

# TWENTY YEARS

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



I was born and raised in the East end of London not far from where the Kray twins ruled many years before me.

Being of mixed raced heritage it's surprising that my school years were very good considering this was in the eighties, but Hackney was a very multicultural place to grow up.

Even though I'd never been the type to get into trouble, I still had my fair share of times of being stopped by the police whilst walking on my own. Even whilst in my school uniform at the age of 13 and 14, I can still remember the embarrassment of being up against the wall while my pockets were searched, while people walked past.

This just became something of the norm, something that you accepted and expected, it was even worse once I learnt how to drive.

I suppose it wasn't until the drama series *Roots* was aired on TV in the UK about slavery, that I first started to question how even in the UK the colour of your skin could determine how far you could go in life.

I have always been a keen story teller and there were many reasons for writing this book.

There are many things the people in charge do not let us hear about, and sometimes it takes many years for these things to be exposed, just like here in the UK, the Windrush scandal springs to mind.

Like I said there were many reasons for writing this book but the question I was left with was, in today's world, could this actually happen?

## PROLOGUE

This is a story set in America in the late 1960's early 1970's with racial tension still apparent.

The story centers around a black male by the name of Anthony Johnson. A normal, hardworking, law-abiding, family man. With a wife, Michelle, and two young children, a girl and a boy, to support. Anthony was a delivery driver for a small stationery company, while his wife was a part-time cleaner in the local school. Money was always tight, but there was enough to go around, with overtime they could live relatively comfortably.

The weekends made it all worthwhile for him when the family could spend their time together, culminating in their Sunday trip to church, which they all enjoyed, where the kids got to play with their friends and Anthony got to thank the Lord for what he had, and to put the world to rights with his fellow black men in this small community.

If Anthony finished work early, he would go to the school and pick his children up. He always took great delight in how excitable they were to see him, as they would come running through the doors, almost overpowering him with hugs and kisses. As an extra treat they would stop off at the park on the way home for half an hour and Anthony would stand there and watch his two children playing happily on the swings and roundabout, feeling a warm glow at how contented they seemed, before he would call them in, to carry on the journey home as not to upset their mum by getting home late for dinner. Off they would go hand-in-hand, heading home.

Once home the routine was always the same, the kids would start doing their homework, Anthony was a stickler for this, even if it was a Friday and no school tomorrow,

there would be a few moans and groans from the kids. But, Anthony's reply was always, "You have your whole life to play once you have finished your studying."

Michelle would be busy in the kitchen cooking their evening meal, as Michelle thought Anthony was a bit of a hindrance in the kitchen, he wasn't allowed to help her. So he would just stand there like a spare part trying to talk to Michelle as she rushed from one pot to the other, then taking his chance, he would wrap his arms around Michelle giving her a hug as he moved in for a few cheeky kisses.

Michelle would always laugh and remind him he was supposed to be keeping an eye on the kids, and making sure they were doing their homework. Anthony's reply was always, "Ok, one more kiss and then I'll go." As he closed his eyes and puckered up his lips, Michelle would place her hands on either side of his cheeks and lean forward to give him his last kiss. As her lips touched his, Anthony's hands would grab Michelle around the neck and pull her towards him for one last passionate kiss. Michelle would finally break free, and laughing would slap Anthony on the bum, telling him he was insatiable, before ordering him out of the kitchen so she could carry on with the dinner.

Anthony would head towards the lounge to check on the kids with a big grin on his face. Michelle always falls for that trick, he would think to himself.

One week, the church had organised a family day on Sunday, with fairground rides for the children, and stalls selling candy floss and hotdogs. Anthony had never seen his kids so eager to go to church before.

As they arrived the excitement was almost too much for them as they broke from their parent's hands and both ran towards the rides, each of them calling their mum and dad to hurry up, as if they were going to miss going on the rides.

They always had to explain to young Leon, who was 6 years old, how he couldn't go on the same rides yet as Jay, who was 9 years old, as he was still too young. Anthony would normally end up taking Leon over to the rides that were more appropriate for his age, whilst Michelle would stay with Jay. Occasionally their paths crossed as they headed for different rides, and they would take the opportunity for a quick kiss before the kids would drag them away in opposite directions.

They met up when it was time to go home, the kids walked on in front, both eating their candy floss. Michelle and Anthony following behind, arms wrapped around each other as they were eating their hotdogs.

It was the same thing every night, having to explain to young Leon why he was going to bed first, and why Jay was allowed to stay up a bit later. Leon would always say when he got to the top of the stairs, "I can't wait to be older." This would always make Anthony smile. The routine was that Leon would get in bed and Anthony would look at the bookcase and pick a book to read to Leon, but this particular night, by the time Anthony had picked a book and turned around, Leon had already fallen asleep. Anthony smiled to himself as he tucked Leon in.

When Anthony got back downstairs and walked into the lounge Michelle nodded her head towards the sofa, where he found Jay lying in her nightclothes fast asleep, Michelle laughed as Anthony struggled to pick Jay up.

As he placed Jay in her bed, pulling the covers over her, he gave her a goodnight kiss on her forehead. Standing back, he gazed at her asleep and felt like the luckiest man alive to have two such wonderful children.

Michelle was sprawled out on the sofa when he got back downstairs, so Anthony snuggled up next to her as Michelle

watched her programme on the television. Anthony wouldn't do much watching himself, as he normally fell asleep halfway through whatever Michelle was watching, and then she would wake him up when it was time for them both to go to bed. But Anthony didn't mind, he loved this part of the night, the part where it was just himself and Michelle snuggled up together, with their hands entwined. It's been a great day he thought to himself, as he rested his head on Michelle's shoulder and gave her a kiss on her cheek.

## CHAPTER 1

What started out as a normal Monday morning, would be the last normal Monday morning I would ever have.

The kitchen was always a madhouse in the morning, Michelle trying to get the kids to eat their breakfast without arguing with each other, me, just trying to drink my coffee, read my paper, and listen to my music on the radio, at the same time as listening to Michelle tell me what we needed for the house. Whoever said men can't multitask?

We never really did politics in the house, but this morning the President was on the TV saying he could feel everybody's pain and was hoping to make things better for everyone. "That man has got some nerve, he will never feel everybody's pain, how can he in his position?" Michelle said angrily.

"I happen to think President Keane is alright, he seems to be working for everyone and not just the chosen few," I replied.

"Your trouble is you believe everything people tell you, just look at him, does he look like the kind of man who gives a dam about a black family?" Michelle snapped as she started doing the washing up. I'd never seen her so passionate before unless it was something to do with the kids.

"Hey, come on darling, let's not argue about someone we're never going to meet. You, the kids and me, that's all we need darling, not forgetting the good lord of course," I said trying to calm her down.

With a sigh, she said, "Ok, but get that man out of my house by turning the TV off."

As normal I gave everyone a kiss and told them I'd see them all tonight, and to the kids, "Do as you're told in school today."

"We love you, dad," they said.

"I love you too," I replied, which was to be my last words to them for many years.

Jumping into the van the first thing I always did was put my music on, you can't drive without music. So off I set on my way to the yard to pick up my round for the day. The four tops, 'I'll be there', was playing on the radio, and as I was singing along, I thought it should have been the five tops with yours truly in the line-up.

Driving down a normal family avenue, you know the type with white picket fences all along, I can see a white man in a dark suit flagging me down. Now being black, this wasn't the kind of neighbourhood you wanted to go out in on your own, even at 8.15 am. As I approached him, I had a quick check either side and he appeared to be alone.

As I pulled up, he came round to my window and was in a panic, "Can you please come into my house? My wife has collapsed, and I need help to get her up," he asked.

"Have you called the emergency services?" was my first response.

"Yes! Now please can you give me a hand?" he pleaded.

I wasn't happy about this, being so far from my neighbourhood, nobody around on the streets here. If I go in that house, what could I be walking into? Could it be the KKK behind the door? I was asking myself. Don't be silly, there's a woman collapsed in there who needs help, what would the good lord say if you just drove on, I reminded myself.

Jumping out of the van the man led me towards the

house. Surely being dressed in a sharp suit, nothing untoward was waiting behind the door. We entered the house. "Where is she?" I asked.

"Quick upstairs," he replied. We got to the top of the stairs with a door right in front of us. "Quick, open the door!" he shouted. I put my hand on the door handle, and as I opened it...

I can vaguely hear voices in my head getting nearer and nearer, struggling to open my eyes, the voices seem to be saying, "POLICE, DON'T MOVE!" I finally open my eyes to be greeted by four policemen with guns pointing at me. I look to my left to see a white, naked blonde woman lying next to me. Who the fuck is she? "Put your hands up!" the police are shouting at me, as I put my hands up.

"What's happening?" is all I can manage to say. Two of the policemen drag me out of the bed onto my front and handcuff me, whilst telling me I was being arrested for murder. "MURDER?" I scream.

At the police station, out of nowhere a lawyer turns up to represent me. "Hello, I'm Mr. John Gordon from Jameson & Jameson law firm," he says shaking me by the hand. Reading the report he tells me the police have all the evidence needed to charge me with murder, it seems the blonde woman died of a drugs overdose and my fingerprints were on the syringe she had used, meaning I was the one who had administered the fatal dose.

I can't take all this in.

I'm trying to explain to Mr. Gordon what I can remember, but he doesn't seem interested.

"You have two choices," Mr. Johnson tells me. "One, you plead guilty and hope the judge gives you a lesser

sentence for your plea, or two you plead not guilty and when they find you guilty, you will definitely be sentenced to death.”

“How can there only be those two choices when I’m innocent?” I ask.

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I finally get to speak to Michelle through the glass window, God how I have missed looking into those eyes. “Was you really seeing a prostitute?” Michelle asked, with a look of bewilderment on my face.

“What prostitute?” I reply.

“The prostitute you were found in bed with, how could you Anthony?” she screamed.

“Darling, I don’t know any prostitute; you know I would never do anything like that,” I pleaded.

“You were in her bed; how can you explain that?”

There was so much I wanted to say, but no words would come out. It’s very hard trying to explain something when you don’t know the answer, it almost makes you look guilty. What was I doing in another woman’s bed I’m asking myself? “Darling I wish I could tell you what happened, but I just don’t know.” That must have sounded like an admission of guilt because Michelle jumped up and said she had to go. “Darling please!” I’m shouting as she walks away, not looking back even once. I’m taken back to my cell and as I sit there I’m struggling to take it all in, it’s as if it’s happening to someone else... why can't I remember anything?

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The day of the trial came around, and I had seen Mr. Gordon about twice in all that time, and each time it seemed as if it was just to make sure I was going to plead

guilty. Now I don't know if that made his job easier, if it was less paperwork or what, but it just didn't seem as if he was making an effort on my behalf.

I started to wonder where he had come from. All dressed up in his expensive suit, it was obvious he wasn't from no downtown cheap law firm, so where was he from? Who was paying for him? It certainly wouldn't have been anyone who I knew. Every time I tried to ask him questions, he would tell me just to concentrate on my case. Being able to take no more I eventually said, "I want a new lawyer." He came out with some appendix number saying that I had left it too late, and if I was to get rid of him now, it would look really bad, and no other lawyer would be willing to take the case on, due to the lack of time to prepare.

He then said some words to me that got into my head and changed how I felt. "You know," he said, "being black, you don't have a chance in there. They will find you guilty no matter what, in fact, they have most probably found you guilty already," he continued. "Now the only thing you have to decide is if you want to die, or at least have a chance of seeing your children grow up, even if it is from inside the penitentiary," he said.

"So, I plead not guilty and get sentenced to death, or I plead guilty and spend the rest of my life in prison for something I didn't do, is what you are telling me?" What a choice, I thought to myself.

"How do you plead?" the judge asked.

"GUILTY," was my reply.

The words life imprisonment are etched on my brain, I don't think they will ever go.

The judge seemed to say those words so easy as if they didn't really matter, but they did matter to me. Looking around the courtroom after the sentence was passed, I saw

some of our friends from church, there were some friends from work, and my Michelle. Now I don't know what it was, but they all looked so different. I can't explain why, but just so cold, as if they were strangers. Maybe it was the courtroom setting or the sentence I had been given, maybe they were all in shock, because I know I certainly was.

As I was lead from the dock to be taken to the holding cells downstairs, I had one last look at Michelle expecting to see a broken woman sobbing her heart out, hoping that by me mouthing the words "I LOVE YOU", might have eased some of her pain. But she was just staring right at me, almost through me with the look of a cold-hearted woman. Mr. Gordon came down to the cells and shook my hand and said, "All the best to you", before scuttling away, not giving me a chance to say anything back.

I think my head was still all over the place by the time I got taken to my cell and got to meet the man I would be spending the rest of my life with, my cellmate.

He was a black man called Leeroy Smart and being in his late 50's he was a right old timer.

We exchanged pleasantries, and after telling me the top bunk was his, he left the cell. I unpacked my few belongings that I had and laid down on my bunk still not being able to take it all in, thinking at some stage I would wake up, and come out of this nightmare I was having.

Looking at the brick wall I was thinking is this all I'm going to know for the rest of my life?

The old timer, Leeroy, returned to the cell. He told me he had been following my case in the papers, and knowing I had never been in prison before, he would forgive me if I woke up screaming the place down in the middle of the night, as the first night was always the worst.

It was true, that first night was bad, although I didn't do

any screaming out, I certainly didn't get much sleep, tossing and turning all night on the hard mattress, whilst my brain couldn't work out how it had come to this. It seemed just as I got to sleep, it was time to get up.

For the next couple of days, the old timer took me under his wing, showing me around and where not to go, and where to sit at mealtimes and things like that. It was on about the fourth day just before lunch that I was called for, seemed I had a visitor, my heart started racing. Could it be my lawyer coming to tell me there had been a mistake and he was here to take me home? As I approached the visiting area, I saw it was Michelle. Now under any other circumstance it would have made my day to see her, but just for this one time, I would have much preferred it to be my lawyer.

Our first visit was still conducted behind the Perspex screens. As I sat down opposite Michelle, I looked into those amazing eyes of hers, just like I had done every night since the first time we had met. Those eyes just used to melt away any troubles I had, and I always got lost in them, but this time they seemed cold, almost as if she had borrowed someone else's eyes.

"How are you darling? How are the kids?" I asked trying to get everything out in one go.

"Has your memory come back yet? Can you remember why you were in bed with a prostitute? Tell me Anthony, give me the answer," Michelle was almost pleading.

"Darling, I've told you everything that happened."

"Why are you still lying to me, Anthony? Trying to make me look like a fool. Everybody is saying it, why couldn't I keep my man happy, why did he have to visit prostitutes?"

"Darling I'm not lying, I've never visited prostitutes, you have always been..."

“STOP, STOP!” Michelle screamed, “I can't do this, I can't go through this anymore, me and the kids deserve better, so I just came to tell you I won't be coming back, me and the kids will get our lives back on track.”

“What about me and my life darling?” I asked.

“You made your own choice Anthony,” came her reply, and with that, she said goodbye and got up and started to walk away. I couldn't even call out to her, I was feeling that numb. Being taken back into the dining hall I was later than normal after Michelle's visit, I sought out the old timer as I just needed to see a face I was comfortable with. I couldn't see him, he must have already eaten and left, so I sat down on an empty bench on my own.

It wasn't long before what I can only describe as a big black mountain of a man and two slightly smaller versions appeared. “You're sitting in my seat,” the big one said. So I moved along the bench to the end, giving them all the rest. They didn't move. “I said you're sitting in my seat,” the big one said again, now I may not have been in prison or had anything to do with hard men before but even I guessed he meant his seat being the whole bench. So, I duly got up and went to move, I heard the word “STOP” and as I turned around the big one was pointing at me.

“Hey nigger you're fresh meat, and I always like to be the first one to get fresh meat,” he said. I turned round to carry on walking. “Tell everyone you're mine nigger,” he was saying in the background.

I found a bench on my own and finished up my lunch. On returning to my cell the old timer was laying on his bunk, word had already got back to him about the episode in the dining hall. “So I heard you met Kong,” he said.

“Who's Kong?” I asked.

“Your friend in the dining hall, that's what they call him

in here, King Kong,” he replied.

“Yeah, I can see why,” I said.

The old timer got off his bunk and walked over to me and looked me straight in the eye. “Listen son,” he said, “Now if Kong said he was going to have you he really means it, and he will stop at nothing until it happens. So you really need to be on your guard 24/7.” I kindly thanked the old timer for his words of wisdom, but I had other things on my mind like my Michelle. How could she abandon me in my hour of need?

As I’m laying on my bed all I can see in my mind are images of my kids playing, Michelle and I joining in, Michelle and I snuggling up on the sofa after the kids had gone to sleep, thinking how lucky I was to be so happy. The more I was seeing these images the more I could feel my temperature rising, almost as if there was some sort of red mist rising. And with that, I jumped out of my bunk and headed out of the door. “Where you going?” I heard the old timer ask, but I was on a mission, whether it ended well or not I had to do this now while it was in my head.

As I approached the cell door, I could hear laughter and music coming from inside. It’s now or never I thought to myself. Pushing the cell door open I come face to face with King Kong, the smaller versions are sitting on the bunks. “Can I have a word in private please?” I say quietly. King Kong is smiling, “Of course you can my nigger. Me and fresh meat are going to have a chat so you two can leave us in peace,” he says to his two sidekicks, “and close the door behind you,” he demands.

As the door closes Kong does all the talking, I notice as he is walking towards me, he is undoing his belt. “Now don’t worry,” he says, “I’m always gentle the first time nigger, you’ll get to enjoy it,” he finishes.

Now that red mist that had appeared earlier was still there, but it had been joined by rage, so just as Kong dropped his trousers and beckoned me over, I threw a right uppercut and caught him right between his legs. Now any man will tell you after that you are out of action for a little while until you get your breath back. But I didn't stop there, having all the images of my family in my head, I threw a punch to his face and kept punching until he went on the floor. It was as if something had taken over me, jumping on top of him I carried on punching away. Punch after punch was landing on his face, I didn't really notice the blood.

He had long stopped saying anything now, and I only think a splat of blood going in my eye was what made me stop. Wiping away the blood from my eye I could see my hands were covered in blood. Looking down at Kong, I'll never forget the sight of a lifeless body covered in blood, and blood all over the floor, it was a shock. I managed to get back to my cell without anyone noticing me.

“What the fuck's happened?” the old timer said.

“I went to see Kong,” I replied.

“Oh, shit, quick get yourself over here to the sink,” the old timer demanded. “Wash all that blood off your face and hands before anyone comes in and get your top off.” I did as I was told, now in the cold light of day, I was quite worried about getting myself into trouble, and expected the prison guards to turn up at any minute, but the old timer assured me that wouldn't happen. “That's not the way we do things in here,” he said.

And that was how after just a week in prison I became the Daddy of the wing. Now it was not something I had set out to do or something that I wanted, but if it meant I was going to be able to live the rest of my life in here in peace then I would take it. No one seemed to realise that I wasn't

a fighter, in fact, I'd never had a fight in my life until that one with Kong, but rage and anger do funny things to people and give you so much more strength and bottle.

Apparently, I had beaten Kong to within an inch of his life, so by the time he came back to the wing he looked a sorry sight, still with some of the hospital bandages on him. As we were heading for the dining hall the old timer told me everyone would be looking out to see what would happen with me and Kong. I didn't want anything to happen, I was quite happy to be left alone now, but the old timer said, "You have to let everybody see that you're above Kong now."

I got my food and noticed Kong sitting on his bench with his two sidekicks, so I walked over to him. All of a sudden there was a hush in the dining room, and I could feel everyone's eyes on me. Well, it's now or never I thought, that thought worked for me last time, and with the old timer's words ringing in my ears, "You're sitting in my seat," I said, trying to say it in a gangster's voice, whatever that is. Kong and his sidekicks moved along the bench to the end. Now I thought shall I be happy with that, or how far can I go with this? "You're sitting in my seat," I said, "Don't let me have to say it again." With that, the three of them got up and moved to the other side of the hall.

I tried not to show that I was amazed they did it but inside I was shaking. If only they knew they would have only had to call my bluff and say no, and they would have then seen I was no gangster. Luckily for me they didn't. The old timer came and joined me on our new bench and said my life would be a lot easier now. "My life can never, ever be easier. I'm in prison, remember?" I replied.

Back in my cell laying on my bunk, my thoughts turned to Michelle, the love of my life. How could she say what she said? Did she mean it? How can I go through the rest of my

life not seeing her? I need to stop thinking I tried telling myself. At that moment, the old timer came in, slapped me on the legs, and said, "So what's your plan now?"

"Plan for what?" I replied.

"Plans for being in charge of the wing," came his reply.

"There is no plan, I don't have one," I said with a puzzled look. The old timer laughed and shook his head. "What you shaking your head at?" I asked.

"You just don't understand, do you?" the old timer replied.

"Understand what?" I asked.

"Understand, you have a role to play now," the old timer informed me.

"What role? I don't want to play any role," I tried to tell him, he shook his head again.

"Unfortunately, you see when you took Kong out, you became top dog, now everybody is going to be watching you to see what you do next, so as top-dog you have responsibilities," the old timer explained.

"Responsibilities? Like what?" I asked.

"Well for a start any contraband coming in here, you need to be in control of," the old timer informed me.

"What? You mean like drugs?" I asked.

"Drugs, cigarettes, alcohol, anything like that," the old timer said.

"No, I never touch drugs, or cigarettes, come to that matter," I replied. The old timer laughed again.

"You don't need to touch them, or take them, to be in control," the old timer exclaimed.

"Then what?" I asked.

“Well, you take Kong for instance, he controls everything coming in here now when it comes in, he gets his goons to distribute it to the rest of the wing, sharing out the profits to him and his team,” the old timer explained.

“So where do I come into this?” I ask.

“Well, you need to be the one sharing out the profits,” the old timer explains.

“What become a drug dealer?” I ask. The old timer laughs.

“Just think of it as more of a business,” he says.

“So let me get this straight,” I say, “you’re expecting Kong to say, *‘here you go Anthony, there’s all my profits, please help yourself?’*” I ask.

“Well not exactly like that,” the old timer replies, “Believe me he will be expecting you to take over. That’s the way of life in here, now if you don’t, all the things you have done in here to give yourself an easy life, will come crashing down, and you’ll go back to having to look over your shoulders all the time. Is that what you want?” the old timer asks.

“No, of course not,” I reply.

“Well then, the ball’s in your court,” the old timer tells me.

“So, what do I do then?” I ask, knowing I won’t like the reply.

“Well, you’re going to have to tell Kong you’re taking over.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” I say.

“You have no choice,” the old timer says.

“What if he says no?”

“He won’t say no, he has already had a beating from you,

and won't want to risk another.”

“Yeah, but that was only because I was angry,” I inform him.

“But he doesn't know that, he just thinks you're some mad man in here for murder, so we have to keep letting him think that.”

“I don't know, I don't know if I'd be able to go through with that,” I explain.

The old timer has a little think, then says, “Ok, we'll have a practice in here, pretend I'm Kong.”

I look at the old timer with a frown. “Oh, come on, you don't look nothing like Kong,” I plead.

“Use your imagination,” I'm told. So there I am telling the old timer who is supposed to be Kong, that I'm taking over the running of his business. After three attempts the old timer tells me I need to put a little more gangster attitude into my role.

“How do I do that? I'm not a gangster,” I explain.

The old timer has a little think. “Maybe lower your voice a bit,” he says. So I try that, but it's still not working. “Right hang on, bear with me a minute,” the old timer says, as he sits at the table in our cell and starts to write something on some paper.

I lay back on my bunk and can't believe the situation I have got myself into. After what seems like ages, the old timer gets up with the sheet of paper in his hand. “I think it was more the words that didn't make you seem real,” he says, handing me the sheet of paper. “Now read that out to me, and we'll see how you sound.”

So, looking at the paper I begin. “Right now, listen you mother fucker, I'm taking over your operation from now, do you understand? But I'm prepared to let you be