

IN THE END

A D JAMESON

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PART I

In the end, he said a great many things that he later came to regret.

He had been standing in the bookstore's basement. New in town. Not a regular there.

Nonetheless, he'd quickly figured out where they kept the bargain books.

He'd sussed it out. He'd knowingly tracked it down.

They kept the bargain books in barrels, massive barrels, crammed inside, mass-market paperbacks on discount.

Some of the books were missing covers. Most of the paperbacks were soiled, or missing pages.

He stood there alone, thumbing through them, reading snatches of phrases, words here and there. Enjoying the feel of the pocket-sized paper. The size of the books.

The overhead lights went suddenly out. They were feeble lights, weak and dim, providing barely any illumination. At first he didn't take any notice of their absence.

As though he could see well enough in the dark. As though he no longer needed light.

As though he had reached a turning point, perhaps.

But then the book disappeared before him. And then his hand disappeared before him. They went away, snatched up by a darkness, an all-encompassing inkiness.

An inkiness that had presence, washing about him and over him. So dark as to be tangible, pervasive, sensuous.

A thick, heavy medium he could sink into, relaxing, forgetting. An end in itself.

He supposed that the power had gone out, that a fuse had blown, or that the breaker had been damaged. The bookstore was old, and no doubt its wiring was fickle.

He tried to remember the way to the staircase, and how far it was, the direction stairs lay in.

They lay to the right, around a bookcase, around a few barrels. He thought. Pretty certain.

He started to move. He was starting to move when a voice in his ear told him not to move.

A voice nearby, a woman's voice. It said it was dangerous to move.

There are large gaping holes in the floor, the voice said. Beneath the floorboards. Large holes left from all of the water damage.

Behind his ear. Beneath his right earlobe, beside his right shoulder. The voice was close by. The woman was standing very near him.

He reached out and took her hand in his. Instinctively. Instinctually. He held hands with the voice.

The woman's hand was warm. It had blood in it, coursing inside it.

She squeezed his hand. Their palms pressed together, enveloped in inkiness. His right hand and her left hand.

And in her right hand — she had one as well — she held a small flashlight on a keychain. She switched it on.

She pulled on his hand, on his wrist. She led him, guiding him gently by his hand around the boards, to the basement's exit.

Following light. Together, behind the mottled beam that she emitted.

They went upstairs, still holding hands. The wooden stairs

creaking underfoot. They joined other customers leaving the bookstore, filing out into the street.

No one carrying books. No one taking the chance to make off like a crook. The people not thieves. Polite, good-natured, kind.

Swiftly filling the streets. Proceeding calmly in an easy-going fashion.

Everybody who lived on the street was filling the streets, was filing from darkened apartments, holding flashlights if they had them. Holding hands.

The street had gone dark. The block had gone dark. The whole of the neighborhood had gone dark.

The city entire had gone dark. The world had gone dark, had succumbed to an onrush of sudden darkness.

Shadows tangible, pervasive and sensuous.

A dark such as comes only once in a while, once in a decade, once in a lifetime. A dark like a bookend, demarcating a length of time.

A full sudden stop brought on by a shift in celestial clockwork. A precursor zone. Intermediate, wanting.

A kind of prologue, or intermission. A coda, even. . . .

They had come to the end of the current era, somebody suggested. They'd used up the time that had gone before, the days

that had been allotted to them. They'd arrived at the end of an age.

Which age it was depended on who it was you asked.

The Mechanical Age. The Industrial Age. The Atomic Age. The Post-Atomic.

An inhuman epoch. An impersonal history, an atheistic age.

An inherited period that others had set in motion, that passed without comment from anyone living, that no one living had played any part in setting in motion.

A motionless age. It was high time, then, for a change. It had long been high time. The time was ripe for something new — they agreed that this was so.

Things couldn't continue the way they'd been going. Not given the impersonal, atheistic, inhuman way they'd been going.

Them making a mockery of themselves. A laughingstock. Jerks and asses, everyone, one and all.

Thank heaven, a new day was finally dawning. The Promising Era. This dark was the dark before the dawn, the darkest time, somebody suggested.

Earnestly. Convincingly.

Somebody had started to pass around candles, short flimsy candles, like the kind handed out at a vigil. Somebody some-

where had brought out a whole box, perhaps left over from a vigil.

A million man march. A million short, flimsy, brittle candles.

One of the boxes came around. He picked out two candles. He handed a thin, fragile candle to her.

People passed around bags of cuffs for the candles, little ring collars to slip on to catch the dripping wax.

People passed around matches. They shared their lighters.

They passed around food. People passed around drinks. Inside their apartments, fridges were no longer running. Computers and TVs had gone dark, had turned themselves off.

As the AC had gone off. The night was a humid one, a hot one. The forecast had called for occasional breezes, but it had been wrong. Occasional breezes hadn't come.

The drinks now were sweating in their hands. The candles were dripping in their hands, melting over their collars.

Men unbuttoned their button-down shirts. They took off their jackets, their ties, their dress shoes. Women rolled up their short sleeves, tied their T-shirts up over their midribs. They rolled up their pants legs, took off their sneakers, sandals, socks.

The whole world around them was dripping, melting. Cleansing itself, stripping down, preparing itself for the imminent Promising Era.

They'd met, he and she, at the end of an inhuman era. They'd met at the end of a failed age. A new one was just beginning, was sticking its soon-to-be-tousled head around the corner.

Some people played music. They brought out guitars and sat on their windowsills, strumming chords. Some people played checkers on the sidewalk. Some people unfolded their laptops, draining their batteries, checking for news, reporting that the WiFi had gone down.

Most everyone stood around and talked, sweating, fanning their faces with hands and with pieces of paper. Drinking, eating.

They talked, he and she, no longer holding hands but talking. Surrounded by other bookstore customers, neighbors, strangers.

The night still and languid, humid, sweating, yet still somehow passing. Snatches of music overlapping, fragments freely interwoven with mixed-up voices.

The night mostly silent, still. The common attitude hushed, even reverential.

Expectant. Patient.

The moon wasn't out, or was out and was hidden where no one could find it. Behind a stray cloud, or behind an old tree.

Behind the bookstore, even, or one of the neighborhood's many apartments.

Behind a crumbling warehouse, or factory one block over.

The darkness was thick, and silent, and pulsing, and lay all around, the candles clustered like little pinpricks raised two meters off the ground.

In time, the streetlights came back on. Small balls of light inside them lit and came slowly on, intensifying, glowing neon and blue. Back on in emergency mode, brought online by some small emergency generator somewhere. Reserved expressly for that purpose.

The lamps growing steadily brighter, replacing the darkness and pockets of candlelight.

The Promising Era advancing, surely and steadily nearing. Bearing a new light, neon and blue.

His candle had burned down by now, guttered out. He dropped the remaining stub inside the empty bottle he'd been holding.

They'd finished their candles.

They'd finished their food. They finished their drinks. She blew out her own candle, dropping the stub inside the bottle, beside his.

They shook hands with everybody around them, fellow customers, neighbors, strangers.

They walked hand-in-hand through the streets, in no hurry. They passed other groups out talking, singing. They waved

hello and they nodded, sharing. They smiled at strangers.

They said goodbye to the former era, the bygone age. The Mechanical Age. The Industrial Age. The Atomic Age. The Post-Atomic.

The time holding still and yet still somehow passing. Minute by minute. Tick by tock.

They ended up soon enough back at his place, a ramshackle single-bedroom, a garden apartment roughly hewn from a musty, unfinished basement.

He lived in a bad part of town, not too far away from the bookstore, a spot in a former industrial zone. Near the city's large, sluggish, muddy river, in the lowlands.

In a neighborhood that must have at one time been very pretty, the edge of a wealthy, early suburb. Overtaken throughout the decades by the downtown's spread, by industrial rezoning, by urban blight.

In a decrepit brownstone, barely holding itself up, falling down at the end of a dead-end street.

It's a metaphor, he laughed. A figure of speech.

What does the river symbolize? she asked him. Teasingly. Half-earnestly.

Stagnation, he easily answered. And self-ruination.

They went inside, down the narrow steps. They had moved

from one basement to another.

His place was unfurnished. He had a TV and a couch, and a carpet, a mini-fridge. Nothing more.

Do you have any roommates? she asked. No, he answered. He didn't have any roommates. He lived alone. He had been living alone in the city.

Before that, he'd lived all by himself in a different city. He'd lived far away, in a country that no one had ever heard of.

In a country, he said, where life was still occurring, where creation was still ongoing, a thing left unfinished. Every day that dawned there different, a brand-new day.

He had, after college, gone away to the earth's far end. To live by himself.

Did you make any friends there? she asked. Did you meet up with anybody?

No, he answered. He hadn't made friends.

Did you see anybody while there? she asked. Did you go on blind dates?

No, he answered. I didn't.

He'd had of course offers of friendship, of seeing, but didn't engage them. Those offers unopened, left littering his doorstep. None of those offers taken up on.

He'd bypassed all offers—frank suggestions from girls who were willing, who thought him exotic. Girls in black suit-like school uniforms that barely concealed shocking bodies, lean and dark. That barely covered their foreign bras, their native thighs.

Their forthright offers left dangling before him, unrealized, unravished. Unseized upon.

They'd failed to compel him, he said, to entice him. Despite his loneliness, they had failed to arouse his interest, his wit.

Why did you leave and move back here? she didn't ask him. She didn't need to; she'd already parsed it, already perceived it.

He'd come back to make another try, to start anew. To give his country another go.

To tie up loose ends.

And are you? she asked him. Are you tying up loose ends?

No, he answered. The loose ends were still dangling loose around him, their fabric frayed.

He didn't do much of anything, honestly, nowadays. He didn't have any work. He didn't like to work.

He'd played a popular card game, professionally, a while back, while in college. He'd made some money doing that.

He'd always been good at games, at whatever popular pastimes

he tried his hand at. Marbles. Cards.

He could play both ends, could play both ends against the middle. He didn't mind taking startling risks. He was willing to risk it all, to cash in, to go all in.

When playing marbles, he would play for all the marbles. He would play for all the cards when playing cards. He was fearless when playing. He had good instincts. He had sharp wits. He was intuitive, strategic.

For over five years, he had lived by the skin of his wits alone. He had lived by the means of his wits.

Until one day, a while back, he'd grown tired of playing popular card games. Of intuition. Of strategizing, of risk and witty, unfailing instincts. Until he was no longer at all certain what he wanted.

He'd grown lethargic. He'd lost his vision.

He'd lost his ambition. He'd moved overseas, to someplace cheap. To an unknown country where the dollar was still enormous.

He took fresh stock of his resources and potential.

He still had his wits. He knew how to stretch his savings out, to make ends meet.

He could live very simply. Even after he'd moved back here, he still had some money left, enough for a little while.

Enough to meet his ends, for now. Enough to meet somebody nice in the basement of a used bookstore.

Enough to be able to afford to wander the streets for days on end, for weeks on end. Relentlessly aimless. Lacking guidance. Going nowhere. Knowing no one.

He'd nowhere to go, no place he particularly wanted to get to. He'd step outside and not know which direction to head in.

He'd wait for an impulse to overtake him, for inspiration to strike. But he'd stand there, unmoved, not stricken, not taken with anything in his surroundings.

He had too many options, none appealing. He could go either right or left. He could go straight. He could go back inside, and sit down on his couch. He could waste half the day, watching TV, playing his Nintendo.

He had no direction.

It was, he said, just like when he'd lived in the foreign country. There, he'd step out of his house and topple over, disoriented, unable to focus on a fixed point, unable to read that foreign landscape, to even tell which end was up.

He'd get hungry but couldn't be bothered to eat, to choose from the foreign dishes, none of them appealing. He couldn't be bothered to barter for deals in the street-side markets.

He'd head back inside, retreat inside to his bedroom, his AC unit, to watch TV, to try to understand what the people were saying.

His education, was how he justified it then. Nevertheless consistently uncomprehending.

Nowadays, these days, he mostly spent his time in cafés and in bookstores. Gadding about, reacclimatizing, just observing. Minding his business. Parceling out pennies for unsweetened tea and used books with torn covers.

Idle and listless. Wanly pursuing what had turned out to be the next stage in his miseducation.

He said this without shame. It didn't embarrass him to not work, to have no purpose.

It didn't expose him. He still kept his chin up. He maintained a durable upper lip. He didn't shave all that often, but wasn't ashamed to show his face off, to make a display of it daily.

Have you been seeing anyone? she had wanted to ask him.

No, he answered. He never saw anyone, not anymore, not very often. He'd made few friends.

He kept to himself on most days, his head held high, yet somehow remaining hidden.

Not talking to those he saw around him in the bookstores and cafés. Not asking his questions.

Do you have questions? she asked him.

I do, he answered. I'm burning with many questions.

You can ask me your questions, she said. Before you burst.

He did so. He asked her the ones he'd been holding for her, all this time. Such as: What do you do? And: How long have you lived here, lurking beside me in bookstore basements?

All her life, she answered. She was, unlike him, a city native, had suffered through a childhood languishing out in the suburbs.

A misspent youth. Time she'd never reclaim.

As soon as she could, she had gotten away. By now, she'd been living downtown for a while. Ever since leaving college.

Ever since college, she had wanted to be a writer. She'd written short stories. She'd written short poems. She'd published a few, here and there, in small journals.

No books as of yet. Right now, at the moment, she was working away on her first, a very short novel.

A very small book, which she had been working on now for a while. For far too long, when it came time to honestly say it, to admit it freely.

Giving up and starting over. Making small edits. Experimenting with different structures.

Swapping the characters in and out.

Her problem was never having time, not time enough, enough free time that she could set aside to write. Not time in the way

she really wanted.

For hours on end. For days on end.

It was only her night job, writing was, no more than a hobby at the moment.

What's your day job, then? he asked her. You don't want to know, she said. No, tell me, he said. Insistently playful, encouraging her to confide in him.

Odds and ends, she said. She ran random errands in the daytime.

Her schedule book somehow always full. Her date book crowded with errands and deadlines and appointments.

So delete them, he said. Blow them off. Use that time for yourself, for writing your novel. Will you do that? he asked. No, she answered.

She couldn't do that. She wouldn't be capable of doing that, of deleting a single thing.

Because she liked it, she said. She secretly had to confess.

She liked the days when she didn't have time enough to think. She craved routine.

Always running from rendezvous to assignment. From assignation to assignation.

For the most part, she worked as a freelance copywriter. She

was in widgets, caught up in their complicated promotion. She wrote their copy. She worked on their user manuals, how-tos for end-users.

She had lots of widgets lying around. I can get you a couple, she offered, can keep you healthy in widgets. Lousy in widgets. A lifetime supply.

I could use a few widgets, he answered, laughing. More widgets and gizmos. It's what this apartment has been lacking.

Back in college, she said, it wasn't the kind of thing she'd ever thought she'd end up doing. When she'd pictured herself in a trade. When she'd envisioned herself as a young woman, as a professional.

You'll do something else, he said. He squeezed her hand. I don't know about that, she said. I've been stuck in this widget thing for quite a while.

It's what I've been doing, am doing each day, she said. Every day, she wrote an endless amount of copy.

On a laptop in a café. In different cafés, wherever her daytime appointments took her.

You're a rascal! he told her. All of this time, you've been hovering at my elbow. Teasing her gently. Gently laughing.

She had her own business card, she said, and that she could show him.

She showed him her business card. It was real. She really had

one.

Simple and unadorned, like her. In neutral colors. Her full name embossed in small capital letters, first and last, and including both middle initials.

Keep it, she said. I've got boxes full at home. Small boxes, neatly arranged in a corner.

Barely earning a proper living. Barely bringing her ends together, making her ends meet, those ends she could reach.

She lived in another part of town, a different neighborhood, one more affluent. She rented a third-floor apartment in a house.

It isn't much, she said. It's really nothing more than a room at the top of the stairs. Even still, she could barely afford it.

Without a stove, with nothing more to cook her meals on than a hotplate. With barely a pot that she could piss in. Always cold.

With fickle steam heat that rarely came on, that clanked when it did so, waking her up.

With no room for a couch, or a TV, or bookshelves. Her only furniture an antique Murphy bed that, when folded down, filled the whole apartment.

The boxes of business cards neatly beneath it.

She had one bookcase, a small one, set into the wall. It was full

of her books, titles wedged in together. Whenever she wanted to add a new title, she was obliged to take one off.

He squeezed her hand. It sounds lovely, he said. I'd love to see it. I'd love to see your Murphy bed.

Her hand still warm, still coursing with blood. He rubbed her arm.

He rubbed her head, rubbed his own head against hers.

They brushed their lips. They brushed their chins.

They made love very slowly on his couch, in the unfinished basement, rocking calmly. Gamely balling. Screwing from end to end for hours and hours on hind end, twisting together, then gently unraveling.

As soon as she'd touched his hand, he whispered, back in the bookstore, before he had even gotten to see her, he'd had a vision of her nude, lying back in the nude on a marble floor, the floor ice-cold between her shoulders, against her thighs. He'd fantasized, he'd gotten a vision of crawling in between her thighs, of sticking something deeply inside her, a thing that she wouldn't soon forget, that would surprise her.

He wanted to see her eyes widen in shock, her nose and chin tremble. He wanted to see her clench her teeth, to make her head rock back and forth, to shake loose her earrings.

For years now he'd had these visceral tendencies, strong desires. Unfulfilled. Unacted-upon.

To his surprise, she shared them, those viscid desires. Those ten dozen tender needs.

She wasn't embarrassed to hear him voice them. She liked to hear them. She came back to hear them every weekend.

She came by on weekends. She visited him. She returned and she did whatever he asked her to.

Lying back with her eyes closed, backside itchy against the carpet. Uncomplaining. Freely submitting to his hand, his administrations.

His explorations. For the first few weeks he dominated her. He had his way with her, the way he thought he'd wanted. But in time their positions shifted, rebalanced, reversed.

She came to dominate him, to force him back onto the carpet, to order his eyes closed, to cause him to hush.

He lay back for her. He did what she wanted. Willing. Eager. Filled with a nervous expectation.

She sodomized him with a candle, with a carrot stick, with her hand, with a sticky widget. You like to take it in the rear end, she knowingly whispered.

He grunted. Yeah. Yeah, I like to take it. He liked to be on the receiving end.

Inserting whatever items were at hand to be inserted. Marbles. Carrot wedges. Candles.

You're something, he said. You're onto something. Let's go out. Let's do something together.

Sharing their hands, their whispered wants, their ten dozen urgent, tender needs. Their noses and lips and chins. Their reversed administrations.

In the unfinished basement, on the cheap carpet, beside the couch. From now on tethered together, stuck together, stuck on one another, sticky.

Let's be close friends, she whispered to him. Let's be better than friends, the very best of friends.

I'll be your friend till the very end, he whispered to her. Cupping her body, tasting her tongue, her teeth, her chin. You can count on me. You can always come back to depend on me.

Together, they burned their tether at both ends. His rear end burning.

For hours on weekends. For weekends and weekends.

In the evenings, they returned to the bargain bookstore. They had this common history between them.

They had the used bookstore in between them. It lay exactly halfway between their two apartments.

On weekend evenings they would set out, he from his basement, she from her overpriced third-floor apartment, each walking there. They'd set out at roughly the same time and measure their paces, meeting to go down together into the

basement.

They watched where they stepped. They minded the floorboards.

There are more basements under this one, she informed him. Basements and basements. Basements of basements. They continue down forever, bottomless.

Despite the danger, they turned off the overhead lights, unscrewing the paltry incandescent bulbs.

They used her flashlight. They looked at the poor books crammed in together, musty, unwanted, wedged in together on slumping, water-damaged shelves.

Pathetic. Neglected.

The floorboards beneath them softly creaking. Their hands interlaced, their palms pressing together. Their fingers interlocked and sweating.

They stayed close together, side by side, lightly playing the flashlight's beam across titles. They felt for the bookshelves, for the barrels, for the books.

He displayed his wit. He took this chance to showcase his famous wit for her.

He imagined new titles for each of the authors.

Lumpy Mongoose. Big Zeppelins Among Us.

The Curse of the Unfinished Nighttime Ballgame. The Screaming Amigo.

Stop, she gasped, laughing hard. Stop, stop. She laughed so hard that she couldn't stand up, that she needed to sit down.

He saw how, instead of sitting down on her hind end, she squatted.

These are only the old books, he said. These are only the old, used books. Where are the new books?

There were no new books in the bookstore, on none of the shelves. No new books in the barrels. No new books in sight.

There will never be any new books, he told her. Not unless new authors write them.

You need to write them, he said. People will want new books. You need to finish your book, for the sake of human expectations.

Its needs and desires.

They browsed and they fingered, playing the beam of light aimlessly, gently.

Despite their long hours in the basement, despite her attention, she never bought anything. So why do you come to the bookstore? he finally asked her.

New words, she said. She gestured. I'm always in need of new words for my unfinished novel. She pointed the beam of

light at the dozens of titles around them. I need their words. They've already taken all the words.

She grabbed a title, flipped it open. *Effervescent*, she read. Now there's a word. I need a word like that, a poetic word.

He picked up another book, flipped it open. *Effortless*, he read. That's a damn good word as well. You should put that word inside your novel.

I will, she said. Now I have two new words.

Effervescent. Effortless.

A novel needs so many words, she said. It isn't a thing that's short.

You need, at the very least, she said, ten thousand words, each one of them different. Arranged in all sorts of combinations.

And you need to know where they all go, which word goes where. Or else you end up in the poorhouse.

The next time she came to visit him, one weekend later, he smiled and handed her a present. Unwrap it, he said.

She unwrapped it. Inside was a beat-up pocket dictionary. Now you can have all of the words, he said. You can carry them all around with you.

Thanks, she said. But they're not arranged in the proper order.

That's your task, he said. That's your mission. You must find

the proper order.

Show them no mercy! Keep your chin up! Don't be lazy! Keep your lip the way I keep mine!

He had a fine chin, a firm upper lip. His eyes got rather teary in the morning. He woke up crying, more often than not.

He smoked first thing. He reached for a fag as soon as he could.

She put an end to that. She put a stop to that. She convinced him to stop.

She couldn't French-kiss him if he were smoking, couldn't bring herself to caress him, to embrace him.

Once he quit them, the smokes, the fags, she was his, without any reservations.

Her hands down the front of his pants in a heartbeat. Her lips on his ear, her licks on his earlobe. Her breathing heavy.

She was, he realized, as he learned more and more about her, as she opened up and relaxed, as she showcased her genuine personality, much wittier than he. And much more clever.

She had a subtle way with words, from years of long practice. From noting which words meant what, due to how other people used them.

Taking them down. Scrawling quick little notes in the brown spiral notebook that she carried.

Her penmanship tiny, impossibly small. Cramped letters collapsed in upon themselves, without any room left in their tightened loops. She could take down a thousand new words on a page and still not fill it.

Shaking and thin. Her fragile body shivering, snuggled up against his.

She never had money. She never bought books for herself, or any food at all. She never ate.

He'd never seen her eat, not since the first night that he'd met her, no food, not once ever. He cooked dinner for her.

His fridge stuffed full, filled up with various odds and ends. With marbles, with unread used books. With cans of piss, with smokes, with steam, with a gas. With unidentified animal scraps.

With marbled meats, thick with fat, written through with webs of viscera and tendons.

He'd learned to eat crazy things in the foreign country he'd lived in. Odds and ends. Poor animals' chins and noses and lips.

He cooked a soup for her, "shark fin soup." He knew how to cook that exotic soup.

I find these things down by the river, he said, indicating a stack of what he said were shark fins. People leave them there, lying around.

She was starting to recognize when he was kidding. She was starting to realize when he was joking. She asked what was really inside the soup.

You don't want to know, he said. Just eat it. Just enjoy it.

She just enjoyed it. She simply ate it. Whatever the soup was, whatever it comprised, it was delicious. She wanted to eat it.

Not once in her whole life had she eaten such tasty soup. Don't say what's inside it, she asked him.

She gobbled down all of her soup. They shared the soup. They ate soup and played his Nintendo together, in the basement, on the couch.

Sharing secrets and tips and codes and strategies. Sharing memories of games they had each of them played when younger, at earlier ages, one another as yet unknown, with vast distance and ignorance still between them.

She asked him, What are you thinking about? Not a thing, he said. He wasn't thinking about anything.

They had moved, hand-in-hand, arm-in-arm, well beyond the early stages, well beyond mere wit. They had moved to pure presence, a patience, a zone that awaited beyond mere clever sayings.

He promised her many new things. They promised each other such beautiful, brand-new things.

I'll follow you, he said, to the very end of the earth. To the

be-all and end-all of the earth.

To the ends of the earth. To the means of the earth. To the earth's meaner parts, overseas, in countries as yet unheard-of.

I'll take you overseas with me, he promised her. To my foreign country, unknown by most. To be part of its daily ongoing creation. To witness ballgames played by teams you've never heard of.

She pressed up against him, cold, always chilly. The city they lived in was famously cold, was well known for its lengthy, harrowing winters.

Why do you live here, he asked her, here in this frigid climate? For surely the earth has much warmer places.

The foreign country where he had lived was always hot, was to this day hot. Was day by day getting even hotter.

Sticky humid. Sweat-inducing.

I'll share the long plane ride there with you. I'll give you the smatterings of the language I've still retained, he said. The phrases he still understood.

She liked these offers. She liked these suggestions, these patient promises.

At first, they had meant to share nothing more than sex, but in the end they had shared something else.

They were rhymed together now, bargained together, close to-

gether, holding one another up.

She had come to depend on him. He had come to depend on her.

They had come to depend on one another.

They shared their fears.

He had his fears, some irrational, some somewhat more rational.

There were sharks in the nearby river, he said, river sharks that could thrive in the fresher water. They swam in from out of the ocean, in search of the unsuspecting, the unwary.

He could hear them at night, on the other side of the wall. Their sharp fins scraping against the plaster.

She didn't argue. She didn't mouth one word in objection. Instead, she pulled his couch away, out into the center of the room.

That helped him a little. But nevertheless, his fears persisted. The walls were too thin, too weak to support the brownstone building overhead. The ceiling would cave in. The walls would collapse one day and cave in.

His basement would flood, would flood and fill up with river sharks.

I'll end up inside of a shark, he said. He'd get chewed up, gobbled up and digested. He'd end up as nutrients, structural

parts of a shark's right fin.

Serves me right, he said. Can't say that I don't deserve it, he said.

She said something soothing and soft and calming in response. She shushed in his ear.

You're safe, she said. You're in my arms now, safe, she said. Don't be afraid.

She rocked him to sleep. He nodded off.

He woke up lying in her arms, his head in her lap. Her legs crossed cross-legged underneath him. He had drooled all over her shins.

She was scribbling small notes in her notebook, her miniature observations. Are you writing about me? he asked.

He'd end up, he knew, as a word in one of her stories. His full name would end up as one of the many hundreds of words constituting her novel.

A word meaning *piss*. A word meaning *sticky*. A word that was equal to *depression*.

Don't be ridiculous, she said.

A word meaning *cute boy whom I love despite his having drooled on my shins*.

Her legs having cramped, having gone to sleep underneath his

head. She having not minded in the least.

I need a word like that, she said. In point of fact. For the opening chapter.

Drool being an unguent, a lubricant. An emulsifying agent. A catalyst.

It gets things going. Throughout human history, throughout time, drool's been the start of many a thing.

New ages. New customs.

Brand-new eras. New cuisines.

She had to get going. Their weekend was coming to a close.

The evening shadows were drawing near, were thickly gathering.

Their weekend was ending. Soon he'd have to walk her back to her apartment.

She started crying. She cried real tears.

I hate my apartment, she said. I hate its lack of space and its clanking steam heat. I hate its third-floor nature, its no space for furniture proper, its Murphy bed that lowers and smothers everything.

She wept. She shook, her body racked with violent weeping.

Hey, he said. Hey, hey. Hey, look at me, he said.

He took her hand in his. He took her into his arms.

He said some reassuring thing, something reassuring. Why do you live out where you do? he asked.

That spot was good for her business, she answered. It was what she'd wanted, what she had once thought she had wanted.

Once, long ago. Once upon a lost time.

He ended his next sentence to her with a proposition. You could move in with me, he proposed.

PART II

There was no clear end, no clear beginning of the end.

The bottom line ran dry. The bookstore basement line ran dry.

The barrel ran dry. The tether came loose in both their hands.

She felt as though she had been struggling for a long time, for weeks and for hours, fighting her way heavily through the levels.

Jumping and ducking. Swinging on tenuous vines over pits. Escaping the maws of ravenous critters. Pulling her own butt out of the fire, again and again.

A new realization was finally dawning on her. The levels were, in fact, endless. The levels were, in fact, repeating.

Recombinations of basic elements. Variations on a pattern.

For years she had dutifully planned and practiced, developing moves that she could use at the end of the level, against the end-boss. But now she knew that she would never reach the end-boss.

She'd wasted her fighting moves against minions, and minions only.

She was gloomy. She filled up with gloom.

Gloom was a thing she had inside her. Leaking in steadily, slowly, carelessly from someplace else. Ceaselessly.

She grew gloomier and gloomier. She grew thinner. Her gloom, thinner, lingered.

He saw at last her deep depression. She shared it with him. He saw her fears.

She feared she would never finish her novel.

She feared she would never add a title to the bookstore. She'd never have anything crammed in their barrels, never get squashed in with the other bargain books, stuffed, musty, together.

Never to sit out of order on slumping, neglected shelves.

She'd never go anywhere, never travel. She'd never get out of the city, the country. She'd never escape her dumb dead-end jobs.

A whole lot of effort leading nowhere, winning her nothing.

She'd rocket from rendezvous to assignment, from assignation to assignation, her schedule book full, her hours accounted for and ordered, and she would never finish her novel. She'd lose the days, the weeks, the years she'd devoted to it.

She'd gotten lost, somewhere, in the process. The road she was on was not the right road.

She'd been on the right road at one time, making regular progress. Keeping steady, her hands on the guide rope.

But now she had dropped her end of the guide rope, somehow, and wandered off into the margins.

Somehow, she'd stumbled off the right road, in dead of night, perhaps. To end up all by herself, alone.

Wading through tall grass and loose rocks and shifting garbage. Stumbling, desperate. Increasingly frantic.

She held a deep pit of despair deep inside her. She looked at the world with a negative outlook. She couldn't find bargains. She was steadily losing her marbles.

Her hand wasn't steady. There were things that she failed at before she tried her hand at them. She'd stretch out her hand, and then she'd pull her hand back toward her.

She couldn't earn a proper living. She was incapable of living, bad at living.

She would end up in the poorhouse. In the final equation. In the final financial analysis.

She'd come to a stricken end, a bad end, untimely. She'd be left destitute, unable to regain the guide rope. She'd find herself holding the end of the widget, the sticky end.

Her friends would walk away from her. They would each of them meet up with success and walk away.

She'd be stuck writing copy forever, penniless. She'd end up stripped nude, having sold off her clothes, dressed in nothing but a barrel.

Enjoy it now, she said. It won't last, she told him. Our sex. Our fun. Our days and nights inside on your one piece of furniture. Our weekend trips to the bookstore.

It would all go up in smoke. It would all go up in a steam. It would end in a gas. It would end in piss.

It would all wash out in a good strong piss, in a good long stream. Leaking into the river. Drifting away.

It would end in tears, she said, in a single, gigantic, oversized tear that would drop from her eye any day now. At any moment, it would drip out of her left eye, and come to a quivering rest on her chin.

Her nose endlessly ran. Her lower lip trembled.

Things will get better, he promised. Stick with it! Our situation will pick up. Our matters are bound to pick up and improve.

At any moment. At any day now. This is the start of a brand-new era.

He cooked up more soup for her, the mysterious soup that she liked. He set it before her. She cried in her soup.

The world, she cried, would end in tears. The earth would come to its end in tears. The bookstore, too, would end in tears. The box of candles would end in tears.

The fridge. The widgets. The Nintendo.

She was willing, unlike him, to put an end to it. Let it go, she said. Let me go. I've got nothing, she said.

Let me out. I'm out, she said. Count me out.

She had nothing left to say. He had nothing left to say. She had no more to say. There was nothing to say.

They had moved beyond words. They had left behind language.

Instead, they shared anger.

Anger, he realized, was what was inside him. It lived inside him, somewhere low. His anger was lodged inside his pelvis. He couldn't get rid of it, no matter how hard he tried.

He couldn't expel it. It grew and it filled him. It swelled, expanding within his chest.

A be-all and end-all. A means to a cause. It was an end within itself, an end to itself.

He got steamed up. He got his feathers all up in a huff. They entered a rough patch, a hostile stage.

A certain number of her tears were justifiable, he thought, but some were unjustifiable. He pounced on those tears.

He pointed them out with pointed barbs, with names he invented for her various fickle moods.

He reached at last the end of his patience. He shot off his mouth. He yammered on endlessly. He found himself filled with aggression.

He worked so hard to get in the last word, and then to get in another last word.

They argued themselves into bitter dead ends. They argued in circles, round and round endlessly, throwing words carelessly, throwing around hard, bitter words.

Into bottomless depths. Into the bottomless, deep, bitter end.

At the end of the day, and even beyond the end of the day. They'd entered the endgame—the untimely business stage of their failing relationship.

It was a game that he knew how to play. Instinctively. Instinc-

tually.

A game played on opposite ends of the couch. And then at opposite ends of the dark unfinished apartment.

Him sleeping as best that he could on the carpet, her on the couch. Both turning and tossing, neither one sleeping. Their faces and backs turned toward one another.

Seething. Sorry. Alternating between different moods, at times almost sorry enough, almost ready to turn around, to reach out to the other. This close to repenting.

At last she put a stop to it, just as she'd promised that she would. She called an end to their silly games.

She packed up her marbles. She packed up her books. She picked up her pocket dictionary and walked up the steps.

Not looking back. Her chin held up. He footsteps firm and steady, decided.

She called it all quits. She picked up her ball and she spiraled away. She struck out for home.

She left his apartment, holding her flashlight in her right hand. She left him in it, to it. Silent.

He woke up alone in his drool on the carpet. The couch where she'd slept, crying quietly, empty.

She was nowhere to be seen. She left no sign of herself behind, no trace behind. As though she had never been there, or

known him.

He was no longer very certain of what had occurred, in point of fact.

He kept trying to process it, to find the end result. The facts were pointless. It wasn't the end of the world, he said. It wasn't the end of all creation.

He thought, I have once again been left with my fingers gripping the stick's short end. I have once more been left with my fingers sticky from grasping the short end of the stick, from touching its sap. Which might be an end in and of itself.

Which end? he thought. Which end have I been left, this time, once again grasping?

He couldn't decide. It seemed to him, the more he considered it, that their time together had formed a kind of line, a complex tangent.

It formed a line, a tangled string, a walk that had started that one mild night, that late winter night, that night they had both gotten stuck in the blackout.

One of its endpoints was tied to a book in the bookstore's basement. It stretched out from there.

Around and around and around his couch. Around his TV and mini-fridge.

Around and around the empty barrels, their gentle screwing and bowls of soup.

Around and around cold marble floors and dirty carpets, discarded earrings. Wrapped around strategies for the Nintendo and sodomy. And around itself.

And now the line had suddenly stopped. He stood holding its end, looking back, squinting hard at the shape that it made.

Their walk had been jumbled up and confused.

At the time it had seemed simple, back and forth, back and forth, from the bookstore to his apartment and back again, but now he could see that it ranged all over, roamed all over known creation.

No matter how hard he looked at it, no matter for how long and how hard he stared and squinted at it, it seemed to him now nothing more than a tangle. A knot they had made, by twisting and writhing around and over one another.

It held no shape. It had no name that he could give it. He didn't know what to call it now, no matter how desperately he longed to give it a name.

Like some favorite toy from his childhood, some treasured game, that he didn't know what it had been called by others, and now wasn't able to track down in stores, couldn't locate again.

In desperation, he returned once more to the bookstore, to the basement bargain section.

The overhead lights there screwed back in. Weak and feeble again. Barely what he'd call luminant.

The place for the most part looking unchanged. None of the books in their barrels or on their shelves had sold; they were all still there. Torn and musty. Wedged in. Tightly hoarding the language.

Or: people had bought them and read them and brought them all back. They were unhappy with their books. No one wanted those books.

People wanted new books. Fresh books, and untorn. Full of words that they'd never read before, laid out in original, fresh new arrangements.

Describing unknown worlds, new countries. New friends about to embark on adolescent adventures.

The promise of better times to come. The onset of high ideals and fulfillment.

Easy books, easy reads for the sleepy weekend. Effortless reads to share before screwing to sleep.

He thought about her, though he didn't want to. He looked for the spot, for the origin spot, where that thin bit of string had been left tied. His most recent anchor. He looked for the book that he'd been holding at that time.

He tried to remember the snatch of words that he'd been reading, the precise phrase that he'd been putting into his mind.

He couldn't place it.

His mind went to her, to her mysteries, her secrets. Ephemeral

things that were already fading.

He tried to remember the feel of her rear end, her chin on his rear end. Her lips and nose nestled between his buttocks.

He tried to remember the look in her eyes when she closed her eyes.

He closed his own eyes. If he couldn't remember these things precisely, he didn't want them; he'd want to be rid of them. He didn't want his mind filled up with half-formed odds and ends.

He purchased a brown spiral notepad, one not unlike hers. He'd decided he'd write something for her — clever and poignant, apologetic yet dignified, and above all else seductive.

He retreated to and ensconced himself in the corner of a café. He tried his hand. He tried and he tried. He attempted all night.

He passed a whole week there. He wasted hours, whole days, even. He transformed himself into a fixture.

The problem, he soon discovered, was that nothing rhymed.

Nothing rhymed with “widget.” Nothing rhymed with “rocker” or “Nintendo.” Nothing rhymed with “lips,” with “candle,” with “your end zone.”

Nothing good. Not the better expressions. Not the really good words, the words that expressed what he really wanted to say.

Nothing rhymed with “the feel of your rear on my pelvis drives me crazy.”

Nothing rhymed with “the feel of your lips on my chin make me wish that I had two chins.”

Before, from time to time, he had thought about one day writing. He had contemplated trying his hand at it, someday. He’d fancied it.

He had thought he’d be good at it, that it would come to him rather easily. That it would come to him, as so many things did, without effort.

Effervescently. Unceasingly. Willing, freely.

He’d made mental lists, imagined the books that he would write, the poems and the stories. If nothing else, at the very least, he had his life’s story stored within him, a possible novel.

Ten thousand words, good words, compelling words, that others would line up to read. That he could recombine in compelling new ways, giving rise to new expressions.

Needed expressions. But now he knew he didn’t have a novel in him. He didn’t have any great poem held inside him. He might, at best, have a very short story buried inside him.

Unable to get out. Only a fragment or two of the text ever escaping, from time to time, leaking out in sloppy dribs and drabs, a feeble vomit struggling to rise up after hours to drop to the page.

The last few lines of a story within him, the perfect ending. He might have a joke, or a clever punch line. The butt of a joke.

Just a butt on the ground. Smoked up, unraveled.

Without her, her influence gone, he took up smoking again. He picked up a pack and worked at burning away at his marbles.

His marbles were mixed up, loose in and of themselves, come loose and steadily falling toward his bottom. They were eager to get away, to escape and get on with it. To be witless.

He lost all his marbles.

He drove himself crazy. He went off the deep end for a while, the earth's deep end. For days on earth, for hours on end.

He went off his rocker. He fell off his couch. He'd jumped off the business end of his couch.

He cried himself to sleep after hours and hours of crying. His eyesight burning, his tears running out in an endless stream.

He wouldn't have guessed he had so many tears, an endless amount welled up inside him. All this time. A current abiding.

In a restless night, he dreamt himself into a funk. His dreams just fragments, snatches jumbled up and angry. Wedged in together, nonsense on nonsense.

He woke up lying on the floor, his face hot and pressing into

the carpet. He woke up aching and full of piss, his bladder burning.

Unable to piece together what he had envisioned, the fragments still floating loose inside him.

He burned his business at both ends. He burned away angrily at his tether.

Cast me loose, he said. Cast me loose. He whispered this quietly to himself.

A phrase that had gotten stuck in his head. A renegade fragment bouncing forth and back and forth, a hot pressure building behind his eyes.

He grew bloated and dumpy. Gases built up inside him, leaking from his hind end, noxious clouds.

He ran out of smokes. He ran out of fags. He had to go outside to look for more.

He went out and looked for them and he found them and went back inside. He went home again.

He tried, half-heartedly, to keep busy. He played his Nintendo by himself. He ran his little guy into enemies on purpose. He jumped into fire. Into water. Into night. He leapt into bosses and bottomless pits.

He used up all of his little guys. He didn't win any extra guys.

He bottomed out. He called it quits. He had nothing left — not

anything that he'd ever wanted to ever end up with. He had hit rock bottom at last.

He had run out of gas. He had run out of steam, out of piss. He had run out of things to say. He scraped the bottom of the barrel.

He tried to summon his clever wit, to put it to use. He tried to think of something to say, something clever and new to put his voice to. Some new thought he'd never had, some notion he'd never arrived at before.

Some shocking business, deep and close and open-ended. Something that, once thought, would leave an impression, would stay remembered.

Nothing arrived. Nothing came to his mind.

He was then, he realized, at his wit's end. He was, quote, in wit's inescapable poorhouse, end quote.

In wit's fabled end zone. In wit's empty pit. At wit's end rhyme.

He had become, he thought, wit's living end. Wit's ass.

What had arrived, what he had thought of, were loose, sloppy facts. He had remembered his facts instead. Just garbage he'd read somewhere, its source long forgotten.

The shark, he remembered, has never changed. It's always been the way it is, since the start of time, since time immemorial.

Gliding. Hungry. Looking. Unblinking. Possessed of nothing but its instincts. In its tireless search for something else, for the good-to-eat, the unwary.

The nuclear bomb, he recalled from another source, will murder us all. It will come in the night, and will offer us no escape. There's nowhere to run from the nuclear bomb. There's no basement deep enough to hide in, nowhere to jump.

These thoughts, these facts, arrived to his endless consternation. They arrived and they kept him up at night, anxious all through the night on his ramshackle couch.

He went to a bookstore, an all-night café. He left the apartment. He wandered the well-lit streets downtown.

He headed out. He didn't care where he ended up — just somewhere bright.

He met and dated someone new, a girl named Death. That can't really be your real name, he insisted.

She stared at him, strangely. My name is whatever I choose it to be, she said. I choose Death.

Death chooses us all, in the end, she said.

He admired her nonchalance, her easy-going hatred. He admired her short spiky hair, her long pierced nipples. She was gothic, a trashy punk rocker.

Pouting. Sneering. Scorning the world in torn stockings, ripped fishnets. Aloof in torn jeans and black torn punk-band

T-shirts.

In torn socks. Her black sneakers torn up as well, cheap and falling apart, riddled all through with millions of tiny holes that dotted their canvas.

All of her clothing torn, every article torn a little. Bearing a small tear somewhere, hidden, the fabric fraying.

Her ends fast and loose. Her hair filled with split ends, damp and frizzy.

Shocking bangs. Her armpits unshaved. Her shoulders braless.

Her punk-band T-shirt falling off her, her breasts dangling free. Her nipples gleaming.

She grabbed his hand tightly. C'mon, she said. She slapped his chest. C'mon, she said.

Fucking fuck me, she said, you fucking fucktard. Fuck me harder.

Her small sharp teeth gleaming. Her earrings come loose. Her earringed boobs wanting, her nipples erect and dark red and ready.

In desperation, he seduced her. He allowed her to seduce him. In a moment of desperation, he said things that he didn't think true.

The end justifies the means, he thought. Where are you even from? he asked her.

Nowhere, she said. No place special, really. She had no clear place that she called home.

She'd been around. Since the day she'd been born, she'd traveled all over, here and there, many different places.

She was worldly. She told him about it. Loose and easy with her words — effervescent, even. Speaking was effortless for her.

They both had many things to say to one another, things to tell. She wouldn't shut up, and then he wouldn't be able to shut up. They talked and they talked.

He feared that he'd never hear the end of it. They'd never reach the end of it.

He told her about his foreign country, his days there, his lack of direction.

He told her about the sweltering heat and the side-street markets, his inability to speak or press for bargains.

He told her about the foods that he'd eaten, the odd bits and pieces.

So why did you come back, she asked, if that country's so fucking fantastic? What's good about here?

He had no answer. He offered to cook for her, to make her something special, but she didn't want his soup. She didn't go in for crap like that, she said, little fragments of murdered animals, just floating. I don't want to live on crap like that, she said, to have crap like that inside me.

She didn't like his apartment, either. It was too subterranean. She liked more light, more open space.

More elevation. She squatted in an abandoned loft with a dozen other punks. They had no heat. They had no lights, no running water.

They had no privacy. She slept on a mattress thrown down behind a curtain. They were still framing out the walls, constructing rooms. Making all of the necessary arrangements.

He sat on his ass on the cheap hardwood floor, a floor covered over with carpet ends, with various mismatched carpet samples.

An alternative space of their own wants, their own creation. Their go at alternative culture. A place of their own. A whole world of their own.

I get it, he said. I understand. After all, it's the Promising Era, he said.

They only laughed. The Promising Era — that's a gas!

We are living outside of time, they said. We're outside of the eras.

In every era, they said, some people exist outside. They give up and jump off the ship we call culture. They sink to the bottom and disappear.

They're happy to do it. They lurk at the bottom of the culture, fashioning new culture from its fragments.

We're free in here, she said. We can do whatever we want.

Up all night with our flashlights and our candles, smoking, talking, strumming chords.

On weekends they went out and scavenged the trash bins. They set out on bikes and meandered the city, rooting through trashcans and unlocked Dumpsters. They gathered what supermarkets and restaurants threw away.

This stuff's still good, she said. This stuff, for the most part, hasn't yet expired. It hasn't reached its sell-by date.

Hard wedges of cheese. Dented soup tins. Half-thawed boxes of imitation meat.

While the others cooked, she took his hand and dragged him behind her bedroom's curtain. Do me, she said. Do me over and over.

She had to be done in particular ways. She had certain desires.

She had her own kinks that she wanted fulfilled. She showed no interest in the things that he really wanted, not in the things that he really enjoyed.

She had her particular customs and habits. She laid them out for him, one by one.

To drag her down the rickety staircase and into the alley behind the apartment.

To pull her hair roughly and pull off her clothes, to tear some

new holes. To have none of it gentle.

She told him to drag her downstairs and to take her out into the alley. Pressed up roughly against a Dumpster. Pressed down roughly inside of a Dumpster. Bent roughly over an empty, rusty gasoline barrel.

She begged him to tie her up, to bind her. She wanted her circulation cut, to slip on plastic handcuffs, to be chained very tightly to something metal. For hours on end. For long enough for her hands to go numb, for her legs to go numb, for her to feel dead.

I want to be, she said, as close as I can be to death when I come. Her body flushing with excitement.

He tried to appease her. He tried to do those things. He tried his hand at these things.

He dripped hot wax on her metallic nipples. He tugged at her shoulders, her hair's loose ends.

Do it harder, she said. Make it like rape, she whispered. Wanting to be threatened, to be struck, to see the anger behind his eyes. To feel it released.

Lust and anger, she said, in point of fact, being one and the same thing, she often said.

Her saying this capped with a cruel little laugh. Love and hate the same thing—a well-known fact.

To be stricken with fright. To feel fear for one's life.

He half-heartedly tried to placate her, to pleasure her, but he lacked the proper taste for it. He didn't know how to tie knots, not the strong ones that she wanted.

He didn't know how to satisfy her. He shrank, he withdrew before her bottomless, constant need. She was unfillable, unpluggable, insatiable. Possessed of a steady hunger.

Hunger for him or for anyone else. An anonymous, open-ended desire. A pointless desire, he more than once thought.

That's fine, she said. You go back to sleep, she said. I'll just go fuck somebody else, she often said.

He brushed it off. He did what he always did, and retreated behind his wit. He showed her the business end of his wit, its receiving end.

Words and words on high end, a dozen dozens, an endless procession. Inflated as though by a steam, by a gas, by a noxious perfume. Words leading nowhere, promising no one anywhere anything. Meaning nothing.

He turned cruel. He took joy in degrading her, in humiliating her. In subtly mocking her, in constantly putting her down.

In saying things that he thought above her, her and her crowd.

Nihilism's a mug's game, he said, cold and cowardly. And anathematization of the world is no real response to the world, he said. Not an adequate one.

You've missed the boat, he said. You'll find out soon enough.

You've dropped out too late, at precisely the wrong time.

You're decades behind. The steamship of culture is sailing on, it's passing the line on the horizon, full steam on without you.

Heading someplace else, out of sight. The people who made it, who didn't jump ship, who are all still aboard, are one and all waving at you from the deck.

Still in love with the world. Brave enough to still love it, to not just dismiss it. To know there are more things in heaven and earth than they can conceive of.

Words undreamt of in your philosophy, he said, in your lack of philosophy.

With that, he shut up at last. He was finished for now. He felt very satisfied to have said that, to have gotten it all of it out.

Do you think that that's clever? she asked him, scowling. Fuck clever, she said.

Fuck erudition, and all of scholasticism, she said.

Fuck higher learning. And fuck all the books that were ever written. In point of fact.

And fuck truth—fuck what people say is true. Truth's only a concept, conventions that others agreed upon before I was born, without asking my input, or for my consensus.

Are you finished? he asked her, smugly. Interrupting her.

Fuck you, she said. And fuck this shit, she said.

Fuck all of this shit, she said, every bit of your fucking shit.

He was, she said, too depressing for her. Too passive, she said, too passive-aggressive. She resented the little mean things that he always said, the contemptuous stuff that he always came up with.

His dry, burning, double-sided wit. His snark and his cynicism, his clever be-alls and end-alls. His marble-mouthed mutterings.

He made her hair stand on end.

Get out of here! she said. She threw his clothes out one of the loft's open windows, out into the alley. She threw his sneakers out into a Dumpster.

Fucking scram. Go fuck yourself. You fucking fag.

He found himself, after that, at last at the bottom of wit. At the loose end of wit. He had finally run out of his wit.

He wasn't as smart as he'd once thought he was. He found himself staring at wit's cruel end, looking up at wit's rear end, at wit's pimpled ass.

He wallowed for hours on end in the lowlands. He walked by the river.

Waves there were churning. Currents and eddies.

He went outside, and then he turned around and headed back inside.

He regarded his mini-fridge, its inside. It was still crammed with various odds and ends. With business cards. With rope, with marbles, with candles, with lips and chins and noses.

With widgets and with tears, with all of creation. With everything, really, except what he needed, crammed tight with everything except beer.

He stepped outside again, and once again he had no idea where to go.

He sat down somewhere, carelessly, not caring where his ass rested. He sat on the curb, on the dirty sidewalk. Behind him, he heard the river lapping.

He felt very sloppy. He felt embarrassed. He felt depressed. The end is nigh, he said. He said this thing aloud, and to himself.

The rhyme is nigh. The process is nigh. The end boss is nigh. The piss is nigh. The pissy end of the bargain is nigh.

The candle was nigh. The hold-up was nigh. The barrel's bottom. The bottomless pit. The tether, the stickier end of the widget, the endless night.

The endless days on end were nigh. The end of a sentence with a proposition was nigh. The sharks were nigh, were circling him.

The river lapped, a wet little current, an unending drift. Around him, the day gently came to a close.

All good things, in point of fact, he said, must finally end. All the marbles must end. And all's well that ends well, he said, too must end. All the be-alls and end-alls, no matter how clever. They all must end.

The end of the ballgame must come to an end. The end of the road must end. The end of the line must end. The end of the day must start, and then it must come to an end.

Day's end must end. The end of the world must arrive and eventually it must end.

He lit up, his last cigarette in the pack. His mini-fridge was still crammed tight and fast with any loose object that wasn't a beer.

He stepped out, and for once he knew precisely where he was headed. He went to the dive bar on the corner. He stepped inside, arriving just in time for last call.

And when that bar closed, he didn't head for home; he went to another bar. And then, another.

By the end of the day, he had gotten rather drunk. By the end of the day, he drunkenly thought, you can't see past the end of your nose, past your firm little nostrils.

By end of the day, you can't see past the business end of your scruffy chin. Past the gaseous pit where your midriff was. Past your two sticky lips.

By the end of the day, you can't see past the fridge that sits at the end of your couch. Past the books you've been meaning to read all this while, slumping in piles.

You can't see past the unmatched rhyme at the end of the road. Past the word in your mouth. Past the dozens of words that have stuck in your throat. You can't see the next zone. You just follow your tether, letting it tug you, your palms chafing skinless. Hoping blindly that you won't end up in the drink.

Until you fill up with the piss. Until you guzzle down a barrel, depleting the earth. Enjoying its bounty until the earth's gone empty around you, all of its businesses running dry.

Until its odds and ends end up coming right out of your hind end, taking the piss out of your rocker.

Until all the world, no matter how pretty it may have once been, becomes a poorhouse. Until you wake up and you realize it's all been a waste of your time.

Finally starting to end, though. The ballgame must end. The business must end. The small, flimsy candle must come to a close. The day, too, must come to a proper close. Days on end must end and come to a close.

The play. The rhyme. The story. The stage. The fondled rear end must come to a close. The hind end must close. The nose, the chins, the lips. They all must come to a close.

Tears must come to a close. The world. They all must close up shop. The business end must shut down and come to an end. The line. The road. The playing cards. The rail. The boxes of

sticky widgets.

Others around him, other customers, were talking, nursing their beers, discussing the end of the Promising Era.

The Promising Era, they all agreed, had already come to a premature close. The Promising Era, it had to be said, had not been working out as promised.

It hadn't held up. It couldn't continue. It hadn't lived up to its end of the bargain.

It wasn't the light at the end of the tunnel that everyone had, at the onset, promised that it would be.

The light at the end of the tunnel hadn't lived up to its promised end of the bargain.

Now things would go back to the way things were before, to what they had all thought was normal before. At one time, long ago.

Nobody was sure which age they were going to be heading back to—the Mechanical Age, the Industrial Age, the Atomic Age, Post-Atomic. Nonetheless, they were already going.

This knowledge, it had to be said, it was already being said, wasn't turned away. This news, in fact, it had to be said, was coming to everyone as a relief.

A new day was nigh, a day that would burn away all failed traces of the prior.

A new light. A searing burst of sudden flame.

A new day. The light at the end of the brand-new day. The light at the brand-new end of the rope. At the end of the tether that soon comes loose, after starting to fray.

The problem had been, everybody suggested, that, all of this time, they had been on the wrong end of the light. On what had been, in point of fact, nothing more than the receiving end of the light. On its business end.

On the end of the light at the end of the nose. On the end of the light at the end of the horn. On unjustified light. On untimely light that wasn't firm, and wasn't good. That was neon and blue.

That blue neon light was going away now, was dimming, was finally running down. Its emergency generators failing, giving out.

It would soon be replaced. It would soon be exchanged with a better light, with the light of all lights, which was finally nigh. Loose light. Promised light.

The living light at the living end, a light that was actually alive.

The light that exists at the end of the story. The light that exists at the end of the quote. The light at the end of the endless night.

Itself endless and deep. The deep end of the light.

The living light. The ultimate light, open-ended, its hind end.

The light that you'd see at the end of the line. The light that you'd see at the end of the road. The light that you'd see at the end of creation, leftover, the fag-end of creation. At the bitter hind end of creation.

At the tail end of creation. At creation's business end.

The light like the light at the end of the ballgame, when the game is played and over, when they turn on all of the lights.

That light was nigh. It was bitter, and sharp, and thin, and close at hand, and deep, and bottomless. And it was good, and simple, and timely, and justified. A bringer of justice and of judgment.

That light would swish past him, scraping him, slashing him with its scales, with its firm upper fin. It would swipe him a good one, a deep one, showing him the sharp business end of its tail.

And as it swished past him, the long night would end, and the world would at last be illuminated. Coming to life with spectacular light.

All of the lights in the city would turn themselves on at once. The streetlights. The house lights. The headlights. The flashlights in warm right hands, taken out of pants pockets.

The smaller lights fueled by emergency generators, hidden somewhere. The book lights and reading lights.

Every one of the candles would reignite. Every one of the mini-fridge doors would swing open.

Laptops would power up, flip open. TVs would turn themselves on in the nighttime.

And all this collected light would gather, would spill out of all of the windows of all of the apartments, the third-floor apartments, the basement apartments. The loft apartments. It would spill out into the alleys, the crowded streets. It would reflect off of the sidewalks, the river, the buildings, the unlocked Dumpsters. It would illuminate his way.

It would direct him, coax him, guide him out of the city, beyond the nearby city limits. It would lead him someplace else, to his new destination, to his proper resting place, to where he had been meant to be all this time.

To the place where he should have ended up. He could travel there now. Effervescent. Effortless.

Fine, he said. Fucking finally, he said. At long last, he said. Bring it on, he said. I'm long past ready.

He finally knew which direction he wanted, which way, which road he should strike out on.

He was still on the sidewalk, sitting, just getting dirty. He pulled up his socks. He tied his shoes tightly. He pulled himself up with a grunt.

He started to move.

He understood at last what she'd said to him, what she had whispered to him in the basement of the bookstore, in the beginning.