

JOEY GOES TO LEBANON

SETUP

It's 1984 and Joey has dropped out of university. He ends up joining his brother Sam in Beirut, nine years into the Lebanese civil war, where he had got a job as a war correspondent. In this scene, Joey has just arrived and wanders around to absorb daily life in his new home.

ALMONDS ROASTING AND LAMB KEBABS SIZZLING on a charcoal brazier filled Joey's nostrils. Exhaust fumes belched from idling cars and rattling lorries. Horns blared, and car stereos pounded, snaring his eardrums. A pack of skeletal dogs barked at passers-by as they scavenged in a rubbish heap. Two street hawkers bellowed from opposite corners of a busy street junction: 'Marlboro, Kent, Rothmans' fighting for customer attention with 'Johnnie Walker, Gordon's, Smirnoff'. From behind his mirrored shades, the scene was yellow and fogged with sweat. Joey strode along rue Makhoul, flip-flops clapping. Ahead, a raucous argument had broken out at a sandbagged militia checkpoint. He turned right onto a side street, which led to a souk. At the entrance, an enterprising vendor rattled off his simple sales pitch: 'Glass for houses, glass for cars'. Business as a glazier in a war zone was obviously brisk, Joey thought as he pushed the shades onto his head, scraping back the jumble of sweaty brown hair.

Inside the souk, a heaving mass of humanity jostled under the corrugated plastic roof. A web of electric cables clung to its underside, powering a network of light bulbs that hung over the stalls. Two wide-hipped women in long, dark galabeyas passed alongside, bum cheeks wobbling like blancmanges. Joey followed in their slipstream until the dense press of bodies bottlenecked outside a stall selling old-style women's underwear and men's pyjamas. A trolley of hessian sacks had tipped over and coated the ground in a layer of flour. Alongside, a tall, officious man barked instructions, but no one seemed persuaded by his route out of the jam. Dodging down an alleyway, Joey overtook a navy-robed woman, arms swinging Spinney's supermarket shopping bags. An olive-skinned man with an eagle-nose in a jowly face called out as he pointed at a tower of sesame seed flatbreads piled high on his handcart. Joey smiled and continued to a street corner coffee shop.

On the way in, he passed a group of old men sitting on plastic chairs, smoking hubbly bubbly and drinking coffee. One of them called out some sort of greeting, and Joey mumbled, 'Ahlen' as he crossed the sticky linoleum to the only available table. From the waiter — quick to introduce himself as Ali and to welcome Joey to his fine country — he ordered a coffee. Despite his limited English, Ali soon had Joey signed up for a *Man'oushe* (explaining that 'it is very popular with all Lebanese for breakfast') and a *Jallab* ('very fresh fruit drink, with very much ice, and on top, nuts and raisins'). Floor-to-ceiling mirrors covered the back wall, giving the interior an illusion of depth. On the wall opposite, a fading poster of a swimsuit-clad Farrah Fawcett grinned toothily. Below her, a bearded youth slammed his

hands against the pinball machine and, with a roar, stormed off.

In the sudden quiet, Joey closed his eyes and let his mind wander. Breakfasting in civil war-ravaged Lebanon. Who'd have thought he'd land up here? Until he dropped out of university, Joey did at least have a loose life plan: finish his English degree, maybe get a job as a journalist, maybe write a novel, maybe get into teaching, maybe do some academic research. He'd been into English ever since his secondary school teacher had kindled his imagination and prised his eyes open to the magical prose of Fitzgerald and Waugh, the heady pleasures of Austen, and the poems of Kavanagh, Keats, and Dickinson. Now, he was on a very different track, unfamiliar in so many ways, although it wasn't Joey's first time in Beirut. When the UN Hogans (as they were known within the wider Hogan clan) adopted him, he joined the nomadic family on their travels across the Middle East, until aged twelve he and Christy were sent to the same Irish boarding school as Damien and Sam. After that, time with Ma and Pops was limited to Christmas and summer holidays, when the three brothers (and later Bee) and Joey transited through Heathrow on their way to some exotic, often dangerous, location. As Pops progressed up the UN ranks, he secured increasingly prestigious postings: Transport Officer in Damascus, Head of Security in Cairo and Jerusalem, then his appointment as the head honcho CAO in Beirut for three years until he was shipped off to head up the mission in Pakistan, his current post. As the last one in, Joey often felt like an outsider, although his sense of detachment was tempered with gratitude that he was even part of this strange family. Nonetheless, it would have been reassuring to occasionally hear some loving words from Pops, maybe something like, 'I'm proud of you, son, well done'. That was now even more unlikely after Joey's phone call when he announced over a hissing line from Paris to Rawalpindi that he had packed in university. Pops was quick to cut him loose. 'If you're going to squander all those years of education . . . and you're not going to put the brains that God has given you to good use . . . a decent university degree was the least I could have expected in return . . . and you seem to have no interest in establishing a conventional career . . .' Joey had tuned out as the monologue rambled on.

His hunger sated, Joey left the café, puffing a fourth cigarette in a futile attempt to smoke off the layer of sticky, cardamom-flavoured coffee that lined his throat. Crossing the street, he noticed a portly, bearded man dressed in a sack-cloth tunic and a straw-hat shading gold-rimmed sunglasses on his head. He was sweeping the pavement in front of a makeshift home: latticed metal poles interlaced with palm leaves, and inside was a wood-framed hessian bed and a paraffin stove.

'Good morning, good sir,' Beardy called out in a booming, affected English accent. 'Look! Up there.' He pointed skywards, and their eyes followed a Peregrine falcon as it shifted from hover to plummet and whooshed down to pick off a scuttling rodent. 'Aha, banzai!' the man roared as he held out his hand. 'By the way, my name is Adolf. Please sit, and we will have a coffee.'

Great, another coffee, this time with a loony, bird-spotting street bum. 'Ah, no, thank you, not today. I'm in a hurry, maybe another time.'

'No problem, another time, I am always here,' Adolf said, already back to sweeping butts and spent matches into a neat pile on the pavement.

Joey figured he'd done enough exploring for his first morning and trudged up the hill towards Sam's apartment. At the top, he stopped to take in the view. The Mediterranean Sea was framed by two high-rise buildings and on the horizon a line of ships stuttered across the sweeping arc of Beirut's azure bay. Just yesterday, he'd arrived by ferry into the port of Jounieh after a short crossing from Cyprus, the safest route into Lebanon. From there, bathed in glorious early afternoon sunshine, his fin-tailed Mercedes 200 shared taxi had joined the chaotic coastal route south to Beirut. In the backseat, he was squeezed between a bulky woman in a full-body black dress, with a headscarf covering her entire head save for two dark eyes, and a squat man sweating profusely in a beige safari suit. The Merc belted along, doing over one hundred and forty clicks per hour, scrambling for road position with luridly painted lorries and battered cars, all with the same speed imperative. Off in the distance, a cable car ferried passengers up to the snow-capped mountain peaks, providing a serene backdrop to the

turbulent traffic flow. The Sannine Heights was known as the only place you could still find the Lebanese national emblem, cedar trees, that had survived for thousands of years but were now decimated by disease, deforestation, and, of course, the incessant war. As the taxi entered the northern outskirts of the city, Joey was struck by the geographical similarities between Beirut and Dublin: both constrained by mountains on one side and the sea on another, although Beirutis had the better boast: in the morning, they could swim in the Med and then head up the snowy mountain slopes for skiing in the afternoon.

Panting and sweating, hair stuck to the back of his neck, Joey climbed the stairs to Sam's fourth-floor-apartment, downtown in the Hamra district. Like its neighbours, the exterior of the apartment block bore the scars of war, its walls chipped by bullets and pockmarked with shell holes. From the building opposite, dark cavities gaped like empty eye sockets where windows should be, and shredded blue awnings fluttered in the light morning breeze. Joey peeled off his shorts and tee-shirt and took a quick shower. After a Lipton's tea, Sam suggested they visit the scene where it had all kicked off for him, where he took the now famous photographs for the International Herald Tribune that hung on the wall opposite Joey's new bed.

'When I got here, the top five storeys had been blown off and moved maybe twenty feet sideways,' Sam said, pointing straight ahead. The March noon heat wrapped the sweaty black shirt tight as a bandage around his slender torso. 'All that was left was a massive smoking crater and a pile of rubble. Over there is where I took that shot of the paratrooper, crawling through a haze of smoke, a wounded colleague on his back.'

At 6 a.m. on October twenty-third, 1983, in a synchronised attack, two suicide bombers blew up the Drakkar building, which served as the French battalion headquarters, and shortly afterwards, the US Marines' headquarters near the airport. Sam was on the scene within an hour, snapping the photographs he had been destined to take ever since his fifteenth birthday when Maeve raided her rainy-day kitty to buy his first camera. He still had it, a Pentax K1000, 35mm SLR — Sam had reeled off the peculiar sequence of numbers and letters so often that they tripped off Joey's tongue without effort. In his head, he could hear Sam banging on, 'Listen to that cloth blind shutter, still firing after all these years,' as his snapping finger produced that distinctive click-click-pachuum coda to the camera recording a new image for posterity.

Since that birthday, Sam had looked only forward, through his camera lens, into a career that became a vocation, his mission in life. He watched movies about photographers, he devoured books about cameras, he studied coffee-table albums of famous photographs. School was never his thing but with photography, he found something that used different parts of his brain, that only required him to juggle visual images in his head, not crunch numbers into each other or assemble words into sentences. Once he turned sixteen, Sam quit school and worked his way through a series of photography jobs, searching for his angle, once it didn't involve wedding photos, debts' parties, and happy family snaps. He found it in 1979, aged eighteen. For a fortnight after its release, he went to see *Apocalypse Now* every day, dozing through the early story until Martin Sheen nears his journey's end and meets Dennis Hopper's photojournalist character. After that, 'Photojournalism is the life for me' became Sam's mantra. Whereas his friends plastered posters of Liverpool and Leeds, or Led Zeppelin and the Stones, across their bedroom walls, Sam had a huge print of Robert Capa's photo of the falling Spanish Civil War soldier. On the opposite wall, he blue-tacked a similar-sized print of Eddie Adams' snapshot of the handcuffed Vietcong prisoner, a pistol inches from his temple, seconds from execution. These were Sam's heroes, the fearless, driven men who ventured into dangerous warzones to record the unfolding horrors and dispatch the photos home for everyone to see.

'It was total devastation everywhere,' Sam continued, 'like nothing you can ever imagine. Bits of metal shutters ripped off by the force of the explosion and buried in a tree trunk as if someone had thrown them like a hatchet. Ripped-off legs and arms mixed up with building debris and furniture

scraps, all scattered in the mud. Horrendous.' He paused and stared at Joey. 'I got some of my best shots that day. You've seen the one of the French army officer, with his war medals pinned to his breast and his head blown apart?'

'Yeah, sure, I remember. Lovely, not.'

Sam looked away to his left, where the wreck of the Drakkar building still stood, a gaping hole in the centre and the wing on one side completely missing. Joey had seen the entire sequence of his brother's photos; every scene suffused with a curtain of smoke so thick it shut out the sun. Moments of black and white action frozen on colour film. Slabs of concrete hanging precariously from the upper floors. Two frames later, those slabs collapsing as the outside walls sheared off the main building, as if sliced by a machete. In the next frame, a huge dust cloud from the fallen debris, and as the cloud cleared over subsequent frames, reminders of human existence: tables, chairs, and filing cabinets pinning dead bodies to the ground.

And then the shot that was syndicated around the world: a French paratrooper stooped over, blood pumping from his head, and in the background, a first-floor room, pristinely preserved, all its furniture neatly arranged. Everything in its right place, while the room next door was a jumble of upturned desks, shattered chairs, shredded carpets, and scraps of paper swirling in the wind.

As he walked across the bomb site, with echoes of the devastation all around, Joey could sense the death still rising from the ashen ground. He was shocked by how real the horror was here, even six months later. It was no longer a well composed series of photos but had come back to life in his imagination, this place of gruesome death where once peacekeeping soldiers from a far-off land had innocently gone about their business. The reality that Beirut was a dangerous place struck him forcibly; here he was plunged deep into a warzone when just last week he was sipping coffee with his aunt on the Champs Élysées. Suddenly, it wasn't so easy to act all cool and who cares. He was glad when Sam suggested they move on.

Down towards the bar and restaurant area of Hamra, the early afternoon sun was burning off the smoke haze that hovered over the city. A pair of cockerels crowed, drowning out the blaring car horns and the muezzin's call to prayer.

Later that night, Joey lay stretched out on the leather sofa, facing the chrome and glass shelving unit that lined an entire wall of Sam's sparsely furnished apartment. In the bedroom there was two single beds and a creaky pine wardrobe, although most of Sam's clothes were in a heap on the floor. The kitchen was kitted out with all the mod cons, but none looked like they'd seen any recent action. The rest of the apartment was open-plan with sliding French doors leading onto the balcony and randomly scattered Damascus rugs covering the stone-tiled floor. There was a leather camel stool and a wobbly table with four rush-seat chairs at one end of the room; the sitting area at the other end contained the only item of real value in the whole apartment, a top-of-the-range Sony stereo system, into which Sam loaded an AC/DC cassette.

'I tell you, Sammy, snagging this job with Liban à l'Etranger is about the only thing that's worked out for me recently. It's like some sudden, strange alignment of the stars, the gods forming a conspiracy to fix up something good for me.'

Sam sat in the armchair across from Joey and huddled over the fuming paraffin heater, a tumbler of Johnnie Walker cupped in his hand. The nights were still cold, even after a hot day. 'I wouldn't read too much into it, just a bit of good fortune after a run of real bad.'

Aunty Cissie's husband, Loic, had set the whole thing up. After leaving Dublin, Joey was living on the streets of London when Maud chanced upon him one day, hustling outside Hamleys. As she told it, 'I don't know what it was, if it wasn't the holy man himself up above, that made me turn back to take a closer look. And there in front of me was the poor crathur like I'd never seen him before.' During

his first week sleeping rough, Joey was unconscious on the hard ground of the Waterloo underpass when someone stole the backpack containing his meagre collection of belongings: some faded photos of the good times in St Jude's, his passport and bank card, his address book and three cassette tapes. Now that she'd found him, Maud wasn't letting him go again, and she dragged Joey home with her. In time, she persuaded him to visit Cissie in Paris to recuperate with his favourite aunt while he figured out what to do next. He and Loic got talking one night about Lebanon and Sam's work there as a photojournalist. Joey had a way with the written word, but he had put limited effort into developing that talent, and its potential had languished until luck, that most powerful of forces, weighed in behind it. Turned out Loic had some useful connections: his grandfather had lived in Beirut back in the days when France still had some political influence over Lebanon. Loic made some phone calls, pulled in a few favours, and next thing, Joey had himself a six-month contract as the guy on the ground for Liban à l'Etranger. Like all the Hogans, Joey was always alive to the opportunity in a problem.

'That's for sure. Cheers to the end of bad shit happening and me now going on a winning streak.' Joey held his whiskey glass aloft. 'Been meaning to ask, what's with the gold tooth?'

'Another of my big finds in Beirut, a good, cheap dentist to sort out my mess of teeth.'

'Looks good, very Goldfinger!' Joey glugged back his whiskey. 'What about a Lebanon history lesson then, headlines only.'

'Ah, right, your primer so you can write all these insightful stories for this magazine I've never heard of?' Sam's scruffy, fair hair, tucked behind his jug ears, had grown longer, and his oval face, tanned and acne-free, had lost the scornful demeanour of his Dublin days.

'Don't be such a fucking snob, Sammy. The magazine's very popular with the Lebanese expat community in France.'

'But you're going to have to write in French?'

'Relax, it's all sorted. It was a condition of Loic's. Before he recommended me for the job, he signed me up for a total immersion French language course. I did get an A in the leaving cert, you know.'

'In fairness, you were always good with languages.'

'Before I left, they did all these test articles and said my French was well up to the task. It's not as if they have many alternative candidates.'

'That's for sure.'

'The idea is to cover the war from the perspective of ordinary people, you know, how it affects them day-to-day, their personal stories. Not all that journalistic bullshit recording history as it happens, about this bomb here, that many dead there, this militia group did that. Just the experiences of everyday common people like you and me.'

'Ha, common people like us. That's a laugh.' Sam lit a Marlboro and tossed the pack over to Joey. 'Still can't get over how you blagged this job with no track record in journalism?'

'Well, I did get three-quarters of my English degree completed.' Joey grinned back at him. 'I mean, it's no skin off their nose; they only pay per article, so if I don't deliver, there's no cost to them.'

'A history lesson, then? Okay. Where to start? First, you need to forget about figuring out who all the militias and ethnic groups are. Or which one's in bed with whom or which political party is supposedly in power. Basically, it's a totally fragmented population, broadly divided into Christians, Muslims, and Palestinians, each split into hundreds of factions, and all the factions fight each other nearly all the time.'

'This is Christians in the sense that the Godfather was a Christian.'

'You got it. Then you've got all these big-shot foreign armies who have been coming here for

millennia to bring peace.'

'Fighting for peace, like fucking for virginity,' Joey sniggered as he tossed a handful of peanuts into his mouth.

'Exactly. These foreign armies, they roll into town in their tanks and jeeps, overflowing with honourable intentions and noble aspirations. They're greeted by mobs of Lebanese lining the roads and showering them with rice and rose petals — that's the traditional welcome, by the way — because they're so desperate to get rid of whoever it was that last arrived to save them. Lebanon is this great big, fizzing pot of combustible ingredients, churning away until it reaches boiling point and erupts, burning everything that gets in its path.' Sam stubbed out his cigarette and took a sip of Scotch. 'In recent times, we've had the French, the Syrians, even the Israelis got the rice and rose petal treatment when they showed up to boot out the PLO. Then, of course, there's the Americans and our lot, UNIFIL, the United Nations peacekeepers—'

'That's the UN interim force in Lebanon, right? Doesn't interim imply you're not going to hang around for years on end?'

'It's the same with all these' — Sam made rabbit-ear fingers in the air — 'salvation armies. They start out full of optimism, then get bogged down in an unwinnable guerrilla war. They're always humiliated in the end and forced to retreat, creating a vacuum that sucks in the next saviours. What I call the red Leb cycle, circling endlessly from rose petal to bloody nose.'

'Speaking of red Leb,' Joey said, yawning. 'What about the partying?'

A sudden jackhammer rattle of automatic gunfire distracted Sam, and he wandered out to the balcony. Joey joined him as a procession of golden flares flashed across the charcoal sky and exploded, illuminating the empty streets below. 'Whoa, look at that one,' Joey said. 'I thought there was supposed to be a ceasefire.'

Joey was struck again by the proximity of danger in this city. There it was right in front of him, no longer some abstract concept that he read about in the paper or watched on the TV news. It worried him how blasé Sam was about it all, nonchalantly viewing the fireworks show from his balcony, with a drink in his hand. Growing up, Sam had always abhorred any form of violence, never even got into a fight at school. Now people shooting at each other had become a form of evening entertainment for him.

'Ceasefire my ass,' Sam scoffed. 'When a militia calls for a ceasefire, basically what they mean is: Hey, we're running a bit low, so we need some time to go restock our ammo. But don't go away; we'll soon be back. For more mindless, pointless fighting.'

Sam leaned over the railings for a better view and continued, 'Yeah, the partying is good in Beirut; no shortage of weirdos, that's for certain. But I really feel like I'm involved in something here, making a difference. Sometimes, it can be hard to take. You know, like that scene at Drakkar today, reminders of death everywhere.'

'Yeah, I'm a bit freaked out by it all, to be honest.'

'Quite a change from Dublin. You'll get used to it pretty quickly, mark my words. Tell me, what's been happening back home with the sibs?'

Not long ago, they'd all lived together in St Jude's, a five-bedroom semi-detached house in a quiet Dublin suburb. When Christy was accepted for a Law degree in Trinity, he figured that, with few friends in Dublin, his best chance of getting to know people was to get a house share. Neighboured on one side by an aged couple and on the other by two elderly sisters, and colonised in the immediate vicinity by a bevy of home-proud young families, St Jude's reputation as a student party house was already well established by the time Joey moved in. As the one who found the house, Christy got the largest bedroom, on the first floor. Damien had the bedroom next door, and Sam was in the boxroom

across the hall, affectionately known as “the Brewery” (it housed the hot press where novice attempts at home brewing occasionally produced a drinkable beverage). Their friend Maud from Limerick, whom they’d known all their lives, slept in the large, converted attic space, a bedroom where both Damien and Joey sometimes took some comfort. Joey was on the ground floor, in a converted garage, pleased to be away from the others and living in a house named after the patron saint of hopeless cases (poetic karma, he called it).

‘The big news I have for you is that Christy and Maud just got married a couple of months ago.’

Sam turned towards Joey, his mouth agape. ‘No fucking way, how did that come about?’

‘Who knows, I was as surprised as you. Seems they got it together soon after I left Dublin.’

‘So, they were only going out, what? Barely six months. And then they got married?’

‘It was a registry office job. Very hush, hush. No one was invited besides the two witnesses.’

‘Something’s cooking there for sure. You mustn’t forget that Maud grew up on a farm, surrounded by animals mating and birthing like clockwork every year. I guess her own body clock was ticking, and she wanted the gold-ring thing to settle down with a good man who’d give her a posse of wee ones.’

‘There ya go, that’s the other bit of news. They’ve just had a baby, a little girl called Kathleen.’

‘Why did I not know anything about this?’

‘You are stuck out here in the middle of nowhere, Sam, in a country with famously poor lines of communication.’

‘I know, but still.’ Sam gazed out at the cloudless, now dark sky and fell silent. ‘So that makes us both uncles, of course. How weird.’

‘Tell me about it. Very fucking weird.’

‘Maud was always obsessed with you, Joey. Totally obsessed.’

‘Leave off. She certainly never showed any of that sort of interest in Christy.’ Joey was distracted by a fresh trail of fiery bullets lighting up the sky. He shook his shoulders and rubbed his arms. ‘I’m getting cold, man. Fancy rolling another one? I’ll get us some jumpers.’

‘Mind the rocks,’ Sam called out as Joey stumbled past the row of geranium pots lining the front of the balcony. The gutter outlets were blocked at either end with large rocks to prevent rats from coming up through the drainpipes. Long-tailed rats thrived in Beirut, grown pot-bellied and brazen from feasting on the garbage piles littering the streets.