

Why I Wrote STAND YOUR GROUND

"Not again," were words that kept reverberating through my mind on February 15, 2014. We were just a few weeks away from the second anniversary of Trayon Martin's murder and as I watched the verdict come down in the first trial of Michael Dunn (the man who murdered Jordan Davis) I felt like this country was taking giant leaps backwards.

It had happened again. While Michael Dunn had been found guilty of attempted murder, the jury couldn't reach a verdict on the murder charge for Jordan Davis's death.

Of course my social media timelines blew up. People were upset and rightfully so...though, I didn't understand the specific reactions. People attacked the men and women of the jury, and then, there were those who were once again calling for America to boycott one of its own states. "Nobody go to Florida!" became the social media mantra.

That confused me -- I didn't understand how people could get upset with Americans who had not only stepped up to fulfill their jury duty, but who were following the law. And it was even more confusing that people wanted to boycott Florida when two dozen other states had some version of the same law. So what...were people going to boycott every state? Were they going to boycott the states where they lived?

I couldn't make sense out of what I thought was nonsense. I couldn't understand why people were attacking juries and attacking states, and not going after the real culprit. Why not make this a political rallying cry? Why not register thousands of people to vote? Why not go after the law?

Yes, people are behind the law, but not the people who would suffer under a boycott. And not the people who fulfilled their civic duty by serving on the jury.

It was that night and those reactions that started the seed of this novel to grow inside of me. I so wanted to get people to understand that the law was the problem. I wanted people to understand the law better, I wanted people to know that Stand Your Ground is not a defense in itself, it is part of self defense. And though I had never been through anything like this myself personally, I wanted people to really think about the families in these situations. Maybe all of that would get us to finally stand *our* ground...stand up and do something. Do something that would matter, do something that would count.

And while this idea began to brew inside of me, one of my friends on FaceBook said, "Victoria, you should write a book about this." Others agreed, saying they believed that I could teach something. That was when I knew that I did have a platform to reach thousands of people about this -- I could do it through entertainment; I could do it through a book.

It was my editor who challenged me to add layers to this story and to show both sides of this tragedy. It was my publisher who gave me the title.

And so it was on and I was ready.

But then, I wasn't as ready as I thought. When I sat down and thought about these women in Stand Your Ground -- the mother of the victim and the wife of the shooter, it became such a difficult book to write. Of course, the emotions that I had to write for the mother were clear and obvious. What I didn't expect was to feel for the wife of the shooter. These were two women who were suffering -- in different ways -- but still, they suffered. And as I lived with both of them in my head for all of those months, I suffered with them.

Another thing that surprised me a bit about writing this book was the language. I always believe in being true to my characters, but to this point, profanity hasn't had any place in my novels. Not that there is much inside of Stand Your Ground; but I'm sure you can imagine that the N word -- a word I abhor -- comes up a time or two.

But if I wanted to write the truth, which I always try to do, if I wanted to speak to the two opposing sides of Stand Your Ground, I had to speak their language -- especially the language they would use in this particular situation.

So, I went with my characters. And I took this journey. Never before can I say that a book I've written has changed me. But writing this one did. It wasn't writing this book alone that changed me -- it was that I was half-way through writing this book when Eric Garner was choked to death in New York, and then Michael Brown was executed in the streets of Ferguson. I wrote this novel while those incidents and the aftermath played as background music in my mind.

And I changed.

I wrote and I changed. I wrote and I became an Angry Black Woman.

My prayer, though, is that I will channel that anger in the right way. I was able to work some of that anger out in the pages of this book. Now, I hope that I'll be able to work that anger out in a way that will help to change America -- for the better.

And that begins with repealing Stand Your Ground.

We must know the facts. We must never forget....

PART ONE

Janice Johnson

**I WISH . . . I COULD
HAVE BEEN THERE . . .
TO SAVE HIM**

May 12, 2014

Chapter 1

There is nothing like being in love with a naked man.

Now, I'm not saying that I didn't love my husband when he was fully clothed. But right now, right here, all I could do was perch myself up on my elbow and enjoy as my husband strutted around our bedroom as if he were looking for something. He wasn't looking for a doggone thing; Tyrone was just giving me a show.

And what a show it was, 'cause there was nothing like a naked, carved, then chiseled to perfection, chocolate man.

I sighed and my heart swelled with even more love than I ever thought possible. I didn't know it could be like this. Didn't know it could be like this after sixteen years of marriage. Didn't know it could be like this after the betrayal of infidelity.

"What are you staring at?" Tyrone's voice broke through my thoughts. He flexed his pecs and inside, I moaned. "What? What are you looking at?" he asked again.

Really? He was standing there, full frontal, and he was asking me what I was looking at? Did he want me to describe the human statue of excellence that he was to me?

I answered my husband. "Nothing. I'm not looking at anything."

He busted out laughing, then leaned over and kissed my forehead.

I tugged at his arm, trying to pull him down on top of me so that I could do more nasty things to him. If our life were a book, it would've been titled *Love and Sex*. It had started with the marriage counselor that my best friend, Syreeta, had referred us to after "the cheating incident."

“Stay in the bed,” the counselor had advised. “You have to connect again with one another sexually. Once you get the trust back in bed, because that’s where it was broken, you’ll be able to get the trust back in every other aspect of your life.”

That had just sounded like some man talking at the time. And trust me, it had been hard on both of us. But after a couple of months, we needed therapy to get us *out* of bed. It was like we couldn’t stop. And the counselor had been right. We connected again, in bed first, and everything else followed.

But even though my husband was always down for second and third sexual helpings, this time he pulled back and I frowned.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I’ll be right back.” Turning away, he grabbed his bathrobe from the chaise. “I’m going to check on Marquis. Make sure his homework is done and he’s getting ready to turn in.”

I bounced back in the bed and sighed. “Tyrone . . .”

“Don’t start, Janice.”

“It’s barely nine o’clock and you’re sending him to bed? He’s seventeen! Come on, now. When are you going to let up on him?”

The expression of pure pleasure that had been on my husband’s face just a minute before faded fast. “Let up on him?” Tyrone grumbled. “We’re raising a black boy in a white world. I will never let up. I will never go easy. We’ve got just one chance to get this right.”

“I get that,” I said, having heard this lecture so many times. But if he was going to give me his speech, then he was going to once again listen to mine.

“It's been a month since he was suspended. And he's done everything that we've asked him to do. All he does is go to school and then come home. He's back on track.”

“See, that's my point right there,” Tyrone said, jabbing his finger in the air. “He's *back* on track. He should have never been derailed in the first place and I want to make sure that he never gets derailed again.”

“But what else do you want from him? We've got to let him know that there is redemption after repentance. We've got to teach him that he can do something wrong, but then he can make up for it by doing something right.”

“He's a black boy. In this country, he won't get a makeup opportunity. In this country, he won't be given a second chance, and our son has to learn that lesson now.”

“That may be how it is in this country,” I said. “But we've got to let him know that it's not like that in this house. At home, he has to know that we trust him again.”

Tyrone shook his head.

“It was one joint, Tyrone,” I said for what had to be the millionth time since our son had received that three-day school suspension a month ago. “Don't make it out to be any bigger than that.” When Tyrone opened his mouth to lecture me more, I added, “Don't forget you smoked when you were in high school.”

“Yeah, but now that I know better, I've done better. And I wasn't at Winchester Academy when I smoked. I wasn't at some high falutin' school where the people there were expecting and waiting for me to fail.”

I sighed as Tyrone went on and on about how our son's mistake was much worse since he was at Winchester—one of the top college-prep academies in the country. It had been my idea to

send Marquis there since I recognized his brilliance from when he was in my womb. Seriously though, our son was smart and I wanted my only child to have the best opportunities, to give him a future that I could've never imagined for myself when I was growing up motherless, fatherless, oftentimes feeling homeless as I was shuffled from one foster home to the next.

"You know I'm right, Janice." Tyrone broke through my thoughts. "Those white folks don't want him there, and he goes around acting a fool."

"He was acting like a seventeen-year-old . . ." I held up my hand before Tyrone could pounce on my words. "And yes, he was wrong," I continued. "But he's learned his lesson and all I want you to see is that Marquis is a good kid. A really good kid who's going to do great things in life."

"I know he has that potential. But if he's going to be great, he has to understand that he can't get caught up. He has to do everything right."

"Everything right? Really?" It took all that was inside of me not to shake my head and roll my eyes at this man. Sometimes Tyrone spoke as if he were the only parent with dreams for our son, but I wanted the same, perhaps even more, for Marquis. While Tyrone focused on his academics, accepting nothing less than straight A's, I focused on the fullness of the life that I prayed Marquis would have. I wanted him to be well educated, but happy, with a wife and plenty of children who called me Grandma. I wanted to see him grow up doing the things he loved, playing the saxophone and piano, writing poetry, and participating in amateur golf tournaments.

But none of that extracurricular stuff mattered to Tyrone. He was a strict disciplinarian who walked a straight military line. I understood structure and parental control; it was just that sometimes, Tyrone was so strict, even I felt stifled.

“I *am* letting up a little bit,” Tyrone said as if he heard my thoughts. “I let him go out tonight, didn’t I?”

I couldn’t help it; I laughed. “You let him go to the library!”

Tyrone grinned with me. “I let him go to the library . . . with Heather,” he said, referring to our son’s girlfriend.

While those words made Tyrone smile, the thought made me want to shout, and I wasn’t talking about shouting hallelujah! This discussion was going fine—why did Tyrone even have to bring up Marquis’s girlfriend? His *white* girlfriend. She was the only thing that made me regret busting my butt, working those extra shifts at the post office so that we could send Marquis to Winchester.

“I guess you don’t have nothin’ to say now, huh?” Tyrone chuckled.

My husband was torturing me and he knew it. He knew how I felt about Marquis bringing that girl home when there were all these beautiful black girls that he knew from growing up in church, and even a few at Winchester. Every day, I brought up a new name to him, but Marquis could not be moved. I have no idea where I went wrong, but sometime after Marquis became a teenager, he suddenly and only had eyes for girls who looked like Snow White.

It sickened me, though his son’s preference for girls with blond hair and blue eyes didn’t seem to bother Tyrone. I didn’t get that. My husband was always talking about white people this and white people that and how he lived *in* this country, but he was not *of* this country. Well, why didn’t he have an issue with his son dating a white girl?

“Okay, I won’t tell him that he has to turn in,” Tyrone said, saving me from myself. Because thoughts of Heather were getting me riled up. Now that Tyrone had mentioned Heather, I was beginning to think maybe we should keep Marquis on lockdown (and away from that white girl) until he left for college in the fall.

“Thank you,” I said to Tyrone.

“But I’m still gonna talk to him. Make sure that his head is on straight since I did let him go out earlier. And I’m going to talk to him about the suspension . . .”

This time I did roll my eyes.

“Make sure he understands the seriousness of it.”

“He does.”

“Make sure he knows it could’ve messed with his scholarship to UPenn.”

“He knows.”

“Make sure he understands why he won’t be valedictorian now, even though he earned it.”

“He understands.”

“Well, if you can guarantee that he knows all of that, then, he’s off lockdown.” Tyrone shook his head. “You’re a softy, you know.” He kissed me again as he tied his robe. “Our son better thank you, ’cause if you weren’t so cute . . .”

I laughed, but then stopped suddenly when the doorbell rang and a hard knock followed.

Tyrone and I frowned together. It was just a little after nine now, and I couldn’t imagine who would be coming by our home. Marquis and his friends knew that they couldn’t hang out on school nights, even when Marquis wasn’t on lockdown.

No more than a couple of seconds passed before the visitor on the other side of our front door rang the bell again and then another knock.

“Who can that be?” I asked, pushing myself up from the bed.

Tyrone held up his hand. “You stay here. I’ll get it.”

But before my husband could make it to the top of the staircase, I had wrapped myself inside my robe and stepped into the hallway. Marquis’s bedroom door was closed, which was the only reason why I was sure he hadn’t bounced down the stairs to get to the door before his father.

By the time I made my way to the top of the stairs, Tyrone was at the bottom and opening the door.

“Mr. Johnson?”

The door was open wide enough for me to see the two policemen, one black, one white, standing shoulder to shoulder, looking like soldiers.

“Yes,” my husband said, his voice two octaves deeper now, the way it always dropped when he stood in front of men wearing uniforms.

“May we come in?” the black one asked.

Those words made me descend the stairs even though I wasn’t properly dressed for company. Not that two policemen showing up in the middle of the night could ever be called welcomed visitors.

“What’s this about?” My husband asked the question for both of us.

The policemen stepped inside, though Tyrone hadn’t extended an invitation. Both men glanced up at me as I stood on the second stair, gripping the lapels of my bathrobe to make sure it didn’t open and trying to come up with a single reason why two officers would be in our home.

“Ma’am.” It seemed that the black officer had been assigned to do all the talking as the white one just nodded at me.

“What’s this about?” Tyrone asked again.

They once again stood shoulder to shoulder, at attention, as if this were a formal visitation. “Would you mind if we went in there?” The black officer twisted slightly, nodding toward our living room. “I’d like for us to sit down.”

If the officer had been speaking to me, I would’ve said yes just because it seemed like the right thing to do.

But Tyrone said, “That’s not necessary, just tell me what this is about,” because that was right to him. My husband had been raised on the hard streets of Philly, where a policeman, no matter his color, was never an invited guest.

The officers exchanged glances before the black one said, “Marquis Johnson, is that your son?”

Tyrone’s eyes narrowed while mine widened.

“What’s this about?” It felt like that was the fiftieth time my husband asked that question, and now I needed to hear the answer, too.

“There’s been a shooting . . .”

“Oh, my God,” I gasped, and covered my mouth. “Did something happen to one of our son’s friends?”

The officers looked at each other again before the black one continued, “No. It’s your son, Marquis. He’s been shot.”

“What?” Tyrone and I said together.

“That’s impossible,” Tyrone continued. “Marquis is upstairs. He’s in his room.” And then he yelled out, “Marquis, come down here.”

I didn’t let even a second pass before I dashed up the stairs, taking them two at a time, moving like I hadn’t in years. Not that I had any doubt. Of course Marquis was in his bedroom. He’d come home while Tyrone and I . . . had been spending some personal time together. I mean, he hadn’t come into our bedroom, but he never did when we had the door closed.

Tonight, he’d been home by eight, nine at the latest. I was sure of that.

Since Marquis had become a teenager, I never entered his room without knocking. But tonight, I busted in. And then I stood there . . . in the dark. I stood there staring at the blackness, though there was enough light from the hallway for me to see that Marquis wasn’t sitting at his desk, he wasn’t lying on his bed, he wasn’t here.

“Marquis,” I called out anyway, then rushed back into the hall and headed to the bathroom. “Marquis!” Just like with his bedroom, I busted into the bathroom and stared at the empty space.

It was only then that I felt my heart pounding, though I’m sure the assault on my chest began the moment the policeman had told that lie that my son had been shot.

“Marquis,” I called out as I jerked back the shower curtain that revealed an empty tub.

“Marquis,” I shouted as I now searched our guest bedroom. No one, nothing there.

I returned to his bedroom, turned on his light, then swung open the door to his closet before I crouched down and searched under his bed. “Marquis,” I screamed as I went into my bedroom, wondering why my son was playing this game of hide-and-seek, something we hadn’t

done since he was four. When he finally came out of hiding, he was going to have to deal with me!

I rushed back into the hallway and bumped right into Tyrone.

“He’s not up here,” I said to my husband as he grasped my arms. “He’s downstairs somewhere. Did you check the kitchen? Wait, I know,” I continued, without letting my husband speak. “He’s in the family room. I know you said he couldn’t watch the TV in there, but you were about to take him off lockdown anyway and you know that Marquis—”

“Janice.” Tyrone shook me a little.

I looked up into Tyrone’s eyes, which were glassy with tears.

“What?” I frowned. “You don’t believe those policemen, do you?”

He nodded at the same time that I shook my head.

“No, they’re lying.”

“They’re not lying,” Tyrone said softly. “They showed me a picture, just to make sure.”

Now I whipped my head from side to side because I didn’t want to hear anything else from Tyrone. I couldn’t believe that he would accept the word of two men in blue. Wasn’t he the one who always said that you couldn’t trust the police?

Well, if he wasn’t going to look for our son, I was. “Marquis!” I screamed.

Tyrone still nodded, and now a single tear dripped from his eye. “Janice, listen to me.”

For a moment, I tried to remember the last time my husband had cried. And I couldn’t think of a single time.

“Janice.” He repeated my name.

“No!”

“Marquis is gone.”

“No!”

“He was shot over on Avon Street.”

“No!”

“He’s dead.”

“Why would you believe them,” I cried. “Why don’t you believe me?”

My husband looked at me as if I was talking foolishness. And I looked at him and begged with every fiber of my being for him to tell me that he was wrong. Or for him to wake me from this nightmare. Either scenario would work for me.

But Tyrone did neither of those things. He just held me and stared into my eyes. And as I stared into his, I saw the truth.

Not many words that Tyrone had shared had made it to the understanding part of my brain. But four words did: Marquis. Gone. Shot. Dead.

“Marquis is gone?” I whispered.

Tyrone nodded.

“Someone shot my son?”

He nodded again.

“And now he’s dead?”

This time, Tyrone didn’t nod. He just pulled me close, so close that I could feel the hammering of his heart. But though there were few times when I didn’t want to be held by my husband, I didn’t want him to hold me now. I didn’t want him to comfort me. Because if what

Tyrone and these policemen were saying were true, then I didn't want to be in my husband's arms.

If everything they said about my son was the truth, then all I wanted was to be dead, too.