

excerpt from *A Darker World*

a novel by Chris Cefalu

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Diego is a worrier. Thin face, pinched before me in the bar gloom.

"I don't know, man..."

One of several of the local regulars. A handsome, neat-looking guy, he squints out at the late afternoon foot traffic on Gayoso Street as if he would like to nuke every able body scurrying to and fro out there in the light. Through the open door and way off across the park I can see the band: five small figures generating some kind of noise. At this distance I can only faintly hear the thudding of Tommy's drums and some indistinct hollering. I'm joining the time-killers in Johnny Raspberry's bar, draining beers and shooting molasses-slow games of pool. Christ Johnny, when you gonna get some AC?

Johnny's bar is a gathering place for good old boys in the downtown area. They hitch around on their stools and spit and talk in dull monotone voices, the occasional "nigger this" and "nigger that" falling from their lips with no particular malice. Reggie, the black cook, never bats an eye. And, bad talk aside, when it comes down to it, Johnny seems to treat Reggie well, and they seem to like – even *trust* – each other. When

Raspberry was in county hospital for kidney stones, Reggie ran the joint by himself for almost three weeks. I'll never figure the South out.

"I don't know, man..." Sigh. Sip.

Diego: long hair, thinning slightly on top. Aerosmith half-tee, snakeskin boots and leather blazer. Plays a mean guitar. A longtime bedroom noodler. Learned Stairway To Heaven before the Pledge of Allegiance. Never been in a band.

"I just gotta get it together enough to go sit in with someone one of these nights. I gotta just get the nerve up."

This said with earnest determination and steely resolve. Listening, you'd imagine he was on his way to doing it. But he's been saying the same thing every night since I met him, and long before that, no doubt.

"So, listen. Why don't we jump in the car, cruise down to Junior's joint in Mississippi tonight. Or hell, just go across the street. I know they'll let you sit in on a tune or two."

This from me, playing along.

"I don't know, man. I need to play with white people. No shit, I ain't racist or nothin' but I can't hang with that 'bumpa bumpa' blues stuff."

"What about the Peanut – out by the college? Open mic night."

His eyes are hungry for a moment, then go slack. "I'm not ready."

"Maybe never be ready at this rate."

He readily concedes this, grasping gladly at impossibility. "I know. I'm thirty-three, man. I gotta get going with this music thing. I just don't want to get up there in front of people until I've, like, really got my shit together. I don't want to do it half-assed."

"Maybe better half-assed than not at all."

"No!" Emphatically. Fingers moving on Stollicran in the shape of a C7 chord. He's wound up now, ready for his favorite subject: Why I Fail. "See, man, this is my whole problem. Like, it's gotta be perfect with me. Like with chicks. You know I haven't been laid in like, four years?"

"Get out."

"Oh, yeah!" Something like pride. "The same reason. Like, I'm talking to this chick and I think, okay, okay, and then I always notice something about her. Like her nose is too long, or maybe I don't like something she says. Something. And I abort the whole thing, because it's gotta be perfect, man, or I can't roll with it, y'know?"

This is what the world of arena rock does to its lesser-endowed citizenry. Perpetuates the feeling that you're constantly coming up short. That just outside are perfect lives being lived by imperfect people, and why the hell not me?

"Maybe there's no such thing as perfect."

"Oh yeah, I know, man. You're totally right. I'm chasing some thing that don't exist. It's sick. You think I should see a shrink or something?"

"Just tell you what you already know."

"You're right. I just gotta do it. I just gotta get up there and do it."

"You're not getting any younger." Feeding him my lines, which I already know by heart.

"Totally."

"Time passing you by. Be too late for all of it soon. Nothing left but regrets."

"Totally!" Eyes wild, feverish. "I just gotta get it together. You heard me play, Oscar. I'm good enough, right?"

Sure, I've heard him. And I've been to his house, plastered with guitar god posters scotch-taped to the walls like the college dorm rooms I couldn't wait to escape. Diego always has booze and his house is a popular after-hours spot for those who aren't ready to let the night drain away just yet. But after the whiskey and the weed, he'll pull out his notebook and read lyrics out loud in a droning monotone, frightening and boring everyone in sight. But he can play, sure.

"I don't know, man..."

Something about a good dark bar in the late afternoon. Sun slanting through, lighting the grime in the air and rendering it celestial, like pixie dust. Nobody here to hook up or raise hell. To be drunk in a

bar at 4 p.m. indicates that at some point today you said, whether to yourself or to someone else, "Fuck it, I'm gonna go get wasted." To hell with the day. That's the refrain here, and I am drawn to it, thinking myself a kind of tourist, an impartial observer. After all, *I'm* going somewhere. Just not right *now*.

I sit with Diego, who is worrying the details of his demise like a kitten with a never-ending string, and I listen to the bleep-bleep of the video poker machines at either end of the bar, and I savor the sweet whimsical wind of the early stages of drunkenness. Later it will be more manic, and perhaps more depressive, but for now, I amble over to the jukebox – gliding, not yet stumbling – and a benevolent smile crawls across my face as I look out the open door at the writhing yellow world outside (go ahead, friends), and feel a gentle sadness, but also a rightness, as if it couldn't really have been any other way and how astute of me to grasp this.

I drop in the coins and punch up Louis Armstrong, and his voice fills the place with a majestic dignity, and I think: why do I pay money to play these songs that I have at home? Because music sounds different in a bar. Better. It becomes part of the environment, integrates itself with memory and motion in a way that it never does in the confines of one's own tiny space. Even convicts prefer the yard to the cell.

I settle onto my stool, and Diego falls silent for once. The whole bar falls silent. There is only the clinking of ice, the bleep-bleep, and the gentle, musical clack of a cue ball finding its mark. It only lasts as long as the song, but it is shared (though not acknowledged) by everyone in the place. A tiny bit of grace, of light in the dark before the bad jokes start again.

It's A Wonderful World.