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The IRISH Mail

ON SUNDAY

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MORAL MATTERS

A key that is so important, you use it once and throw it away

YOU turn the key, open the door and it hits you – that unmistakable scent of home. Suddenly, the problems of the day subside as you enter your comfort zone. For that is what home is: a refuge of comfort and peace, a sanctuary from the world and its pain.

We so often forget that the key is much more than a device to gain access. Symbolically, it is the most significant thing that we possess. It is a sign that we belong somewhere, that there is a small corner of this great earth which is ours.

Each key has its own unique identity. It signifies that this property is mine, and that I alone have a right to enter. It is that which opens a private space in which I can be myself, one that is off limits to the public.

The key: a symbol of ownership, settlement and belonging. When perceived as such, we see how central keys are to our sense of identity. Without them, we are devoid of refuge and condemned to a life of constant wayfaring.

Once the key has served its immediate purpose, it is quickly cast out of mind. For now you are at home and at peace. It is only when the key fails to function, or when it gets stuck in the lock, that you realise how critical it is.

To be locked out of home is to experience acute alienation. We all know what it is like: impatience is quickly followed by anxiety which soon turns to embarrassment. You are at home and yet you are stranded in the public gaze. It is as though you have been evicted from your life.

That is why we should never take our keys for granted. They link us to that place without which existence would have little meaning. They open many doors, not least that of the heart.

Keys bind us to place, time and people. To hear the key being inserted in the door is one with many meanings. For some, it is the sound of impending terror. To others, it signifies the end of loneliness – that special moment when heart cries out to heart.

I approach the door full of expectation. I know that once the key is heard a shout will sound from within: 'Dada's home!'

In that moment, the outside world recedes and I enter a space where I am accepted for who I am.

How often do we find ourselves awaiting the return of a loved one? It is late at night and we are finding it difficult to sleep. Suddenly, the peace of the house is disturbed by the sound

of the key. It is such a welcome sound and all we need to hear before quietly drifting off.

The key provides access to everything we hold dear. Without it, we are – quite literally – blocked off from our loved ones, our private life and our sense of ownership.

We are divided from ourselves and from that inner realm where we are free simply to be.

There are, of course, moments in life when keys do loom large.

The '21st key' is a powerful reminder that we have reached adulthood – that we are now free to leave home and to acquire one of our own. It is a symbol that we have attained the maturity necessary for ownership and full citizenship.

There are also those terrible occasions when people have to hand back their keys.

Can anything be more crushing to a family than having to surrender the key of their home? It is tantamount to handing away their identity, their privacy and right of ownership.

In handing over that key, you hand away your life.

We have keys to the home, to the kingdom, to success and to the heart. In each case, they unlock what we all desire to possess at various stages of life. They open and shut doors, barriers that divide the inside from the outside, the private from the public, and the sacred from the profane.

Today, we have key codes which safeguard our phones, computers, bank accounts and credit cards. Where once we had only to worry about the hall door and car keys, now we have to worry about remembering dozens of codes without which we could not operate as citizens. In many ways, we have become the key to our personal and financial security.

IF our keys are there to keep others out, they are also there to let them in. As I say, nothing is of greater value than the key to someone's heart. Discovering what that code is can be as vital to life as the key to our front door.

Possessing a key to a person's heart is not about ownership.

It is more about devotion, commitment and love. It is about finding a way into someone's soul and remaining there forever.

And, once safely there, you suddenly realise that this key is unlike any other. It is the most precious, but it is also the only one that you don't have to worry about losing or forgetting. It is the only one that has a momentous but sole purpose.

Unlike all others, the key to someone's heart unlocks a lifetime of love, after which it can be simply thrown away.