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# The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks

By Rebecca Skloot

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Gosh almighty.

The Johns Hopkins Science Review  
with Dr. George Gey.

In this jar, we have a sample  
of cancerous human tissue.

What makes this sample so unique  
is that this is the first cell line  
we have discovered  
in over 30 years of trying  
that can survive and reproduce indefinitely.

With this, scientists will  
be able to perform experiments  
that they never could  
on a living human being.

Growing like crabgrass.

Free of charge!

Well, how many vials do you want?

Known as "HeLa," this cell strain  
has since been given to laboratories  
around the world.

Used by doctors and scientists  
to perform experiments and research,  
starting with Dr. Salk's polio vaccine.

Who owns the patent on this vaccine?

The people, I would say.

There is no patent.

Would you patent the sun?

Did you know the donor?

No. No, but towards the end of her life,  
I leaned over her hospital bed.

By this time, she was unconscious,  
and I said to her,

"Your cells are going to help a lot of people  
"and make you immortal."

What was her name?

We see no reason why an interesting story  
could not be written without using her name.

And so, George, rather than run the risk  
of getting in trouble for disclosing it,  
the cell strain should be referred to as "HeLa"  
and the patient's name not be used.

Helen, Helen Lane.

...remarkable advances

in medicine and surgery  
that are bringing us tomorrow's medicine.  
For years, it seemed like a dream,  
not knowing what was going on,  
not knowing who to go to for understanding.  
Didn't even know how to talk about it.  
About our mother? Could this be true?  
We miss you.  
And we love you, Mama.  
Freelance science  
and medical writer and editor.  
Yes.  
With a degree in...  
Biological sciences.  
And,  
this represents the entirety  
of your journalistic career?  
Yes, well, thus far.  
Deborah is Henrietta's baby girl.  
The family calls her "Dale."  
She's 50 now, living in Baltimore  
with grandchildren of her own.  
She's the most determined to know about  
her mother and the most vulnerable.  
Deborah came near a stroke recently  
because of all the agony she's gone through  
regarding the inquiries  
into her mother's death and those cells.  
I won't be a part of anyone  
doing that to her.  
Oh, no, no, I... Dr...  
What can you tell me  
about African-Americans and science?  
Well, from 1932 to '72,  
the U.S. Public Health Service, uh,  
withheld treatment from  
a group of African-American men  
infected with syphilis so they could study  
the long-term effects of the disease.  
- And look, I know I'm white...  
- And from Portland.  
Yes. Yeah. That's right.  
But when I was in high school,  
my father got very sick

and ended up in a research study.  
And, in my opinion, the hospital,  
you know, they didn't behave  
in the most ethical manner,  
and I remember being very angry about that.  
And at the same time,  
I was taking a biology class  
at a community college,  
and the teacher told us about the cells  
and how they've been  
at the forefront of basically  
every major medical breakthrough,  
and they belonged  
to a black woman named Henrietta Lacks.  
And after the class, I asked him,  
"What can you tell me about her?"  
And, you know, the second he told me  
that he didn't know anything,  
I just became obsessed with it.  
And, Dr. Pattillo,  
the Lacks family trusts you,  
so if there is anything  
that you could do to help me  
connect with Henrietta Lacks' children,  
I would be so, so grateful.  
Yeah, who's this?  
Hi, my name is Rebecca Skloot. How are you?  
Mmm-hmm.  
Dr. Pattillo actually gave me your...  
- How's he doing?  
- He's fine.  
I'm not sure exactly how much he told you  
about what I'm trying to do.  
Just that you was gonna ask me some questions  
about my mama's cells.  
Yes, yes, well, um,  
uh, I want to write a book about your mother.  
And while there's all this stuff  
about her cells,  
it always struck me  
that nobody ever wrote about her or her life,  
and that's why I've been  
trying to track you down  
and your family down to see if you would be

interested in working with me,  
and just telling me, um, more about...  
About her.  
Well, all I gotta say  
about that is, hallelujah!  
Finally, somebody want to talk about my mama.  
Because back when I was a child,  
old folks, they didn't talk  
about nobody who wasn't alive,  
so my whole life,  
I grew up not knowing one thing,  
not even the littlest things,  
like what was her favorite color,  
or... Or what happened to her clothes,  
her shoes?  
Now, I know about that watch and ring  
'cause they got stolen  
by the time my brother killed that boy.  
What exactly did her cells do?  
Girl, you better get yourself ready,  
'cause this story  
is crazy enough for three books.  
I'm ready, I'm ready.  
Bet you didn't know my mother's sister  
converted herself to Puerto Rican.  
And that state hospital, "the hospital  
for crazy Negroes" they used to call it,  
we are not skipping over that part.  
Plus all the things  
I've been dying to know, really,  
but don't 'cause she died  
when I was so young.  
Like, did she... Did she breastfeed me?  
Did she... Did she love to dance?  
No, it's... I'm...  
It sounds like  
we really want to do similar things here.  
- Mmm-hmm.  
- I live in Pittsburgh  
and I don't have a publisher yet,  
but I'm committed and determined...  
- Grandmama, mail!  
- Oh, my God!  
I can't talk to you now.

Mail. Gotta go.  
Now listen, uh, you can call me  
late Monday afternoon  
'cause usually I'm out  
running with my grandchildren.  
Now, what'd you say your name was?  
Rebecca, Rebecca Skloot. You can call me...  
Mail!  
Deborah?  
Deborah? Okay.  
Hello?  
Deborah, hi. It's Rebecca.  
Can't talk.  
Oh, well, shall I call back in, say...  
Done talking.  
My brother say I ought to  
write a book myself.  
But I ain't no writer.  
Can't talk to you.  
Why can't you talk to me?  
Did somebody... Deborah?  
Talk to the men.  
Sonny, Lawrence.  
Deborah, if you'd just give me a chance,  
I can...  
We could spend some time together and...  
I don't want to get hurt again.  
So, I'm here in Baltimore in a parking lot,  
waiting for Sonny Lacks to show up  
and hopefully take me to introduce me  
to the rest of the family.  
And I'm really hoping that Deborah might...  
Might be there, but...  
Oh. That's...  
Oh, my God, he's actually here.  
Yeah, I told you that I'll be passing.  
Hi.  
I will be over there. All right, okay, bye.  
- Miss Rebecca!  
- Hey.  
- Happy New Year.  
- Happy New Year.  
Uh, you're a very hard man to track down.  
I'm a busy man, Miss Rebecca.

- I'm a very busy man.

- That's good.

- No, it's not.

- No?

Here, come on.

Oh. Oh, okay, well, let me just get my stuff.

Is Deborah gonna be there today?

No. Lawrence will check you out.

He'll decide what's what.

- Okay.

- I told you I'm in a meeting.

I'm in my car.

You can have a meeting in the car.

It's a mobile office.

Do you mind if I turn this on,

- so I could...

- No, no.

Go ahead, go ahead.

Trying to find something on the radio.

Your cell phone always ring that much?

Ripping and running, Miss Rebecca.

Ripping and running.

So, what's the earliest memory  
you have of your mother?

Well, I hear she was pretty.

Lawrence the only one  
old enough to really remember.

Me, Dale, Zakariyya,  
we got no memories at all.

Lawrence was a teenager?

Mmm-hmm. He was around 15.

Zakar-ree-ah?

Changed his name in prison.

Good thing he ain't here  
to hear you mispronouncing it.

I'm just messing with you.

So, here's where we take  
scientists and reporters  
who wanna know about our mother  
so the whole family can gang up on them.

Now, you seem nice enough,  
so I won't go get Zakariyya.

- Here you go.

- Thank you.

- Which house exactly does Lawrence live in?

- Good luck.

Hello?

Hello?

Hello? Anybody...

Come on in.

I'm Rebecca. Rebecca Skloot.

Wanna taste the meat I cook?

Now, my wife thinks I cook them too long.

How could I resist?

Uh, Lawrence, do you mind if I...

Sonny was telling me you're the only sibling who has any memory of your mother...

I blacked out most of my memory because of the sadness and hurting.

I found this cool thing. Um...

Using techniques that HeLa helped develop, scientists can now take a piece of a person's cornea and grow it in a dish to help treat blindness.

Imagine that.

Right?

It's a miracle.

- I was hoping I could meet Deborah...

- No, just the men.

My wife, she's a fire dragon without her morning coffee.

Hmm. Come in the front room while I take it up.

- Come on.

- Take your time, Daddy.

You like the way she decorate the house?

- Hey, Miss Rebecca!

- Sonny.

- Thank you.

- This is our father.

- Nice to meet you.

- Ma'am.

Lawrence, it's after 2:00.

You're just taking Barbara her morning coffee?

Miss Rebecca, you better run while you can.

Pay him no mind.



Pops, did you know Mama's cells  
gonna make Stevie Wonder see?  
Don't surprise me none.  
They're not actually being  
put into people's eyes, her cells, but, um...  
Hey, Pop, Miss Rebecca want to know  
everything Dale always asking about.  
I'm writing a book about Henrietta,  
but what I'm missing is information  
about her and her life,  
what she liked,  
what she liked to do, you know.  
She was born in Roanoke?  
That's right. Raised in Clover.  
Didn't like Baltimore much.  
So, every summer  
she'd head on down to Clover.  
Called herself tending a little tobacco.  
Pick it, string it, even after she got sick.  
Wow.  
And when did you first hear  
about your wife's cells and...  
Hopkins called, said, "Come on up here,  
'cause she died."  
They wanted to do an autopsy.  
They said, "It'd help your children  
in case they come down with cancer."  
When I went to claim the body,  
none of them doctors told me nothing  
about keeping her alive in them tubes.  
What'd you expect?  
I wouldn't go to Hopkins  
to get my toenails cut.  
Remember when we were little?  
If you were bad,  
the old folks would threaten to put you out  
so them Hopkins night doctors could get you.  
I remember.  
Hopkins was known for snatching  
black folks, experimenting on them.  
You'd be surprised how many people  
disappeared in East Baltimore.  
They'd snatch them right off the street.  
Well, it might be a myth. You never know.

- You know what is a myth?

- Hmm?

Everyone saying Henrietta Lacks  
donated them cells.

'Cause she didn't donate nothing.

- Mmm-hmm.

- They took them and didn't ask.

Well, this matters to me,  
the story, and why it needs to be told.

If this is something  
that's gonna help mankind,  
I can't imagine someone not wanting to help,  
but be forthright, inform the family.

- Just show a little respect.

- Drop a little note.

- A postcard.

- Something.

Hopkins say they gave them cells away,  
but they made millions.

A girlfriend of mine's brother-in-law  
worked in a lab over in D.C.

She introduced us, and he said,

"'Lacks'? That's funny.

"For years I've been working  
with the cells of this woman  
"who died of cervical cancer  
named Henrietta Lacks,"  
and goes on to explain  
how any time he wants more,  
all he has to do is order them  
from a supplier, like everybody else.

Day has got gangrene. Toes need amputating.

Sonny, a bad heart.

Lawrence, high blood pressure.

And Dale's got...

Run herself into the ground  
over all the wrong that's been done.

This family's the only ones  
haven't made a dime  
off of their own mother's cells.

Hello?

If you're gonna write this book  
about my mama and want my help,  
first, you got to tell everybody

her name wasn't no Helen Lane  
or whatever they sometimes say.  
And second, everybody talk  
about Henrietta Lacks got four kids.  
That ain't right. She got five.  
'Cause my sister Elsie got sent away  
to that Crownsville place,  
and I don't know why.  
So, we are not leaving my sister out.  
Now, my brother's all upset  
'cause everybody come around,  
make money off our mama's cells,  
but I don't care nothing about that.  
What I care about is knowing about my sister  
and knowing about my mother.  
And you got to promise me no matter what,  
you ain't gonna lie  
and you ain't gonna keep nothing from me.  
I promise.  
Well, you better get yourself ready, girl,  
'cause you got no idea  
what you're getting yourself into.  
Hi.  
Hi, I'm Rebecca.  
- Mmm.  
- So nice to meet you finally.  
"Finally" is right.  
- Finally, finally.  
- Can I help you?  
No, I'm all right.  
"Finally" is good.  
Here's my card just in case  
anything you need or...  
Swore up and down I wasn't gonna talk  
to nobody ever again about my mother.  
But here I am.  
Hope I don't regret this.  
You okay?  
Do you mind if I start?  
- Go ahead.  
- Okay.  
I'm the gray child  
'cause I'm the one doing all the worrying...  
...about our mother's cells.

Oh, I can only imagine.  
Nothing but lies and deceit.  
I'm... I'm good, thanks.  
But no matter what,  
my mother's always been there,  
watching out for us.  
Look at that salad bar.  
So, when you say  
your mother's always been there, what...  
What you don't understand is  
we didn't know nothing about nothing  
till that Asian lady from Hopkins showed up.  
Daddy, why they want our blood?  
They're testing to see  
if you got the cancer killed your mama.  
Did you know my mama?  
No, her cells.  
Everybody does.  
They've been in outer space,  
in a nuclear bomb.  
You should be proud.  
But she said everybody knows her.  
She done been in bombs and outer space.  
- Mama's cells have been...  
- Now, hush!  
We put your mama in the ground  
when you was two.  
You alive or you dead.  
Can't be both.  
Finally, somebody did call me back,  
asking for more of my blood.  
What made my mama sick? What kind of cancer?  
Am I gonna get it, too?  
And how can she rest in peace if they keep  
shooting her up into space like that?  
Did she get hurt  
when they blew her up in those...  
Here is everything you need to know.  
And so, they never explained to you  
they were looking  
for genetic markers specific to your mother?  
Keep talking.  
After HeLa, scientists figured out  
how to grow lots of other cell lines

using these cells  
in research and experiments.  
Any time HeLa  
came in contact with another cell,  
it would completely take over.  
HeLa was unstoppable.  
It was traveling through ventilation systems,  
moving from lab to lab.  
That's why they wanted samples of your DNA,  
so they could tell which cells  
had been contaminated by HeLa  
and which had not.  
Deborah, they weren't testing you for cancer.  
They were just using you  
and your brothers for research.  
So, if it hadn't have been for her cells  
causing all of that damage,  
they never would have come  
knocking on our door?  
And what Hopkins done to my mama  
never would've started to come out?  
Mess with Henrietta  
and she sic HeLa on your ass.  
I bet you she's here right now,  
watching every move you make.  
This all I got about my mother's cells.  
Went to the market.  
Something told me to pick this up.  
- Scared me half to death.  
- I can understand.  
- This is...  
- What about this?  
And just like Hopkins stole my mama's cells,  
this doctor steals a woman's eggs  
and cloned an army of little boys  
that look just like her dead son.  
Deborah, that's just science fiction.  
It all sound like science fiction.  
Then I started thinking,  
"How many people walking around London  
looking like my mother?"  
Why would there be...  
"The cells known as HeLa  
"could populate a village with their clones."

They didn't clone her. They cloned her cells.  
I wanna learn everything I can  
about my mama's cells.  
I wanna go to labs, and I wanna meet people.  
Every time I think about  
what Hopkins did to my mother,  
my... My blood just grows cold,  
but even one day...  
One day, I'm gonna even go to Hopkins  
'cause I am tired of wanting to know and...  
And... And hiding.  
I've been carrying this around  
for a long time.  
It's a Mother's Day card.  
"May the spirit of the Lord  
and Savior be with you  
"on this day on which you are honored  
"for all the love that you have given  
your family and your loved ones.  
"From your daughter, Deborah."  
I have something for you.  
They're Henrietta's cells.  
It's a gift.  
A research doctor at Johns Hopkins.  
It's his way of saying thank you to you  
for everything  
that your mother has done for science.  
In vitro fertilization, the AIDS cocktail,  
chemotherapy drugs.  
Deborah, there isn't a person alive  
who hasn't benefited  
from your mother's cells.  
Who's this?  
My big sister Elsie.  
Died so young, never knew her.  
She was so beautiful.  
She's pretty.  
Are these your mother's medical records?  
- No!  
- Oh!  
No... I'm so sorry, Deborah.  
I wasn't trying to...  
That's right, you wasn't.  
What you trying to do

with my mama's medical records?  
Nothing! Nothing.  
I thought you put them there for me.  
We are not ready for that!  
I wasn't trying to do anything bad at all.  
I just wanna learn the story of your mom,  
just like you.  
Just like Sir Lord. Don't know who to trust.  
Deborah! Deborah!  
Got a phone call  
this morning from my brother Zakariyya.  
You know, things ain't been so good for him  
since he got out of jail,  
but I'm pretty sure he about ready  
to start talking about our mother again.  
So, you're pretty sure?  
Long as we get there  
before he start drinking, you'll be fine.  
Boys!  
I don't want y'all running off  
all around here anyway, okay? Mmm-hmm.  
There he is.  
Hey, Zakariyya.  
Said you were gonna be here in an hour!  
Didn't wanna be late, so we left early.  
I'm not ready!  
Well, take your time.  
Goddamn kids!  
Listen, I'm gonna be right up there...  
- Where?  
- In that window.  
If anything get funny, just wave.  
Boys, come over here. Let's go.  
Hi. I'm Rebecca.  
Dale said you had some magazine.  
Yes. Yeah.  
This is an article I wrote on your mother.  
- Do you mind if I...  
- You work for Hopkins?  
Oh, no, no, no, no.  
They just published the article.  
I work for myself.  
Over here.  
- My hearing.

- Sorry.  
I guess I don't count.  
Sonny not the youngest.  
No, I didn't do the captions at all,  
like I say there...  
Got a couple of dummies for brothers.  
Don't have enough sense to spit.  
My father buried my mother  
in an unmarked grave,  
and when that fool die,  
I don't wanna know where he buried either.  
He need a ride to the hospital,  
he can take a cab.  
I used to go there.  
To Johns Hopkins?  
I needed money.  
Checked myself into this program.  
A research program?  
One time, paid me money  
just to watch me sleep.  
Another time, I needed new eyeglasses,  
so I let them test this drug.  
If they'd have known I was Henrietta's son,  
who knows what they'd do?  
She was sick when she was  
pregnant with you, right?  
I figure I had to start fighting  
before I was born.  
They say her cells all this and that.  
Didn't do her no good.  
Didn't do any of us any good.  
I hope that George Gray is burning in hell.  
- His name's actually George Gey...  
- Who cares what his name is,  
what he did was wrong!  
God handles that!  
God wanna have a disease cure,  
He provide one for Himself!  
You don't mess with that!  
You don't lie and clone people  
behind their back!  
If he was here, I would kill him dead.  
Stick a black pitchfork up his ass.  
Y'all done reporting?



Me and Zakariyya, we a lot alike.  
We can't go shutting our feelings on and off  
just like everybody else.  
Once something's done, it stays inside.  
Don't go away.  
Come on.  
Come on and walk us back to the car.  
"Welcome to Clover!"  
I feel welcome.  
Looks like somebody went out for lunch  
a couple of decades ago  
and forgot to come back.  
How you doing?  
- Your muffler! Your muffler!  
- What?  
Oh, yes. Thank you, sir.  
I got it. Muffler.  
Let's see if you and that tape recorder  
can get my mama's family to talk.  
So, Gladys is Henrietta's sister.  
And Aunt Sadie is her cousin and  
best friend from when they were girls.  
Whoo!  
Looky here, looky here!  
Miss Sadie!  
Oh, Deborah, so good to see you!  
And there's Cousin Cootie over there!  
Cousin Cootie over there! Ooh!  
- Cousin!  
- Cousin Cliff, Cousin Cliff.  
It's good to see you.  
- Y'all meet my reporter.  
- Hello!  
- Good to see you.  
- Look at Aunt Gladys up here!  
How you doing, Aunt Gladys?  
Aunt Gladys, how you doing?  
How you doing? Nice to see you.  
- Come on in the house.  
- Nice and cool.  
Just so I don't miss anything.  
Mmm.  
So, how long did you know Henrietta for?  
We don't believe in

telling stories on the dead.

I hear she was a very nice person.

A very good-conditioned person.

Pretty teeth.

So, what else can you tell me about her?

Well...

Hennie made the good come out of you.

She made life come alive.

Every year, a carnival would come to town  
and we'd ride the Ferris wheel.

And when our car stopped at the top...

We'd scream, just scream!

Cootie, when did you move to Turner Station?

December 1942.

If the Japanese ain't attacked,  
colored never would've had jobs  
over there at Bethlehem Steel.

- That's right.

- Day used to work the night shift,

**so around 11:**

would sneak over to the Twin Pines.

Amos Milburn playing on the box.

Down the Road.

Me and Hennie would swing out heavy!

Swinging out heavy!

Two-step across the floor.

Whoo!

Yeah, Sadie!

Whoo! Spin her!

Come on, y'all! Dance, y'all!

And when all her cousins moved from down here  
to Turner Station,

Hennie'd take care of them.

Okay, now, which cousin are you?

- Uh, Cousin Fred, ma'am...

- Don't call me "ma'am."

- I'm too young to be anybody's ma'am.

- Mmm-hmm.

Call me Henrietta. Bring me your plate.

Half of them fools wasn't even a relation,  
but she'd feed 'em just the same.

Everybody up in here family.

Make sure you have enough.

She always kept herself real pretty.  
Oh, Lord! Day done lost his mind.  
Oh, you looking good, baby.  
Fingers and toenails painted red.  
Now, Cousin Billy  
is the best carpenter 'sides Jesus himself.  
Ain't that right, Cousin Billy?  
- Well, I guess.  
- "I guess"?  
If you be it, say it. Ain't that right?  
- That's right.  
- Okay, girl.  
Go on over there.  
That's the way your mother was.  
What all did she cook?  
- Rice pudding.  
- Oh, yeah.  
- Slow-cooked greens.  
- Oh, yes.  
Neck bone.  
Henrietta  
no neck bones.  
Neck bones me!  
Put that in your tape recorder!  
Thank you, Aunt Gladys! Thank you!  
- Me.  
- You! Okay. I got it!  
Henrietta took care of me  
when my polio got bad.  
That's why she used her cells  
to help get rid of it for other folk.  
One thing I'll never forget,  
when word spread that Henrietta was sick,  
every man who could walk,  
and a few who couldn't,  
made their way to Hopkins.  
I'm here to give blood in case she needs it.  
- It's got dirt and straw floors.  
- Wood underneath.  
When was this built?  
During slavery.  
But ain't nobody lived here  
for 35, 40 years since your mama.  
I think about you all the time, Mama.

I wish I could see you  
and hold you in my arms  
the way I know you held me.  
'Cause I know I'm a part of you, and...  
And you're part of me.  
Henrietta's buried over there somewhere.  
Better get your snake stick.  
"Snake stick"?  
If I see a snake, I'm hiding behind you.  
Sometimes they be hiding in the trees.  
Snakes don't really hide in any trees.  
Look for your grandmother's tombstone.  
She's joking about the snakes  
in trees, right?  
Oh! There she is.  
Eliza Pleasant.  
Oh. So, Henrietta was only four  
when she died.  
She lost her mama young just like me.  
Henrietta is buried  
in one of these unmarked graves.  
Elsie, too.  
Elsie was one pretty little girl.  
Stare at you with those sad brown eyes,  
hands a-waving, cawing like a bird.  
Couldn't do a thing for herself.  
Hennie had to feed her, bathe her.  
Had Day driving to every tent show  
so preachers could lay hands on her.  
Nothing helped.  
This one time, Elsie run smack dead  
in the middle of traffic.  
Scared Hennie half to death.  
What was it that made Henrietta  
finally send her to Crownsville?  
It was more than she could handle.  
You and Sonny were just babies,  
little Zakariyya on the way.  
She fought against it till she couldn't.  
The day she sent Elsie to Crownsville,  
Hennie liked to die.  
Last night when I got back  
to the motel, oh, my God!  
Ticks up and down my legs.

What's that right there?

I don't... Oh!

Oh, my God.

I'm done with you.

Okay, well,

I'm gonna start sending you articles...

Yeah.

...and essays and everything  
that I discover along the way,  
I want you to know about it as well.

- Send them. Send them all.

- Okay.

And once

I've done some writing and find an editor,  
I'm gonna be ready to hit the road again.

- Count me in.

- Really?

- Yeah.

- Okay, great.

When the time is right,  
we need to go to Crownsville.  
And get yourself a cell phone.  
You shouldn't be  
on them back roads without a phone.

- All right.

- All right.

Get this muffler fixed, too!

It's embarrassing!

"There's a photo on my wall  
of a woman I never met,  
"its left corner torn  
and patched together with tape.

They're not saying Henrietta wasn't human.  
Sure sound like it to me.

But that her cells have,  
over time, changed so much,  
it's as if they're their own species now.  
And the long one is about how HeLa cells  
made it possible to do stem cell research.

Go, HeLa! Go, HeLa!

That's my mother.

Working on HeLa  
was the highlight of my career.  
When Dr. McKusick said,

"Go get this blood drawn," I did.  
Were you aware that the Lackses thought  
that you were testing them for cancer?  
I suspect there was no effort  
to explain anything in great detail.  
It's not like those people  
would have understood anyway.  
- I was shocked.  
- I don't know why.  
They see me coming, they lock the door.  
They see you coming,  
it's, "Rebecca, come on in."  
They'll say things they wouldn't say,  
at least to my face.  
So, go ahead on, girl, keep on being white.  
Good news. I found a publisher for the book.  
'Course you did.  
That's my mother paving the way.  
You mind asking her  
to pave it a little faster?  
Ask her yourself.  
- Hi.  
- Hi.  
- Rebecca. Hey.  
- Hi.  
- Sorry I'm a bit late.  
- No problem.  
And you know I'm sincere  
when I say you're a great writer.  
- "But..."  
- But...  
We got a bit of a problem.  
The family.  
What about them?  
The mentally damaged daughter.  
Well, that's very poignant  
and essential about Elsie...  
The indigent ex-con brother.  
Zakariyya actually spent  
the first year of his life  
- in an incubator...  
- The manic-depressive daughter  
with, what, 27 different kinds of ailments?  
The story of Henrietta is about legacy.

- Right.  
- It's cultural, personal, racial.  
- We got a contract.  
- And it's about this family...  
- I jotted down a few notes.  
- ...who has lost their mother,  
and the world that got HeLa.  
Eliminate the family and keep writing.  
Rebecca?

Sasha Walz, Danbury Publishing.

We have a bit of a situation.

What kind of situation?

A PATH train Bill was on  
overshot the platform.

Bill fell and suffered a concussion.

He's experiencing a temporary loss of memory.

I see on his calendar you two met last week.

Do you remember what you talked about?

Well, as a matter of fact, he wasn't exactly  
happy with how the book was going,  
so we had mutually agreed to part ways.

That's what happens when you try  
and take her children out of a book.

Henrietta throw your ass off a train.

Deborah!

Everywhere. She everywhere.

"She filled her bathtub,  
lowered herself into the warm water,  
"and slowly spread her legs.

"a hard lump."

What time tomorrow should I get here?

I didn't ask you, I was asking her.

- Sonny.

- I'm speaking for her.

- Sonny.

- Hmm?

Wait till you see this picture

I got of our mother's cells.

This cancer scientist that Rebecca knows  
over at Hopkins gave it to me.

Mmm-hmm?

He wants us to come see  
our mother's real cells.

And you gonna go?

I'm thinking about it.

Hopkins lies to us.

Hopkins deceives us, takes and steals  
and tells us nothing.

And then all of a sudden, Rebecca comes along  
and you choosing her,  
choosing Hopkins over your own family.

- Why you attacking me?

- 'Cause you need to stop.

- Lawrence.

- Just 'cause you wanna go running around  
digging up graves, don't mean the rest of us  
gotta go along for the ride.

Now, Barbara and I have always protected you.  
And I'm grateful for all that.

- When you were pregnant with Alfred...

- Lawrence.

There's many a day  
the only thing kept me going  
was knowing my mama loved  
and missed me as much as I miss her.

- Making sure you stayed...

- I ain't stopping.

- I am not stopping!

- Deb,

Lawrence is gonna keep getting upset,  
and Dale is gonna do what she wants,

- like Dale always does.

- You don't remember!

- Go ahead.

- How thin she got,

how whatever they put up in her  
burned her inside and out!

Dale, baby, why do you think  
Gey used "Helen Lane"  
instead of "Henrietta Lacks"?

Becca showed me the papers  
where he wanted to use her name,  
but the lawyers...

And Hopkins made  
all that money off of our mother!

Hopkins ain't made a dime!

Rebecca's saying whatever  
Hopkins wants her to say,



and you dumb enough to believe her.

I'm gonna go check on Davon.

Dale, Dale.

All those trips the two  
of you take, who pays?

Thank you, Barbara.

It was a very lovely meal.

Once they get what they want,  
they're gonna leave you to die.

Just like they did Mama.

Oh, hi. I wasn't expecting you  
until tomorrow.

Remember that first time we talked,  
and I didn't wanna see you?

- Yeah.

- Who told you to go down to Clover?

Sonny.

And Dr. Pattillo. And I had read it in...

Sonny didn't mention that to me.

I don't know, Rebecca.

I'm not doing anything  
behind your back, I swear.

Well, this card of yours say you a freelance  
science, medical writer and editor,  
and you say you're doing  
all this on your own.

So, I don't know about that.

Freelance just means that I work for myself.

I know what it means,  
but everybody got somebody backing them.  
Nobody have the money to do  
all these things you're doing,  
your traveling and your... Your recording...

Deborah, I swear,

I haven't gotten a penny from anyone.

So, let's talk about this book you wanna  
write, which is all fine and good,  
but where's the funding in there  
for the family?

- I don't have any funding.

- And you ain't offered none neither.

I can't offer you something  
that I don't have.

I told you I wanna start that foundation.

- Where is it?
- Where's what?
- The book!
- What?

You said you turned it in!

So, where is the book?

- There's no book yet.
- Where is the book?

I said where is the book?

- Is it for sale already out there?
- Deborah! Deborah!

And you making money off of my family  
like everybody else?

- Where is the book?
- Look, here, here, here!

MasterCard, Visa, \$2,000 past due.

Travel expense report.

I write cheesy articles

to pay for our rooms and gas.

Checking account. \$87 in my checking account.

Okay? Deborah, I swear to you, honest to God,  
no one's given me any money.

Before you called that first time, well,  
this Alabama snake entered our lives.

Sir Lord Keenan Kester Cofield, Esquire.

And you are?

A corrective to all that ails.

And in no time,

he had everybody cheering him on.

We can all lift up our heads

with the knowledge that Henrietta Lacks  
helped cure polio.

- That's right.
- But the fact remains,

Johns Hopkins Hospital is guilty  
of medical grand larceny.

Ooh! I've been saying that.

Haven't I been saying that?

- That's right. Yeah!
- And somebody's going to pay.

After dealing with Johns Hopkins,

I'm walking over to the office

of every biotech CEO

and demanding reparations to the tune

of \$60 million.

Lord have mercy!

Hard not to get caught up in hope  
when you been powerless for so long.  
And then, guess who called.

Richard Wilson, attorney  
with Johns Hopkins Hospital.

I'm calling regarding Sir Lord Cofield,  
whom you should know is not a lawyer.

Deborah, no.

...incarcerated in Alabama.

Since his release, Mr. Cofield  
has been masquerading as an attorney.

Suing everybody left and right.

Burger King for cooking  
their French fries in pork fat  
and the Chattanooga Times  
for printing my obituary.

Which he wrote and submitted hisself!

The main reason I'm calling is last week,  
Mr. Cofield was here at the hospital

demanding a copy of your  
mother's medical records.

I will walk through fire  
before I let you touch  
anything belonging to my mother.

Gal,

you ain't the only one ain't scared of fire.

Just like that,

Mr. Corrective To All That Ails  
set out to do us in.

He sued everybody, sued Hopkins, sued me,  
Lawrence, Sonny, Barbara.

Every day, another summons.

Child, I was a mess.

Then one day, I'm home by myself,  
another one of Sir Lord's summonses.

I knew she died when she was 15,  
but not in that place.

Just to think about her in there all alone...

In the same summons,

he wrote about this book.

When I saw my mama's picture  
and read her autopsy report,

my nerves just broke.  
They took me to  
every doctor and psychiatrist,  
and, you name it, they said I had it.  
Paranoia, schizophrenia, anxiety.  
Dale.  
All I know is, when I...  
When I get in that mood and I get frightened,  
I just... I just... I wanna hide.  
And this all happened...  
Just before you called.  
Oh, my... Wow.  
My mama's medical records is...  
It's all I have.  
The only thing I have  
that don't nobody else have.  
When the time is right, I'll share them.  
But I get to say when that is.  
Elsie, I'm coming to find out  
about you and take you home.  
You ready?  
Hmm.  
Where is everybody?  
- Hello?  
- Well, let's see.  
Maybe something down here.  
Oh. There it is.  
Hmm.  
What the hell?  
Hello!  
Anybody here?  
- Hello?  
- Hello? Somebody come help us!  
- Can I help you?  
- I'm looking for my sister.  
Uh, could you tell me  
what this is in reference to?  
Guess I just got invisible.  
My sister was a patient here  
till she got killed in 1955,  
so I'd appreciate it if you would point us  
in the direction of her files  
'cause that door over there  
say "medical records,"

but they ain't nowhere to be found.

What was your sister's name?

Was Crownsville always  
predominantly African-American?

- Um, until '63.

- Mmm-hmm.

You'll have to be prepared.

Sometimes learning  
is just as painful as not knowing.

That's why I always say to my brothers,  
"You gonna go into history,  
can't have no hate attitude."

- I am ready.

- All right.

I've been ready.

Uh, here.

I'm afraid that Crownsville  
was not a very nice place to be back then.

Let me see.

No holding back.

We had a serious asbestos problem.

Here we go.

You know,  
of all the thousands upon thousands  
of autopsy reports,

- this is all that remains.

- Wow.

The year she died?

19... 1955...

No, 1940... '45.

- Incredible.

- Wow.

- 1955.

- Oh, my goodness. Wow.

Um, her full name?

- Elsie. Elsie Lacks.

- Sure.

- Her name was Elsie?

- Elsie Lacks.

Elsie Lacks. Elsie...

Oh, my goodness, there she is!

Oh!

Oh, my goodness!

- Oh, my gosh!

- Jesus!  
- Oh, my gosh!  
- Whoo!  
Oh, my goodness! Oh, my goodness!  
I can't tell you how impossible this is.  
Thank you, Mother. Thank you, Lord.  
- I found my sister!  
- Oh, my God.  
I have never seen a picture  
in one of these reports before, it's...  
Let me see. Let me see.  
Why they holding her neck like that?  
They shouldn't be holding her neck like that.  
What are they doing here?  
Stop taking notes and put  
that document down now.  
This is the family of a former patient!  
My birth certificate.  
My sister's birth certificate  
and power of attorney.  
Now get me a copy  
of my sister's records and her picture  
so we can get on out of here.  
How are you feeling?  
Time to take my sister back to Clover.  
This is my mother. This is my mother.  
She in history 'cause of her cells.  
This is my sister.  
We just found my sister today.  
Now, look. She a little puffy  
around the eyes.  
- Deborah! Deborah!  
- She had been crying 'cause couldn't find me.  
- Oh, this my reporter. This my reporter.  
- Hey.  
- We on our way to Clover.  
- Hey.  
- You ever been to Clover?  
- Deborah, hey.  
You ever been to Clover?  
You need to go to Clover!  
- Deborah. Listen.  
- Bye!  
Come here. I have to talk to you.

I'm... I'm tired. You're tired.  
Why don't we go to the motel now, check in,  
and then we can  
drive to Clover in the morning?  
Let's do that.  
Here you go, my mama's records.  
Are you sure?  
Knock yourself out.  
I'm going to bed.  
I'm not going to bed.  
Let's get busy.  
What you got?  
Okay.  
"Twenty-eight-year-old woman.  
"Rh-positive, November 2, 1949."  
This is three days before you were born.  
Let me see.  
"August 8, 1951.  
"Tubes filled with radium were placed  
inside the cervix and sewn into..."  
Let me see that. Let me see that.  
Why don't we...  
Why don't we call the front desk  
and see if there's a Kinko's nearby?  
Why?  
There's over 100 pages here,  
and some are in really bad condition,  
and there's just no way  
that we're gonna be able to  
read them all and take notes tonight.  
I can read.  
And you can take notes.  
"August 8, 1951.  
"Thirty-year-old colored woman.  
"Cervical biopsy."  
Oh, wait, wait, wait. Can I see...  
Oh, my God, this could be  
when Johns Hopkins first took a sample.  
Enough about Hopkins!  
"Lucille Elsie Lacks.  
"Pneumo..."  
"Encephalography.  
"To prevent brain fluid blurring X-rays,  
doctors would drill holes into skulls

"and drain the fluid out  
and pump air into the brain."  
Deborah, are you okay?  
"Elsie Lacks, 10 years old.  
"January 20th."  
Deborah, you were only two months old when...  
Turn that off.  
I do not want you putting that in the book.  
I don't want you putting that in the book!  
- I won't, I promise.  
- You smiling 'cause you're lying.  
No, I'm smiling because I think it's very sweet  
that you wanna protect your sister.  
That's why I'm smiling.  
- I'm sorry.  
- Who's paying you?  
- What?  
- Who you working for?  
We've been through this before.  
- I told you that...  
- Who's paying you?  
- Who's paying for this room?  
- I told you I'm working...  
- ...at Johns Hopkins! Johns Hopkins!  
- I told you before...  
Get the fuck off me! Get off me!  
Jesus Christ, how many times  
do I have to tell you  
I'm working for myself?  
I'm not working for Johns Hopkins!  
I'm not Sir Lord!  
If you don't trust me  
after everything we've been through,  
you can go fuck yourself!  
I was all anxious last night.  
Took me an Ambien.  
Painted my nails.  
I did a horrible job.  
Continental breakfast, 99 cent.  
Save you some money.  
Deborah, I...  
We a mess, girl.  
But you gotta promise me something.  
You can't let me and nobody else



keep you from writing this book.  
And all that happened last night,  
all that's gotta go in there, too.  
No, no, no, I'm not putting  
myself in the book.  
Well, I'm not gonna be in there by myself.  
It's all a part of the story now.  
We okay, boo?  
Are you... Are you okay? What...  
I get this way sometime.  
You wanna ride with me?  
I've been thinking about  
copyrighting my mama's signature  
so can't nobody steal it,  
then I'm gonna set up a webpage  
and have people do donations,  
and then I'm gonna use them donations.  
I'm gonna get a monument  
and I'm gonna put it on her grave.  
And then I'm gonna turn the Home House...  
I'm gonna turn the Home House into a museum.  
I think we should find a doctor.  
I think that these don't look like  
they're clearing up.  
- I think we should pull over...  
- Nothing a Benadryl won't fix up.  
Here, open this for me.  
And inside... I've been thinking about it.  
Inside I'm gonna put a wax figure of her,  
of my mother, and then  
I'm gonna put a wax figure,  
and then some of her cells,  
and then I'm gonna have  
people come and watch them multiply.  
Come on, bring your camera.  
Deborah, slow down. Deborah?  
Take a picture of me and my sister.  
Now, the three of us on my mother's grave.  
Hurry, hurry. Weather not looking good.  
This is the only time  
the three of us gonna be together.  
Okay, listen to me. Let's go back to the car.  
I think... I think this is...  
Deborah?

Deborah?

Lawrence stayed away.

Didn't wanna see my mother put in the ground.

These welts, these welts don't mean nothing  
compared to the welts

up and down Zakariyya's back.

Evil Aunt Ethel,

who my daddy had take care of us  
after our mother died, she hated us.

Daddy busy working, nobody looking.

She hated us!

But she saved a special hate  
for little Zakariyya, a special hate for him.

Sometimes in the middle  
of the night for no reason,  
she would stand him

in the corner in the basement,  
and she would... She would beat, and beat,  
and beat, the love out of him.

So, this hurt...

This hurt ain't nothing compared to Galen,  
Aunt Ethel's husband, when I turned 15...

- Stop.

- Shh!

- Stop, stop, stop.

- Shh!

Stop!

God, stop it...

Stop.

If the two of you put your hands  
on these children ever again,  
so help me God, I'll kill you dead.

Open your mouth to lie, bitch,  
and I'll do it now.

Sonny, Little Joe,  
you're coming home with me.

If my mama had lived,  
all of these bad things,  
they never would've happened,  
because my mama...

My mother, she would've...

She would've slapped Aunt Ethel.

And she would've told Galen, "You stop it!"

"You stop it. That's my daughter.

You stop it. That's my daughter!"  
You just didn't stop it.  
Zakariyya wouldn't have had to go to jail.  
He wouldn't have been so mean.  
Everybody taking things  
they ain't got no right to take.  
And that's why she got that look on her face.  
She knew.  
Her mama ain't never coming back.  
One day, she got a mother.  
And the next day, she don't.  
Ain't nobody even tell her why.  
It's all right. It's all right.  
I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry.  
- It's all right.  
- I'm so sorry.  
It's all right. It's all right.  
It's all right...  
Hey, cuz. Hey, Aunt Gladys.  
Hey. How you doing?  
Hey, cuz, look what I got.  
Look what I got from Crownsville.  
It's my sister.  
Cuz, you don't seem so good right now.  
I'm just having a reaction.  
I'm having a reaction.  
I'm breaking out, and I'm swelling up  
because of all this stuff  
I'm learning about my mother.  
It hurts.  
- It hurts.  
- Come, sit.  
Bet you didn't know...  
Bet you didn't know  
that they injected my mama  
with all kinds of poisons.  
Dale, relax.  
No, only time I can relax  
is when I'm driving down here.  
That's the only time I can relax, till I start  
thinking about what they did to my mama.  
You know what they did?  
They did whatchamacallit.  
They cloned her! They cloned her!

Deborah, remember we talked about this?  
They didn't do that.  
They didn't do that.  
Remember we talked about it?  
No, no, you know what they did?  
They mixed her with mice.  
And now they saying that  
she's not even human no more!  
She's not even human no more!  
They gave my mama AIDS,  
and then they injected her into a monkey.  
They injected her into a monkey.  
They injected her into a monkey...  
Don't make yourself sick over something  
you can't do nothing about!  
You got to let God handle it!  
I was just talking to God,  
and He's trying to take over,  
but I've been trying to keep Him out of this,  
but He just won't let me keep Him out.  
Lord, I lift up my hand...  
I lift up my hand and offer  
praises to You, Lord.  
You are welcome in this place.  
You are welcome into this broken vessel.  
Come touch me, Lord. Come touch me tonight.  
- Lord...  
- I thank You, Lord,  
because we need Your help  
lifting the burden of them cells  
from this woman, Lord.  
Lift this burden, Lord.  
Lift this burden, Lord.  
Take it away. We don't need it.  
You are welcome to this place,  
welcome into this broken vessel.  
Show me the way, Lord.  
Show me which way to go.  
Show me which way to go.  
Take this burden from me, Lord.  
Take this burden from me.  
I don't want it no more.  
I don't want it no more.  
You are not alone!

You are not alone.  
Let her carry 'em!  
Give her...  
Let her carry it! Let her carry it!  
Let her carry it!  
Let it go.  
Let it go, let it go, let it go.  
Let it go. Let it go.  
Let it go. Let it go.  
It's all right. It's all right.  
Let it go, baby.  
Just let it out, there you go.  
Let it go, baby. Let it go.  
Phew.  
I'm gonna come back tomorrow  
for some more of that.  
Oh, it's still coming down out there.  
It's still coming down out there.  
Still coming down out there.  
What does that feel like, when you're  
speaking those words, and...  
What does that really feel like?  
Well, that's just God  
telling Deborah that He cares.  
Read.  
Out loud.  
"Those who believe in me  
will live even though they died,  
"and those who live and believe in me  
will never die."  
Henrietta was chosen,  
and when God chooses an angel to do his work,  
you never know what  
they're gonna come back looking like.  
So, you believe that Henrietta's spirit  
lives in those cells?  
No, Henrietta is those cells.  
Aunt Sadie, what you doing here?  
Checking on my girl.  
The other day,  
I got to remembering the last time  
Hennie and me ride that wheel.  
Oh, that breeze.  
Oh, you can see clear across

to Sparrow's Point.

I got something inside of me.

Hennie, please don't tell me  
you have another baby with that man.

Oh, Gladys. What kind of thing?

Cancer.

Hennie, no.

You got to promise me.

Make sure nothing bad happen to my children.

Especially my baby girl.

I wanna braid her hair,  
dress her up real pretty,  
teach her how to paint her nails  
and handle men.

You were your mother's  
first breath in the morning,  
and her last prayer at night.

- Should I call Christoph?

- Dale!

Don't worry, he promised to behave.

I ain't got no time  
for crazy today, so be good.  
Otherwise you won't be able to  
go see them cells.

- Christoph. Hi.

- Hi, Rebecca.

Hello. This is Deborah, Christoph.

- Hello.

- This is Henrietta's son. Christoph...

Zakariyya Bari Abdul Rahman.

Zakariyya followed John the Baptist.

Bari, made of clay. Abdul, service.

Rahman, most gracious.

I've been working with your mother's cells  
for my entire life, and this is  
truly an honor.

Please, follow me.

Thank you so much.

Thank you.

Miss? Follow me.

Oh, don't worry, it's not dangerous.

Which... Which one is our mother's cells?

Well, they all are.

Oh, my God.

We can keep them here  
for 100 years, even more.

She's cold.

You famous.

Just nobody knows it.

- Oh, there they are.

- Yeah.

Could I look at it in the...

Oh, yes, please.

It's right here.

Dale, look.

Would you look at here!

Excuse me.

Would you hit the light, please?

Oh, my God.

I can't think of anybody  
who deserves it more.

Hold the baby.

Here you go, hold the baby. She won't...

See? She won't cry.

All right, let's all take the picture  
on the count of three.

One, two, three.

- Jabrea!

- Jabrea!

- Thank you, son.

- Mmm-hmm.

Bye.

So, when I finish it,  
do you want me to send it to you  
or do you want me to come down and read it?

Only certain parts.

Been thinking about going back to school.

Wow.

- Getting certified to become a nurse's aide.

- That's fantastic.

Time to get busy.

Deborah, hey.

I'm headed to  
the Roanoke public records room,  
so I figured I'd just swing by Clover,  
check on Cliff.

You wanna tag along?

Deborah, I saw a mock-up

of the book cover today.

I hope you love it as much as I do.

Call me.

Sonny, will you please tell your sister  
to stop messing around and return my calls?

Thanks.

When I die, I'm glad I won't  
have to tell my mother's story,  
everything that's happened,  
'cause you've been watching it all.

There won't be any words,  
just a lot of hugging and crying.  
Heaven look just like Clover, Virginia.

My mother loved it down there,  
more than anyplace else in the world.

I don't wanna be immortal  
if it means living forever.  
Because then everybody else just die  
and get old in front of you  
while you stay the same,  
and that's just sad.

Three floors up. Can you count?

Say "hey" to Mommy.

Mommy.

I don't know how I'm gonna go.  
I just hope it's nice and calm.  
Maybe I'll come back as some HeLa cells,  
like my mother.

That way, we can do good out there  
in the world together.

I think I'd like that.

My baby Deborah

Your mommy loves you

Your mommy loves you

Baby Deborah

Baby Deborah...

That's right.

Baby Deborah...

See?