

SATISFACTION. And until anybody makes an AGREEMENT or puts that on PAPER, they are NOT going to talk ANYMORE. Everybody's received some compensation but them, and that was they MOTHER. They just feel wrong about it. It's been a real long haul for my wife, and she really takes a trip on it. Used to be she just wanted John Hopkin to give her mother some credit and explain that cell stuff to where she understand what happened to her mother. But they ignored us, so now we just mad." Then he hung up on me.

A few days later, ten months after our first conversation, Deborah called me. When I answered the phone, she yelled, "Fine, I'll talk to you!" She didn't say who she was and didn't need to. "If I'm gonna do this, you got to promise me some things," she said. "First, if my mother is so famous in science history, you got to tell everybody to get her name right. She ain't no Helen Lane. And second, everybody always say Henrietta Lacks had four children. That ain't right, she had five children. My sister died and there's no leavin her out of the book. I know you gotta tell *all* the Lacks story and there'll be good and bad in that cause of my brothers. You gonna learn all that, I don't care. The thing I care about is, you gotta find out what happened to my mother and my sister, cause I need to know."

She took a deep breath, then laughed. "Get ready, girl," she said. "You got no idea what you gettin yourself into."

Deborah and I met on July 9, 2000, at a bed-and-breakfast on a cobblestone street corner near the harbor in Baltimore, in a neighborhood called Fell's Point. When she saw me standing in the lobby waiting for her, she pointed to her hair and said, "See this? I'm the gray child cause I'm the one doing all the worrying about our mother. That's why I wouldn't talk to you this last year. I swore I was never talkin to nobody about my mother again." She sighed. "But here I am... I hope I don't regret this."

Deborah was a substantial woman—about five feet tall and two

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A Village of
Henriettas

For nearly a year after our first conversation, Deborah refused to talk to me. I traveled back and forth to Clover, sitting on porches and walking the tobacco fields with Cliff, Cootie, and Gladys's son Gary. I dug through archives, church basements, and the abandoned, falling-down building where Henrietta went to school. While I was on the road, I'd leave messages for Deborah every few days, hoping to convince her that if she talked to me, we could learn about Henrietta together.

"Hey, I'm in your mother's tobacco field by the home-house," I told her. "I'm on the porch with Cousin Cliff, he says hi." "I found your mother's baptism records today." "Aunt Gladys is doing well after her stroke. She told me some great stories about your mom." I imagined Deborah leaning over her answering machine listening, dying to know what I'd found.

But she never picked up.

One day her husband, the Reverend James Pullum, answered the phone on the second ring and started yelling without saying hello: "They want to be assured that they going to get some MONETARY

hundred pounds. Her tight curls were less than an inch long and jet black, except for a thin streak of natural gray framing her face like a headband. She was fifty, but seemed both a decade older and younger at the same time. Her smooth light brown skin was dotted with big freckles and dimples, her eyes light and mischievous. She wore capri pants and Keds sneakers and moved slowly, leaning most of her weight on an aluminum cane.

She followed me to my room, where a large flat package covered in bright, flowered wrapping paper lay on the bed. I told her it was a gift for her from a young Hopkins cancer researcher named Christoph Lengauer. He'd e-mailed me a few months earlier in response to an article I'd published in *Johns Hopkins Magazine* after meeting the Lacks men. "I felt somehow bad for the Lacks family," Lengauer wrote. "They deserved better."

He'd been working with HeLa cells daily his whole career, he said, and now he couldn't get the story of Henrietta and her family out of his mind. As a Ph.D. student, he'd used HeLa to help develop something called *fluorescence in situ hybridization*, otherwise known as FISH, a technique for painting chromosomes with multicolored fluorescent dyes that shine bright under ultraviolet light. To the trained eye, FISH can uncover detailed information about a person's DNA. To the untrained eye, it simply creates a beautiful mosaic of colored chromosomes.

Christoph had framed a fourteen-by-twenty-inch print of Henrietta's chromosomes that he'd "painted" using FISH. It looked like a photograph of a night sky filled with multicolored fireflies glowing red, blue, yellow, green, purple, and turquoise.

"I want to tell them a little what HeLa means to me as a young cancer researcher, and how grateful I am for their donation years ago," he wrote. "I do not represent Hopkins, but I am part of it. In a way I might even want to apologize."

Deborah threw her black canvas tote bag onto the floor, tore the wrapping paper from the photo, then held the frame at arm's length in

front of her. She said nothing, just ran through a set of French doors onto a small patio to see the picture in the setting sunlight.

"They're beautiful!" she yelled from the porch. "I never knew they were so pretty!" She walked back inside clutching the picture, her cheeks flushed. "You know what's weird? The world got more pictures of my mother cells than it do of her. I guess that's why nobody knows who she is. Only thing left of her is them cells."

She sat down on the bed and said, "I want to go to research labs and seminars to learn what my mother cells did, talk to people that been cured of cancer." She started bouncing, excited like a little girl. "Just thinkin about that make me want to get back out there. But something always happens and I go back into hiding."

I told her Lengauer wanted her to come into his lab. "He wants to say thank you and show you your mother's cells in person."

Deborah traced her mother's chromosomes in the picture with her finger. "I do want to go see them cells, but I'm not ready yet," she said. "My father and my brothers should go too, but they think I'm crazy just comin down here. They always yellin about 'Them white folks gettin rich off our mother while we got nothin.'" Deborah sighed. "We ain't gonna get rich about any of this snuff on my mother cells. She our there helpin people in medicine and that's good, I just want the history to come out to where people know my mother, HeLa, was Henrietta Lacks. And I would like to find some information about my mother. I'm quite sure she breastfed me, but I never knew for sure. People won't talk about my mother or my sister. It's like the two of them never born."

Deborah grabbed her bag off the floor, and dumped its contents onto the bed. "This is what I got about my mother," she said, pointing to a pile on the bed. There were hours of unedited videotapes from the BBC documentary, a tattered English dictionary, a diary, a genetics textbook, many scientific journal articles, patent records, and unsent greeting cards, including several birthday cards she'd bought for Henrietta, and a Mother's Day card, which she grabbed off the pile.

"I carried this around in my purse for a long time," she said, handing it to me. The outside was white with pink flowers, and inside, in flowing script, the card said, "May the spirit of our Lord and savior be with you on this day on which you are honored for all the love you have given to your family and loved ones. With prayers and love. Happy Mother's Day." It was signed "Love, Deborah."

But mostly her bag was filled with ragged newspaper and magazine articles. She held up a story about her mother from the *Weekly World News* tabloid. It was headlined THE IMMORTAL WOMAN! and it ran between an article about a telepathic dog and another about a half-human, half-alligator child.

"When I saw this thing in the grocery store, it scared me half to death," Deborah told me. "I was like, what crazy thing they sayin happened to my mother now? Everybody always say Hopkins took black folks and experiment on them in the basement over there. No-body could prove it so I never did believe it really. But when I found out about my mother cells, I didn't know what to think except maybe all that stuff about them experimentin on people is true."

Just a few weeks earlier, Deborah told me, Day's new wife, Margaret, came home from a doctor's appointment screaming about something she'd seen in the basement at Hopkins. "She hit some wrong button on the elevator and it took her all the way down in the basement where it was dark," Deborah told me. "The door opened up and she looked straight ahead and saw all these cages. She started yellin, 'Dale, you not gonna believe it, but them cages was filled with man-sized rabbits!'"

Deborah laughed as she told me the story. "I didn't believe it. I was like, 'Man-sized rabbits?! You crazy!' I mean, who ever heard of a man-sized rabbit? But Margaret usually honest with me, so I know she saw something got her all scared. I guess anything possible."

Then, as though she was saying something as everyday as *It's supposed to rain tomorrow*, she said, "Scientists do all kinds of experiments and you never know what they doin. I still wonder how many people they got in London walkin around look just like my mother."

"What?" I said. "Why would there be women in London who look like your mother?"

"They did that cloning on my mother over there," she said, surprised I hadn't come across that fact in my research. "A reporter came here from England talking about they cloned a sheep. Now they got stuff about cloning my mother all over." She held up an article from *The Independent* in London and pointed at a circled paragraph: "Henrietta Lacks's cells thrived. In weight, they now far surpassed the person of their origin and there would probably be more than sufficient to populate a village of Henriettas." The writer joked that Henrietta should have put ten dollars in the bank in 1951, because if she had, her clones would be rich now.

Deborah raised her eyebrows at me like, *See? I told you!*

I started saying it was just Henrietta's cells scientists had cloned, not Henrietta herself. But Deborah waved her hand in my face, shushing me like I was talking nonsense, then fished a videocassette from the pile and held it up for me to see. It said *Jurassic Park* on the spine.

"I saw this movie a bunch of times," she said. "They talking about the genes and taking them from cells to bring that dinosaur back to life and I'm like, *Oh Lord, I got a paper on how they were doin that with my mother's cells too!*" She held up another videocassette, this one a made-for-TV movie called *The Clone*. In it, an infertility doctor secretly harvests extra embryos from one of his patients and uses them to create a colony of clones of the woman's son, who died young in an accident.

"That doctor took cells from that woman and made them into little boys look just like her child," Deborah told me. "That poor woman didn't even know about all the clones until she saw one walk out of a store. I don't know what I'd do if I saw one of my mother clones walkin around somewhere."

Deborah realized these movies were fiction, but for her the line between sci-fi and reality had blurred years earlier, when her father got that first call saying Henrietta's cells were still alive. Deborah

knew her mother's cells had grown like the Blob until there were so many of them they could wrap around the Earth several times. It sounded crazy, but it was true.

"You just never know," Deborah said, fishing two more articles from the pile and handing them to me. One was called HUMAN, PLANT CELLS FUSED: WALKING CARROTS NEXT? The other was MAN-ANIMAL CELLS BRED IN LAB. Both were about her mother's cells, and neither was science fiction.

"I don't know what they did," Deborah said, "but it all sound like *Jurassic Park* to me."

For the next three days, Deborah came to my B&B room each morning, sat on the bed, and unloaded her mind. When we needed a change of scenery, we rode water taxis and walked along the Baltimore Harbor. We ate crabs and burgers and fries and drove the city streets. We visited the houses she'd lived in as a child, most now boarded up with CONDEMNED signs out front. We spent day and night together as I soaked up as much of her story as I could, constantly worried she'd change her mind and stop talking to me. But in reality, it seemed now that Deborah had started talking, she might never stop again.

Deborah's was a world without silence. She yelled, punctuated most sentences with a raspy, high-pitched laugh, and maintained a running commentary on everything around her: "Look at the size of those trees!" "Isn't that car a nice green?" "Oh my god, I've never seen such pretty flowers." She walked down the street talking to tourists, sanitation workers, and homeless people, waving her cane at every person she passed, saying, "Hi there, how y'all doin'?" again and again.

Deborah was full of oddly charming quirks. She carried a bottle of Lysol in her car that she would often spray at random, only half-joking. She sprayed directly in front of my nose several times when I sneezed, but mostly she sprayed it out the window when we stopped somewhere that looked particularly unsanitary, which happened often. She

also gestured with her cane as she spoke, often tapping my shoulder with it to get my attention, or smacking it against my leg to emphasize a point.

One of the first times she hit me with her cane, we were sitting in my room. She'd just handed me a copy of *Medical Genetics*, by Victor McKusick, and said, "I met this man cause he wanted some blood from me for some cancer tests."

I told her he'd taken the blood for research on Henrietta's cells, not to test her and her brothers for cancer. That's when she smacked me on the leg with her cane.

"Dang!" she yelled. "Now you tell me! When I started asking him questions about them tests and my mother's cells, he just handed me a copy of this book, patted me on my back, and send me home." She reached over, flipped the book open, and pointed. "He autographed it for me," she said, rolling her eyes. "Would have been nice if he'd told me what the damn thing said too."

Deborah and I sprawled across the bed for hours each day, reading her files and talking about her life. Then, toward the end of the third day, I noticed a thick manila folder on my pillow.

"Are those your mother's medical records?" I asked, reaching for it.

"No!" Deborah screamed, wild-eyed, leaping up and diving onto the folder like it was a fumbled football, hugging it to her chest, curling her body around it.

I sat stunned, hand still reaching toward the pillow where the envelope had been, stammering, "I . . . I mean . . . I wasn't . . ."

"That's *right* you wasn't!" Deborah snapped. "What were you gonna do to my mother medical records?!"

"I thought you put them there for me . . . I'm sorry . . . I don't need to read them now . . . It's fine."

"We ain't ready for that!" Deborah snapped, her eyes wide and panicked. She grabbed her bag, stuffed all her things back inside it, then ran for the door.

I was stunned. The woman I'd been lying next to for days—

laughing, elbowing, consoling—was now running from me like I was out to get her.

“Deborah!” I called after her. “I’m not trying to do anything bad. I just want to learn your mother’s story, same as you.”

She whipped around, her eyes still panicked, “I don’t know who to trust,” she hissed, then ran out the door, slamming it behind her.