

husband wouldn't talk to me, I needed to visit Clover and find her cousins.

That night, back at the hotel, I finally got Sonny on the phone. He said he'd decided not to meet me but wouldn't tell me why. When I asked him to put me in touch with his family in Clover, he told me to go there and find them myself. Then he laughed and wished me luck.

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## The Other Side of the Tracks

Clover sits a few rolling hills off Route 360 in southern Virginia, just past Difficult Creek on the banks of the River of Death. I pulled into town under a blue December sky, with air warm enough for May, a yellow Post-it note with the only information Sonny had given me stuck on my dashboard: "They haven't found her grave. Make sure it's day—there are no lights, gets darker than dark. Ask anybody where Lacks Town is."

Downtown Clover started at a boarded-up gas station with RIP spray-painted across its front, and ended at an empty lot that once held the depot where Henrietta caught her train to Baltimore. The roof of the old movie theater on Main Street had caved in years ago, its screen landing flat in a field of weeds. The other businesses looked like someone left for lunch decades earlier and never bothered coming back: one wall of Abbott's clothing store was lined with boxes of new Red Wing work boots stacked to the ceiling and covered in thick dust; inside its long glass counter, beneath an antique cash register, lay rows and rows of men's dress shirts, still folded starch-stiff in their plastic. The lounge at Rosie's restaurant was filled with overstuffed chairs,

couches, and shag carpet, all in dust-covered browns, oranges, and yellows. A sign in the front window said OPEN 7 DAYS, just above one that said CLOSED. At Gregory and Martin Super Market, half-full shopping carts rested in the aisles next to decades-old canned foods, and the wall clock hadn't moved past 6:34 since Martin closed up shop to become an undertaker sometime in the eighties.

Even with kids on drugs and the older generation dying off, Clover didn't have enough death to keep an undertaker in business: in 1974 it had a population of 227; in 1998 it was 198. That same year, Clover lost its town charter. It did still have several churches and a few beauty parlors, but they were rarely open. The only steady business left downtown was the one-room brick post office, but it was closed when I got there.

Main Street felt like a place where you could sit for hours without seeing a pedestrian or a car. But a man stood in front of Rosie's, leaning against his red motorized bicycle, waiting to wave at any cars that might pass. He was a short, round white man with red cheeks who could have been anywhere from fifty to seventy. Locals called him the Greeter, and he'd spent most of his life on that corner waving at anyone who drove by, his face expressionless. I asked if he could direct me to Lacks Town, where I planned to look for mailboxes with the name Lacks on them, then knock on doors asking about Henrietta. The man never said a word, just waved at me, then slowly pointed behind him, across the tracks.

The dividing line between Lacks Town and the rest of Clover was stark. On one side of the two-lane road from downtown, there were vast, well-maintained rolling hills, acres and acres of wide-open property with horses, a small pond, a well-kept house set back from the road, a minivan, and a white picket fence. Directly across the street stood a small one-room shack about seven feet wide and twelve feet long; it was made of unpainted wood, with large gaps between the wallboards where vines and weeds grew.

That shack was the beginning of Lacks Town, a single road about a mile long and lined with dozens of houses—some painted bright

yellows or greens, others unpainted, half caved-in or nearly burnt-down. Slave-era cabins sat next to cinder-block homes and trailers, some with satellite dishes and porch swings, others rusted and half buried. I drove the length of Lacks Town Road again and again, past the END OF STATE MAINTENANCE sign where the road turned to gravel, past a tobacco field with a basketball court in it—just a patch of red dirt and a bare hoop attached to the top of a weathered tree trunk.

The muffler on my beat-up black Honda had fallen off somewhere between Pittsburgh and Clover, which meant everyone in Lacks Town heard each time I passed. They walked onto porches and peered through windows as I drove by. Finally, on my third or fourth pass, a man who looked like he was in his seventies shuffled out of a green two-room wooden cabin wearing a bright green sweater, a matching scarf, and a black driving cap. He waved a stiff arm at me, eyebrows raised.

"You lost?" he yelled over my muffler.

I rolled down my window and said not exactly.

"Well where you tryin to go?" he said. "Cause I know you're not from around here."

I asked him if he'd heard of Henrietta.

He smiled and introduced himself as Cootie, Henrietta's first cousin.

His real name was Hector Henry—people started calling him Cootie when he got polio decades earlier; he was never sure why. Cootie's skin was light enough to pass for Latino, so when he got sick at nine years old, a local white doctor snuck him into the nearest hospital, saying Cootie was his son, since the hospitals didn't treat black patients. Cootie spent a year inside an iron lung that breathed for him, and he'd been in and out of hospitals ever since.

The polio had left him partially paralyzed in his neck and arms, with nerve damage that caused constant pain. He wore a scarf regardless of the weather, because the warmth helped ease the pain.

I told him why I was there, and he pointed up and down the road. "Everybody in Lacks Town kin to Henrietta, but she been gone so

long, even her memory pretty much dead now," he said. "Everything about Henrietta dead except them cells."

He pointed to my car. "Turn this loud thing off and come inside. I'll fix you some juice."

His front door opened into a tiny kitchen with a coffeemaker, a vintage toaster, and an old woodstove with two cooking pots on top, one empty, the other filled with chili. He'd painted the kitchen walls the same dark olive green as the outside, and lined them with power strips and fly swatters. He'd recently gotten indoor plumbing, but still preferred the outhouse.

Though Cootie could barely move his arms, he'd built the house on his own, teaching himself construction as he went along, hammering the plywood walls and plastering the inside. But he'd forgotten to use insulation, so soon after he finished it, he tore down the walls and started over again. A few years after that, the whole place burned down when he fell asleep under an electric blanket, but he built it back up again. The walls were a bit crooked, he said, but he'd used so many nails, he didn't think it would ever fall down.

Cootie handed me a glass of red juice and shooed me out of the kitchen into his dark, wood-paneled living room. There was no couch, just a few metal folding chairs and a barber's chair anchored to the linoleum floor, its cushions covered entirely with duct tape. Cootie had been the Lacks Town barber for decades. "That chair cost twelve hundred dollars now, but I got it for eight dollars back then," he yelled from the kitchen. "Haircut wasn't but a dollar—sometimes I cut fifty-eight heads in one day." Eventually he quit because he couldn't hold his arms up long enough to cut.

A small boom box leaned against one wall blaring a gospel call-in show, with a preacher screaming something about the Lord curing a caller of hepatitis.

Cootie opened a folding chair for me, then walked into his bedroom. He lifted his mattress with one arm, propped it on his head, and began rummaging through piles of paper hidden beneath it.

"I know I got some information on Henrietta in here some-

where," he mumbled from under the mattress. "Where the hell I put that . . . You know other countries be buying her for twenty-five dollars, sometimes fifty? Her family didn't get no money out of it."

After digging through what looked like hundreds of papers, he came back to the living room.

"This here the only picture I got of her," he said, pointing to a copy of the *Rolling Stone* article with the ever-present hands-on-hips photo. "I don't know what it say. Only education I got, I had to learn on my own. But I always couldn't count, and I can't hardly read or write my name cause my hand's so jittery." He asked if the article said anything about her childhood in Clover. I shook my head no.

"Everybody liked Henrietta cause she was a very good condition person," he said. "She just lovey dovey, always smilin, always takin care of us when we come to the house. Even after she got sick, she never was a person who say 'I feel bad and I'm going to take it out on you.' She wasn't like that, even when she hurtin. But she didn't seem to understand what was going on. She didn't want to think she was gonna die."

He shook his head. "You know, they said if we could get all the pieces of her together, she'd weigh over eight hundred pounds now," he told me. "And Henrietta never was a big girl. She just still growin."

In the background, the radio preacher screamed "Hallelujah!" over and over as Cootie spoke.

"She used to take care of me when my polio got bad," he told me. "She always did say she wanted to fix it. She couldn't help me cause I had it before she got sick, but she saw how bad it got. I imagine that's why she used them cells to help get rid of it for other folk." He paused. "Nobody round here never understood how she dead and that thing still livin. That's where the mystery's at."

He looked around the room, nodding his head toward spaces between the wall and ceiling where he'd stuffed dried garlic and onions.

"You know, a lot of things, they man-made," he told me, dropping his voice to a whisper. "You know what I mean by man-made, don't you?"

I shook my head no.

"Yoodoo," he whispered. "Some peoples is sayin Henrietta's sickness and them cells was man- or woman-made, others say it was doctor-made."

As he talked, the preacher's voice on the radio grew louder, saying, "The Lord, He's gonna help you, but you got to call me right now. If my daughter or sister had cancer! I would get on that phone, cause time's running out!"

Cootie yelled over the radio. "Doctors say they never heard of another case like Henrietta's! I'm sure it was either man-made or spirit-made, one of the two."

Then he told me about spirits in Lacks Town that sometimes visited people's houses and caused disease. He said he'd seen a man spirit in his house, sometimes leaning against the wall by his woodstove, other times by the bed. But the most dangerous spirit, he told me, was the several-ton headless hog he saw roaming Lacks Town years ago with no tail. Links of broken chain dangled from its bloodstained neck, dragging along dirt roads and clanking as it walked.

"I saw that thing crossin the road to the family cemetery," Cootie told me. "That spirit stood right there in the road, its chain swingin and swayin in the breeze." Cootie said it looked at him and stomped its foot, kicking red dust all around its body, getting ready to charge. Just then, a car came barreling down the road with only one headlight.

"The car came along, shined a light right on it, I swear it was a hog," Cootie said. Then the spirit vanished. "I can still hear that chain draggin." Cootie figured that car saved him from getting some new disease.

"Now I don't know for sure if a spirit got Henrietta or if a doctor did it," Cootie said, "but I do know that her cancer wasn't no regular cancer, cause regular cancer don't keep on growing after a person die."

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### "The Devil of Pain Itself"

By September, Henrietta's body was almost entirely taken over by tumors. They'd grown on her diaphragm, her bladder, and her lungs. They'd blocked her intestines and made her belly swell like she was six months pregnant. She got one blood transfusion after another because her kidneys could no longer filter the toxins from her blood, leaving her nauseated from the poison of her own body. She got so much blood that one doctor wrote a note in her record stopping all transfusions "until her deficit with the blood bank was made up."

When Henrietta's cousin Emmett Lacks heard somebody at Sparrows Point say Henrietta was sick and needed blood, he threw down the steel pipe he was cutting and ran looking for his brother and some friends. They were working men, with steel and asbestos in their lungs and years' worth of hard labor under their calluses and cracked fingernails. They'd all slept on Henrietta's floor and eaten her spaghetti when they first came to Baltimore from the country, and anytime money ran low. She'd ridden the streetcar to and from Sparrows Point to make sure they didn't get lost during their first weeks in the city.

She'd packed their lunches until they found their feet, then sent extra food to work with Day so they didn't go hungry between paychecks. She'd teased them about needing wives and girlfriends, and sometimes helped them find good ones. Emmett had stayed at Henrietta's so long, he had his own bed in the hallway at the top of the stairs. He'd only moved out a few months earlier.

The last time Emmett saw Henrietta, he'd taken her to visit Elsie in Crownsville. They found her sitting behind barbed wire in the corner of a yard outside the brick barracks where she slept. When she saw them coming, she made her birdlike noise, then ran to them and just stood, staring. Henrietta wrapped her arms around Elsie, looked her long and hard in the eyes, then turned to Emmett.

"She look like she doin better," Henrietta said. "Yeah, Elsie look nice and clean and everything." They sat in silence for a long time. Henrietta seemed relieved, almost desperate, to see Elsie looking okay. That was the last time she would see her daughter—Emmett figures she knew she was saying goodbye. What she didn't know was that no one would ever visit Elsie again.

A few months later, when Emmett heard Henrietta needed blood, he and his brother and six friends piled into a truck and went straight to Hopkins. A nurse led them through the colored ward, past rows of hospital beds to the one where Henrietta lay. She'd withered from 140 pounds to about 100. Sadie and Henrietta's sister Gladys sat beside her, their eyes swollen from too much crying and not enough sleep. Gladys had come from Clover by Greyhound as soon as she got word Henrietta was in the hospital. The two had never been close, and people still teased Gladys, saying she was too mean and ugly to be Henrietta's sister. But Henrietta was family, so Gladys sat beside her, clutching a pillow in her lap.

A nurse stood in the corner watching as the eight big men crowded around the bed. When Henrietta tried to move her arm to lift herself, Emmett saw the straps around her wrists and ankles, attaching her to the bed frame.

"What you doin here?" Henrietta moaned.

"We come to get you well," Emmett said to a chorus of yeas from the other men.

Henrietta didn't say a word. She just lay her head back on the pillow.

Suddenly her body went rigid as a board. She screamed as the nurse ran to the bed, tightening the straps around Henrietta's arms and legs to keep her from thrashing onto the floor as she'd done many times before. Gladys thrust the pillow from her lap into Henrietta's mouth, to keep her from biting her tongue as she convulsed in pain. Sadie cried and stroked Henrietta's hair.

"Lord," Emmett told me years later. "Henrietta rose up out that bed wailin like she been possessed by the devil of pain itself."

The nurse shooed Emmett and his brothers out of the ward to the room designated for colored blood collection, where they'd donate eight pints of blood. As Emmett walked from Henrietta's bedside, he turned to look just as the fit began to pass and Gladys slid the pillow from Henrietta's mouth.

"That there's a memory I'll take to my grave," he told me years later. "When them pains hit, looked like her mind just said, *Henrietta, you best leave*. She was sick like I never seen. Sweetest girl you ever wanna meet, and prettier than anything. But them cells, boy, them cells of hers is somethin else. No wonder they never could kill them... That cancer was a terrible thing."

Soon after Emmett and his friends visited, at four o'clock on the afternoon of September 24, 1951, a doctor injected Henrietta with a heavy dose of morphine and wrote in her chart, "Discontinue all medications and treatments except analgesics." Two days later, Henrietta awoke terrified, disoriented, wanting to know where she was and what the doctors had been doing to her. For a moment she forgot her own name. Soon after that, she turned to Gladys and told her she was going to die.

"You make sure Day takes care of them children," Henrietta told

her sister, tears streaming down her face. "Especially my baby girl Deborah." Deborah was just over a year old when Henrietta went into the hospital. Henrietta had wanted to hold Deborah, to dress her in beautiful clothes and braid her hair, to teach her how to paint her nails, curl her hair, and handle men.

Henrietta looked at Gladys and whispered, "Don't you let anything bad happen to them children when I'm gone."

Then she rolled over, her back to Gladys, and closed her eyes.

Gladys slipped out of the hospital and onto a Greyhound back to Clover. That night, she called Day.

"Henrietta gonna die tonight," she told him. "She wants you to take care of them kids — I told her I'd let you know. Don't let nuthin happen to them."

Henrietta died at 12:15 a.m. on October 4, 1951.

