

THE NIGHT TRAIN TO ANYWHERE · BOOK 26

The Toy Maker's Midnight Sale

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.

Grandfather Tallow — The toymaker — a big, slow, shaggy old sloth in a green apron, with spectacles on a chain and a tiny brass magnifying glass, who writes every catch on a tiny tag. Read him at half speed, warm as honey, with pauses long enough to make everyone lean in — he never says which toy; he says 'read it, dear,' and waits.

Zip — The young ring-tailed lemur with enormous eyes and an armful of toys, who has never read a tag in its life. Read Zip fast, breathless and thrilled — "it's FREE!" — and let it slow right down the first time it holds a tag up to its eyes and says, 'oh.'





The Night Train came on a night that smelled of sawdust and peppermint. Rowan noticed the smell before the train—fresh-cut wood, wet paint, and something sweet and wintry, like a candy cane left on a windowsill—and then, faint and far off, a shop bell. DING! Exactly at midnight.

Rowan opened the window. Beyond the train lay a small snowy square, and across it stood a tall, crooked toy shop with every window glowing gold and every window CRAMMED with toys. Red banners hung right across its front. Even from here, Rowan could read them. They said one thing, and they said it BIG.

“Alllll aboard,” said the Conductor. “No hurry. That’s the Midnight Sale—once a year, everything in Tallow’s toy shop is free, and every traveler may take one toy home. One.” He paused, long as a yawn. “Mind you read the little tags, though. Every toy in there is honest. It’s just honest in very, very small writing.”

FREE toys! Rowan grabbed the orange coat. Tick grabbed Rowan’s pocket. “I would like it noted,” squeaked Tick, “that I am NOT a toy!”

The train is waiting. Turn the page.



Inside, the shop went up and up and UP—toys on every shelf, a tiny paper tag on every toy. Hanging from a ladder by one long, shaggy arm was a big, slow old sloth in a green apron. “Grandfather Tallow,” he said, at half speed. “I made every one. Take your time, dear. I do.”

ZOOM! A small lemur with enormous eyes and a stripy tail came whizzing round a shelf with an armful of toys already. “Zip!” it said. “That’s me! It’s all FREE! The sign says! Free means you TAKE it!”

“The big sign says free,” said Grandfather Tallow, “and that’s true. The little tag says the rest, and that’s true too. Every toy has a catch, dear. I write it on the tag. Small—but I write it.”

Rowan looked at a red drum on a low shelf. FREE, said the banner, enormous as a bedsheet. The tag on the drum’s rim was the size of a postage stamp. Rowan’s fingers itched for the drumsticks!

★ **Everything’s free, and every toy has a tiny tag! What does Rowan do first?**

- **Grab the big shiny drum — it’s free!:** *If you choose the drum, it’s the loudest bargain in the shop — in more ways than one! → turn to page 5*
- **Follow Zip, who’s already got an armful:** *If you choose Zip’s way, free means free — until the toys start doing what their tags said. → turn to page 19*
- **Ask Grandfather Tallow how to read a tag:** *If you choose the toymaker, he’s slow, he’s honest, and there’s one toy in here even he can’t give you. → turn to page 33*



The drum was beautiful! Red, with gold hoops, and two sticks laid across the top as if they'd been waiting all year. Rowan picked it up. It was lighter than it looked, and it hummed a little—mmmmm—the way a drum does when it wants to be played.

“Play it!” said Zip. “It's yours! It's FREE!” Zip did a small, hoppy dance of encouragement. “Tick would like to go back to the train,” said Tick, from the pocket.

Rowan lifted a stick. Then noticed the tag, swinging from the rim: tiny, folded, easy to ignore. Reading it would take a whole ten seconds. The drum hummed. Zip bounced. Ten seconds felt like a very long time!

★ **The drum is humming! Play it — or read the tiny tag?**

- **Play it now — the banner said free, what else is there?:** *If you choose to play, you'll find out what else there is — and so will the whole square! → turn to page 7*
- **Read the tiny tag first, all ten seconds of it:** *If you choose to read, the drum will still be free afterward — you'll just know what free means. → turn to page 9*



— The Drum That Never Stops —

BOOM! Oh, it was a wonderful sound. BOOM-ba-da-BOOM! Rowan hadn't hit it the second time. Or the third. The sticks were moving all by themselves, faster and faster, and the drum was drumming, and it did not appear to have any plans to stop. Ever.

Toys rattled off the shelves. A teddy bear fell into a bucket. PLOP! Tick dived into a teacup. Zip put both paws over both ears and shouted something nobody could hear. Across the square, one by one, the windows of the houses lit up, and the faces in them did not look pleased. Not one bit!

Rowan tried to put the drum down. It came along. Rowan tried to hold the sticks still. They buzzed in Rowan's mittens like two angry bees.

Grandfather Tallow reached down, very slowly, unfolded the tiny tag, and read it out over the din: "Free. Never stops." He folded it back up. "It's an honest drum," he said. "Just small about it."

"I didn't READ it!" Rowan shouted over the BOOM-ba-da-BOOM. "Let me go back and READ it!"

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



Rowan unfolded the tag. The writing was tiny and neat, and there were only three words: Free. Never stops.

Rowan read it twice. Then looked at the drum, humming happily, waiting to be the loudest thing that had ever happened to a bedroom. Then at the banner: FREE. Both were true! The banner had just left the important part out.

“Never stops?” said Zip. “That's not a catch, that's a FEATURE!” Zip thought about it for a whole second. “...That's a catch.”

“Well read,” said Grandfather Tallow from above, in a voice like slow honey.

“Most people only read the big words. The big words aren't lying, dear. They're just not finished.”

Turn the page.



Rowan set the drum back on its shelf, gently, as if it might wake up. Then—because it had worked once—Rowan went along the shelf, flip, flip, flip, turning tags over!

A kite: Free. Flies only in wind you make yourself. A wooden train: Free. One carriage short. A music box: Free. Plays only while you sleep. A spinning top: Free. Spins whoever's holding it. A yo-yo: Free. Doesn't come back.

It was like a game! The big sign said one thing; the tag said the rest; and the toy was exactly the two put together. Zip, sitting on the floor, held a tag up to its enormous eyes for the first time in its whole life and said, very quietly, “Oh. They're all DIFFERENT.”

“Told you,” said Tick, from the teacup. “Nobody ever reads the small print. Except mice.”

Turn the page.



END OF YOUR FREE SAMPLE

Which toy is worth the catch?

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 Zip, who's already got an armful" or "Ask Grandfather Tallow how to read a tag" 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 26.

Books that branch. Minds that grow.

Once a year, at midnight, everything in Tallow's toy shop is free — and every single toy has a catch, written on a tag the size of a stamp! ★

Tonight, every choice belongs to YOU. Play the drum before you read its tag? Believe the fancy sign that says NO CATCHES? Take the last bear, even though its tag says somebody's coming back for it? Every toy in the shop is honest — just honest in very small writing.

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 26 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 — read the small words before the big ones decide for you — and Choose What's Right.

Storybranch

Books that branch. Minds that grow.



★ ADMIT ONE GROWN-UP ★

The Grown-Up's Ticket

Your guide to reading *The Toy Maker's Midnight Sale* together

Tonight the Night Train stops in a snowy village square where, once a year at midnight, everything in Tallow's toy shop is free — and every single toy has a catch, written on a paper tag the size of a stamp. Grandfather Tallow, the old sloth who made them all, is honest at half speed: the big banner says FREE and it's true, the tiny tag says the rest and that's true too. Zip, a young lemur with enormous eyes and an armful of toys, has never read a tag in its life. Each traveler may take one toy home, and your child — as Rowan — is about to learn that the big words aren't lying, they're just not finished, and that the whole truth sometimes has somebody else in it.

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

Reading the whole thing — the small words as carefully as the big ones — before deciding. A banner that shouts FREE isn't false; it's unfinished, and the tag finishes it.

✦ SECONDARY SKILL

Choose what's right

Doing the right thing with what the tag says — even when it says the last bear is free, and also says somebody is coming back for it at half past midnight.

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: the big words aren't finished — read the small ones.

Nothing in this shop lies, which is what makes it such good practice. The drum's banner says FREE; its tag says NEVER STOPS; the drum is exactly the two put together. The book escalates the trap by one notch per branch: first a toy with a tag, then a fancy sign that says NO CATCHES with a tag on its own corner ('except this sign'), then the toymaker himself saying 'I'm honest — but I'm slow, so read them anyway.' Honest isn't the same as complete. Watch page 32, where Zip reads a catch and wants it: a catch you know about is just part of the toy. At ages 3–8 this looks wonderfully simple: *"the big sign says one thing. What does the little tag say? Read the whole thing first."*

PARENT MOVE №1

The Unreliable Source Audit

When a banner, a sign, or a character (even a kind one!) states something as fact, **put a finger on it and ask three quick questions out loud: "Who put this here? What does it want us to do? And what's written small — on the tag, on the corner, at the end?"** Then look at the picture together and find the tiny tag. Make it a game: the bigger and shinier the sign, the more fun it is to find its tag. (Use it at least once a night.)

✓ TRY SAYING	✗ INSTEAD OF
"The banner says free. What does the tiny tag say?"	"It's FREE, just take it!" (a drum that never stops, and a whole square awake)
"That sign's the fanciest in the shop. Does it have a tag too?"	"It SAYS no catches, on a SIGN." (except this sign)
"He's honest — is he complete? Let's read them anyway."	"He made them, so they're fine." (a music box that only plays while you sleep)

SECONDARY

Choose what's right

The habit: read it all, then do the right thing with what it says.

In Branch C the bear's tag is longer than the others: Free. The last one. Somebody is coming back for it at half past midnight. Rowan reads every word, and the whole truth has a sparrow in it. Zip's answer is the easy one — 'it says free, and they LEFT, that's their catch' — and the dead end is taking the bear anyway, because 'free' turned out to be a bigger word than 'somebody.' The two skills meet at that one tag: spotting what's not true gets you the whole truth; choosing what's right is what you do with it.

PARENT MOVE №2

The Compass vs. Clock Test

When a choice is really easy versus *right*, **hold up two fists** — one is the clock (quick, it's free, nobody would know), one is the compass (the right thing). Ask: **"Which fist is 'take the bear, it says free'? Which one is 'leave it, somebody's coming'? ... Which one does Rowan want to be holding when the bell rings?"** Let them tap the fist.

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 Zip do?**" (Zip's answer at every fork is the biggest armful — "**it's FREE!**" "*the sign SAYS no catches!*" "*they LEFT, that's their catch!*" — and it never reads a tag, which is exactly why it's useful. Even a 3-year-old can hear the difference between 'free' and 'finished.' And watch it learn: on page 12 it holds a tag up to its enormous eyes for the first time and says 'oh — they're all DIFFERENT.')

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 Tallow

The big, slow, shaggy old sloth in the green apron who made every toy and wrote every catch. Read him at half speed, warm and honeyed, with pauses long enough to make everyone lean in — he never says which toy; he says 'read it, dear,' and waits.

Zip

The young ring-tailed lemur with the enormous eyes and the armful of toys. Read Zip fast, breathless and thrilled — "**it's FREE!**" — and let it slow right down the first time it reads a tag and says, 'oh.'

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.

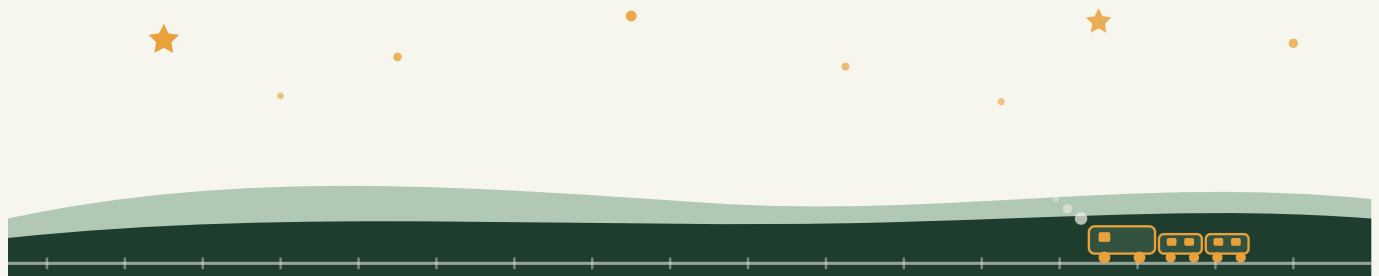
AFTER THE LAST PAGE — THREE LIGHTS-OUT QUESTIONS

1. "Which choice was the hardest tonight — and what made it hard?"
2. "Which big sign tonight wasn't finished? What did the tiny tag add — and would we have wanted the toy anyway?"
3. "The bear's tag said free AND said somebody was coming back. Which word mattered more? What's a 'free' thing we saw today that had a somebody in it?"

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.

