

## A longtime holdout is ready to join the club

By EVE GLICKSMAN

It only took a precocious 3-year-old to size me up. "No car?" Ryan asked, visibly disappointed as he searched the street near his house. "Husbun? Babies?" he queried next as his parents, whom I was visiting, looked on helplessly.

I shrugged twice more wistfully, hoping he wouldn't ask if I rented or owned. This wasn't the first time it hit home that I don't measure up to certain rudimentary standards of success, ones that even a preschooler grasps.

For the most part, I have made peace with being single, childless and unwealthy as I tiptoe toward 40 next year. What is harder to chalk up to bad luck or choice is my carlessness. To exist into your 30s without a vehicular conquest is to cast doubts on your adulthood. As another auto-free friend of mine noted, you might as well be in a wheelchair the way others react when they learn of your transportation status.

It's true that many people judge you by what you have, not by what you've accomplished. Moreover, ours is a driven society. I have friends who won't date men without cars because they think it spells "loser." ("It's different for a woman," they add quickly.)

The wise response is to ignore these vulgar sensibilities, but with the weight of a symbolic birthday looming, I find myself groping for cheap social validation. People who have arrived have wheels.

As a less than affluent free-lance writer, buying a car and insurance means having to relinquish some vacation and lifestyle niceties. On the other hand, public transportation is limiting and bumming rides can slowly chip away at your self-esteem.

What sealed my decision to buy a car was what seemed like a ticket to join the club. My brother in Baltimore actually sells cars. Here, some behavioral expert can link my previous resistance to automobiles to a

lifetime of playing sibling opposite. Maybe doing business with my brother now would forge the bonds of kinship that never came naturally before.

Or so I thought until he told me I was the worst customer he ever had. "I told you I'd take anything in my price range that's good. How is that being difficult?" I defend myself. Just because I said a red velour interior looked like a coffin when he thought he found the perfect used Toyota Camry for me?

He lost it when I tried to explain why I'd rather not pay extra for automatic door locks (I'm used to doing it myself), push-button windows (one more thing to break), a tape deck (one more thing to steal), or four doors (shall I put my imaginary family in back?). "You mean the car has all that and not airbags or anti-lock brakes — sensible things I'd pay more for?" I asked incredulously.

"Tell me what you want and I'll get it," he barked. The problem, of course, is that I don't know. I couldn't tell a Thunderbird from a

Skylark although I might be able to hum the commercials. All I want is something affordable and small enough to park on city streets without blood pressure elevation, low breakage potential, and above all, no red velour interior. "You want a Honda Civic?" he says, regaining his composure.

While I'm waiting for the phone call that will change my walkaday life, I try to learn how to drive again. I take three lessons from a commercial driving school that advertised special care for nervous (in large wavy letters) drivers and another from my parents, who are less special with the nervous. Fortunately, I've been renewing my driver's license since high school; this, to avoid the humiliation I already suffered by failing the road test initially in two states.

Everyone has advice. Of course, my brother will have a mechanic check it — we're not that estranged. No, I'm not going to put an American flag on the antenna so cops are less likely to stop me. Sure, I'll consider putting "CYNIC" on my li-

cence plate. And no, I'm not going to contribute to the decline of American values by registering the car at my parents' address where insurance is cheaper.

I tell my brother that I'll take a train to Baltimore to pick up the dream machine as soon as he's found something. My father intervenes, however. "You're not driving a car you're not used to from Baltimore to Philadelphia," he says firmly.

"It's all of 100 miles and I'll go during daylight and not rush hour," I protest like I'm 16 again. There's no further discussion. My brother — that's my younger brother — is assigned the task of driving my car-to-be to Philadelphia and my father will take him home. Not!

So much for becoming a car-buying grown-up. Maybe you need the husband and mortgage, too. Better ask Ryan.

Eve Glicksman is now the proud owner of a 1988 Toyota Corolla.

