



The Coyote Kings of the Space-Age Bachelor Pad

A novel excerpt by Minister Faust

Hamza: I Wash Dishes for Scumbags

It's Wednesday night again, which it always is after Wednesday afternoon, which it always is after Wednesday morning.

Wenzzday.

This is what my life has become as I stand in front of this stinking sink in the colostomy zone of the Brightest Li'l Preppy Joint in Town™, ShabbadabbaDoo's. Can you believe that name? Temple of freaking jerks. Here's a haiku for you:

ShabbadabbaDoo's:

Frolicking fashion-fascists

Wealthy swine dining.

Yes, while mentally composing happy poems just to keep my soul from falling into the deep fryer, I get to both

scrape *and* wash the crud off of the shingles they slide in front of a bunch of rich kids' maws night after succulent night in this Tex-Mex-Cali-cocktail cesspit, before, during and after they drain pitcher after pitcher of Can't Believe It's Not Urine!

Why pick on Wednesday? *Wednesday* is the day that says it all. See, in Norse mythology that'd've been Woden's Day, or Odin's Day. Odin was the supreme god, kind of like Zeus but with one eye and icicles hanging off his ass (the eye wasn't hanging off his ass—I mean he had only one eye, which you knew what I meant anyway).

And what day gets named after him? The middle of the freaking week. As in, week's not young enough for freshness and vitality, and week's not old enough for the hopeful release of the weekend.

Wednesday: it's like Grade 8 in junior high or Grade 11 in high school—the big hump, the long dump. Odin was the top dog, father of The Mighty Thor, hander-over of the invincible hammer Mjolnir and all-around troll-ass-kicking holder of the title “The Man.” And what day do we give him? Tough break, Odes.

I work Mondays to Fridays here at Castle Scumulus, way down in the kitchen, the lower intestine, if you will, scraping and swearing and stacking and dreaming of leaving for Star Fleet Academy, and the day that gets me worst is always Wednesday.

Mondays I can actually take, which is because of an aggressive policy of Weekendventurism that gives me some hold-over. Tuesdays I'm okay cuz if I work during the day I might catch a flick on account of it being cheapskate night.

Thursday is practically Friday and Friday is Friday. But W—Don't make me say the name again.

There's this one zitsack here, a freaking blonde puffball who looks like a sissy-sized Ken doll with really, really, really tiny teeth (I swear, they look like someone glued rows of white corn niblets into a denture), who for some bizarre reason unknown to me *doesn't like me*. The little bastard.

Anyway, every time this busboy—did I mention he's a busboy?—drops off stuff for us to wash, if he sees *me* at the sinks he always arranges to take a big pot or frying pan from one of the cooks and slams it in my sink to splash me sudsy, so my goatee looks like an ice-cream bar hanging off my chin.

I warned him that if he wanted his gonads to remain in their handy travel pouch he'd better back off, but every

KELLY SUTHERLAND

night he keeps coming back with more kitchen meteors.

Now this *busboy* aspect is significant because the pecking order here is vicious. Out on the deck you got all the hostesses and managers and wait staff who're mid-20s, usually blonde and therefore White. The cooks are usually cooking-college Whites, with the prep cooks uneducated Whites or Browns. The dishwashers are all Brown. Most of these poor freaks don't speak much English, and none of them has an education.

Except me. Honours B.A. in English Literature. Well.

Okay.

Actually I'm missing one course.

Actually I'm not likely to get that course.

Actually I'll never be allowed back to do that course.

I don't wanna talk about it.

So I'm here in this freaking swinetopia taking orders from a bunch of spray-ons in rayon. Sometimes I try to liven it up a bit here in the dish pit, put on some music the boys'll like. I've brought CDs by the great oud player Hamza El-Din, my namesake and fellow Nubian (although he's Egyptian and my dad's Sudanese), and of course Fela Anikulapo Kuti, King of Afrobeat. Sometimes I've slammed in some Nusrat remixes by Bally Sagoo and Massive Attack or some Apache Indian or Hot Hindi Hits for my boys here—

You know, two weeks ago I brought in Public Enemy's latest album, *Muse Sick-N-Hour Mess Age*. Angry, super bad, and a Brother's best pain relief in this freaking joint.

So it's late night, I'm playing the music and washing pots, when the damn head cook comes in off his break—it's like one in the freaking morning and he's basically done anyway—and he tears my disk out of his box and in his ear-splittingest Australian accent yells at us (actually at me), "Keep yoh fakkin ands off moi radio!"

And to tell you the truth, that mess is still burning up my guts.

(The sink-swamp in front of me is now filthy, and I figure I'm gonna cut my hand against a sunken X-Wing if I don't drain it.)

I'm a grown man. And this Outback tool, who probably hasn't read a book since the warden sent him a hygiene manual in solitary, yells at me not to touch his stereo like I was *infecting* it or something.

Bad enough having to do this crummy job in the first place. Bad enough having to put up with the Zitsack. But getting sworn at? If my dad knew I was letting scumwads treat me like this he would cry. I mean he would actually cry.

The sink's empty now, I got it washed out again, blasting it free of crud with the water jet. And now, while I'm filling it up with scalding hot, the steam is billowing out of the depths like a spell from beyond time, a formula-of-hiding to keep me from going completely nuts in this stenchorium.

I'm wearing a Walkman-style belt jobby but without headphones. My madman roommate Yehat, who I'll be seeing in a couple of hours after I get off work, he's a genius with gadgets and whatnot—anyway, he rigged this baby up

for me. An antidote to Captain Kangaroo's tirades and musical censorship. Got super-slim speakers sewn right onto my belt so I can play music for me and my South Asian dishwash posse.

I put in a Vangelis score, *Opera Sauvage*. It's for quiet times, melancholy, you know? And with the steam swirling around me and blanking out Dante's Ristorante, and Vangelis's lonesome strains chiming like death's bells...I'm suddenly on the cliff.

I don't know how long ago it was that I saw the cliff for the first time.

I guess it was way back maybe even before high school, before Yehat and me met. Might've even been the first time I heard this Vangelis piece, "Irlande," as in *Ireland*.

Hm. Never thought of that before. Ireland: *The Angry Country*.

Anyway, house was empty, which it basically always was by then, and me at all of fourteen years old listening to this gaunt, ribcage-echo piece in the basement and probably, being the melodramatic kid I was, maybe even thinking about how lonely I felt and my eyes welling up with water. Poor little boy.

And suddenly I see myself on the side of a cliff, in a little carved-out portion, way too high up to climb to the top and walk to safety, with the angry sea way below all cold and clutching. No trees, not even the cries of seagulls.

And then...in this vision...I realize I'm not alone.

She's with me.

I don't know who she is but her skin is like fired bronze, dark and glowing, and her hair is midnight and curly and wet-heavy, like soft, black chain mail draping round her shoulders. We're holding onto each other, and, I suddenly realize, we're both naked.

But it's not sexual. I don't know what it is, in the vision...maybe it's...survival.

With the swirling ocean mists cutting off the world and killing the skies, we're clutching each other for sweet life, like if we let go the seas and rocks below will shred us apart like the teeth of some grim leviathan from those cold, cold waters.

I don't know her name. I can't even say for sure I see her face. But for more than a decade, whenever I see fog or overcast, or even just a wall of steam, I'm back on that cliff.

And the feeling it carries with it is of a loneliness and yet a sense of, well, *completion* so intense it's like a mouthful of fresh blackberries, bitter and gritty-seeded and intensely, intensely *there*.

Ah, hell's bells. Now you're thinking I'm pretentious and flowery and navel-gazing. Guess you want me to apologize.

Get used to it.

In two interminable hours I'm off. Until tomorrow. Until the next day.

Until the next Wednesday.

Maybe when we walk home Ye can pull me outta these Wednesday freaking mist-grey blues.

I swear, I'm starting to feel so freaking trapped by the wrong stuff *in* my life and the right stuff being *out* of my

life...so pinned down and pissed on and pissed off and pinning for something, *anything* to tear me outta here. I'm so damn desperate I sometimes feel like I should just find the cliff in my dreams and jump the hell off it.

Yehat: Kingdom of the Jimps

I'll be clear. The customer enters at 1:13 a.m. to get a video. So far it's by the book.

I'm in the first third of *The Right Stuff*, where LBJ is talking with Wernher von Braun, rocketry genius and formerly my hero (until Hamza spoiled that for me by informing me von Braun was an unreconstructed Nazi). In this scene, LBJ is trying to get his post-Sputnik American sponsors to rally around the flag and beat "the comm'nists" in the space race. Von Braun declares that NASA should send up a chimp, which LBJ hears as "jimp," demanding, like Foghorn Leghorn (only missing the "what's a, I say, what's a—"), "What the *hell's* a jimp?"

Now at *exactly* this moment, buddy comes into the store, White, mid-40s, startling resemblance to a prairie dog (somewhat, but not substantially, larger). I am about to be annoyed. He's a 5. Allow me to explain.

Having endured interminable nightshifts at Super Video 82 for 37 months, I can assure you with empirical clarity that I have classified five subspecies of the life form called Customer:

1. The loving.
2. The lusting.
3. The lonely.
4. The librarians.
5. The losers.

Note: Subtype 5 usually covers the previous four, but they do vary.

Subtype 1, the loving, usually means couples looking for chick flicks. It's always painful for me to see a guy so obviously and obliviously whipped that he should, in fact, be bottled and labelled "Lite Dressing."

Subtype 2, the lusting, is fairly clear. Sometimes this includes couples, but it's usually single men looking really ashamed, and when you give them their change they avoid your eyes and you avoid their palms.

Subtype 3 is a huge category, likely subsuming 2, but these jimps are pathetic in a paleolithically painful way. These demicretins like to watch movies about lonely people or dying people or doomed romances and the like.

(This practice strikes me as paralleling that of a man dying of starvation who rents documentaries on the Ethiopian famine while whistling "Food, Glorious Food," but in fairness, they're *not* me.)

Subtype 4, the librarians, are film freaks such as myself who genuinely want to see everything worth seeing—"Watch all that is watchable," to paraphrase V'ger of the vastly underrated *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (aside from the flat, featureless Ilia/Decker romance and the fact that the series's supporting cast gets almost no lines, the Kirk/Spock stuff is touching, funny and fresh, without camp, and the SF is some of the screen's best ever, as screen SF

goes. I still get misty when Ilia says that "Carbon units are not true life forms," and then later when V'ger explodes in earth orbit from the Ilia/Decker cosmic orgasm).

Subtype 5, the losers, brings us to the jimp in question. Tragic, weird loners who don't know what they want, these guys. They say they want your help but actually they don't want your help, they just want somebody, *anybody*, to talk to, or *at*, forever. Which, sadly, is usually me.

These jimps, presumably lost on their way to or from the thirteenth circle of hell with just enough film trivia and mistaken information to make a team of Young Life Christian teenagers seek out Doctor Kevorkian, are the worst part of my Super Video 82 splendid isolation.

So that brings us back to the initial moment of this

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story, the big bang, if you will, of cosmic jimpdom at the moment the jimp emerges from the celestial darkness into the brightness of the Videopolis.

Once again: I'm watching *The Right Stuff* while filling out an application for a local business needing a network jockey. John Shannon, my overlord and paymaster, bumbles towards me in all his glorious, towering baldness and orders, "Yehat!"

"Yes, Captain?" (He's never asked me once why I call him "Captain," "milord," "Quartermaster," or any of my galaxy of false titles. He is a truly incurious being.)

"Yehat, hurry up with whatever y're doing there and get over to the pornos. Alphabetize all of 'em between *Dirty Harriet* and *Robocock*. Somebody's got 'em all screwed around slipperier'n bat shit."

His turns of phrase are uncharacteristically comprehensible tonight, believe it or not. While he's talking, of course, I'm hiding my job application, and I tell him I'll get to it.

That's when the jimp comes in, wearing, no lie, one of those square-shouldered black-and-red jackets from Michael Jackson's "Thriller" video, except this guy looks like a postal worker or a middle-aged ex-Hutterite from outside Red Deer.

"I'm looking for something in a good De Niro, maybe," he says. "Got any recommendations?"

A promising start: like all men my age, I burn offerings of goat and herbs at the Temple De Niro. "*Goodfellas*," I say instantly. "All-time greatest—"

"Aw, yeah," he says, "just saw it last week."

"Okay, *Once Upon a Time in Amer*—"

"Actually, I'm not really into gangster movies."

This remark strikes me as somewhat peanuttty. How the

hell can a jimp say he likes De Niro but doesn't like gangster movies? That's like saying you love swimming but you hate the water, or you like sex but hate spanking.

"Okay, guy," I sigh. "*Awakenings?* Subtle and startling performances with a touching story of tragedy and transformation." Between the movie boxes and living with Hamza, I've enjoyed learning to talk in copy.

"Oh, I can't stand Robin Williams..."

"Okay, okay, I can grok that. *King of Comedy?*"

"Yeah!" he snorts and sneers. "Sandra Bernhard? Right! She's like a big, y'know, screeching, annoying...hoot...uh..."

"Owl?"

"Yeah, Sandra Hoot Owl!"

"Well spoken." This charade of human interchange grows weary for me. Irritation is building up in my facial muscles like nitroglycerine. Unless I can ditch this guy ASAP. "*Last Tycoon?*"

The Jimp: "I don't like period pictures."

Me: "*Taxi Driver.*"

Jimpotron: "I want something...fun. Funny!"

Human: "*Midnight Run.*"

Jimpimple: "Oh, that Charles Grodin drives me crazy!"

And we're out the door, standing on a sign-lit Whyte Ave night with drunks and weirdos and losers and nutcases, and each other. Me and Hamza. Brothers without a womb between us.

Increasingly angry sentient being: "*Deer Hunter.*"

Jimpuddy: "I don't like war pictures—"

Premeditating premurderer: "*Mad Dog and Glory!*"

Jimpuke: (pause) "Y'know, that Bill Murray is such a scamp!"

I'm on the edge of the counter. Is this fruit fly actually going to land?

"Sounds good," he says.

I'm ecstatic—I tap away frantically at my computer, but, wait for it:

"It's...out," I whisper. I'm a Roman centurion—at Masada.

And then he does it.

The Bad Year Jimp, looking very dismayed, chirps, "Hey, do you have Madonna's *Truth or Dare?*"

"Get outta here!" I scream. "Get the hell outta here!"

The guy bolts out the door in his "Thriller" coat, running like Michael J. away from all those zombies.

Considering how the neighbourhood's changed here on Whyte Ave, that's not a bad idea, given the proliferation of drunks and punks.

But I'm stalling, as I'm sure you realize. Because Grand



Moff John Shannon is running up from the backroom like I've just shot the secretary general.

"Yehat! What in the donkey's balls is going on out here?"

Yes, he actually talks like that.

Fortunately, my comrade-in-arms, my brother-in-dashiki, dishwasher and imagineer supreme Hamza Senesert, is slipping through the door right now and knows what to do.

Hamza: "And stay out, you damn pedophile!"

John is huffing and puffing, glancing, with eyes dancing. "What'd...what just...who..."

"Don't worry, John, it's all under control," I say.

"Ye, it's Mum," pleads Hamza. "She's really sick. We gotta get some medicine fast!"

John looks like we're either trying to steal candy or steal the very concept of candy.

"John, my shift's over," I point to the two o'clock clock, "and Mum's real sick. How sick is she, Hamza?"

"She's speaking in tongues again, and her gums are really, really puffy."

"But what about restacking the pornos?" demands John, arms akimbo, actually whining.

"Well, jeez, John, you shoulda asked me with more than four minutes left in my shift. You heard my brother, Mum's gums are puffy. You wanna live with that on your conscience?"

John's pupils flick between us like two tiny cataracted tennis balls.

"Okay," I decide to stop waiting. "We gotta go." I grab my duffel from beneath the counter. "John, I'll overhaul the 'baters section tomorrow, alright?"

"But—"

And we're out the door, standing in a sign-lit Whyte Ave night with drunks and weirdos and losers and nutcases, and each other. Me and Hamza. Brothers without a womb between us (read that how you like). Soul men. Champions of a new age. Together at last. The Coyote Kings.

Minister Faust, a.k.a. Malcolm Azania, is an Edmonton-based English teacher and broadcaster. The preceding is an excerpt from his novel *The Coyote Kings of the Space-Age Bachelor Pad*, which will be published in August 2004 by Del Rey/Ballantine.