



Extra Freedom and Independence

My life was gaining more and more momentum. It was 1993, I was 23 years young. From the moment I started my first job as an overnight school counselor, I knew I would soon be able to support living on my own. In the street close to my parents home I moved into a very little rental home with garden. Soon after my boyfriend moved in with me.

Wouldn't it be nice to have a car of my own now, I thought? That sounded like the next logical step towards even more freedom, flexibility and independence. Having a car was not really needed where I lived. Everything was close by and reachable by foot, by bike or public transportation. Train, bus and tram were easily available and I could even walk to most places I wanted to go. The European towns are all interlinked and easily accessible without the need of a car. The opposite is true in America where a car is needed for everything if you are not living in a big city. Public transportation is in most places not available or very minimal. In Deinze, where I lived in Belgium, I was going everywhere by scooter, by bike or on foot. My mom and my grandfather, the only two sighted drivers had their own car and I borrowed their cars frequently.

The main reason I really wanted my own car was the freedom to go where and when I wanted.

Aunt Rosie, my mom's sister, knew of a 10 year old Peugeot 304 for sale still in good condition. Hardly any miles and it fit my budget! I was over the top excited and could hardly wait to go see it. I didn't know much about cars and was accompanied by my uncle who could inspect it. Seeing the car for the first time I was very excited! It was the perfect car for me. I imagined driving and owning it! I was really hoping that my uncle would also see the value of this vehicle for me! The owner, my uncle's youngest brother, had taken very good care of it. It had very low mileage and it still had new car plastic wrap inside the doors. They asked only 10,000 Belgian Franks, only about \$280.

After a little test drive and the thumbs up of my uncle I was able to make the deal! I wanted to shout out loud, which I did once I was in the car by myself.

To maintain the pristine condition of that car, my uncle advised me to limit the number and quality of drivers and to make sure I and other drivers would care for it the way previous owners had. Great advice! I listened to it and was accepting his advice but was more excited to have my own car in that moment than to really take in the importance of his words.

Being on the road for the first time in my own car was such a highlight in my life. I still recall the moment I parked the car in front of my little rental home. Freedom, joy, excitement, accomplishment and abundance all embraced in one moment!

Now that I had a car, I wanted to go on an adventure. I asked my boyfriend, Bart B., where shall we go? We realized we could go wherever we wanted.

Because I worked in the school system, I had all school

vacations off. We got very excited about a camping road trip to the South of France or even into Spain. These were my favorite places to go since childhood. I loved the hot weather and the palm trees. In European terms this would be considered a long trip! The border of Spain was about 1,200 km (745 miles) from my home and we figured about a two or three day drive.

My mom expressed that she understood my desire for a vacation and a road trip. She advised me not to use my “new” car because it might not be able to endure a long and hot trip like that. She suggested we go on a vacation by train. My aunt Rosie also thought that would not be wise. My young mind was envisioning freedom and independence, fun and adventure. I decided to do it anyway.

We packed a tent, camping stove, some dishes, an air mattress, sleeping bag and some clothes. Unleashing our adventurous and free spirit, we were on our way to France. Windows open, a cigarette in hand, tapes playing on the tape player and the feeling of the hot sun on my skin was pure joy for me. It was the ultimate feeling of freedom! I loved exploring other countries, cultures and languages.

Before the Euro, I had to go to the bank and exchange my Belgian Franks into the currency of the country I was visiting. I had to calculate the exchange rates for all the products and services that we purchased. The unique different colored bills and different sizes of coins was also part of the fun of traveling in Europe. All of this disappeared with the Euro in 2000. I really enjoyed the uniqueness of each country, culture and its currency.

The weather was hot and I loved it! Real bathing suit weather. Jumping in a lake or the ocean was part of the adventure. All went well and we made it to the central part of France.



All of a sudden I noticed a light came on on the dash board. It was the temperature light. Oh no! We stopped, took out our car manual and investigated what this light was indicating. The car was overheating. Concerned we quickly looked for the closest campground. We set up our tent and prepared our dinner. We considered the best way to handle this problem. After consulting a few other French and German campers, we decided to locate a car repair shop. The shop owner gave us good and bad news. The bad news was, the hot weather and the long drive overheated the car and damaged the radiator. The good news was, if we followed his instructions, we would be able to slowly make it back home. I was very thankful this man did not charge us for his diagnosis. This was my first lesson in car mechanics, what to do if my car is overheating.

We were instructed to drive our disabled vehicle back home. While driving we had to turn the heater and blower on high. It would transfer the heat from the engine to the passenger compartment. This was good for the overheated engine, but not for us already cooking with all windows open and no air conditioning. We did what was instructed and saunaed our way back to Belgium. We were also told what to do if we were stopped in traffic and how to manage an overheated engine.

How we happened to understand all of this in French was a

miracle. With repetition and the use of our French/Dutch dictionary, we did figure it out. The old fashioned way of connecting with people combined with the inherent good intent of human beings willing to help each other made it possible and a powerful educational experience.

We made it back home in my car. It was a short lived vacation and a short lived relationship with my first car. I did not have the money to put in a new radiator or pay for repairs. Sadly I had to let that wonderful car go. I learned many valuable lessons. It wasn't until 1997 that I again had a car of my own.

Going through my own experiences combined with the offered wisdom and guidance from older generations taught me valuable lessons in my pursuit of Freedom and Independence.

