

Festival of the Bizarre

a novel by A.R. White (currently seeking representation)

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Starlight danced across her wide-open eyes as she sailed clear into the neon haze that comprised seventy-six stories of the Houston, Texas sky. A second shot whizzed its way through the tempered glass snowflakes. It caught her clean in the abdomen, the hydrostatic shock causing a steaming eruption of entrails. The dent her body would make in Metro bus number one-eighty-five and the ensuing news stories about the death of the pop idol would serve as the only solemn testament that she had ever lived. Andrea Crash, beloved singer to thousands of screaming little girls, murdered in her hotel room at age eighteen.

Cigarette smoke joined the sulfurous odor of cordite and burnt wadding as Vince cupped his hand around the lighter. The stench of cheap Turkish spice blossomed into the room and Vince flicked the lighter shut.

“Stupid bitch shouldn’t have called my bluff,” Vince muttered under his breath.

He was a gangly fellow, particularly in his arms. He looked something like he’d been flung about by his feet, arms outstretched, and he got stuck that way. On top of that, he wore a grey suit with white pinstripes that just made matters worse. All in all, he was only six-foot-two, but one would never know by looking at his bony form.

His hair was in a special type of disarray- a sort of organized chaos intended to create the “freshly fucked” look. The jet-black bird’s nest on his head was offset by his dangerously-sharp face and frosty grey eyes. His complexion was ghastly white, contrasted against the fiery red ascot that he wore. Beatrice had once joked that the ascot was actually a scrap of Valentine’s lingerie, and that wearing it was the closest Vince could ever get to a woman. Vince broke Beatrice’s nose for the trouble.

Vince sucked in a breath of cancer through stony lips. The Turkish spice was soothing, and the killer felt his heart begin to slow. It would ruin his night vision, but Vince didn’t expect any more resistance if the others did their jobs. A pair of expensive alligator skin boots crunched the glass at his feet as Vince turned to the door.

Vince looked around the room, seeing no indication of the treasure that had brought him up here in the first place, and grimaced.

“Shit.”

Each single crest of each single wave flowed over Candy’s skull- an electronic euphoria punctuated by periodic bursts of awareness from behind the bridge of her nose. The pulses from the subwoofers beside the stage penetrated her abdomen, simulating the feelings of love and lust that she had long forgotten. Her entire body was permeated by the feeling of arousal, ultimately in tune with the vibrations from the music of the club.

Every man in the room watched her as she swayed to the beat, tilting her head back and rubbing every inch of her black leather-clad torso with her elegant hands. She licked her enameled fingernails, eliciting a quick shout from one of the bystanders. Candy thought back to all of those girls in school who teased her about being too skinny as she ripped off the snap-on top that covered her pert breasts.

A gasp and a few hoots- typical.

Each of the hideous, multicolored gel lights of the stage reflected off of her perfect porcelain skin, washing her in clashing hues. Her hair was jet black today and she wore a pair of gaudy plush leopard ears with fiber optics set to rotating chrominance, an homage to Betty Page. Hovering just on top of her skin was a painted-on coating of second-generation organic LEDs, which rotated from one kitsch glowing animal print pattern to the next.

Of course, none of this contrived display did anything for her clients. They were already at the maximum level of sexual tension. Every man in the place had wanted to sleep with her the second she entered the room, so she hadn’t really altered the situation any. Candy knew that, though. She wanted to make them lose control. She wanted them to pant, to touch themselves, to swing wide the doors to their minds.

To drop their guards for just long enough.

“Ready for more?” Candy breathed over the blaring music.

The sticker microphone that she wore over her throat was routed to the speakers, and her sensual voice pulsed through the room as though she had whispered directly into their ears. The standard hoots and hollers went up like fireworks. The boys were clearly ready.

The subdermal speaker in her inner ear chimed once. "I killed Crash. You've got three minutes," Vince's voice echoed into her head.

She wanted to argue or talk back, but she couldn't. It was all moving too fast. There was commotion outside, and that was almost certainly Vince's doing. She had to entice the door guard to look inside the lounge.

Another woman's voice came over the communicator. "No shit," Beatrice shot back.

The practical applications of being a good mime and contortionist are not many, but this was Candy's day. She took firm grasp of the pole and started a shimmy that quickly worked its way into a full-on exhibition. She danced onstage with a seemingly invisible partner, his hands working their way around her hips.

Slowly but surely, the invisible man caressed her delicate skin, pleasuring her at every turn. She slid her hand over his as he wrapped his phantasmal arms around her. Eventually, her partner force began to make love to her- gingerly, gracefully at first, but then, it gained a sort of conviction that would make all but the most jaded onlooker blush. She needed to appear to lose all control. She needed to become someone who was dominated. Candy needed to become a fantasy spinning out of control.

"Answer me this, Benedick: how hard is it to pretend that you're getting fucked?" Beatrice asked with a sour look.

"I'd imagine that it's very hard, Madame Beatrice. Miss Candice has some of the highest accolades ever given to a performance artist," Benedick replied.

"She's not that special. I pretend to have fun in bed all the time."

"I believe that they are two different arenas, Madame."

Benedick and Beatrice stood on the edge of the alleyway as copies of the Chronicle rolled by like tumbleweeds. Twenty-six stories up, but rapidly approaching, was the body of Andrea Crash, intestines fluttering about like the paper mache whiskers of a New Year's dragon.

Benedick stood tall, watching the roaring skies as though he was merely a mountain, a steadfast insinuation of the ground below into the divine realms. At six-seven, he was easily the tallest attraction at the Festival, and the heaviest as well; his frame was hardly skeletal. His face was honest, and he wore a brilliant scarlet suit that almost seemed to fight to make an impression against his startlingly simple fea-

tures. Strangely enough, his most noticeable characteristic was his pair of average-sized, white-gloved hands, which seemed to be dwarfed by everything else about him. They were his negative space, the one thing that a person should notice last, and thus they were the subject of the most attention.

Beatrice, on the other hand, was perfectly normal, in a fashionable way. She had an athletic build and bland-yet-deliberately-coiffed brown hair. Her clothing stood out because it seemed to be the perfect, idealistic representation of what she was trying to portray. Her jeans were the same cut that made Levis famous, and her leather jacket was probably the same one worn by American pilots in World War II. She stood out in the most unremarkable way possible.

The impact of the body against the one-eighty-five bus was fiercely subtle. The one hundred-fifteen pound girl simply splattered against the steel roof, her connecting tissues barely remaining intact. The roof caved a little, but all Houston Metro busses were required to have better top support after cars became flight-enabled. The electroluminescent lights on the top the bus flashed and buckled, but the photo chains held, so within moments, illumination was restored.

Beatrice snapped open a tiny plastic scroll about the size of her palm and tagged the screen with a gnarled fingernail. With that one stroke, she blacked out all emergency communication in her cellular site. After all, she only wanted to stop EMS and police contact, not alert Crash's goons in the nearby lobby bar.

"Benedick, sterilize the scene while I watch the doorman at the lobby," Beatrice ordered matter-of-factly.

Benedick pulled out a glassy sphere filled with a hazy liquid from his blazer. He pressed a small grey button on the tip of the device and shook it hard, mixing the binary compound inside. The compound in turn ate away the inner lining of the ball and exposed the outer lining to the harsh, acidic chemical. The plasticine outer casing's molecular structure aligned, instantly crystallizing and becoming brittle. The ball let out a hellish glow, beaming like the sun through an open sky.

He calculated the trajectory, quickly checking predicted wind patterns on the F.A.A. database and flung the tiny star into the distance. A single speck of light, much like the singularity that created the universe, glided through the evening skyline towards the roof of the bus. The flight was long, about two and a half football fields, with an unnatural accuracy. The device disappeared among hundreds of television advertisements and neon luminaries and didn't reappear until striking the bus and plunging the roof into a raging inferno.

Beatrice's PDA pinged at least fifty-six calls placed to 911 within three seconds, but none to the police department's direct line or anything else of the sort. Good, she thought, an all-civilian set of bystanders. No guns.

A series of chimes rang through the duo's ears. "I killed Crash. You've got three minutes."

"No shit," Beatrice shot back. She didn't much appreciate feeling rushed.

The occupants poured out of the bus, unaware that they had just sat beneath one of the most high-profile crime scenes of the past decade. Along with the authorities, they would never know for sure who the victim was until the DNA tests came back two weeks later. Of course, given the broken window and the soon-to-be dead goons below, the authorities would most likely figure things out. Vince's molded starch bullets, however were long-gone with the flames.

The doorman of the Helmhurst Hotel took a good long look at the bus fire, then scuttled inside.

"Let's move, Benedick."

Candy spotted the doorman the second his ugly head passed through the frame. She was onstage, her imaginary tryst in full-swing. She arched her back and pushed forward, unleashing an animalistic growl as her partner suddenly changed pace. Her arms tensed and her eyes rolled back in her head as he seemed to wear away her veneer.

In stripping, the measure of moderate success is when the audience screams for more. The measure of ultimate success is when they shut up. The doorman stopped dead, unthinking, unmoving.

Candy signaled for her lover to stop, and then waved him away. She winced and squeaked a bit as he disengaged and disappeared into the ether. With that subtle detail, the illusion was complete. The guards would always wonder if her pantomimed playmate was ever there or not.

"What? Did you think he'd stay forever?" came Candy's voice, deep and breathy in their ears. "Not if one of you has the balls to fuck me."

The audience continued their enamored stupor as she rolled onto her back and ripped away the OLED2s that covered her loins. The leopard pattern on her skin sizzled and disappeared, exposing bare flesh. She watched the door guard intently, focusing on him with a carnal eye that made no distinction between predator and mate. The guard sat down.

The audience was completely dazed. None of them appeared to know what to do. None of them understood the proposition that blurred the line between show and ritual.

From across the club, she saw the door guard lean over to his buddy to whisper something. She acted fast.

“You!”

The doorman sat up like a squirrel who just spotted a prowling cat. “Me?”

“Are you guarding Ms. Crash?” Candy inquired, pursing her lips and cocking her head.

“Me?”

“Me, me, me! Can’t you think of me?” she begged, spreading her legs.

The doorman chuckled nervously, looking around to his pack mates for support. He gulped as he realized that all eyes had settled upon him.

“I wasn’t- I wasn’t trying to-”

“‘Not trying’ is right. Someone doesn’t want me to fuck his brains out.” Candy’s teeth held onto her lower lip as she chewed out the eff sound.

The air in the room dripped with derisive laughter.

She licked her canines. Her dark eyelids, brushed with navy glitter, draped across her eyes like sequined curtains, and when she opened them again, her irises were illuminated with an azure lunar glow. Candy walked towards him as his pores excreted pure, fearful excitement.

“I... What? I want to... You know, but, uh... Are you- I mean, are you clean?” His speech was like watching someone try to talk when they are dry heaving- slow, laborious, fearful of vomiting.

“Wow, Romeo. You’re amazing. Are your pick-up lines always this smooth?”

Candy grabbed his throat and turned his head aside, licking the door guard’s scruffy neck. She was completely turned off at this point, but the subwoofer under the pole in the stage had already done its job. Candy wiped the sweat from her bosom and rubbed the slickness across the guard’s face. The fluid was like a contact drug- the doorman’s eyes dilated, his nostrils flared, and a tiny bulge swelled in his pants.

“This game isn’t hard, daddy-o. Now, the question is, are all of you guards for that bitch, Andrea Crash?”

“Wh- wh- why do you want to know that?”

She gave him a wicked sneer and yanked his tie hard, drawing his face to hers. “You still backtalk me? Why do I want to know that? Because I want to know if there’s only me, or if that worthless cunt still holds something for all of you!”

He looked down, finally understanding the charade. He smiled, simply saying, “This is the End of Tour party. Of course we all used to guard her, but then you came around, mistress.”

Candy leaned in close and licked his ear as she whispered directly into it. “That’s good, so maybe you wouldn’t mind letting my friends explore her room for another two minutes until the cops get here.”

Precisely then, the bartender looked down at a console behind the bar, and then up again.

“Hey, uh,” the bartender began, “the window break sensor in Ms. Crash’s room is going off and the emergency network is down.”

There were two transmitters on Candy’s body. One was the subdermal communicator implanted behind her ear. The other was a small, flesh-colored ring on her pinky that was connected to two canisters of gas that had been planted in the subwoofers the night before. A quick squeeze and the ring broke, causing two pops from the back of the room and a sudden flood of nerve gas.

Candy waved politely as she rolled backwards and deactivated her higher-brain functions. She cut the connection to her cerebellum, inducing a severe state of bradycardia and shutting off her involuntary breathing. At the same time, an enzyme in her bloodstream activated the oversaturated plastic hemoglobin that she’d injected the night before. Her blood would be flooded with enough time-released oxygen to keep her alive until she reactivated. Candy set the wake-up call for one minute and thirty seconds, hoping that Beatrice had the sense to carry some migraine medicine for when she woke up.

The world around Candy split into two stereoscopic pictures and then winked out.

A properly-calibrated minigun sounds a lot like a jet engine, with low-frequency punctuations every hundredth of a second. However, to those in front of

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it, it sounds like the wail of the Gates of Pandemonium. Benedick thought it was a perfectly wonderful sound, because it was the sound of things going to sleep in a hurry. The Vulcan cannon weighed a ton, which wasn't helped by the three hundred rounds that Benedick carried in a specially-engineered backpack. He carried that many bullets because he figured that if three seconds worth of firepower wouldn't kill something, he would have to go ahead and beat it to death with the three hundred and fifty pound gun.

The gaudy faux-hardwood patterned ABS plastic in the bar buckled under the twenty millimeter slugs as they ripped through, leaving charred divots in their wake. There was no way that he should have been able to handle the recoil- he wouldn't have been able to even stand if it weren't for the piton cleats that his mechanical boots had rammed into the floor.

Benedick painted the picture of carnage with a flaming brush as he tore the club apart with his emotionless strokes. The gun whined loudly, drowning out the frightened screams and peppering the area with a scorching rain of tracers. The men who died never even had time to consider why the giant was slaying them.

Within seconds, the gas had become inert and the air was clean, which was why they had chosen that particular brand of toxin. The Vulcan grinded to a halt and Benedick turned to Beatrice, only to be confronted with her sour face as she ripped off her gas mask.

"I'm sorry, Beatrice," Benedick confessed with a look like a sad puppy.

"It's not your fault. This was Vince's goddamned doing," Beatrice said, giving Benedick a sidelong glance. "Why couldn't we use more lethal gas?"

"There's a risk that Candy could be hit through epidermal oxygen exchange," Benedick stated quietly.

"She'd be fine." Beatrice sighed as she kicked a bloody stump of an arm away from Candy's face. She slapped the young contortionist's perfect cheek, leaving a blush bruise. "Wake up!"

"She's in a coma. She can't hear you, Beatrice."

"I know that. I just wanted to slap her."

The room unfolded in front of Candy's eyes as blackness gained substance and the cold floor bit into her clammy skin. Her head swam from the low oxygen content of her blood and she felt Benedick's hand firmly gripping her shoulder. Her vision focused upon the enormous man in the gas mask.

"Hey, handsome."

Benedick's head tilted, pantomiming curiosity. "Hello, Candice. Are you all right?"

Candy drunkenly clambered to her feet. "I'm fine. Why is my cheek hot?"

Beatrice let out a haughty snort.

Exhaust stung Vince's sinuses as the dead breeze poured into the room from the treetops of the concrete jungle. The passing of hovercars wailed through the air, an aural aftershock to those first few painful shots. He flicked his cigarette to the ground and crushed it into the patterned, velveteen carpet, fusing thousands of microscopic polymers into one indelible, annoying spot. They would have to redo the entire room. That was, of course, after the police were done with it.

Vince snorted and walked into the main room. He tapped the pulse transmitter behind his ear.

"I killed Crash. You've got three minutes," Vince stated matter-of-factly.

"No shit."

Vince queued up a private message to Beatrice. "Don't give me lip, now. We might have to talk about that later."

Vince really hated Beatrice. He had enjoyed breaking her haughty little nose. She was really shocked when he did it, too. She just kept going on and on about how he was a son of a bitch, and didn't it make him feel so big to hit a woman. She completely misunderstood. Vince felt that the point of hitting a woman wasn't to make himself feel big- it was to make the woman feel small. He knew that she wouldn't have said that stuff about him if she'd known what he'd do.

The main room was awash in the dim blue glow of one hundred forty-four flat screens, each seamlessly integrated into the incredible media mosaic. They roared at him with incessant fanatical paraphernalia about the idol. Leather covered every inch of furniture and the walls were coated with True Black, a type of paint that reflected no light and had gained popularity in theaters. The black enamel tables looked like they had slithered in to watch television and had stopped mid-move, halted in time.

Vince checked the room for threats, then turned around, seeing the goddess in all of her glory.

All one-hundred forty-four pieces of the mosaic switched to the current telecast of Andrea Crash's last concert, the one that she had done in Tokyo the previous night. Her movements slowed, each single frame hitting the screen- a cold raindrop on the back of Vince's neck. Her eyes were perfect and glassy like a doll's, and the reflections of the spotlights swam across them like goldfish. Her eyes were also dilated. Her lips were swollen and her nipples were obviously erect under her shirt. All of this was done to create the illusion of sexual availability- an ideal propagated by her marketing team.

However, the sexual features quickly began to disappear, starting with the nipples. The colors began to hue-shift and desaturate towards a more nostalgic scene. Her hair took on a hazy sort of halo from the spots behind her, and the high-contrast, stylized look of the concert used to make males aroused and females envious changed to a look of sadness and remembrance. That could only mean one thing- someone at the record company was monitoring Crash's vitals and they already knew she was dead.

Vince felt his heart fall empty and a tragic sadness crawled through his veins like morphine. He clutched his hands and tried to shake off the unnatural feeling of guilt that had washed over him like never before. Someone had altered the flow of his neural network, causing the interference. Vince looked back up at the screen.

Synaptic Specular Triggers flowed across the screen as each highlight blinked in a precisely timed pattern. The SynaSpecs were pioneered by an errant bygone corporation who believed that they could use light to trigger higher thought processes, just as they could use it to trigger an epileptic seizure. Many megacorps had bought into the idea, if only to use it to make zombies out of consumers. It didn't work, and only three patterns were discovered- fear, sadness, and arousal. Since then, many human rights committees advocates had spoken out against the SynaSpecs, stating that they removed free will. In the end, the leaders of the advocacy disappeared.

SynaSpecs were unreliable at best, and expensive at worst. They normally took weeks to render into a piece of footage, and market tests indicated that only two thirds of the market would be affected by a SynaSpec. Of the remaining third, ten percent of the people would perceive that they had been the target of neural programming. Vince was part of that three percent who would not only remain unaffected, but he would also notice the triggers the instant they happened.

These were new, though. These were different. Vince realized that he was witnessing their debut right as he stood there. Vince tapped his pulse transmitter, "I think we were expected, folks."

Candy's voice came over the system, "Yeah, boss. That's why we took care of everyone down here."

Vince viciously kicked over a nearby chair. “You’re hilarious. Beatrice, what’s our status?”

“Hey, hey! Just trying to put things in perspective,” Candy retorted.

“She’s right, Vincent. Everyone on this floor is toast,” Beatrice calmly stated. “Why are you worried?”

“They’re using SynaSpecs.”

“So what? It’ll just make her look like a porn star,” Beatrice huffed.

“Not these, sweetheart,” Vince cut her off. “They’re top notch. I wouldn’t have noticed if...”

“If what?”

There was a long pause as Vince thought something out.

“I just realized. I don’t give a fuck what you think. Put Benedick on.”

“What?” Beatrice exclaimed.

“Benedick here,” Benedick’s voice cut in.

Vince scanned the room, searching for anything out of the ordinary; anything that would denote a hiding spot. He only had a few minutes before the authorities would figure out that the emergency cell site was down and descend upon the place. At least the guards downstairs were all dead.

“Benedick, mull over the schematics for this room and tell me if there’s anything that seems a might out of the ordinary. The safe wasn’t in the closet.”

Another thoughtful pause.

“According to the city planner’s office, there is an oddly-shaped conduit system behind the media wall.”

“Yeah. It’s what’s giving power to the picture show,” Vince replied.

“No sir. One of the televisions is routed to a solar capacitor on the roof,” Benedick stated.

Vince jogged over to the media wall, eager to get to work and get the feelings of remorse drilled out of his head with a bit of loot. “Which one, chief?”

“Unclear, really. It-,” Benedick paused with a short sigh, “It doesn’t really say, Vincent.”

“What do you mean ‘It doesn’t say’? I thought all buildings were required to register every aspect with the city planner’s office!”

“That doesn’t apply if the safe system was installed after the building was completed.”

“Goddamn it, Benedick! How do we know about the solar capacitor then?” Vince pressed his finger up against the pulse transmitter so hard he thought he felt the housing crack under his skin.

“It must have been a plan that was executed after the building was built.” Benedick responded. “Would you like to have Beatrice hack the security company that installed the safe?”

“Why? We’re not going to be here in an hour when she fucking finishes! Now you listen good: I’m up here risking my life based on Beatrice’s bad intel from her ‘saint’ of a handler. Now when this is all over, we-“

“Vincent.”

“What?” Vince shouted.

“This isn’t very productive.”

Vince’s eyes widened and his lips quivered in rage. Instinctively, he drew his two FM .50 calcs and took aim at the wall.

“Fuck it. I’m smashing them all. We’ll sort this out later.”

“Wait, Vincent!” Benedick mustered more ferocity than the usual polite monotony in his voice. “If you do that, the safe will lock down and we won’t be able to extract it before the authorities arrive.”

Vince threw one of his pistols through a nearby lamp. “What, then? What now, oh Wise One?”

“Why not have Beatrice cut power to the room and just see which one stays on?”

Vince stopped his tantrum instantly. He plopped down in one of the nearby chairs with raised eyebrows and lips curled into a smirk. He retrieved his pistol from the bits of broken glass at his side.

“Ah. A plan. I see.”

“Would that be okay, sir?” Benedick asked, a hint of pleading in his voice.

“Yeah. Get on with it, then trigger the fire alarms. I want to get the fuck out of here.”

That night, it rained in people’s rooms, waking them from their five-star slumber with icy daggers of water.

Hundreds of people filled the hallways and stairwells of the Helmhurst Hotel, frightened and soaking wet under the humming fluorescent emergency lights. Vince walked among them in the deafening sirens, clothed only in a drenched housecoat. In one hand, he carried a duffel. In the other, he carried a damp manila envelope, its inner contents shielded by thick, sealed plastic. He joined the panicked throngs of people hurtling towards the street below.

In the back room of the hotel bar, Benedick carefully pulled Candy onto his shoulder as she passed out from the side effects of hyper-oxygenation. She was quickly learning that timing a neural disconnect was a tricky thing. Beatrice closed down the shutters as they left to join the frightened mob outside.

In the street outside, people clamored to find out what manner of flaming debris had struck the Metro one-eighty-five and to speculate whether or not it was the same thing that had hit the hotel. They wondered if the police would ever come, and whether or not they had actually heard a jet engine on the ground floor right before the fire broke out. Some of them even wondered whether or not terrorists had set off some sort of bomb.

And one-by-one, four murderers made their way to their vehicles and fled into the Houston skyline. They were the only four people truly appraised of the situation, truly possessing a full understanding of what had happened that evening.

Or so they believed.