

1920s 1930s 1940s 1950s 1960s 1970s 1980s 1990s 2000s  
A  
1951

## The Exam

On January 29, 1951, David Lacks sat behind the wheel of his old Buick, watching the rain fall. He was parked under a towering oak tree outside Johns Hopkins Hospital with three of his children—two still in diapers—waiting for their mother, Henrietta. A few minutes earlier she'd jumped out of the car, pulled her jacket over her head, and scurried into the hospital, past the "colored" bathroom, the only one she was allowed to use. In the next building, under an elegant domed copper roof, a ten-and-a-half-foot marble statue of Jesus stood, arms spread wide, holding court over what was once the main entrance of Hopkins. No one in Henrietta's family ever saw a Hopkins doctor without visiting the Jesus statue, laying flowers at his feet, saying a prayer, and rubbing his big toe for good luck. But that day Henrietta didn't stop.

She went straight to the waiting room of the gynecology clinic, a wide-open space, empty but for rows of long straight-backed benches that looked like church pews.

"I got a knot on my womb," she told the receptionist. "The doctor need to have a look."

For more than a year Henrietta had been telling her closest girlfriends something didn't feel right. One night after dinner, she sat on her bed with her cousins Margaret and Sadie and told them, "I got a knot inside me."

"A what?" Sadie asked.

"A knot," she said. "It hurt somethin awful—when that man want to get with me, Sweet Jesus aren't them but some pains."

When sex first started hurting, she thought it had something to do with baby Deborah, who she'd just given birth to a few weeks earlier, or the bad blood David sometimes brought home after nights with other women—the kind doctors treated with shots of penicillin and heavy metals.

Henrietta grabbed her cousins' hands one at a time and guided them to her belly, just as she'd done when Deborah started kicking. "You feel anything?"

The cousins pressed their fingers into her stomach again and again. "I don't know," Sadie said. "Maybe you're pregnant outside your womb—you know that *can* happen."

"I'm no kind of pregnant," Henrietta said. "It's a knot."

"Hennie, you gotta check that out. What if it's somethin bad?"

But Henrietta didn't go to the doctor, and the cousins didn't tell anyone what she'd said in the bedroom. In those days, people didn't talk about things like cancer, but Sadie always figured Henrietta kept it secret because she was afraid a doctor would take her womb and make her stop having children.

About a week after telling her cousins she thought something was wrong, at the age of twenty-nine, Henrietta turned up pregnant with Joe, her fifth child. Sadie and Margaret told Henrietta that the pain probably had something to do with a baby after all. But Henrietta still said no.

"It was there before the baby," she told them. "It's somethin else."

They all stopped talking about the knot, and no one told Henrietta's husband anything about it. Then, four and a half months after

baby Joseph was born, Henrietta went to the bathroom and found blood spotting her underwear when it wasn't her time of the month.

She filled her bathtub, lowered herself into the warm water, and spread her legs. With the door closed to her children, husband, and cousins, Henrietta slid a finger inside herself and rubbed it across her cervix until she found what she somehow knew she'd find: a hard lump, deep inside, as though someone had lodged a marble just to the left of the opening to her womb.

Henrietta climbed out of the bathtub, dried herself off, and dressed. Then she told her husband, "You better take me to the doctor. I'm bleedin and it ain't my time."

Her local doctor took one look inside her, saw the lump, and figured it was a sore from syphilis. But the lump tested negative for syphilis, so he told Henrietta she'd better go to the Johns Hopkins gynecology clinic.

Hopkins was one of the top hospitals in the country. It was built in 1889 as a charity hospital for the sick and poor, and it covered more than a dozen acres where a cemetery and insane asylum once sat in East Baltimore. The public wards at Hopkins were filled with patients, most of them black and unable to pay their medical bills. David drove Henrietta nearly twenty miles to get there, not because they preferred it, but because it was the only major hospital for miles that treated black patients. This was the era of Jim Crow—when black people showed up at white-only hospitals, the staff was likely to send them away, even if it meant they might die in the parking lot. Even Hopkins, which did treat black patients, segregated them in colored wards, and had colored-only fountains.

So when the nurse called Henrietta from the waiting room, she led her through a single door to a colored-only exam room—one in a long row of rooms divided by clear glass walls that let nurses see from one to the next. Henrietta undressed, wrapped herself in a starched white hospital gown, and lay down on a wooden exam table, waiting for Howard Jones, the gynecologist on duty. Jones was thin and graying,

his deep voice softened by a faint Southern accent. When he walked into the room, Henrietta told him about the lump. Before examining her, he flipped through her chart—a quick sketch of her life, and a litany of untreated conditions:

Sixth or seventh grade education; housewife and mother of five. Breathing difficult since childhood due to recurrent throat infections and deviated septum in patient's nose. Physician recommended surgical repair. Patient declined. Patient had one toothache for nearly five years; tooth eventually extracted with several others. Only anxiety is oldest daughter who is epileptic and can't talk. Happy household. Very occasional drinker. Has not traveled. Well nourished, cooperative. Patient was one of ten siblings. One died of car accident, one from rheumatic heart, one was poisoned. Unexplained vaginal bleeding and blood in urine during last two pregnancies; physician recommended sickle cell test. Patient declined. Been with husband since age 15 and has no liking for sexual intercourse. Patient has asymptomatic neurosyphilis but cancelled syphilis treatments, said she felt fine. Two months prior to current visit, after delivery of fifth child, patient had significant blood in urine. Tests showed areas of increased cellular activity in the cervix. Physician recommended diagnostics and referred to specialist for ruling out infection or cancer. Patient canceled appointment. One month prior to current visit, patient tested positive for gonorrhea. Patient recalled to clinic for treatment. No response.

It was no surprise that she hadn't come back all those times for follow-up. For Henrietta, walking into Hopkins was like entering a foreign country where she didn't speak the language. She knew about harvesting tobacco and butchering a pig, but she'd never heard the words *cervix* or *biopsy*. She didn't read or write much, and she hadn't studied science in school. She, like most black patients, only went to Hopkins when she thought she had no choice.

Jones listened as Henrietta told him about the pain, the blood. "She says that she knew there was something wrong with the neck of her womb," he wrote later. "When asked why she knew it, she said that she felt as if there were a lump there. I do not quite know what she means by this, unless she actually palpated this area."

Henrietta lay back on the table, feet pressed hard in stirrups as she stared at the ceiling. And sure enough, Jones found a lump exactly where she'd said he would. He described it as an eroded, hard mass about the size of a nickel. If her cervix was a clock's face, the lump was at four o'clock. He'd seen easily a thousand cervical cancer lesions, but never anything like this: shiny and purple (like "grape Jello," he wrote later), and so delicate it bled at the slightest touch. Jones cut a small sample and sent it to the pathology lab down the hall for a diagnosis. Then he told Henrietta to go home.

Soon after, Jones sat down and dictated notes about Henrietta and her diagnosis: "Her history is interesting in that she had a term delivery here at this hospital, September 19, 1950," he said. "No note is made in the history at that time, or at the six weeks' return visit that there is any abnormality of the cervix."

Yet here she was, three months later, with a full-fledged tumor. Either her doctors had missed it during her last exams—which seemed impossible—or it had grown at a terrifying rate.

gas lanterns, and water Henrietta hauled up a long hill from the creek. The home-house stood on a hillside where wind whipped through cracks in the walls. The air inside stayed so cool that when relatives died, the family kept their corpses in the front hallway for days so people could visit and pay respects. Then they buried them in the cemetery out back.

Henrietta's grandfather was already raising another grandchild that one of his daughters had left behind after delivering him on the home-house floor. That child's name was David Lacks, but everyone called him Day, because in the Lacks country drawl, house sounds like *byse*, and David sounds like *Day*.

Young Day was what the Lacks family called a sneak baby: a man named Johnny Coleman had passed through town; nine months later Day arrived. A twelve-year-old cousin and midwife named Munchie delivered him, blue as a stormy sky and not breathing. A white doctor came to the home-house with his derby and walking stick, wrote "stillborn" on Day's birth certificate, then drove his horse-drawn buggy back to town, leaving a cloud of red dust behind.

Munchie prayed as he rode away, *Lord, I know you didn't mean to take this baby*. She washed Day in a tub of warm water, then put him on a white sheet where she rubbed and patted his chest until he gasped for breath and his blue skin warmed to soft brown.

By the time Johnny Pleasant shipped Henrietta off to live with Grandpa Tommy, she was four and Day was almost nine. No one could have guessed she'd spend the rest of her life with Day—first as a cousin growing up in their grandfather's home, then as his wife.

As children, Henrietta and Day awoke each morning at four o'clock to milk the cows and feed the chickens, hogs, and horses. They tended a garden filled with corn, peanuts, and greens, then headed to the tobacco fields with their cousins Cliff, Fred, Sadie, Margaret, and a horde of others. They spent much of their young lives stooped in those fields, planting tobacco behind mule-drawn plows. Each harvest they pulled the wide leaves from their stalks and tied them into small bundles—their fingers raw and sticky with nicotine resin—then

1920s 1930s 1940s 1950s 1960s 1970s 1980s 1990s 2000s  
1920-1942

## 2 Clover

Henrietta Lacks was born Loretta Pleasant in Roanoke, Virginia, on August 1, 1920. No one knows how she became Henrietta. A midwife named Fannie delivered her into a small shack on a dead-end road overlooking a train depot, where hundreds of freight cars came and went each day. Henrietta shared that house with her parents and eight older siblings until 1924, when her mother, Eliza Lacks Pleasant, died giving birth to her tenth child.

Henrietta's father, Johnny Pleasant, was a squat man who hobbled around on a cane he often hit people with. Family lore has it that he killed his own brother for trying to get fresh with Eliza. Johnny didn't have the patience for raising children, so when Eliza died, he took them all back to Clover, Virginia, where his family still farmed the tobacco fields their ancestors had worked as slaves. No one in Clover could take all ten children, so relatives divided them up—one with this cousin, one with that aunt. Henrietta ended up with her grandfather, Tommy Lacks.

Tommy lived in what everyone called the home-house—a four-room log cabin that once served as slave quarters, with plank floors,

climbed the rafters of their grandfather's tobacco barn to hang bundle after bundle for curing. Each summer day they prayed for a storm to cool their skin from the burning sun. When they got one, they'd scream and run through fields, snatching armfuls of ripe fruit and walnuts that the winds blew from the trees.

Like most young Lackses, Day didn't finish school: he stopped in the fourth grade because the family needed him to work the fields. But Henrietta stayed until the sixth grade. During the school year, after taking care of the garden and livestock each morning, she'd walk two miles—past the white school where children threw rocks and taunted her—to the colored school, a three-room wooden farmhouse hidden under tall shade trees, with a yard out front where Mrs. Coleman made the boys and girls play on separate sides. When school let out each day, and any time it wasn't in session, Henrietta was in the fields with Day and the cousins.

If the weather was nice, when they finished working, the cousins ran straight to the swimming hole they made each year by damming the creek behind the house with rocks, sticks, bags of sand, and anything else they could sink. They threw rocks to scare away the poisonous cottonmouth snakes, then dropped into the water from tree branches or dove from muddy banks.

At nightfall they built fires with pieces of old shoes to keep the mosquitoes away, and watched the stars from beneath the big oak tree where they'd hung a rope to swing from. They played tag, ring-around-the-rosy, and hopscotch, and danced around the field singing until Grandpa Tommy yelled for everyone to go to bed.

Each night, piles of cousins packed into the crawl space above a little wooden kitchen house just a few feet from the home-house. They lay one next to the other—telling stories about the headless tobacco farmer who roamed the streets at night, or the man with no eyes who lived by the creek—then slept until their grandmother Chloe fired up the woodstove below and woke them to the smell of fresh biscuits.

One evening each month during harvest season, Grandpa Tommy hitched the horses after supper and readied them to ride into the town

of South Boston—home of the nation's second-largest tobacco market, with tobacco parades, a Miss Tobacco pageant, and a port where boats collected the dried leaves for people around the world to smoke.

Before leaving home, Tommy would call for the young cousins, who'd nestle into the flat wagon on a bed of tobacco leaves, then fight sleep as long as they could before giving in to the rhythm of the horses. Like farmers from all over Virginia, Tommy Lacks and the grandchildren rode through the night to bring their crops to South Boston, where they'd line up at dawn—one wagon behind the next—waiting for the enormous green wooden gates of the auction warehouse to open.

When they arrived, Henrietta and the cousins would help unhitch the horses and fill their troughs with grain, then unload the family's tobacco onto the wood-plank floor of the warehouse. The auctioneer rattled off numbers that echoed through the huge open room, its ceiling nearly thirty feet high and covered with skylights blackened by years of dirt. As Tommy Lacks stood by his crop praying for a good price, Henrietta and the cousins ran around the tobacco piles, talking in a fast gibberish to sound like the auctioneer. At night they'd help Tommy haul any unsold tobacco down to the basement, where he'd turn the leaves into a bed for the children. White farmers slept upstairs in lofts and private rooms; black farmers slept in the dark underbelly of the warehouse with the horses, mules, and dogs, on a dusty dirt floor lined with rows of wooden stalls for livestock, and mountains of empty liquor bottles piled almost to the ceiling.

Night at the warehouse was a time of booze, gambling, prostitution, and occasional murders as farmers burned through their season's earnings. From their bed of leaves, the Lacks children would stare at ceiling beams the size of trees as they drifted off to the sound of laughter and clanking bottles, and the smell of dried tobacco.

In the morning they'd pile into the wagon with their unsold harvest and set out on the long journey home. Any cousins who'd stayed behind in Clover knew a wagon ride into South Boston meant treats for everyone—a hunk of cheese, maybe, or a slab of bologna—

so they waited for hours on Main Street to follow the wagon to the home-house.

Clover's wide, dusty Main Street was full of Model As, and wagons pulled by mules and horses. Old Man Snow had the first tractor in town, and he drove it to the store like it was a car—newspaper tucked under his arm, his hounds Cadillac and Dan baying beside him. Main Street had a movie theater, bank, jewelry store, doctor's office, hardware store, and several churches. When the weather was good, white men with suspenders, top hats, and long cigars—everyone from mayor to doctor to undertaker—stood along Main Street sipping whiskey from juice bottles, talking, or playing checkers on the wooden barrel in front of the pharmacy. Their wives gossiped at the general store as their babies slept in a row on the counter, heads resting on long bolts of fabric.

Henrietta and her cousins would hire themselves out to those white folks, pulling their tobacco for ten cents so they'd have money to see their favorite Buck Jones cowboy movies. The theater owner showed silent black-and-white films, and his wife played along on the piano. She knew only one song, so she played happy carnival-style music for every scene, even when characters were getting shot and dying. The Lacks children sat up in the colored section next to the projector, which clicked like a metronome through the whole movie.

As Henrietta and Day grew older, they traded ring-around-the-rosy for horse races along the dirt road that ran the length of what used to be the Lacks tobacco plantation, but was now simply called Lacks Town. The boys always fought over who got to ride Charlie Horse, Grandpa Tommy's tall bay, which could outrun any other horse in Clover. Henrietta and the other girls watched from the hillside or the backs of straw-filled wagons, hopping up and down, clapping and screaming as the boys streaked by on horseback.

Henrietta often yelled for Day, but sometimes she cheered for another cousin, Crazy Joe Grinnan. Crazy Joe was what their cousin

Cliff called "an over average man"—tall, husky, and strong, with dark skin, a sharp nose, and so much thick black hair covering his head, arms, back, and neck that he had to shave his whole body in the summer to keep from burning up. They called him Crazy Joe because he was so in love with Henrietta, he'd do anything to get her attention. She was the prettiest girl in Lacks Town, with her beautiful smile and walnut eyes.

The first time Crazy Joe tried to kill himself over Henrietta, he ran circles around her in the middle of winter while she was on her way home from school. He begged her for a date, saying, "Hennie, come on . . . just give me a chance." When she laughed and said no, Crazy Joe ran and jumped straight through the ice of a frozen pond and refused to come out until she agreed to go out with him.

All the cousins teased Joe, saying, "Maybe he thought that ice water might cool him off, but he so hot for her, that water nearly started boiling!" Henrietta's cousin Sadie, who was Crazy Joe's sister, yelled at him, "Man you so much in love with a girl, you gonna die for her? That ain't right."

No one knew what happened between Henrietta and Crazy Joe, except that there were some dates and some kisses. But Henrietta and Day had been sharing a bedroom since she was four, so what happened next didn't surprise anyone: they started having children together. Their son Lawrence was born just months after Henrietta's fourteenth birthday; his sister Lucile Elsie Pleasant came along four years later. They were both born on the floor of the home-house like their father, grandmother, and grandfather before them.

People wouldn't use words like *epilepsy*, *mental retardation*, or *neurosyphilis* to describe Elsie's condition until years later. To the folks in Lacks Town, she was just simple. Touched. She came into the world so fast, Day hadn't even gotten back with the midwife when Elsie shot right out and hit her head on the floor. Everyone would say maybe that was what left her mind like an infant's.

The old dusty record books from Henrietta's church are filled with the names of women cast from the congregation for bearing children

out of wedlock, but for some reason Henrietta never was, even as rumors floated around Lacks Town that maybe Crazy Joe had fathered one of her children.

When Crazy Joe found out Henrietta was going to marry Day, he stabbed himself in the chest with an old dull pocketknife. His father found him lying drunk in their yard, shirt soaked with blood. He tried to stop the bleeding, but Joe fought him—thrashing and punching—which just made him bleed more. Eventually Joe's father wrestled him into the car, tied him tight to the door, and drove to the doctor. When Joe got home all bandaged up, Sadie just kept saying, "All that to stop Hennie from marrying Day?" But Crazy Joe wasn't the only one trying to stop the marriage.

Henrietta's sister Gladys was always saying Henrietta could do better. When most Lackses talked about Henrietta and Day and their early life in Clover, it sounded as idyllic as a fairy tale. But not Gladys. No one knew why she was so against the marriage. Some folks said Gladys was just jealous because Henrietta was prettier. But Gladys always insisted Day would be a no-good husband.

Henrietta and Day married alone at their preacher's house on April 10, 1941. She was twenty; he was twenty-five. They didn't go on a honeymoon because there was too much work to do, and no money for travel. By winter, the United States was at war and tobacco companies were supplying free cigarettes to soldiers, so the market was booming. But as large farms flourished, the small ones struggled. Henrietta and Day were lucky if they sold enough tobacco each season to feed the family and plant the next crop.

So after their wedding, Day went back to gripping the splintered ends of his old wooden plow as Henrietta followed close behind, pushing a homemade wheelbarrow and dropping tobacco seedlings into holes in the freshly turned red dirt.

Then one afternoon at the end of 1941, their cousin Fred Garret came barreling down the dirt road beside their field. He was just back from Baltimore for a visit in his slick '36 Chevy and fancy clothes. Only a year earlier, Fred and his brother Cliff had been tobacco farm-

ers in Clover too. For extra money, they'd opened a "colored" convenience store where most customers paid in IOUs; they also ran an old cinderblock juke joint where Henrietta often danced on the red-dirt floor. Everybody put coins in the jukebox and drank RC Cola, but the profits never amounted to much. So eventually Fred took his last three dollars and twenty-five cents and bought a bus ticket north for a new life. He, like several other cousins, went to work at Bethlehem Steel's Sparrows Point steel mill and live in Turner Station, a small community of black workers on a peninsula in the Patapsco River, about twenty miles from downtown Baltimore.

In the late 1800s, when Sparrows Point first opened, Turner Station was mostly swamps, farmland, and a few shanties connected with wooden boards for walkways. When demand for steel increased during World War I, streams of white workers moved into the nearby town of Dundalk, and Bethlehem Steel's housing barracks for black workers quickly overflowed, pushing them into Turner Station. By the early years of World War II, Turner Station had a few paved roads, a doctor, a general store, and an ice man. But its residents were still fighting for water, sewage lines, and schools.

Then, in December 1941, Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, and it was like Turner Station had won the lottery: the demand for steel skyrocketed, as did the need for workers. The government poured money into Turner Station, which began filling with one- and two-story housing projects, many of them pressed side by side and back-to-back, some with four to five hundred units. Most were brick, others covered with asbestos shingles. Some had yards, some didn't. From most of them you could see the flames dancing above Sparrows Point's furnaces and the eerie red smoke pouring from its smokestacks.

Sparrows Point was rapidly becoming the largest steel plant in the world. It produced concrete-reinforcing bars, barbed wire, nails, and steel for cars, refrigerators, and military ships. It would burn more than six million tons of coal each year to make up to eight million tons of steel and employ more than 30,000 workers. Bethlehem Steel was a gold mine in a time flush with poverty, especially for black families

from the South. Word spread from Maryland to the farms of Virginia and the Carolinas, and as part of what would become known as the Great Migration, black families flocked from the South to Turner Station—the Promised Land.

The work was tough, especially for black men, who got the jobs white men wouldn't touch. Like Fred, black workers usually started in the bowels of partially built tankers in the shipyard, collecting bolts, rivets, and nuts as they fell from the hands of men drilling and welding thirty or forty feet up. Eventually black workers moved up to the boiler room, where they shoveled coal into a blazing furnace. They spent their days breathing in toxic coal dust and asbestos, which they brought home to their wives and daughters, who inhaled it while shaking the men's clothes out for the wash. The black workers at Sparrows Point made about eighty cents an hour at most, usually less. White workers got higher wages, but Fred didn't complain: eighty cents an hour was more than most Lackses had ever seen.

Fred had made it. Now he'd come back to Clover to convince Henrietta and Day that they should do the same. The morning after he came barreling into town, Fred bought Day a bus ticket to Baltimore. They agreed Henrietta would stay behind to care for the children and the tobacco until Day made enough for a house of their own in Baltimore, and three tickets north. A few months later, Fred got a draft notice shipping him overseas. Before he left, Fred gave Day all the money he'd saved, saying it was time to get Henrietta and the children to Turner Station.

Soon, with a child on each side, Henrietta boarded a coal-fueled train from the small wooden depot at the end of Clover's Main Street. She left the tobacco fields of her youth and the hundred-year-old oak tree that shaded her from the sun on so many hot afternoons. At the age of twenty-one, Henrietta stared through the train window at rolling hills and wide-open bodies of water for the first time, heading toward a new life.

1900s 1910s 1920s 1930s 1940s 1950s 1960s 1970s 1980s 1990s 2000s

1951

### 3

## Diagnosis and Treatment

After her visit to Hopkins, Henrietta went about life as usual, cleaning and cooking for Day, their children, and the many cousins who stopped by. Then, a few days later, Jones got her biopsy results from the pathology lab: "Epidermoid carcinoma of the cervix, Stage I."

All cancers originate from a single cell gone wrong and are categorized based on the type of cell they start from. Most cervical cancers are carcinomas, which grow from the epithelial cells that cover the cervix and protect its surface. By chance, when Henrietta showed up at Hopkins complaining of abnormal bleeding, Jones and his boss, Richard Wesley TeLinde, were involved in a heated nationwide debate over what qualified as cervical cancer, and how best to treat it.

TeLinde, one of the top cervical cancer experts in the country, was a dapper and serious fifty-six-year-old surgeon who walked with an extreme limp from an ice-skating accident more than a decade earlier. Everyone at Hopkins called him Uncle Dick. He'd pioneered the use of estrogen for treating symptoms of menopause and made important early discoveries about endometriosis. He'd also written one of the