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LOUISIANA'S

WAY

HOME

Louisiana's  
Way Home



# Louisiana's Way Home

Kate DiCamillo



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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places,  
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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 three 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 windshield 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 gas pedal.

In any case, the sun was bright. It was lighting up the splotches and stains on the windshield 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 windshield!

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 very 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 has 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 named Buddy without getting to tell any of them good-bye; 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 semis drove past us. One was painted with 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 semi 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 nonetheless, 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 semis 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 pickup truck stopped.

• • •

The old man in the pickup truck was named 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 gasoline.” She smiled a very large smile. She used all of her teeth.

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

• 11 •

“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 vinyl. 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 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 farther from my home and friends, I walked away from the two of them and went inside Vic's Value, where it smelled like motor 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 toward 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 three 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.

# Three

George LaTrell drove us back to our car and put the gas in it for us, and Granny smiled at him and called him “Mr. George LaTrell, our hero,” and the whole time I could not stop thinking about Vic’s Value.

Because behind the counter at Vic’s, there was a calendar hanging on the wall. The calendar said OCTOBER 1977 in swirly gold letters, and there was a picture of a tree covered in red leaves underneath the words. It was a very pretty tree.

But the important thing is that next to the calendar, there was a phone.

It was a green phone. It was mounted on the wall, and it was covered with greasy black fingerprints.

I should have asked Vic if I could use that phone. I felt like someone in a fairy tale who had wasted her one wish. I wished for fourteen bags of peanuts, but I should have wished to make a phone call.

And then I could have called Beverly Tapinski and asked her to come and get me.

Beverly Tapinski could figure out a way to come and get anybody.

Beverly, if you are reading this, you know it's true.

There are the rescuers in this world and there are the rescued.

I have always fallen into the second category.

• • •

We were back on the road, and even though it was October, it was hot in the car. And it was made hotter still by the fact that I absolutely refused to speak to Granny.

“You can shun me, Louisiana,” she said. “You can turn your face away from me, but it does not change my abiding love for you.”

I stared out the window.

“Do not worry,” said Granny. “I am working toward our date with destiny, but I must tell you that I feel somewhat hobbled by my unwellness.”

She cleared her throat. She waited. But I did not ask what kind of unwell Granny was.

Instead, I continued to stare out the window. I ate my peanuts one by one. And I was glad that I had taken fourteen bags of them, because there were not very many peanuts in each bag.

I did not offer to share the peanuts with Granny, because I was not, in any way, feeling generous of spirit.

“Louisiana Elefante,” said Granny, “the day will come when you regret not speaking to me.”

I doubted it.

Somewhere past Wendora, Granny started to whimper.

And then the whimper became a moan.

Granny moaned so loudly that I forgot about not talking to her.

I said, “Granny, what is wrong?”

She said, “Oh, my tooth, my tooth. Oh, it is the curse of my father.”

Which did not make any sense at all.

Because the curse of Granny’s father is not a tooth curse. It is a curse of sundering.

But we will not speak of that now.

We slowed down. And then we went slower still. Granny moaned a great deal.

And then after a while, she pulled the car over to the side of the road and climbed into the back seat and lay down.

“Granny,” I said, “what are you doing?”

“I am working to regain my strength,” she said. “Do not worry, Louisiana.”

I am sure that I do not have to tell you that I did worry.

Also, it didn't work. Granny did not regain her strength. She moaned louder. When I looked back at her, her cheeks were wet with sweat. Or maybe it was tears.

Although I have never in my life known Granny to cry.

“Tears are for the weak of heart, Louisiana, and it is our job to be strong in this world.” That was what Granny always said.

“What do you need, Granny?” I asked.

Instead of answering me, she howled.

“Granny!” I shouted. “You have to tell me what you need!”

Granny then said one word.

And that word was *dentist*.

It was not at all what I expected her to say.

My goodness! I had been torn from my

home and from my friends. There was a curse upon my head. And I was on the side of the road in Georgia with a granny who was asking for a dentist.

What could I do?

Well, I will tell you what I did.

I sat there for a minute and thought about my options, and there weren't many of them.

And that is how it came to pass that I— Louisiana Elefante—slid behind the wheel of the car and cranked the engine and put the blinker on and pulled out onto the highway and went in search of a dentist.

# *Four*

You may be surprised to learn that I had never driven a car before.

However, I had certainly spent a lot of time watching Granny drive, and I had learned some things.

I knew to lean as far forward as I could. I knew to press on the gas pedal to make the car go. Also, I had a good idea of where the brake was. And steering was easy. I had no problem at all steering.



Several semis blew their horn at me as they went barreling down the highway, and I took this as a criticism that I was not going fast enough.

I blew my horn back at them. And then I gave it more gas. Granny was moaning in the back seat.

“Don’t worry, Granny!” I shouted at her. “I am going to find you a dentist!”

She did not answer me. I believe that she was in so much pain that she had lost the ability to form words.

I had never known her to be in such a state.

I felt a wild shot of joy go through me.

I made the car go faster.

In the back seat, Granny moaned louder and then louder still.

I loved driving!

However, it came to me after some time of flying down the highway that I wasn’t sure how to find a dentist.

There were billboards for real estate and

hotels and pecan pies (I love pecan pies), but there were no signs for dentists.

I figured that I was going to have to exit the highway.

According to the signage, Richford was the next town.

Richford, Georgia — it sounded like the kind of town that would have a dentist.

I took the exit.

And that is where my problems truly began.

Driving down the highway is easy. Getting off the highway is not.

At least it was not easy for me.

I knew that I needed to slow down. I knew the brake pedal was next to the gas pedal, and I moved my foot in that direction and then I pressed the brake pedal very hard.

We came to a stop with a surprising amount of speed.

We also did a lot of spinning around.

Granny was thrown off the back seat and onto the floor.

Empty peanut bags and other items went flying through the air.

We stopped so fast that my whole life and everything that had ever happened to me flashed through my head.

I am only twelve years old, but several exciting things have occurred in those twelve years. For instance, in 1975 I was crowned Little Miss Central Florida Tire and received a check for one thousand nine hundred and seventy-five dollars.

Also, that same year, I almost drowned, and when I was underwater, I saw the Blue Fairy from *Pinocchio*. The Blue Fairy is very beautiful. I don't know if you know this or not. She is very beautiful and very kind. And when I was underwater and almost drowning, the Blue Fairy opened her arms to me and smiled. Her blue hair was floating above her head, and there was a light all around her.

And then Raymie came and saved me from drowning and the Blue Fairy floated away. She went in the opposite direction, deeper into the

pond. She looked extremely disappointed as she left.

I have never told anybody that before — about the Blue Fairy appearing to me and how sad she seemed that I was not going with her. But I am writing it down now.

There is a great deal of power in writing things down.

But continuing on with the highlights of my life: My parents were famous trapeze artists known as the Flying Elefantes. They are dead, and I do not remember them at all. I have only ever known Granny. She has been my mother and my father. She has taught me everything I know.

I have a cat named Archie.

And there is also Buddy, the one-eyed dog. He is the Dog of Our Hearts, and he lives with Beverly, but truthfully, Buddy belongs to all of us — me and Raymie and Beverly — because we rescued him together.

And of course there is the curse. The curse came about because my great-grandfather (the