

Chapter 32

Excessive Purity Turns Away Affection
Weilin Finds the Tinder Box at Last

It was in towards the end of his first year at the University that William's disappointment became acute.

The University was run on the British principle: students were required to pay their fees and were expected, though not required, to attend lectures and examinations. Nothing else was asked of them at all. This was not the best possible environment for a nineteen-year-old with underdeveloped study habits and a budding obsession with the financial markets.

There was, furthermore, an undue concentration on logical rigor in all the courses. William had been aware of this aspect of mathematics from his high school studies, but had never before felt so hindered in his advances through mathematical topics by his instructors' insistence on pausing to construct strict proofs of even the most obvious assertions. He chafed under this puritanism, felt more keenly than ever his lack of early training, and fled to the University library, which had good historical tables covering all the major financial indices.

At the end of that first year their Analysis course culminated in Jordan's Curve Theorem, which asserts that every simple closed curve in the plane—a circle, for example—possesses both an inside and an outside. The instructor stretched out the proof over three lectures, in the third of which William fell asleep, having spent the previous evening in the

Ngs' apartment constructing a model for the short-term movements in the prices of U.S. money-market instruments. He took a scolding from the lecturer, a good deal of cheerful joshing from his classmates, and passed his first-year exams the following week with only a middling mark.

"Don't waste this opportunity," preached Mr Ng on the first week of summer vacation. "I can see you're not satisfied. Things can't always go the way we want, you just have to stick them out."

"It's just that I thought things would be more *practical* once I got out of high school," said William.

The second year things only got worse. In Algebra they were taught group theory, ring theory and field theory, in none of which were the objects of their attention any less abstract than rotations and permutations. In Analysis they discovered functions of a complex variable, which could only be adequately visualized by regarding the heretofore-friendly Cartesian plane as a sheet of infinitely stretchable rubber, capable of being folded over on itself an infinite number of times. The lecturer in Applied Mathematics, a fierce lanky Scotchman with red hair and beard, attempted to persuade them that Newton's laws of motion merely described lines of least distance in certain curved n -dimensional spaces. William developed a strategy for evaluating the comparative worth of stocks by taking ratios across, instead of within, the balance sheets of the underlying companies. He itched to try it out on the Hong Kong market, but had no funds.

In the British academic calendar, three semesters comprised one year. Tuition fees were payable at the beginning of each semester, which was also the time William received each portion of his scholarship. Being privately funded, the scholarship came to him as a check. He cashed this check at the University bursar's office, paid his tuition fees for the semester at the registration office, and gave the balance to Mrs Ng, who managed the family finances.

At the beginning of spring term, in January 1977, William cashed his check but did not pay his fees. Instead he went out of the University and down into the business district. The broker recognized him, and made small jokes as he wrote up William's deposit into Mr Ng's account, which was still open. William then gave careful instructions for some stock

purchases, after which he went back up the hill to the university, and sat in the library wondering how he would explain things to the Ngs.

William's theory about stocks proved false, or perhaps true only over a much longer term than he had allowed for. His investments stolidly failed to earn, and in fact slumped somewhat. As the weeks went by, he grew more and more despairing. *Should have stayed with commodities. Fast results—either good or bad, but fast.*

Meanwhile his position at the University was becoming untenable. A certain degree of latitude was allowed in the payment of fees, but after two weeks notes from the registration office began appearing in William's pigeonhole at the Department of Mathematics. After two more weeks a large Englishwoman from that office came seeking him, cornering him as he came out of a complex variable class.

"Is there a problem, William?" asked the woman in a kindly way. "Some family problem?"

"No," said William. "Not at all. It has just slipped my mind. I'll pay tomorrow."

The next day William put on the suit and tie the Ngs had bought him when he started at the University and left the apartment, explaining to Mrs Ng that there was a function he had to attend. He rode round to the business district and walked into the lobby of Talmadge Tucker.

Talmadge Tucker was an American trading firm. William had read about them in the *Hong Kong Standard* financial pages. They had opened a Hong Kong office the year before, "to dip a toe" (this had been the Standard's metaphor) "in the Asian markets". From subsequent reading, William gathered that Talmadge Tucker had not proceeded from toe-dipping to full immersion, being more averse to risk than suited the oriental temperament; but were highly regarded none the less, as being American and therefore not likely to disappear to Taiwan one night with the clients' funds.

The lobby of Talmadge Tucker reminded William of Blitzter, where he had studied English an age ago. It had the same dark, grave furnishings in polished wood with shining brass accouterments, the same cream-colored venetian blinds; but the carpet was a pleasant fawn color, not

green. The desk featured a pretty Chinese receptionist talking on the telephone. William waited for her to finish.

“I want to speak to Mr Wolf,” said William in English, naming the man who had been interviewed for the *Standard* piece.

“Have you an appointment?”

“No. I . . .”

“I’m sorry,” said the receptionist, concealing her sorrow with a very high order of dramatic skill. “Mr Wolf will not see you without an appointment.”

“Won’t you ask him, please, *siuje?*” William asked, using Cantonese for maximum connection. “I’m from the University. Department of Mathematics. We think we’ve made a breakthrough in analyzing commodity price fluctuations. I know Mr Wolf would be most interested.” William had brought with him a thin folder, outlining his theories on commodity prices. He had spent hours typing it up, on the Selectric typewriter Mathematics shared with Psychology.

“I’m sorry . . .”

A door opened at the side and a foreigner came through, putting on a suit jacket. “Just going for a club sandwich, Daisy,” the man said in English.

William stepped forward. “Mr Wolf?”

The man stopped, not altogether pleased. “No, I’m Murray Seidman. And you are . . .?”

“My name’s William Leung, Mr Seidman. I’m a student at the University. Department of Mathematics. Mr Seidman, I’m a keen student of the financial markets, and I think I can improve on the current pricing models. By an order of magnitude, I believe.”

“Is that so?” Seidman was broad, though you would not have said fat, and somewhat taller than average. He had a round, pleasant face with blue eyes. He was bald on top of his head, but had carefully brushed some hairs across to soften the effect. Now, as he contemplated William indifferently, he was making the last of the shucking movements involved in settling into his jacket.

“Why should I be interested in this?” he said.