

Futures

Eight laws I wound up breaking while attempting to restore the timeline

Time travel is harder than it looks. By P. A. Cornell



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

1. The International Treaty Against Using Time Travel to Alter the Timeline

OK, so I'll admit it was *not* my finest moment. In my defence, you're the one with all the science know-how so, as my best friend, it was on you to hammer home the importance of not changing anything while travelling back in time. Although I accept partial blame for preventing the sinking of the *Titanic*, it was your time machine and it was therefore your responsibility to lock it so I couldn't use it while you were at your dentist appointment getting that crown repaired. A guy tries to do a good thing and this is what happens. I guess it's true what they say: no good deed goes unpunished.

2. The 18th Amendment

Look, history is not my forte but I have heard of prohibition before. Like I told those 'Keystone

Cops', what happened was an honest mistake. After realizing I'd altered the timeline and accidentally erased you from existence in the process, I needed a little liquid courage before going back to fix things. I mean, it's not every day you mess up this big, so maybe I was a little ... distracted. It wasn't until I found myself in 1922 instead of 1912, that I realized I must've punched the numbers in wrong when I programmed the machine. By then my whisky flask was empty, so I slipped into this little speakeasy to drown my sorrows. How was I to know the place was about to get raided? I barely even got to taste the Gin Rickey I'd ordered.

3. Jaywalking (technically a minor infraction)

When I finally got back to the present – well what passed for the present at this point – I

did some research and found out where things had taken a turn. Luckily, time travel had still been invented. Not so luckily, your grandparents had never met, which meant your parents were never born, and therefore neither were you. While doing my research I got peckish and ran across the street to McDaniel's. (Don't ask. Just be thankful that timeline no longer exists.) As it turns out, even minor infractions like jaywalking can still earn you a pretty hefty fine. Something a sub-par spamburger just does *not* take the sting out of.

4. Several laws of physics

You're the science guy, so you'd know best which laws I broke here, but even with my limited knowledge I know something went wonky when I tried to use the time machine again to go fix what I'm now calling the 'your grandparents paradox'. Pro: I somehow erased

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the timeline with McDaniel's in it. Con: I ended up in the late 1600s.

5. Laws against practising witchcraft

Upon seeing me appear out of thin air, the people of the 1600s immediately took me for a witch. Turns out being chased by an angry mob holding torches and pitchforks is a real thing, as I found out while running for my life. I had to remove most of my clothes, including my good boots, to throw off the dogs and swim across a river to get away. That's when the machine snapped me back through time and I found myself standing in the middle of Times Square in nothing but wet boxers. Boy, were those tourists surprised!

6. & 7. Wearing slippers in public after 10 p.m. in New York State and falling asleep with shoes on in North Dakota

I finally managed to find a set of dry clothes, but decent shoes are hard to come by. Best I

could get were some old slippers from a donation bin. With that taken care of, I tracked down your grandfather when he was a young guy living in New York. It took some convincing – especially because I was wearing slippers – but he finally agreed to come with me to meet your grandma. I hope you'll forgive me for telling him she was a 'sure thing', if you know what I mean. Anyway, I later learnt I was actually in violation of an obscure New York law against wearing slippers in public after 10 p.m.. This is similar to an obscure North Dakota law against falling asleep with your shoes on. I discovered this after travelling to North Dakota to introduce your gramps to your granny. They hit it off. I collapsed with exhaustion, and with the slippers still on, I guess I managed to inadvertently break that law, too. The rest is history.

8. Murphy's law

I stuck around in the past just long enough to make sure your grandparents got married, then got myself back here to see if you'd returned. And here you are! With so much that

could've gone wrong, but didn't, it turns out Murphy's law is the one law I'm happy to have broken. Granted, this still isn't the timeline I started out in, but most things are the same, and I figure at least you're here now if you want to go back and sink the *Titanic* again. I'll leave that up to you. As for me, I think I'm done with time travel for a while.

P. A. Cornell is an award-winning author whose short fiction has appeared in numerous markets. In 2022 she published her SF novella, *Lost Cargo*. For more on her work visit pacornell.com.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

P. A. Cornell reveals the inspiration behind *Eight laws I wound up breaking while attempting to restore the timeline*.

I'm a member of the Codex writers group and have been a regular participant in their Weekend Warrior flash-fiction contest since 2019. As the name implies, the goal is to write a story of no more than 750 words over a weekend. In the past, the contest has run for five weeks, but in 2023, a bonus 'warm-up' week was added at the start that didn't count towards your final score. It was during this week that this story got its start.

Codex flash contests begin with a series of prompts you use as a starting point. The prompt I chose in this case was, "You've broken the law but had a darn good reason for it."

At first, I had no idea what to write, but I kept coming back to that prompt. Even when I went to bed, I was thinking about laws, but beyond the obvious laws of society, there are other laws, like the laws of physics, Murphy's law, etc. I didn't know which I'd pick and in what way they'd be used.

The next day the title just came to me, and I thought: why not write a story that uses several of these different laws as the jumping off point to my character's timeline problem?

I wrote a single draft that came to exactly 750 words and submitted it to the contest. As it turned out, it was my best-received story, the irony of course being that it was the one that didn't count towards my score. Eventually, I tweaked it a little more and wound up with a slightly longer version, which is the one published in *Nature Futures*.

