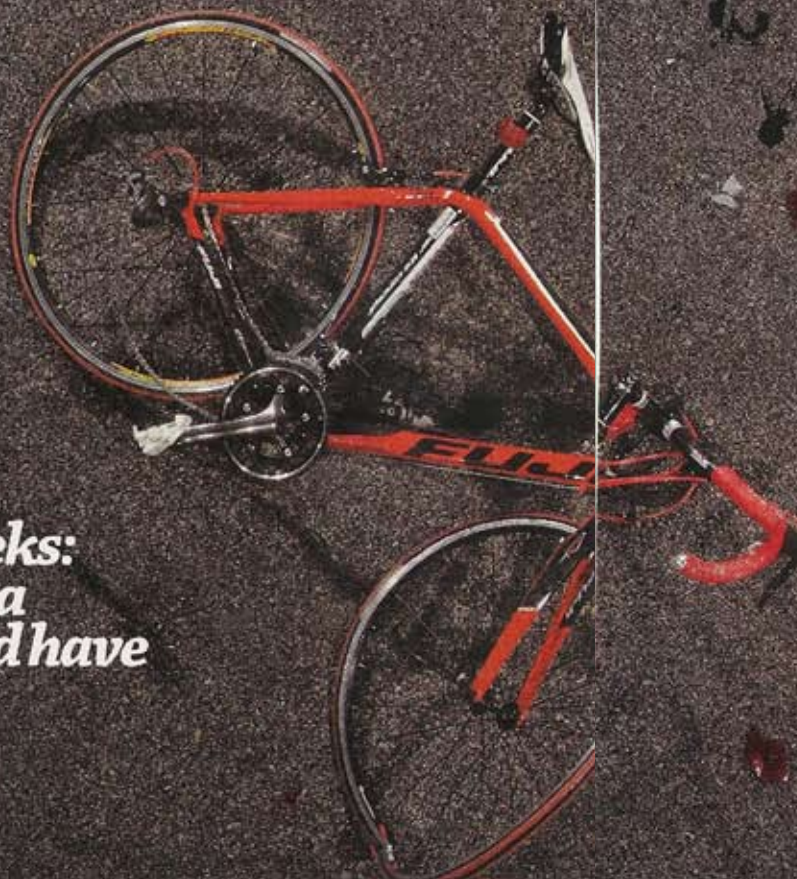




**oof!**

*A beautifully hot summer day, that weightless feeling of a great ride, then that sickening crunch you'll hear in your head for weeks: What a drag it is getting hit by a truck—especially when it could have so easily been avoided.*

*by Steven Slon  
photographed by Brent Humphreys*





*It starts with a sound,*

# a kind of crunch.

A sound bad dreams are made of. The kind that stays with you, that comes back to you for weeks. It's your helmet and your bicycle hitting the side of the truck—for chrissake, a truck. Which was plainly alongside of you a moment ago. You sensed its presence, felt its proximity, smelled its diesel, but it was of a different universe, the world of heavy things held down by the earth's pull, while you were weightless, soaring in a slipstream. For a brief moment, you had entertained the fantasy of grabbing hold of that post standing up in the flatbed and letting the truck pull you gloriously down the road. Ha-ha, but no: You were weightless, in that groove that occurs 25 miles into a ride when there is no pain, no effort, and so you'd let that little notion go. But when you looked up, something was out of place. The truck wasn't alongside you; it was in front of you. Like, inches in front of you. And it registered that the truck had made a sharp right turn, but you couldn't stop.

That's when you hear the crunch of your helmet. Then, another sound, "Oof!" as your breath is compressed and blown out. Time expands and for a long-seeming fraction of a second, you are hanging in the air before you are on the ground, bouncing. Sliding to a stop. The truck tire stopping a few inches short of you. Your first thought is, incongruously: *Turn off the music.* But that seems too complicated, so you just yank out the earbuds. The music remains, but tinny and distant. Then you are still for a few seconds, holding on, holding everything in, first mentally inspecting yourself, then with your hands and with little movements. There is no pain, and nothing feels separated or in the wrong place.

You say, "Give me a hand," to the frightened-looking man with the crew cut who appears standing above you with his mouth all twisted up. You think, *you're not supposed to move*, but screw that. You're going to get up just to prove to yourself that you can. When his hand reaches down, you take it and you are now on your feet, still patting yourself all over to see if you're broken. Amazingly, though you are bleeding, though you bounced and slid on macadam, it seems you are not broken.

"I'm really sorry, man," he says. And he must mean

it, because he says it again a couple more times.

I'm the one who feels sorry. This is the last day of a beach vacation. Mid-July. There's a wonderful flat strip of beach road I've been riding for the past hour, 15 miles to the southern tip of this sandbar island into a stiff headwind, then 15 miles back with a lovely tailwind. I was flying...

A guy leans out the window of an ice cream truck that's just pulled up. "You want some water?"

Water? No, I don't want some water. I want to be back where I was 15 seconds ago, soaring down the road, lighter than air, free of gravity, free of the earth.

Now the truck driver is losing his cool. Instead of saying he's sorry, he's moaning. He's gotten back into the truck, into the passenger seat. He is rocking back and forth, rhythmically, chanting to himself, "I coulda killed him, I coulda killed him, I coulda killed him."

A patrolman arrives. He asks me if I'm okay and what my name is and how old I am. As I say 56, I suddenly feel that this number cannot be correct. It is incongruous that a man of 56 would be, in no particular order, a) dressed in spandex, b) bleeding from a run-in with a truck, and c) only, it seems, marginally injured.

HE IS ROCKING  
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"I COULDA  
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It's hot. Midday, mid-July hot. A kind of heat that drenches you in seconds, particularly now that you've stopped gliding, your body heated up like a furnace and there's no more cooling breeze. Why did I refuse that water? And where is the cop? He has left me sitting; he has left me bleeding for what seems like quite a long time, five minutes, 10 minutes.

The cop is sitting in his car filling out his report. I move to the shade by the side of a store. A young man opens the door of the nearby store. I seem to be an object of some interest, thanks to the cop car and the mangled bike and the bleeding. Behind the kid in the doorway, an older man leans over his shoulder. More people are stopping to look. No one comes close. They just want to look.

I start to wonder incongruously if someone will steal my bike. It's a Fuji carbon job, of recent vintage. Good street value. Normally, I wouldn't let it out of my sight. Now it's on the ground, across the street, out of view from where I'm sitting. Will someone walk by and see what a gorgeous machine this is, not notice the patrol car, not notice me in my bike attire, and make a grab for it? Really, no. But I can't displace the idea that someone might, so I get up, walk over and pick up my bicycle. The front wheel is twisted up pretty bad. The frame looks okay. Nineteen pounds, and picking it up hurts. I carry it back to where I can see it. Then I sit again.

"I'm sorry," says the cop, returning to where I'm sitting. That's the second person now who is sorry in the space of a few minutes. He's sorry because he's been trying to talk to the truck driver to ask him all the basic questions that I had answered—who are you? How old are you? Where do you live? The driver had started to explain that he was

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## goof!

*Six mistakes the author made—and how to avoid them*

### LEAVE THE MP3 AT HOME

Even though riding while listening to music can be enjoyable, headphones often limit or drown out your ability to anticipate passing vehicles. Listening to music while you ride might even be illegal in your state. If you choose not to heed our advice, just take care by turning the volume down and listening to music only out of the right earbud.

### BECOME MORE VISIBLE

While the shoulder is often the calmest and safest-seeming part of the road, riding too close to the curb can tempt motorists to try to squeeze past you even in heavy traffic. Many cycling-safety experts believe (and some studies have shown) that taking up part of the lane actually makes you safer. You're more visible riding slightly to the left of the white line, and to pass you, drivers have to move into the other lane instead of trying to share one with you.

### BE PATIENT POST-CRASH

Even though you may feel strong enough to move, take a few extra minutes to get up slowly, unless you're lying in the middle of the road. Some injuries may not be recognizable due to bursts of adrenaline released by your body immediately after a crash. For head-on collisions and potential back or neck injuries, it is best not to move at all.

### DON'T LEAVE THE SCENE

Collect your belongings and bicycle, and sit tight in plain view of any police officers or EMT workers. Staying close to the scene of the accident forces the focus to remain on your health and condition.

### ACCEPT MEDICAL ATTENTION

When in doubt, get checked out. Some medical issues post-incident may not surface for a few hours or even days. Furthermore, hospitals can provide relevant documentation of immediate treatment, which will help with legal and insurance issues, whereas any undiagnosed injury may cause long-term issues.

### EXCHANGE INFORMATION

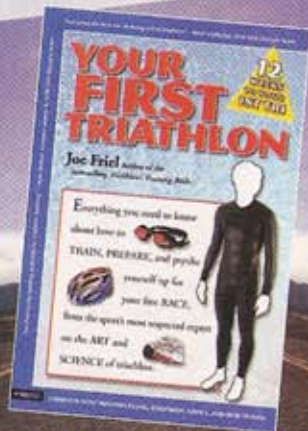
In any accident, take time to exchange information with your counterpart in the incident and the police. The easier it is to communicate in the days after the crash, the easier it will be to move on from the mishap.—Chris Worden



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lost, thought he saw the turnoff he was looking for, made a hard right and hit me, then realized he was in the wrong town and it was the wrong turn. He'd never seen me. But partway through his explanation, he stopped being able to speak coherently. He'd gone back to rocking back and forth, crying and saying, "I coulda killed him, I coulda killed him, I coulda killed him."

"This guy," says the cop apologetically, "is schizing out on me."

An ambulance whizzes past us. Doesn't stop. The cop says into his radio, "Hey, if you're not on emergency, can you come pick up another one?"

The ambulance brakes, turns around, pulls up to us. A middle-aged lady in an EMT uniform steps out, takes gauze pads and saline solution out of a box and wipes my cuts. I've got a broad streak of road rash on my shoulder and both knees. I expect the saline to sting. It doesn't.

That's it? I just got hit by a truck. I keep poking myself, feeling for something to be broken or out of place. My sternum is sore, but only when I push on it. I take a deep breath. Ribs seem fine.

The EMT asks me if I want to go to the hospital. I say no. It's a great beach day, and I'm not going to spend it in the ER. A few minutes later, another guy from the ambulance also asks me if I want to go to the hospital. I say no again. He hands me a form to sign so he doesn't have to take me.

The lady EMT helps the truck driver, still burbling about nearly killing me, into the back of the ambulance. It pulls away, carrying the guy who caused the accident, not the victim.

Another patrolman drives up. He looks young, just a kid, and is ordered by the first cop to give me a ride to the beach house I'm renting, a mile or so away. (I was so nearly home!) The young cop hoists my bicycle into his trunk, remarks that it looks like a nice bike. Yeah, I say. He has no idea. On the drive, he talks about what's on his mind, the rash of petty crime in the neighborhood, cars being broken into, bicycles being stolen. He doesn't seem to mind my bleeding on his seat.

I spend the rest of the day at the beach, not really enjoying it but determined not to miss it. It's my last day here. ☹

*Steven Slon, a writer and editorial consultant living in Washington, DC, has worked for Men's Health, Reader's Digest, AARP and other magazines.*

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