

RANDOM SCENES

If you watched a movie about a guy who wanted a Volvo and worked for years to get it, you wouldn't cry at the end 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 to think about the story 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 actually living those stories, and expect our lives to feel meaningful. The truth is, if what we choose to do with our lives won't make a story meaningful, it won't make a life meaningful either.

Here's what I mean by that:

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.

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 guys in the tuba section beat the girls in the clarinet section 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 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 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 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 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.