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# Lost Time Accidents

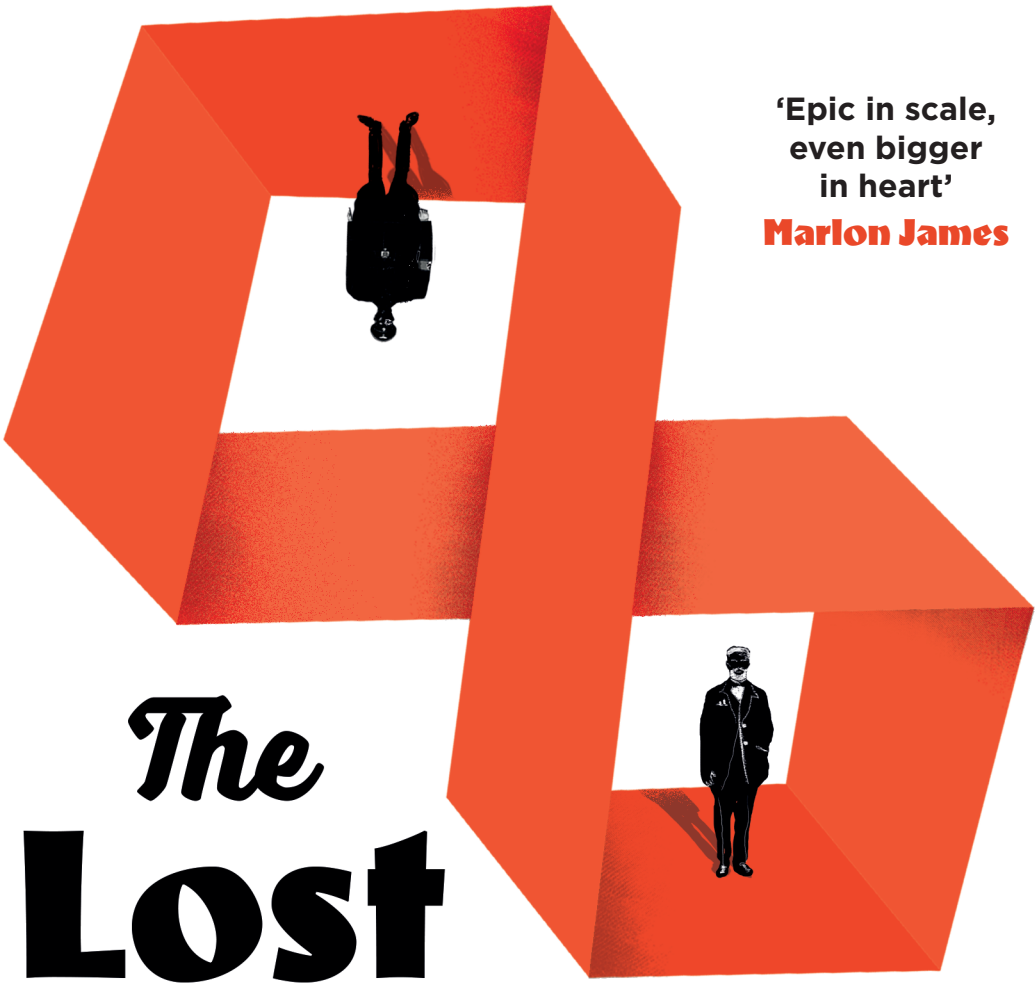
Written by John Wray

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**Marlon James**

# The Lost Time Accidents

## John Wray



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*I saw Eternity the other night,*
*Like a great ring of pure and endless light,*
*All calm, as it was bright;*
*And round beneath it Time, in hours, days, years,*
*Driven by the spheres,*
*Like a vast shadow moved; in which the world*
*And all her train were hurled.*

– HENRY VAUGHAN

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 doting, 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-curled 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.