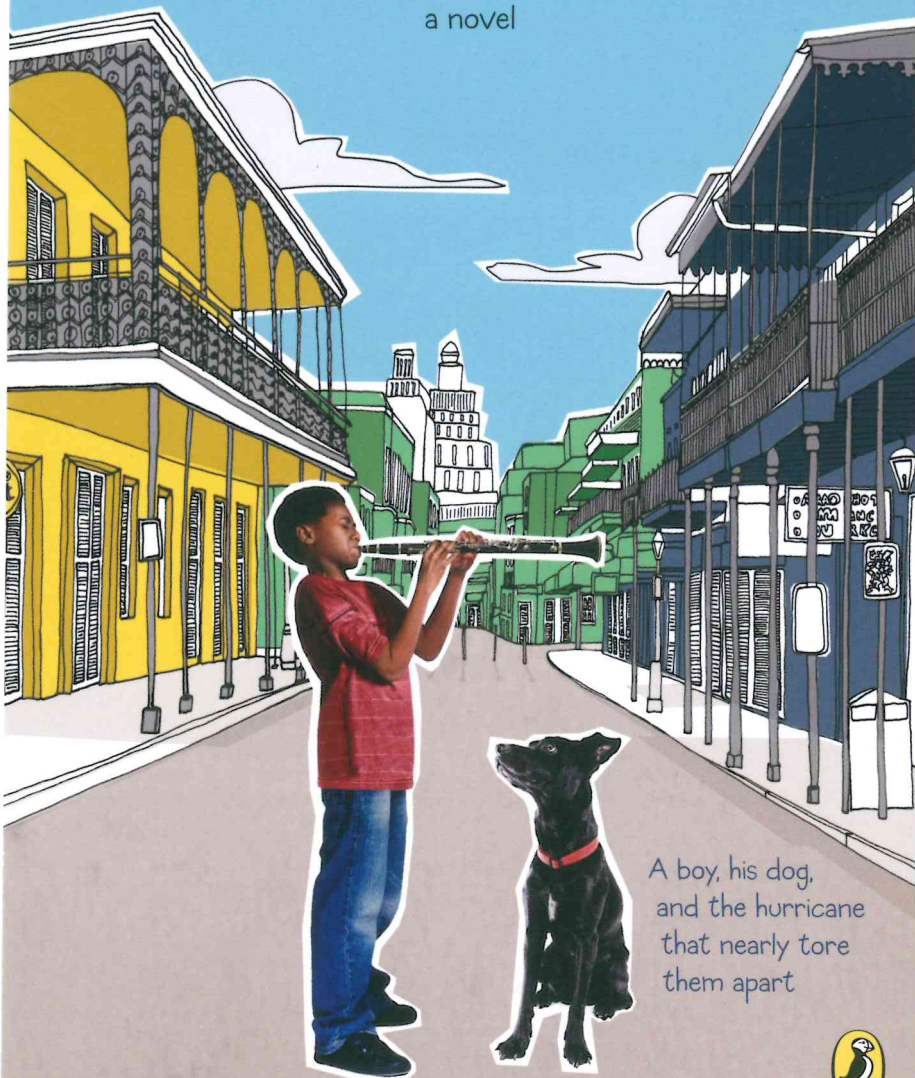


brenda woods

Coretta Scott King Honor Winner

SAINT LOUIS ARMSTRONG BEACH

a novel



A boy, his dog,
and the hurricane
that nearly tore
them apart



SAINT LOUIS ARMSTRONG BEACH

brenda woods

PUFFIN BOOKS

PUFFIN BOOKS
An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, New York



First published in the United States of America by Nancy Paulsen Books, 2011
Published by Puffin Books, an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, 2012

Copyright © 2011 by Brenda Woods

Penguin supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin to continue to publish books for every reader.

Visit us online at penguinrandomhouse.com

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA IS AVAILABLE UPON REQUEST

Puffin Books ISBN 9780142421864

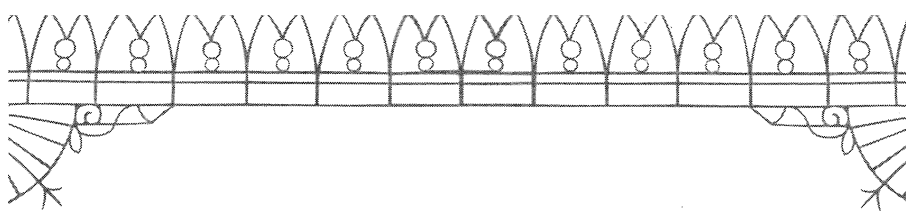
Design by Annie Ericsson
Text set in Goudy Old Style

Printed in the United States of America

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

In memory of my great-grandparents—
Lee Murphy and Henry and Alabama Jordan—
and my grandparents—John and Josie Jordan—
who once called the city of New Orleans home.

And to my mother, Maxine,
a member of the graduating class of
1940, McDonogh No. 35 Senior High School,
New Orleans, Louisiana.



THE STORY OF SAINT LOUIS

ARMSTRONG BEACH

One thing I know for sure is that most important stuff comes in more than one part. Things like skateboards, bicycles, computers, houses, cars, and life. Life is made out of this invisible thing called time that we watch disappear into weeks, years that we track like bloodhounds or K-9 dogs, and centuries that move so slowly they may as well be standing still. The last time I checked on my computer, 616 weeks had disappeared since the day I was born, which makes me almost twelve but technically still eleven.

Other stuff has a beginning and an end: red lights and green lights, the muddy Mississippi River, clarinet lessons, the road to Lake Pontchartrain, summer vacation, video

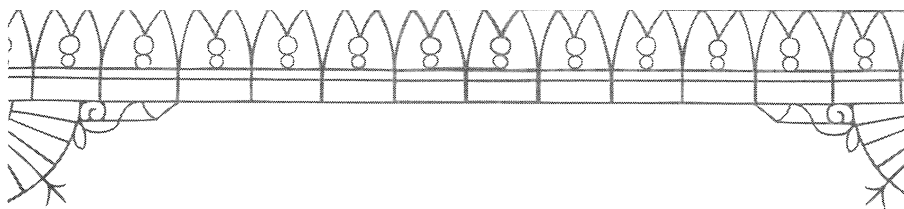
games, and life. Life always has a beginning and always an end.

As for me, my life has three parts: the before, the during, and the after. My before was mostly good and the after keeps getting better every day, but the during sure was hard. The during was, I hope, the most horrible-est thing that will ever happen to me. The during was almost my end.

The during is also known as Hurricane Katrina.

This is the story of Saint Louis Armstrong Beach. No, it's not a place with folks trying hard to catch a big-enough-for-dinner fish, or where big-mouth pelicans and noisy seagulls swoop. And it's not a place where I paddle out too far on my Boogie Board, come face-to-face with a ginormous wave that looks like it wants to swallow me, and even though I know I shouldn't take the ride, I do anyway and luckily land belly-up on the sand in a pile of dead smelly seaweed.

No, Saint Louis Armstrong Beach isn't one of those places. Saint Louis Armstrong Beach is me. And like I said, this is my story, beginning with the absolute best day of my mostly good before—August 20, 2005—exactly one week and two days before the during.



THE ABSOLUTE BEST DAY OF MY MOSTLY GOOD BEFORE

“Saint, shut that dang dog up!” my pops yelled from his bedroom.

“His name’s not Dang Dog,” I muttered.

The sun was up and so was I because Shadow was outside barking. Shadow is the neighborhood dog, the kind that belongs to everyone but no one in particular. Pops calls him the noisiest dog in Tremé, but that’s not even close to the truth because Tremé has its share of noisy dogs. And for those of you who don’t know much about New Orleans, Tremé is just *back* from the French Quarter and the way you say it is *Trah-MAY*.

Anyway, Shadow was yelping and scratching at our back door like he did every Saturday, which had somehow turned

into my day to feed him. I stretched, rolled out of bed, and headed downstairs.

My hand was still on the doorknob when he pushed his way inside, jumped up on me, and started licking my face, his tail swishing like a windshield wiper. Shadow may belong to everyone on our block, but I swear I'm his favorite. Whenever he sees me outside, he runs straight to me, an arrow to a bull's-eye. He's coal black, mostly Labrador, we think, and if I could, I'd own him. But Pops keeps saying no because when he was a kid a dog bit him twice, right on the butt, and since then he's had it in for canine creatures. As for Shadow, he seems perfectly happy with things just the way they are, never being cooped up, no collar around his neck, no tags jingling, free to follow behind anyone he chooses—like a shadow. That's how he got his name. In fact, it was me who gave it to him . . . well, me and my used-to-be best friend, Money Lafayette.

Quickly, I opened two cans of dog food and scooped it into his bowl, but before he stuck his nose in it, Shadow gazed up at me with a look that lets me know I'm his friend. I patted him and opened the fridge to see if my pops, Valentine, had brought anything special from the restaurant.

Having a pops who's a chef at a famous restaurant is good in one way but bad in another. It's good because he usually brings home leftover fancy food and it's bad because my

mouth has kind of gotten used to it. I searched the racks, nothing special today, so I settled for cereal.

As soon as I finished eating, I got dressed and grabbed my clarinet and cowboy hat. "See y'all later!" I called out from the landing to my mama and pops.

Mercedes, my mama, appeared in the doorway of their room, tying her robe, fussing with her hair. Her hair and eyes are black and her skin's the color of peanut butter. She's not skinny or fat and she smiles with her whole face. "You be careful, Saint!" she said. "And be home way b'fore dark," she added.

"I will."

"You got some change?" she asked.

I checked my pocket. I had three quarters and seven dollar bills. Hopefully by the end of the day I'd have a lot more. "Plenty," I replied.

Mama made the sign of the cross, kissed her fingertips, and tossed me a blessing.

I caught it.

Mama smiled. "Love you."

I grinned. "Love you too," I replied, and thought about how lucky I am that my mama and pops never nag me about spending most of my spare time performing and are very cool about me being into music. But they weren't always like that.

The summer before sixth grade, when I'd asked if I could start performing in Jackson Square, I got a double no. So I told them I signed up for advanced swimming lessons at the park, a little white lie, and instead headed to Jackson Square with my clarinet. And I got away with it too—for four days, that is.

On the fourth day, I was playing to a small crowd of happy tourists, really putting on a show, when I glanced up and there they were, Valentine and Mercedes Beach, not smiling. How they knew where to find me I'll never know. My punishment consisted of having to actually take advanced swimming lessons and no street performing for a whole year.

"A whole year? You gotta be kidding!" I argued. "Do you know how much money I could be making?"

"Take it or leave it," they'd replied.

Surprisingly, the year seemed like it passed in no time, and now I'm a really good swimmer and also free to put on the Saint Louis Armstrong Beach Show practically whenever I want.

Shadow trailed me to the front door and I had one foot outside when I saw her climbing into the passenger side of her mama's car. "Hey, Money!" I shouted, hoping for the hundredth time that she'd talk to me or at least smile. Instead, she glanced my way, frowned, waved at me like she was shooin' away a fly, and shut the door. I imagined her

whispering the words *little boy* as her mother drove off and watched until the car turned the corner. Shadow, resting on his hind legs at my feet, was quiet and as still as a statue. "C'mon, boy," I told him, and headed to the Quarter. Like a shadow at noon, he was on my heels.

"Mornin', Saint," old Miz Moran greeted me from her narrow porch, where she was sitting in her creaky rocking chair like she does every day but Sunday. Sundays she goes to early mass at St. Augustine's, then takes the Canal Street ferry across to Algiers to visit her daughter. Come Monday, though, you'll find her right back in that chair, creaking and watching, watching and creaking.

"Hey, Miz Moran."

"I ever tell you that you're as handsome as that tall, brown daddy of yours?"

Almost every time I see her, she says the same thing. "Yes, Miz Moran."

And as usual she shook her crooked finger at me and chuckled. "You be good as a saint, now."

"I will," I promised, knowing I couldn't, wouldn't ever come close to being any kind of saint . . . well, maybe in my dreams . . . naw, not even there.

As I walked, I once again wished that my name wasn't Saint. Folks always have something to say about it—and I mean always. Usually they assume my pops is a huge fan of

the New Orleans Saints, which he is, but that's not how I came by the name. Then, I wished my middle name wasn't Louis Armstrong, but only because the trumpet's not my instrument, and since I carry his name, some people insist it ought to be. If I could have picked my own name, I'd have chosen Valentine Xavier Beach, just like my pops. Instead I was named after my pops' daddy, Saint, who according to everyone who knew him was anything but, and Louis Armstrong, who supposedly had been a bosom buddy of his. King Daddy Saint, which is what almost everyone called him, already had one foot in the grave when I was born, so my mama and pops gave him the honor of naming me. Sadly, six months after I was born, King Daddy Saint died.

Halfway to Jackson Square, I thought about Money again, not the money in my pocket, the Money who lives next door to me and who, even though she's a year older than me and is a teenager now, up until just before Christmas had been my play sister and very best friend.

Her name's not really Money, it's MonaLisa, but a long time ago her baby cousin who couldn't say MonaLisa started calling her Money and it stuck. That's another thing that happened last year. She told everyone, "Please stop calling me Money. Call me MonaLisa." But . . . I never did.

Shadow nudged the back of my leg as if to say stop thinking about her, but I kept on.

The way I figure, there are three reasons Money changed up on me. The number one reason was that she got her girl parts, which caused the older boys in the neighborhood to glance her way and sling sweet talk. The second reason was that she grew at least five inches in what seemed like overnight, making her a full head taller than me. The last reason was her parents let her transfer from St. Anne's, our Catholic school, to the public middle school last fall. In no time flat, she became a member of this pretty-girl clique who kept on her about why the *little boy* was always hanging around her house. "Hey, *l'il boy*," they teased, and whenever Money was with her new friends, she began to ignore me. But if she was alone, she'd still talk to me when I'd knock on her door or squeeze through the back fence into her yard, so I didn't mind too much, and Mama said, "Don't let your feelings get hurt, Saint. It's just peer pressure." Mama's a social worker at a big hospital, so she knows all about that kind of stuff.

Then, just before Christmas, everything changed.

I rang Money's doorbell and this high school dude with a goatee and a thick gold chain who I'd seen around now and then, always with a different cutie, answered the door like he lived there. Because I'd seen her parents leave for work, I'd expected her to be home alone. Inside, music blasted.

"Is Money here?" I asked.

He smirked and peered inside. "I dunno. Lemme see.

Is Money here, y'all?" he yelled over the music. I peeked through the cracked door. It was a party. People were dancing. I recognized some of the girls from Money's clique.

"Naw, money ain't here, but if you got some you wanna give us, you welcome to c'mon in," one of the fellas replied. By that time people were laughing, so when the brother with the goatee threw the door open as if to say it was okay to enter, something warned me not to, but I didn't pay attention. Instead, I listened to the nosy side of me and stepped inside.

There were open liquor bottles on the coffee table and almost everyone was drinking. I scanned the room for Money.

"It's *li'l boy*," one of the girls slurred, and took a sip from her paper cup. Snickers followed.

Then this blue-eyed Creole brother poured some alcohol into a cup and handed it to me. "Here . . . have a taste, *li'l boy*."

He and some of the others began to cheer me on and I had the cup to my lips when, from the corner of my eye, I glimpsed Money coming downstairs, a bottle in each hand. Without taking a sip, I lowered the cup from my mouth.

"The *li'l boy* wanna know if Money's here," the high school brother told her.

As soon as she saw me, she tried to hide the bottles behind her back.

"H-hey, Money," I stammered.

"My name ain't Money, it's MonaLisa, everyone knows that," she proclaimed, then asked, "What're you doin' here, Saint?"

That really got them started. "Saint . . . Saint who?" the blue-eyed brother asked.

"Saint Beach," I replied.

Even more laughter.

"MonaLisa's *li'l boyfriend*," one of the girls mocked.

The one with the goatee glared at me as he slipped his arm around Money's waist. "That so?"

"He's just a kid from next door . . . a kid from next door who needsta go home . . . now," she commanded as she quickly ushered me to the door.

"Bye, *li'l cutie*," the girl with the paper cup said, and her giggling followed me outside.

Before Money closed the door in my face, she glanced at the cup that was still in my hand and grabbed it. "Gimme that! And Saint, keep your big mouth shut. Don't turn into no rodent on me or I'll never talk to you again, ever."

I gazed into her pretty brown eyes. "I won't," I said, and left.

Later that day, Shadow must have heard the sad song I was playing on my clarinet. He squeezed through the gate into the backyard and nuzzled my shoulder like he wanted to play. At least he's still my friend, I thought.

That should have been the end of that story because, as promised, I kept my big mouth shut.

It was Money who didn't.

Christmas Eve, Money's mama, Miz Olympia Lafayette, came to our house wearing a lot of makeup, a glittery green dress, and, instead of her usual perfect smile, a disgusted look. She burst in like a mad bull. "Where's your mama, boy?"

Boy? She'd never called me boy before, always Saint. "What's wrong, Miz Lafayette?"

"Tween me and your mama."

I pointed to the kitchen, where Mama was getting the roux started for her gumbo.

Miz Lafayette rushed through the house, her high-heeled shoes going click, click, click, click on the wood floors, and closed the kitchen door. Next thing I knew, I was summoned to the kitchen and ordered to sit down. Like detectives on a lady cop show, Mama and Miz Lafayette began their cross-examination.

To make it short, when Miz Lafayette went to the locked cabinet to get the liquor out for her annual Before Midnight Mass Party, which was supposed to start any minute now, it was all gone.

"At first Money played stupid," Miz Lafayette snarled. "But she finally told the truth."

I hung my head. "Oh."

"Saint, look at me," Mama commanded. "This true?"

I nodded.

Miz Lafayette patted Mama's shoulder sympathetically. "Don't know how any one person could go through that much liquor, let alone an eleven-year-old."

"Huh?" I asked.

"Your drinking problem . . . Money told me everything. How you tried to get her started but—thank the Holy Blessed Virgin—she wasn't weak."

My ears couldn't believe what they were hearing. I spit out the truth. "Me? It wasn't me. It was Money and her friends. They were all at your house. I just went over there to see if Money wanted to go with me to get something to eat, and she was havin' a party. That's who was drinking, not me. I didn't even take a sip."

Miz Lafayette's eyes shifted from Mama to me, then back to Mama again.

I peered into the front room at the painting of my granddaddy Saint that hangs over the fireplace mantel, placed my hand over my heart, and declared, "I swear on King Daddy Saint's grave, I'm tellin' the truth."

For some reason, I still can't say why, Miz Lafayette believed me. She retreated to the front of the house and we

were right behind her. "Sorry to have bothered y'all on Christmas Eve." She paused briefly, then added, "Y'all welcome to come by t'night."

Mama begged off. "Gotta get my gumbo on, Olympia."

"Then I'll see y'all at midnight mass."

"Like always," Mama replied.

"Merry Christmas, Mercedes . . . you too, Saint. Sorry," Olympia Lafayette apologized again, and she scurried home.

"Merry Christmas," we echoed.

Mama shut the door and plugged in the Christmas tree lights. The tiny white lights twinkled and the yellow glass ornaments sparkled. Every year Mama's trees had a color theme. This year's was yellow.

She lifted up my chin and gazed into my eyes. "Not even a sip, Saint?"

"Not even," I replied.

Playfully, she rubbed my head. "C'mon, help me with the shrimp."

Though the shrimp wouldn't go in until minutes before the gumbo found its way to the bowls, it needed to be shelled and cleaned tonight. Most times Pops did it, but he'd called earlier, saying he'd probably be at the restaurant until after 1:00 A.M.

I peeked through the window curtains at Money's house, where I could hear Miz Lafayette screaming at her, but as

soon as the first partygoers rang their bell, she stopped. Even though I was mad at Money for lying on me, I still felt sorry for her. I let the curtain fall and joined Mama in the kitchen.

Hours later, at midnight mass, Money stood to get in the Communion line, but Miz Lafayette made her sit back down. On my way down the aisle to the altar, I caught Money's eyes. They were red from crying and filled with hate.

Money hasn't spoken to me in the eight months since.

I felt like I was being cooked inside an oven, heat coming at me from every side. Shadow was panting and sweat dripped from my forehead. As usual in August, it was way too hot. I tiptoed into someone's yard and plucked a ready-to-burst pomegranate from a tree that had so much fruit, I convinced myself it wasn't really stealing. And when I passed in front of Willie Mae's Scotch House, I smelled red beans cooking. When my work is done, I thought, I'll stop there for fries and lemonade.

On Moon Walk, across Decatur Street from Jackson Square, I set up. Moon Walk in the summertime had three things I needed: tourists, a few shady trees, and the Mississippi River breeze.

First, I found a container I could put water in for Shadow and filled it at one of the drinking fountains. He lapped it up fast, so I filled it again, then took a long drink myself. I tossed

my cowboy hat on the ground, threw in a couple of rocks to keep it from blowing away, opened my case, and took out my clarinet. I imagined the hat full of change and dollar bills and me studying at Juilliard someday. With Shadow curled nearby, I began to play.

Rule Number One: Always start early.

I learned that from the one and only Smokey De Leon. Like a priest is a man of the cloth, Smokey De Leon is a man of the flute, at least that's what he told me. "Knew the flute was plenty trouble first time I put my lips to it. That was the day I forgot about everything else. Some days I'd even forget to eat. Woulda forgot 'bout women if they hadn't chased me night and day." And when folks ask him how long he's been playing, he gazes into the sky dreamily and tells them, "Seems like fo'ever." He's kind of skinny, probably from not eating, and he's got a head full of white hair and grown-up grandkids, which makes him—old.

According to Smokey, tourists who've been warned to steer clear of some parts of New Orleans at night feel safe strolling almost anywhere in the morning. Plus, he claims, you get them with their wallets full, before they've had a chance to spend too much money in the Old French Market or along Royal Street or in the Bourbon Street bars.

I stopped playing and listened. Behind me the Mississippi water quietly rushed and the wind carried the sound of a

flute to my ears. My eyes searched the Walk. Though I couldn't see him, the man of the flute was near.

Then, in the distance, I saw them, three folks strolling toward me. Guessing they were tourists, I put my green Cecilio clarinet to my mouth and blew some blues.

While one smiling tourist lady pointed her camera in my face and took lots of pictures, a bald-headed man wearing shorts and a sun visor that had the words *New Orleans* printed on it in bright red letters tossed a couple of dollars into my hat. The other grinning tourist lady, wearing strands of Mardi Gras beads and chomping a praline, stuffed in a five-dollar bill. Inside, I chuckled. The day was off to a very good start. And as soon as I was alone, I snatched the crisp five-dollar bill, folded it neatly, and put it inside the secret money pouch I keep taped around my ankle.

Smokey De Leon's Rule Number Two: Never let folks see you with too much money.

There are two reasons for this rule. First, folks with money might think you don't need any more and pass you by, and second, folks who don't have much themselves might try to rob you.

Sweat dripped into my eyes. I wiped at it with my white handkerchief, did some addition in my head, and realized that if things kept up the way they had for most of the summer, I'd soon be able to call it mine—a beautiful Leblanc

L1020 Step-Up Pro clarinet. One of Smokey's friends who he used to play with at the Jazz Park was selling off some of his instruments and had promised it to me at a discount, \$1200. He also has a Leblanc 1191S Opus II, but he wants \$5000 for it. Mr. Hammond, my music teacher, claims that's much too much money for a young person to spend on an instrument. I'd say he's probably right.

A daydream fell into my mind, and I was picturing the Leblanc L1020 in my hands, when someone tapped me on the shoulder. Startled, I jumped. It was Smokey. Shadow howled long and loud.

Wearing a purple button-down shirt, faded blue jeans that were way too big, black suspenders to keep them from falling off his skinny body, a red bow tie with yellow polka dots, and a gray derby, he looked ready for Mardi Gras. The hat, which I've never seen him without, matches almost perfectly the color of his eyes, which is why everyone calls him Smokey. "Dreamin' 'bout that Leblanc, ain't ya?" he asked as he settled on the bench, flute, as always, in his hand.

I nodded. "How'd you know?"

Smokey grinned. "The look in your eyes. I know that look."

"Another two hundred dollars and it'll be mine," I boasted.

"Congratulations, Mister Saint," he replied before he placed the flute to his lips and began playing the birthday song.

"It's not my birthday yet, Smokey."

Swaying to the melody with his eyes closed, he continued playing until the end. "Nosiree, it's mine," he proclaimed.

"You jokin'?"

"No sir, Mister Saint, no joke. Seventy-nine today, August 20, 2005."

"Seventy-nine? Wow, that's old."

Smokey agreed, "Yep, gettin' there. Never thought I'd see the twenty-first century, but here I am."

Part of me wanted to talk hogwash and tell him he didn't look his age—you know, that stuff grown-ups always say—but Smokey has gray hair and a bunch of wrinkles. In other words, he really does look old, and I wasn't in the mood to tell a lie. Besides, I have a one-white-lie-a-day rule. Pops claims white lies don't hurt much, but Mama says a lie is a lie. I didn't know who was right, so a while back I decided to allow myself one white lie a day and only if necessary. The way I figured, it wasn't even noon yet and I didn't want to waste a lie I might need for later. So instead I said, "Well, happy birthday, Smokey," and proceeded to play the birthday song for him on my clarinet.

He stood in front of me, put his hands together, and bowed. "You gettin' pretty good with that thing, Mister Saint. Keep it up and one day you'll be a virtuoso."

"What's a virtuoso?" I asked.

“A master of his instrument . . . but remember what I taught you.”

He'd taught me a lot of whats. I shrugged my shoulders. “Which what?”

“Music ain't nuthin' 'less you put your soul in it.”

“Is my soul in it?”

“Almost.” He winked, put the flute to his lips, began to play, and strolled away.

“Bye, Smokey,” I said with a wave of my hand.

Abruptly, he stopped playing, turned to me, tipped his hat, and replied, “No such thing as good-bye for me and you, Mister Saint.” With that, Smokey resumed playing and sauntered away toward Jackson Square.

Something about Smokey always left me smiling, and that's what I was doing when a herd of tourists showed up.

“Got a song for us?” one of them asked.

I nodded. “This is for Smokey De Leon, a friend of mine,” I told them, and played the birthday song again. And when someone asked me for another song, I gave them an all-time tourist favorite, “When the Saints Come Marching In.” Then a Mozart piece, which as usual raised some eyebrows. I followed it with “Summertime” by Gershwin. They were impressed by my versatility, I could tell. By the time they left, my hat was brimming with bills. Quickly, I stowed them in my pouch.

"That Leblanc is 'bouta be mine," I told Shadow.

Shadow yelped.

Almost like a whisper, I heard someone calling out my name. There were people milling around and I searched their faces for someone I knew. Then, four times in a row, "Saint, Saint, Saint, Saint," each time louder, a girl's voice, until finally *she* stood right in front of me. "Saint!" she screeched. It was a girl from my class whose name is Jasmine Jupiter. Most people, including me, call her Judi, but some call her Star Girl because she knows two tons of stuff about astronomy. You know, planets, constellations of stars, even stuff about other galaxies. I'm kind of indebted to her because she helped me study for the planet test and even taught me how to remember them in their order from the sun—My Very Educated Mother Just Served Us No Pizza—Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, Pluto. Judi's latest thing is palm reading, which she swears can predict the future. Her skin and eyes are a pretty chocolate brown and her hair is always in braids. And somehow she's always showing up where I am.

"I'm not deaf, Judi."

Judi stared at me with that twinkle in her eyes she always has whenever we're alone. "Sorry."

It isn't breaking news that she likes me. She is way too obvious.

"What're you doing here?" she asked.

I held up my clarinet.

"Still trying to make money for that Leblanc?"

"Yeah. I only need another two hundred dollars," I informed her.

"Let's go, Jasmine!" someone yelled. It was her pops.

I waved hello.

"In a minute," she hollered, then sweetly commanded, "Lemme see your hand so I can read your palm."

Figuring it was just an excuse for her to touch me, I gave her my hand. At first she was smiling. Jupi looked extremely cutie-licious when she smiled. But suddenly, she frowned.

"What?"

"Nuthin'," she said softly.

I stared at my own palm like I knew what to look for. "Don't lie, Jupi. You saw somethin' . . . what?"

"I swear, it's nuthin'," she repeated. "Plus, you'll get mad."

What I saw in her eyes made me feel creepy, like the way I felt last Halloween when I snuck into the St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 after dark with some of my buds. I pleaded, "You can tell me . . . whatever it is. I promise not to get mad."

She held my hand again and blurted, "You have a very short life line."

"Which means?"

"You're probably not gonna live much longer."

I yanked my hand away. "Shut up, Judi! You dunno jack! I can't stand you!"

Judi hung her head. "Sorry, Saint," she whispered.

"You can leave . . . now," I ordered.

Shadow bared his teeth and growled at her.

"Sorry," she repeated, and headed to where her pops was waiting.

When she glanced back at me, which I knew she would, I gave her the evil eye. Jasmine Jupiter, Judi, Star Girl, whatever you want to call her had freaked me out.

I examined the lines on my palm closely and wondered which one was the life line. Bunch of black magic, voodoo, hocus-pocus, I told myself, remembering the stuff I'd heard my pops say about palm reading and fortune-tellers. Besides, if Smokey could live to be seventy-nine, so could I. Better yet, I'd live to be ninety-nine and hope Judi was still around so I could tell her, "Told ya you didn't know jack. What you gotta say now, Star Girl?"

A clump of tourists surrounded me, forcing me to stop fuming and get back to business. They looked like the sort that only wanted jazz, and that's exactly what I gave them. But while I was playing, I thought about having told Judi "I can't stand you." Well, there goes my lie for the day.

Its job almost done, the sun began to set. "C'mon, boy," I said, and headed toward home. Shadow wagged his tail happily and tagged along. The Mississippi River was quiet and I'd quit expecting a cool breeze hours ago. Even without the sun, it was still August hot.

My take for the day was ninety-eight dollars and some change, an all-time record. "If those still mimers hadn't shown up in the afternoon, I woulda made even more," I grumbled to Shadow. Even so, I was shining like a five-hundred-watt lightbulb inside and out.

Most Saturdays, I take a detour along Bourbon Street, watching the tourists, waving at some of the carriage drivers who know me, peeping into the bars, including the Jazz Shack that King Daddy Saint used to own, but today I decided to avoid the crowds in the Quarter. And as I made my way home, I tried to persuade myself to forget about Jupi's prediction. "What does she know, anyway?" I asked Shadow. Like he was agreeing, Shadow yelped.

By the time I passed Willie Mae's restaurant it was dusk, and I decided not to get the fries and lemonade I'd promised myself, but only because I didn't want to hear it from Mama if I came in after the streetlights came on. She has these special buttons I try not to push too often. Her *she's going to*

holler at me so long, I'll wish I didn't have ears buttons. Me coming home after dark was one of those buttons.

Thinking back to Jupi's prediction, I glanced at my palm and wondered who Mama'd fuss at if I was dead. Probably at me, for dying. Just a buncha hocus-pocus, I reminded myself.

Before I opened the door, I smelled the corn bread baking. Pops' car wasn't in the driveway, so I let Shadow follow me inside.

Mama peeked from the kitchen. "Thank you for gettin' in before dark."

I tipped my hat.

"How'd you do?" she asked.

"I only need a hundred and two more dollars," I told her proudly.

"That's terrific, Saint. Dinner's almost ready and your pops should be here soon, so you'd better feed Shadow in a hurry and put him outside, you hear?"

"I hear. Lemme put my stuff away first." My stuff included my money, which I keep in a makeshift safe inside a secret compartment in my closet. Only one other person in the cosmos knows about it—Money Lafayette. So if any bills ever turn up missing, I know exactly who to accuse.

But in case Jupi's right about this life line thing, maybe I

should leave Mama and Pops a note, I worried. It'd be a shame to leave this much cabbage to turn into dust. *Stoppit, Saint. Jupi doesn't know jack.*

Later that night, I was upstairs in my room playing video games when I heard noises coming from outside—someone crying loudly. I poked my head out the window. At first it was quiet, then suddenly more boohooing. Immediately, my ears locked in on the source, the Lafayettes' backyard. It was Money. I rushed downstairs, tiptoed past the living room where my parents were snuggled together watching a movie, and snuck outside. She was still blubbing.

Softly, I called from my side of the fence, "Money?"

She kept crying.

I tried her real name. "MonaLisa?"

The crying stopped but she didn't utter a word.

"You okay?" I asked, pulling the loose fence board we used to climb through aside so I could see her.

"Go away, Saint," she sniveled.

"Whatsa matter? Did someone die?"

"Yeah, me." She started wailing again.

Like an eel, I squeezed through the fence into her yard, half expecting her to make a beeline inside, but she stayed on the top back porch step, hunched over, sobbing away. Cautiously, I settled on the bottom step.

"You don't look dead to me," I told her. Some of me felt

sorry she was so upset, but most of me was glad she was talking to me again.

She wiped her snotty nose with her sleeve. "I may as well be."

"Are you sick?"

"No!" she blurted. "I'm 'bouta run away."

"Where to?"

"Anywhere."

"How come?" I asked. It was a question I kind of knew the answer to. She was still grounded.

"Cuz it's been eight months since . . . I still can't have no cell phone, no computer. When school starts again, Mama or Daddy gonna still be taking me to school and soon as the bell rings be picking me up like some kinda armored truck drivers."

When she said that, I started laughing because her name is Money. Get it? Armored trucks . . . money pickups.

She squinted her eyes. "You think that's funny?"

I shook my head. "No, definitely not funny."

"And all summer, my nana's been making me read the Bible to her for hours, claims she can't see the words. She needs to get some glasses and soon," she rambled.

"Oh."

"Yeah, oh. It's prison . . . like I'm under house arrest. May as well have one of those ankle things on. Juvie'd be better'n this. Can't go nowhere. Can't hardly talk to no one. All I got is can'ts."

"Oh," I repeated.

"That all you got to say, 'oh'?"

"No . . . I mean, eight months is a long time."

"Feels like eight years." She paused and started boohooing again. "Darius, the dude with the goatee, kicked me to the curb. Said he didn't have time for no little girl," she whimpered. "I ain't even got no friends no more."

"You got me," I told her, hoping it was true.

"You don't get it, do you, Saint?"

I shrugged.

"That clique was *all about the cool*."

"Kinda like me, right?" I said, attempting to make her smile.

It worked and she grinned. "Wrong."

"You sure?" I asked, inching up to the next step. "Cuz today I made almost a hundred dollars' worth of cool."

"Money don't make you cool."

"So what does?" I asked, and pushed myself up to the step where she was sitting.

"Cool is all 'bout how you talk, how you walk, how you dress, how you be."

"Like I said before . . . kinda like me."

Finally, Money laughed. "You so crazy, Saint." She leaned into me and rested her head against mine.

Us being together again felt like heaven, and if this wasn't heaven, it sure ought to be.

Out of the blue, she did something that totally amazed me. With one hand, she turned my face toward hers and kissed me on the cheek but almost on the mouth. Afterward, Money leaned her head back on mine. I took this to mean that we were on good terms, but right then I didn't feel like her play brother anymore. This new feeling like a gazillion fluttering fireflies had gotten inside of me. Silently I wished she would kiss me again—this time square on the mouth. Only she didn't. She just said, "And stop callin' me Money, okay?"

"Okay."

Like a tree, I was still planted there when Shadow showed up, wriggled into her yard, pranced up the steps, and began licking our faces. We were doing some crazy giggling when Shadow let loose one of his famous killer farts—farts worse than someone who'd just finished off two plates of red beans and rice.

Money held her nose. "Pee-yuu!"

"Maybe we should have named him Fart," I said.

"For real," she replied.

And that night, before I fell asleep, I decided that even with Judi's palm-reading nonsense, August 20, 2005, Smokey De Leon's birthday, had turned into a day that was better than any birthday I'd ever had. It was the absolute best day of my life. The absolute best.



IN THE PALM OF MY HAND

Sleep had won and the sun had snuck up on me. I rubbed my eyes and stretched.

"You still in bed, Saint?" Pops asked. He was standing in my doorway, dressed for church.

"Gonna be late for mass!" Mama hollered. "You know how I feel about being late for mass!"

"Better get a move on," Pops warned.

I shot past him into the bathroom.

"Don't some people die in their sleep?" I asked my parents as we drove. I'd started a mental list of possible ways I might bump into Mr. Death.

"Some," Pops answered. "Why?"

"Just wondering."

"Oh," he replied.

"Can love really make you sick?"

"What?" Pops asked.

"You know, lovesick," I explained.

Mama chuckled. "It's just a saying."

"That's good," I said, then asked, "But if a person had an incurable disease, they'd know, right?"

"Maybe," Mama answered.

"And suppose someone was going to be in an accident. Do you think they'd have a . . . what's it called—a premo—?"

Suddenly Pops took his eyes off the road and glanced around at me. "A premonition?" Ahead, the stoplight turned yellow, then red. Pops screeched to a stop.

"You need to drive more carefully! You could kill somebody!" I blurted loudly.

"What's wrong, Saint?" Mama asked, and touched my forehead with her hand, checking to see if I had a fever. "You feeling okay?"

"Yeah, I'm cool."

"Then why all these questions?"

"Just curious."

She stared into my eyes and raised one eyebrow like she didn't believe me.

For the next few blocks I didn't say a word. Then, as we were turning into the church parking lot, I saw a guy who looked like he was homeless holding a sign with printed words that said THE END IS NEAR—REPENT. He looked right at me and grinned.

I gasped and made the sign of the cross.

And as if I was truly jinxed, we wound up sitting in a pew right behind Jupi, her two big-head younger brothers, and her parents. With smiling faces, they turned and greeted us.

"None of us know how much time we have left on this earth," Father Collins preached from the pulpit.

Huh?

"None of us," he repeated.

Except for me, Saint Louis Armstrong Beach, who, according to Jasmine Jupiter, will sometime in the very near future croak!

The priest continued, "Therefore, we would be wise to make good use of our time in this world."

After a few more minutes of his boring words of wisdom, my mind dissolved into nothingness—a clear plastic bag of air. And the next thing I knew, the congregation was on its feet and folks were reaching toward my hand, saying, "Peace be with you."

Jupi extended her hand to me. "Peace be with you, Saint."

I slipped my hand into my pocket and scowled at her. *Kiss my donkey.*

. . .
“Sorry, Saint,” Jupi whispered as I stood in the doughnut line in the church basement after mass.

“You ain’t got nuthin’ to be sorry for,” I told her.

“Why?”

“Cuz I’ve got big plans for the future and I’m gonna live to be a hundred, maybe a hundred and ten,” I said confidently.

“You could,” she agreed.

If she was trying to turn me into a nutcase, she was doing a good job. “Didn’t you just tell me yesterday that I was ’bout to bite the dust?”

“Maybe I was wrong. Meet me at the library tomorrow at ten o’clock on the dot.”

“For what?”

“I bet they have better books on palm reading than the really old one I found at my auntie’s house. They have books about everything.”

If Jupi really was wrong, I needed to know so I could stop worrying. “What library?”

“The one on Loyola between Tulane and Gravier.”

“Okay,” I said, and took a chomp out of my doughnut.

The next morning, Mr. Lafayette was outside, watering his (as he calls it) hopeless grass. Mondays were his day off. “Hard to keep anything green in this heat.”

"I spoze."

"Where you headin' in such a hurry, Saint?" Sometimes he liked to talk and this was one of those sometimes.

"To the library."

Just then, Money opened their screen door and waved. "Hey, Saint."

I halted and gave her my cool-little-brother-head-tilted-to-the-side nod. "Hey, MonaLisa." I'd practiced saying it over and over last night, hoping I wouldn't screw up.

"Where you goin'?" she asked.

"To the library," her pops answered.

In a flash, she was standing in front of her pops. "Can I go?" she begged. "Pleeeeeeze?"

The look on his face had me convinced the word *no* was about to come out of his mouth, but probably because most parents want their kids to hang out in libraries, he instead said, "To the library and nowhere else, y'all promise."

We gave our word and vamoosed.

MonaLisa was what my grandma in Baton Rouge calls tickled pink. She tugged my arm. "Let's go to Willie Mae's."

"No . . . I gotta be at the library by ten. Plus, if anyone sees you there, you'll be sentenced for life." I sped up.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah . . . you're right." She paused, then asked, "Why're you goin' to the library?"

"For a book—about palm reading."

By the time we got there, I'd told her the whole story.

"Tell me you don't believe in that booty cheddar."

"Booty cheddar?"

"Crap."

"Not really."

"Then why are we here?"

I shrugged.

Jupi was waiting out front.

"Hi, MonaLisa," Jupi said with a squint that let me know she wished I'd come alone.

"Hey, Jupi."

"I got here early and already looked at some books. It's not as simple as I thought."

"It's a buncha booty cheddar," MonaLisa blurted.

Jupi's eyes jumped from MonaLisa to me. "Huh?"

I interpreted. "Crap."

"Maybe so, maybe not," Jupi replied.

"And by the way, Jupi—isn't it 'bout time you made everyone call you Jasmine?" MonaLisa asked.

Jupi twisted her mouth. "I dunno. C'mon."

We tagged along behind her up the stairs. "There are lots of books." Jupi opened one and pointed. "The name for all this stuff is palmistry, and the people who practice it are called palmists. Look, this picture shows hand shapes. There are four kinds, earth, air, water, and fire."

"Sounds just like astrology. God's gonna send both a y'all straight to hell," MonaLisa scolded.

Jupi chewed at her nails. "We're just learnin'. No sin in that."

"Yeah," I agreed as I studied a diagram of the palm lines in one of the other books. Instantly, I zeroed in on the one called the life line and matched it to mine. Jupi was right; my life line was short, real short. I gasped and sank to the floor.

"Gimme that!" MonaLisa demanded, and yanked the book from my hand. I was in a daze. Minutes passed. "Told y'all this was nuthin' but nonsense. It says right here . . . 'The length of the life line isn't linked to how long a person will live.'"

I sprang to my feet. "Show me . . . where?"

"Right here. It says a long time ago palmists used to believe that, but they don't anymore."

Like a speed reader, I scanned the paragraph, then belly laughed. "That's exactly what it says!" I proclaimed loudly.

Jupi smiled shyly, rested her hand on my shoulder, and gazed into my eyes. "I told you my auntie's book was really old." She paused and her eyes twinkled. "And for once I'm really glad I was wrong."

"Now can we go to the teen section and look at some real

books or magazines even?" And like a snake, MonaLisa slithered away.

Quickly, Judi and I placed the books back on the shelves and strode after her.

It was just after noon when Judi's pops picked her up.

"You ready to bounce?" MonaLisa asked me.

"Yeah, let's roll."

"She's cute," MonaLisa remarked as we strolled.

I knew exactly who she was talking about, but I still asked, "Who?"

"Judi."

"I know."

MonaLisa poked my shoulder. "Plus, she's diggin' on you," she teased.

"Yeah, I know."

"A lot."

I chuckled.

"I'm comin' back to St. Anne's for eighth grade. My mama 'n' daddy are makin' me," she said matter-of-factly.

To music only I could hear, I started doing the Saint Louis Armstrong Beach boogie, a little hip-hop mixed with my famous pop-locking.

"Stoppit, Saint! You look too stooo-pid."

But I was in a groove and I kept dancing until I accidentally brushed against her. Suddenly, those gazillion fireflies got inside me again. I remembered Saturday's almost-real kiss and shivered. Love?

When we got home, Mr. Lafayette was still working in his yard, clipping his hedges. His face, back, and armpits were drenched with sweat. He wiped his forehead. "So, where's the library books?" he asked.

"We were just doing research," MonaLisa replied.

Right away, that look that gets on grown-ups' faces when they think you're lying got on his. He asked three questions. "Research? In the summertime? On what?"

Without a thought, I answered, "Palm reading."

Then another grown-up look got on his face, the one that makes you think you said something in a foreign language. "Oh" was all he said.

The question-answer thing seemed over.

"Me and Saint are goin' inside to make a sandwich, okay?"

He nodded and inquired, "Palm reading?"

MonaLisa rolled her eyes and blurted, "Saint has a short life line, so he thought he was gonna die, but we found out he isn't. Can we go now?"

"Yeah. And if y'all make tuna, don't use too much mayonnaise and save some for me."

MonaLisa squinted shiftily. "I could make you some lemonade, Daddy," she offered. I could tell she was trying hard to get off punishment for good.

But Mr. Lafayette was smart and he gave her that other grown-up face that says *I'm not as stupid as you think*. "Lemonade would be nice . . . not too sweet."

"I know."

Of course, I was given the job of lemon picker and squeezer.

"Use the strainer to make sure there's no seeds. He hates that," she bossed.

But I didn't care. I'd squeeze a whole treeful of lemons if she asked me.

She put the sandwich, lemonade, and a plate of cookies on a fancy tray and brought it to her pops. "Am I still on lockdown?"

Mr. Lafayette grinned. "Don't seem like lockdown to me. Y'all went to the library and Saint's here. Don't push your luck, Miz Money."

I waited for a comeback but there wasn't one. She'd let him get away with calling her Money.

In a little-girl voice she asked, "Can I have my computer?"

He took a sip of lemonade. "Ask your mama when she gets home."

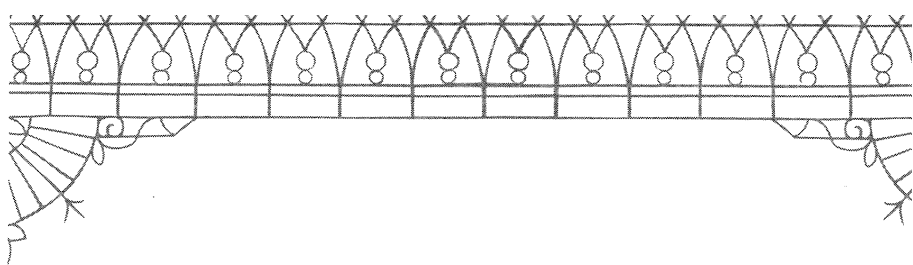
"What about my cell?"

"Ask your mama. . . . Did y'all clean up behind yourselves?"

“We will . . . then can I at least go over to Saint’s house?”

When her dad said no, MonaLisa scowled and stormed into her house. I was right behind her. She must have cussed for ten minutes straight.

The next day, she was shipped off to her nana’s house again, I supposed for more Bible reading. Mrs. Lafayette was one tough warden. The lockdown continued.



HURRY-CANE

One hand was on the front doorknob and my clarinet was in the other when Pops asked, “Where you headin’?”

“To Moon Walk, maybe the Quarter. I almost have enough to buy the new clarinet.”

“Not today, Saint.”

“How come?”

“Storm supposed to hit the Florida coast.”

“This ain’t Florida.”

“Might change course is what I’m hearin’. Most big storms seem to have minds of their own.”

“A hurry-cane?” I asked, saying the word the way I had when I was little.

“Tropical storm. . . Katrina.”

Remembering last year's Hurricane Ivan and the seven hours it took for us to travel eighty miles to my grandma's house in Baton Rouge, I sighed. "Tell me we're not gonna have to evacuate again."

"I dunno. But what I do know is that your mama'll have nine kinds of fits if I let you outta my sight. Later we'll go on over to Lil Dizzy's for some lunch and I'll drop you off at the hospital with your mama on my way to work. Those are my orders."

"Dang!"

Pops raised an eyebrow.

"I said *dang*."

He gave me his *be careful Saint* stare.

"Can I at least go outside?"

"Yep."

I opened the door and scanned the sky. Except for a single straggly cloud, it was clear and bright blue. Meteorologists can be wrong, I thought. But just in case, I dashed upstairs to find my list.

Saint Louis Armstrong Beach's Evacuation List

1. My clarinet
2. My money
3. My computer

4. The 18K gold engraved cuff links and tie clip
King Daddy Saint left me
5. My video games
6. Shadow
7. Extra boxer shorts

During the Ivan evacuation we'd been in such a rush that I'd forgotten some very important things. Plus, Mama had the car so stuffed that there was barely a spot for me, let alone my clarinet and computer. So after Ivan I'd made the list and strategically figured out a way to arrange everything in one of those plastic storage boxes—everything but Shadow, of course.

It had taken two bucketfuls of tears to get Pops to agree to bring him with us, and even though I'd found Shadow with time to spare, for some reason I couldn't get him to follow me. So I had to leave him. But as soon as we returned home after Ivan, I'd bought a leash and collar. That way, if we ever had to evacuate again, I'd be the boss of Mr. Shadow. I dragged the storage box out of my closet. The leash and collar were still inside.

I went to my computer and typed in the words *Tropical Storm Katrina*. There it was. A tropical depression had turned into Tropical Storm Katrina near the Bahamas.

Hurricane warnings had been issued for southeastern Florida. If it turns north and west, as some were predicting, Katrina might hit Mississippi and Louisiana.

Pops came in and stood over my shoulder, staring at the monitor.

"We could get lucky. Maybe it'll fizzle before it has a chance to gather enough energy to do much damage."

"I got my fingers crossed that it doesn't reach New Orleans."

"Get your things ready today just in case, Saint," he ordered.

"What about Shadow?" If he said no, I was prepared to whine, blubber, and snivel.

But without any hesitation he replied matter-of-factly, "Okay."

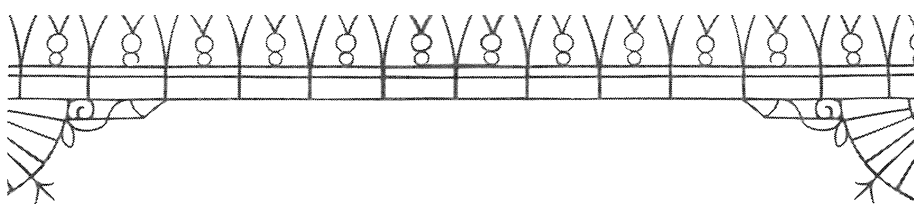
"For real?"

"For real," he echoed.

"Thanks, Pops," I said as I whipped around in my chair, but lickety-split he was out of the room. Something smelled fishy. That was way too easy. I didn't even have to use my pitiful look. He's probably betting on a repeat of last year. Trying to outlick me, huh? I glanced at the storage box and chuckled. The collar and leash would remain my secret. Still, I needed a plan of action to make sure Shadow would be around. In no time at all I had one, but I needed a sneaky accomplice—MonaLisa, of course.

Our garage has a classic 1956 Chevy inside that Pops has been working on for as long as I can remember. His *project*, he calls it. *Heap of junk* is Mama's name for it. Every other inch of space is taken up by bits of this and that. Stuff we might use someday. But MonaLisa's garage is always empty. Pops claims it's because they like to keep their expensive cars outside for everyone to notice. I don't care. An empty garage spells temporary doghouse.

Today, I thought, as soon as I get home with Mama, I'm heading to MonaLisa's house pronto. She has to help me. After all, I am her only friend while she's on lockdown.



THE PLAN

1. Find Shadow today.
2. Use the collar and leash to capture him.
3. Put him in MonaLisa's garage with his food and water.
4. Walk him twice a day so he can poop.

That way, if we did have to evacuate, I'd know exactly where Shadow was. I had it all figured out.

Of course, as with almost every tricky scheme, there was a flaw. MonaLisa said yes. I found Shadow. And with food and water, we hid him in her garage. Where he barked all—night—long.

The next morning, when the doorbell rang at 6:00 A.M., no one had to tell me who it was: Miz Lafayette.

All I heard her say was, "Take this animal."

Then I heard Pops apologize.
Then I heard the door close.
And then I heard, "Saint!"
I'd forgotten one thing, a muzzle.
"Sorry, but I knew you wouldn't let him stay here."
"You're right. Darn dog barks all night."
"His name's Shadow," I reminded him.
"Folks gotta get some sleep."
"If we let him stay inside, he might not bark." We both
knew it was a lie.
And so, as I let Shadow off the leash to roam, I lost a small
battle. But the war wasn't over.

Problems to Solve

1. How to get a muzzle.
2. Where to keep Shadow.

Instantly, I had the answer to number one. When Pops dropped me off at Mama's work, I'd take a quick detour to the pet store that was right around the corner. Now for problem number two. For the next few minutes the circuits in my brain worked hard until I finally got it the answer—old Miz Moran, the neighborhood animal lover. She always puts food out for stray cats and she loves her some Shadow.

"Okay if I go see how Miz Moran's doin'? See if she needs

some help?" I asked Pops. Helping old people is only one of many ways to build a parent's pride.

As expected, Pops' eyes beamed that *I'm so glad you're my son* look. "Sure."

"Thanks, Pops." I grinned and scurried to Miz Moran's.

"Hey, Miz Moran. Came to see if you need any help packing in case we have to evacuate."

"I'll tell you the same dang thing I told my daughter this mornin'. I ain't goin' nowheres. Me and everythin' I own is stayin' right here. Watched 'em build them levees 'long Pontchartrain after that storm in '47. Hurricane cain't scare me. Lived through Betsy. After that, they built them levees up to twelve feet. Only evacuated once for Cah-mille becuz my mister made me. And even that one turned and missed New Orleans. B'sides, won't be long b'fore they put me in the ground no way. So you g'on back home and tell your daddy it's very nice of him to send you over here, but I ain't budgin'." She balled up her fist and shook it at me like she was prepared to fight. She was mad.

"No one sent me. I came on my own."

Her face changed and she gave me the *you are such a nice young man* gaze.

If I hadn't been doing this for a good cause, I would have felt like a crumb.

"You hungry, Saint?" she asked. "Got some crab cakes I could heat up, and fruit punch."

I licked my lips. Crab cakes, it was the least I could do.

"Takes a while for my old oven to heat."

"Don't you have a microwave?" I asked.

She pointed to an unopened box in the corner of her front room that said MICROWAVE OVEN. "Been sittin' there for years. Got no use for none a that. Woulda gived it to the Goodwill but it was a Christmas present from my daughter."

While Miz Moran fiddled in the kitchen, I looked around. Though I'd been inside her house more than a few times, it felt like I'd never really seen it. I scanned her wall of mostly old black-and-white photographs and landed on one of a smiling couple on their wedding day. It had to be Mr. and Miz Moran.

She peeked from the kitchen. "The one next to that is me and my sis, MiMi, at one of the Mardi Gras balls. Lord, we used to have us some good times during Mardi Gras."

"Yeah, Mardi Gras is fun," I agreed.

"It ain't nuthin' like it was back then. Mardi Gras was somethin' you planned for. All the balls. The dresses. Lord, it was wonderful."

Usually I hate it when old people start to talk about the good ole days, but today with Miz Moran I let it slide.

I was washing down my third crab cake with punch when

I decided to come clean. "I didn't really come over here to help you pack."

"You don't say."

"I came to ask you for a favor."

She didn't seem surprised. "That so?"

"Thank you, Miz Moran," I told her a half hour later as I hovered at her front door. Problem number two was solved. "Soon as I get the muzzle and find Shadow, I'll bring him over."

As usual, she wagged her finger. "Be good as a saint now, you hear?"

"I hear."

"And you welcome to stop by anytime to visit and have a li'l bite to eat. Old folks gets lonely."

"I will," I said, then I headed home. And when I glanced back, she was still on her porch, looking after me. If Hurricane Katrina did come and we were ordered to evacuate New Orleans, I hoped she'd change her mind.

As soon as I got home, Pops ordered me to the car. "Gonna drop you off with your mama before I head to the restaurant."

I needed cash for the muzzle. "Can I at least go to the bathroom?"

"Be quick."

Because the Leblanc was almost mine, I really didn't want

to spend any money, but I had no choice. I had no clue how much a muzzle cost, so I took five twenties from my safe, snatched my duffel bag, and scrambled.

"So Miz Moran's gonna evacuate this time, huh?" Pops inquired as we drove.

"Nope," I replied. "Said she wasn't goin' anywhere."

"Then what were you doin' there so long?"

"She made some crab cakes."

"Were they good?"

I rubbed my stomach. "You know it."

Pops and I joined in laughter.

"Traffic's starting to get heavy," he noted. "Lotsa folks are already leavin' the city, just in case."

"But the levees'll keep most of the water out, won't they?"

Pops sighed. "Hope so."

He dropped me off in front of the hospital. "Your mama's in the cafeteria waitin' on you," he said, and sped off.

As soon as he turned the corner, I made a beeline to the pet store. And minutes later, when I greeted Mama, the muzzle was in my duffel bag and I was grinning.

"You look happy," she remarked.

"I am."

The rest of the day was spent trailing her from place to place, sitting in on a boring meeting where people in charge of the hospital were reviewing the hurricane preparedness

plan. Mama called these *if* meetings. *If* this happens, then we do this, or *if* that happens, we do that. They seemed to have it all together, but some had worried faces.

"There's nothing to be concerned about. Remember Ivan?" some doctor commented.

Heads nodded.

"Yeah," I agreed. "We went to Baton Rouge for nuthin'."

Eyes flew to Mama, who quickly glared at me and pressed a finger to her lips, telling me to hush.

"Sorry," I said.

Mama's cell phone rang as soon as we got home. "What now?" she asked.

I figured it was the hospital.

"Yes," she said, and paused while the other person talked.

"The patients in the ICU, of course," she answered.

"Can I go to MonaLisa's?" I mouthed and gestured.

"Yes," she mouthed back.

My belief that the best time to try to get away with stuff is when parents have their minds on other things had been confirmed twice today.

"You gonna evacuate if they tell us to?" I asked MonaLisa as we searched Tremé for Shadow.

"We're leavin' tomorrow for Los Angeles to go to my auntie's wedding. Spozed to fly back Monday. But if they evacu-

ate, we'll stay there till whenever. Y'all goin' to Baton Rouge again?"

"Pro'bly, if they make us."

"Shadow!" she shouted. "Here, boy!"

"Here, boy!" I repeated, and whistled as loud as I could. Still no Shadow.

"My daddy said he's sick of this hurricane mess. We might move to Houston if he can find a good job there."

"Texas?" I asked.

"What other kinda Houston you know?"

"But you can't."

"Why not?"

"B-be-cause," I stammered, then mumbled my pops' words, "because ain't no place like New Orleans."

"For real, huh?"

That was when Shadow, tail wagging, acting like he didn't have a care in the world, found us. Before long we had him on the leash and at dusk deposited him at Miz Moran's.

Her television was blaring with hurricane news. "These weather people sure like to make a fuss, don't they?"

The forecasters were now claiming Katrina might be a major hurricane.

"Sure like to make a fuss," Miz Moran said again.



A JUST-IN-CASE DAY

“Saint!”

I opened my eyes. It was barely morning. I must be dreaming, I thought, until I heard it again, coming from the front yard.

“Saint!” I knew the voice—MonaLisa. I bolted out of bed, practically bounced down the stairs, and stepped outside in my pj’s.

“Hey,” she said. “Sorry if I woke you up.”

“No you’re not.”

“You’re right, I’m not.”

“Whatsa matter?”

“Nuthin’. We’re leavin’ for the airport. I wanted to say good-bye.”

"You're comin' back Monday, right?"

"Depends on the hurricane. Some people died in Florida, and they're pretty sure it's comin' this way. My daddy boarded up last night, just in case."

I looked up. The sky was still that beginning-of-the-day gray color.

From his shiny white Escalade, Mr. Lafayette honked and motioned for MonaLisa to come. "Gotta go," she said, and kissed me on the cheek. The fireflies inside me were suddenly wide-awake.

"Mornin', Saint! We're goin' to Los Angeles! My sister's big wedding at the Ritz-Carlton!" Miz Lafayette yelled.

I waved.

MonaLisa grimaced. "She has the biggest mouth on earth. Wants everyone in the neighborhood to know."

I laughed.

"See ya Monday," MonaLisa said, and added, "I hope."

"Me too."

Seconds later they were gone, and I headed to my room to catch the z's that got away.

My head had just hit the pillow when Mama came in and tapped my shoulder. "Saint."

"Huh?"

"Get up and get dressed."

"No, I wanna sleep," I moaned.

"Need you to come to work with me."

I yawned and pulled the covers over my head. "Again? I don't wanna."

"No choice, young man."

Young man? Those were her *I'm serious* words.

"So get up and get dressed now. We have to find other hospitals to send our patients to if they decide to evacuate New Orleans," she explained.

"All right."

We were in the car when it finally occurred to me. "Where's Pops?"

"At the restaurant. He'll be by to pick you up at lunchtime."

For the rest of the drive, Mama was the way she gets when she has too much on her mind—quiet. And when we got to the hospital, I understood why. It was the opposite of calm.

Like a third-grader, I was led to the cafeteria. "You need money for breakfast?" she asked.

I nodded.

She slipped me a twenty. "Eat and plant yourself right here."

"Okay."

"I mean it, Saint," she commanded, then bounded off to problem solve.

It was buffet style and I got scrambled eggs, sausage, bacon,

hash browns, grits, toast, milk, orange juice, and hot chocolate. "Hungry, huh?" the cashier asked.

The answer to the question was obvious, so I just grinned.

I was checking out the room for an empty table when I saw my friend, the man of the flute, Smokey De Leon. He was busy with a plate of food.

"Hey, Smokey."

He glanced up and chuckled when he saw the mountain of food on my tray. "So you learned my secret?"

"Secret?"

"A heap of food on the cheap. Hospitals got plenty of it. Have a seat, buddy."

"My mama works here," I explained as I slid into a chair.

"Think you told me that once . . . I think." He shoveled a forkful into his mouth. "She's some kind of—"

"Social worker," I reminded him.

He stared at the television that was mounted to the ceiling. Hurricane news blared. "As long as the levees don't get breached, it should be fine."

"You gonna leave if they tell us to?"

"Yes indeed. I'm old, not stupid, Mister Saint. Got a daughter in Atlanta with a big house. Me and my tribe plan to head there if need be."

Smokey must have been a mind reader, because just as I was getting ready to brag about how much I'd saved for the

Leblanc, he asked, "How's that money comin' along for that L1020?"

Taking into account what I'd spent on the muzzle, I was still close to my goal. "I'm just 'bout ready to call it mine."

"Good, cuz I got it right here for you. Been carryin' it around for a couple days, hopin' I'd run into you. Never thought it'd be here." Smokey lifted a clarinet case from the floor and laid it on the table.

"But I don't have all the money yet," I said.

Smokey smiled slyly. "Paid in full is what I was told."

"But—"

"You got a birthday comin' up, don't you?"

"Yeah. I'll be twelve," I replied.

"Consider it an early birthday gift from me to you." He slid the case toward me.

"You bought it for me? Are you kiddin'? That's a lot of money, Smokey."

"Don't you worry. I've been, shall we say, frugal."

My eyes got watery.

He patted the case. "What you waitin' on? . . . Open it up."

I put down my fork and flipped open the case. There it was, a beautiful Leblanc L1020 Step-Up Pro clarinet. "It's really mine?"

"Yessiree."

"Thank you, Smokey. I'll pay you back."

"That won't be necessary, unless the definition of 'gift' somehow changed overnight."

Hurriedly, I put on the mouthpiece and played some scales. It was more than perfect. Suddenly I was on my feet, doing the Saint Louis Armstrong Beach boogie. Every eye in the cafeteria was on me. When I finished, some folks, including Smokey, applauded. I bowed and sat down.

"You should eat b'fore your food gets cold," Smokey said.

But right then I wasn't interested in food. Carefully, I ran my fingers over the Leblanc and sighed. There might be a hurricane coming, I thought, but to me this was one spectacular day.

Smokey glanced at his watch. "Well, Saint, I spoze something called destiny brought us together today, but I promised my son I'd be home where he can find me, just in case New Orleans comes under siege and we are forced to once again retreat. I hope to see you sometime soon." His gray eyes stared into mine. "You take good care of that instrument."

"You know I will," I told him. I stood up and gave him a big hug. "Thanks, Smokey."

"My pleasure," he replied, and with that, he put on his derby and was out the door.

For safekeeping, I rested the case in my lap, then got back to the business of food.

Obedying Mama's order to stay planted wasn't easy, but I

did. And from the cafeteria TV I learned a bunch of stuff about hurricanes, and Louisiana, the Pelican State.

Stuff I Didn't Know About Hurricanes

- A. Over the past 150 years, 49 hurricanes have struck Louisiana.
- B. The intensity of a hurricane is measured by something called the Saffir-Simpson scale. It goes from 1 to 5, and 5 is the worst.
- C. The weight of a single cubic yard of water is equal to 1700 pounds. WOW!
- D. The chance of Hurricane Katrina hitting New Orleans head-on was calculated today to be only 17 percent.

I'm no math genius, but 17 percent didn't sound like we had much to worry about, so I gave up watching TV and decided to unplant myself and do some hospital snooping. Besides, my butt was getting sore from sitting so long. I grabbed my instrument and headed to the corridor.

Of course, who did I immediately run into? "Thought I told you to stay planted," Mama said sternly.

Lucky for me, the restroom was close by. "I have to pee." My white lie for the day.

"Excuse me?"

"I have to go to the restroom."

Mama pointed at the bathroom door. "Go," she ordered.

"Can you hold this for me?" I asked, offering her the clarinet.

Her face turned into a question mark. "Did you have this with you this morning?"

"Nope."

"Did your pops bring it to you?"

"Nope." I was having fun messing with her mind, wondering how many more questions she'd ask before she got mad.

But right then, someone said her name over the loud-speaker, "Mercedes Beach, call 4443 . . . Mercedes Beach, call 4443," so she was saved.

"Go to the restroom and then straight back to the cafeteria, or you can come sit in my office with me."

"Can I use the computer?"

"Yes."

"Your office," I decided. Mama was hardly ever in her office. I'd have it all to myself—sweet. I trailed her. And as expected, she was immediately called away.

Before anything else, I took out the Leblanc again and played a few songs. Next, I turned on the computer, but soon I got drowsy, so I curled up on the sofa and crashed, making up for this morning's subtracted z's.

I awoke to Pops standing over me. I yawned and stretched. "Is it lunchtime already?"

"Not yet. But they decided to close the restaurant." His eyes shifted to the new clarinet. "Where'd that come from?"

The Leblanc was cradled in my arms like a baby.

"It's the one I've been saving for. Smokey gave it to me as a gift."

"Gave it to you? Why?"

"He said it was an early birthday present."

"That's an expensive present."

"Stop worrying, Pops, he's not a weirdo or nuthin'. Smokey and me are all about music. It's our destiny. He's like a grandpa."

That seemed to calm him down.

"Okay. C'mon, we need to pack."

As we drove, we shot the breeze.

"Is evacuation mandatory?" *Mandatory* is a word I'd learned this morning from the TV newscasters. It means people have to do something or else.

"Not yet, but it's not lookin' good. We need to be ready just in case."

"But there's only a seventeen percent chance," I argued.

"Of a *direct* hit," Pops said.

"When are we leaving?"

"Very early tomorrow, possibly late tonight. Depends on

your mama. You know how she is. Won't wanna leave unless she's certain the patients are gonna be well taken care of. I might have to drag her away from there."

"We goin' to Gramma's again?"

"Where else. . . . Some folks are stocking up on water and canned goods at the supermarkets," he mentioned as we passed a grocery store.

"Why're they doin' that? If Mayor Nagin tells us to get in our cars to leave, then we have to, right?"

"Some folks don't have cars, Saint."

"Then they could take a bus or a train or a plane, even."

"To where? Some folks got nowhere to go."

"They could go to another city and stay in a hotel." Like Mama, I was trying to problem solve.

"And who's gonna pay for that? Some people got no jobs, others got no money, and when I say no money . . . I mean *no* money. Some people got nuthin' except the clothes on their backs, Saint."

"Money's real important, huh?"

"Yep, but what you do with it is even more important. Most a the people who claim money's not important are folks who have plenty of it. You remember that."

"Smokey said he's been frugal. What's that mean?"

"Means he hasn't wasted his money."

"I've been frugal too," I proclaimed. "And now I have all that money I'd been saving for the clarinet."

"Keep savin', got college to think about."

"That's right, Pops. Juilliard," I reminded him.

"You always had the music in you, even before you could walk. Guess it's right us being here in New Orleans . . . music everywhere. King Daddy Saint . . . he had the music too. He'd sure be proud of you."

My grin was ear to ear.

As I packed, I checked off my list. Then I got to number six—Shadow. Without even asking, I left the house and sped to Miz Moran's. She was, of course, sitting on her porch.

"I came for Shadow," I panted.

"Got loose."

This can't be true. "How?"

She shrugged. "Don't know. Had him on the leash hooked to a tree. Only-est thing I could figure is someone musta come into my yard while I was on the toilet and let him go. I am truly sorry." She handed me a paper bag.

"What's this?" I asked.

"The muzzle, leash, and leftover dog food."

No way, I thought, after all my planning and scheming. There were only two words to describe the situation, as MonaLisa would say—booty cheddar. Shadow had managed

to get away and I somehow knew that he hadn't needed any help. "I give up."

"You'll find him. I just know it," she said hopefully. "You hurry home now."

"You changed your mind about evacuating?" I asked.

"Nosiree."

"But . . . ?"

Miz Moran patted my shoulder. "Bye, Mister Saint."

"Bye, Miz Moran." I hung my head and plodded home.

The look on my face must have shown exactly how I felt—sadly defeated—because Pops patted my shoulder like he felt sorry for me. "Don't worry. Unless they evacuate New Orleans, she'll be back on Monday."

"Who?"

"MonaLisa. Isn't her being gone the reason for the long face?"

I burst out laughing. Here I was starting to think I was grown when deep down inside I was still just a kid who was a lot more worried about a dog than any girl.

Then I heard *him* outside the door, yelping. "Shadow!" I hollered. I butted the screen open. He jumped against me so hard that I fell.

Quickly, Pops put two and two together. "He's why you were upset, huh? Not MonaLisa."

"Yes."

"If that dang dog means that much to you, Saint, he can stay in your room. But if he starts that barkin', he's outta here. You understand?" he added.

"I understand, and thanks, Pops. He won't bark, I promise."

"You finished packin'?"

"Only one more thing," I assured him.

"Get a move on."

"We gonna load the car?" I inquired as I trotted upstairs.

"And put out a welcome sign to thieves? No. We'll leave everything near the back door." Pops glanced at the mantel clock. It was way past lunchtime. "You hungry?" he asked.

The breakfast I'd eaten had been more than enough to feed most people for an entire day, but not me. "Always."

He grinned and headed to the kitchen. "Must be storin' up for your growth spurt. Fish sound good?"

"Very good."

"After lunch we'll get the plywood outta the garage. You can help me board up the windows just in case."

That he asked me to help didn't surprise me because lately Pops has been treating me kind of different. "Startin' seventh grade," he keeps reminding me.

I'm not sure what crossing the line into seventh grade means to adults, but I sure know what it means to me. Seventh grade is the beginning of cool.

In my room, Shadow tried to squirm into the closet with me, but there wasn't enough space, so I pushed him out. "Cut it out." He nuzzled my back and I fell forward. "Stop it!"

Shadow stuck his snout in the air and howled long and loud.

"Saint!" Pops yelled longer and louder.

I grabbed my money box and dashed to the top of the stairwell. "It was a howl, not a bark!" I hollered.

Pops laughed.

Once downstairs, I gave Shadow a bowl of water and some food. When he finished, I put the muzzle on him. At the sight of that, Pops got wide-eyed and asked, "Where'd you get that from?"

"I have my sources," I confided slyly as I sat down to eat.

He smiled and knuckle rubbed my head. "Love you, boy."

"Love you too," I repeated, and dug into the food.

That afternoon, as Pops and I boarded up our windows, the sound of nails hitting plywood echoed all over Tremé.

On the other side of us, Mr. Quinn, a pharmacist, was busily boarding up his house. He grinned and waved at us with his hammer. And directly across the street at the Tiberons', jazz blasted over the noise of their buzzing saw.

"Katrina. I never heard that name before," I commented to Pops.

"Kinda pretty, isn't it?"

I agreed.

Pops wiped sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. "Hope to God this Katrina doesn't do much harm."

"Me too."

I handed Pops another nail, then glanced at my palm. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't put the creepy life line stuff out of my head. Being an only child was something I'd pretty much gotten used to and I hadn't thought about having a brother or sister for a while. "You and Mama still wanna have another kid?" I asked.

"Yep, but so far no luck."

"Luck can change, right?"

Pops chuckled. "Been a long time since we had this conversation—thought you'd decided you kinda liked havin' me and your mama all to yourself."

"Kinda—but lately I've been thinkin' y'all really should have another kid."

"It's still on my to-do list. What you want this time, a sister or a brother?"

"Doesn't matter."

Pops rested the hammer at his side and stared at me. "What's wrong, Saint, you lonely?"

I shrugged.

When he hugged me to his chest, tears got in my eyes.

. . .

We'd nailed the last board and Shadow and I were headed inside when Pops informed me that we had more work to do.

"What?"

"Gonna board up Miz Moran's house for her."

"Miz Moran told me she's not evacuating no matter what."

"We'll see about that too."

Tools in hand, we carted the wood to Miz Moran's house. As expected, she was on her porch and met us with a frown.

"What's that for?" she asked.

"You know dang well what it's for." Pops didn't give her time to object. "You got a ladder, Miz Moran?"

"I might."

Pops grinned. "Where is it?"

"Where are most folks' ladders?"

"In the garage," I answered.

Miz Moran smirked. "Smart child you got there, Valentine." She paused, then continued, "I ran my son-in-law off last night when he came to board me up, but judgin' by the look in your eyes, I spoze there ain't nuthin' I can say to get you to go on home and leave me be."

"Spoze there isn't," Pops replied, and headed to the garage.

We were almost halfway through when Perry Tiberon came over to give us a hand. Until his fingers got crooked from arthritis, he played piano for King Daddy Saint at the

Jazz Shack. Pops calls him one cool old white dude. Perry Jr., his grown son, who everyone calls Squirrel because he can shell and eat a bag of peanuts faster than anyone on earth, was right behind him.

Of course, before we could leave, Miz Moran offered us “A little somethin’ to eat,” which smelled so good, none of us could refuse. And our stomachs were fat and full when Mr. Tiberon pointed down the street. “Think we should board up old Doc Hunt’s house, Val?”

Old Doc Hunt, who had no kids and whose wife was dead, had recently been carted off to a nursing home. His was the biggest and prettiest house on the block.

Pops agreed, “I think we oughta.”

“Hard work makes time move with dispatch,” Squirrel commented as we hammered and sawed. Squirrel is a college professor with a Ph.D.

“And that means?” I asked.

“It makes time move quickly,” he replied.

Why couldn’t he just say that? I thought. But when I looked at my watch, I had to agree. No matter how he’d said it, Squirrel was right. The work had taken up all of the afternoon.

By the time we were done with Doc Hunt’s house, it was dusk. Quickly, I headed to my room to do what I’d been

looking forward to all day. Carefully, I removed the Leblanc from its case and ran my fingers over it. I still couldn't believe it was mine. I played a song I knew well, Gershwin's "Summertime." An instrument as sweet as this ought to have a name, I thought. And just like that, I knew. In honor of the man of the flute, I named it Smokey. I played a few more songs, then carefully tucked Smokey away for the night.

Much later, when Mama finally got home from work, the argument began.

I cracked my door and eavesdropped.

Pops was really ticked off. "What do you mean you might not be able to leave tomorrow?"

"We're still working on getting out-of-area hospitals to agree to take our patients if we have to evacuate. Some will need to be airlifted. But every other hospital in New Orleans is doing the same thing. We can't just leave people here. Got women about to give birth, folks recovering from surgery . . . the ICU and CCU are full, several people on ventilators. I can't just leave."

"Let someone else do it, Mercedes! You got a boy upstairs to think about. I'm not goin' anywhere without you. Let the hospital administrators take care of it. It's their job. Me and Saint, we're your job."

That started Mama crying. "No, Val, you and Saint aren't my job!" she sobbed.

Like a torpedo, Pops exploded. "Not your job!"

"That's right. You and Saint aren't my job. . . . You and Saint are my life!"

Instantly, everything got quiet, so I snuck out to see what was going on. Mama was whimpering and they were hugging. Apparently, the fight was over.

Shadow in tow, I crept back into my room. And a bit later, when my head hit the pillow, I didn't know whether we were leaving for Baton Rouge early the next morning or not. Just in case, I kept Smokey and my cash close.