

Pas d'accent

Episode 2 : Getting there - a short history of my life on wheels

Some of my earliest memories involve riding in cars, and as the years go by, automotive vehicles have added many chapters to my life story. This episode is a chronological account of some of my most memorable adventures in transportation.

The Austin

When my parents married in 1954, they received a little Austin A40 Somerset sedan as a gift from my maternal grandparents (it was a thing people did in those days). They picked up the car in Paris and drove it all over Europe during their honeymoon, before returning home with it to the old farmhouse they were restoring in Massachusetts. One day in 1959, when I was three years old, my mother helped me into the back seat for a trip to the local market. With her pocketbook on one arm and some clothing for the dry-cleaner in the other, she managed to slam her finger in the door while closing it behind me. She left me in the car, parked in the garage, and ran into the house to deal with her bleeding finger. This was before the days of seatbelts and car seats but apparently I was mature enough not to mess with the gearshift or dashboard, or she was just in too much pain to worry about what I might do on my own. When she came back out, finger bandaged up, she opened the driver's seat door to hear me repeating, mantra-style, "Sonafabitch, sonafabitch".

The Volkswagen bus

When my sisters and I were young, our family car was a Volkswagen

bus, the iconic model that today's hipsters long for, with that trademark "saddle-shoe" paint job, in white and HoJo's-turquoise, and a giant chrome VW emblem on the front. At Christmas time, my mother made an evergreen wreath with a big bow that my father attached with wire over the VW logo. It had a name, too - "Buski" - because we drove in it to Vermont every winter weekend to ski our asses off at Mad River Glen. My Dad is a mechanical engineer and he loves to tinker with engines, which in my personal experience is a very good thing when you own a Volkswagen bus.

The sliding side door, on one side only, unlike modern minivans, had no safety lock on it and once one of our little friends felt out the door and rolled down the street for a few feet when the door accidentally opened as we came to a stop on a slight hill. Luckily for her, we had been going very slowly and she was wearing a super-padded snowsuit that protected her from injury. We hustled her back into the car and I'm not sure whether her parents ever even heard about the incident.

My mother was a member of a local amateur modern dance troupe. Every production involved making costumes, some of them quite amazing, like the front and back end of Ferdinand the Bull and the duck from Peter and the Wolf. The members of this troupe - all of them women - and their husbands were fond of throwing pretty wild parties, often with costumed themes. Our house was a centuries-old Colonial with a huge attic, so it became the default storage location for not only the dance production costumes, but for many of the costumes that my parents and their friends fabricated for these parties. As a child, I feared going up there because it not only held a lot of wasps that had made their nests in the dark eaves, but because everywhere you looked, there were frightening things looking down at you from hooks on the walls - clowns,

wolves, robes, masks and characters from popular culture, like Snoopy on his doghouse and the Red Baron's bi-plane. Every time there was a costume party, my parents would plan and make a new crazy costume or borrow one from the attic stock. You could fit two adults, three kids and a couple of big costumes in the VW, as there weren't yet any seatbelt laws, and we didn't live in fear of what could happen and how the insurance company might get out of covering anything that did. So off we would go, us kids in our pyjamas, ready to sleep in the VW until our parents decided it was time to go home. Before we actually fell asleep, cozy in our sleeping bags, two of us in the back luggage area, one on the backseat, we'd peek out the windows and see people dancing and carrying on through the living room window of the host's house. I'm not sure what state the driver was in on our return trip as I don't remember a single drive home, but we'd all wake up the next morning, safe and sound in our own beds.

The VW's last days were not long after a drive to Vermont, just my mother and us three girls. It sputtered and died in Rochester, Vermont, across the entrance to the local cemetery, effectively blocking it. Naturally, there was a funeral the next morning, so somehow we managed to push it to a slightly better location and then spent the night in a local inn until my father could arrive and get it going long enough to make it to an actual garage.

Porsches and Fords

As a mechanical engineer, a graduate of Worcester Polytechnic Institute, and fixer of anything broken, my Dad was and still is the champion. He, his best friend and my uncle, also an engineer who worked in the space program, all bought used Porsche sports cars at the same time and spent a lot of their free time tinkering with them, rebuilding engines, trading tips and driving their

sporty vehicles to work, possibly hoping to look cool in the process, even though they were by default more nerdy than hip. My uncle also had a VW bus - our families had VWs at the same time, too - and at one point, he put one of his Porsche engines into the VW, which has the engine in the rear. He would pull up to a stop light and when a couple of young guys alongside him revved their motor as a challenge, he'd look straight ahead and then hit the gas when the light changed, leaving them in the dust with dropped jaws.

By this time my Mom had taken over the family car, a Ford Econoline van with a V8 engine which had replaced the unfortunate Volkswagen bus. Meanwhile, I was learning to drive on both of our cars. The Ford had a three-speed manual transmission with the gearshift on the steering column. The steering was horribly loose - you'd turn the wheel to the right about halfway before the wheels followed, which made for a lot of oversteering and a few close calls. We used this van for our weekend trips to ski in Vermont and to haul our three-horse trailer which was a good six inches wider than the van on each side. My father had bought the Ford without seats, and built a platform bed and wooden seat with two drawers under it and a cubby for the dog, so we could ride in comfort. My mother upholstered red, vinyl cushions. He also put two old iron radiators in the back cargo area under the bed, to help with winter traction, since it was a rear-wheel-drive model, as were most cars at the time. The van had the engine between the front seats and no heat made it to the back so he installed an old school bus heater that used the engine water, putting it behind the engine on the floor. Every Friday night during ski season, we'd set off for Vermont as soon as my father got home from work, with a homemade picnic (chicken rolled in apricot jam sauce and coated in crushed potato chips was my favourite) and lots of car singalongs. My sleeping spot on these trips was on the floor between the back bench seat

and the motor, snuggled up to the heater in my army-surplus sleeping bag. There never was a cozier bed.

In the Ford, with my new learner's permit in my pocket, I hauled horses to Pony Club meets, lessons and horse shows. When I got a long line of impatient drivers behind me as we creeped along winding New England roads, my mother told me she'd give me twenty-five cents for every car behind me at the next stop sign. She wouldn't allow me to take my driving test until the day I could smoothly back the Ford and horse trailer for a quarter-mile down a narrow, sinewy dirt road. I thanked her for this many years later when I could seriously impress local farmers as I effortlessly backed my sixteen-foot stock trailer down a long, curving driveway to the barn where I was picking up a load of hay.

But it was in my father's Porsche that I took my driving test, since it was the only car we owned that would allow the Massachusetts state trooper who administered the test to reach his foot across and step on the brake if necessary. In those days, you could take your test in a car with a manual transmission, and this car boasted six speeds. My father had taught me to watch my RPMs on the tachometer so I knew when to shift, and soon I knew it by feel. When the trooper saw what I was driving, he gave me a disdainful look, as if I was trying to show him that I was a cool, rich kid, which I most certainly wasn't. He didn't know that my father was simply an engine geek and that his next car would be the cheapest Rabbit money could buy. I passed the test with flying colours and the state trooper told me I was a great driver. I'm proud to say that all three of my kids can drive any stick shift and this has come in handy many times for them.

Bad passenger

I readily admit to being a control freak, and when it comes to my safety in a motor vehicle, I am always happier when I am driving. Although I have been lucky not to be involved in any serious accidents, I have had my share of experiences where things were beyond my control.

When I went off to university in Rochester, New York, a seven-hour drive from home, I didn't have a car, so I had to find rides with other students from the Boston area if I didn't want to take the bus home for holidays and school breaks. One of the people I came to regularly hitch a ride with was a guy in the printing program who later went on to run his family printing business in Boston. He owned what was a pretty exotic vehicle at that time, a four-wheel-drive Isuzu Scout, with dials on the wheel hubs that you got out and turned to activate the four-wheel-drive, and a hard top that could be removed to make it like an open safari-type vehicle. He was a cool, rich kid.

The first time he gave me a lift, it was in February, and the top was off. It was a bright, sunny day but the temperature was well below freezing as we barreled along for many hours on Interstate 90. To compensate, I wore a vintage, full-length muskrat coat, scavenged from a trunk in our attic, that covered every inch of my body except my head, on which I wore a Peruvian-style wool hat. I think I wore goggles, too, since I had brought them with me to go skiing. My friend was keeping warm as he drove by drinking beer from a six-pack stashed directly behind his seat. He was speeding, not a lot but enough to be pulled over when he passed a state police speed trap. The policeman came up to the car and asked him for license and registration, not appearing to notice the six-pack in plain sight, with a few cans missing. When he went back to his car to write the ticket, my friend got out, went to the rear of our

car, directly in front of the policeman, and proceeded to pee on the grass near the shoulder of the highway. I said nothing. I was sure we'd be taken in and he'd end up tested and arrested. But he was a confident, cheerful guy, and it seemed to rub off on the policeman, who handed him the ticket and kindly suggested that we slow down.

On another trip in the Isuzu, this time returning from Vermont to Rochester, thankfully with the top on, we pulled over to the shoulder just before arriving at our exit. We had a taken a ticket where we'd first gotten on I-90 and the toll would be around thirteen dollars for the miles we'd covered. The snow had melted and the ground was fairly dry and still frozen. My friend spun the four-wheel hubs to the ON position, hopped back in and drove down the embankment on our right, up a hill, through a cornfield and out onto a small side road, eventually reaching the main road that would take us back to campus.

The Chevy Impala

After I graduated from university, I made the move, along with my fiancé, a fellow student, to Atlanta, Georgia, where he had accepted a job. During our last year at school, his father had sold us the family's old Chevy Impala for one dollar. In addition to being full-time students, we were also musicians, playing several times a week to help pay school expenses. We traveled to winter music gigs, the trunk full of sound gear and instruments, and back and forth from Rochester to our respective homes in all types of weather and the car became known affectionately as the Big Banana because it was yellow. In those days, people like us didn't have snow tires when we drove it to Vermont during several blizzards. We didn't have four-wheel-drive or even front-wheel-drive. We just had a lot of people sitting in the back on most trips so we managed to

get up enough traction to make it up those Vermont hills. When we arrived in Georgia, with a canoe on top of the car and everything we owned in the trunk and back seat, my fiancé, with his new salary, bought a new Volkswagen Rabbit, a diesel because the fuel was so much cheaper back then, and because his job involved a lot of long distance driving. The Impala became mine. I loved that car. It drove like a dream and you could put a lot of stuff in the trunk. In fact, for awhile, I managed a stable in nearby Marietta and every day I put hundreds of pounds of grain in fifty-pound bags into that trunk and drove out to the fields to feed horses belonging to the Atlanta Polo Club and to others boarding at the stable. Over the years, a lot of people partied in that Impala, rolling joints and smoking them as we drove along to go canoeing, to go out to the local bar for a Friday night beer, or to go to a drive-in movie. I saw Smokey and the Bandit twice while lying on the warm hood, my back against the perfectly-tilted windshield, the drive-in speaker hanging from the driver's side mirror. Atlanta is a very humid place, and one day, while parked, I noticed something by my feet as I bent to tie my work boot. A baby pot plant. Marijuana junior. No doubt the result of the aforementioned activities. But that was not all. Around the same time, I was looking for something in the trunk and I noticed that there was grass growing there. Really. Grass. The kind you mow. All the grain I had hauled had left behind a few seeds and some had sprouted. And there were mushrooms, too. Two-inch tall mushrooms. A few years later, we sold the Impala for seven-hundred dollars - it really held its value in my opinion - to a friend who had been a part of the car's history. In a way, that car is still with me - as the answer to one of my online security questions!

The Volvo

I needed a new car after the Impala left, my very first, very own car, bought for me. We shopped around at local garages, in the classifieds. I had always longed for a Volvo Amazon, one of those cute, little sedans or station wagons with rounded bumpers, friendly curves and delicate chrome. I couldn't find one, though, and finally we visited a small garage where the mechanic specialized in vintage Volvos. He was selling another model, a 1964 P1800 sports coupe, on consignment, and I fell immediately in love. A tiny two-door car with long, sexy lines, it was the car that Roger Moore - the future James Bond - drove in the TV series The Saint. And it was RED. Boy was it red. With a red leather interior to boot, five-speed manual transmission and electric overdrive, which never worked as long as I owned it. It had dual carburetors, the kind that auto-mechanical snobs carry stethoscopes to listen to in order to properly tune them. I think we paid \$1200 dollars for it. And that car was HOT, in more ways than one! If it was a ninety-five-degree day in Atlanta, a common occurrence, the engine that stretched out in front of your legs sent huge waves of heat back into the car. I remember finding a cartoon depicting a P1800 with a huge block of melting ice on the hood. Now I knew why one of my Vermont friends thought it was such a great winter car. But I loved my Volvo. It purred like a cougar, had incredible pickup and shifting it was practically orgasmic. I think it was the beginning of my secret affair with cars. It was also the beginning of me wishing that my father had taught me a LOT more about mechanical things. We now had the Volvo and the diesel Rabbit, and one day, when the Volvo was at the bottom of our steep driveway, and the Rabbit parked at the top, I heard a strange noise while I was inside the house preparing to leave for work. I looked out the window to see the Rabbit rolling, ever faster, down the driveway and straight into the rear end of my Volvo. My little red car was hurtled into the deep kudzu at the end of the driveway, the rear

end dented and tail lights broken. The Rabbit was scratched where it had rubbed the house, with a dent or two in front and one headlight broken. It had been parked in first gear with the handbrake on and the handbrake cable had snapped, somehow popping it out of first gear to roll, scraping alongside the brick house on the way. When I contacted the insurance company to report the strange accident, it turned out that we couldn't be liable for ourselves so the entire damage was covered, without a deductible! My Volvo, which had previous rear-end damage that had been badly patched when I bought it, got a complete fix-up and new paint job and the Rabbit's more cosmetic damage was also covered. I think that is the only car-related good luck I've ever had.

The end of the marriage that had brought me to Atlanta led me to another relationship, with my Volvo as the catalyst. I was suddenly single, had to move into a dark, creepy apartment, all that I could afford on my current low-paying job, and to help pay the rent, got myself a roommate who turned out to be a drug dealer, albeit an endearing one. About this time, my P1800 began having all sorts of problems, and too many of my short trips began to involve tow-trucks. After the second breakdown, I contacted the mechanic from whom I'd bought it and he asked me to drive it over for a look-see. Just this once, I got there without incident, and when he discovered that I was no longer married, he asked me out. It was the beginning of the strangest relationship I've ever had. We'd go out to dinner, driving my Volvo and he'd come back to my apartment for the night. When he'd leave in the morning, he would trade cars with me, fix my Volvo and then trade it back on the next date. While we enjoyed each others' company, I always had the feeling that he was actually having the relationship with my car and that I was just the "vehicle" for his infatuation (no pun intended). I joked with my friends that I had to sleep with the mechanic in

order to own a Volvo, but at a certain point, there was just too much truth in this. Neither of us was really serious about the other, so I finally decided to sell the P1800. I put an ad in the classifieds and was immediately contacted by a guy who raced classic cars at racetracks like Road Atlanta. I nearly shit my pants on the test drive, but he paid me cash and left with my red Volvo, taking along a little piece of my heart and effectively ending my mechanical romance.

The Rabbit

With the departure of the Volvo, I inherited my father's aging VW Rabbit when he got a new company car. A gas model, it had pretty high mileage but the fact that he was a mechanic meant it had been well cared for. I got a ride back north and drove it back to Atlanta, a 24-hour drive, all in one shot, with help from a lot of truck-stop coffee.

In Atlanta, I had a few minor adventures with the Rabbit, the most exciting being the time the brakes failed as I was crossing Peachtree Street on the way to work. My current job doing maintenance for two guys who owned apartment buildings all over the city, mowing lawns, changing lightbulbs and showing units to prospective renters. At one point, I couldn't shift the Rabbit into reverse, so I had to be very strategic when parking, especially as I often had a lawnmower in the back. I managed to wrangle another date with my former Volvo mechanic who fixed that issue, but I was pretty tired of being poor and living on the edge with my depressed drug-dealing roommate. I'd begun a new music duo with a friend and she and I decided that we were both ready for a change of scenery, so we quit our jobs, packed up the Rabbit and drove north to Canada, and eventually, west to California. We slept in the car when it was too rainy to pitch a tent, and shortly after leaving

Seattle, heading south through heavy rain, we discovered that we had to choose between having the headlights on or using the windshield wipers. We were nearing Portland, Oregon, and pulled off at the next exit, when the engine quit. I put it in neutral and coasted down the hill, spotting a Sears directly across from the exit. The light at the bottom turned green at the precise moment we arrived, and we continued to roll silently, directly into the Sears parking lot, where we braked, parked and went inside to buy a new battery that held things together for the rest of the trip.

That Rabbit was a tough bunny. We finished our tour of the west coast, then headed back east on Interstate 10, crossing Arizona and a lot of desert. Driving in the dark, we could feel a strange bump-bump-bump and wondered why they didn't keep the roads in better shape considering that they didn't have to deal with snow or salt. In the morning, when the sun came up, we realized that we had been hitting an endless stream of jackrabbits as they crossed the highway.

For much of our trip, when it was very hot, we had driven shirtless, with t-shirts nearby in case of emergencies. When we stopped for construction, the flagman was nearly always a flagwoman who would tell us that she envied our option to cool off that way as she pointed toward the shirtless male roadworkers behind her. Neither of us was particularly well-endowed, so we didn't attract much attention. As we headed back to Atlanta, there was a lot more traffic than there had been crossing Canada or the western plains of the US. On the road home, as we battled the crosswinds on I-10, an eighteen-wheeler pulled up alongside of us and the driver, a young, laughing guy, waved his pants out the window at us.

The Suburban era

The Suburban years were when I was still a farmer, with seven sheep in the back as we passed through Montréal traffic, their noses poking out the window, on the way to their new home; pulling a sixteen-foot stock trailer, hauling three kids and all their friends; driving across plains, over mountains and crossing borders and only stopping now and then to fill the expensive but long-lasting gas tank.

The first of my second-hand Suburbans was the classic silver with blue pin-striped detailing and three bench seats - my second, a glossy black one with AC and twelve places to put your coffee mug. In it I drove from Québec to Montana with a friend and our four kids. They built Lego creations in the back seat slept in it on nights when thunder and lightning scared them too much to sleep in the tent. They also slept in it into the wee hours on the last night of many a folk festival as we jammed the night away on guitar and fiddle.

The Suburban era was also the transmission era, including the time I lent it to my sister and father who were taking six grandchildren to the Jersey shore for a visit to their cousins' house. The transmission gave up the ghost while crossing a bridge on a major freeway. When the tow truck arrived, the operator winched the Suburban - with all eight passengers aboard - up onto the flatbed and drove them, lights flashing, to the nearest garage. They ordered a rebuilt transmission and then rented a car for the rest of the trip, picking it back up on the way home.

I traded in my last Suburban when I finally switched to a Subaru to save on gas as prices skyrocketed.

Subarus

I come from a Subaru family and it is the unofficial state automobile of Vermont, so for many years, I continued the tradition. It is also the shortest chapter in this tale, since we've had relatively few adventures with these great, practical cars.

Our first was a used, dark grey Legacy which unfortunately had endless electrical problems. When we finally donated it to a friend in need, they ended up calling us regularly to complain about it. Moral of the story : never give your funky old car to a friend. The second Subaru was a brand-new Impreza, a 2005 model, with five-speed manual transmission and lots of pizzazz that I just loved to drive. It had been a special sport package that included a sunroof, racing skirt and a positively silly spoiler, possibly in hopes of converting scores of aspiring race-car drivers in souped-up Honda Civics to make the switch. It also sported a six-cd changer, which I grew to hate since my husband and kids regularly stocked the car with CDs that promptly lost their covers and ended up scratched and unplayable as they slid around on the car floor and under the seats. I blessed the advent of Bluetooth, streaming clean, package-free audio to the car speakers. The Impreza was finally paid off after five years, during which I had to pay for full market replacement value insurance. Naturally, only days after I at last owned it, my son, a new driver, skidded off the road with it on a dark, rainy night, totalling the car but luckily escaping without injury. The insurance paid out the minimum value, so I had to satisfy myself with a used Subaru Outback, a pretty, emerald green station wagon that my daughter said I "looked good in", obviously an important consideration when buying a car! It has nearly 300,000 kilometres on the odometer today and just began a new life as a second car for my oldest son and his young family.

VW breakdowns

"All journeys have secret destinations of which the traveler is unaware." - Martin Buber

This couldn't be truer than for some owners of a Volkswagen Eurovan. As traveling musicians, we thought that it was a great way to go - front-wheel-drive, good on gas (regular or diesel models), manual transmission, great drivability and lots of space. Our first was a simple camper with a table and bed inside in a metallic blue-green. We drove it to Nova Scotia, ferrying to Newfoundland where we drove from one end to the other. We drove it to northern Ontario and south across the border, to New England, to the Outer Banks, to North Carolina. Our bandmate Denise was the designated driver when we rolled down the "Pennsylvania Turnip", as she referred to it, expertly downshifting the four-speed "fish stick" as we descended long hills.

When it began having issues, a friend sold us another one, a nine-passenger diesel model. Now we had two, and that was a good thing, because there was always something wrong with one of them! They were a year apart in age, and we learned that every time something broke on one, it was best to buy two replacement parts as the other would soon need it.

When traveling with our family band, I was unanimously recognized and respected as the Queen of Packing. I knew exactly where to put everything and with five musicians and many more instruments than that, it almost required a map to properly repack the car after each gig.

One day, Claude and I visited his sister in Montréal so that he could do some small renovation tasks for her. We took the red van,

always handy for toting tools and building materials. Around rush hour, when the work was done and we'd had a meal together, we prepared to leave, and discovered that the brakes were kaput. The van had a manual transmission, and there was a manual handbrake within reach of the passenger seat, so we decided to go anyway, despite my sister-in-law's horrified protests, so we could get it fixed at our neighbourhood garage and avoid towing charges - this was before we'd begun to spring for CAA Plus. Claude and I were like a well-oiled machine, with him at the wheel as we inched along through Montréal North on the way to Autoroute 40 in heavy traffic. He'd downshift and I'd prepare the handbrake to with a light touch, just enough to hold us as we came to a stop. Once we made it to the highway, it was a piece of cake, and we cruised home sans souci.

We spent more than one unplanned night in a hotel while traveling in our Eurovans and missed more than one concert date. We once smuggled a kitten into Canada and another time, the driver's window refused to go back up after rolling it down at the border crossing on the way home - in January. Later that year, the engine conveniently died as we stopped to show our passports, only restarting after a few anxious minutes with the irritated Homeland Security officer. And then there is the time that we drove to Montréal to play a concert at the Yellow Door and the engine died as we reached the street where the show was. I jumped out while the car was still moving and spotted a parking space up ahead. Wearing a dress, with Claude steering, I pushed the Eurovan the last ten feet, maneuvering it into the parking space, which required a permit. We left a sign on the windshield, played the concert and then called CAA for a tow back to Sainte-Béatrix, over an hour away arriving home at three a.m.

In fact, it was while owning our VWs that we developed our intimate

relationship with CAA. It got to the point that when I called, I'd barely get my name out and they'd be like "Hey! How's it going? Where'd you break down today and is the blue or red one?". Everyone in the band had CAA and we have CAA Plus so we can tow it further than the five kilometres allowed. It is very hard to find a VW mechanic at two a.m. on a Monday morning. It is even harder to find a mechanic that will agree to work on an old Eurovan.

The Caravan

In 2006, we purchased a 2002 Dodge Caravan for \$4,000, the perfect vehicle for traveling with our band of five musicians and all the necessary baggage. I was unanimously recognized as the Queen of Packing. I knew exactly where to put everything and with five musicians and many more instruments than that, it almost required a map to properly repack the car after each gig.

When we went from the nine-passenger VW Eurovan to the much-smaller Caravan, it really put my packing skills to the test. One of our band members, in particular, required a bit of special attention. He was traveling with a guitar, banjo, mandolin, foot percussion board, instrument stands, pedal board and pedals, small electronics, huge suitcase for clothing and multiple small bags, usually with broken zippers, containing a chaotic array of computers, iPods, snacks and other stuff he forgot to put into his suitcase or instrument cases. On one memorable trip, he was the last band member to be dropped off, at his apartment in Joliette, on our way back to Sainte-Béatrix. On this trip, we had all been teaching at a music camp in northern Ontario, a twelve-hour ride, and we were exhausted from nearly no sleep for a week and way too much fun. In addition, I'd purchased a mini-refrigerator, which is another story for another time, and had gone to great lengths to get it into the car along with all our gear which was already

nearly too much for the available space. When we arrived at his apartment, I quickly unloaded everything of his and carefully repacked items that were to continue on. I noticed that our bandmate was looking a bit panicked. "I can't find my apartment key" he said. "I put it in the outside pocket of my computer bag like you told me to!" he protested. I frequently gave him tips on how to be less chaotic, usually to no avail. He got out his phone and called his roommate, who should have been asleep in the apartment as it was now nearly two a.m. No answer. To top it off, there was massive construction happening just in front of the apartment and we were parked in a construction zone, unable to unload any closer. I finally had to unpack everything I had just put back into the car, repack all of his baggage and ours, and we drove home, bringing him with us for the night. We then had to unpack everything once again, and repack his stuff into the car for another trip to the apartment the next day. It turned out that his roommate had been there after all but hadn't heard the phone.

At 223,000 kilometers, the Caravan is showing its age, but rarely in ways that have us hitchhiking home. In fact, it leaves tomorrow with our son at the wheel on a trip to Lac Saint-Jean for a week of car camping. But make no mistake, we still include our kids on the family CAA policy.

The Tradmobile

The biggest adventure in my tales of transport involves the purchase of a used Bluebird mini school bus that we had a great time converting into a rustic camper, meaning that it has no fancy plumbing or systems, just a plug that lets us run the mini-fridge - the one from the previous packing story - and outlets that can charge our phones. Previously a handicapped transport bus, it was shiny and clean inside, without any seats. Essentially a Chevy

Express 3500, it has a 5-cylinder diesel engine and automatic transmission. We removed the lift and built in a queen-sized bed, kitchen counters, propane stove, foot-pumped water tank and overhead storage. We called our new rolling home the "Tradmobil" in honour of our musical lifestyle. The bus had one major issue right at the start - from time to time, it would suddenly turn off. It would restart a few minutes later, but this was very inconvenient if it happened at, say, a stop light. Some internet research led us to an analysis and a fix. It was a gas pump regulator that needed replacement. The Tradmobile is a cheerful vehicle, always starting on the first turn of the key. It is still painted bright orange, and has the handle that opens the door to welcome passengers on board, a big hit with kids and grownups alike. While it is tall enough to stand upright inside, very nice on rainy travel days and while cooking, it is still short enough to park in most parking spaces and is eligible for the same ferry boat rates as a regular car.

Our first real trip in it was to the Magdalen Islands in the mouth of the Saint-Lawrence, via a long drive to PEI and the five-hour ferry crossing from Souris. We spent a week visiting musical friends, sleeping in the bus near the beach, in driveways and even parked across the street from our friend's restaurant where we jammed each night. Our dog Patsy came along to guard our stuff and we had a great time both on the way out and back. Upon returning home, we began to have some problems with shifting. The second transmission era was about to begin.

In mid-August, I drove the Tradmobile to our gig at the 2017 Festival du violon de Sutton in Québec's Eastern Townships. I was to meet Claude there as he was returning home from a week as an instructor at Maine Fiddle Camp. About twenty-five kilometres from

Sutton, I realized that the bus seemed to be stuck in third gear. Since it is an automatic, this made changing speeds and stopping and starting rather challenging. I made it another ten kilometres and pulled into a gas station, shutting it off and calling Claude for advice. He was still somewhere in the boonies of Maine, not too far from the Québec border, and of course there was nothing he could do but share my stress. I waited fifteen minutes and turned it back on, managing to get it into drive and begin rolling, fingers crossed. I drove the last fifteen kilometres in third gear, ignoring the frustrated folks gathering in my wake, and made it to the festival grounds without ever coming to a full stop, pulling into the parking space and finally stopping. Phew.

Claude arrived, the weekend's musical activities took over and we ignored reality for two days. On Sunday afternoon, I packed everything up. Claude was to follow me as we made our way back home to Sainte-Béatrix. We said goodbye to everyone, I hopped in, cranked it up and couldn't put it into reverse. Claude immediately opened the fridge, grabbed a beer and began eating potato chips. We were well-enough stocked to spend a week there if necessary. I went into auto-pilot, calling CAA, worried now about whether or not they'd tow our bus which was significantly bigger than a car. I got the name of the nearest transmission specialist from them and said I'd call them back for the emergency tow once I'd talked to the garage, thirty kilometers away. The friendly man who answered assured me that he would come get the bus, size and weight was not an issue, and that we should call him when we were ready and they would take care of everything, *n'inquietez-vous pas!* So we played a whole bunch more tunes, drank another beer and made the call. Thirty minutes later, a tow truck whipped into the parking lot and a dapper man in his eighties hopped out. He had short, silver hair, retro, gold wire-rimmed glasses, suspenders over a crisp white

shirt and a sharp bowtie. He took the keys from me, jumped spryly into the bus, got it out of its frozen gear and into reverse and proceeded to winch it onto the flatbed. This took all of five minutes. Meanwhile, Claude's previous look of total discouragement had transformed into relief. You could see that this man knew exactly what he was doing and he exuded positivity. Once the bus was secured, he turned to Claude and said "Hey, you're a fiddler aren't you?". I was thinking that we were at a fiddle festival and he probably noticed the sign at the end of the parking lot. "Yes" Claude answered. "Well, I'm a fiddler, too!" said the man. Then he asked "Didn't I bring a tractor from your father-in-law's farm in Warren, Vermont to Sainte-Béatrix, Québec for you about 22 years ago?". We were stunned! It was the same man who we'd found in the Yellow Pages to move my father's 1956 tractor to our home in Québec as a gift for Claude. And he just happened to have been answering the phone at the garage that was now owned by his son. So he towed away the bus, we drove home in Claude's Dodge Caravan and we marvelled at the serendipity of it all. The transmission was toast and it cost four thousand dollars to rebuild it and fix a multitude of other small things, but hey, it could have broken down in the Lafontaine Tunnel and cost a thousand dollars to tow somewhere where they didn't have any idea how to fix it. When we went to pick it up a few weeks later, we discovered that Claude was related to the family who owned the garage, distant cousins, in fact.

The Mazda

When I finally passed on my elderly but still functional Subaru Outback I shopped around and became the new owner of an ever-so-slightly-used Mazda CX5, a cute, red all-wheel-drive model with automatic transmission, high-tech sport shifting, sunroof and leather interior. We put it to the test on a nearly 20,000

kilometres tour from Québec to Louisiana back to Québec over two months, traveling with Cajun fiddler David Greely. So far, the only adventure with the Mazda has been leaving Québec in April with summer tires - risky business, indeed - as we headed south during snowstorm season. But we made it, even though we were snowed in in Milwaukee and had to cancel an Illinois concert when the major highways closed. We passed huge piles of snow on the dry interstate as we drove south, two feet of snow that had tumbled from the tops of eighteen-wheelers as they whooshed along, and it snowed on the April morning when we arrived in Nashville, Tennessee. The Mazda is our first vehicle with hands-free phone, Bluetooth connections and those crazy no-key locks and a starter button - I'm not sure I'll ever get used to starting a car with a button. It's already difficult enough to resist putting in the non-existent clutch, which can lead to big surprises for the passengers. Claude still doesn't understand why he can't lock the rear door, even though our daughter has patiently explained to him that it is only unlocked while he is standing next to it with the key in his pocket.

Car names

Not every car I've owned has had a name but sometimes they just happen naturally.

Our red Eurovan earned the name "Ruby", as in slippers. She even had her own Facebook page for awhile, because she had more adventures than we did. The Chevy Impala was affectionately known as the Big Banana since it was long and yellow with a black hard-top. My little silver Subaru Impreza ended up being named "Sparkle", the name my oldest son had proudly decided on at age six for his newborn baby sister. His feelings were hurt when we opted out and named her Béatrix, so, now in his teens, the car name became a belated consolation prize. Ever fans of anything Batman,

my kids dubbed our black Suburban the Batmobile and one day, as I was climbing into it, I noticed that very word roughly keyed into the paint near the gas tank. I confronted the two youngest kids, who stood nearby. The older one, who was coincidentally wearing a Batman costume at the time, immediately protested "I didn't do it!".

Although I'm not 100% sure I agree with him, Scottish author and world traveler Robert Louis Stevenson once wrote, "It is better to travel hopefully than to arrive."

P.S. - The Dodge Caravan suffered from a jammed front wheel brake caliper not twenty minutes after our son left in it yesterday. Luckily, CAA was happy to reconnect with us, delivering it promptly to our local garage, where it was repaired this morning and put back on the road again, enroute for the next adventure.