THE SILVER ARROW

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Uncle Herbert Is a Bad Person

KATE KNEW ONLY TWO THINGS ABOUT HER UNCLE Herbert: He was very rich and totally irresponsible.

That was it. You'd think there would've been more – he was her uncle after all – but the thing was, she'd never actually met Uncle Herbert. She'd never even seen a picture of him. He was her mother's brother, and her mother and Uncle Herbert didn't get along.

Which was weird when you thought about it. I mean, Kate had a younger brother, Tom, and he was gross and horrible, but she couldn't imagine not actually, you know, seeing him once in a while. But apparently with grown-ups that was a thing.

Uncle Herbert never came to visit. He never called. Where did he live? What did he do all day? Kate imagined him doing weird rich-people things, like travelling to remote islands, and collecting rare exotic pets and, I don't know, buying an entire gingerbread house and eating it all by himself. That's what she would've done.

But it was all a big mystery. The only thing Kate's parents were clear on was that Uncle Herbert was lazy and that he had too much money and no sense of responsibility. It made Kate wonder how such a lazy, irresponsible person could've gotten his hands on all that money, but adults never explained contradictions like that. They only ever changed the subject.

Which isn't to say that Kate's parents were bad parents. They really weren't. Parenting just never seemed to be right at the top of their list of priorities. They went to work early and came home late, and even when they were home they were always staring at their phones and their computers and making serious worky faces. Unlike Uncle Herbert, they worked all the time and were extremely responsible, though they never seemed to have much money to show for it.

Maybe that's why he annoyed them so much.

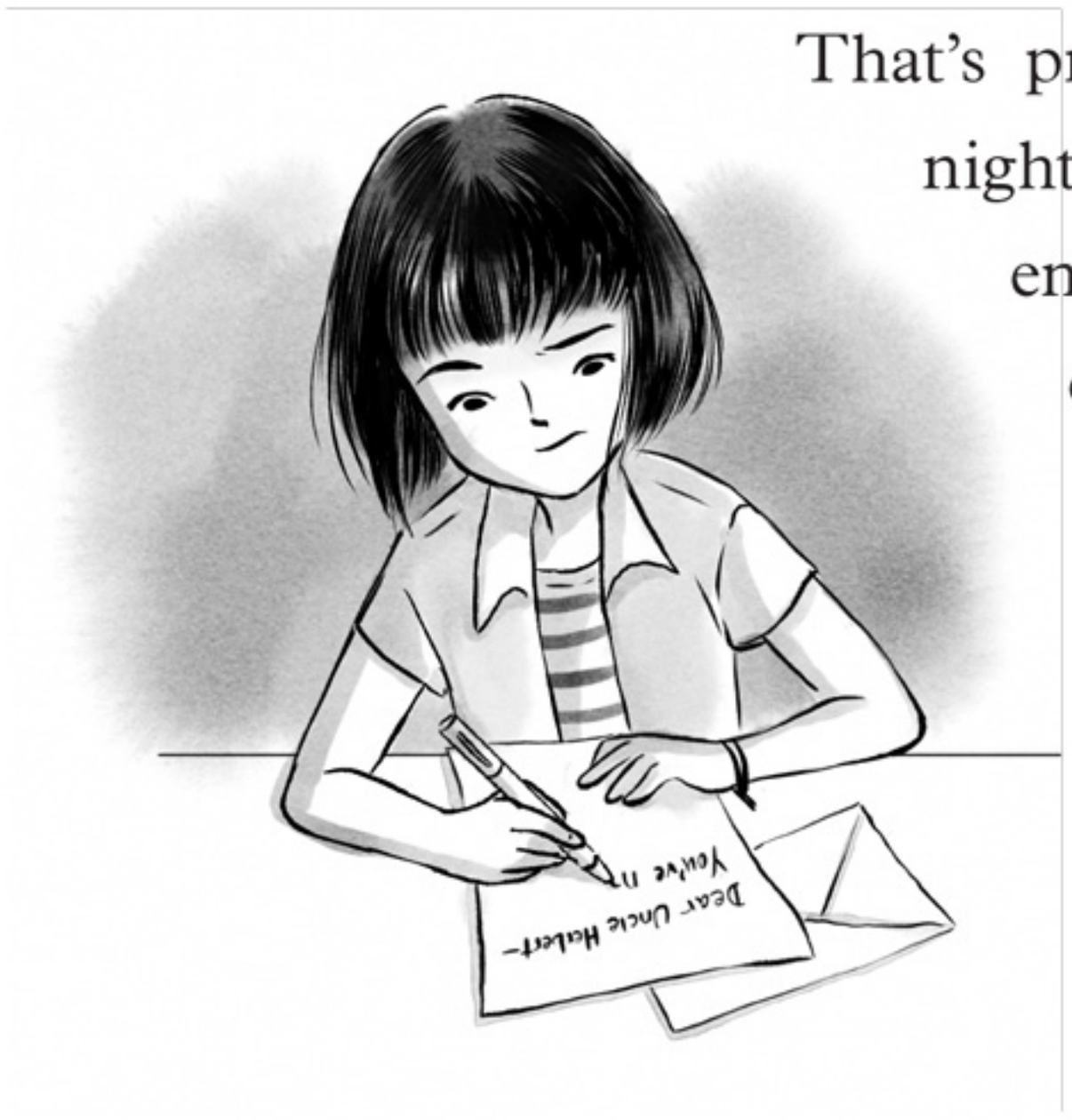
Either way, they never seemed to have much time for Kate.

Kate had plenty of time for Kate, though. Sometimes it seemed like too much. She rode her bike, and played video games, and did her homework, and played with her friends, and once in a while she even played with Tom. She wasn't one of the kids in her class who had a special talent – like drawing, or juggling four beanbags at once, or identifying rare mushrooms and telling the difference between the ones you could eat and the ones that would kill you – though she often wished she was. She read a lot; she had to be told, with tiresome frequency, to close her book during dinner. Her parents sent her to piano lessons and tennis lessons. (They sent Tom to cello lessons and Judo lessons.)



But some days, as she pounded away at the mahogany upright in the living room or punished the garage door with her forehands and backhands, Kate found herself feeling restless. Impatient. What was the point? She was young enough that all she had to do was kid things, but she was also getting old enough that she wanted to do more than play games and pretend. She felt ready for something more exciting. More real. Something that actually mattered.

But there wasn't anything. Just toys and games and tennis and piano. Life always seemed so interesting in books, but then when you had to actually live it nothing all that interesting ever seemed to happen. And unlike in books, you couldn't skip ahead past the boring parts.



That's probably why, on the night before her eleventh birthday, Kate sat down and wrote her uncle Herbert a letter. It went like this:

Dear Uncle Herbert –

You've never met me but I'm your niece Kate, and since it is my birthday tomorrow and you are super rich do you think you could please send me a present?

Warmly,

Kate

Reading it over, she wasn't sure it was the greatest letter anybody had ever written, and she wasn't 100 per cent sure that the word *please* was in the right place. But she thought it contained her personal truth, which her English teacher always said was the important thing. So she put it in the postbox. Probably nobody would ever read it anyway because she hadn't put an address on the envelope, because she didn't know where Uncle Herbert lived. She didn't even have a stamp for it.

Which made it all the more surprising when a present from Uncle Herbert arrived the very next morning. It was a train.

Kate didn't especially want a train. It's not like she was into trains, that was more of a Tom thing.

Kate was more about books, and LEGO, and Vanimals, these cute little animals that drove vans, which everybody in her class was insane about and which she liked, too, for some reason that she couldn't really explain.

But after all she hadn't asked for anything specific, and she guessed that her uncle probably didn't have much experience with kids. So. Kate tried to be philosophical about these things.

What was really surprising, though, was how big it was. I mean this thing was really big. Like too big to send through the mail. It arrived at their house on a specially reinforced double-wide flatbed truck with twenty-eight wheels. Tom counted. It was giant and black and incredibly complicated. In fact it didn't look like a toy at all, it looked like an actual, real, life-sized steam train.

That, Uncle Herbert explained, was because it was one.

Uncle Herbert had come to deliver it personally, in a banana-yellow Tesla so insanely sleek and tricked-out it looked like one of Tom's Hot Wheels. He was fat, with thinning brown hair and a round, mild-mannered face. He looked like a history teacher, or

somebody who might take tickets at an amusement park. He wore shiny blue leather shoes and a banana-yellow suit that perfectly matched his car.

Kate and Tom came running out to stare at the train. Kate had lots of straight brown hair cut to the length of her chin and a sharp little nose that gave her a slightly princessy look, though she wasn't really especially princessy. Tom's hair was short and blond and tufty, like a guinea pig that just woke up, but he had that same nose, which on him looked princely instead.

She was so surprised she couldn't think of anything to say.

'That is a really big train' was all she came up with. It would have to do.

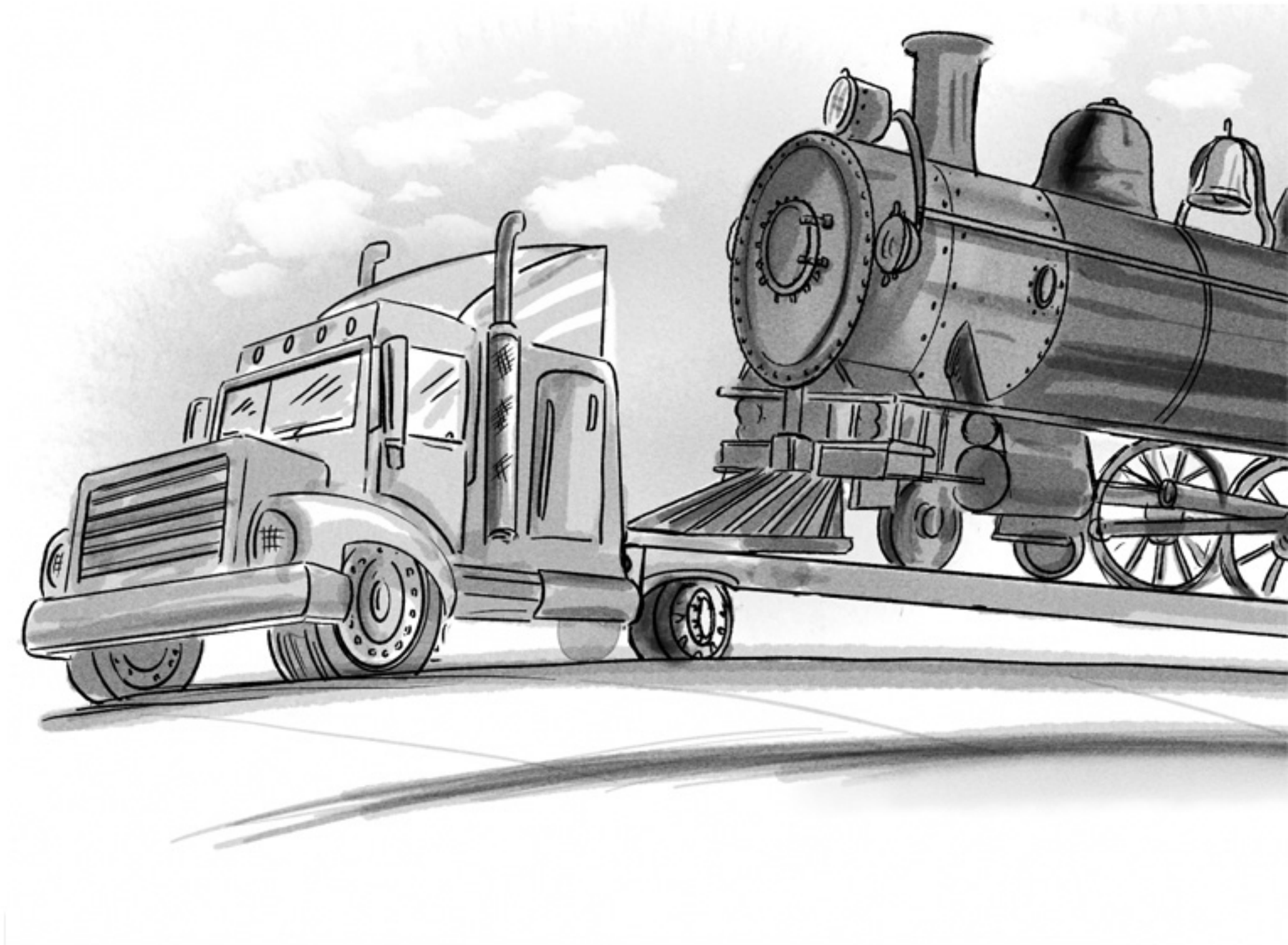
'It's not a whole train,' Uncle Herbert said modestly. 'Just the engine. And a tender – that's the coal car right behind it.'

'How much does it weigh?' Tom asked.

'One hundred tons,' Uncle Herbert said crisply.

'What, exactly?' Kate said. 'Like, it literally weighs exactly one hundred tons?'

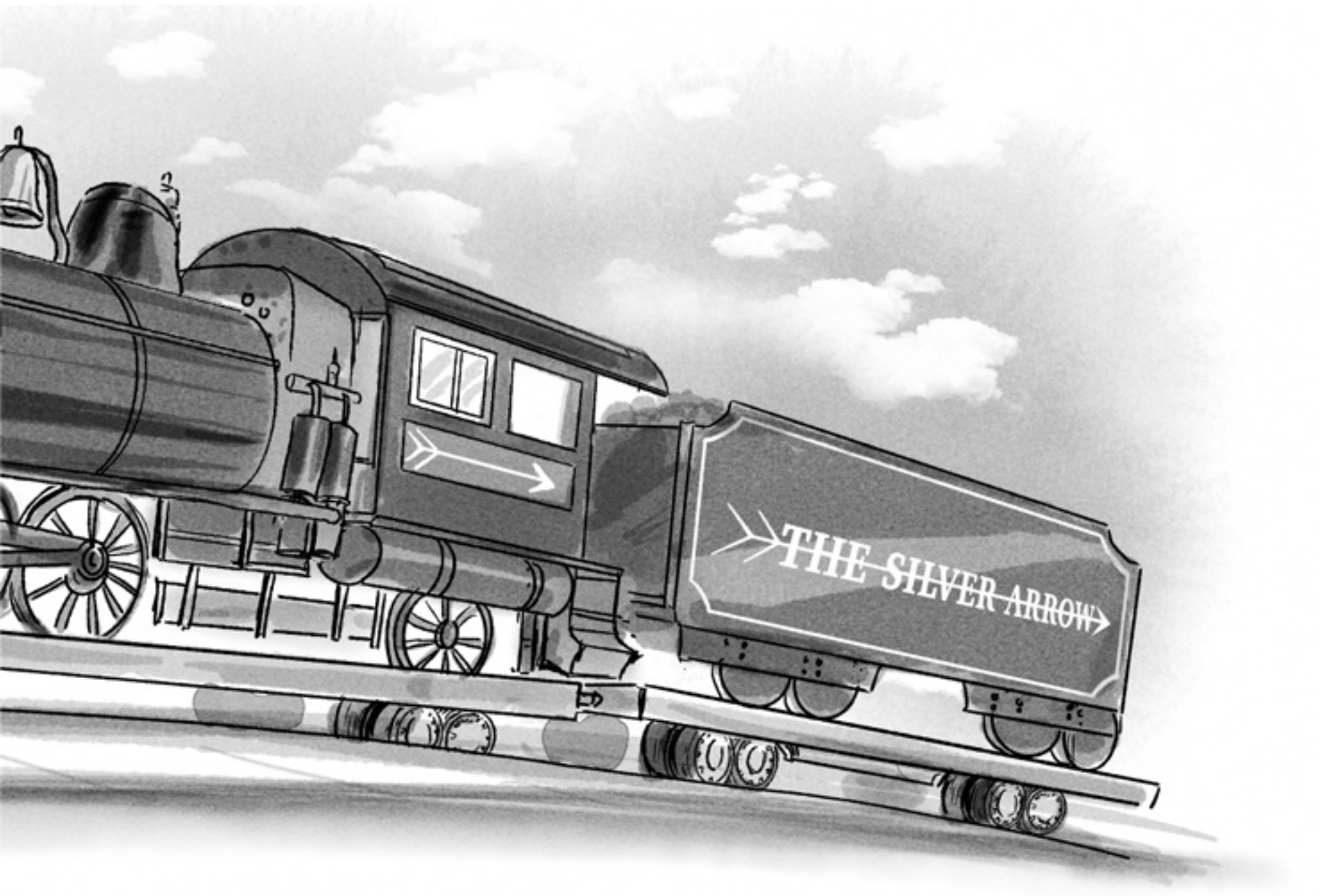
'Well, no,' Uncle Herbert said. 'It weighs a hundred and two tons. A hundred and two point three six. You're right to be suspicious of overly round numbers.'



‘I thought so,’ said Kate, who was.

You really don’t appreciate how incredibly colossal a steam locomotive is till one shows up parked on the street in front of your house. This one was about fifteen feet high and fifty feet long, and it had a headlight and a smokestack and a bell and a whole lot of pipes and pistons and rods and valve handles on it. The wheels alone were twice her height.

Kate’s father came out of the house too. In fact most of the people on their street came out to look at the train. He put his hands on his hips.



‘Herbert,’ he said. ‘What the blazes is this?’

He didn’t really say *blazes*, but you can’t put the word he did say in a book for children.

‘It’s a train,’ Uncle Herbert said. ‘A steam train.’

‘I can see that, but what’s it doing here? On a truck? So very close to my house?’

‘It’s a present for Kate. And Tom, I guess, if she wants to share.’ He turned to Kate and Tom. *‘Sharing is important.’*

Uncle Herbert definitely didn’t have much experience with kids.