

And don't forget the little car

Brian sells cars. Now, before you begin conjuring up an image of a grinning, pot-bellied, open-armed, congenital liar, complete with greasy hair plastered over a bald spot, bearing down upon you in his white shoes and white tie — Brian is a good guy.

For a start, Brian sells new cars so there is none of the ‘Only had one careful lady owner, in fact, it’s such a bargain I was planning to let my mother have it, but unfortunately she died last week.’

No, Brian sells quality, with a cast-iron warranty that guarantees him repeat business from the comfortable suburbs that surround his dealership. His customers are fellow Rotarians. He sells them quality saloons, roadsters to their sons, and estates to their wives, and over the years Brian has become a great observer of human nature.

He understands how important it is to his aspiring customers to be seen in the ‘right’ car, and for their wives and children to be seen in the ‘right’ car. They judge

others by the cars they drive and fully expect to be judged accordingly themselves. Brian, businessman that he is, knows how to exploit this. He would never, for example, point out that the truly wealthy buy modest reliability and expect it to last forever. The conversation changes dramatically when it comes to the last car.

He sees them coming from a long way off. Heads bowed, shoulders slumped, they hover around the edge of the showroom. Once, they would have strode purposefully to the gleaming new convertible for a brief daydream, thinking ‘How would I look in that!’, before giving serious attention to the latest, fully-optioned executive chariot.

Now, they potter around the back of the showroom where the smaller, budget cars are, asking lots of questions — baggage capacity, fuel economy, length of warranty. And, most importantly of all: how long will it last? Brian watches as they do the mental calculations. One question, always unspoken, is paramount. ‘Will it last me out?’

Brian probably thinks an existentialist is something that belongs in a gearbox, but in his own way, he is every bit a philosopher and a great judge of human nature. He understands the ‘last car’ syndrome all too well.

There comes a point in everyone’s life when they accept their own mortality. Inevitably they ask: ‘What’s the point?’ The point, as the more thoughtful have concluded, is to be, and keep on being, taking responsibility for your own life. The sad alternative is to retreat into a meaningless world of nothingness, a slow form of suicide. And nothing,

absolutely nothing, sums it up better than the ‘last car’ syndrome. The last ‘little’ car.

Brian sees and hears it all too often: ‘Well, I’m getting on a bit now and need a car to see me out. Something for pottering about in, not too expensive, not too heavy on the gas.’ What they’re really saying is that they’re waiting to die, entering into a form of voluntary home detention. When you think that your ‘retirement’ could last for thirty years, doesn’t that seem a bit extreme? Thirty years of low mileage — if that isn’t being half-dead, what is?

This is a great trap you must not fall into, under any circumstances. The little car that will ‘see us out’, together with the new little home next door to all the other poor souls ‘waiting for God’. Now you can all hold meetings to discuss that all-consuming crack in the footpath.

And for goodness sake don’t go anywhere in the new little car in case you wear it out too fast. Before you know it, the new little car has become a mobile coffin and every time you use it you’ll be worrying about whether it’s going to ‘see you out’. You’re actually hoping to conk out before your car? Sound scary? Can you believe people actually do this to themselves? Well they do. Please don’t let it be you.

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And why do we so willingly change from being alive and vibrant to deadly dull? Because we’ve been conned into accepting the cycle — live, work, retire, die. Notice