

THE NIGHT TRAIN TO ANYWHERE · BOOK 17

The Mirror Maze Meadow

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, holding the thread very tight.

Granny Loom — The gatekeeper — a round, soft, teapot-sized spider who has watched a hundred years of travelers walk into glass. Read her slow and cozy and unsurprised, with a little click of knitting needles between sentences.

Jinx — The young jackdaw who loves anything shiny and is sure about all of it. Read him quick, bright, and thrilled — 'THAT one!' — and let him go quiet, and look at the ground, when he finally learns to tap first.





The Night Train came on a night so bright that Rowan thought, for a moment, that it was morning. It wasn't! It was the moon, and it was EVERYWHERE—bouncing, glittering, doubled and doubled again, as if the whole world outside had been made of glass.

Rowan opened the window. Beyond the train lay a meadow, and in the meadow stood mirrors: hundreds of them, tall as doors, in wooden frames, arranged in rows and turns like the walls of a maze. A small black bird flew over them with something shiny in its beak.

“Alllll aboard,” said the Conductor. “No hurry. But that's the Mirror Maze Meadow, and it only stands one night a year. Every mirror shows a path, and most of them aren't there. The Heart Lantern in the middle has gone out, I'm told, and a family of quails is lost inside. Nobody finds the middle by looking. That's rather the point.”

A maze you can't find by LOOKING? Rowan looked at it anyway, hard, and then went to get the orange coat.

The train is waiting. Turn the page.



The gate stood between two lantern posts, and on one post sat a spider the size of a teapot—round, soft, grey-lilac, in spectacles and a knitted shawl—winding silver thread onto a spool. Click, click, click.

“Granny Loom,” she said. “I’ve kept this gate for longer than the mirrors have stood. Listen, dear. A mirror shows you what you’d LIKE to see. The real path shows in more than one place—in the glass AND on the ground, or in the glass AND on the end of a stick. Look for what agrees.”

“THAT one!” A young jackdaw with a brass button round his neck hopped along the gate, pointing a wing at a mirror where a golden archway glittered. “The gold one! Look how SHINY—” “That’s Jinx,” said Granny Loom. “He likes shiny. Shiny isn’t the same as there.”

Rowan looked at the archway. It was very shiny. Tick looked at it too, and his whiskers went sideways with wanting.

★ **A maze of paths, and most of them aren't there! How does Rowan find the real one?**

- **Test every path with a stick before stepping into it:** *If you choose the stick, glass goes clink and a real gap doesn't — slow, but a stick can't be fooled by shiny. → turn to page 5*
- **Take Granny Loom's silver thread and let it lead:** *If you choose the thread, it only runs where there's a real gap — though silver thread shows up in mirrors too, and so does everything else. → turn to page 19*
- **Follow the clues on the ground — footprints and bent grass:** *If you choose the ground, the quails left a trail — but mirrors reflect footprints as well as paths, and a reflected footprint leads into glass. → turn to page 33*



Just inside the gate the maze split. On the left, a mirror as tall as a door showed a golden archway with a bright path beyond it—the prettiest thing Rowan had ever seen a meadow do. On the right, a plain dark gap between two frames, with trodden grass. “Left!” said Jinx, already flying at the arch. “Gold! Obviously! Who’d hide a lantern down a BORING gap?”

Tick, on Rowan’s shoulder, said the gold one did look very official.

Rowan had a stick, and a rule from Granny Loom, and a strong feeling that the golden arch was exactly the sort of thing a mirror would show you if it wanted you to walk into it!

★ The golden arch — or the boring gap?

- **Go through the golden archway — it’s obviously the way:** *If you choose the arch, it’s bright and beautiful and pointing exactly where you want to go — which is what a mirror does best. → turn to page 7*
- **Tap both with the stick first:** *If you choose to tap, glass rings and grass doesn’t — a two-second test that a shiny reflection can’t pass. → turn to page 9*



— The Prettiest Path —

Rowan walked toward the golden archway, and it got closer, and brighter, and more golden, and then—BONK!

Glass. Cold, smooth, and nose-shaped. Tick fell off Rowan's shoulder. Jinx, who had flown at the arch first, was sitting on the grass with his feathers going in several directions at once.

Then the mirrors **MOVED**. Not much—a quarter turn each, quiet as doors—and when they stopped, Rowan was standing at the gate. The same gate. With Granny Loom on the post, winding thread.

“The prettiest reflection,” she said, “walked you home. It always does. That's what it's for.” “But it looked so—” “It **LOOKED**. Looking isn't the test, dear. Everything in here looks. What did it feel like?” Rowan rubbed a nose. “Glass.”

“Then next time,” said Granny Loom, “feel first.”

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



Tap. The stick touched the golden arch and stopped, with a small clear ring like a spoon on a glass. Tink! Rowan pushed. The stick did not go anywhere. The arch was a picture.

Tap. The stick went into the boring gap and kept going, and touched grass, and bent a clover.

“Clink means glass,” said Rowan. “No clink means THERE.” Jinx, who had been very sure about the gold, said nothing, and then said, “...the gap is a bit shiny too, if you look at it right.”

They went through the gap. Behind them, the golden arch went on glittering at nobody at all.

Turn the page.



The stick worked! Clink, clink, no clink—and Rowan went where the no-clink was, deeper and deeper, until the maze forked into three gaps at once, and the stick went through all three.

Three real gaps. Only one led to the middle. The stick couldn't tell which; a stick only knows glass from not-glass.

Rowan crouched with the lantern. In the left gap, nothing. In the middle gap, nothing. In the right gap, half hidden in the grass: three small speckled feathers, and a scatter of tiny three-toed footprints, all pointing the same way.

Quails! Rowan had a hunch—a proper one, the kind you get before anyone tells you anything. Jinx opened his beak to have an opinion. “Wait,” said Rowan, and Jinx, amazingly, waited.

Turn the page.



END OF YOUR FREE SAMPLE

Which path is real?

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

Chose "Take Granny Loom's silver thread and let it lead" or "Follow the clues on the ground — footprints and bent grass" 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 17.

Books that branch. Minds that grow.

A meadow of standing mirrors shows paths that aren't there — and only what all the clues agree on is real! ★

Tonight, every choice belongs to YOU. Walk through the golden archway because it's the prettiest? Take a shortcut to a lantern you know is out? Follow your own reflection? A family of quails is lost inside, and every mirror in the meadow would love to walk you home.

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 17 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 Spot What's Not True — test it, don't just look — and Think First, Then Ask, so a shiny answer can't push yours aside.

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 Mirror Maze Meadow* together

Tonight the Night Train stops at a meadow that stands one night a year: hundreds of tall mirrors in wooden frames, arranged like the walls of a maze, and every one of them shows a path. Most of the paths aren't there. The Heart Lantern in the middle has gone out, a family of quails is lost inside, and Granny Loom, the gatekeeper, has one rule: the real path shows in more than one place. Your child — as Rowan — is about to learn that the most convincing thing in the meadow is a picture of exactly what you'd like to see, and that the way to beat it is a test, not a look.

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

Spot what's not true

Telling a claim from a fact — a golden arch, a shortcut, your own reflection walking somewhere you aren't — by testing it against something that can't be faked: a stick, a thread, a dent, a shadow. Two clues that agree, or it's glass.

✦ SECONDARY SKILL

Think first, then ask

Forming your own hunch — *the feathers point right; the lantern's out, so that mirror is lying* — before Jinx gets a word in, so a shiny answer has something of yours to be compared with instead of pushing it aside.

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

Spot what's not true

The habit: looking isn't the test — feel first, and find two clues that agree.

A mirror maze is the perfect place to practice this, because every wrong answer looks better than the right one. The golden arch is prettier than the plain gap. The shortcut to a lit lantern is brighter than the dull pull of a thread. A reflection of Rowan walking confidently to the light is more persuasive than any stranger. Each one is a picture of something true, placed exactly where your child would like it to be — which is how most untrue things arrive. Every winning path in this book tests before it trusts: a stick that clicks on glass and doesn't on grass, a thread that can't pass through a mirror, a footprint that's a dent and not a picture, a shadow that a real thing casts and a picture can't. And every one of them looks for agreement — the glass AND the ground, the thread AND the stick. At ages 3–8 this looks wonderfully simple: *"it looks like a path — what could we touch to check?"*

PARENT MOVE №1

The Unreliable Source Audit

When a mirror (or a character, or a headline) shows something as fact, **put a finger on it and ask three quick questions out loud: "What's showing us this? What would we see if it were true — and can we see it somewhere ELSE too? What could we touch to check?"** Then look at the picture together and find the second clue. Make it a game: the shinier the path, the more fun it is to audit. (Use it at least once a night.)

✓ TRY SAYING

"That one's beautiful. What could we tap to check it's there?"

"The lantern's out. So what does that tell us about a mirror showing it lit?"

"Where else does that path show up — on the ground? On the stick?"

✗ INSTEAD OF

"It's the gold one, obviously — go!" (Jinx's plan, and the gate again)

"It's right THERE, take the shortcut!" (right there is what mirrors do best)

"It's YOU in the mirror, you can't be wrong about you." (a picture of you doing a thing that isn't)

SECONDARY

Think first, then ask

The habit: my own hunch first — then I can hear Jinx out.

Jinx has an opinion about every fork and it's always the shiniest one — and he says it fast. Watch what changes when Rowan gets a hunch in *before* he speaks: the feathers point right, so when Jinx says 'middle,' Rowan has something to compare it with, and a sparkle turns out to be the moon. Asking isn't the enemy; being empty when the answer arrives is. A child who has already thought *"I think it's the plain gap"* can hear ten shiny opinions and still choose. That's the second skill, and it's the one that keeps the first one safe.

PARENT MOVE №2

The Blind Pitch

When a fork appears, **cover the choices with your hand** before reading them aloud. Ask: **"If you were standing in that maze right now, which way would YOU go — and why?"** Let them pitch their own hunch — then reveal the options and see if the book (or Jinx) thought of it. Their idea comes first, before anyone's shiny 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 Jinx do?"** (Jinx's answer at every fork is **"THAT one! The shiny one!"** — and he's sure, and he's quick, which is exactly why he's useful. Even a 3-year-old can hear a choice made for sparkle instead of for a reason. And watch him learn: the night he looks at the ground instead of the glass is a big one.)

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.

Granny Loom

The gatekeeper — a round, soft, teapot-sized spider in spectacles and a knitted shawl, who has watched a hundred years of travelers walk into glass. Read her slow, cozy and entirely unsurprised, with a little click of knitting needles between sentences, and never once an 'I told you so.'

Jinx

The young jackdaw with the brass button, who loves anything shiny and is certain about all of it. Read him quick, bright and thrilled — **"THAT one!"** — and let him go quiet, and look down, when tapping the ground turns out to 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.

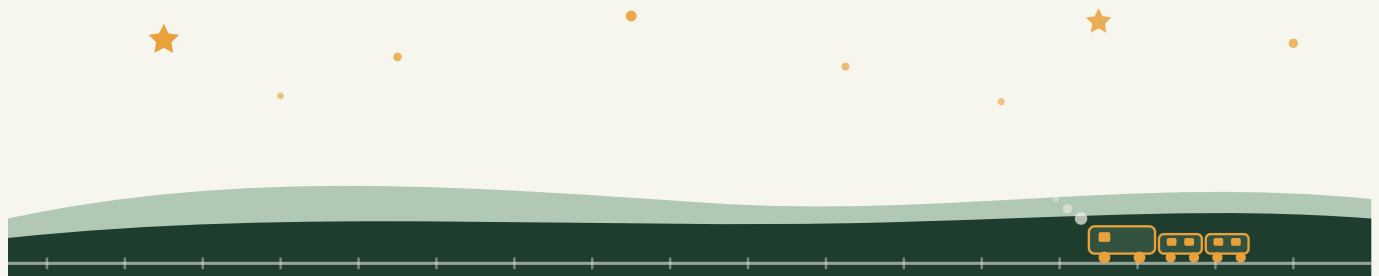
AFTER THE LAST PAGE — THREE LIGHTS-OUT QUESTIONS

1. "Which choice was the hardest tonight — and what made it hard?"
2. "Which path looked the most real tonight but wasn't — and what test showed it was glass?"
3. "What did YOU think before Jinx said anything? Did his answer change yours — and should it have?"

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.

