

# A DAYTRIP TO GAZA 1991

## SETUP

*Christy, Joey and Bee are siblings, who grew up in a UN Peacekeepers family and travelled throughout the Middle East until they were about twelve; now in their thirties, Joey and Christy are both back working in the region. Christy works in procurement for UNWRA in Gaza, providing support to Palestinian refugees. Joey is a journalist with the Jerusalem Post having previously worked in Lebanon.*

*In this scene, Bee is visiting from Ireland and goes with Joey to visit Christy, where he is now based.*

CHRISTY'S WHITE RENAULT 5, with Joey in the passenger seat and Bee in the back, crossed into the Gaza Strip with only a short delay. It was Bee's first visit to Israel since Christy abandoned his promising law career in London to join UNWRA and do his bit for the Palestinian cause. It had taken a while to find his groove, but ever since he'd got the job in Gaza, he'd been walking around with a puff in his chest and a hop in his step. An inconvenient downside was that he had to commute down from Jerusalem every Monday morning, leaving Maud and the kids behind for the week.

In the opposite direction, heading into Israel, a long line of cars and pedestrians waited to have their exit permits checked by the border guards; these were only issued to market traders and workers in businesses inside Israel or patients requiring medical treatment outside of Gaza. The besieged coastal enclave was where most of the Palestinian refugees, whose homes were taken in the 1948 War, still called home. Pushed far out of the way, down into the southwest corner of Israel, one million people were packed into a strip of land twenty-five miles long by five wide. With their backs to the sea and severe restrictions on their movement in and out by land, the refugees lived in extreme hardship and were dependent on UNWRA assistance for all aspects of life. In the absence of an official Palestinian state, the UN agency acted as a quasi-state body for the refugees, providing education, health care, and a wide range of other support services to a people who, at one time, were prosperous and independent.

Once through the border checkpoint, the tarmac road turned into a slushy mud trail, saturated after the recent two-day downpour. Car tyres had gouged deep trenches into the squelchy ground, and a stream of what smelled like sewage trickled diagonally across the road. Christy beeped the horn to clear a bunch of kids jumping in puddles by the roadside, their trouser legs pulled above their knees. Further on, two men, ankle-deep in the swampy mud were pushing a battered Renault and shouting at a boy of about ten behind the steering wheel.

'What a fucking mess,' Christy said, sounding apologetic. 'It's a bit overwhelming sometimes. Health, education, all the infrastructure, houses, roads, and bridges, all of it only happens with UNRWA support. Generations of Palestine refugees have grown up dependent on us.'

'So many young people hanging about,' Bee observed, 'I guess they've nothing to do.'

'Nothing to do but plot revenge,' Christy said. 'When you box people in like this, forcibly confine them to a crowded space, like cornered rats they're going to strike back. It's bound to blow up some

day, they're left with no other choice.'

'That's exactly right,' Joey said. 'All the Israelis are doing with their Gaza policy, and of course on the West Bank, is breeding the next generation of terrorists.'

'The tragedy for the Palestinians is that they got hooked up with the wrong superpower. You ever hear of an influential Palestinian in America?'

'Look at the shit show since the fall of the Berlin wall. Whatever power Russia once had on the world stage, that's all over now.' Joey craned out the car window and shouted, 'Hang on, what's that over there? Christy, pull over so we can take a look.'

On a wall pockmarked with bullet holes, a faded mural of PLO leader Yasser Arafat in his trademark black and white keffiyeh looked down on two old men (themselves wearing matching keffiyehs) who were sitting on stools and puffing on a shisha pipe. Beside them, a teenaged boy was carving shapes out of watermelons.

'Look, look, that's what I thought,' Joey called back into the car. 'He's cutting watermelons into the shape of Palestine. That's genius! You see the colours, same as the Palestinian flag.' To the boy, Joey shouted in Arabic, 'Please, effendi, give me three pieces.'

As they drove off, Joey said, between bites of watermelon, 'This reminds me, in the bad times in Beirut, we made lights out of watermelons. The electricity was on and off all the time, so along the floor, we set up a row of carved-out watermelons and stuck candles in them to light up the dark nights. All Halloween like.'

'How funny,' Bee said. 'I remember a time in Beirut when you were both back in boarding school; the shooting was so bad we had to sleep in the corridors.'

'Ha, Sam and I did that for a while, too.'

'There was this one time, I must have been about eight or so,' Bee continued, 'and I was really into ballet. We were in the parents' bedroom, and I was doing a ballet routine, showing off my moves because I wanted them to buy me a tutu. There I was twirling around on their bed when suddenly a stray bullet came flying through the window and missed me by inches.'

'No way,' Christy called from the front as he swerved to avoid a pair of scrawny dogs running alongside the car, wild and barking. 'Why have I never heard about this?'

'Go on, dare I ask?' Joey grinned as he turned to face Bee.

'Yes, you may, and no, I never did get that tutu.'

Just then, a gang of boys chased after the car, slipping and sliding in the mud, as they called out, 'Baksheesh mister, Baksheesh.' From nowhere, two older boys appeared, both with smaller kids propped on their hips. 'No, no, not today, please,' Christy called out, then to Bee said, 'Don't encourage them, or we'll be mobbed.'

'Ma was always a sucker for people begging, do you remember?' Joey said as Christy floored the accelerator. 'She could never resist, and next thing she'd be swarmed.'

'I feel so sorry for them.' Bee waved at a woman peeling vegetables cross-legged on the ground in front of a makeshift house with corrugated roofing held down with rocks. 'The housing's still terribly basic, isn't it? What's with these corrugated iron shacks?'

'There's a mixture,' Christy said. 'Some people have houses with blockwork walls, but many still have corrugated roofing.'

'I'd say that makes quite a racket when you've got heavy rain pounding down on it,' Joey said.

'All the camps are ridiculously overcrowded, so people build houses right beside each other. As

families expand, they often add an extra floor to fit more people in, but it's usually poorly built, and often they collapse.'

Driving the familiar route, Christy saw his workplace afresh through his visitors' eyes. The jostling press of vehicles and donkeys pulling laden carts, splashing through puddles of brown rainwater. People sweeping water out of their houses back onto the road, and over there, a young boy bailing out a flooded house with a plastic container. Three teenaged boys astride the husk of a burnt-out car laughing as a man carrying a bed base slipped in the gloopy mud and banged into his child, who had a cot mattress balanced on his back.

'I can't get over the change since we were last here,' Bee said. 'Remember, we used to come down to the Beach Club all the time.'

When the Hogans last lived in Israel, in the 1970s, at weekends, the UN peacekeepers' families decamped to a beach club in Gaza. By day, the mothers drank coffee and gossiped as their children splashed on Johnson's baby oil and lay on loungers worshipping the sun king. They raced in packs down to the sea and body-surfed the predictably large waves, watched over by Hussein, the lifeguard. They played table tennis in the clubhouse and volleyball on the beach. They went for saunas, interspersed with cold showers and bottles of Tuborg. And they behaved like horny teenagers, hot from the sun and the hormones, flirting in bulging Speedos and skimpy bikinis. By night, there were barbecues and G&Ts and happy hour cocktails and, every so often, classic movies on a rickety old projector. For a few, romances that had started at a young age with, 'Show me yours and I'll show you mine', behind the shed in the Anglican School progressed to, 'Let's go to third base' (and sometimes further), in a quiet corner of the Gaza Beach Club. Meanwhile, the parents unwound by drinking and singing and playing bridge, occasionally casting a watchful eye on the goings-on with the younger folk.

'I know, a different world altogether. In fairness, that's nearly twenty years ago,' Christy said. 'The last four years, with this Intifada, has been a disaster for Gaza.'

'What's the Inti . . . what?'

'The Intifada. It started back in 1987, from nothing really, when an Israeli army truck rammed into a car in Gaza and killed four people. That spark galvanised a collective Palestinian frustration with Israel's military occupation which by then had been going on for twenty-years. Anti-Israeli protests, boycotts, all sort of acts of civil disobedience broke out across the country and they've been virtually a permanent feature of life since, no matter how aggressively the Israeli army try to suppress it.'

Reminiscing about the freedoms of their childhood and the relaxed nature of parenting in those days, Christy wondered aloud whether he and Maud were getting it right. Everything seemed so much more controlled nowadays. Parents were so much stricter with their kids and involved in every aspect of their lives. Maybe they should be taking a page out of the UN parenting book. 'I mean, we all turned out fine, didn't we?' he said.

'Depends on who you're asking,' Joey snorted. 'Not all would agree with that conclusion, my man.'

Bee laughed. 'One day, I overheard one of the mothers talking about Declan Clancy, remember him, with the blonde hair and the dreamy blue eyes, and one of them said, "I saw him making eyes at so and so girl", and his mum Bernadette quick as a flash says, "Well, I suppose we should be grateful that he's a normal healthy boy who's into girls". Can you imagine? Parents were so un-politically correct back then, especially out here in the UN, isolated from any conventions or trends that were happening back home.'

'Remember Ma used to spend her days roaring at us to be careful in the sea,' Christy said as he lit a cigarette. 'She and Nuala Dempsey used to stand on the shoreline, waving us back in, saying that it was too dangerous. Neither of them could swim, of course, which didn't help.'

'Did you ever hear the reason why they didn't swim?' Bee asked.

‘I just presumed they never learnt.’

‘Ah, sort of. Ma told me all about it.’ Bee was animated and having fun. It had been way too long since Christy had spent time with her, and he’d forgotten what good company she was. Spiky, platinum blonde hair and tie-dye tee-shirt, with a cheeky smile, Bee brought a lot of colour to this drab Gaza morning as she continued, ‘Seemingly Barney Nolan, remember him, the tall, muscular guy with a bald head? He was very sporty. This one time, they’re all out at Abu Ghosh pool, Ma, Nuala, and Eithne Maguire, and Nolan decides he’s going to teach them how to swim. None of the ladies had ever been in the water before. He lines them up along the side of the pool, starts giving a little spiel on what he’s going to show them, and then, without any warning, walks along behind, pushing each of them in.’

‘You’re fecking joking,’ Christy guffawed. ‘What a hero.’

‘For real, I’m telling you. He’d read in National Geographic about how babies instinctively swim if you throw them into water as an infant. Well, it turns out that doesn’t work for grown women, with their fully developed danger radar on red alert. None of those three women ever got into the water again.’ For a moment, they were lost in their own thoughts until Bee continued, ‘It’s weird being back here. Plus ça change. Seeing all this, Jerusalem too obviously, it stirs up lots of memories. Ma in her prime, always laughing, making people feel good, that’s what I remember most.’

‘She was so encouraging of all of us, always—’

‘It was kind of embarrassing sometimes, in a lovely way though, how she’d go on about some success or other one of us was having. So sweet of her.’

Joey turned to face Bee and said, ‘You’re right though, Bee, everything’s the same as it used to be, yet it’s all so different now. I find that too. When we were kids, we used to drive through Gaza City and pass right by Beach refugee camp; back then I didn’t even know it was called that, wasn’t even aware there was a refugee camp there.’

‘It’s scary how insulated we were from what was going on,’ Christy said. ‘Basically Israel, or wherever we were living, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, we just existed in a cocoon with all the other UN families.’

‘I guess it was the parents doing that on purpose, to protect us, keeping us away from any of the nasties,’ Bee said.

‘You know, before the Nakba, when they were thrown off their land, the Palestinians were skilled labourers, they had jobs, they were self-sufficient,’ Christy said. ‘But now unemployment is out of control — we have the highest unemployment rate in the world — and very few families can provide for themselves. You’ll see for yourself. I just want to pop into the office, and then we’ll go out to Jabalia camp.’

Entry to Christy’s office compound was via a large, blue metal gate, emblazoned in white with “UNRWA HQ Gaza” beside the UN globe and olive leaves emblem. As they approached, a security guard came out, shook Christy’s hand then signalled to have the gate opened. They drove through and parked in front of a white stone, three-storey building that curved around a grassy courtyard. Christy gave them a quick orientation, and they continued talking as they walked along the corridor and up the stairs.

‘I guess Maud has no interest in moving down to Gaza with you?’ Bee asked.

‘Nah, you can see living conditions are pretty shitty here for a family, and besides, the kids are all set up in school in Jerusalem.’ And Maud’s already struggling enough with life in Israel, he could have added. Nor did he elaborate with details of yesterday’s rant, in front of Kathleen, about how boring and pointless her life had become. Or his concerns about the amount of time she was spending with

Eithne Mulcahy and her bottles of gin. Instead, he went with, 'And, of course, all Maud's friends are in Jerusalem.'

'Again, so weird,' Bee said. 'The kids are back at the Anglican School, just like their daddy and his brothers and sister before them.'

'I know, it's quite nice, actually, going back there. They're very happy in the school. Kathleen is in second class, and the twins just started last September.'

'Remember we used to have Mrs McAndrew, Orla's mum, teaching us,' Joey said.

'I loved that school.' Christy sometimes wondered if Maud found it difficult adjusting to life in Israel because she hadn't grown up as a UN kid like he had. But plenty of their friends had never been anywhere near the Middle East before they moved here, so it's not like prior experience was a prerequisite for satisfaction.

'When you look back at those school class photos now, it's hilarious. There's every country represented,' Bee said. 'The photo from my last year in the Anglican, I counted up, and there were eighteen of us in the class and sixteen different nationalities.'

'Actually, the quality of education was surprisingly good,' Joey said. 'Both of us were there for the two years before we were sent back to boarding school. I was worried we were going to be behind the other lads, but we had no problem keeping up, and in some subjects, we probably knew more.'

'Here we are,' Christy said as he pushed open a door into a cluttered office with two desks facing each other.

'Guys, meet Sadie Sorenson. Sadie's from Sweden. This is my brother, Joey, and my sister Bee.'

Sadie had straight, shoulder-length blonde hair and glowing blue eyes. She smiled broadly and nodded as she shook hands and said in a lilting voice, 'Hello, Joey. And your name is Bee? Like the buzzing thing?'

Joey exchanged a glance with Christy, a glance confirming that men could resist anything but temptation, and expressing concern that Maud was living seventy-five kilometres away.

'That's it, Bee, as in B-E-E,' Christy replied. 'When she was five years old, Bee announced to all of us that Bridget was a stoopid name, and she didn't want to be called that anymore—'

'Stoopid name,' Bee echoed.

'—and that people should henceforth call her Bee. This was before she got seriously into boxing, although at the time, she had fixated on Muhammad Ali.'

'Boxing, for a girl. That's unusual,' Sadie said.

'Yeah, well, that's Bee for you. European Women's Boxing champ, I'll have you know. She can tell you all about it while I grab that paperwork about the new health centre in Nuseirat camp. Then I'm going to take them to Jabalia.'

Sadie was all ears as Bee explained that by 1973, when Pops was reassigned from Amman to Jerusalem as UN Head of Security, she'd had enough of always being in her brothers' shadows sports-wise and demanded that, if the boys had their football, then she wanted to have her own sport too. 'In fairness,' Bee laughed, 'I could play football as good as any of them — the brothers and their friends — and these were a sporty gang of boys; two of them went on to play rugby for Ireland, and another made it to the Irish athletics Olympic team.' At the time, sporting options for ten-year-old girls in Jerusalem were limited, but one of Pops' colleagues, Captain Robert McCool (everyone knew him as cool Bob), had just started giving boxing lessons in Government House, the United Nations HQ. Bee had spent years jousting with her older brothers and, by then, could hold her own in play fights. The previous Christmas, Santa had brought boxing gloves for Christy, but Bee had commandeered them, and she

soon had a matching punch bag hanging in her bedroom. When she got wind of cool Bob's classes, she wanted in. Bob had some boxing pedigree (he had won numerous competitions with the Canadian army) and was delighted to have Bee as his first coaching protégée.

Joey interjected. 'Of course, Bee has always been a maverick; it's hardly a surprise that she uses the "Female Rebel" as her boxing nickname. Check out her tattoos.'

Bee leaned forward and twisted her neck to show the butterfly tattooed just below her ear. 'And a bee on the other side, I like it,' Sadie said, grinning.

'You know, women have been boxing for as long as there's been boxing,' Bee continued, her cheeks flushed and her lively eyes fixed on Sadie, 'but actual fights between women that people could pay to watch were outlawed everywhere until very recently. Even though, right back in 1904, women's boxing appeared as a demonstration sport in the Olympic Games. After that, all the naysayers piled in, worried that women boxers were unladylike, that they would be gratifying a perverse crowd of vulgar men or some nonsense like that. But things are changing, there's growing pressure. A number of states in America and, more recently, Sweden, your place, Sadie, have issued licenses to women boxers. That's where I won my championship title.'

'Sisters doing it for themselves,' Sadie laughed as she slapped palms with Bee.

Christy appeared from the room out back. 'No better woman to talk about struggles against the odds than Bee. Sorry to interrupt you in full flow but we gotta bounce. Maybe see you later, Sadie, for a drink?'

Jabalia, the largest of Gaza's eight refugee camps, was overlooked by an Israeli observation post that towered over everything in the area, a 360-degree treehouse-like structure manned by two soldiers with a machine gun turret. Below it, two Palestinian flags attached to a roof fluttered in the gentle wind.

'Those guys over there, they're Hamas,' Christy said pointing to a group of youths with green bandanas on their foreheads, rifles pointing skywards. 'Very dangerous crew. They've been getting more and more support since the Intifada started. Palestinians feel that the PLO have totally failed them, that after years under Arafat the situation hasn't improved at all. In fact, it's much worse, so people are ready for a new approach. A more militant approach. These guys are way more radical, seriously committed to the Islamic cause. There was a big blow out last October when the Israeli army killed 17 Palestinians who were causing trouble at the Temple Mount. Hamas have now declared every Israeli soldier a target and called for a jihad against what they call the Zionist enemy. It's not going to end well.'

'You're right, you know,' Joey said. 'The Arab states have tried and failed to oust Israel, and the PLO got nowhere. Hamas will learn from that; they'll use people's hopelessness to garner support for a more ambitious terrorist campaign.'

On the edge of the camp, Christy parked the car, and they picked their way gingerly through the sloppy mud towards the food distribution centre. The chop-chop roar of an engine drew their attention to the intimidating sight of an incoming Israeli helicopter, which then hovered above them, menacing like a bird of prey. Conversation was drowned out momentarily by the swish swash of whirring blades. Control of the skies had always been at the root of Israel's military success; it was a key reason the 1967 war only lasted six days. From inception, Israel recognised the importance of establishing superior air power in the region and invested heavily in new technology while leveraging American financial support to build up its fleet. Training for those invited onto the prestigious pilot training programme is notoriously demanding, and Israelis considered acceptance into the Airforce to be a badge of honour that only the very best got to wear. With nothing to see, the chopper flew off, spinning scraps of newspaper off the ground in its downdraught.

Christy directed them past a smouldering house in ruins. A tall, thin man with an immense black beard beckoned them inside to meet his wife, who was stirring a bubbling cauldron on a paraffin stove as their daughters ran up the stairs. His family had just moved in after an explosion damaged the building and drove off the previous inhabitants. Loosening his keffiyeh, the man called them closer to look at a photo album. Slowly, it dawned on Christy that instead of showing off his own family, the man was paging through snapshots from the previous residents' lives. Did this hirsute interloper really think, now that he had their home, he would also assume their life? Would he also go on holidays with his wife to Cairo and capture on film their visit to the Pyramids? Would his girls have their starring role in the school play and have it recorded on celluloid for posterity? Christy nodded at the others and as they left, a battered old green Volvo, with both side panels missing and piles of white sacks on its roof rack, beeped hello at Christy. Further on, they came upon a line of people queuing for food handouts off an UNWRA truck tailgate, waiting to have their name ticked off a clipboard list by a bearded man seated at a table alongside.

'Those people are cleared for prepacked food rations, which are typically given to the most needy,' Christy explained. 'They get a plastic bag with a bottle of oil, some rice, and a selection of tin cans – vegetables, beans, definitely corned beef, Joey's favourite when he was a young lad, as I recall.'

'Don't knock it till you've tried it.'

'I have, and it's just fine. Come on, let's go inside.'

As they entered the distribution centre, an elderly woman flashed them a buck-toothed smile, a laden brass tray balanced on her head. It was a huge warehouse with fanlight windows high along one wall and a line of pillars down the middle, between which hessian sacks of rice were piled five high. On the other side of the warehouse, white cardboard boxes stamped with the blue UNRWA logo were stacked on top of each other, reaching up close to the ceiling. Everywhere, people were in motion: an official handed out white bags of flour, which people carried away on their shoulders, or on various forms of wheeled vehicles: a bicycle or a cart or an improvised trolley. Across the room, a bald man with a smoking cigarette dangling from his mouth measured out portions of olive oil and poured them into whatever container people had brought with them. A line of women in traditional embroidered (now mud-caked) dresses shuffled patiently in a line to collect their rations. Three young men, wearing high-vis jackets with UN printed on the back, scooped chickpeas into small plastic bags.

'I like to help out every so often, just to get involved on the ground,' Christy said. 'Here, you two, grab a jacket and get stuck in.'

Christy loved having Joey and Bee around, seeing first-hand the difference his work was making. Once again, his life had meaning; he had something that gave him a sound reason to get up every morning and that drove him forward during the day. From an early age, Christy had wanted a career in law, as it worked for him on several levels: it brought job stability and a clear career path; it provided a moral support system that appealed to his basic sense of fair play (the righteous man fighting the good fight against evil); and a defined set of conventions, rules, and precedents governed the work. For a while, his job in London had ticked those boxes. But after his visit to Joey and Sam in Lebanon, and his balcony discussions with their neighbour Abu Amar, that all changed. When he announced his intention to pack in his safe job in London to go help Palestinian refugees, a parade of disapproving family members – uncles Sean and Barry (both solicitors), brother-in-law Fintan (a Guard), his grandmother Marie (a retired judge) – lined up to vent their dismay but Christy had held firm. For once, he had done just what he wanted to do.