The Boozeletter

The red-headed stepchild of the red-headed stepchild of a whore

July 2008 (2)

Doctor Kush

How medical marijuana is transforming the pot industry.

"The Tibetan prayer flags suspended on a string over the sleeping body of Captain Blue rose and fell in fluttering counterpoint to the wheezy rhythm of his breath. Lifted by a gentle breeze off the Pacific Ocean, each swatch of red, white, yellow, or green cotton bore a paragraph of Asian script. Every time a flag flaps in the breeze, it is thought, a prayer flies off to Heaven. Blue's mother says that when her son was an infant he used to sleep until noon, which is still the time that he wakes up most days, on his platform bed in a one-bedroom apartment overlooking Venice Beach, a neighborhood of Los Angeles.

It was now three o'clock in the afternoon, and Captain Blue was dozing after a copious inhalation of purified marijuana vapor. (His nickname is an homage to his favorite variety of bud.) His hair was black and greasy, and was spread across his pillow. On the front of his purple T-shirt, which had slid up to expose his round belly, were the words "Big Daddy." With his arm wrapped around a three-foot-long green bong, he resembled a large, contented baby who has fallen asleep with his milk bottle.

Captain Blue is a pot broker. More precisely, he helps connect growers of high-grade marijuana upstate to the retail dispensaries that sell marijuana legally to Californians on a doctor's recommendation. Since 1996, when a referendum known as Proposition 215 was approved by California voters, it has been legal, under California state law, for authorized patients to possess or cultivate the drug. The proposition also allowed a grower to cultivate marijuana for a patient, as long as he had been designated a "primary caregiver" by that patient. Although much of the public discussion centered on the needs of patients with cancer, AIDS, and other diseases that are synonymous with extraordinary suffering, the language of the proposition was intentionally broad, covering any medical condition for which a licensed physician might judge marijuana to be an appropriate remedy—insomnia, say, or attention-deficit disorder.

The inside of Blue's apartment, where he spends most of his time, measures less than four hundred square feet. It opens onto a huge wraparound terrace that offers mind-bending views of the ocean and the Hollywood Hills. The apartment, which is in the vicinity of Washington Boulevard, used to be occupied by another pot dealer, who moved out a few years ago, leaving Blue with his crash pad and a list of about a hundred patients. The building is near Abbot Kinney Boulevard, the commercial drag in Venice that, in recent years, has been transformed from a low-rent strip of bars and secondhand-clothing stores into a destination for well-heeled shoppers and restaurant-goers. The building retains a funky seventies vibe, with white wood floors, murky brown walls, and faded Morrison Hotel-style carpets. The sounds of "Tom and Jerry" episodes blare through locked doors in the middle of the day.

* from the issue

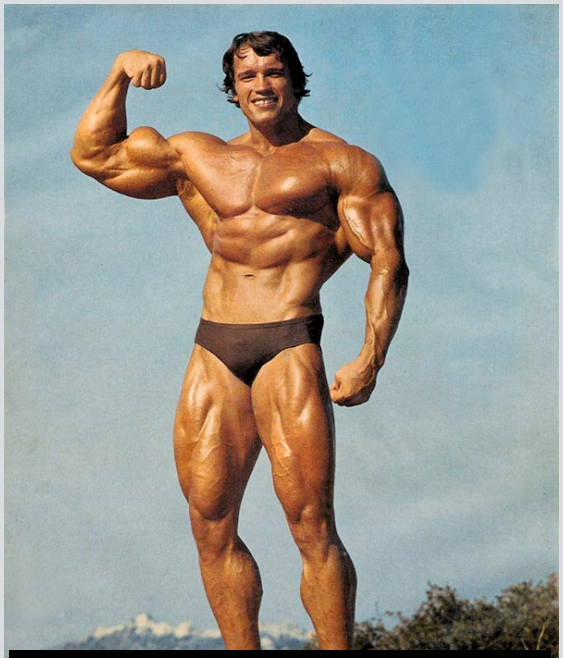
"It was three in the afternoon, and Blue was dozing after a copious inhalation of purified marijuana."

* cartoon bank
* e-mail this

I recently spent six months, off and on, with Blue—at his apartment, in private homes, on farms, in pot grow rooms, and in other places where "medical marijuana" is produced, traded, sold, and consumed in California. During that time, I saw thousands of Tibetan prayer flags. The flags identify their owners with serenity and the conscious path, rather than with the sinister world of urban dope dealers, who flaunt muscles and guns, and charge exorbitant prices for mediocre product. For Blue and tens of thousands of like-minded individuals, Proposition 215 presented an opportunity to participate in a legally sanctioned experiment in altered living. The people I met in the high-end ganja business had an affinity for higher modes of thinking and being, including vegetarianism and eating organic food, practicing yoga, avoiding prescription drugs in favor of holistic healing methods, travelling to Indonesia and Thailand, fasting, and experimenting with hallucinogenic drugs. Many were also financially savvy, working long hours and making six-figure incomes.

Blue and I have known each other for almost two decades. Our fathers were both professors of political science, and, starting in the mid-eighties, we both attended Ivy League colleges in the Northeast, where we shared a fondness for illegal drugs. After graduation, Blue spun records and taught nursery school in Manhattan. He left for California in 1998, not long after the state banned cigarette smoking in workplaces—Blue is highly allergic to cigarette smoke—and passed Proposition 215. After working for a while as a bouncer, he began selling pot full time.

Many thanks:



ARNOLD:
The droid munching freak done good

In 2003, the California State Legislature passed Senate Bill 420. The law was intended to clear up some of the confusion caused by Proposition 215, which had failed to specify how patients who could not grow their own pot were expected to obtain the drug, and how much pot could be cultivated for medical purposes. The law permitted any Californian with a doctor's note to own up to six mature marijuana plants, or to possess up to half a pound of processed weed, which could be obtained from a patients' collective or coöperative—terms that were not precisely defined in the statute. It also permitted a primary caregiver to be paid "reasonable compensation" for services provided to a qualified patient "to enable that person to use marijuana."

The counties of California were allowed to amend the state guidelines, and the result was a patchwork of rules and regulations. Upstate in Humboldt County, the heartland of high-grade marijuana farming in California, the district attorney, Paul Gallegos, decided that a resident could grow up to ninety-nine plants at a time, in a space of a hundred square feet or less, on behalf of a qualified patient. The limited legal protections afforded to pot growers and dispensary owners have turned marijuana cultivation and distribution in California into a classic "gray area" business, like gambling or strip clubs, which are tolerated or not, to varying degrees, depending on where you live and on how aggressive your local sheriff is feeling that afternoon. This summer, Jerry Brown, the state's attorney general, plans to release a more consistent set of regulations on medical marijuana, but it is not clear that California's judges will uphold his effort. In May, the state Court of Appeal, in Los Angeles, ruled that Senate Bill 420's cap on the amount of marijuana a patient could possess was unconstitutional, because voters had not approved the limits.

Most researchers agree that the value of the U.S. marijuana crop has increased sharply since the mid-nineties, as California and twelve other states have passed medical-marijuana laws. A drug-policy analyst named Jon Gettman recently estimated that in 2006 Californians grew more than twenty million pot plants. He reckoned that between 1981 and 2006 domestic marijuana production increased tenfold, making pot the leading cash crop in America, displacing corn. A 2005 State Department report put the country's marijuana crop at twenty-two million pounds. The street value of California's crop alone may be as high as fourteen billion dollars.

According to Americans for Safe Access, which lobbies for medical marijuana, there are now more than two hundred thousand physician-sanctioned pot users in California. They acquire their medication from hundreds of dispensaries, collectives that are kept alive by the financial contributions of their patients, who pay cash for

each quarter or eighth of an ounce of pot. The dispensaries also buy marijuana from their members, and sometimes directly from growers, whose crops can also be considered legal, depending on the size of the crop, the town where the plants are grown, and the disposition of the judge who hears the case.

California's encouragement of a licit market for pot has set off a low-level civil war with the federal government. Growing, selling, and smoking marijuana remain strictly illegal under federal law. The Drug Enforcement Administration, which maintains that marijuana poses a danger to users on a par with heroin and PCP, has kept up an energetic presence in the state, busting pot growers and dispensary owners with the coöperation of some local police departments.

In the past five years, an unwritten set of rules has emerged to govern Californians participating in the medical-marijuana trade. Federal authorities do not generally bother arresting patients or doctors who write prescriptions. Instead, the D.E.A. pressures landlords to evict dispensaries and stages periodic raids on them, either shutting them down or seizing their money and marijuana. Dispensary owners are rarely arrested, and patient records are usually left alone. Through trial and error, dispensary owners have learned how to avoid trouble: Don't advertise in newspapers, on billboards, or on flyers distributed door to door. Don't sell to minors or cops. Don't open more than two stores. Any Californian who is reasonably prudent can live a life centered on the cultivation, sale, and consumption of marijuana with little fear of being fined or going to jail.

Captain Blue displays his pot on a shelf by his bed, next to two new laptop computers and an assemblage of high-end stereo equipment. The weed is kept in silver Ziploc bags. All the pot that Blue sells is grown in accordance with California state law, he says, and is provided only to dispensaries of which Blue is a member, and to patients for whom he is the primary caregiver.

Blue has a photo I.D. card from the City of Los Angeles confirming that he is a bona-fide medical-marijuana patient. His malady is anxiety. On a side table by his bed, he keeps a Volcano, a German-made vaporizer that resembles a stainless-steel coffeemaker. The Volcano, which costs five hundred dollars, warms dried marijuana, releasing vapor into a plastic bag and leaving behind a toasted brown chaff that smells oddly like popcorn. When Blue uses the Volcano, he inhales the contents of the plastic bag through a bong, which purifies the vapor.

While Blue napped, I wandered around his apartment, and counted nearly a dozen images and carvings of the elephant-headed Hindu god Ganesha. The proliferation of Ganesha dates back to a well-publicized federal bust in January, 2007, when the D.E.A. seized the medicine and cash of eleven pot dispensaries in Los Angeles. The only major dispensary that wasn't busted had a Ganesha in its window. Now it is hard to find a karmically inclined ganja dealer in Los Angeles who doesn't own a herd of lucky figurines.

Blue's cell phone rang several times in succession, rousing him. His phone rings, on average, once every two and a half minutes between noon and 2 A.M., and I soon developed a Pavlovian aversion to his ringtone, a swirling, Middle Eastern-inflected electronica tune called "Lebanese Blonde." Blue switches phone numbers every six months or so. Although it is unlikely that the D.E.A.

"A resident could grow up to ninety-nine plants at a time."

would tap his phone, he told me, it doesn't hurt to take simple precautions, if only to reassure his more paranoid clients.

Blue answered the phone, rubbed his eyes, and began rattling off numbers. "Three hundred fifty? Three-fifty? Three-twenty-five? We could do three-twenty-five," he said, quoting a final price per ounce. Assuming a sitting position on his bed, he punched numbers into a calculator and suggested some designer strains that his patient might enjoy.

"Try Sour Diesel," he told the client. "Take that and the Bubba Kush." In addition to Sour Diesel and Bubba Kush, which are grown indoors, he also had AK Mist, an outdoor strain; Jedi, which is brown and fuzzy; Purple Urkel, whose hue is suggested by its name; O.G. Kush and L.A. Confidential, two particularly potent strains; and Lavender, a fragrant purple grown up North. Modern Kush plants are derived from a strain that is said to have originated in the Hindu Kush mountains, in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and, according to stoner lore, was imported to Southern California by some hippie surfers in the seventies, and then popularized in the late nineties by the Los Angeles rap group Cypress Hill. Stronger, better-tasting varieties of pot can sell for more than five thousand dollars per pound, more than double the price of average weed. The premium paid for designer pot creates a big incentive for growers and dealers to name their product for whatever strains happen to be fashionable that year. The variety of buds being sold as Kush has proliferated to the point where even the most catholic-minded botanist would be hard pressed to identify a common plant ancestor.

Only a small percentage of consumer marijuana sales in California occur within the medical-marijuana market. Even so, the dispensaries, by serving as a gold standard for producers and consumers, have fuelled the popularity of high-end strains in much the same way that the popularity of the Whole Foods grocery chain has brought heirloom lettuce to ordinary supermarkets. To serve these sophisticated new consumers, growers in California and elsewhere are producing hundreds of exotic new strains, whose effects are more varied, subtle, and powerful than the street-level pot available to tokers in the nineteen-seventies and eighties.

" The vapor in the bag was Gush, a robust mixture of Goo—a lighter, giddier high—and Kush."

"Does Terrence have paperwork with him?" Blue asked the customer. From the living room, I could hear the hum of the Volcano and the crinkle of the expanding plastic bag. The vapor in the bag was Gush, a robust mixture of Goo—a lighter, giddier high—and Kush.

Blue's business consists mainly of selling a few pounds a week to various dispensaries; occasionally, though, a single outlet will buy five or more pounds at a time. In the course of a month, Blue is typically in debt to half a dozen people, and in turn holds markers for twenty to thirty thousand dollars that he is owed by distributors around town. Because Blue works only with people he trusts, he usually gets his money back, although it can take as long as two or three years for some debtors to make good. Understanding the abstractions of ganja credit and debt is important in the pot business, where financial success is determined largely by the velocity of your cash transactions. A practiced flipper like Blue can make twenty to thirty dollars on an eighth of an ounce of high-grade pot, which retails for anywhere between fifty and seventy-five dollars. Last year, Blue made roughly a hundred thousand dollars, and paid some ten thousand in taxes.

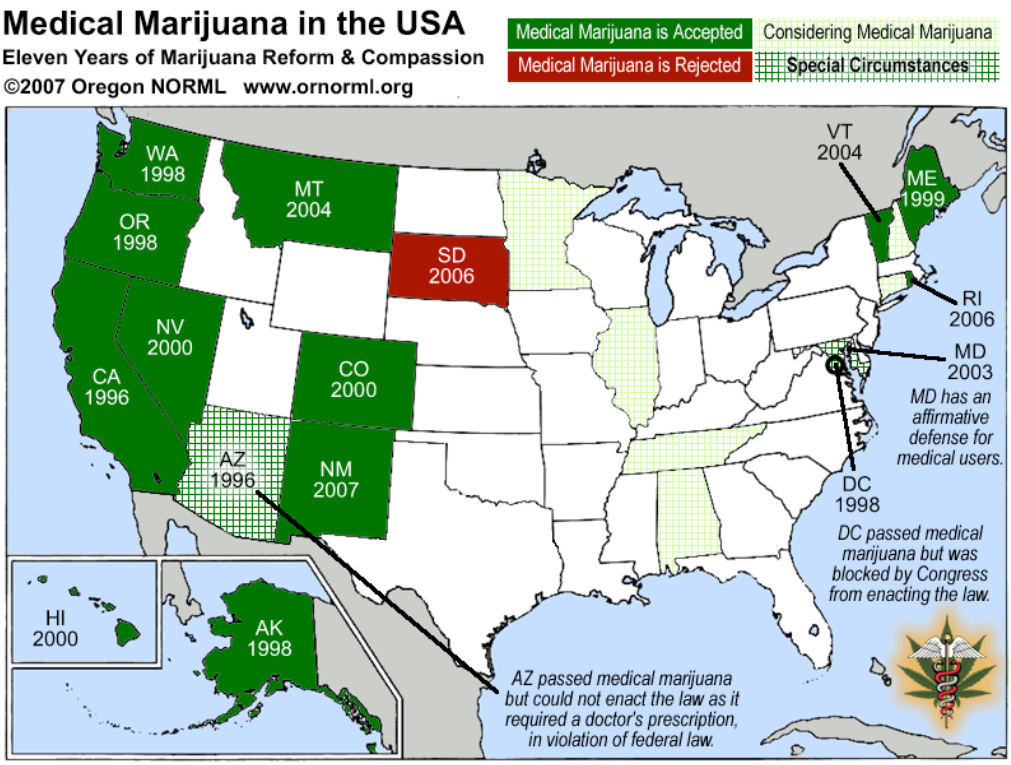
Later in the afternoon, a friend of Blue's, who calls herself Lily, showed up with a duffelbag. She unzipped the bag and placed on Blue's kitchen table three black trash bags filled with ganja. Lily is a courier; she transports pot to Los Angeles from the growing regions upstate. A witchy Japanese-American girl with a dolphin tattoo on her right shoulder, she wore large gold hoop earrings, a Lucite cross necklace, and sunglasses perched on top of her hair. She said that she got into the business because she suffers from chronic back and neck pain from a spinal injury, and found that smoking weed helped her with symptoms such as nausea and a loss of appetite.

Captain Blue encourages the growers he deals with to stay within legal cultivation limits, and makes sure that the dispensaries he joins keep the doctor's recommendations of members on file. The only participants in Blue's transactions whose activities are not strictly covered by prevailing interpretations of state law are couriers, or mules, who usually transport marijuana in airtight containers in the trunk, seats, or tires of a car. Neither Proposition 215 nor Senate Bill 420 spelled out how medical marijuana should be transported from rural growers to urban patients, leaving the mules as the least protected link in the distribution chain. Once the mules reach Los Angeles, they make the rounds of middlemen like Blue, who can legally broker their product to dispensaries where they are members. Mules receive a cut that ranges from five to sixteen per cent of the purchase price.

Being a courier was risky, Lily said, but the pay was good enough to let her not work for half the year. Her methods of transporting the pot from Northern California to Blue's apartment were time-tested and low-tech. You get the largest garbage bags you can find, some food bags, and a vacuum sealer. Then you double- or triple-bag the pot, seal it, pack it in garbage bags, put the bags inside some old newspapers, and stuff the bags into some cheap knapsacks, and then put three knapsacks each into duffelbags, along with a few hockey gloves or soccer balls. Then you pack the duffelbags in the back of the trunk and throw an old blanket over them, and toss on top a few folding chairs, along with some grocery bags full of fresh organic apples, to mask the scent of pot.

Blue, having assessed Lily's stash, made his offer for a portion. "Six thousand," he said.

One day, Blue and I went for a drive up the Pacific Coast Highway, in his blue hybrid S.U.V. I watched him make more than a thousand dollars in under an hour, dealing on the phone. "I've got some tasty L.A.



Confidential," he told a customer, motioning me to extract a disk of trance music from a pile of stale laundry in the back seat. "It's like O.G. Kush. A pound? I think I can do that." Blue said that he sells pot solely for medical purposes, although he conceded the possibility that some clients might break their purchases down into smaller amounts for the street trade. Asking questions about what buyers intend to do with their pot is not friendly behavior, Blue explained with a smile.

We were headed up to Topanga Canyon, in the mountains near Malibu, to meet a broker who supplies Blue with some of the best weed in the state. I'll call him Guthrie. A lifelong resident of Humboldt County, he funds a number of growing operations, ranging from a large underground bunker to smaller outdoor plots of fewer than a hundred plants. He also uses a fat bankroll to buy product from other producers, which he takes to Los Angeles two or three times a month. The house in Topanga, an old hippie enclave, belonged to a friend who let Guthrie sleep outside in a blue-and-green tent that resembled one of Buckminster Fuller's geodesic domes. I ducked to avoid a string of Tibetan prayer flags that hung over the entrance.

Guthrie was a lean, healthy-looking, brown-eyed man in his mid-thirties. "We have a list of all the pot growers in Humboldt County," he said, repeating an old Northern joke for my benefit. "It's called the Yellow Pages." He reached beneath a table and handed Blue a large black trash bag. Blue untied the bag and stuck his head inside, as the rich aroma of Purple Kush filled the interior of the tent.

"Mmm," Blue said, inhaling. Purple Kush smells like a mixture of cardamom and cloves, with a darker, earthier undertone of dried peat moss, and an acidic top note evoking freshly ground coffee. The two men agreed on a figure of forty-four hundred dollars a pound; the price had eased somewhat since its peak, in 2005. A large number of new growers entering the market had nudged prices down.

Guthrie's parents had been hippies. Growing up in Humboldt, he and his siblings got used to fleeing their house in the middle of the night when D.E.A. helicopters raided his family's growing patch. Perhaps a quarter of the kids in his class had parents involved in the marijuana trade. "You'd say, 'My dad, he fixes our house a lot,' " Guthrie recalled with a laugh, as he offered me a loaded pipe. By the end of the summer, the family was usually broke. In October, the harvest would come, and the family would sell their crop and have a great Christmas; by the next summer, they'd be back in a jam.

Guthrie stayed out of the family business until he was twenty-seven. Then he obtained a trucker's license and began hauling propane. Since truckers who transport hazardous materials are professional drivers who must go through background checks, the police generally leave them alone once they show their license, whether they are driving a truck or not. Guthrie's trucker's license gave his family a free pass through the "gantlet"—a stretch of Highway 101 between Humboldt and Santa Rosa where state police routinely search cars for pot.

Guthrie said that the quasi-legal status of smaller growing arrangements, combined with consumers' preference for potent, high-maintenance weed, has shifted the balance of the pot business away from large-scale farms. "There's a lot more people doing little scenes," he said. The welter of laws pertaining to medical marijuana in California has offered careful operators like Guthrie the best of both worlds: prosecution for growing and selling has become much less likely, while federal busts and seizures keep prices high. Guthrie sells about ten per cent of his product to dispensaries and collectives. Starting up a sophisticated indoor farming operation costs about three hundred thousand dollars, he said,

"'Mmm,' Blue said, inhaling."

including the cost of making a building airtight—to lock in the humidity, and to keep passersby from smelling the pot and calling the cops—and fitting it with thousand-watt grow lights.

Guthrie grows his plants in octagons, a hydroponic arrangement that allows producers to maximize the number of plants in a confined space. The cost of a piece of property upstate can run an additional three hundred thousand to one and a half million dollars, he said. After a few years, if you know what you are doing, you can make your investment back, and then you can pay a sharecropper to run your operation and spend your time travelling. Guthrie told Blue that he would soon be heading to Indonesia. "It's amazing over there," he said. The last time he was in Java, he recalled, he stayed in a Muslim village near the beach, and found the people generally relaxed and welcoming, if somewhat hostile to the Western habit of lying in the sun without clothing.

Life was good, he said; the only problem was that too many other people wanted the same life. Most people who moved up North to become pot entrepreneurs fucked it up, he said. Their failures, however, did nothing to diminish the potency of the dream.

One of Captain Blue's regular marijuana customers was a dispensary in Venice Beach. The store, which has cement floors, a glass display case, and a couch the color of aluminum, looks like a cross between a photographer's loft and a Kiehl's boutique. When I last visited, large Mason jars in the display case were filled with designer strains of weed selected by the owner, Cindy 99, whose nickname refers to a variety of designer pot. In a refrigerator, and marked "For medicinal use only," were treats such as marijuana granola and marijuana milk chocolate with crispy wafers. Above the counter hung a notice: "To our valued patients: in accordance with California law, we are required to add 8.25% sales tax."

Cindy 99's employees included a receptionist, a full-time counter girl, a part-time counter girl, and a bonded security guard—a former Green Beret—who is licensed to carry a weapon. Dr. Dean, a local physician, saw aspiring patients at the dispensary once a week. As long as they had a California state I.D., those who received recommendations for marijuana could buy some immediately from the dispensary's stock. Cindy told me that when she opened her shop, in 2007, she needed the same licenses that she would have needed to open a newsstand on the Santa Monica Pier: a commercial lease, a seller's permit, a federal tax I.D. number, and a tobacco license (for selling rolling papers and pipes). She estimated that forty per cent of her clients suffer from serious illnesses such as cancer, AIDS, glaucoma, epilepsy, and M.S. The rest have ailments like anxiety, sleeplessness, A.D.D., and assorted pains.

Like many other dispensary owners I spoke with, Cindy derives particular satisfaction from providing medication to people who suffer from chronic diseases. Although she suspects that there is nothing seriously wrong with many of the young men who come in to buy an eighth of L.A. Confidential, she doesn't regard marijuana as a

harmful drug when compared with Xanax, Valium, Prozac, and other pills that are commonly prescribed by physicians to treat vague complaints of anxiety or dysphoria. It was easy to see why the dispensary was so popular with young men: there was good pot, and Cindy 99, who is in her thirties, looks like an adolescent boy's fantasy of his best friend's hot older sister. The day I was there, she wore a tight sleeveless blue T-shirt with a gilt-winged emblem of a flying horse.

The first customer of the day was a Hispanic guy with three tattoos, the biggest one of which read "Angeles del Inferno." He had a doctor's note on file. After a short discussion, Cindy recommended two strains, which cost sixty-five dollars for an eighth. "These two have sativa in them," she said. "They're really good for daytime use." All strains of pot sold in the United States are derived from two varieties of the plant—indica and sativa—which have discernibly different effects on the user. Indica is a heavier, numbing drug; sativa is better for doing creative work or listening to music. Cindy refers to a popular book called "The Big Book of Buds" to determine the precise balance of indica and sativa in the strains she sells. Purple Urkel, Cindy explained, was mostly indica, making it better for alleviating pain. "The percentages are arbitrary, because of all the cross-breeding," Cindy admitted to me. "You take a Blueberry and you cross it with a Kush and you go back into Trainwreck, and how do you get a percentage from that?"

A young white man, barely out of his teens, with lace-up black boots, a nubby backpack, and a goatee, came in and bought an eighth of Trainwreck. He selected a chocolate turtle from the edibles case while gazing shyly at Cindy. "Don't eat it all at once if you have anything to do," she warned him.

Cindy has been in the ganja business for seventeen years, her entire adult life. Both of her parents grow pot. She began selling weed in high school, in British Columbia, where enforcement of anti-marijuana laws was famously lax. One day, a friend asked her if she would help distribute what his mom had grown. Within six weeks, they had doubled their money. "We started bringing it from Canada down to California," she recalled. "And then we moved to snowmobiles and then hollow-panelled speedboats on trailers, and then semis and shadow-planes. A plane would go up in the States and another plane would go up in Canada, and they'd fly around as if they were sightseeing, and you're allowed to switch airspace as long as you don't land. And then they would land in each other's countries looking like each other, same serial number, same everything."

A patio in back of the shop had been set up with a white plastic table with a batik tablecloth and two plastic chairs, in preparation for Dr. Dean's weekly visit. Each prospective patient pays the Doctor a hundred and fifty dollars, in cash, for a diagnostic interview. Dr. Dean's full name is Dr. Dean Hillel Weiss. Forty years old, he is one of a few dozen doctors in Los Angeles who regularly write medical-marijuana recommendations. In the past few years, he said, he had written several thousand such letters, none of which had been successfully challenged in court.

"To our valued patients: in accordance with California law, we are required to add 8.25% sales tax."

I told Dean that I wanted a doctor's recommendation that would allow me to legally smoke pot. He began a fifteen-minute interview, asking me about my reasons for wanting the drug. "How long have you been under the care of a psychiatrist?" he asked me, writing down the answer on a notepad. I provided him with a bill from my psychiatrist in New York, along with proof that I was currently living in California. He then quizzed me about my brief and unsatisfactory experiences with prescription medications for anxiety and depression, and my history of illegal drug use. Deciding that I was a suitable candidate for a medicalmarijuana recommendation, Dr. Dean took my money and provided me with a quick tutorial on strains of pot—indica offered a "body high," whereas sativa was "more heady and abstract"—along with a signed letter certifying that I was a patient under his care. The letter was good for a year, after which I could renew it, for a hundred dollars.

So far that day, Dr. Dean had seen seven patients, including a former doorman at a Manhattan night club, a musician working on a Bob Marley tribute album, and a young woman named Cassandra who was in the publishing business and came armed with a purse full of prescription medications for anxiety and depression. The vast majority of his referrals, he said, were by word of mouth. Though he was always careful to observe the letter of California state law, he said, "My personal belief is that marijuana is a useful and relatively harmless substance and that adults should be free to choose whether they want to use it or not."

Dean graduated from Columbia University and SUNY Downstate Medical Center, and began an orthopedics residency in his home town of Detroit before moving to Los Angeles, in 1998, and becoming an emergency-room doctor at Martin Luther King, Jr./Drew Medical Center —known to locals as Killer King. By 2005, he was burned out. One day, a friend invited him over to his house to sample some marijuana that he had obtained from his fiancée's boss, who had a recommendation for pot. "My friend said, 'I've got six strains you've got to try. I've got lollipops, I've got brownies,' " Dr. Dean recalled. "I went over. It was like being in Amsterdam. At the end of the night, he turned to me and said, 'You know, you hate working in the emergency room. Maybe you should look into this.' "

Cassandra, the publishing employee, was interviewed by Dr. Dean after I was. Emerging from the patio, she said, "That was amazing! That was fantastic!" She went over to the display case.

"What's the best in terms of social life, having other people around?" she asked. As Cindy discussed the relative merits of the various sativa strains, Cassandra noticed some small hash pipes in the glass case.

"It's a great little travel device that you can take to the beach," Cindy explained.

"No way! Cool! I love it!" Cassandra said. She bought one.

As Cindy weighed out Cassandra's marijuana purchases, which totalled a hundred and ten dollars, she commiserated with her new customer about the unattractive names of some popular strains. "Cat Piss?" she said.

“Dog Shit? If it’s going to be legal, the stoners can’t still be making up the names.”

The Farmacy, which has outlets in West Hollywood, Venice, and Westwood, made Cindy 99’s dispensary look like a mom-and-pop operation. Famous for the “Very Open” neon sign in the window of the West Hollywood location, the Farmacy has the carefully art-designed “natural” aesthetic of an Aveda boutique. The reigning concept is that pot is simply another benign medicinal herb, like echinacea or ginkgo biloba. The Farmacy is the brainchild of Michael, an elusive hippie who doesn’t give out his last name and whose defiant nature and marketing prowess have made him a celebrity on the medical-marijuana scene. His success has begun to irritate the authorities: the D.E.A. recently forced the Farmacy’s landlord to close a fourth outlet, in Santa Monica.

I met Michael one afternoon at the Venice store, a large retail space on Abbot Kinney. In the front of the shop, Asian handicrafts are for sale. Saint-John’s-wort and various Chinese herbs are stocked in jars behind the main counter; a forty-two-inch plasma TV screen displays Tao symbols and other karmic imagery. An extensive selection of organic soaps and shampoos is available in the back of the store, near a children’s-medicine section. The main sign that the Farmacy is not, in fact, a Body Shop is a large color portrait on the wall of Bob Marley, smiling broadly while toking on a fat spliff.

Customers with a valid doctor’s letter may request one of the bamboo-bound menus kept behind the counter, which list available strains of pot, some of them requiring a “donation” of seventy-five dollars per gram. There is also a gelato bar, which offers a variety of flavors laced with marijuana and other herbs.

Michael, a sixty-year-old man with a gray ponytail, was wearing jeans, a faded navy T-shirt, a yellow flannel shirt, and a battered fleece vest. Shifting impatiently from one foot to the other, he read from a poster on the wall stating that words and phrases like “weed,” “dope,” and “getting stoned” were used to “devalue, disempower, and criminalize people who choose to use medical cannabis.” Recently, he noted, characters on “Desperate Housewives” had used the words “medicine” and “medicating” while referring to cannabis consumption. The culture was changing. “We see cannabis as a gateway herb,” he said.

Upstairs, he showed me a light-filled waiting room with a grand piano and handcrafted wood chairs and couches. Someday soon, he said, the room would be filled with patients waiting to meet with therapists practicing massage, acupuncture, and other healing arts. Licensed professionals would be available to consult about medication, diet, and exercise. The waiting room was even equipped with children’s toys, so that mothers could bring their kids to appointments. As we spoke, he trimmed some long-stemmed flowers that were in a vase on top of the piano. He then sat down and played a passage of Brahms.

Michael had trouble sitting in one place for any length of time, a legacy, in part, of five and a half years he says he spent in San Quentin for various pot-related offenses. (Spending years in a small, cramped prison cell had made him antsy, he said.) Michael has been involved in the marijuana business since he was eighteen years old. His first big deal, with an Arab partner, was smuggling into California two hundred pounds of hash from Lebanon. In the early seventies, he attended a pot-legalization rally in Washington, D.C. While in the city, he did some research on cannabis at the Library of Congress. He found a trove of cannabis studies from the early twentieth century; botanists at the time had studied the plant extensively. According to a paper from 1903, the internal clock that tells a marijuana plant whether to flower or not could be turned on or off by varying its exposure to light. By lengthening the “day” to sixteen or eighteen hours, growers could speed up the initial growth of the plants; later in the growing cycle, they could cut back on light exposure, causing female plants to flower. The useless male plants, which produce pollen rather than smokable buds, could then be thrown away.

By speeding up the growing cycle and getting rid of the males, you could produce three or four times the amount of pot indoors. In the winter of 1973, Michael, who was living in Mendocino County, put together a slide show for upstate growers based on what he had learned about manipulating the growing cycle. “Nobody ever grew males again,” he boasted.

Michael said that he served two stints in San Quentin. After he was discharged the second time, in 1999, he grew tomatoes for Whole Foods and worked for a seed bank. After the passage of Senate Bill 420, a friend told him about the dispensary scene and loaned him a 1987 BMW. Michael placed an ad in the newspaper saying that he would deliver cannabis right to a customer’s door. He opened the first Farmacy in 2005.

I asked Michael if being involved in the dispensary business was a wise choice for a two-time drug offender. “I’ve got two strikes around my neck, and, yes, I’ve been anxious,” he said. He noted that he had ten children from various wives and girlfriends, all of whom were supported by the income from his stores. He declined to reveal how much money he made.

Michael jumped off the couch and bounded downstairs to take care of some business, leaving me with JoAnna LaForce, who helps run the business side of the Farmacy. A cheerful woman in her fifties, she believes that she is the only pharmacist in the United States who actively participates in a medical-cannabis dispensary. Though doctors are protected under California state law, she explained, pharmacists are not, which means that she is theoretically subject to arrest, although the D.E.A. generally avoids entanglements with medical professionals.

LaForce told me that she had once been married to Michael; they did not have children. “I met him in San Diego in February, 1993, through a mutual friend,” she said. “At the time, he was on the lam. We were together for a year before the feds took him away.” When he got out of prison, they were together for two more years, and then he went to Mexico, to live on the beach and surf. When Michael decided to open the Farmacy, she was happy to help.

LaForce spent fifteen years working in a hospice with dying patients. “I saw the value of alternative medicine,

“ The first customer of the day was a Hispanic guy with three tattoos, the biggest one of which read ‘Angeles del Inferno.’”

particularly cannabis, in helping with appetite, pain management, and anxiety," she said. "I found that I could use cannabis to decrease the pain medication, which in turn made patients able to spend their last days talking to their friends, spouses, to share good times." The upcoming pot harvest, she said, was set to be the largest in the state's history, adding, "There is a gold rush going on with cannabis in the state of California."

The dispensary owners of Los Angeles hold a meeting once a month in an anonymous office building in the shadow of Cedars-Sinai hospital. At a recent gathering, a sign on the wall said "Stop Arresting Medical Marijuana Patients." The shades were drawn. There were twenty-five people in attendance, and most of them were either in their mid-twenties or in their mid-forties. A few—such as a muscular man in biker gear and a woman in glittery flip-flops and not much else—looked like refugees from the porn industry.

The meeting began with a "raid update," delivered by Chris Fusco, a young field coördinator for Americans for Safe Access. In the past month alone, ten dispensaries had been raided in Los Angeles by the D.E.A. "Raids suck," Fusco said.

"I think things will get worse before they get better," said Don Duncan, the owner of the California Patients Group, a large dispensary that was raided by the D.E.A., and then shut down, in the summer of 2007. He owns another dispensary, the Los Angeles Caregivers and Patients Group, which was raided a few months later but has subsequently reopened, despite the rumored seizure of close to a million dollars in marijuana. (Duncan puts the figure at thirteen thousand dollars' worth of cannabis-based products.)

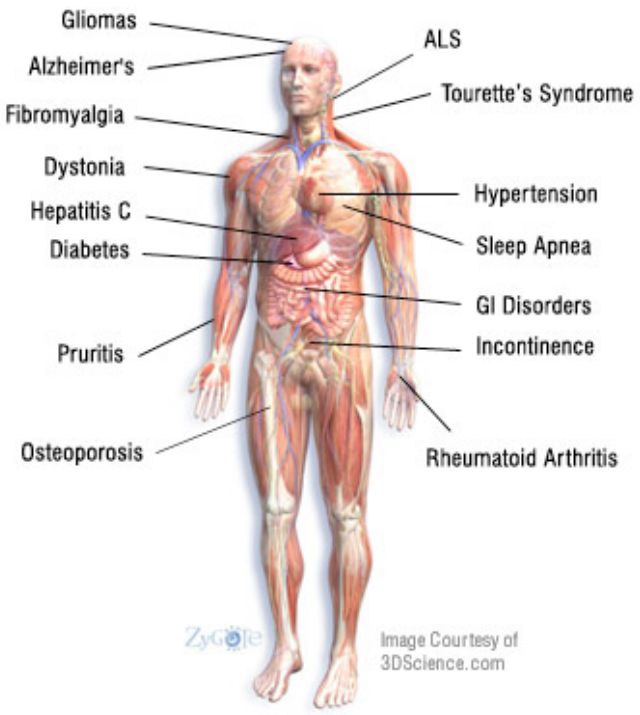
Several of the top dispensary owners had recently attended meetings with the city planning department, the city attorney, and the L.A.P.D. The meetings were intended to help draft a set of legal guidelines to govern the conduct of the dispensaries. Despite the dispensary owners' willingness to coöperate with the city, Duncan said, everyone who attended the meetings had either had his dispensary raided by the D.E.A. or received a letter from his landlord asking him to give up his lease, owing to threats from federal authorities that the property would be seized.

"What is the information that the D.E.A. wants from the people they detain in these raids?" a man asked.

"They want to know who is in charge and where the medicine comes from," Duncan answered. "They want growers." Patient records were untouched. "They left all the concentrates," he added, describing the aftermath of the raid on the Los Angeles Caregivers and Patients Group. "That's how we reopened the vapor bar."

"Did they take computers?" another person asked.

"They planted some tracking software that records user names and passwords which was transmitting to an I.P. address in Virginia," Duncan said. "Our computer guy found it right away."



Potential Therapeutic Uses of Medical Marijuana

After the meeting, I paid a visit to Allison Margolin, who calls herself "L.A.'s dopest attorney." Her trade is a sort of family business—her father, the lawyer Bruce Margolin, is the author of the Margolin Guide, which enumerates the legal penalties for the sale and possession of pot in each of the fifty states. She works in a black-glass office tower on Wilshire Boulevard owned by Larry Flynt, the publisher of Hustler. On the walls in her office, a Harvard Law School degree is juxtaposed with a pictorial layout from the magazine Skunk, featuring her in a low-cut leopard-print dress. Margolin's sexpot image is an advantage with clients, who, more often than not, are socially isolated men. Margolin has a reputation for getting cases dismissed, and for retrieving marijuana plants that have been seized by the police.

"The truth is, it's very rare to get plants back," Margolin said. Her long auburn hair was in a tidy French bun, but a few strands had been allowed to slip loose. Like many of her clients, she adopted a tone of adolescent vulnerability and outraged innocence when talking about the mean grownups who don't like pot. "People are talking about how it's being over-recommended and abused," she said. "I mean, big fucking deal. It's not toxic!" I asked her if she had a doctor's letter, and she nodded vigorously, explaining that she suffers from an anxiety disorder.

"Cat Piss?" she said. "Dog Shit? If it's going to be legal, the stoners can't still be making up the names."

She said that courts are sometimes sympathetic to her arguments about the relative safety of pot, but most judges and prosecutors seem to have only a glancing acquaintance with the case law since the passage of Proposition 215. "I've gone to court, like, several times where the judge has read only the first half of the case, which talks about how dispensaries are not legal according to Proposition 215," she said. "I think it's just intellectual and physical laziness."

A patient whose plants Margolin had recovered, Matt Farrell—known in the community as Medical Matt—stopped by for some counsel. Medical Matt was hardly an advertisement for the curative wonders of medical marijuana, or for the idea that all medical-marijuana patients are enjoying themselves by gaming the system. His cheeks and chin were covered in a three-day growth of dark stubble, and his red-rimmed eyes got wet as he spoke.

"I've always suffered from mental problems," Farrell said, reciting a long list of prescription drugs that he had taken, including Paxil, Wellbutrin, Risperdal, and Prozac. He had obtained his first doctor's letter for pot in late 2001 or early 2002—his memory wasn't clear. He began growing pot to support his habit, which costs him between sixty and a hundred dollars a day.

In December, 2005, he said, police officers ransacked his house—seizing about a hundred and twenty plants and nine grow lights—even though he showed his doctor's letter, and contended that the plants were for his own use and the use of the members of the collective to which he belonged. He was accused of unlawfully cultivating marijuana; the charge was dismissed in 2006. The police came back to his house in 2007, he said, once again trashing the premises and charging him with the unlawful cultivation of marijuana and the possession of marijuana for sale. They

froze his bank account, which, he said, destroyed his credit rating. The second case against him is still pending.

Although the police behavior he described may seem excessive, it is usually forgiven by judges who try to balance the competing demands of state and federal law. By routinely looking the other way when law-enforcement officers make "mistakes," the courts have allowed police departments that don't like current state law to work around it, and put pressure on people like Farrell.

> " A really good trimmer can trim two pounds of pot a day, at a rate of two hundred and fifty dollars per pound."

In the wake of the seizures and the property damage, Farrell said, he was borrowing money from his parents, and his house was going into foreclosure. "It's either a joke or I'm delirious," he said, starting to cry. "I mean, I'm not the smartest person in the world, but I sure as hell can read something pretty simple and understand it. If the state, county, city council, and everybody else is saying you can, how the hell does the L.A.P.D. come in to say you can't?" Spokesmen and officers of the D.E.A. and the L.A.P.D. told me, off the record, that the federal laws regulating the possession and distribution of marijuana took precedence over the laws of the State of California, and that, until federal law changed, the D.E.A. and the L.A.P.D. would continue to work together in their fight against the drug trade.

Sitting beneath a willow tree on a breezy day in Sonoma County, you can see why the idea of leaving the city behind and growing your own weed exerts such a pull on the holistic health nuts, masseurs, d.j.s, art-school dropouts, and New Age types who populate the medical-marijuana scene in Los Angeles. Farming a crop of twenty-five or thirty plants of killer weed is an updated (and highly profitable) version of the age-old California dream of an orange tree in every back yard. For those who can't afford to pay for a prime plot of land in Humboldt, there is the possibility of renting a small split-level house in Sonoma or Mendocino and converting the master bedroom into a grow room, where you can turn around an indoor crop every sixty days.

Captain Blue and I took a five-day excursion to the growing fields up North. Our guide was an old friend of his, a woman who called herself the Kid. She had been minding a grow house in Sonoma since being laid up with a half-dozen broken ribs after a bad motorcycle accident. The Kid had large eyes, a big nose, and long hair, and a squat, powerful body covered in black-ink tattoos, which ran across her chest and arms and up the back of her neck. "There's a lot of women in the bud scene that are just looking to be with some guy that has some property and some plants, so that they can sit on their ass and do nothing," she said, as we sat outside on her porch and watched horses graze. "There is a large percentage of really fabulous beauties. And then there's the hard, serious worker girls that dig holes all day."

Blue wiped the sweat from his forehead with the sleeve of his loose plaid shirt. He wasn't used to being outside. He asked for a glass of water and drank it in a single gulp. Then he wrapped his arms around his friend and gave her a hug, taking care not to put pressure on her ribs. They made for a weird, medieval-looking couple; both had long hair, round bodies, and shoulders strong enough to chop wood. Both had spent years smoking pot and consuming staggering quantities of mushrooms, cactus powders, LSD, and other mind-altering substances.

The Kid made her bed by the picture window in the living room, next to a plaster Buddha and a shelf of books about plants, including "Marijuana Horticulture," by Jorge Cervantes. The dining room was occupied by a pool table. If you are selling your own product, she explained, you can clear as much as seventy-five thousand dollars, after expenses, on a duffelbag filled with thirty pounds of pot. The easiest way to make this kind of small indoor scene work is to live in someone else's house and nurture the plants in exchange for a third or half the profits, and that is how the Kid would be spending her time for the next two months.

The Kid's plants, all Sour Diesels, were being raised on a mixture of nutrients which changed every three to five days, in accordance with a detailed regimen that had been laid out, in black Magic Marker, in a battered spiral-bound notebook. The notebook had been bequeathed to the Kid by a longtime friend. The cost of the nutrients was approximately six hundred dollars a week.

We entered the darkened bedroom, and were confronted by the fetid smell of plant life. Without the ventilation system that the Kid had installed, the temperature would have been about a hundred and ten degrees in the dark, largely from the stored-up heat of the lights—seven of them, a thousand watts each. There was a tank of carbon dioxide in the corner. "The more CO2, the thicker the bud," the Kid explained.

It was a relatively small operation: the lights and their installation had cost about fifteen thousand dollars, and power and nutrients had cost an additional twelve thousand or so. The array of nutrients along the walls included specialized growing products such as Bud Blood ("promotes larger, heavier & denser flowers and fruit") and Rizotonic (a powerful root stimulant). "Voodoo Juice is going to go in here, and Scorpion, and it goes on and on," the Kid said. Every three or four days, she ran purified water through her hydroponic growing medium for a full day, in order to give the plants a break. After the full, eight-week growth cycle, the Kid planned to harvest her crop and clear out.

Up North, the marijuana harvest is known as "trimming season." In Humboldt and Mendocino, she said, October is a month-long sleepover, with all the free ganja, beer, and organic food you want. A really good trimmer can trim two pounds of pot a day, at a rate of two hundred and fifty dollars per pound, while sitting around a table with three or four friends. Kids from San Francisco or even Australia hear about the harvest from friends of friends and show up for the pot and the cash. The D.E.A. routinely busts a few big scenes each year, and the local police have been known to stop cars and check the passengers for telltale scratches on their arms or sticky resin under their fingernails.

None of this intimidated the Kid. "It's a fucking blast," she said. "This is crop No. 6 for me this year." After a month of being cooped up, she was eager to get on the road. I agreed to drive, because her license had been suspended since the motorcycle accident. Along the way, she recounted a transformative experience that she had had at the age of nineteen with the psychedelic drug DMT. While tripping, she had a vision of herself lying down on a forest floor. She heard a growling sound and saw a twenty-foot-tall woman guarded by a gigantic dog. "She was enormous, and definitely not attractive, and I recognized the look in her eye," the Kid remembered. "I said, 'Oh, my God, that's me.' And she said, 'Yep, I am you. But I'm very old. My energy is very big.' I was kind of in shock, but I didn't feel threatened." The old woman explained that the Kid didn't need to worry about death anymore. There was no such thing as death, in fact. Energy returned to its source and then took another form.

The Kid fell silent for a moment. “I only saw her that one time,” she said. Afterward, she recalled, she felt a bit woozy, and a friend sat her in front of the television and let her watch

cartoons.

The Kid, Blue, and I arrived in Arcata, a small, well-kept Northern town, around dusk. After dinner, we drove to a farm owned by a couple whom I’ll call Nick and Danielle. Nick, who had long brown hair and Mediterranean features, and Danielle, a yoga-toned blonde, had both worked as massage therapists in Malibu. One day, a massage client of Nick’s asked him about dispensaries, and he took her to one. “She saw people spending two thousand dollars at the counter,” Nick said, with a laugh. “She said, ‘What kind of business is this?’ ” Her next reaction was to suggest that Nick and Danielle could run a dispensary, and that she could front them the fifty thousand dollars they would need to get started. They soon opened one, and, after the business took off, they bought the property up North.

Nick and Danielle’s farm was at the end of a long, well-protected valley surrounded by high mountains. The turnoff was a dirt path barred by a classic old wooden ranch gate featuring the longest string of Tibetan prayer flags I saw during my stay in California.

Arriving at the house, we dumped our bags on a wooden deck. Nick, who was dressed in jeans and a sweaty T-shirt, showed us around the property. He was already a skilled grower: last year, he told me, he won second place in the Los Angeles Cannabis Cup, an annual competition, for a particularly potent strain of marijuana that he had grown from seeds he ordered through the mail from Amsterdam. But he did not consider pot his life’s calling. He spoke of one day starting up a healing center on Mt. Shasta, where people could clean out their systems and go hiking.

The property lacked sufficient water for pot growing, Nick said, but their neighbor up the mountain helped them out. “He’s a great bro,” he said. “Every few days, he drops two thousand gallons down a pipe.” In exchange, Nick paid the neighbor a minimal fee. “He’s an older guy, he’s been up here for forty years. He knows how hard it can be when you first move somewhere.” Nick had about three hundred plants in the ground on a hill behind his house. On another plot of land, a few hills over, he had two hundred and fifty plants, as insurance against a targeted raid on his property.

A perfect half-moon was shining brightly in the twilight. The North Star was already visible. Nick, Danielle, and some friends had gathered in the living room, whose focal point was a large homemade altar, for meditation, surrounded by burning tea candles. At the kitchen table, a friend of Nick’s, Charlie, packed a large water pipe with the smoke of the day. Next to Charlie was Nick’s friend Dylan Fenster, from Venice, who was spending a few months up North to help with the harvest. He said that he smoked marijuana primarily to deal with the pain from a degenerative spinal condition; he carried his doctor’s letter in his back pocket. “Twice in the last six months, I’ve been cited for smoking in public,” he told me. “Both times I got the weed back, and both times the judge admonished the cops, ‘You know, this is legal.’ ”

On the fridge, someone had posted a handwritten sign with the motto “Today is the day we manifest heaven on earth and godly bliss.” Water pipes were passed around, and everyone got high. After four hits on Nick’s bong, the slogans on the refrigerator started to vibrate with uncommon significance. I looked over at Blue and saw that he was dozing off again, this time with a homemade bong resting on his chest.

“I always wanted to heal the world or find the cure for cancer,” Nick told me, with a faith-healer stare. “I have massaged over ten thousand people, and I hope to massage ten thousand more, and to heal the world with good medicine that I can grow here and provide on a compassionate basis to the people who need it.”

Danielle started talking with the Kid about her wedding. “It was three days,” she said. The wedding was held in a clearing in a forest, and a cigar box was passed around containing two hundred hand-rolled joints of Kush.

I headed out to a swinging bench on the porch and gazed intently at dozens of bright stars, and thousands of lesser stars. Nick came outside and offered another hit. “I love it here,” he said. “I love the earth and the sounds and the smells and the sounds at night.” The farm’s location at the tip of the valley was particularly sweet. “There are no cars driving by and no planes flying over and no sirens going off or any kind of negative frequencies,” he said. “It almost feels like it must have felt for the original pioneers who were first exploring California.”

Every morning, Nick said, he woke up at seven, had a smoothie, and got in tune with nature. “Then I’ll head out to the garden and I’ll do some watering,” Nick continued. “Depending on the day of the week, I’ll maybe feed the plants, check in with them. Double-check for damage from the deer and whatever else has been creeping in through the cracks. Make sure the praying mantises are on duty.” Growing marijuana outdoors, he felt, emphasized the holistic qualities of the plant rather than its psychotropic function. Someday, he said, he wanted to plant cherry trees, and peaches, plums, and apricots.

Nick said that he hoped to have kids, and he liked the idea of raising children on a farm. When I asked him whether he worried about the atmosphere of danger and illegality that came with operating a gray-area business, he shook his head. “I really feel like my karma’s good,” he said. “I’m not doing anything wrong.” He owned the dispensary for which his crop was intended. He had never been arrested or done time in jail. “We’ve got a good lawyer, and we pay state sales tax,” he said.

Nick’s income from the dispensary last year, he said, was only around fifty thousand dollars. “That’s what I make for all the scary shit I do,” he said, looking up at the constellations. “I’m not making millions of dollars. I’m a hardworking, compassionate person, and I spend my time helping people. It makes me feel happy to bring smiles to the faces of people that have frequented my collective.”

“I really feel like my karma’s good,” he said. “I’m not doing anything wrong.”

The next morning, I woke up on the floor of Nick and Danielle's living room, a ceiling fan whirring stale air above my head. There were three other people asleep in the room. As my head cleared, I perused a nearby bookshelf, which contained various speculative and esoteric texts, including "The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Christian Myth," "Secrets of Shamanism," and "Crop Circles: Signs of Contact."

I wandered outside. Behind the building were two long greenhouses made of translucent plastic sheeting supported by bent steel ribs, which sheltered smaller plants until they were ready to be put in the ground. I ran into Nick, who was already at work, and he led me on a tour of the slopes at the back of his property. "I planted these at the end of May," he said. "They're three months old." Outdoors, the sativa growth cycle is eleven weeks; the indica cycle is seven to nine. Toward the end of the cycle, the flowering plant loses its lush green leaves and manifests a shrivelled brown bud. "This is Afghooey crossed with Maui Wowie," Nick said, pointing to a six-foot plant with half its leaves missing. So far, he said with equanimity, he had lost about a quarter of his crop—more than a hundred thousand dollars' worth—to nibbling deer.

The three hundred or so plants on this part of the mountain were arranged in a V shape. The arms of the V ascended the mountain and spread out beneath the shelter of the surrounding forest. Nick admitted that the plants were not particularly well hidden, and said that the planting formation was mainly a respectful tip of the hat to the D.E.A. planes that flew over the valley. "They appreciate it when you're not growing it in rows, like a cornfield," he explained. Small planes had been buzzing overhead lately. Last night, one of Nick's visiting friends had reported that a helicopter had canvassed the property and shone a light down onto the front porch. The friend admitted to having been stoned when he saw the searchlight.

Virtually everyone in the valley made a living from growing pot, Nick said. The signs of their activity were hard to miss. To illustrate his point, he indicated to the top of a mountain across the way. "It's quite expensive to put electrical poles up a mountain," he said. As I followed his gaze, I caught sight of what looked like a sail. "You're looking at greenhouses," he explained.

With so much pot on the market in California, it paid to differentiate your crop. Later that day, Nick and Danielle's investor from Malibu arrived with a lawyer, who was there to inspect the farm's organic-farming methods. If the farm passed, the pot would be certified as an organic product. The lawyer was a tall, fit-looking middle-aged man from San Francisco who wore a gray suit and a white starched shirt with no tie. He declined to be interviewed about his business.

Captain Blue spent the day outside, roaming the property and taking photographs with a digital S.L.R. camera. He took pictures of Nick's friends working the pot fields and tending to the mature mother plants. And he took closeups of the enormous brown buds on a fifteen-foot-high pot plant. The physical exertion was hard for Blue. Beads of sweat collected on his forehead, and his shirt was soon soaking wet.

Blue handed me his camera, and I clicked through his photographs. I had told Blue many times that if he were slightly more motivated he could probably have a career as a photographer. My motherly attempts to lure Blue away from a life centered on pot had created a certain degree of tension in our friendship, even though he claimed not to mind. The truth was that Blue's life had never been better. He was making money. People depended on him. He was a respected member of his community. He treated the people in his life—growers, suppliers, patients, customers—in a considerate fashion. He had even figured out a way to keep his marijuana business within the letter of California state law.

But it is hard to argue that what Blue does for a living is the kind of activity that California's medical-marijuana laws were designed to protect. Though he is not a dangerous criminal, he is not exactly a hospice worker, either. He is a gray-area entrepreneur, working the seams of a hidden economy, populated by tens of thousands of people whose lives and minds and bank accounts it has altered forever, even as the rest of the country is only beginning to realize that it exists.

After leaving Nick's farm, Blue, the Kid, and I stopped at a diner in Redway to get a slice of blackberry pie. While we ate, I watched a long-haired teen-ager guide her stoned father to their car. His hair was gray, and longer than hers, and when he stepped off the curb and started to amble toward a black BMW she grabbed his arm. "Dad, this is not your car," she said sweetly. "Your car is over there."

Humboldt's economy is so heavily dependent on cannabis cultivation that you can drive for miles on well-kept highways and back roads without discovering a single legitimate source of income, aside from honey stands. Heading north, we eventually entered a maze of logging roads on a private reserve. A bunch of hippies grew pot in the forest, and the local cops stayed away.

Our destination was a house occupied by a woman who identified herself as Emily. A wiry marijuana sharecropper who also works as an environmental activist, she was busy watering her plants. There were twenty-five plants in all, surrounded by a fence on which hung a laminated patient's letter, signed by Ken Miller, M.D., stating that the marijuana was intended for medical purposes. Because marijuana is a fungible commodity, like soybeans or rice, there is no way to tell the difference between marijuana that winds up going to patients and marijuana that winds up on the street. The doctor's letter was, therefore, halfway between a legal document and a good-luck charm. Tibetan prayer flags fluttered along the length of the fence.

Emily was thin, with curly hair, and had a solitary, independent air; she'd been living alone for five months. She wore a gray T-shirt advertising a club called the Boom-Boom Room, in Cambodia. Her hands were covered

"He indicated to the top of a mountain across the way. "It's quite expensive to put electrical poles up a mountain," he said."

with homemade tattoos of the kind that skater kids draw on each other.

The Kid and Emily were old friends, and they quickly launched into the technical details of Emily's growing regimen. "It's a three-day flip with Penetrator and a carbo load," Emily said, and then I lost them.

After Emily finished her watering, we hiked over the mountain to a patch of twenty plants, where she went through the same routine. We sat on a couch that someone had carried up the mountain, and looked down on the verdant valley below as Emily described her growing arrangements. The house where we first met was owned by a man in his fifties, Emily said, who lived on the peak of the next mountain over. In addition to the two parcels of land that Emily tended, her host had half a dozen other plots in and around the reserve, which were worked by other sharecroppers. By taking care to stay under the local limit of ninety-nine plants on each of his properties, Emily's host had averted most of the risk inherent in his profession while enjoying an income large enough to finance a laid-back life of self-exploration. He also donated considerable funds to environmentally friendly social-action projects in Central America and South America.

Emily had come to Humboldt ten years ago as a young activist, working to save old-growth redwoods. She first encountered marijuana plants after she picked some edible mushrooms on a friend's land, cooked them up in marijuana-laced butter, and ate a good meal with some wine. That evening, her friend went outside briefly and returned with three huge plants over his shoulder. He taught Emily and some other activists how to trim the plants, separating the buds from the leaves over a framed screen with a sheet of glass underneath, to catch loose trichomes.

Emily decided to stay in the mountains. She loved the odd mixture of people who lived in a place with no apparent cash economy: the old lesbian couples who made jam and grew pot, the acupuncturists with connections to the San Francisco drag-queen scene, the old hippie ladies whose grower husbands had left them years ago and who toughed it out on the land they got in the divorce. Gazing at the setting sun, Emily said, "I think a lot of those people were drawn up here for intuitive reasons—soul reasons, or whatever." The problem with growing pot back then, she said, was that it was illegal, and that changed you. "You had to carry a gun and be scared of people, and you lost track of the reason you came up here."

Before the legalization of medical marijuana, she said, the wholesale price of good weed was forty-eight hundred dollars a pound. Now it was between twenty-two and twenty-six hundred. That was still profitable, though, and there were fewer stories in the newspapers about people being bound and gagged by cash-hungry gangsters.

The one thing that hadn't changed was the Humboldt Slide. "You start at this really great percentage, and you're buddy-buddy and everything's great," Emily said. As the harvest approaches, growers inevitably begin to run out of money and get greedy, and the sharecroppers lose whatever leverage they had earlier in the growing cycle, when their daily attention was necessary for the young plants to survive. Emily's wage the previous year was initially set at a third of the value of the plants that she harvested. Later, her boss "slid" her percentage to a sixth, meaning that she owned only a dozen of the eighty plants that she grew that season. Emily's philosophical approach to her losses is psychologically necessary for surviving in a gray-area business, where there are no signed contracts and recourse to the police or the courts is impossible, even in Humboldt. ("Officer, this man had me growing marijuana on his land for five months, and now he's only giving me twelve plants!")

Providing that the weather and the authorities coöperated, Emily expected to end up with approximately twenty pounds of pot. She would dispose of it in whatever manner brought her the most money; she thought it could fetch as much as fifty thousand dollars.

"There's a bunny!" she cried out as a tiny brown rabbit scampered through her marijuana plants. "Oh, he's cute!" Being around plants made her happy, she said. She'd be even more excited to grow something else, if it paid decently. Growing pot required a careful rhythm between periods of benign neglect and periods of close, loving attention. She noted that all her marijuana plants were females. "They're ladies, right?" she joked. "So how do ladies like to be treated? They like to be given lots of attention and then left the fuck alone for a few days to revel in it. If you hang on to them all the time, they're not going to do anything for you."

That morning, Emily said, she had spent four hours on eight plants, plucking the thickest leaves in order to channel more energy to the buds. She had fertilized the soil with a mixture of bat and seabird guano. (Humboldt supermarkets sell the blend for nineteen dollars a gallon.) Her arms had become dark and sinewy from her labor.

Back at Emily's borrowed house, we got high on her private stash and settled in for the night. The living room was decorated with save-the-rain-forest posters and a fake-leather gray couch. On the table was a boom box, a Mason jar of marijuana, and a Mac PowerBook. There was no television set; the radio was tuned to NPR. Emily was reading William Morris and working on a half-finished jigsaw puzzle of a Brazil nut, which she had bought at the thrift store for a dollar. Puzzles were popular during growing season, she said. That's what being a grower in Humboldt County is like, she said. You do jigsaw puzzles at night, get high, and shit in the woods.

For Emily, that was enough. "It's fuuun! It's super-fun," she said the next morning, lazily sunning herself on top of the mountain and smoking a spliff. "We're gonna smoke it to the Man, you know?" Twenty years ago, people like Emily would have been too soft for the pot business in Humboldt County. The statewide legalization of medical marijuana has allowed for the illusion that farming pot can provide opportunities for travel and cool art projects and personal growth without any corresponding commitment to the perils of a life of crime. Medical marijuana has made it easy for people like Emily, the Kid, and Captain Blue to see growing pot as a casual life-style choice. By going into the pot business, Emily had made the kind of compromise with reality that idealistic people often make when they get older and lose faith in their ability to effect wholesale change, and when they need the money.

Growing ganja lets you feel that you're still living on the edge, especially when you've become a little complacent politically. Emily nodded, and took another puff. "The forest is still getting cut down or whatever," she said, watching the fragrant smoke swirl in the breeze. "But you're still working out here. You're still subverting the Man. And you're getting people high."

(Article by David Samuels – "A Reporter at Large" for The New Yorker)

www.planetpotcast.com

Credits:

King of all: FIERO
Design: ataric0n
Words: David Samuels
This was much longer than it looked on the website