

Jonathan Edward Doyle

**The View From The Centre Of The Universe**

The phone had been ringing all evening but I had ignored it. I did finally answer but was in no mood for discussion. What was I supposed to say to her. I put the phone down on the table and could still hear Meg speaking on the other side. I put my hand to my face - four fingers on my left cheek and thumb on the right - and ran it over crackling stubble. I find it difficult to properly express myself, that's what I told them. I told them that if I could somehow communicate with them, somehow let them feel what I feel, then it would all make sense. I knew this wasn't true. The reason I couldn't communicate was that I knew they wouldn't like the truth. They *couldn't handle* the truth. It wasn't a good enough excuse. It ate at me, drove me to seemingly illogical actions, but it wasn't a good enough reason. It didn't stand up against *real* problems. My kid wouldn't get it and I would want nothing less. He didn't deserve to be forced to get it. I didn't want to bludgeon it into his majestic head. He may never be in a position where a single person isn't enough, where no matter how deep the feeling, no matter how requisite that person is, some vacuity perseveres in your chest. He may exist outside of this torment, this curse. He may live a life worthy of a man, a committed life of devotion and unimaginable closeness to a woman who reciprocates. God knows they deserve it.

I left the phone off the hook and retreated to the kitchen. I opened the fridge and looked inside. I remained like that, head in the brightly lit box for a few minutes, scanning but seeing no further than my own smudged corneas. My head was a bustling cinema - figures rushing around between fragmented narratives. People laughing, shouting, crying. Masked signals, hidden contexts. Close ups of streaked faces; eyes shut tight against the outside, thin painted membranes standing between the ideal self and caustic reality. Older pictures, sepia-tone and sugar-sweet. Sunshine dripping over young bodies. Faces ignorant of the future, faces ignorant of the present. Noble faces. The idea that a problem overlooked is a problem shed. The idea that life is that moment, that buoyant soundtrack, that flowery bikini and baby bump. I closed the fridge and sat at the table, my eyes unable to focus. I had the sensation that I had forgotten something.

I returned to the phone and put it to my ear. Silence. No dial tone. Megan's voice came immediately. She asked me if I was still there. I moved the handset a foot from my face, afraid to move. Her voice was different over the telephone, especially at this distance from my ear. Slowly, I returned mouthpiece to my lips and spoke carefully. "I need to speak to my son". I put the phone back on the hook and stood in the silent darkness. The only light came from the kitchen, a dim yellow in the doorway. I remembered closing the fridge door but doubted myself. I put my finger in the #0 and dragged the piece around. I held it there for a while before releasing it, the period of whirring my final time of contemplation before I was committed. I slowly traced across the transparent plastic of the dial to #1 and dragged that around too. By the time I finished the area code my action had gained speed, still exaggerated but not hesitant. Languid, the way my grandmother would dial, address book to hand and glasses low on her nose. It was her phone. After she had died Sarah and I went

to her home to clear out – bag her clothes, that sort of thing. She had seen the phone and hovered near it, rotating meaningless numbers. The humming return had filled the house. She asked if we could take it. *May we take it?* were the words she used. An endearing question, compassionately phrased. I told her that she would have liked that. “She had also liked you Sarah.” I cried after saying this. I hadn’t shed a single tear at her bedside, I had been more afraid than anything. But then, in her house with bright, *bright* Sarah I wept. When she had spoken to me, when she asked so nicely – something in my stomach exploded, a chrysalis that had been slowly developing within me transformed. What came out astounded me. I couldn’t keep it in. It was simultaneously red hot and deadly cold. Years later, in the sultry hotel room, me with my hand on our unborn child, I had told her of that moment. I described that release. ‘Liquid love’ I called it and regretted it instantly. Sarah laughed through her mouth and nose, fitful, beating me gently with her pillow.

I entered the last digit of Sarah’s number and watched the dial retreat to its resting position. I imagined them at home, a pinprick of light across the dark town. I imagined them as I always did; him sitting close to her, maybe reading quietly, her stroking his forehead. Maybe he was reading aloud to her, spelling out the longer, more difficult words. Her hair was freshly washed and dried, a pristine cinnamon flow. Her eyes were lined with black but her pale skin highlighted the palpebral swelling, puffy frames of red around devastated plunge pools. She held a glass of wine. I imagined the signal running down the cord and into the floor. I imagined the subterranean spark haring towards their house, the house that still bore my name. The ringing tone sounded in my ear and I imagined their peace being shattered. They looked up in tandem, offended by the shrill noise. Shaken, a little hurt. The ringing tone continued. I tried to sense the moment it would cease, the moment it was interrupted by another human being. I waited for proof that I was not alone. The cycle continued. Now and then I sensed a slight delay and felt sure someone would pick up. My stomach would hurl itself upwards, my palms beaded with sweat. The ring always came though. A mocking continuation.

Time passed but I could not say how much. I had removed the phone from my ear slightly on numerous occasions but the silence of the house threatened to swallow me and I quickly submitted again. *Ring ring*. I contemplated the sound. *Ring ring*. I contemplated the phrase. It wasn’t at all phonetic. It didn’t capture the full sound I was hearing. Someone must have decided ring ring would do and the phrase propagated. It became familiar. It became fact rather than interpretation. I wondered who decided on *ring ring*. Someone knocked the door. I didn’t move. I could see the silhouette of my visitor. I could see her thin jeans hugging her shapely legs. I could see her hair hanging over her face as she bent to the letter box and tried to look in. She had a bag in the crook of her arm. I even thought I could smell her perfume but this could have been psychological. *Ring ring*.

It hadn’t been a lustful thing. That’s what people thought but they were wrong. They saw her dainty but confident frame, her long lashes, her full lips, and they thought of me drooling over her. They imagined a drink-fuelled and painfully loaded conversation at a party. Her bare and freckled shoulders in a black dress that skimmed her thighs. They imagined her whispering in my ear. A professional. They saw glossy heels leading

### Wilderness House Literary Review 7/3

to the elevator. Us fumbling into a room a satisfying urges. They didn't understand. They didn't know her. They didn't know how I felt safe in her arms. Some sort of return to blissful ignorance, a womb-like capsule of protection. I woke in the morning to her and felt just a little further from death. She called through the slot but it was masked by the ringing. Putting the handset down didn't occur to me. They didn't know how gentle she was with him; how she spent the majority of her time trying to think of ways to endear herself to him and the rest carrying it out with a wonderful spontaneity. She was natural with him. A brilliant, *beautiful* natural. She banged the door, harder than before. Her rings or bracelet clattered against the door too, producing a strangely musical noise. She screamed my name, a few threats. They scratched from her throat, shaking and gurgling. The sound was inhuman, immersed in salt and hot water.

I tasted her tears for the first time a few months after we moved in together. Every so often her shell would fracture, cracks appeared from which boiling fluids would seep. Between us, sheltering beneath gunfire from all sides, we managed to make this sensation *something*. I liked to think I gave it physical form. As parents and spouses and everyone else attacked (or else surrendered, inflicting worse damage upon our feeble bodies), we let ourselves gush out, run over one another. Experience it all, privately but together. She amazed me. She knew who to give the middle finger and who to embrace. Through all of my guilt and regret, through her insecurity and battle for acceptance and self-worth, she didn't seem afraid.

She wasn't enough.

I neither heard Meg outside nor did I ever sense her leave. She was somewhere I couldn't imagine; a dark limbo, swearing and cursing. Relapsing. The phone kept ringing. They sat in silence, looking at the phone. He hoped that Dad was on the line. He hoped his father was far away and that Dad was calling. Sarah sat up straight in false defiance, the emerald lagoons overflowing. Fathomless and without end. My back ached so I straightened out, rotating my shoulders to relieve the stress. I thought about getting a beer from the fridge (*that's what I went for earlier*) but remained stationary. The ringing continued.

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As with all stadiums, the building from the outside gave no indication of the glory within. It's only when you climb that last set of steps and see the ground open up do you appreciate the scene. The crowds outside and on the concourse cannot prepare you for that first view into the arena. That flood of sensory information. Cold fresh air blows across his face and he is reminded that he is outside. People all around, small figures in the stands opposite, they are all waiting for the same thing. Some are on their phones, facing up into the stand, giving directions, waving. The grass is luminescent under floodlights. The players look sharper than reality. Everything shimmers with anticipation, breaths are withheld slightly. Megan took a small tube from her bag and applied something to her lips. She returned it and rubbed her lips over one another. She ruffled his hair and lent forward in her seat, hands clasped. She noticed he was smiling and smiled too. He glanced sideways at her; her vividly blue eyes alive under lights. A strand of dark hair clung to her lip. She said something he

## Wilderness House Literary Review 7/3

didn't quite catch and bent down to her purse again. A thin slice of pale flesh appeared between her sweater and jeans. She righted herself with the phone to her ear. She had been trying to call his father all evening to tell him about their plans; to say that Sarah was going out and had called to ask if Meg would take care of him. This time he must have picked up. She spoke for a while but cut off mid sentence. His father hadn't said anything and she wasn't sure if he was there anymore. Hello? Hello? He felt sorry for Meg and was really worried about his dad. He went back to watching the game as prickly panic crept from his stomach, trying to ignore it. A few minutes past but she kept the phone to her ear. Finally he heard a small voice at the end of the phone. "Your Dad wants to speak to you." She passed him the phone but all he heard was a dial tone.

This wasn't his sport. He sensed some similarities but something was missing. The thrilling hostility is absent. There was no rumbling from the away supporters far to his right. There were too many players on the field. Swinging, throwing, running around. Laughing and signing gloves. The event seemed more like a showcase than a true game. At least the pressure was off. Nerves were absent. He could enjoy the game for the sheer spectacle. The result was meaningless, the consequences irrelevant. The night was clear but stars were difficult to see. It was chilly. The seats weren't as close together as at The Bridge and he had to shuffle across to get under her arm. She lifted squeezed him gently and kissed the top of his head. Her lips stayed in place for a long time. She must have been watching the game over his head.

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*Ring ring. Ring ring.*