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PHILIP

K. DICK

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Radio Free Albemuth

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THE MOST CONSISTENTLY BRILLIANT SF WRITER IN THE WORLD”

JOHN BRUNNER, author of STAND ON ZANZIBAR

Philip K. Dick was born “in Chicago in 1928 and lived most of his life in California. He attended college for a year at Berkeley. Apart from writing, his main interest was music: at one time he ran a record shop and also a classical music programme for a local radio station. He won the Hugo Award for his classic novel of alternative history, *The Man in the High Castle* (1962). He was married five times and had three children. He died in March 1982.

“Dick quietly produced serious fiction in a popular form and there can be no greater praise” Michael Moorcock

“One of the most original practitioners writing any kind of fiction, Philip K. Dick made most of the European avant-garde seem navel-gazers in a cul-de-sac” Sunday Times

“No other writer of his generation had such a powerful intellectual presence. He has stamped himself not only on our memories but in our imaginations” Brian Aldiss

The most consistently brilliant SF writer in the world” John Brunner

Prologue

In 1932 in April a small boy and his mother and father waited on an Oakland, California, pier for the San Francisco ferry. The boy, who was almost four years old, noticed a blind beggar, huge and old with white hair and beard, standing with a tin cup. The little boy asked his father for a nickel, which the boy took over to the beggar and gave him. The beggar, in a surprisingly hearty voice, thanked him and gave him back a piece of paper, which the boy took to his father to see what it was.

“It tells about God,” his father said.

The little boy did not know that the beggar was not actually a beggar but a supernatural entity visiting Earth to check up on people. Years later the little boy grew up and became a man. In the year 1974 that man found himself in terrible difficulties, facing disgrace, imprisonment, and possible death. There was no way for him to extricate himself. At that point the supernatural entity returned to Earth, loaned the man a part of his spirit, and saved him from his difficulties. The man never guessed why the supernatural entity came to rescue him. He had long ago forgotten the great bearded blind beggar and the nickel he had given him.

I speak now of these matters.

PART ONE

Phil

My friend Nicholas Brady, who in his own mind helped save the world, was born in Chicago in 1928 but then moved right to California. Most of his life was spent in the Bay Area, especially in Berkeley. He remembered the metal hitching posts in the shape of horses' heads in front of the old houses in the hilly part of the city, and the electric Red Trains that met the ferries, and, most of all, the fog. Later, by the forties, the fog had ceased to lie over Berkeley in the night.

Originally Berkeley, at the time of the Red Trains and the streetcars, was quiet and underpopulated except for the University, with its illustrious frat houses and fine football team. As a child Nicholas Brady took in a few football games with his father, but he never understood them. He could not even get the team song right. But he did like the Berkeley campus with the trees and the quiet groves and Strawberry Creek; most of all he liked the sewer pipe through which the creek ran. The sewer pipe

I was the best thing on the campus. In summer, when the creek was low, he crawled up and down it. One time some people called him over and asked if he was a college student. He was eleven years old then.

I asked him once why he chose to live his life out in Berkeley, which by the forties had become overcrowded, noisy, and afflicted by angry students who fought it out at the Co-op market as if the stacks of canned food were barricades.

"Shit, Phil," Nicholas Brady said. "Berkeley is my home." People who gravitated to Berkeley believed that, even if they had only been there a week. They claimed no other place existed. This became particularly true when the coffeehouses opened up on Telegraph Avenue and the free speech movement started. One time Nicholas was standing in line at the Co-op on Grove and saw Mario Savio in line ahead of him. Savio was smiling and waving at admirers. Nicholas was on campus the day the PHUQUE sign was held up in the cafeteria, and the cops busted the guys holding it. However, he was in the bookstore, browsing, and missed the whole thing.

Although he lived in Berkeley for ever and ever, Nicholas attended the University for only two months, which made him different from everyone else. The others attended the University in perpetuity. Berkeley had an entire population of professional students who never graduated and who had no other goal in life. Nicholas's nemesis vis-a-vis the University was ROTC, which in his time was still going strong. As a child Nicholas had gone to a progressive or Communist-front nursery school. His mother, who had many friends in the Communist Party in Berkeley in the thirties, sent him there. Later he became a Quaker, and he and his mother sat around in Friends Meeting the way Quakers do, waiting for the Holy Spirit to move them to speak. Nicholas subsequently forgot all that, at least until he enrolled at Cal and found himself given an officer's uniform and an M-1 rifle. Thereupon his unconscious fought back, burdened by old memories; he damaged the gun and could not go through the manual of arms; he came to drill out of uniform; he got failing grades; he was informed that failing grades in

ROTC meant automatic expulsion from Cal, to which—Nicholas said, "What's right is right."

However, instead of letting them expel him, he quit.

He was nineteen years old and his academic career was ruined. It had been his plan to become a paleontologist.

The other big university in the Bay Area, which was Stanford, cost far too much for him. His mother held the minor post of clerk for the US Department of Forestry, in a building on campus; she had no money. Nicholas faced going to work. He really hated the University and thought of not returning his uniform. He thought of showing up at drill with a broom and insisting it was his

M-1 rifle. He never thought of firing the M-1 rifle at his superior officers, though; the firing pin was missing.

Nicholas, in those days, was still in touch with reality.

The matter of returning his officer's uniform was solved when the University authorities opened his gym locker and took the uniform out of it, including both shirts. Nicholas had been formally severed from the military world; moral objections, more thoughts of brave demonstrations, vanished from his head, and in the fashion of students attending Cal he began roaming the streets of Berkeley, his hands stuck in the back pockets of his Levi's, gloom on his face, uncertainty in his heart, no money in his wallet, no definite future in his head. He still lived with his mother, who was tired of the 1 arrangement. He had no skills, no plans, only inchoate anger. As he walked along he sang a left-wing marching song from the International Brigade of the Loyalist Army of Spain, a Communist brigade made up mostly of Germans. The song went:

Vor Madrid im Schützengraben, In der Stunde der Gefahr, Mit den eisernen Brigaden, Sein Herz voll Hass geladen, Stand Hans, der Kommissar. The line- he liked best was "Sein Herz voll Hass geladen," which meant "His heart full of hate." Nicholas sang that over and over again as he strode along Berkeley Way, down to Shattuck, and then up Dwight Way back to Telegraph. Nobody noticed him because what he was doing was not unusual in Berkeley at that time. One often saw as many as ten students striding along in jeans singing left-wing songs and pushing people out of the way. "

At the corner of Telegraph and Channing the woman behind the counter at University Music waved at him, because Nicholas often hung around there browsing through the records. So he went inside.

"You don't have your uniform on," the woman said.

"I've dropped out of the fascist university," Nicholas said, which certainly was true.

Pat excused herself to wait on a real customer, so he took an album of the Firebird Suite into a listening booth and put on the side where the giant egg cracks open. It fitted his mood, although he was not certain what came out of the egg. The picture on the album cover just showed the egg, and someone with a spear evidently going to break the egg.

Later on, Pat opened the door of the listening booth, and they talked about his situation.

"Maybe Herb would hire you here," Pat said. "You're in the store all the time, you know the stock, and you know a lot about classical music."

“I know where every record in the store is,” Nicholas said, excited at the idea.

“You’d have to wear a suit and tie.”

“I have a suit and tie,” Nicholas said.

Going to work for University Music at nineteen was probably the greatest move of his life, because it froze him into a mold that never broke, an egg that never opened - or at least did not open for twenty-five more years, an awfully long time for someone who had really never done anything but play in the parks of Berkeley, go to the Berkeley public schools, and spend Saturday afternoons at the kiddies’ matinee at the Oaks Theater on Solano Avenue, where they showed a newsreel, a selected short subject, and two cartoons before the regular subject, all for eleven cents.

Working for University Music on Telegraph Avenue made him part of the Berkeley scene for decades to come and shut off all possibilities of growth or knowledge of any other life, any larger world. Nicholas had grown up in Berkeley and he remained in Berkeley, learning how to sell records and later how to buy records, how to interest customers in new artists, how to refuse taking back defective records, how to change the toilet paper roll in the bathroom behind the number three listening booth - it became his whole world: Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra and Ella Mae Morse, Oklahoma, and later South Pacific, and “Open the Door, Richard” and “If I’d Known You Were Coming I’d Have Baked a Cake.” He was behind the counter when Columbia brought out LP records. He was opening cartons from the distributors when Mario Lanza appeared, and he was checking inventory and back orders when Mario Lanza died. He personally sold five thousand copies of Jan Peerce’s “Bluebird of Happiness,” hating each copy. He was there when Capitol Records went into the classical music line and when their classical music line folded. He was always glad he had gone into the retail record business, because he loved classical music and loved being around records all the time, selling them to customers he personally knew and buying them at discount for his own collection; but he also hated the fact that he had gone into the record business because he realized the first day he was told to sweep the floor that he would be a semi-janitor, semi-clerk the rest of his life - he had the same mixed attitude toward it he had had toward the university and toward his father. Also, he had the same mixed attitude toward Herb Jackman, his boss, who was married to Pat, an Irish girl. Pat was very pretty and a lot younger than Herb, and Nicholas had a heavy crush on her for years and years, up until the time they all became older and did a lot of drinking together at Hambone Kelley’s, a cabaret in El Cerrito that featured Lu Walters and his Dixieland jazz band.

I met Nicholas for the first time in 1951, after Lu Watters’s band had become Turk Murphy’s band and signed up with Columbia Records. Nicholas often came into the bookstore where I worked during his lunch hour, to browse among the used copies of Proust and Joyce and Kafka, the used textbooks the students at the university sold us after their courses - and their interest in literature - ended. Cut off from the university, Nicholas Brady bought the used textbooks from the poly sci and literature classes that he could never attend; he had quite a knowledge of English lit, and it wasn’t very long before we got to talking, became friends, and finally became roommates in an upstairs apartment in a brown shingle house on Bancroft Way, near his store and mine.

I had just sold my first science fiction story, to Tony Boucher at a magazine called Fantasy and Science Fiction, for \$75, and was considering quitting my job as book clerk and becoming a full time writer, something I subsequently did. Science fiction writing became my career.

The first of Nicholas Brady's paranormal experiences occurred at the house on Francisco Street where he lived for years; he and his wife, Rachel, bought the house for \$3,750 when they first got married in 1953. The house was very old - one of the original Berkeley farmhouses - on a lot only thirty feet wide with no garage, on a mud sill, the only heat being from the oven in the kitchen. His monthly payments were \$27.50, which is why he stayed there so long.

I used to ask Nicholas why he never painted or repaired the house; the roof leaked and in wintertime during the heavy rains he and Rachel put out empty coffee cans to catch the water dripping everywhere. The house was an ugly peeling yellow.

"It would defeat the purpose of having such an inexpensive house," Nicholas explained. He still spent most of his money on records. Rachel took courses at the University, in the political science department. I rarely found her home when I dropped by. Nicholas told me one time that his wife had a crush on a fellow student, who headed the youth group of the Socialist Workers Party just off campus. She resembled the other Berkeley girls I used to see: jeans, glasses, long dark hair, assertive loud voice, continually discussing politics. This, of course, was during the McCarthy period. Berkeley was becoming extremely political.

Nicholas had Wednesdays and Sundays off from work.

On Wednesday he was home alone. On Sunday both he and Rachel were home.

One Wednesday - this is not the paranormal experience - when Nicholas was home listening to Beethoven's Eighth Symphony on his Magnavox phonograph, two FBI agents dropped by.

"Is Mrs Brady home?" they asked. They wore business suits and carried bulging briefcases. Nicholas thought they were insurance salesmen.

"What do you want from her?" he demanded with hostility. He imagined they were trying to sell her something.

The two agents exchanged glances and then presented Nicholas with their identification. Nicholas was filled with rage and terror. He started telling the two FBI agents, in a stammering voice, a joke he had read in "Talk of the Town" in The New Yorker about two FBI agents who were checking up on a man, and, while interviewing a neighbor, the neighbor had said that the man listened to symphonies, and the agents asked suspiciously what language the symphonies were in.

The two agents standing on Nicholas's front porch; on hearing his garbled version of the story, did not find it funny.

"That wasn't our office," one of them said.

"Why don't you talk to me?" Nicholas demanded, protecting his wife.

Again the two FBI agents exchanged glances, nodded, and entered the house. Nicholas, in a state of terror, sat facing them, trying to quell his shaking.

"As you know," the agent with the greater double chin explained, "it is our job to protect the liberties of American citizens from totalitarian intrusion. We never investigate legitimate political parties such

as the Democratic or Republican parties, which are bona fide political parties under American law.” He then began to talk about the Socialist Workers Party, which, he explained to Nicholas, was not a legitimate political party but a Communist organization devoted to violent revolution at the expense of American liberties.

Nicholas knew all that. He kept silent, however.

“And your wife,” the other agent said, “could be of use to us, since she belongs to the student corps of the SWP, in reporting who attends their meetings and what is said there.” Both agents looked expectantly at Nicholas.

“I’ll have to discuss this with Rachel,” Nicholas said. “When she comes home.”

“Are you engaged in political activity, Mr Brady?” the agent with the greater double chin asked him. He had a notebook before him and a fountain pen. The two agents had propped one of their briefcases between Nicholas and them; he saw a square object bulging within it and knew he was being taped.

“No,” Nicholas said, truthfully. All he did was listen to exotic rare foreign vocal records, especially those of Tiana Lemnitz, Erna Berger, and Gerhard Husch.

“Would you like to be?” the lesser agent asked.

“Um,” Nicholas said.

“You’re familiar with the International People’s Party,” the greater agent said. “Had you ever considered attending meetings of it? They hold them about a block from here, on the other side of San Pablo Avenue.”

“We could use someone in there at the local group meeting,” the lesser agent said. “Are you interested?”

“We can finance you,” his colleague added.

Nicholas blinked, gulped, and then gave the first speech of his life. The agents were not pleased, but they listened.

Later on that day, after the agents had left, Rachel arrived home, loaded down with textbooks and looking cross.

“Guess who was here today looking for you,” Nicholas said. He told her who.

“Bastards!” Rachel cried out. “Bastards!”

It was two nights later that Nicholas had his mystical experience.

He and Rachel lay in bed, asleep. Nicholas was on the left, nearer the door of their bedroom. Still disturbed by the recent visit of the FBI agents, he slept lightly, tossing a lot, having vague dreams of an unpleasant nature. Toward dawn, just when the first false white light was beginning to fill the room, he lay back on a nerve, awoke from the pain, and opened his eyes.

A figure stood silently beside the bed, gazing down at him. The figure and Nicholas regarded each other; Nicholas grunted in amazement and sat up. At once Rachel awoke and began to scream—

“Ich bin’s!” Nicholas told her reassuringly (he had taken German in high school). What he meant to tell her was that the figure was himself, “Ich bin’s” being the German idiom for that. However, in his excitement he did not realize he was speaking a foreign language, albeit one Mrs Altecca had taught him in the twelfth grade. Rachel could not understand him. Nicholas began to pat her, but he kept on repeating himself in German. Rachel was confused and frightened. She kept on screaming. Meanwhile, the figure disappeared.

Later on, when she was fully awake, Rachel was uncertain whether or not she had seen the figure or just reacted to his start of surprise. It had all been so sudden.

“It was myself,” Nicholas said, ‘standing beside the bed gazing down at me. I recognized myself.’”

“What was it doing there?” Rachel said.

“Guarding me,” Nicholas said. He knew it. He could tell from having seen the expression on the figure’s face. So there was nothing to be afraid of. He had the impression that the figure, himself, had come back from the future, perhaps from a point vastly far ahead, to make certain that he, his prior self, was doing okay at a critical time in his life. The impression was distinct and strong and he could not rid himself of it.

Going into the living room, he got his German dictionary and checked the idiom that he had used. Sure enough, it was correct. It meant, literally, “I am it.”

He and Rachel sat together in the living room, drinking instant coffee, in their pajamas.

“I wish I was sure if I saw it,” Rachel kept repeating. “Something sure scared me. Did you hear me scream? I didn’t know I could scream like that. I don’t think I ever screamed like that before in my life. I wonder if the neighbors heard. I hope they don’t call the police. I’ll bet I woke them up. What time is it? It’s getting light; it must be dawn.”

“I never had anything like that happen before in my life,” Nicholas said. “Boy, was I surprised, opening my eyes like I did and seeing it - me - standing there. What a shock. I wonder if anybody else ever had that happen to them. Boy.”

“We’re so near the neighbors,” Rachel said. “I hope I didn’t wake them.”

The next day Nicholas came around to my place to tell me about his mystical experience and get my opinion. He was not exactly candid about it, however; initially he told it to me not as a personal experience but as a science fiction idea for a story. That was so if it sounded nutty the onus wouldn’t be on him.

“I thought,” he said, “as a science fiction writer you could explain it. Was it time travel? Is there such a thing as time travel? Or maybe an alternate universe.”

I told him it was himself from an alternate universe. The proof was that he recognized himself. Had it been a future self he would not have recognized it, since it would have been altered from the features

he saw in the mirror. No one could ever recognize his own future self. I had written about that in a story, once. In the story the man's future self came back to warn him just as he, the protagonist, was about to do something foolish. The protagonist, not recognizing his future self, had killed it. I had yet to market the story, but my hopes were good. My agent, Scott Meredith, had sold everything else I had written.

"Can you use the idea?" Nicholas asked.

"No," I told him. "It's too ordinary."

"Ordinary!" He looked upset. "It didn't seem ordinary to me that night. I think it had a message for me, and it was beaming the message at me telepathically, but I woke up and that ended the transmission."

I explained to him that if you encountered your self from an alternate universe - or from the future, for that matter - you would hardly need to employ telepathy. That wasn't logical, since there would be no linguistic barrier. Telepathy was used when contact between members of different races, such as from other star systems, took place.

"Oh," Nicholas said, nodding.

"It was benign?" I asked.

"Sure it was; it was me. I'm benign. You know, Phil, in some ways my whole life is a waste. What am I doing at my age, working as a clerk in a record shop? Look what you're doing - you're a full-time writer. Why the hell can't I do something like that? Something meaningful. I'm a clerk! The lowest of the low!" And Rachel is going to be a full professor some day, when she's through school. I should never have dropped out; I should have gotten my BA."

I said, "You sacrificed your academic career for a noble cause, your opposition to war."

"I broke my gun. There was no cause; I was just inept the day we had to take apart our gun and put it back together. I lost the trigger down inside the works. That's all."

I explained to him how his subconscious was wiser than his conscious mind, and how he ought to take credit for its vision, its sense of higher values. After all, it was part of him.

"I'm not sure I believe that," Nicholas said. "I'm not sure what I believe any more. Not since those two FBI agents came by and roused me. They wanted me to spy-on my wife! I think that's what they were really after. They get people to spy on each other, like in 1984, and destroy the whole society. What does my life add up to, Phil, in comparison to yours, say? In comparison to anyone's? I'm going to Alaska. I was over the other day talking to the man at Southern Pacific; they have connections to Alaska through a yacht that goes up there three times a year. I could go on that. I think that's what my self from the future or an alternate universe was there to tell me, the other night, that my life doesn't add up to anything and I better do something drastic. I probably was about to find out what I was supposed to do, only I wrecked it all by waking up and opening my eyes. Actually it was Rachel who scared it off by screaming; that's when it left. If it wasn't for her I'd know how to organize my future whereas as it stands I know nothing,

I'm doing nothing, I have no hopes or prospects except checking in the goddamn Victor shipment that's up there at the shop waiting for me, forty big cartons - the whole fall line they pushed on us, the even Herb went for. Because of the ten percent discount." He lapsed into gloomy silence.

"What did the FBI agents look like?" I asked, never having seen one. Everybody in Berkeley was scared of just such a visit as Nicholas had received, myself included. It was the times.

They have fat red necks and double chins. And little eyes, like two coals stuck into dough. And they watch you all the time. They never take their eyes off you. They had faint but detectable southern accents. They said they'd be back to talk to both of us. They'll probably be by to talk to you too. About your writing. Are your stories left-wing?"

I asked, "Haven't you read them?"

"I don't read science fiction," Nicholas said. "I just read serious writers like Proust and Joyce and Kafka. When science fiction has something serious to say, I'll read it." He began, then, to talk up the virtues of *Finnegans Wake*, in particular the final part, which he compared to the final part of *Ulysses*. It was his belief that no one but himself had either read it or understood it.

"Science fiction is the literature of the future," I told him, when he paused. "In a few decades they'll be visiting the moon."

"Oh, no," Nicholas said vigorously. "They'll never visit the moon. You're living in a fantasy world."

"Is that what your future self told you?" I said. "Or your self from another universe, whatever it was?"

It seemed to me that it was Nicholas who was living in a fantasy world, working in the record store as a clerk, meanwhile always lost in great literature of a sort divorced from his own reality. He had read so much James Joyce that Dublin was more real to him than Berkeley. And yet even to me Berkeley was not quite real but lost, as Nicholas was, in fantasy; all of Berkeley dreamed a political dream separate from the rest of America, a dream soon to be crushed, as reaction flowed deeper and deeper and spread out wider. A person like Nicholas Brady could never go to Alaska; he was a product of Berkeley and could only survive in the radical student milieu of Berkeley. What did he know of the rest of the United States? I had driven across the country; I had visited Kansas and Utah and Kentucky and I knew the isolation of the Berkeley radicals. They might affect America a little with their views but in the long run it would be solid conservative America, the Midwest, which would win out. And when Berkeley fell, Nicholas Brady would fall with it.

Of course this was a long time ago, before President Kennedy was assassinated, before President Ferris Fremont and the New American Way. Before the darkness closed over us completely.

Being politically oriented, Nicholas had already noted the budding career of the junior senator from California, Ferris F. Fremont, who had issued forth in 1952 from Orange County, far to the south of us, .an area so reactionary that to us in Berkeley it seemed a phantom land, made of the mists of dire nightmare, where apparitions spawned that were as terrible as they were real -more real than if they had been composed of solid reality. Orange County, which no one in Berkeley had ever actually seen was the fantasy at the other end of the world, Berkeley's opposite; if Berkeley lay in the thrall of illusion, of detachment from reality, it was Orange County which had pushed it there. Within one

universe the two could never coexist.

It was as if Ferris Fremont stood amid the deserts of Orange County and imagined, at the north end of the state, the unreal thralldom of Berkeley and shuddered and said to himself something on the order of That must go. If the two men, Nicholas Brady in the north and Ferris Fremont in the south, could have looked across the six-hundred-mile distance between them and confronted each other, both would have been appalled as he read in the Berkeley Daily Gazette about the rise to political power of the publisher from Oceanside who had gotten his chance in the Senate by defaming his Democratic rival, Margaret Burger Greyson, as a homosexual.

As a matter of record, Margaret Burger Greyson was a routine senator, but the defamatory charges had formed the basis of Fremont's victory, not her voting record. Fremont had used his newspaper in Oceanside to blast Mrs Greyson, and, financed by unknown sources, he had plastered the southern part of the state with billboards darkly alluding to Mrs Greyson's sex life.

CALIFORNIA NEEDS A STRAIGHT CANDIDATE!

DON'T YOU THINK THERE'S SOMETHING QUEER ABOUT GREYSON?

That kind of thing. It was based on a supposedly actual incident in Mrs Greyson's life, but no one really knew.

Mrs Greyson fought back but never sued. After her defeat she vanished into obscurity, or maybe, as Republicans joked, into the gay bars of San Diego. Mrs Greyson, needless to say, had been a liberal. In the McCarthy days there wasn't that much difference in the public's view between communism and homosexuality, so Fremont had little difficulty winning, once his smear campaign began.

At that time Fremont was a callow lout, fat-cheeked and sullen, with beetle brows and pasted-down black hair that looked greased into place; he wore a pinstripe suit and loud tie and two-tone shoes, and it was said that he had hair on his knuckles. He was frequently photographed at the target range, guns being his hobby. He liked to wear a Stetson hat. Mrs Greyson's only rejoinder to him that ever received any favor was a bitter remark, made after the returns had come in, that Fremont certainly was no straight shooter, straight or not. Anyhow, Mrs Greyson's political career was ended, Ferris F. Fremont's begun. He flew at once to Washington, DC, in search of a house for himself, his wife, Candy, and their two bulbous sons, Amos and Don.

Now, you should have seen the effects in Berkeley of all this shit. Berkeley did not take it well. The radical student milieu resented a campaign's being won on such a basis, and they resented Fremont's showing up in Washington even more. They did not so much care for Mrs Greyson as they resented the winner; for one thing, as Republicans pointed out, there were many gays in Berkeley, and there certainly were many pinkos: Berkeley was the pinko capital of the world.

The pinko capital of the world was not surprised when Senator Fremont was named to a committee investigating un-American activities. It wasn't surprised when the senator nailed several prominent liberals as Communist Party members. But it was surprised when Senator Fremont made the Aramchek accusation.

Nobody in Berkeley, including the Communist Party members living and working there, had ever

heard of Aramchek. It mystified them. What was Aramchek? Senator Fremont claimed in his speech that a Communist Party member, an agent of the Politburo, had under pressure given him a document in which the CP-USA discussed the nature of Aramchek, and that from this document it was evident that the CP-USA, the Communist Party of America, was itself merely a front, one among many, cannon fodder as it were, to mask the real enemy, the real agency of treason, Aramchek. There was no membership roll in Aramchek; it did not function in any normal way. Its members espoused no particular philosophy, either publicly or privately. Yet it was Aramchek that was stealthily taking over these United States. You'd have thought someone in the pinko capital would have heard of it.

At that time I knew a girl who belonged to the Communist Party. She had always seemed strange, even before she joined, and after she joined she was insufferable. She wore bloomers and informed me that the sex act was an exploitation of women, and one time, in anger at my choice of friends, she dropped her cigarette in my cup of coffee at Larry Blake's restaurant on Telegraph Avenue. My friends were Trotskyists. I had introduced her to two of them in public, without telling her their political affiliations. You never did that in Berkeley. Liz came by my table the next day at Larry Blake's, not speaking; I think it got her in trouble with the Party. Anyhow one time kiddingly I asked her if she also belonged to Aramchek as well as to the Party.

"What a crock," she said. "What a fascist lie. There is no Aramchek. I would know."

"If it existed," I asked, "would you join it?"

"It would depend on what it does."

"It overthrows America," I said.

"Don't you think monopoly capitalism with its suppression of the working class and its financing of imperialist wars through puppet regimes should be overthrown?" Liz said.

"You'd join it," I said.

But even Liz couldn't join Aramchek if it didn't exist. I never saw her after she dropped her cigarette in my coffee at Larry Blake's; the Party had told her not to talk to me again, and she did what it said. Still, I don't believe she ever managed to rise high in the Communist Party; she was a typical low-echelon type, devoted to following orders but never really getting them right. Ever since, I've wondered what happened to her. I doubt if she ever wondered what happened to me; after the Party pronounced the ban on me I ceased to exist, as far as she was concerned.

One night I had dinner with Nicholas and Rachel where the topic of Aramchek came up. The Socialist Workers Party had passed a resolution denouncing both Senator Fremont and Aramchek: one the arm of US imperialism, the other the arm of militant Moscow.

"That's covering both bases," Nicholas commented. "You SWP are certainly opportunists."

Rachel smiled the superior sneering smile of a Berkeley poly sci girl.

"Are you still seeing that guy?" Nicholas said, meaning the SWP organizer that his wife had a crush on.

“Are you still in love with your boss’s wife?” Rachel demanded.

“Well,” Nicholas muttered, fooling with his coffee cup.

“I think Fremont has a great concept there,” I said. “Denouncing an organization that doesn’t even exist -one Fremont made up and says it’s taking over America. Obviously no one can destroy it. No one’s safe from it. No one knows where it’ll turn up next.”

“In Berkeley,” Nicholas said.

“In Kansas City,” I said. “In the heartland. In Salt Lake City - anywhere. Fremont can form anti-Aramchek cadres, youth groups on the right dedicated to fighting it wherever it manifests itself, armed uniformed bands of kids ever vigilant. It’ll get Fremont into the White House.” I was kidding. But, as we all know, I turned out to be right. After the death of John Kennedy, and his brother’s death, and the death of virtually every other major political figure in the United States, it took only a few years.

The purpose of killing the leading political figures in the United States by violent assassination, allegedly by screwed-up loners, was to get Ferris F. Fremont elected. It was the only way. He could not effectively compete. Despite his aggressive campaigns, he bordered on the worthless. Some time ago one of his aides must have pointed that out to him. “If you’re going to get into the White House, Ferris,” the aide must have said, “you’ve got to kill everyone else first.” Taking him literally, Ferris Fremont did so, starting in 1963 and working his way forward during the administration of Lyndon Johnson.

By the time Lyndon Johnson had retired, the field was clear. The man who could not compete did not have to.

There is no point in dwelling on the ethics of Ferris Fremont. Time has already rendered its verdict, the verdict of the world - except for the Soviet Union, which still holds him in great respect. That Fremont was in fact closely tied to Soviet intrigue in the United States, backed in fact by Soviet interests and his strategy framed by Soviet planners, is in dispute but is nonetheless a fact. The Soviets backed him, the right-wingers backed him, and finally just about everyone, in the absence of any other candidate, backed him. When he took office, it was on the wave of a huge mandate. Who else could they vote for? When you consider that in effect Fremont was running against no one else, that the Democratic Party had been infiltrated by his people, spied on, wiretapped, reduced to shambles, it makes more sense. Fremont had the backing of the US intelligence community, as they liked to call themselves, and ex-agents played an effective role in decimating political opposition. In a one-party system there is always a landslide.

One asks, Why should such disparate groups as the Soviet Union and the US intelligence community back the same man? I am no political theoretician, but Nicholas one time said, “They both like figureheads who are corrupt. So they can govern from behind. The Soviets and the fuzz, they’re all for shadow governments. They always will be, because basically each of them is the man with the gun. The pistol to the head.”

No one had put a pistol to Ferris Fremont’s head. He, was the pistol itself, pointed at our head. Pointed at the people who had elected him. Behind him stood all the cops in the world, the left-wing cops in Russia, the right-wing cops in the United States. Cops are cops. There are only divisions of rank, into

greater and lesser. The top cop is probably never seen.

However, Nicholas was no political theoretician either. In point of fact he had no idea how the coalition behind Fremont had formed; in fact he had no idea it existed. Like the rest of us over those years, he simply stood amazed as prominent politicians were murdered and Fremont rose rapidly to power. What was happening made no sense. No pattern could be discerned.

There is a Latin motto, when one is seeking to know who has committed a crime, that goes, Look to see who gains. When John Kennedy was murdered, and Dr King, and Bobby Kennedy, and the others, when George Wallace was crippled, we should have asked, Who gains? All men in America lost by these dreadful senseless murders except one second-rate man whose way was now clear to the White House: clear to get in and clear to remain. Who otherwise would have had no chance.

We should forgive ourselves, though, for not figuring out who was doing it and why; after all, it had never happened in the United States before, although the history of other countries is full of it. The Russians know it well; so do the English - take Crookback Dick, as Shakespeare calls Richard III. There was the paradigm for this: Richard, who murdered his way to the throne, killing even children, and all with the excuse that nature had made him ugly. Nature had made Ferris Fremont ugly too, inside and out. Personally, it never entered my mind. We thought of a lot of possibilities, but not really that. The Tartar mind had never schemed for the American throne until then.

I do not, however, propose to write about how Ferris Fremont got to power. I propose to write about his downfall. The former story is known, but I doubt if anyone understands the way he was defeated. I intend to write about Nicholas Brady, and about Nick Brady's friends.

Even though I had quit my job at the bookstore to write full-time, I still liked to drop into University Music to listen to the new LPs and say hello to Nicholas, who now spent much of his time with the salesmen from the various distributors or up in the office doing paperwork. By 1953 for all intents and purposes he managed University Music; the owner, Herb Jackman, had another store in Kensington and spent his time there. It was nearer his home. Pat still worked in Berkeley, and she and Nicholas were together most days.

What I didn't know was that Herb had a heart condition. He had suffered one heart attack in 1951, and his doctor ordered him to retire. He was only forty-seven and he would not retire; instead he bought a very small store in Kensington, and puttered around in it. The only day it did any business was on Saturday, whereas University Music employed five clerks and was busy all the time.

Nicholas and Pat, of course, knew about Herb's heart condition. Sometimes on Saturday night Herb and his buddies got together in the office at University Music and played poker, at which times I occasionally joined them. All his buddies knew about his heart condition. They were a rough bunch, but they liked him a lot; most of them were small businessmen in the neighborhood, and they had common interests, such as all the dopers moving onto Telegraph Avenue. They could see what lay ahead. Nicholas used to say later on that what killed Herb was the drug scene on Telegraph. Before Herb died he had time to see spade pushers offering joints to passersby openly across the street down toward Dwight. To a straitlaced man from Oklahoma like Herb, that would do it.

I also played poker with Tony Boucher and his friends, at his house on Dana; they, „like me, were all science fiction writers. Nicholas never played poker; he was too intellectual for that. Nicholas was

your typical Berkeley intellectual, involved with books and records and the Avenue coffeehouses. He and Rachel, when they felt like going out, crossed the bay to San Francisco and headed straight for North Beach and the coffeehouses there, along Grant. Before that they stopped in Chinatown and ate dinner at exactly the same restaurant, the oldest one there, according to them: Yee Jun's, on Washington. You had to go downstairs to the basement, and the tables had marble tops. There was a short waiter there named Walter who, it was said, fed homeless students for free, the sort filling up San Francisco who would one day cease being the Beatniks, as Herb Caen termed them, and become the Haight-Ashbury hippies. Nicholas was never a Beatnik or a hippie - he was far too intellectual for that - but he resembled one, with his jeans and tennis shoes and his short beard and tousled hair.

The big problem for Nicholas was the prospect of remaining a record clerk all his life. Even managing University Music seemed to be that, and it was messing up his head, especially as his wife moved toward getting her degree. Instead of going to school he was putting his wife through school. He had the feeling that Rachel looked down on him. Berkeley being a college town, he felt that most people looked down on him. It was a difficult period for him. Obviously his boss would have another heart attack, at which point Pat, as the legal owner of University Music, would undoubtedly put him, Nicholas Brady, in charge of the store. He would be doing what Herb had been doing, which he was virtually doing already, and it came into his mind that probably he would wind up like Herb: dead from worry and overwork at a job that gave little back, dead at an early age, at his post from nine in the morning until midnight. Retail record selling, for the independent owner, was a losing proposition; the big chains were starting to come in, Music Box and the Warehouse, the discount record stores.

At this time Nicholas had another paranormal experience. He told me about it the next day.

This one had to do with Mexico. He had never been to Mexico and knew little about it, and this was why the detail of the dream amazed him so: every car, every building, all the people on the sidewalks and in the restaurants were so sharply etched. And it was no return to a past life because he saw Yellow Cabs - it was truly modern, a big city such as Mexico City itself, very busy, very noisy, but with the sounds somehow muted and at a constant background level of murmuring. In the dream he never heard a single clear word. No one spoke to him; there were no characters, just cars and taxis, street signs, stores, restaurants. It was entirely scenic. And it rolled on and on for hours, in a strange vivid shiny color, the kind, Nicholas said, you find in acrylic paint.

The dream had come to him oddly: during the day. At about two in the afternoon, on his day off, he had gotten sleepy and had lain down on the living room couch. The dream began at once. He was at a taco stand buying a taco. But then the scene rolled open, as if doors had swung wide or lifted up; all at once he no longer stood before the taco stand but, instead, faced a panorama of Mexico itself. Romantic and thrilling it was, sparkling with color in the night, drawing him toward it with many hints and promises. It fanned out in all directions, a vast foreign landscape not known to him, not a part of the contents of his own mind, lovely, compelling, leading him on so that after a short time he was in the midst of it, with the rich life spilling by on all sides: the murmur of people, the swish of traffic, and all so real, so unmistakably real.

At one point he found himself moving with a small group through a museum of some sort, located at the edge of the ocean. He saw many exhibits and pictures he could not later recall, but that section alone evidently lasted for hours. The total elapsed time of the experience, in real time, was almost eight hours. He had noticed what time it was when he lay down, and when he rose he rechecked it.

Eight hours of scenic Mexico, and for no cost!

Later he said to me, "It was as if another mind were trying to communicate with me. Life unlived, I think. Where I might have lived. What I might have experienced."

I couldn't argue with that. His constricted Berkeley life certainly cried out for such a vivid trip.

"Maybe it means you should move to Southern California," I said.

"No, it was Mexico - a foreign country."

"Have you ever thought of moving to LA?"

He did not find that funny. "A vast mind was talking to me! Across endless miles of space! From another star!"

"Why?" I asked.

"I believe it has seen my needs. I believe it intends to direct my life toward some great goal presently unglimped. I - " Nicholas got a sly, secretive look on his face. "I have a name for it: Valisystem A. I stands for

Vast Active Living Intelligent System A. I call it "A" because it may be only one out of many. It has all those characteristics; it is vast, it is active, it is intelligent, and it forms a coherent system."

"You know all that from its showing you Mexico?"

"I sensed it there. I intuited its nature. Sometimes I lie awake at night and try to commune with it. All this has resulted from my appeals over the years; I've appealed for this many times."

I thought over the word "appeal" and then realized that the word he meant was prayer. He had prayed for this, was what he intended to say, but no one in Berkeley ever used the word "prayer." There was no religion in Berkeley, except among the Okies who had migrated out during World War II to work in the Richmond shipyards. Nicholas wouldn't be caught dead using the word "prayer."

I guessed, then, that he had had other experiences with Valis, as he called him.

As a matter of fact he had had other experiences, which he later told me about: dreams of a peculiar repetitive nature, in which large open books were held up before his eyes, with printing like that of old Bibles. In each dream he either read or tried to read the printing, with meager results - at least to his conscious mind. There was no telling how much he absorbed unconsciously and repressed or forgot on awakening; probably a great deal. I had the impression, from what he said, that he was shown enough writing in his dreams to have taken the equivalent of a crash course - in what, neither he nor I could tell.

This went on for some time. A year later when I ran into Nicholas he was still seeing written pages in his sleep, although not as frequently. One interesting thing he told me was that he had discovered, upon falling into and out of sleep, that the writing appeared in his dreams only between 3:00 and 4:00 A.M.

That must mean something," I said.

The only words he had been able to read clearly had to do with him, although he was certain that his name appeared frequently in other texts. This passage ran:

A RECORD CLERK IN BERKELEY WILL HAVE MANY TROUBLES, AND AT LAST HE WILL

No more; the rest had been forgotten or just plain blurred. In that dream the book was held by, of all people, me; I stood with the pages open and extended to him, inviting him to examine them, which he did.

"Are you sure it's not God talking to you?" I said.

That was an unpopular topic in Berkeley, when it was a topic at all; I said it just to needle him. But he himself had said that the great open pages, the large old-looking books, resembled Bibles he had seen. He had made the connection himself. However, he preferred his theory that an extraterrestrial intelligence from another star system was conversing with him, and for this reason he kept me posted about his experiences. Had he decided it was God, he undoubtedly would have ceased talking to me and consulted a minister or priest, so his theory was a lucky break for me.

Lucky, that is, insofar as I was interested in what he had to say. However, since he had seen me in his dream extending the written page, I was involved somehow. But although I was a professional science fiction writer, I could not really give credence to the idea that an extraterrestrial intelligence on another star system was communicating with him; I never took such notions seriously, perhaps because I was a writer of such things and was accustomed to dredging them up from my own mind in purely fictional form. That such things could genuinely occur was foreign to my way of thinking. I did not even believe in flying saucers. It was a hoax and fiction to me. So perhaps of all people he knew to confide in, Nicholas had picked the worst.

As far as I was concerned it was a chronic fantasy life that Nicholas's mind had hit on to flesh out the little world in which he lived. Communicating with Valis (as he called it) made life bearable for him, which it otherwise would not be. Nicholas, I decided, had begun to part company with reality, out of necessity. Being a record clerk in a city of educated intellectuals was too much for him to endure. That was a classic example of how the human mind, lacking real solutions, managed its miseries.

I stuck to this theory about Valis for several years - up to the day, in the late sixties, when I personally saw Valis heal Nicholas and Rachel's little son of a birth defect. But that came later.

There was a lot, it turned out, that Nicholas hadn't told me, from the start. He tailored what he said. It was his intention not to appear crazy, which is a desire indicating some residual smarts, some vestigial grip on reality after most of it had fled. He knew he shouldn't be experiencing what he was experiencing, and he knew that if indeed he was (which he was), he should not talk about it. He selected me to tell because I wrote science fiction and therefore, he presumed, I was more tolerant, more broad-minded in regard to contacts with nonhumans. That was one matter Nicholas was certain about. Valis was nonhuman.

Regarding all this, Rachel, his wife, took the crudest and most derisive attitude imaginable. Her Berkeley intellectual ferocity grew continually. Nicholas, if he tried to discuss Valis in front of her,

was immediately subjected to sneers that beggared description. You would have thought that he had become a Jehovah's Witness, another area of boundless contempt on his overeducated wife's part. A Jehovah's Witness or a member of the Young Republicans - some abomination of such an absolute nature as that. Something that set him apart from reasonable man entirely. Which I guess the narrations about his experiences with Valis did. You could hardly blame her. Except, I always thought the excessive harshness was unnecessary; she should simply have sent him over to California State Mental Hygiene for some group therapy. I still thought Nicholas should move to Southern California mainly to get him out of Berkeley. He did go, but just to visit Disneyland. Still, that was a trip of sorts. It meant he had to get his car fixed up, with new tires; he and Rachel piled their sleeping bags, tent and Coleman stove into the back of their Plymouth and set out, with the intention of sleeping on the beaches in order to save money. Nicholas also had a secret mission, about which he did not tell his boss, Herb Jackman. According to Nicholas's official story, this was simply a vacation. In actuality (he confided to me, his best friend), he would be visiting Progressive Records in Burbank, where he knew someone: their West Coast representative, Carl Dondero. This little record outfit put out folk music records, which sold better in Berkeley than anywhere else, and since Nicholas was part of the Berkeley scene he spent a lot of time listening to such folk singers as Josh White and Richard Dyer-Bennet, owned as many Hudson Back Bay Ballad records as existed, and could tell you who revived the five-string banjo (Pete Seeger, Nicholas claimed, and then discoursed on the Almanac Singers, with whom Seeger had sung anonymously). The idea was that Nicholas, if he liked what he saw at Progressive Records and liked what he heard from the brass there, might go to work for them. I had met Carl Dondero once, and he and I both felt that Nicholas should get out of Berkeley. This was Dondero's way of accomplishing it.

What Carl Dondero had not thought out clearly is the ominous fact that Los Angeles is the nut capital of the world; that every religious, paranormal, and occult group originates there and draws its followers there; that Nicholas, were he to resettle in the southland, would be exposed to other people like himself and hence would probably worsen rather than mend. Nicholas would be moving to an area which ill defined the quality of sanity. What could we expect from Nicholas, if he were exposed to LA? Valis, most likely, would emerge into the open as Nicholas's meager contact with reality dwindled out of existence entirely.

Nicholas, however, did not in fact plan to move from Berkeley. He and it were too closely bonded. What he looked forward to was lunch with the brass from Artists and Repertoire at Progressive Records; they would woo him and wine him, and he could then triumphantly say no to them and return to Berkeley, having been given a viable alternative which he had turned down flat. For the rest of his life, as a record clerk on Telegraph Avenue, he could tell himself that he had chosen his life in preference to the disloyalty of moving to LA.

But when he got down to the LA area, in particular down to Orange County and Disneyland, and had had a chance to cruise around in his old Plymouth, he discovered something unexpected, although more or less in fun I had suggested it to him. Parts of that region resembled his Mexico dream. I had been right. Upon leaving the freeway near Anaheim - he took the wrong exit ramp and wound up in the town of Placentia - he discovered Mexican buildings, low-rider Mexican cars, Mexican cafes, and little wooden houses filled with Mexicans. He had stumbled onto a barrio for the first time in his life. The barrio looked like Mexico, except that there were Yellow Cabs. Nicholas had made actual contact with the world of his visionary dream. And this changed everything in regard to taking the job at Progressive Records.

He and Rachel returned to Berkeley, but not to stay. Now that he knew an actual world existed as depicted in his dream - as seen in his dream - Nicholas could not be stopped.

"I was right," he told me on returning to the Bay Area. "It wasn't a dream. Valis was showing me where I ought to be living. I have a destiny down there, Phil, that dwarfs anything you can imagine. It leads to the stars."

"Did Valis tell you what your destiny down there is?" I asked him.

"No." He shook his head. "I'll find that out when the time comes. It's the same principle as in the spy services; you're to know only what's necessary for you to know. If you understood the big picture it'd blow your head off. You'd go crazy."

"Nicholas," I said, "you'd quit your job and move down to Orange County because of a dream?"

"As soon as I saw the barrio in Placentia I recognized it," Nicholas said. "Every building and street, every car that passed - they were precisely as I dreamed them. The people walking along, the street signs, even. Down to the smallest detail. Valis intends for me to move down there."

"Ask him why before you do it. You have a right to know what you're getting into."

"I trust Valis."

"Suppose he's evil."

"Evil?" Nicholas stared at me. "He's the absolute force of good in the universe!"

"I'm not sure I'd trust him," I said, "if it were me and my life. I mean you are talking about your life, Nick. Here you are giving up your house and your job and your friends because of a dream he shows you - a preview. Maybe it's just precognition on your part. Maybe you're a precog." I had written several stories about precogs, in fact a novel, *The World Jones Made*, and I tended to view precognition as a mixed blessing. In my stories, and especially in the novel, it placed the character in a closed loop, a victim of his own determinism; he was compelled, just as Nicholas seemed now, to enact later what he foresaw earlier, as if by previewing it he was destined to fall victim to it, rather than obtaining the capacity to escape it. Precognition did not lead to freedom but rather to a macabre fatalism, just as Nicholas now displayed: he had to move to Orange County because, a year ago, he had experienced a preview vision of it. Logically it made no sense. Couldn't he avoid going just precisely because he had suffered a premonition? I was willing to admit that what Nicholas saw in his dream-vision was an accurate representation of the barrio down in the city of Placentia in Orange County. But I saw it more as a paranormal talent on Nicholas's part than a communication from an extraterrestrial entity in another solar system. One had to draw the line of common sense somewhere. Using Occam's Principle of Scientific Parsimony, the simplest theory was mine. One did not need to drag in another, more powerful mind.

However, Nicholas did not view it that way. "It's not a question of which theory is more economical; it's a question of what's true. I'm not in communication with myself. I have no way of knowing that my destiny lies down in Placentia. Only a greater mind, above human level, would know that."

~~“Maybe your destiny lies directly at the center of Disneyland. You could sleep under the Matterhorn ride and live on Coke and hot dogs, like they sell there. There’re bathrooms. You’d have all you need~~

Rachel, who was listening to all this, shot me a look of pure malice.

“Well, I’m just doing what you do,” I said to her. “Making fun of him. You don’t want to live in the LA area, do you, Rachel? Outside of Berkeley?”

“I’d never live in Orange County,” Rachel said vehemently.

“There you are,” I said to Nicholas.

Nicholas said, “We’re thinking of splitting up. So she can continue on at the university and I can pursue my destiny down there.”

That made it real. Divorce based on a“ dream. What strange grounds. Cause of divorce? I left my wife because I dreamed about a foreign land . . . which proved to be ten miles from Disneyland, near a lot of orange trees.

Down in plastic-town USA. It was unreal, and yet Nicholas meant it. And they had been married for years.

The resolution to this came three years later when Rachel discovered that she was pregnant. Those were the days of the diaphragm, which wasn’t all that good. This ended her university career; after she had little Johnny she didn’t care where they lived. She got fat and sloppy; her hair became a mess; she forgot all she had learned at school and instead watched daytime TV.

In the mid-sixties they moved to Orange County. In a few years, Ferris F. Fremont would become president of the United States.

How are you to treat a friend whose life is directed from beyond the stars? What attitude do you take I saw Nicholas rarely after he and Rachel moved down to Orange County, but when I did see him, when they drove up for a prolonged stay in the Bay Area or I flew down to visit them and take in Disneyland, Nicholas always filled me in on what Valis was up to. After he moved to Orange County Valis communicated with him a lot. So from his standpoint the move was worth it.

Also, the job at Progressive Records turned out to be a vast improvement over working as a record clerk. Retail record selling was a dead end and Nicholas had always known it, whereas the recording field itself was wide open. Rock had become big, now, although that did not affect Progressive Records, which signed only folk artists. Even so, Progressive Records was getting them up there on the sales charts; they had some of the best folk artists under contract, many from the old San Francisco scene: from the Hungry i and the Purple Onion. They almost signed Peter, Paul and Mary, and, according to them, they had turned down the Kingston Trio. I heard about this through Nicholas, being in Artists and Repertoire, he himself auditioned new vocal artists, instrumentalists-, and group made tapes of them on location . . . although he did not have the authority to sign them. He did have the authority to reject them, however, and he enjoyed exercising this. It beat changing the toilet paper roll behind listening booth three, back up in Berkeley.

At last Nicholas's natural ear for a good voice was paying off. His talent plus what he had learned from listening to rare vocal records at University Music late at night were now underwriting him financially. Carl Don-dero hadn't erred; in doing Nicholas a favor he had done Progressive Records a favor as well.

"So you have a groovy job," I said, as he and I and Rachel sat around their apartment in Placentia.

"I'm driving to Huntington Beach to take in Uncle Dave Huggins and His Up-Front Electric Jugs," Nicholas said. "I think we should sign with them. Sign them up. It's folk rock, really. A little like the Grateful Dead does on some of their tracks." We were listening to an LP of the Jefferson Airplane at that moment, quite a jump from the classical music Nicholas had loved back in Berkeley. Grace Slick was singing "White Rabbit."

"What a groovy broad," Nicholas said. "One of the best," I said. I had just become interested in rock. The Airplane was my favorite group; one time I had driven over to Marin County to the town of Bolinas to gaze at the house reputed to be Grace Slick's. It was up over the beach but back away from the people and noise. "Too bad you can't sign her," I said to Nicholas.

"Oh, I see plenty of groovy broads," Nicholas said. "A lot of folksingers, aspiring folksingers, are broads. Most of them are what we in the industry call strictly no-talent. They've maybe listened repeatedly to tracks by Baez and Collins and Mitchell and imitated them - nothing original."

"So now," I said, "you have power over people."

Nicholas was silent, fooling with his glass of Charles Krug wine.

"How does it feel?" I asked.

"Well, I - " Nicholas hesitated. "I hate to see the expression on their faces when I say no. It's - " He gestured. "They have such high hopes. They come to Hollywood from all over the country with such high hopes. Like in the song by the Mamas & Papas, „Young Girls Are Coming ,to the Canyon.“ There was one girl today . . . she hitch-hiked from Kansas City, Kansas, with a fifteen-dollar Sears practice guitar . . . she knew perhaps five chords, and she had to read out of a songbook. We don't generally audition them unless they're booked somewhere already. I mean, we can't audition everybody." He looked sad as he said this.

"What's Valis have to say these days?" I asked. Perhaps with his new, more expanded life he was no longer hearing voices and seeing printed pages in his sleep.

Nicholas got a strange look on his face. For the first time since the topic came up he seemed reluctant to discuss it. "I've - " he began, and then he motioned me to go along with him, out of the living room of the apartment and into their bedroom. "Rachel has a rule now," he explained, shutting the door after us. "I'm not to ever mention it. Listen." He seated himself on the bed facing me. "I've discovered something. The clarity with which I can hear him - or her, or them; whichever it is - depends on the wind. When the wind is blowing - it blows in here from the desert to the east and north - I receive the communication better. I've been taking notes. Look at this." He opened a dresser drawer; there lay a stack of papers, typed on, about a hundred sheets. And in the corner of the bedroom stood a small typing table with a Royal portable on it. "There's a lot I haven't ever told you," he said, "about my

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