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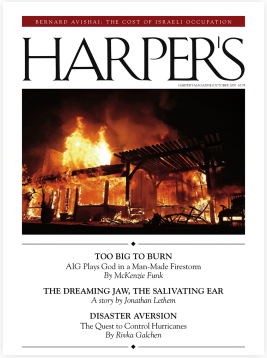
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Tokeville

On the frontiers of federalism and dope

by **Gideon Lewis-Kraus**



From the
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It was northern California in the warm, early spring, and we had been at war in Iraq for years, and the bright protest marches—which had begun in self-congratulation at City Hall and ended in heirloom produce and unpasteurized chèvre at the Ferry Plaza Farmers Market—had faded from memory, and a great many people who might in another era have cared about illegal foreign wars or grave threats to civil liberties had been outraged into apathy by the unrelenting malevolent ineptitude of their government and had again become preoccupied with their live-work loft spaces and the vesting schedules of options and how best to "monetize eyeballs." And whereas their forebears, in a bygone time, might have been found in Golden Gate Park scoring grass from which seeds and twigs had to be charily picked, our contemporaries were pleased to take the state of California up on its gracious proposition of Compassionate Use and relieve their chronic white-collar neck pain with top-shelf industrial-grade

medical marijuana, purchased semi-legally and with post office–like convenience in the shabby boutiques increasingly blacking out shop windows all over town. What seemed clear was that the federal government had at some point become a distant and obdurate entity, and yet California, in its generous cannabinoidal dispensation, had achieved an almost alarming level of sensitivity to its subjects' sense of well-being. So I decided to leave San Francisco for the mountains, or rather the nearer-by hills, where the people were growing this state-sanctioned marijuana and were apparently making a lot of money doing so, and I thought I'd stay around a while and try not to make any enemies.

Despite the rhetoric of the Drug Enforcement Administration and other anti-pot scolds, much of the decriminalized marijuana that is sold at local "cannabis clubs"—at least in the neighborhood where I then lived in San Francisco—can be traced not to Levantine assassins or shiftless Mexicans but to some bearded men and pajama-draped women just a few hours northeast, sitting in the street at the unpatrolled dead end of a six-mile tether of steep county-maintained road. I had come up here, to Washington, California, in Nevada County, because it was as proximately remote as one could get and I had heard that some of these people were growers—pot is almost certainly the county's largest cash crop, as it is for most of the region—and furthermore I had heard that there was a smart young postmaster who might be able to point me in their direction. When not sitting in the road, the people live in weathered stone dens and tin-roofed shacks that huddle along the peeling shale banks of the South Yuba River. Half a mile of sugar pine and incense cedar above these homes, Highway 20 loops down from Truckee on its way to the bed-and-breakfast districts of historic Gold Country. The hundred-odd citizens of Washington

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switchback out of the canyon and head west into "Big Town" only when they have no other choice. Big Town is Nevada City, a village of 3,000 people in the sunlit uplands between Lake Tahoe and the Bay Area, and it bumbles along expensively with former hippies made good, or at least wealthy. The residents of Nevada City—who trade in generically mystical trifles and refurbished Victorians—tend to think that the people up in Washington who sit in the road and glower at strangers are a gang of crank addicts and murderers.

Some of them might indeed be crank addicts and murderers, but that is mostly not the case. (The crank-cookers bivouacked by the river were run out of town some years ago by Campground Don.) The people glowering in the road between the Washington Hotel and the Trading Post are just hard up: pensionless hippies and veterans and assorted itinerants here for miscellaneous reasons. But they all have, as the saying once went, turned on and dropped out, indeed dropped out with crowning success, and they regard the outside world with suspicion. "If you don't smoke pot when they offer it to you," warned a squinting gentleman named Tiedye Bob, "they're going to think you're a narc, and they won't talk to you. There are a few things you're going to have to do to get people to talk to you around here: smoke their pot, tell 'em their pot is the best you've smoked, and be seen talking to the old-timers." The chief importance of the canyon's old-timers is that they do the job of appearing connected to something more solid than their own vagrancy. Of chiefer importance is marijuana. In Washington there is not much to do and nobody to keep you from doing it. But here marijuana provides as much of a footing as it does an escape. Pot, in ways both obvious and unexpected, connects Washington to what's beyond the canyon—those who consume it

and, more important, the government that equivocally permits its use. If either antagonist in California's pot controversy got its way—that is, if pot were fully legalized or once again criminalized—it is hard to imagine not only how the residents of Washington might fill their days but also how they would think of themselves.

Buck

What I knew about Washington, before I resided at the end of the corridor over the bar at the hotel for a little while, I learned from Buck. Buck lived here for a while as a kid in the Eighties, when his mom was having a hard time, and now he freelances as the person who holds the town together. Until he finally moved down to Washington, some time after I left, he was one of the few Nevada City residents willing to come into Washington, CA 95986 at all. Before he bought a house a little ways up the hill and tricked his (knowing, game) girlfriend into moving up here, he trucked up early every morning, before the night fog had risen out of the valley to resume its drift as cloud. Buck wears stovepipe Dickies and black Vans and pressed guayabera shirts and, at twenty-seven, is by his own speculative fancy probably the youngest postmaster in California. Buck's further speculation reckons that the town of Washington is the smallest town in California with its own post office. Washington is officially a town of 121 people, but since Buck became postmaster a few years ago it has lost at least twelve, thirteen if you include Connie, who drove her car off a cliff into the river one night soon after I arrived in town.

The post office is housed in a fastidiously maintained modular unit between the road and the river. Across from the post office, on the way toward the hotel and its bar, a woman keeps some geese, which high-step in and out of two kiddie pools in her yard. She is taken

for a little batty. The Little Town of Washington, as it is locally nicknamed, almost certainly does not need this post office, at least in a strictly postal sense. At 7:59 a.m., Buck unlocks the back door, flicks on the long fluorescent lights, and rolls up the segmented portcullis that defends the counter from the lobby. He swings open the top half of a bipaneled side door to the left of the counter, so he can lean on the ledge as he chats all day. He slides the wheeled display case—ReadyMade bubble mailers and Flat Rate Priority Mail envelopes, neither of which Buck can remember someone having bought—out in the lobby by the front door. He turns on his postal computer and visits a postmasters-only website called MyPostOffice.com: here he might find electronically filed mail-stoppage requests or mail-forwarding requests or complaints. There are never any mail-stoppage requests or mail-forwarding requests or complaints. If a resident of Washington needed her mail stopped or—in that very unlikely event—forwarded, she would call Buck at home whenever she felt like it and tell him. There are never any complaints because there are few residents of Washington who do not admire and rely on Buck in some way.

By 8:10, Buck has completed his tasks for the morning, and he sits down. At 9:00, his first customer comes in. She greets Buck warmly and buys one thirty-nine-cent stamp. Most customers, and on that day this held for the first five people, come in and buy one thirty-nine-cent stamp. Buck reminds them, as is his duty, that they are always free to buy books of stamps, but then there would be no need to stop into the post office every day to see Buck.

At 11:00, Buck must remember to scan one bar code and transmit that scan via satellite to his postal overlords in Washington, DC 20002. That takes

about one second. This sort of instruction is included somewhere in the two broad shelves bent with training manuals, instructional DVDs on mail fraud and identity theft, and thick binders of standard operating procedures. Between 12:30 and 2:00 p.m. the day's mail arrives, and Buck spends twenty to forty more or less concentrated minutes sorting it into the one hundred post office boxes in his bailiwick. There is no mail-carrier service in Washington. Once he has finished his sorting task he hangs on the porch a small, bright-green wooden sign —the mail is up—and sometimes he rings a bell, although the school has a bell, too, and he doesn't want to confuse anyone. At 3:58, Buck writes down on a paper form the day's total sales, $33.76 or $25.12 or sometimes $1.84; enters that information into a digital form; and then transmits the information to Washington, D.C. Buck is slightly busier in December, when he responds to Santa letters. (If he's unsure whether the correspondent's parents will be able to afford the requested gifts, he writes, in a subtly inclusive and convincing first-person plural, "Santa's super busy, but we're going to do what we can.") On the side, Buck runs some websites and maintains some properties and does a bit of contract work in search-engine optimization. Now that he's moved to town he'll probably be mayor one day. In the interim, though, he completes an average of about thirty-five minutes of postal work each day.

Buck's days involve varying ratios of scheming, altruism, and gossip. But Buck is no begrudgingly sinecured employee of the USPS; he's one of its most fervent partisans. To complaints, should he ever receive one, he has his responses preformulated: "If you don't like the post office, how about *you*"—he jabs a pointed finger at his imagined antagonist, whom I can't help but imagine (probably rightly) in mid-flirt

with a well-benefited man in brown knee-length cotton-polyester-blend shorts—"take *this piece of paper* to *New York* for *thirty-nine cents*." Another time he says, "How about *you* take this *box* to Costa Rica *by tomorrow* for *fifty dollars*." It's hard not to get swept up in his postal enthusiasm. One almost forgets that in most other places the post office—with its exasperating waits, touchy customers, and apathetic clerks who dabble in psychosis—does not tend to inspire such pride.

Tiedye Bob

Buck's close friend Tiedye Bob points to Buck and says, "Well, this guy's got the most fuckin' dick job I ever seen." Tiedye Bob, a stoned teddy bear with faded snake tattoos set deep and blurry into his forearms, wears flannels over the homemade tie-dyed tank tops that have given him his name. A flicker of old violence, now relaxed and mild, swims languorously behind his wire-rimmed sunglasses. Tiedye Bob has been known to guard Buck's post office with a shotgun. Buck says Bob is one of the only people he knows who would take a bullet for him. "This kid's a fuckin' genius," Bob says sometimes, not only to himself but to others.

Bob putters home and returns with a mason jar of what looks to my relatively untrained eye like about four ounces of pot. Bob unscrews the lid, and Buck, without looking up from some search-engine optimization, says, "Not in the post office, Bob." Outside, Bob fishes his fingers, pale and mottled like whitish wursts, into the jar, retrieves a thick bud, and places it with gentleness in my hands. It's meant, and succeeds, as a touching gesture, but I'm not really sure what to do with it. I put it in my pocket.

We sit on Tiedye Bob's porch, and he tells me about the Sixties. Bramble vines twist through little heaps of rusty tools and rubble. Bob takes out a thin joint

and says that thing about proving I'm not a narc. Now Bob is saying that the first time he was called in for his draft medical he took four hits of mescaline—he pronounces the last syllable as though it rhymes with "tureen"—and got into his '61 Plymouth and drove across the Bay Bridge. Bob hunches his shoulders and bounces up and down in a muted approximation of what it was like to take four hits of mescaline and drive across the Bay Bridge. Bob failed the hearing test. A few years later he got called in again, and this time he wasn't taking any chances. He took six hits of mescaline. He passed the physical and his 4-F became a 1-A, but then Nixon ended the fuckin' draft.

Tiedye Bob was living down in Marysville or maybe Smartville when he decided to head to Nashville, far away but close-sounding, with his band to record an album. But Nashville had a bad winter that year, and it was all froze up four states around. He and his wife found this trailer in Washington, where they could winter on the cheap until those four unidentified states thawed and people could stream to Nashville again. That was twelve years ago. This is how Washington stories end: calm surprise as the years since drifting to town are tallied.

Some interval later it's late morning and Buck for some reason is building a terraced garden into the post-office hillside. Bob surveys Buck's tasks and calculates briskly. "I think this is about a fourteen-joint job. That's how you figure jobs around here," Bob says.

Buck digs in the sun for what seems like an awfully long time, so Bob and I go back behind his trailer where there's a patch of chunked dirt enclosed by some cyclone fencing lined with torn-open black plastic trash bags. "This is where I grow," Bob explains, as if one might have taken this bagged-fence

chunked-dirt plot for a miniature-golf course. It's early spring, though, March or something, and no plants will be in the ground until late May. Chicken wire tessellates the sky not far over our heads. "The plants grow up and hit the chicken wire and they have to bend sideways," Bob observes, bending his elbow in slow mimicry of a crowded plant.

I ask Bob how many plants he grows, the first of many questions that make me look like at best an idiot and at worst a narc. That I might be perceived as both makes me uneasy, but I figure it's better to be an idiot. He grows twenty plants, he says, the legal limit of ten on his prescription and ten on his wife's. He harvests between eight and ten pounds a year. Buck says that if Bob lined his pen with translucent white sheeting instead of black plastic trash bags he'd easily double that. Buck has been helpful—he set up Bob's irrigation system—but this calculation makes Bob bristle. I ask Bob if he sells any to the dispensaries, the "cannabis clubs." Bob gives a moment of thought to what I realize with rippling anxiety is yet another bad question. "I might sell," he says at last, "if I had any left over."

Most prescriptions generously allow you to smoke one ounce a week, but Bob's allows him two. It's not easy to surprise Buck, but this fact makes him shake his head in what seems like a form of admiration. If Bob smoked his entire allotment, that six pounds a year would be worth $20,000 wholesale, twice that amount retail. Bob rolls relatively thin joints, so a conservative estimate is that he gets at least forty joints per ounce. Bob smokes his first joint at 6:30 every morning with his wife before she commutes ninety miles out of town. He goes to bed around 8:30 p.m. He naps from 3:00 to 5:00 so that he's alert and refreshed enough to smoke more when his wife gets home. ("Write this down in your little book," he says,

stabbing at the air in the rough vicinity of my notepad. "DON'T BOTHER BOB AT NAPTIME.") Buck will not let Bob smoke joints during the few hours each day he spends inside the post office.

Plodding and possibly accurate arithmetic on my part suggests that Bob can thus legally smoke a joint about every forty minutes. In the four hours Buck spends digging his terrace, Bob does, in fact, smoke about fourteen joints, with some amateurish bench support. Sunlight cascades down over the verdigris hills and it's so pleasant, watching Buck dig. Periodically birds chirp or Bob and I exchange thoughts. Bob tells me that things are somewhat less fun than they were in the Sixties. What happened to kill the fun? I ask a short time later. He pauses and says, That's a good question. Solitary chain saws compete intermittently with the river roar.

I ask Bob if he ever gets bored in Washington. Bob says no. Then he says yes. "When I do get bored, I smoke a few joints and then I'm not bored." He pauses. "When my friends ask what I'm doing, I say I ain't doing a damn thing and I ain't doing *that* till noon." There's a lazy sweep of gold sunlight fanning off the ridge, where sugar-pine spires unevenly serrate the duck-egg sky. Pot is the perfect investment for this town: as a crop that takes an enormous amount of time, energy, and (if you're growing indoors) money to produce, its needs consume lulls. Then you harvest a natural analgesic whose purpose is to diminish our anxieties and dissatisfactions, and sometimes create new ones. It is an ingeniously demanding way to kill aspiration.

Later on Bob is talking about how come harvesting time the canyon whirs with the zigzagging aerial reconnaissance of black DEA helicopters. I ask if this worries him, since his twenty plants still violate federal law. "Heck, no. They're looking for the big

growers. Once, there was a big Mexican cartel set up 15,000 plants on that hillside. Had AK-47s and shit." He points off vaguely toward the green-gold hills awash in heavy sunlight. "They cracked down on *them*, but they don't care about my twenty plants."

Gypsy John

"That warn't no goddamned *cartel*," says Gypsy John, wincing, as he holds afternoon court one day at the picnic table in front of the general store, which is between the post office and the hotel. "All that cartel bullshit was *crap.* It was just a couple of Mexicans took to calling themselves *cartel.*"

Gypsy John is drawling at his leisure from beneath a broad black-brimmed derby. Set into the picnic table is a five-inch-deep steel tray filled with kitty litter; half-buried cigarette butts stick up like they're marking claims. "I blew up in '82 and had 151 injuries on my right side," he says. "Now some days it hurts too bad to work, but I gotta work." Gypsy John is maybe seventy-eight, maybe seventy-nine, and says he has children, aged fifteen to fifty-three, from five different wives. His current wife, who will shortly run him out of town for alleged but unproven philandering, is Sandy, who also serves as Buck's PMR–postmaster relief.

"I take the purple that I grow and I take the seeds out and I put it into the blender and I got weed chew. Put it under my lip. Works great, and then I can get back to work. Can't take synthetics. My fancy doctor tried to give me some Oxy-whatever, and it put me out three days. Couldn't do nothing but lie in bed. I dumped 'em in the toilet. And my weed chew is a hell of a lot better than smoking joints all day, like old Tiedye Bob," with whom I have been smoking joints all day.

"Bob's shit is okay," Gypsy says as I concede this, "but mine's purple." In Washington this passes for an

ironclad argument. Bob told me that Gypsy's the town's oldest-timer—he's been in Washington, on and off, for forty-four years, since this was still a mining town—and that Gypsy John sits out in front of the general store all afternoon telling stories.

Gypsy John dresses entirely in black, with a drooping flash of diamond in his left ear and hard knots of gold ornamenting his fingers, which are short and tapered, and which he drums coolly on the table. Gypsy John is an old powder monkey, an explosives handler. He blew things up first for the mining concerns and then for the Navy and finally for construction companies whose assignments allowed him to sample cannabinoids of exotic persuasions from Guam to Venezuela, he says, though that particular stretch seems mostly ocean. (I see Buck's green truck on its way out of town, deserting me, and suddenly feel a bit paranoid and stupidly mention this, that I suddenly feel a bit paranoid. Gypsy smiles sympathetically. "I had six ounces of Elephant Ear out of Venezuela City and that stuff made me so paranoid I was scared to death, had to smoke some Acapulco Gold to mellow out.")

Gypsy has deep ties to the town's mining history. As late as the 1880s, Washington is said to have been home to 3,000 people and thirty-five bordellos, perhaps an exaggerated figure but one nobody budges from. "My Grandpa Aldo had a claim up in Alleghany. In 1939, he went down to Nevada City and sold $12,000 of gold. The next day they found him *in his own tunnel* with four bullet holes in his chest." Many of Washington's residents still mine, not a few of them in preparation for the collapse of the paper-money system. After a 1997 flood that almost wiped out the town, Gypsy limped down the bank and plucked fist-sized nuggets from the receding waters.

Gypsy lights another long, thin cigarette with a tarnished Zippo, which he considers for a moment. "Back in '42, I used to ride with five guys: me, a Mexican, a Chinaman, a black guy, an East Indian, and a six-ten three-hundred-pound hairless Mongolian." His setups are so absurdly delightful. "We each put fifty dollars into a pot and sent it up to the Mapes Hotel in Reno. Few days later we got on our bikes and raced up there—first one there won the pot. Well, three of us got there at the same time and had to split the money. Folks at the Mapes gave us these lighters." The Zippo has a tiny but functional roulette wheel on the back.

Every few weeks Gypsy drives up to Carson City to buy padlocked self-storage containers, which the storage companies auction off when they've gone unpaid for some time. Sometimes you get junk or garbage, sometimes you get meth-lab antiques, but sometimes your few-hundred-dollar charge hits a rich seam: a sideboard with antique dolls, a Harley, caches of firearms (sometimes with the serial numbers filed off, in which case you want to give them to the police). When Gypsy John got a Harley he sold it to pay for one of the Washington School's annual Rib and Chicken Feed fund-raisers. Town lore has it that the school is the oldest operational one-room schoolhouse in the state, although (a) it has three rooms and (b) it's not true anyway. Town lore also has it that due to the property taxes of second-home owners and to the small number of children who grow up in town—most eighth-grade graduating classes are of one or two, and all grades are taught together—it is the richest school per student in the state, which raises some pointless questions about why it needed Gypsy John to sell that Harley.

Lightning Joe

DJ comes by, says hello to Gypsy, and checks his cell-

phone messages at the payphone; there is no cell-phone reception in Washington. Gypsy says DJ is one of his sons, but later Buck tells me that DJ is actually one of Sandy's boys. Gypsy tips his hat and totters unsteadily down the road.

DJ asks if I'd like to come down to the bar with him. He asks if I'm a smoker and I say, "Cigarettes?" and he shakes his head and I say okay. Frankly I'm not sure I can do this—my custom is a soberer one—but I can't get Bob's advice out of my head. Besides, DJ says he's got some Green Dragon that is better than Gypsy's purple. DJ is handsome and young, with a clean narrow beard like a racing stripe on a sharp jaw. He goes to college part time and trains as an electrician and pro-jects a distant but kind honesty.

We walk toward the bar, but instead of making a left we make a right through a menacing wrought-iron gate into a tidy junkyard. Along the gate, some molded-concrete heads are gibbeted atop poles like decapitated parking meters. The heads have large, colorful marbles for eyes, a small and watchful brigade of creepy arts-and-crafts projects. A few dogs listlessly circle the Day-Glo engine blocks in the yard. There's a matte-black Model A with a "Laguna Honda" inscription in wood along its short bed. Five men with jagged beards and dirt-rolled denim loiter.

DJ introduces me to Lightning Joe, a ruddy house of a man with smiling black smudges for eyes and a brushed cake of Brillo beard. Another man uses unwieldy tongs to turn aromatic half-chickens over a trash-can grill. I wonder if the chickens are for everyone—it's a Monday or a Tuesday and the hotel cook has the day off, so there's no food in town, though I've stored some greasy yellow cheese and Triscuits in my room—but then it turns out that the chickens are for the school-board meeting.

We're soon in The Washington Hotel and Café, a grand old affair with a functional 1904 cash register, a seventy-foot-long madrone bar inlaid with seventy-seven silver dollars dating to the 1880s, and a brass rail "so you don't have to step in the bullshit." Two levels of deck oversee a sheltered swimming hole behind a stone dam in the river, now patiently drowning the early-evening sun. Hank and Sue own the place. They've been in the county since the early Seventies. Sue asks me if I know why the zip code is 95986 and I say no. "It's because everybody here got 86'd from somewhere else!" She laughs. "It's kind of a joke."

"When we first came up here," she says, "there were hundreds of abandoned mining cottages in the hills, and hippies who had problems with drugs or the law could come up and hide out. The Forestry Service didn't like the longhairs, so they went around burning the cottages to the ground." Later I ask Potter, a pipe fitter from the refineries in Vallejo, about these exchanges between countercultural elements and the local blue collar. By way of an answer he lifts his baseball cap, tucks his ponytail up inside, and reseats it. He looks at me and lifts his cap, freeing his ponytail once more. "See?"

The jukebox plays some Skynyrd and "Gimme Shelter" and Hank Williams Jr.'s "Family Tradition"—*If I get stoned and sing all night long it's a family tradition*—and everyone sings along. Lightning Joe claps me on the back and I almost fall off my stool (into the bullshit), but he's smiling placidly. I ask him why he's called Lightning Joe and he reaches into his pocket and produces a neon-green business card. Across the top in italics it reads, "He don't move too fast and he don't move too slow, that's why we call him . . ." and then, in huge caps, "LIGHTNING JOE." Some hours later that refrain will be improvised to music.

Below "LIGHTNING JOE" it says "Auto-Repair, Welding, Metal Fabrication." Buck says he's heard Joe is an ace mechanic. For people who leave this canyon only with great reluctance, they spend a lot of time working on their cars.

It's woozy and scary and lonely in Washington at night without Buck around or cell-phone service, and pretty much everybody is passed out by 8:30 or 9:00. I think about whether I could make it safely over the hill to Buck's place, but the answer is clearly no, and I've already paid for the night at the hotel. Bob has given me some cookies in case it's too quiet to sleep. They're made with the same pot butter he feeds his dogs to calm them down.

Art

Art keeps a dirty Seventies-era trailer under a tarp half-hidden behind his house, which, for the record, accurately describes most of the houses in town. I ask Art if he worries that someone will sniff out its use and he says, "No way. It just looks like some dude is crashed out in there, and why would anybody bother some dude crashed out in a dirty trailer?"

The inside of the trailer, with a lining of bright silver insulating panels secured with shiny duct tape, could pass for a homemade space shuttle. On the wall there is a large wheel of a thermometer whose needle hovers between seventy-five and eighty degrees at all times; the system is completely automated. Intake and exhaust hoses snake professionally in and out of the corners. Under 3,000-watt bulbs is a humid manicured thicket of forty knee-high plants with those placid fronds so familiar from the T-shirts and bumper stickers of jerks. Set into one wall is a circuit-breaker box with a pleat of electrical cords thick as a fire hose. A small whiteboard advertises that this is a legal grow and has four laminated prescriptions (for headaches, back pain, neck pain, trouble sleeping)

hanging by a red ribbon. A small surveillance camera in the corner allows Art to monitor the inside of the trailer on closed-circuit television from his house.

I ask Art to run through the numbers with me. The initial outlay was about $2,000: the trailer itself was nabbed for free (off NevadaCountyTrader.com, one of Buck's Craigslist-like websites), so capital costs included the lights, the insulation, the wiring, and the exhaust system. Art offhandedly estimates that growers like him spent at least $2 million a year on these items at mom-and-pop hardware stores throughout Nevada County.

Each plant should generate at least an ounce of pot, which means the harvest will come to between three and five pounds. Art is conservative and counts on three. Each pound will sell for between $2,900 and $3,900 in a cannabis club, depending on the time of year and the quality of the crop. Electricity runs a few hundred dollars a month. Once the fixed costs are recovered, the $10,000 this trailer will bring in every fiscal quarter is almost all profit. The only additional cost comes at the bud-trimming stage, since no cannabis club will accept buds undenuded of their leaves and stems. (The price for this trailer tour was two hours of my time with razor shears at a well-lit kitchen table; I was issued a modest retainer that I nervously muled to San Francisco and, frankly, distributed. I thereby discovered that I have no future in this trade. Art, like many of the growers in Washington, tried to unload a pound on me at a too-good-to-be-true discount, replete with a cleverly sympathetic spiel about the hardships of an unreliable freelance income, but I demurred.)

The enterprise thus requires serious time expenditures for a decent but modest financial return. It is an exurbo-Republican myth that these growers are rolling in free, if blood-stained, drug

money—$13 billion worth—under marmalade skies; this small-scale pot husbandry is closer to the hardscrabble yeoman ideal that most upstanding citizens would celebrate. As usual, the culture has instead tailored the counterculture to its own projections: it envies its irrepressible freedom, its money trees, its lack of alarm clocks.

Recriminalization might vacate the local economy, putting hardware stores out of business and half of the county on welfare. Were Philip Morris to begin selling cartons of machine-rolled joints, the economies of scale involved would price out these ten-plant growers, who are protected by a rickety legal structure—as far as the feds and most courts are concerned, of course, none of this is okay—that inadvertently provides for the kind of progressive and healthy localism that hasn't existed here in over a century.*

But equally repercussive for this small town would be the psychological effects of full legalization. There is great value in what is perceived as lax apostasy: growing pot under these conditions allows one to feel as though one is carrying on what a Washingtonian I met called "that dead San Francisco spirit" without too much at stake. In fact, these growers have an unexpectedly sophisticated quasi-Marxist analysis of that San Francisco deadness. Now that Bay Area denizens can buy pot at the cannabis clubs, Washingtonians believe, the smokers have become more alienated from the means—or at least the spirit—of production than ever before.

The small-time growers in Washington don't want to face jail time, but neither do they want to be seen as doing something pedestrian: hence the ostensibly silly preoccupations with narcs and helicopters, which melodramatize their hard-won status as soft renegades. When you ask a guy like Tiedye Bob if he

ever thought pot would be legalized in his lifetime, he says of course not, and he clearly feels some real gratitude that he can grow his own—right under the suspicious but ultimately unproblematic watch of helicopters overhead. There's some comfort in being checked up on.

Donny

Donny's probably in his mid-thirties, but he shifts and dodges like an antsy kid. Donny is one of Buck's favorite people in town. He is also, Buck mentions, one of the more trustworthy people around, so Buck plans to hire him to work on his new house. Donny slams his hand against his forehead in frustration as he complains about his employers outside of the canyon, who take advantage of his good nature by trying to pay him with pot.

Buck says he has an idea for Donny. Because Tiedye Bob is disabled—he left Oakland, it turns out, after falling off a two-story ladder and breaking his back and neck—he's probably eligible for in-home care: the county will pay a neighbor to help buy groceries and clean. Buck thinks Donny can get in on this. Donny slams his hand against his forehead with interest. Buck calls the county and gets transferred around for ten minutes before he finds the proper official. He listens for a while, periodically uh-huhs.

"Bob should be eligible, and it won't affect his Social Security, since that's federal money and this is a county program. Bob applies and then they send a representative to check out his modular unit. We just have to make sure that Bob doesn't decide to clean for once in ten years before they come. They'll say something like, 'Bob requires ten hours a week of grocery-shopping assistance and house maintenance.' They'll pay you $8.15 an hour to help Bob out." This is considerably less than Donny usually makes, but

the upside is that the county most likely won't try to compensate him with pot or beer.

This does feel slightly scammish. Bob, after all, does okay for himself. But then Donny slams his hand against his forehead with pleasure. "If Bob's place is clean," Donny realizes, "then Lori will finally let me take the kid inside there to play. It's filthy now, so the kid has to stay on the porch." Buck grins and nods.

I wonder what Bob will think of this arrangement, given the atmospheric antagonism to government in town. That day Buck was digging for so long, Bob commented approvingly on Washington's legal situation. If you call the sheriff they tell you they'll be down there in forty-five minutes. Then they call back in forty-five minutes to make sure you meant it, because by then most disputants have resolved their quarrel by passing out. The gist of Bob's commentary was that it's nice here where nobody's going to fuck with you.

"When Poison Bob moved to town, they said he carried a 9mm around with him," Bob said. Poison Bob is an old vet with PTSD, a lanky asp in saggy camos who scares the hell out of me. Bob calls Poison Bob an "ornery old fuck," but Bob calls pretty much everyone he admires or knows an "ornery old fuck."

"So I went up to Poison Bob, that ornery old fuck, and I say, 'I heard you carry around a nine.' Poison says, 'Yep' and I said, 'So do I,' and I pull mine out right there. So Poison and I get along great since then." It's not clear why they wouldn't have gotten along in the first place, since both of them keep up the ornery-old-fuck routine for about as long as it takes to buy them a beer or smoke their pot, but Bob's point is that people like to handle things around here themselves.

But when Bob arrives a while later and Buck and Donny tell him about the in-home-assistance plan, Bob seems only pleased. Bob and Donny head out, and it's just Buck and me again. I ask Buck if this kind of program causes any cognitive dissonance, since it is facilitated by a government that people around here purport to mistrust and despise. "Nope," says Buck. "It's not the same thing. These people don't like the feds, but they don't mind the county at all." The federal government plays the bad cop and the county government gets to play the good cop—we help you help each other—and in the process everybody gets to work out his or her own ambivalent yet functional relationship to the authorities.

In *Where I Was From*, Joan Didion writes about the delusional sense of autonomy that informs the way Californians have historically understood themselves: "The idea of depending on the government of course ran counter to the self-image of most Californians." But such dependence, she says, invoking as examples the railroad and the defense industries, has always been "almost total." It occurred to me, sitting with Bob on a cedar fence watching Buck dig, that Didion couldn't have been talking about places like Washington, or rather that her point is less about some specific western bad faith than it is a general lament about how poorly we are served by dreams of atomic solitude. What Didion reacts to—and what Buck's customers have perhaps fled—is the lonely and garrisoned landscape of hedge-and-fence suburbia, that cold geometry of planned distances and proximities. In the late spring of 1967, Didion went to the Haight to make a few hippie friends. She characterized these subjects as unwitting apostles of dissociation and drift, exactly the sorts of people who fled "San Jose, Chula Vista, I dunno" for San Francisco and might subsequently have fled San

Francisco to find themselves in Washington forty years later.

What Didion witnessed, she wrote, was "the desperate attempt of a handful of pathetically unequipped children to create a community in a social vacuum." But the creation of community, in Washington at least, has less to do with equipment or vacuums than with simpler acknowledgments of vulnerability and shared need, and the recognition that one can be vulnerable and resourceful at the same time. There's not much law to speak of, but the food bank comes through. A young civil servant warmly attends to his daily parade of single-stamp requests. The artisanal pot is arguably legal, for now at least. All concerned seem well aware of how the government aids their survival and how it seems intrusive or irrelevant.

Buck's ability to attend to these needs, to sense what might be helpful and what might offend feelings of self-reliance, rests on both the institutional authority of his command and the pitiless compassion of a fellow sufferer. When he was fifteen, he went down to the bridge and put his mom's ashes in the river. When I asked him why his mom had come to Washington in the first place, he didn't hesitate. "This is one place where you can be drunk in the middle of the road during the day and nobody's going to look down at you for it."

Mitch, an old rocker who is always forgetting his post-office-box key, comes in as Buck is closing up for the day. Buck says it's a shame about Connie driving off the cliff into the river, but Mitch consoles him with a local view. "If you think about it from a historical perspective, you know, like the Hundred Years' War or the Sack of Vienna, things are better now than they've ever been." Buck nods and Mitch nods and Bob, awake from his nap, nods too.

Gideon Lewis-Kraus's "The Last Book Party" appeared in the March 2009 issue of Harper's Magazine.

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