

University of South Australia

Nat Texler

Lifeline: an extract

Abstract:

This creative paper contains an extract of *Lifeline*—a short thriller play presented in the 2016 Adelaide Fringe. *Lifeline* explores the ramifications of metadata retention and social media information falling into the hands of a character with malicious intentions, in the case of the play, a character called ‘Lewis’, who uses the personal information of a man named ‘Guy’ to manipulate him into performing heinous acts. The extract details the section of the play following the opening, where Lewis begins to reveal the far-reaching consequences of being able to access Guy’s personal information through a combination of his details (birthdate, full name, address) and billing information (banking details, credit card information, and purchase history). The play explores the consequences of storing personal details in a mediatised environment, and the consequences of not understanding the legislation that is designed around personal identity. It also details other aspects of cyberspaces that are often misunderstood—the Darkweb, the ease in which someone can steal personal information, and how unsecure information is when there is access to metadata through telecommunications services.

Biographical note:

Currently based at the University of South Australia, Nat Texler is an emerging researcher in the field of creative writing, focussing on playwrighting and practice as research. Most recently, she has produced her short play *Lifeline* in the 2016 Adelaide Fringe Festival and is currently working on an accompanying exegesis for submission in 2017.

Key words:

Play – artistic audit – performative research – creative writing – playwright

LIFELINE EXTRACT

BY NAT TEXLER

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Characters:

Guy: Twenties to Thirties. Recently separated from his wife.

Lewis: Early twenties. Telemarketer. Satan.

Voiceovers:

Samuel: Twenties to Thirties. Businesslike. Brusque.

Setting:

Two spaces:

Lewis's Space: A cubicle set-up, computer, desk, chair, headset. Spartan.

Guy's Space: A table with a chair. There's a photo of a woman and a laptop on the table. A noose hangs from the ceiling.

Hold music plays. Lights up on Guy standing on a table with a noose around his neck. As he moves, the music is cut as his phone rings again. He ignores it, takes a breath. Pause. Lifts his foot. Pause. Phone rings again. Guy answers.

Guy: *Christ! What!*

Lewis is illuminated in a chair. He is wearing a headset and throwing/catching a ball absentmindedly.

Lewis: (*cheerfully*) Hi! This is Lewis calling on behalf of your telephone service provider. Am I speaking with Guy Stevens?

Pause.

Guy: Now's not a good time.

Lewis: Oh I completely understand if you're busy. A lot of my customers are busy when I contact them but they find, after talking to me that–

Guy: Really not interested. /Thanks

Lewis: I wouldn't take that step if I were you.

Guy: What?

Lewis: Don't do it, sir.

Guy: How did you know?

Lewis: About?

Guy: Nothing... So... what was this call about?

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Lewis: It's to help you, Guy.

Guy: How did you get this number?

Lewis: This call is to help you. Now just so you know, the call will be monitored and recorded for quality and coaching purposes, is that ok?

Guy: Uh... No thanks

Lewis: Easy. Recording is switched off. Now, the best way for this call to work is that I'm just going to ask you a couple of questions about how you like to use your services so I get a better idea of your usage and needs. Is that ok?

Guy: How long is this gonna take?

Lewis: I assure you, it will only take a few moments of your time, Guy. Now, to allow me to access the account and to ensure the privacy and security of your personal information, may I verify your date of birth?

Guy: Uh... I'm not sure I'm comfortable with this.

Lewis: I'll need you to tell me your date of birth to verify your account.

Guy: You have it there. Right?

Lewis: Yes I do, but I just want to ensure that your privacy is protected. Privacy is important.

Guy: But I don't know you.

Lewis: Mr Stevens... I am here to help. I am here to serve you. It's not as if I can see where you are. I just need your date of birth.

Guy: Fine. 12. August. 1982.

Lewis: So that's one two oh eight nineteen eighty-two?

Guy: Yes.

Lewis: Thank you ever so much for your cooperation, Guy Stevens.

Long pause. Lewis is typing.

Guy: So... where did you get my number from?

Lewis: Your phone company. You'd be surprised how easy it is.

Guy: What? Do you work for them?

Lewis: Well, I now have your phone record in front of me. I see you have the home phone, internet and two mobile services on the account, correct?

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Guy: One mobile.

Lewis: I'm sorry, there appears to be two on this bill.

Guy: I know. It's just one mobile now.

Lewis: What happened to the other one?

Guy: It's gone.

Lewis: Oh, did you lose it?

Guy: No. She took it.

Lewis: Did she?

Guy: Yes.

Lewis: I appreciate your cooperation, Guy.

Guy: Oh I'll bet you do.

Lewis: I mean, it's not as if you've got something to hide, is it?

Guy: Look, mate, she took the phone when she left.

Lewis: When she left, hmmm?

Guy: Yes.

Lewis: What a pity your wife left you.

Pause

Guy: I never said she was my wife.

Lewis: Didn't you?

Guy: No. I didn't.

Lewis: Was my assumption incorrect?

Guy: Well... no, but still. How did you know?

Lewis: Would you believe me if I told you it was a lucky guess?

Guy: I don't know.

Pause. Lewis types. His keyboard is the only sound.

Guy: Look, what do you want from me?

Lewis: Excuse me?

Guy: What do you want from me?

Lewis: Excuse *you*.

Guy: It's a simple question. Why can't you answer it?

Lewis: Why can't you trust I have your best interests at heart?

Guy: Bullshit.

Lewis: I'd be careful if I were you.

Guy: Or else what?

Lewis: I know more than you think I do.

Lewis stops typing and leans back.

Guy: Oh I'm sure you do. You know my phone number, my date of birth, my name. So what? It's not as if-

Lewis: (*Interrupting*) I have all the phone records right here... all of it. It's like a map of how-to fail your marriage 101. Especially on your side.

Pause

Guy: What do you mean? What records?

Lewis: All her phone calls to him... The guy she's been calling. I can even give you his name. Of course, that would have to be something you earn...

Guy: You have his name?

Lewis: And number and mobile account. Oh and look, he has a Facebook too. And on the account... yep. There's his home address. Work address. He even keeps his appointments in an iCloud calendar. Got to love my job. So much accessibility, so little time.

Guy: What do you want?

Lewis: Your co-operation, for starters.

Guy: Co-operation? What's in it for you?

Lewis: (*archly*) It's not about me. Mind you, there's some profit here and there to be had.

Guy: So what, you're going to try and bribe me? There's nothing I want.

Lewis: Oh no, that would be illegal. I'm just providing you with... added value. To make things run more smoothly... Or interestingly, depending on your actions in the next 30 minutes or so.

Guy: And if I refuse?

Lewis: Well, given that you've verified your account... I'm guessing you're still at 43 Faust Street?

Guy: What?

Lewis: Well look here! There's your credit card details. Oh what a shame... It's unsecured. Ah look at all those websites and details. Hmmm... I wonder what would happen if I just (*he types*) remotely logged in? Well, well, well. Nice retirement fund there. Super going well, for someone who recently lost their business.

Guy: You. What. H-How are you doing that?

Lewis: (*smugly*) My powers of persuasion.

Guy: Stop it!

Lewis: Again, why would I do that? You really haven't been that polite to me.

Guy: Look, it doesn't matter. Who cares if you steal from me, it's not like-

Lewis: Let's make a deal.

Guy: I'm hanging up now.

Lewis: I wouldn't do that if I were you.

Guy: Or else what? You steal all my money? So what? It's not as if it matters.

Lewis: Why don't you stay on the line and find out?

Guy: Is this some kind of crank call?

Lewis: No.

Guy: No?

Lewis: No. I have a very particular motivation in mind for you, Guy.

Guy: Oh enough of this!

Lewis: Enough of what?

Guy: Who do you work for? I'm going to report you and then I'm-

Lewis: Why don't you shut up and listen?

Pause.

Guy: What did you just say?!

Lewis: You heard me, Guy. Shut up. And listen.

Guy: Give me one reason why I shouldn't hang up right now!

Lewis: I'll help you get your wife back.

Pause

Guy: You can't do that. She's cut all contact with me.

Lewis: After seeing what I know of you, is it really that impossible for me to know more about her?

Pause.

Guy: What's involved?

Lewis: I'm going to ask you a few things. Eventually, I'll direct you to do certain tasks. For every task you successfully complete, I will give you a detail about the whereabouts of your wife – and the lovely fellow she's involved with.

Guy: A detail?

Lewis: Indeed. Maybe his name? Maybe his phone number. Or even maybe his address... Maybe what he does to her when no one is watching. You never know what can be dredged up from the records.

Guy: Why would I care? She left me.

Lewis: Because if you refuse, your wife is as good as dead.

Guy: You can't do anything to me. You don't even know me. So what if you can see my personal information? It doesn't mean you know the kind of man I am.

Lewis: Oh you're right. I can't do anything to you. *(Pause)* Have you ever made a pipe bomb, Mr Stevens?

Guy: A what?

Lewis: Have you ever made a pipe bomb? Or a Molotov cocktail? Dry ice bomb? IED?

Guy: You have no idea what you're on about. I'm going to get you fired and arrested for harassment.

Lewis: Then your wife dies.

Guy: You're bluffing.

Lewis: Am I?

Lewis presses a button on his keyboard. A sudden explosive sound is heard.

Guy: What the hell was that? (*He looks out*)

Lewis: I do hope you have insurance. Just let me check—

Guy: My car! Holy shit. My car!

Lewis: Lucky you, comprehensive insurance with a reliable company. Good thing you paid that yesterday.

Guy: What the hell was that? It looks like the devil took a shit on my windscreen!

Lewis: How apt. Call it a warning.

Guy: How do you know where I live? Who the fuck is listening to this call?

Lewis: I have your phone records here. They contain your place of residence, the calls you make to the numbers you use, the websites you visit and the devices connected in your house. Furthermore, you verified your date of birth.

Guy: Meaning you get to blow up my car?!

Lewis: Meaning that what I don't have here, I can access by bypassing your password and entering your birthday into the website connected. I have control over your home computer, your online presence, your bank account... by extension, every bit of information about you is at my fingertips. All I needed was your phone number and birthday.

Guy: Well, you're not the only one who can play this game! I know your name and who you work for—

Lewis: Do you really? Or do you just have some bullshit information I fed to you over the phone?

Guy: You're lying.

Lewis: That is indeed the point. I lied. You know nothing about me whereas I...

He types

Lewis: ... have all the details of where you live, what you've been up to, everything right here. All the websites, every keystroke and exchange, every transaction. More importantly, I have her location locked down via GPS and I will not hesitate make a call that would result in a rather explosive demise.

Guy: (*Flatly*) What are you saying?

Lewis: The truth is – I am someone who could destroy the only thing you still care about.

Guy: Yeah right. I don't care about anything.

Lewis: Oh Guy, you weren't really going to kill yourself. Not yet at the least. You were going to wait until she called tonight... or tomorrow night. Testing the set-up does you no good.

Guy: ... what. How do you know? Who the fuck are you? Am I being watched?

Lewis: You looked up how to do a hangman's knot two days ago. You also attempted to send a friend request to your wife on facebook from a secondary account. I believe you were drafting up some message from that account – a cry for help of sorts. Pathetic, really. Maybe letting you die would be of benefit to you and killing your wife would be just rewards.

Guy: Don't you dare touch her!

Lewis: I could even make it more interesting! How do you feel about paedophilia? I'm sure I can upload something to your hard drive. Then we'd have a suicide driven by innate guilt over a sexual perversity. What a lovely story.

Guy: Oh my god.

Lewis: But seeing as I'm so kind, I'm going to restrain myself from doing so. In fact, you should think of me as your fairy godmother.

Guy: Fairy... Christ almighty.

Lewis: I'm here to help you, in whatever form that may take.

Guy: By blackmailing me?! Threatening me? Blowing up my car?

Lewis: By giving you an opportunity to clean the slate. To walk in there, a proud man, the saviour. To become better. To get her back. To be a hero.

Pause

Lewis: Or by beating the shit out of your wife's man. Hell knows, he probably deserves it.

Guy: I still don't understand. What's in it for you?

Lewis: All I seek is your co-operation. I'm offering you all the information you could need to make it right. I may even help financially here and there.

Guy: You have no idea what you're getting yourself into.

Lewis: Neither do you. Remember – I have the power to make things go boom.

Guy: Why do you even care? I'm no one special.

Lewis: Unlike you, I'm smart enough to keep my business to myself. Both online and offline.

Guy: That's not good enough! Who are you! Why do you care?

Lewis: Guy, you just fit a profile. There are a million souls like you. I'm just lucky your situation gives me plenty of leverage.

Guy: I don't believe you.

Lewis: I don't care. Do we cease this call, and I make another one to someone who is out the front of a particular house in a particular suburb armed with a particular kind of IED?

Guy: IED?

Lewis: That means 'Big boom'. The kind terrorists love to make.

Pause.

Guy: Fine.

Lewis: Fine?

Guy: I guess I don't have a choice. *(Guy reaches for the home phone slowly)*

Lewis: Oh you always do have a choice. It's just that some are less painful than others. For example, if I were you, I'd stop dialling the police right now unless you like scraping your loved ones up off the sidewalk.

Guy freezes.

Lewis: And again! You choose wisely! You are full of surprises, Guy.

Guy: Very funny. How did you—

Lewis: (*ignoring him*) Now before we begin, I want you to put in a Bluetooth earpiece and put your phone on charge

Guy: I don't have—

Lewis: First mistake: lying to me. You bought this equipment for the phone last week. I have the records of transaction here. Get it, and connect yourself up.

Guy reaches into his pocket and attaches a Bluetooth earpiece to his ear.

Guy: H-Hello?

Lewis: Why hello there, Guy.

Guy: Hi.

Lewis: Thank you.

Guy: For what?

Lewis: If your phone were to die, I would assume you would have hung up. Which makes our agreement null and void, and your wife a rainbow of human remains.

Guy: That's a charming image.

Lewis: I do try. So, the phones...

Guy: What about my phones?

Lewis: You have a home line, with a private number. Tell me, how much do you use that phone?

Guy: Excuse me?

Lewis: I said, how much do you use that phone?

Guy: Not much, ok?

Lewis: It was mostly her, hmmm?

Guy: Yes. She was always chatting away. I should have known she was—

Lewis: If I wanted to hear a sob story about some pathetic excuse for a man losing a woman he probably ignored to the point of madness, I wouldn't be engaging in this particular exercise.

Guy: You only want the details that suit you, I guess.

Lewis: Correct. Now. I want you to pick up that home phone and dial a particular number.

Pause.

Lewis: Did you hear me? Pick up the phone.

Guy: Why?

Lewis: It's either a big boom or a detail about your wife's lovely man. Remember our deal? One or the other. Pick up the phone, Guy.

Guy picks up the phone.

Lewis: Once the call is picked up, I will tell you what to say.

Guy: Why?

Lewis: Time is ticking, Guy. Don't ask pointless questions

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Guy: Lewis-

Lewis: Tick tock, Guy. In this case, 'boom!' usually comes after tick tock. Remember that.

Guy: Fine! What number?

Lewis: 08 8342 1255

Guy dials. Pause

Guy: It's ringing.

Lewis: That's what phones do, Guy.

Guy: What do you want me to say?

Pause

Guy: What do you want me to say?!

Lewis: Say 'We know what you've done to her'. Then hang up.

Guy: It's still ringing!

Lewis: Wait until he picks up. We know what you've done to her. Hang up.

Guy: What if it doesn't go through?

Lewis: It will.

Pause

Samuel (V/O): Hello?

Guy: We know what you've done to her.

Guy hangs up

Lewis: Very good, Guy! It's clear you know how to follow instructions. Why, I think that deserves a treat, don't you?

Guy: I'm not a dog, don't treat me like one.

Pause

Lewis: So you're saying you don't want the first name of the lovely fellow who is hurting the only thing you hold dear?

Guy: Hurting! What do you mean he's hurting her?

Lewis: One thing at a time.

Guy: How's he hurting her?!

Lewis: Oh we'll get to that. His name is Samuel. He's just a regular guy.

Guy: How is that useful information?!

Lewis: It gives you something to focus on. Imagine him answering the door and you greeting him. "Hey Sam". Punch. Kick. Stab. How rewarding to give your enemy a name. Someone who is as horrible as him deserves renown.

Guy: I'm not a violent man.

Lewis: You will be.

Research statement

Research background

In his paper *creative writing: words as practice-led research*, researcher Graeme Harper states that ‘creative writing is both creative and critical in nature’¹. To contextualise, the act of writing creatively relies on a level of critical engagement with the sources from which the artefact is born. The extract in this paper, *Lifeline*, draws inspiration from many different conceptual fields and areas of interest, however a major central narrative point comes from the writer’s experiences as a telemarketer, and learning about ‘metadata’ and the privacy laws in Australia as part of her employment. Per the Australian Government’s summary of the *Telecommunications (Interception and Access) Amendment (Data Retention) Act 2015*, metadata is ‘information about a communication (the who, when, where and how)—not the content or substance of a communication (the what)’². This information, by Australian Law, must be retained by service providers for at least two years, and contains the method in which the communication was sent, as well as who received it. This law was passed by the Australian Government in 2015.

Research contribution

To facilitate the access to this information, and to further extrapolate the dangers of retention, the writer created a telemarketer with access to this metadata as the antagonist of *Lifeline*, and then examined what other personal information could be recovered using this information – social media networks, online cloud storage devices and net banking applications. The results of the exploration directly informed the actions taken within the narrative, and contributed to the creation of a creative piece that explores the potential repercussions of personal information falling into the hands of someone with malevolent intentions. This question of ‘what if’ is explored by *Lifeline*, where the information is used to blackmail and manipulate the protagonist into performing heinous acts in order to protect his wife – who is implied to be in danger. The play *Lifeline* addresses the dangers of the accessibility of personal information through a combination of the new metadata laws in Australia, and social media networks. It also includes discussions on the dangers of rhetoric and questions the capacity society has to manipulate information in order to control behaviour.

Research significance

The significance of this research is that it shows the dangers of the manipulation of our personal information and how easy it is to access personal accounts with the bare minimum of details and certain software – in this case someone’s date of birth and telemarketing programs. Its value is attested to by the following indicators: presentation at the 2016 Adelaide Fringe Festival, and the resulting positive reviews from Benjamin Orchard of Stage Whispers³, Corinna DiNiro of FringeUK⁴, Linda Edwards of Adelaide Theatre Guide⁵, and Sean Fewster, Advertiser Court Reporter (via twitter)⁶.

List of works cited

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¹ See Harper, 2008, p.161

² See <https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2015A00039/Html/Text>

³ See <http://www.stagewhispers.com.au/reviews/lifeline>

⁴ See <http://fringereview.co.uk/review/adelaide-fringe/2016/lifeline/>

⁵ See http://www.theatreguide.com.au/current_site/reviews/reviews_detail.php?ShowID=lifeline&ShowYear=2016

⁶ See <https://twitter.com/SeanFewster/status/697364828529287168>