

Fast Food

(and other tales of delicious consequence)

Written by Gary Huerta

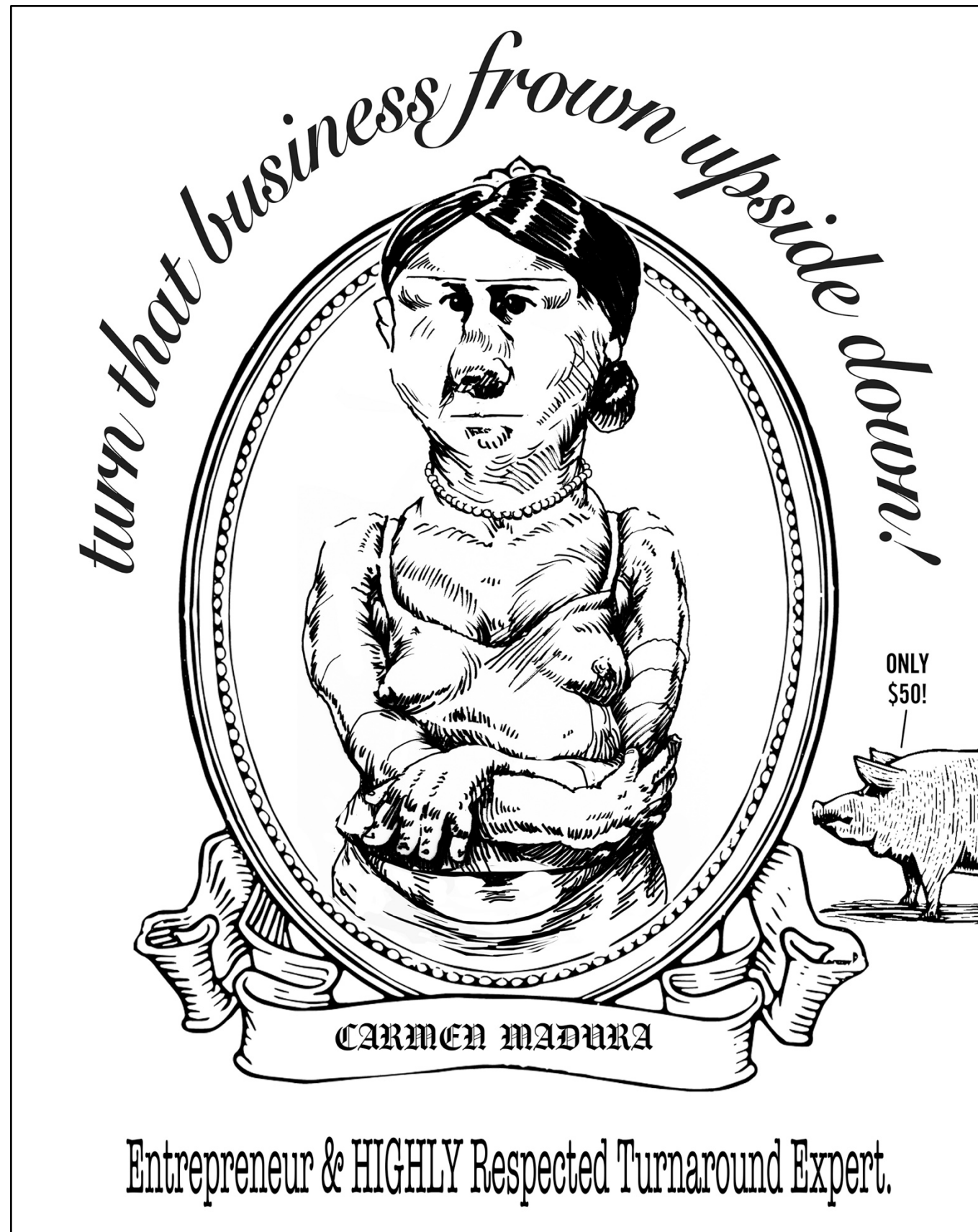
Illustrated by Stephen Wright

On behalf of Stephen Wright, I am excited to share an excerpt from Chapter 9, filled with all kinds of unsavory delights. The story follows Steve Bacon's quest to find financial success and emotional happiness. It 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 9 introduces Steve's business partners, Mike and Carmen Dillweed. In this scene, Mike Dillweed is drowning his sorrows in Las Vegas when he meets his future wife, Carmen Madura, hosting a business seminar at Bob Apple's Gamblin' Galaxy On The Strip.

Enjoy!





9. Mike and Carmen Dillweed

With his home life literally being sucked away and his business in freefall, Mike did what anyone might do under the crushing weight of such turmoil: he went to Las Vegas and got a room at Bob Apple's Gamblin' Galaxy On The Strip. He checked in with no real idea of what he might do next. Gamble? Hit the \$5 all you can eat buffet? Pry open the window and jump? He opted for drinking and figured the best way to do that was free, which also meant sitting at the blackjack table with the lowest minimum bet, which also meant gambling with a group of people in similarly dire straits.

But a funny thing happened on his way to the most depressing card table in Las Vegas. Before his senses could be fully dulled by hissing neon, ca-chinging bells, and ker-plunking quarters, his eyes locked onto a retractable banner near the casino entrance. It promoted a seminar taking place in the Armadillo Ballroom that, if his watch was still working, was about to get underway. The name of the seminar was: "Turn that business frown upside down!"

Holy fucking Christ! With a snake oil cliché title like that, he should have known a fleecing was all he'd find.

For the remarkably low price of \$50, a couple more bullet points promised to help any business owner overcome every obstacle and achieve financial stability. The hour-long session was being moderated by a woman named, Carmen Cerda. Under her picture was the title: Entrepreneur & Highly Respected Turnaround Expert. Realizing the opportunity to lose money would always be there, Mike decided to hear what this, so called expert, had to say.

Mike examined the rather unflattering picture of Carmen with interest. She had thick brown hair that sat impossibly flat on her skull. Her eyes were smallish and black, set close on either side of a wide flat nose – the kind a journeyman boxer might have attained after a few

too many bouts late in his career. Her eyebrows were plucked to a hairline thinness and almost touched. Her lips were equally thin making it look like her face consisted of: two buttons, three lines and a flattened piece of Silly Putty. On the upside, this was a woman who was not levels above Mike in the looks department and he found this comforting, refreshing and almost thrilling.

True to form for events like this, Carmen had absolutely nothing insightful to impart upon the audience of desperate entrepreneurs hoping to find a quick fix to their various tax/income/expense woes. Had it not been for the Nevada Superior Court, Carmen would have never been allowed to host any seminar at Bob Apple's Gamblin' Galaxy On The Strip.

Earlier in the year, Bob Apple had pleaded no contest to numerous complaints filed by current and former female employees accusing him of gender-related hiring bias. As part of his sentence, he was required to engage an equal number of female entertainers as headliners in his casino at pay rates equal to men. But Bob was not accustomed to having mandates set upon him and with the help of his attorney, crafted language including seminars as a type of, "entertainment". So, Bob Apple continued booking Shecky Greene and Marty Feldman to play the main rooms. And to satisfy the court, a very loose net was cast to fill his small conference rooms with female speakers/entertainers regardless of their bona fide expertise.

And Mike just happened to be there when Carmen was a "headliner"!

Having grown up poor and on the streets of Tijuana, Carmen learned to survive by over-exaggerating or simply making up anything necessary to coverup and rise above her current caste. By the time she was 15, she had fabricated a resume of extraordinary skills and accomplishments, constructing an illusory throne where she could project her ego over anyone who might question her actual authority.

When her family decided to migrate to the United States, Carmen found her false narrative not only useful, but the ideal way to blend right in. This new land of opportunity was filled with pompous asshole con-artists who had no credibility or purpose yet seemed to be doing better than many of the earnest, hardworking citizens of her native country. She had found her place in the world. All she had to do was perpetuate her amazing backstory and be willing to step on the necks of anyone who tried to disprove it.

Or as Yoda might opine, "Strong in this one does the American Dream exist, hmmm?"

A few attendees – the ones who recognized her lack of business acumen - got up and left, which she had become used to at this point in her performance. She smiled and gestured confidently towards the rear of the room, waiting until the last of the deserters had left.

Carmen waved them off with the same elbow and wrist motion a Rose Parade Queen might use while riding a float on New Year's Day. "Well, bye now!" Then she put her hand to the side of her mouth as if to reveal a secret to those who stayed. "I guess some people are afraid of success! Am I right?"

Carmen's assumptive question got a big laugh and a scattering of applause. It always played well, and she knew it.

As she had learned during a similarly fraudulent course entitled, "How to Make Friends and put them on Auto Bill Pay", also booked by Bob Apple and taught by another bullshit, self-promoting weasel, Carmen made it a practice to engage her audience with direct eye contact. This ensured an emotional connection between speaker and listeners, and more importantly identified the best prospects for her business success, not necessarily theirs. On more than one instance she found herself looking at Mike for signs of approval.

Mike, in turn, squinted back, trying to discern whether she had two eyebrows or one. He had no idea he was being hunted. Instead, he thought her flirtatious glances were a come on and not the acts of a dark haired, Tijuana-born Ahab, perched in the crow's nest trolling the high seas for her Moby Dick.

Her big closing number was offering her expertise to the remaining attendees at a 20% discount. Unfortunately, and unknown to everyone, Carmen had raised her consulting fee by 30% in order to cover the costs of renting the teal, beige and sandstone themed conference room. So, if they took her up on the offer, they were going to be paying more.

She is a go getter!

With the sermonette concluded and her great white whale in sight, Carmen walked straight at Mike. "I feel like we made a real connection," Carmen said assertively.

"I really enjoyed your insights," Mike replied, seeing the twinkle in Carmen's eyes. Again, he misinterpreted affection for his being identified as an easy mark. "I had a question about P&L."

Thar he blows!

"I can tell right away, you are a good judge of character and your ability to engage people is not why your business is struggling," Carmen said, landing the harpoon with fatal consequence.

“I’m a people person,” Mike said. “But really, about P&L...”

A few of the other attendees began to hover around Carmen, giving her the excuse to avoid the question that would reveal the tell in her bluff. Gesturing towards the other minnows: “I’d love to hear more about your business, but...” Carmen said.

“I’m staying here at the hotel if you want to have a drink.”

Carmen suggested: “How about in an hour at the Mumbling Toad – it’s the bar near the roulette tables.” She then checked one last item off her list. “Bring your wife or your girlfriend and we can all chat.”

Mike replied sullenly, “I’m here alone.” Carmen’s nipples got hard upon hearing this.

“The better to focus on your business,” she said like a fanged Brothers Grimm beast. Mike nodded and left Carmen to the other business owners. She smiled kindly as he made his way out the door.

Carmen turned her attention to another of the attendees, an enormous woman dressed in a burgundy rayon pant suit with a rosey blouse buttoned up to her neck. Her hair was two shades darker than normal and her thick pair of bifocals magnified her eyes to cartoonish proportions. The man-made fabric of her wardrobe held onto an odor reminiscent of smoked oysters. Trying not to gape, Carmen noted her sloppily scrawled name tag. “Well, look at you! Barbra Kockz! You know, I can tell right away, you are a good judge of character and your ability to engage people is not why your business is struggling.”