

Graded reading: Mystery train (level 3) – text

The candyfloss should be the perfect ending to an evening at the fair ... but the walk along the old train tracks turns into a terrifying nightmare.

'The ghost train is for kids!' said Claire. 'You guys go on it if you want, but I'm not paying for a kids' ride.'

'People look pretty scared when they come out,' said Peter, trying to pull her towards the ticket office in front of The World's Scariest Ghost Train. 'Come on, it'll be fun!'

'They're pretending to be scared,' said Claire. 'They know it's not real, so what's there to be scared of?'

'OK, your loss,' Peter called over his shoulder as he went off to buy a ticket for himself and the rest of their friends.

Maybe it was time to go home anyway, Claire thought, though there was one thing left to do at the fair – buy candyfloss. Claire had never, ever managed to finish a whole one. They were just too big and too sweet, yet, at the same time, there was nothing there. It must be possible though, she thought, as the lady at the candyfloss stall handed her a huge, pink sugar cloud. She set herself a challenge. Tonight she was going to eat all of it. For that, she would have to give herself time, and that meant walking home from the fair by the train tracks instead of through the town.

It wasn't very dark yet, and she could see the dust kick up under her sandals as she stepped off the dirt and onto the track. Each wooden sleeper was just the right distance apart so she could step from one to another comfortably. Of course, Claire knew better than to walk on train tracks anywhere else – it was stupid and dangerous. Only last year some boys in the city had died playing on the tracks. But there was nothing dangerous here, as long as she was careful not to fall and break her ankle.

No one in Fellside had any memory of a train ever using the railway tracks that cut across the north-west corner of town. There wasn't even a train station. The tracks suddenly finished at the football stadium as if the engineers had simply run out of wood. The iron rails continued a few metres further, and then ... nothing. Claire always thought of them like those cartoons where the cat chases the mouse and the mouse puts down tracks in front of his speeding carriage until he runs out.

The train tracks were a mystery, but one that was so old nobody wondered about it any more. They were just there, they'd always been there, and that was that. The tracks seemed to buzz as she walked. She could feel the vibration through her sandals and into her feet. And then she could hear it too. She stopped and it got stronger and louder. And then she heard a much louder sound, the screech of metal on metal. She looked behind her. A round light, small but getting bigger, was rushing towards her. It couldn't be ...

A train.

The wheels screeched louder against the rails as the driver braked. There was no way the train could stop before it reached her. Luckily, Claire lost her balance and fell to the right, off the track. She knew she was screaming even though she couldn't hear anything above the old steam train as it slowed. Its carriages passed her, empty.

Where is it going? she wondered. The tracks end in a couple of miles.

A man stuck his head out of the window of the engine and shouted, furious. 'Don't you know it's dangerous on the tracks?'

'But ... but ... there aren't any trains!' Claire said, feeling stupid as the words came out of her mouth. There was clearly a train now, whatever had been true before. The train shouldn't be, couldn't be, there. It's not real, she told herself.

'This isn't real,' she repeated out loud. But the heat coming from the engine certainly felt real enough.

'You can't keep walking on the tracks, so you're going to have to take the train the rest of the way.'

'No!' Claire protested.

'Not scared, are you?' he said. 'If it isn't real, what's there to be scared of?' It was what she had said to Peter.

She found herself climbing the metal stairs up to the train's engine, candyfloss in hand.

'Sit.' He pointed at a pile of wood as the train slowly started moving again.

'Where are we going?' Claire asked.

'End of the line,' he said.

'Oh, OK!' Claire was relieved. That wasn't far at all. The tracks ended not far from here. He said nothing.

She didn't want the candyfloss. It would take forever to eat it all, she decided. Impossible. After a few minutes, she guessed they must be reaching the end of the line, but they weren't slowing down.

'Er ... excuse me?' Claire shouted, because it was as noisy inside the train as outside. 'How long until we get there?'

'As long as it takes to finish your candyfloss,' the driver of the real ghost train said. The pink cloud in Claire's hand looked as big as when she took her first bite.

'How long is that?' she asked, but she already knew the answer.

He turned to face her. Except now there was no face. There was nothing there under his cap at all. 'Forever.'

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Preparation

Match the vocabulary with the correct definition and write a–h next to the numbers 1–8.

- | | |
|----------------------------------|---|
| 1..... a carriage | a. to go very fast |
| 2..... to buzz | b. a sweet made of sugar, usually pink or white, that you buy at the fair |
| 3..... to screech | c. to make a loud noise like a scream |
| 4..... candyfloss | d. to make a low, continuous sound, like a bee |
| 5..... a sleeper | e. a continuous shaking movement |
| 6..... to run (out of something) | f. a separate section of a train |
| 7..... a vibration | g. one of the wooden parts in the middle of the train tracks |
| 8..... to speed | h. to use something completely so there is none left |

1. Check your understanding: true or false

Circle *True* or *False* for these sentences.

- | | | |
|--|-------------|--------------|
| 1. Claire is scared of the ghost train at the fair. | <i>True</i> | <i>False</i> |
| 2. Claire has never eaten candyfloss before. | <i>True</i> | <i>False</i> |
| 3. No one knows why there's a train track in Fellside. | <i>True</i> | <i>False</i> |
| 4. The train seems real. | <i>True</i> | <i>False</i> |
| 5. Claire eats all her candyfloss. | <i>True</i> | <i>False</i> |
| 6. The driver is going to take Claire home. | <i>True</i> | <i>False</i> |

2. Check your understanding: multiple choice

Circle the best answer to these questions.

1. Claire walks home by the train tracks because ...
 - a. she wants a change.
 - b. it's faster.
 - c. it's longer.

2. When the train comes, she ...
 - a. hears it before she sees it.
 - b. sees it before she hears it.
 - c. can't see it.

3. Claire doesn't finish her candyfloss because ...
 - a. it's not real.
 - b. it's not possible.
 - c. she doesn't have time.

4. The train driver ...
 - a. is real.
 - b. is a ghost.
 - c. works for the fair.