

'Wray's immense  
talents shine'

THE NEW YORK TIMES



*The*

LOST TIME

*Accidents*

'Epic in scale,  
even bigger in heart'

MARLON JAMES

JOHN WRAY

Dear Mrs. Haven—

This morning, at 08:47 EST, I woke up to find myself excused from time.

I can picture you perfectly, reading this letter. You'll be telling yourself I've gone stupid with grief, or that I've lost my mind—but my thinking has never been clearer. Believe me, Mrs. Haven, when I tell you that this is no joke. Time moves freely around me, gurgling like a whirlpool, fluxing like a quantum field, spinning like a galaxy around its focal hub—at the hub, however, everything is quiet.

Is there a chance, no matter how infinitesimal, that you'll find and read this manuscript one day? If I didn't think so, I could never keep on. And if I don't keep on I'll disappear completely.

A physicist might term this place a “singularity”—a point in spacetime where the laws of the cosmos have snapped—but it's like no singularity I've heard of. As you know very well, the only type of singularity permitted by physics is a point of infinite density and weight, ripping everything—even light itself—out of the continuum in which time exists. A black hole, in other words, which should have torn me limb from limb by now.

But this place is no black hole. I'm sure of that.

It's comfortable, first of all: an armchair, a card table, a half-empty bottle of Foster's Lager, a ream of stationery, and a refillable tortoiseshell pen, the kind you see in duty-free airplane catalogs but would never dream of actually buying. It also happens to be a place I know well: the library of my deceased aunts' apartment on 109th Street and Fifth Avenue, on the fourth

floor of a crumbling brownstone with the improbable name of the General Lee, at the middle-income end of Central Park. You never came here, Mrs. Haven, because my aunts stopped receiving visitors during the Nixon administration. But I want to make sure you can see this place clearly. Cramped though it is, it's my entire world.

*Monday, 08:47 EST*

If God had commanded Noah to build an ark for consumer goods instead of animals—and if Noah had been a drunken paranoiac—his ark might have resembled this apartment. The room I'm in is twenty by thirty, cavernous by Harlem standards: its floors are parquet, its bay windows gothic, its ceiling age-buckled and brown. I have a watery memory, from childhood, of powder-blue walls, but from where I sit there's no sure way of telling. That's because aside from a bell-shaped perimeter surrounding this chair—and a kind of tunnel meandering from one room to the next—every cubic inch of this apartment is taken up by shoe boxes, newspapers, Styrofoam peanuts, cinder blocks, dressmaker's dummies, Game Boys, PA systems, dollhouses, Harlequin romances, collectible plates, chandeliers, sawhorses, carburetors, bicycles, almanacs, humidors, assault rifles, fainting couches, chalkboards, VHS players, Betamax players, laser disc players, Frisbees, ziggurats of balding tennis balls, half a century's worth of *Popular Mechanics*, *Omni*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Amazing Stories*, *Scientific American*, *Barely Legal*, *Juggs*, *Modern Internment Magazine*, mail-order catalogs, college yearbooks, high school yearbooks, product manuals for discontinued products, and every other sort of flotsam you can think of. Not to mention clocks, needless to say, this being Tolliver property: chronometers of every make and model, pendulums primed, springs oiled and wound, circuitry buzzing, charting Spanish Harlem's progress through the so-called fourth dimension with a constancy that makes me want to cry.

I'm not sure how much you heard about my aunts' demise—the papers were full of it for a while, especially the tabloids—but it wasn't a dignified passing. They had trouble letting go of things, Mrs. Haven. I've been told that it runs in the family.

*Monday, 08:47 EST*

One of the first clues I got, as a child, that my father and I hailed from different star systems arrived in the form of a joke. It was in the dog days of a flawless upstate summer, one I'd half convinced myself would never end: I was sitting with my mother in our humid, sun-drenched kitchen, picking at a scab on my left elbow and grumbling about going back to school. Orson—he insisted I refer to him as “Orson,” never “Dad”—came up from his writing room in the basement, grinning for some reason I never discovered. He listened to my bitching for as long as he could stand it.

“There’s a Venusian proverb, Waldy, that you might find instructive.”

I took the bait and asked him what it was.

“Time flies like an arrow.” He paused for dramatic effect. “*Fruit* flies, on the other hand, like a banana.”

That was it. He looked from my mother’s face to mine, deeply pleased with himself, then let out a belch and retreated downstairs, like a squid escaping in a cloud of ink.

Orson had a terrible sense of humor, Mrs. Haven—a pulp fictioneer’s sense of humor, the most cornpone there is—but this joke, in particular, preyed on my six-year-old mind like a tick. When I found out, years later, that he’d stolen it from the Marx Brothers, I actually danced a little jig: it was Groucho’s children’s cross to bear, not mine. But I can’t help but be reminded of it now, when time isn’t flying at all, and my existence has become like that banana: a battered, motionless mass, soft and greasy and passive, with memories harassing it like flies.

The reason Orson’s joke got under my skin was this: I knew, even then, that time doesn’t fly like an arrow. The belief that every physicist since Newton has been a fraud or a sucker (or both) is our family dogma, passed from generation to generation like a vendetta or an allergy to nuts. I was weaned on the proposition that time flies like a boomerang, or like a satellite, or—if an arrow at all—like the arrow on a well-oiled weathervane. My aunts always claimed that I’d be the one to lead the Tollivers out of oblivion’s subbasement, to popularize their crackpot notions, to sell our shared obsession to the world: that’s why I was given my great-uncle’s name. I resisted their prophecy as long as I could, but in the end I had to

slay their dragons for them. What else could I do, with a name like Waldemar?

Believe it or not, Mrs. Haven, there was a time when my name sounded noble and strange to my ears, like Aragorn or Thor or Ivanhoe. I was knee-high to a ball of snot back then, as Orson liked to say, and my aunts and grandfather (and even Orson himself) were like sorcerers or demigods to me. I knew nothing about my namesake—everyone made very sure of that—except that he'd done some extraordinary thing. A hush crept into the voices of the grown-ups whenever the subject came up, and his name was rarely uttered, as if its power might wear thin with repetition. I grew to see myself as heir apparent to a grand occult tradition—one that mustn't be alluded to until I came of age. I promised myself I'd learn everything I could about this great-uncle of mine, the better to do my mystic birthright justice. And I told no one my plan, not even my dotting, long-suffering mother.

I must have known, even then, that the day would come when it would cause her pain.

*Monday, 08:47 EST*

I can't see much in my current position, but I'm not too far from the windows, and—if I crane my neck to look past a cracked lucite bust of J. W. Dunne—I can make out a light-speckled sliver of park. For an hour a day, the view has the patina of a retouched picture postcard: the willow boughs sigh, the asphalt promenades gloam, and Nutter's Battery and the old wooden boathouse hum with a mystery they could never aspire to at noon. Right now, for example, the evening sun is setting across Harlem Meer, glimmering up from the pond scum, giving a pair of overweight maintenance workers the look of lovers in a cheap romantic comedy. The universe is still in motion, close enough to take hold of, patiently awaiting my return; but the clock at my elbow—a Tolliver Magnetic Chronometer, model 8-Ω, accurate to .000000000000000178 of a second—remains frozen, Miss Havisham—like, at 08:47 Eastern Standard Time.

So many forces had to conspire for our paths through the chronosphere to intersect, Mrs. Haven, let alone for us to share a bed. Isn't that a great and terrifying notion? If the past of a given event—let's call it event X—might be considered as all things that can influence X (as mainstream physicists

claim), then the whole of human history could be thought of as the past of our affair. You've decided, under the influence of God knows what toxic cocktail of fear and regret, to deny the events of the last seven months; but I believe—I have no choice but to believe—that if I bear witness to our history, you'll consent to raise it back up from the grave.

I can picture you shaking your head as you read this, your magnificent corkscrew-curved head with its translucent ears. You've ordered me, in no uncertain terms, to obliterate all traces of our friendship: I've received clear instructions, in writing, to cease and desist. I don't blame you for that. We were given three shots, after all—far more than we deserved—and we bungled each one.

Our last and bravest attempt ended on the morning of August 14, between 08:17 and 11:47 CET, in the honeymoon suite of the Hotel Zrada, in that fatal little town in Moravia whose name I choose not to recall. We'd slept with our clothes on, a full arm's length apart, a first in all our secret life together. You informed me that you'd struggled all night to come to a decision; your coppery hair stuck straight out on one side, I remember, as though pointing the way out the door. I noticed a minor constellation of freckles under your left clavicle—a faint, Pleiades-like clustering I didn't recognize—and wondered whether your recent safari in Mr. Haven's company might have brought it to the surface of your skin. A vision came to me of you riding naked on a Bengal tiger, leading a winding file of porters through the khaki-colored bush; I tried to make a joke about it, but instead let out a strangled chirp, like a deaf child attempting to speak.

You took no notice, Mrs. Haven, because you were making a speech of your own. I watched your beautiful lips move, unable to follow. Something momentous was happening, that much was obvious, but my conscious mind refused to let it in. I thought of something you'd said on our first day together, coming out of the Ziegfeld after seeing some by-the-algorithm Hollywood romance:

“There ought to be a word for this feeling, Walter.”

“What feeling is that?”

“The one when you come out of a movie—in the daytime especially—and everything still feels like part of it.”

“The ancient Greeks called it *euphasia*,” I'd said, inventing a word off the top of my head.

“Aren’t *you* the bright penny,” you’d laughed, then asked me to spell it for you, which I did. I could do no wrong that perfect afternoon.

“*Euphasia*,” you’d said thoughtfully. “I’ll make a note of that.”

My memory of our last hours has gone nova since then, grown so bloated and bright that it’s all I can see, though I sense—though I *know*—that glorious things are hidden just behind it. I want to make a pilgrimage back along the causal chain: to line up my mistakes in a row, for the sake of comparison, with those of all my star-crossed ancestors. From the moment we met I’ve felt like an impostor, like the single normally proportioned member of a clan of sideshow geeks, desperate to keep his pedigree obscured. That ends as of this writing, Mrs. Haven. I want to explain the Tollivers to you, to take you on a private tour of our shabby little hall of curiosities; but in order to do that properly, I’ve got to take an axe to the vitrines. I’ll have to reckon with my namesake—Waldemar, Freiherr von Toula, physicist and fanatic, the Black Timekeeper of Äschenwald-Czas—by testifying to his many crimes at last.

I’m writing to bring you back to me, Mrs. Haven. I can’t deny that. I want to reenter the continuum, if for no other reason than because it’s the place—or the field, or the condition—in which you exist. And there’s only one way to do that, appalling though the prospect is to me.

I’m writing to tell you about the Lost Time Accidents.

# I

ON JUNE 12, 1903, two hours and forty-five minutes before being killed by a virtually stationary motorcar, my great-grandfather made a discovery that promised to shake the world to its foundations. Ottokar Gottfriedens Toula, father of two, amateur physicist, pickler by trade, had spent the morning in his laboratory—a converted brining room directly beneath the Hauptplatz of Znojmo, Moravia, the gherkin capital of the Habsburg Empire—and was about to lock up for the afternoon, when something about the arrangement of objects on a workbench caught his eye. According to his notes, he spent the better part of a quarter hour perfectly motionless, his right hand still cradling his keys, staring over his left shoulder at the “spatial dynamics” between a crucible, a brining jar, and a slowly desiccating winter pear.

A jarring, insistent noise which he eventually identified as the jangling of his key ring brought him out of his bedazzlement, and he approached the workbench with a trembling step. By the time he’d cleared a space on his perennially cluttered desk, pinched his pince-nez into place, and dug his notebook out from under a heap of cherry pits, the first crude attempt at a theory was already coalescing in his brain. He lowered himself to the bench, taking great care not to tip it over, and in less than an hour wrote the entry—seven pages of tilting *courant* script—that would trouble the dreams of his descendants for the next one hundred years.

I couldn’t possibly know this, Mrs. Haven—not all of it—but I hope you’ll indulge me a little. Ottokar’s notes, the sole source I have for this scene, are as dry as pencil shavings. The only means I’ve got to bring this



primal scene to life, to keep you here beside me—if only *in potentia*—is the license I've given myself to speculate. Imagination is a form of time travel, after all, however stumbling and incomplete. And every history is an act of subterfuge.

The town my great-grandfather lived and died in—Znaim to the Germanic ruling class, Znojmo to the Czechs—was a pretty imperial backwater, prosperous and unpretentious, known for its views of the Dyje River, its pickling mills, and not a thing besides. A postcard from the year of Ottokar's death combines these twin distinctions into a single tidy package: entitled "A Visit to Znaim," the postcard depicts a portly businessman in a bowler hat, happily suspended in midair above the Dyje, with the town square glowing rosily in the background. Pickles peek out of his pockets, and he brandishes a brining brush in his right hand, like a riding crop; his flight seems to have been made possible by the gargantuan, midnight-green, unapologetically phallic gherkin that he straddles like some suicidal gaucho. A poem at the bottom left-hand corner does nothing whatsoever to explain matters, though it does strike me as pertinent to my great-grandfather's brief, quixotic life:

*A Gherkin from the land of Znaim  
Is mightier than the Hand of Time;  
Its savory Brine, at first so sour  
Grows sweeter with each Passing Hour.*

Znojmo's only other claim to a place in history, oddly enough, is even more closely aligned with poor Ottokar's fate. From 1716 until 1719 the town was home to Václav Prokop Divis, an otherwise unassuming Catholic priest who had the spectacularly bad luck of inventing the lightning rod at the same time as Benjamin Franklin. Divis died a pauper's death in a Moravian monastery, forgotten by the scientific world; Franklin got his fat face on the hundred-dollar bill. There's a lesson in that—about the disadvantages of being Czech, if nothing else—but my great-grandfather opted to ignore it.

By his own account, Ottokar was six foot four, 183 pounds, and "of forty-nine years' duration" at the time of his demise. He'd have stood out wherever he lived, most likely, on account of his great height and his slew of

eccentricities; but in sleepy, unassuming Znojmo he was practically a figure of legend. He wore the same woolen overcoat all the year round, and was known to describe it as a “musical instrument,” for no reason the townsfolk could discern. His iron-gray beard—which, in spite of his ardent Catholicism, demands to be described as Talmudic—was a thing of wonder to the local children, who tagged after him at a respectful distance, waiting for the instant when he’d stop short, glance back at them darkly, and mutter a rumbling “Saint Augustine protect you, little foxes,” before passing out the caramel drops he carried in his pockets. A key ingredient in Ottokar’s celebrity was his extravagant sweet tooth, and his claim—always made with the greatest solemnity—that he’d never eaten a pickle in his life.

Oddities notwithstanding, my great-grandfather was a gentleman of what was even then referred to as “the old school,” equally devoted to his family, his mistress and his Kaiser. In spite of his matter-of-fact embrace of the newest pickling and storage technologies, his distrust of what he referred to as “newfangledhood”—and especially of its totem animal, the horseless carriage—was his overriding passion. He was fond of taking strolls in the evenings, usually in the company of his wife and two sons, Waldemar and Kaspar, and returning the greetings of his neighbors with a dignified tip of his homburg. On those still-infrequent occasions when a motorcar passed, he never failed to step squarely into its wake, oblivious to the dust devils whirling around him, and to bellow “*Combust!*” in the voice of Jehovah. (The fact that combustion was, in fact, the very thing that made motorcars possible was an irony no one was brave enough to call to his attention.) Ottokar was a man well aware of his place in the world; a man who took his influence for granted, no differently than his cherished Kaiser did.

Unbeknownst to my great-grandfather, however, both he and his Kaiser were approaching the ends of their terms.



According to the testimony of the last person known to have spoken with him before the accident, Ottokar was in a state of almost saintly exaltation during his final hours. The witness in question was one Marta Svoboda, the knödel-faced spouse of the town’s leading butcher, with whom my great-grandfather had maintained a clandestine friendship since the middle of

his twenty-second year. A specialty of Svoboda's shop was *Fenchelwurst*—pork sausage with fennel—and Ottokar was in the habit of calling on her each weekday at a quarter past twelve, just after the shop had closed for midday, to pick up the tidy wax-paper package, tied with red butcher's twine, that was awaiting him there like an anniversary present. (Where the man of the house spent *his* lunch hour, Mrs. Haven, I have no idea; perhaps he had a *valentinka* of his own.) For the whole of his adult duration, my great-grandfather's days followed an inflexible schedule, divided with perfect symmetry between mornings in his laboratory and afternoons devoted to the gherkin trade. The intervening hour, however, was reserved for a game of tarock with his *kleine Martalein*, who was—to judge by the only photograph I've seen—anything but *klein*, but whose fennel sausage, coincidentally or not, was reputedly the manna of the gods.

My great-grandfather showed up earlier than usual on that cataclysmic morning, dabbing at his forehead—although it was perfectly dry—with a filthy gray rag from his workshop. Marta bustled him at once to the enormous settee in her bedroom and insisted he remove his shoes and socks. Ottokar indulged her good-naturedly, protesting that he was in excellent health, that he'd never felt more vigorous, but allowing her to have her way, as always. (It's an odd thing, Mrs. Haven: although the thought of my parents' lovemaking turns my stomach, I don't feel the slightest resistance to picturing my great-grandfather and his mistress fornicating like love-struck bonobos. On this particular day, given his condition, I imagine the butcher's wife straddling him like a cyclist, leaving her apron on in case of interruption, her ample body driving his hips into the upholstery and causing the French enamel of the settee's frame to crack like the shell of an overboiled egg. These were his last earthly moments, and I like to think he made the most of them.)

At some point, Ottokar dug his left hand into a pocket of his coat, pulled out some—but not all; this is very important—of the hastily scribbled notes he'd made while sitting on his workbench, and arranged them in a row across the table. He confessed to feeling slightly feverish, and allowed Frau Svoboda to apply a compress to his brow. At five minutes to one, with the freakishly precise awareness of the hour that has always distinguished the men of my family, he sat up and announced that he had to be off. He seemed refreshed by the respite, and his forehead felt cooler, but

his eyes shone with a fervor that took Marta quite aback. She made no attempt to stop him when he teetered to his feet and left the house.

It was just past 13:00 CET, the hour of rest in every cranny of that narcoleptic empire, and by all accounts a muggy afternoon. By the time the clock on the Radnicní tower struck a quarter past, Ottokar was crossing Obroková Street with his hands clasped behind him, taking long, abstracted steps, staring down at the freshly cobbled street and nodding to himself in quiet triumph. At the same instant, Hildebrand Bachling, a dealer in jewelry and pocket watches from Vienna, was making a leisurely circuit of Masarykovo Square, affording the public as much time as possible to admire his fifteen-horsepower Daimler. The precise sequence of events is impossible to reconstruct, though half a dozen Toulas have tried: most likely Herr Bachling was momentarily distracted—by the smile of a *fräulein*? by the smell of fresh hops?—and failed to notice the man drifting into his course.



Wealth is famously insecure, Mrs. Haven, and even the greatest art is shackled to its culture and its age; a scientific breakthrough, by contrast, is timeless. A great theory can be amended, like Galileo's planetary system; improved on, like Darwin's principle of natural selection; even ultimately discarded, like Newton's postulation of absolute time; once it's been metabolized, however—once it's been passed through the collective intestines, and added to the socioconceptual chain—it can vanish only with the death of human knowledge. My great-grandfather had just made a discovery that promised to bring him not merely fortune and fame—and even, in some quarters, infamy—but immortality. This intoxicating fact must have colored his thoughts as he made his way homeward, reviewing that morning's calculations like a magpie sorting bits of bottle glass. He barely recognized his neighbors, returned nobody's greeting, perceived nothing but the cobbles at his feet. The clatter of the Daimler's engine was thoroughly drowned out by the buzzing of his brain.

What happened next was attested to by everybody on the square that day. Bachling took sudden notice of the man in his path—"He popped up out of nowhere," he said at his deposition—"out of the air itself"—and

clawed frantically at the Daimler's manual brake; Ottokar paid no mind to his impending end until its grille made gentle contact with his paunch. His coat seemed to drape itself over the hood of the Daimler, as if no human body were inside it, and by the time he hit the cobbles he was in his shirt-sleeves. Bachling opened his mouth in a coquettish O of disbelief, extending his right arm over the windshield in an absurd attempt to shunt aside his victim; a stack of loose papers pirouetted skyward with no more urgency or fuss than the Daimler took to pass over the obstruction. The papers came to rest in the middle of the street—in perfect order, as I picture it—but no one present took the slightest notice.

No one except a single passerby.