

Baja

A Novel

David Ollier Weber



Kila Springs

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For Alexa, Emilio and Sebastian Quauhtli

Bajo, baja (adjective): Low; lower; under(most).

Baja California (Lower California): A mountainous, semi-arid peninsula comprising two of Mexico's 31 states: Baja California and—south of the 28th parallel—Baja California Sur. The narrow landmass is approximately 230 kilometers across at its widest point (143 miles) and extends for 1,100 kilometers (684 miles) from the California (United States) border to Cabo San Lucas at the southerly tip. It is bounded on the west by the Pacific Ocean and on the east by the Gulf of California, also known as the Sea of Cortez. Estimated total population in 1970 was 870,000, mostly concentrated in the gateway cities of Tijuana and Mexicali.

Baja (noun, feminine): A drop, fall or loss. *Seguir en baja* (Colloquial): Go from bad to worse; (Military) A casualty.

Our grappling and nuzzling soon boiled our breath away. We rolled apart and lay with our feet in the licking surf, sand caked to our sweaty bodies, bludgeoned into siesta by the white-hot wrecking ball of the sun. Within minutes the rising tide surged to our chins, withdrew, surged again – its warm, rhythmic lubrication so sedative I wasn't able to rouse myself until the water swirled into my earcups. I turned over on my front and pushed myself down the beach-slope until I was afloat. Leslie crawled in the opposite direction.

I drifted with my face down, arms spread, hair undulating over me like a bed of kelp. The dead-man's float. I let the lapping breakers tug and tumble me at their will. I held my breath for as long as I could, reluctant to exert my independence. It seemed a pity I couldn't simply loll indefinitely, slack-muscl'd on the sea's maternal pulse. Finally I put a hand down to steady myself, arched my neck and snorkeled in a lungful of delicious air.

I pushed out deeper and suddenly, when my arms had clearance, began to swim. I churned out toward the island, limbering up my crawl, and then tacked right, down the long open center of the channel. In prep school I'd been a competition swimmer; it felt good to cut loose, scissor-kicking in tight, metronomic rhythm. Reaching through the water with full, loose-wristed overhand strokes. I aimed for the boat and checked my course every few breaths by a slight forward twist of the head.

My chest was heaving by the time I glided up and grabbed the side for support. Out of shape, I was, though it could have been worse. I chinned myself on the gunwale, hooked an ankle across the grab-rail and struggled aboard. The bottom was dry. I unlimbered the oars and then wobbled forward into the bow to weigh anchor.

The boat was fairly narrow amidships and it rolled easily. I hauled the anchor in over the raked bow and coiled the line. I was feeling very exultant, keyed up by my captaincy of this vessel. There must be some atavistic satisfaction in managing to surmount water. I scrambled back into the midsection and, using one oar only, dipped from side to side – holes had been bored into the rails to house oarlocks but, I now realized, there weren't any oarlocks on board – I set a slow, erratic course for Leslie.

She was lying on the bank, sunning herself.

“Ahooy there! Naiad!” I hailed. “Come aboard! I'll give you a free ride. You can tell your mythological friends you took a deluxe cruise on the Sea of Cortez.”

She cocked her neck to look at me around her shoulder, shaded her eyes, but otherwise remained motionless, supine.

“No thanks,” she called. Her grimace seemed friendly.

“Hey, come on,” I protested. “That's no fair. Don't be a stick-in-the-mud. A lie-in-the-sand.”

“Aw, I'm just comfortable.”

I started to argue, then gave in. “Okay, never mind. But,” I exclaimed, back-handing the oar blade into the water, “you'll be sorry. You don't know what incredible fun you're missing.”

I rowed a laborious figure-eight perpendicular to the channel. By the second loop I had settled myself in the stern, where I found I had more control. With practice I gained dexterity at shifting the oar, too, so that my courses were truer. I took my time, enjoying the new angle on the scenery.

The sky was a brilliant blue, tufted with dazzling wads of cumulus. The channel was full now, deep enough to mirror the sky's intensity of color. The breeze karate-chopped the surface, and what I had taken to be occasional loud splats of the current were, I suddenly saw, the belly-whacks of trout-sized silver

fish. They were leaping, twisting, flashing in the air. There must have been a school of them cavorting through the channel. Probably something bigger was preying on them from below.

“Hey, Les! Did you see the fish?” I called.

She sat up slowly and squinted at me under cupped hands. “Huh? What?”

“Fish! Little silver ones. They’re jumping out of the water. You’ve got to watch carefully. Actually, they’re pretty good size.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. Hey, babe, come on. Swim on out here and let me give you a tour. This is our last day, remember, so we’d better milk it for all it’s worth.”

“Oh... all right. Except, you don’t expect me to swim out there with all those fish in the water, do you?”

“For crying out loud. They’re just little ones.”

“Yeah. But maybe they’ll nibble me.”

I laughed. “Oooh. You are kind of delectable, my sweet. Juicy bait. Okay. I’ll come get you.”

I rowed in toward the beach until the prow snubbed on the bottom. Leslie waded out and climbed over the side.

“Stay up front,” I instructed her. “Here, can you push us off?” I handed her the other oar.

She poled as hard as she could, but with her own added weight in the bow the boat was stuck fast. I hopped out and shoved it free and gave it a good heave toward deeper water. I swam a couple of strokes in pursuit, snagged the bow and made my way hand over hand toward the lower, midships section. As I started to pull myself up, Leslie rose and staggered toward me.

“Here, I’ll balance...,” she said.

“No! Don’t!” I warned.

Too late. My side dipped sharply and, with a shriek, Leslie lost her footing. She had enough

presence of mind to push herself clear – and, with windmilling arms, to fling the oar well away from her. Back arched, legs bicycling, she walloped into the water.

At that instant my head went under too. I had pulled the gunwale down with me, but I let go as soon as my reflexes got the message. Then something heavy clunked me on the head and shoulders. I gasped – the wrong thing to do under water. My feet touched the bottom and I sprang up, clawed for the surface, my chest constricted by an inhaled noseful of caustic seawater.

My clutching hand found the boat's grab-rail and I clung to it, wheezing for air, choking and hawking and sniveling. Leslie trod water beside me.

I coughed up most of the brine from my lungs, and wiped the tears from my cheeks and the drivel off my beard.

"I'm sorry," Leslie said. She had paddled closer to observe my spasms with concern. "Are you all right? What happened to you?"

"Hooey. Shweef," I gurgled. "Something hit me just as I was going down. Must have been...." I groped up over the gunwale. "...the other oar. Yep. Took me by surprise."

I rubbed the top of my crown and the point of my left clavicle. Neither hurt all that much – the blow had been cushioned by the water.

"Gee, I'm sorry," she repeated. "I know that was really the wrong move. For a second there, though... I figured I was in more danger than you were."

"Danger of what?"

"Of getting conked, or whatever."

"Yeah." My voice was raw and the lining of my nose felt like a cheese grater. I coughed up another teaspoonful of saltwater.

"No real harm done," she declared, "luckily."

"Easy for you to say."

“Mm. Did you suffer permanent damage?”

“Doesn’t count if it isn’t permanent, huh? Don’t worry. Looks like I’ll live.”

“That’s a relief.” She splashed off to retrieve the oar that had struck me, while I floundered back aboard. Then I hoisted her in after me. We took our places gingerly, sloshing through the two or three inches of water the boat had shipped when I’d rocked it over on its rail. We scouted around for a few minutes but for some reason were unable to spot the oar Leslie had so Olympically hurled. It had to be floating nearby somewhere. We only needed one anyway, though, for our purposes. We decided to look for it on the way back. I canoed us down the channel at a determined clip, while Leslie bailed.

“See, isn’t this fun?” I leered.

“Oh, God yes!” she grunted. She straightened and emptied a trickle of water over the side from the rusty bailing can. “I just hope my poor heart can stand the ecstasy.”

I zigzagged almost to the southern end of the island, where a shallow bar glistened green under the broken current. To pass across it would put us in open water.

“I don’t suppose you’re game for a little sea voyage,” I said.

“Definitely not,” she declared.

“Not even just around to the other side? Just to see what it feels like? I’ll keep very close in to the shore, I promise.”

“Not with me in this thing, you won’t.”

“Okay. Whatever you say. Chicken.”

“Sticks and stones can break my bones, but, unlike leaky old boats in the ocean, words can never harm me.”

I pivoted the bow and began to work my way back north. My arms and shoulders were getting tired.

“Maybe you’d like to try your hand at rowing?” I

suggested.

“Thanks, no,” she demurred. “I’m the passenger type.”

Somewhere in the background of her voice and the hissing breeze and the splash of waves and the irregular, repetitious churning of my oar in the water, a new sound was beginning to register. A throbbing... muffled... inorganic... mechanically insistent...

“Hey, do you hear...?” Leslie said.

“Just a minute!” I ordered. I froze with the oar across my lap and flashed a silencing hand.

“It’s a motor!” Leslie exclaimed. “A boat! Somebody’s coming!”

“Yeah, it’s a boat motor, all right,” I concurred.

“Oh God. And we’re all the way down here!”

“It’s still way over on the other side of the island,” I soothed her. “Still plenty of time to get to the car. Anyway, there’s no reason to assume it’s necessarily coming into this little lagoon.”

“Yeah, great. That’s fine with me,” she said. “Only let’s not take any chances.”

“I’m not,” I assuaged her. I upped my rowing tempo. But the boat’s tendency to yaw was accentuated by my increased thrust. And I found the awkward shifts of the oar from side to side – stroke, stroke on the left, swing across, stroke, stroke on the right, change again – time-consuming. You had to do it that way to keep from slaloming even more wildly than I was. And I kept dousing Leslie with spray from the flying blade.

“Christ!” she yelped. She flinched, ducked her head. “Oww!” She buried her fists in her eye-sockets. “Right in the eye! God, can’t you do any better than this? Jesus.” She blinked up at me red-eyed, shielding her face with an open hand. She half-turned in her seat.

“That thing’s getting closer. And we’re hardly making any progress.”

“I’m doing the best I can,” I grunted. “Settle down. There’s nothing...”

“Barry, for Christ’s sake! I haven’t got anything on!”

“I know, I know. Neither do I. Just don’t get panicky.”

“I’m not!” Her voice had an edge of hysteria. “Row!”

“I am!”

“For God’s sake, I could *swim* faster than this!”

“Maybe,” I grumbled between strokes, “you could... and maybe... you couldn’t.”

She muttered something through clenched teeth and slid down off her seat to crouch in the bow, facing forward. She clung to the rails with a tension that showed all the way up her sinuous arms.

I was tiring. Game but starting to slow. This was no canoe, indeed, and the heavy oar was no paddle. By now my ears were completely filled by the steam-pipe racket of my own panting. The world was beginning to close in too, to fade at the edges as fatigue narrowed the sensory shutters. I found myself focused blankly on the ridge of knobs along Leslie’s bent brown back.

“At least,” I gasped, “it... doesn’t seem... to be gettin’... any nearer.”

“The hell it isn’t.”

“Wanna... swim?”

“I don’t know. Yeah... maybe....”

Plut-plut-plut-plut.... Even I could hear it now. Echoing on the wind from somewhere behind the sandy island crown to our right. A gull, riding high, banked across a pillar of cumulus.

“They can’t... see us... in here anyway,” I said. I could squeeze out words in short-winded clusters as my body knotted around each stroke. “Just... keep cool.... They’re... probably... goin’... by....”

“Ooh Jesus...,” Leslie sighed.

Oops.

No indeed. Not going by. Around the northern point of the island – curling in toward us very surely and steadily to the throttled-down beat of a small, noisy outboard engine – was a tiny boat, almost identical to the one we were in. Two people were aboard. Two humpy silhouettes. Still too distant to be made out in detail.

All I could do was keep rowing.