JACKSON ON A JAUNT

OR

MISTAKEN IDENTITIES

by

Eleanor Wong

CAST

Jackson Ong	29. Not too goodlooking but thinks he is
Mother	Jackson's mother
Father	Jackson's father
Susan	Jackson's fiance
Celene	Jackson's latest hot passion. Possibly Eurasian, studying in the US
Doctor Mei	Celene's good friend, and coincidentally, the doctor treating Jackson
Nurse	
Mimi	A prostitute
Mei Choo	A hairdresser at the Great Image Hair Salon

Dedication : To Deborah "Thanks for the dream sequence, Debs!"

The play opens onto a split screen, half of which is a setting in an HDB/HUDC type apartment, the other half is free space for conversion into various scenes as required. I see the play as moving very quickly from one scene to another. Perhaps locations and persons can be indicated by placards. That's one alternative to having to make multiple sets, all lifelike. Mother comes bustling in.

Mother Alamak. That Wong Tai, I never thought she would be ready to go home. You think that just because her husband made a pot of money when the stock market crashed in '87, she now has to buy up the whole of Metro. And what about you? Lost again, I suppose?

Father Only a little. Stop nagging lah.

Mother Luckily for us your son earns a good living. I tell you. I don't know what we did when Jack was in school.

Father I was working then. I was earning the CPF that you spent today.

Mother Hah! Your CPF? Your CPF? If I have to rely on your CPF, we all cannot even invite the Wongs to dinner, let alone pay for your son's wedding.

Father I think it is because of wives like you that make the government force us to keep a minimum SUM in our CPF. Don't worry, lah. Did I hear you complain when I paid for our holiday to America with my mahjong money? Maybe next game I can win enough to order another crate of XO for the wedding.

Mother Don't think too much about your mahjong. That's what I say. You and that Lo Wong sitting all day by the mahjong table. No wonder they're saying all those things about Wong Tai.

Father (interest suddenly alerted) What about Wong Tai?

Mother You know. The other day, Mei Choo was telling me, lor..

Father Mei Choo?

Mother Mei Choo at the Great Image Hair salon.

Father That gossip.

Mother Mei Choo is better than a priest. You tell them both your secrets, but Mei Choo can give you a few in return.

Father So what about Wong Tai?

Mother Oh, nothing much.

Father (Exasperated at the anticlimax) What?

Mother Oh. . . . (dragging out the suspense) Mei Choo just said that Wong Tai has been going to the salon to get her hair set every three days instead of once a week. And sometimes, she even asks Mei Choo to paint her nails.

Father So? You also get your nails painted sometimes.

Mother My fingernails maybe, but my toenails?

Father So?

Mother Aiyah. You men are blind. Now, you better teach Lo Wong. When a woman starts doing her hair very often and painting her nails Coral peach, Hawaiian Sunset and what have you, I tell you it is not for her husband. Especially not when the husband is Lo Wong, you understand? There is sure to be another reason, another man.

Father Choy! And you encourage such vicious rumours about our future in-laws.

Mother I don't encourage Mei Choo. But when she has news, it's like a special offer. If I don't take, everyone else will. Then next time when I want, it's not available.

Father Hah, that's what you always say whenever you see a cheap sale, then you go ahead and buy up the store. What's more, everything we don't need, you buy.

Mother Anyway, Susan is the perfect match for our Jack. That's the important thing.

Father You have been pushing him long enough to get married to her.

Mother Of course. Who else should he get married to? The Wongs are our oldest friends. Lo Wong was your former business partner...

Father You and Wong Tai bankrupt us with your shopping. . .

Mother (dismissing that with a wave of her hand) Who else? I ask you? It's the right time too. Our son is graduated now. That insurance job pays well, some more. Just bought a new car. Ah, that Jack. He's the

perfect son.

Cut to other screen

Jackson Hello, I'm Jack, but my friends all call me Jackson. (Looks in the audience for a pretty girl) Yes, you can call me Jackson if you like. My Mum is always talking about me. I used to be irritated by that. She would talk about me in front of me, behind my back, to my teachers... Uggh. But hey, I can understand it now. She can't help it. After all, I'm 29, dress Gucci, dine French. I'm a success. Next month I get married, move into my new apartment off Holland Road. Next year, I trade in my new Corolla for a newer BMW. But right now, I have an appointment with a doctor.

Nurse First time here, fill in the form. You want to pay by Medisave, fill in this form, you want to pay by cash or credit card, fill in this form.

Jackson Excuse me, I have an appointment.

Nurse You fill in the form or not?

Jackson I have an appointment.

Nurse Fill in the form first. Your number is 633.

Jackson (starts filling in the form) Will I have to wait long?

Nurse You fill in the form or not?

Mimi walks in, heavily made up, obviously a "tart".

Mimi (sashaying past Jack) Hallo Jackson.

Jackson (embarrassed) Oh Mimi. Don't tell me you're here too.

Mimi Every three weeks, must have checkup, otherwise cannot get my yellow card. So inconvenient, lah. Luckily, in my line, usually free during office hours.

Jackson Oh.

Mimi So how are you Jackson? Very busy, ah? never come around to see me these days.

Jackson Yah, very busy.

Nurse 633.

Mimi Oh. That's me. I see you later, hor, Jackson. You

got my number right?

Jackson Yah.

Nurse (to Jack) You're next.

Jackson OK. (To audience) I don't you to get the wrong impression. I'm not a regular here... I mean... It's just that I have this skin problem and my GP said I should come here, see a specialist, government hospital cheaper than private clinic. The service is not bad. (Doctor comes out. The doctor is pretty) Not bad at all.•..(eyeing the Doctor).

Doctor Mr. Ong. (Looking at the form) Mr K.C. Ong?

Jackson That's me.

Doctor I understand you've got a bit of skin irritation here?

Jackson Er. Yes. My GP thinks that I picked up this skin infection during my last business trip to Bangkok. It's just a little itchy, that's all but my GP thinks that it may be infectious, advised me to come here. It's nothing serious is it?

Doctor Well, just to be safe, we'l1 run through all the tests.

Jackson Yeah, OK.

Doctor Nurse.

Freeze for a few seconds on nurse and Jackson (to signify blood sample taken etc) attaches the number to the test capsules etc.

Nurse Your number?

Jackson 633.

Nurse We'll send the results to you.

Jackson Will it take long?

Nurse We'll send the results to you.

Jackson That's all?

Nurse Yes.

Nurse leaves. Mimi sashays back out.

Mimi Oh, Jackson.... are you finished here already?

Jackson Yes.

Mimi Good. I'm free now. You want to go out?

Jackson Oh, so sorry Mimi. I have another appointment.

Mimi Yah lah, no time for Mimi these **days.** Too low class for you is it (pouting, only **half** serious)?

Jackson Not true what.... I'm just ... **very busy, Lah.**

Mimi OK lah... **So next** time **you're free, hor? Don't** forget to call.

Jackson Sure.

Mimi sashays out.

Jack walks out too.

Flash back to Jack's house.

Mother Just wait **awhile, Susan. Jack said he'd be a little** late. He **had an appointment with a client. What would** you **like to drink, some Coca Cola?**

Susan **That's alright Aunty. We're going out to dinner.**

Mother **Or you prefer Pepsi, hah? We don't drink Pepsi ourself, I always keep a few bottles just in case. Some people are so fussy.**

Susan **It's okay...**

Mother **You're sure? (bustle) So have you gone for your second fitting?**

Susan **Not yet. The tailor said it'll be ready next week.**

Mother Wah, very fast er? (Mother rambles on to Susan's occasional ineffective attempts to agree or disagree) Only the other day I was telling Uncle what a good match you and Jack are. You two have been going out for very long already. (Goes into kitchen) Better get married soon, I said. (Pokes her head back out) You're twenty-five, hor, Susan, mustn't wait too long, you know. It's not good. Should have all your children before you're thirty. (Brings back a glass of Coke) Good thing you're not one of those career women, Susan. I can tell you, once you're 30, having children, very difficult. Look at me, I had Jack when I was 21. And now Jack is all grown up. You're sure Coca Cola is alright?

Susan It's fine.

Mother Aiyah, where's that Jack? Always working late. You must make sure when you're married you know that he doesn't work too hard.

Susan Yes.

Jack comes home.

Mother There. Speak of the Devil.

Susan Hello, dear.

Jackson Hi. Ready?

Flash to other side of stage

Dr. Mei So tell me more about this Jackson. What a name. Jacks I get at the clinic every day, but Jackson?

Celene Nothing much to tell.

Mei Don't tell me he's goodlooking, rich and drives an Alfa.

Celene Hardly.

Mei A porsche?

Celene Mei, you're way off mark. This one's a nerd, a real loser.

Mei So why have you been going out with him every other night? I've never known you to have a desire for nerds and losers. He's either got to be rich or an intellectual giant. Come on, tell me all about this mystery man of yours.

Celene No mystery. We met at a party. He seemed to like me..

Mei A lot!

Celene He asked me out. I've gone out with him a few times. Paul's not going to be in Singapore till the 15th. He may be a nerd but a nerd who buys you dinner beats eating alone. Besides , it's a good break from physics. All this Jackson can think about is the latest horror movie. Rather quaint, actually.

Mei Sounds like a great dinner conversationalist.

Celene I wouldn't knock it. The metaphysical properties of the hideous Swamp Monster can be bloody engaging after discussing quantum mechanics for 6 months.

Mei I know. Sometimes, after a hard day, I'd give

anything to discuss nothing deeper than Falconcrest. But say, what does this Jackson think about ... you know... what is it ... quantum mechanics ...?

Celene About quantum mechanics? Sweetie, are you kidding? The man doesn't know one end of a proton accelerator from the other. As far as he's concerned, I'm home on holiday from the US. I model on the side. He probably assumes that I've been studying hotel management or communications or something.

Mei You haven't told him you're doing a PHD in physics?

Celene Mei, the man has trouble co-ordinating his tie with his shirt. His ego wouldn't hold up to the fact that I had a brain.

Mei Sometimes I think you're not ready to have a man deal with your mind as well as your other more obvious assets. Don't you ever get tired of this act?

Celene Oh. It's no act honey. What you see is what you get (posing).

Mei You're a terrible fraud, Celene.

Celene It's called image management, darling, and I'm the fairest of them all.

Mei Well, Paul's not going to like this.

Celene You gonna tell him?

Mei No, aren't you? I thought you had this wonderful mature open and honest relationship.

Celene Oh come on, are you crazy ? All that stuff is strictly PR. There hasn't been the man born, howevr modern, liberated, rational and reasonable who could handle having competition. Hell, Paul would kill me first.

Telephone rings

Mei That'll be him again.

Spotlights on Jackson and Susan.

Jackson I drop you off here, OK? Ay, tomorrow are you free or not?

Susan After work, if my boss don't keep me back, should be. Why?

Jackson Do me a favour can or not? Beng Huat says the

wedding invitations are ready. Can you go collect them or not? The shop is at Jalan Sultan. I'm not free, otherwise I'll do it myself. Can?.

Susan Jalan Sultan, ah? Quite far from Jurong, you know. I may not be able to get there on time.

Jackson Tech. I'11 tell Beng Huat to wait for you, lah. It's not that far, what.

Susan You sure you can't pick it up some other time? Your office is at Dhoby Ghaut, much more convenient for you to drop by.

Jackson Ay, the wedding is next month already. Some more you know I'm very busy with work these days. Simple thing like this also you can't do.

Susan OK. I'll do it. No need to get irritated.

Jackson OK. Good. I'll see you day after tomorrow then.

Susan OK. Goodnight, dear. (as Jackson leaves with a hurried peck on her cheek).

Jackson walks to his home. Picks up telephone.

Jackson (speaking in a suddenly affected accent) Hey Celene, how're you doing? Hey, sorry about tonight. Had some work to attend to at the office. Big client, you know, heh heh. You free tomorrow night? We can go catch a movie. There's a good one on at Orchard, Poltergeist 4. Supposed to be really scary. What do you think, hey?

Celene Well, I've got a shoot at Upper Thomson tomorrow. Some ad.

Jackson Hey, no problem, man. I'll come pick you up? 6.30?

Celene I'm not sure what time I'll be through, better make it 7.00.

Jackson Sure. I'll come up at 7.00. Wait for the shoot to be over. We can catch the 9.15 show. No problem, hey?

Celene Yeah, OK.

Jackson I'll see you then. Ciao, baby.

Celene 'Night.

Spotlight on Jackson

Jackson Heng,ah.

Note: There is no page number 9 for this work.

Mother Who was that?

Jackson Oh, just some guy I'm trying to sell insurance to.

Mother You work too hard, Jack. Can't you call him from the office tomorrow?

Jackson Mum. It's nothing, just a phone call. You don't want me to lose the deal, right? In my line, you know I have to be aggressive, Mum.

Mother Well, don't work so hard that you fall ill, understand?. I know you too well, Jack, you always must be working. It's not good for you, lah.

Mother goes off to bed.

Jackson Mothers always think they know you better than you know yourself. As if the years spent living out this local adaptation of Happy Families means you know each other. Do you ever?

Lights up. A few days later. Jack and Celene have a good time.

Jackson (kiss) Mmmmm, hey Celene, are you free next weekend?

Celene Maybe. Why?

Jackson What say you and me take a drive up to Malacca?

Celene Malacca? That dusty little town? What the Hell is there to do there?

Jackson (lecherously) Hey... I thought we could... you know, take a chalet at this place called Shah's Beach Resort, spend a quiet weekend, get to know each other better.

Celene (Raising her delicate eyebrows at this example of rank amatuerism) What about that precious job of yours that keeps you late every other night?

Jackson No problem, man. I'll just take leave. What do you say, hey?

Celene Let me think about it.

They are about to kiss.

Celene Jesus. What time is it? Hey, I've got to go.

Jackson What?

Celene I'm supposed to meet Mei.

Jackson Give her a call. Tell her you'll be late. She'll understand (suggestively).

Celene Sorry. Got to go.

Jackson Who's this great friend of yours, anyway? Maybe I should meet her someday.

Celene I doubt it. Look. I really have to run. Goodbye.

Jackson Shit.

Flash to Hospital.

Doctor Nurse. Are you sure these are the results for number 633?

Nurse Yes.

Doctor Hmm. Looks like we'll have to call Mr. Ong in to tell him the news.

Nurse Do you want me to make the necessary arrangements?

Doctor Please. (Looking at her watch. She's thinking that with her appointment with Celene, she can't fit this in today) Make it sometime tomorrow, perhaps. And, nurse...

Nurse Yes?

Doctor Let's keep this discreet, alright?

Nurse Yes.

Flash back to the Hospital

Doctor Now those of you out there who were quick enough will have caught that there were two patients who came in that day and were alloted the number 633. One was Mr. K.C. Ong.

Jackson That's me, Jack KC Ong, but my good friends call me Jackson.

Doctor Mr. Ong would appear to be a typical successful young man. In the prime of his life, outgoing, not too goodlooking..

Jackson Well, that's a matter of opinion.

Doctor Normal.

Jackson I prefer outstanding.

Doctor The other patient, you'll recall, was Mimi. A prostitute. 21 years of age. No education to speak of. Looks unascertainable under a layer of makeup as thick ats your average Sunday newspaper.

Mimi Ay, don't make that kind of remark about my face, OK? My clients like it.

Jackson and Mimi move closer till they're standing next to each other.

Doctor The **question** is. **Which test result do I now** hold **in my hand? You all know that comedies should have happy endings so maybe you think you know the answer to that question. Maybe you think that a horrible, life shattering mistake is going to be made right here on stage but that everything will** turn **out right in the end.T**he problem is, **with** AIDS, **there are no happy endings.**

Back **to** Jack's **house.**

Mother **Aiyoh, it's very irritating. Mei Choo refuses to** tell **me who Wong Tai is going out with.**

Father **You shouldn't be listening to what she says.**

Mother Some more, she definitely knows.

Father (sighs unconvinced)

Mother I'm telling you. I asked her when she was putting the perm lotion on my hair. She thought I couldn't see her. Behind my back, giving smug looks to Su Lin pretending not to know. Huh! I saw them in the mirror. She definitely knows. I can't understand why she won't tell me.

Father Maybe she's being discreet for once.

Mother Mei Choo, discreet? If Mei Choo was discreet none of us would go to her salon anymore. No, there must be more to this. I shall be dying of curiosity until I find out. Unconfirmed gossip is very bad for a friendship. I just cannot be comfortable with Wong Tai until I know the answer. Of course, once the whole story is out, everything will be fine again.

Father Don't be too sure.

Mother looks at him a little surprised at the response, just as Susan and Jack walk in.

Susan Hello, Uncle, Aunty. (Father and Mother are equally embarrassed for entirely different reasons).

Jackson You didn't forget the wedding cards, did you?

Susan No, they're right here.

Jackson Put them on the dining table. It'll be easier to address them there. (To audience) Sending out wedding invitations can be a risky venture. One wrong move and an ass you've kissed for many years could be lost to you so to speak. Therefore, I made a few lists of people to invite. First there are the friends that we like and want present at the wedding. You could call this the genuine invitation list. Then there are the people we don't especially like but will still invite to the wedding. You could call this the expedient invitation list. And finally, there are the people we dislike so much that even getting a wedding present from them is not worth putting up with their presence during the wedding. This list is crucial. What we do is to address cards to each of the names on this list and then keep the cards aside until the last minute before sending them out. This serves a dual purpose. We don't offend them by not inviting them at all but it's too late for them to come. And sometimes if you're extra lucky, they'll send you a belated wedding present. But that's a fringe benefit.

Telephone rings, startling Jackson from his monologue. He picks it up.

Celene Hey, Jackson, that you?

Jackson Er... yes. Hi...

Celene So about next weekend. I'm free. Is Malacca still on?

Jackson Er....yes..

Celene Hey you don't sound too enthusiastic about it. If you've changed your mind....

Jackson Oh no. It's still on. It'll be ...(looking at Susan and deciding that a slightly less exuberant response might be called for) interesting.

Celene So, how do you want to do this?

Jackson Well, I'll take care of the reser... arrangements, and let you know the details as soon as possible.

Celene Hell, Jackson, this isn't some kind of bloody appointment I'm making with you. What's the matter anyway? The last time we talk you're practically falling over yourself to get me to go up to Mallaca with you, and now... What's up? Hey, if you're

getting cold feet, we can just forget it, OK. I have better things to do than sit around and wait for you to get warmed up. Life isn't one of your screwy movies,' Jackson. If the action's too hot for you, just get the hell out.

Jackson Oh shit!

Susan What's that?

Celene What's that?

Jackson Nothing. (To Susan) **Nothing to do with you, OK?** (To Celene) I mean, sure, **I'm interested. It's just that** this **may not be the best time to discuss the matter. Perhaps I could call you tomorrow morning and we** could talk about it **further?**

Celene Look, Jackson. I **don't know what your trouble** is, but if you think **I'm going to wait around for you to** find **an appropriate time to discuss things, you're** sadly mistaken. **Goodbye, Jackson. And you know what** you can **do** with **that Malacca weekend of yours.**

Jackson Damn.

Susan What's **wrong dear? Client?**

Jackson Nothing important.

Susan **You sounded very upset.**

Jackson **Forget it, OK? It's nothing.**

Susan But...

Jackson I said forget it. How are the cards coming along?

Jackson (To audience) And that's how things were when I found out. One evening I was at home, addressing cards for my wedding. Trying to figure out how to get Susan out of the room so that I could call Celene and patch things up. One day, I was presumptiously secure. The next day, I get a phone call. An appointment is made. I sit in a cold office that smells of antiseptic and fear. Opposite me sits the doctor. Actually she's rather cute. I took a moment to register that fact. The rest of the facts weren't quite as pleasing.

Doctor Mr. Ong. I'm glad you could make it today.

Jackson Could you make it quick? I've got a meeting to attend after this.

Doctor Certainly. I'm afraid we have some bad news for you,

Mr. Ong,

Jackson Don't tell me it's skin cancer (laughs).

Doctor Oh nothing like that.

Jackson Then?

Doctor You have acquired immune deficiency syndrome.

Jackson Oh. Is that all? (To audience) I wasn't too smart then. (To doctor) What's the problem? It's the medicine is it? Very expensive is it?

Doctor Mr. Ong. I don't think you understand.

Jackson (To audience) She was kind of patient with me, you know.

Doctor Mr. Ong you have AIDS.

Jackson Ay, ay, wait a minute. You never said anything about AIDS, OK? This what you call it syndrome is fine, but AIDS as well?

Doctor Mr. Ong, it's just AIDS.

Jackson Just AIDS? It's really very simple in the final analysis, isn't it? Just AIDS. I ask her what the problem is. She tells me a word - AIDS. (Pause) You begin to understand? There are words and there are words. I once told Susan that I loved her. It was a matter of definition. Mine had neither permanence nor exclusivity, but she was not to know. Came home late one night. I gave my mother a word to hang on to. Work. It was a matter of definition. We seldom take the time to define what we say. We can seldom afford to, in case we give ourselves away. So we use a shorthand in our speaking, a code which only we can decipher. We sum things up in a single word in order to hide their full meanings. (Pause) One word. Like Jackson. And all this time none of us knew that Jackson was defined "Just AIDS".

Back to Jack's home.

Mother Aiyah, Jack. These few days your face is so long. You hardly eat. What's the matter? I know you Jack, you must be working too hard, that's why you're feeling depressed.

Jackson I'm OK mum.

Mother But you look terrible. Don't you think he looks terrible, Susan?

Jackson Don't you get involved in this as well.

Mother You stay out late. You don't seem to get any sleep at all. You go and tell Mr. Ho at the office your mother wants to talk to him. He's working my son too hard.

Jackson I'm really OK, Mum.

Father Leave the boy alone, lah. But maybe you should go see a doctor tomorrow...

Jackson NO!! I mean, I don't think I need to see a doctor over a minor matter like this.

Father Suit yourself, Jack. But your mother's right. you must take care of yourself you understand.

Susan Yes, Jack, I...

Jackson I told you to stay out of this.

Susan Jack...

Father That's enough, Jack. Don't be rude.

Jackson I think I'll go out for a while.

Mother What?

Jackson I'm going out.

Mother How can you leave Susan like that?

Jackson You and Susan can talk about the wedding. I'm going out.

Jackson stalks out. Susan goes after him.

Mother (As Jack walks out the door) Ay, bring your umbrella. It may rain. Susan. At least, bring an umbrella for Jack....

Father Aiyah. Leave them alone. They're both adults. They can take care of themselves.

Mother You don't know our Jack. He's so hardworking. He doesn't think about himself enough. Ay, I'm really worried about him, lah. Haven't you noticed how ill he looks.

Father He didn't look so bad to me.

Mother That's the problem with you men. You never see what's going on in front of your own noses.

Susan catches up with Jackson

Susan Jack...

Jackson Leave me alone.

Susan Jack, what is bothering you? You been so depressed these last few days. What is wrong?

Jackson Nothing.

Susan Jack, if something is wrong, why don't you tell me what it is, maybe I can help.

Jackson I told you already. There's nothing wrong.

Susan But...

Jackson Susan. Leave me alone. Nothing is wrong. You're acting like a bloody wife, and we're not even married yet.

Susan I can't help worrying about you, Jack.

Jackson Don't bother me with your worries, OK. I got other things on my mind.

Susan If it's your work... I know I'm just a secretary and you think I don't understand anything about insurance, but...

Jackson That's right. You don't understand. You don't understand at all. Just stick to your wedding decorations and reception planning, and leave me alone.

Susan Why do you always pretend with me? I never hide my feelings from you.

Jackson Look. I just want to be on my own OK?

Jackson walks off

Susan (helplessly) Jack. Why can't you just tell me what's wrong?

Jackson doesn't turn around

The scene is back at the hospital (actually this is a flashback to his appointment with doctor).

Doctor What about your family, Mr. Ong. Would you prefer that we inform them?

Jackson What do you mean?

Doctor They will have to be told, you know.

Jackson I can't tell them.

Doctor Mr. Ong. They need to know.

Jackson I can't tell them.

Doctor I know this has been a shock, but we need to consider the ... safety... of your loved ones. I see that you're not married (from the form filled in at the beginning of the appointment, of course), but is there anyone who should be informed of this, anyone with whom you may have had sexual relations in the past year or so.

Jackson Oh God.... What do you mean, safety?

Doctor Mr Ong (firmly). We cannot force you to tell your family, but I would strongly advise you inform any partners with whom you have had sex in the last few years, and that they take the test themselves in order to make sure they're in the clear.

Jackson In the clear? How can I tell them? I'm engaged, you know. I can't tell Susan. She doesn't know.

Doctor Mr. Ong. It may be difficult, but it has to be done. You would not want to endanger your fiance in any way.

Jackson Oh God. Susan. What have I done?

Doctor (Softer) It could help, you know. We usually find that after the initial shock, the patient's family is a source of strength. You don't have to face this alone, Mr. Ong.

Jackson I JUST CAN'T TELL THEM.

The obligatory soliloquay.

Jackson The worst thing is not the knowing. It's knowing alone. It's having something eat into you that you can't tell another soul. YOU JUST CAN'T. You live a lifetime of shorthand. But you always have the option of translation. You cheat on your girlfriend. You use the right words and and no one knows. But there are times when you can insinuate the truth with friends, over a beer, after a day at work. It's a conversation piece. You compare notes. You boast. You're almost glad that like everybody else you have a precious little secret to give away, in exchange for the currency of mutual confidence. You employ your shorthand, you control it. It's easy and brave and macho. Then they tell you that you have AIDS,

and you're suddenly alone. No more after office conversation. Hey John, guess what I heard the other day? I've got AIDS. No,you're alone. So alone that the only other person in your universe is the grinning idiot staring back at you in the mirror when you shave in the morning. And you stand in front of that plastic image, searching the pores for the first tell-tale sign to show, for that first lesion that will proclaim your aloneness to the world, hating the thought that soon your clever contrived definitions will break down, willing that day to come so that you can break the awful silence at last.

Flashback to the hospital again.

Jackson So you see? I can't tell them. I don't know how to.

Doctor I can understand your reluctance...

Jackson RELUCTANCE?? Reluctance??? You don't understand, my family, Susan, they don't know ... about the others. Susan...they... have no idea at all.. How can I tell them about this?

Doctor You mention others. Have these been recent contacts?

Jackson Some... no.. not really.. I don't know...

Doctor Mr. Ong, I am afraid you have to face up to the fact that all of these contacts, and any other subsequent sexual partners they may have had are at risk.

Jackson It can't be. Not all of them...

Doctor If you took precautions.. perhaps...

Jackson Precautions? ... If they get this, I'm responsible, isn't it? I'll be the one who killed them. Oh God. I'll be the one who killed them.

At a public phone.

Jackson Hello?

Celene Yeah?

Jackson Celene?

Celene Yeah?

Jackson It's Jackson.

Celene It's about time.

Jackson Celene

Celene What, Jackson?

Jackson Celene, I need to talk to you...

Celene Talk then.

Silence

Celene Jackson?

Jackson (in a rush) Celene, I'm sorry about the other night. Something's come up. I can't go to Malacca with you after all.

Celene Just great. You think I'm some kind of fool,

Jackson? Tell me the truth. Is it another girl?

Jackson No.

Celene Don't give me that bullshit about your work.

Jackson No, not that.

Celene Then?

Jackson Celene. I can't talk about it now. I'm sorry.

Celene Hey, Jack..

He puts the phone down.

Celene Jerk.

Mei Now what?

Celene "I can't go to Malacca with you after all" What does he think I am?

Mei You sound like this guy's gotten under your skin.

Celene No such fucking luck.

Mei Celene!

Celene My language bother you?

Mei You've got to admit it doesn't go with the rest of the soft look.

Celene Au contraire, dear Mei. It goes very well indeed. It's the fashion to sprinkle the dish with a little saltiness. Spices things up. Adds a taste of excitement.

Mei Celene. Do me a favour, just this once?

Celene If it's within my power, Mei.

Mei Tell me honestly, you care for this guy, don't you? Just this once, drop the mask.

Celene Impossible. Without it I have no face. (Does a quick action of removing a mask) Ta da! See? The incredible disappearing visage! (Trying to be funny and lighten the mood)

Mei (Reacting so strongly that it surprises Celene who is rather uncomfortable) DON'T! Everyday I deal with people whose masks are stripped off for them by the news that they have AIDS.

Celene Okay, okay... I'll drop the mask... just don't give me AIDS...

Mei I'm dead serious, Cel.

Celene Bad joke.

Mei No joke. Where I work, masks can kill. Deception, dishonesty, ommission. And you can pass death on. No one's really safe, without total honesty.

Celene Don't let it get to you, Mei...

Mei The sad thing is, after all that, after they're stripped naked of their masks,... I don't know, out of ignorance ... or fear, the rest of world paints new faces on for them - and now they're trapped behind masks that say "AIDS". Frightening, repulsive masks that stay with them till death.

Celene Hey, lighten up. If it'll make you feel better, I'll tell Paul to take the test when he comes, and we'll refrain till the results are known...

Mei (refusing to be cheered up) And when he does?

Celene And when he does what?

Mei When Paul comes back, what about Jackson?

Celene What about Jackson?

Mei It's bye bye Jackson, just like that? You're killing it? No explanations?

Celene Your work has made you far too serious my dear. Jackson isn't AIDS, Mei. Our relationship is hardly a matter of life and death. And before you ask again... I do not care for him... This is me, remember? The faceless, heartless wonder? Besides, caring would be far more trouble than Jackson is

worth. Look at him. Giving me the runaround. He deserves what's coming to him. Don't we all?

Mei Not always.

Nurse comes on, and calls for Mei's attention.

Nurse Doctor.

Doctor (Putting on the highly efficient Doctor image again) Yes, what is it Nurse?

Nurse I think you should have a look at the test results for Mr. Ong again.

Fade to Susan and Jack who are in the car together

Jackson OK, I drop you here

Susan Jack, (no response) we really need to settle the dinner seating arrangements.

Jackson You and Mum take care of it, lah.

Susan We really would like your suggestions, Jack, expecially your colleagues, where to put them.

Jackson Don't you understand that I really don't want to have to deal with this? Why can't you handle it. You women always want to manage the whole of our lives, isn't it? Start with the wedding, lah.

Susan (getting cold) What is wrong with you Jack? You're moody for a few days I can understand, but you're like this all the time. What is the matter?

Jackson Nothing

Susan Don't pretend with me, Jack. I'm sick of it. You don't want to get married, is it?

Jackson No....

Susan Is there someone else, Jack? Are you seeing someone else? Is that why you are so far away these days?

Jackson You don't understand.

Susan Yah. You keep saying that. But you never tell me anything about yourself. How am I supposed to understand if you won't let me know you? How am I supposed to help you?

Jackson I told you there's nothing wrong with me.

Susan Jack, I love you. You know that. If there is

anything wrong, I can help you, I promise.

Susan starts to kiss Jackson. Jackson avoids her. Then gives in. Then breaks away. This scene should take its time.

Susan Jack?

Jackson I'm sorry.... Susan.... I

Susan Jack?

Jackson I'm sorry. Not now, OK?

Long pause.

Susan There is someone else, right?

Jackson Susan, it's not that...

Susan Look at me, Jack. Look at me and tell me that there's no one else.

Jackson It's not that.... I just can't talk about it, that's all

Susan Don't lie to me Jack. Don't turn your eyes away from me. There is someone else.

Jackson I'm telling you. It's got nothing to do with that.

Susan Who is she? Tell me. Who is she?

Jackson Susan

Susan You think I'm stupid Jackson? Just because all this time, I never hide anything from you, I never hide my feelings. You think I'm stupid.

Jackson I don't.

Susan I'm very boring to you, is it? Everything about me you know because I tell you. Maybe you prefer that I am like you, is it? Always pretending, always hiding. So that I can be exciting?

Jackson That's not true, Susan. I care for you very much.

Susan Sure. Now you can say that but you never bother to show it. You're very clever with words Jackson, unlike me. Sometimes I think you only know how to talk. If you don't want to marry me, why don't you just say so? Why don't you just use your clever words and tell me to leave. I will go. Just tell me.

Jackson Susan, please don't be like this. You don't

understand.

Susan Tell me then. How can I understand if you don't tell me? Tell me.

Long silence. Jackson proves unable to abandon his masks quite yet.

Susan (after long pause) Jack. I love you and I want to help you, but I also got to look after myself, Jack. I don't think I can take this any more. I cannot keep taking your word for everything today-, then tomorrow you just shut me out again. If you really need me, you must stop pretending.

Jackson (Long pause) I don't know. I'm not sure I know how.

Susan Goodbye, then.

Jackson Susan. Damn it.
(Turns to audience. Picks up a glass. Throughout this, he steadily drinks himself into an alcoholic stupor) It's not my fault. It's not my fault, is it? that I never learnt the vocabulary of death? You know me. I'm Jack. Jackson. I didn't grow up equipped to die as "Just AIDS".
I've run out of words. Isn't that funny?
Wait.
Wait.
How about "No"? No is a a good word. No is a good word, isn't it?
No, this isn't happening to me. No, I haven't done anything to deserve this. No, I'm not responsible for whatever happens to anybody else...
No is a good word. It can be used for anything.
Special offer today. Today, no can be shorthand for "yes", shorthand for death, shorthand for AIDS.
(Almost laughing hysterically now, falling into an alcohol induced haze)
Ay, pretend, lah. Agree with me.
I'm not even fooling you. The only people I'm fooling are the people I need.

The other characters slowly come on behind Jackson. The scene should be played like a dream sequence, the lighting, music should be garish. The characters could have bizarre makeup (masks) on so that they're recognisable but not quite.

Mother What's wrong, boy? Hah? Your face is still so long.

Father Son, if there's something bothering you, why don't you come out with it?

Mimi You can always tell your problems to Mimi.

Celene Who the Hell do you think you are, anyway, Jackson

Ong?

Susan Don't pretend with me.

Everybody converges on Jackson, urging him to tell them what's wrong•

Jackson You want me to start defining myself? Dropping masks, because masks can kill? You want me to re-define my plans for life. You want me to start planning for death? (to his dream characters) I have AIDS. I'm going to die.

At the word death there is general pandemonium.

Mother Choy! Jack. What do you want to talk about death for?

Susan Jack, what is this about?

Celene Hey, lighten up too, man. You're beginning to sound like Mei.

Mimi Don't worry, lah, maybe it's just a skin infect. I have a skin infect too, Jackson.

Father Be serious, boy.

This should all be said overlapping etc. Bedlam, you know.

Jackson WAIT A MINUTE !!! ! I thought you understood. I thought you wanted me to drop my masks...

Silence

Mei Choo Ay, they got their own masks too, you know. As if they want you to spoil market.

Everyone turns around to look at Mei Choo.

Celene Who the Hell is that, Jackson?

Susan Mei Choo from the Great Image Hair Salon.

Father Oh, that gossip.

Mei Choo Ay, my news is as accurate as SBC, and more interesting.

Susan (To Celene) And who are you? (To Jackson) And why is she calling you Jackson? It's such a stupid name.

Celene I might ask the same of you.

Susan I'm Jack's fiancee.

Celene Well, well, a two-timer, Jackson? I hope you have an explanation for this.

Father Jack, I think you better tell us exactly what is going on. Are you having an affair with this woman?

Celene He should hope.

Father My son cheating on his fiancee? The Wongs are our best friends. What am I going to tell them?

Mother And the wedding is supposed to be next month.

Father I'm ashamed of you, Jack.

Mei Choo And what about you and Wong Tai?

Mother What? You and Wong Tai? You?

Father Well____

Mother Alamak! Is it true or not? You and Wong Tai?

Father (To Jack) This is your show, Jack. How do you want it? (Jack is bemused, does not respond. Father shrugs, turns to mother) Yes.

Mother How can I go to the Salon anymore? They must all be laughing at me.

Jackson Is that all you can think about?

Mother (To father) So that is what you were doing when you were supposed to be playing mahjong with Lo Wong, you were cheating on me and on him! Why? Cannot bear the fact that Lo Wong is richer than us is it? You must take his wife away from him some more.

Mei Choo Lo Wong had his secrets too. He didn't make any money from the stock market crash. In fact, the Wongs are broke.

Mother Alamak. That Wong Tai and all her airs. You mean all this time it wasn't true?

Mei Choo But Lo Wong never told Wong Tai either.

Mother Aiyoh, that's what I always said. You men are too clever and sly. But at least I know the truth about Lo Wong before Wong Tai does. Now she will not dare to embarrass me.

Father Lo Wong has no money?

Susan (To Mei Choo) Are you satisfied? Now my family has lost face altogether.

Celene Look. I don't know what the fuck is going on here, and I don't much care. Don't mind me, folks. I'm leaving. (To Jack) You're a scheming two-timer Jackson. It's a good thing Paul will be back soon.

Jackson Wait a minute, who's Paul?

Celene Paul's my Physics PHD tutor.

Jackson Physics? PHD?

Susan So there was someone else. I told you, I'm sick of your lies.

Mother Jack, how can you do this, and the wedding is next month.

Father Jack ...

Mother And you! You're a fine one to talk.

Jackson WAIT A MINUTE! SHUT UP!

There is a stunned silence

Jackson It's not important. None of that's important. Haven't you heard what I've been trying to tell you? I have AIDS.

Stunner silence.

Jackson I have AIDS. I'm going to die.

Jackson goes to Mother, Father, Susan and Celene in turn, saying sorry, asking for acceptance. Each of them reject him, painting his face with broad, ugly brush strokes, till his face is just a mess of colour. Only Mimi, whom he does turn to, seems to be about to reach out to him, but somehow, the connection is still missing. She cannot comfort him. He drops to his knees in despair.

Doctor But Mr. Ong,

Jackson (without looking up) What?

Doctor Mr. Ong...

Jackson (sees Doctor, groans) Oh God. Not you.

Doctor I'm afraid there's been a terrible mistake.

Jackson What?

Doctor You don't have AIDS after all.

Jackson I don't understand.

Doctor You don't have AIDS after all.

Jackson They found a cure?

Doctor No. There was a mix up in the test results. You just had a skin fungus, probably picked up in Bangkok as your GP had thought. Nothing serious.

Jackson You mean I'll live?

Doctor Yes. We're awfully sorry about this, Mr. Ong. (To the audience) As for the faint hearted among you, there is no possibility of a mistake such as this happening in real life. But this is a play and some liberties are permitted in order to enhance the dramatic flavour. You see, in real life, all hospitals would take meticulous care in ensuring that the results match the patient. There's a certain justice to that.

Mei Choo Yah, I think, that's very true.

Doctor Why, thank you. I don't believe we've met.

Mei Choo Mei Choo.

Doctor Oh?

Mei Choo Mei Choo. From the Great Image Hair Salon.

Doctor Pleased to meet you.

Mei Choo Me too.

Jackson I'll live.

Susan Jack, you never told me about Bangkok.

Jackson I'll live. Did you hear that? I'll live!!

Exuberance

Celene Big deal.

Jackson It wasn't too late after all...

Mother I don't understand (crying).

Father It's alright. Everything is going to be okay.

Jackson Thank God, it's not too late. Not too late to look beneath the mask that was labelled Jackson. Jackson. Like any other name, it's just this tag that they tied around my big toe when I was born and I was

content to allow it to stay there. I seldom thought to look any deeper. I seldom let anything see beyond my Jackson tag. But maybe I will now. Jackson's a lot nicer than just AIDS.

The spot light on Jackson fades as the stage slowly starts to light up. Everyone is moving away. These moments of relief can be dragged out a little.

Suddenly, Jackson realises something.

Jackson Oh my God.

Everybody freezes.

Mimi comes forward.

Mimi Jackson. . . ?

Jackson Mimi

Mimi goes up to Jackson and tries to wipe the paint off, but her efforts only make the mess worse and she stands there with her hands wet with paint. She puts her hands to her face and she is now garishly painted as well.

Mimi I'm sorry, Jackson. All along I thought it was only a skin infect. Otherwise I will tell you... you know I will tell you...

Jackson Oh my God, Mimi... your number... 633

Mimi 633.

At the realisation that he is truly doomed, Jackson breaks out of the dream sequence, his horror fully reflected on his face.

Lights fade.

END

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Eleanor Wong