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# SWAMP NURSE

*What's the best hope for the first child of a poor mother?*

**By Katherine Boo**

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*Luwana Marts, a “nurse–visitor,” with Maggie Lander, her daughter, Maia, and Maia’s father, José.* Photograph by Alec Soth for The New Yorker / Magnum

In the swamps of Louisiana, late autumn marks the end of the hurricane and the sugarcane seasons—a time for removing plywood from windows and burning residues of harvest in the fields. Then begins the season of crayfish and, nine months having passed since the revelry of Mardi Gras, a season of newborn Cajuns. Among the yield of infants in the autumn of 2004 was a boy named Daigan James Plaisance Theriot, and, on the morning of Daigan’s thirtieth day of life, he was seated next to a bag of raw chickens in the back of an Oldsmobile Cutlass. His mother, a teen-ager named Alexis, was in front, squeezed between her younger sister and her sister’s latest beau, a heavily tattooed man who had just been released from maximum-security prison. The car came down a road that begins with a bayou and ends in dented trailers, and stopped at a small wooden house.

When Alexis’s sister leaned into the back seat to fetch the poultry, the young man, grinning, slipped a hand down the back of her jeans. Alexis stared at the couple for a moment, then pushed them aside to pick up Daigan. Alexis’s hair was long and streaked with pink, and her face was a knot of frustration. As Daigan began to cry, she crossed the yard denouncing in absentia his father, whom she called Big Head: “If I see him, I will hurt him—Big Head asking for it now.” When she reached the porch, which was crammed with auto parts and porcelain toilets, she fell silent, then forced a smile. Amid the fixtures stood a tall black nurse.

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