

## Prologue

In 1953 a woman named Lula Tarlton was working as a domestic for a family in Cincinnati. One day, waiting for a bus to go to work and straightening the blouse of her white uniform, she felt a lump under her collar bone. She realized at once that she might have breast cancer and instead of going to work, she made her way to Cincinnati General Hospital.

Tarlton did have breast cancer, and a few weeks later she had a right mastectomy, then the following year a mastectomy on the left. For over five years Tarlton lived a normal life, but then complications and more treatments ensued.

In the spring of 1960, unbeknown to Tarlton and other cancer patients, a new research project had begun within Cincinnati General Hospital for the U.S. military. This project needed subjects who could be irradiated over their whole bodies as if for treatment for cancer. On December 4, 1960, Lula Tarlton was exposed to a large dose of total body radiation in a specially built room in the basement of the hospital. The radiation was given in one continuous dose in an effort to simulate the exposure of soldiers in nuclear war.

Tarlton's niece, Barbara Ann Mathis, remembers well her aunt's last illness and her radioactive treatment. In the hospital a two-inch-thick metal shield was placed at the foot of her bed and the family told to stand behind it when they came to visit, not to approach the patient.

Lula Tarlton and her niece both lived in a small African American enclave in Cincinnati's East End, a long corridor of lower-income neigh-

borhoods that runs outward from the city along the eastern stretch of the Ohio River. Over that Christmas, Mathis took her aunt home with her to the East End. Tarlton was vomiting profusely and becoming more and more ill. A bucket was kept upstairs for her to vomit in. She was soon returned to the hospital and fell into convulsions. No treatment availed—in time the doctors noted that she was “totally unresponsive,” and on January 22 Tarlton died.

No one in Tarlton’s family knew that she had been used in an experiment, nor that she had had radiation over her whole body. No consent form had been offered her. According to the doctors, patients were being told “they were being treated for their disease.”

Many years passed, and in 1994 Barbara Ann Mathis was working as an information clerk in the same hospital where her aunt had died. She was reading the morning paper during a break at her desk one day when she saw her aunt’s name and began to weep. She wept because the paper reported that her aunt had been experimented on, and also because her name was printed among the names of those who had no relations. To think that her aunt had had no one to claim her, as if she had been all alone in the world, was the most sorrowful thing of all, Mathis said. Tarlton was sixty-six when she died, those many years ago, and the youngsters in the family had known her only as “Aunt Lula.” Mathis felt that she herself might be the only living person who could still recognize her aunt’s full name.

In time Mathis spoke to a coworker that day. “I wish you would look at this,” she said. “This is my aunt—here is her name. And look at this that happened to her.”

Barbara Ann Mathis had known her aunt well and remembered her as a strong woman who could do anything she made up her mind to. She loved to travel. She had come to Cincinnati from Bryson, North Carolina, and she often went back there to visit. Once she took a young grandchild by the hand and got on a train to California, just for the fun of it, and though she didn’t know a soul out there to call on.

“She just loved to go,” Mathis said.

Mathis read in the papers that a legal action had been filed on behalf of the families of the victims of the experiments, and she contacted the attorney whose name she saw. Many patients, she learned, had been less

ill than her Aunt Lula when they were exposed and yet had died within weeks of their radiations.

Mathis became part of the legal action, and in 1999, after many bitter disputes among the contending parties, thirteen researchers and their institutions agreed on a settlement of over five million dollars with their accusers. A memorial plaque in honor of the ninety victims of the experiments was placed in a yard of the hospital.

In time the surviving families began to learn the full story of these strange events—how it was they had come to pass, and why so few had ever known of them.