

Maybe it is attitude. It's my decision; will I stop? I am given an appealing glance. I'm not taking a chance and getting involved in a risky situation. I have all of five seconds to decide whether to stop. My nature is to help those who need it but in five minutes my journey by car will be over, and anyway walking is good for the health of the hitchhiker.

I stop. Conscience or good neighbour is the winner. The family, my wife and I and our four children, are temporarily residing in a caravan by the sea at Garrylucas near Kinsale. I commute daily to Bandon, just twelve miles away to manage our poultry business. The laying fowl are at the rearing stage so not much time is necessary to carry out the routine tasks. On most days half a day is adequate, consequently I am free to join the family for the afternoon if the weather is conducive to beach migration.

There are two of them, one of each gender, definitely not a teenage runaway pair, a more mature couple. She sits in front and he takes a back seat and says "Thank you". So I say, "Having a holiday?"

"Well actually..." She speaks with a distinctly American tone. They were camping near the Old Head the previous night and as the gate was locked, they had parked outside.

He went for a walk to see the lighthouse, over a mile away at the tip of the peninsula. As it was warm she lay on the grass and read her book. In due course he returned and they renegotiated the gate. She went to open the car door; the key was missing and she experienced an awful moment of unbelievable reality.

It must have slipped out of her pocket while she lay on the grass. They surmounted the iron barrier once again and located the flattened grass. No key! Try the pockets, look near the car; despite an intensive search, no luck.

A restless, worrying night followed, and no doubt a plan was made on how to resolve the dilemma. Quite simply all that was required was another key. The car was hired in Dublin and she was the sole driver. Next day they phoned from a public house a mile away.

They were to go to Cork and get a key there from that branch of the hire company and everything would be fine.

They got to Cork, located the office and collected another key and then proceeded towards the abandoned transport on one of Ireland's picturesque extremities.

This is when I had the dubious pleasure of getting acquainted with the irresponsible couple, or more specifically the woman, so now you see the position and what I had got myself into. That is to say, do I let them off at my stop and be heartless?

It could only be about two miles to the stranded vehicle which would take maybe fifteen or twenty minutes, so I thought what the heck, I'll run 'em up and have peace of mind.

We set off towards a T-junction where the grocery/confectionary shop is the only building between the road and the sea. The road used to be in front of the shop a hundred years earlier but due to severe coastal erosion it had to be re-routed.

We turn left, down past Manning's cottage, where the cups and plates were shaken and chipped on the dresser by the shock waves from the explosion that sunk the Lusitania on 7th May 1915 when 1198 died, just a few miles off the coast.

The road skirts the shoreline for half a mile here, at almost sea level and has a narrow strip of sand between it and the sea, which fluctuates in depth with the tides. There is a constant battle here to save the facility and preserve the road as a combination of severe winter elements manifest their powers.

Soon the road runs through the sand dunes that are preserved by the sharp edged marram grass. Just before the fork in the road is the old national school, a solid structure built with stone in the 19th Century. A dark evergreen escallonia hedge, which is covered in pink, pleasant smelling flowers every summer, shelters it. Resistant to, and so undamaged by, spray. Just beyond are the obsolete coastguard cottages, now used as summer homes.

We now proceed up a gradual hill and pass through farmland, mostly grazing for black and white cows. The roadside banks are covered with the yellows, blues, greens and reds of blooming Sanfoin and rest-harrow and wild-time, hedge bedstraw and violets. The road is just adequate for single lane vehicular traffic through the ruined remains of old stone dwellings and animal shelters.

Close by are modern houses that indicate a degree of affluence has been generated. The road levels off for a short distance then the sea is visible again as far as the Seven Heads, the next promontory westwards, about ten miles away. It penetrates inland between Coolmain Point and Courtmacsherry Point to create a sheltered bay used by small craft.

Another slight rise in the road to the highest point above sea level, 300 feet where, on a clear day, there is a spectacular view of the Old Head of Kinsale peninsula stretching out further, and beyond the panoramic Atlantic Ocean all around as far as the horizon.

A most acceptable place normally, to stop and view, and listen to the larks unmistakable symphony as they soar. A rare oasis, free of traffic and fumes and stress, where one can escape and think there is a positive side to life and depart refreshed.

Or one can dream and visualise the hundreds of sailing ships that passed with emigrants getting their final glimpse of their homeland as they travelled to the New World. The most infamous of ships passed here in 1912, having left Cobh some hours earlier on its fatal voyage. The Titanic so new, so promising, so flawed nominally, reaching the promised land was risky.

We duly arrive beside the car and all emerge. Madam sits in, inserts the key and ... silence!

I try and fail to turn it so, at the very brink of the anticipated end to the crisis, it becomes painfully obvious that they had collected the wrong key and the trip to Cork was in vain.

I am now hungry and shortly expected by my wife for lunch.

It is probably around this time I may have assumed a certain control and decide a resolution to the problem must surely not be impossible with a little decision making. The three of us get into my car and head for the shop near our 'home', which has a public phone as I think of a simple plan.

I could phone the Austin garage in Bandon, as I am aware they carry a big selection of duplicates. It is the dinner hour so they are closed. In fact it is early closing day so they will not reopen until next morning.

Our younger son Ronald appears from the crowd of kids coming and going to the shop to say lunch is ready and the three of us should come immediately. Chicken Casserole is on the menu so we all sit in the rather cramped conditions and proceed to eat. Due to the circumstances, conversation is very limited.

However, Ms America announces we should all introduce ourselves as she sits with a fork full poised for the empty stomach. "I'm Donna and this is Tony", so I say, "My wife is Daphne and I'm George". Donna was originally from Detroit and they are now living together in Dublin.

Tony rarely speaks, for several reasons; such as his inability to drive, and probably shock from the fact his highly intelligent loveable girlfriend had instigated this traumatic position by committing such a simple stupid act.

As we continue to enjoy the meal, Donna attempts to resolve the predicament by interjecting on what she thought we should do while she is about to stuff the next consignment into her mouth. When she ceases to waffle for a moment with her mouth full, I shoot down her various plans and decide what the next move will be.

We have a cup of tea and emerge. The period that lapsed during the meal break allowed us to take a less panicked view of the state of affairs. Of course as far as I am concerned the sooner the situation is resolved the better as, on an exceedingly excellent summer's day, I am rather anxious to immerse in the Atlantic.

I am vaguely acquainted with a car mechanic in the local village of Ballinspittle so what better way to begin than consult our expert for advice or even a remedy. The frustrated couple and my two boys and myself travel back the road and receive a very sympathetic welcome from the owner Mr Joe O'Regan.

He is feeling the affects of the hot day and is more comfortably undressed to the waist, and consequently, as a result of his occupation, a few black streaks are visible on the upper body - a memorable spectacle.

I explain the predicament and he immediately climbs out of the pit and takes down a circular shaped piece of wire with maybe fifty or more keys on it. He says: "This usually gets people with lost keys out of trouble".

So we are not unique. Maybe there is an opening for a lucrative breakdown rescue service with the addition of meals on wheels and this is our maiden voyage!

Once again we take off for the Old Head and discover the Austin Mini has not moved. I sit in, and set to work. About ten of the keys actually enter the ignition but none turn.

I had better mention I would have liked to tow the lifeless wheels back to our abode but due to the steering locking device this was not possible. Even so I'm sure you have gathered that I am determined to bring the situation to a satisfactory conclusion.

We retrace the four miles to Ballinspittle and pull up on Joe's forecourt.

I cannot recollect having had any conversation during this journey so if there was any exchange, it must have been pretty trite. I enter the garage and duly replace the unacceptable keys on the wall hook.

Joe was still stuck at some obstinate problem on the lower extremities of the geriatric immobile and probably wishing it was receiving the last rights.

“Well?” he says. “No go” I reply. “Give me twenty minutes, and I’ll be with you.” I emerge from the conspicuous shed in the residential area and inform the love birds about the next episode. Deep depression has, I feel, descended on the odd couple as they pace in various directions in the thirsty heat while the afternoon ebbs away. What are their thoughts, as thinking they must be? I may surmise his. It was not his fault so it was her that caused the predicament.

The fact that he was inadequate to assist in resolving the pickle meant it took on a magnitude far in excess of its reality and hence the inability to converse. As for Donna’s mind, I never really got to fathom or comprehend the depth of her thoughts or how she was coping mentally.

Perhaps she was concerned about Tony's attitude, after all the future of this happy loving relationship may have reached a critical phase and failure to extricate themselves may jeopardise their co-existence. Can the course of true love really be tested by the disappearance of a little key?

As for me I felt we were over the worst, as light was appearing when I located Joe. Surely I'm not partly responsible for the future of a beautiful friendship. I re-enter the garage and Joe emerges from the hole in the floor with some tools.

He crosses to the bench and collects some more including a heavy hammer, always a handy weapon to have in one's armoury. He closes the door; wouldn't it be great if I could say he hung up a sign "Gone fishing".

Now six of us pack into my Nissan and off we set. Are you counting? This is my third trip to the Old Head! In a situation like this, one is not very aware of the rest of the world, or time or anything else! The mini remains intact and is patiently waiting to be revived, we all hope. It may have taken all of five minutes for the ignorant audience members; me included, to witness the master at work achieving what is necessary.

Very impressive, observing a man with knowledge operating in a crisis. He places the point of a screwdriver against a strategic bolt on the anti-steering device, raises the persuader and bang, bang. The whole locking device just falls off.

Then he locates two vital wires, places one against the other and hey presto the silent, lifeless jalopy makes some very welcome agreeable, relieving noises! The car is the only thing to receive a kiss...the kiss of life!

If Donna was a young hysterical, highly-strung emotional female wouldn't you think Joe and me should have received a peck on the cheek? I must resist such feeble thoughts.

Can we assume the shock depressed her natural emotions and her blood froze? Or alternatively she may be the deep thinking type that recites poetry standing on her head while Tony sweats for the bread.

The two boys help Tony disassemble the tent and we load the gear and all return with two cars to our site. The nightmare is over; I am free. I tell them to erect the tent near our wagon and then the whole family is re-united on the beach with the hoards of sun worshippers for the slightly delayed plunge, which had been put on hold.

Tony and Donna took Joe home and that was that. Well almost. Next morning I am just about to depart for farm duties, when Tony emerges from the tent.

He has managed to recover his normality and self-confidence and probably thinks life is worth living and maybe any decision on Donna's future can be postponed. His final words were "I don't know what we would have done only for you." I think I said: "Sure anyone would have done it in Cork"! He very kindly refunded my petrol expenses and I departed. When I return for my lunch they are gone.

They had been to the village and Joe had located a key and reassembled the bits that fell apart and they returned with some necessaries for our kitchen and then disappeared and that was how the hilarious afternoon came to an end.

And now, in the best Hollywood tradition of the silent movie days, the caption might read: meanwhile back at the chicken farm, twenty long years later. (Actually twenty-one.) My Leyland Cypress trees had reached sixty feet and were a possible health hazard so we knocked 'em and then there was a mess.

During the last week of August 2002 I was gathering up the remains when I heard a voice. "Is this where Mr. Beare lives?" "Yes." "Could I speak to Mr. George Beare?" "Yes, speaking." "You won't remember me but I'm Tony...!"

George Beare.