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# Just a Hint

By

**David Brin**

It was exactly seven A.M. when Federman finished typing the last data entry. The small console flashed a confirmation and, several miles away, the central processor began correlating the results of the previous evening's observation run.

Federman winced as he stretched in the swivel chair, his spine cracking. Age seemed to make every strain and pop a cruel reminder, as if decay were audibly calling out its territoriality.

The classical music station playing on his desktop radio began an update of the morning's headlines.

The weather would be beautiful over most of the country. The chance of rain in the nearby area was less than twenty percent. The current probability estimate for the likelihood of nuclear war this year still hovered around twenty percent, also.

Liz Browning backed in, pushing the door open with one foot as she balanced a cardboard tray with coffee, doughnuts, and the morning newspaper.

"Good," she said, laying her load down on his desk. "I knew you could finish without me. I don't know how you stay up all night reducing data without getting hungry. I just had to get some food!"

As a matter of fact, Federman had started noticing a growling emptiness in his stomach almost the moment the last figure had been typed. If his graduate student had been glad to let him finish alone, he was just as happy she had brought back the goodies.

"It's love, Liz. Anyone who stays up all night has to be in love... in this case with astronomy. Either that or he's crazy or in the army."

Elizabeth Browning grinned ironically, leaving crinkled smile lines around her eyes. Her straight brown hair was braided behind her back.

"Or it means he wants to beat Tidbinbilla into print with that new pulsar analysis. Come on, Sam. Outside it's already a beautiful day. Let's let some light in here." She went to the window and pulled the heavy drapes aside. A bolt of brilliant sunshine came crackling in. She didn't even wince as she leaned forward to open the window, but Federman covered his eyes.

"Cruel youth," he moaned. "To bring these spotted hands and time-wracked limbs before the searching gaze of day."

"Aw, come on, Sam. You and I both know there's no such quotation. Why do you keep making up fake Shakespeare?"

"Perhaps I'm a poet at heart?"

"You're a scoundrel and a rogue at heart. That's why I'm so incredibly pleased with myself for latching onto you as a research advisor. Everybody else may be losing their grants as the military budget increases, but you know how to finagle enough funding to keep the radio astronomy program here going. My biggest hope is that I can learn your techniques."

"You'll never learn them as long as you fail to understand why I make up Bard-isms." Federman smiled.

Liz pointed a finger at him, then thought better of it.

"Touché," she said. "I'll enroll in Lit. 106 next term. Okay? That is, if there's still a world then."

"Are we in a pessimistic mood today?"

Liz shrugged. "I shouldn't be, I suppose. Every spring it seems there's less smog and other pollution. Remember that eyesore wrecking yard on Highway Eight? Well, it's gone now. They've put in a park."

"So nu? Then what's wrong?"

She threw the morning paper over to his side of the desk. "*That's* what's wrong! Just when we seem about to make peace with nature, they're stepping along the edge of war! There were demonstrations on campus yesterday... neither side listening to the other, and neither side willing to concede a single point. I tell you, Sam, it's all I can do to keep from hiding in my work and letting the world just go to hell on its own!"

Federman glanced at the paper, then looked up at his assistant. His expression was ironic.

"Liz, you know my feelings about this. Radio astronomy is not disconnected from the problems of war and peace on Earth. It may, indeed, be intimately involved in the solution."

The sophont had no nose, but he did have a name. If one started there and kept listing his attributes one would find him quite a bit more human than not. The things his species had in common with the dominant race of Earth would have surprised

them both almost as much as the differences, but the most important of each has already been mentioned.

He had no nose. His name was Fetham.

"No!" he cried out in the language of confrontation. He pounded a four-fingered fist on his desktop. "Are you mad? Mad! What do you mean, the funds are needed elsewhere? The legislature agreed by almost unanimous vote. Full, permanent, emergency funding!"

The smaller being with no nose was named Gathu. He held up his hand in a newly discovered version of the Gesture of Placation directed at the Optic Nerve.

"Please, Academician! Please remember that those votes were taken years ago. There is a new Assembly now. And since the public health situation has deteriorated..."

"The problem I am trying to solve!"

"... it has fallen on the leadership to seek out new sources of finance for medical research. Surely you know that we applaud your efforts. But it seemed more and more a shot in the dark."

Fetham's prehensile ears waved in agitation.

"Of *course* it's a shot in the dark! But isn't it worth it? There may be a race out there that has been through what we now face. With the entire world threatened, our very survival in question, shouldn't we make an effort to contact them?"

The government representative nodded. "But you have another two years in your appropriation, have you not? And by husbanding your funds you might make them last longer."

"Idiots!" Fetham hissed. "Why, the first beamed message will reach my first target star only this year! It will take more years for their reply to reach us, barring *any* delay in interpreting the message!"

"Are *all* governments as stupid as ours?"

Gathu stiffened. His ridge crest waved in suppressed irritation.

"You may, of course, emigrate to any other nation you wish, Academician. The international Concords give you the right to establish yourself as a citizen of any system of government found under our sun."

"Shall I arrange to have the papers sent over? Perhaps you'll have better luck..."

Gathu's voice trailed off, for Fetham had raised his hands in the Gesture of Supreme Disgust and fled the room.

Federman stared at the ceiling while he tilted back in his swivel chair. "You know, someone once told me that the true definition of genius was the ability to suddenly see the obvious."

Liz Browning stopped pacing long enough to pick up her coffee cup. The stained

newspaper was open to a page of boldface headlines and photos of armed men.

"Do you mean that the answer may just be staring us in the face? Are you saying we're stupid?"

"Not stupid. Obstinate, perhaps. We hold on to our basic assumptions tenaciously, even when they are about to kill us. It's the way human beings work.

"For instance, did you know that for years Europeans thought tomatoes were poisonous? No one bothered to test the assumption.

"Even the most daring and open of us can't question an assumption until he becomes *aware* of it! When everyone accepts a paradigm it never becomes a topic of conversation. There must be thousands, *millions*, of things like that which men and women never even notice because they don't stand out from the background."

Liz shook her head.

"You don't have to belabor the point. Every sophomore has thought about that at one time or another. And it's certainly happened that some genius has leapt out of the bathtub, screaming 'Eureka!' and gone on to tell everybody of the new way to do things."

She tapped the newspaper.

"But this isn't as easy as that. Our problem of world survival is made up of several hundred million tiny problems, each with all the complexity of a living person. There's no underlying simplicity to war and politics, much as Marxists and others dream of finding one. They only make matters worse with simplistic claims and pseudologic."

Federman sat up straight and rested both palms on the desk. He looked at Liz seriously.

"The idea is that we may have missed something *basic*."

He stood up quickly, and instantly regretted it as his heart pounded to make up for the shift in blood pressure. For a moment, the room lost its focus.

Deliberately, to keep Liz from becoming concerned, he picked his way around the clutter of books and charts on the floor and rested his shoulder against the window frame.

Brisk, cool spring morning air flooded in, carrying away the stale odors of the night. There was the sweet, heavy smell of new-mown grass.

On its way to him the breeze toyed with the branches of aspen and oak trees and the waving wheatfields in the valley several miles away. A low pride of cumulus clouds drifted overhead, cleanly white.

In the distance he could see a gleaming Rapitrans pull into the station at the local industrial park. Tiny specks that were commuters wandered away from the train and slowly dispersed into the decorously concealed factories that blended into the hills and greenery.

It was, indeed, a beautiful day.

Birds were singing. A pair flew right past his window. He followed them with his eyes until he saw that they were building a nest in the skeleton of what was to have been the new hundred-meter radio telescope.

There was a rumbling in the sky. Above the high bank of clouds a formation of military transports made a brief glint of martial migration. The faint growling of their passage had become an almost daily occurrence.

Federman turned away from the window. Inside, except where the brilliant shaft of light fell, there appeared to be only dimness. He spoke in the general direction of his friend and student.

"I was only thinking that maybe we've been missing the forest for the trees. It might be something so simple... something another culture with a different perspective might..."

"Might what, Sam?" Liz's voice had an edge to it. "If there ever *were* peaceful cultures on Earth, they didn't have the other half of the solution—a way to keep from getting clobbered by the other guy who *isn't* peaceful! If they did have that answer too, where are they now?"

"Look at the world! Western, Asian, African, it makes no difference which culture you look at. They're all arming as fast as they can. Brushfire wars break out everywhere, and every month the Big Blow doesn't happen makes worse the day when it does!"

Federman shrugged and turned to look out the window again.

"Maybe you're right. I suppose I'm just wishing for a *deus ex machine*." His eyes lovingly coveted the abandoned, unfinished dish outside.

"Still, we've done so well otherwise," he went on. "The simple problems with obvious answers are all being solved. Look at how well we've managed to clean up the environment, since people found out about the cancer-causing effects of pollution in the seventies and eighties. Sure, there was inertia. But once the solution became obvious we went ahead and did the logical thing to save our lives."

"I can't escape the feeling, though, that there's a similar breakthrough to be made in the field of human conflict... that there's some *obvious* way to assure freedom and dignity and diversity of viewpoint without going to war. Sometimes I think it's just sitting there, waiting to be discovered, if only we had just a hint."

Liz was silent for a moment. When she spoke again it was from the other edge of the window. She too was looking out at the spring morning, and at the armed convoy in the sky.

"Yes," she said softly. "It would be nice. But to be serious, Sam, do you really think you could get any more funding than you've already got, to do your spare-time search for radio messages from space? And even if you were successful, do you think the Big Blow would wait long enough for us to decipher a message, then send one of our *own*, and eventually ask complex questions on sociology?"

She shook her head. "Would they be similar enough to us to understand what we'd be asking? Do you really think we're missing something so fundamentally simple that just a hint over the light-years would make that much difference?"

Federman shrugged. His gaze remained fixed on the skeleton in the yard.

The scientist with no nose looked out over his city. For a long time he had fretted and fumed beneath the great dish antenna; then he had gone for a walk around the edge of the research center compound.

Years ago these hills had been suburbs. Now factories belched smoke into the air on all sides. The sight cheered him slightly. He could never look at such an obvious sign of progress and prosperity for long and stay in a black mood.

There were so many other things to be proud of, too.

After the invention of atomic weapons, before he was born, his parents' generation had finally found the motivation to do the obvious and abolish war. The method had been there all along, but no one had been sufficiently motivated before. Now the fruits of peace were multiplying throughout the world.

Two automobiles for everyone! Fast, efficient stratospheric transport! Quick-foods easily dispensed from fluorocarbon-driven aerosol cans! The licentious luxury of lead-lined dinnerware!

All of this was good. Peace and prosperity.

But the Plague had then come among them, soon after the last war, and now affected almost everyone. Lung ailments, skin cancer... that horrible sickness that struck the mercury and bismuth mines... the death of the fisheries.

Huge sums were spent to find the microorganisms responsible for this rash of diseases. Some were found, but no germs yet that could account for the wide range of calamities. Some scientists were now suggesting a pathogen smaller than a virus.

Fetham looked up. Gathu. The government representative had followed him outside.

"I am sorry I shouted," Fetham said slowly. The other being-with-no-nose did the equivalent, for his species, of a forgiving nod. Fetham gave a handturn of thanks.

"It's just that I was hoping the Others might know something... something that would help us understand."

Gathu was sympathetic.

"I know, Academician. But honestly, what could they tell us about *our* problems—especially biological problems—even if you did succeed in making contact?"

"If they exist at all, they live on a completely different world, with different body chemistry. How could they give us knowledge that would help us defeat this Plague?"

Fetham performed a gesture that conveyed the meaning of a shrug. His large and very subtle ears filtered out the brash, ever-present noise of traffic, yet allowed him to hear the whistling of the wind through the silted, murky sky.

Suddenly he had a totally irrelevant thought.

*I wonder where the birds are? They used to be all over this part of the city. I never noticed that they had gone, until now.*

"I suppose," he sighed. "I suppose I was hoping for just a hint..."

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## AUTHOR'S NOTES

*This part of the collection, called Speculation, features three stories of the "what if" type, where the emphasis is less on plot or characterization or a literary style than on the idea itself. Science fiction is noted for such stories. Fortunately, though, they are not all there is to SF.*

*"Just a Hint" was my second published work, the first to see print after my novel Sundiver. It addresses that venerable problem "Where is everybody?" from a different angle.*

*Also, it talks about assumptions... those beliefs we may all hold so much in common that we never notice them.*

*I don't really believe there is such an underlying thread just waiting for some genius to lift up for our amazement that could, save the day. For one thing, we are a civilization (perhaps the first) that rewards people above all else for discovery, for overturning rocks and exposing the newness beneath. From music to art to science to investigative journalism, young professionals are encouraged to achieve a name by shaking up the status quo and making it stick. In other words, if you rock the boat and prove your point, you've got it made.*

*Millions of bright people, picking, poking away, earnestly trying to find something everyone else has missed... oh, we're a clever bunch, all right. If some problems defy simple solutions, it's probably because they require maturity and sanity and compromise to be solved, not some panacea from the stars. Still, one can dream . . .*