

THE NIGHT TRAIN TO ANYWHERE · BOOK 5

The Clockwork Carnival

A story where YOU choose the way

STORYBRANCH

Books that branch. Minds that grow.



Meet Your Fellow Travelers

Every journey on the Night Train is better with friends. Here's who is riding with you tonight — and how each one sounds when you read them aloud:

Rowan — The hero of every journey — curious, brave, and wearing the orange coat. Rowan's choices belong to YOU.

The Conductor — Keeper of the timetable and the wisdom. Read him slow as syrup, in your deepest, sleepest rumble.

Tick the Ticket Mouse — Punches the tickets, panics the loudest. Read him fast-fast-FAST, squeaky and tremendously official — and tonight, a little dizzy from the teacups.

Madame Pendule — Keeper of the Clockwork Carnival. Read her precise as a pocket watch — tick — with little pauses — tock — between her facts.

Bolt — The carnival's clockwork monkey mechanic, who loves all nine rides equally. Read him quick and clicky, like a pair of very happy scissors.





Some nights the Night Train comes in loud and puffing and in a hurry. Some nights she comes in soft as a secret. Tonight was a soft night—but something was wrong with the view out Rowan's window.

The far hill should have been BLAZING! That was Clockwork Carnival hill, and on carnival nights it lit up like a birthday cake with a hundred candles. Tonight the great wheel, the carousel, the loops of the roller coaster—all of it stood black against the stars, like a carnival cut out of paper.

“Alllll aboard,” came the Conductor's slow voice. “No hurry... but bring your thinking cap, little traveler. The carnival's run short of moonlight—and the whole town is already walking up the hill.”

Short of MOONLIGHT? Rowan hadn't even known you could run short of that. Down the stairs, coat half on, thinking cap definitely on.

The train is waiting. Turn the page.



Madame Pendule, keeper of the Clockwork Carnival, was an owl of great precision, and she delivered the bad news precisely.

“Tick,” she said. “The facts. Tock. A cloudy week—our moon-collectors caught almost nothing. The jar stands at one quarter. That is enough moonlight to run three rides tonight. Tick. We have nine rides. Tock. The town wants ALL of them!”

Beside her, a small brass monkey named Bolt wrung his oil can like a hat. “I love all nine,” he clicked miserably. “Equally. It's a design flaw.”

Beyond the gates the queue stretched all the way down the hill, lanterns bobbing like a string of fireflies. At moonset the light was DONE—no ride would run at all. Somebody had to choose. And everyone, Rowan realized, was looking at the somebody in the orange coat. Tick looked too. Then he looked at his own feet, in case it was him.

★ **Three rides' worth of light. Nine rides. Where does Rowan start?**

- **The power house — study the ledger:** *If you choose the ledger, every ride's true cost in moonlight is written down, and costs can be compared — but numbers only say what things cost, not what they're worth. → turn to page 5*
- **The queue — ask the town what matters:** *If you choose the queue, the people waiting know what tonight means to them — but a hundred wishes are heavier than one jar, and asking raises hopes that light may not keep. → turn to page 19*
- **The old moon-mill — try to catch MORE light:** *If you choose the mill, the rusty old moon-catcher on the hill might change the whole problem — but it hasn't turned in years, and fixing things eats the very night you're trying to save. → turn to page 33*



The power house smelled of brass polish and old starlight. In the middle, on a pedestal, stood the great glass jar—and Rowan's heart sank a little at the sight of it. One quarter full. The silver light lay at the bottom like the last bit of lemonade at a picnic. Slosh.

One wall held the ledger board: every ride's name with a little dial beside it. Madame Pendule tapped it with a wing-tip. “Tick. The great wheel drinks five measures. The coaster, five. The swing-ship, four. The carousel—one. The swan boats, the teacups, the music box, the swings, the mirror tent—one measure each. Tock. We hold nine measures. Spend them as you see fit.”

Bolt bounced from lever to lever, patting each one fondly. “This one's the wheel! This one's the coaster! This one makes the teacups spin—gently! Or NOT gently—”

So many levers. So little jar. Tick counted the levers on his fingers, ran out of fingers, and started on his toes.

★ How does Rowan spend nine measures of moonlight?

- **Chart it first — cost beside joy, ride by ride:** *If you choose the chart, breaking the big choice into small comparisons shows what each measure really buys — but chalk lines feel slow when a whole town is walking up the hill. → turn to page 9*
- **Throw the big three levers right now:** *If you choose the big three, the wheel, the coaster, and the swing-ship are the famous ones, the postcard ones — surely the carnival IS those three. One pull each. What could a jar-quarter not handle? → turn to page 7*



— The Moonlight Fuse —

Rowan pulled all three levers at once—CLUNK, CLUNK, CLUNK—and for one second, it was GLORIOUS.

The great wheel bloomed silver! The coaster's loops lit up like glowing handwriting! The swing-ship swung one mighty, magnificent swing—

Then the fuse above the jar—a coil of moon-wire as thick as a rope—glowed white, went PANG!, and died heroically, taking every light on the hill with it. Darkness. Total. Tick squeaked. Somewhere in the black, Bolt's voice: “That was the surge-fuse. She protects the jar. She is ALSO,” a clatter, “our only one. So we mend her before anything else lights.”

Mending the fuse cost twenty minutes and—worse—a whole splash of moonlight, gulped down by the surge. The jar now stood BELOW a quarter. Whoops.

“Tick,” said Madame Pendule, not unkindly, into the dark. “Everything at once, and now we have less than we started with. Tock. That is what 'at once' costs, little traveler. Choose next time. Choosing is cheaper.”

🔄 **Go back to page 6 and choose again.**



This time: chalk before levers!

Rowan drew every ride on the power house wall and put its price beside it in little moons. The great wheel: five moons. The coaster: five. The swing-ship: four. Then all the small rides in a happy row—carousel, swans, music box, teacups, swings, mirror tent—one little moon each.

Set out that way, the enormous impossible choice quietly turned into arithmetic a person could hold in one hand. One giant ride... or five small ones... for the very same light!

“And the joy?” Rowan asked. “Which rides matter MOST?”

“Tick. The coaster thrills forty rabbits an hour,” said Pendule. “The carousel carries the same forty—but it carries the ones too small for anything else. And the wheel...” Her round eyes went rounder. “The wheel doesn't carry riders so much as it carries the whole town's looking-up. Tock. Cost is easy, dear. Worth is the puzzle.”

And then the jar began to drip. Turn the page.



It was Bolt who heard it—a sound like a coin dropped in syrup. Plip.

Uh-oh. A seam at the bottom of the jar had opened a hair's width, and moonlight was leaking out one silver drop at a time. Plip... plip... Each drop landed on the floor and fizzled into a tiny useless glow, like a firefly retiring.

“WAX!” hollered Bolt, already climbing. He slapped a patch of chewing-wax over the seam and pressed it down with both paws AND his tail. The dripping slowed. Mostly.

“It'll hold till morning,” he panted. “Probably. But the patch weeps a little. Every minute we stand here deciding, we lose a drop we could have spent.”

Rowan looked at the chalk wall, at the nine little dials, at the town's lanterns gathering outside the gate. Deciding had a price now, too! It was time to pay it—once, and well.

Choose, and choose once. Turn the page.



END OF YOUR FREE SAMPLE

Which three rides will it be?

You've reached the end of the free pages, and the biggest choice of the night is waiting on the very next page.

Chose "The queue — ask the town what matters" or "The old moon-mill — try to catch MORE light" on page 4? Those paths are in the full book too: 9 choices, 3 friendly dead ends and 7 different endings, so it's a new adventure every time you read it.

Start the series — \$49/month

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Next in this file: The Grown-Up's Ticket, your parent guide to Book 5.

Books that branch. Minds that grow.

The Clockwork Carnival has nine wonderful rides — and only enough moonlight for three. ★

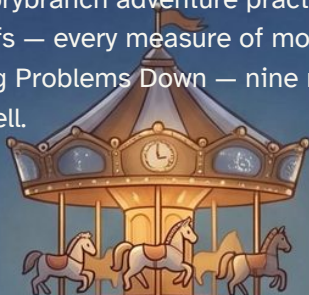
Tonight, every choice belongs to YOU. Chart every ride's cost in the power house? Walk the queue and ask the town what really matters? Climb the hill and wake the old moon-mill? The whole town is walking up the hill, the jar is leaking — plip! — and at moonset, the light is gone.

Storybranch books are parent-guided choose-your-own-adventure-style stories for kids 3–8, made to be read together. You read, they choose — and every fork in the story builds the core skills of smart thinkers for the next AI revolution.

- ★ Read together · ages 3–8
- ★ 9 choices · 7 endings · a new adventure every night
- ★ Book 5 of 30 in The Night Train to Anywhere series

THE SKILLS IN THIS BOOK

Every Storybranch adventure practices two of the seven skills of smart thinkers. This book builds Weigh the Trade-offs — every measure of moonlight spent on one ride is a measure another ride will never get — and Break Big Problems Down — nine rides, a mile of wishes, and a broken mill all give way to small pieces, sorted well.



Storybranch

Books that branch. Minds that grow.



★ ADMIT ONE GROWN-UP ★

The Grown-Up's Ticket

Your guide to reading *The Clockwork Carnival* together

Tonight the Night Train stops at a carnival that runs on moonlight — and there's only enough of it to power three rides before sunrise. The carousel, the gear-swings, the great wheel: everyone wants a different one, and wanting everything is the fastest way to get nothing. Your child — as Rowan — holds the moonlight ledger tonight, and every glowing choice dims another.

And here's the fun part: **your job isn't to teach.** You're the Conductor — you set the pace, do the voices, and ask one good question at the forks. Your child drives. This guide gives you everything you need: the two skills hiding inside the story, two signature "parent moves," a few tricks for making every choice feel like an event, a tracker for the nights ahead, and an observation log for noticing how the thinking grows.

★ PRIMARY SKILL

Weigh the trade-offs

Naming what each path gains *and* gives up before choosing. Anything can generate ten options in a second — choosing well among them is the human job, and it starts here.

✦ SECONDARY SKILL

Break big problems down

Turning one daunting, impossible-looking challenge into ordered, bite-sized steps — the executive-function habit behind every project your child will ever run, with or without AI.

9

CHOICES TO MAKE

7

DIFFERENT ENDINGS

3

FRIENDLY DEAD ENDS

∞

WAYS TO READ IT AGAIN

★ **The one golden rule: never pick for them.** Ask, then wait — even when the silence stretches, even when they're clearly about to pick the "wrong" one. The pause is where the thinking happens, and the wrong turns are where the learning happens. Everything in this book is safe to get wrong.



PRIMARY

Weigh the trade-offs

The habit: every choice buys something and costs something.

Options are cheap — a carnival barker, a wish, or a machine can rattle off ten in a second. Choosing well among them is the human job: naming what each path gains, what it gives up, and which of those we can live with tonight. In this story the moonlight is the budget. Every ride lit is a ride dimmed somewhere else, and every dead end is what happens when "all of it, please!" meets a fuse. At ages 3–8 this looks wonderfully simple: the word "but," and the mighty sentence "we can't have both — which matters more tonight?"

PARENT MOVE №1

The 15-Second Trade-Off Scan

At a fork, before choosing, run the scan — one gain and one give-up per option, out loud: **"The gear-swings are the most fun, but they drink the most moonlight. The carousel only sips it, but it's slow. Which trade are we willing to make?"** Fifteen seconds, no lecture. The magic word is **"but"** — once your child starts adding it to options unprompted, this skill has moved in for good.

✓ TRY SAYING

"If we pick this one, what do we give up?"

"Which one matters most tonight — and why?"

"Is there a third way that gets us most of what we want?"

✗ INSTEAD OF

"Let's do all of them!" (the fuse would like a word)

"Fine, the first one, let's just go."

"There are only two choices." (there almost never are)

SECONDARY

Break big problems down

The habit: no problem gets solved in one move — find the first step.

A carnival is a sequence pretending to be a spectacle: check the fuse, read the ledger, light the rides in order. Once the big choice is made, the winning paths in this book still get there one step at a time — and the child who can name the steps owns the plan, instead of renting one from whoever sounds surest. Watch for steps hiding inside steps: the wheel can't turn until the gears are oiled, and the gears can't be oiled until someone finds the little brass can.

PARENT MOVE №2

The Backwards Map

When the big goal appears, **start from the ending and walk backwards**. Ask: **"We want the great wheel turning at midnight. What would have to be true FIRST? ... And what gets us that?"** Each answer becomes a step; count the steps on your fingers as they name them. Working backwards turns one big impossible wish into a little checkable plan.

Showtime: making every choice a moment

THE GROWN-UP'S TICKET

A choice page is a tiny stage play, and you're the stage manager. You don't need all six of these — pick two that fit your kid and make them *yours*. Rituals are the point: by Book 3, your child will be doing them to *you*.

1 The Conductor's Whistle

When a choice is coming, give a long, low, sleepy "**whooooo...**" — the signal that a Big Decision is pulling into the station. Slow everything down. Decisions get drama; page turns don't.

2 The Finger Hover

One finger hovers over each option while you think out loud together — but **no touching until the choice is made**. The hover makes the pause physical (and very hard to rush).

3 The Ticket Punch

Decision made? Your child "punches the ticket": two firm taps on the chosen option and a squeaky "**Tickets, please!**" No punch, no page turn — Tick the Ticket Mouse insists.

4 Freeze the Picture

On each full-page painting, stop before reading on: "**What do you see? What's about to happen?**" Predict, then read, then check. Wrong guesses are cheered — that's a scientist at work.

5 Ask the Cast

Stuck between options? "**What would the Conductor do? What would Bolt do?**" (Bolt loves all nine rides equally — "*it's a design flaw*" — so his plan is always ALL OF THEM, RIGHT NOW. Which is exactly why he's useful. Even a 3-year-old can spot the problem with a plan that costs everything and keeps nothing.)

6 Swap the Chooser

On re-reads, flip the roles: you choose, your child holds **veto power** — but a veto must come with a reason. Or let a stuffed animal choose, and audit its judgment together. (Be a deliciously bad chooser. Getting overruled is the goal.)

THE VOICES — YOUR FIVE-MEMBER CAST

Rowan

Warm and wondering — but mostly, Rowan speaks with your child's voice. When Rowan decides, hand the line over: "*what do we do?*"

The Conductor

Slow as syrup, deep and sleepy, with looong pauses. The easiest voice in children's literature — and the one they'll beg for. "*No hurry... no hurry at all...*"

Tick the Ticket Mouse

Fast-fast-FAST, squeaky, tremendously official. Sit up straight when he speaks. He is very busy and everything is an emergency.

Madame Pendule

Keeper of the Clockwork Carnival, an owl of great precision. Read her precise as a pocket watch — *tick* — with little pauses — *tock* — between her facts.

Bolt

The carnival's clockwork monkey mechanic, wringing his oil can like a hat. Read him quick and clicky, like happy scissors — and let him love every ride out loud.

Performance note: you need exactly *one* voice you love — the Conductor is the beginner's choice — and the Train needs no voice at all: whistles, hums and rumbles are your child's job. Consistency beats talent. Nobody is grading you, and the reviews in that bedroom are already five stars.

Punch your ticket: the re-read tracker

THE GROWN-UP'S TICKET

One night is one path — but this station holds **seven endings and three secret dead ends**, and no single read finds them all. Keep this page by the bed. After each ride, check off where you landed and give the ending a name of your own invention. Completing the whole card usually takes a week or two of bedtimes ... which is rather the idea.

★ THE SEVEN ENDINGS

☐ Ending 1 _____	☐ Ending 2 _____
☐ Ending 3 _____	☐ Ending 4 _____
☐ Ending 5 _____	☐ Ending 6 _____
☐ Ending 7 _____	

Write the name YOU gave each ending on the line.

• THE THREE DEAD ENDS — A BADGE OF HONOR, NOT A RECORD OF FAILURE

☐ Wrong turn 1 _____	☐ Wrong turn 2 _____
☐ Wrong turn 3 _____	

What did each one teach you? Jot the lesson.

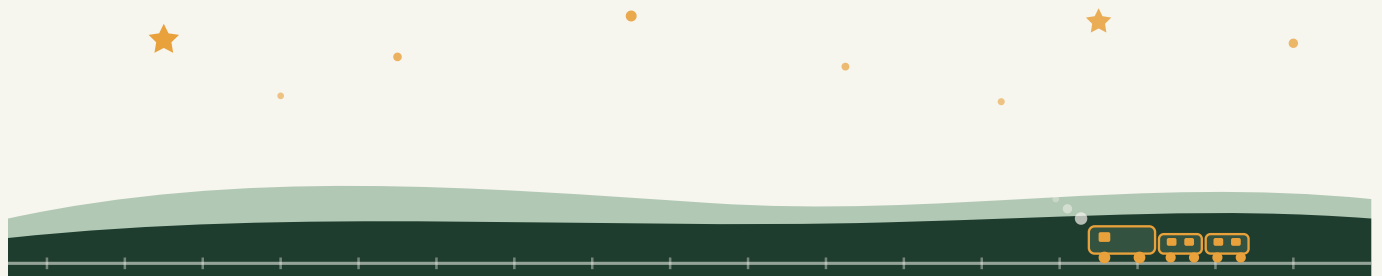
AFTER THE LAST PAGE — THREE LIGHTS-OUT QUESTIONS

1. "Which choice was the hardest tonight — and what made it hard?"
2. "What did we give up tonight — and was the trade worth it?"
3. "Was there a big job that went better because we did it in order?"

Sixty seconds, lights low, no quiz energy. If you only have time for one, ask the second — it's the whole book in a single question.

Same station, different night.

Every reader who boards makes different choices — which means the book your child read tonight isn't quite the book they'll read tomorrow. When you've collected every ending, leave the card in the book: it's the story of how your child learned to think, one fork at a time. Next month, a new station.



The observation log: what you noticed tonight

Page 4 tracks **where the story went**. This page tracks **how your child thought** along the way — the part that carries over to homework, playgrounds and every station still to come. After each read, take a quiet minute to score the six behaviors below. It isn't a test, and "not yet" is honest, useful information: over a few weeks, the *pattern* is what matters.

0 Not yet tonight 1 With a nudge from you 2 On their own *Write the date in the top box of each read.*

WHAT TO WATCH FOR	READ 1	READ 2	READ 3	READ 4	READ 5	READ 6
DATE						
Paused before choosing Waited, thought, or offered an idea before picking an option.						
Went back after a dead end Chose to return to the fork and try a different path.						
Named what went wrong Could say, in their own words, why a wrong turn was wrong.						
Accepted an outcome they didn't want Stayed with the story after a disappointing turn, without a meltdown or a demand to undo it.						
Kept track across pages Remembered something from earlier in the story and used it at a choice.						
Stayed with the story Attention held from the first page to the ending, without needing a break.						
Found choosing stressful tonight Tick if the forks felt like pressure rather than fun. If this gets ticked often, read one path straight through and choose only at the final fork — fewer decisions, same story.						

NOTES — ONE LINE PER NIGHT

READ 1

READ 2

READ 3

READ 4

READ 5

READ 6

Scores aren't grades, and no single night means much. What you're collecting is a picture of a growing mind at work — the same six behaviors, book after book, station after station. Keep the page with the book and compare it to next month's.

