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# The Muse Drank Hazelnut

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## **The Muse Drank Hazelnut**

By Jon Hansen

On a chill autumn evening at the millennium's turn, the ultimate cyberpunk story crashed into existence. This instant classic would have driven the final nail into the coffin of cyberpunk as a subgenre worth exploring, crashing the careers of several authors and screenwriters, both famous and obscure. Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately, it never saw print.

This literary climax sprang into being from the mind of James R. Palmer, codewarrior and self-described writer from Seattle who, up until then, had actually written very little. James had literary ambitions, true, but his day job as a freelance coder for small software companies squatting in the shadow of Redmond ate up his time.

On that electric evening in late October James sat in Java Wired, his favorite coffee shop, unwinding from his day in the programming mines. Normally he would spend his time like the other Java patrons: logged into chat rooms, ignoring everyone except the waitress, who every thirty minutes brought another french vanilla espresso.

However, with his laptop in the shop (two nights previous he had dumped a double tall lowfat mocha into the keyboard), tonight was destined to be low tech. He flipped through the latest issue of Brave New Millennium and sipped a hazelnut café latte. He had just finished skimming "Hacker Trackers: How to Use the Government's Secret SDI Machines to Get Them Off Your Back," when inspiration struck. A vision, if you will.

It felt like a wafer of purest silicon slipped between his brain's lobes, unifying both rational and artistic avatars. As the two sides connected

directly for the first time, synapses began firing like lightning strikes, blam blam blam! Molten possibilities uncoiled and spun down fiery paths. A creative fury took place in his head, and James envisioned what he, for the rest of his life, would refer to as THE STORY.

It would be a futuristic murder mystery, but literary at its heart. It would be edgy and gritty and clever and gorgeous, a Paul-DiFilippo-Dashiell-Hammett-Marcel-Proust kind of thing. In his mind's ear he heard the opening booming forth: The broken man slumped on the bench, lips jet black from nanotech-rich blood. The cracked memory implants had finally ruptured...

James's heart pounded in excitement. His fingers itched to begin typing, to gallop after the muse whispering inspiration into his head and nail down the words in white-hot phosphorescence. The glowing vision faded, however, when he remembered he was without his laptop. He cursed himself for ignoring his workshop group's advice: carry a notebook with him at all times. "Way medieval," he said, laughing. Now he would have killed for a scrap.

He considered rushing back to his apartment, a three story walkup a twenty-minute dash away, but the muse would not be denied. He must write or feel THE STORY slip away and leave behind a dusty unplugged vacancy in his head. He had to act.

First, he needed something to write with: a pen, pencil, lipstick, anything. As he tried to think, the waitress, a skinny dye-job blonde whose nametag read Sam, appeared. "Need anything?" she said with a bored sigh, and snapped her bubblegum. The thick scent of raspberry watermelon filled James's nose.

James looked up in annoyance, but paused. Amidst the tangled strands of Sam's pulled-back hair, a cheap ball-point pen stuck out from behind one ear. Muttering prayers, James focused all his cunning on the task.

"Uh, yeah," he said, trying to sound casual. "I was thinking of trying a new flavor. Can you tell me what blends you guys carry?" He leaned forward. "All of them."

With a sigh, Sam rolled her eyes up toward the ceiling tiles and began rambling out the one hundred and thirty-eight blends on Java Wired's menu, completely on autopilot.

As she glazed over, James reached up and, as if he did this everyday, plucked the pen from behind Sam's ear. Startled at the touch, she broke off and looked around in confusion. "Don't worry, just a spider," he said, slipping the pen up his sleeve.

In a stammering voice she thanked him, then blushed as she tried to remember where she was in the list. Before or after coconut Kenya? With the attitude of a benevolent technocrat, James cut off her fumbblings, and ordered another café latte. She left, still looking confused. Halfway there. Now he just needed something to write on.

Some experimenting proved Brave New Millennium's glossy pages were useless: they refused to hold the ink without turning into illegible smears. The same with the simwood vinyl coating the table; the pen slid right off. James considered his alternatives.

Napkins seemed a natural choice: flat, white, paper's close cousin. However, he only had one. THE STORY began throbbing, insistent. To silence it, he began writing on the napkin.

He covered the napkin front and back with the opening scene before running out of room. Head still aching, he looked around for something else to write on.

Hopeful, James went from table to table, begging for napkins, used or unused. Startled and annoyed by human contact, his fellow coffee drinkers either snarled or stared at him in contempt. He looked for Sam, but in vain; she had noticed her pen was missing, and went outside to sulk on an hour-long cigarette break.

A short trip to the bathroom revealed two things. First, the Java Wired had no papertowels, only an environmentally friendly hand dryer gathering dust. Second, one-ply toilet tissue is completely useless. Completely.

Now truly desperate, James headed towards the serving station near the front, intending to pillage it for new writing surfaces. Napkins, an order pad, anything. Just as he reached it, however, the manager, a tall, hairy fellow named Lars, stepped out of the kitchen. Lars scowled at James in disapproval and flexed one thick forearm, flourishing a tattoo of a flaming skull showing a mouthful of fangs. Underneath thick, crude letters read, "Babies for Breakfast." Meekly James retreated to his table.

He sat squirming for a minute. The pressure was killing him. He had to write on something.

In the end, he resorted to sugar packets. Although tiny, they were both numerous and blank, except where the package read 'SUGAR' in pink letters. Numbering each one with care, James then covered the sugar packet with his spidery handwriting, squeezing as many words as he could on each side. Upon covering every millimeter of its surface, he then dropped the packet in his backpack for safe keeping.

After he had gone through fifty or sixty packages, his conspicuous consumption drew notice. Lars came out and glared at him again, which almost caused James's colon to empty into his polyester hip-huggers. To distract him, James scooped up his untouched double tall latte and dumped in eight packets. "Low blood sugar," he called to Lars cheerfully. Lars stared, then lumbered into the back, gnashing his teeth.

James wrote until closing time. When he finished his hand had cramped into a claw, struggling to grip the pen. THE STORY covered two hundred and forty nine packets of sugar. To further appease Lars, James had also bought six café lattes, sixteen biscotti, and two cups of water. Wallet empty but his backpack bulging with the precious sweetener, James returned home.

He emptied the backpack on his kitchen table in a powdery white thump. He made a quick trip to the bathroom, then began sorting packets. For two hours and twenty-eight minutes he sorted, pausing only for the bathroom.

By the time he finished James discovered something terrible: three packets were missing. Not just any three. The missing packets described the grand climax of THE STORY, the murderer's unmasking.

Frantic, James looked everywhere. He searched his pockets, his clothing, eventually even shredded his backpack. No luck. His mind raced as he tried to think where the packets might be.

Then he remembered: while puzzling out the ending's wording, Sam, now smelling of Marlboros, had reappeared and demanded to know how much sugar he really needed. Panicked, he had grabbed a fistful of sugar packets and poured them into the coffee, all the while babbling about adult

versus child diabetes until she left for another break. He must have used the missing packets to sweeten his last latte.

Frantic, he cudgeled his brain, trying to remember how THE STORY ended. It was useless. It was as if THE STORY had been a computer virus in his head, demanding to implement, and once it had finished, erased itself. Only meaningless fragments remained: "phantasy engine," "burning tires," and "pork." Try as James might, he couldn't remember how it ended. His ears filled with the pounding of his caffeine-saturated blood, overwhelming everything else. After a minute of desperate thought, he realized he had to go back to the bathroom.

For three days James couldn't sleep, and for three days he tried to remember how THE STORY ended. He wrote it out again and again, hoping that would trigger the ending. He tried to write another ending, but everything he thought of seemed weak, pointless even. He even tapped into one of his employer's servers and wrote a quick analysis program to try and calculate a plausible ending. Nothing worked. Finally, weak and exhausted, he fell into a seventeen hour coma. When he awoke, THE STORY had truly disappeared.

Despondent, he took the remaining sugar packets and began mixing Irish coffees. One after the other he drank them, until a dark oblivion overwhelmed him. He never recovered. He spent the rest of his days online in chat rooms, telling others about THE STORY that would have made his literary name.

Meanwhile, unaware of the threat that passed them by, cyberpunk authors everywhere slumbered on, dreaming sweet silicon dreams.

The End