

## The Night I Met Phil Dick

by James Blaylock

I met Phil in 1975 when Tim Powers and I drove over to Phil's house on Commonwealth Avenue in Fullerton carrying a bottle of zinfandel. Not long before that he had undergone the mystical "pink beam" experience, which had an enormous effect on how he perceived the world. He was still passionate about it, trying to make sense of it. I listened to him recount the implausible experience without doubting him for a single moment. There was something in the way he told the story that was absolutely, utterly convincing.

Over the course of that evening we talked about a number of odd things. He showed us a trilobite fossil, for instance, that he was fond of, and we speculated about the great age of the thing, and whether there was any accreted magic in it, whether it soaked up power of some sort – time itself – over the eons. (I borrowed this idea, by the way, and have used it freely in stories and novels ever since.) When the hour grew late, the conversation grew more

ominous. Phil revealed that his research had led him to uncover an ages-old secret plot that had resulted in the murder of hundreds of people, including Jesus Christ and Ambrose Bierce. The Knights Templar had known all about it, as did the KGB, which was ever on the watch for people who also knew but shouldn't know, whom they were certain to murder. Phil had very recently stumbled upon the secret, he told us, and lived in constant fear for his life, and now, on this dark, winter midnight, when it was almost certain that the KGB was monitoring the house, Phil was going to reveal the secret to us.

Both of us shouted at him to stop, standing up out of our chairs and trying to convince him that we didn't want to know, for God's sake. (I can't actually remember shouting, "I don't want to die!" but it was that sort of moment.) For the rest of the evening we could scarcely avoid looking out the front window, watching for movement in the moonlit shrubbery. Tim imagined (for reasons he couldn't quite explain) that an enormous copper baby's head would rise up grinning from behind the juniper bush like the Floating Head of Death in the Far Side cartoon. Somehow this made perfect sense to me. We fled to the car around two in the morning, locked the doors, and, on the drive home, glanced from time to time out the rear window, watching

for the long, black vehicle that was almost certainly following us. I have a vague memory of waking up Viki, my wife, to try to explain it to her, babbling about Ambrose Bierce and floating heads. Of course I got exactly the response that you're imagining. I remember her turning the bedside lamp off with a sort of calm deliberation and going back to sleep. Next morning Phil called Tim on the phone, laughing. "I really had you two going last night, didn't I?" he asked.

He had us going in that way moderately often. On another night we drove home certain that the KGB (almost always the KGB) had developed a madness ray that was impervious to the horizon. They had aimed the device at Los Angeles, Phil had told us, and it was only a matter of time before we all woke up in the morning gibbering like apes. "God save us," I thought, looking out at the dreaded juniper, wondering whether I should call Viki at that very moment to tell her to pack a bag. (I borrowed the idea of the madness ray, too, and am making use of it in the story that I'm currently writing, the very story that I put down to write this reminiscence. I've been carrying the madness ray around with me for decades.) Another time it was three-eyed men from San Diego, one of whom had been discovered dead in a ditch along the Coast Highway. Tim seems to

remember an extra nose rather than an extra eye, but the idea of an extra nose is so ludicrous that I'm certain he's wrong. I think it was Chesterton who pointed out that once we've seen the human nose we can no longer doubt that God has a sense of humor.

The longer I knew Phil the easier it was to differentiate between the strange ideas that were vital to him – like the pink beam experience – and the strange ideas that were merely interesting or amusing (and vastly more amusing if he could find eager listeners). Lawrence Sutin, in his admirably written biography of Phil, says that Phil “always bore in mind what he called the ‘minimum hypothesis’ – that is, the possibility that all he had undergone was merely self-delusion.” That, of course, is nearly a definition of sanity. Phil was looking very intensely and seriously for the truth, but he was also seriously willing to doubt himself, to laugh at himself and to invite us to laugh along. His entire adult life, it seems to me, was an unceasing effort to get at the truth of things, like Mercer climbing the hill, and he got at more of it than nearly anyone else I know. But although he was willing to believe in the truth, he was unwilling to believe too much in himself, and his natural humility in that regard made him all the more convincing.

That was over 35 years ago. I'll admit that I've forgotten the vital parts of some of the stories. I can't recall whether the three-eyed (or two-nosed) man in the ditch was a space alien, a mole man, or a creature from the sea. Nor can I remember why the discovery of the body had filled me with fear, which is probably just as well. Earlier I said that I'd awakened Viki, babbling about floating heads, but it's entirely possible that I did not, and that my "memory" of it is simply another one of my own fears swimming to the surface of my mind these long years later.

That night that I first met Phil, we sat up late talking joyfully about pink beams, housing tracts, trilobites, red wine, and a dozen subjects long forgotten, but (perhaps strangely) not about writing. During the six or seven years that I knew Phil we rarely talked about writing – writers, maybe, and books, and films made from books, but not the craft. It was much more likely that we talked about anything else. Relatively often I read that Phil was a "mentor" to me or to Tim or K. W. Jeter, but in fact he was the last person to presume to be teaching people anything about anything. He was far too humble for that, and far too funny, often in a self-deprecating way. When Phil was living there in Fullerton, a journalist from (as I recall) Time

magazine flew out from the east coast to interview him. He had gotten about two minutes into the interview when Phil asked him, very seriously, if he thought that frogs could talk. It was a question of pressing importance, Phil told him. The man was baffled, and when he packed his stuff into his briefcase and left a short time later he was still baffled. Phil had blown his mind, and with it he had blown the interview, which never appeared in the magazine. It seems to me that to be a “mentor” one has to take oneself moderately seriously, and (like I said) although Phil took a number of things seriously, he didn’t take himself that way.

But now I look back on it and realize that he was a mentor after all, even though he didn’t mean to be. I took away a big box of treasures from my too-brief friendship with Phil, and whenever I recall the time we spent together, talking nonsense, I find something new in the box.