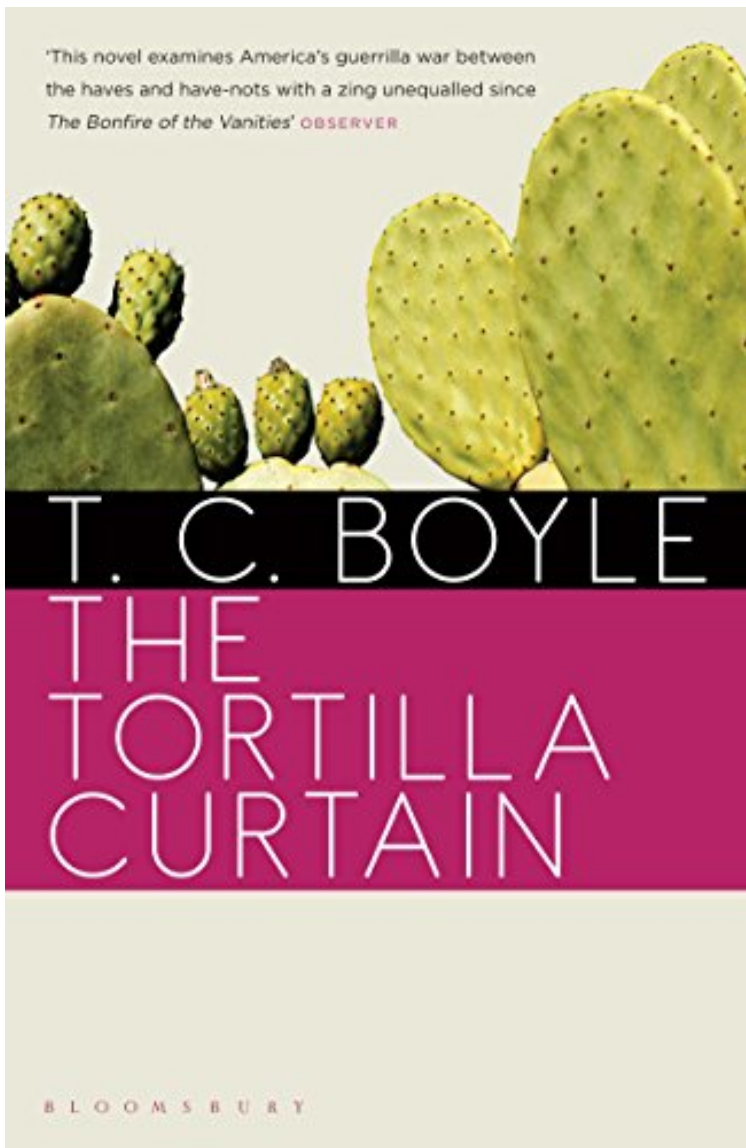


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# The Tortilla Curtain



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**Description :** Description du produitA rich and moving novel about the price of the American Dream by

Prsentation de l'diteurWhen Delaney Mossbacher knocks down a Mexican pedestrian, he neither reports the accident nor takes his victim to hospital. Instead the man accepts \$20 and limps back to poverty and his pregnant 17-year-old wife, leaving Delaney to return to his privileged life in California. But these two men are fated against each other, as Delaney attempts to clear the land of the illegal immigrants who he thinks are turning his state park into a ghetto, and a boiling pot of racism and prejudice threatens to spill over.ExtraitPART ONEArroyo Blanco1AFTERWARD, HE TRIED TO REDUCE IT TO ABSTRACT terms, an accident in a world of accidents, the collision of opposing forcethe bumper of his car and the frail scrambling hunched-over form of a dark little man with a wild look in his eyebut he wasnt very successful.

This wasn't a statistic in an actuarial table tucked away in a drawer somewhere, this wasn't random and impersonal. It had happened to him, Delaney Mossbacher, of 32 Pion Drive, Arroyo Blanco Estates, a liberal humanist with an unblemished driving record and a freshly waxed Japanese car with personalized plates, and it shook him to the core. Everywhere he turned he saw those red-flecked eyes, the rictus of the mouth, the rotten teeth and incongruous shock of gray in the heavy black brush of the mustache they infested his dreams, cut through his waking hours like a window on another reality. He saw his victim in a book of stamps at the post office, reflected in the blameless glass panels of the gently closing twin doors at Jordans elementary school, staring up at him from his omelette aux fines herbes at Emilios in the shank of the evening. The whole thing had happened so quickly. One minute he was winding his way up the canyon with a backseat full of newspapers, mayonnaise jars and Diet Coke cans for the recycler, thinking nothing, absolutely nothing, and the next thing he knew the car was skewed across the shoulder in a dissipating fan of dust. The man must have been crouching in the bushes like some feral thing, like a stray dog or bird-mauling cat, and at the last possible moment he'd flung himself across the road in a mad suicidal scramble. There was the astonished look, a flash of mustache, the collapsing mouth flung open in a mute cry, and then the brake, the impact, the marimba rattle of the stones beneath the car, and finally, the dust. The car had stalled, the air conditioner blowing full, the voice on the radio nattering on about import quotas and American jobs. The man was gone. Delaney opened his eyes and unclenched his teeth. The accident was over, already a moment in history. To his shame, Delaney's first thought was for the car (was it marred, scratched, dented?), and then for his insurance rates (what was this going to do to his good-driver discount?), and finally, belatedly, for the victim. Who was he? Where had he gone? Was he all right? Was he hurt? Bleeding? Dying? Delaney's hands trembled on the wheel. He reached mechanically for the key and choked off the radio. It was then, still strapped in and rushing with adrenaline, that the reality of it began to hit him: he'd injured, possibly killed, another human being. It wasn't his fault, god knew the man was obviously insane, demented, suicidal, no jury would convict him but there it was, all the same. Heart pounding, he slipped out from under the seat belt, eased open the door and stepped tentatively onto the parched strip of naked stone and litter that constituted the shoulder of the road. Immediately, before he could even catch his breath, he was brushed back by the tailwind of a string of cars racing bumper-to-bumper up the canyon like some snaking malignant train. He clung to the side of his car as the sun caught his head in a hammerlock and the un-air-conditioned heat rose from the pavement like a fist in the face, like a knockout punch. Two more cars shot by. He was dizzy. Sweating. He couldn't seem to control his hands. I've had an accident, he said to himself, repeating it over and over like a mantra, I've had an accident. But where was the victim? Had he been flung clear, was that it? Delaney looked round him helplessly. Cars came down the canyon, burnished with light; cars went up it; cars turned into the lumberyard a hundred yards up on the right and into the side street beyond it, whining past him as if he didn't exist. One after another the faces of the drivers came at him, shadowy and indistinct behind the armor of their smoked-glass windshields. Not a head turned. No one stopped. He walked round the front of the car first, scanning the mute unrevealing brush along the roadside eucalyptus, chamise, redshanks for some sign of what had happened. Then he turned to the car. The plastic lens over the right headlight was cracked and the turn-signal housing had been knocked out of its track, but aside from that the car seemed undamaged. He threw an uneasy glance at the bushes, then worked his way along the passenger side to the rear, expecting the worst, the bleeding flesh and hammered bone, sure now that the man must have been trapped under the car. Stooping, palm flat, one knee in the dirt, he forced himself to look. Crescendo and then release: nothing there but dust and more dust. The license plate PILGRIM caught the sun as he rose and clapped the grit from his hands, and he looked to the bushes yet again. Hello! he cried suddenly over the noise of the cars flashing by in either direction. Is anybody there? Are you okay? He turned slowly round, once, twice, as if he'd forgotten something a set of keys, his glasses, his wallet then circled the car again. How could no one have seen what had happened? How could no one have stopped to help, bear witness, gape, jeer anything? A hundred people must have passed by in the last five minutes and yet he might as well have been lost in the Great Painted Desert for all the good it did him. He looked off up the road to the bend by the lumberyard and the grocery beyond it, and saw the distant figure of a man climbing into a parked car, the hard hot light exploding round him. And then, fighting down the urge to run, to heave himself into the driver's seat and burn up the tires, to leave the idiot to his fate and deny everything the date, the time, the place, his own identity and the sun in the sky Delaney turned back to the bushes. Hello? he called again. Nothing. The cars tore past. The sun beat at his shoulders, his neck, the back of his head. To the left, across the road, was a wall of rock; to the right, the canyon fell off to the rusty sandstone bed of

Topanga Creek, hundreds of feet below. Delaney could see nothing but brush and treetops, but he knew now where his man was down there, down in the scrub oak and manzanita. The high-resin-compound bumper of the Acura had launched that sad bundle of bone and gristle over the side of the canyon like a Ping-Pong ball shot out of a cannon, and what chance was there to survive that? He felt sick suddenly, his brain mobbed with images from the eyewitness newsshootings, stabbings, auto wrecks, the unending parade of victims served up afresh each day and something hot and sour rose in his throat. Why him? Why did this have to happen to him? He was about to give it up and jog to the lumberyard for help, for the police, an ambulance they'd know what to do when a glint of light caught his eye through the scrim of brush. He staggered forward blindly, stupidly, like a fish to a lure he wanted to do the right thing, wanted to help, he did. But almost as quickly, he caught himself. This glint wasn't what he'd expected: no coin or crucifix, no belt buckle, key chain, medal or steel-toed boot wrenched from the victim's foot, just a shopping cart, pocked with rust and concealed in the bushes beside a rough trail that plunged steeply down the hillside, vanishing round a right-angle bend no more than twenty feet away. Delaney called out again. Cupped his hands and shouted. And then he straightened up, wary suddenly, catlike and alert. At five-foot-nine and a hundred and sixty-five pounds, he was compact, heavy in the shoulders and with a natural hunch that made him look as if he were perpetually in danger of pitching forward on his face, but he was in good shape and ready for anything. What startled him to alertness was the sudden certainty that the whole thing had been staged: he'd read about this sort of operation in the Metro section, gangs faking accidents and then preying on the unsuspecting, law-abiding, compliant and fully insured motorist ... But then where was the gang? Down the path? Huddled round the bend waiting for him to take that first fatal step off the shoulder and out of sight of the road? He might have gone on speculating for the rest of the afternoon, the vanishing victim a case for Unsolved Mysteries or the Home Video Network, if he hadn't become aware of the faintest murmur from the clump of vegetation to his immediate right. But it was more than a murmur: it was a deep aching guttural moan that made something catch in his throat, an expression of the most primitive and elemental experience we know: pain. Delaney's gaze jumped from the shopping cart to the path and then to the bush at his right, and there he was, the man with the red-flecked eyes and graying mustache, the daredevil, the suicide, the jack-in-the-box who'd popped up in front of his bumper and ruined his afternoon. The man was on his back, limbs dangling, as loose-jointed as a doll flung in a corner by an imperious little girl. A trail of blood, thick as a finger, leaked from the corner of his mouth, and Delaney couldn't remember ever having seen anything so bright. Two eyes, dull with pain, locked on him like a set of jaws. Are you ... are you okay? Delaney heard himself say. The man winced, tried to move his head. Delaney saw now that the left side of the man's face—the side that had been turned away from him—was raw, scraped and flensed like a piece of meat stripped from the hide. And then he noticed the man's left arm, the torn shirtsleeve and the skin beneath it stippled with blood and bits of dirt and leaf mold, and the blood-slick hand that clutched a deflated paper bag to his chest. Slivers of glass tore through the bag like claws and orange soda soaked the man's khaki shirt; a plastic package, through which Delaney could make out a stack of tortillas (Como Hechas a Mano), clung to the man's crotch as if fastened there. Can I help you? Delaney breathed, gesturing futilely, wondering whether to reach down a hand or not: should he be moved? Could he? I mean, I'm sorry, I why did you run out like that? What possessed you? Didn't you see me? Flies hovered in the air. The canyon stretched out before them, slabs of upthrust stone and weathered tumbles of rock, light and shadow at war. The man tried to collect himself. He kicked out his legs like an insect pinned to a mounting board, and then his eyes seemed to sharpen, and with a groan he struggled to a sitting position. He said something then in a foreign language, a gargle and rattle in the throat, and Delaney didn't know what to do. It wasn't French he was speaking, that was for sure. And it wasn't Norwegian. The United States didn't share a two-thousand-mile border with France or with Norway either. The man was Mexican, Hispanic, that's what he was, and he was speaking Spanish, a hot crazed drumroll of a language to which Delaney's four years of high-school French gave him little access. Docteur? he tried. The man's face was a blank. Blood trickled steadily from the corner of his mouth, camouflaged by the mustache. He wasn't as young as Delaney had first thought, or as slight: the shirt was stretched tight across his shoulders and there was a visible swelling round his middle, just above the package of tortillas. There was gray in his hair too. The man grimaced and sucked in his breath, displaying a mismatched row of teeth that were like pickets in a rotting fence. No quiero un matasanos, he growled, wincing as he staggered to his feet in a cyclone of twigs, dust and crushed tumbleweed, no lo necesito. For a long moment they stood there, examining each other, unwitting perpetrator and unwitting victim, and then the man let the useless bag drop from his fingers with a tinkle of broken glass. It lay at his feet in the dirt, and they both stared at it, frozen in

time, until he reached down absently to retrieve the tortillas, which were still pinned to the crotch of his pants. He seemed to shake himself then, like a dog coming out of a bath, and as he clutched the tortillas in his good hand, he bent forward woozily to hawk a gout of blood into the dirt. Delaney felt the relief wash over him: the man wasn't going to die, he wasn't going to sue, he was all right and it was over. Can I do anything for you? he asked, feeling charitable now. I mean, give you a ride someplace or something? Delaney pointed to the car. He held his fists up in front of his face and pantomimed the act of driving. Dans la voiture? The man spat again. The left side of his face glistened in the harsh sunlight, ugly and wet with fluid, grit, pills of flesh and crushed vegetation. He looked at Delaney as if he were an escaped lunatic. Dooo? he echoed. Delaney shuffled his feet. The heat was getting to him. He pushed the glasses back up the bridge of his nose. He gave it one more try: You know help. Can I help you? And then the man grinned, or tried to. A film of blood clung to the jagged teeth and he licked it away with a flick of his tongue. Monee? he whispered, and he rubbed the fingers of his free hand together. Money, Delaney repeated, okay, yes, money, and he reached for his wallet as the sun drilled the canyon and the cars sifted by and a vulture, high overhead, rode the hot air rising from below. Delaney didn't remember getting back into the car, but somehow he found himself steering, braking and applying gas as he followed a set of taillights up the canyon, sealed in and impervious once again. He drove in a daze, hardly conscious of the air conditioner blasting in his face, so wound up in his thoughts that he went five blocks past the recycling center before realizing his error, and then, after making a questionable U-turn against two lanes of oncoming traffic, he forgot himself again and drove past the place in the opposite direction. It was over. Money had changed hands, there were no witnesses, and the man was gone, out of his life forever. And yet, no matter how hard he tried, Delaney couldn't shake the image of him. He'd given the man twenty dollars; it seemed the least he could do and the man had stuffed the bill quickly into the pocket of his cheap stained pants, sucked in his breath and turned away without so much as a nod or gesture of thanks. Of course, he was probably in shock. Delaney was no doctor, but the guy had looked pretty shaky and his face was a mess, a real mess. Leaning forward to hold out the bill, Delaney had watched, transfixed, as a fly danced away from the abraded flesh along the line of the man's jaw, and another, fat-bodied and black, settled in to take its place. In that moment the strange face before him was transformed, annealed in the brilliant merciless light, a hard cold wedge of a face that looked strangely loose in its coppery skin, the left cheekbone swollen and misaligned: was it bruised? Broken? Or was that the way it was supposed to look? Before Delaney could decide, the man had turned abruptly away, limping off down the path with an exaggerated stride that would have seemed comical under other circumstances. Delaney could think of nothing so much as Charlie Chaplin walking off some imaginary hurt and then he'd vanished round the bend and the afternoon wore on like a tattered fabric of used and borrowed moments. Somber, his hands shaking even yet, Delaney unloaded his cans and glass: green, brown and clear, all neatly separated into the appropriate bins, then drove his car onto the big industrial scales in front of the business office to weigh it, loaded, for the newspaper. While the woman behind the window totted up the figure on his receipt, he found himself thinking about the injured man and whether his cheekbone would knit properly if it was, in fact, broken: you couldn't put a splint on it, could you? And where was he going to bathe and disinfect his wounds? In the creek? At a gas station? It was crazy to refuse treatment like that, just crazy. But he had. And that meant he was illegal: go to the doctor, get deported. There was a desperation in that, a gulf of sadness that took Delaney out of himself for a long moment, and he just stood there in front of the office, receipt in hand, staring into space. He tried to picture the man's life: the cramped room, the bag of second-rate oranges on the street corner, the spade and the hoe. and the cold mashed beans dug out of the forty-nine-cent can. Unrefrigerated tortillas. Orange soda. That oom-pah music with the accordions and the tinny harmonies. But what was he doing on Topanga Canyon Boulevard at one-thirty in the afternoon, out there in the middle of nowhere? Working? Taking a lunch break? And then all at once Delaney knew, and the understanding hit him with a jolt: the shopping cart, the tortillas, the trail beaten into the dirt: he was camping down there, that's what he was doing. Camping. Living. Dwelling. Making the trees and bushes and the natural habitat of Topanga State Park into his own private domicile, crapping in the chaparral, dumping his trash behind rocks, polluting the stream and ruining it for everyone else. That was state property down there, rescued from the developers and their bulldozers and set aside for the use of the public, for nature, not for some outdoor ghetto. And what about fire danger? The canyon was a tinderbox this time of year, everyone knew that. Delaney felt his guilt turn to anger, to outrage. God, how he hated that sort of thing: the litter alone was enough to set him off. How many times had he gone down one trail or another with a group of volunteers, with the rakes and shovels and black plastic bags? And how

many times had he come back, sometimes just days later, to find the whole thing trashed again? There wasn't a trail in the Santa Monica Mountains that didn't have its crushed beer cans, its carpet of glass, its candy wrappers and cigarette butts, and it was people like this Mexican or whatever he was who were responsible, thoughtless people, stupid people, people who wanted to turn the whole world into a garbage dump, a little Tijuana ...Delaney was seething, ready to write his congressman, call the sheriff, anything but then he checked himself. Maybe he was jumping to conclusions. Who knew who this man was or what he was doing? Just because he spoke Spanish didn't make him a criminal. Maybe he was a picnicker, a bird-watcher, a fisherman; maybe he was some naturalist from South of the Border studying the gnatcatcher or the canyon wren ...Yeah, sure. And Delaney was the King of Siam. When he came back to himself, he saw that he'd managed to reenter the car, drive past the glass and aluminum receptacles and into the enormous littered warehouse with its mountains of cardboard and paper and the dark intense men scrabbling through the drifts of yesterday's newsmen, he saw with a shock of recognition, who were exactly like the jack-in-the-box on the canyon road, right down to the twin pits of their eyes and the harsh black strokes of their mustaches. They were even wearing the same khaki workshirts and sacklike trousers. He'd been in Los Angeles nearly two years now, and he'd never really thought about it before, but they were everywhere, these men, ubiquitous, silently going about their business, whether it be mopping up the floors at McDonalds, inverting trash cans in the alley out back of Emilios or moving purposefully behind the rakes and blowers that combed the pristine lawns of Arroyo Blanco Estates twice a week. Where had they all come from? What did they want? And why did they have to throw themselves under the wheels of his car? He had the back door open and was shifting his tightly bound bundles of paper from the car to the nearest pile, when a shrill truncated whistle cut through the din of machinery, idling engines, slamming doors and trunks. Delaney looked up. A forklift had wheeled up beside him and the man driving it, his features inscrutable beneath the brim of his yellow hard hat, was gesturing to him. The man said something Delaney couldn't quite catch. What? he called out over the noise of the place: A hot wind surged through the warehouse doors, flinging dust. Ads and supplements shot into the air, Parade, Holiday, Ten Great Escapes for the Weekend. Engines idled, men shouted, forklifts beeped and stuttered. The man looked down on him from his perch, the bright work-polished arms of the vehicle sagging beneath its load of newsprint, as if it were inadequate to the task, as if even sheet metal and steel couldn't help but buckle under the weight of all that news. Ponlos all, he said, pointing to the far corner of the building. Delaney stared up at him, his arms burdened with paper. What? he repeated. For a long moment, the man simply sat there, returning his gaze. Another car pulled in. A pigeon dove from the rafters and Delaney saw that there were dozens of them there, caught against the high open two-story drift of the roof. The man in the hard hat bent forward and spat carefully on the pavement. And then suddenly, without warning, the forklift lurched back, swung round, and vanished in the drifts of printed waste. So what'd you hit a deer? Coyote? Delaney was in the showroom of the Acura dealership, a great ugly crenellated box of a building he'd always hated. It didn't blend with the surrounding hills, didn't begin to, not at all but somehow, today, he felt strangely comforted by it. Driving up with his cracked lens and disarranged signal housing, he'd seen it as a bastion of the familiar and orderly, where negotiations took place the way they were supposed to, in high-backed chairs, with checkbooks and contracts and balance sheets. There were desks, telephones, the air was cool, the floors buffed to brilliance. And the cars themselves, hard and unassailable, so new they smelled of wax, rubber and plastic only, were healing presences arranged like heavy furniture throughout the cavern of the room. He was sitting on the edge of Kenny Grissom's desk, and Kenny Grissom, the enthusiastic moon-faced thirty-five-year-old boy who'd sold him the car, was trying to look concerned. Delaney shrugged, already reaching for the phone. A dog, I think it was. Might have been a coyote, but kind of big for a coyote. Must have been a dog. Sure it was. Yeah. A dog. Why was he lying? Why did he keep thinking of shadowy black-and-white movies, men in creased hats leaning forward to light cigarettes, the hit-and-run driver tracked down over a few chips of paint or a cracked headlight? Because he was covering himself, that's why. Because he'd just left the poor son of a bitch there alongside the road, abandoned him, and because he'd been glad of it, relieved to buy him off with his twenty dollars blood money. And how did that square with his liberal-humanist ideals? I hit a dog once, Kenny Grissom offered, when I was living out in Arizona? It was this big gray shaggy thing, a sheepdog, I guess it was. I was driving a pickup at the time, Ford half-ton with a four-sixty in it, and my girlfriend was with me. I never even seen the thing one minute I'm cruising, and the next minute my girlfriend's all in tears and there's this thing that looks like an old rug in the middle of the road in back of me. I don't know. So I back up and the dog like lurches to his feet, but he's only got three legs and I thought like holy shit I blew his leg right off, but then

Kim gets out and we kind of look and theres no blood or anything, just a stump. Kennys face was working, as if there were something trapped under the skin trying to get out. Friggin thing only had three legs to begin with, he suddenly shouted, no wonder he couldnt get out of the way! His laugh reverberated through, the vast hollow spaces of the room, a salesmans laugh, too sharp-edged and pleased with itself. And then his face came back to the moment, sober suddenly, composed round the pale tawny bristle of his mustache. But its a bitch, I know it is, he observed in a sort of yodel. And dont you worry, well have your car for you any minute now, good as new. Feel free to use the phone. Delaney just nodded. Hed dialed Kyra at work and was listening to the number ring through. Hello? Her voice was bright, amplified, right there with him. Its me, honey. Whats wrong? Is it Jordan? Somethings happened to Jordan? Delaney took a deep breath. Suddenly he felt hurt, put-upon, ready to let it all spill out of him. I had an accident. Now it was her turn the sharp insuck of breath, the voice gone dead in her throat. Jordans hurt, isnt he? Tell me, tell me the worst. Quick! I cant stand it! Nobodys hurt, honey, everybodys okay. I havent even gone to pick Jordan up yet. A numb silence, counters clicking, synapses flashing. Are you all right? Where are you? The Acura dealer. Im getting the headlight fixed. He glanced up, lowered his voice, Kenny Grissom nowhere in sight: I hit a man. Hit a man? There was a flare of anger in her voice. What are you talking about? A Mexican. At least I think he was a Mexican. Out on the canyon road. I was on my way to the recycler. My god. Did you call Jack? Jack was Jack Jardine, their friend, neighbor, adviser and lawyer, who also happened to be the president of the Arroyo Blanco Estates Property Owners Association. No Delaney sighed I just got here and I wanted to tell you, to let you know What are you thinking? Are you out of your mind? Do you have any idea what one of these shyster personal-injury lawyers would do to get hold of something like this? You hit a man? Was he hurt? Did you take him to the hospital? Did you call the insurance? Delaney tried to gather it all in. She was excitable, Kyra, explosive, her circuits so high-wired she was always on the verge of overload, even when she was asleep. There were no minor issues in her life. No, listen, Kyra: the guys okay. I mean, he was just ... bruised, that was all. Hes gone, he went away. I gave him twenty bucks. Twenty? And then, before the words could turn to ash in his mouth, it was out: I told you he was Mexican. 2 HED HAD HEADACHES BEFORE-HIS WHOLE LIFE was a headache, his whole stinking worthless pinche vida-but never like this. It felt as if a bomb had gone off inside his head, one of those big atomic ones like they dropped on the Japanese, the black roiling clouds pushing and pressing at his skull, no place to go, no release, on and on and on. But that wasnt all the throb was in his stomach too, and he had to go down on his hands and knees and vomit in the bushes before hed even got halfway to the camp in the ravine. He felt his breakfast come up two hard-cooked eggs, half a cup of that weak reheated piss that passed for coffee and a tortilla hed involuntarily blackened on a stick held over the fire-all of it, every lump and fleck, and then he vomited again. His stomach heaved till he could taste the bile in the back of his throat, and yet he couldnt move, that uncontainable pressure fighting to punch through his ears, and he crouched there for what seemed like hours, hypnotized by a single strand of saliva that dangled endlessly from his lips. When he got to his feet again, everything had shifted. The shadows had leapt the ravine, the sun was caught in the trees and the indefatigable vulture had been joined by two others. Yes, sure, come and get me, he muttered, spitting and wincing at the same time, thats all I ama worn-out carcass, a walking slab of meat. But Christ in Heaven, how it hurt! He raised a hand to the side of his face and the flesh was stiff and crusted, as if an old board had been nailed to his head. What had happened to him? He was crossing the road, coming back from the grocery after the labor exchange closed the far grocery, the cheaper one, and what did it matter if it was on the other side of the road? The old man there at the checkout a paisano, he called himself, from Italy he didnt look at you like you were dirt, like you were going to steal, like you couldnt keep your hands off all the shiny bright packages of this and that, beef jerky and nachos and shampoo, little gray-and-black batteries in a plastic sleeve. Hed bought an orange soda, Nehi, and a package of tortillas to go with the pinto beans burned into the bottom of the pot ... and then what? Then he crossed the road. Yes. And then that pink-faced gabacho ran him down with his flaming gabacho nose and the little lawyer glasses clenched over the bridge of it. All that steel, that glass, that chrome, that big hot iron engine it was like a tank coming at him, and his only armor was a cotton shirt and pants and a pair of worn-out huaraches. He stared stupidly round him at the fine tracery of the brush, at the birds lighting in the branches and the treetops below him, at the vultures scrawling their ragged signatures in the sky. America would help him when she got back, shed brew some tea from manzanita berries to combat the pain, bathe his wounds, cluck her tongue and fuss over him. But he needed to go down the path now, and his hip was bothering him all of a sudden, and the left knee, there, where the trousers were torn. It hurt. Every step of the way. But he thought of the penitents at Chalma, crawling a mile and a half on their knees,

crawling till bone showed through the flesh, and he went on. Twice he fell. The first time he caught himself with his good arm, but the second time he tasted dust and his eyes refused to focus, the whole hot blazing world gone cool and dark all of a sudden, as if he'd been transposed to the bottom of the ocean. He heard a mockingbird then, a whistle and trill in the void, and it was as if it had drowned in sunlight too, and then he was dreaming. His dreams were real. He wasn't flying through the air or talking with the ghost of his mother or vanquishing his enemies; she was stalled in the garbage dump in Tijuana, stalled at the wire, and America was sick with the gastro and he didn't have a cent in the world after the cholos and the coyotes had got done with him. Sticks and cardboard over his head. The stink of burning dogs in the air. Low man in the pecking order, even at the dompe. Life is poor here, an old mana garbage picker had told him. Yes, he'd said, and he was saying it now, the words on his lips somewhere between the two worlds, but at least you have

garbage. America found him at the bottom of the path, bundled in the twilight like a heap of rags. She'd walked nearly eight miles already, down out of the canyon to the highway along the ocean where she could catch the bus to Venice for a sewing job that never materialized, and then back again, and she was like death on two feet. Two dollars and twenty cents down the drain and nothing to show for it. In the morning, at first light, she'd walked along the Coast Highway, and that made her feel good, made her feel like a girl again; the salt smell, people jogging on the beach, the amazing narrow-shouldered houses of the millionaires growing up like mushrooms out of the sand but the address the Guatemalan woman had given her was worth nothing.

All the way there, all the way out in the alien world, a bad neighborhood, drunks in the street, and the building was boarded up, deserted, no back entrance, no sewing machines, no hard-faced boss to stand over her and watch her sweat at three dollars and thirty-five cents an hour, no nothing. She checked the address twice, three times, and then she turned round to retrace her steps and found that the streets had shuffled themselves in the interim, and she knew she was lost. By lunchtime, she could taste the panic in the back of her throat. For the first time in four months, for the first time since they'd left the South and her village and everything she knew in the world, she was separated from Cndido. She walked in circles and everything looked strange, even when she'd seen it twice, three times over. She didn't speak the language. Black people sauntered up the street with plastic grocery bags dangling from their wrists. She stepped in dog excrement. A gabacho sat on the sidewalk with his long hair and begged for change and the sight of him struck her with unholy terror: if he had to beg in his own country, what chance was there for her? But she held on to her six little silvery coins and finally a woman with the chilango accent of Mexico City helped her find the bus. She had to walk back up the canyon in the bleak light of the declining day while the cars swished by her in a lethal hissing chain, and in every one a pair of eyes that screamed, Get out, get out of here and go back where you belong! and how long before one of them tore up the dirt in front of her and the police were standing there demanding her papers? She hurried along, head down, shoulders thrust forward, and when the strip of pavement at the side of the road narrowed to six inches she had to climb over the guardrail and plow through the brush. Sweat stung her eyes. Burrs and thorns and the smooth hard daggers of the foxtails bit into every step. She couldn't see where she was going. She worried about snakes, spiders, turning her ankle in a ditch. And then the cars began to switch on their lights and she was alone on a terrible howling stage, caught there for everyone to see. Her clothes were soaked through by the time the entrance to the path came into sight, and she ran the last hundred yards, ran for the cover of the brush while the cold beams of light hunted her down, and she had to crouch there in the bushes till her breath came back to her. The shadows deepened. Birds called to one another. Swish, swish, swish, the cars shot by, no more than ten feet away. Any one of them could stop, any one. She listened to the cars and to the air rasping through her lips, to the hiss of the tires and the metallic whine of the engines straining against the grade. It went on for a long time, forever, and the sky grew darker. Finally, when she was sure no one was following her, she started down the path, letting the trees and the shrubs and the warm breath of the night calm her, hungry now, ravenous and so thirsty she could drink up the whole streambed, whether Cndido thought the water was safe or not. At first, the thing in the path wasn't anything to concern her; a shape, a concert of shades, light and dark and then it was a rock, a pile of laundry, and finally, a man, her man, sleeping there in the dirt. Her first thought was that he was drunk; he'd got work and he'd been drinking, drinking cold beer and wine while she struggled through the nine circles of Hell and she felt the rage come up in her. No lunch; she hadn't had a bite since dawn, and then it was only a burned tortilla and an egg and nothing to drink even, not so much as a sip of water. What did he think she was? But then she bent and touched him and she knew that she was in the worst trouble of her life. The fire was a little thing, twigs mostly, a few knots the size of a fist, nothing to attract attention. Cndido lay on a blanket in the sand beside it, and the flames were like a magic show, snapping and leaping and throwing

the tiniest red rockets into the air round a coil of smoke. He was dreaming still, dreaming with his eyes open, images shuffled like cards in a deck till he didnt know what was real and what wasnt. At the moment he was replaying the past, when he was a boy in Tepoztlán, in the south of Mexico, and his father caught an opossum in among the chickens and he hit it with a stick just above the eyes. The opossum collapsed like a sack of cloth and it lay there, white in the face and with the naked feet and tail of a giant rat, stunned and twitching. That was how he felt now, just like that opossum. The pressure in his head had spread to his chest, his groin, his limbs to every last flayed fiber of his body and he had to close his eyes against the agonizing snap and roar of the fire. They skinned the opossum and they ate it in a stew with hominy and onions. He could taste it even now, even here in the North with his body crushed and bleeding and the fire roaring in his ears, that's what it tasted like, wet rat. America was cooking something over the fire. Broth. Meat broth. She laid him here on the blanket and he'd given her the crumpled bill he'd earned in the hardest way any man could imagine, in the way that would kill him, and she'd gone up the hill to the near store, the one run by the suspicious Chinamen or Koreans or whatever they were, and she'd bought a stew bone with a ragged collar of beef on it, a big plastic bottle of aspirin, rubbing alcohol, a can of gabacho-colored Band-Aids and, best of all, a pint of brandy, E J, to deaden the pain and keep the dreams at bay. It wasn't working. From Publishers Weekly

Boyle's latest concerns two couples in Southern California—one a pair of wealthy suburbanites, the other illegal immigrants from Mexico. Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc.