

As the day went on, the story behind the picture grew more elaborate. "She's a little puffy from cryin because she misses my mother," she said at one point. Another time she told a woman, "My sister's upset because she's been looking for me but can't find me."

Occasionally she'd pull over to the side of the road and motion for me to pull up beside her so she could tell me various ideas she'd come up with as she drove. At one point she'd decided she needed to get a safe deposit box for her mother's Bible and hair; later she asked if she needed to copyright Henrietta's signature so no one would steal it. At a gas station, while we waited in line for the bathroom, she pulled a hammer from her backpack and said, "I wish the family would give me the home-house so I can make it a historical place. But they won't, so I'm gonna take the doorknob so at least I have something from it."

At one point, Deborah climbed from her car looking near tears. "I been havin a hard time keepin my eyes on that road," she said. "I just keep lookin at the picture of my sister." She'd been driving with both of Elsie's pictures on the passenger seat beside her, staring at them as she drove. "I can't get all these thoughts outta my head. I just keep thinkin about what she must've gone through in those years before she died."

I wanted to take the picture from her so she'd stop torturing herself with it, but she wouldn't have let me if I'd tried. Instead, I just kept saying maybe we should go home, it had been an intense couple days, and perhaps she wasn't ready for so much reporting at once. But each time, Deborah told me I was crazy if I thought she was stopping now. So we kept going.

At several points during the day, Deborah said I should take her mother's medical records into my hotel room when we stopped for the night. "I know you'll have to look at every page, take notes and everything, cause you need all the facts." And finally, when we checked into a hotel somewhere between Annapolis and Clover around nine o'clock at night, she gave them to me.

"I'm going to sleep," she said, walking into the room next to mine. "Knock yourself out."

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

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2001

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## The Medical Records

A few minutes later, Deborah pounded on my door. She'd changed into an enormous white T-shirt that hung past her knees — on it was a picture of a stick-figure woman taking cookies out of an oven, and the word GRANDMA in big childlike print.

"I decided I'm not going to bed," she said matter-of-factly. "I want to look at that stuff with you." She was jittery and twitchy, like she'd just had several shots of espresso. In one hand she clutched the Crownsville picture of Elsie; with the other she grabbed the bag filled with her mother's medical records off the dresser where I'd put it. She dumped the bag's contents on my bed just as she'd done the first night we met.

"Let's get busy," she said.

There were more than a hundred pages, many of them crumpled, folded, or torn, all of them out of order. I stood staring for a long moment, stunned and overwhelmed, then said maybe we could sort through it together, then I could find somewhere to photocopy what I'd need.

"No!" Deborah yelled, then smiled a nervous smile. "We can just read it all here and you can take notes."

"That would take days," I said.

"No it won't," Deborah said, climbing on all fours across the pile of papers, and sitting cross-legged in the center of the bed.

I pulled up an armchair, opened my laptop, and started sorting. There was a land deed from the small chunk of Clover property Deborah bought with two thousand dollars from her father's asbestos settlement. There was a 1997 newspaper mug shot of Lawrence's son with a caption that said, WANTED. LAWRENCE LACKS, ROBBERY W/DEADLY WEAPON. There were order forms for buying Helix cells online, receipts, newsletters from Deborah's church, and seemingly endless copies of the photo of Henrietta, hands on hips. And there were dozens of notebook pages where Deborah had written definitions of scientific and legal terms, and poems about her life:

*cancer  
check up  
can't afford  
white and rich get it  
my mother was black  
black poor people don't have the money to  
pay for it  
mad yes I am mad  
we were used by taking our blood and lied to  
We had to pay for our own medical, can you  
relieve that  
John Hopkin Hospital and all other places,  
that has my mother cells, don't give her  
Nothing.*

As I read, Deborah grabbed several photocopied pages from a genealogy how-to book and held them up for me to see, saying, "That's how I knew to get power of attorney and bring all that stuff to get my

sister information at Crownsville. They didn't know who they was foolin' with!" As she talked, she watched my hands moving through the pile of papers.

I held a page of the records close to my face to make out the small script, then began reading out loud, "This twenty-eight-year-old . . . something . . . I can't read the handwriting . . . 'positive Rh.'" The entry was dated November 2, 1949.

"Oh wow!" I said suddenly. "This is three days before you were born—your mom's pregnant with you here."

"What? Oh my god!" Deborah screamed, snatching the paper and staring at it, mouth wide. "What else does it say?"

It was a normal checkup, I told her. "Look here," I said, pointing at the page. "Her cervix is two centimeters dilated . . . She's getting ready to have you."

Deborah bounced on the bed, clapped her hands, and grabbed another page from the medical records.

"Read this one!"

The date was February 6, 1951. "This is about a week after she first went to the hospital with her cervical cancer," I said. "She's waking up from anesthesia after getting her biopsy. It says she feels fine."

For the next few hours, Deborah pulled papers off the pile for me to read and sort. One moment she'd screech with joy over a fact I'd found, the next she'd panic over a new fact that didn't sit well, or at the sight of me holding a page of her mother's medical records. Each time she panicked, she'd pat the bed and say, "Where's my sister autopsy report?" or "Oh no, where'd I put my room key?"

Occasionally she stashed papers under the pillow, then pulled them out when she decided it was okay for me to see them. "Here's my mother autopsy," she said at one point. A few minutes later she handed me a page she said was her favorite because it had her mother's signature on it—the only piece of Henrietta's handwriting on record. It was the consent form she'd signed before her radium treatment, when the original Helix sample was taken.

Eventually, Deborah grew quiet. She lay on her side and curled

herself around the Crownsville picture of Elsie for so long, I thought she'd fallen asleep. Then she whispered, "Oh my god. I don't like the way she got her neck." She held up the picture and pointed to the white hands.

"No," I said. "I don't like that either."

"I know you was hopin I didn't notice that, weren't you?"

"No. I knew you noticed."

She laid her head back down again. We kept on like this for hours, me reading and taking notes, Deborah staring at Elsie's picture in long silences broken only by her sparse commentary: "My sister look scared. . . . "I don't like that look on her face. . . . "She was chokin herself? . . . "I guess after she realized she wasn't going to see my mother no more, she just gave up." Occasionally she shook her head hard, like she was trying to snap herself out of something.

Eventually I leaned back in my chair and rubbed my eyes. It was the middle of the night and I still had a big pile of paper to sort through.

"You might think about getting yourself another copy of your mother's medical record and stapling it with all the pages in order to keep it all straight," I said.

Deborah squinted at me, suddenly suspicious. She moved across the room to the other bed, where she lay on her stomach and started reading her sister's autopsy report. A few minutes later, she jumped up and grabbed her dictionary.

"They diagnosed my sister with idiocy?" she said, then started reading the definition out loud. "Idiocy: utterly senseless or foolish." She threw down the dictionary. "That's what they say was wrong with my sister? She had *foolish*? She was an idiot? How can they do that?" I told her that doctors used to use the word *idiocy* to refer to mental retardation, and to the brain damage that accompanied hereditary syphilis. "It was sort of a generic word to describe someone who was slow," I said.

She sat down next to me and pointed to a different word in her sister's autopsy report. "What does this word mean?" she asked, and I

told her. Then her face fell, her jaw slack, and she whispered, "I don't want you puttin that word in the book."

"I won't," I said, and then I made a mistake. I smiled. Not because I thought it was funny, but because I thought it was sweet that she was protective of her sister. She'd never told me something was off limits for the book, and this was a word I would never have included—to me, it didn't seem relevant. So I smiled.

Deborah glared at me. "Don't you put that in the book!" she snapped.

"I *won't*," I told her, and I meant it. But I was still smiling, now more from nervousness than anything else.

"You're lying," Deborah yelled, flipping off my tape recorder and clenching her fists.

"I'm not, I swear, look, I'll say it on tape and you can sue me if I use it." I clicked the recorder on, said into the mic that I wouldn't put that word in the book, then turned it off.

"You're lying!" she yelled again. She jumped off the bed and stood over me, pointing a finger in my face. "If you're not lying, why did you smile?"

She started frantically stuffing papers into her canvas bags as I tried to explain myself and talk her down. Suddenly she threw the bag on the bed and rushed toward me. Her hand hit my chest hard as she slammed me against the wall, knocking me breathless, my head snapping the plaster.

"Who you working for?" she snapped. "John Hopkin?"

"What? No!" I yelled, gasping for breath. "You know I work for myself."

"Who sent you? Who's paying you?" she yelled, her hand still holding me against the wall. "Who paid for this room?"

"We've been through this!" I said. "Remember? Credit cards? Student loans?"

Then, for the first time since we met, I lost my patience with Deborah. I jerked free of her grip and told her to get the fuck off me and chill the fuck out. She stood inches from me, staring wild-eyed again

for what felt like minutes. Then, suddenly, she grinned and reached up to smooth my hair, saying, "I never seen you mad before. I was starting to wonder if you was even human cause you never cuss in front of me."

Then, perhaps as an explanation for what just happened, she finally told me about Cofield.

"He was a good pretender," she said. "I told him I would walk through fire alive before I would let him take my mother medical records. I don't want nobody else to have them. Everybody in the world got her cells, only thing we got of our mother is just them records and her Bible. That's why I get so upset about Cofield. He was trying to take one of the only things I really got from my mother."

She pointed at my laptop on the bed and said, "I don't want you typin every word of it into your computer either. You type what you need for the book, but not everything. I want people in our family to be the only ones who have all them records."

After I promised I wouldn't copy all the records, Deborah said she was going to bed again, but for the next several hours, she knocked on my door every fifteen or twenty minutes. The first time she reeked of peaches and said, "I just had to go to my car for my lotion so I thought I'd say hi." Each time it was something else: "I forgot my nail file in the car!" . . . "X-Files is on!" . . . "I'm suddenly thinking about pancakes!" Each time she knocked, I opened my door wide so she could see the room and the medical records looking just as they had when she left.

The last time she knocked, she stormed past me into the bathroom and leaned over the sink, her face close to the mirror. "Am I broken out?" she yelled. I walked into the bathroom, where she stood pointing to a quarter-sized welt on her forehead. It looked like a hive.

She turned and pulled her shirt down so I could see her neck and back, which were covered in red welts.

"I'll put some cream on it," she said. "I should probably take my sleeping pill." She went back to her room and a moment later the volume on her TV went up. Screaming and crying and gunfire poured

out of the television all night, but I didn't see her again until six o'clock in the morning—one hour after I'd gone to sleep—when she knocked on my door yelling, "Free continental breakfast!"

My eyes were red and swollen with dark circles under them, and I was still wearing my clothes from the day before. Deborah looked at me and laughed.

"We're a mess!" she said, pointing to the hives now covering her face. "Lord, I was so anxious last night. I couldn't do anything with myself so I painted my fingernails." She held out her hands for me to see. "I did a *horrible* job!" she said, laughing. "I think I did it after I took my pill."

Her nails and much of the skin around them were bright fire-engine red. "From a distance it looks okay," she said. "But I'd get fired if I was still doin nails for a living."

We walked down to the lobby for our free breakfast. As Deborah wrapped a handful of mini-muffins in a napkin for later, she looked up at me and said, "We're okay, Boo."

I nodded and said I knew. But at that point I wasn't sure of anything.