



“Big Chance”

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

By MARK GILCHRIST
Special to Planet Earth

4,000 feet up in the Himalayas, I was riding a beautiful, Royal-Enfield motorcycle, just floating, it seemed, along the mountain roads. The rhythm of the straightaways and hairpin switchbacks kept in my head a melody of bliss and peril, of life and death.

I'd had a knot in my stomach all morning; a knot tied up in failure. Traveling alone gives a person time to think, and my thoughts dwelled on the immense pile of nothing that I called a life. I'd had plenty of dreams — oh, boy, those dreams! — but an annoying fact, gnawed at me, nagging me that I never woke up to turn those dreams into cash.

But, that's the thing about mountain roads; you never really know where they will take you, and on this road, I was headed for a most incredible collision.

I had been out for three hours, 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 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 with solemn bodies going... anywhere, their impatient drivers blowing horns with every tap of the gas pedals; Gone were 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 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 Sundays.

“Every day,” I said, “since this morning.” It was a nervous attempt at humor made by a nervous man — me — because all that hair

“Hey, yourself,” he said, smiling cautiously. “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 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 Sundays.

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There was no mistaking who belonged to that voice; who was the very person I had just bumped into thousands of miles from home, on a mountaintop in Northern India. Seriously, I struggled — you would too — to act as if all along, I had expected that the man sitting right in front of me would 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.

“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 his right ankle was a mess. Blood all over. I got up and walked to my motorcycle as he 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 saddlebags, opened the left bag and pulled out a small first-aid kit.

“A jumping crocodile, eh?” I said. “Here?”



ing 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 struck on an opportunity.

I had just spent the morning comiserating on my failures, and here before me was my answer! I began plotting a move, a request... yes! Why, for the past two decades I had seriously wanted to pitch a project to this very man.

But then, likely expecting that, he created a diversion, asking questions about me, and keeping the conversation away from himself. 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, why, he seemed almost interested.

After about 10 minutes, there was a lull in the conversation.

“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, from “Cast Away,” bearded and, well, stranded.

“Back to my, um,

“Right!” he said. “You?”

“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 supplies, but I was supposed to administer help as well.

“Think I'll survive?” “Um, sure,” he said. “What is it? Cash? I don't carry much, but I can get you some...”

“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 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 was about to 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 disappointed, like I had just let him down. 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, I just can't... 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 leave, 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 bandaged it. 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!”

“Okay... two words?” he said. “What could possibly... all right, all right, 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. Like his acting teacher 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 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 a movie about Ernie Pyle? Many times?”

“Oh, I know!” I said. “I know, exactly! This isn't a pitch, really, sir, but I just want to know

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

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

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why... I mean, I just can't figure out why in the world you haven't touched this.”

“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...”

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



“Well, I, umm...”

“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? One of the most influential men 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 step and tripped over a huge rock.

“You okay to drive?” he said, and I gathered my thoughts. 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 it on his 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 hundred 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. Well, I swear he was lost, and we went 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 crossed the street and walked into a storefront building.

I felt like I had just been pinched and that this dream was over, and that would be the last I would see Tom Hanks, and my helmet! I parked my bike right on the sidewalk — hell, let him pay the fine. I was wondering where I was going to get another helmet when it appeared over my left shoulder.

“You coming?” Tom said. “Hungry? C'mon, there's a decent place here with... character.” 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 not like a hotel for a man of his stature. 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,” Tom 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 tonight?” Tom stopped, and I ran right into him in the dim light.

“Say, Gigi, can I have the same thing you



Ernie Pyle



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 steel rebar, the meandering cows and people walking, never stopping — it never stopped!

I was on my way to Darjeeling, a more “civilized” India, filled with tourists, Buddhists and stunning mountain views, and I was ready to relax.

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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 (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. "Oh, Mr. Adam is here..." Tom stopped abruptly, again, and I walked right into him, again.

"What? No!" He said. "I told him next week!"

"He said he needs now!" Gigi said.

"Oh, sheesh," Tom said. "Why does he always..." Then, handing me the beers, "would you mind? This won't take long..." We climbed down a short, but steep and dark stairway, and Tom opened a handmade, wooden door, kicking the bottom to unjam it.

We entered a small room that was filled with



ning his hands over it like it was a shiny, new toy. I won't go into details here, because we have, well, other business, but, wow, I was really impressed! Remember how Forrest Gump assembled that rifle in the barracks? Well, Tom went at this old portable Underwood 16 like it was his drill sergeant's rifle; thoroughly, vigorously and with an uncanny sense of love and respect. It was fascinating to watch, and before I knew it, a half hour was gone and he was done.

"How much?" Adam said, speaking English, maybe for my benefit?

"Well," Tom rubbed the back of his neck. "Let's see, that baby sure was dirty..."

"Yes, yes, you say that each time, Mr. Tom."

"Well, okay – three hundred," Tom said, referring to Indian Rupees, equal to about a dollar-fifty, U.S.

Tom shoved the bills Adam gave him into his pocket and picked up the typewriter.

"Be right back," Tom said to me, kicking



"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. I can do all that."

"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?"

"I'll ask the questions," 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,

"I derailed you with one question?" he said, fumbling with something in his hands. "Son, you have to work on your pitch." I heard a match strike and the flare of ignited phosphorous 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 lit a candle as I tried to get back on 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 uh... well, right. So he goes to Washington, D.C. and works for a newspaper there for a few years. He 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, Tom," 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? They put them 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 the Midwest, the South – everywhere, from snake handlers to bar owners – everybody. Say, I can just see you now, holding a little notebook and nod-

ders I had 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 candlelight, a bit uncomfortable, carrying 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, placemats and a few more beers.

I stood and helped him unload, putting everything 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 get this."

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 savouring 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 wanted to ask why one of the world's most famous people was hiding out in an Indian slum, fixing typewriters and serving his own dinner, but I remembered his rule about questions.

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 incredible that it deserves 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.



benches and tables that were filled with typewriters, and adding machines, and papers and junk piled so high you couldn't see the tables, or the floor, or even a few of the walls. On one wall, a hand-painted sign read: "Hanks' Typewriter Repair School... No job too small, no student too old."

"Come here... often?" I said a bit under my breath, but Tom ignored me as he approached the man called Adam. They had a beautiful and colorful conversation in some language of which I didn't understand a word. Tom explained later that the man owns the local newspaper and is his biggest customer. The guy is too cheap to have his machines cleaned each year, and he waits until they jam up or something, and then they need major work.

"Mark, you mind?" Tom said, not waiting for an answer. "This will only take a few... well, a while," He sat down at a bench and addressed the decades-old machine, first run-

ning his hands over it like it was a shiny, new toy. I won't go into details here, because we have, well, other business, but, wow, I was really impressed! Remember how Forrest Gump assembled that rifle in the barracks? Well, Tom went at this old portable Underwood 16 like it was his drill sergeant's rifle; thoroughly, vigorously and with an uncanny sense of love and respect. It was fascinating to watch, and before I knew it, a half hour was gone and he was done.

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and I tried to put together a game plan, but I was useless. He returned a few minutes later and sat down.

"Okay, I'll just 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 that plumbed 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? Joins the Navy after high school – serves for a few months – and then goes to college..."

"Where?"

"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..."

ding 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 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 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 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 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 blun-

"Wait," he said, "dark in here..." He reached over to my side of the table, grabbed a thick curtain and pulled it back, all the way across the table and behind him, and the room filled with such 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 float 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 mouth was full to do the talking. I continued my pitch.

"Right, so Pyle finds his real passion in war correspondence," I said. "But he will not – cannot – just report on the war; so he writes about people, the soldiers – and he carries a small typewriter with him everywhere!"

"He interviews the everyday-man in the fox-hole, and he makes sure to get the soldiers' names and hometowns in the paper. 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, but also animated me.

"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



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than him – and they drank...
 “Much?” Tom said.
 “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. Tries to kill herself. They divorce and then remarry by proxy.”
 “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 this down my throat?”
 “Wow! Um. 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. “I kind of lose track. I, I...”
 “Yeah, I’ll say!”
 “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...”

slight and drove myself right into a quagmire.
 “Yeah, I can see the whole scene, 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 wanted them to go right back in. I even tried to stop the 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 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 on camera, right?”
 “Stop, please!” I said. “Okay, I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”
 “Have you seen...”
 “Here 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 clean. We took one last, amazing look outside, got up and walked out.
 Gigi was gone, and we just walked down the maze of stairs and outside to the street.



to leave the pavement before he started pedalling right into heavy traffic, and we became a part of the great river of steel and noise that makes up urban India. Coughing engines, blaring horns and a million near-misses are the body of any city here.
 “Why don’t you write up a treatment for me?” Tom said, referring to a print version of the pitch I’d just failed to give him, only much, much better.
 “Well, I guess...”
 “You guess?” he said. “You guess what?”
 “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.”
 “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 were just the flames of a campfire. “On the bench, you said; ‘I want to write the screenplay for your next movie.’”
 “I... did?...”
 “It has to be good, too,” Tom said. “Very good – don’t make me pay some drunks 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.”

“Oh yeah, for autographs, right?”
 “No, no!” he said. “Of course not! No, just to write down addresses... and things.” He uncapped the marker and wrote on the 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 opened my phone, took a quick photo of the address 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 for you.”
 “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 Tom 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 throng of people walking 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.
 “What?” he said. “Oh, Mark, Mark.. There’s a Kinkos around the corner. Email it to them and they’ll print it out and walk it

over.”
 “I, I, uh...”
 “Make it good, Mark – this is your big chance,” he said. “It had better be top-notch, ‘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, entering a doorway in another building that looked about to fall down. He shut the door behind him, and I knew better than to follow.
 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, chuckling with the thought that somewhere, floating around the streets of Northeastern India is a decades-old rickshaw with the very address of Tom Hank’s personal office, right there in front of dozens of innocent riders every day, who happen to see it, just by chance.



“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.”
 “Me?... Read?” Tom said, but I missed the

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