

THE NIGHT TRAIN TO ANYWHERE · BOOK 29

The Star Map Station

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 — except tonight, when for the first time in a hundred years he isn't sure of the way.

Tick the Ticket Mouse — Punches the tickets, panics the loudest. Read him fast-fast-FAST, squeaky and tremendously official.

Grandfather Wander — The enormous old albatross in the red scarf who has steered by stars for sixty years and keeps the Star Map Station. Read him slow and far-away, like wind over water — he never tells Rowan the answer; he asks “What do you think?” and waits.

Glide — The young flying squirrel with button eyes who leaps before she looks. Read her quick, bright and certain — “The BRIGHTEST one! Just ASK him!” — and let her go slow and careful the first time she looks through the telescope herself.





The Night Train came on a night so clear the stars seemed to hum. But Rowan noticed something else first: the train wasn't singing along the rails the way it always did. Clackety-clack had turned to... clack. Pause. Clack. It was going slowly. Carefully. Like someone feeling for a step in the dark.

Rowan opened the window. Outside lay a wide dark plain where railway lines fanned out in every direction, each one running toward a star on the horizon—and every signal lamp was dark! Above the plain stood a bare round hill with a domed building on top, and a slot of light where a telescope looked at the sky.

“Alllll aboard,” said the Conductor, not sounding sleepy at all. “Fog at the Great Fork. We took a line that isn't on my timetable. That's Star Hill, and the Star Map Station—and for the first time in a hundred years, I don't know the way home.”

The Conductor—LOST? Rowan grabbed the orange coat. Tick grabbed Rowan's pocket. “I would like it noted,” squeaked Tick, “that this is NOT on the timetable!”

The train is waiting. Turn the page.



The Star Map Station was a round stone room under a dome, and it was FULL of maps: great round charts of the sky, deep blue, pale stars joined by thin lines, on tables and pinned to the walls. In the middle stood a brass telescope as long as the train!

Beside it stood an enormous old albatross in a worn red scarf. “Grandfather Wander,” he said. “Sixty years steering by stars. Every line down there runs toward one. Home has a star too. You only have to find it.”

FLUMP! Something landed on Rowan's shoulder: a flying squirrel, young and grey, with eyes like black buttons. “GLIDE!” she said. “That's me! Just ASK him! He knows! Or pick a star—the BRIGHTEST—and go!”

Rowan looked at the maps, and the telescope, and the sky in the slot of the dome, and thought: there's more than one way to start.

★ **A hundred lines, one home! How does Rowan start?**

- **Ask Grandfather Wander which line is home:** *If you choose to ask, you'll find out what the old albatross does with a question you haven't tried to answer yourself. → turn to page 5*
- **Pick a star from the sky and steer for it:** *If you choose a star, Glide has one in mind — the brightest — and you'll learn what bright can be! → turn to page 19*
- **Study the star maps first, then ask:** *If you choose the maps, you'll come to Grandfather Wander with a guess of your own — and find out what a guess is worth. → turn to page 33*



“Which line is home?” Rowan asked. Grandfather Wander turned his long head and looked at Rowan with one old dark eye. “What do you think?” he said.

“I don't know! That's why I'm asking.” “Mm,” said the albatross, and looked back at the sky.

“He DOES that,” said Glide, from the telescope. “He NEVER just says! Ask him again. Ask LOUDER. Or ask me—I'll say something!”

Rowan felt the question sitting in the air, unanswered. It was a big question, and Rowan realized it had nothing in it—no guess, no reason, nothing for the old bird to say yes or no to. Just: tell me.

★ **Grandfather Wander answers a question with a question! What now?**

- **Ask again — louder, and ask Glide too:** *If you choose to ask again, you'll get answers. Lots of them. Not the same ones!* → **turn to page 7**
- **Go and look at the sky first, and come back with a guess:** *If you choose to look, the question changes shape — and so does the answer.* → **turn to page 9**



— The Empty Question —

“WHICH LINE IS HOME?” Rowan asked, louder. “What do you think?” said Grandfather Wander, no louder at all. “Glide, which line?” “THAT one!” said Glide, pointing. “Or that one. Ooh—THAT one!” Five directions in five seconds, each one absolutely certain.

Rowan took the first one, and the Conductor, who trusted Rowan, took the train down it. It ran toward a bright star for a long time, then into a bog—SQUELCH!—and stopped at a buffer with reeds growing through it. The star was exactly as far away as before.

“Well?” said Glide. “Was it that one?” “You didn't know either,” said Rowan. “You just said something.” “Saying something is FAST,” said Glide.

Back at the Station, Grandfather Wander hadn't moved a feather. “You asked me for the answer,” he said, “with nothing in the question. What would I have said yes to?”

“I never made a guess,” said Rowan. “I just wanted one. Let me go back and LOOK first!”

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



Rowan climbed the little iron steps to the telescope and looked. Not through it—just up, through the slot in the dome, at the whole sky. Oh!

The stars were everywhere, thick as sand. Some bright, some faint, some in shapes: a ring, a ladder, a kite. And below them, through the doorway, the lines on the plain fanned out, each one pointed at the horizon like a finger.

Rowan looked from the lines to the stars and back, and a thought began to happen. Every line ran toward a star. So the Home Line ran toward the home star! So the question wasn't which line—it was which STAR. And the maps were maps of stars.

“You're being QUIET,” said Glide. “I'm being first,” said Rowan.

Turn the page.



Rowan came back to the albatross with the thought held carefully, like a very full cup that might spill.

“I think the lines follow the stars,” Rowan said. “And I think a home star would be one that doesn't move—because a track can't chase something. So I think it's one of the ones that stays still all night. There's a ring of seven over the hill's left shoulder that hasn't moved since we came. I think it's that one. Is it?”

Grandfather Wander looked at Rowan for a long moment. Then he opened his wings, which were very, VERY wide, and folded them again, which Rowan later learned is how albatrosses smile.

“NOW,” he said, “that's a question I can answer!”

Turn the page.



END OF YOUR FREE SAMPLE

Which way is home?

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

Chose "Pick a star from the sky and steer for it" or "Study the star maps first, then ask" 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 29.

Books that branch. Minds that grow.

For the first time in a hundred years, the Night Train is lost — and the old albatross who knows the way home won't say it until Rowan makes a guess! ★

Tonight, every choice belongs to YOU. Ask louder? Steer for the brightest star in the sky? Try both lines and see? A hundred railway lines fan out across the dark, each one running toward a star, and only one of them is home. The maps are on the table, the telescope is pointed at the sky, and Grandfather Wander is waiting to hear what you think.

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 29 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 — look, form a hunch, then ask about the hunch — and Ask Sharp Questions.

Storybranch

Books that branch. Minds that grow.

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★ ADMIT ONE GROWN-UP ★

The Grown-Up's Ticket

Your guide to reading *The Star Map Station* together

Tonight, for the first time in a hundred years, the Night Train is lost. Fog at the Great Fork, a line that isn't on the timetable, and now a wide dark plain where a hundred railway lines fan out toward a hundred stars — and every signal lamp is out. On the hill above stands the Star Map Station, and in it Grandfather Wander, an old albatross who has steered by stars for sixty years and knows the way home perfectly well. He won't say it. He asks "What do you think?" and waits. Glide, the young flying squirrel, wants to ask louder or just pick the brightest star. Your child — as Rowan — is about to learn that a question with nothing in it gets nothing back, that the brightest thing in the sky might be a firefly on the glass, and that one minute of looking beats a whole night of trying both.

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, and a tracker for the nights ahead.

★ PRIMARY SKILL

Think first, then ask

Making your own guess — from what you can see — before you ask anyone for the answer. The old albatross won't answer anything else, and that's the point.

✦ SECONDARY SKILL

Ask sharp questions

Shaping the question so it can actually be answered — a which, a how-many, a left-or-right — instead of 'which way?' or 'am I right?', which only get 'what do you think?' back.

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.

The whole skill lives in one bird. Grandfather Wander could say the way home in a breath, and never does, because a question with no guess in it gives him nothing to say yes or no to. Every dead end skips the thinking: the same empty question asked louder, the brightest star grabbed because Glide said so, both lines tried instead of one look through the telescope. Every good ending starts on page 10, when Rowan stops asking and just looks — lines, stars, lines — until a thought 'begins to happen.' Watch page 22 too, where Rowan notices a thought that arrived already finished, 'like a parcel someone else had wrapped.' At ages 3–8 this looks wonderfully simple: "before we ask anyone — what do YOU think, and why?"

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 in that observatory right now, what would YOU look at first? ... What's your guess? ... And what would you want to ask Grandfather Wander about your guess?**" Let them pitch their own plan — then reveal the options and see whether the book (or Glide) thought of it. (Use it at least once a night.)

✓ TRY SAYING

"Before we ask him — what do you think the lines have to do with the stars?"

"That one's very bright. Is bright the same as right? What would the map say?"

"You've got a telescope and a minute. What could one look tell you?"

✗ INSTEAD OF

"WHICH LINE IS HOME?" — louder (a bog, a buffer, and reeds through the rails)

"The BRIGHTEST — go go GO!" (a firefly on the glass, and a fence)

"Try BOTH lines — trains can back up!" (a marsh, a grey field, and no stars left)

SECONDARY

Ask sharp questions

The habit: make it a question a nod could answer.

Once Rowan has a guess, the question changes shape. 'Which way is home?' and 'Am I right?' bounce straight back — 'about what, small one? You've asked me three things in two words.' But 'which of the two rings is over the hill's left shoulder?' gets a wing, and 'is the circled ring the still one?' gets a nod. The albatross's rule works on anyone: give me a which, a how-many, or a left-or-right. A sharp question isn't a clever one — it's one small enough that the answer fits in a nod.

PARENT MOVE №2

The "Vague vs. Specific" Upgrade

When the story offers to ask Grandfather Wander something, **pause before the asking**. Try: "**Wait — if we ask 'which way?', he'll just say 'what do you think?' Could he answer our question with a nod, or a wing? ... No? Then let's make it smaller.**" Upgrade the ask together — a which, a yes-or-no, a left-or-right — and read what the sharper version earns.

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 Glide do?**" (Glide's answer at every fork is the one with no thinking in it — "**Just ASK him!**" "**The BRIGHTEST!**" "**Try BOTH!**" — and it's quick and certain, which is exactly why it's useful. Even a 3-year-old can hear a plan that skipped the looking. And watch her learn: in one ending Rowan turns the albatross's question round on her, and she looks through the telescope for a very long time and comes back with a guess and a small question of her own.)

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 Wander

The enormous old albatross in the worn red scarf who keeps the Star Map Station and has steered by stars for sixty years. Read him slow and far-away, like wind over water — he never tells Rowan the answer; he says "What do you think?" and waits. When he opens and folds his wings, that's a smile.

Glide

The young flying squirrel with the button eyes who leaps before she looks. Read her quick, bright and completely sure — "**The BRIGHTEST one! Just ASK him!**" — and let her go slow and careful the first time she looks through the telescope herself.

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 Storybranch are already five stars.

Books that branch. Minds that grow.

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. "Grandfather Wander never once told Rowan the way. Why do you think he asks 'what do you think?' instead? What did Rowan look at to make a guess?"
3. "'Which way is home?' got nothing. 'Is it the ring over the left shoulder?' got a nod. What's the difference? Can you make one of your questions smaller?"

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.

