



THE NIGHT TRAIN TO ANYWHERE · BOOK 18

The Pancake Volcano

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, wearing a pancake.

Grandpa Ember — Keeper of the Griddle — an old fire salamander in a straw hat as wide as a wheel, who has watched ninety years of fast fixes go wrong. Read him warm and slow and crackly, like a fire settling, with a long pause before the important bit.

Dollop — Chief taster of the village — a chubby young marmot in a red neckerchief who always has a plan, and it's always the first one he thought of. Read him quick, bouncy and delighted — “PLUG IT!” — and let him go quiet, and thoughtful, and a little bit fuller, as the night goes on.





The Night Train came on a night that smelled of BREAKFAST. Rowan noticed it before waking properly: warm, sweet, buttery, exactly like Sunday morning—except the window was dark, and the moon was up, and the Night Train was hissing softly outside.

Rowan opened the window. Beyond the train rose a round, friendly mountain with a glow at the top like a lamp under a blanket. Golden light lit the clouds from underneath. At the mountain's foot sat a tiny village of round stone houses, every chimney smoking.

“Allll aboard,” said the Conductor. “No hurry. But that's Mount Griddle, and the glow at the top is batter—pancake batter, warm as a bath. It feeds the whole village, most nights. Tonight it's rising, and it hasn't stopped. If it goes over the top before sunrise, that village is going to be a very large breakfast.”

A PANCAKE volcano! Rowan's stomach said one thing and Rowan's feet said another, and the feet won. Coat, boots, stairs!

The train is waiting. Turn the page.



On the slope stood an old fire salamander—orange, black-spotted, in a straw hat as wide as a wheel—leaning on a wooden ladle taller than Rowan. Beside him bounced a chubby young marmot in a red neckerchief. Boing, boing, boing.

“Grandpa Ember,” said the salamander. “Keeper of the Griddle. And that’s Dollop, chief taster. Listen. The mountain rises every night, and every night the batter finds its way down. Tonight it isn’t finding it. I’ve kept this mountain for ninety years, and I’ll tell you the one thing I know: the fastest fix is never the first one you think of.”

“I’ve thought of one!” said Dollop. “PLUG IT. With a rock. A BIG one. Then—done!”

Above them, the golden dome at the crater’s rim swelled a little more, and a slow bubble rose and popped: GLUB. Tick, on Rowan’s shoulder, said “oh dear” very quietly.

★ **The mountain is rising and the village is below! What does Rowan do first?**

- **Climb to the crater and look before doing anything:** *If you choose to look, you’ll see what the batter is actually doing — and whether Dollop’s rock is a fix or a cork. → turn to page 5*
- **Follow the batter’s path down the mountain to find what’s wrong:** *If you choose the path, the batter has to go somewhere — and a big problem down a long slope might be three small ones. → turn to page 19*
- **Run to the village and warn everyone:** *If you choose the village, the marmots will be safe — but a village full of frightened marmots is its own kind of problem. → turn to page 33*



The crater was a bowl as wide as a pond, full of warm golden batter that bubbled slowly, like honey thinking. It was beautiful! It was also very, very close to the top.

“ROCK!” said Dollop, pointing at a boulder the size of a bathtub. “Roll it in! Plug the hole! Breakfast saved!”

Tick, on Rowan's shoulder, said that it did look like a very good rock.

Rowan looked at the rock, and at the batter, and at the slow bubble rising in the middle of it. A plug would stop it. Wouldn't it? Grandpa Ember said nothing at all, which somehow felt like a question.

★ **Plug it — or watch it first?**

- **Roll the boulder in and plug the crater:** *If you choose the boulder, it's the fastest fix there is — and fast fixes are the ones Grandpa Ember warned about. → turn to page 7*
- **Sit down, watch the batter, and count the bubbles:** *If you choose to watch, you'll lose a minute — and maybe learn what the batter is trying to do. → turn to page 9*



— The Nearest Boulder —

They rolled it. It was a very good rock. It dropped into the crater with a deep, satisfied SPLOTCH and the batter stopped rising.

For about four seconds.

Then the mountain made a noise like a giant with the hiccups—HUP!—and the batter went UP, all at once, in a golden dome the size of a house, and the boulder rode up on top of it like a hat. Dollop cheered. Then the dome burped—BLORP—and everyone was wearing a pancake.

“Pressure,” said Grandpa Ember, wiping his hat. “Batter that can’t go down goes up. A cork doesn’t stop a bottle from being full, dear. It just makes the pop bigger.”

Rowan peeled a pancake off Tick. “The first thing I thought of.” “Always is,” said Ember. “Come back to the rim. Try the second thing.”

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



Rowan sat down at the rim, chin on mittens, and WATCHED. Dollop held his rock and did not throw it, though it clearly hurt.

The batter rose slowly. Then a bubble came up in the middle—a slow gold one—and popped, GLUB, and for a moment the batter sank a little before rising again.

“It sinks after every bubble,” said Rowan. “Just a bit!” Another bubble. GLUB. Sink. Rise. “The bubbles come from underneath. Something’s pushing. It’s trying to go somewhere.”

Grandpa Ember’s hat tilted. “Now THAT,” he said, “is the first useful thing anyone has said tonight.”

Turn the page.



Rowan stood up and walked round the rim, looking down the OUTSIDE of the mountain instead of into it. And there they were: three wide stone grooves, like slides, running from the crater down the slope to three great flat round stones near the village.

All three were dark. All three were dry. At the top of each, where it met the crater, a little gold seeped out and stopped.

“That’s where it goes!” said Rowan. “The batter goes down the slides to the flat stones and cooks. But the slides aren’t taking it. So it’s rising instead.”

Rowan had a hunch now, a good one—and a question. There’s a difference between asking because you’re empty and asking because you’re nearly full. “Are you going to ask him?” whispered Tick. “In a second,” said Rowan. “I want to be sure what I’m asking first.”

Turn the page.



END OF YOUR FREE SAMPLE

Can the village be saved?

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

Chose "Follow the batter's path down the mountain to find what's wrong" or "Run to the village and warn everyone" 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 18.

Books that branch. Minds that grow.

The batter volcano is about to erupt over the village — and the fastest fix is not the first one Rowan thinks of! ★

Tonight, every choice belongs to YOU. Plug the crater with the nearest boulder? Drag the pancake-tower out in one big pull? Wake the whole village and eat as fast as you can? A mountain of breakfast is rising, and thinking first has never been harder.

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 18 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 Think First, Then Ask — a minute of looking before the fast fix — and Break Big Problems Down, one pancake at a time.

Storybranch

Books that branch. Minds that grow.



★ ADMIT ONE GROWN-UP ★

The Grown-Up's Ticket

Your guide to reading *The Pancake Volcano* together

Tonight the Night Train stops at Mount Griddle, a round, friendly mountain whose crater is a bowl of warm pancake batter that feeds the village below. Tonight the batter is rising and it hasn't stopped. Grandpa Ember, the old salamander who keeps the mountain, has one rule: the fastest fix is never the first one you think of. Dollop, chief taster, has a plan already — and it's always the first one. Your child — as Rowan — is about to learn that a minute of looking can beat a boulder, and that a mountain of a problem is only a lot of small ones stacked up.

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

Think first, then ask

Forming your own idea *before* reaching for the fast fix or the loud voice — the anchor habit that keeps kids the authors of their thinking instead of passengers of whatever a tool (or a bouncy marmot) suggests first.

✦ SECONDARY SKILL

Break big problems down

Turning one impossible-looking job into a stack of small ones — three grooves instead of one mountain, forty pancakes instead of one tower — 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

Think first, then ask

The habit: look, form a hunch, THEN ask — and ask about the hunch.

Every dead end in this book is a fast fix taken before anyone looked: a boulder rolled into the crater (it makes the pop bigger), one big pull on the pancake stack (it brings the batter over the top), a feast instead of a plan (sixty full marmots, one still-rising mountain). Every winning path spends a minute first — counting the bubbles, walking the grooves, standing at the bell rope with eyes closed — and then Rowan asks Grandpa Ember something sharp, because Rowan is nearly full of an idea rather than empty. Notice how Ember answers: he's known about the blocked grooves all night, but he waits to be asked, because *his* answer instead of Rowan's would have been plugged into the crater anyway. At ages 3–8 this looks wonderfully simple: "before we do Dollop's thing — what do YOU think is going on?"

PARENT MOVE №1

The Blind Pitch

When a problem appears, **cover the choices with your hand** before reading them aloud. Ask: "**If you were standing at that crater right now, what's the very first thing YOU would try? ... And what would you want to know before you did it?**" Let them pitch their own plan — then reveal the options and see if the book (or Dollop) thought of it. Their idea comes first, before anyone's menu can bias it. (Use it at least once a night.)

✓ TRY SAYING

"What is the batter actually doing? Let's watch for a minute."

"Where does the batter usually go? What's different tonight?"

"That's a big stack. What's one small piece we could move right now?"

✗ INSTEAD OF

"Quick, plug it!" (Dollop's plan — and a pancake hat for everyone)

"What do we DO?" (a question anyone can ask, and nobody can answer)

"Everybody PULL!" (a whole festival of cold butter says no)

SECONDARY

Break big problems down

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

A mountain of batter is too big to fix. Three blocked grooves are three jobs. The Great Stack is only a lot of pancakes standing on each other — and somewhere around the fortieth, Rowan stops thinking about the tower and just thinks: *this one*. Watch what breaking-down buys: an order (quickest job first, so the crater eases and the big job stops being a rush), and a share-out (a marmot for the butter, a mouse for the crack, a salamander for the ladle). Nobody has to be strong enough for the whole mountain. Everyone only has to be good at their piece.

PARENT MOVE №2

The Backwards Map

When the big goal appears, **start from the ending and walk backwards**. Ask: "**We need the batter to stop rising. 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 impossible wish into a little checkable plan — and fingers make it 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 Dollop do?"** (Dollop's plan at every fork is the first one he thought of — **"PLUG IT!"** **"PULL!"** **"EAT IT!"** — and he's sure, and he's fast, which is exactly why he's useful. Even a 3-year-old can hear a plan made before anyone looked. And watch him learn: by the end of the night he's holding a rock he isn't allowed to throw, and thinking about it.)

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.

Grandpa Ember

The old fire salamander in a straw hat as wide as a wheel, Keeper of the Griddle for ninety years. Read him warm, slow and crackly, like a fire settling, with a long pause before the important bit — and never once an 'I told you so,' even when he could.

Dollop

The chubby young marmot in the red neckerchief, chief taster, who always has a plan. Read him quick, bouncy and delighted — **"Then — done!"** — and let him go quieter, and fuller, as the night goes on.

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.

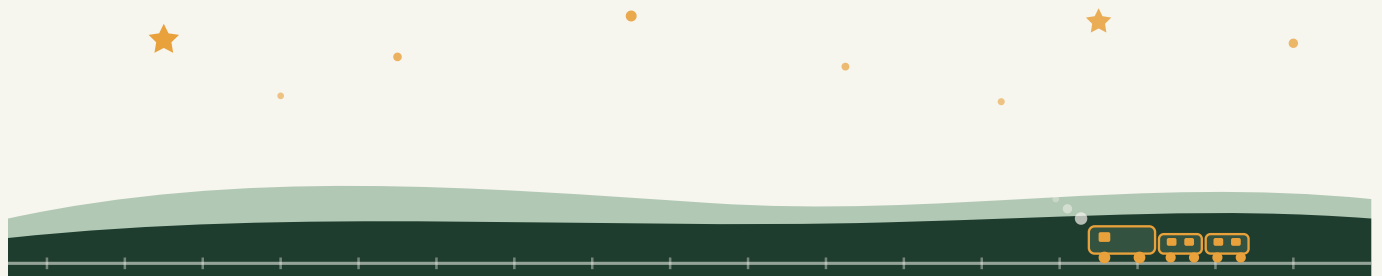
AFTER THE LAST PAGE — THREE LIGHTS-OUT QUESTIONS

1. "Which choice was the hardest tonight — and what made it hard?"
2. "Which fast fix tonight made things worse — and what did Rowan see when Rowan stopped to look?"
3. "What was the big problem, and what small pieces did Rowan break it into? Which piece went first, and why?"

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.

