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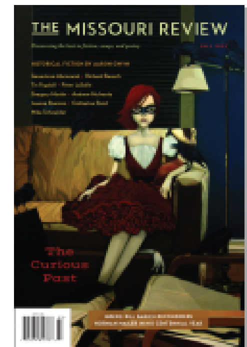
Accident

Gregory Martin



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Accident

Gregory Martin

It had rained all day, warm for January in Montana. It was dark now, the temperature dropping, the road turning to black ice. I was driving to Kalispell on Route 2 from where I lived in Marion, on the working ranch that was the Wilderness Treatment Center. This was 1994, and I was twenty-three years old.

I'd been at the center less than a month, hired as a wilderness instructor, working with drug-addicted teenagers, teaching them basic backcountry skills and eventually taking them on twenty-one-day trips as part of their recovery plan. I couldn't believe my luck. I was paid fifteen thousand dollars a year to be in the woods every day, helping young men put their lives back together, backpack through dense forests on remote trails, and ski and pull a sled along snowbound logging roads and jeep trails leading up to passes over the Continental Divide. I was with them as they slept on and under tarps beneath a million cold stars and woke up to wide, frozen rivers, black patches of open water steaming in the silent light of dawn.

Earlier that afternoon, I'd taken a group of eight on a short hike in our Sorels, the snow heavy and wet, across the ranch to Hidden Falls on the Little Bitterroot River. I stopped at different points along the way, teaching them to use a compass and topographical map, read contour lines, shoot a bearing, adjust for magnetic north. It was easier for them to be outside and with me, on a hike in the woods. I didn't want them to get sober in the way their counselors did, who were each themselves addicts in recovery. I sat with them in a circle in day-by-day meetings each morning, and I was learning about the twelve steps and the Big Book, but I didn't understand them in that way, not really. With me, they could pretend to be less troubled than they were. They could be boys in the woods. My job was to teach them how to survive in the Montana backcountry for three weeks in winter. How to avoid hypothermia or trench foot and not get lost in a whiteout. Because I was not and had never been jaded or cynical—I am not wired that way—I wanted also to teach them to trust me and each other, to trust themselves, because they had quit on most everything that had once mattered to them. They shot heroin. They drank already, at fifteen, to blackout and oblivion. They stole from friends and family and strangers. They lied and connived. They bristled with surly, simmering impatience at this way station between their last high and their next. Most were there because it had been court ordered; for many, it was their last chance before juvenile detention. Only a few chose to be there and wanted in any way to learn anything, much less how to get sober. In my short time knowing them, I could see all this. But still, I enjoyed them: their sarcasm, their irreverence. And I saw also that a frozen waterfall could lift their spirits. I wanted to teach them how to thrive in the outdoors so that this might

somehow help them when they returned to the world. They expected to fail. Plenty of people expected them to fail, but I thought they had choices to make, and I wanted to help them start making more good ones than bad.

I lived on the ranch in a small log cabin with a woodstove a quarter mile from the main lodge and bunkhouses. I cross-country skied across a meadow to breakfast in wool trousers with leather ankle belts. Gore-Tex had been around for decades, but I dressed like a Swiss mountaineer in a black-and-white photo taken between the wars. The teenagers teased me about this. They called me "Scoutmaster." They had my number. I ate meals in the lodge with them, and on many nights, I played cribbage or Ping-Pong with them after dinner because I wasn't much older than they were and because I was new to Montana, and I was lonely.

It has been more than twenty-five years since I worked at the Wilderness Treatment Center. I recently learned that it closed for good during the pandemic, the staff laid off, the ranch and all its buildings sold. On the Facebook page announcing this, you can read dozens of grateful testimonials from men who were treated there, who were once confused, lost, desperate, hurting, angry, and who are now ten, fifteen, twenty, thirty years sober.

That night, I drove into Kalispell for an avalanche safety class. Spitting rain had turned to sleet. My truck was a rusted red '77 step-side Chevy I'd bought for eight hundred dollars from a peanut farmer in West Texas. I had three hundred pounds of sand in fifty-pound bags in the bed to weight the rear axle because it had rear-wheel drive and was not at all suited for winter. But it had new tires and new brakes. I needed to drive only twenty miles.

Halfway there, the road curved north, and I started up the Kila hill. Kila wasn't really a town. A few houses stood on acreage in the valley below. A vet, a bar and grill, an elementary school. I pressed down on the gas, not hard, not to accelerate, just to gradually increase my speed. I was being careful.

The logging foreman driving behind me saw my truck fishtail back and forth before starting to spin a complete 360 across the two solid white lines into oncoming traffic and back, and he saw me go over the fifty-foot embankment tailgate first, ass over teakettle, headlights doing

back handsprings down through the dark evergreens, through the blackness and the fog. He pulled over to the shoulder. He had one of those early mobile phones the size of a shoebox plugged into the cigarette lighter with a tight black spiral cord. He called the highway patrol and told them to send an ambulance to the Kila hill: a truck had just gone off the road, and it was going to be bad.

When I started to spin, I turned the wheel into the slide, as I had been taught, but the truck kept spinning. When I felt the bed of the truck tilting backward off the road, by instinct and with both arms, I reached behind the steering column and grabbed the top of the wheel like a pull-up bar. I braced the insides of my elbows against the bottom of the wheel and tucked my head in the space below the horn and held on. I don't know how many times the truck flipped, end over end, backward, but I felt myself go upside down again and again.

The foreman left his truck and postholed through the snow down the embankment. He found me sitting beside the truck, which had come to rest against a tree, perpendicular to the ground, all four wheels and undercarriage exposed, headlights beaming into the night sky. The truck's engine was on and idling. Peter Gabriel's "Red Rain" played loud on cassette on the stereo. Bright crimson blood was dripping down my face from my scalp.

The foreman knelt down beside me. He said, "An ambulance is on its way."

I didn't say anything.

He said, "They're coming."

I looked at him.

He took off his Carhartt jacket. "You're bleeding pretty bad. I'm putting this on your head to try and stop the bleeding."

"I'm gonna be late," I said.

He put the jacket on my head and pressed down. "Is that OK?"

"I'm not sure anymore."

"You're in shock."

"Yeah."

"They're coming," he said.

He told me later, when he visited me in the hospital, that I must have crawled out over the steering wheel, and maybe then I had cut my head on the jagged broken windshield glass. That was the only way I could have gotten out: the passenger-side roof of the truck was crushed down to the bench, and both doors were crushed shut and would not open.

He'd tried. He'd been to the salvage yard that morning. My truck had been towed into town, and he wanted to look at it again in the daylight.

He said, "There must be some reason you're still here, because I wouldn't put the chances of walking away from that accident at one in a hundred."

I thanked him. I must have. He was ten or fifteen years older, in his thirties, an adult. Sturdy but not heavyset, he had short red hair, a beard. Reticent. He wasn't a talker. But he was talking a lot more than I was.

He said, "When I found you sitting in the snow, I thought you were a ghost. I thought your body was going to still be in the truck. I looked. You weren't in the truck. You were sitting in the snow."

"I don't know what to say," I said.

"I don't either," he said.

I never learned his name. Maybe he told me, and I didn't remember. Maybe I didn't think to ask. He saved my life. I do not think I would have made my way back up the steep embankment to the road and flagged down a car. I was bleeding badly, and I had a terrible concussion from being slammed around the inside of the cab like a crash-test dummy. I had a blazing headache for days. To this day, I get terrible migraines. I did not have a single broken bone. If it hadn't been for him, I would have sat there in the snow and cold and dark, and I would have lain down and gone to sleep.

I remember the wail of sirens in the distance and then paramedics bandaging my head and strapping me to the gurney. With the foreman's help, they carried me into the life I am living now.

The next morning, I called my parents from the hospital. They were glad I was OK. Maybe in a few months, if I was frugal with my paychecks, I could put a down payment on a used four-wheel-drive vehicle, they said. They did not offer to loan me the money. They did not look for plane tickets for that very afternoon, landing in Missoula and renting a car and driving two hours north to Kalispell. They were playing bridge that evening. It did not even cross their minds to get on a plane and come to me, and I didn't expect them to. This only occurs to me now, all these years later, because if the same thing happened to one of my children, who are now twenty-two and nineteen years old, I would be on a plane within hours. But who knows what I would have done if I'd been a parent back then? Who knows if that way of loving, that way of parenting, wasn't better?

I wasn't sure how I would get back to work, twenty miles away, in Marion, but I didn't bring this up with my parents. I would figure it out. They thanked me for calling and letting them know, told me they loved me, and we hung up. A nurse came to check on my stitches and bring me a carton of milk with a bendable straw.

A few days after the accident, I called Christine. We'd been out of touch for nearly a year. She lived in Seattle. I knew she had a boyfriend, and they lived together with three or four housemates in a rundown house on Capitol Hill. I'd heard that her boyfriend was a Buddhist, undernourished, with a drug problem and a goatee. (I could never grow a goatee, even if I tried for months.) Maybe I figured that since I shouldn't even be alive, I didn't have anything to lose.

Christine answered, and she was warm and kind. She had not expected to hear from me again, she said. She was direct, and I liked this about her.

"I'm full of surprises," I said, and she laughed. This was something else I liked. Her laugh was open and bright and Midwestern, without scorn or derision. It was good to hear her voice, and I said so. I told her about the accident.

"That's so scary," she said. "I'm glad you're OK."

I said, "I want to come see you."

She hesitated. Then she said, "I'm living with Franklin."

"I know."

"You do," she said. This was not a question.

"Yes."

"Do you have a place to stay?"

"I was hoping to stay on your couch."

She paused again, longer this time. Then she said, "OK." She wanted to know how I planned to get there.

"A friend could drive me. He knows people in Seattle. He could stay with them."

"When will you come?"

"How about today?" I said. It was almost noon on a Saturday in late January. Seattle was five hundred miles from Kalispell, an eight-hour drive. "I could be there tonight." I would have to leave the next day. A short visit. I had to work Monday morning. "There's something I want to tell you, and I want to tell you in person."

I heard her take a deep breath. "Drive safe," she said.

My friend dropped me off around ten that night. Christine met me at the door with a hug, and we stood in the kitchen for an hour or so and drank tea and caught up. Franklin did not seem to be home, a fact neither of us mentioned but which hung in the air like a scented candle and which I took as a sign. We said goodnight, Christine went up to her room, and I slept in my clothes in my sleeping bag on the couch in the living room. I slept deeply. I slept the sleep of the dead.

The next morning, we walked to coffee. We crossed the street and went up the hill through the neighborhoods. After a few blocks, Christine stopped and turned and looked at me. She said, "I know you want to tell me something. But there's something I want to tell you first. I know you didn't really break up with me because we were never really dating, because we barely knew each other. But it felt like you broke up with me." Her eyes were narrowed, and there was hurt in her voice, and anger. "I don't let people do that to me."

I nodded, looked her in the eyes, and said, "I'm sorry." I knew better than to make excuses. I knew that everything between us was tenuous and there was no room for error. I was only twenty-three years old, but I knew this much. I had somehow become, in this matter only, wise. I told her I understood why she felt that way, that she was right to feel that way, and that I felt the same. I'd come to apologize, to put things right between us.

We'd met eighteen months before, outside Portland, on the first day of orientation for the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, a yearlong service commitment we'd both taken on after college. I had arrived from Virginia, Christine from Minnesota.

I had recently completed an undergraduate degree in philosophy and sometimes quoted Aristotle. Christine was a year older. She had just returned from six months in Guatemala, where she'd volunteered in an orphanage. She'd considered joining the Catholic Workers and was surprised to learn that I'd read *The Long Loneliness*. She wore oversized cable-knit sweaters and overalls. She had dirty blond hair past her shoulders, pale green eyes, and pale hands with long, bony fingers. "Irish peasant hands," she said.

We were idealistic, privileged, white, naïve. We had intensity to burn. We were trying to figure out how to live purposeful, fulfilling lives without making the world worse. Christine would work that year in a homeless shelter for women and children in Seattle, and I went to Sitka,

Alaska, to work as a youth advocate for the Tlingit, running an after-school program, a homework club, and a self-esteem group and assisting the tribal court with foster and group-home placement.

Over the five-day orientation at a retreat center in the woods near Mount Hood, Christine and I attended the seminars and earnest trust exercises together and ate every meal in the cafeteria. I had never seen someone drink so much coffee. Christine drank coffee the way Russian mobsters drink vodka. (She says now, "I'd never really had coffee before. I'd just discovered it. It was like crack cocaine.") She went back for cup after cup. She downed five full cups of coffee at breakfast. I was smitten.

We stayed up late each night talking, holding hands. The last night, we didn't sleep. It was all very wholesome, very PG. It was also one of the most memorable nights of my life, then and since. The next morning, she took a bus to Seattle and I got on a plane to Alaska.

We wrote long letters and talked a few times on the phone, long-distance. I flew down to see her over the Christmas holidays, and we went winter camping on the Olympic Peninsula. I wanted Christine to understand that I was rugged. That I sought and embraced adversity and hardship. The hiking trails were steep and icy, like luge runs. The sun failed to appear. The wood we gathered was waterlogged; it smoked but did not burn. Christine did not complain. She was Minnesotan, and this was not cold. I had never been happier. We were plenty warm, our sleeping bags zipped together. When I flew back to Alaska after my visit, we said we'd write letters and keep in touch, and we did for a while, and then we didn't.

Sometime that spring in Sitka, I went out a few times with a woman who worked at the Alaska Raptor Center, a falconer. Over this same time in Seattle, Christine went out with a guy who worked at REI, rode a motorcycle, and took her to a George Clinton funk concert. We were young. We lived more than a thousand miles apart after knowing each other for only a handful of days. Over the next year, I thought of her often, and every time with a pang of regret and sadness. I had written her a couple of times and called once, but we'd spoken for only a few minutes because by then she was dating the Buddhist pot smoker and the accident had not happened yet.

Now, all these years later, Christine will laugh and tell you that I broke up with her because she sent me rock deodorant in the shape of a heart for Valentine's Day and that I was so put off by this gift that I ended things. It's true that I found the gift of rock deodorant in the shape of a

Photo courtesy of the author

heart strange, but I didn't break up with her. Nothing like that was ever said by either of us, nothing final or definitive. We wrote less. We called and didn't call. Perhaps it was no more my fault than hers. Perhaps it's not true that I let her slip away, but it felt that way. I think of this now, even after twenty-five years of marriage, and I still feel the ache. I am convinced that if I had not almost died in the dark and snow at the foot of the Kila hill, the life we share together with our children, who are now young men, the life for which I am so grateful, would not have happened. I would not have called. I would not have made the trip to see her and sleep on her couch and say what I needed to say. I would have lost her, and I would have lived a different life. I'm sure of it.

It follows from this that my life now is in some sense an accident, accidental, contingent, dependent on weather, on sleet turning to ice, on a logging foreman I can only dimly visualize. So much good in my life is dependent on his pulling over to the road shoulder, on his shoebox-sized mobile phone, on his postholing down the embankment. And if this is true, it follows from this, like a syllogism, that so much good in my life is dependent on contingencies and circumstances I have no memory of whatsoever and on moments I never even noticed or knew about, much

less fail to remember. My life depends on a tangle of happenstance and intention and mystery that runs contrary to how I would prefer to view my life, to how anyone would prefer to view their life.

My lifelong conditioning tells me that I am the orchestrator, the decider. I chose to drive in the dark on the icy road, just as I chose to drive to see the woman I was still in love with so I could say what I needed to say in the hope that she would then choose me, choose us. "Seize the day." "Fortune favors the bold." But the truth is more that my life is the result of chaos as much as choice, that whatever credibility I have in telling this origin story of my life together with Christine comes from the acknowledgment of all I did not choose, cannot remember—that the story itself is a kind of speculation, full of omission and hypothesis.

Here is one hypothesis: My truck sliding on the ice off the highway, flipping end over end, was one of the best things that ever happened to me. It clarified things. It clarified *me*. The accident was a gift that—for reasons I will never understand and cannot now explain—I was lucky not only to see but also to accept. Who knows why I decided to call Christine? I don't. I was as much of a mystery to myself then as I am now.

I tried Christine's Valentine's rock deodorant only once; it did not have a discernible fragrance or leave much of a trace. It really was some kind of rock and nothing like my father's Old Spice, which I didn't like either. I don't like deodorant and rarely use it, and this irks Christine, a problem she's trying to solve to this day.

That morning in January, standing with Christine on the sidewalk in Seattle, huge trees all around, the cars rushing past on Aloha near the border of Volunteer Park, I told her that when I'd been sitting in my gown in the ER in Kalispell and they were threading the stitches through my scalp, tugging hard with the needle, I realized that I wanted to call her and tell her what had happened and that I wanted to come see her.

I said, "I don't care that you're in a relationship now. It's not going to last. I'll wait. I don't care how long. I'm not in a hurry. I'd like a second chance, if you'll give me one."

Christine's eyes got big, and she shook her head. She broke into a grin. She said, "I'll think about it."

We were skiing above tree line, ten days into a twenty-one-day trip in the Badger–Two Medicine Wilderness. The guys were tired. They wanted to quit. They said so again and again. "We're fucking drug addicts," they

said. “This is ridiculous.” They hated the woods. The snow. The whole thing sucked. “There is no fucking point to any of this,” they said. “Here’s how you get sober,” they said. “You go way back into the nowhere woods, and you get really fucking cold.” They had never been so cold. This was the same group of young men I’d taken to the frozen waterfall on the outskirts of the ranch only a few weeks before. “OK, fine,” I said. “Let’s stop for lunch.”

The wind was howling, and they couldn’t hear me, so I repeated this, shouting. We were on the crest of a ridgeline, steep drop-offs to either side. We each pulled a sled with all our belongings and group gear: food, extra clothes, stoves, tarps, sleeping pads and sleeping bags rated at minus-twenty degrees. We unbuckled harnesses attached to our waists, which were attached to two six-foot metal poles, which attached to the sleds, which we sat on while we ate. Except that when Aaron unbuckled his harness and turned to say something to Curtis, his sled started to slide, and we all watched it slowly gain speed and then accelerate over the lip of the ridge. We watched it briefly become airborne before dropping out of sight into the trees. Aaron was blond and thin and sixteen, and he began swearing and screaming and punching himself in the side of his head. I shouted at him to stop, and after a moment, he did. I told him that this was my fault, not his. We should not have stopped here. I should have known better but didn’t. We were going to make our way down the mountain and find the sled. It was going to be OK.

He stared at me. They all stared at me; they did not believe me. Then I said what we all knew. It would be dark in only a few hours, and if we didn’t find the sled before nightfall, one of us would have to spend the night in the ten-degree cold without a sleeping bag. That would be me, not Aaron. And so we made our way down the mountain, and that night I burritoed myself in a tarp in all my clothes and the guys slept more or less on top of me in their sleeping bags. All through the night, each of them, at different times, woke to check on me. They said, “Scoutmaster, you OK?” And “Don’t be dead. We don’t want to wake up sleeping on your frozen body. We have no idea how to work the map and compass.” At dawn, I crawled out from under them and made the biggest bonfire in the state of Montana that winter. One by one, the guys woke and stood beside me and warmed themselves, and later that morning, we found Aaron’s sled, undamaged, with all his belongings, and we whooped and hollered with a collective, thunderous glee that rang out through the forest.

GREGORY MARTIN

For years, when someone asked how Christine and I met, I told a version of this story. I kept it light. I wanted the listener to shake their head, marvel at my luck and audacity, and I wanted Christine to roll her eyes. But at some point, I realized that this was nothing like the way I felt when memories of that time came to me unbidden. I never relived the accident and its aftermath. Instead, I would see myself driving over the Kila hill, the sky clearing, and arriving in Kalispell safely. I imagined not the accident but its absence, an alternate reality, without Christine, without my sons. Shaking myself free from this was like startling awake from a nightmare.

My youngest son now goes to college in Montana. He loves backcountry skiing, and in winter, he drives to trailheads on winding, ice-bound mountain roads in terrible weather, just like I did thirty years ago. I've told my son about my accident, about what can happen even when you're vigilant, about how little control we have. I became interested in the way these different versions of the story informed one another, with the story from the recent present—that a father tells his son—submerged in the essay, like in Hemingway's iceberg principle.

Gregory Martin is the author of two nonfiction books, *Stories for Boys*, a Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers selection, and *Mountain City*, a New York Times Notable Book. He directs the creative writing program at the University of New Mexico.