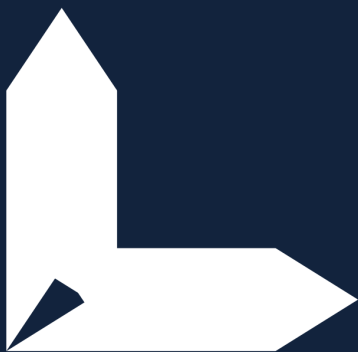


THERE WOULD NEVER BE
ANOTHER TIME



MARCIN WOJDYNA

There Would Never Be Another Time

By Marcin Wojdyna

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This book is provided “as is.” This story repeats itself for a reason. It changes its mind. It expects you to notice. Any disorientation is intentional and temporary. Any recognition is permanent. There will never be another time.

This book deals with themes of grief and loss. Reader discretion is advised.

Published independently by Marcin Wojdyna.

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To explore more of my work, visit: wojdyna.com

For what happened while I was elsewhere.

Cycle One

The world was ending again. Not with fire or floods, but with convenience. The kind that sneaks in, rearranges the furniture, and leaves you thinking it was always like this.

Streets remembered layouts no one had drawn. Towers stood where ruins had been; too clean to be real but too familiar to be questioned. Something underneath it all had not been fixed. Only covered.

The one behind it all called himself the Archivist. He didn't want to rule the world. He wanted to curate it. He did not burn cities. He simply removed the reasons they had ever crumbled.

A man appeared without context and kept showing up. He had no passport. No paper trail. No version of history that included his presence.

Something was wrong when he arrived. He stood in a city that used to be rubble and looked at a place called Café Null. The whole block felt assembled rather than built. Across the square, someone smiled like they'd just solved a puzzle and realised they were holding the wrong lid.

Cycle Two

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He didn't repair the past. He replaced it. Cropped out wars. Painted over disease. Cancelled revolutions before the slogans got printed. It wasn't history. It was interior design. But some edits didn't hold.

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Cycle Four

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The door to Café Null opened by itself. Inside, the lights were on, but there were no customers. Just four empty chairs, arranged like a stage. On the counter, a steaming mug waited for someone who hadn't ordered yet.

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There was a receipt under the mug, folded twice like a secret. It was warm, as if it had just been printed, but the paper looked old at the creases. One line was circled so hard it nearly tore through: DO NOT STEP. The handwriting was his. Not similar. Not familiar. His, down to the impatient slant and the way he crossed his T like he was striking something out. He stared at it until the ink stopped being ink and became a threat.

He stepped forward. The man across the square didn't move. Neither did the birds, or the light, or the air. Somewhere between steps, and without warning, the city shifted sideways. Café Null was in front of him again. The four people looked different now. One of them was now staring straight at him.

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One of the chairs scraped back. The sound came twice: once sharp, once delayed, like an echo that had missed its cue. He turned. The chair was still where it had been. The floor beneath it was scuffed anyway, a pale arc etched into the tiles. He knew, with a certainty that made his stomach drop, that he had already pulled it out. He just hadn't decided to yet.

He stepped forward. The man across the square didn't move. Neither did the birds, or the light, or the air. Somewhere between steps, and without warning, the city shifted sideways with a jolt. Café Null was in front of him again. The four people looked different now. One of them was now staring straight at him.

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He sat down anyway. The chair that had scraped back was waiting, already warm from someone who hadn't been there. The mug was for him. He knew that now. It had always been for him. Steam curled upward in a pattern that looked like handwriting, spelling nothing, meaning everything.

He stepped forward. The man across the square didn't move. Neither did the birds, or the light, or the air. Somewhere between steps, and without warning, the city shifted sideways with a jolt. Café Null was in front of him again. The four people looked different now. One of them was now staring straight at him.

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He didn't drink from the mug. Couldn't. His hand wouldn't reach for it, as if someone else had already decided he wouldn't. Or would. The steam kept rising in patterns. Three curls. A pause. Three more. His left thumb was tapping against his thigh. Three beats. Pause. Three beats. He tried to stop it. His hand kept going anyway.

One of the chairs scraped back. The sound came twice: once sharp, once delayed, like an echo that had missed its cue. He turned. The chair was still where it had been. The floor beneath it was scuffed anyway, a pale arc etched into the tiles. He knew, with a certainty that made his stomach drop, that he had already pulled it out. He just hadn't decided to yet.

He sat down anyway. The chair that had scraped back was waiting, already warm from someone who hadn't been there. The mug was for him. He knew that now. It had always been for him. Steam curled upward in a pattern that looked like handwriting, spelling nothing, meaning everything.

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Cycle Eleven

The world was ending again. Again. Not with fire or floods, but with convenience. The kind that sneaks in, rearranges the furniture, and leaves you thinking it was always like this. The kind that doesn't get named. The kind that leaves no record.

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The one behind it all called himself the Archivist. He didn't want to rule the world. He wanted to curate it properly, without exceptions. He did not burn cities. He simply removed the reasons they had ever crumbled. That was enough. He had been standing in the square the whole time. Waiting.

He had once been a records officer. Low rank, low stakes, high access. Someone told him to delete the past. He archived it instead. That version of him is long gone now, overwritten by one who believes no memory is irrelevant, no loss too small to undo, no edit too dangerous to attempt.

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His footsteps never quite matched the sound they made. There was always a delay, like someone was narrating his walk after the fact. Barely noticeable. Unless you were listening for it. He always was and today it lagged longer, long enough to overlap, long enough that he heard himself walking before he moved.

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The receipt crumpled in his hand. Not by choice. His fingers closed around it anyway, folding it along creases that already existed. The moment the paper bent, the square flinched. Not shifted. Flinched. Somewhere behind him, glass cracked without breaking. The birds in the air dropped a fraction, like gravity had briefly reconsidered. He let go. The paper fell flat again. The world exhaled. He understood then, with a cold, precise clarity, that the warning wasn't about where he stepped. It was about what happened when he touched things at all.

He didn't drink from the mug. Couldn't. His hand wouldn't reach for it, as if someone else had already decided he wouldn't. Or would. The steam kept rising in patterns. Three curls. A pause. Three more. His left thumb was tapping against his thigh. Three beats. Pause. Three beats. He tried to stop it. His hand kept going anyway.

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Cycle Twelve

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The receipt crumpled in his hand. Not by choice. His fingers closed around it anyway, folding it along creases that already existed. The moment the paper bent, the square flinched. Not shifted. Flinched. Somewhere behind him, glass cracked without breaking. The birds in the air dropped a fraction, like gravity had briefly reconsidered. He let go. The paper fell flat again. The world exhaled. He understood then, with a cold, precise clarity, that the warning wasn't about where he stepped. It was about what happened when he touched things at all. He was the edit that wouldn't hold.

He didn't drink from the mug. Couldn't. His hand wouldn't reach for it, as if someone else had already decided he wouldn't. Or would. The steam kept rising in patterns. Three curls. A pause. Three more. His left thumb was tapping against his thigh. Three beats. Pause. Three beats. He tried to stop it. His hand kept going anyway.

One of the chairs scraped back. The sound came twice: once sharp, once delayed, like an echo that had missed its cue. He turned. The chair was still where it had been. The floor beneath it was scuffed anyway, a pale arc etched into the tiles. He knew, with a certainty that made his stomach drop, that he had already pulled it out. He just hadn't decided to yet.

He sat down anyway. The chair that had scraped back was waiting, already warm from someone who hadn't been there. The mug was for him. He knew that now. It had always been for him. Steam curled upward in a pattern that looked like handwriting, spelling nothing, meaning everything.

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Up close, the resemblance was undeniable: same narrow shoulders, same way of holding tension in the jaw, same scar under the left eye that he didn't remember getting but could feel when he touched his own face. The Archivist's mouth moved. He heard his own voice say, "You're doing it wrong."

Cycle Thirteen

The world was ending again. Again. Not with fire or floods, but with convenience. The kind that sneaks in, rearranges the furniture, and leaves you thinking it was always like this. The kind that doesn't get named. The kind that leaves no record. He knew this.

Streets remembered layouts no one had drawn. Towers stood where ruins had been; too clean to be real but too familiar to be questioned. Something underneath it all had not been fixed. Only covered. The difference was beginning to show.

The one behind it all called himself the Archivist. He didn't want to rule the world. He wanted to curate it properly, without exceptions. He did not burn cities. He simply removed the reasons they had ever crumbled. That was enough. He had been standing in the square the whole time. Waiting for him to understand what he already knew.

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His footsteps never quite matched the sound they made. There was always a delay, like someone was narrating his walk after the fact. Barely noticeable. Unless you were listening for it. He always was and today it lagged longer, long enough to overlap, long enough that he heard himself walking before he moved.

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He didn't drink from the mug. Couldn't. His hand wouldn't reach for it, as if someone else had already decided he wouldn't. Or would. The steam kept rising in patterns. Three curls. A pause. Three more. His left thumb was tapping against his thigh. Three beats. Pause. Three beats. He tried to stop it. His hand kept going anyway.

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Cycle Fourteen

The world was ending again. Again. Not with fire or floods, but with convenience. The kind that sneaks in, rearranges the furniture, and leaves you thinking it was always like this. The kind that doesn't get named. The kind that leaves no record. He knew this.

Streets remembered layouts no one had drawn. Towers stood where ruins had been; too clean to be real but too familiar to be questioned. Something underneath it all had not been fixed. Only covered. The difference was beginning to show.

The one behind it all called himself the Archivist. He didn't want to rule the world. He wanted to curate it properly, without exceptions. He did not burn cities. He simply removed the reasons they had ever crumbled. That was enough. He had been standing in the square the whole time. Waiting for him to understand what he already knew. Or remembered.

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He looked away from the face. At the space around it instead. The outline was wrong. Not blurred. Misaligned. Like the Archivist was arriving a fraction late to himself. He raised his hand. The air resisted, elastic and humming. The Archivist's eyes flicked to the movement before it happened. "Don't," he said, too fast.

Cycle Fifteen

The world was ending again. Again. Not with fire or floods, but with convenience. The kind that sneaks in, rearranges the furniture, and leaves you thinking it was always like this. The kind that doesn't get named. The kind that leaves no record. He knew this.

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The Archivist didn't look angry. That was the problem. He looked tired in a way he recognised immediately. The kind that came from rehearsing the same argument until it stopped sounding like a lie. "It wasn't supposed to get this big," he said. "I only needed one thing fixed. Just one." He never said what would have happened if he'd arrived on time. The square tightened around them, listening. "Everything else was collateral. You would have done the same. You understand that." He did understand. That was what scared him. Because he would have done the same thing. Had done the same thing. Was still doing it. But understanding and accepting were different edits entirely.

He looked away from the face. At the space around it instead. The outline was wrong. Not blurred. Misaligned. Like the Archivist was arriving a fraction late to himself. He raised his hand. The air resisted, elastic and humming. The Archivist's eyes flicked to the movement before it happened. "Don't," he said, too fast.

Cycle Sixteen

The world was ending again. Again. Not with fire or floods, but with convenience. The kind that sneaks in, rearranges the furniture, and leaves you thinking it was always like this. The kind that doesn't get named. The kind that leaves no record. He knew this.

Streets remembered layouts no one had drawn, and one impact they could never forget. Towers stood where ruins had been; too clean to be real but too familiar to be questioned. Something underneath it all had not been fixed. Only covered. The difference was beginning to show.

The one behind it all called himself the Archivist. He didn't want to rule the world. He wanted to curate it properly, without exceptions. He did not burn cities. He simply removed the reasons they had ever crumbled. That was enough. He had been standing in the square the whole time. Waiting for him to understand what he already knew. Or remembered. That some debts cannot be edited out. That forgiveness doesn't come from erasure.

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He lifted the receipt again. This time, the delay came first. His fingers closed a beat before the paper touched them. The square reacted immediately. Windows along the street shuddered in sequence, left to right, like a skipped stone. Someone screamed halfway through a breath and stopped. The sound cut cleanly, as if edited out. He dropped the receipt. Everything resumed, badly. He didn't look at the Archivist. He didn't need to. Whatever this was, it wasn't punishment. It was correction. The world was learning to reject him.

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He looked away from the face. At the space around it instead. The outline was wrong. Not blurred. Misaligned. Like the Archivist was arriving a fraction late to himself. He raised his hand. The air resisted, elastic and humming. The Archivist's eyes flicked to the movement before it happened. "Don't," he said, too fast.

He reached forward anyway. His hand passed through the Archivist's chest like pushing through cold water. For a moment, he felt it: the weight of every edit, every erasure, every apology that had been replaced instead of spoken. A child's name. A moment of inattention. The specific texture of guilt that grows teeth. The Archivist gasped, or he did, or they both had been gasping this whole time and only now noticed. When he pulled his hand back, the square was different. Not cleaned. Not curated. Just empty. The café was gone. The chalk drawing was gone. The dog, the receipt, the four chairs were all gone. Just rubble and smoke and the truth of what had actually happened here.

Cycle Seventeen

The world was ending again. Again. Not with fire or floods, but with convenience. The kind that sneaks in, rearranges the furniture, and leaves you thinking it was always like this. The kind that doesn't get named. The kind that leaves no record. He knew this.

Streets remembered layouts no one had drawn, and one impact they could never forget. Towers stood where ruins had been; too clean to be real but too familiar to be questioned. Something underneath it all had not been fixed. Only covered. The difference was beginning to show.

The one behind it all called himself the Archivist. He didn't want to rule the world. He wanted to curate it properly, without exceptions. He did not burn cities. He simply removed the reasons they had ever crumbled. That was enough. He had been standing in the square the whole time. Waiting for him to understand what he already knew. Or remembered. That some debts cannot be edited out. That forgiveness doesn't come from erasure. It comes from carrying what cannot be fixed.

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The door to Café Null opened by itself. Inside, the lights were on, but there were no customers. Just four empty chairs, arranged like a stage that had forgotten its audience. One of them had his jacket draped over the back. On the counter, a steaming mug waited for someone who hadn't ordered yet. On the sill, a plant leaned toward the square. A cat sat beside it, unblinking, as if it had been there before and expected to be again.

There was a receipt under the mug, folded twice like a secret. It was warm, as if it had just been printed, but the paper looked old at the creases. One line was circled so hard it nearly tore through: DO NOT STEP. The handwriting was his. Not similar. Not familiar. His, down to the impatient slant and the way he crossed his T like he was striking something out. He stared at it until the ink stopped being ink and became a threat.

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Cycle Eighteen

The world was ending again. Again. Not with fire or floods, but with convenience. The kind that sneaks in, rearranges the furniture, and leaves you thinking it was always like this. The kind that doesn't get named. The kind that leaves no record. He knew this.

Streets remembered layouts no one had drawn, and one impact they could never forget. Towers stood where ruins had been; too clean to be real but too familiar to be questioned. Something underneath it all had not been fixed. Only covered. The difference was beginning to show.

The one behind it all called himself the Archivist. He didn't want to rule the world. He wanted to curate it properly, without exceptions. He did not burn cities. He simply removed the reasons they had ever crumbled. That was enough. He had been standing in the square the whole time. Waiting for him to understand what he already knew. Or remembered. That some debts cannot be edited out. That forgiveness doesn't come from erasure. It comes from carrying what cannot be fixed.

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Cycle Nineteen

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He knelt beside where the shoe had been. The pavement was clean now, scrubbed of blood and glass and meaning. But the shape remained. A small depression in the concrete, barely visible unless you knew to look for it. Unless you'd spent years trying to erase it. He traced the outline with his finger. He was still the father who arrived too late. And he had a choice the Archivist had long since forgotten: to let it stay broken. To carry the weight instead of burying it.

Cycle Twenty

The world was ending one last time. Not with fire or floods, but with convenience. The kind that sneaks in, rearranges the furniture, and leaves you thinking it was always like this. The kind that doesn't get named. The kind that leaves no record. He knew this.

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The one behind it all called himself the Archivist. He didn't want to rule the world. He wanted to curate it properly, without exceptions. He did not burn cities. He simply removed the reasons they had ever crumbled. That was enough. He had been standing in the square the whole time. Waiting for him to understand what he already knew. Or remembered. That some debts cannot be edited out. That forgiveness doesn't come from erasure. It comes from carrying what cannot be fixed. He had always known.

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A man appeared without context and kept showing up. He had no passport. No paper trail. No version of history that included his presence. He never seemed surprised to be there. A square-headed dog built like a sofa was watching him from the kerb. The dog didn't blink. Neither did he. He'd forgotten how. The dog hadn't. It had been watching since before he arrived.

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The rubble wasn't abstract anymore. He stood in the aftermath, and this time it had weight. Broken concrete. Twisted rebar. The smell of burnt wiring and something worse. "I'm fixing it," the Archivist said, or he said, or they both said it at different times that had collapsed into the same moment. The voice came from everywhere and nowhere, like hearing yourself on a recording you don't remember making. "You can't fix everything. You can't fix that." That was him. Or the Archivist, years ago, before he learned how. "Everything broke. I'm the only one who remembers." "You remember wrong," he said. The Archivist didn't answer. He was already turning away, or had never turned toward him at all. Or both.

The square tried one last time. Not a reset. A memory. The bus stop slid into place where the café had been, concrete still warm from impact. A timetable bent around a pole. Bus 42. No destination listed. Four figures in chalk. His son had been waiting there, backpack on, lunch box empty, excited about some drawing he'd made in class. The sports car had come too fast. The driver, a man in a suit, never braked. The impact had been instantaneous. Clinical. Final. Meanwhile, he was still at his desk, signing off on records that couldn't wait. Except they could have. They always could have. By the time he arrived, the ambulance was already leaving, and all that remained was a small shoe on the curb and the knowledge that he'd chosen paperwork over being there. That he'd been late. And this time, it had mattered, because there would never be another time.

He knelt beside where the shoe had been. The pavement was clean now, scrubbed of blood and glass and meaning. But the shape remained. A small depression in the concrete, barely visible unless you knew to look for it. Unless you'd spent years trying to erase it. He traced the outline with his finger. He was still the father who arrived too late. And he had a choice the Archivist had long since forgotten: to let it stay broken. To carry the weight instead of burying it. Not as punishment. As proof he had been there.

He stood up. The Archivist did not fade or vanish. He didn't need to. There was no line between them anymore. The square didn't correct. It didn't resist. He stayed a moment longer, not to fix anything, not to rewrite it, just to be where he should have been. Then he walked away. The delay was gone. His footsteps arrived when they were supposed to. The world offered no absolution. It didn't need to. It had already taken its due. It kept going. And this time, so did he.

Author's note

Thank you for reading *There Would Never Be Another Time*.

This story began with a different outcome in mind. It ended with the one it needed.

To anyone who has loved something they couldn't protect, this is for you.

Marcin Wojdyna

The man in the suit returns in *The Farewell Fare*.

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