

NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF *BLUE LIKE JAZZ*

# DONALD MILLER

WHAT I  
LEARNED WHILE  
EDITING MY  
OWN LIFE

A MILLION MILES IN A

THOUSAND

YEARS

A Million Miles in a Thousand Years

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## **Authors 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 at the end of the movie 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 even remember that movie a week later, except to feel robbed and want your money back. Nobody cries at the end of a movie about a guy who got a Volvo.

But we spend years living those kinds of stories and expect life to feel meaningful. Maybe that's why we go to so many movies, because our real lives don't feel meaningful anymore.

# 1

## 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've got 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 and 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 and 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 you 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 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 and 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 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 said 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 her story. You get a feeling when you look back on life that that's all God wants from us, to live inside a body He made and enjoy the story and bond with Him 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 too. 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 out of the car she held the 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 more noble 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 just annoys me. But I still remember scenes. I remember Holden Caulfield in the back of a Taxi, asking the driver where the ducks in Central Park go in the winter. And I remember

the nuns who were asking for donations. I remember the last scene in the book, too, when you realize he'd been telling the whole 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 beauty and light coming in through windows a thousand miles away, all the fields sweeping down to a couple chairs under a tree, and we'll sit and tell him our stories and He'll smile and then tell us what they mean.

I just hope I have something interesting to say.

## 2

# It's Improv

I have a friend named Barak Hardley who is an artist and actor living in Los Angeles.

Last year I saw him in a commercial on the Travel Channel. He played a bearded security guard riding a Segway through a Casino, mumbling through his beard about how boring it is to work in Vegas, all the while passing sequined showgirls, magicians fanning cards, and gamblers jumping from their tables with wads of chips clacking through their fingers.

A few months after I saw the commercial, Barak came to Portland for a wedding and stayed at the house. We sat on the balcony and he told me about the commercial, about how he had to ride across the Cirque de Soleil stage, a narrow walkway with deep pools of water on either side. Synchronized swimmers were coordinating leg kicks as he passed, and Barak said he could hardly get his lines out because he was afraid he'd ride off the stage into the water. They had to do seven takes.

I asked how it was going in Hollywood and he told me he was part of an Improv theater called The Groundlings. He was only taking classes but he hoped one day to perform live. It's one of those shows where the audience yells out a character and a situation, and the actors have to make things up on the fly. He hoped to get acting jobs from casting directors who used the theater to scout for talent.

It all sounded enviable, but after a couple of beers Barak told me about the pressure he feels coming up with something during the classes.

“One minute you're playing a kid in elementary school with a crush on his teacher,” he said, “and then a meteor hits the building—only you don't know it's a meteor, and you have to figure it out in order to end the scene.” He peeled the label off

his bottle and took a slow swig. “I have this fear one night I’m not going to get it. The scene will drag on, and I won’t say anything funny.”

Barak said he hopes a casting director will hire him for what he calls “the right part,” a character he can play that will make him feel like he’s not really acting. He said when he’s playing the right role he comes alive. I told him I thought that might be a universal desire and he peeled the rest of the label off of his beer. “Well, here’s to finding our part,” he said, holding up his bottle.

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I got a chocolate Lab puppy a few months ago, and when I brought her home I showed her where to use the bathroom and where her bowl of food was. She’d whine and I’d ask what was wrong, and she’d look at me with the blankly inquisitive stare of an old person in a retirement home. I read a book that said Lucy was designed to live in a pack, and thought I was another dog and I should be the pack leader. The book said to lay her on her back and close my fingers in the fold of her neck so she knew I was in charge. In a way, the book ruined it for me because before I read it I imagined Lucy was more like a furry little human than a dog. I interacted with her like an underdeveloped child who couldn’t say words and only thought in French. But after reading the book I realized she wasn’t a human; she was a dog. It made me feel lonely, to be honest. But in reading about Lucy, and realizing she was just an animal, I wondered what a book would say that taught some other species to keep humans as pets. I wondered if it would say how to potty train us and explain that we need to eat a few times a day. You never realize what kind of animal you are when you are the animal who is trying to figure it out.

I bring up Lucy because I was at The Ugly Mug the other morning and heard a girl tell another girl about a man she'd met. She was excited about him and was telling her friend what he looked like and what he'd said, and she asked her friend whether she thought he might like her or something.

Watching people at The Ugly Mug felt like watching the dogs at the dog park. I watched people walk in and look around to see what kind of other people were in the room. I watched their mannerisms and expressions and could see all of us, for a moment, from the perspective of God looking down at humans, looking down at the animals He'd made, all of us with our animal instincts doing what we'd been programmed to do, drinking from our coffee bowls and sniffing other people to see what kind of music they like and what they did for a living.

We don't like to think of ourselves as animals, but we are. I know we have spirits and all that, but when I look at myself in the mirror, I don't see a spirit; I see a head and some hair. I see teeth. I see the sleep in my eyes because God made me to sleep and to wake up and look for food and all the other instincts in our DNA. It's as though God hands you a slip of paper that says you're a woman or you're a man; you got born in a rich family in America or you got born in a village in Africa.

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I've never been an actor, but I could relate to the pressure my friend Barak was talking about because I feel like I am supposed to do something interesting with my life. I

don't mean I'm supposed to entertain people, although sometimes I identify with that. I'm talking about a sense that life has the basic ingredients for a meaningful experience and I'm supposed to put things together so the meaning happens.

I'm not exactly sure where the sense that life is supposed to be meaningful comes from, except maybe the beauty of the landscape and the complexity of my body tell me I am here for a reason and it's not just to play video games.

As a writer of nonfiction I'm supposed to know what life is about, but to be honest, I don't. I write books about faith, which only makes the job harder. When you write books about faith, people read them and expect to hear from God, as though God calls me on the phone in the morning and says, *Write this down; I forgot to say this in the Bible*. I know writers who actually approach their books this way, but none of them has given God my phone number.

You can make a lot of cash telling people what to do with the scenes God gives them. If you're a religious writer, all you have to do is tell people how to live and throw in some Scripture references and people will believe you. It's true. That's the thing people are always asking me the most: they're always asking what they're supposed to do with their lives. That's why I'm not a priest, I think, because I have no idea what people are supposed to do with their lives.

I don't blame people for wanting somebody to tell them what to do, though. I bet if Barak could have an earpiece so God could tell him what to say on stage, he'd wear it. He'd wear it and he'd get discovered for sure, because God would feed him the best lines. Barak would make the audience laugh and then cry and then make them laugh again.

He'd get on *Saturday Night Live* and everybody would say he's a genius.

Maybe that's why we buy so many self-help books, because we want somebody to tell us what to do, what to say. Maybe self-help books are animal training books for humans and we're all just trying to train ourselves. I'm sounding fatalistic.

This isn't the sort of thing you wanted to read about, I would imagine. Fatalism and the fact we might just be animals. And I hate saying all this in writing because being a fatalist and a writer rarely works out. Nietzsche did it with some success, but he is one of the few. He didn't have personal success, mind you, because he was a puny loser. But he is huge with twenty-something intellectuals. He's the Justin Timberlake of depressed Germans. And there are a lot of depressed Germans.

You'd think God would just come out and tell us what to do in the Bible. But He doesn't. He mostly tells stories, and He rarely stops the story to say what the point is. He just lets the characters and the conflict hang in the air like smoke.

I don't think we give stories enough credit, though. Last year, my roommate Jordan and I moved into a condo above the library in Sellwood. It's a big brick building and every few mornings when I take Lucy for a walk I see a man delivering crates of books through the back door. He parks his truck behind the building by the Dumpster, and the other day when he was stacking crates next to his truck I wondered if he ever got tempted to drive the truck off the Sellwood bridge because he realized it's full of a thousand books that contradict each other. I bet if he drove his truck off the Sellwood Bridge nobody would grieve for the nonfiction. We'd all grieve the loss of the novels. We'd all be sad about the drowning stories.

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I've noticed they don't make self-help books for dogs. Lucy just *is*, and she's fantastic at it. I can't say for sure, but I don't think she ponders a better way to be a dog. Dogs don't read books about how to be dogs. They say humans are the most evolved of animals, and I suppose our bridges and furniture prove this to be true, but sometimes when I watch Lucy look for the toy I've hidden, her little body joggling behind her wide eyes, I wish life could be so pleasurable for the rest of us.

It's harder being a human than it is being a dog. When I'm at the dog park, I never know what to say to the other dog owners. We're all there so our dogs can exercise, but the awkward conversation kills me. The other day I asked what kind of dog one of the owners had and they said something, and then I asked the other and they said their dog was a Lab like mine. I said Lucy looked like a seal when she's wet and her ears are pinned back, but nobody laughed. And I stood there feeling uncomfortable while our dogs sniffed each other's poop without the slightest hint of self-awareness.

And part of me feels like God is more pleased with the dogs' interaction than He is with ours, as though they are the ones having fun with the scenes He gave them, and we are still trying to figure it out.

### 3

## A Million Miles in a Thousand Years

I learned a lot about what to do with the scenes God gave me 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, shoot the thing, and then it usually goes straight to DVD. It's a crap job. It made me glad I wrote books, to be honest.

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 or not 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*.

...

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 like 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 show he and his friends drafting a fantasy football team this Sunday. I wanted to come but he said I ask too many questions.

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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 everybody they don't know how to drive in snow.

I stayed off the highway but still had to navigate the hill on 82<sup>nd</sup> 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 website. 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 on 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 fruits.

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 new, because if there is silence in the conversation I feel like 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 we would want to shoot it there at the airport, 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 into 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.