

A-level

ENGLISH LITERATURE A

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

Insert

Extract from *Digging to America*, a novel by Anne Tyler published in 2006

"This is the worst mistake of my life."

"Excuse me?" Ziba said.

She looked over at Sami. He was standing to one side of the stove now, waiting for the kettle to heat. "Mom didn't mean to say yes," he told her.

"Didn't mean . . . ?"

Maryam said, "I was trying to be . . ." She let out a little breath of a laugh, although her expression stayed grim. "I was trying to be polite," she said.

"Polite!" Ziba echoed.

"Well, what would *you* have done? If someone put you in a spot like that, asked you in front of everyone? Funny," Maryam said. "I've always wondered about those very public proposals. The men who propose on billboards or hire a plane to fly a banner past. What if the women have no wish to get married? But there they are, trapped. On public view, and so what can they say but yes?"

Ziba was speechless. After a moment, Sami cleared his throat and said, "Well, ah, but it's always been my assumption that those couples have arrived at some understanding beforehand, so that the men feel fairly sure of their answer. Are you saying that you and Dave never discussed the subject?"

"Never," Maryam said. Then she hesitated. "Or never in so many words, at least."

Sami cocked his head.

"It's true we have been . . . a couple for some time," she said. "I admit that he means a great deal to me. And my first reaction yesterday was 'yes'; I won't deny it. But not two minutes later I thought, My Lord, what have I done?"

She looked at Ziba when she said this. Instead of responding, Ziba sank onto the chair across from her. She didn't know whether the hollow in her stomach came from her hangover or from dismay.

"He is so American," Maryam said, and she hugged herself as if she felt cold. "He takes up so much space. He seems to be unable to let a room stay as it is; always he has to alter it, to turn on the fan or raise the thermostat or play a record or open the curtains. He has cluttered my life with cell phones and answering machines and a fancy-shmancy teapot that makes my tea taste like metal."

"But, Mari-june," Ziba dared to say. "That's not American; it's just . . . male." Then she shot a quick glance at Sami, but he was too focused on his mother to take offense.

"No, it's American," Maryam said. "I can't explain why, but it is. Americans are all larger than life. You think that if you keep company with them you will be larger too, but then you see that they're making you shrink; they're expanding and edging you out. I could feel myself slipping away. I was thinking so for a while now! And then before I could say that, he did this thing in public."

She was speaking in an unusually stilted manner, Ziba noticed, and with more of an accent, perhaps to prove that she herself was not American in the least—that she was the opposite of American. And her huddled posture, so unlike her, did make her seem to have shrunk.

"All his fuss about our traditions," she said. "Our food, our songs, our holidays. As if he's stealing them!"

"Oh, well, but, Mom," Sami said. "That's a *good* trait, his interest in our culture."

"He's taking us over," she said, unhearing. "Moving in on us. He's making me feel I don't have my own separate self. What was that sugar ceremony but stealing? Because he borrowed it and then he changed it, switched it about to suit his purposes."

Even though she had had nearly the same thought herself, Ziba said, "Oh, Maryam, he just wanted to show he respects our way of doing things." She was suddenly filled with sympathy for him, remembering Dave on his knees and his eager, open face. "You can't object to his Americanness and then fault him for trying to act Iranian. It's not logical."

"It may not be logical, but it's how I feel," Maryam said.

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