

A MEMOIR

13 DAYS IN FERGUSON

CAPTAIN RONALD JOHNSON

with ALAN EISENSTOCK



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13 Days in Ferguson

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CONTENTS

PROLOGUE:
CONFRONTATION / 1

DAY 1:
MICHAEL BROWN'S BODY / 7

DAY 2:
"THIS IS WAR" / 15

DAY 3:
"THESE PEOPLE" / 25

DAY 4:
"WHY AM I DIFFERENT?" / 37

DAY 5:
WAITING FOR THE STORM / 61

DAY 6 (DAYLIGHT):
A DIFFERENT MORNING / 71

DAY 6 (AFTER DARK):
"I NEED ANSWERS" / 97

DAY 7:
“SAVE OUR SONS” / 111

DAY 8:
“NO MORE THAN I CAN BEAR” / 135

DAY 9:
“I AM YOU” / 167

DAY 10:
A BULLET HAS NO NAME / 189

DAY 11:
MAN, BLACK MAN, TROOPER / 205

DAY 12:
“WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?” / 225

DAY 13:
“TROUBLE DOESN’T LAST ALWAYS” / 239

EPILOGUE:
AFTER FERGUSON / 255

NOTES / 279
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS / 281
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS / 287
ABOUT THE AUTHOR / 291

PROLOGUE

TWO MONTHS AFTER FERGUSON

CONFRONTATION

In short, we, the black and the white, deeply need each other here if we are really to become a nation—if we are really, that is, to achieve our identity, our maturity, as men and women.

JAMES BALDWIN
THE FIRE NEXT TIME

THEY SIT A COUPLE OF TABLES AWAY, staring at me.

Four of them. Well muscled, steely eyed, rural Midwestern, midtwenties to early thirties. White. Two with shaved heads, two with military buzz cuts. All four in full camouflage and jackboots. Laughing too loud, pounding beers, chewing tobacco, drawing attention to themselves.

I keep them locked in my periphery. One of them senses me eyeing him and nods slowly. I'd call the look menacing.

I turn away, sigh, and speak as quietly as I can to my daughter and her boyfriend.

"Don't look, but across from us, a couple of tables down, we have four gentlemen who have been staring at me this whole time."

I wait a beat while Amanda glances over. When she turns back, her eyes narrow and she shakes her head, not understanding.

“Things happened,” I say. “People didn’t always agree with me. I knew at some point I would be confronted in public.” I cock my head, smile, and try to appear calm. “Tonight’s the night.”

“What do we do?”

“I want you guys to walk out the door. If anything happens—” I catch myself. “Don’t worry. I’ll be okay.”

Amanda’s eyes widen slightly, sparkle. “Maybe I should call Mom.”

I laugh. I’m a twenty-seven-year veteran of the Missouri State Highway Patrol; I go six two, two forty; and my daughter’s telling me to call my wife. She has a way of defusing even the most difficult situations.

I gently squeeze Amanda’s hand, and she doesn’t argue. Gathering her purse, cell phone, and scarf, and with a minimum of clatter and scraping of chairs, she and her boyfriend exit the sports bar.

I sip my Pepsi and wait. For a fleeting second, I consider calling for backup, but I immediately dismiss the thought. I’m in this alone. This confrontation is about me, my actions, my decisions—and, I expect, about both the color of my uniform and the color of my skin.

Adrenaline revving, I signal the waitress for the check. She holds up a finger, and after clearing some dishes from another table, arrives at my side with her hands shoved into the pockets of her uniform.

“All taken care of,” she says.

I stare at her for what must be a solid ten seconds, and she starts to laugh.

“Somebody paid your bill.”

“Really? Who?”

She shrugs. “The party wants to remain anonymous.”

I scan the entire restaurant. I don’t recognize anyone. Nobody makes eye contact with me. I look up at the waitress.

“Come on, tell me.”

She pokes her finger out of her pocket and subtly points behind her. I follow the direction of her fingernail and search every face in the vicinity, but I can’t for the life of me identify anyone who would have picked up my check.

“I don’t see where you’re pointing,” I say.

She rolls her eyes, tightens her lips, and speaks like a ventriloquist: “The four guys over there.”

“Those guys?”

I don’t remember getting to my feet or walking over, but I find myself standing at their table. They pause their conversation and look up at me.

“I’m sorry to interrupt your dinner,” I say. “I just wanted to thank you for paying my bill.”

One of the guys smiles and looks away. Another one taps his fingers on the table.

“You’re welcome,” he says.

“But why?”

“We live here,” the finger tapper says. “We appreciate what you’ve done.”

“Thank you,” I say again. “Sincerely.”

Then, one by one, I shake their hands.

I return to my table, pick up my cell phone, and head toward the exit. Halfway to the door, I stop and look back at the four guys who bought dinner for my daughter, her boyfriend, and me. Four young white guys with shaved heads, dressed in full camouflage

and jackboots, laughing too loud and pounding beers. The last guys I ever would have expected.

I feel embarrassed. And I feel small.

I've had the confrontation I expected. What I didn't expect was that the confrontation would be between myself and my own bias. I experienced firsthand how easily and suddenly we can cross over into presumption and even paranoia.

We're all biased in some way, every one of us. It's what we do with our bias that matters. We can't allow it to affect our attitudes, influence our decisions, or inform our behavior. Instead, we must acknowledge it. We must be humbled by it. Ignoring our biases or believing they are *truth*—and refusing to change when we recognize bias within ourselves—that's when bias becomes bigotry and prejudice becomes racism.

How do we overcome these tendencies that so often seem to separate people in our nation from one another?

Admitting that we all have our biases seems like a good place to start.

DAY 1

SATURDAY, AUGUST 9, 2014

MICHAEL BROWN'S BODY

Please, God, let me be enough.

I just want to be enough.

RON JOHNSON

THE FIRST CALL COMES IN around one o'clock in the afternoon. I'm in a car with three other African American state troopers, returning from a National Black State Troopers Coalition conference in Milwaukee. My cell phone vibrates, and I take the call. A lieutenant from our office reports that there has been an officer-involved shooting of a young black man in Ferguson and a crowd has begun to gather.

"Ferguson," I say.

Anywhere, USA.

A town like so many others.

I basically grew up in Ferguson. Half the kids in Ferguson go to Riverview Gardens High, the same high school I attended. I played football there, ran track, played in the marching band, went to prom, walked in my graduation.

An officer-involved shooting.

Crowds gathering.

Unrest developing.

In *Ferguson*?

I can't wrap my head around this. We're not talking about a depressed, dangerous, potential powder keg like the south side of Chicago or St. Louis City, where I once lived. Ferguson has its share of challenges and problems—poverty, crime—but nothing you could point to that would precipitate an officer-involved shooting.

At least that's what I thought.

"Keep me updated," I tell the lieutenant. I click off my cell and pass along the news to the other officers.

Several hours later, the lieutenant calls again.

"Things have escalated," he says. He explains that more people have flooded the residential street in Ferguson where the shooting took place. He also tells me in a low monotone that the body has not yet been removed from the street, now nearly four hours after the shooting.

"This could turn into something bad," I say.

When the lieutenant informs me that many more officers have reported to the scene, I end the call and tell the other troopers about the crowd escalation and the body still lying in the street.

We all go silent. For a moment, I shut off the thoughts that are spinning in my mind and focus only on the sounds I hear—the rumble of the car on the road, a sigh, an intake of breath, a throat clearing. But a moment later, the images of race riots from fifty years ago come charging unchecked into my mind's eye—buildings burning; black men being beaten and shot, their bodies left on the streets, their heads pressed against curbs, their

faces in the gutters. Pictures of hatred. Reminders. Examples. Warnings.

Another time, I tell myself. *Another place*.

“They still haven’t removed the body?” someone asks.

“Four hours,” another trooper says. “In the *street*.”

“If that were *my* child—”

An intake of breath.

A sigh.

A throat clearing.

The rumble of the car on the road.



At home, six hours later, I watch the news with my wife, Lori. While the local reporters at the scene relay the latest information, behind them and around them the crowds gather and swirl—people’s anger, frustration, and outrage simmering, threatening to boil over.

I lower the volume on the television as my phone rings with updates, the news dribbling in, though many details remain vague or unconfirmed.

Outside contractors working for a funeral parlor have finally removed Michael Brown’s body.

Reportedly, a robbery was committed.

Michael Brown was apparently unarmed.

The police officer, the shooter—name withheld—is Caucasian.

Protesters are mobilizing; the police presence is growing.

My training kicks in, and my mind begins a makeshift checklist. Based on the rules in our officer training manual for crowd control, the goal is to secure the area and make the streets safe.

On TV, a newscaster stands in front of a mound of rubble

near the site of the shooting, describing what, only a short time ago, had been a growing memorial to Michael Brown—flowers, photos, candles, cards, stuffed animals. According to reports, he says, a police officer allowed a dog on a leash to urinate on the memorial and then another officer drove a police vehicle over the memorial and destroyed it.

I have no words. I look over at my wife as her eyes water with confusion and pain.

Why is this happening?

I turn back to the news.

Ferguson.

A place I thought I knew.

Suddenly I don't know where I am.



Lying in bed, my eyes jacked open, my body rigid, my arms glued to my sides beneath a single white sheet, I hear the central air humming softly like a gathering swarm of insects.

I picture another body, beneath another bunched-up white sheet, lying lifeless and abandoned on the dirty gray pavement of Ferguson, Missouri, in the suffocating heat of an early August day.

Michael Brown.

Eighteen years old.

Somebody's son.

Gone.

His body left unattended on the ground for four and a half hours.

I think about his parents—two people I've never met; two people whose appearances I can only vaguely conjure into my mind; a mother, a father. I don't know them, but as a father myself

I know that their hearts have been ravaged, their souls shattered. And I'm certain that one central question knifes through them: How could *they*—meaning the police, meaning us, meaning *me*—leave their son lying in the middle of the street for *four and a half hours*?

By now, they've been given a reason. An explanation. An excuse.

But the question remains.

Crowds—angry, incensed crowds—had gathered near the shooting site, and the people who came to remove the body from the street didn't feel safe. Somebody reported hearing gunshots. The officers at the scene suggested to the people tasked with removing the body that they not leave their vehicle without wearing bulletproof vests. To my knowledge, nobody provided them with bulletproof vests. So they sat in their air-conditioned black sedan, concerned for their own safety, waiting for the police to secure the area so they could do their job.

Any way you try to explain it, Michael Brown's young, black body lay unattended in the street for four and a half hours, beneath that sheet stained with his blood, while the residents of Ferguson gathered to gawk, seethe, anguish, grieve, lash out, scream.

Michael Brown's shooting ignited the fire.

Michael Brown's body burned the city down.