

Radio Free Albemuth

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Extract

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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 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-à-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 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 Watters 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.

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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, that 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?'

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