

furnaces several times a day to make sure they stayed at 120 degrees. Inside Cliff's house, the electric-blue and white walls were darkened with smudges of oil and dirt. He'd blocked the stairs to the second floor with cardboard and blankets to keep warm air from going up and out through missing windows, and he'd patched holes in his ceiling, walls, and windows with newspaper and duct tape. He slept downstairs on a thin, sheetless twin bed across from the refrigerator and woodstove, next to a folding table where he'd piled so many pills, he'd forgotten what they were all for. Maybe the prostate cancer, he said. Maybe the pressure.

Cliff spent most of his time on his porch, sitting in a plaid recliner so worn down it was mostly just exposed foam and springs, waving at each car that passed. He was about six feet tall, even with several inches of slouch, his light brown skin dry and weathered like alligator, his eyes sea green at the center, with deep blue edges. Decades in shipyards and tobacco fields had left his hands coarse as burlap, his fingernails yellowed, cracked, and worn to the cuticles. As Cliff talked, he started at the ground and twisted his arthritic fingers, one over the other like he was crossing them all for good luck. Then he untwisted them and started again.

When he heard I was writing a book about Henrietta, he got up from his recliner, pulled on a jacket, and walked over to my car, yelling, "Come on then, I'll show you where she buried!"

About a half-mile down Lacks Town Road, Cliff had me park in front of a cinder block and pressboard house that couldn't have been more than three hundred square feet inside. He jerked open a log-and-barbed-wire gate that led into a pasture and motioned for me to walk through. At the end of the pasture, hidden in the trees, stood a slave-time log cabin covered in boards with gaps wide enough to see through. Its windows had no glass and were covered by thin pieces of wood and rusted Coke signs from the fifties. The house slanted, its corners resting on piles of rocks of varying sizes that had been holding it above ground for more than two hundred years, its base high enough off the ground for a small child to crawl under.

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

## 16 "Spending Eternity in the Same Place"

During my first visit with Henrietta's cousin Cootie, as we sat drinking juice, he told me that no one ever talked about Henrietta. Not when she was sick, not after she died, and not now. "We didn't say words like *cancer*," he told me, "and we don't tell stories on dead folks." At that point, he said, the family had gone so long without talking about Henrietta, it was almost like she'd never existed, except for her children and those cells.

"It sound strange," he said, "but her cells done lived longer than her memory."

If I wanted to know anything about Henrietta, he told me, I'd need to go up the road and talk to her cousin Cliff, who'd grown up with her like a brother.

When I pulled into Cliff's driveway, he figured I was a Jehovah's Witness or an insurance sales rep, since the only white people who visited him were usually one or the other. He smiled and waved just the same, saying, "How you doin'?"

Cliff was in his seventies and still minding the tobacco barn behind the farmhouse his father had built decades earlier, checking the

"That there is the old home-house where Henrietta grew up!" Cliff yelled, pointing. We walked toward it through red dirt and dried leaves that cracked under our feet, the air smelling of wild roses, pine, and cows.

"Henrietta kept it nice—a real home-house. Now I can't hardly recognize it."

The floors inside were covered with straw and manure; they'd collapsed in several places under the weight of cows that now roamed free on the property. Upstairs, in the room Henrietta once shared with Day, a few remnants of life lay scattered on the floor: a tattered work boot with metal eyes but no laces, a TruAde soda bottle with a white and red label, a tiny woman's dress shoe with open toes. I wondered if it was Henrietta's.

"Could be!" Cliff said. "Sure look like her shoe."

He pointed toward what used to be the back wall, which had fallen years earlier, leaving little more than the frames of two tall windows. "This is where Henrietta slept."

She used to lie on her stomach and stare out those windows, looking at the woods and the family cemetery, a small quarter-acre clearing where a few strands of barbed wire now surrounded a scattering of tombstones. The same cows that had trampled the home-house floor had destroyed several sections of the cemetery fence. They'd left manure and hoofprints on graves, crushed flower arrangements into piles of stems, ribbon, and Styrofoam, and knocked over several tombstones, which now lay flat on the ground next to their bases.

When we got outside, Cliff shook his head and picked up fragments of a broken sign. One piece said WE LOVE, the other said MOM.

Some of the family tombstones were homemade from concrete; a few were store-bought and marble. "Them's the folks with some money," Cliff said, pointing to a marble one. Many graves were marked with index-card-sized metal plates on sticks with names and dates; the rest were unmarked.

"Used to be we'd mark them graves with a rock so we could find em," Cliff told me. "But the cemetery got cleaned out one time with a

bulldozer, so that pretty much cleared those rocks on away." There were so many people buried in the Lacks cemetery now, he said, they'd run out of room decades ago and started piling graves on top of each other.

He pointed at an indentation in the ground with no marker beside it. "This was a good friend of mine," he said. Then he started pointing around the graveyard to other body-sized indentations in the dirt. "See that sunk in right there . . . and that sunk right there . . . and there . . . Them's all unmarked graves. They sink after a time when the dirt settle around the bodies." Occasionally he'd point to a small plain rock poking through the earth and say it was a cousin or an aunt.

"That there's Henrietta's mother," he said, pointing to a lone tombstone near the cemetery's edge, surrounded by trees and wild roses. It was several feet tall, its front worn rough and browned from age and weather. The inscription said this:

ELIZA  
WIFE OF J. R.  
PLEASANT  
JUL 12, 1888  
OCTOBER 28, 1924  
GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

Until I read those dates, I hadn't done the math: Henrietta was barely four years old when she lost her mother, about the same age Sonny was when Henrietta died.

"Henrietta used to come talk to her mother, took real good care of her grave. Now Henrietta somewhere in here with her," Cliff said, waving his arms toward the clearing between Eliza's stone and the next tree a good fifteen feet away. "Never did get a marker, so I couldn't tell you exactly where she at, but the immediate family be buried next to each other. So she probably round in here somewhere."

He pointed to three body-sized indentations in the clearing and said, "Any one of those could be Henrietta."

We stood in silence as Cliff kicked at the dirt with his toe.

"I don't know what happened on that deal with them cells from Henrietta," he said eventually. "Don't nobody say anything about it round here. I just knowed she had something rare, cause she been dead a pretty good while, but her cells still living, and that's amazing." He kicked at the ground. "I heard they did a lot of research and some of her cells have develop a lot of curing other diseases. It's a miracle, that's all I can say."

Then suddenly he yelled at the ground, as if he was talking directly to Henrietta. "They named them HeLa! And they still living!" He kicked at the dirt again.

A few minutes later, seemingly out of nowhere, he pointed to the dirt and said, "You know, white folks and black folks all buried over top of each other in here. I guess old white granddaddy and his brothers was buried in here too. Really no tellin who in this ground now." Only thing he knew for sure, he said, was that there was something beautiful about the idea of slave-owning white Lackses being buried under their black kin.

"They spending eternity in the same place," he told me, laughing. "They must've worked out their problems by now!"

Henrietta's great-great-grandmother was a slave named Mourning. A white man named John Smith Pleasants inherited Mourning and her husband, George, from his father, one of the first slaveholders in Clover. Pleasants' father came from a family of Quakers, and one of his distant relatives had been the first to fight successfully to free his own slaves through the Virginia courts. But Pleasants hadn't carried on the family's antislavery tradition.

Mourning and George were enslaved on a tobacco plantation in Clover. Their son, Henrietta's paternal great-grandfather Edmund, took his owner's last name, which lost the *s* to become Pleasant. He was eventually freed from slavery at the age of forty, only to be committed later to an asylum for dementia. But before he was freed, he fathered many children, all of them born into slavery, including

a daughter named Henrietta Pleasant—the great-aunt of Henrietta Lackes.

On the other side of Henrietta's family, her maternal great-grandfather was a white man named Albert Lackes, who'd inherited part of the Lackes Plantation in 1885, when his father divided his land among his three white sons: Winston, Benjamin, and Albert.

Winston Lackes was a burly man with a beard that grew to his belly—he drank almost every night in a saloon hidden in the basement beneath the general store. When Winston got drunk and started fighting, the locals knew it was time for the soberest man to ride and get Fannie. There are no records of Fannie's life, but she was most likely born a slave on the Lackes property, and like most Lackes slaves who stayed on the plantation as sharecroppers, she never left. She often rode beside Winston in his wagon, and when he got drunk, she'd march into the saloon, snatch him off the barstool by his long beard, and drag him home.

The other brothers, Albert and Benjamin, led more private lives and left behind little history aside from their wills and land deeds. Most of the black Lackses I talked to over the years referred to Benjamin Lackes as "old white granddaddy," though some still called him "Massuh Ben," as their parents had.

When Albert died on February 26, 1889, slavery had been abolished, but few black people owned land of their own. Albert's will left land to five "colored" heirs, most of it in ten-acre chunks, and one of those heirs was Henrietta and Day's grandfather, Tommy Lackes. Albert's will said nothing of his relation to his heirs, but folks in Lackes Town knew they were children he'd had with a former slave named Maria.

After Albert's death, his brother Benjamin sued to take some of that land away from Albert's black heirs, saying that since it was his father's land originally, he had the right to choose whichever plot he wanted. The court agreed and divided the original Lackes plantation into two plots "of equal value." The lower section—on the river—went to Benjamin Lackes; the upper plot—now known as Lackes Town—went to the black Lackses.

Sixteen years after the court case, when Benjamin Lacks dictated his own will days before his death, he gave small plots of land to each of his sisters, then divided the remaining 124 acres and his horses between seven "colored" heirs of his own, including his nephew Tommy Lacks. There's no record of Benjamin or Albert Lacks marrying or having any white children, and as with Albert, there's no record that the black children in Benjamin's will were his own. But he called them his "nigger children," and according to black Lacks oral history, everyone living on the land in Clover that was once the Lacks Plantation descended from those two white brothers and their black mistresses who were once slaves.

When I arrived in Clover, race was still ever-present. Roseland was "the nice *colored* fellow" who ran Rosie's before it shut down; Bobcat was "the *white* man" who ran the mini-mart; Henrietta went to St. Matthew's, "the *colored* church." One of the first things Cootie said when I met him was, "You don't act strange around me cause I'm black. You're not from around here."

Everyone I talked to swore race relations were never bad in Clover. But they also said Lacks Town was only about twelve miles from the local Lynch Tree, and that the Ku Klux Klan held meetings on a school baseball field less than ten miles from Clover's Main Street until well into the 1980s.

Standing in the cemetery, Cliff told me, "The white Lackses know their kin all buried in here with ours cause they family. They know it, but they'll never admit it. They just say, 'Them Black Lackses, they ain't kin!'"

When I went to visit Carlton and Ruby Lacks, the oldest white Lackses in Clover, they smiled and chit-chatted as they led me from their front door into a living room filled with pastel-blue overstuffed chairs and Confederate flags—one in each ashtray, several on the coffee table, and a full-sized one on a stand in the corner. Carlton and Ruby were distant cousins before they became hus-

band and wife. They were both related to Robin Lacks, the father of Albert, Ben, and Winston Lacks, which meant they were also Henrietta and Day's distant cousins.

Carlton and Ruby had been married for decades and had more children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren than they could count. All they knew for sure was that there were more than one hundred of them. Carlton was a frail man in his late eighties, with skin so pale it looked almost translucent. Tufts of hair like overgrown cotton sprouted from his head, brow, ears, and nostrils as he sat in his easy chair, mumbling about his years working the bank at a tobacco warehouse.

"I wrote out the checks," he said, mostly to himself. "I was the tobacco king."

Ruby was in her late eighties too, with a sharp mind that seemed decades younger than her frail body. She talked right over Carlton, telling me about their relatives who'd farmed the Lacks Plantation, and their relation to Ben and Albert Lacks. When I mentioned that Henrietta came from Lacks Town, Ruby straightened in her chair.

"Well, that was colored!" she snapped. "I don't know what you talking about. You're not talking about coloreds are you?"

I told her I wanted to learn about both the white and black Lackses.

"Well, we never did know each other," she said. "The white and the black didn't mix then, not like they do now, which I can't say I like because I don't think it's for the best." She paused and shook her head. "Mixing them like that, during school and church and everything, they end up white and black get together and marry and all . . . I just can't see the sense in it."

When I asked how she and Carlton were related to the black Lackses, they looked at each other from across the coffee table like I'd asked if they were born on Mars.

"My daddy's uncle kept a lot of the colored Lackses as slaves," Ruby said. "That must be where they got their name. Evidently they took it when they left the plantation. That's the only thing I can figure."

Later, I asked Henrietta's sister Gladys what she thought of their

theory. Though she'd lived about a mile from Carlton and Ruby Lacks most of her ninety years, Gladys said she'd never heard of them.

"Black and white Lacks is kin," Gladys said, "but we don't mix." She pointed under the couch where I was sitting.

"Get Lillian's letter," she said to her son Gary.

As far as Gladys knew, all of Henrietta's other siblings were dead, except maybe Lillian, the youngest. The last anyone had heard from Lillian was a letter she'd sent sometime in the eighties, which Gladys kept in a shoebox under the couch. In it, Lillian wrote, "I heard daddy died in a fire," and she asked if it was true. It was: He'd died in 1969, two decades before she sent that letter. But what Lillian really wanted to know was who'd been talking to people about her life. She'd won the lottery, she said, and she believed someone was trying to kill her because white folks had been coming around asking questions about her life in Clover and her family, especially Henrietta. "They knew things I didn't even know," she wrote. "I don't think anybody should talk about other people." No one in the family had heard from her since.

"Lillian converted to Puerto Rican," Gladys said, holding the letter to her chest.

I looked at Gary, who sat beside her.

"Lillian's skin was real light, even lighter than mom's," Gary explained. "She married a Puerto Rican somewhere in New York. Since she could pass, she disowned her blackness—converted to Puerto Rican because she didn't want to be black no more."