

A Talent for Vanessa

by David W. Goldman

From behind the beat-up desk in his cramped office, Marv Pennybacker—impresario, humanitarian, and sole proprietor of the Pennybacker Special Talent Agency—was trying to talk the young woman before him out of her dreams when one of his Talents shambled in from the day room.

“Name a date,” said the Talent, a big, slow-talking young man named Oliver. “A date in the future.”

“March 16,” said Marv. “How about 2089?”

For an instant, Oliver’s eyes shifted from side to side, scanning some private landscape. Then he announced, “March 16, 2089 will be a Wednesday. Marv doesn’t work on Wednesdays.” Oliver nodded to himself in satisfaction, and shambled back out of the office.

The young woman twisted her neck to watch him leave. “That’s amazing,” she whispered.

“What?” asked Marv. “One day off per week astounds you?”

The young woman, a Ms. Vanessa Kortright-Kingston, untwisted. “No, I mean that he just *knows* the date like that! As if he could look into the future.”

Marv snorted. “Calendar calculating. They all do that. Not worth a paper dollar, not even in a carnival sideshow.”

“I’ve heard of it, but—” Her blue eyes were wide as a con man’s smile. “They can *all* do it?”

“Sure.” Marv tilted back, his big wooden chair squeaking. “All the Counters, anyway. It’s like the Artists—*they* all draw horses. Or dogs. Which is funny, because back when they got their talents you’d never see a horse here in the city. Dogs, okay, no big deal. But you ask any Artist to sketch you a horse, and blam—if the damn thing galloped off the paper you wouldn’t be surprised.”

Her gaze went a bit distant. “That’s what I’d like,” she said. “To become an artist. Or a musician.”

Marv sighed, recalling why Vanessa was here. Not that he didn’t understand her desire—he himself had never been able to draw so much as a convincing square. But these rich kids depressed him.

“Look,” he said. “You understand why Dr. Hornblatt sent you to me? Why she’s paying for this hour of my terribly valuable time?”

Vanessa glanced at the papers, magazines, and glossy photos piled in haphazard mounds about the room, no doubt drawing her own conclusions as to just how valuable Marv’s time might be. But she straightened her cardigan and looked him in the eye.

She said, “You’re supposed to tell me what I can expect from the operation. What talents I might develop.”

Marv shook his head. “No, Ms. Kortright-Kingston. I’m supposed to tell you that your odds are slimmer than a soup-kitchen sandwich. That even if you do find yourself with some slight new skill, for the rest of your life you’ll regret the price you paid. I’m supposed to scare you out of having your surgery.”

She frowned, creating unattractive wrinkles in a pale, narrow face that was, Marv had to admit, at best debatably attractive to start with. Though there was something familiar about it.

“Bonnie came to see you,” Vanessa objected. “And Ryan, too. And they both had the operation, and it worked! They get invited to

everybody's parties now. You didn't scare them!"

No, thought Marv as he rubbed a palm against his cheek bristles. And I won't scare you either, Ms. Kortright-Kingston, will I?

Hornblatt didn't actually send her patients to Marv to be talked out of their operations. She just wanted legal cover. Any parents trying to sue Hornblatt for misleading their child with false claims and assurances would find themselves bankers without a bailout when Marv took the stand—because he really was trying his hardest here.

His phone—a clunky black desk unit half a century out of date—jangled loudly. “Excuse me,” said Marv to a startled Vanessa. He lifted the handset. “Pennybacker Special Talent Agency.” As he listened he picked up a fat pen and started doodling on his notepad. “Inventory? Sure. How big's the warehouse?...So it would take how long to stroll through the whole place—two hours, three?...Okay, hang on.” Marv covered the mouthpiece with his hand and shouted out to the day room. “Doris, you there?”

After a moment a plump, gray-haired woman appeared in the doorway, a magazine dangling from her hand. She gazed at the floor.

“Doris, when's Roger free?”

“Tuesday.”

“Got an inventory job. About three hours.”

Her head bobbed. “Four thousand two hundred and fifty.”

“Thanks. Hold on.” He uncovered the mouthpiece. “How's next Tuesday, around one-thirty?...No, my guy's no good in the mornings.... Uh-huh...Forty-two fifty.... No, *forty*-two fifty.... Yeah, well, the Depression's over.... Right, just the one afternoon and then you're open again for business.... Okay, what's the address?” He scribbled it below his doodle. “Fine. We'll see you Tuesday. Thanks for your business.”

He tore the orange, octagonal page from his pad—Marv liked a little personality in his desk accessories—and held it out. Her gaze never lifting, Doris shuffled past Vanessa to the desk, took the paper, then turned and left the room.

It wasn't a magazine in her other hand, Marv realized. A census report.

"Did *she* have the operation?" Vanessa seemed disturbed.

"Doris? No, she's a natural." Which should have been obvious from Doris's gray hair. The Greater Depression hadn't begun until fifteen years ago, and most of the artificial Talents had been kids when their desperate, homeless parents were persuaded by back-alley neurosurgeons into allowing the operation.

"So I won't be like that?"

"Well, it's possible. But usually it's boys who become Counters. Or Tinkerers. You're more likely to get music or art. If," he hastened to add, "you pick up any talent at all."

"No, I mean, she's so—" Vanessa leaned forward and whispered, "She's so *fat!*"

"Oh," said Marv. He stopped himself from glancing down to the bulge of his own gut.

"Because if I get like *that*, then nobody's going to want me around! Even if the operation does make me interesting."

Opportunity tugged at Marv's conscience. With one simple lie he could send Vanessa home, armored against the current neurosurgery fad. But he'd based his career on honesty—and Vanessa's yearning expression demanded no less.

"No," he sighed. "Brain surgery won't make you fat."

"Thank God." She sat back in her chair.

Marv rubbed his cheek. All of the rich kids who'd come through his office—all of the wealthy people he'd ever met, for that matter—struck him as caricatures. But this Vanessa Kortright-

Kingston seemed like a caricature's caricature. He couldn't figure her.

She interrupted his musing. "I'm supposed to sign something, right?"

Marv held up his hand. "Look, we're talking permanent brain damage here. Why don't you try the magnets instead?"

"TMS?" Vanessa pronounced it "timms." She gave the notion a dismissive wave. "That never works. One day you're an amazing painter, the next day the magnet shifts and you're reciting daily stock market closings for the past five years."

She was right, of course. Despite three decades of research, TMS—transcranial magnetic stimulation—remained a party trick. The current recreational-savant fad among the trustfundistas demanded neurosurgery.

Marv asked Vanessa, "What do you know about the downsides of the operation?"

She shrugged. "It doesn't always work. But everybody says that Dr. Hornblatt is really good."

"What else?"

She frowned. "Well, it hurts, right? After you wake up? And I guess you need to take some medicine for a while?"

Marv sighed. "Okay, stick out both ears and listen hard now, Ms. Kortright-Kingston. The operation destroys a small part of your brain's left anterior temporal lobe. About here." He tapped the side of his head, just above the cheek bone. "That's the spot where all natural savants have damage. But there's a lot of stuff going on in there, and nobody understands it all. So Dr. Hornblatt is going to do her best to knock out enough brain to allow a talent to emerge, but not so much that she leaves you a cripple. You're following me?"

Vanessa's hands clutched each other in her lap. Marv thought

that she looked a bit pale. “A cripple?”

He held up a hand and ticked off his fingers as he spoke. “Language problems—especially proper nouns. Difficulty interpreting other people’s facial expressions. Trouble generalizing from specifics, understanding metaphors. Snags when trying to reason sequentially.”

“Oh!” said Vanessa. “How often do those things happen?”

“Every time,” said Marv. “A little bit, anyhow. But one out of a hundred patients will lose all of their nouns and adjectives. Or find other people’s thoughts and feelings impossible to comprehend. They’ll get lost on their own street because a house has been repainted.”

Vanessa looked concerned, but Marv didn’t think he’d reached her yet. He tried to come up with a side effect that would truly bother her.

“After the operation,” he said, “it’s pretty common to have difficulties in social situations.”

Now she sat up straight. “What do you mean?”

He waved a hand, as if downplaying his words. “Not getting people’s jokes. Being the only one in the room who’s not following the conversation. Always feeling left out.”

Vanessa’s cheeks reddened as she looked away, and Marv belatedly realized that some people had less to lose than others.

Her gaze returned to him—a new, grim determination in her expression. “Thank you, Mr. Pennybacker. Is there anything else you’d like to tell me before I sign?”

Dismayed, he rubbed his cheek. “There’s no guarantee—you know that, right? Except for the side effects, and those you’ll never get rid of. But a talent only emerges in half of patients. Maybe two-thirds, if your surgeon is *very* good. Still, even if—”

Oliver wandered back into the office. Ignoring Vanessa, he bellied

up to Marv's desk and asked, "You got a number, Marv?"

Marv gave Vanessa an apologetic shrug. He reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a little notebook. Opening it at random, he read aloud, "One hundred and two million, seven hundred and three thousand, three hundred and thirty-nine."

While Vanessa watched in fascinated bafflement, Oliver's face went blank for a moment. And then he let out a small sigh and smiled, like a gourmet at the conclusion of a successful meal. He nodded and headed back to the day room.

Holding up the notebook, Marv explained to Vanessa. "Had a guy make this for me. Prime numbers, yes? The Counters, they all love prime numbers. When you show 'em a new one, it's like..."

Marv paused. He hated how people always thought of Talents as performing seals, as walking, talking bags of amusing tricks. After living with a houseful of Talents all these years, Marv knew better. And he supposed Vanessa deserved to know better, too.

"It's like you're standing on this big, big beach," he said, "where all these people are sunbathing—you know, like in the old movies, when you could still do that? And then some guy way over there stands up, and you realize it's one of your best old pals, somebody you haven't thought of in, well, longer than you can recall. And your old pal grins at you, and you grin back, and you both wave at each other, and then he lies back down. And you're happy, because now you know he's over there, and you can say hi to him again anytime."

Vanessa was eyeing Marv strangely. "This beach—it sounds like you've been there."

The idea sat Marv back in his big, squeaky chair. "Me!" He waggled the notebook. "This is as close as I'll ever get. No number's been *my* pal since I flunked long division in Ms. Milinowski's third grade class. Nope, I've simply spent a lot of time with Talents. After

a while you get some ideas about what goes on in their heads.”

Vanessa looked worried. “But you can’t do what they do? Play music you’ve only heard once? Draw a detailed scene after just a glance?”

“Me? Hah!”

“Because I’ve heard that maybe *anybody* could learn how to do it...”

It took Marv a second to realize what she was talking about. “Oh! You’ve been listening to those eggheads who pop up on the talk shows, haven’t you? The ones who talk about how we could all unleash these same amazing powers of memory and expression, if only we could—how do they say it?—learn to suppress our higher mental functions? Yes? Feh!”

“You think they’re wrong?” She was leaning forward now, her slightly protuberant eyes locked on his face. Vanessa’s sudden intensity surprised Marv. But then she blinked, and her demeanor fell back to simple concern.

“Ms. Kortright-Kingston, the scientists have been talking like that for decades now, but here Dr. Hornblatt is making a lot of money off your friends, yes? If there were some trick, some knack that anybody could learn, don’t you think somebody would have picked it up by now? How about me—I’ve spent nearly a dozen years in this house with three Musicians, so by now I should have caught onto their knack, right? Okay, name this tune.” And with great vigor he began whistling a melody of recent popularity.

Vanessa’s expression changed from worry to surprised amusement. As Marv’s whistling continued, though, amusement gave way to pained non-recognition. And then simply to pain.

“Well?” asked Marv. “Have I got the music knack?” He shook his head and leaned back. “Talents aren’t singing dogs. You can’t *train* anybody to do what they do. A different world, though it’s right here

all around us”—his arm swept a wide arc above his desk—“that’s where they live. Yes, you can buy a ticket to get there. But it’s a one-way trip.”

Although the mention of singing dogs had Vanessa looking a bit perplexed, by the end of Marv’s oration she was nodding thoughtfully. He finally realized what must have been worrying her.

Suppose she got her operation, but then the scientists figured out how to put everybody else in touch with their inner savant. Where would that leave Vanessa and her party invitations?

“Look,” he began, but his phone’s shrill ring interrupted. He lifted the handset. “Pennybacker Special Talent Agency. Hang on a sec.” He covered the mouthpiece with his hand and to Vanessa said, “Why don’t you wait for me in the day room? Meet the Talents—they’re all friendly enough. I’ll be right there.”

“Really?” She glanced eagerly over her shoulder toward the door, but stayed in her seat. Her expression puzzled Marv.

Most people were uneasy around Talents, but Marv didn’t detect that in Vanessa. Instead, her face combined eagerness with nervous shyness with—what? Anticipatory guilt, he decided. Like some ravenous kid who’d been told to go wait in the candy aisle.

Marv gestured with the handset, shooing her out. She lifted her glossy pink purse and stood. As she turned to leave the room, her profile struck him again with its familiarity. Where could he have met her?

There was something that set Vanessa Kortright-Kingston apart from the others that Hornblatt had sent. An underlying focused purpose. Initially he’d taken it for desperation; now he wasn’t so sure. Whatever it was, though, he didn’t think it was likely to survive the operation.

Marv shook his head, wondering what else he could say to get the poor kid to change her mind.

He returned the phone to his ear. “Sorry about that. So what can we do for you?...Uh-huh...What, like small appliances? Toys?...Okay, yeah, we can help you.... Hey—don’t call them that!...Just plain savant. Or Talent.... Sure, okay, well now you know. Anyhow, yeah, lots of the swap shops use my guys for repairs. But I gotta tell you up front, they can’t handle electronics. Motors, buzzers, light-bulbs, that’s all good—pre-digital, you know? Mechanical is even better—bikes, wind-up toys. Say, you got any toasters? ’Cause you haven’t seen happy until you’ve seen a Tinkerer and a shelf-load of old broken toasters.... Right, hang on. Doris!”

After squaring away the order, Marv followed Doris into the day room. Vanessa, he saw, had taken a stuffed armchair by the wall, beside one of the windows and its floral chintz curtains. Despite the yielding cushions she perched on the front edge of the chair, hands on her knees. Her enthralled gaze followed Oliver as he shuffled past, his head bobbing.

As Doris retook her usual place on one of the sofas, Marv noticed an octagonal scrap of paper in the wastebasket beside her. Above some scribbled text somebody had sketched a frisky pony, its head turned back over its shoulder with a big cartoony grin.

Most of the Talents were out on jobs; the room’s only other occupant was Roz, across the room near the glistening baby grand piano. Hunched over a small electronic keyboard, dangling brunette hair hiding her face, Roz played intently. Marv stepped to her side and tapped her shoulder. After a second she looked up. Finding Marv, she stopped playing and pushed back her earphones.

“Go ahead,” he told her, tipping his head toward the baby grand. “I don’t think anybody will mind.”

Roz grinned at him as she shifted to the piano’s bench. She paused a moment, then launched into a barrage of shimmering

runs up and down the keys.

Marv lowered himself into the seat beside Vanessa's. She was leaning forward now, captivated by Roz's playing. Marv had trouble putting a name to her expression. Hunger?

"Listen to her," whispered Vanessa. "She's no older than me, but when she plays this Beethoven stuff—"

"Chopin," Marv corrected absently. "Prelude in G major, opus 28, number 3."

"—it's like she's been practicing forever! I bet she only heard it once, right? And now she can repeat it any time she wants. A human parrot."

"No," said Marv. "That's not it at all." He faced across the room. "Hey, Roz, how about jazzing it up a little?"

The pianist grinned, and—without a break—the music fell into bluesy, Gershwin-esque syncopation. But it was still Chopin.

Vanessa shook her head in wonder. "Soon maybe *I'll* be able..."

Marv groaned. "Maybe," he said. "*Possibly*. But probably not. Look, kid, I wish the scientists did know how to teach us all to be Talents. Then you wouldn't be wanting somebody to crack your head open and scoop out a piece of your brain. Believe me, this is a Bad Idea."

"But it's okay for them?" Her arm's sweep took in the room's occupants. "They seem happy!"

"Sure," he replied. "They've got me." He watched Oliver pace to the room's end, then turn around and retrace his path, never once looking up. Oliver's lips opened and closed like the mouth of a hyperventilating fish, making a soft "pat-pat-pat" sound. "Most of them I found wandering the streets, abandoned by their recruiters because their particular talents weren't flashy enough. Or—later, as the Depression was winding down—because a traveling carnival had folded, or a business could finally afford to replace its old

broken-down computers and stop relying on Counters. Out on the street you think they were happy, with nobody looking out for them?”

Indignant, Vanessa said, “I’ll have people to look out for me! Like Ryan—he’s got a valet now.”

Marv shrugged. “People you hire to care about you—well, I suppose that’s something.”

She started to reply. But then she looked around the room, and back at Marv. Her head tilted to the side and she said, “You really do care about them, don’t you? It’s not just a business for you.”

He rubbed his cheek as he looked away. Watching Doris flipping through her census report, Marv said, “I used to run the other kind of talent agency. During the Depression, though...well, let’s just say that some of my priorities rearranged themselves.”

For a moment they sat without speaking, listening to Roz play. Then Oliver wandered over. He stopped before Vanessa. Her surprise was no greater than Marv’s when Oliver looked her in the eye and with a big smile announced, “Eighty-six million, twenty-eight thousand, three hundred and seven.” He waited, still smiling.

Vanessa glanced at Marv. She faced Oliver, then licked her lips. “Um. Thank you.” Her voice quivered slightly. Then she grinned. “Thank you very much!”

Oliver nodded. To Marv’s further astonishment, as Oliver turned away to resume his pacing he gave Marv a clandestine wink.

Marv shook his head. “He never talks to strangers...”

Vanessa’s eyes tracked Oliver, but her focus seemed elsewhere. “Why don’t you want me to get the operation? It might give me so much, and what would I lose?” She pointed across the room at Oliver, and lowered her voice. “Or do you think of *him* as less than human?”

Marv sighed. “Of course I do. The Talents, they’ve forgotten how

to connect with other people. They can't see into our world of abstract ideas and relationships. Sure, they know something we don't—how to reach right into the world of numbers, or the worlds of music or images or machines. That little spot in our temporal lobes, it blocks you and me from touching those worlds. So we have to get there the long way around, which means language and reasoning and dealing with other people. But that's all good stuff, kid—especially the people part. Took me a long time to figure that. I'd hate to see you miss out."

When she didn't say anything for a few seconds, Marv glanced over. She didn't look happy.

Her voice was wistful. "Maybe if I had just a *little* bit of surgery...?"

Marv ached to give her a big hug. "Sorry, kid. All of the brain operations, no matter what they give you, they also take away something you need for connecting with other people. It's never worth it, believe me."

Roz had eased into quiet, soothing tinkling. Doris sat on her couch, slowly flipping pages. Oliver had wandered out of the room for the moment. Sunlight streamed through the front window, painting a bright slash across the worn carpet.

Marv always liked the day room on afternoons like this. He let his weight settle deeper into the chair's cushions.

Softly, Vanessa asked, "What did you mean, *all* of the brain operations?"

"Well," said Marv, in his growing relaxation paying only half-attention to the conversation, "you know about the temporal lobe surgery. A few people have tried the opposite approach, sort of, hoping to become great thinkers. Went after a spot in their frontal lobe—the spot that the temporal lobe tries to suppress."

She sounded intrigued. "Did it work?"

“Turned them into the most boring, tedious, thinking-inside-the-box people you’ve ever run into.”

“Oh.”

“Then there’s the right parietal lobe.” He tapped the side of his head. “That’s where we separate ourselves from the rest of the universe. A little snip in there and when you wake up you’ll remember that somebody just had brain surgery—but it won’t occur to you to wonder who.”

“Really?”

“A big snip, and you’re looking at an out-of-body experience for the rest of your life.”

“So,” Vanessa said slowly, “if I had that operation—the little kind—and then somebody said a name, I wouldn’t even know whether it was mine?”

“Right.”

“And if I heard people talking about me...”

Marv nodded. “No different than if they’d been discussing the weather.”

Vanessa seemed more animated now. “So even if they said really mean things, it wouldn’t bother me at all?”

Marv’s languor abruptly vanished. “Now wait a minute—”

She leapt to her feet. “Thank you, Mr. Pennybacker!”

He struggled from his chair. “Slow down, kid! You’re not thinking this through.”

But she was already reaching for her purse.

Marv wanted to throttle himself. He’d nearly had this one talked out of following a fad he hated, and now it looked like he was going to be personally responsible for the next, even worse, craze.

“Let’s talk about this, okay? First off—”

From his office came a shrill jangle.

“Damn! Listen, kid, just give me a minute, okay? I’ll be right

back.”

He waited for her impatient assent as the phone rang again, and then he hurried to his desk. He took the call standing up, keeping an eye on the day room.

“Pennybacker Special Talent Agency.”

It was a guy wanting a band for his son’s bar mitzvah. Marv kept the number of one of his former colleagues taped to his desktop for such moments; he’d never been any good at remembering phone numbers. Marv passed along the number, but then the guy wanted to know what was so Special about a Special Talent Agency.

As Marv tried to steer the conversation to an end, his gaze fell upon a stack of news magazines leaning against the wall. And he finally realized what had been nagging him about Vanessa.

“So you’re saying that people call you up to hire—”

“And mazel tov to your son,” said Marv. He dropped the phone into its cradle.

Must have been two years ago, he thought as he pushed his chair over to the magazines. Maybe two and a half. He lowered himself into the squeaking seat, and tilted forward to dig through the stack.

A waving, big-haired senator—mere months from the scandal that was about to end not only career and marriage, but also send all three of her lovers babbling to the tabloids—grinned from a cover that struck Marv as the one he sought. Marv flipped pages impatiently until he found the image he’d belatedly recalled. Behind a podium, a tall, smartly dressed figure addressed a roomful of young women. *Recruiters from government intelligence services, the caption began, urge elite college women to join the nation’s efforts.*

Marv dropped his forefinger onto the photo. Second row, ninth from the left, Vanessa Kortright-Kingston stared at the speaker, rapt. She could have been modeling for a cartoon—one in which her

head would have been topped by a sudden light-bulb.

Marv tipped back in his chair. He pondered the photo for a long moment, his palm sliding back and forth across his stubbly cheek.

When he returned to the day room, Marv discovered Vanessa sitting on the piano bench beside Roz. His jaw dropped as Vanessa picked out a few notes and then turned to share a triumphant grin with Roz.

Vanessa noticed him gaping. “Look, Mr. Pennybacker—Roz is giving me a piano lesson!”

He nodded, speechless. Roz was the shyest of his Talents; her usual method of coping with other people involved sticking a piano between them and herself.

Marv approached the baby grand as Roz played a little phrase and Vanessa labored to repeat it. They grinned at each other.

“Mr. Pennybacker, do you suppose that I could come back for more lessons?”

He leaned against the piano. “Sure, Ms. Kortright-Kingston. Of course, once you get that surgery you’re not going to want to anymore.”

Her smile faltered.

“But I don’t get it,” he continued. “Couldn’t you have taken piano lessons in college?”

She didn’t seem to know how to respond to that.

“You did attend college, didn’t you, Ms. Kortright-Kingston? No, wait, let me guess...” He squinted for a few seconds, then suddenly leveled a finger at her. “Barnard. Am I right?”

Her half-smile seemed frozen to her face. “Now, how—”

Marv pressed on. “So what was your major?”

“Why—”

“Humor an old man, yes?”

By now she was down to maybe a quarter of a smile. “English, at

first. Senior year I switched to political science.”

“Political science.” Marv nodded. “Very nice. And back when you were studying English, did you maybe do some drama? Maybe an acting class or two? Because I think you’re pretty good at it.”

Her widened eyes were response enough.

Marv had noticed Roz’s concerned gaze shuttling back and forth to follow their volleys. Behind him, Doris’s steady page-flipping had paused.

Marv beckoned Vanessa with a finger as he turned and headed back to his office.

He was settling into his chair by the time she caught up. Spying the magazine lying open on his desk, she sucked in a breath. He watched her naive, open expression shift subtly then, growing more shrewd and—as her gaze lifted to meet Marv’s—more guarded. Her posture improved, too.

“So, Ms. Kortright-Kingston, you’re not here on your own time, are you? Who’s your employer? FBI? CIA? DHS?”

She stood even straighter. “I’d prefer not to say, Mr. Pennybacker.”

“I see. Well, why did they send you to spy on my Talents?”

Her gaze fell. It gratified Marv that she at least had the consideration to look embarrassed.

But her answer took him off guard. “Not the Talents.” She licked her lips. “You.”

As an astounded Marv floundered for a response, Vanessa continued, gradually regaining her newly evident poise. “One of our analysts has been studying accounts from family members of natural savants. He thinks that some of them, after spending decades caring for their relative, might have acquired some skills of their own.”

Marv shook his head. “I already told you,” he said, “it doesn’t

work like that.”

She shrugged. “The rest of the analysts agree with you. Still—what if he’s right? What if ordinary people *could* acquire these skills? Imagine an agent with the powers of a savant! No need to carry around a codebook full of random numbers if you can simply memorize them all. Nor a camera, if later you can sketch all the details of a glimpsed scene. Even the abilities of your Tinkerers—imagine what one of them could do to sabotage a factory.”

“Ah,” said Marv. “So that’s why you were so interested in piano lessons. Because with a Musician’s talent, you could—what? Identify an enemy combatant’s favorite tune?”

Again her gaze dropped. “No,” she said. She pointed toward the chair beside her and raised an eyebrow. Marv waved her into it.

For a moment she just sat there, one hand fiddling with a button of her cardigan. Then—her voice quieter, and some of her earlier innocence returned to her face—she said, “Savants, especially musical savants—I’ve always been fascinated by them. Since I was little, and a friend’s parents hired one for her birthday party. A pianist. A tall, thin red-headed woman. She wore such a pretty yellow dress. When she played...” Vanessa’s voice fell away, her expression momentarily easing into blissful recollection.

Once more, thought Marv, she could be acting. But he doubted her skills were *this* good.

Vanessa let out a long breath and shook her head. “Me, I’ve never had any facility for music or art.” She looked up. “Last month I learned about this investigation. It took some work to get myself assigned.”

Marv recalled his earlier impression of a focused purpose within Vanessa. Apparently that reflected something deeper than duty to her employer.

“Well, Ms. Kortright-Kingston, I’m sorry to be sending you back empty-handed.”

She leaned forward. “Are you *sure* you haven’t picked up any savant skills? They might have crept up on you quite gradually, so you wouldn’t notice at first. You’ve had more exposure to savants, for more years, than anybody else we could locate.”

Marv sighed. “Look at this dump, kid. If I had the powers of your super-agent, don’t you think that by now I’d have moved to Atlantic City and made myself good and rich?”

She studied him for a long moment. Finally, she nodded. She stood.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “for misleading you. Really.”

He started to wave off her concern—even if the Depression were officially over, he still wasn't in the habit of judging people for how they earned their living—but then he noticed the hangdog look with which she awaited his response. So he said, simply, “Thanks.”

She took a step toward the door, then paused.

“Mr. Pennybacker? I meant it, earlier, about coming back for more piano lessons. Could I? On my own time.”

“I don’t know, kid,” said Marv. “I’m going to have to think about that one. Tell you what—come by tomorrow afternoon and we’ll talk about it.”

“You don’t work on Wednesdays,” said Vanessa.

“Thursday, then. Whenever.”

She gave a small nod and started to turn away. Then she asked, “You’re really sure—even if I worked with Roz every day, I’d never catch her knack? Not even a little bit?”

Marv sighed. “Don’t get your hopes up, kid.”

Still, after Vanessa had waved good-bye to the Talents in the day room and left, her idea wouldn’t leave his head. Imagine that ordinary people *could* gain talents. What would that world be like?

Students wouldn't need to waste time on rote memorization. Read a book or hear a lecture once, then move on to advanced material.

Researchers could know *all* the work in their field, and in lots of other fields, and see connections nobody expected.

Every kind of music and painting and sculpture would be fascinating to you, something you could understand and do yourself.

You'd be able to fix your own car. Or invent a better engine.

You'd never forget a phone number.

Marv smiled at his fantasy. But something was bothering him. It had been nagging him awhile; dealing with Vanessa had kept him too busy to figure out what it was. His chair squeaked a bad harmony to the piano notes coming from the day room as he thought back over the afternoon.

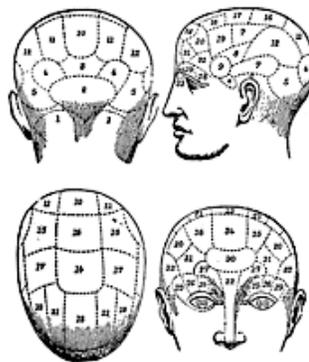
And then he knew. It was that number Oliver had offered Vanessa. 86,028,307. There was something *wrong* with it. Like it would fall apart if you gave it a tug.

Marv pulled out his little notebook. He flipped to the appropriate page.

Oliver's number wasn't there.

He tossed the notebook onto his desk and shook his head.

That Oliver, thought Marv. What a kidder.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.

Human-readable summary: You are welcome to share this story with others, which includes making and giving away electronic or physical copies. But you must always include the name of the author, and you may not alter the text or title of the story. You may not charge a fee when sharing this story, nor use it for commercial purposes.