

A MILLION MILES IN A

# THOUSAND YEARS

#### WHAT I LEARNED WHILE EDITING MY OWN LIFE

# DONALD MILLER



Since 1798

NASHVILLE DALLAS MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO BEIJING

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To Kathryn Helmers, for giving me a chance to tell my story.

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You have given my narrative depth and joy, and I am so grateful.

### Author's Note

IF YOU WATCHED a movie about a guy who wanted a Volvo and worked for years to get it, you probably wouldn't cry when he drove off the lot, testing the windshield wipers. You wouldn't tell your friends you saw a beautiful movie or go home and put a record on and sit in a chair to think about what you'd seen. The truth is, you wouldn't remember that movie a week later, except you'd feel robbed and want your money back. Nobody cries at the end of a movie about a guy who wants a Volvo.

But we spend years living those stories in real life, and expect our experiences to feel meaningful. In truth, if the stuff we are doing with our lives wouldn't make a movie meaningful, it won't make a real life meaningful either.



# Exposition

#### one

### Random Scenes

THE SADDEST THING about life is you don't remember half of it. You don't even remember half of half of it. Not even a tiny percentage, if you want to know the truth. I have this friend Bob who writes down everything he remembers. If he remembers dropping an ice cream cone on his lap when he was seven, he'll write it down. The last time I talked to Bob, he had written more than five hundred pages of memories. He's the only guy I know who remembers his life. He said he captures memories, because if he forgets them, it's as though they didn't happen; it's as though he hadn't lived the parts he doesn't remember.

I thought about that when he said it, and I tried to remember something. I remembered getting a merit badge in Cub Scouts when I was seven, but that's all I could remember. I got it for helping a neighbor cut down a tree. I'll tell that to God when He asks what I did with my life. I'll tell Him I cut down a tree and got a badge for it. He'll most likely want to see the merit badge, but I lost it years ago, so when I'm done with my story, God will probably sit there looking at me, wondering what to talk about next. God and Bob will probably talk for days.

I know I've had more experiences than this, but there's no way I can remember everything. Life isn't memorable enough to remember everything. It's not like there are explosions happening all the time or dogs smoking cigarettes. Life is slower. It's like we're all watching a movie, waiting for something to happen, and every couple months the audience points at the screen and says, "Look, that guy's getting a parking ticket." It's strange the things we remember.

I tried to remember more and made a list, and it pretty much amounted to the times I won at something, the times I lost at something, childhood dental appointments, the first time I saw a girl with her shirt off, and large storms.

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After trying to make a list of the things I remembered, I realized my life, for the most part, had been a series of random experiences. When I was in high school, for example, the homecoming queen asked me for a kiss. And that year I scored the winning touchdown in a game of flag football; the tuba section beat the clarinets twenty-one to fourteen. A year or so later I beat my friend Jason in tennis, and he was on the tennis team. I bought a new truck after that. And once at a concert, my date and I snuck backstage to get Harry Connick Jr.'s autograph. He'd just married a Victoria's Secret model, and I swear she looked at my hair for an inappropriate amount of time.

The thing about trying to remember your life is it makes you wonder what any of it means. You get the feeling life means something, but you're not sure what. Life has a peculiar feel when you look back on it that it doesn't have when you're actually living it.

Sometimes I'm tempted to believe life doesn't mean anything at all. I've read philosophers who say meaningful experiences are purely subjective, and I understand why they believe that, because you can't prove life and love and death are anything more than random happenings. But then you start thinking about some of the scenes you've lived, and if you've had a couple of drinks, they have a sentimental quality that gets you believing we are all poems coming out of the mud.

The truth is, life could be about any number of things. Several years ago, my friends Kyle and Fred were visiting Oregon, for instance, and we drove into the desert and climbed Smith Rock. There were forest fires in the Cascade Range that summer, so a haze had settled in the Columbia River Gorge. The smoke came down the river and bulged a deeper gray between the mountains. When the sun went down, the sky lit up like Jesus

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was coming back. And when the color started happening, my friends and I stopped talking. We sat and watched for the better part of an hour and later said we'd not seen anything better. I wondered then if life weren't about nature, if we were supposed to live in the woods and grow into the forest like tree moss.

But that same year I met a girl named Kim who didn't wear any shoes. She was delightful and pretty, and even during the Oregon winter she walked from her car to the store in bare feet, and through the aisles of the store and in the coffee shops and across the cold, dirty floor at the post office. I liked her very much. One night while looking at her, I wondered if life was about romantic affection, about the thing that gets exchanged between a man and a woman. Whatever I felt for Kim, I noted, I didn't feel for tree moss.

And when my friends Paul and Danielle had their second daughter, I went to the hospital and held her in my arms. She was tiny and warm like a hairless cat, and she was dependent. When I looked over at her mother, Danielle's eyes told me life was about more than sunsets and romance. It was as though having a baby made all the fairy tales come true for her, as though she were a painter who discovered a color all new to the world.

I can imagine what kind of conversation God and Danielle will have, how she'll sit and tell God the favorite parts of the story He gave her. You get a feeling when you look back on life that that's all God really wants from us, to live inside a body He made and enjoy the story and bond with us through the experience.

Not all the scenes in my life have been pleasant, though, and I'm not sure what God means with the hard things. I haven't had a lot of hard things happen, not like you see on the news; and the hard memories I've had seem like random experiences. When I was nine, for instance, I ran away from home. I ran as far as the field across the street where I hid in the tall grass. My mother turned on the porch light and got in the car and drove to McDonald's and brought back a Happy Meal. When she got home, she held the McDonald's bag high enough I could see it over the weeds. I followed the bag down the walkway to the door, and it shone under the porch light before it went into the house. I lasted another ten minutes. I sat quietly at the table and ate the hamburger while my mother sat on the couch and watched television. Neither of us said anything. I don't know why I remember that scene, but I do. And I remember going to bed feeling like a failure, like a kid who wasn't able to run away from home.

Most of the painful scenes in my life involve being fat. I got fat as a kid and got fatter as an adult. I had a girlfriend out of high school who wanted to see me with my shirt off, but I couldn't do it. I knew if she saw me she would leave. She wouldn't leave right then, but she would leave when she found a nobler reason. She never did, but I never took my shirt off either. I'd kiss down her neck, and she'd reach into my shirt, and I'd pull her hand down, then lose concentration. I suppose a therapist would say this memory points to something, but I don't know what it points to. I don't have a therapist.

When I was in high school, we had to read *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger. I liked the book, but I don't know why. I go back to read it sometimes, but now it annoys me. But I still remember scenes. I remember Holden Caufield in the back of a taxi, asking the driver where the ducks in Central Park go in the winter. And I remember the nuns asking for donations. I remember the last scene in the book, too, when you realize he'd been telling the story to a counselor in a nuthouse. I wonder if that's what we'll do with God when we are through with all this, if He'll show us around heaven, all the light coming in through windows a thousand miles away, all the fields sweeping down to a couple of chairs under a tree, in a field outside the city. And we'll sit and tell Him our stories, and He'll smile and tell us what they mean.

I just hope I have something interesting to say.

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two

## A Million Miles in a Thousand Years

I STARTED THINKING differently about life when I met a couple of filmmakers who wanted to make a movie about a memoir I'd written. I wrote a memoir several years ago that sold a lot of copies. I got a big head about it for a while and thought I was an amazing writer or something, but I've written books since that haven't sold, so I'm insecure again and things are back to normal.

Before I met the filmmaker guys, I didn't know very much about making movies. You don't think about it when you're watching a movie, but there's a whole world of work involved in making the thing happen. People have to write the story, which can take years; then raise a bunch of money, hire some actors, get a caterer so everybody can eat, rent a million miles of extension cords, and shoot the thing. Then it usually goes straight to DVD. It's a crap job. It made me glad I wrote books.

But I like movies. There's something about a good story that helps me escape. I used to go to movies all the time just to clear my head. If it was a good movie, the experience felt like somebody was resetting a compass in my brain so I could *feel* what was important in life and what wasn't. I'd sit about ten rows back, in the middle, and shovel sugar into my mouth until my brain went numb. And when my brain went numb, I'd get lost in the stories.

I'd go to the movies because for an hour or so I could forget about real life. In a movie, the world faded away and all that mattered was whether the hobbit destroyed the ring or the dog made it home before the circus people could use him as a horse for their abusive monkey.

The movies I like best are the slow literary movies that don't seem to be about anything and yet are about everything at the same time. They are about insecurities and sexual tension and whether the father will stop drinking. I like those movies more because I don't have to suspend as much disbelief. Nobody in real life has to disassemble a bomb, for instance. Not the kind of bomb you think about when you hear the word *bomb*.

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I was sleeping in one morning and got a call from a guy who said he had a movie company, and he and his cinematographer wanted to talk to me about an idea. I told him I was planning on seeing a movie that afternoon, the one about the rat that wants to be a chef, and then I wondered out loud how he got my number. "I got your number from your publisher," he said, "and I'm not calling from a theater," he clarified. "I own a movie company. I direct movies."

"That sounds like a good job," I told him, still waking up. "I go to a lot of movies."

"What kind of movies do you like?" the man asked.

"Reese's Peanut Butter Cups," I answered sleepily.

Steve, the movie director, went on to explain he wanted to talk to me about turning my book into a film. He asked again if he could come to town and talk about it. I asked him if he knew where I lived, above the library in Sellwood. He said he didn't, but maybe I could pick him up at the airport.

"Can you repeat what you said about making a movie?" I asked.

"Don, we want to make a movie about your life. About the book you wrote." He said this in a voice that seemed to smile.

"You want to make a movie about *my* life?" I said, sitting up in bed.

"We do. We want to come to town and talk about it. Are you busy the next few days?" "No." I said. "My roommate is having people over on Sunday, but I wasn't invited."

"We should be gone by Sunday. We were thinking of going out tomorrow."

"Are you going to bring cameras? I need to get a haircut."

"No, we're a long way from that, Don. Can we come out and talk?" he asked.

I hung up the phone and wondered what my life would look like on film. I imagined myself at the theater with a soda in my hand watching myself on the screen doing the things I do in real life. I wondered whether the experience would be like taking a picture of yourself in front of a mirror taking a picture of yourself in front of a mirror.

I wondered whether they wanted to make a documentary about me, because it seems as if life works more like a documentary than a normal movie, and I wondered whether they would show me sitting at my desk smoking a pipe or maybe reading a book while sitting in an oversized chair. I thought maybe my friend Penny could be in the documentary. Maybe Penny and I could be walking through a park, talking. There was a scene like that in my book. I wanted my roommate Jordan to be in it, too, maybe showing him operating the register at the grocery store where he works, or with friends, drafting a fantasy football team this Sunday. I wanted to come, but he said I asked too many questions. It snowed the day the filmmakers, Steve and Ben, came to town. And it only snows a few days a year in Portland, so people drive slowly and on the sidewalks thinking it might be safer. People who moved here from Boston come out of the woodwork to tell the natives they don't know how to drive in snow.

I stayed off the highway but still had to navigate the hill on 82nd where the land dips down to the airport. I kept looking around, because everything in the industrial district was cleaner and very heavenly.

Steve and Ben were outside when I rounded the corner and drove under the glass overhang at the airport. The white road turned wet where the asphalt was protected, and I saw them standing at the end. I knew what they looked like because I had gone to their Web site. Steve, the one who directs the movies, is tall and thin and has longish Mick Jagger hair, and though he is fifty or so, he can still get away with designer jeans and shirts with elaborate buttons and bright stitching. Ben, the cinematographer, is about fifty also and had a short-sleeve T-shirt and stood with his hands in his pockets rocking back and forth on his heels to get warm. He looked to be in very good shape, even from a distance, as though he exercises and drinks juices from fruit.

I pulled over a few feet away, but they didn't see me. I watched them for a moment. I wasn't trying to be a spy or anything; it's just that I never know what to say to people when I first meet them. I can get tired when I talk to somebody

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new, because if there is silence in the conversation, I feel it's my fault. I wondered if I was going to have to spend a couple days with some guys I didn't know and whether there would be awkward silences all the time. I got out of the truck like a real estate agent, though, and introduced myself.

You would have thought I was the king of Persia, because the guys both shook my hand and Ben almost hugged me, and they said they felt like they already knew me after reading my book. They weren't giddy or anything; they were just glad to see me. I don't know how to say it exactly. We put their bags in the back of the truck, and they got in. As I rounded the front of the truck, I stopped, because I noticed snow floating and landing on the enormous glass overhang that covers the front of the airport.

I thought about heaven, about how if we were shooting a movie about heaven, at the airport, we would want to shoot it there, and how in the movie, people would be arriving from earth and from other planets, and when the angels picked us up, they'd put us in their cars and drive a million miles for a thousand years, and it would be miserable until you got to where you were supposed to stay, where you would see your family and the girlfriend you had in the second grade, the girl you always believed was the only one who really loved you.

I got back in the truck and pulled out from under the overhang, and the snow blew softly against the window and melted. The sky was gray-blue, and the weather on the mountains made them look taller. With the city covered in snow, I felt like I was arriving along with my guests. I felt like we were about to explore my same old places in a way that might make them feel new.

#### three

### **They Fell Like Feathers**

WE DIDN'T START talking about the movie right away. We stood on the porch and watched snow make magic of the sky. Steve and Ben live in Nashville, so it doesn't snow that often there either, and we watched it like we were in the second grade. Ben was standing with his eyes toward the sky and letting the snowflakes fall on his face. He had borrowed a jacket, and it fit him too big. He watched the snow as though there were writing on each flake and he was trying to read. He watched each flake as if it were the only one, and they all fell like feathers. He gave us the stories permission to notice how remarkable it was, water frozen and falling from the sky, all the cars stopped and the busses stopped, people out taking pictures of their dogs jumping through snow. "You have a sled, man?" Ben asked, still reading the snowflakes.

"No. It doesn't snow here much." I wondered whether I'd have a sled if it did.

"We could use trash can lids," Steve said.

"I have two kayaks," I said. I said this because I didn't want them to think I wasn't an outdoorsman just because I didn't have a sled. But I did have kayaks. I got them on clearance at REI the previous year. One night, I and a girl I was dating put in at Oaks Park and paddled into town. The Willamette looks better at night. The lights of the city float on the surface of the river, and you paddle through their reflections like lily-pads. I hadn't used the kayaks since then. We broke up and she moved to Switzerland.

"Kayaks are nice. Kind of a summer thing," Steve said. He was crossing his arms to stay warm.

"Let's have a look at them," Ben said. "Anything will slide, really. Some things slide better than others. But anything will slide." We started walking up the driveway toward the garage. I wondered what we were going to do with the kayaks. My driveway sloped down toward the street, but it wasn't a steep drop. Ben kept looking back at the slope as if it were a river, as though there were rapids flowing over the cement and the ice.

"Did you do a lot of drugs when you were younger, Ben?" I hoped he wasn't offended at the question. He stopped as we walked up the driveway. I turned toward him, and he stood and thought about it for a second. Then he kind of punched me in the chest. "I did, man. I did." He said. "Wow, man, it's like you know me."

• • •

An hour later Ben had tied one end of a rope to a leather steering wheel cover he found in my garage. He'd tied the other end to the back of my truck. I was sitting in a kayak in the middle of the street holding the steering wheel cover. Steve was in the back of my truck, looking at me as though he were going to have to call my mother soon. Ben was in the driver's seat, and Jordan was in the passenger's seat, fidgeting with the stereo.

"I don't know if I want to do this," I whispered.

"Are you saying something?" Steve shouted. Then Ben hit the gas and pulled me through the streets of Sellwood. I went ten blocks then lost control and mounted a curb, lodged the bow of the kayak under a guy's porch, and had to write a small check for a birdbath that honestly didn't fit the dignity of the neighborhood. I kept the pieces, though, because I'd paid for them.

"My turn," Jordan said.

"It steers you left," I warned him.

"It will steer where I tell it to steer," he said in a kind of pretend man voice. I got in the back of the truck with Steve and the birdbath.

"You looked great doing that," Steve said.

"I know," I said.

We watched Jordan for a while, and he figured out how to ride in the ruts. It made me want another turn. But Steve started talking about the movie.

Steve said he liked the book and thought there was a story in it that might make something special onscreen. I couldn't exactly see it, though. The book had been a rambling series of thoughts, mostly essays. I kept seeing a slide show with subtitles. Nobody watches something like that unless James Earl Jones is the narrator. I asked Steve if James Earl Jones was still alive, but he didn't know.

Steve said we might have to create what he called a narrative arc, a structure that would help make sense of the themes for a viewer. At the time I didn't know what he was talking about. He went on to say that in order to turn the book into a movie, we might have to give Don a clearer ambition and put some obstacles in his way. I kept seeing those Japanese game shows where people have to run across padded rolling pins floating over pond water.

He asked if I had a problem with changing things around to create a better story, and I told him I wasn't sure. I used the term *artistic integrity*, which is something I'd heard on National Public Radio.

Steve said he understood how I was feeling, but then his forehead wrinkled like a father about to explain sex. He talked about how books have to be changed for the screen and how people have trouble engaging a story unless the plot is clear. He rattled off the names of several books that had been turned into movies, but I hadn't seen very many of them.

We stopped talking about it for a minute when Jordan ran into a tree. Ben said he wanted to try the kayak. Jordan got in the back of the truck and lay down holding a wadded T-shirt filled with snow up to his nose to stop the bleeding. Steve and I got in the truck.

"Let me put this another way," Steve said. "While you've written a good book, *thoughts* don't translate onto the screen very well. The audience can't get inside your head like they can in a book. They will be restless. They won't engage. Trying to be true to the book is like asking people to read your mind. A story has to move in real life and real time. It's all about action."

"You think they might be bored if we just show my life the way it is," I clarified. I guess I was asking for reassurance that my life was okay.

"I think they'd stab each other in the necks with drinking straws," Steve said. "Nothing against your book. It's a fine book," he added after I sat silent.

I imagined people stabbing each other with straws.

"You in?" Steve asked.

"With their drinking straws?" I asked.

"Crazy, right? We can't let that happen." Steve turned down the radio.

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I thought about it for a moment. I thought about artistic integrity. I was going to said I needed a couple weeks to consider the idea, but then he told me how much he'd pay me, so I told him I'd do it.