5

"Blackness Be Spreadin All Inside"

Henrietta knew nothing about her cells growing in a laboratory. After leaving the hospital, she went back to life as usual. She'd never loved the city, so almost every weekend she took the children back to Clover, where she worked the tobacco fields and spent hours churning butter on the steps of the home-house. Though radium often causes relentless nausea, vomiting, weakness, and anemia, there's no record of Henrietta having any side effects, and no one remembers her complaining of feeling sick.

When she wasn't in Clover, Henrietta spent her time cooking for Day, the children, and whichever cousins happened to be at her house. She made her famous rice pudding and slow-cooked greens, chitlins, and the vats of spaghetti with meatballs she kept going on the stove for whenever cousins dropped by hungry. When Day wasn't working the night shift, he and Henrietta spent evenings at home, playing cards and listening to Bennie Smith play blues guitar on the radio after the kids went to sleep. On the nights Day worked, Henrietta and Sadie would wait until the door slammed, count to one hundred, then jump out of bed, put on their dancing clothes, and sneak out of the house,

careful not to wake the children. Once they got outside, they'd wiggle their hips and squeal, scampering down the street to the dance floors at Adams Bar and Twin Pines.

"We used to really swing out heavy," Sadie told me years later. "We couldn't help it. They played music that when you heard it just put your soul into it. We'd two-step across that floor, jiggle to some blues, then somebody maybe put a quarter in there and play a slow music song, and Lord we'd just get out there and shake and turn around and all like that!" She giggled like a young girl. "It was some beautiful times." And they were beautiful women.

Henrietta had walnut eyes, straight white teeth, and full lips. She was a sturdy woman with a square jaw, thick hips, short, muscular legs, and hands rough from tobacco fields and kitchens. She kept her nails short so bread dough wouldn't stick under them when she kneaded it, but she always painted them a deep red to match her toenails.

Henrietta spent hours taking care of those nails, touching up chips and brushing on new coats of polish. She'd sit on her bed, polish in hand, hair high on her head in curlers, wearing the silky slip she loved so much she hand-washed it each night. She never wore pants, and rarely left the house without pulling on a carefully pressed skirt and shirt, sliding her feet into her tiny, open-toed pumps, and pinning her hair up with a little flip at the bottom, "just like it was dancin toward her face," Sadie always said.

"Hennie made life come alive—bein with her was like bein with fun," Sadie told me, staring toward the ceiling as she talked. "Hennie just love peoples. She was a person that could really make the good things come out of you."

But there was one person Henrietta couldn't bring out any good in. Ethel, the wife of their cousin Galen, had recently come to Turner Station from Clover, and she hated Henrietta—her cousins always said it was jealousy.

"I guess I can't say's I blame her," Sadie said. "Galen, that husband of Ethel's, he was likin Hennie more than he like Ethel. Lord, he

followed Hennie! Everywhere she go, there go Galen—he tried to stay up at Hennie house all the time when Day gone to work. Lord, Ethel *was* jealous—made her hateful to Hennie somethin fierce. Always seemed like she wanted to hurt Hennie." So Henrietta and Sadie would giggle and slip out the back to another club anytime Ethel showed up.

When they weren't sneaking out, Henrietta, Sadie, and Sadie's sister Margaret spent evenings in Henrietta's living room, playing bingo, yelling, and laughing over a pot of pennies while Henrietta's babies—David Jr., Deborah, and Joe—played with the bingo chips on the carpet beneath the table. Lawrence was nearly sixteen, already out having a life of his own. But one child was missing: Henrietta's oldest daughter, Elsie.

Before Henrietta got sick, she took Elsie down to Clover every time she went. Elsie would sit on the stoop of the home-house, staring into the hills and watching the sunrise as Henrietta worked in the garden. She was beautiful, delicate and feminine like Henrietta, who dressed her in homemade outfits with bows and spent hours braiding her long brown curls. Elsie never talked, she just cawed and chirped like a bird as she waved her hands inches from her face. She had wide chestnut eyes that everyone stared into, trying to understand what went on in that pretty head. But she just stared back, unflinching, her eyes haunted with fear and sadness that only softened when Henrietta rocked her back and forth.

Sometimes Elsie raced through the fields, chasing wild turkeys or grabbing the family mule by the tail and thrashing against him until Lawrence pulled her off. Henrietta's cousin Peter always said God had that child from the moment she was born, because that mule never hurt her. It was so mean it snapped at air like a rabid dog and kicked at the wind, but it seemed to know Elsie was special. Still, as she grew, she fell, she ran into walls and doors, burned herself against the woodstove. Henrietta made Day drive her and Elsie to revival meetings so preachers in tents could lay hands on Elsie to heal her, but

it never worked. In Turner Station, sometimes Elsie bolted from the house and ran through the street screaming.

By the time Henrietta got pregnant with baby Joe, Elsie was too big for Henrietta to handle alone, especially with two babies. The doctors said that sending Elsie away was the best thing. So now she was living about an hour and a half south of Baltimore, at Crownsville State Hospital—formerly known as the Hospital for the Negro Insane.

Henrietta's cousins always said a bit of Henrietta died the day they sent Elsie away, that losing her was worse than anything else that happened to her. Now, nearly a year later, Henrietta still had Day or a cousin take her from Turner Station to Crownsville once a week to sit with Elsie, who'd cry and cling to her as they played with each other's hair.

Henrietta had a way with children—they were always good and quiet when she was around. But whenever she left the house, Lawrence stopped being good. If the weather was nice, he'd run to the old pier in Turner Station, where Henrietta had forbidden him to go. The pier had burned down years earlier, leaving tall wooden pilings that Lawrence and his friends liked to dive from. One of Sadie's sons nearly drowned out there from hitting his head on a rock, and Lawrence was always coming home with eye infections that everyone blamed on the water being contaminated by Sparrows Point. Anytime Henrietta got word that Lawrence was at the pier, she'd storm down there, drag him out of the water, and whip him.

"*Ooooh* Lord," Sadie said once, "Hennie went down there with a switch. Yes *Lord.* She pitched a boogie like I never seen." But those were the only times anyone could ever remember seeing Henrietta mad. "She was tough," Sadie said. "Nothin scared Hennie."

For a month and a half, no one in Turner Station knew Henrietta was sick. The cancer was easy to keep secret, because she only had to go back to Hopkins once, for a checkup and a second radium treatment. At that point the doctors liked what they saw: her cervix was a bit red and inflamed from the first treatment, but the tumor was

shrinking. Regardless, she had to start X-ray therapy, which meant visiting Hopkins every weekday for a month. For that, she needed help: Henrietta lived twenty minutes from Hopkins, and Day worked nights, so he couldn't take her home after radiation until late. She wanted to walk to her cousin Margaret's house a few blocks from Hopkins and wait there for Day after her treatments. But first she'd have to tell Margaret and Sadie she was sick.

Henrietta told her cousins about the cancer at a carnival that came to Turner Station each year. The three of them climbed onto the Ferris wheel as usual, and she waited till it got so high they could see across Sparrows Point toward the ocean, till the Ferris wheel stopped and they were just kicking their legs back and forth, swinging in the crisp spring air.

"You remember when I said I had a knot inside me?" she asked. They nodded yes. "Well, I got cancer," Henrietta said. "I been havin treatments down at John Hopkins."

"What?!" Sadie said, looking at Henrietta and feeling suddenly dizzy, like she was about to slide off the Ferris wheel seat.

"Nothin serious wrong with me," Henrietta said. "I'm fine."

And at that point it looked like she was right. The tumor had completely vanished from the radium treatments. As far as the doctors could see, Henrietta's cervix was normal again, and they felt no tumors anywhere else. Her doctors were so sure of her recovery that while she was in the hospital for her second radium treatment, they'd performed reconstructive surgery on her nose, fixing the deviated septum that had given her sinus infections and headaches her whole life. It was a new beginning. The radiation treatments were just to make sure there were no cancer cells left anywhere inside her.

But about two weeks after her second radium treatment, Henrietta got her period—the flow was heavy and it didn't stop. She was still bleeding weeks later on March 20, when Day began dropping her off each morning at Hopkins for her radiation treatments. She'd change into a surgical gown, lie on an exam table with an enormous machine mounted on the wall above her, and a doctor would put strips of lead

inside her vagina to protect her colon and lower spine from the radiation. On the first day he tattooed two black dots with temporary ink on either side of her abdomen, just over her uterus. They were targets, so he could aim the radiation into the same area each day, but rotate between spots to avoid burning her skin too much in one place.

After each treatment, Henrietta would change back into her clothes and walk the few blocks to Margaret's house, where she'd wait for Day to pick her up around midnight. For the first week or so, she and Margaret would sit on the porch playing cards or bingo, talking about the men, the cousins, and the children. At that point, the radiation seemed like nothing more than an inconvenience. Henrietta's bleeding stopped, and if she felt sick from the treatments, she never mentioned it.

But things weren't all good. Toward the end of her treatments, Henrietta asked her doctor when she'd be better so she could have another child. Until that moment, Henrietta didn't know that the treatments had left her infertile.

Warning patients about fertility loss before cancer treatment was standard practice at Hopkins, and something Howard Jones says he and TeLinde did with every patient. In fact, a year and a half before Henrietta came to Hopkins for treatment, in a paper about hysterectomy, TeLinde wrote:

> The psychic effect of hysterectomy, especially on the young, is considerable, and it should not be done without a thorough understanding on the part of the patient [who is] entitled to a simple explanation of the facts [including] loss of the reproductive function. . . . It is well to present the facts to such an individual and give her ample time to digest them. . . . It is far better for her to make her own adjustment before the operation than to awaken from the anesthetic and find it a *fait accompli.*

In this case, something went wrong: in Henrietta's medical record, one of her doctors wrote, "Told she could not have any more children.

Says if she had been told so before, she would not have gone through with treatment." But by the time she found out, it was too late.

Then, three weeks after starting X-ray therapy, she began burning inside, and her urine came out feeling like broken glass. Day said he'd been having a funny discharge, and that she must have given him that sickness she kept going to Hopkins to treat.

"I would rather imagine that it is the other way around," Jones wrote in Henrietta's chart after examining her. "But at any rate, this patient now has . . . acute Gonorrhea superimposed on radiation reaction."

Soon, however, Day's running around was the least of Henrietta's worries. That short walk to Margaret's started feeling longer and longer, and all Henrietta wanted to do when she got there was sleep. One day she almost collapsed a few blocks from Hopkins, and it took her nearly an hour to make the walk. After that, she started taking cabs.

One afternoon, as Henrietta lay on the couch, she lifted her shirt to show Margaret and Sadie what the treatments had done to her. Sadie gasped: The skin from Henrietta's breasts to her pelvis was charred a deep black from the radiation. The rest of her body was its natural shade—more the color of fawn than coal.

"Hennie," she whispered, "they burnt you black as tar."

Henrietta just nodded and said, "Lord, it just feels like that blackness be spreadin all inside me."

6

"Lady's on the Phone"

Eleven years after learning about Henrietta in Defler's classroom—on my twenty-seventh birthday—I stumbled on a collection of scientific papers from something called "The HeLa Cancer Control Symposium" at Morehouse School of Medicine in Atlanta, one of the oldest historically black colleges in the country. The symposium had been organized in Henrietta's honor by Roland Pattillo, a professor of gynecology at Morehouse who'd been one of George Gey's only African-American students.

When I called Roland Pattillo to see what he knew about Henrietta, I told him I was writing a book about her.

"Oh you are?" he said, laughing a slow, rumbling laugh that said, *Oh child, you have no idea what you're getting into.* "Henrietta's family won't talk to you. They've had a terrible time with the HeLa cells."

"You know her family?" I said. "Can you put me in touch with them?

"I do have the ability to put you in touch with them, but you need to answer a few questions, starting with 'Why should I?' "

For the next hour, Pattillo grilled me about my intentions. As I told him about the history of my HeLa obsession, he grumbled and sighed, letting out occasional *mmmmmms* and *wellllllls*.

Eventually he said, "Correct me if I'm wrong, but you *are* white."

"Is it that obvious?"

"Yes," he said. "What do you know about African-Americans and science?"

I told him about the Tuskegee syphilis study like I was giving an oral report in history class: It started in the thirties, when U.S. Public Health Service researchers at the Tuskegee Institute decided to study how syphilis killed, from infection to death. They recruited hundreds of African-American men with syphilis, then watched them die slow, painful, and preventable deaths, even after they realized penicillin could cure them. The research subjects didn't ask questions. They were poor and uneducated, and the researchers offered incentives: free physical exams, hot meals, and rides into town on clinic days, plus fifty-dollar burial stipends for their families when the men died. The researchers chose black subjects because they, like many whites at the time, believed black people were "a notoriously syphilis-soaked race."

The public didn't learn about the Tuskegee study until the seventies, after hundreds of men enrolled in it had already died. The news spread like pox through black communities: doctors were doing research on black people, lying to them, and watching them die. Rumors started circulating that the doctors had actually injected the men with syphilis in order to study them.

"What else?" Pattillo grumbled.

I told him I'd heard about so-called Mississippi Appendectomies, unnecessary hysterectomies performed on poor black women to stop them from reproducing, and to give young doctors a chance to practice the procedure. I'd also read about the lack of funding for research into sickle-cell anemia, a disease that affected blacks almost exclusively.

"It's interesting that you called when you did," he said. "I'm organizing the next HeLa conference, and when the phone rang, I'd just sat down at my desk and typed the words *Henrietta Lacks* on my screen." We both laughed. It must be a sign, we said; perhaps Henrietta wanted us to talk.

"Deborah is Henrietta's baby girl," he said, very matter-of-fact. "The family calls her Dale. She's almost fifty now, still living in Baltimore, with grandchildren of her own. Henrietta's husband is still alive. He's around eighty-four—still goes to the clinics at Johns Hopkins." He dropped this like a tease.

"Did you know Henrietta had an epileptic daughter?" Pattillo asked.

"No."

"She died at fifteen, soon after Henrietta's death. Deborah is the only daughter left," he said. "She came near a stroke recently because of the agony she's gone through regarding inquiries into her mother's death and those cells. I won't be a part of anyone doing that to her again."

I started to speak, but he interrupted me.

"I need to go see patients now," he said abruptly. "I'm not ready to put you in touch with the family yet. But I think you're honest about your intentions. We will talk again after I think. Call back tomorrow."

After three straight days of grilling, Pattillo finally decided to give me Deborah's phone number. But first, he said, there were a few things I needed to know. He lowered his voice and rattled off a list of dos and don'ts for dealing with Deborah Lacks: Don't be aggressive. Do be honest. Don't be clinical, don't try to force her into anything, don't talk down to her, she hates that. Do be compassionate, don't forget that she's been through a lot with these cells, do have patience. "You'll need that more than anything," he told me.

Moments after hanging up the phone with Pattillo, his list of dos and don'ts in my hand, I dialed Deborah's number, then paced as her phone rang. When she whispered hello, I

blurted out, "I'm so excited you answered because I've been wanting to talk to you for years! I'm writing a book about your mother!"

"Huh?" she said.

I didn't know that Deborah was nearly deaf—she relied heavily on lip reading and couldn't follow anyone who talked fast.

I took a deep breath and tried again, forcing myself to sound out every syllable.

"Hi, my name is Rebecca."

"How ya doin?" she said, weary but warm.

"I'm very excited to talk to you."

"Mmmhmm," she said, like she'd heard that line many times before.

I told her again that I wanted to write a book about her mother and said I was surprised no one seemed to know anything about her, even though her cells were so important for science.

Deborah sat silent for a long moment, then screamed, "That's right!" She giggled and started talking like we'd known each other for years. "Everything always just about the cells and don't even worry about her name and was HeLa even a person. So hallelujah! I think a book would be great!"

This was not what I'd expected.

I was afraid to say anything that might make her stop talking, so I simply said, "Great." And that was the last word I spoke until the end of our call. I didn't ask a single question, just took notes as fast as I could.

Deborah crammed a lifetime of information into a manic and confusing forty-five minutes that jumped without warning, and in no particular order, from the 1920s to the 1990s, from stories of her father to her grandfather, cousins, mother, and total strangers.

"Nobody never said nothing," she told me. "I mean, where my mother clothes at? Where my mother shoes? I knew about her watch and ring, but it was stolen. That was after my brother killed that boy." She talked about a man she didn't name, saying, "I didn't think it was fit for him to steal my mother medical record and autopsy papers. He was in prison for fifteen years in Alabama. Now he sayin John Hopkin killed my mother and them white doctors experimented on her cause she was black.

"My nerve broke down," she said. "I just couldn't take it. My speech is coming back a little better—I almost had two strokes in two weeks cause of all that stuff with my mother cells."

Then suddenly she was talking about her family history, saying something about "the Hospital for Crazy Negroes" and her mother's great-grandfather having been a slave owner. "We all mixed. And one of my mother sisters converted to Puerto Rican."

Again and again, she said, "I can't take it anymore," and "Who are we supposed to trust now?" More than anything, she told me, she wanted to learn about her mother and what her cells had done for science. She said people had been promising her information for decades and never delivering it. "I'm sick of it," she said. "You know what I really want? I want to know, what did my mother smell like? For all my life I just don't know anything, not even the little common little things, like what color she like? Did she like to dance? Did she breast-feed me? Lord, I'd like to know that. But nobody ever say nothing."

She laughed and said, "I tell you one thing—the story's not over yet. You got your work cut out for you, girl. This thing's crazy enough for three books!"

Then someone walked through her front door and Deborah yelled straight into the receiver, "Good morning! I got *mail*?" She sounded panicked by the idea of it. "Oh my God! Oh no! Mail?!"

"Okay, Miss Rebecca," she said. "I got to go. You call me Monday, promise? Okay, dear. God bless. Bye-bye."

She hung up and I sat stunned, receiver crooked in my neck, frantically scribbling notes I didn't understand, like *brother = murder, mail = bad, man stole Henrietta's medical records,* and *Hospital for Negro Insane?*

When I called Deborah back as promised, she sounded like a different person. Her voice was monotone, depressed, and slurred, like she was heavily sedated.

"No interviews," she mumbled almost incoherently. "You got to

go away. My brothers say I should write my own book. But I ain't a writer. I'm sorry."

I tried to speak, but she cut me off. "I can't talk to you no more. Only thing to do is convince the men." She gave me three phone numbers: her father; her oldest brother, Lawrence; and her brother David Jr.'s pager. "Everybody call him Sonny," she told me, then hung up. I wouldn't hear her voice again for nearly a year.

I started calling Deborah, her brothers, and her father daily, but they didn't answer. Finally, after several days of leaving messages, someone answered at Day's house: a young boy who didn't say hello, just breathed into the receiver, hip-hop thumping in the background.

When I asked for David, the boy said, "Yeah," and threw the phone down.

"Go get Pop!" he yelled, followed by a long pause. "It's important. Get Pop!"

No response.

"Lady's on the phone," he yelled, "come on . . ."

The first boy breathed into the receiver again as a second boy picked up an extension and said hello.

"Hi," I said. "Can I talk to David?"

"Who this?" he asked.

"Rebecca," I said.

He moved the phone away from his mouth and yelled, "Get Pop, lady's on the phone about his wife cells."

Years later I'd understand how a young boy could know why I was calling just from the sound of my voice: the only time white people called Day was when they wanted something having to do with HeLa cells. But at the time I was confused—I figured I must have heard wrong.

A woman picked up a receiver saying, "Hello, may I help you?" She was sharp, curt, like *I do not have time for this.*

I told her I was hoping to talk to David, and she asked who was calling. Rebecca, I said, afraid she'd hang up if I said anything more.

"Just a moment." She sighed and lowered the phone. "Go take this to Day," she told a child. "Tell him he got a long-distance call, somebody named Rebecca calling about his wife cells."

The child grabbed the phone, pressed it to his ear, and ran for Day. Then there was a long silence.

"Pop, get up," the kid whispered. "There's somebody about your wife."

"Whu . . ."

"Get *up*, there's somebody about your wife cells."

"Whu? Where?"

"Wife cells, on the phone . . . get up."

"Where her cells?"

"Here," the boy said, handing Day the phone.

"Yeah?"

"Hi, is this David Lacks?"

"Yeah."

I told him my name and started to explain why I was calling, but before I could say much, he let out a deep sigh.

"Whanowthis," he mumbled in a deep Southern accent, his words slurred like he'd had a stroke. "You got my wife cells?"

"Yeah," I said, thinking he was asking if I was calling about his wife's cells.

"Yeah?" he said, suddenly bright, alert. "You got my wife cells? She know you talking?"

"Yeah," I said, thinking he was asking if Deborah knew I was calling.

"Well, so let my old lady cells talk to you and leave me alone," he snapped. "I had enough 'a you people." Then he hung up.