

Fast Food

(and other tales of delicious consequence)

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Illustrated by Stephen Wright

On behalf of Stephen Wright, I am excited to share Chapter 5 of a novel currently in labor. The story explores an enduring moral question: If you knew there was no chance of getting caught, what crimes would you be willing to commit to find justice, fame and fortune?

Chapter 5 finds Steve Bacon in Samalayuca, Mexico. In a desperate attempt to rid himself of a persistent monkey-mind (*represented in italics*) that has plagued him since childhood, he takes the recommendation of his therapist and seeks the help of Octavio Harina, a shaman who has been experimenting with a Native American plant medicine in the Sonora Desert – Flor de Verdad.

Having experience with hallucinogens, but unsure of what he might encounter, Steve and his monkey mind hike into a remote canyon with Octavio to eat one of the flowers.



Right at the point where I felt like I might melt into a puddle of sweat, we reached a clearing. There were footprints moving in all directions. Scrub brush had been cleared. In its place, large rocks had been purposely arranged to make a fire pit. A large stockpile of wood was stacked a few feet away. To the north of the pit, the trail continued west, the eye easily able to follow it up the side of the hill to a bluff, which overlooked the way into the canyon.

“A little more,” Octavio said quietly. “This is sacred ground. I have already asked the elders of this territory for us to be here.” The path steepened and we walked another miserable quarter mile before Octavio stopped.

Pointing at a plant like no other around, he said, “Flor de Verdad.”

It was peculiar. Freakish. A different green from the other natives, chartreuse and garish, unearthly, it glowed almost like a poster painted with fluorescent paint. It stood alone, as if the other vegetation was either respectful of its authority or utterly terrified by its presence. Now that the sun was lower, the plant was half lit, half in shadow.

The portion in the light was astonishing in its beauty. It radiated life with its bulbous white flowers pointing at the heavens, petals closed delicately protecting the precious yellow pistil and stamen. The gentle breeze made each bud dance gracefully in unison. There was a feminine, almost fuckable seductiveness to its rhythmic sway.

Worlds apart. The branches in the shade were hideous and deformed. Each push of hot air made it move spastically. Void of light, the leaves and stems looked sickly, moldy, reeking of disease and decay. The darkened flowers were grayish and weathered. They scowled down at the barren soil, each petal looking more like a scarred, armadillo scale, whose purpose was to shield and guard a secret.

“Pick one flower,” Octavio said.

“Is this a test?” I asked.

In a surprisingly lighthearted tone Octavio replied, “What isn’t?”

I approached the plant with a fair amount of concern treating it less like a plant and more like...a viper. I wondered if the flowers in the sun had enlightened properties, reflective of their appearance? Or maybe the test is that if you pick the sunny flower you are punished for basing your choice on something as shallow as outward appearance? Maybe there’s a flower in both light and dark!

5. Flor de Verdad

I strolled over to the kitchen area at 4:25. “If you aren’t early, you aren’t on time.” It had been drilled into my brain compliments of David Olsen, the Fortune 100 Senior Vice President of Sales who had lured me away from the liberal ad agency world into the more conservative confines of Corporate America. I was an anarchist within those walls, a walking HR catastrophe. I fought the system for the first four years, until I realized the gift I had been given. My time on the, “client side” was like getting paid for an MBA in business and without it, I would never have known how to get Plant Matters up and running, which included building the presentation decks that had us on the cusp of persuading investors to fund our scale up. Having to wear business casual instead of jeans and flip flops to work was about to pay off.

Octavio showed up at 5 pm with two small bags, each containing a blanket and thermos of water. Tossing one of the knapsacks to me, the two of us began the trek into the canyon where, God only knows what, the Flor de Verdad waited for us. The sun was still high enough to scorch the desert, a hot wind turning the trail into a convection oven.

We walked silently for an hour through the blazing, parched landscape. Despite my preference for cooler climates, I was grateful it was a dry heat, reminding me of the soupy discomfort of Chicago, where I had spent two weeks visiting a college friend who had grown up in Hegewisch, closer to the Indiana border than anything remotely metropolitan.

A small white rabbit darted across the trail.

Almost on cue, Octavio spoke. “Whatever flower you pick is perfect for you. This moment was supposed to happen right now. So whatever you do will be the right thing. The only exercise you are creating right now is...” And then he put his hand to his chin, looked skyward, and whined, “Ohhh, how long should I punish myself by not deciding?”

Octavio giggled and pushed me toward the Flor de Verdad.

C’mon, pick one asshole.

Back off! I picked one of the flowers in the sunlight. As I turned towards Octavio, the flower in my hand passed through the shade and immediately wilted.

“You see? Now it’s like the flowers you did not pick,” Octavio remarked.

“If I had picked one of the flowers in the shade and held it in the sun, would it have changed?”

Octavio laughed. “Who is to say? You did not pick it. Stop with your worrying. The flower in your hand is the one. Now let’s go back to the fire pit.”

The day surrendered to the spectral colors of the sunset.

Let’s have a nibble of that fucking flower, we gotta start tripping balls before everything goes black!

Octavio removed his blanket and made a sitting area. I followed and the two of us sat across from each other, legs crossed.

Looking out into the sky, bats began to take wing, searching for the millions of unsuspecting insects. Prey. Crickets sang along with a pack of coyotes, calling out to one another across the valley below. Octavio placed kindling at the bottom of the fire pit and then stacked smaller branches, and finally larger ones. He lit the kindling and the crackling sound of the dry tinder became another instrument of the desert soundtrack.

“Eat the flower you picked,” Octavio said after a while. “You are going to experience a place of deeper connection with the infinite. This realm you cannot see with your current vision, but—”

“Can you see it now?” I asked.



“I am a brujo. I experience the world as it is. Now stop interrupting,” said Octavio. “There are guides and energies you may access only in this place to help you find meaning for the challenges in your life. You are part of a collective consciousness beyond our comprehension. It is infinite. But it is one. Its purpose is to realize, and understand, and experience everything to fully know reality on every level. Your path as a human, regardless of the outcome, is a small piece of what defines infinity.”

“So that makes us insignificant?” I asked.

Octavio poked at the fire. “Think of the universe as a large weaving made of threads. So many you cannot count. You are one thread. Without your thread, the weaving is not complete. With your thread, good or bad, the whole becomes closer to completion. You cannot worry about all the other threads, there are too many. Add your thread. This is all you have to do.”

“If that is the case, it doesn’t matter what I do, it is still a thread,” I said.

“This is true if you have no intention to have the life you want,” Octavio said. “Or if you give the world permission to destroy you.” Octavio began to sway back and forth. “Did you come with a reason?”

I got this one - HE CAME HERE TO KILL ME!

“I have a monkey mind. It never stops. It constantly blames and has to be right. I’m never at peace.”

Wrong. I do not always blame. I just happen to always be right.

Octavio did not respond immediately. He looked at me carefully. Thoughtfully. Accepting me. Your mind keeps you from something. You are avoiding a pain. You don’t trust. You don’t like to feel vulnerable.

OK. That’s it. I don’t trust this guy.

Almost at once, the fire began to grow on its own. Flames licked themselves feverishly as Octavio began chanting. His voice seemed to split into several notes, keeping harmony with itself. The other sounds of the night vanished.

“The Flor de Verdad will not guide you to one outcome or the other,” Octavio said. “The paths are yours to walk.”

My saliva turned to molasses. Movements slowed. “Something, thing, thing, thing is happening ing.”

Now batting, Steve Bacon-n-n-n-n!

I could still manipulate my arms and legs, but it was taking more effort. The slowing down of my reflexes made me think of how a baby might feel as it realized he could control the thing scratching his face.

Waves of geometric colors began moving rhythmically, cloaking the dark sky. I reached out to touch them and giggled at the untouchable fabric of violet, green and yellow.

“Yes, si,” Octavio acknowledged. “Soon you will see, a gateway perhaps, and a guide. Let yourself travel through to that place where you see what has been hidden. I will stay by the fire with your body, while you are wandering.”

“Am I leaving-ing-ing my body-y-y-y-y?”

Octavio giggled again. Pulling a rattle from his knapsack, he began to chant rhythmically. This he did for the next five minutes. When he stopped, it was as if all sound ceased. No crickets, nothing. And then the thunder came.

My gut responded with an ungodly gurgling.

I twitched. And twitched again. And again. I was aware of the twitching, but unable to stop. My head began to look up towards the sky, fully cognizant, but helpless. Snorting. Guttural, hard snorts. Like a pig. Unstoppable. Like something else was driving my body.

Snort. Twitch. Spasm. And then, the sound of my ass cheeks slapping together like a timpani drum. Two. Long. Howling. Farts.

Octavio fell to his side, laughing hysterically. “What did you eat?”

When we get back to camp you better check-eck-eck-eck below deck-eck-eck for skid-id marks.

“Just some beans frommmmm a street vendor. Is this normal?” I let more thunderous farts out with every syllable I uttered.



My god, it smells like you hid-id-id a dead ferret up your ass. I wonder if the flower-er-er-er from the light side would have made your farts smell like Gwyneth Paltrow's vagina-na-na scented candle?

Next to the fire, a small conical shape of light began to form, azure and white, the sharp end pointing towards the stars.

Don't get near that thing, your explosive bowels will blow us all to hell!

The cone grew, spinning and twisting, reminding me of the soundstage tornado from the Wizard of Oz.

It feared my eyelids were so wide open my eyeballs might just fall out of my head and into the fire. Then I started laughing, comparing the absurdity of what was happening to Hollywood special effects, the way victims of catastrophic events often tell newscasters, "It looked just like somethin' out of a movie!"

Looking away from the electric funnel, I gazed out at the pulsing desert and saw tiny explosions everywhere. Thousands of little sparklers fluttering low on the horizon.

Then, from the center of the funnel, a pair of eyes came to life. Large, white, shaped like alien candy corn, wide at the top, pointed at the bottom, about 18 inches apart. Two very small pupils began to look intently at me. Now a triangular head was starting to form, the eyes on either end of the long side with the other two sides meeting at a severe angle forming a beak-like mouth. Two large, thick, red antennae were protruding from the top, almost like horns. The head moved slowly, inquisitively, now completely out of the funnel, taking in whatever was left of reality.

What does reality even mean?

I was looking at a giant praying mantis. The sheer size of it should have frightened me, but there was something about it completely non-threatening. It stepped out of the funnel to reveal the body of a large nude man, imposing, with a gigantic wiggling cock, the size of which I had never seen personally, although I had often heard tales about the sizable dick the late comedian Milton Berle was said to own.

The Mantis Man was standing over me, its stance wide and well-established with arms crossed. Strictly from its posture, it felt like the creature was some kind of guardian or protector. I It was not there to harm me, although its throbbing schlong may have had other intentions.

The Mantis Man held a hand/claw towards me.

“Am I dead?”

It was Octavio who answered. He must have realized by my wild stare and gaping mouth something unearthly was revealing itself. “Go,” he said.

“I am a guardian of this territory,” the Mantis Man said. “Come with me.” With considerably more effort than it should have taken, I got up and took a couple of steps towards the funnel. Looking back towards the fire I saw Octavio. Across from Octavio, I saw myself, still seated, legs crossed.

“Fuck me!” I said.

The Mantis Man walked into the funnel, pulling me along. In an instant, I was alone in the black. Mantis Man was gone. As I tried to gain my bearings, the ridge where I had just been sitting was a thousand feet away. The fire, nothing more than a small speck of flickering light in the utter dark. There were no more tiny explosions, no waves of geometric colors. Just blackness. And a strangely familiar song.

Sometimes late
When things are real
And people share the gift of gab
Between themselves

America? What the actual fuck?

Some are quick
To take the bait
And catch the perfect prize
That waits among the shelves

I started to get angry at not knowing what those lyrics meant.

Cut yourself a break. No one knows what America lyrics mean.

The need to figure out their meaning in the middle of a pitch-black alternate reality with a Mantis Man was more than I had bargained for. Or so I thought.

But Oz never did give nothing to the Tin Man
That he didn't, didn't already have
And cause never was the reason for the evening
Or the tropic of Sir Galahad

Somewhere in the distance I could hear Octavio's rattle keep time with the music. I started to laugh uncontrollably.

So please believe in me
When I say I'm spinning 'round, 'round, 'round, 'round
Smoke glass stained bright colors
Image going down, down, down, down
Soapsud green like bubbles

“OK. No. Fuck this. I did not come here to listen to top 40 hits of the 70's.”

I closed my eyes tight and when I reopened them it was black and quiet again. A new sound - something sizzling. Or was it beginning to rain? Listening more closely, it was rustling. Something undefined was walking in dry brush, approaching from behind. I turned quickly to confront the whatever. And then she was there, sitting, her legs crossed, dipping a wand into a small plastic bottle, blowing bubbles.

She was dressed in a green and blue plaid jumper with a white cotton blouse underneath, short sleeved, with a small, rounded collar buttoned all the way to the top. She had knee high white socks and on her feet were black patent leather Mary Jane shoes. Her hair was dark brown, pulled into two braids on either side of her head. A pair of grayish horn-rimmed glasses fit tightly on what I thought was a rather large head for her size.

“There you are!” the girl said. “I've been waiting for you.”

“Do you know me?” I asked.

“Doo doo head. Of course I do! And you know me!”

Yes. She looked familiar. Something about the glasses and the head. The rolodex of faces in my mind spun, trying to land on the identity of the girl. Click.

A flood of emotions washed over me all at once. Relief. Guilt. Happiness. Regret. Joy. Sorrow. Fear. Curiosity. Shame.

“Maggie Mitchell?” I said.

“I knew you’d remember me! I just knew it!” Maggie replied gleefully.

“Maggie, you’ve been dead since 1972. You died in second grade.”

Maggie giggled. “I know that, silly. But you’ve kept me tethered to the world all these years. You are one of the only people in the whole wide world who still remembers I was ever a little girl. My parents are dead and no other friends from Mrs. Kirsch’s class thinks of me like you do.

And... no one else snubbed her from their birthday party before she died, like you did!

Maggie pushed her horned-rimmed glasses up the bridge of her nose. “There’s an existential psychologist named Irvin Yalom who wrote about the time when there is no one left who remembers you, when you exist in no one’s memory. That’s when you are truly dead.”

“That’s deep for a nine-year-old ghost,” I said.

“It’s just you and my older brother and a grave marker at Forest Lawn in Glendale. Did you know I’m buried near one of the Three Stooges? The one with the curly hair.”

“Larry,” I said. “Jesus, I never thought about where you might be buried.”

“I liked Curly more,” Maggie said. “But Speed Racer was the best!”

“Maggie, I’m so sorry.” Regret slammed into me and I began to cry.

“Awww. Don’t cry. I’m not here to make you sad,” Maggie said.

“Then why are you here?” I asked.

“I’m your guide. Well, one of them, anyway.” Maggie pointed at five deer, glowing blue, who were about 25 yards away. “One of those is the other. But I get to go first. Isn’t that so much fun?”

Maggie took me by the hand and the two of us started walking forward into the dark. We had only taken a few steps when the smell of fresh cut grass filled the air. A cool breeze began to blow and the path changed from the black, Sonora desert to a beautiful park. The hills green, the sky blue, the air crisp. I knew this park. Griffith Park. Near the old zoo and the merry-go-round. Two picnic benches were decorated with streamers and balloons. On one of the benches sat a small pile of gifts.

A pitcher of fruit punch was at the ready. Batman, Robin and a plastic Batmobile sat atop a white frosted sheet cake. The writing on the cake read, “Holy 9th Birthday, Stevie!”

There were about 20 place settings with a child’s name in front of each. The paper plates had cartoons of Batman, Robin, Penguin, Joker, Mr. Freeze and Catwoman.

A group of children were playing pin the tail on the donkey. I recognized a few of them. “Jesus, it’s Patrick and Scott, Shannon and Alison. And there’s Tom and Roland and David and Jennifer.

I turned to look down at Maggie, but she was now at eye level. Suddenly, I was a child again. “Neato! This is my birthday party. I’m nine.”

“It looks like a fun party,” Maggie observed.

I squinted. “I remember wondering if Tom was having fun. He wasn’t in our class, so he didn’t know anyone.”

Watching the kids play, Maggie said, “It looks like he’s having fun to me.”

“I guess. Why are we here?”

“I think you know why.”

I fidgeted and bit down hard on my thumbnail. “Because I didn’t invite you to the party because you had a big head and I thought you looked weird, OK? And then you died of a brain tumor three weeks later and it hurt so much to think about it and I can’t forget you because I can’t undo it and you were the only person who wasn’t invited and how could I know it was a brain tumor?”

Maggie looked at me with a bit of surprise. “Really? I was the only one who didn’t go? Well, that is fucked up!” And then she laughed. “Haaaa! I said the F word! I said the F word! What fun this party was!”

“Is this hell?” I asked.

“Oh no. Not yet!” Maggie said cheerfully. Clouds filled the sky, blocking the sun, turning the trees and grass an ashy, dead gray. The wind picked up and one of the paper plates stood up on edge and began to spin on its axis, making the mouth of the Joker sneer at me before it fluttered off into the sky. “Wait here, doo doo head, and we’ll make the memory of this birthday even better!”

Maggie skipped off towards the other kids, picking up a baseball bat that was laying in the lifeless sod below a donkey shaped pinata. Despite having the physical appearance of a child, the grown-up part of me still questioned the merits of teaching kids the entertainment value of beating the effigy of a domesticated animal in order to fight over its candy guts. Maggie turned, winked and waved. Then she lifted into the air like a ninja warrior, floating towards the other kids with one leg bent, the other pointing back gracefully. “Weeeeeee!” she screamed, half girl, half banshee. She raised the bat over her head and swung for the fences.

“Maggie, no!” I screamed.

Roland’s head exploded, spattering brains, blood and bits of skull all over Tom, freezing him in a state of shock, which was unfortunate because Maggie had already begun her ghoulish glide towards his noggin and with a second swing, caved in his face, dropping him like a sack of flour, sending his soul in search of wherever Roland’s went.

The rest of the kids were running like ants being roasted by a magnifying glass. Setting her sights on David, Maggie looked back at me, her dress tie dyed with sticky crimson gore.

“Thank you so much for finally inviting me to your birthday! I can’t wait for cake,” she said with delight. Crack. Three for three.

As she was about to knock Alison into the forever, everything went dark and I was back in the pitch-black desert.

What would your therapist say about that?

“Oh, fuck off.”

That’s right motherfucker. That was me and that flower conjuring up some wicked guilt. Yo! This shit is cray cray!”

Out of the black, the fire was coming back into focus. I was sitting cross-legged. My body was completely numb, and it took every bit of effort to move my limbs. I fell sideways and over. As I propped myself back up. Octavio was still seated in front of the fire, watching me carefully. His face seemed to have a transparent bird mask with big black eyes and a huge beak. There was nothing threatening about him having a bird head and in fact it felt like what I was seeing was something – an aura – that might always be there only without the Flor de Verdad it remained invisible.

Hey maybe you have masks no one can see. A hedgehog perhaps?



Behind Octavio I could see shadowy, tall, thin figures. The flickering fire made their visages dance back and forth. I had no ability to speak so I concentrated all my effort on my arm and lifted it, pointing at the figures behind Octavio.

“Don’t worry about them,” Octavio said. “They are the elders of the territory. They are here to keep the mischief away from our ceremony.”

“Real?” I asked.

“Si, yes.”

Oh, thank God. For minute there I thought we were in trouble.

A sheet of colors, almost like a screen with large hexagonal openings began to undulate all around me, coming in waves. I was being enveloped again. Octavio, the fire, and the elders began to fade away and I was once again in a purgatory of black nothingness.

Twenty feet away, the parcel of glowing blue deer reappeared. The looked completely disinterested.

“You can do better than that,” I said.

These guys are not me. I don’t know what, the, fuck, those are.

Luminescent white antlers began to grow from their heads, their collective eyes glowing fiery red. The largest deer flickered, sending a wave of panic through me. Hypnotic. Paralyzing. Like a night terror.

Uh, tell you what. You go see what Bambi from hell wants. I’m just going to go check out that pretty tree over there.

Standing on its hind quarters the momentary silence was broken by crunching, breaking tearing, like the Velcro on cycling gloves, ripped apart with intense violence.

More human now. Its front legs lifted, kicking, transforming into sinewy arms, its hooves stretching into hands with long spiny fingers. Its torso thinned, with quivering pectoral muscles bulging in a severe "v" shape, the point ending where a navel normally sits. It no longer had a hide, but flesh, marred, cracked, like mud drying out. The head was small with one elfin ear and the other a deformed mass of cartilage. The skull was concaved where a nose should have been, separating two small white eyes under a bony, wrathful brow. Dense,

matted hair covered the scalp and upper shoulders in mangy patches. Three long, threatening horns shot out of the top of the skull, looking almost like a pitchfork.

“Me Wechuge,” it said. “Follow.”

The creature walked slowly down the path, back towards the fire where Octavio was waiting. The other deer remained behind as I followed.

The dark of the Sonora retreated again, this time to a dense jungle, moist and dark with shafts of light fighting its way through vines, trunks and branches. The floor of the jungle seemed to slither and writhe in all directions, like a million worms. In small patches above, a blue sky was filled with billowy, white cumulous clouds.

Wechuge led me towards a small clearing where a group of five indigenous men, warriors I guessed, were armed with spears and clubs.

Was it the weapons that gave it away?

The five warriors were standing over three dead bodies. Now in the circle, I was dressed as the warriors were and thought, “Fuck me. I’m Magua, from Last of the Mohicans!”

So I guess all natives look alike to you. Wrong continent. That took place in the Northeast United States. The Huron.

The warriors spoke an ancient language, which for some reason, I understood perfectly.

One of the warriors crouched over the dead bodies. He grabbed one of the heads by the hair so it would have his full attention. “You will not take what is ours.” He now had a sharpened piece of obsidian in his hand. Sitting on the corpse, and with a forceful blow plunged it into the chest. He did this several times, the sound of ribs shattering, each thrust spewing blood on the warrior. The corpse shook, orgasmic in its bloody ejaculate.

After several more violent thrusts, the warrior reached into the lifeless cavity, yanking at the heart, still attached via its major veins and arteries. The lifeless mass that had been someone’s son, or brother, or husband, seemed to pull back, trying to keep what had been his sole beating possession a few minutes earlier. The warrior gripped the heart and gnawed through the remaining bits of connective tissue with his teeth.

The heart was finally free. The warrior stood up, his face smeared ruby red, bit off a mouthful of his enemy and pushed the organ skyward. He let out a piercing scream, which

was echoed by the other members of the war party. In a way that was pure reflex, I also yelped and hooted. It felt primal, familiar. I liked it. A lot.

Moving rhythmically back and forth over the three dead bodies, the warrior passed the heart to his left and with no hesitation, the second warrior grabbed it. As he tore away at the sinewy meat, blood squirted from one of the main arteries.

The heart was handed to me. Its warmth stirred up a reflexive gag. “Um, I don’t eat meat,” I thought, as the words came out of my mouth in their native tongue.

The fierce five stopped cold and looked at me in silence, leaving only the gentle rustling of the leaves and the cry of a lone toucan in the distance. And then all broke out laughing.



When they got hold of themselves, the first warrior turned to me and said, “Stop playing games. This is your enemy. Eat.”

I turned to Wechuge: “What am I doing here?”

“Learning the way back to your redemption,” Wechuge said as he vanished along with the war party, jungle and heart.

Alone in the dark, I felt a temporary relief at being dismissed from having to chew on the heart of another man. In the distance where dense foliage had been just seconds ago, a familiar shape flickered on and off.

“Howdy partner!” the pulsing light said as it grew larger and larger.

Hey, at least it's friendly, right?

“How the fuck do I know? It could be welcoming me into the mouth of hell as far as I know.”

In that case, I'll just back over to that tree.

As I opened my eyes to the real world, the sun was rising, the fire dying. Sitting silently, he sipped water.

“You traveled far,” Octavio said.

“I don't remember a thing,” I said.

Octavio began to pack the rattle and blanket into his pack. “We should go back now. The sun will not be our friend on the trail.”

I'll catch you up on the way home, cowboy.

I stood, wobbled a bit, surveyed the landscape below, and let out a resigned sigh.

And yes. I'm still here. But hey, maybe you'll have better luck with a massive dose of Haldol.