

THE TRAIN To  
IMPOSSIBLE  
PLACES

A CURSED DELIVERY

P. G. BELL

*illustrations by Matt Sharack*

FEIWEL AND FRIENDS  
NEW YORK



A FEIWEL AND FRIENDS BOOK

An imprint of Macmillan Publishing Group, LLC  
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010

THE TRAIN TO IMPOSSIBLE PLACES: A CURSED DELIVERY.

Text copyright © 2018 by Ty Gloch Limited. Illustrations copyright © 2018 by Matt Sharack.  
All rights reserved.

Printed in the United States of America  
by LSC Communications, Harrisonburg, Virginia.

Our books may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational, or business use.  
Please contact your local bookseller or the Macmillan Corporate and  
Premium Sales Department at (800) 221-7945 ext. 5442 or by e-mail at  
[MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com](mailto:MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com).

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.  
ISBN 978-1-250-18950-9 (hardcover) / ISBN 978-1-250-18951-6 (ebook)

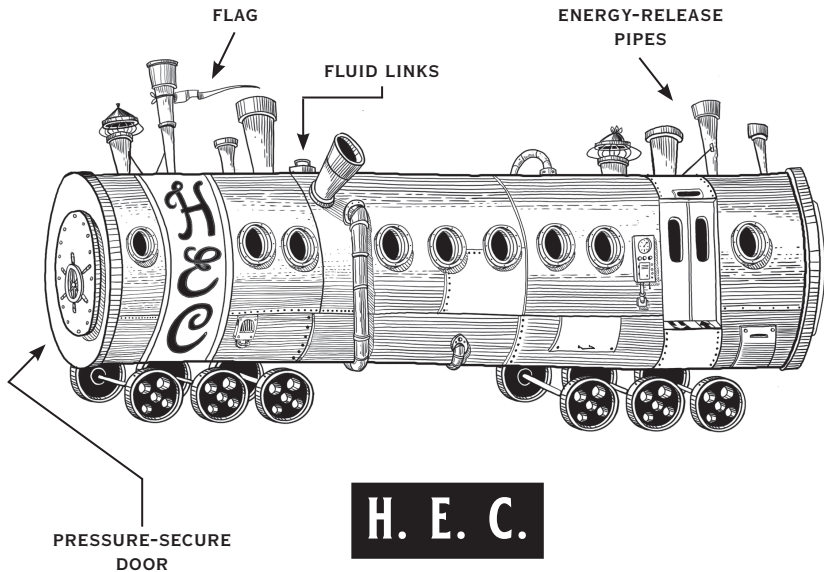
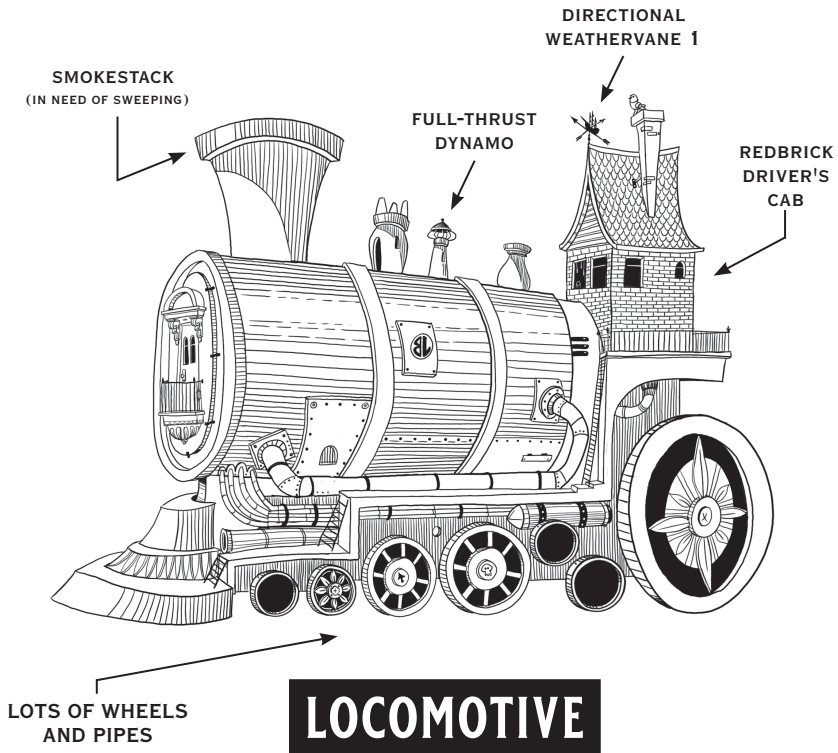
BOOK DESIGN BY KATIE KLIMOWICZ

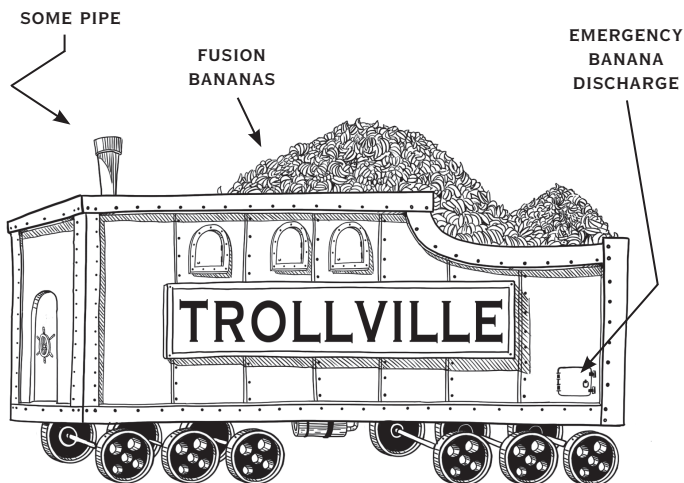
Feiwe! and Friends logo designed by Filomena Tuosto  
First edition, 2018

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

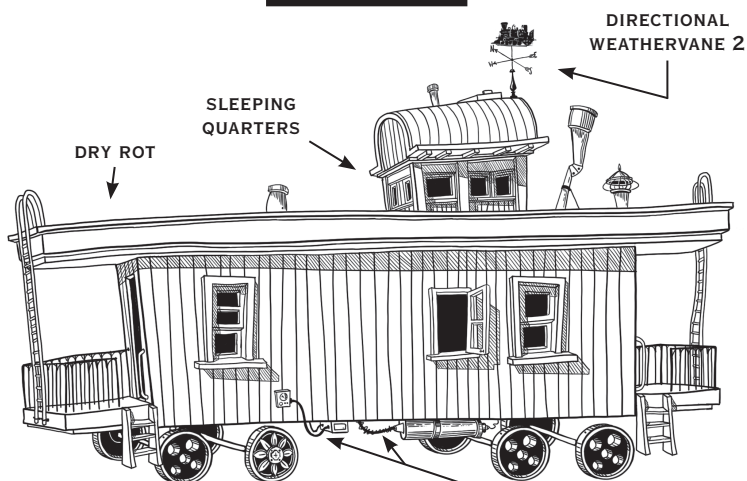
[mackids.com](http://mackids.com)

*For Aurelien, who heard this story first*





## TENDER



## SORTING CAR

STICKY TAPE  
AND STRING



THE TRAIN TO IMPOSSIBLE PLACES

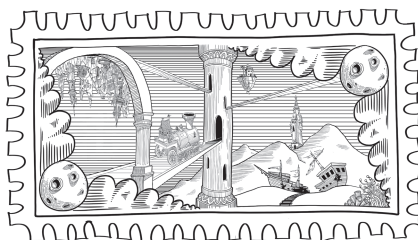
# A CURSED DELIVERY



---

# LIGHTNING IN THE LIVING ROOM

---



It started with a flash.

A green flash, as bright and quick as lightning, there and then gone again. It happened so quickly that Suzy wasn't sure she had seen anything at all, although she raised her head from her homework and looked around.

"What was that?" she asked.

"What was what, darling?" said her mother from the sofa, where she and Suzy's father both sprawled in a heap, still in their work clothes.

Suzy frowned. "Did you see it, Dad?"

Her father was hunched over his tablet, reading the news and muttering to himself about the state of the government. "See what, sweetheart?"

“That green flash. Didn’t either of you see it?”

“Hmmm,” said her mother, shaking her braids loose while trying to stifle an enormous yawn.

Her father looked around the room in bleary-eyed confusion. “I didn’t notice anything.”

Suzy set her lips into a hard line. Perhaps it had been the TV? She peered over her mother’s shoulder at the screen, but she was watching another costume drama—men with tall hats riding on horses in the countryside. No green flashes there.

“You’ve been overdoing the homework again,” said her father, scratching at his unruly mop of ginger hair. “Give your eyes a rest and come and sit with us for a bit.”

“I’m almost finished,” Suzy said, and turned back to her workbook.

It was physics homework, and Suzy was good at physics. Actually, she was good at math, but she preferred physics because it made the math useful; it turned the numbers into real things that moved and made a difference. She couldn’t understand why anyone would want to do plain old math all by itself—solving equations was fun for a while, but all you ever ended up with was more numbers, and what were you supposed to do with them then? No, math was just another way of filling up pieces of paper. Physics was where the action was.

But lately it had started to make her feel a bit unusual,

which wasn't a feeling she liked much. None of her friends shared her enthusiasm, and they had started to sneak little sideways looks at her in class whenever she gave the right answer or got her experiments to work properly. They never said anything, of course, and they weren't being rude, exactly, but she had seen it in their eyes—it was the same look they sometimes gave Reginald, the class nerd with the dinosaur obsession, who, on the rare occasion when someone engaged him in conversation, would talk about nothing else. It was a look that mixed pity with suspicion, as though she were the victim of some terrible affliction and they were afraid it might be catching.

The thought made her pause and lift her pen from the paper. The homework was pretty simple. Mr. Marchwood, her teacher, had assigned ten questions on Newton's laws of motion. Suzy had actually finished them an hour ago, but her imagination had been sparked and she had carried on, testing herself to see how she could put the knowledge to use. How fast would a rocket need to fly to escape Earth's gravity? How long would it take at that speed to reach the moon? How much force would she need to get back?

She had taken up three extra pages of her book with her own questions, her workings-out spilling into the margins. She was fairly confident she had the answers right, but would need Mr. Marchwood to confirm them.

She hoped he would; he had given a long, weary sigh the last time she had handed in her homework. “Suzy,” he had said. “As if I didn’t have enough work to do.”

Her pen hovered above the page, the next question already forming in her mind. She looked back over her shoulder at her parents, who were now propped against each other, snoring gently. Tomorrow was Saturday—she had the whole weekend to work out the final question, she decided. Perhaps her dad was right; if she was seeing green flashes that weren’t there, her eyes probably needed a rest.

Suzy replaced the top on her pen, shut her homework book, and stuffed them both back into her schoolbag.

“Good night,” she whispered, deciding not to disturb her parents as she padded across the room to the hall.

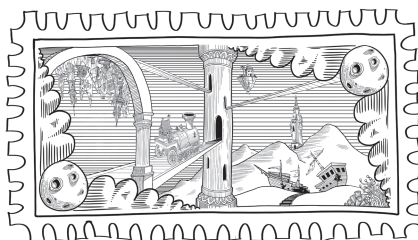
Her footsteps had faded upstairs before another green flash filled the living room. Then another. And another. Ribbons of green energy curled out of the air around the table where she had been working, probing down across her chair, as though searching for something. When they didn’t find it, they flickered uncertainly for a few seconds before fizzling away into nothing. The green light faded.

Upstairs, Suzy brushed her teeth and prepared for bed, oblivious.

---

## AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR

---



Suzy wasn't sure, at first, what woke her. She was just awake, in that sudden, surprising way that catches your brain unawares, as though nobody had told it that it had been asleep to begin with.

The clock on her bedside table read two a.m. She sat up, waiting for her eyes to adjust to the dark and tell her what was wrong.

After almost a minute the answer seemed to be: nothing. But she was wide awake, and a troubling little itch at the back of her mind told her there was a good reason.

She swung her feet out of bed and into her slippers, then crept to the window, easing the curtain aside to peer out. The street was deserted, the houses dark and

sleeping. No traffic hummed, no people spoke. Even the clouds, vague and shadowy in the overcast night, were still.

She was just getting back into bed when she heard it: a sharp, hard noise from somewhere inside the house. She jumped in shock.

It came again: a *clank!* of metal on metal, like heavy saucepans being smashed together. Her parents wouldn't be up in the middle of the night, banging pots and pans together, which meant only one thing—there was someone else in the house!

The sound drew Suzy toward the door, her chest tight with apprehension.

*Burglars!*

The thought came crashing into her mind, huge and urgent and dangerous, and it froze Suzy to the spot. She tried to shift it, to send it away somewhere, but it refused to budge.

*What if they come upstairs?*

Her heart beat a stuttering rhythm in her chest, and she realized she was beginning to panic.

This wouldn't do. If the burglars, or whoever they were, burst into the room at any second, she didn't want them to find her just standing there in her pajamas. (And not even her nice pajamas—the dark blue ones with the lightning bolts on them. These were her spare set: the

pink-and-yellow ones with the lacy cuffs that Aunt Belinda had given her for Christmas last year.) If they found her like this, they wouldn't have to hurt her—she'd probably drop dead of embarrassment.

She clearly needed to do something. *But what?*

Despite her fear, Suzy closed her eyes and forced herself to breathe deeply. It was a simple trick, but it calmed the storm inside her mind just enough to let her hear the thought that had been there all along, calling for her attention: Burglars don't make noise. At least, not this much noise, and never on purpose. You couldn't expect to steal anything if you woke everyone up.

So, probably not burglars, then.

This reassured her a little, but she was still tense as she crossed to her bedroom door and eased it open, taking her bathrobe down from its hook as she did so. The noise was deafening, even out here on the landing. Definitely not burglars, she decided. If she didn't know any better, she would say it was builders, but what would builders be doing in her house in the middle of the night?

No, it was her mom and dad—it had to be. But what on earth were they up to?



The light in the hallway was on, but looking down the stairs from the landing, Suzy couldn't see much. The noise

was getting louder—too loud for pots and pans, although it was definitely the sound of metal striking metal. She crept down the first few steps and was about to peer through the banisters into the hall when a cascade of orange sparks leaped into the air from somewhere below her, ricocheting off the ceiling and walls. She flinched and almost toppled over, but grabbed the banister just in time.

“Mom?” Her voice shook. “Dad? Is that you?”

The hammering sounds stopped immediately, and she heard someone gasp. There was the sound of something heavy being dropped and a sudden scuffle of feet on the hall carpet. Then a rustle and a flap, like bed-sheets being folded. Then silence.

“Hello?” Suzy leaned over the banister, wary of another eruption of sparks, and looked down into the hall. At first everything seemed normal, but then a glint of metal caught her eye. Two long silver strips winked up at her from the carpet. They lay side by side, several feet apart, and seemed to run into the house from underneath the front door. Suzy frowned in confusion, her fear momentarily forgotten as she descended the stairs, trying to understand what she was seeing.

They were train tracks.

She knew they couldn't be, but she prodded the nearest track with her toe, then knelt down and rapped her

knuckles against it. It was cold and hard and very, very real. A railway line, set into the floor of the hall. Someone had even cut strips of carpet away to make room for them. She could see the frayed edges.

“But that doesn’t make sense,” she said to herself, stepping back and giving them a hard look. They glinted back at her, indifferent. Suzy turned and followed their path with her eyes, past the door to the living room and down the whole length of the hall, toward the kitchen. Before she got there, though, her attention fell on the object sitting to one side of the kitchen door.

It was a workman’s tent, made of grubby red-and-white-striped tarpaulin—the sort she had seen erected over holes in the road when people had to dig up gas mains or water pipes. They were usually small, but this one was minute. Even though it sagged a bit in the middle, it barely reached her shoulder.

Light spilled from between the canvas flaps.

“Mom? Dad?” she called, taking a cautious step forward. Something shifted within the tent, and a vague shadow played across the inside of the fabric. “Who’s in there?”

“Nobody!” replied a hoarse voice that she did not recognize. “There’s nobody in ’ere. Go back to bed.”

*There was a stranger in her house!*

Where were her mom and dad? Why hadn't the noise woken them up, too? She took a step back, ready to turn and run. She should call the police, or go get help.

But . . .

Whoever this person was, why were they hiding in a tent? And what were those train tracks doing here? Her mind started to prickle, searching for an answer that didn't seem to be there.

Very carefully, she reached out to the house phone, which stood on a small table beside the front door, and lifted it from its cradle.

"Tell me who you are or I'll call the police," she said, trying to keep her voice steady.

For a moment there was no response. Then the voice said, "I'm no one."

"Well, you must be someone," she said. "You're talking to me."

The voice grunted in obvious annoyance. "No, I'm not. You're dreamin'. Go back to bed."

Without realizing it, Suzy took a few steps toward the tent. "If I'm dreaming," she said, "then I'm already in bed."

Another grunt, even more annoyed than the last.

"Well?" she said, creeping closer.

"Aha! You could be sleepwalkin'." The voice sounded rather pleased with itself.

“Maybe,” said Suzy. “That would certainly explain a lot.”

“There you are, then,” the voice concluded. “Sleep-walkin’. Now, off to bed with you.”

Suzy took another step, but her toe struck something hard. “Ouch!” She hopped onto one foot and looked down. A squat hammer lay on the floor between the rails.

“What ’appened?” snapped the voice. “What’s goin’ on?”

“I’ve just proved to myself I’m not asleep,” said Suzy, reaching down to rub her throbbing toe. “That hurt.”

“Serves you right.”

Suzy thought the voice was starting to sound a little scared, which gave her a bit more confidence. Then she glanced over to the living room door, which stood open. There, slumped on the sofa where she had left them, were her parents, still snoring.

“Mom! Dad!” She ran into the living room and shook them. Neither of them woke, but her dad snorted and gave a big, slightly dribbly grin.

“More cake?” he muttered. “Just one slice.”

“Wake up!” she shouted.

“You’re wastin’ your breath,” said the voice from the tent. “They’re out for the count.”

“What have you done to them?” she said, marching back into the hall, her anger rising.

“Me? Absolutely nothin’. Anyway, they’re happy. Best just leave ’em dreamin’ for a bit.”

Suzy threw the phone down. “Come out!” she said, stamping her foot for emphasis.

There was a pause. “No.”

“I’m not asking,” she said in her best imitation of her mother. She didn’t feel half as fearless as she sounded, but the owner of the voice didn’t seem to realize that. “Come out here right now!”

“Have it your way,” muttered the voice. There was more movement inside the tent, and then something poked its way out between the canvas flaps. It was a nose: the longest, strangest nose that Suzy had ever seen—almost a foot long, aquiline, with a pair of enormous nostrils filled with thick, bristly gray hair. A broad mouth, as wide as a toad’s, was set in a sneer beneath it, while two small yellow eyes squinted at her over the top. This strange face was set in a round, bald head, with skin as thick and knotted as old tree bark. A huge pair of pointed ears stuck out on either side.

“Well?” said the creature, stepping into full view. “Here I am. Take a good look, why don’t you?”

Suzy realized her mouth was hanging open and shut it with a snap.

The creature, whatever it was, stood almost a head

shorter than Suzy and wore orange overalls over its squat body. A name tag pinned to its chest read FLETCH.

“What, I mean . . . who? I mean, what are you?” stammered Suzy.

“I’m behind schedule, that’s what,” said Fletch, elbowing her aside and snatching up the tools from the floor. “They’ll have my ears for slippers if I don’t get this connection finished. Out of my way.” He slouched past her to the kitchen door, where he stooped and gave the nearest rail an experimental tap with his hammer.

“You put these here?” she asked, coming up behind him.

“’Course I did,” he snapped. “An’ in record time, I’ll have you know.” He pulled a tuning fork from the pocket of his overalls, flicked it, and set the stem down on the rail. The fork emitted a high keening note, and Fletch nodded, apparently satisfied. “Back in the day, I’d have had a whole crew with me, and we’d have been in an’ out in five minutes flat. Blinkin’ cutbacks. This job gets harder every year.”

Suzy listened without really understanding. “But what are they for?”

Fletch looked as though he was about to reply, but paused with his mouth open. “Never you mind. You’ve already seen too much. You’re not even s’posed to be here.”

“Excuse me?” She stamped her foot again and meant it this time. “I live here.”

“Which is why you’re supposed to be fast asleep and leavin’ me in peace,” he said, getting to his feet. “I don’t know how the prep team missed you. They got those other two.” He waved a hand in the direction of Suzy’s sleeping parents in the living room. “They’re normally very thorough.”

“What are you talking about?” she said. “What prep team?”

But Fletch just spun on his heels and marched past her, heading for the tent. “I’d make meself scarce, if I was you,” he said. “Just go upstairs and pretend you didn’t see anythin’. This’ll all be gone by mornin’.” And before she could say anything, he had ducked inside the tent and disappeared.

She stood there until her anger finally overcame her confusion. “Listen,” she said. “You can’t just turn up in my house in the middle of the night and start telling me what to do. I don’t even know what you are! And what about my parents? I demand you wake them up!” But if he’d heard her, he ignored her. She could see his shadow moving back and forth across the inside of the tent and heard the sound of rummaging.

She considered following him into the tent, but she was still cautious enough not to want to be stuck in a confined

space with a . . . whatever Fletch was. A gnome? A pixie? Maybe an elf? But that was ridiculous. Those things didn't—*couldn't*—exist, and she shook the thought off as quickly as she could. All she knew for certain was that Fletch was an intruder, which meant he had to be up to no good.

This thought drew her eyes back to the tracks. She made her way to the kitchen door and pulled it open, wanting to see how far they reached. She was a little surprised to see that they stopped dead, right on the threshold to the room. The kitchen floor was untouched.

“’Scuse me.”

She was elbowed roughly to one side by Fletch, who had reappeared carrying a black cylindrical rod, about the length of a pencil but much thicker. He swung the door shut again with a crash and began tapping the end of the rod against the doorframe.

“What are you doing now?” she demanded.

“Concentratin’,” he said. He pressed an ear to the wood. “Not my finest work, but it’ll have to do.”

Her patience finally at an end, Suzy leaned over his shoulder and plucked the rod from his fingers.

“Oi!” he shouted, jumping to snatch it back. Suzy held it over her head, out of reach.

“I’m not giving this back until you tell me who you are and what you’re doing here,” she said.

“That’s not a toy!” he said, still jumping and waving his arms. “You’re stealing. Thief!”

“Intruder!” she countered, and raised herself up on tip-toes.

“That’s not fair,” Fletch whined, finally coming to a breathless halt. “It’s size-ist.”

“It’s perfectly fair,” said Suzy, trying to maintain some composure. “Just tell me, and you can have it back. I promise.”

Fletch shut one eye and peered at her sideways. “Really?”

“Really. But neither of us is going anywhere until you cooperate.”

Fletch sighed, and his shoulders sagged in defeat. “All right, you win. But I hope you realize how much trouble I could get into for this.”

“You’re already in trouble,” she said. “With me.”

He gave her a resentful look and scuffed a foot back and forth on the carpet. “I’m an engineer,” he muttered. “I maintains the lines, and builds new ones when they’re needed.”

“What lines?”

“What lines d’you think?” He indicated the tracks. “These lines. The railway lines.”

Suzy blinked. “But the nearest railway line is miles away. And anyway, this is a house. You don’t get railway lines in houses.”

“Well, not normally, no,” said Fletch in a tone of voice that Suzy had only ever heard used on other people. It made her feel a bit stupid, and her skin prickled with embarrassment. “But we’re in a bit of a pickle, y’see. The Express got held up at those new border controls in the Western Fenlands, and we’ve got to make up the time before our next delivery. Going by the normal route would take an age, so this is a shortcut.” He tapped the side of his great nose. “Strictly unofficial, of course. We’re not really allowed to set foot in human territory, but here we are, for a one-night-only sort of thing.”

Suzy didn’t grasp most of what Fletch had said, which only made her more frustrated, and she seized on the one nugget that she felt sure she’d understood. “Railways can’t just appear and disappear overnight,” she said hotly.

“They can when I’m around,” said Fletch with a proud smile. “Fastest in the business me, although, at my age, I’m starting to feel it a bit.”

“Why? How old are you?”

Fletch puffed his chest out and affected an air of great dignity. “A thousand and ten,” he said. “And still two centuries from retirement.”

“Don’t be silly,” she said. “Nobody’s that old.”

“Really? And how old are you, exactly?”

“Eleven,” said Suzy.

“Ha!” Fletch’s laugh was so explosive that it rocked him back on his heels. “So I s’pose you know everything, then?”

Suzy felt a fresh rush of embarrassment and, hot on its heels, a surge of anger. She was so angry that she could hear her blood singing in her ears. Perhaps her feelings showed on her face, because Fletch began backing away from her toward the safety of the tent, his eyes widening.

“Don’t walk away from me,” she demanded, but he plunged a hand into his overalls and pulled out an old-fashioned pocket watch. He flipped it open. “Crikey, where’s the time gone? They’re here!”

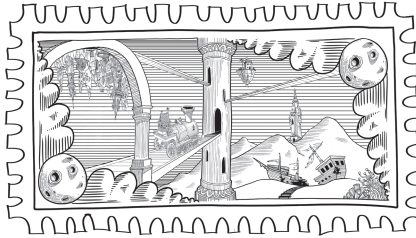
Only then did she feel the tremor beneath her feet and realize that the singing sound she heard wasn’t coming from her ears at all—it was coming from the rails.

A rush of cold air barreled down the hall, and she turned, thinking the front door had opened. Instead, it had vanished, and in its place stood an archway of old stone bricks. She just had time to realize that the world that should have been visible outside it—the street, the houses, the neat little gardens—was missing, replaced by an echoing black void, before she was blinded by the glare of a huge light, racing toward her through the darkness. The scream of a whistle filled the hall, metal ground on metal, and Suzy threw herself backward as the train bore down upon her.

---

# THE IMPOSSIBLE POSTAL EXPRESS

---



**T**he last thing Suzy saw before she hit the ground was a train erupting in a whirling mass of wheels, rods, and pistons from the tunnel mouth. Then she screwed her eyes shut, and for a second, the world was dark and full of noise. Hot steam gusted over her hands and face, metal screeched and clashed, a whistle howled. She gritted her teeth and clapped her hands over her ears.

The scream of brakes reached a crescendo and died suddenly away. There was a last outrush of steam, like a sigh of relief, and everything went quiet.

Suzy risked opening one eye.

She had fallen at the foot of Fletch's tent, her feet just

inches from the track. Rough hands grasped her shoulders, and she looked up to see Fletch standing over her, pulling her into a sitting position. She was too shocked to resist.

“What were you thinkin’?” he said, hopping from foot to foot with agitation. “You almost became an Incident!”

“A what?” she said, her ears still ringing.

“An Incident on the Line! The worst type of Incident it’s possible to be.”

Suzy looked at him blankly and wondered what to say. His tone made her want to apologize, but she wasn’t sure he deserved it. In fact, didn’t he still owe *her* an apology? She was just gathering her thoughts to say so when a new voice called out from somewhere high above them.

“Fletch? Is that you, old chap? What the dickens is going on down there?”

They both looked up toward the source of the voice, and Suzy almost fell backward in surprise. A mighty old steam locomotive towered over her, hissing and shuddering and belching yellowish steam from its chimney. It was bigger than any Suzy had seen before—at least, bits of it were. To her eyes, it looked like a large train had smashed into several smaller ones, and maybe a few buildings along the way, and the parts had all got mixed up and stuck together; its chimney was too wide, none of the drive wheels quite matched, and the cylindrical belly

of its boiler was too fat at the front and too narrow at the back. The driver's cab was nothing less than a neat little redbrick cottage, complete with tiled roof, window boxes, and a bright red front door, which stood open on the near side of the boiler.

It was from here that the voice had come, and as Suzy watched, a small figure scampered out of it and onto a narrow gangway that ran along the length of the locomotive's flank, a few feet above the wheels. The figure carried a lantern and, when they were directly above Fletch, shone the light down over the gangway's safety railing, like a spotlight. "Fletch? We didn't just have an Incident, did we?"

Suzy tried to make out the figure's face, but it was just a black patch of shadow behind the glare of the lantern.

"It's worse than that, Stonker," said Fletch. "Look." He hooked a thumb in Suzy's direction, and the light swung over to cover her.

"Good grief, a local! And it's awake."

"Looks like someone on the prep team messed up," said Fletch. "Who was on shift tonight?"

"Not a soul, old chap," said Stonker. "Didn't you get the memo? They did it all remotely."

"Pah!" Fletch spat. "No wonder. What do I keep telling 'em? This remote spell business is all well and good, but you need people on the ground if you want the job

done properly. I mean, it's just a sleeping spell. A common tooth fairy could do it."

"Quite right, old boy, quite right," said Stonker, clearly distracted. "But given that it's here, what do you suggest we do with it? We're still behind schedule."

Fletch scratched his scalp and looked Suzy up and down. "I should put a call in to HQ, I s'pose. See if they can send someone to reset 'er memory."

"Don't you dare!" Suzy said, jumping back. "You can't go poking around inside my mind. It doesn't belong to you."

"It's probably for the best," Stonker told her. "We're not really supposed to be here, you see. Outside our jurisdiction and all that, and it won't do to have you giving us away. Although having said that, it might take HQ a while to get somebody out here. Couldn't you do it yourself, Fletch?"

Fletch sucked his breath in through his teeth. "I dunno, Stonks. Memories are fiddly, like unknotting spiderwebs. You never know which bit's connected to what. Maybe I could do a confusion spell instead."

"No, you won't," said Suzy, backing away. "I'm confused enough as it is." She squinted into the circle of light hiding Stonker. "And I am not an *it*, I'm a *she*, thank you very much."

"Female of the species, eh?" said Stonker. "Afraid I'm

not really well versed on the fauna in these parts. Do you have a name?"

"I'm Suzy," said Suzy. "Suzy Smith. And I'd like to know who you are and what you're doing here, please."

"I suppose we do owe you the courtesy." The light bobbed and weaved as Stonker grappled with the lantern, then it flickered out entirely. It took Suzy a few seconds to blink away the red-and-green smudge it left on her vision, and then she saw him.

He was the same sort of creature as Fletch, though his skin was a flinty gray, and less warty and wrinkled. He wore a smart blue uniform, with a coat that fell to his waist and a peaked cap with silver piping. He looked down at her past both his enormous nose and an equally impressive salt-and-pepper mustache, as thick and lustrous as a badger, which hung down almost to his knees before the tips curled back up into rigid little spirals. His blue eyes twinkled as he spoke.

"J. F. Stonker," he said. "Driver of the Impossible Postal Express. The finest troll train on the rails." He reached up and gave the locomotive's boiler an affectionate pat.

"You're trolls?" she said. "How is that possible?"

"We hadn't intended to stop," said Stonker, clearly misunderstanding her, "but I'm afraid you wandered onto the tracks. You're jolly lucky the brakes have just been serviced."

“But that wasn’t my fault,” said Suzy, feeling the temperature rise in her cheeks. “The tracks aren’t supposed to be here. None of this is supposed to be here. Including you!” This was all starting to feel terribly unfair.

“Fear not,” said Stonker. “We’ll be on our way again momentarily, and Fletch will have the tracks up and everything back to its normal proportions in no time. You’d never know the difference.”

*“Normal proportions?”* For the first time, Suzy realized there was a question she hadn’t asked herself: How could such an enormous steam locomotive even fit inside the house? She looked up and saw the hall ceiling impossibly high above her head, the purple light shade like a distant hot-air balloon. The hall had grown to the size of a cathedral without her even noticing.

“What happened?” she said, wide-eyed. “What did you do?”

“Not really my department, I’m afraid,” said Stonker. “Fletch here is the technical genius.”

Fletch sniffed. “I try my best.”

Suzy hardly heard them. She was running back and forth, trying to take it all in. The living room door was as tall as a cliff now, and she would have to stand on tiptoes if she wanted to reach the top of the baseboard. The kitchen door had vanished altogether, replaced by another enormous stone arch. The tracks didn’t end there

anymore, but ran on into the blank darkness beyond. Her voice echoed in the cavernous space as she cried, “You shrank us!”

“Nah,” said Fletch, cocking his head to one side and plucking at the hair in his ears. “I just gave the hall a bit of a stretch, that’s all.”

“You mean you made everything *bigger*?” Suzy gaped at him, horrified. “But that’s worse! How big’s the house now? It must take up half the street.”

“What sort of a fly-by-night merchant do you take me for?” said Fletch. “I didn’t make the outside any bigger, and I haven’t touched any of the other rooms. What would be the point in that?”

“Wait a minute.” Suzy fought to digest this new information. “You mean the house is still its normal size, even though the hall is bigger than the house?”

“That’s right.” Fletch grinned, warming to his topic. “It’s pretty standard stuff, really, your basic metadimensional engineerin’, a dash of magic, and a few bits of double-sided sticky tape. Job done.”

Suzy looked again at the living room doorway. She could still see her parents beyond it, fast asleep and normal sized, but the doorway itself seemed to flicker and stretch when she focused on it. It only took her a few seconds to realize she was seeing it in both sizes at the same time, but by then it had started to make her feel seasick

and she had to look away. “No,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m sorry, but that’s impossible.”

“Is it?” said Fletch, feigning surprise.

“You can’t just make something bigger on the inside than the outside.”

“‘Course you can. It’s simple fuzzics.”

Suzy frowned. “You mean *physics*.”

“No,” said Fletch. “Fuzzics. Like physics, only fuzzier.”

“Physics can’t be fuzzy,” said Suzy, indignant that something so precious to her should be treated like a bit of a joke. “It’s either right or wrong. It won’t let you break the rules.”

“That’s why fuzzics kind of saunters past ‘em,” said Fletch. “It’s easier than doing everything by the book.” He gave her an infuriating grin, and she was drawing breath to argue her case further when Stonker cleared his throat.

“This is all jolly nice,” he said, “but I’m afraid we really must be leaving. We’re already late, and I want to get under way before—”

“Mr. Stonker! Mr. Stonker!” The voice came from the direction of the carriages.

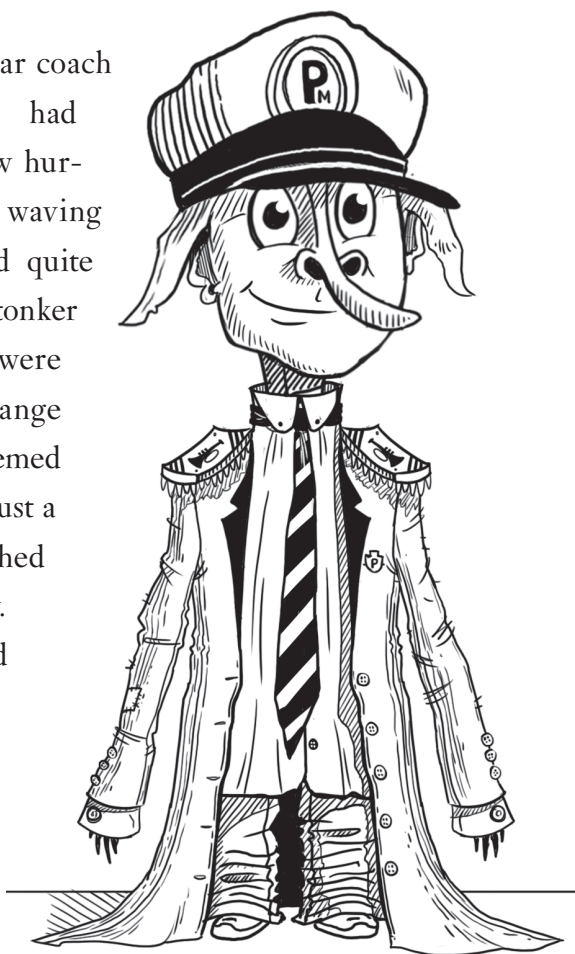
“Too late,” sighed Stonker, pinching the bridge of his enormous nose. “Here he comes.”



The train’s locomotive pulled a large tender behind it, which Suzy assumed must be full of coal, or whatever

fuel the engine burned. Behind that were two carriages; the first was big, bulky, and cylindrical, like an armored gasoline tanker, but with a row of small port-holes in the side and a knot of tubes and chimneys sprouting from the top. The letters H. E. C. were stenciled down the side in large white script. The carriage at the rear was smaller and looked like an antique goods coach, the red paint peeling from its wooden panels.

It was from this rear coach that another troll had emerged and was now hurrying toward them, waving frantically. He looked quite different from both Stonker and Fletch; his arms were long and bent in strange directions, and he seemed to have no legs at all, just a pair of large feet attached directly to his body. Only when he tripped and landed flat on his face did Suzy realize why he looked particularly



strange—he was wearing a uniform that was several sizes too big for him.

“Aren’t either of you going to help him?” she asked as the new arrival floundered in a confusion of sleeves and coattails, trying to get back on his feet.

“I suppose we ought to,” said Stonker. “Fletch, be a good chap and help the Postmaster up, would you?”

“Not in my job description,” muttered Fletch. “Why don’t you do it?”

“Because I’m all the way up here,” Stonker said. “Besides, I helped him up last time.”

Suzy shook her head and hurried over to the flailing bundle of clothes. It was hard to tell which part of the troll was which, so she just reached out, hauled him up, and deposited him on what she hoped were his feet. His uniform wasn’t the same as Stonker’s, she saw—it was red instead of blue, and it looked older, more ornate. A tarnished gold medal dangled from the chest, and an old-fashioned horn or bugle was embroidered on both the shoulders, although the thread was badly frayed.

The bundle shook itself, and another huge nose, followed by a small, wide-eyed face, poked out from above the collar of the coat. This troll’s skin was a pale lichen green and hardly wrinkled at all. Suzy guessed he was much younger than the others.

“Thank you,” said the troll, and then, “Oh no! A local!”

He leaped into the air in fright, but his feet were already moving by the time he touched down, and he took off like a bullet, swerving around Suzy and heading for Fletch and Stonker, where he promptly tripped over the hem of his coat and went sprawling once again.

“It’s all right, Postmaster,” called Stonker. “We think she’s harmless.”

The fallen troll said something in response, but his words were muffled by several layers of cloth. Neither of the others made a move to help him, so with a weary sigh, Suzy retraced her steps and set him back on his feet. He shrugged the uniform away from his face and gave her a suspicious look. “Are you sure, Mr. Stonker? She looks like she might bite.”

“I promise I won’t,” said Suzy.

“She’d have to chew her way through all that uniform first, Wilmot,” said Fletch. “You know they come in smaller sizes, right?”

The Postmaster sniffed and turned his nose up. “I’ve told you before, Fletch—this was my father’s uniform, and his father’s before him. I have a legacy to uphold.”

“The legacy needs longer legs, boy,” said Fletch with a sly grin. Wilmot flared his nostrils in response.

“What exactly did you want, Postmaster?” said Stonker. “As you can see, we’re a trifle busy.”

"I came to see what was causing the delay," said Wilmot.  
"Our next customer is waiting for us."

"I'm aware of that," said Stonker.

"And I can't just leave the package on her doorstep and run," Wilmot went on, jiggling from foot to foot inside his uniform. "It needs to be signed for! I don't want to be the one who rings her doorbell if we're late."

"We'll get there as quickly as possible," said Stonker.  
"I'm just waiting for . . . Aha! Here we are."

A second figure had emerged from the driver's cab and was hurrying along the gangway; Suzy could tell immediately that it was not like the others—it

was bigger than she was, loping along on all fours in a powerful run. It wore faded blue overalls but was otherwise covered from top to bottom in vivid yellow fur. Only when it came to a halt beside Stonker and reared up onto its hind legs did Suzy realize what she was looking at.



“Is that a *bear*?” she exclaimed. The creature spared her a curious glance.

“A brown bear, to be precise,” said Stonker. “*Ursus arctos*. A bit of a departure for a troll train, I’ll admit, but she scored top marks in all her entrance exams. Ursel here keeps the firebox stoked and the wheels turning.”

Ursel flashed a set of startlingly white fangs at Suzy, who wasn’t sure if the gesture was meant as a greeting or a threat. She tried not to show her discomfort.

“How are we looking, Ursel?” said Stonker.

“Growlf,” said the bear with a voice so deep that Suzy felt it as a shiver in her bones.

“Jolly good. Well, stand by the valves and be ready to give it plenty of pep. I want to get out of here before anything else goes wrong.”

“Grunf.” With a last glance down at the assembled audience, Ursel turned and began loping back toward the cab.

Suzy felt the question well up in her throat before she had time to stop it. “If it’s a brown bear, why is it bright yellow?”

Everything stopped.

Stonker and Wilmot stared at her, mortified, and even the train seemed to have quieted its hissing and clanking. Fletch winced. Then, very slowly, all eyes turned to Ursel.

Suzy clapped her hands over her mouth, as though she

could stuff the question back inside it. She could tell from everyone's reaction that it had been the wrong thing to say, but it *shouldn't* have been. This whole situation—trolls and bears and trains and just *all of it*—was starting to upset her. Because, while she never would have admitted it, she had always been secretly proud of her ability to understand the nuts and bolts of reality. Now, though, it felt as if that reality was tilting underneath her, threatening to throw her off. She just wanted to make sense of it again.

Ursel turned and padded back toward them, dark eyes fixed on Suzy, who was now too terrified to move. *It's going to eat me*, she thought. *Eaten by a bear, in my own house.* But the thought that made her saddest was this: *Now I'll never get to understand what's happening.*

Ursel reared up and leaned over the railing. A string of saliva hung from a large incisor. "Growlf," Ursel grunted. "Grrrrunf orf nnnngrowlf!"

Suzy stood to polite attention, not daring to take her eyes off those fangs. "What did it say?" she said with a pleading look toward Stonker.

The driver gave a knowing smile, and his eyes twinkled again. "She said she's not an *it*, she's a *she*, thank you very much. And it's none of your business if she happens to prefer being blond."

Suzy looked again at Ursel with a mixture of shock and relief. "You mean you're a girl?"

This was met with a guttural roar that made everyone jump back.

“What!” said Suzy, trembling with shock. “What did I do wrong this time?”

“It’s a common mistake,” said Stonker, rubbing his ringing ears. “She prefers the term *woman*. Something to do with being a responsible adult who pays her taxes.”

Ursel flexed her shoulders and gave a decisive nod before turning and lumbering back toward the cab. Suzy wasn’t sure it was possible for bears to wink, but she was sure Ursel gave her one as she went.

A few seconds later, steam hissed from between the driving wheels. The boiler rattled and the whole train lurched forward an inch, straining against the brakes. Wilmot turned and dashed back toward the rear coach, his coattails flapping behind him.

“I’m sorry there’s no more time for pleasantries,” Stonker called over the rising noise. “I’ll leave you in Fletch’s capable hands.”

Fletch grunted.

“But I still don’t understand what all this means,” Suzy protested. “Where did it all come from? Where are you going?”

Stonker drew himself up, eyes twinkling. “From Trollville to the five corners of reality, my dear. No package too big, no postcard too small. Come rain, shine, or

meteor shower, the Impossible Postal Express will deliver.” He whipped off his cap and gave a theatrical bow as the locomotive strained forward again, its carriages rattling. “Farewell,” he called, steadying himself against the handrail, “and try not to worry. Fletch really is jolly skilled.” He turned and hurried back along the gangway to the cab, slamming the door shut behind him. A second later, the brakes unlocked with an almighty *clunk*, and the huge driving wheels ground slowly forward.

“I s’pose we’d better get on with it,” said Fletch, cracking his knuckles. He reached to his tool belt and paused. “Where is it?”

Suzy had no idea what he was talking about, but some nervous instinct told her to start backing away as the train lumbered into motion beside them.

“I can’t do the job without it,” said Fletch. He patted his pockets and looked around in confusion. Then his head snapped up and his eyes fixed on Suzy. “You!” he exclaimed. “You took it from me.”

Suzy started retreating slowly as Fletch advanced on her. “What?”

“Where is it? I need it!”

Before Suzy could answer, her foot came down on something hard and narrow, and it rolled out from under her, taking her foot with it. She felt a moment of weightlessness before she landed flat on her back.

She sat up, nursing her head with one hand, and looked down to see what she had stepped on. It was Fletch's metal rod. She must have dropped it when she threw herself clear of the train.

He saw it at the same instant she did, and pounced for it. He was fast, but she was faster—she snatched it up and sprang away.

“Give it back!” he shouted.

“No,” she said. “Whatever it is, you'll use it on me. You just said so.”

Fletch crept toward her, his hands up as though she were pointing a gun at him. “I know how to use it properly. You don't.”

“I don't want to use it,” she said. “And I don't want you to, either.”

The locomotive slid into the archway. The huffing of its chimney, the clank of its wheels, the hiss and gush of steam echoed back out of the darkness as it continued to gather speed, drawing the carriages ever closer to the tunnel mouth. Suzy felt a sudden tug—a fear that something very important was right in front of her, but was slipping away.

“Are there really five corners of reality?” she asked.

Fletch stopped, surprised. “'Course there are. Don't they teach you anything useful at school?” The tender slipped through the tunnel mouth and out of sight.

“Now give back what’s not yours.” He started forward again.

Suzy didn’t realize she had made her mind up until she started running—not away from Fletch, but toward him. She saw the startled look on his face as he spread his arms wide to catch her, but she was too quick. She heard his little yelp of shock as she rushed past him and felt the slight tug on her bathrobe as he tried to snatch at her.

She was running level with the train now, but it was still gathering speed and steadily outpacing her. The tug of anxiety felt stronger, but clearer as well; the world made no sense anymore because of this train and the things that were on it. If she ever wanted to understand the world again, she couldn’t afford to let the train go without her. If she did, they would make her forget she’d ever seen it, and she’d live out the rest of her life in blissful ignorance, never knowing any better, and that scared her. That scared her so badly she put her head down and ran until she could feel her heartbeat in her throat.

The strange cylindrical tanker that bore the letters H. E. C. entered the tunnel, leaving only the old red coach at the rear. It was close enough to touch, but the tunnel mouth was fast approaching and she was running out of ground. She had no idea what would happen to her if she ran on into the tunnel, and she wasn’t keen to find out.

“Stop!” bellowed Fletch.

The carriage slid past her, the leading wheels vanishing over the threshold. The door through which Wilmot had disappeared was gaining on her fast. Last chance. She put on a final burst of speed, swerved toward the coach, and jumped.



Her hand closed around the coach's door handle in the same second that the world around her went dark. The deep echoes of the hall were swept away by the noisy rush of the tunnel. Cold wind tugged at her hair and clothes, and she planted her feet as securely as she could on the narrow metal step below the door. Looking back, she was just in time to see the tunnel mouth shrinking away into the distance. Framed inside it was the tiny figure of Fletch, standing in the hallway, shaking his fist in anger.