**The Witch's Kitchen**

**by Cpl Ferro**

A weak wailing began, jiggery-coughing and then assuming a familiar aural shape.

Blinck, blinck from the radio speaker, “That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.”

A knob-turn click and the understated triumphant tones were silenced.  Tush-tush-tip by a brown finger and a small flaky cylinder of ash dropped off the end of a cigarette into a black plastic ashtray embedded with abalone shells.

“Terence.”

Rocking, creaking.

“Ter-ence!  Come here, baby.”

Terence emerged from the saddle-shaped enclosure of blankets fastened with pins and laces to bedposts, chairs, and a shiny plastic blue milk crate, where he had been exploring, taking along his stockpile of canned foods--sugar beets, wax beans, a trio of sardine tins, along with a small aquarium containing his pet turtle, Shackleton III, who always chafed his neck looking up at him--and pretending he was out of earshot.  He stood up and bit his ample lip:  a good-looking boy of about ten, doe-eyed, with that upbeat, shining brown and attractive face of a Negro destined to look exactly like the white people preferred their Negroes look like.

“Coming, Momma!” he cried weakly, bantering his way in a subconscious sine wave down the creaking stained chestnut floorboards of the cramped hallway, ignoring the photographs of his relatives in their oval frames, dodging a bucket of soiled diapers, stepping around a stack of laundry, round past the bulging little television in its nook and into the kitchen where he found his Momma rocking by the yellow paisley Formica kitchen table, with his baby sister Amartha to be heard wailing from the castored crib he himself had rolled into the room a few hours before.

His mother had run to fat, but wasn’t quite obese just yet.  She had a very large lower lip, but almost no top one.  She wore a purple dress and more slouched than sat in her rocking chair, but Terence had no consciousness of just how she was slouching, whether forward, side, or back.  She just seemed to dwell in this ambiguous layercake of purple and brown.  He loved his Momma and sometimes could just eat her up.  Sometimes.

“Your sister’s hungry, Terence.”

“I know.”

“She’s too weak to get it started herself, now, you be a good boy and get her started for me.”

Terence’s gaze was trapped by his mother cat’s cradle of wrinkles that seemed to have exclusively incised round her mobile and shrewd black eyes.  He felt a kind of dancing in his intestines.  In the preconscious and unspeakable logic of the captured young, he realised there was no shirking his duty to his hapless baby sister.  He glanced down at his thighs briefly, and then looked at Amartha in her crazy nest of coloured cloth.

“Alright, Momma.”

“You a good boy, Terence, you never doubt that.”

His mother unbuttoned her blouse, and produced a swollen brown lobe adorned with a thick dark brown nipple, an aureola the size of a tin can base.  Terence, like walking through water, familiar with the maneuver, climbed up to sit on his mother’s solid knee, her arms catching him around the triceps, firm-like, like a coach testing the tone of his football players.  Licking his lips unconsciously, he leaned forward to do his duty.

\* \* \*

Nauls lay in bed with his roller-skates on, his feet hanging limply off the end of the bed.  The door to his room, the room he shared with Norris, was open, and he kept looking at it.  There was no sound save the sick soughing of the cool fool wind beating endlessly at the compound walls.  A nameless, everchanging, polychromatic tune by the Jackson Five peddled and bopped in the back of his brain, but that was just a cover.  What really got his attention was that open door.  It just stayed open.  A shadow from the hall light darkened a slash across the door, the wooden, plasticky-grey door.  He knew down the hall there was nothing, just roller-skateable green floor, nice and slick, and the scientifical innards of the station beyond them. But there was that open door.

Anything might come through that door, he thought.

Anything.

\* \* \*

Blair took a break from his examination of that horror from Dogtown.  He set his slickened scalpel down, snap-peeled off his latex gloves, deposited them in the trash, and walked out shaking his head, trying to suppress the thought of lunch roiling within that impelled him to avoid exhaustion and sup.

Nauls rolled out from the greenhouse wing, noticed the elder Blair’s retreating back and rolled up to the lab.  Empty.  Except that whatever-the-shit.  Nauls looked at it, a FUBAR-ed hulk with spindly purple-red legs.  Funky cold mutha.  He looked around both ways, saw nobody around, and rolled into the lab.

Those spindly legs, they reminded him of the king crab legs he used to cook in Bellevue.  The smell was nothing like it though—like someone had barbecued a mink-coat-wrapped ghetto-blaster filled with piss.  He frowned a little, but his eyes didn’t waver.

He slid closer, holding his right hand up in an almost holy gesture, his rate of progress slowing down asymptotically to a precise toe-stop half an inch from the nearest discoloured, black-spiked leg.

His fingers wavered in that Saint-like gesture.  The top pad of his middle finger contacted a black hair, stroked down the chitinous surface, eyes glancing at what he was doing.  It was slick like plastic, and dry, and had little erect stipples as texture.  Hair, smooth, hair, smooth, hair, hair, smooth.

Hair, hair, hair, smooth, smooth, smooth, hair, hair, hair…

Nauls pulled back his fingers, held them to his nostrils and smelled them.  Buried within it was a blue smell, a hateful, sickening blue smell.  This thing ain’t from no place that you ever want to go, Terence, his mother said to him.  This thing ain’t got no right to be here and here you are touching it.  You go wash your hands and you stay out of Mr. Blair’s place.  And of course, Terence obeyed.

\* \* \*

If Clark had have seen what went on in Nauls’ room that night, he would have smiled a ruddy smile at the same he wondered what the hell was going on.  There was a hunched over, lithe form of a young black man pawing through his laundry sack like a husky jam-digging through the crusty snow.  Khaki standard-issue underwear was arranged neatly in a non-touching row on one of the beds.

Nauls upended the sack and dumped out its contents.  One was missing.  They all started with eight--there were supposed to be eight--but he could only find six.  His brown and beautiful face micro-beaded with sweat.  He swallowed, looked around, under the beds, transferred the underwear to Norris’s bed, stripped his covers and sheets off, pillowcase on the floor, lifted up the mattress, looked behind the lampstand, looked on the floor squatting and then dropping down as if he were prepping for  a set of pushups.

He didn’t make a sound except for his bit-lip nostril-breathing.

He got up, made his bed, rearranged everything as it was, transferred the six pairs of underwear to his bed as before.  Then he tore apart Norris’ side of the room, looked in his sack, under his bed, stripped his bed—there was a junk pile:  under a stack of Geophysics Monthly magazines he found a photograph of a twelve-year-old ballerina in a crinoline red dress and pointed pink pointe shoes doing a set.  His brow wrinkled.  He picked it up.  It wasn’t a photograph after all, it was a painting, or at least a painting out of a magazine.  He flipped it over, Archman School of Fine Arts, Milkwaukee, WI, Luxembourg Performances Series.

\* \* \*

“Nauls.”

Dear Lord, dear Jesus oh dear Jesus please oh please Jesus maybe I just put them somewhere maybe I forgot them somewhere maybe someone stole them cause they needed a pair that’s right they needed a pair cause whoever did whatever they did needed a pair that weren’t theirs so they come in and take mine that’s all, who cares if Nauls is missing a pair oh Jesus.

“Nauls, open up, I gotta take a shit.”

“Yeh-ah brosky, I be finishin’ what you be startin’.”

A horrid red siren split the air.  The fire alarm, again.  Nauls got up, slipped momentarily when he forgot he wasn’t wearing his roller skates, unbolted the water-closet door and brushed past Blair, standing there nonplussed with a notebook in his hand and a pen cocked behind his right ear.  He glanced at Nauls hastening away, and then went in.

Blair glanced into the toilet bowl.  Nothing but water.

\* \* \*

Nauls found his way to the far end of the station.  He heard some men rustling with coats and boots and rushing out.  He caught a vibe that they had come from the store room.  He went in, and stepped on something that jingle-crunched beneath his feet.  Garry’s key-ring.  A tongue of cold air out of the de-glazed window maw made him shiver.

They gonna do a test on you, Terence, his mother said.  They gonna do it all science-like, like them men they sent to the moon.  They know things, Terence, more than any poor old little boy like you is ever gonna know.  They gonna mix yo blood with that clean blood in their fridge, and when it goes like ammonia and bleach, they gonna smell you.  Whatcho think they gonna do when they smell you, Terence.  Hmm?

Nauls’ face changed at that moment.  Everything was the same, the siren wailing like a monstrous red baby, the men were all gone.  Within the madness there hung silence.

Nauls bent down, snatched up the keys, and took off running down the hallway toward the lab.

\* \* \*

Palmer strolled nonchalantly into Nauls’ kitchen.

“Hey there, buddy-roo.  What’s cookin’?”

”Gingerbread.  Why, you got any secret ingredients?” Nauls retorted.

“You notice anything wrong with the air conditioning?  Norris had me check his but it wasn’t anything.”

”Temperature’s fine down here.  Here, try some of this to warm ya up,” Nauls said as he held up a ladle.

Palmer walked over and half-touched the ladle as Nauls fed him some brown, mysterious soup.

“Pretty good, man.  What’s in it?”

”Pretty good, that’s my Momma’s home cookin’, ten thousand miles from Wisconsin straight to your stoner stomach.”

“You ain’t gonna tell me are you?”

“Secret recipe, my friend.  Now, are you gonna hook me up with some of yours, or what?”

“I burned it.”

”You what?”

“This shit goin’ down, Bennings killed, Blair locked up, this is bullshit, man.  I’m fried but I ain’t fuckin’ retarded.  No more weed till things bleed.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Nauls asked mock-exasperatedly.

“I don’t…know.  It just came to me.  You been having…bad dreams?” Palmer asked tentatively.

“No.  And if I did I wouldn’t tell nobody, neither.”

\* \* \*

Nauls lay in his bed, his feet naked and hanging over the edge of the bed.  Norris lay sleeping soundly, snoring in a way that alternated between being pleasant and ignorable, and being grating and attention-getting.

But, Nauls didn’t care about Norris’ humpbacked shape under the covers.  Nauls cared about that open door.  It just stayed open, no matter what he did or thought.  It was open, right there, a rectangle of wan light with that slashing shadow and the dulled brass doorknob.  Anything could come through there.

Don’t make sense to me…but

Can’t touch it…but

Can’t feel it inside neither.

Nauls pulled his feet in under the covers.

\* \* \*

Her name was Louise, all of fifteen years old, and Terence, himself seventeen that April, had her alone in his Momma’s light blue Chevy Nova.  There was a throw-cover on the front wide seat, and they had been kissing.  Terence was entranced with the smucking, smacking, gentle play of lips and skin in the misty fulgent glow of a sodium-arc streetlight.

She pushed at his chest.

“Wait,” she said.

She dug into her skirtline, and hauled up her brown sweater to reveal no brassiere, just ripening brown breasts with nipples and everything, just for him.

“You can kiss them if you want.  I trust, you Terence.”

Terence paused.  He felt his intestines roil and he tasted the nicotine that clung to the car’s upholstery.

“No, let me just hold them.”

When he did, he kept his eyes open and riveted to her face, and he kissed her and felt his passion approach and didn’t care because finally there was some gingerbread for him alone.

\* \* \*

The charges were planted.  Mac was really taking it down, after all.  Nauls remembered what Norris had said to him when they were alone in their room, the room with the open door.

"These things, Drake knew they were out there.  We didn’t know what," Norris chortled weakly, became sober, "But they’re out there.  Why the Christ did it have to happen now?  To us?"

“Don’t take the Lord’s name in vain, Peter.”

“…” Norris was nonplussed.

“My Momma said there were things out there.  Angels and devils, things we ain’t never heard of and never want to hear of.  We’ll know all about it when we die.  We ain’t never supposed to find out about these things down here.”

“And those Norwegians dug it up.”

”Mm-hmm.”

Terence.

Nauls looked down the frosty gingerbread basement hallway, its sides packed with jumbles of hoarfrosted supplies and appurtenances.

Terence, come here, baby!

He thought he saw something down there.  Mac was busy doing his Mac thing.  Garry?

Nauls started to advance, curious.  His slit thumb itched inside his mitten.

There was something there.  Something that smelled good.  It smelled like white gingerbread, like sweet milk, and nicotine, and baby powder, and a girl’s machine-oil taste, and there were other smells, too, a rainbow of smells not of this Earth, smells that angels might have.

Nauls, cold, beyond terror, and thirsty, hastened off into the dark alone, smiling.

THE END