

## **50 MPH: EPISODE 3**

### **“AN EXERCISE IN STRUCTURE”**

Transcript (00:22:16)



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**KRIS TAPLEY**

This is *50 MPH*!

**[INTRO MUSIC]**

**DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)**

Pop quiz, hot shot!

**DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)**

There’s a bomb on a bus.

**JEFF DANIELS (as “Harry Temple”)**

You’re deeply nuts, you know that?

**DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)**

Once the bus goes fifty miles an hour, the bomb is armed.

**SANDRA BULLOCK (as “Annie”)**

Stay on or get off?

**DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)**

If it drops below fifty...

**SANDRA BULLOCK (as “Annie”)**

Stay on or get off?!

**DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)**

...it blows up.

**ALAN RUCK (as “Stephens”)**

Oh, darn.

**DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)**

What do you do?

**KEANU REEVES (as “Jack Traven”)**

You have a hair trigger aimed at your head. What do you do?

**DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)**

What do you do?!

**KEANU REEVES (as “Jack Traven”)**

What do you do?

**KRIS TAPLEY**

I’m your host, Kris Tapley, and you’re listening to an oral history of director Jan de Bont’s 1994 summer blockbuster, *Speed*, straight from the people who made it happen. Now, don’t forget to fasten your seatbelts. Let’s hit the road!

**KRIS TAPLEY**

Hello, everyone, and thank you for tuning in once again. If you missed last week’s episode and you want a succinct rundown of why you should care about a podcast dedicated to the making of *Speed*, well I encourage you to go back and listen to me and *Los Angeles Times* film critic Justin Chang talk through why this movie matters so much. I think he did an excellent job of setting the table for us. But today, we start to get our hands dirty. I’m calling this chapter one, ground zero, if you will, for the genesis of *Speed*. Because after all, every story has a beginning. Every story fades in. So, where does *Speed* fade in?

**KRIS TAPLEY**

*Speed* fades in on screenwriter Graham Yost. Today Graham is the Emmy Award-winning writer and producer of series like HBO’s *From the Earth to the Moon* and *The Pacific*, as well as FX’s *Justified* and *The Americans*. But in the late-80s and early-90s, he was a writer and story editor on programs like Nickelodeon’s *Hey Dude*.

**[HEY DUDE THEME]**

**DALE JARVIS (singing)**

It’s a little wild and a little strange. When you make your home out on the range.

**KRIS TAPLEY**

There Was also Fox’s *Herman’s Head*. Remember that one?

**[HERMAN’S HEAD INTRO]**

**MOLLY HAGAN (as “Angel/Sensitivity”)**

Is that all you can think about? Food and sex?

**KEN HUDSON CAMPBELL (as “Animal/Lust”)**

Yes.

**PETER MACKENZIE (as “Genius/Intellect”)**

Please, focus.

**RICK LAWLESS (as “Wimp/Anxiety”)**

Look out!

**KRIS TAPLEY**

Yeah, you could hear the VHS in that one. Anyway, soon enough, not to be forgotten, ABC’S TGIF staple, *Full House*.

**[FULL HOUSE THEME]**

**JESSE FREDERICK (singing)**

Everywhere you look (everywhere you go), there's a heart (there's a heart). A hand to hold onto.

**KRIS TAPLEY**

He even had a handful of spec scripts under his arm for shows like *Murphy Brown* and *Roseanne*. A spec script is something you write on “speculation,” something that isn’t commissioned and is written in the hopes that it will be optioned or purchased by a producer or a production company. In other words, Graham was a working writer making his way into a new decade in Hollywood. And episodic television had become his purview.

**GRAHAM YOST**

When I decided that I wanted to be a writer in Hollywood, I thought, “Well, I like television and I like movies.” And I was happy to do either one. Way back when, before I did the *Roseanne* and the *Murphy Brown*, I wrote a spec, *Head of the Class*. Just to try the form. And I could tell I wasn’t terrible at it. I’m not just being the self-effacing Canadian. You know, it’s like, I knew I wasn’t great, but it wasn’t bad. It was like, “I think I could maybe do this.” So, when I got the work on *Hey Dude*, that was a godsend. That was my first real job writing scripts. That was writer’s boot camp. We were shooting an episode every two-and-a-half, every five days outside of Tucson. Before I got hired on *Full House*, I had the idea for *Speed*. It wasn’t called that initially. You probably know that story.

**KRIS TAPLEY**

And now we’ve hit our first real piece of trivia on this quest. *Speed* is a fantastic title, isn’t it? It’s simple. It’s pure. Nothing else can ever be called *Speed* because *Speed* is *Speed*! I mean, it’s perfect. But it wasn’t always perfect. It was pretty far from perfect. The original title of *Speed* was...

**[DRUMROLL]**

**KRIS TAPLEY**

*Minimum Speed*.

## **[THE PRICE IS RIGHT LOSING HORN]**

### **GRAHAM YOST**

*Minimum Speed*. People love to still give me shit about that one. But I had time. I had written the *Murphy Brown* and *Roseanne* and my friend, who is an agent, said, “No one is staffing until May so I’ve got nothing for you until then.” And I thought, “Well, I’ll write this script,” and I ran it by a friend, a writer friend, Brian Risley, and he said, “That’s a good idea. You should write that one.”

### **KRIS TAPLEY**

Now, before we get into the real genesis of this idea, it’s worth understanding where Graham was coming from as a storyteller and what was formative for him as someone discovering his own cinematic taste.

## **[SATURDAY NIGHT AT THE MOVIES CLIP]**

### **ELWY YOST**

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome once again to *Saturday Night at the Movies*. My name is Elwy Yost.

### **KRIS TAPLEY**

Graham’s father, Elwy Yost, was the host of *Saturday Night at the Movies*, a popular weekly series that aired on TVOntario, which was the public educational television network in Ontario, Canada. I suppose the best way to describe it is as a genteel *Siskel & Ebert at the Movies* meets Robert Osbourne’s wonderful Turner Classic Movies intros. Elwy would present films and then feature interviews and segments with the directors and actors. He hosted the show for a quarter of a century, from 1974 to 1999. And what’s great about it, and what I particularly would have loved if I was lucky enough to have something like this growing up, was that Elwy also talked to the artisans involved in making these movies – cinematographers, film editors, folks who, certainly back then, never got a lot of publicity. There was a focus on craft and how movies were actually made, and that was sort of the soup that Graham was surrounded by.

### **GRAHAM YOST**

We just grew up talking about movies. Always talking about cool ideas. He loved really good suspense movies. He loved the movies of this lesser-known director now, Andrew Stone, who had a great ship-sinking movie called *The Last Voyage*. You know, there’s this sort of hokey prologue thing, but then when it starts, it’s in the big ballroom, the dining room, at the captain’s table. He’s handed a note and he opens it up and it says, “Fire in the boiler room.” That’s how the movie starts, and it’s just one of those – it just doesn’t stop, and it’s just solving problems. The boiler blows up. Robert Stack’s wife is trapped. Can he get an acetylene torch? It’s just tension and this sort of, how do people respond in that kind of situation?

**KRIS TAPLEY**

This sort of thing really attracted Graham. Concept-driven storytelling. It's almost become a dirty word nowadays, and believe me, we'll get into why *Speed* is an absolute specimen of concept over character and why it's kind of brilliant in how it navigates that in due course. But *Speed* came along at a time when the industry traded in these clean engines. Guy who escaped Alcatraz has to help a Navy SEAL team infiltrate it to thwart a nerve gas attack on San Francisco.

**[THE ROCK CLIP]**

**SEAN CONNERY (as "John Patrick Mason")**

Welcome to The Rock.

**UNKNOWN ACTOR (as "Navy SEAL")**

We got visitors.

**KRIS TAPLEY**

Nuclear submarine captain and his C.O. clash over conflicting interpretations of an incomplete order to launch their missiles.

**[CRIMSON TIDE CLIP]**

**GENE HACKMAN (as "Ramsey")**

God help you if you're wrong.

**DENZEL WASHINGTON (as "Hunter")**

If I'm wrong then we're at war. God help us all.

**KRIS TAPLEY**

Terrorists hijack Air Force One and the president takes matters into his own hands.

**[AIR FORCE ONE CLIP]**

**GLENN CLOSE (as "Vice President Kathryn Bennett")**

How the hell did this happen? How the hell did they get Air Force One?

**HARRISON FORD (as "President James Marshall")**

Get off my plane.

**KRIS TAPLEY**

The elevator pitches were out of control in the best way in the 90s. And while character certainly made these films work, concept and premise put butts in seats. It was in this spirit that Graham's gears started turning on his bomb-on-a-bus movie. Well, that and legendary filmmaker Akira Kurosawa.

**[RUNAWAY TRAIN CLIP]**

**REBECCA DE MORNAY (as “Sara”)**

I don’t know what happened but there’s no engineer on this train. There’s nobody on this train but us!

**KYLE T. HEFFNER (as “Frank Barstow”)**

The brake shoes have burned off. The overspeed control must have gotten screwed up.

**ERIC ROBERTS (as “Buck”)**

Engineers do not just croak!

**JON VOIGHT (as “Manny”)**

You want to be a tough guy? You want to be a legend? Go back! Sucker, come on!

**KRIS TAPLEY**

That’s the 1985 Andrey Konchalovskiy film *Runaway Train*, starring Jon Voight, Eric Roberts and Rebecca De Mornay. It was adapted from an un-produced Kurosawa script – and voila, we just started this podcast and we’re already drawing lines from *Speed* to a guy some might argue is the greatest film director of all time. In any case, Elwy Yost was completely taken by this film’s premise.

**GRAHAM YOST**

All he said was there was a Kurosawa script about a train that can’t slow down or it’ll blow up. And that was an idea that just got him. And then I saw the movie when it finally came out and I said, “Oh, no, they just can’t get to the brakes,” and, “it would be better if it was a bus.” Because there’s something just so linear about a train. You know, for me, a lot of it was just problem-solving. How can they solve this problem? It’s really more of a disaster movie, in many ways, than an action movie. Yeah, it’s like, you know, you’re in a boat that’s upside down. How do you get out of the Poseidon? So in this case, what do you do? And I thought, “If it’s a train, you’re just going to land a helicopter on the roof and start getting people off.” And so, it was very much a concept-driven enterprise. It was not, “Oh, I know the character of Jack and what he’s going through.” No, it was really built on the events.

**KRIS TAPLEY**

In the early-1990s, Los Angeles was, as ever, a sprawling urban patchwork of highways and byways, asphalt arteries connecting disparate enclaves and neighborhoods all over the second-largest metropolitan area in the United States. In *Speed*, they all converge one fateful day on a city bus that faces one hell of a ticking clock. Take it away, Dennis Hopper.

**[SPEED CLIP]**

**DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)**

There’s a bomb on a bus. Once the bus goes 50 miles an hour, the bomb is armed. If it drops below 50, it blows up. What do you do?

**KRIS TAPLEY**

That's a ballsy premise, and also, kind of brilliant. I mean, it would become a great way to showcase a number of featured players reflective of the melting pot quality the city has, and to thrust these two central figures – police officer Jack Traven and unassuming bus rider turned driver Annie – into sudden chaos. So, what's the research like on something like this?

**GRAHAM YOST**

So, my joke is, the guy who got hired to write *Speed 2* was put on a cruise ship for two weeks. I rode a bus. And I paid for it myself. I got on the bus in Santa Monica, I rode to downtown, walked across the street, caught the bus back. That was my research. I just wanted to see the type of people that might be on the bus. I did get a tour of the Santa Monica bus yard, and the one cool thing was seeing how they cleaned the buses, which was basically, they put this thing that sealed over the front doors, and they put this thing that sealed over the back doors, and then they just blew a shit-ton of air into that and spun everything up and just sucked it out the back. And I was like, "That is really cool."

**KRIS TAPLEY**

But I have to go back to the start of this episode and say again, every story has to fade in. How do you start a screenplay that is meant to ultimately be a gripping thrill-ride through Los Angeles? Something that will grab the audience like that "fire in the boiler room" note from *The Last Voyage*? How do you set up this hero cop, Jack Traven?

**GRAHAM YOST**

Initially, I had this whole – there was an opening sequence and it was going to be this bicycle cop in Santa Monica who stumbles onto the whole thing. And so, I talked to a bicycle cop, and that was fun. But then I realized, nah, it needs a big opening. And it needs to be something that, you know, that is suspenseful and introduces the bad guy, and all of that stuff. That became the elevator sequence.

**[SPEED CLIP: ELEVATOR SEQUENCE]**

**KRIS TAPLEY**

But, let's not get ahead of ourselves. We'll get to that soon enough. What about the character of Annie, ultimately played by newcomer Sandra Bullock?

**[SPEED CLIP]**

**KEANU REEVES (as "Jack Traven")**

Ma'am, you did very well. Actually, you were incredible. I've never seen driving like that.

**SANDRA BULLOCK (as "Annie")**

Annie.

**KEANU REEVES (as “Jack Traven”)**

What?

**SANDRA BULLOCK (as “Annie”)**

It’s my name. Annie.

**KEANU REEVES (as “Jack Traven”)**

Annie.

**SANDRA BULLOCK (as “Annie”)**

As opposed to ma’am?

**KEANU REEVES (as “Jack Traven”)**

OK.

**KRIS TAPLEY**

In the film, she’s a graphic designer taking the bus because her, well, she says because her car is in the shop, but wink-wink, nudge-nudge, she’s had her license taken away for speeding. And I don’t even think you would know she’s a graphic designer but for an extended scene on the special edition DVD. Anyway, she becomes an unlikely heroine who has to actually drive this massive beast through LA rush-hour traffic.

**GRAHAM YOST**

So, it started – first of all, she wasn’t Annie. She was Darlene and she was a Black ambulance driver. I wanted someone who could drive well. And then, you know, one of the stories is the very first person we went to was Halle Berry, and she said no. And yet, it was great to see the two of Halle and Keanu together in *John Wick 3*. Because she kicked ass. Then I said I wanted her to be funny, so what if she teaches a, you know, a driving course for people who have gotten a ticket and it’s a comedy driving school? What if she does that, so we can just sort of give her, make her a little funnier? That would have been, the comedy thing, that’s when I thought of Ellen.

**KRIS TAPLEY**

So, you might have seen the clip of Ellen DeGeneres interviewing Keanu Reeves and talking about how she was up for this role. Anyway, that’s what Graham is talking about here.

**[THE ELLEN DEGENERES SHOW CLIP]**

**ELLEN DEGENERES**

You know that we were supposed to – the way we should have met is *Speed* was originally written for me. Did you know that?

**KEANU REEVES**

Really? Cool.



**ELLEN DEGENERES**

This is a true story, and Sandra Bullock will tell you. So, the guy that wrote *Speed* wrote it with me in mind, and then Sandy got the part.

**KEANU REEVES**

OK.

**ELLEN DEGENERES**

But it would have been you and me and it would have been-

**KEANU REEVES**

Nice.

**ELLEN DEGENERES**

It would have been nice. It would have been phenomenal.

**KEANU REEVES**

That would have been awesome.

**ELLEN DEGENERES**

Yeah.

**KEANU REEVES**

Another multiverse version of *Speed*.

**ELLEN DEGENERES**

It just would have been different.

**KRIS TAPLEY**

It's truly one of the many great casting stories of what might have been with *Speed*. But sticking with these early days on the page, everyone you talk to who read Graham's first draft talks about how well-written it was, how the characters and dialogue popped and, more importantly, how he managed to jump right into the story and somehow maintain its energy throughout. A sense of propulsion was very much key to his approach.

**GRAHAM YOST**

It was an exercise in structure. To me, and I would say this to people, you know, doing a good comic bit, a good scene – everything is a three-act structure. You know, whether it's a joke: It's set-up, development, punchline. Or an action scene: There's a problem. What do you do? How do you solve it? What happens? Everything is an exercise in structure. And that was William Goldman's line, was, great dialogue is nice but it's really all about structure. There was something about puzzling through the *Speed* thing, was, how can I make it worse? How can I get them to almost succeed, and then the bad guy has thought of something, and just keep on going at it? Just that idea of – my brother and I talk about this – contain and sustain. And the other thing was, *Die Hard* came out in '88. Love that film. And that's, you know, in an office building. It's just all there. And to

me, that's still one of the great movies. So, that was something that, you know, was kind of a guiding light, to shoot for something like that.

### **KRIS TAPLEY**

I love that he doesn't shy away from admitting this, by the way. You know, *Speed* would be derided early on in some studio circles as "*Die Hard* on a bus." But, listen, there's nothing wrong with being inspired by what works.

### **GRAHAM YOST**

The funniest thing was later on, Allison Segan – Allison Lyon Segan, who was a producer on the movie – the year after *Speed* came out, Allison was submitted a script by someone who said, "It's like *Speed* in an office building." And it was, like, that is the best compliment we could ever get.

### **GRAHAM YOST**

I maintain, if I talk to a class or whatever, that the great heroes of literature are not the smartest. They're not the strongest. Although sometimes they are. Hercules or whatever, or Jack Reacher. Although I'm not that interested, frankly, in Hercules. I'm more interested in Perseus. And he figures out that to kill Medusa, he's going to look at a reflection. Because everybody else looks at her and turns to stone. He figures out the trick. And so, throughout the whole movie, Jack is trying to figure out the trick. "How can I solve this problem?" And I love that. I mean, listen, John McClane is just trying to stay one step ahead. He's trying to keep from getting killed. He's trying to figure out what they're doing and it's just one trick after another. "How can I get from A to B without, you know, I'm going to have to run across broken glass. Fuck. OK." So, to me, that's the real fun of the movie, is solving problem after problem, and that we're trying to stay a little bit ahead of what the audience is thinking.

### **KRIS TAPLEY**

So, here we are. Graham Yost has conceived something ambitious on the page. He's got a riveting elevator sequence to set up a hero cop and a breakneck race – I'm going to use "breakneck" a lot, I think, throughout this – through the streets of Los Angeles that culminates first with a number of loops around Dodger Stadium and, ultimately, an epic explosion at the Hollywood sign. Sorry, what's that? None of that is in the actual movie? Well, you're right. When producers come on board and first one studio and then a second start to throw their notes into the mix, everything about this first draft would inevitably shift and evolve. At this point, though, it's all about getting the right partners involved. And this is where we bring in co-producer Allison Lyon, who Graham just mentioned.

### **GRAHAM YOST**

I had met Allison Lyon, and she was at, oh, God, I think Adelson-Baumgarten or something like that. And we were talking about this other idea I had about a crisis line and this sort of fucked-up thriller narrative from that and she was interested and we were sort of developing it.

### **ALLISON LYON**

He was pitching me a completely different project called *Suicide Hotline*, which I liked. And, you know, I said, "I don't know how much longer I'm going to be here." He said, "It's OK. I'm going to go home and I'm working on a spec script."

### **GRAHAM YOST**

And then I said, "You know, I've got this idea about this bomb on a bus and blah blah blah" And she said, "Don't tell me anything more and don't send it to me, because I'm leaving this place, but I'm not exactly sure where I'm going to go." At the same time, my wife, I had met her in the business, she had worked at CAA, Connie. And then she had gone to work for Sally Field. Sally had her own production company over at Columbia, and Kevin McCormick was her producing partner. Kevin's gone on to do, you know, dozens of big films. But Connie was the development executive, and then Sally's deal ended and Connie was out of work, and so she went to interview with Mark Gordon. And it was down to between Connie and Allison for this job. And Mark went with Allison. And if he had gone with my wife, if he had gone with Connie, I couldn't have given her the script and said, "Here, have your boss read this," when she's just starting this job. It would have been weird. But Allison said, "I'm with Mark Gordon. Let me read the script now." And so, she read it, gave it to Mark. He was taken by it. Mark, you know, said at the time, he said, yeah, it was the elevator sequence that sold him.

### **KRIS TAPLEY**

And that is probably as a good place as any to stop this week. We've got an eager writer in Graham Yost, a helpful development executive in Allison Lyon and next, finally, a producer ready and willing to take this ballsy script out to the studios. Surely everyone in town will be interested, right? I mean, who's gonna say no to this? Eh, hold that thought.

### **[OUTRO MUSIC]**

### **KRIS TAPLEY**

Next week on 50 MPH...

### **MARK GORDON**

You know, I read the script and I was just floored by the way Graham wrote action. This was poetry.

### **KRIS TAPLEY**

Screenwriter Graham Yost finds himself a producer in up-and-coming Mark Gordon, but convincing literally any studio to take a chance on this outrageous prospect would be an uphill battle.

### **ALLISON LYON**

We sent out the script, you know, to different studios, and people were like, "What are you thinking?" And Don read it and totally got it.

**KRIS TAPLEY**

We'll meet former Paramount executive Don Granger, who played a key role in *Speed's* early development and fought valiantly to get it a green light.

**DON GRANGER**

And I said, "OK, I get it. I know what I like about this. I think we've got a lot of work to do on the script, but let's go after it."

**GRAHAM YOST**

And that was one of those, you know... My life just changed.

**KRIS TAPLEY**

But heartbreak was on the horizon and *Speed* would still have a long and winding road ahead.

**MARK GORDON**

The odds of a movie that you're developing at a studio getting made, it's always slim.

**KRIS TAPLEY**

All of that and more next week right here on 50 MPH!

**KRIS TAPLEY**

Thanks so much for listening. 50 MPH is written, produced and edited by yours truly, Kris Tapley. You can find us on Twitter @50MPHPod. I'm @kristapley. That's Kris with a K. You can also catch every episode and more at our website 50MPHpodcast.com. If you dug the show, please like and subscribe and do all the things. We'll see you next time.