

JOHN McAVOY
WITH MARK TURLEY

REDEMPTION

FROM IRON BARS
TO IRONMAN





REDEMPTION



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Prologue

21 September 2012

'I don't know why you do this to yourself'

I HAD never run more than 10km before, but my need to stretch boundaries overrode common sense. Everyone around me had doubts. 'You haven't trained for it, running is a new discipline for you, start small and build up,' but fun-running held no appeal. I'm not even sure what fun-running means.

I heard that on an ultra-run (classified as anything above marathon distance) physical and mental pain took you to a whole new place, sometimes dark or sometimes joyous, deep within yourself but connected to nature. People described it as a 'spiritual awakening'. Maybe that's what I was looking for.

We assembled at six on a chilly, autumn morning, me and the other 300 entrants for the London-to-Brighton footrace. Our starting point was on Blackheath, a large, flat, treeless plain, criss-crossed with roads and ringed with bars and restaurants in the south-east of the city. A few ghosts hovered around, memories of coke-fuelled binges, robberies, a kid nearly bleeding to death in the back of my car. The area was one of my old hangouts, but it felt good to be back.

As the top of the sun crested the skyline I looked around. Most of the others seemed edgy, shuffling, biting their lips. I was already high,

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head surging with the dew and air and people. 2012 was the last purists' race, the final self-navigated year on that route. Now they have signposts and maps, even guide runners to lead you along. Back then it was you, your provisions and a compass. The starting pistol fired and *bang!* Off you went, 106km cross-country, from the capital to the sea, as quickly as you physically could.

For the first third everything was smooth and under control, the boring bit. There's no challenge in running comfortably.

My hips began complaining on a grass trail in Surrey after about five hours. It originated as a dull ache, either side of my lower-waist before sharpening into intense pain over the next four or five kilometres. That's when it got interesting. My pace did not slow.

Endurance sport hinges on pain, which is why it attracts a certain kind of athlete. You begin an event with your fitness and strength but you finish it only with stubbornness. Hip ache was just a teaser of what would come. I ate a couple of flapjacks, drank some of the flat cola from my backpack and pressed on. The throbbing stayed with me and grew worse, steadily joined by stabs from every other joint below my ribs – *good*. If you're not hurting, you're not trying.

I got lost in the fields after East Grinstead and started following a wide-eyed beanpole from Holland. He had that craziness about him, the absorption of the hopeless addict, but he claimed to know what he was doing and I believed him. We meandered way off course, along a winding hedgerow, before finding a gap into a farmer's field. The old guy spotted us and jumped out of his tractor, swearing, gesticulating wildly. His big, woolly dog barked its head off. The two of us scampered away laughing like schoolboys.

By the three-quarter mark, on a towpath near Haywards Heath I had left the disorganised Dutchman long behind and felt deliriously, insanely happy. The body's internal drugs are as powerful as any you can buy. This kind of event teaches you that.

Endorphins erupted, adrenaline surged, while birds sang and breeze laced with wild flowers tickled my sweaty skin. It was mid-afternoon by then and I had been running for nine hours straight, most of it alone.

16km from the sea I drew level with a woman, the first fellow runner I had seen in a while. She wore the number 76.

'I think I'm in second place,' she coughed, looking sideways, grim-faced. 'I'm struggling though. My back is torture.'

I had banished all my pain by then, locked it away, a trick I learned to perfect. 'Come on,' I smiled, 'we'll run together.'

'Thanks.' She eyed my bulky shoulders and arms suspiciously. 'You don't look like an ultra-runner. What do you do?'

'I row.'

'So why are you here today?'

'I just wanted the challenge. What about you?'

She seemed better already. The conversation had fired a hormonal reaction and given her a lift. Emotional, chemical and physiological states all combine on the road. You learn that too.

'Oh I'm obsessive,' she said. 'I do all of these I can. I competed in the world championships at Mont Blanc six weeks ago. My legs still haven't recovered. That's why I'm not having a great race.'

'Wow,' I thought. What a privilege to run with an elite competitor.

The best ultra-runners are usually anonymous. It's not about glory for them. Spectators are sparse and prize money scant. They have other reasons. A light rain fell.

'I started seven years ago,' she went on. 'I was diagnosed with stage two breast cancer and had to have a double mastectomy. After the operation I felt so low, so useless. I lay in hospital, thinking, "What have I done with my life?" I hadn't done anything, you know, nothing worth doing. I realised I'd never properly lived, never used my body to its fullest. I owed it to myself to do that.'

I felt like hugging her. If we had not been running, maybe I would have. Her words resonated with my own situation so deeply.

'So I entered a 5k,' she continued. 'Then a 10k, then a half-marathon, then a marathon. Every time I upped the distance, I found I needed something new to inspire me, a greater challenge. That was six years ago. Now here I am!'

Our resolve deepened as the rain grew harder. We pounded the fields, then the streets, side by side. For those last two hours, 76 and I were kindred spirits.

On the edge of town, we caught and passed the woman in first. She had her chin on her chest and moved in stuttering, staccato strides.

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Her breath wheezed. She looked ghoulish, half dead. A few hundred metres on, I shot a glance over my shoulder and saw her motionless, face contorted, gazing after us with her hands on her hips. Her eyes said, 'Why now? I came all this way and you pass me now?'

I don't know if she ever got to the end.

We almost sprinted the last 3km – 76 had won! I congratulated her as we breasted the line on Brighton beach, squeezing her hand before we parted. For me it had been perfect. I established heartfelt communication with another human being.

My wrist monitor told me I completed the course in just over 12 hours and burned 11,500 calories. I would need something sweet and something salty as soon as possible.

With the sun setting on the water I hauled myself off the pebbles, towards town to find a taxi. The change from running to walking, on the pavement, brought home the full physical reality of what I had done. My body seized up, back like an ironing board, buttocks like boulders. I felt sick. My hands shook.

Fashionably dressed people stared as they passed by, on their way out to bars and restaurants. To them I must have looked like a junkie.

The cabbie was a chatty one. We had an hour together in the car, on the M23 all the way back. He rattled on about how expensive football tickets and pints are these days and how London was being ruined by gentrification. I smiled and listened. None of it meant much to me. He asked what I had been up to, so I told him.

'You've just run all this way?' he cried, incredulous. 'I can't believe what you're telling me!'

After parking he had to help me out of the back seat and up to the house.

My joints had set solid. My calves had cramped into cricket balls, making my toes curl.

My quadriceps were like marble slabs. Feet and ankles had swollen inside my shoes, while pus oozed from spectacular blisters on to my socks. Standing under my own strength was impossible.

'I don't want to take your money, mate,' he said. 'Not after what you've done.'

It was a £90 fare, so I insisted.

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Mum opened the door, horrified at my dishevelled state. She threw her arm around my shoulders and led me into the lounge, where I flopped on the sofa.

'I don't know why you do this to yourself,' she said, as sleep overcame me.

The next day, they took me back to prison.

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.

Beyond extreme physical fitness it requires utter single-mindedness. Self-belief is not enough, although it helps. You have to belong on the

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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.

BRINKS-MAT AND HOW IT ALL BEGAN

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 McAvoy's. Family honour always counted.

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

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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 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.

BRINKS-MAT AND HOW IT ALL BEGAN

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 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.

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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.

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‘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.