

And Sometimes...Mama

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For Black mothers like me

Yeah, sometimes she'd beat him
For skipping school, stealing ten dollars from her purse,
Pretending to be too sick to go to church.
She had to. She knew the world
Stings much harder
Then the snap of her belt.

And sometimes she'd go through the sacred motions
of lathering him in Ivory soap and warm water
The slosh of her wash cloth
Kneading and scrubbing every pit and crack and bone,
A way of sculpting and inspecting her little boy's body.

Other times, maybe for a holiday or birthday, she would give in,
Press her forehead to his.
Breathe him in,
The crackle of his laugh.
She might even buy him
That braided gold chain that
She can't afford,
Just to see him wear it like a crown
Only he gets to hold.
And while he sleeps,
She will confess in his ear, as if begging God:
You are my reason.

And then other times, she'd catch him
Admiring his new chin hair,
The smell of mouthwash mixing with drugstore cologne,
And those Black creases around his thick neck,
How they shined in the light
Of that new gold chain.

She'd catch him tracing--with pride--the angle of his jawline,
And she'd holler:
Boy, remember, only God is King
And your shit stinks too, so
Put that laundry in the wash.

But mostly she'd fight
That rising choking fear,
The stink of shame that comes from
Knowing that no matter how hard she washed,
She cannot save him.
Not really.
Not from the unholy ghost--
That shackles and strangles, then stains.

And Him?
Before his neck snapped,
He saved his last breath for her: *Mama*.

By Ama Anane, a writer, educator, and mother living with her wife and three children in Los Angeles.