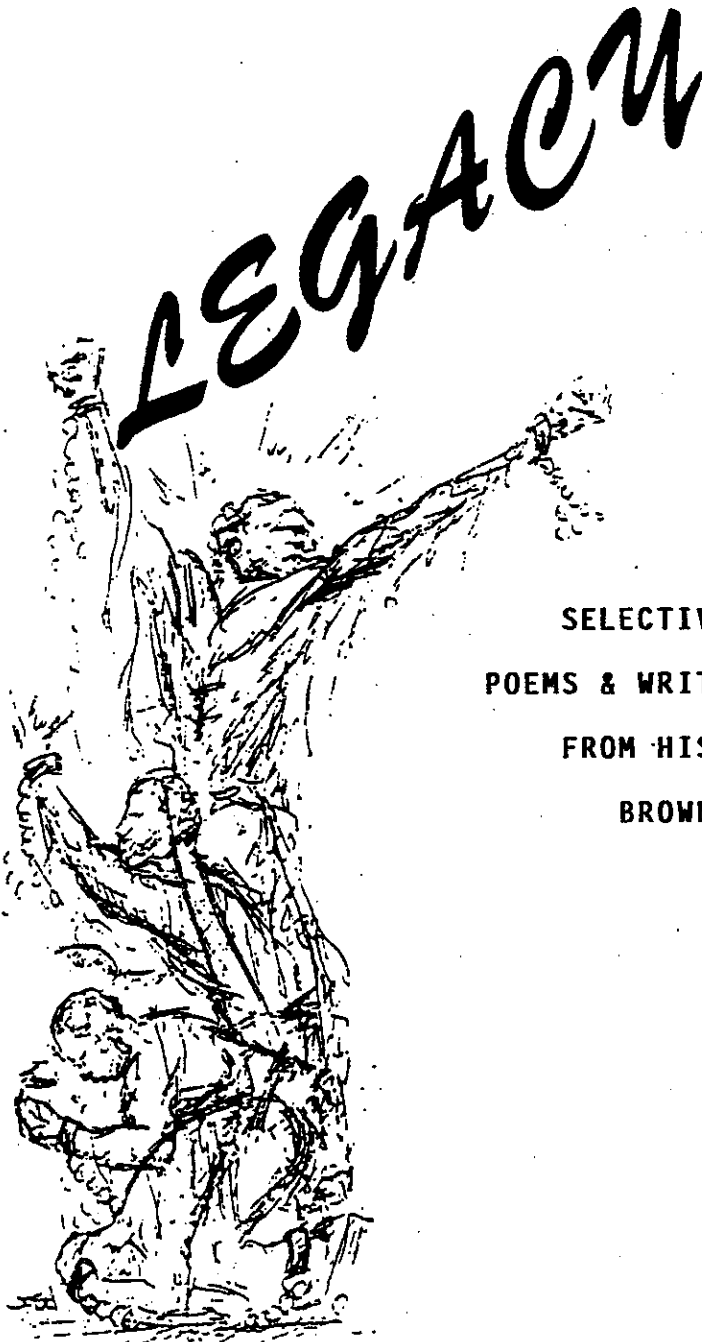


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By: John Griffin

SELECTIVE
POEMS & WRITINGS
FROM HIS
BROWN PAPER RAPPER
INTROSPECTIONS
TALES FROM THE YARD
&
A LETTER TO MY FATHER
COLLECTIONS

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January 27, 2013

Dennis Sobin, Director
Safe Street Art Foundation
1600 K Street NW, Suite 501
Washington, DC 20006

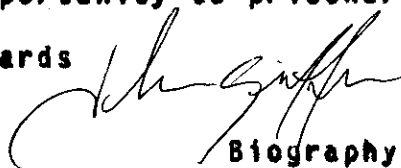
Dear Mr. Sobin:

Thank you for your reply to my letter. As a prisoner who has been incarcerated for almost 40 years and involved along with others in prison reform, I commend you and the Safe Street Arts Foundation for what you are doing.

Enclosed with this letter please find a copy of my poetry manuscript for publication on your site. I believe that I have met all guidelines you require. However, because this prison doesn't allow inmates to have stamps or send out SASE, I must have this manuscript mailed by a representative who will enclosed a SASE.

I am also sending a brief bio just incase you include them on the writers you post. If possible, please let me know if I have failed to meet the guidelines. Again, I thank you for giving this opportunity to prisoners.

My sincere regards



Biography

My name is John Griffin and I have been incarcerated for 40 years. I have two college degrees, one in Human Services and one in Marketing. I have published an auto-biography entitled A Letter to My Father and a murder mystery entitled, Screams from the Coffin. I hope to publish two more novels this year, entitled, First Shot Fired and Sequence of Protocol-subtitle, The Philadelphia Black Mafia. Other books I have published are a poetry/short fiction booklet, Insie/Out, a literary magazine, Images, and the one shown on this site, Legacy, a book of poems.

In 1984, I was one of the co-founders of The Prison Literacy Project an participated in designing and writing its well-documented Handbook and Newsletter.

DEDICATION PAGE:
CARRIE, THE
KEEPER OF THE
FLAME.
by john griffin

THIS SHOUT-OUT GOES TO:

CARRIE,
THE KEEPER
OF THE FLAME

By word of mouth, we journeyed
back through time and places
unknown. We sat amongst people
we did not know, yet saw
through their eyes.

So beautiful were the
sun's rays, reflecting on the
lake. So warm and sensuous the
breeze upon our faces. And we
heard the drums; her voice,
the drums.

Like Luqman, the Ethiopian,
her tongue weaved an African tradition.
Her-story spoke, like whispers
from our ancestors. Spellbinding,
holding us in one place, while
transporting us to another. Humbling us,
while raising the spirits of old black folk.

Some bound under the weight of
oppression, others danced to the birth
of the blues. Not only did we hear
the rattle of the chains, but also
the melodic rhythm of the horn.
There was a noble rarity about her,
Carrie, The Keeper Of The Flame. One
the world is too soon without.

*

BROWN PAPER

RAPPER

BROWN PAPER RAPPER, comin at'cha,
not to grab ya,
but to map ya;
in hope that i can tap ya.
Your brain that is,
so we may give,
more respect
to those we neglect.
Little babies, women, and oldheads too,
are in fear of the things we do.
On the West Coast, East Coast,
and in between,
we gotta do wha we say, and say wha we mean.
We may have skills
to call on at will,
might even be poetic.
But should be academic
when we represent it,
and not just pathetic.
Whas'sup with common courtesy?
You tell me, Gee Money.
Is positive imagery,
now some vulgar crap,
we dump in God's lap,
to express thanks for successful rap
while wearing bras and jock straps?
For someone already half insane,
and not puttin nothin in our brains,
wallowing in the luxury of chill'in,
shows we be doin some serious ill'in.
Sure, celebrate Tupac, Biggie, and others,
but be realistic, don't canonize the brothers.
Aren't you from the jungle?
Can't you hear and read the drums?
Then you, better than most,
should kno where i'm comin from.
I ask! Are you down wit us?
Comin round to us?
Ready to do wha'cha must,
to bound wit us?
If i offend, i apologize.
But it's time to recognize.
In order to energize,
we must stand and maximize.
I asked! Are you down wit us?
Comin round to us?
Ready to do wha'cha must,
to bound wit us?

GANGSTAS DON'T RAP

High noon, on a busy urban street,
where dope dealers, turned gun fighters, choose to meet.
Standing their ground, and facing each other,
oblivious to babies, at the feet of their mothers.
Deluded minds say they're the original black gangstas.
Images they've cloned, from original white prank'stas.
Itchy fingers, poised to draw,
semi-automatics, like in some movie they saw.
And now without any shame,
you have the nerve to claim,
you're that gangsta rap'pin niggah,
the one who pulled - the deadly triggah.
The one who told - on himself,
and didn't stop til - he told on everyone else

But you're a joke, young buck,
don't even kno whas'sup.
Real gangstas don't rap, they don't tell,
nor do they cry, weep and moan, when they go to jail.
I kno ya, cause I'm the one to sho you,
and do fo ya, wha'cha lawyer didn't do.
He took ya money, then dumped'cha,
sent'cha here, in fear,
someone would hump ya.
I heard the lies you've told,
bout'cha overly expensive gold,
that give off a glare in the sun,
and weighs a ghetto ton.
I've seen your benz parked in the rec yard,
saw you at commissary using ya platinum card.

But corner boy, ya been betrayed,
into thinking ya king of the grave.
What do ya no of a world outside ya own?
Who'll care fo ya when ya fifty and finally grown?
Will ya still need a tit to suck on?
Define yo'self by the length of ya hard-on?
Real gangsta's don't rap son.
And real men don't take none.
They respect their mothers, sisters, and daughters,
and demand respect from others.
Rappers entertain us.
Gangstas appall us.
Don't confuse the two,
it could be deadly for you.

*

WHAT ABOUT YOUR SONS AND DAUGHTERS

A word to the young men, cloaked in black,
you can change many things, but you can't change that.
But don't get it twisted, or get it messed up,
spin out of orbit, and self-destruct.
No purpose has the niggah, who internalize that word.
No future, the bitch, when that's all she's heard -
from some disrespecting joker, who s'pose to represent,
but for whatever reason, can't seem to pay his own rent.
And what of your sons? Will they - like you,
learn to view,
guns and cars as toys,
to replace those they played with as little boys?
History holds a place for those,
who stood, gun in hand.
It's a grave of souls - filled with holes,
from which red rivers ran.

And what about your daughters? Who will they count on?
They will need real men, not males with hard-ons.
What legacy will you leave them -
to ponder and dwell upon? Will it be a lack of hope? Neo-Slavery?
A stash of dope?
Will they be forced to follow your foolish dreams,
of desiring shiny and sparkling things,
far beyond their meager means?

Will you teach your children that people die -
when bullets fly?
That they can't get up when the credit stops?
And men in blue are not Hollywood cops?
That when the show is over, and the movie ends,
there will be no sun-set to ride off in?
How many of their own
will you teach them to kill?
If not with the gun,
then the needle, pipe, or pill.

A word to you young men, cloaked in black,
change what you can, and be proud of that.
Remember fate plays no favorites -
in the final tally.
What might seem like the right road,
just may be the wrong alley.

*

aMERICA, THE beautiful?

Are there no mirrors in America,
so your flaws you may detect?
Or is it because of your vampirism,
that your image will not reflect?
haven't you noticed that your armor is tarnished,
and your crown is slightly bent?
That your slave has risen from his grave,
to become your embarrassment?
He marches in your streets,
at your capital steps, he sings,
proclaiming loudly, the burdens,
from which injustice springs.

And what of your conscience, America?
Does it rose-color the sight,
of citizens walking your streets, by day,
and sleeping in them, by night?
Can't you look into their eyes
and see that they're vacant?
That they're void of emotion,
and somewhat complacent?
That their spirits are broken,
their self-esteem is low?
That they're constantly moving,
with never anyplace to go?
But to some other shabby shelter,
with what little they have to carry,
and the only permanence to the dwelling,
is that it's always temporary.

You're emptying you schools, America,
while filling your prisons and jails.
Holding elaborate hearings
into why your youth rebel.
You're being extremely hypocritical,
that's something the whole world knows.
And regardless how expensive the façade,
it's obvious, the emperor has no clothes.

You need to find and clean your mirror,
and look closely at what you see.
Discover your conscience, America,
and be all you were supposed to be.

*

INTROSPECTIONS

INTROSPECTION

i see myself, dying,
day by day.
Day by day, it's like sitting
before a mirror, and slowly
watching
hair turning grey.
Inch by inch,
drop by drop,
I feel life seeping from my body.
Oozing,
pore by pore,
out into the stale damp
air. And I no longer care.
There's no
difference between
letting go and holding
on. When it's all said and done,
i'll still be gone.

God used to pass
this way, he used to step over the
hole
where i lay, in. And i , would call out,
confessing, and say, i've sinned.
But he
don't walk by here no more,
he sends loneliness instead, who's
name
is time, and walks with a cane,
cause he's blind, and
can't see me,
dying.

*

REPOSE

Even in their graves,
there's no repose for our mothers,
our fathers. They're not free from the
distress and shame of our dishonorable ways.
Their voices reach out,
lamenting in our ears, a resounding plea
for assertion. A call for us to recognize
and revere the womb that bore and died for us.

Should we not have
even a shadow of sorrow, our brows
full of discontent? Like Antigone,
should we not cover our ancestors
with credible earth? For their eyes,
saw no glory in the coming
of the lord of others, nor were they
guests at the kind of parties held
in their honor.

They fought and died
in this country's wars, fought and died,
when this country waged war
against them. And we do them
a disservice by not continuing their
struggle, our struggle. By neglecting
what they have built with their blood,
their sweat, their tears. How can they rest
in peace,
when we refuse to live in peace with
ourselves?

*

VANISHED MEMORIES

There are no days,
no nights,
nor are there wrongs,
or any rights.
Only the realities of
the obvious in between,
no where is there but
the vagueness of all things.
Clinging to my mind,
refusing to free me.
Shapeless images
of what use to be.
Yesterdays were here,
so warm, so alive,
todays are gone,
my tomorrows wonder why.
There are no answers to questions
i don't know to ask,
only pain and confusion,
and a memory of an unsure past.

**

Legacy

A Nubian Magnificence,
to some, a chronicle unclaimed.
But amazingly, a human diary of color,
indicated that a legacy remained.
Descendants of the past,
though for many, hard to trace,
stood as a distinguishing testament
to an entire human race.
Once captured and enslaved,
but undefeated by circumstance.
They rose, like Akhnaton's sun,
brightening the world with a glance.
Though snatched from the womb of their Motherland,
the umbilical cord remained intact.
Though temporarily blinded by their persecutors,
they regained their sight and looked back.
Studying their ancestors,
and learning that they were the same
developing pride and moving forward,
they proved the legacy remained.

*

CAPTIVE LOVER

Secretly, we meet
in public, before
the eyes and hearing
of many. And all things
go unnoticed.

Purposely, we mask
our courage so that
our fears will become
apparent. Depending solely
upon our ability to dissemble,
our stolen moments quiver
atop a precipice of
vulnerability. And we love,
through a maze of obstacles,
anchored in odious
circumstance. We convert
their wall of enmity
into our enduring niche,
and we are again,
quenched.

**

NUBIA'S PEACH

Shades of pink,
golden rays untamed,
oceans of purple,
frizzled in my veins.

Swirling flashes of grey passion,
provided the perfect rhythm,
combined hearts that couldn't last,
cursed an imperfect system.

Gone now are the cherry dreams,
and strawberry fantasies.
I became so use to the noise,
that the silence awoke me.

Misty colored tears,
images without reason,
days too long remembered,
of a peach out of season.

**

A BREATH OF FRESH AIR

There was this breath
of fresh air. It
blew across my face one day.
It was cool, clean, and
very soothing to my senses.
I tried to capture it,
and was successful
for awhile.

But as air will do
when a little heat and
pressure is applied,
She expanded and
slipped silently away.

**

LETTERS FROM PRISON

Around mid-afternoon,
the mailman will hand her my letter.
She'll stare in disgust,
and wonder. Why does he
continue to write?
Doesn't he realize, she'll
ask herself, i'll never
answer? But still, she'll
open it, begin to read,
and smile gently at
some ridiculous thing
i've said. She'll
fold it, then
nonchalantly cast it
aside. But
for a moment, at least,
she thought of no one
but me, saw my face,
felt my heart, and
read my mind. She
experienced, minutely,
what i have endured constantly.
And she knew why
i continued to write.

*

YOU, ME, AND MILES

A quiet moment,
listening to Miles,
and thinking of you,
is all I have
to look forward to.
Cherishing my thoughts,
not wanting
to be disturbed,
find a lonely place
to sit,
soothe my nerves.
My Funny Valentine
flows melodiously
from his horn,
laid back
eyes closed,
mind gone.
In search of
any little time
in the past,
that brings you to mind,
make the moment last.

*

THE ROPE BROKE

Okay,
if no one else will say it,
I will.
All eyes were focused and
firmly fixed,
as some drank beer and ate
their lunch. Much of white america
stood rigid, wringing hands, one
over the other, and
waiting. Desperate to relive a
passion of their youth. Hoping,
as a manner of tradition, for
a historical lynching. While most
black americans, in defiance
of those accustomed to being
accommodated, prayed for the miracle
that always seemed to
elude them. And suddenly,
heaven had ears, a moment forever
stilled in time, erupts
into the cheer heard around
the world. O.J. wouldn't hang
today. The rope broke.

**

SISTA'S

She has all the worries of a woman,
the fears of a child.
When to be happy, when
not to be.
There are times
when she needs to be alone,
reconciling herself,
for herself. Who shall she run to,
if no one is there? What shoulder
can she lean on? What hand
can she clutch? Representing all
women, her pensiveness
grips all men. When she cries,
the world moans, her sobs lyrics
the blues,
and there are no love songs. No
starlit nights, no warmth
of the morning sun. But
when she smiles,
it's a celebration, her laughter,
a jubilee, and
we dance to her stride.
Her broad hips, bouncing us,
enticing us, leading us
while following us. She is
that recurring fire
that burns between our thighs
and deep within our souls. Gripping us,
reconnecting us
to that innateness
we had long ago lost touch with. She is
that sista, fine black,
brown, yellow, red, even white,
if she chooses;
looking good and
transforming us again
into men. She is that sista,
our mothers, lovers, and wives,
the preserver of us all.

DIVINATION

Will i see you again, Mom? Will James
be there,
too? How will you know me,
if i'm older? Will I be
too tired from the struggles
of this world? And oh so weary,
from missing you?
My thoughts of you,
are constant,
I smile,
once and awhile,
when I think of your naive sayings,
your southern wit. And James,
singing his old songs.
Is my dad there, too?
Did he
remember you? Did he smile
when he saw you coming near? After all this time,
did he remember, James,
his oldest son? And that we
were only babies
when he, so young himself,
was taken from us?
I stare at your pictures,
a lot, and wonder,
if there will come a time
when a child, of my
child's child,
will stare
at the faces of our picutres,
and for awhile,
feel what i feel,
miss what i miss now,
and be connected,
inspired,
and smile proud,
to be apart of us,
like i'm apart of you?

**

**TALES
FROM THE YARD**

OLDHEAD

Yeah, i'm waitin' for Oldhead. You waitin',
to see him too?

Yeah, i gotta see'im bout som'um.
Well he comes in the yard every evening,
sits, watches,
and laughs at dem half-ass basketball
playin' niggahs. He calls it
his laxation time, cause
usually he's busy being bombarded
by a bunch of jokers
wantin' his help with som'um another.

You got dat right.
Sometimes Oldhead be duckin' dem dudes,
jus'ta get a moment's peace. People he don't even kno
be askin' him to fight their case,
or wantin' him to talk bout black history,
slavery, or som'um. Not dat the two
necessarily go together; i mean,
cordin' to Oldhead,
som'ma dese dudes are still in slavery.
And dat ain't history. He says,
it ain't easy tellin' a man he a slave
to his own mental limitations,
while dat man is struttin' round
on the dark and deary plantations inside
his own head.

Yeah, sometimes Oldhead can sho be
brutal, but he's truthful. One time
he told me,
that history to some of us
is asking bout Angela Davis.

"She sho was fine", he said, we say.

"Wonder who was boning in her?" And

"How bout Malcolm, Oldhead? He was all that, huh?"

Oldhead jus frown and say,
you niggahs need to get a book. I ain't your
entertainment system. You all the time,
wanna be listenin' to som'um, watchin'
som'um, and understandin' nuffin', unless
it comes live from MTV.

"Damn Oldhead." We say. "We ain't the enemy."

Then stop ackin' like one, he say. Walkin'
round under the influence of arrogance,
steppin' on old folk's feet, don't even say,
s'cuse me.

My Bag. What's that?

Naw, Niggah, that's my feet you're steppin' on,
not your bag. Say
s'cuse me, sir,
s'cuse me, ma'am,
like your mommas taught you.

All style, no substance, huh?

Yeah, accordin' to him,
we act like we never had parents or som'um. Says
we should be ashamed, but have no shame,
no courtesy neither. He always
talkin' to us bout how we be callin' home,
beggin', cryin', then havin' the nerve
to ask our poor mommas for \$200 dollar
sneakers to play basketball. You Niggas in prison,
he say,
the white man used the law to put you ere,
but the law library is always empty,
the basketball court, always full.

Hey, i never heard Oldhead call nobody a niggah.

He didn't, dat's my word. Oldhead calls those
he says don't deserved to be called black men,
negroes. He says,
out of respect for his mother,
dat's as insulting as he can be. Plus,
he says,
we sometimes take the word nigga to mean som'um thorough,
and he don't want us thinkin'
we thorough. Some negroes, he says,
ain't even deservin' to be called nigga. He calls dem, Jerry Springer watchin' negroes, said they be ackin'
like they kno it all; got no money, no job,
hidin' from the parole man
by sittin' in their momma's house,
watchin' Ricki Lake and Jenny Jones.

Remember when loud mouth Shorty Brown came back?

He went straight to Oldhead's bench,
started tellin' Oldhead bout
how hard it was out dere.
"Whas'sup, Oldhead?" He asked,
then immediately, Shorty started talkin',
sayin' how the parole man had brought'im back
for nuffin', and how he had it in for'im, and stuff.
Oldhead listened to Shorty's whole story,
even when he started tellin' him bout Shirley,
and how good the pussy was,
how he stop goin' round her, cause
she and her momma was into this Zen type shit,
sittin' round in Japanese clothes,
eatin' rice with chopsticks. And her brotha,
Fat Larry,
all intellectual and all,
breakin' up his face
tryin' to pronounce white people's words.
Finally, Oldhead, tired of hearin' dat crap,
jus threw his hands up in the air
and walked off, leavin' Shorty Brown standin' dere.

Yeah, i kno, snoop told me bout it. But
guess wha? Shorty Brown was right there
the next day,
waitin' for Oldehad,
even sittin' on his bench,

with another story to tell.

But it was the final straw, when Shorty,
fool dat he is,
asked Oldhead to help'im fight the parole board,
again.

Wha Oldhead say to dat fool?

Shit. You don't know? Oldhead
looked dat fool in his weasel eyes,
and said,
Listen ere Negro,
you recidivism muth-fucka,

Oldhead cussed?!

Right in that niggah's face.

Damn! He mus'ta really made Oldhead mad.

Man, Oldhead looked at Shorty for a long time,
then said,
you a do nuffin', kno nuffin' fool,
been in and out of here four or
five times since I started this bit,
and I've helped you get back out
three of those times already. Now you
wanna come sit your
pathetic ass down next to me,
tellin' me stories, bout a woman
you don't even kno. Lyin' on her,
talkin' bout her mother, her brother,
weepin' bout how hard it was outside,
while bitchin' bout how hard it is inside,

and how bad they treat you here.

Man, you should've seen the look on Shorty
Brown's face. He looked like he wanted to jump
Oldhead or som'um. But he knew better,
cause everybody loves Oldhead; Plus,
Oldhead ain't done all dem years being no punk.

Wha Shorty do?! Wha he do?

He sat dere, and listened,
dat's wha he did. But Oldhead
wasn't finish. He told Shorty
to take that, I wanna punch an old man
look off his face, befo he knocked
it off. I readily admit, Oldhead said,
lookin' Shorty up and down,
I suffer from the residuals of slavery and self-hatred,
when it comes to punk-ass negroes, like you,
who become the scourge of their own communities,
scarin' old black folks,
women and children to death,
then come to prison, too afraid
to even look at dem white men standin' round
in dem guard uniforms, hard looks on their faces,
never smiling, tryin' to fool somebody,
into thinkin' they tough,
when we kno, even Hitler, Stalin,
and the rest of dem maniacs,
who scared people for real,
broke a smile, once and awhile.

And dem weak minded, imitation, S.S. men,
got y'all dumb-ass, wanna-be neighborhood gangstas,
scared to death. And then you,
a four block radius,
crack creature, mutha-fucka,
want me to help you, again. Help you
go back out so you can frighten more
old women and little babies.

Finally, Shorty Brown found his tongue,
and sarcastically asked, what Oldhead would do,
if he ever made parole.

**Shorty was tryin' to signify huh? He kno
Pennsylvania ain't got no parole for lifers.**

Yeah, but dat didn't faze Oldhead. Can a Jackal
offend a lion? Oldhead jus shook his head a bit,
a slight smile appeared on his graying face.
He said: Shorty, I kno
You had the misfortune of being born rotten,
low down, no good, and a bunch of other things
that are even less flattering to say. But'cha lucky,
i'm an understandin' man.
So, jus for the sake of argument,
say by some unfortunate set of circumstances,
you saw me on the evening news, standin' over a body,
gun barrel smokin'. Kno that the Judge,
would let me go, cause i'd tell'im
a negro like you,
tried to sell me some of dat crack shit ya'll be smokin'.

And the Judge,
even wit his limited wisdom,
would proclaim me innocent by reason of
justifiable homicide.

"Why you come down so hard on me?" Shorty Brown
asked Oldhead. "All I wanted to kno
is how to fight the parole board."

Hard on you! Oldhead shouted, Maggot,
you don't know hard. Actually,
I've been easy on you, cause you
don't kno no better. Wha I hate is,
every time a good meaning brother
try to tell you dumb-ass
young boys som'um, y'all think
y'all already kno it all. And the only
time y'all half listen,
is when your dumb-asses is in trouble,
and even then, you want somebody to take it
easy on ya. When I was a little boy,
my momma, good meaning woman that she was,
always had some medicine to give me and my brothers.
Whether we were sick or not,
she always had som'um to give us,
some bitter, nasty tasting,
castor oil lookin' crap
that she'd use sweet words with,
tryin' to sugarcoat it,
make it taste better, be easier for us to swallow.

But my daddy, no nonsense,
hard hittin', so in so, dat he was,
would always yell, don't whisper no sweet shit to dem! Mak'em
drink it from da bottle, like men!
Don't make no sissies out my boys! And do you kno,
everyone of my brothers,
who continued to slurp from that spoon,
sweet words and all,
turned out to be punks,
jus like you.
So, if you want this shit spoon-fed to ya,
you gotta go find my momma,
cause, i'm like my daddy,
I don't play dat shit.

And since dat day,
Shorty Brown, fool niggah dat he is,
ain't bothered Oldhead with no mo questions, and he
ain't told no mo stories bout no women either.

Here come Oldhead now.

Hey Oldhead! Whas'sup?! We been waitin' fo ya

Yeah, we saved your seat on da bench.

TEAM SUPPORT

Yo, Cojo, you seen Abdul?

Yeah, he's in the library.

What he doing there? He s'pose to be runnin' ball wit us this afternoon. We're playin' D-unit in the play-offs.

I don't think he's gonna make it, man.

Why?

Cause he's at a meeting.

A meeting? A meeting wit who? We need em on the court.

Yeah, but he's meeting with the Prison Society. He got some questions for them.

Who? What kinda questions that niggah got?

The people from the Prison Society, and some from a black community group. Abdul said he wanted to ask them:

"who will solve these problems for us? Are there any among them, men or women, with enough courage to lend a helping hand, a voice of reasoning?"

Wha'cha talking bout, man? I ain't got time for this shit.

When this meeting thing over?

I don't know. All I know is, Abdul said he planned to ask them:

"When anyone would speak seriously for the prisoner? Those looked upon as the rejected and despised, never deserving, always generalized... When will anyone dare scratch the surface, peek through the wall, look into the faces of those who struggle against all odds to redeem themselves?..Those trying to stand as corrected individuals before their families, their communities, and society as a whole? But for their efforts, have received only looks of condemnation from the public's jaundiced eye?"

Hey Cojo. Cojo, you hearing me man? We need a player.

Yeah, I here you, but Abdul say we got issues. Issues we should have answers to. Answers Like:

"Who will challenge the politicians? Those who use the necks of prisoners as podiums to bellow out their one line speeches of,
. I'll pull the switch, throw away the key, build new prisons, where coal mines used to be. Never mind that the money they'll use, will come from inner-city schools, and the guards they'll employ, from schools in places like Frackville, Coal Township, and Mahanoy. Never mind that those new prisons will house our youth, not yet born. Creating a future for others, while pounding that of our own."

Who that niggah think gonna listen to all that? Them people don't care bout us.

Well, perhaps we gotta care bout ourselves first.

What Niggha? You making some kinda joke? That supposed to be funny or som'um?

Nope. The brother serious. He says black and brown people are affected most by the criminal justice system, but that our communities know less bout it than anybody else. He wanna know things.

What things?

"Will common sense ever prevail? Will taxpayers finally realize, there are no real returns on investments into a prison system that has become a business now being underwritten by Wall Street brokerage firms? Will they awake to see there will be no benefits when the only profit comes at expense of eliminating concern and continuity of educational and vocational programs that would have enable those confined to avoid being a commodity in a new Prison Industrial Complex?"

Those are just a few of the questions Abdul wants to ask.

Hey Cojo, you wanna take his place, man? We need a point

guard for the game. C'mon Cojo, take his place.

No. I don't think so. I'm going to the library and listen to

the answers these people will give. You wanna go with me? You know, support the team, so to speak?

Yeah, might as well.

* *

ONCE ROUND THE TRACK

Who's got the ticket this week, Theo?

Don't kno.

Don't kno? You, wit'cha good football spread pickin' self. You don't kno?

that's right. I don't play the spread no more.

Why, you tryin' to make parole or som'um?

Very funny, Like these people gonna give me parole.

Then why you ain't playin football tickets no more?

Cause i'm tryin' to stop smokin', and if I buy packs to play dem damn tickets, i'll be smoking again.

Yeah, I kno wha'cha mean. Wish I could stop. Every time I try, som'um happens to start me all over again. I'll quit for two weeks, call home, get bad news, go right to my cell and light up. I tell you Theo, sometimes I don't wanna call home no more.

That bad, huh?

Man, one time it's my little sista, Lori. She runnin' with the wild bunch, drinkin' and usin' crack. Then another time, it's by brotha, Logan. He shootin' at people bout my sista.

Damn Mike. I thought white people didn't do that shit. That's the kinda stuff you hear bout in my neighborhood.

Yeah, right. Like South Philly is any different than North Philly.

Sorry bout your borther and sister, man. How's your mom doing? She holdin' up okay?

Aw, she better now. Since my uncle been comin' over, Lori has cooled out a bit. Logan got his-self a job after school, so maybe he'll be alright. He'll be graduating this year.

Lookout Mike, here comes that damn guard again. You kno he's always countin' heads to see if too many of us are standin' in one place.

Yeah, he always lookin' for a reason to write som'body up.

Let's take a tum round the track.

Wha's his problem? His wife don't giv'im any, or he jus one of dem prisoner hatin' son-of-a-bitches?

Maybe a little of both. But som'body like his dumb-ass.

I don't think so, man. You ever see one of his misconduct reports: he's a no spellin' stupid-ass.

Yeah, but som'body, somewhere, probably jus as stupid as him, but likes 'im jus the same. Seems everybody play different roles in their life.

Wha'cha mean, different roles?

Here, he's a dumb-ass, prisoner hate'n, son-of-a-bitch, who gets his kicks fuckin' wit us. He feels superior, and probably brags to his friends bout how tough he is on the caged animals. But at home, if he has one, he's probably a husband and father. There he plays a completely different role. Like you, you worry bout your sister, your brother, and you're always talkin' bout how your mom took care of y'all after your pop left. So with your family, you're a lovin' and carin' brother and son. But when you on the streets of South Philly, you one vicious white boy nobody better mess with, right?

Wha'cha been reading those damn psych books again?

Naw, that's jus role playin', that's all.

Yeah, wha'ever. He still a dumb-ass guard, and if I ever see'im on the streets.

Huh? You doing life like me. Don't think we be seein' him on the streets anytime soon.

Well, you kno wha I mean. If I did see'im, i'd give'im the same kinda trouble he be givin' us.

He sould be your last worry, man. If you're ever able to get back in the streets again, your main concern has to be your family. Their needs outweigh any petty revenge you might feel for some worthless maggot like him. He's a punk, only ack that way cause he scared to death. Men who don't have nothin' to prove, don't ack like that.

Yeah, you're right. I read in one of their handbooks where they have to take this assertive trainin' to learn how to ack and talk tough. They tell'em to stand in front of a mirror at home and practice how to look stern and sound authoritiative and shit. Ha, I would like to suddenly appear behind him while he's staring in that mirror. He'd probably drop dead from fright.

yeah, and the judge would give you another life sentence; call it fright degree murder.

Wha'cha miss most bout the streets, Theo?

Hard question Mike. Ten years ago it would have been easier to answer. I still had a family to miss. Now my parents are dead, and God only kno's where my woman is. I guess at different times in our lives, we miss differently. Smells,

taste, people, they all change. But that's what I miss.

Smells, taste, people's laughter. I remember how my woman use to look at me, cook for me. How she use to lean up against me, and I could smell the mixture of her natural scent mixing wit that of the soap she used. Safeguard soap. Beige safeguard soap.

Safeguard soap?

Yep. Ain't that funny? After all these years, I still can remember the faint scent of her body....I miss traveling too. Once I went to Texas. I saw all these Mesquite trees lining the highway. It was the first time I ever noticed them; they looked so willowy, so mysterious like. I later learned that they didn't jus grow in Texas, but elsewhere as well, even in Pennsylvania. But it took me goin' all the way to Texas, 2000 miles away, to notice their beauty....How bout you Mike, wha'cha miss most?

I miss my girlfriend and my family a lot. My daughter is only seven, so she can't remember me being home wit her. She was only two when I left the streets.

Well at least you and your woman are still on good terms. She still brings your daughter up to see you, right?

Yeah, but it won't last, you kno that...Hey, I miss goin' swimmin', too. The cold water splashin' round me and my dog.
Wha damn dog? You ain't told me bout no dog. Bet he got three legs and carries one of your miniatures confederate flags round in mouth, right?

Fuck you, Theo. I told you bout my dog. Even showed you the pictures I got of 'im last year.

I know. I know. I was jus playin'. A black Rottweiler, right?

His name, uh, uh, Bruno.

Hey, you gotta good memory for an old man. Bruno is old now, but I had lots of fun wit'im. When my uncle gave'im to us as a pup, he only weighed 7 lbs. He's now round 80 lbs. Since he was a gift to me and my little brotha, Logan, my mom went out and bought Lori a miniature Schnauzer. Lori named her Ming Ming, and them dogs got along like they were born from the same momma.

Bruno didn't fight her?

No. Bruno became Ming Ming's protector. And when Lori taught Ming Ming how to fetch the ball for treats, Bruno would fetch Ming Ming. Then Bruno figured out that when he wanted a treat, all he had to do was bring Lori som'um; anything, sock, shoes, trash. But treats for trash ended when Bruno made the mistake of tearin'up one of Lori's stuffed teddy bears, and tryin' to trade it for a treat.

Hey Mike, you kno what I really miss? A real bed wit...

Yeah, yeah, I kno. Wit a real mattress, right?

You're right! Twenty years of sleeping on paper thin mattresses and iron slabs have jus about done me in. And this food! Man, I don't think I can digest street food anymore.

When they use to allow us to have those family-day celebrations, and our people would bring up home-cooked meals. I would have to go straight to the bathroom no sooner than I got back to my cell.

Food too rich for ya, huh?

Yeah, prison food has done a job on me, and completely

destroyed my taste buds. Did you see that greasy-ass minute steak they served in the mess-hall last Tuesday?

Yep, that stuff so greasy, it leaves bout a centimeter of residue on your tray. You gotta take toilet paper to the kitchen jus to squeeze the grease out' or get extra bread off the line to do it wit.

Did you eat it?

Nope.

Well, you kno that joker everybody call, Astronaut, cause he look spaced-out all the time, right? This idiot called his-self stealin' some of that greasy-ass meat from the mess-hall.

Wha he do, put it in his pocket?

Naw, that fool. Now dig this. The temperature is sizzlin' that day. I mean it must've been bout 95 degrees in the shade.

But astronaut walks in the chow-hall wearin a winter coat. He gets the steaks the other guys aren't eatin', and puts them in one of those plastic gloves that the kitchen workers wear. He places the glove under his cap; not one of those ski-like caps, but a baseball cap. The finger of the glove were stickin' out from beneath the back of the cap and fillin' up wit grease, right. Then this fool tries to walk by the hacks like he one of them runway models dispalyin' the latest in fall fashions; his head and back all straight and shit. So much greas was drippin' down his back that he looked like he was wearing one of those 1976 gerri-curls or som'um. All the white hats and regular guards were standin' in the hallway lookin' at'im. Lookin' at each other, at'im, then lookin' at the other prisoners, who were tryin' to keep from laughin' at this

fool as he walked by.

You gotta be kiddin' me, man?

Hey, man. Kid you not. If I'm lyin', I'm flyin'... Those white hats jus shook their heads. One of them even called Astronaut over and made'im stand there talkin' for a minute or two. Finally, he jus let that fool walk away leavin' a trail of grease up and down the hallway.

Damn, he throwed-off

Yep. And mighty hungry too.

There's the horn.

Yep. Well, if I wake up in the mornin', I'll see you tomorrow, Mike.

Be careful, Theo.

You too. And remember, man, the season jus started. We got plenty of time to check the spreads.

Ha! I knew it!

A LETTER TO MY FATHER

**IN MEMORY ONE
FOR YOU DAD**

Calmly on the heels of life,
rides death.
It will overtake it,
but only in degrees,
and not before life's eye
has blossomed,
preserved itself through others
or felt the warmth upon its face.
Life must first
taste the fruit succulent sweet
and dance to the pleasure of the ear.
It must
experience the scent of the rose
while gaily playing in the light.
But
death's certainties are not,
once death causes life's brief pause,
it receives only a short rest itself.
For life's roots are deep,
and the frost of death, temporary.
Life will spring forth again
and death
again must wait.

* **

MEMORIES

A collection of past events
coexisting as images.
Some are mine,
others are borrowed
from those who knew you better than I.
Sometimes I confused the two. Their memories
became mine. Their time with you
became my precious moments. My personal
glimpses into a mirror, shattered,
each piece reflecting a different view,
a separate part of the same puzzle
in the mind of a three year old. Fragmented
images of a tall dark man,
with a white toothy grin.
His outstretched arms,
reaching down over a vast distance,
lifting me, picking me up,
rubbing his cheek against my skin. And,
through another shattered piece,
I see his large hands,
rope-like veins pushing up
from beneath black leathery skin,
wiggling like fat worms as I
play with them, pushing them,
this way and that way
 But,
it wasn't just the memories,
though we cloaked ourselves in them.
As if they were a shroud rendering us safe, we anchored
them around our necks so no other man
would have our love.
It was her devotion to you. A display
of loving, that never changed
even after her life was tragically altered.
Like a poetic griot,
she gave you life after death. She excited
our young minds with accounts of you,
like an artist, her words the brush,
our minds the canvas,
she brought you into our world. With a voice,
more enchanting as she spoke, sometimes, pausing,
an intense hush adoring her, as she
seems to relish and appreciate the taste
of her thoughts. Like the food a mothering eagle
feeds to her young, her words roll
around in her mouth before she drops them, unselfishly
into our minds. No, it wasn't just the
memories, dad,
it was her love.

WINTER DREAMING

Through a frost covered pane
confined in a wooden cage
lies in plain view, everything and yet
splintered ice renders it nothing.

Gray, bleak, harsh, cold,
unmerciful winter, damn winter,
subtly stole summer and now
laughs mockingly at spring.
Somewhere long forgotten, hidden in the depths of
his steely grips, lay the knowledge
and the promise that only with winter
snow will come.

How I longed, yearn, ached
and waited for its gentle arrival
to magically erase all traces of the past.
Its absolute purposefulness giving
rebirth to all it touches, and
generously endowing the gift of its presence
to all who brave the winter to celebrate its coming.
So warm and delicious to a child who would
stick out his tongue for a taste,
icy blue gracefully falling into place,
delicate crystals transcending humans to melt
and blend with them in nonhuman form.

I wished, hoped, prayed, pleaded
and I waited.
I opened my eyes toward the heavens
and as if on cue,
it started to snow.

MY STORY
AGE 9

As a child one day,
and being in a rush,
against this old lady's hand,
accidentally i brushed.
She stared at me,
such hate i'd never seen.
And proceeded to wipe,
as if trying to clean,
some infectious disease
from her white skin,
and no one could have felt
as small as i did then.
Saying i was sorry,
i turned and walked away,
not knowing at the time,
i'd never forget that day.
Now years later
i still wonder as i look back,
was the apology for touching her hand,
or was it for being black.

* * *

BIRTHDAY PARTY
AGE 12

A scarlet bulb
suspended from a basement ceiling
cast its magic silhouette
as it transforms darkness
into a dusty veil.
The soft shimmer falls
upon splendid black faces
aglow with a glossy sheen.
Moving and swaying
in the lengthening shadows
of one another
their young bodies cling to a moment
"In the still of the night."
While crepe and cotton caress their flesh,
urban rhythms resound enchantingly
in their ears.

* **

FIRST LOVE

I can remember vividly our younger days,
we were the harbingers of spring.
It seemed we would forever have
the love we shared at fifteen.

In the summer we would walk in the rain,
in the winter we'd play in the snow.
And although the years have passed quickly
it seems not so long ago.

When we would have our pensive moods,
at times saying nothing at all.
Walking slowly and holding hands,
as we'd watch the leaves fall.

Other times it seems,
we had plenty to say.
Just two loquacious lovers
passing the time of day.

If I returned to our old neighborhood,
I wouldn't be surprised to find,
your name still carved in Clarion Street,
right above mine.

MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA 1963

On the wings of angels
rides the souls of four little black girls.
Holding hands, they look down upon us;
their minds one.

Remembering being born to a world of
spiritually soulful women and hard working men of pride.

Their eyes opened to smiling faces
and the loving outstretched arms of those
who cherished and taught them
the beauty of the child
and the hope of the world.

But,
heaven didn't weep,
nor did it cry out
when a combination of racial hatred,
ignorance, and dynamite, mixed
and exploded in its blessed house.
Snatching the life from our most precious,
and setting their spirit to
celestial play.

Nor
did justice peek myopically
from beneath its blindfold
and extend its arm to give full measure
instead of granting
impunity to those who throw the stone,
then hide the hand.
Is there power in the patience of our people?
Strength in our endurance?
If there is, then lay this wisdom
at the graves of these four little black girls,
so they may rest.

CONVERSION

Are we really that patient
or are we just cowards.
For so long we have endured
with our heads tilted skyward.

Begging the whiteman first,
and God second,
to give us freedom,
and that our human rights be reckoned.

Only to be continuously denied,
physically and mentally enslaved,
wherever the sun sets,
from the cradle to the grave.

We exploit the land for others,
at home and abroad.
While singing about streets of gold,
and pearly gates as our reward.

But as long as we confuse divinity,
we will continue to play that role.
Revering blindly in our folly,
the biggest lie ever told.

That God is a whiteman
nailed to a cross.
And for our salvation,
he paid the ultimate cost.

Indeed, if it is patience,
at least it may wear thin.
Because if it's cowardliness
it means failure for all blackmen.

NALGONA WOMAN
Jerri, a love matured

Finally, the door opened,
and through her brown eyes
she reveals the world to me.
This Nalgona Woman,
cloaked in a nut brown spell,
her sepia beauty casting its secrets,
inviting a rare pilgrimage
to her familiar.
As brilliant colors from quiet fireworks
explode in my brain,
she snatches me from the turbulent
into the serene.
I the raft,
she the rapids.
The past quivers,
the present quakes;
surrendering me to her nubility
This Nalgona Woman,
her movements constantly evolving,
cradling me
with a sensuous source from her
lower Nile valley.
Recreating me with a historical love
of our ancestors.
Her milk chocolate skin,
warm as the mid-day sun,
so delicate, but not fragile.
Her phenomenal thrust
lifts me beyond the fantasy,
her passion untamed,
bring me forth
as a harmonious community.

**RASHEEDAH
THE RAREST GRAPE**

A child born
from our family tree.
She proves to be,
one standing amongst many,
but apart.
And though sharing their blood,
alone is she
in virtue of heart.
A child is born, with eyes
honest as the Ashanti sky.
Her beauty unique, causes
African violets to sigh.
The gazelle to aspire, her
delicate grace, as branches
of the Baobab stretch to embrace.
With a natural love, she
cares for her mother. And defends
her father above all others.
From girl to womanhood,
be born child, a
heritage renewed. She
loathes all rumor and
rejects family feud.
When siblings eschew, she
remains committed and true. Elegant
and refined, firm
and genuine. This
child of mine, has
stayed through time, truly,
the rarest grape on the vine

SHACKLES AND CHAINS

Like the first slave seeing his wavery
reflection upon the muddy face of the
Mississippi.

My reflection stared back at me
from a makeshift mirror fashioned
from a piece of tin attached to
the damp grey wall.

And from someplace,
near and distant,
urban renditions of Ledbetter's blues
reverberate and compete
with cries of pain and anguish
long into the night.

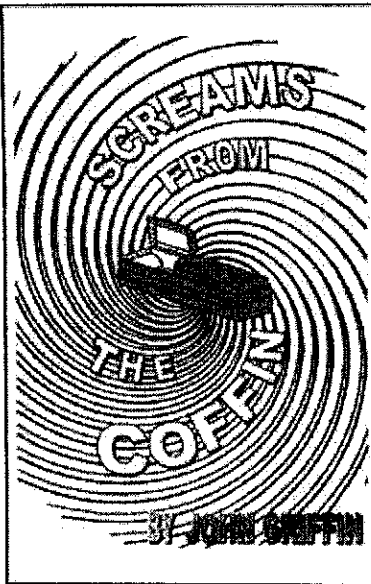
THE LIFER

Cold reality hits you with
the closing of the door,
the jingling of the keys,
fading footsteps on the floor.
There's austerity in this place,
a loud silence, like a tomb
that whispers constantly, telling
of a cell instead of a room.
As you think of things you've done
the importance comes to mind,
of turning a corner, crossing a street,
or just forgetting to be someplace on time.
From the inside looking out,
even the beggar isn't poor,
for he has all the things in life
that freedom holds in store.
The picture upon your wall,
only serves as a constant reminder,
of the woman with whom you shared the love
that must now be placed behind her.
But it is unwise to
dwell in retrospect.
There are manipulating roles here,
that would be dangerous to neglect.
Under the mask of so many,
lies, fears, and trepidation,
faces hidden from view,
unwilling to risk apperception.
Among a multitude of personalities,
you find the powerful and powerless,
corralled and warehoused together,
under conditions of acridness.
Concrete, steel, and the mentality,
keeps you in and the public out,
and no pictorial in "Time Magazine"
can depict what it's all about.
Year after year of monotonous routine,
as you search for someone to blame,
maybe justice, who is blind,
or Father Time, who is lame.
Reality striking the lifer,
an experience like no other.
Trapped between death and living death,
never again to recover.

* **

IN MEMORIAM

A mother's affliction, a
brother's pain.
From the depths of some
divine despair, tears flow
and crystalize beneath the surface
of my grief.
Seeping slowly dripping
to form some amorphous reservoir
neither to sob nor to weep
but rather to dam and impede the
noble language of the eye.



by:
John Griffin (Author)

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A LETTER TO MY FATHER

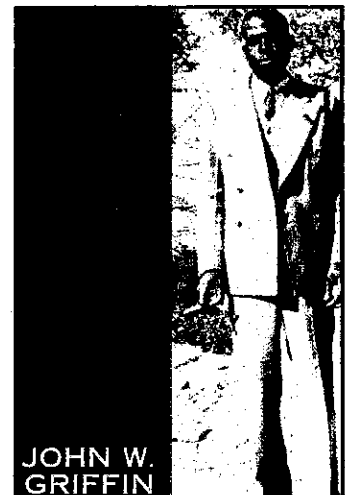
JOHN W. GRIFFIN

A revealing account of a son's personal memories to his deceased father about the love and strength of their family.

The author shares his experiences of growing up in Philadelphia, Pa., surrounded by racial images, while trying to find his place in a struggle for social equality during the 1960's.

His search leads him to the black nationalist ideology of the Nation of Islam, community activism, and crime. Arrested, convicted and though eventually acquitted of an infamous murder, he finds himself trapped in and swallowed up by a repressive and counterproductive prison system.

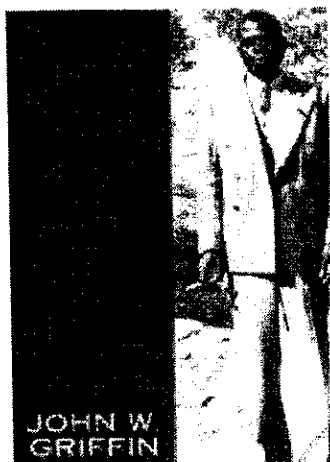
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Screams From The Coffin by John W. Griffin



Calvin Russell is a 39 year-old black auto repair shop owner, who moonlights as a private investigator. His long time friend and busines partner, Jason Miller, asks him to investigate the prison murder of a Jewish inmate, allegedly by a black inmate named Suluwesi. Russell who years earlier, worked with Miller as a prison guard, is fearful about taking this cse. It reminds him of when he was a guard and witness to a brutal murder and mutilation that left him ont he verge of a nervous breakdown. a murder so shocking that he left the prison that night and never returned.

I was rivited by this book and found I could not put it down. I recommend it to anyone who likes a good mystery and an explosive ending!!

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