‘Dude, this is my bike’: How I got my stolen ride back

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I am one of the lucky 10%. By a stroke of providence, I got my stolen e-bike back.

Last December, I wrote in The Times that I had joined thousands of unhappy folks who had a bicycle ripped off in Seattle.

As of Nov. 9 of this year, there were 2,431 Seattle Police Department reports of a stolen bicycle or e-bike. Sadly, my Giant Fastroad E+ Pro was among them. And I had many questions.

Where do the bikes go? Are organized cartels shipping bikes across the state, across the country? King County Prosecuting Attorneys said that wasn’t likely.

Are they sold on internet marketplaces like Craigslist, OfferUp and Facebook?

A bike thief I met in Sodo discounted that notion. For the most part, it was too dangerous, with folks posing as buyers who are undercover police or the actual owners. Stolen bikes just tumble through encampments and the underground economy, he told me. A good one can fetch $400, about a tenth of their retail price.

Last Thursday, walking back to The Times after lunch, I crossed Second Avenue along Stewart Street. Since someone cut the lock and ran off with my e-bike back in October, I’ve always kept an eye out for it.

And there, waiting for the light to change, was a rider on a black bike that looked a lot like mine.

The mind works in strange ways. I’ve never been in a fistfight in my life. I wear glasses. I’m middle-aged. But I’d be damned if I was going to let this one-in-a-million opportunity slip away.

I approached the guy and stood in front of the bike. “Hey,” I asked the rider. “Where did you get this?”

He wore a mask and a hat pulled low but I could see bluish tattoos around his eyes. He seemed bewildered.

I checked over the bike. “Look, these pedals don’t come stock. I put these on. And the grips — I changed these out, too. Dude, this is my bike. And I’m going to take it back or call the cops.”

I had my phone out as if ready to dial 911. Fumblingly, he asked if I had a photo of my bike. I sure did, I told him, and escorted him to the sidewalk. I showed him my posting on Bike Index, a

registry of stolen bikes. I bent over and rubbed the dirt off the serial number stamped on the bottom of the frame. Confirmed. This was my baby.

“I paid $400 for it,” he said as we stood together.

“You paid $400 for a stolen bike. I’m taking it back.” There were two phone mounts on the bars that weren’t mine. You want these, I asked. He shook his head. And then I rode it back to the office.

It may have been stupid to confront the guy. I do not recommend this tactic. At the time, I felt that he could have simply pedaled past me and down the street, so the risk of physical violence was pretty low. To his credit, he was reasonable about the whole ordeal.

My bike is in rough shape. The headlight was broken off. The rear fender and rack removed. The tires are bald, the spokes loose. It oddly smelled like cigarettes. But it’s mine, again. At least, for a while.

Bike theft is a huge problem in Seattle. There were 17 stolen bikes in Seattle registered on Bike Index last week alone. They were taken from University of Washington facilities, street racks and residential garages. According to statics provided by Bike Index, only about 10% of stolen bikes are recovered. And the nonprofit only tracks a small portion of the overall problem.

More attention ought to be paid by city officials to this out-of-control crime. Seattle wants to be a bicycle friendly city, but no amount of protected lanes and other improvements will persuade people to switch to pedal power if losing their ride seems like only a matter of time.

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