



THE NIGHT TRAIN TO ANYWHERE · BOOK 14

The Firefly Festival

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, counting fireflies on a slate.

Grandmother Lumen — The Lamplighter — the oldest firefly in the meadow, who has counted every light she has. Read her soft and warm and unhurried, like a candle that has decided not to flicker.

Flicker — The young firefly who promises everyone everything. Read him bright, quick, and thrilled with himself — and let him go quiet, for the first time in his life, when he finally counts.





The Night Train came on a warm night—so warm Rowan had kicked the blanket right off the bed—and outside the window the dark was full of tiny lights. Not stars. Lower than stars, and MOVING, drifting over a wide meadow like sparks that had forgotten to go out.

In the middle of the meadow stood one enormous old oak, dark, with a few of the lights gathering at its roots like they were waiting for something.

“Alllll aboard,” said the Conductor, very softly, as if the lights might scatter. “No hurry. But it's the Firefly Festival at Glimmer Meadow—once a year they light the Great Oak from root to crown. Only tonight, I'm told, two little ones are lost in the woods. And the fireflies have light enough for the festival, or for the path home. Not both.”

Rowan looked at the thousand tiny lights, and the one dark tree, and thought: that's a puzzle. Then: that's a puzzle I want to SEE. Coat on!

The train is waiting. Turn the page.



Glimmer Meadow was a bowl of summer grass with the Great Oak in the middle and every creature for a mile around on blankets at its roots—voles, dormice, moths, rabbits—waiting. Above them drifted thousands of fireflies, saving their light.

On a low branch sat the oldest: Grandmother Lumen, the Lamplighter, glowing soft amber under a knitted shawl. “Each of us has one night of light,” she told Rowan. “Spend it on the Oak, and the meadow has its festival. Spend it on the path, and the little ones get home. I have counted. There is not enough for both.”

“There IS!” A small firefly in a red cap zipped round Rowan’s head—zzzip, zzzip! “Both! Easy! And the bridge!” “That’s Flicker,” sighed Lumen. “He promises. He has never once counted.”

At the meadow’s edge, where the dark ferns began, two small hedgehogs stood holding hands. Tick saw them, and stopped fidgeting.

★ **One night of light, and two things that need it! Where does Rowan start?**

- **Go to the lost hedgehogs and the path home first:** *If you choose the path, two frightened little ones come first — but a path through the woods is long, and light spent there is light the festival never gets. → turn to page 5*
- **Look for a way to make the light go further:** *If you choose to stretch the light, maybe there’s a cheaper way to light a path than lining every step of it — but clever takes time, and the little ones are waiting in the dark. → turn to page 19*
- **Ask the whole meadow what they’d give up:** *If you choose to ask, it’s everyone’s festival and everyone’s light — but a hundred creatures want a hundred different things, and Flicker will promise all of them. → turn to page 33*



The hedgehogs were called Thistle and Tuft. They had come from Far Hollow, over the woods, to see the Oak light up, and the path had been easy in the daylight and was not there AT ALL in the dark.

“It’s a mile,” said Grandmother Lumen. “Twelve turns, and the Boggy Crossing in the middle. To line it with light takes every firefly I have. The Oak would stay dark. All of it.”

Rowan looked back at the meadow—a hundred creatures on blankets, waiting all year for one night.

“Half!” said Flicker, spinning in a loop. “Half the fireflies on the path, half on the Oak! Half a path and half a tree! Everybody gets SOMETHING!”

It sounded fair. Rowan thought about it. Half a path. Tick thought about it too, and frowned, and counted something on his fingers that didn’t come out right.

★ **Split the light in half — or count what each thing really costs?**

- **Do half and half, so everybody gets something:** *If you choose half and half, it sounds like the fair thing — but half a path ends in the dark, and half a festival is a strange sort of festival. → turn to page 7*
- **Stop and count exactly what the path costs before spending anything:** *If you choose to count, you’ll know what you’re really trading — but counting takes time, and Thistle has started to cry. → turn to page 9*



— Half and Half —

Half the fireflies flew to the path and half to the Oak, and for a moment it looked like the best of both!

Then Rowan walked the path with the hedgehogs. The light ran along the ferns, warm and gold—for six turns. At the seventh it STOPPED, and the woods beyond were as black as a closed box, and Thistle and Tuft stood at the edge of the last glow and would not go one step further.

Back in the meadow, the Oak was lit in patches: a glow here, a glow there, and the crown dark. The voles clapped politely. Pat, pat, pat. Nobody danced.

“Half a path,” said Grandmother Lumen, when Rowan came back, “is a path to the middle of the woods. And half a festival is a lot of creatures being polite. You didn't give everybody something. You gave everybody NOT-ENOUGH.”

Flicker, who had promised, had gone very quiet. “Everything costs what it costs,” said Lumen. “Splitting it doesn't make it cheaper. It just makes it not work twice!”

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



So Rowan sat in the grass and counted, with Lumen on one knee and Tick on the other.

The path: a mile. Rowan had walked a mile before—about a thousand steps.

“One firefly lights ten steps,” said Lumen. “A hundred fireflies for the path. And a hundred fireflies is what lights the crown of the Oak.”

There it was, then! Not “the festival or the path.” Smaller than that, and sharper: the CROWN, or the path. The roots and the trunk would still glow either way.

“A hundred,” Rowan said. “Not all of them. The crown.”

“That's still a lot,” said Tick. “Yes,” said Rowan. “But now I know what it IS.”

Flicker, for once, had counted too—on all six legs—and looked very surprised at the answer. “Oh,” he said. “Oh! That's... a real number.”

Turn the page.



Rowan climbed onto a root and told the meadow. ALL of it: the two hedgehogs, the mile, the hundred fireflies, and what a hundred fireflies was—the crown of the Oak, dark, tonight.

There was a silence. Then a very old dormouse in a nightcap said, “I’ve seen the crown lit sixty times. I’ve never seen a hedgehog get home in the dark.” And a moth said the roots were the best part anyway, and a vole said she couldn’t see the crown from down there in any case, and it was decided!

Nobody had to like it. Rowan noticed that. They just had to know what it cost, and choose it anyway.

Which left the question of HOW. Lumen had two ideas, and so did Rowan.

Turn the page.



END OF YOUR FREE SAMPLE

Festival lights, or the path home?

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

Chose "Look for a way to make the light go further" or "Ask the whole meadow what they'd give up" 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

A new adventure every month · parent guide included · shipping included (US & Canada)

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Next in this file: The Grown-Up's Ticket, your parent guide to Book 14.

Books that branch. Minds that grow.

The fireflies have light enough for the festival, or for the path home — but not both!

Tonight, every choice belongs to YOU. Split the light in half so everyone gets something? Put a firefly on every step, just to be safe? Promise the whole meadow whatever it asks for? Two lost hedgehogs are waiting at the edge of the woods, and one night of light only goes so far.

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 14 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 — count what it costs, and who pays — and Choose What's Right, even when it costs you.

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 Firefly Festival* together

Tonight the Night Train stops at Glimmer Meadow on the one night a year the fireflies light the Great Oak from root to crown — and two small hedgehogs are lost at the edge of the woods. Every firefly has one night of light. Spend it on the Oak, and the meadow has its festival. Spend it on the path, and the little ones get home. Grandmother Lumen has counted, and there is not enough for both. Your child — as Rowan — is about to learn that there is no choice in this meadow that costs nothing, and that the only bad choices are the ones that pretend otherwise.

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

Seeing what a choice really costs — and who pays — before making it. A hundred fireflies is the crown; twenty is the star plus a risk; walking costs the walker. Every option has a price tag, and the skill is reading it.

✦ SECONDARY SKILL

Choose what's right

Naming what matters most out loud — two frightened little ones first — and then finding the fairest way to pay for it, even when the fairest way costs you your own night.

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: everything costs what it costs — say the price before you choose.

Children are natural bargainers, and the bargain they reach for first is the one where nobody has to give anything up: half and half, a bit for everyone, 'just to be safe.' This book lets that wish fail three times, gently, and each time for the same reason — one night of light spread thin is a very thin night. Every winning path does the opposite: it counts. Not 'the festival or the path,' but exactly a hundred fireflies, which is exactly the crown. Once the price is that clear, the meadow can pay it with open eyes, and a festival with something missing feels nothing like a festival that feels like a cheat. In a world where tools will happily promise your child everything at once, the habit of asking "*what does this cost, and who pays?*" is the one that keeps them honest with themselves. At ages 3–8 this looks wonderfully simple: naming what you'd have to give up before you say yes.

PARENT MOVE №1

The 15-Second Trade-Off Scan

At a choice page, before anyone picks, **hold up two hands**. Say: "***This hand is what we GET. This hand is what we GIVE UP. Fill them for me — what goes in each?***" Fifteen seconds, both hands, every option. Then ask which trade they'd make. Kids who can fill the 'give up' hand out loud have already done the hardest part of the thinking — and they notice, all by themselves, when a plan has nothing in that hand at all. (Use it at least once a night.)

✓ TRY SAYING

✗ INSTEAD OF

"What does that one cost — and who pays it?"

"Let's just do a bit of both!" (*half a path ends in the dark*)

"If we say yes to this, what are we saying no to?"

"Put fireflies everywhere, just to be safe." (*safe costs light too*)

"Who needs it most — and whose is it to give?"

"Tell everyone they'll get what they want." (*Flicker's promise, and nobody gets anything whole*)

SECONDARY

Choose what's right

The habit: say what's right first — then find the fair way to pay for it.

Two hedgehogs who can't vote, at a festival that isn't theirs, while a hundred creatures who waited all year look at the dark crown. The right thing here isn't hidden — even the old dormouse can see it — but the book makes your child say it, out loud, in front of everyone, and then work out how to afford it. Watch for the quiet moment on the Boggy Crossing: Rowan can spend the meadow's star, or spend Rowan's own festival by walking the bridge. Both are fair. One is Rowan's to give. That's the second skill: not just knowing what's right, but choosing the price that's yours.

PARENT MOVE №2

The Compass vs. Clock Test

When a choice is really easy versus *right*, **hold up two fists** — one is the clock (quick, comfortable, everyone smiles now), one is the compass (the right thing, whatever it costs). Ask: "***Which fist is 'promise everyone everything'? Which one is 'tell them the real cost'? ... Which fist does Rowan want to be holding at the end of the night?***" Let them tap the fist. Then read on and see whether the story agrees — and what the compass cost, and whether it was worth 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 Flicker do?**" (Flicker's plan is always "**BOTH! Easy! And the bridge!**") — a promise with nothing in the 'give up' hand — which is exactly why he's useful. Even a 3-year-old can hear a plan that costs nothing and suspect it. And watch him learn: the first time he counts on all six legs 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.

Grandmother Lumen

The Lamplighter — the oldest firefly in the meadow, plump and amber-glowing in a knitted lavender shawl, who has counted every light she has. Read her soft, warm and unhurried, like a candle that has decided not to flicker; she never raises her voice, and she never rounds up.

Flicker

The young firefly in the red cap who promises everyone everything. Read him bright, quick and thrilled with himself, every sentence ending in an exclamation — and let him go quiet, visibly, for the first time in his life, when he finally counts.

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.

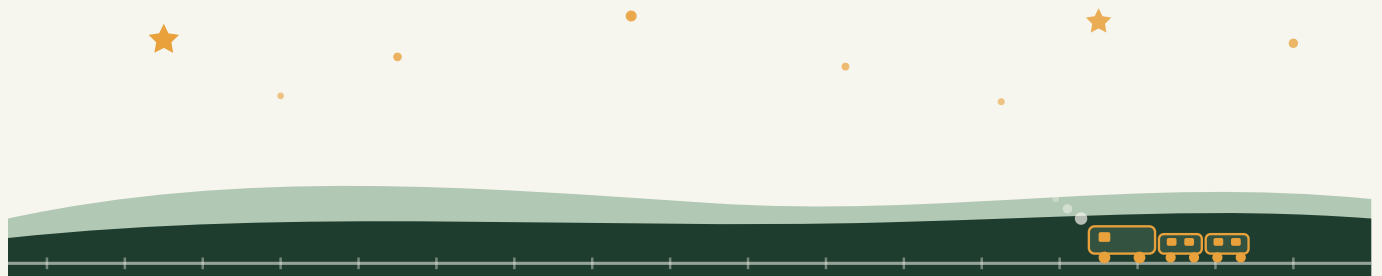
AFTER THE LAST PAGE — THREE LIGHTS-OUT QUESTIONS

1. "Which choice was the hardest tonight — and what made it hard?"
2. "What did tonight's choice cost — and who paid for it? Was it worth it?"
3. "What was the right thing tonight — and was the right thing also the easy thing?"

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.

