

THE NIGHT TRAIN TO ANYWHERE · BOOK 25

The Echo Canyon Riddle

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 on tight in a canyon that talks back.

Grandfather Dust — Keeper of the echoes of Echo Canyon — a tall thin old roadrunner with a tufted crest, sixty years of listening. Read him dry, clipped and quick, like a bird that says exactly one thing and then stops — he never tells Rowan the way; he shows one sharp question and waits.

Skitter — The young kangaroo rat with enormous feet who can ask the canyon ANYTHING — and does. Read Skitter loud, bouncy and delighted — “WHERE’S THE WAY?!” — and let it go still and careful the first time it thinks before it opens its mouth.





The Night Train came on a night that smelled of warm rock and sage. Rowan noticed the smell before the train—dust, and something green and sharp, like the inside of a spice jar—and then the train's whistle blew, and something in the dark blew it BACK. Wrong!

Rowan opened the window. Beyond the train yawned a canyon of red rock, its walls striped and glowing under the moon, and out of its mouth came the whistle again—“whooo-eeee” turned to “whoooo-me,” then “ooo-meee,” then gone.

“Allll aboard,” said the Conductor. “No hurry. Well—a little. That's Echo Canyon. The way home runs right through it, and the echoes will tell you the way, if you ask them right. Ask soft, and they twist your words. Ask sharp, and it comes back straight. And the Singing Arch at the far end closes at sunrise.”

A canyon that TALKS BACK? Rowan said “hello” out of the window, just to see. “...ello... lo... o...” said the canyon. Rowan grabbed the orange coat.

The train is waiting. Turn the page.



At the canyon mouth stood a tall thin old bird with a tufted crest and a long tail, one foot on a flat rock. “Grandfather Dust,” he said. “Roadrunner. Keeper of the echoes.”

A small sandy creature with enormous hind feet bounced up in a spray of sand.

BOING! “Skitter!” it said. “Kangaroo rat! I can ask the canyon ANYTHING. Watch.” It cupped its paws. “WHERE’S THE WAY?” The canyon rolled the words round its walls and sent back: “...wear... the... hay...” Skitter looked pleased. “See? It answered!”

“It answered what you ASKED,” said Grandfather Dust. “Not what you meant. The canyon hands back a question the size you sent it. Mushy in, mush out. Sharp—left or right, this rock or that—and it comes back straight.”

Rowan looked up the canyon. It forked, and forked again, as far as the moon could reach. Tick looked up the canyon too, and held on tighter.

★ **The echoes will tell you the way — if you ask right! How does Rowan begin?**

- **Ask the canyon the big question, straight out:** *If you choose the big question, you'll find out exactly what the canyon does with a mushy one. → turn to page 5*
- **Follow Skitter, who says the echo already told it a shortcut:** *If you choose Skitter's shortcut, it sounds sure — and you'll have to work out what the echo really said. → turn to page 19*
- **Ask Grandfather Dust to show one sharp question first:** *If you choose the lesson, it's short — and the trick is making it fit the fork in front of you. → turn to page 33*



Rowan cupped both mittens. “HOW DO WE GET HOME?” The canyon took the words, rolled them along its walls like marbles in a bowl, and handed them back: “...ow... dew... ee... comb...” Then a second echo crossed the first, and a third crossed that, until the air was full of tangled sounds like wool!

“Try again,” said Skitter, “but LOUDER.” It seemed sensible. A bigger question, a bigger answer.

Rowan opened a mouth to shout—and stopped. The canyon hadn't been quiet because it couldn't hear. It had answered exactly what was sent. Louder would send the same mush, only MORE of it.

★ **The canyon gave back mush. Louder — or smaller?**

- **Shout the same question, much louder:** *If you choose louder, you'll get more echo — the same echo, a great deal more of it. → turn to page 7*
- **Make the question small: this fork, or that one?:** *If you choose small, the canyon can hold the whole question — and hand it back straight. → turn to page 9*



— Louder, Not Sharper —

“HOW DO WE GET HOOOOOME?” Rowan bellowed, and Skitter bellowed too, and the canyon did what canyons do: it gave back EVERYTHING, louder, from every wall at once. “...OW... HOOOO... COMB... DEW... ME...” The echoes crashed into each other and piled up and kept coming for a whole minute after everybody stopped.

Somewhere in the noise was a sound like “...this way...” Skitter heard it. Skitter RAN. Rowan ran after, into a side passage, round a bend, over a slope of loose stones—and into a wall. A box canyon. Rock on three sides, and the mush still bouncing overhead.

“It SAID this way,” said Skitter. “It said everything,” said Rowan, sitting down on a rock. “We just picked the bit we wanted.”

Grandfather Dust's voice drifted in, not loud: “A mushy question, dear, gets a mushy echo, and a mushy echo leads exactly nowhere. It's not deaf. It's PRECISE.”

“Then I'll be precise,” said Rowan. “Let me go back and make it small!”

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



Rowan walked to the first fork and looked. Left: a tall pointed rock. Right: a round boulder. Not “which way home”—that was a MILE of question. Just this.

“IS THE ARCH PAST THE POINTED ROCK?” Rowan called. One ring of sound went up, clean, and one came back, clean, and drifted down the left fork: “...past the pointed rock.”

Skitter's mouth fell open. “That's IT? That's ALL you asked?” “That's all it can carry,” said Rowan. “So that's all I sent!”

Grandfather Dust, from his ledge, made a small clicking sound that might have been approval. Tk-tk.

Turn the page.

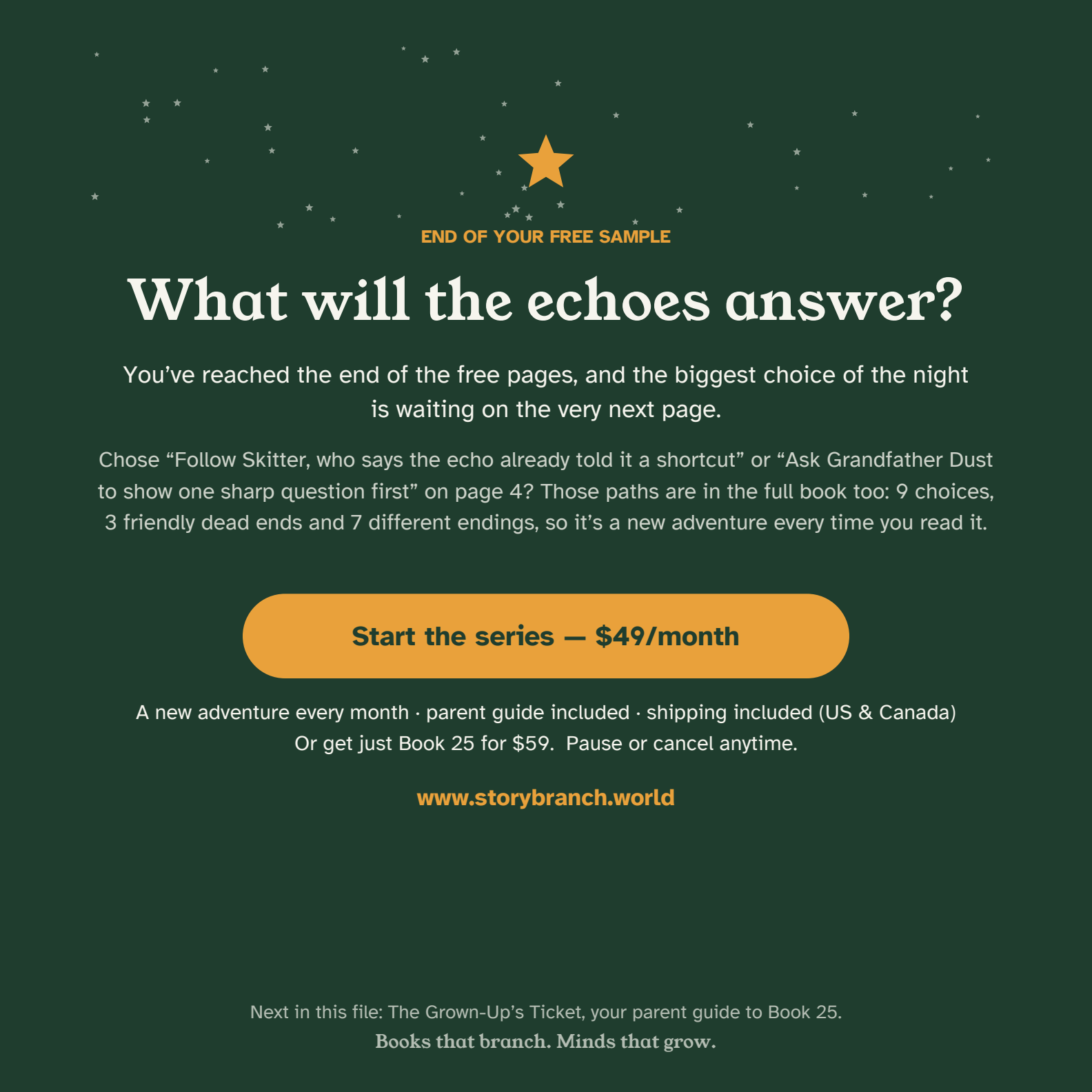


It went like that. Fork by fork. “Is the arch up the sandy side?” “...sandy side.” “Is it past the juniper?” “...past the juniper.” Each question was tiny, and each answer was tiny, and tiny answers, it turned out, STACK: by the tenth fork Rowan had a whole map, made out of nothing but yes!

Skitter tried one. “Is the good stuff near?” “...stuff... near... ear...” “What good stuff?” said Rowan. “Near what?” Skitter thought about it and said, “Oh.”

Then the passage opened into a three-way split—juniper, quartz streak, fallen stones—and one yes wasn't going to cover three doors.

Turn the page.



END OF YOUR FREE SAMPLE

What will the echoes answer?

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 Skitter, who says the echo already told it a shortcut" or "Ask Grandfather Dust to show one sharp question 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.

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Next in this file: The Grown-Up's Ticket, your parent guide to Book 25.

Books that branch. Minds that grow.

The echoes of Echo Canyon will answer any question — but they twist mushy words, and only sharp questions come back straight! ★

Tonight, every choice belongs to YOU. Shout the big question louder? Follow Skitter's shortcut, because the echo said 'shortcut!'? Trust the ledge that answers clear as a bell — and backwards? The Singing Arch closes at sunrise, and the way home is made of forty small questions, asked right.

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 25 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 Ask Sharp Questions — small enough to carry, true enough to check — and Spot What's Not True.

Storybranch

Books that branch. Minds that grow.



★ ADMIT ONE GROWN-UP ★

The Grown-Up's Ticket

Your guide to reading *The Echo Canyon Riddle* together

Tonight the Night Train stops at Echo Canyon, where the way home runs through a maze of red-rock forks and the echoes will tell you the way — if you ask right. Ask soft and they twist your words; ask sharp and it comes back straight. Grandfather Dust, the old roadrunner who keeps the echoes, shows one sharp question and then stops. Skitter, a young kangaroo rat, can ask the canyon ANYTHING, and does, and believes every word that comes back. The Singing Arch closes at sunrise, and your child — as Rowan — is about to learn that an answer can only be as straight as the question that fetched it, and that an echo which just repeats you isn't telling you anything at all.

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

Ask sharp questions

Cutting a big fuzzy wish into small questions that can actually be answered — this rock or that, how many turns, what color — so the answer comes back straight enough to use.

✦ SECONDARY SKILL

Spot what's not true

Telling a real answer from a bounced one: does it contain a word I didn't send? Does it match the rock? Does it come back the same from somewhere else?

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

Ask sharp questions

The habit: send a question small enough to carry, and it comes back straight.

The canyon is a perfect answering machine with one rule: it hands back a question the size you sent it. 'How do we get home?' is a mile of question, and it comes back as mush; 'Is the arch past the pointed rock?' fits in an echo, and comes back clean. Every branch teaches a different way to sharpen — yes-or-no, a number, two things you can see and a which, a question whose answer isn't already in it — and every dead end is a mushy question asked louder, or a clear answer nobody tested. Watch the quiet turn on page 12: tiny answers stack, and by the tenth fork Rowan has a map made of nothing but yes. At ages 3–8 this looks wonderfully simple: *"that's a big question. What's the small one inside it we could actually get answered?"*

PARENT MOVE № 1

The "Vague vs. Specific" Upgrade

When the story offers to ask the canyon something, **pause before the asking**. Try: **"Wait — if we shout 'where's the way?', it'll just give us mush. What are two things we can actually SEE at this fork? ... Now ask it which."** Then upgrade the ask together: a which-way, a yes-or-no, a how-many. Read what the sharper version earns — and count the answers on your fingers as they stack into a map. (Use it at least once a night.)

✓ TRY SAYING

"What are the two things we can see here? Ask it which one."

"Did the echo tell us something new — or just say our last word back?"

"Let's ask it something we already know, and see if it tells the truth."

✗ INSTEAD OF

"HOW DO WE GET HOME?!" (mush, and a box canyon)

"It said 'shortcut!' so it's a shortcut." (it said Skitter's own word)

"It said right, clear as a bell — go right!" (the Bounce Ledge, and a wall)

SECONDARY

Spot what's not true

The habit: an answer that only repeats you is you, telling you.

Not every echo is an answer. 'Is this the shortcut?' comes back 'shortcut!' and 'are we close?' comes back 'close!' forever, because the canyon hands back your last word whatever the truth is — and on page 23 the echo-ring is shaped exactly like Skitter's own mouth. The Bounce Ledge is the sharper trap: its echoes come back perfectly clear and perfectly backwards, and clear-and-wrong is worse than mushy, because you believe it. Rowan's three tests are the whole secondary skill: ask for a word you didn't send (gold), check it against the rock, or ask again from somewhere else and see if it matches.

PARENT MOVE № 2

The Unreliable Source Audit

When an echo (or anyone) states something as fact, **put a finger on it and ask three quick questions out loud: "Did it say a word WE didn't say? How would the canyon know? What would we see if it were true — and can we see it?"** Then look at the picture together and check — the more confident the echo sounds, the more fun it is to audit.

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 Skitter do?**" (Skitter's answer at every fork is the biggest, loudest question — "**WHERE'S THE WAY?!**" "**Louder!**" "**Ask if we're close!**" — and it believes every echo, which is exactly why it's useful. Even a 3-year-old can hear a question that's too big to carry, and an echo that's just Skitter's own word. And watch it learn: on the last page it thinks before it opens its mouth, and asks the best question of the night.)

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 Dust

The tall thin old roadrunner with the tufted crest, sixty years of listening to the canyon. Read him dry, clipped and quick, like a bird that says exactly one thing and then stops — he never tells Rowan the way; he shows one sharp question, and waits.

Skitter

The young kangaroo rat with the enormous feet who can ask the canyon ANYTHING. Read Skitter loud, bouncy and delighted — "**WHERE'S THE WAY?!**" — and read every echo as the last words of whatever was just said, slow and drifting, twisted a little when the question was mushy.

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.

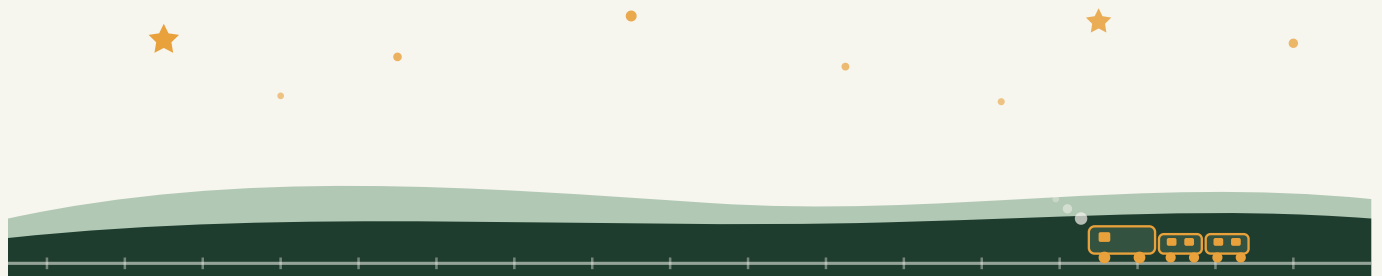
AFTER THE LAST PAGE — THREE LIGHTS-OUT QUESTIONS

1. "Which choice was the hardest tonight — and what made it hard?"
2. "What was the biggest question tonight, and what did the canyon do with it? What was the smallest — and what did that one get?"
3. "How did Rowan know an echo was telling the truth? What's one thing someone said today that we could check against the rock?"

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.

