

Chapter 5. Bodhisattva Goes to Sinaloa

The sun was not even up and already I found several new species. I was really excited to find otate bamboo and other tropical grasses and perennials on this north-facing slope above the water. Things I thought were gone for a hundred years, gone when the great flood washed out the cienega, cut the river channel way below its floodplain, and left the acequia-watered fields and orchards high and dry. Real estate values plummeted overnight and the town was relocated downstream, and they started their grazing and trampling, woodcutting, and overuse of the water all over again. But back then there was still endless gallery forest of great cottonwoods, willows, Mexican bald cypress, and tropical figs overhanging the clear deep dark slow water.

I moved little faster after I looked up and saw that the sun would soon poke through the yellow-red mackerel sky and turn the day sweaty hot. I slipped on the steep grassy embankment wet from last night's thunderstorm and nearly stepped on something that looked like an adult alligator, realizing there are no alligators on the Pacific Coast, only in the southeastern corners of America and China. So it must have been a daydreaming wet log.

I scrambled back up the grassy slope, wiped off more sweat and looked down on the largest, fattest, most magnificent crocodile I had ever seen. Green oscillations on the olive green-brown body and the permanent smile you see on all twenty-nine crocodylian species. I had heard that in the early twentieth century a huge crocodile had been shot in Guaymas harbor and was taken to a museum in Mexico City, and that there used to be crocodiles in the deltas of the Río Yaqui and Río Mayo. The Yaquis tell of crocodile women coming ashore, peeling off their hides and placing them in neat bundles by the beach. After going to the villages, seducing and marrying young men, they went back to the beach, put their hides back on and swam away.

When I was a student I saw a few small crocodiles sunning on fleshy salt marsh plants among the mangroves below Ahome in the delta of the still-untamed Río Fuerte in northwestern Sinaloa. We had spent three days trying to get across the flooded river in the first days of the monsoon. The water had gone down enough to get the old Buick onto the hastily built cable raft that was starting to ferry cars across the river. But first we had

to get a tractor to pull the car out of the ditch at the side of the so-called road which, when we came here three days earlier was a slick sliding expanse of wet mud. No matter how slowly I crept along, the car just went into a long sideways slide into the roadside ditch. People were still paying \$100 to put their cars up on huge trucks that pushed across the leaning bridge now under water too high for passenger cars.

We ate bananas and drank beer because there was nothing else and it rained again. Ninety-foot buttress-rooted ficus trees and tropical cottonwoods bobbed along the frothy chocolate water and by and by the bridge went as they always do. People were talking about all the *mordida* for another big construction contract when the bridge will be rebuilt, and as always it will be almost big and strong enough. The cars and trucks that managed to get across never yielded a right of way and like a thousand fat pigs in the mud they all became grid-locked in the magnificent monsoon. So we had to try the new road where we ended up in this toad pond with horny *Bufo* males scream-croaking all night, their vocal-chord pouches blown out like bubblegum. It was so loud we had to yell in each other's ears and finally just gave up and drank more beer and made our contributions to their breeding pond. It was during those three days mired in the mud that I first learned of Río Fuerte crocodiles and went down the river looking for them.

It was already steaming hot in the early morning when I first saw those little crocs. As we crawled thru the stubby little mangroves to get close enough to photograph them we swatted mosquitoes and cursed *jejenas*—those fierce little flies that burrow under your skin and then you feel them and then you see them and feel them for days. Under the microscope they are all proboscis with jagged ripsaw teeth.

I had the buckshot pistol the evil professor left with me to shoot lizards for his research. I guess it was the *jejenas* that drove him back to his lab at the brick university while I was assigned to carry on the all-important fieldwork. But it was about that time in my life that I decided on no more herpetology since I could no longer stand to put my brothers in formaldehyde. My local guide and friend Pancho did not share my reverence for the northernmost crocodiles. He wanted to know if the gun would kill big *cocodrillos* and coyotes. I said “of course not” and was glad I didn't have heavier arms. Just before I left he stole the evil professor's gun.

In the 1940s Gweneth Harrington and her friends visited the Seris on the vast desert coast of Sonora north of Kino Bay. She took paper and colored pencils and Aurora López drew a sea creature, a crocodile with a fixed smile and a thick belly and a curved tail just like the huge crocodile I am looking down on. There are worlds below the earth and below the sea just like here and some places are so rich that they have

fresh water that runs all day. When Aurora was a girl and her family took her to Hermosillo for the first time she and her brother were amazed by the water fountains. But the electric light pouring out of the big houses at night didn't seem any more unusual than the bright light that streams out of vision caves. She and her friends drew some of those vision caves and other special places and creatures for Gweneth. I saw the drawings in acid-free plastic covers in a drawer at the State Museum library, and a crocodile drawing riveted my attention. I just couldn't stop looking at the drawing that Gweneth labeled a "mythical sea creature." It didn't seem at all mythical to me; it had the key characters of a crocodile, or *caimán* as they are called in Latin America. In another drawing the back legs were missing, making it look like a Yaqui mermaid.

I kept staring down from the bridge at the huge crocodile, its inner tube-like belly half inflated on the wet mud, and well-fed puffy hands and feet spread-eagle absorbing the warmth. I was surprised to see my friend sitting down near the water under a large seepwillow that filled the air with early-morning streamside smell. She was hanging out with the crocodile; or rather I should say it looked as if she had been hanging out with it for a long time. I don't mean to say that they talked to each other or nonsense like that, but she just calmly sat next to it. I got really excited and tried to warn her—she must be a bit daffy not to realize that this is a crocodile, not an alligator. Large crocodiles are far more dangerous than alligators, and even large alligators can be dangerous but are easier to gauge. And I should know since I raised three baby alligators until they were approaching six feet. They went to the zoo and I went to university. Once I tried raising a baby crocodile but it never ceased being mean so I found it another home. My friend said not to worry, that for many years the crocodile lived with her old Yoga teacher until he died. Did the crocodile eat him?