

Mixed Signals

Leon Wing

Sefen's eyes strayed briefly away from the green glowing cursor on his monitor when his digital Casio wristwatch beeped. The digits blinked 12. The night was now segueing into Saturday. He had been hunched over his desk for more than the normal eight working hours now, tapping away on his keyboard.

Unlike some of his colleagues who had had it for the day at 6. A few even dared to leave for home promptly at 5, while others afraid of repercussions from their superiors stayed on a few more hours before slinking off.

Sefen grudged them their freedom, imagining them letting loose on a Friday night at some club or bar, scoring some hot bod, or dancing to some pounding music. No such luck for him though. The only tune he was listening to now was 1995's Coolio's *Gangsta Paradise*, emitting from some radio belonging to one of his few colleagues still remaining behind. He could hear the staccato of their key tapping as well. Sefen bet that like everyone they were also working away against some unrealistic deadline.

His own deadline for his project was due this weekend. But his perseverance and endurance over the long hours this evening paid off. He now pressed the key that would save and archive his work for review by his superiors.

He heaved a big sigh of relief. He straightened, stretched his arms, and pulled his shoulders back. He had been hunching by degrees over his desk as he worked away throughout the evening. At one instance he nearly slumped over the keyboard, his eyes just centimeters away from the green monitor.

He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and gazed over the top of his partition. He saw Mason looming towards him, his bulk becoming more defined as he came closer.

Sefen wasn't aware that he had crossed his thighs over each other until a raised knee banged the underside of his desk. He let out a little yelp of pain. He shot a hand underneath to rub his knee.

Mason's hirsute face now hovered over the partition, his hairy arms



propped on top. He had a sheepish grin on him.

"I'm done. Wanna go for some *mamak*?"

Sefen stopped kneading his knee and replaced his grimace with a smile.

Mason added, "Since it's so late in the night already, you might as well not go back home." His grin grew wider. "What do you say? Sleep over at my place?"

Sefen didn't anticipate anything like this. His glasses slipped down again. He nudged them up his nose. He wanted to cross his thighs again, this time making sure his knee didn't make contact with the desk again.

"You mean now? Well, what I mean is, after this?" He swept a hand over his desk.

Mason grinned and nodded. He looked down at Sefen's keyboard. "I can tell you managed to finish your task."

Oh sure, Sefen thought, because he wasn't hunched over his keyboard? Both of them had been paired together by their manager to share the work of various modules of their project. So it was no wonder that Mason was now *au fait* with his work habits after spending this many weeks working together.

Mason was looking very relaxed and casual. Which was how Sefen himself knew he had also, like him, managed to complete his modules. And that was great, because now they could relieve some stress and not think about work for the space of this long holiday weekend.

Last week during lunch with his colleagues, Mason interrupted the small talk, which was as usual about work. They were sitting beside each other, and Sefen felt something knocking on his side. It was Mason's elbow. Sefen turned, meeting his grin. He arched his eyebrows: *what?* Mason had to raise his voice above the hubbub: Would Sefen like to spend a few days at his hometown in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, this coming weekend. As there were the holidays, it would be one long weekend. They could climb Mount Kinabalu and get a certificate, snorkel at some nearby island. And Sefen would love the taste of KK's famous AHA fried chicken and other local delicacies. The others around the table suddenly stopped chatting or eating, and looked at him expectantly.

He remembered he gulped down his noodles without chewing. He had



to take a sip of his coffee before replying. His voice might even have gone a pitch higher. He didn't even make a show of thinking it over and giving an answer later. He remembered he had been a little too precipitate in accepting. And it wasn't because of the irresistible draw of Mount Kinabalu, snorkeling or the local food. Did he squirm in his chair anticipating spending quality time with Mason? But he did remember his colleagues around the table making fun, putting up their hands, wanting to also go to KK. Anyway, Mason had ignored them and had given him a thumbs-up and a wink for accepting his invitation.

Sefen now reminded him that they had already made plans to leave from his apartment in Petaling Jaya this Saturday afternoon for the airport. He had not counted on this sudden change of plans. There were a lot of things he needed to do. Like leaving for home as soon as he could, after logging out. He would be tired and exhausted of course but he would have to drive home fast (and safely of course) tonight. He needed to get a little nap and wake up and pack a few days worth of clothing for the KK trip.

Mason suggested that after the sleepover at his place, he could drive him back home after breakfast, to pack his luggage and return to the apartment, in time to leave for the airport in the afternoon. This arrangement sounded so rushed to Sefen, but in spite of this, he trusted Mason.

Downstairs, at the *mamak* stall across the road, Mason called out "*Dua roti canai, kopi ais*" to the Bangladeshi cook throwing down greasy mounds of dough onto a huge hot metal plate. The man raised his steaming metal scraper: Ok, boss. Sefen thought he was going to touch the steaming scraper to his head in a salute. Their food didn't take long to prepare, just ten to twenty minutes the most for him to flip the flattened and stretched hot *roti canai* onto plastic plates. A little boy carried the food over to where Mason and Sefen were sitting. They ate quickly, Sefen cutting up his food with fork and spoon, and Mason tearing his to pieces with one hand.

Afterwards, they walked into a dark lane behind their office building. Sefen always dreaded this shortcut to their car park when it was dark, when the sun came down. If he was by himself he would rather take a longer route out towards the main road, in order to safely reach his parked car. He had been mugged before, not here or at the car park, but in the city centre. And this had been during the day. He would rather not risk another occurrence and in the dark. But now, walking beside Mason, he felt safe and protected. After all, Mason used to play American football in college. He figured that was how his body had gotten this bulk.



Sefen looked at the Mason's sizeable silhouette walking beside his own soft and lanky one. He giggled softly, relishing this moment when Mason didn't have his girlfriend with him. As well as the fact that she would be spending her holidays with her parents in Ipoh, leaving Mason all by himself. Well, not all, because he had Sefen now, hadn't he?

Coming out at the end of the lane, they crossed a pathway leading into their car park. They got their beepers out and trained them in the direction of their cars. Sefen's car sounded nearer as he had parked closer. Entering every morning, he always looked for an empty space. He reckoned that this way, he could reach his car in shorter time than if he had parked it all the way inside. Also, getting away from the place would be quicker. He still had mugging on his mind.

The beep from Mason's car sounded a little softer. He had parked much farther inside. Passing Sefen, he gave him a pat on his buttocks. He didn't turn around but gave a backhanded wave. "See you at my place. I'll wait for you outside the main road, and you follow me. Ok?"

Sefen had been to his place before, during daytime. But Mason knew Sefen well enough by now to assume that he would probably lose his way at night.

Sefen didn't get in but stood with his car door opened, watching Mason's broad back disappear into the dark shadows, where his car was waiting. It was not that he wanted to make sure Mason got in safely. It was so that he could hear Mason start his engine.

Mason's car appeared out of the gloom and he honked as he passed Sefen. Sefen waved after him. He got in, started his car, reversed and drove out onto the main highway, pausing behind Mason's waiting car. Together they drove off, Mason leading the way.

All through the journey, Sefen leant over his steering wheel. He imagined that it was better this way so as not to lose sight of Mason's car. And his headlights lighting up the rear of Mason's car helped a little. As Mason was wont to drive faster than him, he had to rev up a little more than he would normally like to. By rights he always stayed on the slower lane. A few instances he panicked when Mason swerved to an empty lane. He followed suit, only after he checked in the mirror for any vehicles. In the end, a big relief for Sefen, they reached Mason's apartment building in one piece. Once past the guard house, Mason wound down his window, stuck his head out and pointed towards the guest parking area. Sefen nodded and headed there, while Mason went around the building and entered the private



parking.

Sefen rode the lift up to Mason's floor. He found Mason's apartment without any hitch. He still remembered the correct door number, from the last time he came up for a little get together for his girlfriend's birthday, a few months back. He brushed imaginary dirt from his sleeves, swept his fringe up with his fingers, and then rang the door bell.

The door was promptly opened. He breathed in sharply—Mason was shirtless. He was used to seeing the thick hair on his forearms when he rolled up his sleeves. Nevertheless, he was still taken by the wide expanse of fur on his chest. And more than that, he had wrapped a not very accommodating towel around his middle. And the knot he tied over his side looked precarious.

He revealed some expanse of muscled and furred thigh as he stepped forward to slide open the gate to one side of the door frame. He stood aside to allow Sefen to step into the hall. There was plenty of space but Sefen made a show of twisting his body and maneuvering so as to avoid brushing against him.

Mason grinned as if he didn't notice this. He pulled the gate shut and locked the door. Turning around, he nearly stepped into Sefen. He didn't expect Sefen to be still standing there. And he was staring at him.

"Sorry, mate," Mason apologised instead. He managed to secure his towel's knot, much to Sefen's disappointment.

Sefen still didn't move but watched Mason head towards the bathroom. Mason's hand was grasping his towel's knot. It looked like it had unfurled during their collision. At the threshold, he looked back over his shoulder and told Sefen to help himself to drinks in the kitchen. And that his bedroom was the spare room, of course. Mason closed the door, but not before releasing his hold on his towel and letting it fall, flashing furred buttocks.

Sefen didn't want to eat or drink anything more after their supper outside their office. He just wanted to get a nice kip. Well, good luck to that, he rued, going into the spare room, not after Mason just mooned him.

He was not used to sleeping without some kind of pajamas, even if it was just a tee shirt and shorts. He turned on the air conditioner, but he still felt hot lying on the guest bed with just his undies. After turning and tossing about on the bed, he was finally worn out and he fell into a slumber. A few



times during the night, the sound of bare feet padding on marbled floor and the noise of a cistern roused him from his sleep. And he was too exhausted to sense if he opened his eyes in the deep gloom. Only when he made out the dark shapes of the chair and cupboards across his bed did he remember where he was.

The red glow under his eyelids told him that it was morning. Something was prodding him on his shoulder. He dreamt a huge furry creature was pecking him. He reached out for his glasses on the dressing table.

He now saw who was poking him, clearly. Mason was standing over him. In his not completely woken state Sefen could still make out a bulge behind the front of Mason's towel. He shot his arm out and made to clutch at his towel. But Mason reacted quickly and stepped backwards. He guffawed and wagged a no-no gesture with a finger. He told him to get dressed, and that they were going across his apartment for some breakfast. Then he padded out of the room.

They sat in a *kopitiam*, sipping hot coffee and eating dim sum. Mason finished his plates and lit a cigarette. He turned his head and blew out smoke. They didn't speak. They didn't bring up how Mason mooned him last night and also how Sefen tried to grab at his towel this morning. Sefen speared another piece of dim sum and chewed and swallowed, pretending to be interested in the passersby.

Mason smoked his cigarette nearly down to the filter. He stubbed it out on an ashtray. It was a signal for Sefen to finish draining the last dregs of his thick local coffee. They both got up. Mason waved away the money Sefen held out for his share of the breakfast.

Back at the apartment building, they got out of the lift on the floor where Mason had parked his car. Mason said he'd drive him back home now and he'd wait outside while Sefen packed his luggage. It took Sefen less than 15 minutes to reappear. He stowed his luggage behind him, on the passenger seat.

Riding up the lift to the apartment, Mason assured Sefen he could leave his car in the guest parking, no one would notice or bother. They would rest for a bit upstairs and then leave here two hours before boarding time in Subang airport, taking a taxi.

At the airport, they rolled their luggage around the duty free shops. Sefen was looking for chocolate. He went to a counter displaying all sorts of



the stuff. He dithered whether to get just one giant Toblerone white chocolate bar or a few smaller Cadbury packs. He lifted up one huge bar as if to weigh it. Mason tapped him on his arm and told him it might be better if he got a bottle of good wine instead. It would please his father immensely. So they went to find a liquor store. There were all these various wines from various countries: Argentina, Australia, Spain. In the end Mason helped him select something he was sure his father would appreciate. After paying for it, Sefen checked his watch and realised they had spent too much time just finding gifts. He angled his watch up to Mason's face. They had to make a move now and find their boarding gate.

They carried into the plane only their small bags, which they stowed above their seats. Mason let Sefen sit beside the window. After the plane took off and they unbuckled, Mason immediately pressed a button for some service. He asked for a beer from a heavily made up stewardess, flirting with her. Sefen glared at her and ordered an orange juice. As the flight across the sea would merely take just a few hours at best, there were no meals served. When they landed, and collected their luggage, Mason went to find a taxi.

The Chinese driver looked friendly, with a smile on his face. During the ride Mason gave directions in Hakka, a Chinese dialect Sefen didn't understand. The driver expressed surprise and took his hand off the steering wheel for a few seconds, giving Sefen a brief moment of panic. The driver continued talking with Mason, his hands now on his steering wheel.

It didn't take long to arrive at Mason's parents' home. Mason gave more directions to the taxi driver, pointing at some side lane they were approaching. They turned into it and rode up a steep incline. When they pulled up in front of a large gate, Sefen saw a huge house on the pinnacle of a plateau. It looked more like a mansion, with a wide balcony. A woman came out and stood under its shade. She waved when they both got out of the taxi with their luggage.

A pair of Mastiff dogs were barking and roving around behind the gate. Mason wasn't afraid. He stuck a hand between the bars of the gate before Sefen could protest. But nothing untoward happened. The animals sniffed his fingers and seemed to remember him. They licked his hand, and one of them nuzzled it, whimpering like a puppy while Mason kept telling them that they were good boys.

Sefen then was aware of a Filipino, or perhaps Indonesian, maid having made her way down unobtrusively, carrying some leashes. She clipped them to the dogs and pulled them away from the gate. Only after



she and the animals had gone up to the back of the house, did the woman step away from the house and come down and unlock the gate.

Mason whispered, "That's my mum." Meaning the woman now before them. She was tall and big boned, with a high nose and round eyes. Definitely not Chinese at all. She looked like Mason. Sefen guessed she could be in her late fifties or early sixties. She had no make-up on and wore an expertly cut but simple hairdo. Sefen was curious to meet the father. He remembered Mason mentioning he was Chinese.

Mother and son did not embrace. The only concession to any form of intimacy was merely a pat on his shoulder and a broad smile. They talked in Hakka. She broke off and said a welcome in English when Mason introduced Sefen.

At the house the servant girl appeared again, without the dogs, Sefen wasn't sure from where. He looked around and presumed she had locked them away in some dog house somewhere. He was certain she would have released them back to the guard the gate after they got inside the house. He was right. He turned around and spied the dogs in the distance patrolling the gate again.

It was past 6 pm when Sefen glanced at his watch. Mason's mum told them to simply drop their luggage anywhere on the floor. Mary, the maid, would carry them to their respective rooms. She had prepared the guest room upstairs for Sefen. Mason grinned and explained to Sefen it was right at the back of the house, upstairs. His own room was nearer to the landing.

They followed his mum into a large dining room. She flourished a hand at a big round table, to indicate the spread prepared for their dinner. She said she and her husband had eaten earlier, and he was still napping upstairs. Sefen was now feeling very hungry; there had been no meals on the plane. Mason acted the gentleman and pulled a heavy looking ornate chair, mock bowing, "Your dinner awaits, sir." He didn't stand on ceremony with his mother though.

Sefen looked over the table and saw that she had already seated herself down. She caught his eye and said, "Don't be shy. Help yourself to the food. I made the roast chicken myself, Mason's favorite. And I'm trying out a western recipe for pulled pork. The cook whipped up the rest of the dishes." She gave a little titter as if embarrassed.

All throughout the meal, both mother and son chatted in English, for the benefit of their guest. Sefen joined in only when they asked him



about this and that. When the meal ended, the mother excused herself, saying Mason knew the surroundings well, and that he would take Sefen upstairs to his room.

Climbing the winding stairs, Sefen looked out the windows. The sky was already darkening. He turned back and looked up at Mason climbing the stairs. He marveled at his firm behind and the bulges at the back of his legs.

At the landing of a long passageway, Mason pointed towards the far end. Sefen's room was the furthest one there. At the door of his bedroom, Mason leaned against the frame. "Well, goodnight then. I'll see you in the morning. Have a good rest." He was about to close his door. "By the way, if you cannot sleep, there is a small TV in your room." Then he shut the door softly.

Inside the guest room, Sefen clicked the light switch on and closed the door. He looked around. The room looked normal, meaning it was neither big nor too small. The furniture and furnishings were a contrast to the old school splendor of teak downstairs. They were utilitarian, fit for an unimportant guest. Or was he given the servant's quarters? He made a moue of disappointment.

There was a dressing table with a mirror, beside the bed. Someone—the maid, most likely—had placed his luggage on the bed. He sat on the edge of the bed and was satisfied it was firm but not hard and lumpy. He unpacked his clothes and hanged them inside a cupboard. He pulled a pair of slippers out of his bag, which he placed on the floor beside the dresser.

There was an adjoining bathroom. He went in to take a piss and was excited to find a tub. He emptied his bladder into the toilet bowl and flushed. He turned on the faucet and watched the water falling into the tub. He felt like a little kid. He had used a tub before but only in hotel rooms. He never expected finding one in a house. Well, come to think about it, it was expected, seeing that this house was as big as a mansion.

Over the noise of the shower, he thought he heard someone knocking on the door outside. He turned the faucet off and went out. He presumed it must be some maid or servant bringing him some towels, like in a hotel. But he was surprised to find Mason standing there. And there was a towel, actually. But this time it wasn't around his middle but over his arm.

Mason said, "Can I use your bathroom? The shower in my room doesn't seem to be working. And I'm sticky all over."



He didn't wait for a response and came in, pushing the door shut behind him with his heel.

Sefen said, "Of course, go ahead, it's your house after all. You go first." He presumed Mason might want to lie down in the tub and have a long soak. "Take your time."

Sefen hadn't taken his luggage down from his bed yet. He pointed at it. "I'll just finish unpacking." Only a few items remained inside. He hadn't decided where to put them, besides the drawers and the cupboard.

Mason saw him eyeing a big rattan basket. "Don't worry about putting your things away into the cupboard and all that. We have maids coming in to clean up after us. Just drop your dirty clothes on the floor for them to pick up to wash. They'll even iron and bring them back here later, clean and folded."

He gave Sefen a smile. And true to what he just mentioned about dropping clothing on the floor for servants to pick up, Mason started unbuttoning his shirt, letting it fall onto the floor. Then he unzipped his trousers and stepped out of them. Then his underwear came off. His towel was still over an arm, and he didn't wrap it around him when he headed for the bathroom.

Sefen stood transfixed during all this, his jaw hanging.

He heard the taps turning, and then the splashing of water on porcelain. He slowly stepped over the crumpled clothes on the floor. Mason has left the bathroom door ajar. Sefen reached for the door knob.

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Sefen did not have breakfast with Mason the following morning. Instead he called a taxi to pick him up outside the front gate. The maid had taken the dogs away from it so that he could freely walk outside.

The taxi pulled up outside the gate. He was surprised it didn't take very long for it to ride up the hill. He had presumed he might have a very long wait beside his luggage, seeing as how the taxi yesterday moved at such a leisurely pace.

After lugging his luggage into the back of the taxi, he got in the front passenger seat. He looked out his window at Mason's house on the hill.



There were no dogs about. Someone must have instructed the maid to release them only after he had gone.

Then he turned back to tell the driver to take him to the airport. The driver pointed at Sefen's face. He asked in Malay if *encik* had been mugged.

Sefen touched his swollen cheek and bruised eye. He answered, "No, I fell down."

