It was supposed to be a typical Friday evening event after a long week at work. My wife and I would have a glass of wine after we got home from work, then take a short drive to one of our favorite restaurants in the Littleton suburb of Denver. On this particular evening, the restaurant was busy, and the maitre d’ suggested we have a drink in the bar while we waited for a table.

There is something comforting and homey about a well appointed bar. Rich woodwork. Comfortable furniture. Background music. The soft confusion of voices in a hundred different conversations. People relaxing. People having a good time. And, at the center of it all… the Bartender.

The Bartender! If this were the New York Philharmonic, he’d be Leonard Bernstein. If this were Metropolis, he’d be Superman.

The Bartender. Orchestrating the evening for his fans. In control. At the center of things. Admired. Envied. Everyone wanting to be his friend. To be on a first name basis with the Bartender was to have arrived.

“Look at that guy,” I said to my wife, as I swirled the remains of a perfect Rob Roy in its stemmed glass. “He’s got the best job in the world. Works in a great environment, meets tons of interesting people, has fun, and is the Father Confessor to any number of people who come in here to forget their problems.”

At the time, I was a middle level manager for a distribution company in Denver. Maybe the least satisfying job I ever had. “I think, in my next life, I’m gonna be a bartender,” I said absently, leaning back in my chair.
Two weeks later, it was Christmas. There, in my Christmas stocking, was a gift certificate to attend Abby’s School of Bartending.

Several weeks later, I stopped in at the Bartending School. It was on the first floor of a corner building on Colorado Boulevard, with a picture window looking out on the street. Inside, it was just like a real working bar. Several young people were behind the bar, making drinks and looking over small recipe books. A handsome, self-confident Hispanic man walked up to me with a smile and asked if he could help me. This was Abby, I guessed.

Abby told me he owned the school. I told him about my gift certificate, and he explained how the school operated. It was a six week course on drink mixing, beer and wine, and some bar business management. He said most of his students were young people who were looking for their first jobs, who thought bartending was an easy and fun way to make a living.

I told him I had a job, and wasn’t interested in a career change. I just wanted to see what bartending was like. And I could only attend evening classes, since I worked full time.

“No problem, man,” he said. ”You come when you can. You’ll meet a lot of interesting people here. You’ll have a lot of fun. Plus, you can make some money on the side. You got a tux shirt and bow tie?”

“Sure,” I said, curious.

“We get lots of calls here at the school for bartenders for private parties,” he said. “The run of the mill parties I give to the students. The interesting parties, the upscale ones, I take myself. You’re an older guy. You’ll fit in better as a bartender at those parties. You want, you can work with me on the good ones.”

“Sounds good to me,” I told Abby. Heck, maybe John Elway would be throwing a party soon. Wondered what he drinks?

I started taking classes, two hours on those evenings when I could attend. Abby let me be flexible. In fact, flexibility defined the school. It was low key, almost a party atmosphere. Abby believed in having fun with his work. We worked with bottles of colored water to represent the various liquors. Occasionally, we’d have a “live class,” in which we used the real stuff. If he was teaching us to make some colorful layered drink, colored water wouldn't work. Had to use the real thing.

Making a layered drink was tricky. You had to put the heavier liquors in first, then carefully layer the other lighter liquors so they would float on top without mixing. While Abby said there wasn’t much call for layered drinks, they were fun to make and profitable. You could charge a lot of money for a seven or eight-layered drink.
We learned free pouring - how to pour a precise 2 ounces without using a shot glass. (It’s all in the timing.) And speed mixing, so we could keep up with the demands of a hot bar. We memorized recipes.

About three weeks into school, as I walked in one evening, Abby came up to me and said, “We got a party, man; you and me. The Hispanic Policeman’s Association. I bartended it once before, man. It’s a happening party.”

It was on a Saturday night, a week off. Abby said we’d each get $100 for 3 hours, plus tips. “Cops tip good, man. Cops and firemen. They’re the best. They got a dangerous job, man. When they party, they relax, and have a good time. We’ll make some serious money.”

Saturday night came. Abby and I met at the school, and stocked up with our tools, corkscrews, shot glasses, towels, knives and fruit for garnishes. Abby had a name tag for me, a white plastic name tag that said ED. Under that, in smaller letters, Abby’s School of Bartending.

The party was at a hall in west Denver. As we set up our bars, people began arriving; officers and their dates, husbands, wives…dressed to the nine’s and ready to party.

The Hispanic Police Association was made up of all the Mexican-American police officers in the Denver area. At each bar, the Association had provided an officer to help pour beer, so we could concentrate on mixed drinks. I set up my bar, not far from Abby’s, introduced myself to the officer helping with beer, and got ready for MY FIRST BARTENDING EXPERIENCE! I had my recipe book out of sight, but handy, just in case. I didn’t want to embarrass myself on my first job.

The music started. A south of the border band. My first customer approached. A short young woman in a dazzling red dress.

“What may I get for you?” I asked with my best and most confident bartender voice.

“I would like a Yellow Bird. Make it a double,” she said.

Ahh crap, I thought helplessly. My mind was blank. What in blazes was in a Yellow Bird? I fumbled for my little recipe book, my hands shaking. More people were lining up to order, and my first customer was shifting from foot to foot, in time with the band.

I flipped through the book. Yellow Bird. Where the hell is the recipe?

“Hey man, let’s go!!” I looked up. Several impatient (and obviously thirsty) customers, wanted to be served…. now.

I forced a smile to the short woman. ”Just a minute, ma’am…be right back!” I had to get to Abby to see what the hell was in a Yellow Bird. I eased quickly over to his bar. Abby
was clearly in his element; swiftly and smoothly pouring drinks, bantering with his customers, and I could see his tip jar was already brimming.

“Abby, what the hell is a Yellow Bird? My first customer wants a Yellow Bird!!”

Abby didn’t miss a beat as he continued to mix drinks, two at a time. He said, “Tell her you don’t got the stuff for a Yellow Bird. Make her a double vodka with lime and a little tonic. And for God’s sake, get that panic off your face! Smile! This is a party. Get ‘em happy! Serve ‘em what you got; gin, vodka, whisky, wine. This ain’t the The Broadmoor.”

My face red, I went quickly back to my bar, where a group of impatient customers waited. I made a strong Vodka tonic, threw in a lime slice, and handed it to the lady in red. ”Close as I can come to a Yellow Bird,” I said with an uncertain smile.

“Thank you Ed,” she said, dropping a dollar in my tip glass, and heading back to her table.

Well crap, why didn’t I think of that myself? Why panic in front of Abby? Just make ‘em a drink! Make ‘em anything, as long as it’s close.

“Yours?” I asked the next person, hoping they’d ask for a Cosmopolitan. Just to try my newfound ingenuity. I knew now how to handle any request.

One of my next customers was a young, handsome man in a brown three piece suit. Tie knotted perfectly. Black hair combed just so.

“I’ll have a martini, please. Gin. Very dry. A double. Not too much ice.”

I took pains to make a perfect martini. After all, this fellow was probably a detective, one of Denver’s finest. I sneaked a look to see if his jacket bulged where, undoubtedly, he carried a gun in a shoulder holster. I didn’t see anything. Maybe he was wearing an ankle holster, I thought.

During the evening, he came back to my bar several times. Each time with the same order. Martini. Gin. Very dry. A double. This guy was drinking a lot of gin. Gin is very powerful stuff. And, each time he came up, he was just a little less put together.

Around eleven o’clock, he was back. This time, his tie was loosened. His shirt was open at the neck. And he’d spilled some yellowish something on his shirt. His hair spray had yielded to the heat and humidity. Damp strands of hair fell over his forehead. His eyes were bloodshot, and he struggled to focus on me.

“Mertooni. Die Dubuh.”
Good Lord, I thought; this guy is about one sip away from being falling down, gutter crawlin’, commode-huggin’ drunk. And he’s a cop! I can’t serve him! What if he leaves here and has a wreck? I’ll be sued. Abby will be sued. I’ll lose my real job.

I took his glass, added just a few drops of gin, and tried to reach for some water to add to it, but he was determined. His hand clamped around my wrist, and he positioned the gin bottle over his glass and filled it. He smiled at me crookedly, turned, and staggered away. I watched him until he disappeared into the crowd, then turned to the police officer helping me behind the bar. He was leaning against the wall, sipping on a beer.

“What the heck happens to that guy when he leaves here? What if he gets stopped by the police on the way home? Do you guys have some code that keeps you out of trouble?”

The officer took a sip of his beer, smiled slightly and said, “Nope. That’s why I’m working a desk job these days. I left this party last year with a snoot full, and got pulled over on I-25 by a Colorado State Trooper. I got out my badge and ID, handed it to him, but he just looked at it and said, ‘You’re a cop! You ought to know better!’ I spent a night in jail, and lost my license for a year.”

I had been thinking about having a little something myself as the party wore on, but the thought of having my wife drive me to work for a year was all the incentive I needed to have another cup of that delicious instant decaf.

The party ended finally, and Abby and I cleaned up our bar area, pocketed our tips, and went to a Denny’s to, as he put it, “settle up.” We pooled the cash from our tip jars. Over $300! Abby smiled and said, “Not bad, man. Cops are the best. Good tippers. They respect the working man. We split down the middle.”

Abby was a class guy. He could have insisted on the bulk of the tip money as the owner, and as my teacher.

Abby was right about cops being good tippers. In fact, as I continued to work parties with Abby, I discovered that the average working guy (or gal) is more generous with tips than many so-called high rollers.

Abby and I worked a reception at the Denver Art Museum some months later, attended by the “movers and shakers” of Denver: oil executives, doctors, lawyers, wives and girl friends. Even the Mayor was there. It was an opportunity for community leaders and wanna-bees to see and be seen.

Two things struck me that night at the Art Museum. Executive types approached the bar, laughing and talking among each other. But when they addressed me or Abby, the look on their faces changed slightly- just enough to communicate that we were hired help. We were only there to serve them, quickly, so they could get back to their party. Most took their drinks and turned immediately away from us. With seldom even a “thank you,” they turned back to whomever they considered important at the moment.
What they lacked in manners was matched by their stinginess with tips. Maybe the mortgage on the mansion in Cherry Hills, the BMW payment and Junior’s private school tuition was keeping these guys awake at night.

But that first night, after the Policeman’s party, I drove home almost giddy. What a great experience! I was a BARTENDER (got my own nametag to prove it). Despite the rocky start with the Yellow Bird, I’d had fun, and I was going home with just over $250 bucks. Pretty good money for almost nothing; just like that Dire Straits song said.

Abby called me late one Saturday afternoon.

“Hey, man, how’d you like to make serious money and be in the company of some great looking women?”

I hesitated. After all, I was a married man, the father of two teenagers, and probably not the kind of bait that “great looking women” would fall for.

“Uh Abby, you ain’t exactly talkin’ to Hugh Hefner here. What do you have in mind?”

Abby laughed. ”Hey, loosen up! I scheduled one of the students to bartend for the Denver Models meeting tonight, but he called me. He’s sick. He can’t make it. This is a party for all the fashion models in Denver. It should be a blast. Want to do it?”

Do I want to bartend for all the fashion models in Denver? Bartend for a group of beautiful women, in skimpy mini-dresses and trendy boots? Some of whom might like the idea of getting to know a mature, balding, bartender? Does a hobbyhorse have a hickory dick? Of course I’d like to do it!

“Well, Abby, I had some plans,” (didn’t want to seem too anxious) “but I’d be glad to help out.”

He gave me the details. A fashion photographer was hosting the party in his loft apartment in downtown Denver. All the coolest and ‘in demand ‘models would be there. I’d be working alone. Standard fee- $100 bucks. And I’d keep all the tips. Plus, this was a ‘society’ event; a big deal each year.

The apartment where the party was held was on the 4th floor of a refurbished downtown warehouse. Most of the entire floor was an open living/dining area, with a built in wet bar on one side. The big windows provided a great view of downtown.

The host briefed me on the party. Most of the male and female fashion models got together once a year to network, brag about their upcoming gigs, and drink. As I was setting up, I looked around…and decided I had, indeed, died and gone straight to heaven. Beautiful women everywhere- long dresses, miniskirts, and fabulous figures. Not a dog in the pack. I’d have to really thank Abby for this opportunity. Maybe even split the tips with him.
Models tend to drink foo-foo drinks, if that evening was representative of their tastes. Cosmopolitans and the like. But, as a seasoned bartender, I now knew how to handle those requests, and keep my customers satisfied. “Sorry, Ma’am, our host has provided me with just the basics. I don’t have the ingredients for a Screaming Orgasm; how about a Screwdriver?”

Works every time.

Later in the evening, one of the male models came sweeping up to the bar, a beautiful girl on each arm. He was dressed in a tux, replete with bow tie and a stiff pointed collar. He had chosen his best white tennis shoes to round out his outfit. His blond hair was swept back in ducktails. He was stunning, a legend in his own mind.

He looked at my name tag and, head tilted upward slightly to in an attitude of superiority, said, “Ed, my good man…can you make me a perfect JB and soda? And find a fine white wine for my companions?”

The two girls were clearly fascinated by their Man Of The World, based on the admiring smiles they gave him, and the look in their eyes that said ‘isn’t he just TOO fascinating? Tux, for his part, glanced around the big room to see whom he should be schmoozing next.

My cynical side was instantly alert. This jerk wouldn’t know J & B scotch from the cheapest bourbon whiskey on the planet, I thought to myself.

So I said, “You bet, Sport. A perfect J & B scotch coming right up. And I have a special bottle of wine for the ladies.”

While Tux preened his slicked back hair and bantered with the girls, I fixed him a strong Jim Beam bourbon with soda, and presented it to him with a flourish. “There you are, Sir. A perfect J&B and soda. You really know your scotch, sir!

Tux swirled his drink under his nose, then took a long and critical sip under the admiring stares of his ladies. A smile crossed his face. He bowed to me grandly, and pronounced that drink to be the finest scotch to ever pass his lips.

I made him at least two more strong bourbons as the evening wore on. He bragged to his friends all evening that his good friend Ed was undoubtedly the finest bartender who’d ever served him; a man who really knew how to present Scotch whisky as it was meant to be consumed.

Man, this was a great gig.

I even bartended for a coven of witches.
When I moved to Denver I had to find a dentist. In the dental office a friend had recommended, I struck up a conversation with the hygienist.

“What do you do when you aren’t being a hygienist?” I asked, in what I thought was my best relationship-building voice.

She gave me a quizzical look, and then looked away, as if deep in thought. She was a striking beauty; tall, long black hair, great figure, and piercing green eyes. She turned back to me.

“Actually, I’m a Witch.”

I was instantly alert. I had read articles in Time about witches. Witches who slew cows in Wyoming, and reportedly drank their blood. Witches who danced naked around candles in East Village basements. And pledged their allegiance to Satan, or the Hugo, or some equally horrible menace to the human race.

I hoped she was into the latter. Who wants a witch with blood breath?

She smiled at what must have been my shock. “I’m a Priestess in the Church of Guidea. Don’t be offended or put off,” she smiled. “I’m a good witch. My name is Gretchen.”

I decided immediately I’d second that. There was simply NO QUESTION she was a “GOOD” witch.

She turned those intense eyes on me. “And, what do you do when you aren’t my patient?” She smiled slightly, brushing a strand of that beautiful hair away from her face.

I told her I was in the diesel engine business (did I notice her eyes beginning to glaze?), that I also wrote country and western songs, and I was a bartender on the side.

Those great eyes! At the mention of bartending, her eyes came alive, and she flashed a smile.

“Really? A bartender? Our Coven has a Gathering coming up. The Mother High Priestess will be there. We have invited Eduardo to speak. He’s a recognized expert on our Church history. And we do need a bartender for the time preceding our Mentoring Session with Eduardo.

We worked out the details. The hotel, where they had arranged a meeting room, the time and, of course, my fee.

Heck, I would have done this one gratis. The Priestess, dancing naked, would have been fee enough.
The day of the Gathering, I arrived at the hotel an hour early. If there was going to be a lot of nudity involved, I wanted to have all my set-ups ready, and my bar stocked, so I could devote my total attention to the activities at hand. All in the interest of a better intellectual understanding of the culture, of course.

I found the room. Rats. Just a standard hotel meeting room. Set up theatre style. With a podium at the front and the bar over to one side. No black candles burning. No strange symbols. Hell, this looked like the Rotary might arrive at any minute. And, if anybody did get naked, those metal chairs were going to be a tad uncomfortable.

I started setting up my bar; arranging the glasses and bottles, slicing lemons and limes for the inevitable gin and tonics, and opening small bottles of cherries and olives for Manhattans and Martinis. I looked up. An older woman in a sensible black dress was approaching. Her hair was in a beehive, and she wore thick glasses straight out of a ‘50s TV show; with black frames that swooped up, giving her an owl-like look.

She extended her hand. “Hello. I’m Glenda. I am the Mother High Priestess. And you are?”

I introduced myself, as my spirits dropped. This was a Witch? The Boss Witch? The Mother …whatever? If this old bat decided to get naked, I’d personally call 911. The sight of her wrinkled, sagging butt could have incited a riot.

Others began to arrive. An assortment of women and men. Mostly under forty, and most a tad overweight. All were dressed as if they’d just left work at the bank or office building. Over there, a nurse in blue scrubs. Around the room, small groups talked quietly and intently and just coming in, two young women who were probably college students. Behind them, Gretchen, my Gretchen, walked in accompanied by a tall thin black man carrying a backpack, wearing khakis, sandals, and a red golf shirt.

Must be the famous Eduardo, I thought.

This was turning out to be a major bust as a memorable bartending gig- before it even got started. These people were witches? Hell, the Chess Club probably had more bewitching and exciting parties than this.

People started drifting over to my bar. I had on my bartending best- crisp white shirt, black bow tie, my snazzy black bartending vest, and my plastic name tag that proclaimed me “Ed”

At first, the usual boring drinks- white wine, gin and tonics (“not too much gin, Ed”), bloody Marys, club soda on the rocks.

Gonna be a long, sober evening at this rate.
I glanced around the room, trying to spot Gretchen. There she was, sitting on a couch with Eduardo. Her attention was riveted on him. Whatever he was saying held her spellbound. He was talking quietly, making occasional small hand gestures. I noticed several of his gestures included touching Gretchen on her leg, just below the hem of the short tight skirt she was wearing.

Eduardo said something to Gretchen as he stood up. He started toward my bar. Guess this genius will want orange juice on the rocks, I thought cynically.

Eduardo approached the bar. I was already reaching for the pitcher of orange juice. Skinny little fellow, I thought. Probably a vegetarian. My opinion of the whole witchcraft thing was in a power dive.

Eduardo put both hands on the bar, looked at my name tag and said softly, “Ed, make a Martini for the lady. Straight up. Olives. And make me a gin on the rocks, with water. Not too strong.” He looked at me and smiled.

Instantly, I had this guy nailed. A Martini straight up for Gretchen? Weak gin for him? This dude had a plan, I realized. He was gonna play the Priestess with several Liquid Panty Removers while he nursed a weak gin and water.

Several times, during the social hour, Eduardo was back, with the same order. As I mixed the fourth Martini, I looked past Eduardo over to the couch where Gretchen was sitting. Sure enough, ol’ Eduardo’s plan was working. Gretchen’s skirt had ridden up; she had a slightly sloppy smile playing over her lips, and she was staring absently at Eduardo’s back.

The Social hour ended. The High Priestess called for the Coven to gather around the podium. Eduardo was about to begin his pontificating.

As I packed up my utensils, I looked over to the Podium. Eduardo had donned reading glasses, and was looking at his notes. Gretchen was seated in the front row, idly playing with a strand of her black hair, focused as best as she could on Eduardo.

So, when the Gathering ended, there was a good chance that at least one witch would get naked, And Eduardo would continue his Mentoring. Hell, maybe he wasn’t a vegetarian after all.

Try this one the next time someone wrinkles his nose at your liquor supply:

Abby and I were bartending for a ten year class reunion of a small upscale liberal arts college. Ten years out of school, and into new careers, these folks were anxious to impress one another- designer clothes, the mandatory BMW, and their TITLES, Vice President Jones, Doctor Smith, Senior Partner Shagnasty. Listening in on the bar chatter, nearly all these folks had second homes in Aspen, vacationed on St. Croix routinely, or had recently had cocktails with Mick Jagger. In other words, the bullshit was “knee high
and risen’ “Occasionally, Abby would look over to me with a grin and shake his head at some particularly questionable claim. Abby could spot a phony in a nanosecond.

Early in the evening, a tall, tanned, and obviously Well Arrived thirty-something strode confidently up to the bar and stood tapping his recently manicured right hand on the bar, scanning the bottles. Bright yellow ascot offset a black silk shirt and matching jacket in black suede.

“Yours, Sir?” I asked, using a slightly differential tone in keeping with my lesser status among moguls.

“Well, I’d like a very dry Martini” (do I detect a slightly annoyed tone in his voice?) ”but I insist on Boodles Gin. I can’t stomach any of that bar swill you’re pouring.” He shook his stylishly shaggy razor cut slightly and said curtly, “Just give me a Heineken.”

I sensed an opportunity to have a little fun.

“Well, my friend, I am forced to serve what your hosts have supplied me. But, as it happens, my partner always has a few choice brands set aside for the discriminating drinker, and I can just tell you’re discriminating. Let me see what I can do.”

Abby’s trunk always contained a selection of upscale brands for use at the school when we had “live” classes and used real booze instead of colored water. Sure enough, he had a full bottle of Boodles. Who said there’s no God?

I came back to the bar where Ascot was leaning casually, flashing a sparkling fortune of dental perfection at a slightly overweight blond in a low cut beige dress. He seemed as impressed with her cleavage as she was proud of it. He looked up as I approached the bar, and he flashed a smile at the sight of the bottle of Boodles.

“That’s more like it,” he said. “I’ll have a very dry Martini, straight up. With a single olive.”

“Coming right up, my good man” I replied. Then, after a pause, I said, “Not many people can tell the difference between makes of gin. It takes a trained and talented pallet to detect the difference. You obviously are a man of good taste and one who appreciates fine gin.”

He snorted, and gave me a cocky smile. ”I can tell the difference between Boodles and Tanguery blindfolded,” he said with a smirk. “And I wouldn’t have that stuff (gesturing at the bar bottle of Seagrams) if I was stranded somewhere.” He began tapping that manicured hand again, watching me make his Martini. His blond friend couldn’t seem to take her eyes off him.

“Tell you what, sir” I said, “let’s have a little fun before you try this Martini. I’ve never met anyone who can tell the difference in brands of gin. But, I have a feeling you are an
exception to the rule. A connoisseur. Let me pour three shots of gin- one Boodles, the other two, bar brands. Impress your friend here with your discerning taste buds.”

Ascot thought for a second, then grinned and winked at Cleavage. ”Set ‘em up,” he said with a wink at the blond. He turned his back dramatically to the bar, so I could prepare the test. ”This will be a piece a’ cake,” he said to the blond. I watched as he put his hand on her shoulder, then let it slip casually down her side until it stopped just under her right breast.

I put three shot glasses on the bar; then took the Seagrams bottle from the bar and poured 3 equal shots of bar gin into each glass.

“Okay sir, all set.” Ascot and the blond turned around to face me. Abby watched with obvious interest from the corner of the bar, his arms folded casually across his chest. He had listened to my conversation with Ascot.

“Three shots of gin, friend,” I said. ”Your challenge is to identify the Boodles.”

Ascot went to work, picking up each shot glass; sniffing it, swirling it, holding it up to the light. Taking small tastes, casting his eyes heavenward, he attempted to identify the unique (at least in his mind) taste of the Boodles.

Finally, after several minutes of sniffing, peering, and swirling, he pushed one shot glass toward me roughly. “Well, I’m having a little trouble with these two here,” he said pointing to the two glasses closest to him. “One is Tanquery, I’m sure. The other is Boodles. But the stuff in that glass is the worst excuse for gin I’ve ever tasted.”

I looked Ascot in the eye, smiled and said, “They’re all Seagrams, pal….all three of ‘em from that bottle right there.”

Ascot looked at the three shot glasses. He glanced over at Abby, who flashed him a bright smile. His face reddening and without a word to Cleavage, he picked up his Martini and walked away from the bar. The blond looked first at me, then at Abby; shook her head slightly with a smile, and joined a group of her friends.

I looked over to where Abby was leaning against the bar, the smile still on his face. He gave me thumbs up, then turned to serve a customer.

“Man,” I thought to myself, “what a great gig!”