

KATE DICAMILLO



Ferris



Ferris

Also by Kate DiCamillo

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Raymie Nightingale

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Ferris

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CANDLEWICK PRESS

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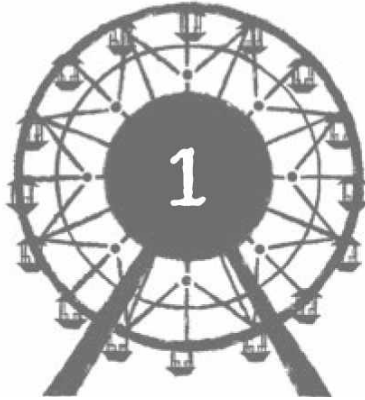
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Coda

About the Author

For Rainey Steward and Tracey Bailey



It was the summer before Emma Phineas Wilkey (who everyone called Ferris) went into the fifth grade.

It was the summer that the ghost appeared to Charisse, the summer that Ferris's sister, Pinky Wilkey, devoted herself to becoming an outlaw, and the summer that Uncle Ted left Aunt Shirley and moved into the Wilkey basement to paint a history of the world.

It was the summer that Ferris's best friend, Billy Jackson, played a song called "Mysterious Barricades" over and over again on the piano.

Billy Jackson loved music.

The very first sentence he had ever spoken to Ferris was "I hear piano music in my head all the time, and, I wonder, would it be all right if I held on to your hand?"

They were standing in Mrs. Bleeker's kindergarten classroom. Squares of sunlight were shining on the wood floors, and Ferris gave her hand to Billy Jackson while he continued to explain to her about the piano music in his head.

Billy's hand was sweating. His glasses were attached to his head with a strap, and Ferris knew almost immediately, from that very first moment, that she didn't want to ever lose hold of Billy Jackson. She said, "There's a piano

at our house. You can come over and play it whenever you want.”

It was a big, old house, the house where Ferris lived.

Ferris had her own room. So did Pinky, and so did Ferris’s parents.

Charisse, Ferris’s grandmother, had her own room, too.

That was where the ghost showed up—at the threshold of Charisse’s room.

“Darling,” Charisse said to Ferris, “this ghost! She just stands there in the doorway and stares at me with the most mournful expression.”

“What does she look like?” said Ferris. “Besides mournful?”

“She’s wearing a long dress. She has a handkerchief in her hand, and she wrings and squeezes it. Clearly, she is in despair over something. She is very unhappy, darling.”

“Are there happy ghosts?” said Ferris.

“I would like you to know that Boomer sees her, too. In case you are inclined to doubt my sanity.”

Boomer was the dog. He was part sheepdog and part German shepherd and also, according to Ferris’s father, part woolly mammoth. No one was sure, really, *what* kind of dog Boomer was, only that he was enormous and furry.

“Boomer refuses to enter the room if he sees her standing there,” said Charisse. “He is a very perceptive dog.”

“But why is the ghost here?” asked Ferris. She was sitting in the window seat of Charisse’s room, looking out into the backyard.

Ferris figured that she had spent more than half of her time on earth in Charisse’s room—talking to her grandmother, listening to her, playing gin rummy with her, and reading to her from the Bible and also from a battered paperback copy of Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*.

“I mean,” said Ferris, “what do you think the ghost wants?”

“I have absolutely no idea,” said Charisse. “I am utterly baffled by all of it, darling.”

Boomer was asleep on the rose-patterned carpet by Charisse’s bed. He was moving his paws, breathing heavily, dreaming of chasing something. The one time Boomer had actually managed to catch something (a baby squirrel), he had dropped it immediately and crept into the house with his tail between his legs—devastated by shame and regret.

His was a gentle soul.

That was what Charisse said about Boomer. “His is a gentle soul.”

“Are you afraid of her?” said Ferris. “Are you afraid of the ghost?”

“When you’ve lived as long as I have,” said Charisse, who was seventy-

three years old, “you are not afraid of ghosts.”

“What are you afraid of, then?” said Ferris.

“Indignities,” said Charisse.

“I don’t understand,” said Ferris.

“Isn’t that wonderful?” said Charisse. “I’m so pleased that you don’t understand.”

It was late afternoon, and Charisse was in bed.

“Why are you still in bed?” asked Ferris.

“I don’t feel well, darling, and that is all I want to say about that. I would ask you not to question me to death, as is your wont.”

Ferris was Charisse’s favorite person on the planet. No one denied it—not Charisse, not Ferris, not anybody in the whole household.

Charisse was the person who had caught Ferris when she entered the world—literally caught her.

Charisse had been on her knees in the dirt of the fairground, and she had been the one who had seen Ferris first. She said she recognized her at first sight.

“Welcome, darling.” That is what she had said to Ferris, and Ferris swore that she could remember it—entering the world, seeing the blue sky, seeing Charisse’s face smiling down at her.

“It’s a love story,” Charisse said whenever she told the story of Ferris being born. “But then, every story is a love story. Or every *good* story is a love story.”

“You can’t possibly remember it,” said Ferris’s mother that evening. “I barely remember it. You know what your grandmother does? She dramatizes everything. No, she romanticizes everything. Going into labor on a patch of dirt at the fairground is not romantic, I can tell you that much. Hand me the sponge, will you?”

Ferris and her mother were at the kitchen table. Her mother was pasting Green Stamps into an S&H Green Stamps book. She was working on filling enough books to get a toaster oven.

Ferris’s mother was practical. She was a pragmatist. She taught high school math. “Attempting to teach math to a roomful of teenagers on a daily basis leaves no room for romantic notions,” her mother often said. “I am a pragmatist through and through.”

Was Ferris a pragmatist or a romantic?

She didn’t know.

But sometimes, right before she fell asleep, she saw blue sky—the blue sky that she remembered from being born—and she saw Charisse smiling at her, her face lit up and beautiful.

Ferris believed that she'd recognized Charisse as soon as she had laid eyes on her.

Just the same way she'd recognized Billy Jackson from the first day she took his hand.

“Every story is a love story,” Ferris said out loud to herself that night when she was in bed.

The windows in her room were open. The crickets were singing. Boomer had thrown himself across her feet. He was snoring.

It was hot having a woolly mammoth draped across her feet, but Ferris was worried about Charisse not feeling well, and she was worried about the ghost—what did she want? Why was she only appearing to Charisse? And so Ferris was grateful to have Boomer there, anchoring her to the bed, the house, the world.

“I am ten years old,” Ferris said into the darkness.

Ten seemed like a significant number of years.

Ten seemed like the age when Ferris might start to understand some things.

“I am ten years old, and every story is a love story.”

Above her, above the house, the stars were shining, wheeling their way across the sky.

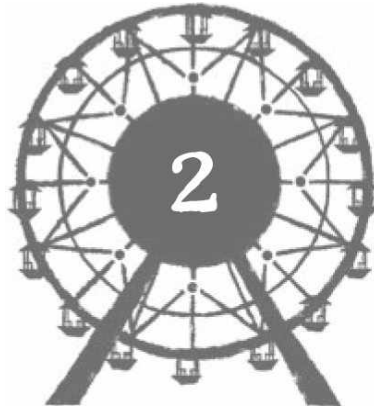
Boomer snored.

The crickets sang.

It sounded like maybe the stars were singing, too.

Ferris closed her eyes. She listened.

Every story is a love story, the whole world seemed to be singing. *Every good story is a love story.*



Ferris's aunt Shirley was a cosmetologist.

"I am not a beautician. I am not a barber. I do not simply *cut* hair," Aunt Shirley said to anybody who expressed an interest in her vocation (and also to those who did not).

"What I am is a cosmetologist," Shirley said. "I have a cosmetology *degree*. I am a businesswoman."

Aunt Shirley owned a beauty shop called Shirley Curl.

The letter y in the Shirley Curl sign came up underneath the word *Curl* and formed a sprightly curlicue. Under "Shirley Curl," it read: "Why Not Look Your Best!"

Ferris thought "Why Not Look Your Best" should have a question mark after it, but Shirley did not want a question mark. She wanted an exclamation mark.

"I am not interested in sowing doubt," Aunt Shirley said to Uncle Ted when he made the sign for her. "It is every woman's right to be beautiful. Do *not* put a question mark on my sign. You must be emphatic."

Uncle Ted had a PhD in philosophy, and he had worked as a professional sign painter until the news was suddenly delivered to him that he must paint a visual history of the world.

“Who delivered that news to him, exactly?” asked Ferris’s mother.

“I’m not certain,” said Ferris’s father. “But I do believe someone delivered something to him.” Ted was his younger brother, and her father understood him on what he often referred to as a “cellular level.”

“Delusions of grandeur,” said Ferris’s mother. “He’s a romantic. Just like Charisse.”

“Now, honey,” said Ferris’s father. “Let’s just see where the dust settles here.”

“The dust has already settled,” said her mother. “Ted’s living in the basement, isn’t he?”

They were in the kitchen, sitting at the yellow table. Ferris’s father was reading the paper. Ferris’s mother was pasting more Green Stamps into the Green Stamps book. Actually, she was pounding Green Stamps.

Boomer was under the table. He thumped his tail approvingly every time Ferris’s mother pounded another stamp into place. Outside the kitchen window, the magnolia tree was standing solemnly, patiently, its glossy green leaves reflecting the morning light.

It was the first day of summer vacation.

Ferris had her bare feet on Boomer’s hairy flank. She was drinking coffee with a lot of cream and sugar in it. Her father had handed her the cup and said, “I think a ten-year-old can join her parents in a morning cup of coffee.”

Pinky was running around the backyard. She had on a black cape, and she was shouting the same sentence over and over, louder each time: “Out of my way, fools!”

Pinky was six years old, and even though Ferris was her older sister, she did not understand Pinky on a cellular level.

Pinky was a fearsome mystery.

Charisse was in her room, sleeping (which was worrisome), and Uncle Ted was in the basement.

“The dust,” said Ferris’s mother, “has settled into a blanket of certainty. We’ll never get Ted out of that basement.”

“It’s his house, too,” said Ferris’s father. He rattled the paper. “It’s his ancestral home as well as mine.”

Ferris’s mother snorted. She said, “Ancestral home.” She snorted again. “I bet Shirley is relieved to be rid of him.”

Ferris took a sip of coffee. It was rich, mysterious. It tasted like being an adult.

“I do not want him living in the basement indefinitely,” said Ferris’s mother. “I am not raising another child.”

“Honey,” said Ferris’s father. “I’m sure he’s not expecting you to raise him. Also, he can hear you.”

“Good,” said her mother. She pounded a foot on the kitchen floor at the same time that she pounded another Green Stamp into place.

Boomer sat up and barked.

From the backyard came the sound of Pinky shouting (again), “Out of my way, fools!”

Ferris took another sip of coffee. She said, “Charisse doesn’t feel well.”

“She’s old,” said Ferris’s mother. Which didn’t seem like a very reassuring thing to say. Her mother often fell short in the reassurance department.

Ferris said, “I think I’ll go see Uncle Ted.” She put down her cup of coffee and got up and went to the pantry and retrieved the big jar of peanuts. Uncle Ted loved peanuts.

Boomer came out from underneath the kitchen table and followed her. He loved peanuts, too.

“Do not leave that jar down there with Ted,” said her mother.

“Okay,” said Ferris.

The stairs down to the basement were creaky and dark and cobwebbed. Ferris and Boomer descended slowly. Ferris held the jar of peanuts out in front of her. She felt as if she were carrying a lantern.

“Ferris!” said Ted when he saw her.

“Hi, Uncle Ted,” said Ferris. “I brought you some peanuts.”

“You are a deeply thoughtful child, honey,” said Ted.

“Okay,” said Ferris. She handed Ted the jar. “How’s the history of the world going?”

“Would you like to see?” said Ted.

Ferris nodded. Ted escorted her over behind the boiler, where there was a gigantic white canvas with a small lump in the left-hand corner. Ferris stepped closer. She peered at the lump. It looked like maybe it could be a foot.

“Is that a foot?” she said.

“Yes,” said Ted.

Ferris said, “It looks good.”

She wasn’t sure exactly what a foot had to do with the history of the world.

“I had to start somewhere,” said Uncle Ted. “A foot seemed like a good

place.”

Ferris nodded again. Ted unscrewed the lid to the peanut jar, tipped the jar back, and poured peanuts directly into his mouth.

He was still in his bathrobe. His hair was sticking out on either side of his head and also on the top.

Ferris went back to studying the foot. It seemed like the polite thing to do.

“Ferris, honey, I have a favor to ask of you,” said Uncle Ted.

“Okay,” said Ferris.

“I wonder if you could go down to Shirley Curl and find out what Shirley is thinking.”

“Thinking about what?”

“About me, honey. See if she misses me. I’m asking you to spy. I’m asking you to be a spy in the house of love.”

Uncle Ted tipped the peanut jar and poured more peanuts into his mouth.

Boomer barked. Ted looked down at him.

“He wants a peanut,” said Ferris.

Ted tossed Boomer a peanut.

“Wouldn’t Pinky be a better spy?” said Ferris.

“Your little sister is a proper terror. Yes, she is. A genuine terror. That child would be entirely at home with Robespierre. However, she lacks subtlety. You do not.”

“Who’s Robespierre?” said Ferris.

“He was a French revolutionary, honey,” said Ted. He turned back to the canvas and stared at the foot.

The basement smelled like cobwebs and bathrobe and oil paints. And peanuts.

Why, Ferris wondered, would you start painting the history of the world with a single foot? And how could you ever hope to paint something as complicated as the world and its history anyway?

Ferris licked her lips. She tasted coffee, adulthood.

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll try to be a spy.”



Aunt Shirley was blond and pink. She looked like someone who had been spun out of sugar and placed on top of an elaborate, celebratory cake.

“Now, Ferris, you have some beautiful hair, but you don’t tend to it right,” said Aunt Shirley. “You do not *own* your beauty.”

Ferris had gone to Shirley Curl to spy on Aunt Shirley, and somehow she had ended up sitting in the beauty chair with a flowered gown tied around her neck.

“I believe I’ll set it,” said Shirley in a meditative voice.

“Set what?” said Ferris.

Shirley swatted at Ferris’s shoulder. “Hush up, now,” she said. “I’m going to make you just as pretty as God intended you to be.” She turned away and started mixing up chemicals in a bowl.

Outside the shop was the sunlit street, which, from the vantage point of the beauty chair, seemed absolutely paradisaical to Ferris.

Boomer was standing in front of the plate-glass door, staring in at her. Shirley didn’t believe in dogs in beauty shops. “It sends entirely the wrong message,” she’d said. “Particularly with that dog. Who is unkempt in the extreme.”

Ferris waved at Boomer. He pricked his ears and wagged his tail in return.

“Tell the truth, Emma Phineas!” Shirley suddenly shouted. She twirled around and pointed at Ferris with a hair-encrusted brush. “Ted sent you here to spy on me, didn’t he?”

“Yes, ma’am, he did!” Ferris shouted back.

“I knew it,” said Shirley. “I just knew it. Let me tell you something.” She pointed the brush at Ferris again. “Charisse has done that son of hers no favors. You cannot tell someone that they are a genius from the minute they arrive in the world without them starting to believe you. And then what happens?”

“I don’t know,” said Ferris.

“I’ll tell you what happens,” said Shirley. “They *believe* that they are a genius, and they quit their job and they get the ludicrous . . .” Shirley stopped talking for a second or two. She said the word *ludicrous* again, slowly—savoring it, like she couldn’t believe what a perfect word it was.

Ludicrous meant foolish, unreasonable.

Ferris knew this because Mrs. Mielk, her fourth-grade teacher, had been vocabulary-obsessed.

“Vocabulary is the key to the kingdom!” said Mrs. Mielk. “All of life hinges on knowing the right word to use at the right time.”

The difference, Mrs. Mielk said, between the right word and the almost-right word was the difference between lightning and the lightning bug.

“Mr. Mark Twain said that,” said Mrs. Mielk. “That is a quote from Mr. Mark Twain, wordsmith extraordinaire.”

Mrs. Mielk had crooked teeth. She was impatient. She stamped her left foot (never her right foot, only her left foot) when she got angry, and she got angry often. She was not an altogether likable person, but Ferris loved her because Mrs. Mielk had given Ferris and Billy Jackson the gift of words.

Together, Ferris and Billy had worked to memorize definitions and spellings for test after test. And in the process, the words had lodged themselves permanently in Ferris’s brain and heart. They were hers.

“The truly *ludicrous*,” continued Shirley, saying the word for the third time, “notion that God has picked you to paint the history of the world. And not to hold down a job while you are painting this *history* of the world? That is *ludicrous*.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Ferris. As if she agreed. Which she kind of did.

Shirley started to put curlers in Ferris’s hair, and Ferris wished that someone would come and rescue her.

The door to Shirley Curl opened, and Twilla Dormin walked in.

Twilla Dormin would not rescue anyone from anything, ever. Twilla was mean. She had taught Sunday school for years. She made kids cry by describing in great detail what it would be like to burn in Hell for all eternity.

“Howdy, howdy,” said Twilla in her deceptively singsong voice.

“Hey, Miss Twilla,” said Shirley and Ferris in unison.

“I’ll be right with you,” said Shirley.

“That’s fine,” said Twilla. “That’s just fine. Now, is that Ferris Wilkey I see? Is that Ferris sitting there and getting her hair done like a proper young lady?”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Ferris. “It’s me.”

“About time,” said Miss Twilla. “About time you grew up and acted like a lady instead of running around all over the place with that strange little Billy Jackson. Shirley, is it true that Ted moved out? I am so sorry for you and all of your suffering.”

“Go on and get yourself a magazine and sit down, Twilla,” said Shirley in a very firm voice. “I will be right with you.”

Shirley waited until Twilla had sat down and picked up a copy of *Good Housekeeping* that had a picture of a Jell-O mold on the cover.

“And now it has all come to fruition,” whispered Shirley into Ferris’s ear. “All that praise has done him in. Now he believes himself to be the next Mona Lisa.”

“*Mona Lisa* is a painting,” said Ferris.

“I know that!” shouted Shirley. And then she went back to whispering. “Tell me, honey, have you seen the painting? How does it look?”

Which is how Ferris, without intending to, ended up describing the foot blob to Shirley.

“A foot?” shrieked Shirley as she slathered Ferris’s hair in permanent solution. “What do you mean, a foot?”

“It’s a really good foot,” said Ferris. Even though she didn’t think it was much of a foot.

“What is it you two are talking about?” said Twilla.

“Nothing, Miss Twilla,” said Shirley and Ferris together.

The permanent smell was making Ferris dizzy.

She couldn’t believe how quickly things had spun out of control.

“I feel funny,” Ferris said to Shirley.

“Well, I feel funny, too,” said Shirley. “But not in a laughing way. Not in a

ha-ha kind of way.”

“I don’t see where anything at all is funny,” said Twilla.

Which she didn’t need to say.

Nobody had ever heard Twilla Dormin laugh.



There was a lot of laughter at the dinner table that night.

Most of it came from Pinky.

“You look like you stuck your finger into an electrical outlet,” said Pinky to Ferris. “You do not look like a proper outlaw.”

Why, Ferris wondered, did Pinky have to be so objectionable at every possible juncture?

“I know I don’t look like a proper outlaw,” said Ferris. “I don’t want to be a proper outlaw.”

Pinky stopped laughing. “Well, then,” she said, “something is wrong with you.”

“No,” said Ferris. “Something’s wrong with you.”

“That’s enough,” said Ferris’s mother.

“You look like Shirley Temple, honey,” said Ferris’s father. “I mean, if you squint a little, that’s how you look.”

“I don’t understand how it happened,” said her mother.

“Aunt Shirley did it,” said Ferris.

“Yes,” said her mother. “But why?”

They were in the dining room, sitting underneath the old chandelier—which was not lit because it had never been wired for electricity.