had been putting new cells in the culture dishes each time he "fed" them using an "embryo juice" he made from ground tissues. At least one of Carrel's former lab assistants verified Hayflick's suspicion. But no one could test the theory, because two years after Carrel's death, his assistant unceremoniously threw the famous chicken-heart cells in the trash.

Either way, by 1951, when Henrietta Lacks's cells began growing in the Gey lab—just five years after the widely publicized "death" of Carrel's chicken heart—the public image of immortal cells was tarnished. Tissue culture was the stuff of racism, creepy science fiction, Nazis, and snake oil. It wasn't something to be celebrated. In fact, no one paid much attention to it at all.

1951

8

"A Miserable Specimen"

In early June, Henrietta told her doctors several times that she thought the cancer was spreading, that she could feel it moving through her, but they found nothing wrong with her. "The patient states that she feels fairly well," one doctor wrote in her chart, "however she continues to complain of some vague lower abdominal discomfort. . . . No evidence of recurrence. Return in one month."

There's no indication that Henrietta questioned him; like most patients in the 1950s, she deferred to anything her doctors said. This was a time when "benevolent deception" was a common practice—doctors often withheld even the most fundamental information from their patients, sometimes not giving them any diagnosis at all. They believed it was best not to confuse or upset patients with frightening terms they might not understand, like *cancer.* Doctors knew best, and most patients didn't question that.

Especially black patients in public wards. This was 1951 in Baltimore, segregation was law, and it was understood that black people didn't question white people's professional judgment. Many black

patients were just glad to be getting treatment, since discrimination in hospitals was widespread.

There's no way of knowing whether or how Henrietta's treatment would have differed if she'd been white. According to Howard Jones, Henrietta got the same care any white patient would have; the biopsy, the radium treatment, and radiation were all standard for the day. But several studies have shown that black patients were treated and hospitalized at later stages of their illnesses than white patients. And once hospitalized, they got fewer pain medications, and had higher mortality rates.

All we can know for sure are the facts of Henrietta's medical records: a few weeks after the doctor told her she was fine, she went back to Hopkins saying that the "discomfort" she'd complained about last time was now an "ache" in both sides. But the doctor's entry was identical to the one weeks earlier: "No evidence of recurrence. Return in one month."

Two and a half weeks later, Henrietta's abdomen hurt, and she could barely urinate. The pain made it hard to walk. She went back to Hopkins, where a doctor passed a catheter to empty her bladder, then sent her home. Three days later, when she returned complaining once again of pain, a doctor pressed on her abdomen and felt a "stony hard" mass. An X-ray showed that it was attached to her pelvic wall, nearly blocking her urethra. The doctor on duty called for Jones and several others who'd treated Henrietta; they all examined her and looked at the X-ray. "Inoperable," they said. Only weeks after a previous entry declared her healthy, one of the doctors wrote, "The patient looks chronically ill. She is obviously in pain." He sent her home to bed.

Sadie would later describe Henrietta's decline like this: "Hennie didn't fade away, you know, her looks, her body, it didn't just fade. Like some peoples be sick in the bed with cancer and they look so *bad*. But she didn't. The only thing you could tell was in her eyes. Her eyes were tellin you that she wasn't gonna be alive no more."

Until that point, no one except Sadie, Margaret, and Day knew Henrietta was sick. Then, suddenly, everyone knew. When Day and the cousins walked home from Sparrows Point after each shift, they could hear Henrietta from a block away, wailing for the Lord to help her. When Day drove her back to Hopkins for X-rays the following week, stone-hard tumors filled the inside of her abdomen: one on her uterus, one on each kidney and on her urethra. Just a month after a note in her medical record said she was fine, another doctor wrote, "In view of the rapid extension of the disease process the outlook is quite poor." The only option, he said, was "further irradiation in the hopes that we may at least relieve her pain."

Henrietta couldn't walk from the house to the car, but either Day or one of the cousins managed to get her to Hopkins every day for radiation. They didn't realize she was dying. They thought the doctors were still trying to cure her.

Each day, Henrietta's doctors increased her dose of radiation, hoping it would shrink the tumors and ease the pain until her death. Each day the skin on her abdomen burned blacker and blacker, and the pain grew worse.

On August 8, just one week after her thirty-first birthday, Henrietta arrived at Hopkins for her treatment, but this time she said she wanted to stay. Her doctor wrote, "Patient has been complaining bitterly of pain and she seems genuinely miserable. She has to come in from a considerable distance and it is felt that she deserves to be in the hospital where she can be better cared for."

After Henrietta checked into the hospital, a nurse drew blood and labeled the vial COLORED, then stored it in case Henrietta needed transfusions later. A doctor put Henrietta's feet in stirrups once again, to take a few more cells from her cervix at the request of George Gey, who wanted to see if a second batch would grow like the first. But Henrietta's body had become so contaminated with toxins normally flushed from the system in urine, her cells died immediately in culture.

During Henrietta's first few days in the hospital, the children came with Day to visit her, but when they left, she cried and moaned for hours. Soon the nurses told Day he couldn't bring the children anymore, because it upset Henrietta too much. After that, Day would park the Buick behind Hopkins at the same time each day and sit on a little patch of grass on Wolfe Street with the children, right under Henrietta's window. She'd pull herself out of bed, press her hands and face to the glass, and watch her children play on the lawn. But within days, Henrietta couldn't get herself to the window anymore.

Her doctors tried in vain to ease her suffering. "Demerol does not seem to touch the pain," one wrote, so he tried morphine. "This doesn't help too much either." He gave her Dromoran. "This stuff works," he wrote. But not for long. Eventually one of her doctors tried injecting pure alcohol straight into her spine. "Alcohol injections ended in failure," he wrote.

New tumors seemed to appear daily—on her lymph nodes, hip bones, labia—and she spent most days with a fever up to 105. Her doctors stopped the radiation treatment and seemed as defeated by the cancer as she was. "Henrietta is still a miserable specimen," they wrote. "She groans." "She is constantly nauseated and claims she vomits everything she eats." "Patient acutely upset . . . very anxious." "As far as I can see we are doing all that can be done."

There is no record that George Gey ever visited Henrietta in the hospital, or said anything to her about her cells. And everyone I talked to who might know said that Gey and Henrietta never met. Everyone, that is, except Laure Aurelian, a microbiologist who was Gey's colleague at Hopkins.

"I'll never forget it," Aurelian said. "George told me he leaned over Henrietta's bed and said, 'Your cells will make you immortal.' He told Henrietta her cells would help save the lives of countless people, and she smiled. She told him she was glad her pain would come to some good for someone."

1999

9

Turner Station

A few days after my first conversation with Day, I drove from Pittsburgh to Baltimore to meet his son, David "Sonny" Lacks Jr. He'd finally called me back and agreed to meet, saying he'd gotten worn out from my number showing up on his pager. I didn't know it then, but he'd made five panicked phone calls to Pattillo, asking questions about me before calling.

The plan was that I'd page Sonny when I got to Baltimore, then he'd pick me up and take me to his brother Lawrence's house to meet their father and—if I was lucky—Deborah. So I checked in to the downtown Holiday Inn, sat on the bed, phone in my lap, and dialed Sonny's pager. No reply.

I stared through my hotel room window at a tall, Gothic-looking brick tower across the street with a huge clock at the top. It was a weatherbeaten silver, with big letters spelling B-R-O-M-O-S-E-L-T-Z-E-R in a circle around its face. I watched the hands move slowly past the letters, paged Sonny every few minutes, and waited for the phone to ring.

Eventually I grabbed the fat Baltimore phone book, opened to the