

THE NIGHT TRAIN TO ANYWHERE · BOOK 23

The Puzzle-Piece Bridge

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, building row three on nothing much.

Grandmother Tally — Keeper of the Puzzle-Piece Bridge — a tall old white crane with a black cap, standing on one leg beside a tally-stick with fifty years of notches and stars. Read her slow, thin and clear, like a flute, with long patient pauses — she never says which piece; she asks what the last one taught you.

Snip — The young magpie with the blue shine on its wings and a heap of the shiniest pieces. Read Snip quick, bright and a bit too pleased — “look at THIS one!” — and let it go quiet and careful the first time it waits a breath before placing a piece.





The Night Train came on a night that smelled of river mist and wet stone. Rowan noticed the smell before the train—cold, green, a little like the inside of a cave—and then a sound like a thousand tiny doors clicking open at once. Click-click-click-click-CLICK!

Rowan opened the window. Beyond the train yawned a deep misty gorge, and across it, where a bridge should be, a fountain of painted wooden pieces was rising slowly into the moonlight—hundreds of them, tumbling, drifting, settling on the rocks like leaves.

“Alllll aboard,” said the Conductor. “No hurry. Well—some hurry. That’s the Puzzle-Piece Bridge, the only way across Mistwater Gorge. Once a year it bursts into a thousand pieces and has to be put back before sunrise, or the pieces drift off down the mist. And it only goes back one way, I’m told. Edges first.”

A bridge made of PUZZLE? Rowan loved a puzzle. Rowan grabbed the orange coat and went to find the corners.

The train is waiting. Turn the page.



On the near bank stood two tall stone posts with nothing between them but mist, and a tall old crane, white with a black cap, on one leg beside a notched wooden stick as tall as herself. “Grandmother Tally,” she said. “Keeper of the bridge. Fifty years. Fifty bursts. Fifty rebuilds.”

A small magpie with a blue shine on its wings hopped up onto a rock with a piece in its beak. “Snip!” it said, dropping it. Clatter. “Look at THIS one! It's got a whole golden window on it! I'm collecting the BEST ones!”

Grandmother Tally looked at the thousand pieces, unworried. “Every year somebody looks at a thousand and freezes,” she said. “The bridge doesn't want a thousand, dear. It wants four corners. Then the edges. Then one row. It's never a bridge. It's always the next small piece.”

Snip said the corners were BORING. Snip had a point. Tick, looking at a thousand pieces, sat down rather suddenly.

★ **A thousand pieces, one night, and the mist is drifting! Where does Rowan start?**

- **Find the four corner pieces first:** *If you choose the corners, you're starting with the smallest, duldest job on the bank — and Snip will want to skip it. → turn to page 5*
- **Grab the prettiest middle pieces with Snip:** *If you choose the pretty pieces, they're the best part of the picture — and they have nothing to hold on to. → turn to page 19*
- **Ask Grandmother Tally how she does it:** *If you choose the story, fifty rebuilds started with one collapse — and a stick full of notches. → turn to page 33*



A corner piece has two flat sides. Rowan crawled along the bank turning pieces over, and there—a soft gold glow along two edges. One corner! Then, under a fern, another. Snip found the third by accident and the fourth on purpose, and looked surprised at itself.

Four corners snapped onto the stone posts—click, click, click, click—and a thin gold line of light ran between them, out across the mist, like the outline of a bridge waiting to be filled in.

“Now the edges,” said Grandmother Tally. There were hundreds of edge pieces. There were ALSO hundreds of not-edge pieces, all mixed together in the grass. Snip picked up a big bright middle piece with a bit of painted sunrise on it and said, “This one's practically an edge. Look how BIG it is. Shove it in, it'll hold!”

★ **Four corners and a glowing outline. What goes in next?**

- **Shove in the big middle pieces to fill the outline fast:** *If you choose the big pieces, the outline fills quickly — for about a minute. → turn to page 7*
- **Sort the pieces into piles before placing any:** *If you choose to sort, nothing gets built for a while — and then everything does. → turn to page 9*



— The Middle First —

Rowan and Snip shoved the big middle pieces into the glowing outline, and for a minute it looked WONDERFUL—a bridge growing out over the mist, colorful and fast, sunrise-gold and window-gold and sky-blue.

Then it sagged. The middle pieces had nothing flat to hold on to; they were hanging off each other, and each other was hanging off nothing. The span gave a long wooden CREEEEEEAK, folded like a book closing, and slid—piece by piece—into the mist. It didn't even splash.

Grandmother Tally made one notch in her tally-stick with her beak. Tock. “Thirty-one pieces gone,” she said. “They’ll come back next year. You have fewer now, and the same night.”

Snip said, in a small voice, “But they were the BEST ones.”

“That's the trouble with the middle,” said Rowan slowly. “It's the best part, and it's the part you can't start with! Let me go back and do the small dull thing first.”

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



Rowan didn't place a single piece. Rowan sat down on the bank and made PILES.

Flat-side pieces, here. No flat side, there. Then the flat-side pile into colors—blue sky edges, gold sunrise edges, pink cloud edges. Snip said this was the most boring thing that had ever happened at Mistwater Gorge, and then, ten minutes later, said, “Oh. Oh! The blue ones go together,” and started sorting too.

It took a long time. When it was done, a thousand pieces had turned into six piles, and six piles is not scary at all.

“You've made the bridge small,” said Grandmother Tally. “That's the whole trick. Nobody builds a bridge. People place one piece a great many times.”

Turn the page.



With the piles made, the edges went FAST. Blue edge, blue edge, blue edge along the top; gold along the bottom; corners turned; done! A glowing rectangle hung across the gorge like an empty picture frame, and the mist drifted through it.

Rowan stepped onto the near edge. It held. Then Rowan snapped the first row in—one piece, check, next piece, check—and a strip of painted sky reached out over the mist.

“Now,” said Rowan, looking at the frame, and the far bank, and the piles, “how do we do the rest?” Because there was still a lot of rest. There was just a shape for it now. “A shape’s good,” said Tick. “I like a shape.”

Turn the page.



END OF YOUR FREE SAMPLE

Will the bridge go back together?

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

Chose "Grab the prettiest middle pieces with Snip" or "Ask Grandmother Tally how she does it" 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 23.

Books that branch. Minds that grow.

Once a year the only bridge across Mistwater Gorge bursts into a thousand puzzle pieces — and it only goes back together edges first! ★

Tonight, every choice belongs to YOU. Jam in the big beautiful middle pieces? Push harder when they slide into the mist? Build three rows at once to save time? Sunrise is coming, the pieces are drifting, and the bridge has never once wanted a thousand — only the next small piece.

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 23 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 Break Big Problems Down — corners, edges, one row — and Learn From Every Outcome, one notch at a time.

Storybranch

Books that branch. Minds that grow.



★ ADMIT ONE GROWN-UP ★

The Grown-Up's Ticket

Your guide to reading *The Puzzle-Piece Bridge* together

Tonight the Night Train stops at Mistwater Gorge, where once a year the only bridge home bursts into a thousand painted puzzle pieces — and only goes back together edges first. Grandmother Tally, the old crane who keeps it, has rebuilt it fifty times and carries every collapse as a notch on her tally-stick. Snip, a young magpie, has already collected the shiniest middle pieces and wants to start with those. Sunrise is coming, the pieces are drifting off down the mist, and your child — as Rowan — is about to learn that nobody builds a bridge: they place one small piece, checked, a great many times — and that every piece that slides into the mist is telling you something.

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

Break big problems down

Turning one impossible-looking job into a stack of small ones — four corners, then edges, then one row — so each piece is easy, checkable, and tells you where the next one goes.

✦ SECONDARY SKILL

Learn from every outcome

Treating every result — especially the misses — as information. Three pieces in the mist are a lesson the moment Rowan stops pushing harder and asks what they had in common.

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

Break big problems down

The habit: it's never a bridge — it's always the next small piece.

Grandmother Tally's rule is the skill in one sentence: the bridge doesn't want a thousand, it wants four corners, then the edges, then one row. Every branch is a different way of making the big thing small — six piles instead of a thousand pieces, one job (feel for flat) repeated, color heaps that turn out to be the picture, two halves that check each other, a list of four little drawings in the dust. And every dead end is the same mistake in a different hat: starting with the impressive middle, or building three rows at once, so that nothing has anything to hold on to. Watch the quiet moment in Branch A where Rowan places no pieces at all for ten minutes and just sorts — the most useful ten minutes of the night. At ages 3–8 this looks wonderfully simple: *"that's huge. What's the smallest piece of it we could do right now?"*

PARENT MOVE №1

The Backwards Map

When the big goal appears, **start from the finished bridge and walk backwards**. Ask: **"For the last piece to go in, what has to be there already? ... And before that?"** Each answer becomes a step; count the steps on your fingers as they name them — corners, edges, one row. Working backwards turns one impossible wish into a little checkable plan — and fingers make it visible. (Use it at least once a night.)

✓ TRY SAYING

"A thousand is too many to think about. What's the first tiny thing?"

"Can we make piles first, so it's six jobs instead of one?"

"One row, then check it. Then the next one."

✗ INSTEAD OF

"Just start building!" (thirty-one pieces into the mist)

"Sorting is boring — shove the big ones in." (they hang off nothing)

"Everybody grab a different row, it'll be done in a minute!" (three bridges, none of them the same one)

SECONDARY

Learn from every outcome

The habit: a miss is a clue about the next try.

Grandmother Tally's tally-stick is fifty years of notches for collapses and stars for rows that held — and her whole plan came from one notch. In Branch B, Rowan loses three beautiful pieces and Snip's answer is 'push harder'; the dead end is fifteen notches of the same try, and the way out is to lay three dull pieces on a rock and ask what the lost ones had in common (nothing flat). In Branch C, copying a good plan without looking at the bank costs an armful — right plan, wrong eyes — and the last ending carves tonight's misses into the stick so next year's builder can read them instead of paying for them.

PARENT MOVE №2

The Dead-End Post-Mortem

When a page snaps shut, **resist flipping back right away**. First: **"Ooh — that one missed! Before we go back ... what did it tell us? What did those pieces have in common?"** Ten seconds of detective work, then flip back with full ceremony. Count out loud — **"notch number two, collected!"** — so misses become clues, not embarrassment.

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 "**whoooooo...**" — 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 Snip do?**" (Snip's answer at every fork is the biggest, shiniest, fastest option — "**Look at THIS one!**" "**Shove it in, it'll hold!**" "**Everybody grab a row!**" — and it's quick and sure, which is exactly why it's useful. Even a 3-year-old can hear a plan that starts with the best part. And watch it learn: by the end Snip is saving the golden-window piece for LAST, and waiting a breath before every piece.)

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 Tally

The tall old white crane with the black cap, standing on one leg beside a tally-stick with fifty years of notches and stars. Read her slow, thin and clear, like a flute, with long patient pauses — she never says which piece; she asks what the last one taught you.

Snip

The young magpie with the blue shine on its wings and a heap of the shiniest pieces. Read Snip quick, bright and a bit too pleased — "*look at THIS one!*" — and let it go quiet and careful the first time it waits a breath before placing a piece.

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.

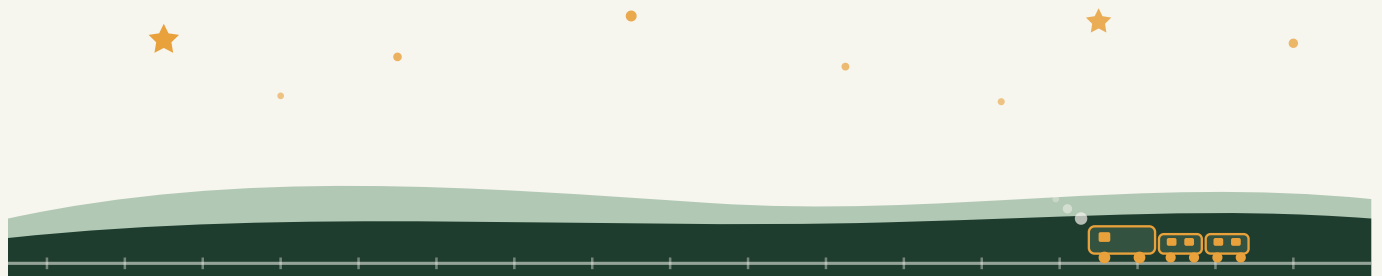
AFTER THE LAST PAGE — THREE LIGHTS-OUT QUESTIONS

1. "Which choice was the hardest tonight — and what made it hard?"
2. "What did Rowan do first tonight — and how did it make the thousand pieces feel smaller? What would you have started with?"
3. "When the pieces slid into the mist, what did they teach Rowan? What's one notch you'd carve on the stick from today?"

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.

