

q life: with GABRIEL TABASCO

The Greek Ambassador's Son Chapter 9: The Devil Drinks Lager

After graduating from my degree in Shipping Law I did not want to begin a corporate job just yet. The summer loomed ahead like a blank paper where I could write the story so I decided to go to get a job as a barman.

With no plans and a small holdall containing my beach clothes I hopped on a ferry, for a Greek island near Athens, which was famed for its crazy nightlife and tacky tourists. I rented a cheap apartment near the island's main town..

After a rather unsuccessful couple of days of job-hunting I found myself in a small bar towards the outskirts of town and popped into the first bar I saw, called Los Chicos. Initially I stopped for a cool drink but then I thought I might as well ask if they had any openings.

'Are you looking for staff?' I asked.

'We actually need someone right now,' the tall, pot-bellied man behind the bar said. 'Glavkos quit didn't he?' Did Glavkos quit?' yelled the man as he tried to pull his stained t-shirt over his belly.

'Yes,' said a voice from the bottom of the stairs.

'But first, we have some questions for you.'

'Okay, sure,' I said, expecting an interview.

'Are you a top or a bottom?' asked the man.

'I'm not sure you can...'

'Iason? What do you think?' he said 'Is our friend here a top or a bottom?'

'He looks like a total bottom to me.'

'Nick, what do you think of this guy? Top or bottom?'

'Bottom. But a power bottom.'

'Bottom, no. Power bottom, yes' I responded, playing along.

Perhaps it was my sass they liked, or my ass, but I got the job. In reality it was netiehr sass or ass, they just needed a barman and anyone would do. 'Can you begin in three hours?'

Two gay British men in their late 50s owned the bar. Dave was a silent owner who never showed up. The other co-owner who managed the venue was Billy, he was the man who asked me if I was top or bottom. He had an insatiable drinking habit. The only thing worse than a teetotaler in a gay bar is a bar owner who likes a good drink... all the time!

'Come and meet my favourite bottom,' Billy drunkenly told clients, much to my embarrassment. If I made an error Billy would shout. 'You undercharged them by a euro! You're eating up my profit,' he would say, stamping his feet.

'Wrong. You're drinking up your profit,' I wanted to shout but held my tongue. His behaviour became increasingly loutish as he got increasingly drunk. Forget the devil wears Prada. At that bar, the devil drank lager.

Billy usually arrived at the beginning of a shift looking like a beaten up bulldog, with grey hairs protruding from his cheap two-euro t-shirt. Upon arrival he would begin to boss everyone around while he began drinking which would continue until closing time. The more anyone angered him, the more abusive he became. Since I was the rookie, I was always the butt-end of his abuse.

'Gabriel, hello. So nice of you to come to work,' he'd say when I arrived five minutes late. 'Thank you so much for coming. Would you like some coffee?'

'No thanks,' I'd reply, waiting for the punchline.

'Good because it's your job to make them!'

Billy was as crass as he was bad at business. He was so loud it put customers off.

'I was shaving naked in the bathroom earlier today,' he started one afternoon as he leaned at the bar telling stories speaking in his Manchester accent 'and I hung my balls over the sink. It felt nice.' Some gay men tittered, some lesbians smirked and other staff members tried to suppress their giggles.

The staff members included Symeon who was from Patra. He came from a wealthy family, which forced him to marry the girl he got pregnant. He moved to the island to get away from them. There was Jamie, a short Australian man who had been working at the bar for four years every summer and wanted to keep working there until he 'stopped having fun being a barman' as he put it. He had a relaxed attitude to life that I admired.

The two bar managers, Iason and his best friend Gerasimos, were both from Cephalonia. They spent so much time together that they actually started resembling each other. In fact, they mirrored each other to such an extent that people would get them confused and call one by the other's name. I was distrustful of Iason who ran to Billy, telling him when anyone did anything wrong, for example if I was late or if I had spilt any drink over a customer. It wasn't a way to build camaraderie with the team and clearly did it to stay in Billy's good books.

By far, the best person to work with was Nikitas, a slight, short man in his 40s who was a professional waiter. He was genuine, uncomplicated and easy to talk to. He always helped me out when I needed it and offered a sense of security amid a sea of bitchy barmen and the barfly hangers-on.

However the most interesting member of staff was Nick, a 32 year-old student of architecture from the north of Spain, who had blonde highlights in his hair and used to participate in nude oil wrestling at a nearby club every Wednesday night to pay off his tuition... but that's for the next chapter.

In order to work at Los Chicos there were no barman certificates to complete, no training, no processes. I just went to a bar and instead of pulling punters I was pulling pints. On my first night there were just two of us manning the bar. It turned out to be one of the busiest nights that summer! I was a total disaster: rushed, unknowledgeable and clumsy. Just like my first time. I didn't do a good job. My disco may have needed me. My local gay bar didn't.

'A Snakebite please,' ordered one patron.

'Where do we keep our snakes?' I asked Iason who gave me a look that said #WTH. As with everything practice makes perfect and after a couple of weeks I was comfortable making even the trickiest cocktails.

From flirting for drinks I was flirting for tips. I made minimum wage, being paid around EUR50 per shift but making easily triple that in tips. What payment I lacked in cash I received in compliments.

'You look like one of those Greek statues,' said one regular. He must have meant it since he was only on his second drink. He couldn't have had his beer-goggles on yet. In one gulp he downed the rest of his pint then gurgled. Beer gurgling was the new beer-goggles.

Other regulars included an older straight, heterosexual couple. The wife always wore marginally transparent tops. As I was serving her I noticed that her left breast was hanging out of her top. I made intense eye contact and didn't mention anything. What could I say? 'Excuse me ma'am but your boob is hanging out of your blouse?' It happened the following week. And the following. By then I got used to it and assumed she enjoyed either shocking young gay men or flaunting what she had.

One mole-like looking man in his 50s always has an entourage of twinks around him. They'd come in carrying heaps of shopping bags. He got into a fight with one twink after he refused to show him the text he received.

'Let me see who that is,' screamed the mole trying to grab the phone. When the boy refused he said 'give me back those trainers,' which triggered a bout of tug-and-war over the twink's shopping. It was funny. It got me through my shift. But I felt sorry for the twinks.

'Don't feel sorry,' said Iason as he prepared their third G&T. 'Those twinks make more money than we all do combined.'

I changed my mind: The only thing worse than an alcoholic bar manager are drunk suburban housewives let loose in a gay bar while their husbands were at the soccer match. It was Desperate Housewives meets Girls Gone Wild. The housewives ordered the most ostentatious, complicated cocktails as if they were trying to get drunk on the gayness of it all. Dressed up as sexy nurses or as scary fairies they would behave outlandishly by grabbing our crotches and asking rude questions.

'Are you the man or the woman in bed?' they asked Nick, the Spanish barman.

'I'm everything. And I like to mix it up. In the kitchen,' he said.

'Mix it up? Like a blender?' asked one housewife whose interest was whetted with the talk of kitchen appliances.

'Like a whisk... because you got to work for it!' purred Nick. Whatever that meant.

When it came to drinks, Drag Queens tortured us with their indecision over which cocktail to order, taking a half hour to decide before changing their order and then complained they were being overcharged. With drag queens we were instructed to put two straws in each drink regardless of what they were drinking, whether it was wine, beer or cocktails. Why? Because drag queens wear so much lipstick it was hard to get off the glass. Usually a glass used by a drag queen required at least two washes to look reasonably clean.

Bears, usually in couples, came in on Sundays for brunch and Bloody Marys. Gym Junkies were predictable: they ordered Vodka Soda (64 calories). Twinks ordered a Rum & Cola (248 calories) and were as irritating as the sugar that gets stuck in the straw of a Mojito drink. Straight men came in asking 'you boys serve beer? Or is it just cocktails?' emphasising the 'cock.' We couldn't help but roll our eyes. My favourite customers were the lesbians who were as cool as the cucumbers in their G&Ts.

But it was the barmen who were the wackiest characters of all. Jamie said he wanted to be a barman 'for as long as it was fun.' He partied all night after work and went on more dates than there were dates in the calendar. And Nick did nude oil wrestling in a club nearby.

'You should come check it out,' said Nick, handing me a flyer.

You can even seem to make a proper cocktail

You only serve with a smile when the punter's male

If you see someone you like, invite him back to your room

And hoping that from all these men, one might be your groom



