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Disciples

Gardner Dozois

I was roaming the post-midnight halls of a science fiction convention hotel not long ago, trying to find a party still functional, when I heard great waves of laughter filtering through a locked door. I knocked and was informed that I had stumbled on the "bad joke" party; to gain admission you had to tell a joke bad enough to elicit universal groans. I did dredge one out of childhood memories, and entered to find—of course—Gardner Dozois, the party's perpetrator, surrounded by dozens of adoring science fiction fans. The party turned out to be one of the most entertaining times I've ever had, because although the rest of us did tell a joke now and then, it was mainly The Gardner Dozois Show, tale after hilarious tale emerging from the shaggy heap enthroned in the corner.

Gardner is a natural-born storyteller, with great gifts of gesture, accent, timing. He can hypnotize a crowd in .seconds and keep them laughing for hours. But the aforementioned Buchwald Paradox is very much at work here: Gardner's writing is anything but jolly: his work is predominantly concerned with the dark face of life, with tragedy and pathos. His writing is a

unique brand of gritty naturalism, done with terrible accuracy but also compassion and grace. As witness this tale of Nicky the Horse.

Nicky the Horse was a thin, weasely-looking man with long, dirty black hair that hung down either side of his face in greasy ropes, like inkmarks against the pallor of his skin. He was clean-shaven and hollow-cheeked, and had a thin but rubbery lower lip upon which his small yellowed teeth were forever biting, seizing the lip suddenly and worrying it, like a terrier seizing a rat. He wore a grimy purple sweater under a torn tan jacket enough sizes too small to look like something an organ grinder's monkey might wear, one pocket torn nearly off and both elbows worn through. Thrift-store jeans and a ratty pair of sneakers he'd once found in a garbage can behind the YMCA completed his wardrobe. No underwear. A crucifix gleamed around his neck, stainless steel coated to look like silver. Track marks, fading now, ran down both his arms, across his stomach, down his thighs, but he'd been off the junk for months; he was down to an occasional Red Devil, supplemented by the nightly quart of cheap chianti he consumed as he lay in the dark on his bare mattress at the Lord house, a third-floor loft in a converted industrial warehouse squeezed between a package store and a Rite-Aid.

He had just scavenged some two-day-old doughnuts from a pile of boxes behind a doughnut store on Broad Street, and bought a paper container of coffee from a Greek delicatessen where the counterman (another aging hippie, faded flower tattos still visible under the bristly black hair on his arms) usually knocked a nickel or two off the price for old times' sake. Now he was sitting on the white marble steps of an old brownstone row house, eating his breakfast. His breath steamed in the chill morning air. Even sitting still, he was in constant motion: his fingers drumming, his feet shuffling, his eyes flicking

nervously back and forth as one thing or another—a car, some windblown trash, pigeons taking to the air—arrested and briefly held his attention; at such times his shoulders would momentarily hunch, as if he expected something to leap out at him.

Across the street, a work crew was renovating another old brownstone, swarming over the building's partially stripped skeleton like carrion beetles; sometimes a cloud of plaster powder and brick dust would puff from the building's broken doorway, like foul air from a dying mouth. Winos and pimps and whores congregated on the corner, outside a flophouse hotel, their voices coming to Nicky thin and shrill over the rumbling and farting of traffic. Occasionally a group of med students would go by, or a girl with a dog, or a couple of Society Hill faggots in designer jeans and expensive turtlenecks, and Nicky would call out "Jesus loves you, man," usually to no more response than a nervous sideways glance. One faggot smirked knowingly at him, and a collegiate-jock type got a laugh out of his buddies by shouting back "You bet your ass he does, honey." A small, intense-looking woman with short-cropped hair gave him the finger. Another diesel dyke, Nicky thought resignedly. "Jesus loves you, man," he called after her, but she didn't look back.

When his butt began to feel as if it had turned to stone, he got up from the cold stoop and started walking again, pausing only long enough to put a flyer for the Lordhouse on a lamppost, next to a sticker that said EAT THE RICH. He walked on, past a disco, a gay bookstore, a go-go bar, a boarded-up storefront with a sign that read LIVE NUDE MODELS, a pizza stand, slanting south and east now, through a trash-littered concrete park full of sleeping derelicts and arrogantly strutting pigeons—stopping now and then to panhandle and pass out leaflets, drifting on again.

He'd been up to Reading Terminal early that morning, hoping to catch the shoppers who came in from the suburbs on commuter trains, but the Hairy Krishnaites had been there already, out in force in front of the station, and he didn't like

to compete with other panhandlers, particularly fucking groups of them with fucking bongos. The Krishnaites made him nervous anyway—with their razor-shaved pates and their air of panting, puppyish eagerness, they always reminded him of ROTC second lieutenants, fresh out of basic training. Once, in front of the Bellevue-Stratford, he'd seen a fight between a Krishnaite and a Moonie, the two of them arguing louder and louder, toe to toe, until suddenly they were beating each other over the head with thick packets of devotional literature, the leaflets swirling loose around them like flocks of startled birds. He'd had to grin at that one, but some of the panhandling groups were mean, particularly the political groups, particularly the niggers. They'd kick your ass up between your shoulder blades if they caught you poaching on their turf; they'd have your balls for garters. No, you scored better if you worked alone. Always alone.

He ended up on South Street, down toward the Two Street end, taking up a position between the Laundromat and the plant store. It was much too early for the trendy people to be out, the "artists," the night people, but they weren't such hot prospects anyway. It was Saturday, and that meant there were tourists out, in spite of the early hour, in spite of the fact that it had been threatening to snow all day; it was cold, yes, but not as cold as it had been the rest of the week, the sun was peeking sporadically out from behind banks of dirty gray clouds, and maybe this would be the only halfway decent day left before winter really set in. No, they were here all right, the tourists, strolling up and down through this hick Greenwich Village, peering into the quaint little stores, the boutiques, the head shops full of tourist-trap junk, the artsy bookstores, staring at the resident freaks as though they were on display at the zoo,

relishing the occasional dangerous whiff of illicit smoke in the air, the loud blare of music that they wouldn't have tolerated for a moment at home.

Of course, he wasn't the only one feeding on this rich stream of marks: there was a juggler outside of the steak-sandwich shop in the next block, a small jazz band-a xylophone, a bass, and an electric piano-in front of the Communist coffeehouse across the street, and, next to the upholsterer's, a fat man in a fur-lined parka who was tonelessly chanting "incense sticks check it out one dollar incense sticks check it out one dollar" without break or intonation. Such competition Nicky could deal with; in fact, he was contemptuous of it.

"Do you have your house in order?" he said in a conversational but carrying voice, starting his own spiel, pushing leaflets at a businessman who ignored him, at a strolling young married couple who smiled but shook their heads, at a middle-aged housewife in clogs and a polka-dot kerchief, who took a flyer reflexively and then, a few paces away, stopped to peek at it surreptitiously. "Did you know the Lord is coming, man? The Lord is coming. Spare some change for the Lord's work?" This last remark shot at the housewife, who looked uneasily around and then suddenly thrust a quarter at him. She hurried away, clutching her Lordhouse flyer to her chest as if it were a baby the gypsies were after.

Panhandling was an art, man, an art-and so, of course, of course, was the more important task of spreading the Lord's word. That was what really counted. Of course. Nevertheless, he brought more fucking change into the Lordhouse than any of the other converts who were out pounding the pavement every day, fucking-A, you better believe it. He'd always been a good panhandler, even before he'd seen the light, and what did it was making maximum use of your time. Knowing who to ask and who not to waste time on was the secret. College students, professional people, and young white male businessmen made the best marks-later, when the businessmen had aged into senior executives, the chances of their coming across went way down. Touristy types were good, straight suburbanites in the twenty-five-to-fifty age bracket, particularly a man out strolling with his wife. A man walking by himself was much more likely to give you something than a man walking

in company with another man-faggots were sometimes an exception here. Conversely, women in pairs-especially prosperous hausfraus, although groups of teenage girls were pretty good too-were much more likely to give you change than were women walking by themselves; the housewife of a moment before had been an exception, but she had all the earmarks of someone who was just religious enough to feel guilty about not being more so. Brisk woman-executive types almost never gave you anything, or even took a leaflet. Servicemen in uniform were easy touches. Old people never gave you diddly-shit, except sometimes a well-heeled little old white lady would, especially a W.H.L.O.W.L. who had religion herself, although they could also be more trouble than their money was worth. There were a lot of punkers in this neighborhood, with their fifties crewcuts and greasy motorcycle jackets, but Nicky usually left them alone; the punks were more violent and less gullible than the hippies had been back in the late sixties, the Golden Age of Panhandling. The few remaining hippies-and the college kids who passed for hippies these days-came across often enough that Nicky made a point of hitting on them, although he gritted his teeth each time he did; they were by far the most likely to be wise assesonce he'd told one, "Jesus is coming to our town," and the kid had replied, "I hope he's got a reservation, then-the hotels are booked solid." Wiseasses. Those were also the types who would occasionally quote Scripture to him, coming up with some goddamn verse or other to refute anything he said. That made him uneasy.

Nicky had never really actually read the Bible that much, although he'd meant to; he had the knowledge intuitively, because the Spirit was in him. At that, the hippie wiseasses were easier to take than the Puerto Ricans, who would pretend they didn't understand what he wanted and give him only tight bursts of superfast Spanish. The Vietnamese, now, being seen on the street with increasing frequency these days, the Vietnamese quite often did give something, perhaps because they felt that they were required to. Nicky wasn't terribly fond of Jews, either, but it was amazing how often they'd come across, even for a pitch about Jesus—all that guilt they imbibed with their mother's milk, he guessed. On the other hand, he mostly stayed clear of niggers; sometimes you could score off a middle-aged tom in a business suit or some graying workman, but the young street dudes were impossible, and there was always the chance that some coked-up young stud would turn mean on you and maybe pull a knife. Occasionally you could get money out of a member of that endless, seemingly cloned legion of short, fat, cone-shaped black women, but that had its special dangers too, particularly if they turned out to be devout Baptists, or snake-handlers, or whatever the fuck they were; one woman had screamed at him, "Don't talk to me about Jesus! Don't talk to me about Jesus! Don't talk to me about Jesus!" Then she'd hit him with her purse.

"The Last Days are at hand!" Nicky called. "The Last Days are coming, man. The Lord is coming to our town, and the wicked will be left behind, man. The Lord is coming." Nicky shoved a leaflet into someone's hand and the someone shoved it right back. Nicky shrugged. "Come to the Lordhouse tonight, brothers and sisters! Come and get your soul together." Someone paused, hesitated, took a leaflet. "Spare change? Spare change for the Lord's work? Every penny does the Lord's work . . ."

The morning passed, and it grew colder. About half of Nicky's leaflets were gone, although many of them littered the sidewalk a few paces away, where people had discarded them once they thought that they were far enough from Nicky not to be noticed doing so. The sun had been swallowed by clouds, and once again it looked like it was going to snow, although once again it did not. Nicky's coat was too small to button, but he turned his collar up and put his hands in his pockets. The stream of tourists had pretty much run dry for the moment, and he was just thinking about getting some lunch, about going down to the hotdog stand on the corner

where the black dudes stood jiving and handslapping, their giant radios blaring on their shoulders, he was just thinking about it when, at that very moment, as though conjured up by the thought, Saul Edelman stepped out of the stand and walked briskly toward him.

"Shit in my hat," Nicky muttered to himself. He'd collected more than enough to buy lunch, but, because of the cold, not that much more. And Father Delardi, the unfrocked priest—the unfairly unfrocked priest—who had founded their order and who ran it with both love and, yessir, an iron hand—Father Delardi didn't like it when they came in off the streets at the end of the day with less than a certain amount of dough. Nicky had been hoping that he could con Saul into giving him a free hotdog, as he sometimes could, as Saul sometimes had, and now here was Saul himself, off on some dumbshit errand, bopping down the street as fat and happy as a clam (although how happy were clams anyway, come to think about it?), which meant that he, Nicky, was fucked.

"Nicky! My main man!" said Saul, who prided himself on an ability to speak jivey street patois that he definitely did not possess. He was a plump-cheeked man with modish length gray-streaked hair, cheap black plastic-framed glasses, and a neatly trimmed mustache. Jews were supposed to have big noses, or so Nicky had always heard, but Saul's nose was small and upturned, as if there were an

Irishman in the woodpile somewhere.

"Hey, man," Nicky mumbled listlessly. Bad enough that he wasn't going to get his free hotdog-now he'd have to make friendly small talk with this dipshit in order to protect his investment in free hotdogs yet to come. Nicky sighed and unlimbered his shit-eating grin. "Hey, man! How you been, Saul? What's happenin', man?"

"What's happening?" Saul said jovially, responding to Nicky as if he were really asking a question instead of emitting ritual noise. "Now how can I even begin to tell you what's happening, Nicky?" He was radiant today, Saul was, full of bouncy energy, rocking back and forth as he talked, unable to stand still, smiling a smile that revealed teeth some Yiddish momma had sunk a lot of dough into over the years. "I'm glad you came by today, though. I wanted to be sure to say goodbye if I could."

"Good-bye?"

Saul's smile became broader and broader. "Yes, goodbye! This is it, boychick. I'm off! You won't see me again after today."

Nicky peered at him suspiciously. "You goin' away?"

"You bet your ass I am, kid," Saul said, and then laughed. "Today I turned my half of the business over to Carlos, signed all the papers, took care of everything nice and legal. And now I'm free and clear, free as a damn bird, kid."

"You sold your half of the stand to Carlos?"

"Not sold, boychick-gave. I gave it to him. Not one red cent did I take."

Nicky gaped at him. "You gave your business away, man?"

Saul beamed. "Kid-I gave everything away. The car: I gave that to old Ben Miller, who washes dishes at the Green Onion. I gave up the lease on my apartment, gave away my furniture, gave away my savings-if you'd've been here yesterday, Nicky, I would've given you something too."

"Shit!" Nicky said harshly. "You go crazy, man, or what?" He choked back an outburst of bitter profanity. Missed out again! Screwed out of getting his yet again!

"I don't need any of that stuff anymore, Nicky," Saul said. He tapped the side of his nose, smiled. "Nicky-He's come."

"Who?"

"The Messiah. He's come! He's finally come! Today's the day the Messiah comes, after all those thousands of yearsthink of it, Nicky!"

Nicky's eyes narrowed. "What the fuck you talkin' about, man?"

"Don't you ever read the paper, Nicky, or listen to the

radio? The Messiah has come. His name is Murray Kupferberg, He was born in Pittsburgh-"

"Pittsburgh?" Nicky gasped.

"-and He used to be a plumber there. But He is the Messiah. Most of the scholars and the rabbis deny Him, but He really is. The Messiah has really come, at last!"

Nicky gave that snorting bray of laughter, blowing out his rubbery lips, that was one reason-but only one reason-why he was sometimes called Nicky the Horse. "Jesus is the Messiah, man," he said scornfully.

Saul smiled good-naturedly, shrugged, spread his hands. "For you, maybe he is. For you people, the goyim, maybe he is. But we've been waiting for more than five thousand yearsand at last He's come."

"Murray Kupferberg? From Pittsburgh?"

"Murray Kupferberg," Saul repeated firmly, calmly. "From Pittsburgh. He's coming here, today. Jews are gathering here today from all over the country, from all over the world, and today-right here- He's going to gather His people to Him-"

"You stupid fucking kike!" Nicky screamed, his anger breaking free at last. "You're crazy in the head, man. You've been conned. Some fucking con man has taken you for everything, and you're too fucking dumb to see it! All that stuff; man, all that good stuff gone-" He ran out of steam, at a loss for words. All that good stuff gone, and he hadn't gotten any of it. After kissing up to this dipshit for all those years . . . "Oh, you dumb kike," he whispered.

Saul seemed unoffended. "You're wrong, Nicky-but I haven't got time to argue with you. Shalom." He stuck out his hand, but Nicky refused to shake it. Saul shrugged, smiled again, and then walked briskly away, turning the corner onto Sixth Street.

Nicky sullenly watched him go, still shaking with rage. Screwed again! There went his free hotdogs, flying away into the blue on fucking gossamer wings. Carlos was a hard dude, a streetwise dude-Carlos wasn't going to give him anything, Carlos wouldn't stop to piss on Nicky's head if Nicky's hair was on fire. Nicky stared at the tattered and overlapping posters on the Laundromat wall, and the faces of long-dead politicians stared back at him from among the notices for lost cats and the ads for Czech films and karate classes. Suddenly he was cold, and he shivered.

The rest of the day was a total loss. Nicky's sullen mood threw his judgment and his timing off, and the tourists were thinning out again anyway. The free-form jazz of the Communist coffeehouse band was getting on his nerves-the fucking xylophone player was chopping away as if he were making sukiyaki at Benihana of Tokyo-and the smell of sauerkraut would float over from the hotdog stand every now and then to torment him. And it kept getting colder and colder. Still, some obscure, self-punishing instinct kept him from moving on.

Late in the afternoon, what amounted to a little unofficial parade went by-a few hundred people walking in the street, heading west against the traffic, many of them barefoot in spite of the bitter cold. If they were all Jews on their way to the Big Meeting, as Nicky suspected, then some of them must have been black Jews, East Indian Jews, even Chinese Jews.

Smaller groups of people straggled by for the next hour or so, all headed uptown. The traffic seemed to have stopped completely, even the cross-town buses; this rally must be big, for the city to've done that.

The last of the pilgrims to go by was a stout, fiftyish Society Hill matron with bleached blue hair, walking calmly in the very center of the street. She was wearing an expensive ermine stole, although she was barefoot and her feet were bleeding. As she passed Nicky, she suddenly laughed, unwrapped the stole from around her neck, and threw it into the air, walking on without looking back. The stole landed across the shoulders of the Communist xylophone player, who goggled blankly for a moment, then stared wildly around himhis eyes widening comically-and then bolted, clutching the stole tightly in his hands; he disappeared down an alleyway.

"You bitch!" Nicky screamed. "Why not me? Why didn't you give it to me?"

But she was gone, the street was empty, and the gray afternoon sky was darkening toward evening.

"The Last Days are coming," Nicky told the last few strolling tourists and window shoppers. "The strait gate is narrow, sayeth the Lord, and few will fit in, man." But his heart wasn't in it anymore. Nicky

waited, freezing, his breath puffing out in steaming clouds, stamping his feet to restore circulation, slapping his arms, doing a kind of shuffling jig that along with his too-small jacket-made him look more than ever like an organ grinder's monkty performing for some unlikely kind of alms. He didn't understand why he didn't just give up and go back to the Lordhouse. He was beginning to think yearningly of the hot stew they would be served there after they had turned the day's take in to Father Delardi, the hymn-singing later, and after that the bottle of strong raw wine, his mattress in the rustling, fart-smelling communal darkness, oblivion

There was . . . a sound, a note, a chord, an upswelling of something that the mind interpreted as music, as blaring iron trumpets, only because it had no other referents by which to understand it. The noise, the music, the something-it swelled until it shook the empty street, the buildings, the world, shook the bones in the flesh and the very marrow in the bones, until it filled every inch of the universe like hot wax being poured into a mold.

Nicky looked up.

As he watched, a crack appeared in the dull gray sky. The sky split open, and behind the sky was nothingness, a wedge of darkness so terrible and absolute that it hurt the eyes to look at it. The crack widened, the wedge of darkness grew. Light began to pour through the crack in the sky, blinding white light more intense and frightening than the darkness had been. Squinting against that terrible radiance, his eyes watering, Nicky saw tiny figures rising into the air far away, thousands upon thousands of human figures floating up into the sky, falling up while the iron music shook the firmament around them, people falling up and into and through the crack in the sky, merging into that wondrous and awful river of light, fading, disappearing, until the last one was gone.

The crack in the sky closed. The music grumbled and rumbled away into silence.

Everything was still.

Snowflakes began to squeeze like slow tears from the slate-gray sky.

Nicky stayed there for hours, staring upward until his neck was aching and the last of the light was gone, but after that nothing else happened at all.