

THE TORTILLA CURTAIN- T.C. Boyle

I. Key information : (l. 1-16)

- 1) Who is the main character in the passage? Where and when does the scene take place? A Mexican woman named América . The story takes place near Los Angeles at night.
- 2) Who does the pronoun « him » l. 1 refer to ? Quote the text. What is their situation?

It refers to Cándido, América's husband who stayed in the canyon where they were hiding. They are poor Chicanos, both unemployed. They have fled Mexico, and their status is that of undocumented (illegal) migrant workers.

- 3) Did *he* greet her as she came back? Quote the text.

No, he didn't move. What's more, when she spotted him, she didn't recognize him straight away as he was lying/ "huddled" on the ground.

What did the position of *his* body suggest?

It suggested that he was either drunk (unable to stand or sit), unconscious or asleep.

- 4) Find information about her trip that day : How far? Where ? What for ? what kind of activity? Means of transportation used ? result of her quest?

She had walked 8 miles in order to apply for a job as a seamstress (a "sewing job" in Los Angeles. She walked on the path down the canyon to the highway and then took a bus to Venice. She failed : she had been ill-informed. She came back empty-handed. She didn't manage to get any job as the place was deserted. the windows were "boarded up", there was no trace of activity there, and therefore no job available.: "the job never materialized". Worse still, she had wasted money while they had hardly any left. "....down the drain..."

- 5.) Pick out more details about the job.

- Who had informed her? A Guatemalan woman (another illegal immigrant)
- Place / type of area : An alien world / a bad neighborhood in Los Angeles.
- Pay/ wages : starvation wages / very low wages / \$ 3.50 an hour

-Working conditions : she would have been sweated/ exploited. Her extra hours wouldn't have been paid. She would have been taken advantage of and unable to complain unless she wanted to be deported back! ("watch her sweat")

- 6)Read the whole text. Sum up the main facts of the story briefly.
América and Cándido left their Mexican village, so as to try their luck in the U.S.A. As América was to find a job as a seamstress, they separated. América decided to walk back to find Cándido. At last, after walking all day, scared, hungry and thirsty, she found him lying on the ground, either dead or very sick. She was in a predicament/ in a tight spot.

II. America's trip to Venice (1.8 to 1.31)

1) On her way, what type of area did she notice along the Coast Highway?

She walked along a posh/privileged area where affluent people/ the well-to-do lived (people who rolled in money) “millionaires” “amazing narrow shouldered house”.

2) Imagine her hopes and dreams, describe her feelings from the beginning of her trip until she arrived.

She hoped that she would be hired / be given some sewing to do / she hoped that she would be able to earn enough money to buy food and find lodgings. Even the most hard-hearted , ruthless/callous boss would have received her blessings.

She felt better “like a (carefree) girl”, she could probably figure herself spending some time strolling along the beach , entertaining herself, maybe even lying on the beach, basking in the sun...sunbathing . she dreamt of being part of the American society...enjoying some comfort and maybe leisure activities. She might have thought that if there were so many millionaires it wouldn’t be so difficult to be hired, find a menial job, and that if she and Candido worked hard enough they might have her share of the American Dream, maybe why not work for one of those millionaires as the economy fo the country seemed to be booming , this is suggested by “like mushrooms” . The houses pop up/ grow at an incredible speed.

3) When she reached her destination, what did she discover? What must have happened? How did she feel? When she arrived, the place was deserted. The “business” might have closed down, the boss and the moonlighters might have been arrested. She was dejected /in low spirits/terribly disappointed.

4) Have a close look at the passage from line 17 down to line 19 “By lunchtime....separated from Candido”.

a) What happened to América? She got lost and panicked.

b) America’s feelings : Account for her feelings. (highlight what we learn about her past : probable country/native tongue).

America felt panicky because she had ventured into the unknown, an “alien world” : she probably came from **a small village** in Mexico and **only spoke Spanish**. It was also the first time she had been separated from Candido.

She felt utterly helpless without her husband’s support. She wasn’t used to fending for herself / she was probably used to relying on her husband. She wished he had come with her.

5) “She didn’t speak the language”. (121) Find an adjective present in the whole text that best applies to the way she felt at that point : **Lost and alien**.

6) On seeing the beggar, what did she realize? Describe her feelings at that point.

She understood that her American Dream was an illusion, and that she wouldn't find a job. She felt discouraged and dispirited.

7) Sum up her trip with the help of these words : walk – catch – look for – give

–
find – realize – exist- in vain – decide- grow panicky- retrace her steps.

At dawn, she walked down the canyon and caught a bus to Venice. She looked for the address a woman had given her, but she did not find it. When she realized that the place did not exist and that she had done all this in vain, at lunchtime, she decided to go back to the canyon but grew panicky as she was unable to retrace her steps.

III. Focus on lines 32 to 58.

1) What was America walking along ?

She was walking along the road / highway on her way back up the canyon.

Was it safe ? Quote the text. 2 quotes .

2) Explain.. No. "The cars hissed by her in a **lethal** hissing chain". "The cars shot by, no more than ten feet away". She was **risking her life** every step of the way/ She might have been run over by a car or a truck.Cars were dashing past her in a continuous flow.

3) "...and in every one **a pair of eyes that screamed**, Get out of here and go back where you belong!" (l.23-24)

a) What does the pronoun "one" refer to? **a car**

b) " a pair of eyes": who is referred to? What literary device is used? **the driver in each car. metonymy (syndecdoche).** Dehumanizing effect: **anonymous eyes,men** no more human than their cars. Felt as judgmental/disapproving. She could read rejection in their eyes. further in the text, their lights will play the same role, like the border patrol officers' torch lights, inquisitive and threatening ... "**A pair of eyes that screamed**": she could feel rejection as acutely as if they had screamed at her. It helps convey and highlight her almost irrational fear.

c) Who is supposed to be speaking? **The drivers** : this is what America imagined the drivers were saying, based on the look in their eyes. Her sense of guilt made her imagine all that. She imagined that they all knew about her and wanted to send her back home.

d) What attitude is revealed here?

a racist attitude. América was under the impression that the people in the cars

were **xenophobic / racist**; they did not want any immigrants in their country. She imagined they held her in contempt / despised her / resented the Hispanics' presence. They objected to / couldn't bear Hispanics being in their country. They were

prejudiced against them and fed up with the continuous flow of immigrants / what they regarded as an invasion.

4) Her fears as she walked back. a) Pick out two sentences stressing what America dreaded most. 1) - “before one of them tore up the dirt in front of her”.

2)- “the police were standing there demanding her papers”.

b) Going further : use the following help to explain her fears.

Le 1 est à laisser (far-fetched?)

1) Feel /threaten / warning /intimidate/make / wish / stay in her country/unwanted/ the scum of the earth/ frighten / go back home/ humiliated.

“any one of them might stop” : She felt they might want to threaten her or even mug her. She thought any driver might want to intimidate her, give her a warning, make her wish she had stayed in her country, make her feel unwanted, as if she was the scum of the earth. She feared one of them might want to frighten her into going back to Mexico /crossing the border again. She must have been panic-stricken.

worst fear /border patrol /dread / be arrested /be deported back/unable to warn Candido/ be separated / dreams shattered.

She could already see her worst fear materialize : she feared she would be arrested by a border patrol and be deported back. She dreaded to think what would happen if she was unable to warn Candido. She was afraid she might be caught, be separated from Candido. All their dreams would then be shattered/crushed.

IV. Focus on lines 40 to 58.

1) show that she was very cautious. “She worried about snakes, spiders, turning her ankle in a ditch.” “Finally, when she was sure no one was following her...” She crouched in the bushes and made sure no one was following her.

2) Nature in the passage : what impressions are conveyed to the reader?

It is a hostile and malevolent Nature: the narrator mentions “thorns”, “snakes” and “spiders”, or uses the metaphor of “daggers”, and she was “on a terrible howling stage” as if she were besieged/surrounded by a pack of wolves. Even nature was against her, made her progression harder. It was hindered in every possible way.

3) pay closer attention to sound and light : draw a list of the sounds and one of words associated with light. Say what impressions they convey.

All the sounds are either unpleasant or scary : **scream/ howl/ whine/the hiss of the tires/rasp/hissing chain.** They are also associated with suffering/ they conjure up images of despair. As for “**bleak** light”/ “**cold** beams of light”/ “switch on

their lights”, light is “clearly”! felt as threatening / light is her enemy. It is associated with exposure. The reader is therefore made to feel that América **belongs in darkness**. And although darkness may appear as protective further down (“let the warm breath of the night calm her”), it is also associated with death, doom and failure as she may never come out of the shadows to fulfil her dreams.

The semantic field of difficulty, struggle: climb/plow/struggle through/
suffering : “sweat stung her eyes/ Burrs and thorns and the smooth **hard daggers** of the foxtails bit/turning her ankle in a ditch/ravenous/so thirsty...”

We may add that since she is climbing up a hill, with thorns biting her flesh and not a drop to drink, her journey is a sort of calvary/way of the cross. A Christ-like figure?

V. Read from line 59 down to the end.

1) List the words linked with “the thing”

“a shape”, “a concert of shades”, “a rock”, “a pile of laundry”, “a man”, “her man”. She couldn’t make out what “the thing” was until she understood it was Candido.

2) Who does “a man, her man” refer to? **her husband, Candido.** Find an adjective associated with him. **drunk.** It means she wasn’t surprised as he was used to drinking a lot/ he was a heavy drinker.

4) Describe and analyse America’s first reaction when she saw Candido from a distance.

When she walked back to the canyon, she noticed something on the ground. At first,

América thought it was just a rock or a pile of laundry but then, she suddenly realized that it was her husband who was lying there. She thought he was probably

drunk/ had drunk himself to sleep / had been celebrating his new-found job and

she felt furious at the idea that he had been drinking while she was away looking for

a job. She blamed him for being so forgetful of her situation (she was pregnant). She

must have been indignant and shocked by his selfish attitude and his indifference

to what she had to endure. She thought he did not care about her suffering/ordeals...

5) Explain the importance of the “circle” image in the text: **felt trapped.**She had come full circle/ she was back to square one / she hadn’t achieved anything/made any progress/it

also suggests that she was caught in a vicious circle; "she walked in circles" "The nine circles of hell" are a metaphor of all the ordeals she had to go through. She had been to the bottom/ reached rock bottom, had struggled to climb back only to discover her husband unconscious. She hadn't made any progress, things were simply going from bad to worse.

Teacher : Let's explain the reference to the "nine circles of hell": A reference to Dante' s *Divine Comedy*...In the *Divine Comedy* (an allegory) Dante passes through the gate of Hell, which bears an inscription, the ninth (and final) line of which is the famous phrase "*Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate*", or "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here."¹ So the hopeful America will be forced to abandon all hope as she gets into Venice. Her dream will slip out of reach... (In the Divine Comedy, Virgil and Dante move from one circle to another , discovering the torments of the damned getting worse with each circle as they go further down the bottomless pit...)

But América held on to her six little silvery coins The toll required to leave this "inferno". (those coins given to the bus driver will take her away from this hellish place) and finally a woman with the *chilango* accent of Mexico City helps her find the bus. The bus is like Charon's barge, taking her out of hell..... (In the Divine Comedy, Virgil and Dante move from one circle to another , discovering the torments of the damned getting worse with each circle as they go further down the bottomless pit...)

6) A portrait of América in one word :

América is a symbol of **resilience**. She is said to "**hold on to**" what she has and she keeps walking in spite of all the hardships she has to go through. Whenever she stumbles, **she rises up to her feet** and walks on to the upper part of the canyon. She may also be seen as very **vulnerable** : which do you prefer?

7) What did America realize when she touched Cándido ? Explain the last sentence of the text. Imagine a sequel .

when she touched him she knew something dreadful had happened. América realized that Cándido was dead and she was left alone. Given her illegal situation, she would soon get into trouble / was bound to have problems : the police might get hold of her, fine her or imprison her, and even expel her out of the U.S.A. She might even have to account for Cándido's death.

VI.Talk about the narrator.

1) What is the narrator's attitude toward América? What image of her does he want to convey ? (40 words). Free indirect speech is used several times, so we have direct access to her thoughts and feelings. The point of view expressed is América's and the reader is made to side with her. She appears as a courageous and strong-willed young woman who clings to her dream, but who is eventually defeated by events. The word "rage" suggests that she cannot take any more. Her frustration is extreme.

2) What is the tone of the text? What image of the U.S.A. is given here ? (40 words)

The tone is pessimistic since whatever América may do, however hard she tries, she seems to be doomed to fail. All the negative terms that are used point to failure. The USA appears as a lure, a nightmarish place where immigrants get lost or trapped because they are trespassers. There doesn't seem to be the faintest ray of hope.