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**Bad boys** A 23-year-old government witness talks about the underside of Boston's neighborhoods, where there is no shame in being a wise guy, where it's easy to justify stealing, shooting, and killing because nobody ever gave you anything, anyway

BY KEVIN CULLEN

Richie Zirpolo was crazy. I mean crazy. There he was, 4 o'clock in the morning, an ax in his hand, chasing a rooster around the nearly deserted grounds of a condominium complex in North Conway, New Hampshire.

All because he wanted some tequila.

Billy DeVincenzi had had it. You can freebase cocaine only so much. Three days of basin' was enough. He had crashed.

When Billy woke up on the couch, there was about 2,000 bucks worth of booze around him, on tables, on chairs, on the floor. Crown Royal. Chivas Regal. Fifteen-year-old Jameson. There were also skis, food, lamps, all scattered around the chalet.

And there were cops at the door. Two of them.

"Can we see some identification?"

Billy DeVincenzi knew something was wrong. Terribly wrong.

Richie was asleep. Crashed to the max. And here was Billy DeVincenzi, a 21-year-old kid from East Boston, on the run, taking the heat.

"What's the problem, officer?"

The problem was that Richie, wired on coke, had taken an ax to every one of the 300 chalets in the place in his quest for tequila. They were all empty, except the last one, the one where the rooster and its owner lived.

It was the cocaine, damn it. Billy knew. It had screwed everything up.

As the cops led Richie away, they asked Billy if he'd come down and make a statement about his friend and the ax. It was April of 1984, and Billy was wanted on a dozen different charges, including attempted murder, in a half-dozen jurisdictions, including his hometown. But he had a new identity. He was Bill DiPerry. He had IDs and everything. So why invite suspicion?

"Stupid ass that I am," Billy recalled later, "as soon as I got to the station, they arrested me."

Billy wasn't too worried. They couldn't prove he'd axed the condos with Richie, and the cops didn't know who he really was. Billy

had gone into business with some Colombians, moving some serious cocaine, and money was no problem. He called his friends in East Boston, asking them to bring \$10,000 to bail him out.

Well, the kids from Eastie came north, all right. And they bailed Richie, all right. But Billy was left behind.

The way Billy tells it, his good buddy Paul Mattarese had his eyes on Billy's partnership with the Colombians. If Billy's in jail, his franchise is up for grabs. So the bail money never came north.

Worse still, Billy's sitting there in the cell when a North Conway cop comes up and says, "Mr. DiPerry, we just got a telephone call saying you're not who you say you are."

Uh oh. See ya later. Billy's looking at 20 years in the can, life if the cops ever find out about the murder. And his buddies, one of whom made the call, are home free, having freebasing parties, robbing banks, getting girls.

A few days later, Bill Murphy, an agent with the US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms in Boston, got a call.

"Hi, Mr. Murphy? This is Billy DeVincenzi. Listen, about that information you wanted: I think I'm ready to talk."

Murphy had been chasing DeVincenzi for months, ever since he found out that DeVincenzi and his buddy Carmen Ciampa had made a fortune by filing phony insurance claims with a Weymouth auto-glass company run by a guy named Bill Sweeney. It seemed that the shop run by Sweeney's nearby competitor had burned down under suspicious circumstances. While Murphy and other

agents from the ATF arson squad were doing some background checks, they thought it highly unusual that a couple of punks from East Boston had collected \$50,000 in claims in just a few months.

As it all turned out, when DeVincenzi flipped, when he became a government informant, Murphy and his partners solved the arson. Sweeney got put away for hiring the Eastie punks to burn down his competition. But DeVincenzi gave the feds more than they had bargained for. He gave them dozens of bank robberies, armored-car heists, drug rip-offs, and a murder — the murder of a security guard, cut down by a shotgun blast in the Liberty Plaza in Eastie, before the guard even got a chance to pull the toy gun he carried in his holster.

Billy DeVincenzi gave the authorities so many crimes the government considered prosecuting DeVincenzi and his merry band of hoodlums under a federal law reserved for organized-crime figures.

**DEVINCENZI AND HIS BUDDIES ARE organized-crime figures. Not the Mafia. Not a street gang. They are a small element, a subculture, that hangs on corners in East Boston, on the wall at Revere Beach, thinking of ways to get rich quick. They steal without fear. They shoot without remorse. And they kill without conscience. Before they are 25 years old, these young men have done more crime than most of the figures of American criminal folklore, such as Dillinger or Bonnie and Clyde. They wear expensive clothes, drive luxury automobiles, have girlfriends all over the** *Continued on page 31*

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place, and enjoy a degree of status that, in affluent suburbs, is usually reserved for college jocks and those who pass their CPA exam on the first try.

"I'm just a normal East Boston kid," Billy DeVincenzi is saying, sitting there in a visiting room at the Midwest prison where he is being held in the federal witness-protection program. "I never thought of myself as a gangster, just a guy who wanted to make money. My girlfriends' mothers used to say I was a punk. I guess that's about right. I never wanted to be in the Mafia. You have to work for them for 10 years before you make any real money. I was always out there for myself, and so were my friends."

Billy DeVincenzi isn't very different from the thugs who plan bank heists in the Charlestown housing projects or the teen-agers from the lower end of Southie who sell cocaine out of any number of gin mills on and off Broadway or the wise guys who sell guns in the shadows of small parks in the North

End. Except that Billy likes to talk. He has a tremendous eye for detail and an unfailing memory. That's what made him a good witness. That's what makes him about the only one willing to talk about an underside of Boston's poor, predominantly white neighborhoods, where there is no shame in being a wise guy, where the dispossessed have their own codes of honor, where it's easy to justify stealing, shooting, and killing because, hell, nobody ever gave you anything, anyway.

In Eastie and the North End, the kids are mostly Italian. In Southie and Charlestown, they're usually Irish. Only the names change. And the stories, oh, the stories. The stories abound. Like the one about the chubby kid from Charlestown who got shot by a guard during an armored-car heist in Medford. His buddies sped off, leaving him bleeding on the pavement. When he threw the towel in and pled guilty, the judge asked him if he could identify the two guys who had done the job with him.

"Well, your honor," the Townie began, "they had masks on, and I didn't really get a

good look at them."

Those are the stories that float around housing projects and street corners in Charlestown, Eastie, Southie. The stories are part of a folklore that makes crime in some Boston neighborhoods more a piece of the fabric of the community than a symptom of social deviance or poverty.

It is no coincidence that a guy like Whitey Bulger commands great respect in some quarters of Southie, just as Joe Russo is looked up to in Eastie, and Bobby Smith's white Cadillac is a status symbol in Charlestown. The cops say these men are career criminals; in the projects, on the corners, these guys are respected. They have money. They take crap from no one.

It is no coincidence that the most difficult places to solve a murder in Boston are Eastie, Charlestown, Southie, and the North End. Talk to cops. They'll tell you. No one sees anything. No one knows anything.

"That's what makes it a lot easier," DeVincenzi says. "Everybody is afraid to talk to the cops."

Everybody, it seems, is

afraid to talk about Billy DeVincenzi, too. His relatives declined requests for interviews. They endured slashed tires and threats after Billy became a government witness. A neighbor called Billy a "pain in the ass," but declined to elaborate. A few friends who did talk insisted they not be identified. One kid in Orient Heights, asked about DeVincenzi, took a swing at a reporter. It could be, as the government is wont to point out, that a lot of people want Billy DeVincenzi dead, and so associating with him in any manner, shape, or form is deemed hazardous in East Boston. It's more likely, as Billy says himself, that people in Eastie don't like to talk about other people. Particularly about that underside where Billy lived, robbed, and shot his way to the top.

So this is Billy's story. The fast lane according to Billy.

**L**ife for this "normal" East Boston kid began September 23, 1963, when he was born in Medford to Noreen and William DeVincenzi Sr. When he was 2, Billy and his parents moved to what was then Cape Canaveral, in Flor-

ida, where his father worked as an architect on the Apollo 11 project.

"I remember we lived in a trailer park near the base. I remember the beaches," Billy says.

Billy, the oldest of three siblings, was still a toddler when his parents broke up. His mom moved back to her parents' home in Revere. It was in Revere, at the old Flamingo club, which later burned down, that Billy's mom met Ronald (Sully) Sullivan. They got married. After a few moves, Billy's mom and stepfather settled on Trenton Street in East Boston.

"I'd have to say I had a good childhood. Sully and me, we got along real good. When we moved to Trenton Street, there were a lot of kids, no playgrounds, but we always found something to do. It was better. We finally settled down."

Billy started at the O'Donnell School.

"I was always rotten in school. I was smart, but I got bad conduct. I couldn't stand rules. I couldn't stand listening to teachers. I hated rules. I used to have my mother come up to school once a month. Bad

language. Bad report card. After the third grade, I was always in trouble in the schoolyard, always looking for a way out of school."

By the time Billy got into junior high at the Barnes School on Marion Street, his antisocial behavior had escalated.

"I started hooking school, cutting classes, not doing no work, always fooling around in class. I was famous for paint fights. In art class, we had these watercolors. We'd be throwing spoonfuls of paint at each other, everybody would be getting hit. I used to melt crayons on the radiators. It would drip down the sides, real psychedelic.

"Eastie High was great. It was one four-year party. I tried hard in 10th grade, actually. I wasn't with nobody I knew. I used to like math and science. I hated English and history. Math was my favorite. You have to be able to add to make money."

As a youngster, before his teens, Billy remembers the kids who hung out at the corner of Trenton and Marion. They were bad. They had girls. They had nice cars. Caddies. Anybody who was anybody in Eastie

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## Bad boys

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drove a Cadillac or a Lincoln Continental. Foreign cars weren't big and bad enough.

"I really looked up to those kids. I knew where they got their money. It didn't bother me. They had the money. That's the bottom line. When I was 15, I bought one of their cars. A Caddy. It was 'hot.'

"I grew up hearing stories that in Charlestown a mother hands a baby a gun, then the bottle. That the kids dream about growing up to be bank robbers instead of baseball players. In East Boston, you live a normal life until you're a teenager. Then it seems you're aware of all the guns, all the drugs, all the money to be made.

"On my block, there were eight convicted criminals, guys about my age. They say you're a product of your environment. Well, I knew as many straight kids as criminals. I just wanted to make money. And I don't like to work.

"There were always a lot of gangsters in East Boston. I

seen the gangsters when I was a kid. They'd be going around collecting the numbers money. They'd pat me on the head. I said I wanted to be like them. Then as I got older, I realized most of these guys were [Mafia] and worked for somebody else. I'm not gonna work hard and risk getting shot, then turn most of the money over to some old Italian guy. That's crazy."

**B**illy's brother and sister turned out OK. They weren't troublemakers. In fact, his brother is a valued employee at a ravioli company, displaying a capacity for hard work that Billy can't comprehend.

When Billy was in high school, he was in a work-study program. Billy didn't last too long at his first work-study job in a Chelsea machine shop.

"They fired me. They said I was a deadbeat. I was. I hate work. I don't believe in work."

Actually, Billy had been fired a few years earlier, shortly after he got his first job. As a paperboy. They caught him stealing money from the circulation director's desk. Billy was 12.

Forty-nine days before Billy and Richie Zirpolo were supposed to graduate from high school, they got kicked out.

"We beat up a teacher because he pulled my hair," Billy says. "The summer of 1981 began a little early for me. I just relaxed and stole cars."

Billy had begun breaking into cars a year before.

"That's the first thing you start doing if you want to be a criminal," he explains. "It's like a progression. You've gotta work your way up."

His first car: It was the spring of 1980. Billy and a buddy rifled a Jeep parked on Marion Street.

"We took the radio and a few other things out of it. I felt good. I knew I'd have money in my pocket the next day. We got a couple of bucks for it. Fencing stuff in East Boston is no problem. We started doing it a lot. But I realized I was taking a lot of risk for not much money. I wasn't worried about the cops. I was worried about my parents more, because if you got caught and went to court, you'd just get a slap on the wrist."

His first stolen car: There was a gas station on the truck route behind Bradlees in Chel-

sea. The mechanics would often leave the keys in the ignitions of cars they were working on, and, as Billy remembers, "it wasn't too hard to turn an ignition."

"We stole a Buick Century in the middle of the afternoon. Before they knew it was gone, we were halfway down the street. I jumped into the passenger's side. I felt great. We used that car to go to the MBTA parking lots and steal every radio we could find. Radios were big then. Blaupunkts, Jensens, stuff like that. We'd hit Saab turbos, BMWs, Jaguars. Blaupunkts were standard in BMWs and Jags. Saabs had Sony digitals or Blaupunkts. They were worth 200 bucks apiece."

Billy found it hard to feel sorry for his victims.

"Anybody that can afford a Blaupunkt, tough for them," he says. "A couple of times we'd be leaving with a car and a guy would come running up screaming, 'My car! My car!' But I figured, hey, they're insured. If they're not insured, then next time they'll be insured. It was like a lesson for them."

"The only time I felt bad was this lady in Revere. In the

wintertime, people who live off Broadway in Revere start their cars and go back inside and have a cup of coffee while the cars warm up. Once we stole a Cadillac, and this lady came out in her robe yelling at us, 'My husband will kill me. He told me not to leave the car running.' I felt bad, and I almost brought the car back because I was afraid the guy would beat up his wife. As it turns out, I got arrested in that car when I stopped to place some bets at Wonderland.

"After stealing radios for six months, making a couple hundred bucks a day, we started driving around to all the auto-body shops and gas stations and asked what kind of parts they wanted. We'd make a list. Then we'd fill that list and sell the parts to the dealers. We were making \$1,000 to \$2,000 a week, sometimes more, sometimes less."

**S**tealing cars was more than profitable. It was fun. Getting in chases with the cops was even more fun. Billy made a point of stealing only fast cars, so he seldom got caught. His first chase was the best. He stole a Saab turbo,

cruised around Orient Heights to show off, then took off when the Boston cops pulled up in back of him and checked the plate. He lost them in Chelsea, after the speedometer had hit 130 m.p.h. Once, after taking a souped-up black van from the Wonderland parking lot, Billy crashed through a roadblock fashioned from two Revere police cruisers. Billy claims the cops shot at him and his buddy. The cops did wind up catching them that night. The van ran out of gas on the Tobin Bridge.

"We had to wait 30 seconds for them to catch up and arrest us."

Billy talks about car chases the way jocks reminisce about great ball games. He smiles, becomes animated, and one gets the feeling these were the best days of his life. He remembers that most cops who managed to catch him didn't smack him around, which he fully expected, but instead congratulated him for such masterful driving. While blond kids with braces were running track in places like Westwood and Lexington, Billy and his buddies were long-jumping stolen cars off a loading dock next to the Ramada Inn in Eastie. And he thought it was

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great.

Being a wise guy also meant you had no shortage of girls, either. The nice looking ones, too. The girls who wear the sexy clothes from Tello's.

During the several trials in which Billy was the prosecution's star witness, defense attorneys tried to impeach his credibility by trying to portray Billy as a heartless Romeo. Billy, who has seven tattoos, including two with different girls' names on them, accepted the label, except for the heartless bit. The way he saw it, keeping five girls on the string at one time was part of the lifestyle. Girls came with the territory.

"Girls have to have the best clothes, jewelry, this, and that. Anything they wanted, I got them. I spent a lot of my money on girls. I never robbed anything just to please a girl, though. They're not worth it. You can always find a girl. They're a dime a dozen."

Billy's romances were not confined to gum-snapping bleached blondes who swear like stevedores. One longtime girlfriend had been considering the convent before she met Billy. Another, whose mother runs a food-service company at Lo-

gan Airport and whose father is a successful Boston businessman, said she went with Billy because he "spiced up my life. It was exciting."

Billy did occasionally get caught cheating on his girlfriends. "And in a way," he says, "it was more embarrassing than getting caught by the cops."

**B**illy got arrested five times for stealing cars, but as he remembers it, "The judges always let me off easy."

One judge was not so magnanimous.

It's 1982. Billy DeVincenzi and Bobby Stack are standing there, in front of a judge. The judge is reading the yellow piece of paper that's his copy of a police report. Ninety-five miles an hour, the report says. Bobby Stack and Billy DeVincenzi were driving a stolen Ford Bronco 95 m.p.h.

"Why, gentlemen," the judge begins, "tell me, why were you going 95 miles an hour on a street in a residential area?"

The pause, the utter silence, seems interminable, and

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Billy DeVincenzi casts his eyes downward, hoping it will pass.

But there is Bobby Stack, crazy Bobby Stack, drawing his breath and making a statement that will land Billy D. in the can for a year.

"Your honor," Bobby Stack says, "that's as fast as the thing would go."

Stack got probation. Billy got it down to six months on an appeal.

That sentence — to the house of correction in Billerica — was Billy's first taste of "rehabilitation." Billy was 17 when he went away. He had been into drugs on the street. He got into more drugs in jail.

"It was no big deal, going to jail. I didn't like it, but there were more drugs in there than on the streets. It was like one big party. I was high all the time. I was getting coke and crystal [an amphetamine] in. Everybody had grass. Mescaline was in there. I even learned a few scams in there. Jail is no deterrent. I didn't want to come back, but I looked at it more like an occupational hazard."

Billy says the only East Boston buddy who had done crime with him and later went straight did so after six months in Billerica.

In December of 1982, Billy went before a judge, looking for a reduction in his sentence. Christmas was in the air, and Billy was looking for a gift. He asked the judge to let him out for the holidays, to be with his

family. The judge was swayed. He said Billy could go home December 21, but had to be back before him on January 2, when he would reinstate the sentence.

"I had no intentions of going back," Billy says. "The way I looked at it, even if they caught me, the worst I'd get is to do the rest of my time. They've got so many guys in jail they don't know what to do

with them. I just stayed out and lived normally."

Normally, of course, was robbing banks and armored cars.

**B**illy had participated in his first stickup a year before, in January of 1982. He was 17. The guys who planned the job knew Billy could drive. After all, it's the young crazies, the kids still at

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the top of their game ripping off cars and eluding the cops every day, who make good wheelmen. Billy never went into the East Boston Savings Bank. He just drove the cars, including two switch cars. Then they handed him his cut: \$35,000. It was less than the 10 percent they had promised him, but he was a 17-year-old kid and in no position to argue. He put the money into a Dom Savio High School gym bag and walked home.

At the time, Billy had already bought his first gun, a .25-caliber automatic. As long as you're in your teens, and as long as you've got the money, you can buy one in Eastie or Revere, no problem. It occurred to Billy that this bank-robbery business was lucrative and pretty easy. He and his friends, all about 17 to 19 years of age, started doing their own.

In August of 1982, for the first time, Billy walked into a bank carrying a gun. It was the State Street Bank in Orient Heights. Billy remembers the feeling of power that surged through his veins as strangers cowered at the sight of him. During another robbery, a woman hit the floor when Billy pulled his gun, leaving her in-

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fant on the counter. Billy walked over and handed the baby to the woman while his buddies rifled the tellers' drawers. "I didn't want the baby to fall off," Billy says.

Billy justifies and colors his criminal behavior with frequent shrugs. "I wasn't robbing old ladies or molesting little kids," he says. "Banks are insured. I was just making money."

**A**s he stood in banks, his gun pointed, there was more than a feeling of power surging through his veins.

"Before a robbery, I'd do a line of crank [an amphetamine]. It makes you aggravated, you grind your teeth, you look crazy. But it's not like cocaine. You do stupid things on coke. It makes you paranoid and more liable to shoot somebody. Crank just makes you mean, sharp, not stupid."

Drugs were a focal point of Billy's life. They got him up for jobs, and he spent a good portion of the money he made from crime on drugs, particularly cocaine. By 1984, he was freebasing \$1,000 worth of coke every day. He and Carmen Ciampa would grab their girlfriends and head for one of the motels up Route 1, just outside the city, and freebase for days.

Billy, one of the few who stayed away from the hallucinogen angel dust, which is still popular in Eastie and Charlestown, claims he was the peace-keeper among his crazier drugged-up friends. Like when Anthony Plante got dusted and started slashing his arms with a razor, spurt-ing blood on the white leather interior of Billy's Cadillac while the boys' girlfriends howled in horror. Or when Carmen got so paranoid about some teen-agers looking at his Fleetwood outside the Malden motel room where he, Billy, and the girls had been freebasing that he proposed to invite them in, then shoot them.

"Freebasin' is some crazy [expletive]," Billy is saying. "I'd get so paranoid myself that I'd think my friends were gonna kill me. Once I held myself in the push-up position for an hour, looking under the crack of the door, waiting for my friends to come and kill me. Just before I rolled, it got so bad I was even taking my gun into the shower with me. My girlfriend snuck in once and threw back the shower curtain, trying to be cute, and I had the gun right in her face. It was a pretty bad scene."

Drugs ate away at the friendships and partnerships that were Billy's world. They were tenuous liaisons at best, anyway. It was not uncommon for Billy to threaten his friends with a gun. And vice versa. A day later the incident would be forgotten, and they would be planning the next bank job. When his buddy Randy set him up with the cops, leading to Billy's arrest on a stolen-car charge, Billy and another friend tied Randy up and shot arrows at him, narrowly missing him, until he agreed to do bank jobs with them and give them his cut.

"When you're dealing with people like us, the only way we know how to settle things is force," he explains. "One day we'd be great friends, ready to die for each other, the next day we'd be enemies. Most of it was show. It was a macho thing. You had to show even your friends that you could shoot them if you wanted."

**L**ike asking a girl to dance, or getting drunk at the age of 16, or smoking dope for the first time, there is a lot of peer pressure involved in armed robberies. And so Billy was feeling that pressure when Carmen Ciampa and

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Marc Orlandella showed up at his home on the evening of April 11, 1983. Carmen wanted to hit Tello's, the clothing store where most Eastie girls buy their disco outfits. Billy thought it was dumb. It was a Monday, so there wouldn't be much money. Let's wait till Saturday, Billy suggested, thinking he'd have his girlfriend go out and buy a closetful of clothing there on a charge card if he knew he was going to steal all the receipts. But Carmen was insistent, and Billy went along reluctantly. It was a big mistake.

Carmen had the whole thing scoped. As he had expected, the store manager was walking across the street, on his way to make a night deposit of the receipts, escorted by a security guard named Sherwood (Butch) Caulfield. (Caulfield's sister-in-law, Caroline Isenberg, a Harvard-educated actress from Brookline, would become the focus of national attention the following year when she was stabbed to death on a Manhattan rooftop.)

When Marc screeched the car to a halt in front of Caulfield and the manager, they froze. Billy, carrying a handgun, yelled, "This is a holdup," while

Carmen leveled a shotgun out the back window at the two men.

"I told the store manager to drop the money. He did," Billy says, recalling an event he says he still sees in color in his mind.

"I was going to go for the guard's gun, but he was backing up, he was scared. I never saw a guy so scared. At the time, I didn't know the gun he was carrying was a fake, plastic one, but I knew he wouldn't go for his gun, so I just bent over to pick up the money. As I was picking it up, I heard the shot. I saw the guy falling. He was saying something like 'Ow!' or 'I'm hit.' I didn't think he was that badly hurt. He was sitting up, saying he was shot, feeling the blood on his shoulder. Carmen took a shot at the manager, but that guy was booking it across the street, and he missed. I jumped back in the car, told Marc to go, go, go!

"We're in the car, and I go, 'Carmen, what are you [expletive], crazy or something?' And he goes, 'The guy was gonna shoot.' I say, 'Bullshit, that guy was scared. He wasn't gonna shoot anybody. What'd you do that for?' And so Carmen looks at me and says, 'Hey, I didn't do

that. We all did that. We're all in this together.' So we drive around before we go to Paul's to count the money. We got a little over nine grand. It was a real waste of time."

As Marc floored the car and Billy and Carmen bickered, Butch Caulfield bled to death on the pavement.

**D**ue in part to the murder, but more as a result of the criminal progression Billy talks about, there came the realization that robbing banks and armored cars and stores brought too much heat from the cops. It occurred to Billy and his buddies that robbing bookies and drug dealers could be as profitable and less dangerous, providing the victim wasn't carrying a piece himself or paying the Mafia protection money.

Robbing his first coke dealer proved Billy right. He and a buddy came up with 80 grand in cash, plus eight kilograms of cocaine they sold at a cut-rate price of \$7,000 a kilo. That still netted them a cool \$136,000 just for sticking a gun in the face of some guy who isn't about to go running to the cops.

When the target of a crime

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is as illegitimate as the perpetrator, a different system of justice applies. Billy found that out when he stabbed and robbed a drug dealer who was associated with the Trampers, an outlaw motorcycle gang that operated out of Liverpool Street in Eastie. Billy lucked out when the dealer, seeking revenge, hired two guys who knew and liked Billy. Instead of whacking out Billy, as the contract called for, they pocketed the cash, told Billy about it, and had a real good laugh for themselves.

Things weren't so cheery when, in December of 1983, Billy decided to rob a drug dealer named Jimmy. For some time, Billy and some of his buddies had a young woman named Anna helping them to set up cocaine dealers for rip-offs. Anna would befriend the dealer to get free samples of the guy's coke, then tell Billy and the boys when and where he had the stuff with him. Billy took a couple of younger kids from the Orient Heights housing project when he scoped out Jimmy, the drug dealer. "I was teaching them," Billy says. But as Billy and his proteges approached the corner of Border and Lexington, Jimmy smelled a rat. Jimmy reached for the rifle in his trunk just as Billy pulled his gun. One of Billy's shots got Jimmy in the shoulder, but the wounded drug dealer unleashed a volley of shots that sent the would-be thieves scampering.

Billy's robbery attempt failed, but it did have a ripple effect in the neighborhood economy. Jimmy, the drug dealer, thought the confrontation was a hit, that someone wanted him dead, so he went to another East Boston hood and paid for some protection. The hood asked Billy to scare Jimmy again, to up the ante.

If it was Billy's caving into pressure and going along with Carmen on the Tello's robbery that got him into serious trouble in the first place, it was Billy's not accompanying Carmen on the night the Settles Glass company burned down that sealed his eventual fate.

Billy and Carmen had a sweet scam going. They had diversified their criminal portfolios after a con Billy met in jail told him that if he ever needed fast money he should go down to Sweeney's Glass, which was located on the same street as Settles Glass in Weymouth. The scam was simple. Sweeney told them to call their insurance companies, say that all their glass had been smashed and that Sweeney was fixing it. The insurance company would send a check to reimburse Sweeney for work that was never done. Sweeney gave them their half — \$900 each — on the day he met them. Billy and Carmen saw a gold mine. They started driving around and jotting down the license plates of cars that had a lot of expensive glass — Corvettes, Continentals, Caddies, Camaros. Then they went to the Registry of Motor Vehicles and handed over a list, saying they wanted information on the listed license numbers.

"If somebody asked us why," Billy says, "we'd tell them we ran an auto-body shop and we were just verifying ownership, that we didn't want to be working on hot cars. They'd give us the person's name, insurance company, year of the car, the ID number. The only thing they didn't give us was the name of the insurance broker. That was the only hard part. But we figured Allstate and Aetna and the others have only so many brokers, so we'd call around until we found it."

Billy and Carmen managed to do about 25

cars before Sweeney asked them to burn down his main competitor, Settles Glass. Arson was not on Billy's resume. But, hell, it was another way to make some money. They haggled over a price before it was agreed he and Carmen would torch the place for \$3,000.

"The night before we went to burn it, I got shot in the foot in front of Carmen's house," Billy says. "A drug dealer I robbed before drives up in his big brown Lincoln. He knew I had a gun, so he leans in and grabs my gun. He pointed it at me. Said he wants his coke back. He pointed the gun at the floor and pulled the trigger. I think he only wanted to scare me, but it hit me square in the foot. Ruined a brand new pair of shoes. I couldn't go to the doctor's because I was on the run."

So Billy bandaged it as best he could, put a plastic bag over the bandage so the slush and snow would not seep through, and limped around. And Carmen went to torch the place with Marc.

"Carmen didn't do it right," Billy says now. "That's when all the trouble came down."

As a member of the ATF arson squad, Bill Murphy was the

agent assigned to the case. The fire looked suspicious, and when Murphy found evidence of insurance fraud at the main competitor of the burned business and, better still, a couple of East Boston hoods involved, Murphy knew he was onto something.

**B**y the time Murphy and agent Wayne Miller tracked DeVincenzi down in December of 1983, they found Billy had landed back in the can, to finish the sentence he had walked out of the Christmas before. Murphy and Miller found a streetwise punk who wasn't about to give them anything. Billy had three days left in Billerica. They couldn't do him any favors. He had a bullet hole in his foot at the time these smart-aleck feds were trying to tie him to some half-assed arson plot on the South Shore.

Screw, Billy told them.

Murphy, once a streetwise kid from Dorchester himself, remained undaunted. He saw something in Billy DeVincenzi, an arrogance, a cool, calculating demeanor, that made it clear Billy D was in it up to his eyeballs. Billy would later recall

that he came to respect Murphy for his doggedness.

"You can't bullshit Bill Murphy," Billy says. "Murphy's a lot like me. Except he's not a criminal."

Billy managed to duck the feds for a month, until later that winter. He had a new scam going. Some girls he knew who worked at car-rental agencies at Logan Airport would rent Billy a car, which Billy would turn around and sell. The paperwork would get lost, and everybody made out OK. Billy was sitting in one of those stolen Cadillacs, waiting for his girlfriend to get out of work at a bank in the financial district, when Murphy and ATF agent Terry Barry spotted him. They jumped in the car and handed Billy a subpoena. They also took down the license plate number, ending Billy's airport scam.

Billy didn't tell the grand jury anything, pleading the Fifth like a broken record. The feds told Billy that the next time he'd be testifying with immunity and couldn't invoke the Fifth. Billy decided there would be no next time. He heeded some friends' advice and headed north, to New Hampshire,

setting the stage for the free-basing, the chalet axing, the double-crossing, and, ultimately, his rolling.

"You know, I should have been smarter," Billy says. "You can't take city kids to the country. We're like fish out of water. Some of my friends were up in New Hampshire with me, and these ducks were coming up to us. My friends were putting guns in the ducks' mouths, shooting them so that the duck would go skidding across the ice, leaving this trail of blood. My friends were laughing, but I didn't like it. I'm an animal lover. I'd rather shoot a person than an animal."

**M**urphy and his colleagues were stunned when they realized the scope of criminal activity in which these young punks were involved. But the investigative work they had done corroborated most of Billy's stories. And his straightforwardness about his odious past made him a natural witness.

Murphy, his boss, Phil Tortorella, the chief of the ATF arson squad, and their boss, Terry McArdle, the regional head of the ATF, say to this day

they've never had a better witness than Billy DeVincenzi. Certainly none as successful in obtaining convictions.

There he was, Billy DeVincenzi, on the witness stand, his black nylon shirt with the pointy lapels opened to reveal a neckful of gold chains. He talked about shooting and looting like it was a hobby, like deep-sea fishing. The juries believed him.

Not everyone believed him. Certainly not Alan Chapman.

"Billy DeVincenzi is a compulsive liar," says Chapman, a well-known criminal attorney who represented Paul Mattarese during the Tello's murder trial. "How anybody could believe anything he says is beyond me. Everything he says is full of inaccuracies, obvious fallacies, and lies rooted in pure jealousy, over girls, cars, childhood grudges, you name it."

The way Chapman and many other folks in Eastie see it, Billy DeVincenzi lied to get himself a deal, less time in the can. Billy doesn't deny he rolled to keep himself from getting a long prison stretch. But he insists he told the truth, that he and his friends did so much crime he didn't have to make anything up.

Chapman and Billy yelled at each other on more than one occasion in Suffolk Superior Court. Apparently, Chapman and his client, like others along the way, saw how effective Billy's matter-of-fact testimony was. Midway through the trial, Mattarese pleaded guilty to accessory charges in the Tello's case.

**I**ncarceration has allowed Billy to be a bit more introspective. He thinks about what might have happened had he been raised in an affluent suburb.

"If I grew up in Newton, maybe I'd think that being a mechanic with two kids was OK. But I didn't grow up there. Where I grew up, being a criminal brought a lot of status. Criminals are looked up to. They have money, cars, nice clothes, girls, everything that everybody else is trying to earn the honest way. If I grew up in a different environment, there's a good chance I wouldn't have been like this. But the part of East Boston I grew up in breeds criminals. Everybody I hung out with carried a gun. I mean kids 15, 16, 17. You don't see that outside the city. At that age, you have a gun, you feel important. You realize what you can do with that.

"I can't see myself getting up at 8 in the morning, coming home at 5 and kissing my wife.

I guess I'll always be a criminal at heart. I'd rather take than earn. In *The Color of Money*, Paul Newman says, 'Money won is better than money earned.' Well, I think money stolen is better than money earned."

Down in Orient Heights, they used to call Billy DeVincenti the Cowboy because he carried a .357 Magnum in his waistband, a .45-caliber pistol on his back, and had a quick draw. Now they call him Billy the Rat.

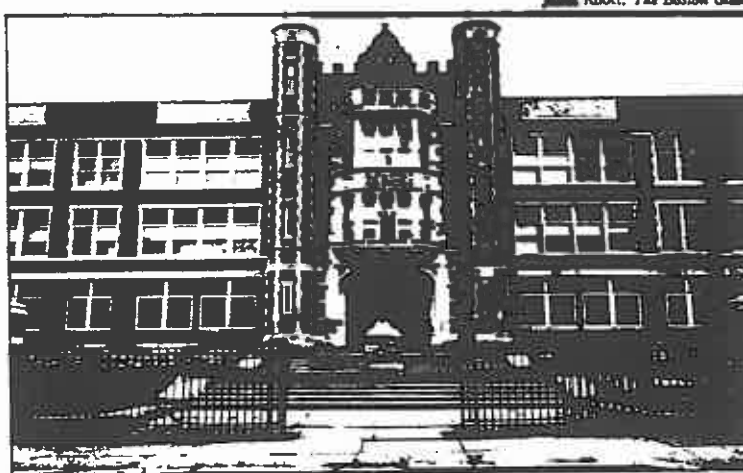
"Billy DeVincenti is a rat," said one teen-ager in Orient Heights, who calmed down after a reporter explained he was only writing about DeVincenti, not a friend of his. "He lied to save himself. He lied about his friends. How can you respect somebody like that?"

Sometimes, Billy regrets his decision.

"I feel guilty about rolling," he says. "I grew up with these people. I used to eat at Carmen's house. His mother treated me like a son."

But just as quickly, Billy places the blame elsewhere.

"Carmen turned his back on me. So did everybody else. I asked for loyalty. I never



"Eastie High was great," Billy DeVincenti says. "It was one four-year party. I tried hard in 10th grade, actually. Math was my favorite. You have to be able to add to make money."

turned my back on one of them. I could understand them trying to kill me. I would think more of them if they did. But I wouldn't put my worst enemy in jail. If I wanted to take someone's business, I'd take it, not set them up and leave them in jail. They didn't do it the way the street says you do it. They used the system we're all trying to beat. And this is what happened."

**T**hey all fell because of Billy. Eddie Portelle, Anthony Plante, Bobby Stack, Paul Mattarese, Marc

Orlandella, Carmen Ciampa. All his buddies got time. Carmen and Marc got life.

Still, Billy is ready to provide an alibi for a friend whom he once implicated in a robbery. Darin Bufalino was the state's most wanted fugitive before he was arrested in Spain in June. Bufalino, wanted for a murder Billy says Bufalino did not commit, was traced to Ireland, from which he fled to Spain when the Irish government instituted an extradition treaty with the United States. Before Bufalino was caught, "it was like he was

God, being on that fugitive list," Billy says.

Billy knows his willingness to testify that Bufalino was freebasing cocaine in Revere with him at the time the government alleges Bufalino was pumping bullets into the head of a drug dealer named Vinnie DeNino does not sit well with his captors.

"Hey, I don't care," Billy says, "I'm telling the truth. They told me in the beginning to just tell the truth. I've done that so far, and I'm gonna keep doing it."

Billy's world is now one of comfortable confinement. His room in the dormitory setting for protected witnesses, separated from a neighboring federal prison, is 12 by 8 feet. He has a color television, a stereo. He made sure he got to be head of the committee that chooses what video cassettes are ordered for the facility. He is also the one prison authorities first blame for organizing any gambling, wine-making, or contraband-smuggling that goes on behind the walls.

Many witnesses work up to eight hours a day at the glove factory at the federal facility. Billy D, never one to value le-

gitimate physical labor, works about three hours a day, enough to make \$100 a month to spend at the commissary.

"I didn't come to jail to be a factory worker," he says.

He hopes soon to be an author. He is writing a book about his experiences and has a contract with Quinlan Press, a Boston publishing company. He remains a hustler.

The hustler has yet to be sentenced, but under his plea-bargain agreement with the government, the state will ask for 12 to 20 years for Billy De-Vincenzi. That means he would be eligible for parole in 1991.

Will he go straight?

"I don't have a legal bone in my body, I guess. But, really, I don't know. Until you get out of here, it's hard to say."

Billy is fully aware that when he does get out, there will still be some people around who would like to kill him. Despite that, and despite the fact that most of those people still live in Eastie and Revere, Billy wants to return to Boston.

"The way I look at it, just as many people want to kill me now as before I got put away. I'll take my chances. I'm a survivor." •