



THE NIGHT TRAIN TO ANYWHERE · BOOK 6

The Upside-Down Orchard

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, very worried about tunnels.

Aunt Juniper — Keeper of the Upside-Down Orchard and the hundred-year Flop Book. Read her slow, warm, and chuckly, with a little wince for her back.

Pockets — The apprentice squirrel with a shovel and a thousand pockets. Read him breathless and bouncy, like he's just run up a hill — which he has.





The Night Train pulled in on the very first crisp night of autumn, under a moon so big and round and golden it looked like somebody had polished it for company.

Rowan smelled this trip before seeing it. A sweetness came creeping under the window—like pears, and honey, and cold wet grass, all at once. It was the kind of smell that makes your mouth water and your feet go looking for your boots all by themselves!

“Alllll aboard,” came the Conductor’s slow, sleepy voice from down below. “No hurry... no hurry at all... but it’s harvest night at the Upside-Down Orchard. I hear the orchard-keeper’s back has gone TWANG, and the moonpears won’t wait. They never do.”

Moonpears? An orchard that was upside-down? Rowan was down the stairs before the Conductor had finished his sentence, one boot on and one boot in hand.

The train is waiting. Turn the page.



The Upside-Down Orchard was exactly what it said it was. The trees grew up the ordinary way—and then their branches bent right over and dove into the ground, tips first, like a swimmer going SPLOOSH! And down there, in a little hollow at the foot of every trunk, the moonpears were ripening. You could see them glowing through the soil: soft silver-gold, like nightlights under a blanket.

“Aunt Juniper,” said a badger leaning on a cane, with a wince. “Keeper of this orchard for forty years, and my back picked TONIGHT to quit. Harvest night, dear! Moonpears ripen once a year under the full moon—and by sunrise they’ve gone sour and hard as stones. The whole town’s winter jam is down in those holes.”

A young squirrel in a vest with a hundred bulging pockets bounced beside her like a rubber ball. “I’m POCKETS! I’m the apprentice! I have a SHOVEL!”

“He has,” sighed Aunt Juniper, “had a shovel every single year.” She looked at Rowan over her spectacles. “Now then. Where would you start?”

★ **Fruit that grows into the ground! Where does Rowan begin?**

- **Read Aunt Juniper's Flop Book:** *If you choose the Flop Book, a hundred years of harvests-gone-wrong are written down, with what each one taught — but reading old mistakes by lamplight is slow, and the moon is already high.* → **turn to page 5**
- **Go to a tree and start trying things:** *If you choose to experiment, every try — flop or not — teaches you something real and fast — but flops bruise moonpears, and a bruised pear is a pear the town can't eat.* → **turn to page 19**
- **Take the stairs down to the root-cellar:** *If you choose the cellar, the fruit hangs from the ceiling down there, in easy reach at last — but the cellar is a maze of roots, and a lantern only shows you the tunnel you're standing in.* → **turn to page 33**



Aunt Juniper's cottage was small, and warm, and mostly bookshelf. On the table lay the Flop Book: leather-bound, thick as a doorstep, and older than the oldest tree in the orchard.

“Every harvest that ever went wrong,” said Juniper, lowering herself into a chair one creak at a time. “From eighteen-seventy-one to last year. What we tried. What happened. What it taught us.” She opened it to a drawing of a badger holding a shovel—with a big cross through it. “My great-great-grandmother. Page one!”

It was a LOT of pages. Pockets, in the doorway, was vibrating like a kettle about to whistle. “Orrrr,” he offered, “SHOVELS! Right now! Obviously! We just dig around the pears and lift them out—it's SO simple, I don't know why nobody has ever—”

Aunt Juniper looked at Rowan over her spectacles and said nothing at all, in the loudest possible way. Tick, who had been nibbling the corner of page one, quietly stopped.

★ Read a hundred years of flops — or grab a shovel?

- **Read the Flop Book carefully first:** *If you choose to read, every entry is a flop somebody already paid for, and what it taught is free to you now — but it's a long book, and Pockets isn't the only one who'd rather be outside. → turn to page 9*
- **Grab shovels and dig the pears out:** *If you choose to dig, you'll be at a tree with dirt flying in two minutes, and it does seem terribly simple — though a hundred years of orchard-keepers had shovels too, didn't they? → turn to page 7*



— The Same Old Shovel —

They dug! Pockets dug like a squirrel—which is to say, everywhere at once—and Rowan dug like a person in a hurry, and the dirt flew, FLUMP, FLUMP, and the glow at the bottom of the hole got closer and closer—

—and the edge of the shovel found the moonpear half a second before Rowan did. CLONK.

Out it rolled: dented, bruised down one side, its glow flickering like a disappointed nightlight. A moonpear, it turned out, was softer than a ripe peach, and just about as fond of shovels.

Aunt Juniper had followed them out at her slow pace, and now she held up the Flop Book, open to a very old drawing. A badger. A shovel. A dented pear. The year 1871 in faded ink, and underneath it: Do not dig. Bruises them. — G.

“Page one,” she said gently. “My great-great-grandmother would like a word.” She tapped the drawing. “A flop that’s already in the book, dear, isn’t a lesson. It’s a repeat! Come and read what she learned—so you don’t have to learn it all over again.”

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



This time Rowan READ. Not skimming for the trick—reading the way you'd read letters from a friend, one at a time, in order.

1871: Dug them. Bruised. 1883: Pulled them by the stem. Stems snapped, fruit stayed put. 1904: Sang to them. (Lovely evening. No effect.) 1922: Tried the shovel again, but gently. Bruised—but gently. 1953—

Rowan stopped. 1953 was different! Waited for the moon-dew, it said. Near midnight, dew forms on the branches—and the fruit LOOSENS all on its own. Pears began slipping free in the hollows. We were too late with baskets; most dropped deeper into the soil and were lost. But—CLOSE.

And under that, in different ink, written years later: Nobody's tried since. Somebody should.

Rowan looked up with the tingly feeling you get when a puzzle piece clicks. Every flop in the book had left a clue—and 1953 had left a DOOR. “Aunt Juniper! What time does the dew come tonight?”

Midnight is coming. Turn the page.



Near midnight, exactly as the book had promised, the moon-dew came.

It formed along the down-curving branches like beads sliding down a string, silver in the moonlight. And where each drop ran down into the soil, the glow in the hollow underneath gave a little answering shiver—the fruit loosening, the way a sleepy hand loosens on a blanket.

1953's mistake had been simple: no baskets ready! So Rowan had spent the last hour with Pockets lining every single hollow with soft things—quilts, blankets, and an entire drawer of Aunt Juniper's spare cardigans—so that whatever slipped loose would land in something kind.

“Fifty-three trees,” panted Pockets, staggering up with the last armful. “Fifty-three hollows! I have used every soft thing in the county. Aunt Juniper's cat has nowhere left to sleep!”

The dew ran faster. Somewhere out in the dark, with a soft WHUMP, the first moonpear let go.

Now the harvest — but how? Turn the page.



END OF YOUR FREE SAMPLE

Can the orchard be harvested?

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

Chose "Go to a tree and start trying things" or "Take the stairs down to the root-cellar" 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.

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Next in this file: The Grown-Up's Ticket, your parent guide to Book 6.

Books that branch. Minds that grow.



In the Upside-Down Orchard, fruit grows INTO the ground — and tonight is picking night!

Tonight, every choice belongs to YOU. Read a hundred years of flops in Aunt Juniper's Flop Book? Try things at the trees and learn from every flop? Climb down into the root-cellar beneath the roots? Pockets has a shovel, the moon is climbing — and by sunrise the moonpears turn sour, unless someone learns the trick in time.

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 6 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 Learn From Every Outcome — every flop is a clue; repeating one is the only real mistake — and Think First, Then Ask — the book before the shovel.

Storybranch

Books that branch. Minds that grow.

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★ ADMIT ONE GROWN-UP ★

The Grown-Up's Ticket

Your guide to reading *The Upside-Down Orchard* together

Tonight the Night Train stops at an orchard where the fruit grows down into the ground — and every picking plan that works in a right-side-up orchard flops here, sometimes gloriously. That's not a problem; that's the curriculum. Your child — as Rowan — is about to learn what every gardener and every scientist knows: the first try is a rough draft, and the flops are how the orchard teaches you the trick.

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

Learn from every outcome

Treating every result — especially the flops — as information. First tries are rough drafts; the skill is asking "*what did that just teach us?*" and adjusting the next attempt.

✦ SECONDARY SKILL

Think first, then ask

Forming your own idea *before* reaching for help — the anchor habit that keeps kids the authors of their thinking instead of passengers of whatever a tool (or a talking earthworm) suggests first.

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

Learn from every outcome

The habit: a flop is feedback, not a verdict.

First answers — from kids, from grown-ups, and from machines — are rough drafts. The children who thrive won't be the ones who never flop; they'll be the ones who mine every flop for its lesson and change *something* on the next pass. In this orchard that's literal: every dead end is what happens when a failed plan gets repeated exactly, only hoped-at harder — and each one loops back so your child can adjust instead. Your reaction at a flop teaches more than the page does: groan, and failure is shameful; grin, and failure is interesting.

PARENT MOVE №1

The Dead-End Post-Mortem

When a plan flops, **resist flipping back right away**. First: **"Ooh — a flop! Before we go back ... what did that try just teach us? What will we change?"** Ten seconds of detective work, then flip back with full ceremony. Try counting the harvest out loud — **"lesson number two, collected!"** — so flops become fruit, not embarrassment.

✓ TRY SAYING

✗ INSTEAD OF

"What did that try teach us?"

"Well, *THAT* didn't work."

"What will we do differently this time?"

"Try it again!" (the same way, but harder)

"What surprised us just now?"

"See? I knew that would happen." (nothing grows from I-told-you-so)

SECONDARY

Think first, then ask

The habit: my own hunch comes before anyone's answer.

Upside-down fruit rewards a look before a grab. The other half of learning from a flop is having had a real plan in the first place — you can't adjust a plan you never made. A child who says *"I think the fruit will pop up if we pull the leaves"* has built something testable; when the orchard disagrees, the surprise actually teaches. A child who just grabbed learns only that grabbing didn't work.

PARENT MOVE №2

The Blind Pitch

When a problem appears, **cover the choices with your hand** before reading them aloud. Ask: **"If you were standing in that orchard right now, what's the very first thing YOU would try?"** Let them pitch their own plan — then reveal the options and see if the book thought of it. Their idea comes first, before anyone's menu can bias it.

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 Pockets do?"** (Pockets' plan is always *"the same as last year — but with a SHOVEL, and harder."* Which is exactly why it's useful. Even a 3-year-old can spot a plan that already flopped bouncing back for another go.)

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.

Aunt Juniper

Keeper of the Upside-Down Orchard and the hundred-year Flop Book — an elderly badger with a cane and a bad back. Read her slow, warm, and chuckly, with a wince for her back and a raised eyebrow for every shovel.

Pockets

The apprentice squirrel with a shovel and a thousand pockets. Read him breathless and bouncy, like he's just run up a hill — which he has — and very, very sure this time will work.

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.

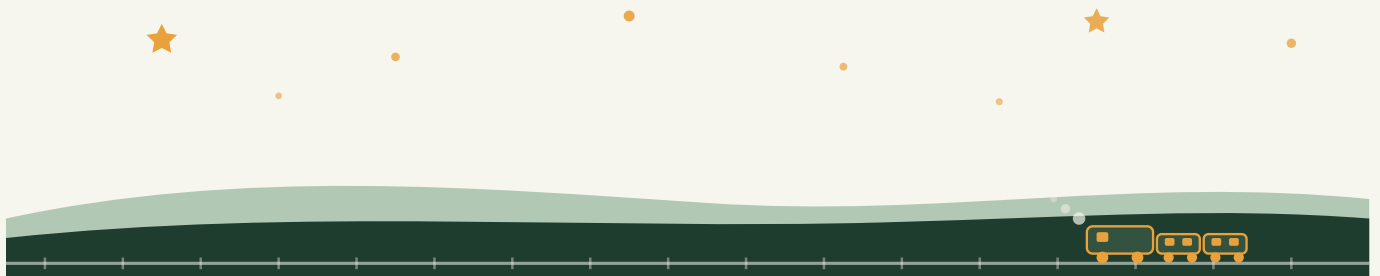
AFTER THE LAST PAGE — THREE LIGHTS-OUT QUESTIONS

1. "Which choice was the hardest tonight — and what made it hard?"
2. "What flopped tonight — and what did the flop teach us?"
3. "What did we do differently on our second try?"

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

THE GROWN-UP'S
TICKET

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.

