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It was 1966 and I was fresh out of school, newly landed in Baltimore. A war was going on in Vietnam, but for me life was good. You'd have thought so, too, after four years of stress analysis and heat transfer and only the barest sprinkling of Hemingway or Beckett. Now I had my first real job. I was making money. I could go down to Sherman's Book Store and buy all the books I wanted and not worry they'd distract me from studying for the next exam. I had a car, a battered old Peugeot 403, like the one Peter Falk later made memorable in the Columbo TV series. A few weeks before, I'd turned 20; I was ignorantly, happily young. Ahead of me were Life, and girls, or women, or whatever we called them then, and my fine new job.

But in the few years after I arrived in Baltimore, my life turned abruptly on itself, twisted away from the past, never returning to the familiar thing it had been: I left a job I could no longer bear. I fell in love. I became a writer. This is the story of how, along the rowhouse-lined streets of Baltimore and the great, gray boulevards of Paris, I was remade into a new life. And it's the story of my old life, too, and how, with each fitful and confused step away from it, sometimes hurting myself and others along the way, I stumbled

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onto a path more naturally, more truly, my own.

By now it borders on a snarky, over-told joke to say that, these days, the personal memoir has become a bastion for harrowing tales of childhood abuse, addiction, recovery, adventures in exotic places, and every kind and degree of misery, crime, or excess; or else, that it has become a second home for rock stars and celebrities. This is a cartoonish breakdown, one overlooking real distinctions between the bad, the good, and the great. Still, it's more true than not that memoirs today turn their backs on the ordinary and the familiar.

The story I tell here mostly plays out in this often unloved landscape. It embodies much youthful confusion, heartbreak, and foolishness, set against a tumultuous period in the nation's life. But the tumult lies mostly offstage. And the mistakes I made, the paths I followed, didn't leave me with needle tracks or in jail. My account is not of depravity, trauma, or threatened death—if for the moment we exclude the frequent outcome, in 1968, of being shipped off to Vietnam.

My story is not one of life and death, but of love and work.

In the wake of those exhilarating few years of the late 1960s, and across my whole adult life since, I've been a writer of articles, essays, and books. Even in the early days, I wrote articles about everything—movie censorship, longshoremen, the *Whole Earth*

Catalog, bar owners and bike racers, modern physics and old books.

Having served an apprenticeship of sorts, over the next three decades I wrote books, nine of them, which took me to Europe and Asia and across the reaches of the centuries, to research and to write. One was adapted for a film featuring international stars you may have heard of, and has been translated into more than fifteen languages. Another was the basis for a public television documentary. Several earned fellowships or awards, or splashy reviews in national magazines, or respectful appraisals in scholarly journals.

Others sank without trace. Their modest first printings were their only printings. They were read by a scant few of those interested in whatever outlandish topic I had chosen to write about, and no one else. Sometimes my books got cruel reviews. Sometimes they were just ignored.

Altogether, with the highs and the lows, the hits and misses, maybe I inhabit the broad middle rank of working nonfiction writers. I've made a living from my work and, after early struggles, have managed a middle class-enough life. Enough, anyway, to keep on keeping on.

But that's now. In 1966, I could not have imagined my life playing out as it has. That I would do the work I do. Or love the women I loved. My life and work seemed laid out for me, the future a detailed

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roadmap. The map was wrong.

Baltimore then was more like our time than not, though set to the dark bass notes, as the whole country was, of the Vietnam War. America was on its 36th president; we're up to 46 today. There were McDonalds, just as now; millions of cars on the roads, but not so many millions; and computers, too, though they fit in rooms, not palms. It was the time of the first moon landing, which President Kennedy had made the nation's goal a few years before; we haven't been back since, more than half a century later. But people worked, played, dreamed, loved: The time-traveler would find contrasts, but American life's broad landscape would be familiar.

And yet the very air was changing.

The Sixties are forever shackled to their vivid and disruptive events. So much happened. So much spun around, so fast. There were demonstrations and tear gas, hippies and ridiculous outfits and wild color and peculiar newspaper fonts and amazing music and marijuana and sex everywhere, and the war—always the goddamn senseless war.

As much changed internally as externally. The Sixties were about the world opening up for us, about *possibility*. They were a time when chaotic events pressed hard against everyday assumptions and aspirations. A time when the sheer pressure of new ideas challenged middle-class life as so many millions, like me, had been prepared to accept it only

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a few years before. The Sixties swept our confused young lives onto new paths. That's what happened to me, and that's the story this book tells.