

Six Degrees of Lois Weisberg

She's a grandmother, she lives in a big house in Chicago, and you've never heard of her. Does she run the world?

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Everyone who knows Lois Weisberg has a story about meeting Lois Weisberg, and although she has done thousands of things in her life and met thousands of people, all the stories are pretty much the same. Lois (everyone calls her Lois) is invariably smoking a cigarette and drinking one of her dozen or so daily cups of coffee. She will have been up until two or three the previous morning, and up again at seven or seven-thirty, because she hardly seems to sleep. In some accounts -- particularly if the meeting took place in the winter -- she'll be wearing her white, fur-topped Dr. Zhivago boots with gold tights; but she may have on her platform tennis shoes, or the leather jacket with the little studs on it, or maybe an outrageous piece of costume jewelry, and, always, those huge, rhinestone-studded glasses that make her big eyes look positively enormous. "I have no idea why I asked you to come here, I have no job for you," Lois told Wendy Willrich when Willrich went to Lois's office in downtown Chicago a few years ago for an interview. But by the end of the interview Lois did have a job for her, because for Lois meeting someone is never just about meeting someone. If she likes you, she wants to recruit you into one of her grand schemes -- to sweep you up into her world. A while back, Lois called up Helen Doria, who was then working for someone on Chicago's city council, and said, "I don't have a job for you. Well, I might have a little job. I need someone to come over and help me clean up my office." By this, she meant that she had a big job for Helen but just didn't know what it was yet. Helen came, and, sure enough, Lois got her a big job.

Cindy Mitchell first met Lois twenty-three years ago, when she bundled up her baby and ran outside into one of those frigid Chicago winter mornings because some people from the Chicago Park District were about to cart away a beautiful sculpture of Carl von Linné from the park across the street. Lois happened to be driving by at the time, and, seeing all the commotion, she slammed on her brakes, charged out of her car -- all five feet of her -- and began asking Cindy questions, rat-a-tat-tat: "Who are you? What's going on here? Why do you care?" By the next morning, Lois had persuaded two Chicago Tribune reporters to interview Cindy and turn the whole incident into a cause célèbre, and she had recruited Cindy to join an organization she'd just started called Friends of the Parks, and then, when she found out that Cindy was a young mother at home who was too new in town to have many friends, she told her, "I've found a friend for you. Her name is Helen, and she has a little boy your kid's age, and you will meet her next week and the two of you will be best friends." That's exactly what happened, and, what's more, Cindy went on to spend ten years as president of Friends of the Park. "Almost everything that I do today and eighty to ninety per cent of my friends came about because of her, because of that one little chance meeting," Cindy says. "That's a scary thing. Try to imagine what would have happened if she had come by five minutes earlier."

It could be argued, of course, that even if Cindy hadn't met Lois on the street twenty-three

years ago she would have met her somewhere else, maybe a year later or two years later or ten years later, or, at least, she would have met someone who knew Lois or would have met someone who knew someone who knew Lois, since Lois Weisberg is connected, by a very short chain, to nearly everyone. Weisberg is now the Commissioner of Cultural Affairs for the City of Chicago. But in the course of her seventy-three years she has hung out with actors and musicians and doctors and lawyers and politicians and activists and environmentalists, and once, on a whim, she opened a secondhand-jewelry store named for her granddaughter Becky Fyffe, and every step of the way Lois has made friends and recruited people, and a great many of those people have stayed with her to this day. "When we were doing the jazz festival, it turned out -- surprise, surprise -- that she was buddies with Dizzy Gillespie," one of her friends recalls. "This is a woman who cannot carry a tune. She has no sense of rhythm. One night Tony Bennett was in town, and so we hang out with Tony Bennett, hearing about the old days with him and Lois."

Once, in the mid-fifties, on a whim, Lois took the train to New York to attend the World Science Fiction Convention and there she met a young writer by the name of Arthur C. Clarke. Clarke took a shine to Lois, and next time he was in Chicago he called her up. "He was at a pay phone," Lois recalls. "He said, 'Is there anyone in Chicago I should meet?' I told him to come over to my house." Lois has a throaty voice, baked hard by half a century of nicotine, and she pauses between sentences to give herself the opportunity for a quick puff. Even when she's not smoking, she pauses anyway, as if to keep in practice. "I called Bob Hughes, one of the people who wrote for my paper." Pause. "I said, 'Do you know anyone in Chicago interested in talking to Arthur Clarke?' He said, 'Yeah, Isaac Asimov is in town. And this guy Robert, Robert...Robert Heinlein.' So they all came over and sat in my study." Pause. "Then they called over to me and they said, 'Lois' -- I can't remember the word they used. They had some word for me. It was something about how I was the kind of person who brings people together."

This is in some ways the archetypal Lois Weisberg story. First, she reaches out to somebody -- somebody outside her world. (At the time, she was running a drama troupe, whereas Arthur C. Clarke wrote science fiction.) Equally important, that person responds to her. Then there's the fact that when Arthur Clarke came to Chicago and wanted to meet someone Lois came up with Isaac Asimov. She says it was a fluke that Asimov was in town. But if it hadn't been Asimov it would have been someone else. Lois ran a salon out of her house on the North Side in the late nineteen-fifties, and one of the things that people remember about it is that it was always, effortlessly, integrated. Without that salon, blacks would still have socialized with whites on the North Side -- though it was rare back then, it happened. But it didn't happen by accident: it happened because a certain kind of person made it happen. That's what Asimov and Clarke meant when they said that Lois has this thing -- whatever it is -- that brings people together.

2

Lois is a type -- a particularly rare and extraordinary type, but a type nonetheless. She's the type of person who seems to know everybody, and this type can be found in every walk of life. Someone I met at a wedding (actually, the wedding of the daughter of Lois's neighbors, the Newbergers) told me that if I ever went to Massapequa I should look up a woman named Marsha, because Marsha was the type of person who knew everybody. In Cambridge, Massachusetts, the word is that a tailor named Charlie Davidson knows everybody. In Houston, I'm told, there is an attorney named Harry Reasoner who knows everybody. There are probably Lois Weisbergs in Akron and Tucson and Paris and in some little town in

the Yukon Territory, up by the Arctic Circle. We've all met someone like Lois Weisberg. Yet, although we all know a Lois Weisberg type, we don't know much about the Lois Weisberg type. Why is it, for example, that these few, select people seem to know everyone and the rest of us don't? And how important are the people who know everyone? This second question is critical, because once you begin even a cursory examination of the life of someone like Lois Weisberg you start to suspect that he or she may be far more important than we would ever have imagined -- that the people who know everyone, in some oblique way, may actually run the world. I don't mean that they are the sort who head up the Fed or General Motors or Microsoft, but that, in a very down-to-earth, day-to-day way, they make the world work. They spread ideas and information. They connect varied and isolated parts of society. Helen Doria says someone high up in the Chicago government told her that Lois is "the epicenter of the city administration," which is the right way to put it. Lois is far from being the most important or the most powerful person in Chicago. But if you connect all the dots that constitute the vast apparatus of government and influence and interest groups in the city of Chicago you'll end up coming back to Lois again and again. Lois is a connector.

Lois, it must be said, did not set out to know everyone. "She doesn't network for the sake of networking," says Gary Johnson, who was Lois's boss years ago, when she was executive director of the Chicago Council of Lawyers. "I just think she has the confidence that all the people in the world, whether she's met them or not, are in her Rolodex already, and that all she has to do is figure out how to reach them and she'll be able to connect with them."

Nor is Lois charismatic -- at least, not in the way that we think of extroverts and public figures as being charismatic. She doesn't fill a room; eyes don't swivel toward her as she makes her entrance. Lois has frizzy blond hair, and when she's thinking -- between her coffee and her cigarette -- she kneads the hair on the top of her head, so that by the end of a particularly difficult meeting it will be standing almost straight up. "She's not like the image of the Washington society doyenne," Gary Johnson says. "You know, one of those people who identify you, take you to lunch, give you the treatment. Her social life is very different. When I bump into her and she says, 'Oh, we should catch up,' what she means is that someday I should go with her to her office, and we'd go down to the snack bar and buy a muffin and then sit in her office while she answered the phone. For a real treat, when I worked with her at the Council of Lawyers she would take me to the dining room in the Wieboldt's department store." Johnson is an old-school Chicago intellectual who works at a fancy law firm and has a corner office with one of those Midwestern views in which, if you look hard enough, you can almost see Nebraska, and the memory of those lunches at Wieboldt's seems to fill him with delight. "Now, you've got to understand that the Wieboldt's department store -- which doesn't exist anymore -- was a notch below Field's, where the suburban society ladies have their lunch, and it's also a notch below Carson's," he says. "There was a kind of room there where people who bring their own string bags to go shopping would have a quick lunch. This was her idea of a lunch out. We're not talking Pamela Harriman here."

In the mid-eighties, Lois quit a job she'd had for four years, as director of special events in the administration of Harold Washington, and somehow hooked up with a group of itinerant peddlers who ran the city's flea markets. "There was this lady who sold jewelry," Lois said. "She was a person out of Dickens. She was bedraggled. She had a houseful of cats. But she knew how to buy jewelry, and I wanted her to teach me. I met her whole circle of friends, all these old gay men who had antique stores. Once a week, we would go to the Salvation Army." Lois was arguably the most important civic activist in the city. Her husband was a judge. She lived in a huge house in one of Chicago's nicest neighborhoods. Yet

somehow she managed to be plausible as a flea-market peddler to a bunch of flea-market peddlers, the same way she managed to be plausible as a music lover to a musician like Tony Bennett. It doesn't matter who she's with or what she's doing; she always manages to be in the thick of things. "There was a woman I knew -- Sandra -- who had a kid in school with my son Joseph," Lois told me. Lois has a habit of telling stories that appear to be tangential and digressive but, on reflection, turn out to be parables of a sort. "She helped all these Asians living uptown. One day, she came over here and said there was this young Chinese man who wanted to meet an American family and learn to speak English better and was willing to cook for his room and board. Well, I'm always eager to have a cook, and especially a Chinese cook, because my family loves Chinese food. They could eat it seven days a week. So Sandra brought this man over here. His name was Shi Young. He was a graduate student at the Art Institute of Chicago." Shi Young lived with Lois and her family for two years, and during that time Chicago was in the midst of political turmoil. Harold Washington, who would later become the first black mayor of the city, was attempting to unseat the remains of the Daley political machine, and Lois's house, naturally, was the site of late-night, top-secret strategy sessions for the pro- Washington reformers of Chicago's North Side. "We'd have all these important people here, and Shi Young would come down and listen," Lois recalls. "I didn't think anything of it." But Shi Young, as it turns out, was going back up to his room and writing up what he heard for the China Youth Daily, a newspaper with a circulation in the tens of millions. Somehow, in the improbable way that the world works, a portal was opened up, connecting Chicago's North Side reform politics and the readers of the China Youth Daily, and that link was Lois's living room. You could argue that this was just a fluke -- just as it was a fluke that Isaac Asimov was in town and that Lois happened to be driving by when Cindy Mitchell came running out of her apartment. But sooner or later all those flukes begin to form a pattern.

3

In the late nineteen-sixties, a Harvard social psychologist named Stanley Milgram conducted an experiment in an effort to find an answer to what is known as the small-world problem, though it could also be called the Lois Weisberg problem. It is this: How are human beings connected? Do we belong to separate worlds, operating simultaneously but autonomously, so that the links between any two people, anywhere in the world, are few and distant? Or are we all bound up together in a grand, interlocking web? Milgram's idea was to test this question with a chain letter. For one experiment, he got the names of a hundred and sixty people, at random, who lived in Omaha, Nebraska, and he mailed each of them a packet. In the packet was the name and address of a stockbroker who worked in Boston and lived in Sharon, Massachusetts. Each person was instructed to write his name on a roster in the packet and send it on to a friend or acquaintance who he thought would get it closer to the stockbroker. The idea was that when the letters finally arrived at the stockbroker's house Milgram could look at the roster of names and establish how closely connected someone chosen at random from one part of the country was to another person chosen at random in another part. Milgram found that most of the letters reached the stockbroker in five or six steps. It is from this experiment that we got the concept of six degrees of separation.

That phrase is now so familiar that it is easy to lose sight of how surprising Milgram's finding was. Most of us don't have particularly diverse groups of friends. In one well-known study, two psychologists asked people living in the Dyckman public-housing project, in uptown Manhattan, about their closest friend in the project; almost ninety per cent of the friends lived in the same building, and half lived on the same floor. In general, people chose

friends of similar age and race. But if the friend lived down the hall, both age and race became a lot less important. Proximity overpowered similarity. Another study, involving students at the University of Utah, found that if you ask someone why he is friendly with someone else he'll say that it is because they share similar attitudes. But if you actually quiz the pairs of students on their attitudes you'll find out that this is an illusion, and that what friends really tend to have in common are activities. We're friends with the people we do things with, not necessarily with the people we resemble. We don't seek out friends; we simply associate with the people who occupy the same physical places that we do: People in Omaha are not, as a rule, friends with people who live in Sharon, Massachusetts. So how did the packets get halfway across the country in just five steps? "When I asked an intelligent friend of mine how many steps he thought it would take, he estimated that it would require 100 intermediate persons or more to move from Nebraska to Sharon," Milgram wrote. "Many people make somewhat similar estimates, and are surprised to learn that only five intermediaries will -- on the average -- suffice. Somehow it does not accord with intuition."

The explanation is that in the six degrees of separation not all degrees are equal. When Milgram analyzed his experiments, for example, he found that many of the chains reaching to Sharon followed the same asymmetrical pattern. Twenty-four packets reached the stockbroker at his home, in Sharon, and sixteen of those were given to him by the same person, a clothing merchant whom Milgram calls Mr. Jacobs. The rest of the packets were sent to the stockbroker at his office, and of those the majority came through just two men, whom Milgram calls Mr. Brown and Mr. Jones. In all, half of the responses that got to the stockbroker were delivered to him by these three people. Think of it. Dozens of people, chosen at random from a large Midwestern city, sent out packets independently. Some went through college acquaintances. Some sent their packets to relatives. Some sent them to old workmates. Yet in the end, when all those idiosyncratic chains were completed, half of the packets passed through the hands of Jacobs, Jones, and Brown. Six degrees of separation doesn't simply mean that everyone is linked to everyone else in just six steps. It means that a very small number of people are linked to everyone else in a few steps, and the rest of us are linked to the world through those few.

There's an easy way to explore this idea. Suppose that you made a list of forty people whom you would call your circle of friends (not including family members or co-workers), and you worked backward from each person until you could identify who was ultimately responsible for setting in motion the series of connections which led to that friendship. I met my oldest friend, Bruce, for example, in first grade, so I'm the responsible party. That's easy. I met my college friend Nigel because he lived down the hall in the dormitory from Tom, whom I had met because in my freshman year he invited me to play touch football. Tom, then, is responsible for Nigel. Once you've made all the connections, you will find the same names coming up again and again. I met my friend Amy when she and her friend Katie came to a restaurant where I was having dinner. I know Katie because she is best friends with my friend Larissa, whom I know because I was told to look her up by a mutual friend, Mike A., whom I know because he went to school with another friend of mine, Mike H., who used to work at a political weekly with my friend Jacob. No Jacob, no Amy. Similarly, I met my friend Sarah S. at a birthday party a year ago because she was there with a writer named David, who was there at the invitation of his agent, Tina, whom I met through my friend Leslie, whom I know because her sister Nina is best friends with my friend Ann, whom I met through my old roommate Maura, who was my roommate because she had worked with a writer named Sarah L., who was a college friend of my friend Jacob. No Jacob, no Sarah S. In fact, when I go down my list of forty friends, thirty of them, in

one way or another, lead back to Jacob. My social circle is really not a circle but an inverted pyramid. And the capstone of the pyramid is a single person, Jacob, who is responsible for an overwhelming majority of my relationships. Jacob's full name, incidentally, is Jacob Weisberg. He is Lois Weisberg's son.

This isn't to say, though, that Jacob is just like Lois. Jacob may be the capstone of my pyramid, but Lois is the capstone of lots and lots of people's pyramids, and that makes her social role different. In Milgram's experiment, Mr. Jacobs the clothing merchant was the person to go through to get to the stockbroker. Lois is the kind of person you would use to get to the stockbrokers of Sharon and also the cabaret singers of Sharon and the barkeeps of Sharon and the guy who gave up a thriving career in orthodontics to open a small vegetarian falafel hut.

4

There is another way to look at this question, and that's through the popular parlor game Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon. The idea behind the game is to try to link in fewer than six steps any actor or actress, through the movies they've been in, to the actor Kevin Bacon. For example, O. J. Simpson was in "Naked Gun" with Priscilla Presley, who was in "The Adventures of Ford Fairlane" with Gilbert Gottfried, who was in "Beverly Hills Cop II" with Paul Reiser, who was in "Diner" with Kevin Bacon. That's four steps. Mary Pickford was in "Screen Snapshots" with Clark Gable, who was in "Combat America" with Tony Romano, who, thirty-five years later, was in "Starting Over" with Bacon. That's three steps. What's funny about the game is that Bacon, although he is a fairly young actor, has already been in so many movies with so many people that there is almost no one to whom he can't be easily connected. Recently, a computer scientist at the University of Virginia by the name of Brett Tjaden actually sat down and figured out what the average degree of connectedness is for the quarter million or so actors and actresses listed in the Internet Movie Database: he came up with 2.8312 steps. That sounds impressive, except that Tjaden then went back and performed an even more heroic calculation, figuring out what the average degree of connectedness was for everyone in the database. Bacon, it turns out, ranks only six hundred and sixty-eighth. Martin Sheen, by contrast, can be connected, on average, to every other actor, in 2.63681 steps, which puts him almost six hundred and fifty places higher than Bacon. Elliott Gould can be connected even more quickly, in 2.63601. Among the top fifteen are people like Robert Mitchum, Gene Hackman, Donald Sutherland, Rod Steiger, Shelley Winters, and Burgess Meredith.

Why is Kevin Bacon so far behind these actors? Recently, in the journal *Nature*, the mathematicians Duncan Watts and Steven Strogatz published a dazzling theoretical explanation of connectedness, but a simpler way to understand this question is to look at who Bacon is. Obviously, he is a lot younger than the people at the top of the list are and has made fewer movies. But that accounts for only some of the difference. A top-twenty person, like Burgess Meredith, made a hundred and fourteen movies in the course of his career. Gary Cooper, though, starred in about the same number of films and ranks only eight hundred and seventy-eighth, with a 2.85075 score. John Wayne made a hundred and eighty-three movies in his fifty-year career and still ranks only a hundred and sixteenth, at 2.7173. What sets someone like Meredith apart is his range. More than half of John Wayne's movies were Westerns, and that means he made the same kind of movie with the same kind of actors over and over again. Burgess Meredith, by contrast, was in great movies, like the Oscar-winning "Of Mice and Men" (1939), and in dreadful movies, like "Beware! The Blob" (1972). He was nominated for an Oscar for his role in "The Day of the Locust" and also made TV

commercials for Skippy peanut butter. He was in four "Rocky" movies, and also played Don Learo in Godard's "King Lear." He was in schlocky made-for-TV movies, in B movies that pretty much went straight to video, and in pictures considered modern classics. He was in forty-two dramas, twenty-two comedies, eight adventure films, seven action films, five sci-fi films, five horror flicks, five Westerns, five documentaries, four crime movies, four thrillers, three war movies, three films noir, two children's films, two romances, two mysteries, one musical, and one animated film. Burgess Meredith was the kind of actor who was connected to everyone because he managed to move up and down and back and forth among all the different worlds and subcultures that the acting profession has to offer. When we say, then, that Lois Weisberg is the kind of person who "knows everyone," we mean it in precisely this way. It is not merely that she knows lots of people. It is that she belongs to lots of different worlds.

In the nineteen-fifties, Lois started her drama troupe in Chicago. The daughter of a prominent attorney, she was then in her twenties, living in one of the suburbs north of the city with two small children. In 1956, she decided to stage a festival to mark the centenary of George Bernard Shaw's birth. She hit up the reclusive billionaire John D. MacArthur for money. ("I go to the Pump Room for lunch. Booth One. There is a man, lurking around a pillar, with a cowboy hat and dirty, dusty boots. It's him.") She invited William Saroyan and Norman Thomas to speak on Shaw's legacy; she put on Shaw plays in theatres around the city; and she got written up in Life. She then began putting out a newspaper devoted to Shaw, which mutated into an underground alternative weekly called the Paper. By then, Lois was living in a big house on Chicago's near North Side, and on Friday nights people from the Paper gathered there for editorial meetings. William Friedkin, who went on to direct "The French Connection" and "The Exorcist," was a regular, and so were the attorney Elmer Gertz (who won parole for Nathan Leopold) and some of the editors from Playboy, which was just up the street. People like Art Farmer and Thelonious Monk and Dizzy Gillespie and Lenny Bruce would stop by when they were in town. Bruce actually lived in Lois's house for a while. "My mother was hysterical about it, especially one day when she rang the doorbell and he answered in a bath towel," Lois told me. "We had a window on the porch, and he didn't have a key, so the window was always left open for him. There were a lot of rooms in that house, and a lot of people stayed there and I didn't know they were there." Pause. Puff. "I never could stand his jokes. I didn't really like his act. I couldn't stand all the words he was using."

Lois's first marriage -- to a drugstore owner named Leonard Solomon -- was breaking up around this time, so she took a job doing public relations for an injury-rehabilitation institute. From there, she went to work for a public-interest law firm called B.P.I., and while she was at B.P.I. she became concerned about the fact that Chicago's parks were neglected and crumbling, so she gathered together a motley collection of nature lovers, historians, civic activists, and housewives, and founded the lobbying group Friends of the Parks. Then she became alarmed on discovering that a commuter railroad that ran along the south shore of Lake Michigan -- from South Bend to Chicago -- was about to shut down, so she gathered together a motley collection of railroad enthusiasts and environmentalists and commuters, and founded South Shore Recreation, thereby saving the railroad. Lois loved the railroad buffs. "They were all good friends of mine," she says. "They all wrote to me. They came from California. They came from everywhere. We had meetings. They were really interesting. I came this close" -- and here she held her index finger half an inch above her thumb -- "to becoming one of them." Instead, though, she became the executive director of the Chicago Council of Lawyers, a progressive bar association. Then she ran Congressman Sidney Yates's reelection campaign. Then her sister June introduced her to someone who got

her the job with Mayor Washington. Then she had her flea-market period. Finally, she went to work for Mayor Daley as Chicago's Commissioner of Cultural Affairs.

If you go through that history and keep count, the number of worlds that Lois has belonged to comes to eight: the actors, the writers, the doctors, the lawyers, the park lovers, the politicians, the railroad buffs, and the flea-market aficionados. When I asked Lois to make her own list, she added musicians and the visual artists and architects and hospitality-industry people whom she works with in her current job. But if you looked harder at Lois's life you could probably subdivide her experiences into fifteen or twenty worlds. She has the same ability to move among different subcultures and niches that the busiest actors do. Lois is to Chicago what Burgess Meredith is to the movies.

Lois was, in fact, a friend of Burgess Meredith. I learned this by accident, which is the way I learned about most of the strange celebrity details of Lois's life, since she doesn't tend to drop names. It was when I was with her at her house one night, a big, rambling affair just off the lakeshore, with room after room filled with odds and ends and old photographs and dusty furniture and weird bric-a-brac, such as a collection of four hundred antique egg cups. She was wearing bluejeans and a flowery-print top and she was smoking Carlton Menthol 100s and cooking pasta and holding forth to her son Joe on the subject of George Bernard Shaw, when she started talking about Burgess Meredith. "He was in Chicago in a play called 'Teahouse of the August Moon,' in 1956," she said, "and he came to see my production of 'Back to Methuselah,' and after the play he came up to me and said he was teaching acting classes, and asked would I come and talk to his class about Shaw. Well, I couldn't say no." Meredith liked Lois, and when she was running her alternative newspaper he would write letters and send in little doodles, and later she helped him raise money for a play he was doing called "Kicks and Company." It starred a woman named Nichelle Nichols, who lived at Lois's house for a while. "Nichelle was a marvellous singer and dancer," Lois said. "She was the lead. She was also the lady on the first..." Lois was doing so many things at once -- chopping and stirring and smoking and eating and talking -- that she couldn't remember the name of the show that made Nichols a star. "What's that space thing?" She looked toward Joe for help. He started laughing. "Star something," she said. "Star...Star Trek! Nichelle was Lieutenant Uhura!"

5

On a sunny morning not long ago, Lois went to a little café just off the Magnificent Mile, in downtown Chicago, to have breakfast with Mayor Daley. Lois drove there in a big black Mercury, a city car. Lois always drives big cars, and, because she is so short and the cars are so big, all that you can see when she drives by is the top of her frizzy blond head and the lighted ember of her cigarette. She was wearing a short skirt and a white vest and was carrying a white cloth shopping bag. Just what was in the bag was unclear, since Lois doesn't have a traditional relationship to the trappings of bureaucracy. Her office, for example, does not have a desk in it, only a sofa and chairs and a coffee table. At meetings, she sits at the head of a conference table in the adjoining room, and, as often as not, has nothing in front of her except a lighter, a pack of Carltons, a cup of coffee, and an octagonal orange ceramic ashtray, which she moves a few inches forward or a few inches back when she's making an important point, or moves a few inches to the side when she is laughing at something really funny and feels the need to put her head down on the table.

Breakfast was at one of the city's tourist centers. The Mayor was there in a blue suit, and he had two city officials by his side and a very serious and thoughtful expression on his

face. Next to him was a Chicago developer named Al Friedman, a tall and slender and very handsome man who is the chairman of the Commission on Chicago Landmarks. Lois sat across from them, and they all drank coffee and ate muffins and batted ideas back and forth in the way that people do when they know each other very well. It was a "power breakfast," although if you went around the table you'd find that the word "power" meant something very different to everyone there. Al Friedman is a rich developer. The Mayor, of course, is the administrative leader of one of the largest cities in the country. When we talk about power, this is usually what we're talking about: money and authority. But there is a third kind of power as well -- the kind Lois has -- which is a little less straightforward. It's social power.

At the end of the nineteen-eighties, for example, the City of Chicago razed an entire block in the heart of downtown and then sold it to a developer. But before he could build on it the real-estate market crashed. The lot was an eyesore. The Mayor asked for ideas about what to do with it. Lois suggested that they cover the block with tents. Then she heard that Keith Haring had come to Chicago in 1989 and worked with Chicago high-school students to create a giant five-hundred-foot-long mural. Lois loved the mural. She began to think. She'd long had a problem with the federal money that Chicago got every year to pay for summer jobs for disadvantaged kids. She didn't think it helped any kid to be put to work picking up garbage. So why not pay the kids to do arts projects like the Haring mural, and put the whole program in the tents? She called the program Gallery 37, after the number of the block. She enlisted the help of the Mayor's wife, Maggie Daley, whose energy and clout were essential in order to make the program a success. Lois hired artists to teach the kids. She realized, though, that the federal money was available only for poor kids, and, Lois says, "I don't believe poor kids can advance in any way by being lumped together with other poor kids." So Lois raised money privately to bring in middle-income kids, to mix with the poor kids and be put in the tents with the artists. She started small, with two hundred and sixty "apprentices" the first year, 1990. This year, there were more than three thousand. The kids study sculpture, painting, drawing, poetry, theatre, graphic design, dance, textile design, jewelry-making, and music. Lois opened a store downtown, where students' works of art are sold. She has since bought two buildings to house the project full time. She got the Parks Department to run Gallery 37 in neighborhoods around the city, and the Board of Education to let them run it as an after-school program in public high schools. It has been copied all around the world. Last year, it was given the Innovations in American Government Award by the Ford Foundation and the Harvard school of government.

Gallery 37 is at once a jobs program, an arts program, a real-estate fix, a schools program, and a parks program. It involves federal money and city money and private money, stores and buildings and tents, Maggie Daley and Keith Haring, poor kids and middle-class kids. It is everything, all at once -- a jumble of ideas and people and places which Lois somehow managed to make sense of. The ability to assemble all these disparate parts is, as should be obvious, a completely different kind of power from the sort held by the Mayor and Al Friedman. The Mayor has key allies on the city council or in the statehouse. Al Friedman can do what he does because, no doubt, he has a banker who believes in him, or maybe a lawyer whom he trusts to negotiate the twists and turns of the zoning process. Their influence is based on close relationships. But when Lois calls someone to help her put together one of her projects, chances are she's not calling someone she knows particularly well. Her influence suggests something a little surprising -- that there is also power in relationships that are not close at all.

The sociologist Mark Granovetter examined this question in his classic 1974 book "Getting a Job." Granovetter interviewed several hundred professional and technical workers from the Boston suburb of Newton, asking them in detail about their employment history. He found that almost fifty-six per cent of those he talked to had found their jobs through a personal connection, about twenty per cent had used formal means (advertisements, headhunters), and another twenty per cent had applied directly. This much is not surprising: the best way to get in the door is through a personal contact. But the majority of those personal connections, Granovetter found, did not involve close friends. They were what he called "weak ties." Of those who used a contact to find a job, for example, only 16.7 per cent saw that contact "often," as they would have if the contact had been a good friend; 55.6 per cent saw their contact only "occasionally"; and 27.8 per cent saw the contact "rarely." People were getting their jobs not through their friends but through acquaintances.

Granovetter argues that when it comes to finding out about new jobs -- or, for that matter, gaining new information, or looking for new ideas -- weak ties tend to be more important than strong ties. Your friends, after all, occupy the same world that you do. They work with you, or live near you, and go to the same churches, schools, or parties. How much, then, do they know that you don't know? Mere acquaintances, on the other hand, are much more likely to know something that you don't. To capture this apparent paradox, Granovetter coined a marvellous phrase: "the strength of weak ties." The most important people in your life are, in certain critical realms, the people who aren't closest to you, and the more people you know who aren't close to you the stronger your position becomes.

Granovetter then looked at what he called "chain lengths" -- that is, the number of people who had to pass along the news about your job before it got to you. A chain length of zero means that you learned about your job from the person offering it. A chain length of one means that you heard about the job from someone who had heard about the job from the employer. The people who got their jobs from a zero chain were the most satisfied, made the most money, and were unemployed for the shortest amount of time between jobs. People with a chain of one stood second in the amount of money they made, in their satisfaction with their jobs, and in the speed with which they got their jobs. People with a chain of two stood third in all three categories, and so on. If you know someone who knows someone who knows someone who has lots of acquaintances, in other words, you have a leg up. If you know someone who knows someone who has lots of acquaintances, your chances are that much better. But if you know someone who has lots of acquaintances -- if you know someone like Lois -- you are still more fortunate, because suddenly you are just one step away from musicians and actors and doctors and lawyers and park lovers and politicians and railroad buffs and flea-market aficionados and all the other weak ties that make Lois so strong.

This sounds like a reformulation of the old saw that it's not what you know, it's who you know. It's much more radical than that, though. The old idea was that people got ahead by being friends with rich and powerful people -- which is true, in a limited way, but as a practical lesson in how the world works is all but useless. You can expect that Bill Gates's godson is going to get into Harvard and have a fabulous job waiting for him when he gets out. And, of course, if you play poker with the Mayor and Al Friedman it is going to be a little easier to get ahead in Chicago. But how many godsons can Bill Gates have? And how many people can fit around a poker table? This is why affirmative action seems pointless to so many people: It appears to promise something -- entry to the old-boy network -- that it can't possibly deliver. The old-boy network is always going to be just for the old boys.

Granovetter, by contrast, argues that what matters in getting ahead is not the quality of your relationships but the quantity -- not how close you are to those you know but, paradoxically, how many people you know whom you aren't particularly close to. What he's saying is that the key person at that breakfast in downtown Chicago is not the Mayor or Al Friedman but Lois Weisberg, because Lois is the kind of person who it really is possible for most of us to know. If you think about the world in this way, the whole project of affirmative action suddenly starts to make a lot more sense. Minority-admissions programs work not because they give black students access to the same superior educational resources as white students, or access to the same rich cultural environment as white students, or any other formal or grandiose vision of engineered equality. They work by giving black students access to the same white students as white students -- by allowing them to make acquaintances outside their own social world and so shortening the chain lengths between them and the best jobs.

This idea should also change the way we think about helping the poor. When we're faced with an eighteen-year-old high-school dropout whose only career option is making five dollars and fifty cents an hour in front of the deep fryer at Burger King, we usually talk about the importance of rebuilding inner-city communities, attracting new jobs to depressed areas, and re-investing in neglected neighborhoods. We want to give that kid the option of another, better-paying job, right down the street. But does that really solve his problem? Surely what that eighteen-year-old really needs is not another marginal inducement to stay in his neighborhood but a way to get out of his neighborhood altogether. He needs a school system that provides him with the skills to compete for jobs with middle-class kids. He needs a mass-transit system to take him to the suburbs, where the real employment opportunities are. And, most of all, he needs to know someone who knows someone who knows where all those good jobs are. If the world really is held together by people like Lois Weisberg, in other words, how poor you are can be defined quite simply as how far you have to go to get to someone like her. Wendy Willrich and Helen Doria and all the countless other people in Lois's circle needed to make only one phone call. They are well-off. The dropout wouldn't even know where to start. That's why he's poor. Poverty is not deprivation. It is isolation.

7

I once met a man named Roger Horchow. If you ever go to Dallas and ask around about who is the kind of person who might know everyone, chances are you will be given his name. Roger is slender and composed. He talks slowly, with a slight Texas drawl. He has a kind of wry, ironic charm that is utterly winning. If you sat next to him on a plane ride across the Atlantic, he would start talking as the plane taxied to the runway, you would be laughing by the time the seat-belt sign was turned off, and when you landed at the other end you'd wonder where the time had gone.

I met Roger through his daughter Sally, whose sister Lizzie went to high school in Dallas with my friend Sara M., whom I know because she used to work with Jacob Weisberg. (No Jacob, no Roger.) Roger spent at least part of his childhood in Ohio, which is where Lois's second husband, Bernie Weisberg, grew up, so I asked Roger if he knew Bernie. It would have been a little too apt if he did -- that would have made it all something out of "The X-Files" -- but instead of just answering, "Sorry, I don't," which is what most of us would have done, he paused for a long time, as if to flip through the "W"s in his head, and then said, "No, but I'm sure if I made two phone calls..."

Roger has a very good memory for names. One time, he says, someone was trying to talk him into investing his money in a business venture in Spain, and when he asked the names of the other investors he recognized one of them as the same man with whom one of his ex-girlfriends had had a fling during her junior year abroad, fifty years before. Roger sends people cards on their birthdays: he has a computerized Rolodex with sixteen hundred names on it. When I met him, I became convinced that these techniques were central to the fact that he knew everyone -- that knowing everyone was a kind of skill. Horchow is the founder of the Horchow Collection, the first high-end mail-order catalogue, and I kept asking him how all the connections in his life had helped him in the business world, because I thought that this particular skill had to have been cultivated for a reason. But the question seemed to puzzle him. He didn't think of his people collection as a business strategy, or even as something deliberate. He just thought of it as something he did -- as who he was. One time, Horchow said, a close friend from childhood suddenly resurfaced. "He saw my catalogue and knew it had to be me, and when he was out here he showed up on my doorstep. I hadn't seen him since I was seven. We had zero in common. It was wonderful." The juxtaposition of those last two sentences was not ironic; he meant it.

In the book "The Language Instinct," the psychologist Steven Pinker argues against the idea that language is a cultural artifact -- something that we learn "the way we learn to tell time." Rather, he says, it is innate. Language develops "spontaneously," he writes, "without conscious effort or formal instruction," and "is deployed without awareness of its underlying logic.... People know how to talk in more or less the sense that spiders know how to spin webs." The secret to Roger Horchow and Lois Weisberg is, I think, that they have a kind of social equivalent of that instinct -- an innate and spontaneous and entirely involuntary affinity for people. They know everyone because -- in some deep and less than conscious way -- they can't help it.

8

Once, in the very early nineteen-sixties, after Lois had broken up with her first husband, she went to a party for Ralph Ellison, who was then teaching at the University of Chicago. There she spotted a young lawyer from the South Side named Bernie Weisberg. Lois liked him. He didn't notice her, though, so she decided to write a profile of him for the Hyde Park Herald. It ran with a huge headline. Bernie still didn't call. "I had to figure out how I was going to get to meet him again, so I remembered that he was standing in line at the reception with Ralph Ellison," Lois says. "So I called up Ralph Ellison" -- whom she had never met -- "and said, 'It's so wonderful that you are in Chicago. You really should meet some people on the North Side. Would it be O.K. if I have a party for you?'" He said yes, and Lois sent out a hundred invitations, including one to Bernie. He came. He saw Dizzy Gillespie in the kitchen and Ralph Ellison in the living room. He was impressed. He asked Lois to go with him to see Lenny Bruce. Lois was mortified; she didn't want this nice Jewish lawyer from the South Side to know that she knew Lenny Bruce, who was, after all, a drug addict. "I couldn't get out of it," she said. "They sat us down at a table right at the front, and Lenny keeps coming over to the edge of the stage and saying" -- here Lois dropped her voice down very low -- "Hello, Lois. I was sitting there like this." Lois put her hands on either side of her face. "Finally I said to Bernie, 'There are some things I should tell you about. Lenny Bruce is a friend of mine. He's staying at my house. The second thing is I'm defending a murderer.'" (But that's another story.) Lois and Bernie were married a year later.

The lesson of this story isn't obvious until you diagram it culturally: Lois got to Bernie

through her connections with Ralph Ellison and Lenny Bruce, one of whom she didn't know (although later, naturally, they became great friends) and one of whom she was afraid to say that she knew, and neither of whom, it is safe to speculate, had ever really been connected with each other before. It seems like an absurdly roundabout way to meet someone. Here was a thirtyish liberal Jewish intellectual from the North Side of Chicago trying to meet a thirtyish liberal Jewish intellectual from the South Side of Chicago, and to get there she charted a cross-cultural social course through a black literary lion and an avant-garde standup comic. Yet that's a roundabout journey only if you perceive the worlds of Lenny Bruce and Ralph Ellison and Bernie Weisberg to be impossibly isolated. If you don't -- if, like Lois, you see them all as three points of an equilateral triangle -- then it makes perfect sense. The social instinct makes everyone seem like part of a whole, and there is something very appealing about this, because it means that people like Lois aren't bound by the same categories and partitions that defeat the rest of us. This is what the power of the people who know everyone comes down to in the end. It is not -- as much as we would like to believe otherwise -- something rich and complex, some potent mixture of ambition and energy and smarts and vision and insecurity. It's much simpler than that. It's the same lesson they teach in Sunday school. Lois knows lots of people because she likes lots of people. And all those people Lois knows and likes invariably like her, too, because there is nothing more irresistible to a human being than to be unqualifiedly liked by another.

Not long ago, Lois took me to a reception at the Museum of Contemporary Art, in Chicago -- a brand-new, Bauhaus-inspired building just north of the Loop. The gallery space was impossibly beautiful -- cool, airy, high-ceilinged. The artist on display was Chuck Close. The crowd was sleek and well groomed. Black-clad young waiters carried pesto canapés and glasses of white wine. Lois seemed a bit lost. She can be a little shy sometimes, and at first she stayed on the fringes of the room, standing back, observing. Someone important came over to talk to her. She glanced up uncomfortably. I walked away for a moment to look at the show, and when I came back her little corner had become a crowd. There was her friend from the state legislature. A friend in the Chicago Park District. A friend from her neighborhood. A friend in the consulting business. A friend from Gallery 37. A friend from the local business-development group. And on and on. They were of all ages and all colors, talking and laughing, swirling and turning in a loose circle, and in the middle, nearly hidden by the commotion, was Lois, clutching her white bag, tiny and large-eyed, at that moment the happiest person in the room.