

Biscuit in the Lovespace

by Nick Cody

In the summer following the seventh grade I tried to summon a demon. I'd read about the art of conjuration from a book in my middle school library. Its black spine caught my eye one day as I wandered the stacks during study hall while waiting for my turn to play *The Oregon Trail*.

Fingering through the hardcover tome I thought all of the contents in it were real. The ology of its title, *Demonology*, must have given me that impression. I was too young or too stupid (perhaps both) to know better. The drawings that captivated me made one thing clear: the horned, smoldering forms rising from pentagrams were not metaphorical. These slavering things with their drool and their fangs were not symbols for something else like ailments, vices, or sins in any sense of the word. These beings screamed agency, and behind their eyes gleamed the spark of intelligence.

Astrology, biology, cardiology: to my impressionable mind these were all equally the study of real things. Ditto for demonology. My youthful acuity left much to be desired: once in science class Mr. Giving pointed with his gnarly index finger to a word on the blackboard, ecology, and called on me to define it. I said, "It's the study of sounds sent out that come back to you."

So it has been established that I was not too bright. Yet I was content in my dumbness: let the smart kids perform chemistry experiments with their Bunsen burners, I'd thought. For better or worse, a major strain in my character always preferred séances to hard science. After reading the black book and others adjacent to it, I wanted nothing more than to open a portal to another dimension and see what would come through.

A word or two on motive. While one can't rule out the influence of puberty, neither do I think adolescent vitality was the sole cause. Perhaps I craved novelty. Having already leapt the chasm of virginity – well before any of my friends – I was racing to seize new experiences.

Maybe the best way to account for my frame of mind at that time is to recount an anecdote I read several years ago. In this Nordic tale, hundreds of years old, an aged fisherman braves the gray North Atlantic alone in his craft. He is out in the deep waters. In his boat he has only one thick rope hooked to a steer's head. It is not known what he had hoped to catch with such bait.

II. The Urge Toward Memoir

I tried to write a short work of fiction using this demon episode but I failed every time. Fiction is a con, and mine wasn't fooling anyone. No matter how many attempts I made to alter the form, play with the voice, and bend the style into a more suitable mode, the thing would not come together. My Creative Writing professor gave one of my early versions a C. It probably deserved worse. As I remember, some of his marginal notes included exasperated questions (Garden path?), double-underlined exclamations (Narratus Interruptus!), and a reminder to use spellchecker (ouroboros). As was his custom, he scribbled a summation underneath The End which included one terse sentence on story arcs and two bits of advice: change 1st person to 3rd and set the story in NYC. Good luck!

I could see where he was coming from. Rural teenagers boldly mulleted, championing heavy metal and constantly chasing tail, who would go for that? And it's true: the narrative

exuded sloppiness. I could never stick to a plan. But despite his admonishments, a few years later I decided to give the short story one final try after an idea suddenly possessed me.

It would be a case of apophenia's delight. The story would work like this: arouse awareness with an unusual proposition; serve up some mumbo-jumbo with a dash of red herring; then disappoint sought-after climax with an apparent nonevent; and finally, turn the denouement into a hook-shaped loop pointing the reader back toward the beginning. A second reading would make clear some telling details that could be senseless or forgotten the first run through. A first-time reader doesn't know what to look for, but the re-reader is primed. In that version, the pattern of details would point to a demon there, camouflaged and couched in the living room.

That story flopped too. I paid two hundred dollars for a writer's workshop at The Loft in Minneapolis and the feedback session for my piece can only be compared to a group of medical interns poking tentatively at a pale cadaver. These were good people: a bank teller, a paralegal, a Christian. How could I expect them to appreciate such a tale! Fortunately, over a couple beers afterward, at a bar around the corner, a shy guy with glasses from the class made it all worthwhile. He'd felt reluctant to speak in front of the others, but once alone with me he wanted to let me know that he got the whole reflexive structure of the piece, and with a dour expression – probably as close as he could come to mirth – told me some parts were really funny. Finally, he assumed that I'd borrowed from Vladimir Nabokov's "The Vane Sisters". Hadn't I merely substituted my demon for Nabokov's ghosts when writing my story? Later, reading that miniature masterpiece, I was simultaneously slain and set free. For that tip, Bart Flossom, I salute you! If the best I could do amounted to the crude imitation of a vastly superior writer, why stick with fiction?

Yet, I kept writing. And if I couldn't stop writing, and if fiction had to be thrown out the window, the next step became one of direction: how to *sluice* a way for my stories. The answer came to me at a party years ago. In the meantime, it'd lain like a seed buried deep in the compost of my personal history.

III. The Problem of Memory

The solution created a new problem. It's true that at first I found the constraints of autobiography liberating. All I had to do was compose fitting sentences in coherent passages, using the usual tricks writers employ to do their job, all the while sticking with the facts. Things that really and truly happened in this world. Theoretically, the story arcs and details would take care of themselves. After all, in writing a memoir there are rules, and we are not free to just make shit up. But who amongst us remembers in vivid detail any given day from their 13th year? However, if you're not using detail in your writing, you're not writing well. On the other hand, if you spice up your memoir with invented specifics, you'll lose credibility, landing you back in the bullshit pile.

Take for example that little library scene I started with. I remember it happened during the 7th grade and not the 8th. But I don't recall the season, much less the month. That early computer game I remember because it might have been the only one available in the mid 80s at a public school, but it was certainly the only game I remember playing there. The library is also easy to recall because it was in the back of a large room with high ceilings which served as the study hall. But look at the torturous, unreadable way that these sentences must be written in order to remain strictly factual. Was every paragraph to be an unweeded garden of "as I remember", "probably was", "most likely", and "I'm pretty sure"? How insufferable!

Regarding the books, not long ago I returned to my hometown and decided to pop into the school library to see if I could get a hold of them. I didn't seek information. I just wanted to see what it felt like to peruse them again. Would I recognize the drawings? Would I be awash in emotion? Or would it all seem like delightful, childish nonsense? It was winter time, specifically Christmas break because the place was almost empty. It wasn't until I was walking down the hallway – black woolen overcoat frosty and arched around my neck – and fast approaching the librarian, when I realized how I might look, politely requesting to see if *Demonology* was available. It was the only title I remembered verbatim. I decided to go ahead with it. Nodding at my request, she typed out a quick search. They had no such book. What about *Witchcraft*? Sorry. *Black Magic*? Nope. She appeared to be nonplussed, but at this point I felt I'd used up all the goodwill I could expect and left. Bottom line: those books are real, and though I couldn't verify that fact, it's not important to me.

IV. Nothing Much Happens

According to the book, to summon a demon one needed mustard seed sprinkled in a circle, at midnight, under a full moon. Unsure of the risks involved with this endeavor I decided it was best for the deal to go down at a friend's house. So I called my second-best friend Mutt Caramelli and dropped hints until he invited me to spend the night. Mr. and Mrs. Caramelli were headed out as I arrived. It was Wing Night at a bar downtown and Happy Hour from six until two, so they wouldn't be home until late.

Another bonus about Mutt's place was his older sister Lucy. Two years our senior, she lived in defiance of bras and had a way with the Ouija board. A thorny crop of russet curls sprang out from under the sides of her sweat headband. Did she sleep with it on? Ever since I called her Smelly Caramelli she had a thing for me. That's why I said it.

With the Caramelli parents out of the nest, we gorged on hot dogs and macaroni and cheese and floated ideas for games. There were five of us including myself: Lucy, Mutt, Lucy's friend, and Dirk, a four year old neighbor's kid who we were instructed to look after while his parents ate ribs at the steakhouse on the river.

It was young Dirk who first suggested hide-and-seek. I sighed with an exaggerated heaviness and made a big deal about giving in to his request. Then I volunteered to take the first turn as seeker. Everyone heard Dirk run into the kitchen, crawl into the cupboard under the sink and slam the door. I turned to cover my eyes and count to ten. Mutt snuck downstairs and buried himself in the laundry room closet while I spent a solid five minutes upstairs in the master bedroom squeezing his sister's titties. Lucy's friend went god knows where. When we heard Dirk panting on the stairway running up toward us, I suddenly boomed, "There you are, Lucy! Ok, everyone, it's her turn. Let's all go and hide!" Then I whispered to Dirk at the top of the stairs to go find Mutt and let him know Lucy is "it". Rinse and repeat.

The Ouija board came sometime after that. To further set the mood, Lucy covered the rectangular glass table top with a linen spread. I sat next to her, close enough for our knees to knock, and Mutt joined Lucy's friend to finger the planchette. Dirk, circling the table, asked nonstop how to play and looked nowhere near ready to submit to bedtime. Lucy informed him that we were going to talk to a spirit.

Lucy leaned toward the table until only her head loomed over the board. She intoned the first question, "Where are you now?" Her shoulders touched the table edge and her hidden hand slid to rub my three-quarter chub. Here Dirk piped in, shouting over Mutt's shoulder, "What's

your name?” Lucy informed Dirk that the sound of noisy children can make ghosts very cranky. Mutt and Lucy’s friend watched the heart-shaped plank swirl and land on the number six. I said maybe it’s an address. Keep going! The planchette swirled again and landed twice more on six. Lucy’s free hand sprung to slap the back of Mutt’s head. “Very funny, 666!”

Chagrined, he muttered that he couldn’t help it if it was an evil spirit. Again he touched the other half of the plank. It swirled and landed on O. Dirk screamed “Okobogi!” Everyone shooshed him. A second letter came into view: U. And when the third finally landed on R, Mutt’s jaw dropped convincingly and he said, “Whoa! I did NOT do that!” Nobody seemed to get it until Lucy ventured, “Our... house?” At which point everyone is seized by the heebie-jeebies and bounces around the living room like kittens on catnip.

At midnight I got the mustard seed and sprinkled some from its little plastic sack into a circle on the kitchen table. It was exactly midnight. The full moon was up there somewhere obscured by clouds. And that’s about it. Nothing much happened.

V. Drinking Fire, Belching Smoke

The memory of that time came to me many years later as a result of what transpired at a party in Minneapolis. The demon episode, and many others from childhood, was buried somewhere inside me, waiting for its trigger. In this case, the spark came from one of my favorite things-Storytime. Storytime occurred automatically whenever more than a couple old friends from back home got together to drink, talk, and listen to music. One topic always dominated discussion: our days growing up in Bullseye, Dakota.

In this case, two friends from back home were in town visiting, and two others invited the lot of us over for a party. During most of my time in Minneapolis my work schedule as a night security guard had kept me out of the loop, so this would be my first soiree in several years. I parked on the street and climbed two flights of stairs to reach their apartment inside a massive house. I started to feel self-conscious. The passage of time had whitewashed my wardrobe, gentrified my style, and calcified me in other ways I probably hadn’t realized.

As I walk down the hall a voice comes to me, “White, cotton. Panties that thin are just like powdered sugar on pancakes.”

Immediately upon entering the upstairs kitchen where everyone was gathered I felt out of place, overdressed and undersized. Long-haired hulks stood arms-length from the fridge, meaty hands cupping bourbon highballs. Their collective fashion sense was a variation of black boots, faded blue jeans, concert t-shirts, tattoos, piercings. A pipe and a joint circled clockwise. To my great relief, I was welcomed as an equal. Heath “Heat” Seager patted me on the back, poured me some firewater, and then, long enough for me to board, halted the ganja express right at my station. The bourbon and smoke provided a pleasant burn.

Storytime took off. Low energy at first. Someone would mention a song or a band or a beach out at the lake and others would grunt and nod, say yeah. Someone else would recall a house party or a park and the stories would just start bubbling up. Drinking well underage in the Pool Hall. Three dollar pitchers of Busch. Seager said that what he loved about Bullseye was, legally, you had to be 21 to drink, but by that age all of us were bored with the bars.

By meandering this way and that in our talk, we struck upon a fertile topic that had everyone chiming in. Gas stations. Particularly, gas station names from back home. As others spoke I felt Memory and the days of my adolescence surging inside of me and begin flooding over the synapses of my brain. Broadway was the main drag, a four-lane royal stretch of road

that began at the river and climaxed at the Bowling Alley on the edge of town. Broadway heralded an A&W and a drive-in theater. And it had five gas stations which had come about in the following chronological order:

Pump n Stuff

Kum & Go

Pump & Stuff & Cum

Stop n Shop
Or Gas eM

Mike's Gas

The last one had a sign saying, "Stop in for the Chili con Carne!" As teens we thought Mike's was the funniest of them all because we felt it had taken the humorous trend to another level. But at this point my best friend Sullen Bob issued a correction: Mike's Gas was actually the first gas station/auto shop on Broadway. His cousin's brother-in-law had owned it for over thirty years, but the clueless regularly praised its "retro/grunge" look.

Sullen Bob, besides being a wizard with a six-string, could draw pretty much anything he wanted to. For the Stop n Shop, he made (and hung without consent) a wheatpaste poster of a huge, cartoonish prick of a nozzle aiming for an eager car's uplifted rear. He was always posting his art around town.

But what about these gas station names with their well-lit signs? Though the history is crystal clear, it was impossible to say exactly when and where the trouble started. Who was the first to cross the invisible line? The obvious answer is the third title, but one couldn't be so sure. Was it maybe Pump n Stuff? When bestowing the name, was the owner acting innocent but secretly urging others on in its dark vein? And then there's Kum & Go. Why the idiotic spelling, or perhaps it too was hinting at mischief while at the same time providing itself a fig leaf of cover? The owners of the Pump & Stuff & Cum, it's true, represented those blatant blackguards who live without apology on the dark side of good taste. It made their day when uptight out-of-towners asked for whom to make out their personal checks. And maybe the owners of the Stop n Shop, the last in line, were just bandwagon conformists who thought they could not only fit in but one-up their predecessors.

During our gas station ramble somebody mentioned Leda Swanson, the girl I lost my virginity to. She'd worked at Pump n Stuff and had worn button-fly Levi's 501 blues. Images blossomed in my mind's eye. I started to babble and wax poetic. I gripped my guts and swore there never had been another ass as nice. And there was something about those jeans; all the girls looked good in them. Faded button-flies seemed to cradle that meat in just the right way. I would have kept going on like that but Sullen Bob interrupted me, "Hey didn't you try to get her to take Seager's virginity? For like, ten bucks or something?"

Canon blasts of laughter exploded all around me. The memory struck home. Reeling from its onslaught, I noticed Heat sitting on the counter and bearing a shit-eating grin as I hit the linoleum. Spasms of hilarity have me curled up on the kitchen floor. I sputtered something about Seager being a sad sack, needing me to pimp his first fuck. "I remember now, I remember how I

was, how bad I was. Little fucker.” The laughing fit gripped me. I was a thing of amusement. Then there was a lull. People stepped over me and bowed out for piss breaks. When they returned, everyone continued roasting Seager. Still weak with glee, I got up and stumbled into the living room and flopped onto the couch.

I recover from my stupor and see Sullen Bob in a chair beside the sofa. He is staring into the hardwood floor. It doesn't look like he's doing too well. I decide to help him if I can. Several minutes pass. My muscles don't want to cooperate. The room spins. I crawl on my hands and knees to him and learn he is struggling with regret. He says he's tired of the drinking, the partying, the bullshit. He felt this way yesterday and the day before and for a long, long line of days. We look in the kitchen and see the others are setting up a six-foot bong, Mile High written on the side of it.

I'm so fucked up I can hardly even slur. I say to him, “Wanna me to look up Leda Swanson for ya?” Sullen Bob will have none of it. No more jokes. He wants out.

VI. The Way

I have narrowed the possible titles for my autobiography to the following three variations: *My Fucking Life: A Sexual Retrospective*, or *My Life Fucking: the Liberation of a Sex Addict*, or *My Unprintable Life: Confessions of a Sex Fiend*. But I'm nowhere near being finished, so talk of titles is admittedly premature. The Bullseye portion alone should take me years to get done just right. But at least I have my way before me now. I don't worry about sales. My audience is the second circle of hell.

With a lightness and openness of heart I leave my Bangkok hotel in search of some confirmation that I'm on the right path. Something from a higher power to lure me along. I step into a 7-11 and there is something on the stationery shelf, a little pink notebook which shimmers to me. On the cover is a kitten, baby blue, winking in a space helmet and holding a chocolate bar in one hand and a cream puff in the other. She is floating in a cosmos of candy and swirling red hearts. At the bottom it reads Biscuit in the Lovespace. I feel something behind me, or around me, a presence. Are you my demon?