

A Million Miles in a Thousand Years

by Donald Miller

An Advance Chapter and a Few Other Passages I Thought You'd Like

[Uncorrected Proof, Not For Resale]

Chapter One: A Million Miles in a Thousand Years

My life has been a series of random experiences. Some of them were good. When I was in high school the home-coming queen asked me for a kiss. And that year I scored the winning touchdown in a game of flag football. A year or so later I beat my friend Dean 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 back stage to get Harry Connick Jr's autograph. He had just married a Victoria Secret's model and I swear she looked at my hair for an inappropriate amount of time.

Several years ago my friends Kyle and Fred were visiting Oregon and we drove into the desert and climbed Smith Rock. There were forest fires in the Cascade Range that summer and so a haze settled in the Columbia River Gorge. The smoke came down the river and bulged a deeper grey 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 down and watched for the better part of an hour and later each of us mentioned we'd not seen anything more beautiful. I wondered then if life weren't about nature, if all of us were supposed to live in the woods.

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 walked from her car to the store in her 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 and 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.

But when my friends Paul and Danielle had their second daughter I went to the hospital and held her in my arms. She was as tiny as a bald cat and warm and so exceptionally needy and dependant and when I smiled at her mother I saw something in her eye that told me life was about more than sunsets or romance. I didn't know what it was, exactly, but I felt like a painter that had discovered a color all new to the world.

I learned from an early age life has its highs and lows, and I suppose I fell into thinking a person's ambition should increase the highs and rid himself of the lows. But none of that explains why the lows happen.

I say this because not all of the scenes I remember are good. 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 the porch light on and then drove to McDonalds and bought a happy meal. When she got out of the car she held the Happy Meal up high so I could see it over the weeds. I followed the bag up the driveway and it shone under the 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 remember going to bed feeling like a failure, like a person with no resolve.

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 her hand would get under 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.

If you ask me, the people who get the most out of life are the ones who don't ask questions. I wish I was this kind of person. I was at Crème the other morning and heard a girl tell another girl about her previous night's date and I kept wondering how she could go on about her date without knowing what love is for and what it means. I kept wondering how she could be excited about something when there was no philosophical map that would tell her where she was going and whether or not arriving there would give her a sense of closure and fulfillment. And there is a man who delivers library books to the library downstairs and the other day when he was carrying cartons of books into the library I wondered if he ever got tempted to drive the truck off the Sellwood bridge because he knew it was filled with a million ideas that contradicted each other. There are times when I think an act like that might be righteous. But I don't know why.

I have a friend who has the uncanny ability to live in the moment. He manages a Bi-mart and has a wife and he doesn't think about the future and doesn't think about the past and to me he is like a person floating on his back in a river and only thinks about the rapids when he finds himself in the rapids.

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The worst thing that happened in my writing career was when I realized that if people took my advice they might end up like me. It was a wet November morning and I was living with some guys across town. I was sitting by the window in my boxers staring at a blank computer screen eating Cheetoh's out of a bowl of dried up cereal. As I was sitting there I pictured people reading my book then quitting their jobs to numb themselves with carbohydrates. That was the only day I seriously considered going back to college.

The thing you are supposed to do as a writer is justify a person's experiences. It doesn't matter whether you are a self-help writer or a novelist. This is why people turn to books. But the truth is writers don't often know anything. We are emotionally needy people trying to figure *it* out as we type. Since the first day I got published I haven't trusted books.

If you want to find people who are emotionally healthy, attend a scuba-diving class. I tried it once. A friend told me I ought to do something to get my mind off myself, to stop analyzing everything. We got into our scuba outfits and I stood at the edge of the pool and self-consciously compared my body to the lean seventy-three year old who stood next to me. I felt like a seal that had eaten a basketball. And when I got into the water, all I could think about was using the experience as a metaphor in a book. I was going to talk

about the tranquility of the water as it relates to divine awareness, leaving out the fact I was afraid to leave the shallow end, or that I nearly drowned. If it weren't for the old man's dexterity, I would have died.

This is what I mean when I say a writer's job is to justify a person's experiences. But what if you don't have a justification? What if you can no longer look somebody in the eye to say why they are here or what they are supposed to do? Or worse, what if you could tell them, but you couldn't do it while looking them in the eye. What if, inside, you knew a person could do the things you told them to do but end up only numbing themselves to the overall randomness of their experiences, of life itself. What if secretly you wanted the books you had written to end up in the back of a truck at the bottom of a river?

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My religious life suggests life is about God, but I don't know what that means. To me, life seems like sunsets and sunrises and crushes on girls and other people having babies. But because all of these things die, and because time is like a river that carries into a fog from within which nobody calls back a warning about rapids, I began to think somewhat fatally about life. I didn't know it at the time, but what I felt was that life could not end up at an overall place of meaning and completion.

Being a writer and a fatalist doesn't have to be a bad deal. Neitzche did it with some success. Not personal success, mind you, because he was a 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. And I tried to write as a fatalist for a season. But when I sent a few chapters of my fatalist memoir to my publisher they said they weren't interested and asked me to write a real book. Specifically, they didn't like the meditation chapters, not chapters about meditation, mind you, I am talking about short introductions followed by actual blank pages.

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I wanted to write a book but I couldn't. I found myself stuck in a place where words didn't mean anything. And neither did experiences. The publisher called to remind me a book was due but I didn't answer the phone. I let the battery on my phone die so I could say the battery had died and I hid. After a week I decided to face the truth and asked my roommate to call the publisher. Jordan is a young aspiring writer who works at a grocery store and though he spoke to my editor in his deepest and most authoritative voice he was not able to calm him down.

As Donald's representation on these matters I command you to calm down, Jordan said, holding the phone away from his ear and pointing at it.

The publisher spoke with authority in return about how many deadlines I had missed and said they had been too patient for too long. Jordan agreed I was awfully irresponsible and

this seemed to calm my publisher down. Then Jordan asked how much money I made and asked if they could send a free book about gardening. And I could hear my publisher raising his voice. I left the room because I knew my career was over. I went into the bathroom and splashed water on my face and looked forcefully into the mirror hoping to have a come-to-Jesus experience when I noticed Jordan had bought a new toothpaste that was lemon flavored. I tasted the toothpaste and went back into my room where Jordan had his feet on my desk and was pitching a book to my publisher about a guy who works at a grocery store but at night is a super hero. When Jordan started talking about how his main character could freeze time *like the Japanese guy on that show Hero's* the publisher hung up.

“They don’t know about genius.” Jordan said.

“What is the difference between your character and the Japanese character on Heroes?” I asked.

“My character *doesn't know* he can stop time.” Jordan said, lowering his head as though to look at me over glasses, though he wasn’t wearing glasses.

I haven’t seen the show *Hero's* but because of commercials I know the guy Jordan is talking about. I don’t watch a great deal of television, to be honest. I like Ken Burns documentaries because they seem to make sense of epic events like the Civil War or Baseball. I’ve started watching the new one about World War II and I like that he goes into the stories you never think about. I mean when you think about World War II you think about Africa and Hitler and Japan but you never think about race relations in the ship yards in Memphis and you never think about the government camps where Japanese-Americans had to move and survive the high-mountain California winters.

I don’t watch a lot of television but I go to a lot of movies. I started going to a lot of movies about the time I realized life was meaningless. I used to 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. Life seemed to make sense while I was sitting in the movies. I’d forget that I had a deadline and that I couldn’t write anything and I’d forget about the million ideas that contradict each other. In a movie, the whole world fades away and all that matters is whether the hobbit destroys the ring or whether the good guy gets that bad guy. I didn’t just like actions movies, either, I liked the slow literary movies that didn’t seem to be about anything and yet they were always about everything at the same time. They were about insecurities and sexual tension and whether or not the father would stop drinking. Sometimes I liked those movies even more because I wouldn’t have to suspend as much disbelief. Nobody in real life has to disassemble a bomb. Not the kind of bomb you think about when you hear the word bomb.

I didn’t know when I was going to all those movies that the movies would help me find meaning in life. I’m not talking about something I learned while watching the movies, although that is part of it. I am talking about something else.

I was asleep in one morning and got a call from a guy down south who said he had a movie company and he and his cinematographer wanted to talk about shooting a film. I

told him I was planning on seeing the movie about the rat that wants to be a chef that afternoon and then I wondered out loud how he got my number. *I got your number from your publisher*, he said. *I'm not calling from a theatre*, he clarified, *I own a movie company. I direct movies.*

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

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

"Reeses Peanut Butter Cups." I answered, sleepily.

Steve, the movie director, went on to explain he wanted to make a movie out of one of the memoir's I had written. He asked if he and his partner could come to town and talk about it. I asked him if he knew where I lived, at 35th and Bybee near Reed College. He said he didn't but maybe I could pick him up at the airport, which I could.

"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 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 in the next few days?"

"No." I said. "One of my roommates is having people over on Sunday."

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

"Are you going to bring cameras? I need to get a haircut is the reason I ask."

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

I hung up the phone and wondered what a movie about my life would look like. I imagined myself at the theatre with a soda in my hand watching myself on the screen doing the things myself does in real life. I wondered whether the experience would be like when you take a picture of yourself in front of a mirror taking a picture of yourself in front of a mirror taking a picture of yourself in front of a mirror...infiniti.

The more I thought about it, though, the more I wondered what part of my life interested them. 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 a big chair. I started cleaning my room and changing some light bulbs around the house. I wanted my friend Penny to be in the documentary. Maybe we could be walking through a park. I wanted Jordan to be in it, too, maybe showing me going through his line at the grocery store.

It snowed the next day, the day Steve and Ben came to town. It snows only a few days a year in Portland and so people drive slowly and on the sidewalks and sometimes in reverse thinking it might be safer. 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 seemed cleaner than it ever had and I wondered if that were a metaphor for something. I wondered if it meant the things we use to clean ourselves are just facades, that underneath all the white there is still a dirty core where property values were sinking.

Steve and Ben were already outside when I rounded the corner and drove under the overhang. I knew who they were because I looked at their website. Steve is tall and thin and has longish McJagger hair and though he is fifty or so can still get away with designer jeans and hip shirts that look like they are slightly hard to find. Ben is warm, even from a distance, and in very good shape as though he exercises regularly and makes juices from fruits. I pulled over a few feet away from them but they did not see me and so 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 really tired when I talk to somebody new because if there is silence in the conversation I feel like it is my fault. I got out of the truck like a Real Estate agent, though, and introduced myself and 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.

We put their bags in the back of the truck and the guys got in and 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 had been thinking about movies ever since Steve called and as the snow fell against the glass I thought that might be a great picture of what it would look like to arrive in Heaven, only once the angels picked you up in their car you would have to 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 one you really loved. The sky was grey-blue and the snow was making the mountains look taller and with the city all covered and clean I felt like I was arriving along with my guests. I felt like my new friends and I were about to explore my same old places in a way that might make them feel new.

From Chapter Two: The Weight of Our Creation

Steve asked if I had a white board and I did, in the garage. I pulled it out and set it on top of the mantle. Ben asked if I had any chips or crackers, and whether I happened to have pipe tobacco. I had all those things and set them on the coffee table, along with a few beers. And the room had a kind of excitement in it as though we were about to draft a fantasy football team.

We sat around the coffee table and Steve told me what goes into creating a movie, how you come up with a script and then search for financing and then hire actors. The process can take several years, he said, even though the actual film gets shot in a month. Then Steve asked whether or not I would be willing to turn the book into a film but I didn't know what to say. I told him I wasn't sure because of *artistic integrity*, which is something I heard on National Public Radio. But when Steve said they would give me money I told him yes.

The book I had written was less a memoir and more topical essays about relationships and faith. I talked about my friends and about little epiphanies I had gathered throughout my life. It was not an advice book, I don't think, as much as it was a message in a bottle. I found it hard to understand how they could turn the book into a movie. Visually, the book worked more like a slide show.

Ben opened the crackers and looked at the blank white board as if he were reading something. He stared so carefully I looked back at the board to see if there was some writing I hadn't noticed. But the board was blank. I looked at Steve who was staring at the white board too so I grabbed a few crackers, leaned back and stared at it myself. I looked at the board so intently I thought I saw a unicorn. Then Steve leaned forward.

“Why do we like Don?” He asked.

From Chapter Five: A Character Is What They Do

There's an old saying writers know that says *a character is what they do*. I take this to mean a character isn't what they want or what they feel or what they wish for, rather, they are people who go fishing with their kids or leave notes for their spouses or make things happen with their hands. I learned *a character is what they do* at the Robert McKee seminar and lately I've realized it applies to life. I've been wondering if my daydreaming has only produced a character that daydreams. And that isn't a very interesting character. And it doesn't make for a very good story, either. . . .

. . . What is so sexy about a life of fantasy is its greasy subtext, namely, that life can be experienced cheap and easy. The gratification, while false and insalubrious, is instant. Fantasy is life, micro-waved. But living an actual story takes action.

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I have a friend named Bob Goff who is terrific at living good stories. He's a lawyer who lives in San Diego and a few times a year we get together for lunch. The last time we had lunch I mentioned I was pretty bored with whatever I was writing at the time and Bob told me a great story about the sort of thing he and his family do to conquer boredom. His wife and three children were sitting around on New Years Day about ten years before and Bob decided New Years Day was, perhaps, the most boring day on the calendar. His kids were laying around on the floor and fidgety and Bob found himself wishing the day would pass more quickly. But then he realized that a day is a day, and if he and the family didn't want to be bored, they didn't have to. He could do something about it. So he asked his kids what they could do to make New Years Day less boring. The kids started throwing around ideas, things like buying a pony or building a rocket ship and then one of the children mentioned they should have a parade. Perhaps getting himself out of buying a pony, Bob lit up and said a parade sounded great. They sat around the dining room table and dreamed of what their parade might look like. They could wear costumes and have balloons and maybe they could invite their friends to watch. Bob thought about it for a second, though, and realized its much more fun to be *in* a parade than to watch a parade and so he made a rule. Nobody would be allowed to watch the parade but anybody would be allowed to participate. So he and the kids walked down their small street and knocked on doors, explaining to neighbors they were having a parade, and anybody who wanted could be in the parade but nobody could watch. And New Years Day being the most boring day of the year, plenty of his neighbors agreed to take part. Bob and the family dressed up in whatever costumes they could come up with and the parade started at one end of the street and ended at Bobs house where they had a neighborhood barbecue.

Now, ten years later, the parade attracts hundreds of participants. People who have left the neighborhood even fly back just to take part. The residents on Bob's street have taken the idea so far they select a parade queen from the local retirement center, and each year the queen, always an elderly woman and often a widow, gives a speech, explaining what

she intends to accomplish during her year-long reign. There's even an annual Queen's Brunch at the San Diego Yacht Club. This last year, Bob said to me smiling, the street's mailman was chosen as the Grand Marshal and showed up in full uniform, leading the parade by throwing envelopes into the air. After we talked that day, Bob sent me a picture of the parade and sure enough, the picture revealed hundreds of people marching down his street dressed in full costume under arches of balloons, carrying flags and banners. And as I looked closely at the picture I noticed there wasn't a single person sitting on the curb. It's a terrific scene.