

1951-1965

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## "Too Young to Remember"

After Henrietta's funeral, cousins came from Clover and all over Turner Station to help cook for her family and care for the babies. They came and went by the dozens, bringing children and grandchildren, nieces and nephews. And one of them—no one was ever sure who—brought tuberculosis. Within weeks of Henrietta's death, Sonny, Deborah, and baby Joe—all between one and four years old—tested positive for TB.

The doctor sent Deborah home with TB pills as big as bullets, but her little brother Joe was another story. He was barely a year old, and the tuberculosis nearly killed him. Joe spent much of his second year in the hospital, coughing up blood in an isolation chamber. After that, he spent months being passed from cousin to cousin.

Because Day was working two jobs, Lawrence dropped out of school and spent most of his time taking care of his brothers and Deborah, but he wanted to get out of the house now and then to go to the pool halls. At sixteen he was too young to get in, so he lied about his age and got himself a voter's registration card saying he was eighteen. No one could prove he was lying since he'd been born on the

home-house floor and didn't have a birth certificate or social security card. But his plan backfired. Because of the Korean War, Congress had just lowered the minimum age for military service to eighteen and a half, so Lawrence was drafted at sixteen. He was sent to Virginia, where he'd serve two years in a medic unit at Fort Belvoir. With Lawrence gone, someone else had to raise the Lacks children.

No one told Sonny, Deborah, or Joe what had happened to their mother, and they were afraid to ask. Back then, the rule in the house was, *Do what adults say—otherwise you'll get hurt*. They were to sit, hands folded, and not say a word unless someone asked them a question. As far as the children knew, their mother was there one day, gone the next. She never came back, and they got Ethel in her place.

Ethel was the woman that Sadie and Henrietta once hid from on the dance floor, the one Sadie and Margaret swore was jealous of Henrietta. They called her "that hateful woman," and when she and her husband, Galen, moved into the house, saying they were there to help with the children, Sadie and Margaret figured Ethel was trying to move in on Day. Soon, stories began spreading about Ethel sleeping with Day instead of Galen. A good handful of cousins still think Ethel moved into that house and started up with Day just to get out all the hate she had for Henrietta by torturing her children.

Henrietta's children grew up hungry. Every morning Ethel fed them each a cold biscuit that had to last them until dinner. She put latches and bolts on the refrigerator and cupboard doors to keep the children out between meals. They weren't allowed ice in their water because it made noise. If they were good, she'd sometimes give them a slice of bologna or a cold wiener, maybe pour the grease from her bacon pan onto their biscuit, or mix some water with vinegar and sugar for dessert. But she rarely thought they were good.

Lawrence came home from the military in 1953 and moved into a house of his own—he had no idea what Ethel was doing to his brothers and Deborah. As the children grew, Ethel woke them at dawn to clean the house, cook, shop, and do the laundry. In the summers she took them to Clover, where she'd send them into the fields to pick

worms off tobacco leaves by hand. The tobacco juice stained their fingers and made them sick when it got in their mouths. But they grew used to it. The Lacks children had to work from sunup to sundown; they weren't allowed to take breaks, and they got no food or water until nightfall, even when the summer heat burned. Ethel would watch them from the couch or a window, and if one of them stopped working before she told them to, she'd beat them all bloody. At one point, she beat Sonny so badly with an extension cord, he ended up in the hospital. But Joe got the worst of Ethel's rage.

Sometimes she would beat Joe for no reason while he lay in bed or sat at the dinner table. She'd hit him with her fists, or whatever she had closer: shoes, chairs, sticks. She made him stand in a dark basement corner on one foot, nose pressed to the wall, dirt filling his eyes. Sometimes she tied him up with rope and left him down there for hours. Other times she left him there all night. If his foot wasn't in the air when she checked on him, she'd whip his back with a belt. If he cried, she'd just whip harder. And there was nothing Sonny or Deborah could do to help him; if they said anything, Ethel just beat them all worse. But after a while it got to where the beatings didn't bother Joe. He stopped feeling pain; he felt only rage.

The police came by the house more than once to tell Day or Ethel to pull Joe off the roof, where he was lying on his stomach, shooting strangers on the sidewalk with his BB gun. When the police asked what he thought he was doing up there, Joe told them he was practicing to be a sniper when he grew up. They thought he was joking.

Joe grew into the meanest, angriest child any Lacks had ever known, and the family started saying something must have happened to his brain while he was growing inside Henrietta alongside that cancer.

In 1959, Lawrence moved into a new house with his girlfriend Bobbette Cooper. Five years earlier she noticed Lawrence walking down the street in his uniform, and fell for him instantly. Her grandmother warned her, "Don't mess with that boy, his eyes green, his army suit green, and his car green. You can't trust him." But Bobbette

didn't listen. They moved in together when Bobbette was twenty and Lawrence was twenty-four, and they had their first child that same year. They also found out that Ethel had been beating Deborah and her brothers. Bobbette insisted that the whole family move in with her and Lawrence, and she helped raise Sonny, Deborah, and Joe as if they were her own.

Deborah was ten years old. Though moving out of Ethel's house had ended the abuse for her brothers, it hadn't stopped it for her. Ethel's husband, Galen, was Deborah's biggest problem, and he found her wherever she went.

She tried to tell Day when Galen touched her in ways she didn't think he was supposed to, but Day never believed her. And Ethel just called Deborah words she'd never heard, like *bitch* and *slut*. In the car with Day driving and Ethel in the passenger seat, and everybody drinking except her, Deborah would sit in the back, pressed against the car door to get as far from Galen as she could. But he'd just slide closer. As Day drove with his arm around Ethel in front, Galen would grab Deborah in the backseat, forcing his hands under her shirt, in her pants, between her legs. After the first time he touched her, Deborah swore she'd never wear another pair of jeans with snaps instead of zippers again. But zippers didn't stop him; neither did tight belts. So Deborah would just stare out the window, praying for Day to drive faster as she pushed Galen's hands away again and again.

Then one day he called Deborah, saying, "Dale, come over here and get some money. Ethel wants you to pick her up some soda."

When Deborah got to Galen's house, she found him lying naked on the bed. She'd never seen a man's penis and didn't know what it meant for one to be erect, or why he was rubbing it. She just knew it all felt wrong.

"Ethel want a six-pack of soda," Galen told Deborah, then parted the mattress beside him. "The money's right here."

Deborah kept her eyes on the floor and ran as fast as she could, snatching the money off the bed, ducking when he grabbed for her, then running down the stairs with him chasing after her, naked and

yelling, "Get back here till I finish with you, Dale! You little whore! Just wait till I tell your father!" Deborah got away, which just made him madder.

Despite the beating and the molesting, Deborah felt closer to Galen than she ever had to Day. When he wasn't hitting her, Galen showered her with attention and gifts. He bought her pretty clothes, and took her for ice cream. In those moments, Deborah pretended he was her father, and she felt like a regular little girl. But after he chased her through the house naked, it didn't seem worth it, and eventually she told Galen she didn't want any more gifts.

"I'll get you a pair of shoes," he said, then paused, rubbing her arm. "You don't have to worry about anything. I'll wear a rubber, you don't have to worry about pregnant." Deborah had never heard of a rubber, and she didn't know what pregnant was, she just knew she wanted him to leave her alone.

Deborah had started scrubbing people's floors and ironing for small amounts of money. She'd try to walk home alone after work, but Galen would usually pick her up along the way and try to touch her in the car. One day not long after her twelfth birthday, he pulled up beside Deborah and told her to get in. This time she kept walking. Galen jammed the car into park and yelled, "You get in this damn car girl!"

Deborah refused. "Why should I get in?" she said. "I ain't doing nothing wrong, it's still daylight and I just walkin down the street."

"Your father looking for you," he snapped.

"Let him come get me then! You been doin things to my body you ain't supposed to do," she yelled. "I don't want to be nowhere with you by myself no more. Lord gave me enough sense to know that."

She turned to run but he hit her, grabbed her by the arm, threw her into the car, and kept right on having his way with her. A few weeks later, as Deborah walked home from work with a neighborhood boy named Alfred "Cheerah" Carter, Galen pulled up alongside them, yelling at her to get in the car. When Deborah refused, Galen raced up the street, tires screaming. A few minutes later he pulled up

beside her again, this time with Day in the passenger seat. Galen jumped out of the car, cussing and screaming and telling her she was a whore. He grabbed Deborah by the arm, threw her in the car, and punched her hard in the face. Her father didn't say a word, just stared through the windshield.

Deborah cried the whole way home to Bobbette and Lawrence's house, blood dripping from her split eyebrow, then leapt from the car and ran through the house, straight into the closet where she hid when she was upset. She held the door closed tight. Bobbette saw Deborah run through the house crying, saw the blood on her face, and chased her to the closet. With Deborah inside sobbing, Bobbette pounded on the door saying, "Dale, what the hell is going on?"

Bobbette had been part of the family long enough to know that cousins sometimes had their way with other cousins. But she didn't know about Galen hurting Deborah, because Deborah never told anyone—she was afraid she'd get in trouble.

Bobbette pulled Deborah from the closet, grabbed her shoulders, and said, "Dale, if you don't tell me nothing, I won't know nothing. Now, I know you love Galen like he your father, but you got to tell me what's goin on."

Deborah told Bobbette that Galen had hit her, and that he some-times talked dirty to her in the car. She said nothing about Galen touching her, because she was sure Bobbette would kill him and she worried that with Galen dead and Bobbette in jail for murdering him, she'd have lost the two people who cared for her most in the world.

Bobbette stormed over to Galen and Ethel's house, and burst in their front door screaming that if either of them touched one of those Lacks children again, she'd kill them herself.

Soon after, Deborah asked Bobbette what *pregnant* was. Bobbette told her, then grabbed Deborah's shoulders again and told her to listen good. "I know your mother and father and all the cousins all mingled together in their own way, but don't you ever do it, Dale. Cousins are not supposed to be havin sex with each other. That's uncalled for."

Deborah nodded.

"You promise me," Bobbette said. "You fight them if they try and get with you—I don't care if you have to hurt them. Don't let them touch you."

Deborah promised she wouldn't.

"You just got to go to school," Bobbette said. "Don't mess with boy cousins, and don't have babies until you're grown."

Deborah wasn't thinking about having babies anytime soon, but by the time she turned thirteen she *was* thinking about marrying that neighbor boy everyone called Cheerah, mainly because she thought Galen would have to stop touching her if she had a husband. She was also thinking she'd drop out of school.

Like her brothers, she'd always struggled in school because she couldn't hear the teacher. None of the Lacks children could hear much unless the person speaking was nearby, talking loud and slow. But they'd been taught to keep quiet with adults, so they never told their teachers how much they were missing. None of them would realize the extent of their deafness or get hearing aids until later in life.

When Deborah told Bobbette she wanted to leave school, Bobbette said, "Sit up front if you can't hear. I don't care what you do, but you get an education, cause that's your only hope."

So Deborah stayed in school. She spent summers in Clover, and as she developed, her boy cousins would grab her and try to have their way. Sometimes they'd try to drag her into a field or behind a house. Deborah fought back with fists and teeth, and soon the cousins left her alone. They'd sneer at her, tell her she was ugly, and say, "Dale mean—she born mean and she gonna stay mean." Still, three or four cousins asked Deborah to marry them and she just laughed, saying, "Man, is you crazy? That ain't no game, you know? It affects the child!"

Bobbette had told Deborah that maybe she and her siblings had hearing problems because their parents were first cousins. Deborah knew other cousins had children who were dwarves, or whose minds never developed. She wondered if that had something to do with what happened to Elsie.

Deborah didn't know she had a sister for much of her childhood. When Day finally told her, all he said was that Elsie was deaf and dumb and she'd died in an institution when she was fifteen. Deborah was devastated. She demanded to know if anyone ever tried to teach her sister sign language. No one had.

Deborah begged Lawrence to tell her about their sister, but the only thing he'd say was that she was beautiful, and that he had to take her everywhere he went so he could protect her. Deborah couldn't shake the idea that since Elsie couldn't talk, she couldn't have said no to boys like Deborah did, or tell anyone if something bad happened. Deborah hounded Lawrence to tell her anything he remembered about their sister and mother. Eventually he broke down sobbing and Deborah stopped asking.

When she was in high school, Deborah cried and lay awake at night worrying about what awful things might have happened to her mother and sister. She'd ask Day and her parents' cousins, "What in the world happened to my sister? And who was my mother? What happened to her?" Day just said the same thing again and again: "Her name was Henrietta Lacks, and she died when you was too young to remember."