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this is science fiction at its best."—George R.R. Martin

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relatively few authentic masters.  
Gardner Dozois is one of them."—William Gibson

# SLOW DANCING THROUGH TIME



**5-time  
Nebula Award  
Winning Author**

STORIES BY

**GARDNER DOZOIS**

IN COLLABORATION WITH  
JACK DANN, MICHAEL SWANWICK,  
SUSAN CASPER & JACK C. HALDEMAN II

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Slow Dancing Through Time  
Gardner Dozois

Here are the short story collaborations of legendary editor and multiple Nebula Award winning author Gardner Dozois with some of the greatest writers of modern science fiction. Each story is followed by an essay by the collaborator discussing Dozois and his influence on science fiction and beyond.

Includes collaborative stories and appreciations by:

Michael Bishop  
Pat Cadigan  
Michael Swanwick  
Jack Dann  
Jack C. Haldeman, II  
Susan Casper

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*for Virginia Kidd*

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## FOREWORD:

# WRITE LIKE DOZOIS? I CANT EVEN SAY HIS NAME

MICHAEL BISHOP

Over the twenty years that Gardner and I have known each other, we've met in person less than half a dozen times—at a convention in Philadelphia, at a Nebula Awards banquet in New York City, at a booksellers convention in New Orleans, at the World Science Fiction Convention in Atlanta. Four meetings? I *believe* that's all, but memory is always suspect, and I sometimes fear that I wouldn't be able to pick mine out of a "Dragnef"-style lineup even if the other memories up there beside mine belonged to, say, Jack Dann, Jay Haldeman, Michael Swanwick, and Susan Casper.

This is what I do remember: around the late 1960s/early 1970s, I read every number of three original SF anthology series: *Orbit* edited by Damon Knight, *New Dimensions* edited by Robert Silverberg, and *Universe* edited by Terry Carr. I was trying to write and sell stories of my own, and the stories in these volumes, especially by such writers as R.A. Lafferty, Kate Wilhelm, Gene Wolfe, Joanna Russ, Edgar Pangborn, and Silverberg himself, struck me as the best of that period's cutting-edge work—stuff I hoped to emulate and, as unlikely as it obviously was, even to surpass. My excuse for thinking that I had a shot at competing with these fine writers—in these prestigious, hard-to-crack anthologies—was that I was young yet, twenty-five, twenty-six, a virtual babe at my brand-new IBM Selectric. Just wait until I got cranked up. I'd overtake the leprechaunish Lafferty, the elegant M. Wilhelm, the subtle Wolfe, the sneakily profound Russ, the lyrical Pangborn, and even that prolific but literate Silverberg fellow in, hey, a year or two, tops. And then the SF world would know that a new Zelazny, a new Delany, a new whoever-was-hot-this-week had ridden into town to gun down yesterday's tomorrows.

Problem was, some upstart with a hard-to-say last name and an image-packed, rhythmic prose style had beat me to the draw and was filling up major portions of *Orbit*, *New Dimensions*, and *Universe*—not to mention other magazines and anthologies—with ambitious, gripping, imaginative, *successful* stories that I could read only with jealous awe. His stories had enigmatic, creep-under-your-skin titles—"Where No Sun Shines", "A Dream at Noonday", "The Last Day of July", "A Special Kind of Morning"—and, damn it all to Philadelphia and back, they actually conjured the kinds of stunning SF-grounded effects I hoped my unwritten stories would one day pull off. But this guy—long-haired hippie-ish ex-soldier, to paint a rough portrait from some of what Silverberg said about him in his various introductions—was already doing what I still only hoped to do. Worse, it seemed that this infuriating Doh-ZOYS was—damn it all to Alpha Centauri and back—younger than I was maybe by as much as two years.

AARRRGH!!!

How did I first make contact with this DUZ-wheeze person? If I remember correctly (and I may not), it was Gardner (thank God his first name wasn't Aloysius or Heneage or Vyvyan) who contacted me. In the late 1960s/early 1970s, he was working, or had worked, as a slush-pile reader for Ejla Jakobsson at *Galaxy* and *If* magazines, and my first sale of a science fiction story was to *Galaxy* with a Bradburyesque little piece titled "Piñon Fall." At the time, I thought that Mr. Jakobsson had discovered my story in his morning's mail, read it with both alacrity and appreciation, and set it aside for six months to allow his admiration to cool. (No, no, no—I figured that the post office had lost m

manuscript in the mail.) Actually—or, a bit closer to “actually”—Gardner, according to a letter written in 1970 or 1971, had found “Piñon Fall” in *Galaxy*’s slush pile, had liked it well enough to tell Mr. Jakobsson, and had urged him to buy it. The sale took place, and my story appeared in *Galaxy*’s October-November 1978 issue, along with the third part of Robert A. Heinlein’s *I Will Fear No Evil* and a Silverberg novella called “The World Outside.”

So, in a very real way, I owe my first legitimate SF sale to this Duh-ZOID person. With that sale as a credit, I was able to persuade other editors—Edward L. Ferman, David Gerrold, Damon Knight, and, eventually, even Robert Silverberg—to pay me real money (two to five cents a word) for the stories rattling out of my Selectric. In fact, it was Gardner, telling me that he had found “Piñon Fall” among *Galaxy*’s unsolicited submissions, who urged me to try to enhance my earnings, my visibility, and my reputation as an up-and-comer by submitting material to the hardcover anthologies that I was enjoying both a gratifying popularity and a degree of prestige unknown at the digest-sized magazine. “If,” wrote Gardner, “you have something available, you ought to send it to *New Dimensions*.” He listed reasons, all of which struck me as convincingly astute, and I wrote back to thank him but also to point out that I had only a story or two to my credit and didn’t have anything else “lying around” for *New Dimensions* or *Orbit* or *Quark*. I was in awe of this Dō-ZWAH fellow (roughly, the correct pronunciation), but I would have never told him so, for my immature competitiveness kept me from viewing anyone younger than myself as a mentor, that person’s demonstrable talents be damned. I just couldn’t imagine having new stories always at hand, the way this guy apparently did.

Later, I learned that Gardner wasn’t as prolific as I had first thought him to be. He worked hard over each of his stories, with the patience and precision of a lapidary, and the style in which he couched his gnomic musings about fate, man’s inhumanity to man, and the alien strangeness of life in this universe often verged on the achingly beautiful. It still does, but, briefly at least, he was the object of a couple of bad raps, namely, that his work was pessimistic and/or defeatist, that he was a writer more interested in fine writing than in substance, and that the most likely result of reading his stuff—for those who care mostly for story, with little attention to or concern for style—was the cultivation of an ulcerous depression.

Balderdash, every charge. Gardner always puts his style at the service of content. Early stories like “Chains of the Sea”, “The Visible Man”, and “A Special Kind of Morning”, as well as such finer later stories as “Dinner Party”, “The Peacemaker”, “Morning Child” (the latter two are Nebula Award winners), and “Solace” disclose a writer with an insightful sense of what our humanity often demands of or takes from us. Further, Gardner has compassion big enough to redeem his put-upon and/or wrung-out characters from the snares that they have fallen into or laid for themselves—even when the redemption is philosophical rather than physical. Maybe, in fact, especially then.

But *Slow Dancing* is a collection of collaborations, not of solo stories, so let me add here that the Gardner Dozois who shows up in these collaborations has an antic streak that isn’t always visible in his solo work. That’s not to say that you won’t recognize the “serious” Dozois (familiar to us from *The Visible Man* and the four other noncollaborative stories just listed) from “Touring,” “Down Among the Dead Men”, “Executive Clemency”, and the psychological horror tales “Playing the Game” and “The Clowns”, but that at least a bit of the madcap Gardner Dozois, known for years as a convention-goer, crops up conspicuously, and hilariously, in the stories “A Change in the Weather”, “Afternoon at Schrafft’s”, “Golden Apples of the Sun”, “The Stray”, “Send No Money”, and (maybe idiosyncratically, my favorite of the collection) the at-once funny and touching “Slow Dancing with Jesus”.

(By the way, about this last story, Gardner writes, “I alone am responsible for the appalling job I did at the story’s end.” I may be a little weird, but I don’t see the story’s final line—at least on one level.)

—as either appalling or laughable. It is, I suppose, but it also isn't. As a result, "Slow Dancing with Jesus" harbors resonances that hoist it out of the territory of clever commercial writing into the heady vicinity of—hush, now—art. And it may even be why this volume uses the title of my favorite of Gardner's collaborative efforts as its title piece, sort of.)

Okay, so you get Gardner being madcap, antic, cut-upish, and downright laugh-out-loud funny in some of these stories (along with his fine collaborators, of course). What else do you get? To my mind, maybe the most obvious thing you get—and why not, given the diverse hands that brought the stories into existence?—is *variety*. You get horror ("Down Among the Dead Men", "Touring", "The Clowns", etc.), science fiction ("Executive Clemency", "The Gods of Mars", "Time Bride", "Snow Job", etc.), and fantasy ("Slow Dancing with Jesus", "Afternoon at Schrafft's", "A Change in the Weather", "Golden Apples of the Sun", "The Stray", etc.). And it's interesting to note, too, that many of the stories I've arbitrarily plunked into one category—horror, science fiction, or fantasy—actually cross genres, sometimes repeatedly. Far more important to Gardner and his collaborators than in which bin to place one of their productions were the lovable mongrel demands of an individual tale's own internal logic. Thus, "Playing the Game" is both horror and SF, "Time Bride" both humor and smoothly didactic SF, "Touring" both wish-fulfillment fantasy and an unsettling kind of existential horror. And so on.

Suffice it to say that this is a wide-ranging, entertaining, colorful, and unpredictable collection of stories, well worth both your time and your money.

I'm sorry—truly sorry—that there's no story here with a byline citing Michael Bishop as collaborator of Gardner's. Once upon a time, I made a half-hearted attempt at a collaboration which Gardner sent me the opening of a long SF story and gently suggested that I ponder the material to see if I could add to and maybe even resolve the conflicts already set forth—but I stuck, and never got unstuck, and finally Gardner opted to pass the material along to George R.R. Martin. That was a wise decision, even if he and George haven't yet finished the story either, but I remain jealous of all the good souls—Jack, Jay, Michael, and Susan—who have collaborated successfully with Gardner.

I hope that one day, if only for a wisecracking short-short, I can join their company and experience myself the exhilaration of working with Gardner, of bouncing ideas off his bizarrely flexible brain, and of hitting again and again those high-paying slick markets that so often featured his and his collaborators' cunningly hewn stories—tales of mystery, imagination, and *joie de vivre*.

I'm not sure I know how to pronounce *joie de vivre*, but I know it when I encounter it, and Gardner's undoubtedly got it. Over the past few years, incidentally, I *have* learned how to pronounce his lovely last name.

(To reiterate: Dō-ZWAH, Dō-ZWAH, Dō-ZWAH.)

And I keep hoping that some small relaxation of his editorial duties—he does a bang-up job of *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, assembles a respected annual best-of-the-year anthology, and edits a series of entertaining theme anthologies with Jack Dann—will give him more writing time of his own. In the meantime, we have this handsome collection, and I'm damned grateful to the folks at Ursus Imprints that we do.

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# INTRODUCTION I: HOW DID THEY *DO THAT*?

PAT CADIGAN

Immediately, I understood there was Chemistry at work, definitely the capital-C variety. This is the kind you feel when it all works, everything's in synch, in phase—so much so that even the conflicting forces make it all come out right. For a result like that, you need the right combination of people to strike a spark—or maybe it's more like a quark. Then just stand back and watch what happens. You're going to get either some great stories or some great parties. And if you're enormously lucky, both.

So how did they do it?

Further on, you can read the individual accounts of how the stories came about, from Susan's perspective, and Michael's, and Jack Dann's, and Jack Haldeman's. You'll be entertained and amused, and you'll learn a few things about some special people who found a way around what I think of as the writer's Privacy Fence. Not all writers can do that and of those who can, not all of them can do it well—and of that minority, almost none can do it with more than two. But here we have some stories with *three* names on them. So how did they *do* it?

It drove me crazy. I wanted to know. I pored over the accounts, looking for the key phrase (or phrases) that would give me the royal road into the process and enable me to divine what was at work here.

My first thought, after all this reading and re-reading, was that I was sorry I hadn't been there to mean, talk about a writer's idea of a good time—! And . . . well . . . that's about it, really. Sounds like everyone involved was having a good time, and that wasn't exactly a revelation to me. Even though I wasn't around for the collaborating, I've been at a few of the parties.

Only once, however, have I seen all the people in this book in one place at one time. That was in Boston, at the 1989 World Science Fiction Convention. I gather that doesn't happen very often, probably less often than the Worldcon, which is annual.

Most often, I see Gardner and Susan together, but they're married, so that figures. And I suppose it also figures that two writers under the same roof would think of collaborating. The thing is, Gardner and Susan were together for a number of years before Susan's first published work came out, a nascent story having to do with Jack the Ripper and video games called "Springfingered Jack." Then there was "Mama," the kind of horror story anyone who's ever had a mother can relate to; and "The Cleaning Lady," about the woman who breaks into people's houses and *cleans* them; and "Under Her Skin" about the fat vampire—not an obese vampire, but a vampire that makes Weight Watchers obsolete (I didn't make this up, Susan did); and "A Child of Darkness," about a vampire wannabe.

Where Gardner writes mostly science fiction, Susan has gone her own way in horror, speaking in her own voice and doing just fine. I know her work well, but I cannot point to any part of the stories she has had a hand in and say, *There she is—she starts here and leaves off here and comes back again over here*. And yet there in "Send No Money," I hear her. In the blend of "The Clowns," a three-way collaboration, I pick up on her presence and I know that without her, it wouldn't have been the same. How did they *do* that?

Besides Gardner and Susan, only Michael Swanwick also lives in Philadelphia. (Philadelphia is also home to Tess Kissinger, the only person I know of who went to the prom with Jesus. Interesting town.) Author of *In the Drift* and *Vacuum Flowers*, as well as numerous acclaimed short stories like

Nebula-nominee “The Feast of St. Janis” and Hugo-nominee “The Edge of the World,” Michael is also a fine writer on his own. When I first met him, I thought he would probably have been at home with Monty Python. That kind of humor, by turns goofy and sophisticated, always springing from the unexpected, delivered in a voice that I think of as the sound of merry. I am privileged to own—no, sorry, *my son* owns and I am privileged to borrow (once in a while) a rare cassette recording of the funniest children’s story ever, *The Two Buildings Do Lunch*, as performed and interpreted by the authors, Michael and his son Sean. I picture Marianne Porter (wife and mother, respectively) listening to this with a smile identical to my own.

This is the same guy who collaborated on “Snow Job,” a story I could see belonging to either Gardner or Gardner—and as Gardner explains elsewhere, it was more collaboration by surprise than design. Okay—but how to account for the seamlessness of “Touring”? If you don’t know which part is Michael’s, you’ll never figure it out. But you can hear him, loud and clear. How did they *do* that?

Jack Dann lives in upstate New York with his wife, Jeanne Van Buren Dann, and son, Jody; and if you don’t know that he, too, is another major individual author on his own, you must have just fallen off the turnip truck yesterday. My initial impression was that Jack and Gardner had known each other forever, circularly—i.e., they never actually met for the first time, they’d just always known each other. Put them together for any length of time and they start sounding like each other. Okay, *I* think they start sounding like each other. They also get *really silly*. Jack Dann, author of *Junction* and *The Man Who Melted*, “The Dybbuk Dolls” and “Camps”, *giggling*? Meeting my husband for the first time and ruffling his hair and pinching his cheek? (Hell, *I* didn’t do that the first time I met Arnie.) Jack Dann, distinguished author, extrovert, and party man.

And not just collaborative writer, but editor, too—*Future Power*, *MagiCats!*, *DogTales*, *Mermaids!* with Gardner; *In the Field of Fire* with Jeanne; and lone editing of *Wandering Stars* and *More Wandering Stars*.

If I were to put my finger over the byline of “Down Among the Dead Men,” (for one example, this could be either Gardner’s alone or Jack’s alone—but if I didn’t know for sure, I could not attribute it to only one or the other by guessing. I hear them both. Granted, I’m the one who thinks they sound alike, but I meant their speaking voices. Their writing voices are quite individual, but here they blend, and boy, does it work. Just like in “Time Bride” and “Slow Dancing with Jesus” (which also may give you some idea of how funny it can get at those parties). How did they *do* that?

Jack C. Haldeman is funny, too, another fine author in his own right, with over forty short stories and three novels to his credit. He shares with Jack Dann the distinction of being a genuine Jack—i.e., not a John calling himself Jack, but bearing it as his real first name. I first met him and his wife, Victoria, in New Orleans a couple of years ago, long after I heard Gardner read “Executive Clemency” at a convention. Already familiar with Jack’s humor in stories like “Wet Behind the Ears” and “My Crazy Father Who Scares All Women Away”, the story made me blink. It still does. There are things about the story that are Gardner, but Jack is also unmistakably and equally present—once again, the voices merge and harmonize without undercutting each other, resulting in a very different story than either of them would have written alone. How did they *do* that?

Well, yes, I did mention Chemistry, didn’t I? You could just say Chemistry and leave it at that. . . and I’m afraid that’s exactly what you’d have to do. That kind of Chemistry you can’t cultivate artificially or bring out by decree or demand. It just happens between people, between writers. *Among* writers, for God’s sake. So here they are, in twos and threes, all of them with Gardner in common—and now that I think of it, that’s just like all those great parties I’ve been to. Which means, I guess that no matter how they did it, we’re all going to have a good time here, and that’s what really counts.

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# INTRODUCTION II: COLLABORATING

GARDNER DOZOIS

We started writing these collaborative stories at a time when I had been in a creative slump for a couple of years, and, looking at them from the narrowest and most selfish perspective possible, they were invaluable to *me* because they helped to jump-start my creativity, shake me out of a dry spell, and launch me into a high-production period in which I completed, in addition to these collaborations, quite a few stories of my own.

Of course, they were valuable for a lot more than that. For one thing, they made us all a fair amount of money, and got us, as authors, some worthwhile exposure in prestige markets where we had previously been little known. For another thing, we ended up with a bunch of stories that none of us would ever have written on our own, and most of them were, at the least, worth the writing. (I know that I am leaving us wide-open to some sneering hostile criticism here, but I *do* think that the collaborative stories were worth writing, and, for what *it's* worth, the public response to them has been pretty good as well—many of them have been reprinted and anthologized, a few have shown up on award ballots, some have been picked up by Best of the Year anthologies, and so forth. My *mother* liked them, or no doubt would have *said* so anyway if she'd ever read any of them. So there.)

For yet another thing, I think that doing them taught us all quite a bit about the craft of writing about our own strengths and weaknesses as writers, and, ideally, how to *combine* those strengths to create a synergistic effect that sometimes enabled us to accomplish things beyond the ability of any one of us alone.

For me, these collaborations are inextricably bound up with workshopping, and in a sense arose out of the workshopping process itself. Workshop bashing is a popular sport, with some curmudgeons always willing to pop up and blame the decline and moral decay of science fiction as a genre on the advent of workshopping—and it is true that the big formalized teaching workshops like Clarion have their drawbacks (they also have their *good* points, however, something the curmudgeons are never willing to admit) . . . Nevertheless, working SF writers have been getting together to analyze and critique each other's work—take each other's stories apart to see why they're not working right—since before there was such a thing as SF as a formalized genre. Lovecraft and Bloch and Leiber did it—by mail—in the '30s; the Futurians—Kornbluth, Pohl, Knight, Blish, etc.—did it in the '50s; and other writers have been doing it ever since. I suspect that they will keep on workshopping, too, despite the curmudgeons, since if you can find some people who really know how to workshop—a big “if” admittedly—and who are temperamentally suited to survive the process with their egos reasonably intact, and if those workshopppers are willing to stick to practical nuts-and-bolts criticism rather than spouting ideological party lines or wandering away into the airy realms of obtuse aesthetic theorizing (the two biggest workshop-killers), then workshopping can be a highly valuable tool, not only for fixing flaws in specific stories, but also for learning something about writing as a craft.

I had belonged to one such workshop—the Guilford Workshop—in the early '70s. Perhaps not coincidentally, it was after that workshop had dissolved, and I no longer had any outside inputs on my work, that I slowly drifted into a long dry spell. I'm sure that it was not at all coincidental that my creative juices started to flow again after I got into the habit of having frequent informal workshop sessions with Jack Dann and Michael Swanwick, and, later, after she herself had started to write, with Susan Casper.



These sessions started sometime in 1977, and increased in frequency throughout 1978 and 1979. I was not producing much fiction myself at that point, but Jack was working on a novel he wanted advice on, and Michael was working on the early stories with which he would soon launch his writing career and wanted advice on *them* . . . and so, even though I had nothing of my own to place upon the sacrificial altar (which is considered bad form, usually), we began workshopping; at first, I worked with them individually, and then, after one memorable drunken evening, we all started workshopping together. And at some point in late 1979 or early 1980, we slid from these workshopping sessions to the idea of working on stories together, a transition so natural, gradual, and imperceptible that we almost didn't notice it. Before we quite realized what was happening, we were actually *writing* collaborative stories, in various combinations, and then we started *selling* them.

And so, we kept on doing it.

Perhaps because the collaborations evolved organically from the workshopping experience, we instinctively stumbled upon what I consider to be one of the secrets of successful collaboration, *especially* of *three-way* collaborations, which are as rare as hen's teeth: somebody must do a final unifying and homogenizing draft of the story, smoothing out differences in style, and that somebody must have the authority to decide what goes into the finished draft and what must come out, especially if there are alternate versions or drafts of the same section by different hands. With most of these stories, the person who did that final draft was me, perhaps because of my long experience as a story doctor, perhaps because Jack and Michael had already become inured in the workshop to having me inflict such advice upon them and the habit had been formed. At any rate, nobody ever complained about it, nor was it something that was ever discussed or questioned or formalized—it just worked out that way, an unspoken assumption. Perhaps because the collaborations grew out of workshopping sessions, where we were all used to commenting upon each other's work, regarding a bit of prose as something to be reshaped and changed in the crucible, mutable, improve-uponable, "in progress," we never had any major ego clashes over these stories—although many another collaborative team has foundered on the shoals of Injured Vanity—and those minor ego problems and clashes of creative vision we did have were fleeting and easily worked out.

We just *wrote* the stories, without intellectualizing the collaborative process much, each writer contributing what they could, one set of hands picking up what another set had put down, all of us concentrating on ways to get the *story* down on paper however we could, by hook or crook, whatever worked, changing things around, discarding what didn't work, working things *out* . . . and it wasn't until much later when editors began to marvel that three such different writers could possibly work well-enough together to produce a viable three-way collaboration without murdering each other, that it even occurred to us that we might be doing something unusual.

A word on marketing is perhaps in order, before we get to the stories themselves. These collaborations were all strange stuff, pretty offbeat, occasionally bizarre, and were all pretty much beyond the pale as far as the traditional digest SF-magazine world of the late '70s and early '80s was concerned. Instead—again, without conscious design or even thinking about it much—we ended up selling most of them outside the strict genre boundaries of the time. Kathy Green at *Penthouse* bought several of them, as did Ellen Datlow at *Omni*, and Alice K. Turner at *Playboy*. One of them appeared in *Oui*, another appeared in *The Twilight Zone Magazine*, and yet another appeared in, of all places, *High Times*. Later, we sold one to *Amazing* and then one to *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*—under Shawna McCarthy at this point, when the magazine had started loosening up—and later still a few of these stories were reprinted in the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* and in *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, but their *initial* acceptance was with the so-called "slice-of-life magazine" market; only retroactively did they penetrate the genre market. The funny thing about a

this is that there were only a handful of SF writers in those days who were appearing with any regularity in all of the “Big Three” slick markets (*Playboy*, *Penthouse*, and *Omni*): Robert Silverberg, Thomas M. Disch, Harlan Ellison, and *us*. There were writers working in the genre market who had far bigger reputations than Jack or Michael or I, but somehow we were selling to those markets—the top-paying fiction markets in the country—and they weren’t; I suspect that’s at least partially because they weren’t bothering to submit to those markets, something that doesn’t seem to have changed much subsequently.

Once again, we’d done something right—mostly by accident, as usual.

(From here on in, my comments will appear *after* the stories, since I intend to give too much away in them about some of the stories for them to function well as headnotes. Somewhere in the book, scattered throughout at the whim of the publisher, you’ll also find general comments by Jack, Michael, Susan, and Jay Haldeman.)

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# TOURING

## GARDNER DOZOIS, JACK DANN, & MICHAEL SWANWICK

The four-seater Beechcraft Bonanza dropped from a gray sky to the cheerless winter runways at Fargo Airport. Tires touched pavement, screeched, and the single-engine plane taxied to a halt. It was seven o'clock in the morning, February 3, 1959.

Buddy Holly duckwalked down the wing and hopped to the ground. It had been a long and grueling flight; his bones ached, his eyes were gritty behind the large, plastic-framed glasses, and he felt stale and curiously depressed. Overnight bag in one hand, laundry sack in the other, he stood beside Ritchie Valens for a moment, looking for their contact. White steam curled from their nostrils. Brown grass poked out of an old layer of snow beside the runway. Somewhere a dog barked, flat and far away.

Behind the hurricane fence edging the field, a stocky man waved both hands overhead. Valens nodded, and Holly hefted his bags. Behind them, J.P. Richardson grunted as he leaped down from the plane.

They walked towards the man across the tarmac, their feet crunching over patches of dirty ice.

“Jack Blemings,” the man rasped as he came up to meet them. “I manage the dancehall and the hotel in Moorhead.” Thin mustache, thin lips, cheeks going to jowl—Holly had met this man a thousand times before: the stogie in his mouth was inevitable; the sporty plaid hat nearly so. Blemings stuck out a hand and Holly shuffled his bags awkwardly, trying to free his own hand. “Real pleased to meet you, Buddy,” Blemings said. His hand was soggy and boneless. “Real pleased to meet a real artist.”

He gestured them into a showroom-new '59 Cadillac. It dipped on its springs as Richardson gingerly collapsed into the back seat. Starting the engine, Blemings leaned over the seat for more introductions. Richardson was blowing his nose, but hastily transferred the silk handkerchief into his other hand so that they could shake. His delighted-to-meet-you expression lasted as long as the handshake, then the animation went out of him, and his face slumped back into lines of dull fatigue.

The Cadillac jerked into motion with an ostentatious squeal of rubber. Once across the Red River, which still ran steaming with gunmetal pre-dawn mist, they were out of North Dakota and into Moorhead, Minnesota. The streets of Moorhead were empty—not so much as a garbage truck out yet. “Sleepy little burg,” Valens commented. No one responded. They pulled up to an undistinguished six-story brick hotel in the heart of town.

The hotel lobby was cavernous and gloomy, inhabited only by a few tired-looking potted rubber plants. As they walked past a grouping of battered armchairs and sagging sofas toward the shadowed information desk in the back, dust puffed at their feet from the faded gray carpet. An unmoving ceiling fan threw thin-armed shadows around the room, and everything smelled of old cigar butts and dead flies and trapped sunshine.

The front desk was as deserted as the rest of the lobby. Blemings slammed the bell angrily until a balding, bored-looking man appeared from the back, moving as though he were swimming through syrup. As the desk clerk doled out room keys, still moving like a somnambulist, Blemings took the cigar out of his mouth and said, “I spoke with your road manager, must've been right after you guys left the Surf Ballroom. Needed his okay for two acts I'm adding to the show.” He paused. “S'awright with you, hey?”

Holly shrugged. "It's your show," he said.

---

###

Holly unlaced one shoe, let it drop heavily to the floor. His back ached, and the long, sleepless flight had made his suit rumpled and sour-smelling. One last chore and he could sleep: he picked up the bedside telephone and dialed the hotel operator for an outside line so that he could call his wife Maria in New York and tell her that he had arrived safely.

The phone was dead; the switchboard must be closed down. He sighed and bent over to pick up his shoe again.

###

Eight or nine men were standing around the lobby when Holly stepped out of the elevator; husky fellows, Southern boys by the look of them. Two were at the front desk, making demands of the clerk who responded by spreading his arms wide and rolling his eyes upward.

Waiting his turn for service, Holly leaned back against the counter, glanced about. He froze in disbelief. Against all logic, all possibility, Elvis Presley himself was standing not six yards away on the gray carpet. For an instant Holly struggled with amazement. Then a second glance told him the truth.

Last year, Elvis had been drafted into the army, depriving his fans of his presence, and creating a ready market for those who could imitate him. A legion of Presley impersonators had crowded into the welcoming spotlights of stages across the country, trying vainly to fill the gap left by the King of Rock and Roll.

This man, though—he stood out. At first glance, he *was* Elvis. An instant later you saw that he was twenty years too old and as much as forty pounds overweight. There were dissolute lines under his eyes, and a weary, dissipated expression on his face. The rigors of being on the road had undone his ducktail, so that his hair was an untidy mess, hanging down over his forehead, and curling over his ears. He wore a sequined shirt, now wrinkled and sweaty, and a suede jacket.

Holly went over to introduce himself. "Hi," he said. "I guess you're playing tonight's show."

The man ignored his outthrust hand. Dark, haunted eyes bored into Holly's. "I don't know what kind of game you're playing, son," he said. A soft Tennessee accent underlaid his words. "But I'm packing a piece and I know how to use it." His hand darted inside his jacket, emerged holding an ugly-looking .38.

Involuntarily, Holly sucked in his breath. He slowly raised his hands shoulder-high, and backed away. "Hey, it's okay," he said. "I was just trying to be friendly." The man's eyes followed his retreat suspiciously, and he didn't reholster the gun until Holly was back at the front desk.

The desk clerk was free now. Holly slid three bills across the counter, said, "Change please." From the corner of his eye, he saw the imitation Elvis getting into the elevator, surrounded by his entourage. They were solicitous, almost subservient. One patted the man's back as he shook his head and recounted his close call. *Poor old man*, Holly thought pityingly. The man was really cracking under the pressures of the road. He'd be lucky to last out the tour.

In the wooden booth across the lobby, Holly dumped his change on the ledge below the phone. He dialed the operator for long distance.

The earpiece buzzed, made clicking noises. Then it filled with harsh, actinic static, and the clicking grew faster and louder. Holly jiggled the receiver, racked the phone angrily.

Another flood of musicians and crew coursed through the lobby. Stepping from the boot ruefully glancing back at the phone, he collided with a small woman in a full-length mink. “Oof,” she said, then reached out and gave him a squeeze to show there were no hard feelings. A mobil hoydenish face grinned up at him.

“Hey, Sport,” she said brightly. “I love that bow-tie and those glasses—! Jesus, you look just like Buddy Holly!”

“I know,” he said wryly. But she was gone. He trudged back to the elevators. Then something caught his eye, and he swung about, openly staring.

Was that a *man* she was talking to? My God, he had hair down to his shoulders!

Trying not to stare at his amazing apparition, he stepped into the elevator. Back in his room, he stopped only long enough to pick up his bag of laundry before heading out again. He was going to have to go outside the hotel to find a working phone anyway; he might as well fight down his weariness, hunt up a laundromat, and get his laundry done.

The lobby was empty when he returned through it, and he couldn’t even find the desk clerk to ask where the nearest laundromat was. Muttering under his breath, Holly trudged out of the hotel.

Outside, the sun was shining brilliantly but without warmth from out of a hard, high blue sky. There was still no traffic, no one about on the street, and Holly walked along through an early morning silence broken only by the squeaking of his sneakers, past closed-up shops and shuttered brownstone houses. He found a laundromat after a few more blocks, and although it was open, there was no one there either, not even the inevitable elderly Negro attendant. The rows of unused washing machines glinted dully in the dim light cast by a flyspecked bulb. Shrugging, he clumped his clothes into a machine. The change machine didn’t work, of course, but you got used to dealing with things like that on the road, and he’d brought a handkerchief full of change with him. He got the machine going, and then went out to look for a phone.

The streets were still empty, and after a few more blocks it began to get on his nerves. He’d been in hick towns before—had grown up in one—but this was the sleepest, *deadest* damn town he’d ever seen. There was still no traffic, although there were plenty of cars parked by the curbs, and he hadn’t seen another person since leaving the hotel. There weren’t even any *pigeons*, for goodness sake!

There was a five-and-dime on the corner, its doors standing open. Holly poked his head inside. The lights were on, but there were no customers, no floorwalkers, no salesgirls behind the counter. True, small-town people weren’t as suspicious as folk from the bigger cities—but still, this was a business, and it looked as if anyone could just walk in here and walk off with any of the unguarded merchandise. It was gloomy and close in the empty store, and the air was filled with dust. Holly backed out of the doorway, somehow not wanting to explore the depths of the store for the sake of the personnel who *must* be in there somewhere.

A slight wind had come up now, and it flicked grit against his face and blew bits of scrap paper down the empty street.

He found a phone on the next corner, hunted through his handkerchief for a dime while the wind snatched at the edges of the fabric. The phone buzzed and clicked at him again, and this time there was the faint high wailing of wind in the wires, an eerie, desolate sound that always made him think of ghosts wandering alone through the darkness. The next phone he found was also dead, and the next.

Uneasily, he picked up his laundry and headed back to the hotel.

###

The desk clerk was spreading his hands wide in a gesture of helpless abnegation of responsibility.

when the fat Southerner in the sequined shirt leaned forward, poked a hard finger into the clerk's chest, and said softly, "You know who I am, son?"

"Why, of course I do, Mr. Presley," the clerk said nervously. "Yessir, of course I do, sir."

"You say you know who I am, son," Elvis said in a cottony voice that slowly mounted in volume. "If you know who I am, then you *know* why I don't have to stay in a goddamned flophouse like this. Isn't that right? Would you give your mother a room like that, you know goddamned well you wouldn't. Just what are you people thinking of? I'm *Elvis Presley*, and you'd give me a room like that!"

Elvis was bellowing now, his face grown red and mottled, his features assuming that look of sulky, sneering meanness that had thrilled millions. His eyes were hard and bright as glass. As the frightened clerk shrank back, his hands held up now as much in terror as in supplication, Elvis suddenly began to change. He looked at the clerk sadly, as if pitying him, and said, "Son, do you know who I am?"

"Yessir," whispered the clerk.

"Then can't you see it?" asked Elvis.

"See what, sir?"

"That I'm *chosen*! Are you an atheist, are you a goddamned atheist?" Elvis pounded on the desk and barked, "I'm the star, I've been given that, and you can't soil it, you atheist bastard! You *sonovabitch*!" Now that was the worst thing he could call anyone, and he never, almost never used it for his mother, may she rest in peace, was holy. *She* had believed in him, had told him that the Lord had chosen *him*, that as long as he sang and believed, the Lord would take care of him. Like this? This the way He was going to take care of me?

"I'm the star, and I could *buy* this hotel out of my spare change! Buy it, you hear that?" And even as he spoke, the incongruity of the whole situation hit him, really hit him hard for the first time. It was as though his mind had suddenly cleared after a long, foggy daze, as if the scales had fallen from his eyes.

Elvis stopped shouting and stumbled back from the desk, frightened now, fears and suspicion flooding in on him like the sea. What was he doing *here*? Dammit, he was the King! He'd made his comeback, and he'd played to capacity crowds at the biggest concert halls in the country. And now he couldn't even remember how he'd gotten here—he'd been at Graceland, and then everything had gotten all foggy and confused, and the next thing he knew he was climbing out of the bus in front of this hotel with the roadies and the rest of the band. Even if he'd agreed to play this one-horse town, it would have to have been for charity. That's it, it had to be for charity. But then where were the reporters, the TV crews? His coming here would be the biggest damn thing that had ever happened in Moorhead, Minnesota. Why weren't there any screaming crowds being held back by police?

"What in hell's going on here?" Elvis shouted. He snatched out his revolver, and gestured to his two bodyguards to close up on either side of him. His gaze darted wildly about the lobby as he tried to look into every corner at once. "Keep your eyes open! There's something funny—"

At that moment, Jack Blemings stepped out of his office, shut the door smoothly behind him, and sauntered across the musty old carpet toward them. "Something wrong here, Mr. Presley?" he drawled.

"Damn *right* there is," Elvis raged, taking a couple of steps toward Blemings and brandishing his gun. "You know how many *years* it's been since I played a tank town like this? I don't know what in hell the Colonel was thinking of to send me down here. I—"

Smiling blandly and ignoring the gun, Blemings reached out and touched Elvis on the chest.

Elvis shuddered and took a lurching step backward, his eyes glazing over. He shook his head.

looked foggily around the lobby, glanced down at the gun in his hand as though noticing it for the first time, then holstered it absentmindedly. “Time’s the show tonight?” he mumbled.

“About eight, Mr. Presley,” Blemings answered, smiling. “You’ve got plenty of time to relax before then.”

Elvis looked around the lobby again, running a hand through his greased-back hair. “Anything to do around here?” he asked, a hint of the old sneer returning.

“We got a real nice bar right over there the other side of the lobby,” Blemings said.

“I don’t drink,” Elvis said sullenly.

“Well, then,” Blemings added brightly, “we got some real nice pinball machines in that bar, too.” Shaking his head, Elvis turned and moved away across the lobby, taking his entourage with him. Blemings went back to his office.

###

J.P. Richardson had unpacked the scotch and was going for ice when he saw the whore. There was no mistaking what she was. She was dressed in garish gypsy clothes with ungodly amounts of jewelry about her neck and wrists. Beneath a light blouse her breasts swayed freely—she wasn’t even wearing a bra. He didn’t have to be told how she had earned the mink coat draped over one arm.

“Hey, little sister,” Richardson said softly. He was still wearing the white suit that was his onstage trademark, his “Big Bopper” outfit. He looked good in it, and knew it. “Are you available?”

“You talking to me, honey?” She spoke defiantly, almost jeeringly, but something in her stance, her bold stare, told him she was ready for almost anything. He discreetly slid a twenty from a jacket pocket, smiled and nodded.

“I’d like to make an appointment,” he said, slipping the folded bill into her hand. “That is, if you *are* available now.”

She stared from him to the bill and back, a look of utter disbelief on her face. Then, suddenly, she grinned. “Why, ‘course I’m available, sugar. What’s your room number? Gimme ten minutes to stash my coat and I’ll be right there.”

“Room four-eleven.” Richardson watched her flounce down the hall, and, despite some embarrassment, was pleased. There was a certain tawdry charm to her. Probably ruts like a mink, he told himself. He went back to his room to wait.

###

The woman went straight to the hotel bar, slapped the bill down, and shouted, “Hey, kids, pour up! The drinks are on Janis!”

There was a vague stirring, and two or three lackluster men eddied toward the bar.

Janis looked about, saw that the place was almost empty. A single drunk sat wall-eyed at a table holding onto its edges with clenched hands to keep from falling over. To the rear, almost lost in gloom, a big stud was playing pinball. Two unfriendly types, who looked like bodyguards, stood nearby, protecting him from the empty tables. Otherwise—nothing. “Shoulda taken the fat dude up on his offer,” she grumbled. “There’s nothing happening *here*.” Then, to the bartender, “Make mine whiskey sour.”

She took a gulp of her drink, feeling sorry for herself. The clatter of pinball bells ceased briefly as the stud lost his ball. He slammed the side of the machine viciously with one hand. She swiveled



her stool to look at him.

~~“Damn,” she said to the bartender. “You know, from this angle that dude looks just like *Elvis*.”~~

###

Buddy Holly finished adjusting his bow-tie, reached for a comb, then stopped in mid-motion. He stared about the tiny dressing room, with its cracked mirror and bare light bulbs, and asked himself *How did I get here?*

It was no idle, existential question. He really did not know. The last thing he remembered was entering his hotel room and collapsing on the bed. Then—here. There was nothing in between.

A rap at the door. Blemings stuck his head in, the stench of his cigar permeating the room. “Everything okay in here?”

“Well,” Holly began. But he went no further. What could he say? “How long before I go on?”

“Plenty of time. You might want to catch the opener, though—good act. On in ten.”

“Thanks.”

Blemings left, not quite shutting the door behind him. Holly studied his face in the mirror. He looked haggard and unresponsive. He flashed a toothy smile, but did not feel it. God, he was tired. Being on the road was going to kill him. There had to be a way off the treadmill.

The woman from the hotel leaned into his room. “Hey, Ace—you seen that Bleming motherfucker anywhere?”

Holly’s jaw dropped. To hear that kind of language from a woman—from a *white* woman. “He just went by,” he said weakly.

“Shit!” She was gone.

Her footsteps echoed in the hallway, were swallowed up by silence. And that was *wrong*. There should be the murmur and nervous bustle of acts preparing to go on, last-minute errands being run, equipment being tested. Holly peered into the corridor—empty.

To one side, the hall dead-ended into a metal door with a red EXIT sign overhead. Holly went the other way, toward the stage.

Just as he reached the wings, the audience burst into prolonged, almost frenzied applause. The Elvis impersonator was striding onstage. It was a great crowd.

But the wings were empty. No stagehands or gofers, no idlers, nobody preparing for the next set.

“Elvis” spread his legs wide and crouched low, his thick lips curling in a sensual sneer. He was wearing a gold lamb jumpsuit, white scarf about his neck. He moved his guitar loosely, adjusting the strap, then gave his band the downbeat.

Well it’s one for the money

Two for the show

Three to get ready

Now go cat go!

And he was off and running into a brilliant rendition of “Blue Suede Shoes.” Not an easy song to do because the lyrics were laughable. It relied entirely on the music, and it took a real entertainer to make it work.

This guy had it all, though. The jumps, gyrations, and forward thrusts of the groin were stock stuff—but somehow he made them look right. He played the audience, too, and his control was perfect. Holly could see shadowy shapes beyond the glare of the footlights, moving in a more than sexual frenzy, was astonished by their rapturous screams. All this in the first minutes of the set.

~~He's good, Holly marveled. Why was he wasting that kind of talent on a novelty act? There was a tug at his arm, and he shrugged it off.~~

The tug came again. "Hey, man," somebody said, and he turned to find himself again facing the woman. Their eyes met and her expression changed oddly, becoming a mixture of bewilderment and outright fear. "Jesus God," she said in awe. "You *are* Buddy Holly!"

"You've already told me that," he said, irritated. He wanted to watch the man on stage—who was he, anyway?—not be distracted by this foul-mouthed and probably not very clean woman.

"No, I mean it—you're *really* Buddy Holly. And that dude on stage—" she pointed—"he's Elvis Presley."

"It's a good act," Holly admitted. "But it wouldn't fool my grandmother. That good ol' boy ain't forty if he's a day."

"Look," she said. "I'm Janis Joplin. I guess that don't mean nothing to you, but—Hey, lemme show ya something." She tried to tug him away from the stage.

"I want to see the man's act," he said mildly.

"It won't take a minute, man. And it's important, I swear it. It's—you just gotta see it, is all."

There was no denying her. She led him away, down the corridor to the metal door with its red EXIT sign, and threw it open. "Look!"

He squinted into a dull winter evening. Across a still, car-choked parking lot was a row of faded brick buildings. A featureless gray sky overhung all. "There used ta be a lot more out here," Janis babbled. "All the rest of the town. It all went away. Can you dig it, man? It just all—went away."

Holly shivered. This woman was crazy! "Look, Miss Joplin," he began. Then the buildings winked out of existence.

He blinked. The buildings had not faded away—they had simply ceased to be. As crisply and sharply as if somebody had flipped a switch. He opened his mouth, shut it again.

Janis was talking quietly, fervently. "I don't know what it is, man, but something *very weird* is going down here." Everything beyond the parking lot was a smooth even gray. Janis started to speak again, stopped, moistened her lips. She looked suddenly hesitant and oddly embarrassed. "I mean, like, I don't know how to break this to ya, Buddy, but you're *dead*. You bought it in a plane crash way back in '59."

"This *is* '59," Holly said absently, looking out across the parking lot, still dazed, her words not really sinking in. As he watched, the cars snapped out of existence row by row, starting with the furthest row, working inward to the nearest. Only the asphalt lot itself remained, and a few bits of litter lying between the painted slots. Holly's groin tightened and, as fear broke through astonishment, he registered Janis's words and felt rage grow alongside fear.

"No, honey," Janis was saying, "I hate to tell ya, but this is 1970." She paused, looking uncertain. "Or maybe not. Ol' Elvis looks a deal older than I remember him being. We must be in the future or something, huh? Some kinda sci-fi trip like that, like on *Star Trek*? You think maybe we—"

But Holly had swung around ferociously, cutting her off. "*Stop it!*" he said. "I don't know what's going on, what kind of trick you people are trying to play on me, or how you're doing all these things, but I'm not going to put up with any more of—"

Janis put her hand on Holly's shoulder; it felt hot and small and firm, like a child's hand. "Hey, listen," Janis said quietly, cutting him off. "I know this is hard for you to accept, and it *is* pretty heavy stuff . . . but Buddy, you're *dead*. I mean, really you are . . . It was about ten years ago, you were on tour, right? And your plane *crashed*, spread you *all* over some farmer's field. It was in all the goddamn papers, you and Ritchie Valens, and . . ." She paused, startled, and then grinned. "And the

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