

on skiing

# Road Trip

BY DEVON O'NEIL

**THE LAST THING YOU WANT TO** hear while traveling at 80 mph on a barren interstate in rural Montana is an expletive indicating a loss of control. Yet that's what my twin brother, Sean, gasped as we began to fishtail around a shaded, icy curve.

*"Sbit."*

It was last January, and we were on our way to the steeps of Bridger Bowl. The trip had taken months of coordination due to circumstances that also served as its inspiration: Sean has two children under six, and my wife was expecting our first in April. We aimed to steal one last adventure together before time got even tighter.

I left my home in Breckenridge at 6:30 a.m. and met Sean in Denver. I drove the first eight hours. We traded places in Sheridan. Precisely 54 miles later, at 3:40 p.m., Sean felt the tires slide on I-90. I was looking down at a CD. I realized we were in trouble when I looked up and saw us skimming across the road to the right. People say it happens fast, and it does.

We spun a quarter-rotation clockwise before the front left wheel caught some snow on the shoulder. My truck, a 2008 Nissan, flipped two and a half times and landed upside down in a ditch. The roof collapsed eight inches. All the windows blew out. The side airbags deployed but were punctured by flying glass. I recall the airbag next to my head inflating and then popping, and thinking that wasn't a good development.

We rolled in 20 inches of snow, which cushioned the impact and probably saved our lives. It also left the cab half-full of what felt like avalanche debris when we stopped, suspended upside down by our seatbelts.

The scariest thought of my life ensued from there. For an instant, I wondered whether Sean was alive.



"Are you OK?" I asked. My voice was quivering.

"Yeah," he replied, obviously still taking stock of what happened. "Are you?"

Shards of glass had shredded my head and arms. Soon my white shirt would be soaked in blood, an ominous image for the motorist across the highway to see when he stopped a minute after the crash and called 911. Next came a Bureau of Indian Affairs officer (we crashed on the Crow Reservation), then a state patrolman, then the paramedics a few minutes later. I remember wondering why no one used any sirens. Staring at my totaled truck, I felt like we'd won the lottery.

The crash left a debris field 70 yards long, including the roof rack and three pairs of skis. We never found Sean's poles.

"Ski trip: over," Sean said.

Our paramedics were a pair of middle-age women who worked Tuesdays and Thursdays and reminded me of the movie *Fargo*. "The Flat Corner got ya," Patty said once she knew we were OK. "There's no bank. It just turns."

Sean went to talk to the state trooper, which left me filling in the gals. "Skiers, eh?" Patty said, raising her eyebrows. When she finished her evaluation of my cuts, she looked at Karen. "Maybe some glue for the head wound and a stitch or two on the arm, but I think he's all right." She turned toward me. "You could probably even still go skiing."

We caught a ride with Travis, the driver of the tow truck, back to Sheridan and unloaded the truck at his junkyard. Then Travis dropped us off at the Best Western. Sean and I called our wives. I think all four of us felt a tug to reunite in our homes, but by then Sean and I were intent on continuing. It felt like we had an obligation.

It was nine below when we picked up a rented Chevy Impala at the Sheridan airport the next morning and once more set out toward Bozeman. I drove cautiously past the crash site, marveling at our good fortune and feeling some weird cosmic connection to this poorly engineered curve. We boarded our first lift at Bridger at one o'clock—just four hours later than we originally planned.

This is not a story about skiing the best powder of your life after totaling your truck. We spent our weekend punching through a quarter-inch rain crust.

Sunday morning, a friend gave us a ride to the airport. A storm was moving in as we took off, and we watched the fat flakes fall outside the window, down one vehicle but up in perspective.

The trip had been a bust in so many ways. But it also reminded each of us, lest we forget, what matters in our lives. It damn sure isn't a pickup truck or powder snow. I leaned back in my seat and fell asleep, full of life and gratitude. ●

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