

“COMIC AND MASTER OF APPAREL”

by D.C.Benny
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One of my last day jobs was selling Italian suits at a fancy boutique owned by a Lebanese gangster.

I grew up in Washington D.C. and during the 80's, I worked for a guy named Ziad, the John Gotti of Lebanon who had a clothing empire in the Georgetown area. Ziad was Middle-East rags to riches success story and was both admired and feared by all his competitors. He was ruthless, religious, and always carried a rusty box cutter in the pocket of his slacks, which he would produce at the slightest provocation. He went from selling suits out of the back of his car, to owning a string of stores staffed with brothers imported from Lebanon to work for him which they simultaneously appreciated and resented, secretly cursing behind his back after he yelled at them to “sell suit!”. There was Ihsam who changed his name to Sam, and assigned inanimate objects a gender, while speaking in the past tense. For instance, instead of saying, “take that cardboard box in the back and break it down”, he would say “took her and broke her cuz she is in the way”. Agnan, became Danny, who eventually broke off and started his own store. Joe the African tailor who always smelled like he had just bathed in

Polo cologne and wouldn't lift a finger to do alterations unless there was a tip involved.

There was an implicit threat that if the customer didn't tip Joe, one pant leg might end up shorter than the other. There was also Archie, a Chilean homosexual, who had to sit down before a joke was told because the constant sodomy he was a recipient of had rendered his anal muscles a liability when he laughed. That's as diplomatic as I can put it.

Ziads cousin Abdallah oversaw the crew, and while very nice was not too bright. He had changed his named to Boudi, some sort of nickname in an effort to blend in with the American public. Unfortunately, Boudi was pronounced “booty” which was a real hoot to the black drug dealers who made up about 60% of the customer base. “Yo, where Booty at? I need some fass-achie gators!” (Versace alligator shoes). Boudi lied to everyone and said he was Sicilian, an idea he got from an Iranian named Farhad, who shaved his chest and told everyone his name was “Mario” from some nonexistent Sicilian town like Corleone. Mario was also known as “Deesco”.

He would always show up late having spent the night dancing in multi pleated pants to Depeche Mode at a club called Cafe Med, completely populated by Iranians pretending to be Sicilian. And blonde American college girls. After

When Mario/Deesco showed up late Ziad would yell at him, and Mario would say: “So kill me, I like to deesco”. That is how he became “Deesco”.

Perhaps some of my favorite characters were the customers, the lifeblood of all the stores on the block, heavily competed for. There were the black drug dealers (this was the 80's and crack was all the rage) who Ziad specifically bought loud colors for. Offsetting the loud colors were the solid black ties, always in demand for the constant funerals of drug dealers killed in the line of duty. Sadly, black ties were always in season. There were also the gay guys who trickled over from Dupont circle and demanded items that didn't exist: “I want this shirt but in salmon with French cuffs”. We palmed them off to Boudi who would appease them with stories of his boyhood in the mountains of Sicily. Then there were the Nigerian credit card scammers. Well dressed, schooled in England, with a friend at the post office that siphoned them credit cards before they could be mailed to the rightful aowners. I don't know how many times I had to refuse a credit card with a name like Chong Li from a guy who looked like Idi Amin. I found out later that the FBI had a whole department devoted to Nigerian credit card theft.