

Powers, then reached slowly for the gun. John Henry knew that if he were to die today it would have to come in that instant as the man's hand came closer and closer to the barrel. The hand of Bobbie's uncle, gripped the barrel and firmly pulled it from Powers. Then he threw an arm around his brother's shoulder and pulled him away.

The man turned to John Henry. "You lucky to be sittin there. You better get the hell away while you can."

The card players had stood up and a few started moving off, not too quickly because now they could afford swagger in the face of the boys with the basketball.

"Damn man's crazy," John Henry said, lighting a cigarette. "Always was crazy as long as I known him." He wanted to pee, his bladder was still strained. He wanted to go someplace and think. If he had died that afternoon, they'd forget him in less than a year and only remember that before he went off to war he was something of a clown and not even a good one. And someone new and slicker would come along to claim the Horse. They'd forget.

A week later as summer chilled toward another fall, John Henry packed two bags. He lied to his mother, telling her he was on his way to a Detroit assembly line. He knew she had heard about Bobbie. He timed his visit to miss his father who was at work and who had cursed him the last time they talked. John Henry had only tried to make a little money to catch up with his tired friends, most of whom were working two jobs. The Horse would have come to his hometown anyway. Someone would have brought it, yes. He turned on the radio as he picked up the expressway outside of town. A bigger town with better contacts might do wonders for his luck.

FICTION / JAMES ALAN MCPHERSON

Problems of Art

Seated rigidly on the red, plastic-covered sofa, waiting for Mrs. Farragot to return from her errand, Corliss Milford decided he did not feel comfortable inside the woman's apartment. Why this was he could not tell. The living room itself, as far as he could see around, reflected the imprint of a mind as meticulous as his own. Every item seemed in place; every detail meshed into an overriding suggestion of order. This neatness did no damage to the image of Mrs. Farragot he had assembled, even before visiting her at home. Her first name was Mary, and she was thin and severe of

manner. He recalled that her walnut-brown face betrayed few wrinkles; her large brown eyes were quick and direct without being forceful; her thin lips, during conversation, moved with precision and resolve. Even her blue summer dress, with pearl-white buttons up its front, advertized efficiency of character. The bare facts of her personal life, too, argued neatness and restraint; he had them down on paper, and the paper rested on his knee. Milford juggled his knee; the paper shifted, but did not fall. That too, he thought. It was part of why he felt uneasy. For a few seconds, he entertained the notion that the living room was no more than a sound stage on a movie lot. Somehow, it seemed too calculated.

Milford's suspicion of an undisclosed reality was heightened by the figure in the painting on the wall across the room. It was the portrait of a sad-eyed Jesus. Immaculate in white and blue robes, the figure held a pink hand just above the red, valentine-shaped heart painted at the center of its chest. Bright drops of red blood dripped from the valentine. Such pictures as this Milford had seen before in dime stores. Though it had a certain poignancy, he thought, it was . . . cheap. It conveyed a poverty of the artist's imagination and tended to undermine the sophistication of those who purchased such dimensionless renditions. Did not the Latin poor build great cathedrals? Even country Baptists wheeled their preachers about in Cadillacs. Why then, Milford asked himself, would a poor black woman compound an already bleak existence by worshipping before a dime store rendition of a mystery? He recalled having heard someplace something about the function of such images, but could not recall exactly what he had heard. The plastic crinkled as he shifted on the sofa to review Mrs. Farragot's papers. She had been born in Virginia, but had lived for many years in Los Angeles. She was a widow, but received no compensation from her husband's social security. She had been arrested for driving under the influence of alcohol, although she insisted that she was a teetotaler. About the only consistent factual evidence about her that Milford knew was her insistence, over a period of two weeks, that no one but a white lawyer could represent her at the license revocation hearing. For her firm stand on this, she was now notorious in all the cubbyhole offices of Project Gratis. Milford looked again at the portrait. Perhaps that explains it, he thought. Then he thought, perhaps it does not.

He leaned back on the sofa, impatient now for Mrs. Farragot to return. According to his watch it was 11:45 a.m. The hearing was scheduled for 1:30 p.m. The day was already humid and muggy, and would probably grow warmer as events developed in the afternoon. But Milford was used to it. For want of a better rationalization, he liked to call such occasions invigorating. Now he sighed and glanced again about the room, wondering just who would return with her to act as witness and corroborator. Since

his mind was trained to focus on those areas where random facts formed a confluence of palpable reality, he became restless for easy details. His eyes swept over the brown coffee table; above the red, plastic-covered armchair across the room; past the tall glass china closet packed with jade-green and brandy-red and sunset-orange cut-glass ashtrays and knick-knacks whose scale-like patterns sparkled in the late morning sunlight streaming lazily through the open window on bright particles of dust; beyond the china closet to the yellow-white door leading into the quiet, smell-less kitchen from which sounded the hum of a refrigerator; past the doorframe, quickly, and to the sofa's edge on his right to where a group of pictures in cheap aluminum frames stood grouped on a brown plywood end table. These he examined more closely. The larger one was of Mrs. Mary Farragot. It was a close-up of her face as it must have looked ten years ago. There were fewer wrinkles and no strains of gray in her ebony black hair. She was smiling contentedly. This, Milford thought, was not the face of an alcoholic. It reflected strength and motherly concern. Next to this picture was a small color print of two white children. Both were smiling. One, a blond boy seated in a blue high chair, grinned with his spoon raised above a yellow dish of cereal, as if about to strike. The little girl, with dark brown hair, posed extravagantly beside the chair, her skinny right arm raised in anticipation of the falling spoon. The picture was inscribed: "To Aunt Mary, Love, Tracy and Ken." Corliss Milford did not pause to examine their faces. Instead, his eyes were drawn to the third picture. This was a faded black and white enlargement of a very weak print. Behind the glass stood a robust black man in army uniform, saluting majestically. His grin was mischievous and arrogant; his nostrils flared. The thumb of his raised hand stood out prominently from his temple; a few inches above the hand the edge of an army private's cap hung casually over his forehead like an enlarged widow's peak.

This is a good picture, Milford decided. He picked it up and examined its details more closely. The man stood in what was obviously an exaggeration of attention. He saw that the man's left brogan was hooked nonchalantly around his right ankle. In the background a flagpole whistled up some six or eight feet above the man's head. The flag was snapping briskly in what might have been the morning breeze, although the faded condition of the print obscured the true direction of the sun. Milford counted the number of stars in the flag. Then he peered deeper into the background, beyond the pole, and saw what might have been palm trees, and beyond these mountains. His eyes moved from the mountains back to the flagpole and down the pole past the saluting soldier to the bottom of the picture, where the grass was smooth as a billiard table. His eyes fastened on a detail he had missed before: a bugle stood upright on its mouth just

at the soldier's feet; in fact, the man's left brogan was pointing slyly at the bugle. This was why the man was grinning. Near the bugle, at an angle, someone, probably the soldier, had written: "To Mary Dear, Lots of Love, 'Sweet Willie.'" There was a flowing line just below this inscription, as if the signer had taken sudden inspiration.

Corliss Milford shifted his eyes to the papers on the sofa beside him. Mrs. Farragot had reported that she was a widow. He had written that down. But now he recalled she had actually said "grass widow," which meant that Sweet Willie was still around. It also explained why she was not drawing social security. Perhaps, he thought, it also justified her frustration if indeed she had been drunk when arrested. There was no doubt that it accounted completely for the bitterness which had compelled her to request specifically the services of a white lawyer. From his picture, Milford concluded, Willie Farragot seemed to reek of irresponsibility. Perhaps all the men she knew were like him. This would account for the difficulty she seemed to be having in getting a witness to corroborate her story that she had not been drunk or driving when arrested.

Now he shifted his eyes to the print on the wall, but this time with more understanding. He had re-entered the living room on another level, and now he could sympathize. Still, he did not like the painting. A disturbing absence of nuance undermined the face: the small brown eyes were dimensionless, as if even they did not believe the message they had been calculated to convey. The pigeon nose had no special prominence, no irregularity suggestive of regality; even the lips, wafer-thin and pink, suggested only a glisten of determination. In the entire face, from forehead to chin, there was not the slightest hint of tragedy or transcendence. To appreciate it, Milford concluded, required of one an act of faith. The robes, though enamel white and royal blue, drooped without majesty from shoulders that were round and ordinary. And the larger-than-life valentine heart seemed to have been merely positioned at the center of the figure's chest. The entire image suffered badly from a lack of calculation. It did not draw one into it. Its total effect did no more than suggest that the image, at the complete mercy of a commercial artist, had resigned itself to being painted. The face reflected a nonchalant resignation to this fate. If the mouth was a little sad it was not from the weight of this world's sins but rather from an inability to comprehend the nature of sin itself.

Milford was beginning to draw contrasts between the figure and the picture of Sweet Willie when Mrs. Mary Farragot opened the door and stepped quickly into the room. A heavysset brownskin man followed behind her. "May Francis Cripps wouldn't come," she announced in a quiet, matter of fact voice, "but Clarence was there too. He seen it all. Clarence Winfield, this here's Mr. Milford from that free law office round there."

Milford stepped to the center of the room and extended his hand.

"How do?" the man, named Winfield, boomed. He grasped Milford's hand and squeezed it firmly. "Everything Miss Mary told you, she told you the truth. I was there and I seen it all. Them cops had no call to arrest her. She warn't drunk, she warn't driving, and I know damn well she warn't going nowheres in that car." While saying this Winfield ran the thumb of his left hand around the inside of his belt, tucking his shirt more neatly into his trousers. "Like I say," he continued, dropping Milford's hand, "I was there and I seen the whole thing."

Corliss Milford stepped back and considered the man. He wore a light brown seersucker suit and a red shirt. A red silk handkerchief flowered from the pocket of his jacket. A red silk tie dangled in his left hand. He had obviously just finished shaving because the pungent scent of a cheap cologne wafted from his body each time he moved. There was something familiar about the cologne, Milford thought; he imagined he had smelled it before, but could not remember when or where. He turned and sat on the plastic-covered sofa, crossing his leg. "I'm from Project Gratis," Milford announced. "Did Mrs. Farragot tell you about my interest in her case?"

Clarence Winfield nodded. "When Miss Mary told me what happen I put on my business clothes and rush right on over here. I told her"—and here he threw a comforting glance at Mrs. Farragot who stood several feet behind him—"I told her, I say, 'Miss Mary, you don't have to beg May Francis and Big Boy and them to testify for you.' Anyway, that nigger Big Boy couldn't hit a crooked lick with a straight stick."

"Speak good English now, Clarence, for the Lord's sakes," Mrs. Farragot called. "We got to go downtown. And there's one thing I learnt about white people: if they don't understand what you saying they just ain't gonna hear it." She looked conspiratorially at Milford.

The lawyer did not say anything.

Clarence Winfield glanced again at Mrs. Farragot. "I knows good English," he said. "Don't you forget, I worked round white folks too. They hears what they wants to hear." Then he looked at Milford and said, "No offense intended."

The lawyer studied the two of them. Over Winfield's broad shoulder he saw Mrs. Farragot leaning against the chair, directly under the painting. With both hands placed firmly on her hips, she stood surveying the two men with something close to despair playing over her face. Milford noticed her high brown cheeks twitch slightly. Her lips were drawn and thin. She seemed about to say something to Winfield, but no words came from her mouth. The big, middle-aged black man remained standing in the middle of the room as if waiting for something to happen. The longer Milford studied him, the more he became convinced that it was not the smell of the

cologne but something else, possibly something about his carriage, which made him seem so familiar. The man seemed eager to be in motion. He seemed self-conscious and awkward standing at attention. Corliss Milford took up the papers from the sofa. He flipped a page to the statement of facts he had typed before leaving the office. "Now Mr. Winfield," he said, "please tell me what you saw the night of August 7 of this year."

Clarence Winfield cleared his throat several times, then glanced once more at Mrs. Farragot. "That there's a night I remember well," he began slowly. "It was hot as a sonofabitch. I was setting on my porch with May Francis Cripps and Buster Williams. It warn't no more than eight-thirty 'cause the sun had just gone down and the sky up the street was settling in from pink to purple to black. I remember it well. We had us some beer and was shooting the shit and the only sound was the crickets scraping and a few kids up the block raising hell when all at once there come this loud honking. I look 'cross the street and seen Miss Mary here come running out her door and down the stairs. I knowed it was her 'cause she left the door open and the light from in here come out through the screen and spotlight her porch like a stage. Yeah, come to think of it, just like a stage. See, there was this car right behind hers that was park so close the headlights was burning right into Miss Mary's tail end, and right up close behind *him* was another car. Well, the guy was trap and couldn't get out. I don't know who was in that car, but that guy kept honking his horn 'cause he couldn't move without scratching against Miss Mary's car. I never found out who that guy was, but man he played Dixie on that horn. See, he couldn't back back either 'cause that car behind had him squeezed in like a Maine sardine. That's the way it is round here in summertime. There's so many big cars park end to end it look like some big-time I-talian gangsters was having a convention. For folks poor as these round here, I don't know where in the *hell* all these here cars come from. Me, I drive . . ."

"You see what I mean, Clarence?" Mrs. Farragot interrupted. She walked toward Winfield, her hands still on her hips. "The man didn't ask about no *gangsters!* All he want is the *facts!*" Then she threw up her hands, cast a look of exasperation at Milford, and dropped into the plastic-covered armchair beneath the painting.

"It's all right," Milford told the two of them. He set down his notes and watched Mrs. Farragot. She was sprawled in the armchair; her arms were folded, her legs were crossed, and there was great impatience in her face. Milford attempted to communicate to her, with a slight movement of his pencil, that he had no objection to the mode of Winfield's presentation.

For his own part, Clarence Winfield grinned bashfully. Then he said, "'Scuse me, Miss Mary; you right." Then he swallowed again and proceeded, this time pausing tentatively before each sentence. "Well, me and

May Francis and Buster listen to all this racket and we seen Miss Mary here, plain as day, open up her car and start it up and cut on the headlights. Now *her* car was lighting up the taillights of the car in front of her, and it reflect back on her behind the wheel. I seen that. And I heard this guy steady honking on his horn. Well, just about then who should drive up the street in his new Buick but Big Boy Ralston. He lives up the block there, 'bout five houses down from me. Big Boy a security guard down to the bank and I guess he just naturally take his work serious. I mean he bring it home when he come. Anyway, he drives up just about even with this guy that's honking and he stops and calls out, 'Who that making all that motherfucking racket?' Well, this makes the other guy mad and then he *really* tore into that horn. By this time the street is all lit up like a department store. All three of 'em got they headlights and brakelights on so the street's all white and yellow and red and Big Boy car is fire engine red and the sky is black and purple now, with just a little bit of pink way over West yonder where the sun done gone down. But this guy is still playing Chopsticks on that horn. Big Boy holler, 'If you don't quit that racket I'ma put my foot up your ass as far as your nose!' Well, that there just shell old Buster's peanuts. He scream out, 'Stomp on his ass, Big Boy!' Big Boy lean out the window and look over at us setting on the porch. He holler, 'That go for you too, Buster. I'm tired of this shit every night. Ain't y'all got nothing else to do but set on them motherfucking steps selling wolf tickets?' But this guy is honking hard and strong now, and he don't pay Big Boy no mind. So Big Boy scream, 'You blowing your own funeral music, chump!' And he jerk open the door of his Buick. But right about then I seen Miss Mary pull out of her spot and go *faward* about three feet. I seen that, 'cause my eyes got pulled in that direction when her brake-light went off and the red in the back of her car went all yellow and white. Well, Big Boy leaves his motor running and he jumps out his car and slam the door. Old Buster laugh and say to me and May Francis, 'Watch old Big Boy *bogart* this motherfucker. I ain't seen a Friday go by yet he don't floor somebody.' I think old Buster was right. When Big Boy round his car his shoulders was hunched like he was fixing to clean house. The light was shining on his brown uniform and that red Buick and I tell you the truth, you couldn't hardly tell the steel in that Buick from the steel in him. He moved round that car like six feet and three hundred pounds of mad nigger in a *po-lice* uniform fixing to clean him somebody's *plow!*"

Here Winfield paused to chuckle. "Lawd," he said, not looking at anyone in particular, "that there was a *night!* We just set and watch and drunk our beer. People run out they houses. Some look out they windows. Some of them bad kids round here commence to sic Big Boy on. Well, this guy in the car warn't no fool. He must of knowed he didn't have a snowball's

chance in hell against Big Boy. He cut his wheels fast and scrunch out of that space like a flash. Fact is, he just miss swatting Big Boy as he wheeled round that Buick. Well, old Big Boy rush back round his front end to get in his car and go after the guy. But just then, who should I see but Miss Mary here come back backing up real slow-like into her old parking space. Well, just then *four* things happen, all at the same time. Them wild kids yell; Miss Mary's brakelights come on fast and red; there was a real loud *scrrrunch!*; and Big Boy scream, 'Mother-*fuck!*' See, Miss Mary here done back back right into the side of his red Buick."

Milford sat transfixed. He leaned forward on the sofa, oblivious to anything but the big man in the brown seersucker suit standing quietly in the center of the room. He did not notice Mrs. Mary Farragot, seated in the armchair beneath the picture of Jesus, draw her crossed arms tighter about her breasts.

"*Now,*" Clarence Winfield continued, wetting his lips slowly, "now we come to the part *you* interested in. See, when Big Boy mad he don't have no respect for *nobody!* He run over to Miss Mary's car, pull open the door, and commence to give her hell. Buster Williams spit on the sidewalk and said to us, 'Oh shit! Now they go'n be some *real* trouble. The one thing *nobody* can do is mess with Big Boy Buick. Me, I seen the time he near kilt a guy for putting a dent in his *bumper*, so you know they's hell to pay now with the side all smash in. Somebody better run and call up the *po-lice!*' He nudge May Francis and she taken and run up to her place to call up the law. And just in time too. I heard Big Boy tell Miss Mary here, 'Woman, what the fuck you mean back backing into my car that way? If you was a man I'd kick your ass to kingdom come!' Lawd, he cuss this poor woman here something awful . . ."

"Please, Clarence," Mrs. Farragot called from behind him. "Just get the thing told." She looked at Milford while saying this. "This man ain't got all day."

Corliss Milford said nothing. Nor did he allow his eyes to respond to Mrs. Farragot's searching expression. Instead, he kept his face turned toward the big man standing before him and touched his pencil to the paper on his lap.

Clarence Winfield smiled, as if the gesture had reassured him. "Okay," he said, to no one in particular. "Me and Buster run on over before Big Boy could swing on Miss Mary here. Like I say, Big Boy don't much care *who* he swing on when he gets mad. Poor Miss Mary here just standing there in her peejays crying and carrying on, she so excited, and there was dogs barking and them wild kids was running round whooping and hollering in the floodlights of them two cars, and by this time the sky was all black and purple with no pink. I tell you, man, it was a sight. Buster, he run

down the corner for more beer and Miss Bessie Mayfair, up the block, lean out her window and scream, '*Fish sandwiches! Hot fresh fish sandwiches, just out the pan! Don't rush, they's plenty. Fifty cents!*' Miss Bessie don't miss a chance to make a dollar. Anyway, long about then a squad car come screaming up with red and white lights flashing and it screech to a stop right longside Big Boy's red Buick and this white cop lean out the passenger window and holler, 'Stand back! Don't nobody touch the body. The law is here to take *charge!* Big Boy push me away from him and look at that cop. He stare him dead in the face and say, 'Drop dead yourself, cream-puff! Hot damn! That's what I heard him say. That street was all lit up like a department store with red and white lights flashing on all them people in blue and brown and pink clothes. Lawd, it was a sight! But even in all them lights I saw this white cop turn red in the face; his own strobe lights made his face look like it was bleeding. I seen that. I seen the driver get out of the car. It was a colored fellow and he walk like he was ready to do somebody in. He walk up real close to Big Boy and look him dead in the eye. He say, real cool-like, 'What it is, feller?' and Big Boy say, 'Plenty! This here woman done *ruin* my new Buick Electra with *push*-button drive and *black leather* bucket seats! There ain't a worser thing that could of happen to me.' So the colored cop begin to question Miss Mary. She was so mad and angry and crying so much I guess he thought she was drunk, 'cause he ask her to walk the line. He just walk over to the sidewalk and point the toe of his shoe to a crack. Well, Miss Mary here look at him and say, 'No. No, *sah. N. O. Naw!*' That's what I recollect she said. Then I heard him tell her the law was writ so that if she refuse she was bound to lose her license. Well, by this time there was so much commotion going on till I suspect Miss Mary here was too embarrassed to even *think* about walking no line. Folks was laughing, drinking beer, grabbing for fish sandwiches and raising so much hell till I reckon a private person like Miss Mary here would rather lose her license than walk the line in her *peejays*. So she refuse. Well, them two cops put her in the car and taken her off to jail. Like I said, I seen it all, and I done told you the truth of all I seen. And I'm ready anytime to go down and tell the same thing to the judge."

Corliss Milford completed his notes. He had scribbled sporadically during the recitation. Now he looked up at Clarence Winfield, who shifted impatiently as though confirming his eagerness to be on his way downtown. Then he looked at Mrs. Mary Farragot, still seated in the armchair behind Winfield, her arms locked tightly across her breasts. "His story corroborates yours in all essential details," Milford called to her.

"Of course it do," Mrs. Farragot answered. "That ain't the problem." She shrugged. "The problem is how in the *hell* can I tell a white judge something like all that Clarence just said without being thrown out of

court?" She paused and sighed, raising her head so that her hair almost touched the edge of the picture frame. "What I wanted me in the first place," Mrs. Farragot added slowly, "was a white boy that could make some *logic* out of all that."

Now both she and Winfield looked imploringly at Corliss Milford.

II

At 1:45 p.m. the three of them sat waiting outside the hearing room of the Department of Motor Vehicles. During the drive downtown, Milford had attempted to think through the dimensions of the situation; now he decided that Mrs. Farragot had been right all along. Since this was not a jury case, there was no way a judge would allow Clarence Winfield to tell his version of the story. As Mrs. Farragot had anticipated, any defense she offered would have to be confined to the facts. Milford cast a sidewise glance at the woman, seated on the bench beside him, with new appreciation of her relative sophistication. In the car she had disclosed that she did domestic work for a suburban stockbroker; from listening in on conversations between the broker and his wife, she must have discerned how a bureaucracy, and the people who made it function, must of necessity be restricted to the facts. And as colorful as were the circumstances of her case, there was not the slightest possibility that any responsible lawyer could include them in her defense.

A pity, too, Milford thought, turning his gaze to Clarence Winfield. Despite the imprecision of his language, the man possessed a certain rough style. He watched Winfield pacing the waxed tile floor of the corridor. The black man had put on his tie now, but because of the excessive heat allowed it to hang loosely about his collar. At one point, with Milford looking on, Winfield lifted his right foot and polished the pointed toe of his shoe against the cloth of his left trouser leg. When he saw Milford watching, Winfield grinned. A pity, the lawyer concluded. Now he would have to restrict the man's statement to yes or no answers to specific questions. He motioned for Winfield to come over to the bench. "Now listen," Milford said, "when you talk to the hearing officer, restrict your statement to the *last* part of your story, the part about her *not* being drunk when she was arrested. You understand?"

Clarence Winfield nodded slyly.

"And don't volunteer anything, please. I'll ask all the questions."

Winfield nodded again.

"Do like he tell you now Clarence, hear?" Mrs. Farragot said, leaning sideways on the bench. "Don't mess up things for me in front of that man in there." Then she said to Milford, "Clarence one of them from downhome. He tend to talk around a point."

"Ah hell!" Winfield said, and was about to say more when the door to the hearing room opened and a voice called, "Mary Farragot?"

It was a woman's voice.

Corliss Milford stood. "I'm representing Mrs. Farragot," he said. "I'm with Brown and Barlow's Project Gratis."

"Well, we're ready," the woman called, and she stepped out into the corridor. She was short and plump, but not unattractive in a dark green pantsuit. Her silver blond hair was cut short. Dark eyelashes, painted, Milford suspected, accentuated her pink face. "I'm Hearing Officer Harriet Wilson," she announced.

As she stood holding open the door, Milford noticed Mrs. Farragot staring intently at Hearing Officer Harriet Wilson. The expression on her face was one he had not seen before. Suddenly he remembered the photograph of Mrs. Farragot on her plywood end table, and the expression became more familiar. He touched her shoulder and whispered, "Let's go on in." They filed into the hearing room, Mrs. Farragot leading and Clarence Winfield bringing up the rear. Over his shoulder, Milford saw the hearing officer sniffing the air as she shut the door. The room was humid. Over on the window sill a single electric fan rotated wearily, blowing more humid air into the small room. They seated themselves in metal chairs around a dark brown hardwood table. Only Hearing Officer Harriet Wilson remained standing.

"Now," Hearing Officer Wilson said, "we're ready to begin." She smiled round the table pleasantly, her eyes coming to rest on the red silk handkerchief flowering out of Clarence Winfield's coat pocket. It seemed to fascinate her. "Now," she said again, moving her eyes slowly away from the handkerchief, "I'll get the complaining officer and we'll begin." She moved toward a glass door at the back of the room.

"Lawyer Milford," Mrs. Farragot whispered as the glass door opened and shut. She tugged his coat. "Lawyer Milford, I thought it was men that handled these hearings."

Milford shrugged. "Times change," he answered.

Mrs. Farragot considered this. She glanced at the glass door, then at Winfield seated on her right. "Tell you what, lawyer Milford," she said suddenly. "Actually, Clarence don't do too bad when he talk. Maybe you ought to let him tell his story after all."

"I thought we had already agreed on procedure," the lawyer muttered. He found himself irritated by the mysterious look which had again appeared in Mrs. Farragot's eyes. She looked vaguely amused. "We can't change now," he told her.

"Miss Mary," Winfield volunteered, "I can't tell it exactly like I did before."

"Clarence, that don't matter, long as you hit on the facts. Ain't that right?" she asked Milford.

He had no choice but to nod agreement.

"Good," Mrs. Farragot said. She straightened in her chair and brushed her hand lightly across her sweating forehead.

It seemed to Milford she was smiling openly now.

Hearing Officer Harriet Wilson re-entered the room. Behind her, carrying a bulky tape recorder, stepped the arresting officer. He was a tall, olive-brownskinned man who moved intently in a light gray summer suit. Cool dignity flashed in his dark brown eyes; his broad nose twitched, seeming to sniff the air. He placed the recorder on the table near Hearing Officer Wilson's chair, then seated himself at the head of the table. He crossed his leg casually. Then he gazed at the three seated on his right and said, "Officer Otis S. Smothers."

"How do?" Winfield called across the table.

Milford nodded curtly.

Mrs. Farragot said nothing. Her eyes were fixed on the tape recorder.

Hearing Officer Harriet Wilson noticed her staring and said, "This is not a jury matter, dear. At this hearing all we do is tape all relevant testimony and forward it on to the central officer at the state capital. The boys up there make the final decision."

Milford felt a knee press against his under the table. "I should of knowed," Mrs. Farragot whispered beside him. "Won't be long they gonna just give you a lie detector and railroad you that way."

Milford shushed her into silence.

From the head of the table Officer Smothers seemed to be studying them, quiet amusement tugging at the corners of his plump lips.

Officer Wilson placed a finger on the record button and looked round the table. Milford felt Mrs. Farragot tense beside him. A desperate warmth seemed to exude from her body. Officer Wilson smiled cheerily at Clarence Winfield, but sobered considerably as her eyes came to rest on Officer Smothers. She pressed the record button. After reciting the date and case record into the microphone, she swore in the parties. Then she motioned for Officer Smothers to make his statement. It seemed to Milford that Smothers, while taking his oath, had raised his right hand a bit higher than Mrs. Farragot and Winfield. Now he told his version of the story, presenting a minor masterpiece of exactness and economy. His vocabulary was precise, his delivery flawless. When he reached the part of his testimony concerning the sobriety test, he pulled a sheet of paper from his coat pocket and recited, ". . . suspect was informed of her legal obligation to submit to the test. Suspect's reply was . . ." and he touched a lean brown finger to the page ". . . 'I ain't go'n do *nothin'!*'" These words, delivered in comic

imitation of a whine, stung Milford's ears. Even Mrs. Farragot, he noticed, winced at the sound. And Clarence Winfield, slouching in his chair, looked sheepish and threatened. To Milford the action seemed especially cruel when Smothers looked over at Hearing Officer Wilson and said in crisp, perfect English, "That's all I have to say," as though he intended to end the recital of facts without some account of his own response to the refusal. Milford watched Smothers as he leaned back in his chair, looking just a bit self-righteous.

"If you have no questions," Hearing Officer Harriet Wilson said to Milford. Her finger was already on the off button of the recorder.

"You *did* offer her a test, then?" Milford asked, stalling for time to reconsider his position.

"Of course," Smothers replied, his fingers meshed, his hands resting professionally on his knee.

"And you had already concluded there was probable cause to believe she was drunk?"

"Certainly."

"How?"

"Her breath, her heavy breathing, and her slurred speech."

"Could you have mistaken a Southern accent for slurred speech?"

"No, I couldn't have," Smothers answered nonchalantly. "I'm from the South myself."

Across the table Hearing Officer Harriet Wilson smiled to herself, her finger tapping the metal casing just above the off button on the recorder.

"Let me say something here," Clarence interrupted. "I was there. I seen the whole thing. It warn't like that at all."

Hearing Officer Wilson looked at Winfield out of the corner of her eye. "Do you want this witness to testify now?" she asked Milford.

But before the lawyer could answer he felt the pressure of Mrs. Farragot's hand on his shoulder. Looking up, he saw her standing over him. "Nome, thank you," he heard her say in a voice very much unlike her own. She was facing Hearing Officer Wilson but looking directly at the recorder. Her face was expressionless. Only her voice betrayed emotion. "I'm innocent," Mrs. Farragot began. "But who go'n believe me, who go'n take my word against the word of that officer? Both of us black, but he ain't bothering his self with that and I ain't concerning myself with it either. But I do say I'm innocent of the charges he done level against me. The night this thing happen I was inside my house in my pajamas minding my own business. I wasn't even *fixing* to drive no car . . ."

She told her side of the story.

While she talked, in a slow, precise tone, Milford watched the two officers. It was obvious that Hearing Officer Harriet Wilson was deeply

moved; she kept her eyes lowered to the machine. But Officer Smothers seemed impervious to the woman's pleadings. His meshed fingers remained propped on his knee; his eyes wandered coolly about the room. At one point he lifted his left hand to rub the side of his nose.

When Mrs. Farragot had finished speaking she eased down into her chair. No one spoke for almost a minute; the only sounds in the room were the soft buzz of the recorder and the hum of the window fan. Then Clarence Winfield cleared his throat noisily. Officer Harriet Wilson jumped.

"Tell me something, Officer Smothers?" Milford said. "If you did offer a test, which one was it?"

"I asked her to walk the line, as both of us have already testified," Smothers answered.

"That was the only test you offered?"

"That's right," Smothers said in a tired voice.

"But doesn't the statute provide that a suspect has the right to choose one of *three* tests: *either* the breathalyzer, the blood or the urine? As I read the statute, there's nothing about walking the line."

"I suppose that's right," Officer Smothers said.

"Are you authorized to choose, arbitrarily, a test of your own devising?"

"My choice was *not* arbitrary!" Smothers protested. "The policy is to use that one on the scene. Usually, the others are used down at the station."

Now Milford relaxed. He smiled teasingly at the olive-skinned officer. "Was this lady offered one of the other tests down at the station before being booked?"

"I don't really know," the officer answered. "I didn't stay around after filing the report."

Milford turned to Mrs. Farragot, new confidence cooling his words. "Were you offered any other tests?"

"No, suh," she said quietly, her voice almost breaking. "They didn't offer me nothing in front of my house and they didn't offer me nothing down to the jail. They just taken me in a cell in my pajamas."

"We've had enough," Hearing Officer Harriet Wilson said. Her pink face seemed both sad and amused. She pressed the off button. "You'll hear from the board within thirty days," she called across the table to Mrs. Farragot. "In the meantime you can retain your license."

They all stood abruptly. Milford smiled openly at Officer Smothers, noting with considerable pleasure the man's hostile glare. Milford offered his hand. They barely touched palms. Then the lawyer took Mrs. Farragot's arm and steered her toward the door. Clarence Winfield came behind, tearing off his tie. Just before Winfield closed the door, Hearing Officer Harriet Wilson's voice came floating after them on the moist heat of the room: "Otis, tell the boys that in the future . . ."

Milford and Clarence Winfield waited by the bench while Mrs. Farragot rushed down the corridor toward the ladies' room. Winfield walked around, adjusting his trousers. Milford felt pleased with himself. He had taken command of a chaotic situation and forced it to a logical outcome. Absently, he followed Clarence Winfield over to the water fountain and waited while Winfield refreshed himself. "This meant a lot to her," Milford observed.

Winfield kept a stiff thumb on the metal button. The cold water splashed the side of his face as he turned his face upward and nodded agreement.

"All this sweat over one freak accident," Milford observed.

"Yeah," Winfield said. He straightened and wiped his face with the red silk handkerchief. "Many's the time I've told Miss Mary about that drinking."

"What's a beer on a hot night," Milford said, bending to drink.

Clarence Winfield chuckled. "Man, Miss Mary don't drink no *beer!*" He leaned close to Milford's ear. "She don't drink nothing but Maker's Mark." He laughed again. "I thought you *knowed* that."

Turning his head, Milford saw Mrs. Farragot coming up the hall. Her blue dress swished gaily. It seemed to him that she was strutting. He observed for certain that she was smiling broadly, not unlike the picture of her next to Sweet Willie on the coffee table in her home.

Clarence Winfield nudged him, causing the cold water to splash into his eyes. "Don't you pay it no mind," Winfield was saying. "Between the two of us, why we ought to be able to straighten her out."

FICTION / ALISON MILLS

From Cakewalk Kangaroo

it is evenin. my old man and me and pipo live in my father's house (durin our strugglin minute), a big two-story house (with the walls chippin and elegant furniture that no one is allowed to sit on) surrounded by bushes and trees and wild cats that scream like hungry babies on full moon nights.

last night my father—who is a good man, a kind man with patient ways and understandin, a tall black man with curly peppered hair, big brown eyes that are red from drinkin too much cause he worries bout his kids, bout his house notes, cause he worries. but no matter how much he may drink, every mornin he will go to work, and every sunday he will go to church,