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The Minority Report 4
by Philip K. Dick

The Head Hunters 37
by William Morrison & Frederik Pohl

Wednesday's Child 54
by William Tenn

The Last Quarry 71
by Bryce Walton

Keepers of the House 82
by Lester del Rey

Life Force 94
by Benjamin Ferris

The Nothing 103
by Frank Herbert

You Got to Have Brains 112
by Robert Bloch

Preview 122
by Frank Belknap Long

Universe in Books 125
by Hans Stefan Santesson

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the nothing

by . . . Frank Herbert

The Nothings stemmed from the future's tragic lack of courage. But one man and woman dared to shape a more audacious tomorrow.

IF IT hadn't been for the fight with my father I'd never have gone down to the Tavern and then I wouldn't have met the *Nothing*. This *Nothing* was really just an ordinary looking guy. He wasn't worth special attention unless, like me, you were pretending you were Marla Graim, the feelies star, and him Sidney Harch meeting you in the bar to give you a spy capsule.

It was all my father's fault. Imagine him getting angry because I wouldn't take a job burning brush. What kind of work is that for an eighteen-year-old girl anyway? I know my folks were hard pressed for money but that was no excuse for the way he lit into me.

We had the fight over lunch but it was after six o'clock before I got the chance to sneak out of the house. I went down to the Tavern because I knew the old man would be madder than a tele in a lead barrel when he found out. There was no way I could keep it from him, of course. He pried me every time I came home.

The Tavern is a crossroads place where the talent gets together to

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Though Frank Herbert started free-lancing less than two years ago his writing career for the past fifteen years has been both accomplished and varied. He has been copy or managing editor of the Salem, Oregon, Statesman, Portland Journal, Tacoma Times, Seattle Star and the Santa Rosa, California, Press-Democrat. His stories have appeared in COLLIER'S *and* ESQUIRE, *and a number of science fiction magazines. There's prophetic magic in this star-bright tale of tomorrow.*

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compare notes, and talk about jobs. I'd only been in there once before, and that time with my father. He warned me not to go there alone because a lot of the jags used the place. You could smell the stuff all over the main room. There was pink smoke from a hyro bowl drifting up around the rafters. Someone had a Venusian Oin filter going. There was a lot of talent there for so early in the evening.

I found an empty corner of the bar and ordered a blue fire because I'd seen Marla Graim ask for one in the feelies. The bartender stared at me sharply and I suspected he was a tele, but he didn't pry. After awhile he floated my drink up to me and 'ported away my money. I sipped the drink the way I'd seen Marla Graim do, but it was too sweet. I tried not to let my face show anything.

The bar mirror gave me a good broad view of the room and I kept looking into it as though I was expecting somebody. Then this big blond young man came through the front door. I saw him in the mirror and immediately knew he was going to take the seat beside me. I'm not exactly a prescient, but sometimes those things are obvious.

He came across the room, moving with a gladiator ease between the packed tables. That's when I pretended I was Marla Graim waiting at a Port Said bar to pick up a spy capsule from Sidney Harch like in the feelie I'd seen Sunday. This fellow did look a little like Harch—curly hair, dark blue eyes, face all sharp angles as if it had been chiseled by a sculptor who'd left the job uncompleted.

He took the stool beside me as I'd known he would, and ordered a blue fire, easy on the sugar. Naturally, I figured this was a get-acquainted gambit and wondered what to say to him. Suddenly, it struck me as an exciting idea to just ride along with the Marla Graim plot until it came time to leave.

He couldn't do anything to stop me even if he was a 'porter. You see, I'm a pyro and that's a good enough defense for anyone. I glanced down at my circa-twenty skirt and shifted until the slit exposed my garter the way I'd seen Marla Graim do it. This blond lad didn't give it a tumble. He finished his drink, and ordered another.

I whiffed him for one of the cokes, but he was dry. No jag. The other stuff in the room was getting through to me, though, and I was feeling dizzy. I knew I'd have to leave soon and I'd never get another chance to be a Marla Graim type; so I said, "What's yours?"

Oh, he knew I was talking to him all right, but he didn't even look up. It made me mad. A girl has some pride and there I'd unbent enough to start the conversation! There was an ashtray piled with scraps of paper in front of him. I concentrated on it and the paper suddenly flamed. I'm a good pyro when I want to be. Some men

have been kind enough to say I could start a fire without the talent. But with a prying father like mine how would I ever know?

The fire got this fellow's attention. He knew I'd started it. He just glanced at me once and turned away. "Leave me alone," he said. "I'm a *Nothing*."

I don't know what it was. Maybe I have a little of the tele like that doctor said once, but I knew he was telling the truth. It wasn't one of those gags like you see in the feelies. You know—where there are two comedians and one says, "What's yours?" And the other one answers, "Nothing."

Only all the time he's levitating the other guy's chair and juggling half a dozen things behind his back, no hands. You know the gag. It's been run into the ground. Well, when he said that, it kind of set me back. I'd never seen a real-life *Nothing* before. Oh, I knew there were some. In the government preserves and such, but I'd never been like this—right next to one.

"Sorry," I said. "I'm a pyro."

He glanced at the ashes in the tray and said, "Yeah. I know."

"There's not much work for pyros any more," I said. "It's the only talent I have." I turned and looked at him. Handsome in spite of being a *Nothing*. "What did you do?" I asked.

"I ran away," he said. "I'm a fugitive from the Sonoma Preserve."

That made my blood tingle. Not only a *Nothing*, but a fugitive, too. Just like in the feelies. I said, "Do you want to hide out at my place?"

That brought him around. He looked me over and he actually blushed. Actually! I'd never seen a man blush before. That fellow certainly was loaded with firsts for me.

"People might get the wrong idea when I'm caught," he said. "I'm sure to be caught eventually. I always am."

I was really getting a feeling for that woman-of-the-world part. "Why not enjoy your freedom then?" I asked.

I let him see a little more through the circa-twenty slit. He actually turned away! Imagine!

That's when the police came. They didn't make any fuss. I'd noticed these two men standing just inside the door watching us. Only I'd thought they were watching me. They came across the room and one of them bent over this fellow.

"All right, Claude," he said. "Come quietly."

The other took my arm and said, "You'll have to come, too, sister."

I jerked away from him. "I'm not your sister," I said.

"Oh, leave her alone, fellows," said this Claude. "I didn't tell her anything. She was just trying to pick me up."

"Sorry," said the cop. "She comes, too."

That's when I began to get

scared. "Look," I said. "I don't know what this is all about."

The man showed me the snout of a hypo gun in his pocket. "Stop the commotion and come quietly, sister, or I'll have to use this," he said.

So who wants to go to sleep? I went quietly, praying we'd run into my father or someone I knew so I could explain things. But no such luck.

The police had a plain old jet buggy outside with people clustered around looking at it. A 'porter in the crowd was having fun jiggling the rear end up and down off the ground. He was standing back with his hands in his pockets, grinning.

The cop who'd done all the talking just looked toward this 'porter and the fellow lost his grin and hurried away. I knew then the cop was a tele, although he hadn't touched my mind. They're awfully sensitive about their code of ethics, some of those teles.

It was fun riding in that old jet buggy. I'd never been in one before. One of the cops got in back with Claude and me. The other one drove. It was the strangest feeling, flying up over the bay on the tractors. Usually, whenever I wanted to go someplace, I'd just ask, polite like, was there a 'porter around and then I'd think of where I wanted to go and the 'porter would set me down there quick as a wink.

Of course, I wound up in some old gent's apartment now and then. Some 'porters do that sort of thing for a fee. But a pyro doesn't have to worry about would-be Casanovas. No old gent is going to fool around when his clothes are on fire.

Well, the jet buggy finally set down on an old hospital grounds way back up in the sticks and the cops took us to the main building and into a little office. Walking, mind you. It was shady in the office —not enough lights—and it took a minute for my eyes to adjust after the bright lights in the hall. When they did adjust and I saw the old codger behind the desk I did a real double take. It was Mensor Williams. Yeah. The *Big All.* Anything anybody else can do he can do better.

Somebody worked a switch somewhere and the lights brightened. "Good evening, Miss Carlysle," he said and his little goatee bobbled.

Before I could make a crack about ethics against reading minds, he said, "I'm not intruding into your mental processes. I've merely scanned forward to a point where I learn your name."

A prescient, too!

"There really wasn't any need to bring her," he told the cops. "But it was inevitable that you would." Then he did the funniest thing. He turned to Claude and nodded his head toward me. "How do you like her, Claude?" he asked. Just like I was something offered for sale or something!

Claude said, "Is she the one, Dad?"

Dad! That one smacked me. The *Big All* has a kid and the kid's a *Nothing!*

"She's the one," said Williams.

Claude kind of squared his shoulders and said, "Well, I'm going to throw a stick into the works. I won't do it!"

"Yes, you will," said Williams.

This was all way over my head and I'd had about enough anyway. I said, "Now wait a minute, gentlemen, or I'll set the place on fire! I mean literally!"

"She can do it, too," said Claude, grinning at his father.

"But she won't," said Williams.

"Oh, won't I?" I said. "Well, you just try and stop me!"

"No need to do that," said Williams. "I've seen what's going to happen."

Just like that! These prescients give me the creeps. Sometimes I wonder if they don't give themselves the creeps. Living for them must be like repeating a part you already know. Not for me. I said, "What would happen if I did something different from what you'd seen?"

Williams leaned forward with an interested look in his eyes. "It's never happened," he said. "If it did happen once, that'd be a real precedent."

I can't be sure, but looking at him there, I got the idea he'd really be interested to see something happen different from his forecast. I thought of starting a little fire, maybe in the papers on his desk. But somehow the idea didn't appeal to me. It wasn't that any presence was in my mind telling me not to. I don't know exactly what it was. I just didn't *want* to do it. I said, "What's the meaning of all this double talk?"

The old man leaned back and I swear he seemed kind of disappointed. He said, "It's just that you and Claude are going to be married."

I opened my mouth to speak and nothing came out. Finally, I managed to stammer, "You mean you've looked into the future and seen us *married?* How many kids we're going to have and everything like that?"

"Well, not everything," he said. "All things in the future aren't clear to us. Only certain main-line developments. And we can't see too far into the future for most things. The past is easier. That's been fixed immovably."

"And what if we don't want to?" asked Claude.

"Yeah," I said. "What about that?" But I have to admit the idea wasn't totally repulsive. As I've said, Claude looked like Sidney Harch, only younger. He had something—you can call it animal magnetism if you wish.

The old man just smiled. "Miss Carlysle," he said, "do you honestly object to—"

"As long as I'm going to be in the family you can call me Jean," I said.

I was beginning to feel fatalistic

about the whole thing. My great aunt Harriet was a prescient and I'd had experience with them. Now I was remembering the time she told me my kitty was going to die and I hid it in the old cistern and that night it rained and filled the cistern. Naturally the kitty drowned. I never forgave her for not telling me how the kitty was going to die.

Old Williams looked at me and said, "At least *you're* being reasonable."

"I'm not," said Claude.

So I told them about my great aunt Harriet.

"It's the nature of things," said Williams. "Why can't you be as reasonable as she's being, son?"

Claude just sat there with the original stone face.

"Am I so repulsive?" I asked.

He looked at me then. Really looked. I tell you I got warm under it. I know I'm not repulsive. Finally, I guess I blushed.

"You're not repulsive," he said. "I just object to having my whole life ordered out for me like a chess set up."

Stalemate. We sat there for a minute or so, completely silent. Presently Williams turned to me and said, "Well, Miss Carlysle, I presume you're curious about what's going on here."

"I'm not a moron," I said. "This is one of the *Nothing* Preserves."

"Correct," he said. "Only it's more than that. Your education includes the knowledge of how our talents developed from radiation mutants. Does it also include the knowledge of what happens to extremes from the norm?"

Every schoolkid knows that, of course. So I told him. Sure I knew that the direction of development was toward the average. That genius parents tend to have children less smart than they are. This is just general information.

Then the old man threw me the twister. "The talents are disappearing, my dear," he said.

I just sat there and thought about that for awhile. Certainly I knew it'd been harder lately to get a 'porter, even one of the old gent kind.

"Each generation has more children without talents or with talents greatly dulled," said Williams. "We will never reach a point where there are absolutely none, but what few remain will be needed for special jobs in the public interest."

"You mean if I have kids they're liable to be *Nothings?*" I asked.

"Look at your own family," he said. "Your great aunt was a prescient. Have there been any others in your family?"

"Well, no, but—"

"The prescient talent is an extreme," he said. "There are fewer than a thousand left. There are nine of us in my category. I believe you refer to us as the *Big All.*"

"But we've got to do something!" I said. "The world'll just go to pot!"

"We *are* doing something," he said. "Right here and on eight other preserves scattered around the world. "We're reviving the mechanical and tool skills which supported the pretalent civilization and we're storing the instruments which will make a rebirth of that civilization possible."

He raised a warning hand. "But we must move in secrecy. The world's not yet ready for this information. It would cause a most terrible panic if this were to become known."

"Well, you're prescient. What does happen?" I asked him.

"Unfortunately, none of us are able to determine that," he said. "Either it's an unfixed line or there's some interference which we can't surmount." He shook his head and the goatee wiggled. "There's a cloudy area in the near future beyond which we can't see. None of us."

That scared me. A prescient may give you the creeps, but it's nice to know there's a future into which someone can see. It was as if there suddenly wasn't any future—period. I began to cry a little.

"And our children will be *Nothings*," I said.

"Well, not exactly," said Williams. "Some of them, maybe, but we've taken the trouble of comparing your gene lines—yours and Claude's. You've a good chance of having offspring who will be prescient or telepathic or both. A better than seventy percent chance." His voice got pleading. "The world's going to need that chance."

Claudé came over and put a hand on my shoulder. It sent a delicious tingle up my spine. Suddenly, I got a little flash of his thoughts—a picture of us kissing. I'm not really a tele, but like I said, sometimes I get glimmers.

Claude said, "Okay. I guess there's no sense fighting the inevitable. We'll get married."

No more argument. We all traipsed into another room and there was a preacher with everything ready for us, even the ring. Another prescient. He'd come more than a hundred miles to perform the ceremony, he said.

Afterward, I let Claude kiss me once. I was having trouble realizing that I was married. Mrs. Claude Williams. But that's the way it is with the inevitable, I guess.

The old man took my arm then and said there was one small precaution. I'd be going off the grounds from time to time and there'd always be the chance of some unethical tele picking my brains.

They put me under an anesthetube and when I came out of it I had a silver grid in my skull. It itched some, but they said that it would go away. I'd heard of this thing. They called it a blanket.

Mensor Williams said, "Now go home and get your things. You won't need to tell your parents any more than that you have a govern-

ment job. Come back as soon as you're able."

"Get me a 'porter," I said.

"The grounds are gridded against teleporters," he said. "I'll have to send you in a jet buggy."

And so he did.

I was home in ten minutes.

I went up the stairs to my house. It was after nine o'clock by then. My father was waiting inside the door.

"A fine time for an eighteen-year-old girl to be coming home!" he shouted and he made a tele stab at my mind to see what I'd been up to. These teles and their ethics! Well, he ran smack dab into the blanket and maybe you think that didn't set him back on his heels. He got all quiet suddenly.

I said, "I have a government job. I just came back for my things." Time enough to tell them about the marriage later. They'd have kicked up a fine rumpus if I'd said anything then.

Mama came in and said, "My little baby with a government job! How much does it pay?"

I said, "Let's not be vulgar."

Papa sided with me. "Of course not, Hazel," he said. "Leave the kid alone. A government job! What do you know! Those things pay plenty. Where is it, baby?"

I could see him wondering how much he could tap me for to pay his bills and I began to wonder if I'd have any money at all to keep up the pretense. I said, "The job's at Sonoma Preserve."

Papa said, "What they need with a pyro up there?"

I got a brilliant inspiration. I said, "To keep the *Nothings* in line. A little burn here, a little burn there. You know."

That struck my father funny. When he could stop laughing he said, "I know you, honey. I've watched your think tank pretty close. You'll take care of yourself and no funny business. Do they have nice safe quarters for you up there?"

"The safest," I said.

I felt him take another prod at my blanket and withdraw. "Government work is top secret," I said.

"Sure. I understand," he said.

So I went to my room and got my things packed. The folks made some more fuss about my going away so sudden, but they quieted down when I told them I had to go at once or lose the chance at the job.

Papa finally said, "Well, if the government isn't safe, then nothing is."

They kissed me goodbye and I promised to write and to visit home on my first free weekend.

"Don't worry, Papa," I said.

The jet buggy took me back to the preserve. When I went into the office, Claude, my husband, was sitting across the desk from his father.

The old man had his hands to his forehead and there were beads of perspiration showing where the fingers didn't cover. Presently, he

lowered his hands and shook his head.

"Well?" asked Claude.

"Not a thing," said the old man.

I moved a little bit into the room but they didn't notice me.

"Tell me the truth, Dad," said Claude. "How far ahead did you see us?"

Old Mensor Williams lowered his head and sighed. "All right, son," he said. "You deserve the truth. I saw you meet Miss Carlysle at the Tavern and not another thing. We had to trace her by old-fashioned methods and compare your gene lines like I said. The rest is truth. You know I wouldn't lie to you."

I cleared my throat and they both looked at me.

Claude jumped out of his chair and faced me. "We can get an annulment," he said. "No one has the right to play with other peoples' lives like that."

He looked so sweet and little-boy-like standing there. I knew suddenly I didn't want an annulment. I said, "The younger generation has to accept its responsibilities sometime."

Mensor Williams got an eager look in his eyes. I turned to the old man, said, "Was that seventy percent figure correct?"

"Absolutely correct, my dear," he said. "We've checked every marriageable female he's met because he carries my family's dominant line. Your combination was the best. Far higher than we'd hoped for."

"Is there anything else you can tell us about our future?" I asked.

He shook his head. "It's all cloudy," he said. "You're on your own."

I got that creepy feeling again and looked up at my husband. Little laugh wrinkles creased at the corners of Claude's eyes and he smiled. Then another thought struck me. If we were on our own, that meant we were shaping our own future. It wasn't fixed. And no nosey prescient could come prying in on us, either. A woman kind of likes that idea. Especially on her wedding night.