*Outliers* (Malcolm Gladwell, 2008)

Chapter 4: Trouble with Geniuses, Part 2

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Chris Langan’s mother was from San Francisco and was estranged from her family. She had four sons, each with a different father. Chris was the eldest. His father disappeared before Chris was born; he was said to have died in Mexico. His mother’s second husband was murdered. Her third committed suicide. Her fourth was a failed journalist named Jack Langan.

“To this day I haven’t met anybody who was as poor when they were kids as our family was,” Chris Langan says. “We didn’t have a pair of matched socks. Our shoes had holes in them. Our pants had holes in them. We only had one set of clothes. I remember my brothers and I going into the bathroom and using the bathtub to wash our only set of clothes and we were bare-assed naked when we were doing that because we didn’t have anything to wear.”

Jack Langan would go on drinking sprees and disappear. He would lock the kitchen cabinets so the boys couldn’t get to the food. He used a bullwhip to keep the boys in line. He would get jobs and then lose them, moving the family on to the next town. One summer the family lived on an Indian reservation in a teepee, subsisting on government-surplus peanut butter and cornmeal. For a time, they lived in Virginia City, Nevada. “There was only one law officer in town, and when the Hell’s Angels came to town, he would crouch down in the back of his office,” Mark Langan remembers. “There was a bar there, I’ll always remember. It was called the Bucket of Blood Saloon.”

When the boys were in grade school, the family moved to Bozeman, Montana. One of Chris’s brothers spent time in a foster home. Another was sent to reform school.

“I don’t think the school ever understood just how gifted Christopher was,” his brother Jeff says. “He sure as hell didn’t play it up. This was Bozeman. It wasn’t like it is today. It was a small hick town when we were growing up. We weren’t treated well there. They’d just decided that my family was a bunch of deadbeats.” To stick up for himself and his brothers, Chris started to lift weights. One day, when Chris was fourteen, Jack Langan got rough with the boys, as he sometimes did, and Chris knocked him out cold. Jack left, never to return. Upon graduation from high school, Chris was offered two full scholarships, one to Reed College in Oregon and the other to the University of Chicago. He chose Reed.

“It was a huge mistake,” Chris recalls. “I had a real case of culture shock. I was a crew-cut kid who had been working as a ranch hand in the summers in Montana, and there I was, with a whole bunch of long-haired city kids, most of them from New York. And these kids had a whole different style than I was used to. I couldn’t get a word in edgewise at class. They were very inquisitive. Asking questions all the time. I was crammed into a dorm room. There were four of us, and the other three guys had a whole different other lifestyle. They were smoking pot. They would bring their girlfriends into the room. I had never smoked pot before. So basically I took to hiding in the library.”

He continued: “Then I lost that scholarship…. My mother was supposed to fill out a parents’ financial statement for the renewal of that scholarship. She neglected to do so. She was confused by the requirements or whatever. At some point, it came to my attention that my scholarship had not been renewed. So I went to the office to ask why, and they told me, Well, no one sent us the financial statement, and we allocated all the scholarship money and it’s all gone, so I’m afraid that you don’t have a scholarship here anymore. That was the style of the place. They simply didn’t care. They didn’t give a shit about their students. There was no counseling, no mentoring, nothing.”

Chris left Reed before the final set of exams, leaving him with a row of Fs on his transcript. In the first semester, he had earned As. He went back to Bozeman and worked in construction and as a forest services firefighter for a year and a half. Then he enrolled at Montana State University.

“I was taking math and philosophy classes,” he recalled. “And then in the winter quarter, I was living thirteen miles out of town, out on Beach Hill Road, and the transmission fell out of my car. My brothers had used it when I was gone that summer. They were working for the railroad and had driven it on the railroad tracks. I didn’t have the money to repair it. So I went to my adviser and the dean in sequence and said, I have a problem. The transmission fell out of my car, and you have me in a seven-thirty a.m. and eight-thirty a.m. class. If you could please just transfer me to the afternoon sections of these classes, I would appreciate it because of this car problem. There was a neighbor who was a rancher who was going to take me in at eleven o’clock. My adviser was this cowboy-looking guy with a handlebar mustache, dressed in a tweed jacket. He said, ‘Well, son, after looking at your transcript at Reed College, I see that you have yet to learn that everyone has to make sacrifices to get an education. Request denied.’ So then I went to the dean. Same treatment.”

His voice grew tight. He was describing things that had happened more than thirty years ago, but the memory still made him angry. “At that point I realized, here I was, knocking myself out to make the money to make my way back to school, and it’s the middle of the Montana winter. I am willing to hitchhike into town every day, do whatever I had to do, just to get into school and back, and they are unwilling to do anything for me. So bananas. And that was the point I decided I could do without the higher-education system. Even if I couldn’t do without it, it was sufficiently repugnant to me that I wouldn’t do it anymore. So I dropped out of college, simple as that.”

Chris Langan’s experiences at Reed and Montana State represented a turning point in his life. As a child, he had dreamt of becoming an academic. He should have gotten a PhD; universities are institutions structured, in large part, for people with his kind of deep intellectual interests and curiosity. “Once he got into the university environment, I thought he would prosper, I really did,” his brother Mark says. “I thought he would somehow find a niche. It made absolutely no sense to me when he left that.”

Without a degree, Langan floundered. He worked in construction. One frigid winter he worked on a clam boat on Long Island. He took factory jobs and minor civil service positions and eventually became a bouncer in a bar on Long Island, which was his principal occupation for much of his adult years. Through it all, he continued to read deeply in philosophy, mathematics, and physics as he worked on a sprawling treatise he calls the “CTMU”—the “Cognitive Theoretic Model of the Universe.” But without academic credentials, he despairs of ever getting published in a scholarly journal.

“I am a guy who has a year and a half of college,” he says, with a shrug. “And at some point this will come to the attention of the editor, as he is going to take the paper and send it off to the referees, and these referees are going to try and look me up, and they are not going to find me. And they are going to say, This guy has a year and a half of college. How can he know what he’s talking about?”

It is a heartbreaking story. At one point I asked Langan—hypothetically—whether he would take a job at Harvard University were it offered to him. “Well, that’s a difficult question,” he replied. “Obviously, as a full professor at Harvard I would count. My ideas would have weight and I could use my position, my affiliation at Harvard, to promote my ideas. An institution like that is a great source of intellectual energy, and if I were at a place like that, I could absorb the vibration in the air.” It was suddenly clear how lonely his life has been. Here he was, a man with an insatiable appetite for learning, forced for most of his adult life to live in intellectual isolation. “I even noticed that kind of intellectual energy in the year and a half I was in college,” he said, almost wistfully. “Ideas are in the air constantly. It’s such a stimulating place to be.

“On the other hand,” he went on, “Harvard is basically a glorified corporation, operating with a profit incentive. That’s what makes it tick. It has an endowment in the billions of dollars. The people running it are not necessarily searching for truth and knowledge. They want to be big shots, and 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. When you’re there, they got a thumb right on you. They are out to make sure you don’t step out of line.”