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Heavenly
Bodies

The next morning Deborah's hives had gone down some, but her eyes were still swollen, so she decided she needed to go home to see her doctor. I stayed behind in Clover because I wanted to talk to Gary about the night before. When I walked into his living room he was standing on a plastic folding chair in a bright turquoise shirt, changing a lightbulb.

"I can't get that beautiful song out of my head," I told him. "I've been singing it all morning." Then I hummed a few bars: *Welcome into this place . . . welcome into this broken vessel.*

Gary jumped off the chair, laughing and raising his eyebrows at me. "Now why do you think that's stuck in your head?" he asked. "I know you don't like to think about it, but that's the Lord telling you something."

He said it was a hymn, then ran from the living room and came back carrying a soft blue Bible with large gold lettering across its front. "I want you to have this," he told me, tapping the cover with his finger. "He died for us that we might have the right to eternal life."

A lot of people don't believe that. But you *can* have eternal life. Just look at Henrietta."

"You believe Henrietta is in those cells?"

He smiled and looked down his nose at me like, *silly child*. "Those cells *are* Henrietta," he said, taking back the Bible and opening it to the book of John. "Read that," he said, pointing to a chunk of text. I started reading to myself and he covered the Bible with his hand. "Out loud," he said.

So I read aloud from the Bible, for the first time in my life: "Those who believe in me will live, even though they die; and those who live and believe in me will never die."

Gary flipped to another passage for me to read: "Someone will ask, 'How can the dead be raised to life? What kind of body will they have?' You fool! When you plant a seed in the ground, it does not sprout to life unless it dies. And what you plant is a bare seed . . . not the full-bodied plant that will later grow up. God provides that seed with the body he wishes; he gives each seed its own proper body."

"Henrietta was chosen," Gary whispered. "And when the Lord chooses an angel to do his work, you never know what they going to come back looking like."

Gary pointed at another passage and told me to keep reading. "There are heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, the beauty that belongs to heavenly bodies is different from the beauty that belongs to earthly bodies."

When Christoph projected Henrietta's cells on the monitor in his lab a few days earlier, Deborah said, "They're beautiful." She was right. Beautiful and otherworldly—glowing green and moving like water, calm and ethereal, looking precisely like heavenly bodies might look. They could even float through the air.

I kept reading: "This is how it will be when the dead are raised to life. When the body is buried, it is mortal; when raised, it will be immortal. There is, of course, a physical body, so there has to be a spiritual body."

"Hela?" I asked Gary. "You're saying Hela is her spiritual body?"

Gary smiled and nodded.

In that moment, reading those passages, I understood completely how some of the Lackses could believe, without doubt, that Henrietta had been chosen by the Lord to become an immortal being. If you believe the Bible is the literal truth, the immortality of Henrietta's cells makes perfect sense. *Of course* they were growing and surviving decades after her death, *of course* they floated through the air, and *of course* they'd led to cures for diseases and been launched into space. Angels are like that. The Bible tells us so.

For Deborah and her family—and surely many others in the world—that answer was so much more concrete than the explanation offered by science: that the immortality of Henrietta's cells had something to do with her telomeres and how HPV interacted with her DNA. The idea that God chose Henrietta as an angel who would be reborn as immortal cells made a lot more sense to them than the explanation Deborah had read years earlier in Victor McKusick's genetics book, with its clinical talk of Hela's "atypical histology" and "unusually malignant behavior." It used phrases like "the tumor's singularity" and called the cells "a reservoir of morphologic, biochemical, and other information."

Jesus told his followers, "I give them eternal life, and they shall never die." Plain, simple, to the point.

"You better be careful," Gary told me. "Pretty soon you're gonna find yourself converted."

"I doubt it," I told him, and we both laughed.

He slid the Bible from my hands and flipped to another passage, then handed it back, pointing at one sentence: "Why do you who are here find it impossible to believe that God raises the dead?"

"You catch my drift?" he said, smiling a mischievous grin.

I nodded, and Gary closed the Bible in my hands.

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"Nothing to Be Scared About"

When Deborah got to her doctor's office, her blood pressure and blood sugar were so high, her doctor was amazed she hadn't had a stroke or heart attack while we were in Clover. With levels like hers, he said, she could still have one any minute. Suddenly her strange behavior on the trip seemed less strange. Confusion, panic, and incoherent speech are all symptoms of extremely high blood pressure and blood sugar, which can lead to heart attack and stroke. So is redness and swelling, which could explain why her red welts didn't go away despite all the Benadryl she drank.

The doctor told her she needed to avoid stress completely, so we decided she should stop coming on research trips with me. But she insisted I call her from the road to tell her what she was missing. For the next several months, as I continued my research, I told Deborah only the good things I found: stories about Henrietta dancing and watching the boys play baseball at Cliff's house, details about her family history from county records and wills.

But we both knew the break from Hela wouldn't last—Deborah was still scheduled to give a talk at the National Foundation for