

# DETOUR

*Cycling, coma, and living  
with a brain injury*

*Nick  
Mercer*



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Cycling, coma and living with a brain injury

Nick Mercer

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*To the Victoria General Hospital Emergency Room doctors. Thank  
you!*

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# INTRO

There was no way I was going to stay in that boring hospital room for the entire weekend. I wouldn't see a doctor until Monday and I was ok anyway. Granted, I probably had some weird flu or something that was making moving around a bit tough, but that would likely go away sometime soon, so there was really no reason for me to stick around.

Besides, my friend Penney was there to see me. I guessed he was surprised to see me home now since I should be in Victoria or Ottawa. Nevertheless, I was in St. John's and I'd probably be flying to Ottawa for my co-op job once I had seen the doctors and had this weird flu, bug or something taken care of. For the time being, I was home and I'd be damned if I was going to spend my time in the Health Sciences Centre. I mean, I hadn't even stopped at the house yet.

"Come on Penney, we're going."

"What?"

"Yeah, just get closer to the bed and I'll climb on your back. You can carry me to your car, right? We'll just go to my house. I don't think I can really go downtown tonight, but we can get some food and a few beer and hang out. What's everybody up to this weekend?"

"I don't think so."

"Yeah, just get closer and turn around."

I spent the entirety of that conversation first trying to sit up, and then trying to climb on my friend's back. When I think back, I picture myself sitting up on my bed and actively trying to grab Penney's shoulders and spin him around so I could climb on his back to piggyback me out of there. When Penney tells me about it,

it's a bit different: Me struggling to sit up, constantly collapsing to my left, haplessly flailing my arms in his direction, all the while trying to convince him (and myself) that I was fine and I'd be out of there after the weekend.

That was September 12, 2003. I had arrived in St. John's via air ambulance at something like 3:30 or 4am the night before from Victoria, BC, where I had been doing a Master's degree at University of Victoria. That's a long day of travel; Victoria, BC to St. John's, NL, not that I remember much of it. I remember that it was a morning flight from Vancouver and we stopped in Calgary. We definitely stopped again before St. John's, but where or when, I don't know.

Actually, all of this started 6 weeks earlier in Victoria, BC. On Friday, August 1, 2003 I woke up at some ugly hour of the morning - I think it was 5:30 or 5:45 or so - as was my routine that summer. I was on a triathlon team and we had open water swim training on Friday mornings at 7am at Thetis Lake in Saanich, a suburb of Victoria. Although it rained a lot during the winter in Victoria, the summer of 2003 was very dry and aside from the odd 20 minute rain shower, it hardly rained. Runs or bike rides were rarely cancelled due to weather. This was good for me in terms of getting to swim practice at the lake.

I would bike a fairly easy 20 minutes to the lake early in the morning, swim, then cycle back to my apartment. I didn't have class on Fridays, so I would then shower, eat breakfast, rest and then hop back on my bike, meet up with my friend John outside a nearby Starbucks, meet up with our friend Dawn, and her twin sister Tanya at a gas station while cycling to meet up with Alain outside his apartment. Then it was off on a 2 or 3 hour ride around the outskirts of Victoria - an area my friends knew well. After a bunch of rides on Fridays, and other days throughout the summer, I began to know the routes as well.

This Friday was different. The aforementioned dry summer meant forest fires. Especially for the tree-crowded forests of Vancouver

Island (and all of BC). Either at class or on TV, the night before, Thursday, July 31, I heard that there was a fire in Thetis Lake Park. I remember going to bed, alarm set, listening to the radio updates, thinking “I guess we don’t have swimming tomorrow, I wonder if anyone will want to go on an earlier ride. I’ll just get up at 5:30 anyway.”

I woke up, started getting ready as usual and a triathlon teammate called to let me know that swim practice was cancelled. I don’t remember if I went back to bed or if I just stayed up for something to do, but either way we didn’t start our bike ride until our usual 11:00am or so. Once we all met up, we decided to take a different route than one of our 3 or 4 regular options. Luckily for me, this route would take us close to the hospital, even though the hospital itself was not very far from the forest fire at Thetis Lake.

I remember swim practice being cancelled, the rest is hearsay. After returning to Victoria in 2005 to complete my Master’s in Public Administration, I asked my good friend John to take me to see the route and to see where my ride ended.

The road is on a relatively long hill, surrounded by tall, sturdy trees. It takes something of an abrupt right turn, while continuing straight takes you down a grassy embankment, toward the bottom of which is a wooden fence and a few more tall, sturdy trees. After the road makes its right turn, there is a single house set back from the road down a gravel driveway. My memory of the day is sketchy, but based on the rest of the summer, the previous day, and the fact that we were cycling, I’m led to believe it was a hot, dry day. The wooded area in which we were cycling would have provided ample shade from the sun.

This was not a route I had been on before and when John took me back to that place I could see how much fun it would be to ride down that long hill, aggressively pushing down on the left pedal, trying to keep the tires in at least somewhat solid contact with the road. The road was quiet and there would have been hardly any traffic. We



would've been a group of 4 or 5 riders and my guess is that I tried to keep my speed into the turn by going wide and cutting across. Unfortunately for me, there was another cyclist riding up the hill that we were coming down and as I swerved to avoid him, I lost control of my bike, sending me airborne, off my bike and directly, head first into one of the awaiting, tall, sturdy trees guarding the wooden fence.

I regained consciousness 2 weeks later in the Intensive Care Unit of Victoria General Hospital (VGH). My friends in Victoria, many of whom were on the triathlon team, were at the hospital from the moment the ambulance took me in until the moment I was flown back to St. John's.

On the morning of September 11, 2003, I was awoken in my hospital room at Victoria General Hospital and my parents were there to tell me that they'd see me in Vancouver. They were getting the ferry from Victoria to Vancouver and we'd all be on the same plane from Vancouver to St. John's. Meanwhile, I would be on a stretcher all day with air ambulance paramedics/nurses and arrived at Vancouver airport on a helicopter. I vaguely remember looking, from my stretcher at the scenery below and I remember seemingly random parts of the flight home. At that point I was being fed via stomach tube, as I had been ever since I came out of my coma on August 16, and I remember the two air ambulance paramedics/nurses sitting next to me as my stretcher took up three or more side rows of seating on the plane. My parents were always in the seats across the aisle that were closest to me and the Spin Doctors (well past their "Two Princes" days), who were playing a show in St. John's or Mount Pearl, were sitting in front of them. Weird.

Seeing me lying in a stretcher, rarely awake and being fed through a tube directly into my stomach, had my parents being asked questions such as, "What happened to him?"

That is a perfectly good question to ask, so long as it is asked

politely and respectfully, but if you don't ask you won't know, which leads to guessing and speculating. Neither of which are good. So, my parents answered. For the most part this induced a similar and expected reaction from the questioner. Normally it was a more condoling response than "Cool!", but, to each their own.

In 2002 they were also asked about a cross country trip I was taking, however, that was under decidedly cheerier circumstances.