

parking lot next to the hotel. He'd borrowed it from one of his daughters. "Nobody wants to ride in my old raggedy van," he said, easing the car into gear. "You ready to go see the Big Kahuna?"

"The Big Kahuna?"

"Yep," he said, grinning. "Deborah says you got to talk to our brother Lawrence before anybody else talk to you. He'll check you out, decide what's what. If he say it's okay, maybe then the rest of us will talk to you."

We drove in silence for several blocks.

"Lawrence is the only one of us kids who remembers our mother," Sonny said eventually. "Deborah and I don't know nothing about her." Then, without looking from the road, Sonny told me everything he knew about his mother.

"Everybody say she was real nice and cooked good," he said. "Pretty too. Her cells have been blowed up in nuclear bombs. From her cells came all these different creations—medical miracles like polio vaccines, some cure for cancer and other things, even AIDS. She liked takin care of people, so it make sense what she did with them cells. I mean, people always say she was really just hospitality, you know, fixing everything up nice, make a good place, get up, cook breakfast for everybody, even if it's twenty of them."

He pulled into an empty alley behind a row of red brick townhouses and looked at me for the first time since we'd gotten in the car.

"This is where we take scientists and reporters wanting to know about our mother. It's where the family gangs up on them," he said, laughing. "But you seem nice, so I'll do you a favor and not go get my brother Zakariyya this time."

I got out of the car and Sonny drove away, yelling, "Good luck!" out the window.

All I knew about Sonny's brothers was that they were angry and one of them had murdered someone—I wasn't sure which one, or why. A few months earlier, when Deborah gave me Lawrence's phone number and swore she'd never talk to me, she'd said, "Brother gets mad when white folks come askin about our mother."

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

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Night Doctors

Two months after Sonny Lacks stood me up, I sat waiting for him again, this time in the lobby of the Baltimore Holiday Inn. It was New Year's Day, and he was nearly two hours late. I figured he'd backed out again, so I started packing to leave. Then I heard a man's voice yell, "So you're Miss Rebecca!"

Suddenly, Sonny was standing beside me with a sweet and bashful gap-toothed grin that made him look like a fifty-year-old teenager. He laughed and patted me on the back.

"You just won't give up, will you?" he said. "I got to tell you, only person I know more hardheaded than you is my sister Dale." He grinned and straightened his black driving cap. "I tried to convince her to come meet you today, but she won't listen."

Sonny had a loud laugh and mischievous eyes that squinted nearly closed when he smiled. His face was warm and handsome, open to the world. He was thin, five foot nine at most, with a carefully manicured mustache. He reached for my bag.

"Okay then," he said, "we best get this thing goin."

I followed him to a Volvo he'd left unlocked and idling in the

As I walked through a narrow, half-cement yard from the alley to Lawrence's house, a wisp of smoke seeped through the screen door of his kitchen, where static blared from a small television on a folding table. I knocked, then waited. Nothing. I stuck my head into the kitchen, where fat pork chops sat burning on the stove. I yelled hello. Still nothing.

I took a deep breath and walked inside. As I closed the door behind me, Lawrence appeared, seeming bigger than two of me, his 275-pound, six-foot frame spanning the width of the narrow kitchen, one hand on the counter, the other on the opposite wall.

"Well hello there, Miss Rebecca," he said, giving me a once-over. "You wanna taste the meat I cooked?"

It had been a decade or so since I'd eaten pork, but suddenly that seemed irrelevant. "How could I resist?" I said.

A sweet grin spread across Lawrence's face. He was sixty-four, but aside from his gray curls, he seemed decades younger, with smooth hazelnut-brown skin and youthful green eyes. He hiked up his baggy blue jeans, wiped his hands on his grease-stained T-shirt, and clapped.

"Okay then," he said, "that's good. That's real good. I'm gonna fry you up some eggs too. You're too damn skinny."

While he cooked, Lawrence talked about life down in the country. "When older folks went to town to sell tobacco, they'd come back with a piece of bologna for us kids to share. And sometimes if we were good, they'd let us sop up the bacon grease with a piece of bread." His memory for detail was impressive. He drew pictures of the horse-drawn wagon Day had made out of two-by-fours. He showed me, with string and napkins, how he tied tobacco into bundles for drying when he was a child.

But when I asked about his mother, Lawrence fell silent. Eventually he said, "She was pretty." Then he went back to talking about tobacco. I asked about Henrietta again and he said, "My father and his friends used to race horses up and down Lacks Town road." We went

in circles like this until he sighed and told me he didn't remember his mother. In fact, he said, he didn't remember most of his teen years.

"I blacked it out of my mind because of the sadness and hurting," he told me. And he had no intention of unblocking it.

"The only memory I have about my mother is her being strict," he told me. He remembered her making him hand-wash diapers in the sink; he'd hang them to dry, then she'd dump them back in the water, saying they weren't clean enough. But the only times she whipped him were for swimming off the pier in Turner Station. "She'd make me go fetch a switch to get a beatin with, then send me back out sayin get a bigger one, then a bigger one, then she'd wrap all them together and haul off on my tail."

As he talked, the kitchen filled with smoke again—we'd both forgotten he was cooking. Lawrence shooed me from the kitchen table into the living room, where he sat me in front of a plastic Christmas place mat with a plate of fried eggs and a chunk of charred pork the size of my hand, only thicker. Then he collapsed into a wooden chair beside me, put his elbows on his knees, and stared at the floor in silence while I ate.

"You're writing a book about my mama," he said finally.

I nodded as I chewed.

"Her cells growin big as the world, cover round the whole earth," he said, his eyes tearing as he waved his arms in the air, making a planet around him. "That's kinda weird . . . They just steady growin and growin, steady fightin off whatever they fightin off."

He leaned forward in his chair, his face inches from mine, and whispered, "You know what I heard? I heard by the year 2050, babies will be injected with serum made from my mama's cells so they can live to eight hundred years old." He gave me a smile like, *I bet your mama can't top that*. "They're going to get rid of disease," he said. "They're a miracle."

Lawrence fell back in his chair and stared into his lap, his smile collapsing. After a long quiet moment, he turned and looked into my eyes.

"Can you tell me what my mama's cells really did?" he whispered. "I know they did something important, but nobody tells us nothing."

When I asked if he knew what a cell was, he stared at his feet as if I'd called on him in class and he hadn't done his homework.

"Kinda," he said. "Not really."

I tore a piece of paper from my notebook, drew a big circle with a small black dot inside, and explained what a cell was, then told him some of the things HeLa had done for science, and how far cell culture had come since.

"Scientists can even grow corneas now," I told him, reaching into my bag for an article I'd clipped from a newspaper. I handed it to him and told him that, using culturing techniques HeLa helped develop, scientists could now take a sample of someone's cornea, grow it in culture, then transplant it into someone else's eye to help treat blindness.

"Imagine that," Lawrence said, shaking his head. "It's a miracle! Suddenly, Sonny threw open the screen door, yelling, "Miss Rebecca still alive in here?" He leaned in the doorway between the kitchen and living room.

"Looks like you passed the test," he said, pointing at my half-empty plate.

"Miss Rebecca telling me about our mother cells," Lawrence said. "She told me fascinating stuff. Did you know our mother cells gonna be used to make Stevie Wonder see?"

"Oh, well, actually, it's not *her* cells being put into people's eyes," I said, stammering. "Scientists are using technology her cells helped develop to grow *other* people's corneas."

"That's a miracle," Sonny said. "I didn't know about that, but the other day President Clinton said the polio vaccine is one of the most important things that happened in the twentieth century, and her cells involved with that too."

"That's a miracle," Lawrence said.

"So is this," Sonny said, slowly spreading his arms and stepping

aside to reveal his eighty-four-year-old father, Day, teetering on unsteady legs behind him.

Day hadn't left the house in nearly a week because of a nosebleed that wouldn't stop. Now he stood in the doorway in faded jeans, a flannel shirt, and blue plastic flip-flops, even though it was January. He was thin and frail, barely able to hold himself upright. His light brown face had grown tough with age, cracked but soft, like a pair of well-worn work boots. His silver hair was covered with a black driving cap identical to Sonny's.

"He's got the gangrene in his feet," Sonny said, pointing to Day's toes, which were several shades darker than the rest of him and covered with open sores. "His feet hurt too much in regular shoes." Gangrene was spreading from Day's toes to his knee; his doctor said his toes needed amputating, but Day refused. He said he didn't want doctors cutting on him like they did Henrietta. At fifty-two, Sonny felt the same way; his doctors said he needed angioplasty, but he swore he'd never do it.

Day sat beside me, brown plastic sunglasses shading his constantly tearing eyes.

"Daddy," Lawrence yelled, "did you know mama's cells gonna make Stevie Wonder see?"

Day shook his head in what looked like slow motion. "Nope," he mumbled. "Didn't know that till just now. Don't surprise me none though."

Then there was a thump on the ceiling and the rustling of someone walking around, and Lawrence jumped from the table and ran into the kitchen. "My wife is a fire dragon without morning coffee," he said. "I better make some." It was two in the afternoon.

A few minutes later, Bobbette Lacks walked down the stairs and through the living room slowly, wearing a faded blue terry-cloth robe. Everyone stopped talking as she passed and headed into the kitchen without saying a word or looking at anyone.

Bobbette seemed like a loud person being quiet, like a woman

with an enormous laugh and temper who might erupt with either at any moment. She exuded *Don't mess with me*, her face stern and staring straight ahead. She knew why I was there, and had plenty to say on the subject, but seemed utterly exhausted at the idea of talking to me, yet another white person wanting something from the family.

She disappeared into the kitchen and Sonny slid a crumpled piece of paper into Day's hand, a printout of the picture of Henrietta with her hands on her hips. He grabbed my tape recorder from the center of the table, handed it to Day, and said, "Okay, Miss Rebecca got questions for you, Pop. Tell her what you know."

Day took the recorder from Sonny's hand and said nothing.

"She just want to know everything Dale always askin you about," Sonny said.

I asked Sonny if maybe he could call Deborah to see if she'd come over, and the Lacks men shook their heads, laughing.

"Dale don't want to talk to nobody right now," Sonny said.

"That's cause she's tired of it," Day grumbled. "They always askin questions and things, she keep givin out information and not gettin nuthin. They don't even give her a postcard."

"Yep," Sonny said, "that's right. All they wants to do is know everything. And that's what Miss Rebecca wants too. So go on Daddy, tell her, just get this over with."

But Day didn't want to talk about Henrietta's life.

"First I heard about it was, she had that cancer," he said, repeating the story he'd told dozens of reporters over the years, almost verbatim. "Hopkins called me, said come up there cause she died. They asked me to let them have Henrietta and I told them no. I said, 'I don't know what you did, but you killed her. Don't keep cuttin on her.' But after a time my cousin said it wouldn't hurt none, so I said okay."

Day clenched his three remaining teeth. "I didn't sign no papers," he said. "I just told them they could do a topsy. Nothin else. Them doctors never said nuthin about keepin her alive in no tubes or growin no cells. All they told me was they wanted to do a topsy see if they could help my children. And I've always just knowed this much: they is the

doctor, and you got to go by what they say. I don't know as much as they do. And them doctors said if I gave em my old lady, they could use her to study that cancer and maybe help my children, my grandchildren."

"Yeah!" Sonny yelled. "They said it would help his kids in case they come down with cancer. He had five kids, what was he going to do?" "They knew them cells was already growin when I come down there after she died," Day said, shaking his head. "But they didn't tell me nuthin bout that. They just asked if they could cut her up see about that cancer."

"Well what do you expect from Hopkins?" Bobbette yelled from the kitchen, where she sat watching a soap opera. "I wouldn't even go there to get my toenails cut."

"Mmm hmm," Day yelled back, thumping his silver cane on the floor like an exclamation point.

"Back then they did things," Sonny said. "Especially to black folks. John Hopkins was known for experimentin on black folks. They'd snatch em off the street . . ."

"That's right!" Bobbette said, appearing in the kitchen door with her coffee. "Everybody knows that."

"They just snatch em off the street," Sonny said.

"Snatchin people!" Bobbette yelled, her voice growing louder.

"Experimentin on them!" Sonny yelled.

"You'd be surprised how many people disappeared in East Baltimore when I was a girl," Bobbette said, shaking her head. "I'm telling you, I lived here in the fifties when they got Henrietta, and we weren't allowed to go anywhere near Hopkins. When it got dark and we were young, we had to be *on the steps*, or Hopkins might get us."

The Lackses aren't the only ones who heard from a young age that Hopkins and other hospitals abducted black people. Since at least the 1800s, black oral history has been filled with tales of "night doctors" who kidnapped black people for research. And there were disturbing truths behind those stories.

Some of the stories were conjured by white plantation owners taking advantage of the long-held African belief that ghosts caused disease and death. To discourage slaves from meeting or escaping, slave owners told tales of gruesome research done on black bodies, then covered themselves in white sheets and crept around at night, posing as spirits coming to infect black people with disease or steal them for research. Those sheets eventually gave rise to the white hooded cloaks of the Ku Klux Klan.

But night doctors weren't just fictions conjured as scare tactics. Many doctors tested drugs on slaves and operated on them to develop new surgical techniques, often without using anesthesia. Fear of night doctors only increased in the early 1900s, as black people migrated north to Washington, D.C., and Baltimore, and news spread that medical schools there were offering money in exchange for bodies. Black corpses were routinely exhumed from graves for research, and an underground shipping industry kept schools in the North supplied with black bodies from the South for anatomy courses. The bodies sometimes arrived, a dozen or so at a time, in barrels labeled *turpentine*.

Because of this history, black residents near Hopkins have long believed the hospital was built in a poor black neighborhood for the benefit of scientists—to give them easy access to potential research subjects. In fact, it was built for the benefit of Baltimore's poor.

Johns Hopkins was born on a tobacco plantation in Maryland where his father later freed his slaves nearly sixty years before Emancipation. Hopkins made millions working as a banker and grocer, and selling his own brand of whiskey, but he never married and had no children. So in 1873, not long before his death, he donated \$7 million to start a medical school and charity hospital. He wrote a letter to the twelve men he'd chosen to serve as its board of trustees, outlining his wishes. In it he explained that the purpose of Hopkins Hospital was to help those who otherwise couldn't get medical care:

The indigent sick of this city and its environs, without regard to sex, age, or color, who require surgical or medical treatment, and

who can be received into the hospital without peril to other inmates, and the poor of the city and State, of all races, who are stricken down by any casualty, shall be received into the hospital without charge.

He specified that the only patients to be charged were those who could easily afford it, and that any money they brought in should then be spent treating those without money. He also set aside an additional \$2 million worth of property, and \$20,000 in cash each year, specifically for helping black children:

It will be your duty hereafter to provide . . . suitable buildings for the reception, maintenance and education of orphaned colored children. I direct you to provide accommodations for three or four hundred children of this class; you are also authorized to receive into this asylum, at your discretion, as belonging to such class, colored children who have lost one parent only, and in exceptional cases to receive colored children who are not orphans, but may be in such circumstances as to require the aid of charity.

Hopkins died not long after writing that letter. His board of trustees—many of them friends and family—created one of the top medical schools in the country, and a hospital whose public wards provided millions of dollars in free care to the poor, many of them black.

But the history of Hopkins Hospital certainly isn't pristine when it comes to black patients. In 1969, a Hopkins researcher used blood samples from more than 7,000 neighborhood children—most of them from poor black families—to look for a genetic predisposition to criminal behavior. The researcher didn't get consent. The American Civil Liberties Union filed suit claiming the study violated the boys' civil rights and breached confidentiality of doctor-patient relationships by releasing results to state and juvenile courts. The study was halted, then resumed a few months later using consent forms.

And in the late nineties, two women sued Hopkins, claiming that

its researchers had knowingly exposed their children to lead, and hadn't promptly informed them when blood tests revealed that their children had elevated lead levels—even when one developed lead poisoning. The research was part of a study examining lead abatement methods, and all families involved were black. The researchers had treated several homes to varying degrees, then encouraged landlords to rent those homes to families with children so they could then monitor the children's lead levels. Initially, the case was dismissed. On appeal, one judge compared the study to Southam's HeLa injections, the Tuskegee study, and Nazi research, and the case eventually settled out of court. The Department of Health and Human Services launched an investigation and concluded that the study's consent forms "failed to provide an adequate description" of the different levels of lead abatement in the homes.

But today when people talk about the history of Hopkins's relationship with the black community, the story many of them hold up as the worst offense is that of Henrietta Lacks—a black woman whose body, they say, was exploited by white scientists.

Sitting in Lawrence's living room, Sonny and Bobbette yelled back and forth for nearly an hour about Hopkins snatching black people. Eventually, Sonny leaned back in his chair and said, "John Hopkin didn't give us no information about anything. That was the bad part. Not the sad part, but the bad part, cause I don't know if they didn't give us information because they was making money out of it, or if they was just wanting to keep us in the dark about it. I think they made money out of it, cause they were selling her cells all over the world and shipping them for dollars."

"Hopkins say they gave them cells away," Lawrence yelled, "but they made millions! It's not fair! She's the most important person in the world and her family living in poverty. If our mother so important to science, why can't we get health insurance?"

Day had prostate cancer and asbestos-filled lungs. Sonny had a

bad heart, and Deborah had arthritis, osteoporosis, nerve deafness, anxiety, and depression. With all that plus the whole family's high blood pressure and diabetes, the Lackses figured they pretty much supported the pharmaceutical industry, plus several doctors. But their insurance came and went. Some were covered through Medicare, others on and off by spouses, but they all went stretches with no coverage or money for treatment.

As the Lacks men talked about Hopkins and insurance, Bobbette snorted in disgust and walked to her recliner in the living room. "My pressure's goin up and I'm not gonna die over this, you know?" The whole thing just wasn't worth getting riled up over, she said. But she couldn't help herself. "Everybody knew black people were disappearing cause Hopkins was experimenting on them!" she yelled. "I believe a lot of it was true."

"Probably so," Sonny said. "A lot might a been myth too. You never know. But one thing we do know, them cells about my mother ain't no myth."

Day thumped his cane again.

"You know what is a myth?" Bobbette snapped from the recliner. "Everybody always saying Henrietta Lacks donated those cells. She didn't donate nothing. They took them and didn't ask." She inhaled a deep breath to calm herself. "What really would upset Henrietta is the fact that Dr. Gey never told the family anything—we didn't know nothing about those cells and he didn't care. That just rubbed us the wrong way. I just kept asking everybody, 'Why didn't they say anything to the family?' They knew how to contact us! If Dr. Gey wasn't dead, I think I would have killed him myself."