I recently came across this note in my agenda. Nearly illegible and several sizes larger than my regular handwriting, it couldn’t possibly be mine, but I had indeed scrawled it two days after being doored on Bloor Street.

On July 10, 2016, I was biking east on Bloor, just west of Ossington. It was about 1:40 pm, a bright and dry day. I was biking more slowly and carefully than usual because I was wedged between parked cars and steady traffic—yes, the door zone, an especially dangerous place to ride during Sunday shopping hours, but the primary space available on this stretch.

I saw the parked car door open and I half-swerved to avoid it. The door collided with my bike, throwing me into a passing minivan. I hit the van once, broadside, ricocheted off, hit it again. I wobbled alongside, eventually coming to a stop in front of the van, both feet on the ground. My rear pannier, broken in the accident, fell to the pavement. My bike lock, clipped to my pannier, had gouged the minivan in two places.

“Car hit me. I hit car.”

Had I collided with a different vehicle, going a little faster, the results could have been catastrophic. Indeed, two thoughts ran through my head in this instant: “I can’t believe this is happening to me again” and “This is the moment when I die.”

I turned around to face the driver who had doored me. “I am so sorry,” she said, aghast. “I didn’t see you at all.”
I wear bright colours. My bike has yellow fenders. But that is beside the point. I could have been wearing the same colour as the pavement—she would have spotted me if she’d used a simple shoulder check or the “Dutch reach” (http://99percentinvisible.org/article/dutch-reach-clever-workaround-keep-cyclists-getting-doored/).

I pulled over. Witnesses gathered. I gave my contact information to both drivers. Once they were reassured that I was not physically injured, the drivers basically left me to my own devices while they exchanged insurance information. No one called the police. The well-meaning witnesses left the scene without taking my information or giving me theirs. I thought I had the information I needed, but when I checked later all I had was a photo of the driver who’d doored me, the insurance information of the minivan driver, and a photo of the minivan.

My legs were shaking. I started to cry. In a state of high stress, I continued on to my original destination, in post-traumatic reflex mode.

Where was I biking to? I had a date. It was the last day of the Fringe Festival and we were going to a play. I texted to say I had been hit by a car and would be late. I then pushed my bike to the theatre.

We sat outside the theatre so I could regroup. I badly wanted to forget the whole thing had happened, not only because it was traumatic but because this type of event happens all the time. The majority of cyclists I know have had run-ins with cars—near misses or minor collisions have become the norm.

Twice I’ve been hit and thrown off my bike; neither time was my fault. I suffered soft tissue damage and reduction in mobility that required months of physiotherapy, not to mention distressing experiences with insurance companies. But I always got back on my bike.

My friends frequently point to me as the safest cyclist they know: I adhere to all the rules of the road, I’m always ablaze with lights, and I have been known to rock a reflective vest and a flag. For a long time I was a Cycle Toronto volunteer, and I co-founded The Reading Line (http://www.thereadingline.ca), an annual reading festival on two wheels, which advocates for improved infrastructure for all road users, not just cyclists.

I discovered that three other cyclists had been hit within a four-hour period

When I returned home that evening, I discovered that three other cyclists had been hit within a four-hour period. Of course, these were only the accidents that had been reported to the police. Just a week before, a cyclist was killed at Christie and Dupont after being struck.

Monday morning I was too rattled to ride, so I walked the hour to the office. I decided to report the accident, if only to give the police and the City a record. That’s when I scrawled that brief account—“Car hit me. I hit car.”—and more details about the time and location. I was afraid that the police would blame me for the accident. A friend gently reminded me that the police are not supposed to blame the victim.

On Tuesday evening, I called it in. The dispatcher told me that as they “take dooring very seriously,” they would send a police officer to take my report. I waited three hours for the constable to arrive, gave my report, and left it in their hands. I was confident I had done the “right thing.”

I was too spooked to ride—and that’s saying a lot, given my skill level and previous accidents. I parked my bike and walked everywhere: to and from the office, yoga, the food co-op. I kept checking in with the police about the “result of the investigation.” Just over a week after the accident I’d handed the constable the identification of both drivers after the minivan driver had called to tell me the vehicle had been repaired, and
I’d asked for the information of the other driver.

I heard from the constable in early October. He told me that “no charges would be laid.” When I asked why, given that dooring carries a fine and demerits in Ontario, he told me: “I’ve used discretion in this case and chose not to lay any charges as the damages and injuries were not serious in nature. Take care.”

You either break the law or you don’t

This refusal to lay charges is confusing and unacceptable. The officer cannot use discretion when applying charges—you either break the law or you don’t, and injuries suffered as a result should not come into account. It is also inappropriate for the officer to overlook mental and emotional distress as injury. Were I to run a red light on my bike, I should be charged, regardless of the outcome.

I was told that the police take dooring seriously, and just a year ago Ontario increased its penalty for dooring, from $60–$500 to a $365 set fine and three demerit points.

Should I have stayed at the scene and called police? Likely. Did I do the best I could in a very stressful situation and try to do the right thing after the fact? Absolutely. Should the police have charged the woman who hit me? Without a doubt.

Pilot bike lanes were installed on Bloor in August, and I mounted my bike for the first time since the accident for a victory lap with my fellow cyclists. Then I parked again and resumed walking. I have been on my bike only a handful of times since, usually when I need to be across town (biking is generally faster than the TTC) or when I need to be somewhere very late or very early and there are few cars on the road. I am still a confident rider, but I have zero confidence in other road users. This accident has completely affected where I travel, the range of activities I choose to do, and the errands I run along the way.

The pilot bike lanes stop at Shaw, just a few blocks from where the accident occurred. Had there been a bike lane, I would not have been doored. Approximately 83% of motor vehicles in Toronto during rush hour are single occupancy (https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/99-012-x/99-012-x2011003_1-eng.cfm), meaning that while there’s 100% dooring-risk when biking on the driver’s side, there’s a significantly less risk on the passenger side (in a parking-protected bike lane). What’s more, when you’re doored on the driver’s side you’ll likely fall into the active roadway instead of the sidewalk. If there were protected bike lanes along the entire of Bloor Street and throughout the city, I would feel safer riding again.

Even with this trauma and my disappointment in the police’s response, I know I was lucky. I miss the freedom my bike affords me and I’m working up to getting back in the saddle. But I want the police, the City, and all road users to learn from my experience. It’s not enough to encourage people to ride. We need safe infrastructure and proper enforcement of the law if we’re going to create a safe and healthy city.

Thanks to Amanda Lewis for this blog post. Amanda is a freelance editor and co-founder of The Reading Line (http://thereadingline.ca/) book ride.

We want to hear your stories about the impact of infrastructure as you ride your bike around Toronto. Does it matter? What makes you feel safe? What actually makes you more safe? Share your #bikeTO stories via social media.