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opening extract from

The Ring of Five

written by

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The Ring of Five

Eoin McNamee's first children's book *The Navigator* has received critical acclaim in the UK and the US, where it was on the *New York Times* bestseller list for several weeks. His adult books have been shortlisted for the *Irish Times* Literature Prize and longlisted for the Man Booker Prize. He has lived in London, Dublin and New York and is now settled in Sligo on the west coast of Ireland.



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A Journey

Danny didn't want to go. He loved their house with its creaky floors and high windows with shutters you could close at night and attics you could explore. He liked living there and the idea of far-off boarding school didn't appeal to him. He didn't even like the name of the school. Heston Oaks. He imagined it full of muscled goons who were good at sport and not much else.

Danny was too small to be good at sports, and got a hard time on the football pitch. In fact when he thought about it he got a hard time more or less all the time at school. His eyes and his appearance were the target of constant cruel jokes. Because of an accident during an eye operation when he was young, his eyes were different colours – one blue and one brown. And if that wasn't enough, his face was a kind of triangular shape, with a sharp chin and pointy ears. Danny the Pixie was the mildest of his nicknames.

The abuse was one of the reasons, his parents said, that they had decided to send him to boarding school. He doubted that Heston Oaks was going to be any better, and in fact would probably be worse. But his mother had visited the school, and said it was perfect for him.

It wasn't that they were going to miss him, Danny thought bitterly. His father, a tall stooped man with a high forehead, was away at work most of the time. And even when he was home he would walk into a room and look at Danny for a moment before recognition dawned on him. He would flash a smile, grunt a hello and leave the room.

Friday was his last day and he had gone to school as usual. Friendlier classmates had said goodbye to him at the school gate, and he got on the bus, realising, with surprise, that he was going to miss the shabby old building with its rundown classrooms and potholed playground. The other students had waved, even the pupils who had tormented him, and he'd waved back and tried to smile.

The night he had lain awake, listening to the familiar noises that the house made, the hot-water pipes groaning, the loose slate that always rattled in the wind, the leaky drainpipe outside his bedroom window. He knew that he would be back at the end of term, but it felt as if he was leaving forever. Late

at night, his bedroom door opened and light from outside the room fell on his face, and he was vaguely aware of his mother looking down on him. Then he went back to sleep.

Like his father his mother was always busy. She was rarely home when he got back from school, and often went out at night, leaving him alone in the house. He was used to it. There was always cold meat in the fridge, or pizza in the oven. Besides, she always seemed to be present in some way. There was a hint of expensive perfume in the air, a silk shawl draped over a chair as if she had just left it there. It wasn't much as mother's love went, he thought, but it was what he was used to, and he couldn't imagine swapping it for a cold dormitory.

The weekend dragged. He woke on Sunday morning with a feeling of dread. His suitcase was packed and sat in the hallway. His father had left the night before. Danny's mother had to remind him to say goodbye to Danny. He shook his son's hand, looked as if he was about to make a speech, then merely grinned at Danny, swept up his coat and bag, and was gone. His mother spent most of the day on the phone, making plans, it seemed, for the week ahead when she would be free. His father had arranged for a taxi to pick Danny up at the house at three. He waited in the hallway, sitting at the bot-

tom of the stairs. Three o'clock came and went and there was no sign of the cab. Outside the sky darkened and the wind tossed the trees in the garden.

An hour passed and then two hours. His mother looked anxious.

'I really must . . .' She frowned and looked at her watch. She tried to phone Danny's father to check the arrangements, but he didn't answer. At six o' clock, she came into the hallway. She was wearing her coat and gloves, and Danny's heart sank.

'Danny, I hate to leave you,' she said, 'but there is somewhere I absolutely have to be. You'll be able to wait for the cab on your own, won't you?'

He could feel hot tears prick his eyes, but he refused to cry in front of her, so he nodded dumbly. She crouched down in front of him and took his face in her hands.

'I know you're going to have a great time,' she said gently. 'It won't be easy at first – I know that, but you'll make friends and learn lots of things you wouldn't learn if you stayed here. Make sure and write every week if you can.'

She leaned forward and kissed him gently on the forehead, and for a moment he felt enveloped by her soft hands and her perfume. She released him, stood up and walked to the door She opened it. It was getting dark outside. The wind tugged at her coat and

behind her he could see the storm-tossed trees. She put her hand to her lips and blew him a kiss. For a moment he thought he saw her eyes shining a little too brightly in the dim hallway light. She put a gloved hand up to her face, then slipped through the doorway and was gone.

Danny heard the sound of her car starting and wheels crunching on the gravel driveway. He got up and went to the old gilt mirror on the wall and looked at his reflection, the different-coloured eyes, and the pointed chin, and wished that he was someone else.

It was dark when he saw the lights of a car coming up the drive. He went to the window. An old-fashioned black taxi pulled up at the kerb. The trees along the drive were swaying wildly, and Danny could see rain and leaves being driven almost horizontally in the taxi headlights.

The driver got out and came up the front steps. Danny went to the door and opened it, having to struggle to hold it against the wind. The taxi driver seemed to fill the doorway. He wore a black great-coat and a black cap, like a sailor's cap. A large and bristling moustache hid his mouth, and large dark eyebrows almost concealed his deep-sunk eyes. It was hard to tell what colour they were, but they gleamed from a great depth.

'Taxi,' he said, his voice deep and gravelly, then turned and walked back down the path and got into the cab.

Danny took a last unhappy look round the hallway. He touched the familiar chipped wood of the banisters, one last time, looked up into the darkness of the stairs that led to his room, then lifted his suitcase and closed the door behind him.

Outside the wind tugged at the suitcase so that he could barely carry it. He waited for the driver to get out and help him put the case in the cab, but he didn't move, so Danny heaved it into the back seat and slid in. The driver swung the taxi out into the road, sending Danny thudding back against the leather armrest. By the time he had straightened himself and looked back, the house was no longer to be seen.

They drove along the ill-lit country road until they reached the main road. Ten minutes later they were on the motorway, but after half an hour they turned off, on to an unfamiliar road. Danny looked out of the window for landmarks, but the rain was so heavy he could only see blurred lights, and then after a while, nothing at all.

'Is this the right way?' he asked. 'I thought Heston Oaks was further down the motorway.'

'Diversion,' the driver said, almost growling the

word. Danny wanted to ask more, but something about the man intimidated him. In fact the whole situation was so strange he didn't know what to say. It was bad enough going to boarding school without this. The musty cab interior. The silent driver. Even the cab radio seemed strange, a voice coming through every so often as happens in a taxi, but the voice hissed and crackled more than normal so that you couldn't make out what it said. Although, if he hadn't known better, Danny would have said that it wasn't speaking English, but a jagged and alien-sounding tongue.

They drove for a long time. At first there were the lights of passing cars, and then there were no lights at all. The cab was unheated, and Danny's feet were frozen.

'How much further?' he asked. In reply the cab driver reached behind him and slammed shut the little window between the driver and the cab. Danny reached up and tried to open it again, but he couldn't. He rapped sharply on it. The cab man turned to look at him. Despite the darkness of the cab, Danny could see his eyes. Or rather he could see a gleam deep in the sockets, and knew that the man was much older than he appeared, and full of grim knowledge. The cab man held his gaze for what seemed far too long. How was he keeping the

speeding cab on the road? He turned slowly back to the steering wheel. Danny fell back against the seat. His heart was pounding, and the palms of his hands were wet. The engine note of the car rose to a kind of a howl. Although he couldn't see anything out of the window, he knew that they were travelling at tremendous speed. On they went, the cab driver hunched unmoving over the wheel, Danny gripping the door handle, hardly able to believe what was happening.

'Checkpoint!' he heard the driver say.

And then suddenly the engine note started to fall, the cab decelerating quickly so that Danny was thrown forward. The glass screen shot back. The cab man's hand grabbed the front of his shirt and hauled him up to the opening. Those eyes met his again, like chips of light in a dark tunnel.

'If you breathe a word, it'll be the last,' the cab man said, almost in a whisper, his voice laden with menace. Danny was closer than he wanted to be to a face that was veined and wattled, with a big nose, and teeth that looked like tombstones. Danny nodded dumbly, and made a zipping motion across his lips.

'Not a word,' he wheezed, half-strangled, 'promise.' The cab man released him. Danny could see lights up ahead, as if someone was carrying a

torch. The cab slowed to a halt. There was a sharp rapping on the driver's window, and the cab man slowly wound it down. A torch was shone into the driver's face. Danny found himself sliding across the seat to the far side of the cab.

'Good evening, Mr Fairman,' a clipped military-sounding voice said. The cab man grunted in reply. Danny could see the hand that held the torch, the jacket cuffs above like those of a uniform. The torch swung towards Danny. He held one hand up to his face to ward off the dazzling light.

'A human cargo tonight, Mr Fairman?' The voice said, an oily quality creeping into it. Once again the cab man didn't reply.

'And a suitcase? What is in the suitcase, Mr Fairman? No breaches of the treaty, I hope?'

Danny made to speak, then remembered what Fairman had said.

'None of your business, Sranzer,' the cab man said gruffly.

'You will let me search the vehicle.'

'You know that those given passage are outside your jurisdiction. You can't touch anything. Now, get out of my way, I'm in a hurry.'

'It's my job to make sure the treaty isn't broken.'

'Be about your business, Sranzer, you know I'm the only one allowed to cross these days,' the driver

growled. The torch moved away, and the cab shot forwards. Danny caught a glimpse of a cold, pale face at the window, and then it was gone.

'What was that?' he gasped. 'Who was he?'

'Never mind who he is,' Fairman said.

'I don't understand,' Danny said. 'What's going on?'

But instead of replying Fairman floored the accelerator. If the cab had been moving quickly before then this time the speed was blinding. Danny was thrown from side to side, and the vibration was so great that he could hardly see. He didn't know how long this went on. It seemed like hours. He closed his eyes and wedged himself in the corner of the cab and tried to shut out the noise of the engine and the wind whistling past outside. Then, with a great shudder, the noise stopped.

Danny opened one eye, then cautiously stretched his cramped limbs. He looked out of the window. They were on a long avenue which wound upwards. To either side there were trees, their dark limbs covered in lichens. As they went upwards the trees began to give way, and they were driving through lawns. He saw moss-covered urns standing on plinths in the headlights of the car. And then the drive turned to the left and the headlights swept across a large building five or six storeys high, its

weathered front punctuated with many diamond-pane windows. There were turrets spiralling up into the sky and buttresses and niches containing statues. Ancient ivies clung to the red brick walls, hiding much of the building from view. The roof met the walls in many different shapes and angles, and great tangles of ivy hung from the guttering, obscuring the upper storeys. Imposing stone steps led down from large oak doors in the middle of the building, and it was here that the cab jolted to a halt.

'Where are we?' Danny asked. 'This doesn't look like a school . . .'

'This is as far as I'm paid to take you,' Fairman interrupted, getting out of the cab. He opened the rear door, grabbed Danny's case and threw it on to the steps.

'Out.'

'But I don't even know if I'm in the right place . . .'

'Out.'

Danny scrambled towards the door. Anything was better than another minute in Fairman's cab. His feet hit the gravel in front of the building and he looked up at it. It could be a school, he supposed. And in fact, when he looked, there was a weathered sign over the door, saying Reception.

'Is this where I'm supposed to go?' he asked.

'I don't know anything about that. I was paid to

bring you over and I brought you,' Fairman said. He leaned over Danny until his face was only inches away, his gleaming eyes the only spark of light in his dark bulk.

'I done what I was paid to do,' he growled once more.

The taxi man swung away from him, and before Danny could do or say anything, Fairman had leapt into the driver's seat of the taxi and slammed the door. Sending gravel flying in all directions, the black cab turned hard, and sped off the way it had come, leaving Danny staring after its tail lights. A gust of wind struck him in the face and he realised how cold and hungry he was. There was nothing for it. He lifted the suitcase and marched up the steps.

There was no bell that he could see, so he put his weight against the great oak door. It swung open, creaking in protest. He hesitated, until another gust of wind drove cold rain down the back of his neck.

The room he entered was large, with high ceilings and wood-panelled walls. There were portraits of sad aristocratic-looking people on the walls, and logs burned and crackled in a massive open fire. The lighting was dim, but he could see signs attached to the panelling in various places. Some of them said things like Ballroom, and Night Porter, which he understood. But there were others saying things like

General Tradecraft, or Inks and Cyphers, which were strange to him. At the back of the room there was a reception desk, with a bell on it. He carried the case over to it and rang the bell.

Afterwards he puzzled about where the man who appeared had come from. There didn't seem to be any doorway behind the desk, and yet the moment his hand touched the bell, the man was there. He wore a dark suit and had gold glasses perched on a sharp little nose. His grey hair was brushed neatly back. He peered over the top of the glasses at Danny with a disapproving look in his shrewd little eyes. He glanced around as if there was a danger of them being overheard, then leaned over the counter and spoke in a low voice.

'Were you followed?'

'Er, I don't really know.'

'What do you mean, you don't know?' The little man's voice rose. 'Don't you know how to spot a tail?'

'A tail . . . what do you mean?'

'Tails. Spotting them and losing them. It's a basic.' The man's voice had risen to a falsetto.

'I came in a cab. Fairman's cab,' Danny said. 'He went very fast . . .'

'Ah, Fairman! Yes, of course.' The man seemed satisfied. 'Not many could keep a tail on Fairman.

But you're not due until tomorrow morning.'

'Like I said, he went very fast,' Danny said, losing patience. 'Maybe that's why I'm here early. I don't care. I'm tired and I wouldn't mind something to eat.'

A large ledger seemed to appear in the man's hands. He flicked rapidly through it.

'You are Daniel Caulfield.' The man studied the page he had stopped at. 'No known alias or *nom de guerre*?'

Danny shook his head dumbly. What was the man talking about?

'There's no one but you booked in, and since you are early, we'll have to put you in pre-enrolment.'

'What's pre-enrolment? Where are the teachers? This is Heston Oaks, isn't it?'

The man gave him a long, grimly amused look.

'Heston Oaks? No, this is not Heston Oaks. You have been sent for instruction. My name is Mr Valant.'

'What? Sent? What do you mean . . .'

Valant came out from behind the counter. He was taller than he had looked behind the desk, tall and thin, and he glided rather than walked.

'Enough questions now,' he said softly.

'What do you mean, enough questions!' Danny exploded. 'I want to know what's going on! I . . .'

Valant grasped Danny's wrist gently in one hand and placed the other on top of his hand. Without seeming to exert much force, he pressed the hand downwards. The pain was exquisite. Danny felt his knees buckle.

'Now Daniel,' Valant said soothingly. 'Come along. Do you think you are the first reluctant recruit I've welcomed?'

Two floors above, in the library of the third landing, Master Devoy waited impatiently. The news from Sranzer was disturbing. Fairman had carried a passenger, a young man, across the border. The problem was the usual one. Could Sranzer's information be trusted, or was it a ruse put out for some other purpose? Devoy walked to the fire and threw on another log. The fire flared up, illuminating the great bookcases, the gleaming oak floors, the light reaching the life-size portrait of Longford, an amused look in his eyes as he looked down on them. The portrait had been left up there as a warning, and an admonishment.

Devoy straightened from the fire and caught sight of himself in the mirror above the fireplace. It was a Mirror of Limited Reflection, and showed only his long pale face as though it floated in a pool of darkness. He noted with satisfaction that the face was

perfectly expressionless, despite his inner agitation. He had trained it to be so. It was said that, even under torture, Devoy's calm mask would not crack. He turned his back to the fire and waited. Rain spattered against the windowpane. The library of the third landing had one door, and three secret entrances, one of which had never been discovered, and as he waited, Devoy saw a shadow move behind the statue of Diana the Huntress in the corner.

'You can never resist it, can you, Marcus? You can never just walk in through an open door,' he said. A cloaked figure slipped out from behind the statue, and straightened. The hood of the cloak was thrown back. Marcus Brunholm had thick dark eyebrows over brown eyes, long black hair and a heavy, sensuous mouth, almost hidden by a large, drooping moustache. He crossed the floor to the fireplace and warmed his hands at it, his movements quick and furtive, his expression hidden in shadows.

'What did you want to see me about, Devoy?' he said.

'Don't act the innocent, Marcus,' Devoy growled. 'Fairman brought a boy across the frontier tonight.'

'Who is at the minute receiving the tender ministrations of Mr Valant,' Brunholm said smoothly.

'I can't believe this, Marcus!' Devoy's voice exploded into the library, and yet his face remained

tranquil. 'What about the treaty? You know the Ring are only waiting for an excuse. The Two Worlds are poised on the brink!'

'Have you seen him?' Brunholm said quietly.

'Cherbs are raiding every night as it is. Recruitment from the Upper World is expressly banned.'

'He is perfect. He is the one.'

'We must not let the frontier become open. The harm would be immeasurable.'

'We can't last like this for ever,' Brunholm said, straightening suddenly. 'We have to act, to take a risk. We grow weaker by the day. The boy is perfect. In every way.'

Brunholm looked up at Devoy, who was a few inches taller, his brown eyes seeming to plead. The way a dog might look at you, Devoy thought, a dog that wags its tail when it is in front of you and bares its teeth when it is behind you.

'Perfect in every detail, you say?'

'Yes, Devoy.' Brunholm could not keep the eagerness out of his voice.

'That cannot be taken for granted.'

'Of course not.'

'I will see the boy tonight.'

'Thank you, Devoy.'

'We shall see whether thanks are due.'

Devoy's gaze fell on the Mirror of Limited Reflection. Brunholm's eyes followed. For a moment, their faces floated side by side on an infinity of darkness.