

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF FALLING

WORST CASE



SCENARIO

T.J. NEWMAN **AN NOVEL**

WORST CASE SCENARIO

A Novel

T.J. NEWMAN



LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY

New York Boston London

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Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)
[Chapter Thirty](#)
[Chapter Thirty-One](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Four](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Five](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Six](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Seven](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Eight](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Nine](#)
[Chapter Forty](#)
[Chapter Forty-One](#)
[Chapter Forty-Two](#)
[Chapter Forty-Three](#)
[Coda](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Discover More](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by T.J. Newman](#)

[Praise for T.J. Newman](#)

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original T.J.*

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LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY

AUTHOR'S NOTE

THE IDEA FOR my first novel—*Falling*—came to me when I was working as a flight attendant and I asked a pilot I was flying with: “What if your family was taken and you were told to crash the plane or they would die? What would you do?” The look on his face terrified me. I knew he didn’t have an answer. And I knew I had the makings of my first book.

While writing that book, I had many conversations with pilots about the nuts and bolts of flying procedures and protocols—and also about the emotional and psychological side of being a pilot. *What is your biggest fear as a pilot?* That’s the one question I kept asking.

Pilots told me that they feared uncontrolled fires in the cabin or cargo bays. Getting hooked in power lines. Making the wrong call in an emergency. Freezing up and not being able to make any call at all. They worried about turning their spouses into widows or widowers.

The answers started to blur together. I kept hearing the same things over and over until I finally got a response that stopped me in my tracks:

“My biggest fear is a commercial jet slamming into a nuclear power plant.”

I wasn’t sure if this pilot was being serious. I sort of laughed it off, saying that nuclear power plants—like dams, like any critical infrastructure—were safe in a post-9/11 world. Officials had already worked this out. They had already done whatever was needed to ensure that all nuclear power plants were safe from attack.

As I said this, the pilot just listened. When I finished, he smiled and replied: “And that’s exactly what they want you to believe.”

T.J. Newman

The International Nuclear Event Scale has seven levels.

Level 1: Anomaly

Level 2: Incident

Level 3: Serious incident

Level 4: Accident with local consequences

Level 5: Accident with wider consequences

Level 6: Serious accident

Level 7: Major accident

There are only two INES level 7s on record: Fukushima and Chernobyl. There has never been a level 8.

Yet.

TWO HUNDRED AND NINETY-FIVE lives were in the hands of a pilot who was having a widow-maker heart attack at 35,000 feet.

There was no time to tell his copilot to get out of the bathroom and come fly the plane. No time to teach the flight attendant standing at the back of the cockpit how to work the radio. No time to declare an emergency to air traffic control. No time to warn the passengers and crew in the cabin to hang on. There was no time to do anything because he never even realized what was happening. He simply felt a sudden tightness in his chest—and a split second later, his dead body slumped forward on the yoke, and the plane went into an uncontrolled nosedive.

Instantly, everything in the cabin shifted forward. Sodas and bags of pretzels slid off tray tables. Cell phones flew out of hands. Passengers in line for the bathroom fell into one another. And anyone not buckled in found they were no longer in their seats.

Doors to the carts and carriers stretched across the back galley swung open in unison. Sleeves of cups, packets of sugar, plastic-wrapped cookies, pots of hot coffee, heavy pallets of soda—everything was dumped out, crashing onto the floor and spilling out into the plane.

The flight attendant mid-cabin lunged after the cart, but the aisle was clear for the fully stocked beverage trolley to barrel toward the front of the plane. Eight rows up, the four-hundred-pound cart ran over a man's foot, crushing his bones, before lodging itself tenuously between rows.

Every seat in the plane was filled. But in that first moment, that first drop, the cabin was completely silent. No one screamed. No one made a sound. There was no fear, only surprise. Because just like the pilot—unaware of what the pain in his chest meant—the two hundred and ninety-four other souls on board Coastal Airways Flight 235 hadn't figured it out yet either.

Moments later, once they realized they were about to die, the screaming began.

Push the yoke forward, the plane goes down. Pull the yoke back, the plane goes up.

That was the extent of what the flight attendant in the cockpit for the bathroom-break security procedure knew about the controls. That and if she didn't pull the pilot back off the yoke, he would send them straight into the ground.

Her positioning could not have been worse. She was five one and barely a hundred pounds; the captain was well over six feet, pushing three hundred, and she had no leverage. She could only reach him at an awkward angle from behind and to the side of the chair.

Stepping into a wide straddle between the seat and the center control panel, she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and pulled back with a grunt.

His body barely moved. The yoke stayed pushed forward as far as it would go.

At the front of the plane, the flight attendant on the floor in the forward galley crawled toward

the lavatory. Breakfast entrées squished under her hands as broken first-class china bloodied her knees. Reaching the bathroom, she pounded on the door.

“Greg,” she cried, her voice barely audible over the passengers’ screaming. She stopped to listen for a response from the copilot inside—but there was nothing.

When the plane first dove, she’d heard a loud *slam* in the lav, followed by breaking glass. Since then—nothing. The flight attendant didn’t know what was happening in the cockpit, but she did know the only other person on board who knew how to fly the plane needed to get out of the bathroom and back up there.

“Greg, *please!* Help!” she pleaded, pounding the door with both fists.

There was no response.

The arms of the flight attendant in the cockpit were shaking. Her hold on the dead pilot was weakening. Nearly all his weight continued to press the yoke forward.

The plane was headed straight down.

“*Good morning, Minneapolis center. Delta heavy two-two-four, checking in at flight level three-four-zero.*”

The routine squawk from a pilot talking to air traffic control coming in over the cockpit speaker startled the flight attendant—but then it hit her.

Air traffic control...

Air traffic control!

“*Good morning, Delta heavy. Maintain three-four-zero.*”

If she could talk to ATC, they could tell her what buttons to push to give the first officer’s side control. Then she could pull up on the yoke on *that* side, the right side. She could get the plane out of its nosedive, and from there, ATC could talk her through what to do.

The plane’s cabin shook violently as the uncontrolled free fall stressed the airframe. Passengers got out their phones to record the moment or send messages to their loved ones. The lead flight attendant pretended she didn’t hear the crying babies or the loud praying as she reached up and lifted the silver placard labeled LAVATORY to expose the door’s hidden locking mechanism. She slid the lever to the right; it unlocked.

“Greg,” she called, pushing in on the center of the folding door—but it barely budged, stopped by something wedged against it from the inside. “*Greg!*” she said, pushing harder.

Angling her head at the opening, she pressed on the door and peered with one eye through the crack into the lav.

The copilot was crumpled on the floor. Eyes closed, unmoving. Bright red blood streaked down his face from a gash on his forehead. Broken shards of the shattered mirror covered his body.

She couldn’t tell if he was alive or not.

If he wasn’t, then they were already dead.

“Greg,” she barked, her mouth pressed against the crack in the door. “Greg, *get up.*”

Up front, the flight attendant reached around the far side of the captain's seat, feeling for the radio. Panic began to take over when she couldn't find it—until her fingers touched a plastic spiral cord.

Heart thumping, she snagged the cord, pulled it up, and took hold of the mic she'd seen the pilots use countless times. Deep breath. She pushed the button.

"It's Coastal... we... please help," she stammered in a rush, not knowing what to say. "He's dead. The captain's dead. He had a medical, I think a heart attack. The FO's in the lav. He's not here. He's... the pilots are gone! We're going down. Please help us!"

Her voice was loud and trembling and for the first time the fear was coupled with emotion as she stifled a sob... at hearing the sound of her own voice echoing out in the cabin.

It wasn't the radio.

It was the PA system.

The lead flight attendant stared at the locked cockpit door as the sound of her colleague's ragged breathing continued over the plane's speakers.

So that was it. The captain was dead. They were going down.

As she kicked at the lav door, her own tear-soaked sobs joined the passengers'. "Get up! Get up!"

Greg's eyes fluttered open to a hazy view of... where was he?

Everything hurt. Nothing made sense. It was all fuzzy—until he saw the broken mirror.

Woozily scrambling to his feet, he heard someone shrieking his name. He opened the door and found the lead flight attendant on the ground, covered in blood and food.

"He's dead," she said, sobbing. "The captain's dead. *Do something.*"

Shock froze him in place. As he blinked, a noise in the cabin grew louder and closer until—*bam*—the cart rammed into the flight attendant, pinning her against the cockpit door and snapping him back to reality.

If he didn't get back in the cockpit, they were *all* going to die.

Now barricaded in the bathroom, Greg clambered to the top of the cart, spilling cups and napkins and stir sticks into the lav. He pounded on the cockpit door.

"Tim!" he called out. "Open up! Tim, open up!"

As blood poured from her facial gashes, the flight attendant moaned in pain, still pinned between the cart and the door. Greg looked around from his perch atop the cart, trying to figure out what else he could do. He glanced over his shoulder back into the plane—and regretted it instantly.

There were two hundred and ninety-five souls on board. Nearly three hundred lives *he* was responsible for.

And they were all looking at him.

"*Tim! Open the fucking—*"

The cockpit door flew open.

In that split second, the image in front of him was frozen in time. The wide-eyed terror of the flight attendant inside who was about to be crushed by a four-hundred-pound cart. The body of

the captain slumped forward in his seat. The flashing buttons on every panel in the flight deck. The incessant, robotic voice warning them: *Pull up. Pull up. Pull up.*

And beyond all that...

Was the ground.

CHAPTER ONE

COUNTDOWN TO ZERO HOUR

16 HOURS AND 38 MINUTES

UNITED GRACE CHURCH served not only as a community center, but as the center of community for Waketa, Minnesota.

“You belong to each other, and you are responsible for each other. That is what community means. And that is what Waketa is about.”

The congregation nodded.

“We are always told that family is everything,” Reverend Michaels continued. “But family’s not just your blood. Family is your friends. Your neighbors. Family’s your coworkers. And family is everyone in this church today. We are family.”

In the last pew at the back of the small church, Steve Tostig listened without hearing.

If Reverend Michaels was responsible for safeguarding Waketa’s soul, Steve was responsible for protecting its body. He was the guy who’d be on the town’s postcard if there were one: tall, broad chest, flannel shirt, five-o’clock shadow. The type of guy who was popular in high school, mainly because he stood up to the bullies. The kind of person who you hope your child will one day end up with.

Steve sat alone in “widowers’ row,” as he’d taken to thinking of it, staring out the stained-glass windows at the cemetery down the hill. He’d brought carnations this time, blue ones. At least, the little sign on the bucket at the grocery store said they were carnations.

Claire Jean Tostig

1975–2023

Beloved teacher, daughter, wife, mother.

It wasn’t long enough, but it never is.

He hadn’t wanted that last part on there. It felt too... woo-woo. Too kumbaya and circle of life. Claire would have liked it. But to Steve, it should have said: *It wasn’t long enough*—period.

No acceptance, no meaning. Only injustice. Just sheer, unfair bullshit.

“You know,” continued the reverend, “I couldn’t help but notice the parking lot has a lot of open spots today.”

The sparse congregation mumbled in agreement.

“I’m not concerned,” he said. “People are at work. Kids are in school. And Good Friday, the day when we mark the Lord’s crucifixion... well, it’s not exactly a real crowd-pleaser.”

The congregation gave a collective chuckle.

“But you better show up early on Sunday,” he continued, wagging his finger. “Boy, that parking lot will be full then. Because on Easter, we celebrate! Sunday we will come together as a community in a moment of joy and light to declare as one: He lives! *We live.*”

Reverend Michaels paused. That perfect length of a pause that’s not taught in seminary but discovered Sunday after Sunday, season after season, year after year, as you feel out the needs of your flock. Those aching, human souls that once a week came to this place to ponder or discover or wrestle with or be reminded of the whys and hows and whats of existence.

“But you’re here today.”

He paused again, looking around the chapel, holding eye contact with members of his congregation. When his gaze reached the back of the church, Steve looked away. He had come in after the service started; he would slip out before it ended, and he would not be here on Sunday. Reverend Michaels knew Steve came only on the days when the congregation was light because that meant there wouldn’t be as many people asking him how he was doing and if he and his son, Matt, needed anything.

“You showed up *today*,” said the reverend. “This day when our Savior was killed. This day when all hope seemed lost. This day of darkness when we had absolutely no assurance that the light would come again...”

He paused.

“You showed up.”

People nodded in agreement.

“You know, there’s a reason we come on...”

He trailed off, pausing again—but not for dramatic effect or to give time for reflection. He paused because they were all trying to figure out what that noise was. That distant rumble. A rumble that was growing louder with each passing moment.

The walls of United Grace began to shake. The floor beneath the congregation’s feet vibrated. Reverend Michaels looked down to the Communion chalice. The surface of the dark red wine rippled.

Suddenly a shadow passed quickly through the church as something flew low overhead. Everyone was immediately up and looking out the stained glass on the west side of the church. Reverend Michaels stayed where he was, three steps up on the altar, hands gripping the sides of the pulpit. From there, he was the only one with a view through the window above the stained glass. He alone saw clearly the enormous commercial airliner streaking low across the sky.

Moments later, the entire church shook in the *boom*.

Screams filled the room as the congregants clutched one another. A framed picture fell off the wall; glass shattered as it hit the floor. At the back of the church, a flash of light grabbed Reverend Michaels’s attention. It was the door opening.

The reverend watched Steve sprint through the door and across the parking lot to his truck. While everyone else cowered in the fear and confusion of the moment, Steve was already in action.

Joss Vance sat at her kitchen table a few miles away in a state of shock as hot coffee dripped from her fingers onto the morning paper. Her heart pounded with adrenaline as she looked around the room wondering what the hell that had been when suddenly—the lights flickered.

Joss looked up.

“No. No, no, no...” she whispered to no one but herself as the lights flickered again. But by then, Joss was already on her feet and moving.

She knew what was about to happen. She knew what it meant. And then, just as she’d expected—the power went out completely.

CHAPTER TWO

COUNTDOWN TO ZERO HOUR

16 HOURS AND 37 MINUTES

FIFTY-FIVE MILES SOUTH of the town of Waketa, every office building in downtown Minneapolis went black. Every traffic light blinked off. Every supermarket freezer stopped humming. Every heater in every house in the surrounding suburbs clicked off.

A man at a gas station heard the pump shut off but his truck's tank was only a third full. A kid at recess pushed the silver button on the drinking fountain and ran off, still thirsty, after nothing came out. People in an elevator fell into one another as the cab jolted to a stop. The couple in the front row of a roller coaster looked down the steep drop, wondering if the long pause was part of the ride. A surgeon stayed his hand, the scalpel hovering over the patient's chest cavity, no longer able to see in the pitch-black OR.

As the nearly three million residents of the Minneapolis–St. Paul area looked at one another in that first moment, wondering aloud, “What happened?,” most were curious but not terribly concerned.

It was the first misjudgment of the day.

In Waketa, the impact had been less subtle.

A woman flinched as a neighbor's front window shattered at the *boom*.

Her arm shot out, yanked forward by her dog's leash as the golden retriever took off down the road. Running after him, she lost control and fell forward, slicing open her knee, as the dog dragged her onto her back, where, looking up, she watched in disbelief as an aircraft engine dropped from the sky, headed straight for her.

Flames roiling out the back, fan blades still spinning, the engine whistled in its incoming approach. The woman closed her eyes and curled into a ball, and moments later, she felt the heat as it passed overhead before crashing into a neighbor's mailbox, sending catalogs, bills, and torn metal in every direction.

Half a mile away, a farmer bouncing along in his tractor watched a burning chunk of metal sail through the sky and smash into the side of his barn, sending cows running and splinters of rust-red siding high in the air. Distracted, he jammed his foot into the brake pedal at the last second, cranking the tractor wheel to the right in a desperate attempt to miss the single row of aircraft seats that crashed into the freshly tilled soil in front of him.

The seats were not empty.

In the center of town, the water tower stood tall, WAKETA declared proudly in faded green across the front. No rebellious teens were up on the platform scratching their names into the paint as generation after generation of young Waketans always had, which was a stroke of luck, as that was the exact point where a four-hundred-pound beverage cart impaled the bulbous metal tank. Water exploded into the air and began pouring out the side as the most recognizable landmark of the town bled out, splashing mud and grass up onto its rusty, weathered supports below.

Not far away, a section of fuselage hurtled into the center of Main Street with such impact that two manhole covers shot into the air like steel Frisbees. When they fell back down to earth, one crashed through the bank's front window while the other landed on top of a pizza delivery car. The owner of the pizza parlor and the bank's secretary both rushed out to see what had happened. All they could do was gape at each other and the destruction all around them.

Fishermen standing in their waders on the banks of the Mississippi River flinched at the big *boom*, wondering aloud: "What the hell was that?" Moments later, they ducked for cover, pelted from above by falling objects smacking into the river. The fishermen watched charred debris float downstream around them, everything from a suitcase and a coat to tiny bottles of Jack Daniel's and a still burning book. But it was a shoe bobbing past that stopped the men cold.

The foot was still in it.

A grazing herd of white-tailed deer suddenly took off, startled, not knowing what the hissing whistle of the incoming metal shrapnel was. Leaping through the trees and brush, they fled out of the forest, into the open area beside the highway, directly in front of the oncoming headlights of a semitruck.

The driver slammed on the brakes but didn't cut the wheel—unlike the two-door Honda beside it. The car swerved to the right, missing the deer but clipping the semi's back wheels. Spinning around, the car became lodged under the truck, pancaked flat as the semi dragged it down the highway, sparks erupting from the undercarriage.

Brakes locked, the semi's driver struggling to maintain control, the truck jackknifed, twisting perpendicular to the road. The box tipped and rolled forward—one, two, three times—flattening four cars in its path while its cargo rolled out the back. Wood pallets splintered into pieces as cardboard boxes filled with bottles of olive oil burst on the highway. Broken glass and thousands of gallons of oil covered the asphalt in every direction.

A family sedan rear-ended a pickup truck full of yard equipment. The tailgate dropped, and rakes, leaf blowers, and a riding lawn mower scattered across the highway as bags of lawn clippings burst, sending grass and leaves into the air and onto windshields, making the cars'

disoriented drivers swerve.

A large SUV lost control and dropped down into the grassy median, where it hit a boulder, flipped up on its nose, and somersaulted end over end into oncoming traffic on the other side of the highway.

A car full of college kids heading home for the weekend didn't see the vehicle in front of them brake until it was too late. The one who wasn't wearing a seat belt was violently ejected, his body landing fifty yards away at the edge of the forest where the deer had first appeared.

In less than a minute, the traffic on I-35, the primary route in and out of Waketa, Minnesota, came to a complete stop in both directions as seventeen vehicles piled up in a tangle of twisted metal and broken bodies. By the time it was done, the only things moving were the few surviving deer leaping awkwardly around the mangled, burning cars and injured, bloody humans as they made their way to the woods on the other side of the road.

Carver Valley Elementary School's playground was buzzing, the kids sugar-rushing from their class parties on the last day of school before the Easter weekend.

Legs pumping, fourth-graders on the swings went higher and higher. A group of second-graders were on a ladybug hunt under the tall oak tree. The sixth-graders, the big kids on campus, played soccer; the game was tied, two to two.

Miss Carla knelt beside one of her first-grade students, who was crying loudly, sand stuck to his scraped knee.

"It's okay, Leo," she said. "Let's get you to the nurse. She can—"

A loud *boom* sounded. Everything halted.

The swings went back and forth, propelled by gravity and momentum, no longer the pumping kicks of nine-year-old girls. A ladybug crawled out from under a leaf and no one noticed. The soccer ball rolled to a stop on its own. Miss Carla instinctively pulled Leo in close as both their gazes rose to the sky.

Every student, every teacher, the crossing guard, the janitor—they all looked up in awe as an aircraft wing, fully intact but separated from the plane, careened over their heads like a flying saucer. They watched as the wing disappeared over the line of trees beyond the parking lot, and together, they waited for what came next—a deafening crash followed by a roiling cloud of orange flames and a plume of black smoke rising up into the clear blue sky.

The church long behind him, Steve dropped his speed to eighty-five and gawked at the mushroom cloud rising into the air to his left. He instinctively wanted to turn the wheel toward it as he wondered, *Is that... the school?*

Matt.

Adrenaline shot through Steve's system. Was Matt okay? Should he go to his son? His mind flashed to Claire's fourth-grade classroom, even though it no longer belonged to her. If she were there, Matt could have run to her. He could have been safe with his mom.

But not now. She was gone. And Matt was alone.

Steve rode the brakes, coming to a stop in the middle of the road, his heart pounding with parental worry. *Either figure it out and fix it or keep going.* Steve took a deep breath, forcing

himself to look at the big picture—clearly, not through a distorted lens of fear and grief.

He could tell the billowing black smoke was actually on the far side of the tree line, the river side. It was in the general direction of the school, but it was not coming from the school itself. Carver Valley Elementary was fine. Matt was fine.

Steve nodded and told himself that he was doing the right thing as he accelerated the truck back up to felony-level speed, racing away from the area. Matt was okay and Steve had to get to work. Because damage *there* was a far greater threat.

As he tore down the single-lane dirt road, taking in the smoke plumes large and small that rose across the whole valley, Steve shook his head. Things like this didn't happen in a place like this, a place this quiet. And Steve knew that disbelief coupled with the kind of confusion and terror he'd felt in the church was being felt right now all around Waketa, including at the school. It couldn't get any more horrific than a plane crash like that, he knew they were all thinking.

He knew they were wrong.

He turned at the sign that proudly declared CREATED TODAY TO POWER TOMORROW and came to a stop at the main entrance to Clover Hill nuclear power plant. Holding his badge out the window, Steve was surprised when the door to the security shed opened and an armed guard in a full-body hazmat suit came out. The man scanned the badge, and Steve's face popped up on the computer in the guard shack.

**STEVE J. TOSTIG—FIRE CHIEF
CLOVER HILL ON-SITE FIRE DEPARTMENT
FULL OPERATIONAL CLEARANCE**

“Bill, is it that bad?” Steve asked, motioning to the hazmat suit.

Bill shrugged as he pushed a button and the arm to the gate went up. “You tell me. They're too busy to call us and give an update. Read that how you will. I'll radio your crew and let them know you're headed back.”

Broken glass crunched under her boots as Joss stepped over one of the framed diplomas that had fallen off her home office's wall. Grabbing her work go-bag, she brought it out to the kitchen, setting it on the coffee-splattered newspaper she wouldn't get to finish reading.

Powering on the satellite phone, she rifled through the bag's contents—full-body hazmat suit, masks, gloves, rubber boots—until she found the bottle of pills. Shaking one into her hand, she knocked back the radioprotective potassium iodide with some of the still-warm coffee she wouldn't get to finish drinking.

“C'mon...” Joss whispered impatiently as the sat phone booted up. Taking a deep breath, she stared out the kitchen window at the smoke rising in the distance while she waited.

Behind her in the living room, last night's empty Chinese takeout container sat on the unopened moving box she used as an end table. She'd been back for nine months, but so far, her office was the only room in the house that showed it. After throwing a coat on over her worn brown sweater and faded blue jeans, she grabbed her keys from a hook on the wall with a glance down at the set of Thomas the Train picture books covered in Thomas the Train wrapping paper