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Opening Extract from...

Exile

Written by Denise Mina

Published by Orion

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EXILE

Denise Mina



An Orion paperback

First published in Great Britain in 2000
by Bantam Press,
a division of Transworld Publishers
This paperback edition published in 2011
by Orion Books Ltd,
Orion House, 5 Upper St Martin's Lane,
London WC2H 9EA

An Hachette UK company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-4091-3531-9

Typeset by Input Data Services Ltd, Bridgwater, Somerset

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

The Orion Publishing Group's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

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The End

'Kick it and see,' he said.

She felt the foot going into her side, a dull thud ripple through the crippling pain.

'She's dead,' said the woman.

But she wasn't, she was still alive and she heard them. The ground was warm and wet beneath her. Her dry eyes were stuck open and she could see across the floor to a dirty glass by the skirting board. The woman crouched down by her. She was pulling at her wrist, tugging at the bracelet.

'Leave it,' he said, but she ignored him, tugging again. '*I said leave it.*'

The woman dropped her arm and backed off. The man shuffled into her line of vision, worn trainers, grey trousers. They were talking about her, about how to get rid of her, about getting Andy's van. The pain surged and she spasmed at the shrieking trill on her spine, the scalding whiteness behind her eyes. The searing light grew brighter and brighter until there was nothing.

1

Postie

It was minus five outside the bedroom window and Maureen's face prickled against the cold. She wanted to get out of bed, wanted a cigarette and a coffee and to be alone, but his leg was pressed tightly against hers and his hand was under her thigh. The cumulative heat was itchy and damp. She peeled their skins apart, trying hard not to wake him, but he felt her stir. He peered around at her through sleep-puffed eyes.

'Kay?' he murmured.

'Yeah,' breathed Maureen.

She waited, watching her milky breath hover above her, listening to the wind hissing outside. Vik's breathing deepened to a soft, nasal whistle and Maureen slid into the bitter morning.

She flicked on the kettle, lit a cigarette and looked out of the kitchen window. January is the despairing heart of the Scottish winter and black clouds brooded low over the city, pregnant with spiteful rain. It came to her every morning now; it was the first thought in her head when she opened her eyes. After a wordless fourteen-year absence, Michael, her father, was back in Glasgow.

They only found out afterwards that their elder sister Marie hadn't bumped into Michael in London. She'd gone looking for him, contacting the National Union of Journalists and putting adverts in the *Evening Standard*. She found him living in the Surrey Docks in a high-rise council

flat carpeted with empty lager cans. He was troubled with his health and hadn't worked for a long time so Una paid his fare home. Maureen told them she wouldn't see him but her insistence was needless. Liam said Michael never mentioned her, had never once spoken her name and ignored it when anyone else did. Even their mother, Winnie, was starting to wonder about that. Maureen couldn't get over the injustice of it. Michael was back in the bosom of the family and she was outcast.

The moment she heard he was home everything changed for her. It wasn't like the breakdown: she wasn't flashing back all the time and she knew it wasn't depression. It was a limitless, aching sadness that marred everything she cast her eye over. She couldn't contain it: her eyes had become incontinent, dripping stupid tears into washing-up, down her coat, into shopping trolleys. She even cried while she slept. When she stood at the window in Garnethill and looked down over Glasgow she felt her face might open and flood the city with tears. Grief distracted her entirely; it was as if her life continued in an adjacent room – she could hear the noises and see the people but she couldn't participate or care about any of it.

Vik snored loudly once and stopped. He was the only thing in her life that wasn't about the past but it was the wrong time for a fresh chapter and coy new discoveries. Maureen was seeing her father everywhere, grieving for Douglas and missing Leslie desperately. Vik knew almost nothing about her, nothing about Douglas being murdered in her living room six months ago, or Michael's late-night visits to her bedroom when she was a child, nothing about the schism in her family. Telling about Michael was the worst moment with new boyfriends: she saw them change towards her, saw them feel confused and implicated.

Douglas had been different because he was a therapist. She'd never had to explain away the nightmares or the irrational phobias. Douglas was as soiled and melancholy as herself and Vik was a big, jolly boy.

She looked out of the window, took a deep draw on her fag and heard the swish of paper scraping through metal, followed by a light thud on the hall carpet. She recognized the blue hospital envelope at once – Angus was keeping busy. She picked it up and went back into the kitchen, sat down and lit a fresh cigarette from the dying tip of the old one. The envelope was made of cheap porous paper, her name and address written in a careful hand. She leaned across to the bills drawer and pulled out the pile of blue envelopes, laying all fifteen in chronological rows on the table. The writing was changing, becoming more controlled. He was getting better. Some of his letters were threatening, mostly they were gibberish, but the threats and the gibberish were evenly interspersed, regular and anticipatable. She knew the voice of random insanity from her own time in mental hospital and this wasn't it. He was a rapist and a murderer, but she wasn't afraid of him and she didn't give a shit. He was locked away in the state mental hospital. It was like being challenged to a dancing competition by a brick. Wearily, she gathered the unopened letter together with the old ones and shoved them into a drawer. She could read it later.

'Maureen?' Vik called sleepily from the bedroom. 'Maureen?'

She stubbed out her fag and tried to find her voice. 'Yeah?' She sounded tense.

'Maureen, come here.'

She stood up. 'What for?' she called.

'I've got something for you.' Vik was grinning.

She brushed the hair off her face. 'What sort of thing?' she said, forcing the playfulness. If she could act normal she might feel normal.

2
Daniel

London is a savage city and she didn't belong there. She might never have been found but for Daniel. She would have disappeared completely, a missing splinter from a shattered family, a half-remembered feature in a pub landscape.

Daniel was having a good morning. It was a sunny January day and he was on his way to his first shift as barman in a private Chelsea club favoured by footballers and professional celebrities. The traffic was sparse, the lights were going his way and he couldn't wait to get to work. He slowed at the junction, signalling right to the broad road bordering the river. He took the corner comfortably, using his weight to sway the bike, sliding across the path of traffic held static at the lights. He was about to straighten up when he saw the silver Mini careering towards him on his side of the road, the wheel-trim spitting red sparks as it scraped along the high lip of the pavement. He held his breath, yanked the handle-bars left and shot straight across the road, up over the kerb, slamming his front wheel into the low river wall at thirty miles an hour. The back wheel flew off the ground, catapulting Daniel into the air just as the Mini passed behind him. He back-flipped the long twenty-foot drop to the river, landing on a small muddy island of riverbank. The tide was out, and of all the urban rubble in the Thames he might have landed on, Daniel found himself on a sludge-soaked mattress.

He did a quick stock-take of his limbs and faculties and

found everything in order. He thanked God, remembered that he didn't believe in God and took the credit back for himself. Staggered at his skill and reflexive dexterity, he pushed himself upright on the mattress, his left hand sliding a viscous layer off the filthy surface. Gathering the mulch into his cupped hand, he squeezed hard with adrenal vigour. A crowd of concerned passers-by were leaning over the sheer wall, shouting frantically down to him. Daniel waved. 'Okay,' he shouted. 'Don't worry. Other bloke all right?'

The pedestrians looked to their left and shouted in the affirmative. Daniel grinned and looked down at his feet. He was sitting on a corpse, the heel of his foot sinking into her thigh.

He scrambled to his feet, shaking the mattress, making her arm fall out on to the muddy bank. She was wearing a chunky gold identity bracelet with 'Ann' inscribed on it. He staggered backwards towards the river, keeping his eyes on her, trying to make sense of the image.

He could see her now, a bloated pink and blue belly and a void of a face framed by stringy grey hair, drained of colour by the rapacious water. A ragged handful of custard skin was missing from her belly. Daniel called out, a strangled animal cry, and flailed his left hand in the air, scattering her disintegrating flesh. He crouched and splashed his hand in the brown water, trying to wash away the sensation. Panting, he turned back and pointed at the rotting thing hanging out of the mattress.

A man shouted to him from the high river wall. 'Are you injured?'

Daniel looked up. His eyes were brimming over. The man's head was an indeterminate blob floating above the river wall. Daniel's eyes flicked back to the corpse, startled afresh by its presence.

The well-meaning man was shouting slowly, enunciating

carefully. 'Can you hear me?' he yelled. 'I am a first-aider.'

Daniel tried to look up but each time his eyes flicked back to her. He imagined she had moved and fear took the breath from him. He started to cry and looked up. 'Are you the police?' he shouted, in a voice he barely recognized.

'No,' shouted the man. 'I am a first-aider. Do you require medical attention?'

'*Get the fucking police!*' screamed Daniel, his eyes streaming now, his nose running into his mouth. He shook his hand in the air, his skin burning with disgust. '*Get the fucking police.*'

3
Winnie

A stark wind streamed into Glasgow tugging black rain-clouds behind it. Litter fluttered frantically outside the strip of glass and the close door breathed gently in and out. The students kept their heads down as they worked they way up to the art school. Maureen cupped her scarf over her ears and turned up her stiff collar before opening the door and venturing out. The bullying wind buffeted her, making her totter slightly as she turned to shut the door. She kept her fists tight inside her silken pockets and made her way down the hill to the town, cosy in her rich-girl overcoat.

She had bought the coat in a pre-Christmas sale. It was pure black wool with a grey silk lining, long and flared at the bottom with a collar so stiff that it stood straight up and kept the wind off her neck. It was the most luxurious thing she had ever owned. Even at half-price it had cost more than three months' mortgage. She swithered in the shop but persuaded herself that it would last three winters, maybe even four, and anyway, she enjoyed losing the money. On the day Angus murdered him, Douglas had deposited fifteen thousand pounds in her bank account. It was a clumsy act of atonement for their affair and the money compromised her. She knew that the honourable thing to do was give it away but she was dazzled by the string of numbers on her cashpoint receipts and kept it, justifying her avarice by doing voluntary work for the Place of Safety Shelters. She was haemorrhaging money, leaving the heating on all night,

smoking fancy fags, buying endless new cosmetic products, fifty-quid face creams and new-you shampoos, trying to lose it without having the courage to give it away.

The biting wind made her eyes burn and run as she crossed the hilt of the hill. Leslie would be coming into the office today and Maureen was dreading meeting her.

'Maureen?'

Someone was shouting after her, their voice diluted by the wind. She turned back. A woman in a red headscarf walked quickly over to her, keeping her head down, stepping carefully over the icy ground. She stopped two feet away from Maureen and looked up. 'Maureen, I love you.'

'Please,' said Maureen, fazed and wary, 'leave me alone.'

'I need to see you,' said Winnie.

'Mum, I asked ye to stay away,' insisted Maureen. 'I just want ye to leave me alone.'

Winnie grabbed her, squeezing her fingertips tight into the flesh on Maureen's forearm. She was drunk and had been crying for hours, possibly days. Her eyes were pink, the lids heavy and squared where the tear-ducts had swollen beneath them. A gaggle of pedestrians hurried past, coming up the steep hill from the underground, walking uncertainly on the slippery ground.

'I love you. And look,' Winnie held a silver foil parcel towards her and clenched her teeth to avert a sob, 'I've brought you some roast beef.' Winnie poked the package towards her but Maureen's hands stayed in her pockets.

'I don't want beef, Mum.'

'Take it,' said Winnie desperately. 'Please. I brought it over for you. The juice has run in my handbag. I made too much—'

A passing woman skidded slightly on the frosty ground, let out a startled exclamation and grabbed Winnie's arm to steady herself. She dragged Winnie over to one side, jerking

her hand and knocking the lump of silver on to the pavement. The cheap foil burst, scattering the slices of brown meat, splattering watery blood over the white ice.

'Oh, my.' The woman giggled, nervous with fright, patting her chest as she stood up. 'Sorry about that. It's so icy this morning.'

Winnie yanked her arm away. 'You made me drop that,' she said, and the woman smelt her breath, greasy with drink at nine in the morning.

She glanced over Winnie's shoulder to Mr Padda's licensed grocer's, shot Winnie a disgusted look and stood up tall and straight. 'Didn't mean to touch you,' she said perfunctorily.

'Go away,' said Winnie indignantly.

'I'm sorry,' the woman addressed Maureen, 'I slipped—'

'We didn't ask for your life story,' snapped a suddenly nasty Winnie.

Maureen couldn't help herself. It was a big mistake but she smiled at Winnie's appalling behaviour and gave her quarter. The disapproving woman took to her heels and scuttled away, watching her feet on the icy ground. Maureen took Winnie's arm and guided her out of the busy thoroughfare and into the side of the pavement.

'Thank you, honey,' said Winnie, covering Maureen's hand with her own.

Maureen wanted to turn and walk away. Every time she had seen Winnie before the schism Winnie hurt her or freaked her out or had done her head in one way or another. She dearly wanted to walk away, but looking at her mum's badly applied makeup, at her shiny nose and big mittens, Maureen realized that she'd missed her terribly, missed all the fights and the high drama and the mingled smells of vodka and face powder. 'Mum,' she said, 'I'm not staying away from you because you don't love me.'

Tears were running down Winnie's face and her chin began to tremble. 'Why, then?' she demanded, catching the eye of a workman on his way into the newsagent's.

'You know why,' said Maureen.

Winnie wiped her face with her mittens, scarring the beige suede with her tears. 'You know about Una?' she asked.

'I know she's pregnant. Liam told me.'

Winnie sniffed, wringing her hands. 'And what did you do on Christmas Day?' she asked.

Maureen shrugged. 'Had dinner with friends,' she said.

She had spent the day alone with a packet of Marks & Spencer's sausage rolls, which she had eaten and hadn't liked at all. An hour later she had read the back of the packet and realized she was supposed to have cooked them. Liam had come over in the evening and they had watched the tail end of the good television together and had a smoke. He had refused to eat with the family because Michael would be there. Liam said George, their stepdad, had almost come out with him. George didn't like Michael either and he liked everyone. George would have liked Old Nick if he could hold a tune and got his round in.

'It's because of your father, isn't it? We hardly see him now,' said Winnie. 'He isn't very nice.'

But Maureen didn't want to know. She didn't want one more scrap of information for her subconscious to build nightmares around. 'Mum,' she said, trying to stick to the point, 'it pains me to see you, do you understand?'

Winnie pressed her hankie to her mouth. 'How do I pain you?' she said, as her face crumpled. 'What have I ever done?'

'You know fine well.'

'No,' wept Winnie, 'I don't know fine well.'

'How could you have him back in your house after what

he did to me? I'll never understand that. I know you don't believe me but if you even wondered about it—'

Winnie took a deep wavering breath, snapped her wrist out and slapped Maureen's arm. 'At least phone—'

'Don't fucking slap me, Mum!' shouted Maureen. 'I'm an adult. It's not appropriate.'

Winnie began to sob, making Maureen into the sort of person who would shout unkind things at her crying mother. She had promised herself peace from this but here she was, falling into the old traps, playing the bad guy again, coming to hate herself on a whole new level.

'We don't see him any more,' Winnie struggled to speak through convulsive sobs, 'and Una's angry and George won't speak to me … I miss you, Maureen. I don't want you to not see me.'

Maureen wondered at Winnie's resilience. If Winnie had set her mind to world domination she could have done it. Unhampered by the twin evils of manners or empathy, Winnie could railroad an acre of salesmen into charity work if she set her mind to it.

'Mum,' she said softly, 'I don't want to see you for a while and that continues to be true, whether or not you're all having a nice time together.'

Winnie clocked the condition. She looked up when Maureen said it would only be for a while and looked away again. She blew her nose and narrowed her eyes at Maureen. 'Don't you tell me what to do,' she said, hope twitching at the corners of her mouth. 'You're still a cheeky wee besom. And I'll slap ye if I want to. I could take you in a fight any day.' She looked at the spilled meat, scattered and trampled by passing feet. 'Are ye sure ye won't have a slice?'

Maureen started to smile but her eyes began to water and she had to breathe in deeply and blink hard to stop herself crying. It was good news: they weren't getting on, he had

nothing to keep him here, no reason to stay. Winnie took off one of her mittens and played with her hankie, pulling at the corners, looking for a dry patch. The wedding band George had given her was loose on her finger Winnie was losing weight; her skin looked thin and a watery grey liver spot was developing on a knuckle. Maureen reached out suddenly and held her mum's hand, cupping it in her own, trying to hold the warm in. The wind blew freezing tears across her face like racing insects. 'Mum,' she breathed. 'My mum.'

They stood close, looking at Winnie's hand, chins trembling for love of each other, crying for the pointless sadness of it all.

'I can't stand this,' whispered Maureen.

'Me neither,' said Winnie

But she meant the moment and Maureen meant her life. Winnie reached up to Maureen's face, dabbing at her wet ear like a drunken St Veronica, letting her fingers linger on her cheek.

Maureen sniffed hard, dragging the cold air up to her eyes, waking herself up. 'Is he going back to London, then?'

'Don't think so,' said Winnie.

'Who's keeping him here?'

Winnie tutted at her. 'No-one's keeping him here,' she said. 'He's got a flat, a council flat, in Ruchill.' She pointed over Maureen's shoulder to the horizon, to the jagged red-brick tower of the old Ruchill hospital.

Maureen could see it from her bedroom window. She dropped Winnie's hand. 'What the fuck did you tell me that for?'

Winnie shrugged carelessly. 'It's where he is.'

'I don't want to know anything about him and you come here and tell me he lives near me?'

Winnie knew she was in the wrong. She tugged her

mitten back on and pressed her face up to Maureen's. Did it ever occur to you,' she said, 'that the rest of us know him as well?'

'What?'

'It's not all about you,' shouted Winnie. 'He's their father too. Don't you think they wonder about him? Don't you think I wonder?'

'Wonder?' shouted Maureen. 'You stupid cow! D'ye think I was committed to a psychiatric hospital suffering from pathological wonder?'

'Don't you cast that up to me.' Winnie held up her hand. 'Your breakdown wasn't just about him. You were always a strange wee girl. You were always unhappy.'

They hadn't seen each other for five months and although Maureen vividly remembered how angry her mother made her, she had forgotten the sanctimonious bulldozing, the utter disregard for her feelings, the vicious kindness and blind denial of what Michael had done.

'Think about it, Winnie,' she said, talking through her teeth, the fury reducing her voice to a whisper, 'think about what he did to me. If it wasn't for him I'd never have been so unhappy. If it wasn't for him I'd never have been in hospital. I'd have gone on to a real job after my fucking degree. I might be happy, I might be married. I might even have the nerve to hope for children of my own. I might be able to sleep. I might be able to look at myself in the fucking mirror without wanting to scratch my fucking face off.' She was out of control, shouting loud and crying in the street. Art students stole glances at her as they came out of Mr Padda's with their newspapers and lunchtime rolls. 'And what did he sacrifice all of that for? For a fucking tug.'

Winnie had never believed in the abuse and had never flinched from saying so before. But this time she pursed her lips and clasped her hands prissily in front of her. 'Is that

all you want to say?' she said, grinding her teeth and looking off into the middle distance.

Winnie was trying to listen. She was actually trying, and Maureen had never known her do that. Not when they were children, not when they were adults, not even when Maureen was in hospital. 'Mum, that man and the memories and stuff. I know what he did. He knows he did it too.'

Winnie looked nervously around her. 'Do we have to discuss this here?'

'Does he ever ask for me?'

Winnie swallowed hard and looked away. She muttered something into the wind.

'What?' said Maureen.

'No,' said Winnie quietly. 'He never asks for you. Ever. It's as if you were never born.'

'How likely is that, Winnie? Doesn't it make ye wonder?'

Winnie couldn't think of an answer. It must have bothered her terribly. She looked angrily over Maureen's shoulder. 'I'm sick of this,' she said.

'Why did you tell me he lives there? God, am I not troubled enough already?'

'You can't blame me for that—'

But Maureen was backing off into the street. She leaned forward in case Winnie missed anything. 'Stay away from me,' she said slowly, pointing at her mum's soft chest. 'And stop phone-pesting me when you're steaming.'

'If I was that bad of a mother,' Winnie shouted after her, 'how come none of the rest of them had breakdowns?'

The vicious morning frost had numbed Maureen's ears before she was two hundred yards down the hill. She turned a corner and the wind ambushed her, parting her eyelashes. She stopped and waited at the lights, staring at the patchwork tar on the road. The nervous cars and buses jostled

each other for road space, speeding across the twenty-foot yellow box, afraid of being left back at the lights. If she threw herself into the road she'd be killed instantly, a five-foot jump to an eternity of peace and no more brave ploughing on, no more shouting over the storm, no more nightmares, no more Michael. She thought of Pauline Doyle and envied her.

Pauline was a June suicide. She had been in psychiatric hospital with Maureen. Two weeks after she was released, a walker had found her dead under a tree. Maureen couldn't stop thinking about her. Her thoughts kept short-circuiting straight from worry to the happy image of Pauline at peace on the grass in springtime, oblivious to the insects crawling over her legs.

She glanced up, conscious that something around her had changed. The green man was flashing on and off and the other pedestrians had almost crossed the road. She jogged after them, clutching the fag packet in her pocket, bribing herself on with the promise of a cigarette when she got to work.