

A Hike with Jimmy

All I wanted was for Jimmy to be my friend and mentor, to lead me through the thickets of adolescence. I followed his manly figure everywhere and did whatever he said and he never minded or told me to leave him alone. Best of all, Jimmy would take me on a hike whenever my family went to visit his.

Our last hike happened on an August day in 1950 when I was nine. When we arrived at his house, I was the first one out of the car. “Where’s Jimmy?” I demanded. Then Jimmy came out and I hung back.

He was taller than I remembered and had pimples all over his face. A mop of dark brown ringlets had replaced his crew cut and Jimmy was combing them, trying to bring order to the unruly mass. But when I asked him if we were going on hike the next day, he punched my shoulder and said, “Don’t we always go on a hike, ol’ buddy?” and I was happy.

As we went to bed that night, Jimmy instructed me, “Get a good night’s sleep so you’ll be ready for tomorrow. We’re going on a real long hike. We rise at dawn and I want you to be alert. There’s lots you need to learn.”

He woke me as gray light began to come through the windows. For breakfast, we had a glass of milk and a handful of brownies, picked up our five-pound packs and army surplus canteens, and walked out the front door. No one else was awake.

The morning was pleasant, not more than 90°, but ready for the climb to 120° that was the usual August afternoon temperature in the town of Abqaiq, Eastern Province, Saudi Arabia.

As we walked out the front door a three-inch tan lizard hid in a mortared crack by the front door, blending with the light tan stone walls of the house, hoping for a moth to fly close enough to provide him with a snack (this was before they started spraying DDT – it killed the lizards and left all the moths). He swiveled an eye to watch us as we passed.

Our eyes assumed a “desert squint” in the bright light. Sunglasses were the mark of an effete newcomer or an adult – like wearing a hat or having pale skin – but we were expert at squinting to keep sun and sand out of our eyes. As the sun rose higher and higher, we would squeeze our eyes more and more, until they were all but closed and we peered through a curtain of eyelashes. Mothers complained, but we kids knew squints were the mark of a true desert rat – almost as good as being a Bedouin. Jimmy checked to make sure I was squinting properly.

The packed-sand streets in front of Jimmy’s house were newly oiled, and I inhaled the luscious, mouth-filling aroma of fresh crude oil. I am told that farmers regard the smell of manure as the smell of prosperity and well being; someone raised in the oil fields has just such affection for crude’s delicious essence.

As we passed out Jimmy’s front gate, we could see four columns of black smoke from the “sour gas” flares just outside of town. The greasy pillars rose straight as chimneys to an immense height and spread broad canopies in the sky. The flares burned all the time, and at night the town was lit with an eerie orange glow that varied with wind and clouds — no streetlights were needed in Abqaiq.

“That’s what’s so great about hiking around Abqaiq,” Jimmy said. “You can’t get lost. All you have to do is steer by the flares.” He paused and added in a serious tone, “If anything should happen to me, just head for the smoke.”

Our callused bare feet made scritch-scratch sounds on the sidewalks as we headed for the edge of town. The sound always reminded me of someone trying to strike a wooden match. Hiking barefoot

was a treat. I rarely wore shoes except to go to school, but in Dhahran, hikes went up limestone *jebels* and over jagged rocks too sharp even for my leathery soles. Around Abqaiq, though, we would be hiking over bare sand and gravel plains, so my feet could breathe free.

“O.K., Brown,” Jimmy said, “Now that you’re a Cub Scout, I suppose you think you know a lot. Let’s see how sharp you are. What’s the worst stuff in the world to walk on?”

I had no doubt. “Hot, fresh oil sand. The black oil soaks up the sun and you sink down in it and it sticks to your feet like boiling tar. Sometimes we try to see who can cross a street the slowest.”

“I used to do that when I was a kid,” Jimmy said, “but you’re wrong. *Subkha* is definitely worse than oil sand.”

Subkha occurred around the Persian Gulf when salt water washed inland, soaked the top half-inch of sand, and then receded. The stuff baked in the sun and bubbled up like tough, overdone piecrust. Footsteps crunched through and made little bitty cuts around the edges of your feet. Salty sand would get in and then you had had it.

“You can always scrape off oil sand,” Jimmy said, “but with *subkha* cuts you suffer until you get home and wash your feet.”

“It’s nice to go barefoot again, though,” he added. “I almost always wear shoes now that I’m fourteen.”

The last stone wall and feeble man-tended bush dropped behind us, and the scritch-scratch sidewalk sound was replaced by squeaky sand sound and the rising sun was beginning to prickle the backs of our necks. We were at the end of the houses and approaching the town fence. An eight-foot high chain-link fence topped with barbed wire surrounded Abqaiq, like all company towns. We were never sure who it was supposed to keep out (maybe it was supposed to keep us in), but it was a true boundary, and “crossing the fence” was a milestone that made a genuine hike, not a mere child’s stroll.

Jimmy asked, “Have you ever hiked outside the fence in Dhahran?”

“Three times,” I boasted.

“That’s pretty good for a kid, but it’s lots different in Abqaiq. You’re lucky I’m taking you. I know all about this country.”

The wind had blown the sand out from under a section of fence and we slid through. Now we could head out toward the horizon – intrepid explorers who had to be home by noon. Although there’s rarely a horizon in eastern Arabia. Sun and wind whip humidity, dust, and heat waves into a froth that obscures vision, and blurs the line between sandy distance and white sky.

The sand under our feet ranged in color from rust-red to pale tan. Sand was to us what weather and hills were to hikers in the States. Good sand made for easy hikes, bad sand made hikes sheer trudging. But once you knew what you were doing, you realized rust-red patches were large, coarse grains and provided firm footing, while lighter colors were progressively finer and softer and more tiring walking. Jimmy led where footing was best, especially avoiding the leeward side of dunes – the sand was softest of all there. I was almost as good as Jimmy at walking on sand – you set each foot down perfectly flat, spreading it out so it didn’t sink and when you strode off, you tried not to let your toes dig in. If you were careful, and rolled your weight exactly right, you hardly left footprints. Jimmy stopped and made me walk up and down in front of him so he could see if I was doing it right. He got down on his hands and knees and inspected my tracks and told me I was digging in my big toes too much.

Blowing sand felt like flashes of hot pepper on my skin. At that, it wasn't as bad as a full fledged *shamal*, when the sand blew hardest about a foot above the ground. After walking in one of those, your ankles and the tops of your feet would be raw – sandblasted. Jimmy said even he never went hiking in a *shamal*. But, he added, *shamals* were much worse in Abqaiq than in Dhahran.

Jimmy stood tall, looked back toward the smoke pillars, shaded his face with his hand, cocked his head with his eyes squinty, and calculated, “We must have come about thirty-five miles. We’ll stop here for lunch.” He waved his hand at a lone bush perched on a sand hummock, its cranky, gnarled, nearly leafless branches defying wind and sand.

He took off his pack and sighed with pleasure. I took off my pack and sighed with pleasure.

He unzipped his fly and relieved himself. I unzipped my fly and relieved myself.

I expressed my awe at the force of Jimmy’s stream and the size of his instrument. I was embarrassed to display my little bare noodle when I was so clearly outclassed, but Jimmy sympathized. “Don’t worry,” he said, “time will take care of you.”

“But how long do I have to wait?”

“Probably ‘til you’re thirteen or fourteen. But it isn’t all peaches and cream. You itch a lot and girls laugh at you.”

That was one of the things I liked about Jimmy – he was always willing to explain things to me. He would answer my questions at length and with enthusiasm, even supplying questions when I ran dry. Sometimes he would go on for an hour, telling me questions I didn’t know, and giving me answers I didn’t understand.

“I’m not sure I like being grown up,” he said. “There’s so many things I can’t do any more – like play with my toy trucks, play with girls, or even just play – and there’s so many more things to worry about – going on dates, combing my hair, trying to make the football team, getting good grades...” He petered out with a wistful expression on his face. He took his comb out of his pocket and began tugging at his curls.

I didn’t know exactly what he meant, but I said that **I** would play with **my** trucks no matter how old I got. Jimmy punched at my jaw and chuckled. “You’ll find out soon enough.”

Growing up seemed so complicated. Jimmy seemed so complicated. Even his name, “James Patrick Daniel McCarthy Sullivan,” seemed so complicated. It had the majesty of a peal of distant thunder and seemed ever so much better than my little bare noodle of a name. I don’t know how he handled all the complexities of just being Jimmy - but of course it was nothing for him.

We sprawled in the sparse shade of the bush, wiggled contoured holes through the scalding top layer of hard sand into the cooler, finer stuff underneath, and pulled out our lunches. We had two sandwiches each – fluffy white bread, thick slabs of Velveeta cheese, lots of mayonnaise – just the way we liked them. Jimmy took his Boy Scout pocketknife out to open the bottles of Pepsi-Cola the Sullivan’s houseboy, Peter, had packed, but I wouldn’t let him open mine. Now that I was nine, I had my own Scout knife and wanted to open my own soda.

Jimmy said, “Being a Cub Scout isn’t so great. It’s being a Boy Scout that really counts.”

I don’t know why Peter insisted on giving us Pepsis. They make such a mess when they have been jiggling in a pack and they are about 95° and you pop the cap off and they explode and they don’t taste too great hot and flat anyway.

“Jeez, what a mess,” Jimmy said. “I told you to let me open it.”

I washed the sticky stuff off my hands with a little water from my canteen and bit into the soft, smooth cheese sandwich. My jaws worked ecstatically and there was hardly any sand in the first sandwich. After we finished our sandwiches, we rummaged to see what else Peter had packed for us. We each had a thick wedge of last night's white-frosted chocolate cake, a waxed-paper package of peanut-butter cookies, and a twelve-ounce can of apricot nectar – Peter had a real sweet tooth, and figured we did too. We polished off the cake, licking our fingers to get every bit of the butter cream frosting. Then we lounged back in our holes in the sand.

Jimmy pointed to a line of hieroglyphics circled in the sand under the bush. “Do you know what those tracks are?” he asked.

“Of course,” I said proudly, “those are dung beetle tracks.”

Jimmy got a little hurt look. “Well, sort of, but don't call them dung beetles, they're really called turd rollers.”

He was quiet for awhile and then pointed to some marks that looked like a kind of a railroad track with one rail in the middle and the ties sticking out to the sides. “Those are the tracks of a *thub-thub* lizard,” he announced. “They're big fat, light tan lizards. That line in the middle is where their tail drags when they walk.”

“I know that,” I said, “we caught one on our last Cub Scout trip.”

“Don't be so smart. Cub Scouts aren't anything,” he said. “Besides, lunch is over and it's time to get moving.”

I wanted to eat the peanut butter cookies, but he stood and picked up his pack. “We'll save them for emergency rations, it's time to go,” he ordered.

Jimmy climbed up on the bush's mound of sand, shaded his eyes, and cast around the horizon. I didn't know what he was looking for, because there was nothing to see but the four pillars of smoke behind us and mirages and heat waves in all the other directions. He stared in a direction a bit to the right of where we had been heading. He pointed and declared, “We're going that way. I see a lake.”

“A lake?” I said, “Come on, Jimmy, I'm not just a little kid, you can't fool me like that.”

“No, no,” he insisted. “I really do see a lake, look for yourself.”

I thought it might be another snipe hunt trick, but I climbed up on the mound and looked in the direction he pointed. At first it looked like just another mirage, but it had blueness to it that mirages don't, and you couldn't see palms reflected in it the way you could with most mirages.

“Well,” I said, “I don't know.”

“Are you chicken?”

“If we go that far, we won't get back by noon like they told us.”

“Don't worry,” he said, punching my shoulder real man-to-man. “Parents don't really mean noon. They just say noon so you'll be back by two o'clock, and as long as you're back by three, no one gets mad.”

By this time, it was getting hot and we hunched our heads against the sun's assault on our necks. After walking for a while, we came to a second bush – there are lots of bushes around Abqaiq – and climbed up for a look. This time it looked even less like a mirage and even more like a lake and Jimmy started to get excited.

“I bet we can even go swimming,” Jimmy said.

Sand squeaked underfoot as we hurried toward our mysterious goal. Finally, we ran the last few hundred yards and gazed on it. Long and narrow, it was a wondrous indigo color out in the middle.

Dunes on the far side were visible a few hundred feet away, but the ends couldn't be seen through the mists of distance. Wavelets slurped against the shore. The edge of the lake was slimy and smelled pretty awful, but it didn't bother us too much. Foul smells are part of life in an oilfield and you adapt.

Maybe you have to be raised in the desert to appreciate the supernatural impact of a lake full of real water. It seemed as if one of the mirages had come to life. We stood close together and stared and stared for quite a while.

We stripped and waded in. The water was fine. It was cool enough – not as cool as the town pool in Abqaiq which was artificially chilled, but much nicer than the pool in Dhahran, which wasn't. There were some peculiar-looking floating things, but I figured if they didn't bother Jimmy, I wouldn't let them bother me. Besides, who knew what you could expect to find in a lake.

"Do you think there's any fish?" I asked Jimmy.

"There might be," he said. "I wish we had fishing poles and a boat so we could catch some."

We floated on our backs for awhile, and then Jimmy spoke solemnly.

"Never tell anyone about the lake," he ordered. "It'll be a secret place and I'll have a club and only bring members here. You can come to the lake whenever you visit, even though you're only a Cub Scout and from Dhahran besides. The other club members will accept you because I'll tell them to, and you were part of the original discovery voyage."

"I'm going to name it 'Lake James,'" he pronounced. "Since I discovered it I have the right to name it."

We floated a little longer, and even attempted a few swim strokes.

Jimmy finally held up his thumb, and squinted at the sun. "It's time to start back. We'll walk along the shore so we can find the headwaters of Lake James."

In the afternoon heat, we were dry as soon as we stepped out of the water. My skin felt a little crusty as we dressed – kind of like after swimming in the Persian Gulf.

We hiked along the edge of the lake, more or less in the direction of the smoke pillars until we came to the source of our indigo lake – an 18-inch steel pipe vomiting brownish water onto the sand. The water flowed along a sand channel for a hundred feet or so as a turbulent brook, then subsided into Lake James.

Jimmy announced, "I'll name the stream 'Brown Brook' after the co-discoverer of Lake James. Besides, it's kind of a brown color, anyway."

"Wow, I can hardly wait to tell my friends!" I said.

We sat on the pipe and munched our cookies. Jimmy looked at Brown Brook and the pipe like he was thinking really hard.

"Where does the pipe come from?" I asked. "Is that what you're thinking about?"

"Don't ask so many stupid questions," Jimmy grumped.

I never thought there were many flies in the desert, but the waters of Lake James must have attracted them, because we walked back to town in a cloud of undesired company. We walked faster and faster, trying to get away from them. We even hoped for a *shamal* to blow them away. By the time we got into town, we were running, still with our buzzing escort. I was out of breath and I had stitch in my side and I couldn't keep up, but Jimmy wouldn't slow down a bit.

By the time we got to Jimmy's front gate, even he was out of breath, but the flies were as playful as ever. When we crashed into the house, a few of our escorts made it through the door.

Jimmy's younger sister was the first to see us.

“You **stink!**” Peggy shrieked, pinching her freckled nose dramatically with freckled fingers, every freckle proclaiming disdain for boys and all they represented, red pigtails flying from the vigor of her gesture. Since Peggy worked best with an audience, she gathered the rest of the household to hear her views.

“Well, there was this lake,” Jimmy mumbled, looking at his crusty toenails, “and we kind of went swimming...”

They made us go out to the front yard and strip to our underpants and then they turned a hose on us. Jimmy was red with embarrassment and kept looking to see if any girls were around. Then they brought out soap and shampoo and brushes and kept hosing us as we scrubbed right there in the front yard. I was trying to explain to my dad about Lake James and Brown Brook and how neat they were, but he just kept spraying me with the hose.

It was only as we were drying off that Jimmy’s father explained the bitter truth. I guess I should have known – after all, raw sewage has to go somewhere – and with thousands of miles of empty desert available...

Jimmy got mad when Peggy asked him about “Lake Poopy.” He said he would beat us both up if we ever told anyone. I promised him it would be a secret forever, but he was still mad when it was time to leave.

It was our last hike. I guess he got too old or I got too old or something, because the next time we came to visit, Jimmy was fifteen, and had big muscles, and only talked about girls and basketball, and slept ‘till noon, and was crabby when he got up, and never wanted to go hiking or even talk to me.

I just hung around hoping he would take me on another hike.