

THE LAST  
CALIFÓRNIO

ROBERT SANÁBRIA



ParaguasBooks

# 1

Water lapped deceptively at the shore. Just steps from the bank it became a torrent, rushing and rain-swollen, roaring with terrifying life. Gar waded in with the others. Unseen flotsam slammed into his body. The relentless flow, chest high, pulled at him with an eager grip. His feet felt for purchase on the uneven trash-littered river bottom. Halfway across, where the channel ran deepest, he stumbled. Swamped by a wave, he had the sensation of being plunged into a black hole. A mouthful of foul river water left him choking and retching, spitting to get rid of the fetid taste.

Up ahead, *Mercúrio*, the *coyote*, heedless of Gar's desperate gagging, hissed "¡Silencio!" The seven other crossers, inky silhouettes in the black night, barely noticed Gar's agony. Each man, backpack held aloft, was immersed in his own struggle to navigate the 900 feet of the churning Rio Grande.

Gar had crossed this river before. Then, clothes and feet dry, it was over a bridge, smiling officials on both sides of the border, waving his passage through. That time, it wasn't survival on his mind, but life's professional and personal pleasures. He remembered that moment now, wondering whether he'd even live to make it to the other side.

They all feared it, even half expected it. Still, when it happened the shock was no less. Only minutes into the swirling waters, the shortest of the crossers, the man the others called Ignacio, became caught in the branches of a floating tree and was swept away like jetsam. His anguished cry, barely heard above the deafening furor of the water, sent

## THE LAST CALIFÓRNIO

a shudder through Gar. Some crossers registered the man's plight, but no one turned to help; every man fended for himself.

They strained onward, the silence occasionally broken by muttered curses after someone stepped in a hole or tripped over something. Afraid of losing the *coyote*, they stayed in a cluster, fighting to remain upright and trying not to stumble into each other.

After a seeming eternity, the group emerged on the opposite shore near Laredo, Texas, the twin of Nuevo Laredo on the Mexican side. Mercúrio hesitated a moment, found the path he was looking for and set off at a steady jog, with Gar and the others close behind.

They moved away from the river quickly, along one of the myriad trails through a tangle of mesquite, whitethorn, and cactus. The cool spring air intensified the chill from wearing soaked clothes, and the pelting rain reduced Gar's focus to the man in front of him. Despite the dampness, they found relief in the downpour, which muffled the shushing of sneakers through buffalo grass and the rasping of labored breathing. It would also wash away their footprints.

More curses and cries of pain punctuated their progress as unseen cactus spines penetrated trousers or tore at unprotected hands and arms. Once, when his ankle twisted, Gar unthinkingly grabbed for balance at what turned out to be a small cactus, and needles bristled his left hand. The new pain distracted him for only a moment.

Rain and darkness heightened fear and discomfort. Their cover also reduced the chances of being spotted by the border patrol's ground and helicopter missions with their low-light cameras, night-vision devices, and thermal-imaging scopes. Mercúrio warned that the riverbank was littered with seismic sensors and rushed the group into the brush to the north, with luck before patrols could respond. His zigzagging increased the distance but also avoided the network of raked sand traps the patrol used to track sneaker-sole markings.

Mercúrio's \$2,000 fee seemed exorbitant, but Gar could see that without him they'd quickly have lost their way through the labyrinth of crisscrossing trails, the telltale evidence of the thousands who'd gone before them.

Jog-walking for what felt like hours without stopping, the fast pace at least warmed and kept his muscles from stiffening. The backpack chafed heavily on his shoulders, the dull ache vying for attention with the sharper pain of blisters, the penalty of new sneakers—his runner's endurance didn't matter much at all. Sitting at a desk for hours at a stretch while working at a city newspaper hadn't prepared him for this, either. Whatever his limitations, there could be no stopping or turning back. His Indian companions, though shorter, were better suited to the test.

On the brink of exhaustion, Gar finally saw the *coyote* raise a hand to halt the group. Mercúrio went on alone, leaving them crouched in place, their overheated bodies and steamy breath rising into an eerie cloud above them. Three of his companions, dark-skinned men from Oaxaca, eyed Gar as they whispered among themselves in Nahautl. Maybe it meant nothing, but he felt their interest at his back. Then Mercúrio was signaling for their advance. Gar's thought fled with their move to a large van hidden in the scrub-oak beside a rutted gravel road.

"Your ride," Mercúrio whispered, standing beside the van's open side door. "Now, *por favor*, the rest of my payment."

Each man counted out the *coyote's* due and, throwing luggage and packs into the compartment behind the back seat, climbed in. After a few words with the man at the wheel, Mercúrio disappeared into the night. With the soft click of the side door as it closed, the driver started the engine. He pulled the van onto the narrow road and drove slowly for some distance with the headlights off.

*On the way at last*, Gar thought. The *coyote* had described the journey as effortless. Except for the physical strain, up to

## THE LAST CALIFÓRNIO

now it had been. Gar barely noticed the smell of wet hair and sweaty bodies filling the van. He leaned back in the seat feeling as if the last of his strength had drained away. His body begged for sleep, and he shifted to get comfortable even as he began to shiver in his soaked clothing. Others beside and behind him already snored softly, lulled by exhaustion and the *whap whap* of the windshield wipers.

To the distant east the first bands of light streaked the horizon. Reaching the main road, the driver steered onto it heading north, turned on the van's headlights and picked up speed. Once beyond Laredo, the van headed northwest on Route 83 to avoid the heavier traffic and highway patrols on the interstate.

Gar struggled to keep from dozing off, a premonition warning to make sure the driver made the turn. Moments later, alarm needled his scalp as the speeding vehicle flashed by Route 83's shield-shaped road sign, its bullet riddled numbers barely legible. The van blindly roared past it. Anxious now, Gar leaned toward the driver.

"*Oye*, didn't you see the sign? You missed the turnoff. Go back."

The driver said nothing, his eyes fixed on the roadway ahead. Gar waited, thinking the driver might be looking for a place to turn around. But he drove on at high speed, clearly with no intention of going back. Gar felt a shudder of panic as each minute ticked past, taking them farther away from the turnoff.

"Hey, driver," Gar tapped him on the shoulder, "didn't you hear? You passed..."

Before he could finish, the passenger in the front seat, a wiry man the others called Cordero, turned around to speak.

"*Hombre*, I been watching you. You're nobody special. You don't tell us where to go. Understand? We go through San Antonio to New York."

"No, no, wait, you can't do that. I paid to be taken..."

The man then turned to the driver.

“Pull off at the next exit.” As he spoke, Cordero drew a pistol from under his jacket. Minutes later the van left the highway and pulled onto the shoulder of a deserted side road. A faded and battered sign advertised a café in the tiny village of Artesia Wells.

“Get out,” Cordero ordered.

“Wait, you can’t...”

“Get out, now!” His voice was a deadly calm. “You,” he told the men beside Gar, “get out and watch him.”

Disbelieving that this could be happening, Gar hesitated. As the gunman dismounted the others brusquely pushed him from the van.

“Put your hands on your head,” Cordero growled. To the others, switching rapidly between Spanish and Nahuatl, he directed, “See what he’s got.”

It was common knowledge, and Gar should have remembered, that the border was full of people without scruples; hardly a day passed without someone getting robbed or killed. For a fleeting moment he thought how foolish he’d been to leave his father’s pistol behind.

As they searched him, Gar realized that hiring the *coyote* at the border was an even bigger mistake. Time short and anxiety high, he’d failed to check him out first. As for the others in the group, he hadn’t bothered to learn beforehand who they might be, concerned only that none of them be hampered with women or children. Now these failings had put him in a very bad spot. He saw, too, that his educated, university-honed speech, combined with an ingrained sense of superiority over whom he assumed were simple laborers or farmers, had only set him apart, marked him as a target.

“*Bueno, no hay problema.*” Gar shrugged and raised his hands higher as if giving in. “OK, I misunderstood the *coyote*. We’ll go to San Antonio, like you say. San Antonio is no problem.” His attempt to bargain was useless.

The men patted him down then took his money belt, passport, and watch, everything of value. Gar could only

## THE LAST CALIFÓRNIO

glare at Cordero and shake his head, incredulous. He cursed himself for not keeping some money in his shoes.

“*¡Pinche bastardos!*” Gar exploded. He’d often read of illegals turning on each other, even that something like this could’ve been planned. Had he been set up?

“Quiet!” Cordero looked hard at Gar for a moment as if debating about shooting him on the spot. “Get your stuff out of the van.”

Seething, Gar opened the cargo door, rummaged around and pulled his backpack and belted canteen from the compartment.

“Drop them,” Cordero ordered. To the others he said, “Open the pack and dump the contents on the ground. See what he’s got.”

With a foot, Cordero sifted through Gar’s few belongings. Moments later, he shook his head, indicating there was nothing worth taking. With a jerk of his head toward the van, the gunman ordered the others to close the cargo door.

“You want to go to Carrizo Springs?” Cordero looked at Gar with a malicious grin. “It’s that way,” he motioned with the pistol. “Start walking.”

Looking was Gar’s next mistake. A blinding flash exploded in his head, the pain only slightly more acute than his surprise. A well-placed kick buckled his knees and in the next instant, he was face down in the dirt. The blows came more rapidly as the men—Gar couldn’t tell how many—kicked repeatedly at his head, back, and midsection. He tasted blood. Helpless to defend himself, he curled into a fetal position, arms protecting his head. There was a last kick in the kidneys, but Gar was so far gone he barely felt it.

Fifteen minutes later, he opened his eyes.

The pain was a constant throb. Trembling from the receding adrenaline rush, shock began to wear off, replaced by permeating aching. He tried not to breathe too deeply, as every intake was excruciating. It took several minutes for him

to find the strength to push himself up onto his knees. He made an examination of his torso and limbs, and then struggled to his feet to collect his canteen and the scattered contents of his backpack.

When he could think more clearly, he wasn't all that surprised that his *paisanos* attacked him. They were just desperate, desperate enough to turn on each other.

Aware of his surroundings for the first time, he surveyed the cluster of unpainted board and concrete-block houses. Windows from a few showed light, but most were dark, their occupants still sleeping. Maybe it was they whom the gunman had been afraid of rousing, why he hadn't been shot. Gar probably owed them his life.

At least the rain had stopped. Aching and stiff, he began a westward march.

Sleeping in culverts or makeshift brush shelters during daylight and walking at night, Gars reached Route 83 and the ragged little village of Caterina after two days. He guessed that Carrizo Springs was still another two night's walk away. Behind him, a veil of salmon-colored clouds bled across the sky, their streaks piercing the dark horizon of the desolate Texas prairie.

It was dawn, and in a few hours he'd have to find another place to hide for the day. The sparsely treed terrain left him vulnerable to discovery by police or border patrols and made capture or death the more likely outcomes of his misguided adventure. His hands and knees were raw from dropping to the ground each time a vehicle approached. His stomach growled from emptiness and he berated himself for not packing more food. He'd eaten everything, had almost no water and no money. It struck him that he couldn't even prove his identity.

Along with the pain of blistered feet and calves stabbed with cactus needles, Gar reflected on how quickly the good beginning had gone bad. The vast prairie stretched ahead, endless. With no landmarks anywhere, everything looked the

## THE LAST CALIFÓRNIO

same, the horizon unbroken in all directions. He could only guess at how far he had yet to go. As for getting to Los Angeles, the city might as well be on another planet.

The moon had set. The stars shone like pinpricks of light in a black bowl. It occurred to Gar that those stars in the inky sky were neither Mexican nor American. The division only existed in the minds of the men of their two countries who'd fought over controlling land.

Stumbling on rocks, fearful of snakes, he trudged on. Only the crunch of his shoes along the shoulder and the chirp of insects broke the stillness. Abruptly silent at his approach, they resumed their night song after he passed. At times it was so quiet his thoughts seemed to echo in his head. Then there was his own lurking fear. Drained and aching, Gar once again allowed the awareness that little in his life had prepared his mind or body for a journey like this.

The thought of dying in this foreign wasteland loomed large, made him shudder. He tried not to think about how he'd gotten into this madness.

It all came rushing back anyway.

**Get your copy of *The Last Califórnio* from [Amazon](#).**

**Join us on Facebook: [Paraguas Books](#) and [Robert Sanábria](#).**