

KIBBUTZ DAYDREAMIN'

SETUP

Christy and Joey are brothers, who grew up in a UN Peacekeepers family and travelled throughout the Middle East until they were about twelve; now in their thirties, they are both back working in the region. Christy packed in his law career in London, and now works in procurement for UNWRA in Gaza, providing support to Palestinian refugees. Joey was working with the Jerusalem Post but is struggling with his mental health and has recently moved to a kibbutz where he works full-time as a volunteer.

In this scene, Christy visits Joey's kibbutz near the Dead Sea with their childhood friend, an Israeli called Moshe.

CHRISTY WAS HAPPY TO LET MOSHE DRIVE, but he was a little on edge about what they'd find to talk about for the two-hour car journey. Moshe was really Joey's friend, and Christy had only ever talked to him when they were out at night, fuelled by alcohol. A gentle breeze blew through the car windows, taming the stifling July heat, as they drove west out of Jerusalem, making good progress until the traffic ground to a sudden standstill. Word from the car up ahead was there'd been a suicide bombing in the bus station near the Hebrew University, and all vehicles were being diverted onto a narrow side road. As they approached the turn, they passed a line of Israeli soldiers hitchhiking. It was a common sight and in a country with compulsory military service for everyone — three years for men and two for women — it was an unspoken code that you gave them a lift. Moshe looked at him with a questioning smile but Christy half-laughed and said, 'Absolutely no fucking way!'

Once they had looped back onto Highway 1, the traffic became fluid again, and Christy settled into the drive. 'Joey was telling me that you grew up on a kibbutz yourself.'

'Yes, I was born on Ein Gev kibbutz, further north beside the Sea of Galilee. In fact, it is close to where Joey had that incident with the police last year.'

'Jaysus, don't remind me. Dark days, indeed. Hopefully, he's in a better place these days.'

'We shall see very soon, my friend. This is a happy day, a day where we see Joey in his new life. Don't worry.'

An awkward silence ensued until Moshe said, 'My parents were one of the original settlers in Ein Gev when they immigrated from Czechoslovakia after the war. The kibbutz was beside the Syrian border, and I remember as a child, there were many shooting incidents and shellings across the border. You know, violence has always been a part of kibbutz life. Many kibbutzim were set up in vulnerable, remote areas, often along the borders of the state, so they have always played a prominent military role. Every kibbutz has a weapons armoury, and kibbutz members have regular shooting practice.' He snorted, 'Some say they live with shovels and rifles in their hands.'

'I don't know much about kibbutz except that it's basically some version of a hippy commune, but the Israeli version seems to work better.' Christy lit a cigarette and offered one to Moshe.

‘Toda raba, yes, can you light it for me, please?’ Moshe said. ‘The kibbutzniks were never pie-in-the-sky idealists; they were doers, focussed on getting the job done. They were on a mission to revive this barren land, swamp by swamp, field by field, and make it fertile again.’

‘Moses’ land of milk and honey.’

‘Nowadays, it is more a land of lush crops and mineral salts, as you will see when we get there. To make the desert bloom, they needed to grow crops in hostile areas with hard ground, so obviously, irrigation was the major issue and led to a lot of innovation. More recently, they have diversified away from just agriculture; many now have industrial plants and high-tech enterprises.’

‘When did they start allowing foreigners to do the work?’

‘For the founders of the kibbutz movement, the idea was to redeem the Jewish nation through manual labour but only so many Israelis wanted that sort of labour-intensive life. From the 1960s, during harvest time, labourers were sought outside, and it has grown from there.’

Fair play to Moshe; he got Joey into the kibbutz after he was released from hospital, made a few calls, pulled a few strings, and next thing Joey was off to somewhere he hopefully couldn’t do any damage: Kibbutz Kalia at the northernmost point of the Dead Sea. Living a whole new life with three hundred others, picking fruit, cooking meals, working in the laundry, and generally helping with whatever needed doing. In return, the volunteers were provided with food, board, and a little pocket money that they could spend in the kibbutz shop. Standing prominent in the arid, rocky land, Kalia suddenly appeared in front of them, an oasis of green leafy trees and palm groves. A chain-link fence, razor wire along the top, ran around the perimeter, inside of which were neatly trimmed grass lawns criss-crossed with footpaths leading to rows of concrete bungalows.

Joey appeared from one of these, looking fresh and relaxed, wearing a ball cap and shades. ‘Welcome, my friends,’ he said, arms spread wide as he grasped them both in a hug. ‘Let me show you around. We’ve no cars around the kibbutz itself, but we do have a horse, or you can use a bike, or you can just use the two strong legs the good Lord gave you.’

‘So how are you settling in? All good?’ Christy asked as they walked along, the soles of his feet burning through his flip-flops.

‘Never better, man. Forever in your debt, Moshe, thanks for setting this up.’

They high-fived, and Joey continued, ‘There we have the chicken coops, and behind that is the milking parlour. I’m on duty this week, up milking at the crack of dawn. Can you believe it, Christy? Just like we used to back home on Uncle Tommy’s farm. And over here is the swimming pool, five lanes, no less! I tell you, jumping in at the end of the day after a long shift labouring, that’s the dog’s bollocks.’

‘Joey the milkman, feck me.’

‘Hey, what’s with the no glasses?’

‘Yeah, it’s cool, eh? I had the operation. Finally, I’ve got twenty-twenty vision.’

‘Rock and roll. Looks kinda weird seeing you without them, but in a good way. And look at this,’ Joey said, clasping his hands around Christy’s waist. ‘The new slimline version, good on you.’

‘Yeah, I’ve lost nearly ten kilos on this new diet.’

‘It’s certainly working. Hey, the tour—’ Joey bounded ahead, pointing. ‘These are the dorms, mind you, not huge dorms like in school, Christy. We share a room with two, maybe three others. Bathrooms are communal, and we all eat in a big dining hall.’

Christy smiled to himself as he adapted to this new Joey, who had clearly swallowed large volumes of the kibbutz Kool-Aid. The good news was that it looked like he was also swallowing his prescribed

medication; Christy hadn't seen him in such good form for years.

'Let me show you the beach, lads. Very cool. Actually very hot at the moment! Our big claim to fame is that Kalia is the lowest kibbutz in the world. We have the lowest synagogue in the world, transmitting all the way up to whoever your God is on high. And here,' Joey said as they emerged from an olive grove and the concrete path turned to sand, 'is our very own private beach. Right here on the Dead Sea.'

Ahead of them, rows of blue umbrellas and white plastic sun loungers lined the beach. Crowds of people bobbed in the sea, in classic Dead Sea pose, supine on the surface, buoyed by the dense, saline water. By the shoreline, a young couple rolled in the mud, then stood up waving, covered head to toe in green-black mud, with only two slitty eyes and pink lips visible.

'Let's grab a beer, I'm fecking parched,' Christy said.

They sat on stools at the bar, and Joey ordered three Goldstars. 'L'chaim gentlemen, you now have the honour of drinking in the lowest bar in the world, four hundred and twenty metres below sea level. And dropping all the time if they continue diverting the Jordan River and siphoning off the lake water.'

'Be Jaysus, Joey.' Christy chuckled. 'It's very strange hearing you with all this talk of the lowest this and the lowest that. I'm used to you banging on about getting the highest.'

'That's all in the past, my man. History.'

Moshe and Christy exchanged a sceptical look as Joey continued, 'It's not called the Dead Sea for nothing. Nothing lives in it.'

'It's nice to get that breeze,' Christy said, wiping his face with a napkin.

'Yeah, isn't it? There's usually a breeze blowing off the lake during the day, then weirdly at night, it reverses direction and blows towards the centre of the lake.'

'That fecking rotten egg smell, I always hated it. Used to make me gag.'

Moshe pointed at a couple of large concrete buildings with windows on a ridge behind the beach bar. One was painted red overlaid with ghoulish, man-sized cartoon characters in black and white; the other had a yellow background with leaping human shapes silhouetted in blue. 'What are those over there?'

'They were abandoned and left empty for ages, but last year, a pile of artists moved in and turned them into workshops. I did that painting,' Joey said, pointing at the gable wall, which had a mural of the Doors band members' heads, arranged in a diamond shape, like Queen did for the *Bohemian Rhapsody* video.

'Very Joey,' Moshe laughed. 'Have you been converting the kibbutzniks to your music?'

'See that guy on the shore there,' Christy said, munching on a pretzel. 'Is that a big slab of salt that he's standing on? It's big as a fecking rock. Remember that UN kid who died from swallowing too much of the Dead Sea water?'

'God, yeah. Everyone stopped coming after that. Not that we really came to the Dead Sea that much, in fairness.'

Christy drained his beer. 'That drive home was always a nightmare, all five of us crushed together in the back of the Merc, with dry, salty skin, desperate to get home and shower off. Any cut you had would sting like mad. I see you've lots of showers here now.'

'We do indeed. OK, lads, let's grab some lunch.'

The dining hall was busy as they queued for the tray and rail buffet. It was only when they sat down, and Joey took his cap off that Christy realised his head was shorn to just a spiky brown stubble.

His eyes were clear, and his skin tanned.

'Man, the food in this place is topping,' Joey was off again, all evangelical. 'Everything's grown right here on the kibbutz. Lots of veg and fruit, we have one of the largest date groves in the country. I don't eat meat anymore, just an occasional bit of fish, though obviously not from the Dead Sea!'

'What's the story at night? Is there much partying?' Christy asked.

'That's not really what this life is about here. Of course, there's boozing, but no major sessions. No major drugs either, a bit of puff, that's all.'

'Really? So, what do you do all night?

'Reading. Board games. Maybe play some volleyball, toss a frisbee, sit around the campfire playing guitar and toasting marshmallows, maybe blow off a J. Living the dream, man.'

'Yours brother, not mine.'

'Ah, come on! Fridays we have discotheque. Put on your dancing shoes, dude.'

'Yeah, right. Tonight's not the night, my friend.'

'I thought you'd dig this communal, big family vibe, Christy. You've always been a closet hippy. You know, there's virtually no crime here, no point because everyone has the same as everyone else.'

'Which is pretty much nothing, of course.'

'What a sceptic. Hey man, what's up? Be happy for me. I am!' Joey said and proceeded to gobble down the lentil bake.

'No, I get it, Joey.' Christy leaned in and put an arm on his shoulder. 'It's great you're happy. Delighted for you. Just maybe dial down the holy roller enthusiasm for the kibbutz cult, or you'll have me worrying.'

Moshe grinned and said, 'It used to be that on a kibbutz, everyone got paid the same amount no matter what they did, and the money was put into the communal pot and shared by everyone. That has changed now, of course; whatever you earn, you keep for yourself.'

'What about all the layabouts? Don't tell me there's none of them?' Christy asked.

'Sure, there's a few that don't pull their weight, but the court of public opinion sorts out any freeloaders. Parasites, we call them.' Joey spat the words out.

'You know, when I lived on a kibbutz, gender equality was a big thing.' Moshe refilled their glasses from the water jug. 'Women went back to work after they had children rather than being tied to domestic duties. In some very conservative kibbutzim, they would not even use the traditional Hebrew word for husband because it can also mean "master" or "owner". All of us children lived in communal houses; we played there, had school lessons, we even slept there instead of with our parents; nurses and teachers looked after us, and parents would only spend time with their children after work and before dinner.'

'Jaysus, that's another way of doing things, a bit like boarding school when you think about it. How did you feel about that?' Christy asked.

'I didn't know any different. The theory was that relationships between the children and their parents would be better because, when the parents weren't the sole disciplinarians, they would form closer bonds with their children. I have to say that has not been my experience. I am not particularly close to my parents, but that might be for other reasons.'

'His folks were pissed off when Moshe joined Peace Now, said it was a sell-out,' Joey explained.

Turned out that Moshe had become a big fish in Peace Now, an activist group formed in 1978 when

hundreds of Israeli soldiers published an open letter to Menachem Begin urging him not to mess up the historic opportunity for peace with Egypt. At the time, many young Jews were disillusioned and had come to believe that, despite Israel's superior military strength, a lasting peace between Israel and its neighbours would only come from a negotiated agreement. In the end, the peace talks led to Israel's withdrawal from Sinai and Egypt's recognition of Israel in the Camp David Accords.

'My parents had many issues with me, not just because I joined Peace Now, but certainly that was a big problem for them. For me, it's important that the world sees another side to the modern Israel and that people understand not all Israelis toe the party line. Some of us are very unhappy with the constant fighting and the oppression of the Palestinians. You know, after the Sabra and Shatila refugee camp massacres in Beirut, people were disgusted with what had happened there in our name. Nearly ten percent of the population attended a Peace Now protest in Tel Aviv to pressurise the government into investigating the camp massacres and to get rid of Ariel Sharon for his role in letting it happen.'

'I've seen photos of that Hands Around Jerusalem event.'

'Yes, we had over twenty-five thousand Israelis and Palestinians linking hands in a chain of peace all the way around the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem.'

'The problem with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict,' Joey announced, in the voice of one announcing a significant insight, 'is that it's not a Wild West movie. It's not your typical struggle between good and evil, between right and wrong. Really, it's a clash between right and right, where both sides have rightful claims to this land. The Palestinians want the land they call Palestine, their only homeland, given back to them; they've tried to live in other Arab countries, but everywhere, they've been rejected, sometimes even humiliated, and persecuted by the so-called Arab family. Sam and I saw it very up close in Lebanon. But the Israelis want exactly the same land for exactly the same reasons; there is no other country in the world that the Jews, as a people, as a nation, could ever call home. Both have powerful, very different, yet convincing claims on the territory.'

'Paradoxically . . . ' Christy paused, as if unsure whether to say, ' . . . in a strange way, the Jewish people and the Palestinian people have had a parallel historical experience. The Jews were kicked out of their homes in Europe during the Holocaust and forced to flee, and they came here and kicked the Palestinians out of Palestine, scattering them homeless across the Middle East.'

Moshe was nodding feverishly. 'When my father was a teenager in Czechoslovakia, the walls were covered with graffiti, "Jews, go back to Palestine." When he revisited Europe fifty years later, the walls were covered with new graffiti, "Jews, get out of Palestine."'

'Enough of all this politics,' Joey interrupted. 'This is what happens when you put two journalists and an UNWRA worker together at a table in a kibbutz.' They all laughed. 'What were we talking about before all that?'

'The parents, their relationship with the children in kibbutz,' Moshe said. 'Ah yes, this egalitarian society ideal. I recall one time my aunt visited and brought me a box of chocolates. I was allowed to have a few of the chocolates myself, and then I had to give the rest of the box to the other children.'

'Tell me,' Christy leaned forward, his voice dropped to a stage whisper. 'Were you all shagging like mad when you were teenagers?'

'The honest and surprising answer is no, very little. Even though we were not segregated at night, people were quite prudish. Of course, there was some action, but less than with teenagers elsewhere. Some people researched this, and they found the marriage rate among communally-raised children was very low. They call it the Westermarck effect, when unrelated children if raised together from an early age, tend to reject each other as potential partners because they regard them more like brothers and sisters.'

'That's a bit like the UN kids,' Christy mused. 'Although there were flings when we were teenagers,

none of them developed into anything serious. It's strange now that I think about it, no UN kid ever got married to another. You would have thought we'd be very compatible because of the similar childhoods.'

'Thankfully, we have lots of pretty girls here, and none of them is my sister, so you need have no concerns on that front,' Joey laughed. 'I better crack on and leave you to your own devices for the afternoon. We can catch up for a beer later, down on the beach. Magniv?

'Ha Joey, now with all the Hebrew? Yes, all cool.'

'Good one. I'm thinking, tomorrow's Saturday, Shabbat obviously, so I'm off all day, the holy day of obligation to relax, so let's head out and see a bit of the area.'

Next day, they went on a whistlestop tour of local tourist hotspots, Joey as their guide: 'Up there is the Qumran Cave where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found by Bedouin shepherds. They kept them hanging on a tent pole for ages until someone suggested they might be important and thus valuable . . . And over there is the fortress of Masada, where a long time ago, there was a two-year siege that ended in the mass suicide of its Jewish Zealot defenders. A kind of early Jim Jones event.' They drove up the dusty hill towards Masada and stopped at a tourist shop where Joey bought a pot and saucer with a Bible Land Tourist Bureau authentication certificate, supposedly dating the object from 1200BC and claiming, "This is a guaranteed genuine juglet and plate of the Iron Age period". Christy wasn't convinced, but Joey was chuffed with his precious relic from the past.

Then it was off down the road past the 'world-famous Dead Sea Works' — Joey was in full flow — 'This is where they mine the lake for all sorts of salts: bath salt, table salt, and loads of chemical products,' and all the way down to Eilat where they went scuba diving, 'for the most mind-blowing colour extravaganza you'll ever experience.' They saw coral reefs of every hue and shape, poked at countless playful small fish (like 'the perennial favourite clown fish', ducking in and out between its protector anemone's tentacles) and swam alongside the more threatening stingrays, moray eels, and barracuda, while off in the deeper water, grey reef sharks whizzed by.

All kinds of wonderful things and Joey all cock-a-hoop, walking on the moon, apparently euphoric with his new kibbutz life. Christy really wished he could lose the feeling that it all seemed a bit too good to be true.