

THE NIGHT TRAIN TO ANYWHERE · BOOK 24

The Lantern Keeper's Apprentice

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 all two hundred steps.

Grandfather Fathom — Keeper of the Lanternhead light — a stout old penguin in a navy jersey and a keeper's cap, sixty years on the tower. Read him low, warm and unhurried, like a foghorn that has learned to be gentle — he never scolds; he asks the size of the thing, and waits.

Dodge — The young ferret with the bandit mask who carries the polish and knows where the biscuits are. Read Dodge quick, whispery and a bit too helpful — “nobody SAW!” — and let it go slow and small the moment it picks up the tin to tell its own part.





The Night Train came on a night that smelled of salt and lamp oil. Rowan noticed the smell before the train—sea wind, warm brass, the sweetish smell of a wick just trimmed—and then a slow gold light swept once across the bedroom ceiling and was gone. Whooooosh.

Rowan opened the window. Beyond the train a grassy headland ran out into the dark, and at its very tip stood a tall wooden tower with a great lantern on top—dark now, waiting—and below it a wide black bay where tiny boat lights bobbed far out on the water.

“Allll aboard,” said the Conductor. “No hurry. That’s Lanternhead. The night boats come home through the rocks by the shape of that light, and once a year the keeper takes an apprentice to help him polish it before it’s lit. I’m told he’s expecting one tonight.”

An APPRENTICE! Rowan had never been anybody’s apprentice. Coat on, boots on, and down to the train before the Conductor could say “no hurry” again.

The train is waiting. Turn the page.



At the top of two hundred spiral steps—two HUNDRED, Tick counted every one—was a round room of windows, and in it stood the great lantern: brass, as tall as Rowan, with six tall panes of amber glass. Beside it stood a stout old penguin in a navy jersey and keeper's cap. "Grandfather Fathom," he said. "Sixty years on this light. You'll be my apprentice. Good."

A small ferret with a dark mask across its eyes bounced up with a brass tin. "Dodge!" it said. "Polish-carrier. I know where everything is, especially the biscuits."

Grandfather Fathom handed Rowan a soft cloth. "Six panes, front first—the boats steer by the front. I'll wind the tide clock, then light her." And down he went. Clump, clump, clump.

Rowan polished. Dodge tossed the tin. Rowan reached to catch it, the cloth caught the brass—and the front pane CRACKED, top to bottom, with a sound like ice. Tink-k-k-k-k.

★ The front pane is cracked, the keeper is far below, and Dodge says nobody saw. What does Rowan do?

- **Go down and tell Grandfather Fathom right now:** *If you choose to tell him, the hardest part is the two hundred steps — and what size you make it at the bottom.* → **turn to page 5**
- **Try to mend it quietly before he comes back:** *If you choose to mend it, it might even work — and then you'll have to decide what to say about it.* → **turn to page 19**
- **Stop, look at the crack, and think it through first:** *If you choose to think, Dodge has a lot of ideas, and most of them start with 'nobody has to know.'* → **turn to page 33**



Two hundred steps is a long way to carry a crack. By step fifty Rowan's stomach felt like the tide clock—something heavy going round. By step one hundred Dodge, scampering behind, had suggested FOUR ways to say it. By step two hundred, Rowan had one.

Grandfather Fathom was at the bottom, winding the big brass tide clock, humming. Hmm-hmm-hmmmm. He looked round. “Apprentice! Front pane shining?”

Rowan opened a mouth to say it. And a small, easy voice inside—it sounded a bit like Dodge—said: you could make it small. A scratch. A little mark. He's got old eyes. He'll light it and never know.

It would be SO easy to make it small.

★ **Rowan is standing in front of him. How big is the truth?**

- **“There's a tiny scratch on the front. It's nothing.”:** *If you choose to make it small, he'll believe you — that's the trouble with being trusted. → turn to page 7*
- **Say exactly what happened, the whole size of it:** *If you choose the whole size, there'll be a silence — and then an hour to fix it instead of an hour to hide it. → turn to page 9*



— The Tiny Scratch —

“A tiny scratch,” said Grandfather Fathom. “We’ve all left one of those! Up we go—time to light her.” And he trusted Rowan, which felt worse than being caught.

He lit the wick without looking. The lantern blazed amber, and the crack—not tiny, NOT a scratch—bent the beam sideways like a stick in water. Out on the bay, a small boat’s light turned the wrong way—toward the black rocks called the Teeth.

Grandfather Fathom snatched the fog-horn and blew—HONNNNNNK—until the boat turned back. Then he looked at the pane for a long moment.

“A tiny scratch,” he said, quite gently. “Tell me the size of the thing, dear, and I’ll know the size of the fix. Tell me it’s small, and I’ll fix it small—and the boats pay the difference.”

Rowan looked at the crack, top to bottom, and at the boat, and said, “It wasn’t tiny. Let me tell it the right size.”

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



“I cracked the front pane,” Rowan said. “Top to bottom. I reached for the tin and the cloth caught the brass. It's not a scratch. I don't think it can be lit.”

There was a silence. It was the longest silence of the whole night. The tide clock ticked through it. Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

“Thank you,” said Grandfather Fathom at last. “That's the whole size of it, and now I know the size of the fix.” He set down the winding key. “We've got an hour and a problem. That's a great deal better than an hour and a SECRET!”

Dodge, on the stairs, let out a breath it had apparently been holding since step fifty. Phewwwww.

Turn the page.



They climbed. Grandfather Fathom didn't scold; he talked about the boats. Four out tonight. The Teeth left of the beam, the sandbar to the right, and the light in between like a hand saying THIS way.

In the lantern room he opened a chest of spare panes wrapped in straw, held one up against the crack—and frowned. Too wide! The old glass had been cut for the old frame, and the frame had been mended smaller, years ago. Every spare was a thumb too big.

“I could cut one to size,” he said. “It takes a steady hand and most of an hour, and the boats come in at the turn of the tide.” Rowan looked at the dark bay. There was more than one way to help a boat find home.

Turn the page.



END OF YOUR FREE SAMPLE

Will the boats get home safely?

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

Chose "Try to mend it quietly before he comes back" or "Stop, look at the crack, and think it through first" 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 24.

Books that branch. Minds that grow.

The night boats come home through the rocks by the shape of the great lantern's light — and Rowan, the keeper's apprentice for one night, has just cracked its front panel!

Tonight, every choice belongs to YOU. Call it a tiny scratch? Mend it with wax and say nothing? Turn the crack to the back, or blame a passing gull? The keeper is two hundred steps below, the tide is turning, and every hidden crack sends a boat drifting the wrong way.

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 24 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 Choose What's Right — say the whole size of it, first — and Think First, Then Ask.

Storybranch

Books that branch. Minds that grow.



★ ADMIT ONE GROWN-UP ★

The Grown-Up's Ticket

Your guide to reading *The Lantern Keeper's Apprentice* together

Tonight the Night Train stops at Lanternhead, where the fishing boats come home through the rocks by the shape of one great amber lantern — and where Rowan, apprentice for a single night, has just cracked its front pane while the keeper is two hundred steps below. Grandfather Fathom, the old penguin who has kept the light for sixty years, only ever asks one thing: the size of it. Dodge, a young ferret with a bandit mask, has four ideas, and all four start with 'nobody has to know.' Your child — as Rowan — is about to learn that the easy thing and the right thing usually sit on opposite sides of the same minute, and that a question with your own name in it gets a better answer.

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

Choose what's right

Telling the right thing from the easy thing when they sit on opposite sides — a tiny scratch, a hidden mend, a passing gull — and choosing the true one even when it costs a long silence.

✦ SECONDARY SKILL

Think first, then ask

Forming your own idea *before* reaching for the loud voice — sitting on the top step and working out what the lantern actually needs, so the question that comes out is the real one.

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

Choose what's right

The habit: say the whole size of it, first.

Every road in this book but one is easier than the truth, and every easy road ends the same way: a hidden crack bends the beam, and a boat drifts toward the Teeth. Watch how gentle the pressure is — nobody makes Rowan lie. Grandfather Fathom simply trusts, and being trusted turns out to be the hardest thing to lie into. Watch, too, the Branch B trap: the wax mend actually works, and 'fixed' starts to feel like the same thing as 'honest.' It isn't; a fix nobody knows about can't be checked. And watch the last ending, where Rowan says exactly one half of the truth and leaves Dodge's half for Dodge — not blaming, not covering, just true. At ages 3–8 this looks wonderfully simple: *"what's the easy thing here — and what's the right thing? Are they the same?"*

PARENT MOVE №1

The Compass vs. Clock Test

When a choice is really *easy* versus *right*, **hold up two fists** — one is the clock (quick, close enough, nobody would know), one is the compass (the right thing). Ask: **"Which fist is 'tiny scratch'? Which one is 'the whole size of it'? ... Which one does Rowan want to be holding when the boats come in?"** Let them tap the fist. Then read on and see whether the compass cost anything — and whether it was worth it. (Use it at least once a night.)

✓ TRY SAYING

✗ INSTEAD OF

"What's the whole size of it? Say it that big."

"It's just a tiny scratch." (he believes you — and the beam bends)

"It's mended — but does he KNOW it's mended?"

"It's fixed, so there's nothing to tell." (the wax melts in a minute)

"Whose part is that to say — ours, or Dodge's?"

"Say a gull did it — he'll fix it either way." (he fixes the roof instead)

SECONDARY

Think first, then ask

The habit: work out what's needed, then ask the real question.

On page 36 Rowan asks a question built to get a comfortable answer ('are the back panes important?'), gets a cheerful yes, and is exactly no better off. A vague question is a hiding place with a door in it. In Branch C, Rowan sits on the top step and thinks about it like a puzzle instead of a secret: the lantern needs a whole pane, the spares are somewhere, fitting one needs the keeper — so the real question is 'I cracked the front pane; where are the spares, and can I help?' It has Rowan's name in it, and the fix starts the same minute.

PARENT MOVE №2

The Blind Pitch

When a problem appears, **cover the choices with your hand** before reading them aloud. Ask: **"If you'd just cracked that pane, what does the lantern actually need? ... And what would you say to Grandfather Fathom — in one sentence?"** Let them pitch it — then reveal the options and see whether the book (or Dodge) thought of 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 Dodge do?**" (Dodge's answer at every fork is the one where nobody has to know — "**Nobody SAW!**" "**Turn it round!**" "**Say a gull did it!**" — and it's quick and sure, which is exactly why it's useful. Even a 3-year-old can hear a plan that's really a hiding place. And watch it learn: the last ending is Dodge walking across the room with the polish tin in both paws to say its own half.)

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 Fathom

The stout old penguin in the navy jersey and keeper's cap, sixty years on the tower. Read him low, warm and unhurried, like a foghorn that has learned to be gentle — he never scolds; he asks the size of the thing, and waits through the silence.

Dodge

The young ferret with the bandit mask who carries the polish and knows where the biscuits are. Read Dodge quick, whispery and a bit too helpful — "*nobody SAW!*" — and let it go slow and small the moment it picks up the tin to tell its own part.

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.

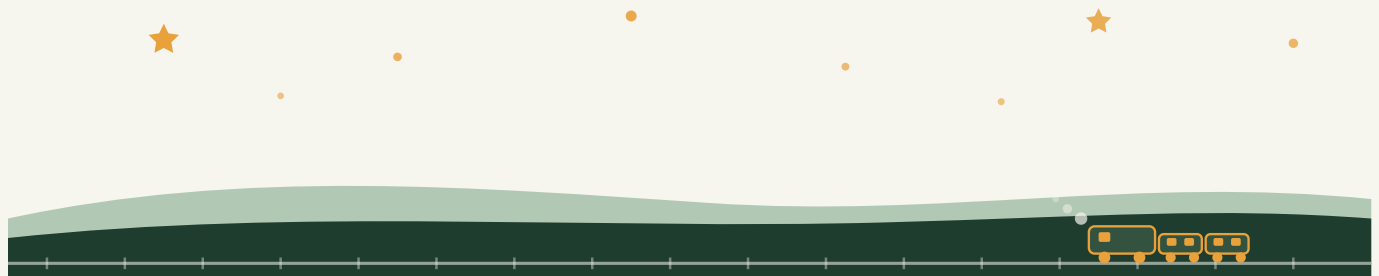
AFTER THE LAST PAGE — THREE LIGHTS-OUT QUESTIONS

1. "Which choice was the hardest tonight — and what made it hard?"
2. "Where was the easy thing different from the right thing tonight? What did the right one cost Rowan — and was it worth it?"
3. "Before Rowan asked Grandfather Fathom, what did Rowan work out first? What made the real question better than the vague one?"

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.

