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Chapter One:

A Lost Train of Thought



Matthew Plumb sits at his desk, head in hands. Papers are spread around him like a confetti of disarray. Three major assignments loom from his school satchel and his publisher's constant emails hang around like a terrible stench. His fingers absentmindedly tug at the stitching around the **patch** on his blue coat. Matt is desperate. His first book, a complete accident, had found some success but not enough to pay off his student loans. And now the published copy of *The Galactic Collective of Baking and Ballroom-dancing Gophers* sits to his left, mocking him. He groans, digging through his brain for some distant speck of inspiration that could spark his next masterpiece. The last thing he needs is a distraction. Or maybe, that is the only thing he needs...

A knock on the door sounds throughout the room. Matt clenches his teeth as he shuffles the dirty laundry away from his bed and shoves the three half-full Ramen cups under his desk. He pats down his stained shirt and answers the door. His grandmother, Betsy Plumb, stands before him, her toothless grin spread across her face like peanut butter, holding a platter of Tic-Toc biscuits.

“Hello, dearie!” she smiles.

“Oh hey, Grandma,” Matt sighs, returning a half-awake smile himself. She shuffles purposefully into the messy room, disregarding the odour of two-minute noodles. Placing the platter in the only space she can find on the desk, she turns to him with a clap of her hands.

“So how is my darling grandson at his fancy university?”

Matt slumps into his desk chair. “Fine, Grandma. Just fine.”

“This ain’t my grandson! Look at your face, flat and thin as a pancake. Disgraceful!” Betsy shoves a **clock** biscuit into his grubby hands.

“No, really,” he insists, “I’m fine, Grandma. I just...” It all catches up with him; a tear slips from his eye. “I can’t think, Grandma! I just...I just can’t!” The tear drizzles down his face like rain on a window pane, dropping onto the Tic-Toc from his chin.

Betsy wraps him in a blanket-like hug. “Oh, Mattie, it’s alright. This is about your next book isn’t it? Yes, I loved the first. Baking *is* one of my favourite things.” She steps away and holds up her finger. “You know what? I’ve got an excellent idea! Why don’t I help you with your next book, huh? How does that sound?”

“No Grandma, I don’t think that’s necessary. You don’t need to...”

“No, no, don’t be silly, dearie. Your Grandma will figure something out! I always do!”

Matt sighs again, his eyes still red and puffy. It was true. She was always rescuing him from his mishaps. She was the one who made all the costumes for his primary school play, even though he changed characters eight times. She was the one who found him when he got lost in Woolworths. She convinced him to write his first book. But Matt is an adult now. Grown up. Independent. It didn’t feel right to depend on his Grandma like he used to. He takes a bite out of his biscuit.

“...I guess I could use some help,” he mumbles through the mouthful. “But I have to set a limit; I want to be the one writing this story, so just a bit of help, no wild ideas like last time, okay?”

Betsy smiles again, a glint in her eye. “Why don’t we discuss it over a cuppa tea at the Jane Austen café down the road?”

“And it’s no trouble at all?” Matt asks again, hot cup in his hands, notebook poking out of his coat pocket.

“Of course not, my boy. I have plenty of ideas I am willing to share. Just trust me. Now, how’s life at Uni?”

Matt thinks back to Monday, and the lecture he missed because he’d slept in. And then Tuesday, and the assignment he lost an hour before it was due. No, he couldn’t share that.

“I don’t know, Grandma. Not much goes on,” he shrugs, “Some of the professors are alright, and I’ve got enough friends I guess.”

“Anyone...you know, a little *more* than friends?”

“Grandma!” Matt groans, “I barely leave my room as it is.” He chuckles. “I don’t need something else like that to fit into my schedule.”

Betsy chuckles and throws her hands up. “Okay, okay. Are they feeding you enough there? I hear they provide lunches.”

Matt clears his throat, trying to ignore the receipt for twenty packets of ramen in his pocket.

“I, uh, I usually buy and...cook my own food. I don’t use the onsite canteen. It’s kinda lame anyway. Just toast and banana bread.”

“Well then I’d better start making up some snack boxes for you.” She pulled her address book out of her purse to make a reminder note. A gold coin fell out and she offered it to him. “For good luck,” she said.

Matt reluctantly accepts the coin but pushes the book and her hands back down to her purse. “That won’t be necessary, Grandma. I’m okay. But...” He stands up from the table.

“I’ve got a heap of work due soon.”

She nods and waves him out of the café. “Goodbye darling, I’ll be visiting soon with some ideas!” Once she can no longer see him, Betsy picks up her phone and scrolls down her contacts to the ‘S’ section. “It’s me,” she says, a slight growl in her voice. “I’m gonna need that favour.”

Chapter Two:

The Christmas Controllers



“What do you mean we’re behind schedule? The presents must be ready by Christmas.” The train screeches to a halt and Bald Eagle Santa turns away from his elfssistant, stalking onto the platform to meet Red Deer Santa.

“Behind on present production again? Honestly Bald Eagle, we can’t have a Christmas Catastrophe because you’re behind again.”

“I thought we agreed to wait to have this conversation,” Bald Eagle replies and stomps into the underground train station.

“You’re the last one who is unprepared. We now have every Santa here representing their respective countries,” says Deer Santa, following him inside and walking up to the platform. The other Santas were waiting.

“Welcome all Santas, to our Christmas preparation meeting,” Deer Santa’s voice booms. “As you all know, we have a Christmas Catastrophe looming. Kangaroo Santa has stopped making presents. And it has been going on for some time.” A wave of gasps crawls around the room.

“Worse still, he is using his trains not to deliver presents to Australia’s people, but to

imprison the children on the naughty list.”

“How will we stop him?” A voice creeps up.

“I know, let’s make everything legal, then they can’t be naughty and Santa Roo can’t imprison them,” someone replies. Red Deer lowers his head and sighs.

“No. Then everyone would be allowed to be bad and *that* would be a Christmas Catastrophe,” Red Deer argues.

“What if we gave all the children pets? No one is naughty when they have a pet,” another voice suggests.

“No. Most of them already have pets anyway.”

“I know. We give them presents and make them promise to be good,” Bald Eagle shouts.

“NO! Honestly what do you think the Naughty and Nice list *is*?!” Red Deer leapt down from the platform, one hoof cradling his head.

“Does anyone have *any* good ideas?” Suddenly, an off-key rendition of Jingle Bells rings throughout the room. Red Deer’s ears prick up. Almost no one had the Santas’ phone number. He presses the answer button.

“Hello?”

“It’s me, I’m gonna need that favour.”

“Betsy?” Red Deer whispered, glancing at the other Santas.

“Yeah, I said that. Now...” Back in the café, Betsy shifts her eyes back and forth. “I need to have clearance to visit the Christmas tunnels in Australia.”

“Why should we do that?” The others glance around, muttering. Deer Santa anticipates her answer. She says something he wasn’t expecting.

“I’ll help you take down SantaRoo.”

This comment merely fuels the muttering in the room as the Santas close enough to hear her, repeat her proposition. They are embarrassed at their inability to stop SantaRoo themselves.

Deer Santa replies bitterly, “And why do you think we need your help?”

“Because kids are still going missing, Red, and that’s unacceptable.”

Deer Santa splutters and stutters for several minutes, sweat on his brow and hundreds of eyes watching him and the phone closely. Bald Eagle Santa stands in the corner, wings

crossed.

“...F-f-f-f-f-f-f-f,” Deer Santa sighs and remembers the children, sitting cold and scared in those once cheerful trains, “Fine. Betsy, fine.”

Betsy grins. “Good, but I’m going to need a bit of help.” She pulls a knitting needle from her purse and spins it around her fingers, leaning back in the café seat, “My grandson, Matt, will be attending the visit with me. I want him to have full access. To everything.”

“One hundred percent access isn’t possible, Betsy, you know how uncooperative SantaRoo can be.”

“Those are my requirements, Red, take them or leave them. But I am warning you, that band of **prickly** bearded fools you have up there aren’t going to be able to stop this on their own.”

Chapter Three:

On the Right Track



The light flickers once, twice. Matt winces as the sole of his sneakers sticks to the stairwell leading down to the underground train station. He doesn't make any sudden movements or noises— not wanting to interrupt the silence he was enveloped in. Granny Betsy didn't give much away to Matt when she told him about her new story idea, but already he was unsure if this was going to lead anywhere. All she mentioned was something called a 'Council of International Santas' and to be very, *very* careful. Matt has been introduced to a small, child-sized person with suspiciously pointy ears. The small man, in bright green uniform, walks a step ahead of Matt. Betsy stayed back outside the station to let Matt go on the tour by himself, which has led to this prolonged awkward silence that he was now subjected to. The elvish man who is walking ahead of him looks back in annoyance, as if he had better things to do.

"So, this is the station. I guess I'll show you around." The guide sighs with a **struggle** and gives a half-hearted gesture with his miniscule hands. As soon as Matt stepped onto the platform of the station, he felt regret. What was Granny Betsy thinking with this story idea? Just from entering this place it felt as though all of his inspiration and delight had evaporated. There must be much better things he could write about. Still, he follows the guide, never more than a step behind.

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The train station went on for about a kilometre. Matt can't believe that he has never heard of such a place. He follows behind the guide as they both walk along wooden train tracks. Surrounding Matt are an endless amount of seemingly empty trains. Each train interlocks with the others as if they are glued together. The train windows have been blocked out and have been collecting dust for at least ninety years. Matt's eyes grow wide with awe as he looks just above the windows of the train. A long line of tinsel extends as far as the station reaches. The tinsel reflects off the lights and spreads a pattern all through the station, contrasting with the rest of it. Random scatters of biscuit crumbs were spread out along the platform, as if they were left there to be clues. Despite Matt's immediate bad gut feeling, he knows there is something deeper going on here, and he has to get to the bottom of it.

"Now, this station has been operating for nearly one hundred years and our anniversary is coming up soon." Matt's thoughts are interrupted by the small man's nasal voice. Matt's intrigue grows and takes his notebook out of his back pocket. He does a small sketch of what he sees – the brightly coloured tinsel, the crackled tracks that went forever and the grumpy guide always ahead of him. He didn't want to forget these details.

The guide stops for a moment and looks around. Before he could open his mouth Matt has a question: "So, are there many other guides around this place? It looks pretty empty." He doesn't imagine that a story about an abandoned train station and a small man fully dressed in green (including his small pointy hat) will be very interesting to his dedicated fan base of two readers. The guide's eyes grow with shock, not anticipating the author's question.

"Us elves are a dying breed, I tell you that." Matt once again whips out his handy notebook. "There used to be heaps of us to help our Lead—I mean SantaRoo, but now after the *incident*, we've had to find a solution for Australia." Matt is lead gradually down the track as the elvish man spoke.

"What was the solution to the elves disappearing?" Matt starts thinking he should have majored in journalism instead.

"Well, the Santas had to start putting together a list of workers. They called this the 'Naughty List'. We now have thousands of children who stay here, working for us." The

small man doesn't blink, as if this is a completely normal concept. Something doesn't sound right about this, and Matt is determined to find out if there is going to be a bestselling idea behind it.

"Do you think that maybe I can talk to these workers? I'd love to get some characters for my story," he asks. The elf guide stops in his tracks and turns to face Matt for the first time. Matt waits for exactly one minute. "I don't see why not. Just know, I'll be right outside the whole time, so no funny business." Matt nods and continues to follow the elf.

Before his eyes lay the perfect concept for a new story.

Chapter Four:

Getting off the Rails



Matthew enters the train cell. He shivers, the temperature dropping sharply. His eyes search the room cautiously. He sees a group of children ranging from seven to fifteen, sitting in the corner playing cards. They all stop, turning to look at him, staring with psychopathic intent. One slams a card onto a pile with force and yells “Lannister!”

“Hi,” Matt says, perplexed. The guide turns to leave, raising a hand, presumably saying that Matt only has five minutes here. A kid shakes her head, and raises both hands; another kid raises his hand next to them. The guide stares at the kid.

“Fine.” The guide says. “Fifteen minutes.”

The guide leaves, closing the door behind him, struggling to reach the knob. Matt begins to feel nervous, noticing that the card game has halted since his arrival in the cell. One kid stands up and picks up something from near the card pile. He walks forward towards Matt, and holds it out. “Oh, snap. These are Tic-Tocs, these are my favourite biscuits.”

He takes the biscuit and shoves it into his mouth. It tastes like heaven, and Matt finds himself smiling through the mouthful. The boy nods, looking happy with his efforts to try and make friends, going back to his seat.

“Hello,” Matt says again.

“Hi,” one of the kids says, starting to question him. “What did you get in here for?”

“No,” a kid interrupts. “He’s too old. Why are you here?”

"I'm Matt," Matt says, although most of the kids look like they don't care. "I'm here to gain inspiration for my new book, but I don't have anything to tell you about it yet."

Matt pulls out his notepad having written almost nothing this entire time. He turns the notebook around, and quickly jots down "*Scary kids*," to start his notetaking. He sits down on the floor. The kids watch his every movement. He puts the notebook down, and crosses his arms.

"What are you guys here for?" He asks. The first kid to talk grabs the cards from everyone, and starts dealing out new cards.

"Hi Matt." A youngish girl furthest from Matt, around the age of nine, starts to speak. She puts her cards down. "I'm Nora. I got in here because I used a pen without my pen license."

"Huh," Matt replies. He wasn't sure what he was expecting, but using a pen? "Being imprisoned for using a pen without a license? That's... odd."

The boy who had dealt the cards interjects. "I'm Bartholomew. I'm ten."

"Lannister!" One of the oldest looking kids yells, and takes all the cards that had been thrown onto the ground. The girl near Nora sulks and pouts. Matt hadn't played Lannister for a long time, but it seemed like a very important game to these kids.

"I looked at a bad word in the dictionary," Bartholomew admitted.

"Which word?" Matt asks.

"I'd rather not specify," Bartholomew says, slurring his words. "Bad enough to get me here. That's all you need to know."

"My name is Elizabeth, but everyone calls me Eliza, and I'm twelve," a girl, sitting close to Nora says. "I did something *super* funny. I went in and out of the boy's toilets as fast as I could. Well, I thought it would be funny. My friends thought it would be funny. But now I'm here, and I'm not laughing."

"Lannister!" another says aggressively, less excited about it than the first winner.

“My name is Jedidiah, and I’m ten,” the boy next to the recent winner says. His eyes were burning with an emotion Matt had never seen in a child before. “I played crosswords. I *WON* crosswords.”

Eliza sighs, and shuffles away from the direction of Jedidiah. Matt motions for him to continue.

“I always lost at crosswords. Always. *Always*. I was sick of losing. I just wanted to win once. Just once.” Jedidiah says. The kids around Jedidiah roll their eyes, and all move away. “I just wanted to win. So one day, I found a dictionary. I was so bad at crosswords, so I used the dictionary. I won. I, won! I won, but now I’m here. And I’ll tell you, it. Was. Worth it!”

One of the last kids left to introduce themselves raises her hand.

“I’m Silver, fourteen. If you really must know what I did, I guess I’ll tell you. The last free dress day, my teacher forced me to go around, collecting the gold coins. All that responsibility, all that power, thrust on me without warning – I couldn’t handle it. I took it, I took the money and ran. I didn’t get far, before... before the elves found me. Now I’m here, stuck with this lot.”

A guide walks in.

“Time’s up,” he says.

Matt stands up, and turns to leave. A tugging, deep emotion falls over him, and he realises that he likes these kids, and doesn’t want them to suffer anymore down here. The guard motions to the door, in a rather threatening way.

“I’ll get you – all of you out of here,” He whispers to a girl sitting near him. She nods. He smiles in return. He turns to face the door, and notices a small carving near the handle. BP was here, it reads.

He traces his hand over the words as he leaves.

He follows the guard out, and closes the door for the elfish man. They walk in silence, and when they reach the exit, Matt holds his hand out to shake hands. The man looks at him strangely, but shakes his hand anyway.

He gets off the train, and runs straight to his grandmother.

“We have to save those—” His grandmother cuts him off and moves away from the train. “We need to save those kids, not just the ones in that cart but all the 600 others trapped in this train station. We *have* to. But first we gotta make a plan.”

Granny pulls Matt to the side of the station. “Alright, here’s what’s going to happen. First I’ll take out the elf guarding the barracks, then Matt, you can use his ID to get access to the weapons room. We’ll need ten bauble bombs, a high-watt laser cutter and five walkie talkies. You got that?”

“Yeah.” Matt keeps an eye out for the Elf Guide—who has walked away, unaware that Matt had stopped to talk to his grandmother. ‘Pssst!’ Matt calls back into the train cage. ‘Can you hear me?’

“Yes,” says Nora. “We’re all listening.” Matt and Betsy stand casually on the platform near the train cage door, trying to blend in.

“On Christmas Eve,” Betsy half-whispers, “all of the elves leave their posts to party on the platform. Matt and I will stay the night. At midnight I’ll put on the elf uniform I acquired from the elf I took out and use the laser cutter to get through the floor. The party will be quite loud and jam-packed so I’ll use that as a cover to plant the bauble bombs on the pillars. Now we’ll need to move fast because the baubles degrade in about 30 minutes after you pull the pin. When the bombs are set I’ll use the handcar on the track next to the train to get to the lever in time.”

“What lever?” asks Nora.

“About 2 kilometres north there’s a tunnel that leads directly to the surface but I need to switch the tracks.”

“Ohhh.”

“While this is happening you guys will need to find your way to the engine at the front of the train.”

“But the doors are locked?” says Jedidiah.

“That’s where you come in. You like crosswords right?”

“Yes yes yes yes yes yes I love crosswords!”

“Good. Because every door has a code and a clue. Just like a crossword.”

“But I’m really bad at crosswords.”

“Bartholomew.”

“Yes?” He replies.

“You still got that dictionary?”

“Sure do Miss.”

“Good. Jedidiah, I permit you to cheat the crosswords.”

“Yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes!” He replies eagerly.

“When you get to the engine you will need three one dollar coins to get it started again so Silver, I hope you saved some of that cash.”

“Of course it’s worthless down here,” she replies.

“Good. I’ll be back by then.”

“What if you’re late?” Asks Matt.

“Then you go without me.”

“But—”

“You go...without me.”

Chapter Five:

Derailed



The days leading up to Christmas Eve, besides Elizabeth getting gastro, the plan went according to plan.

It's Christmas Eve and the last elves have left the train. The team wakes from their false sleep and without hesitation the plan is set into action. Betsy squeezes into the skin-tight elf uniform and slings over the bauble bomb belt over her shoulder. Using the laser cutter, she cuts through the train's 6-centimeter steel floor, drops down and crawls out the side. The entire platform is swarming with elves standing shoulder to shoulder drinking and laughing.

Faking a drunk grin Betsy manoeuvres her way through the crowd, strategically placing the bombs on each support column. When all the bombs are in place she starts the countdown, then makes her way to the handcar sitting on the parallel tracks and starts pumping.

“Operation Bauble, complete,” Betsy says into her walkie talkie.

Matt and the kids acknowledge, and Jedidiah begins cheating the codes. Carriage by carriage the team make their way up the train, collecting the kids in other cars as they go.

Betsy makes it to the lever and switches the tracks.

The team are now one door from the engine room. Jedidiah flicks through the dictionary to find the word for ‘The organ of the male reproductive system’. He giggles and punches it in. But when the doors open they are greeted by a gang of elves in combat armour, guarding the giant golden piston led by the tour guide.

“Well well well, three holes in the ground, what have we here?” says the guide.

As Betsy is returning to the handcar it spontaneously combusts and from the flames emerges a partially charred Santaroo, pacing closer.

“Look who we have here. Did you miss me...Margaret?”

“The name’s Betsy now Roo. Margaret died the day you brought me here.”

“You know I had no choice.”

“We always have a choice. It was your choice to imprison innocent children...”

“INNOCENT?! Those children had a choice too and they chose to cheat and steal and they would surely do it again. First it’s using a pen without a license, then it’s owning a dog without a license, then it’s working out in a public park without a license and then, before you know it, BOOM T-bone collision!”

Betsy screams and charges in Santaroo’s direction cocking her arm to punch. But with super-roo speed Santaroo limbos under her fist and kidney punches her from behind.

Matt and the kids attack the gang of elves with everything they've got. Matt karate kicks one of the elves in the nose, Nora stabs an elf in the leg with her pen and Elizabeth rapidly gut punches an elf superfast. Jedidiah whacks an elf in the head with the dictionary and Bartholomew gives an elf a crippling squirrel grip. The team holds off the gang as Silver pushes her way to the piston. She opens her zip lock bag of coins and starts feeding them in but with only one coin left to go she is knocked down by a recently sucker-punched Nora.

"Grab that coin!" Silver screams, watching the gold coin roll down the car.

Silver stumbles through the action collecting elf boots to the face as she crawls after the coin that is inching closer to the gap between the cars. With the coin almost in reach, Silver makes a dive but is cut short by a crushing boot on her arm. She follows the leg up and standing above her is the elven tour guide.

"I don't know about that one dearie," he says, grinning.

The guide bends down and pulls up his trousers revealing a sharpened candy cane dagger in a brown leather scabbard. He pulls the dagger from its pouch and holds it against Silver's throat.

"You've been a very naughty girl."

Silver shuts her eyes and prepares herself for what's to come but strangely instead of opening her neck he removes his boot from her arm and instead of taking her life he releases his grip on her. Confused, she opens her eyes and sees the guide on the floor with a gash on his head and standing above him is Jedidiah with a baton. The two share a smile.

Surrounded by a ring of fire, Betsy and Santaroo punch it out in a boxing match worthy of a Rocky instalment.

"Don't you see Margaret, I'm saving the world. I'm making Christmas safe again!"

"I told that's not my name anymore!"

Betsy swings a right hook but is stopped short by Santaroo's elbow block.

“What’s wrong with the engine?” demands Matt.

“You wouldn’t happen to have a one dollar coin would you?”

Matt fondles around in his pocket and pulls out Betsy’s gold dollar coin.

Matt pauses, “We need to wait for Granny.”

“In seven minutes those bombs will go off and we’ll all be dead,” Elizabeth declares.

Matt pulls out his walkie talkie.

“She’ll be here.”

Betsy finally lands a punch and knocks Santaroo to the ground. In this brief moment she hears Matt’s sombre voice through her walkie talkie repeating her name. She removes the device from her pocket and holds the button.

“Go!” She says as a tear leaves her eye.

Matt’s eyes well up, “Not without you.”

“It’s my time to go son. Not yours.”

After this Betsy smashes her walkie talkie on the gravel floor.

Matt drops to his knees and hands the coin to Silver who quickly feeds it into the piston and presses start. The engine purrs and the train jolts into motion and in a little over four seconds the train has reached its destination.

The light was blinding as they exited the tunnel but when their eyes finally adjusted the children realized they had emerged in the middle of a busy Melbourne street. Silver pressed a button that opened every door on the train. Cars moved around them as they stood in awe of the majestic city. The jailbreak was complete.

“Silver?” a surprised voice whispers from the Melbourne crowd.

Silver turns in the direction of the voice.

“Mum?”

A tidal wave of concerned family members surged forward as they went to embrace their long-lost children.

“I thought I would never see you again!” cried the various parents as they squeezed their lost children tightly with no intention of letting go. Matt looked on as a Grandma hugged her Grandchild. He smiled sadly. His eyes watered as he remembered all his grandma had done for him. When he was lost in Woolworths and couldn’t find the way out, who had helped him? His grandma. She had always been supportive of his crippling ramen addiction and had even convinced him to start writing books. The tears now flowed down his face like a raging river. Silver came up to him and patted him on the shoulder.

“Your grandma was a kind lady.”

“I know,” He replied as he wiped away his tears

“So, what now?” She asked

“I don’t know.”

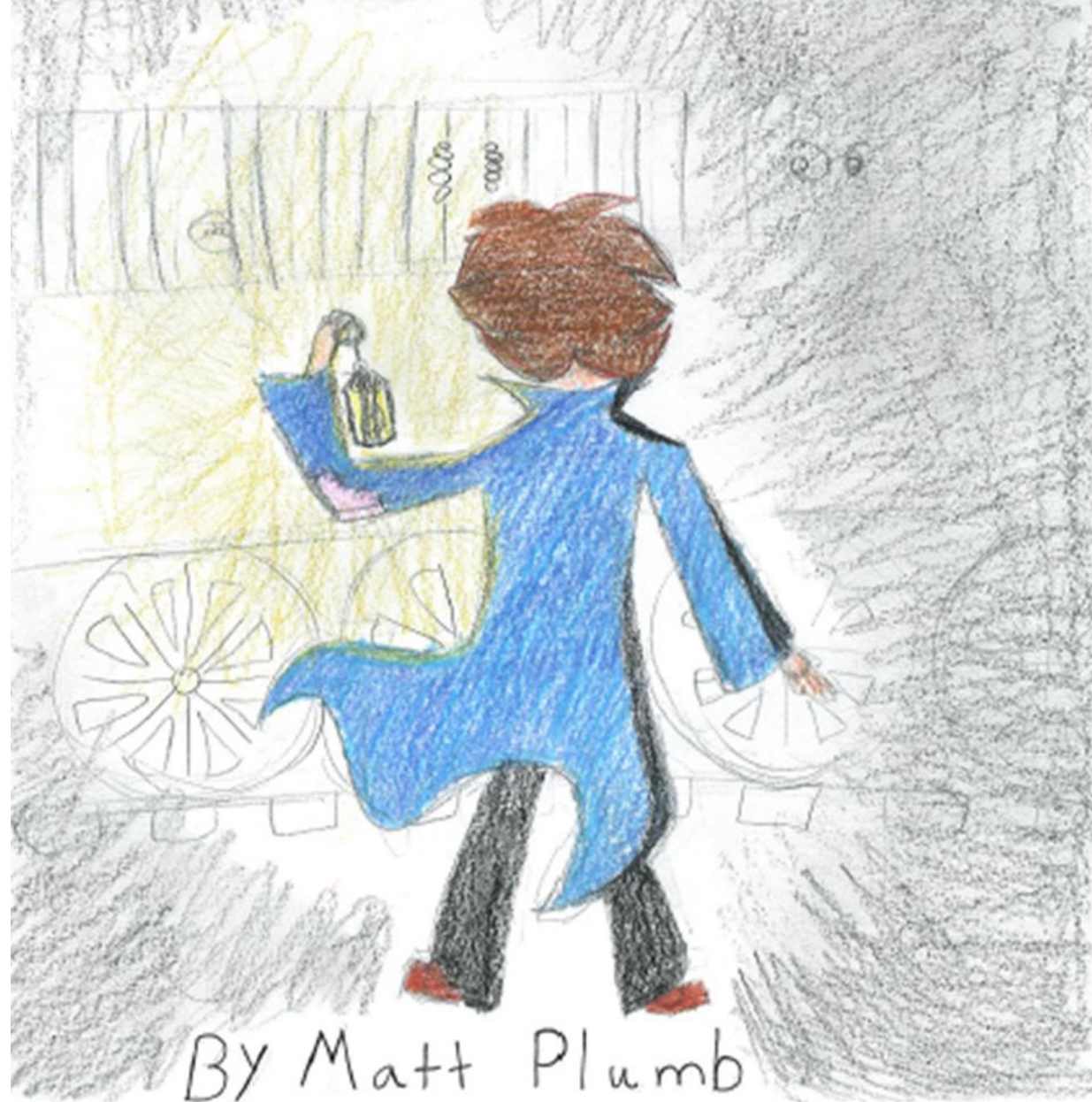
When Matt finally came home that night he slumped down on his bed with a sigh. He emptied his pockets and prepared to sleep when his eyes drifted over the notes he had taken in his notepad. He looks at his notes and began to smile. He knew just what to do now. Grabbing his writing tools, he sat down began to write. The words read:

Tunnel Vision

By Matt Plumb.

Dedicated to Betsy Plumb. My kind and loving Grandmother.

TUMMEL VISION



By Matt Plumb

