

Author's introduction

My story is set in 1966 and follows the story of a young white nurse on probation being forced to consent to something unimaginable. I chose to set my story in the 1960s because this was a decade of social change – the civil rights movement, women's liberation and protest surrounding the Vietnam War. Despite the progress engendered by these movements, injustices were still deeply entrenched in society, especially in places in the Deep South such as Alabama.

I chose to set my story in Alabama because it was a place where there was a federal programme funding the sterilisation of women and girls who were poor and black.

I was inspired to write my story on this subject as I read about it in a history magazine and was shocked by the injustices perpetrated by the federal government. My central character, Nancy, emerged from my wondering what I would have done had I been a bystander to such distressing events. The character of Imani came to me as a symbol of an innocent person who is unjustly hurt.

Scars Never Heal

1966

Selma, Alabama

I smooth my starched dress and dab on a layer of pastel pink lipstick. Today I'm a nurse-in-training. I gulp down remnants of once-warm coffee. Distant hums of orange-breasted robins commingled with revs of spluttering car engines setting off enter my ears, achingly familiar as I set off.

My first assignment for the Selma Family Planning Clinic is to visit a young girl. I'm administering birth control shots, Depo-Provera. It's surprising - she's only eleven. So young. Poor and black, what a hard life.

The acrid stench of dirt hits me as I knock on the door of what is more like a shack than a building, rustic panels of wood making up the walls. The place is on the verge of collapse. A busy-looking woman opens the door. “Who are you?” she blurts out. Behind her a girl appears, clutching her mother’s skirt.

“I’m Nancy Sullivan, the new nurse here to give your daughter her birth control shots.”

The woman places protective hands over her daughter.

“Get in,” she mutters abruptly. “I get all these government people so often I don’t ask. Do what you’ve been paid to do.”

“Well, I’m glad to meet you,” I say, plastering on a professional smile as I enter. I take in the house – barely fit for habitation with cracked walls, broken ceiling tiles and mud flooring – and I silently, unknowingly let appearances speak for themselves.

“You must be Miss Johnson.” The woman mutters ‘yes’ uneasily. “Are you Imani?” I ask. Retreating away from me, the girl nods.

“You’ve had the shots before, haven’t you?” I try to sound as friendly as possible. Mrs Johnson leaves us to it.

“Two years,” Imani whispers. A girl of nine was put on birth control?

We enter a tiny room where the walls have more holes than not. It’s so cold air sweeps through me like I’m in a freezer.

“Now, I promise it’s not going to hurt at all,” I assure her. We sit down on the couch so moth eaten there’s hardly any fabric to sit on; I take out the needle but Imani immediately shrinks away. “It won’t hurt,” I repeat. Imani is close to tears.

“Because you’re being so brave, I brought a candy bar, how do you like that?” I give her a comforting squeeze. I’ve been given a job to do and I *will* complete it.

Imani slowly grins and I’ve finally gained her trust. Taking out the shiny Razzles bar, I place it between us and Imani thrusts her arm out towards it. I take out a prefilled syringe and am about to inject the shot, when I take a pause. I’m breathing lungfuls of air and my hand won’t keep still. Every time I look at Imani I can’t imagine injecting shots into her. A lump of vomit rises up my throat. I imagine the liquid making its way through the veins in her bloodstream. Water wells up in Imani’s eyes and I don’t want to cause her any pain. I close my eyes as the needle penetrates her skin.

A month later

I’m entering the Clinic, face flushed from the coldness of late autumn and eyes raw red from lack of sleep, when Mrs Carmine, head of the clinic and my supervisor, stops me in the entrance hall.

“Nancy, I need a moment,” she orders, narrowing her eyes at me. Carmine smiles and it’s as frosty as ice on windowpanes in the dead of winter.

“Of course, Mrs Carmine. If it’s about the mess-”

“It’s not,” she cuts in sharply, a dagger knifing through my words. “It’s a matter regarding a patient – Imani Johnson.” An image of Imani smiling at me for the first time flashes before me like a hologram. “She’s on birth control shots, but I’m not convinced it’s enough.”

“But Mrs Carmine, she’s only eleven. She’s so young,” I reply, vehemently.

Carmine arches her eyebrows. “She’s coloured and lives in a poor neighbourhood. We need to keep her safe. That’s what you want, right?”

“Y-yes, I always want her to be safe...” I mumble, trailing off.

“The tubal ligation operation is happening at noon at Jefferson Hospital. I’ll meet you there.”

Tubal ligation? I can’t deny I was confused – confused, not worried. “But Ma’am, Imani’s probably never even talked to boys, she’s so young.”

“We need to step in before it’s too late,” Carmine says, gravely. She doesn’t take her eyes off me, like I’m a specimen being examined under a microscope. Carmine leans in towards me and her pungent fruity perfume hits me. “Nancy, you haven’t been at the clinic for long. Your probation period has only just started. If you cooperate, your position could be made permanent. Very soon.”

My probation. It’s been weighing on me for too long. Carmine’s eyes have followed me throughout my time at the clinic, quietly scrutinising me for any evidence showing I’m not up to scratch. My job constantly on the line. It’s between me and the poverty line. I need it to eat three square meals a day, to pay for my younger sister’s education.

I should trust Carmine – she’s an experienced nurse and surely she wants the best for Imani?

There is a fluttering in my chest as I reply. “Mrs Carmine, I’ll collect Imani now.”

“Oh, and Nancy, if the mother asks why you’re taking the girl, just say it’s a routine check-up. Better not to worry her.” Carmine smiles widely and I could challenge her.

But I don’t.

My mouth closes as quickly as I opened it.

I walk towards my car, unaware of the severity of what I am complicit in... in... I can’t even write it.

Sterilisation.

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“You’ll pick Imani up from Jefferson Hospital at six.”

Mrs Johnson hugs Imani, caressing her daughter’s hair lovingly. “Alright, you be good Imani,” Mrs Johnson says fondly.

Fifteen minutes later, Imani and I race to the hospital doors. “I win, I win!” she cries out, laughing.

“You win!” I exclaim, hugging her. “Want to go to the park after this is over?”

“Yes!”

My smile dissipates into a frown once I notice Carmine standing in the reception, lips curling. Imani sees Carmine and rushes to hug her. I shudder when Carmine wipes her hands on her dress where Imani touched her. Noticing this, Imani's eyes droop and she lowers her head defeatedly.

"The doctor is waiting," Carmine announces. "I need to wash my hands," she whispers to me, detestable disgust dripping through her voice like sticky phlegm.

We walk to the operating room and are greeted by a doctor who hands Carmine a consent form. Carmine signs it without even glancing at it, immediately handing it to me. "Sign below," she instructs, her snow white teeth flashing in the light.

"Do I have to?" I ask, drumming my fingers incessantly.

"Don't keep the kind doctor waiting, Nancy," Carmine replies, shoving the pen into my hand.

Imani sits on a hospital bed so huge it threatens to swallow her up.

Remember what's at stake, Nancy.

I scribble my signature onto the form.

I, Nancy Sullivan, consent to the sterilisation of Imani Johnson.

Imani puts on a too-white hospital gown so big it hangs off her and she bites her lip restlessly. The doctor is preparing for the operation, Carmine hovering over him like a hawk waiting for its prey. "Nancy, I don't like this," Imani whispers, her fragile body trembling.

The first time she's said my name.

Yet, at this crucial moment, I see what I've been conditioned to see: a young, helpless girl who from the moment she was born never stood a chance in this world. A coloured girl who

doesn't deserve to have a child. I push her hand off my arm and fetch the *kind* doctor a cup of water. There are no tears because my heart has been ripped out of me and been replaced by a pumping machine.

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An hour later

I watch as general anaesthetic is injected into Imani's arm and she wilts onto the bed, helpless. I watch as the doctor inserts a needle into Imani's stomach and takes out his pair of long, searing scissors as if he's about to butcher a steak. My lips are cracked dry. I don't utter one word the whole time this is happening.

Chop, snip, cut, chop.

Butcher, butcher, butcher.

Blood, blood, blood.

Dizzy, dizzy, dizzy.

I try to stand but I'm teetering dangerously on my heels. The doctor announces that he's finished after what seems like a lifetime and Carmine claps her hands together excitedly.

Imani wakes up from her stupor and immediately starts screaming. A ferocious scream, so impossibly loud in such a tiny girl. It's a scream of immense pain, a lion's roar.

"Shut up, child!" Carmine bellows, but Imani doesn't stop. She's in too much pain.

"Mrs Carmine, she's in pain!" I exclaim, rushing to Imani's bed. Imani is whimpering now, shivering and shaking.

That's when I see blood pouring out of her. "Mrs Carmine, I'm begging you, Imani's bleeding!"

Somehow this plea for help cuts through my hard exterior and forces me to realise the entirety of what I have done.

Carmine grimaces. I hold in my breath as she shakes Imani hard, not stopping until Imani's desperate cries subside into quiet raindrop tears.

Suddenly, I can't bear this anymore.

How stupid

I've been

how naïve

how complicit.

The guilt crashes down on me, boulders falling from a cliff, and I cannot bring my pathetic self to face it.

I run out the room.

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The vomit hits the sink with a splash and I splash water over my face to rid of it.

My palms are clammy, face drenched in tears.

I've been biting my lip so much it's bleeding. Bleeding like Imani is bleeding.

They cut her tubes. Took them right out of her.

I did it to be off probation.

I did it because it *seemed* like the *right* thing to do.

For me. To keep afloat.

For Imani.

For Imani – what did I ever do for her except hurt her? Heck, I gained her trust. I made her think I cared about her, and I know I did.

So why did I do it?

I wipe my face of its tears and shakily walk out of the toilet. I can't stay there forever. The taste of warm blood, sweat and saliva swirls through my mouth and makes me want to gag again, but I can't go back to that sink.

I've been there for three whole hours.

I have a headache so burning I'm afraid my head will split open.

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I enter the hospital room where Imani is lying, quietly moaning. Carmine is speaking to the doctor in hushed tones. I gently hug Imani and look into her eyes and see a ghost of who she was before the operation. Eyes grey, full of insurmountable pain, skin pulled taut over her face. Wet with tears.

The door creaks on its hinges and Mrs Johnson appears in the doorframe. Her eyes widen in shock as she sees Imani on the hospital bed. "Get your hands off my daughter!" she bellows, and I stop cradling Imani. "What have you done?" Mrs Johnson asks.

She's staring directly at me.

What have you done?

"I-I-I..." I close my eyes because once again I'm dizzy.

My head hits the hospital bed.

We gave your daughter a tubal ligation to prevent any pregnancies in the future, Carmine responds.

How could you

It will help the girl no doubt she would otherwise not be able to control herself

Is she not worthy of having a child

I was completely justified

What did you do

Mummy's here be brave

Who consented to this

Nurse Nancy signed

no, don't expose my guilt

imani

mama it hurts so much

what have you done

this guilt cuts me to the core

scars

blood

scissors

cut, cut, cut

scars never heal