



JOHN
MCAVOY

REDEMPTION

FROM IRON BARS
TO IRONMAN

WITH MARK TURLEY

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The events described in this
book are all true.

Some names have been
changed for legal reasons.

Part One
Arrested Development

‘Although protection racketeers such as the Kray and Richardson brothers had certainly been more feared in their day than the lower-profile robbery gangs, they were not so much admired by the next generation of aspiring criminals. They had held sway over their fiefdoms in east and south London by muscle and intimidation, but it was a tawdry business. They were capricious and vain, and ultimately brought down by their own hubris and stupidity.

‘Successful armed robbers, by contrast, were seen through the underworld prism as wily, audacious and buccaneering – men who used brains and planning rather than psychopathic violence and who carried off huge one-off jobs rather than having to engage in the burdensome and monotonous business of extortion. The risks of epic robbery were high but quick, and the payday was potentially enormous. As early as 1963, the Great Train Robbers made more in 24 hours than any of the old racketeers made in a lifetime.

‘As the Krays and Richardsons, Mad Frankie and the rest took their inevitable fall at the end of the 1960s, a new breed of mainly white, working-class armed robber was emerging from the pubs, drinking clubs and coffee bars of Walworth and Bermondsey, Hackney and Islington, Stepney and Bethnal Green.

‘Their names – George Davis, Bertie Smalls, Billy Tobin, Ronnie Knight, Freddie Foreman, Mehmet Arif, Micky McAvoy – were barely known to the wider public, but they were ambitious and some would soon become notorious. They were also prolific. In 1972, the annual total of armed robberies in the Metropolitan district was 380. By 1978, it had risen to 734 and by 1982 it more than doubled to 1,772 – a 366 per cent increase in a decade.’

Neil Darbyshire, *The Telegraph*, 19 May 2004

Brinks-Mat and How It All Began

IDENTITY? That's a tricky one. I'll try to make sense of it as far as possible. Can we really change and start again? Are we not always *who we are*?

In all the time I spent alone – way too much time – these questions stayed with me, turning over and over. They still follow me now.

Maybe they're what I'm running away from.

People like to believe in a common thread woven throughout your life, to tie up your sense of self, to make it neat and easy to understand. Everyone likes talking about their *journey*, don't they? 'Think of your childhood,' they might say. 'Pick a moment when you saw how things would be.'

A footballer might go misty-eyed and describe a goal he scored for the school team. A boxer may tell of a black eye or a dust-up with a bully, a Formula One driver his first spin in a kart. Not me.

I'm an Ironman, competing in the toughest test of one-day, all-round sporting endurance imaginable – a 2.4-mile swim, 112 miles on the bike followed by running a marathon.

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Beyond extreme physical fitness it requires utter single-mindedness. Self-belief is not enough, although it helps. You have to belong on the road. If you are not prepared to die there, you can't win. I don't do things I can't win at.

Ironmen go through hell every time they race, maybe even every time they train. Ironmen like hell, they learn to thrive in it. Maybe that's what it is, my common thread, my link to before. Maybe I always liked hell.

The defining moment of my early years wasn't on the saddle of a bike, in a pool or on a track, but in the car park of a pub called The Plough, in Dulwich, south-east London. It was early summer 1999, a warmish day, about an hour before lunchtime opening. Ozcan, the Turkish lag I was due to meet, pulled up in an old Volvo, dark blue with a silver bonnet.

The wheel-arches were corroded. It was a proper shabby ride, a real third-class banger.

I sat perched on the edge of a picnic table and watched him park. As he got out and walked towards me, my excitement gave way to impatience. One of my associates had set up the deal and I had expected a *player*, but Ozcan was scruffy, twitchy and a mess of nerves. He looked as wrecked as the car.

'Have you got it then?' I asked him.

'Yes,' he nodded.

'Well, go on then.'

He gave me a bad feeling, bags under his eyes, dirty teeth, greasy hair. Rather than meet my eye and speak, he hissed in a conspiratorial whisper. This was supposed to be the *game*. Front mattered. His nervousness bothered the shit out of me. My instinct for jeopardy, stranger-danger, went into overdrive.

Should I back out? A helicopter flew across a corner of the sky and he froze. Mug.

He adjusted himself when he saw my concern then shook my hand gently.

'Okay, okay,' he said.

I followed him over to the rear of the Volvo. He popped the boot and there it was, a sawn-off shotgun in good, clean condition

just lying there, like a baby in a crib, on top of a holdall in the wide space of the hatchback.

‘You got any food for it?’ I asked.

He nodded and fumbled around, pulling out a blue carrier bag. I peered inside. Sunlight glinted off a heap of golden cartridges.

‘Here,’ he said. ‘How many?’

I shrugged.

‘Twenty?’

At last he cracked a little smile. ‘Six hundred pounds.’

He put the cartridges in with the gun and passed it all over. I slid a roll of notes from my jeans and pressed it into his hand. He put a fag-stained finger to his forehead in a mini salute, got back in his rust-bucket and drove off.

My eyes stayed on him for as long as humanly possible. His Volvo intermingled with the everyday traffic on the road, circled the roundabout and disappeared in the direction of Forest Hill.

Being alone felt good and I savoured the knowledge of what was in that bag. Pride swelled inside me.

South London looked somehow different. Everything was bright, everything was alive; the pavements glittered with opportunity.

I was 16.

* * *

People often ask how I came to be in the line of work that I was. It’s not a regular thing, organised crime, not like working in Tesco or selling life insurance, but then regular people don’t grow up as a McAvoy. They don’t understand what that means.

My grandad came over from Ireland just before World War Two and fought for King and Crown on the Italian campaign. The IRA was yet to exist, but back in the old country his brothers were mixed up with the Irish Volunteers fighting against British rule. There was a fair bit of bloodshed involved – ‘Protect your own, *chuckie-ar-la*, our day will come.’ Maybe it all started there, I don’t know. We’re good Catholics, us McAvoyes. Family honour always counted.

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Grandad had 12 kids in London, seven of them boys and pretty much all of them ended up in various forms of villainy. Mostly it was armed robbery, but there's no sense restricting your options so some dabbled with the drugs trade, money laundering, dealing in stolen cars, any opportunistic way to make a bit of money. Theorists can come up with all sorts of reasons to explain why but I think it's pretty straightforward. They grew up on sink estates with few options. Back in the 1960s, first and second generation Irish immigrants didn't tend to get white collar jobs. That wasn't how the world worked. It was still the era of 'no blacks, no dogs, no Irish'.

Each part of London had its own group of emerald-isle hard-cases. The East End had the fighting O'Sullivans. Kilburn and Cricklewood in the West had the Sunshine Boys. Around Bermondsey and Southwark everybody knew the McAvoy's. A family that size was bound to create an impression and nearly all of them got their hands dirty. The only one who didn't take that road was my Dad, but he suffered a massive heart attack and passed away just before I was born.

Apparently Dad used to say the family business was for mugs, that you could make a better and safer living legally. He ran nightclubs, betting shops, he even owned a construction firm. I don't know where he got his seed money from and I suppose it's possible some of it came from his brothers' activities, but his day-to-day interests were legitimate. Mum always said if he'd stayed alive he would have kept me out of it all, but I'm not so sure. I think there was something inside me, something that made me susceptible. And the game has a way of sucking you in if you grow up within its reach.

After Dad died we stayed close as a family, meeting around at my grandparents' house every Sunday, all the uncles, aunties and cousins. My uncle Micky kept an eye on Mum and made sure she was okay. He would pop to see her and give her regular money to cover bills and expenses. Unfortunately, before I was a year old, Micky disappeared as well, sent on a nice, long holiday at her majesty's pleasure. He masterminded the Brinks-Mat robbery, a

BRINKS-MAT AND HOW IT ALL BEGAN

legendary event in British criminal folklore and the biggest gold heist in UK history.

One of Micky's mates, a guy called Anthony Black, had managed to blag his way into a job as a guard at Heathrow Airport. He often watched over the high security vault, guarding huge amounts of cash. The idea was that Micky and his crew would turn up, their inside man would let them in, they would overpower the other guards, crack the vault and drive off in their transit van with about £3m of paper money. In and out in ten minutes – quick, easy and lucrative.

On the day the first part went off as expected. Anthony was ready and did his bit. Uncle Micky and his five masked mates stormed in, caught the other staff unaware, tied them up and covered them in petrol. It's amazing how amenable a captive drenched in flammable liquid can be if you're holding a lit match.

Unfortunately for Uncle Micky the security company had been clever. The supervisor spilled his guts and told the combination numbers for the vault doors, but his information wasn't enough on its own. His numbers had to be combined with two other codes to open the vault, but the men who knew those codes weren't there. With the cash inside and no way to get it, things got a little frantic before Micky and his mates realised there had been a delivery that morning that was still waiting to be secured.

Next to where they had tied up the hostages, stacked up on crates under plastic sheeting at the side of the depot, they found three tons of gold bullion bars. It was worth £26m, an unbelievable sum for 1983. In today's terms it would be valued at ten times that.

In the end it took two hours to load it all and the poor van's suspension could barely cope. They made their getaway with the chassis virtually scraping along the road surface, but in those precarious minutes, Uncle Micky's reputation was made forever. Inspired by headlines and TV news reports whispers spread about the daring raid and the incredible amount of loot. People still talk about it now.

Uncle Micky had a major problem though. While it's fairly easy to launder cash money, shifting that amount of raw gold

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presented a logistical nightmare. It would have to be melted down, combined with other gold to make it untraceable then sold off. That required specialist input.

Micky sought help from a powerful underworld figure known only as 'The Fox' who agreed to use his network of associates to shift it. Through him, Brinks-Mat turned from being a robbery committed by a small, tight-knit group, to a caper that involved half the criminal community of the UK. Tons of people got mixed up in it. Some of the original gang left the country. John Rowley ending up living in Colombia, for example, but after a few shenanigans Micky got collared. They gave him 25 years.

Police immediately searched every address with a McAvoy connection, trying to find the missing bullion. I was still just a baby and when they raided Mum's house a uniformed constable actually lifted me out of the cot to see if there was gold stashed under my mattress. That was my first brush with the law, at about a year old. After that they hung around for a couple of days, digging up the garden, but Mum wasn't hiding anything. She never got involved in all that stuff. She didn't like it.

Even today the Brinks-Mat investigation continues, with a string of murders and spin-offs related to it. All the side-deals led to double-crosses and a poisonous atmosphere of mistrust. I once heard it said that if you bought a piece of gold jewellery anywhere in Britain during the late 1980s or 90s, the chances are it came from Brinks-Mat. Uncle Micky touched a lot of lives.

Yet strange as it may seem, without Dad or Micky around, for most of my early childhood I lived what would be called a normal life. The same kind of life as everyone else, I guess. My Mum, Margaret, worked as a florist and we had a spacious house near Crystal Palace that Dad had left for her. One of Mum's best friends, Jacqui, was the stepmum of Kenny Sansom, the England footballer and Kenny's Dad, George, used to take me to Arsenal games. I loved it. He would bring me down to the changing rooms after matches to meet the players.

George must have been a lovely man, making lots of effort with me because he knew I had no father. Unfortunately, he also

died of a heart attack when I was five. Perhaps if he stayed alive he might have encouraged me to get involved in sport as a youngster. Who knows?

In reality I wasn't an active kid, at all. Chubby and heavily-set, I preferred things I could do sitting down. A Greek guy called Edis, who lived next door to us, taught me chess when I was still a toddler. We used to sit in the garden and play for hours. I enjoyed the challenge, thinking forwards, planning, three, four, five moves ahead. Later I joined the chess club at primary school and thrashed everyone, a nice feeling. I liked winning.

We lived a life of ordinariness and the only signs we were slightly different were few. At the time I didn't dwell on them. You don't at that age. Sometimes uncles or friends would come over, stay for a drink and give Mum little cash gifts.

'They're just looking after us,' she would say. 'They're making sure we're okay. That's what we're like in our family. We look after each other.'

Good Catholics.

It was all I knew and I thought nothing of it. I was a typical kid. Primary school went fine, although I hated PE. I was rubbish at football and detested athletics. When they asked me to run the 200m I would get to halfway, pretend I'd pulled a muscle then walk. I was slower than most of my classmates and couldn't be bothered with it.

It didn't upset me. I just assumed nature hadn't blessed me with those abilities. I was perfectly happy eating crisps, playing Nintendo or watching TV. That was much more my scene.

All that changed when I was eight years old.

Good Stuff

MY Mum, my half-sister Donna and I were eating dinner in the kitchen, summer of 1991. I had the radio on in the corner playing 'Ice, Ice Baby' by Vanilla Ice.

Mum looked up from her chicken kiev and asked me to turn it down. I got up, lowered the volume and took a can of fizzy drink from the fridge. As I returned to the table she spoke again.

'Billy gets out tomorrow.'

Billy Tobin was Mum's first husband, Donna's Dad. They had grown up together on a council estate in Peckham and married at 16. In those early days Billy had been scraping a living as a builder and they had Donna when they were both just 18. Mum always used to say that Billy would have stayed out of crime but for the fact he witnessed his Dad get murdered. Three men set about him with knives during a pub fight in Nunhead. Billy was powerless to stop it.

'After that, he changed,' Mum used to say. 'He never wanted anyone to take advantage of him and end up a victim like his old man.'

Billy's new self-image blossomed quickly. In no time he became a major face on the London scene, a millionaire by the age of 20, driving around in a Rolls-Royce at 21. He and Mum divorced

just before his first sentence, but by then he was on borrowed time anyway, having already had five acquittals at the Old Bailey. An informer on his last job tipped off the Flying Squad who intercepted their car and shot him three times.

By the time of his release he had served eight of a 16-year stretch for armed robbery and been granted parole.

‘He’ll probably come over,’ she went on. ‘He’s been away for quite a while so give him a bit of space, okay?’

We both nodded.

When Billy arrived the next day, he didn’t look anything like my expectation of someone just released from jail. He was tall, strong and dressed like a movie star; £400 loafers, a Rolex watch, designer clothes. He settled into a chair in the lounge and smiled so warmly you couldn’t help but fall for him a bit. He called me over.

‘You must be John,’ he said. ‘Do me a favour. Go make me a cup of tea?’

When I came back from the kitchen with the drink, he patted me on the head.

‘Nice work,’ he grinned. ‘I’d like to shake your hand.’

The generosity in his manner overrode my wariness and I reached up. He held on for a few seconds, just long enough for me to feel the strength of his grip. When he released, a £20 note was stuck to my palm. No one had ever given me folding money before.

‘Thanks Billy!’ I said.

He laughed and ruffled my hair.

‘Good stuff.’

A few days later, he took me and my sister out shopping together. Donna was 18 and keen on getting a car, so he bought her a brand new MG convertible, just like that.

‘You haven’t seen me for a long time,’ he told her as she signed off on the papers. ‘And I missed you in prison. This is my way of making it up to you.’

Here was a man just days out of jail. Yet he spent money freely and had an aura. He was so confident, so charismatic.

From then on, Billy became a regular fixture at our house. He didn’t stay over, but he and Mum had a close bond that went right

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back to early childhood. They believed in supporting each other. Whenever he was there I'd rush to get him a drink and he always gave me money. He would tell little stories and make jokes. They were happy times and I suppose there was quite a deep emotional need behind it all. We stepped into a sort of mutual void – I didn't have a father and he didn't have a son. We became close.

By the time I was ten, Billy and I were hanging out regularly. He would take me out for the day or on little trips in the evening. Sometimes we would go to lunch or dinner at expensive restaurants. He taught me which fork to use for fish and the right glasses for water or wine. To begin with I didn't realise, but I was meeting and interacting with infamous members of the criminal fraternity. I didn't think of them like that, they were just Billy's mates. Guys like Mehmet Arif, Georgie Davis, Ronnie Knight. Every time it would work the same way.

'Who's the kid, Billy?'

'It's all right, he's Micky's nephew. He's good stuff.'

And with those words I'd be welcomed with open arms.

For Christmas of 1993 we went to an Italian restaurant, the Don Amici. It was full of families having get-togethers for the festive period and we had a big table reserved in the middle for Billy, us and some of Billy's friends. The manager met us at the door.

'What a pleasure to see you Mr Tobin, we have our best table for you, any special requests please let us know, we can put everything on your tab.'

It was always like that with him, anywhere he went. You couldn't help but be swept along by it. Our crowd stood to greet us and each handshake that came my way carried notes, sometimes lots of them. One after the other pressed my palm and leaned into my ear.

'Here's a little something for Christmas, John. Nice to see you. Give my regards to your Uncle Micky. Your Dad was a good man.'

I took home nearly a grand in cash that night, not bad going when you're ten. Nobody said it in so many words, they had no reason to, but an inkling was forming in my mind. Without

understanding any specifics, I realised that all this money and respect didn't come from the normal world. Not the world the other kids at school and their parents came from. This wasn't how most people lived.

Billy and his mates were from working class backgrounds. Most of them had grown up on estates. They were sharp, but they weren't book-clever. None of them were employed, but they were wealthy and larger-than-life. In my young head a little light went on in the darkness.

Early in the New Year a movie called *Fool's Gold* premiered on TV and I sat to watch it in the lounge. It starred Sean Bean, who was one of the UK's biggest stars at the time. Within the first few seconds it became clear that Bean was playing my Uncle Micky and the film was about Brinks-Mat.

Sitting at home, viewing that movie by myself was a surreal experience. Other than Uncle Micky, the characters – John Palmer, my Auntie Jackie, Brian Robinson – these were all people I knew in real life. Most of them had visited my house. The film was a load of sensationalised nonsense, but as I watched I started to get a sense of scale, to understand the magnitude of my family's name.

A few months after that Grandad died and after the funeral I went to his house with Mum and a couple of aunties to clear out his stuff. We found a box in a kitchen cupboard full of newspaper clippings about Billy, Uncle Micky and the rest of them. They were taken from *The Sun*, *The Mirror* and various other national newspapers.

The red-tops had dubbed Billy as 'Billy the Liar' while they called Uncle Micky 'Mad Micky McAvoy'. Grandad had kept them all, like you might keep your kids' football trophies. A strange feeling came over me as I looked through them.

I was a McAvoy. And the McAvoy's were so notorious they made films and wrote front page articles about us. More lights went on.

So this is who I am?

It was unsettling, but exciting at the same time. There was glamour and danger in it. That's a potent mixture for a kid.

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By then I was attending Kelsey Park secondary school in Beckenham, which was a real pain to get to, about eight miles from my house. Perhaps that's why I started bunking off so much. I think too that I subconsciously understood I had another path to follow. The family business, whatever it was, could provide me with a very decent living without having to listen to crap from teachers.

I began to develop the disdain for authority that I'd absorbed from Billy and his mates. Anyone who was part of the system was on the wrong side. We were free men, making our own way, living off our wits, like cowboys. We existed in the moment and didn't appreciate interference.

I would spend my days loafing about the shops or the park, or even just kicking around at home. Mum half knew, I think, but turned a blind eye. On one occasion when I was 13, as I sat in the lounge playing computer games, I heard the front door go. It was the middle of the day and Mum wasn't due back yet. Had she forgotten something?

Instinctively I turned off the TV and dived behind the sofa. Peering out from between the cushions I saw that it wasn't her, but Billy, carrying a bulging bin liner tied in a knot. I watched as he walked into the kitchen, sat down at the table, opened the bag and shook out its contents. Feeling silly, I crept out from my hiding place.

'Billy!' I said.

He spun around.

'Jesus, John!' he laughed. 'I didn't know you were in!'

The tabletop behind him was covered in banknotes.

'How much is that?' I asked.

'Dunno, haven't counted it yet, should be about £250,000.'

I felt like asking where it came from, but stopped myself. Instinct told me he would not welcome the question.

Not long after that I was picked up by police for the first time. I had been in a local park with some friends and a bag of beers. There had been a scuffle and I got gobby with someone, not a big deal really. A passer-by must have heard the disturbance and dialled 999 because the cops appeared out of nowhere. They

questioned us, found my bag with all the booze and made an issue out of it because we were underage. Rather than take me to the station, one copper decided to drive me home. He seemed a nice enough bloke and we had a little chat in the car. He asked who I had been with and I gave him a few names.

When he knocked on the front door Mum came out, hovering on the step like a thundercloud, grey-faced with fear. Her prior experiences of opening doors to policemen were not happy memories. He explained the relatively trivial situation and she settled down.

‘Thank you officer,’ Mum said. ‘It was very kind of you to bring John home safely.’

‘Not at all madam. I’m just happy to be of help.’ The copper whistled through his teeth and turned to me.

‘What on earth are you doing young man?’ he said. ‘You’ve got a lovely home and a mother worrying about you. Half the places I go into around here I have to wipe my feet on the way out. You’ve got a nice life, son, you’re very lucky, but if you carry on the way you’re going, you’ll end up in Feltham young offenders’ institution. Mark my words. I see this all the time, believe me. It’s up to you. Don’t make the wrong choices.’

Choices? He didn’t know the half of it.

When Billy found out he was absolutely furious. Not because I had behaved badly or got myself in trouble, but because I communicated with the law.

‘You never speak to them, do you understand!’ he shouted. ‘It doesn’t matter if they take you in and stick you in a cell. It doesn’t matter if they get rough! When Old Bill ask questions, you say nothing. Don’t tell them your name. Don’t tell them where you live, not a thing!’

I nodded, accepting the lesson. Then like the kid I was, I blurted out, ‘What was it like in prison?’

Billy’s face changed. The sneer left his lips. His eyes went flat. ‘I don’t want to talk about it. It’ll jinx me.’

For me, that was how everything started to come together. Bit by bit, I learned how it works. Don’t speak to police and don’t talk

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about prison. That's bad karma. I soaked up everything Billy told me, absorbing all his hard-earned wisdom. If I put it all together, it would go something like this:

Police are scum. They'll try and be your mate because they admire what we do. They see we've got balls, but they're still scum. Politicians, judges, solicitors too, except the bent ones. Banks, insurance companies, big corporations or financial institutions, they're all fair game, they don't deserve respect. You can do what you like to them and it's victimless. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise, but the average working man? That's another story.

You never take from working people, that's what little dickheads do. Burglary, street crime, mugging, all that stuff is for spotty herberts in Nike trainers who watch too many rap videos. For us, robbing a bank or turning over a security van is a job, but we won't so much as steal a bar of chocolate from a corner shop. In fact, we do the opposite. Any local restaurants or bars we go to, any local businesses we use, we pay extra. We tip everyone. A tenner here, a score there – this is our way.

To thrive in our world, you have to get on with anyone. You can be in a boozier with a bunch of thugs one day or the Pont de la Tour on Tower Bridge with barristers and brokers the next. The most important thing of all is loyalty, respect. Your name, your reputation is everything. If your name is shit, then so are you. And you never hurt women or children. If you have an issue with someone you deal with them. You never touch their family. People think it's old-fashioned, but this is our code and it's set in fucking stone.

Billy and his mates used to spit with anger when they heard news stories about gangs who killed someone's kid in a reprisal. That

disgusted them. It really was a case of honour among thieves. We had our morals.

We were good stuff.

Some of the other lads at school got involved in petty crime, selling £10 bags of weed, vandalism, street nonsense. I was above all that. I knew where I was going and had bigger goals. By the time exams rolled around when I was 16, I never attended. School didn't interest me. It held no relevance to my life. Who cares why Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries?

Billy turned up one day with a brand new, silver, Porsche 911 turbo. The thing was a real work of art, special edition; leather seats, top-end stereo, fully kitted out. He had it super-chipped so it could do 0-60 in about two and a half seconds with a top speed of nearly 200mph. He asked if I wanted to go out for lunch. I jumped in.

For the first few minutes we sat in silence as he drove through Bromley, then he wound the window down and pointed at the street. There were a few everyday types walking the pavements, folks in their standard euro-box cars on the road.

'You see all them?' he said. 'All them with their mortgages and direct debits and problems at the office? They're all mugs, the lot of 'em. They're slaves to the system. And the system doesn't give a fuck about them. They go to work, they pay their taxes and then they die. They all get fucked and they bend over and take it. You only get one shot at life John. If you want something, you go out and get it. End of.'

I sat in that gorgeous Porsche and thought about all the kids in my year, in their revision classes, feeling pressured to achieve grades. Billy was right. Who needed that? That wasn't for people like us.

By the time summer term got underway, I had not been to school in weeks and GCSEs loomed. Mum banged on about it every day, repetitive and pleading.

'You should go in for your exams John. Please, love. It might give you some options.'

In her heart I think she knew where I was going, but still had that slice of hope, of mother's desperation. I had a go for her sake.

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I didn't want her to be upset. I hadn't completed any coursework or preparation but tried to do the exams. What a headache!

One particular morning we were having breakfast about eight o'clock and I had an English paper I was supposed to sit. I was tired, it was raining and I really could not be bothered. Billy had popped in for coffee and heard me whining.

'I'm not doing this one, Mum.'

'But it's English, John. It's one of the important ones.' She was nearly in tears.

'I can't be arsed getting the bus. It's a massive ball-ache and it's pointless. I'm staying here today.'

Billy found it funny.

'Why are you talking to your Mum like that, John?'

'I ain't getting the fucking bus, Billy. It takes ages and I don't want to go anyway.'

He looked at me, straight.

'You're a big man are you?'

'What do you mean?'

'You're a big man, yes or no?'

'Yeah!' I was indignant.

'Then take my car.'

'What, the Porsche?'

He nodded. 'Yeah, take it. If you've got the bottle, take the car.'

I shrugged, trying to play it cool.

'All right.'

He passed me the keys and I went out to the driveway, climbed in and revved the engine. It roared like a jet plane. I kept expecting him to come out smiling, saying it was all a big joke. He never did.

Obviously I didn't have a licence, I was too young, but Billy had taught me to drive around some local back streets. I had even had a go in a few lorries on an industrial estate in Millwall, but I wasn't fully competent yet. I kept stalling it because the clutch was so twitchy and got plenty of funny looks from pedestrians, but arrived without incident and had the sense to park around the corner from school. If teachers had seen me they would probably have phoned the law.

GOOD STUFF

I walked in, head in the clouds, grinned all the way through my literature exam surrounded by anxious classmates, then drove back feeling like the king of the world. Sixteen years old and cruising around south London in a brand-new, special edition Porsche 911. There were only about 20 of them in the whole country. *That* was what it meant to be a McAvoy.

Billy was waiting for me with a big smile.

'You haven't scratched it have you?'

'No.'

'Course you haven't!' I gave him the keys. 'You're one of us. You're good stuff.'

How I loved him.

I don't believe in fate, but by then my future was set. Billy never made me do anything I didn't want to do. But he taught me a way of looking at things, a way of being that was just a fantasy to most people.

Billy was my bridge to the underworld.