

During Henrietta's first few days in the hospital, the children came with Day to visit her, but when they left, she cried and moaned for hours. Soon the nurses told Day he couldn't bring the children anymore, because it upset Henrietta too much. After that, Day would park the Buick behind Hopkins at the same time each day and sit on a little patch of grass on Wolfe Street with the children, right under Henrietta's window. She'd pull herself out of bed, press her hands and face to the glass, and watch her children play on the lawn. But within days, Henrietta couldn't get herself to the window anymore.

Her doctors tried in vain to ease her suffering. "Demerol does not seem to touch the pain," one wrote, so he tried morphine. "This doesn't help too much either." He gave her Dromoran. "This stuff works," he wrote. But not for long. Eventually one of her doctors tried injecting pure alcohol straight into her spine. "Alcohol injections ended in failure," he wrote.

New tumors seemed to appear daily—on her lymph nodes, hip bones, labia—and she spent most days with a fever up to 105. Her doctors stopped the radiation treatment and seemed, as defeated by the cancer as she was. "Henrietta is still a miserable specimen," they wrote. "She groans." "She is constantly nauseated and claims she vomits everything she eats." "Patient acutely upset . . . very anxious." "As far as I can see we are doing all that can be done."

There is no record that George Gey ever visited Henrietta in the hospital, or said anything to her about her cells. And everyone I talked to who might know said that Gey and Henrietta never met. Everyone, that is, except Laure Aurelian, a microbiologist who was Gey's colleague at Hopkins.

"I'll never forget it," Aurelian said. "George told me he leaned over Henrietta's bed and said, 'Your cells will make you immortal.' He told Henrietta her cells would help save the lives of countless people, and she smiled. She told him she was glad her pain would come to some good for someone."

1920s 1930s 1940s 1950s 1960s 1970s 1980s 1990s 2000s
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1999

9

Turner Station

A few days after my first conversation with Day, I drove from Pittsburgh to Baltimore to meet his son, David "Sonny" Lacks Jr. He'd finally called me back and agreed to meet, saying he'd gotten worn out from my number showing up on his pager. I didn't know it then, but he'd made five panicked phone calls to Patillo, asking questions about me before calling.

The plan was that I'd page Sonny when I got to Baltimore, then he'd pick me up and take me to his brother Lawrence's house to meet their father and—if I was lucky—Deborah. So I checked in to the downtown Holiday Inn, sat on the bed, phone in my lap, and dialed Sonny's pager. No reply.

I stared through my hotel room window at a tall, Gothic-looking brick tower across the street with a huge clock at the top. It was a weather-beaten silver, with big letters spelling B-R-O-M-O-S-E-L-T-Z-E-R in a circle around its face. I watched the hands move slowly past the letters, paged Sonny every few minutes, and waited for the phone to ring.

Eventually I grabbed the fat Baltimore phone book, opened to the

Les, and ran my finger down a long line of names: *Annette Lacks* . . . *Charles Lacks* . . . I figured I'd call every Lacks in the book asking if they knew Henrietta. But I didn't have a cell phone and didn't want to tie up the line, so I paged Sonny again, then lay back on the bed, phone and White Pages still in my lap. I started rereading a yellowed copy of a 1976 *Rolling Stone* article about the Lackses by a writer named Michael Rogers—the first reporter ever to contact Henrietta's family. I'd read it many times, but wanted every word fresh in my mind.

Halfway through the article, Rogers wrote, "I am sitting on the seventh floor of the downtown Baltimore Holiday Inn. Through the thermopane picture window is a huge public clock in which the numerals have been replaced by the characters B-R-O-M-O-S-E-L-T-Z-E-R; in my lap is a telephone, and the Baltimore White Pages."

I bolted upright, suddenly feeling like I'd been sucked into a *Twilight Zone* episode. More than two decades earlier—when I was just three years old—Rogers had gone through those same White Pages. "Halfway through the 'Lacks' listings it becomes clear that just about everybody had known Henrietta," he wrote. So I opened the phone book again and started dialing, hoping I'd find one of those people who knew her. But they didn't answer their phones, they hung up on me, or they said they'd never heard of Henrietta. I dug out an old newspaper article where I'd seen Henrietta's Turner Station address: 713 New Pittsburgh Avenue. I looked at four maps before finding one where Turner Station wasn't covered by ads or blow-up grids of other neighborhoods.

It turned out Turner Station wasn't just hidden on the map. To get there, I had to drive past the cement wall and fence that blocked it from the interstate, across a set of tracks, past churches in old storefronts, rows of boarded-up houses, and a buzzing electrical generator as big as a football field. Finally I saw a dark wooden sign saying WELCOME TO TURNERS STATION in the parking lot of a fire-scorched bar with pink tasseled curtains.

To this day no one's entirely sure what the town is actually called, or how to spell it. Sometimes it's plural (Turners Station), other times possessive (Turner's Station), but most often it's singular (Turner

Station). It was originally decided as "Good Luck," but never quite lived up to the name.

When Henrietta arrived there in the forties, the town was booming. But the end of World War II brought cutbacks at Sparrows Point. Baltimore Gas and Electric demolished three hundred homes to make room for a new power plant, leaving more than 1,300 homeless, most of them black. More and more land was zoned for industrial use, which meant more houses torn down. People fled for East Baltimore or back to the country, and the population of Turner Station dropped by half before the end of the fifties. By the time I got there, it was about one thousand and falling steadily, because there were few jobs.

In Henrietta's day, Turner Station was a town where you never locked your doors. Now there was a housing project surrounded by a 13,000-foot-long brick-and-cement security wall in the field where Henrietta's children once played. Stores, nightclubs, cafés, and schools had closed, and drug dealers, gangs, and violence were on the rise. But Turner Station still had more than ten churches.

The newspaper article where I'd gotten Henrietta's address quoted a local woman, Courtney Speed, who owned a grocery store and had created a foundation devoted to building a Henrietta Lacks museum. But when I got to the lot where Speed's Grocery was supposed to be, I found a gray, rust-stained mobile home, its broken windows covered with wire. The sign out front had a single red rose painted on it, and the words REVIVING THE SPIRIT TO RECAPTURE THE VISION. PROVERBS 29:18. Six men gathered on the front steps, laughing. The oldest, in his thirties, wore red slacks, red suspenders, a black shirt, and a driving cap. Another wore an oversized red and white ski jacket. They were surrounded by younger men of various shades of brown in sagging pants. The two men in red stopped talking, watched me drive by slowly, then kept on laughing.

Turner Station is less than a mile across in any direction, its horizon lined with skyscraper-sized shipping cranes and smokestacks billowing thick clouds from Sparrows Point. As I drove in circles looking for Speed's Grocery, children stopped playing in the streets to

stare and wave. They ran between matching red-brick houses and past women hanging fresh laundry, following me as their mothers smiled and waved too.

I drove by the trailer with the men out front so many times, they started waving at me with each pass. I did the same with Henrietta's old house. It was a unit in a brown brick building divided into four homes, with a chain-link fence, several feet of grass out front, and three steps leading up to a small cement stoop. A child watched me from behind Henrietta's old screen door, waving and playing with a stick.

I waved back at everyone and feigned surprise each time the group of children following me appeared on various streets grinning, but I didn't stop and ask for help. I was too nervous. The people of Turner Station just watched me, smiling and shaking their heads like, *What's that young white girl doing driving around in circles?*

Finally I saw the New Shiloh Baptist Church, which the newspaper article had mentioned as the site of community meetings about the Henrietta Lacks museum. But it was closed. As I pressed my face to the tall glass out front, a black town car pulled up, and a smooth, handsome man in his forties jumped out, with gold-tinted glasses, black suit, black beret, and the keys to the church. He slid his glasses to the end of his nose and looked me over, asking if I needed help.

I told him why I was there.

"Never heard of Henrietta Lacks," he said.

"Not many people have," I said, and told him I'd read that someone had hung a plaque in Henrietta's honor at Speed's Grocery.

"Oh! Speed's?" he said, suddenly all smiles and a hand on my shoulder. "I can take you to Speed's!" He told me to get in my car and follow him.

Everyone on the street waved and yelled as we passed: "Hi Reverend Jackson!" "How you doin, Reverend?" He nodded and yelled right back, "How you doin!" "God bless you!" Just two blocks away, we stopped in front of that gray trailer with the men out front and the Reverend jammed his car into park, waving for me to get out. The

cluster of men on the steps smiled, grabbed the pastor's hand, and gave it two-handed shakes, saying, "Hey Reverend, you brought a friend?"

"Yes I did," he told them. "She's here to talk to Ms. Speed."

The one in the red pants and red suspenders—who turned out to be Speed's oldest son, Keith—said she was out, and who knew when she'd be back, so I may as well grab a seat on the porch with the boys and wait. As I sat down, the man in the red and white ski jacket smiled a big bright smile, then told me he was her son Mike. Then there were her sons Cyrus and Joe and Tyrone. Every man on that porch was her son; so was nearly every man that walked in the store. Pretty soon, I'd counted fifteen sons and said, "Wait a minute. She's got fifteen kids?"

"Oh!" Mike yelled. "You don't know Mama Speed, do you? Oooh, I look up to Mama—she tough! She keep Turners Station in line, boy! She fears no man!"

The men on the porch all nodded and said, "That's right."

"Don't you get scared if anybody come in here try to attack Mama when we're not around," Mike said, "cause she'll scare them to death!" Speed's sons let out a chorus of amens as Mike told a story, saying, "This man came in the store once yellin, 'I'm gonna come cross that counter and get you.' I was hidin behind Mama I was so scared! And do you know what Mama did? She rocked her head and raised up them arms and said, 'Come on! Come onnnnn! If you think you crazy, you just try it!'"

Mike slapped me on the back and all the sons laughed.

At that moment, Courtney Speed appeared at the bottom of the steps, her long black hair piled loose on her head, strands hanging in wisps around her face, which was thin, beautiful, and entirely ageless. Her eyes were soft brown with a perfect halo of sea blue around the edges. She was delicate, not a hard edge on her. She hugged a grocery bag to her chest and whispered, "But did that man jump across that counter at me?"

Mike screamed and laughed so hard he couldn't answer.

She looked at him, calm and smiling. "I said, *Did that man jump?*"

"No, he did not!" Mike said, grinning. "That man didn't do

nuthin but run! That's why Mama got no gun in this store. She don't need one!"

"I don't live by the gun," she said, then turned to me and smiled. "How *you* doin'?" She walked up the stairs into the store, and we all followed.

"Mama," Keith said, "Pastor brought this woman in here. She's Miss Rebecca and she's here to talk to you."

Courtney Speed smiled a beautiful, almost bashful smile, her eyes bright and motherly. "God bless you, sweetie," she said.

Inside, flattened cardboard boxes covered most of the floor, which was worn from years of foot traffic. Shelves lined each wall, some bare, others stacked with Wonder Bread, rice, toilet paper, and pigs' feet. On one, Speed had piled hundreds of editions of the *Baltimore Sun* dating back to the 1970s, when her husband died. She said she'd given up replacing the windows each time someone broke in because they'd just do it again. She'd hung handwritten signs on every wall of the store: one for "Sam the Man Snowballs," others for sports clubs, church groups, and free GED and adult literacy classes. She had dozens of "spiritual sons," who she treated no different than her six biological sons. And when any child came in to buy chips, candy, or soda, Speed made them calculate how much change she owed them — they got a free Hershey's kiss for each correct answer.

Speed started straightening the items on her shelves so each label faced out, then yelled over her shoulder at me, "How did you find your way here?"

I told her about the four maps, and she threw a box of lard onto the shelf. "Now we got the four-map syndrome," she said. "They keep trying to push us off the earth, but God won't let them. Praise the Lord, he brings us the people we really need to talk to."

She wiped her hands on her white shirt. "Now that He brought you here, what can I do for you?"

"I'm hoping to learn about Henrietta Lacks," I said.

Courtney gasped, her face suddenly ashen. She took several steps back and hissed, "You know Mr. Cofield? Did he send you?"

I was confused. I told her I'd never heard of Cofield, and no one had sent me.

"How did you know about me?" she snapped, backing away further.

I pulled the old crumpled newspaper article from my purse and handed it to her.

"Have you talked to the family?" she asked.

"I'm trying," I said. "I talked to Deborah once, and I was supposed to meet Sonny today, but he didn't show up."

She nodded, like *I knew it*. "I can't tell you anything until you got the support of the family. I can't risk that."

"What about the plaque you got for the museum?" I asked. "Can I see that?"

"It's not here," she snapped. "Nothing's here, because bad things happened around all that."

She looked at me for a long moment, then her face softened. She took my hand in one of hers, and touched my face with the other.

"I like your eyes," she said. "Come with me."

She hurried out the door and down the stairs to her old brown station wagon. A man sat in the passenger seat, staring straight at the road as if the car were moving. He didn't look up as she jumped in, saying, "Follow me."

We drove through Turner Station to the parking lot of the local public library. As I opened my car door, Courtney appeared, clapping, grinning, and bouncing on her tiptoes. Words erupted from her:

"February first is Henrietta Lacks day here in Baltimore County," she said. "This February first is going to be the big kickoff event here at the library! We're still trying to put a museum together, even though the Cofield situation did cause so many problems. Terrified Deborah. We were supposed to be almost done with the museum by now — we were so close before all that horribleness. But I'm glad He sent you," she said, pointing to the sky. "This story just *got* to be told! Praise the Lord, people *got* to know about Henrietta!"

"Who's Cofield?" I asked.

She cringed and slapped her hand over her mouth. "I really can't talk until the family says it's okay," she said, then grabbed my hand and ran into the library.

"This is Rebecca," she told the librarian, bouncing on her toes again. "She's writing about Henrietta Lacks!"

"Oh, that's wonderful!" the librarian said. Then she looked at Courtney. "Are you talking to her?"

"I need the tape," Courtney said.

The librarian walked down a row of videos, pulled a white box from the shelf, and handed it to her.

Courtney rucked the video under her arm, grabbed my hand, and ran me back to the parking lot, where she jumped into her car and sped off, waving for me to follow. We stopped outside a convenience store while the man in her front seat got out and bought a loaf of bread. Then we dropped him off in front of his house as Courtney yelled back to me, "He's my deaf cousin! Can't drive!"

Finally she led me to a small beauty parlor she owned, not far from Speed's Grocery. She unlocked two bolts on the front door and waved her hand in the air, saying, "Smells like I got a mouse in one of those traps." The shop was narrow, with barber chairs lining one wall and dryers along the other. The hair-washing sink, propped up with a piece of plywood, drained into a large white bucket, the walls around it splattered with years' worth of hair dye. Next to the sink sat a price board: Cut and style ten dollars. Press and curl, seven. And against the back wall, on top of a supply cabinet, sat a photocopy of the picture of Henrietta Lacks, hands on hips, in a pale wood frame several inches too big.

I pointed to the photo and raised my eyebrows. Courtney shook her head.

"I'll tell you everything I know," she whispered, "just as soon as you talk to the family and they say it's okay. I don't want any more problems. And I don't want Deborah to get sick over it again."

She pointed to a cracked red vinyl barber's chair, which she spun

to face a small television next to the hair dryers. "You have to watch this tape," she said, handing me the remote and a set of keys. She started to walk out the door, then turned. "Don't you open this door for nothing or nobody but me, you hear?" she said. "And don't you miss nothing in that video—use that rewind button, watch it twice if you have to, but don't you miss nothing."

Then she left, locking the door behind her.

What rolled in front of me on that television screen was a one-hour BBC documentary about Henrietta and the HeLa cells, called *The Way of All Flesh*, which I'd been trying to get a copy of for months. It opened to sweet music and a young black woman who wasn't Henrietta, dancing in front of the camera. A British man began narrating, his voice melodramatic, like he was telling a ghost story that just might be true.

"In 1951 a woman died in Baltimore in America," he said, pausing for effect. "She was called Henrietta Lacks." The music grew louder and more sinister as he told the story of her cells: "These cells have transformed modern medicine. . . . They shaped the policies of countries and of presidents. They even became involved in the Cold War. Because scientists were convinced that in her cells lay the secret of how to conquer death. . . ."

What really grabbed me was footage of Clover, an old plantation town in southern Virginia, where some of Henrietta's relatives still seemed to live. The last image to appear on the screen was Henrietta's cousin Fred Garret, standing behind an old slave shack in Clover, his back to the family cemetery where the narrator said Henrietta lay buried in an unmarked grave.

Fred pointed to the cemetery and looked hard into the camera.

"Do you think them cells still livin?" he asked. "I talkin bout in the grave." He paused, then laughed a long, rumbling laugh. "Hell naw," he said, "I don't guess they are. But they're still livin out in the test tubes. That's a miracle."

The screen went blank and I realized, if Henrietta's children and

husband wouldn't talk to me, I needed to visit Clover and find her cousins.

That night, back at the hotel, I finally got Sonny on the phone. He said he'd decided not to meet me but wouldn't tell me why. When I asked him to put me in touch with his family in Clover, he told me to go there and find them myself. Then he laughed and wished me luck.

10

The Other Side of the Tracks

1999

Clover sits a few rolling hills off Route 360 in southern Virginia, just past Difficult Creek on the banks of the River of Death. I pulled into town under a blue December sky, with air warm enough for May, a yellow Post-it note with the only information Sonny had given me stuck on my dashboard: "They haven't found her grave. Make sure it's day—there are no lights, gets darker than dark. Ask anybody where Lacks Town is."

Downtown Clover started at a boarded-up gas station with RIP spray-painted across its front, and ended at an empty lot that once held the depot where Henrietta caught her train to Baltimore. The roof of the old movie theater on Main Street had caved in years ago, its screen landing flat in a field of weeds. The other businesses looked like someone left for lunch decades earlier and never bothered coming back: one wall of Abbott's clothing store was lined with boxes of new Red Wing work boots stacked to the ceiling and covered in thick dust; inside its long glass counter, beneath an antique cash register, lay rows and rows of men's dress shirts, still folded starch-stiff in their plastic. The lounge at Rosie's restaurant was filled with overstuffed chairs,

couches, and shag carpet, all in dust-covered browns, oranges, and yellows. A sign in the front window said OPEN 7 DAYS, just above one that said CLOSED. At Gregory and Martin Super Market, half-full shopping carts rested in the aisles next to decades-old canned foods, and the wall clock hadn't moved past 6:34 since Martin closed up shop to become an undertaker sometime in the eighties.

Even with kids on drugs and the older generation dying off, Clover didn't have enough death to keep an undertaker in business: in 1974 it had a population of 227; in 1998 it was 198. That same year, Clover lost its town charter. It did still have several churches and a few beauty parlors, but they were rarely open. The only steady business left downtown was the one-room brick post office, but it was closed when I got there.

Main Street felt like a place where you could sit for hours without seeing a pedestrian or a car. But a man stood in front of Rosie's, leaning against his red motorized bicycle, waiting to wave at any cars that might pass. He was a short, round white man with red cheeks who could have been anywhere from fifty to seventy. Locals called him the Greeter, and he'd spent most of his life on that corner waving at anyone who drove by, his face expressionless. I asked if he could direct me to Lacks Town, where I planned to look for mailboxes with the name Lacks on them, then knock on doors asking about Henrietta. The man never said a word, just waved at me, then slowly pointed behind him, across the tracks.

The dividing line between Lacks Town and the rest of Clover was stark. On one side of the two-lane road from downtown, there were vast, well-manicured rolling hills, acres and acres of wide-open property with horses, a small pond, a well-kept house set back from the road, a minivan, and a white picket fence. Directly across the street stood a small one-room shack about seven feet wide and twelve feet long; it was made of unpainted wood, with large gaps between the wallboards where vines and weeds grew.

That shack was the beginning of Lacks Town, a single road about a mile long and lined with dozens of houses—some painted bright

yellows or greens, others unpainted, half caved-in or nearly burnt-down. Slave-era cabins sat next to cinder-block homes and trailers, some with satellite dishes and porch swings, others rusted and half buried. I drove the length of Lacks Town Road again and again, past the END OF STATE MAINTENANCE sign where the road turned to gravel, past a tobacco field with a basketball court in it—just a patch of red dirt and a bare hoop attached to the top of a weathered tree trunk.

The muffler on my beat-up black Honda had fallen off somewhere between Pittsburgh and Clover, which meant everyone in Lacks Town heard each time I passed. They walked onto porches and peered through windows as I drove by. Finally, on my third or fourth pass, a man who looked like he was in his seventies shuffled out of a green two-room wooden cabin wearing a bright green sweater, a matching scarf, and a black driving cap. He waved a stiff arm at me, eyebrows raised.

"You lost?" he yelled over my muffler.

I rolled down my window and said not exactly.

"Well where you tryin to go?" he said. "Cause I know you're not from around here."

I asked him if he'd heard of Henrietta.

He smiled and introduced himself as Cootie, Henrietta's first cousin.

His real name was Hector Henry—people started calling him Cootie when he got polio decades earlier; he was never sure why. Cootie's skin was light enough to pass for Latino, so when he got sick at nine years old, a local white doctor snuck him into the nearest hospital, saying Cootie was his son, since the hospitals didn't treat black patients. Cootie spent a year inside an iron lung that breathed for him, and he'd been in and out of hospitals ever since.

The polio had left him partially paralyzed in his neck and arms, with nerve damage that caused constant pain. He wore a scarf regardless of the weather, because the warmth helped ease the pain.

I told him why I was there, and he pointed up and down the road. "Everybody in Lacks Town kin to Henrietta, but she been gone so

long, even her memory pretty much dead now," he said. "Everything about Henrietta dead except them cells."

He pointed to my car. "Turn this loud thing off and come inside. I'll fix you some juice."

His front door opened into a tiny kitchen with a coffeemaker, a vintage toaster, and an old woodstove with two cooking pots on top, one empty, the other filled with chili. He'd painted the kitchen walls the same dark olive green as the outside, and lined them with power strips and fly swatters. He'd recently gotten indoor plumbing, but still preferred the outhouse.

Though Cootie could barely move his arms, he'd built the house on his own, teaching himself construction as he went along, hammering the plywood walls and plastering the inside. But he'd forgotten to use insulation, so soon after he finished it, he tore down the walls and started over again. A few years after that, the whole place burned down when he fell asleep under an electric blanket, but he built it back up again. The walls were a bit crooked, he said, but he'd used so many nails, he didn't think it would ever fall down.

Cootie handed me a glass of red juice and shooed me out of the kitchen into his dark, wood-paneled living room. There was no couch, just a few metal folding chairs and a barber's chair anchored to the linoleum floor, its cushions covered entirely with duct tape. Cootie had been the Lacks Town barber for decades. "That chair cost twelve hundred dollars now, but I got it for eight dollars back then," he yelled from the kitchen. "Haircut wasn't but a dollar—sometimes I cut fifty-eight heads in one day." Eventually he quit because he couldn't hold his arms up long enough to cut.

A small boom box leaned against one wall blaring a gospel call-in show, with a preacher screaming something about the Lord curing a caller of hepatitis.

Cootie opened a folding chair for me, then walked into his bedroom. He lifted his mattress with one arm, propped it on his head, and began rummaging through piles of paper hidden beneath it.

"I know I got some information on Henrietta in here some-

where," he mumbled from under the mattress. "Where the hell I put that . . . You know other countries be buying her for twenty-five dollars, sometimes fifty? Her family didn't get no money out of it."

After digging through what looked like hundreds of papers, he came back to the living room.

"This here the only picture I got of her," he said, pointing to a copy of the *Rolling Stone* article with the ever-present hands-on-hips photo. "I don't know what it say. Only education I got, I had to learn on my own. But I always couldn't count, and I can't hardly read or write my name cause my hand's so jittery." He asked if the article said anything about her childhood in Clover. I shook my head no.

"Everybody liked Henrietta cause she was a very good condition person," he said. "She just lovey dovey, always smilin, always takin care of us when we come to the house. Even after she got sick, she never was a person who say 'I feel bad and I'm going to take it out on you.' She wasn't like that, even when she hurtin. But she didn't seem to understand what was going on. She didn't want to think she was gonna die."

He shook his head. "You know, they said if we could get all the pieces of her together, she'd weigh over eight hundred pounds now," he told me. "And Henrietta never was a big girl. She just still growin."

In the background, the radio preacher screamed "Hallelujah!" over and over as Cootie spoke.

"She used to take care of me when my polio got bad," he told me. "She always did say she wanted to fix it. She couldn't help me cause I had it before she got sick, but she saw how bad it got. I imagine that's why she used them cells to help get rid of it for other folk." He paused. "Nobody round here never understood how she dead and that thing still livin. That's where the mystery's at."

He looked around the room, nodding his head toward spaces between the wall and ceiling where he'd stuffed dried garlic and onions.

"You know, a lot of things, they man-made," he told me, dropping his voice to a whisper. "You know what I mean by *man-made*, don't you?"

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."

11

"The Devil of Pain Itself"

1951

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.