

A-level

ENGLISH LITERATURE A

Paper 2B Texts in shared contexts: Modern times: Literature from 1945
to the present day

June 2020

Insert

Extract from *Everything I Never Told You*, a novel by Celeste Ng published in 2014

She'd had the highest grade in her class, had set the curve on every test; she had loved physics. But he couldn't know that. On the transcript, it said only "A". She held her breath, waiting, afraid he would tell her that science was too hard, that she'd better try something like English or history instead. In her mind she prepared her retort. Instead he said, "All right, then, why don't you try chemistry – if you think you can handle it," and signed her course slip and handed it over, just like that.

When she arrived at the laboratory, though, she found herself the only girl in a room of fifteen men. The instructor tut-tutted and said, "Miss Walker, you'd better tie up those golden locks." "Can I light the burner for you?" someone else would say. "Let me open that jar for you." When she broke a beaker, the second day of class, three men rushed to her side. "Careful," they said. "Better let us help." Everything, she soon realized, started with *better*: "Better let me pour that acid for you." "Better stand back – this will make a pop." By the third day of class, she decided to show them. She said no, thank you, when people offered to make her pipettes, then hid a grin as they watched her melt glass tubes over the Bunsen burner and stretch them, like taffy, into perfectly tapered droppers. While her classmates sometimes splashed their lab coats, burning holes all the way down through their suits, she measured acids with steady hands. Her solutions never bubbled onto the counter like baking-soda volcanoes. Her results were the most accurate; her lab reports the most complete. By midterm, she set the curve for every exam, and the instructor had stopped smirking.

She had always liked surprising people that way. In high school, she had approached her principal with a request: to take shop¹ instead of home ec. It was 1952, and in Boston, researchers were just beginning to develop a pill that would change women's lives forever – but girls still wore skirts to school, and in Virginia, her request had been radical. Home economics was required for every sophomore² girl, and Marilyn's mother, Doris Walker, was the only home ec teacher at Patrick Henry Senior High. Marilyn had asked to switch into shop with the sophomore boys. It was the same class period, she pointed out. Her schedule wouldn't be disrupted. Mr. Tolliver, the principal, knew her well; she had been at the top of her class – girls and boys – since the sixth grade, and her mother had taught at the school for years. So he nodded and smiled as she made her case. Then he shook his head.

"I'm sorry," he said. "We can't make an exception for anyone, or everyone will expect it." At the look on Marilyn's face, he reached across the desk and patted her hand. "Some of the equipment in the shop would be difficult for you to use," he told her. "And to be honest, Miss Walker, having a girl like you in the classroom would be very distracting to the boys in the class." He meant it as a compliment, she knew. But she also knew that it wasn't. She smiled and thanked him for his time. It wasn't a true smile, and her dimples didn't show.

So she had slouched in the back row of the home ec classroom, waiting out the first-day welcome speech her mother had given for a dozen years, drumming her fingers as her mother promised to teach them everything a *young lady* needed to keep a house. As if, Marilyn thought, it might run away when you weren't looking. She studied the other girls in her class, noting who bit her nails, whose sweater was pilled, who smelled faintly of a cigarette snuck over lunch. Across the hall, she could see Mr. Landis, the shop teacher, demonstrating the correct way to hold a hammer.

Glossary

1 'Shop' is a practical lesson in woodwork and/or metalwork, today usually called design technology or resistant materials.

2 'Sophomore' means a high school student aged 16–17.

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