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Send in the Advance Clown

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There must be a psychological explanation for this. But all we have are the facts.

Let us lay them bare: As a grade-schooler in a Chicago suburb, Rik Gern was bullied. He was asthmatic, labeled a femme, picked last for sports teams (along with the boy in the body brace).



Bonzo Crunch hands out plastic clown noses to kids at at a Breakfast with Santa in Delray Beach on Dec. 17. (Chris Matula/Post)

He didn't like the competition, so when it was time for high school, it made sense that he would become a lifeguard. He'd help people in trouble, and his only competition would be himself. Swim farther, swim faster; he could do that.

When Rik was alone, he spent his time with books — he still does, in fact — or he'd watch old videos of Laurel and Hardy. He liked that goofy, benign world the comics traveled. *We're all human*, they seemed to be saying. *We all have foibles*.

Laurel and Hardy were fodder — clown food — for the character Rik would create: that shabby chap in a vest and green pants who goes by Bonzo Crunch. He's an outgoing clown, arrogant, putting on airs; a dolt who thinks he's elegant.

As Bonzo Crunch, Rik is perpetually on the road. He travels alone — like a modern-day Paul Revere always a step ahead of the circus. He spreads his message loudly: *It's coming! The circus is coming!*

Rik is the "advance clown." That's how he's known in the biz. He shows up in a big white van weeks ahead of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey circus. Publicists hand him an hour-by-hour agenda. Make kids laugh, they say. Juggle. Balance broomsticks on your nose.

And so it's been for nine months. Divorced and without kids, Rik hasn't been to his Austin, Texas, home for the last four. It's just he and his white van. Clowning, advance-style. Thousands of miles a month he's logged. Thousands of children he's had laughing.

He rolled through West Palm Beach earlier this month, giving seminars for prospective clowns, entertaining first-graders, eating breakfast with Santa. His presence told us that the circus is coming, and finally it's here. It starts today at 7 p.m. and runs through Jan. 1 at the South Florida Fairgrounds.



Bonzo Crunch kids around with Alexandra Stewart, 9, at a Breakfast with Santa in Delray Beach on Dec. 17. (Chris Matula/Post)

Rik is gone, and the show will go on, but still... we need to know more. Who is that clown over by the kids? Who is that man who walks among us, spreads the news, then flits away?

"I tend to be more of a person who sits in a corner," he says before leaving for Daytona Beach. "I eat most of my meals alone, and usually in the company of a great book."

People ask him all the time, doesn't he get lonely?

The 48-year-old lifts his cap, running his hand through dark hair that's starting to gray. No, he says. "I haven't had an inkling of loneliness yet."

He lives to work, to be Bonzo Crunch, that character from a timeless, mythical place.

But there is an intersection — a most bizarre intersection — between life as an advance clown and life as an ordinary man.

Sometimes, Bonzo Crunch (not Rik Gern) goes out to eat, his cheeks ruby red, his Pinocchio-like nose upturned and still attached with glue. Before he leaves the van, Bonzo fills his pockets with noses (giveaways for kids). Inside restaurants, he orders spicy foods. Carefully, he drinks iced tea or water, his face pointed toward the ceiling because of his proboscis.

One can see Rik's eyes (not Bonzo Crunch's) when he's eating. He'll let down his guard, talking over a slice of pizza. Then, a child enters the room and something changes. His face takes on an animation, a sense of wonder, that wasn't there before. He stands up, tips his cap, dispenses beach balls or clown noses. *The circus is coming!* his presence says.

When strangers are around, Rik walks differently in his clown regalia. He bends his torso forward at the waist, arms waving as he shuffles, pigeon-toed in his floppy boots.

It's like a wind-up key is hidden in his back and something foreign is propelling him.

With Ringling, Rik says, you put on your makeup and wear it all day.

A trip to Target or the hardware store might take three times as long, but that's OK.

"To deny that I'm in makeup and I'm a clown would be betraying my profession," he says.

Bonzo Crunch is always buried somewhere in Rik Gern, but their personalities are different. The clown's outgoing. Rik's a loner. Being extroverted, he says, was learned.

Rik is thoughtful, humbler than Bonzo. Before he leaves a hotel, he takes the sheets and pillowcases off his bed (piling them up carefully) so that life is easier on the maids.

He packs his van: five identical clown suits (striped shirts with baggy green pants). Two pairs of floppy clown boots. His books (heavy stuff, like Bob Woodward's *Plan of Attack* or Stephen Jay Gould's *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory*). His ukulele, and his "Cadillac," that portable prop station (not much more than a trashcan on wheels full of rubber chickens, juggling balls and wooden spoons).

Then, Rik gets in his van and drives away, off to the next city. Off to spread the news. *It's coming!* he'll say. *The circus is coming!*

Work hard, relax hard, he says. He's Rik Gern. He's Bonzo Crunch.

Don't bother asking why he keeps it up.

"Why will I always eat?" he says. "Why will I always breathe?"

That question is philosophical, like the sound of one hand clapping. That is all we know.