

field note
MOTHERING

Donte lives with his mother, Mariana, and his brother in an apartment over a local fast-food restaurant on a busy street not far from a major intersection. The stairway up to the apartment is dark as night and gets darker the closer I get to the top of the stairs. There are two apartments on either side of the narrow landing; the doorways are about six feet apart. I have no idea which is Donte's apartment because it is so dark that I cannot even see the number on the door, so I knock on one door and wait. No one comes to the door, so I knock on the other door and this time Mariana appears. She invites me to come inside.

All the lights are on in the small room that I enter, but the room is still dim and depressing. I sit next to her on a couch that has a huge gaping hole in the middle. We sit on either side of the hole. In one corner of the room is a kitchen table and two chairs. To the right of the couch is a large TV with some framed photographs on top. Framed colored photographs also line the wall behind our heads on the couch. Family members have been captured in moments of success, triumph, passages into new life stages. I found these family photographs clustered on walls, TV sets, mantelpieces in almost every house that I visited as family members sat in graduation regalia, confirmation dresses, family portraits. Happiness shows on every face, hair perfectly combed, expressions purposeful, clothes neat and conventional. No clowning, candid, or spontaneous snapshots here. These portraits mark off the passage of the time and landmarks attained.

There is a photograph of Donte with his mother, smiling and poised. Several of the photographs are of Donte's sister, who is now going to a university in the South on a scholarship. Donte's mother is extremely proud of her daughter's accomplishments. They have been like two sisters, she tells me. There are pictures of the girl in her high school graduation cap and gown. There is one of Mariana wearing graduation cap and gown, her two sons and daughter on either side of her. She has worked hard to get her GED.

She begins to tell her story. I turn the tape recorder on. The

following is a partial transcription of my interview with Mariana, who almost immediately after we begin starts telling me about the time she was arrested by the Arcadia police for beating Donte, or Tay as she calls him, with his belt one evening after the boy had been gone from home for several hours on his bicycle without telling his sister, who was babysitting, where he was going. Mariana had found him in another part of town and right there on the street had pulled off his belt and begun whipping him. Someone had called the police.

(This was spoken to me. You must read what Mariana had to say aloud. You cannot understand it unless you hear the words.)

I. THIS IS MY CHILD

They pulled the guns out
what did I do?
This is my child!
Don't tell me how to raise my child.

I was so upset at that time. The lady cop
she was checking his elbows and his knees.
He was scratched up
but I didn't do that.

[Her voice is thick with tears.]

And they write down
he has a hairline scratch on his back
so many inches long.
I was like,
I didn't do that
his sister did that
they was fighting one day
and she did that.

They read me my rights,
put my hands behind my back,
put handcuffs on me.
and I was like—
Why?
What did I do?

I cried
I actually cried

they told my boyfriend to leave
he said,
she didn't do anything
that's her baby son.
who slipped off from home.
She was worried.

And they told him
they said
 leave.
So he drove off
And he was looking back at me
as he drove off.
I mean I was hysterical
I had never been in trouble with the law
never been to jail
Never even dream of going to jail.

How could they tell me how to raise him?
This is my child.
These people have so much power over us.
This is my child.

I'm a black woman,
single black woman.
He's my little black kid.
If they tell us how to raise our children
what else will they do?

[Mariana laughs bitterly.]

II. A NIGHT IN HELL

I didn't know what to do. They took me down, they booked me, took my fingerprints and pictures. It was humiliating, it was a dream. It was a night I spent in hell.

III. I LOVE MY MOMMA

So then they come back to jail
tell me that my son
was in very good health
that his blood count
his iron count
his potassium
is all in place.
Is this what you lock me up for
to tell me that my son eats well?

And I ask them again,
 why did you bring me to jail,
 if this is what you was going to come back and tell me?

They said
 he is a very smart little boy
 and he is very strong.
He showed me this book
I still have that book in the room
showed me this book
that they gave him
at the hospital.

They had him to draw these faces
and said
how do you feel now?
are you happy or sad?
And he drew a happy face
with a happy smile on it.
And they said
draw your family,
and he drew his brother,
his sister,
his mommy,
his cat.
And everybody had happy faces on it.

And they asked him
how do you feel about your mommy
and he wrote
I love my momma.

And I said
 Tay
 did they tell you to do this?
And he say,
 yeah.
He say
 I drew it.

And they asked him
What's your favorite food
what do your mom cook at home?
And he drew a hamburger,
his french fries
and a whole lot of
ketchup.

They asked you a lot of questions about me
didn't they?

He say,
 yeah
 they ask me a lot of questions
 and I told them,
 mom is good.
 She gets mad,
 I get in trouble,
 she whip me.

For them to do this has caused a lot of mental anguish. I'm still angry
about it. It forced me. I haven't whipped Tay since that day.

[Mariana gives a dry laugh, a bitter laugh.]

IV. I DON'T BELIEVE IT

Since I went to jail
I punish him,
I take away his Nintendo game,
I take away the TV,
I do a lot of screaming again.
I had stopped that.

It's not the same.
It hasn't been the same
with me and my family
since that night I went to jail
because they had labeled me
as a child abuser.

they said
 right now,
 you are charged with abusing your son
 and mental cruelty to his mind,

you guys
could actually fucking
charge the momma,
charge the momma of this child
with all of this shit
because you say
this is what I did to my son
when I know better what happen to my son.

you got the right to tell me I did all of these things
when he told you
that he fell offa the bike
and he scarred up his arm but—

you got the right to tell me I did this,
and you got the right to fill out a report
saying Mariana Tompkins
as of this day
1987
that I did this to my child.

I said
 all of this
 in this police report
 is a lie

I said,
 I would never let you
 charge me with that.

And the police officer said
you already charged with it.

Everything in there was a lie. I still have that report in there now
[pointing to the bedroom] right now. It tells all these lies. And I let
my friend read it, the one I was telling you about, and he said, I don't
believe it.

V. TIME

They put me in jail. I was there twelve hours
(I cried)
twelve hours.
and the sound of those doors
slamming behind me
it was like I was never going to come out of there.

Never been in jail
never been in any trouble
That was my first time
I thought it was going to be my last time
seeing the outside world
My freedom had been ripped away from me
for twelve hours.
With four other women
with a bunk bed
(the mattress was maybe a inch
as thick as that table
with a wool blanket that wouldn't even cover my feet)
on a steel bunk
the windows all the way up to the ceiling
you couldn't
see outside
and it was hella cold in that cell.
I was on my period.
I kept calling them
ask them,
could you please
please bring my sanitary napkins

they did not respond
they treat you like a animal right
the next morning about ten o'clock
that's when she came with the sanitary napkin
she told us
she said
you're supposed to be seeing the judge for nine o'clock

I did not see the judge till five-thirty
that Monday evening.

(They were so many people in that jail)

they handcuffed us
had our feet in chains
chained to another person's ankle
they had our hands
both our hands
chained to the other person's
they had us in a row of two
and they took us down this little long alleyway
around the corner
up the steps
into the courthouse
and they put us in a little room
maybe eight by six
it was small
it had a toilet
it had a little bench on each side
it was eight women in this little room
we was almost stacked
on top of each other
waiting to see the judge.

they called six women
before they called me out
all of those got sentenced to time in prison
They was in there for possession of drugs
beating up on other women
and stuff

they was charged with different things.
But I was the only one that was a child abuser.

VI. THE LABEL

A woman there in the cell with me had told me
she said
they treat women that abuse children
dirty, real real bad
if you go to prison
they're going to dog you
the other inmates are going to kill you
because they got you labeled as child abuser

I'm not a child abuser
this is my child
if I don't chastise my child
teach him what is right from wrong
who will?

the white man don't care
hey
they don't care if this little boy
woulda got killed that night
they don't care
all they was in for
was arrest another black citizen
get one off the streets
put her in jail
they didn't care.

VII. THE STORY

And I went to court
the judge she looked at me
she said
what did you do Miss Tompkins?
I said
well you have the papers in front of you.
She said

I want to hear your words

I said,

thank you

I told her my side of the story

my son slipped off from home

I work during the day

sometimes from twelve o'clock to eight o'clock at night

I work

my daughter

she's sixteen

she was there

she was babysitting

and he slipped off

on his bike

did not let her know where he was

I came home

he wasn't there

I was furious

I was scared out of my mind

thinking that my son

was dead somewhere

She said

and you whipped him?

I said

I whipped him

with his belt

they brought out the belt. She felt it. She waved it around.

she said

who arrested you?

I said

the lady officer sitting right there

she said

this is a case

that shoulda never came in front of me

I asked her

what would you have done
if that would have been your
little
seven year old
son

and she said
I would have did the same

and she said
don't let this happen again
Above all you have to do probation.

VIII. PUNISHMENT

They punished me
She told the lady officer
she said
don't bring another case in front of me like this again
and she shook her head
but she still punished me
she gave me two years probation
with the mental health counselor
and I had to go to court
twice a month.

[Mariana is sobbing deeply. We stop for a long time.]

I went to court
they'd call me
Mariana Tompkins
and I'd get up
they'd lead me up to the little altar
right there where she was sitting
she was like
uummmm, your progress report is very clean
and
I see that you been doing all of your mental health time
and

you haven't been getting in any trouble
and
you keeping yourself up
come back again
may twelfth
nine-thirty in the morning

they'd write me a little slip
give me my little court sheet
and I'd leave
I didn't have to say anything

I did this for two years

Two years.

I was working during that time!

I was going to school in the morning
had to be in school for eight o'clock till twelve
had to leave school
be at my job for one o'clock.

I was a bartender

I was under a lot of pressure

I was a busy little momma
when I leave work sometimes

I would just go to Safeway
come home

if the kids want something to eat
fine

if they didn't want to eat

that was okay too

most of the time

they would cook something

and they eat because they would be big enough to.

The way the system treats you

with your children

these days

is wrong

they have a law

where you can't whip your children

If you do

you gotta do it in the privacy
of your own home
you cannot yell at your child
in a public place
or you go to jail
if you talk to them too roughly
you're going to jail
for that
but where do the parents have rights?
as for the child talking doggish
to the momma and the daddy
and not doing
what they are told to do
not coming home on time
that's why these kids is running around here
they out there on the corner
selling drugs
they're killing each other
that's exactly why
because the law is not on the parents' side

my son when he came home
two days later he told me
you can't whup me
that's child abuse

I said
 oh really
I said
 we'll see about that!

he kept throwing these little hints at me
My son
 Donte
he kept saying
 if you hit me
 I'll call the police
for the longest period
he threatened me
with that

IX. MY LIFE SHATTERED

I was going to adult school then
It had gotten so bad
mentally I couldn't take it
things started falling apart around me
I mean my life shattered
it went down
I was meaner than ever
I didn't want to be around friends
I didn't want to talk to anyone on the phone
I even took a deferral from school
I stayed right here in my apartment
mentally in the dark
I didn't want to be bothered
it was like people
other people
was ruling
they had control of me
they told me where I go
twice a week
from nine-thirty to ten-thirty in the morning
they had control of my life
and for some strange reason
I kept thinking
that the police would pull up
in front of my apartment building
just to sit there
and see
what was going on
in my house.

X. A WHITE WOMAN

The bad part about it
a social worker
would come to my house

twice a month
to check on little Donte
would get to my house
at three fifteen every evening
and stay till about six o'clock
twice a month
watch the kids
their behavior
talk to my son
ask him questions

[Mariana begins imitating the social worker by talking in a sugary sweet voice.]

How is Donte doing in school?
and how is he?

when he come through the door
would give him a big hug
and a book
would sit there with my son
would talk

sometime
she would go in the kitchen

if we was eating dinner
I would offer her dinner
or coffee

she was here so long.

my daughter had nothing to do with her
she would not give this lady the time of day
she said

you're out now momma
but they're sending this lady
this white woman
in our house
twice a month
to put us under surveillance

[Pauses for a long time thinking. Then a long sigh.]

She became to be nice to me
at first I didn't agree with it
I was under surveillance
It was like they got my life in their hands
I wasn't free for two years
you know I was skeptical of this lady
this white lady
coming into this black house
she's not going to be comfortable here
I had to watch what I said
around her
the way I carried myself
around her
she would never let you know
 when she was coming
all I knew
it was twice a month
it was like sneak up visits
and each and every time
she came into my house
it was clean
I had dinner on the stove
I was dressed
my hair was combed
the kids were intact
they were coming in from school

she was amazed
 because my daughter
would come right in from school
 go to the table with her books
she would put her headphones on
 do her homework

but she never spent time
with this white lady
she said
 she shouldn't be

in our house
she said
Momma
what did you do so bad?
what you did with Tay
any momma woulda did that.

[At this moment Mariana's other son, Ronnie, who is about sixteen comes into the room and tells her he is going out. After he leaves she begins to talk about him.]

XI. WHERE DID YOU GET THE MONEY FROM RONNIE?

Ronnie is very dysfunctional!
I'm so afraid he's going to get killed
That room he never cleans it up
he talks back once he drew back to hit me
that was a no no
he threatened me
he said I'll put my posse on you
I said
oh you will huh!
what do you call a posse?
I got female posses
they not dope dealers and dope smokers either
they are concerned mothers
I'll put my posse on you too
He was
yeah
all females huh?
I said
but they love their children
just like I love my son
he drew back to hit me
and I downed him right here

and we fought

You see how big he is now? He was taller than me at thirteen.
and bigger! we go through world war twenty sometime. I mean
verbally
we be going at it.

Sunday
he came in
he threatened me
I found money in his shoe
a lot of money.

[She holds up her fingers to indicate a fat stack of bills.]

I said

I'm not going to give you
this money

you going to give me my money.

No I'm not going to give you this money
Where did you get it from?

you don't need to know
where I got the money

Where did you get the money from
Ronnie?

ain't your business
that's my money
you ain't taking nothing

he got real vicious
like a dog
he had changed
his whole attitude
just popped in front of my eyes
I said

I will not have you talk to me that way.

[Her voice is thunderous now.]

I brought you in this world
you never bite the hand that feed you
that's one thing you don't do.
I'm the only person
will probably care about you
in this whole world
I had to stress the point that I love my sons
I love you Ronnie!

I'm not a very cuddly huggable person
but I wanted to hug him but I knew he woulda pushed me
away
so I didn't even try
I sit on the table in his room
he was in the bed
all curled up between the blankets

why don't you leave me alone
put my money back in the shoe.

I'm not going to give you the money back
I'm not putting the money back in the shoe
Ronnie.

XII. YOUR SON IS A MONSTER: LOCK HIM UP

When Tay was in third grade, he had this teacher
wear African clothing
she's into the cultures
she used to come up to my house all the time

I used to say
 Omigod
 here she come again
 it was always something
 about Donte

she told me
 lock your son up
 put him in a boys home
 lock him up

he's a monster

He was getting in a lotta trouble
he was lying
saying he was going to school
but he wasn't going to school
I said what are you doing Tay?

he be's with this little boy
Richard
his grandmother have custody of Richard
I met Richard
the courts took Richard away
from the mommy and daddy
the grandmother's old
she can't tame him

Teacher say
Richard is selling drugs for his uncle.
They found cocaine rocks on him
Richard didn't come to school today
Donte didn't come
and one other little boy
She say,
 they bad!
 the uncle is paying these boys to sell drugs
 at the subway station.

When I found this out
I start calling the police
to find my son
because after six o'clock
it's dark

Where's my son?
he's not here, y'know
I thought
something had happened
but I refused to go looking for him
I had been arrested once
I told him

I'm not going back to jail for you

The police
they used to tickle me
they used to come in the door
laughing at me
they said Miz Tompkins
you get paranoid now
I said
you damn right I do
I said
I'm not going to let you guys
lock me back up
because
if I find that little boy
I might just do him like that
and it's going to be over between him and me
I won't be his momma no more
I'll let you guys run the show
since you got my life in your hands
you run this show
I will let the police go look for this little runaway boy
let them get paid
the taxpayers are paying them money
for them to do a job
let them work it out

Every ten days
I was calling the police
I'm Mariana Tompkins
I'm looking for my son

They say
oh here she come again.

Somedays Tay would not go to school
he would leave here
with his bookbag
throw his bookbag in the bushes
he would be missing from school

they would call me
I was going to job training
they call me as soon as I walk in that door
at 9 o'clock
Mariana, Donte teacher call

I say
oh my god
what is it now!
And I'd just start boo hooing
I cried all the time
I was so little
I had lost so much weight
I said
what is it now?
Teacher say, call the school
and I say
I don't want to know
I don't want to know
I don't want to know

I wouldn't call
I would sit there
and get my books
my books
would be soaking wet
from tears
teacher she say
call the school
I don't want to know
I ask Petra
that's one of the teachers there
I say
Petra would you call the school for me?
She say
I think you should
that made me think
something bad
had happened to my child

XIII. THE SEARCH

the school they said
Donte didn't show up
for school
this morning

I left school
come home
put my tennis shoes on
my sweat pants
my sweatshirt
get on my feet

I walked fifty to sixty blocks
looking for my son

I asked the little kids in school
which direction did my son go?

I would go down these streets
hoping to find him

No luck

I gave up
I came home
called the police

they found him
they found him on the playground

it was raining that day
He was soaking wet
said he had been on the playground
all day

I found that very hard to believe
I asked him
 why would you sit on the playground?
 Who were you selling drugs for?

Nobody!!!

He was so offensive
when I said
 who were you selling drugs for
Nobody!!!

 But Tay
 don't you know
 somebody will kill you

I said
 I went to jail once for you
I said
 I won't do it again
I said
 somebody's going to kill you

no it's not,
I know what I'm doing

I said
 No you don't know
 what you doing.
 you're only ten years old
 how can you possibly know what you're doing?

XIV. I WENT TO JAIL FOR YOU, ONCE

Then one day
he didn't come home
after school
the police brought him home
I told them
I said
 get him out of my house I don't want him here anymore
I said
 Donte
 you have disobeyed me
 you went against my punishment
 you didn't come home
 you're trying me
 I won't have that

I said

I went to jail for you
once
I kept stressing that jail point
because that had mentally scarred me up here
I told him

I don't have to whup you to get you outa my house
Police are going to take you out

the two police officers
they didn't want to take him

I cried a little bit
and I wiped the tears away
I wouldn't let him see me cry
no more.

I told him

go get your change of clothes
and he wrote his little sister a note
left it under her pillow

I went in there that evening and found the note:

Nita, I am at Granville Place
momma put me out
I love you Nita
and I'm going to miss you Nita

I cried a little bit over that.
The police took him away from here
put him in the back of the police car
took him to Granville Place
for a whole evening.

Nita said

momma
did you have to send him to Granville's like that?

I said

we gotta teach him a lesson
she said

I know
because he's going to be just like Ronnie.
I said
Ronnie is like a footprint
a big giant footprint
Tay little feet steps in these big giant footprints
he wants to follow his big brother
that's the key to it all!

at that time I didn't realize it.

XV. BECAUSE I AM AN ABUSER

The next day I had a GED test
I didn't pass
That made me angry.
Then this lady from child welfare called
she told me to come pick my child up
or
"I'll put your child out on the sidewalk in front of your house."
I said
if you do I'll sue the Arcadia Police Department
I said
I'll sue the whole damn county
She said
well its your responsibility to come and pick him up
I told her
remember when you locked me up
you guys put me in jail
for whupping him
I said
if you can raise my son better than I can
dammit you do it!

I hung up in her face.

The chief of police called me and said
the child welfare agency had dropped my son off
at the police department

and said the mother said she wasn't going to be responsible
'Cause I knew then that they was responsible for him.
They sent two officers out here
with my son and his bag
They said
 Miss Tompkins what you want us to do with him.
I said
I don't care what you do with him
take him to a foster home
I don't care
I said
you locked me up!
Fine!
Find a home for him.
Them foster people
oughta take care of him better than his mother
I said
 I won't have my child telling me I can't whip him
 I'll go to jail
 I will whip his ass
 and I'll whip him right in front of you.
The officers they just looked at me
I said
 I'm mad, I'm mad, I'm really mad right now
 It's not a good place for him to be right now
 because I am an ABUSER
 remember.

XVI. THIS SYSTEM STINKS

So they say
 I don't think you an abuser
 If that was my son I woulda did the same thing.
I said
no
they told me I couldn't whip him

But when they take him away
they say I gotta have him back in my house
What is this!
What's going on with this system!

I told the police
I'm sick of this system
This system stinks.

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