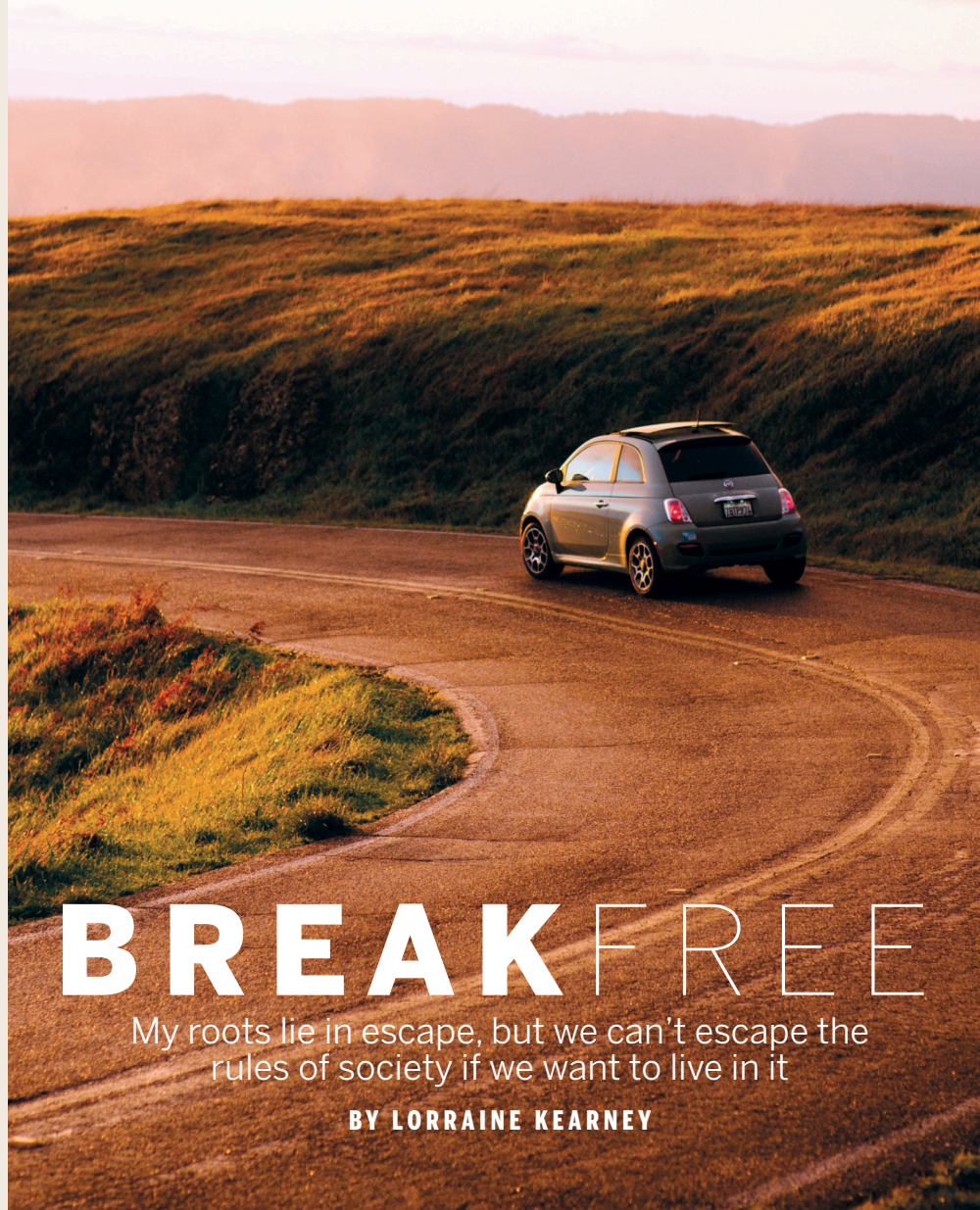




BREAK FREE

My roots lie in escape, but we can't escape the rules of society if we want to live in it

BY LORRAINE KEARNEY

Some of the best chats you ever have with your children are when you're in the car. Something about you focusing on the road and not looking at them, or them not having to look at you, makes conversation easier.

It flows freely, and you can ask them things that would normally irritate them (though I am not saying there are no eye rolls coming from the passenger seat), and they are strangely more open to telling you things about their lives, both day to day and in their inner world.

This trick even works on teenage boys. The usual conversation when my son

was newly in high school:

Me: How was your day?

Him: Fine.

That's it. But on the weekends, when we'd drive off on an adventure somewhere, I'd learn all about how his days really were, the good, the bad and the ugly. With a few careful questions – not too much interrogation, this is not the secret service – he'd really open up.

Why do I tell you this?

Because to me, my car has always represented freedom. And freedom has always been my core necessity. As a child in a family of many – in the seventies! – although you had a lot of freedom, you had no

personal agency. You

went where your parents/ grandparents/aunts/uncles and so forth took you. And came home on their time.

At one of their many cocktail parties or dinner parties and midnight rolled around without any signs of going home? Sleep in the car or on the floor behind the couch until they were ready to leave.

At school, the chains on your freedom were even tighter; they controlled what you learned, what you wore, when you had meals. They even tried to control your thoughts and desires.

It was a weird dichotomy. On the one hand, it was the

seventies and children pretty much raised themselves, seeing to their own needs while the grown-ups enjoyed their devilled eggs and gin. There was a single rule: you can run around with your friends all day doing whatever it is children do, but you had to come home when the street lights came on.

I had felt trapped since I first realised I was my own person. So when I finished school I fled as soon as I could. The world was out there and I was going to devour it. Though I was still beholden to bus timetables and friends with wheels.

When I got my first car, it was an epiphany: I could do what I wanted, where I wanted. I could come and go whenever I wanted. I could escape dull events and festivals when the mud got too much.

My roots are buried in this burning desire to be free: my ancestors set sail across the seas to a new land, uncharted by European folk, where they could practise their religion without the tyranny of the churches in the lands of their birth, where they could form their own societies with their own rules.

When even those strictures got too confining, they packed up again and set off on wagons and horses.

It was in the freedom of my car that my children learned these stories of their heritage.

Of course, there are still rules of common sense. Like don't reverse without first looking properly. It's a rule my son has just learned, chasing his freedom in his car. His first fender bender. And the boring bits of police reports and insurance claims.

You can never be truly free of restrictions. Unless you run away to commandeer your own island. We're checking the maps as we speak.