



Casually man-spreading on the sofa next to me, the birthday boy seemingly magicked the tiny plastic bag out of nowhere. He gave it a gentle tap. The contents settled into a dense pocket of dust. He plied open the zip and swiftly upended the contents onto the glass coffee table. The credit card appeared next; and, with the dexterity of sushi chef, he created three lines of white powder. Neat, orderly, clean.

My fingers stopped mid-chord, suspended above the guitar strings in musical *rigor mortis*. I searched over both shoulders to see what the rest of the party behind me made of this new development. Steph was locked in conversation, glass of champagne in hand. A small crowd loitered by the full-length French windows, casually blowing cigarette smoke outside into the cold, London night air. I panicked: *the couple with the child — had they left already?* I glanced at my watch. The dial showed 1 a.m. *Fair enough*, I thought. *Kids ought to be in bed by now*.

I locked focus back to the coffee table. Was no one else fazed by this? When Steph invited me to her friend's birthday party, I conjured up images of cake and presents and those silly, conical dunce hats with the elastic band they always make you wear: I didn't think all-night rave and crack cocaine. Yet, here was the birthday boy, casually cutting lines on the table next to me.

The dilemma was real: play it cool or be a square? Everyone else seemed so nonchalant. Should I square up my glasses, adopt the nerd voice and say, "Hey guys, I'm not cool with this"? It was too late to bow out from the party — a graceful exit was thwarted by the lack of trains at this hour, coupled with the pre-arranged commitment to stay over and continue celebrations with brunch the next morning.

The solution colluded with my curiosity. This was, I realized, the first time in my life that I had knowingly been in the presence of a class-A drug. So why not do some fact gathering? Attempting my best to sound casual, I plucked a few more guitar chords before asking, "So... who's your dealer?" Was it too inquisitive? Despite myself, my fingers played faster.

Unfazed, my seat mate shored up the tiny dams of powder with the edge of the card. "Just a local guy. Does house calls here in East London."

"How often do you get takeaway?" I joked. A misplaced chord rung out from the guitar.

"Usually just on birthdays and holidays. The occasional deadline at work." He produced a 5 pound note; the Queen's smiling face disappearing as he rolled it into a tight tube.

I fumbled for ways to make him reconsider. "Can I ask why you do it?"

"Why does anyone do anything?" he mumbled. "It feels good." He tightened the tube with a final pinch.

"So, what kind of effect does it have on you?" I pitched wildly.

"Look, you want a line or not, mate?"

I blinked. "No thanks. Just... curious to know. That's all." I silently stared. I realized I had stopped playing again.

"Suit yourself," he replied. *Sniff*. And one of the white lines disappeared.

* * *

Open Heart

The rest of the evening panned out fairly benign. Music, dancing, a bit of drink, with the eventual exhaustion settling in as the revelers fade with the late hour. Except, I was the only one to fade. Cocaine, a stimulant, keeps the body going. So while birthday boy and a few other partakers kept the night young until 8 o'clock the following morning, I curled up in the threadbare armchair and attempted to wait out the night with fitful sleep. By the time the winter sun rose, I was plucking stale cigarette butts out of my hair and peeling my shoes off the sticky, champagne covered floor. A splash of water across my face, a quick finger toothbrush and tousle of the hair, and I was out of there.

It was a weekend of social commitments; so I travelled across the capital for soirée number two. I'd spent the better part of the day in various coffee shops and quiet parks, regathering my wits and caffeinating my existence after the previous sleepless night. I meandered along the canals in northwest London towards the home of my hostess and rang the bell at number 78. Ushered into the lounge, the small group of friends drifted in from the chilly January evening, exchanging coats and scarves for drinks and canapés. Perched on dining room chairs with wine stems casually aloft, the guests engaged in good-natured debate about the latest political trends and societal ills. The evening — in stark contrast to the previous night's debauchery — was like a high-brow 18th-century French salon.

As bizarre as the juxtaposition may seem from the outside, the reality is that I live in this kind of postmodern world everyday. I remember sitting in a Communication Theory class during my undergraduate days, grappling with a story designed to explain postmodernism. The narrator described her morning routine of waking up in her Egyptian cotton sheets to make love to her Brazilian boyfriend, after which she padded downstairs to brew a cup of Columbian coffee to drink with her French croissants while reading the Jerusalem Post. The specific details of the story and its message are lost to time for me, but I distinctly remember reading this narrative and thinking, "Yeah, right. Nobody really lives like that!"



Exploring family ancestry in Norway with my mother was a highlight this past autumn.



Exploring Wales with International House summer school students.

And yet, many years later, my life does resemble this mish-mash mosaic of globalism: Perhaps even more so than my narrative storyteller could have imagined. While sitting at a concert with my mother this autumn in Oslo, I heard her murmur under her breath, "Who would've thought I'd be listening to a Polish Klezmer band with my British son in Norway?" Or what about this past summer, where I supervised young Russian and Portuguese students on educational excursions to Wales, organized by my Slovenian colleague?

My latest installment of life adventures — teaching in Iraqi Kurdistan — feels in some ways like a mere variation on a life theme. Just last weekend, I ventured to Azady Park — my city's equivalent to New York's Central Park — to participate in the traditional Kurdish custom of a weekend picnic. A vast expanse of food was laid out on blankets spread across the browning grass: traditional *yaprax* (vine leaves, tomatoes and eggplant stuffed with rice) alongside pizza, chicken wings, watermelon and cookies. As the assembled guests picked their way through the buffet of picnic items, I learned my neighbor on this particular corner of blanket was French. "What brings you to Kurdistan?" I asked, eager to practice a bit of my rusty language skills.



Sulaymaniyah, Iraqi Kurdistan.

"I have Turkish and Kurdish ancestry," he replied, "but my ultimate goal is to get into Syria to help re-establish their education system." His dimpled smile revealed a certain penchant for mischief and adventure.

I fawned a bit at this noble cause. "I'm just a simple English teacher. I ended up here purely for the money," I laughed. "Low cost of living; decent wage. Makes me sound a bit shallow by comparison."

Open Heart

Our conversation was cut short by the intrusion of Kurdish music, blaring a full volume from a tiny speaker set on a discarded breeze block. “Come dance!” shouted Chao, a mutual friend and Chinese expat who works for a local telecommunications company. She coaxed a few others onto their feet, as they all held hands and started stepping in rhythm to the reedy whine of the *qernête* and trilled strum of the *tinbour*. The dancers snaked through the grass and swallowed us into the line: a shoulder-shaking, foot-stomping, Turco-French, Amero-British, Chinese, Canadian and multi-ethnic party of Kurdish dancers. And I thought to myself, “Pinch me now; because I never thought living in Iraq would look like this.”

It’s true that a lot of fear surrounded my move here: family, friends — and even I, myself — wondered at the sanity of moving to an area of the world that receives so much negative press. Yet, I had to remind myself that there are millions of people who manage to sustain themselves everyday in this environment. They wake up, commute to work, get angry at traffic, fight with their spouses, buy their groceries, earn a pay check, get married and have children, and pursue the very same principles and values that you and I would deem normal anywhere else in the world. If we base our decisions solely on the fear and judgment we receive from the news, then by the same logic, my French compatriot should never move to Syria; and I should never move back to America for the fear of gun violence, police brutality, and post-election protest riots.

Truth be told, the on-the-ground reality is completely different. Yes, violence and war and crime and terrorism exist here as much as anywhere else — but only because these traits live in each of our own hearts. We all have our secrets, our shortcomings, our sins. It may be the violent words we inflict on others through hate speech. Or the terror of screaming for change when nobody seems to listen. Or the wars we wage in our own hearts when vying for control over the limited resource of our own willpower. We fear the terrible stories we hear in the media — not because they belong to a realm of the unknown, but because we recognize a thread of the same ilk running along the seam of our own hearts.

I could be afraid here. However, I take comfort from these words from the Bible, which state that ‘perfect love casts out all fear’. If it’s one thing I’ve learned in my adventures across this spinning terrestrial ball, it’s that in our post-modern societies, it is our connections — our similarities — that form the basis for this kind of love. Rather than riding out the waves of inhumane suffering and wrongdoing with white-knuckled sobriety, we are meant to search for the common, deeper thread of our humanity that binds us together. Whether it’s the joy of celebratory dance, or the desperate self-soothing attachment to addictive substances — the ability to recognize these higher themes in one another encourages us to love others for who they are, and not for what they do.



Though the music is foreign and the steps may be different, the purpose is the same: To express our joy through a shared experience. Seeing the higher values that bind us together can help overcome fear and unite us.

I don’t approve of cocaine use or condone acts of terror. But I can identify with the tearful cry to self-soothe in the face of trouble and worry; or the screaming outlash of frustration when there appears to be no other recourse to meet your will. To err, after all, is human: from East London cocaine parties, to my own self-seeking cries for attention; from the war on ISIS around the corner, to my own self-appointed righteous anger at personal injustices — our common humanity overrides any sense of hubris or ego. So I choose to love, because, if I do not love, I am just making noise in this world.

This Thanksgiving, I am seeking to have an open heart. Because my heart, in all its imperfect flaws and frayed edges, needs love just as much as anyone else’s — no matter where they are from or what they do.

• Joel Bond