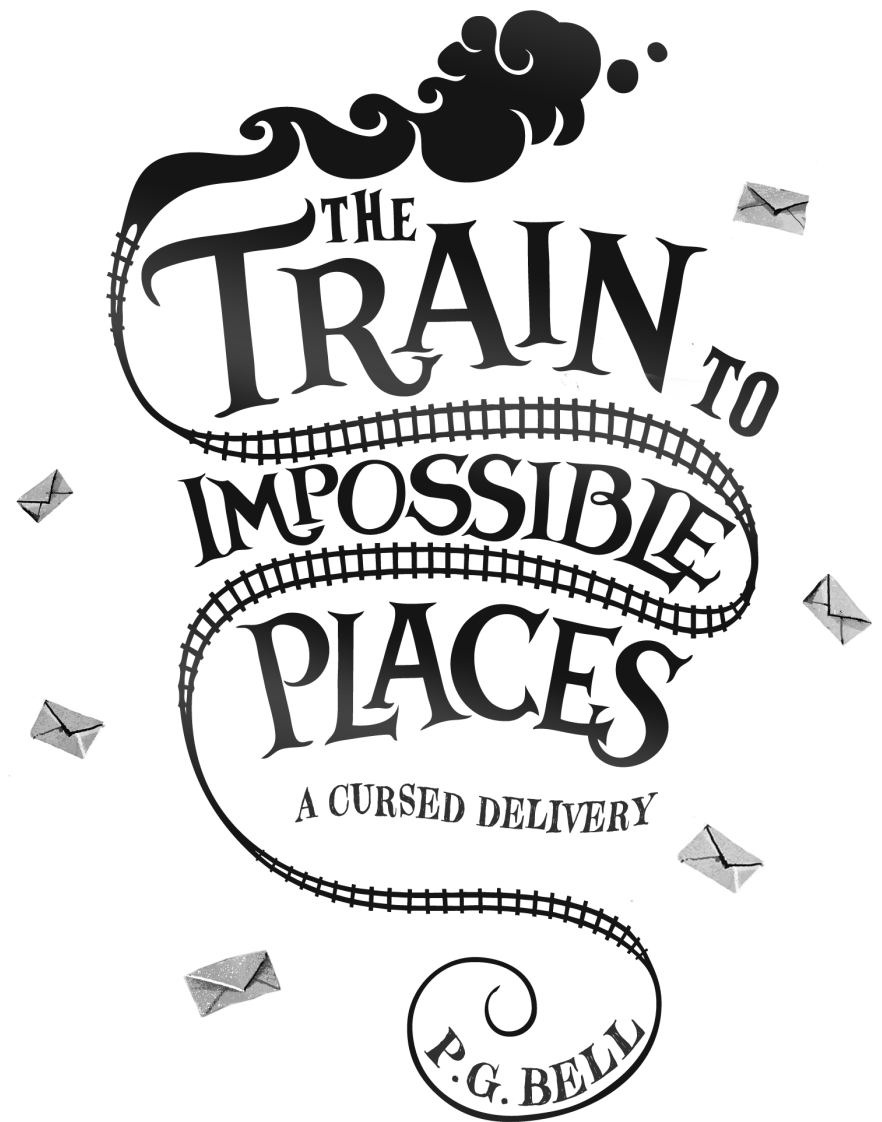


The title is surrounded by approximately 15 decorative elements: 10 four-pointed stars and 5 asterisks, scattered around the text in a circular pattern.

THE
TRAIN
TO
IMPOSSIBLE
PLACES



A CURSED DELIVERY

Illustrated by Flavia Sorrentino





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For Aurelien,
who heard this story first



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 about.

"What was that?" she asked.

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

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

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

THE TRAIN TO IMPOSSIBLE PLACES

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

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

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

Suzy pressed her lips together. 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 maths, but she preferred physics because it made the maths 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 maths 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, maths was just another way of filling up pieces of paper. Physics was where the action was.

The trouble was, she was starting to feel that liking physics so much made her a bit unusual, which wasn’t a feeling she

LIGHTNING IN THE LIVING ROOM

liked much. None of her friends shared her enthusiasm, and they had started to sneak little sideways glances 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 boy with the dinosaur obsession, who, on the rare occasions 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 set 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 over 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 rolled his eyes the last time she had handed in her homework.

“Suzy,” he had sighed. “As if I didn’t have enough work to do.”

Her pen hovered over 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 more questions for herself, 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 of her pen, shut her homework book and stuffed them both back into her school bag.

She decided not to disturb her parents. “Goodnight,” she whispered, as she padded across the room and out into 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 it hadn’t realized it had been asleep to begin with.

The clock on her bedside table read 2 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

THE TRAIN TO IMPOSSIBLE PLACES

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 towards 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 her room, she didn't want them to find her just standing there in her pyjamas. (And not even her nice pyjamas – 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 her Aunt Sandrine in Mauritius sent her for Christmas last year.) If they found her like this, they wouldn't have to hurt her

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR

– 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 wasn't much, 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 much 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 dressing gown 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 mum 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 though – 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.

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

The hammering sounds stopped immediately and she heard someone gasp. There was the noise 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, a metre or so 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 railway tracks.

She knew they couldn’t be, and yet there they were. She prodded the nearest one with her toe, then kneeled 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 the tracks; 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. She turned and followed their path with her eyes, past the living room door and down the whole length of the hall towards the kitchen – where her attention fell on an 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. It sagged a bit in the middle, and it barely reached her shoulder.

Light spilled from between the canvas flaps.

“Mum? Dad?” she called, taking a cautious step forward. Something shifted inside the tent, and a vague shadow played across 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 mum 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 and fetch help.

But...

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

THE TRAIN TO IMPOSSIBLE PLACES

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 towards 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. "Sleepwalkin'. Now off to bed with you."

Suzy took another step, but her toe struck something hard. "Ouch!" She hopped on 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 that I'm not asleep," said Suzy, reaching down to rub her throbbing toe. "That hurt."

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR

"Serves you right."

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

"Mum! 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 – it was as long as her forearm, hooked, and flanked by a pair of enormous nostrils, which were filled with wiry grey hair. A broad mouth, as wide as a toad's, was pulled into 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 dark and knotted as old tree bark. A huge pair of pointed ears stuck out on either side. Even more grey hair sprouted from inside them.

"Well?" said the creature, stepping out 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 on its squat body. A name badge 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 hammer 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 back to 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 respond, 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 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 immediately. 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 railway tracks. She moved 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 door frame.

"What are you doing now?" she demanded.

"Concentrating," 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 tiptoes.

"That's not fair," Fletch whined, finally coming to a breathless halt. "It's sizeist."

"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. "Alright, 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 maintain

the lines, and build 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 she's got to make up the time before her 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 this neck of the woods, but here we are, for one night only, sort of thing."

Suzy didn't grasp most of what Fletch had said, which only made her more frustrated, so 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?"

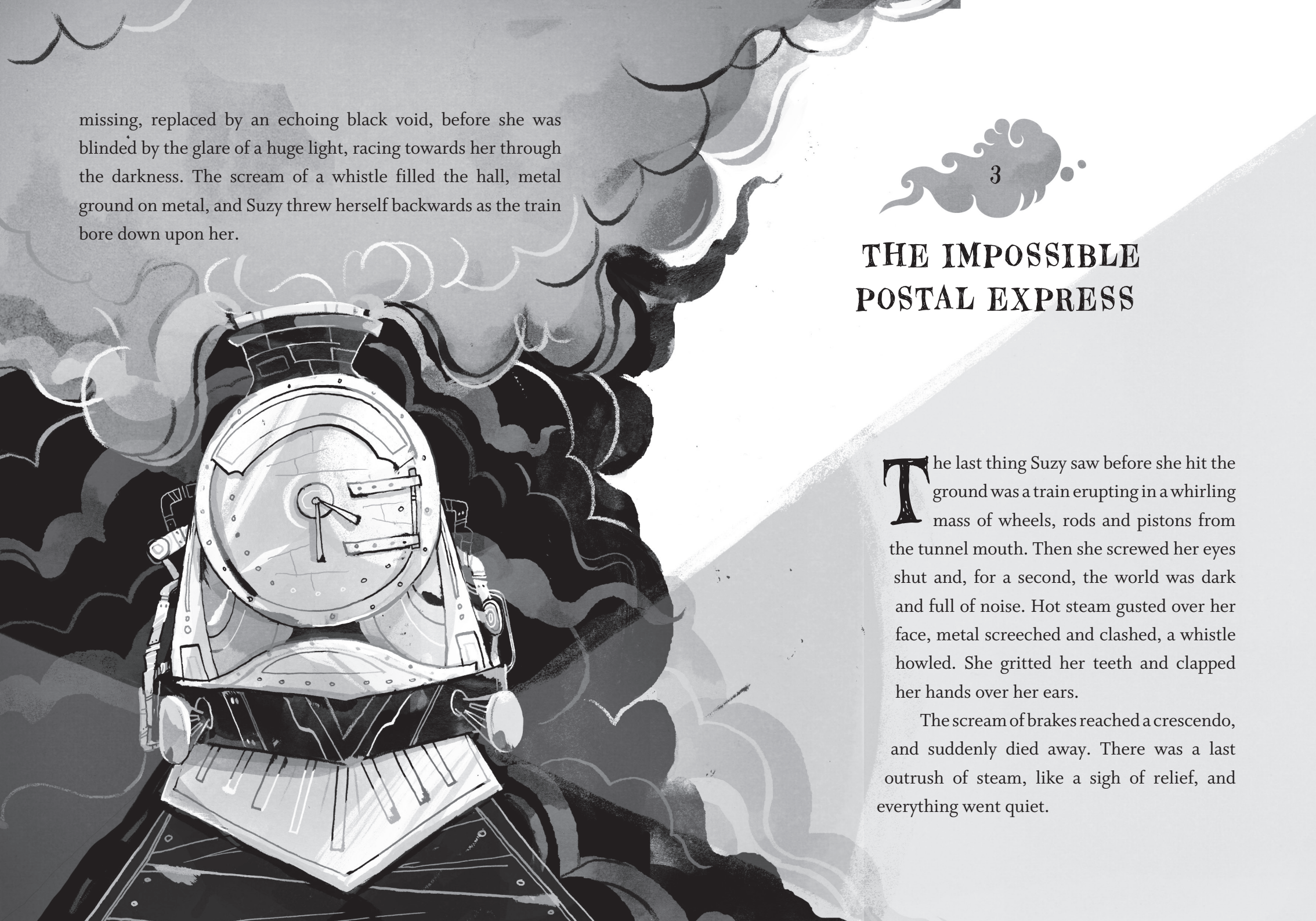
Suzy felt a fresh rush of embarrassment and, hot on its heels, a surge of anger. She was so angry that she could hear her blood singing in her ears. Perhaps her feelings showed on her face, because Fletch began backing away from her towards the safety of the tent, his eyes widening.

"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 was hearing wasn't coming from her ears at all – it was coming from the rails.

A rush of cold air barrelled down the hall, and she turned, thinking that 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 towards her through the darkness. The scream of a whistle filled the hall, metal ground on metal, and Suzy threw herself backwards as the train bore down upon her.

3

THE IMPOSSIBLE POSTAL EXPRESS

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