

Love , Electricity and Epic Commutes

I fell in love with an electrician. He brought me flowers, lit up my world with compact fluorescents and wound a copper wire engagement ring around my finger.

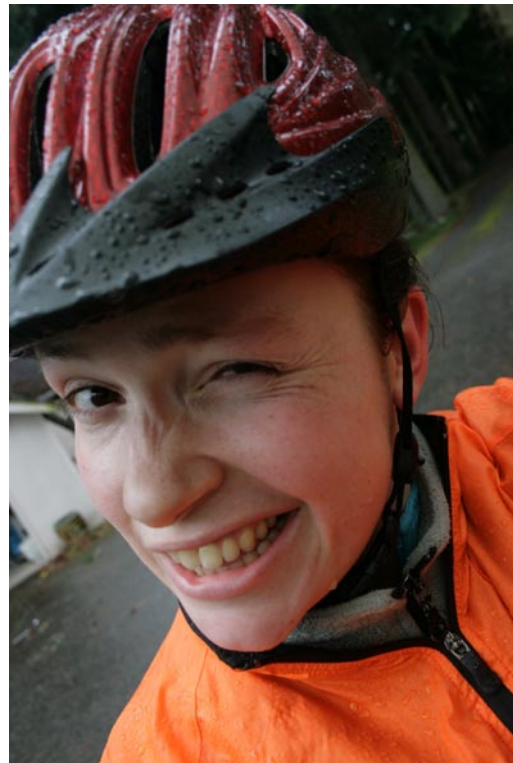
The chance to live in a house on Elk Lake brought us from Vancouver to Saanich and I started a new job at Bike to Work Victoria. With the job came a 40 km round trip commute which I dreamed would be heroic but which proved to be, despite my trusty wonder woman T-shirt, impractical.

It's not that it can't be done. I see them out there — blackberries tucked neatly into panniers, quads like sledge hammers — these graceful athletes who made Victoria the Commuter Cycling Capitol of Canada. It's also not that I'm incapable — in another lifetime I rode daily from East Vancouver up to SFU, after which I moved to South Africa and exhausted my guardian angels by cycling to work in Johannesburg. I was a ferocious, self-propelled woman.

But in 2005, an accordion bus knocked me out of a bike lane and off my bike for years. Now older, out of shape and skittish in traffic, my new job at Bike to Work motivated me to try again. And try I did, but on my first day, after hours of getting lost, rained on and intimidated by aggressive motorists, I found myself sobbing melodramatically at the side of road less than a click from home. Even as I was phoning my fiancé to come rescue me, I resolved to make it work - but how? The answer in the advice of seasoned bike commuter Bill Scriven is "a few kilometers at a time". A Victoria triathlete, Bill cycled to his work as a school teacher for over a decade. His advice for new long distance bicycle commuters is to take it easy and not to do too much too fast. "Bike to a bus stop part way, and break up the trip, then build to the whole distance."

The second spark of a solution came from my fiancé, who presented me with a new Currie Electric bike from Greenworld Electric. (For commutes over 20 km, I recommend a second battery pack and an extra charger to use at work). A protective instinct also inspired him to install a mardigras of head lights, blinkers and reflective strips. The hardcore ex-triathlete in me balked at the pedal assist, but the reality is that the electric bike allows me to pace myself, and keep up a consistent speed on inclines. For me it's a perfect stepping stone while I build up my endurance. Other good choices are light road bikes, or hybrids, if your route includes trails.

More solutions came in rapid succession. Thorough route planning knocked another 45 minutes off my commuting



time; a modest investment in decent raingear and a pair of fenders from Mountain Equipment Co-op help keep me dry; and, as for the fear, a little research revealed that, statistically, cycling is actually safer than driving a car. And to regain confidence in downtown traffic I'm taking advantage of a Free Safety Skills Course offered through Bike to Work Victoria. Instructor Patrick O'Connor teaches that lack of skill is the chief danger to cyclists, and training in traffic cycling techniques is the best antidote.

Emilie Crosbie, who recently cycled from Vancouver to Saskatchewan with the Otesha Project, offered simple advice for getting back in the saddle, "make it fun and don't beat yourself up." She routinely skips out on busy streets and recommends choosing routes where you get to go by something beautiful.

Now I'm falling in love with the Galloping Goose trail, with its ocean views and tree-lined green-ways. My bike commute time matches the national average for motorists of about an hour. I plan to beat that average out over the summer as I tone up these wobbly thighs. I alternate cycling, riding the bus and carpooling to keep things in balance. By the time Bike to Work Week comes along in June, I will be fully in gear to join the ranks of over 6000 cyclists who participate in this annual celebration of commuter cycling.

And two weeks into my mission, the love-of-my-life electrician said something more useful than any other advice: "I believe you can do it".

Ronya Lake