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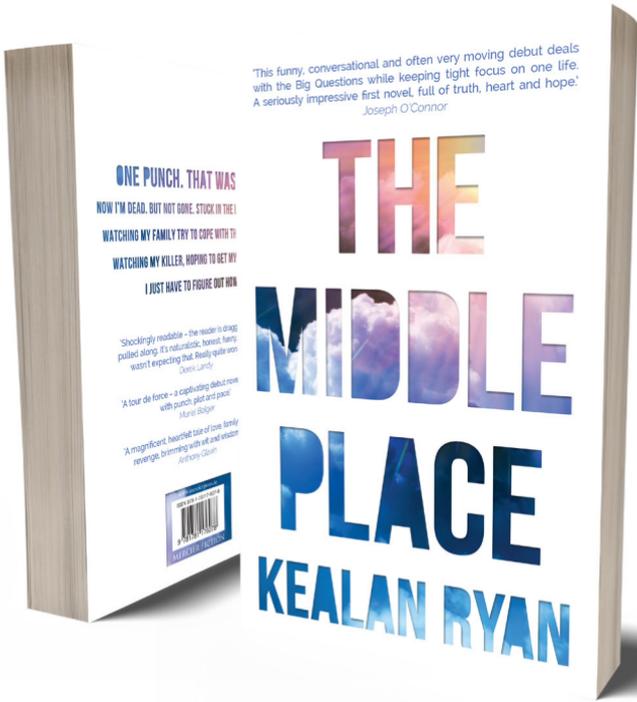
Joseph O'Connor

THE

MIDDLE

PLACE

KEALAN RYAN



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**THE
MIDDLE
PLACE**

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MERCIER PRESS

PROLOGUE

I'm still here. I know I am because I can see them. But how come I can see them all at once when they're in different places? That doesn't make any sense.

I'm not ...? Stop thinking that.

Can you hear me? Can you see me? I can't see myself. I can't breathe, I can't scream. I want to scream. I must be dreaming, but I can't wake up.

You're not dreaming.

I can't do anything. Yes, I can. Get a hold of yourself. At least I'm still with her. With Pamela.

No you're not.

Yes I fucking am! But she can't see me.

Hold on. It's okay. It's a dream.

Long fucking dream.

Of course it's a dream! It's definitely a dream. Okay. Thank God for that. What a crazy messed-up dream. Okay. Time to wake up now. I can always wake myself up from my dreams. Wake up now like a good man. Christ, that was scary. Wake up. Wake up, you bollocks! Wake the fuck up. Why am I not awake? And why am I still seeing him? I don't want to look at him. Look at her instead. Look at my Pamela. He's still here. Or I'm there. Look at someone else. Not him. My parents. No, they're too sad. Back to Pamela. Oh Christ, please stop crying.

You can hear me, Pamela, can't you? Except I know you can't. Stop crying, baby.

My baby. My Robbie. My angel. My son. My life.

This isn't a dream, is it?

It must be. The alternative is not meant to happen like this. Everything is supposed to just go black, right? Oblivion.

How do you know?

If not black, then heaven. God, angels and all that craic.

Hell?

Jesus, I wasn't that bad! Don't tell me I've landed in hell. No, if it was hell, she wouldn't be here. It's not hell, Pamela is here. And my baby boy, my Robbie. I'm with you, buddy. Don't worry, I'm with you.

But I'm not, am I? So what? What the fuck happened? Don't say it. Don't admit it.

It will be okay. Focus. Get through to her.

She can't hear you.

Someone else then.

None of them can hear you, you stupid dead bastard.

There. I said it.

Dead.

No, it's not true; it can't be.

So what then – you just obtained mystical powers?

Stranger things have happened.

They really haven't.

So that's it then?

That's it, alright. Admit it.

No.

Just admit it.

I'm dead.

You're dead.

Am I still me? I still feel like me. I still think like me. I'm alone, I know that much. But I'm still here. That's got to be something, right? Not really – I don't want to be here, not like this. But I am.

I've got to deal with this somehow.

But how? Why?

You know how. You know why. Think about it.

I don't want to think about it.

Admit it again then.

I don't want to.

You have to.

I have to.

It's the only thing you know for certain.

I'm dead.

Okay. I've admitted it. Now what?

Now it's time to figure this whole thing out.

No, fuck that. I'm dreaming. Time to wake up.

**THREE
MONTHS
DEAD**

1

The funny thing about being dead is that you start to think about stuff you never thought of when you were alive. I mean, you'd think you wouldn't have a care in the world after you die, but the truth – for me, anyway – is that I started caring about things a lot more.

Take those ads on TV, the ones for Concern or whatever. I watched those ads hundreds of times when I was alive but never cared enough to pick up the phone and make my seven euro a month donation. Seven euro, for fuck's sake. 'Earthquake in China' – *That's a pity*. '10,000 people homeless across Ireland' – *They really should do something about that*. But did I really give a shit? Not really.

I don't know if that makes me a bad guy. When I was alive I thought I was great – it's only now I'm starting to re-evaluate things. A bit late, I guess.

Just to clear something up – the life flashing before your eyes thing is a load of bollocks. Truth is, you haven't a clue what's going on when it happens and the past thirty-five years, or however long you've lived, is the furthest thing from your mind. I was thinking of Clint Eastwood, for fuck's sake. I thought I was going to be fine. Even after you've died you still assume that you're going to be all right. Believe me, it takes a while for the realisation to land, but when it hits, it hits harder than anything you can possibly imagine. Try to think of the worst sinking feeling you've ever had. I bet you could see a way through, no matter how bad it was, whether it's by throwing money at the problem, or even just waiting it out. But death? What the hell can you do to get out of that one? Your

life starts passing before your eyes over the next few hours, weeks, months – but it doesn't flash. It crawls.

Since my death I've been trying to think of one defining moment that proves I was a great person in life and I can't come up with any. I've come up with plenty that, on paper, make me sound like a bad bastard, though. If I were in a romantic comedy I'd definitely be the asshole that everyone hopes doesn't get the girl. Any time I watched those movies I'd even be rooting for the nerd guy, not realising that I was much more like the dickhead character.

I did do some nice things, of course. I loved my wife very much and was a good father. Was good to my parents and brothers. I participated in the odd fun run, did Movember each year. If any of my mates needed help moving house or anything like that I was always Johnny-on-the-spot to lend a hand. I had no problem making airport runs. If anyone needed a lift anywhere, for that matter, I was your man.

But I also cheated on my wife shortly after I proposed to her, broke my best friend's nose for no reason, and when I was in school I bullied a kid named Simon so badly that he had to leave. I brushed thoughts of these acts aside when I was alive and focused instead on the kind, but relatively minor deeds that I'd done that gave me some sort of reward – never fully admitting that I only did them so people would think I was wonderful. In life, your regrets are things like missing a night out or never finishing college or some shit. When you're dead the only regrets you have are the times where you let someone you care about down.

So, as if being dead isn't depressing enough, I'm also beginning to see now that I was a bit of an asshole when I was alive. Tough to come to terms with, that one, because I can't make it right. Not

now. All I can do instead is wish that I could change things, wish I had been a better man, wish I had committed one truly selfless act. Wish that I hadn't been so full of shit all the time.

2

I miss chilling out and watching movies. It's weird, but that's one of the things I miss the most. Sounds kind of stupid, I guess. I miss my wife and family too, obviously, but I don't want to think about that right now. It's the small things that are getting to me at the moment. I can't relax and stick on a film. I can't have a pint. I'd love a pint.

Oh yeah, the other thing about being dead is that you are cold all – and I mean all – the time. It fucking sucks. I never exactly pictured the afterlife as me hanging around my old neighbourhood, freezing my balls off. I've got a chill deep in my body, except, of course, I can't even see my body – I just know I'm here. Existing. It's weird. Kind of hard to explain. All I can say is you're not going to like it.

There's not a lot about being dead that I like, to be honest. Life was so much better, so enjoy it while you can. This whole thing isn't at all how I imagined it. I don't mean to be all gloomy and morbid – you're probably thinking what a miserable bastard I am, but Christ I can't help it. The old me was happy-go-lucky. Well, maybe not happy-go-lucky exactly, but definitely not depressing. I was happyish most of the time. Some things used to piss me off but, by and large, I was pretty upbeat.

Now everything pisses me off. Even the things I used to love the most – in fact, especially the things I used to love the most. The people. Because I can't do anything with them; I can't hold them or talk to them, laugh with them. I can watch them, which is comforting, I guess, but then sometimes that makes me feel like a

bit of a weirdo. I mean, they haven't a clue that I'm there. But what the hell else am I supposed to do? I've got no life – literally.

The one positive in this whole shit state of affairs is that I'm kind of like a superhero. A completely useless superhero, but still. I can read minds; I hear people's thoughts and memories, I know what they are feeling. I can go from place to place and time to time depending on what I'm focusing on. I can fly. I can walk through walls. I'm invisible. I can see things no one else can see. I can feel things. Not in the way I once did. Not to touch, but I can feel life grow and thrive everywhere. I can take hold of it and become part of the world around me. I can't see myself but I know I'm here, existing in several places at once. I see what is happening with all the people I love all the time, the people who were affected by me. I'm with them, always.

Maybe this is what I'm supposed to do. When you're dead you're meant to watch over your loved ones, aren't you? But am I watching over them or am I just watching them? I know for a fact that I'm not helping them, so I'm beginning to think this whole guardian angel stuff is a load of crap.

3

Bullying that kid Simon was bad, I totally accept that, but to be perfectly honest with you, he was kind of a knob. He was one of those kids that even the teachers hated. He was on the slow side, always showing off and never knew when to shut up. He just rubbed me the wrong way and whipping the piss out of him was a happy pastime for me back then.

He had this bowler haircut, not the cool Oasis-style bowler, more of a lame *Eight is Enough* type thing. One day, I started chanting, 'Bowler ... bowler ... bowler ...' at him in the classroom and pretty soon my chant had turned into a screaming mantra from the entire class. Simon kept his head down on the table, crying, while we all laid into him. My friend John was the only one who tried to stop it. He'd dished out as much as anyone at the start, but after a while he must have figured that enough was enough, so called out to start slagging one of the other oddballs in the class instead. But I stayed on Simon, like the asshole ringleader that I was. The more insulting I got, the worse language I used, the cooler I felt. I knew it was wrong, but, with the entire class behind me, there was no way I was stopping. When Mrs McGuire walked in we all went mute. She saw that Simon was crying, had heard the roar of the class, but didn't give enough of a shit about him to do anything.

He left about two weeks later, and everyone knew it was down to me. I pretended to act like I didn't give a bollocks, but deep down I felt a bit bad. I was only eleven – I had no big master plan to break this kid's self-esteem and force him out of the school. He was just an annoying boy that I didn't like, so I pushed him around.

I used to see him about from time to time after he left. He still lived in the same area. Every time he saw me he'd give me a big smile and an 'Alright, mate.'

I never understood that.

'Alright, Simon,' I'd respond.

If someone treated me the way I'd treated him I'd sooner spit on them than say hello. What kind of a person was he, to greet me like we were old friends? Did he have such a low opinion of himself that he still wanted to be buds despite everything?

I had hoped that he'd get on better in his new school, but I heard that he ended up being as much of an outcast there as he ever was in Saint Michael's. After a few years, though, I stopped seeing him around and he left my mind completely.

I don't know why he's back in my thoughts after all these years. Like I said, I'm thinking about all sorts of stuff that I never bothered with when I was alive. Life crawling before my eyes. Memory stops for a little while on Simon O'Donnell and then moves on again to something else, someone else.

I can remember things perfectly, not as if they happened yesterday but as if they're happening now, right in front of me. Splashing around in a puddle with my dad when I was four is as clear to me as the day I passed my driving test, or the first time I was allowed to have a shower instead of a bath. There used to always be a fog obstructing these things. But now, for me, that fog has lifted and everything is crisp in my mind, allowing me to look back over my past with perfect clarity.

When I was still alive, I'd forgotten just how good my parents were to me – how much they truly loved me. I was one lucky bastard growing up – and all through my life, really. How well they treated me, how many things they did for me. The look on Dad's face at my funeral, trying to console Mam – they will never be the same

again and I can see that in them. The same way I can see it in other faces. They've both been so good to Pamela. Shit, I really let her down. *But I'm going to make it up to you, baby. I'm going to protect you somehow, make sure you and Robbie will be okay, live happy lives.* I'll figure it out. I'm here for something, amn't I? I have to be.

If I'm not here for that, then what am I here for? All the cool things that are supposed to happen after you die haven't happened. I'm not playing hacky sack with Jesus on a bunch of fluffy clouds, or having beautiful angels feed me grapes while fanning me down.

Instead I have to concentrate on the good memories from my life to make the days bearable. Or focus on things I never truly noticed when I was alive. Like the sea. I lived beside the coast for most of my life, but I never really looked at the sea. It's amazing, particularly given how I can watch it now – I can follow the waves as they race towards the strand; I can ride along with them, sense them lifting, struggling, then crashing down on the shore only for the cycle to begin again, the waves rising.

I want to rise again, to live again. I want to hold my wife, breathe air into my lungs, touch the sea – really touch it. I want to feel Robbie's little hand in mine. I want to close my eyes and discover that this is all over; close my eyes and wake up beside Pamela. If I can't do that then let me go; it's too painful. Let me go, let me close my eyes and just disappear.

ONE PUNCH. THAT WAS ALL.

NOW I'M DEAD. BUT NOT GONE. STUCK IN THE MIDDLE PLACE.

WATCHING MY FAMILY TRY TO COPE WITH THIS TRAGEDY.

WATCHING MY KILLER, HOPING TO GET MY REVENGE.

I JUST HAVE TO FIGURE OUT HOW.

'Shockingly readable – the reader is dragged in and pulled along. It's naturalistic, honest, funny, and sad. I wasn't expecting that. Really quite wonderful.'

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'A tour de force – a captivating debut novel, packed with punch, plot and pace.'

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