In order to tell this story, I’ve got to go back – way back to my childhood. And what’s more annoying than a retelling of that, right? But it’s crucial to the ending, and so must be told.

Before I begin, though: the world is about to end.

And I don’t have a bomb shelter.

So, I’m cradled in my bathtub, and duct tape seals all the cracks in my house. Even though the Department of Motherland Security assures us that just a few gallons of water, a three-yard-roll of duct tape, a gas mask, and a bathtub will do the trick, I don’t feel any safer for the trouble.

I guess all the street-corner maniacs finally got it right.

But then again, it had to happen sooner or later; the world had to end. It just so happens that the prophets of my generation are right. It’s really a shame the end is happening now, while I’m alive and never healthier or happier, and so on.

But I shouldn’t feel sorry for myself. There are all those poor bastards without bathtubs to feel sorry for.

(Most have had little use for baths after the earthquake.)

So, I’m in my bathtub writing this, waiting for the end, or a Beautiful Beginning, as the Christian zealots are calling it.

I’m not a religious man. If the end permits you’ll know the reason for my incredulity.

That’s a little too fancy – there’s no time for big words.

Here’s the thing: I have trust issues.

No, that’s not it – there’s no time for psychology either.

I love to sin. There. That’s it. I love to sin and hate insincerity, so I’m not Christian. I love to eat and hate deprivation, and so I’m not Muslim. I am not at all ceremonious or sentimental, which is why I’m not Jewish. And if I had time to study the others, I’m sure that I would find them just as unsatisfying and tedious as all the rest.
But still I wonder.
Doesn’t everyone?
My childhood, how could I forget? It was good. Nothing spectacular about it or anything; it was just good.
But it never prepared me for this.
No way.
But I suppose if it had, then my parents would’ve been terrible people. If this ending seemed like a good thing, then how bad must the beginning have been?
What does that say about God?
But most parents were kinder than our gods.
Sure, we were spanked and our toys were taken away. Our parents told us not to touch the hot stove – we did it anyway – but they didn’t open the furnace grate and throw us in. They grounded us. And there in our rooms we learned aboutaloneness, understanding that its only penalizing aspect was there being no one to complain to.
Jesus, this whole generation was afraid of being alone. But we fixed it with radios, cell phones, dial-up internet access, traffic, voicemails, jet engines, diesel engines, televisions, FM transmitters, newspapers, movie houses, and – ah, yes – coffee houses. These things kept away the panic of existing alone.
What a shame.
Existing, as it turns out, is the most inventive of all creations.
I take it back, all that stuff about God being tedious and all that – yeah, he isn’t tedious. He’s mad, absolutely mad with love, like a jealous ex-boyfriend. His love letters go something like this:

*Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven; and he overthrew those cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities.*

*(Genesis)*

I guess if he can’t have us, then no one will.
But what can I do to stop the end? Dig my heels into the ground, kicking and screaming, like a child?
Ah, yes, my childhood. As I said before, it was good. But I wish that life was also good. Don’t get me wrong. It had its moments, just like anything else.

But the bottom drops out sometimes. And what does one call that feeling; the one that quivers deep in the solar plexus during a sudden drop? . . . exhilaration. Well, that’s how the end feels. It feels like being dropped.

It feels like your first romance.

I had my first while I was young. It would be an exaggeration to call it a romance, at least not in the traditional sense.

Summer was my first and last true love. She really was. She liked me for all the right reasons. We both enjoyed slides, finger-painting, and naptime. But our special bond was formed from dangling upside down from the monkey bars, our t-shirts dropping over dizzy heads as the sun touched our swollen bellies, shivering with laughter.

A boy named Vance Huffington, who reeked a strange mixture of mold, ammonia, cigarette smoke and glue (the glue because he often ate the stuff, but the others I could only guess), would linger around the flag-pole, eyeing us with envy. He found special amusement in watching her and me kiss in the playground’s tire-fort. Anyway, little Vance loved Summer, too, but he just couldn’t understand that she was mine, mine, mine.

Not that I was possessive.

He was wild for her, though.

The last time I saw Summer or Vance was after Ms. Finn poured punch into twenty-five separate cups and set them on a table during recess. Summer and I took our cups of punch to the tires.

Vance had followed us, pestering me to kiss her in different ways and so forth. He hovered from each opening to the next, popping his face into the hubcap windows and puckering his red, punch-stained lips. I was a very gentlemanly sort of kid and refused taking suggestions from someone who was rumored to eat glue; however, I refused to allow his presence (because I was quite used to it) to spoil the recess.

I kissed Summer on the lips, very sweetly and for all the right reasons.
Vance wanted to kiss her too.
I said I’d hit him in the face if he even tried.
In pure delight he kissed a tire instead.

(I whispered in Summer’s ear that we should go to the slides.) Vance followed us despite the exclusion. He was a stupid kid.

Now, sliding was a special talent of mine, and I was particularly well-known for it, famous even. Whenever I would reach the top of the slide, an anxious kid would yell to the others: “Watch out, you guys!” And I would take the slide’s top step like an aviator about to screech into the sky.

But as I ascended the steps that time, I saw something horrifying: Vance Huffington hanging upside down from the monkey bars, and so was my lovely Summer.

“Watch out, you guys!” Warned that anxious kid with a weakness for eating anything he was dared to eat.

Wonder what happened to him?

I quickly realized that Summer must have been tricked or taken against her will.

Remember, I was a hero and a gentleman.

“Don’t worry,” I shouted aloud, gallantly. “I’ll save you!”

And down I zoomed – headfirst into the sand – and everything went black.

That’s it.

Awaking in the emergency room, I was alarmed that Vance had followed me even there. I could smell him everywhere, in the sheets, in the jello, in the little blue wrist-bands, everywhere. And when night came and the hospital lights dimmed and only the buttons on machines blinked; I could see him sneak behind mom as she slept in the chair. He wanted her, too. He wanted everything that was mine.

And all I had were the scabs, which had replaced my lips, and they bled and itched for weeks, never healing.

I didn’t kiss again for years.
But there won’t be anyone to kiss in the end. And we’ll all withdraw from the world in different ways. Some will be in temples praying to every god, any god willing to help. And others will be among loved ones, each staring into the face of each, asking unanswerable questions. Why? Where? How? And a few of these will grit their teeth in anger that wisdom did not grow in the breast of the old, because no one knew anything, not really. What was there to know? And just when everything goes black or purple or whatever color it’ll go, yes, yes, we were born with the answer. It was in our bellies, feet, and eyes; it was our youth.

I’ll be in this bathtub hoping that the end is a miscommunication, that wires got crossed, and, if not, that duct tape is really as good a sealant as advertised.

And why tell you that anecdote from my childhood? Well, I had wanted to tell you so much more. And that story wasn’t it, not at all.

The train trip I took with my mother one winter, which was the only one in my life, and still I wonder why more travel wasn’t done that way, all that landscape blurring like Monet’s paint brush . . .

On the train’s right were great Western dust bowls of light brown that stayed even with the thin line of blue horizon, and then mountains capped with snow developed and tottered forward, and suddenly rose along the tracks, just inches from my nose pressed against the window; and then those mountains unlocked, opening to vast Pacific cliffs on my left.

The train went all the way to British Columbia in three days and two nights. The moon, occasionally veiled by December storm clouds, held even with the night train. And I remember that it snowed on the final day, snow so bright it hurt my eyes.

When the train stopped in town, I sprang out and trudged in the snow, and, because of its deepness, falling didn’t hurt. My mother and everyone else either milled around the concrete depot or huddled themselves inside the train, oblivious to the thrill of new snow; all I could do was laugh about it, my tear ducts squinting and tearing and freezing, and even though no one heard my exhilaration, it didn’t matter.

I want you to know that not every drop hurt, and that life, as I said, has its moments.

That’s why I wrote this. That’s why I’m so sad to see it end.
But writing is really useless when it finally comes. And it’s comical, really, because there won’t be anyone left to read this.

So long as men can breath, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

(Shakespeare)

And what good does it do me, even if you should come across these pages, in say, three million, billion years? I suppose you could only be surprised, and possibly troubled, that I lost a girl to someone like Vance Huffington. And you might wonder who the hell Shakespeare was.

Don’t worry. We wondered the same thing.

The world will go on and on and so forth, even if no one’s around to interpret. The theme, I suppose, was always this: everything, like this story, had its ending.

And rarely did it end as we hoped.