

DRIVING HOME FOR CHRISTMAS

I can hear her.

“Can we have the radio on?” my daughter said. 18 years old, Sandi with an “I”, coming home from college for the first time and she likes rock music – real rock music like Deep Purple and Biffy Clyro and Black Sabbath. I didn’t think kids liked rock music any more, but it seems they do. They also like covering their arms with tattoos and colouring their hair weird shades of urgh. (I can cope with the tattoos and the dye – I’ve been there too and at least it’s not drugs – but why is the dye always such a horrible colour? What’s wrong with bright colours? These kids colour their hair in pastel shades and it’s just wrong).

I shook my head.

“It’s broken,” I lied.

It wasn’t broken. I just couldn’t take it anymore. The voices, howling in the static. The voices of the dead.

I can hear her voice.

The dead, it turns out, have their own stories to tell, and no-one to tell them to. Elvis, his voice echoing in the dark. John Lennon, telling me how he feels for ever and ever. Kurt Cobain, Freddie Mercury, Ian Curtis, all wanting me to hear their stories. They don’t know that I’ve already heard them – how can they, where they are there’s no rock press, no ultimate guides to the music of – and they probably don’t care. They just want to talk. And I drive, and I listen, and sometimes I tune out.

“ – I still love her, even after what she did – ”

Elvis was the first, I think. I had the radio on, some gooey oldies station playing Misty or something like that, and I was about to press the button, put on another station, when I heard the voice. It sounded like a drowning man, but who drowns on the radio? The voice was familiar too, the deep Southern drawl, and at first I thought it was the idiot DJ, trying to sound like Elvis. But what he was saying was wrong.

“ – if you see her, tell her how I feel. There never was anyone else, she needs to know that – ”

That sort of thing, over and over. I pictured him, tumbling into a well, lost in a tunnel, wondering what the darkness all around was, kept going only by the need to talk to someone, to tell his story.

“It’s broken,” I told Sandi.

“No it’s not,” she replied, with the directness of youth, and turned the radio on. Immediately the car filled with the sound of stadium metal.

“Yeah!” Sandi shouted. “Ozzie!” And she made a devil sign.

“Don’t do that,” I said.

“Why not?” she asked, giving it full-on devil sign jazz hands, and I didn’t say anything, because I couldn’t think of a reply. Or rather I could, and it was ‘because you’re four years old and it’s weird’, but she wasn’t four, she was eighteen and she was coming home from college for Christmas.

Elvis was the first, but he wasn’t alone for long. The next voice came soon after, though it was hardly a voice at all, more of a shiver in the dark.

The stereo was playing an oldies playlist I’d made, soul and doowop and r’n’b, and the song playing at that moment was Why Must I Be A Teenager In Love?, a goofy gallop of a song that I’d always loved. The singer was Frankie Lymon, a real teen idol who’d lost his life to heroin, and now Frankie was fighting against his own voice on the stereo. As his 13 year old self whooped and soared and bemoaned the trials of love, another Frankie – older, emptied of all excitement – tried to fight his way in.

“ – it’s cold, why is it so cold, why am I here, they said they’d come for me, they said it would be OK, it’s cold, they should be here by now, why am I so cold – ”

Frankie’s voices mingled and twisted together like a whirlpool until it was hard to tell who was singing and who was crying out. Even before the song ended, I had to turn the iPod off, and drove the rest of the way in silence.

The song Ozzie was singing was called Crazy Train, and it wasn’t bad if you like that sort of thing, which I don’t but Sandi definitely did. She was doing air guitar to the solo now, and head-banging, which was quite an achievement in the passenger seat of a small family car.

“ – no – we’re out of control – help us – ”

Ozzie wasn’t dead, but – I suddenly remembered – his guitarist was. Randy Rhoads, died in a plane crash. As Sandi rocked out, Rhoads’ thin, panicked voice began to scream.

“ – no – shit - we’re going to – ”

I changed stations.

“I was listening to that,” Sandi said, slumping into her seat for a sulk.

The next day I went to the tree farm outside town, and it was not a good drive. The radio had started playing itself, as though the backlog of voices wanted to be heard had burst a dam inside the transmitter, and there was a constant stream of songs overlaid with voices.

Buddy Holly, killed in a plane crash with Richie Valens and the Big Bopper.

Otis Redding, killed when the plane he was on crashed into a lake.

Sam Cooke, killed by a jealous lover.

Bobby Fuller, famous for one song – I Fought The Law – murdered by gangsters.

Eddie Cochran, killed in a car crash.

They kept on coming. Sometimes I didn't know who they were – they might be a drummer or a bass player, or even a backing singer, it didn't matter, if they were dead, they wanted to be heard.

The Christmas before, we'd bought Sandi a home studio. Not a literal studio, but a plug-in or something for her laptop which apparently was just as good as a real studio. She even looked pleased, so maybe it actually was a home studio.

I used to look in on Sandi, working out how to multi-track guitars or add drums. One day she caught me standing outside.

"Don't listen!" she shouted.

"I wasn't," I lied. "I just wanted to see how it works."

She sighed.

"OK," she said, and for the next ten minutes showed me how to move faders and add tracks. It all seemed a bit difficult and she must have seen my confused look, because she reached under her desk – her childhood desk, which I'd bought from Argos and assembled myself – and brought out, of all things, a tambourine.

I tried to pull the radio out of its housing, but it was welded or glued in. I tried to pull the wires out, but nothing happened. And then while I was hitting the stereo, perhaps, or rummaging through the glove compartment for a manual – when I was distracted, anyway – I looked up to see the front of a truck hurtling towards me.

Sandi pressed a letter on the keyboard, and a click track began to play.

"Hit this in time," she said.

"In time to what?" I asked.

"To the clicky noise, Dad," she said, almost as sarcastically as possible.

I don't know if it was my fault or the truck's fault, but it really doesn't matter anymore.

For the next four minutes, I hit the tambourine as close to the beat as I could.

"Now what?" I asked.

She gave me a look.

"Do not say anything," she said. "Do not laugh, or say it's not as good as the Beatles, or anything."

She pressed a key and suddenly my tambourine was one of ten other instruments – drums, guitar, bass, piano, synthesiser, and vocals. Her vocals. Sandi, singing a song I'd never heard before.

She sang beautifully, and the song was good too.

"Did you –"

"I said be quiet."

She stopped the track, saved it to her hard drive and looked at me defiantly.

I mimed zipping my lips together.

She gave me the finger, but she was smiling.

I am in air. All around me is movement, and light.

There are voices. Some of them I've heard before, and some are new.

I can hear her voice.

She is singing.

Sandi has her own car now. She likes to play metal stations but sometimes, when she's coming back from a gig, she takes out her mp3 player and she puts on her demos, the songs she made with the home studio plug in. She sings along to her songs, with her own guitar and her own keyboards. She listens for improvements that she could make, better basslines or melodies or drums.

I think that when she plays one of the songs, she listens out for the tambourine. It's not exactly session musician quality, but it's there. And I think that one day, she'll hear me.

I don't know what she'll say when she does.