

A DESPERATE ILLUSION

A film short

Dave Sinclair

CAST:

Joe/Jon

Sophia/Sophie

Barman (non-speaking)

EXT. BROADWAY - NIGHT

Joe is driving a sleek car down Broadway, NY. Bright lights and billboards flash by, illuminating his face.

JOE (V.O.)

Just one hour ago, I had been warm and calm and comfortable, swaddled like a baby, high in the skies in my aluminium cradle. From LA to JFK, I had boozed and snoozed across the continental divide until the thump of the wheels on the runway cleared my gin fogged head. Now, driving north on Broadway, the billboards whispered to me in the darkness of the night. No PowerPoint needed, they pitched their deal in compelling fonts of pink and neon, their unique selling point a fragile, desperate promise of intimacy amongst the city millions.

As I left the rental in a parking lot, the pavement released its heat into the late evening under my feet, fanning my senses with the sweet perfume of tarmac and the acrid taste of cement dust. I set off towards the brightness of the lights, ready to settle amongst the other moths, thirsty to drink the nectar of companionship.

INT. BAR - NIGHT

A bustling, upscale bar. Joe, now with a drink, scans the room. SOPHIA, early 30s, stunning, just under six feet in her four inch Jimmy Choo stilettos - waves of blonde hair lapped gently on her shoulders. Her Pearl Rose cut-out tulle gown does not so much clothe as embrace and caress her perfect hour-glass figure. Their eyes meet.

SOPHIA
Hello, stranger.

JOE
What will it be?

SOPHIA
Vodka, straight, one ice cube.

In the background the barman unobtrusively serves her drinks.

JOE
Beware of her fair hair, for she excels,
All women in the magic of her locks,
And when she winds them round a young man's neck,
She will not ever set him free again.

SOPHIA
Byron?

JOE
Close, but no cigar - Goethe, actually.

Well, either way, it's an interesting opener. I rarely get propositioned in verse.

JOE

And am I propositioning you?

SOPHIA

I'd be disappointed if you weren't.

JOE

Don't you think we should be formally introduced first?

SOPHIA

Naturally. Sophia, thirty two and unattached. By day, Im an associate professor in Algebraic Mathematics at Columbia. I teach number, space, quantity and arrangement. My speciality there is the dynamic assessment of chaotic distributions.

JOE

Impressive.

SOPHIA

So now you know everything.

JOE

Well almost everything - what do you specialise in at night?

SOPHIA

Let's just say I like to study human nature.

JOE

Funny, I thought you might be in fashion, or the theatre, movies. Maybe even real estate. That's a fabulous dress. Worn with great *savoir faire*, if I may say so.

SOPHIA

Indeed, you may.

JOE

But a professor - I'm intrigued and bit abashed. They say appearances can clearly be deceptive. Clearly my preconceptions are unreliable. If

I'm honest, I may be a little
unnerved too.

SOPHIA

I sometimes think honesty can be
over-rated. It makes a man so
uninteresting. Now it's your turn.

JOE

Roger Prendergast. Thirty five.
Twice attached and equally twice
detached. Eastern sales manager for
Derringborn Agricultural Machinery.
Our model 3500C harvests more than
90% of the blueberries in New York
State - that's kind of impressive
too.

SOPHIA

Now you do disappoint me. And so
soon, too.

JOE

Really? I'm sure I could change your
mind, given the opportunity.

SOPHIA

Now you do disappoint me. And so
soon, too. You're no more Roger
Prendergast than I'm Marilyn Monroe.

JOE

Ah, now you disappoint me.
Blueberries are a nice healthy
business. Lots of antioxidants,
plenty of fibre, vitamin C, K - a bit
of manganese... The sales pitch was
falling flat - I sensed from her
glowing complexion she already had
access to a reliable supply of
vitamins.

SOPHIA

Somehow, I don't think you're called
Roger. And I don't see you being a
Prendergast either. Goethe and
Prendergast aren't likely bedfellows.

SOPHIA

Well, that would be rather contradictory - but then logical paradoxes are part of my mathematical specialities.

JOE

But how about this... If I say I'm dishonest then how can I be - because I would be being honest by saying I was dishonest.

SOPHIA

I think maybe I need another drink before I work on that one.

JOE catches the eye of the barman, who serves two more drinks. Neither Joe nor Sophie seem surprised that that barman has the head and body of a Labrador and has already prepared the drinks.

SOPHIA

So, if you're not Roger, then would you like me to tell you who you really are?

JOE

Be my guest, my analyst has been trying to do that for some time.

SOPHIA

You are in fact, Joe Cortana. Thirty five -

JOE

There you go, I wasn't completely dishonest.

SOPHIA gives JOE the sort of stare that would freeze the Gulf of Mexico

SOPHIA

As I was saying, Joe. Thirty five. A PhD in Natural Language Simulation using Coherent Artificial Intelligence Engines at MIT then an MBA at Yale followed by five years on Wall Street. Then CTO in a Silicon

Valley start-up. Half a billion turnover in 2 years. A little better than blueberries, I think. Don't worry, I won't tell a soul.

JOE

How come?

SOPHIA

I've a soft spot for dishonesty.

JOE

Is that the only reason?

SOPHIA

Well, what is dishonesty, really?

JOE

Wikipedia would say it was a lack of probity, cheating, lying, or deliberately withholding information, or being deliberately deceptive or a lack in integrity, knavishness, perfidiousity, corruption or treacherousness.

SOPHIA

That sounds pretty comprehensive to me. But I get the feeling you're going to tell me that isn't the whole story.

JOE

Well, what happens if Wikipedia itself isn't honest? It's only a machine after all.

SOPHIA

Ah, but it has a bunch of honest humans behind it.

JOE

How do you know they are honest? As Macbeth says, according to Wikipedia, There is no art to see the minds construction in the face, and in fact you cant even see their faces, so how can you possibly know they are

thinking? How can you know they are honest?

SOPHIA

They're honest because that's the consensus. If someone puts a rogue description up, then the community will remove it or correct it. Everybody's watching, so you can't be dishonest.

JOE

Maybe the probability is that the description is true. But there is no absolute reality surely? Perceptions change. New things are discovered. Society moves on. A while ago we all were certain the Earth is flat, that there were canals on Mars and the moon was made of green cheese. Now we live in a different reality.

SOPHIA

You know you really do have a rather unique way of propositioning a girl.

JOE

And how is it working for you?

SOPHIA

Im wondering if you want me to be Lady Macbeth, given that you are quoting Macbeth.

JOE

Hmm, that would probably be better than one of the three witches. They had an interesting take on reality too - Fair is Foul, and Foul is Fair I recall.

The conversation has reached a natural pause. After a few seconds...

SOPHIA

So, are you going to tell me what you really do?

JOE

You might say I'm in the reality business. Occasionally people get confused and ask me to sell their house for them, but then I explain their realty is not my reality. It rarely gets a laugh. I'm all about truth, in all its forms.

SOPHIA

How so?

JOE

There are two sorts of truth. The truth that describes the hard, cold world we live in and the other truth, the truth that you can't touch or taste or see - the truth that warms the heart. The first of these is science - that's your hunting ground. The second is art. That's where I come in. I provide a little warmth when people get a little too cold in the harsh reality of the every-day world. I find them a truth that they can believe in.

Joe and Sophia have finished their drinks again. Joe signals the barman, who has returned to normal but again has their drinks ready. There is a hint of a growl as he servers them.

SOPHIA

You make it sound very attractive. Everyone needs a bit of comfort these days. But it doesn't really tell me what you actually do. What would do if you I asked you to comfort me?

Again, I fell into the gentle blues of her eyes - this time I recalled summer hay, and the warmth of the sun on my back.

JOE

I'm an Imagineer. You might even say a cultivator. I harvest people's ideas, desires and aspirations and re-engineer them, and give them back. I sell people their dreams. It's a compelling product - when you can

have whatever your heart desires.

SOPHIA

And my dream is?

JOE

I sense you need a little warmth too.

INT. THE SAME BAR - NIGHT BUT A LONGSHOT OF THE COUPLE

JOE (V.O)

We were just two slices of prime meat, perched on our stools, gently sparring as we gradually got to know one another, already knowing how it would end, enjoying the journey as much as the destination. Of course, I would soon find out I was wrong, probably as wrong as I've been. This would turn out to be the most unusual night of my life. It was only when I was locked away in an eight by six county jail cell two years later, that I realised how big a mistake I had made. By then she was long gone, her departure leaving a trail of destruction like some capricious tornado, tearing up the foundations of my life and leaving me sucked dry of breath and thought. I looked through the rusty bars at the flaking plaster on the wall opposite and wondered where she was now. I determined then that I would track her down, even if, as seemed likely, it was the last thing I would do. But that was all in future.

INT. THE SAME BAR - NIGHT NOW BACK AGAIN ON THE COUPLE

SOPHIA

Shall we go somewhere a bit quieter?

JOE

I'd invite you to my room, if I had a room.

SOPHIA
Not checked in yet?

JOE
No.

Sophia puts a hotel key on the bar.

SOPHIA
Here's the key to my hotel room.
There's an alley back onto the main
drag. The kitchen is next to the
John. I imagine the sanitation
inspector is not that happy about
that, but it makes a nice discreet
exit. I'll see you at the hotel
shortly.

JOE
Surely, that would be rather
ungallant, to leave a lady at the
bar.

SOPHIA
Maybe, but I think I recognise the
two Feds that just walked in...

INT. COMPUTER LAB - NIGHT

The scene starts in monochromes. Gradually the colours return
by the end of the scene.

The lab contains computers, displays and other complicated
machines in racks in the room, gathered around a central
console. The walls are decorated with posters of well-known
computer games through the decades, eg Pacman, Tron, several
generations of Grand Theft Auto, etc.

JON, sitting at the main console desk, takes off his virtual
reality headset, rubs his eyes and hits the big reset button
on the console in front of him. Olivia is still leaning back
in her chair, still wearing her headset, peering sightlessly
into the distance.

JON
What do you think?

Sophie can't hear him, so he turns his microphone back on

JON

Sophie, how was it for you?

Sophie reaches up and untangles her long blond hair from her headset.

SOPHIE

I still think it's a pile of sexist rubbish, Jon. But it will sell well. Because its sexist rubbish, even though that is more than a bit annoying. There's a bug at 3:42 where the AI repeats itself - its where Sophia says she's disappointed. Or maybe the AI is just telling the truth for once ... The Labrador was a bit surreal - but I think we should leave that in - it was kind of fun. I liked the way his paws seemed to give him no difficulty when mixing the drinks. I did however find it a little distracting when he wolfed down Joe's brandied cherry.

JON

I'm still getting a headache though when Joe's thoughts are played back over mine.

SOPHIE

Maybe it would help if I knocked 3 dB off the induction amplitude in the headset. What do you think? And I did not really like the way they keep quoting stuff of Wikipedia. Maybe we should disconnect the conversation engine from the internet - it's not great pillow talk when they keep quoting Shakespeare or Goethe at one another. Would that be a turn on for the average thirty year old? Somehow, I doubt it.

JON

Yeah, that sounds good. Let's take a break and call in a pizza.

SOPHIE

Then we can go over the
conversational subroutines again.

JON

Right, shall I get a large New Yorker
then?

SOPHIE

Naah, go for a Hawaiian, I've had
enough of New York for the time
being.

END