

I shook my head no.

"Voodoo," he whispered. "Some peoples is sayin Henrietta's sickness and them cells was man- or woman-made, others say it was doctor-made."

As he talked, the preacher's voice on the radio grew louder, saying, "The Lord, He's gonna help you, but you got to call me right now. If my daughter or sister had cancer! I would get on that phone, cause time's running out!"

Cootie yelled over the radio. "Doctors say they never heard of another case like Henrietta's! I'm sure it was either man-made or spirit-made, one of the two."

Then he told me about spirits in Lacks Town that sometimes visited people's houses and caused disease. He said he'd seen a man spirit in his house, sometimes leaning against the wall by his woodstove, other times by the bed. But the most dangerous spirit, he told me, was the several-ton headless hog he saw roaming Lacks Town years ago with no tail. Links of broken chain dangled from its bloodstained neck, dragging along dirt roads and clanking as it walked.

"I saw that thing crossin the road to the family cemetery," Cootie told me. "That spirit stood right there in the road, its chain swingin and swayin in the breeze." Cootie said it looked at him and stomped its foot, kicking red dust all around its body, getting ready to charge. Just then, a car came barreling down the road with only one headlight.

"The car came along, shined a light right on it, I swear it was a hog," Cootie said. Then the spirit vanished. "I can still hear that chain draggin." Cootie figured that car saved him from getting some new disease.

"Now I don't know for sure if a spirit got Henrietta or if a doctor did it," Cootie said, "but I do know that her cancer wasn't no regular cancer, cause regular cancer don't keep on growing after a person die."

1951

11

"The Devil of Pain Itself"

By September, Henrietta's body was almost entirely taken over by tumors. They'd grown on her diaphragm, her bladder, and her lungs. They'd blocked her intestines and made her belly swell like she was six months pregnant. She got one blood transfusion after another because her kidneys could no longer filter the toxins from her blood, leaving her nauseated from the poison of her own body. She got so much blood that one doctor wrote a note in her record stopping all transfusions "until her deficit with the blood bank was made up."

When Henrietta's cousin Emmett Lacks heard somebody at Sparrows Point say Henrietta was sick and needed blood, he threw down the steel pipe he was cutting and ran looking for his brother and some friends. They were working men, with steel and asbestos in their lungs and years' worth of hard labor under their calluses and cracked fingernails. They'd all slept on Henrietta's floor and eaten her spaghetti when they first came to Baltimore from the country, and anytime money ran low. She'd ridden the streetcar to and from Sparrows Point to make sure they didn't get lost during their first weeks in the city.

She'd packed their lunches until they found their feet, then sent extra food to work with Day so they didn't go hungry between paychecks. She'd teased them about needing wives and girlfriends, and sometimes helped them find good ones. Emmett had stayed at Henrietta's so long, he had his own bed in the hallway at the top of the stairs. He'd only moved out a few months earlier.

The last time Emmett saw Henrietta, he'd taken her to visit Elsie in Crownsville. They found her sitting behind barbed wire in the corner of a yard outside the brick barracks where she slept. When she saw them coming she made her birdlike noise, then ran to them and just stood, staring. Henrietta wrapped her arms around Elsie, looked her long and hard in the eyes, then turned to Emmett.

"She look like she doin better," Henrietta said. "Yeah, Elsie look nice and clean and everything." They sat in silence for a long time. Henrietta seemed relieved, almost desperate, to see Elsie looking okay. That was the last time she would see her daughter—Emmett figures she knew she was saying goodbye. What she didn't know was that no one would ever visit Elsie again.

A few months later, when Emmett heard Henrietta needed blood, he and his brother and six friends piled into a truck and went straight to Hopkins. A nurse led them through the colored ward, past rows of hospital beds to the one where Henrietta lay. She'd withered from 140 pounds to about 100. Sadie and Henrietta's sister Gladys sat beside her, their eyes swollen from too much crying and not enough sleep. Gladys had come from Clover by Greyhound as soon as she got word Henrietta was in the hospital. The two had never been close, and people still teased Gladys, saying she was too mean and ugly to be Henrietta's sister. But Henrietta was family, so Gladys sat beside her, clutching a pillow in her lap.

A nurse stood in the corner watching as the eight big men crowded around the bed. When Henrietta tried to move her arm to lift herself, Emmett saw the straps around her wrists and ankles, attaching her to the bed frame.

"What you doin here?" Henrietta moaned.

"We come to get you well," Emmett said to a chorus of yeahs from the other men.

Henrietta didn't say a word. She just lay her head back on the pillow.

Suddenly her body went rigid as a board. She screamed as the nurse ran to the bed, tightening the straps around Henrietta's arms and legs to keep her from thrashing onto the floor as she'd done many times before. Gladys thrust the pillow from her lap into Henrietta's mouth, to keep her from biting her tongue as she convulsed in pain. Sadie cried and stroked Henrietta's hair.

"Lord," Emmett told me years later. "Henrietta rose up out that bed wailin like she been possessed by the devil of pain itself."

The nurse shoosed Emmett and his brothers out of the ward to the room designated for colored blood collection, where they'd donate eight pints of blood. As Emmett walked from Henrietta's bedside, he turned to look just as the fit began to pass and Gladys slid the pillow from Henrietta's mouth.

"That there's a memory I'll take to my grave," he told me years later. "When them pains hit, looked like her mind just said, *Henrietta, you best leave*. She was sick like I never seen. Sweetest girl you ever wanna meet, and prettier than anything. But them cells, boy, them cells of hers is somethin else. No wonder they never could kill them... That cancer was a terrible thing."

Soon after Emmett and his friends visited, at four o'clock on the afternoon of September 24, 1951, a doctor injected Henrietta with a heavy dose of morphine and wrote in her chart, "Discontinue all medications and treatments except analgesics." Two days later, Henrietta awoke terrified, disoriented, wanting to know where she was and what the doctors had been doing to her. For a moment she forgot her own name. Soon after that, she turned to Gladys and told her she was going to die.

"You make sure Day takes care of them children," Henrietta told

her sister, tears streaming down her face. "Especially my baby girl Deborah." Deborah was just over a year old when Henrietta went into the hospital. Henrietta had wanted to hold Deborah, to dress her in beautiful clothes and braid her hair, to teach her how to paint her nails, curl her hair, and handle men.

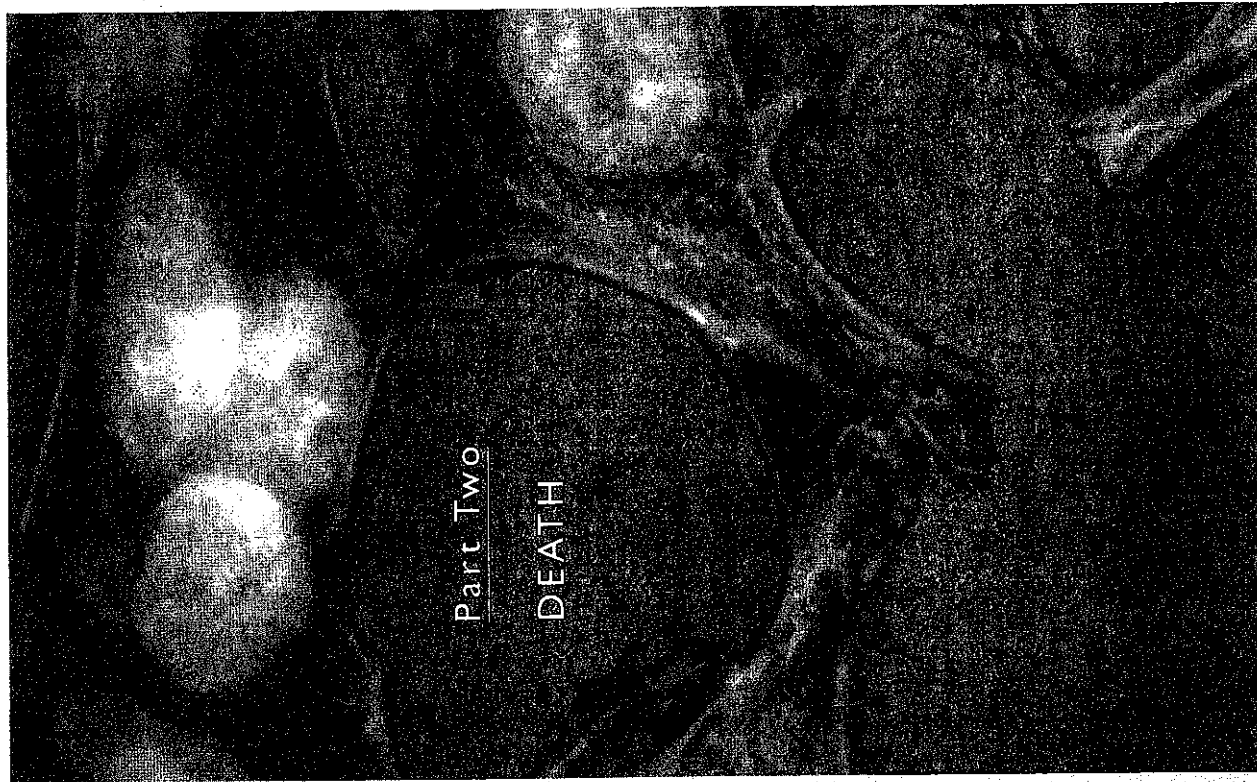
Henrietta looked at Gladys and whispered, "Don't you let anything bad happen to them children when I'm gone."

Then she rolled over, her back to Gladys, and closed her eyes.

Gladys slipped out of the hospital and onto a Greyhound back to Clover. That night, she called Day.

"Henrietta gonna die tonight," she told him. "She wants you to take care of them kids—I told her I'd let you know. Don't let nuthin happen to them."

Henrietta died at 12:15 a.m. on October 4, 1951.



Part Two

DEATH