

"Hela?" I asked Gary. "You're saying Hela is her spiritual body?"

Gary smiled and nodded.

In that moment, reading those passages, I understood completely how some of the Lackses could believe, without doubt, that Henrietta had been chosen by the Lord to become an immortal being. If you believe the Bible is the literal truth, the immortality of Henrietta's cells makes perfect sense. *Of course* they were growing and surviving decades after her death, *of course* they floated through the air, and *of course* they'd led to cures for diseases and been launched into space. Angels are like that. The Bible tells us so.

For Deborah and her family—and surely many others in the world—that answer was so much more concrete than the explanation offered by science: that the immortality of Henrietta's cells had something to do with her telomeres and how HPV interacted with her DNA. The idea that God chose Henrietta as an angel who would be reborn as immortal cells made a lot more sense to them than the explanation Deborah had read years earlier in Victor McKusick's genetics book, with its clinical talk of Hela's "atypical histology" and "unusually malignant behavior." It used phrases like "the tumor's singularity" and called the cells "a reservoir of morphologic, biochemical, and other information."

Jesus told his followers, "I give them eternal life, and they shall never die." Plain, simple, to the point.

"You better be careful," Gary told me. "Pretty soon you're gonna find yourself converted."

"I doubt it," I told him, and we both laughed.

He slid the Bible from my hands and flipped to another passage, then handed it back, pointing at one sentence: "Why do you who are here find it impossible to believe that God raises the dead?"

"You catch my drift?" he said, smiling a mischievous grin.

I nodded, and Gary closed the Bible in my hands.

1920s · 1930s · 1940s · 1950s · 1960s · 1970s · 1980s · 1990s · 2000s

2001

37

"Nothing to Be Scared About"

When Deborah got to her doctor's office, her blood pressure and blood sugar were so high, her doctor was amazed she hadn't had a stroke or heart attack while we were in Clover. With levels like hers, he said, she could still have one any minute. Suddenly her strange behavior on the trip seemed less strange. Confusion, panic, and incoherent speech are all symptoms of extremely high blood pressure and blood sugar, which can lead to heart attack and stroke. So is redness and swelling, which could explain why her red welts didn't go away despite all the Benadryl she drank.

The doctor told her she needed to avoid stress completely, so we decided she should stop coming on research trips with me. But she insisted I call her from the road to tell her what she was missing. For the next several months, as I continued my research, I told Deborah only the good things I found: stories about Henrietta dancing and watching the boys play baseball at Cliff's house, details about her family history from county records and wills.

But we both knew the break from Hela wouldn't last—Deborah was still scheduled to give a talk at the National Foundation for

Cancer Research conference in honor of Henrietta. She was determined to do it, even though she was terrified by the idea of getting up on stage, so she started spending her days planning her speech.

One afternoon, in the midst of preparing for the conference, she called me to say she'd decided she wanted to go to school. "I keep thinking, maybe if I understood some science, then the story about my mother and sister wouldn't scare me so much," she said. "So I'm just gonna do it." Within days, she'd called several local community centers and found one that offered adult education classes, and signed up to take math and reading placement tests.

"Once I get tenth-grade level, I'm ready to go on to college!" she told me. "Can you imagine? Then I can understand all that science about my mother!" She thought about becoming a dental assistant, but was leaning toward radiation technologist so she could study cancer and help patients who were getting radiation treatment like her mother.

As the conference approached, Deborah was calm, but I wasn't. I kept asking, "Are you sure you want to do this?" and "How's your blood pressure?" and "Does your doctor know you're doing this?" She kept telling me she was fine, that even her doctor said so.

Deborah took her placement tests for school and registered for the classes she'd need to get herself up to tenth-grade level and qualify for the community college classes she wanted to take. She called me, giddy, screaming, "I start a week from today!"

But everything else seemed to be spiraling in the wrong direction. A few days before the conference, Lawrence and Zakariyya called yelling again about how she shouldn't talk to anyone, and saying they wanted to sue every scientist who'd ever worked on Henrietta's cells. Sonny told them to stay out of it, saying, "All she doin now is goin places to speak and learn—y'all don't want to do that, so just leave her alone." But Lawrence insisted Deborah give him the records she'd gathered on their mother.

Then her son Alfred called from prison, saying he'd finally be going on trial right after the conference, and the charges now included

armed robbery and attempted murder. That same day, Deborah got a call about one of Lawrence's sons who'd been arrested for robbery and was in the same jail as Alfred.

"The Devil's been busy, girl," she told me. "I love them boys, but I'm not gonna let nobody upset me right now."

The next morning was September 11, 2001.

I called Deborah around eight in the morning, saying I was leaving my home in Pittsburgh, and headed to the conference in Washington, D.C. Less than an hour later, the first plane hit the World Trade Center. A reporter friend called my cell phone and told me the news, saying, "Don't go to D.C., it's not safe." I turned my car around as the second plane hit, and by the time I got home, the TV was filled with footage of the Pentagon's wreckage and buildings throughout D.C. being evacuated, including the Ronald Reagan Building, where the conference reception to honor Henrietta was supposed to be held.

I called Deborah, and she answered in a panic. "It's just like Pearl Harbor all over again," she said. "And Oklahoma! There's no way I'm going to D.C. now." But there was no need. With airlines and Washington shut down, the NCFR canceled the Henrietta Lacks conference, with no plan to reschedule.

For the next several days, Deborah and I talked many times as we both struggled to make sense of the attacks, and Deborah tried to accept the idea that the conference had been canceled. She was depressed, and worried that it would take another ten years for someone to honor her mother.

Then, on Sunday morning, five days after September 11, Deborah went to church to pray for Alfred, whose trial was only a few days away, and to ask that the Henrietta Lacks conference be rescheduled. She sat in the front pew in a red dress suit, hands folded in her lap, listening to her husband preach about September 11. About an hour into the service, Deborah realized she couldn't move her arm.

Davon, who was now nine years old, always sat in the choir and watched his grandmother during church. For a moment, as Deborah's face began to sag and her body slumped, Davon thought maybe she'd

accidentally taken her sleeping pill before coming to church. Deborah saw his little eyes watching her, and she tried to wave, to tell him something was wrong, but she couldn't move.

At the end of the service, the congregation stood, and Deborah's mouth twisted as she fought to scream. The only sound came from Davon, who yelled, "Something's wrong with my grandma!" He sprinted from the choir platform just as Deborah fell forward onto one knee. Davon screamed, "Grandpop! Grandpop!" Pullum took one look at Deborah and yelled, "Stroke!"

The second Davon heard the word *stroke*, he grabbed Deborah's pocketbook, dug out her car keys, and ran to the car. He opened all the doors wide, laid the passenger seat back as flat as it would go, and jumped behind the wheel, feet dangling far above the pedals. Then he started the engine—so Pullum could just climb in and start driving.

Soon they were speeding along the winding road from church, Deborah slipping in and out of consciousness in the passenger seat while Davon leaned over her, screaming, "Don't you go to sleep, Ma!" and slapping her hard across the face every time she closed her eyes. Pullum kept yelling for him to stop, saying, "Boy, you gonna kill your grandma!" But Davon wouldn't stop.

When they got to the fire station down the road, medics pulled Deborah from the car, gave her oxygen and injections, ran an IV to her arm, and loaded her into an ambulance. As the ambulance drove away, a fireman told Davon he was smart to smack Deborah in the car.

"Boy, you did your grandmother a favor," the fireman said. "You just saved her life."

One of the first things Deborah said when she regained consciousness was, "I have to take a test." The hospital staff thought she meant she needed a CT scan or a blood test, but she meant a test for school.

When the doctors finally let Deborah's family see her, Davon,

Pullum, and Deborah's daughter, Tonya, filed in to find Deborah sitting propped up in bed, eyes wide. Tired, but alive. Her left side was still weak, and she couldn't move her arms well, but the doctors said she was lucky and would probably recover completely.

"Praise the Lord!" Pullum yelled.

A few days later, when Deborah got out of the hospital, she left me a voice mail. It was my birthday, and we'd planned to meet in Clover that day. "Happy birthday, Boo," she said, her voice utterly calm. "I'm sorry I can't come celebrate with you down in the country, but I had me a couple strokes the other day. It was bound to happen, but praise the Lord, I'm okay. Can't talk too good out one side of my mouth, but doctor says I'm gonna be fine. You keep reportin, and don't you worry about me—I feel good. Better than since before I found out they took my mother cells. I feel so light, you know? It lifted my burden. I thank the Lord for what happened."

The doctor told Deborah a second stroke was almost always worse than the first. "Trust me," he said, "you don't want to do this again." He told her she needed to educate herself, learn the warning signs, know how to bring down her blood pressure and control her blood sugar.

"Just another reason I got to keep goin on and get to school," she told me. "I already signed up for a diabetes class and a stroke class to get more understanding about that. Maybe I can take a nutrition class to learn how to eat good, too."

The stroke seemed to ease tension in the family too: Deborah's brothers began calling every day to see how she was doing, and Zakariyya even said he wanted to visit. Deborah hoped this meant her brothers would find peace with her desire for information about their mother.

She called me laughing, saying, "Girl, I got to get my rest so we can get back on the road and do more research before the trail get cold! But from now on, I ride with you. Everything will be all right. That's what I woke up knowin. I just gotta move a little slower, pay attention to things, and not let myself get scared. Cause there's

nothin to be scared about with my mother and them cells. I don't want nothin to keep me from learnin no more."

But in fact there was something that would keep Deborah from learning: she didn't have enough money. Her social security check barely covered her living expenses, let alone classes and books. She came up with several ideas for making money, including a colorful disposable baby bottle with premeasured amounts of water and formula—something a busy mom could shake with one hand while holding a baby. She drew careful diagrams and sent them off with a patent application, but she dropped the idea when she found out it would cost several thousand dollars to make the prototype.

Eventually Deborah stopped thinking about going to school herself and instead started focusing on making sure her grandchildren and grandnieces and grandnephews got educated.

"It's too late for Henrietta's children," she told me one day over the phone. "This story ain't about us anymore. It's about the new Lacks children."

Two months after Deborah's stroke, we went to Pullum's church to watch him baptize Sonny's nine-month-old baby granddaughter, Jabrea. There was hardly an empty seat when the sermon started. Pullum stood behind the pulpit wrapped in a long black robe with red crosses on its front, sweat beading his forehead. A blind piano player tapped his way to the piano and began to play as the congregation sang along: "*Stand by me, while I run this race, for I don't want to run this race in vain.*"

Pullum pointed at me and grinned a mischievous grin.

"Come stand by me!" he yelled.

"Oh girl, you in trouble now," Deborah whispered, elbowing me in the ribs.

"I am *not* going up there," I whispered back. "Just pretend like we can't see him."

Pullum waved his arms over his head, then pointed at the pulpit for me to join him. Deborah and I stared at the choir behind him, our faces blank, pretending not to see. Pullum rolled his eyes, then yelled into the microphone, "We have a guest with us today! Rebecca Skloot, would you stand for us this morning?"

Deborah whispered, "Uh-oh," as the entire congregation followed his pointing finger to look at me.

I stood.

"Sister Rebecca Skloot," Pullum said, "I know this might not be the right time for you, but it's the right time for me."

"Amen," Deborah said from her seat beside me, her voice suddenly serious.

"John Hopkins took my wife's mother's body and used what they needed," he yelled into the microphone. "They sold her cells all over the world! Now I'm gonna have Sister Rebecca Skloot come and talk about what she doing with my wife and them cells."

I'd never sat in a congregation before, let alone spoken in front of one. My face flushed and my throat clenched as Deborah pushed my back to get me moving. Pullum told the congregation to give me a hand, and the room erupted in cheers. I walked to the pulpit and took the microphone from Pullum, who patted me on the back and whispered in my ear, "Just preach it in your own words." So I did. I told the story of Henrietta's cells and what they'd done for science, my voice growing louder as the congregation yelled "Amen!" and "Hallelujah!" and "Lord have mercy!"

"Most people think her name was Helen Lane," I said. "But she was Henrietta Lacks. She had five children, and one of them is sitting right over there." I pointed at Deborah. She was holding Jabrea in her lap now, grinning, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Pullum stepped forward and took the microphone, putting his arm around my shoulders and squeezing so I wouldn't walk away.

"I was very angry with Sister Rebecca when she started calling us," he said. "So was my wife. Then finally we said okay, but we told

her, 'You need to talk to us like we're regular folk. You need to tell us what's goin' on.'"

Then he looked at Deborah. "The world gonna know who your mother is. But you and Sonny and the rest of Henrietta's children, they probably won't see real benefits from them cells." Deborah nodded as Pullum raised his long robed arm and pointed to Jabrea, a breathakingly beautiful baby dressed in white lace with a bow in her hair.

"This child will someday know that her great-grandmother Henrietta helped the world!" Pullum yelled. Then he pointed around the room at Davon and Jabrea's other cousins, saying, "So will that child . . . and that child . . . and that child. This is their story now. They need to take hold of it and let it teach them they can change the world too."

He raised his arms above his head and yelled hallelujah. Baby Jabrea waved her hands and let out a loud happy screech, and the congregation yelled amen.

1920s 1930s 1940s 1950s 1960s 1970s 1980s 1990s 2000s

2009

38

The Long Road to Clover

On January 18, 2009, on a cold, sunny Sunday, I pulled off the highway onto the road into Clover. As I passed one green field after the next, I thought, *I don't remember the road into Clover being so long.* Then I realized I'd just passed the Clover post office—it was across the street from a big, empty field. *But it used to be across the street from the rest of downtown.* I didn't understand. If that was the post office, where was everything else? I kept driving for a moment, thinking, *Did they move the post office?* Then it hit me.

Clover was gone.

I jumped out of the car and ran into the field, to the spot where the old movie theater once stood—where Henrietta and Cliff once watched Buck Jones films. It was gone. So was Gregory and Martin's grocery and Abbott's clothing store. I stood with my hand over my mouth, staring in disbelief at the empty field until I realized there were splinters of brick and small white plaster tiles pressed into the dirt and grass. I knelt down and began collecting them, filling my pockets with what remained of the town of Henrietta's youth.