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For the love of Lio

WHEN HIS WIFE WAS KILLED IN AN ACCIDENT AND HIS SON WAS LUCKY TO ESCAPE WITH HIS LIFE, MARTIN SPINELLI LEARNED THE TRUE MEANING OF FAMILY

Portrait by Debra Hurford Brown

Many parents search for the exceptional in their children. They look for and nurture the skills and qualities that might see their offspring stand above the rest. They fret about reading levels and music lessons, grades and exams.

These things are relatively inconsequential to Martin Spinelli. That his son Lio is just like any other normal ten-year-old boy is something to be celebrated, and is exceptional enough in itself.

In September 2006, the car Lio's mother Sasha was driving was hit by a lorry while she stopped on the hard shoulder of the M2. The driver - who was later given two-and-a-half years in prison for dangerous driving - had fallen asleep at the wheel. Sasha was killed and her four-year-old son was thrown from the car and left with horrific injuries.

Martin, who had kissed them both goodbye as normal that morning after they left their home in Lewes together, was given a police escort to the hospital where

Interview by
Alice Wyllie



he found his son in a coma with brain injuries and a badly damaged leg. Sasha was dead.

One doctor offered a prognosis which saw Lio spending the rest of his life in a vegetative state. Another said he would never walk again. Yet another simply said that nothing was certain, the only prognosis Martin could bear to absorb.

The little boy's recovery, however, amazed even the most optimistic of the physicians who saw him in the days after the crash. While there will be operations and therapy in his future, after a long battle in hospital, today he is a healthy, happy boy with a father who continues to be in awe of his resilience.

I meet father and son in the unlikely setting of The Groucho Club, the famous Soho private members' club, where the great and the good of the London media scene are today lunching loudly. Lio, in a bright-blue T-shirt and matching blue watch, is getting used to being something of a media personality himself.

Martin, an eloquent American-born academic, has written a book about their experiences, *After the Crash*, and during the promotion of its release, Lio has fielded lots of questions about his remarkable story. Today he sits next to me, quietly munching on carrot sticks and playing a game on my iPad while his dad relives the events that have come to shape both of their lives.

"The moment I saw Lio in intensive care everything just evaporated," he says simply. "My previous life just disappeared and there was just me and Lio in the hospital bed."

Martin soon created a blog to keep friends and family updated on his son's progress. Along with notes and diaries kept by both of Lio's grandmothers, it acted as a backbone for the book, which was fleshed out with his memories of events, charting everything from the moment Lio woke from his coma to his long, slow recovery and the painful process of grieving for the loss of one family member while simultaneously hauling another one back from the brink.

As he talks, Martin often looks at Lio as if he's addressing him directly, telling him, not me, just how brave he has been, just how strong he is and how amazing his mother was. Oblivious to the attention, Lio, who is perhaps too young to fully comprehend what he's been through, keeps playing his game.

"I wanted to give Lio a document that he could have as he grows up," says Martin, looking at his son. "A document that he can refer back to, to understand how incredibly brave, strong and dedicated, determined and tenacious he was and how hard he worked for his recovery in spite of lots of people throwing down lots of limitations. And I also wanted to give him a document about how wonderful his mom was."

A part-time lecturer in media, film and music at the University of Sussex, Martin was a published writer before the crash. Combined with a typically American openness and willingness to analyse his emotions, his clear, candid writing is powerful and tells a story of recovery more than one of loss.

The last six years have changed his outlook entirely,

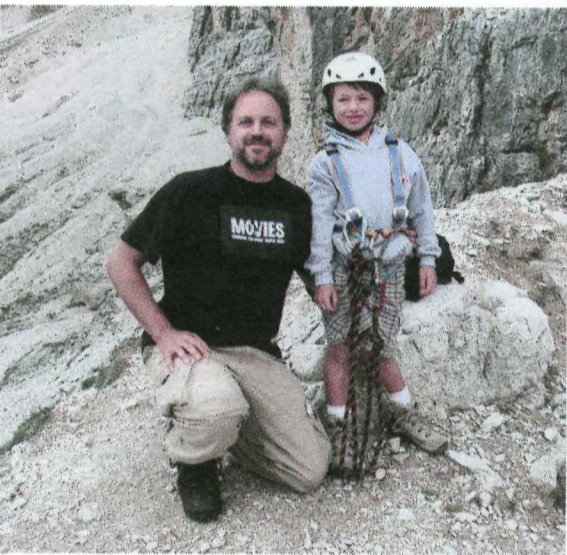
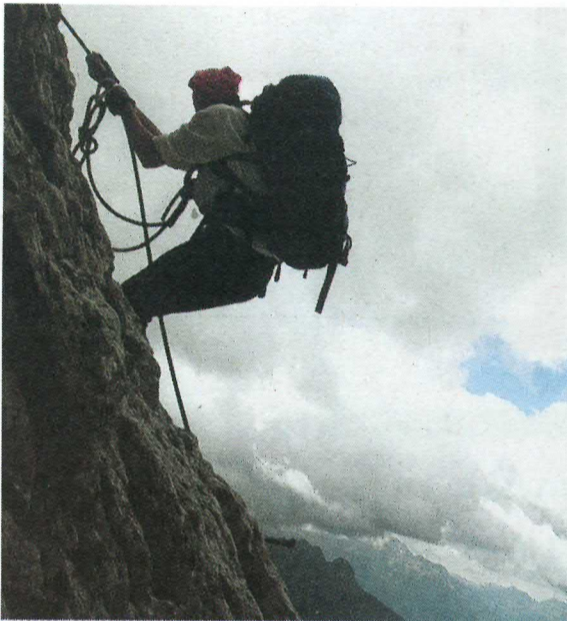
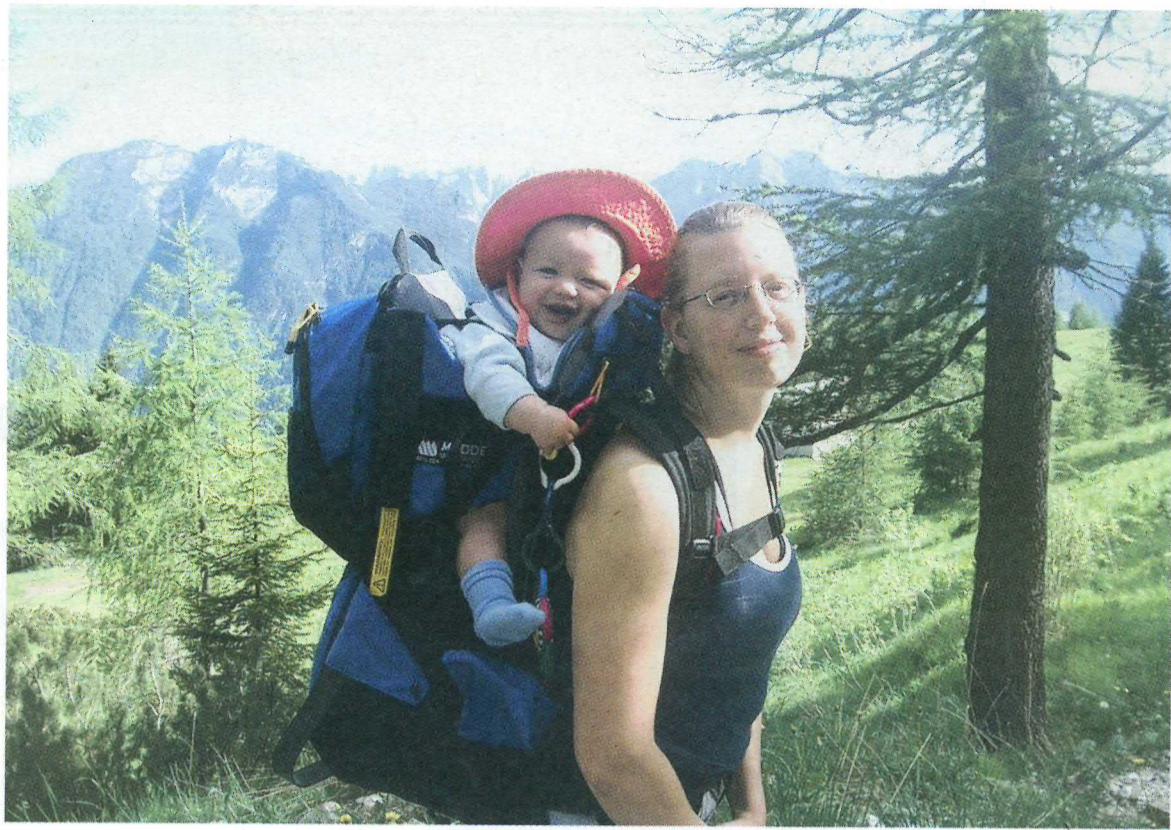
"I've learned not to live so much in my head, to live in my heart a little bit more"

and he talks repeatedly of "what's really important". One passage in the book describes meeting Tony Blair at 10 Downing Street. Martin and Lio have their photograph taken with the then Prime Minister and Martin asks Blair how old his own son - also called Leo - is.

"He couldn't remember," says Martin, a look of complete incredulity on his face. "He fumbled around for the date. He fumbled around for the age of his son. And I thought in that moment that wow, I've got a really, really strong relationship with Lio. I've got the kind of relationship that very few fathers and sons have."

"I think that it was forged in hospital when he was so near to death, when his mother had passed away," he adds. "All of those things added to the intensity of the experience which added to the strength of this bond that we had. The sense of what's really important, I absorbed it the instant I saw him in intensive care."

Before the crash, the Spinellis were a close family. Sasha - also an academic - was working on a book on the subject of beauty, and her last pieces of writing,



which Martin describes as some of her best, are dotted throughout the book. "That writing is uncanny," says Martin, "because in the paragraphs she wrote days before the crash there are lots of meditations on death and on change. I get gooseflesh thinking about that and I can't explain it in a way that makes sense in an academic vernacular. I don't try to anymore."

Martin remembers Sasha as a fantastic mother, something he is endlessly keen to communicate to Lio. The three of them travelled regularly (Lio speaks Italian)

with family photographs in the book showing them walking together in the Dolomites. One poignant photo shows just Martin and Lio in the same area after Sasha's death.

The intensity of Martin's grief following the death of his wife is portrayed with disarming starkness in *After The Crash*. One difficult passage sees him describing the moment he tells Lio that Sasha has died. Four years old and on the road to recovery, the broken little boy is too young to grasp the situation fully, but old enough to understand that he won't see his mother again.

Then there's the letter Martin writes to the Belgian driver of the lorry, an attempt to reach out to him and acknowledge that he too must be suffering. The letter was never sent since after the driver was released from prison he was repatriated and became uncontactable, but it is published in full in the book. Such emotionally-charged moments are broken up by the mundane and frustrating practicalities the family must address; compensation payouts, insurance battles and medical bills.

Today Martin acknowledges that the crash could easily have had a different impact on his outlook. He might have become bitter, morose or turned to substance abuse, he says. That things didn't turn out that way was not due to any active attempts on his part to forge a positive path out of the tragedy. It just happened that way, and he hopes that his book - in addition to being a way for a future Lio to better understand his own story and his mother's love for him - will give hope and guidance to others whose lives have been similarly upturned.

"I realised that my writing had a value to people," he says, "and that the way I told the story moved and affected people, that it could help them think and feel in new and productive ways in their own lives. I would love to have people who read the book and are experiencing similar things to not lose heart and to take from it a grain of hope, not just for a child's recovery but for the possibility of taking a tragedy, meeting it head on and making it into something good, an opportunity to figure out what's really important to you. I learned this from Lio, as he was going through the different stages of recovery, battling forward, never getting discouraged, just doing what needed to be done."

Martin is an optimist. Tragedies happen, he says, and "what matters is not that they happen but how you approach them". He is sunny and happy and takes immeasurable pleasure in his son, a level of pleasure that can only come, one imagines, from nearly losing him: "The small, wonderful little things that he does every day, whether it's laughing with his friends in the playground or kicking a football on a Saturday afternoon,



Clockwise from left: Martin Spinelli with Lio ten days after the crash; father and son on a climbing expedition; Sasha climbing in the same place while pregnant with Lio; Sasha with Lio in the Dolomites

“My previous life just disappeared, there was just me and Lio in the bed”

I take an almost euphoric pleasure in those moments now in a way that I couldn't have before. I was a good dad, but I was not the dad that I am now.”

What has the process of recovery taught him about himself? “I've learned not to live so much in my head, to live in my heart a little bit more, to feel things before I think them. That's something I want for Lio as he grows up, to know that it's OK to think things after you feel them, to experience them, to want them, desire

them and hold them before the critical impulse kicks in and tells you how you should be feeling or acting.”

Before the crash, Martin was “a driven and committed academic” who was devoted to his career. “There was always another project to say yes to, there was always another line to add to my CV.” To say that the crash gave him a sense of perspective would be a gross understatement. Today, the only job that really matters is being a parent to Lio.

What does he understand now about parental love? He smiles a smile that suggests he doesn't know where to begin. “I've learned that parental love is boundless. I've also learned the value of patience in a way that I don't think I could have appreciated it before. Being a single parent you're constantly on call, you're the one who has to resolve everything. You can get frustrated and I would be lying if I said I never do. But I've learned that patience has immense rewards. I'm a far more patient person than I was six years ago, far more charitable and open.”

As for Lio, he's happy, content, normal. He talks about Harry Potter and asks about my dictaphone. He flexes his muscles (he's been doing push-ups with a friend) and winds up his dad. Before the crash, his parents were delighted to hear from his nursery teachers that he was exceptionally bright with an exciting future ahead of him. The fallout of the accident interrupted his development, but today Lio Spinelli is exceptional in a more unique way.

“By all accounts, from everyone who knew him, Lio was an exceptionally bright and clever child [before the crash]” says Martin, as Lio flops into his side, beginning to tire of the long interview. “But in actual fact he was exceptionally bright and clever in a very mundane and typical way.”

“There are exceptionally bright and clever children in every classroom in Britain. Now I think of Lio as an exceptional child because of what he's been through, because of what he's managed to achieve and because of his own strength of character in pulling himself back from a terrible prognosis and the loss of his mother to create for himself a really happy and fulfilling childhood.”

He ruffles his son's hair: “Now I think of Lio as exceptional in an exceptional way.”

After the Crash by Martin Spinelli is published by Mainstream, £7.99 ■■■

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