

LOUISIANA'S WAY HOME

KATE DICAMILLO



WALKER
BOOKS

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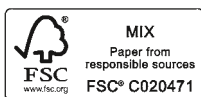
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For Tracey Priebe Bailey

One

I am going to write it all down, so that what happened to me will be known, so that if someone were to stand at their window at night and look up at the stars and think, *My goodness, whatever happened to Louisiana Elefante? Where did she go?* they will have an answer. They will know.

This is what happened.

I will begin at the beginning.

The beginning is that my great-grandfather was a magician, and long, long ago he set into motion a most terrible curse.

But right now you do not need to know the details of the terrible curse. You only need to know that it exists and that it is a curse that has been passed down from generation to generation.

It is, as I said, a terrible curse.

And now it has landed upon my head.

Keep that in mind.

We left in the middle of the night.

Granny woke me up. She said, “The day of reckoning has arrived. The hour is close at hand. We must leave immediately.”

It was 3 a.m.

We went out to the car and the night was very dark, but the stars were shining brightly.

Oh, there were so many stars!

And I noticed that some of the stars had arranged themselves into a shape that looked very much like someone with a long nose telling

a lie – the Pinocchio constellation!

I pointed out the starry Pinocchio to Granny, but she was not at all interested. “Hurry, hurry,” said Granny. “There is no time for stargazing. We have a date with destiny.”

So I got in the car and we drove away.

I did not think to look behind me.

How could I have known that I was leaving for good?

I thought that I was caught up in some middle-of-the-night idea of Granny’s and that when the sun came up, she would think better of the whole thing.

This has happened before.

Granny has many middle-of-the-night ideas.

I fell asleep, and when I woke up, we were still driving. The sun was coming up, and I saw a sign that said GEORGIA: 20 MILES.

Georgia!

We were about to change states, and Granny was still driving as fast as she could, leaning close

to the windscreen because her eyesight is not very good and she is too vain to wear glasses, and also because she is very short (shorter, almost, than I am) and she has to lean close to reach the accelerator.

In any case, the sun was bright. It was lighting up the splotches and stains on the windscreen and making them look like glow-in-the-dark stars that someone had pasted there as a surprise for me.

I love stars.

Oh, how I wish that someone had pasted glow-in-the-dark stars on our windscreen!

However, that was not the case.

I said, "Granny, when are we going to turn around and go back home?"

Granny said, "We are never going to turn around, my darling. The time for turning around has ended."

"Why?" I said.

"Because the hour of reckoning has arrived," said Granny in a serious voice, "and the curse at last must be confronted."

"But what about Archie?"

At this point in my account of what became of me, it is necessary for you to know that Archie is my cat and that Granny had taken him from me before.

Yes, taken! It is truly a tragic tale. But never mind about that.

“Provisions have been made,” said Granny.

“What sort of provisions?”

“The cat is in good hands,” said Granny.

Well, this was what Granny had said to me the last time she took Archie, and I did not like the sound of her words one bit.

Also, I did not believe her.

It is a dark day when you do not believe your granny.

It is a day for tears.

I started to cry.

I cried until we crossed over the Florida–Georgia state line.

But then something about the state line woke me up. State lines can do that. Maybe you

understand what I am talking about and maybe you don't. All I can say is that I had a sudden feeling of irrevocableness and I thought, *I have to get out of this car. I have to go back.*

So I said, "Granny, stop the car."

And Granny said, "I will do no such thing."

Granny has never listened to other people's instructions. She has never heeded anyone's commands. She is the type of person who tells other people what to do, not vice versa.

But in the end, it didn't matter that Granny refused to stop the car, because fate intervened.

And by that I mean to say that we ran out of gas.

If you have not left your home in the middle of the night without even giving it a backward glance; if you have not left your cat and your friends and also a one-eyed dog called Buddy without getting to tell any of them goodbye; if you have not stood on the side of the road in Georgia, somewhere just past the irrevocable state

line, and waited for someone to come along and give you a ride; well, then you cannot understand the desperation that was in my heart that day.

Which is exactly why I am writing all of this down.

So that you will understand the desperation – the utter devastation – in my heart.

And also, as I said at the beginning, I am writing it down for somewhat more practical matters.

And those more practical matters are so that you will know what happened to me – Louisiana Elefante.

Two

This is what happened.

We stood on the side of the road.

In Georgia.

Just past the Florida–Georgia state line. Which is not at all – in any way – a line. Yet people insist that it exists. Think about that.

Granny turned to me and said, “All will be well.”

I said, “I do not believe you.”

I refused to look at her.

We were both quiet for a very long time.

Three trucks drove past us. On the side of one

was a picture of a cow standing in a field of green grass. I was jealous of that cow because she was at home and I was not.

It seemed like a very sad thing to be jealous of a fake cow on the side of a truck.

I must warn you that a great deal of this story is extremely sad.

When the third truck blew past us without even slowing down, Granny said, "I am only attending to your best interests."

Well, what was in my best interests was being with Raymie Clarke and Beverly Tapinski. Raymie and Beverly were the friends of my heart, and they had been my best friends for two solid years. I could not survive without them. I couldn't. It was just not possible.

So what I said to Granny was, "I want to go home. Being with Archie is in my best interests. Raymie and Beverly and Buddy the one-eyed dog are in my best interests. You don't understand anything about my best interests."

“Now is not the time,” said Granny. “This conversation is inopportune. I feel extremely unwell. But none the less, I am persevering. As should you.”

Well, I did not care that Granny felt extremely unwell.

And I was tired of persevering.

I crossed my arms over my chest. I stared down at the ground. There were a lot of ants running around on the side of the highway looking very busy and pleased with themselves. Why would ants choose to live on the side of a highway where they were just going to get run over by cars and trucks on a regular basis?

Since I was not talking to Granny, there was no one in the world for me to ask this question of.

It was a very lonely feeling.

And then an old man in a pick-up truck stopped.

The old man in the pick-up truck was called George LaTrell.

He rolled down his window and raised his

cap off his head and said, “Howdy, I am George LaTrell.”

I smiled at him.

It is best to smile. That is what Granny has told me my whole life. If you have to choose between smiling and not smiling, choose smiling. It fools people for a short time. It gives you an advantage.

According to Granny.

“Now, what are you two lovely ladies doing on the side of the road?” said George LaTrell.

“Good morning, George LaTrell,” said Granny. “It seems we have miscalculated and run entirely out of gas.” She smiled a very large smile. She used all of her teeth.

“Miscalculated,” said George LaTrell. “Run entirely out of gas. My gracious.”

“Could we impose upon you for a ride to the nearest gas station and back again?” said Granny.

“You *could* impose upon me,” said George LaTrell.

I considered not imposing upon George LaTrell, because the truth is that in addition to being tired of persevering, I was also tired of

imposing. Granny and I were always imposing on people. That is how we got by. We imposed. Also, we borrowed.

Sometimes we stole.

I considered not getting into the truck. I considered running down the highway, back to Florida. But I did not think I would be able to run fast enough.

I have never been able to run fast enough.

And by that I mean that no matter where I go, Granny seems to find me.

Is that fate? Destiny? The power of Granny?

I do not know.

I got in the truck.

The inside of George LaTrell's truck smelled like tobacco and fake leather. The seat was ripped up, and stuffing was coming out of it in places.

"We certainly do appreciate this, George LaTrell," said Granny.

Once somebody told Granny what their name was, she never lost a chance to use it. She said that

people liked to hear the sound of their own names above and beyond any other sound in the world. She said it was a scientifically proven fact.

I doubted it very sincerely.

I sat in George LaTrell's truck and picked at the stuffing coming out of the seat, and then I threw the little pieces of stuffing fluff out the window.

"Stop that, Louisiana," said Granny.

But I didn't stop.

I threw pieces of truck stuffing out the window, and I thought about the people (and animals) I had left behind.

Raymie Clarke, who loved to read and who listened to all of my stories.

Beverly Tapinski, who was afraid of nothing and who was very good at picking locks.

And then there was Archie, who was King of the Cats.

And Buddy, the one-eyed dog, who was also known to us as the Dog of Our Hearts.

What if I never got the chance to use those names again?

What if I was destined to never again

stand in front of those people (and that cat and that dog) and say their names out loud to them?

It was a tragic thought.

I threw more stuffing from George LaTrell's truck window. The stuffing looked like snow flying through the air. If you squinted, it did. If you squinted really hard.

I am good at squinting.

George LaTrell took us to a gas station called Vic's Value. Granny started the work of talking Mr LaTrell into pumping some gas into a jerry can for her and also making him pay for what he pumped.

And since I had no desire to witness her efforts to get the gas that would only take me further from my home and friends, I walked away from the two of them and went inside Vic's Value, where it smelled like engine oil and dirt. There was a tall counter with a cash register on it.

Next to the cash register, there was a rack that was full of bags of salted peanuts, and even though

my heart was broken and I was filled with the most terrible despair, my goodness, I was hungry.

I stared very hard at those little bags of peanuts.

The man behind the counter was sitting on a chair that had wheels, and when he saw me, he came out from behind the counter like a spider, moving his feet back and forth and back and forth. The chair made a squeaky exasperated noise as it rolled towards me.

“How do you do?” I said. I smiled, using all of my teeth. “My granny is outside getting some gas.”

The man turned his head and looked at Granny and George LaTrell, and then he looked back at me.

“Yep,” he said.

I considered him.

He had a lot of hair in his nose.

“How much are your peanuts?” I said.

I said this even though I did not have any money at all. Granny always said, “Ask the price exactly as if you intend to pay.”

The man didn’t answer me.

“Are you Vic?” I said.

“Could be.”

“I am Louisiana Elefante.”

“Yep,” he said.

He took a yellow spotted handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped it across his forehead. His hands were almost entirely black with grease.

I said, “I have been made to leave home against my will.”

“That right there is the story of the world,” said Vic.

“It is?” I said.

“Yep.”

“I hate it,” I said. “I have friends at home.”

Vic nodded. He folded his spotted handkerchief up into a neat square and put it back in his pocket.

“You can take as many of them little bags of peanuts as you want to,” he said. He nodded in the direction of the peanut rack.

“Free of charge,” he said. And then he rolled himself back around the counter.

Well, this was the only good thing that had happened to me since Granny woke me up at 3 a.m. and told me that the day of reckoning had arrived.

In some ways, this is a story of woe and confusion, but it is also a story of joy and kindness and free peanuts.

“Thank you,” I said.

I helped myself to fourteen bags.

Vic smiled at me the whole time I was taking the peanuts from the rack.

There is goodness in many hearts.

In most hearts.

In some hearts.

I love peanuts.