

read about the students—whose stories may resonate with “successful” high school students throughout this country—ask yourself the following questions: What kind of behavior is fostered by the expectations of the school community and by those outside of the school? Can students meet these expectations without sacrificing personal and academic goals and beliefs? Can parents encourage their children to strive for future success without pushing too hard or advocating questionable behavior? What can school teachers and administrators do in light of the constraints of college admission requirements and national education policies that spur competition for high grades and test scores? Are we fostering an environment that promotes intellectual curiosity, cooperation, and integrity, or are our schools breeding anxiety, deception, and frustration? Are they impeding the very values they claim to embrace? Are we preparing students well for the future? Are they ready for the world of work? Are they ready to be valuable members of our society? And is this the kind of education to which we as a nation should aspire?

Listen to the voices of these five students.

CHAPTER 2

Kevin Romoni:

A 3.8 Kind of Guy

I've been really fortunate, and I mean the breaks went my way. You know, I didn't let up and I tried almost as hard as I could, and it's just that I don't want to let other people down. . . . I don't know if you'd say I'm like a people pleaser. I only do stuff to please other people because pleasing other people pleases me.

Kevin Romoni is a people pleaser. He's the student who offers to collect the homework for the teacher, or to gather the PE equipment. He says, “Bonjour, Madame” each morning to his French teacher and asks about her weekend. He is the class cheerleader, the one who gives the high five to students when they answer questions correctly. He pats a nearby shoulder and says, “Good job, Jerome. You're a star.” He reminds his fellow English students to clap loudly during the oral presentations—“because it takes guts to get up there, dudes.” He is also happy to play the clown at times, crack-

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ing a joke to break the tension in history class before a test or attempting to tell a funny story with his poor accent in French class about president “Beeceel Cleenton and Madame Hillary?” He is short for his age, with straight brown hair that hangs in his face according to the latest style, and a dazzling smile. A natural athlete, he is the most valuable player on the junior varsity soccer team and was picked for all-league this year. He is also considered to be a good student and regularly gets his name on the school bulletin board under the heading “students with honors.” He is bright, funny, polite, and charming. And he knows it.

He describes himself in his writing as a “glass is half-full kind of guy,” and he certainly has reason to feel this way. His family moved from a large city to the suburbs when Kevin was in the third grade. They live in a newly remodeled home on a beautiful tree-lined street in one of the best areas of town. Kevin has his own room, complete with a large-screen television set and all the newest video games, a jumbo stereo system, Macintosh computer and printer, and several photographs of past prom dates and best friends. He points out many times to me that he has had the same close-knit group of friends since he moved to this community, and they hang out together every day. They go off campus to lunch, play basketball, listen to the newest CDs and take most of their classes together.

His parents are educated Faircrest professionals. His father, a Caucasian, is an aeronautical engineer who holds degrees from Stanford, Berkeley, and the University of California at San Diego, and his mother, a first-generation Japanese-American, put herself through night school and became an executive assistant to the CEO of one of the largest consulting firms in the area. Kevin has an older sister who dropped out a couple of times from community college and, as he describes it, “really messed up her life.” He also has a sister, eleven months younger, who attends the same high school but

is in a lower academic track than Kevin and has separate friends and interests.

His younger sister doesn't receive the kind of high grades that

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Kevin does, but he characterizes her as a better student because she “studies her butt off, makes index cards, and does everything a good student is supposed to do.” He, on the other hand, describes himself as a different kind of student:

I would say I am a good person, not a good student. . . . I mean, I'm not one of those people that shoots for a B. I'll do what it takes to get an A, but I don't think I'm a good student. I mean, I don't study as often as I should, I don't read as often as I should, I don't keep up as often as I should. I'm still getting by, getting mostly A's, but it's just by the skin of my teeth . . . and I really want to change that. I mean my parents say it's going to catch up with me, catch up with me really quick. It's going to have bad effects, . . . that's what they always say.

Kevin feels pressure to change his study habits, even though he admits that he is doing well in school. He strives to meet the expectations of his parents and teachers—to be the good student—and he worries about letting them down.

In fact, the pressure to please others is so intense for Kevin that it dominates his school experience. Instead of engaging with his classes, he spends most of his time trying to obtain the “good grades” that will get him into college and thus make his parents happy. He's aware of the stress he feels and reluctantly tells me that it's “probably beneficial,” believing that without it, he wouldn't be where he is today. The irony is not apparent to Kevin, though, that perhaps without the undue pressure, he might have quite a different school experience, one not so heavily marked by competition, frustration, and fear.

Pleasing Dad: The “Good” Student

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Kevin’s father told him once that “pressure turns coal into diamonds,” and, as is clear from many of our conversations, Kevin feels pressure:

I can’t look like I am slacking off. This is very important, *very*. More important to my dad than to me, but also important for me. I have taken seven periods [the normal load is six] my whole career here, so I don’t want to look like a slacker.

See, my older sister really messed up her life. When we moved, you know, from Redland, she got caught in that whole transfer thing. She was a sophomore then—my age now—and had a really tough time adjusting to a new school. She graduated in, like, 1988, then went to community college—dropped out, went back and forth. Then she dropped out finally. . . . She did get A plusses though in French like every year. She’s basically fluent.

That’s why I took French, because my mom and sisters took it. That’s why I want to do well in school. To prove to my dad and to justify the move was good. It is important for me to do well. . . . See my parents want me to do this engineer or lawyer thing. . . . My dad wants me to go to Stanford like him. He says college leads to success.

Don’t look like a slacker. Don’t be like your sister. Go to college and be a success. Make us proud. Kevin explains that he hears over and over again about the importance of getting good grades for mainly external future-oriented benefits—college acceptance, his parents’ pride, a lucrative career. Rarely does he hear that he should strive to do well in school for his own edification and enjoyment. Whether

or not his parents intended the messages to be heard this way, this is how Kevin characterizes them.

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It is no wonder then that Kevin is obsessed with his grades. He calculates his grade point average (GPA) several times a day—when ever he gets back a test or quiz. He asks his counselor for advice as to which courses will “look better” on his transcript for college: For instance, he can take French IV, where he might get a B, or start a new language in his junior year where he has a likely chance of getting an A, since it will be an introductory level course. His counselor says the best option is for him get an A in French, but if that is not possible, then his next best option is to take Latin I. Kevin opts for the latter, explaining that Latin might help him with the vocabulary section of his SATs. He also admits that he takes physical education every year because it’s an “easy A to pad the GPA,” and he is thankful that the University of California system awards extra points on the transcripts of students who take advanced placement and honors classes. On the rare occasion that he gets a C, “a practically failing grade” by his standards, he re-takes the class during the summer to replace the grade on his transcript. He did this with his French class last year and “will probably need to do it again.” Unfortunately, he is not allowed to re-take his English course, and therefore becomes extremely upset when he learns that he might get a B+ for the semester. In every school decision he makes, the paramount importance of grades is clear:

My goal is to get a 3.7 or higher. . . . My dad will give me 50 bucks if I get it—even though 50 bucks isn’t really that much. . . . Do I have any other goals? [long pause] I mean look, grades are the focus. I tell you, people don’t go to school to learn. They go to get good grades which brings them to college, which brings them the high-paying job, which brings them to happiness, so they think. But basically, grades is where it’s at. They’re the focus

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and otherwise. Period.
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In the narrow world of the academic track, his assessment appears accurate. Most of his friends seem intent on achieving good grades, and many discuss future college plans with certainty. Aside from the usual high school banter about sex, music, food, and parties, their classroom conversations often turn to grades and the stress of having too much work to do. Though this might not be the norm for “every student in every high school,” in Kevin’s world, getting high grades is a primary goal.

With this focus clearly in mind, Kevin uses various strategies to achieve his goal: He “kisses up,” compromises, begs, and even resorts at times to cheating, in his efforts to be the “good student.” He also does the “minimum required to get by”—usually at the last minute.

Kevin believes that he is “the biggest procrastinator known to man.” He typically puts off starting his homework until nine or ten o’clock at night and often opts to “wing” things the next day at school if he is not adequately prepared. He waits until the very last moment before starting to write a paper or work on a large project, and this delay usually results in a marathon work session the night before the due date. He proudly tells horror stories of staying up for two straight days writing his English I-search paper (a large research project on the daily practices of the local police) or reading 130 pages of his history text the night before the test. His parents are very concerned about these study habits and even bought him special self-help cassette tapes on procrastination, which, he says with a grin, he “[hasn’t] even turned on yet. Talk about procrastination.”

He manages to get high grades despite such late starts because he knows the system well. He knows, for example, that his math and

French teachers only glance at the pages when they check in the homework, so he frequently skips some exercises. He also knows that he has a real talent for “winging it”—especially on oral presentations or class discussions. A few well-placed questions during a class discussion serve to disguise the fact that he is four chapters behind in his reading. And, in his oral presentation of the paper on local police practices, he knew that a good hypothetical scenario involving the police’s prejudicial treatment of teenagers would get his friends talking for at least half of the time he was supposed to be presenting his report. Reflecting on this, he explains his usual approach to “doing school”: “I’m obviously not working to my fullest potential, . . . but students have a way of coping by only doing the minimum required. Nobody does more than what they have to.”

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Again, Kevin generalizes about the way all students handle the pressures to succeed. His statement does not seem as accurate to me as the earlier one on the focus of grades (see the student discussed in the next chapter, for instance); nonetheless, it is important to Kevin that he show he is just like every other student in the way he copes with the stress. This may serve to alleviate any guilt he might feel for not fulfilling his potential, and thereby letting his parents down; if “nobody” does more than is required, then surely Kevin cannot be blamed for only doing the minimum.¹

This minimalist strategy, however, requires that Kevin bolster his approach by making sure he stays in the good graces of his teachers and the school administrators. He admits that he is “excessively nice and polite” to his teachers and befriends them because they grade his papers. It is not clear whether this strategy wins Kevin higher marks, but he feels such behavior certainly doesn’t hurt when the grading process can be quite subjective. Many of his teachers tell me that he is “a really good kid” whom they entrust with such special tasks as taking attendance or delivering messages to the office. In

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turn, Kevin's amiability allows him to get away with certain behaviors in class that would otherwise not be allowed. He has the special privilege of sitting on top of the file cabinet in his history class, or lying in the middle of the floor to take notes in English, or borrowing the teacher's chair at times in chemistry.

His peers mock him for using this strategy and call him the "biggest kiss ass in the country." For instance, Kevin tells a friend that he "begged his way to an A—in chemistry." The friend is surprised that this teacher (who has a tough reputation in the school) was willing to change the quarter grade. His friend looks at me and explains: "Parents and teachers love Kevin because he is just like Eddie Haskell,² coming in and helping them with things and saying, like, 'You look great Mrs. B.'" Kevin admits that politeness has its benefits but also says that he genuinely likes most of his teachers and many of the school administrators and that he would "rather be nice to people in general than just be a jerk." Though this may seem contradictory to his false geniality above, I believe Kevin does like his teachers and honestly prefers to treat people with courtesy and respect. It is part of his cheerleader mentality.

Of course, relying on last minute work sessions and charm can only go so far, and at times Kevin is forced to take more drastic actions to achieve his goals. He occasionally "compares answers" on quizzes and tests and often copies homework from his friends. In his chemistry class, he had a regular cheating system worked out with another student to help him do well on some of the tough exams. When the student was absent during the last chapter test of the year before the final, Kevin was forced to do it alone. He got the test back and proudly showed me the high score: 36 out of 40. He smiled:

Yeah, I needed that. That's a real morale boost for me. [He whips out his calculator and quickly calculates his cumulative chem-

istry grade.] Ninety. Not bad. I still have time to get it higher. [He stares at the test.] Yes! I did it. Without Bob too. Not bad, huh? Hey listen to this answer. . . . [He proceeds to show me his answers to the difficult problems at the end of the test. He looks proud and continues to stare at his answers for the first ten minutes of class.]

Clearly, Kevin is more proud of the good grade when he achieves it honestly, but he cannot say at the end of the year that he will not resort again to cheating if he finds he needs to; instead he shakes his head in mock sarcasm and says, "Teenagers these days—no sense of morals."

Kevin explains sincerely that, ideally, he wishes he could forget about the grades and just do the work the way *he* wants to do it. He wishes he could write papers the way he would like to see them written, instead of how the teachers want to see them. He says with a sigh, "I wish I could say I'm an individual, and I am not going to sacrifice my individuality for a grade, you know. . . . just write for writing's sake." But he feels he cannot do this. Instead, he says, he "compromises his beliefs" about good writing and tries to guess how the teacher wants the essay to be written or the test question to be answered. He gives up his own sense of style³ and strives to please others. This is, after all, a key part of what one learns in school—how to assimilate, behave according to a certain system, learn to write and think and speak the way you are taught, the way teachers, parents, and community members believe will lead to future success. In this sense, Kevin is doing well; his strategies, for the most part, seem to get him the results he desires (pleasing his teachers and his parents), and school officials consider him a success.

However, throughout the semester, I see glimpses of a vastly different side of Kevin, a side that is revealed when the strategies don't

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Getting Furious: The Competitor

Kevin hides this fierce side of himself well, because it doesn't jibe with his "nice boy" reputation. It comes out in PE class, in an occasional comment when he receives a low grade, and in his conversations with friends. Behind his motivation to please others is a competitor who wants to succeed. Usually, he vents this rage at himself, pushing himself harder to meet expectations; at other times, he directs it outward. Either way, it is a fairly stark contrast to the Kevin the school community usually sees.

Here is Kevin during PE class:

He is on fire. He races through the warm-up exercises, grabs his tennis racket and screams loudly to no one in particular: "Did I mention we are undefeated so far? UNDEFEATED, BABY?" He screams, "Yes! We are the best!" and throws his racket in the air. "Hey, who hasn't lost to us yet?" During the game he taunts his opponents: "What's the score? Me winning: a lot to a little." He laughs demonically when he makes a shot and wiggles his rear end in the air. After the match he is told to do 25 pushups for jumping over the net in victory. (He never does these.) . . . However, when it looks as if he might lose a game due to several of his double fault serves, he screams at his partner who merely offered some helpful advice: "FUCK! Don't coach me buddy!"

Later in the semester, the PE teacher, who is one of Kevin's biggest fans, tells me about an unusual accident in the warm-up room. Apparently Kevin punched three huge holes in the wall with his feet. At first no one confessed; then, after the teacher called security,

Kevin admitted his guilt, apologized for his mistake, and offered to pay for the repairs. He swears that he had no idea why he did it; he just didn't know what came over him. He explains that this was a good time to be "in" with the administration since he simply walked up to the principal and said, "Hey Dr. G, I'll take care of it. OK? I'll pay for it, no problem." And that was that. Kevin received no other punishment besides paying for the damage.⁴ The PE teacher told me later that the usual punishment for such behavior is suspension.

Another time I saw this kind of behavior from Kevin was in English class. It was a week before the English I-search paper was due, and the students were told originally that they would have time to work on their papers in class that day. Instead, the substitute teacher assigned a short story and a writing assignment. Kevin was extremely upset about this change of plans and lost his temper in front of the class:

Hell no! I am not reading this story. [He throws the story to the ground.] Mr. K is so unfair! I am not doing it. I don't care. I am having words with Mr. K. Dude, this is due today? Due today? What happened to, "Bring all your work with you to class and we will give you time to work"? . . . Mr. K is a liar! He said he would give us the whole week to work on it. It's a 30-page paper!

Later he tells me angrily that he had many other assignments due this week and really needed the time in class to work on his paper. He felt he was rushing through the assignment and was furious because he wasn't given adequate time to do the research.

A month later while waiting to receive the graded English I-search paper, Kevin is visibly nervous. He bites his nails and says out loud, "I revel in my B-plussness. . . . I am settling for mediocrity. . . . Screw A's and go for the B+. It sucks." When he gets his

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paper back, he curses loudly: "Bl God damn it! I just knew it!" Reflecting on his own behavior later that day, Kevin is still quite upset. He calls his teacher "an unfair asshole" and a "bastard." He admits that he is under "severe" pressure and says,

I have got to take this pressure off myself somehow. I need an A in English and I am going to get a B+. Sometimes I just feel like giving up. I don't care. Oh, I just know I am going to get a B in that class and I don't know what to do.

When faced with the possibility of not achieving the grade point average he and his parents have set as a goal, Kevin panics. At first he tries to convince himself that it doesn't matter. He says aloud that he will settle for mediocrity—that he just doesn't care. But clearly he does care. The possibility of failure worries him enough that he loses the usual control he exerts over his temper and shows a side of himself of which he says he is not proud. I observe that this furious side is typically reserved for safe places before it is unleashed; he shows it in PE class (where this competitive behavior is usually rewarded—hence, the "easy A" he receives), and he shows it to the substitute teacher, someone who is not in a position of power to grade him. Only when he gets the graded paper back does he curse loudly in front of his English teacher, but he would never call him a "bastard" to his face. He even admits to me that he "b.s.'d his way through the paper," and that it didn't deserve an A, but he *needed* the high grade. When Kevin's usual strategies prove ineffective, he literally does not know what else to do. For the final weeks of the semester, he tries desperately not to care about his English grade, especially because he cannot do much about it at this point, but it continues to infuriate him.⁵

Finally, near the end of the year, the pressure catches up with Kevin. He describes what he calls a "breakdown" that occurred

when it became clear that he could not meet everyone's expectations for him:

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I had a breakdown on May 2nd. I was feeling frustrated and behind, and I had all these tests and it was like I was being sucked under . . . sucked down. I wasn't doing well in my classes, and I was feeling helpless, and I *don't* like feeling helpless. I was miserable and tired and I didn't know what to do. So I went to my mom and my dad, and I said, "I can't take this. . . . I just can't do it; I cannot do it anymore." And they said, "Don't worry Kevin, just do your best. That's all we expect from you."

And that was a relief. . . . Actually it was refreshing to hear it from them, and I knew I had to just dust myself off and pick myself up, and start getting my act together. . . . It wasn't really a breakdown. I guess more like I just couldn't take it anymore. I know I needed to motivate myself since no one else could do it for me. So that's why I studied for chemistry. We didn't have homework because he didn't want to grade it, so I got really lazy and behind and didn't understand the chapter. So I took all these notes and did all these problems, see . . . [He shows me the notes.] And I studied for two tests in one night. I took all these notes on two of my French chapters, too. . . . And then the night after that I finished *Siddhartha*. I read 90 pages in one night.

And then I just started knocking down these tests. Everything is starting to click. [He points to his head and smiles.] . . . Basically I am studying, and I never used to really study before. I would do the homework and listen in class, but I wouldn't really study. Now I do practice problems, take notes, other stuff, too, to study. If you study, you do well.

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For Kevin, this “breakdown” signifies a way to re-define himself as a student. He is relieved to hear what he believes are new expectations from his parents—that he do the best he can—which sounds much different to him from “Get the good grades you need to be admitted to Stanford.” He implies that these new expectations cause him to be self-motivated (as opposed to working hard to please his parents). Now he is “really” studying, that is, taking notes, reading ahead, and behaving according to his definition of a good student, and he finds he is successful on several tests and assignments in the week that follows his breakdown.

This burst of energy and commitment to studying, however, comes at the end of the year for Kevin, in a final push to get his grades up. He isn’t reading *Siddhartha* for understanding (in fact, he tells me later, he didn’t “get the book or the stupid group test we had on it. . . . it was too deep”), nor, in my opinion, is he engaging with the chemistry or French material in a significant way. In fact, the breakdown doesn’t necessarily change his habits as much as it serves to show the intense pressure he feels to succeed. His parents still expect his “best,” so do his teachers, and so, it turns out, does he. Kevin doesn’t want to settle for less than a 3.7 grade point average, and when it looks as though he may not achieve this, he pushes himself even harder.

Another episode seems significant in exemplifying Kevin’s pattern of “getting furious” when faced with failure and then working hard to fulfill expectations. This time he felt the “competitive urge” to push himself to understand the concept of imaginary numbers. He told me that he didn’t want people to “think less of his abilities” and that he had to show them—his parents, teachers, friends—that he could succeed.

I was in class thinking about it, and I was so mad, I was getting furious because I wanted to check my work and it was like all wrong. I was frustrated like hell. I was getting most of the right numbers, but not the negative signs. I never wanted to understand something so much in math. It was like a personal thing between the teacher and me. I was so mad and I was asking like a flurry of questions and nothing she said was making sense.

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The turning point was when I asked if you have a negative sign, does that account for the fact that “r” is present? And she said she doesn’t know if I should think of it that way—that I should understand it for what it is. . . . She said I need to gain confidence. She was totally condescending. It was like she thought less of my abilities, and I hate that. . . . All that period I was so mad. And [my friends] were understanding it and I couldn’t do it. See. Usually I don’t get frustrated, but this whole concept of imaginary numbers perplexes me. I learn something one way my whole life, and now none of those rules apply. God, it’s so frustrating.

Afterward, he works hard to learn the concept on his own, without the teacher’s help. He sees her during break and yells out, “Hey I think I am finally getting these imaginary numbers!” And later, he proudly shows me the high score he receives on the unit quiz. In this case, like the burst of energy he displays after the breakdown, Kevin is determined to push harder to prove that he can do well. He seems to reserve this determination (and the anger that usually accompanies it) as a sort of last resort, to be used only when things look most bleak and he is in danger of letting others down.

Thus, the moments of “real studying” (by Kevin’s definition of the term) are rare and usually happen when he determines that he must change his ways or risk failure. However, I notice a few other times during the semester when Kevin truly seems to be engaged

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so important to mingle among the adults for a change. . . . It is strange to think back to those lost Christmases of yesterday. Now my Grandma Helen is gone and the food doesn't taste quite as good. My Uncle Leo is gone and the jokes aren't quite as funny. Christmas gets harder and harder every year.

It was not so much the quality of the writing that struck me as particularly impressive; it was the fact that he asked to read the story aloud to me. I took that as a sign of great pride. Usually the students I shadowed offered to show me their work but never to read it aloud. In addition, Kevin refers specifically to the passion with which he wrote the portrait. Unlike the other work he did that received high marks, on this project he felt he truly deserved the A because he wrote from his heart. Though the grade was still a major focus, the writing was "real" for him and legitimate; he didn't cheat or kiss up or compromise, and so he felt his success was sweeter and more genuine.

Kevin discusses his community service project, PenPals, with the same kind of passion. He and a friend created the project freshman year as part of an assignment in their English class. The students were required to do ten hours of service, but Kevin and Ian spent more than 100 hours organizing students at the high school and a few local elementary schools to donate school supplies and clothing for children in the community who could not afford these necessities. This year they decided to continue and expand the project on their own—not for any course credit and not for a grade. Kevin notes with pride that he and his friends do the project without any adult sponsors or supervisors; "It's really kids helping kids directly. . . . we do everything ourselves." And aside from some friendly advice from Ian's mother, this is true: The boys organized

volunteer recruitment meetings and appointed site leaders. They contacted principals and parent teacher associations for approval. They supervised the distribution of collection bags to thirteen schools in the district, made promotional signs, and passed out 6,500 flyers. They appealed to local businesses and service organizations for help and received several thousand dollars' worth of supplies and in-kind donations. They collected all the bags (which literally filled a large meeting room at a nearby church) and spent the entire month of July sorting through the donated items. They collected so much, in fact, that they were featured in the city newspapers and broadcast news reports. Finally, at the end of the summer, they distributed the clothing and supplies to the schools that indicated they had students in need. In all, Kevin probably spent more than 200 hours working on PenPals, and plans to do it all again next year. He and Ian are even writing a handbook so the project can be a "legacy" to the school, and students can continue to run it after the boys graduate.

He explains the motivation behind the project:

Community service is a big part of my life. I like it. It's fun. [I do it] to feel good about myself. Just to know I'm doing something to impact the community. . . . There's, like, studies that show that lack of school supplies, school necessities and proper clothing, contribute to the lack of self-esteem, which in turn contributes to the big thing about grades. . . . So if you get the problem early and help them with their self-esteem and help them get these common necessities that aren't that expensive, that aren't that hard to get, then you can in turn change them slightly.

In a later interview he adds that the rewards of helping others outweigh the typical rewards he receives in school:

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with the curriculum. These are the times when he is not necessarily motivated by external factors and seems passionate about accomplishing his tasks.

Motivated by Passion: The Engaged Learner

Three times during the semester I hear Kevin discuss work he has done of which he is very proud. He has read *Don Quixote* (the abridged version), he has written a Family Portrait (five short stories with photos about his childhood), and he has successfully led PenPals, a community service project.⁶ He tells me he read *Don Quixote* to “kill two birds with one stone.” The students were assigned to do a book report in English class, and they were learning about the Renaissance in European history class, so he chose to “open [his] mind to a new perspective⁷” and read a more challenging book than he normally would have selected. This time he read slowly—because he had to in order to understand the difficult language used in the text, and because he wanted to “for the entertainment value.” In one of our interviews, he jokingly compares himself to the knight errant who has a perfect vision of his life in his head and tries really hard to meet that vision, but “sometimes he doesn’t succeed.” Kevin emphasizes that “at least the guy always tries; he tries real hard.” This change in attitude seems significant because, although he was reading for credit in his classes, he went beyond the minimum requirement in selecting a difficult book, and he took the time to think about the book in relation to his own life. He *felt* something when he read about the knight errant, and though he mocks himself for making the comparison, his statement implies that he connected with the character and perhaps learned something about himself, specifically, the value of perseverance. He does not talk in this way about other texts or materials he encountered during the semester.

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Even more striking is how Kevin talks about the Family Portrait he wrote for his English class. The students were asked to find five photographs from their past and to write a short story on the memories they had about each picture. The assignment was to coincide with the reading of *A House on Mango Street*, a book about a Mexican girl’s recollection of her childhood. Kevin rolled his eyes when he first received the assignment and wrote the portrait “all in one night.” In our final interview, though, he said this was the school project of which he was most proud⁷ because:

I got my best writing grade on this. . . . I think I really deserved that grade, like, I didn’t get away with anything on this one.⁷ Cause it was about my family. When you write about something passionate and you write about real love . . . that’s when I think, that’s when, like, I get decent grades on poetry and stuff like that because it comes from me here. [He points to his heart.]

He then asked if he could read one of the stories aloud to me. It was a memory of a Christmas Day spent at his uncle’s house, accompanied by a picture of a young Kevin and his sisters opening presents under a Christmas tree. It was fairly good tenth-grade writing, with lots of concrete details to describe the day and just the right amount of sentiment:⁸

Nothing could ever pull us away from our precious toys, nothing except my Grandma Helen’s cooking. My Grandma Helen was blessed with a heavenly gift. She had the power to make anything taste good. Her cooking was so good that it could make a five-year-old beg for seconds of lima beans. Our Christmas meal was usually unconventional. We had turkey, homemade pizza, kidney beans, hors d’oeuvres, homemade bread, custard, and ice cream pie. I remember sitting down at Christmas dinner feeling

KEVIN
ROMONI

I mean we are bringing joy to people and to ourselves, so that's why we do it, you know? No, we're not working for the recognition. We work for the fact that we like to help people, and it's a lot of work, like a job really, but we don't get paid, but it's worth it. . . .

I think I'm learning a lot more through PenPals than I actually would through high school. I mean, Pals, I mean it's like a business right now. I mean it's like we have to call people, we have to make contacts, we have to network, we have to, like, manage people, manage time, . . . and it's so much more than, the rewards are so much greater than grades. . . . You actually get to see, I mean a grade is a letter, but these people you're actually helping, do you know what I'm saying?

He points up to the newspaper articles written about the project that he has taped to the ceiling over his bed and says, "See I put that on my ceiling 'cause every morning I look up and I can feel good about myself."

Kevin does not post his transcript or his grade point average above his bed. These indicators of achievement do not mean as much to him and do not seem to make him feel as good about himself; rather, he values the work he does for the community above his school work for a number of reasons. He enjoys the opportunity to actually help, to make a difference in his community, to do something that feels real. He likes the fact that he can practice skills needed for business such as organizing people and managing his time. He likes that he and his friends can work together on the project without the help of adults. Kevin works as hard for PenPals and worries as much about the project as he does for his regular school work, except in this case, his motivation to do more than the minimum requirements appears to be intrinsic—it comes from the heart—and his work is rewarded in ways that are meaningful to him.

KEVIN

ROMONI

In fact, when imagining an ideal school, Kevin admits that he would like to see more projects done like PenPals that "matter" and that teach "people skills." He believes the real purpose of high school is to teach "life lessons like how to get along with others," lessons that he feels he has learned well so far and that will help him later in life. This is why he emphasizes in an earlier interview that he thinks he is a "good person, not a good student." He gets more pleasure out of helping people than out of achieving high grades.

When reflecting on the past semester and all the pressure to succeed, Kevin leaves the fantasy world of his ideal school and reverts back to his focus on grades. Success as a good person, it seems, is still not enough for Kevin to feel fulfilled. This time he compares himself to his friend Ian who struggles to maintain a 4.0 average and to balance several extracurricular activities on top of his academic load:

I balance a lot, but I just don't have as much as Ian. . . . I mean, I don't see how he does it, but he does, and more power to him. . . . But I wouldn't want that. I wouldn't want the kind of life Ian has. I've told him that before. Because I know that he's probably going to have more opportunities because of what he's doing right now, but he's not having any fun. . . . Because he's really scared to have fun because his whole life is just balancing on one little teeter totter thing, and like one little thing could throw it all off balance. My life's a lot better. I'd rather be me. I mean Ian's really smarter, he's in more honors classes, but—I don't care. I'd rather have fun and live life now, you know, and really have fun and do well at the same time. I like how I am now. I don't think I want to be classified as a 4.0 student; I would rather just be a 3.8 kind of guy.

KEVIN
ROMONI

When taken literally, it seems Kevin wants to be defined by his grade point average (one that is actually a bit higher than his current average). He admits that he feels pressure and must strive to balance his desires. He finds solace in the fact that at least he has more fun than his friend. He convinces himself that he can really “live life” (go to parties, goof off in class, hang out with his friends) and that this is a fair trade-off to getting a 4.0. Perhaps Kevin uses this as another excuse for why he is not fulfilling his potential (he’d rather live life than do the best he can in school), or as a way of competing with Ian (at least he has fun and does well enough). In any case, Kevin’s actions belie the belief that he is happy to be a 3.8 kind of guy, and this attitude represents another strategy he uses to cope with the pressure.

His process for “doing school,” thus, necessitates compromises. He feels obliged to choose conformity over authenticity in both his written assignments as well as his classroom behavior. He is compelled to emphasize external, future-oriented goals over personal satisfaction, except in the rare cases of doing community service and being able to attend parties while maintaining his high GPA, and—he attempts to convince himself that his behavior, if not genuine, is at least fairly “normal” and representative of the other students. “Everybody” does the minimum required to get by and everybody focuses on grades instead of learning the material. The pressure Kevin feels to succeed is his prime motivation, and though he doesn’t like it, and it causes him occasional “breakdowns,” he is resolved to rely on the strategies that have worked for him thus far. Until he hears messages from his parents, the school, and elsewhere that reward other kinds of behavior, Kevin will continue to work for the A’s, if not for a 4.0, then for a 3.8. If he is unfulfilled, at least he can try to convince himself that he is having more fun than some of the other students he knows, students like Eve Lin in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 3

Eve Lin: Life as a High School Machine

I was really stressed this weekend. I have a calculus test coming up, which means I have to do the homework for the past two weeks. I also have a physics quiz, which, of course, I was behind in that class by two chapters. So I played field hockey on Saturday with the team, and then did all the physics homework on Saturday and Sunday. Then I had two papers for English class. They are short papers, but still, I had to read the stories and then try to say something intellectual about them and relate them to my life. So I took No-Doze on Sunday night and kept drinking coffee, but I fell asleep writing my physics lab. A few hours later, at like 4 AM I woke up with a stomachache, but I had to do these papers, so I drank more coffee, and just kept writing. I had severe pains this morning which is probably like appendicitis or something, but look at me, I am still drinking coffee! I will finish the papers during lunch and then try to do all this stuff for ASB. ¹ [She groans.] I swear I am not going to make it; I am going to die!