

RMIT University

Stephen Sculley

Stringer: episode 1: A television novel

Abstract:

Chris Stringer is an investigative journalist who has been duped into doing a story, which conceals the identity of a murderer. In attempting to find the truth, he is dragged into a web of business and political corruption. *Stringer* is a six-part *television novel* with each chapter being a one-hour episode. Episode 1 establishes the key characters and the core dramatic question; who killed Gary Morley? *Stringer* uses a novelistic approach to develop a multi-episode high-end television drama. This prose text utilizes literary, cinematic and theatrical elements inherent within the high-end format to present multiple storylines and complex characterisation. Through the creative writing process *Stringer* extends the traditional skeletal approach to series development by framing the drama as a *television novel*. The outcome for this approach is twofold; firstly as a way of developing a high-end narrative with complex characters, themes and counter themes and secondly as a new way of valuing the work of the screenwriter by removing it from the industrial hierarchy of current script development and retaining the screenwriter's original authorial voice in book form.

Biographical note:

Stephen Sculley is a Doctoral Research Candidate at RMIT University School of Media and Communication. He is an actor and creative writer with extensive experience in theatre, film and television. He holds a Diploma in Dramatic Arts and Graduate Diploma in Film and Television at Melbourne University, Advanced Diploma in Professional Screenwriting, BA Creative Writing with Distinction, and BA Honours in Media and Communication, at RMIT University.

Keywords:

Creative Writing – Screenwriting practice – Screen idea development – TV drama

EPISODE 1

The high beam of a Ford Ranger pick-up shone on the car in front highlighting the bumper sticker: *Vote More Mobility – More Freedom*. Morley looked into the rear view mirror ... the Ford accelerated and rammed the car causing it to skid across the white line and broadside into the gravel apron. Morley spun the steering wheel left, right, left as sweat poured from his brow. He was panicked his bulging eyes and shallow breathing a dead giveaway. The Ford bumped a second time and the car catapulted forward, Morley stabbed the brakes – HARD, the car flipped on its side and slid into the scrub with metal screeching and sparks flying. The pick-up stopped – stillness except for the ominous idling of the engine. Morley opened the door and his short, full frame fell onto the ground. He raised his arm to shield his eyes from the lights; doubled over with blood running from his temple he limped to the side of the road. In a desperate attempt to escape he climbed the fence but his trouser leg snared in the wire. The engine revved low at first then HIGHER and HIGHER. The Ford had nowhere to go but forward; gears crunched, brakes released and the pick-up rolled Morley in barbed wire and dust. In a final statement the truck reversed: tyres inked in blood, revealing the body – LACERATED, MANGLED, DEAD.

FLASH FORWARD – 6 MONTHS LATER

Northside Media was an independent online news site. They profiled and investigated politics, business, current affairs and news of the day. *Northside* was located in an old renovated textile factory in Northcote.

Over a dozen staff raced around in a state of continuous excitement. There were deadlines to be met, copy to be revised and images to be uploaded. From copywriters

to photographers, IT people and Journos, *Northside* was dedicated to networked news and breaking stories. The open plan office had a large screen bolted onto the distressed red brick wall. News had just broken ...

**CONVICTED MURDERER, DALE WILSON
LOSES APPEAL.**

CHRIS STRINGER was the lanky and unshaven head writer who wrote his opinion on a regular basis. He was one of the reasons *Northside* had gained traction with a strong subscription base and social media following. As he watched the television he typed:

Wilson's appeal thrown out of court: What can you say about a society that is driven by economic necessity? When ambition is no more than a knife in the back or in this case a drunken killer behind the wheel. The murder of politician Gary Morley highlights the degree to which money means everything. Convicted murderer, Dale Wilson had a lot to lose ... greed and booze will now see him in gaol for a very long time...

Outside, the city was caked in dust: the wipers of a car streaked across the windscreen, a pedestrian held a handkerchief to her mouth and an unkindness of ravens took flight. The city was a network of roads, freeways, and trains linked in a web of imperfect order. This was a first-world metropolis bursting at the seams – a city driven by self-interest and run by *Fat Cats*.

From the steps of Parliament House to the Docklands and the Crown Casino, traffic pushed and crawled at a hopeless pace.

A Black Chrysler rose from the underground car park at the base of the Docklands apartment. It inched forward in peak hour traffic, swamped in the murky haze of a carbon monoxide cloud.

Honey sat with Damir.

She had her phone on speaker. ‘No is not an option Don.’

Don’s whinny voice could be heard through the phone, ‘Honey, I’m doing everything I can.’

‘That doesn’t move things along does it?’

Their driver was Sammy, his porcine belly pressed hard against the steering wheel.

He honked the horn.

‘Where are you?’ asked Don.

‘In traffic, I’ll see you tonight.’

Honey took out a cigarette and Damir provided the flame. She inhaled and expelled a cloud of smoke, which quickly filled the car. She opened the window. A tin rattler with a visy vest and a gammy leg hobbled between the stagnant traffic. The tin had a multiple sclerosis sticker wrapped around it. Honey waved the guy over. She handed him fifty dollars then butted her cigarette in the tin and said, ‘Nothing’s for free’ and the car moved off.

CROWN CASINO 5/4/2015

‘MEDIA HOUNDS’

SLAP EACH OTHER ON THE BACK.

Inside the Palladium at Crown, Chris was pissed off at having to attend the Australian Media and Journalism Awards. His rosy cheeked wife, TALIA and nine year old stepson, AARON sat at the *Northside* table. Chris kept his arms folded, jaw clenched

and his attitude on display. Sitting with them was journalist JEAN SAYER and Chief Editor HARRY ROSENBERG. Aaron sulked and sucked his fizzy drink. Talia clasped Chris's hand. The nerves were palpable at the *Northside* table. They gulped their wine and watched intently. Chris's petulance gave way to anticipation – he chewed his lower lip while Jean smiled inanely. Harry loosened his tie and kicked his shoes off as a way of containing his excitement. Aaron tugged at his mother's arm. 'I need to go to the toilet.'

'Can't you wait?'

'No, I don't want to go by myself. Hurry.'

Talia, loving helicopter mum and best friend to Aaron disappeared to the washroom, much to Chris's dismay. He looked across the room and caught the eye of Morley's widow JANE. She stared back – her thin lips smiled momentarily then retracted – the sorrowful widow.

The MC, ABC Journo TONY NATALI introduced the contenders. 'The finalists are Bruce Shamrock and Erica Austin – Southern News, Edwin Sarjan and George Pescano – ABC Dateline, Harry Rosenberg, Chris Stringer and Jean Sayer– *Northside Media*.'

Tony then introduced DON McALPIN, Minister for Infrastructure and the Arts. Don glided across the stage and Natali adjusted the microphone to account for Don's diminutive stature. 'Thank you, Gary was a personal friend of mine and I am honoured to announce the winner in what has been a dark event in our political life. The task of bringing justice to the travesty that befell a most trusted and senior Member of Parliament has been a powerful collaboration between the police and the

media. The winner for Best Investigative Journalism is ... Harry Rosenberg, Chris Stringer and Jean Sayer – *Northside Media*.’

APPLAUSE

Harry punched his fist in the air. Chris looked to the door but there was no sign of Talia or Aaron. Video footage with voice over played on the large screens that flanked the stage.

ROAD KILL: THE MURDER OF GARY MORLEY

The vision showed protestor Dale Wilson at a rally heckling the Minister for Infrastructure, Gary Morley. Serial pests LYNDON, RUBY and GROMMO were front and centre. Grommo wore his trademark Khaki jacket and red bandanna and held a megaphone leading the mob in a vociferous attack. Morley left the stage under pressure from the crowd. Deep in the mob a young woman approached Gary, her hand grabbed his for a short moment then released.

Wilson sat in his cell watching the A.M.J.A event on his small TV. His face was rock hard. He thought about that day at the rally and how the events of the last 6 months

had landed him in a high security prison. His memory of that night was blurred. True – he had been found behind the wheel. It was his pick-up truck that crunched Morley into the dirt. Did he kill Morley? He still couldn't believe it – he shook his head in dismay and switched off the television.

Chris had watched the footage many times; filming, rough-cut, final cut but now he saw something and it didn't feel right.

FLASHBACK
WOMAN STROKED MORLEY'S HAND?
MOMENT OF REALIZATION.

Harry & Co made their way to the stage with Harry in his socks. Chris tried to crack a smile as he stepped onto the stage, he accepted the Perspex award and held it in the air as he looked to the empty table and for a moment his disappointment could be seen. He stared blankly, Natali re-adjusted the microphone and Harry said. 'I just want to thank Jean and Chris ... I want to acknowledge Gary Morley's family in particular Gary's wife Jane, who has suffered incredible loss. Journalism – has a role to play beyond phone hacking and celebrity meltdowns. Real people, real stories. More power to independent media.'

Chris, Jean and Harry left the stage as Talia and Aaron rushed back into the room.

Talia downed her eyes sheepishly and took her seat.

She leant across to Chris and gave him a kiss. Aaron brought the straw to his mouth and sucked the bottom of the glass dry. SLURP.

The A.M.J.A. proceedings were thankfully short as the real show was about to get under way – the pressing of flesh and flashing of teeth. The event was full of media

people and minor celebrities. Don circled the room shaking hands, smiling and waving. It was a good publicity opportunity, *McAlpin Attends Media Night—Supports the Arts*. For a ‘late forties’ Don carried himself with certain aplomb. He had a head full of hair and a boyish charm that wooed girls ten years younger but from Don’s point of view there was a downside. It was his height. He suffered from small dog syndrome. The media referred to him as *The Poodle*.

People mingled – flamingos on a lake. Chris stood by the aspidistras framing the exit. Jean approached. ‘I thought Harry was going to explode.’

‘Awards are good for business...’ said Chris. He paused. ‘The footage of Morley ... at the protest rally?’

‘What?’ asked Jean.

‘I saw something.’

‘What?’

‘When Morley stepped off the stage a woman grabbed his hand.’

‘So what?’

‘Well Morley was married.’

‘Was he having an affair?’ asked Jean.

‘Maybe ... been known to happen.’

Harry slapped Chris on the back. ‘There’s a lot of buzz – all good.’

‘Was Morley having an affair?’ asked Chris.

‘It was never raised in the court case.’

‘You knew about it?’

‘No, we would have picked it up if it’s true.’

‘I’m not sure but the footage of Morley with the girl looks a little NQR.’

Harry stood up. 'Okay, well let's not rush to any conclusions.'

'You're right.'

'It's a bit of a worry.'

'You worry too much.'

'Talk about this later,' said Harry.

Don approached Honey.

'I'm not very happy with you,' said Honey.

'Don't be so petulant the wheels of fortune are turning and in our favour.'

'Cut the spin and push it through.'

Yelling could be heard across the room. Grommo in a tight fitting waiter's jacket jumped onto a table. 'Stop the Tunnel Now!' He was dragged from the table but not

before he threw hundreds of flyers into the air ... floating gently to the floor:

SAY NO TO CITY CONNECT – VOTE GREENS. Grommo was dragged from the room, screaming the slogan and lunging at Don McAlpin yelling, 'No trucks – scumbag!'

Damir moved close to Honey's side as the fracas subsided.

'It's alright get the car, I've had enough of this swill,' said Honey.

MARLA DAVIS, doe eyed, red hair and dressed in a grey pencil skirt with matching jacket stood next to Chris.

'That was dramatic,' said Marla.

'The story that keeps giving.'

'Do you think it will go ahead?'

'They'll push it through before the election.'

They looked across the room and saw staff picking up the flyers and putting them in champagne buckets.

‘With anyone?’ asked Chris.

‘Jake, he’s stationed at St. Kilda Road. Think we could meet someone else other than cops ... like real people! Great job on the Morley story.’

‘Thanks.’

‘Haven’t seen you round the courts,’ said Chris.

‘I’m over at the media liaison.’ Marla gave a cheesy smile. ‘Call, we’re here to help.’

She turned to find her guest Jake the cop who waved from across the room looking like a shag on a rock. Chris finished his drink and saw Aaron. He moved towards the side-table.

Aaron jammed another canapé into his mouth and washed it down with a Pepsi.

‘How ya doin’?’

He replied, ‘I’m tired.’

‘Where’s your Mum?’

‘She’s over there talking with Jean.’

‘Let’s go,’ said Chris.

The combo started to play their Latino bracket. It was Don’s cue to bust a few moves.

Photos of the politician and the weather girl dancing were destined for the social pages and they knew it.

Chris, Talia and Aaron sat in the back seat of the taxi with Aaron in the middle. ‘Are you okay?’

Chris retorted. ‘Are *you* okay? So much for thanking my family.’

‘Oh, come off it.’ She turned her head acknowledging Aaron, ‘not now.’

They sat in silence as the taxi turned left into Brunswick Street.

Sammy parked the Chrysler at the entrance of the Docklands apartment and Honey disappeared behind the smoky glass foyer and into the lift. The doors gently closed.

Damir and Sammy kicked back at Damir’s apartment, two buildings away from Honey. The large screen played loud Croatian heavy metal music as Sammy smoked a foil and left a deep impression on the plush lounge. Damir started pumping iron. ‘You should take more care of yourself.’

‘Whadda ya think I’m doin’ bro?’

‘Where I come from we don’t tolerate amateurs.’

‘Where I come from ...’

‘Shut-up Sammy it’s okay relax. You like this music?’

‘Yeah it rocks.’

‘You bet it rocks – HARD.’

‘If you say so, I’m goin’ to the club wanna sit in?’

‘Later.’

Talia pulled the doona up to Aaron’s chin and Chris stood in the doorway. The ‘parents’ stood and for a moment there was a feeling of ‘happy families’.

Chris cracked a bottle of *Di Georgio*. He poured a celebratory drink and in the silence their eyes softened. He opened his arms and Talia felt his warm embrace. Her dress slipped away as they pushed against the cupboard. They retired to the bedroom with bottle in hand. The queen size bed filled the bedroom and Talia’s plump naked body

spread across the sheets. She rolled onto her side and polished off her glass. Chris gently stroked her thigh but Talia grabbed his hand and made him stop. ‘I don’t think I can do this anymore.’

Talia lay on her back and stared at the ceiling for an inordinate amount of time thinking, *somebody say something!*

Chris said. ‘I’m gonna take a shower.’

Aaron switched on his night-light and vomited onto the floor. Deeply ashamed he threw a towel on the mess and hid under the doona.

The following morning Chris sat at his computer and trawled the old files from his investigation into the Morley murder. He found the footage of the City Connect rally and slowly reviewed it confirming what he had seen the night before.

Talia called out to Aaron. ‘You’re going to be late for school.’

Aaron called from the bathroom. ‘I’m tired.’

Chris turned up the volume on the television in the kitchen. It was Don McAlpin giving a doorstep interview as he entered Parliament House. He was surrounded by a voracious media pack and protestors chanting and holding placards.

We need a tunnel like we need a hole in the head. No Trucks. Trains not tolls.

Reporters thrust their microphones towards McAlpin. ‘Is the link going ahead?’

‘Absolutely. No more questions thank you.’

‘What happened at the A.M.J.A. last night?’

‘I had a great night.’

Talia grabbed the remote and turned the TV off. ‘Hello! Can you pick up Aaron after school?’

‘What? Yeah sure.’

‘Can you take an interest in anything other than yourself?’ Chris looked at her. ‘Don’t answer that. Aaron hurry up we’re gonna be late.’

Aaron appeared from the bathroom and Talia said. ‘You alright sweetie?’

‘Yeah.’

Chris took a screen shot of the girl and emailed it to Marla Davis, requesting ID information. The phone rang – it was Harry, wanting to capitalise on winning the A.M.J.A. ‘We need to do a follow up story about the truck industry.’

‘Something stinks about the Morley story.’

Harry cautioned him. ‘You’re still worried about the other woman? He probably was having an affair. He was a politician. I guess we have to think about his family – will it serve any purpose to drag it up? I think the story is a done deal mate.’

‘I wanna track down the girl.’

‘Chris! Stringer!’ Harry took several deep breaths and thought, ‘*Fuck, it’s never easy.*’

The Speaker slammed his gavel on the wooden block. ‘Order, order in the house.

Would the Honourable Member for Pascoe Vale please refrain from interjecting and allow the Minister for Infrastructure to continue.’

Don nodded and puffed his chest forward. ‘As I was saying, Mr. Speaker the City Connect project is in the final stages of securing the tender for stage one of the proposed development ...’

‘No way, you’ve got no right,’ came from the floor.

‘I will ask the member for Pasco Vale to leave the chamber for a period of one hour.’

Don continued. 'Mr. Speaker my department is currently reviewing the tender submissions and will make a decision. A decision I might add that will benefit, will absolutely benefit the people of this great state of Victoria for generations to come.' Cries approval could be heard. 'Here, here.'

Honey was standing in her apartment overlooking Port Phillip Bay. Don was sitting on the couch drinking tea.

'I suppose you think you looked good this morning standing on the steps.'

'I like to think I look good at all times.'

Honey turned to face Don which prompted him to say, 'I'm sorry things are moving slower than I'd hoped.'

Honey sat next to Don. Her hand circled his face then slapped it hard.

Don said. 'Some people want the local mob, DB Constructions,' he raised an eyebrow, 'due process.'

Honey grabbed Don's tie and pulled him close. 'I'm not interested in due process.'

Chris met Marla at the Police Media Unit.

'I got the pic but there's not much to go on. What about a name?'

Chris's mobile rang. It was Talia he declined the call. 'She's about mid-twenties, dark hair, Chinese. Maybe Young Liberal?'

'I'll check the database see what we can come up with.'

Outside St. Vincent's hospital patients sat in wheelchairs and savoured their ciggies – their last grab for control before being wheeled back into the wards.

The lift doors opened and Talia nervously stepped onto the ward. After speaking at reception she waited. The doctor approached – Talia desperately trying to read his face. They exchanged a few words. She entered the room and found Aaron sitting upright in bed with a saline drip connected to his arm. Talia hugged her. ‘You’re gonna be alright baby.’

Chris arrived at the hospital. Talia felt relief at seeing him but it quickly turned to anger. ‘Where were you?’

‘Work. Is he alright?’

‘Vomiting at school.’

‘Something he ate?’ asked Chris.

‘Diabetes,’ said Talia, then she bawled her eyes out. They sat in the waiting room and Chris began to pace the floor, he looked at his watch. Talia asked, ‘Do you have to be somewhere?’

‘No, no I’m here. When can we see him?’

‘He’s asleep.’

He continued to pace and check his phone.

Talia picked up a teddy bear from the toy box. ‘Just go.’

‘I had planned on going to Barwon to see Wilson.’

She threw the teddy bear and it landed at his feet.

Chris took the Western Ring Road. It was adorned by industrial sculptures and architectural textures – multi-lane freeways with crossovers and lane changes.

On arrival he was led through security into the visitors’ area. Wilson fronted with a black eye and bruised face.

‘What do you want?’

‘Ask a few questions.’

Silence from Wilson.

‘Did you know Morley was having an affair?’

‘News to me.’

‘Did you ever see him with a Chinese girl?’

Wilson thought for a moment. ‘I couldn’t say.’

‘On the night you killed Morley ...’

‘I didn’t kill Morley.’

‘You don’t remember because you were drunk. Come on, you were found behind the wheel of your car, you crunched him into the dirt. Forensics matched the paint from your car to Morley’s.

‘I got a call from Morley’s secretary, she said he wanted to meet at the Little River pub talk about a compromise over the Parkville section.’

‘And your house?’

‘That wasn’t an issue in fact I was going to do okay out of the deal. He wasn’t there. I had a beer and that’s the last thing I remember.’

‘You didn’t like Morley?’

‘Of course not he was a snake ... doesn’t mean I killed him. Fuck, I don’t know. I was spiked.’

‘Nobody believes that.’

‘I was guilty before it got to trial thanks to you.’

Chris stood in the car park and called Talia. No answer. He rang Harry.

‘Where are you?’ asked Harry.

‘I’m at Barwon.’ Silence. ‘Not Wilson? I thought we agreed to let that go, mate, there are other stories out there. We won the prize – I’m worried. You have to know when a story has run its course.’

‘You want Wilson to rot for something he didn’t do?’

‘Of course not, but Morley having an affair doesn’t change anything.’

‘We don’t know that.’

The sun, set over the *You Yangs* as trucks and cars vied for the optimal lane on the Geelong freeway.

Wilson was stretched out on his bunk. His hands cupped behind his head. The meeting with Chris prompted thoughts about the night of Morley’s murder.

FLASHBACK

**Wilson arrived at the Little River Pub
He ordered a drink and looked at his watch.**

INSERT

Blurred montage: Sammy, Damir, trees, and moon – all in a swaying sickening motion.

When Chris arrived home he found his suitcase leaning against the veranda wall. He stood for a moment not sure how to respond. He inserted the key in the front door but had second thoughts. He grabbed his belongings, turned and jumped into his car.

Harry was asleep in the upstairs living area. The ground floor comprised of a large table, a few digital cameras, tripods and several computers. The place was dark he climbed the stairs to the living area. 'Harry, it's me.' No answer. Chris switched on the light and found Harry, naked asleep on the couch.

Harry bolted upright. Chris responded, 'Fuck, put some clothes on.' Harry was awake now. 'What are you doin' here?'

'I saw Wilson. Nothing.'

'I could have told you that.'

Chris grabbed a couple of beers from the fridge while Harry pulled on his pants.

'I didn't know you were a naturalist.'

'You mean naturist. And I'm not.'

'You just like to free-snake it?'

'I went to the doc and she said I have anxiety issues.'

'I could have told you that.'

'I get chest pains and nausea ... it's fucked.'

Chris was about to sit on the couch and then thought better of it he sat in the designer winged chair and got stuck into the beer. 'What's your problem?'

Harry said, 'I just want to get my gear off. The doc gave me some Zoloft but it's a bad mix with whiskey. I must have passed out.'

Chris pondered for a moment and then noticed Harry's shoes by the wall. 'You just get a feeling?'

Harry nodded, shamefully.

They sat quietly. 'You're joking, right?'

Harry popped his beer and drank.

More silence. 'It's good you're seeing the doctor, that's good,' said Chris.

They drank throughout the night and Chris curled up in the chair.

The following morning Harry came downstairs fully clothed and Chris was at the computer. 'Find anything?' asked Harry.

'Wilson said he received a call from Morley's secretary ... from a mobile? Did we check with his secretary?'

'No. At the time it seemed like Wilson was it. Sounds like we missed some of the finer points. But we're not cops we're journos.'

'How did you know Wilson's house was up for demolition?' asked Chris.

'I can't remember ... public record?' The coffee started to percolate. Harry turned and stepped on Chris's bag. 'Shit.'

Chris pulled out the broken Perspex award.

Harry grabbed it. 'No, I fucked it up.'

'Superglue?' said Chris.

Jean arrived. 'Public Transport don't ya just love it.' She rummaged through the shelves, grabbed a camera bag, tripod and batteries. 'Batteries charged?'

Harry and Chris shrugged their shoulders.

'McAlpin is giving a press conference at ten!'

Harry nodded his head. 'Find what he's on about.'

Jean arrived with the camera bag slung over her shoulder. She took a seat with the other journos as Don McAlpin walked towards the podium.

'Our future relies on infrastructure and the City Connect project will be one of the most ambitious projects this city has seen in decades. In making my decision I have shown no fear nor favour – this project is in the best interests of the community.'

‘What about the tender?’

‘The truth of the matter is – we’re working our way through the contracts, Leasehold have pulled out and we have two others, DB Construction and UK Lester Group.’

‘Didn’t your predecessor Gary Morley favour DB?’

‘Thank you’ and he did a ‘Clive Palmer’. Exit stage left. His voice could be heard down the corridor. ‘I have an important lunch date.’

Jean noticed the Member for Pasco Vale, Allen Harcourt at the back of the room.

‘Allen, hi Jean Sayer from *Northside Media* any comment?’

‘This is a sell-out, McAlpin has the chance to do the right thing but he’s pushing ahead. This project should be delayed until the election.

City Connect should be taken to the people. McAlpin has no right to sign any contracts. It’s being rushed through and you have to ask yourself – why?’

Chris met Jane Morley at the Yarra Bend Boathouse. The geese and ducks waddled in and out of the water as if they knew what they were doing.

‘Thanks for seeing me.’ Chris opened his laptop and played the scene where the Chinese girl grabbed Morley’s hand.’

Jane started to cry. ‘I knew about it. I wanted out but Gary begged me to stay.’

‘What are you saying?’

‘Gary was having an affair.’

‘Do you know who she was?’

‘Katherine Cheng – she was a prostitute.’

‘Did she have anything to do with Gary’s death?’

‘I found out he was seeing her at a B&B on the Little River Road, where they found Gary. He’s dead that’s all I know.’

Jane left and Chris threw breadcrumbs at the ducks. He rang Marla. ‘Her name is Katherine Cheng. She works as a hooker.’

Marla sat at the computer and brought up a list of Chengs. ‘Okay, I’ve got a K. Cheng in Epping, Croydon, Richmond ... Interstate?’

‘Thanks send the list and I’ll do the legwork.’

Chris walked into Neptune Lane and was met with a funeral procession. A coffin pasted in white and yellow holy paper was carried by six pallbearers and placed on the side of the road. The small crowd of mainly Chinese stood respectfully while gongs and bells were sounded. The coffin was then lifted into the hearse.

Michael Cheng, his sister Katherine and their elderly mother Lily rested their heads on the vehicle for a moment. Michael led the group, holding a lit joss stick.

Katherine stared at Chris and for a moment their eyes met. The procession moved solemnly as mourners tried to subdue their grief. Chris watched as the hearse slowly passed by. A lady stood at the gate of her house and told him that old man Cheng died. She pointed to the family. ‘That’s Lily Cheng and her son Michael and his sister Katherine. She’s trouble.’

Once the hearse drove away Chris approached Katherine. ‘I’m Chris Stringer from *Northside Media*.’ He handed her his card. ‘Did you know Gary Morley?’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about, leave us alone.’

Michael Cheng saw his sister in distress. ‘Who are you?’

‘Chris Stringer, *Northside Media*.’

‘My sister is upset?’

‘I just want to ask a few questions.’

‘Fuck off.’

Chris nodded apologetically and made a strategic departure. ‘Maybe another time?’

Pink clouds morphed into grey streaks and the sun fell in the Western skies.

Night – Heat – Insects buzzed around the entrance light of the VIP club.

Katherine sat at the bar. She was plastered.

‘You’re not supposed to drink on the job,’ said Damir.

‘I buried my dad today so who gives a shit.’

‘A nice girl, such a filthy mouth.’

‘I told Honey I wasn’t on tonight okay.’

‘Sure, sure, drink.’

‘This came today,’ Katherine handed Chris’s card to Damir. ‘Some journo asking about Gary.’

‘What did you say?’

Katherine slurring her words, ‘I didn’t tell him anything ... no I told him to fuck off!’

Damir nodded. ‘Good.’

The red dust rolled across the city skyline as Chris stared at the brown stagnant water of the Yarra. Marla arrived. ‘I asked around and you might be onto something.

Katherine Cheng had \$250,000 deposited into her account about a year ago.’

Chris jumped on this piece of info, ‘Who made the deposit?’

‘Came from an account under the name of The Institute for Free Enterprise.’

‘Where do they come up with this shit?’

‘It’s set up as some kind of not for profit foundation. Headed up by a guy called Marcus Agrippa.’

‘Who’s he?’

‘A Roman general 63-12 BC. That’s all I’ve got at the moment.’

‘Thanks.’

‘You should relax drink more. I’ll call if I know anything else.’

‘Thanks again.’

Honey sat behind the desk at Pieter’s transport when Damir called, she picked up the phone and Damir spoke. ‘Kathy Cheng.’

‘Yes, I know her Daddy died.’

‘The journalist was at the funeral.’

‘What! Which journalist?’

‘Stringer – Kathy said he was asking about Morley.’

Honey said. ‘She knows too much.’

‘I’ll take care of her no problem.’

Katherine was tanked, she sat in the passenger seat and her head lolled back onto the headrest. ‘Where are we going Dammy?’

‘Need to lay low for a while. I’ll take care of you.’

‘You’re a good man. I need to tell my brother he’ll be worried.’

‘You can call once we get to the safe house.’ Damir played his heavy metal music – a ballad and Kathy lit a smoke.

‘I won’t say anything.’

‘What’s to say?’

‘Nothing.’

They drove out onto the Calder highway the M79 towards Bendigo. Damir pulled into the scrub at Ravenswood and stepped from the car, ‘wait here,’ using his phone torch he scanned the area. The beam came to rest on a piece of corrugated iron.

Katherine saw Damir lift the sheet and the penny dropped. She ran from the car and into the bush.

‘Katherine it’s okay, no problem,’ said Damir.

She ran, pushing her way through the scrub until she fell into the Buck Eye Creek.

Damir stood listened and followed the sound of the splashing water. Katherine was out of breath she stumbled in the creek and crawled her way up the bank. Weeping and terrified she staggered through the darkness. Damir crossed the creek and followed. She hid behind the tree as he edged closer. She couldn’t contain her fear and pleaded. ‘Please no, please I won’t say anything.’

She screamed ‘No!’ Damir lunged and grabbed her by the throat.

Damir’s phone started ringing and in a moment of distraction Katherine kicked him in the groin and he doubled over. She made her escape into the dense bush.

Damir answered his phone.

‘Where are you bro?’

‘Get up here now you fuckwit ... the mineshaft.’

Damir spent the night wandering through the scrub. Mosquitos left bites all over his face. Sammy drove to the mineshaft and waited. He woke as the sun rose and then honked the car horn. A flock of Galahs took flight. Damir followed the sound and appeared from the bush a complete mess.

‘What happened?’

‘I blame you, you fat prick!’

‘Whoa bro I dunno what you’re talkin’ about but you can’t speak to me like that.’

‘You fuck me over like that ever again and I’ll cut your heart out and throw it to the dogs. Katherine is somewhere ... find her.’

Damir arrived at Honey’s apartment.

‘We have a problem. She got away.’

Honey’s face hardened. ‘She what?’

‘It was dark Sammy is up there now looking for her. Don’t worry we’ll find her.’

Sammy smoked a foil. He clicked his MP3 player and reclined in his bucket seat.

Chillout sounds of electronic hip-hop wafted through the trees, a far cry from Croatian heavy metal.

Katherine’s brother Michael had been trying to call her. He stood at the window of the family home and left yet another message.

Jean sat at the computer and uploaded the footage of McAlpin onto the *Northside* website. ‘Can you write some copy on McAlpin?’

Chris sat opposite the large trestle table. ‘Like what?’

‘You’re turning into one of those people that answers a question with a question.’

‘You want me to write something about McAlpin?’

‘There you go again.’

Michael Cheng opened the door. ‘Looking for Chris Stringer.’

‘Yeah.’ Chris was pleased to extricate himself from the arduous task of writing something interesting about McAlpin.

‘Have you seen my sister? Did she talk to you?’

‘No don’t know anything about it. What’s the problem?’

‘I’ve been trying to contact her it’s not like her not to call me.’

‘Come in, coffee? Sorry about your father. Maybe Katherine is having a bit of quiet time.’

‘Something’s not right. She went to the club and they haven’t seen her.’

‘What club?’

‘VIP club in West Melbourne.’

‘Okay, I’ll look into it. What do you know about her relationship with Gary Morley.’

‘She hung out with him. She said it was a business deal.’

Chris stood out the front of the VIP club – a small entrance with an olive canopy and steps leading to a solid black door with a gold knocker.

It was a brothel with a small bar laced with fairy lights. Girls sat in mock antique chairs and reclined on divans wearing lace and satin.

‘Hi babe. How ya doin’? Can I get you a drink? See anything you like?’

‘Looking for Asian.’

‘Sure,’ she called out, ‘Lily!’ In a softer voice she said to Chris, ‘Lily is Thai.’

‘Thinking more Chinese.’

‘You are particular. Take a seat I’ll get you drink and I’m sure we can work something out.’

No sign of Katherine and he knew too many questions would lead to fewer answers.

Damir sat upstairs surrounded by monitors, which covered the entrance and bar area and some of the rooms. He sat with his feet on the desk and the speakerphone on.

‘You know the mineshaft. She has to be somewhere near there.’

‘I’ve been lookin’ bro nothin’. I reckon she hitched a ride on a truck she could be in Sydney.’

‘I don’t need you to tell me where she could be. I need you to find her. Watch her brother’s house. She’ll call her brother. Chinese they are fucked up about family.’

Damir looked up at the monitor and saw Chris sitting at the bar.

He routed the phone to Honey at her apartment. ‘The journalist.’

‘What?’ asked Honey.

‘He’s here at the club.’

‘Send him a message.’ Honey ended the call and threw the phone onto the coffee table.

Marla ordered a boutique cider and Chris stuck with whiskey. The L-bar was a cosy club where people could talk. They sat in the corner surrounded by Chinese lanterns and Tretchikoff prints.

‘I had a visit from Katherine Cheng’s brother – Michael. He’s worried – hasn’t heard from her since yesterday.’

‘Doesn’t sound too bad.’

‘Reckons she works out of a brothel in West Melbourne called the VIP Club.’

‘Classy.’

‘I went there.’

‘You have all the fun.’

‘It wasn’t fun I asked for ‘Chinese’ and she was a no show.’

‘You sure you weren’t in a restaurant?’

Chris’s face went blank.

‘I’ll make a few calls but it’s a bit early to be putting her on missing persons list.’

‘Okay.’

Chris finished his drink and waved for more.’

Marla opened her notebook. ‘The Institute for Free Enterprise receives anonymous donations. No address just a P.O. Box. Money goes in and money goes out.

‘Marcus Agrippa paid Cheng?’

‘Well, the I.F.E. paid Cheng. It could be legit.’

‘Paid her for what?’

Marla took a sip of cider.

Chris answered his own question. ‘Paid her to sleep with Morley?’

It was a warm night with a light shower making the air sticky and humid. They stumbled towards the *Northside* office, Chris was more tanked than Marla, and he tripped on the uneven footpath. Marla hailed the approaching taxi. She opened the door and slid across the back seat. ‘Thanks for the drink.’ The taxi disappeared. Chris continued to walk. The lights of a Silver Lexus SUV shone in his direction and it came at him in a flash. The car mounted the footpath and he realised he was the target. He was too drunk to recognize the hooded Damir behind the wheel it swerved and hit a wheelie bin that subsequently pushed Chris against the wall of the L-Bar. He slumped forward dazed and confused then hit the ground with a heavy thump.

An ambulance arrived at St.Vincent's. Chris was wheeled into emergency.

Grommo chained himself to an earthmover as protestors
chanted *Trains Not Trucks*.

Sammy parked his car in Neptune Street and
watched the Cheng house.

Honey gathered the girls at the VIP Club.
Most of them are crying.

End of Episode 1

Research statement

Research background

Drawing on academic research in the field of screenwriting studies and practice, this work is inspired by the current debate about the value of the unpublished screenplay and the provenance of the screenplay as it moves through the industrial stages of development. Informed by Price (2010), Macdonald (2013) and Barthes (1971), this creative practice research synthesizes screenplay and novel with the intention of retaining the screenwriter's authorial expression in book form i.e. a 'television novel', a prose text for the imagined screen work.

Research contribution

Stringer contributes to the emerging area of screenwriting studies by challenging the accepted orthodoxy of screenplay development. By combining screen language and a plain modernist prose writing style, this work explores the potential of the 'television novel' as a stand-alone text with embedded information for screen development.

Research significance

This work draws on literary theory and screenwriting studies to create a 'television novel'. It explores the screen idea as a literary object and acknowledges the ontology of the work in and of itself regardless of a completed screen production. This innovative approach privileges the screenwriter and text through the separation of conception and execution and seeks to offset the problem of what Maras (2009) calls the 'vanishing screenplay'.

Works cited

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