

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 calls." 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 reach 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.

I have to send some of this to Deborah, I thought. She's not going to believe Clover is gone.

Standing on Main Street, staring at the corpse of Clover's downtown, it felt like everything related to Henrietta's history was vanishing. In 2002, just one year after Gary had wrapped his hands around Deborah's head and passed the burden of the cells on to me, he'd died suddenly at the age of fifty-two from a heart attack. He'd been walking toward Cootie's car, carrying his best suit to put in the trunk so it wouldn't get wrinkled on the way to Cootie's mother's funeral. A few months later, Deborah called to say that Cliff's brother Fred had died from throat cancer. Next it was Day, who died of a stroke, surrounded by his family. Then Cootie, who killed himself with a shotgun to the head. Each time someone died, Deborah called crying.

I thought the calls would never end.

"Death just following us and this story everywhere we go," she'd say. "But I'm hangin' in there."

In the years that followed the baptism, not much changed for the Lackses. Bobbette and Lawrence went on with their lives. Lawrence didn't think about the cells much anymore, though occasionally he and Zakariyya still entertained the idea of suing Hopkins.

Sonny had a quintuple bypass in 2003, when he was fifty-six years old—the last thing he remembered before falling unconscious under the anesthesia was a doctor standing over him saying his mother's cells were one of the most important things that had ever happened to medicine. Sonny woke up more than \$125,000 in debt because he didn't have health insurance to cover the surgery.

Zakariyya got kicked out of his assisted-living facility, then a Section Eight housing project, where he smashed a forty-ounce beer bottle over a woman's back and pushed her through a plate-glass window. He sometimes worked with Sonny, driving a truck.

In 2004 Deborah left her husband and moved into an assisted-living apartment of her own, which she'd longed to do for years—she

was tired of fighting with Pullum, plus their row house had too many stairs. After she moved out, to cover her bills, she went to work full-time for her daughter Tonya, who'd opened an assisted-living home in her house. Each morning Deborah left the assisted-living facility where she lived, and spent the day cooking and cleaning for the five or six men living in her daughter's home. She quit after two years because her body couldn't take walking up and down stairs all day.

When Deborah officially divorced Pullum in 2006, she had to itemize her income as part of a request for the judge to waive her filing fee. She listed \$732 per month from Social Security Disability and \$10 per month in food stamps. Her checking account was empty.

When I went back to visit Clover and found Main Street razed, it had been a few months since Deborah and I talked. During our last call, I'd told her that the book was done, and she'd said she wanted me to come to Baltimore and read it to her, so I could talk her through the hard parts. I'd called several times since to plan the visit, but she hadn't returned my calls. I left messages, but didn't push her. *She needs some space to prepare herself*, I thought. *She'll call when she's ready*. When I got home from Clover, I called again saying, "I brought something back for you from Clover—you won't believe what's happened down there." But she didn't call back.

On May 21, 2009, after leaving many messages, I called again. Her voice-mail box was full. So I dialed Sonny's number to say something I'd said to him many times over the years: "Will you tell your sister to stop messing around and return my calls? I really need to talk to her. Our time is running out." When he answered the phone I said, "Hey Sonny, it's Rebecca," and for a moment the line went silent.

"I've been trying to find your phone number," he said, and my eyes filled with tears. I knew there was only one reason Sonny would need to call me.

Deborah had gone over to her niece's house on Mother's Day, a week and a half before my call—Sonny had made crab cakes for her, the grandchildren were there, and everyone laughed and told stories. After dinner he took Deborah back to the apartment she loved and

said good night. She stayed home the next day, ate the leftover crab cakes Sonny sent home with her, and talked to Davon on the phone—he was learning to drive and wanted to come over in the morning to practice. The next morning when he called, she didn't answer. A few hours later Sonny dropped by to check on her, as he did nearly every day, and found her in her bed, arms crossed on her chest, smiling. He thought she was sleeping, so he touched her arm, saying, "Dale, time to get up." But she wasn't sleeping.

"She's in a better place now," Sonny told me. "A heart attack just after Mother's Day—she wouldn't have wanted it another way. She's suffered a lot in life, and now she's happy."

After finding Deborah in her bed, Sonny cut a lock of her hair and tucked it inside their mother's Bible with the locks of hair from Henrietta and Elsie. "She's with them now," he told me. "You know there's no place in the world she'd rather be."

Deborah was happy when she died: her grandson Little Alfred was now twelve, headed into the eighth grade, and doing well in school. Lawrence and Bobbet's granddaughter Erika had gotten into Penn State after writing an admissions essay about how her grandmother Henrietta's story had inspired her to study science. After transferring to the University of Maryland, she earned her bachelor's degree and entered a master's program in psychology, becoming the first of Henrietta's descendants to attend graduate school. At seventeen, Deborah's grandson Davon was about to graduate from high school. He'd promised Deborah he'd go to college and continue learning about Henrietta until he knew everything there was to know about her. "That really made me feel okay about dying whenever my time come," she'd told me.

As Sonny told me the news of Deborah's death, I sat staring at a framed picture of her that's been on my desk for nearly a decade. In it, her eyes are hard, her brow creased and angry. She's wearing a pink shirt and holding a bottle of pink Benadryl. Everything else is red: her fingernails, the welts on her face, the dirt beneath her feet.

I stared at that picture for days after her death as I listened to

hours of tape of us talking, and read the notes I'd taken the last time I saw her. At one point during that visit, Deborah, Davon, and I sat side by side on her bed, our backs to the wall, legs outstretched. We'd just finished watching two of Deborah's favorite movies back-to-back: *Roots* and the animated movie *Spirit*, about a wild horse who's captured by the U.S. Army. She wanted us to watch them together so we could see the similarities between the two—*Spirit* fought for his freedom just as Kunta Kinte did in *Roots*, she said.

"People was always tryin to keep them down and stop them from doing what they want just like people always doin with me and the story about my mother," she said.

When the films ended, Deborah jumped out of bed and put in yet another video. She pressed play and a younger version of herself appeared on the screen. It was one of nearly a dozen tapes the BBC had recorded that didn't make it into the documentary. On the screen, Deborah sat on a couch with her mother's Bible open in her lap, her hair brown instead of gray, her eyes bright, with no circles beneath them. As she talked, her hand stroked the long lock of her mother's hair.

"I often visit her hair in the Bible," Deborah said into the camera. "When I think about this hair, I'm not as lonely. I imagine, what would it be like to have a mother to go to, to laugh, cry, hug. God willing, I can be with her someday. I'm looking forward to that."

The younger Deborah said she was glad that when she died, she wouldn't have to tell her mother the story of everything that happened with the cells and the family, because Henrietta already knew. "She's been watching us and seeing all that's going on down here," Deborah said. "She's waiting patiently for us. There won't be any words, just a lot of hugging and crying. I really believe she's up in heaven, and she's doin okay, because she did enough suffering for everyone down here. On the other side, they say there's no pain or suffering. . . . I want to be there with my mother."

Sitting between me and Davon on the bed, Deborah nodded at her younger self on the screen and said, "Heaven looks just like Clover,

Virginia. My mother and I always loved it down there more than anywhere else in the world."

She stroked Davon's hair. "I don't know how I'm going to go," she said. "I just hope it's nice and calm. But I tell you one thing, I don't want to be immortal if it mean living forever, cause then everybody else just die and get old in front of you while you stay the same, and that's just sad." Then she smiled. "But maybe I'll come back as some Hel a cells like my mother, that way we can do good together out there in the world." She paused and nodded again. "I think I'd like that."

Where They Are Now

Alfred Carter Jr., Deborah's son, is in prison, serving a thirty-year sentence for robbery with a dangerous and deadly weapon, and first-degree assault with a handgun. While incarcerated, he went through drug and alcohol rehabilitation and taught GED classes to other inmates for twenty-five dollars a month. In 2006 he wrote to the judge who sentenced him, saying he wanted to pay back the money he stole and needed to know who to send it to.

Dr. Sir Lord Keenan Kester Cofield's whereabouts are unknown. Most recently, he served several years in prison for trying to buy jewelry at Macy's with a stolen check, and filed several lawsuits while incarcerated. In 2008, after being released from prison, Cofield filed a seventy-five-page lawsuit—his last to date—that a judge called "incomprehensible." He sued 226 parties for more than \$10 billion, and argued that past decisions in all his cases should be reversed in his favor, and that anyone who'd printed his name without permission should be included in his suit, because he'd copyrighted his name. I was never able to get in touch with him to interview him for this book.