Outside the bedroom windows the garden is full of snow. The lily pond is frozen, the dark branches of the apple tree, standing alone in its stone circle, are sharply defined against a winter sky. Snow caps the bronze statues at either end of the rectangular pool, each of a child offering water to birds. A thoughtful garden, with its matching statuary, its low hedges and flower beds flanking a sloping grassy avenue that leads outward to a wide lawn and a lily pond, the garden of someone more than casually interested in symmetry and perspective. In the spring the grass will turn a deep blue-green, just as the apple tree will be surrounded by a perfect circle of lily of the valley. But for now everything but the bare tree branches is white.

Upstairs in the master bedroom, a red-haired woman lies in a white-painted iron hospital bed facing the southeast window, which has a long view not of her garden, where she has spent so much time and to which she has given so much thought, but of the Little Miami River and the low hills of Ohio’s Clermont County. Across from the foot of the bed is a fireplace, beside which is a chaise longue. A fire burns in the fireplace, firelight reflecting off the glass covering a very old, very simple pencil-and-ink drawing hanging near the bed. A sketchbook drawing of a woman in a plumed hat. Also red haired. The artist has shaded her hair, face, and lips with colored pencil. But only her hat and the black plumed feather are distinct, the woman’s face is barely outlined, half smiling, the eyes mysterious, half closed,
The Box in the Attic

The last time I visited Cincinnati was at Christmastime in 1973, a few days after my grandfather died. I was twelve years old. We had come from Washington DC for his funeral and then stayed on for a week while my parents got his house in order so that it could be sold. One afternoon when we children had been making too much noise and pestering sweet, palsied, gray-haired Anna, my grandfather’s cook, for kipfels—wonderful sugared crescents made with ground almonds—my father became irritated and told us to go play outside. But it was December, and raining, so instead my mother, who was adroit at figuring out how to divert us and placate my father, led us up a set of narrow backstairs and turned us loose in the attic.

My grandfather had outlived his wife by more than forty years and in all that time he’d scarcely moved an armchair or shifted the placement of a vase. At least partly because he felt more like a tenant in that house than its owner (in fact, he was a tenant; his sons inherited everything, while he lived off dividends from a trust). But also because he was permanently staggered by his wife’s death; he simply could not accept that he would now be in charge of the life they’d made together, a life that she had designed, for the most part, and paid for, and made sensible, while he sat by, grateful and admiring.

He was turning fifty when my father was born in 1926, already almost elderly. A man who had spent his entire life studying music, an only child who nearly died of typhoid fever when he was
The Grocer’s Daughter

Whenever people ask me where I am from, I answer “Virginia” or “Washington DC.” Those are both places where I lived as a child, first on a horse farm in Fauquier County, later in different neighborhoods off MacArthur Boulevard in DC. But always I feel that I am not telling the truth. I am not “from” that horse farm (we didn’t even ride horses) or those Washington neighborhoods; I happened to live there for a while with my parents, who never seemed to feel committed to one residence over another. Over the last fifty years, for instance, my father has lived in more than twenty houses or apartments, and he was not in the real estate business. Where I secretly feel I am “from” is Cincinnati, a place I visited only a few times as a girl, and know hardly at all, and yet like “the old country” for an exile’s children, it absorbs the past for me. Cincinnati may not seem as romantic as St. Petersburg before the revolution, but it is where my father’s family has lived for a century and a half, and where his grandfather transformed grocery stores into supermarkets, and himself into a brand name. To find Lucile, I decided, it would make sense to find the place where she was born, the family she was born into, and maybe stake a small claim to both of them myself.

Bernard Henry Kroger was a small, wiry, bony-faced man with a large Bavarian nose. He had big ears and, for someone so slight, big wrists that stuck out from the cuffs of even expensively
IV

Child of a New Century

Whenever my father has visited me over the past ten years, inevitably during his stay one of my children has thrown a fit about losing a game or feeling insulted, has shouted various denunciations, and then required soothing. Then off she’s skimmed, fully recovered, at which point my father has always observed (unhelpfully), “If I had done that, I would have been murdered.” He himself did not tolerate much childish drama as a parent; our shrieks were often met with savage disapproval. Apparently a learned response, at least to some degree. “She was always severe,” my father said not long ago, when I asked what happened when he ran to his mother with injuries. “She didn’t have time for that kind of thing.”

Instead of sympathizing with my father, as he was probably hoping, I found myself wondering whether Lucile’s perceived severity wasn’t instead a well-worn stoicism. People who have learned early to be brave and uncomplaining often have trouble attending to the complaints of others. And children have so many complaints and are so desperately attached to them. Which doesn’t mean they shouldn’t have complaints, only that different mothers will hear those complaints differently; the main thing for a child is to have someone to hear them at all.

Just yesterday I was waiting outside my younger daughter’s school when I discovered a little boy of about five, wearing bright red rain boots and a fireman’s raincoat, sobbing in the dirt behind a holly
Camera Lucida

When she was thirteen or fourteen years old someone, probably Barney, gave Lucile a No. 2 Brownie box camera. What I know or can infer about her adolescence is based almost entirely on snapshots she glued into two photo albums, one begun “Christmas 1904,” according to the flyleaf (though she’s stuck in some snapshots from 1903), and “Finished August 9, 1905,” just before she left for boarding school. The second, which came to me from my brother’s invaluable canvas bag, that mail pouch from the past, was started immediately afterward.

The first album is made up almost entirely of pictures of Lucile’s sisters and brothers, friends and neighborhood children, babies, dogs, all against various backdrops. “A family’s photograph album is generally about the extended family,” notes Susan Sontag, adding, “and, often, is all that remains of it.” She calls snapshots like these “souvenirs of daily life,” and Lucile’s first photo album—the size of a paperback turned sideways, bound in rusty black leather with black pages—certainly looks like a turn-of-the-century memento of a pleasant upper-middle-class midwestern world. Skating parties at Worken’s Pond, a holiday visit to Lake Charlevoix, boating at Grande Pointe (the girls in long dresses with huge floppy bows in their hair). Trips to Eden Park, which had a scenic reservoir with a valve house and a water tower that looked like something that belonged to a German Schloss, also a fountain and a beautiful stone bridge, an aqueduct, arching above the entrance. Drives into the countryside. Rides
VI

College Girl

One fall day several years ago, I stood on the lawn behind the library at Wellesley College gazing across the silvery expanse of Lake Waban, admiring the russet oaks and dark pine trees on the opposite shore. And I found myself thinking that simply by standing on the same ground where Lucile had stood during her college years, I might divine something essential about her. Perhaps she had once lingered on this exact grassy spot, looking across the lake at a tumult of red and gold leaves. Breathing in the scent of leaf mold and damp grass. Feeling the autumn sun warming the top of her head. Perhaps somehow, in this moment, she was there.

Or that's what I pretended to be thinking. Most biographers suffer from a necessary vanity regarding their subjects and I am no exception. What I was secretly hoping for that fall day was not communion with Lucile over the foliage but some sort of paranormal sighting—my feeling being that if she was going to appear to anyone, it would be to me, and that the likeliest place she might put in an appearance, spectral or otherwise, would be in a place where she had lived intensely. After all the summoning I was doing, was it so unlikely that Lucile might pay me a fleeting visit by the Hazard Quadrangle or up on Severance Hill? And so I spent several cool, sunny hours rambling around the Wellesley campus, trying to glimpse a shade of my grandmother against the bricks and shrubbery and within the lengthening shadows of the turning oak trees.
In the fall of 1911, a few months after graduation, Lucile traveled back to Wellesley to see Dean Ellen Pendleton inaugurated as the college's fifth president. Several of her friends did the same. In a letter I found in the Wellesley College Archives, Mary Rhodes Christie describes herself and another girl rushing to the Huntington Avenue station in Boston, where “we found Lucile and fell on her neck with shrieks of joy, greatly astonishing the natives thereby.” Off they went to visit their old house at Wellesley, Wood Hall, “where tidings of our arrival had preceded us. . . . We were just beaming with joy.” The next day they hurried to Houghton Memorial Chapel for Miss Pendleton's inauguration “and greeted so many people so enthusiastically that our coiffures all came down.”

My father has insisted so often that he never saw his mother smile—“she was always severe”—that I can't resist pointing out here that Lucile was not only capable of smiling but also of beaming and shrieking with joy. What this says about the nature of memory I'm not sure, except that the minute you use the words never or always someone else will go hunting for an exception.

When my mother handed me that fruitcake tin from my grandfather's attic several years ago and I opened the lid, the first thing I saw among Lucile's artifacts was the olive green Kodak packet of negatives she had brought back with her from France after the war. Unceremoniously, I unsnapped the packet and leafed through
VIII

Mrs. Albert Berne
and Her Sons

So many pieces now, the clues are adding up. And yet I find myself reluctant to begin writing this last chapter.

I suppose I don’t want to let go of Lucile, now that I’ve discovered her. (But have I? Who is this woman with whom I’ve spent almost 250 pages? Half-imagined, and half what else?) She has become a familiar and empathic companion, gazing out at me from photographs scattered across my desk, enduring my speculations. And my father and I haven’t had so much to talk about in a long time. For much of the past twenty years, our phone conversations tended to be hesitant and self-conscious, confined to movie reviews, whatever politician was currently under indictment, and whether or not it was raining. Yet now, when it’s almost too late, we once again share a life in common, of great interest to us both.

“Did you know that Lucile was captain of the Wellesley Running Team?” I tell him one day, knowing that he did not. “Did you know that she went to a concert at a prison camp?” She broke her arm, read the biography of Oliver Goldsmith, tried to raise chickens. She visited battlefields in France that were still full of bones and carried home two packets of postcards as proof of where she’d been. Whenever I visit my father in Charlotte, I bring along photographs or a letter I’ve found in the Wellesley College Archives, or lately, something I have written. We talk about Cincinnati, his aunts and uncles, the family trip to Bermuda when he was four. His lung cancer has returned, and there is no further treatment for it; but we don’t