Lulu sighed. I was driving the girls home from school, and I was in a bad mood. Sophia had just reminded me that her sixth-grade Medieval Festival was coming up, and there's nothing I hate more than all these festivals and projects that private schools specialize in. Instead of making kids study from books, private schools are constantly trying to make learning fun by having parents do all the work.
For Lulu’s Passport-Around-the-World project, I had to prepare an Ecuadoran dish (chicken stewed for four hours in ground achiote, served with fried plantains), bring in Ecuadoran artifacts (a carved llama from Bolivia; no one knew the difference), and find a real Ecuadoran for Lulu to interview (a graduate student I recruited). Lulu’s job was to make the passport—a piece of paper folded in quarters and labeled “Passport”—and show up for the international food festival, featuring dishes from a hundred countries, each prepared by a different parent.

But that was nothing compared to the Medieval Festival, the highlight of the sixth-grade year. For that, every student had to have a homemade medieval costume, which could not be secretly rented or look too expensive. Each student had to bring in a medieval dish prepared in an authentic medieval way. Finally, each student had to build a medieval dwelling.

So I was in a cranky mood that day, trying to figure out which architect to hire—and how to make sure it wasn’t the parent of another student—when Lulu sighed again, more deeply.

“My friend Maya is so lucky,” she said wistfully. “She has so many pets. Two parrots, a dog, and a goldfish.”

I didn’t reply. I’d been through this many times with Sophia.

“And two guinea pigs.”

“Maybe that’s why she’s only in Book One of violin,” I said. “Because she’s too busy taking care of pets.”

“I wish I had a pet.”

“You already have a pet,” I snapped. “Your violin is your pet.”

I’ve never been much of an animal person and didn’t have a pet as a child. I haven’t done a rigorous empirical survey, but I’m guessing that most Chinese immigrant families in the United
States don’t have pets. Chinese parents are too busy coming down hard on their kids to raise a pet. Also, they’re usually tight on money—my father wore the same pair of shoes to work for eight years—and having a pet is a luxury. Finally, Chinese people have a different attitude toward animals, especially dogs.

Whereas in the West dogs have long been considered loyal companions, in China they’re on the menu. This is so upsetting that it feels like an ethnic slur, but unfortunately it’s true. Dog meat, especially young dog meat, is considered a delicacy in China, and even more so in Korea. I would never eat dog meat myself. I loved Lassie. Caddie Woodlawn’s smart and faithful dog Nero, who finds his way back from Boston to Wisconsin, is one of my favorite literary characters. But there’s a big difference between eating dog and owning one, and it never remotely occurred to me that we’d have a dog in our household. I just didn’t see the point.

Meanwhile, my violin practice sessions with Lulu were getting more and more harrowing. “Stop hovering over me,” she’d say. “You remind me of Lord Voldemort. I can’t play when you’re standing so close to me.”

Unlike Western parents, reminding my child of Lord Voldemort didn’t bother me. I just tried to stay focused. “Do one small thing for me, Lulu,” I’d say reasonably. “One small thing: Play the line again, but this time keep your vibrato perfectly even. And make sure you shift smoothly from first position to third. And remember to use your whole bow, because it’s fortissimo, with a little more bow speed at the end. Also, don’t forget to keep your right thumb bent and your left pinkie curved. Go ahead—play.”
Lulu would respond by doing none of the things I asked her to do. When I got exasperated, she'd say, “I'm sorry? What did you want me to do again?”

Other times when I was giving instructions, Lulu would pluck loudly at her strings as if she were playing a banjo. Or even worse, she'd start to swing her violin around like a lasso until I shouted in horror. When I told her to straighten her posture and raise her violin, she'd sometimes crumple to the floor and pretend she was dead with her tongue stuck out. And always the constant refrain: “Are we done yet?”

Yet other times, Lulu would seem to love the violin. After practicing with me, she'd sometimes want to play more by herself, and she'd fill the house with her beautiful tones, forgetting all about the time. She'd ask to bring her violin to school and come home flushed and pleased after playing for her class. Or she'd come running up to me when I was at my computer and say, “Mommy, guess what my favorite part in the Bach is!” I'd try to guess—I actually got it right about 70% of the time—and she'd either say “How did you know?” or “No, it's this part—isn't it pretty?”

If it weren't for those moments, I probably would have given up. Or maybe not. In any case, as with Sophia and the piano, I had the highest hopes for Lulu and the violin. I wanted her to win the Greater New Haven Concerto Competition so that she could play as a soloist at Battell Chapel too. I wanted her to become concertmaster of the best youth orchestra. I wanted her to be the best violinist in the state—and that was for starters. I knew that was the only way Lulu could be happy. So the more time Lulu wasted—quibbling with me, drilling halfheartedly,
clowning around—the longer I made her play. "We're going to
get this piece right," I'd say to her, "however long it takes. It's up
to you. We can stay here until midnight if we need to." And
sometimes we did.

"My friend Daniela was amazed at how much I practice," Lulu
said one afternoon. "She couldn't believe it. I told her six hours
a day, and she went—" And here Lulu imitated Daniela with her
mouth open.

"You shouldn't have said six hours, Lulu—she's going to
get the wrong idea. It's only six hours when you waste five of
them."

Lulu ignored this. "Daniela felt so sorry for me. She asked
when I had time to do anything else. I told her that I don't really
have time for anything fun, because I'm Chinese."

I bit my tongue and said nothing. Lulu was always collecting
allies, marshaling her troops. But I didn't care. In America, ev-
eryone was always going to take her side. I wasn't going to let
peer pressure get to me. The few times I did, I regretted it.

Once, for example, I allowed Sophia to attend a sleepover
party. This was an exception. When I was little, my mother used
to say, "Why do you need to sleep at someone else's house?
What's wrong with your own family?" As a parent, I took the
same position, but on this occasion Sophia begged and begged
me, and in a moment of uncharacteristic weakness, I finally gave
in. The next morning, she came back not only exhausted (and
unable to practice piano well) but crabby and miserable. It turns
out that sleepovers aren't fun at all for many kids—they can be
a kind of punishment parents unknowingly inflict on their chil-
dren through permissiveness. After pumping Sophia for informa-

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tion, I learned that A, B, and C had excluded D; B had gossiped viciously about E when she was in the other room; and F at age twelve had talked all night about her sexual exploits. Sophia didn’t need to be exposed to the worst of Western society, and I wasn’t going to let platitudes like “Children need to explore” or “They need to make their own mistakes” lead me astray.

There are many things the Chinese do differently from Westerners. There’s the question of extra credit, for example. One time, Lulu came home and told me about a math test she’d just taken. She said she thought it had gone extremely well, which is why she didn’t feel the need to do the extra-credit problems.

I was speechless for a second, uncomprehending. “Why not?” I asked. “Why didn’t you do them?”

“I didn’t want to miss recess.”

A fundamental tenet of being Chinese is that you always do all of the extra credit all of the time.

“Why?” asked Lulu, when I explained this to her.

For me this was like asking why I should breathe.

“None of my friends do it,” Lulu added.

“That’s not true,” I said. “I’m 100% sure that Amy and Junno did the extra credit.” Amy and Junno were the Asian kids in Lulu’s class. And I was right about them; Lulu admitted it.

“But Rashad and Ian did the extra credit too, and they’re not Asian,” she added.

“Aha! So many of your friends did do the extra credit! And I didn’t say only Asians do extra credit. Anyone with good parents knows you have to do the extra credit. I’m in shock, Lulu. What will the teacher think of you? You went to recess instead of doing
extra credit?” I was almost in tears. “Extra credit is not extra. It’s just credit. It’s what separates the good students from the bad students.”

“Aww—recess is so fun,” Lulu offered as her final sally. But after that Lulu, like Sophia, always did the extra credit. Sometimes the girls got more points on extra credit than on the test itself—an absurdity that would never happen in China. Extra credit is one reason that Asian kids get such notoriously good grades in the United States.

Rote drilling is another. Once, Sophia came in second on a multiplication speed test, which her fifth-grade teacher administered every Friday. She lost to a Korean boy named Yoon-seok. Over the next week, I made Sophia do twenty practice tests (of 100 problems each) every night, with me clocking her with a stopwatch. After that, she came in first every time. Poor Yoon-seok. He went back to Korea with his family, but probably not because of the speed test.

Practicing more than everyone else is also why Asian kids dominate the top music conservatories. That’s how Lulu kept impressing Mr. Shugart every Saturday with how fast she improved. “You catch on so quickly,” he’d frequently say. “You’re going to be a great violinist.”

In the fall of 2005, when Lulu was nine, Mr. Shugart said, “Lulu, I think you’re ready to play a concerto. What do you say we take a break from the Suzuki books?” He wanted her to learn Viotti’s Concerto no. 23 in G Major. “If you work really hard, Lulu, I bet you can have the first movement ready for the winter recital. The only thing is,” he added thoughtfully, “there’s a tough cadenza in the piece.” Mr. Shugart was wily, and he understood Lulu. A cadenza is a special section, usually near the end of a
It's bad news. But I'm a test-experienced individual.

Extra-good news on a minimum scale. (Of course, I'm not a kid. I kept my aid, say, around here.)

The concert movement, where the soloist plays unaccompanied. "It's kind of a chance to show off," said Mr. Shugart, "but it's really long and difficult. Most kids your age wouldn't be able to play it."

Lulu looked interested. "How long is it?"

"The cadenza?" said Mr. Shugart. "Oh, very long. About a page."

"I think I can do it," Lulu said. She had a lot of confidence, and, as long as it wasn't me forcing it on her, she loved a challenge.

We plunged into the Viotti, and the battles escalated. "Calm down, Mommy," Lulu would say maddeningly. "You're starting to get hysterical and breathe all funny again. We still have a month to practice." All I could think of was the work ahead of us. Although relatively simple, the Viotti concerto was a big step up from what Lulu was used to. The cadenza was filled with rapid string crossings as well as "double stops" and "triple stops"—notes played simultaneously on two or three different strings, the equivalent of chords on the piano—which were difficult to play in tune.

I wanted the cadenza to be good. It became a kind of obsession for me. The rest of the Viotti was okay—parts of it were a bit pedantic—but Mr. Shugart was right: The cadenza made the whole piece worthwhile. And about a week before the recital, I realized that Lulu's cadenza had the potential to be spectacular. She made its melodic parts sing out exquisitely; somehow that was intuitive for her. But not nearly so good were the sections that required technical precision—in particular, a series of double-stop-string-crossing zingers near the end. During practice, it was always hit or miss with those passages. If Lulu
was in a good mood and concentrating, she could nail them. If she was in a bad or distracted mood, the cadenza fell flat. The worst thing was that I had no control over which mood it would be.

Then I had an epiphany. "Lulu," I said, "I have a deal to propose."

"Oh no, not again," Lulu groaned.

"This is a good one, Lulu. You’ll like it."

"What—practice two hours, and I won’t have to set the table? No thanks, Mommy."

"Lulu, just listen for a second. If you play the cadenza really well next Saturday—better than you’ve ever played it—I’ll give you something you won’t believe, something that I know you will love."

Lulu looked scornful. "You mean like a cookie? Or five minutes on a computer game?"

I shook my head. "Something so amazing even you won’t be able to resist."

"A playdate?"

I shook my head.

"Chocolate?"

I shook my head again, and it was my turn to be scornful. "You think that I think you can’t resist chocolate? I know you a little better than that, Lulu. I have in mind something you’ll never EVER guess."

And I was right. She never guessed, perhaps because it was so wildly out of the realm of possibility given the available facts.

In the end, I told her. "It’s a pet. A dog. If you give me a great cadenza next Saturday, I’ll get us a dog."
For the first time in her life, Lulu was dumbstruck. “A . . .
dog?” she repeated. “A live one?” she added suspiciously.

“Yes. A puppy. You and Sophia can decide what kind.”

And that’s how I outsmarted myself, changing our lives
forever.