

wrongly believed to be strangers to one another." Harold no longer had to work to apply qualities like *thumos* to the world around him; they simply became the automatic categories of his mind, the way he perceived new situations.

When he was in kindergarten and first grade, Harold struggled to learn to read, but then it came naturally to him. Suddenly reading wasn't about piecing together words; he could concentrate on the meanings. As a senior in high school, he had similarly internalized some Greek thought, and now he could automatically apply it to his life moment by moment.

He would go off to college and he would sit in classes as required, but he understood those classes would be only the first stage of his learning. He would have to spend nights writing random thoughts in his journal. He would organize his thoughts on the floor. He would have to stew and struggle and then maybe a few times in his life, while taking a shower or walking to the grocery store, some insight would come to him and make all the difference. This would be his method for escaping passive institutional learning. This would be the way he would build for himself a mind that is not stuck in an inherited rut, but which jumps from vantage point to vantage point, applying different patterns to new situations to see what works and what doesn't, what will go together and what will not, what is likely to emerge from the confusion of reality and what is not likely to emerge. This would be his path to wisdom and success.

CHAPTER 7

NORMS

LERICA, WHO WOULD SPEND SO MUCH OF HER LIFE INTWINED with Harold, started out in a very different place than he. At age ten, she almost got arrested.

She and her mom had moved into a friend's apartment in a public-housing project. Their new neighborhood had a charter school called the New Hope School, which was in a new building, with new basketball hoops with nets, and with new art studios. The students wore elegant maroon and gray uniforms. Erica was desperate to go there.

Her mother took her down to the social welfare agency, and waited in a hallway for over an hour. When they finally got in, the caseworker told them that Erica couldn't even qualify for the lottery to go there because she didn't have legal residence in the neighborhood.

The social workers spent their days besieged by impossible requests. To make their lives manageable, they developed a brusque and peremptory way of talking. They kept their eyes focused down at their papers, and sped through the supplicants who came streaming through the doors. They spoke in municipal-government jargon that nobody else could understand and challenge. Their first instinct was always to say no.

The moms had no confidence in settings like that—in an office with people in business dress. Half the time, they couldn't understand what the caseworker was saying and were afraid of revealing how little they

knew about the rules. They put on a mask of apathy and sullenness to disguise their nervousness. Most of the time, they just accepted whatever judgment the caseworker rendered and went home. They'd make up some story to explain their humiliation for their friends later on.

Erica's mom was following the pattern. They'd moved into this neighborhood three months before, but the truth is they had no legal status there. It was a friend's apartment, and Erica's mom didn't want to raise a fuss about the school and risk getting evicted from her home. When the caseworker kept repeating that she had "no authorization" to be in the school district, Erica's mom stood up and got ready to leave.

Erica refused to budge. She could already imagine the way her mom would be on the bus ride home—cursing the caseworker, spewing out all the anger she should have let loose right here in the office. Plus, the caseworker was a bitch—chewing gum, looking down on them. She'd barely looked up from her papers to make even a show of eye contact. She hadn't even tried to smile.

Erica gripped the chair as her mom stood and headed toward the exit. "I wanna go to New Hope," she said stubbornly.

"You have no legal residence in the district," the caseworker repeated. "You have no authorization."

"I wanna go to New Hope." Erica had no argument, no logic, just some furious sense that her mother shouldn't take this shit lying down. Her mother, now alarmed, pleaded with her to get up and leave. Erica wouldn't go. She gripped the chair harder. Her mom tugged. Erica wouldn't release. Her mom hissed at her in quiet fury, desperate not to make a scene. Erica wouldn't budge. Her mom yanked her, and the chair fell over with Erica still in it.

"You want me to call the cops?" the caseworker hissed. "You want to go across the street?" The juvenile-detention center was across the street.

Erica held on and soon three or four people were tugging at her at once, including some sort of security guard. "I wanna go to New Hope!" She was crying now, her face a mask of tears and anger. Eventually they got her loose. The rent-a-cop screamed at her. Her mom took the furious little girl back home.

Her mom didn't scold her or even say a word. They rode home silently. That night her mom washed Erica's hair in the sink, and they talked sweetly about other things.

ERICA'S MOTHER, AMY, was the most downwardly mobile member of her family. Her parents had emigrated from China, and all her other relatives were doing well. But Amy suffered with recurrent long bouts of mania and depression. When her spirits were up, she had phenomenal energy and she'd be off doing the model-minority thing. In her early twenties she spent months each at several different colleges, training academies, and learning centers. She trained as a medical technician. She learned computer software in the hopes of becoming an IT professional. She would work two jobs and just plug away with a doggedness she said she'd inherited from her ancient Chinese peasant stock.

During these prosperous months, she'd take Erica out to the all-you-could-eat buffet at Golden Corral and buy her new clothing and shoes. She'd also try to run her life. She'd tell Erica what to wear and which of her friends she wasn't permitted to see (most of them—they carried germs). She assigned Erica extra reading so she'd "run ahead" of the other children. Amy even taught her Chinese calligraphy, with brushes she'd kept packed away in the closet. There was a lightness and rhythm to her brushstrokes that Erica hadn't known her mother possessed. "When you do calligraphy, you must think in a different way," her mom would tell her. For a couple of years, Erica even took skating lessons.

But then there were the down times. Amy would go from slave driver to nullity in a matter of days, leaving Erica to play the role of mother. It was normal to find bottles of Bacardi and Manischewitz Cream and weed and mirrors with cocaine dust around the apartment. Amy wouldn't shower or wear deodorant. Nothing at home would get done. When Erica was a baby, and depression struck, her mom would put Pepsi in her baby bottle just to get her to shut up. Later, she would feed her Cheerios for dinner. They'd go for days on a diet of bologna

from the corner bodega. When she was nine, Erica learned how to call a cab so she could take her mother to the emergency room for what she told everybody were heart palpitations. She learned to live in the dark, because her mom would tape shut the curtains.

During these times, her dad didn't come around. Her dad was Mexican American. (The genetic combination accounted for her striking looks.) Erica's dad was a mixed bag—charming and bright but not exactly Mr. Reliable. On the negative side, he seemed incapable of holding reality in his mind. If he was driving drunk and hit a fire hydrant, he would invent a lavish tale to explain that his car had been rammed by a runaway bus. He would give strangers invented versions of his life story. He would tell lies so glaring, even young Erica could see through them.

Furthermore, he talked constantly about his self-respect. His self-respect prevented him from taking any job that involved serving others. His self-respect caused him to flee whenever Amy got domineering. He'd disappear for weeks and months and then show up with Pampers, even when Erica was five or six. He came and went and yet complained that Amy and Erica were sucking away all his money.

On the other hand, Erica didn't hate him, the way some of her friends hated their dads who came and went. When he was around, he was funny and compassionate. He remained close to his own parents, brothers, and cousins and often included Erica in large family get-togethers. He'd bring Erica and her various stepsiblings around to picnics and parties. He was very proud of her then, and told everybody how smart she was. He never went to jail and he never abused her, but somehow he could never stay on task. He had momentary enthusiasms but nothing ever amounted to anything.

Both of Erica's parents were desperately in love with her. In the early days, they wanted to marry and build a traditional home. According to a Fragile Families study, 90 percent of couples who are living together when their child is born plan on getting married someday. But, as is typical, Erica's parents never performed the deed. According to the Fragile Families research, only 15 percent of those unmarried couples who planned on being married actually did so by the time of their child's first birthday.

There were many reasons they never actually got hitched. They faced very little social pressure to actually do it. They didn't entirely trust each other. They never could afford the glorious wedding of their dreams. They were afraid of divorce and the pain that would spread all around. Most important, the cultural transmission belt had snapped. For at least a few decades in American life, it was simply assumed that couples with children would get married—that this was part of entering adulthood. But somehow those life scripts no longer got passed along, at least in certain subcultures, so a decision that had once been automatic and canalized in the brain now required conscious intention. Marriage was no longer the default option. It took specific initiative. For Erica's parents, it never quite happened.

What was Erica's socioeconomic status? It depended on the month. There were times, when her mom was productive and her dad was around, when she lived a middle-class life. But in other years they slipped back toward poverty and into a different cultural milieu. These downward slides sent them hurtling back into disorganized neighborhoods. One month they'd be living in a neighborhood with intact families and low crime. But then they couldn't make the rent, and they'd have to scramble to find a place in a different neighborhood, with empty lots, high crime, and a varied array of living arrangements from apartment to apartment.

Erica would remember those scenes all her life—the small plastic bags to carry stuff away, saying good-bye to the comforts of the middle class, getting crammed into the spare room of some relative or friend, and then the dreary first visit to the decrepit empty apartment in some half-abandoned neighborhood, which would be their new temporary home.

There were fewer jobs in these new neighborhoods. There was less money. There were fewer men, because so many were in prison. There was more crime. But it wasn't just the material things that were different. Modes of thought and habits of behavior were different, too.

The people in the poorer neighborhoods wanted the same things as everybody else wanted—stable marriages, good jobs, orderly habits. But they lived within a cycle of material and psychological stress. Lack

of money changed culture, and self-destructive culture led to lack of money. The mental and material feedback loops led to distinct psychological states. Some people in these neighborhoods had lower aspirations or no aspirations at all. Some had lost faith in their ability to control their own destinies. Some made inexplicable decisions that they knew would have terrible long-term consequences, but they made them anyway.

Many people in these neighborhoods were exhausted all the time from work and stress. Many lacked self-confidence even while making a great show of pretending they had plenty of it. Many lived on edge, coping with one crisis after another. There were more horrible stories. A girl Erica knew stabbed and killed a classmate in a moment of passion, effectively ruining her life at fifteen. Erica decided that in these neighborhoods you could never show weakness. You could never back down or compromise. You could never take shit from anybody.

To cope with the disorder, the moms set up sharing networks, and would help one another out with child care, food, and anything else. They looked after one another within the networks, but they were alienated from almost everything beyond—the government, the world of middle-class jobs. They radiated distrust—most of it earned. They assumed everyone was out to get them: Every shopkeeper would short-change them; every social worker would take something away.

In short, each cognitive neighborhood had a different set of rules of conduct, a different set of unconscious norms about how one should walk, say hello, view strangers, and view the future. Erica handled the moves between these two different cultures with surprising ease, at least on the surface. It was like jumping from one country to another. In the country of the middle class, men and women lived in relatively stable arrangements, but in poverty country they did not. In middle class country, children were raised to go to college. In poverty country they were not.

Annette Lareau, of the University of Pennsylvania, is the leading scholar of the different cultural norms that prevail at different levels of American society. She and her research assistants have spent over two decades sitting on living-room floors and riding around in the backseats

of cars, observing how families work. Lareau has found that educated-class families and lower-class families do not have parenting styles that are on different ends of the same continuum. Instead, they have completely different theories and models about how to raise their kids.

Educated-class kids like Harold are raised in an atmosphere of what Lareau calls “concerted cultivation.” This involves enrolling the kids in large numbers of adult-supervised activities and driving them from place to place. Parents are deeply involved in all aspects of their children’s lives. They make concerted efforts to provide a constant stream of learning experiences.

The pace is exhausting. Fights about homework are normal. But the children raised in this way know how to navigate the world of organized institutions. They know how to talk casually with adults, how to perform before large audiences, how to look people in the eye and make a good impression. They sometimes even know how to connect actions to consequences.

When Lareau showed lower-class parents the schedule one of her educated-class families stuck to, the lower-class parents were horrified by the pace and the stress. They figured the educated-class kids must be incredibly sad. Lower-class child-rearing, Lareau found, is different. In these homes, there tends to be a much starker boundary between the adult world and the children’s world. Parents tend to think that the cares of adulthood will come soon enough and that children should be left alone to organize their own playtime. When a girl Lareau was watching asked her mother to help her build a dollhouse out of boxes, the mother said no, “casually and without guilt”—because playtime was deemed inconsequential, a child’s sphere and not an adult’s.

Lareau found that lower-class children seemed more relaxed and vibrant. They had more contact with their extended families. Because their parents couldn’t drive them from one activity to another, their leisure time was less organized. They could run outside and play with whatever group of kids they found hanging around the neighborhood. They were more likely to play with kids of all ages. They were less likely to complain about being bored. They even asked their mom’s permission before getting food out of the refrigerator. “Whining, which was

pervasive in middle-class homes, was rare in working-class and poor ones," Lareau wrote.

Harold's childhood fit into the first of Lareau's categories. Erica's childhood was so chaotic she sort of bounced between styles—sometimes her mother doted on her; sometimes she had no mother, only a patient she had to care for and nurse back from the edge.

The lower-class mode has many virtues, but it does not prepare children as well for the modern economy. In the first place, it does not cultivate advanced verbal abilities. Language, as Alva Noë has written, "is a shared cultural practice that can only be learned by a person who is one among many in a special kind of cultural ecosystem." Erica's home, like the homes of most working-class kids, was simply quieter. "The amount of talking in these homes varies," Lareau wrote, "but overall, it is considerably less than in middle-class homes."

Harold's parents kept up a constant patter when he was around. In Erica's home, the TV was more likely to be on all the time. Erica's mom was simply too exhausted to spend much energy on childlike conversation. Scientists have done elaborate calculations to measure the difference in word flows between middle-class and lower-class households. A classic study by Betty Hart and Todd Risley of the University of Kansas found that by the time they are four, children raised in poor families have heard 32 million fewer words than children raised in professional families. On an hourly basis, professional children heard about 487 "utterances." Children growing up in welfare homes heard about 178.

And it wasn't just the quantity; it was the emotional tone. Harold was bathed in approval. Every minuscule accomplishment was greeted with a rapturous paean to his magnificent abilities. Erica heard nearly as many discouraging statements as encouraging ones. Harold's parents quizzed him constantly. They played trivia games and engaged in elaborate duels with mock insults. They were constantly explaining to him why they had made certain decisions and imposed certain restrictions, and Harold felt free to argue with them and offer reasons why they were wrong. Harold's parents also corrected his grammar, so that by the time it came to taking standardized tests, he didn't actually have to learn the

rules of the language. He just went with whatever answer sounded best. These differences in verbal environment have been linked in study after study to differences in IQ scores and academic achievement.

In short, Harold's parents didn't just give him money. They passed down habits, knowledge, and cognitive traits. Harold was part of a hereditary meritocratic class that reinforces itself through genes and strenuous cultivation generation after generation.

Erica didn't have most of these invisible advantages. She lived in a much more disrupted world. According to Martha Farah of the University of Pennsylvania, stress-hormone levels are higher in poor children than in middle-class children. This affects a variety of cognitive systems, including memory, pattern awareness, cognitive control (the ability to resist obvious but wrong answers), and verbal facility. Poor children are also much less likely to live with two biological parents in the home. Research with small mammals has found that animals raised without a father present were slower to develop neural connections than those raised with a father present, and as a result have less impulse control. It is not only a shortage of money and opportunity. Poverty and family disruption can alter the unconscious—the way people perceive and understand the future and their world.

The cumulative effects of these differences are there for all to see. Students from the poorest quarter of the population have an 8.6 percent chance of getting a college degree. Students in the top quarter have a 75 percent chance of earning a college degree. As Nobel Prize-winning economist James J. Heckman had found, 50 percent of lifetime-earnings inequality is determined by factors present in the life of a person by age eighteen. Most of these differences have to do with unconscious skills—that is, attitudes, perceptions, and norms. The gaps in them open up fast.

Emergence

When Erica was in eighth grade—not in the New Hope School, but in an old-fashioned public school—two young Teach for America alumni

started a new charter high school nearby, called simply the Academy. It was meant to pick up the kids who graduated from New Hope, and it had a similar ethos—with uniforms, discipline, and special programs.

The founders had started out with a theory about poverty: They didn't know what caused it. They figured it arose from some mixture of the loss of manufacturing jobs, racial discrimination, globalization, cultural transmission, bad luck, bad government policies, and a thousand other factors. But they did have a few useful observations. They didn't think anybody else knew what caused poverty either. They believed that it was futile to try to find one lever to lift kids out of poverty, because there was no one cause for it. They believed if you wanted to tackle the intergenerational cycle of poverty, you had to do everything at once.

When they first conceived of the Academy, they worked up a presentation for donors, which they later discarded because almost none of the donors understood it. But the premise behind the presentation was still dear to their hearts. The premise was that poverty is an emergent system.

Through most of human history, people have tried to understand their world through reductive reasoning. That is to say, they have been inclined to take things apart to see how they work. As Albert-László Barabási wrote in his influential book *Linked*, "Reductionism was the driving force behind much of the twentieth century's scientific research. To comprehend nature, it tells us, we must decipher its components. The assumption is that once we understand the parts, it will be easy to grasp the whole. Divide and conquer; the devil is in the details. Therefore, for decades we have been forced to see the world through its constituents. We have been trained to study atoms and superstrings to understand the universe; molecules to comprehend life; individual genes to understand complex behavior; prophets to see the origins of fads and religions." This way of thinking induces people to think they can understand a problem by dissecting it into its various parts. They can understand a person's personality if they just tease out and investigate his genetic or environmental traits. This deductive mode is the specialty of conscious cognition—the sort of cognition that is linear and logical.

The problem with this approach is that it has trouble explaining dynamic complexity, the essential feature of a human being, a culture, or a society. So recently there has been a greater appreciation for the structure of emergent systems. Emergent systems exist when different elements come together and produce something that is greater than the sum of their parts. Or, to put it differently, the pieces of a system interact, and out of their interaction something entirely new emerges. For example, benign things like air and water come together and sometimes, through a certain pattern of interaction, a hurricane emerges. Sounds and syllables come together and produce a story that has an emotional power that is irreducible to its constituent parts.

Emergent systems don't rely upon a central controller. Instead, once a pattern of interaction is established, it has a downward influence on the behavior of the components.

For example, let's say an ant in a colony stumbles upon a new food source. No dictator ant has to tell the colony to reorganize itself to harvest that source. Instead, one ant, in the course of his normal foraging, stumbles upon the food. Then a neighboring ant will notice that ant's change in direction, and then a neighbor of that ant will notice the change, and pretty soon, as Steven Johnson puts it, "Local information can lead to global wisdom." The entire colony will have a pheromone superhighway to harvest the new food source. A change has been quickly communicated through the system, and the whole colony mind has restructured itself to take advantage of this new circumstance. There has been no conscious decision to make the change. But a new set of arrangements has emerged, and once the custom has been set, future ants will automatically conform.

Emergent systems are really good at passing down customs across hundreds or thousands of generations. As Deborah Gordon of Stanford discovered, if you put ants in a large plastic tray, they will build a colony. They will also build a cemetery for dead ants, and the cemetery will be as far as possible from the colony. They will also build a garbage dump, which will be as far as possible from both the colony and the cemetery. No individual ant worked out the geometry. In fact, each individual ant may be blind to the entire structure. Instead individual ants followed

local cues. Other ants adjusted to the cues of a few ants, and pretty soon the whole colony had established a precedent of behavior. Once this precedent has been established, thousands of generations can be born and the wisdom will endure. Once established, the precedents exert their own downward force.

There are emergent systems all around. The brain is an emergent system. An individual neuron in the brain does not contain an idea, say, of an apple. But out of the pattern of firing of millions of neurons, the idea of an apple emerges. Genetic transmission is an emergent system. Out of the complex interaction of many different genes and many different environments, certain traits such as aggressiveness might emerge.

A marriage is an emergent system. Francine Klagsbrun has observed that when a couple comes in for marriage therapy, there are three patients in the room—the husband, the wife, and the marriage itself. The marriage is the living history of all the things that have happened between husband and wife. Once the precedents are set, and have permeated both brains, the marriage itself begins to shape their individual behavior. Though it exists in the space between them, it has an influence all its own.

Cultures are emergent systems. There is no one person who embodies the traits of American or French or Chinese culture. There is no dictator determining the patterns of behavior that make up the culture. But out of the actions and relationships of millions of individuals, certain regularities do emerge. Once those habits arise, then future individuals adopt them unconsciously.

Poverty, the two Academy founders believed, is an emergent system, too. The people who live in deep poverty are enmeshed in complex ecosystems no one can fully see and understand.

In 2003 Eric Turkheimer of the University of Virginia published a study that showed that growing up in poverty can lead to a lower IQ. Journalists naturally asked him: What can be done to boost IQ development in poor children? "The honest answer to the question is that I don't think there is anything in particular about the environment that is responsible for the effects of poverty," he wrote later. "I don't think

there is any single thing in an impoverished environment that is responsible for the deleterious effects of poverty."

Turkheimer had spent years trying to find which parts of growing up with a poor background produced the most negative results. He could easily show the total results of poverty, but when he tried to measure the impact of specific variables, he found there was nothing there. He conducted a meta-analysis of forty-three studies that scrutinized which specific elements of a child's background most powerfully shaped cognitive deficiencies. The studies failed to demonstrate the power of any specific variable, even though the total effect of all the variables put together was very clear.

That doesn't mean you do nothing to alleviate the effects of poverty. It means you don't try to break down those effects into constituent parts. It's the total emergent system that has its effects. As Turkheimer notes, "No complex behaviors in free-ranging humans are caused by a linear and additive set of causes. Any important outcome, like adolescent delinquent behavior, has a myriad of interrelated causes, and each of these causes has a myriad of potential effects, inducing a squared-myrriad of environmental complexity even before one gets to the certainty that the environmental effects co-determine each other, or that the package interacts with the just-as-myrriad effects of genes."

For scientists, this circumstance leads to what Turkheimer calls the "Gloomy Prospect." There is no way to pin down and clarify the causes of human behavior or trace the sources of this or that behavior. It is possible to show how emergent conditions, like poverty or single parent-hood, can roughly affect big groups. It is of course possible to show correlations between one thing and another, and those correlations are valuable. But, it is hard or impossible to show how A causes B. Causation is obscured in the darkness of the Gloomy Prospect.

For the founders of the Academy, the lesson was: Fixate on whole cultures, not specific pieces of poverty. No specific intervention is going to turn around the life of a child or an adult in any consistent way. But if you can surround a person with a new culture, a different web of relationships, then they will absorb new habits of thought and behaviors

in ways you will never be able to measure or understand. And if you do surround that person with a new, enriching culture, then you had better keep surrounding them with it because if they slip back into a different culture, then most of the gains will fade away.

The founders figured they would start not just a school but a counterculture. Their school would be an immersive environment that would give lower-class kids access to an achievement ethos. It couldn't be totally hostile to the culture in which they lived, or else they would just reject it. But it would insist on the sort of norms, habits, and messages that had allowed the founders, sons of doctors and lawyers, to go to college. Their school would bluntly acknowledge that we live in an unequal and polarized society. It would declare forthrightly that poor kids need different sorts of institutional support than middle-class kids.

Their school would be "parent neutral," which was a polite way of saying they would blot out the culture the poor kids' parents were unconsciously handing down. The sociologist James Coleman had once found that parents and community have a greater effect on achievement than school. The founders of the Academy decided that their school would not just be a bunch of classrooms where math and English were taught. It would also be a neighborhood and a family. The school the pair envisioned would train the kids to see childhood as a ladder to college, a ladder out.

The difficult thing about emergence is that it is very hard in emergent systems to find the "root cause" of any problem. The positive side is that if you have negative cascades producing bad outcomes, it is also possible to have positive cascades producing good ones. Once you have a positive set of cultural cues, you can get a happy avalanche as productive influences feed on and reinforce one another.

There was no way Erica was going to not be in this school. By the time she was in eighth grade, Erica had grown taller and prettier but no less stubborn. Some deep dissatisfaction had crept into her blood. She screamed at her mother and loved her fiercely, a tangle too complex for anybody to understand. On the streets with her peers, she argued, overreacted, and sometimes fought. At school she was both an excellent student and a problem. Somehow it had gotten into her head that life is a

battle, and she lived on a warlike footing, antagonizing people for no good reason.

She was sometimes a bitch to people who were trying to help her. She knew she was being a bitch, and she knew it was wrong, but she didn't stop. When she looked in the mirror, her motto was "I am strong." She persuaded herself she hated her school, which she didn't. She persuaded herself she hated her neighborhood, which she sort of did. Here was her true genius. She somehow understood she couldn't change herself on her own. She couldn't remain in her current environment and just turn her prospects around by force of individual willpower. She would always be subject to the same emotional cues. They would overpower conscious intention.

But she could make one decision—to change her environment. And if she could change her environment, she would be subject to a whole different set of cues and unconscious cultural influences. It's easier to change your environment than to change your insides. Change your environment and then let the new cues do the work.

She spent the first part of eighth grade learning about the Academy, talking to students, asking her mother, and quizzing her teachers. One day in February, she heard that the board of the school had arrived for a meeting, and she decided in her own junior-warrior manner that she'd demand that they let her in.

She snuck into the school when a group of kids came out the back door for gym class, and she made her way to the conference room. She knocked, and entered the room. There was a group of tables pushed toward the middle of the room, with about twenty-five adults sitting around the outside of them. The two Academy founders were sitting in the middle on the far side of the tables.

"I would like to come to your school," she said loud enough for the whole room to hear.

"How did you get in here?" somebody at the table barked.

"May I please come to your school next year?"

One of the founders smiled. "You see, we have a lottery system. If you enter your name, there is a drawing in April—"

"I would like to come to your school," Erica interrupted, launching

into the speech she had rehearsed in her head for months. "I tried to get into New Hope when I was ten, and they wouldn't let me. I went down to the agency and I told the lady, but she wouldn't let me. It took them three cops to get me out of there, but I'm thirteen now, and I've worked hard. I get good grades. I know appropriate behavior. I feel I deserve to go to your school. You can ask anyone. I have references." She held out a piece of binder paper with her teachers' names on it.

"What's your name?" the founder asked.

"Erica."

"You see, we have rules about this. Many people would like to come to the Academy, so we decided the fairest thing to do is to have a lottery each spring."

"That's just a way of saying no."

"You'll have as fair a chance as anyone."

"That's just a way of saying no. I need to go to the Academy. I need to go to college."

Erica had nothing more to say. She just stood there silently. She decided it would take some more cops to take her away.

Sitting across from the founders was a great fat man. He was a hedge-fund manager who had made billions of dollars and largely funded the school. He was brilliant, but had the social graces of a gnat. He took a pen from his pocket and wrote something on a piece of paper. He looked at Erica one more time, folded the paper, and slid it across the table to the founders. They opened it up and read the note. It said, "Rig the fucking lottery."

The founders were silent for a moment and looked at each other. Finally, one of them looked up and said in a low voice. "What did you say your name was?"

"Erica."

"Listen, Erica, at the Academy we have rules. We have one set of rules for everybody. Those rules we follow to the letter. We demand discipline. Total discipline. So I'm only going to say this to you once. If you ever tell anybody about bursting in here and talking to us like that, I will personally kick you out of our school. Are we clear about that?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then write your name and address on a piece of paper. Put it on the table, and I will see you in September."

The fat man heaved himself up out of his chair and handed Erica his pen and a little pad. She had never seen a pen like that, except on TV. She wrote out her name and address and her Social Security number, just to make sure, and she left.

When she was gone the members of the board just looked at one another. Then after a few seconds, everybody was sure she was out of earshot. The hedge-fund guy broke out into a grin. The room erupted in a wave of joyful laughter.