

Don't Let My Baby Do Rodeo Study Guide

Don't Let My Baby Do Rodeo by Boris Fishman

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Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Fishman, Boris. *Don't Let My Baby Do Rodeo*. HarperCollins, 2016. Kindle Edition.

As the novel begins, it is 2012 and time for children to come home from school. Maya Rubin goes to the school bus stop to meet her adopted son, Max, but discovers that instead of taking that bus, he has taken a city bus which goes towards the New York State line. In a state of panic, Maya starts making phone calls, including ones to the school and the police, to try and find Max before calling her husband, Alex. She finally calls him and he comes home, bringing his mother Raisa and his father, Eugene, with him.

While they wait for news about Max's whereabouts, the family discusses disturbing elements of Max's recent behavior. In addition to the current event, he sleeps on the floor and eats grass. Eugene attributes Max's behavior to his genes. He comments that it is impossible for them to know what they are dealing with because Max is adopted and they do not know anything about his biological family.

In the midst of all of the discussion, Maya decides that she wants to take the same bus route that Max took earlier in the day. Alex drives her to the bus terminal and as the bus takes off with Maya on it, he gets a call from home saying that Max is back. A woman found him by a lake with his head under the water. Max says he was counting pebbles. No one can tell Maya, though, because she left her cell phone at the house. During the bus ride, Maya gains the sympathy of the bus driver, even though he thinks that she is crazy. When they get back to the terminal, he lets her use his cell phone and she learns about Max's return. Eugene comes to pick her up.

After the family chides Maya for not being reachable and she chides them for not contacting the bus terminal to relay the message to her, Max goes to bed and the family takes turns questioning him to find out why he did what he did and explaining why he should not do it again. No one gets a real answer out of him, though. Maya thinks that he needs to see a psychiatrist. Alex thinks that he is just a boy being a boy, but finally everyone agrees that if he is going to see an psychiatrist, it would be okay to see a family friend, Bender. They take Max to see Bender and after the appointment is over, he tells them that Max is adapting to his adopted world, but is still having difficulties doing so.

Maya is not satisfied after the session, but knows that she cannot take Max to the specialist she would like him to see, so she decides to take him to a healer. When she does, though, the healer treats her, not Max. Later that evening, Alex, Maya, Bender and his wife observe Max performing a ritual to keep the deer away from the pine tress. While he does it, the deer surround him, but do not harm him until Alex intervenes and scares them. After that, Alex looks for information about Max in his records and, when he cannot find anything, Maya suggests that they find Max's biological parents, Tim and



Laurel, and go and talk to them personally to see whether they can provide an explanation for Max's behavior.

As Alex and Maya do not have Laurel's and Tim's address (it was a closed adoption), they go to their old adoption caseworker for help. He is of no help, but then Alex realizes that he has a vague memory of the couples' license tag as, even though it was a closed adoption, they had come in person to deliver Max when he was a baby. A search for the license tag number does not give them a phone number, but they do get an address. Taking Max with them, they go to Montana to look for his birth parents. They tell Max that they are going on vacation as he does not know that he is adopted.

Once there, they find the man who now owns the car, but the only thing he knows about Tim and Laurel is that they got a windfall, bought a nice new car, and left.

During the trip, though, Maya meets a man, Marion, at a diner who shows up at the various places where the family stays. They talk, share information about their lives and she imagines having sex with him before they finally do. When she does have sex with him, she does so in his hotel room after leaving Alex and Max at their hotel and spending the night with him. Afterwards, he tells her that she can stay. She tells him that she loves him, but that she cannot stay.

Marion goes back to her hotel with her and Alex sees them together. He already knows that Maya finds Marion attractive and there are signs that he has been crying. He argues with her when she comes to the room and she points out that she came back. They leave to go back home.

The weather conditions are deteriorating as they leave to drive back to New Jersey. Even so, Maya wants to stop at a rodeo. She goes in with Max, but he does not like it. She chooses this moment to tell Max that he is adopted. Max takes the news badly. When they get on the road again, the conditions are so bad that it will take hours for them to reach the highway, something that should have taken much less time in good weather. They take a detour, but it is not any better. Finally Maya cuts off the engine and gets out of the car. She realizes that things may look bad, but with work, they can make it out of the situation. She beckons Max and Alex out of the car so that they can get the same message.



Section 1: Chapters 1 - 3

Summary

It is the end of the school day in Chapter 1 and Maya Ruben goes to meet her adopted son, Max, at the school bus stop. The bus comes, but Max is not on it. When she asks the driver about him, he simply says that Max was not on the bus and tries to leave. She is persistent, though, and finally one of the students tells her that she saw him get on a town bus. The girl does not know the bus number, but the bus driver realizes which one it is and now begins to show concern. The bus goes towards the New York State line. He tries to contact the school, but he cannot get through. Finally, he tells Maya that he will reach the school and that Max will turn up. Maya goes home and calls the principal. He says that he will ask around to see whether anyone knows anything. She calls the police and talks to a dispatcher who tries to reassure her. Finally, she calls her husband, Alex. He comes home with his parents, who live nearby and almost always have dinner with them.

They four of them sit at the table and discuss the situation. Alex's father, Eugene, says that he always knew something bad would happen, as Max is adopted and they do not really know his background. The police come and ask questions. Maya shows them photos and tells them that Max is adopted, but does not know that he is. After the police leave, Eugene suggests that they look in Max's room, even though Maya already has, in case he left a note. Maya tries to keep them from going, though because she knows that they will find out that Max sleeps on the floor. While they are there everyone also realizes that Max has been eating grass. Maya and Alex did not know about this behavior.

Maya finally decides that she is going to ride the bus that Max took. Alex reluctantly drives her to the bus station. Even though Eugene suggests that they take the Escape, Alex decides to take the Corolla. On the way, Alex and Maya fight about Max. Alex does not think anything is wrong with him, but does not like that he only has one friend and that friend has a cleft palate. Maya worries that something may be wrong with Max and does not disapprove of his friend.

Chapter 2 goes back to the past (1992) and provides the history of how Alex and Maya became a married couple. Alex lives in Brooklyn with his parents and is just out of college. He plays hockey with his friend Dima, who is Russian, on a regular basis. Maya is Dima's girlfriend and is in the United States on a student's visa. On this particular day, Dima and Alex go to Maya's apartment to retrieve Dima's lucky puck. When they get there, Alex does not want to go upstairs at first because to him, the fact that Dima left his puck at Maya's shows that she is important to him. Dima finally convinces him to go though.

On the way up to Maya's apartment, Alex tries to figure out what type of relationship the couple has. He discovers that Dima has not thought about what will happen to them



when Maya's visa expires. When they get inside, Alex realizes that Maya is cooking something that he recognizes as dishes from Belarus and Ukraine are the same even though they have different names. Alex finds himself attracted to her. When it is time to go, Dima wants to leave, but Alex wants to stay and help her cook. In the end, Dima leaves and Alex is left alone with Maya. In spite of his attraction to her, he still remembers that she is Dima's girlfriend. He finds out that the meal is for a possible investor as she would like to open a restaurant. He would like to stay for dinner, but when she makes it sound like charity he leaves. He calls her the next day under the guise of seeing how the dinner went. She says that she does not want to talk about it, but she wants to see him.

Alex feels guilty, but he wants to see Maya so he starts doing more things with Dima so that he can see Maya. Even though he sees Maya alone at times, she does not break up with Dima. Then he meets her three weeks before she is supposed to leave. He proposes to her and she accepts. Maya's mother comes to the United States for the wedding and has mixed feelings about it. She knows that Maya does not follow orders. She could have stayed in the United States if she had taken a medical job, but instead decided to get married to Alex. Her mother thinks that this is typical of Maya.

Back in the present in Chapter 3, Maya takes the bus alone. She gets the bus driver's attention because she pulls the cord before every stop until he tells her to stop. When they arrive at the final stop and he realizes that she is going back with him, they talk to each other and she tells him about Max. Then she suddenly starts climbing up a grass embankment. The bus driver thinks that she is crazy. Finally she comes back down and he leads her to the bus. While she is at the bus terminal Maya remembers when Max was young and how she had felt bad because she could not experience many of the things biological parents experience with their children like not being able to sleep at night because Max slept through the night. When Max got older, she was bored. She wondered whether this was a normal way for adoptive mothers to feel. One day she felt as if she had to get out of the house to escape. She went to the store, but did not buy anything because she felt the sudden need to be with Max. She realized that they were the same in that they were both foreign.

Analysis

An important element in this section is its focus on adoption, as it raises several related issues: the ability and process of a mother's bonding with their adoptive child, the fact that one really does not know the genetic history of an adoptive child and this fact can cause problems later on, and whether a child's environment can overtake the influence of an adoptive child's genetic code.

Alex's father brings attention to the concept that when someone adopts a child they can never really know the genetic background of the child they adopt in spite of trying to make sure that the child is healthy. When Max does not come home, Eugene blames the situation of the lack of information Alex and Maya have about Max. What he knows about Montana is not good which, in his opinion, explains why Max's parents dropped



him off the way they did. "Of course those parents sprang him on you the way they did...And got away with it without ever telling you why. Rodeo?...What is that? A Lie. But you ate it...What didn't they tell you?" (10). Eugene says that he is surprised that they have not had a problem until now.

Eugene continues expressing his opinion on the importance on one's genetic makeup in determining one's behavior when the adults are in Max's bedroom. At this point, Eugene's opinion raises the question of the influence of nature versus nurture on one's behavior. Eugene thinks that one's genetic makeup determines their personality. "He came to us with programming; you can spend your whole lives changing the code, and still you are going to only rewrite fragments" (16). He bases his view on his own experience. He is just like his great-grandparents.

Alex believes something different, though. He believes that Max is what they "make of him" (21). He wants to make sure that Max starts doing "normal" things. In an effort to do that, they are going to dismantle the tent, take down the masks, and he wants Max to have "normal" friends. This is why he does not want him to be friends with Oliver any longer. Alex thinks that it is their indulgence in letting him do these things that are making him act strangely.

The question of nature versus nurture is even more interesting in Max's case, because Alex and Maya adopted him as a baby. This makes the issue clear. His genes come from his biological parents, but the nurture side of the equation comes from Alex, Maya, Eugene and Raisa. When readers consider the environment Max is growing up in, they may realize why he may act strangely at times. Max is an American child growing up in a semi-Russian world.

Alex's mother and father made a decision to leave their homeland and have made a success of their business. They have managed to merge their heritage and their adopted lives in a manner that works for them. Their lives, however are isolated. Alex works for his father and does not seem to have a life outside of his family. Raisa swims, but swimming is a solitary sport. Maya works outside of the family circle, but she seems to work and come home. When she does meet a stranger, like the bus driver, she talks to him like a patient undergoing therapy. She lacks meaningful contact with the outside world. When one considers how self-contained his family is, it is no wonder that Max only has one friend.

The nature versus nurture question arises again when Maya talks to the bus driver. This time, though, it extends to the question of whether anyone really knows their own biological children. When talking about his behavior, she says, "And every time, you ask yourself: Is that him being a child, or is that him being my child?" (52) Frank answers, "You ask yourself the same questions when you're biological" (52).

The issue regarding a mother's ability to bond with their adoptive children appears when Maya goes on her bus trip. She recalls her early days with Max and how he was foreign to her. She did not get to do any of the things birth mothers got to do with their children. She could not even share the experiences of sleepless nights because Max slept



through the nights. She could not breastfeed him and when he was finally able to eat she found that she was bored. She was so bored that she researched boredom on the Internet. She wondered, "Did all adoptive mothers feel this punishment, to remain aloof from their children in some unnameable, but undeniable way all because they had not birthed them" (56)?

It is interesting that in relaying Maya's difficulty in bonding with Max, she refers to him as being foreign to her. Learning how to adapt to things that are foreign is another concept that occurs in this section. Both Alex's family and Maya are foreign. One of the things that attracts Alex to Maya is the fact that the food she is cooking when he first meets her is the same as what he would find in his home country. The Rubins still hold on to superstitions from where they are from, but when they came to the United States, they came knowing that they were going to stay and have adapted to life in America. Maya came to the United States thinking that she was going to go back home. Even though she chooses to stay, the option to stay is thrust upon her when Alex asks her to marry him. She is fearful at times and has not adapted the life in her new home. She does not like to drive long distances and has to rely on Alex to take her places. The school bus driver ignores her and she does not stand up to him until Max does not come home on the school bus. She feels like a foreigner in her own house because Alex has his family unit. His parents have, in essence, adopted her. When she finally connects with Max, she does so because she has realized that they are both alone, together, and this is what makes them a family, just the two of them within Alex's family.

This section also presents the symbols of Maya's house with Alex that makes her feel imprisoned. There are times when she has to get out like when she goes to the store when Max is a baby. "She only wanted out of the house - anywhere" (56). She feels the same need to escape when she decides to take the bus. Her house there is the opposite of her apartment where Alex first met her. There, there was life. Her current state is something that her mother feared would happen as she knows that her daughter does not like to follow rules and orders. Living with Alex with the constant presence of his family means living their way of life, not hers.

Usually buses, or any form of transportation symbolizes growth and finding oneself. While this bus takes Maya to a different place, it sends her back with just a taste or what it is like to be free. It is interesting that when she goes on this trip, Alex takes the Corolla, not the Escape as Maya does not escape. She is still in her bland, safe, and secure world.

Discussion Question 1

Eugene and Alex have different views about what makes Max what he is. Eugene thinks that genes play a dominant role. Alex thinks that it is his environment. Who do you agree with? Support your opinion.



Discussion Question 2

Why do you think Maya married Alex? What would you have done in her situation? Do you think she made a good decision? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Should Alex have gone with Maya on the bus? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

indifference, discreet, marvel, interminable, magnanimousness, resentment, reproachfully, malevolent, unvigilant, hex, futility, confounded, miscalibration, renegade, vestibule, silhouette, trudging, daunting, inscribed, finagle



Section 2: Chapters 4 - 6

Summary

In Chapter 4, Maya returns home on the bus. The bus driver lets her use his cell phone and Alex and Eugene tell her off. Finally, Raisa gets on the phone and tells her that Max returned just after the bus left with Maya on it, but no one could reach Maya because she left her cell phone in the house. She and Raisa exchange insults and then Raisa tells her that someone found Max facedown in the river, but he is okay. Eugene comes to pick her up.

Raisa puts Max to bed, but will not allow him to sleep on the floor. The adults continue to fight about him. They tell Maya, when she arrives home, that he told them that he was counting pebbles. When she asks Max why he took the bus, he says that he was sad and just wanted to get away. She also wants to know whether Max was scared when he was on his own. When she goes back downstairs she tells Alex that he needs to see a psychiatrist. No one else agrees for different reasons. Finally Raisa suggests that he could see a family friend, Bender. Maya goes upstairs to go to bed, but before she does she calls the woman who had found Max and thanks her. Afterwards, Alex goes to talk to Max. Then he goes to bed, careful not to wake Maya.

After Alex and Maya have gone to bed, Raisa and Eugene go upstairs to see Max. He is awake, so Eugene talks to him. He makes a deal with Max to stop him from eating grass. Max finally falls asleep and dreams that he is riding a pike down a creek with another boy. He drops the boy off, but reminds him that he has to bring him back before morning.

It is 2002 in Chapter 5. Maya and Alex cannot have children, but Alex wants a child and his parents want a grandchild, Maya neither liked nor disliked children. She had wanted to open her café, something that her in-laws did not understand. As time goes on, though, her desire to open a café leaves and her desire to have a child replaces it. Alex and Maya decide to adopt even though adoption is something that none of them look favorably upon. Maya and Alex go to an adoption agency. They have an interview and then they have to go to an orientation. They have homework. Maya writes poetic answers to the questions, while Alex rewrites them, making them more concrete and grounded. The next day, the class votes that his response is the best in the whole class. When it is time to take their picture, Alex and Maya are happy together. During the exit interview, the issue of whether or not the adoption is going to be closed or open arises. Alex is adamant that it will be a closed adoption.

On the way home, Maya questions where they live. They had met in New York, but they live in New Jersey. Then she wants to drive even though she does not know how. She says that she needs to learn how to do it.



Chapter 6 returns to the present. The family has decided that Max will see Bender. They tell Max that Maya needs to see the psychologist, but Max can come along. When they get there, they go in to talk to Bender first. They catch up with each other and he gives them a book that he wrote. Then he wants to see Max alone. While Max is in Bender's office, Maya flips through his book and finds several explanations for Max's behavior. Finally, Max and Bender come out and Bender tells them that Max has dreams about pike. This fish is prevalent in Russia, so it shows that Max is adapting to his adopted culture, but as the pike is a murderous fish, his dreams show that he is still having problems adapting. He suggests that they let him choose a new name for himself and select an animal for a pet.

On the way home, Maya brings up the subject of Max having a different name and when Max asks how he got the name he has, Alex explains how he and Maya had come up with it. Max says that he likes it. Maya keeps pushing other names at him, though, which makes Alex angry especially when she mentions Max's father's name, Tim. When they get home Maya and Alex continue to argue. She still thinks Max has a problem, while Alex thinks that he is fine.

Analysis

Three major points that this section emphasizes are the importance of having children to some people, the burden parenthood can pose to mothers who also desire a career, and the issues surrounding the decision to adopt.

Chapter 5 uses a simile to create a strong image of just how much Alex and his parents want children and grandchildren in their lives. "Alex and his parents had wanted children and grandchildren with the same mindless hunger which they sat down to meals" (82). The choice of the word "mindless" is interesting as it shows that, for them, the wish to have children and grandchildren is based on pure instinct.

Maya does not have a natural love for children, but she always assumed that she and Alex would have them because that is just what is done. "When Alex and Maya met, Maya was indifferent toward children. When she happened upon one, she spoke to him like an inattentive adult" (83). When the subject comes up when she and Alex are having meals with his parents, she talks about having a lot of children, but for her it is a joke. She "made fun" (83). Making fun is something her in-laws like, as it shows that everyone is in a good mood. When she starts talking about working in her restaurant while holding babies at the same time, the elder Rubins do not think that it is so funny, though. "Like a sputtering engine, the Rubins' laughter caught in their throats" (83). Still, they play along. "If Maya had to work all hours in a cafe, of course Raisa would look after the child" (83).

Once Maya feels that the desire to open a restaurant leaves her, or at least she would no longer know how to do so, she feels that it is okay to have children. This fact about Maya says that a woman cannot truly have both - the desire to have children and the desire to have a career, both physically and mentally. Physically, having both would



mean that Raisa would have to take care of the child. In Maya's head, the desire to have a cafe leaves as her desire to have a child grows.

The author shows that the desire to have children is so great that everyone in the family is willing to go through great lengths to get a child. In this case they arrive at the decision to adopt, an option that none of them like. The narrative uses their thought process to highlight a line of thought that families that adopt may go through when making the decision and shows the difficulty for the family of an adopted child to fit into the culture of adoption. This difficulty can make life even more difficult for the adopted child. The narrative makes the point that some people may only decide to adopt because it is the best they can do. The Rubins consider adopted children to be "second-class, by definition unwanted; and why would a child be unwanted? Because something was wrong" (82). Maya does not like the idea either. She compares it to marrying someone "one hoped one would figure out how to love" (82).

When they finally decide to go through with the adoption, Alex and Maya face the decision of whether or not to let the child know who his biological parents are which raises the question of whether it is better to have a closed or open adoption. As the counselor has experience herself both as an adopted child and parent, and experience from her work, she tells them how children tend to behave when they know they are adopted, but do not have the answers they search for about their real parents. The counselor's description of the children's thought process helps readers understand why Maya now thinks that Max needs to know about his birth parents. Children make up stories about their parents once they know they are adopted. They either run away because they make up a story that their birth parents still love them and they want to live with them, or they withdraw because they think that their real parents did not love them. Maya thinks that Max needs the answers. He has already run away. Bender's diagnosis that Max is having a hard time adapting to his new culture supports Maya's fear.

It is interesting to note, though, that Max is not the only one who may be having problems adapting to a new culture. Maya has the same problem. She is afraid to drive too far. She does not fly, so does not go on holidays with the family to Mexico. She does not travel in the United States either. When she first gets Max, she sees him as foreign and does not immediately bond with him. She asks Max whether he was afraid when he was away from home because she wants to know for herself. He has dared to do what she fears doing. He has explored.

It is also interesting to note that this section gives evidence for the argument that Max may be the way he is due to his environment. Alex reads stories to him about explorers and they inspire Max to want to build a tent. When the family makes the decision that Max will see Bender, they tell him that Maya needs to go, implying that Max would not think it strange that his mother needs to see a psychiatrist. Thus, he notices her acting strangely as well.

One final point that this section highlights deals with the notion that adoptive and birth parents have the same questions about their children, but birthparents do not think to



ask these questions. Tran, the adoption counselor, who has adopted children herself answers Maya's question as to whether or not her children feel like her own by saying, "Even yours don't feel like yours half the time...At least that's what they tell me...But we forget that birth parents usually feel the same things - they just don't have the self-consciousness that makes them wonder these things" (97).

Discussion Question 1

Do you think Max need to see a psychologist? Why or why not.

Discussion Question 2

Compare Alex's response to the homework assignment questions to Maya's. What do they say about the personality of each character? Do you think the couple would have been allowed to adopt based on Maya's answers alone? Why or why not.

Discussion Question 3

What is your interpretation of the fact that Max dreams about pike?

Vocabulary

jubilant, humiliations, quavering, ministrations, sedation, incomprehensible, altercation, magnanimously, badgering, impediment, barren, dubious, inattentive, reluctance, capricious, compatriots, smattering, existential, incapacitated, indulgence, impending



Section 3: Chapters 7 - 9

Summary

Chapter 7 takes place in 2004. Maya and Alex are working with a new adoption supervisor, Mishkin, as they wait to complete the adoption process. Finally, they get news that a young couple from Montana would like them to adopt their baby. Maya questions what is wrong with the newborn child and then why the couple chose them. She wants to talk to the parents, but cannot because the adoption is closed. Alex and Maya agree to take the child, a boy. A week after signing the papers, Alex and Maya find out that the mother and father of the baby, Laurel and Tim, are on their way to deliver the baby to them. Laurel and Tim come with the the baby. Maya and Laurel have a long talk about the baby and why she and Tim chose Maya and Max. Before they leave, Laurel says that they drove so far to deliver the baby because she wants Maya to look in her eyes and tell her that she will not let the baby do rodeo, Tim's profession.

In Chapter 8, the narrative returns to the present. The Rubin's are eating breakfast and they discuss how to keep the deer from damaging the trees in the backyard. Maya offers to get the spray they need and faces protest that she will get the wrong thing. Finally, Alex agrees to let her do it. She takes Max with her, but she really has an additional destination in mind. She wants to take him to a healer, Madam Stella.

On the way, Maya tells Max that they are going to play a game. She tells Madam Stella that this is what she has told Max and Madam Stella says that everyone plays this game. She makes Maya go first. In the end, Madam Stella only performs her treatment on Maya. Maya dreams that she is having sex with her husband and then that everyone is having dinner together, but Alex is not there. Three other men and two women are though. Eugene and Raisa act as if nothing is strange about what is going on. When Maya wakes up, Madam Stella is not there. Maya and Max leave. On the way home, Maya realizes that the incident with Alex in her dream had been from when they first met. She talks to Max and finds out that there had been no time to play the game with him.

When Maya gets home, she is worried that she is going to get into trouble for being late and for not getting the deer repellent, which she had forgotten to do. She is lucky, though, because Bender is there, so no one asks questions. Maya cooks dinner and is bringing the food into the living room when she realizes that everything is quiet. She sees Alex, Bender, and Bender's wife staring outside into the backyard. Max is there performing a ritual to keep the deer from attacking the pine trees. They were not chewing the pines, but they were all around Max, They are not hurting him, though. Bender stops Maya from going outside and they watch Max tame a deer that seems hostile. All of this amazes Bender, but Alex runs outside, scaring the deer that Max had just calmed down. As the deer moves, its antler hits Max in the head and Max finds himself in the middle of a stampede.



After removing Max from the situation, they take him to the hospital and the next morning Alex looks for answers about Max's past. There are none, though, as it was a closed adoption. Maya suggests that they go to Montana to find Laurel and Tim. Max hears them fighting and they cover up the real reason for the argument. The next morning, Maya tells Alex that she is going to make a phone call.

Alex and Maya go to Gabe Mishkin's house in Chapter 9. He has retired, but Maya has managed to get his address. They want him to give them information that would lead them to Laurel and Tim. They explain the situation, but he tells them that he cannot help them, even though Maya tries to tempt him with food. When they leave, Alex realizes that he remembers the car that Laurel and Tim came in had license plates having something that included the word "rodeo." They give the possible license plate number to Eugene to give to a friend who works in the DMV. That night Maya's and Alex's hands naturally touch while they sleep.

The license plate search comes back with one possibility, but there there is no phone number associated with it and they cannot find one when they search for it themselves, so Maya suggests, once again, that they got to Montana. She and Alex fight. He admits that he knows that she wants to leave New Jersey and has wanted to do so ever since they had moved there. He goes on to say that if she wants to leave, she can. Maya admits that she wants to know what is beyond her knowledge of the few places they have been in the United States. They discuss going to Montana on vacation with Max who finally agrees that it is okay for them to go. It will also be her birthday while they are out west. Maya plans the trip, paying special attention to the dangers. She later dreams of a house, which is her house, not her husband's, and sliding through the snow.

Analysis

An important point to note about this section is the focus on the question about whether a person's genetic background determines their character or whether their environment determines it. This section also helps readers interpret the meaning of the title. A final point that it highlights is the fact that Maya is having problems adapting to her adoptive home and raises the question of who is this trip really for, Max or Maya.

When Laurel and Tim deliver Max to the house, readers get a glimpse into Max's genetic background. Max's biological parents are young, and with the exception of Tim's limp, appear to be healthy. Laurel seems to be wise for her age, and, like Maya, she is headstrong. She wants to make sure that her baby has a better life than she and Tim can give him, so she convinces Tim to drive to New Jersey and does not announce the fact that they are coming until they are almost there. At the same time, she realizes that rodeo is important to Tim, so she does not try to make him give it up. In addition, she realizes that life involves making choices that one can live with. She says that she cannot give up Tim. She can, though, give up the baby while making sure that he will have a good life.



When Laurel makes Maya promise that she will not let Max do rodeo, Laurel may be saying several things. One could be that she literally does not want her child to do rodeo. She does not even want him to see a rodeo show in Madison Square Garden. When Maya tells Tim that they will go to see the show, Laurel responds "No, you won't" (133). Perhaps she fears that the love of rodeo is in Max's genes since his father loves it so much. She knows the grim future it holds for those who do it. During their conversation, Laurel tells Maya, "And you see the way he walks. So I don't know if I'll have a husband in a wheelchair in five years. Like half of them end up in wheelchairs, making the best of it" (137). She cannot make him stop any more than Maya could have changed Alex's opinion about making the adoption open instead of closed, but she does not want Tim to bring up their child in the world of rodeo. Her statement, "I ain't letting him raise a child this way. Not with me" (138) seems to imply that nurture, or how you raise a child shapes his character. Ultimately she is happy that he will be far away from the rodeo mindset.

The title could also have a figurative meaning. Rodeo could stand for a future that leads to nowhere but misery. Laurel chooses Maya and Alex because they can give her baby a good life. She feels that, as their son, he will not be a loser like his biological father.

Laurel may have misjudged Maya and Alex though because this section provides more evidence that Max's wish to get away because he was sad was generated due to his ability to sense Maya's struggles. When the healer first sees Max and Maya she says that he has demons in his head, thus agreeing with everyone that something is wrong. Then, though, instead of continuing to focus on him, she asks Maya whether she has any demons. When it is time for the treatment to begin she gets Maya to go first and only treats her. Her action implies that Maya is the source of Max's problem and to fix it, Maya needs to fix herself. Nurture not nature is the problem.

Maya, indeed, is having problems adapting, just as Bender had said that Max is having problems adapting. She and Alex do not see things the same, but she follows his views because his need is greater than hers, she tells Laurel. Still, she is restless, ready for something new. "Instead of a child, Maya had given birth to a new life in America. It was twelve years old now, and she was ready for another. She wanted for it a sibling" (135). The dream she has at the healer's house is not indicative of her current sexual relationship with Alex. In fact, "since Max's trouble began, they had not touched each other at all" (154). This fact shows how desperate Maya's situation is because before "their unflagging desire was as responsible as anything else for moving them through the years," but while they still desired each other physically "so much else tripped, sank, got turned around on themselves" (154). Now they do not even desire each other sexually. Maya cannot even identify her husband in the dream she has at the healer's house and when she dreams after making the arrangement for the trip to Montana, she dreams that she lives in a house and is going on a journey alone.

Even Alex realizes Maya's failure to adapt to life in New Jersey. He says to her "You've been wanting to leave New Jersey for twenty years. It's like a prison to you" (184). When he tells her to leave if she wants to, she admits that she does want to leave. "I want to live somewhere else with my family" (184). Their discussion shows that she



wants to leave, but Alex is fine where he is. He tells her "You want to live somewhere else, go live somewhere else" (184). He does not plan to move.

A final possible sign that Max has learned things from his environment is that he shrugs like "a little Eugene" (186). In fact, Maya sees other "resemblances of the Rubins" including being "annoyingly pedantic" (186). However, when he does decide to go on vacation in Montana and lets Maya hug him, she thinks that maybe "there was a trace of her in her son after all" (186).

Discussion Question 1

Given that Alex's essay is voted to be the best in his class, why do you think it takes so long for someone to finally choose the couple as the adoptive parents of their child? Would you have chosen them? Why or why not.

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think that the healer chose to work on Maya instead of Max? What do you make of her dream?

Discussion Question 3

Is it right for Alex and Maya to try and find Laurel and Tim? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

placated, reverified, skepticism, lamented, titrating, unconventional, petrification, dumbfounded, detriment, contemplated, prostrate, refine, serrating, innocuous, perpetuity, foraged, rummaging, miraculously, gallantly, belatedly, formidable



Section 4: Chapters 10 - 13

Summary

In Chapter 10, Maya, Max, and Alex make it out west. Maya wakes up in the car and is mad at Alex because he drove straight through from Chicago, where they had spent some time with Alex's uncle on his father's side. She and Alex argue because of the speed in which he has reached their current destination. She had wanted to observe Max and stop and see things. He says that he thought the point of the trip was to find the parents. Alex is smoking, something that he never does and he now knows that Maya smokes, too. During their conversation, she tells him that she wants to camp, even though Alex does not want to. Max gets out of the car and says he needs to go to the bathroom. Maya takes Max to do it outside, but gets in trouble when a policeman drives up. The policeman takes them to a diner. Maya starts talking to a man in the diner and Max goes to the bathroom after the daughters of the man she is talking to come out. The man, Marion, tells Maya something about the parenting book he is reading that makes Maya laugh. He gets coffee for Maya. While Max is still in the bathroom they discuss their children. Max finally comes out of the bathroom and before they leave, Marion gives Maya the name of a campground to go to.

Alex is talking to his parents when they come out. Max wants to know who Marion is and she says that he is a new friend comparing him to Oliver. They talk about friends and what a soul is and whether or not Max is honest. Max goes to talk to his grandparents and Maya goes behind the car and cries.

The family goes to the campground. Max realizes that Maya was crying and asks her about it. He also questions why they are there and questions her again because of her conflicting answers. Max is not happy about camping because the ground is hard, but agrees to give it a try. Alex is having problems with the tent, but Max comes and works it out. Afterwards, they go on a tour of the area. Max knows the name of a bird the guide points out, but turns shy and complains that they are not on vacation. They continue to tour.

Later, Maya takes a shower and imagines that she is having sex with Marion. When she goes back to the tent, she finds out that Max thinks that there is a rattlesnake in the tent. She goes with Max to the office to report the possible rattlesnake. Wilfred, the owner, takes his shotgun and they go to the tent. Before Wilfred can do anything, Marion appears. Max identifies who Marion is and Alex's expression changes. They do not find a snake and disperse. Alex and Max go into the tent and Maya and Marion say good night to each other.

In Chapter 12, Maya wakes up and goes outside. She thinks that maybe Marion may come out for fresh air and suddenly he appears. They talk about his children and his ex-wife, Clarissa. Then they talk about Max and during the conversation she tells Marion that her birthday is in two days. Marion shows her the time capsule that he and his



father created when he was a child. Marion tells Maya about his father and his time with him. He leaves her at the place where he and his father had buried the time capsule for awhile. She has the opportunity to imagine getting rid of something as one would do by putting it in a time capsule. He tells her that it is his birthday present to her. Instead of imagining getting rid of something, Maya asks the universe for what she wants, a second love for Marion and a second sighting of Laurel and Tim. He comes back and they return.

Maya goes back to sleep, but does not get to sleep for long once Alex and Max wake up in Chapter 13. She has come back with Marion's thermos and when she gets up she makes coffee and takes it to him in the thermos with Alex watching. When she goes back to their tent Alex questions her about whether they are going to continue. She asks him why he is asking and he does not finish his breakfast.

The family goes to Montana. Maya makes Alex stop so that they can take a picture at the state sign and go to the bathroom. Then Maya wants to drive - even though she does not know how to - on the highway. She takes the wheel and almost has an accident, making Alex express his anger. They find a hotel in Adelaide. In their room, Maya and Alex have a fight because he keeps silent in an attempt to show respect for her. Alex wants to look for Max's parents right away, but Maya does not want to spend her birthday on the road and cooking for everyone at home. They then fight about Max. Alex says he wants to go home, but Maya thinks that Max has been better since they have been on the road. My leaves and it turns out that she has gotten potatoes for Max to peel with the hotel's owner to keep him busy while they go to search for Laurel and Tim.

Analysis

One of the points to note about this section is its focus on Alex's character. Readers have seen signs of his passive-aggressive behavior in previous sections, but now, with just him, Maya, and Max, it is becoming more noticeable. Alex also explains why he behaves the way he does. A perfect example of this characteristic is the fact that he drives straight through from Chicago while Maya sleeps. Alex does what he wants knowing that she is not in a position to complain. Alex does not want to be on this trip anyway. He knows that the trip is just as much for Maya, if not more so, than for Max's benefit and Alex is not going to give her the satisfaction of being able to enjoy it. When she does start arguing with Alex, he does not look at her. "He didn't look up at her, instead working at something in the grass with his foot" (194).

Alex behaves the same way when Maya takes the thermos back to Marion. In response to Maya's answer when he asks whether they are continuing west he "breathed heavily and went back to his toast. A moment later, he gave up and threw it down, half-eaten, on the porcelain plate" (253).

Maya complains about this element of Alex's character when they are in the hotel room. "Why didn't you speak up, Alex?...Order me around, Alex. But order me by speaking,



not by not speaking. You are like a general who doesn't fight, only waits for conditions to kill the other soldiers one by one" (282). Alex says that he does so because he is trying to respect her, but instead of answering Maya when she says that she does not want his respect, he looks away.

It is also interesting to note that this is really Maya's journey. Alex calls his parents. Max talks to them as well. Porcelain plates, a bit of their home in New Jersey, come along with them. Alex wants to go home and so does Max. Maya is the only one who wants to continue. She admits that she wanted to see things along the way. She flirts with Marion at the diner, laughing at what he says. Her actions are so obvious that even Max wants to know who he is. She fantasizes about having sex with Marion and even gets over her fear of going outside because she hopes that she will see him. Maya makes coffee for Marion and takes his thermos back in front of Alex. She does not want to be in New Jersey for her birthday. Alex says that "Birthdays are meant to be spent at home" (263). Her comeback is that where they are in Max's home, but she has already admitted that she does not want to spend her birthday cooking a meal for everyone. Meals are supposed to express a feeling of community and togetherness. She does not feel this with Alex's family. If she did, Maya would want to eat with them. When they talk about Max, Alex basically tells Maya that she is only there because of her own needs, "For anyone actually paying attention to him, it's quite obvious. For anyone actually paying attention to him instead of herself" (263). She also cries. This could be because she is sad that she is at the point that she is in her life with another birthday coming up.

Readers see Maya making progress in her journey to find her identity in her own adopted world. Maya has been fearful throughout the novel. She is afraid of saying the wrong thing; she is afraid of speaking with too much of an accent; she is afraid to drive long distances. At the campground, Maya wants to go outside, but is afraid to. Her fear makes her think of her uncle who would not be afraid and then the fact that she has abandoned her biological family in favor of her adopted one. "Her adopted family was not at fault, even as she loved to hold it responsible. For some reason, Maya had decided that the old family could only come at the expense of the new..." (231). The regret Maya feels because of this fact leads her to understand why she tends to fear things. "It was easier to fear than regret. Fear held out the possibility of being unwarranted, regret meant it was too late" (232). Yet, she realizes that if she does not do what she fears, this will lead to regret. After analyzing what she is afraid of, and not being able to identify what it is, Maya breaks through the safety net, or in this case the safety tent, and goes outside.

Maya's realization that she needs her biological family and that there is no real reason why she cannot have both families helps explain her furor for uniting Max with his biological parents. She thinks that not doing so will lead him to become lost, like her. Alex, who is close to his parents and came to the United States knowing that he was going to stay, does not see how not knowing, or having contact, with one's biological parents can cause the adoptee to wander around without an identity. He thinks that Max is what they make of him and they are all he needs.



This section also points out that even biological parents have questions about raising their children. Marion's daughters are with him and due to their presence, he is reading a book, *21st Century Parenting*. When talking about his girls, he tells Maya that he thinks that his daughters are adopted sometimes when she tells him that Max is adopted. In this way biological parents are not so different from adoptive parents in terms of trying to understand the behavior of their children.

The section also brings up the issue of sacrificing yourself for others. Marion talks about why he left Clarissa. He says that they grew apart as she rose in her position at work. He left based on principle, "Staying together despite all that seemed like the wrong thing to do" (238). Maya reminds him that he took marriage vows, but he justifies his actions by saying that the children understand. Maya sees fault in this and says that when people say they did it for the children, they usually mean that they stayed together for them, not divorced for them. Given the reason for Marion's dissatisfaction with his wife's job, the question becomes what should one give up, if anything, to save a relationship? Should his wife have given up her position? Should he have become more understanding? Finding an answer to this question is part of Maya's journey. How much of herself, if anything, should she give up to be happy and have a happy family?

Discussion Question 1

How would you describe Maya's relationship with Marion? Why do you think she behaves this way? Does her behavior surprise you? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

In this novel, family members do a lot to ensure the happiness of other family members. Alex goes out West for the sake of Maya and Max. Marion did not stay with his wife for the sake of the children. Maya gives up her dreams of opening a cafe for the sake of her adopted family. Do you think this practice is a good thing for all involved? Why or why not? If not, is there some type of compromise that would benefit everyone? If so, what could it be?

Discussion Question 3

How would you characterize Alex based on what you have seen of him on this trip? How do you feel towards him? Explain your answer.

Vocabulary

cantilevered, tantalizing, astringency, indigenous, beleaguered, disdainful, vanquished, conciliation, bedlam, provocation, somnolent, amiability, terrain, compliance, pervasive, transgression, placation, equanimity, unwarranted, conjured, divergence



Section 5: Chapters 14 - 16

Summary

In Chapter 14, Alex and Maya fight about when to go home, and she finally agrees that they will leave the next day. They stop and Maya gets out of the car and comes back with tears in her eyes. They finally reach their destination, but discover that the man who has Laurel's and Tim's car, Harry, bought it from a friend of his who had gotten the car from Laurel and Tim. Harry knows of them, but he does not know them. Maya explains why they came and laments that nothing has happened. Max just wants to go home. Harry says that it is something. Maya sits in the car to experience what Laurel and Tim saw from their respective seats. She finds some papers and photos that the couple left in the glove compartment. Maya returns everything except for a postcard with Laurel's and Tim's pictures on it and a marriage proposal from Tim.

Alex and Maya returns to the hotel in Chapter 15. Max has done such a good job peeling potatoes that they can eat dinner for free. Maya says that she is not hungry, but wants to go to a bar with music. They go to one and Marion is there as well. Alex has not seen him and Maya manages to get everyone out of the restaurant saying that she will pay. She admonishes Marion for coming, but realizes that she told him where they were going and there was only one hotel in town, so he had been able to find her. Maya tells him that she cannot be with him. He offers to pay and she leaves.

Alex, Maya, and Max eat at the restaurant and Maya is happy to see that Max has his appetite back. They go to bed and after Alex falls asleep, Maya leaves to go and see Marion. On the way, Maya has a vision in which she meets Laurel. In Maya's vision, the two women talk about Laurel's present life. She has two children and only thinks of Max as Maya's son. Laurel tells Maya that she (Maya) is why Max is the way he is and raises the question of whether or not she should change.

Maya continues towards her destination and finds Marion. They dance and sleep in the same bed. The next morning, Marion tells Maya that she can stay and they talk about her life since getting married and why she cannot leave Alex even though she says that she loves Marion. She undresses and the two of them have sex.

Marion and Maya go back to her hotel in Chapter 16. Marion tells her to leave before the weather gets too bad. They part with Alex watching them from the balcony of the hotel room. Alex confronts Maya and they argue. Maya says that she is ready to go back. Alex, Maya, and Max are on the road when Maya sees a sign about a rodeo. She wants to go even though the weather is getting worse. Maya and Max watch the rodeo and Max does not like it. Then they go back to the car and build a snowman. A couple takes a picture of the good looking family and their picture is still in the rodeo association scrapbook. The narrator describes it as being the image of the Shulman-Rubins.



Then, against Alex's will, Maya tells Max that he is adopted. Max reacts badly to the news and says that he does not believe her. In her head, Maya makes plans to contact Harry again and ask him to become Max's godfather and make up stories about Laurel and Tim until they find them.

The weather worsens and Maya cannot make any sense of the map. She finally finds a road that she thinks may be a shortcut to the interstate. They find the turnoff, but then they get stuck. Maya wants to turn back, but Alex says they cannot. Then Maya turns off the car and gets out. She finally gets Alex and Max out of the car too, as she wants to show them that things were really not as bad as they appeared to be. There is nothing to fear. They will find a way out and everything will be okay.

Analysis

The storm emerges as a focal point in this section both on a literal and physical level. A bad snow storm is literally moving into the area. Marion warns Maya to take her family and get out before it is too late. She does not listen to him and instead continues to take steps in her journey. As a result, the family gets stuck in the storm at the end of the narrative.

The family is facing another type of storm as well and this fact gives the storm a symbolic meaning. They are facing an emotional storm. Maya has stirred things up. She has not only been unfaithful to Alex, but she has done so in a way that flaunts her actions in front of him and those around her. Even the hotel owner knows what is going on. This has the potential to rattle Alex's manhood and his place as the head of the family.

Maya tells Max that he is adopted. When she does this, she gives him no forewarning of what she is going to tell him and she does not discuss her decision to do so with Alex. Maya also decides, by herself, that she is going to ask Harry to be Max's godfather and she is going to have him make up stories about Laurel and Tim until they find them. No one is happy with Maya as they head home. This is why they cannot find their way home; as a family, they are lost. Maya, however, is able to see hope in the situation as she has made progress in her personal journey. Maya no longer feels fear. Thus, she can look out and see the possibility of getting back on track even though she realizes that it will take hard work to do so.

One thing is obvious at the end of the novel. There is no going back. What is not obvious is the final outcome. While the novel ends on a hopeful note with the family holding hands, there is no way of knowing whether they will make it out of either storm. Making it out of the physical storm will be the easier feat as they have to work together to survive. The emotional storm may not be as easy to get through. Alex has not changed and readers may wonder how he is going to deal with the new Maya. Readers also do not know how Max will act now. In addition, there are two characters waiting for their return, Alex's parents, who will also likely have an influence on the family's situation.



It is interesting to note that in this section Maya's maiden name appears hyphenated with her married name, Shulman-Rubins. This fact shows that she has come into her own and has learned how to merge her two families, her adoptive family and her biological family. It may also show that everyone does accept the new Maya in the end.

Another point to note is that while Maya realizes that she needs her mother, Max does not seem to feel any attachment with Montana. He does not like camping there. He hates the rodeo. The trip does not even seem like a vacation for him. He just wants to go home. For Max, home is his life in New Jersey. Maya admits this to Marion. Even Laurel in her "meeting" with Maya tells her that Max is her's. Laurel thinks of Max as Maya's son. All of the signs point to Max being fine the way he is. Since Maya needs more than her adoptive family though, she cannot see this. She tries to project her own needs onto Max to know his biological family just as she has projected her feelings of wanting to get away and feeling sad on him. Considering that both she and Max are "adopted" the different needs shows that all adopted children do not have the same need to connect with their biological parents or not to connect with them. Some adopted children need to merge the two, as Maya does, and others are fine with just one, as is the case with Max.

Discussion Question 1

Do you agree with Harry that Max wants to go home means something? If so, what does it mean? Explain your answer.

Discussion Question 2

Who do you think is the wild person in the novel? Why do you think this person is the way they are? Has the journey helped them in any way? Explain your answer.

Discussion Question 3

What is your prediction for the future of Maya, Alex, and Max? Support your answer.

Vocabulary

stunted, reciprocating, impasse, provisional, nostalgia, metronomic, brandishing, minuscule, reassurance, anomie, warped, vindication, obliterate, ludicrous, predicaments, transpire, berate, obstacle, accompany, hostility



Characters

Maya Shulman-Rubin

Maya is the novel's main character. She is Alex's wife, Max's adoptive mother, and Eugene and Raisa's daughter-in-law. During the narrative, the reader sees two different Maya's. One is full of life, has dreams, and is sensitive and mystical. This is the Maya that Alex meets and the one that emerges again by the end of the novel. Between the two timeframes, however, Maya loses her spirit. She is doing a medical job that she does not like and that she had tried to avoid doing. She lives a quiet life with her husband and in-laws who do not live with them, but eat dinner with them almost every day. She does not have friends of her own. Even communicating with the woman who finds Max is difficult for her. Maya is also afraid to do things that people in the United States do on a daily basis, like driving. She feels as if she is imprisoned in New Jersey. Sensing her unhappiness, the healer attributes Max's behavior to her.

Maya's main issue is that she is foreign in every situation she is in. The United States is her adopted country. What makes the adjustment harder for her than Alex is the fact that she did not come to the United States knowing that she was going to stay. Staying and marrying Alex tears her away from her family. She is also like the adopted daughter of Alex's parents, which is something that marrying Alex thrusts upon her. In addition, she never has the chance to know whether she married Alex because she loves him or because she wanted to stay in the United States. Her uncertainty causes her to become uncertain of herself.

Maya's motivation in the novel is to find herself. She initiates the trip to Montana to find answers to help Max, but it is really a journey to help her find her own identity. As she finds herself, she influences the lives of Marion, Alex, and Max. She loves and leaves Marion. She betrays Alex as he looks on. She shakes Max's view of his family by telling him that he is adopted.

In spite of all of the mental destruction Maya causes, she still wants to make her family work as she proves by coming back to Alex and Max when she could have stayed with Marion. She also calls them out of the car so that they can share her view that there is nothing to fear and they can make it even though it will take hard work to do so.

Alex Rubin

Alex is Maya's husband, Eugene's and Raisa's son and Max's adoptive father. He is a practical man who has adjusted to his home in America and his life with his family. Between his parents, who express their opinion of what is going on in his household, and Maya, whom Alex tries to appease, it is not easy for Alex to find a place where he is needed. He tends to adopt a passive-aggressive stance, as he does not like



confrontation. Maya sees this in him and tries to push Alex so that he reacts and confronts her when he does not like what she does.

Both Alex's father and Maya comment on what they see as Alex's tendency of not wanting to admit that there are problems when they exist. When Max disappears and the family discusses the possible cause Eugene tells Alex, "You like to bury your head in the sand" (10). Later the narrator, when contrasting Alex's and Maya's behavior in the weeks after Max returns home writes, "Things Alex could not see, he dismissed..." (144).

Alex, however, does take action when it is important enough to him. He does it, though, in a way that does not generate conflict, thus fitting the description of someone who is passive-aggressive. He feels an instant attraction to Maya when he meets her; However, he does not create any conflict in winning her over. He wants to see her, but as he feels guilty because she is dating his friend, he does things with both of them. Alex shocks himself by taking the action that he does take. When he suggests that Maya marry him, it is right before she is supposed to leave and it is obvious that Dima is not going to ask her.

Alex experiences several silent victories with Max. The first one readers learn about occurs when he builds the tent with Max in their backyard. The next time comes when Max returns home after running away. When he goes to Max's bedroom, the narrator writes, "Now Alex was needed for something much greater than building a tent...patiently, Alex had kept his mouth closed so that Maya could have what she wanted. But now his insight was needed. Alex's parents would have to receive their say, but he had no intention of allowing them anything other than that. He was Max's father" (75).

Even though there are times when Alex shows his anger, he still allows Maya to take the lead, especially in the second half of the novel. He drives straight through to get them there when she is asleep and cannot object. When she is awake, he stops every time she wants to, even though he knows that the weather is worsening. Alex lets her go into the rodeo with Max while Alex passively stays at the car. At the end of the novel, Maya is the one who calls Alex and Max out of the car to send the message that they will make it and, even though the message is supposed to be a positive one, it is hard to know whether Alex will change his passive-aggressive stance.

Max Rubin

Max is the biological son of Laurel and Tim and the adopted son of Maya and Alex. When he begins to act in ways that they think are strange, his adoptive family begins to look for answers as to the cause, which spurs the trip out west.

Max is close to his family and is a good boy in general. He does such a good job peeling the potatoes with a woman who is a stranger that he earns the family a free meal. He seems to be happy to see his mother and father together at the bar and



encourages them to dance. The news that he is adopted upsets him. Yet, he is willing to stand with his mother and father at the end of the novel, showing that he shares her hope that they will make it as a family.

Max has an affinity with nature that could come from his biological parents, but could also come from Maya who appreciates nature as well. Through Max, the novel explores the question of nature versus nurture and whether one can ever even know their children even if they are the biological parents.

Eugene Rubin

Eugene is Raisa's husband, Alex's father, Max's grandfather, and Maya's father-in-law. He is a successful businessman with strong opinions that he does not mind expressing. He also loves his wife and wants the best for his family, but has reservations about Max because he is adopted - something he did not like the idea of to begin with.

Eugene is a man of action. He came to the United States and made his business a success. He believes that one has to intervene when there are problems. "...Problems don't fix themselves. Customs is not going to wake up tomorrow and realize they made an effort and expedite my honey. Philadelphia is not going to get why my Bulgarian feta is just as good as Greek fucking feta unless I go down there, and I open the buyer's mouth, and I put a square of Bulgarian feta in it..." (10).

Raisa Rubin

Raisa is Eugene's wife, Alex's mother, Max's grandmother, and Maya's mother-in-law. She is a good wife and mother who has enough of the American habits to live not too close to her son and his family, but has also kept Russian ways, like eating dinner with them almost every night as well as superstitions from her homeland.

There are things that Maya does that Raisa praises, but she also shows her displeasure in actions that she thinks are not appropriate and does not mind expressing her opinion. For example, Raisa expresses both feelings about Maya's decision to take the bus that Max took in the hope of finding him. Maya comments that at least she is taking action. However, when Max comes back and no one can find Maya, Raisa makes the underhanded comment that no one knew what Maya was doing. This comment shows that even though Maya is like their adopted daughter, she is not one of them, so Raisa does not completely trust her.

Raisa's voice is often the voice of compromise when the family members fight. She is the one who suggests that Max can go and see Bender; she thinks that she should have made Maya a sandwich for her trip; and she reminds everyone to keep their voices down when they are arguing because Max can hear them.



Marion Hostetler

Marion is a divorced man with two college-aged daughters. Maya meets Marion at a diner when Maya, Alex, and Max are on a road trip out west. Marion is philosophical and he listens to Maya and she to him. Marion decides that he loves Maya, and she says that she feels the same. In the end, Marion helps Maya see that she wants to make things work with her family, and she goes back to Alex - at least for now.

Laurel

Laurel is Max's biological mother and Tim's girlfriend at the time they deliver an infant Max to Maya and Alex. When Laurel comes with the baby, she is young, but also a strong woman who knows what she wants and knows that this means making trade-offs. When it comes to Max, Laurel wants to make sure that he has a good life and does not think that he can have this life if she and Tim raise him, as she does not want Max to be drawn into the world of rodeo. For Laurel, rodeo is a road to nothing.

Tim

Tim is Max's biological father and Laurel's boyfriend at the time he and Laurel deliver Max to Maya and Alex. He participates in rodeo, and in doing so, leads the type of life that Laurel does not want Max to grow up in.

Harris Sprague (Harry)

Harry is an author who bought Laurel's and Tim's car when they bought a new one after the adoption went through. Maya and Alex go to talk to him because they trace the car to his address. Later, Maya decides that she wants Harry to be Max's godfather, as he is the only connection they have to Max's biological parents.

Harry is straightforward and tells them what he knows about Laurel and Tim. Harry also gives Alex and Maya helpful advice when he says that it is something that Max wants to go home.

Dima

Dima is Alex's friend when he is younger and Maya's boyfriend at the time Alex meets Maya. It is Dima who introduces Maya to Alex. Dima is sure of himself and does not have any serious intentions towards Maya, making it easy for her to accept Alex's marriage proposal a few weeks before her visa expires.



Bender

Bender is a family friend and the psychiatrist the family agrees is acceptable for Max to see. Bender's diagnosis helps reinforce in Maya's mind that they need to find Max's biological parents.

Madam Stella

Madam Stella is the healer Maya takes Max to. Madam Stella realizes that Max has issues but treats Maya, signaling that Max's issues are a reflection of Maya's.



Symbols and Symbolism

Maya's Bus Trip

The bus trip that Maya takes while the family waits for news about Max symbolizes her need to escape and find her identity. The trip takes Maya much farther than she would have driven herself, but it does not provide any answers. It is the bus to nowhere.

Maya's House in New Jersey

The house that Maya lives in with Alex and Max in New Jersey symbolizes a prison for her. In it, she is not free to be her true self, and thus she is sad and wants to leave. This is the message Max picks up from her and why he takes the city bus instead of coming home after school. Max is doing what Maya is afraid to do.

Rodeo

When Laurel says not to let her baby do rodeo, she is using rodeo to symbolize not letting her baby be a loser or waste his life away as his father, Tim, is doing. Tim does rodeo and already limps. Many men who do rodeo end up in wheelchairs at a young age. She does not want this lifestyle for her child.

The Pike

The pike that Max sees in his dreams symbolizes the fact that people are trying to put pressure on him and influence Max and that something is going to happen to fill a gap in his life. The decisions people are making for him include not letting him sleep on the floor, taking away his tent, not allowing him to play with his friend, and looking for his biological parents. The filling of the gap in his life is answering questions that Max may have like why are there no pictures of him when he was first born and finding his biological parents.

The Creek in Max's Dreams

The creek in Max's dream symbolize the new experiences and short journeys he wants - or thinks he wants - because he senses that this is what his mother wants.

Maya's Meals With Her Family

The fact that Eugene, Raisa, and Alex enjoy their meals together at the house and Alex and Max enjoy their meal at the hotel, but Maya does not enjoy eating with her family



symbolizes the discord that exist between her and her family. Maya does not even like cooking for them though as she shows when she does not want to go back to New Jersey for her birthday.

The Brand Name of Eugene's Car - Escape

Eugene's car, the Escape (which is the one Maya's family takes to Montana instead of the Corolla), symbolizes Maya's wish to escape from the prison of her house and life in New Jersey. This is in contrast to the car Alex took when they when she caught the bus at the beginning of the novel. Then they took the Corolla and she was not able to make an escape.

The Imagined Rattle Snake

The snake that Max thinks he sees symbolizes the temptation Marion offers his mother and the danger Marion poses to his family if he, indeed, does tempt Maya. Max sees this as he is sensitive and attuned to nature and his mother.

The Potatoes Max Cuts With The Hotel Owner

The fact that Max contributes to the creation of a popular dish by cutting the potatoes symbolizes that he is fine, as he is able to provide food and nourishment for others.

The Storm

The storm that the family finds itself in at the end of the novel is symbolic of the emotional storm generated by Maya's actions such having a one-night-stand with Marion and telling Max that he is adopted. The family literally cannot turn back because they cannot turn back the clock. They have to work together to figure out how they can make it through the emotional storm if they are to survive as a family unit.



Settings

Maya's and Alex's House

Maya's and Alex's house is in New Jersey and it is very close to his parents' house. Much of the activity in the first half of the book takes place here and as Maya is afraid to drive too far away from it, when she is not working, she is there. For Maya, the house also symbolizes a prison. She rushes out once when Max is a baby because she just has to get out. Max mirrors her feelings when he says he ran away because he needed to get away. At the end of the novel, Maya is ready to return to the house. It is interesting to note, though, that she does not return, as her journey is not yet over.

The City Bus

Maya takes the city bus with the number that Max's classmate saw him taking. It takes her on a short journey that allows her to escape the house as she leaves without her cell phone. Other than literally touching the soil of a different place, she does not get any of the answers she is looking for, so she has to go on a longer journey later.

Bender's Office

Bender's office is where Bender sees Max and Maya reads Bender's book which gives her more ideas of what could be wrong with Max.

The Diner

The diner is where the policeman takes Maya and Max so that Max can go to the bathroom and where Maya meets Marion. It is here that Maya begins to let go of her inhibitions as she laughs.

The Campsite

The campsite is the place Max, Alex, and Maya camp based on Marion's recommendation. Marion shows up there as well. It is also the place where Maya and Marion get to know each other better and Alex notices their attraction to each other.

Harry's House

This is where Alex and Maya go thinking that they will find Laurel and Tim because they trace the car to this address. It does not have a phone which is why there is no phone number. Their car is there because Harry bought it, but Tim and Laurel are not.

Marion's Hotel

Marion's hotel is where Maya spends the night together and the two of them have sex.



Themes and Motifs

Nature Versus Nurture

The fact that Max is adopted and, more importantly, was adopted basically at birth introduces the question of what produces one's character. Is it nature, meaning that one comes, as Eugene says, programmed with a genetic code that outside factors can only alter by a small amount no matter how hard they try, or does one's environment shape their character? If this is the case, one's environment is strong enough to overwrite a person's genetic code.

When Max runs away and then the family learns of other strange behavior, like eating grass, Eugene argues that Max is a product of his genetic code. Eugene reminds Maya and Alex that they do not really know anything about Max's genetic background and raises the question as to what do they not know about his background. Eugene's limited knowledge of Montana is all he needs to explain Max's behavior. Max is wild because people from Montana are wild. "An Aryan they get, from Montana. Where? Who? People fuck sheep over there. There aren't any women. Sheep, goats, whatever's at had. Of course those parents sprang him on you the way that they did...What didn't they tell you?" (11). He even suggests that Alex and Maya would have been better off adopting "...an Asian child. 'Those at least have good genes for school'" (10). Eugene bases his opinion on the fact that he is so much like his great-grandparents. "I knew my great-grandparents. And who am I if not their great-grandson, buying for ten cents and selling for twenty?...But it's the same game" (16).

The narrative presents evidence, however, that Max's behavior could be a result of his environment, and not his genetic code. First of all, he is growing up in a unique household with unique people. He and his biological family come from the United States. The family that adopts him, however are Immigrants from Russia and the Ukraine. They are explorers, like the people Max reads about with his father, who left their home country to set up a new life in the United States. Max's father reads to him in Russian, giving him a sense of the culture. It is from the stories that Max gets the idea to build a tent. While the pike in Max's has a strong symbolic meaning, it is also prevalent in Russia. Thus, is it strange that Max's dreams features this type of fish? Alex's parents adopt certain American ways, but they keep their superstitions and Max sees them a lot. In addition, he does not see a lot of other people coming to the house or them going to see friends. As a result, it is not strange that Max, too, would operate in a world void of a lot of friends.

There are other elements of Max's environment that could explain his behavior. When Max explains why he did not come home on the school bus he says, "I wanted to go away. I was sad" (67). His words express his mother's feelings. Maya has not adapted to living in her adopted country or within her adopted family. She no longer has the drive that she had when she first met Alex. Maya is fearful to talk, because she might reveal her accent or say the wrong thing. She does not fly and does not like to drive long



distances, thus limiting her ability to travel. To Maya, her home in New Jersey is a prison. Alex even acknowledges that this is how she feels, and Maya does not deny it. Both of the people Maya takes Max to in order to diagnose his problem end up diagnosing her's instead. Bender tells them that Max is adapting to his environment, but not without difficulties. Madam Stella treats Maya - not Max - when Maya goes to see the healer after admitting that Max does have demons. This fact indicates that Maya needs to get rid of her demons if Max is to get rid of his. His demons come from her, not his biological family. Even Laurel, during her "meeting" with Maya says that Max is wild because of Maya. In addition, Maya has a mystical and emotional element to her character. This could explain why Max relates to nature and is so sensitive to Maya's feelings.

Finally Maya sees traces of Eugene and Alex and herself in Max. "Max shrugged heavily, a little Eugene. (Why did Max demonstrate only distinction from Maya but resemblances to the other Rubins?)...her son could be annoyingly pedantic...And from whom had he inherited this blessing?...But Max was different. Perhaps there was a trace of her in her son after all" (186). However, when they go to Montana, there is nothing there that he likes. The only time that Max shows that he is happy is when he is slicing potatoes, as Maya taught him to do, and earns them a free meal. Then Max eats well with his father.

The narrative leaves the answer to the question of nature versus nurture for the reader to determine as it presents both sides of the argument.

Both Biological and Adoptive Parents Face the Same Questions When it Comes to the Behavior of Their Children

In addition to providing a source to discuss the issue of nature versus nurture, the fact that Max is adopted allows the narrative to pose the question as to whether the concerns that adoptive parents have about the behavior of their children are really any different from those of families who are raising their own children. In other words, do parents ever really know the reasons for the behavior their children exhibit? The conversations Maya has with biological parents indicates that when it comes to knowing why children behave the way they do, both adoptive and biological parents face the same questions.

When Maya takes the same bus Max took earlier in the day, she confides in the bus driver when they reach the terminal at the end of the outbound trip. "And every time, you ask yourself: Is that him being a child, or is that him being my child?" (51). When the bus driver says that he does not understand what she is saying, she tells him that Max is adopted. Then, he tells her, "You ask yourself the same questions when you're biological" (52). She says that he can answer them, but he does not totally agree. He just says, "I guess so" (52).



Later Maya confides in Marion and gets almost the exact same response. When she tells him that Max is adopted, he references his daughters and says, “Sometimes, I think they’re adopted” (208). Like the bus driver, Marion is not sure he has all of the answers. In fact, he is reading a book, *21st Century Parenting*, to learn more.

During the adoption process, Tran, the woman who gives Alex and Maya their exit interview, shares her experience with them about her adopted children. She is Vietnamese and her children are white. Maya asks whether they feel like hers. Tran responds, “Even yours don’t feel like yours half the time...At least that’s what they tell me” (97). She goes on to provide the viewpoint of biological and adoptive parents. “As an adoptive parent, the question on your mind is: Is it me? Is this him being a kid or is this him being adopted? But we forget that birth parents usually deal with the same things – they just don’t have the self-consciousness that makes them wonder these things” (97).

Personal Sacrifice for the Sake of Others

The author contrasts Laurel and Maya's sacrifices for the sake of others with Marion's decision to leave his wife in order to lead readers to question which choice is best for all of the involved parties.

As the mother of a newborn child, Laurel makes a personal sacrifice by giving up her baby for adoption. She does so because she does not want Tim to bring him up to lead the type of life Tim, Max's father, leads. When Laurel talks to Maya about why she chose them, Laurel tells her about Tim's mindset which is basically the mindset of people who do rodeo in general. Laurel does not understand it, but she is not willing to give him up. Still, she will only go so far. “I ain’t letting him raise a child this way. Not with me, if that’s what he does with his life” (138). She knows that she is making a sacrifice by giving up her baby and she even has to find out how she will manage letting go of him, but she knows that Max will be in a better place and far away from the life of his father. “He’ll be with good people...Earn real money. And don’t ride bulls for a living” (138).

It is interesting to note that even though Laurel has made a personal sacrifice, she chose the sacrifice that best suits her. She goes on to say that given the situation, which she says is complicated, “...decisions need to get made, I made it...my need was greater” (138). From what readers know about what happened to them afterwards, it seems as if she made the right decision by giving up Max. He was saved from living a life that would end in misery and she and Tim received enough money to make a new start and improve their lives.

Maya also makes a personal sacrifice when she marries Alex, but the outcome leaves her lost. She gives up her dream to open a restaurant because her in-laws convince her that it is better to work in the hospital. Maya lives in the world of the Rubins with no friends of her own. Maya tells Marion that he is her first friend “in twenty-five years in America” (300). She also makes a personal sacrifice when she lets Alex's parents think



that she is the reason she and Alex cannot have children. As a result, the Rubins are okay, but Maya is not. In essence she sees their needs as greater than her's and thinks that in serving them she is serving her needs as well. Maya even tells Marion that she took the job at the hospital because she thought that Eugene was right about what was best for her. At the end of the novel, Maya sacrifices her personal happiness once again, for the Rubins so as not to ruin their family, as well as to protect Max from his family. This time, though, Maya is going to do so on her terms. "Don't I have to unfaith myself before I fail him?" (301).

Marion's marriage failed because neither party wanted to make the sacrifices that would make the other one happy. Clarissa would not cut back on her work and Marion would not understand what her work meant to her. He "sacrificed" himself for the sake of the children until they went to college by staying in the marriage. Once they left home, he left. He has no regrets about not making the ultimate sacrifice, to calm his ego to make the marriage work. In fact, Marion says that his children accept his choice and that it was the best thing to do. Readers cannot judge whether it was or not as they only meet him after his marriage has ended.

Adoption Issues

The narrative uses the story of Max's adoption to bring attention to the negative perception that people looking to adopt can have of children who are put up for adoption, the need to get agreement from one's extended family if they are going to be involved in the child's life, the question of whether an adoption should be open or closed, and the question of whether the biological parents ever want to be found. While the narrative highlights the questions regarding an open and closed adoption and the biological family's wish to be found or not, the answers are left up to the reader to decide.

The first issue that Maya and Max have to deal with is getting over the perception that something is wrong with children who are put up for adoption. They see them as second-class citizens. Maya thinks that learning to love an adopted child is like trying to learn to love a man from an arranged marriage. This becomes an even bigger issue as adoption involves the extended family as well as the nuclear family.

Another issue is whether the adoption will be open or closed. The narrative shows that this decision can have an influence on the child's behavior once they find out that they are adopted. Tran tells them, "But what children tend to do when they know they're adopted but they don't have clear answers is to make up the birth parents. They tell themselves stories in order to make sense of having been given away" (96) Their stories can lead to a suspicion of the adoptive parents or cause them to withdraw. The narration shows that there are other ramifications, as well. What if it is a closed adoption and the child has health problems that knowing its genetic background can help. If it is closed adoption, what is the adoptive family to do?



The search for Laurel and Tim also raises the point of whether the biological family even wants to be found. They may have made a new life for themselves. Laurel and Tim stayed together, but what if they had not? What if the mother had kept the pregnancy a secret? Will they be happy with someone looking for them years later and telling everyone about the adoption as Maya is doing?

Finding One's Identity as a Foreigner

In addition to being a novel about the adoption of children, the narrative functions as a story of finding one's identity as a foreigner in an adopted country. Alex and his parents are originally from Russia. Maya is Ukrainian. Even though they all live in an adopted country, the United States, they have not adapted in the same way, and what works for one does not work for the other.

When Eugene and Raisa bring Alex to the United States at the age of 8, they plan to stay and integrate in order to make a better life for everyone. With that in mind, they succeed in achieving the American dream as they see it. Eugene's business gives them a good life. They live in a nice house in the suburbs. At the same time, they maintain elements of their culture such as their superstitions. Alex also makes sure that Max knows Russian. It is important to note, though, that this is not because of a love for his home country. It is because he thinks that it is valuable to have a second language.

Maya's story is different. She does not leave her home country with the plan to never return. She comes on a student's visa. She can extend it if she works in her field, medicine, for another year. That idea does not entice her to stay, though, because she misses her family. The apartment she lives in as a student is not that much different than one that she might have lived in in Kiev. When Alex goes there with Dima he notes, "Dima's girlfriend did not have to leave Kiev if she wished to live in a building whose elevator smells like urine and rumbles like it is about to snap off its cables" (26). This is where Maya is happy, though. It is a complete contrast to the nice house she inhabits in New Jersey. She views the New Jersey house as a prison. In New Jersey, Maya is afraid to be herself. The school bus driver ignores her until the day that Max does not come home on the bus even though she meets Max at the bus stop on a regular basis. Even when Maya speaks to the driver on this day she worries about her accent, "She heard, as always, her slight accent, like a hair under the collar" (5). She also worries about saying the wrong things and often apologizes for expressing her thoughts.

As Maya starts coming into herself again she realizes that she has made an error in trying to adapt to her adopted home. She has lost real contact with her family in Kiev and she needs them to be part of her life. In essence she had ignored part of herself in an effort to be what she thought would make her fit into her adopted country and adopted family. Somewhere in the process of making her home in the United States, Maya had behaved as she could not have both her new existence and her old one, "For some reason, Maya had decided that the old family could only come at the expense of the new – and allowed it to drift away in ways easily justified by the distance and time" (231). Once she realizes what she needs, one of those things being to see her mother,

she begins to regain her identity. She even makes a “friend” when she meets Marion. She says that he is the only friend she has.



Styles

Point of View

The narrative is written in the third-person point of view. It goes into the head of the novel's major characters. This is appropriate, as a first-person point of view from the perspective of any of the major characters would not provide the full story of the Shulman-Rubins, as theirs is a complicated story with people having different views of what makes a good life. For example, Alex thinks he is doing the best thing by keeping quiet when Maya behaves in ways that he does not like. He is trying to show her respect. His behavior, though, drives her crazy. Eugene is also trying to be helpful when he finds the job in the hospital for Maya. She is only happy there, however, because she feels alive compared to the patients. A first-person perspective would lead to an unreliable narrator. In addition, all of the characters do not appear everywhere. Thus, the narration needs to be from a point of view that sees everything and the third-person perspective achieves this goal.

The point of view also works well in showing Maya's growth. There are places where it allows readers to understand her thought process as she works through her issues. There is one pivotal moment when the narration shows that Maya has found her identity when she references the family as the Shulman-Rubins. Previously, Maya had only been Maya Rubin. In fact at one point the narration states, "Maya Rubin nee Shulman,,," (12). In this reference, the name "Rubin" overshadows her previous self. This point is important because it is the cause of her identity issue.

Language and Meaning

At times, the narrator uses words to add to the imagery within the novel. This imagery often includes the use of similes such as how the narrator explains how much the Rubins wanted a child and a grandchild, "Alex and his parents had wanted children and grandchildren with the same mindless hunger with which they sat down at meals" (82). This literary device, as well as the use of individual words to enhance the imagery of the scene, gives the narrative a poetic feel which works with the characterization of Maya and Max who are sensitive people and Maya's mother who often told stories.

Another point that adds to the characterization of the novel's characters is the use of the speech patterns of Laurel and Tim. They are a young couple who does not have much money and have not had the type of education that Alex and Maya have had, and it shows in the way they speak. They do not use correct grammar and they use the word "m'am" as a sign of respect which is common in some parts of the country. Having them speak in this way does a lot to help readers picture the state that they are in and how young they are. This helps readers empathize with them.



Even though Max's adoptive family's native language is Russian, there is not much use of the Russian language in the novel. Raisa calls Eugene, Zhenya when Max is missing and he makes his views known about adoption. As this is a Russian name, her use of it could mean that this is Eugene's real name. If he has indeed changed it to a more American sounding name, this could explain why they do not use many Russian terms when they speak with each other. Even though they have bought their superstitions and memories with them (Eugene references the night of a Cossack Pogrom), they have assimilated into American society and this means speaking English. In fact, Alex and Maya fight about whether Max should learn Russian. Alex teaches it to him, as Alex thinks that it is good to have more than one language. Even when Alex thinks that Max has made a mistake due his understanding of Russian and used the word "build" instead of "set up" the Russian word never appears.

Structure

The novel is divided into two parts, East and West. Both parts contain an equal number of chapters. The first part contains chapters that take place in the past and the present. It serves to give the backstory of relevant events that help to explain the present. Once the narration has brought readers up to date, it launches into the trip to the west which only moves forward to reflect Maya's journey to find her identity. She is moving forward as the narration moves forward.

It is also interesting to note how the second section really is Maya's story. She often appears without Alex or Max and it follows her revelations about herself, what has gotten her to this point, and what she needs to do to move forward in a positive way.



Quotes

Genes are not water...Biologically, he is and always will be the child of those people.
-- Eugene (chapter 1 paragraph 82)

Importance: Eugene says this when Max runs away. The quote shows their negative view of adoption even though Alex has been with them for eight years and raises the nature vs. nurture issue. Is Max behaving as he is because he is genetically inclined to do so? Eugene believes that this is the case.

Diabolical because now how will Maya know whether she said yes to the man or the country?
-- Narrator (chapter 2 paragraph 102)

Importance: This quote shows what Maya's mother is thinking when she comes to the United States for Maya's wedding. She realizes that, because Maya's visa is about to expire, she has to move quickly and thus does not have the time to find out how she really feels about Alex. Thus it is hard for even Maya to know if she her decision to marry Alex is because she loves him or because she wants to stay in the United States. This foreshadows the problems they will have in the future.

Let us be tenacious together.
-- Narrator (chapter 2 paragraph 105)

Importance: Maya thinks this during her wedding ceremony. Alex's courtship of her makes her think that the two of them can make something special together. It shows how she expects the marriage to progress and helps readers understand her discontent with how it turns out.

She and Max constituted a family of their own - a family within a larger family.
-- Narrator (chapter 3 paragraph 78)

Importance: The narrator says this at the point that Maya bonds with Max. She realizes that they are both foreign. He is foreign to their family and she is foreign to the United States and the family she is in as well. In essence they have both been adopted and this is the basis of their bond.

I wanted to go away. I was sad.
-- Max (chapter 4 paragraph 78)

Importance: This quote is Max's reason for not coming home after school. He never explains why he was sad which leads Maya to think that he needs to see where he was born, know that he is adopted and meet his biological parents. In reality though he is reflecting her feelings. She is the one who is sad and wants to go away. The quote also shows that Max has sentiments from both sides of the family. Maya is sad and wants to



leave, but is afraid to go anywhere. Max is an adventurer, like the Rubins. So he acts on his impulse and leaves to explore his world.

Please don't let my baby do rodeo.
-- Laurel (chapter 7 paragraph 160)

Importance: Laurel says this because she does not want her son to be a loser like his father. Rodeo is a metaphor for this.

Things Alex could not see, he dismissed, whereas they were what terrified Maya.
-- Narrator (chapter 8 paragraph 34)

Importance: This quote concerns how Alex and Maya deal with Max and his situation. Their attitudes serve to characterize how they treat their lives as well. Maya is not happy, but she does nothing to show it on the surface, so Alex dismisses the possibility that something is wrong with their marriage. Maya fears things in general, as a foreigner does who is uncomfortable in their setting and fears the unknown. This also helps explain why she needs to go on her journey. She knows she needs answers, but does not quite know what she needs answers to. It all scares her, but she has to go forward to find what she needs.

But this is what Americans did, they just started talking to each other, a nation with the oafish amiability of the slightly touched.
-- Narrator (chapter 10 paragraph 105)

Importance: This quote occurs when Maya first meets Marion in the diner and she marvels that she is shaking hands with a complete stranger. It reminds readers that Maya is a foreigner and thus she views what is going on as an outsider even after all of the years she has been in the United States. The fact that she still marvels at the attitude shows how she has not integrated into the culture in the United States and reminds readers of how uncomfortable she was talking with the lady who found Max. In addition, the quote shows how foreigners view what is common in the United States.

All this is doubly so for the immigrant, who does not realize the tenuousness of his hold on the originally adopted home until he has cavalierly relinquished it in the service of...what?
-- Narrator (chapter 11 paragraph 62)

Importance: This quote occurs when Maya is taking her shower at the campgrounds. It reminds readers that she is a foreigner even though she has lived in the country for years. Yet, she does not know the country. Now she is in the middle of nowhere as she looks for the answer of why they are there in this awful place.

It was easier to fear than regret. Fear held out the possibility of being unwarranted, regret meant it was too late.
-- Narrator (chapter 12 paragraph 6)



Importance: Maya is afraid to exert herself because she is a foreigner. Now, on her journey, she learns how to overcome her fear. She starts with leaving the tent when she does not know what wild things may be out there. The quote takes her farther than just her current situation and applies to her life in general and helps explain why she makes some of the choices she makes later in the novel, like sleeping with Marion and why she chose to fear things in the past. Now she realizes that she has been hiding behind fear and that her fear has led to regret.

A woman lives a life of contradictions wrapped inside paradoxes wrapped inside a big candy wrapper.

-- Marion (chapter 12 paragraph 59)

Importance: Marion says this as he talks to Maya about the end of his marriage and he talks about the nature of women. He sees them as people who look pretty on the outside, but have layers of complications and contradictions associated with them. It is interesting that he says this to Maya, someone whom he is attracted to because it describes her. She is much more complicated than she seems to be on the surface.

She wanted them to see that it would take some doing to get out of this trouble, but the forecast was good, and the world full of wonder, and there was nothing to fear out there at all.

-- Narrator (chapter 16 paragraph 105)

Importance: This quote occurs at the end of the novel when Maya gets everyone out of the car to look at what surrounds them. It literally represents their current situation, but figuratively it represents their lives. They are in the middle of a storm, but they can overcome it and she has learned that indeed her fears are unwarranted. There is really nothing to fear in life.