

The Highway



Will Marks

The Highway

A Novel By

Will Marks



To...

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Meet Yama, meet the fathers, meet the merit of free or ordered acts, in highest heaven.

Leave sin and evil, seek anew thy dwelling, and bright with glory, wear another body.

Rig-Veda X 14.8

The End of the Road

It starts at the end of road.

Grant smiles as he pulls up alongside me on his Enfield Bullet motorcycle, cruising at seventy kilometres an hour on the one of the highest roads on earth, where the Indian Himalaya climbs onto the Tibetan Plateau. Grant doesn't try to say anything; he just smiles crazily and starts to laugh really crazily.

The road's little more than an asphalt gash cut through waves of skeletal rock. It starts snaking up a vertical face, turning back on itself so as I come out of each hairpin bend I'm face to face with Grant. We ride slowly but climb fast, and as the mountain drops away we see the road we've travelled from a new perspective. Clouds lie below. The gunmetal sky is no longer above us; we've become part of it.

Prayer flags stretch over the ruins of an old temple at the top of the pass. Whitewashed stupas crowned by gold spires stand out like kaleidoscopic projections against grey rock. Snow on the surrounding peaks reflects a dazzling light against the piercing blue sky. Soldiers in dark green uniforms with black berets, moustaches and machineguns wave us through, indicating we're to park next to a few jeeps and another Enfield Bullet. A desolate calm descends as our air-starved engines shudder to a halt.

The road provides a false zenith. We walk the last stretch over loose rock to get an unobstructed view, our legs wobbly from the four hours it took to ride here by early afternoon. Wind pushes us from behind, coming up over the plateau's patches of dark snow like a cold flame. The ride burnt my fingers numb despite leather gloves, and now, without a helmet, my ears and nose are on fire.

One man is on the summit. He turns towards us and I feel a bolt of electricity though my whole body. Sapphire eyes with bleached whites pulse against his bronze sun-painted skin. Blond dreadlocks whip around in the wind. It's a face like a tribal mask. I see by the look in Grant's eye that it's not just me, that he looks like Sam, my brother, who was supposed to be

here, on this trip, with us. He smiles, narrowing his eyes, his only sunglasses the faint white shadow of where real ones have been.

‘The end of the road’ he says, but the wind sweeps away his unusually deep voice and his mouth seems to move out of sync. This is the highest point on what’s actually a loop road; it’s not the end of the road, but up here it feels the end of the world. We are over four and a half thousand metres above sea level in northern India, in the middle of rugged mountains that surge around us in great oceanic rises and falls. It’s only directly ahead that they open up and fall away, creating a lone valley that spreads out like a map before us, showing the Hindustan-Tibetan Highway entering Spiti valley. A river winds into the distance, adding faint green tints to the luminous greys and yellows and browns.

We stagger back down the hill together to find his motorcycle parked next to ours. My face is visible as a stretched reflection in the chrome of my teardrop shaped fuel tank. The cold has turned it grey, purple and blue. I look like death.

‘You’re travelling alone?’ Grant asks him.

‘That’s how it ends up.’

We kick-start our motorcycles and gun the engines. Our feet scrape along the ground until motion counters their inherent instability. We ride side-by-side, weaving down the road, riding close before I speed ahead, the bike sucking in air, oil and grease lubricating metal, petrol and sparks meeting and exploding, chain ripping at the rear wheel.

We sway our hips, moving our bikes to avoid potholes and falling rocks from slides that gouge the mountainside like fresh wounds still bleeding. The road twists through a gorge, a sharp drop-off on one side, cathedrals of jagged rock leaning over us on the other, pushing us towards the empty space. I drift unconsciously towards the edge. Then he comes out of nowhere, races past me, and disappears into a corner.

Tick.

I doubt he even saw the truck before he became part of it.

A huge black and orange heavy goods truck materializes like a speeding

wall of rock from around the corner, smoke streaming from the tires, saving me but braking for him though his head and upper torso are compressed against the grills below the cab and his bike is ricocheting back, flipping bent and broken, and all I can do is brake and jack-knife my handlebars to get away from it, turning ninety degrees into the cliff just to get away, but the back kicks-up and I'm bucked off into an trajectory that even as I fly through it has its own unaccountably joyful beauty, letting me land two feet, one then the other, before momentum propels me into the rock, hitting my shoulder like a punch and whiplashing my head, the helmet hitting with a dull crunch, then there's the sound of the ocean and the lowering of a veil of overwhelming bodily murkiness. Rocks stab like injections of scorching water as I drop to my knees, but it's far away and I lie peacefully, arms splayed, floating, feeling like a child again, tingling more than anything, the wind blowing right through me.

Lying face down, the scratches on the back of my helmet don't look too bad.

After a while the noise of my bike's engine whines into my awareness, the rear wheel still turning frantically but getting no traction, no resistance so no forward movement, and realise I'm okay, I'm still breathing.

I push myself up with my good arm and feel my shoulder. It doesn't feel broken, no more than a good bruise. I take my helmet off, pull myself to my feet and stagger towards Grant. He's running towards me, his face white. I tell him I'm okay and walk towards where the truck has slid to a stop, its two occupants standing over the body.

Black lines on the road ooze the acrid stench of burnt rubber, and the trucks engine turns over like a hyperventilating animal vomiting diesel fumes, but that's not what brings the bile to my throat in a suppressed retch.

He's lying face down, but he doesn't have a face. His helmetless head looks like it has been decapitated, but his head hasn't left his body, it's been stuffed back inside. There's a slurred red mark where it hit the truck like a ripe mango. Blood runs thick out of the collar of his dusty brown leather jacket, darkening as it mingles with dirt and engine oil. A few dreadlocks

obscure the wound, still intact, only his head cut; their matted bases soaked red, their tips trail down and absorb the growing liquid pools in the gravel.

‘Your friend?’ asks the older man, arms hugging his body over a thick brown wool jacket, protecting himself from the cold and the view.

‘I don’t know’ I stammer, ‘I don’t know him.’

I reel backwards and sit with my back to the cliff, elbows on my knees and my head slumped. Grant and the other man, a young fair-skinned Indian with a thin unshaven face beneath a tan woollen hat, carry his body and pack into the back of the truck and move his wrecked bike to the side of the road. Grant walks down to my motorcycle, picks it up and puts it on its stand. My paragliding bag ripped itself free from the top of the large metal racks that surround the back wheel. Grant reseals the hooks of the tough elastic cords that hold it in place. My small backpack and laptop travel-bag are still in the sidesaddles behind their fishnet webbing.

‘Your bike’s okay’ says Grant, pulling up beside me. ‘The rear-view mirrors are smashed. You’ve bent the leg-guard, but not so it gets in the way. The pillion racks saved it. There are plenty of scratches but nothing that seems to affect how it rides.’

‘You go in truck’ says the younger man, taking the keys to Grant’s bike. I haul myself up into the cab. We slowly follow the bikes back up to the army post.

We try to help the soldiers but once they understand we’d only met him minutes before and they’ve found his passport there’s not much we can do besides drink the tea they give us, picking off the dark milk skin and sipping noisily from the small glass cups, bringing air into our mouths to cool and spread the sweet hot liquid, letting the cardamom and ginger wash over our palate.

A soldier gives me a medical check, and apart from bloody knees, I’m okay. They clean and bandage the wounds and I change out of my ripped combat trousers into a matching pair. Despite the momentary affect, the helmet seems to have saved me from concussion. The shock and shaky murkiness wear off as we give the soldiers our details and take the details

from his passport, unsure of what else to do but keep going. The truck drivers hug us as we leave.

We take it slowly at first. Once we pass the crash site the road drops away quickly. The bike feels okay. The road becomes empty, long, flat, and straight for kilometres ahead. I accelerate, my heart beating in my throat, the force of the air pushing my body back, pulling water from my eyes and throwing them behind me. The frequency of the hum rises, the vibrations intensify and the bike no longer feels connected to the road. My vision blurs until it disappears in a flash of white light and I feel I can push a button and take-off and smash through the asphalt and follow the cracks in the tectonic plates into the magma and fly through the earth's molten core coming out the other side with debris trailing like a bullet exiting a brain.

Then I wake up.

Realising we're riding through deep green forest soaked in pine scent and laced with white cloud like Christmas tree decorations. Fifty kilometres have gone by unnoticed. I wonder how I got here.

I forgot what I was doing; I was too into doing it. I didn't know where on the road I was, but I always knew where I was on the road.

Some things you don't have to think about, you just let your body do it, only you can't always remember what happened to your mind. When you're nowhere else but here, it's like you're not here at all.

We read potholes like braille as we crawl through the thick white cloud like blind men. Coming out of the bottom of the mist into the greenery of the valley is a sensory overload after the high mountain peaks and plains. Two birds fly, over and under a lake, creating parallel lines of increasing circles wherever their wings touch. Mountains dive into the water until the wind writes ripples and it all shimmers and waves and melts away.

Before, it's like I've seen everything before, but this time it's backwards, back the front, the wrong way around.

This is not the first time I've thought this, everybody thinks this sometime, sooner or later. It's like seeing a movie or reading a book you've seen or read before but have forgotten, and the whole time you're watching

or reading you're also trying to remember the first time.

We pause near the town of Kaza to gaze up at Ki monastery, a collection of dirty whitewash square buildings with red-rimmed windows built perilously on and into the vertical rock face. In Kaza we spend a couple of hours getting the permits required to be in this sensitive border region that was only opened to foreigners in 1991; this highway will take us alongside the border with the sensitive Tibetan Autonomous Region of China.

We ride on through the copper coloured late afternoon. After an hour another town comes into view on the valley floor, our base for the next few weeks, Tabo.

Encircling mountains sit like a council of gods surveying their kingdom. An inner layer rises two kilometres above the valley, the outer layer reaches up as far again. Father gods sit behind their sons, distinguished by their snow beards. Looking back the road is lost and invisible in the mountains, and now it all seems like one giant god and we're riding on the tongue of a wide-open mouth, the mountains teeth, the jaws threatening to snap shut at any moment.

People begin to appear by the roadside, gradually building into a stream of men in shades of brown and grey flowing shirts over loose trousers, mixed with the maroon and yellow of Tibetan Buddhist robes. A few women appear in *salwar kameez* and veils, their bareheaded daughters look on with eyes sharp and green like cut grass.

'I know where we want to go,' I say to Grant over the rhythmic throb of the motorcycle engines when we pull over at the outskirts of town, 'but from this map I can't figure out where we are.'

Two monks in their twenties, all stubbled heads and smiles, walk up to us saying 'hello, hello.'

'Is this your monastery?' I ask, pointing to the map.

'Sure, sure' one says. 'You actor?'

I nod.

'We waiting you. Your friends already come. I am Thubten. This is Yeshe. We show you monastery.'

We bounce along the main market road, the monks holding their robes away from the chain and wheel. We ride out past hard fields before climbing a ridge to find the huge orange and red archway of the monastery gate framing stark mountain and sky.

As we ride into the courtyard a mass of mini monks swarm us, all under thirteen with bright round faces and toothy smiles and robes flung everywhere. One of them, he's only about seven years old, puts his hand on my forearm to get my attention. He looks me in the eye and says matter-of-factly 'you look just like a hero', a beaming grin splitting his face.

'This one is a *tulku*' says Thubten, 'a reincarnate lama.'

'But only *like* a hero' the tulku says, laughing at me, acting like an adult while he treats me like a child.

We unstrap our packs and paragliders from the sidesaddles of our motorcycles and follow Thubten as he leads us across the monastery, pointing out the main gompa, the library, dining area, school and monks accommodation blocks. We walk from one courtyard to the next until we finally see a small white-walled building nestled into rock.

'Your friend with abbot' says Thubten. 'See you later, okay?'

On a small balcony area, sit my film's director, Amin Khan, and an older monk.

'Good, good' booms Amin with the easy confidence of a large man used to calling the shots, 'my star is still alive after the long road from Delhi, doing it the hard way.' His small head merges into his body via a thick neck. 'But you look a little pale.'

'Nothing a bit of makeup can't fix' I say joining in with his good-natured enthusiasm, exaggerating my limp to disguise it. 'The greatest risk we can ever take is choosing the easy way.'

'Yeah, well I have responsibilities and keeping you alive is one of them' he says, one fleshy hand pumping out a handshake, the other slapping my shoulder so hard I have to adjust my stance to stay upright. 'Lama Lobsang, meet Zac Goodman and Grant Watson.'

'*Tashi dalek*' I say, using up all my Tibetan in a one go, shaking his hand

which has all the power his exposed muscular arm suggests. His smile creates crevasses at the corners of his eyes, and as I look into them I get a disconcerting feeling of recognition, and give him the look that so many people give me when they're trying to remember where they've seen me before. He gives me the look people give me once they realise they've seen me in a movie; I know who you are.

'Some of the crew have arrived in town and the rest of the cast are due late next week, after you've finished your retreat up here' says Amin.

'So there's no problem with us staying here until we begin?'

'No problem' Lama Lobsang says firmly and quickly, and seems to have enjoyed doing so and says it again, 'no problem', before a laugh that starts as an explosion in his abdomen bursts out. He obviously enjoys that too so he keeps laughing which makes Amin laugh, and they look at us, me and Grant being polite and wanting to do the introductions and nice-to-meet-you's right, and we're smiling, at first just going along with their laughing, but it's infectious and though we're not quite sure why real laughter explodes out of us too.

A thin serious looking monk comes out of the front door onto the balcony and in a moment the Lama's muscles relax, wiping his face clean except for the smile in his eyes.

'Tenzin is Lama Lobsang's attendant monk' Amin says. 'He'll introduce you to the monks acting in the movie and organise your meditation training.'

'Lucky you are' Lama Lobsang says, in a voice with a slower textured melody, ranging from a rich bass to a high pitch in just those three words. 'If you are good I train you.' He laughs again.

I don't know what to say to this, and I want to think of something to avert his gaze but I can't so I hold it and use it to try to more fully take him in, to identify any distinguishing features that might trigger any recall, but his shaven head and robes lend itself to anonymity.

His short hair has flecks of grey but his skin looks older, worn and blotched by exposure to the sun and extreme elements. Amin told me in Mumbai that he walked to India from Tibet, spending weeks trudging

through the snow on the high passes far from any roads to avoid capture by the Chinese, losing two toes to frostbite and a number of members of the party altogether.

I feel a flush of embarrassment at my comment about choosing the easy way.

‘We’re lucky this monastery’s still here’ says Amin. ‘It was built a thousand years ago when this was part of the Kingdom of Western Tibetan. Now it’s one of the oldest Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in existence thanks to being on the Indian side of the border.’

‘You’re tired. Go, take rest’ says Lama Lobsang. ‘Tenzin will bring you chai and supper. I see you for morning meditation. Five o’clock.’

‘I’ve left a copy of the latest script in your room’ says Amin, putting his arm around my shoulder, ‘Come, I’ll show you the changes.’

Amin leads Grant and me to our one-room huts built into the rock. There’s a only a single bed in each, with a desk and two chairs, one inside and one on the cleared rock balcony. My room has a picture of Maitreya, the Buddha to come. It feels peaceful after the haunted energy of the one-night road stops.

The brown red of the mountains is fading and the deep blue of the sky darkens by the time we crowd onto my balcony with the script. A couple of novice monks arrive with chai, vegetable soup, fresh white bread and cheese. We sip the soup as the cooling mountain air bites at our faces.

‘So sleep guys,’ Amin says as he finishes eating, his breath a fiery mist. The cold air is cutting through our clothing. ‘You both look worn-out. Zac, we’re still okay to start shooting next week, but I’ll see you in the next few days. Ciao.’

The calm atmosphere and the days of solid riding kick in, and soon Grant staggers off to his hut, visible only as an unsteady patch of torchlight on the rock.

Alone in the cool air of my room, I lie down and feel the pain in my shoulder and despite a body numbing exhaustion, my brain starts spinning with recollections of the crash and the man who looked like Sam and Sam.

My pure black scratched motorcycle helmet watches me from the corner of the room as if it's a decapitated Sam while I wonder how the darkness influenced Sam and how he influenced me.

My head hurts. I don't know if it's from the crash or altitude sickness. I recognise some of the other symptoms of altitude like difficulty sleeping, loss of appetite, lethargy, confusion and irrational thoughts, but I recognise these things from the lowlands too. I've felt like this before.

It starts when I feel like this. It starts with the feeling that the world's based wholly on a misunderstanding, that all its activity arises from this one fatal misunderstanding, and that all our effort is for nothing. It starts when you realise all you ever wanted was to be free. You are free. You're free to play this game any way you want to play this game. But you're not free not to play this game.

Everybody plays, nobody wins.

No one.

I try to sleep, but I can't and it's nearly midnight by the time I take out my pen and sit with my head in my hands in front of the crisp empty white sheets of my notebook.

At dawn I wake to find pages & pages of writing and wonder who wrote it.

DAY ONE

Finally, I feel like I know all that I am, was and will be.

Out, in, out, in, out, in.

Falling through blue back to empty inky space.

Blue eyes open. Legs unfold like lotus petals.

Wind blows onto my face like a kiss.

I go, barefoot, into the amphitheatre of mountains and valley and forest.

Zac wrote this. It's a beautifully handwritten piece of scrap paper left on a table in the spacious living room of an old highland farmhouse. Through the open windows, framed by the intricate woodcarvings on the encircling veranda, sit the foothills of the Indian Himalaya. Snow-white peaks merge with the mountain of advancing clouds. The cool breeze of the preceding wind is on my face and the weight of my body presses my feet firmly on the wooden floor. Maya's breath is soft in my ear as she reads over my shoulder, her arms around my waist and her body warm against my back.

'Zac's gone, and this is all the goodbye we get' she whispers.

'Gone? We haven't heard from him for months, but now we've practically found him.'

'This only tells us he was here, not where he is. Or if he's dead or alive.'

Maya walks over to the door that opens onto the balcony; her loose white shirt from warmer Goan days flutters like a prayer-flag in the wake of her statuesque body. Her motorcycle jacket lies draped over the arm of a worn-out couch.

'Well, if he's dead he's still warm. Someone's been living here. And it hasn't changed from how we left it.'

Our sun and moon sarong hangings still cover the walls, along with pictures of paragliders, Shiva, Buddha and His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Afghan rugs, mini-discs, books, and incense holders overflowing with burnt-out sticks are scattered over the floor. Our keys still fit the padlock in the sliding bolt of the front door, though its green-chipped paint exposes a little

more of the rough timber beneath. Clothes cover the mattress in Zac's room, but his paraglider and motorcycle are gone. My motorcycle, a silver-chrome Enfield Bullet 500, stands beside Maya's under the shelter of the veranda.

The wooden chair creaks lightly as I sit at the large table and hit the silver button on Zac's laptop computer.

'These mountains are so beautiful,' says Maya, the word *beautiful* emphasised by her light Middle Eastern accent, 'even more so than autumn with the snow down to the foothills.'

'It'll be great to get some height and see over the back to the really big ones. The conditions look like they're good for flying again.'

'Maybe too good, those cu-nims look like mushroom clouds.'

The laptop's wallpaper is a deep blue dusk-lit sky with a paraglider flying over waves of ridges. A login box partially obscures the image, providing the username, *zacgoodman*, but not the password. Hitting cancel gets me through, and all the icons appear, including a shortcut next to the body of the paraglider that leads to a document titled *The Highway*.

'There's a file here that looks like a narrative' I say, scrolling through the first few pages. 'Looks like Zac typed up the writing he was doing on our trip. This might help us find him.'

'I'm so not sure he wants to be found' says Maya, still staring out the window. 'We can't spend too much time looking for him. We've got to be in Israel for my brothers wedding.'

'He could walk through the door at any moment.'

'So far all we've found are an empty house and empty words' she says, turning and looking at me, holding eye contact, her voice as strong as her attractive features. Her soft clear skin, arched eyebrows and striking ashen blue eyes maintain her femininity even though her recently shaved dark hair isn't much more than stubble.

'I've got to look for him.'

'You've got to let him go like he did you, and come home with me in a week' she says, her tone of voice remaining even; she's not trying to convince me of a truth, she's simply telling it to me matter-of-factly.

The room darkens as the grey clouds tower over the valley. I scan through the text, wanting to skim it to extract its meaning quickly, but it's not going into my head.

I go back to the beginning and try to slow down, forgetting about all the pages to come and try to read it line by line, word by word, as if each was the first and the last.

After a few pages I'm calmer and develop a rhythm. And I feel like someone's watching me.

I look up and see Zac's larger-than-life face on a promotional picture from his first movie, *Zero Sum Game*. The facsimile of Zac's blue eyes are pinned on me, shining from above his trademark curl-lipped smile, full of presence. In the flesh he has a slightly removed quality; he doesn't seem quite as real as his silver-screen incarnation.

As I finish the first chapter, I notice a tiny corner of white paper poking out from underneath the laptop. I pull at it to find it's the tip of another piece of handwritten scrap paper. At the moment I read its words the first drops of rain hit the window.

The mountain of clouds arrive and begin to deliver their ocean, drop by drop, each one falling in exactly the right place.

Maya plucks the paper from me, replacing it with the soft skin of her hand.

'Remember the view?' she says, and leads me through the hall and up a steep staircase to an alcove the size of two double beds built into the sloping roof.

Fat raindrops create dark dots on the dusty grey-brown slatted tiles, soon joining up, creating a film over everything. The smell of the warm asphalt path and fields comes up from below. Maya steps into the rain, arms outstretched. Large drops explode on her forehead. Her hair's too short to be plastered to her head but it runs down her brown skin and makes her

white shirt cling to the shape of her body. She starts spinning around, her laughter fusing with the white noise of the rain.

A stream of light illuminates the cloud making a bright mist of the downpour. Our farmhouse sits encircled in the Kangra valley at the edge of where terraced fields rise into foothills. I can just make out the bare patch on the ridge almost one kilometre above us where there's enough of a break in the birch and rhododendron forest to make room for our paragliding takeoff.

Foothills jag up another half kilometre, the forest transforming into pine speckled with snow, but it's just the first layer obscuring the waves of rock and snow mountains forming the five thousand metre Dhauladhar Range, part of the Great Himalaya Range.

Dharamsala sits in these foothills fifty kilometres as the crow flies to the west, and Mandi and the Kullu valley are the same distance to the east. To the south India runs away to the plains and eventually the ocean. To the north lies pure mountain, creating an impenetrable barrier protecting the desert moonscapes of the Tibetan Plateau from the monsoon.

Lightening cracks in the next valley, the rumble echoing and eventually rolling into ours. Maya screams, grabs my hands and pulls me out from undercover, trying to spin me around with her as thick globs hit my hair, penetrating to my skull, running down the back of my neck and following my spine into the warm air pockets in my shirt. I pull her into me and we slow down, experiencing a pleasant disorientation as we clumsily regain balance in each other's arms. I hold her close to me, vainly trying to prevent our soaking.

Be On The Road Beyond The Road...



Zac Goodman is lost in the Himalaya, no one knows if he is dead or alive, and the only clue is a manuscript found by Grant, his estranged travel companion.

Zac writes of motorcycling with Grant on the Tibetan Plateau in northern India where they met a rider strongly resembling Zac's dead brother Sam, and only minutes later witness his violent death. Zac suffers a blow to the head in the crash, but continues on to co-star in a Bollywood movie partially set on location at a Tibetan Buddhist monastery. Visions in meditation and an affair with a French yoga teacher propel Zac on a relentless journey through India, from paragliding over a Manali full moon party, to mystical encounters in the sacred cities, to a violent reunion in Goa.

Grant reads Zac's narrative during his rain-soaked search in the mountains, and is drawn into its increasingly vivid and disquieting version of reality.

The Highway takes a lucid, otherworldly trip to the end of the road where wisdom and love are paid for in blood and personal transcendence blurs with apocalypse.



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