

Vanitas

INT.LARGE ROOM "STATION 1"

We see a large wall in a dark office, populated with individual passport photos of various people. A man slowly adds a new photo to the wall, a young woman.

JOE (V.O)  
My day is not like yours.

FADE TO BLACK

INT.TELEVISION STUDIO.

The only visible part of the room, the rest obscured by darkness, is populated by a single chair accompanied by a large sofa, with a small coffee table supporting two unusual looking drinks positioned slightly forward, equidistant between the two. The chat show host, LINDA VANE, a pristine older woman, well spoken and dressed, sits in the singular chair. There is a noticeable silence in the room. The show's title 'What's Happening', can be seen floating behind the furnishings.

(applause from unseen crowd)

VANE begins her introduction.

VANE  
Welcome to another episode of *Whats Happening*. I'm Linda Vane, and it is my pleasure to be joined tonight by one of this week's most *viral* stars. He rose to fame after his *wonderful* series of online videos '*it'd be rude not to...*'

Clips from these videos are shown, replacing the show's title floating behind the furniture on transparent displays.

VANE  
(continued)...and then went on to even further success by becoming a finalist on *celebrity knockout with Paddy Ryan*.

The clips continue.

VANE  
Ladies and gentlemen,  
introducing... FREDDY LAURENCE!

LAURENCE, a young man in his late teens, dressed in a tight-fitting suit with trainers, hair shaved at the sides

(CONTINUED)

and back, slicked back on top, makes his way out to greet VANE, the crowd levelling applause and cheers his way. He emphatically kisses VANE on the cheek, soaking in the admiration from the audience.

VANE

Freddy... *How* are you?

The channel changes.

ADVERT

An abstract advertisement for a virtual reality mask, the *Vanitas* plays. Smoky plumes of vivid colour and wide remote vistas are intercut with extreme close-up pans of the device.

INT. BAR/RESTAURANT. EVENING.

JOE is having a candlelit meal in a seemingly deserted restaurant, across from him sits a young attractive woman, whose wide eyes are trained solely on JOE.

JOES DATE

That's so interesting! I've never met *anyone* who does that for a living!

JOE looks back at her, and begins to reply, but is distracted by a distant shouting. As he turns to view the source of the distraction, the whole scene is torn away from the bottom up, the highlights blowing out until nothing is visible.

INT.LIVING ROOM IN JOE'S FLAT. EVENING.

JOE is sat on the sofa dazed, as his girlfriend ELLA, a tall European woman around the same age as himself, stands over him berating him, holding an expressionless white mask with a vague design of a human face moulded on it's front. The hollow eyes glow a pale red. JOE shakes himself back to reality and looks up to her.

ELLA

Again? This is the second time in two weeks!

JOE

El, relax. I was just catching up on *What's Happening*.

(CONTINUED)

ELLA

(brandishing the mask) Do you think  
I don't know what you're doing in  
here? For fuck's sake Joe!

ELLA hurls the mask at the wall, causing it crack across the bridge of the nose, the glowing eyes begin to flicker. ELLA grabs her coat begins to storm out, ignoring JOES protests. He rises to follow her, but before he can reach her, ELLA grabs a digital photo frame from the sideboard and pitches it at his head, striking him in the face, and leaving a cut across his nose. ELLA leaves and JOE picks up the frame from the floor, and see's that it is also cracked, some dark liquid part of the device bleeding over the displayed photographs of the two in their 'special place', a park overlooking the whole city where they met. JOE walks over to the mask and briefly inspects the damage before slipping it over his face.

INT. VIRTUAL REALITY

We see the inside of the mask from JOES perspective, a crisp clean menu over a white backdrop for a program called *Somnium*, with sections titled *Partner*, *Location*, *Time Of Day*. These fields are already filled, *Partner* with JOES DATE from earlier, *Location* the restaurant, and *Time of Day* as *Clear\_Evening*. There is visible distortion affecting large amounts of the screen.

INT.LIVING ROOM IN JOE'S FLAT. EVENING.

JOE sighs and removes the mask before tossing it away.

INT. WALKWAY. THE NEXT DAY

JOE (V.O)

My day revolves around making  
people unhappy.

JOE is standing on an elevated walkway somewhere in a tall office building looking at the panoramic view of a city in front of him. He is viewing an information file on his smartphone. We see that the file contains a passport photograph of a kind looking middle-aged man, along with a body of text, describing an affair between the man and the CEO of his company (this doesn't necessarily have to be legible on screen). The man from the photograph, MICHAEL, enters the scene and walks to JOE.

JOE

Thank you for coming.

INT. TELEVISION STUDIO.

We cut back to the talk show, with VANE and LAURENCE in the midst of discussing a new designer drug, *Animocine*.

VANE

So, I actually have some *Animocine* here, Shall we give it a go?

LAURENCE

Oh... It'd be RUDE NOT TO!

The audience applauds the use of the catchphrase whilst the two ingest the drug, a blue liquid, from a small vial.

INT. WALKWAY

JOE and MICHAEL are still in conversation, MICHAEL is visibly distraught.

MICHAEL

Why? (pauses) *Why like this?*

JOE gathers himself, locks eyes with him and begins to respond, but as he does, our viewpoint is pulled back to the end of the hallway, and we cannot hear his response.

INT. COFFEE SHOP. MIDDAY

JOE is seated at a table in the corner of a coffee shop, his co-worker, LP, walks over and joins him.

LP

Jesus Joe, what happened to your face?

JOE

...Ella found me using *Somnium*

LP

Ohhh shit, everything okay?

JOE

Yeah, I'm sure it'll be alright, I'll just give her her space.

LP looks concerned.

LP

How much *have* you been using that thing?

(CONTINUED)

JOE  
Not too much, it's under control.

LP  
How much is that?

JOE  
Look, It's broken now anyway.

LP looks sceptical.

LP  
Alright. How many this morning?

JOE  
Just the one, was a fucking  
*inquisition*.

LP  
What?

JOE looks a little disheartened to have to explain himself.

JOE  
He asked a lot of questions.

LP seems confused that JOE would even mention such a thing.

LP  
Have you ever had one who *didn't*  
ask questions?

JOE considers this for a moment, meanwhile, LP begins to mimic the distraught pleas the two routinely receive on jobs.

LP  
(mocking)  
What can I do?... Why is this  
happening to me? WHHHHHYYYYY-

LP cuts himself off with laughter at his own joke whilst JOE, smiling and laughing along with him, is alerted to a ping from his smartphone. He pulls it out and sees a new information file, containing the details of a young woman, MARTA.

JOE  
Time to go.

LP  
Go get 'em, killer.

JOE leaves.

INT. MARTHA'S LIVING ROOM. AFTERNOON

We see JOE and MARTA sitting in her living room opposite one another, JOE explaining something with large hand gestures, and MARTA visibly enraged.

MARTA

So what this is your *job*? This-  
(Gestures to the two of them)  
is what you do for a living?

JOE looks a little dejected, the meeting has clearly not gone well. He draws his breath as if to reply, but is cut off.

MARTA

How do you sleep at night?

JOE composes himself, and begins to say:

JOE

Look, miss Grey, I-

MARTA

Why like this?

EXT. STREETS. NIGHT

JOE is walking home at night.

JOE (V.O)

Why. Like. This.

He walks past other people on their own journeys, seeing businessmen on their way home, couples enjoying a walk, groups of friends making their way somewhere.

INT. JOES FLAT. NIGHT

We see ELLA packing her things at JOES flat.

JOE (V.O)

It's this question that I'm asked the most. Why or how I can do what I do. And I don't really ever have an answer, other than, it's my job. Because this is what I do. I'm good at it.

INTERCUT BETWEEN JOE AND ELLA

JOE arrives at a door below street level.

ELLA is on the phone, although we cannot hear what she's saying, it's clear she's angrily explaining a situation.

JOE (V.O)

We end relationships or affairs in a calm, controlled, safe manner for those who don't to go through with what is often a messy thing. We provide a *service* to mop up the messy remains of human lust.

ELLA writes a note for JOE, telling him to meet her at their 'special place' tomorrow.

JOE is escorted into a small dark room by a dishevelled man. The room is empty other than an almost complete circle of chairs occupied by unknown figures, all wearing various clearly home repaired versions of the virtual reality masks. JOE takes the vacant chair and slips on the mask. He is transported to a dreamlike landscape, which he wanders through as his voice over continues.

JOE (V.O)

...At least that's what I tell myself. In reality, we're enforcers doing the dirty work of power abusing influencers, cheating spouses, and literal criminals.

The circle sits, silent aside from the faint hum of the devices, the only thing piercing the darkness the white glow emitted from the eyes.

INT.JOES FLAT. LATER THAT NIGHT

JOE returns to his flat to find the message from ELLA. He sighs as he views the note. He moves to the mask and picks it up, staring into its dead eyes, the crack across its face a mirror of his own facial injury.

JOE (V.O)

We give them an ultimatum, take the offer, be it money, a promotion, a foot on the ladder somewhere new, and we imply that not accepting will lead to a variety of life-ruining consequences. I always knew I couldn't do it forever.

EXT.PARK 'SPECIAL PLACE'. MORNING

JOE arrives at the entrance to the park where he is to meet ELLA. It is a beautiful day. JOE strolls through the park.

JOE (V.O)

I think maybe now's the time to get out. I've lost my nerve, I'm taking the job home with me, thinking about the people.

MONTAGE. VARIOUS

JOE continues his walk through the park.

ELLA is on a train, looking out of the window.

MARTA is waiting for a bus.

MICHAEL is cleaning out his desk having been forced out of his job.

LP is perturbed looking at an information file on his phone.

EXT.PARK 'SPECIAL PLACE'. MORNING

JOE (V.O)

Yeah, time to get out, time for a fresh start

JOE closes in on the meeting place.

JOE (V.O)

Sort things out with El, new job, new...

As the meeting spot comes into view, JOE can see that it is not ELLA waiting for him, but rather LP, looking apologetic.

JOE (V.O)

...shit.

INT.LARGE ROOM "STATION 1"

The same man from the first scene slowly adds JOE's photo to the wall.

INT.TV CHAT SHOW.

The credits roll as VANE and LAURENCE have a heated argument in the background, devolving into a brawl.

**END**