

Sample

Chapter One: Taking Flight

I got drunk the day of my first communion.

Our little seven-year-old voices echoed in the church as each of us answered “Amen” before receiving the host. Taken with the ritual, we stood hushed in the vestibule after the ceremony. My parents and relatives milled around the vestibule with other proud, happy adults, shaking hands and congratulating one another. The sun set, casting the scene outside the church in orange and red, the sky purple above.

We arrived home at dusk, the house was dark but for a light by the front door. My grandparents and a few uncles joined us in our rarely used dining room. As we filed in around the china hutch and table, my mother didn’t turn on the overhead lamp but lit a candle that made our faces glow. A hush fell when everyone found a place. My dad poured everyone a glass of wine, including me, and said a prayer. He had me put the gallon bottle in refrigerator.

The wine tasted heavenly. After further toasts and prayers, my dad sent me to fetch the jug from the darkened kitchen. The rosé seemed to glow in the lighted refrigerator. The rest of the evening, I ferried the jug from the fridge to the dining room as my parents and grandparents grew increasingly cheerful. During transit, out of sight of my elders, I unscrewed the cap and humped the bottle up on my chest and gulped the wine like water. The nectar burned pleasantly in my stomach. Warmth spread out along my limbs and into my face. At about 7 p.m., after

several of these trips, I felt tired and happy and unsteady. Fearing detection, I told my parents I needed to go to bed. They excused me, figuring I'd had a long day due to the church ceremony and subsequent celebration at home. Hugs and pats on the back sent me off for the evening.

I felt glorious. I bobbed around my room, doffing my clothes and dropping them to the floor. The bed felt like a barrel slowly rotating. I shook my head to stay awake, even as my eyes pulled shut. I just wanted to feel more of the warmth and comfort.

After that communion celebration, I begged my dad for sips from his nightly beers. Remnants of wine, beer, and mixed drinks littered tables at family gatherings. I became the helpful child, so I could sneak what remained in the glasses. One drink fired off anxiousness that I later learned would only be satisfied with more drink. I thought this was normal. At home, drinking had assumed the status of a sacred ritual, a ceremony practiced daily. I wanted to be like my dad and drinking constituted part of his identity.

At 11, I joined the Boy Scouts and filched communion wine from the church basement during meetings. I graduated to exhilarating, furtive, full-fledged draws from my parents' liquor bottles at least once a week. When I was 14 and in high school, I made friends with boys who owned cars and had affinities for beer. We traveled across the state line to Kansas, where 18-year-olds could legally buy beer at the time. My friends and I pooled our meager resources and bought as much as we could whenever we could. We always found a willing retailer if one of us "looked" old enough. I drank deeply and regularly after I got my own car at 16. I ceased to draw a sober breath by the time I graduated from high school.

Meanwhile, the ups and downs of being a kid masked the symptoms of incipient manic depression until I entered high school. During my four years at Archbishop O'Hara High, I considered myself an eccentric outsider. Hormones, teen angst, and rebelliousness made me

miserable. Bursts of extraordinary energy preceded incredible lows, sometimes within the same hour.

Now, having become aware of manic depression as an adult, I see my high school and early college years much differently. Incredible flights of mind convinced me I could do anything. I tackled difficult projects and took on extracurricular activities. I enrolled in weightlifting classes and contemplated joining the wrestling team. (Even in my most agitated state, I realized this was foolish—I weighed 250 unmuscular pounds in high school.) As a sophomore, in one week, I joined the backpacking club, the skeet shooting club, the yearbook, and the newspaper—all of which I would continue until graduation. I flagged at these activities when my mental state swung into depression, but I stuck with them out of duty and made excuses for poor performance. In college, during a heady burst one Wednesday afternoon while sitting in the student center, I suddenly decided to run for student government. I campaigned frantically. By Friday afternoon, I'd won a seat on the All Student Association.

When in manic-mode, I received enough positive feedback from these endeavors to convince me of my abilities. I wrote well, and teachers admired my enthusiasm and productivity. I shot at skeet, which thrilled me and kept me coming back to the shooting range, though I never, not once, hit one. I backpacked trips, climbed rocky bluffs, and took long nature hikes. I spoke up at student government meetings and people listened. I often received praise for my unorthodox perspective and unusual approach to solving student-administration issues.

During these moments of immense energy, I made myself the class clown. I often wound up in the high school principal's office. Charm and quick talking slipped me past her, a woman on whom I had an undying crush. I found it a little rougher to talk my way out of things when she left for another job and a man named Stuart took over the administration. Still, in four years,

I never did detention. In college, I diverted my energies into becoming the inquiring student. I took front row seats in classes and drove teachers to distraction. I became well-known to other students who sought my company at the local pub, where I drank under age and where I gave everyone a good time until I passed out in a back booth.

Many times, during periods of manic euphoria, little things—a momentary setback or failure, the slightest resistance from people around me, even something as simple as lost keys—triggered wild bouts of irritability. Anyone could prompt my ire. I groused and grumbled. I spun into rage that only ended with exhaustion or impact with impenetrable circumstance. One time my sister wouldn't let me use her car. Late for an appointment, I laid into her with a fury that moved her to call the police. Faced with impending arrest, I apologized with the same vigor as when I'd berated her. Fortunately, she put the phone down. Who knows where that would have gone.

Euphoria and irritability never lasted. Seemingly within minutes, I would fall from great heights into bone-crushing depression. Feelings of worthlessness, remorse, and guilt plagued me. I lost motivation. I ate too much. I played sick to stay at home and in bed, curtains drawn. I suffered persistent insomnia but would fall asleep during the day or pass out for 15 or 16 hours in a row only to suffer more nights of sleeplessness. Interest in school suffered, and I did the barest minimum to maintain B-average grades, which kept parents and teachers off my back (though they often gave me the “you're not applying yourself” speech in both high school and college).

I moved into my own apartment at age 20. Freedom from parental eyes and the confines of home intoxicated me as much as the spirits. My drinking increased. I celebrated my new liberties with beer drawn openly in my living room while I lounged in my underpants. Look at me, I said to myself, master of all I survey.

Patrick Dobson, *Ferment: Wine, Vineyard, and Manic Depression*

Generally, days started with a trip to the corner store for a couple of quarts of beer or a pint of whiskey, often both. The owner, a man I know well now, often scoffed at me but didn't question my age or intent. I soon discovered that when I drank in the morning, I passed out by 2 p.m. I'd come to at 5 p.m. and go to work making and delivering pizzas, only to binge again after I timed out at 11 p.m. or midnight. On my days off, my morning trips to the market started daytime binges in which I passed out and came to several times until the alcohol sent me under for good at 9 or 10 p.m.

I slept off drink in front yards of friends' houses and apartments in the middle of the day. I'd come to in strange quarters of the city with no way home. Many times, after I'd been out with friends or on my own, I emerged from a blackout in my own apartment, wondering how I got there. I popped out of a blackout more than once and found myself busting up park benches with a tire iron in violent fits. I often groaned on waking in the morning, "Where's my car?"

Drinkers often gather with or attract other drinkers. But my drinking did not qualify as a social disease. No one I knew drank like I did. They didn't drink fast enough. They didn't drink as much. Self-consciousness prevented me from making extra trips to the bar or drinking too frequently from the table's pitcher of beer. So, I often excused myself from a social situation and repaired to another tavern where I could drink alone at my own pace. When I was with others, I often fell into reveries about "the old days" I never knew or I'd develop some new scheme or great idea. I grew sloppy as the evening wore on. To sidestep the embarrassment and remorse I felt the next day, I abandoned bars altogether and took to drinking by myself in my apartment or while driving Kansas City streets alone. Alcohol blunted the euphoria and eased the depressions.

Eventually, I backed off drinking in the morning and afternoon. Jobs demanded it. My own conscience commanded it. By age 21, I only drank in the evenings after work. It didn't

matter how late I clocked out, I always drank the same way. I'd devour a 12-pack and a pint or two of liquor, or a couple bottles of wine. I couldn't get enough fast enough, and even resorted to pouring wine and liquor into glasses, so I could slug back whatever I was drinking without the neck of the bottle getting in the way. I drank most of my "dose" in about an hour or hour and a half. I passed out every night. I woke in the morning drunk and stayed that way well into the afternoon. About the time a hangover and the shakes set in, it was time to start drinking again.

I denied I had a drinking problem and didn't realize the abnormality of mania and depression. I kept a job, paid rent, and earned a 3.0 GPA at the university. Legally, I lucked out. I drove drunk all the time but earned only one speeding ticket and one citation for careless and imprudent driving (\$35 fine, a lucky break after totaling five parked cars and abandoning the scene of the accident). I stole from employers, friends, and strangers, but they never noticed or confronted me. I never went to jail. Car wrecks—mine and others when I was a passenger—landed me in hospital emergency departments on occasion and gave me scars and head trauma, but I bounced back quickly.

Relationships with women, as with friends, came and went. Periods of euphoria and agitation alienated people to whom I felt close. Depression drove me into isolation. While I might mourn the loss of a romantic relationship or friendship one minute, I looked forward to new opportunities the next. I always met more women, made new friends, and experienced more mood swings.

I'd take a job in a liquor and wine store to reduce my drinking bill and afford me access to better wines. After a while, I devoted myself to wine and experienced the illusion of climbing the wine-expert ladder. Later, a liquor and wine distributorship hired me. I formulated designs on becoming a wine salesman, though my training for that position had me lugging cases and

loading trucks in the warehouse with the other workers. When feeling up, I saw myself variously as a master sommelier, a vineyard owner, and a “somebody” in the wine trade. When feeling down, I doubted the worth of this effort and often contemplated suicide.

I hid behind the façade of the “wine professional.” Since I appeared sociable when not depressed, people perceived me as an excitable, friendly guy often off the charts with energy. I was pretty good at the wine game and had the knack of a good taste memory. The Kansas City wine crowd fancied themselves sophisticated and urbane. I mimicked the language and waxed poetically about the grape. I recited information I’d memorized from books on grapes, regions, winemaking methods, and vintages. I found acceptance.

Always deluded, I might start a night with other enophiles. But a glass or two of wine led me to ensconce myself alone in my apartment, guzzling whatever I could carry home in my coat. I enrolled in a college class called Wine and Civilization. On the way home from one of the off-campus “tastings,” the friend I brought—and talked into driving that night—ran a red light in front of my apartment and crashed into another car. I don’t remember the accident that totaled his car and sent a woman to the hospital. I only remember coming to the next morning knowing something awful occurred. My friend went to jail and wound up in nasty legal trouble for driving under the influence. The professor almost lost his job when the local paper caught wind of the incident. I suffered no other consequence than crippling feelings of guilt easily wiped away with more alcohol.

All this—the love of wines, the excessive drinking, the embarrassment and remorse—led to my eventual departure from Kansas City. My youthful Germany adventure started with a phone call I received one night after I’d had a particularly hard day at the liquor warehouse. My friend Larry, who had been vagabonding in Germany, had found a broken payphone on a street

corner in Hamburg. He called everyone he knew from that phone, but it charged him not one *pfennig*. When he hailed me, my evening bender was just skidding to a halt. I'd been suffering debilitating depression and drank myself numb. Alone in my apartment watching reruns on my 12-inch black-and-white portable, I needed only another deep snort off the bottle of vodka I kept in my freezer to pass out.

I lived in the basement of a bare-bulb Midtown Kansas City apartment building. My place qualified as one of those dim dwellings landlords build into the bowels of their buildings to squeeze the last dimes out their real estate. It had two rooms, a front room with a kitchenette and a small bedroom. During the day, outside light dribbled through narrow, filmy, cobwebbed windows at the very top of the walls. A sewer pipe ran through the front room about a foot and a half below the low ceiling. Anytime I stood up or went from room to room, I had to bend at the waist to avoid banging my head. I suspended a goldfish bowl in a cheap macramé plant hanger from a bend in the pipe just to give the pipe purpose. I kept a discarded toilet as an umbrella stand, though I had no umbrellas. I just thought it funny. I lacked air-conditioning during the pounding-hot summer of 1985.

Larry's voice mercifully intruded on that solitary night. "Why don't you come to Germany and travel for a while?" he asked. "You talk about getting a job in a vineyard. Why not come where the vineyards are?" In my depressive state, I felt little to begin with and even less after getting good and drunk. Only fear of unemployment and being on the street kept me going to work every day. Something clicked in my head during that phone call and said "jump."

As Larry talked, I kept thinking, why not go to Germany? He caught me at the right moment. My life empty and lonely, I drank harder as time unfolded. The grind had grown too burdensome, the job increasingly dreary and loaded with drudgery. I fulfilled the duties of a

warehouseman and junior wine and liquor salesman but couldn't see a future in them. I'd never developed a notion of a career. I only knew manual and menial labor. I had no idea what working in a place like Germany meant.

I needed a new excuse for dodging responsibility and leaving the life I had. I came to in the morning and stumbled about until time to go to work. Days in the warehouse dragged on. Intense physical labor associated with the job absorbed the heights of mania and depths of depression. Summer descended on the vast open space beneath the warehouse roof with a vengeance. I packed box upon box with pints and half pints. I carted and heaved cases of wine and hard liquor. I loaded trucks and unloaded shipping containers. I came home every night dehydrated and on the edge of heat prostration.

The sewage treatment plant next door to the warehouse only made things worse. Stench filled the superheated building every day soon after we opened the loading dock doors in the morning. I smelled of sweat, stale booze, and the excrement of an entire city. No amount of laundering removed the smell of sewage from my clothes. My nose had become so used to the pong that I smelled it all the time no matter how far from the treatment plant. Flowers smelled like sewage, as did my food, wine, and beer. I gave up on flowers and mostly on food.

Looking back on all of this, I realize I had nothing to stay for. Besides the dead-end job, certain triggers set off mania and depression, but most of my episodes arose for no obvious reason. Sometimes I would cycle quickly from mania to depression and back up again. Then, I would often go months without experiencing either mania or depression. Regardless of my condition, I couldn't imagine a future for myself.

In the end, alcohol and manic depression ruled my life. And that's why, when Larry said working in Germany would change life's trajectory, I took to the idea. When he declared I

should be in Germany rather than in what he called a backward Midwestern city, I believed him. He made the notion of selling my meager possessions and packing a backpack seem like the best idea I ever had. I pictured myself laboring in picturesque vineyards, learning the winemaking trade. I imagined myself in candle-lit cellars, standing next to ancient barrels and tasting wines with rotund *Kellermeisters*. I would learn to be a real expert, one who knows from experience and not from books or from mimicking others.

By the end of the conversation, I'd decided. My trip to become a winemaker wouldn't resemble a youthful European frolic, the likes of which I'd read about in books or heard about from my acquaintances. I'd find a job in a Mosel or Rheingau winery. There I'd start my grandiose journey to a career as a respected maker of fine wines.

Getting busy soothed depression. I quit my job and sold my meager possessions in a Saturday sale on my street corner. With the day done, I threw away what remained in the dumpster behind the building. I bought a one-way ticket to Luxemburg on Iceland Air. I planned to take a train from Luxemburg City with Larry to Trier and then to the village of Wawern, where we would stay with his friends. I had \$400 in cash, most donated from my grandmother. I used my last check, the proceeds from my sale, and what I'd saved to buy another \$400 in travelers' checks. I folded them into the back of my large wallet behind my passport, just in case the Germany experiment failed and I needed a way back to Kansas City.

Three weeks after my friend suggested I go to Germany, I boarded a plane with a backpack and a sleeping bag.

I'd put no thought into what getting a job in a foreign land would take. I gave not one moment of contemplation to the complications of securing work visas or paying tax authorities.

Germany would solve my problems, plain and simple. It would save me without any effort on my part.

Little did I realize at the time that Germany really would redeem me but not in the way I thought. When I arrived at the Luxemburg airport on that initial flight to Europe, I felt at the end of a great whirlwind. Larry met me at the terminal door. You'd love Germany, he'd told me. Now I wanted to find out.

Back then, I was a 22-year-old drunken and mentally unbalanced kid with little self-awareness and great dreams. Fear almost paralyzed me, but fear of not undertaking the journey overcame the fear of doing it. By luck and accident—and before I went broke or committed suicide—I landed a job at a famous winery in Trier, a German city west of the Luxemburg border 10 times older than my country. The winery's director guided me to a sleeping room in the attic of the vineyard apprentices' school, where a small breakfast and coffee with some of the students came with the price of rent. I spent the next year learning the language and laboring in one of the loveliest places I've ever seen.

I loved the country and the work I did and the people I met. I came back after a year and a half in pursuit of a Kansas City opera singer with whom I carried on a fiery affair in Germany. The relationship failed almost immediately on my return due to my severe neediness and dissolution. I went back to Germany again about eight months after I left to attend the wine school in Geisenheim on the Rhein. But without means, having not planned at all, and deep into what I found later were the last days of my drinking career, I gave up and returned to a dissolute life in my hometown.

By that time I was 27, drinking had done me in. I was sick, broke, and unemployable. Bereft of friends and isolated from family, I was alone in my own universe. When I stopped

drinking in July 1990, I was born again—not in the evangelical sense but in the sense that I made a sudden and complete break with the past. I thought, at the time, that I'd leave all of what happened to me and never look back. I would make a new start.

Everything changed immediately and not all for the best. Unbuffered from the effects of manic depression, I went through periods of suicidal pain and even greater heights of euphoria. I was immature, stunted in my growth from having dodged the emotional lessons one learns in their teens and twenties. Dealing with adult situations escaped me. I made poor decisions now not due to alcohol but due to ineptitude and inexperience. I ran four-square into myself and didn't understand me one bit.

In other ways, things improved a great deal. Physical ailments that plagued me as a drinker abated within a matter of weeks and months. My blood pressure went from 220 over 100 to normal. My kidneys stopped hurting. My swollen liver returned to the size it was supposed to be. Mentally, but for frequent ups and downs, my head cleared and I began to perceive things as they were rather than through the curtain of untreated alcoholism. I enrolled at the university again and earned A grades. I formulated designs on graduate school. I would let nothing hold me back. Even on the event of my girlfriend's pregnancy, I was determined to make up for lost time and make something of myself. I sought to become legitimate.

In that process, I denigrated and dismissed much of my old behavior and the person I once was. I didn't give myself any credit for good intention, thirst for experience, and eyes wide in wonder. I gave no thought to manic depression, though it was a constant in my life. For many years, I didn't worry too much about my former self. I negotiated single-fatherhood, sometimes ineptly, sometimes expertly and on intuition. I finished grad school and found a solid job. When I was four years sober, I planned a long trip when I was in a deep depression. A year later, in

May 1995, I walked to Montana and canoed home on the Missouri River, starting life all over again on my return. I landed my first writing gig, which turned into a full-time job and then into a career.

As I matured, I began reconsidering my old self. As I looked back, I saw a “me” who also possessed positive qualities. My intentions were almost always good, and when not too looped, people considered me a nice guy. I felt bad about stealing and wrecking my cars and those of others. I made friends easily.

Despite my drunkenness and penury, I’d backpacked in south-central Missouri and went camping in Missouri state parks. Friday evenings, I’d strike out on my own for the drive to the Missouri Ozarks. I explored national forest wilderness areas. A mile or two into the backcountry, human-made sounds disappeared. The forest and animals took over. I loved standing on the bluffs overlooking a creek, pines and oaks and hickories forming a solid canopy over the valley. When I went to the woods, my drinking moderated, even stopped. When manic, I might hike the whole night through, dropping from exhaustion near dawn. When depressed, the difficult terrain and hard hiking distracted me from darker thoughts.

In conversations and arguments, I stood up for the underdog in those drunken years. I didn’t devote my income to others, though I’d give what change and bills I had to anyone who asked. While an irritable workmate and mercurial friend, I tolerated other people’s beliefs and ideas. My friends, uneducated and young, included strippers and hookers, alcoholics and drug addicts, and many jobless. I went about with single mothers, at least those who didn’t know the depths of my drinking. I questioned everything I’d been told in school, church, and just about every book I read. I had cast off the religion of my youth and doubted the existence of a loving God. My intellectual universe broadened. Despite the drinking and perhaps because of manic

depression, I did well in school and read books, hundreds of books—history, philosophy, great fiction works, nonfiction books—anything that struck my fancy.

Going to Europe also provided an excuse to avoid what I really should have been doing. Underneath all the grand schemes I hatched, and beneath the idea of a European trip, I had only ever wanted to be a writer. When level-headed or jacked on mania, I filled notebooks with ideas and stories. Depression led me to write poems in those same notebooks. I'd even taken to an old Royal portable typewriter to put many of those stories and poems to paper. But I didn't know what to do with them. I didn't know what it took to be a writer and feared that if I tried, I'd fail.

Through the haze of alcoholism and mental illness, I couldn't see what I could now. In my former life, I'd grown wise beyond my years and had already plowed and fertilized ground for a life as a fighting young writer. I always looked for new experiences, feeling hemmed in by the routine and mundane labor. I talked philosophy with my mates and leaned toward existentialism and absurdism. Life's big questions preoccupied me. I thought about mortality and the finality of death. I thirsted to experience new cultures and sought life in the dark corners and nooks of my city.

As I began to reconsider my dissolute years, I found there was a continuum from the old to the new. Many of the good aspects of my sober personality lived in the person I once was. As I gained self-awareness, the distance between who I was and who I became began to narrow. But it also seemed to widen. Do I ponder the big questions with ache and wonder, as I once did? Does the world hold the same intrigue? Would I give up my comforts for unknown adventure today? Would I have the pluck to leave everything and take off for a distant and foreign land? Would I have the wherewithal to weather the shock of understanding I had nothing to come back to?

Each time I went to visit my German friends after my first jaunt in the country, I learned more about myself—the person I am and the person I was. Through the summer of 2014, I bided my time, living a paradox that created a kind of cognitive dissonance. I confronted each day as if it were my last but looked forward—counted the days—to another journey to Germany. Shimmering vineyards and lush, green valleys populated my dreams and daydreams, woke me in the night, and made my heart skip. I reveled in memories of evenings with friends in *biergarten* and walking along cobbled medieval streets.

At the same time, mania's prickly edges crawled up my neck and clawed at my forehead. I had to keep my head. My family and friends depended on it. I had work to do.

The end of another semester loomed near. I labored on my online classes, wrote during the day, and went with Nick, my 12-year-old, to the neighborhood park pool in the late afternoons. Evenings began rounds of student emails and grading and more writing. As the Germany trip grew closer, mania threatened to “break through” despite medication. As it huddled beneath, ready to spring, I sunk deeper into my work. Intellectual work felt sometimes as challenging and exhilarating as physical labor, like carrying several tons of rebar in a day, as I had done as an ironworker. I ached to ditch teaching and re-up my union card.

I calmed myself using techniques I'd learned from years of dealing with manic-depressive illness. I took deep breaths, paused often to contemplate my actions, and walked the dogs farther and faster. Doing heavy yardwork between grading essays and caring for Nick mortified body and distracted my mind. Sleepy or not, I made sure to go to bed and rise at regular hours.

I kept a lid on it. The mania crept away, and my head cleared. My thoughts slowed. Physically, I remained steady. I methodically figured student's grades and conscientiously

completed administrative work. My wife, Virginia, and Nick had been packing and repacking for days. Only one evening remained for me to get my things together between the semester's end and our appointment with United Airlines. No problem. Virginia had passports and tickets. As I worked through student exams, I worried more about getting together my medications than packing underwear. Always medications.

Virginia and I had been contemplating a trip to Germany for more than three years and thinking of one long before. Something always came up in the weeks before we bought our tickets—a death in the family, a wedding, schooling needs for Nick. We determined this time that nothing would stand in our way. In the weeks leading up to our departure, no close relatives or friends died or decided to get married. We buttoned up all of Nick's outstanding and future school projects.

This journey meant far more than a European romp for a bunch of American tourists. We anticipated seeing our German friends in the flesh. Phone calls and emails couldn't suffice anymore. In going back to Germany, I would also embark on a quest to understand the young man who made the drop-of-a-hat decision to hop a plane for Europe during bottomless depression three decades before. I would contemplate relationships he established and their endurance. The journey, then, served several purposes for me, not the least of which was looking again into my past.

We had blocked out three weeks for the trip. During that time, we planned to visit Josef and Marlies Frick, a couple now in their 80s who became closer to me than my own parents. I met them the day I first stepped foot in Germany on September 23, 1985, and they've influenced my life ever since. Their son Joachim soon felt like my brother, and I shared a relationship and closeness with him I never had with my sibling.

Joachim's doctors diagnosed him with brain cancer in late-2010. I visited him in Berlin for two weeks in January. Back home and as the seasons turned, my usual springtime depression worsened. Darkness deepened as the days grew longer. I became isolated and lost all appetite for anything but sleep. Despite having been medicated for depression for years, this depression and grief over his impending death led me to the brink of suicide and sent me to a mental hospital in March 2011. There, an insightful doctor determined I suffered from manic-depressive illness. Joachim died later that year, the same day our trusty dog Auto died. Virginia and Nick grieved Auto's death. I had to behave like the strong one in the family. Due to more comprehensive medication and therapy I'd received since March, I stood on solid mental ground while mourning my friend and taking up duty to family.

The friends we planned to visit on this trip had befriended me in Trier in 1985 and 1986. They taught me German. They fed me when hungry. They nursed me when sick. When I faced weekends alone in my room, they opened their homes to me. They gave me clothes, boots, shoes, coats, and gloves. They ushered me through the heights and depths of undiagnosed manic-depressive illness. That year and a half in Trier, I formed some of the closest and most enduring relationships of my life. They shaped the person I am today.

One of our friends, Ivo Rauch, lives above the Rhein in Koblenz. I met him by chance while he worked as an apprentice at a stained-glass-window-restoration firm in Trier. After finishing his apprenticeship, Ivo went on to earn a doctorate in art history. He now runs his own stained-glass-conservatory business.

Finding social outlets, let alone steady companionship, escaped me during my first months in Trier. Loneliness haunted me as I plunged headlong into manic and depressive episodes, and long contemplative periods between them. In one of those lonely depressions, I

despaired. I contemplated suicide, not wanting to face giving up my Germany experiment and heading back to Kansas City.

Meeting Ivo changed my plans and my life. He opened avenues of friendship and acquaintance that kept me afloat. He taught me more about Trier, its Roman origins, and medieval history than I could have learned on my own. He took me to cafés and coffeehouses. We walked the city's ancient ruins and parks.

After our first meeting, Ivo presented me to his roommates, who all lived in a house in Trier's Saarstrasse on the south side of the city. Udo Bethke worked as an apprentice at the same company as Ivo. Udo was a gentle giant of a man with huge hands. Whatever he handled, he did gently and with firm intention. He thought through everything thoroughly, sometimes to his detriment. But he taught me to slow down and live more contemplatively. His considered movements and actions showed me I needn't rush through life looking for the next adventure. It would find me if I could open myself to it. He'd go on to become a master stained-glass artist with his own workshop.

On this trip, Udo planned on a week-long camping trip for us through central France from where he lived in Reutlingen, near Stuttgart. We'd then circle back through Belgium and Luxemburg to Koblenz where we'd meet up with Ivo and Martin Streit, who had once worked with Ivo and Udo in the stained-glass-restoration firm.

When Martin lived in the Saarstrasse, he used free time evenings and weekends to experiment with drawing and painting. He gained skill and acuity as time passed. Since Martin's apprenticeship, he had labored to establish himself as a painter. He attended the famous *Kunstakademie Düsseldorf*, where he studied under renowned German artist Gotthard Graubner. Since then, Martin has achieved more success as an independent painter than any of us ever

dreamed possible when we lived in Trier. Like Udo, he was introverted and contemplative. From him I learned the vagaries and joys of creative endeavor, and that the creative mind needs space. Distractions I indulged in from habit provided excuses not to know myself.

On this trip, Virginia would see some things for the first time, and Nick would experience things wholly new. Except for the trip to France, I would revisit familiar territories. I'd see myself in those places again. I'd examine my mindset and thinking three decades hence. I'd discover more of old self, which I knew would lead to further awareness of my present self.

In some ways, I didn't look forward to the task. There were ugly truths yet to discover, things I might not want to know about myself. But now we'd checked our bags at the airport counter, taken off our shoes, and made our way past security.

"Damn," I said looking out over the airport runway—one of the most beautiful sights I know. "We're on our way."

For the international flight out of Philadelphia, I had a seat widely separated from Nick and Virginia, next to a window in an empty row. I wanted and needed the space. I had my notebook and pen. Sleep, of course, eluded me. I cannot sleep on an airplane. I'd stretch out with my notebook for the duration of the flight and begin my journey into the past.