

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.<sup>1</sup> [She groans.] I swear I am not going to make it; I am going to die!*

JUNIOR year is "hell-year" for Eve Lin. Almost every week is "the worst" in her life, as she allows the endless demands of chapter tests, research projects, reading assignments, and study sessions to drive her to race through each day in a constant state of stress. She describes her life as one of "push, push, push," of "just surviving until June," and of literally working almost every moment of every day. She frequently does school work during brunch and lunch periods, and each night after dinner until the early morning hours. She "lives for" the weekends when she can catch up on all the homework that she could not complete during the week, and she spends her vacations working six or seven hours a day on school assignments. She admits that she is exhausted all the time, but that she can't help it: "This is just my work style. . . . This is how I do school."

Eve is overextended. She is enrolled in every available advanced placement and honors level course. She is a member of 12 school clubs and committees, including the School Site Council, the Associated Student Body, the Spanish Club, Junior Statesmen of America, the National Honors Society, and Mock Trial. She plays on the field hockey and badminton teams, and performs in two school bands. She boasts that she is ranked sixth in her class according to her grade point average and that she plans to keep this high ranking in order to get accepted to a top university. "The main purpose of high school," she explains, "is to prepare students for college" and, for Eve and her friends in particular, "to prepare for acceptance to the Ivy League."

She often dreams of a different kind of school life, one where she gets to "go home in the afternoon after playing a sport, and eat dinner, maybe watch an hour or two of TV, rest a bit, maybe have time to hang out with friends, and then do homework which you can finish in two hours." She "envies" students who have this life, "stu-

ENTS who are in college prep classes and who will probably go to fairly good schools."<sup>2</sup> But she is sure that these students will never get into Ivy League colleges, and this is not an acceptable option for her. Eve wants to go "as high as [she] can go." She wants to go to Harvard.

Eve acquired this philosophy at an early age. She completed four years of school in Taiwan, and she remembers the atmosphere there as very strict, competitive, and "completely focused on academics." When she came to the United States, she worked hard in her English as a Second Language (ESL) classes and learned English well enough to be mainstreamed into regular classes by fifth grade. By the time she finished middle school, she had won the 25 dollar reward for achieving a perfect grade point average two years in a row. (She explains that the reward would have been higher, except she had to share the money with the ten other 4.0 students in her class that year, "many of whom were also Asian.")<sup>3</sup>

When she began high school, Eve constantly worried about grades and college acceptances. She had planned to maintain her perfect grade point average throughout the four years, but during one of her final exams freshman year, something "terrible" happened:

I needed to get a 98 on my math final to get an A in the class. But, as it turns out, I only got a 95 which gave me a B+ for the year. At first I was devastated, like, "How could this happen to me?" But sometimes I think it is good because I don't have to worry about maintaining a 4.0. I mean some of my friends are really freaking out about this, and I can just laugh at them because I don't need to worry.

Eve repeats this story several times during the semester. She tries to convince me (and apparently herself) that she is not overly con-

EVE  
LIN

cerned about her grades because she has already “ruined” her average by getting a B. However, rather than freeing Eve of such worries, the “low” grade on her math exam actually seems to have increased her anxiety. She sees it as a blight on her record that makes her appear, “lesser in [her] friends’ eyes—like not an equal anymore.” She finds some solace when she hears from friends that “freshman grades don’t really count [on college transcripts],” and resolves to work harder to keep up with her high-achieving peers. Her current 3.97 GPA, along with her high class ranking, attests to her success.

Over and over again I ask Eve, “Why are you doing this? Why push so hard?” And each time she replies with the same answer:

To get into an Ivy. That’s all I can think about . . . to get in and become a successful \$500,000-a-year doctor or engineer or whatever it is I want to be. . . . It’s very narrow-minded for me. . . . I have to get accepted; then I can have a life, once I’m in. . . .

Of this goal, Eve seems sure. However, she is less clear when she ponders the reasons behind the goal. She says on one occasion that it is her choice to take on such a difficult course load. Another time she says she feels forced to conform—that her parents, her friends, her “environment,” the school—all are pushing her toward the “Ivy League route.” At the end of the year, she wavers again: “I choose to go for the maximum. . . . I do it to myself. I don’t want to be this busy, but then I don’t think I would be happy if I was a major slacker. I worked my way up, and I am proud of the results.”

It is true that her hard work has earned her high marks and the respect of teachers, peers, and administrators. The principal calls Eve a “real star,” and one teacher tells me that Eve is an “ideal student;” in fact, he wishes “more students had her academic dedica-

EVE  
LIN

tion.” However, Eve’s demanding work style and “narrow-mindedness” takes a severe toll on her health and social life. She fails to recognize the large gap that exists between “working every minute” and being a “major slacker.” Indeed, Eve’s “academic dedication” results in some consequences that hardly seem “ideal.”

### “Going for the Maximum”

Unlike Kevin’s success strategy of “doing the minimum to get by,” Eve chooses to “go for the maximum,” often doing extra work for a few more points on her transcript. While her peers bring in half a page of sketchy notes or no notes at all to a discussion on Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” Eve shows me two typed pages on the use of themes and stylistic devices in the piece that she’s written for extra credit. She also opts to re-write her English papers to change the A – grades to A’s, and, by doing so, is praised by her teacher for showing such a “commitment to excellence.” In her Spanish presentations, she almost always employs elaborate visual aids and runs over the thirty minute time limit, while her classmates struggle to find even fifteen minutes’ worth of material to discuss. Furthermore, in her AP history class, when she knows that she has a 99 at the end of the year, and that she could get a D+ on the final and still have an A grade on her transcript, Eve chooses to spend her whole weekend studying for the exam. She explains her strategy:

This is the way I have always done my work. I think if I spend any time on it, I might as well turn in like the best I can, and also it gives the teacher an impression of you. . . . For me it’s always been, like, it’s not that much more difficult to do a better job. It takes about one or two extra hours or whatever, and then the

teacher also respects you more and sees that you're not a slacker. Then it's also the relationship with the teacher is better too, because the teacher thinks that you're taking his or her class seriously.

One or two extra hours to another student may seem like an eternity, but to Eve, it is time well spent for the difference between an A- and an A, or maybe even an A+. Besides, if she pleases the teacher, he may write her a better college recommendation.

Such a strategy, however, comes with severe consequences. Because Eve is enrolled in so many advanced courses and serves on so many committees and clubs, she cannot possibly do everything she needs to do and still, as she puts it, "have a life." Instead of seeking some sort of balance between work and play, as Kevin believes he does, Eve chooses to focus solely on her school commitments at the expense of an active social life, and often at the expense of her health as well. She explains:

I sometimes have two or three days where I only get two hours of sleep per night. I see lots of my friends burned out, but I don't have time to worry about this. . . . It's the typical Asian way. Lots of us are getting sick, and I am addicted to coffee; actually, I prefer to say voluntarily dependent on caffeine. See, some people see health and happiness as more important than grades and college; I don't. I feel compelled to compete because we have a really smart class, and I am competing with them to get into college.

Eve is not exaggerating here. On several occasions she and her friends drag themselves through the school day, puffy-eyed and haggard, only to face another evening of more homework and very little sleep. At the end of the year when most of the big projects and

reports were due, Eve, along with many of the top students in the class, became quite ill. She complained of frequent stomach-aches, heartburn, and an "acid-taste" on her tongue. She said she wasn't eating well—just "surviving on cereal" because she literally didn't have time for meals, and she was usually "too stressed and tired to feel hungry."

Eve's health became so poor at times that her parents started to worry about her. She told me that her father believed she had an ulcer and that he asked her to "cut back" on some of her activities so she could have more time to sleep. Twice during the semester, when Eve fell asleep while working at her desk at home, her mother decided not to wake her up to go to school that day. Instead, she met with Eve's teachers to excuse these absences and to pick up any work she may have missed. Eve appreciated the kind gesture from her mother but felt trapped by her parents' demands to slow down: "They are worried about me and say that it's okay if I don't go to an Ivy school, like they'll still be proud of me, but that's b.s. because no they won't." In the same conversation Eve says:

If I quit something, I will consider myself a failure, and I really really fear failure. Afterwards I think, "Oh that wasn't that bad." It was okay; I mean I am not dead yet. . . . I mean certainly I never got to the extent of some of my friends who get so stressed and tired that they talk about suicide. I mean I was never like that, you know. . . . In fact most of the time I am really proud that I was able to withstand all the stress. It makes me a stronger person, and, like, next time I know I will be able to deal with it and not break down. I think high school really builds up your tolerance for stress.<sup>4</sup>

Eve believes that withstanding this stress will make her "a stronger person," yet physically (and mentally at times), she seems

EVE LIN on the verge of collapsing. Surely, such consequences are not intentional on the part of the school or her parents, yet Eve receives mixed messages from both sources. On the one hand, the school purposely schedules certain courses at the same time, so, according to Eve, students cannot enroll in all of them and “get too stressed out.” Students, for instance, must choose between writing for the school newspaper, publishing the yearbook, and serving on the Associated Student Body. They are also allowed to take only one advanced placement level science class at a time, and they must pass rigorous prerequisite qualifications for honors classes—to ensure, as one teacher explains, “that no one gets in over [his or her] head.”<sup>5</sup> The students, however, seem to have enough to worry about in spite of these precautions. The course limits in science are the exception to the rule, as the school course guide suggests “typical pathways for exceptional students” that include honors level and advanced placement courses in almost every subject area. Moreover, students like Eve are prominently featured on the student honors board located outside the school office, and many receive monthly departmental awards for their academic success that serve to reinforce the importance of achieving high grades.

Eve’s parents join her teachers in praising her outstanding school work. Eve hears them brag to their friends and relatives in Taiwan about her many awards and her high grade point average. So, naturally, when her parents tell her to “cut back,” Eve doubts their real intent. She has heard messages of “future success” from too many sources for too long. She has become used to the accolades and the limelight and has grown to fear failure, so much so that she is willing to exchange “health and happiness” for acceptance to an Ivy League college. Her diligence and commitment may appear to be that of the ideal student, especially compared to those

EVE LIN students who rarely do homework or show little concern for their future, but beneath the high GPA and the “packed” résumé, lies a tired and worried teenager with “no life.” Eve says, “I am just a machine with no life at this place. . . . This school turns students into robots. I have been thinking about it a lot; I am a robot just going page by page, doing the work, doing the routine.”

School, for Eve, is lifeless; her grueling routine leaves little time for anything else. For example, one day during Spirit Week on campus, the school secretary gave Eve a water balloon. Eve was very busy and couldn’t decide what to do with the balloon, so she handed it to a friend. Five minutes later, neither girl could decide what to do with the balloon, and, as they discussed the calculus problem set, Eve eventually threw the balloon away in a nearby trash can. She was so focused on her math problems that she could not be bothered by such frivolity. Later she told me, “I want to have fun, just not at the expense of school.”

### Survival of the Fittest

In her tenth grade biology class, when Eve learned about Darwin’s theory of evolution and the concept of “survival of the fittest,” she immediately related the theory to her own life. She explains, “I love that theory because that’s the way my group of friends are.” The ones who manage to “stay up and take as much stress as possible and still stay alive” are the most fit and “stay on top and survive.” But the ones who can’t “take all the pressure and the intensity. . . . They are not on top anymore.” The whole point is to “beat each other and rise above.”

Eve admits that such a theory seems “harsh” and “cruel,” but she believes that one must have this mindset in order to get into the best universities:

EVE  
LIN

A person who wants to go to Ivy League knows the ideal goals, . . . and you get so caught up in like this conflict preparing for it . . . that you realize, "Oh wait I'm competing with all these other students too." And the college can only accept a certain amount of people from a school, you know, and . . . so you start competing with them, kind of hiding things from them.

Eve understands the intense competition to get accepted to an Ivy League school. She also realizes that she and her friends are very much alike. Most are high-achieving, intelligent, and talented Chinese students who often participate in the same school clubs and enroll in the same advanced courses. She believes that she must set herself apart from her friends in some way to "catch the attention" of the admissions committees and rise above her peers, so she engages in secretive behavior to hide those activities she believes will distinguish her. For example, she hides the fact that she volunteers at a local hospital each week, hoping that this community service will somehow set her apart. She also tries not to reveal much information about a special math class at a local college that she plans to take in the summer, praying that her friends won't find out about it in time to register. Finally, she and her friends are secretive about their grades, pretending they didn't do as well as they had hoped on a paper or exam, thereby attempting to divert attention away from themselves and onto another top student. Usually, though, the students discover the truth by sneaking glances at the graded paper or counting down the alphabetical rows of posted grades on the classroom wall to discover their friends' scores.

Despite the intense competition among her friends, Eve says they are also her main source of support. They go to each other's games and recitals, they buy flowers and candy to cheer each other up, and they listen to one another complain about the workload

and the exhaustion they face. Eve notes the irony within their relationships:

EVE  
LIN

In one sense, we are very competitive and we don't want the other one to beat us . . . but we also really understand what we are all going through and the pressure we are undergoing, . . . so we push each other because we know we are all capable of going to the best colleges, and we just kind of like cheer for the other one. . . . Sometimes it is cut-throat and we don't tell each other what we are doing, and we are always looking for ways to prove we are better than them . . . but then we will email each other late at night and say, "How's it going?"

As the school system has been constructed, this kind of love-hate relationship between peers seems necessary to achieve the results Eve desires; when students from the same school compete for a few spaces in a particular university, when students are graded on a curve where only some can achieve an A, when classrooms are set up to reinforce competition between students (by posting the A papers on the board or announcing the top test scorers, or by allowing the top five percent of the class to skip the final exam), students are often forced to choose between cheering on their friends or plotting against them.<sup>6</sup> Even in the classrooms that emphasize cooperative learning and group work (which many of the advanced courses do), Eve feels her loyalty torn. She knows that ultimately the teacher must assign individual grades, and she wants hers to be the best.

Eve mentions the same conflicting emotions when she describes the practice of cheating among her friends. Clearly, with the intense competition and stress the students face, the temptation to cheat is strong, and Eve admits that many of her friends engage in some cheating behavior. She is upset by this deceptive conduct because

EVE LIN “they get A’s without studying as much,” while she “works her butt off for the same grade.” But she does not report this behavior to the authorities. She does not want to get her friends in trouble or hurt their chances for college acceptance, even though she believes some of the things they do are “completely immoral.”

I notice, in fact, that most of the advanced students do not cheat in the ways the students in other tracks do. I see very little copying of others’ answers during tests or use of cheat sheets. Instead, as Eve points out (and I observe), the advanced students cheat by programming equations into their calculators, cutting classes on the day of the exam to gain more studying time, and asking friends who took the exam earlier that day about specific material and questions. This behavior, according to Eve, “screws over the honest students because the teacher never changes the test and grades everyone on the same curve.” Eve prides herself on never using any of these tactics to get ahead. She is determined to “work [her] way to the top the right way, the honest way, by not cheating or cutting class,” even if this means she may not be the school valedictorian. And in the eight months that I observe her, this is true; she does not “cheat” according to her definition of the word.

What I do observe, however, is the use of various strategies that some educators may qualify as cheating but that the students believe are perfectly acceptable. I often notice Eve and her friends sharing homework answers and checking problem sets together. Eve also regularly copies the answers to calculus problems from the board and then turns them in as her own work. She whispers answers to friends during class question-and-answer sessions and gratefully accepts help from her neighbors when she is called on during discussions. Eve does not construe this behavior as cheating; instead she insists that “comparing and discussing answers for homework or during class discussions is okay. The teachers want

EVE LIN us to work together.” One teacher tells me later that this is a “tough call.” He encourages students to share strategies on problem sets, but he ultimately wants the work they turn in to be their own. Eve and her friends have decided that the line here is unclear. Because they cannot possibly do all the assignments by themselves, they have created a “cooperative” learning environment to help them get through the mounds of work. Here, as is typical with these students, the focus is on getting good grades, rather than on actually learning the material.

In addition to these creative but somewhat deceitful strategies, Eve relies on other tactics to help her achieve success. In many of her classes, she consciously strives to appear as if she is paying attention, even though in reality she may be doing other homework assignments or studying for exams. For instance, she tries to ask a question “every ten minutes or so” in her science class so the teacher will think she is on task. In between these moments of attention she manages to write two journal entries for English class. When the science teacher calls on her without warning a few minutes later, Eve is able to answer his question correctly. I see her do this on several occasions, even in her difficult classes such as calculus. When asked about this impressive feat, she replies:

I have a talent for listening out of both of my ears. I can carry on a conversation with a friend or work on homework and still know what’s going on at the board. . . . I can also tell when they’re going to ask a question and I start to pay attention.

She has learned the right time to “tune-out” and on which days she should “sit in the front of the class and really concentrate.” In this sense, Eve has become the “consummate” student. She has learned to use almost every moment in school to her advantage, at times even photocopying pages of her history text so she can study with-

EVE  
LIN  
out the danger of being caught in calculus with the wrong book on her desk.

Eve engages in other subterfuge as well. Though she believes ditching class to study for a test is “immoral,” she has no problem cutting classes for other reasons such as going home to print out her Spanish paper or taking a long lunch with friends after a particularly exhausting morning of exams. She simply makes up an excuse (“I have a counseling appointment”) or informs the teacher that she will miss class “for a really important reason” but promises to make up any missed work. The teachers trust Eve because she does well in their classes, because she is a student leader in the school, and because she works hard to maintain a friendly relationship with them. She laughs as she zooms out of the parking lot during fourth period, “They would never think I would be doing anything like cutting a class!”

Like Kevin, Eve consciously attempts to win favor with her teachers and the school administrators. She tries to “dress nicely” when she comes to school to “make a good impression.” “After all,” she explains, “you never know when you will have an important meeting or interview where you need to look mature.” She also chooses to be on “highly visible” committees so the principal and vice principals will get to know her. The strategies obviously pay off as Eve brags:

I am so in with the administration, I can get away with so much it’s pathetic. Even my friends sometimes ask me to approach administrators for favors for them. Like last week I missed the deadline for the AP checks, so I got the bookkeeper to give me an extension. See, it helps to know people and for them to know me.

One day she cut class to buy the two school secretaries some giant yellow sunflowers. She told me that she feels very close to them because they help her all the time. They allow her to use their phones

EVE  
LIN  
and computers and to study at their desks when they are not busy. Once, when Eve was very stressed about missing a deadline for a scholarship application, one of the secretaries offered to type the essay for her. In turn, Eve obliges a favor when she can; for example, she agreed to help a new Taiwanese student’s family communicate with the district office.

Eve’s visibility at the school gains her other advantages as well. Because she has served on several committees with school personnel, she feels comfortable stating her mind and challenging various school decisions. She regularly contests grades that she believes are unfair (though often this contesting wins her only a point or two), and twice she has appealed teachers’ decisions that could have prevented her from taking honors level courses. Both times, she went above the teachers’ heads and convinced an administrator to allow her to re-take the entrance exams, which she then passed, and was admitted into the courses. She even engaged in a one-on-one fight with the Academic Vice Principal for the right to enroll in multiple advanced placement science courses. As noted above, the school usually forbids this practice, but after several meetings Eve prevailed and was allowed to enroll, giving her a grand (and unprecedented) total of seven advanced placement courses during her senior year.

Happy with the results of her battle, Eve nonetheless felt frustrated that her friends did not join her in the fight, especially since they too would have been allowed to take the multiple advanced courses, thanks to her efforts. She pleaded with them to attend meetings with her or write letters of support, but they claimed to be too busy or they feared repercussions with the administration. Eve pressed harder, telling them that “at some point in their lives they will be working with people who are older and smarter, and they will need to take a stand and fight for what they want.” But her friends did not share Eve’s passion; nor did they share her close ties



EVE  
LIN

with the school personnel. In this sense, Eve has distinguished herself from her peers. She has achieved a position of power in the school, one which allows her to voice opinions and be heard. Although she regrets that she cannot “command as much respect as some parents or teachers,” she vows to keep on fighting for her needs at the school. “It’s *my* education,” she says, “They [administrators] usually get the final say, but I am here to remind them that they are supposed to be watching out for *me*.”

Such conviction and passion is rare in my observations of the advanced students. Most tend to placate teachers and administrators since the adults wield power in the form of grades and college recommendations. Eve may not be as sugary sweet and polite as Kevin, for instance, but she achieves similar results. The teachers know her, respect her, and accord her the advantages that go along with winning their trust. Thus, in the survival game, Eve seems to have adapted well to her environment and has secured a place among the most “fit.”

### Enjoying the Process

At the end of the school year, Eve receives a letter from a friend at MIT. He wrote that he realized “too late into his senior year of high school” that he “regretted the focus on competing for an Ivy League school.” He advised Eve: “If you are going to go for the result, you might as well enjoy the process of getting there, and then if you don’t get the result you actually want, at least be satisfied that you enjoyed yourself.”

I ask Eve if she can honestly say she “enjoyed the process” this year. She replies that she “loved” doing some of her extracurricular activities such as “Mock Trial and coordinating the activity cards” for ASB.” She explains that she was surprised by how much she enjoyed these activities, especially since they were both “so stressful.”

EVE  
LIN

At first I did [Mock Trial] mostly because my mom told me it would look good on my transcript, but then it was just really exciting. You know you go up there and you are with a real judge . . . in a real courtroom . . . and you go up there and you present this case. Like you hear about the O. J. Simpson case and think . . . oh, I don’t understand it, but then when you actually start preparing for this kind of process, you actually understand bits and pieces of . . . the court system and what’s going on in the community.

Eve appreciated the “real life” aspect of her activity card work as well. She says the ASB project represented one of her “biggest risks this year,” because the school usually contracts with an outside company to create and sell the activity cards. Eve figured that the school would make more money by creating the cards “in-house” and selling advertisement and coupon space on the back of the cards to local food and retail stores. The money from the sales would help defray costs of school activities, and local stores would benefit from an increase in student patronage. She had several meetings with the principal where she “sold him” on the idea and then met with the district’s Assistant Superintendent to work out the details. She boasted that she got to meet with the Assistant Superintendent “all by [herself]” and that she only needed to change “one clause” in the contract she had written for the potential vendors. The best aspect for Eve was that she “had the power to . . . make a change . . . and to interact with big people on campus.” Like Kevin, Eve enjoyed engaging with an activity that could make a difference in the community. She felt empowered by the opportunity to play a role normally reserved for an adult and enjoyed the fact that she could take a “real” risk (in terms of the school’s money as well as her own reputation) and emerge successful.

EVE  
LIN

The other time Eve spoke with such pride in her accomplishments was after her presentation on the history of NASA Apollo missions. The students worked with their friends in groups of three or four to do intensive research on a topic in American history. They were supposed to present their findings in a "well-organized, highly creative, multi-media, educational and entertaining" hour-long presentation that comprised the joint English and history classes' semester project. Eve's group met and did research together for more than 250 hours before their final presentation. Each group tried to out-perform the ones who went before them, and Eve's group, the last one of the day, delivered, by far, the best presentation I had seen. The following excerpt from field notes conveys the magnitude of the students' presentation:

Teachers, students, and the District Superintendent, who are here to see the group presentations, enter the darkened room to the booming sound of Star Wars music. The walls are covered from floor to ceiling with dark sheets and silver twinkling stars. All four group members wear NASA name tags and t-shirts, and we are handed a NASA spacecraft center visitor pass as we walk through the door. At the front of the room are three large computer terminals, a large-screen television set, and four sets of six-foot speakers, creating a surround-sound effect. . . . During the hour the students make several scene and costume changes as they take the audience on a fact-filled journey of the various Apollo rockets. We are on the launchpad; we are at the NASA museum; we are "with" the astronauts via a video montage of real NASA footage, Hollywood clips of space travel, and a student-made video of what life is like in space. . . . The music blasts and the computers beep madly as the rockets take off. Now the audience is assigned the task of constructing plug filters needed to

EVE  
LIN

take the Apollo 13 crew safely home. We tape together cardboard cones and rubber hoses and styrofoam cups to simulate what the astronauts needed to do. . . . At the end of the hour the audience "grades" the presentation. Several students whisper that it deserves an A. The teacher gives the group an A+, calling the presentation "magnificent."

Afterward, the group is pleased with the teacher's grade, but they are more excited that the student whom they describe as the "toughest critic in the class" has awarded them an A. They take this to be "an extreme compliment," because he usually gives no higher than a B grade. Perhaps Eve and her friends have become so used to receiving high grades from their teachers, that good marks from them have become routine. But when a proven "tough critic" commends their work, it truly means something.

While she cleans the room and takes down the set, Eve tells me that despite the good grade, she is a little disappointed with the results of the project:

To be honest, it went as well as I hoped; I mean we got the A, but it's a little anticlimactic. I guess with all the work I hoped maybe we could do it for other periods or teach younger kids at an elementary school assembly about NASA. All that work for a one-hour performance. . . . I mean I am glad because I learned a lot, and I am really proud of all of us, but it is a little sad. Like the Superintendent was so impressed with our use of technology and stuff. I think people really underestimate what students can do. We could do more with this presentation.

Eve's pride in the performance is tempered by her regret that she couldn't "do more" with the presentation, and she feels unfulfilled.

It is one of the few times that she realizes she wants more from her high school education than simply “getting the grades.”

Such sentiment is short-lived, however. One day after the performance, Eve hears that some students are upset about her group’s use of genuine NASA material. They complain that it is unfair that Eve’s group had access to NASA and received video clips and uniforms normally off-limits to the general public. Eve shrugs and replies: “Yeah, we had connections. That’s life—it’s all about connections—who you know. Kind of like how I know all the secretaries in the office. What can I say? That’s how you get what you need.” Hence, even while Eve searches for greater fulfillment (beyond grades and college acceptances), she remains constantly aware of playing the game and getting what she needs. Though she thoroughly enjoys some of her school activities, she knows their ultimate value: her Mock Trial work looks great on her transcript; her activity card innovation pleased the school administrators and gave her an “in” with the district office; and her NASA project won her an A grade, in part, due to a connection through her friend’s father who worked there.

Eve struggles to find an activity she does “just for [herself].” She tells me that she reads Chinese philosophy in both English and Chinese “just for fun.” Although she was introduced to some of the texts in Chinese school, an extracurricular private school which she attends once a week to learn Chinese language, culture, and cuisine, she says she has “moved ahead of the class” and tries to “squeeze in fifteen minutes here and there” to read her favorite philosophers.<sup>8</sup> She enjoys the reading because she can learn more about her “cultural heritage,” and she already has books on Confucius, Laoism, and Taoism on her summer reading list.

This summer Eve plans to teach science to middle school students, write her college essays, apply for several scholarships, read

her required literature for AP English, attend the Girls’ State convention, and, she whispers, “take that special math class” at the community college (“don’t tell anyone!”). She shakes her head when she realizes how busy she will be: “I don’t know why I do this to myself.” She pauses for a moment then adds—contradicting an earlier statement, “I don’t think I would enjoy going home, watching TV, doing an hour of homework. . . . I need to be active, to feel like I really accomplished something. . . . Call me crazy, but I actually love being pushed.”

Like Kevin who tries to convince himself that he is somehow “having fun” in his pursuit for a high GPA, sacrificing a possible 4.0 to “go to parties and live life,” Eve tries to convince herself that she wouldn’t be happy doing school any other way. Ultimately, however, Eve cannot hide her frustration and disappointment with some of her achievements. She resents her life as a school robot and the tactics she must use to get ahead. She wants to believe that she has chosen this route to success freely, but she recognizes the outside pressures that have influenced her. She hopes that ultimately college acceptance and the future benefits that accompany admission to an Ivy League institution will prove that her efforts have been worthwhile; until then, she knows she will have to give up sleep, good health, and a social life in order to maintain her ranking as one of the top students in the class.