

GRAND THEFT BICYCLE

The phone rang last Thursday at 3pm, the time my 14-year-old son usually appears rosy-cheeked at the door after his ride home from school. "Hi Mom," he said. "My bike was stolen." Had this been our family's first bike theft, I would have greeted the news with the urge to throw up. I would have tried out a fancy word I don't generally use and found that "violated" was indeed how I felt. I would have been socked by a surprisingly strong grief.

But it wasn't our family's first bike theft. It was our sixth. So I had a different set of reactions. First came relief that he was safe. Next I sighed with resignation, as if a periodic New York City tax that I like to put out of my mind had come due again. I also felt complicity, because the silver Gary Fischer bike we would surely never see again had been our 13th birthday present to him. We knew when we bought it that it was a little pretty to spend hours every day locked to a signpost. But he's a dedicated cyclist, like us, and we thought he deserved it.

As seasoned victims, we knew the drill. He made the long, bikeless trudge home. Then we headed to the police precinct to fill out a theft report, which doesn't change anything but at least creates an official record. Then we started talking about a replacement bike, definitely a reconditioned one. And we weighed competing advice about locks, trying to find a more clever thief-thwarting locking system than the one he was already using.

The next day I had disturbing talks with two officers at the precinct. The crime prevention officer taught me a new expression: the "major seven." These are the "real" crimes: rape, murder, grand larceny, and the like. Bike theft is petty larceny or, as the officer who filled out our theft report spelled it, "petit" larceny, making it sound almost charming, which I guess it probably is to someone who books rapists and murderers. He told me the petty larceny numbers don't figure in the city's falling crime statistics—which is interesting given all the emphasis on quality of life.

"It's not something we can put a lot of resources into," he explained. He told me that the police are, however, focusing on the problem of kids' iPod thefts. These gadgets are often taken by force, or fear of force, which bumps the crime up to major-seven status. Meanwhile, the property clerk told me the only time the precinct gets recovered bikes is when they seize them during the monthly Critical Mass bike rides.

A statement of Mayor Bloomberg's started ringing in my ears. When asked about two recent cyclist deaths on the West Side bike path by motorists who were driving there illegally, he replied: "Even if they're in the right, [cyclists] are the lightweights. Every year, too many people are hit by cars—and bikes have to pay attention."

Creating safe bike parking for New York school kids—and safe riding conditions for all cyclists—would be a pain in the neck, I agree. But the city administration has shown its talent for creating new priorities. It's apparently rallying now to protect children's iPods. It has rallied to reorganize the school system several times over in the past five years. It rallies every month to protect the populace from Critical Mass, though for the life of me I can't understand how a single monthly gathering of bicyclists constitutes more of a public nuisance and menace than the conditions on the streets every day.

When I tell people about my son's bike theft, they often lament the loss of innocence that must accompany it. What upsets me more, and what I can't explain satisfactorily, is why the powers that be are so resistant to supporting bicycling as a serious mode of transport. Every day, bicyclists are relegated to the role of relative nobodies. We are stereotyped as lawless light-runners (a letters-to-the-editor staple as durable as the welfare queen in her Cadillac). And our problems are considered too small to count.

Mayor Bloomberg has it backward. We bicyclists *are* the ones paying attention. We already know the value we provide. What we need is the city's support in providing a basic level of safety for us and our vehicles. If more people rode regularly, this city (and this nation) could make a significant dent in our society's most pressing problems: obesity, lack of exercise, diabetes, asthma, pollution, global warming, and dependence on Middle Eastern oil. You might call them the major seven.

Michele Herman writes essays, articles and stories, and teaches fiction. She lives in Greenwich Village with her family.

Editor's Note: This article has been adapted by the author from "If It Were Only a Bike That Were Stolen," published in the February 16-22, 2007, issue of Downtown Express (http://www.downtownexpress.com/de_197/ifonlyitwerea.html). It appears here by kind permission from the author and publisher.