



**Background** In addition to being the author of more than a dozen novels for young adults, **Jean Davies Okimoto** (b. 1942) is a therapist. Perhaps that is why she has such insight into the characters that she portrays. Okimoto typically writes about the everyday problems and challenges faced by teenagers like Maya, the main character in “My Favorite Chaperone.” Maya and her family have come to the United States from Kazakhstan, a country in Central Asia that used to be part of the Soviet Union.

# My Favorite Chaperone

Short Story by Jean Davies Okimoto

**SETTING A PURPOSE** As you read, pay attention to Maya’s interactions with her family and her friends. How do these interactions help you to understand the challenges of being an immigrant in a new country?



As you read, mark up the text. Save your work to **myNotebook**.

- Highlight details
- Add notes and questions
- Add new words to **myWordList**

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10 In homeroom when Mr. Horswill handed out the permission slip for the Spring Fling, the all-school dance, I almost didn’t take one. Why should I bother when I was sure the answer would be the same? Even though I’m in ninth grade now, it would still be the same. No. *Nyet* is what they say, and I don’t want to hear this again. But I took a permission slip anyway. I don’t know why I didn’t just shake my head when this very popular girl Marcia Egness was handing them out. And even after I took one, I don’t know why I didn’t throw it away. Maybe I just couldn’t give up hope. It’s like that in America. It’s a place where things can change for people, and many people always seem to have hope. At least that’s how it seems to me. Maybe I was beginning to think this way, too, although my hope was very small.

We came to America through an international dating magazine. I don't mean that our whole family was in the magazine looking for dates, just Madina Zhamejakova, my aunt. Aunt Madina came after Kazakhstan broke away from the Soviet Union and things got very hard. Everyone's pay  
20 was cut and the *tenge*, our money, was worth less and less. Then my grandmother died. That was the worst part. She was the head of our family, and without her everything fell apart. That's when Aunt Madina started reading international dating magazines.

The next thing we knew, she had a beautiful photo taken of herself wearing her best outfit, a black dress with a scoop neck and a red silk band around the neck. Aunt Madina is very pretty. Mama says she looks like an old American movie star we saw on TV named Natalie Wood, except Aunt Madina  
30 looks more Kazakh with her dark, beautiful Asian eyes. She sent the photo to one of these magazines, and in a very short time a man from Seattle saw her picture. He started calling her, and they would talk on the phone for hours. I guess he had plenty of money for these calls, which Aunt Madina thought was a good sign. After about six months, he asked her to marry him.

His name was Bob Campbell and he'd been in the navy. He told Aunt Madina he never had a chance to meet anyone because he traveled so much. Maybe that was true, but Mama  
40 was worried.

"Madina, something must be wrong with this man if he has to find a wife through a magazine."

Mama was afraid for her, but Aunt Madina went to America anyway and married Mr. Bob Campbell. She phoned us a lot from America, and Mama admitted she sounded okay. Madina said Bob was a lot older and had less hair than in the picture he had sent her. He was also fatter than in the picture, but he was very nice. She sounded so good, Mama stopped worrying about Aunt Madina, but then things got so bad in  
50 Kazakhstan that she worried all the time about us. Papa and Mama lost their teaching jobs because the government was running out of money. Mama had to go to the market and sell many of our things: clothes, dishes, even some furniture. When Aunt Madina asked us to come to America for the hundredth time, we were running out of things to sell and my parents finally agreed. Aunt Madina **sponsored** us, and not

**sponsor**

(spɒn'sər) v. If you *sponsor* someone, you support his or her admission into a group.

long after we got here, Papa got a job driving a cab, and Mama worked cleaning people's houses. It was hard for them not to have the respect they were used to from holding government teaching jobs, but they had high regard for the food they could  
60 now easily buy at the store.

Six months after we got here, the Boeing Company moved to Chicago and Mr. Bob Campbell got transferred there. When Aunt Madina left with him, it broke Mama's heart. Aunt Madina was the only person we knew from Kazakhstan, and it felt like our family just huddled together on a tiny island in the middle of a great American sea.

I looked at the permission slip, wishing there were some special words I could say to get Mama and Papa to sign it.  
70 Around me, everyone in my homeroom was talking excitedly about the Spring Fling. Mama says she thinks the school is strange to have parties and events after school when students should be doing their homework. Ever since I've been at Beacon Junior High, the only slip they signed was for the gymnastics team. Papa loves sports. (I think he told Mama that giving permission for this activity was important for my education.) I can't find words to say how grateful I was he signed that slip. The gymnastics team is a fine, good thing in my life. I compete in all the events: vault, beam, floor exercise,  
80 and my favorite: the uneven bars. I love to swing up and up, higher and higher, and as I fly through the air, a wonderful thing happens and suddenly I have no worries and no responsibilities. I'm free!

But there's another reason why I love gymnastics. Shannon Lui is on the team. We became friends when she was a teaching assistant in my ESL class. We're the same age, but she says I'm like her little sister. Her grandparents came from China, and her parents speak perfect English. Everything about Shannon's family is very American. Her mother has a  
90 red coat with gold buttons from Nordstrom, and her father cooks and sometimes even washes dishes! (I couldn't believe this when I first saw it; no Kazakh man would do kitchen work.) Shannon encouraged me to try out for the gymnastics team, and the team has meant even more to me this year since I got put in the mainstream and had to leave ESL. Since I left ESL, I often feel like I'm in the middle of a game where I don't know the players, the rules, or even the object of the game.

In my next class, Language Arts, even though I knew it was foolish, I was dreaming of the Spring Fling. I really like Language Arts. Ms. Coe, our teacher, is also the gymnastics coach, and there's a guy in the class, Daniel Klein, who was my partner for a research project last semester. He encouraged me to talk and listened to what I had to say (he's also a very handsome guy), and I always look forward to this class so I can see him. I was trying to think of some ideas to convince Mama and Papa to give permission (and also sneaking glances at Daniel Klein) when Mr. Walsh, the vice-principal, came into our class. He whispered something to Ms. Coe and she nodded. And then I was **stunned** because she nodded and pointed to me!

"Maya, you're wanted in the office," Ms. Coe said. "You can go now with Mr. Walsh."

My fingers tingled with fear. What was wrong? What had I done? Mr. Walsh only comes for people when there's trouble.

Like a robot, I gathered my books and followed Mr. Walsh. As he closed the classroom door behind us, my heart began to bang and I felt like I needed to go to the bathroom. In the hallway he told me Ms. Johnson, the school counselor, wanted to speak with me.

"What is wrong?" My voice came out as a whisper. I felt such terror I could barely speak.

"What's that?" Mr. Walsh couldn't hear my whisper.

"What is wrong?" I tried to speak more loudly.

"She didn't say. She just asked me to find you since I was heading down the hall anyway."

I suddenly remembered Sunstar Sysavath, who was in my ESL class last year. Her family came from Cambodia, and on her first day at Beacon she was in the wrong line in the lunchroom. Mr. Walsh went to help her, and he tapped her on her shoulder to get her attention. When she felt the tap and saw him, she lifted her hands in the air as if she were being arrested and about to be shot. People who saw this in the lunchroom laughed, but it wasn't a joke. Sunstar was filled with terror.

I knew I wouldn't be shot, but walking with Mr. Walsh to the office seemed like one of the longest walks of my life. I often fill my mind with nice things, such as imagining myself at the Olympics winning a gold medal for the U.S.A.—especially on days like today, when we have a gymnastics meet

**stun**

(stŭn) *v.* To *stun* someone is to make him or her feel shocked or dazed.

140 after school. But now my mind was filled with nothing. It was empty, like a dry riverbed where there is only cracked, baked earth and nothing lives.

I walked into the main office, where Ms. Johnson was waiting for me. “Come with me, Maya.” Ms. Johnson smiled at Mr. Walsh. “Thanks, Tom.”

Like a person made from wood, a puppet, I followed Ms. Johnson through the main office down the hall to her office across from the principal’s. She showed me in and closed the door behind us.



150 “Sit down, dear.”

I sat in a chair across from her desk and clutched my books to my chest. I’d never been in her office before. She had many nice green plants in front of the window and a small fish tank in one corner. I stared at the brightly colored fish swimming back and forth, back and forth. Then Ms. Johnson spoke.

“I received a call from Mr. Shanaman, the principal at Evergreen Elementary, and your brother’s been suspended for fighting.”

“Nurzhan?”

160 “Yes. Nurzhan Alazova.” She read his name from a pink message slip. “They haven’t been able to locate your mother, so they called over here to see if you could help.”

“Is Nurzhan all right?”

“Yes. And I believe the other boy wasn’t seriously hurt.”

“Who did Nurzhan fight?” It was a foolish question—  
I was sure of the answer. Ms. Johnson hesitated, so I just said,  
“Ossie Nishizono,” and she nodded.

“What must I do?” I asked.

170 “The school policy on suspension requires that the parent  
or guardian must have a conference at school within twenty-  
four hours of the suspension. Can you help us locate your  
mother or your father?”

“Yes. I can do that.”

“Do your parents speak English, Maya?”

“Just a little.”

“Then perhaps you could attend the meeting and translate  
for them.”

“Yes. I must always do this for my parents—at the store, at  
the doctor, things like that.”

180 “Here’s the phone. I’ll step out to give you some privacy.”

Ms. Johnson left the office, quietly closing the door  
behind her. I looked at the nameplate on her desk.  
CATHERINE JOHNSON, it said. Outside her window, the  
sky was gray and it had started to rain. I stared at the phone,  
wishing I didn’t have to be the messenger with this bad news.  
Then I called the Northwest Cab Company and asked them to  
contact my father.

“Aibek Alazova. Cab 191. I’m his daughter, and there is a  
family problem I must speak with him about.”

190 I stayed on the line while the **dispatcher** radioed Papa. I  
looked at the clock and felt my heart grow heavy. In a minute  
the bell would ring, school would be out, and the gymnastics  
meet would begin.

“Maya!” Papa’s voice was alarmed. “What is wrong?”

“Nurzhan has been in a fight with another boy.” Then  
I explained in Russian what had happened, and Papa said  
he had to drop his passenger at the Four Seasons Hotel  
downtown and then he’d come straight to Nurzhan’s school.  
He’d be there about three-thirty.

200 Ms. Johnson came back into the office as I hung up the  
phone. “Did you get your mother?”

“I don’t have the number where she works today, but I got  
my father. He will come to the school.”

“Good.”

**dispatcher**

(dīs-päch´ər) *n.* A  
*dispatcher* is a person  
who sends out  
vehicles according to  
a schedule.

“Ms. Johnson?”

“Yes?”

“I will leave now for Evergreen. Will you tell Ms. Coe I have a family problem and I cannot attend the gymnastics meet?”

210 “Of course. And I’ll call Mr. Shanaman at Evergreen now and let him know that you and your father will be there.”

I went to my locker, got my coat, then walked quickly down the hall to the south door that opens onto the play field that joins our school with Evergreen. Poor Nurzhan, getting in such big trouble. I couldn’t fault him for fighting with Ossie Nishizono. Such a mean boy—he’d been teasing Nurzhan without mercy for not speaking well and mispronouncing things. I hoped Nurzhan had given him a hard punch. But why did he have to make this fight today! I felt angry that I  
220 had to miss the meet because of Nurzhan. Would Ms. Coe still want me on the team? Would she think I wasn’t reliable?

But as I neared Nurzhan’s school—my old school—I only worried about Papa. Even though he didn’t shout at me on the phone, that didn’t mean he wasn’t angry. He had a person in his cab and the dispatcher might have been hearing us. Probably the dispatcher didn’t know Russian, but Papa wouldn’t show his anger in the cab anyway. But Papa could be very, very angry—not just with Nurzhan but with me, too. He and Mama think it’s my duty to watch out for Nurzhan and  
230 keep him out of trouble.

As I walked up to the front door, Mr. Zabornik, the custodian, waved to me. He was picking up papers and litter around the bushes next to the front walk. It was still raining lightly, and Mr. Zabornik’s wet gray hair was pasted against his forehead.

“Hi, Maya.”

“Hello, Mr. Zabornik.”

“Here about your brother, I suppose.”

“How did you know?”

240 “I was fixing the drainpipe when it happened.” He pointed to the corner of the building by the edge of the play field. “That kid Ossie Nishizono was teasing Nurzhan something fierce. Telling him he could never be a real American, making fun of the way he talked.” He bent down and picked up a candy wrapper. “Reminded me of how this bully used to treat me when my family came after the revolution.”

“Oh.” I think Mr. Zabornik could tell I didn’t know what revolution this was.

250 “The Hungarian revolution, in 1956.” He looked out over the play field and folded his arms across his chest. “Guess some things never change.”

“Nurzhan’s going to be suspended.”

“Sorry to hear that. ’Course, the school can’t allow fights, and this was no **scuffle**. But I can sure see how your brother lost his temper.” Then he went back to picking up the litter. “Good luck.”

**scuffle**  
(skŭf’əl) *n.* A *scuffle* is a disorderly fight.

“Thank you, Mr. Zabornik.”

I went to the front office, where Ms. Illo, the head secretary, spoke to me in a very kind way. “Maya, Mr. 260 Shanaman is waiting for you in his office. You can go right in.”

Mr. Shanaman was behind his big desk, and Nurzhan was sitting on a chair in the corner. He looked like a rabbit caught in a trap. He had scrapes on his hands and on his cheek, and his eyes were puffed up. I couldn’t tell if that was from crying or being hit.

“I understand your father will be coming. Is that right, Maya?”

I nodded.

270 “Just take a seat by your brother. Ms. Illo will bring your father in when he gets here.”

Then Mr. Shanaman read some papers on his desk and I sat down next to Nurzhan and spoke quietly to him in Russian.

“*Neechevo, Nurzhan. Ya vas ne veenu.*” It’s okay, Nurzhan. I don’t blame you, is what I said.

Nurzhan’s eyes were wet with tears as he nodded to me.

I stared out the principal’s window. Across the street, the bare branches of the trees were black against the cement gray 280 sky. The rain came down in a steady drizzle, and after a few minutes, I saw Papa’s cab turn the corner. His cab is green, the color of a lime, and he always washes and shines it. I watched Papa park and get out of the cab. His shoulders are very broad underneath his brown leather jacket, and Papa has a powerful walk, like a large, strong horse that plows fields. He walked briskly, and as he came up the steps of the school, he removed his driver cap.



It seemed like one thousand years, but it was only a minute before Ms. Illo brought Papa into the office. Nurzhan and  
290 I stood up when he entered, but he didn't look at us, only at Mr. Shanaman, who shook hands with him and motioned for him to have a seat.

Papa sat across the desk from Mr. Shanaman and placed his driver cap in his lap.

"We have asked Maya to translate, Mr. Alazova."

"Yes." Papa nodded. When he heard my name, he understood what Mr. Shanaman meant.

"Your son, Nurzhan, was involved in quite a nasty fight."

Papa looked at me, and I said to him in Russian, "Nurzhan  
300 was in little fight."



**It seemed like one thousand years,  
but it was only a minute before Ms. Illo  
brought Papa into the office.**



Mr. Shanaman continued. "The other boy, Ossie Nishizono, needed two stitches at the hospital."

"The other boy, Ossie Nishizono, was a little hurt," I told Papa.

Nurzhan's eyes became wide as he listened to my translation.

"We have a policy that anyone who fights must be suspended from school. Both boys will receive a two-day suspension."

310 "The other boy, who is very bad," I translated for Papa, "is not allowed to come to school for two days and his parents must punish him. Nurzhan must stay home, too. But he should not be punished so much."

Papa nodded.

Then Mr. Shanaman said, "We've been told the other boy was teasing your son. We'd like you to help Nurzhan find ways to handle this situation without resorting to violence. We're working with the other boy to help him show respect for all students."

320 I looked at Papa and translated: “The other boy was teasing Nurzhan in a violent manner. This boy will be punished and must learn to respect all students. We understand how Nurzhan became so angry, and we ask that you punish him by not allowing him to watch television.”

“Yes, I will punish my son as you suggest,” Papa said in Russian.

I looked at Mr. Shanaman. “My father says he will teach Nurzhan not to fight by giving him a very serious punishment.”

330 “We are glad you understand the serious nature of this situation,” Mr. Shanaman said. Then I told Papa in Russian the exact words of Mr. Shanaman.

Mr. Shanaman held out a form on a clipboard. “We require you to sign this to show that we’ve discussed the suspension and you’ll keep Nurzhan at home until Monday.”

Again, I told Papa exactly what Mr. Shanaman said, and Papa signed the form.

We said nothing as we left the school and followed Papa to his cab. Nurzhan and I sat in the back, not daring to speak.

340 There was a small rip in the leather of the seat and I poked my finger in it. The cab smelled of perfume; maybe Papa’s last ride was a lady who wore a lot of it. It smelled like some kind of flower, but I couldn’t name it. I wished so much I was in a beautiful meadow right then, surrounded by sweet-smelling flowers, lying in the soft grass, looking up at the clouds. I tried to calm myself by thinking about this meadow, but I just kept feeling scared—scared Papa might somehow find out I’d changed what Mr. Shanaman said.

Maybe I should’ve felt bad about changing Mr. Shanaman’s words, but I didn’t. I only felt afraid. I don’t mean that I think changing words like that is okay; I have to admit it’s sort of like telling lies. But I think maybe some lies are okay, like in the play we read last semester about Anne Frank and how the people who were hiding her family lied and said no one was in the attic when they really were. They lied to save Anne’s family from the Nazis. Maybe I wasn’t saving Nurzhan from death, but I was sure scared to death of what Papa might have done if I hadn’t changed the words. I stared at the back of Papa’s thick neck. It was very red, and he drove in silence until  
360 he pulled up in front of our building. Papa shut off the engine. Then he put his arm across the top of the seat and turned his face to us, craning his neck.

His dark eyes narrowed and his voice was severe. "I am ashamed of this! To come to this school and find you in trouble, Nurzhan! This does not seem like much punishment to me, this no watching television. You will go to bed tonight without dinner." He clenched his teeth. "I have lost money today because of you. And Maya, you must keep your brother out of trouble!" Then he waved us away furiously, like shooing away bugs. "Go now! Go!"

We went in the house, and Nurzhan marched straight to the table in the kitchen with his books. He seemed to be in such a hurry to do his work, he didn't even take off his jacket.

"Take off your jacket and hang it up, Nurzhan."

"Okay."

I began peeling potatoes for dinner, while Nurzhan hung up his jacket. Then he sat back down at the table.

"Maya, I—"

"Don't talk. Do your work."

"But I—"

"I missed the gymnastics meet because of you!"

"Watch the knife!" Nurzhan looked scared.

I glanced at my hand. I was holding the knife and I'd been waving it without realizing it.

"I wasn't going to stab you, stupid boy."

"I was only going to say thank you." Nurzhan looked glumly at his book.

I went back to peeling the potatoes. I'd had enough of him and his troubles.

"For changing what Mr. Shanaman said when you told Papa," he said in a timid voice, like a little chick peeping.

"It's okay, Nurzhan." I sighed. "Just do your work."

A few minutes before six, we heard Mama get home. She came straight to the kitchen, and when she saw Nurzhan sitting there doing his work, a smile came over her tired face.

"Oh, what a good boy, doing his work."

"Not so good, Mama. Nurzhan got in trouble." I didn't mind having to tell her this bad news too much (not like when I had to call Papa). Then I explained about the fight and how Papa had to come to the school.

"Oh, my poor little one!" Mama rushed to Nurzhan and examined his hands. Tenderly, she touched his face where it had been cut. Then she turned sharply toward me.

"Maya! How could you let this happen?"

“Me! I wasn’t even there.”

“On the bus, when this boy is so bad to Nurzhan. You must make this boy stop.”

“No, Mama,” Nurzhan explained. “He would tease me more if my sister spoke for me.”

410 “I don’t understand this. In Kazakhstan, if someone insults you, they have insulted everyone in the family. And everyone must respond.”

“It’s different here, Mama.”

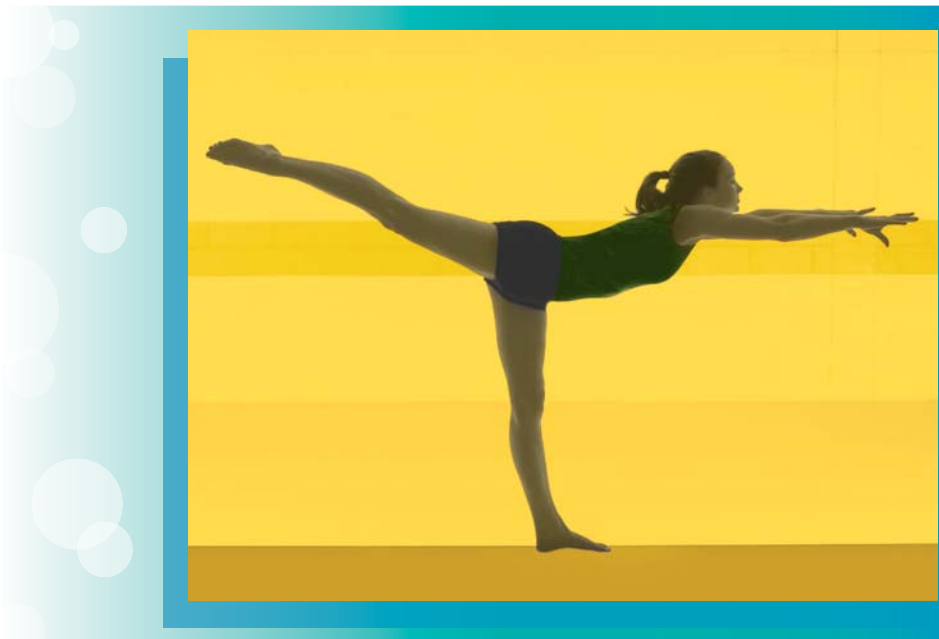
Mama looked sad. She sighed deeply. Then the phone rang and she told me to answer it. Mama always wants me to answer because she is shy about speaking English. When her work calls, I always speak on the phone to the women whose houses she cleans and then translate for Mama. (I translate their exact words, not like with Mr. Shanaman.)

420 But it wasn’t for Mama. It was Shannon, and her voice was filled with worry.

“Maya, why weren’t you at the meet? Is everything all right?”

“Everything’s okay. It was just Nurzhan.” Then I explained to her about what had happened. “I hope I can still be on the team.”

“Ms. Coe is cool. Don’t worry, it won’t mess anything up.”



Shannon was right. The next day at practice Ms. Coe was very understanding. Practice was so much fun I forgot all about Nurzhan, and Shannon and I were very excited because  
430 Ms. Coe said we were going to get new team leotards.

After practice we were waiting for the activity bus, talking about the kind of leotards we wanted, when two guys from the wrestling team joined us. One was David Pfeiffer, a guy who Shannon talked about all the time. She always said he was so cute, that he was “awesome” and “incredible” and things like that. She was often laughing and talking to him after our practice, and I think she really liked him. And today he was with Daniel Klein!

“Hey, Maya! How was practice?”

440 “Hi.” I smiled at Daniel, but then I glanced away, pretending to look for the bus because talking to guys outside class always made me feel embarrassed and shy.

The guys came right up to us. David smiled at Shannon. “Wrestling practice was great! We worked on takedowns and escapes, and then lifted weights. How was your practice?”

“Fun! We spent most of it on the beam.”

“I’m still pumped from weight training!” David grinned and picked up a metal trash can by the gym door. He paraded around with the can, then set it down with a bang right next  
450 to Shannon. Everyone was laughing, and then David bent his knees and bounced up and down on his heels and said, “Check this out, Daniel! Am I strong or what?” The next thing we knew, David had one arm under Shannon’s knees and one arm under her back and he scooped her up. Shannon squealed and laughed, and I was laughing watching them, when all of a sudden Daniel scooped me up too!

“*Chort!*” I shouted, as he lifted me. I grabbed him around his neck to hang on, and my head was squished against his shoulder. He strutted around in a circle before he let me down.  
460 I could feel that my face was the color of borscht, and I flamed with excitement and embarrassment and couldn’t stop laughing from both joy and nervousness.

“That’s nothing, man.” David crouched like a weight lifter while he was still holding Shannon and lifted her as high as his shoulders.

It was exciting and crazy: Daniel and David showing each other how strong they were, first picking up Shannon and me, then putting us down, then picking us up and lifting us

higher, as if Shannon and I were weights. After a few times,  
470 whenever Daniel picked me up, I was easily putting my arms  
around his neck, and I loved being his pretend weight, even  
though Shannon and I were both yelling for them to put us  
down. (We didn't really mean it. Shannon is a strong girl,  
and if she didn't like being lifted up and held by David, there  
was no way it would be happening.) I couldn't believe it, but I  
began to relax in Daniel's arms, and I laughed each time as he  
slowly turned in a circle.

Then Shannon and I tried to pick them up, and it was  
hilarious. Every time we tried to grab them, they did wrestling  
480 moves on us and we ended up on the grass in a big heap, like  
a litter of playful puppies. I couldn't remember a time in my  
life that had been so fun and so exciting. We lay on the grass  
laughing, and then David and Daniel jumped up and picked  
Shannon and me up again.

But this time when we turned, as my face was pressed  
against Daniel's shoulder, I saw something coming toward the  
school that made me tremble with fear.

"Daniel, please. Put me down!" My voice cracked as my  
breath caught in my throat.

490 But Daniel didn't hear. Everyone was shouting and  
laughing, and he lifted me up even more as the lime green cab  
came to a halt in front of the school. The door slammed. Papa  
stood like a huge bull in his dark leather jacket and flung open  
the back door of the cab.

"MAYA ALAZOVA!" His voice roared across the parking  
lot. He pointed at me the way one might identify a criminal.  
"EDEE SUDA!" he shouted in Russian. COME HERE!

Daniel dropped me and I ran to the cab, **whimpering** and  
trembling inside like a dog caught stealing a chicken.

500 Papa didn't speak. His silence filled every corner of the  
cab like a dark cloud, slowly suffocating me with its poisonous  
rage. Papa's neck was deep red, and the skin on the back of  
my hands tingled with fear. I lay my head back against the  
seat and closed my eyes, squeezing them shut, and took myself  
far away until I was safe on the bars at a beautiful gymnastics  
meet in the sky. I swung back and forth, higher and higher,  
and then I released and flew to the next bar through fluffy  
white clouds as soft as goose feathers, while the air around me  
was sweet and warm, and my teammates cheered for me, their  
510 voices filled with love.

**whimper**

(hwĩm'pər) v. To  
*whimper* is to sob or  
let out a soft cry.

We screeched to a stop in front of our building. My head slammed back against the seat. When I struggled from the taxi, it was as though I had fallen from the bars, crashing down onto the street, where I splintered into a million pieces. And as hard as I tried, I couldn't get back on the bars any more than I could stop the hot tears that spilled from my eyes. Papa roared in front of me, and as he charged toward the door in his glistening dark leather jacket, he again seemed transformed to a creature that was half man and half bull.

520 "Gulnara!" He flung open the door, shouting for Mama, his voice filled with anger and blame.

"Why are you here? What has happened, Aibek?" Mama came from the kitchen as Nurzhan darted to the doorway and peeked around like a little squirrel.

I closed the front door and leaned against it with my wet palms flat against the wood, like a prisoner about to be shot.

"Is this how you raise your daughter! Is this what you teach her? Lessons to be a toy for American boys!" Papa spat out the words.

530 The color rose in Mama's face like a flame turned up on the stove, and she spun toward me, her eyes flashing. "What have you done?"

"Your daughter was in the arms of an American boy."

Mama looked shocked. "When? H-how can this be?" she stammered.

"Outside the school as I drove by, I found them at this. Don't you teach her anything?"

540 "Who let her stay after school? Who gives permission for all these things? You are the one, Aibek. If you left it to me, she would come home every day. She would not have this permission!"

Mama and Papa didn't notice that I went to the bathroom and locked the door. I huddled by the sink and heard their angry voices rise and fall like the pounding of thunder, and then I heard a bang, so fierce that the light bulb hanging from the ceiling swayed with its force. Papa slamming the front door. Then I heard the engine of the cab and a sharp squeal of tires as he sped away.

550 I imagined running away. I would run like the wind, behind the mini-mart, sailing past the E-Z Dry Cleaner, past the bus stop in an easy gallop through the crosswalk. As I ran, each traffic light I came to would turn green, until there would

be a string of green lights glowing like a necklace of emeralds strung all down the street. And then I would be at the Luis' house. Mrs. Lui would greet me in her red Nordstrom coat with the gold buttons. She would hug me and hold me close. Then Mr. Lui would say, "Hi, honey," and make hamburgers. "Want to use the phone, Maya?" Mrs. Lui would say. "Talk as long as you want—we have an extra line for the kids."

560 "Oh, by the way," Mr. Lui would say, "Shannon is having David and some other kids over Friday night for pizza and videos. It's fine if there's a guy you want to invite, too."

"Maya! Open this door. Do you want more trouble?" Mama rattled the doorknob so hard I thought she'd rip it off.

"I'm coming." My voice caught in my throat. I felt dizzy as I unlocked the door and held my stomach, afraid I would be sick.

"You have brought shame to your father and to this family." Mama glared at me.

570 "Mama, it was just kids joking. Guys from the wrestling team pretending some of us were weights."

"I don't know this weights."

"It was nothing, Mama!"

"Do not tell me 'nothing' when your father saw you!" she screamed.

The next morning Papa was gone when I woke up. And even though Mama hadn't yet left for work, it was like she was gone, too. She didn't speak to me and didn't even look at me, except once when she came in the kitchen. I was getting *kasha*, and she stared at me like I was a stranger to her. Then she turned and left. Not only was Mama not speaking to me, but she didn't speak to Nurzhan, either. This never happens. Even when he was punished for the fight with Ossie Nishizono and had to stay home, Mama still spoke to him. But as I was getting dressed in my room, I heard Nurzhan try to talk to her. I put my ear to the door to listen.

"It's different here, Mama. I'm sure Maya and those guys were playing. Joking, like in a game."

"Quiet, boy! You know nothing of these things!"

590 I was shocked. Mama hardly ever says a harsh word to her precious boy. Then I heard her rush by, and then *bam!* The door slammed. The *kamcha* that hung by the door trembled with the force. We brought our *kamcha* when we came to



America. It looks like a riding crop with a carved wooden handle and a leather cord, decorated with some horsehair. It's an old Kazakh tradition to put the *kamcha* inside the house next to the door because it's believed to bring good fortune and happiness. But our *kamcha* was not bringing us good fortune today. Mama left without a word of goodbye to either

600 one of us.



**I didn't feel happy that Nurzhan got yelled at; I felt bad about the whole thing.**



I came out of my room and Nurzhan and I just looked at each other. I didn't feel happy that Nurzhan got yelled at; I felt bad about the whole thing.

"Did you hear?"

I nodded.

"She won't listen."

"Thank you for trying, Nurzhan."

"It did no good," he said with sadness. "They don't know about things here, only their own ways. They are like stone."

610 I wondered how long this tension and anger would stay in our home. I was afraid it might be a long time, because Mama and Papa were so upset. But gradually, in the way that winter becomes spring, there was a slight thaw each day. Perhaps because we huddled together like a tiny Kazakh island in the middle of the great American sea, we couldn't allow our winter to go on and on, and by the next week, things in my family were almost calm.

620 But it was not to last. On Wednesday afternoon of the following week, Mama was waiting to talk to me when I got home from school. I was afraid when I saw her. Her ankle was taped up, and she sat on the couch with her leg up on a chair. Next to it was a pair of crutches!

"Mama, what happened?"

“I fell at work. Mrs. Hormann took me to the emergency room. I can’t work for six weeks until it heals. I must keep my foot up as much as possible.”

“I’ll start dinner.” My eyes filled with tears, I felt so bad for her. And I felt bad that I’d made them so upset when my father saw me and Daniel. Even though I knew I hadn’t done  
630 anything wrong, it still bothered me that I’d been the cause of such trouble in our house.

It was decided that I’d take Mama’s jobs for her while she couldn’t work. I wouldn’t go to gymnastics practice; instead, right after school I’d go straight to the houses Mama cleaned. The people Mama worked for agreed to this, and I worked at each house from three-thirty until six-thirty, when Papa came to pick me up. I wasn’t able to clean their entire houses in this amount of time, but they told me which rooms were the most important, and I was able to clean those. Bathrooms were on  
640 the list at every house.

I didn’t mind doing Mama’s jobs. Although I did get very tired, and I was scared sometimes that I might break something when I dusted (especially at Mrs. Hathaway’s house, because she had a lot of glass vases and some small glass birds), but I didn’t mind vacuuming, mopping, dusting, cleaning cupboards, counters, stoves, and refrigerators. I didn’t even mind cleaning toilets. It was as if all the work I did at Mama’s jobs was to make up for the problems I’d caused. And besides, our family needed the money.

650 When I finished working for Mama, as soon as I got home I had to make dinner for everyone. Each day I got more tired, and on Friday, when I was peeling potatoes, I cut my finger. I thought it was just a little cut, so I washed it off and continued to peel.

Nurzhan looked up from the table, where he was doing his work. “What’s wrong with the potatoes?”

“Nothing,” I said automatically, with my eyes half-closed.

“They’re red!”

“What?”

660 “The potatoes, Maya. They look like you painted them with red streaks.”

I looked down and saw my finger bleeding on the potatoes, and it scared me to be so tired that I hadn’t seen this. “It’s just blood, Nurzhan. I cut myself. It’ll wash off.”

“Oh, yuck.”

“Quiet, boy! I said I would wash it off.”

That night at dinner, Nurzhan refused to eat the potatoes, even though there was no sign of blood on them, and I wanted to take the whole dish and dump them on his head.

670 The next week I was so tired after going to school and cleaning Mrs. Hathaway’s house that I burned the chicken. After I put it in the oven, I sat at the table with Nurzhan to do my homework. I rested my head on my book for just a minute, and the next thing I knew, Nurzhan was pounding on my arm.

“Maya! The oven!” he shouted.

I woke to see smoke seeping from the oven. “Oh, no!”

I leaped up and grabbed a dishtowel and pulled the pan from the oven. The chicken was very dark but not black, although all the juice at the bottom of the pan had burned and  
680 was smoking. “It’s okay, Nurzhan. We can still eat it.”

“Good.”

Nurzhan didn’t mind the almost-burned chicken that night, but Papa did.

“This tastes like my shoe!” Papa grumbled.

“Aibek, I have to keep my foot up, and Maya is doing the best she can. It is not easy. She must go to school, then do my work, then cook for us. She is just a young girl.”

I looked at Mama and felt tears in my eyes. I couldn’t remember another time when Mama spoke on my behalf, and  
690 my tears were the kind you have when you know someone is on your side.

The next evening as dinner was cooking, I sat with Nurzhan at the kitchen table and helped him with his spelling words. While I waited for him to think how to spell *admire*, I took the permission slip for the Spring Fling from my notebook and stared at it. I’d never thrown it away.

“A-D-M-I-E-R.”

“Almost, Nurzhan. It’s this,” I said as I wrote the correct spelling on the top of the permission slip and turned it for him  
700 to see.

“A-D-M-I-R-E,” he spelled. Then he looked closely at the slip. “What’s this for?”

“It’s a permission slip for the Spring Fling, the all-school dance, but it is only good for scratch paper to help you with spelling. Papa will never let me go. I don’t know why I trouble myself to keep such a thing.”

Nurzhan took the slip and put it in his notebook.

“What are you doing with it?”

“Let me try.”

710 “Try what?”

“Let me try to get permission for you from Papa.”

I laughed. “Oh, Nurzhan. Don’t be foolish. You waste your time. Papa will never change his thinking because of you.”

“I will try anyway. When he comes home tonight, I will speak to him myself. I have a plan.”

I could only smile a sad smile at the idea of little Nurzhan trying to change the mind of Papa, who is a man like a boulder.

720 After dinner I went to my room to study, leaving Nurzhan to talk with Mama and Papa. I was afraid to really hope that any good thing could come from Nurzhan’s plan. To hope and then be disappointed seemed to be worse. It was better not to hope and to live my dreams through Shannon. I could at least hear every little detail of her experience at the dance and be happy for her, giving up the idea that I’d ever be the one who goes to the dance, too.

730 But I comforted myself thinking about the dream in my life that really had come true—the gymnastics team. I still had that, and I was warming my heart with thoughts of the team when Nurzhan burst into the room.

“Maya! You can go!” Nurzhan jumped up and down like a little monkey, and I stared at him in disbelief.

“Don’t joke with me about such a thing, boy!” I snapped.

“No! It’s true. Look!” He waved the permission slip in front of my face.

I stared at the slip, still in disbelief. *Aibek Alazova . . .* Papa’s name and Papa’s writing. *It was true!* I was still staring at the slip, still afraid to completely believe that such a thing could be true, when Mama and Papa came in.

740 “We give permission for this, Maya, because Nurzhan will go, too,” Mama said.

“He will not leave your side,” Papa announced in a most serious tone. “He is your *capravazhdieushee*.”

“Chaperone.” I said the English word. I knew this word because the parents who help the teachers supervise the kids at school activities are called this. But I hadn’t heard of a little boy being a chaperone.

“Thank you, Mama. Thank you, Papa.”

“It is Nurzhan you must thank,” Mama said.

750 I thanked Nurzhan, too, and Mama and Papa left our room. Then I heard the front door close and I knew Papa had left for work.

That night Nurzhan and I whispered in our beds after Mama had gone to sleep.

“Nurzhan, what will I tell my friends when you come to the dance?”

“Don’t worry. I thought about that problem. You will tell them you must baby-sit for me.”

“But at a dance?”

760 “I think it will work. At least it is better than to say I am your chaperone.”

“That is true.”

I watched the orange light of the mini-mart sign blink on and off, and I heard Nurzhan’s slow breathing as he fell asleep.

“Thank you, Nurzhan,” I whispered as I began to dream of the dance.

The morning of the dance, Mama came into the kitchen while Nurzhan and I were eating *kasha*. Mama still had a wrap on her ankle, but she was walking without her crutches now.

770 She was happier, and I could tell she felt better. It was better for me, too. When Mama was happier, I didn’t feel so worried about her.

“Maya, I have something for you.” Mama came to the table and put a small package wrapped in tissue paper in front of me. “Open.” She pointed at the package.

I looked up at her, my face full of surprise.

“Open.”

Carefully, I unfolded the tissue paper and let out a gasp when I saw a small gold bracelet lying on the folds of the  
780 thin paper.

“You wear this to the dance.” Mama patted my shoulder.

“Oh, Mama.” I wanted to hug her like we hug on the gymnastics team, but I was too shy. We don’t hug in our family.

“I forget sometimes when there is so much work that you are just a young girl. This bracelet my mother gave to me when I was sixteen. Girls and boys dance younger here, Maya. So you wear this now.”



“Thank you, Mama. I will be careful with it.”

790 “I know. You’re a good girl. And Nurzhan will be right there. Always by your side.”

“Yes, Mama.” Nurzhan nodded.

Shannon and I met in the bathroom after school, and she loaned me her peach lip-gloss. I can’t remember ever being so excited about anything, and so nervous, too.

Nurzhan was waiting by the gym door when we got out of the bathroom. Shannon and I said hi to him, and he followed us into the gym. Nurzhan found a chair next to the door and waved to us while we joined Leslie Shattuck and her sister  
800 Tina and Faith Reeves from the gymnastics team. The gym got more and more crowded, and everywhere you looked there were flocks of boys and flocks of girls, but no boys and girls together, as if they were birds that only stayed with their own kind.

Then a few ninth-grade guys and girls danced together. They were very cool and everyone watched them, except some seventh-grade boys who were pushing each other around in an empty garbage can.

Shannon and I were laughing at those silly boys when  
810 Daniel and David came up to us. I was so happy to see Daniel,  
even though I was embarrassed about my face, which I knew  
was once again the deepest red, like borscht. But the next  
thing I knew, Daniel had asked me to dance, and Shannon was  
dancing with David!

Daniel held my hand and put his arm around my  
waist, and I put my hand on his shoulder just the way  
Shannon and I had practiced so many times. It was a slow  
dance, and Mama's bracelet gleamed on my wrist as it lay on  
Daniel's shoulder.

820 "My little brother's here. I had to baby-sit."

"Want to check on him?" Daniel asked.

"Sure."

We danced over near Nurzhan, who sat on the chair like a  
tiny mouse in the corner, and I introduced him to Daniel.

"Are you doing okay?" I asked Nurzhan.

"Yes. It's a little boring though."

"I'm sorry you have to be here."

"It's not that bad. The boys in the garbage can are fun to  
watch. I would enjoy doing that if I came to this dance."

830 Then we danced away and danced even more slowly, and  
Daniel moved a little closer to me. I looked over, afraid that  
Nurzhan was watching, but all I saw was an empty chair. And  
then we danced closer.

Daniel and I danced four more times that afternoon  
(two fast and two *very* slow), and each time Nurzhan's chair  
was empty and he seemed to have disappeared. I didn't think  
too much about Nurzhan during the rest of the dance, and  
on the bus going home, while Shannon and I talked and  
talked, reliving every wonderful moment, I almost forgot he

840 was there.

But that night when Nurzhan and I were going to sleep  
and I was thinking about how that day had been the best day  
of my life, I thanked him for making it possible for me to go to  
the dance.

"There's just one thing I wondered about," I whispered as  
the mini-mart sign blinked on and off.

"What's that?"

"Where did you go when I danced with Daniel?"

"To the bathroom."

850 "The bathroom?"

“Yes.”

“You are an excellent chaperone.”

Nurzhan and I giggled so loud that Mama came in and told us to be quiet. “Shhh, Nurzhan, Maya. Go to sleep!” She spoke sharply to both of us.

After she left, Nurzhan fell asleep right away like he usually does. But I lay awake for a while and I looked over at Nurzhan and was struck by how much things had changed.

860 I looked at the table by my bed and saw the gold bracelet shining in the blinking light of the mini-mart sign, and I imagined Mama wearing it when she was sixteen, and I treasured what she’d said as much as the bracelet: “Girls and boys dance younger here, Maya. So you wear this now.”

And I thought of Daniel, who I think is quite a special boy with a good heart. *Kak horosho*. How wonderful. Thinking of him made me smile inside. Then I closed my eyes, hoping very much that Nurzhan would like to chaperone at the next dance.

**COLLABORATIVE DISCUSSION** Do you think life in the United States is more challenging for Maya, for her brother, or for their parents? With a partner, discuss the story events that support your answer.