



Big Chance...



...That Time I met...

TOM HANKS

in the Himalayas*

By MARK GILCHRIST
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PHOTOS

Cover: View from a hotel in Darjeeling, India, at 7,000 feet above sea level, the city is often above the clouds.

A Buddhist sign greets visitors at a temple in Darjeeling, India

Title Page: A steam locomotive hauls passengers along the 55-mile-long Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, a UNESCO World Heritage Site more than a century old. The rails are only two-feet apart to allow for the many switchbacks and loops needed as the train climbs and descends more than 6,000 feet. Diesel / electric locomotives are also used on the route.

** Every single word of this story is absolutely true, except for the part about meeting Tom Hanks.*



Scenic rest stop in the Lesser Himalayas.

FOUR-THOUSAND FEET UP in the Himalayas, riding a beautiful, Royal-Enfield motorcycle, just floating, it seemed, along the mountain roads on a brisk, February day. The rhythm of the straightaways and hair-pin switchbacks kept in my head a melody of bliss and peril, of life and death. That's the thing about riding in the mountains; you never know exactly where the road will take you, and this road was about to take me on the most amazing ride of my life.

I had been out for three hours that morning, having left the frenetic city of Siriguri, which is filled with the bustle and grime so typical of India, and I launched up into the foothills of the Himalayas, only a few hours along, a few thousand feet up and a world away. Gone were the six lanes of traffic jammed into two lanes; gone were the huge buses packed to the windows with solemn bodies going...



Typical traffic in Delhi, India.

anywhere, their impatient drivers blowing horns with every tap of the gas pedals; gone were the three-wheel "tuk-tuk" taxis and their brash lawnmower engines, all saying the same thing – brah! Brah! Brah!; gone were random bicycles carrying a half-ton of concrete or 30-foot bundles of



A typical view in the Sikkim state of India.

steel rebar, the meandering cows and people walking, just walking somewhere as if they were there just to fill in the scenery.

I was on my way to Darjeeling, a more “civilized” India, with more tourists, Buddhists and stunning mountain views than I had seen in weeks. I was looking forward to



Keeping West Bengal clean.



Busy alleys are hectic and fascinating in Amritsar, Northwestern India.

enjoying a much more relaxed vacation.

From my first days in India, when I rented the motorcycle in Delhi, and then rode it up to Amritsar, then around to Agra and back to Delhi, then stowed it on a train and rode that train to Calcutta, I had not relaxed – it was too much ground to cover in too little time. Only about 1,500 miles in two weeks, but I now know too well that travel in India takes at least twice as long and is twice as tiring as in the U.S. – it just does, and it just is.

I stopped at one of the more magnificent switchbacks on the edge of a 200-foot cliff, where someone had built a concrete bench. I sat for a while and contemplated the universe. Then I walked away from the road, down a little slope and behind some tea bushes to take a leak.

I hope I didn't ruin a bush, or your taste for tea, but, c'mon, it was just a small drop in this great universe. I

made my way back, and there was a man sitting on the bench – *my bench!* This was really odd, because I had been gone only a few minutes from this clear lookout point, and I had not seen anyone – it was like he just appeared out of the clouds. By the color of his skin, (pale,) I guessed that he was a tourist. He didn't notice me as I walked up behind him.

“Hey there,” I said. He spun around, a little surprised, but pleasant.

“Hey, yourself,” he said through a cautious smile. “Beautiful place, isn't it?” Without acknowledging at all that he had just stolen “my” bench, he slid over and patted the concrete, like it was his. “Have a seat.”

“Uhh, thanks,” I said.

“Come here often?” he said. Something was interestingly strange, here. The man hardly had a tan, he was



Selling treats on the Dagapur Tea Estate in Siriguri, south of the Himalayan plateau.



Many tea estates have medical clinics for workers.

maybe a decade older than me, in his sixties, with shabby, grey hair under a straw hat. Most of his face was hidden behind an unkempt beard, like he was on the long end of enjoying a month of weekends.

“Every day,” I said, “since this morning.” It was a nervous attempt at humor made by a nervous man – me – because all that hair and straw could not hide that voice, that very familiar voice, and after only a few seconds and a few words out of his mouth, I was sure I knew exactly who’s mouth it was.

There was no mistaking who belonged to that voice; who was the very person I had just bumped into thousands of miles from home, way the heck up on a mountaintop in Northern India. Seriously, I had to put tremendous effort into acting nonchalant, (and you would too, I’m sure,) and act as if all along, I had fully expected that the man sitting



A Buddhist sign in downtown Darjeeling.

right in front of me would, of course, be sitting right in front of me all along.

But, of course, I failed.

“Tom,” I said, sputtering, “what the heck are you doing here?” He gave me a quick glance of shock, but his mannerisms betrayed his shabby disguise. Either he was a very good Tom Hanks impersonator trying to impersonate Tom Hanks hiding out as someone other than Tom Hanks, or he was Tom Hanks.



Repairing the road up to Darjeeling.

“Why... Um, I am... well, what the heck are you doing here?” he said.

“Looking for you, of course. Name’s Mark Gilchrist. Say, what happened to your foot?” He was wearing sandals and I could see that his right ankle was a mess. Blood all over. I got up and walked to my motorcycle as he



A tea-leaves-picker has her worked weighed and logged for her pay.

talked.

“I uh... I was saving a small child from drowning, you see,” he said, pointing down into the valley. “Right there, and well, this crocodile jumped up and bit me. Tried to take my leg off. Lucky I’m still alive!” I grabbed a bottle of water from a pouch on my right saddlebag, then I opened the left bag and pulled out a small first-aid kit.

“That would be the first crocodile around here,” I said. “Ever.”

“Right!” he said. “So, I’m trying to keep that a secret, see. Say, bandages? Great!” I sat down next to him and just like that, he propped his foot up on my knee and leaned back, like not only would I provide life-saving sup-

plies, but I was supposed to administer help as well. “Think I’ll survive?”

“With only one leg?” I said, wiping the wound with an antiseptic pad. “Start asking for half-price on shoes.”

“Ouch!” he said, “Hey!” The wound was pretty ugly – not a bite at all, but it looked like he had jammed it down against a rock or something and tore some skin off. Lots of blood, and some flesh hanging off. Pretty straightforward, though; just clean and cover it. I poured water on the wound and put a large gauze pad over it.

“Hold that,” I said, and I pulled an elastic bandage from the kit, then wrapped his foot while trying to wrap my head around this whole scene. I struggled to avoid any of the cliché references that he has surely heard hundreds of times; (“Wow, I’m sitting on a bench with Forrest Gump!”)

Next thing you know, the little first-aid project was



A dragon guarding a bridge across the Teesta River in Northeastern India.



Life on the tracks, in Siriguri, India.

done. He put his sandal on, and there we were, just two guys sitting on a bench, looking over the most beautiful scene. We watched an incredible storm a few miles away, with sheets of water coming down, and lightning bolts that seemed to strike forever.

“Come here often?” I said.

“Every day...” he said, revealing that beguiling sense of humor that America has grown to love. I couldn’t risk being nosy, but I was curious about why the heck he was here, and, well, I could ask him a million questions, and well, I knew he would hate all of them. So, I did the dumbest thing possible. I began plotting a move, a request... yes! Why, for the past two decades, I’d had seriously



The Coronation Bridge was dedicated shortly after the coronation of Queen Elizabeth.

wanted to pitch a very ambitious project to this very man.

But then, likely sensing my very intentions, he created a diversion, asking questions about me, and controlling the conversation away from him. So, I told him all about my trip, and the motorcycle, and trains, and traffic and everything that I could just babble on foolishly about, and he



Required at gas stations, like this one in Churu, India, sand can help extinguish fires.



Carrying feed for their animals across a bridge in Northern India.

almost seemed like he might have actually been interested.

After about 10 minutes, there was a lull in the conversation, enough for him to make his pitch.

“Well, we’d better go,” he said, pointing to the approaching storm.

“We?” I said. “Where are you going?” He turned and looked at me, and I saw the face of Chuck Noland, the lead character in *Cast Away*, bearded and, well, stranded.

“Back to my, um, hotel,” he said. “You?”

“Darjeeling...”

“Great! I’ll hitch a ride,” he said. “You mind?”

“Mind? Well, ah... whaa?”

“Well, I’d walk, but, look...” He raised his bandaged foot and feebly pointed to it.

“I, well, I guess...” I said, with thoughts and schemes and plans swirling around my head. Crazy, I know, I mean, here I had an opportunity that most anyone would relish, to hang with Tom Hanks! But... but yeah, I wanted more.

He just sat there, looking at me, and then I made my move. “I’ll make you a deal...” I forced the words out, around a huge lump in my throat.

“Um, sure,” he said. “What is it? Cash? I don’t carry much, but I can get you...”

“No, not that,” I said, giving him a ‘don’t insult me’ look. I was trying to talk myself out of saying what I was about to say because, really, it was a really stupid thing to say. “I, uh, just want a few minutes...”

“A few whaa?” he said, and I sensed he was catching onto my terrible intentions and I just knew that I would blow this little deal, big time.

“A few m-minutes,” I said. “I... I want to pitch a project to you!” His expression changed completely, his face drooped and lost any trace of a smile. He looked dis-



Delivering cargo in Siriguri, India on a net-zero carbon level.



A monument to mountaineer Tenzing Norgay in Siriguri, India.

appointed, like I had just let him down, like I was his oldest son who had just announced that I wanted to quit acting and become a doctor. So, I panicked. “I mean, not pitch, but discuss. I just want to talk to you – I mean, with you – about a project. Not pitch, I didn’t say pitch. Or project. Didn’t say... anything!”

“Seriously?” he said. “Sheesh. Really?... Did you follow me – who told you I was here? Charlese? Tina?”

“No! No one told me,” I said. “Who is Charlese? – I, I just stopped here, and then you stole my ben...”

“Do you know how many times I get pitched?” Tom said. “Each day? Before breakfast even? Stole?”

“I... I, I just. Just let me say...” Then I paused, setting up a strategy. “I got two words for you,” I said. “Let me say just two words and then you can tell me to shut up, to just take my bike and go home – wherever that is – or that

you'll give me a chance. And I'll give you a ride... wherever... you want to go."

"You would just leave me," he said. "Out here... like this." He rubbed his ankle and winced for the first time since I had cleaned the wound. Actor.

"Just think of the book rights," I said, then mocking a book title; "I Was the Last Person to See Tom Hanks Alive – Eaten by Crocodiles!"

"Two words?" he said. "What could possibly... all right, all right," he said. "Give them to me – only two?"

"Yeah."

"That's one..."

"Ahh!" I put a finger in the air, kind of like telling him to behave, and I paused, for effect.

"Take your time," he said, "it'll get dark in a few hours." When he had finally shut up and I knew I had as much of his attention as I could muster, I let it rip.

"Ernie..." I said, "Pyle..."

Silence. Tom Hanks looked puzzled, then confused, then concerned, etc., etc., as though his director had just told him to; 'Give me 12 emotions with no words,' and he was running like crazy with it. This went on for at least a minute. He got up and



Delicious treats made bespoke in Darjeeling.



A gentleman barber serving gentlemen clients, in Churu, India.

paced a little, stepped to the edge of the cliff, put his hands on his hips and stared out into the world. I waited. He turned and looked at me directly, hands still at hips... and he looked a little pissed.

“What the hell...” he said, “makes you think I haven’t already considered this? Many times?”

“Oh, I know!” I said. “I know, exactly! This isn’t a pitch, really, sir, but I just want to know why... I mean, I just can’t figure out why in the world you haven’t touched this yet.”

“Touched?” he said. “Why, I have...”

“Oh, but you haven’t... I mean, made a movie about him yet.”

“Well, I just haven’t seen a good script yet,” he said. “I mean, an excellent script, because this isn’t something you just, just... well, it’s serious and very close to my heart.”

“I, uh...”



Ernie Pyle

“Well, you certainly got my attention,” he said.

“Well, I, um...”

“Okay, look, I planned on hiking the rest of the day, but I got this...” he said, motioning to his ankle, “this thing. So I have a few hours, if you give me a ride to Darjeeling, we can talk there, about how you plan to honor the greatest war correspondent who ever lived.”

I had no idea how to respond to that. I mean, what the heck? Probably the most influential man in Hollywood actually wanted to talk with me? I just knew that I was just dreaming.

“Uh, okay,” I said, and spun around to go. I took one ambitious step and tripped right over a huge rock.

“You okay to drive?” he said, and I wasn’t sure how to



Sharing the road, in Siriguri, India.



A wood craftsman in Berhampore, India.

respond. I felt a little dizzy. We walked to the motorcycle and I picked the helmet up off the seat. He took it from me before I could raise it to my head.

“Thanks,” he said.

“Uh... I, uh... I think the law here requires the operator to wear a helmet,” I said as he put my helmet on his



Very reliable transportation, in Suratgarh, India.

head.

“I’ll pay the fine,” he said, clicking the strap under his chin. “Okay, you get on first.”

“Say, can I... just... get a... selfie?”

“At the hotel. C’mon, your clock is ticking.” So, I got on the motorcycle, as I had done a thousand times before, and then the Greatest Actor of My Lifetime climbed on the back. I started the engine, pulled on the clutch, shifted into first, and well, we rode off. Just me and Tom Hanks – just another day in the Himalayas.

We rolled into Darjeeling about a half-hour later, and he gave me directions, tapping on my left or right shoulder, or just telling me when to turn – okay, shouting directions, (sheesh...) Well, that went on for far too long, up and down hills, through back alleys and far away from the tourist area. Finally, at a stop at the peak of a hill, he said; “this is it,” and hopped off. Still wearing my helmet, he



Chinese noodles are a rare find, I found, in India. These served on newsprint, in Darjeeling.

WELCOME TO DARJEELING



Maintained by: Marg Ngo, D.J.

Darjeeling, and much of the northeast, caters to tourists more than most of India.

crossed the street and walked into a shophouse.

I felt like I had just been pinched and that this dream was over, and, well, that would be the last I would see Tom Hanks, and my helmet! I pulled off the street and parked my bike on the sidewalk – hell, let him pay the fine! I was shuffling through my saddlebags looking for something, and wondering where I was going to get another helmet when it appeared over my left shoulder.

“You coming?” Tom said. “Hungry? C’mon, I got the perfect place.” I put the helmet on my seat and followed him back into the mysterious building. It didn’t quite look like, well, anything, and certainly wasn’t the type



A typical Indian truck, in Calcutta.

of hotel in which I thought a man of his stature would rest his head – heck, I wasn't even sure if I would stay there. I followed him down a short flight of stairs, then left, and up three steps, through a door, down a narrow, dark and sloping – well, tilted – hallway, and past a very small kitchen that was nearly filled with a very small woman.

“Hi Gigi,” he said as he passed.

“Hi Mr. Tom,” came a reply over the sounds of chopping and frying and, I swear, a chicken clucking. “What you want eat tonight?” Tom stopped, and I ran right into him in the dim light.

“Say, Gigi, can I have the same thing you cooked Saturday?” Tom said, brushing me off. “It was delicious, the noodles with the meat – please don't tell me what the meat was, okay? Two, please? One for my friend?”

“Okay, Mr. Tom,” Gigi said. “You okay? Did you get killed in the river?”

“Yeah, yeah, I'm fine,” Tom said. I hurt my

ankle, but I'll survive.”

“I told you river was dangerous,” Gigi said. “Crocodiles!” Tom laughed, leaned over and tried to give Gigi a kiss or something and she brushed him off like he was just



Elegant and courteous service in Jaipur, India.



I recommend visiting the Golden Temple and Amritsar over the Taj Mahal and Agra any day.

another fly in her kitchen.

“We’ll be upstairs, okay?” Tom said, reaching into a refrigerator and pulling out two beers. “Just... whenever.”

“I’ll let you know when ready,” Gigi said, not missing a stir or chop.

“Thanks!” Tom said as we walked up many more stairs, and then he turned to me; “Service here is lousy,” he said, “but the food is mediocre.” I felt like we were climbing an abandoned water tower or something, and I tried to keep a general feel for where we were, but I was



Frying potatoes in a massive skillet in Amritsar.

easily lost. So, like hundreds of actors, directors, writers and producers have wanted to do for decades, I just followed in Tom's footsteps... and then he stopped. "Here we are," he said, and opened a door.

The door opened toward us, because the entire, small room was filled with a table and two benches – a booth, actually – and very dark. He swung the door way open. "Get that one, would you?" he said, and I opened the other one of the heavy, wooden doors. "Have a seat." Our eyes were used to the dark by now, so I could almost make out the contents of the room, and could barely see enough of Tom's face to have a con-

versation with him.

"Cozy," I said.

"More like Crazy," he said. "This whole place is held together with rusty wire and duct tape, hanging off the side of a mountain – I can't believe it hasn't all just slid down into the valley."

"So dark... So, how did you find... why do you eat here?" I said.

"Ah, good question," he said. "Tell me about Ernie



Not a posed photo, at all, nope.

Pyle.”

“I, uh, well ahh...” This was it. I had complained for 20 years that I would never be able to act on my passion to see this story told, and now I had my chance. It was the Great Moment of Truth; I had my tap shoes on and the curtain just opened – it was time to dance. “I, well, uh... Criminy, Mr. Hanks, I, I don’t know where to start!” (Yes, now he was ‘Mr. Hanks,’ as I no longer had his only ride into town, and I had lost all my leverage.)

“Just... well,” he said, helping me along. “Why should I portray Ernie Pyle? I mean, I’m flattered, but, why?”

“You... flattered?” I said. He didn’t respond. “Yes, right,” I said. “Well, other than his and your mannerisms, stature and personality?”

“Mark,” he said. “I’m an actor, we can do all that.”



Clockwise, from above, left; a man in Calcutta, India, processes copper for sale to recyclers; a contractor borrows a city sidewalk to assemble bicycles throughout the night for a store in Sri Ganganagar; and workers from a jewelry store watch as women wash clothing in a street gutter in Calcutta.



From top; a cable-stay bridge leading into Calcutta; just another beautiful tree, in Ranaghat; and there is obviously no limit to the length of bamboo poles that can be carried on a motorbike.





Looking cool in a cool-looking car in Jaipur, India.

“Yeah, well, yes and no, right? I mean, that’s casting, right? Sorry, I didn’t, I didn’t mean to – anyway – look, you did ‘Saving Private Ryan’ with a great passion, didn’t you? ‘Band of Brothers?…’ you love that era. You must have tremendous respect for it, and I just know that you must really want to tell Pyle’s story. How many of his books have you read?”



Decorated “Tuk-Tuk,” three-wheeled taxis attract attention and tourists, in Churu, India.

“I’ll ask the questions here,” he said. “Okay, I know you said this isn’t a pitch, but why don’t you pitch me the project. Have you written a treatment?”

“I, well, no. I... Mr. Hanks?”

“Yes?” He looked worried, like maybe he could tell that I was about to pass out.

“Can I just take a deep breath here? Just collect my thoughts?”

“Sure. I’ll be right back.” He got up and went down the stairs and I tried to put together a game plan, organize my thoughts into some logical pattern, but I couldn’t. He returned a few minutes later and sat down.

“Mr Hanks, I’m just going to tell you his life story as I remember,” I said, “but look, it’s been 20 years since I gave up on this dream...”

“Well, okay,” he said. “Why did you give up?” That was a cold question, revealing a lifetime of failure, and I cried, but only inside – there’s no crying in show business.

“Okay,” I said. “Pyle was born in Indiana in, like, 1900 – real midwestern stock, right? Doesn’t know what to do



Enduring beauty, in Jaipur, India.



Kids explode into fun and silliness with a visitor to their village in Upper West Bengal, India.

after high school. Joins the Navy for a while – serves for a few months – and then goes to college...”

“Where?”



A daycare center in Siriguri, India, provided by the tea plantation so women can work.



Bananas for sale in Amritsar, State of Punjab, India.

“Uh, I – Indiana U, I guess. Sheesh, I don’t know, Google it!”

“Well...” Tom said.

“What does it matter?” I said. “And... now, oh, great, umm, hold on...”

“I derailed you with one question?” he said, fumbling with something in his hands. “Son, you need to work on your pitch.” I heard a match strike, and the flare of ignited phosphorus lit up the tiny room. Before me was Tom Hanks, clean-shaven and looking just like... like Tom Hanks.

“Whaa?” I said. “When did you?... I made a motion across my face as if shaving, but he ignored me and moved



Singer sewing machines are made in Vietnam and China, and the old style is still popular, using both treadles and electric motors, like these in a shop in Jaipur, India.

the glowing match over to the end of the table. He lit a candle there as I tried to get back on the track. “Okay, that was World War One... Then he, Ernie Pyle, he – get this, he goes to college for almost four years and then he quits with only one semester left!”

“I’m going to play a quitter?” Tom said, deep concern masking his actor’s face.

“No, no,” I said. “See, Ernie was kinda rebellious. He would just go his own way, right? He’s brave! He uhh... well, right. So he goes to Washington, D.C. and works for a newspaper there. Works for a few years, gets married, and quits a year later.” Tom looked worried, again.

“No, no,” I said. “I mean, he quit as a reporter, but

then, he begins a weekly column. See, he buys an old Ford roadster and he and Jerry – his wife, Geraldine – travel around the U.S., and he interviews people – just ordinary folks, and he tells their stories in a newspaper column. Becomes quite popular.

“Just think about it,” I said. “You would get to drive a 1920s roadster! Wouldn’t that be cool?”

“You mean, I’d have to buy a 1920s roadster,” he said, “if I produce this thing, and don’t you know actors don’t drive cars anymore? They’re on trailers.”

“Jerry Seinfeld does,” I said. “In *Comedians in Cars...*”

“You’re derailed again.”

“Right,” I said. “Okay, so this would be the coolest part of the movie, if the rest wasn’t even cooler. Just amazing, as he interviews and writes about people from all over the U.S., from snake handlers to bar owners – everybody. Say, I can just see you now, holding a little notebook and nodding as people talk, like you’re really...”

“This is a terrible pitch,” Tom said.

“Right. Sorry,” I said. “Okay, so he does this on and off for a decade or so, and Scripps-Howard newspapers syndicates his column – he becomes one of the most widely-



Her favorite reading spot, in Agra, India.



Prayer wheels at a monastery in Sikkim, northern India.

read, most popular columnists in the country!

Tom started playing with matches in the box. “And what a shame,” he said, “that so few people today have ever even heard of him.”

“Yeah, amazing... okay, World War Two starts up, and the Germans are blitz-bombing the heck out of London. Every night! So Ernie goes there and reports on it all. But he doesn’t write like a war correspondent – he can’t – he just writes like he, well, writes, and it’s different, and beautiful and the readers just love it.”

“How so?” Tom said.

“How...so?” I paused and looked down. I played with the box of matches for a second, spinning it on the table between my fingers. “Tom,” I said. “He actually wrote – can you believe this? – he wrote about how beautiful the bombing raids were.”

“Yeah,” Tom said. “Well, that was Ernie.”

In the brief pause that followed, there was a discordant

clanging from below; someone was beating on the side of something ugly with something mean, is what it sounded like.

“Oh jeez,” Tom said, jumping up. “There’s our dinner – wait here, I’ll be right back.”

Then, shouting; “I’m coming down!” Tom left the booth – nearly running – and disappeared down the stairs, and I just sat there beating myself up for the massive blunders I had just made, pinching myself to awaken from this dream, and searching myself for ways to salvage this pitiful pitch, or whatever it was.

Minutes later, my thoughts were interrupted by the sighs and groans of a middle-aged man carrying something heavy up an old, wooden staircase, like a ghost, dragging a body back from the dead. I knew it was Tom Hanks, as even his sighs and groans sound familiar. He appeared in the candle-light, looking exhausted. He carried with his left hand one of those Asian pot sets that stack together, and under the other arm he had a load of dishes, bowls, place-mats and a few more beers.



A doorman at a hotel in Sikkim.



"Tuk-Tuk" taxis can carry entire families through Agra, India.

I stood and helped him unload, putting things on the table as he set the pots down. He reached into a trouser pocket, pulled out a fistful of silverware and dropped it on the table. He waved his hand across the booth.

"Here, you set the table," he said, "and I'll prepare dinner." I busied myself with the cargo he had just delivered, filling half the table while he separated the pots and filled the other half. We didn't talk during this process, other than Tom savoring aloud the foods he unwrapped.

"They have the most incredible tomatoes in this country!... Can you believe these onions?... Watch this sauce, now, it's hotter than an Indian summer."

I was trying to figure out why one of the world's most famous people was hiding out in an Indian slum, serving



A cooking-oil-can recycling center in Jaipur, India.

himself dinner, but everything else was way too distracting. I had never set a table for a celebrity before, and I wanted to get it just right, (knives face inward, right?...) But it appeared that Tom couldn't care less.

The main ingredient of our meal was noodles, (not "pasta," as I haven't even heard that word here,) fried in a wok larger than Gigi herself. Colorful, chopped vegetables covered everything, and spices made it delicious. The meal was so simple, yet so delicious that it deserves much better reporting, but sheesh, I was kinda busy, you know? Couldn't really concentrate on the food.

We were just about to dig in when Tom Interrupted.

"Wait," he said, "dark in here..." He reached over to my side of the table and grabbed a thick curtain that I hadn't even noticed, and pulled it back, all the way across the table and behind him, and the room filled with such



Traffic of all kinds, in Delhi, India.

light that I had to cover my eyes for several seconds.

“Whoa!” I said. “Thanks for the warning.” He blew out the candle and then opened a pair of tall windows – almost doors – with a real showman’s flourish. We were at the top of a ridge overlooking an incredible valley and parts of Darjeeling, and our table seemed to be floating above it all. Wow, only moments before, I had been thinking that we were abandoned in a hovel of an attic space, but now we enjoyed one of the most spectacular views in the city. “Like it?” He said, wrapping noodles onto a fork. “You should see it at night.”

We began eating, and I took the opportunity while his



A traditional religious ritual in Siriguri, India.

mouth was full to do the talking. I continued my pitch.

“Right, so Pyle finds his real passion in war reporting,” I said. “But he will not – cannot – just report on the war; so he writes about the people, the soldiers. He interviews the everyday-man in the foxhole, and he makes sure to get



Carrying at least a half-ton of cargo on bicycles in Berhampore, India.

the soldiers' names and hometowns in the newspaper. But, as he writes about one soldier after another, he is actually writing about the entire war – brilliant.”

I knew that Tom would like the focus on average people, so I played that up. The fact that I could envision him playing this role so well frustrated me and animated me at the same time.

“Pyle was extraordinary,” I said. “But he had demons.”

“Oh?” Tom said, and he raised his face as if he'd just woken up. This was my Ace Card and I knew it. Movie-people love demons, because they give characters, well, character.

“Throughout his career, he never really felt he was good enough,” I said. “Both he and Jerry suffered from depression – she, worse than him – and they drank...”

“Much? Tom said.”



Dye powders for sale in Jaipur, India.

“What?” I said. “Oh, she’s a full-blown alcoholic, and him? Not sure. She stays home, in Albuquerque most of the time, and doesn’t get much work, so she can fully entertain her demons all day, every day. Tries to kill herself. They divorce and then remarry by proxy. She dies shortly after he does.”

“Wait!” Tom said. “Wait, wait... did you just glide over the crux of this whole story? You spent an hour leading up to the meat of this meal, and then you just shove all that down my throat?”

“Wow!, Umm. Oh,” I said. “I guess I did.” I fumbled with my food, stabbing a chunk of something that could have been buffalo, or maybe camel. “This is where I lose track. I, I...”

“Yeah, I’ll say!”



Fresh meat for sale in Darjeeling, India.



A public bathroom in West Bengal, India, with sensible rates for Nos. 1 & 2.

“He wins the Pulitzer Prize,” I said.

“Of course he does...” Tom said. “And I guess you’ll just mention that in the credits?”

“No, it’s an important scene!”

“Maybe sneak it in the

DVD extras?”

“Be nice!” I said. “I, I haven’t prepared for this... I haven’t even thought about it for 20 years!”

“Really? Sounds like you...”

“He got the Pulitzer after the Waskow column.”

“Waskow...”

“Yeah,” I said. “Captain Henry T. Waskow. He was killed in Southern Italy. Pyle was there the night they brought his body down from the mountain.”

“Brought it...”

“On a mule,” I said. “Very moving piece. Sparse, but rich in detail.”

“How can it be both...?”

“You have to read it, Tom,” I said. “In fact, I’m sure you would read it in the movie.”



In a small community under a highway overpass in Siriguri, India, was this a princess just waiting for her prince to take her away?



Meh... This place in Agra, India, just did not strike me as the “Taj Mahal” of buildings.

“Me?... Read?...” Tom said, but I ignored the slight and went full-speed into a quagmire.

“Yeah, I can see the whole scene now, with your voice over it, maybe for the entire piece,” I said. “It’s beautiful. And actually, since he was a journalist, I imagine the whole movie will have bits of you reading his columns. You can do narration, right? Can you?”

As soon as those words came out of my mouth, I badly wanted to shove them right back in. I even tried to stop the



Trafficking poultry, & other traffic, in Siriguri, India.

whole train wreck even as they came rolling out, but no, I kept talking, right there and then, and, yes, I actually asked Tom Hanks if he could narrate – I had just asked Jesus if he could walk on water.

“I, I...” Tom said, about to give me exactly what I deserved. “I, well, I’ll try! That’s where a person, like, reads things, aloud, right? Moving your mouth and tongue and all, but you’re not even on camera, right?”

“Stop, please!” I said. “Okay, I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

“Have you seen...”

“Just stab me with this fork, okay?” I said. “I deserve it.” I forgot about Aladdin.”

“Toy Stor...”

“Yes! Of course!” I said. “Toy Story! The cop, right... please, Tom, I have no children!”

“Do you know Ken Burns?...”

“I’m a little flustered right now, okay?” I said. “Will you...”

“I know him – nice guy.”

“Can we just get past this?” I said. “Please!”

“Okay, okay,” Tom said. “Look, this is a great story, I know. I would love to tell the world about Ernie Pyle, but I need a script, you understand? I need 108 pages – it’s that simple. Let’s clean up.” Tom started stacking the pots.

“Oh, okay. Right,” I said. I emptied my beer and set about clearing the table.

“Here, just throw it all in here,” he said, sliding one of the empty pots toward me. I put the plates and silverware in the pot as he stacked the others, clipping them together in a tower. In short order, we had the table clear. We took one last, amazing look outside, stood up and walked out, leaving everything on the table.

Gigi was gone, and we just walked down the maze of stairs like a couple of spelunkers, and went outside to the street. “Let’s go for a ride,” he said, waving to a bicycle



Volleyball and bovines, near Calcutta, India.



Waiting on a train, and waiting, on a train, in Ranaghat, India.

rickshaw. It rolled up to us and we got in, adjusting our two large bodies to the small seat. The driver, easily older than both of us, and lean as a gazelle, barely waited for our feet to leave the pavement before he started pedaling right into heavy traffic, and we became a part of the great river of steel and noise that is urban India. Coughing engines, blaring horns and a million near-misses are the body of



Can't wait to grow up and get right to work, in Sikkim State, India.



Working at the Golden Temple, in Amritsar, India.

any city here.

“Why don’t you write up a treatment for me?” Tom said, referring to a print version of the pitch that I had just failed to give him, only much, much better.

“Well, I guess...”

“You guess?” he said. “You guess what? That...”

“Yes, yes, of course. I’d love to,” I said. “It’s just, well... yes, heck, I can do it.”

“You can? Oh, praise the Lord!”

“Tom, easy, okay? I’m drowning in self-doubt, here.”

“More like self-pity,” he said, “and I gotta warn you, I don’t deal well with that. Nope.”

“I will write a treatment for you, Mr. Hanks,” I said. “Consider it done!”

“Good, and while you’re at it,” he said as we squeezed between a speeding bus and a dining cow. “Write a screenplay for me, too.”



Cooking up delicious noodles in Darjeeling, India.

to rewrite it, okay?”

“What are you doing...”

“Giving you a chance,” he said. “The chance of your lifetime.” He reached into one of his trouser pockets – not easy in the cramped space – and pulled out a Sharpie marker.

“Uh, umm... you carry those?”

“Never know when you’ll need one,” he said.

“Oh yeah, for autographs, right?”

“No, no!” he said. “Of course not! No, just to write down addresses... and things.” He uncapped the marker

“A what? I mean... what?”

“A screenplay,” he said. “You know what that is, right? A stack of papers filled with action, dialogue and metaphors on which a movie is born?”

“Yeah, but, but I never said...”

“Sure you did,” Tom said, watching traffic distractedly, as if it was just the flames of a campfire, or waves rolling up on a beach. “Back on the bench, you said; ‘I want to write the screenplay for your next big hit.’”

“I... did?...”

“It has to be good, too,” Tom said. “Very good – I don’t want to have to pay some drunks



He wasn't twice my age, but was likely twice as fit as he pedaled me to the Delhi airport.

and wrote on the inside ceiling of the rickshaw. That's when I realized that he had not spoken to the driver, had not given him directions or a destination; we had just started up and rolled through the streets of Darjeeling. On the canvas top of the old vehicle, he wrote: '14 Ocean Ave. 2nd Floor. Room 1, Santa Monica.'

"Okay..." I said.

The rickshaw pulled to the curb, rolled to a stop and Tom got out. I took a quick photo of the address with my phone, and climbed out. We stood on the sidewalk on a busy street corner in downtown Darjeeling, and that, there and then, was the last conversation I had with Tom Hanks.

“Two weeks,” he said.

“Whaa?...”

“Get it to me by the third. I have a project starting up on the fourth, and I should be able to squeeze in an hour or so to read your screenplay.”

“But, I haven’t writ...”

“You’ve already written it, Mark. Just put it all on paper – simple!” Ah, the classic bane of the failed writer; just getting the story out of his head onto paper. But he was right in one way; if he gave me two months, I would just procrastinate for six weeks.

“But, I’m in India!” I said. “It’ll take... shipping!” I held my arms out to emphasize my exasperation, a difficult posture on the crowded sidewalk. It really was a crazy scene, with this bizarre but incredible conversation with this incredible person, who seemed to be noticed by absolutely no one in the



Every school day is “Take Your Daughter to School Day,” in Darjeeling, India.

throng of people buzzing around us like bees escaping a hive, and the insane traffic, and the horns, and the cow! This bovine was simultaneously eating and pooping right next to us. The whole thing was surreal.



Leaving Calcutta to end my trip, I had my motorcycle stripped, padded and loaded onto a train back to Delhi, so I enjoyed both west and east India, missing about 1,000 miles in between.

“What?” he said. “Oh, Mark, Mark.. There’s a Kinkos around the corner. Email it to them and they’ll print it and walk it over.”

“I, I, uh...”

“Make it good, Mark – this is your big chance,” he said. “It had better be topnotch, ‘cause this project is very close to my heart.” He actually put a hand on his chest for emphasis. “If I like it,” he said, “I’ll give you 50 grand – that’s U.S. dollars, buddy, not these Rupee things.”

“I, I, uh...” Tom turned around and walked away, en-

tering a doorway in another shophouse that looked about to fall down. He shut the door behind him, and I never saw him again.

So here I sit in a grimy hotel in northern India, writing like crazy, 108 pages of dialogue, action and metaphors, with only two days to go, thinking how odd it is



Playing checkers in Calcutta, India.



This nice man, in Upper West Bengal state, offered me a cup of tea in a single-use, terracotta cup, which I gladly accepted.

chance.



I didn't see these checker-style taxis in the west, but they were common around Calcutta.



The warmest of greetings in the warmest of countries, beautiful, beautiful India!

