

About half an hour ago, my car left the range of student radio, and entered the zone of crummy regional radio that dredges up songs that weren't even hits when they came out 20 years ago. Now I've probably got another half hour before the classic "hits" and ads for cattle drenches start to fizz out and leave me with gravel roads and static. Mostly, at least. I did pick up a Christian radio station once, which might of course have had a signal that was boosted by some outside help. The topic of the day, before I drifted into static again, had been Job - the poster child not for divine forgiveness, but forgiveness of the divine. Job's claim to fame: after his God progressively removed Job's wife, kids, wealth and health, he fell down on his knees (or collapsed from his fever) and worshipped Him. The official conclusion is that you should worship God no matter what. My conclusion is that the Christian god is needy, paranoid, and in need of some good psychoanalysis.

As mountaineers and zoology students, Jessie and I have a different God – one that involves DNA, plate tectonics and ocean currents. Our God doesn't play favourites, but nor does he visit wrath unto the seventh generation just because He's not feeling the love. Jessie would say that it's the God of What Is. Up in the mountains, faced with What Is, you definitely get enough moments of jaw-dropping awe (or, occasionally, terror) to know that you're in the midst of something holy.

I swing the car around the next bend in the road. On the car stereo, the ad for truck parts fades into white noise. Then, suddenly, the radio picks up a series of sonar-like bleeps that spike through the dark. I slap out my hand and flick the volume down. I'm feeling a little on edge - my last exam was today and I'm not exactly sure that I passed. I probably shouldn't be making this road trip when I need to go home and plan my life. I definitely shouldn't be out here in this car, which is ancient and currently WOF-free. It's one reason I'm on the gravel backroads, which the cops leave to the locals. On the other hand, these are the roads that we drove, in this piece-of-shit car, all winter long.

This was the second backcountry ski season for both Jessie and me. We got into the mountains at the same time - 3 years ago - but from different directions. I had a family history of tramping and could rock climb like a spider, but my biggest snow experience had been a school trip to Snow Planet. Jessie had been skiing ever since she was old enough to thumb a lift up to the fields, but had never carried a pack in her life, and it was a while before she could use a rope without turning it into an abstract macrame project. So we balanced each other nicely, in our group of crazy mountain lovers that worked its way through the fine arts of navigation, snowcaving, multi-pitch ice climbing and avalanche awareness. We were the two who were right into skiing.

The radio blares out another set of sonar bleeps, which get louder, in spite of the volume dial sitting at its minimum. The sound is too familiar, and it grates against me, out here beyond the range of the Christian God and in the domain of my God who doesn't play favourites. I punch the off button. I'm in the mountains already; outside the car their enormous bulk is lit up by the late night moon. We've been out here every single weekend all winter. And every single Monday, we were so dead at lectures. But so what if you get to be 100% alive at other times, when everyone else lives at 50%, shuffling from uni to flat to pub?

The beeps start coming again. Louder, reaching fever pitch. My foot slams the brake and the car twists on the gravel road before sliding to a stop on the shoulder. My hand wrenches the key out of the ignition and I sprint out of the car and it's a long time before I can stop running. And the memory keeps on coming.

We should have known to keep well clear of that slope on that day, but we just couldn't resist, and we convinced each other that the snowpack would hold steady. There had been a huge dumping of fresh snow, enough to tempt Jess and I to skip lectures and pull a midweek backcountry skiing mission. Halfway up the slope, it released. I was lucky. I made it to a ridge. And watched as it roared past and picked up Jess. Tumbling her. Swallowing her. Sweeping over a bluff.

I was fast and measured as I set up the rope, as I abseiled down, as I pulled out my transceiver and set it to search. I will never forget that sound. The sonar beeps started out so faint, but they got stronger and soon I was digging, in snow setting like concrete, transceiver still beeping at fever pitch. I found her fast, but not fast enough; it would have been too late from the moment the snow washed over the bluff. I walked out and called Search and Rescue from the first farmhouse I found. It had occurred to me, back up on the mountain, that Jess had the locator beacon in her pack. If I had triggered it, a helicopter would have arrived in no time. But I couldn't see the point. To be honest, I haven't been able to see the point in anything much ever since, right up to this moment where I'm on a backcountry road staring up at the moon.

"Jessie," I say, "I think our car's possessed with the spirit of an avalanche transceiver. Or I'm going crazy. I'm not sure which I would prefer at this point."

I wish that she was here sharing this – it aches in my chest – because I can imagine exactly what she'd do. She'd hug me and laugh, outrageously, until I was laughing too. She might even suggest that we exorcise the car with some of the water in the boot that we keep for the dodgy radiator. Then she'd decide that we were wasting time. Because, after all, it's a fine night; the moon's still up and pouring a stream of silver beauty over the world, and there are mountains up there, and wouldn't it be great to see the sunrise from the top of the hill?

The laugh surprises me. It springs out of my mouth and, even more amazing, brings a wave of joy. Why *not* see the sunrise from the top of the hill? "You always did have good ideas," I say to my memory of Jessie. "I have been so lucky to know you." I jump the fence and start striding up the slope in the moonlight. I'll make it to the top of the hill by dawn. Then I'll climb down, get back in the car, drive back to town, and work out what to do next. I'll be so dead tomorrow, but so what if you're dead one day, when you get to be 100% alive first?