



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 shooing 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, Jupi! You dunno jack! I can’t stand you!”

Jupi 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, Jupi, 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 Jupi 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 Jupi “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 blubbering.

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 Jupi’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.