

*Thirty men, women and children set out to cross the Darien Gap, in search of a new life. But an old one found them first.*

## **The Gap**

By J. A. Thomas

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**THE**

**GAP**

**J. A. THOMAS**

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# *THE GAP*

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# LA PUERTA

Nothing moved in the jungle save the line and their sweat. Around them was oppressive green, unyielding. A narrow footpath wound its way forward. Pinche moved the group along, cursing. They were five days in the jungle, but the end was near. No one complained or had dared to for some days. The man leading them would not brook it; on this trip, they called him '*El demonio*'<sup>1</sup>. Those that knew him called him Pinche. It fit him best. Even to himself, his name was lost long before, in El Cartucho. He'd been Pinche since he could remember and lived up to it.

The jungle bled humidity and heat. Both pressed down physically, unrelenting. Occasional columns of green ants, inches long and capable of flattening a man for five hours of agony, crossed the trail in undulating rivers of insectile gluttony. The pass wound upwards with water somewhere on their left and closing. Women sobbed and prayed, albeit quietly.

Mosquitoes were rampant in the bush, and the group was covered with bites after sleeping raw for nearly a week. Chiggers and flies drank their fill each day, as well. Misery was their only other companion.

Water was everywhere but undrinkable. Full of amoebas and pathogens uncounted, a few swallows would produce days of agonizing cramps and uncontrollable rivers of shit from the afflicted. Two of their companions had already been abandoned on the journey, too ill from dysentery to walk. They'd been discarded. The supply of

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<sup>1</sup> 'The demon.'

‘clean’ drinkable water was nearly gone and was going to the *coyotes*, not the wrecked and desperate group they led.

They finally crested a rise, reaching a small clearing. An endless carpet of vegetation, triple canopy rainforest, reached out before them. A river cut the jungle below, the ribbon of blue reflecting the sun. “*Allí,*”<sup>2</sup> Pinche said, pointing. A bare escarpment overlooked the water, visible as a small slash of brown about two kilometers away. The trail wound down now from this point forward, crossing the mountainside in thin switchbacks.

“*Por favor, señor, ¿Dónde cruzamos? ¡No hay nada allí!*”<sup>3</sup> said an old man near the back.

“*¡Viejo, te enviaré al otro lado ahora mismo! ¡Silencio!*”<sup>4</sup> Pinche rasped at him. The thin one, the guide that looked like a man-rat, clicked the safety off of his rifle. He had eyes that gleamed from beneath his rumpled *vueltaio*, and his lips peeled back from broken teeth in a menacing smile.

“*¡Yo digo que vamos, vamos! ¿Necesitas un recordatorio? Tal vez deseas quedarte, ¿eh? ¡Eso se puede arreglar, viejo! ¡Y así es para todos los demás animales sin valor, también!*”<sup>5</sup> The old man stared back defiantly but said nothing, and the column, having little choice and nowhere else to go, moved on.

An hour found them at a fork in the path. Rough-hewn boards nailed to a stake showed an arrow painted in white, pointing northeast.

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<sup>2</sup> “Over there.”

<sup>3</sup> “Please, sir, where do we cross? There is nothing there!”

<sup>4</sup> “Old man, I will send you to the other side right now! Silence!”

<sup>5</sup> “I say let’s go, let’s go! Do you need a reminder? Maybe you want to stay, huh? That can be fixed, old man! And so it is for all the other worthless animals, too!”

Pinche turned them right. Another short march brought them to the packed slash of earth they had observed from above.

Flat, long and narrow, it stood twenty meters above the river. The water was a wide and treacherous brown soup, moving west. Logs floated by in the deceptive murk at surprising speeds, swapping end for end in the unseen currents beneath. The swath below them was perhaps 40 meters across, and no way down the rock face was visible. The migrants milled and murmured to themselves. Pinche gestured to his guides; he whispered to them on the edge of the small clearing, and they faded away back down the path towards the fork. Pinche remained. He dropped a canteen at his feet and said, "*Tu viaje ha llegado a su fin. Pronto cruzarán el río. Esperan aquí a las guías del otro lado.*"<sup>6</sup>

At least three of those remaining spoke no Spanish. Two were African; the *coyotes* couldn't say from which country, and no one could ask, so they never did. The other was the remainder of a party of three, all *gringos*.

Though no one knew it, they were Serbs defecting to the U.S. via Cuba, Colombia, and the Darién. Two of those original three were the ones who were sickened from the water. Now they were certainly dead, left feverish and shuddering and shitting in a patch of grass somewhere along the way.

Maybe the ants had been heading for them. Who knew? Whoever they had been, they were long gone, consumed by the jungle. Their remaining companion spoke to no one.

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<sup>6</sup> "Your journey has come to an end. Soon you will cross the river. Wait here for the guides on the other side."

“Wait...here,” Pinche said in English, pointing at all of them, then the flat patch of earth. “Others will come for you,” he said, and that was true enough. He turned and left the clearing. When he reached the sign with the arrow, his men were nowhere to be found, having moved on. A man in fatigues awaited him instead. Pinche knew he was coming; hadn’t he told the migrants others would be along soon?

*“Trabajo bien hecho, amigo. Esto asegurará que no más.... te suceden percances durante el resto de la temporada. Ya no más... problemas para todos nosotros, ¿sí?”*<sup>7</sup>

Pinche hawked up saliva, spat, and said *“Hice mi parte. Tú haces la tuya. Seguimos adelante sin problemas, ¿de acuerdo, coronel? No más bloqueos, no más de nuestros hombres desaparecen, siendo secuestrados. Nuestro salario, el oro, todo, está fuera de los límites, ¿de acuerdo?”*<sup>8</sup>

The man laughed. *“Tus hombres desaparecen, tal vez simplemente se pierden en la selva, Pinche. Los tontos se desviaron del camino en alguna parte. No lo hacemos, así que no es nuestro problema, ¿lo entiendes? Obtienes tu pasaje seguro, Pinche. ¿Tú compras y ellos pagan eh, cabrón?”*<sup>9</sup> Men were marching past them now, wearing military gear and moving up the path towards the clearing at the top. Pinche shrugged as they passed. *“Sigo órdenes, igual que tú.”*<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> “Job well done, friend. This will ensure that no more.... mishaps happen to you for the rest of the season. No more... problems for all of us, okay?”

<sup>8</sup> “I did my part. You do yours. We move forward without problems, okay, colonel? No more blockades, no more of our men disappearing, being kidnapped. Our salary, gold, everything, is off limits, okay?”

<sup>9</sup> “Your men disappear, maybe they just get lost in the jungle, Pinche. The fools went off the path somewhere. We don't do it, so it's not our problem, you understand? You get your safe ticket, Pinche. You buy and they pay, huh, bastard?”

<sup>10</sup> “I follow orders, just like you.”



*The Gap*

*“Los buenos perros se escabullen cuando se les dice, es cierto. Y nunca muerden la mano de su dueño, ¿verdad?”<sup>11</sup>*

Pinche was half listening as the first indignant voices reached him from the clearing a quarter mile or so away. Their voices were replaced by shouts of fear, then screams, and finally, the chattering of gunfire followed by splashes.

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<sup>11</sup> “Good dogs slink away when you tell them, it's true. And they never bite their master's hand, do they?”

## NEXT MONTH

The beer was sour and piss warm. Like the air in this shithole, Pinche thought. Why that fat monkey couldn't meet him somewhere else! Pinche thought he did it for spite. Even the whores looked desultory and ill-used, like the town the tavern sat in, and most of its patrons, too. The few that had trolled for him he sent scrambling off with a growled threat. He nursed the swill and waited for the news.

An hour later he was coming out of the *baño* and his man had arrived. The fat man. He'd appeared and looked to have been sitting on the stool for days instead of twenty seconds or so. Feeling ambushed, Pinche slid onto his seat and called for another glass. "Why you such a spook all the time, huh?" Pinche asked the fat man.

"Pinche. Nobody too happy in Cartagena, eh, *puto*? They talking about you again. They want you to do more work. You remember home? How could you forget it? Been too long since you've been home, Pinche. They miss you."

"They get their payback on the trail. Not my fault that shipment got stolen last spring. These things happen. They know it, and so do I. Someone else pay the price, then it is done, ¿sí? You see the news? Those fat bastards are famous again, and I'm stuck here, with you."

"Do you remember when they found you, Pinche?" the fat man continued as if Pinche had never replied. "Down on your luck and that's being generous! They take you in; they make you a man from a speck of less than nothing. You have always been a loyal dog, so when our product was taken, they give you a chance to make things right. And *they* will tell you when you have made things right. Oh, *mi pobrecito*! He cries so! 'I'm here with YOU,' he says! Why, do you

think? If everyone was happy, you stupid little shit, I wouldn't be here, in this stinking bar, with *you*."

Pinche drank. "So? The fuck is it this time?"

"What do you think? We use people to move our products north. You move the people. You do things good, everyone smiles. You start to think, and everyone suffers. Simple for you. So, you go and do it good, no? You go tomorrow, get it done, maybe the bosses give you a little vacation. Who knows?"

"I'll stick my boot up the boss' *culo* for my vacation, *pendejo*, see how they like that."

"*Es nada problema*, Pinche. You tell them that. These men we work for, they seem reasonable? Then tell them no. Maybe they only cut off your ears, so you don't have to hear bad news."

Pinche knew this was no idle threat. He'd seen these men in action; he *delivered* the action, not that long ago. This place and this work were how they thanked him.

By way of reply, he finished the watery beer, slammed the cracked glass down on the bar and said, "How many?"

"Not too bad, maybe 15 total. They still coming in, you know. We'll see."

Pinche stood and walked towards the door.

"Don't worry amigo! Maybe not all of them make it here. The jungle, you know? She's rough."

# THE TRAIL

There were 30, at least.

The fat bastard had lied, of course. Pinche knew he was lying when he started talking. The more sheep they could bleed, the faster the flow. Each of these milling fools had paid dearly to be here. Most of them had paid all they had.

Pinche came prepared. Two men he had used before had preceded him. Dependable and ruthless, and neither spoke to the group as they were questioned in at least four different languages, even when they understood what was said.

Guapo was anything but. Once a child soldier, he'd been shot in the face during a skirmish on the border. Sadly, he'd survived the wound. Whatever roughshod triage had saved his life had also left him a scarred monstrosity. From the left cheek to the right jaw, the bullet had crossed, erasing bone, muscle, teeth, cartilage and his left eye.

His nose was gone, and he wore cheap dentures to eat because most of his teeth had been shot out or had fallen out later. The jaw had been reconstructed, poorly, and pulled his lower lip down in a pout. At the same time, the knurled scar tissue on that side had replaced a normal human mouth with a stretched parody of a scream. Since part of his tongue had been carried away by the round that hit him, his speech was clogged and sibilant. He rarely spoke with anything beyond his fists or a rifle butt.

Mosca was a hulking slab of meat, six and a half feet tall and nearly 300 pounds. He chewed coca leaves constantly. His arms seemed too long; the hands at the ends of them were enormous and rock hard. A

pump shotgun was cradled across his chest. All the men carried machetes, knives, and guns, the justice of the region.

Dawn was still two hours hence when Pinche entered the clearing where his men guarded the cargo. He was unsurprised to find twice the number he had been promised milling about in the swelter.

The Gap had two seasons: hot, or rainy and hot. The deluges cooled nothing in the jungle. They only served to loosen the soil, swell the rivers to impassibility, and breed the mosquitoes. Out of all the insects around them, the jungle fostered them best.

When it came to parasites, hookworm, Giardia, guinea worm, *Wuchereria bancrofti*, *Brugia malayi*, *Leishmania promastigotes*, *Trypanosoma cruzi*, and Loa Loa were just a few of the common and exotic tropical life forms endemic to the region. They competed with the bot flies to implant themselves in a warm place.

There were bullet ants and two-inch reddish-brown wasps that seemed sluggish around their nests. If angered, they would happily swarm for an hour and sting anything to death that disturbed them. Scorpions and spiders abounded, some of which could kill a grown man, and certainly a child.

The *fer de lance*, known locally as *equis*, prowled in the trees, along with eyelash and palm vipers. Coral snakes and Bushmasters patrolled the ground. Nothing to worry about there. If you were bitten, agonizing death was certain. A bullet would be kindness.

Anacondas and *candiru* prowled the rivers, though they were less of a worry than the caiman and poison toads. Fresh water was scarce and alive with disease and leeches. A human could avoid some of these threats if properly provisioned and prepared, but the ticks were the most insidious of the minute predators that they faced.

## The Gap

They latched on silently, going for the warm, dark, moist places on a person. The armpits and groin were favorites. Feeding ticks were known to cause rashes, lesions, agonizing itching, anaphylactic reactions, and paralysis while frequently transmitting *Borellia*, ehrlichiosis, *Rickettsia rickettsii*, anaplasmosis, tularemia, and relapsing fevers. Most of the migrants would be carrying stowaways a few hours from now.

The migrants ranged in age from an infant in a sling to a couple of older men and one old woman. There were two children under 12, by the look, and a few teenage boys as well. Two of the men were African, from some unknown part of that continent. Two others were the whitest thing for miles, speaking Russian. There were three dark eyed, dark-skinned men speaking in Arabic to each other. The lady with the baby was indigenous to somewhere south of them, small and dark and hard looking.

The rest were the same as the rest before, the Spanish speaking from Venezuela, Colombia, Peru and Ecuador, even Cuba. There was a Panamanian born Spanish speaking Chinese woman, known regionally as a *chino*. A few had been deported when they were caught trying to cross the Gap on a prior journey, sent far south of the southern Central American border, where the powers that be hoped they'd be too frightened, dispirited, sick from tropical disease, or financially broken to attempt the crossing again.

*Greed made sure they told you nothing that wasn't a lie*, Pinche thought to himself. Of course, being one of them, Pinche knew this already, but the size of this haul was still going to be a problem. He had been through these trips before. The results were usually less than optimal.

His men knew the drill. First, the speech, and then the march. The group was looking away from them, eyeing the pile of taped bundles and the jerricans of water stacked under a tarp. Pinche whistled loudly, and they turned to look.

“*Compadres! Amigos!*” and, in English, “Friends!” he called loudly. His men corralled the group forward. They moved quickly due to Mosca’s size; they feared this man right away, and that was just fine with Mosca and Pinche. Probably with Guapo, as well, though it was hard to tell. He didn’t say much.

“Today, your fight for freedom lies that way,” he said in Spanish, pointing north to the *Cuenca Atrato* at the base of the *Serranía del Darién*. “Remember, no one forced you to come. What is next is what you paid for, and you will get your money’s worth. Do not doubt me.” Pinche repeated the speech in the accented English he spoke.

One of the white men seemed to understand this despite Pinche’s lack of mastery, and he spoke quietly to his companion in their native tongue.

“These men are your guides. Follow them, do as they say, and in maybe 5 days this will be behind you. And now we go!” Pinche said, smiling.

Mosca removed the tarp covering the bundle of gear and contraband. Guapo pointed at the group, then the pile. The implication was clear.

“Food. Water,” Pinche said. “Each of you must carry your weight on this journey.”

“No!” the old lady shouted. “You have been paid. This is madness.”

“No? Old woman, you can stay behind. No one will force you to go. Do you want to die in the jungle, you stupid cunt? You will carry what we tell you to carry, *vieja*, or you can go back where you came from. Or to hell, is nothing to me.”

“¿Dónde están las mulas?”<sup>12</sup> asked one of the men, a middle-aged Venezuelan.

“*Las mulas están aquí*,”<sup>13</sup> Mosca said, scowling. The man lowered his eyes.

Reluctantly, they came forward and began to sort through and load the items into packs and onto backs. The small woman with the baby stuffed four taped bundles into her bag wordlessly and picked up a can of water. In her left arm she cradled her infant.

One of the teen boys, maybe the oldest, tried to get away with taking as little as possible, only stowing away two of the taped bundles in his pack. His *compañeros* watched as he shouldered the weight, smiling. When he turned, Pinche stood before him. “Open it.”

Without waiting for a reply, he spun the boy around, yanked at the drawstrings, and stuffed six more taped bricks into the space. “You got a lot of room in here, boy. You are young, and strong. You can carry this much.”

“I *can*’t!” the boy whined. Pinche slapped him.

“You WILL! And pick up a can, too. For the balance, so you don’t fall over.” The other boys had gotten the message and were throwing bundles in their bags as fast as they could.

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<sup>12</sup> “Where are the mules?”

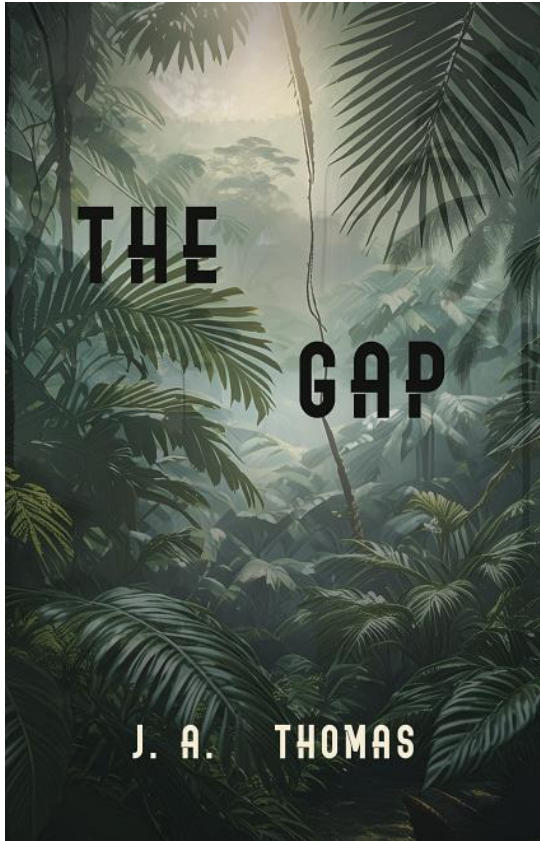
<sup>13</sup> “The mules are here.”



In a short time, everything was aboard the men and women in the clearing. They strained under the weight.

“You carry your own lives, *amigos*. Drop *nothing* that you have taken on. It is part of the bargain you have made. We are leaving, right now. Remember why you are here. Remember what lies ahead for you,” Pinche said, walking forward. His cargo began to move along with him, sweat already streaming off their faces and staining their clothing. They crept forward at a much slower rate, as Pinche and his men strode alongside them. Carrying nothing, the *coyotes* moved faster.

“This trip will be difficult, to be sure,” Pinche said jovially. “But a new life awaits you all!”



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