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The **IRISH** Mail
ON SUNDAY

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INSIDE THIS WEEKEND'S

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Dr Mark Dooley



MORAL MATTERS

The scribble that brought back my friend

EVERY day, you and I leave behind some carbon footprints. Most of us also leave behind a money trail that is often used to track the whereabouts of those who go missing. There is, however, another trail that tells the story of a life – and that continues to exist long after the person has perished.

The human trail comprises clothes, ornaments, books and keepsakes.

It takes the form of photos, paintings and video footage. We also leave behind memories that, when invoked, enable us to live on in the minds of others.

No human life leaves the world untouched. Even today, think of how your words and actions have affected others. They have now become the content of memory and may well shape the way you are viewed after death.

Nothing in the human trail contains more significance than our signature. What's in a name, Shakespeare asks. Everything, for the meaning of a whole life is poured out in that small scribble.

Each line and curve, dot and cross, reveals something about the absent person. Even more than an image, the signature brings before the mind's eye a thousand lost memories. You are reminded of her smile, her scent and even her long silent voice.

We have just applied to have our eldest son's passport renewed. He was unable to write when he got his first passport. Now, however, he signed all the documentation and the accompanying photographs.

As I stood in the local Garda station waiting to have his forms stamped, I looked at our son's signature and realised that he now had an identity of his own.

I smiled, because in each of those small letters I could see his spirit. Everything about him was there before me etched on a page.

Of course, with electronic communication the human trail is shrinking. It seems we are forever typing our names but rarely signing them.

This means we are, metaphorically, vanishing from the world. It means we are draining our words of their life blood.

For a long time, I had not thought of my dear friend John Tierney.

I first met him in the early Nineties when he was student at UCD. His long red hair and beaming white smile ensured no one could ignore this wonderful character known simply as 'Sos'.

In the years that followed, I supervised John's master's thesis, I travelled with him to England to meet philosopher Jacques Derrida and, in 1995, we attended a Bob Dylan concert together.

He was fascinated by my interpreta-

tion of Dylan as the Salvador Dali of popular music. But he was also in love with the Blues, something that drew him to Chicago where he could indulge his passion.

As the years receded, so too did those precious memories.

That was until recently when, by chance, I took a book from my shelves. There, on the title page, was the following inscription: 'John K. Tierney, Chicago, 1992.'

The signature was unmistakable. John's intoxicating personality, his love of life and joyful wisdom, are all revealed in each beautifully crafted letter. As I look now at the elegant curves and defined lines, I can see and sense my friend. I can hear his voice and booming laughter as if for the first time.

John's signature is confined to a small patch of paper. Yet, it has opened up a world of memories that time had threatened to erase. It has transported me back to my early years teaching in UCD, to that period in my life when I was barely older than my students.

John brought colour and excitement to that world. He encouraged and provoked in equal measure but never without laughter or love. And it is these twin virtues of laughter and love that still shine through his striking signature.

Had I not stumbled upon John's signature, so much of those years would have been lost. People I had forgotten are, however, now back in view. Great times have been recovered simply by contemplating one man's name.

AT the beginning and end of the human trail is a signature. Much more than a sequence of marks, it is a window into the world of the signer. It testifies to who I am and the type of life I have lived.

My son has just signed for the first time, his life having barely begun. John, on the other hand, will never sign again. Not long after we saw Bob Dylan, I received a phone call to say my friend had tragically died while on holiday.

The book bearing his signature is one that I borrowed long ago but never had the chance to return. It is a work of philosophy and still contains the receipt of purchase from the University of Chicago bookstore.

Remarkably, it is a book dedicated to the question of remembrance, specifically why we should remember the dead.

John Tierney died in his twenties. He did not have time to leave behind a long human trail. But what he did leave behind were potent traces of a short but extraordinary life.

One of those traces now sits on my desk, a powerful reminder that we shall be forgotten only when we cease to sign.