

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 Gonorrhoea 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."

1960s 1970s 1980s 1990s 2000s
1999

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"Lady's on the Phone"

Eleven years after learning about Henrietta in Deffer'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 Patillo, a professor of gynecology at Morehouse who'd been one of George Gey's only African-American students.

When I called Roland Patillo 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, Patillo grilled me about my intentions. As I told him about the history of my Helä obsession, he grumbled and sighed, letting out occasional *mmmmms* and *welllllls*.

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?" Patillo 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 Helä 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?" Patillo 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, Patillo 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 Patillo, 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

blurred 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 Hel 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 confounding 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.