COLIN HOGG

THE HIGH ROAD

a journey to the new frontier of cannabis

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HarperCollins*Publishers*

Dedication

For Gordon McBride
1950–2016

Epigraph

I’m 80.

If weed is a gateway drug it had better hurry.

Willie Nelson

Contents

Somewhere south of Seattle

‘So tell me Bruce, 50 minutes into the incredible edible, are you feeling anything?’

‘A little slippage,’ he says. On closer examination, he does look a little slipped perhaps. Meanwhile the train is pulling in to Centralia.

‘I think we should wait till after lunch before we drop another one,’ I tell him. ‘It’s maybe best to be a little conservative. This is new territory, after all.’

He nods.

‘Those things look just like throat lozenges,’ I babble on. ‘I could just drop them loose in my toilet bag and, if I’m asked by an officer when we get home, I’ll just say someone in San Francisco gave them to me for my sore throat.’

‘Unless,’ says wise old Bruce, ‘the staff have just had a training lesson on them.’

‘Well, that’s a point, I suppose.’

Only 55 minutes in, and that lozenge is increasingly soothing. Bruce had a terrible struggle with the seal wrapping, and now that it’s out of that and inside him, he’s not so sure he wants it there. I’m writing really slowly and my letters are taking on a different shape.

‘What’s that opening line in Hunter S. Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing*?’ asks Bruce.

‘“We’d just made it to the dining car when the drugs kicked in,”’ I say.

I’ve always had a low regard for edible pot in the past. I’ve eaten plenty of hash cookies over the years, but none ever impressed me. This time, though, feels a little different.

‘So let’s see,’ I say to Bruce woozily, ‘we’ve got eight of those lollies left, several sorts of weed and the vape, which that bud-tender said was good for 150 hits.’

‘We might have to binge,’ he says.

‘I think that’s probably a necessity now,’ I tell him. ‘It’s essential field

research. And don’t forget you signed up for this. Don’t get soft on me now.’

We go back upstairs to the dining car, slightly off our heads, and are seated at our table opposite a friendly young couple from ‘the East Coast’. They’re getting off in Portland, they say, and driving back to Seattle.

The nice young couple notice me scribbling away in my notebook and wonder, out loud, what I’m up to. I’m so zonked by my legal lolly I just come right out and tell them.

‘We’re marijuana tourists,’ I say.

PART ONE

I AM NOT A STONER

Before we go any further, I'd like to get one thing straight. I am not a stoner. I don't like the word and I don't like the way it slips out of some people's mouths when they reach for something to describe a particular person to someone else. So, I am not a stoner, though I am sometimes stoned, and have been, in fact, during much of the research and the writing of this book. But that was inevitable really and not exactly out of my comfort zone.

I can't remember the first time I smoked marijuana, but maybe that's part of the deal you make with marijuana: not remembering. There are other prices to pay. Being a criminal, for instance. But I'm not a stoner any more than I'm an alcoholic just because I enjoy a few beers while I cook dinner. And, as I say, I don't recall that first inhalation, though I do remember an early inhalation, mainly because it was an unforgettable inhalation. It probably constituted an assault, but I didn't lay a complaint at the time.

It was 1979, quite a heavy time in New Zealand, with skinheads, Rastas and the gangs, who were young, fit and dangerous back then. I saw quite a bit of them all. I was the rock music reviewer for *The Auckland Star* and in April 1979 I was out on assignment attending what turned out to be a momentous and far-reaching musical event, though those of us who were there didn't entirely know it at the time. It was a concert by Bob Marley and the Wailers at Auckland's Western Springs Stadium. The mark that single show made on New Zealand's modern culture remains indelible to this day, and not just for the music.

Bob Marley, his music, his message, his brownness, his spirituality and, also significantly, his weed-worshipping ways, attached to us here at the bottom of the Pacific seemingly forever. I was 28 at the time and up for anything. Well, that's what the big gang guy next to me in the audience that day must have thought.

Marley's music was lifting us all off the ground. The Wailers were overwhelming, a wall of sound with the bass so big and low and loud it was vibrating our inner organs. And Marley was mesmerising, like no one any of us had seen or heard. I still remember. I remember, too, the big bugger in the patched jacket next to me. He'd been sucking on a fat joint, blowing perfumed smoke out his flaring nostrils; then suddenly he turned to me, grabbed me by both ears, pulled me right into his face, flipped his

joint in his mouth and firmly kissed me, blasting my pale lungs full of powerful smoke, before throwing me aside.

In that moment, something snapped in my synapses and I felt suddenly part of a big and marvellous thing, perhaps life itself. I've never been the same since, still own every record Bob Marley and the Wailers ever made and still love them and play them on a fairly regular basis. And I still smoke cannabis on what I can only describe as a fairly regular basis. Which, as mentioned, makes me a criminal in my country.

In New Zealand, where marijuana is the third most popular drug after alcohol and tobacco — and it's catching up fast on tobacco — it's illegal, to grow it, sell it, own it, smoke it or hold it. Even the ill have been generally denied it, though there is now some reluctant loosening of those cruel rules.

And this in a country that prides itself on being one of the most liberal in the world, which in many ways it is. We've had women prime ministers, a transsexual Member of Parliament. Men marry men and women marry women and raise children. There is relative racial and cultural tranquillity. We are not uptight, fearful people.

But when it comes to cannabis our lawmakers have been afraid, seemingly very afraid. Which is a most mysterious state of affairs, and most especially strange when other, less liberal countries than ours are increasingly taking a much more enlightened approach to cannabis. If, indeed, it is enlightened — it might, after all, just be mad and slightly self-destructive.

Across my nearly four decades of puffing away on countless jazz cigarettes I've wondered about the enlightenment and wisdom of such a habit, though I've never done much about stopping. But then, neither has the whole wide world.

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Archaeologists, bless them, have found evidence — burnt resin on broken smoking pipes — that humankind has been enjoying the swirly charms of cannabis for several thousand years. Laws attempting to control its use are a very recent oddness. Cannabis was first recorded as being grown and harvested in China and northern India, where it was used for a variety of purposes, including mood enhancement. It was known to the ancient Greeks and Romans, but there's not much evidence that they passed the pipe at the end of a hard day shouting at the slaves. They used it as part of

their medical kits, particularly as an application for inflammation. The Greeks, though, were keen on inhaling vapours of various sorts, like myrrh and frankincense, and it could be that, through their interactions with cannabis-consuming cultures like the Thracians, they added a bit of weed to the mix.

As the ancients would have quickly discovered, cannabis is an extremely adaptable plant, capable of growing almost anywhere there's sun. It has a life cycle of three to five months, germinates within six days, grows exceptionally quickly and can survive in poor soil and with little water. The female plants produce the fluffy, sticky resinous flowers wherein lies the secret to cannabis's everlasting popularity. Another variety of the plant, hemp, was much favoured by settlers of new lands, offering fibre for rope, cloth and paper and seeds for oil used variously in lamps and for soap.

Indeed, the Spanish invaders took cannabis with them to Latin America in the 1500s, to plant and make rope from, and it and its variants proliferated in the wild and spread north over the centuries to the United States. In Western pop culture, cannabis rose into popularity from low places, but influential low places — in music and in the bohemian corners of the arts and entertainment, and especially among players of jazz and blues music. By the 1920s, the weed, or marijuana as it was becoming known, emphasising its Mexican origins, was particularly popular in the just-born jazz scene in racy New Orleans, where the new music grew out of the musicians' habit of stretching out tunes as they played in the town's numerous brothels. Smoking marijuana was a popular distraction among the prostitutes and especially among the musicians. Unlike alcohol, which muddled their playing, the weed helped them play on into the early morning hours, forgetting how tired they were. More importantly, said the jazzmen, it seemed to make their music sound better and pushed their playing into more imaginative areas.

All this thanks to the benefits of just two of the 460 chemicals in the cannabis plant. The first goes by the ridiculous name of tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC for short, and the second is cannabidiol, or CBD. THC is classed as a euphoric intoxicant; while CBD has no direct brain-twirling powers, it is believed to be effective as a painkiller, an anti-emetic, a reducer of epileptic fits, a stimulator of appetite and a dilator of bronchial tissue. The colder the growing conditions, the lower the levels of THC in the cannabis plant.

As the popularity of the magic weed grew, the law started taking notice. In 1920, after a New Orleans musician was arrested for forging a doctor's signature on a prescription for marijuana, the authorities were alerted to the new menace, described by one alarmist as a 'powerful narcotic causing exhilaration, intoxication, delirious hallucinations, drowsiness and stupor'. Yet little was done to stop all the delirious hallucinating. That might have been difficult anyway, cannabis being a common ingredient in various legal medicines of the time, including cough elixirs. Popular medicines of the late 1800s and on into the 1900s were often chock full of the very drugs the world now has sitting firmly at the top of its menace list.

For instance, there was Mrs Winslow's Soothing Syrup, sold in jolly packaging as 'the mother's friend', for children who were teething, which contained an extremely soothing 65 mg of liquid morphine per fluid ounce. No wonder the little ones slept so well. (I'd have been worried that they wouldn't wake up at all.)

And then there were Cocaine Toothache Drops and Bayer's Heroin, which was pitched as a sedative for coughs, not to mention the one with the best name of all, Forced March Cocaine, which promised on its labels to 'allay hunger and prolong the power of endurance'. The makers recommended taking one tablet every hour when required. That one, unsurprisingly, was popular with explorers: Captain Scott took a supply to Antarctica, not that it helped him in the end.

The trashy pop media of the Jazz Age latched onto the so-called marijuana scourge, especially, probably, as it was most commonly used by the people at the bottom of America's social pile, African-Americans and Mexicans mostly. And musicians, of course, who were influential, even then. By the 1930s and '40s, New York's Harlem was full of marijuana dens, or tea pads as they rather cutely called them after 'tea', one of the many pseudonyms for the weed.

Three grades of marijuana were available in the city at the time. The cheapest and weakest was American grown, while the most potent and most expensive was shipped in from Africa. Somewhere in the middle, and the most popular, was the one they called 'Mezzrole' or 'Mezz', named for clarinet player Milton 'Mezz' Mezzrow, who was a major dealer in Harlem, though he was a white guy from Chicago originally.

Cannabis, marijuana, pot, weed, reefer, call it what you will, the stuff was almost overground by this stage and heading into deeper trouble in the

process. Jazz was the pop music of the times and musicians in the know began peppering their songs with sly and unsly drug references. There were songs with titles like ‘That Funny Reefer Man’, ‘Smokin’ Reefers’ and ‘The Mary Jane Polka’. Even a star of the straight music world, Benny Goodman, was playing a song called ‘Sweet Marijuana Brown’.

Scare stories proliferated in the media. There were mutterings in Mother England in the 1930s about reefer frenzy among British musicians. Propaganda movies were even made on the topic, most famously the unhinged US film *Reefer Madness*, released in 1936, which suggested that cannabis was a hellish scourge — though possibly also fun. Which, of course, couldn’t be allowed. Laws throughout much of the Western world popped up to prohibit cannabis and classify its users, along with its suppliers and growers, as criminals. In the process, the various law forces managed to brand cannabis as a drug from the same cabinet of dangerous goods as heroin, cocaine and methamphetamines.

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Here in New Zealand we started with a bit of a handicap in the cannabis stakes. Our native people, Maori, had no known intoxicant or stimulant in their diet. Added to that, New Zealand was a rarity among the British colonies, in that the new settlers didn’t bring hemp with them to plant because the native flax was just as good for fibre and oil especially.

But the dreaded weed got here anyway, eventually, and must have started getting up someone’s nose because in 1927 we passed the Dangerous Drugs Act and included on its hit list the flower of ‘Indian hemp or *Cannabis sativa*’. Cannabis continued to be used as a prescribed drug for a time, but was banned outright in 1965. Which was interesting timing, given that those legal clamps came on just ahead of the late-1960s explosion of druggy behaviour among the rock music–loving young of the world. Demand for cannabis in New Zealand soared in the ’60s, unperturbed by the stern legal implications, though those have loosened considerably in practice in recent years.

New Zealand now ranks around seventh in the world for cannabis consumption, according to figures compiled by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. Iceland, of all places, is number one, Jamaica only 22nd. Around 12 per cent of New Zealand’s population, ranging from teenagers to baby boomers, use it. Thanks to our friendly climate, cannabis grows like topsy here and, given that people have been growing and

refining it pretty seriously for half a century now, our weed is famously strong, not to mention unpredictable.

Cannabis is regarded as a Class C drug in New Zealand. Cannabis oil and hash are Class B and the obvious ones, the real drugs, Class A. (Cannabis oil and hash are derivatives of cannabis, the latter transformed into a solid form after being extracted, purified and compressed. Both have higher concentrations of THC than weed.) Anyone apprehended by the authorities with more than 28 grams of cannabis — in other words, an ounce bag — is deemed a dealer, which is ludicrous. This is, however, increasingly rarely enforced. Total cannabis offences recorded by the police have been falling steadily to the point where they're now about half what they were just six years ago.

But it's still illegal, and for someone like me, a routine smoker, it means living outside the law, while at the same time living within it, as a relatively hard-working, tax-paying regular citizen, father, grandfather and columnist in a popular women's magazine. It hasn't always been easy balancing all that and staying upright at the same time, but it's really far too late to stop now — unless I do, of course.

One of my favourite musicians who happens to smoke weed, Neil Young, announced a couple of years ago that he was giving it up and being THC-free didn't seem to change him too much, aside from seemingly losing him the ability to make decent new records.

So I'm not so sure about the wisdom of entirely giving it away. I find cannabis helps put a good angle on things. The day goes better, I remember to eat, writing blocks unclog, melancholia evaporates, telephone conversations extend, tangents beckon. Also, unlike anti-depressant drugs, for instance, it's 100 per cent natural. As the great country singer and elderly poster boy for weed Willie Nelson once said, 'Marijuana is not a drug. Marijuana is an herb, a flower. God put it here. If he put it here and wants it to grow, what gives the government the right to say God is wrong?' (I particularly like his use of the word 'an' here.)

One of the best descriptions of just how cannabis bends you is that it 'italicises experience'. It makes it un-upright. I've found that it's pretty much possible to spend a lot of your life in italics, though I'd never write in them. Cocaine, as I recall, from the '80s mostly, was like living in capitals, which is impossible for very long, of course.

Cannabis is pretty easy on you, but paying for it, keeping yourself supplied so that you never run out and avoiding getting caught buying it,

using it or possessing it aren't easy, though with the passing of time they can become a manageable part of a slightly dodgy lifestyle. Well, they did for me.

Plus, you make interesting friends. People you buy from — dealers, I suppose — become pals over time, though not all of them. There was a woman I used to buy weed from years back whom I never wanted to be pals with, though I was always friendly, as it's best to be in those circumstances. She lived with her two Dobermans in a dark terrace house in a fashionable part of town. She had several locks on the front door and always seemed to open it reluctantly when I knocked the special knock. Once I was in, she'd lock it again while the dogs stood close, eyeing me in that way dogs like Dobermans do. 'How are ya, Col?' she'd wheeze at me, swiftly getting down to business. 'How much were you looking for?'

Then there was a guy I bought weed from for 30 years, maybe more — like I said, it's hard to remember. He was one of the good ones, a professional musician in a country that's too small to allow you to do such a thing. But he decided early on, much like Mezz Mezzrole did, that he could be true to his calling, be a musician, and support himself by going into the cannabis business and selling to a selected clientele, of which I was just one. Sometimes, when I went to see him, I'd meet some of his other customers, and the demographic was startlingly wide. I'm not saying there were High Court judges dropping in to pick up a bag of hooch, but there were some real societal surprises.

Anyway, my friend with the weed only dealt weed. Nothing harder, not even hash. But it was a risky life and not just because of the law. In fact, it was the lawless side of things that gave him more trouble. One day a couple of guys managed to knock his secret knock and he opened the door to them. They were gangsters. One had a handgun and they came straight at him, though that didn't deter my gritty old friend, who put up quite a fight and pinned them for a while to the wall with his big wooden desk. But, after a further brief struggle, he gave in and let them rob him, though he somehow managed to talk them into going off with only half of his available stock.

Then an inner-city gang decided to hustle him out of the trade because they figured he was bad for business at their tinny houses, where weed was sold, often to kids, in tiny amounts at inflated prices. So they reported my friend so firmly to the cops that they couldn't look away and he ended up going to prison for a while. He was getting on in years by this stage, but he

was completely set in his ways and unrepentant. Of course, he was probably more of a benefit to society in many ways than a threat. It was a ridiculous situation, and it wasn't the first time he'd been locked up for his ever-popular retail activities. When he went to prison, there was a terrible panic among his clientele, who were running in all directions trying to find replacement supplies of the usual quality, which was high, and price, also quite high.

My current source of supply could be described as a semi-retired academic. He needs a little notice usually to get me half an ounce of the only stuff that's usually available: powerful, indoor-grown weed, called skunk for its profound pong. It's $320 an ounce, but that's a good price. My friend has trouble getting his hands on the cheaper, less potent outdoor marijuana, though there's a swing back to it, he says.

His customers are mostly of his generation, baby boomers like me. For the kids, he reckons, it's alcohol first and next maybe meth, followed by cannabis only now and then, usually in small amounts bought from tinny houses. He's had parents, worried about their kids going to the gang-run tinny houses, refer them to him. He doesn't believe cannabis is addictive or a gateway drug 'any more than alcohol is'. He says it's 'an escape, that's all'. But he's the one who has to deal with the sometimes-scary people who supply him. That's just the way it goes when something's illegal.

Because I had to go to so much trouble to buy the stuff, over the years I've made several attempts to cut out the middle man and simply grow my own. I'm not a farmer by nature. Worse, I have trouble telling the female plants from the males and in the cannabis world only the females count. (The males are best pulled out and disposed of or they can, horticultural legend has it, change the female's mind about being female and she won't flower.) But I persisted and there were some modest successes. In the 1980s, living in a tiny inner-city house with a postage-stamp backyard, I raised a half-decent crop of plants. They were budding up nicely when my mother came to town to stay for a few days. I felt confident she wouldn't spot them or know what they were, but then I overheard her out in the backyard with my little daughter.

'What's that plant there, darling?' she asked her granddaughter. 'That's a tomato,' came the familiar little voice.

'And those ones?'

'Those are Daddy's dope plants.'

Bad Daddy. But it was no one's business but mine, I figured, and I wasn't a bad daddy. I was, as I said, a connected, wage-earning, dinner-cooking, caring sort of daddy. I just liked to smoke a little cannabis now and then, that's all. Also, I was in the music business, and there's a lifestyle that goes with that sort of thing.

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At the newspaper office, the reporters tended to look a little like what they did. The sports reporters looked, well, sporty. The racing guys looked sort of racy. Some of them had hats. The police reporter was the one with the blue shirt and the moustache. And the rock writer, I suppose, looked a bit like what he was writing about. And maybe he lived a bit that way too.

After all, you couldn't turn up to interview The Clash clear-eyed in a double-breasted blazer and shiny brown shoes. Well, you could, but they might write a rude song about you. Like that great one The Rolling Stones did, 'The Under Assistant West Coast Promotion Man', Mick Jagger singing sarcastically about the poor promo guy in his 'seersucker suit'.

In the music business marijuana was everywhere and easy to get your hands on all through the 1970s and '80s and on, getting stronger and more expensive as time went by. Almost spookily, one of my most memorable and life-altering marijuana moments of this time once again involved Bob Marley, or at least his music, not long after the aforementioned concert. It was the launch of a new double live album by Bob and the Wailers, *Babylon by Bus*.

The late 1970s was a time of excess, especially in the record business, even in New Zealand. The many album launches I attended at that time were often over the top, but this one set new standards. Marley's albums sold by the truckload in New Zealand, where a generation of Maori kids was growing up thinking that guy on the wall of their home with the proud dreadlocks was their Uncle Bob, though all their mates had the same uncle on their walls too. I also have a photo of him on my wall. It's a rare and wonderful one, catching him in full face-on-face greeting with a woman from the Maori concert group that met him off the plane when he landed in Auckland for the legendary Western Springs show.

Bob's New Zealand record company, Festival, loved him for his record sales, which were earning him gold and platinum discs at a level that would have made him fabulously rich in a more populous country. So the release of a new Bob Marley and the Wailers album was a major local

event, even if it was just a live record, and not his best.

The record company was terrifically excited about it, put their grooviest executive in charge and pulled out all stops for the media launch, to which they invited the likes of me along with a busload of other media types, including, as it would turn out, a woman who I'd go on to live with for 14 years and have children with. All thanks to Bob, really.

Record companies were never famous for the breadth of their imaginations, so when it came to album launches, the bleeding obvious often seemed the best approach to take. For instance, the launch party for a Bee Gees album of the time called *Spirits Having Flown* was held aboard a jumbo jet that flew us over the Tasman Sea for a few hours, though I don't recall that we drank spirits so much as champagne up in that plane.

It was the word 'bus' that must have jumped out of the Bob Marley album title when it came to this launch, because it was designed as a mystery bus trip, an idea that would fill me with dread now, but not back then, when, as mentioned earlier, I was up for anything.

The bus duly filled up on the day with the media types and rumbled off, out of the city and south into the backwoods and eventually to an old pub by the sea for lunch. On the way, we were watered with a funky brownish mix of rum and orange juice, which was clearly trying to pick up on the vibe of Bob's homeland, Jamaica, where rum is the national drink and oranges are everywhere.

The record company people passed out press kits, which thoughtfully included in each of them a big fat joint. This took us all aback a little, if only for a moment. Already slightly crazed by the ugly but efficient tumblers of rum and orange, we went warp speed into the weed — at least, some of us did. Certainly, I did, along with several of my fellow travellers, including the woman who would go on to become my significant other.

There may have been some worried mutterings from the older, stiffer travellers on the bus that day, but the rum-crazed rest of us shouted them down. 'What did you expect? It's Bob Marley,' we might have mentioned. I do also recall someone inquiring, 'Are there any more press kits? I've smoked this one.' That might have been me.

It was a terrific day all round. We wreaked a certain amount of havoc at that quiet little pub, ate everything on offer and pinched a couple of bottles of liqueur for the ride home, knowing the record company was picking up the tab. There were free T-shirts too, and the woman who was to become my significant other accidentally went home afterwards with

my one. The next day she brought it down to the newspaper office and we must have gone for a coffee or something because one thing led to another, as mentioned. And Bob Marley was involved.

There is even photographic proof, a picture taken of us all, in our flared jeans on that sunny day, propped up together outside our *Babylon by Bus* bus. That picture actually appeared on the inner sleeve of a later Marley album. Unfortunately, the end of the photo with me in it is covered over by a photo of something else. But that's okay, I know I'm there. And I remain grateful to Bob for guiding my path.

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At other times during my years in the music world there were more challenging encounters with the weedy way of life. Once or twice, perhaps more, I've come near to being arrested. One night in Melbourne, the guitar player in a popular band of the day slipped a bag of marijuana into my pocket — a little payback for the time I slipped him some when he was touring New Zealand, he said at the time. He was a good bloke for an Australian, and a terrific guitarist.

We must have drunk a bit that night in Melbourne and, as a result, I forgot all about the weed in my jacket pocket, right up until the moment I was standing in the customs queue back home, when I remembered with an awful cold jolt what was in the pocket of the jacket inside the suitcase I was now wheeling towards a friendly customs officer and his perky drug dog. There was little I could do but pray and try not to sweat too much, but I was already sweating like a murderer in a line-up and I blanked on all the words to prayers. In spite of this, God turned out to be on my side, the Beagle turned up its nose at me and my guilty suitcase, and the officer waved me through.

Another time the dogs weren't so kind and surrounded me, barking and carrying on making a bad scene till I was pulled away by the people in uniforms for a closer inspection. The officer put in charge of frisking me said she was a bit of a fan, that she read my column in the *Woman's Weekly*, and it felt a bit like worlds colliding when she asked me if I might have smoked a joint or two on my visit abroad.

'It's just that we're picking up traces on your clothes,' she told me, friendly.

'Maybe I was standing close to someone who was smoking one,' I said.

‘That’ll be it. You need to be careful about that sort of thing, Col,’ she said, waving me on towards the green arrow. I would never have been so foolish as to take any sort of risks on the borderline, of course. We lifelong lawbreakers have rules.

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One of the more sensible rules might be, if you happen perhaps to be a writer, that you don’t come right out and declare your little illegal weakness to the world. Unfortunately, I broke that rule long ago, and most recently with my last book, *Going South*. When my old mother read it, and reached the first reference to her son’s weakness for weed, she was shocked. She threw my book right across the room, she told me, when she’d calmed down enough to catch her breath and ring me up. Her first words were: ‘I didn’t know you were a drug addict.’

She’s back down off her high horse now, but it took a bit of persuading. It’s hard to move the opinions of a 90-year-old, even one who stills enjoys a brandy and dry each evening before her dinner. ‘The way to think about it,’ I told Mum, ‘is to not think of marijuana as a drug, any more than you think of alcohol or tobacco as drugs, though they are. Try to think of it as more of a medicine.’

‘Medicine?’

‘I’d probably have been on anti-depressants all these years if I hadn’t smoked a bit of weed now and then.’

‘Now and then?’

‘Now and then, Mum.’

That last bit might have been an understatement, but I don’t feel like counting the number of joints I smoke any more than I feel like counting the calories I eat or the beers I might drink in a week. And however many I smoke, I’m breaking the law, and that’s what worries my dear old mother, which I don’t like doing.

The *Going South* book came out of a road trip I took with an old friend after he told me he was dying of cancer. We’d grown up and started work together in the far south of New Zealand and going back seemed the right thing to do in the face of this heartbreaking news. It was a very strange thing to do, that trip into the past, then the book coming out and Gordon (my dying friend) being at the book launch and enjoying the attention it got, though of course it was about him dying. But I think that book made

the last bit of his life more fun than it might otherwise have been. We talked about taking another trip, another road trip with a reason, I thought, but it was too late for Gordie.

He wasn't so sure about my new idea anyway. 'You don't want to write a book about that, Col,' he said. 'You'll just get yourself in trouble.'

'But I feel strongly about it.'

'Well, that's a good start. But are you sure you're not just stoned?'

'I need to go to America,' I told him.

'I wish I could come with you, but I don't think I'll make it.'

He tried, though, talked to his specialist about it, but the specialist wouldn't let him fly to Auckland, never mind San Francisco. And I had to go to San Francisco, though that was just the start. America was calling me, you see, and not in a way I'd ever expected it would. But then, America's weird like that: a nation made of countries, a nation made of mood swings and powerful and various beliefs in freedom. One of the better-known beliefs is the right to bear arms. Another, increasingly, is the right to consume cannabis in the privacy of your own lungs.

In one of the least-anticipated societal trends of modern times, several states across America have, starting in the late 1990s, legalised the once-notorious drug for use by their citizens and, increasingly, their visitors. Not surprisingly, California, the most mellow of the American states, moved first, legalising marijuana for medicinal use in 1996. Oregon, Washington and Alaska followed in 1998, Maine in 1999 and Nevada and Colorado in 2000. This basically meant residents of those states could, after consultation, obtain a prescription and purchase cannabis products to treat non-life-threatening conditions, such as headaches, insomnia and loss of appetite, say.

On a visit to Los Angeles a couple of years back, I saw the medicinal system in action down at Venice Beach, where I noticed a gaudy little shop, not much more than a booth, but punching above its weight. It was called the Green Doctor and it offered quick consultations for medical marijuana. There were 'nurses' who looked like models, dressed in green gowns, hustling passers-by. I could see a large notice on the wall inside the booth offering a list of ailments you might want to mention to the 'doctor'. Three would get you a prescription, then you'd be escorted to the nearest dispensary for your medicine. But you had to be a Californian resident and, no, a hotel address wouldn't do.

In 2012, just to the north of California, the states of Oregon and

Washington took the big wild next step and legalised cannabis for ‘recreational use’, setting a stately precedent that was followed by Colorado and Alaska in 2014 and Maine, Nevada, Massachusetts and, finally, California in late 2016. Washington DC, America’s capital, a city-state, legalised weed for personal use and cultivation in 2014, though it’s illegal to buy or sell it. Medical cannabis is legal, under various strictures, in 28 American states.

Some states began to decriminalise cannabis as far back as the 1970s, though there was a certain amount of toing and froing on the issue. Alaska, for instance, decriminalised possession of marijuana in 1982, then, after a public backlash vote, recriminalised it again in 1990, before again changing its mind, seemingly for good, eight years later.

There’s definitely a change underway in America, one that divides the country with a smokescreen enclosing its more liberal zones. And that’s because it’s legal, in variously quirky ways, only within each of those states. Federally, growing or using cannabis remains a crime. After all, cannabis was once a major target of America’s War on Drugs.

New Zealand too remains at war with cannabis, but it’s not the war it once was. The police still spend millions hunting for the drug every year and send out choppers to seek and destroy any plantations they can find as harvest approaches at the end of summer. This continuing close police attention to the supply end of the cannabis business has only served to push it further into the hands of gangs and into warehouses where it can be grown hidden and tended and tweaked to higher and higher potencies. Good old reasonably priced outdoors dak is a hard-to-find treat in New Zealand these days.

The combination of high prices — as much as $450 for an old-world ounce of skunk in Auckland — and unpredictable supply have conspired to create a problem that is beyond the law, beyond treatment and, increasingly, beyond any good sense. Peaceable citizens looking for nothing more, really, than the equivalent of a gin and tonic at the end of a hard day are criminalised and the police are obliged to waste all those taxpayer dollars chasing something they can never totally catch, nor probably want to any more.

Things got so crazy a few years ago the country entered into an experiment to quell the cannabis trade by legalising a synthetic chemicalised version of the real thing, for sale to anyone over 18. It was ugly stuff, a concoction of legal mind-altering synthetic substances. Kids

overdosed, angry small-town people picketed shops that sprang up selling the stuff. It was a nasty failure and the government eventually turned against it, banning what it termed ‘all psychoactive substances’ three years ago. And everyone went back to buying proper weed, overpriced, from criminals.

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There’s been a brute reluctance on the part of our various governments to make a brave move on the matter, to look to some of our traditional friends, our old social and cultural equals like America, maybe learn if what they’re increasingly doing there is the way for us to go too. So it seems important, really, that someone go over there for a bit of a snoop around, a first-hand experience of what life’s like in a weed-friendly world. In the absence of other volunteers, I decide to step forward.

On the whole crazy face of it, it’s the only sensible thing to do. My publishers think so too. They’re so excited they’ll even slightly increase my advance to help with the overheads so I can go to America for a look into its increasingly hot love affair with the weed.

It’s all too weird and interesting. It’s impossible to resist. I feel the awesome, gravitational pull of a planet-sized story. I need to take a road trip, designed to take me to some of the American states where cannabis has been let loose. I’ll explore it as an alternative tourist experience — after all, I figure, I am an alternative sort of tourist. But I need to do it soon because it’s a hot topic, and I need a driver. I’ll be far too busy looking and listening and taking notes and photos to drive as well. I need someone dependable, someone I can bear to be with for days on end.

Apart from Gordon, there are other volunteers. My friend Sam wants to come for a while, but he doesn’t want to drive and it turns out that he doesn’t want to pay his way either. And he isn’t sure about having to sit in a plane for half a day just to get there. ‘Isn’t there another way of getting there?’ he wants to know. There are others too, but this can’t be allowed to turn into a group outing.

Then I remember my most reliable friend. He’s even older than me and possibly not as bullet-proof as he used to be. But he has a reliable name, Bruce, and he’s keen and perfectly happy to drive on the wrong side of the road for a couple of thousand kilometres. We’ve been on the road before, many times over the years, and although there have been a few close calls, we’ve survived. At least so far.

The northwestern part of America seems to offer the best options for our investigation, having a handy arrangement of three states that have given the legal nod to marijuana to various degrees and are linked by road. First there's California, which at the time of our visit, has legalised medical marijuana only; then, across the northern border, Oregon; and then, north again, Washington state, both of which have fully inhaled the cannabis revolution and gone recreational.

All we have to do is get there. And maybe even get back again.

PART TWO

THE HIGH ROAD

No form, no entry

Bruce is squinting at his little movie screen in the seat next to me in Premium Economy. ‘Are those prescription glasses you’ve got on?’ I ask.

‘Yep.’

‘Interesting frames. A bit more frivolous than I’d normally expect from you.’

‘They’re not my glasses.’

‘You mean they’re someone else’s prescription?’

‘Yep.’

This should be an interesting trip: this guy is my driver. But it’s too late to make any changes now. We order gin and tonics. It might help with the focus. It’s 11 and a half hours to our first stop, San Francisco, city of myth and madness, a place once described as ‘49 square miles surrounded entirely by reality’. The two of us have been to San Francisco before, but we were much younger men then and probably much less sensible. Or not. We have less to lose now.

God, I hate flying. The older I get, the weaker my wings become. Several drinks, dinner, two movies, a sleeping pill and a bit of a sleep later, it’s awfully bright out the little plane window and it’s Monday morning now, though we left Auckland on Monday night. It’s 23 degrees in San Francisco, says the pilot, just as the plane angles down towards that very place. I’m just grateful this torture they call travel is nearly over.

The other thing that’s going on, of course, is that it’s now quite a while since I last took a passing puff on a joint and that does exact a certain personal toll, though one that’s a little hard to quantify. Or perhaps I don’t like to.

When I find myself, for a period, beyond the comforts of an occasional joint, I don’t suffer withdrawal symptoms or anything so dramatic. Cannabis is supposed to be non-addictive. But there’s another word that might fit better, a word I don’t much like. Dependency. You do, or I have, become dependent on it, like I am on coffee first thing and a beer or two of

an evening. I won't die or fall apart without them, but I won't be as happy as I might be. A little edgier, more wide awake.

There's an unusually old steward on this flight. He looks to be in his 70s and he seems to hate these complicated seats they give us in Premium Economy. When they malfunction, as they seem to regularly do, he bangs them with his angry old fists to close the tables and to pop the pop-up screens back in.

The breakfast seemed ancient too: the eggs reconstituted, the pastries microwave mushy, the fruit bright-hued, icy and tasteless. Flying would be quick and easy if the airlines were allowed to just pop all us passengers into drawers and drug us to sleep for 12 hours, or even longer should the immigration officers prefer to examine us comatose, which, honestly, I'd be fine about.

Then there'd be no need to feed us pop-up food, serve us too many drinks and torture us with the red-light signs on the toilets. But that's all over now. We're here on the far side of the Pacific which is what matters. All that's left to do is get through American Immigration.

The last time Bruce and I flew in to San Francisco it was the 1990s, which seems rather a long time between trips. And, *bump*, here we are again. Let's see if we survive this one. As I recall, we barely survived the last one. That time we took a road trip from San Francisco to Las Vegas. New Zealand was about to allow its first casinos to open and I thought I

should go to Vegas to see how crazy things could get and write a story about it. This is the same song with a different chorus.

I arrive in America this time behaving as if I'm stoned already, rather than merely looking to get stoned, which is good practice perhaps. I do everything wrong at Immigration. It must be the combination of the gins and the sleeping pill, not to mention the boyish excitement. When I finally get to the top of the queue for my encounter with the first official at his counter I make quite the wrong move. Trying to be helpful, I lean down and put my eye to the little lens that's sticking up at me on a stalk from the counter top. For some reason, I think they must want to ID my iris and that must be the thing they do it with. But apparently it isn't. It's probably a camera, which is now getting an extreme close-up of my crazed eyeball.

'It's not a goddam microscope, man,' the large dude in the uniform snaps, unsettling me so much that I leave my stamped entry form behind on his counter and then I get turned back by the next official I encounter at the end of the next very long queue.

'No form, no entry,' this one growls, and I have to thread and plead my way back through an angry winding queue and return to the first official, who growls at me again as he shoves my abandoned form at me. So, in the end, no one says to me, 'Welcome to America' like I thought they were supposed to, but I'm really much too pleased about actually being here to care.

Outside the terminal, finally, it's blazing hot as we wait on the kerb for our hotel shuttle. I may have overdressed. My merino singlet, under my shirt under my jacket, is cooking me like a chook in an oven bag. Aboard the shuttle out on the six-lane freeway to the city centre, we curl between low, brown, bone-dry-looking hills and a sign announcing, 'South San Francisco the Industrial City'. We pass Candlestick Park, now demolished, where The Beatles played their last stadium show. The last song they played at that last concert was their frantic version of Little Richard's 'Long Tall Sally', Paul McCartney singing lead.

Candlestick Park got its odd name as the result of a naming contest when it opened in 1959. There's not a lot of clarity about what the name might mean. It had an even madder name in the early 2000s, when an outfit called Monster Cable bought sponsorship of Candlestick Park and renamed it Monster Park. The name reverted to Candlestick when the deal ended a few years later and then they knocked the stadium down.

It's the hottest day of the year in San Francisco, says the driver over

his roaring air-conditioning. It's like being delivered into a desert with streets — strange streets, I see on closer inspection, when we're deposited, gasping and sweating, outside our hotel, the Metropolis, a timeworn '30s Art Deco joint behind a lively Modernist sign. I knew it was situated in an interesting part of downtown San Francisco, near Union Square, the centre of the city, but over on the border of an edgy, oddly named inner-city zone called the Tenderloin. But that was research and this is reality — our first confrontation with the nerve-rattling reality of life for the people who live on the streets in these parts. I thought I was used to seeing street people, but this is a shock, a genuine culture shock.

They are many and mostly they appear to be pretty fucked up. They're right here with us, all round the edges of the footpaths outside the hotel — crazy, loud, damaged people, mainly coloured. Several of them are screaming about various grievances. They keep a little distance and don't come right at the pair of us, standing here dizzy with jetlag beside our tempting suitcases on their little wheels, full of clean clothes and money.

Am I imagining an interesting tension in the air? I think so. A soothing joint might be good for the nerves at this point, but that doesn't seem immediately likely. Seeing these troubled people lurking around — dozens of them — is unsettling, like we've dropped in on the set of a zombie movie. That must be why they're not attacking us.

Safe inside the hotel, we check in, drop those bags in our hot rooms on the fifth floor and head out for a walk up Mason Street, at the bottom of which the Metropolis sits, just off San Francisco's major thoroughfare, Market Street. There are hobos and hobo-ettes everywhere. Though hobo isn't the right word for them. It doesn't capture their particular world view, which isn't exactly folksy. 'Street people' doesn't get it either. They're on the street all right, but they mostly look like they've been burnt by some unholy fire, victims of defeat, despair, drugs, abandon, loss of control.

'Don't catch their eyes,' I whisper to Bruce, but he doesn't listen, of course, being a sweet guy with a trusting heart. Just up the road, as we stop at a crossing, we're approached by a skinny, grubby, bedraggled woman, eyes mad, teeth mostly absent. First she tries me. 'I like your hair buddy,' she tells me in a burnt, awful voice. I ignore her. Bruce, bless him, doesn't.

'I have twins in my belly,' I can hear her telling him. She's been in church all morning praying for help, she further reveals.

Bruce's eyes widen. 'I'm so sorry,' he tells her, but that isn't a good move. 'I don't want your fucking sorry,' she shouts right back. 'I want your fucking money.' The light turns green. I pull him away.

Union Square, as its name suggests, is a square, a big, raised paved one

with a great phallic monument in the middle. It's big enough to give some perspective to the city, pushing the towers back. Saks Fifth Avenue looms from across the square and, much closer, Bruce notes, there's a hotdog stand. He's been muttering about wanting a hotdog since we landed. He reckons it's our first important culinary experience. It's on his eating bucket list. I just hope we don't need a bucket after we eat them.

They're five bucks each, which seems quite a lot, and 'organic' apparently, whatever that means in hotdog world. The dog guy hands them over, bare in their buns, and we help ourselves to an array of sauces and pickles on a rack at the end of his stand. They actually taste good. Either that or we're starving. The beers in a bar round the corner, local pale ale, are even better. It's a lovely old bar, nice and dark, all arches and plaster and carved wood and cool.

Then, as you do on a first afternoon in an exotic city, we walk and walk under the cruel sun, to the east beyond Union Square and up through San Francisco's sprawling, smelly Chinatown, heading in the general direction of our loose goal, the famous City Lights Bookshop and, across the road, the Beat Museum.

There are dozens of Chinatowns across the USA, across the whole Western world, in fact. And elsewhere. The oldest one on earth is in Manila and was founded in 1594. There are 11 Chinatowns in California alone and four just in New York City. But San Francisco's is the biggest and oldest in America, its seeds sown in the time of the California gold rush in the 1840s and '50s.

Like most of the other gold miners, the Chinese didn't plan to hang about after the best of all the gold-grabbing was over, but the mayor of the time was welcoming and invited them to stay on as equal citizens. By the mid-1850s, several thousand Chinese had set up home, shop and laundry in the area where Chinatown is today, creating a growing city within a growing city, a place where Chinese could live as Chinese, picking up and developing the more menial tasks the locals didn't fancy doing.

But by the 1870s, that apartness, that disinterest in integration, was seen as an insult and danger. Anti-Sino sentiment blossomed in the midst of an economic depression that had put many out of work and made them newly envious and suspicious of the immigrants from the East who now dominated the shoe and clothing industries, cigar-making, laundering and entertainment, not to mention the opium dens and the brothel-keeping.

There were attempts to stop the Chinese buying property and, as a

result, most of them ended up in the grip of voracious landlords, though not all, which spread rumours that the Chinese were trying to buy some of San Francisco from San Franciscans. Mobs laid siege to Chinatown and local politicians made repeated attempts to force the Chinese to abandon the neighbourhood and move away to a less central location.

But they didn't want to. Not only that, visitors to the city loved San Francisco's Chinatown and its exotic and decadent allure. Despite all the attempts, it persisted and grew right up until 1906, when the great earthquake and fires reduced it, and most of the city, to ruins. Again there were attempts to push the outsiders out, but this time the Chinese took to the ramparts of their legal rights and fought to remain and won, rebuilding their town within the city. And the new Chinatown was better than the old. San Franciscan architects worked with Chinese business owners to build in an Oriental style, with curved rooflines and other design features that emphasised the unifying culture of the district without being entirely tacky.

The quake and the fires had unified San Francisco's population, most of whom now put old enmities aside, and Chinatown got on with being Chinatown. Now about 20,000 residents jam into its 16 blocks. It's a functional ghetto really, as it always has been. The drains still stink their

particular exotic stink, and there are other stinks too.

Just round the corner, I spot my first sign of marijuana, a vast cloud of it pouring out of the face of a funky-looking dude who also exudes the distinct aura of not wanting to be bothered. So I don't. I'm tempted to inquire where a chap might find some weed, but he does, in truth, have the look of a man who, in other circumstances, might be mugging me.

The City Lights bookstore used to be open 24 hours a day, in case a customer should have an urgent need for a book at 4 a.m., but these days it closes at midnight. It's a marvellous, mystical, totally overwhelming place, as bookshops can be when they're, well, jammed full of books you've never seen before.

Named after the Charlie Chaplin movie, City Lights was opened way back in 1953 by the poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti and another lesser-known bloke who did all the day-to-day work. It's not a place you go looking to pick up a nice light romance or a western, unless you fancy William Burroughs' idea of a western. It specialises in poetry, politics and the arts and it is an official historic site, the first business to be made such a thing in these parts. I settle for pottering around the edges and in the San Francisco section I pick up something that looks useful: *Cool Gray City of Love*, a book about the city by a local writer, Gary Kamiya.

Over in the Beat Museum, the vibe's a bit weirder, with an old hippie behind the counter and so many Charles Bukowski books there's even a section devoted to foreign translations of his brilliant, filthy books and his poetry, which is less filthy and perhaps less brilliant. I resisted the allure of a German translation of *Women*.

Made slightly mad and impatient by the jetlag and exhaustion, we don't actually explore the Beat Museum beyond its store, though I've always had a low tolerance for hairy old gaybos like Allen Ginsberg and mad bastards like Jack Kerouac. There's a Jack Kerouac Alley just down the road from the bookshop, but that's no surprise. There's an AC/DC Lane in Melbourne, after all. Ginsberg, of course, was an enthusiastic user of and agitator for cannabis back in the 1960s, when there were so many things to agitate about. He wrote a marvellous, confrontational essay on marijuana that was published in 1966, which goes, in part:

> I have spent half a year in Morocco, smoking kif often. Old gentlemen and peaceable youths sit amiably, in cafes or under shade trees in outdoor gardens, drinking mint tea, passing the tiny

> kif pipe, and looking quietly at the sea. This is the true picture of the use of kif in North Africa, exactly the opposite of the lurid stereotype of mad-dog human beings deliberately spread by our Treasury Department police branch. And I set this model of tranquil sensibility beside the tableau of aggravated New York executives sipping whiskey before a 1965 TV set's imagery of drunken American violence covering the world from the highways to Berkeley all the way to the dirt roads of Vietnam.

By a funny quirk of history, the Ginsberg name came up connected with marijuana again in the '80s when President Ronald Reagan's Supreme Court nominee, Judge Douglas H. Ginsberg, rattled the American establishment by admitting he smoked weed as a student and on a few social occasions in the '70s.

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We lurch back down Mason Street, zigzagging around the walking dead and into a bar just opposite our hotel. A brewer we know back home recommended it to us. It's called Mikkeller's and there are 46 beers on tap, the temperature is cool, the light dim and the atmosphere manly, though in a young and bearded way. There's hardly a woman in the place and the barman's a beer snob. He's talking down his nose, like beer is a new experience for us.

I might be too old to be a hipster any more and far too grey to dare grow a beard, but I do know quite a bit about beer, especially craft beer, which has been rising in popularity in recent years here in enlightened parts of America and back home, almost in league with the cannabis revolution. And beer and weed are connected, chemically at least.

Hops, the dried flowers that make beer bitter, contain THC — not at the levels of cannabis, but still enough to have an effect. And craft beers, especially our favourite, the pale ales, are jammed full of hops, unlike the tasteless beers of yore. I've often wondered if getting tipsy on a 30-hop craft beer isn't that far removed from being a bit stoned — a mellower sort of drunkenness, and perhaps one that will fill in until I can get my hands on something of a more herbal nature.

I ask the know-all barman for a pale ale and of course he's got 10 and I have to make a choice. I go for the one with the 'snappy grapefruit undertones'. I'm exhausted. Jetlag arrives like a bus. Also, the beers in this

bar are all on the powerful side and the alcohol is making me babble. I order another one as I'm trying to make a conversation out of complaining about the business of tipping in America, which I find annoying, mainly because it seems to be compulsory but also because it makes everything quite a lot dearer than it seems at first glance.

A few pints of charismatic craft beers later, we get out of the nerdish bar, where we were the oldest drinkers by a generation, maybe more. Back at the hotel and up in my toasty room, I count my socks and undies into a drawer, and put my passport and money into the safe I find in the wardrobe. Then we meet in the foyer and head out again, walking six edgy blocks down Turk Street to the Whitechapel Gin Bar, which was recommended to us by someone we know who knows a bit about gin, a tipple we've both had a bit of experience with.

The people on the street, the street people, are present in some numbers now: that guy over there with no arms, that one in a wheelchair with no legs. A lot of them are shouting things, some of it at each other, some at us maybe. I have to tune out a bit just to keep moving, my hand tightening on my man bag, my demeanour, hopefully, nonchalant. This crowd could freak you out if you let them.

Down the road, round a corner and inside the Whitechapel Bar, it's another world, a steam punky sort of world, all dark and arched and underground, huge old copper pipes snaking across the ceiling, post-Gothic, but in a good way. And rising up on glittering shelves behind the long bar are hundreds of bottles of gin. This is going to be like drinking in a dangerous museum.

We sample gin of several varieties, eat and, fading, slip out back down the streets, more of the homeless now up and shambling about, shouting threats, one engaging angrily with his own reflection in a window. The troubled are very troubling. Back, relatively safe, up on the fifth floor, I can hear them down there on the hard sidewalks, howling, but my sleeping pill works quickly and I'm gone.

Jimmy Page comes in

I wake up wishing I hadn't. All those gins last night at Whitechapel don't seem to be socialising well with the jetlag, and I feel weak and trembly and make it only as far as Union Square before I have to leave Bruce to his own devices and go back to my room for another hour or two in bed, or rather on it, feet pointing at the ceiling.

I remember now that, sometime late last night, one of the hobos bedded down below my window, on the Mason Street footpath opposite, woke me up when he started yelling, 'I'm gonna kill someone. I am. I'm gonna kill someone.' He sounded like he meant it too, though whether he found someone to kill I'm not sure. I briefly considered going down and killing him instead, but I went back to sleep.

By the morning light, they are gathered over there, smoking their meth or whatever it is that makes them so crazy, so like zombies in the shadows. And this is only my first morning in this place. Things might have changed a little since the last time Bruce and I were here. Certainly, there was no such thing as medicinal marijuana in those days. I do need to get on with exploring that option, though I'm not holding out a lot of hope.

At noon I'm back on the streets, not entirely recovered but a lot less interested in lying down on the job. Bruce wants feeding and watering after being abandoned to wander the business district for two hours under a blazing sun. 'There's a breakfast and lunch place near here, an organic hipster set-up I read something about,' I tell him. 'It's called farm:table, with no capital letters. The review said it was very popular and there might be queues.'

'I can cope with a queue,' says Bruce. At which point, spookily, we spot one of those very things, right there, a queue snaking back out of a modern, glass-sided building and up round the corner at the high end of Union Square. 'That must be it,' I announce, perhaps a little prematurely. We join the queue without looking properly into the place we take to be the groovy new San Fran eatery.

I'd noticed that the people on the inside of the place seemed to be standing around looking down, inspecting things I couldn't see on tables. I assumed what they were looking at was a tasty array of fresh goods straight from somewhere green. But after increasingly wondering why people keep coming back round the corner excitedly waving cell phones at the line of us waiting like ducks in the queue, Bruce goes to take a look. It turns out we're in a line for an Apple shop, and not the crunchy sort. We've been queueing up for the new iPhone when all I want is a nice club sandwich. Though I'm not sure Americans know what a proper club sandwich is.

I am feeling almost fully recovered, though, certainly enough to want to go somewhere interesting, away from all this downtown stuff and all the angry hobos. It's time to go exploring.

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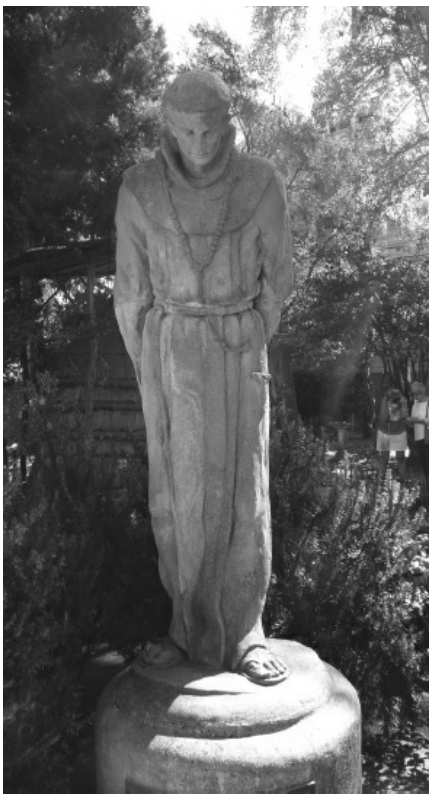
I'd made a list before we left home of various sights and sites to try and see on this trip, and the San Fran section of my list goes on at some length. High up on it is Mission Dolores, a tiny old church, the last standing vestige of the Catholic outpost that spawned the city. It's in the city's Mission district, for obvious reasons, and it still has its old graveyard, which is where cinema suspense master Alfred Hitchcock filmed key scenes for his classic *Vertigo*.

The old mission takes a little finding. The cab driver hasn't heard of 'a graveyard round here', he says, as he drops us outside an old Spanish-style church that sprawls along most of a block on a big heartless street, 16th. Lord it's hot, so hot I feel like I'm standing too close to a huge heater. But this church looks like the place, a beautiful humble old adobe building with its walled cemetery beyond, invisible from the street. It's a strangely lovely spot, an oasis from all the yelling and clanging downtown. Standing in the centre of the hot and sleepy little cemetery is a statue of the old king of this domain, Father Junípero Serra.

At six foot six, plus plinth, he's a slightly daunting presence, though he holds a humble pose in his monks' robes, eyes downcast. He founded this place, as Mission San Francisco de Asís, in 1776, one of a string of 21 missions he established for Spain and the Catholic Church, stretching all the way north from Mexico City, where he'd previously done a stint as the head of the local Inquisition.

He was not a fun guy. Ordained a saint in 1988, Serra was a zealot who

wore a sackcloth woven with pieces of broken wire under his robes. By night in his cell, he'd lash himself with a whip of sharpened chains, though his vice wasn't exactly a secret one. He'd do it in public, if the occasion demanded. Once, making some awful point about the gory glory of his God, he smashed himself with a great big rock before his worshippers.



Despite his best attempts, Serra lived to be 70. And the mission lost its name, becoming known instead as Mission Dolores, for the nearby Arroyo de los Dolores, Our Lady of Sorrows Creek. Previously, the locals had been Indians, the Yelamu, who had been drawn to the area by its game-filled creeks and salt marshes. When the Spanish Christians arrived in the area, the Yelamu were hit hard, their population decimated by disease, deprivation and violence. Visitors to the area would commonly talk about how sad the Yelamu looked, and wonder why.

It's said that 5000 Indians are buried beneath the cemetery, which used to extend much further. The Yelamu, in the end, were wiped out entirely. Their last descendant died in the 1920s. No wonder the good Father has his eyes cast down. Also, his statue is overstated: he was, apparently, a small man. Wiry though. And covered in scars.

Back on the achingly hot street outside Mission Dolores, we manage eventually to stop a cab and I tell the driver to take us to 2400 Fulton

Street, which is also on my list. It's the old Jefferson Airplane mansion, where the famous '60s psychedelic rock band lived and loved and drugged and rehearsed their loud, sinuous music. They bought the place 50 years ago for $70,000, which would have been a lot of money then, but it's quite a place. It has the lines of a great stone temple, though it was painted black when the Airplane lived here.

The band's rhythm guitar player, Paul Kantner, who died of a heart attack in 2016 aged 74, was a lifelong pot smoker, partaking to the end apparently, or near it anyway. He said he was introduced to it in the late 1950s and busted for possession once, in Hawaii in 1969 when he was a rock star.

Right across the road from the old Jefferson Airplane Mansion is Golden Gate Park, which is as big as a city itself. Fulton Street runs all the way down the corridor-shaped park on its northern boundary — for 48 blocks. I had expressed a vague desire to walk the length of the park, but clearly that was a little ambitious.

Bruce has a firmer grasp on the situation. 'It's fucking huge,' he says, and he's right. I've come prepared with a map of the park, which is full of interesting things, I point out: a polo ground, a Dutch windmill, lakes, an island, an art museum. Everything you could possibly want, I'd read, including hippies smoking on a grassy knoll called, appropriately, Hippie

Hill. If we can find it, I plan to ask them about the weed situation and whether they might let me have some in the meantime, to tide me over till I get to Oregon.

But the hotness of the afternoon and the hugeness of the park seem to loom larger than we might quite be ready for. Only a hundred or so steps into Golden Gate Park and we're already lost, in what turns out to be the AIDS Memorial Grove, though that's not so bad. We actually seem to fit in here: there are several other sets of older blokes mooching around. 'Try to look respectful,' I mutter to Bruce. I briefly consider holding his hand, but he might panic and run off.

On we wander. In the bicycle park outside the Academy of Sciences there's a penny-farthing bike parked nonchalantly alongside other two-wheelers. I consider waiting to see who comes out to ride the thing, but it's too hot to hang about. This park's too much for old legs like ours — especially Bruce's, with that dodgy knee of his.

So again, after a long bake under the sun, we get a cab and I tell the driver to take us all the way to the far end of the park where it meets the ocean at aptly named Ocean Beach. There's a place there that's also on my list, called the Beach Chalet, where they're said to have food and beer and views straight out across the wild northern Pacific.

But down by the seaside it's weirdly foggy in that famous Frisco way. Cold, clammy foggy, the Golden Gate Bridge invisible, the beach barely visible. Even the Dutch windmill is a ghostly presence above the trees next to the Beach Chalet, where we sit inside upstairs at the bar because there's no view anyway and, also, the place looks expensive. Maybe we can just have pale ales and bar food, we're thinking.

American food remains a challenge to delicate creatures like us, with our more subdued eating requirements. On the other hand, beer in this part of America is a whole new and wonderful world thanks to the hop-fuelled explosion of craft breweries across the very northwestern states we happen to be travelling through. In even the grittiest, grottiest bars we'll visit on this trip there will be at least four craft beers on tap, usually many more.

Behind the bar at the Beach Chalet there are many, many more and the barman is a babbling beer nut, handing us tasters of a berry beer that's just come on the market. Its trick seems to be that it doesn't taste like beer at all. 'How about this Tripel Threat,' he says pushing another glass at me. 'It has banana tones. It's 7.8 per cent.'

'Too strong for lunchtime,' I tell him, and order a steadying pint of

pale ale and ask for the bar snack menu, at which point Bruce announces he wants to avoid deep-fried food while we're in America.

'Good God,' I tell him. 'I'd expected to eat nothing but deep-fried food while we're here. You have to be realistic.' To emphasise the point, I order calamari, deep-fried naturally. I'm feeling slightly better just at the thought of it. Maybe we can stay here a while, trapped by the fog that increasingly looms outside.

The squid is profoundly deep-fried with a dip on the side, but at least it's food. Bruce's sad salad looks a great deal less tempting.

The next challenge will be getting back into the city from this foggy edge we're at. Any more beers and we might have to stay at the Beach Chalet until they throw us out. The woman at the desk downstairs tells me a cab might take 30 or 40 minutes to get to us. 'Catch the bus,' she says, pointing at the front door. 'Turn right, then right again into Fulton. You'll find the bus stop.' And so we do, after a short sandy walk, and we ride all 48 blocks to the end of Golden Gate Park, hop off and walk west, downhill across streets of funky old houses and apartment buildings to Haight Street, the once and always centre of the old '60s hippie dream.

There are still traces of it, though strange traces. And there are the street people, who are many in the Haight, where San Francisco's famous liberality is taken to extremes. The barbarians are not at the gates, they are in the city, living on its sidewalks, sleeping, pissing and shitting in its doorways. Dying there too, I imagine. Seeing these poor buggers makes it hard to hang onto that carefree tourist feeling.

Bruce's leg is hurting him, I think, though he's too stoic to say anything till it's really bad. We'll see. Meantime, here's Amoeba Records, the famous Haight Street record store, which is run by an expat New Zealander called Tony Green. He's a friend of a friend and he's expecting us, but not till after five for a beer when he finishes work. It's hard to walk past Amoeba, though.

Also, there are other allures indoors besides music. I notice that, inside and upstairs from the cavernous record store, according to a sign, is a Medical Marijuana Evaluation Office, which begs further investigation, though I hardly need evaluation to tell me I need marijuana.

‘I just need to pop up there,’ I tell Bruce. ‘I’ll find you in 10 minutes in the Blues section.’

I’m not expecting to have any luck. I’ve checked out the legal situation and I’m pretty sure you need to be a California resident to benefit from the state’s relaxed laws regarding use of the drug as a medicine. And aside from being a resident, you need to have three or more medical conditions. As mentioned earlier, some places have lists up on a wall to help you decide. If I’m asked, I’ll probably mention headaches, insomnia and maybe anxiety or arthritis. But, unfortunately, it doesn’t come to that, though the marijuana evaluation people are very sweet to me.

‘You English?’ asks the guy behind the counter.

‘New Zealand,’ I say.

‘I’ve got two nephews there,’ says a woman in a white coat. They’re genuinely sorry they can’t help me, but I do need to actually live in California to get medicinal cannabis.

‘I’ll head to Oregon then,’ I tell them.

‘Great,’ says the marijuana man. ‘Washington’s even better.’

What nice people.

I’ve taken longer than the 10 minutes I said and, after a search, find Bruce in Country and Western. We drift outside and down Haight Street. There’s a T-shirt in a shop window with ‘FUCK TRUMP’ printed in bold on it. Down the road at the famous Haight–Ashbury intersection, there’s a

hobo carrying a sign scrawled large on cardboard reading, ‘Just Need a Fucking Cold Beer’.

‘He’s got a point,’ I say to Bruce, but Bruce doesn’t want to follow the sign’s obvious advice. ‘It’ll lead to bad habits,’ he says mysteriously. What the hell? First no fried foods and now no beer. I’ll have to find a new driver if this keeps up.

Round here is where the tourists come for a walk on the wild side, to perhaps view the remains of the Summer of Love. That was 50 years ago now and there aren’t many signs of it except for street names and shops selling tie-dyed T-shirts and big glass bongs. And the hobos.

Having wrestled Bruce into a café, we’re looking at them on the footpath across the street, me with an enormous beer and Bruce with a coffee cup as big as a footbath. Everything’s huge here, including the gulf between the us and the them. There’s a little gang stumbling and lying about over there, one of them an old guy with a haunting face. He looks like an old buffalo hunter waiting for his death. Another guy seems completely out of it and in constant motion, falling, rising again, collapsing in a doorway, then stumbling into the beer shop and out again to fall down once more. Buffalo Bill doesn’t appear to notice.

Bruce has put me in charge of our money, which we’ve pooled to cover our daily running costs. As with measures of weight and distance, the Americans haven’t evolved much with their currency, insisting on the preservation of the sanctified dollar bill, along with the pocket-shredding clutter of tiny one-cent coins and dimes and quarters. The dollar bills clump up into bird-nest tangles in my pockets, though they’re handy for tips once I disentangle them. I think maybe I’m tipping too generously just to get rid of the stupid bills. Cab drivers seem too grateful; tough waitresses smile.

It’s gone five o’clock now, so we drift back down to Amoeba Records to meet Tony, get a tour and head out for a beer. ‘You’ve had quite enough coffee,’ I tell Bruce. ‘We don’t want you getting over-excited.’

Tony Green has an accent halfway between Christchurch and Oakland, where he now lives with his wife. ‘I should have looked out some Craig Scott and Tina Cross records for you,’ he says, greeting us, smiling, perhaps having thought about that line.

‘I think Bruce has all the Craig Scott ones,’ I tell him. ‘He’s Craig Scott’s brother.’

It’s true. He is, in fact, the slightly older brother of the once-famous

New Zealand pop singer Craig Scott. Tony looks alarmed at his cruel and thoughtless sarcasm, which he should be.

‘Not only that,’ I say, pushing my advantage, ‘Tina Cross is a good friend of mine.’ That last bit’s not actually true, though I did meet her a few times, years back on the cabaret circuit.

Amoeba is enormous, probably very buoyant these days on the back of the unexpected vinyl boom, though there are, from the looks of it, tens of thousands of CDs on offer too. Just to check on the depth of their historic integrity, I drift to the ‘J’ section in the Rock department, where those old heroes Jefferson Airplane are so well represented that their wonderful second album *Surrealistic Pillow* has its own section.

Just the sight of that album’s cover takes me straight back to my version of the Summer of Love, in far-off Invercargill at the arse end of New Zealand. It must have been 1967, my last year at high school, so I was 16 turning 17 when one afternoon, in Latin class, something unexpected and life-changing occurred.

I’m not sure why I landed Latin as a subject, but I’d been doing it since starting high school, to little effect. The one plus about our Latin class was that the teacher, instead of being the dried-up rooster you might expect in such circumstances, was a young woman, only a few years older than us, and so cute she might have walked straight out of one of those swinging London movies that were all the go at the time.

Why she did what she did that day I'll probably never know. Maybe she looked out at her class and saw all the blank eyes looking back. Maybe she'd given up on trying to get Latin verbs into us. Maybe she wanted to get our attention, wanted us to like her. Or maybe she just liked her discovery so much she had to share it.

Because, instead of teaching us Latin to little effect, she popped a long-playing record on the school record player, which she had set up on her desk. I can't remember if she said anything or what I was thinking as the needle hit the groove, but for me, at least, nothing was ever quite the same afterwards.

The record was *Surrealistic Pillow* and it was like nothing I'd heard to that point — and I'd heard quite a bit. I was music mad. I went out immediately and bought a copy of that album and I have it still and still it jumps with life and hope and the power of alternative thinking and longing and sex, and drugs, of course. 'Feed your head,' singer Grace Slick yowls at the climax of one of the tracks, 'White Rabbit', like an instruction, though there was little I could do about that at the time, in Invercargill in 1967.

Tony takes me for a look behind the scenes at Amoeba. There's a vast space for the second-hand vinyl collections they buy, sometimes by weight, says Tony. There's a conveyer belt back here to roll the records

out once they've been sorted by the shop's fast-fingered experts.

Next he takes us down the road to a busy bar for some punchy pale ales and bar food. Then, before he has too much to drink, he drives us back to Mason Street and our hotel on its troubled corner. There's yowling in the air and the sound of smashing glass.

Downstairs in the Metropolis the bar is closed so we wander up the street and find a sports bar for a couple of goodnight gin and tonics. TV screens full of football and baseball surround us. I'm still tipping too generously. Then we pick our way back home through the hobos.

I'd asked Tony, back in the bar on Haight Street, whether any famous old rock star types ever came by his shop, checking out the vinyl, seeing maybe if they still existed. San Francisco, after all, was one of the key cauldrons that boiled up a new sort of rock music in the 1960s and some of the old survivors must still be around.

He said Neil Young used to come by now and then when he lived at Broken Arrow, his ranch in northern California, but since he split up with his wife and hooked up with the movie actress Darryl Hannah he's been living somewhere south of LA and he doesn't come by any more.

But, Tony said, Jimmy Page from Led Zeppelin came by Amoeba sometimes — quite a bit actually. 'He comes in looking for records he played on. Session stuff from early on. We've stopped taking any notice of him.'

What's the name of this dump?

It's cooler outside today, fog kissing the tops of the high-rises, the hobos still tucked up in bed as we head up the hill for breakfast. We round the first corner and find a whole row of the poor, doomed-looking buggers, lying end to end in their filthy sleeping bags and blankets, one old guy conked out with his dog and a teddy bear, his grimy deep-lined face crusted with blood.

Round the next corner some of them are up and about in various states of awfulness. They seem like a tribe, but crazy with it. They fight over money, booze, drugs. If you stop or meet their eyes, they're in your face, and you don't want them there. 'Any change?' is their script. Beyond that, it's all madness from what I've seen so far. And when you're staying in a hotel on the edge of the Tenderloin, you see quite a lot. More than you want to.

Today, for breakfast, we find the fabled farm:table, in truth a tiny, achingly hip place where we have to take our coffee and croissant perched on a thin bench on the edge of the sidewalk. Then, back down the hill we drift to Union Square, where we squeeze onto a packed cable car to Fisherman's Wharf, a slightly terrifying ride.

The conductor tells those of us hanging on tight out on the running board to pull in our butts so we can ease past a parked bus. It's a very close thing for a couple of the larger arses. And over the crazy hills and round the mad corners we go. The closer we get to the sea, the chillier the air turns. Fog forms a wall in the distance.

San Francisco's cable cars are a strange phenomenon, a fairground ride trapped on city streets. Stand near the rails on the streets they run up and down and you can hear the cable whirring just down there below your feet. It's ancient and slightly terrifying technology.

The driver, by necessity a husky guy, hauls on a huge lever. He's called the Gripman and that's what he seems to do with that big old lever, basically applying the brakes as we tip down the precipitous streets and

releasing them as we shoot upwards again, pulled along by that whirring underground cable.

And if they seem slightly loose and dangerous that might be because they are. These cable cars have the most accidents per year of all mass transport systems in the US. According to rumours on Wikipedia, over a recent three-year period, San Francisco City paid out more than $8 million to settle claims related to cable car accidents.

But hey, it's fun and we tourists love them, so much so that it's often impossible for the conductors to collect their fares. Nearly half the cable car passengers, like Bruce and me, ride for free.

Soon we're at the bottom of the big hill at the harbour's edge at San Fran's most touristic spot, Fisherman's Wharf, where we wander and where it's strangely quiet, the mad tourist season having recently blown through. Fisherman's Wharf is a marvellous place, grab-your-dollar tacky yet oddly authentic, a five-hectare lagoon of wharfs, unchanged in more than a century.

It's semi-deserted, its hard-sell face exposed. Eating place after eating place has signs shouting about how 'if it swims' they've got it — probably deep-fried. Many of them have photographs of what your meal might look like and some of these are alarming.

We mooch about a bit and, down at the end of a small tucked-away wharf, find something slightly interesting, the Fishermen's and Seamen's Memorial Chapel, as it says on its sign. It's wooden, quaint and quiet, and almost hidden behind some warehouses. The bell in its modest tower dates back to 1860, but the chapel isn't old, having been built in 1979, in memory of local fisher people and seamen lost at sea. Inside, plaques with hundreds of names cover the walls. The chapel also does a brisk trade as a wedding venue.

Almost all the eating places crowding Fisherman's Wharf, unsurprisingly, promise chowder. They must get through oceans of the stuff. It's a disturbing thought and I vow to avoid chowder when we, inevitably, get round to eating here.

Impulsively, we take a harbour cruise, even though the harbour is mostly invisible. It's quite foggy now and cold with it, though there are patches of clarity out here. Pausing right under the Golden Gate Bridge, all we can see are its massive columns; the bridge is way up there somewhere, lost in the fog. San Francisco seems to have a way of making you feel like you're in a movie. This fog is extremely foggy.

There are military remains all around the harbour and on some of the islands, like Angel Island, which we're passing now and which has had various uses since what we sometimes refer to as civilisation turned up a few hundred years ago. The Spanish weren't sure what to do with the island, then the Americans turned it over to cattle ranching. It was an artillery battery during the Civil War, then a quarantine station and then, most notoriously, an immigration station, mainly dealing with Chinese arrivals, many of whom spent years here before finally being allowed onto the mainland to start a life. Prisoners recorded their misery in poems carved into the stone walls of the place. Interestingly, most of our companions on this harbour cruise are Chinese tourists, half of them waving selfie sticks over their heads, capturing things without really seeing them.

San Francisco Bay's most famous island is next, Alcatraz, the old prison island they dubbed 'the worst for the worst'. So it was apparently, as well as supposedly impossible to escape from, with its icy waters,

surging currents and sharks, not to mention the high-powered guns in the guard towers. Only three prisoners ever did escape for good, two of them brothers, in 1962, though there's only patchy evidence that they made it to land. But no bodies were found either.

How many days is it, I suddenly ponder, since I had a smoke? I'm not suffering any sort of withdrawal symptoms, being distracted I suppose by my exotic surroundings and all the pale ales and the deep-fried food. Still, it would be nice to have a little something. It's why I'm here, after all. And a smoke might make me nicer, and more able to eat American food.

Back on shore, we find some antique tourist bait, an old penny arcade, full of rickety antique peep shows and dioramas, mechanical fortune tellers and automated figures, including the large and slightly terrifying Laughing Sal, who fills the place with her maniacal laughter every time someone feeds her a coin.

I see three beheadings, two hangings and several large ladies disporting in their undergarments. Perhaps the farting campfire cowboys fart just a bit too much in the Song of the Prairie display. I pay to have my fortune told by an ancient ghostly typewriter, but the ribbon is so worn it takes quite a bit of deciphering. I can make out only a few words and they're slightly disconcerting.

'GUARD AGAINST OVER-SENSITIVENESS,' it says in patchy capital letters. 'DEVELOP CONFIDENCE IN YOURSELF. YOU POSSESS THE . . .', at which point it peters out, comes back with 'CUT YOURSELF OFF FROM FAMILIAR SURROUNDINGS' and, after more indecipherability, ends with the unsettling 'MAY BE AN OBSTACLE IN YOUR SUCCESS'.

'This might be the high point of the trip so far,' I tell Bruce, who's more worried about his stomach than my fortune. So we settle on a place called the Beach Street Grill for a Fisherman's Wharf lunch. Apart from the chowder, there are a lot of crab options, including Crab Benedict. There's a troubling photograph of that one on the menu. But you don't come to Fisherman's Wharf for good food. You come to Fisherman's Wharf and you get hungry and then you eat. And you hope it's not too bad, though often it is really.

The coffee certainly is. My crab omelette is huge and suddenly not at all what I had in mind. Bruce is still, heroically, managing to avoid eating deep-fried food, though I can't attest to what that is on his plate. He eats it anyway and then finishes my omelette. His appetite has always been a

remarkable thing and something I've always been a little in awe of.

I have an under-developed appetite and never finish meals at home, never mind here in America where they seem to think everyone should eat about half their own body weight every three or four days. Not smoking weed tends to make me even less hungry than usual, though I never lose my taste for beer. But it's too early for beer here. I don't want to start drinking in Fisherman's Wharf, a tacky and greedy but honest neighbourhood.

Getting the cable car back over the hills to the city centre takes forever. There's a long queue of tourists waiting patiently by the big wooden turnaround that marks this end of the line. The men in charge strut about like muscled peacocks, checking their watches every few minutes, ignoring us customers lined up quietly in the chilly wind now coming off that moody bay.

When the cable car rolls in and shakes off its little crowd of passengers, the crew stop strutting and push it back to the giant turnaround device and do just that, turn it around, like they're not really exerting themselves too much. Then, after a bit more strutting around and watch-checking, they let us get on board.

We get a seat indoors this time, though the disadvantage is immediate as we lurch off up the steep hill and our butts slide along the wooden seats into strangers, on my side an old lady who is chatty, but quite bony.

Over those spines of hills and back in the city, I'm keen to get on with our big road trip, which starts tomorrow. Bruce is the designated driver, but otherwise seems determined to do as little as possible, which is fair enough, I suppose. He's expecting me to be our pathfinder, so I want to find a bookshop that might have a decent, old-fashioned, fold-out road map.

Bruce's leg is giving him a bit of gyp, he says. I blame the lack of deep-fried food in his diet. He has some painkillers that seem to work a bit, some off-the-shelf things. It's a pity we don't have any weed, or any of its variants. I hear there are edible versions of cannabis that are supposed to be great for aches and pains. But there seems little chance of us getting our hands on that sort of thing in this town, with its cruel and firm medicinal rules.

Or not so firm maybe. On our way to the nearest big bookshop, we pass a bunch of hipsters sitting in a row on a low wall on a flash street, passing joints between them. Yesterday I saw two fully armed cops on

bicycles pedal unperturbed through a great cloud of dope smoke pouring off some rough types who were standing around on the sidewalk, equally unfazed. I feel awfully left out.

At least there is a vast selection of road maps in the Alexander Book Company, so vast that I need help from a large and extremely enthusiastic assistant, who happens to be hilariously and loudly sweary. I trust everything she tells me and buy maps for California and Oregon. The shop is all out of Washington maps. ‘You can get one when you’re in fucking Portland,’ says the cheery assistant.

Bruce was down in this part of town yesterday when I was having my little lie down. As we wander back to the hotel, he tells me that on his perambulations he’d come upon a hobo lying stretched out on the sidewalk with his head and his feet stuck inside cardboard boxes and his middle section completely unwrapped as he enthusiastically wanked himself. ‘Big guy,’ said Bruce.

‘I wish you hadn’t told me that,’ I say. ‘That’s going to haunt me.’ Right up until the moment we see something worse.

We’re going to a concert in a couple of hours. It seemed wrong to come to San Francisco and not see some music, so I went online and booked us tickets to see a band at the Great American Music Hall, one of the city’s legendary old concert venues. It so happens that our visit coincides with the tour schedule of Squeeze, the reformed ’70s English band best known for their hit ‘Cool for Cats’, and their former keyboards player, Jools Holland.

After a pause back at the hotel, a quick shower and a change of socks, we wander up O’Farrell Street and in the general direction of the Great American Music Hall, six or eight blocks away, thinking to have a drink or two and something to eat on the way.

It’s not a promising part of town, sprinkled with grim ethnic eateries and edgy-looking bars. We wander into one of the slightly less edgy-looking edgy bars. It’s on a corner and I don’t catch its name on our way in, though I imagine it’s something manly. Inside, there’s a down-at-heel vibe and it’s loud with music and lit up by big TV screens tuned to various sports live feeds. The need for beer overwhelms any nervousness about fitting in. We’re never going to fit in anywhere anyway.

We sit at the bar and take in some immediate good news. Even here in whatever it’s called, they have several craft beers on tap. Also, it’s ‘Lucy Hour’, according to a bedraggled sign hanging above the bar, which might

mean ‘Lucky’, making it like the more familiar Happy Hour. Or maybe there’s a generous patron called Lucy.

Whatever, the great big beers we order are only $5 each. The barmaid, who looks like the ageing bad girl from a Mexican gangster movie, insists on squeezing a lemon into Bruce’s wheat beer. ‘Don’t worry,’ she tells him, ‘I just washed my hands.’

‘What’s the name of this dump?’ Bruce asks, so loudly he could be asking me or the barmaid. It turns out it’s called The Outsider, which sounds about right. A noisy guy down the bar starts yelling at a horse race on one of the screens. I can’t tell if he’s excited or angry, but he is deafening. Next he kisses the barmaid and she gets him another Bud Light.

He’s not even drunk. You can’t get drunk drinking that dishwater. There’s really no excuse for him being such a fuckhead, but the barmaid looks used to it. She wanders back to our end of the bar and picks up on our odd accents and tries for an ID. ‘You from Europia?’ she asks. Bruce, sweet thing, tries to explain to her just where it is in the world we are from, but it’s hopeless and he loses her somewhere just west of LA.

Round the corner, I order the deep-fried catfish at a bleak Thai restaurant. The food — if food it is — comes almost immediately and the waiter looks insulted when I ask for beer. They don’t serve alcohol, just water. It’s a religious thing, I think. I don’t mind that, but I do mind the absence of beer. Also, the catfish is awful, a bit like a pile of deep-fried breadcrumbs with a fishy aura.

Twenty minutes later we’re back outside and the fog’s swirling back and forth along the street. It feels like iced steam. Here’s another bar, this one called Lucky’s. Inside, it’s a bit like the last bar: bedraggled, low-lit and sporty. There’s a loud guy sitting along from us at the bar. It’s the same loud guy from the last place.

He’s drunker now, taking bourbon shots with his watery beer. He’s so drunk he mistakes Bruce for a kindred spirit and tries to talk to him about the baseball flickering on the screen above us. ‘I don’t understand the sport,’ Bruce tells him, trying to cut him short and shut him up, but the sports bore babbles on.

There’s a full-size pool table at the back of the bar. A tall, slick black man walks in and heads straight to the table, carrying his cue folded up in a nifty bag. He high-fives the other players and they assume their places. These rugged little bars we visit seem to come with their own particular culture. There’s a woman over on the opposite wall with a younger guy on

an old leather sofa, one of her legs curled over his, looking like she's going to eat him shortly. I catch his eye. I'm not sure if he's nervous. There's a painting on the wall right above them of a naked woman trapped inside a wine glass.

By half past seven we're at the Great American Music Hall, which is living up to its rather showy name. It's an extraordinary place, as it says, a music hall, dating from around 1907. It's like being inside a carved music box and much more civilised than the sort of rock venues I'm used to. Here there are tables and chairs round the walls and beef bourguignon, zucchini and feta pancakes, and root beer floats on the menu, good grief. You wouldn't get that sort of thing back home at the Powerstation. The other odd thing is that I can't detect the whiff of weed in the air, something I'm highly sensitive to. Increasingly so.

The support act hits the beautiful stage. Two middle-aged guys: the one with the glasses, cowboy hat and acoustic guitar sings, while the tubby one plays glissandos on electric. It's doleful, but we have a table and the waitress brings us gins. I wish we'd eaten here, instead of suffering that greasy dust I had for dinner down the road. It's quite a middle-class experience at this rock and roll show so far.

Then things change. There's a wild-eyed man hanging over our table acting like he's our new best friend — or Bruce's at least. He appears to be off his skull. 'The West is the best man,' he tells us as if it's news. 'Like the Doors said.' He says it again, the bit about the West being the best. 'You want some weed,' he asks suddenly. 'I've got the best. Now, where is it?' He starts ferreting in his big leather man bag.

'You go,' I tell Bruce. 'I'll hang onto the table.' I'm not sure why I say this. I'm hanging out for a smoke, but I don't have a good feeling about this guy. Bruce is better with crazy people. The guy doesn't like me anyway.

'What planet are you from man?' he'd asked me a minute ago. 'Not your one,' I told him, which probably wasn't a very good start. Bruce goes out with him, and I wonder after a while whether I'll ever see my old friend again and how I'll explain his disappearance to his family. But he comes back after about 15 minutes, looking a little dizzy. The crazy guy is gone.

Likewise our table once Squeeze come on, so we stand up to get a better view of what turns out to be a terrific show and, oddly for this excited American audience, very English. Squeeze are quintessentially so,

like the Kinks were in the ’60s. They whomp through their many semi-hits with tremendous energy, matched by the audience roaring approval at almost every chorus.

Afterwards, we fall back out into a cold O’Farrell Street, ears happily ringing. On the street, though, we’re back in that other dark world, with the figures in the shadows lying, leaning, some even briefly standing on their own two feet. Down we walk towards our hotel, through the alternative reality of the Tenderloin. No one bothers us, but seeing them bothers me.

Back in my room, I look out the window and see a guy I’d spotted earlier. With his long straight hair and his proud cheekbones, he looks Native American. He’s talking to a parking meter down there. Now he’s yelling at it. I close the window, take a sleeping pill.

Full bar oysters dancing

We're up and out at eight for breakfast at one of those classic American diners that never die in this country, though maybe they should. They are efficient, though. It looks like we'll never get a seat and then we do. The place is pulsing, and the staff are actually running around with their orders. It's like *Happy Days* on bad speed: everything looks like what it's supposed to be, but it isn't. The coffee, for instance, isn't really coffee at all, just dirty water with a few grains floating in it, as if that's proof of some sort of passing relationship with coffee itself and its essential central ingredient, caffeine. I'd have to drink a gallon of this bilge water to get half the buzz I'd get off one decent latte at home.

And then there's the food. It's hard, looking at the gaudy menu, to decide which is the least harmful, and smallest option. Bruce's 'small fruit bowl' isn't small at all and my 'small pancake stack' is only two pancakes tall, but half a metre across. I could have added chocolate chips, but for some reason I drew a line at that. Eating my pancakes is like eating a mattress, a hot, sweet mattress.

But we need some sort of lining in our stomachs because we're heading out of here shortly and onto the road north of San Francisco and up the coast, without much of a clue where or in what circumstances we'll be bedding down tonight. I did, however, take a look at the road map last night, though I was a bit drunk and fell asleep with my face in California.

The car hire place is nearby and I leave driver Bruce in the queue to sort out our wheels, while I head back to the hotel, check us out and haul the bags out to wait for him and our car. I hope he's okay. Sometimes Bruce cracks under pressure, makes rash decisions, takes on things he doesn't entirely understand. He's a rock in most circumstances, but every rock has its weak points.

It's cloudy today and cold. Good travelling weather. The trick now is to find our way out of town unscathed and going in the right direction, not to mention on the right side of the road. Which is to say, the right side of

the road. The last time I was in San Francisco with Bruce driving he nearly ran over a pedestrian after executing a sudden sharp left turn into a crossing. I still recall the guy being incandescent with rage. He was an older bloke, but he was fierce. He pounded on our bonnet and shouted quite a string of profanities at us through the windscreen while Bruce did his best to look innocent. I'm hoping we can avoid that sort of thing this time. I'm hoping Bruce has slowed down a little with age. He used to drive like a Mafia getaway man.

I've felt on the brink of death on several occasions with him at the wheel. He's one of those guys with a need to drive, and I can't imagine him coping for long as a passenger. He'd have to be gagged and clamped. Once he drove us right off the road in a deep dark forest when an unexpected car turned up, travelling in the opposite direction on our side of the road. Another time, in an inner-city suburb, he drove us straight through a hedge in the middle of the night. Oh, and once he hurtled us down a Grey Lynn footpath, somehow fitting between lamp posts and walls, just because he felt like it at the time.

But he's older now, in his late 60s, and perhaps a calmer, quieter driver. He didn't answer when I asked if he was; he just said he was happy driving on the wrong side of the road and that he was putting all the guiding in my hands.

Waiting in the hotel car park with our bags, I watch two ancient German tourist couples take 20 minutes to manoeuvre themselves into their huge car. They're like tortoises. Once inside it, they sit looking utterly buggered, and baffled by their achievement. They're still sitting there when Bruce rolls up in a big Hyundai.

And we're off. Bruce says he'll take care of getting us out of the city, but after that I'm in charge. He seems to know where he's going because it's relatively easy so far. Up Van Ness, then up and over a foggy Golden Gate Bridge, like we're in the clouds, like we're crossing over to another world, which I think we might be.

The Spanish sailed past this narrow and mysterious harbour mouth for nearly two centuries before one of them noticed the gap in the coast — there was no fog that day. The bridge, of course, is a miracle. Only 11 workers died building it, which was a miracle in itself, though in the 90 years since it was completed, more than 1500 people have thrown themselves to their deaths from it. The famous blazing golden orange colour was never intended. That's the primer the iron came painted with.

Once the bridge was erected, it seemed a livelier choice than the duller colour that had been planned, so they stuck with it.

On the other side of the harbour mouth, it's quite distinctly not city any more. It's a bit barren looking, not unlike Central Otago. We pass through the Robin Williams Tunnel, then Sausalito — familiar names but unfamiliar places. We're whizzing along a four-lane freeway, sticking to the 50-mile-an-hour limit, though no one else is, and looking for a turn-off with an unlikely name, Sir Francis Drake Drive. It'll take us west towards the coast road.

The god of directions is with us today: soon we're off the heartless freeway and swooping through Marin County, wooded hills and scattered houses. It's bucolic, but with heavy traffic. Now we're in San Anselmo, which must be a county, not a town. At Sleepy Hollow, Bruce makes his first wrong move, a random unexplained right when he should have continued straight on. But it does give him an opportunity to make what will turn out to be his favourite move on this trip, a U-turn. Then we're back on track, passing the Marin Museum of Bicycling in a place called Fairfax. We're on Highway 1, which is what we're looking for, and in the country now, with an occasional discreet mansion behind the trees. There goes somewhere called San Geronimo, and now we're skirting a redwood

forest, in Samuel P. Taylor State Park.

The trees are so close to the road's edge we might lose a wing mirror if Bruce keeps favouring the far right the way he is. We're in another world, not far from 'civilisation' at all really, but still a long way from punchy downtown San Francisco. I'm not missing it. There's hardly another car on the road as we roll through Olema, a tiny place with an oyster restaurant, which suggests the sea can't be far away. As we head north through low dry hills, there's a misty haze over everything.

Our first view of the sea is of an inlet, where the trees bend away from the coast. There's a pelican cruising a big lazy circle above an oyster farm, lonely wharfs, little fishing boats, and a little harbour village called Marshall hugging the water's edge. 'Full Bar Oysters Dancing' says the sign on a big old wooden barn. Oysters dancing? It's almost worth stopping for that.

'Hold onto your bra straps,' shouts Bruce, pulling suddenly off the road to let some pushy cars pass us. We're now about 80 miles from San Francisco, though it seems a lot further. A road sign announces, 'Deer Next Five Miles', though the cyclists are more of a menace waving their butts at us up the brow of every hill.

In a forest of gum trees, an eating place offers barbecued oysters. Weird, I think, must try some. We're swinging away from the sea now, through big, dry, curvy hills. Through Tomales, a sweet little olde-worlde place; there's a sign at the top of a drive announcing 'Hands Full Farm', though the fields are empty, apart from an occasional cow, a horse or two.

And here's the first place we were aiming for, Bodega Bay (population 950), a little stretched-out settlement with no clear centre. We overshoot the town and come back looking for somewhere to eat. There are several choices, all seafoody-looking and tacky and, very probably, serving deep-fried everything.

We go to the one that says 'fish' twice, the Fishertarian Fish Market, a cheap and cheerful family place where they shout that your order's ready from the counter. Bruce, still trying to stay deep-fry free, has a crab sandwich, while I try oysters and chips. It's ferociously over-salted, but vast, of course, and cheap at $13.

We have some super-sized fellow diners in here, including one bloke as big as a buffalo with his buffalo family gathered around a table full of heart-attack food. Bruce takes some of my abandoned chips.

'You've broken your rule.'

‘They don’t count,’ he says, though I don’t see why they shouldn’t.

I spot a copy of a local newspaper, the *Upbeat Times*, which promises ‘No bad news is . . . Good news’. Only in California perhaps could someone make a good-news newspaper work. This one says it has been ‘publishing the positive side of life in Sonoma County and beyond since 1998’. The medicinal marijuana must help, though of course I’m still hanging out for that. The *Upbeat Times* horoscope is a little worrying. ‘A discovery you were wrong about something may come as a great relief,’ it tells me.

Bodega Bay’s main claim to fame is the fact that Alfred Hitchcock shot another one of his classic movies, *The Birds*, here. There’s a Birds Café to remind us. It specialises in Salt Water Taffy and strange mobiles. There’s a terrific zombie one that tempts me briefly, but it’s a bit on the large size to carry on my travels.

Bodega Bay used to be famous also for its sea otters, but they had been virtually exterminated by fur hunters by the 1820s. Nowadays when an otter is occasionally sighted, it’s big news. A much earlier claim to fame is that Bodega Bay may be the spot where Sir Francis Drake beached his famous ship, *Golden Hind*, for repairs in 1579 and supposedly nailed a brass plaque to a tree, claiming what he called Nova Albion (New

England) for his Queen, Elizabeth I. The real plaque has never been found. However, in 1936 a major hoax was temporarily pulled off when a so-called plaque was ‘discovered’ and accepted as the real thing by the experts of the time. It was even purchased by the University of California, at some cost, both to the campus and to its reputation, after it was proved to be a fake, simply an elaborate campus joke.

*

As we pull out of Bodega Bay, the coast road starts living up to its name, hugging the shoreline and riding us just above beaches and jagged rocks and the ocean stretching on forever, fog hovering above it. Suddenly our calm is shattered when Bruce, fiddling about, idly presses a button on the dashboard and a woman’s voice starts shouting incomprehensible instructions at us. Our car’s navigation system has been set for Spanish.

Bruce lashes at the controls until she shuts up, leaving me wondering, just a little bit, what she was warning us about. She certainly sounded like she was trying to call our attention to something, though everything in Spanish sounds like a warning to me.

Bruce is a menace around technology, the kind of guy who’d press the red button, should he ever be left alone for a moment in the Oval Office, just to see what happens. I need to distract him. All this driving on the same road is maybe making him a little crazy.

I’ve been looking at my map and there are interesting-looking places just inland. ‘Let’s take a side road,’ I tell Bruce, guiding him off the coast road and up the Russian River, just south of a spot called Jenner (pop. 106). There are a couple of towns up the river I’m keen to check out, Monte Rio and Guerneville.

My friend the poet Sam Hunt stayed up here somewhere for a few days back in the ’80s with his girlfriend of the time, Sara, my favourite of all his girlfriends. Sam remembers being up the Russian River like it was yesterday, though not the details. He told me they stayed in a motel up here somewhere. It hung out over the river. They had terrific sex and the wine was good. He said I should go and look, though there won’t be a plaque. And things might have changed.

I did a little research and Guerneville is now famous for its gay-friendliness. This river valley, under a big blue sky, is very fetching, with its pine-covered hills, big winding river on our right and, occasionally,

under us and calendar-cute farmhouses.

In Monte Rio (pop. 1150) there's a sign up saying *Bell Book and Candle* is on at the local repertory theatre. Monte Rio used to be a major stop on the railway line during its lumbering heyday, but now there's not a great deal to the place. Two blinks and we're through. 'Monte Rio Awaits Your Return,' says the sign at the edge of town. As things turn out, Monte Rio will never see us again. Bruce is keen, he mentions now and then, for us to get to Mendocino tonight. I'm keen to get to Oregon for a legal smoke, but that's not going to happen till tomorrow at the very earliest.

After taking another look at my California map, which is very detailed, I tell Bruce I might have found a shortcut back to the coast road and then north to Mendocino, a fabled old cowboy town where rock stars used to go to get away from the madness. Some of them wrote songs about the place.

'What do you mean you might have found a shortcut?' he wants to know.

'Well, there's a little wiggly road that appears to cut back to the coast. It looks like a shortcut,' I tell him.

Meanwhile, we're in the middle of a big dark forest, with towering trees close to the road and strange, gloomy, homemade-looking houses dotted among them. It's the sort of place only a meth chemist might like to live in. A pinecone has just dropped on the car roof. Bruce speeds up.

Soon we reach Guerneville (pop. 1040), a cute little town, caught on the flat land between river and forest. There's a sign outside a bar saying the Jerry Garcia Band is playing tonight, though Jerry has been dead all these years. Bruce has just spotted a sign advertising Meatloaf, but on closer inspection the support act is Chicken Wings.

'I think it's a restaurant and that those are tonight's specials,' I tell him, but he's not so sure. He reckons Meat Loaf's on tour, though he'd have to have fallen pretty low on the touring circuit to be playing Guerneville. Anyway, we're not hanging about. We've got my cunning shortcut to be getting on with.

It looks simple enough on the map, the vast and deeply detailed map I bought from the tall, helpful, foul-mouthed woman in that San Francisco bookshop. It half-filled the car when I unfolded it and I've only just got it under control.

'There's a little grey road that shoots off around here somewhere, going to a place called Cazadero,' I tell Bruce, sounding like I know what I'm talking about, which I feel I do. 'It'll get us back on Highway 1, north

of where we turned off.'

'What does a grey road mean?' he wants to know, which means unfolding the whole bloody map again to find the key. It says 'other road' which isn't particularly helpful. 'But Cazadero sounds interesting,' I say.

'It sounds like a brand of Mexican beer, if you ask me,' mutters Bruce. It's getting towards mid-afternoon now and I don't think Bruce is keen on my shortcut, but I'm persisting and show him where to turn off. As I find out later, Cazadero was famous once for being the town at the top of the North Pacific Coast Railroad. After the 1906 earthquake levelled and burnt much of San Francisco, it's where a lot of the timber for the rebuild came from.

But all of that was quite a long time ago. When we eventually find Cazadero, there doesn't appear to be a great deal going on: there are just two churches and a fire station, and no signs of life at all. Not a visible soul. Only the trees and the road beyond, which leads us deeper and deeper, as the road gets narrower and narrower, into the vertiginous forest. It's so dark in here that the few houses we do spot, lurking back from the road, have their lights on. We spot a sign with more words than usual on it: 'Narrow Winding One-Way Road Next 9 Miles'.

'Are we lost?' Bruce asks, though not in an entirely accusing way. Not entirely.

'Maybe a little,' I say. 'Stop at the next house and I'll go and ask someone where we are.' I haven't much liked the look of the few houses we've passed, but now there are none, just the dark forest and the road getting narrower and steeper by the turn. We should have been back safely on the California coast by now. Also, I feel like we're heading east when we should be going west.

'If something goes wrong here it'll be worse than that time we broke down in the desert out in Nevada, near that town called Walker, remember?' I say to Bruce. 'And that was pretty bad. You left me there with the car and the cactuses, and the sun went down while you went off for help.'

It doesn't look like there's much help here in the forest beyond Cazadero. Mostly, I'd say, the locals will be gun-toting mountain folk who don't care for strangers. You wouldn't live way out here if you had a fondness for strangers. Even if we find a house, I'm not sure I fancy knocking on the front door. I've seen movies set in places like this and the ending is never good.

The vicious road goes on forever and some of the road signs don't help at all. 'LOOSE GRAVE,' one says. 'Let's just look on the bright side and assume it lost its "L",' I tell Bruce.

Even I'm considering admitting we're totally lost now, as we wind higher and higher and deeper and deeper into the forest. We can't see the sun, so it's hard to even know which direction we're going in. Bruce seems reluctant to stop and let me live up to my promise of asking directions from a local hillbilly and he speeds on past several ominous-looking driveways. I've noticed there's no phone signal here in the endless forest. There's tension in the car now. And a little fear.

Then, just when all our hope is about to evaporate, we emerge onto some sort of high ground and the forest falls back below and behind us. The view, however, doesn't offer any clues at all — there are still just valleys and trees in every direction. It's impossible to know which way the coast is or how far away.

But here comes a house and Bruce finally stops, though he stays in the car. It's not a very promising-looking house, I'm thinking as I approach it. I can't see in the windows for all the stuff stacked up inside, and I can't actually see the front door for all the stuff stacked up outside on the porch. It must be the house of a hoarder. As I get close, there's a bustle in the wild hedgerow and out pops a leathery old woman, who turns out to be friendlier than she looks, which is a good thing.

She's a ranch woman and she confirms that we've been going round in circles. Bruce has emerged from the car by this point, having seen that it's safe. Go this way, says the leathery woman, pointing down the dusty road. 'Turn left at the Indian reservation and you'll get out to the coast eventually. Just be careful you don't turn right at the reservation,' she says. I assure her we'll be careful.

'You'll be going south at first,' she says. 'My father used to like to say, "You can't go north from here."' She says she used to farm sheep up here but 'coyote came back' and ate the sheep. A deer wanders across the road just as she says that. These days she 'grows cows and grapes'.

We drive on, past the surprising sight of a Buddhist temple with razor wire adorning its high walls. That's a bit of a mixed message there. Now we're in Kashia tribal territory, driving through the aforementioned 'Indian reservation' and, way ahead, we spot sea fog floating up on high, which surely means we're going in the right direction, back to the coast.

And we are. We were up at quite an elevation in all that deep dark

forest back there. We must have driven in a great circle in the wrong direction. It's a miracle of some sort that we're here at all, safe back on the outer edge of California. Let's hope we can make Mendocino before sundown.

It is nice to be back by the sea, though some of the roadkill is unsettling: we just passed a dead deer. Here's a place called Gualala (pop. 2907), which looks cute enough to stop at, and has several inns, but Bruce is hot to push on for Mendocino and I'm sure he's right. Anyway, I owe him one for getting us so badly lost back there.

So we continue north through Anchor Bay atop tree-fringed sea cliffs. It's foggy again, but the fog is high, floating above us. Point Arena isn't very appealing, so on we roll past Manchester, though not that one of course. America's not very good at place names. Irish Beach is about as beachy as it sounds: big cliffs, no town to speak of. We're both tired now and keen to find a bed, beer and a bite, though not in that order. The fog is lowering.

Finally we strike a decent American place name, Elk (pop. 250), and a pretty arrangement of old colonial-style houses. The names continue to improve as we pass Brewery Gulch and finally reach Mendocino (pop. 894), which turns out to be small and possibly slightly perfect, though a little nutty, which is even better.

We drive round a bit, hoping like hell there's somewhere to stay without having to resort to a bed and breakfast, which we dread the thought of. There are a few in Mendocino, which, as noted, is smaller than expected, with just a short main street full of old western buildings and a handful of side streets. Given the large legend of this place, I'd expected there to be more of it.

We drive slowly down every street in town, which takes up all of 10 minutes. The place that gets our attention is the Mendocino Hotel, a beautiful old two-storey wooden place that harks, without much adjustment, straight back to the Wild West days. It's on a side street that runs down a peninsula.

Our luck is in, they have two rooms available at the hotel, upstairs but no ensuites, just high brass beds and painted antique hand basins. The bathrooms are down the hall and round the corner, and the floors pitch this way and that. I feel I'm likely to run into Wyatt Earp on the stairs.

If I ask I'll probably find out it's haunted, but I don't need to know. I'd rather find out the interesting way, though I've been in enough haunted

hotels over the years and never run into any spirits beyond gin.

Our bags safely deposited upon old jangly beds, we go in search of a drink. There's a bar at our hotel, but it looks a bit well-mannered and there's no sign of interesting beers on tap. So we wander the village, which is what Mendocino is really, sitting on a headland above the crashing sea. Just up the road there's a little bar called, unpromisingly, Dick's Place. It has a sign in the window: 'So few Richards, so many Dicks', which leaves us wondering what sort of dick would put up a sign like that.

Much more promising, round the corner on the main street in Mendocino's understated retail heart, is a bar called Patterson's, so olde-worlde there are long curtains you have to part to enter. There's a funky country feel inside, as well as a promising-looking menu chalked up on a board and a daunting range of crafty beer taps.

We sit at the bar and set into the beer — pale ales and pilsners, some so strong I can feel them wriggling into my brain. And we talk to some locals, most of them as drunk as us. One is a slippery, good-looking guy

who goes on and on about his heritage — Americans are often intense about that sort of thing. He's 'Scotch' he says, but later, after some more strong beer, he tells us his mother is Mexican. 'Great,' I tell him, but he looks like he doesn't believe me. He shows us photos on his phone of his kids. We reciprocate with pictures of our grandchildren on ours.

Unfortunately, our new friend turns out to be a bit of a sleaze, down from his home in Fort Bragg, half an hour north, leaving wife and kids at home while he checks out a few bars, 'looking for pussy'. What a charmer. I wonder if he says that to all the strangers he meets in bars.

The more he talks, the less I like him, but he bought us beers, so we have to buy him some back and so it goes for a while till he drifts off to drive home drunk. The cops won't stop him, he says. He's a big man in these parts. What a prat.

The next guy we talk to is much more fun, a hairy hobbit-looking creature whose sister, he mentions, runs the bar. 'I'm a wood nut,' he tells us, pulling out his big-screen phone when he sees our blank faces and showing us pictures of his passion: handsome cuts of wood, lascivious close-ups of finely grained redwood, studly tree stumps. I suppose there are weirder things to get excited about. I just can't think of many.

Someone else at the bar, when they hear where we are going, reckons it will take us seven hours solid driving to get to Oregon, but I think he is just trying to frighten us. Seven hours won't work: we have to get to Oregon tomorrow.

As we stagger home to the hotel, I notice a couple of hipsters puffing on something on Mendocino's deserted main street. I haven't gone this long without a smoke in a long time. I wonder if I'm drinking more to compensate. But it's not the same of course.

Back in my room on my jangly brass bed, I'm too drunk to read a book, so I settle for the larger print in a pamphlet about the hotel, which was built in 1878 when Mendocino was a wild logging town of 20,000. The hotel is designed in a New England style of architecture and contains 51 rooms. I'm in Room 1. It turns out that it is indeed haunted, by a 'Victorian lady', who is seen only in reflection in mirrors. I'll keep an eye out for her in the bathroom in the morning.

A little weed

I wake after a deep sleep in my big brass bed, which jangled like Hare Krishna bells every time I moved. Sex would be noisy aboard this thing.

Breakfast in the hotel restaurant downstairs is the usual choice of big fat things, along with some less usual things. Skirt steak and eggs for instance. They don't offer toast and jam on the menu, but I manage to order some. Bruce, 'proud', he says, to be maintaining his 'healthy diet', has porridge, though they call it oatmeal. They call the coffee 'coffee', but it isn't; it's just hot and brown, that's all.

As we take a post-brekkie wander down the empty road, I spot a couple of funky-looking dudes standing under a tree. They're older beardie hippie types, and one of them is puffing on something, but there's no breeze so I can't get a whiff of what it is. On a wild, weed-deprived impulse, I decide to investigate. 'Wait here,' I tell Bruce, who's looking a bit dizzy, possibly from all the craft beer we drank last night.

I put on a casual saunter and wander over the empty road, but, as I get closer, I realise the smaller, older, furry freak brother is smoking a standard tobacco roll-your-own, not a joint. Still, nothing ventured.

'Hey man,' I say. They look suspicious, but there's no going back now. 'Nice day,' I blab on. 'You wouldn't know where I might get a little weed around here?'

The smaller hippie, the one smoking the tobacco, says, after a pause, 'Waal, maybe lader on there maayt be somethin' comin' in.' He sounds like he just stepped out of a western movie. I tell him, with a regretful tone, I'm about to leave town.

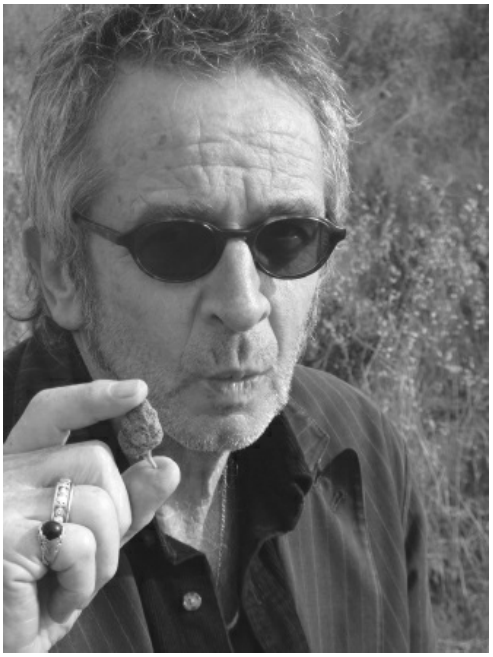
Then the other one asks, 'How much you wanting? Coupla joints?' And he digs deep into his pack, delicately extricates a lovely little nugget of perfectly coiffed cannabis flower and presents it to me.

'How much?' I ask.

'Whatever you think.'

I give him $5, mainly because the next biggest note in my pocket is a

$50. He seems happy enough with that, though I wonder later whether, with Bruce lurking across the road watching us, the hippies suspected I might be a cop. I feel faintly guilty, though only faintly. Really, extremely faintly.



The Mendocino general store, just down from the bar we were at last night, is a gem of a place, a perfect sort of hippie general store, organics by the aisleful, craft beers on tap, medicines, all sorts of foodstuffs, groceries and a very calm vibe. I buy a bottle of coconut water, a cigarette lighter and some rolling papers. I don't really want the coconut water, but I'm thinking it might blur my retail focus a little.

Back outside, Mendocino seems a half-asleep little place, full of quirky architecture. The strange pillar-shaped houses on the side streets are old wooden water towers converted to dwellings and artists' studios. Round on the main drag, there's a particularly weird building, a big old Masonic Hall with an unsettling carved statue adorning its high peaked roof. It's called *Time and the Maiden* and was carved from a single redwood trunk in 1883 by the head Mason of the time, Erik Albertson, obviously a bloke with a gloomy outlook on life, or possibly just maidens.

It features a woman on her knees at an altar. Behind her stands Father Time, leaning his scythe on his shoulder while he gathers her long hair in his hands, as if braiding it. Lightening the scene somewhat are two live crows, one settled on the maiden's head, the other perched on Death's scythe. Mendocino is full of crows.

Albertson took seven years to carve that strange statue and died shortly after completing it, though he was only in his mid-30s. The Masons, who still meet in the upstairs of the building, weren't happy about the statue, given that it so openly depicts details of their secret ceremonies. Visitors to this day constantly ask what it means.

We've had the accidental good timing to come here in a quiet time. On holidays and in the high season, apparently Mendocino pulses with people. That's hard to imagine. Right now, it's somewhere I wish we were staying longer. That road out of here is a long one and I'm not sure where we're going to land up.

One of my favourite dead rock stars lived around Mendocino for a time. His name is Gene Clark and he's half-forgotten now, but back in 1970 when he lived here he was a big deal with his band, the Byrds, with whom he wrote and sang. He'd just left the band after, ironically, refusing to fly, and fled his rock-star lifestyle in Los Angeles to hole up here, where the locals treated him just like anyone else, which he liked.

Living just south of here, at a place called Little River, he wrote a terrific body of haunting songs and launched a solo career that never quite ignited, and then slowly disappeared, dying, another broken rock star, in 1991, aged 46.

‘Mendocino’ once even got into the pop charts when a quirky Tex-Mex band called the Sir Douglas Quintet enjoyed a minor hit with a song of that very name. The town had been a haven for artists and creative outsiders long before the odd rock star started moving in, though. By the 1960s, it was as if, as someone said, ‘Haight Ashbury got sick of the city and moved north.’ There’s still, even all these years later, something of that spirit in the air. I’d like to come back one day.

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The stretch of road north from Mendocino is wide and sensible. Half an hour north, here’s Fort Bragg, which sounds like a military town, but isn’t — well, it hasn’t been for a long time. In the 1850s, this area was designated the Mendocino Indian Reservation and a garrison was posted here to keep order and named for its commander, Captain Braxton Bragg, who went on to fight for the wrong side in the Civil War.

By the end of the 1860s, the garrison was gone, leaving only its name to this plain-faced town, which is flat and full of motels and gas stations. I’m sure the part of Fort Bragg closer to the sea has more charm, but we’re not stopping.

I’ve rolled a nice joint, with plenty to spare from that little purchase from the helpful hippie, and eventually manage to get Bruce to pull over and park at a clifftop truck stop. I seem to have got good value for my $5 back there, enough for maybe four skinny smokes. Here goes the first in a while. I’m sorely sorry I had to break the law, but I just couldn’t wait for Oregon, which is further away than anticipated.

I’m also sorry I’ve just had to tell Bruce to stop driving so fast. I thought he’d grown out of that bad old habit of his of being in a terrible hurry to get everywhere. He has that variety of the macho gene that makes him want to be a racing driver every time he’s in a car. We’ve had those close calls in the past with his breakneck habits, and I don’t want any on this trip. I seem to have missed out on that personal need for speed. Behind the wheel, I’m more of a dawdler than a rally driver.

I haven’t had any pot for days so this stuff surges through me like a turn of the tide, of the mood, of the moment, which slows and bends a

little, but upwards. I think I'd been feeling a little anxious to this point. But not now. No, not at all. It's a pity the driver can't be allowed any, but we must have rules, especially when we're on the wrong side of the road.

North of a place called Westport the ride is spectacular: rugged coast, bridges sweeping across big river mouths, and 22 miles of winding roads promised on the signs. Up we shoot into redwood forest. We aren't among the giants yet, but these trees are big enough. There's toi-toi growing in the clearings. I'd thought those plants were ours. 'Nah,' says Bruce knowledgeably when I mention that.

It's dark in the forest, though the fact that I'm now quite stoned might be affecting my perception a little. One of the other side-effects is that Bruce's breakneck driving is alarming me even more, so I share the anxiety and I tell him off again. Then I feel bad and try to change the subject. 'I'll show you what I write before this book is printed,' I tell him.'

'Uh-huh.'

'You'll be in it,' I say.

He's silent, probably concentrating on trying to slow down a bit. Or considering whether to ditch me in one of those clearings in the forest and take off at high speed. But he must be used to me after all these years. There's probably a lot he could say that he chooses not to. I sometimes get

that feeling in the silences. He can do a powerful silence.

On these sorts of adventures, you have to adjust to each other's personality. Along with his powerful silences, Bruce is a shy, steady type who usually steps back, leaving me to do all the stepping forward, though he does happily chat to strangers whenever we're sitting at bars. After a few drinks, too, he's exceptionally tolerant of oddballs and idiots. He has a magnetic quality when it comes to the most boring person in any room, especially, as mentioned, bar rooms. They come to him like sinners at a prayer meeting.

The road is cutting northeast, away from the coast. We cross the Eel River, heading for the town of Leggett, where we'll join Route 101, which will see us all the way up to the Oregon border and beyond. We're deep in redwood country now, big redwood country. Some of these trees are so big you could drive a car through them if some mad lumberjack cut a hole big enough.

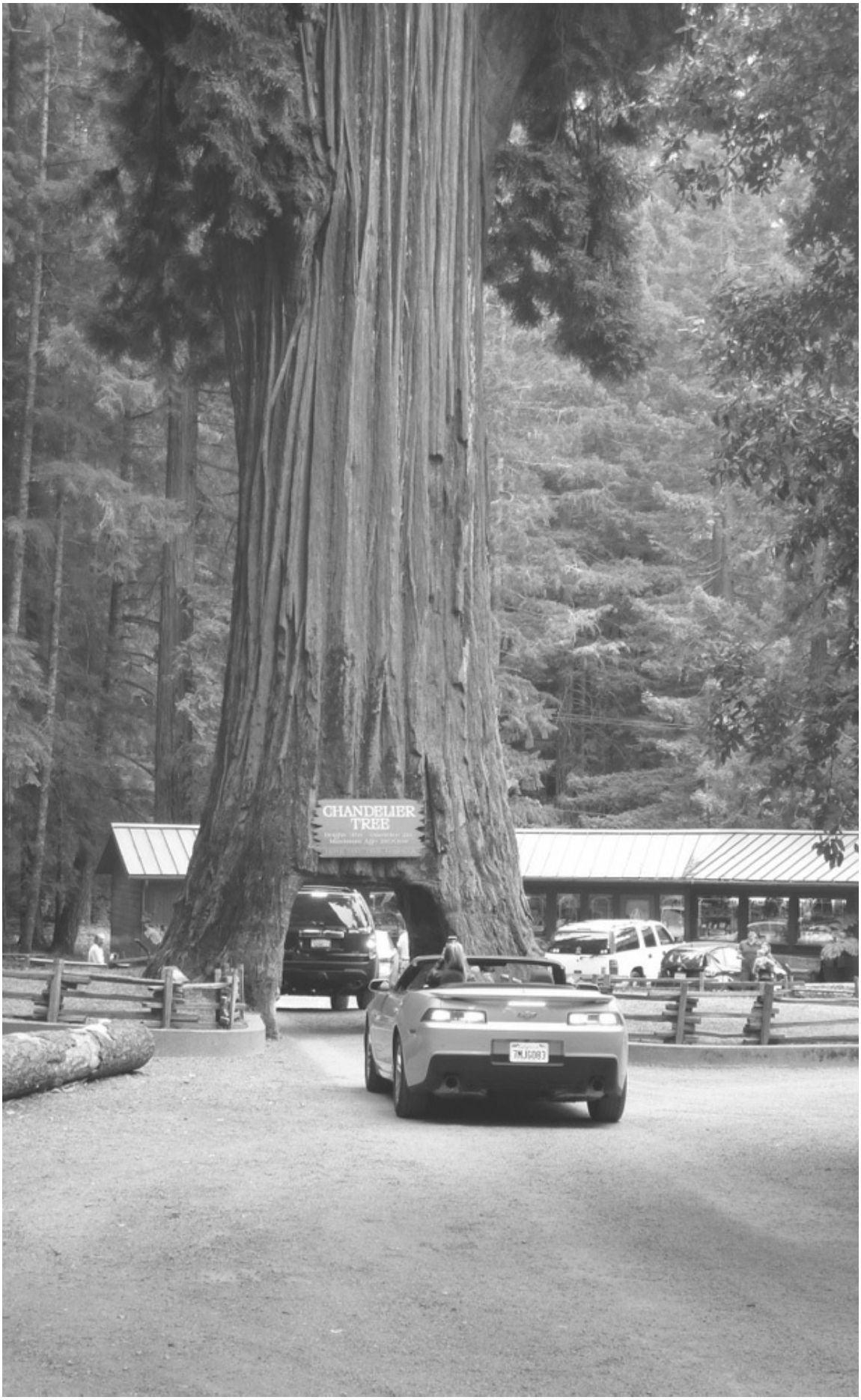
There being no shortage of mad lumberjacks to service such dreams in these parts, I direct Bruce off our path and down Drive Thru Tree Road, not in any doubt at all about where we're heading. The further we go, the more the redwoods thicken, in numbers and girth. It costs us $5 to get into the attraction, and it turns out that there's something odd and unimpressive about driving through a tree.

I don't know why, but I had high hopes for the experience. Over the years, if my thoughts ever turned to the mighty redwoods of northern California — which they did occasionally — I'd consider the fact that some of the trees were so big that you could drive through them. Which is where the mad lumberjacks came in, I suppose.

It turns out to be quite a tight and slightly claustrophobic fit as Bruce sensibly suppresses the need for speed and inches us and our car through. I feel sad halfway, and sorry for the tree.

Back down the road, turning onto 101 again, Bruce hangs a tight rather than a loose left, and proceeds to drive us confidently and at some speed down the wrong side of the road. There's a large car coming straight at us through the misty rain.

'Broo,' I yelp, 'wrong side!'


CHANDELIER
TREE

Cripes, I'm the one who's supposed to be out of it. He snatches us back from the jaws of death with a jerk of the wheel. He doesn't say anything. It's okay. I take a deep breath. Maybe we can find somewhere to stop and I can have a bit more of my Mendocino medicine to steady my nerves. Bruce has no nerves. Well, not any that show. Which is good in a driver, I suppose.

Back on the proper side of Route 101, huge tankers and trucks whoosh by us. There are road works and warning signs. We're into hilly, foresty country now, also traffic-stoppage country where the rain has made some bits of cliff fall down. Bruce seems outraged at being stopped.

'Why aren't we moving?' he's muttering, as we sit waiting for a light to turn green. He's an antsy bugger sometimes. He should look around and notice how small we are. It's big country here, everything on a huge scale: the hills, the rivers, the bridges, the trees. But next thing we're rollicking along again, the speed limit 65 miles an hour and Bruce sticking strictly to it.

I'm taking another look at my maps. I have separate ones for California and Oregon, and California is turning out to be a bit more stretched out than I bargained for, but that's the way things are in America. Everywhere is further than anticipated. That's not helped by the fact that the locals still travel by the mile in this great country, so when we visitors see distance numbers on road signs we tend to think in kilometres and assume there's less of a way to go.

I've just opened the Oregon map for the first time. We have to be in Portland in two days. We have a hotel booked there. But Oregon is e-fucking-normous. I had thought we might stop in Arcata on the north coast tonight, but maybe we should try to get a bit closer to the Oregon state line. Maybe even across it.

Bruce is driving fast again, making it hard for me to scribble in my notebook. Interestingly, my word rate has jumped since I had a smoke or two back there. My driver, of course, is as clean as a mountain stream. That's why he's driving so fast perhaps, but I don't like it much.

There's a guy standing on the side of the road holding a sign that reads: 'WE NEED A MIRACLE.' Not the sort of hitchhiker you want in your car, we agree. There are a lot of tourist traps set in the forest glades on this section of the road, promising grandfather trees and carved creatures. One place offers 'The Legend of Bigfoot'.

The sun breaks through the soupy sky as on and on we roll. The forest seems endless. Bruce's spatial instincts appear to be malfunctioning and he's driving so far to the right hand side of the road that the noise strip keeps roaring through the tyres and straight up through my seat.

There's a roadside billboard advertising a concert by Cheech and Chong, whose old doper comedy routines must surely seem antique in this loose, new, increasingly legalised world. We cross a singing bridge and whizz past Fortuna, 'the Friendly City', though we don't really see it, this being a freeway and freeways having a dull tendency to shoot past the edges of places.

The next town of note immediately ahead of us is Eureka (pop. 27,191), which is a name with a nice ring to it. Isn't it what that Greek philosopher shouted when he got in his bath and defined the concept of displacement? There are useful signs on the roadside saying we're in a tsunami hazard zone. I'm never sure how to react to that sort of information, but the land is flat and so low it feels like we're below sea level and, despite the promising name, Eureka's edges are ugly, with horrid strip malls, strings of deep-fry food shops. We're not going to pause here, though Eureka is an interesting spot, apparently, famous for its historic town centre and the magnificent Victorian mansions built by lumber barons.

Way back, like much of this epic coast, this was a food-rich place occupied in peace by Indians, in this case the Wiyot people, who resisted fiercely when first miners and then permanent European settlers arrived. But there was no winning. In 1860, in an event that still lives in local infamy, or should, the settlers murdered 80 Wiyot, mostly women, children and old folk, at a nearby village and went on to attack other villages in the following weeks. The surviving Wiyot were herded together and transported to a reservation inland, only to return to their homeland later to take sporadic revenge on the awful intruders.

There's a place just a mile or so north of here I'm keen for us to visit for lunch, a place with the unlikely but alluring name of the Samoa Cookhouse. It's the last of the old lumberjack kitchens that were once common in these parts, places where crowds of big hungry woodsmen could get big cheap meals in a swift and orderly manner.

They're not knocking down the redwoods the way they used to round here, so the hungry lumberjacks are mostly a memory, but this out-of-time place keeps the old ways alive for passing trade. The Samoa Cookhouse

isn’t a reference to the South Pacific island group of the same name, but to the little town of Samoa in which it is located. Its sawmill closed for business in 1980, though its cookhouse lives on.

Samoa sits out on the long, skinny northern peninsula of Humboldt Bay, a huge enclosed deep-water harbour and the next big port north of San Francisco. The average height above sea level round here is less than a metre and the open sea is famously fearsome. The waves crest a kilometre out in the Pacific, off Samoa Beach, and can reach heights of nine metres, throwing up great clouds of spume that share company with the fogs that also haunt the area. The approach to the narrow mouth of Humboldt Bay is known as the ‘graveyard of the Pacific’ and going on for 30 ships — including a US Navy cruiser — have beached around here.

The Samoa Cookhouse is a substantial building: red, wooden, as you’d expect, and as big as a town hall, though a very folksy-looking town hall. I’m expecting this to be old-fashioned and possibly quite generous with the portions, which worries me a little. I relax when I read the sign pinned up at the front door: ‘Soup, Salad, Bread, Dessert, Coffee, $10-95’. I can handle that, I tell myself, though I can’t imagine a snack like that filling up the average lumberjack, or even the average American, who is often a large unit these days.

Inside, the place is nearly empty, with a few couples and a family sitting in the distance at the long tables and benches that fill the huge, high-vaulted room. The sign out the front turns out to be a trick. We polish off the salad which, American style, comes first, all by itself, and then the soup, old-fashioned vegetable style, and big chunks of bread.

‘That was perfect,’ I tell Bruce. ‘At last, a sensible-sized meal in this mad country. Now where’s pudding?’

But what comes next in fact is the main course: thick, glistening beef ribs, potatoes, corn, beans and more salad. There are 13 plates on the table and we still don’t have dessert yet.

The waitress drifts over towards our table when she sees us faltering near the end of this monumental challenge and says, ‘I don’t know if either of you gentlemen is over 60, but if you are we can take care of that at the cash register.’ Then, after offering us seconds, she goes and, finally, fetches dessert.

The rule in this place, apparently, is that you’re not allowed to leave till you’re full. With our elder-eater discount, the total tab is $25, a dangerous bargain. I can hardly walk. I feel like I’m about to calve.

We drive back down a causeway towards the mainland and the aforementioned town of Arcata (pop. 16,000), a large coastal settlement. We can't seem to find the centre of the town and I have to get Bruce to pull over so I can ask directions from a chap out for an afternoon stroll with his beard.

He doesn't make Arcata sound appealing and points us north to Trinidad. It's a little place, he says, with sea views. I don't ask about bars. He doesn't look like the sort of guy who'd go to bars. So we get back on the 101 heading north, both feeling a bit stuffed, literally, after that late lunch.

'Did you pee in the hand basin in your room last night?' I ask Bruce.

'Of course I did,' he replies. 'Did you?'

'Yes, but I ran the tap at the same time.'

'They were just the right height too,' he says.

'I noticed. It's a wonder they don't have some sort of alarm on them. An instant fine. Or even a sign saying 'Don't pee in the sink'. But there was nothing.'

'Nothing.'

Ahead of us a great wide bay opens out, lifting our spirits somewhat, though Trinidad turns out to be a bit of a dud, despite the slightly exciting name. There's just a little sprawl of houses, a bit of low-key retail, but no accommodation that we can see, and no bars, no place for us. I wonder if beardie back in Arcata with his unreliable advice was trying to move us along. Maybe he smelt the weed on me, or saw it in my eyes. Maybe it was my lack of a beard.

So, on we roll, north into mystery, the places ahead mere dots on the map, with unpromising names like Patrick's Point and Orick. We're prepared to consider anywhere, but not Orick (pop. 650, elev. 26 ft), a tiny place dedicated to wood carving by the look of it. There's a life-size black wooden bull in a field; there are a couple of motels, one with its 'no vacancy' sign up, the other semi-derelict; and there's a road sign with a number to call up 'For Elk Information'.

Soon Route 101 is cutting away from the coast and deep into the redwoods again. The next even slightly likely place we might stop up ahead is somewhere called Klamath (pop. 707), which turns out to be a tiny town near a river in a forest clearing. There's a sign on the outskirts that says: 'The Yurok Tribe Welcomes You' and, good grief and God bless, here's a Holiday Inn, a vast wooden hotel and casino owned and

operated by the Yurok people, whose land we're passing through.

'It's unavoidable,' I tell Bruce, 'though I imagine the food's all deep-fried. Probably even the salads.'

'I don't care,' he says, pulling into the vast car park.

When we check in, the receptionist tells us, 'There's no smoking allowed on the premises, including medical marijuana,' giving me, I think, a particular look. It's not cheap staying here, at $180 a head, but our rooms are huge, the beds as big as footie fields and everything works. Downstairs there's a restaurant and a bar. Oh, and a casino, but probably only if we get drunk enough. And, as mentioned, it's owned and operated by the local people. That receptionist had a Yurok look about her.

But there's no avoiding the feeling that Klamath is absolutely in the middle of nowhere, or at least well on the way there. Northern California becomes quite sparse of population the further north you drift. Up here, it's big coast and a series of big forests, one connected to the next. And the further north we venture, the greater the redwoods seem to get. In the now-protected forests near Klamath, they are giants.

Down in the Holiday Inn bar, which is possibly the only bar in Klamath, they have a miraculous — for a bar on the edge of nowhere — eight craft beers on tap. One of them, the Abalone Pale Ale, is from just down the road in Eureka. It's seriously thirst-quenching, though I could improve on this relaxed feeling by taking a wander out for some of that medicinal marijuana the receptionist mentioned.

In the meantime, we have some more beer. We're sitting up at the bar, as is our habit, and down the other end there's a group of loud guys, getting louder by the round. One of them is particularly loud. Fringe obnoxious, but shaking the fringe. I have Bruce sitting between me and them, but that doesn't stop the loud one from coming at us with a troubling opening line. Leaning across Bruce, he asks me, 'What band you in?'

It must be the cut of my jib or maybe my hair, which has already attracted the attention of a crazy woman back on the streets of San Francisco. 'No band,' I tell him. 'I'm not in a band.' But it seems he's a persistent bugger.

'C'mon, you're hiding out.'

'No,' I say, 'we're from New Zealand. We have no need to hide out.' He ignores that bit.

'You can tell me the truth.' He's pleading now. 'I won't say anything. Do you know Ringo Starr?'

‘We call him Richard,’ I tell him, which just makes him want to buy us drinks. He’s already about six over the legal limit. He and his pals are here for a few days fishing for salmon in the nearby Klamath River, he tells us. We leave him to get drunker and take ourselves out for a look at Klamath, though there’s not a lot to look at.

So we sit at the picnic table in the village green and smoke the joint I’d thoughtfully prepared earlier. ‘It’s medicinal,’ I tell Bruce. We need to get into the Klamath groove, which seems to be very slow. There’s not a soul in sight, though I feel we’re being watched. Maybe it’s just those trees.

Hungry now, also stoned and a little silly, we wobble into the Holiday Inn restaurant. We want burgers and we feel pretty confident they’ll have that sort of thing here, and they certainly do, with quite a choice of meats. Bruce goes for a bison burger; I opt for elk.

The waitress asks how we’d like them. ‘Rare,’ says Bruce, a manly choice. I’m not so sure.

‘How would you advise I have elk?’ I ask the waitress. ‘I don’t have much experience with elk.’

‘I have no experience with elk,’ says the waitress.

‘Medium rare then, thanks.’

She plonks down plates and points us towards the salad buffet, which is located further down the restaurant at the point where it merges with the bar, just where the salmon bores are still hard at work getting as drunk as possible. I approach the salad buffet from the back for fear of being spotted by them.

If I go round the front, that crazy one who thinks I’m a runaway rock star will spot me and start the interrogation again. As a result, I can’t get to half of the salads and have to serve myself from the back end of the buffet and settle for a dressing I don’t really want and not much salad at all.

The elk burger, which has just turned up, is phenomenally characterful. It tastes like the elk in question has been kept indoors all its life. It has a sweaty, meaty vibe I’m not at all sure about. Bruce, on the other hand, is happy with his bison.

Those salmon guys are really pissed now, on their whisky shots and big weak beers. We can hear them raving over there. I’m wondering if the whole definition of being an American guy involves being drunk and loud. Assholes, in your face, trying to buy you drinks so they’ll have someone to listen to their bullshit.

That loudest one is an ugly little bastard, with his glasses and his

shaved head. One of his friends, who looks like a failed lawyer from Sacramento hiding out from his wife and two fat kids, had tried to apologise when his loud pal went to the bathroom. But there's no apologising for these pricks, the sorts of losers who love Trump, probably mainly in the hope that he'll make all of America more like them. A land of jerks.

Here comes the carrot cake I ordered for dessert and it's certainly interesting, as American desserts so often are, like an incredibly sweet, soft rock formation. We both try it and can't think of any taste comparisons. Then, in an attempt to end the evening on an even lower note, we wander into the casino right next door and pump money into hungry machines that whirr and laugh at us till, defeated and exhausted, we retreat to our huge, cool, dark rooms.

'We should have hired guns for this trip,' I say to Bruce, though I'm not entirely sure why.

Tomorrow: Oregon.

I’m more recreational

Examining the Holiday Inn’s complimentary breakfast, it’s hard at first glance to recognise any of the foods on offer. The eggs, if eggs they are, look reconstituted from powder. There are curled rissoles called ‘turkey sausage’; a large quantity of ‘sausage gravy’ that looks like lilac-hued vomit; and enormous, squishy cinnamon rolls, so sugary I feel my eyes ping when I nervously nibble the awful edge of one.

There’s a big fat family at the next table happily hoeing into the disgusting swill, two or three plates apiece. ‘Eat up your gravy, honey, then you can have some more,’ the fat mama says to one of her fat kids. The little pig dutifully tucks in. Even the plates and utensils are all throwaways. America will die by its stomach, not its guns.

We’re out on the road north by 9.30, with only a few hours driving planned for today. We’re aiming for a place called Bandon, a little fishing port up the coast a bit north of the Oregon border. We’re getting a little road weary, fried slightly by the distances.

We both slept well, though, after all that beer, the weed and those wildlife burgers, so we’re quite perky as the road curves north into the redwoods. We stop at a tourist trap called The Trees of Mystery, attracted by a towering statue of that great American folk hero Paul Bunyan and his cow — sorry, bull. As we get closer, I spot the balls on the cow, which are enormous, dangling above the cars parked beneath.

Paul Bunyan’s bovine buddy is Babe the Blue Ox. I’m not sure of the basis of their relationship, but Bunyan and Babe are lead actors in the loopy legends of old America, along with the likes of Johnny Appleseed and the sasquatch, or bigfoot, a legendary man-ape creature said to roam the forests of the Pacific Northwest, not unlike the yeti over in Nepal.

As figures of fable go, Paul Bunyan was a bit of a shocker, a giant lumberjack famous for felling forests all the way across America, from east coast to west coast, pausing only to eat enormous meals. It was said he got through 50 eggs and several sacks of potatoes a day, plus flapjacks,

which were so big it took five ordinary men just to flip one.

Babe the Blue Ox, in fact, died one day from eating too many of those flapjacks for breakfast; whereas Paul Bunyan never did die, and was seen last in Alaska, looking for more trees to chop down.

There could be something even older, and perhaps even truer, in America's tales of giants. Several Native American tribes tell stories of a tribe of 'white giants' who lived on the plains and in the forests of the continent before them, and who they eventually killed off. Though perhaps not all of them, which might explain the sasquatch.

The coast reappears just down the road and it's a spectacular eyeful after all those trees, but then, at a turn, we're back in the redwoods again, these ones on a Bunyanesque scale. If he saw them now, he might come back from Alaska.

There's Crescent City down there, living up to its name; we skirt its curved edge. Crescent City is famously ugly after its rebuild in the 1960s following a tsunami. We pass Pelican Bay State Prison and an 'Elk Crossing Next 2 Miles' sign, which reminds me that I can still taste that elk from last night.

Next is Smith River, 'The Lily Bulb Capital of the World'. We're

nearing the Oregon border where, among other things, the laws regarding the use of marijuana change — really quite radically. I can't wait. In many ways, this trip so far has been a build-up to this point. This is the tripwire, if you will.

Gordie thoughtfully put together a couple of CDs of road music for our trip. His musical tastes are eclectic, to put it mildly, but there are some good and some apposite songs on it. We're playing an old favourite, 'Drug Time' by Babybird, as we hit the borderline and stop for a photo op at the 'Welcome to Oregon' sign.

Now we're skirting the Siskiyou National Forest, on the right, and the Pacific Ocean, on our left, and crossing low, flat ground as we approach our first Oregon town, a place called Brookings (pop. 6336). It's another ugly, flat coastal settlement at first glance, but I've done a little research and there's more here than immediately hits the eye.

Down on Railroad Street, for instance, there's a low-key retail outlet called West Coast Organics, with a sign outside saying 'Medical and Recreational Marijuana', though you have to get quite close to read it. The signage is discreet and I think that's part of the legal deal in Oregon, where marijuana is available for sale to anyone over the age of 21, including passing tourists.

‘We’re slipping into an alternative world,’ I tell Bruce, who has to hang onto my arm to stop me from leaping out of the car and running across the car park to the front door of this wonderful shop. I am Alice and this is the rabbit hole.

Inside, it’s a shop, but a shop of two halves, as the local laws deem it should be. So, in the front half we find counters and cabinets filled with multifarious cannabis-related paraphernalia: pipes, papers, lighters, hookahs, vapes — you name it, they’ve got it here. This is the dispensary, if you will, and, behind the counter, there’s a sweet-mannered and immaculately turned-out young woman assistant, eager to serve our requirements. ‘Are you interested in buying some marijuana?’ she asks, like that’s a normal thing for a shop assistant to say to a customer.

‘Well, yes,’ I have to admit after a brief pause.

‘Is that medicinal or recreational?’ she persists, nicely.

‘Well, he’s medicinal,’ I say, nodding at Bruce, who’s looking a little dazed at this point. ‘I’m more recreational.’

She says she needs to register us and takes our driving licences for ID. Then, having entered our details on her computer, she leads us to a second door at the back of the shop, where she keys in a code and ushers us through to the supply side of the business. This is the *Alice in Wonderland* chapter at the tea party, I think. The room smells powerfully of cannabis.

We’re introduced to a second young woman, our ‘bud-tender’. Her name is Sarah and she’s a trained expert in her field. My head is beginning to spin with the options available. ‘This is all a bit new to us,’ I tell her. ‘We’re New Zealanders. This sort of thing is a criminal activity where we come from.’

‘I understand,’ she says. ‘It must be quite a surprise.’

‘It is.’

Under spotlights on the shelves behind Sarah are huge jars half full of variously hued, perfectly shaped marijuana flowers, or buds, as they call them here. Then under the glass counter between us, she indicates other options: edibles, fudge and peanuts, bandage-type patches for localised pain, oil and vapes, which are like small metal pens, loaded up with cannabis oil and silent LED-powered ignition systems that light up when you suck, and are smokeless.

For $30, a disposable one will deliver around 150 measured hits, says the bud-tender, demonstrating with a suck on an empty one. She feels they’re very good value and labour-free, of course. ‘We should definitely

have one of those thanks,' I say, 'and maybe a gram each of two sorts of bud. My friend is more medicinal and I'm . . .'

'Recreational,' she says.

'Yes, pretty much. What would you recommend?'

And Sarah points us to one called Pine Tar Kush, which she assures us will help Bruce's sore knee, and another sort called Jager, for my recreational needs.

The weed is packaged up in pharmacy-style childproof pink plastic bottles with computer-printed labels on them, bearing my name at the bottom as well as the batch date and the contents' THC and CBD levels. So, one of the other interesting things about legalisation and regulatory control is that you know what you're taking in terms of potency. Back home, we don't have a clue.

That lot costs us $70, plus the T-shirt and the Snoop Dogg rolling papers I buy on the way back through the dispensary. I'm feeling slightly weirded out by the experience of coming suddenly overground with my previously underground habit. We drive down the road to what may well be Brookings' dumpiest diner to have a coffee and to settle ourselves a little. That was like a lolly shop for grown-ups back there.

There were other customers in the legal weed shop too, now that I think about it: a young guy picking up his mother's prescription marijuana patches, a couple of happy old hippies, and three great big beardie mountain men. Brookings might be a somewhat charmless spot were it not for its unusual retail options.

Back in the car after some truly woeful coffee, I take a look in our medicine bag. As mentioned, the percentages are marked on the labels: the THC, which is the psychedelic bit, and the CBD, which is the pain-relief content.

The vape pen is very high at 55 per cent THC, though it delivers in measured doses of preloaded cannabis oil. Bruce's Pine Tar Kush is a modest 8 per cent THC, but 11 per cent CBD. My Jager is 17.9 per cent THC, but only 0.45 per cent CBD. The smell, when I open the containers, fills the car.

'We might need to be careful we don't overstock,' I tell Bruce. 'I've still got a bit of that stuff I picked up in Mendocino and we've got Seattle to think about as well. I'm duty bound to buy some more there.'

Apart from the alluring fact that Brookings is the first town across the border from California where you can legally buy non-medicinal

marijuana, there is one other interesting thing about the place, and it's an odd interesting thing. Back in late 1942 and completely without warning, a Japanese submarine surfaced offshore from Brookings, unpacked a collapsible seaplane and sent it up to drop incendiaries on the forests around the town, hoping to start major fires. When that failed, the sub set about sinking ships in the area, before heading back into the Pacific.

But that's enough of Brookings. Off we go again, cruising through piney forests — Oregon pines perhaps — offering glimpses of the surfy shoreline way down below on our left. We stop at a lay-by just north of Pistol River. There's a huge beach just below us, and a short track wiggling down to it. With its rocky outcrops, this place is a bit like Piha but supersized. As we wander down to the surging water's edge, it seems to be the right time to test the vape, which I'd thoughtfully slipped into my pocket, thinking how easily it slips into a pocket and what a stylish little bit of equipment it is.

Essentially, it's a slim stainless steel tube with a little hole in one end. Pre-loaded with cannabis oil, it self-ignites and delivers a measured dose straight to your lungs and thence into your bloodstream and straight off to tweak your brain and give some colour to the wind.

It's mellow and cool, with no burning as with a joint, and hash-tasting, because it's oil, I suppose. It's only when I exhale that there's any smell or smoke and, even then, only a trace. I have another suck for good luck.

Back in the car, I feel a little effect, nothing major, though I might have a high resistance. The bud-tender back at the shop in Brookings said I might have when I mentioned I was a regular consumer.

On we roll, hugging this wild coast. The next settlement of any size huddles on the flat land at the mouth of the superbly named Rogue River. It's called Gold Beach, though the sand is actually black and the only building of note is the Rogue Credit Union office. Big river, big bridge, big landscape. What's the word they use for this sort of thing? Majestic, that's it.

Goodness, here's a place called Ophir. That's the same name as the tiny little Otago town back home, famous for being both the hottest and coldest place in New Zealand. Then we have Humbug Mountain, one of the tallest peaks in Oregon, rising straight out of the sea, and then Port Orford, a sleepy little place on a slow curve. Bandon, where we hope to stop for the night, is 26 miles ahead.

I don't know a great deal about Bandon, but it's the boldest name on

the road ahead on my Oregon map, which I've just unravelled. Hopefully, it's big enough to have a selection of accommodation options and maybe a bar or two. I do know that Bandon is slightly famous for having been burnt to the ground twice during the 20th century, which must say something about the place.

As mentioned, we're both a bit road weary, what with everywhere being further apart than expected. Dar Williams is on the stereo singing a terrific version of Bruce Springsteen's 'Highway Patrolman'. We've hardly seen any of those all the way up here towards the top of America.

'Check Out Our Banned Books' shouts a sign outside a rundown-looking store on the edge of a place called Langlois. This area is called the Rain Coast, though it's clear and sunny today. Now it's 'Welcome to Coos County', which sounds slightly rude.

We hit Bandon (pop. 3066) at ten to two, which is a nice treat. We'll be able to settle in a little, have a wander round, count the bars. And here's a likely motel, the Sea Star Guesthouse, a small, slightly gritty, downmarket-looking joint right on the waterfront in the little seaside town, whose cuteness probably disappeared a couple of fires back.

There are two rooms left for hire at the Sea Star and Bruce grabs the upstairs one, leaving me to settle into a small, dark downstairs room with a loud humming noise coming through the bathroom wall and no view at all. But I really don't care. It's only $60 and I'm just glad to be settled in somewhere, even if it is in a converted laundry, which I suspect this is.

The portly couple who run this place mentioned the loud humming through the bathroom wall without seeming to know what it was. 'Sometimes it just stops,' the woman said, as if it was out of their control.

I'd had a plan earlier that we should go for a drive inland for a bit to see if we could find a covered bridge. I've done a bit of looking into what's interesting about Oregon besides the legal weed and it turns out the state is famous for its covered bridges and I'd thought, if there was one nearby, we might get a look at it, though now I'm not entirely sure why. I'm not even entirely sure why the covered bridges need covering. Seeing one, I thought, might provide some clues.

There's a little tourist map of downtown Bandon in my room and it indicates a visitors' bureau just round the corner from our motel, so I go get Bruce and we wander over to see what they can tell us about the covered bridges of Oregon and just how far away the nearest one is. Then we'll decide whether we can be bothered driving to it, though I might have

wiped that possibility out by passing Bruce the vape on the way down the road. He likes it.

Inside Bandon's visitors' bureau, there's no one except an elderly chap at the counter, a volunteer, according to the badge pinned on his shirt. His name is Klaus, though I might have made that up. He has a heavy German accent and a ponderous style. I seem to shake him up a bit when I ask where the nearest covered bridge is.

He seems shaken anyway by the sudden appearance of visitors. Then he misunderstands what I'm asking about. 'I don't know a Covett Bridges,' he says. 'There is a Bridges family I know of at Myrtle Point.' It must be my accent, or perhaps the vape, which I had a blast of again on the way down the road, is making me slur.

I enunciate clearly for Klaus, 'Covered bridges. You know, Klaus, bridges with roofs on them.' The befuddled old Bavarian scratches his wrinkled brow and wanders over to a filing cabinet. 'Ve haff something somewhere. Coffered bridges, eh? Ve don't get many inquiries about those.'

I'm beginning to lose my enthusiasm for finding one and start wondering why I was ever interested in the first place. But I had done some googling on the subject before I came away and discovered the existence of the Covered Bridge Society of Oregon, who are very enthusiastic on the subject.

Apart from having an awful lot of trees, Oregon has one of the largest selections of covered bridges in America, though far from as many as the state once had. After a covered bridge–building boom in the early 1900s, there were around 600 of them across Oregon; these days only 50-odd remain. I probably know a lot more about the covered bridges of Oregon than Klaus does.

'All I need to know,' I tell him, 'is where the nearest one is.'

'Coffered bridge?'

'Yes, coffered bridge.'

After a lot of rattling around, he finds a pamphlet in a file and hands it to me. It's a miracle, but not a useful one. It's a guide to the covered bridges of Cottage Grove, which is many miles away, inland and north towards Eugene — far too far for us to be heading off for at this time of day, though some of the bridges pictured on the full-colour pamphlet do look appealing. One even has windows.

'Bandon has many attractions,' says Klaus. We'd already spotted the

Forget-Me-Knot Quilt shop down the road.

‘Thanks,’ I tell him. ‘We’ll go for a wander.’

‘A vander?’

I briefly consider leaving Klaus battered to death on the floor of the Bandon visitors’ bureau and I can see Bruce is thinking the same thing, but instead we leave to check out the compact charms of the town. There isn’t a lot to it. Maybe they got wary about building much after being burnt down twice.

The first fire was way back in 1914, when Bandon was something of a resort town. One local hotel alone reported more than 9000 visitors in 1912. Bandon was booming a bit in other ways too. There were salmon canneries, a brewery, a broom factory, a match factory, shipyards and timber and woollen mills as well as a foundry. But at midnight on 10 June 1914, a fire flared up in the chimney of a downtown restaurant, burnt the timber building down and spread, out of control, through the streets of wooden buildings. Firefighters used dynamite to stop the fire going further, but most of the business district was already lost to the flames.

The sturdy Bandonians rebuilt their town and all was well until 1936, when the town went up in smoke once more, this time the victim of forest fires that swept in from the east. The townspeople had to escape in boats across the harbour. Those who didn’t reach the boats huddled on the beach at the edge of the surf as the flames marched through the town.

Twenty-one people died in that fire, and it’s said many more died over the following winter from the results of smoke inhalation. One of the few buildings that survived was the stone First National Bank. The persistent locals set about rebuilding Bandon, again mainly in timber.

Oddly, fires continued to plague Bandon down the years. A lumber mill and a battery factory that had survived the 1936 blaze both burnt down in later years. Then, in 1974, Bandon High School was destroyed, the victim of a student arsonist settling a grudge with the teaching staff. That must have been quite a grudge.

Bandon’s not bad, though, a slightly cute, flat-bottomed fishing port with a small selection of bars and plenty of tidy waterfront. We take a late lunch of beer and Polish hotdogs at the Arcade Tavern. I don’t much like sports bars, but they’re hard to avoid. This one’s much like all the others, showing games I don’t understand on screens in every direction.

Still, the beer, a Bandon pale ale, is excellent. After another one, to get rid of the taste of the Polish dog, we drift down to the walk-friendly wharf,

which is dotted with large carved statues with maritime themes, like some promo committee had too much funding to spend.

We watch some big lazy sea lions floating on their backs and slapping the water with their tails, then we try some of that Pine Tar Kush painkilling medicine we picked up back in Brookings. Bruce announces almost immediately that his sore knee's feeling a lot better.

Round the corner we duck into Foley's, an Irish bar, to get out of the wind and Bruce announces the pain hasn't really gone; it's just moved to his other knee. He may be a little stoned, as may I. We both broke the law a little to achieve that state because, while a visitor to Oregon over 21 years of age may legally purchase cannabis products of a dizzying variety for either medicinal or simply recreational purposes, there are limitations on actual consumption. You can't smoke a joint in a public place, for instance.

There's not a lot of public space anyway, there not being a great deal to Bandon, but it's nice enough in a not-too-touristy way. The local beaches, which are somewhere nearby, are splendid apparently, but it's not the weather for that sort of thing. This is more being-in-a-bar weather.

There’s a shop next to this bar we’re in with T-shirts in its window declaring ‘Old Guys Rule’, a sight we both found rather depressing. I like this bar, though. The barman, with a genuine Irish accent, tells the barmaid, ‘I don’t know how you can work here.’ He looks at the game on the screen. ‘You don’t like football. You don’t even like golf.’ There’s golf on another screen. She ignores him.

Ahead of dinner, I feel we should go back to the motel and roll up some of that other legal weed we bought back in Brookings, if only for the sake of comparison. I don’t think the one we smoked for Bruce’s sore knee was that great. The stuff I got from the hippie in Mendocino was stronger.

Off again on another wharf wander, we discover that other stronger stuff, the 17.9 per cent Jager, is in a league of its own. ‘Ooooeee,’ I say, possibly a little loudly. Now we have to go and mingle with citizens in a restaurant. I have a craving for crustacean.

We take ourselves off to a seafood restaurant we’d spotted earlier, where they seat us upstairs so we can stare out across the harbour to the sandbar at its mouth. The other occupied tables are well away from us. Paranoia kicks in.

‘We’re just oddballs,’ I tell Bruce. ‘We’re not fitting in anywhere we go. Everyone probably thinks we’re a couple of old gay things on our second honeymoon. Didn’t this happen the last time we were in America?’

We think the restaurant is quiet because there’s a big football game on, sucking everyone into the sports bars. I’ve ordered something called Shrimp Louie for dinner. I have high expectations and I wish they’d hurry up and bring it. Bruce says I have no patience.

‘But that’s not new,’ I say. ‘I’ve never had any patience. What’s your point?’

At which point, the Shrimp Louie arrives and shuts me up. Bruce’s Yucatan rockfish is making him yelp. It’s the generous slavering of jalapeños that’s to blame. He persists, though. Unlike me, Bruce is a persisting sort of a guy.

‘Have you noticed,’ I ask him, ‘that no one in this country seems to know where New Zealand is. Well, not so far.’

‘It’s worse than the last time we were here,’ he says. ‘I blame the education system. That’s why America’s so woefully ignorant about the rest of the world.’ Though America is so big it hardly even needs the rest of the world. You could spend a whole lifetime exploring the United States of America.

On a more personal front, the two of us are becoming concerned about the washing situation. I've got socks and undies for two more days, but Bruce has only one set left. Turn them inside out, I tell him, though I know that can't go on too long. He asked the large lady in charge back at the motel if she might put a wash through for us, but she just pointed him to a laundromat at some mall in the far distance.

'Can you last till Seattle?' I ask him. I can. Just. He shrugs.

After dinner we drift back round the corner to Foley's friendly Irish sports bar for a bit of the blarney, southern Oregon-style. A pint and then another one. They have some nice craft beer options here. The man in charge, possibly a Foley, is overflowing with the old Irish charm. He loves sport, he declares. All sports. And, realising where we hail from, he declares great respect for the All Blacks. On the strength of that, we have another round. The non-sports-loving barmaid, it turns out, is his wife.

Back at the motel, my room stinks of hooch, which suits the ambience. There's no noise coming through the bathroom wall.

Keeping Portland weird

There's a sign on the wall of the coffee shop we're sitting in out the back of the motel that says, 'Sometimes You're the Windshield. Sometimes You're the Bug.' I'd rather be the windshield wiper.

The coffee's not very good either. It's eight in the morning, we're a little dazed and confused and there's a big day ahead of us. Another big drive. Bruce baffles the gushing, smiling waitress with his breakfast order and now he's eating oatmeal which came with orange juice poured over it.

'Is that good?'

'Not exactly.'

'Shame you can't have any of the vape,' I tell him. 'That helps.'

That's his favourite of all our medicines so far. It's the Nespresso of the cannabis world, he reckons, which is really quite clever of him.

We leave Bandon in rain, drive north through misty forest on a big bendy road and head into the sun. We pass a lazy river and a little log mill on our right then reach Coos Bay, slung over a wide river mouth, where we stop for petrol. It's cheap here, a third of the price of fuel back home.

We've got to push on today to get to Portland in decent time. It's 250 miles or so and there were varying opinions in the bar last night about how long it would take us. We're going to have to leave the beguiling coastal route at some point north of here and cut inland then north towards the city, which lies a couple of hours from the coast and just south of Oregon's border with our next great unknown state, Washington.

When I unwrapped the Oregon map again this morning to look at the ways to approach Portland, I gasped again at the size of the state. Oregon alone deserves at least a week of closer attention than we're able to give it. But we're booked in tonight at a groovy hotel in Portland and everything I've read about Portland is alluring. We have to sacrifice seeing more of the state for seeing more of its most magnetic city, a place whose legend punches way above its weight.

The best route to take, most of the drunks at the bar last night agreed,

is to turn off at a place called Reedsport and then head up the Elk River on Highway 38 and through to the freeway on Highway 5, which rolls efficiently north from there, all the way to Portland. I seem to recall being assured it would be hard to get lost.

Bruce stops at a store for chewing gum, which gives me a chance to enhance my day with a discreet puff on the vape in the car park. I remain in awe of the wonderful marriage of technology and pleasure that brought such a thing as a vape pen into the world. I know I'm going to miss it when we part, though that's not for ages yet.

I did notice, in a possibly paranoid way, that there was no sign or sniff of recreational marijuana use back in Bandon. Probably because you're not allowed to puff in public. Or possibly because Bandon was just a sleepy little old folks' town, which is how it seemed. Portland, I suspect, even on a Sunday, will be funkier. I'm expecting to smell it from miles away.

Meanwhile, over the wide mouth of the Coos River we go via another mighty Oregon bridge. There seem to be many of them and, mostly, they're mighty. Then a big sign: 'Welcome to Douglas County. We Honour Veterans.' Most of the county signs I've seen seem to mention the honoured vets. Which vets? I wonder. All vets? Damaged old Vietnam vets? And, if so, how exactly do they honour them.

I learned about the so-called Vietnam War when, at the age of just 19

or 20, I was put in charge of the foreign news page of *The Southland Times*, in Invercargill, the southernmost city in New Zealand — the furthest place from the rest of the world, really. The war was one of the big overseas news items of the time and I saw to it that Southland got a balanced account of it, which wasn't easy. I said 'so-called Vietnam War' back there, because decades later, on a visit to Vietnam, I learned they call it the American War there, which makes sense.

Here's Reedsport, where we turn inland on Route 38, 'The Scenic Byway'. Now the sea's firmly behind us as we whisk on through hills, valley, forest, then the same all over again. And again. We stop at a sign that says, 'Elk Field'. (These vape things are very handy for a quickie, though not for the driver, poor dear.)

There's actually an elk in the field, but it's lying down in the long grass at the far end, so it's hard to get much impression of how it looks, which I'm not sad about, feeling a little guilty now about that elk burger I ate back in Klamath. Sometimes I can still taste it.

Now we're following the Umpqua River, on the fringe of the forest. It's sunny and still now, the road quiet. We cross the river, then pass through the tiny town of Scottsburg (pop. 290). Bucolic is the word, I think.

For some reason, Bruce is actually driving too slowly today. At this speed, we'll be on the road till sundown. Perhaps he needs some medicine; then again, perhaps not. I wouldn't want my driver to lose the plot somewhere in the middle of a forest in deepest Oregon. Also, I've been a bad influence on poor Bruce in the past and I don't want to be one again, certainly not at this stage of our rather long careers. There was a trip we took together to the West Coast of the South Island years ago when we went badly off the tracks, so badly that after the rather colourful story I wrote about the visit, the West Coast Businessmen's Association banned me from the region, though the ban must have lapsed years ago. Certainly I've been back since and I wasn't arrested.

I'm following our route on this vast map of Oregon and we seem to be making pitiful progress. The next town ahead is called Green Acres, just like the old TV programme in the '60s. I used to love that show. There was a pig in it called Arnold, as well as Eva Gabor, who was Zsa Zsa Gabor's little sister. Arnold the pig lived with an old hillbilly couple, who treated him as if he was their son, and everyone went along with it. In one episode, Arnold was called up by the US Army.

The roads seem safe around here, most having a double yellow line down the middle and passing lanes, so there's little likelihood of straying onto the wrong side. I must have blinked and missed Green Acres. All I noticed were a few houses.

We stop in the next settlement, Elkton, for a coffee and a mysterious pastry served by the usual chirpy waitress. I'm not sure where they find these people, but there's no shortage of chirpy waitresses so far. 'How're you fellas?' she inquires, with a rising cadence at the end, indicating a certain rustic simplicity. There's a sign above the counter: 'A Balanced Diet is a Cookie in Each Hand.'

Perhaps each waitress comes from the waitress factory with her choice of a stupid sign to hang above the counter in the café that hires her, though I'm not saying anything against Elkton, which seems a sweet enough village, though I don't spot any elk, or even see it on the menu.

The next place along the road is a town with the rather grounded name of Drain (pop. 1151). It was named after one Charles Drain, who was a powerful local politician and donated the land the town with the downward name was established on in the 1870s.

It's beyond here that we'll join up with Highway 5, the freeway that zips north up the middle of Oregon and on, and on a bit more, to Portland, city of our dreams. Well, today's dreams anyway.

‘What’s your favourite moment of the trip so far?’ I ask Bruce.

‘Strangely enough,’ he says, ‘I liked the bit where you got us lost. Meeting Mabel, the hoarder ranch lady up on that hill, was definitely a highlight.’

‘You’re a weirdo,’ I tell him. ‘I liked Mendocino. That elk burger in Klamath was some sort of low point. I can still taste it.’

Despite the fact that we’re safely on a freeway that will take us straight where we want to go, Bruce has a continuing impulse to consider every second junction as a possible alternate route. ‘Should we go that way?’ he asks, pointing at a side road coming up at us. Maybe he just wants to get lost again.

We’re approaching Eugene (pop. 160,000), a flat city, the birthplace of Nike and home to the University of Oregon. It’s famous, according to the often frankly silly Lonely Planet guide, for its ‘youthful energy’. Like many of the settlements round here, it started life as a timber town.

‘Portland 126 Miles’ says the sign, which is a good sign. Two or three hours and we’ll be in civilisation. We’re actually travelling the wrong way up the once-famous Oregon Trail. To get in the mood for the drive, I’d watched *The Return of the Magnificent Seven* on the TV in my dank motel room the night before. It wasn’t a patch on the original movie, but it did give me a bit of the western vibe.

There goes Creswell, then Goshen, which sounds more like an exclamation than a place. This freeway lifts us a bit up and beyond any meaningful encounters with towns, though. We slip by the eastern edge of Eugene. Ahead is Albany and then Salem (pop. 160,000), the state capital, not the witch town, which is in New England, way over on the other side of the continent. Some of the pioneers probably came from those parts and carried a few place names with them.

I’ve had a shave this morning, removed the goatee I’d been foolishly developing. Half the guys in that sports bar last night had them. You seem to need a big beer belly to match and I’ve never quite come up with one of those. The genes are against me. I come from a lean family, and there’s little I can do.

We’re skirting Salem now, Portland’s not that far off, and it’s only ten to one. A mobile home on the freeway ahead of us gets the big wobbles, veering left and right in its lane. All the brake lights around us go on as everyone pulls back. Then we’re past it, though I’m wondering when Bruce developed that alarming habit of taking both hands off the steering

wheel every now and then for a stretch or to make a point.

The traffic thickens as we get closer to Portland and our hotel for the night. All our accommodation from here on in is pre-booked, to make the trip slightly simpler.

I get a text from home saying Toni Williams, the singer, has died, aged 71. I saw him sing and met him a few times years back when I was easing into my job as a music writer in Auckland. Toni was strictly an old-school entertainer, a cabaret crooner whose best days were probably behind him, even then. But he was a nice guy, with the sort of voice my mum would have liked, more Vic Damone than Sid Vicious.

Bruce is waving excitedly at the screed of paper he's pulled out of the glove compartment. Ahead of the trip, he says, he printed off a series of photos of freeway lanes and off-ramps to ease our entry to Portland, which does seem blessed with a real tangle of fast, fierce freeways with many exit options.

None of Bruce's print-outs look anything like the reality we're now barrelling through and I have to make a snap decision and we take the wrong ramp and get lost, which bothers me less than it does him. He's not as open to surprises as I am. It's in moments like this I'm reminded.

But that doesn't matter. You can't stay lost forever, even in Portland (pop. 610,000), which spreads out from its watery centre where two major rivers meet, the Columbia and the Willamette. Portland dates back to the 1830s, when it developed as a service centre for the booming timber industry. In the early days it was known as Stumptown, for all the trees that had been felled for the city to grow. By the turn of the 20th century, it was, as the name suggests, a teeming port, deemed one of the most dangerous port cities in the world thanks to rampant racketeering and organised crime.

But by the 1960s, the place was transforming, mellowing, becoming strangely liberal, to the point where today it's famous for having more walkways, bike trails, parks and counter-culturalism than anywhere in America. Its unofficial slogan is 'Keep Portland Weird', which has to be about as good as city slogans get.

As my Lonely Planet guide slightly hysterically puts it, ‘Here, liberal idealists outnumber conservative stogies, Goretex jackets are acceptable in fine restaurants and everyone supports countless brewpubs, coffee houses, knitting circles, lesbian potlucks and eclectic book clubs.’ I intend to keep an eye out for those knitting circles.

We’re not lost for long in Portland. We head downtown, over a river and then out a little to the Jupiter Motel, a splendid-looking place, like something out of a John Waters movie. ‘Welcome to Portland,’ says the nice-smelling young guy at reception. ‘We’re famous for our beer, our weed and our strip clubs.’ Greetings really don’t get much groovier than that.

Upstairs, my room is great: jolly, arty and ever-so kitschy. There’s a complimentary bright red condom on my bedside table. I’m not planning a shag, but I wonder what the policy is on flaring up a big joint in here.

Ten minutes on, I head down to meet Bruce for a wander along the road the Jupiter sits on. It’s a big one, Burnside, running right through the city, east to west, across Portland’s great river port, through the centre and out again. We’re on East Burnside and it looks like a short walk over the river to downtown; just how short depends on the state of Bruce’s dodgy knee. Now that the car’s safely parked away for the day, he can at least be allowed some medicine.

While I’m waiting for him downstairs at the groovy, possibly rather gay Jupiter, I pop into reception, looking for a little guidance, though not of a spiritual sort. There’s a different nice-smelling, friendly young man behind the counter now and I ask him, ‘I don’t want to offend local culture,’ thinking, at the same time, that it’s probably quite hard to do that in Portland, ‘but where could I go to smoke a little weed?’

‘Thank you for asking,’ he says, chirpy and unfazed. ‘Just do it while you’re walking, like it’s a cigarette. It’s not a problem. Carrying a can of beer would be a problem.

‘I smoke a joint on the way home from work most days,’ he adds. ‘And, again, thanks for asking. Have fun out there, you two.’

Bruce is standing outside, inscrutable in his shades.

‘They’ve pegged us as a couple of old gay tourist types,’ I tell him. ‘But I think it’s working for us, so far anyway.’

He smiles and hobbles off. I hand him the vape thing. We mooch down wide East Burnside, over the big grey river, bridges to our right, one of them the sort that lifts its legs up in the air to let big ships through. The buildings are old and grandly utilitarian. There’s a big neon sign towering atop a building by the bridge we’re on. Beneath a prancing elk it says ‘Portland Oregon Old Town’, which is where we’re going. The main reason we’re here is to visit Powell’s Books, which claims to be the biggest independent bookshop in the world. We don’t have long in Portland and Powell’s is top of my list. Next on the list I think I’ve written ‘bars’.

On the way there, to get into a bookshop vibe, we enjoy some of the Kush, partly also for Bruce’s knee, which is a bit sore now, he admits. Portland, viewed from the big stone bridge, is quite an eyeful, but even at a glance there are several sides to the story. As in San Francisco, there are street people, and some of them are young here.

Way below us on a side street on the west side of the river, we can see a sad little tent town, pitched on the sidewalk, an organised sort of grimness. But then we spy a more heart-warming sight, on the rise of West Burnside, Powell’s Books. It fills a whole city block, on several levels. It is a city of books. Inside, it’s overwhelming and we stagger around half blinded by it all. And it is a challenge when you find yourself stoned and lost, looking at the spines in the Lesbian Erotica section.

We spend some time in Journalism Memoir and Oceania Travel, looking for my last book, but it’s not there. Bruce insists we go back to the

Erotica department, with its miles of filthy aisles. His wife writes this sort of thing for a booming online audience and he thinks he might find something to take home for her.

But his heart's not in it and he can't decide. We're there so long I pick up a copy of *The Giant Book of Erotica*, which is going cheap. I read a few lines and they touch me in some way. Perhaps I'll have a wank tonight. I feel sexual activity is encouraged at the Jupiter Motel, though I won't need the strawberry condom.

'I feel uncomfortable being in this aisle with you,' I tell Bruce, trying to move him along. I pick up a few other books in other departments on the way out.

Back on Burnside, Bruce says his knee won't last much longer, but we can't find a cab. There's probably a local cab culture we need to know about. Maybe Portland is so weird and green that it has banned cabs outright. Outside, looking back at Powell's, I see a young guy, tidy, bearded, on his knees near the corner, holding a sign. America seems to be a land of signs. This one reads: 'US Army Iraq War Vet. Any Kindness Helps.' He's holding a pose as if he's praying.

I trick Bruce into walking a bit of the route back while we look out for the invisible cabs. Then we spot an attractive-looking craft beer joint just off the main street. It's called Bailey's Taproom and it's very lively and

full of noisy young things. But there's a table in the corner that seems to be beckoning us. All we have to do now is decide which beer we want. There are dozens on tap and, really, all you can do is stab.

If it sounds good, we tend to give it a go. So we start with large frosty glasses of one called Bend Brewing Hophead. They're only $6 each and they're outstanding, though they don't last long.

The street scene through the window we're sitting by is like a frame from the old Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers comics. There's a dude, with a beard, shades, a peaked cap and striped shirt, leaning on the wall opposite smoking a joint. A jabbering old hippie wino staggers past. They ignore each other. I start looking around inside too. There are hipsters and hipsterettes all around us. We're twice the age of anyone in this bar, maybe more. One hipster couple has a set of parents with them, and even the parents are a lot younger than us.

But the good news is that Bruce's knee has stopped hurting and now the dude in the alley has some friends with him and they're passing round a big pipe, as big as one of those Indian peace pipes in the westerns.

'Maybe we need some more of that sort of thing,' I tell Bruce. So we do that while we cross the river back to Portland's less-edgy east side and find another bar, Burnside Brewing Co., where we try some sour ale the barman reckoned would send our hop senses to heaven.

It's half past six. We're stoned, a bit drunk and quite hungry. We order food, and I choose grilled octopus and chickpea salad. It's to die for.

'You're not actually going to finish a meal are you, Col?' asks Bruce.

'I'm afraid I am.'

There seems to be proper food in Portland. The odds on dying from fried-food overload lengthen. I also like the sour ale and the panna cotta with strawberry compote. Everything is perfect, including the waitress.

Later, we go to a bar right opposite the Jupiter, quirkily called Doug Fir, but we don't fit in. It's full of the beardie hipsters talking about the qualities of pale ale versus pilsner, and we agree among ourselves that we've had enough of this sort of thing for the day and drift off to our colourful rooms.

Seattle tomorrow. Portland seems splendid and barely penetrated by us. We need more. I run a bath in my arty bathroom and consider *The Giant Book of Erotica*.

Very important potheads

Bad news overnight from home. Gordie's cancer has taken a big dive for the worse. 'Dire' scan results, he says; the painkillers have been boosted, the hospice alerted. Jesus, he'd even been talking about coming on this trip, though I think we both knew at the time it was just talk, a daydream of one last adventure together. He's in hospital now, being tinkered with, and will hopefully be home by the weekend.

I meet Bruce outside the Jupiter at eight and we wander far too far in the away-from-town direction on Burnside, looking for a coffee place. But maybe Portland's not so famous for its cafés. Down here, it's gritty and deserted, save for some dark-eyed street people hanging back in the doorways.

There's a billboard above the street advertising the perils of pot. I've seen others around town. Part of the deal with making it legal involves warning of the dangers, especially for the kids. I pull out the vape pen. This stuff's pretty mild, so it's perfect for breakfast. None for the driver, of course. We have to get all the way across Washington state today, to Seattle.

I haven't bothered buying a big Washington road map. I figure we can save ourselves a lot of anxiety if we just follow the signs, straight on up Highway 5, the most efficient route available, to Seattle. We have high hopes of the place, though not of its weather. 'It rains a lot there,' someone said last night.

We check out of the charming Jupiter Motel, the strawberry condoms left untroubled on our bedside tables. After a certain amount of driving in the wrong direction, we're on the freeway heading north. The traffic, jammed all around us, is alternately fast and then slow. It's like being part of a river.

There's not much to be said for freeways, except that they get you there, often without too much in the way of scenery or interesting little towns to divert you. It's cloudy and 55 degrees Fahrenheit, so it's a bit

cool. Once we cross the Columbia River we're in the state of Washington, where the laws regarding cannabis are even more relaxed than they are in Oregon.

The back seat of the car is filling up with discarded maps. Bruce frets terribly about travel directions. Obsesses might be more accurate. That, combined with his incessant urge to take the wrong road or what he perceives as an alternate route, makes him hard to handle at times. I'm a bit more laidback about that sort of thing. I have a theory that, in the end, you're never really lost, though sometimes it takes a while to find the right way — like back in that deep, dark forest in northern California.

We roll past a place called Vancouver, a particularly imagination-free choice of name, given that the real Canadian Vancouver is just a few days' drive to the north. The speed limit is 70 mph, 60 for trucks. We're in rolling country covered in light forest, with the occasional ugly little strip of shops. There's a political discussion on the local radio, with people talking about Donald Trump, how he's crazy even thinking he'll be elected in just a week or so. These people don't seem to know themselves.

Seattle is 141 miles away, which isn't that far. Across the Kalama River, the next place of any significance is Olympia (pop. 48,000), the

state capital, a grungy, musical place apparently. It's where *The Simpsons* creator Matt Groening went to college.

We cross another river on another heroic bridge. Bruce is speeding again, hitting 85 in a 70 zone. I can't be bothered saying anything. He's the one doing all the driving, after all. Maybe it's his business if he wants to speed. Maybe smoking all this dope is making me not care.

Another text comes in from Gordie: 'Keep the word count ticking. I'm actually not so good. In hospital at the mo'. Bloody cancer is getting worse. But see you next week. Drive safe.'

I'm looking forward to seeing Seattle, birthplace of the brilliant guitarist Jimi Hendrix. The great singer Bing Crosby was born in nearby Tacoma a generation earlier. They never worked together that I know of, more's the pity. That might have been interesting. Bing famously smoked a pipe. Jimi famously smoked anything going.

Bing was good pals with Louis Armstrong, who supposedly smoked weed his whole career, starting way back in the 1920s. Louis called marijuana 'gage' and he was arrested for smoking it in California in 1930, fined $1000 and sentenced to six months' jail, which his showbiz connections got him off having to do. According to the 'Very Important Potheads' website, Louis once ran into Richard Nixon at a Japanese airport. Nixon, who hardly knew him at all, greeted him like an old friend and asked if there was anything he could do for him and Louis, who had his stash of weed in his case, asked the politician to carry it for him.

Legend has it Louis also turned Bing Crosby on to marijuana, which some say explains the crooner's exceptionally laidback vocal style. The pair of them appeared together in the hit movie musical *High Society* and, if you look closely, while he sings the title song, Louis appears to be miming the rolling of a spliff — a witty reference to the 'High' perhaps.

The Very Important Potheads site lists a staggering number of famous imbibers, among them Madonna, Freddy Fender, Bob Dylan, Thelonious Monk, Groucho Marx, Shakespeare, Steve Jobs, Fidel Castro, Lord Byron, George Orwell, Marilyn Monroe, Pythagoras, Sarah Palin and, naturally, Smokey Robinson.

All sorts of people have partaken, sometimes in unlikely combinations. New Zealand's best-known writer Katherine Mansfield, for instance, is said to have once smoked hashish with Aleister Crowley, the famous and slightly scary English occultist. There's a link there to Jimmy Page, last encountered in San Francisco: Page, obsessed with the occult when he was

playing with Led Zeppelin, bought and lived in Boleskine House, Crowley's old home, near Loch Ness in Scotland, and doubtless smoked some weed there himself.

Now we're zipping past Lewis and Clark Park and we should be able to see Mount Rainier looming ahead of us, but I can't see a mountain looming for all the cloud out there. 'This road is pretty relentless,' says Bruce, pointing the car straight ahead and on and on. A throaty Dodge coupé races past at 100 mph as we skirt Olympia, the great dome of its capitol building rising above the trees in the distance. Then we have our first glance of mighty Puget Sound, which laps all the edges in these far northern parts.

I've been muttering about how last night in those Portland bars we were like granddads. There was no chat with the locals much. They mostly looked bemused to see such old chaps out and about, sampling craft beers and popping out for a puff. I guess all the people our age would have been safe at home, happy with their weed, whether medicinal or recreational.

Bruce is getting himself all antsy about the off-ramps of Seattle. 'You'll have to guide me,' he's saying, though my maps don't offer any of the sort of detail that involves off-ramps. Seattle's just an orange blob next to some water up by the border with Canada.

I do have a downtown street map of Seattle, though, so the best thing we can do is find an exit that says 'Downtown' or something similar then try and spot some street signs I can find on the map and take it from there.

'Don't fret, Broo,' I tell the driver. 'Seattle's not much bigger than Hamilton after all.'

'You know how easy it is to get lost in Hamilton.' He has a point there.

There goes Tacoma. It's maybe an hour to Seattle and if Bruce starts yabbering about finding the right off-ramp again I'm going to hit him with my useless map. This reminds me of the time we had a fight in Death Valley, and that really big row on the trip to Tahiti, on a hill in the rain. I remember the rain, but not what the fight was about. Probably which way to go. Or him speeding again.

The traffic grinds to a stop at Tacoma, giving B something else to fret about. I don't know where he finds the effrontery to call me impatient. I'm a Zen master next to him in a traffic jam. A slightly stoned Zen master, granted, but still definitely Zennish.

There's a lot of discussion about how to pronounce a place called Pyallup. Pile-Up? A sign says it's half an hour to Seattle and the traffic is

rocketing along again. I hope I'm not tetchy company, but sometimes it does feel like I'm travelling with a worried old wife, and then we get to bickering.

All that can be said for the landscape around here is that it's flat and in plentiful supply. I can't wait to get out of this car. I've been in it so long it probably has some of my DNA. Now we're on a five-laner approaching Seattle, which does, on closer encounter, seem to be quite a bit larger than Hamilton.

Bruce is babbling about finding Highway 99. 'If we hit Canada we know we've gone too far,' I say, but that doesn't calm him at all. Probably I'm slightly annoying at times.

Now we're heroically lost. So lost that I make Bruce stop driving round in circles; I get out and ask the first stranger I find for directions. I don't think Bruce believes in asking for directions when lost. He'd prefer to drive around raving.

The stranger I find is only semi-useful and we get a little lost again, but eventually we find the Maxwell Hotel, which sits up on high ground at the south end of downtown Seattle. The next trick is to help poor, fretful Bruce get the fucking car back to the rental place. It'll be a relief to be rid of it.

The helpful hotel receptionist prints out a route map to the rental office for us, but Bruce keeps asking for directions. 'He's given us a nice map, Bruce. Won't that do?' I snap somewhat snappishly.

Up on the fourth floor, my room is large and luxurious and there's a stuffed toy dog sitting on the bed looking at me, glassy-eyed. To be accurate, we're both a bit glassy-eyed, me possibly with relief. It's so good to be here at the end of all that driving with my white-knuckled friend. I search the room for a laundry bag and gather my odorous smalls together to send them off for a wash, though when I take them down to the front desk they give me a form to fill in with the numbers of socks and undies and I have to sit in the flash hotel foyer and try to count them discreetly.

It's mid-afternoon in Seattle. Before any sort of sanity can settle upon us, we have to drop the car at the rental place, and on the way we're supposed to fill the nearly empty tank. But we can't find a petrol station on all the roads around us and, even then, we only find the rental place by sheer luck as we widen our search for gas. According to the dial on the dash, we have now driven exactly 1000 miles, which seems quite enough.

We deliver the car back with an empty tank and head out of an ugly car

park and wander down towards Seattle's waterfront, which seems to be the heart of this old and watery city. Like San Francisco, Seattle makes much of its waterfront, which is crowded with funky old buildings that, in the high season, pull tourists in like bees to a sugar trap.

Inside Seattle's sprawling labyrinthine Public Market there's a wondrous mix of hard-sell retail, fish, fruit and veg, eateries, artisans and tourist tat. It's gritty and strong-minded and works brilliantly, particularly as the tourist tide has gone out with autumn coming in. Apparently, you can't see across the sidewalk for the crowds in the high season.

The fishmongers have almost zoological displays of their wares on benches covered in ice. There are Alaskan crab claws as long as my legs and probably with more meat on them. In an antique eating place called Lowell's, we settle in with a big view out over the harbour, some pale ales and something to eat: me, a giant prawn cocktail, though they call their prawns shrimps here for some reason. I don't know why. Americans are unreliable around food. Shrimps are prawns, they like to eat their salads first and they call their main courses entrees. Going by the size of their servings, they eat more than anyone in the world and they have made many extraordinary and totally unforeseen advances with deep-fried foodstuffs that, by rights, should have halved the country's average lifespan.

I stare out across the big harbour with its steel-grey water, Ferris wheel, wharfs. Utilitarian yet funky.

We head back out on the streets. Big cities are overwhelming when you're standing with your silly over-simplified hotel street map trying to figure out where you are and which way you're pointing. Bruce doesn't take much interest in this side of things, seemingly happy to depend on my directions, except in the matter of freeway off-ramps.

Public transport seems baffling in Seattle and probably best not approached for fear of accidental transportation to the suburbs. There's a monorail slung above us and there are street cars rattling by now and then. I prefer to leg it, though there's Bruce's knackered knee to consider.

Apparently it rains a lot in Seattle. I noticed an umbrella back in my hotel room attached to a printed note saying just that. We drift up Pike Street across the front of the town, the water on our left, Canada way out there somewhere on the other side.

Bruce's knee is playing up again and we're trying to find a pharmacy, but there's nothing like that round here, just big old buildings, not even

many pedestrians. But, looking harder, I can see our old familiar friends, there in the shadows, lying like corpses in dead doorways, on the steps of a theatre we wander past. Sometimes, when I glance at them, they're staring right back like they're considering coming for me and my little man bag, still reasonably full of all they'd need — a wad of money, legal weed, passport, vape pen. I'd probably fight for that vape pen. Bruce too. It might be all that's keeping his knee going.

We stagger on up the rise away from the water to Roy Street and back to our hotel. In the neighbourhood are two bars we hadn't noticed earlier. One, a bit of a roughie, we pass; the other, The Solo, is fine: a slightly self-aware modern place with an array of craft beers on tap, big spongy old leather sofas and chairs, a Formica-topped bar and a hip young barmaid who says she's pleased to see us. We're the only customers.

The place makes a nice change from all those sports bars we've been frequenting until now. There's no TV in here and they're playing ancient rock through discreet speakers. I'm a little upset thinking about Gordie's email. 'But I'll see you next week,' he'd said, like he really meant, 'Don't worry, I'll still be here. Just.'

We're on our second round of pale ale and pilsner. The combo of those, the earlier ones and the smokes we had in the park round the corner is starting to add up. Bruce is muttering darkly about what happened when we checked into the hotel and there was a misunderstanding about sleeping arrangements.

'That fucking young prick at reception had a cheek,' he says. 'Trying to put us in one room. As if . . .' He peters out, spluttering into his pilsner.

'As if we're a couple of gay old chaps,' I finish for him. 'Remember that time in Vegas at that strip club. The hookers were going around offering blow jobs to every guy in the place except us. I'm still not sure what they thought we were doing in a strip club.'

'Not looking for a blow job.'

'Certainly not.'

We pop back to the Maxwell, three doors down, to freshen up a bit before we go back out for a drink and dinner. It's an extremely nice hotel. There are yellow bicycles in a row in a rack in the foyer, for guests to use, free. I don't think we should risk a ride, though.

The shower in my ensuite is huge, as big as some flats I've lived in. How is it, I wonder, that I packed undies for seven days but socks for only six? I'm having to resort to the purple Air NZ socks I was given on the

plane, though they barely come up over my heels.

Back down at The Solo, Bruce turns up with a new look, changed out of the striped sailor-boy T-shirt he was in earlier. It gave him a bit of a non-heterosexual look. I didn't mind, I just don't want to be defined in any way by his flirtatious dress sense.

I'm having the chilli short-rib beef, Bruce a salad with no dressing. 'You'll die if you don't eat some protein soon,' I warn him. We're drinking Bloody Marys, which are bloody good.

A young guy with a man bun on top of his head wanders in. What is it with the man bun? They're popping up on young chaps' heads all over the place, often accompanied by big bushy beards. Ponytails on men, all those years ago, were weird enough, but who would have guessed the old librarian tight-hair arrangement would end up on top of young groovers? The bar staff take turns going outside for a joint on the sidewalk.

Back at the Maxwell after dinner, we take a drink at the house bar where I'm so stoned and drunk I order the dessert special they're advertising in a lurid display on a wall. It's called a pan skillet cookie dough something or other and the barman says they specialise in it. They also specialise in serving cocktails in buckets it says on another sign on the wall of temptation.

The signs for the toilets here don't say 'Men' or 'Women'; instead they say 'Whatever'. The barman, a slim friendly guy, serving us the alarming-looking skillet cookie with ice cream, confesses he used to weigh 370 pounds till the tummy tuck ten years ago. Isn't he ashamed to be selling us this shit, I ask him. His smile is rueful.

Back upstairs, I hang up my clothes. Two nights in one place seems like a luxury worth celebrating. The writing in my notebook looks drunk. It's 10.30 p.m. in Seattle.

Don’t eat the edibles

I’m stumbling around a bit first thing. The luxury of two nights in the same hotel room is disarming, but I did sleep well in the vast bed with that stuffed dog, who is still glassy-eyed this morning, whereas I am less so. There is a bit of a plan for today. At least, I’ve made a list of a few things to be seen and done while we’re in Seattle. It’s quite a small list, I assured Bruce.

There’s the popular tour that takes you below, into Seattle’s famous underground city, a city beneath the city. Also, for the sake of further research, I need to find a marijuana store and see how that sort of thing operates here in the great and liberal state of Washington.

Just a little way off, down one of the streets that tumble to the city’s basin, is a quiet, parky boulevard with a mammoth lawn and, in the middle of it, a huge recessed fountain like half of an enormous golf ball spiked with jets that blast out water in synch with tunes coming from hidden speakers. It’s a musical fountain.

I get Bruce to take some shots of me smoking a joint with the fountain in the background. There’s a stiff little breeze and my ankles are freezing in these ridiculous little airline socks. In the process I accidentally smoke a whole fat joint of the Jager weed from that shop back in Brookings. It’s nice stuff: characterful, nice bottom, not too punchy. Reminds me of my wife, whom I miss.

So I’m already stoned at the start of the day. Back at the hotel, we order a cab to take us to Pioneer Square, the heart of old Seattle and the starting point of that underground city tour I’m keen on. Our cab driver is good value, a fast-talking black guy who must have smelt the smoke on us. He points out a marijuana store as we whizz through the old central city. ‘That’s a new one,’ he says. ‘Those weed stores are opening up all over town.’

‘What are the rules?’ I ask him.

‘What rules? There are no rules man. You just go in the shop. You can’t smoke it on the street. Well, you could but it’s not legal.’ He says there are hotels in Seattle with floors for smoking in.

‘And there’s not just the smoking,’ says the driver, warming to the topic. ‘There’s the edibles. Man, the edibles. They can get you in trouble. I’ll tell you a story about a friend of mine, a cab driver.’

Our cabbie had a customer one night who left a packet of cannabis edibles on the back seat of the cab. ‘They’re like candy,’ says the cabbie. ‘But I’m not into that kinda thing.’ So he gave them to his pal, the other cabbie, warning him not to go eating those edibles if he was going to be driving.

He rang his friend later, telling him to be sure not to take them, but the guy went right ahead and ate them anyway and flaked out with customers in his cab. ‘The customers had to call an ambulance, maan,’ he shakes his head. ‘Then the ambulance officer checked my friend’s phone for his last call and it was me warning him not to eat the edibles. And they called me.’

The stoned cabbie wasn't in trouble. The police weren't called. The medics only wanted to know what condition they were treating. They sent the stoned cabbie home to lie down and he wasn't allowed to drive for eight hours. I make a mental note to check out the edibles.

Pioneer Square is old and grungy, like somewhere in Edinburgh's Old Town. It's not hard to find the ticket office for the underground city tour. It's well signposted. The guy behind the counter, an older hipster type, eyes me meaningfully. 'You look like somebody famous,' he says. Bruce sighs.

'You look a bit like someone famous yourself,' I tell him.

'Thank you.'

'It's good to finally meet another one,' I say, which shuts him up.

We go out into the square to wait for the next tour to start. There are hobos scattered about. Sad eyes. One poor crazy guy is hopping around picking up all the leaves — well, trying to. It's autumn and there are a million of them lying in this cobbled square. There's an older guy slumped in a chair at an outdoor table, bearded, broken-toothed. I'm upset in general at all the derelict lives on the streets around us, but there's something about this guy that gets me. He has the look of a lawyer for the doomed.

I wander over to give him a few bucks. He's not begging, but he looks like he could use them. He looks up at me when I put the money down, confusion in his sad old eyes. 'You look like you could use something,' I tell him. He's rolling a smoke out of a paper bag full of tobacco. Everything about him is grimy and grim.

I put the money down and leave. Bruce, who took a photo from a distance of the awkward interaction, reckons the old guy cried as I walked away. I hate to think I misunderstood the situation. Maybe the old guy was an eccentric tobacco billionaire just out in the square taking the air when some git with a man bag mistook him for a down and out and gave him money without being asked. Very upsetting. Could make you feel like crying.

Our tour of the underground city is led by Amy, who manages to be confident and funny and relentlessly rude about Canadians, having ascertained there are none of those among the 50 or so of us paying good money for a look at some filthy, fetid history.

After downtown Seattle burnt down in the great fire of 1889, the city was swiftly rebuilt atop the remains of the old city. Because of the low-

lying, water's-edge nature of the city, flooding, drainage in general and sewerage, in particular, had previously caused no end of trouble.

Early lavatorial arrangements like the long drop would backfire badly during high tides, sluicing all the waste up and onto the streets to await another high tide to wash it away. When a sewerage system was installed in the city, its pipes were hewn from timber, the most widely available raw material in the vicinity. These were installed to run from homes and businesses into a single pipe and out into the harbour, but again high tides took appalling vengeance on such casual disposal, blasting the stinking waste back up into the lavatories, sometimes literally blowing citizens off their seats.

Some of the unreliable old wooden pipes are still strung up about the walls of the underground city. Also on display is an old water closet, a Crapper, named for Thomas Crapper, the famous English toilet maker with the vivid name. There's a lot of other dusty old rubbish down here too, but the best thing about the tour is the guide and her bottomless reserve of rudeness about people from nearby places other than Seattle.

She goes on at some length too about how, in Seattle's early days, the prostitutes would describe themselves, for professional reasons, as seamstresses and many comments were passed by visitors on the unusually large population of young women in the seamstressing business in Seattle.

On our way back up above ground, one of the men in our party sidles up to me and asks if his wife could take a photograph of him with me.

'Sure,' I say. And, *click*, she does just that. And then, *click*, another for luck.

'Why do you want a photo with me?' I ask.

'You look like someone I know,' he says, shaking my hand and moving on. I wonder who it is I'm supposed to look like, but I'm not going to let it get to me.

Just off Pioneer Square, which feels like the city's funky old heart, we decide to take lunch at a restaurant called Marcela's Cookery, where the specialty is Creole cooking, and the waiter, with his silver hair tied back in a louche ponytail, has a most faraway look in his dark eyes, like he's seen everything twice and lost interest after the first time. He brings us Bloody Marys, fried alligator, crawfish étouffée, and life feels, and tastes, very fine indeed. Pasted to the ceiling at Marcela's, more than 20 feet above our heads, are dozens of dollar notes. This Bloody Mary's awfully good. Too good for just one. Bruce agrees.

Round the corner from the restaurant sits one of Seattle's most beautiful buildings, Smith Tower, a cool white pointer to the sky. It was Seattle's first skyscraper, 42 elegant storeys tall, and built in 1914 by Cornelius Smith, the gun and typewriter tycoon of Smith-Corona fame. For a while, Smith Tower was the fourth tallest building in the world. Now, it's just good looking.

We wander down to Pike Street Market. I'd spotted a place in there yesterday selling hand-made belts and I need one of those, something with a shiny silver buckle, like my old one, which is falling apart. The belt man makes me one while I hang about watching the tourists taking pictures of the fish for sale two stalls down, but not buying any.

The fish guys put on a show for them every 10 minutes or so, hurling the biggest fish they have to hand back and forth to each other, making the tourists gasp and hide behind their phones to capture a blurry memory.

Aside from the tourists, the blokes around Seattle seem taller than average. Bruce and I are about six foot, but around here we feel shorter than usual. We also continue to feel older, half the time at least. Our demographic is underrepresented.

Another notable thing about Seattle is that the blokes, big and tall and all, sometimes favour kilts. I've noticed kilts for sale in menswear shops, even shamelessly displayed on mannequins on the sidewalks. They're not like Scottish kilts. These are rugged canvas numbers with pockets in them. I've seen men wearing them. Hipster types. I'm thinking it would be extremely hard to be weird in Seattle.

Just off 2nd Avenue and up a street called Blanchard, I spot a marijuana shop called Have a Heart, which seems an odd name for a legal weed store. At its front door there's an enormous bouncer, who wants ID before he'll let us in. A licence won't do for us here in Washington state, he says. He wants passports and, as Bruce has left his locked in the safe in his room back at the hotel, I'm the only one allowed inside.

'I may be some time,' I tell him.

It's a different deal in here from that shop back in Oregon, where the rules on cannabis are slightly tighter. Here, there's no pretence of it being a dispensary. It's more like a supermarket, a great big modern, clean, well-lit place with all its offerings on display in large glass cabinets on the walls and a long counter of smiling young checkout assistants.

Other assistants are out on the floor offering advice to dizzy customers like me. The place is busy with young, old, in-between, hipster, hippie, black, white, Asian — a whole cross-section of pot lovers. My heart beats like a hammer. If there was a sofa available I'd go and sit on it while I took in the weird and wonderful shock of it all, but there isn't one so I get on with perusing the many retail options on offer.

It seems that what you do, when you finally decide what exactly you want to buy, is call over one of the roaming assistants, who then writes your order down on a little piece of paper for you to take to the checkout, where you're united with your purchase. Making some choices is the

immediate challenge. Ha, I nearly wrote problem there, but being legally inside a state-sanctioned legal marijuana shop is hardly a problem.

Back home, I have to deal with dealers, and have had to all my long outside-the-law pot-smoking life. Some of them, as I said, have become friends, but that doesn't alter the fact that they're pot dealers. Criminals by legal definition. And me too, of course, for buying. One day, people will talk about what a ridiculous situation it used to be. Like they do now in California, Oregon, Washington and, in fact, more than half of America's states.

Here, inside Have a Heart, I hardly know where to look. There must be a hundred sorts of weed — loose, perfectly trimmed flowers, or rolled in packs like cigarettes. There are oils, unguents, teas and all sorts of edibles, from cookies to lozenges. Some sort of edible might be good for the train ride tomorrow.

After rather a lot of staring in open-mouthed wonder, I summon the nearest friendly young assistant. 'I'm interested in the Black Cherry Pebbles,' I tell him. He lets me have a look at the package.

'Very popular choice,' he says.

'Discreet,' I say.

'Yes.'

Beautiful packaging. Made by a company called Magic Kitchen. There

are details on the back: ‘We hope you enjoy these delicious cannabis-infused edibles made in our state-of-the-art kitchen by our amazing chefs. We strive to bring you the best-tasting, safest and most consistent cannabis-infused edibles in Washington.

‘We grow with passion, we extract with precision and we cook with care to bring you an edible that’s . . . well, magic. Please enjoy responsibly.’ Ten measured milligrams of THC per lozenge, it says in larger letters. Quite hard to resist. And organic too.

So I order a packet of those, along with what I thought I’d pointed at, a little jar of Platinum Girl Scout Cookies, thinking they were biscuits, intending to make this an all-edible purchase. I pay, take my bag and leave, to find Bruce lurking outside, a good distance from the super-sized bouncer, who thanks me for shopping with them. There’s a cookie shop opening soon, right next door to the cannabis emporium. Makes sense.

It’s only later, back, settled in with a pale ale at The Solo, that I look into what’s in my bag and find there’s been a bit of a misunderstanding. The Black Cherry Pebbles appear as ordered, but instead of a little container of wicked cookies, I’ve got a jar of weed called Phat Panda, which is strong stuff at 16.9 per cent THC.

‘We’re going to have to smoke like trains,’ I tell Bruce. ‘But not on the train, unless they have a smoking carriage.’ That seems a long shot though. The conversation drifts. What do you call a person from Seattle? A Seattler? A Seattlelite? A Seattleliner maybe? There’s a young woman sitting at a table by the bar window, interviewing an earnest young beardie for a job from the sound of it. It’s at the big repertory theatre just down the road, from the further sound of it. Bruce and I both have what used to be referred to as barmaid’s ears — an ability to pick up a conversation on the other side of the room. We don’t think the earnest beardie is doing very well, but he is extremely tall. Maybe she could offer him something in security. The guys wandering past the bar are also mostly extremely tall. It must be the lumberjack genes, which makes sense I suppose. Those pioneering guys must have been on the husky side to chop down all those giant trees. And, apart from being notably tall, almost every young bloke is sprouting a beard. The few older guys we spot tend to go for ridiculous moustaches.

I’ve just been reading some more of the detail on the edibles package. ‘Caution: When eaten or swallowed, the intoxicating effects of this drug may be delayed by two or more hours.’ Which is a bit confusing. Imagine

if alcohol took two hours to kick in. You'd be halfway home and fall over suddenly. Though I suppose it means we can pop the last two — there are ten of them — just before we get on the plane and have panic attacks just as dinner is being served.

Back in my hotel room, there's great excitement. My laundry's been delivered all tucked up in a bespoke cardboard box. It's pricey at $46, but worth every cent. These airline socks can go in the bin.

'I love that shirt you're wearing by the way,' says the guy who brings the laundry to my door. I give him two bucks, bless him. Bless Seattle. Bless the wondrous refreshing science of laundry.

I head out again. This hotel is very long. The lift is a lengthy trek from my room, 356. Bruce is a bit slow coming downstairs, so I settle in the Pineapple Bar off the temple-sized lobby and order a couple of beers.

'Are you from Seattle?' I ask the barmaid.

'Ya,' she chirps, 'I sure am.'

'So what are people who come from Seattle called?' I ask her.

She looks puzzled. 'Maybe Seattleites,' she ventures, but without much confidence. She asks her boss, a skinny, six-foot-two amazon with rings in her lips. She's not sure either.

'When you're from Seattle, you don't need to know,' she tells me, but in a friendly way. Bruce turns up. A young couple along the bar announce it's the first night of their honeymoon. 'Awww,' goes the barmaid.

Bruce tells me there were 450 guests at his wedding in Balclutha. He was 21 at the time. I was 22 when I got married in a bar in Invercargill in the company of a small family group.

We walk 20 steps along the road to a brew bar called McMenamins, where they make their own beers and dream up wild names for them. The Thundercone Fresh Hop Ale fills my head with taste. It's strong too. According to the beer menu, the hops in this one are so fresh they're still alive as they turn into beer. I order Alaskan cod and chips for dinner, Bruce a salmon salad.

The barman, as usual in these snobbish places, is babbling like a young fool about the various hop qualities of this beer and that. He talks me into something that tastes like a salty caramel pie. No, that's dessert and it's covered in aerosol cream.

I go to the bathroom and roll a joint from the new stuff I accidentally bought. I'm a little concerned about how much weed we'll have to consume between now and the plane back home. I roll two and take Bruce

for a walk. At least we'll sleep well.

Should I pack tonight for the train, or in the morning? Both, I think.

Walk like a duck

The alarm rattles me up at 7.20. I've slept like a felled tree. I'm going to miss this hotel. It's the fanciest one so far and I've grown fond of the stuffed dog, who watches me as I leave.

'Bye.'

Our cabbie on the way to King Street Station to catch our train back to San Francisco tells us he's from Baltimore originally, but spent some years in Alaska. 'I was in the whisky business,' he says. 'They drink a bit of that up there, especially in the winter.'

King Street is a beautiful railway station, one of the old originals, a cathedral of transport. There's a counter for coach-car passengers and one for sleeping-car passengers, which is us. We're going to be on the train for more than a day. I just hope they provide a stable writing surface.

Bruce goes off to watch a safety video while we're waiting; I go to the restroom with the sign that says 'Family and Men'. We're going to be travelling back to San Francisco via Portland, Eugene, Klamath Falls, Sacramento and Emeryville. The occasional announcement on the station's sound system is so incomprehensible it could be in Polish. Sometimes there's an urgent tone in the voice, but for nought. I could pop out for a puff on the vape pen, but feel I should keep my system relatively clean for our next experiment, the edibles.

Our fellow travellers are an assorted bunch. I wonder if there's a rule about what happens on the train staying on the train. There's a particular cadence the locals have. 'Alrighty,' they like to say.

We're on board a little late. Our roomette, when we find it, is cosy all right, though not as cramped as Bruce was convinced it would be. Our baggage goes in racks just down the carriage, the seats are wide and comfy, facing each other across a retractable table. As agreed in earlier negotiations, I get to travel facing forwards. The price I'll pay for this is that I have to sleep in the top bunk tonight.

The carriages on this train, the Coast Starlight, are two-storeyed:

cabins downstairs, viewing lounges, bars and dining rooms upstairs. Pulled by huge twin diesels, the Coast Starlight rolls all the way from Seattle to Los Angeles.

And, *toot-toot*, jerk, we're off. Bruce looks wide-eyed. We're five cars back from the diesels. There's a snack bar upstairs. There's Wi-Fi in something called the Parlour Car. And yes, there's a dining car and an observation car. All our food is included, but not our drinks. They have craft beer on board. It seems perfect so far.

We're really belting along now, adjusting to the lurch and wiggle.

'Walk like a duck, honey,' said a bulky black woman in a uniform, as I'd lurched down a corridor towards her earlier.

The coffee and orange juice we get from the snack bar upstairs are both pretty awful, but the thrill of being on a train makes it not matter really. There are confusing announcements over the tannoy about how to make bookings for lunch and dinner, exciting Bruce so much that he goes off to investigate.

I'm quite comfortable in our little room, watching the outer edges of Seattle thin out. We seem to be the only people downstairs in our carriage. We're in room 13, which might explain it. We're scudding through light forest, under freeway bridges. Is this Tacoma? And where's Marsha, who the announcer said would come for our meal orders? Bruce returns, having

failed to find out much of anything. The train stops. It is Tacoma. There are people getting on.

‘Maybe we need a drink.’

‘That might help,’ says Bruce.

It turns out we were missed by Marsha when she came round the carriages making the meal bookings. I go upstairs to report the oversight. ‘Goddamit, Marsha,’ the waitress I’m talking to yells towards the back of the Parlour Car. ‘You missed the boys in carriage five.’

‘There was no one there,’ Marsha yells back.

I shrug. I was there, but I don’t want to spark a war in here. There’s not much room and everyone who works on this train is on the husky side. The women particularly all have butts like bulldozers. And they certainly know how to walk like ducks.

After a certain amount of shouting, I get us booked for a 12.30 lunch. It’s 10.50 when, back in our room, we take our first cannabis-infused black cherry drops. Each of them comes in military-strength shrink wrap plastic and it’s quite a battle to get them open. They’re lozenges, in appearance a bit like something you’d suck for a sore throat. They have a cherry-meets-hash taste about them and, as noted, they’ll take up to two hours to kick in. We’ll be at lunch about then. ‘Perfect timing,’ I tell Bruce, who looks concerned.

‘I’m not so sure about these things,’ he says.

‘Just try and relax. You don’t have to drive any more. If it feels like it’s too big a rush, I’ll get you a drink to settle you down.’

That large body of water we’re slipping by out there is the bottom end of Puget Sound. I can feel my cherry bomb starting to edge in and it’s only 10 minutes since the last sliver of it melted down my throat. Bruce has a funny look in his eyes. His metabolism, when it comes to this sort of thing, isn’t as robust as mine. But we’ll just have to float with the flow now.

We duck-walk upstairs and along to the Parlour Car, with its wrap-around overhead windows. Bruce orders Bloody Marys. ‘You guys been partying like rock stars in Seattle?’ the barman inquires. I think he’s being ironic. The drinks are $7 each, huge and packed full of veggies, along with quite a slug of vodka.

An announcement comes over the system: ‘Ladies and gentlemen, whoever’s Pomeranian dog is roaming around the train, can they come and claim it?’

‘Do you think that’s the drugs speaking?’ I ask Bruce.

I think those of us in the sleeping cars are being kept separate from the cattle-class crowd on this train ride. They get seat service, while we get to swish around in the Parlour and dining cars. There's a cinema somewhere on the train; it has been mentioned in announcements. Also, there's a leak in the roof above Bruce, though he hasn't noticed. And now he's off looking for a snack.

I'm definitely under the influence of something, but it's fairly mellow so far. I look more closely at our fellow passengers, who are mostly older couples, on the large side and mainly white. The crew on the train, meantime, are mostly black. The train has just passed through a town called Winlock and a large sign declaring it 'The Egg Capital of the World'.

Bruce returns with what he describes as two turkey sandwiches. Mine is like biting into a soft, warm mattress, smaller than the real thing and soiled with melted cheese. I can't believe this fits in with Bruce's new dietary regime. Lunch is in an hour and I'm not going to spoil it by eating this grotesque thing in my hand.

Americans eat a lot of turkey, though this sandwich doesn't taste remotely turkey-esque. No hint of Christmas tree here. Just gooey goo, no resistance to the bite, pre-digested possibly. I can't eat this filth, I decide after one horrified bite. Maybe that edible cannabis is making me choosy about what else I eat. I turn to Bruce.

'So tell me Bruce, 50 minutes into the incredible edible, are you feeling anything?'

'A little slippage,' he says. On closer examination, he does look a little slipped perhaps. Meanwhile the train is pulling in to Centralia.

'I think we should wait till after lunch before we drop another one,' I tell him. 'It's maybe best to be a little conservative. This is new territory, after all.'

He nods.

'Those things look just like throat lozenges,' I babble on. 'I could just drop them loose in my toilet bag and, if I'm asked by an officer when we get home, I'll just say someone in San Francisco gave them to me for my sore throat.'

'Unless,' says wise old Bruce, 'the staff have just had a training lesson on them.'

'Well, that's a point, I suppose.'

We stop for 10 minutes in Centralia — which is a terrible name for a

town, if you ask me — passing through, not even stepping off the train, and under the influence of drugs. Only 55 minutes in, and that lozenge is increasingly soothing. Bruce had a terrible struggle with the seal wrapping, and now that it's out of that and inside him, he's not so sure he wants it there. I'm writing really slowly and my letters are taking on a different shape.

'What's that opening line in Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing*?' asks Bruce.

'"We'd just made it to the dining car when the drugs kicked in,"' I say.

I've always had a low regard for edible pot in the past. I've eaten plenty of hash cookies over the years, but none ever impressed me. This time, though, feels a little different.

We take our drinks downstairs and the blue-haired old trout who's moved into the sleeper across the aisle from us spots what's in Bruce's hand. 'Is that a Mary?' she asks. He confirms that it is.

'That's what I like about trains,' she trills. 'You can get sloshed and no one knows.' We might invite her over for a cocktail later if she can hang on to that attitude.

There's not much to say about the passing view except that there's so much of it and it's passing faster and faster. At least I'm facing forwards. Bruce is bitching occasionally about facing the wrong way, but that's the price he pays for getting the more comfortable, capacious and less claustrophobic bottom bed tonight.

Shit, I feel whacked now. And I'm still worried we're oversupplied. 'So let's see,' I say to Bruce woozily, 'we've got eight of those lollies left, several sorts of weed and the vape, which that bud-tender said was good for 150 hits.'

'We might have to binge,' he says.

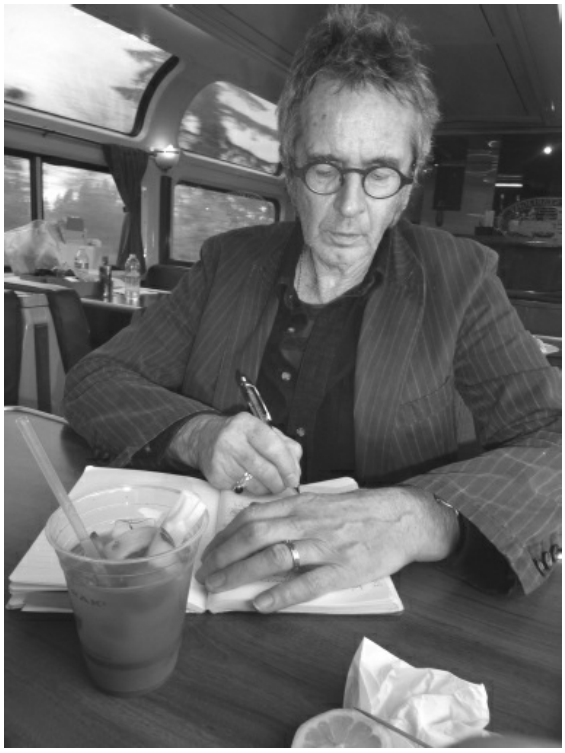
'I think that's probably a necessity now,' I tell him. 'It's essential field research. And don't forget you signed up for this. Don't get soft on me now.'

Our train is following a rainy road into a forest, crossing a river. We must be north of Vancouver, the American one. We've just passed a sign saying 'Swing Nose Frog'. Hopefully that's a railroad term. The occasional train comes rocketing past in the opposite direction, screaming and cutting out the sky and view for minutes on end.

We go back upstairs to the dining car, slightly off our heads, and are seated at our table opposite a friendly young couple from 'the East Coast'.

They’re getting off in Portland, they say, and driving back to Seattle.

I love the way the staff on this train talk to us. ‘Hey kids,’ our waitress greets us. She’s a red-head called Maureen, built like a fire hydrant and younger than us probably. We order beef burgers and bottles of Sierra Nevada Pale Ale and they’re served quickly and disappear inside us just as fast.



The nice young couple notice me scribbling away in my notebook and wonder, out loud, what I’m up to. I’m so zonked by my legal lolly I just come right out and tell them.

‘We’re marijuana tourists,’ I say.

They live in Atlanta and seem pretty straight, so my writing angle comes as a bit of a swerve for them, but they smile their way through my ramblings. Bruce, on the other hand, seems to have been struck dumb by that cherry bomb, and is now gazing glazed through the glass at the whirling view. In the background, the waitresses yell at and sass each other, mainly on the topic of their love lives.

On the way back to our carriage, we pause in the observation car, settle in a couple of the big comfy armchairs and order more beer. The train is rolling past huge car-wreckers and over a great ugly bridge. We’re arriving in Portland, where we’ll stop for an hour, says our waiter. He recommends a park across the road from the station, if we want a smoke. We must look

like the sort of guys who might.

He tells us that the old song-and-dance man and TV star Dick Van Dyke came on this train ride recently. ‘He was cool, y’now, jumping up and down and doing his thing. Very friendly. No big head or nothing like that.’ Van Dyke is 91.

Back down at our roomette, the old woman opposite is lurching around in the corridor shouting that she can’t find her room. ‘They all look the same,’ she squawks at me.

‘They are all the same,’ I assure her. She’s either sloshed, as promised, or it’s late-onset dementia. I point out her roomette to her and she settles down a little. She says she’s heading ‘back down to the desert’ and her home in a place called Indian Wells.

‘It never rains there,’ she sighs. ‘I can’t wait to get home.’ It is a bit damp and grey outside. Her son lives in Seattle. ‘God knows why,’ she mutters, sliding her door closed on me. We’re not inviting her over for cocktails and vol-au-vents now. After a promising start, she’s not much fun at all.

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The train stops in Portland and we get off to stretch our legs and visit that park across the road. The station’s a beautiful building, though folksy rather than in the Grand Central temple-of-train style.

The smoking park is full of crazies. One guy, his face jangling with rings and studs and little dangling chains, offers me something. It’s a bag of ‘magic mind fuck’, he says. There’s only one tooth in his gaping mouth.

‘I might pass on that kind offer,’ I tell him and reach for the vape in my pocket. Bruce still isn’t saying anything, but I’m not too concerned. I’m sure he’ll return when he’s ready, if not before.

The young couple we had lunch with got off here. They’ll be telling their Portland pals, ‘We met these two old stoners on the train. One said he was writing a book. The other one didn’t say anything at all.’ Bruce looks totally zonked. I’ll need to keep an eye on him in case he wanders, like that dog on the train.

Back on board, I’m finding those powerful sliding doors between the carriages a bit scary. I had one close on me earlier. It was a bit like a guillotine, but sideways and blunt. I’m so shaken by the experience I spill my bottle of pale ale on my seat, later to be Bruce’s bed. ‘Sleep with your feet at the beer end,’ I advise him, but he’s still not saying anything.

I keep talking. ‘I wonder if there’s an etiquette about which way to point when you’re sleeping on a train.’ There are new people getting on, filling up the empty compartments in our carriage.

It’s interesting sitting on a train in a station, watching people go by and new passengers getting on, and experiencing the anticipation in the air as the train is about to roll away. The voice on the speaker says every seat is full in steerage. Not here in sleepage, though, I think. Old Bette Davis across the way must have flaked out behind her closed curtains. Probably popped a handful of pills, trying to sleep her way back home to the desert.

Having just pulled out of Portland, we’re now firmly back in Oregon. The Kingsmen, who made a legend out of one song, ‘Louie Louie’, came from Portland.

The voice on the speaker has just announced there’s going to be a wine tasting in the Parlour Car at 4.30. The next major stop isn’t for two and a quarter hours, at Eugene followed by Springfield, both still Oregon. Oregon goes on quite a long way.

Feeling frisky again, I decide to risk another one of those incredible edibles. It’s 2.45. Bruce demurs. He says he hasn’t felt this banged about for a long time. ‘Christ,’ I tell him, ‘there are still seven left and we leave in just a few days.’

Trains tend to show you the ugly backsides of towns and cities. We’re just passing a real horror show, with ugly factories lined up below the rail line, and a dam spewing brown water on a big dull river. It’s hard to spot clues as to which town we’re slipping through, all the place names tending to be on the front side of the view. Oh, there goes Canby, possibly the town that invented the can.

I have to sweet-talk the gals in the dining car to get another couple of Sierra Nevadas. They’re taking their rest between the seething feeding sessions at lunch and dinner times. The cold fish of a barman in the Parlour Bar had kept saying to me when I demanded craft beer, ‘We have a limited choice: Bud Light, Miller Lite, Corona.’

‘No Sierra then?’

‘We have a limited choice,’ he started again and ran through the list like a robot.

I’m tempted to go back to our room and take a third cherry bomb, but Maureen in dining comes to my rescue, bless her. I hand her $15 for the beers plus ‘two for you’.

‘Thank you love,’ she says, which seems an odd thing for an American

to say. Though she's the one who called us 'kids' at lunch.

Little towns roll by, along with great dollops of countryside in between. Here's Salem from the other day again, and here's Maureen again, for our dinner booking. We heard Bette Davis across the way book for 7 p.m., so we go for 6.30, not wanting to be sitting across from her at dinner. Every time we've seen her, she's been wearing a different personality.

The sun's getting low, way out there sitting in a big rainy sky. This is such a cruisy way to travel, once you learn to relax. And to walk like a duck, of course. Red barns slide by. *Toot toot*.

Here's a brave text from Gordie in Wellington: 'Back home now. Resting up. Getting new pyjamas for my more relaxed lifestyle.' His positivity breaks my heart.

*

We stop at Albany. I call the attendant. The heating's not working in our roomette and it's turning a bit chilly. We might have to move rooms, he says, which would be a bit annoying.

Back up in the Parlour Bar, the barman still reckons there's no Sierra. 'There's a lotta drinkers on this train,' he tells me, like that's some sort of problem. So I order gin and tonics, mine a double double as a result of a sudden train lurch.

We pass a sad little hobo tent village by the rail line south of Eugene. 'They're gonna rise up and get ya,' says Bruce, his first full sentence in hours. He's found the lozenge a bit much, I think. I'm considering a third one before bedtime.

We're rolling through a vast field of bright orange pumpkins. Halloween is coming soon. Now we're into the woods again and now we're being biffed out of the bar so they can set up for the dinner rush. I check the news from home. The Prime Minister is condemning an All Black who was caught having sex with a woman in a disabled toilet at Christchurch Airport. This is the lead story on *The New Zealand Herald* site, good God. Though he was wearing his All Black uniform at the time, or partly at least.

We're in a big mist-topped forest somewhere in southern Oregon, approaching northern California at some speed. It's darkening out there. I wonder what happens when there's nothing to look out at. I suppose we'll have to look in. Dinner's in half an hour.

Shit, we just passed a covered bridge, a substantial red one, but then we whipped into a tunnel before I could get a photo of it. Bruce noticed it too.

Now we're off duck-walking to dinner. Chuck Berry must have liked trains. That might be where he picked up his stage moves. This time we're seated opposite an older couple from Arizona. They're a healthy, non-alcohol-imbibing pair. He's in his 70s and runs six miles a day, climbs cliffs and rides a mountain bike, he tells us, sipping his water. They're on this trip celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary.

He might be fit, but he lags behind the conversation a bit, responding to things at some considerable pause from them being mentioned. Bruce, perhaps trying to make amends for being so silent at lunch, gabs on like a madman, leaping from topic to topic like a bear on breaking ice.

Now he's on about how much dairy farming we do back home in New Zealand. I feel like I might need to explain that we're not all so loquacious where we come from. 'He gets excited in company sometimes,' I say to the woman, who made the mistake of asking him to tell her all about New Zealand.

Bruce obliges her and then he starts telling them about my book, forcing me to fill in the gaps. I'm not entirely happy about explaining this book, least of all to old-fashioned, elderly strangers on trains, but I get on with it. The stuff about cannabis tourism is all new to them. 'Good luck with your book,' says the old athlete as they eventually leave. His wife had admonished me, sweetly, for not finishing my vegetables, but they were inedible, rubbery versions of carrots and beans. Shudderingly awful, though the steak was okay. I told her I didn't think they counted as vegetables any more.

Back downstairs, we discover our roomette has been transformed, in our absence, into its night-time attire. Suddenly, it's a bedroom, so tightly furnished with beds, above and below, that there's nowhere for us to stand, never mind sit down. So we go back upstairs to the Parlour Car for a few gin and tonics to pass the time till we feel sleepy. The other sleepers must have gone to bed. The bar is quiet.

The Parlour Car is a beautiful thing to be sitting in: a period piece, more than 50 years old, sparklingly restored and maintained. Sitting in a couple of the big swivel chairs with our gins, we encounter another period piece, a lonely, fragile old bloke called Bill. He wants to chat, but he keeps losing his words. His startling blue eyes have a permanent thousand-yard

stare.

We slip away to figure out how to sleep down there, where our roomette has become a sleepette. My sleeping place, up above, is less of a bed and more of an open drawer, sitting quite tight to the ceiling and accessible by a set of tiny recessed metal steps I hadn't noticed earlier on the wall.

I'd thought I might be able to slip out of my jeans and things up there, but it's too tight to turn over in, even with my modest hips, so I have to send Bruce off to do some lengthy ablutions down the corridor while I disrobe alone on the tiny patch of floor that's left clear in our room. Then, once I'm up in my slot — and I do mean slot — I discover a sign urging me to fasten a safety belt that's dangling nearby to avoid being ejected in the night should the train make a hard right. I'm only inches below the ceiling. There's a reading light, but it just makes things seem worse.

Thank God I thought to take a lozenge, my third for the day, along with a sleeping pill. That should work.

Now I’m pissed off

It turns out to be a rough night. When I eventually get to sleep I have a vivid dream that I am a sausage roll, and wish I hadn’t fallen asleep. The fear of falling out of bed keeps me awake longer. I set the alarm for 6.30. That’s when the breakfast service kicks in, and Bruce likes to be at the front end of queues for that sort of thing.

Up in the dining car, familiarity seems to have put me on touching terms with Maureen, who is running on all cylinders, patting me affectionately on the back and pointing us to our seats at a table, sitting side by side as is the custom. Opposite us this time is a guy who says he’s Russian and tells us he’s a travel video maker. He’d noticed me scribbling in my notebook and got nosey.

Bruce starts gabbing about New Zealand again and our new chum asks him to draw a map of the place for him so he can get more of a feel for it, but Bruce makes the Coromandel Peninsula big far beyond scale. ‘My friend has a holiday home there,’ I explain to the Russian.

The train is running late. There was a broken rail or something in the night. The train apparently had to stop for an hour or two, though we didn’t notice.

After a grotesque breakfast involving pale scrambled eggs, something paler called grits, a thing like a brown scone that’s called a biscuit, and bacon so crispy it explodes when bitten, we retreat to the Parlour Car. We can’t fit back in our roomette while it’s still jammed full of beds.

Outside Sacramento, there’s a transient camp on a dry river bed below the train. A row breaks out in the Parlour Car. Winston, the unhelpful barman from last night, starts yelling at some other guy.

‘Who said that about me? Who said it? Now I’m pissed off.’

Then a husky waitress with a powerful arse and an awful lot of glitter on her eyelids wades in and starts yelling back at Winston and then yells to all of us, ‘Ahm not bein’ talked to like that’ and she storms off. It’s all quite exciting, but far too early in the day for drama, and the coffee doesn’t

help, of course.

Back downstairs, our attendant has arrived to transform our sleepette back into a roomette so we can sit down and watch the last of the scenery going by. She's bewitchingly fast at it, flipping the space from sleep to sit in around 20 seconds flat, I reckon.

She can see I'm impressed. 'I should be good,' she says. 'I been doing it for 20 years.'

Bette Davis from across the way appears from behind her curtain, a vision in pink. Well, not a vision so much as an apparition. Maybe she's dressing for the desert. She'll be back there by tonight. She has mentioned several times that she can't wait.

The train is whizzing through a town called Davis, a university place two stops from our departure point at Emeryville. Bruce had a shower in the cupboard down the passageway this morning, but not me. It was bad enough trying to sleep in a box, never mind showering in one. I checked the showers yesterday when we got on. I don't know how the average American could even fit in there.

Last night was the first of several nights of Bruce and me being room-mates. Our next hotel, the Whitcomb, back in San Francisco, is too expensive for us to have our own rooms, though I'm expecting it to be very nice indeed. Four hundred bucks a night nice.

Meanwhile, we're rolling down through the Central Valley, to the north and inland from San Francisco. There are orchards, fields full of crops, dark fertile-looking soil, wetlands, little waterways and fishermen's shacks, one with a sign reading 'Banjo Lessons Here'. Just ahead is Martinez, which claims to be the birthplace of the martini, then, 45 minutes beyond that, Emeryville — where we get off and have to transfer by boring old bus to central San Fran.

It feels like the right time to be getting off this train anyway. We've come full circle. They're taking bookings for lunch and dinner again. Los Angeles is a long way further down the line, and I'm glad we're not going.

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It's hot and steamy in San Francisco when the bus from the train drops us at Fisherman's Wharf. We go looking for a cab, trying to find our land legs again. It's the middle of the day now. Our hotel looks splendid with its columns and great glass carousel entrance, though it's right in the middle of a dodgy spot on Market Street, well peopled by the sidewalk tribe.

We can’t get into our rooms till three, so we check our bags in after I strip off a couple of layers of clothes in the restroom. It’s like an oven outside. But outside we go, down Market, past the pot smokers and the crazies trying to catch our eyes.

I mention to Bruce that my sunglasses have fallen apart. The screw holding one of the arms has unscrewed itself. I’ve managed to save the screw, but it’s too tiny and finicky for me to reassemble myself. Though we’re half blind under the blazing sun, we spot, of all things, a bicycle shop.

‘Let’s go in here,’ says Bruce.

‘Why? Do you have to buy a bike right now? Can’t we have something to eat first?’

‘They might be able to fix your glasses,’ he says, leading me inside and then, just short of the assistant, disengaging from the situation in that engaging way of his.

‘I know this is a little out of your league,’ I say to the bike man.

But it turns out not to be. Miraculously, he happens to have a tiny screwdriver in his tool belt that enables him to put my specs back together. He takes $2 for his time — about 30 seconds.

Every now and then, Bruce is just brilliant and I tell him so.

‘You’re brilliant.’

‘I know.’

We head up a side street to a likely looking eating place called Dottie’s Café, packed with the lunchtime crowd. It’s nice and cool in here. The menu has a Mexican angle. At the table next to ours are two enormous young black women tucking into two plates apiece, each balancing a white baby on a large thigh. Maybe they’re nannies on their lunch breaks.

I order pulled-pork quesadillas with something called jack cheese and a fresh-squeezed OJ. I overhear one of the big girls at the next table mention into her super-sized cell phone that she’s ‘child-walking’.

The lunch is enormous, probably around two kilos in total and impossible to make much impact on. At a serious push, I could probably eat about half of the average American meal serving. I’m happiest probably grazing on bar snacks, though too much of that sort of diet and your skin starts turning grey.

Back at the Whitcomb, Rene at the counter checks us in at two, as promised. He looks like a tireder, older Trini Lopez, the ’60s cabaret rocker. This hotel is a bit of a knockout, with a foyer like a slightly spooky

palace, all dark vaulted marble. The then just-built hotel served as San Francisco's City Hall for three years from 1912 after the original city hall was destroyed in the devastating 1906 earthquake, delaying the Whitcomb's proper opening until 1916. Our room is vast, its two big beds placed well apart. I grab the one nearest the window, hoist my bag onto it, take a pee and we head back out, looking for adventure and cannabis-taking opportunities in the limited time left.

It's still as hot as an oven out on the sidewalk with the crazy sidewalk people. There's a guy standing just over there talking to his own reflection in a bar window and an ugly bloke in a dress calling us all 'fucking assholes'. So nice to be back in good old folksy San Francisco, city of dreams, city of the doomed.

We're not sure where to go to have the smelly smoke I prepared earlier, with so many cops around keeping an eye on the madness. Meanwhile I'm having a lozenge for my sore throat. I pass Bruce the vape, which I don't think we'll ever finish, no matter how we try.

It feels too hot to climb Nob Hill, as planned and, anyway, we're not sure B's knee is up to it. He's very keen to get back to that Whitechapel gin bar we went to on our last visit to San Fran. Our hotel is right across the wide road from the United Nations Plaza, an arrangement of stately buildings dotted around a paved plaza, flagpoles aplenty, along with cops, who are studded round the place like they're expecting something. One flag, weirdly, is emblazoned 'DON'T GIVE UP THE SHIP.'

The stench of urine coming off a huddle of hobos on the sidewalk swirls around us and makes me feel briefly faint. They're underfoot, under-trodden, oddly invisible. Like if you don't look at them they're not there. Just to add some more edge to the oddness, a jet fighter suddenly appears in the sky, screaming low and heart-stoppingly loud over our heads.

We have, without any planning at all, managed to arrive during Fleet Week, when the US Navy makes its annual visit to San Francisco and puts on an air show to get everyone's attention. In the lead-up to the big gig in the sky tomorrow, the fighter pilots are getting in a bit of showy rehearsal over the city — very low over the city, in wing-tip formation back and forth, then turning great backward circles upwards.

'Stop jumping,' Bruce tells me, but every time those jets scream over they give me a fright. It's making me look suspicious apparently. I see a cop looking at me. I'll try to get a grip. Where's that vape?

A few streets up, we find one of the backstreet bars we visited last time. Two gangsta-looking guys at the bar are swearing and chanting along to the rap on the sound system. The barmaid doesn't look remotely nervous, but I'm getting tired of these rough bars with staunch barmaids and after one beer we head down to Whitechapel to try some gin cocktails.

Bruce opts for a Norman Conquest (gin, absinthe), I order a Lamplighters (gin, hibiscus, chilli, bitter orange soda). When they appear it seems we've ordered flamboyant ladies' drinks, but they certainly hit the spot — though it's becoming harder to know exactly where the spot is, what with all the things we've taken.

We're sitting on stools in a mirrored alcove in the cavernous bar. With its panels and shadows and its sheer Gothicness, I'm expecting a group of well-dressed vampires to drift in any moment. I look across and notice, in the back light, that my companion's body contour has altered since last I noticed. There appears to be a bit more of him than before.

'Bit of a pot there, old pal,' I tell Bruce, patting his tummy in what I hope is an affectionate manner. He pulls it in immediately, as newly chubby chaps do.

'It's your fault,' he says, glaring at me. All the drinking apparently. I apologise immediately and buy another round.

Whitechapel is raving now and it's only six o'clock. Gin seems to be the thing with the young swingers of San Fran. It's like a very loud opium den in here, everyone whacked quite swiftly by these powerful concoctions. But again we're the granddaddies in the room, though, at a glance, rather flamboyant ones, with our bickering and our lady cocktails.

Just as there are craft beer nerds, so there are gin nerds, and of course here there's no such thing as a simple gin and tonic. Many choices have to be made before you can even get your eager hands on one of those. The gin might be a slug of the home-distilled stuff they have on tap or a choice made from the dizzying array of bottles and decanters on mirrored shelves behind the bar.

And then, which tonic to have with it? There are very many. Not to mention, organic lemon or hand-tended limes. And the ice: slivers or manly chunks? It's all too much 'and they're all far too fucking young' in here, I tell Bruce, dragging us out of the place.

Back at the Whitcomb, stopping for a beer on the way up to our room, we find the barman manning the house bar very surly as we examine the bar snack menu for possible dinner options. Upstairs the light is low in the

gloomy lobbies, which have more the air of a superior sort of court than a hotel. If the Addams Family ever designed a hotel it might be like the Whitcomb.

Bruce wants to kill the barman, who seems quite bent on treating us like something he doesn't want to deal with, which does at least make a change from the flirty barmaids and smart-arse beer and gin nerds we've grown used to elsewhere. But we persist with him and make it through a small selection of appalling bar food and several gins and beers in exchange for a $96 tab and another sneer. I make a show of giving the bastard barman an extra $10 for his implacable unfriendliness.

In our ballroom-sized bedroom, we take turns in the antique bathroom and I inquire, I think sensitively, about Bruce's first-thing-in-the-morning bathroom requirements and timing. We take to our beds, Bruce falling asleep almost immediately, me scribbling this and reaching for a Zoplicone. Then Bruce wakes up and wants to watch TV.

The never-ending vape

‘Is it safe to get up yet?’ I ask Bruce. He’s been up since 7.20 it turns out, shuffling round in the dark seeing to his ablutions, which were protracted and complex from the sound of them. I lay, pretending I was asleep, wishing I was. I know I’m going to need my strength today.

I take the second shift in the bathroom: two minutes in the shower, a quick look in the mirror to make sure I’m actually there. Sometimes I’m not entirely sure. Oh, and I roll a joint.

Soon we’re out on the surging streets again, early this time. Worker bees are buzzing off to their offices and shops. It’s a sea of bikes, buses, cars, street cars, cops. And then there are the doomed, of course, lying where they spent the night, on the sidewalks at the edges of the buildings. Some are still asleep, their dirty cheeks on the pavement, one woman lying in her shit, sleeping, reeking.

We go up Mason Street and into Lori’s Diner for breakfast. It’s a vision of shiny, red-backed booths and bustling waitresses delivering and clearing plates at an insistent pace. Our waitress has a dyed bouffant, and carries menus in one hand and coffee jug in the other. My breakfast is huge: scrambled eggs, bacon and hash browns with a pile of buttered toast. Not half bad actually, but only half eaten.

‘We’re off to climb a mountain,’ I tell the woman on the checkout.

‘That’ll sure work your breakfast off, honey,’ she says. If you don’t get called honey at least once in these places, something’s wrong.

We catch the cable car up Powell Street, heading for the Vallejo Steps, which are breathtaking on at least two levels. At the top is Ina Coolbrith Park, a magical green spot with dizzying views, named in memory of California’s first poet laureate. Ina was pals with Mark Twain, Isadora Duncan, Ambrose Bierce and Jack London. Her uncle was Joseph Smith, the Mormon prophet. Her poetry hasn’t quite stood the test of time. Even her titles have dated a bit. Like her most famous one, *Longing*:

A foolish wisdom sought in books!
O aimless fret of household tasks!
O chains that bind the hand and mind —
A fuller life my spirit asks!

And on and on it emotionally goes, scattering exclamation marks like confetti. But Ina Coolbrith does live on a little bit in her lovely park, which is well worth the test of lung and limb to get there. Up the hill a bit further and round a corner we find Jack Kerouac's Love Shack, as the tourist guides call it, though Jack may not have. It's a steep-roofed wooden house, not a shack, and it was here the famous writer lived in a ménage à trois with his close buddy Neal Cassady and Cassady's wife, Carolyn, while he wrote about his famous road trip on a 120-foot roll of paper. I always thought *On the Road* read a bit like it was written on a roll.

After all that excitement, we catch our now-laboured breaths in a little café called the Soap Box on Hyde Street. The hills around here are heroic. That Kerouac must have had some thighs on him. Cable cars rumble past.

The coffee's rubbish as usual. The only decent coffee I've had on this trip so far was a Turkish one in Seattle. Not only is this small latte tasteless, but it's not even small. It must be at least a pint. There's a little

bookshelf near our table with a selection of carefully chosen books. One's called *Eve and Adam* and there are three copies of *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

Bruce's buggered knee isn't good, especially coming down the endless steps on these hills, not to mention having gone up those extreme slopes. He's a soldier, though, and not complaining. Well, not much. We're going to try and get a cab to Golden Gate Park and the de Young museum, where there's an exhibition that's on my list.

Quietly checking the street map, I notice something I haven't noticed before. Our hotel, the well-appointed Whitcomb, is right on the edge of the city's oddly named Tenderloin district. Even odder is the name of the sub-district where the Tenderloin meets the next district along, Nob Hill, where we are now. They call it Tender Nob, though I don't know how anyone could say it with a straight face.

We take a fast cab back to the vast oasis of Golden Gate Park. It's hot and still now, not the weather for much walking, if we can help it, so we get the cab to drop us right outside the de Young, a marvellous Modernist palace hosting an exhibition by a marvellous Modernist painter, Ed Ruscha.

It's a slightly hallucinogenic experience, perhaps due to the smoke we had first in a nearby glade that had beckoned to me. 'It's beckoning,' I'd said to Bruce. 'That glade over there.' One big fat joint later, we reappeared, readjusted tourists.

Inside the gallery, Ruscha's cinematic paintings have a photo-realism about them, a feel of old western movies and a dry humour that suits some of the unwatered landscapes. A lonely desert horizon enlivened only by a pair of distant oil wells is titled *Well Well*. Ruscha likes desert, skies, abandoned gas stations, Hollywood. He doesn't appear to like people much. He's 79 now, a pop-art icon, but so much more soulful than, say, Warhol.

Ruscha's fans add up to an old crowd in here, which makes a nice change for us. And there's a lot more than Ruscha in this huge and amazing gallery, sprawled over three vast levels. There's an astonishing piece by an English sculptor, Cornelia Parker, a huge mobile, called Anti-Mass, made from the great, crispy black wooden beams and other bits of a Southern Baptist church in a predominantly African-American part of Alabama, which were retrieved from its ruins after it was destroyed by arsonists.

Outside and back in a leafy glade, I get Bruce to take a few shots of me

knocking off the last of that weed I got way back at the beginning of our adventure in Mendocino. It's another fat one. The papers are better quality here, the weed perfectly dried and things burn better. I'm completely stoned now.

Bruce takes charge and gets us into a cab to the Haight. The driver is a Vietnamese guy who has been in the US for 37 years, though we can barely understand him. He's explaining about the screaming jets overhead. He's excited about them. They're flown by the US Navy's top aerial performance team, the Blue Angels. They need three straight days of cloudless skies over San Francisco before they can pull off their terrifying air show for the wide-eyed locals, and this is the third day of clear, blazing skies so the show's on tomorrow. Lucky us.

We revisit Amoeba Records to see if Tony the manager has remembered to look out the T-shirts he promised us. He has. 'You're still a medium,' he tells me, 'but you,' he looks at Bruce, 'you look like a large now.' Bruce looks sad. So much for that diet of his.

Still slightly off my head, I drift to the substantial '60s section in the store and pick up an expanded version of *Surrealistic Pillow*, a Moby Grape compilation I haven't seen before and an old Mills Brothers 10-inch doo-wop disc from the bargain bin.

We take our T-shirts, bid Tony farewell and drift off down Haight Street looking for somewhere safe to eat. It's 2.15 and we stumble on somewhere marvellous, a café called Sparrow, where everything is organic and the air-conditioning is cool. Two organic beers, a pear salad for Bruce, and a big crunchy BLT for me.

But that oldies music they're playing is getting on my nerves. I can only take so much of the Doors on a hot day, and it's blazing out there now. We might need to buy sombreros if we're going to walk all the way down to Market Street, which is the plan, Bruce's knee and the merciless sun permitting.

We make it to lower Haight before Bruce's knee becomes too painful and we have to shelter in a bar for a reviving beer. I've had another text from Gordie, who wonders if I might keep an eye out for a decent pair of pyjamas. He can't find anything he likes back home. So I say I will, of course. There are some flash shops in San Francisco I believe, I tell him. He sends back precise instructions on what he's after: 'hundred per cent cotton, proper buttons, matched top and bottom, subtle check or a nice stripe, nothing garish'.

‘That’s a job for tomorrow,’ I tell Bruce. I’ve just noticed we’re in another sports bar. Bruce is looking pretty stuffed. But that’s nothing another cold craft beer won’t cure. And, sure enough, semi-revived, we take to the hot sidewalk and stumble the last few miles back to the hotel, where Bruce collapses on his bed and falls immediately into a deep and snoresome sleep.

I shower and put on fresh socks. We’ve decided to have a dinner in a decent place tonight, instead of snacking in another low-life bar. I’ve been googling for somewhere nearby and found a spot that looks classy, called the Hayes Street Grill, a seafood restaurant a short walk away.

On our way, I do something I’ve never done before and ditch the jar with the last of the weed, confident a happy hobo will find it. The rubbish bins in this city get turned over by them on a regular basis from what I’ve noticed. I’ve rolled a couple of joints and we’ll never get through the rest of it. And there’s still some of those lozenges, not to mention the never-ending vape, which remains Bruce’s favourite.

Hayes Street is in the city’s theatre district, and its sidewalks are rather superior and, quite suddenly and conspicuously, hobo-free. The Hayes Street Grill is classic top-end American eating out, filled with the pre-show crowd, anxious to eat, neck some chardonnay and get to the theatre down the road.

We tell our waiter we’re not in any hurry at all, order drinks and peruse the menu, which certainly reads splendidly. We start with a dozen Hog Island sweet water oysters, then I go for the Maine peepytoe crab cakes and Bruce the Alaskan halibut. We may well have ordered simply on the basis of the splendid names. It seems like it might be a nice life being rich in San Francisco, all the doomed tidied away from view outside.

On the restaurant walls hang dozens of photos of various musical stars who might have played down the block and eaten here at the Grill. There’s one of our Kiri Te Kanawa above the kitchen galley door. She looks to be in her late 30s in it, the fluffy hair looking quite antique now. I don’t recognise any of the others up on the walls. The oysters, however, are very good.

Back at the Whitcomb, we have a last gin and tonic with the surly barman and then head upstairs for our last sleep in this great and unsettling city. I flush my roaches down the historic dunny.

He could be dead

It’s time for a last mad American breakfast, this time in a place called Tad’s Steak House, to get up some strength for the shopping session we have ahead of us. Bruce gives up on his diet altogether and goes for bacon and fried eggs, while I confront a small mountain of French toast, which makes a distinct sucking noise as I pour on the maple syrup.

The coffee, of course, isn’t really. I might be up to my eyeballs in cannabis, but I haven’t had a decent coffee in two weeks now and it’s starting to tell. I’m amazed Americans get anything done at all in the morning.

It’s very hot and crowded downtown at 9.30 in the morning, probably because of the Blue Angels air show that’s coming this afternoon. But all round the edges are the homeless. We walk past a guy urgently shouting ‘Get up’ at the empty footpath, like he’s been an army sergeant in a previous life.

In Union Square there’s a military parade, which we skirt to get to the big Saks store in search of the perfect PJs for Gordie. But at Saks they turn out to have a limited choice and none with matching tops and bottoms. A couple of hot blocks away at Neiman Marcus, which is even posher by the look of it, the shop assistants are really quite snooty. But when I tell my perfectly groomed assistant the pyjamas are for an ill friend back home, he adopts a caring, tender and intimate tone, leads me round a corner and points me to what seems like the perfect pair, though they’re neither striped nor discreetly checked. They’re a regal dark blue with a tiny light polka dot and piping round the edges. Plus proper buttons. The price is a bit over the top at $300, but I don’t want to be chasing pyjamas all day and I feel confident Gordie will like them.

I try to interest Bruce in buying something for himself, but I know from previous experience he’s a reluctant shopper, so I give up after getting us lost in a succession of over-sized department stores.

Back at the Whitcomb we check out and get them to keep our bags till

we head off to the airport in the evening. As we're waiting for Trini Lopez to print the bill, the carousel door to the sidewalk turns and delivers, legless into the lobby, a gibbering and rancid street person who looks as surprised to be on the inside as we are to see him. He staggers around shrieking threats until security get their hands on him and then he's gone, back on the sidewalk. It's like a scene from *The Walking Dead*.

On the hot streets, the crowds are building ahead of the big air show, which neither of us particularly wants to see. 'All it'll do is frighten me,' I tell Bruce. 'I might behave suspiciously and get arrested. Let's go somewhere indoors and air-conditioned instead.' So we decide to visit San Francisco's Museum of Modern Art, which is only six or seven large blocks away and should keep us distracted for an hour or two while the planes scream above.

I drop a couple of the lozenges into a passing rubbish bin. I've just eaten one and there's one to take at the airport. There's an impromptu drum circle happening on the sidewalk outside the café we've paused at. A huge guy, seated, is banging away at a conga drum, with his great arse hanging out the top of his jeans. His ugly arse is so mesmerising I take a photo as we walk by.

There's a hobo being peeled off the pavement opposite by the San Fran Fire Department for some reason. Maybe he was on fire. Further down, on our side of the wide boulevard, there's a guy lying in a tangle of filthy blankets and bags who looks like he could be dead. And maybe he is. But if I get too close to check, I'm sure he'll open one awful eye and melt my face with his terrible meth breath. So I walk on like everyone else.

Just short of the San Fran MOMA there's a groovy-looking modern eating place called the Grove, where we queue to order lunch: hotdogs and beers. I'm feeling pretty cruisy after that lozenge, though my forearms have gone numb. There's a choice here of four craft beers on tap. The 'small' glasses we order are huge.

Finally seated and served, and surrounded by people with kids, we get talking about being grandparents. 'I'm not that good at it,' I tell Bruce. 'Not yet anyway. I think I need them to be a bit older. And maybe closer. Like in the same country would be a start.' I have seven grandkids spread between Auckland, Melbourne and Sydney. Bruce on the other hand is an extremely diligent grandfather. An over-achiever almost. But then he has an endearing tendency to hurl himself at things.

The museum is overwhelming. There's almost too much of it. The Paul

Klee room is my favourite, I think. But then there's Matisse and, upstairs, a whole floor of photography and a roof covered in sculpture. On the fifth floor there's a piece called *The Vortex*, a black oily whirlpool inside a frame on the wall, which threatens to suck me in, and on the sixth, in the Typeface section, I find a typewriter, a dead spit for my old typewriter, a teal-green Olivetti Lettera 22, in a glass case.

After two and a half hours, we force ourselves out of the treasure house, having seen maybe only a quarter of what's on show. We launch ourselves into a last whirl around the shops, including Macy's and a giant Levi's, so big you almost need GPS. On the hot trek back to the hotel I do my best to finish off the vape before passing it to Broo, who takes it for a walk round the block, where he can ditch it too. Oh the tragedy. Such fine technology.

Suddenly, a hobo, made even crazier maybe by the broiling sun, lurches off the sidewalk and out into the traffic, waving his skinny arms like windmills and hooting and hollering. Just to add to the drama, he's half naked, though no one's taking any notice and he fails to go under any wheels. And so the experiment ends.

Meanwhile, I'm so hot I fear for my fellow passengers when I take my shoes off on the flight home. Our transfer mini-bus is half full of Kiwis. Bruce wants to know why I have more money left in my wallet than he has. We pass a billboard on the freeway reading, 'HEMPCOM PRESENTS HALLOWEED', which is certainly a new angle on Halloween. If I put up a billboard right now it would say, 'AMERICA: LARGER THAN LIFE'.

Later, holed up in the airline lounge, we drink gin and congratulate each other for making it through. 'You nearly killed us only once,' I tell Bruce. Maybe I should let him have another go sometime. Though we might have to hurry things along. There's only so much time left and not all of it will be on our side.

PART THREE

I HAVE SEEN THE FUTURE

Denver calls

I had a dream about Gordon. He came out of a door and shook my hand and said something I didn't hear and then turned and went back in and closed the door behind him. It was a little shack, like down on the Mississippi, up three steps and across a little front stoop and through the door. He didn't look back at me. He was wearing the pyjamas I'd bought him in San Francisco. It unsettled me.

I didn't mention the dream when I went to see him the next day. He was looking pretty fucked.

It was the last days and Gordon was home, having been biffed out by the hospice for taking too long to die. Well, that's what we joked, though not for long. There wasn't a great deal of him left by this stage. He was bed-bound, gaunt and only present in broken scenes and, even then, not saying anything, communicating only with a squeeze of the hand or a lift of the finger.

I was there one day towards the end, sitting in his kitchen watching two nurses counting out his pills and loading Gordie's ampoules of painkillers for the day ahead. They were sitting at the round wooden table in its alcove by a window, the sun making a golden strip across the wooden top, when a large black spider suddenly scuttled across the table, through the pill packets between the nurses.

One of the nurses moved quickly, caught the spider and cupped it in her hands. Gordie's brother Donald, who was making a cup of tea for himself nearby, offered to take care of it and Gordie's wife, Patricia, was all for squishing it. But the nurse ignored the offers, got up and took the spider out the back door and set it free. 'We don't kill anything,' she said, getting back to her pills.

A week earlier, I'd given Gordon some marijuana and a little wooden pipe to smoke it in, but he wasn't interested really. When I texted and asked if it had been any help, he said, 'Worked a treat,' but I discovered later that wasn't true. He hadn't touched it. He preferred wine, but now he

couldn’t drink it any more. It reacted with the methadone the doctors had him on. I was shocked to hear they were giving him that poison, methadone, the stuff they prescribe as a substitute drug for heroin addicts.

The doctors would have given him morphine for the rising waves of pain, but his organs couldn’t handle it, apparently. It seems rather a strange thing that while Class A drugs, highly addictive opiates and their substitutes have long been embraced by legitimate medicine, low-key Class C gentle, soothing, painkilling, relaxing cannabis remains so much the outlaw.

Gordie wore those $300 pyjamas only once, for a photo his mother took of him. She 89, he 65, never to be 66. He died a couple of weeks short of his birthday, in the early hours of a Monday morning. A few of us had been by earlier and, in a scene that still makes me cry to recall, I said goodbye to him and him to me it seemed. I told him I loved him and said ‘It’s all right’, meaning all right to die, and that we’d all look out for Patricia and he wasn’t to worry and he squeezed my hand and nodded the best he could. And he died, quite peacefully, just a few hours later.

Gordie didn’t ever really say that he approved of the idea I’d told him I had for my next book. Well not entirely, though he could see where I was coming from. We’d always agreed the best stories come from the heart.

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The current world centre of cannabis tourism is the state of Colorado, back in America. My first excursion to the states of higher states didn’t include Colorado, mainly because it couldn’t be a seamless part of the road trip I had planned, being tucked well away from California, Oregon and Washington. I’d had to look at a map of America to reacquaint myself with its exact location. Turns out it’s well inland, the next state east of Utah, wrapped around the bottom of the mighty Rocky Mountains.

It’s cowboy country — slightly crazy cowboy country — with mesas and mountains. John Denver set his great drug song, ‘Rocky Mountain High’, there and a much better songwriter, Warren Zevon, wrote a song about Colorado’s capital city called ‘Things to Do in Denver When You’re Dead’. There’s a movie with the same title, though it has nothing to do with Warren’s song.

Colorado used to be famous mainly for its skiing, centred on Aspen, and skiing is still the state’s main tourist drawcard. It’s famous too for its craft beer scene, which has exploded to the point where Colorado now has

more micro-breweries than any other place on earth. The beer brings in the tourists there like the Napa Valley and its wine do in northern California.

And then there's cannabis, which Colorado legalised for medicinal use way back in the year 2000. That didn't change things a great deal, but then, 12 years later, Colorado took the big wild step and legalised marijuana for recreational use by anyone over the age of 21, including visitors. Off the back of that has grown a burgeoning business around cannabis tourism, which is rumoured to account for around a quarter of tourist visits to the state. It's a billion-dollar-a-year business and growing. They call it the Green Rush and they're not kidding.

Denver (pop. 620,000, elev. 5690 ft) is the heart of it, or perhaps the lung of it. There are more than 300 marijuana dispensaries across the city — though that number will be out of date by now, and again by next week — and there are companies, funky entrepreneurial ones, specialising in weed-themed vacation packages for bent tourists of all ages.

The more I investigate this stuff the more I know I have to go to Colorado. And when I say 'I', really I mean 'we'. I can't go alone. Anything could happen to me, stoned alone in Denver; and, anyway, I don't want to be the only lonely lemon on the CannaBus or the Budz and Sudz Tour, trying to take sneaky photos of stoned strangers. I'd have no back-up, no cover. I'd seem like what I was, some sneaky writer guy. With Bruce along I'll seem, perhaps, just half of a couple of old chums off for a holiday together.

But Bruce takes quite a bit of persuading this time round. He's barely recovered from the last trip, and just got his waistline back. Also, his life has changed a bit in the few months since our last American adventure. Whereas, before, he had no immediate plans to retire from the working life, the working life has since retired from him. First one and then another regular work gig dried up until, quite suddenly, he had no work at all. By then he was past retirement age anyway.

So, really, he has no good reason to say no to a few days in Denver. Although when I say a few days, I don't really mean that either. 'We'll need six days on the ground,' I tell Bruce. 'There's quite a bit to do. I've been looking into it and there are a lot of options we could explore.' Denver's tagline is the Mile High City and, from what I'd already found out, it's not just because it's so far above sea level.

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Organising a cannabis-themed holiday in far-off Colorado turns out to be not entirely straightforward. It's not something you can book through a regular travel agent. As I find out.

Elly, who'd booked our earlier excursion to California, Oregon and Washington, is a little shocked, I think, when I drop by and take her into my confidence.

'I'm writing a book,' I tell her.

'Ooh,' says Elly. 'I'll look forward to reading that.'

'I might put you in it.'

Elly is South African, super-efficient and outstandingly sunny of personality with it. I'd already got her to book our flights to Denver and back and she'd been in touch wondering if she could do something for us 'on the ground' — hotels and such. So I explain, as discreetly as possible in the open-plan travel agency office, what my book is going to be about, and her eyes widen quite a bit.

'I'm not sure we do that sort of thing.'

'It's not illegal where we're going,' I assure her.

'No, but it's just that . . .' She is looking perplexed, without reference points.

'Am I the first such inquiry?'

'Yes,' she says.

'I won't be the last,' I tell her. She looks a little concerned at that. Then, after looking at her computer screen for a while, she says they'd have trouble with the transfer of funds, and, as I find out later, she is right. The Colorado canna-business is tightly regulated, as something so loose should be, I suppose.

While visitors are pouring into the state looking for some legal weed-enhanced fun, Colorado's official tourism outlets and inlets generally ignore this market, in part because such an attraction can't be advertised outside the state, as that would be a federal offence. Cannabis tourism is a state of mind, while not being entirely on the mind of the state.

Right now, the booming business is in the hands of enthusiastic entrepreneurs rather than the corporates, who probably aren't about to get involved until there's a change of federal law, which hardly seems likely under America's reactionary new President.

I go online and google up 'cannabis tourism Denver' and, goodness me, the options are indeed many. Narrow the search to 'Denver cannabis vacation package' and there's a wild little world of choices. The best and

biggest and supposedly most efficient of them is called My420Tours, named for April 20, the date recreational cannabis was declared legal in Colorado. Since then, ‘420’ has joined the ever-growing list of pet names for cannabis, as in, ‘I’m just popping out for a soothing 420 — care to join me?’

My420Tours offers a range of reasonably sophisticated-looking marijuana-based amusements, and the company can book you into what are termed ‘420-friendly’ hotels for your stay, meaning you can consume in your room. Though the company is a bit coy about the names of the hotels, which makes me a little nervous. On their website under ‘accommodation’, the hotels have slightly evasive, generic-sounding names, like Uptown Suites or DIA Hotel, and because those are not the actual names of the hotels, it’s impossible to find them on Trip Advisor or elsewhere for another opinion, or even to know what they look like. But if we’re going to go to Denver, I figure we need to go in the deep end, go for total immersion, the full cannabis-vacation package, including an unspecified pot-friendly hotel.

Kelleyanne, who is soon in touch by email and telephone from My420Tours in Denver, is a very helpful cheerleader, though she has no hotels available downtown, she says, thanks to a massive coincidence of conventions that are hitting Denver at the very time we’ll be in the city. ‘There are 15,000 people coming to town,’ she says. I don’t ask what sort of convention they’re coming for. I’ll let that be my little surprise.

I opt for the DIA Hotel. The name stands for Denver International Airport, and it’s situated out on the edge of Denver, 15 minutes from the airport. ‘It’s our best hotel,’ says Kelleyanne. ‘You won’t be disappointed.’ She says she’ll tell me the hotel’s real name when our booking’s made and paid. I also ask her to book double tickets to four of the novel tours and classes her cannabis-crazed company promotes, choosing the Cannabasics Sommelier session, the Sushi, Sake and Joint Rolling Class, the Budz and Sudz Grow and Dispensary Tour, and, to finish off on a high note, the Cooking with Cannabis Class.

Kelleyanne says the Budz and Sudz is her favourite. It’s a bus tour of selected cannabis dispensaries and growing facilities. There’s craft beer involved and there’s plenty of sampling. I know we can cope.

When the credit card payment goes through, our hotel of choice turns out to be a classy one, a chain hotel in fact. When we check in, says Kelleyanne, we’ll be given a complimentary vaporiser and coupons for

weed from the nearest dispensary. It's weird already.

I've never dreamt of going to Denver. No one's ever said to me, 'Forget Rome, you really must visit Denver.' I know little about the place save that it has all those marijuana dispensaries and hotels that seem to let you smoke weed in your room. Until it boomed in the 1960s, Denver was said to be the most likeable small city in the American west. Jack Kerouac, previously encountered in San Francisco, loved the place in his famous book *On the Road*. His best pal, Neal Cassady, was born in Denver.

It's said that Denver is a bit too much like all the other rich cities, though, filled up with high-rises and traffic problems. Oh, and because of the high altitude, the air's thin, and I'm not sure how you compensate for that. Also, we'll be going in late winter. And there's a fairly strong possibility we'll be stoned for much of the time. Stoned cold.

*

Gordon might have died but he never went away, of course. The dead stay with you, especially the ones you care about. He's sitting right over there, looking out the window with that faraway gaze of his. So I have quite a bit of protection, which is a good thing at my age. On the matter of age, Bruce is even older than me, turning 70 later this year, which hardly bears thinking about, when you think about it.

In the way of things in the book publishing game, it's about this time in the scheme of things that we need to do the photo shoot for the cover. So I squeeze that into the schedule a few hours before Bruce and I are due to scamper for the airport and Denver, where we'll arrive about 20 hours after departure. The photographer, bless him, brings the essential prop, some weed, and we send my publisher out for rolling papers and then out again, for coffee, so he doesn't witness us breaking the law of the land, as we fog up the big white studio.

I haven't had a smoke in days, having run out altogether in this thin time of the marijuana year, just before harvest, when, traditionally, the weed runs short and the price goes up. So my defences are down, as they are when I've gone a few days without, and, what with the photographer wanting shots of me puffing and exhaling and inhaling over and over, I depart the studio as hammered as a nail.

Bruce finds me swaying outside my cheap hotel, bag in hand, details blurred. Which is just as well. This adventure is a bit of a big one and we're not the rubber-limbed fun boys we were when we first travelled

together, perky in our 40s. But at least we're in the airline lounge, fondling our gins, surrounded by ancient Americans going home from their New Zealand holidays. They'll all be stretching out in Business Class on the plane, unlike us. I'm not looking forward to the club-sandwich seating in Economy, but I'm being brave and at least I've got an aisle seat so I can get up for a pee after all those gins without having to climb over a mountainous American.

As we land in Los Angeles at half past 10 in the morning, I realise that, good lord, it's still Wednesday. Once again, it's tricky in Immigration.

'Travelling alone?' asks the stone-faced officer.

'No,' I tell him. 'My friend was sent to another queue by an earlier officer.' I point towards Bruce, glowing red in the distance in his eye-catching checked lumberjack shirt. Bruce, like Gordon in fact, has always had challenging tastes in shirts.

'What are you going to do in Denver?' the officer persists.

'We hear there's a big craft beer scene there,' I come back, somewhat feebly, I feel. I hope it's not showing.

'You like to drink?'

'Well, we like craft beer,' I say to the guy, who looks more Miller Lite than Rocky Mountain Pale Ale. I briefly worry he's going to ask for a look in my man bag and see our tour schedule, packed with non-craft-beer experiences.

But he waves me through. 'Have a great time in Denver, Colin,' he says. No one's ever said that to me before.

Now it's just a three-mile trek from the city-sized LAX international terminal to Terminal Seven, which is where our United Airlines connection to Denver departs in a couple of hours. It's another time zone over there, apparently. Another hour behind. Or is it forward?

From the plane I can see the Rockies, getting higher and higher, rising towards us, a confection of sugar-dusted peaks and frozen riverbeds. One of the interesting things about flying to Denver must be that there's a shorter descent on landing, the city being a mile above sea level. I wonder if, what with the marijuana tourism boom, the city leaders are having second thoughts about their famous 'Mile High City' motto.

Americans airborne, well at least the ones on this plane, are extra polite, offering a lot of thank yous and excuse mes. Well they are so far. The plane is jam-packed and, inevitably, quite a portion of the passengers are over-sized, so there's plenty of overhang. I'm feeling a bit excited

about Denver and I've just remembered another song about the place, Bob Seger's 'Get Out of Denver'. I'm also very tired. I only managed a couple of sleeping-pill-assisted hours on our 12 hours over the Pacific in seat 46C. Bruce slept like a baby.

But this trip's not about the journey, it's about the destination. It's possibly still quite cold here. We packed in readiness for that sort of thing.

I had no expectations at all of Denver International Airport, but it's so big on the inside that they run an internal light-rail system to get passengers from the arrival hall to the baggage claim, and it plays a loud twangy electric-guitar riff every time it pulls up at a stop. We just go with the system, miraculously find our bags and step outside to look for a cab rank. I'm overwhelmed by the sky and the landscape, the former bright blue like a great bowl over our heads, the latter, unending, flat, vast, treeless and covered in golden brown stubble.

Our cab sails at high speed through the prairie. Looking back, the airport building is an enormous work of Modernism, a series of white peaks giving it the appearance of a clutch of giant teepees. Out by the freeway stands a giant rearing-horse statue, blue with gleaming red eyes. Psychedelic kitsch. I'm going to look for a miniature of that to take home. Or maybe not. We can see the high-rises of downtown Denver in the distance, trimmed by the curve of the horizon.

It's a rather punchy $50 to get to our hotel, the home away from home for the next six days, a palatial place, warm as toast on the inside, with a big fire in a marble fireplace in reception and ceilings as high as a temple's. Check-in is easy, but odd for us the first time round. This receptionist must have done it a hundred times, though her sour-faced manager doesn't look impressed when we're identified as '420Tours clients' and she has to go out a door and fetch our vape kit, in a soft zipped-up bag.

For reasons of budget, we have a two-room suite, a bedroom with a bed the size of a tennis court and a lounge with a measly pull-out single-sized cot sort of thing. As part of the deal of coming on this trip with me, Bruce had bagged the big bed, the bastard, but I try to be dignified about it. Anyway we can't stay and mutter about that. The nearest marijuana shop closes at 6.45, and in the vape bag are vouchers for a discount.

'Come on Bruce,' I tell my dazed friend. 'We have to keep moving while we can.' There's a cab out front of the hotel, which is a good thing because it's not a short stroll to that nearest dispensary, but a 10-minute

high-speed ride in the big Dodge cab.

The Lightshade Dispensary is one of a chain of cannabis shops across the city. It's a nondescript building in a nondescript outer-Denver suburb called Peoria, but we can smell the place as soon as the cab door opens. I ask the cab to stay. 'What is this place?' the driver asks. 'Smells good.'

Inside, everyone's sweet and friendly, though the customer handling is made ritualistic by the tight state controls on the operation of such outrageous retail. First we have to present our passports for registration at the front desk, then we're ushered through to the inner sanctum, the shop, where there's a friendly assistant with sinuous neck tattoos and nose rings, who is happy to help, pointing out the various jars of variously powered weed, edible options, all the stuff.

We settle for a gram each of go-to-sleep and go-to-town weed and a discreet little black vape pen for walking around. It's not much, but I'm sure other options will swiftly follow and I don't want us to over-supply like we did on that last trip. The funky assistant sends us to another counter to pay and show our passports again. 'What a pretty passport,' everyone agrees.

Bruce chats with the security guy, who's standing nearby. Broo wants to know what it's like doing security in a cannabis shop. 'It's a bit like working in a bar,' says the guy, 'but friendlier.' It's so friendly round here, in fact, that the Lightshade manager pops out and gives our cab driver five bucks so he'll hang about. And she doesn't put it on our tab. She may of course be stoned. Actually, everyone might be stoned, with the possible exception of the security guy.

Back at the hotel, in the lift going up, there's a big friendly guy in a sporty blazer who greets us warmly. Maybe too warmly. He looks at me. 'What sort of company are you guys looking for tonight?' he asks. I look at Bruce. The lift door opens. I give the guy what I hope is a stern look, but he can probably smell the hooch in the brown paper bag I'm holding. We walk out.

'What the fuck was that about?' I ask B.

'He looked like he fancied you.'

'Can't he see I'm taken?'

'Exactly Petal.'

Supplies safely stowed in our rooms, we head down to the house bar, which is a spacious, open-plan affair with a big curved wooden bar, with 12 or more comfy stools along it. We select a pair to the right of centre and

try and read the names on the beer handles. I'm scribbling a few notes. 'You writing a journal?' asks Sally the barmaid, in her 40s, with a weary air.

'I'm a travel writer.'

'Do you write about barmaids you meet?'

'Yep.'

'So I'm famous?'

'Hopefully.'

We're drinking a terrific pale ale, from Odell, a Colorado brewery. It's so good we have more, then some spicy food from the menu: me the fish, spicy mahi mahi, and Bruce the spicy short ribs. Sally had strongly recommended the Denver lamb chops. 'They're the best in the world,' she said.

'That's hard for us to hear,' I told her. 'We're from New Zealand. I'm afraid we can't eat your lamb.' She looked nervous.

I come back from the restroom to find Broo has bought us a pair of large gins, undiluted, I realise, after an initial swig.

'Blimey. That's a bit of a surprise.'

'It's Hendricks,' chirps Bruce, whose glass is empty. 'It's a Scottish gin, cucumber and rose infused. Sally recommended it.'

'I'll bet she did.'

Up in our two-room arrangement on the second floor, we drunkenly assemble our vape kit, which turns out to be a relatively easy thing. A vape or vaporiser like this one is basically a heating unit for smoking weed. It's a chunky metal affair that you plug in; it heats up and provides a stream of hot air when you suck through the mouthpiece at the end of a longish plastic hose, at the top end of which you've inserted a joint's worth of ground-up cannabis flower. As you suck, the hot air simply vaporises the weed instead of burning it, as in a joint. When you exhale, there's a little vapour and certainly a heady pong, but no smoke, so no problemo in a hotel room. A portable vape pen, as purchased earlier, contains a tiny tank of cannabis oil.

We start with the Orange Herijuana, containing THC in the 15 to 17 per cent zone, according to the label on the bottle it came in, with its tricky, child-proof pop top. This is the sleepy stuff, but we're as ripped as rats and jet-lagged to boot.

It's unsettling. I keep waiting for the door to burst open, for police with guns and dogs to rush in, followed by violent body searches. But this is legal, of course, perfectly legal, sitting around in your suite sucking on your pipe like a sultan.

Off to class

When I wake, early, I realise I might have overdone it last night, and yesterday maybe, what with all the flying and waiting around, the gins, the time zones, those craft beers down in the bar and, oh, those straight gins. And, yes, the vape. How many times did we fill that up, silly old fools. We might have tried the other stuff we bought too, the Citrus Kush (20 to 21 per cent).

I have a migraine and have to take one of the powerful pills I carry around in case such a thing happens. As swiftly as it takes the pain away, it steals my energy, lending me a wobbly appearance when Bruce comes rapping on the big double doors that separate our rooms.

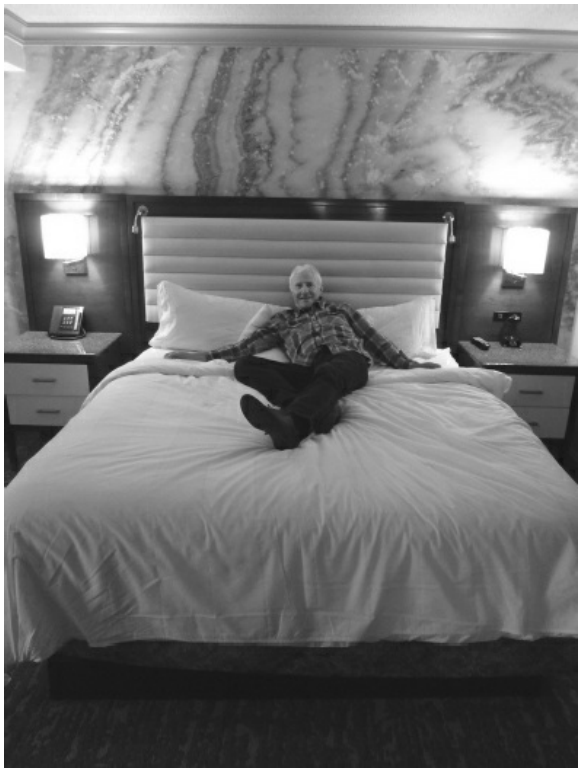
'How was the bed?' I ask him, rising from my skinny pull-out cot. He looks briefly guilty. 'You can have the last three nights with the big bed if you like,' he offers.

'Oh, I might learn to like this,' I say. 'You finished in the bathroom?'

'I was finished half an hour ago.'

'Thank God.'

The staff down in the lobby and in the breakfast area are aggressively unctuous, 'Sir' this and 'Sir' that, and 'thank you, thank you'. We have to be somewhere in the depths of Denver for our first cannabis class at 10.30 and our hotel is not-so-handily placed 15 miles from downtown. Our plan is to leg it to the nearest light rail station, after a fortifying breakfast.



It’s the usual slop on the buffet. Bruce has cereal, bacon and eggs and other stuff less identifiable — the lot, in other words. I drink several cups of the draught coffee and pick at a fruit platter. It’s a mile, maybe more, walking across the arid plains of outer Denver, to the rail station, which sits high on a ridge under a blue sky and a blazing sun — not the weather we’d expected. All the research said it would be chilly. It’s supposed to be around 50, but it’s heading for the 70s. The sun blazes down as I feed dollar coins into the ticket machine on the edge of an endless car park. It’s just $2.60 apiece to Union Station in the middle of Denver. We can get a cab from there to the 420Tours office and our session with a cannabis sommelier.

The Rockies shimmer white on the very distant horizon. There’s no sense at all of a city of 660,000 people 15 miles away. From here, the city’s below the horizon. I take a steadying puff on the vape then pass it to B. Gophers frolic in the dusty grass behind us, below the platform. The sun seems super-hot through the thin air.

The trains arrive efficiently every 15 minutes, so we're soon whizzing along towards the city, sitting backwards which, as noted, I always find unsettling. We pull up at our first stop, Peoria, though you don't get a sense of arriving anywhere when you're going backwards. Then Central Park, which isn't central to anywhere, and 40th and Colorado Station.

I'm feeling rather floaty, thanks to that little vape pen. Bruce likes those things, but it always tastes a bit like sucking on a tiny chimney to me. I much prefer the big chunky machine back in our room. Speaking of which, the room seemed remarkably odourless this morning, though they do seem to pump quite a bit of lavender-scented niceness in through the air-conditioning.

After the 38th and Blake Station, we hit our destination, the end of the line, downtown at Union Station, just a 20-minute ride from our far-off hotel way out in Aurora, on the edge of the great prairie. Union Station sits just a block off Denver's 16th Street Mall, the city's main drag and major destination for tourists, if only briefly before they leave town to go skiing.

Just down the road we find Denver's fabled Tattered Cover bookstore, which takes up the whole ground floor of a great, square, castle-sized corner building. This is one of those places, like Powell's Books in Portland, that actually, slightly madly, venerates books. You can see the signs, like the selection of books I come upon by that rather cosy Scottish writer Alexander McCall Smith with the sign 'Shelved by Author' under

them, which is just a bit too cute maybe. We go in for a coffee in their café and to regroup a bit. We have plenty of time before our Cannabasics Sommelier Class.

It's easy to find a taxi to take us across this flat-as-a-plate, spread-out city, to Steele Street, but more difficult to locate the venue, as it's hidden away in a side street of low brick warehouses, part of a clutch of offices called Cluster Studios.

The staff are very warm and friendly as they check us in and look at our passports. 'What pretty passports,' one of them says, but that's almost inevitable now. Then there's a waiver to sign, quite a lengthy and detailed waiver, though I'm not going to let that stand in my way. It starts out, 'I hereby assume all of the risks, known and unknown, of participating in any/all of the various activities associated with this experience.'

I sign off that bit and five more beneath, though I pause at clause six: 'I acknowledge that this activity may involve a test of a person's physical and mental limits and carries with it the potential for over intoxication, death, serious injury and property loss.' I'm particularly concerned about the property loss. But I sign that one off too, and the next three, tick the 'I am not media friendly' option and sign again at the bottom.

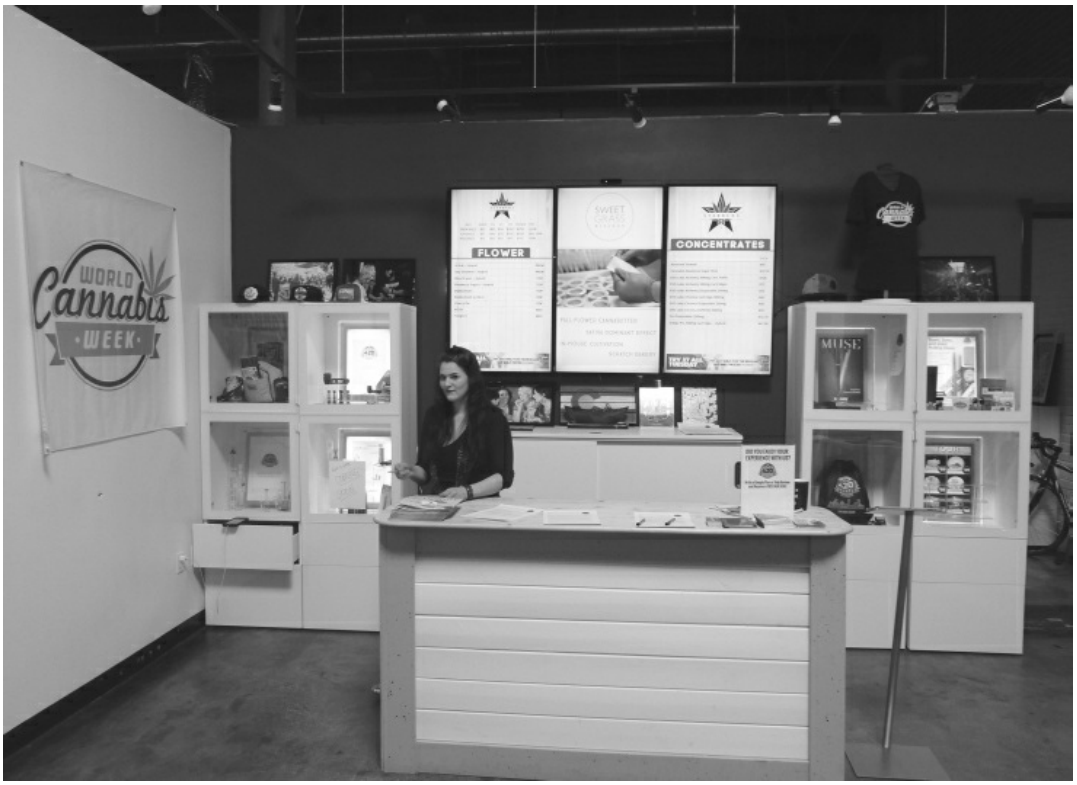
There's a photo up on a shelf behind the 420Tours counter, a close-up of four women, one a grey-haired grandmotherly type, who's sucking hard on a joint with a wicked twinkle in her eyes. She must have signed herself 'media friendly'.

We move next door for our class with our cannabis sommelier, Lexi, and half a dozen classmates, all variously hip or spotty young chaps, maybe two generations younger than us. We relax in a circle on sofas while Lexi shares a little of her personal story. She started out studying tourism management, then she veered into the new frontier of tourism in Colorado. The idea came to her when she was vaping with some friends.

Colorado is leading the way, she says, but there are firm rules. The Marijuana Enforcement Division is very strict. 'There's a lot of tedious process,' and that has shut down a lot of dispensaries. They used to be lined up down the 16th Street Mall, then new rules were brought in to enforce a minimum distance between each shop and that was the end of the Green Mile.

But the business, as mentioned, is booming. Sales of legal marijuana hit a total of more than a billion dollars in 2016 and in January 2017 set a new monthly record, with $120 million in sales. But Lexi says it's

expected to plateau. Prices have been dropping lately.



Business out of the way, she talks about the plant itself, and the two key species of it, *Cannabis sativa*, with all its THC (the exciting stuff), and *Cannabis indica*, 'for the mellow into-the-couch feel'. There are samples of everything she talks about on the tables in front of us to pass round and ponder. She talks about the medicinal side, including tinctures, which contain only painkilling CBD and no THC, and are taken as a drop under the tongue.

We all sample some soothing cannabis-infused body cream. Lexi says there's one called Lady High, a personal lubricant dosed with THC. A 'stoned pussy sensual enhancement oil' she says with a smile. Our young friends smile right back.

Then there are CBD capsules, calming cannabis oil, edibles and drinkables, like this bottle of Bubba Kush Root Beer — yummy. The problem with edibles, Lexi explains, is the ever-present danger of overdosing. With a cannabis-laced chocolate bar, say, there's a measured dose of 10 mg of THC in every square, but it can take an hour or more to actually hit you. Some greedies forget themselves and eat the whole bar and next thing they're on the floor crying and singing and wailing for their mummies. That won't kill you, though. Unless you jump out a window or

wander in front of a bus.

Lexi is full of handy hints. If you eat some mango first, the terpenes in the fruit will boost the high from the THC you swallow because it looks for fat to latch onto. Eating black pepper will lower a high that might have gotten just a bit too high, though I think you'd have to be in fairly dire straits to want to hurl down a handful of black pepper.

In a move that was annoying for all the local confectioners and bakers, we're told, all lollies and cookies now have to be stamped with a 'THC' sign. More happily, the local authorities are set to sign off on the concept of smoke bars, alcohol-free venues where people can go to enjoy a joint and a juice or a coffee, not unlike the famous cafés of Amsterdam.

We pass a vape pen round the class, and then round again. It quickly takes effect. This vape pen is a lot more powerful than the one we bought last evening in Peoria. The pen goes round once more as Lexi rattles on, rather deeply into the scientific side of cannabis. Our young classmates are all stoned, grinning like fools. Bruce and I wave the pen away next time round.

Now Lexi's turned a little legal. Did you know, she says, that in Colorado you can return cannabis for a refund if, for some reason, you're not satisfied. But then that cannabis has to be destroyed, leaving the dispensary out of pocket. She gives us some cooking tips and tells us she went to an institute and studied to become a registered cannabis sommelier. Which is, really, quite crazy when you think about it, though I don't think about it for very long.

There are other rules too, some of them surprisingly liberal, like the recently amended one on maximum purchases. Anyone over 21, local or passing tourist, can buy an ounce of weed a day, which is a great deal of smoke: 28 grams. We bought just two grams in Peoria, enough for maybe six joints or vape fills.

A large cloud on the horizon of Colorado's Green Rush is California, which has voted, in the months since our visit, to legalise the sale and use of recreational cannabis. Colorado is now concerned that California, with its massive population, sun, sea and powerful tourism engine, will steal a lot of its weed-loving visitors away, maybe leaving the state as more of a growing and processing centre. That would lower the extraordinary wave of tax revenue from marijuana that is wilfully spent on good things — for example, Colorado estimates it will earn around $200 million from legal cannabis sales in the year 2017–18. But Colorado's not the only state

experiencing this interesting windfall. More than 20 per cent of the population of America now lives in states where recreational marijuana is legal and the rolling of joints is accompanied by the rolling in of tax money.

That all feels like quite enough knowledge for the moment. We head outside to sit in the merciless sun and wait for a cab to take us to the nearest dispensary. We have instructions to pick up two grams apiece of weed to bring with us for tonight's Sushi, Sake and Joint Rolling Class and we thought we might as well do it now. On our way out the 420 door, two of the boys from our class, the dorkiest ones, hang back and ask Lexi, our cute and confident sommelier, if she'd maybe like to 'hang' with them later. She, with barely a pause, says, 'Sure.'

The Buddy Boy Dispensary is in a rundown part of Denver only a suburb or so away. It's a bit gritty round here, cars roaring by, a railway line on the other side of the road, but it's exceptionally friendly in Buddy Boy. 'Your passports are so pretty,' says the assistant with the tatts and the blue hair. Hearing we're from New Zealand, the second assistant says he has an aunt there, in Marton. We give them our 420Tours coupons, barcodes really, and pick up our two grams each, some medium strength, some from the zippier end of things and called, alluringly I think, Blue Dreams. Then they give us our purchases in a nifty plastic envelope with a seal zip. 'Suitable for shopping', it says rather mysteriously on the side.

*

Back on the sidewalks of downtown Denver, we're feeling a little lost when, a short way up Wazee Street, we're amiably accosted by the doorman at the Oxford Hotel, who might have noticed us looking a bit uncertain. He's young and tall, exceptionally and quite loudly chummy, and eager to help.

He pops into his lobby and brings us a street map, just like the one Bruce left back at the hotel. He says Jack White, the rock star, shot a music clip in the Oxford's famous bar, the Cruise Room, just inside. I tell him that I have 'taking a drink in the Cruise Room' on my list of things to do in Denver.

Our new pal the doorman says he recently sent another rock star, Robert Plant, round the corner to buy a shirt at Denver's famous western clothes store, Rockmount Ranchwear, which I also have on my do-in-Denver list. 'There's a good bar next door to it, gentlemen, should you feel

like sitting down,' he says. Sitting down seems a good move now that we think about it.

The place he mentioned is called the Avelina, a stylish place with a bar that opens out from inside to the street. It's lunchtime, they have craft beers; Bruce has the South Carolina flounder sandwich, I go for a spicy pork one. The beer is big and cold and citrusy. It's very quiet out there on the street. The friendly doorman walks past the bar and gives us a wave. Our barmaid talks a lot without really saying much.

Downtown Denver, what I've seen of it so far, is built of brick, squat, square, solid. Built to last, with a slightly grim elegance. Well, that's what I'd say if I was asked, but the barmaid doesn't ask me what I think of Denver. She wants to help us with places to go, but she hasn't been to any of the places on my list. Not the Museum of Miniatures, the aquarium restaurant or the art museum. 'I'm more of an outdoors person,' she says. 'Do you ski?'

'Not really, and Bruce here is too old to start now.'

We set off again, walk and walk then catch the bus to the far end of the 16th Street Mall and trek across City Park, a monumental square where there are derelicts camped out, to the Denver Art Museum, set inside a striking series of modern buildings and notable, I'd noted, for its American Indian Galleries. And so it should be. It's a beautiful and humbling place. There are modern pieces alongside old: paintings, totem poles, headdresses, saddles, coats, masks, sculptures and beautiful, intricately carved spears and arrowheads and, explaining their beauty, an old saying, 'Because animals prefer to be killed by beautiful things.' Though it might be presumptuous to speak on behalf of the buffalo. I don't know.

The American Indian Galleries is only one of several major galleries, but we've had enough art for the day. Back on the free MallRide bus and off again and back to the Oxford Hotel we go because it's opening time at the Cruise Room, where they're very proud of their cocktails, though I've never liked the things much myself.

Inside, it's a low-lit Art Deco replica of the cocktail bar on the famous old cruise liner the *Queen Mary*. Bruce insists we order a couple of Cruise Room Specials, an indelicate blend of cognac, lemon, cherry liqueur, absinthe and champagne, with the obligatory glazed cherry on a stick.

They are extremely girly-looking drinks, but the light is low in here and the clientele, what there is of it this early, is older. The barmaids, when they learn we've come all the way from New Zealand, start in with

suggestions of places we should go. ‘You can’t come to Colorado and not see the mountains,’ one of them says and I’m sure she’s right. But now we have to go to our Sushi and Joint Rolling Class, which will also, apparently, involve sake.

A cab whips us back across town. It’s getting dark now. We pass an encampment of the homeless, scattered under an overpass. They’re here in Denver too, just a little more hidden than some other places we’ve been. We’re both a little drunk. We had a couple of beers after the cocktails. Just to take the taste away.

Our class is being held in the back of a shop right across from the 420Tours office and it’s a classy affair, set up like a cooking school, with tall prep benches for us pupils and stools to sit on. Patrick, a husky dude in cooking uniform, is our sushi chef. Calyx is our joint roller. She’s from Buddy Boy. They’re young. Not young young: she late 20s maybe, he 30ish. He’s got kids, he says.

Again, though, we are the only grandfathers in the crowd, this time about 10 others, mostly couples, with a set of sisters sitting next to us. They look like they are in their early 20s. Very lively, giggling and ready to roll.

‘If you want to smoke a cigarette,’ says Patrick, ‘you’ll need to go outside. But please feel free to roll up your weed in here.’

So we all do, even though we haven’t had the joint rolling lessons yet. Patrick reckons I’ve done a good job with my joint, but here comes Calyx who is full of good tips. But first she gives us a little of her personal story, as seems to be the way. She grew up in a cannabis culture. Her father was a grower. He named her for the delicate tip of the cannabis flower, the calyx, and he taught her his secret roll and now she’s going to pass it on to us, she says.

It’s tricky and my first attempt is a bit messy; I’ve rolled it in the extra-long Tommy Chong papers I bought back at the dispensary. He’s the guy who was half of the old Cheech and Chong act, with their doper comedy schtick. Like the Marley family and Willie Nelson and several others, he’s branded himself into the Green Rush.

I roll another long one with some weed called Dragon. It’s powerful stuff, but it helps with the sushi rolling part of the class, which is sticky and hands-on. The sake helps a little too. And maybe it’s because I’m so stoned, but I pull off two near-perfect sushi rolls, one with vegetables, one with fish. Even more remarkably, with Patrick’s guidance, I manage to

make the inside-out sort of sushi, with the rice on the outside.

I slice my rolls into tidy pieces and eat them all. It's a marvellous moment. At the end I'm so lifted by the experience I corner Calyx and Patrick, overwhelm them with compliments and drape my arms around them for a photo before disappearing, wobbly, into the dark.

Abraham, our cab driver who took us to class, returns to shoot us back all the long city-circling way to our hotel and Sally at the house bar. Life is already taking on a *Groundhog Day* vibe, but I don't mind that. We order a couple of those quenching Colorado pale ales off the tap and then, for some reason best known to himself, Bruce asks Sally how she slept last night. Sometimes when he's pissed or out of it, or both, he goes off at surprising tangents. Who asks a barmaid he hardly knows that sort of question? Well, Bruce does apparently. And Sally didn't sleep very well at all, it transpires. She had to get up early for church, she says. She gets up early for church every morning, she says, except on Saturdays.

The conversation peters out at this point. Sally yawns, a little dramatically I think. 'Let's have a gin,' I say, but Sally's gone to the far end of the bar and she's not taking any notice of me any more. Well, not for a while.

A young beardie bloke I vaguely recall talking to in the bar last night turns up and we get chatting. 'How's the book research going?' he asks. I'm surprised to hear this.

'I was a bit drunk last night,' I tell him. 'Can you remind me of how much I told you?'

'You know, the cannabis thing and all.'

So I tell him about the sushi and joint-rolling class and he tells me he's 27 and he spent four years being a cook on a US Navy submarine. Now he's in hospital sterile-body-waste disposal. He's here in Denver for a conference on new developments in the hospital sterile-body-waste disposal industry.

Bruce perks up when he hears what my new pal does for a job. As much as I want to change the subject, Bruce needs to know more. All the gruesome detail gets to be a bit much for me after a while. A bit too much for my bearded friend too. Like us, he's had a few drinks and, at some point, shortly before we leave I think, he shouts, 'I do not want to be in the sterile-body-waste disposal industry' at the room.

I try to comfort him. He's young, actually younger than most of my children, though much more heavily bearded. But it's hard to comfort

someone who works in such an uncomfortable industry. I put the drinks on our mounting bar tab and Bruce and I go upstairs.

In the lift, I'm mistaken for Elton John by some teenage volleyball players. We hear them saying it as we walk away from the lift. Bruce is snorting with glee. When we were at the sushi class I'd been mistaken by several of the young people for some movie star or other. 'Who?' I asked. 'The guy who plays Austin Powers' father in the third Austin Powers movie,' one of them said, and others agreed. I pretended I knew who they were talking about, but I didn't have a clue and neither did Bruce. Back up in our suite now, waiting for the vape to heat, we google that movie and find the face they'd confused me with. It was Michael fucking Caine, aged about 80-something. 'It's the glasses,' says Bruce, trying to calm me, but he is cracking up again, the prick.

With the vape warmed up, we consider our growing choice of flavours to inhale, settling on the Blue Dream. I fall asleep thinking about Denver being so flat it curves down at the edges and how everyone tells us we have to go to the mountains.

Gophers watch us

I'm woken by housekeeping rap-a-tap-tapping at my door. It's pitch black in here. I've been counting on Bruce for wake-ups, and he's usually puttering around with his ablutions soon after dawn. The housekeeper starts coming in the door till I emit a startled grunt and she retreats shouting, 'Sorry, sorry.' Then I hear her down the hall, rap-a-tap-tapping on the next door along.

It's nearly nine o'clock, which is unusually late for my old pal next door in the big bed. I let him sleep on a little while I try to make coffee with the machine in my room. Still half asleep, I start it without inserting a cup and it floods the benchtop.

Worrying that Bruce might be dead or stricken by a stroke in his sleep, I throw the connecting door open and shout out the time. Bruce leaps up like he's been scalded.

'Thank God you're all right,' I tell him.

'How can it be ten past nine?' he wants to know, like the world has turned upside-down, which it has in a way.

It looks like another hot sort of day out there as I peel back the curtains, with that big blue sky again. Downstairs, Bruce eats a hero's breakfast, including oatmeal with orange juice over it, a weirdness he picked up in California. I seem to have developed a rash on my arms. I wonder if it's anything to do with all that stuff we vaped till midnight. Or the altitude. Or I could be dehydrated. I'm not sure beer counts as water.

The US President's press stooge is on the TV in the breakfast room announcing some new assault on freedom in the land of the free. We're the only ones taking any notice and, even then, not much. America has been run by jerks before and survived after all.

It's colder today out on the wide prairie as we depart the hotel at a decadent 10.50 a.m. for our train to town. Gophers are watching us again as we stand on the platform. It's hard to tell if they're the same gophers as yesterday, or what they might be thinking as they look at us.

After reaching the city and emerging out of elegant, olde-worlde Union Station, we catch the free bus along the 16th Street Mall to California Street and the Denver Tourist Information Center for some guidance. A lovely older woman takes charge of us. She says we should buy a full-day transport pass for the next day, when we plan to travel out to Boulder and beyond, if we can, up into those mountains everyone keeps talking about, the ones we see every day, glittering along the edge of the view. 'This transport pass,' she says, 'will get you everywhere, train or bus for the whole day.' Then she asks a tricky little question.

'Do you gents know anyone over 65?'

'Us,' I say, lamely.

She smiles and says, in that case, the day passes will be only $4.50, which seems nearly free. I'm falling for the charms of the Denver public transport system and I never thought I'd say that about any place's public transport, least of all Denver's.

One of the more elegant of the byways that run across the 16th Street Mall is Larimer Street, which has an area, one block down, that calls itself Larimer Square, though it's not a square, just a swish block of retail and restaurants. This is the original old city centre of Denver and they've flossied it up quite nicely. There's a good variety of potential lunch spots. A blackboard outside one reads, 'Have You Eaten Buffalo Today Yet?' We walk on and settle for a place on a corner, called Ocean Prime, and take a table inside. I order a latte, but again there's a terrible absence of coffee in it. So we have Denver Pale Ales and I order the $17 surf-and-turf appetiser with a house salad, which, of course, comes first.

The surf and turf is terrific and not an appetiser at all, unless you're Paul Bunyan: slow-cooked short ribs atop a little mound of mashed potato with four large trimmed scallops circling them. Bruce, still toying with a healthy diet, has a salad of some sort. It's certainly large and leafy, but it's glistening with a heart-stopping dressing, probably blue cheese. Americans seem very fond of blue cheese and slop it on food whenever possible. It's a raucous flavour.

Despite the food and the invigorating ales, we're feeling a little sad at having to cross one of the planned destinations off our wish list. Buffalo Bill, the great buffalo slaughterer and showman, is buried on Lookout Mountain, west of Denver, where he died after a very colourful life. So colourful that his legend still shines more than a century after they laid him down up there. Near his grave is the Buffalo Bill Museum. Bruce had been

very keen to visit it and I was a bit too. Bruce had said he wanted to have a ‘western experience’ if possible, and Buffalo Bill seemed a perfect fit. I’m naturally drawn to odd museums anyway.

Buffalo Bill Cody, by the end of the 19th century and into the 20th century, was said to be the most recognisable celebrity in the world. He’d been a soldier, a scout and buffalo hunter in the so-called Indian Wars, before going into show business with his travelling show, *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West*, which involved co-stars like Annie Oakley and Sitting Bull in re-enactments of stagecoach robberies and Indian attacks on wagon trains.

Bill toured the show to Europe eight times and performed for Queen Victoria twice, as well as Kaiser Wilhelm. He and his Wild West circus played more than 300 performances in London alone and drew millions to their shows across Britain and Europe. In his later years, Bill became a conservationist and a forthright fighter for the rights of Native Americans and women. He’s been on two US postage stamps.

It turns out, though, that Lookout Mountain, the grave and the museum lie beyond the reach of public transport. So we decide to let Bill go and hope we’ll stumble on some other western experience for Bruce.

‘What’s been the high point of the trip for you so far?’ I ask him, bracing myself.

‘Probably that flounder sandwich yesterday,’ he says, not even pausing to think about it.

‘Did you know,’ I say to Bruce, trying to cheer him up, ‘that Larimer is Denver’s hippest block?’ It said so on the wall on the way to the restrooms.

Larimer wasn’t always Denver’s hippest block, however, especially in the city’s wild early days. One block down runs Market Street. In the late 1800s, when it was called Holladay Street (after the stagecoach tycoon Ben Holladay), this thoroughfare was the heart of Denver’s saloon and red light district, with more than 1000 prostitutes — ‘brides of the multitudes’ as a newspaper of the time called them — operating out of a wide range of establishments, from 10-cent wham-bam places right up to palaces of pleasure where an encounter might cost $5. According to the Denver writer Dick Kreck in his book *Rich People Behaving Badly*, some of the working girls came from respectable families and worked under colourful names like ‘Few Clothes Molly’, ‘Wide-Ass Nellie’, ‘Ella the Wolf’ and, the worrying one, ‘Nelly the Pig’. The signs they hung in their windows caused shock and scandal. Horrified that they were being associated with

such debauchery, Ben Holladay's descendants petitioned the council to have the name changed and in 1889 it became Market Street.

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Today's big event is the Budz and Sudz Grow and Dispensary Tour, which leaves from the 420Tours office in that brick warehouse block back out in the boonies. We hop in another cab and ride over there, for $20 plus tip. Like on the last trip, I've been put in charge of expenses. We're kicking in a hundred each a day, but the cabs certainly eat into it, not to mention the lunches.

At the 420Tours HQ, the women in charge are pleased to see us again. This is our third session, after all. Nevertheless we have to go through the whole check-in procedure again: passport, waiver, red wristband.

Next we wait for our ride, the so-called CannaBus. There was a grotesquely elongated stretch limo poking out of the parks when we arrived and I'm hoping that isn't it.

'No, no,' says Melinda at the counter. 'It's a bus. You'll know it when you see it.'

It'll be good if there are some other older types on this trip. I've been feeling like we're a travelling novelty up to now.

There's a big neon noticeboard behind the reception counter advertising the current price of cannabis. Flowers, depending on grade and potency, run from $150 to $250 an ounce, $12 to $22 a gram. Back home, illegally, you might pay NZ$400, maybe more, and not even know what you're getting.

As we wait, Patrick, our sushi chef from the night before, wanders over and hands each of us a chilly plastic container and a dinky wooden spoon. It's some vanilla ice cream he's whipped up. 'It's infused,' he says. 'Only 10 mg per serving. Grew it myself.'

It's lovely ice cream: extra creamy with big, bassy vanilla tones. We'd never have known about its infusion if we hadn't been told by the proud chef. Bruce looks nervous, though. He's been wary of edibles ever since the incident on the train from Seattle. He gives me his half-eaten ice cream.

Now here comes our transport. It's a bus all right, a bus of attitude, smaller than a big bus, but big enough and black with tinted windows, like it's full of trouble and behaviour that must be hidden from the public gaze. We're going to Boulder apparently. Bruce and I settle ourselves in window

seats opposite each other at one of two four-person tables. I'm pointing backwards, but I'm comforted by the array of canned craft beers sitting in chilled recesses in the table between us.

We hit the road immediately, with a welcome from our guide. We're going to visit a growing facility out in Boulder and then a dispensary where we can do some shopping.

'On our way, you're welcome to light up. We've supplied you all with rolling trays.' The guide whips out a fat joint, lights it up and passes it straight to our table.

We're seated with the second-oldest couple on the bus. They're from Nebraska. He's called Steve and he's a farmer. He's a big guy in a baseball cap. He doesn't say much and the little he does say I can't understand. I don't think he can understand me either, but that barely matters in the circumstances. She's Brenda and she's in real estate. Things are slow in real estate in Nebraska, she says.

Now the young guys sitting at the table across the aisle from us start passing their joints our way too and next thing the doobies are coming round in both directions and everyone, us at the tables and the rest of the crowd down the back in a circle on big sofas, is disappearing in a funky fug. Our black bus must be belching dope smoke out the open skylights as we honk on down the freeway, but that might be a common sight in these

parts.

Brenda, who is in her 50s maybe, says she's an 'old hippie'. She grows a bit of weed back home, for medicinal purposes, and she's here for some growing tips. She certainly doesn't need any tips on smoking.

After an hour maybe — who knows any more? — we're all off our nuts, us four at the elder table and all the young ones, babbling and grinning while the bus plays music to groove us on our way. It's about then I notice the glitter balls in the ceiling.

At our first destination everyone is dying for a pee after all the icy craft beer and there's only one single-stall toilet at the growing facility we're being ushered into. We're all, as mentioned, quite fried bananas, which is to say, cooked and bent. But still in control, though it would be good to get to the restroom sometime soon.

Inside this warehouse of weed, the plants are separated into vast growing rooms according to age. First we visit a 'bedroom' for the baby plants, then a more brightly lit teenage dorm, home only to girls of course, the boys having been weeded out. Finally in a hot, hallucinogenically bright room and all ready-to-harvest are the big mama plants, drooping under the weight of their ponderous, variously hued flower heads.

We're encouraged to get in among them and fondle them if we want, and they're as sticky as honey and heady with perfume. The whole place is a little overwhelming. They grow around 10,000 plants here, five or six times a year. All sorts of variations on a cannabis theme. The strands have names like Wookie, Chem Dog, Cookie Wreck and Kush Dawg. I even spot an old-fashioned Maui. They vary in colour — some are gingery, some purple-blue — and in the hang of their many heavy heads.

The growing of such things is so heavily regulated by the state marijuana authorities that each plant here wears an individual tag around the base of its stem, bearing a barcode and the name of the weed family it belongs to. Every single plant is thus known to the authorities and will be tracked and measured right through its life cycle: growth, harvest, use, even the eventual disposal of the vegetative remains. This crazy new business provides a lot of jobs on both sides of the track. Inspectors come by regularly and scan the thousands of barcodes.

Weed people are as obsessed and intense and nerdy as craft beer people and wine bores. The guy in charge here is on a higher plane altogether as he talks about how he's tweaked and cross-bred his weed up to cosmic, not to mention karmic, levels. He's kind of entrancing though, as he passes out his business cards to all of us and says he wants to 'share the knowledge', pass it on, make the world a better place. Or more stoned at least.

'Ring me any time,' he tells us. On the stairs on the way out I ask him how high the THC levels can get with all this tweaking.

'We can hit 30 per cent,' he says. And much higher with one of the precious by-products of this place. It's called kief and it consists of the trichomes, or resin glands, of the cannabis plant, found in the form of a powder or shake that comes off the dried flowers. We're shown a plastic baggie of some, a golden-brown powder, pretty much pure THC.

Returning to the black bus with new eyes, I can see we're about as unobtrusive as a sperm whale in this thing. After a lot more queuing for the solitary restroom, we're all finally aboard and then we're off to a marijuana dispensary that dispenses, among other things, the fine products of the growing facility we've just left.

It's not far away, in a bedraggled backlot, looking, from the outside, like a doomed motel. Inside is a little more promising, except we all have to mill about waiting while they let in one set of customers at a time. We're given call numbers after we register. Again, there's a lot of admiration for our handsome New Zealand passports.

There's a young guy in the corner with a colourful little stand hustling some high-end, hand-painted cannabis chocolate assortments. Hand-painted? 'Each one's completely individual,' he chirps.

I look nervously at my number, 48 — only six to go. They're showing some of the products for sale, with prices, up on a screen. All of us on this

tour are getting a 25 per cent discount.

Finally, Bruce and I are called for our turn in the dispensary's inner shop. 'We're in the market for some ready-rolls,' I tell the hipster behind the counter. His beard has been combed recently, but that's all right and he's helpful, pointing me at some of Willie Nelson's product, which comes in two sizes: half-gram joints or cigar-proportioned gram-sized numbers.

I get six assorted half-grams, two each of the Willie's Reserve Island Sweet Skunk, the Willie's Reserve Pineapple Express and the Willie's Reserve Clementine Kush. They are packaged in pairs in cardboard tubes, like cigars. With our discount, each two-pack costs just $9. That should be several mood swings taken care of right there.

Back on the bus in the car park in the gritty back blocks of Boulder, the sun's starting to hit the horizon and we're still waiting for the girls to get back from 'the potty' as they put it. So we break out some of our purchases and light up, as does everyone else on board.

Steve the farmer has drunk his and Brenda's share of the beer and I can see him eyeing what's left of mine, which I've been going easy on, what with the limited restroom access and being stoned anyway, not to mention more stoned now. At one dizzy point, there are so many joints going round the bus that I'm holding two and, not wanting to be impolite, taking a puff on both. Everybody's melting as we hit the freeway back to Denver.

Somewhere south of Boulder, the demons strike. I can see them flapping around out there as I gaze at the darkening sky and I suddenly feel that my end is nigh. It's something to do with the babbling maniacs on the bus, the huge silent farmer sitting next to me, his enormous side resting against my more insubstantial frame. And facing backwards is starting to make me feel travel sick.

Also, they've lowered the lights in the bus and turned on the fucking party lights, so when I try to talk to Bruce or Brenda across the table they have alarming colours playing across their faces and upper bodies. Just looking at them is spinning me out.

I turn to Steve, but he's monosyllabic, so I give up trying to be interesting. I think he went off me a bit after Brenda asked me what I did for a job and she came over all fascinated that I was a writer. I have to stare out the bus window, but the sun's going down and the landscape is relentlessly flat, brown and outstandingly dreary. I'm not a happy traveller. All that THC inside me is peaking in an awful relentless surge. Any moment I might leap up and run gibbering down the aisle, or just turn and

bite Steve suddenly on his huge cheek, which is right next to me. So close. Too close.

On tighter examination, his cheek is a rough and stubbled thing. So I turn back to the fading view out the bus window. We're caught in a mass of vehicles, two lanes to the left, two to the right. This surging freeway traffic has to stop regularly at crossings to let commuter trains pass. I look down at the nearest car, just below us; there's a woman driving, maybe her daughter next to her. She has blue hair, is 12 or so. She leans out the window and looks right up at me, it seems, despite the tinted windows, and blows a big bubblegum bubble.

That might be what steadies me because by the time the bus gets us back to the 420Tours office, I'm relatively sane again. We say our farewells to Steve and Brenda from Nebraska. Brenda's very happy. The guy out at the growing facility shared lots of his secrets with her and she says there'll be no looking back now.

Back downtown, it's only seven o'clock or so, though it feels a lot later after what we've been through.

'You weren't very happy back there on the bus were you, Col?' says Bruce.

'Could you see that?'

'Yeah, but there was nothing I could do. Brenda wouldn't stop talking and did you notice how those mirror ball lights went mad every time I moved? I was trying to stay as still as possible.'

I think we'll mark that one down as another of those once-in-a-lifetime experiences.

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Our friend in the craft beer business back home had recommended a Denver bar called Freshcraft, and it's just a block or so from Union Station, which looks marvellous with its neon sign up against the deep blue sky.

Freshcraft is a cutting-edge sort of a bar, where beers and especially newly invented beers rule. It's not a place for food, but that's all right. We stay for four rounds, including a new sour beer, a very zesty taste experience; it's so much fun to drink that we have another. Then we wobble down to Union Station and the train home.

There’s a security guard on every train, gun on hip, checking tickets, keeping an eye out. He recognises us. ‘I wish this train went all the way to New Zealand gentlemen,’ he says. We’re both a little drunk and now I’m considering what a long train ride it is out to the edge of town, especially with a bladder full of craft beer. I think it’s that sour one especially that wants out.

I try not to think about it, but after 20 minutes it’s hopeless and I’m considering how discreetly I could pee into the tempting vent that runs along the carriage wall next to my feet when the train stops and the door opens at our station. I explode out of the train, leap down the concrete stairs three at a time and scamper out onto the prairie, turn my back to the car park and pee for 15 minutes, looking up in wonder and relief at the stars.

‘That was a close thing,’ I tell Bruce, as we drift across the prairie towards the hotel.

‘It was a close thing for the guy behind you too,’ he says. ‘I think you nicked his usual spot. He was hot on your heels, but you were too fast for him and he didn’t know what to do with himself out there.’

Then we walk and walk across the open ground and then along an empty boulevard, under flyovers and back eventually to our hotel, where I explode through the door, into the long lobby, past the house bar and

straight into the gentlemen’s, where I pee non-stop for one minute. Bloody beer.

Upstairs, we go to the friendly machine and some more of the Blue Dream, which, soon after, gives me blue dreams on my skinny, prison-issue, pull-out bed. Bruce, meanwhile, relaxes next door in his vast white spongy equivalent. Bastard.

The frozen dead guy

Why have I woken up with that nagging old pop song ‘Tie a Yellow Ribbon round the Old Oak Tree’ in my head? Why are there soldiers downstairs in the breakfast room? Is this the end? Has the President pushed the red button, or accidentally sat on it?

Fortunately, the soldiers are simply loading up on eggs and bacon and hash browns. Bruce tells me not to fret.

Outside, it’s wet and cold for a change and we catch a cab to the station. It’s a Saturday morning, about nine. With no cannabis challenges booked for today, we’ve decided to catch a bus to Boulder and beyond, up into the Rockies to a place called Nederland and a weird celebration it just so happens our visit coincides with.

Things seem to be a bit weird already. There’s a guy sitting down the carriage a bit from us with an emerald-green top hat, green braces and, bloody hell, green shoes. I’m just starting to say ‘It’s not St Patrick’s Day today, is it?’ to Bruce when the door opens and a whole green family comes in. Then the train rolls past a car park where what can only be a St Pat’s Day Parade is gathering, floats and leprechauns everywhere.

It is indeed, in Denver anyway, the day of the great and green celebration of Irishness, though several days ahead of St Patrick’s Day itself. I’m not sorry we’ll be missing it. I don’t like the way every second pub in so many places is an Irish one. Where are the Scottish pubs, I wonder. We drink at least as much as the Irish and all we’re famous for is being mean.

Union Station is awash in Irishness, whole families dressed up and looking foolish, from grannies all the way down to little green babies in prams. The bus station, with the service to Boulder, is right downstairs and, with hardly a pause for breath, we’re on the bus, the one they called the Flatiron Flyer, and, indeed, soon flying down that freeway back to Boulder, quite a lot more clear-eyed than yesterday. It’s the same dull landscape again, with scattered suburbs of lookalike houses, many of them

mansion-sized. The Rockies are shrouded in low cloud as the road rises towards them. In downtown, half-deserted Boulder, the mountains loom just up there, in a rather large and dramatic way.

At this point Bruce, whose only responsibility is to be a map reader on this trip, reveals he's left the maps back at the hotel. He looks a bit aggrieved, as if it's someone else's doing. He has been having the odd old-man moment and he's noticed it. 'We'll be okay,' I tell him. 'We'll have a look round Boulder, for what it's worth, have a coffee, regroup and catch the bus up the mountain to Nederland.'

I lead him along the Boulder Mall, where we constitute about a third of the visible population. Boulder (pop. 101,810, elev. 6703 ft) isn't bowling me over so far, though I hadn't quite known what to expect. It's a university town, just 45 minutes from the ski resorts and Rocky Mountain National Park, neither of which are on my list. Down here in its flat centre, it's outstandingly walking and cycling friendly and looks extremely tidy and possibly a bit boring. There is a strong hipster vibe, though. I spot beard products in a shop window. We stop for coffees at a groovy-looking café. I give Bruce some money and send him up to the counter to get the coffees and ask for directions to the visitors' bureau. I'm a bit pissed off at him for leaving everything useful back at the hotel.

When he comes back, he hasn't found out about the visitors' bureau — he doesn't like asking strangers for directions — and he's forgotten the chocolate bread I asked for. He's like an old man sometimes. So I have to go back to get my chocolate bread. 'Where's everyone?' I ask the chook behind the counter. 'They don't turn up till noon,' she says. She hasn't a clue where the visitors' bureau is.

I leave Bruce and his sore knee at the café and go searching for the elusive bureau, walking all the way down to where the retail dissolves into residential. It's a very polite-looking place, despite its rocky name.

When we do eventually find the bloody bureau, it's lurking in a temporary home at the back of another café and it's closed anyway, this being Saturday, though you might think this the most likely day for visitors. Boulder is making no impression on me with its kitschy shops and its mall. Thankfully there's a much more interesting place north of here, a place of myth and freaky legend, Nederland. Even the name is promising.

Nederland (pop. 1470, elev. 8236 ft) is what they call in these parts a mountain town, this one a gathering of hippies and off-the-grid types, along with a few restaurateurs, barkeepers and entrepreneurs of various

leanings. It was an entrepreneur who dreamt up the idea of Nederland's annual Frozen Dead Guy Day.

Up in a shed on a mountainside somewhere above Nederland there is an actual frozen dead guy. His name is Bredo Morstoel and he's been there since 1989, cryogenically preserved, awaiting reanimation, when science permits. Which is a bit weird, but, wait, it gets weirder. Bredo isn't even an American. He didn't get to America till he was dead.

Bredo lived in Norway, where he worked as a director of parks and recreation, enjoyed fishing, skiing and painting, and died while cross-country skiing. His daughter and grandson, who were big believers in cryogenics and can't have been short of money, had Grandpa Bredo packed in dry ice and shipped to the world's leading cryogenics facility, in California.

Meanwhile, his daughter and grandson moved to Nederland, built a house and had a shed put up on the hill. Then they moved Grandpa Bredo into it and put him on dry ice, where he's been ever since, cared for and kept stiff by a succession of caretakers, paid for by the family back in Norway.

That wasn't a big story until 2002, when the entrepreneur came up with the bold idea of a Frozen Dead Guy festival and the Nederland Chamber of Commerce loved the sound of it and decided it would put Nederland on the map, which it has ever since, at least for a few days a year.

Today happens to be the second day of the Frozen Dead Guy Days, which run for three days every March and bring Nederland alive with such events as a parade of hearses, ice turkey bowling, a frozen T-shirt contest and downhill coffin racing. There are bands playing too. And we can get up there for it on our all-day regional transport pass.

Boulder is colder than Denver. It's one of those tourist-friendly places that has lost its soul by making itself a bit too dull and friendly maybe. Back at the bus station Bruce is staring at a map on the wall, his brow all wrinkled with worry.

'What's the matter?' I ask.

'It doesn't go there.'

'What doesn't?'

'Our bus. It's not on the map.'

'That's a rail map you're looking at, you tragic thing.'

Bruce sighs.

When we find the bus to Nederland, there are a hundred kids queuing for it, but the bus company knows what's up and they've put on six extra buses and we're all aboard rather quickly. Everyone else is under 25, except the driver, who's a joker. As he swings the big bus round a corner and up onto a main road, he tells the kids in the front seat, 'I'm taking this bus to Central City, we'll sell it for $50,000 and have some fun.' The kids look nervous. The driver laughs, shaking his grey ponytail.

We're driving up a rocky pass, following tumbling Boulder Creek. Up and up we go on a narrow winding road that looks like it had to be blasted out of this steep valley. Now the creek is half frozen, there are shoulders of snow and ice on each side and we're rising through clouds.

Here comes a place called Stinky Gulch, named for a family of skunks that lived hereabouts once, according to our driver. The creek is completely frozen from here on up and the road is lined with parked cars, stretching for miles. Next thing we're in a traffic jam. This Frozen Dead Guy thing certainly looks to be doing the business for Nederland.

The bus disgorges us, the two grandads and all the kids, outside the Nederland school. Nederland is a characterful, hand-hewn-looking hippie village that rises up from the shores of a frozen lake towards the towering mountains beyond. But here on the folksy lanes of Nederland it's hard to see the village for the crowds. The place is awash in groovers, mostly young, but not all, and little kids too.

There are bands playing outside some of the cafés and louder performers belting it out inside a big tent nearby. Some have come in costume. Count Dracula, striking in a long black leather coat and top hat, stalks past. There's a couple of zombies over there. And there are long queues for the porta-potties. Jesus I hate that baby word.

It's cold, probably only just above freezing point, and the tiny streets are packed with smiling people. There's a cannabis dispensary nearby, though there's no hint of weed in the air. If a whole crowd could ever get stoned, it's this one. I buy, for $20, a little marijuana pipe from an old hippie dude. It's hand-carved from a little red rock.

We drift past Nederland's shopping heart. It has a memorable name, Wolf Tongue Square, and there's a big sign next to it bearing the name of some of the businesses operating there. The usual ones: a dentist, an accountant, the New Moon Bakery and Café, and Silver Stem Fine Cannabis. Just all lined up on the sign together, kind of summing up how things are in these parts. Integrated.

Bruce, with his eye for a hotdog, fetches us a couple, and they're good, or maybe we're just hungry. We've had a few puffs on the trusty vape pen, just to help us catch the Nederland vibe. Bruce reckons the hotdogs taste so good because of the buns. 'The Americans make the best white bread in the world,' he says, as if that's a good thing. He bangs on about the excellence of their bread every morning at breakfast too, as he butters his toast.

There's a young hipster standing on a box in the street shouting poetry, and a white-bearded hippie dancing around in the crowd, humming along and tapping some crazy rhythm on a box under his arm. He'll be up next, on top of his box with his own idea of poetry. There was a van parked back round a corner with 'Poetmobile' painted big along its side.

We seem to have missed the major Frozen Dead Guy events, but the whole gathering is an event really, even if it's bitter cold now. It's easy, though, to find a seat inside a cosy café for another lacklustre latte. I've brought along a couple of our Willie's weed ready-rolls, but the streets are so crowded and the air's so pristine in Nederland it doesn't seem wise to just light up out there. We don't want to be insensitive cannabis tourists. There are smiling cops in the crowd, unless they're just people playing dress-ups.

I buy a Frozen Dead Guy sweatshirt to remember this day by and we wander back to where the bus dropped us some hours ago. On the way we pass a little church, the Calvary Chapel, with a sign outside, ‘Free Trips to Heaven — Details Inside’. Down the valley, the sky is filling with dark, bruised-looking snow clouds. It’s time to get back to Denver, where we can now tell people we’ve been to the mountains. We don’t want to get snowed in up at Nederland, much as we like the vibe.

On the bus home, there’s a full view of the frozen lake just below the little town, stiff as a sheet, its waves and rivulets freeze-framed. All quite odd, but perfect, really, for a festival dedicated to a frozen dead guy. I’m glad we came.

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Back down in Boulder, the bus stops and picks up a little pack of party gals off to Denver for some Saturday night fun, from the sound of it. They’re all terrifically loud and yakky, the loudest one going on about how last time they went to Denver she got hit in the face by a flying bottle in a dance club.

‘Well, it hit some other girl’s head first. Then it fucking got me.’

‘Get over it,’ one of the others says. ‘That was like last year.’

Back in Denver, we take a bit of a walk to find another place on my list, this one a bar called My Brother’s Keeper, quite some way down 15th Street, on the corner of Platte, and with no sign to mark it, as it has always been, apparently. It’s famous mainly for two things: being Denver’s oldest bar and having been a favourite drinking place of America’s king of the road-trip writers, Jack Kerouac, and his good buddy and Denver native, Neal Cassady.

The previous oldest bar in Denver, the El Bronco Bar over on Larimer Street, was closed in 1995 after repeated fights and drug busts. There’s certainly no sign of that sort of thing inside My Brother’s Keeper, an old, woody, elegant place, staunchly old-fashioned enough to have no TV screens and only discreet classical music playing.

The barman, a tall guy with scholarly spectacles and straight silver hair pulled back in a ponytail, tells us, ‘It’s Happy Hour, but only for the first drink, so it’s more like Happy Minute.’ A woman sits down along from me, orders a double shot of something brown, knocks it straight back and leaves. ‘That was a Happy Minute,’ I say. The barman smiles. ‘She’ll be back.’

This is my favourite sort of bar, and I tell Bruce so. We're enjoying the first of what should be several fine pale ales — there's a good selection. The cheeseburgers they make here are famously good and maybe we can have some of those later on.

The place is filling up with hipsters and Bruce seems to have made friends with a hipster chick with an extraordinary beehive pointing straight up from the top of her head. 'Colin here is writing a book,' I hear him telling her. He's pissed, saying too much, as he does.

'Yeah?' she says. 'How many Ls?'

'In what?'

'Colin.'

'One.'

'My boyfriend here is a two-L Collin,' she says. It's now I notice the dim-eyed dude with the great gingery lumberjack beard on him, standing right behind her.

'Irish,' he says, reaching across and shaking my hand. She shakes my hand as well. Her name is Lauren, one R. I fall back into conversation with the barman and when I turn back, Bruce seems to have arranged for us to go out for the evening with Lauren and two-L Col, to an art exhibition opening they're due at, and then they're going to drop us 'somewhere great' for dinner later.

Bruce is wearing that sweet drunk grin of his. 'C'mon,' he goes. 'It'll be fun.'

I tell him I'd rather stay here and try the cheeseburgers, but I can see I'll break his heart if I don't go, though I'm not so sure about these young things wanting to hang with old things like us. I think she's excited by knowing I don't much like the look of her and by this notebook I keep scribbling in. But maybe she's just being sweet and wants to give me something to write about.

Now Bruce is telling her how I was mistaken for Michael Caine and then Elton John. Lauren says I look more like Sting. 'Mmm,' she goes, 'tantric sex.' Bloody hell. Can't I just look like myself? I met Sting once and he wasn't much fun. It's been all downhill for him since the Police.

We head out of the bar and round the corner. The four of us squeeze into Lauren's nice new Mini and off we go to God knows where. We park and follow the lead of our young new chums. I offer to share one of the Willie's ready-rolls I have handy in my bag. Collin doesn't want any, but Lauren inhales enthusiastically. 'This stuff is strong,' she says and she's

quite right.

Bruce has a very faraway look now, I notice under a passing street light. Things are slipping from my control too, but not in a way I'm alarmed about yet. I'll have to try to keep an eye on Bruce. Sometimes, in circumstances like this, when he's feeling extremely relaxed, he wanders off. Sometimes with strangers he's just met, sometimes into danger. One time, after one of his wobbly wanders, I found him back in the bar we'd started in, with blood all over his arms and not a clue as to what had just transpired. No torn body was ever found in the vicinity and no savage harm reported, but I still wonder and watch that he doesn't wander again.

The art gallery opening is in a great sprawling place full of twists and turns and half-hidden rooms. There are paintings and photos, mostly modern, some of them ghastly. Decent wine and some nice craft beers are on offer and we waft around in the crowd of colourful, mostly young, things, Lauren introducing us to this one and that one.

It's all very interesting and boring at the same time, though Bruce is grinning like a goat, giving the appearance of being entranced by it all. I wander off, only to get myself lost, in the end stalking the gallery rooms in search of my lost companions, only to find we were all moving in the same direction at the same speed, me a room behind.

'There's another little opening we should go to,' says Lauren as we spill out into the chilly Denver night.

'Great,' says Bruce. 'Let's go.'

'I'm hungry,' I bleat, but no one listens.

Things are getting quite hazy now, though not in a bad way like on the CannaBus from Boulder. We're going down a road somewhere and round a corner and another one and then inside some funky old workshop-cum-gallery, all bricky and gritty inside.

The woman in charge, who we're introduced to like we're special guests, is a tiny creature with a head of long springy hair and heavy-framed round glasses that make her eyes huge and googly. I'm several sheets to the wind and I'm transfixed by the look of her, though she has a dense accent and I can barely understand a thing she's saying to me.

'These photos,' I say, pointing to the dozen or so arresting black and white prints in a cabinet on a nearby wall. 'Are they for sale? I like this one.'

'You may buy it,' she says, her accent briefly becoming clear.

'How much is it?' I ask, thinking she might come back with anything

from $100 to $10,000.

‘We are asking $100 or above,’ she says.

That’s a bargain, my bleared brain tells me, and I reach in my man bag. ‘How’s $150? Can I take it with me?’

The $150 is good, she says. I give her the cash, get a receipt and leave with a promise that she’ll mail it to me in three months when the exhibition closes.

‘I trust you,’ I tell her, gazing into her enormous eyes. Now where’s Bruce? And where the hell are we going next?

Well, it turns out we’re going for a very long walk, several blocks to the north, then several more to the east and then south down some other boulevard that looks like the other ones. There’s a restaurant here we’ll ‘just love’ says Lauren, striding out, two-L Col and lame Bruce in tow. I drop back.

‘We’re not going to steal your fucking kidneys, darling,’ Lauren shouts back at me. I tell her I rented a gun for the trip and I’m just keeping an eye out for us all. These streets are dark, though I can see a light on a corner up ahead of us, hopefully the fucking restaurant at last.

But it’s not the restaurant and, a little further down the road, I lose the plot. It’s all very well for them, in their vigorous 20s.

‘How much fucking further is this fucking fabulous fabled restaurant,’ I hear myself shouting quite suddenly, bringing everything to a halt, right outside what turns out to be the very restaurant we were being led to all along.

Lauren goes off at me like only someone with a hairdo like hers could. She shouts and swears quite a bit. I point at Bruce, wobbling near the gutter, and say she’s almost killed him with all her walking. Her bearded boyfriend shuffles uncomfortably. Bruce seems oblivious.

She and I shout at each other for a bit more till I calm down and say I’m sorry I yelled but that we aren’t up for all this walking, especially Bruce who’s ancient and falling apart. Lauren doesn’t have an empathy bone in her body, though. She’s been doing us a big favour apparently, introducing us to all those people posing in those art galleries.

I take a deep breath of icy Denver air and say again that I am sorry she’s upset and that I am indeed an ungrateful wretch, really hoping that she and two-L will just fuck off at this point. Which they do. She gives Bruce a big hug. She gives me her card.

Off she stamps, and into the restaurant Bruce and I fall. It’s warm and

it smells good. But the maitre d', full of apologies, gathers us in a small circle and points out that it's after 10.30 now and the kitchen has just closed. He is so very sorry, as are we. He puts his arm round my shoulder, leads us outside and points down the empty street.

'There's a great pizza place down there: three blocks, then left and down a bit,' he says. I thank him, but we're not going looking for anywhere else to eat and we stay right where we are till a cab, thank God, comes by and we take it all the $40 way back to our hotel and the house bar, where we graze on awful bar snacks, the blue crab cakes being particularly noxious.

'That was all your doing,' I tell Bruce over a calming gin and tonic. 'We were lucky to get out of that alive.'

'She told me she'd like to see us again.'

'What?'

'Monday, she said. She wants to show us the town.'

'What about two-L?'

'He'll be at work.'

'Are you crazy? She nearly killed you. Your knee must be a ruin. We must have walked five miles back there. And I accidentally bought an art work, which I may never see again.'

We go upstairs. The gin hasn't settled us down at all. Perhaps a spot of the Orange Herijuana will.

Elevated food

We don’t wake up till nine and have to race a bit to catch the train downtown in time for our Cooking with Cannabis Class, which is being held in a cooking school somewhere out of the city centre a bit. Unfortunately for us, this is the day of the Denver City Marathon or something similar and Zuni Street, where the cannabis cooking is going to be happening, is on the running route. Our cab has to go round a maze of detours till we can even get close.

When we finally arrive, we’re the first, even though we’re late. Patrick, our sushi chef from the other night, is in charge of this class too. He pours us Mimosas. There won’t be any weed smoking at this class. We’re here to cook with it and then consume it.

Eventually there are 12 of us, ranged around three work benches. This is a good set-up, a professional cooking school, nicely appointed, shiny and clean. Patrick and his even-larger assistant, serious in their uniforms, show us how to infuse weed into butter, which he carefully strains and then splits three ways between our benches, where we each prepare a dish.

‘This is not an edible and don’t go calling it that,’ says Patrick, quite bossy. ‘This is elevated food.’

Our bench is making ‘Infused Cheesy Grits’. Bruce and I are paired up with a polite married couple up from Texas. I’m not sure he’s ever cooked before. He’s a useless stirrer when I give him a turn with our big pot of grits.

They’re in their 30s, I’d say. All the others are younger. He tells us cannabis is still illegal in Texas. He gets his marijuana from a pal. He looks like he’s in the oil industry maybe. He doesn’t normally eat grits, he says. We’re mixing stir-fried vegetables in with our grits, along with that THC-laced butter.

They’re a pretty straight-seeming pair, unlike some of our other classmates, especially the skinny young Californian couple who turned up late and looking like they’d been very recently peeled out of a party. They want to come to New Zealand on a cycling holiday, he tells me as we drink our Mimosas and eat the enhanced grub we’ve all just cooked. Along with our groovy grits, which are maybe a bit under-salted, there’s southern fried chicken, and waffles with fruit and cream and cannabis-crazed syrup over the top. All very nice indeed, and it’s only one o’clock.

When we finish up it’s hot and sunny outside. We’re at least a couple of miles from downtown, which we can see, shimmering a bit, in the distance. There being no cabs to be found coming from any direction, we walk, Bruce hobbling ahead, like an old cowboy without his horse. He’s

got a map with him this time and he appears to know where he's leading us.

It's a long hot trek down the gentle slope towards the South Platte River, which runs across the edge of downtown Denver. We pause on a desolate corner and share one of Willie's, the Clementine Kush. This joint has exactly half a gram of perfectly dried and crushed cannabis flower in it and a perfect little cardboard filter, shaped like a cone with a twisted little fuse of a tip.

It might help with Bruce's knee pain. Within minutes, I'm a new man and Bruce is suddenly eager to press on. So we do, down and across the South Platte on a footbridge. The river is on the small side of medium-sized, as rivers go, and here it tumbles, rather brown, down some man-made rapids. It looks like the sort of place you'd dump a body.

There's a grim little park on the other side, just where the South Platte meets a smaller stream called Cherry Creek. It's called Confluence Park, but I read it as Flatulence and get Bruce to pose with the sign.

The weather has changed again. There's a brisk cold wind, gritty with sand. Downtown Denver, where we now are once again, is a little bit boring. It's like they bought all the buildings from the same factory: husky, square and dull red brick mostly.

We find our bar from the other day, the good old Avelina, with the same barmaid as last time, who seems very pleased to see us back. This was Bruce's highlight-of-the-trip place, where he had the fabulous flounder sandwich. We settle in, order IPAs and plot our next move: an early dinner maybe at that taxidermy restaurant I have on my list.

I send off a group message to my kids, who might be wondering how Daddy's doing in Denver: 'Still in Denver. Having a crazy time. Went way up into the Rockies yesterday to a weird little village called Nederland for the Frozen Dead Guy festival, which was excellent. Having dinner tonight in a taxidermy restaurant where they serve rattlesnake and sheep's balls. Bruce can have those.'

Various bambinos message me back. 'Wow daddy that sounds sooo crazy. Please eat sheep's balls for me. Photos?'

'Wow, awesome.'

'I wanna come.'

Four pints of various craft beers later, we're on our second barmaid and Bruce is raving just a bit. He's got his street map unfolded on top of the bar, and is considering places we could go on our last full day in

Denver. I don't want to go to the aeronautical museum that he fancies; we're spending quite enough time around planes. It's way on the outskirts of town in any case. And I don't want to go to any car museums either.

Out of kindness, I've given up on visiting the Museum of Miniatures, though I'm still keen for us to have lunch tomorrow at the seafood restaurant insensitively situated inside the Denver Aquarium. The barmaid, whose name is Abigail, brings us a free snack, sashimi. It's sea bass, she says. It's amazing, though we are a long way from the sea.

I think we're both getting a bit drunk. I mention this to Bruce. 'It could be the altitude,' I suggest.

'Or all the beers,' he says.

He might have a point. I say to Abigail we might move to gin, a soothing, late-afternoon sort of drink. But there are so many to choose from that Abigail turns it into a gin tasting, setting up a little line of samples. After five tastes, we settle on number three. Abigail, perhaps because she's got nothing left to polish, takes off, first, Bruce's glasses and then mine and carefully cleans them before handing them back.

Bruce seems to have moved pretty much beyond speech, though he occasionally says, 'Oh maaan.' I order us an early dinner while one of us can still speak. It's very good. Mine involves octopus. Bruce has an orange salad. Finally, we get out of there. Abigail can see we're a little over-boiled and that if we carry on we'll have to be wheeled out. We only ate at the Avelina because we didn't think we could leave. The taxidermy restaurant will have to wait till tomorrow.

On the train home I become transfixed by the sky, a *Simpsons'* sky, with a frame of white clouds around blue. We walk back across the prairie to the hotel, where we're in no state for the house bar, and head straight upstairs. There the research continues: first the Blue Dream (14.9 to 20 per cent THC), then some of the Citrus Kush (20.68 to 21.34 per cent) and our favourite, we decide, the Orange Herijuana (15.8 to 17.34 per cent) and then, to finish, and I do mean finish, the Dragon (a straightforward 17 to 18 per cent).

We are now stupendously stoned, so stoned I somehow talk Bruce into going downstairs to get us something sweet to eat. 'I've got a shocking craving for chocolate or something,' I tell him. 'I'm sure you have too.' I remind him about the well-stocked candy shop right next to the hotel reception desk, doubtless to cater for stoned guests like us.

I give him a handful of money and send him downstairs. 'I'll hold the

fort,’ I say, and he seems to accept this.

Miraculously, he’s back in ten minutes with a selection of bars. He says the guy in the suit on duty at reception said to him, ‘Good choice, sir.’

I’d always wanted to eat a Babe Ruth. Now I never have to again.

They'll get him, they got Nixon

Next morning there's a big blue sky, but it's cold as a fridge outside. We cross the prairie, get on the train, find a seat pointing the right way. As the guard checks our tickets, I ponder his pistol. I don't like guys with guns. Bullets would really ricochet around inside these metal carriages.

On Wazee Street, the doorman at the Oxford Hotel spots us again, wants to help find us a good breakfast place. 'The Delectable Egg, down Market Street,' he says, so we do as we're told and the eggs are indeed good, but the lattes come in pint glasses, and those are the small ones.

'They just don't understand coffee at all,' I mutter at Bruce.

'It's because everything has to be big,' he says. 'They've never understood small.'

While we're on the matter of tasteless, I'm determined we take lunch at the Buckhorn Exchange, the taxidermy restaurant we failed to get to yesterday. I'm feeling reasonably adventurous. Maybe I could try those sheep's balls. Or we could share. I'll bet they come in twos. Bruce wants to go to a cannabis emporium on the way to get something medicinal for his knee and maybe something too for my wrist, which still hurts from being broken more than a year ago. It's probably arthritis, my doctor told me.

There are an awful lot of hipsters on the sidewalks of Denver, with great big pioneer beards hanging off the face of almost every young chap we see. We hop off the 16th Street Mall bus right outside Euflora, a big marijuana dispensary Bruce says he spotted earlier.

There's the usual ID check at the door, the usual compliments on the passport, then in we go to consider the options. It's $18 for a big bandage, or transdermal patch as they call it, infused with CBD-heavy cannabis. We get one of those each and I grab a chocolate taffy with 10 mg of THC in it to help me get on the plane in good order for the long ride home tomorrow night.

In a café across the road we pop separately to the restroom to apply our

bent band-aids. Like everything else of a cannabis-based nature, they come in a child-proof pack, so child-proof it's almost adult-proof too.

When Bruce comes back to the table he tells me, 'The assistant said it would take two hours to get to my head.'

'Your head? I thought we'd just have a stoned knee and a stoned wrist.'

An hour later, though, we're almost pain-free. I can't feel my wonky wrist at all and Bruce reckons the eight-out-of-ten knee pain reading is way down to a two or a three. It's a medicinal miracle, one that has previously been kept from us, though at $18 a bandage you wouldn't want to make a habit of it. High with excitement and flexible of wrist, I decide to do a bit of shopping.

At the posh shops on Larimer Street, I buy a $100 scarf for the beloved wife back home and, obviously under the influence of the wrist patch, impulsively go into a hat shop, a groovy old place called Goorin Bros. 'Bold Hatmakers. Est. 1895', the sign on the window says.

The hipster assistants inside are all wearing hats. 'I hate hats,' I say to the nearest one, which gets his attention. 'But I wonder maybe if you could change my mind. Show me a hat that suits me, because I'm not sure there is such a thing.'

He leads me straight to the Fedora section. 'I have a big head,' I warn him.

'We'll try an extra-large,' he says and it fits. I turn from the mirror in wonder. 'I think this thing might actually suit me a bit,' I say to Bruce, who's considering a nearby trilby. He nods what looks like approval and I tell the assistant I'll take it. He thinks I should have a feather to go in the band and gives me a book full of feathers to choose from. Some are a bit big and gaudy. I choose a small $3 one from a bird called a drongo, which seems, perhaps, appropriate. The hat itself is $60.

I've always thought that blokes in hats looked daft, unless maybe they were bald, like the Edge in U2, who's never seen in an uncovered state. Or the country rocker Dwight Yoakam, also quite bald, or John McVie, that terrific bass player in Fleetwood Mac. All inseparable from their headgear. I'll bet they're all straight down to Goorin Bros any time they're in Denver.

But I'm totally emboldened by my bold purchase at the bold hatmakers, and I bang my new hat on my bonce as we head for the nearest cab and ask it to take us to 1000 Osage Street and our lunch spot, the

Buckhorn Exchange.

The cab driver, on the way, tells us, without any encouragement at all, that President Trump is a ‘bad man’ and, warming to his topic, says, ‘They’ll get him. They got Nixon.’ He then establishes where we’re from and wants to know if our leader is friends with Trump.

‘Not really,’ I tell him. ‘He’s just polite. We’re a polite people.’

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The Buckhorn Exchange turns out to be an old two-storey building sitting on a lonely corner across from a railway station. Inside, it is pretty much as advertised: an old, insanely over-populated museum of stuffed wildlife operating as a steakhouse. It’s the oldest eating place in Denver, having been opened in 1893 by Henry ‘Shorty Scout’ Zietz. He rode with Buffalo Bill and was gifted his nickname by the great Indian warrior Sitting Bull in recognition of his lack of height. In its early days, the Buckhorn Exchange counted cattlemen, gamblers, Indian chiefs, railroad barons and politicians among its rowdy clientele. One day Sitting Bull’s nephew and a band of 30 warriors dropped in and presented Shorty Scout with the sword taken from the body of General George Custer at the Battle of Little Big Horn.

Since then, all sorts of big names have chowed down here, including Ronald Reagan, Bob Hope, Charlton Heston and Princess Anne, meat-eaters all. You need to have a strong nerve to eat meat here. There are hundreds of sets of sad glass eyes looking at you from the heads and dried carcasses of dead things in every direction. A puma peeps round the corner at me, and there’s a great white buffalo head high on the wall right above me. I’m glad we didn’t top up on any of Willie’s wonder weed before we came in. It might have all been too much.

The menu is printed on a newspaper facsimile, full of colourful facts about the place. The fare is exceptionally meaty: steaks of various cuts and slabs, hickory-smoked barbecued baby back pork ribs, buffalo, turkey, elk, quail, some chicken, a little salmon. And then there’s the appetiser menu, where it gets interesting: Rocky Mountain Oysters (whole order or half), smoked buffalo sausage, alligator tail, rattlesnake dip.

If you’re really hungry, there’s the Buckhorn’s famous 24-ounce porterhouse for $56 or you can share a two-pound New York strip loin with a friend for $105. We order beers while we consider which way to turn. I ask for the restroom. It’s upstairs. ‘Go up and round the corner, honey,’ says the old duck at the desk. ‘If you meet the bears, you’ve gone

too far.’ I’m sure that’s an old line, but it’s a goodie.

On the walls up the stairs is an array of portraits of winners of past Buffalo Bill lookalike contests. They’re a bit like Elvis impersonators, styling themselves on the young Bill or the old Bill.

I deliberately go too far and meet the bears. They’re big and posed in attack stance. I return to the table feeling brave, but not brave enough to order the prairie oysters, aka sheep’s balls. I hate to let my kids down, but a guy at the next table showed us his, the ones he’d ordered and failed to finish. His pal couldn’t cope with them. ‘The texture,’ the pal says to us, shuddering. The one who’d ordered them opens the doggy bag of leftovers he’s taking home. They’re in a caramel-brown sauce. Even worse, they’re sliced.

‘I can’t handle that,’ I tell Bruce, who looks slightly alarmed too at the prospect. ‘Let’s share a rattlesnake dip instead.’ For mains, Bruce has the special, buffalo prime rib, and I have the smoked barbecued baby back

pork ribs, just a half rack, though of course a half in America is any other sensible and slimline country's whole. When I finish, there's still half of the half rack on my plate.

Once you are comfortably trapped in one of the old batwing leather chairs the Buckhorn Exchange plonks you in at your table, it's hard to leave. And after that meal, it's hard to even walk. But I'm glad we came, and I'm also glad the railway station is right across the road. That rattlesnake dip was good, spicy with good big chunks of snake, which has a texture a bit like crayfish.

I'm wearing my fedora. Bruce says I have to take care about the angle I set it at. He reckons I look like a dodgy accountant and I'm not sure how to feel about that. 'I'm worried I look more like that dick Elvis Costello,' I tell him. 'He was always keen on a hat, but he still looked like a prat.'

The truth is I carry an old grudge against Elvis Costello, an intense fellow with a whiny vocal style who once refused to be interviewed by me when he was in New Zealand. He asked the local branch of his record company to let him peruse anything I'd written about him and didn't like something I'd said, so he wouldn't talk to me, which was a bit petulant, I thought.

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It’s just a one-stop ride back to Union Station. Bruce wants another infused bandage for his wonky knee, so we visit another downtown dispensary, this one called the Wellness Center. Bruce gets his bandage and yet another compliment for the pretty passport and I buy myself a nifty plastic grinder to take home with me. I’ve never been much good at breaking up weed properly. Just for the sake of further research, I also buy some enhanced lip balm.

Figuring that’s probably quite enough excitement for the day, we catch the train back out to Aurora, 15 miles away, earlier than usual, at 4.30. Bruce reckons his knee is now the knee of ‘a 60-year-old’, which is quite conservative of him. And off we stride home across the prairie, pausing to smoke a joint I prepared before we left this morning. Kind of like a packed lunch.

A family of huge honking black and white geese bursts out of the stubbly grass and crosses the path ahead of us, hooting warnings and herding their young. It’s a dusty place to call home. It’s extremely western out here. I’m glad I’ve got a hat on. I’ll have to hang onto it. That smoke was very strong and now we’re walking slow and I’m suddenly opening up about something that’s been on my mind, the thing I can’t shake really, though I’m not sure it would be right to want to.

I wake up every morning and he’s there, Gordon that is. Not the hale and hearty Gordie of yore, but the one dying by inches before my eyes. I saw him every day over those last few months on his way out and it haunts me still. Just trying to talk to Bruce about it chokes me up.

Bruce doesn’t have much to say about it and I didn’t expect him to really. There’s nothing that can be said or done. But Gordie’s stoic courage moved me more than I was ready for and I think I have a bass note in me now, a sadness, I didn’t have before. But that’s okay. I like bass notes.

Maybe it’s good spilling out all this stuff to Bruce, who’s a stoic guy too. Maybe it’s good he doesn’t really have much to say. I’ve always been the emotional one in the crowd. And the most stoned. But I feel better for opening up, even though Gordie will be there again tomorrow morning when I wake up.

In the house bar, Sally the barmaid is not talking to us. Maybe her powerful Christian beliefs prohibit her from talking to older gay couples. Maybe I need to stop having this fantasy about people seeing us as an older gay couple on holiday. I figure it’s a good cover and I don’t have any issues about it, though I won’t camp it up. Well, not unless Bruce does

first.

I tune into the hotel Wi-Fi and pick up an email from Mum, who has just got herself an iPad. She hates technology and misses using her old typewriter and letters in the mail. But she's miraculously managed to get a message through to me on her new device, though she can probably hardly see it. Her sight is failing her badly now, though she still complains about not being able to drive her car, which my brother and I had to conspire to get rid of, for the sake of anyone on the roads and in supermarket car parks in her neighbourhood.

'I'll know when to stop driving,' she kept saying, till we realised that she wouldn't and that in the end there would be an incident or an accident that would shatter her confidence, which we didn't want. She had carpet laid in the garage where her little car used to rest. 'It looked awful in there,' she said. 'All empty.'

The carpet cost $1000. 'Shocking,' she said. Without asking anyone for help, she cleared everything out of the garage before the carpet layers came. There were big cupboards in there full of old bottles of wine and beer that Dad had accumulated and now wouldn't be getting to, having died.

Dad had pretty cheap taste when it came to wine. He sat me down on one of my visits and poured me a glass of red wine and asked me what I thought of it. It wasn't really red to be honest. It smelt like Gasoline Alley and it tasted similar.

'What is it?' I gasped at him.

'Pinot noir.'

'Pinot noir? I'm not even sure it's made of grapes.'

'I got it for $5.95 a bottle,' he said, ignoring me. 'Discount for a box.'

Mum said she gave four bottles of it to the carpet guys when they finished. 'Good God Mum,' I said, 'you'll poison them.'

'Red wine gets better with age,' she said with confidence.

'Not that stuff.'

In the house bar, there's nothing happening. I feel like leaping up and shouting, 'So who here likes Trump?' Bruce thinks I'd be shot. I never think about the fact that citizens in America might be carrying arms, but possibly some, several or maybe all of our fellow drinkers are packing heat. Sally, the now surly barmaid, might have a derringer in a handy little holster strapped to her ankle.

It's not very late at all, nine maybe, when we head upstairs. We use our

friend the vape to have a last blast of what's left of our stash. Bruce films me doing a little piece to camera on the mobile. The publisher requested something to excite the promo people. We also shot some stuff in the growing factory in Boulder. Someone clever might knock something suitably incriminating together, I imagine.

There's actually quite a bit of weed left. And I need to use up this enhanced lip balm, so I apply it liberally to all the painful parts of my body before collapsing into my tiny cot.

I imagine I'm going to sleep quite well.

Bigness is the problem

It’s check-out day. It’s get-out-of-Denver day. It’s the end of the last adventure in this great cause that has brought my brave, car-less driver and me here, to be caught between prairie and mountain, elevated, infused, adjusted. Dirty work that just begged to be done.

I de-pack, re-pack and double-check everything so I’m not accidentally smuggling home something I shouldn’t. I roll the last of our weed into a large joint to smoke on our last hike to the train and smack on half an inch of lip balm. We check the bags in at reception, settle the bar tab, hand back the odour-proof zip bag with the vape in it. It’s a sad moment.

Then we’re off. Up at the station, there’s a young guy bumming dollars on the platform. I give him one. The last joint has been smoked but we’ve still got the vape pen to help us ease back down towards something approaching normality, though not too quickly. And I’ve got my lip balm and that edible what-not.

Just down from Union Station, we settle in a little Italian café. It serves the best latte yet, but that’s not saying much. Bigness is the problem. They say small, but they don’t know what it is. Their President even invented the word ‘bigly’.

We’re killing time till lunch, which we’re planning to take at the Downtown Aquarium, which we spotted on Sunday in the distance when we were coming back across the river from our cannabis cooking class. I’m only drawn to the aquarium because of the potential thrill of eating seafood while surrounded by live fish. It’s beginning to feel like a sordid urge, and one I might pay dearly for.

In the meantime, I get Bruce looking at his city map for another place to visit, maybe somewhere my hipster hat will fit in. I point to the Museum of Contemporary Art, which, according to the map, isn’t that far away from where we sit sipping our weak lattes.

We get to the gallery to find there are two big exhibitions on, one dedicated to the seminal graffiti artist Jean-Michel Basquiat, which is

terrific. The other, one floor up, is a little more challenging: a collection of some of the early works of New York doco-art photographer Ryan McGinley.

There are warnings outside about the mature content within, but some of it's pretty immature really, Ryan's young chums larking about, vomiting at the camera, butt-fucking each other and, in one particularly-large-format close-up shot, some guy sucking someone else's cock. Bruce and I move a little further apart.

B's knee is so good, he says when we emerge, shaken but not stirred, from the gallery, that he has decided we should walk all the way to the aquarium for lunch. He's been looking at his map again and he knows which way to go. It's bloody miles. Everywhere in Denver is miles.

When we finally get to the fucking aquarium, we find the restaurant is an awful-looking jolly family joint with kid-friendly menus and brightly coloured drinks. Not only that, there's a 40-minute wait for a table. We agree we have to get out of there, but there are no cabs and we have to walk all the way back to town, across the South Platte River again and through Flatulence Park, where we pause to give the vape pen a bit of a seeing to. I smear on a bit more lip balm. I can't tell what it's doing to me. There's probably too much else going on.

We get ourselves back to Larimer so-called Square and peruse the lunch options. Well, I do, while Bruce rests against a lamp post. At the far end of the block there's a place advertising 'chicken fried chicken' on its board out front. We take ourselves back to Ocean Prime, where we've previously lunched with success. The hat shop's right across the road. It's been a bit breezy today and it's hard to keep my hipster hat on. Bruce warns me again about watching the angle I wear it at. He reckons I might have to get a hat pin. The beer is good, the lobster salad outstanding, even if, I think again, we're very far from the ocean.

Soon, bloody hell, we're in a cab again, hammering one last time down the freeway back to the hotel, my window down. We shoot past a weed shop, down there just below the freeway, and a big whiff of sweet smoke invades the cab and lingers strangely, for several miles.

At the hotel, we ditch the vape pen and the last of my lip balm in the bin by the candy counter. Then I eat my infused taffy chew, which is chocolate flavoured and chock full of THC.

Clearly, it works wonders, as, in what seems the blink of an eye, we're getting ready to land back in Auckland. We're sitting in the front row of

Economy, where we've been able to stretch our legs out for the 13-hour hop from Los Angeles. A hostess takes her seat right opposite us, strikes up conversation, getting Bruce telling her too much. He's ending the trip as leaky as he started, telling her I'm writing a travel book. She's a forward sort of hostie. Hard to ignore. 'Are you going to mention Air New Zealand?' she asks me.

'Of course.'

Now she wants to know if Bruce is a writer too, like we flock together. He says he's a bit retired now, but his wife is a writer. 'What does she write?' probes the hostie.

'Romance,' he says.

'It's not romance,' I tell her. 'It's, um, more . . .'

'Dirty?' she wants to know.

'Well, you know.'

'Porn?'

'No, erotica I believe it's called. I haven't actually read any of it.'

Bruce is having one of his silent turns, so I explain that his other half writes her arousing novels under a secret pen name she won't reveal to anyone except him, and he's sworn to secrecy. I hand him a piece of paper from my pad.

'Write her secret name down on that,' I tell him. 'Fold it so I can't see it and give it to her.' I nod at the nosey hostie, and he does what I tell him.

After that, everything slowly becomes normal again. I'm back home, the weed has run out and my dealer isn't returning my calls.

I wonder if Bruce has taken his bandage off yet.

*

In Uruguay, as in Washington DC, strange to say, the best thing to do if you're passing through and want some weed is to ask a local for a little. Probably a funky-looking local is best. It's legal in both those places to grow cannabis, and to possess, carry, consume and give it away in limited amounts. It's just illegal to buy it or sell it.

Which is an interesting approach to the cannabis problem. The aim of that sort of control must be to keep things folksy, extremely folksy. Unplugged really. Under those sorts of rules, marijuana can become a bit like heritage tomatoes, except that they'll never be for sale in the vegetable section at your local supermarket. Perhaps that's the right option for New Zealand. It's what the Green Party wants. Whether they and the marijuana

consumers of New Zealand get it is another matter.

In the meantime, things are rather stiff and oddly old-fashioned. Under the Misuse of Drugs Act, here in free-and-easy, she'll-be-right, cigarette-smoking, alcohol-ravaged New Zealand, a citizen could still potentially get three months in prison for possession or use of marijuana and a rather breathtaking eight years locked up for cultivation or supply. Even worse, in the long term, drug convictions can deal badly to your foreign travel and employment ambitions.

It's all rather strange and it will change and, really, it can't be soon enough. Apart from the bent gents like me, there are other sectors of the populace who could be made very happy by the legalising of cannabis. Farmers, for instance. The cannabis growing industry in places like Colorado and California has soared right through the roof. It's very heavily controlled and very heavily taxed, but that's good news too. And it's a boon for the local job markets. Enforcement alone must employ thousands and then there are the farmers and their workers, the plant biologists and nutritionists, the oil extractors, the cookie bakers and candy makers, the shop assistants, the factory workers, the delivery drivers, the marketing and advertising people and, now, the fast-growing cannabis tourism operators.

That last bit bothers me a little after the visit to Denver. At this point in time, what happened in Denver stays in Denver, of course, and I'd be happy to go back any time and have another go while I have the strength. But I'm not so sure that such unhinged vacation experiences are necessarily what we want as an add-on to the tsunami of tourists visiting New Zealand these days. Having to put up with all the *Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* fans is challenging enough without a percentage of them being stoned too. There is a distinct danger, should the laws on cannabis be totally and recreationally loosened here, that we would turn into a stoned Hobbiton, clean, green and out of it.

The medicinal option is on its way in New Zealand, creaking like a dinosaur up the front path. It needs to pick up speed and it needs to be liberal, perhaps even as liberal as it was in California, where it was very liberal indeed. But change is slow and reluctant at this stage. Medicinal cannabis is available only at great trouble and expense, to seriously ill patients, so I don't think Bruce will be getting a new bandage for his buggered old knee any time soon, nor me for my sore wrist.

Part of the madness at the moment is that the few medicinal cannabis

products that can squeeze through the loopholes to the few people allowed them are priced like precious metals. We're bringing in weed, good grief, from Holland and Lord knows what the hungry Dutch will be charging us for a gram of that. Certainly a lot more than the $12 I paid for a gram of Willie's Reserve in Colorado.

After more than half a century farming it off the grid, the weed growers of New Zealand could go legal as an almost fully formed, highly skilled and motivated farming force. There are other people out there who can see it coming and some of them are already making plans. I heard recently of two ex-cops at a farm auction, buying up some commercial glasshouses with a view to a change of law making another crop very possible and very profitable.

I just hope the lawmakers shake the dust out of their wigs and hurry along with it. It's baby boomers like me who figure prominently among cannabis users here and none of us wants to wait years for an outbreak of good sense. Not to mention being criminals in the meantime.

*

A judge I ran into at a dinner party told me off when he heard I was writing a light-hearted book about cannabis. He seemed to be suggesting I was acting in a socially irresponsible manner doing such a thing, so I didn't ask him outside to share a smoke after dessert.

Other people too weren't very impressed. Some thought it was a terrific idea, though they were probably outside having a smoke with me when I told them about it. My limited and unscientific survey on the issue suggests cannabis and the use thereof is a divisive topic, extremely divisive.

Which is as good a reason as any of the others for bringing it into the light, unmasking it, unmaking its daft and dark legend and including it as another small part of the panoply of pleasures and medicines humankind has indulged in for millennia. As pointed out earlier, prohibitions are a recent novelty and they simply haven't worked.

Bruce still talks about that flounder sandwich in Denver. He says he can't remember much else, so he's looking forward to reading about what happened out there.

I'm glad I took all those notes or I wouldn't have remembered much either, certainly not much from the Budz and Sudz bus trip. Some of those notes are alarming, especially when they begin to scrawl large across the

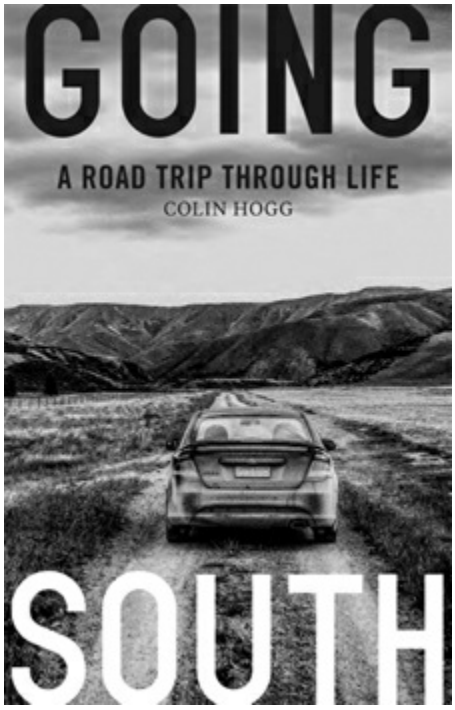
page. That’s hard to look at.

But it’s over now, our work is done. Bruce is slowly recovering and if I’m not a wiser man, then I am certainly a man who rolls a better joint.

About the Author

COLIN HOGG is a writer best known for his music journalism, reviewing and column writing, and for his books and his documentary making. He grew up in Dunedin and Invercargill where he joined *The Southland Times* at the age of 17. He has written biographies of Sam Hunt and Barry Crump. This is his ninth book. He’s working on his next one.

Also by Colin Hogg



GOING SOUTH

A road trip about memory, mateship and mortality, into the heartland of a New Zealand that still exists and still surprises.

It was late afternoon and a few of us were sitting about in the sun having a drink on my birthday when the friend I've known the longest sat down opposite and looked at me like he was going to say something serious.

He was, and he got straight to it. He had health issues, he said, in a tone that put the issues word in ironic quotes. He'd been to see his doctor the previous day. He had maybe a year, he said. Maybe a bit more.

I was so shocked by what he told me that, after an initial gasp, I said the only thing that seemed to make any sense to me in the circumstances. 'We should go away for a road trip,' I blurted out.

He nodded as if he knew I was going to say that. ‘Back south,’ he said.

‘Yeah,’ I said back to him.

South meant Southland, where our story started, 46 years earlier. And that was the end of that conversation. Within weeks the trip was all booked and ready to roll. I felt nervous.

‘It could have so easily become a cliché: two old friends, one diagnosed with terminal cancer, attempting to recapture the threads of their younger selves during a road trip to the place in which they grew up. But *Going South* is saved from affected sentimentality by Hogg’s complete lack of it. What you find instead is a reflective story of friendship, mortality and memory . . . The moments of Rabelaisian humour and observation are admirably underpinned by the pleasures and perils of advancing age’ *New Zealand Listener*

‘A delightful journey, by turns amusing, poignant and disturbing . . . a sort of idiosyncratic history of Southland and Otago’

New Zealand Herald

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HarperCollins*Publishers*

First published in 2017
by HarperCollins*Publishers* (New Zealand) Limited
Unit D1, 63 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand
harpercollins.co.nz

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Level 13, 201 Elizabeth Street, Sydney, NSW 2000, Australia
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1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF, United Kingdom
2 Bloor Street East, 20th floor, Toronto, Ontario M4W 1A8, Canada
195 Broadway, New York, NY 10007, USA

ISBN 9781775491385

Hogg, Colin
The high road : a journey to the new frontier of cannabis / Colin Hogg.
1. Hogg, Colin,—Travel—United States. 2. Cannabis—United States. 3. Drug legalization—United States. 4. United States—Description and travel. I.Title.
615.7827—dc 23

Cover design by Darren Holt, HarperCollins Design Studio
Cover photography by Al Snappo; joint by shutterstock.com; author photo by Birgit Krippner; all other photography by Colin Hogg, Bruce Scott