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What does the story of Chris Langan tell us? His explanations, as heartbreaking as they are, are also a little strange. His mother forgets to sign his financial aid form and—just like that—no scholarship. He tries to move from a morning to an afternoon class, something students do every day, and gets stopped cold. And why were Langan’s teachers at Reed and Montana State so indifferent to his plight? Teachers typically delight in minds as brilliant as his. Langan talks about dealing with Reed and Montana State as if they were some kind of vast and unyielding government bureaucracy. But colleges, particularly small liberal arts colleges like Reed, tend not to be rigid bureaucracies. Making allowances in the name of helping someone stay in school is what professors do all the time.

Even in his discussion of Harvard, it’s as if Langan has no conception of the culture and particulars of the institution he’s talking about. *When you accept a paycheck from these people, it is going to come down to what you want to do and what you feel is right versus what the man says you can do to receive another paycheck.* What? One of the main reasons college professors accept a lower paycheck than they could get in private industry is that university life gives them the freedom to do what they want to do and what they feel is right. Langan has Harvard backwards.

When Langan told me his life story, I couldn’t help thinking of the life of Robert Oppenheimer, the physicist who famously headed the American effort to develop the nuclear bomb during World War II. Oppenheimer, by all accounts, was a child with a mind very much like Chris Langan’s. His parents considered him a genius. One of his teachers recalled that “he received every new idea as perfectly beautiful.” He was doing lab experiments by the third grade and studying physics and chemistry by the fifth grade. When he was nine, he once told one of his cousins, “Ask me a question in Latin and I will answer you in Greek.”

Oppenheimer went to Harvard and then on to Cambridge University to pursue a doctorate in physics. There, Oppenheimer, who struggled with depression his entire life, grew despondent. His gift was for theoretical physics, and his tutor, a man named Patrick Blackett (who would win a Nobel Prize in 1948), was forcing him to attend to the minutiae of experimental physics, which he hated. He grew more and more emotionally unstable, and then, in an act so strange that to this day no one has properly made sense of it, Oppenheimer took some chemicals from the laboratory and tried to poison his tutor.

Blackett, luckily, found out that something was amiss. The university was informed. Oppenheimer was called on the carpet. And what happened next is every bit as unbelievable as the crime itself. Here is how the incident is described in *American Prometheus*, Kai Bird and Martin Sherwin’s biography of Oppenheimer: “After protracted negotiations, it was agreed that Robert would be put on probation and have regular sessions with a prominent Harley Street psychiatrist in London.”

On probation?

Here we have two very brilliant young students, each of whom runs into a problem that imperils his college career. Langan’s mother has missed a deadline for his financial aid. Oppenheimer has tried to poison his tutor. To continue on, they are required to plead their cases to authority. And what happens? Langan gets his scholarship taken away, and Oppenheimer gets sent to a psychiatrist. Oppenheimer and Langan might both be geniuses, but in other ways, they could not be more different.

The story of Oppenheimer’s appointment to be scientific director of the Manhattan Project twenty years later is perhaps an even better example of this difference. The general in charge of the Manhattan Project was Leslie Groves, and he scoured the country, trying to find the right person to lead the atomic-bomb effort. Oppenheimer, by rights, was a long shot. He was just thirty-eight, and junior to many of the people whom he would have to manage. He was a theorist, and this was a job that called for experimenters and engineers. His political affiliations were dodgy: he had all kinds of friends who were Communists. Perhaps more striking, he had never had any administrative experience. “He was a very impractical fellow,” one of Oppenheimer’s friends later said. “He walked about with scuffed shoes and a funny hat, and, more important, he didn’t know anything about equipment.” As one Berkeley scientist put it, more succinctly: “He couldn’t run a hamburger stand.”

Oh, and by the way, in graduate school *he tried to kill his tutor*. This was the résumé of the man who was trying out for what might be said to be—without exaggeration—one of the most important jobs of the twentieth century. And what happened? The same thing that happened twenty years earlier at Cambridge: he got the rest of the world to see things his way.

Here are Bird and Sherwin again: “Oppenheimer understood that Groves guarded the entrance to the Manhattan Project, and he therefore turned on all his charm and brilliance. It was an irresistible performance.” Groves was smitten. “‘He’s a genius,’ Groves later told a reporter. ‘A real genius.’” Groves was an engineer by training with a graduate degree from MIT, and Oppenheimer’s great insight was to appeal to that side of Groves. Bird and Sherwin go on: “Oppenheimer was the first scientist Groves had met on his tour [of potential candidates] who grasped that building an atomic bomb required finding practical solutions to a variety of cross-disciplinary problems . . . . [Groves] found himself nodding in agreement when Oppenheimer pitched the notion of a central laboratory devoted to this purpose, where, as he later testified, ‘we could begin to come to grips with chemical, metallurgical, engineering and ordnance problems that had so far received no consideration.’”

Would Oppenheimer have lost his scholarship at Reed? Would he have been unable to convince his professors to move his classes to the afternoon? Of course not. And that’s not because he was smarter than Chris Langan. It’s because he possessed the kind of savvy that allowed him to get what he wanted from the world.

“They required that everyone take introductory calculus,” Langan said of his brief stay at Montana State. “And I happened to get a guy who taught it in a very dry, very trivial way. I didn’t understand why he was teaching it this way. So I asked him questions. I actually had to chase him down to his office. I asked him, ‘Why are you teaching this way? Why do you consider this practice to be relevant to calculus?’ And this guy, this tall, lanky guy, always had sweat stains under his arms, he turned and looked at me and said, ‘You know, there is something you should probably get straight. Some people just don’t have the intellectual firepower to be mathematicians.’”

There they are, the professor and the prodigy, and what the prodigy clearly wants is to be engaged, at long last, with a mind that loves mathematics as much as he does. But he fails. In fact—and this is the most heartbreaking part of all—he manages to have an entire conversation with his calculus professor without ever communicating the one fact most likely to appeal to a calculus professor. The professor never realizes that Chris Langan is good at calculus.