

Mama Says

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Mama Says

ONE OF THE CHALLENGES in writing for young readers is creating characters who are believable, imperfect, and engaging. In “Mama Says,” a child (or tween) is questioning the wisdom of the grandmother she loves. The author skillfully constructs two different families who seem like opposites but actually have several things in common. Mary has been raised in a strict Christian household but she eventually defies her grandmother’s arbitrary rules and begins to form a worldview rooted in her own lived experiences and observations. The author shows the internal struggle of a child beginning to mature and think independently, yet her religious upbringing makes Mary’s evolution painful and slow. She starts to contrast her particular “home training” with her classmates’ values, and questions the logic that creates the laws by which she’s expected to live. Mary’s desire to please her grandmother (whom she calls “Mama”) and her dependence on her sole family member makes her struggle even more poignant. Susie’s two mothers are presented as “unnatural” by Mary’s homophobic grandmother, yet the protagonist rightly concludes that her family also doesn’t conform to the supposed norm. Mary ultimately risks her grandmother’s disappointment for a chance to bond with her classmates and is rewarded by the kindness and praise of Susie and her moms. With its inclusive cast and message of tolerance, this story promises to teach children empathy and appreciation for the courage it takes to discover and defend your beliefs.

Zetta Elliott

When I was in fifth grade, Mama let me start walking home by myself. She got me a tiny flip phone that needed a card with minutes on it to work and my own keys on a keychain that said John 3:16.

After school each day I was supposed to go straight home, go inside, and lock the door behind me. Then, I had to call Mama and let her know I made it home. And if she didn't answer, I had to leave a voice message.

"Anyone can text me," she explained on my first day of school. "I can't know it's really you unless I hear your voice. That's why you have to call me as soon as you get home, okay?"

"Yes, Mama," I said. And that was that.

Each day I followed the rules exactly, taking the 10-minute walk from school to my house, just like Mama showed me, and calling as soon as I was inside. Then about two hours later, she'd come home from work and give me a big hug, thanking God I was home safely, before cooking us dinner.

But on Halloween, I didn't go straight home. Earlier in the week, the newest girl in our class Susie Hampton announced that she was having a Halloween party at her house after school, and everyone was invited. There would be cookies and candy and we'd watch Halloween movies. Everyone in class was excited and some people even talked about wearing their costumes to the party, but I didn't have a costume, and more importantly, I knew there was no way Mama would let me go.

I wasn't allowed to celebrate Halloween. Mama said that it was a pagan holiday. I didn't know what pagan meant, but I knew better than to ask. The last time I questioned Mama too much about something she said was wrong, she made me sit down with the Bible and read for half an hour, because she said I obviously wasn't doing enough Bible reading in Sunday school.

But even if it wasn't a Halloween party, there was still no way Mama would've let me go. Although I liked Susie a lot, she had two mamas and that was one too many.

"It's not natural," Mama said when Susie and her mamas moved to town. She was in the kitchen chopping up vegetables for a stew she was making for dinner, and I was sitting on the

counter looking out the window at the fence that marked off our backyard. On the other side was Susie's house, and it amazed me that only my fence and hers separated us, even though it felt like we lived in two different worlds.

"Why not, Mama?" I asked before I knew better.

"Because a family is supposed to be made up of a man and his wife," she said sternly. "It's shameful that they let them have a child. That girl is going to grow up thinking that's what a real family is supposed to look like. I'll be praying for her. Hopefully she'll learn the right way, despite her upbringing."

I had so many more questions. For starters, why couldn't Susie have two mamas? Technically, I had two mamas too.

Mama wasn't my *real* Mama; she was my grandmother. I don't remember my real mother and Mama didn't talk about her often. The only thing she did say was that my mother made a lot of mistakes when she was young, but that I wasn't one of them. My mother just wasn't ready to have a baby, so she passed me off to Mama and disappeared shortly after that. Mama said that we just had to pray for her, and hopefully, one day, God would lead her back home. I wanted to believe that was true but it was hard to have faith in someone whose first act as my mother was to leave.

Still, this wasn't what I wanted to ask Mama about.

"But Mama, we don't have a man in our house," I said. "Why is that okay?"

Mama didn't know who my father was. She said that was a secret my mother took with her when she left. As for my grandfather, Mama's husband, he died before I was even born. If a real family was supposed to be made of a man and a wife, what did that make us?

"We've never had a man in our house," I repeated when she didn't answer. "So why is that okay for us and not for Susie and her mamas?"

Mama closed her eyes, and even though her lips weren't moving, I could tell she was praying, but I wasn't sure what for. When she was done, she put the knife down on the cutting board, and turned to look me square in the eyes.

“There was a man in this house and he was a good man, you hear?” Her eyes were dark and serious, so I nodded. “Just because you didn’t get the chance to meet him that doesn’t mean he wasn’t here. His spirit remains here and I am his wife, as I will be until the day I die and join him up in Heaven. That’s what I meant when I said there needs to be a man and wife in the house. He’s still here. Understand?”

I wasn’t sure that I did, but I said, “Yes, Mama,” anyway. She continued looking at me for a while until she nodded and got back to chopping.

After that, I knew better than to ask about Susie’s mamas again and knew that there was absolutely no way Mama would allow me to go to Susie’s house.

The day of the party, everyone had come to school dressed in different costumes, except for me and Tahani, a Muslim girl who always wore a scarf on her head. Once when I asked Mama about Tahani’s scarf all she said was that Tahani and her family believed in the wrong God so they did the wrong things. But other than her scarf, it always seemed like Tahani and me were the only ones doing the same things. We always had to leave the classroom for *Harry Potter* story time and though I didn’t have to wear a scarf Mama never let me wear shorts or skirts that didn’t at least reach down to my knees. I knew there was no way Tahani would be going to Susie’s house for the party either, so even though we weren’t really friends I still felt like we were in this in together.

Except then Susie told me that Tahani was going to the party too and I was the only one who wouldn’t be there.

“And that’s not fair,” Susie said at lunch. She was dressed as Elsa from *Frozen*, one of the few movies Mama let me see despite the magic. “Everyone should be there. It’s going to be so much fun! Why can’t you come?”

I didn’t want to tell her all the things Mama said, but also didn’t want to lie. So I said nothing and shook my head, looking away from her. Susie reached over and covered my hand with hers. It was warm and soft and tiny, her fingers barely covering mine, but I didn’t want her to ever let go. No one had ever held

my hand before, unless it was for prayer. This felt different; it felt nice.

“Please come, Mary,” Susie said. “It’ll be more fun with you there.”

She was lying, but I wanted to believe it could be true. Susie was my only friend at school, and that was mainly because she was the only person who kept talking to me even when I couldn’t find any words to say back. So, I thought about it. Maybe if I did this one thing, if I just broke the rules this one time, maybe I could have fun. If Tahani could break her rules, why couldn’t I?

The questions rolled around in my head all day until it was time to go home. Then, I followed Susie, who tugged me along by the hand, and the rest of our class to her house, almost without thinking. When we got there, I quickly hid in the bathroom to call Mama and tell her I was home before I could change my mind. Thankfully, she didn’t answer so I didn’t have to lie to her directly, but instead to her voicemail. Still, I asked God to forgive me anyway, but it did nothing to ease my guilt.

I stayed in the bathroom a bit longer, unsure what to do now that I was here. Coming was already going to get me into trouble; who knew what else I could get into if I left the bathroom? After I didn’t know how long there was a knock at the door that made me jump. I wiped my hands on my skirt because they felt sweaty and opened the door, and almost ran right into one of Susie’s mamas. She was dressed up in a witch’s costume, wearing a pointy hat that covered most of her curly red hair, and a long black dress with pointed black shoes. She was very tall, and I had to lean back to look up at her.

She was smiling down at me, wearing a big toothy grin. She also had a small ring in her nose, something I knew Mama would never, ever wear. Mama always said our bodies were temples of God and we shouldn’t mar them in any way, not even with earrings, much less nose rings.

But besides the ring in her nose and the witch’s costume, Susie’s mama didn’t look all that different from any of the other mamas I’d met before.

“Hey, there,” she said. “I’m Amanda, one of Susie’s moms.

You must be Mary. Susie sent me to come looking for you. Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," I muttered.

"Are you sure?" Amanda asked. She tilted her head to the side, which made her hat start to tip over, but it didn't fall off.

I nodded. Amanda looked at me a little longer the same way Susie sometimes did when I stopped talking sometimes, and I realized that Amanda was probably Susie's real mama, the one she came from. They had the same red hair too.

"Well, it's nice to meet you," she said finally.

It felt wrong to correct her and tell her that we'd actually met before. Besides, maybe it was better that she didn't remember Mama closing the door in her face.

Amanda held out her hand for me to shake and I stared at it, not sure what to do. I knew Mama would say it was impolite to ignore someone's outstretched hand, but I couldn't imagine her liking the idea of me touching Susie's mama either. But Mama wasn't here, and I wanted this second meeting with Amanda to be better than the first one. I shook Amanda's hand, which was warm and soft, just like Susie's, and I started to breathe a little easier.

"So, Mary, do you need a little help finding the rest of the group?"

"Yes ma'am," I said.

Amanda laughed a little. "Oh dear, you can just call me Amanda. Ma'am makes me feel old."

"Okay...Amanda," I said, testing it out. It felt weird, but not in a bad way.

"You've got it," she said, smiling. She smiled a lot, and it was getting harder and harder not to smile back, but I stopped myself. We already shook hands; if I smiled at her too then she'd think I liked her and I wasn't sure I could.

"How about I show you downstairs so you can join everyone else?" Amanda asked. I just nodded and she led me down the short hallway away from the bathroom and opened up another door for me. She reached up to the side and hit a switch, turning on the light so I could see the stairs.

“There ya go.” She stood back, pushing the door away, so I could get to the stairs. “They’re all down there. Make sure to hit the switch when you get to the bottom, so this light turns off. We don’t want to waste electricity, right?”

It was something Mama would say, and it felt strange hearing the words come from Amanda’s mouth. It was so weird that I forgot to say anything and just turned away, walking quickly down the stairs. I felt relieved when she closed the door behind me and I didn’t have to think about her anymore. Instead, there was just Susie.

“There you are, Mary!” she said jumping up when I reached the bottom of the steps.

The white wig that she’d worn all day at school was gone now and her red curls were now on full display. I liked them better than her wig, but I didn’t know how to tell her so I stayed quiet as she took me by the hand and led me to the circular table where everyone else was sitting.

“Ashley said you probably got scared and went home, but I told her you just went to the bathroom,” Susie was saying. “We’re making Halloween cookies.”

She pulled me down to sit between her and Ashley, who was dressed like Cinderella. Tahani was sitting on her other side and waved up at me when I sat down, but said nothing, focusing her attention back on her cookie. Ashley didn’t even look up, her face screwed up in concentration as she focused on frosting her cookie.

“I wasn’t scared,” I tried to say to her, but I wasn’t sure she heard me.

Mama was always telling me I needed to speak up if I wanted to be heard, but I never knew when the right time was to speak up. With Mama, when I accidentally said something wrong I’d get in trouble and at school when I said the wrong thing everyone laughed. It was easier staying quiet.

Susie wasn’t that way though. She was always talking, saying everything that popped into her head, and talking to everyone she met. I was trying to be more like her, but it hadn’t sunk in yet.

Without asking, Susie grabbed a plate and put a weirdly shaped cookie on it and then placed it down in front of me.

“So we have all the necessary colors,” Susie said excitedly. “There’s orange and black and green for pumpkins. And white and red, if you want to make a vampire—”

“That’s what I’m making,” Ashley interrupted, finally looking up.

“I’m making a bat,” Tahani said, holding up her cookie. “It’ll become Ashley’s vampire.”

Ashley nodded in agreement and then everyone was talking about all their different cookies and what colors they were using to make their creatures. I looked around at all of them, and then looked down at my cookie, not sure what to do with it. Even though I knew this would be the least of Mama’s worries if she found me here, decorating cookies into creatures I wasn’t supposed to believe in felt like one sin too many.

“That one’s supposed to be a ghost,” Susie said. She was watching me as I held my plastic knife over my cookie. “They’re really easy to make. It’s just white frosting and then black dots for the eyes. See?”

She reached across the table at a plate of cookies that were already done and showed me one that looked exactly as she said it would.

“Just copy what I did,” she said, putting it on my plate.

“Thank you,” I said. I hesitated for another second, considering. Mama believed there was a spirit living in our house and spirits were just like ghosts so maybe this would be okay. I started decorating my cookie and before I knew it, I was done, and mine looked just like Susie’s. After I did one I wanted to do another and another, and soon my plate was filled with different colored ghosts.

“Wow, look at all these cookies.”

Susie’s mamas had come downstairs and were looking at all of our creations. Amanda was still wearing her witch’s costume, and Susie’s other mama was dressed up like a fairy with wings on her back.

They both smiled at us as they inspected our work. Beside my ghosts, there was Ashley’s vampire, Tahani’s bat, a few goblins, and some werewolves.

Amanda picked up one of my ghosts that I had covered in pink frosting.

“Oh, I like this one.” She was holding it up so everyone could see it.

“That’s mine,” I said quietly, avoiding her gaze.

“Well, it looks perfect,” she said. “Could I have this one?”

“Mom, you said we couldn’t eat any of the cookies until we had dinner first,” Susie said.

“I’m not going to eat it now Susie, I was just calling dibs.” She winked at me.

Before I could tell it not to, my face broke into a smile, and for a moment I let myself forget that Susie wasn’t supposed to have two mamas. I let myself feel happy, because Amanda liked my cookie the best.

“Speaking of dinner, how about we clean up all this frosting and head upstairs?” Susie’s other mama said. “We ordered some pizza.”

There was a chorus of cheers and then we all got to work, cleaning up the table. It wasn’t until we were making our way upstairs that I realized I’d forgotten all about Mama. My chest squeezed up and I quickly took out my phone to look at the time. Mama would be home any minute; I couldn’t stay.

When we got upstairs, I grabbed Susie’s arm, pulling her aside while everyone else kept walking into the living room. “I have to go home.”

“Why?” she asked, but there was no time to explain and I wasn’t sure I could, anyway. If I told her the truth, that if my Mama found out I was here she would drown me in holy oil and prayers, I wasn’t sure Susie would understand. I barely understood.

“I just have to,” I answered instead. “I’m sorry.”

I pulled away from her then and Susie looked upset, but I didn’t have time to feel sorry. I turned to the pile of backpacks by the living room and grabbed mine and my jacket, and then I ran for the door. I could feel everyone staring after me and saying things, but I didn’t look back. I kept running past the kitchen and straight out of the house. I didn’t stop until I was back home, fumbling with my little keychain. When I got inside, I closed and locked the door behind me, like I was supposed to,

and fell to the floor, breathing so hard I thought my heart would pop out of my chest.

Not even a minute later, I heard Mama's car pulling into the driveway. I quickly stood up and ran upstairs to my room. I threw my backpack down on the bed, and tossed my jacket into the closet, closing the door so she wouldn't see that it wasn't up on a hanger. I could hear Mama unlocking the door downstairs and I quickly took off my sneakers, pushing them under my bed, and then sat on the bed with my backpack.

"Mary?" Mama called.

"I'm up here, Mama," I called back.

Her footsteps echoed as she made her way to the stairs, and I quickly opened up my backpack and grabbed the first book I could find, laying it out on the bed in front of me. Then Mama was walking into my room, asking me how my day was.

"It was good," I said. She sat down next to me on my bed and gave me a long hug. My mouth was dry and I felt sticky all over, but she didn't seem to notice. I tried to relax, but my heart kept beating too fast.

"Me too," she said when she pulled away. "Good, but long. I don't feel much like cooking tonight, so how do you feel about ordering something?"

"That sounds good."

"Great. How about pizza?"

She was staring down at me, watching me, and I was so scared she knew somehow. That either God had told her what I'd done or she could just tell by looking at me that I'd been sinning all afternoon.

"Or we could do something else," Mama said. "Anything's fine, as long as I don't have to cook it."

She smiled at me and I finally let myself breathe. She didn't know.

"Pizza is good," I said. "I'd like that."

"Good, I'll make the call now."

She got up from the bed and made her way to the door, and I watched her, my hands clenched together in my lap.

"Oh, Mary." She stopped and turned back to look at me, and

my stomach twisted with nerves. “Did you remember to thank God for getting you home safely today?”

I relaxed again and shook my head. “No, I forgot. Sorry, Mama.”

She frowned. “Well, that’s alright. You can pray with me now. Come on.”

I hopped up from my bed and followed her downstairs to the living room, where we sat together and prayed, thanking God for letting us both get home safely from work and school. When we were done, I sent up another silent prayer, asking God to forgive me for what I’d done and to help me resist temptation.

Because even though I felt guilty, there was a part of me that wanted to do it all over again.

ZAKIYA N. JAMAL writes middle-grade and young adult contemporary fiction inspired by her experience growing up in Long Island and spending time with her relatives in New York City. She is a graduate of Georgetown University where she received her BA in English and The New School where she received her MFA in Creative Writing with a concentration in Writing for Children and Young Adults. She will be a contributor in the upcoming Latinx anthology, *Wild Tongues Can't Be Tamed* (Flatiron Books; Fall '21) and is currently the Social Media Manager for Scholastic Trade. When she's not tweeting for work, you can find her on Twitter at @ZakiyaJamal.

ZETTA ELLIOTT is a Black feminist writer of poetry, plays, essays, novels, and stories for young readers. She was born and raised in Canada, but has lived in the US for over 20 years. She earned her PhD in American Studies from NYU in 2003; she has taught at Ohio University, Louisiana State University, Mount Holyoke College, Hunter College, Bard High School Early College, and Borough of Manhattan Community College. Her poetry has been published in *New Daughters of Africa*, *We Rise, We Resist, We Raise Our Voices*, the Cave Canem anthology *The Ringing Ear: Black Poets Lean South*, *Check the Rhyme: an Anthology of Female Poets and Emcees*, and *Coloring Book: an Eclectic Anthology of Fiction and Poetry by Multicultural Writers*. Her novella, *Plastique*, was excerpted in *T Dot Griots: an Anthology of Toronto's Black Storytellers*, and her plays have been staged in New York, Cleveland, and Chicago. Her essays have appeared in *School Library Journal*, *The Huffington Post*, and *Publishers Weekly*. Her picture book, *Bird*, won the Honor Award in Lee & Low Books' New Voices Contest and the Paterson Prize for Books for Young Readers. Her young adult novel, *A Wish After Midnight*, has been called "a revelation...vivid, violent and impressive history." *Ship of Souls* was published in February 2012; it was named a *Booklist* Top Ten Sci-fi/Fantasy Title for Youth and was a finalist for the Phillis Wheatley Book Award. Her YA novel, *The Door at the Crossroads*, was a finalist in the Speculative Fiction category of the 2017 Cybils Awards, and her picture book, *Melena's Jubilee*, won a 2017 Skipping Stones Honor Award. She received the Children's Literature Association's Article Award for my 2014 essay, "The Trouble with Magic: Conjuring the Past in New York City Parks." She is an advocate for greater diversity and equity in publishing, and she has self-published numerous illustrated books for younger readers under her own imprint, Rosetta Press; 3 were named Best of the Year by the Bank Street Center for Children's Literature, and *Benny Doesn't Like to Be Hugged* was a first-grade fiction selection for the 2019 Scripps National Spelling Bee. *Dragons in a Bag*, a middle grade fantasy novel, was published by Random House in 2018; the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) named it a Notable Children's Book. *Say Her Name*, a young adult poetry collection, will be published by Disney in 2020; two picture books, *A Place Inside of Me* from FSG and *Awesome Chevonne!* from Flyaway Books, will follow. She currently lives in Lancaster, PA.

