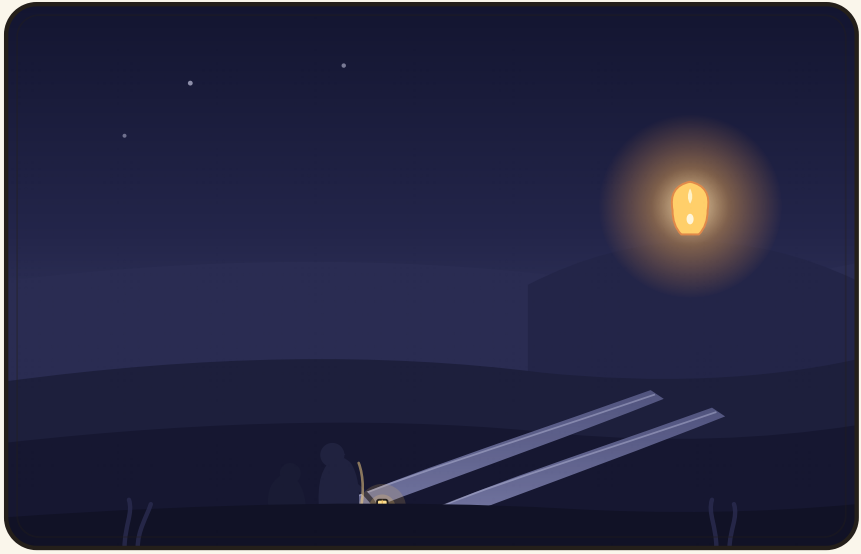
Fen looked out at the dark fields between the village and the hill. It was a long way, and very black. Then he took his sister’s hand. “Then let’s be the ones who go,” he said. So they lit their little tin lantern, stepped off the doorstep, and went.



The fields were wide and quiet. Their little lantern threw a warm circle around their feet, and everything outside it was night. Behind them, Marrow shrank to a handful of glowing windows.

“What if it really is a ghost?” whispered Fen.

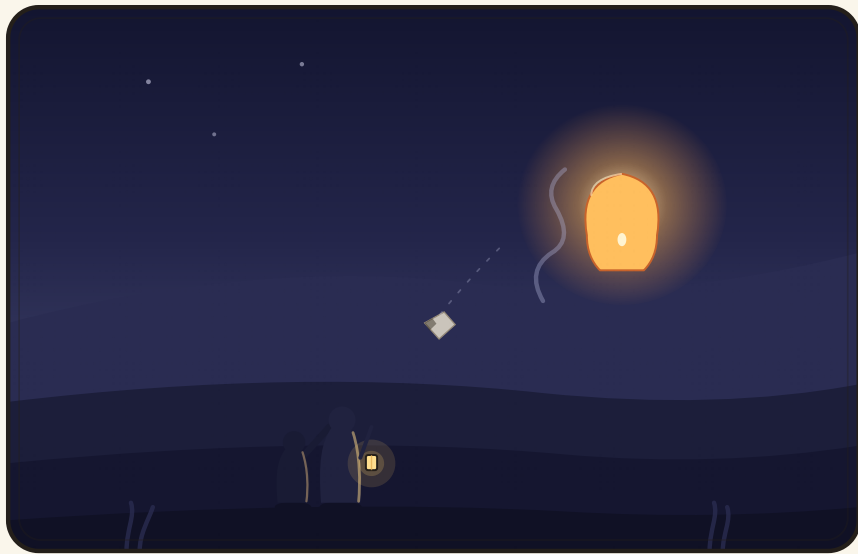
“A ghost,” said Isla, “would not need to climb so slowly. Watch — it drifts, like something light on the wind. Let’s keep our eyes open and see what is true.” And the closer they walked, the bigger and warmer the light became.



Halfway across, Isla stopped and held the lantern low. There, pressed into the wet grass, were two long lines running side by side toward the hill.

“Wheel tracks,” she said. “A cart came this way — a heavy one, loaded up.” Fen crouched beside her and touched them. They were real, and muddy, and cold.

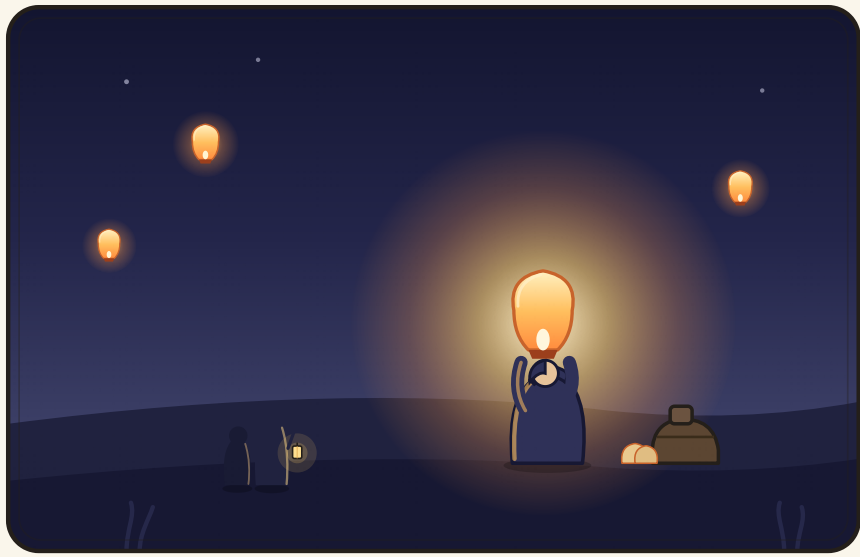
“A ghost doesn’t roll along on wheels,” said Isla slowly. “And it doesn’t leave tracks in the mud.” One frightening story had just quietly ended. So they followed the tracks.



Near the top of the hill, the wind changed, and it carried two things to them. The first was a smell — not a ghost-smell, but the good, plain smell of woodsmoke and warm paper.

The second was a scrap of thin paper, singed brown at one edge, tumbling down the slope. Fen caught it. Above them now, the light was no round mystery at all: it glowed like a little paper bag full of warm air, swaying as it climbed.

“Smoke,” said Isla, counting the clues on her fingers. “Paper. Wheels. No dragon breathes on paper and lets it float away.” She pointed up. “Come on. We’re almost there.”



They climbed the last few steps, and there, on top of the hill, was the whole answer — sitting in the grass beside a little cart.

It was a traveller: a tired, kind-faced woman a long way from home. In her hands she held a paper lantern, round and glowing, warmed by a small flame inside. As the children watched, she opened her hands, and the lantern lifted gently from them and floated up into the night, wandering higher and higher, exactly like the light that had frightened a whole village.

“I lost my road three nights ago,” she said, smiling at them. “So each night I send one up — a light, in case someone kind is looking, and comes to find me. You two are the first who came.”



So Isla and Fen showed the traveller the way home to Marrow — and because it seemed a shame to waste such a beautiful thing, the three of them carried the little cart of lanterns down together, and lit them one by one along the way.

That night the whole village came out again. But this time no one argued. They stood in the square with their heads tipped back, and above them a hundred warm lights wandered up into the cold blue sky, and it was the loveliest thing any of them had ever seen.

There had been no ghost. There had been no curse. There had only ever been a person — out in the dark, holding up a light, waiting for someone brave enough to come and see.

✦ THE END

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