We've been here before.

It seems to come in cycles – not unlike Pennywise the Clown's emergence from the sewers of Derry, Maine, in Stephen King's nightmare-primer *It*.

Every ten years, a Cleveland team cunningly puts together a championship-caliber squad that claws its way to the brink of winning a championship.

Then, after a couple near-misses, its front office sets the building on fire.

They rationalize it with statements like "we need a new voice" or point to a new coach or overpriced free agent who can "take us over the top."

And it always ends the same way. Not with the team going over the top, but spiraling downward into a decade of mediocrity and misery as it pays the price for its fevered "we're-just-one-player-away" rationale.

We first saw it in 1989 with the Browns. Twice in the previous three seasons they came within inches of a Super Bowl, and after lofty expectations for the 1988 season went up in flames after a string of injuries straight out of the Old Testament, the front office decided it had fished that particular lake dry. Marty Schottenheimer – who we now know was the best coach the team has had since Blanton Collier – was unceremoniously forced out and Bud Carson, a great assistant who never should have been handed the reins of a football team (just like every coach the Browns have had since), was brought in to provide new energy and direction.

The gist of that new energy seemed to circulate around exchanging talent for crap. A handful of key players, including Herman Fontenot, Bob Golic, and Earnest Byner, were either traded away or simply let go, to be replaced by Canton-bound legends such as Barry Redden, Robert Banks, and Mike Oliphant.

The result? An aging Browns team limped to one last division title, then plummeted into the bowels of hell. A year later, a troll named Bill Belichick was hired as the wunderkind who would restore the team to past glory, and five years after that, the team ceased to exist. Well done.

Flash forward ten years. The Indians had just won five consecutive division titles, appeared in two World Series, and had redefined itself as the toast of Cleveland– something that not long before would have been considered as likely as an oil spill that made the Exxon Valdez look like a can of Sunkist. With the addition of Roberto Alomar, the 1999 team had been a refreshing reboot, boasting perhaps the best offense in team history. They were cruising to an easy first-round victory over the Boston Red Sox, grabbing a two-games-to-none lead in a best-of-five set, when the bottom fell out. When Game Three starting pitcher Dave Burba was hurt and forced to leave the game in the fourth inning with the Indians leading, manager Mike Hargrove, presumably assuming he was down two games instead of up, tactically disemboweled his pitching rotation and bullpen in the hopes of winning Game Three.

The result? Not only did the Indians lose that game, but then with the entire pitching staff out of whack, gave up 44 runs in the next 22 innings as the Red Sox rallied to win three straight and the series.

Hargrove was fired about fifteen minutes after Game Five ended, coinciding with the departure of GM John Hart and Dick Jacobs selling the team to a father/son duo that owned a junkyard and starred in their own sitcom in the ’70s.

The club spent the next two years trying to keep itself together with electrical tape and Big League Chew, continually wheelbarrowing in overpaid free agents well past their prime to try to make up for the roster of budding All-Stars it had traded away in the frenzy of “we’re-just-one-player-away” fever. By 2002, the Indians finally just bent over and accepted its fate as a team that would never contend on a regular basis. And today, they rightfully take pride in being the best Triple-A team in Major League Baseball.

It’s ten years later, and here we go again.

This time it’s the Cavaliers, who in the last two weeks have followed the “We’re-Past-Our-Prime-and-Know-It” playbook to the letter. Drop-kick the most successful coach in franchise history? Check. Force out a shrewd GM who managed to turn a one-horse team into a pack of Clydesdales classy enough to pull the Budweiser wagon? Mission accomplished.

What’s next? Why watching the Cavs quickly fade back into the middle of the pack, then utterly vanish from the ZIP code of the league’s elite, of course.

But don’t take this to mean that this particular hinge of history is about to turn on whether or not LeBron James re-signs. Naturally, whatever his decision, it will have huge ramifications on the franchise and the city itself. But even if he does return to the Cavaliers next year, this course has already been set. The Cavs’ window of opportunity to win a world title has officially closed.

No doubt there is evidence to the contrary. If LeBron does return, Dan Gilbert will likely redirect

Social Security to bring in a couple of high-profile free agents that seem to fit perfectly, just as Shaquille O'Neal, Anthony Parker, Jamario Moon, and Antawn Jamison did. Under these circumstances, the 2010-11 Cavs will look grand on paper and go into the season once again with lofty expectations, this time buoyed by the fresh attitude brought by (gulp) Tom Izzo or whoever the big-name candidate turns out to be who is willing to obliterate his career and take over as captain of the Titanic a half-hour after the iceberg hit. We'll try to fool ourselves – as we've done before – that this was the missing piece of the puzzle we needed to win the championship. We'll tell ourselves that Mike Brown was actually a four-toed moron who the Cavs "overcame" to win 127 games in two years. We'll say that Mo Williams was overrated (by ourselves, actually) and that Shaq was just too old to provide the spark we needed. The sweet, sugary taste of denial will get us through the summer and maybe even the entire regular season before we're brought back to reality by a well-constructed team in the playoffs.

Of course, if LeBron chooses to go elsewhere, this entire debate becomes moot, replaced by which city will be getting the Cavs in 2014.

In Cleveland, nothing forecasts the future better than the past. It happened to the Browns (who ended up in Baltimore), then the Indians (now brought to you by the "Everything's a Dollar" stores of Northeast Ohio). Now it's the Cavs' turn.

It was a nice run – a very good run, in fact. Statistically, the Cavs of the last two years may have been the most dominant team Cleveland has seen since the Browns of the early 1950s, and they were appreciated and respected in their hometown.

But not nearly as much as they will be five years from now when the Cavs (whether they be in Cleveland or Seattle) are struggling to win 45 games and we'll long for the days when we were disappointed when they only won 61.

It's over, and we know it. Three years from now, so will the Cavs. Bottom line: it just wasn't meant to be.

We've been here before.