

# NONSTOP TO PORTALES

by Connie Willis

---

Taken from: Year's Best SF 2

Edited by David G. Hartwell

Copyright © 1997 by David G. Hartwell

ISBN 0-06-105746-0

eBook scanned & proofed by Binwiped 11-01-2002 [v1.0]

Every town's got a claim to fame. No town is too little and dried out to have some kind of tourist attraction. John Garfield's grave, Willa Gather's house, the dahlia capital of America. And if they don't have a house or a grave or a Pony Express station, they make something up. Sasquatch footprints in Oregon. The Martha lights in Texas. Elvis sightings. Something. Except, apparently, Portales, New Mexico.

"Sights?" the cute Hispanic girl at the desk of the Portales Inn said when I asked what there was to see. "There's Billy the Kid's grave over in Fort Sumner. It's about seventy miles."

I'd just driven all the way from Bisbee, Arizona. The last thing I wanted to do was get back in a car and drive a hundred and sixty miles round trip to see a crooked wooden tombstone with the name worn off.

"Isn't there anything famous to see in town?"

"In Portales?" she said, and it was obvious from her tone there wasn't.

"There's Blackwater Draw Museum on the way up to Clovis," she said finally. "You take Highway 70 north about eight miles and it's on your right. It's an archaeological dig. Or you could drive out west of town and see the peanut fields."

Great. Bones and dirt.

"Thanks," I said and went back up to my room.

It was my own fault. Cross wasn't going to be back till tomorrow, but I'd decided to come to Portales a day early to "take a look around" before I talked to him, but that was no excuse. I'd been in little towns all over the west for the last five years. I knew how long it took to look around. About fifteen minutes. And five to see it had dead end written all over it. So here I was in Sightless Portales on a Sunday with nothing to do for a whole day but think about Cross's offer and try to come up with a reason not to take it.

"It's a good, steady job," my friend Denny'd said when he called to tell me Cross needed somebody. "Portales is a nice town. And it's got to be better than spending your life in a car. Driving all over kingdom come trying to sell inventions to people who don't want them. What kind of future is there in that?"

No future at all. The farmers weren't interested in solar-powered irrigation equipment or water conservation devices. And lately Hammond, the guy I worked for, hadn't seemed very interested in them either.

My room didn't have air-conditioning. I cranked the window open and turned the TV on. It didn't have cable either. I watched five minutes of a sermon and then called Hammond.

"It's Carter Stewart," I said as if I were in the habit of calling him on Sundays. "I'm in Portales. I got here earlier than I thought, and the guy I'm supposed to see isn't here till tomorrow. You got any other customers you want me to look up?"

"In Portales?" he said, sounding barely interested. "Who were you supposed to see there?"

"Hudd at Southwest Agricultural Supply. I've got an appointment with him at eleven." And an appointment with Cross at ten, I thought. "I got in last night. Bisbee didn't take as long as I thought it would."

"Hudd's our only contact in Portales," he said.

"Anybody in Clovis? Or Tucumcari?"

"No," he said, too fast to have looked them up. "There's nobody much in that part of the state."

"They're big into peanuts here. You want me to try and talk to some peanut farmers?"

"Why don't you just take the day off?" he said.

"Yeah, thanks," I said, and hung up and went back downstairs.

There was a dried-up old guy at the desk now, but the word must have spread. "You wanna see something really interesting?" he said. "Down in Roswell's where the Air Force has got that space alien they won't let anybody see. You take Highway 70 south—"

"Didn't anybody famous ever live here in Portales?" I asked. "A vice-president? Billy the Kid's cousin?" He shook his head.

"What about buildings? A railroad station? A courthouse?"

"There's a courthouse, but it's closed on Sundays. The Air Force claims it wasn't a spaceship, that it was some kind of spy plane, but I know a guy who saw it coming down. He said it was shaped like a big long cigar and had lights all over it."

"Highway 70?" I said, to get away from him. "Thanks," and went out into the parking lot.

I could see the top of the courthouse over the dry-looking treetops, only a couple of blocks away. It was closed on Sundays, but it was better than sitting in my room watching Falwell and thinking about the job I was going to have to take unless something happened between now and tomorrow morning. And better than getting back in the car to go see something Roswell had made up so it'd have a tourist attraction. And maybe I'd get lucky, and the courthouse would turn out to be the site of the last hanging in New Mexico. Or the first peace march. I walked downtown.

The streets around the courthouse looked like your typical small-town post-WalMart business district. No drugstore, no grocery store, no dimestore. There was an Anthony's standing empty, and a restaurant that would be in another six months, a Western clothing store with a dusty denim shirt and two concho belts in the window, a bank with a sign in the window saying new location.

The courthouse was red brick and looked like every other courthouse from Nelson, Nebraska, to Tyler, Texas. It stood in a square of grass and trees. I walked around it twice, looking at the war memorial and the flagpole and trying not to think about Hammond and Bisbee. It hadn't taken as long as I'd thought because I hadn't even been able to get in to see the buyer, and Hammond hadn't cared enough to even ask how it had gone. Or to bother to look up his contacts in Tucumcari. And it wasn't just that it was Sunday. He'd sounded that way the last two times I'd called him. Like a man getting ready to give up, to pull out.

Which meant I should take Cross's job offer and be grateful. "It's a forty-hour week," he'd said. "You'll have time to work on your inventions."

Right. Or else settle into a routine and forget about them. Five years ago when I'd taken the job with Hammond, Denny'd said, "You'll be able to see the sights. The Grand Canyon, Mount Rushmore, Yellowstone." Yeah, well, I'd seen them. Cave of the Winds, Amazing Mystery House, Indian curios, Genuine Live Jackalope.

I walked around the courthouse square again and then went down to the railroad tracks to look at the grain elevator and walked back to the courthouse again. The whole thing took ten minutes. I thought about walking over to the university, but it was getting hot. In another half hour the grass would start browning and the streets would start getting soft, and it would be even hotter out here than in my room. I started back to the Portales Inn.

The street I was on was shady, with white wooden houses, the kind I'd probably live in if I took Cross's job, the kind I'd work on my inventions in. If I could get the parts for them at Southwest Agricultural Supply. Or WalMart. If I really did work on them. If I didn't just give up after a while.

I turned down a side street. And ran into a dead end. Which was pretty appropriate, under the

circumstances. "At least this would be a real job, not a dead end like the one you're in now," Cross'd said. "You've got to think about the future."

Yeah, well, I was the only one. Nobody else was doing it. They kept on using oil like it was water, kept on using water like the Ogalala Aquifer was going to last forever, kept planting and polluting and populating. I'd already thought about the future, and I knew what it was going to be. Another dead end. Another Dust Bowl. The land used up, the oil wells and the water table pumped dry, Bisbee and Clovis and Tucumcari turned into ghost towns. The Great American Desert all over again, with nobody but a few Indians left on it, waiting in their casinos for customers who weren't going to come. And me, sitting in Portales, working a forty-hour-a-week job.

I backtracked and went the other way. I didn't run into any other dead ends, or any sights either, and by 10:15 I was back at the Portales Inn, with only twenty-four hours to kill and Billy the Kid's grave looking better by the minute.

There was a tour bus in the Inn's parking lot. NONSTOP TOURS, it said in red and gray letters, and a long line of people was getting on it. A young woman was standing by the door of the bus, ticking off names on a clipboard. She was cute, with short yellow hair and a nice figure. She was wearing a light blue T-shirt and a short denim skirt.

An older couple in Bermuda shorts and Disney World T-shirts were climbing the stairs onto the bus, slowing up the line.

"Hi," I said to the tour guide. "What's going on?"

She looked up from her list at me, startled, and the old couple froze halfway up the steps. The tour guide looked down at her clipboard and then back up at me, and the startled look was gone, but her cheeks were as red as the letters on the side of the bus.

"We're taking a tour of the local sights," she said. She motioned to the next person in line, a fat guy in a Hawaiian shirt, and the old couple went on up the steps and into the bus.

"I didn't think there were any," I said. "Local sights."

The fat guy was gaping at me.

"Name?" the tour guide said.

"Giles H. Paul," he said, still staring at me. She motioned him onto the bus.

"Name?" I said, and she looked startled all over again. "What's your name? It's probably on that clipboard in case you've forgotten it."

She smiled. "Tonia Randall."

"So, Tonia, where's this tour headed?"

"We're going out to the ranch."

"The ranch?"

"Where he grew up," she said, her cheeks flaming again. She motioned to the next person in line. "Where he got his start."

Where who started to what? I wanted to ask, but she was busy with a tall man who moved almost as stiffly as the old couple, and anyway, it was obvious everybody in line knew who she was talking about. They couldn't wait to get on the bus, and the young couple who were last in line kept pointing things out to their little kid—the courthouse, the Portales Inn sign, a big tree on the other side of the street.

"Is it private? Your tour?" I said. "Can anybody pay to go on it?" And what was I doing? I'd taken a tour in the Black Hills one time, when I'd had my job about a month and still wanted to see the sights, and it was even more depressing than thinking about the future. Looking out blue-tinted windows while the tour guide tells memorized facts and unfunny jokes. Trooping off the bus to look at Wild Bill Hickok's grave for five minutes, trooping back on. Listening to bawling kids and complaining wives. I didn't want to go on this tour.

But when Tonia blushed and said, "No, I'm sorry," I felt a rush of disappointment at not seeing her again.

"Sure," I said, because I didn't want her to see it. "Just wondering. Well, have a nice time," and started for the front door of the Inn.

"Wait," she said, leaving the couple and their kid standing there and coming over to me. "Do you live here in Portales?"

"No," I said, and realized I'd decided not to take the job. "Just passing through. I came to town to see a guy. I got here early, and there's nothing to do. That ever happen to you?"

She smiled, as if I'd said something funny. "So you don't know anyone here?" "No," I said.

"Do you know the person you've got the appointment with?"

I shook my head, wondering what that had to do with anything.

She consulted her clipboard again. "It seems a pity for you to miss seeing it," she said, "and if you're just passing through . . . Just a minute." She walked back to the bus, stepped up inside, and said something to the driver. They consulted a few minutes, and then she came back down the steps. The couple and their kid came up to her, and she stopped a minute and checked their names off and waved them onto the bus, and then came back over to me. "The bus is full. Do you mind standing?"

Bawling kids, videocams, *and* no place to sit to go see the ranch where somebody I'd probably never heard of got his start. At least I'd heard of Billy the Kid, and if I drove over to Fort Sumner I could take as long as I wanted to look at his grave. "No," I said. "I wouldn't mind." I pulled out my wallet. "Maybe I better ask before we go any farther, how much is the tour?"

She looked startled again. "No charge. Because the tour's already full."

"Great," I said. "I'd like to go."

She smiled and motioned me on board with her clipboard. Inside, it looked more like a city bus than a tour bus—the front and back seats were sideways along the walls, and there were straps for hanging onto. There was even a cord for signaling your stop, which might come in handy if the tour turned out to be as bad as the Wild Bill Hickok tour. I grabbed hold of a strap near the front.

The bus was packed with people of all ages. A white-haired man older than the Disney World couple, middle-aged people, teenagers, kids. I counted at least four under age five. I wondered if I should yank the cord right now.

Tonia counted heads and nodded to the driver. The door whooshed shut, and the bus lumbered out of the parking lot and slowly through a neighborhood of trees and tract houses. The Disney World couple were sitting in the front seat. They scooted over to make room for me, and I gestured to Tonia, but she motioned me to sit down.

She put down her clipboard and held on to the pole just behind the driver's seat. "The first stop on today's tour," she said, "will be the house. He did the greater part of his work here," and I began to wonder if I was going to go the whole tour without ever finding out who the tour was about. When she'd said "the ranch," I'd assumed it was some Old West figure, but these houses had all been built in the thirties and forties.

"He moved into this house with his wife, Blanche, shortly after they were married."

The bus ground down its gears and stopped next to a white house with a porch on a corner lot.

"He lived here from 1947 to ..." She paused and looked sideways at me. "... the present. It was while he was living here that he wrote *Seetee Ship* and *The Black Sun* and came up with the idea of genetic engineering."

He was a writer, which narrowed it down some, but none of the titles she'd mentioned rang a bell. But he was famous enough to fill a tour bus, so his books must have been turned into movies. Tom Clancy? Stephen King? I'd have expected both of them to have a lot fancier houses.

"The windows in front are the living room," Tonia said. "You can't see his study from here. It's on the south side of the house. That's where he keeps his Grand Master Nebula Award, right above where he works."

That didn't ring a bell either, but everybody looked impressed, and the couple with the kid got out of their seats to peer out the tinted windows. "The two rear windows are the kitchen, where he read the paper and watched TV at breakfast before going to work. He used a typewriter and then in later years a personal computer. He's not at home this weekend. He's out of town at a science fiction convention."

Which was probably a good thing. I wondered how he felt about tour buses parking out front, whoever he was. A science fiction writer. Isaac Asimov, maybe.

The driver put the bus in gear and pulled away from the curb. "As we drive past the front of the house," Tonia said, "you'll be able to see his easy chair, where he did most of his reading."

The bus ground up through the gears and started winding through more neighborhood streets. "Jack Williamson worked on the *Portales News-Tribune* from 1947 to 1948 and then, with the publication of *Darker Than You Think*, quit journalism to write full-time," she said, pausing and glancing at me again, but if she was expecting me to be looking as impressed as everybody else, I wasn't. I'd read a lot of paperbacks in a lot of un-air-conditioned motel rooms the last five years, but the name Jack Williamson didn't ring a bell at all.

"From 1960 to 1977, Jack Williamson was a professor at Eastern New Mexico University, which we're coming up on now," Tonia said. The bus pulled into the college's parking lot and everybody looked eagerly out the windows, even though the campus looked just like every other western college's, brick and glass and not enough trees, sprinklers watering the brownish grass.

"This is the Campus Union," she said, pointing. The bus made a slow circuit of the parking lot. "And this is Becky Sharp Auditorium, where the annual lecture in his honor is held every spring. It's the week of April twelfth this year."

It struck me that they hadn't planned very well. They'd managed to miss not only their hero but the annual week in his honor, too.

"Over there is the building where he teaches a science fiction class with Patrice Caldwell," she said, pointing, "and that, of course, is Golden Library, where the Williamson Collection of his works and awards is housed." Everyone nodded in recognition.

I expected the driver to open the doors and everybody to pile out to look at the library, but the bus picked up speed and headed out of town.

"We aren't going to the library?" I said.

She shook her head. "Not this tour. At this time the collection's still very small."

The bus geared up and headed west and south out of town on a two-lane road. new mexico state highway 18, a sign read. "Out your windows you can see the *Llano Estacado*, or Staked Plains," Tonia said. "They were named, as Jack Williamson says in his autobiography, *Wonder's Child*, for the stakes Coronado used to mark his way across the plain. Jack Williamson's family moved here in a covered wagon in 1915 to a homestead claim in the sandhills. Here Jack did farm chores, hauled water, collected firewood, and read *Treasure Island* and *David Copperfield*."

At least I'd heard of those books. And Jack had to be at least seventy-nine years old.

"The farm was very poor, with poor soil and almost no water, and after three years the family was forced to move off it and onto a series of sharecrop farms to make ends meet. During this time Jack went to school at Richland and at Center, where he met Blanche Slaten, his future wife. Any questions?"

This had the Deadwood tour all beat for boring, but a bunch of hands went up, and she went down the aisle to answer them, leaning over their seats and pointing out the tinted windows. The old couple got up and went back to talk to the fat guy, holding on to the straps above his seat and gesturing excitedly.

I looked out the window. The Spanish should have named it the *Llano Flatto*. There wasn't a bump or a dip in it all the way to the horizon.

Everybody, including the kids, was looking out the windows, even though there wasn't anything much to look at. A plowed field of red dirt, a few bored-looking cows, green rows of sprouting green that must be the peanuts, another plowed field. I was getting to see the dirt after all.

Tonia came back to the front and sat down beside me. "Enjoying the tour so far?" she said.

I couldn't think of a good answer to that. "How far is the ranch?" I said.

"Twenty miles. There used to be a town named Pep, but now there's just the ranch ..." She paused and then said, "What's your name? You didn't tell me."

"Carter Stewart," I said.

"Really?" She smiled at the funniest things. "Are you named after Carter Leigh in 'Nonstop to Mars'?"

I didn't know what that was. One of Jack Williamson's books, apparently. "I don't know. Maybe."

"I'm named after Tonia Andros in 'Dead Star Station.' And the driver's named after Giles Habibula."

The tall guy had his hand up again. "I'll be right back," she said, and hurried down the aisle.

The fat guy's name had been Giles, too, which wasn't exactly a common name, and I'd seen the name "Lethonee" on Tonia's clipboard, which had to be out of a book. But how could somebody I'd never even heard of be so famous people were named after his characters?

They must be a fan club, the kind that makes pilgrimages to Graceland and names their kids Paul and Ringo. They didn't look the part, though. They should be wearing Jack Williamson T-shirts and Spock ears, not Disney World T-shirts. The elderly couple came back and sat down next to me. They smiled and started looking out the window.

They didn't act the part either. The fans I'd met had always had a certain defensiveness, an attitude of "I know you think I'm crazy to like this stuff, and maybe I am," and they always insisted on explaining how they got to be fans and why you should be one, too. These people had none of that. They acted like coming out here was the most normal thing in the world, even Tonia. And if they were science fiction fans, why weren't they touring Isaac Asimov's ranch? Or William Shatner's?

Tonia came back again and stood over me, holding on to a hanging strap. "You said you were in Portales to see somebody?" she said.

"Yeah. He's supposed to offer me a job."

"In Portales?" she said, making that sound exciting. "Are you going to take it?"

I'd made up my mind back there in that dead end, but I said, "I don't know. I don't think so. It's a desk job, a steady paycheck, and I wouldn't have to do all the driving I'm doing now." I found myself telling her about Hammond and the things I wanted to invent and how I was afraid the job would be a dead end.

"I had no future," she said. "Jack Williamson said that at this year's Williamson Lecture. I had no future. I was a poor kid in the middle of the Depression, without education, without money, without prospects."

"It's not the Depression, but otherwise I know how he felt. If I don't take Cross's job, I may not have one. And if I do take it—" I shrugged. "Either way I'm not going anywhere."

"Oh, but to have a chance to live in the same town with Jack Williamson," Tonia said. "To run into him at the supermarket, and maybe even get to take one of his classes."

"Maybe *you* should take Cross's job offer," I said.

"I can't." Her cheeks went bright red again. "I've already got a job." She straightened up and addressed the tour group. "We'll be coming to the turnoff to the ranch soon," she said. "Jack Williamson lived here with his family from 1915 till World War II, when he joined the army, and again after the war until he married Blanche."

The bus slowed almost to a stop and turned onto a dirt road hardly as wide as the bus was that led off between two fields of fenced pastureland.

"The farm was originally a homestead," Tonia said, and everyone murmured appreciatively and looked out the windows at more dirt and a couple of clumps of yucca.

"He was living here when he read his first issue of *Amazing Stories Quarterly*," she said, "and when he submitted his first story to *Amazing*. That was 'The Metal Man,' which, as you remember from yesterday, he saw in the window of the drugstore."

"I see it!" the tall man shouted, leaning forward over the back of the driver's seat. "I see it!" Everyone craned forward, trying to see, and we pulled up in front of some outbuildings and stopped.

The driver whooshed the doors open, and everyone filed off the bus and stood in the rutted dirt road, looking excitedly at the unpainted sheds and the water trough. A black heifer looked up incuriously and then went back to chewing on the side of one of the sheds.

Tonia assembled everyone in the road with her clipboard. "That's the ranch house over there," she said, pointing at a low green house with a fenced yard and a willow tree. "Jack Williamson lived here with his parents, his brother Jim, and his sisters Jo and Katie. It was here that Jack Williamson wrote 'The Girl from Mars' and *The Legion of Space*, working at the kitchen table. His uncle had given him a basket-model Remington typewriter with a dim purple ribbon, and he typed his stories on it after everyone had gone to bed. Jack Williamson's brother Jim ..." she paused and glanced at me, "owns the

ranch at this time. He and his wife are in Arizona this weekend."

Amazing. They'd managed to miss them all, but nobody seemed to mind, and it struck me suddenly what was unusual about this tour. Nobody complained.

That's all they'd done on the Wild Bill Hickok tour. Half of them hadn't known who he was, and the other half had complained that it was too expensive, too hot, too far, the windows on the bus didn't open, the gift shop didn't sell Coke. If their tour guide had announced the wax museum was closed, he'd have had a riot on his hands.

"It was difficult for him to write in the midst of the family," she said, leading off away from the house toward a pasture. "There were frequent interruptions and too much noise, so in 1934 he built a separate cabin. Be careful," she said, skirting around a clump of sagebrush. "There are sometimes rattlesnakes."

That apparently didn't bother anybody either. They trooped after her across a field of dry, spiny grass and gathered around a weathered gray shack.

"This is the actual cabin he wrote in," Tonia said.

I wouldn't have called it a cabin. It hardly even qualified as a shack. When I'd first seen it as we pulled up, I'd thought it was an abandoned outhouse. Four gray wood-slat walls, half falling down, a sagging gray shelf, some rusted cans. When Tonia started talking, a farm cat leaped down from where it had been sleeping under what was left of the roof and took off like a shot across the field.

"It had a desk, files, bookshelves, and later a separate bedroom," Tonia said.

It didn't look big enough for a typewriter, let alone a bed, but this was obviously what all these people had come to see. They stood reverently before it in the spiky grass, like it was the Washington Monument or something, and gazed at the weathered boards and rusted cans, not saying anything.

"He installed electric lights," Tonia said, "which were run by a small windmill, and a bath. He still had occasional interruptions—from snakes and once from a skunk who took up residence under the cabin. He wrote 'Dead Star Station' here, and 'The Meteor Girl,' his first story to include time travel. 'If the field were strong enough,'" he said in the story, "we could bring physical objects through space-time instead of mere visual images."

They all found that amusing for no reason I could see and then stood there some more, looking reverent. Tonia came over to me. "Well, what do you think?" she said, smiling.

"Tell me about him seeing 'The Metal Man' in the drugstore," I said.

"Oh, I forgot you weren't with us at the drugstore," she said. "Jack Williamson sent his first story to *Amazing Stories* in 1928 and then never heard anything back. In the fall of that year he was shopping for groceries, and he looked in the window of a drugstore and saw a magazine with a picture on the cover that looked like it could be his story, and when he went in, he was so excited to see his story in print, he bought all three copies of the magazine and went off without the groceries he'd been carrying."

"So then he had prospects?"

She said seriously, "He said, 'I had no future. And then I looked in the drugstore window and saw Hugo Gernsback's *Amazing Stories*, and it gave me a future.'"

"I wish somebody would give me a future," I said.

"'No one can predict the future, he can only point the way.' He said that, too."

She went over to the shack and addressed the group. "He also wrote 'Nonstop to Mars,' my favorite story, in this cabin," she said to the group, "and it was right here that he proposed the idea of colonizing Mars and ..." She paused, but this time it was the stiff tall man she glanced at. "... invented the idea of androids."

They continued to look. All of them walked around the shack two or three times, pointing at loose boards and tin cans, stepping back to get a better look, walking around it again. None of them seemed to be in any hurry to go. The Deadwood tour had lasted all of ten minutes at Mount Moriah Cemetery, with one of the kids whining, "Can't we go now?" the whole time, but this group acted like they could stay here all day. One of them got out a notebook and started writing things down. The couple with the kid took her over to the heifer, and all three of them patted her gingerly.

After a while Tonia and the driver passed out paper bags and everybody sat down in the pasture, rattlesnakes and all, and had lunch. Stale sandwiches, cardboard cookies, cans of lukewarm Coke, but

nobody complained. Or left any litter.

They neatly packed everything back in the bags and then walked around the shack some more, looking in the empty windows and scaring a couple more farm cats, or just sat and looked at it. A couple of them went over to the fence and gazed longingly over it at the ranch house.

"It's too bad there's nobody around to show them the house," I said. "People don't usually go off and leave a ranch with nobody to look after the animals. I wonder if there's somebody around. Whoever it is would probably give you a tour of the ranch house."

"It's Jack's niece Betty," Tonia said promptly. "She had to go up to Clovis today to get a part for the water pump. She won't be back till four." She stood up, brushing dead grass and dirt off her skirt. "All right, everybody. It's time to go."

There was a discontented murmuring, and one of the kids said, "Do we have to go already?," but everybody picked up their lunch bags and Coke cans and started for the bus. Tonia ticked off their names on her clipboard as they got on like she was afraid one of them might jump ship and take up residence among the rattlesnakes.

"Carter Stewart," I told her. "Where to next? The drugstore?"

She shook her head. "We went there yesterday. Where's Underhill?" She started across the road again, with me following her.

The tall man was standing silently in front of the shack, looking in at the empty room. He stood absolutely motionless, his eyes fixed on the gray weathered boards, and when Tonia said, "Underhill? I'm afraid we need to go," he continued to stand there for a long minute, like he was trying to store up the memory. Then he turned and walked stiffly past us and back to the bus.

Tonia counted heads again, and the bus made a slow circle past the ranchhouse, turning around, and started back along the dirt road. Nobody said anything, and when we got to the highway, everyone turned around in their seats for a last look. The old couple dabbed at their eyes, and one of the kids stood up on the rear seat and waved goodbye. The tall man was sitting with his head buried in his hands.

"The cabin you've just seen was where it all started," Tonia said, "with a copy of a pulp magazine and a lot of imagination." She told how Jack Williamson had become a meteorologist and a college professor, as well as a science fiction writer, traveled to Italy, Mexico, the Great Wall of China, all of which must have been impossible for him to imagine, sitting all alone in that poor excuse for a shack, typing on an old typewriter with a faded ribbon.

I was only half listening. I was thinking about the tall guy, Underhill, and trying to figure out what was wrong about him. It wasn't his stiffness—I'd been at least that stiff after a day in the car. It was something else. I thought about him standing there, looking at the shack, so fixed, like he was trying to carry the image away with him.

He probably just forgot his camera, I thought, and realized what had been nagging at me. Nobody had a camera. Tourists always have cameras. The Wild Bill Hickok gang had all had cameras, even the kids. And videocams. One guy had kept a videocam glued to his face the whole time and never seen a thing. They'd spent the whole tour snapping Wild Bill's tombstone, snapping the figures in the wax museum even though there were signs that said, NO PICTURES, snapping each other in front of the saloon, in front of the cemetery, in front of the bus. And then buying up slides and postcards in the gift shop in case the pictures didn't turn out.

No cameras. No gift shop. No littering or trespassing or whining. What kind of tour is this? I thought.

"He predicted 'a new Golden Age of fair cities, of new laws and new machines,'" Tonia was saying, "of human capabilities undreamed of, of a civilization that has conquered matter and Nature, distance and time, disease and death."

He'd imagined the same kind of future I'd imagined. I wondered if he'd ever tried selling his ideas to farmers. Which brought me back to the job, which I'd managed to avoid thinking about almost all day.

Tonia came and stood across from me, holding on to the center pole. "A poor country kid, poorly educated, unhappy with his whole environment, longing for something else," she said. "That's how Jack Williamson described himself in 1928." She looked at me. "You're not going to take the job, are you?"



"I don't think so," I said. "I don't know."

She looked out the window at the fields and cows, looking disappointed. "When he first moved here, this was all sagebrush and drought and dust. He couldn't imagine what was going to happen any more than you can right now."

"And the answer's in a drugstore window?"

"The answer was inside him," she said. She stood up and addressed the group. "We'll be coming into Portales in a minute," she said. "In 1928, Jack Williamson wrote, 'Science is the doorway to the future, scientification, the golden key. It goes ahead and lights the way. And when science sees the things made real in the author's mind, it makes them real indeed.'"

The tour group applauded, and the bus pulled into the parking lot of the Portales Inn. I waited for the rush, but nobody moved. "We're not staying here," Tonia explained.

"Oh," I said, getting up. "You didn't have to give me door-to-door service. You could have let me out at wherever you're staying, and I could have walked over."

"That's all right," Tonia said, smiling.

"Well," I said, unwilling to say goodbye. "Thanks for a really interesting tour. Can I take you to dinner or something? To thank you for letting me come?"

"I can't," she said. "I have to check everybody in and everything."

"Yeah," I said. "Well..."

Giles the driver opened the door with a whoosh of air.

"Thanks," I said. I nodded to the old couple. "Thanks for sharing your seat," and stepped down off the bus.

"Why don't you come with us tomorrow?" she said. "We're going to go see Number 5516."

Number 5516 sounded like a county highway and probably was, the road Jack Williamson walked to school along or something, complete with peanuts and dirt, at which the group would gaze reverently and not take pictures. "I've got an appointment tomorrow," I said, and realized I didn't want to say goodbye to her. "Next time. When's your next tour?"

"I thought you were just passing through." "Like you said, a lot of nice people live around here. Do you bring a lot of tours through here?"

"Now and then," she said, her cheeks bright red. I watched the bus pull out of the parking lot and down the street. I looked at my watch. 4:45. At least an hour till I could justify dinner. At least five hours till I could justify bed. I went in the Inn and then changed my mind and went back out to the car and drove out to see where Cross's office was so I wouldn't have trouble in the morning, in case it was hard to find.

It wasn't. It was on the south edge of town on Highway 70, a little past the Motel Super 8. The tour bus wasn't in the parking lot of the Super 8, or at the Hillcrest, or the Sands Motel. They must have gone to Roswell or Tucumcari for the night. I looked at my watch again. It was 5:05.

I drove back through town, looking for someplace to eat. McDonald's, Taco Bell, Burger King. There's nothing wrong with fast food, except that it's fast. I needed a place where it took half an hour to get a menu and another twenty minutes before they took your order.

I ended up eating at Pizza Hut (personal pan pizza in under five minutes or your money back). "Do you get a lot of tour bus business?" I asked the waitress.

"In Portales? You have to be kidding," she said. "In case you haven't noticed, Portales is right on the road to nowhere. Do you want a box for the rest of that pizza?"

The box was a good idea. It took her ten minutes to bring it, which meant it was nearly six by the time I left. Only four hours left to kill. I filled up the car at Allsup's and bought a sixpack of Coke. Next to the magazines was a rack of paperbacks.

"Any Jack Williamson books?" I asked the kid at the counter.

"Who?" he said.

I spun the rack around slowly. John Grisham. Danielle Steel. Stephen King's latest thousand-page effort. No Jack Williamson. "Is there a bookstore in town?" I asked the kid.

"Huh?"

He'd never heard of that either. "A place where I can buy a book?"

"Alco has books, I think," he said. "But they closed at five."

"How about a drugstore?" I said, thinking of that copy of *Amazing Stories*.

Still blank. I gave up, paid him for the gas and the sixpack, and started out to the car.

"You mean a drugstore like aspirin and stuff?" the kid said. "There's Van Winkle's."

"When do they close?" I asked, and got directions.

Van Winkle's was a grocery store. It had two aisles of "aspirin and stuff" and half an aisle of paperbacks. More Grisham. *Jurassic Park*. Tom Clancy. And *The Legion of Time* by Jack Williamson. It looked like it had been there a while. It had a faded fifties-style cover and dog-eared edges.

I took it up to the check-out. "What's it like having a famous writer living here?" I asked the middle-aged clerk.

She picked up the book. "The guy who wrote this lives in Portales?" she said. "Really?"

Which brought us up to 6:22. But at least now I had something to read. I went back to the Portales Inn and up to my room, opened a can of Coke and all the windows, and sat down to read *The Legion of Time*, which was about a girl who'd traveled back in time to tell the hero about the future.

"The future has been held to be as real as the past," the book said, and the girl in the book was able to travel between one and the other as easily as the tour had traveled down New Mexico Highway 18.

I closed the book and thought about the tour. They didn't have a single camera, and they weren't afraid of rattlesnakes. And they'd looked out at the Llano Flatto like they'd never seen a field or a cow before. And they all knew who Jack Williamson was, unlike the kid at Allsup's or the clerk at Van Winkle's. They were all willing to spend two days looking at abandoned shacks and dirt roads—no, wait, *three* days. Tonia'd said they'd gone to the drugstore yesterday.

I had an idea. I opened the drawer of the nightstand, looking for a phone book. There wasn't one. I went downstairs to the lobby and asked for one. The blue-haired lady at the desk handed me one about the size of *The Legion of Time*, and I flipped to the Yellow Pages.

There was a Thrifty Drug, which was a chain, and a couple that sounded locally owned but weren't downtown. "Where's B. and J. Drugs?" I asked. "Is it close to downtown?"

"A couple of blocks," the old lady said. "How long has it been in business?" "Let's see," she said. "It was there when Nora was little because I remember buying medicine that time she had the croup. She would have been six, or was that when she had the measles? No, the measles were the summer she ..."

I'd have to ask B. and J. "I've got another question," I said, and hoped I wouldn't get an answer like the last one. "What time does the university library open tomorrow?"

She gave me a brochure. The library opened at 8:00 and the Williamson Collection at 9:30. I went back up to the room and tried B. and J. Drugs. They weren't open.

It was getting dark. I closed the curtains over the open windows and opened the book again. "The world is a long corridor, and time is a lantern carried steadily along the hall," it said, and, a few pages later, "If time were simply an extension of the universe, was tomorrow as real as yesterday? If one could leap forward—"

Or back, I thought. "Jack Williamson lived in this house from 1947 to ..." Tonia'd said, and paused and then said, "... the present," and I'd thought the sideways glance was to see my reaction to his name, but what if she'd intended to say, "from 1947 to 1998"? Or "2015"?

What if that was why she kept pausing when she talked, because she had to remember to say "Jack Williamson *is*" instead of "Jack Williamson *was*," "*does* most of his writing" instead of "*did* most of his writing," had to remember what year it was and what hadn't happened yet?

"If the field were strong enough," I remembered Tonia saying out at the ranch, "we could bring physical objects through space-time instead of mere visual images." And the tour group had all smiled.

What if they were the physical objects? What if the tour had traveled through time instead of space? But that didn't make any sense. If they could travel through time they could have come on a weekend Jack Williamson was home, or during the week of the Williamson Lectureship.

I read on, looking for explanations. The book talked about quantum mechanics and probability,

about how changing one thing in the past could affect the whole future. Maybe that was why they had to come when Jack Williamson was out of town, to avoid doing something to him that might change the future.

Or maybe Nonstop Tours was just incompetent and they'd come on the wrong weekend. And the reason they didn't have cameras was because they all forgot them. And they were all really tourists, and *The Legion of Time* was just a science fiction book and I was making up crackpot theories to avoid thinking about Cross and the job.

But if they were ordinary tourists, what were they doing spending a day staring at a tumbledown shack in the middle of nowhere? Even if they were tourists from the future, there was no reason to travel back in time to see a science fiction writer when they could see presidents or rock stars.

Unless they lived in a future where all the things he'd predicted in his stories had come true. What if they had genetic engineering and androids and spaceships? What if in their world they'd terraformed planets and gone to Mars and explored the galaxy? That would make Jack Williamson their forefather, their founder. And they'd want to come back and see where it all started.

The next morning, I left my stuff at the Portales Inn and went over to the library. Checkout wasn't till noon, and I wanted to wait till I'd found out a few things before I made up my mind whether to take the job or not. On the way there I drove past B. and J. Drugs and then College Drug. Neither of them were open, and I couldn't tell from their outsides how old they were.

The library opened at eight and the room with the Williamson collection in it at 9:30, which was cutting it close. I was there at 9:15, looking in through the glass at the books. There was a bronze plaque on the wall and a big mobile of the planets.

Tonia had said the collection "isn't very big at this point," but from what I could see, it looked pretty big to me. Rows and rows of books, filing cabinets, boxes, photographs.

A young guy in chinos and wire-rimmed glasses unlocked the door to let me in. "Wow! Lined up and waiting to get in! This is a first," he said, which answered my first question.

I asked it anyway. "Do you get many visitors?"

"A few," he said. "Not as many as I think there should be for a man who practically invented the future. Androids, terraforming, antimatter, he imagined them all. We'll have more visitors in two weeks. That's when the Williamson Lectureship week is. We get quite a few visitors then. The writers who are speaking usually drop in."

He switched on the lights. "Let me show you around," he said. "We're adding to the collection all the time." He took down a long flat box. "This is the comic strip Jack did, *Beyond Mars*. And here is where we keep his original manuscripts." He opened one of the filing cabinets and pulled out a sheaf of typed yellow sheets. "Have you ever met Jack?"

"No," I said, looking at an oil painting of a white-haired man with a long, pleasant-looking face. "What's he like?"

"Oh, the nicest man you've ever met. It's hard to believe he's one of the founders of science fiction. He's in here all the time. Wonderful guy. He's working on a new book, *The Black Sun*. He's out of town this weekend, or I'd take you over and introduce you. He's always delighted to meet his fans. Is there anything specific you wanted to know about him?"

"Yes," I said. "Somebody told me about him seeing the magazine with his first story in it in a drugstore. Which drugstore was that?"

"It was one in Canyon, Texas. He and his sister were going to school down there."

"Do you know the name of the drugstore?" I said. "I'd like to go see it."

"Oh, it went out of business years ago," he said. "I think it was torn down."

"We went there yesterday," Tonia had said, and what day exactly was that? The day Jack saw it and bought all three copies and forgot his groceries? And what were they wearing that day? Print dresses and double-breasted suits and hats?

"I've got the issue here," he said, taking a crumbling magazine out of a plastic slipcover. It had a garish picture of a man being pulled up out of a crater by a brilliant crystal. "December, 1928. Too bad the drugstore's not there anymore. You can see the cabin where he wrote his first stories, though. It's still

out on the ranch his brother owns. You go out west of town and turn south on State Highway 18. Just ask Betty to show you around."

"Have you ever had a tour group in here?" I interrupted.

"A *tour* group?" he said, and then must have decided I was kidding. "He's not quite that famous."

Yet, I thought, and wondered when Nonstop Tours visited the library. Ten years from now? A hundred? And what were they wearing that day?

I looked at my watch. It was 9:45. "I've got to go," I said. "I've got an appointment." I started out and then turned back. "This person who told me about the drugstore, they mentioned something about Number 5516. Is that one of his books?"

"5516? No, that's the asteroid they're naming after him. How'd you know about that? It's supposed to be a surprise. They're giving him the plaque Lectureship week."

"An asteroid," I said. I started out again.

"Thanks for coming in," the librarian said. "Are you just visiting or do you live here?"

"I live here," I said.

"Well, then, come again."

I went down the stairs and out to the car. It was 9:50. Just enough time to get to Cross's and tell him I'd take the job.

I went out to the parking lot. There weren't any tour buses driving through it, which must mean Jack Williamson was back from his convention. After my meeting with Cross I was going to go over to his house and introduce myself. "I know how you felt when you saw that *Amazing Stories* in the drugstore," I'd tell him. "I'm interested in the future, too. I liked what you said about it, about science fiction lighting the way and science making the future real."

I got in the car and drove through town to Highway 70. An asteroid. I should have gone with them. "It'll be fun," Tonia said. It certainly would be.

Next time, I thought. Only I want to see some of this terraforming. I want to go to Mars.

I turned south on Highway 70 towards Cross's office. Roswell 92 miles, the sign said.

"Come again," I said, leaning out the window and looking up. "Come again!"

-end-

About the author:

*Connie Willis*, famous in SF for her short fiction and for her time-travel novel, *The Doomsday Book*, is a winner of many awards, including the Hugo and Nebula. She is particularly respected for her insightful portrayal of character and, in person, as a stand-up comic of considerable talent, known for her monologues at conventions, awards banquets, and SF parties. She has strong opinions about movie stars, particularly Harrison Ford and Fred Astaire. She lives in the fragrant city of Greeley, Colorado (presumably where the young men went when they went West, a long time ago). Less known is her considerable command of the history of modern science fiction. This story is the second in this year's volume taken from *The Williamson Effect*, and is as moving, powerful, and accurate a tribute from one living SF writer to another as I have ever read. It takes a fine writer who knows and cares about the SF of the past to write such a story as "Nonstop to Portales." Most other SF writers will envy Jack Williamson his Connie Willis story.