

VIDEO: Tay's story (I). Black background with white text that appears as Tay speaks the corresponding words. He has a deliberate cadence, and he speaks slowly at first, then more quickly as he describes people's excitement. Towards the end, his voice softens and slows down again.

3 o'clock. Count. Then they pass out mail, at like, 3:15. When you can see the CO walk to majority of the cell doors, and give a lot of inmates some mail, it's just not the CO walking in here and he going to like four cell doors, four, five cell doors at the most. But if you can see the CO come and stop at numerous doors, and give a lot of inmates some mail that came from you all, and just to see everybody get up on the door, and to just feel that energy, to be happy, and everybody talking, and everybody recite all the good things that's coming from this letter, or things like that, or what she say, or what he said, or what your penpal say, or something like that, it's just the energy that you can just talk about that and to just be happy, it's a different type of feeling. Ain't nobody on the doors with no negative energy or, "wait til the doors roll, I'm finna beat your ass" or this or that, or they mad because this or because the police that pissed them off—ain't nobody doing that. Everybody happy.

When it's time to come to the dayroom, everybody in the dayroom, they smiling because everybody they got their letters at 3:15 or something like that, so now when it's dayroom time around 6 o'clock, 6:30, everybody in the dayroom with good energy. Cause of something that you all did and sent that energy through there to make sure that everybody feels some type of way. And that's—that's. real. love, man. Like, for real. You don't get that from everywhere. So that's the feeling. That's how it feel to receive something from them. All positive energy. Like, that's what it is. And if somebody need something, and for them to give it to em, to make sure that they okay—it's—that's—I love them. For real. Yeah.

AUDIO: Crystal's story. She has a bright and steady voice that cracks a little at first and then becomes more animated as the story goes on.

Steve—he wanted me to have the babies. So I had my child. And then things started happening. It was a painful experience with him, it's because he was abusive to me. And he felt that he can control me, being that I was doing drugs. But I knew that this was wrong, this whole relationship was wrong, but I went along with it because of the drugs. And basically, um—how you say. The system, ACS, started getting involved with us. Um, my daughter got taken from me, I think she went to Good Shepherds then. Then, when I got pregnant again with Jamel, it was just the last straw, I had—I knew I had to leave him. So I gave my child again to his cousin, which is Carrie, she has him now. And I just left Steve. I knew I'd have had more kids if it was up to him. So I knew Jamel, it was the last—that was it.

By then I was living with Vincent, when I had Jamel. Steve had just came out of prison—again. And I called Carrie, Carrie came to the hospital and she took, um, Jamel for me. And she raised him. And that's when I came to prison, you could say, like, five years after that? And I did my—my crime. And now I'm here today.

Vincent means a lot, yeah. Once a month he used to come see me, bring me a package. If I had a problem, he'd call up here [laughs]. If he don't hear from me, cause he know I—even if I call him for 30 seconds, he know I'mma call him everyday. If I don't call him throughout, say, about—in a week, or something? He'll be calling up here. Actually, he helped me with other people that's there, by sending them 20 dollars. He used to bring different people up to see me. Like, five, six different people. He brung 'em up there to see me. He went into Carrie's house, knocked on the door, and introduced himself, and let my son know he—you know, "You have another mother." He started bringing my son up there to see me, once a month, twice a month sometimes. Vincent just sat in the corner and went to sleep while me and him—it was like, when I see him, he see me, it was like, automatic: we going to play. We took pictures. Vincent fell asleep in the chair, while—you know, we sat at another table so we could talk privately. Then we came back, we played a game—me and him and Vincent played, I think, Monopoly or something like that? And—yeah, it was fun! And then two weeks later he brung him back up here.

One time Jamel ran—left Carrie house, went to Vincent's house, tell him he wanna move in. "You can't just move in no man house, you don't know him!" "I don't care, that's—." He started calling him Daddy at one time. Until Vincent tell him, "I'm not your Daddy, I'm your uncle." Vincent—Vincent is the truth. [laughs]

AUDIO: Tay's story (II)

They say prison is supposed to be some type of place where you get your mind right, and you supposed to come out with bigger ideas, and this and that. To be honest, prison makes you worse. It do. Now, I done been to five different penitentiaries—I'm 33 years old. I've been to five different penitentiaries without my lifetime. This penitentiary, Mount Sterling, I never, NEVER been to a facility like that one until they sent me there. And when I say that shit will fuck. you. up. mentally? If you not prepared? It will fuck you up mentally. I don't know what's wrong with that prison, but it's—it's fucked up. And it's just not that prison, but prison is built to just fuck people up, because you not doing nothing positive—it's people doing things positive inside there, but it's always something, 9 times out of 10, that's going to make you do something negative. Whether it's a bad phone call, or a bad inmate that got some bad energy, or a bad CO that got some bad energy, or something like that? It's something. It's something—that's gone throw you off of tryna be positive. And—I don't know, it's just designed—it's—it's designed to do that, and it's gone mess you up!

AUDIO: Minali and Caren's story

MINALI: There's, like, an internal conflict we have about whether to, like, be rude to the guards? Or to, like, be obsequious, and, like, really suck up to them because we don't want them to harass our loved ones after we leave. And—when we went to go visit Rocko, they were, like, making it the most difficult experience for us, because they check everything you're wearing, and everything you—like, the type of mask you have, like, your vaccine card, can't be on your phone, and—they just make it such that it's

likely that you're going to fail their checks, so you don't get to have your visits after coming all this way.

And so it's, like, hard not to get mad and frustrated and be rude to them, but then knowing that, like, Rocco got strip-searched *twice*—when he came *and* when he left—I don't want to be nice to them.

CAREN: And we've got one chance, we traveled really far to have a three-hour visit with you, and, like, to compromise that—?

MINALI: Right. We were wearing, like, these nice N95 masks. And they made us put on these flimsy masks.

CAREN: Surgical masks—

MINALI: Surgical masks.

CAREN: —that were, like, just paper—like, so thin.

MINALI: And they made such a big deal about it, meanwhile none of them are wearing masks. Then—

CAREN: And Omicron is *surging*.

MINALI: Surging! The day we visit Rocko is the day before they go on an almost two-month lockdown.

CAREN: And, like, 90% of the facility got Covid, yeah. Within the next few weeks.

CAREN: I had to go to another facility and a programs person told me that they can't have N95 masks, KN95 masks—folks inside—because it'll make gas ineffective if they have to pepper spray and gas people. They're too good. And they don't want them to be that good. Yeah. Yeah. And that was just, like, said to me like it was just nothing.

AUDIO: Caren's story

I—yeah. I was called a whore by the chaplain [laughs] at Western Illinois Correctional Center. I wanted to have vegan meals, I think largely because the meat there is absolutely disgusting, and, like, inedible, and probably horrible for your health. You have to do it through religious reasons? For your meal changes? So he applied, I think as, like, a Buddhist. It had been three months, and nothing had happened, and he was getting really fed up with it, and so I was like, "All right, I'll call." And this was like—yeah, one of the first times I called the facility [laughs]. Um—and, they were like, "Oh, the chaplain's in charge of processing the meal plan changes." And I was like, "That makes a lot of sense?" [laughs]

Anyway, I get on the phone with this guy, and he's like, "I have to talk to J, and make sure that he's serious and that he's really in Buddhist practice, cause, like, we don't just make meal plan changes." And he hadn't done any—like, he hadn't processed this or touched this thing at all. And I was like, "What—!" I was like, "Just give him his meal change!" I was like, "It doesn't matter! You're not here to be the police of, like, whether someone's the real—" And I—I really went off on him.

I ended up telling him that he, uh, was like, a shame to Jesus. [laughter] Um—and—and he was like, "I don't know how many boyfriends you have in this facility!" And [laughs] um—and I was like, "A few!" [laughs] Um. I'm just kidding. But I really questioned his devotion to the Lord's word and his interpretations of the Lord's word in order to restrict my friend from having the food that he wanted.

He ended up calling J down, like, right away. And I was like, "Oh my god, I've made an absolute mess, that was so risky, and I shouldn't have lost it at this guy." But J was so happy with me. I had clearly rattled this guy, and J was just like, "I'm so glad you yelled at him!" And like, he didn't change his meal plan, but it was, um—I was so happy when he called me later, because I was like, "Maybe he's going to get in trouble, because his family's calling down"—and I said I was family and whatever, but. Yeah.

In my view of what an abolitionist future is is just infinite care work—like, an abundance of care that exists. And I also think that just modeling that, modeling what relationships can look like, is in itself political education. Being like, "Actually, no-one should be controlling the food that you eat." "I think you deserve everything!" Like, "I think you deserve to have whatever food you want." That it's, like [pause] to me it's, like, the most important—yeah, it's the most important thing. Yeah.

AUDIO: Lawrence's speech

I want to speak on the importance of political education and solidarity in our struggle to survive, get free, and stay free. But first I would like to address the short comings of the prison abolitionist movement today. There is a belief that mutual aid and general correspondence alone will help us survive genocide and escape torture. When instead, these caring acts only help us manage and cope with these conditions while doing nothing to liberate us from them. This approach will only help prisoners suffer peacefully while assimilating our movement into the power establishment in which controls the mechanisms of state violence and oppression. The very thing that developed mass imprisonment as a tool to displace and dispose of entire communities.

This must be met with critical resistance and revolutionary action. It's on us abolitionists who are sincerely committed not just in thought and words but in action and practical application. We are confronting material conditions that must be done away with completely. We are embracing visions, programs, and processes that ensure autonomy, independence, collective self-determination, and sustainability. These are things we've identified as primary aims and objectives to ensure our survival, maintain our freedom, and secure our destiny. And we are committed to do this till we free us.

AUDIO: Tay's story (III)

TAY: I love, but I don't know how to love. Because I never was shown how to love. Like, I can—I don't know, is this—do that make sense?

[Soft trumpet refrain rises in the background—playing several intermittent chords in harmony.]

CHALAY: No! That makes sense! I feel like it's really—I don't know, so many people have, like, fucked up relationships growing up where, you know, it's really hard to kind of, as you said, learn how to love, and what love looks like.

TAY: Right. Right.

CHALAY: And so—that's real! Like, and I feel like I've, you know, spent a lot of time trying to learn how to love people, and love them the right way. So. I really hear that. Does that connect to what you were saying about—

TAY: Yeah.

CHALAY: —Caren and Minali and Will and Lauren, kind of, that being love?

TAY: Yeah. Yeah. They show it. Now they show it. They know how to show it, they—when they—when they say it, they know how to show it. They show it.

[Trumpet refrain crests and falls in the background for several more seconds before closing out on a warm, honeyed note.]