

THE NIGHT TRAIN TO ANYWHERE · BOOK 13

The Backwards River

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, sleepiest rumble.

Tick the Ticket Mouse — Punches the tickets, panics the loudest. Read him fast-fast-FAST, squeaky and tremendously official — and tonight, writing lessons on his ticket.

Grandfather Alder — The ferry-beaver, who has run the river a thousand times and written down every run. Read him slow and gravelly, like a log settling — and let his pencil scratch after every mistake.

Dart — The kingfisher, who has one plan for everything: HARDER. Read him fast, bright, and loud, every sentence a shout — until he learns, and gets quieter.





The Night Train came on a night full of the sound of water—but the water sounded **WRONG**. Rowan lay in bed and listened. A river was running somewhere outside. Rivers always run downhill. This one, somehow, sounded like a bath emptying backwards. Glug-glug-gluuuup.

Rowan opened the window. The train stood beside a wooden dock hung with lanterns, and past the dock was a wide silver river—flowing the wrong way! Every ripple, every wave, every floating leaf was climbing the valley toward a dark mountain.

“Alllll aboard,” said the Conductor. “No hurry. But it's Backwards Night at Ferry Landing—once a year the river runs uphill, and the Moonlings ride it up to bed. Only tonight the weir gate's stuck. And old Alder, who knows that river better than anyone, says everything he knows about it is exactly wrong.”

A river that runs UP? Rowan had to see that. Boots, coat, stairs—gone.

The train is waiting. Turn the page.



Ferry Landing was a dock, a lantern, and a stout old beaver in a teal oilskin coat with a logbook the size of a door. Below the dock, the water glittered: hundreds—THOUSANDS—of tiny silver fish, glowing, all pointed uphill, all waiting.

“Moonlings,” said Grandfather Alder. “Once a year the river runs up to the Source Lake, and they ride it there to sleep the winter. Tonight the gate at Halfway Weir is jammed. If it’s not open by midnight, they sleep in the cold river instead—and some won’t wake.”

A small blue kingfisher in a yellow life-vest zipped past Rowan’s ear—ZIP! “So GO! Paddle HARDER! Faster!” “That’s Dart,” sighed Alder. “I’ve run this river a thousand times, and every run is in this book. But tonight the water’s backwards—and every single thing I know is wrong way round.”

Tick peered down at the glowing fish. “Are they all... looking at us?” They were.

★ **A river running the wrong way, and a gate to open by midnight! How does Rowan go?**

- **Take Alder’s ferry-raft, the way Alder always goes:** *If you choose the raft, you have the river’s oldest expert and his whole logbook — though every page in it was written for a river running the other way. → turn to page 5*
- **Row the little boat straight out into the middle current:** *If you choose the rowboat, the middle of the river is rushing uphill, right where you want to go — but it’s fast, and nobody has ever ridden it this way before. → turn to page 19*
- **Follow Dart’s shortcut through the Reed Maze:** *If you choose Dart, he flies over the reeds every day and knows every channel — from the air. From a boat, between the reeds, it may look different. → turn to page 33*



The ferry-raft was six logs, a rail, and a lantern on a pole. Grandfather Alder pushed off with his tail—SPLAT—and the raft drifted out into the slow water along the bank.

“The old way,” said Alder, “is this. Keep to the bank, where the water's lazy. Pole hard. Count your strokes. A thousand strokes to the weir.” He said it the way you'd say a prayer.

Rowan looked out at the middle of the river. The middle was NOT lazy. The middle was rushing uphill like a silver road, fast and bright, exactly the way they wanted to go!

“HARDER!” said Dart, from the lantern pole. “Pole HARDER! A thousand strokes! Go go go!”

Alder's pencil hovered over his logbook, and did not write.

★ **Pole up the bank the old way — or read the book first?**

- **Pole hard along the bank, the way Alder always has:** *If you choose the old way, it has worked a thousand times — though every one of those times, the river was going the other direction. → turn to page 7*
- **Stop, and read what the logbook says about the last Backwards Night:** *If you choose the book, somebody ran this river backwards once before, long ago, and wrote it down — but reading is slow, and the Moonlings are waiting. → turn to page 9*



— The Old Way —

Rowan poled. HARD. One, two, three—the raft crept along the bank, and Dart shouted the count, and Alder's tail thumped, and for twenty strokes it felt exactly like it was working.

Then Rowan noticed the dock. It was getting CLOSER.

The lazy water along the bank was not lazy tonight. It was sliding gently downhill—the wrong way, the old way—and with every hard stroke the raft went up a foot and slid back two, until it bumped, softly, into the very dock it had left from. Bonk.

“HARDER!” said Dart. So they did it again, harder. Twenty strokes. The dock. Bonk. Again!

Alder finally wrote. “Run one: the bank runs backwards. Run two: same, but harder. Harder didn't help.” He looked up at Rowan. “A run that fails is still a run,” he said. “The only wasted run is the one you don't learn from. What did these two tell us?”

Rowan looked at the bank, and then at the fast bright middle. “That the old way is the wrong way,” Rowan said. “Tonight.”

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



Alder turned back through the logbook—back, back, past a thousand runs, to a page so old it was brown. It wasn't his writing. It was his grandmother's, from the last Backwards Night she'd ever run, fifty years ago.

A wavy line for the river. An arrow up the middle. An arrow down along the bank. And four words: 'Don't fight it. Ride it.'

"She never told me," said Alder softly. "She wrote it down instead. For whoever came next."

Rowan looked at the middle of the river, rushing uphill like a road. "Then we ride it!" One push of the pole, out of the bank water, and the current took the raft like a hand and carried it up the valley, fast and smooth, with nobody poling at all. WHOOSH.

"Run three," said Alder, writing. "The middle. Rode it. Didn't fight." Dart, for once, said nothing. He was too busy holding on to his vest with both wings.

Turn the page.



The river carried them a mile in minutes, and then it ROARED. Ahead, the Tumble Rapids: a steep stretch of big round rocks where, on any other night, the water crashed down in white steps.

Tonight it crashed UP. White foam climbed the rocks like a staircase, pouring uphill from one pool to the next, and the raft bumped and slowed at the bottom step.

Alder found the page. “Tumble Rapids: shoot the V’s. Where the water makes a V between two rocks, aim for the point.” He looked up. Every V in the rapids tonight pointed the wrong way! “I don’t know this river,” he said. “Not tonight.”

“Then we learn it,” said Rowan. “Not all of it. One rock at a time.”

Dart, hovering, could see the whole rapids from above. Rowan, on the raft, could see only the first step. That gave Rowan two ideas.

Turn the page.



END OF YOUR FREE SAMPLE

How do you cross a backwards river?

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

Chose "Row the little boat straight out into the middle current" or "Follow Dart's shortcut through the Reed Maze" 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 13.

Books that branch. Minds that grow.

Tonight the river runs uphill — and every plan that ever worked on it works exactly wrong!

Tonight, every choice belongs to YOU. Pole up the bank the old way? Ride the backwards rapids one rock at a time? Row harder through a spinning pool, or stop and watch a leaf? The weir gate is jammed, a thousand Moonlings are waiting, and midnight is climbing the sky.

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 13 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 — a run that fails is still a run — and Break Big Problems Down, one rock at a time.

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 Backwards River* together

Tonight the Night Train stops at Ferry Landing on Backwards Night — the one night a year the Wending River runs uphill, from the sea to the Source Lake, carrying a thousand tiny glowing Moonlings up to their winter sleep. Only the weir gate is jammed, midnight is climbing the sky, and Grandfather Alder, who has run this river a thousand times and written down every run, says everything he knows about it is exactly wrong. Your child — as Rowan — is about to learn that on a river like this, the only way up is to try, watch what happens, write it down, and try something different.

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 ones that don't work — as information about the next try. The bank runs backwards; the pool spins faster; the pole snaps. Each one is the river telling you something, if you stop to read it.

✦ SECONDARY SKILL

Break big problems down

Turning one roaring, impossible-looking job into a stack of small ones — seven rapids-steps, a hundred twigs before one log, forty-one stairs — so each piece is easy and each one teaches the next.

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 run that fails is still a run — write it down.

Most of what your child will ever learn to do well, they'll learn by getting it slightly wrong first. That's not a bug in learning; it's the mechanism — and in a world where a machine will happily generate ten confident plans a second, the child who can look at a result and say *"that told me something"* is the one still steering. Grandfather Alder's enormous logbook is this book's engine: every run goes in, the good ones and the bad ones, *especially* the bad ones. Every winning path here is a chain of small tries, each read for what it teaches — too far left, stuck at the top, round not through. And every dead end is the same plan again, louder: Dart's *"HARDER!"* At ages 3–8 this looks wonderfully simple: after something doesn't work, saying out loud what it taught you before trying again.

PARENT MOVE № 1

The Dead-End Post-Mortem

When a try flops or the boat slides back to the dock, **resist flipping back right away**. First: *"Ooh — that one didn't work! Before we go back ... what did the river just tell us? What would we do differently?"* Ten seconds of detective work, then flip back with full ceremony. Try keeping a logbook of your own — a finger for each run — and counting out loud: **"run number two, written down!"** Misses become lessons, not embarrassment. (Use it at least once a night.)

✓ TRY SAYING

✗ INSTEAD OF

"Hmm, that didn't work. What did it teach us?"

"Try again, harder!" (Dart's plan — and the dock is right there)

"Same result twice — what's the river saying?"

"Bad luck. One more time." (two runs, same result, isn't luck)

"What's the first small piece we could try?"

"Just push the whole thing!" (Pomfret heaved for an hour)

SECONDARY

Break big problems down

The habit: make the big thing small before you touch it.

Look at how Rowan handles the Tumble Rapids: not as one roaring wall of foam, but as seven steps, each one ridden, checked, and written down before the next. Or the jammed gate: not one tree to heave at, but a hundred twigs holding the tree, and then one bare log a bullfrog can roll. The two skills in this book are secretly one skill: you can only learn from an outcome if the try was small enough to have one. Break it down, try a piece, read the result, try the next. That's the whole river.

PARENT MOVE № 2

The Backwards Map

When the big goal appears, **start from the ending and walk backwards**. Ask: *"We need the gate open. 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 — and fingers make the plan visible.

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 Dart do?**" (Dart's answer to every result is "**AGAIN! HARDER!**" — which is exactly why he's useful. Even a 3-year-old can hear that 'harder' isn't a different plan; it's the same plan, louder. And watch him learn: the first time he says "*...I think*" is a big moment.)

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.

Grandfather Alder

The ferry-beaver — stout, elderly, in a teal oilskin coat and flat cap, with a logbook the size of a door and a pencil behind his ear. Read him slow and gravelly, like a log settling, and give his pencil a little *scratch-scratch* after every mistake. He never says 'I told you so,' because he never does.

Dart

The kingfisher — tiny, brilliant blue, in a yellow life-vest, with one plan for everything. Read him fast, bright and LOUD, every sentence a shout — and let him get quieter, visibly, as the night teaches him something.

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.

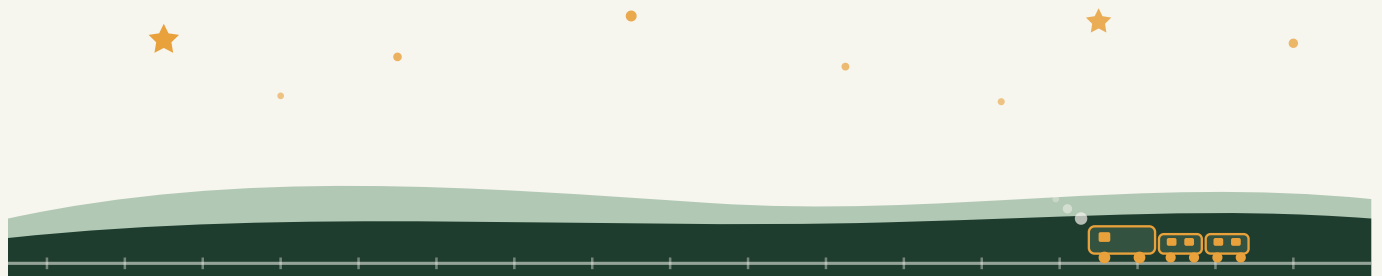
AFTER THE LAST PAGE — THREE LIGHTS-OUT QUESTIONS

1. "Which choice was the hardest tonight — and what made it hard?"
2. "What went wrong tonight — and what did it teach us about the next try?"
3. "What was the biggest job — and what was the first small piece we did?"

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.

