

Midwives for Black Lives

The year is 2020. The year of hindsight. Rose Nettie* is 20 years old. She is Haitian. She moved here, to Delaware, ten years ago, after a 7.0 magnitude earthquake, walloped her island country, cracked open her homeland, displaced 1.5 million people, killed somewhere around 300,000, and blew down a cement wall on top of her mother, a 32 year old woman named Lovey. 75 percent of the population of Haiti became unemployed. In the aftermath of the tremors, a cholera outbreak from unclean water ravaged several communities. Undocumented Haitians living in the United States were granted temporary protection status (TPS), allowing them to stay and work here. Over the next decade, the status was temporarily extended a few more times.

Lovey left behind a husband, Jean Noel, two sons, and Rose Nettie, a pretty, skinny, mature 10 year old girl. The motherless tribe packed up and moved to America. Her dad, a robust young man, previously a grocer, started work right away in a chicken factory in Delaware, single, poor, undocumented, illegal, and defeated as he was. He worked hard. The kids learned English. In ten years, they never forgot about home, but they never did return. One older brother went to jail for something petty. Trespassing or something. One went to community college. Jean Noel kept on working, cutting the throats of chickens and hanging the carcasses on a hook to drain. The number of Haitian migrants permitted U.S. residence under TPS rose to 586,000. Hurricane Matthew hit Haiti a few years later, further devastating the country.

Then, last year, at age 20, Rose Nettie got pregnant. I was the midwife scheduled for her first visit. She was crying. She was scared. She did not want the baby. She told me that she was still a baby her own self.

*Names and identifying characteristics have been changed in accordance with HIPAA

Her chart problem list stated that Rose began the abortion process at 8 weeks. This pregnancy was unplanned and undesired. Ms. Nettie had plans. She wanted to work in business, work her way up to management in poultry work. The father of the baby, also a baby, was supportive of whatever decision she made. He took her for her appointment, paid the money. She took the first pill, Mifeprex, at an abortion clinic in Dover. Then, almost right away, she changed her mind. She wanted this baby. She wanted a girl. She wanted to name her Lovey.

Medication abortions are a two step process. The first pill, the one that Rose Nettie swallowed at 8 weeks, opens the door (the cervix) so to speak. The second set of pills are taken 24 hours later, at home, to push the fetus out said door. Rose didn't complete the process.

Nine months went by. The fetus, a girl, thrived inside of her, grew, kicked, grew some more. Her boyfriend, steadfastly stood by. Then, in May of 2020, her dad, Jean Noel, died of Covid 19, one breathtaking week after he contracted the illness while working at the chicken factory. Jean died in the hospital, still illegal, still undocumented, ten years here in this country; he died without insurance, without any English, alone. Rose Nettie went into labor a few days later, returning to the same hospital where Jean had just died in the ICU. She had no symptoms of the coronavirus, but she had been exposed, her test results would take 4 days to result. We had to treat her as if she might be infected. She was placed in an isolation room. Her partner was not allowed in the room.

Again, I was the midwife on call.

I wore a blue hairnet, two masks, an N-95 and another on top of that, a yellow plastic gown, gloves, blue disposable booties to my knees, and a face shield to introduce myself to her again. I wrote my name in black sharpie across the front of my goggles. All she could see were my blue

eyes. I wanted my eyes to convey that I did not judge her. That I was one of the good guys, friendly to people of color, pro-choice. I too am the child of a parent who died way too young. I'm someone who has also lost both my mother and father, an adult orphan. I am an ally to immigrants. I married one. I am Carrie. I wanted her to know me. The mask belied this. All she could see were my eyes.

But, Rose was sad. She was quiet. She was nearly unresponsive with the pain of labor, insular, alone, withdrawn, shiny with sweat, blood between her legs, naked, still skinny despite pregnancy. The labor, the birth, the pushing out of her tiny baby girl, was an earthquake within her, it cracked her in half. She screamed as if in trauma. She pushed the baby out quickly, less than 4 pushes. I put the wet, vernix-covered wriggling, screaming baby on her breast as soon as it came out of her, still attached by the pulsing cord. She recoiled. She closed her eyes tightly against seeing her daughter. She winced and flung her head to the left refusing to look at her baby. She writhed away like I was squirting her with a hose. She begged me, with clenched teeth, to take the baby away. Eventually, she came around. When the pain subsided, she held her infant daughter close to breast and she smiled as a single tear drop fell. A teardrop fell from my eye too. My goggles fogged up. I touched baby Lovey's hair and asked Rose Nettie if she looked like her mother. "No," she sighed. "She looks exactly like my father."