"One day in the summer of 1913, a twenty-year-old Bengali from an old and prosperous Calcutta family stood in the chapel of King's College in the medieval university town of Cambridge, England. A glorious, grandly proportioned place, more cathedral than chapel, it was the work of three kings of England going back to 1446. Light streamed in through stained glass panels ranging across the south wall. Great fluted columns reached heavenward, flaring out into the massive splayed vaults of the roof.

Prasantha Chandra Mahalanobis was smitten. Scarcely off the boat from India and planning to study in London, he had come up on the train for the day to sightsee. But now, having missed the last train back to London and staying with friends, he couldn't stop talking about the chapel and its splendors, how moved he'd been, how…

Perhaps, proposed a friend, he should forget London and come to King's instead. That was all Mahalanobis needed to hear. The next day he met with the provost, and soon, to his astonishment and delight he was a student at King's College, Cambridge.

He had been at Cambridge for about six months when his mathematics tutor asked him, "Have you met your wonderful countryman Ramanujan?"

He had not yet met him, but he had heard of him. Ramanujan was a self-taught mathematical prodigy from a town outside Madras, in South India, a thousand miles from the sophisticated Calcutta that Mahalanobis knew best, a world as different from his own as Mahalanobis's was from England. The South, as educated North Indians were wont to see it, was backward and superstitious, scarcely brushed by the enlightened rationality of Bombay and Calcutta. And yet, somehow, out of such a place, from a poor family, came a mathematician so alive with genius that the English had practically hand-delivered him to Cambridge, there to share his gifts with the scholars of Trinity College and learn whatever they could teach him."