



CHAPTER I

THE BEACHHEAD

“A burger and a Bebsi boolside.”

WHEN I TRY TO PINPOINT the moment when the Middle East began exerting its gravitational pull on my life, I’m usually drawn back to the first diary entry I ever wrote. It was just one sentence, filling an entire page in a small spiral notebook.

“The war started with boming in Kiro,” I printed in large, wobbly letters on June 5, 1967, a couple months shy of my eighth birthday. (My spelling still needs help.)

The Six-Day War, the third major conflict between the Arabs and Israel, erupted that day with Israeli squadrons bombing the Egyptian air force to smithereens on the tarmac in Cairo, roughly 700 miles and one international border east of my childhood home. My family lived along the sandy Mediterranean coast in Marsa Brega, Libya, where my father, a chemical engineer, supervised a refinery and a water desalinization plant. The town was built and operated by one

of the world's major oil companies—then universally known as Esso—to process and ship the fine, light crude bubbling up from underneath the Sahara desert. Before the discovery of oil in 1959, the impoverished country's main export had been scrap iron left over from the massive battles between the Nazis' Africa Korps and the mostly British Allied forces.

We moved there in January 1965, the seventeenth family to arrive. The vast expanse of the Sahara occupied the entire southern horizon. Flat stretches of sand and rocks interrupted by periodic dunes stretched to infinity, giving us the sense that we were colonizing some distant, lifeless planet. But in the other direction the Mediterranean shoreline was a little slice of Paradise. It's a cliché, sure; yet no beach since has ever seemed as perfect to me. In those early days the coast was still all blindingly white sand and seductive turquoise water. You couldn't see the shoreline from our house because the residential part of town was built in a slight depression. After the first visit, though, it was always there in my mind's eye. It still is.

The beach became our Elysian Fields, endlessly alluring even after a decade of oil spills from tankers loading at an offshore mooring turned the sand khaki and blackened the tops of the coral reefs jutting out of the water. Once, when what was then the largest tanker in the world ran aground, my father drove home from work to take me to gape at the behemoth, a wounded dinosaur that seemed to block out the sea. During the few winter months when it was too cold to swim, we would explore the desert. A couple hours' drive due south brought us to a high, rocky desert plateau, where as a little boy I delighted in scrabbling among the pebbles to find shark teeth dating from prehistoric times when the area was under water. Later, as part of the Scorpions, my Boy Scout troop, I reveled in long camping trips to distant desert oases. We certainly imagined ourselves as Bedouins astride camels, but in fact I don't think we encountered any. The most thrilling expedition was a week spent crossing the desert to visit the wreckage of *Lady Be Good*, a B-24D United States Air Force bomber that crashed more than 400 miles

inland after overshooting its airfield in a sandstorm in 1943. The bomber had been returning from a run over Italy; its nine crew members perished trekking across the desert. When the wreckage was discovered a few years before we got to Libya, the desert air had preserved the plane to the extent that the oil exploration team who stumbled across it could still fire one of the fifty-caliber machine guns and use the radio. Interesting oases, prehistoric cave paintings, and all manner of antiquities existed out there in the desert, but none of those could generate the same excitement to a boy as the American plane.

In July 1965, seven months after we arrived, some Libyan men opposed to the monarchy under King Idris sneaked into Brega's industrial area one night and blew up three oil storage tanks. A column of black smoke hung in the sky for several days. The oil company responded by enclosing eleven square miles of desert behind a heavy-duty chain-link fence, the compound roughly delineated by the sea on one side and on the other by the one-lane, potholed road that at the time constituted the Tripoli-Benghazi highway. All Libyan laborers who entered during the day had to exit after working hours ended at 5 P.M.

After the fence went up, the volatile Middle East always seemed even more distant from inside our oil company cocoon. Brega felt more Texan than Libyan. Apart from periodic family excursions to the bazaar in Benghazi—a two-hour drive down that highway—I rarely interacted with the locals. Libyans were mostly strangers viewed from afar. The few encounters were memorable because they were so rare. Some years at Christmas, for example, a Bedouin herdsman or two would materialize to tend the live sheep, donkey, and occasional camel used in the elementary school's annual pageant, the manger built from freshly cut palm fronds. If our teachers ever tried to connect us with the history of the place, it never seemed to have much to do with the Libyans. The annual school play one year focused on the life of Septimus Severus, a Roman emperor born around 145 A.D. in one of the magnificent colonies along the shoreline near Tripoli.

To amuse himself one day, my older brother Peter decided to have a Lawrence of Arabia moment by striding across the dunes to the distant golf club—three or four miles away—where the clubhouse and a salt-water swimming pool were perched on a rocky bluff overlooking the sea. He decked himself out in North African garb—a flowing headdress, long robe, and sandals. Walking across the fairways, which consisted entirely of sand with oiled “greens,” he came across a Libyan in full golf mufti—a polo shirt, fancy golf pants, spiked golf shoes, golf gloves, a golf hat, golf everything. They just stared at each other in silent disbelief, mirroring worlds that never quite melded.

Nearly every day, the Libyan staff at the club’s snack bar shouted out my standard order, “wahid burger wi wahid bebsi boolside”—there being no “p” in the Arabic language and “wahid” meaning “one.” I didn’t learn much Arabic back then. Every year the oil company would appoint some promising young Libyan engineer with weak English as the Arabic teacher. The idea was to improve his language skills so he could study abroad. But his pupils conspired together and, shaking our little blond heads in unison, avowed that, no, the previous guy had been kind of slow and we had not even mastered the alphabet. Then we all got really good grades by learning to recite “Aleph, bah, tah,” and so on, as if it were the first time. We avoided grammar entirely. Now, of course, it seems a terrible waste.

In its first years Brega consisted of just three residential streets, each a block long, housing about twenty families in nearly identical, single-story homes. They were square structures built of cinder blocks with flat roofs and sandy yards that proved hostile to most vegetation. Only once did our stunted, anorexic orange tree produce a solitary piece of fruit. It looked fake, a luscious orange bauble dangling from little more than a stick. That orange became a major event, worthy of inviting over the entire street to admire. At times the howling winds raging out of the Sahara were so fierce, with the sand biting any exposed skin, that we stayed inside for a day or two.

The winds rapidly built a dune up against our back wall, our very own link to the surrounding desert. I was “camping” in the

yard one night with my best friend, the two of us sleeping on cots under the dazzling battery of stars that are visible in the desert; the array makes eternity seem tangible. At first light, my friend and I went into the kitchen to raid the refrigerator. The back door was ajar and our massive freezer sat at an odd angle, as if someone had failed to maneuver it outside. We crept into the living room and discovered a Libyan man snoring on one of our couches.

“Daddy! Daddy! There’s a Libyan asleep on the couch!” I yelled, running into my parents’ darkened bedroom, my friend trailing me.

My father cracked one eye, put on his glasses, and glanced toward the alarm clock. “You kids knock it off. It’s much too early for jokes. Go back to bed.”

I grabbed his arm and tugged. “No really, Daddy, come look. There’s a Libyan asleep on the couch.” The hapless man, still slightly drunk when my father shook him awake, staggered to his feet and fled the house. We looked around outside and found the tracks where he had stumbled up the dune against the back wall and fallen into the yard. It emerged later that he was a customs inspector.



On that first day of the 1967 war, concerned that the Israeli air force might fly farther west to obliterate Libya’s oil installations, Esso decided to evacuate all women and children. The government also declared a national curfew. Since there was no telling when everyone might come back, the adults threw massive parties to consume the champagne and other delicacies they had hoarded for special occasions. In the darkness, our staggering parents negotiated their way home along the tops of the thick walls so they would not be on the streets after curfew.

For the actual evacuation, every person could bring one suitcase and the company gave each family a \$20 bill. All the evacuees fit aboard two U.S. Air Force C-130 Hercules transport planes, flown down the coast from Wheelus, the American air base outside the Libyan capital of Tripoli. In retrospect, it almost seems like something

out of “Ripley’s Believe It or Not” that there was an American base in Libya, of all places, complete with a PX that sold rare elixirs of the gods that I coveted, such as root beer and Tootsie Rolls.

The Air Force pilots evidently had trouble finding the flyspeck air strip at Brega, located near the lowest point of the Gulf of Sirte, because they arrived hours late, the powerful back-thrust of their engines tearing up great chunks of asphalt as they roared to a halt. It was a broiling day, I remember—so hot that one woman twisted her ankle when the sharp spike of her high heel sank down into the soft tar of the parking lot and snapped off. Many evacuees were crying, uncertain about what danger they faced and reluctant to leave their pets behind. Women and children slopped tearful kisses on German shepherds and poodles straining at their leashes. We had no pets; I wasn’t crying. I don’t even recall saying good-bye to my father. To this day I remember being utterly focused on the fact that I would get to ride on a real American Air Force plane, my rapture complete when we got onboard and the uniformed airmen handed out authentic military C-rations in small cardboard boxes.

The war ended within days, but my mother, brother, two sisters, and I spent several weeks waiting in various Swiss resorts before Esso gave the green light for all the families to come home.

Of course, nobody knew then how profoundly that abbreviated war would affect the region—in ways, it turned out, that shaped the course of much of my professional life. In every Arab nation, Israel’s stunning 1967 victory triggered a religious revival. Fundamentalists avowed that the Arabs would regain their past glory only by returning to a strict observance of the faith, preaching a utopian vision of dominance that fueled much of the violence still plaguing the Middle East. The whole process of change is rooted in the legacy of that war. When I returned to the region as a correspondent, I often felt that the violence had become a barrier to understanding the region as impenetrable as the fence surrounding the oil compound of my childhood.

Our tranquil Club Med existence resumed, at least for a couple years—with barely any sense of the volcano slowly rumbling to life beneath our feet. My brother and my two older sisters, Nina and Gail, were gone most of the time in various European boarding schools because Brega lacked a high school.

In summer we basically camped at the beach. Summer vacations always started with the same ritual: My father would glimpse whatever skimpy bits of fabric my oldest sister Nina had bought as a bathing suit and declare, “You’re not going to the beach in that!” Occasionally, some hapless Libyan herdsman—a few found their way into the compound to graze their flocks—spotted my blonde sister or one of her half-naked friends. He would come interrupt the teenage boys skim-boarding along the shoreline to ask how many camels or sheep he might exchange for one of the girls. A friend of my brother even managed to convince one unfortunately gullible local to show up with a camel herd.

Our days at the beach began with us all tumbling out of our 1960 green Ford Falcon station wagon, with little saddles and long-horns embossed on some manner of fake leather seating. It was the family car for my entire childhood. I would avoid my mother’s attempts to douse me in sunscreen, which meant that my nose was invariably bloody and peeling from overexposure, and gun for the water. I usually swam to a raft anchored about 100 yards offshore, constructed using four oil barrels covered with boards. Just beyond the raft a long coral reef acted as a breakwater—so the inside of the bay remained relatively tranquil even in furious storms.

My brother and one or two of his friends would hunt with spear guns the brilliant parrot fish that darted about the reef, their efforts markedly diminishing the population over the years. Occasionally someone snorkeling would find treasure, like a Roman amphora or an Italian patrol boat sunk during World War II. Exporting antiquities was illegal, so one family, determined to spirit away their prized Roman pot, built an elaborate papier-mâché animal around it before giving it to the movers. On the beach, my sisters would either rig our small Sunfish sailboat or lie on their towels, sunbathing, while

my father lit the coals in a small black metal hibachi. In the early years my mother devised incredibly complicated picnics with multiple courses. But after a sudden sandstorm picked the pea soup right out of the bowls and flung it across our laps on one desert excursion, the standard fare became barbecued hotdogs, hamburgers, and drumsticks. Every once in a while we grilled camel burgers, the meat slightly sweeter and tougher than beef. Fresh fruits and vegetables tended to arrive with a haggard look, acquired through days spent on docks and trucks. I'm not sure my mother improved matters by soaking them all in diluted Clorox to kill any germs. When she sent me to the grocery store for lettuce and I came back with a cabbage, she wondered aloud, not for the first or last time, whether it might not be better to live someplace where I would be exposed to more nature than just sand.

To get fresh bread, we drove to the bustling crossroads that had sprouted right outside the main gates of the compound. Amidst the confusion of garages and tire repair joints, a small bakery churned out short crusty loaves—Libya's delicious bread being one legacy of the Italian occupation. It was the perfect companion for my staple lunch—peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. I never imagined wanting to eat anything else. I honestly don't remember eating a single Libyan meal the whole time I lived there.



When we first got to Brega, movies were shown at night on a tiny screen on the beach. After that, we graduated to a slightly larger screen against the wall at basketball court, with intermission every time the reel needed changing. The reels often played in the wrong order, but nobody complained much. We brought our own chairs, bundling up in winter months against the desert chill and wearing goggles during sandstorms. Eventually the company built a bowling alley and an indoor movie theater that offered a steady diet of Westerns.

One day King Idris came to pay a visit. The aging monarch had ruled Libya since 1951, when it became the first country to gain independence under the imprimatur of the newly formed United Nations. All the schoolchildren were given little paper Libyan flags—a green, a red, and a black strip with a crescent and star in the middle—to wave as he drove past the main road outside the school. There was a reception for him at the golf clubhouse. It was feared that walking up the eight steps from the front entrance to the reception floor might prove too much for the king, around 77 years old at the time, so Esso paved an entirely new parking lot and built a side entrance at the same level as the dining hall. By then the area inside the compound was fairly tamed. In our first years, packs of wild dogs roamed the dunes and as we drove to the distant clubhouse they would chase our cars with abandon. We always rode with the tailgate down, my brother wielding a Louisville slugger in case any tried to leap aboard.

The air conditioning ran most of the year in our boxy, comfortable house with its deep American sofas and stately New England antiques. During the school year the morning ritual never varied—I gulped down a bowl of corn flakes at the kitchen table while my father snapped on the BBC World Service to hear the news. After it ended, I darted across the street to Esso Elementary School. But on the morning of September 1, 1969, when I was 10, after the chimes of Big Ben heralding the news ended, the first headline was a shocker. It reported a military coup d'état in Libya. Really?! We stared at the radio in stunned disbelief, waiting for more details. In our sheltered little enclave there had been no peep, not a single sign that our world would shift irrevocably. A 27-year-old army major, Muammar al-Qadhafi, leading a group of officers called the Revolutionary Command Council, had overthrown the king.

Qadhafi modeled himself on President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, preaching socialism and Arab unity. King Idris was the patriarch of a distinguished clan of Muslim leaders. The upstart military officer, to gain credibility among the Libyans who had revered

their king on religious grounds, implemented his own brand of Islamic law.

For my parents, disaster struck instantly with the implementation of a ban on alcohol, with all liquor removed from the grocery-store shelves three days after the coup. The talented chemical engineers were soon competing over who could produce the smoothest “flash,” as the moonshine was called. Each house had been built with a small room for a maid behind the garage, but no one hired servants because there were none to be had. The shower stalls with their running water, however, proved excellent locations for small stills. Drunken parties, the adults crawling around on the floor by the end of the evening, a Brega trademark since the town was founded, continued almost uninterrupted.

Sometimes distilling experiments went badly wrong. My father tried to make ginger beer, filling several dozen dark-green bottles too full before stacking them in one corner of our wide kitchen counters. As the beer fermented and expanded, the bottles began to explode erratically, showering the kitchen with glass shards. For a day or two the kitchen was like a combat zone. Anyone needing something from the refrigerator cowered behind a garbage-can lid held like a shield. “Cover me!” one of us would yell as we dashed in to retrieve butter or orange juice or milk. Some experiments had far more tragic consequences. A few young Libyan trainees at the refinery went blind from distilling bad moonshine. After that, the government stopped ignoring infractions. An American engineer was deported for supplying bootleg to black marketers and a number of Britons were flogged after being convicted of public drunkenness.

For the kids, though, not much intruded on our idyll. Qadhafi’s revolution imposed some cosmetic changes. All English signs in town were painted out, their script replaced by Arabic cursive. The worst imposition came after Colonel Qadhafi—he promoted himself—booted out all 20,000 Italian expatriates whose forebears had colonized the place starting in 1911. One wily Italian businessman managed to convert all his savings into gold jewelry and snuck

away by sailing a small boat out to a larger yacht, in which his Italian friends had cruised over to rescue him. After that, our Sunfish sailboats were impounded for six months. The entire seventh and eighth grades unanimously agreed that the glorious Libyan people's revolution sucked because after class we could no longer run the ten minutes to the beach to sail every afternoon. It was my first but hardly last exposure to the region's bureaucratic overkill.



By then, Brega had grown to over 300 expatriate families, well beyond its original three streets. There were other changes. Qadhafi used some of Libya's oil revenue to expand the road to Benghazi to a full-blown highway, cutting an hour off the trip. The ban on Libyans living in the compound was lifted and the movie theater began showing Egyptian movies a couple nights a week. My parents ventured out once to see an early Omar Sharif epic, something about boatmen along the Nile with the requisite fight and belly-dance scenes. The compound kids never went to the Arabic movies; it was uncool.

Libyan families trickled in slowly at first because it took the company a while to build a separate school for their children. By that time I was gone most of the year to a Massachusetts boarding school. I chose one in the States because I had been there only twice during the entire decade we lived in Libya. My mother told me that the Libyans moving in complained bitterly that they'd been assigned inferior housing, stables unfit for animals, apparently imagining all those years that the foreigners were living in absolute luxury. The accusation smacked of the very kind of lingering colonialism that Qadhafi had vowed to uproot, so he swept into town to conduct the inspection personally. He went tromping through the Libyan and expatriate houses surrounded by soldiers armed with machine guns—he hadn't formed his female bodyguard contingent yet—before declaring all the houses alike. On the days before major Muslim feasts, however, you could tell where the Libyans

lived because the bleating sheep bought for slaughter would batter their heads against the inside of the wooden garage doors.

We left Libya in 1975. One of my last memories was watching a large Libyan family proudly drive away in our station wagon, which sometimes had sat unused in the garage for a year at a time because Qadhafi banned Ford. Spare parts like a new carburetor or a replacement muffler became part of the hand luggage we invariably carted back from our annual vacation. It was only later, when I was at Stanford University in the early 1980s, that I began wondering what that family was like, what the entire country was like, and started asking myself the questions that had not really occurred to a kid delighting in the adventure of it all. I launched a retroactive search for what I had missed on the other side of that fence. I spent a couple summers in grueling intensive language courses; I read Middle Eastern history in spare moments; I attempted to make hummus in a blender; and, leaving no cliché unscathed, of course I watched the movie *Lawrence of Arabia* endlessly to hear Auda Abu Tayi, the Bedouin tribal leader played by Anthony Quinn, speak one of my favorite movie lines of all time, “I am a river to my people!” (No shortage of Arab leaders still make the same unlikely claim.)

At times I decided it was irrational to be drawn back to such a seemingly hostile, alien part of the world, and I would sign up for economics or Chinese art history and try to forget all about the Middle East. But the gravitational pull proved impossible to counteract. Some deep sense of curiosity, mingling with atonement, needed to be placated.