

Louisiana's Way Home

Kate DiCamillo



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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."

"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

magician) sawed my great-grandmother in half and refused to put her back together again. Onstage. In front of an audience.

This, as you can imagine, had disastrous and far-reaching consequences.

The curse is a curse of sundering. And it is a very complicated and tragic curse.

In any case, those are the important facts of my life, and I considered them all in the long moment of the car spinning around and the empty peanut bags flying through the air.

When all the spinning and flying and considering was done, I realized that we had somehow gone entirely off the road. The car was sitting in the grass on the side of the exit ramp.

Granny was still on the floor in the back.

I could hear a cricket chirping. Crickets are good luck. That is what some people believe.

I sat there and listened to the cricket and thought about how driving was much more complicated than I had imagined. It turns out that many things are more complicated than I ever thought they would be.

The cricket kept singing.

There's a cricket in the story of Pinocchio.

Most people don't know this, but Pinocchio kills the cricket right in the beginning of the story. Yes, kills him—with a mallet! Whenever the cricket shows up after that, he is just a ghost.

Can you imagine being the ghost of a cricket?

That has got to be the most insubstantial thing of all.

I have to say that it doesn't seem one bit lucky to me.

Granny climbed back up onto the seat.

She sat up and looked around.

She said her new favorite word—dentist—and then she lay back down and moaned.

The car was still running. The engine was

making some spluttery noises, but it was still going. And yes, we were on the side of the road, but I figured if I applied the gas pedal, we could get off the side of the road and continue on our journey.

And guess what?

I was right.

I applied the gas, and the car went roaring up the embankment and back onto the macadam.

I felt proud of myself.

I continued down the road to Richford, Georgia. I drove with some caution. I kept my eyes open for a sign that said dentist.

Five

You have to make small plans.

That is one of the things I have discovered in this world. It is pointless to make big plans because you never know when someone is going to wake you up in the middle of the night and say, "The day of reckoning has arrived."

Days of reckoning interfere with big plans.

So I made small plans. The small plans were: Keep the car on the road. Find a dentist. Never forgive Granny. Although, when I think about it, never forgiving Granny would probably go in the "big plan" category.

Granny moaned. She said, "Why must you haunt me so? What do you want from me?"

She also said the word dentist from time to time.

I kept my mouth shut. I did not offer Granny any comfort to speak of.

And what can I say in my defense except that I was very angry and also that I was doing my best under difficult circumstances?

Finding a dentist is not as easy as you might imagine.

Nothing is.

Richford was not a big town. I went past a school and several houses and a church and also a pink cement building that had a sign out front that read BILL'S TAXIDERMY.

How could a town have a taxidermist in a

pink cement building but not have a dentist?

I saw a woman walking her dog down the side of the road, and I felt a pang.

Who was taking care of Archie the cat?

Was he right this very minute walking down the highway in search of me? He had done that before—found his way to me against all odds.

"Where is Archie?" I shouted at Granny.

Of course she did not answer me.

It seemed cruel to press her on the point when she was in so much pain, but as soon as she was not in pain, I intended to do exactly that: press her on the point.

In the meantime, I had to find a dentist.

I stopped the car. I did this by depressing the brake pedal very carefully and very slowly. And when we had stopped completely, I rolled down the window and called out to the lady with the dog. I said, "Excuse me, what is the name of your dog?"

Granny moaned from the back seat.

The woman looked at me. I think she was

surprised to find a child behind the wheel of a car. Well, I was surprised, too.

So far, it had been a very surprising day.

"Pardon me?" said the lady.

"Does your dog have a name?"

"Ernest," she said.

"I have a cat named Archie," I told her. "And there is also a dog in my life. His name is Buddy. You will be happy to know that my friends and I worked together to rescue Buddy from a very tragic situation. Buddy is a dog who has only one eye."

"How old are you?" said the woman. Her eyes narrowed.

"That is an irrelevant question at this juncture," I said. "Isn't it?" I smiled at her using all of my teeth. "I am wondering if you can tell me where the dentist is."

"Dr. Fox?"

"Certainly," I said.

"Should you be driving?" said the woman.

"I should be driving," I told her. I gave her

a very serious grown-up-to-grown-up sort of look. "The situation is dire."

Granny moaned from the back seat, as if working to prove my point.

I smiled at the lady again.

Ernest the dog looked up at me and wagged his tail. Animals of every sort have always immediately trusted me. Ernest had a very handsome tail. It was burnished apricot in color.

"I admire your tail," I said to Ernest.

He wagged it some more.

"Where is Dr. Fox?" I asked the lady.

"You take a left on Glove Street," said the woman.

"And then what?" I said.

Granny groaned.

"Who is that in the back seat?" said the woman.

"That is my granny in the back seat. But continuing on with the directions—after I take a left on Glove Street, what do I do?"

"Dr. Fox's office will be on your right."

"Thank you very much," I told her. "Goodbye, Ernest."

Ernest waved his impressive tail. I rolled up the window.

The whole exchange had cheered me considerably. I had located a dentist. I had met a dog named Ernest.

Also, I liked it that Dr. Fox was on Glove Street.

If you put the words together, they sounded like a song. I started to sing the Dr.-Fox-on-Glove-Street song.

"Where is Dr. Fox?

You take a left on Glove,

and then you continue on.

You take a left on Glove

and you sing this song."

Granny moaned from the back seat.

I got so happy singing the Dr. Fox song that I almost forgot about the wrongs I had suffered at Granny's hands.

Almost.

Six

The clock in Dr. Fox's office said that it was 9:47.

I was struck by how much had happened since three a.m.

I had been kidnapped by Granny. We had crossed over a state line. We had run out of gas. I had eaten fourteen (very small) bags of peanuts. I had seen my life flash in front of my eyes. I had met Ernest. I had found a dentist.

And I had driven the car!

"My goodness," I said to the lady behind the desk at Dr. Fox's office, "would you look at the time! So much has happened."

I was going to tell her about my amazing exploits, or at least some of them, but it was very clear that the woman was not in a good mood. She was staring at me and tapping her pencil against the desk. Her lips were very thin.

"Yes?" she said.

I smiled at her.

I said, "Good morning. My granny is in desperate need of a dentist."

I expected the receptionist to say something along the lines of "Well, you are in exactly the right place."

But she didn't say anything at all.

Instead, she bent her head and started flipping through the pages of an appointment book. I stood there and waited. The office smelled like peppermint and rubbing alcohol. There was some music playing above our heads. It was a sad and wordless kind of song.

On the desk, there was a sign with white letters that said MRS. IVY.

I thought that was a very pretty name for someone with such thin lips.

"Mrs. Ivy?" I said.

She looked up at me.

"It's an emergency," I said.

"Do you have an appointment with Dr. Fox?"

"I do not have an appointment because it is an emergency," I said in a very patient voice. "You cannot make an appointment for an emergency, because emergencies are entirely unexpected. My granny is in a great deal of pain."

"I'm afraid that we are all booked up today," said Mrs. Ivy. Her lips got even thinner.

"May I speak with Dr. Fox?" I said.

"You most certainly may not," said Mrs. Ivy.

There was one other person in the waiting room, an older woman who was working on a crossword puzzle and pretending not to notice that the receptionist and I were engaged in a battle of the wills.

That is what Granny called situations like this—a battle of the wills. She always told me that I could win any battle of the wills. "Your opponent will be willing to give up at some point, but you must never give up. The trick is to never give in. Be wily. And remember: no retreat. You must never retreat."

So instead of retreating, I was wily. I walked over to the waiting room and went and stood next to the crossword-puzzle lady. There was a painting above her head that showed some green trees standing together in the sunshine. In the far left-hand corner of the painting, in a dark puddle of shadow, there crouched a fox.

I stood with my hands behind my back and considered the painting. Was the fox supposed to represent Dr. Fox the dentist?

"What are you doing?" said Mrs. Ivy.

"I am admiring the painting," I said without turning around. "I don't need an appointment to admire the painting, do I?" The woman with the crossword-puzzle book looked up at me and smiled.

"Hello," I said.

"Hello," said the woman.

"Are you doing difficult puzzles or easy ones?"

"They are medium," said the woman. She had a kind face. Also, doing medium crossword puzzles—not too hard and not too easy—made her seem very trustworthy to me.

"Are you willing to give your dental appointment to someone who is in desperate pain?" I asked.

"Pardon?" said the crossword woman.

"My granny needs help," I said, "and I am wondering if you would donate your appointment with Dr. Fox to her."

"I'm afraid that I don't have an appointment to donate," said the woman. "It's my husband's appointment, you see. He's back there now, getting his teeth cleaned." "You need to leave," said Mrs. Ivy.

I assumed that Mrs. Ivy was talking to me and not to the medium-crossword-puzzle lady, but I had no intention of leaving, and in any case, it all ceased to matter.

Because at that moment, Granny opened the door to Dr. Fox's office and came staggering in with her hand to her mouth.

She was howling in a truly impressive way.

Seven

Mrs. Ivy shrieked a surprised little thin-lipped shriek

The crossword-puzzle lady stood up out of her chair. She said, "Heavens!" The crosswordpuzzle book fell from her hands and landed on the floor.

"Help me," said Granny to Mrs. Ivy.

"We are all booked today," said Mrs. Ivy, but she didn't sound very certain when she said it.

Clearly, the time for certainty had passed. Granny shouted, "Argggggghhhh! Help me!" She had on her fur coat. Her hair was standing up straight on her head. Suddenly, I saw her like other people might see her, and I will not lie to you: it scared me.

How can I say this?

She did not look trustworthy.

She looked like somebody with a curse upon her head.

Which, of course, was exactly the case.

"Granny," I said.

And then a little man in a white coat came out from behind a closed door. He said, "Is there a problem here, Mrs. Ivy?"

Mrs. Ivy said, "There is a small scheduling inconsistency, Dr. Fox. No need to concern yourself."

Granny put out her arms.

Mrs. Ivy said, "Stand back!"

But it was too late. Granny went running toward Dr. Fox, and when she got to him, she fell down and clutched his feet.

Well, what could Dr. Fox do?

He took her into his office.

Mrs. Ivy was not pleased.

She had been outwitted in the battle of the wills.

She sat down at her desk.

Her lips got so thin that they disappeared entirely.

It turned out that Granny did not have one bad tooth.

They were all bad.

That is what Dr. Fox came out and told me. He stood in front of me in his white coat, adjusted his tiny glasses, and said, "I'm afraid that the infection was profound and systemic."

I looked at him and thought that he did not resemble a fox at all. He looked more like a mouse. His nose, in particular, was very tiny and mouselike. It twitched in a nervous way when he spoke.

"Profound," said Dr. Fox again. "Systemic."

"Oh, my goodness," I said. I bent over. It was suddenly hard for me to breathe. I have very swampy lungs, and in times of distress, they often fail me.

Carol Anne took hold of my hand and squeezed it. I squeezed back. Carol Anne was the medium-difficulty-crossword-puzzle lady, and we had become good friends while Dr. Fox was busy pulling out each and every one of Granny's teeth.

Carol Anne was a retired librarian, and we had talked for some time about our favorite books. She was very familiar with the story of Pinocchio and even knew that the cricket was killed with a mallet in the beginning of the book.

Carol Anne was going to visit her grand-children after her husband's teeth got cleaned. She was taking her grandchildren some chocolate-chip cookies, which, when she found out how very hungry I was, she was happy to go out to her car and retrieve and share with me.

The cookies were in a red Christmas tin with

a green wreath on it. There were little spots of raised-up white on the tin that were supposed to represent a joyous snowfall.

In addition to the chocolate chips, there were walnuts in the cookies, and that was a surprise. Walnuts are not my favorite nut, but they are a good nut, nevertheless.

I had eaten five walnut-and-chocolate-chip cookies. The Christmas tin was still in my lap.

I looked down at it after Dr. Fox delivered his dental news to me. I ran my fingers over the raised spots of snow. I stared at the wreath. It was a very cheery-looking tin, but to tell the truth, it did not cheer me up very much to consider it. My situation was growing ever more dire.

"She will, of course, need to recuperate," said Dr. Fox. "Antibiotics, painkillers, and bed rest. It is quite a shock when all the teeth are removed at once."

I took a deep breath. I looked up at Dr. Fox. "All of them?" I said. "There is truly not a tooth left in her head?"

Who would Granny be without her teeth? You could say what you wanted about Granny (she lied; she stole; she had a curse on her head—true, true, true), but she was, at the very least, the kind of person who smiled a lot. She used her teeth a great deal.

"Yes," said Dr. Fox. "I thought it best to prepare you."

"It will be all right," said Carol Anne. She squeezed my hand again.

I wanted to believe her.

I stared at Dr. Fox, the dental mouse. I looked him in the eye. I said, "Thank you very much for attending to my granny."

I noticed that there was a spot of blood on Dr. Fox's white coat. It was just one little drop, and it looked like something out of a fairy tale—like a pinprick on Sleeping Beauty's finger. It made me want to cry. But then I saw Mrs. Ivy sitting at her desk, looking disapproving, and I thought, Well, I will not give her the satisfaction.

And I did not.

. . .

And then there was the matter of the bill.

That was what Mrs. Ivy said.

"There is the matter of the bill. Dr. Fox's services are not free."

I said, "I did not expect them to be. You may mail the bill to us."

And on the spot, I made up a person and an address.

I said, "You may send the bill to my grand-father. He pays all our bills. His name is William Sunder. He is at 1221 Blue Fairy Lane, Lister, Florida. My granny and I are just passing through. We are on vacation."

It was deeply satisfying to lie to Mrs. Ivy.

However, the satisfaction did not last long, because Granny emerged from the back room. In addition to being toothless, she looked stunned, as if somebody had hit her over the head with something very heavy.

I followed behind Granny as she staggered

out the door and to the parking lot. I said, "Granny, Dr. Fox says that you need to recuperate. I am perfectly capable of driving, as I demonstrated earlier today. You can recuperate in the back seat, and I will drive."

Granny turned and faced me and held out her hand. She said, "Give me the keys, Louisiana."

Her voice was strange—muffled and uncertain and toothless. She didn't sound like herself at all. It was alarming.

What could I do?

I handed her the keys.

We got in the car, and Granny got behind the wheel. We left Dr. Fox's parking lot and went down the road. Granny's face was very white. She was driving slowly, staring at the road in a grim and determined fashion.

I said, "Where are we going?"

"Do not bother me with small questions, Louisiana," she said in her new disturbing voice.

Well, to me, "Where are we going?" did not seem like a small question.

It seemed like the biggest question of all.

But then I remembered that I was angry with Granny. I remembered that I was not speaking to her. And I decided that in addition to not speaking to her, I would never ask Granny a question again.

We drove until we got to a motel called the Good Night, Sleep Tight.

It was a small motel with a big sign that featured a giant neon candle and neon letters spelling out GOOD NIGHT SLEEP TIGHT. There was a painted sign in the window of the motel office that said A good night's sleep is a good thing, indeed.

This was a sentiment that I agreed with, particularly since I had not had a good night's sleep the previous night—having been awoken at three a.m. and told that the day of reckoning had arrived.

"Are we staying here?" I said to Granny.

And then I remembered that I was not

talking to her or asking her any more questions ever again.

Granny turned to me. She said, "Go inside. Use your charm and secure a room for us, Louisiana."

I stared at her. She stared at me. We stared death rays at each other. We were engaged in a vicious battle of the wills!

But after a very long time, I looked away.

Granny had won. Even without her teeth, she had won. She was still a force to be reckoned with.

I got out of the car. I slammed the door as hard as I could.

Eight

Right before I walked into the office of the Good Night, Sleep Tight, I saw a crow sitting on the roof, looking down at me.

His feathers were very black.

"Hello," I said to the crow. He cocked his head. The sun was lighting up his wings.

Granny blew the horn at me.

"Well," I said to the crow, "as you can see, I am not in charge here, so I guess I will have to move along."

The crow cocked his head again, and then he flapped his wings and flew away.

I still had hold of Carol Anne's Christmas cookie tin. The last thing Carol Anne had said to me was, "Sweetheart, you keep those cookies. You keep the whole tin."

As I said before, there is goodness in many hearts.

In most hearts.

Granny blew the horn again. I raised the tin up higher so that it was in front of my heart like a shield. I opened the door and went into the Good Night, Sleep Tight to use my charm and secure us a room.

What choice did I have?

The good news is that there was a vending machine in the vestibule of the motel office, and it was stocked with the most amazing array of things. There were toothbrushes with little tubes of toothpaste attached to them, and candy bars with caramel and nuts, and also bags of peanuts, and rain bonnets that were folded up into neat little squares, and packages of crackers with orange cheese in the middle of them.

The vending machine was such a miracle that as I stood and contemplated it, I almost wondered if I was dreaming, but then Granny blew the horn again and I knew that it was not a dream.

None of it was a dream.

I opened the second set of doors and went all the way inside the Good Night, Sleep Tight office. There were black and red squares of shag carpet on the floor.

And also, there was an alligator.

He was dead, of course.

But he was dead in a ferocious pose. His mouth was open, and all his teeth were displayed.

"May I help you?" said the woman behind the counter.

Her hair was in curlers.

"Hello," I said. I smiled, using all of my teeth.

"My granny is recovering from some recent tooth surgery and we need a room."

"You pay up front," said the woman. She pointed at a sign up on the wall that listed the prices for rooms in red ink. It was a very emphatic sign.

"Well, my goodness," I said after I studied the sign with pretend interest. "Would you like a chocolate-chip cookie with walnuts in it?"

"Are you selling them?"

"No," I said. "I'm sharing them."

I opened the tin and held it out to her. She took two cookies.

"This is a nice motel," I said. "I admire your vending machine and your alligator."

The woman shrugged. She said, "It's all mine and whoop-de-do and who cares? I never wanted it in the first place, especially the alligator. But that's how it goes around here. Divorce settlement. You end up with all kinds of things you don't want."

"You do?" I said.

The woman took a bite out of one of her cookies. She studied me. "Don't ask me for anything," she said.

"What would I ask you for?"

"Assistance. Mercy. I don't know. It's clear that you have a hard-luck story, and I don't want to hear it."

"Well, as I said, my granny is in the car and she is recovering from tooth surgery. I will go and tell her that we have to pay up front. She is the one with the money."

"Tooth surgery," said the woman.

"Tooth surgery," I said. "And other tragic things have occurred, but it's probably best if I don't speak of them right now."

"Yes. Don't."

I stared at the lady, and she stared back at me.

Granny has always said that long silences make people uncomfortable and that sometimes they will say or do things that they would not normally say or do in order to fill up the silence.

However, this was not the case with the lady

in curlers. I was the one who ended the silence. I said, "Do you have a phone I could use?"

"Obviously I have a phone. But you're not going to use it."

"There are probably some people who are wondering where I am," I said.

"I'm not getting involved in any of that," said the woman. She brushed cookie crumbs from her hands.

"Okay," I said. "My name is Louisiana. What's yours?"

The woman narrowed her eyes. "What difference does it make what my name is? You're still not going to use the phone. And you still have to pay up front for the room."

I smiled at her.

"For heaven's sake," she said. "My name is Bernice."

I kept smiling. I said, "Bernice, do those curlers really make your hair come out curlier?"

"Why would I waste my time with them if

they didn't? Go and get your granny. Nothing happens for free in this world, and I am not in the charity business, as you have surely ascertained by now."

Bernice was right.

I had ascertained exactly that.

I went out to the car to retrieve Granny.

The Good Night, Sleep Tight was a very clean motel.

I know because I looked under the bed, which is the first thing that I do whenever I go into a motel room. Before Granny and I settled into the house in Florida, we stayed in many, many motel rooms, and I kept a collection of all the things I found lurking under the beds: a spool of thread (green); a ballpoint pen imprinted with the words SCHWARTZ EXCAVATING (the ink in the pen was dried up, but I liked the word excavating very much); bobby pins (there is almost always

at least one bobby pin under a motel bed; I do not know why this is so, but it is); paper clips; someone's letter to their uncle Al.

The letter started "Dear Uncle Al." I can't remember what it went on to say, but I was glad that somewhere in the world there was an Uncle Al. I pretended that he belonged to me and that he was the kind of uncle who pulled quarters out of your ear and offered to buy you big bags of salted peanuts and cotton candy on a stick when you went to the ball game together.

One time, in Lucas, Alabama, I looked under a motel bed and found the skeleton of a mouse. I saved that, too. I am not afraid of mice. Or their skeletons.

But when we moved into the house in Florida and Beverly and Raymie became my friends, I threw away my collection of all the things I had found under motel beds because I thought that part of my life was over.

Well, I guess I was wrong.

In any case, the point I am making here is that there was nothing at all under the Good Night, Sleep Tight bed, not even a bobby pin.

The bathroom mirror was spotless, and the toilet had a SANITIZED FOR YOUR PROTECTION strip on it.

The water glasses were wrapped in paper.

The Good Night, Sleep Tight was very clean, and there were even two luggage racks—one for Granny's suitcase and one for mine.

Also, there was a phone in the room, but it had a tiny lock on its rotary dial so that you could not use it without a key.

Granny saw me looking at the phone and said, "Place no calls, Louisiana!"

As if I could.

And then Granny got into bed, pulled the covers up over her head, and became, to all intents and purposes, invisible.

I turned away from her and stared at the curtains, which were pushed to one side and

were printed all over with little palm trees.

A crow flew by. It was the same crow that had been sitting on the roof of the motel office. I recognized him by his shiny feathers.

"Hello," I called out to the crow.

"Close those curtains immediately," said Granny. Her head was all the way under the covers and all of her teeth were gone, but she still knew exactly what everybody was doing and could tell them how to do it differently.

It did not seem to me that her powers were diminished at all.

It was very frustrating.

I closed the palm-tree curtains. There is something sad about palm trees cavorting all over curtains when you are not in Florida but are instead in Georgia. Why weren't the curtains printed with peaches? That is what I wanted to know.

Curtains should be state-appropriate.

Lots of things, in fact, should be different from how they are.

Nine

I waited until Granny was asleep and snoring, and then I went outside.

It was late afternoon, and everything was quiet. I stood and looked at our car. Granny had the keys under her pillow, and the pillow was, of course, under her head.

But I was wily. And I believed that I was wily enough that I could steal the keys and steal the car and drive back to Florida.

However, I didn't know what direction Florida was.

Well, it was south, of course.

But how was I supposed to know which way was south? How could you possibly tell which way south was when there were so many directions in the world? Northeast. Southwest. People can point, and study maps, and say the words "south" and "east," and look very knowledgeable when they say them, but directions have always confused me.

And there was also the fact that I didn't have any money for gas. Or food.

And then, too, how could I leave Granny alone in a motel room with no teeth and no car?

It seemed cruel.

I was thinking about all of this when someone whistled and the crow—that same crow—went flying past me in a burst of shiny feathers. He was so close that I could feel the air he pushed aside.

I looked up, and lo and behold, what did I see?

A boy. Standing on the roof of the Good Night, Sleep Tight.

And the crow was sitting right on the boy's shoulder.

"Hey," said the boy. He was barefoot. He had on blue shorts and a white T-shirt, and his hair was cut so close to his head that it was bristly and shone in the light.

"Hello," I said back.

"You know that vending machine in the office?"

"Yes," I said.

"I seen you staring at it earlier."

"So?"

"So, I can get you any old thing you want out of that machine. Anything at all. All you got to do is name it."

Well, my heart soared up high in my chest at those words. I saw the vending machine as if it were right in front of me. It glowed with all of its special objects—ballpoint pens, cheese-filled crackers, candy bars, rain bonnets—each one of them giving off its own special light.

"My goodness," I said to him.

"Anything you want." He smiled. He looked like a pirate, standing up there with the crow on his shoulder.

And then Bernice came out of the motel office with a broom in her hand and the curlers still in her hair.

"How many times do I have to tell you?" she shouted, waving the broom around. "Get off my roof! Get off it!"

Bernice jabbed the broom at the roof. She jumped up and down.

"Get out of here," said Bernice. "I mean it."

"I'll see you later," said the boy, looking right at me. "Go on, Clarence."

The bird (Clarence!) took off flying; the boy went running across the roof and grabbed hold of the branch of a big live oak that was next to the Good Night, Sleep Tight, and then he was gone, too.

"Don't believe a word he says," said Bernice, turning to me.

But it was too late.

I believed him entirely. I believed everything about him.

I couldn't wait to make my selections from the vending machine.

And then two things struck me at once. The first was that I knew the bird's name but I did not know the boy's.

The second thing that occurred to me was that I felt hopeful.

Yes. For the first time since we had crossed over the Florida-Georgia state line, I—Louisiana Elefante—was filled with hope.

Ten

My hopefulness did not last long.

It turned out that Granny had paid for only one night at the Good Night, Sleep Tight, and at eleven o'clock the next morning, Bernice was knocking at our door saying, "You will pay now, or you will get out. Thank you very much."

Her hair was still in curlers.

"I am recovering from a traumatic event," said Granny in her new toothless voice. She stood at the door in her nightgown. Her legs were skinny and white. She looked like a troubled ghost. Bernice said, "I have absolutely no interest in hard-luck stories. I am interested in you paying for another night, or I am interested in you packing up and leaving. One thing or the other."

Granny said, "Very well. I do not have cash. But I do have Louisiana."

"What?" said Bernice.

"Louisiana," said Granny, "come here."

I went and stood in front of Granny. She put her hands on my shoulders. I could feel her fingers trembling. I had never known Granny to tremble. And her hands were hot. It felt like she was on fire.

"She sings," said Granny to Bernice.

"So what?" said Bernice.

"She sings like an angel," said Granny.

I stood there with Granny's trembling, feverish hands on my shoulders, and I felt a wave of darkness and despair roll over me.

What would become of us?

What would become of me?

I thought about the boy on the roof and the

crow named Clarence and the vending machine stocked full of wondrous things.

I thought about Beverly and Raymie.

I thought about Archie and Buddy.

I missed them. I missed them all.

I wanted to go home.

But who cared what I wanted? Certainly not Granny.

Which is how I ended up at the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church wearing my best dress in preparation for singing to someone named Miss Lulu, who was the church organist and who had made up her mind in advance not to be impressed with me.

And that was fine, because I was certainly not impressed with her.

When Bernice and I arrived, Miss Lulu was playing the organ. She was pounding her way through a song by Bach, and I felt sorry for Bach because Miss Lulu's heart was clearly not involved with the music at all. It was very painful to listen to her play.

Your heart has to be involved with the music, or else there is no point. That is what Granny has always told me, and I believe it to be true.

Also, Miss Lulu was eating a caramel while she played the organ. I could smell it. It is not at all professional to eat a caramel and play the organ at the same time.

Miss Lulu made us wait until she had played the Bach all the way to the end. And then she turned and said, "Good afternoon, Bernice."

"Hello, Miss Lulu," said Bernice. "Here we are, although I am not sure exactly why."

Bernice had a somewhat confused look on her face.

It was because she was dealing with Granny. I had seen the look on the faces of many people. Bernice was wondering just exactly how she had been talked into what she had been talked into.

Granny had a strange power over people, even without her teeth.

"Tell me the story about this child again,"

said Miss Lulu, working the caramel around in her mouth.

Miss Lulu had curls in her hair. The curls bounced when she talked.

Curls—or the hope of them—seemed to be very popular in Richford, Georgia.

"Well," said Bernice. She sighed. "She and her grandmother are staying at the motel, and they cannot pay for another night."

"Isn't that just terrible?" said Miss Lulu. "Some people." She tossed her head, and the curls bounced up and down and the smell of caramel wafted through the air.

I do not believe that people should eat candy without sharing it.

There was a stained-glass window above Miss Lulu's head, and if I squinted at it, I could turn all the colors in the window into a kaleidoscope and also make Miss Lulu's face and curls go fuzzy, so that is what I did and it was very comforting.

In the meantime, Bernice went on talking.

"The grandmother says that the girl can sing. She says that I can make money having the girl sing at funerals and weddings. And since you are the one who plays the organ at the weddings and funerals, I thought I would give you a call and, well, here we are."

Miss Lulu looked me up and down.

I looked her up and down back.

She had on snagged stockings. Her nails were bitten down. So what if she had bouncy curls?

"Well," said Miss Lulu, "it doesn't seem probable, does it? She looks like something blown in by a storm."

Bernice sighed. "I know it. And Lord help me, you should see the grandmother. I feel like I am being hoodwinked. And I am not a fan of being hoodwinked. One time was enough."

"Yes. Well, Bill was a piece of work. And love makes us do foolish things," said Miss Lulu. "But you did get the motel."

Bernice made a huffing noise.

Miss Lulu said, "The truth is that there are often requests for someone to sing at a funeral, and since Idabelle Bleeker passed, there hasn't been anyone with the voice to do it."

"Is there a phone that I could borrow, Miss Lulu?" I said, hoping to achieve success by a surprise attack. I had seen the minister's office on the way into the sanctuary. The door was closed, but there was a sign that said:

MINISTER'S OFFICE REVEREND FRANK OBERTASK ASSISTANCE, ADVICE, HEALING WORDS

I was not particularly interested in receiving Assistance, Advice, or Healing Words.

But every church office has a phone. I could go into the office of Reverend Obertask and pick up the phone and call Beverly or Raymie and have them come and get me!

"What?" said Miss Lulu.

"I need to call somebody," I said.

"Ignore her," said Bernice. "She's odd."

To me, she said, "We did not come here for you to place phone calls. We came here to see if you can sing."

Miss Lulu crashed out a few chords on the organ.

And then she said, "We will perform 'Just a Closer Walk with Thee."

Well, that is a song I know.

Miss Lulu started to play, and I opened my mouth and sang. I sang as if my life depended on it. Which I guess you could say it did. Or at least my room at the Good Night, Sleep Tight depended on it.

I sang as if the Blue Fairy from Pinocchio was smiling at me. I sang as if Beverly and Raymie and Archie and Buddy could hear me and would use the song to find their way to me. I sang as if I knew the name of the boy on the roof. I sang as if he knew my name, too.

The Georgia sun shone in through the stained-glass window. At some point, Miss Lulu

stopped playing the organ and just sat with her hands on the keys and looked at me.

There was a big splotch of orange on her face from the stained glass and a splotch of green lighting up one of her many curls. All of this was good, because it made her look somewhat friendlier.

I kept singing.

Bernice was crying. Tears were rolling down her face.

The world smelled of unshared caramel candy and dust and beeswax. Everything was broken; I knew that. But I felt like I could fix it if I just kept singing. And so I kept singing.

It is good to have a talent in this world.

When I was finished, there was a long silence.

Bernice snuffled. She said, "Bless her heart. I guess you can never say what riches people contain." And then Miss Lulu asked me if I liked angelfood cake.

I told her that I most certainly did.

My goodness, who doesn't like angel-food cake?

The three of us went down to the social hall, and Miss Lulu gave me a piece of cake on a china plate that had little pink flowers all around its rim. It was a very pretty plate.

I sat on a metal folding chair that felt cold against my legs, and I ate the whole piece of cake without bothering to talk in between bites.

Miss Lulu and Bernice watched me.

"Who taught you to sing?" said Miss Lulu when I'd finished eating.

"My granny," I said. I picked at the angelfood crumbs on my fork.

Miss Lulu nodded. Her curls bounced up and down.

"Do you use curlers, or is your hair naturally curly?" I asked.

Miss Lulu stared at me with her mouth hanging open. It was as if I had asked her to solve the most difficult math problem in the world. I was starting to think that she was not a very bright woman.

Miss Lulu turned and looked at Bernice and said, "There is a funeral on Friday. Hazel Elkhorn. I am playing the organ. I am sure that the Elkhorn family would like someone to sing."

Bernice nodded slowly. Her face was puffy from crying. "I guess we will start there and see what happens. How much should we charge?"

And since I was done with my angel-food cake, and since it was almost as if I were invisible to them as they did their planning and cogitating about how to make money from me, I stood up and said, "Excuse me, I will be right back."

I went up the stairs and out of the social hall and knocked on the door of Reverend Frank Obertask's office, and when Reverend Obertask did not answer, I opened the door and went inside, and there it was: a phone. Sitting on the desk. Just as I thought it would be.

My heart beat very fast.

My salvation and rescue were at hand!

Eleven

In addition to my heart beating fast, my lungs felt very swampy.

I bent over and put my hands on my knees and breathed deep. I looked around the office. It was filled with books. They were piled up on the desk and on the floor. The walls were lined with shelves and the shelves were jammed tight with books.

My goodness, it was a lot of books.

Whoever Reverend Frank Obertask was, he certainly believed in the power of the written

word. And that was fine by me, because I believe in the power of the written word, too. For instance, I believe in these words I am writing, because they are the truth of what happened to me.

I considered the power of the written word while I breathed deep and got my lungs calmed down, and then I stood up straight and stepped over to the desk and picked up the phone, and there was a dial tone.

Everything was going exactly right.

But there was one small obstacle.

The one small obstacle was that I did not know Raymie's phone number.

Or Beverly's.

I did not know their numbers because I had never called them.

Granny did not believe in having a phone in the house.

She said it was just one more way for the authorities to keep tabs on us. "What do we need a phone for, my darling? The general populace

does not need to know our whereabouts, and those who love us can always find us."

That is what Granny said.

But it's not true, is it?

Those who love us can't always find us, can they? Or else I would not be writing these words.

There are always and forever obstacles placed in our path.

But I had a plan to overcome at least one obstacle! I was going to request operator assistance.

I picked up the phone and dialed, and a woman came on the line immediately and said, "Directory assistance. What city, please?"

"Lister, Florida!" I shouted the words. I felt like I was on an important game show and that I had to answer very quickly and exactly right.

"Name?"

"Raymie Clarke, and there is an e on the end of Clarke!"

There was a long moment of silence.

"There are five listings for Clarke. None of

them is Raymie. Would you like to try another name?"

"Yes!" I shouted.

"What other name, please?"

"Beverly Tapinski!"

"Please spell the last name," said the operator.

I spelled it, and then there was a long, sad silence.

The operator cleared her throat. She said, "I am sorry, dear, but there are no Tapinskis in Lister, Florida."

"Yes, there are," I said.

"Well, perhaps there are," said the operator.

"But there are no listings for Tapinskis."

"But they exist. Beverly Tapinski and Raymie Clarke both exist. What do I do now?"

"Regarding what?" said the operator.

"Regarding me not knowing who to call," I said.

"This is directory assistance," said the operator.

"I know that," I said. I stamped my foot. "But

I don't know what to do. You should assist me and tell me what to do."

"Honey," said the operator, "it will all be fine."

And then there was a click and she was gone.

I hung up the phone. I bent over and put my hands on my knees and worked to get air into my lungs.

I thought, It will not all be fine.

I thought, I am alone in the world, and I will have to find some way to rescue myself.

Twelve

When I got back to the Good Night, Sleep Tight, the palm-tree curtains were closed and the room was dark and Granny was still in bed.

"Granny?" I said.

"Mmmpph," said Granny without moving or removing the covers from her head.

"Granny!" I said in a louder voice.

"I am very tired, Louisiana," said Granny.
"I am unwell and baffled and compromised. I would like to sleep."

And I said, "Well, sleep away. I will be singing at a funeral, and that means we can keep staying in this motel and you can sleep and sleep and sleep."

Granny moved the tiniest bit. She said, "Do not bother resenting me, Louisiana. I have always put you first in this world. I am trying to protect you. I am working very, very hard to protect you. It is just that I am so tired. . . ." She said all this without taking her head out from under the covers. Her voice was muffled. It was as if she were talking to me from a long, long way away. It was as if she had moved to a different country, a country without teeth.

"I want to go home," I said.

Granny threw the covers off her head. It was the first time I had seen her face-to-face in what seemed like a long time. She looked different—smaller and less certain. Her mouth was caved in. Her cheeks were flushed. She glared at me.

Truthfully, she was somewhat frightening to behold.

"Louisiana Elefante," she said, "we are not going home."

I glared at her.

She glared at me.

I looked away first.

I said, "I'm hungry."

"You are always hungry," said Granny in a relieved voice. She put the covers back over her head. "Yours is a perpetual and unceasing hunger. Go and find some food. I am working to regain my strength. Do not forget the curse, Louisiana!"

How could I forget the curse? My great-grandfather sawed my great-grandmother in half on a stage in Elf Ear, Nebraska, and then refused to put her back together again. That is not the kind of thing you forget.

It may not be the kind of thing you want to face, but it is also not the kind of thing you forget. I left the room and went and stood in the vestibule of the office of the Good Night, Sleep Tight. I considered the vending machine.

Of course, I was hoping that the boy on the roof would show up and offer to get me whatever I wanted, but I was starting to think that maybe I had imagined the boy. Just as maybe I had imagined the Blue Fairy holding out her arms to me the time I almost drowned.

Had I imagined the Blue Fairy?

I could not say for certain.

Had I imagined the boy?

I did not think I had.

I knew for a fact that I did not imagine the crow named Clarence, because he had been sitting on top of the Good Night, Sleep Tight sign when I stepped out of my room.

"Hello, Clarence!" I had shouted at him.

He had nodded and looked down at me in a very kingly way.

He was probably pleased that I had remembered his name.

In any case, the crow was real and the vending machine was real, and I stared at it and thought about what I would get if I could get anything I wanted.

I could see Bernice inside the office, sitting at her desk. Her hair was in curlers. What a surprise. I waved at her. She pretended not to see me.

If the boy showed up and offered to get me whatever I wanted, I decided that I would select a package of peanut-butter crackers and a package of crackers with cheese, and one of the ball-point pens (so that I could continue to write everything down), and also an Oh Henry! candy bar because I like the name of them, how upbeat and hopeful they sound. And also, because they have caramel in them. And peanuts. Which is a very good combination.

I was thinking all of that when the door to the vestibule opened and there he was.

The boy.

"Hey," he said.

Oh, my goodness, I was glad to see him.

I was glad even beyond the contents of the vending machine. And by that I mean that I liked his face and I was glad he existed—even if he couldn't get me the crackers and the pen and the candy bar.

"I thought maybe I had made you up," I said to him.

"Naw," he said. He stood there, holding the door open, smiling. He nodded in the direction of Bernice. "She don't like me," he said. "Any minute now and she'll be out here with her broom, trying to chase me off. Come on."

The minute we stepped outside, Clarence came swooping down from the sign and landed on the boy's shoulder.

I had never seen such black and shiny feathers. The crow stared at me and I stared back at him, and looking into his eyes was like looking in a dark mirror.

I felt that if I looked carefully enough, if I held myself still enough, I would be able to see the whole wide world reflected in that shiny blackness. Almost.

"Would he sit on my shoulder?" I said.

"I reckon if he gets to where he trusts you, he would."

Clarence flapped his wings and took off, past the sign, toward the trees.

"What's your name?" said the boy.

"Louisiana," I said. "What's yours?"

"Burke. Burke Allen. But I ain't the first Burke Allen. My daddy is Burke Allen and my grand-pap is Burke Allen and his daddy before him was Burke Allen, and his daddy, too. There've been a lot of Burke Allens."

"Well, as far as I know, I am the only Louisiana Elefante."

"That's lucky, then. You ain't got to be nobody but yourself."

I said, "I have a curse on my head."

I don't know why I said it. I shouldn't have

said it. Granny has always insisted that we not talk about the curse to other people.

"To speak of the curse only intensifies the curse." That is what Granny said.

Granny said a lot.

For as long as I could remember, Granny had been talking to me, telling me things, and telling me not to tell things.

I had never told Raymie about the curse. Or Beverly. But here I was telling this boy I did not know at all.

Maybe, in addition to being tired of imposing and persevering, I was also tired of keeping my mouth shut.

"A curse," said Burke. "Dang."

"Yes," I said. "It's a curse of sundering."

"Of what?"

"Sundering."

"I don't know what that is."

"It means to tear apart," I said.

"All right," he said. "If you say so." He pointed at the Good Night, Sleep Tight sign. "See

that sign?" he said. "I can climb all the way up to the top of that sign. I can show you how, too."

"I'm afraid of heights," I said.

"Shoot," he said. "There ain't nothing to be afraid of."

"I don't want to fall."

"You can't fall because there's little bitty handholds the whole way up. You just got to hold on and climb. I can show you how to climb up on the roof, too. Ain't nothing to it."

"No," I said.

He waited, and I waited. His almost-notthere hair glinted in the sunlight.

"Why is your hair so short?"

He shrugged. "My mama cuts all our hair. My daddy and my grandpap and me. She cuts it all the same."

"So your mother cuts the hair of Burke Allen and Burke Allen and Burke Allen?"

He smiled. "Yeah," he said. "All of us."

"My parents are dead. They were trapeze artists."

"In a circus?"

"No," I said. "They had their own show. They were famous. They were called the Flying Elefantes."

"I want to be in a circus," he said. "First chance I get, I'm going to join a circus. Circus trains come through here sometimes. You ever seen a circus train?"

I shook my head.

"They're all on it. All of 'em. The whole circus. Elephants and clowns and giraffes and trapeze people. Next time that train comes through here, I am going to hop on it—can't nobody stop me." He sighed. He looked up at the motel sign.

Here he was, right in front of me, and already he was telling me how he was going to leave. It was the curse of sundering. I would never be free.

Suddenly, I felt terrified.

And also annoyed with Burke Allen.

"I thought you said you could get me

anything I wanted out of the vending machine."
"I can."

"Good," I told him. "I want the cheese crackers and the peanut-butter crackers and an Oh Henry! bar. And also a pen. To write with."

He grinned at me. "I'll be right back," he said.

A few minutes later, he came running out of the office holding two packages of crackers and an Oh Henry! bar.

"I didn't get the pen," he said, "on account of I didn't have time. Bernice is right behind me, and she ain't happy."

Well, Bernice was never happy, was she? "Come on," he said. "We got to run."

I ran with him. We ran into the woods. At some point, Clarence showed up and he flew over our heads and cawed and cawed. He was laughing as if somebody had just told him a joke.

Crows have a good sense of humor.

I ran with Burke and Clarence, and I forgot about Granny being toothless and diminished. I

forgot about Miss Lulu and how badly she played the organ and how she refused to share her caramels. I forgot that there were no phone listings for Raymie Clarke or Beverly Tapinski. I forgot that I had to sing at Hazel Elkhorn's funeral.

I forgot that I was far from home.
I ran.

Thirteen

We sat out in the woods under a tree, and Clarence perched on one of the branches above us and his dark feathers shone over us.

"It was in Elf Ear, Nebraska, in 1910," I said. "What was?" said Burke.

"The curse," I said. "That is when it all began."

"I ain't never heard of Elf Ear, Nebraska. It sounds like some made-up place."

"I am telling you a story that I have never told to anybody else," I said. "If you intend to listen to it, you can't doubt everything I say.

Otherwise, there is no point in my telling you."

I had eaten the entire package of peanutbutter crackers and most of the crackers with cheese. I intended to eat the Oh Henry! bar for dessert.

"Dang, you was hungry," said Burke.

"I am perpetually hungry. That is what Granny says."

"I can make you a bologna sandwich if you want," said Burke. "My house ain't far from here."

"Bologna is what they eat in the county home, and the county home is the place of no return."

Burke shrugged. "I don't know about the county home."

"Granny has been warning me about the dangers of the county home my whole entire life."

"Okay," said Burke. "All I'm saying is that I can make you a bologna sandwich if you want one. If you're still hungry."

"Well," I said.

I was. Still hungry.

"Come on," said Burke. "You can tell me about the elf ears later."

"Elf Ear. It's a place. Elf Ear, Nebraska."

"Yeah," he said. "Come on. Let's go to my house and make a sandwich."

I ate the Oh Henry! bar while I walked behind Burke through the woods. The candy bar was chocolaty and caramelly, and it was maybe the sweetest and best thing I had ever eaten in my entire life.

I started to feel somewhat hopeful about the universe and my place in it. Even if I was headed off to eat bologna—meat of the county home, food of despair.

I love bologna!

Burke made me three sandwiches. They had bologna and orange cheese and mayonnaise and they were on white bread, and he stacked the sandwiches up one on top of the other and put them on a blue plate, and we sat in the dining room at a glass-topped table, and I ate the sandwiches one by one without stopping.

Granny had always spoken poorly of bologna, but these bologna sandwiches tasted so good that it was just one more reason for me to doubt Granny and the truth of her utterances.

And by that I mean this: If you are the kind of person who lies about something as small as bologna, what would stop you from lying about bigger, more important things?

Burke stared at me while I ate. "Dang, you can eat a lot."

"Granny says I need to keep my strength up,"
I said

"That's your granny? That old lady who don't never come out of the room at the Good Night?"

"Yes. She recently had all her teeth pulled. She is working to regain her strength."

Burke nodded.

From the glass-topped table in the dining

room, I could see over a field and into the woods. It was late afternoon, and the light was fading. Sometimes, when the light starts to fade, I get a terrible feeling of loneliness, like maybe I am the only person in the world.

One time I confessed this to Granny, and she told me that I shouldn't take everything so personally. She said, "Louisiana Elefante, the light has been fading since the dawn of time, and it will continue fading long after we are gone. It has nothing to do with you."

Still, it makes me sad when the light goes.

Burke sat across the table from me. There was the sound of a clock ticking, and from outside, I could hear a crow cawing.

"Is that Clarence?" I said to Burke.

"Yeah," he said. "He gets mad when I'm inside the house for too long. He misses me, I reckon."

"I am very far from home," I said.

"Well, all right," said Burke. "Where's home?"

"I am now going to tell you the story of the curse," I said.

"Okay," said Burke.

"I need to tell you this story."

"Okay," said Burke. "I'm listening."

"It was in Elf Ear, Nebraska, and the year was 1910, and my granny was eight years old, and her father was the most elegant and deceitful magician who ever lived."

"Your granddaddy was a magician?" said Burke.

"My great-grandfather," I said. "And my great-grandmother—my granny's mother—was the magician's assistant. They traveled all over the country. They performed magic together."

"It was like being in a circus," said Burke.

"It was like being in a magic act," I said.

"But what matters is that I am telling you about the curse. And the curse began on a stage in Elf Ear, Nebraska. My great-grandfather pulled my

great-grandmother out of a hat—a small hat. He made her appear. And then he made her disappear back into the hat. Just like a rabbit!"

Burke was staring at me, listening. He had very blue eyes.

"What happened next?" he said.

"What happened next was that my greatgrandfather uttered the fateful words 'I will now saw my lovely wife in half and put her back together again, for I am Hiram Elefante the Great."

"That was his name? Hiram Elefante the Great? What kind of name is that?"

"It was his name," I said. "The important thing is that the magician's assistant climbed into the box and Hiram Elefante nailed the box shut. And then he took a saw, and he sawed the box in half. With my great-grandmother in it! She was cut in two! Sundered! Do you understand?"

Burke nodded. "Yeah," he said. "It was a magic trick. He sawed her in half, and then he put her back together again."

"Well, that is what the audience thought would happen. That is what everyone anticipated. But it was not what happened."

I stared at Burke, and he stared at me.

"Well?" he said. "What happened?"

"My great-grandfather sawed my great-grandmother in half, and then he walked away. He left my great-grandmother on the stage. Sawed in two. He walked out of the theater in Elf Ear, and he kept walking. No one ever saw him again."

"But what about your great-granny?"

"Someone else put her back together, a man from the audience who knew some magic, and then the two of them ran away together and my granny was left entirely alone."

"Dang," said Burke. "Is this a true story?"

"Of course it's true!"

"What happened to your granny?"

"She got sent to the county home, to an orphanage. And that is the story of the curse of sundering and how it has been passed down through the generations. And now that curse is on my head."

"Well," said Burke, "what you got to do is undo the curse, right? That's what I would do."

"Undo it?" I said. "How would I do that?"

"I don't know. There's got to be a way. Maybe what you do is you go and find you another magician to work some magic—different magic. Magic that puts things back together."

Outside somewhere, Clarence called out. Burke and I sat there and stared at each other, and even though I was filled with crackers and bologna and an Oh Henry! bar, I felt very empty and sad.

Could the curse really be undone? I doubted it.

I don't think Burke Allen fully comprehended the depth and breadth of the curse upon my head.

"I suppose I should go back and check on Granny," I said. "Maybe she is hungry. Maybe you could make her a bologna sandwich." "All right," said Burke.

I didn't know if Granny would eat a bologna sandwich. In fact, a bologna sandwich might enrage her. Maybe I was hoping to enrage her. I don't know.

But in any case, Burke went into the kitchen and came back out a minute later with two bologna sandwiches wrapped up in a paper towel.

I was starting to see what kind of a person he was.

He was the kind of person who, if you asked him for one of something, gave you two instead.

We went back outside and stood in front of Burke's house, which was painted as pink as cotton candy on the outside. It was all by itself in the woods, with no other houses nearby. Burke whistled and Clarence came flying out of the woods and landed on Burke's shoulder. And I thought to myself that my life would never be truly complete until I could whistle and have a

crow come flying out of the trees directly to me.

"There's going to be a carnival at the church on Saturday," said Burke. "A carnival ain't a circus, but it's still something. And it is mostly fun. There's rides and games."

"Oh," I said.

"You and me could go."

"I need to know something," I said. "This is important. What direction is south from here?"

Burke pointed without even having to stop and consider. It was very impressive. "That way," he said. "Why?"

I turned and looked south. Clarence raised his wings and lowered them, but he stayed on Burke's shoulder.

"Why?" said Burke again.

"Because south is where Florida is," I said.

"So?" said Burke.

"Florida is where I am from. That's where my friends are. That's where Archie the cat is. That's where Buddy the dog is. And that is where I need to get back to." "How do you aim to get there?"

"I don't know," I said. "I will figure out a way. I am wily and resourceful. According to Granny."

We started to walk back to the Good Night, Sleep Tight. Clarence flew ahead of us, stopping to wait on tree branches, looking down at us and laughing and laughing.

Maybe crows are right about the world. Maybe everything is funny.