

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/2

Robert Moore
Vital Records

I find Mom where I usually do, in her wheelchair in the sunroom, bathed in the sun light from a large plate glass window overlooking a field greening in the March thaw, wrapped in her Boston Red Sox blanket. It shuts out the chill of a Syracuse spring and lets her close her eyes and savor the heat and pretend she's in Sanibel, a place she loves but will never see again. The facility is called Sunset Rehab, an interesting ambiguity; you might be here healing a hip, you might be in God's waiting room, you might be both.

She smiles when she sees me and I kiss her cheek. "How are you, Mom?" I know her body is dying. I'm visiting every morning now, as Doctor Yellin's last prognosis was, "days, not weeks." Mom looks smaller than she did yesterday, her skin opaque with a glassy finish. I can see every crooked blue vein in her hands, every tendon, the ominous outline of her skull, and her hollow cheeks. Her blue eyes have become cloudy from cataracts Dr. Yellin suggested ignoring, though even now she has her white roots dyed brown weekly.

"I'm fine, Ethan. How are you? How is Eddie?" She hasn't seen my son in two months.

"Okay." I don't know how my son is doing. My wife, Laura, just promoted her boyfriend, Jack, to husband and stepfather and I have finally learned to text message so I can send Eddie unsolicited and artificially cheerful notes, to which he's replied with smiley faces. I see him every odd weekend. Our last two were derailed by Mom's collapse, so it's been a month of contact only through text messages and a couple short phone calls.

How's Grandma?' 'Hanging in there.'

"Did you sleep well?" I ask. She nods agreeably, and I notice this morning there is a morphine drip – and I remember Dr. Yellin's message to that effect. "How was breakfast?" I know she eats next to nothing.

"The toast is always cold," she says, like it's a mystery that demands solving, but shakes her head 'no' when I volunteer to speak to someone.

"Can I get anything for you, Mom?"

She usually smiles and shakes her head. She hasn't asked for much over the years, handmade birthday cards from me as a child, for me to indulge Aunt Leila, a childless sister of my late father's who loved to kiss children, nothing beyond trivial. This morning, out of the blue, she perks up at my question; her eyes focus on me and narrow as if I'm some distance away. Frowning, she says, "my father." She says it like 'last will,' a painful but necessary phrase. "Did you ever find out where his family is from? How far back they go? I've always wondered where he was born and if the Ledbetters go back to the Revolution."

She doesn't claim her own lineage, referring to half her DNA as 'his family.' Smiling, I ask, "Thinking about the Daughters of the American Revolution again?" A friend of Mom's, Joanne Simpson, was a proud DAR

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member and sold her on the prestige of membership. I have tried twice to trace Ledbetters to 1776, but not everything is online and the hunt stalled when I learned the records existed only in the town hall of Drew's Crossing, Ohio.

"I know I don't have forever at this point, but it would be nice to know. I'm pretty sure my Aunt Velma said we had people at one of the battles." She wants me to drive to Drew's Crossing today? I can't bring myself to say, *'Mom, I'm afraid you'll die before I get back.'* I agree because of that look in her eyes. She focuses on me, her cloudy eyes narrowing with need, almost desperation. "I'd really love to know."

"Okay," I promise, and kiss her goody-bye. Not thinking much, from the parking lot I text my son: *'Want to do a road trip???'* There are no classes this week, and I'm missing the son I haven't seen much of lately. I wait, looking back at the rehab; they have a huge lawn, lots of grass I'm sure no one walks on, vast windows in the front and weak sunshine warming the lobby. After fifteen minutes with no reply from Eddie, with no better reason to linger, I go home to grade papers.

Mom is Cora Ledbetter Wilson, one of six children and the only daughter of Jane and John Ledbetter, from Drew's Crossing, Ohio. Jane worked as a slicker in a glass factory, raising six children with little help. John was a drunk. He was, by trade, a pipefitter and got periodic employment with Penn Oil, but spent far more time in the taverns, where his children were sometimes sent to fetch him home. I'd heard stories of him coming home with drunken friends and insisting they be fed, this in a household half starving during the Great Depression. A father who returned at last call, precious coins spent on liquor, intoxicated and abusive, Mom didn't want to remember. Drew's Crossing was a small town. Her shame had settled deep and the family was finally freed of John when he pulled a gun in a drunken tiff and the sheriff threw him in the lockup. The family skedaddled north and John let them go. He died years later, alone in a boarding house somewhere in Pennsylvania.

Mom's mother, Jane Davis, can't get her into the DAR, reaching America on a steamer out of Wales in 1908. So if Mom wants to even qualify, it's Ledbetter DNA or nothing.

After grading essays, I start online again and hit the same wall. This time I call the number listed and confirm that the records I need exist *only* in file cabinets in Drew's Crossing. It's a seven hour drive and the courthouse will likely be closed, so I'll have to burn a day driving, overnight there, the courthouse opening at eight in the morning, maybe an hour or two finding files and seven hours back. Two days and one night away. The prospect of cheering Mom in her final days lures me. After eating a little leftover spaghetti, I am answering emails and roaming Youtube when my phone lights up. It's from Eddie, finally.

'Rodtrip? Kul!' His spelling is his way of tweaking his father, the English Lit professor, but I'm too relieved to reply with anything but *'talk 2 u soon'*.

It's after nine, but I call Laura. She lives just twenty minutes away with Jack the mechanic. "I'm sorry to call so late, but it's a time-sensitive issue. Can I take Eddie out of school for two days?"

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She is talking to Jack with her hand over the speaker. Her voice returns. "Why do you want to take him out of school?" What had she been saying to Jack?

I explain my quest. "He'll learn a little bit about my family history, and I haven't cashed in that weekend IOU you gave me. For last month, for your last-minute trip to Vegas." *To get married*, I finish saying, to myself. I knew we'd never get back together, but now I really know it. "I texted him earlier, and he sounded interested," I add, my last, best argument.

She has always pushed me to spend time with Eddie, insisting at our divorce five years ago that I wasn't interested in fatherhood, so she goes along with this sudden holiday. I'm supposed to see him every odd weekend. Most of our overnights we watch bad movies and eat pizza, and sometimes I drag him to museums, and a few times he's dragged me to a theme park and once to a water park. Sometimes I'm downstairs working and he's upstairs playing a video game. It's still quality time if we're under the same roof, right?

I update Laura on Mom; they don't like each other much but Laura knows it's a hard time for me and is a sympathetic ear. "Okay. I'll email the school. He'll be ready tomorrow morning." she promises.

When I stop by early the next morning I warn Mom I'll be gone overnight. "I'm on my way to pick up Eddie. We're going to get you into the DAR," I explain, and we both laugh, hers a soft, single chuckle. Fortunately my tenure at Onondaga Community College buys me some time, and equally fortunate it's Spring break.

Laura is partly right that I've never felt comfortable as a father. When I pick him up, Eddie is close to my shoulders, dressed in clean and ironed denim – Laura is an ironing freak – and a sweatshirt with *Fulbright Academy* imprinted, the private school she pressed me to pay for, and he hugs me hard when I arrive. His hair is short, a buzz cut, and he favors plump and is shy.

"I'm out of school for two days?" he asks, not believing his good fortune. His grades are acceptable, but only because Laura rides herd on him.

I am surprised at how much better I feel at the sight of him. "Yep. Two days. The Wilson men are taking some time off," I grin at him, and we are off.



Thanks to President Eisenhower's thruway system we speed from Syracuse to Drew's Crossing in daylight. Laura packed Eddie a couple of schoolbooks and mentioned homework, but he spends the ride playing a handheld video game. I peek at the screen; it looks like anime and I don't see any actual violence. Laura's pretty vigilant about that stuff. I let him pick the radio stations, he surprises me by dwelling on country-western, but we fade in and out a few times and he goes back to his game. We lunch at a MacDonald's, his favorite, in Erie, Pennsylvania. I don't know how well this trip will turn out for me but I want him to have a good memory of it.

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As we are getting into my car my cell chirps; it's Dr. Yellin. My breath catches in my throat. "She had a spell. A little arrhythmia. The cancer is stressing her heart. She's stable now." How long does she have? I ask for the hundredth time, and briefly explain my absence. "That's sweet," she says, and I appreciate that Yellin is female. "You have a few days, I think. Your mother's a fighter. She told me this morning about your trip and she seemed more alert. It must mean a lot to her. I'll call you if anything changes. Good luck."

Near sunset we reach Drew's Crossing, a small town clinging to a slope that ends in the Ohio River. It's a little warmer here, the trees are budding, more people are outside, you can smell the river.

"This is where Grandma grew up?" Eddie asks, looking out at the unfamiliar landscape, visibly poor compared to the new townhouse Laura and Jack have. "Looks like a dump," he says, in a softer tone.

"Yes, it does," I agree distantly. I already know Mom's home won't be a beautiful colonial set in a verdant countryside, no Currier & Ives print. I drive my little Korean car uphill on a busy street that was well blessed in the pothole season, and the car thuds like an arrhythmia as I seem to hit them all, then we struggle around a meaningless cycle of one-way streets, looking for numbers on small houses close together, and almost drive past it.

"There it is," Eddie spies it, pointing. Number Eleven, Zane Highway, is a small house on a busy, noisy road, and you can tell it was likely always busy, always noisy. It's a two-story, yellow clapboard with blistering paint, cardboard in lieu of glass in the front window and a broken dish antenna dangling by its cable from the roof. I can't see inside, but how could eight people ever fit in there? The outlines of an old filling station are visible in a dry-cleaning business nearby and I remember my uncles telling of the garage they tried to run during the war. Up here the smell of the river is drowned in exhaust fumes.

We find a diner with hand-lettered signs in dusty full length glass windows on the main street, and I let Eddie order a cheeseburger and fries and no vegetables. Before the food arrives he asks, cautiously, "How is Grandma?" He has only seen her once in the past six months and he knows I cancelled our last two visits when her pancreatic tumor triggered her collapse; I'm not sure how much he's overheard. She's pretty sick, I leave it at that. He's not experienced death yet and I'm in no hurry to push him through that rite.

"Is she going to die?" he presses, studying my face. He's seen Mom for Christmas every year, and I know she sends him birthday cards with cash tucked in.

"Everyone dies someday," I finally say, regretting how cold blooded that sounds. "Mostly when you get very old. She has cancer. When people get cancer when they're old, it's hard to beat."

He nods soberly, and I can't yet tell how this news has affected him. "Why are we here if she's so sick?"

I half-smile at him as if to say, *good question!* "Well, she asked if I could find proof that one of her ancestors – one of ours – was in the Revolution.

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It's important to her." Our soft drinks arrive and I take a long pull. "You're right. I should have done this before. Now is a crazy time to do it. But it's important to her. You know when the revolution was?"

"1776?"

I nod approvingly. Our dinners arrive, a cheeseburger and a mouth-watering pile of hand-cut French fries for him, a limp looking salad for me. I contemplate stealing a few French fries. We're hungry and tear through the food without much talk. He finishes his French fries, after offering me the biggest one - which I take. "You want to hear a joke?" he asks cautiously.

"I'd love to hear one," I answer a little too heartily.

He proceeds to tell a story, with a few backups, about two salesmen in a dead car on a country road seeking help at a farm, "oh, and the farmer's daughter is really hot." It's a mildly dirty joke with a fifth grade punch line. I'm a little surprised, I wonder how much of the joke he understands, but I muster a good chuckle. I could swear I heard that joke myself many years ago, from whom I don't recall.

"Who told you that?" I casually ask a minute later, and it's the stepfather, Jack. He was a live-in boyfriend for three years, so this sort of impact is inevitable. I don't think I could ever tell Eddie a dirty joke, however juvenile, and I'm unsure how I feel about Jack.

There isn't a chain hotel less than a half hour's drive away, according to my smartphone, and Drew's Crossing supports just one colorful hotel with a neon sign hanging vertically in front, and no parking, and that appears to be renting by the hour. It's too chilly to sleep in the car. "Let's check this place out," I say, trying to sound upbeat.

The smell of tobacco and grease wafts over us as we pass through the battered wooden entrance. The lobby resembles a bus station, a dirty, worn linoleum floor, an overfull garbage can with soft drink cups and fast food wrappers jammed in, and a waist-high counter behind a scratched Plexiglass sheet with the pocket in the counter to pass bills. There are some lime green Formica chairs bolted in place along the wall, and a young looking woman with harshly dyed blonde hair snarled around her face is asleep across two of them; she needs cleaning up and there's a scrap of bloody bandage around her ankle, above hard-worn high-heels. Street noise filters in and I feel dirty by association. I weigh the benefits of the Holiday Inn against the hour we lose driving back and forth, and knock on the Plexiglass.

"He'p you?" asks an old man, a walking skeleton, at least eighty, gray hairs in a static discharge, who looks fresh from his own nap.

"How much for one room with two double beds?"

"Two beds?" He cranes around me to see who else will be using the room. "That your son?" I nod rapidly. "For how long?"

"One night."

"Whole night?"

I shiver and nod, and it's a forty-nine dollar tab I don't have in cash. He taps an old handmade sign taped to the window years ago 'no checks,

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no charge'. I don't want to leave Eddie in this room, but I'm faster without him and I dash down the street to an ATM the old man directs me to that charges five bucks for the withdrawal; then I run back to the hotel, very out of breath. "Sorry about that," he says, "Can't afford those credit cards. Fees eat'cha alive." He takes my cash and pushes an old brass key with orange tag attached through the pocket. "Three-oh-four."

The elevator smells like burning motor so we climb the stairs and on the third floor landing pass two men in their forties, heavily tattooed, unwashed and unshaven, in denim and black t-shirts, sharing a paper and a cup of coffee. I find our room, facing the street, and debate opening the window for relatively fresh air. The walls are thin, the sheets smell moldy, the old cathode ray TV has two snowy channels and the bathroom is a common one at the end of the hallway. There's regular traffic, men mostly, but I hear female voices. The 'no-smoking in public places' law of the land hasn't quite penetrated the Imperial Hotel. Eddie is still devoted to his video game, though one shapely female in garish jewelry and a snug dress standing in a doorway down the hall turns his head. *Yep, I think, he'll remember this trip.*

Though he argues that he is old enough to visit the rest room alone at bedtime, I accompany him. He sulks at the protection, but the payoff arrives when we step in and hear groaning in the shadows. I lean back just enough to see one of the guys from the hallway leaning against the far wall as the girl from the lobby kneels at his waist. His groaning lights up Eddie's eyes. "Is he sick?"

I shove him in the cubicle and say, "He's fine. Make it fast." Mostly we just hear it, then the stall walls tremble at one point and I blush wildly and look heavenward. What will make Eddie laugh all the next day is hearing a husky, female, tobacco-cured voice call out, presumably to me, "I'll be with you in a minute." Perhaps Eddie understood more than I thought.

Back in the room, door knob locked, chain locked, chair shoved against the door, we get into our beds.

"The bed smells funny."

"I know." A scream from the street fills the room, but my gut is relieved to hear it dissolve into laughter. "Try to get to sleep." I get maybe two hours. Eddy gently snores for at least seven. The next morning he is still doubled over, giggling from the look on my face in the bathroom.

The cell phone has been quiet, thank God. We breakfast in the same diner. Neither Eddie nor I are morning people so it's minimal chat, bacon and eggs for him, with a generous dollop of ketchup, oatmeal and toast for my cholesterol.

Finally, we pull up to the courthouse, a red brick building with a cornerstone etched 1846. I call Mom from the front, looking out over the rooftops at the Ohio River. "Hi Mom, I'm in Drew's Crossing, with Eddie. We found the house you lived in. The one near the garage."

She is silent a moment. What sort of memories am I stirring?

"Worst idea he ever had. And he had a lot of 'em." Then she asks, "Did you find out where he was born?"

"I should know in a little while. We got here after hours, Eddie's with me. How are you feeling?" Fine, she says, like always. I almost ask, 'Do you have

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any good memories of this place?’ but I don’t want to ripple her serenity, however chemically-based it is. “Um, I brought Eddie with me. You want to talk to him?”

Sure, she says. I put him on, and he says, “Hi Grandma,” listens for a minute, then says, “no, not really. Hey, you wanna hear a joke?” I look at him with alarm, but instead he tells her a knock-knock joke, then laughs. “I love you, Grandma,” and hangs up. “She said she was tired.”

We’re at the courthouse, air warming up, when a guard unlocks the front door at eight-oh-five. “Well, I hope we’re in the right place,” I say.

“This isn’t the right place?” my son asks, looking up from his game.

“I don’t know. I don’t know if my grandfather was born here. That’s the mystery.”

“Oh.” He’s confused.

We then wait twenty-six minutes for a clerk. The public servant arrives late from out front, a bus rider. He’s a misshapen man of indeterminate age dressed in a suit jacket, stained white shirt, worn blue pants and sneakers, treating his right leg like it’s made of glass. His pate is bald but for a tuft on the right side and he looks at me suspiciously through thick spectacles in black frames. “Looking for the tax office?”

“No, birth certificates.”

He looks sour and I understand that we are to follow him only after he walks ten paces and turns to look at me like I’m slow-witted. Down metal steps into the basement, down a cool, dark hallway painted institutional yellow, stopping at the third door, which has a glass window sporting the painted words ‘Vital Records’. He jingles a thick ring of keys, gets the door open and flips a light switch. I see a phalanx of file cabinets and a copier and nod approvingly.

“That machine doesn’t work. You can take records down to the Assessor’s office to copy. You can only remove one record from this room at a time. People have made a mess of it in the past.” He frowns at me. “The Assessor’s office will charge you fifteen cents for each copy. They do not take checks. They will not break large bills.” He heads for the rest room.

I give up a yawn, then take on the file room like it’s a seven course meal I’m determined to consume. The drawer labels are old, some typed, some hand written. The drawers sound like railroad cars when I pull them open

“Okay, here’s where it gets dusty,” I warn my son. “Didn’t you bring some homework to do?” He clearly has no books with him.

“I left it in the car,” he says conveniently. “I brought my game.”

“I hope they grade you on the game,” I frown.

First the birth certificates: Mom lost hers years ago. A whiff of mold tingles my nose, but I quickly find hers, and her brothers’ for good measure. The certificate’s are typed with uneven letters from a manual typewriter and signed in fountain pen, and look like they were written just last week. I find nothing for John Ledbetter, town drunk. I troll through the marriage certificates and find theirs. The black ink signature, with a curlicue for the ‘J’ in Jane is a bridge to my long dead grandmother, in 1920 a twenty-two year old woman from Wales marrying an older, divorced man. How did he win her, I wonder? Was he a snappy dresser?

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I've seen his picture and he was not bad looking but far from handsome. Was he a drinker already? Was she in fear of spinsterhood?

I have seven records in hand, and I remember the clerk's commandments. I decide to risk it; seven sheets of paper in hand I walk to the end of the hall, to a door with a glass window reading 'Assessor'. I open the door and immediately realize that the misshapen man *is* the Assessor. He is talking with an older woman about holiday time, not looking in my direction. Undiscovered, I scamper back to the Records room, set six pages by the door, and begin my seven trip pilgrimage.

"Find what you were looking for?" he asks on my last trip as I count out change on his counter, my copies in hand, and I can't tell whether he really wants an answer.

"Not quite," I admit. "I'm trying to determine if my grandfather was born here. I didn't find his birth certificate, so I guess not. But I don't know where else to look."

He adopts a smug smile. "His place of birth will be on his draft card. Did you check the draft records?"

"Draft records?"

He's got a speck of something in the corner of his mouth and I flinch a little when he talks. He tells me where the records were first stored, four blocks over, and how he argued that they belonged here because the bus line didn't serve that other building and that's how he gets to work, and so on, and I'm trying to pretend he has my attention but I'm really avoiding that bit of his breakfast that might launch at any time. "They're all the way in the back. We have them for World War I and II, and Korea and Viet Nam." He says it '*Na-yam*' "The ones since are all electronic. Unfortunately, I'm going to lunch and I have to lock that room. You can return at two-thirty."

The clock says eleven-thirty. "Two-thirty?" I repeat, and my expression has touched a familiar nerve.

"I have a luncheon meeting with colleagues at a restaurant in Wheeling, a union meeting, not that it's any of your business. If you have a complaint you can call the number on our website," he answers pugnaciously.

I don't usually argue for special consideration for myself, but I do for my mother. "I can't wait that long. My mother is dying, and this is her last request. Couldn't you just let us in the room and then go to lunch?"

He has a pinched look. "That's impossible." Eddie dashes ahead of us and rounds the corner as I trail the clerk, pleading my case. The clerk is ignoring me, seems to be enjoying it, actually, until we round the corner and see Eddie leaning against the door, holding himself and groaning. "Think I'm gonna throw-up," he says and looks sickly. I'm puzzled, but the clerk is horrified.

Eddie starts gagging and I realize he's faking it.

"If he makes a mess you'll have to clean it up," the clerk barks, sees he has to move Eddie to lock the door, and takes off without doing so.

Eddie groans until the clerk turns the corner, then he grins at me. "Good boy," I say with a deep smile and hug him.

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We go after the draft cards. Eddie actually watches me now, bored with his game. "I'm stuck on Level Two." I try to explain what I'm finding, and then have to explain conscription, which shocks him. "They could just come and take you away from home? And make you go shoot people?"

"Well," I try to frame the draft in other terms but give up. "Yes, that's essentially it. But we have a volunteer army now."

I find John Ledbetter. He was fifty-eight in 1942 when he was obliged to sign his registration. I dwell for a moment on the image of a man in his late fifties, with six children, being sent to boot camp, but I stop there; he was never called and he wasn't much of a parent or provider, so I doubt he would have been missed. His alcoholism – would they even take him?

"So this is your grandfather? That makes him..."

"Your great-grandfather."

Eddie contemplates that title for a moment. "Was he a nice guy?"

"No. He drank a lot." I realize then that, Mom not wanting to talk about her father, I really don't have many details. "And he wasn't nice to his kids."

"Did Grandma like him?"

"No." I was tired, but now I'm feeling adrenaline; this is the first contact I've ever had with my grandfather. The draft record itself is a flimsy microfilm print and the writing is blurred and streaked like it was imaged through a Coke bottle. From the signatures I can make out 'Sarah Ledbetter,' his mother. There's a line to enter place of birth, but what he's written doesn't look at all like *Drew's Crossing* but a single place name. Maybe I can make sense of it with better light and a magnifying glass? I make another trip to the Assessor's Office and copy what I've found and leave a ten cent tip. On our way out, I smile and nod to a young woman seated behind a counter on the first floor.

"You have a handsome son," she compliments Eddie, who I love but don't consider especially handsome. "Did you find what you were looking for?" she asks, with a hint of southern drawl.

"Most of it. Are you from around here?"

She nods. She has very frizzy red hair that cries out to be styled, and a pretty face. When she speaks, I see her teeth are in poor shape. "I was born in Memphis, but we moved here when I was three." I'd love to know what could have drawn her family here from Memphis, but it seems nose-y to ask.

I show her the printout, the blurred writing. "Can you make out a town name here?"

She looks for a long minute, eyes narrowing, turning her head slightly as the sheen of the paper reflects light. "I think it's Bridgeville. Uh-huh, Bridgeville, Pennsylvania. About an hour away, not far from Pittsburgh."

"Bridgeville?" I nod. "An hour north?" That's the right direction for us. "Thank you very much."

Back in the car I check my phone and see a text message. It's Yellin

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- shortness of breath, she's on oxygen. I want to start driving back at unsafe speeds, but I've come this far. I call and Yellin minimizes the danger. "She's actually improved a little since that message. All she's talking about is your trip. She hasn't been this animate since her admission. You're already there. Finish what you started."

"Everything okay?" Eddie asks, watching me fold the phone. "Is Grandma alright? She sent me fifty bucks for my birthday," he adds in amazement.

"She's a sick old lady," I concede. "But she's still here." Afraid that reality is making the trip a downer, I ask Eddie, "Are you enjoying this?" He nods vaguely, meaning he isn't, but we are having our odd moments of fun. He starts giggling whenever one of us says 'Imperial Hotel' - and he finds a way to say it or get me to say it every five minutes - and he has me playing punch-buggy until we're both nursing sore arms, then "I-spy". I've been telling him about the people I've found, and he's listening but probably feels like he's exchanged school for school.

A road crew has backed traffic up on Zane Highway, amber brake lights as far up the road as I can see, and someone has crunched someone else's tail gate in the process, and I sputter in frustration as we spend an hour inching our way to the interstate. I glance at the GPS and the estimated time of arrival, which stretches to three p.m. "Would it be okay if you stay at my place tonight?" I ask him. He smiles and nods vigorously. I'm letting him play video games far too much. The traffic finally eases and we get on the interstate and I try to make up time.

"How's everything with you and Jack?"

His face shifts into neutral and he studies his game. "He's okay. He's trying to teach me to play baseball."

I can't help frowning, trumped by the stepfather. "Did you ask him to? Do you like baseball?" I have a hurt tone to my voice I'm a little ashamed of. I've never had the patience for the game and Eddie shrugs and I wonder whose idea it is. "Well, it's exercise." I know Eddie is no lover of sweating. "How much has he shown you?"

He looks out at the landscape whipping past. "We just did it once, last Saturday. We played catch." He studies his game again. "I'm afraid of the ball," he confesses.

"Me, too." At Eddie's age, I played catch with my father twice, and I suspect he was also afraid of the ball. My son grins at me, and I grin back.

We call our respective moms from the parking lot of an IHOP where Eddie puts away a late lunch of burger and home fries with the required ketchup. The coal-laced hills of western Pennsylvania rarely get three bars and the conversation suffers frequent skips. He gives Laura a roundup of our events, especially what he's eaten, fibbing about broccoli and spinach, but I don't rat him out. "And I'm at Level Four in Voyage to Kabar, with seventy-five energy points. And I found out my grandfather - "

"Great-grandfather," I correct him.

"*Great*-grandfather, yeah, he was kind of a dick."

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My eyebrows rise. Apparently so have Laura's. "What? Uh," he blushes, crimson on his pasty, chubby cheeks. "Jack said that the other day about some guy who cut him off. Okay. I'm sorry. Bye." Still blushing, he hands me the phone, looking down.

"Hi, yeah, we're having fun. Uh, not so good. I've been getting updates. Yeah, you might want to talk to Jack. Hey, is it okay if I don't get him back until tomorrow morning? I need to make one more stop and we may run late."

She hesitates but agrees. I decide I will email Laura my concerns about Jack's maturity. I'm a bit of a coward at confrontation, another of Laura's divorce points. Jack's not a bad guy, he also has a son by an ex-wife so we understand each other. He's a mechanic and I know his day is full of hard work and hard language.

"You know calling someone a 'dick' is bad, right?" I ask. Eddie is staring out the windshield and nods quickly. "Just be careful with words you hear from Jack." I reach and squeeze his shoulder and he looks my way and half-smiles.

"I knew it was a bad word," he confesses. "I won't use it again. I thought you'd laugh at it."

I smile instead.

My mom answers on the ninth ring, a little slower than usual. "How are you feeling?" I ask. A crackling sound fills my ear. I yell, "How are you feeling?"

"The toast was cold. It's always cold."

After all, I wonder how much of this she'll understand. "I think your father came from Pennsylvania. I'm on my way to Bridgeville."

A long pause, and just as I think the call's been dropped, she says, "Bridgeville sounds familiar. My aunt Babe came from Bridgeville." Babe, *sister* of John. There's a morsel of history that might have led us directly to Bridgeville. Of course, then my son and I would have missed meeting the Drew's Crossing Assessor, and that night at the Imperial Hotel. Maybe she did us a favor – I can't tell how much more bonding we'll get out of it, but it's been worth every cent of the \$49. She says, "I think my ancestor was named Lanford, or Grantford? The one in the war."

"Okay, I'll know him when I see him. I'll see you tomorrow morning," I say, and can't help adding, "I'll have good news."

"I'll be here."

Bridgeville is slightly larger than Drew's Crossing, less dingy, and in the late afternoon we find a brick building on a side street. "Stupid fucking handicapped parking!" All seven parking spaces at Bridgeville's vital records building are devoted to the handicapped. "Don't tell your mother I said that," I wink at him with a conspirator's smile. "That's even worse than saying 'dick.'"

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"Okay." He grins. He is playing a Johnny Cash CD I forgot I had in the glove box, and replays 'Boy named Sue' four times. "This one is funny."

I park in a supermarket lot a block away. When I turn the car off I hear the cell phone and my throat closes. "She's showing signs of renal failure." My eyes well up. Will she make it through the night? "Yes, almost certainly she'll be here tomorrow. She's waiting to hear from you. But if her kidneys are shutting down it won't be long. Are you returning?" Yes, tomorrow morning, absolutely.

I take a couple deep breaths to calm down, blink hard. My father was a good man, but he worked long hours and I grew up much closer to my mother. It's three-thirty in the afternoon. "Well, we've got an hour before they close."

The room is diabolically similar to Drew's Crossing, gray and black steel file cabinets row by row in a basement room. A happy difference is the Clerk, a silver haired gal with a friendly smile. She is dressed in embroidered denim with a belt decorated in turquoise and reminds me of Dolly Parton without so much bosom. She sits at a desk with a copier next to her. "How are you today? How can I help you?"

I explain, first briefly, then as she questions me I give up all the goods. Drunk grandfather, mother dying, and hoping somehow that the family tree reaches back to the revolution. Eddie is quiet and serious looking, and I think he's taken on my quest.

She says, "How lucky she is to have a son and a grandson working so hard to make her feel better."

I blush; I wish not, but I do. Eddie beams. She has two boys and both are in the service, "overseas in the Arab countries. My husband died a couple years ago, so I do this to keep out of trouble." I smile agreeably, a little anxious to get digging. "What is the family name?" She leads us past a few rows, to gray cabinets in the corner, tagged with an unknown code, 'R3'. She pulls open the drawer for me, I hear that familiar railroad rumble. Several folders are labeled 'Ledbetter', a couple of them quite thick. I've hit the mother lode.

Birth certificates, marriage certificates, death certificates, at least back to the turn of the 20th century. She steps away with a 'good luck,' and there is a sturdy steel table with two chairs on casters that don't roll, giving us privacy as I discover my grandfather's family. I turn pages, dust and mold spiking the air as I peel back the generations. I find Ledbetters who died in 1898 in the Spanish-American War, who worked for Edison Electric in 1890, masons who did brickwork on the early skyscrapers in 1882, who ran printing presses in 1867, and many quietly heroic women, one a nurse in a tubercular ward who succumbed to it in 1854, and one union organizer from well before Sally Field made it look cool.

I keep pointing out my discoveries to Eddie, and I would swear he's a half-inch taller than the day before, and he's being incredibly patient with me. I read out loud. It doesn't occur to me until later that he may have found the stories interesting.

The Bridgeville Ledbetters roots run deep. At the end of the thickest file, in reverse chronology, is a single reference to Henry Ledbetter, scion

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of this brood, born in a holler near the Monongahela River in Virginia in 1816. His existence is testified to by a census, one on a list of names fifty people long. His birth is 'circa 1816', meaning he wasn't sure himself. There's no mention of his parents, who would have been the generation that fought the Revolution. *No Lanford, no Grantford. Where did she hear those names?* The race has ended. It's as if the world was begun there and then. "Shit," I let out softly and let the file drop to the table, shaking my head.

"You okay, Dad?"

I feel a huge door slam and echo. Back then births and deaths were not always documented. I kind of knew this. I labor to get past this wall, pulling open more drawers, glancing at files, but in vain. I hadn't dared to expect we'd get as close as we are, and at first sight that fat file got me thinking great-aunt Velma was right, and now my own excitement crashes.

"Why's this stuff so important to Grandma?" he asks, seeing my devastated look.

She'd told me very little about growing up in Drew's Crossing, and those choice tales were usually testimonials on growing up poor. How her mother stretched a pound of hamburger to feed them all. And how her brothers and father were shanghaied to help sandbag one year the Ohio threatened to flood. "All the welfare families got put to work," she recalled grimly.

I realize, *she was first-generation welfare.* "I think she's kind of ashamed of how she grew up," is how I finally put it.

Eddie's mouth pauses half-open. This is a new concept for him. He digests it with caution.

I collect a dozen pages to copy and it's an honorable and ordinary finish, but I must have looked upset as the clerk asks, "Everything alright?"

The clock tells me she should have kicked us out twenty minutes ago. "We didn't quite make it to the revolution," I try to joke at my scheme. "She's going to be disappointed." To my embarrassment, I'm tearing up. Eddy stands next to me, and he hugs me. I drape my arm around him. And that just makes me tear up more.

She frowns, as if solving a problem. "There's something else you could do," she offers, her voice soft, conspiratorial, and leaves it out there, waiting for me to commit before she says anything more.

"What?" I ask, a little curious, a little scared, which seems ridiculous.

She smiles as though explaining why the grass is green. "Make it up. Fib. I know it's wrong, but I do believe where these issues are concerned, comfort is more important than truth. Especially as the poor woman won't be around long enough to fill out the application." She pauses, looking for my reaction. "You never know, it might be true. Just because we don't have a piece of paper here saying it, it might have happened."

I nod dumbly, thank her yet again, get a hug from her. I smell her perfume, one I later recognize as being my mother's favorite, L'Oreal. It's late already and five hours of driving to go. Outside the sun is low. "We're go-

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ing to get home after ten," I tell my son, who looks worried for me. "I have frozen pizza at home. We won't be eating until late."

"Okay," he nods. "Are you going to tell Grandma her an-ces-ter, "he struggles with his new vocabulary, "was in the Revolution, even if he wasn't?" He looks deeply excited.

"No, I'll tell her the truth. She'll be fine." He looks at me, his eyebrows up in surprise and I feel ashamed. *Don't have the courage to lie for your mother?*

I gas up the car under humming fluorescent lights and get back on the thruway, eyes already tired. Eddie dozes off in the darkness as I choke on emotion, and I'm not precisely sure if it's because I couldn't find a hero or because my soul is trying to determine the wages of lying. Tomorrow I will see my mother and I can give her printouts, which I'm not sure she can still read, and there's nothing that speaks of fame. I am angry over my utter failure and there's no good target for it.

First thing in the morning I pack up my son and get him to his mother's. Laura smiles and hugs Eddie, and I remember that email I was going to send. "We had a good time," I summarize. Eddie hugs me tightly good-bye, I hug him back. "Thanks for going with me."

"Can I go with Dad?" he asks his mother, surprising me. "To see Grandma. Then he can take me to school."

I'm smiling, but I give Laura my surrender sign, a shrug, expecting her to turn Eddie down. "I guess so," she says. "I'll call them, tell them you might be running late. Did you do your homework?"

Eddie blushes. "I forgot it." He's a terrible liar. I need to start sharing the discipline with Laura.

We arrive just as breakfast is served, and see that, as she has mentioned, the toast arrives cold.

She is wispy today, a doped up smile, and there's a new monitor bipping away. A tray of breakfast food sits before her: cold toast, warm oatmeal, a sealed container of orange juice I open for her, another of skim milk I know she won't use, and some hot decaf. She has always hated decaf.

"Hi, Grandma," Eddie greets her with a nervous smile.

"Hi Mom, I brought Eddie with me. He helped me out on the trip." She greets her only grandson, and he hesitantly kisses her withered cheek. "You were right, your father was not from Drew's Crossing. He was from Bridgeville, Pennsylvania."

She smiles, eats a shallow spoonful of oatmeal, leaves some on her lips. I'll wipe them when she's finished.

Eddie asks, in a whisper, "Let me tell her?"

I freeze a moment; we hadn't discussed *what* to tell her. "Okay."

He stands opposite me. "We found a lot of interesting records," he starts, like he's delivering an oral report. "We had a union organizer and a sergeant in the Spanish-American War. And our great, great, I forget how many greats, the oldest Ledbetter, was Henry. Henry was -"

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I look around at this, the last room I'll be in with my mother. The latest monitor, probably for her failing kidneys, flashes a red power light. I interrupt Eddie. "Henry was born in," I do some hasty math, "1764, in Richmond. He was a drummer boy in the Continental Army. Isn't that something? That's the army, and that's good enough for the D.A. R."

"Drummer boy?" she says, and Eddie and I nod enthusiastically – she did hear me. "I thought maybe he might have been an officer. Someone with a sword." She looks out the window, perhaps picturing her famous ancestor.

Someone with a sword, someone dashing, someone off the cover of a historical romance. Someone to be proud of. I tell myself, henceforth, if you're going to tell a comforting lie to a dying relative, make it a *whopper*. I could have made him a VFF, Virginia Founding Father, I could have made him a fucking major general for all it matters now. "Well, he kept the march going. He helped carry wounded soldiers out of the battle. That's pretty heroic. And this gets you into the DAR." I'm bailing and it's all moot. That lie felt huge and awful when I said it. The Bridgeville clerk didn't mention the side effect.

She gives me that opiate smile. "That's okay. I remembered yesterday that Elizabeth Piazza was a member." Elizabeth Piazza was on the school board with Mom, and they fought as fiercely as two genteel housewives could. "She was pure Italian. I don't know how she got into the DAR, there couldn't have been any Italians in the Revolution." I won't remind her that Mrs. Piazza's maiden name was Witherspoon. And that is how Mom talks herself out of wanting to be a Daughter of the American Revolution.

Eddie kisses her good-bye, and we walk together down the linoleum hallway. "Sorry I interrupted you," I apologize. "What were you going to tell her?"

"That Henry Ledbetter was a war hero. He saved twenty men. The president gave him a medal." Eddie is telling this to the floor and looks disappointed he couldn't dress up history for her.

I half-smile. "That would have worked better than my story. Sorry."

He looks up at me, forgiveness in his face. "That's okay. Is she happy now?"

"I think so." *I hope so.*

Sixteen hours later, when she passes on in her sleep, I'm there to say good-bye. In the parking lot, wiping my eyes, the IHOP receipt on the floor reminds me of singing along with Eddie, 'Y'know, *life ain't easy for a boy named Sue*, on its fourth go-round and now I'm smiling and I wish I'd let Eddie do the lying; bad as he was, he was still better at it. A sword-wielding heroic ancestor, someone out of the video games he played. It was the one thing Mom wanted from her father, for him to give her back the respectability he'd cost her.

I reread something that put it in perspective for me. *The past is never dead*, Faulkner wrote, *it's not even past*. He was referring to the South, but it works in Syracuse, too.