

**THE NEARNESS OF YOU**

by

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*First Draft*

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FADE IN:

INT. COLTRANE'S NIGHTCLUB - NIGHT

Deafening STREET NOISE - car horns, hawkers, hookers - blasts into the club as the REPORTER lets herself in. She pulls her LEATHER HALF-COAT close around her as her eyes adjust.

A naked BULB above the door flickers into life - long enough for the Reporter to react to the BUM in the old COAT-CHECK BOOTH. He smacks his gums and mumbles in his sleep. Incongruously, he's wearing a TUXEDO JACKET.

Framed Rat Pack PHOTOGRAPHS leer from the wall. Her fragmented reflection stares back at her in cracked and mildewed MIRRORS. The once ruby-red FLOOR-TO-CEILING CARPET threaten to close in on her. She moves forward.

A strata of choking cigarette smoke obscures the ceiling and veils the club's interior and occupants in a grey murk. An ancient PIANIST shuffles a STOOL towards the microscopic STAGE. It's a painful sight.

A bored WAITRESS tends to the dozen or so scattered PATRONS in various states of alcoholic misery.

The BARMAN watches the Reporter as she scans the room, looking for -

CORNER BOOTH

The PROFESSOR signals the Waitress over. His speech is clipped and careful but it fools no one:

PROFESSOR

Another pot of your firewater, my good wench.

She looks at him as he grips his GIN GLASS for balance.

PROFESSOR (CONT'D)

If it pleases you.

He empties the dregs down his throat and bangs the empty glass at the Waitress's departure. His head weaves and bobs in alcohol-sodden slow-motion.

REPORTER

Uh, hi. Professor -

He shoots to his feet, taking her in on his ascent:

PROFESSOR  
 My good lady, welcome - welcome!  
 (motions to his booth)  
 Please share my humble  
 accommodations.

She complies and discerns his academic garb in the murk:  
 a PLAIN KNIT TIE hangs loose; food stains on his CHECK  
 SHIRT and CORDUROY JACKET.

PROFESSOR (CONT'D)  
 Please forgive my ah, appearance, my  
 dear -

REPORTER  
 (firm but polite)  
 Don't call me 'dear'.

He sways back in his seat.

PROFESSOR  
 I intended no offence, my d-, my good  
 l-, my -,.....  
 (what can he say?)  
 Mm-hm.

REPORTER  
 None taken, professor.

He eyes the PALMPILOT and STYLUS she produces from her  
 jacket. A FRESH GIN seizes his attention:

PROFESSOR  
 (to Waitress)  
 My most sincere gratitude, my -  
 (glances at Reporter)  
 - my good woman.

WAITRESS  
 (deadpan)  
 You've got two drinks left on your  
 tab.

He gestures to the Reporter -

PROFESSOR  
 (expansive)  
 My companion would appreciate some  
 liquid refreshment, so two more, if  
 you please.  
 (winks)  
 I shall have one more... for the  
 road.

## STAGE

Perched on her stool, the SINGER appraises tonight's audience. She glances behind her and nods.

Dwarfed by the UPRIGHT PIANO, the Pianist falters through an opening for 'How Long Has This Been Going On?' It's at a funereal pace. The piano needs tuning.

SINGER

(sings)

"I could cry salty tears / Where have  
I been all these years?"

## CORNER BOOTH

PROFESSOR

'One for the road.' Did you know that one source of the phrase, 'may the road come up to meet you,' was the oral history of Irish travellers? It was an accompanying prescription for hallucinatory mushrooms.

REPORTER

(flat)

Really.

PROFESSOR

(oblivious)

Really.

REPORTER

... That's ... (INTERESTING). I hadn't heard of that.

## WIDE

The cigarette smoke seems to have cleared a fraction: individual smoke-threads unravel towards the ceiling.

## BAR

A rumpled USED CAR SALESMAN hunkers over his EMPTY GLASS. The Barman serves him up a fresh WHISKEY.

SINGER

(sings)

"There were chills up my spine / And  
some thrills I can't define"

The Salesman picks up the new drink with almost reverential gentleness. He looks at the Singer, almost raising her glass to her, his expression softening.

STAGE

A SPOTLIGHT above the Singer encircles her with a wan light. She nods to the Salesman:

SINGER (CONT'D)  
 (sings)  
 "Listen, sweet, I repeat / How long  
 has this been going on?"

CORNER BOOTH

The Professor squints across the table.

PROFESSOR  
 How old are you? You look like an  
 undergraduate.

REPORTER  
 I'm twenty-five.  
 (off the Professor)  
 I've been doing this five years.

PROFESSOR  
 Twenty-five.  
 (beat)  
 My successor -. She's about your  
 age. Straight from school and into  
 university. Not a single year in the  
 real world.

REPORTER  
 (frowns)  
 According to the press release she's  
 thirty-seven -

PROFESSOR  
 Exactly! A child! A woman!

He catches himself - too late - and covers by downing his drink in one. He stifles a burp as she brings up some notes on her palmpilot -

REPORTER  
 According to your bio, you had an  
 almost identical career path -

He looks towards the bar:

PROFESSOR (CONT'D)  
Where are our drinks?

REPORTER  
(beat; patient)  
When we spoke earlier, you mentioned  
—

PROFESSOR  
(annoyed)  
I know what I said. I —.

WAITRESS  
Here you go.

Two fresh GINS arrive. The Professor proffers a limp bill:

PROFESSOR  
And two more.  
(off Waitress)  
Please.

The money slides from his fingers and the Waitress vanishes. He takes a sip, savours it.

PROFESSOR (CONT'D)  
(sotto)  
Twenty five.  
(off the Reporter)  
Boarding school. College. The university. Yes, I have spent my entire life in academia. It was the one thing I excelled at.

NEARBY BOOTH

A faded COCKTAIL DRESS empties her LOWBALL in one experienced go. She fishes out her COMPACT as she glances up at the —

STAGE

The Singer gives the Cocktail Dress a small smile:

SINGER  
(sings)  
"I feel that I could melt / Into  
heaven I'm hurled / I know how  
Columbus felt finding another world"

CORNER BOOTH

The Reporter leans forward in her seat.

REPORTER

There've been reports that your tenure was revoked - not just because your department was being disestablished - but also because of recent interviews.

The Professor looks at her, an expectant audience: yes?

REPORTER (CONT'D)

In one interview - on National Radio, actually, you said that 'education is not a commodity for the market to take care of. Knowing how to make money may be the current mark of success, but it isn't what separates human beings from animals. It's our continued navel-gazing - philosophically, anthropologically, and historically.'

PROFESSOR

I said that?

She waits him out: he knows damned well he did.

His façade slips, and he takes a hit of his drink.

PROFESSOR (CONT'D)

I gave that university sixty years of my life. We went through a golden age of enlightenment while the rest of the world consumed itself with its narcissism and greed. We excavated and hypothesised and argued over history, theology and mythology.

(his lips tighten)

And then some schoolgirl with a, an MBA, arrives to tell me that the dead languages aren't 'economically sustainable'.

He tosses the rest of his gin back and grimaces. He looks around the bar.

WIDE

The nightclub has darkened further - and yet we can see each occupant clearly as if they each have their own spotlight.

The Used Car Salesman straightens his tie.

The Cocktail Dress watches the Singer, tears tracking down her cheeks.

STAGE

The Singer's dress shimmers, her features ethereal.

SINGER

(sings)

"Listen you, tell me do / How long  
has this been going on? / How long  
has this been going on?"

The Pianist closes their song. He seems to have found his stride.

CORNER BOOTH

The Reporter joins in the spotted applause to which the Singer smiles and nods.

PROFESSOR

Do you believe in a god?

The Reporter looks at him:

REPORTER

What?

PROFESSOR

Not god as in the Judeo-Christian  
God, but gods in general.

(off Reporter)

Have you ever wondered what happened  
to the ones like Mercury or Isis or  
Cthulu?

She stares at him.

PROFESSOR (CONT'D)

What if I were to prove to you that  
gods exist?

REPORTER

(flat)

That God exists.

PROFESSOR

No, not that just God exists, but that all gods, any god known to mankind at one time or another, actually existed - and continue to exist.

The Reporter slumps back in her seat and looks about for an escape: she's stuck with a lunatic. Something catches her eye -

WIDE

A couple of BOOZEHOUNDS match each other drink for drink, a BOURBON BOTTLE between them. Heading for oblivion.

PROFESSOR (CONT'D; V.O.)

Who's to say that two or three thousand years from now, archaeologists and anthropologists deduce from the rubble that Elvis Presley and Shania Twain were gods of their own time?

The DOORMAN passes the Boozehounds, giving them a stern look as he approaches the -

NEARBY BOOTH

The Cocktail Dress looks up. The Doorman crouches beside her and says something. She laughs between sobs, nodding. He hands her a WHITE HANDKERCHIEF.

STAGE

The Pianist tinkles a mid-tempo opening for 'The Nearness of You' that would make Oscar Peterson proud. The piano is now, strangely, in tune.

CORNER BOOTH

REPORTER

You're saying that to be a god, you need a good marketing department that continues to sell your work well after your death?

PROFESSOR

(smiles)

You're cynical. That's typical of your generation.

He sizes her up; almost sniffs.

PROFESSOR (CONT'D)  
And yet I sense a classical  
education.

REPORTER  
I can spell 'ex libris'.

PROFESSOR  
But do you see what I'm driving at?  
(off the Reporter)  
Maybe I'm being elliptical.

The Reporter frowns - and we don't know whether it's what she's seeing or hearing.

REPORTER  
You're saying that Zeus and Baal and  
Diana were real -

PROFESSOR  
Yes. Or still are.

REPORTER  
- or at least real enough for their  
worshippers -

PROFESSOR  
(shakes his head)  
No, no. Real. So real you could  
touch them. Sleep with them.

She shrugs into herself: I don't understand.

COAT-CHECK BOOTH

The Doorman smiles in greeting as a WELL-TO-DO COUPLE  
enter arm-in-arm.

SINGER  
(sings)  
"It's not the pale moon that excites  
me / That thrills and delights me /  
Oh no, it's just the nearness of you"

The booth is spotless - and from his tuxedo jacket we  
recognise the Bum the Reporter passed on her way in.

CORNER BOOTH

PROFESSOR

Let's put aside any mention of mass hypnosis or hysteria. Let me posit - . Let me hypothesise that belief is, is...

His eyes dart around for help - and settle on her untouched drink:

PROFESSOR (CONT'D)

A fuel. Let's say that belief is a fuel, if you will. Let's say that a being can be willed into existence. That by sheer power of will or faith, something can be brought about.

(off the Reporter)

In the last two hundred years, at least fifty documented instances. An Amazon forest tribe who revived a thousand year-old chieftain in a time of need. The body of an unidentified Australian aboriginal whose bowels contained undigested bird meat that belonged to a bird extinct three thousand years ago.

The Reporter's hooked.

He knocks back the rest of his drink, and eyes her glass.

PROFESSOR (CONT'D)

Do you see? If the Beatles can have a posthumous hit single, or Elvis Presley's estate continues to make money - surely you can see that there is life after death.

REPORTER

(slowly)

Figuratively -

PROFESSOR

Exactly. And if there's a grain of truth in that hypothesis, then -

He glances about wildly in his excitement.

WIDE

SINGER

(sings)

"It isn't your sweet conversation /  
That brings this sensation / Oh no,  
it's just the nearness of you"

The Used Car Salesman sees the Cocktail Dress - and tips his drink to her.

The Cocktail Dress gives a small smile - the handkerchief still pristine - her make-up back in place. She sips at her highball.

PROFESSOR (CONT'D; V.O.)

- then we can have deities that we  
can see and smell and touch. They  
can exist on a physical plane.

CORNER BOOTH

REPORTER

Look, I'm not sure - (THIS IS GOING  
ANYWHERE)

He continues as if he didn't hear her:

PROFESSOR

We asked for them. Pleaded for them  
to come down from the heavens to help  
us. And they came.

(gathers himself)

We created these beings and gave them  
roles to play. And when they walked  
amongst us, there was a problem: the  
rules of society don't apply to these  
creatures. And why should they?  
They could move mountains, they could  
set the sky alight - and they did.

(beat)

We gave them everything that a god  
could want. And then when they  
served their purpose, or when a  
better god could be imagined, we cast  
them aside as so much rubbish.

He looks at the Reporter, sees she's still with him.

PROFESSOR (CONT'D)

Can you imagine what it must have  
been like?

WIDE

Coltrane's seems to have been plunged into darkness...  
and yet we can see all its patrons - and the bar staff -  
The Waitress's eyes sparkle as she watches the Singer,  
entranced. Bewitched.

PROFESSOR (CONT'D; V.O.)  
Religions or whole civilizations were  
formed in the name of these beings.  
Sacrifices made in their honour.  
Wars waged in their name. People  
lived and cursed by these gods. And  
as long as there was belief or faith,  
these beings continued to exist.

STAGE

The Singer looks over her audience. Gone are the lines  
and creases yet she remains ageless and beautiful.

SINGER  
(sings)  
"When you're in my arms / I can feel  
you so close to me / All my wildest  
dreams come true"

CORNER BOOTH

PROFESSOR  
To have been brought forth by this  
race of mortals, to be worshipped and  
cradled, who lived and died in your  
name.

He gestures at the Reporter's drink: are you - ? She  
shakes her head.

PROFESSOR (CONT'D)  
And what happens after however many  
generations of 'progress', or a  
natural disaster like a volcano or a  
tsunami, or plague, or war? To have  
no more believers. What happens when  
your reason for being ceases to  
exist?

He takes a small sip and savours the taste for a long  
moment.

PROFESSOR (CONT'D)  
It's understandable. There's no longer any need to make the appropriate sacrifices to Mars or Diana. They're self-sustaining.

He waves the glass around for emphasis as:

PROFESSOR (CONT'D)  
Nowadays, we have all manner of counsellors - psychotherapists, hypnotists, dating agencies - who take care of our fragile egos. We don't believe in luck - we've factored it out of all our calculations. We believe we can control our destiny - with maybe some token reference to luck or some Judeo-Christian god or whatever. We rule this world. We don't need gods.

He turns the glass in his hand, staring at it.

WIDE

The Used Car Salesman stands and touches his tie into place. It's razor sharp. He picks up his drink.

PROFESSOR (CONT'D; V.O.)  
But if you're a god whose passed their use-by date, where do you turn to for your lifeblood?

The Doorman nods to the music as the Rat Pack photos smile at INCOMING PATRONS, all of them immaculately dressed for the evening.

The Waitress takes the Well-attired Couple a tray of drinks - but with the full five-star service.

NEARBY BOOTH

The Used Car Salesman is the perfect gentleman as he asks to join the Cocktail Dress. She nods.

PROFESSOR (CONT'D; V.O.)  
Do you shut up shop and shuffle off to some god-heaven? What if you prefer it down here? How would you survive?

STAGE

The Pianist covers the bridge with a solo that sends shivers up our spines. He looks at the Singer, his eyes wide and bright.

The Singer returns his look with the most regal of nods.

CORNER BOOTH

The Reporter and the Professor's eyes are locked on each other's.

PROFESSOR (CONT'D)

But for all our technology and progress, we still have famine and war, love and wealth, music and the arts, travel and wine. Some things haven't changed since we left the trees. Maybe that's what keeps them going.

He breaks their staring match: throws back the last of his drink and grimaces. He leans forward:

PROFESSOR (CONT'D)

That's what's missing from this life. Belief. A belief in anything beyond the latest fashion or music.

Everything is right there in front of them, right under their noses. But they don't see.

He stands - the Reporter has to stop him from falling forward onto the table -

REPORTER

You okay?

He shrugs her off:

PROFESSOR

(gruff)

I'm fine, perfectly fine, thank you.

But she still holds on to his arm.

PROFESSOR (CONT'D)

Young lady.

She follows his look down to her hand gripping his elbow.

PROFESSOR (CONT'D)

Do you mind?

She releases him and he heads for the exit.

WIDE

The Singer nears the end of her song, the spotlight and her dress bejewelling her in diffused sparks and stars.

SINGER

(sings)

"I need no soft lights to enchant me  
/ If you'll only grant me the right"

CORNER BOOTH

The Reporter watches the Professor's departure, trying to make sense of her senses. She slumps in her booth, the only corner of the club not suffused with the adoration that the Singer is clearly enjoying.

SINGER (CONT'D; V.O.)

(sings)

"To hold you ever so tight / And to  
feel in the night"

NEARBY BOOTH

The Used Car Salesman and the Cocktail Dress lean into each other, intimate, in their own world.

WIDE

The Boozehounds forget the bourbon and give their adoring attention to the stage.

The Doorman ignores the departing Professor as he stares at the Singer.

SINGER (CONT'D)

"The nearness of you."

FADE OUT.

THE END