

1975

From "Cakewalk Kangaroo"

Alison Mills

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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,

nothin stops his routine—came to our bedroom, knocked on the door and opened it in a deep concerned full of heart voice . . .

i have waited to see how or when you were gonna contribute something, some money to this house. the water bill and the light bill and all the bills are three times what they used to be, and i can't afford it. and do you have a job? he asked my old man.

i've been lookin for a job. i know it looks like i'm not doing anything, but everyday i get up and look for a job. i think i have a good prospect though. i have an appointment for a job on tuesday.

well, i'm glad to know that your future is coming along. when i was a young man with a family, i worked and went to school, my father said with a warmness and gentility that amazed me. i'm glad your future is coming along, but in the meantime you have a family and you have to take care of them. my father closed the door. he was finished with what he had to say.

we stared at the walls. he's right. me and my old man both knew he was right. we looked at each other. we'll keep workin hard, our eyes said in unison. but we still felt like shit.

it is evenin. my old man and me ate dinner prepared by me with love. we had juicy hamburgers, sweet buttered corn, a beer for my man and orange juice for me (cause i don't drink no alcohol). high jazz is playin on the radio, and i'm wrapped up in a blanket on the couch feelin all cozy and warm (and happy since my welfare check's on time. yeah, i'm on welfare) and my old man's stretched out on the couch, his feet stickin up in my face, talkin bout how in the sixties people, some people were droppin out, throwin jobs away. now folks are holdin onto their jobs. any old job. people be holdin on tight to whatever they got. talkin bout how we got to think in terms of the day to day. we be thinkin in the long range. we big dreamers. the big future on earth, not the sky.

i'm tryin to teach myself to take care of the insignificant cause that little insignificant thing can blow up into a big thing and mean your whole world. just look at that little lowly nigga that blew watergate wide open and got nixon's ass. i mean that little night watchman that ain't nobody ever heard of since or before—blew the president of the united states' ass away.

we started laughin bout that party given by a famous black man and black

lady actin team, the ones that got that new 1940 romance movie comin out that they are both starrin in together. well, we went up to their house in the hollywood hills where they live with two german shepherd dogs that bite and bark if you go anywhere near them. their house is overlookin more mountains than i can remember seein in arizona. i mean, after you get through drivin up all those hills to their house you don't feel like you're in the city at all but somewhere else. pastel-streaked colors hung in the sky that melted into a black night. their house is old, rustic, funky, with old-time furniture, red soft lightin, a fireplace made out of real bricks, and windows that look out on faraway freeway worlds. they don't have a swimmin pool yet but they're gonna build one. just three years ago they lived in a one-room depressin apartment. *they* were scufflin lovers too. they were great then and are great now. anyway, we had a great time over their house cause they weren't like hollywood actors at all, all stuck up and snooty, but loud crazy lovin real people.

luana, the actress (who is extremely paleskinned with greenish eyes and a positive personality that reminds you of a happy little girl) was walkin around in torn blue jeans and holey sweater cause she had been out in the frontyard plantin lettuce and strawberry seeds all afternoon under the orange sun. sax, her actor mate, is dark brown skinned with tones of red and orange in his skin, thin body, so thin he looks like he's on drugs but he isn't, with huge eyes glarin out of a combination indian-neanderthal pre-historic deep character face. i mean, he is fine and weird-lookin at the same time. he was walkin around the house in torn jeans and a torn shirt. sometimes i wondered if they tore their clothes on purpose. sax said out loud: you look raggedy. and luana said in return: so what?

but you should see luana on film. i mean, on film she looks like one sensational knock-out with animal magnetism (a hollywood term they use a lot). after she gets her make-up and wigs and everything else on she looks fantastic, even brown skinned. but on this particular day she looked like a hitch hikin teenager bringin fruit, white wine, cookies, pound cake, blue cheese, string cheese, american cheese and crackers from the kitchen for her guests, sheddin those warm greetings for the people who came to share in the magic.

so me and my old man are sittin up here on the couch laughin loud bout how he got high and started eatin the rug, and everybody laughed, rollin over and kickin their feet in the air. then sax said that luana took all his friends anyway.

you do, he said. carol was a friend of mine, and now she's your friend. she

use to call up to talk to me. now when she calls up she don't even say hello to me.

oh here we go with that paranoid shit, luana said. and everybody laughed. markus, sax said. markus was a friend of mine until you came along, and now he's your friend.

i'm good to people, luana screamed. her guests laughed even louder. the two of them were fightin with fun. i remember lookin at my old man cause it was funny and i felt the same way as sax cause that's exactly what happens to me with my old man. my friends come over and he just takes them away, going off to play tennis with them. he won't even teach me to play tennis, says he don't want me in his back pocket taggin along everywhere he goes.

luana announced that she was goin to have a baby cause pipo's presence inspired luana to want to have a little baby like ours. you got two babies, sax yelled. see those dogs outside. those two dogs are your babies.

oh those ain't no two babies, nigga, i told sax. those are dogs. luana laughed. oh go on and tell him! tell the fool!

oh it was a mess. we had such a good time actin ignorant. now we're sittin up here in our poor house with our scufflin shoes off after hobnobbin with the rich folks cause sax and luana are rich now. our little baby is asleep on the couch. he is a little joy. i wonder when he'll learn to kiss and know the bliss of smackin lips. i wonder when i first learned to kiss. i can't remember.

let's go to bed, my old man says.

i pick up pipo and turn off the radio, followin my old man upstairs to our bedroom—two twin beds pushed together in the room i shared with my sister when i was a little girl.

my old man has a beer in his hand. i can feel it. he slaps my butt and i grin. we're gonna make love. i want to with mad desire. i'm all wet and woozy, ready, willin, cause i dig my old man. he's tall, brown, strong, with big shoulders and long rastafarian hair growin down his back. his hair looks like palm trees. he is not thin, but has a perfect big-shouldered handsome body with beautiful legs. mine ain't half as good lookin as his legs. a genius mind that blows people away. we've been together through hard times, honey. even though i thought i would be rich by now and all, and he thought he would be rich and all by now . . . we discover we *are* rich, in so many ways. DESIRE. i mean, i want to make love to my old man. and he wants me. it feels good cause love makin for a while has to wait till

after the johnny carson show by which time i'm already on my way to sleep and half given up on the whole idea. but here he would come expectin me to be full of romance and love and fire after listenin to don rinkles and whoever else was on t.v., talkin bout their fascinatin life. i would not complain but sometimes, layin in the bed, fantasizin about my secret lover, i get mad, wonderin what happened to the romance. i mean, we're young and diggin on life and life is diggin on us—but what is this after-the-johnny-carson-show bit? i'm sick of it, sick of it!

that's what i would think sometimes when day after day there was no good news. sometimes we didn't have no food. can you imagine not havin no food? natural depression. you feel like you're comin down from some nasty drug. and you know your momma and poppa didn't raise you to be poor, livin off welfare. i can understand a man not wantin to make love when day after day he can't get no job, but somehow life flips around from hour to hour minute to minute and i remember takin my fine old man's hand one night when we weren't talkin to each other cause we were mad at the world (that same night we borrowed five dollars from a friend—boy, that five dollars looked like a million to me) and i said: i love you . . . when it's tough . . . through it all, i love you.

yeah, he groaned, lookin straight ahead. i giggled. i love that about him too, the way he groans.

then the news came on and the white people were throwin rocks at little black children in boston cause they were tryin to integrate the schools there. president ford says that he is against bussin and don't give a damn about little black children tryin to get a decent education and stay alive on their way to and from school without gettin a brain concussion.

BUT TONIGHT NO INTERRUPTIONS. JUST ME AND MY OLD MAN. THAT'S ALL THERE IS IN THE WORLD RIGHT NOW.

we're undressed, and i'm lookin at my old man's nappy hair that grows around his black dick. he gets in the bed beside me and turns off the light and oh i'm so happy. he puts his arms around me. it's not often he puts his arms around me. he spends most of his day workin to get over, lookin for job after job and most of his evenins frustrated from his days.

i mean, i could tell you stories.

like, the time when i was pregnant. six months and happy bein pregnant,

havin mated with a god. bein pregnant is the most natural fantastic glorious breathin high experience of creation i have ever had. i loved walkin down the street with my stomach all big stickin out, feelin more beautiful than i ever felt with a small waist and swervin hips. our baby would be growin and kickin inside of me sometimes, and oh it would feel so good. we couldn't afford to buy vitamin e oil, so i would put cookin oil on my belly so i wouldn't get any stretch marks. anyway, we were pretty poor then and sometimes we didn't have no food. i would go over big tits marilyn's house. marilyn was white with big breasts that oozed with juice and she use to go shakin them around in all the men's faces. she was nice even though she was always talkin bout how she couldn't keep no man and how she was goin to commit suicide cause she was thirty years old and unmarried. she was crazy and lived in a beautiful apartment tastefully furnished with thick mahogany table and chairs, rich velvet red sofa, and all the latest boss albums. she taught elementary school. she loved little kids. well, she was just talkin and i was hungry so i asked her if i could fix myself somethin to eat cause my old man isn't home right now and there's no food in the icebox.

sure, go ahead, marilyn said.

so i fixed myself a tuna fish sandwich, two in fact. she'll never know how much those tuna fish sandwiches meant to me. while i sat eatin, marilyn and i would talk about how hard it was for my old man to get a job cause he didn't go into those offices shufflin around and actin all weak, tommin, kissin ass. shoot, white folks tom too. jews tom. but anyway, my old man was strong and had an ego and black men aren't supposed to have egos. white power structure tries to destroy the black men's ego. look what they tried to do to muhammad ali—and marilyn would say yeah cause marilyn dug black men secretly. she hadn't broken out in the open yet with her closet desires.

i remember stealin two tomatoes, a can of soup, an orange, four tea bags and two pieces of wheat bread from marilyn's house while she went to the bathroom. after i ate, i kissed marilyn goodbye and told her not to kill herself, that somebody would come along. don't look, you'll be surprized. somebody will just show up. and then i walked home alone to our apartment in the night singin cause i was happy now that i had eaten. my baby inside was happy too.

then i'm on the outside with pipo in my arms, waitin for my old man to make it on the outside too. one minute passes. two minutes. all the minutes pile up to an eternity and i go crazy wonderin where he is, wonderin if they got him, if they called the POLICE! i hear sirens soundin through the

street, but they are speedin off in the opposite direction. my heart jumps and falls a million times. i wonder how is he gonna get out. oh how is he gonna get out? where is he? oh pipo, where is he? innocent pipo just looks up at me with those beautiful bright eyes smilin with love. oh god, oh god . . . i remember that my man told me once i got out to just walk straight home, to go straight home, but it's hard to go straight home not knowin how my old man is. i hug our little baby boy and pray some more. oh god, get him out of there. he can't go to jail. he's got to be free to be with me and pipo and to progress in his career, to live his life, and blow his sweet saxophone. they put niggas in jail for a million years for stealin a fish sandwich. life and death flit before my eyes, me watchin the cars go by, hidin behind a bush ten minutes, fifteen minutes more . . .

and then i see this light in the distance. it's his white tennis shoes and he's running the night. i cry for joy, wipin my eyes. pipo, pipo, your daddy made it, pipo! he got out of there! his daddy doesn't see me cause he's turned the corner and is goin home another way. and so my heart is back together again and i don't feel like i'm gonna die no more. i feel like i'm gonna live and love the world, and do marvelous things. i walk home feelin great, wonderin how my mother and father raised the kids they raised. how great all mothers and fathers are in the world who give birth to little glorious human beins, and take care of them and love them and survive. now that i have a kid, i guess i appreciate my parents more. I LOVE YOU, MOM, i scream into the universe. I LOVE YOU, DAD. i get home with pipo and my old man is waitin for me.

where have you been? i told you to walk straight home.

i was worried, and i had to see what happened to you . . . if you got out. i just had to see.

listen, i appreciate the concern, but it's more important for you and pipo to get home safely. i can take care of myself, you hear? now, if there's a next time, i want you to go straight home and not be hangin around the scene of the crime.

we're gangsters, huh? i said.

yeah, that beautiful man said, standin before me in his elegant gangsterness. and he grabbed me, holdin me and pipo tight. yeah, if there's ever a next time, and i hope there isn't, come on home.

lately we ain't had no droughts. we've had enough food to eat. my old man has a good chance at a job on the side cause he's a musician. he plays the saxophone so high, so low, so free, so good, people can't sit in their seats but *got* to stand and wave their arms and hands and shake their head around and come to the rhythm, the sounds of his song, his songs, his mel-

odies ridin up the chills of your vision on screen. we got to make it. we will.

the snake fire in my tongue touches his, and we begin to roast in our love heat. blackness, blackness is my gladness. i am the happiest black girl in the world. pipo is asleep, and we love.

pipo is not asleep. pipo is now cryin in the dark. his little head lifted up in the dark, he watches us kiss. and we, my old man and me laugh.

FICTION / ISHMAEL REED

From Flight to Canada

Rockland Porke, known by his competitors as “the oil hog,” resides in a huge plantation, near Swin’erd, Virginia, one of his many homes around the world. He has just completed the pushups he does after his morning nourishment: two gallons of slave mother’s milk, and though he’s nearly ninety years old he is trim and fit and has outlived all of his doctors. Bubbly-eyed in wonder, Uncle Tom, his slave, is standing against the wall, arms folded, at Porke’s beck and call.

There’s a knock at the door. It’s Moe, the white house slave—Mingy Moe as the Mammies in the kitchen call him. He looks like an albino: tiny piggy pink eyes, white Afro. “Sorry to disturb you, Master Porke, but Abe Lincoln, the President of the so-called Union, is outside in the parlor waiting to see you. He’s fiddling around and telling corny jokes, shucking the shud and husking the hud. I told him that you were scheduled to helicopter up to Richmond to shake your butt at the Magnolia Club tonite but he persists. Says, ‘The very survival of the Union is at stake.’”

“Hand me my robe, Uncle Tom,” Porke says as he stands in the middle of the room, in his briefs. Uncle Tom, his old grey hair concealed by a turban, dressed in blow-out pants and wearing an Arabian-night sword about his waist (he looks like a Moorish lamp) seeks clarification. “Which one do you wont, Suh, the one with the spangly fritters or the silvery-squilly Liberace-street clothes?”

“Give me the spangly one,” and turning to Moe Porke says, “Now, Moe, you tell this Lincoln gentleman that he won’t be able to stay long. Before I fly up to Richmond I have to check on my investments all over the world.”

“Yessir, Mr. Porke,” Moe says, exiting. Momentarily, Lincoln, Gary