

Weed killers: Sheriff's Tactical Enforcement Personnel (Step) on a mission to eradicate illegal marijuana gardens in Sequoia National Park, California, 13 September 2012

## HIGH NOON IN THE GARDEN OF GOOD AND EVIL

Forty years after America declared a war on drugs, an increasing number of states are now legalising the cultivation of cannabis. With this liberalisation has come a clash between violent Mexican cartels happy to propagate their crop north of the border and the law enforcement agencies charged with its control. GQ joins a Swat team on the front line of the conflict in California

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Dawn's early rays break over the ridge at around 5am. The line of men dressed in camouflage, cradling M4 carbines and moving with stealth, halts...



# Receding darkness reveals discarded shotgun shells beneath our feet. This is followed by the muffled snap of machine guns being unslung and handguns snatched out of holsters. The line of men with guns bristles like a porcupine

Up front, a figure indicates that we drop to the forest floor. Soaring redwoods shoot to the skies, some gnarled and sooty after being struck by lightning. A tracker with the Forest Service scouting ahead points to fresh footprints. A bundle of dead sticks has been dropped strategically to mask the trail. From beneath the brim of a camouflaged hat, the man behind me jerks his gun muzzle in the direction of a footprint and then a pile of faeces a few feet away. “They’re here,” he whispers.

We had arrived at midnight with two hours’ sleep at a deserted spot in California’s Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Park, deep within the Sierra Nevada, the highest mountains in the United States outside Alaska and Colorado. A dome of sequined stars and gossamer cloud offered weak light to a cadre of men decamping in the chill from SUVs: the elite, 13-strong Sheriff’s Tactical Enforcement Personnel (Step). We are way beyond mobile-phone coverage in

600 square miles of remote wilderness accessible only on foot or on horseback. Along with machine guns, some also heft machetes and heavy-duty shears. They are here to raid and eradicate an illegal marijuana “garden” in the mountains protected by armed men in the pay of La Familia Michoacana, a violent Mexican cartel with a reputation for beheadings, torture and mass murder, part of Mexico’s ongoing drugs war that has so far cost at least 50,000 lives. The “grow” had been spotted by a helicopter surveillance mission and, later, hidden cameras inserted into the area.

As the men insert brass rounds into their weapons with an oily ratcheting sound, Sergeant Jim Franks, a tall, broad-shouldered, even-tempered detective and veteran Special Weapons And Tactics (Swat) officer palms a pair of night-vision goggles into his back pocket. He observes each of his team quietly, making sure none is exhibiting signs of stress or fatigue. If

so, they are positioned to the rear of the squad. There’s Buddy Hirayama, a sardonic detective with a dry wit who normally joshes and teases Bobby Rader about being a redneck hick. Rader is in fact a loyal, salt-of-the-earth, farm-raised cop who wears his heart on his sleeve. He derides Hirayama as a sort of nerdy C-3PO. Yet now, with the action imminent, they are serious. I have been embedded with them for a week on dawn Swat missions, the arrest of gang members and the enactment of search warrants in tough, urban environments through gruelling 18-hour days. They are now up in the mountains ready, as ever, for a firefight.

Sergeant Franks, satisfied that all are mentally prepared, orders us into a black van that takes off up the mountain. The men are quiet, ruminative, as the guns lie over their laps, and we bounce higher and higher. When we get out we have a tactical advantage of around 7,000 feet above the site. We’ll drop 1,000 feet. Franks orders the men into a single line, ten feet apart, in case they are ambushed and need to return fire. It is all hand signals, no talking, from here on in.

Franks knows all too well what he and his men are up against. Back in July 2002, in an area called Drum Valley, Franks and another detective, Jerry Mayberry, used night vision to descend on a marijuana grow run by a Mexican immigrant whom the team had been surveilling for several months. The two detectives held up the grower with M4s, shouting for him to get on the ground. The man raised a Smith & Wesson revolver and fired. The bullet missed. Franks returned fire with a Glock handgun while Mayberry opened up with his M4 carbine. They shot the suspect, Ignacio Gonzalez, dead. Following the investigation into the shooting, Franks discovered that the man’s ex-girlfriend had told her family that Gonzalez had raped, sodomised and beaten her. She was later found murdered. A raid on his house later led them to believe that the man was a lieutenant in the Magana cartel – for years, this loose-knit affiliation of extended family in Fresno, with links to La Familia in Mexico, ran the biggest marijuana-growing organisation in California. In quieter moments, Franks likes to quote Hemingway: “There is no hunting like the hunting of man, and those who have hunted armed men long enough and liked it never care for anything else thereafter.” Also, says Franks with a wry grin, “Deer don’t shoot back.”

We are led by forest ranger Brian Adams, a rugged and weathered, 50-year-old pure mountain man. He was raised in the Sierra Nevada and has been upset to see them turn from a barren wilderness into a violent haven for drug traffickers. In 2010 a grower raised his rifle to fire on Adams and his men when they raided a garden. Adams shot first. The grower survived. Two months previously, he had had to wrestle a grower to the ground while the man tried to pull a 9mm pistol out of his trousers ➔

## THE EMERALD TRIANGLE

**Top of the crops:** The nutrient-rich soils of California’s Central Valley provide the ideal environment for marijuana gardens; an illegal grow, hacked down with a machete by the Tulare County Step team, September 2012 (below)

**‘The Mexican cartels realised: why bother to smuggle marijuana up through the border when they can grow it right here?’**



➤ to shoot him. And just days before we arrived, a grower with a Remington 870 shotgun had refused to stand down, despite being held at gunpoint. Someone in the grow opened fire on the men with an SKS semiautomatic rifle and then later ran into the brush. “These guys are ordered by their bosses to stand their ground and shoot back,” says Adams. “It used to be that they would run; now they shoot back.”

We head down a deep escarpment into thick coyote brush, vigilant, popping with adrenaline. Some traffickers protect their grows with ever more cunning methods. Some use steel-clawed bear traps that will tear off a man’s leg, others use electrified razor wire. Some dig deep pits lined with sharpened stakes and obscured with vegetation. Others even rig pressure plates linked to propane canisters that shoot nails like shrapnel. In Lake County, sheriffs found 20 shotgun shells taped to a tripwire. Poison oak, which causes severe rashes, is planted on trails. All that is a fail-safe for if they don’t shoot interlopers first. We head deeper in. Adams can

looking for any sign in the undergrowth. “I hear something,” whispers Frazier, a little frantically. On the ridge above us there’s the sound of crackling sticks, branches being broken. “It ain’t us,” says Rader over the radio, down the hill. The deputy next to me swings his gun over my head, ready for what is to follow.



**BEFORE YOU GO THROUGH THE SMALL BROWN** door set into the side of an anonymous warehouse that houses the Step offices in the city of Visalia, Tulare County, the acrid stench of marijuana drifts across the parking lot. Entering the windowless office, there are burlap sacks on the floor stuffed with the potent drug. Propped up next to them are a couple of assault rifles and a .45 handgun tagged with a label; the spoils of a recent raid. On the floor are rugs depicting blossoming marijuana leaves. On the walls are posters and a plaque in memory of Deputy

of year. Already they have made 169 arrests, seized 89 firearms and eradicated almost 185,000 plants.

In August, they did their largest eradication, of 2,554 plants, some of which were more than 15 feet tall and four inches thick. It took 30 men with chain saws plus seven dumper trucks and trailers to transport almost 100,000lb (45.4 tonnes) of marijuana, worth around \$7.6m (£5m). Once, they used to dig a hole and burn it all. “We’d look at some of the deputies who had that job and say, ‘Right, you probably won’t be driving home tonight,’” says Franks. Now plants are taken to an incinerator instead.

In 1996, California passed Proposition 215 that made it legal for patients to be prescribed marijuana for serious illness. It was the first state to do so. Seventeen others followed, and now even traditionally Republican states such as Alabama have been discussing the issue, too. Back in November, Colorado and Washington became the latest states to vote for change; the first steps towards full-blown legalisation.

Mexican drug cartels that have brought rising levels of violence. “People don’t realise that this isn’t a bunch of California hippies and stoners out growing a couple of weeds,” says Franks. “Medicinal marijuana is nonsense. Millions of dollars’ worth of marijuana is grown here which fund drug cartels who kill thousands of innocent people a year. And yet the public just think we are out pulling up people’s medicine.”

Marijuana harvest time induces a sort of full-moon madness in the valley. Gangs start robbing houses where they spot marijuana growing in the back yard, often tying up the occupants at gunpoint and beating them. One gang dresses in police-issue uniform, inspects the marijuana and then comes back to steal it. They are working for a Mexican cartel trying to earn enough to get into the crystal-meth business, the raw product supplied by the same cartel.

The Step team is on the go 18 hours a day, venturing deep into the mountains to gang-

are now operating in at least 1,000 cities as they push aggressively into manufacture and distribution using street gangs.

In the week I am there, I make two surveillance flights in Sheriff’s Department aircraft over the Central Valley and the mountains. Beneath the beating blades of the chopper, the valley is as flat as a billiard table stretching all the way east, where it buckles upwards into the Sierra Nevadas. The valley used to be a lake bed, which makes the dusty loam very fertile. Dense orange and walnut groves flash beneath the skids of the helicopter – a small part of the eight per cent of the total food-stuffs grown in the US that originate there. Throw a stone into the undergrowth here and it would likely sprout. It was here that John Steinbeck, who grew up in Salinas, wrote *The Grapes Of Wrath* and other classics.

We swoop down on an orange grove to see that, cut out of the middle, is a large square bordered by plywood walls. Inside are at least 200 marijuana plants, camouflaged by

Back on the trail, we’re waiting for armed gunmen to come bursting out of the undergrowth. Seconds pass, then minutes. Amid the soaring redwoods there is just a sense of impending trouble. Eventually Bobby Rader and his partner, sweating profusely from the steep terrain, move up to our position. They’ve found a marijuana-processing centre half a mile down the mountain. The plan is to cut across a ravine, thick with gorse and vegetation, to the main camp, which has been taken by Jim Franks. “There’s a lot of people running from us right now,” says Rader, scanning the forest beyond.

Blood soaks my trousers as more thorns rip open my shins the deeper we go. It’s at least 30°C in the shade and we’re told to watch out for bears as we traverse a steep slope. Jerry-rigged in a thicket is a mosquito net tied between four trees. Cans of beer and half-smoked joints lie in the shade beneath. Another processing centre. Before the raid, workers were standing here trimming leaves off the



spot moss that has been kicked off rocks, tiny fragments of grocery bags that have caught on the undergrowth. I step on a twig. It cracks. I wince. The line stops. The forest is then silent. We resume, moving closer to the target.

A half-hour later, we come across a black three-quarter-inch hose running from a secluded creek. The hose forks up towards the mountain summit and down to a valley. Franks splits up the men. Hirayama heads to the top. Rader heads down. GQ photographer Danny Wilcox Frazier and I are left in a thick grove, guarded by two sheriff’s deputies with handguns drawn. We slumber for an hour before the steady beat of a chopper echoes up the mountainside. And then the radio crackles. “They are on the move, heading your way...” The deputies look nervous and begin swivelling their heads

Kent Haws, who was a member of the team. He was shot dead investigating suspicious activity in an orange grove. Another poster reads: “If strippers are called exotic dancers. Then shouldn’t drug dealers be called exotic pharmacists?” On a bookshelf near the door are various trompe l’oeil totems from raids: a bust of Jesús Malverde, patron saint of drug traffickers. Propped up next to it is a woven badge depicting a scorpion, taken from a marijuana grow in Big Foot Spring in August 2011. It is the symbol of the Gulf cartel. There are several cartels in Mexico who control certain areas and trafficking routes.

Step are one of the busiest Swat teams in California and claim the building is regularly watched by drug traffickers. September and October, harvest time, is their busiest time

In California, growers bloomed like algae. Marijuana activists established Oaksterdam University in the Bay Area, a centre of learning for the cannabis industry. And dispensaries popped up offering a bewildering array of marijuana to suit every taste all over the state. In Los Angeles alone, they outnumber Starbucks.

Yet this year California finds itself conflicted over a booming industry that has brought chaos. On one hand, the federal government, which still regards marijuana as an illicit substance, has made a number of high-profile arrests and issued orders for 71 dispensaries in LA to shut down. Yet those involved in the industry turn to state laws for protection.

Adding to the confusion is the fact that, alongside legal industry, an illicit one has flourished, spearheaded, allege the Step team, by

infested neighbourhoods in dead-end towns in an attempt to eradicate this illegal industry. “Every time I go to a meeting these days, I stink of dope,” remarks Lieutenant Tom Sigley, a solidly built lawman who puts one in mind of frontier sheriffs back in the days of the Wild West. He controls both the Step team and a team of undercover narcotics officers. He knows that 60 per cent of the Mexican cartels’ revenue comes not from cocaine, but marijuana.

“After 9/11, the border with Mexico was beefed up,” he explains. “The cartels are business people and they realised: why bother trying to smuggle it up through the border when they can grow it right here? We have soil, land and plenty of Mexican workers, many illegal, who will work for very little. What do car companies like Honda from Japan do? They build a car plant here in America.”

According to a US National Drug Intelligence Center report in 2011, the Mexican cartels are expanding their reach into the US. They

the grove from the ground, but not from an aerial reconnaissance mission. As we ascend, the pilot makes a 360-degree revolution and points out house after house where high makeshift fences have been installed behind which marijuana plants flourish.

Each Wednesday, the FedEx offices in towns and villages all over Visalia are packed with boxes lined with hot sauce or cologne, anything to mask the aroma of marijuana as it is sent to cities on the United State’s east coast and Florida. There, it is worth three times as much as it is here. Today, the Central Valley supplies America with its bud. For Demecio Holguin, a family man on the Step team who showed me a video of a cartel execution on his computer one morning, it’s a nightmare.

“They’ve made it easier for every drug dealer in the world here,” he says. “The cartels have extended their borders so that they grow here legally. We produce great bud in this area, there’s no doubt.”

long spindly stalks of marijuana with scissors to leave the smokeable bud. We press on, balancing across a fallen log perched over a gully.

Franks, gun slung over his chest, greets me on a bluff. “I saw heads bobbing through the undergrowth, running. We might pick them up at the road. All units are looking.”

We were all being watched long before we reached here. Franks motions to a surveillance post on top of the ridge behind a large oak. A breakfast of baked beans lies still warm on a blanket. A .22-calibre air gun sits nearby.

Deeper in is a complete mountain complex that has been constructed over months. There’s a warren linking a fully functioning kitchen, replete with food and seasonings and a temperature clock mounted on a tree. Freshly diced onions are laid out on a chopping board. The kitchen is built beneath a grove of trees and camouflage netting. A trail leads to an underground bunker hewn out of the hillside. It is obscured with foliage and branches in an ➤





**Nipped in the bud:** In California's Tulare County, the sheriff's department targets illegal grows by raiding properties with no-knock search warrants and removing crops. Grower Guadalupe (left), whose 87 marijuana plants in Ivanhoe were destroyed by the Step team in September 2012, says, 'Everything here is connected to gangs. Everything.' Opposite page: A member of the Step team conducts a search of a suspect's property



➤ attempt to make it invisible to passing helicopters. Inside, the air is cool and musty. Amid banks of Miracle-Gro and a clump of sleeping bags is a .45 handgun, loaded and cocked. A later search reveals other firearms along with a shotgun and rifle ammunition.

An army of migrant Mexican workers has terraced southeast-facing mountainsides. The plants are concealed from the air beneath towering oaks, the canopy cut back just enough to let in crucial light. There are 7,675 plants in one garden and 1,478 in another down below. The plants stand in neat, serried rows facing the sun. Each plant is fed drips of water by an elaborate network of hoses that runs for miles from the creek. The pressure is driven by gravity.

Worse are the discarded cartons of poison that once contained chemicals that kill anything that would harm the ganja plants. Buddy Hirayama remembers a previous grow where his skin swelled up and blistered for weeks on end after the operation. Such chemicals are banned in the US. At other grows, the team have found the pesticides zinc phosphide and carbofuran, which have killed entire streams of fish. Once he found a dead bear near a creek. Brian Adams has found sites where deer jerky is drying in the sun, mountain lion pelts are hung up and the heads of red-tailed hawk and other birds of prey stuck on sticks around the grow for voodoo magic. Mountain lions and red-tailed hawks are fast becoming endangered species.

"This is good bud," says Hirayama, as he snaps off a frond and sniffs.

With a potential street value of \$3,000 (£2,000) per pound, the haul would be worth at least \$27.5m (£18.2m). The men begin to chop down the illegal crop and tear up all the hose in a land reclamation. Among the team, Hirayama is an expert in the multitude of strains and potencies. He can tell you that the sativa strain gives a heady high, making you giggly, and that indica is more of a bodily high, getting one fully stoned. This is thanks to tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC, as it is commonly known – the psychoactive ingredient in marijuana which makes the weed such a trip.

"Twenty years ago, that was about three to four per cent [THC]," says Hirayama. "Today, with cloning and other advances, it's more like 20 per cent. This stuff is way more potent than anything that was sold in the Sixties."

In hundreds of arrests, the team find that the growers are mostly illegal Mexican immigrants forced to work in the grows by cartels who demand they do so to pay off the debts they owe "coyotes". These are the traffickers who smuggle them across the border. If they refuse to work in the grows, their families at home are threatened, often murdered.

By midday, helicopters with slings take out piles of eradicated marijuana plants. And then it is our turn. We strap ourselves to a long line attached to the belly of the chopper.

Hirayama and I are torn up into the sky, travelling at 100mph. Down below in the dense forest spreading beneath my feet, at least ten Mexican workers are running for their lives.



**BOBBY RADER PULLS OUT HIS GUN AND** wedges it between the seat and the gearshift of the truck. His partner, taciturn officer Hector Rodriguez, drives while scanning the road looking for the cartel-linked gunmen who are watching the house we are passing. We are in a dangerous area of southern Fresno, looking for a confidential informant that Rader and his partner say I need to meet.

"You can guarantee yourself a gunfight down here," says Rader, sinking lower in his seat, his hand on the reassuring heft of his Glock.



## The growers are mostly illegal Mexican immigrants forced to work by cartels to pay off the debts they owe their traffickers. If they refuse, their families are threatened, often murdered

A year or so ago they raided a mountain grow and the workers escaped. Rader found a bottle of ibuprofen labelled with a name and an address in Fresno and traced the pills to a middle-aged Mexican woman I'll call Maria. When confronted, she broke down in tears. Her former husband was a high-ranking member in the Tijuana cartel in the northern part of the country. In Tijuana, they'd had a luxurious house and expensive cars – a fabulous life, all derived from her husband's status. Often he would smuggle money into the US under the guise of holidays. But then corrupt police officers demanded some of the profits from the drugs. Her husband refused. He was killed by the police.

Shortly afterwards, Maria fled to the US, crossing the border illegally. Through her

husband's connections with the cartels, she quickly found herself involved in the marijuana trade in California. Her current boyfriend is a ranking member of the Zetas, who were once bodyguards for the Gulf cartel, but are now the most feared drug-trafficking organisation in Mexico. Recently, armed police arrested her boyfriend. Now he has put armed gunmen on her house to watch for police activity and anyone he suspects may be informing on him.

We pick her up outside a school. She's a short, demure woman with sun-streaked hair and a hamsterish demeanour. She talks a little and then breaks down in tears.

"It doesn't matter how long he spends in prison," she says. "He has people outside. If he thinks it is me who is informing on him, he will have me killed."

As we drive to a remote hotel carpark, making sure we are not followed, she gives an inside view of Mexican cartel involvement in the Californian medicinal marijuana trade. She describes how her boyfriend and other members of the cartel pay illegal immigrants to visit doctors to get marijuana "recommendations". Each recommendation offers the "patient" a legal recourse to grow 99 plants. The cartel men buy the documents and often have numerous grows staffed by workers they employ. It's a highly lucrative trade. Money is sent back to Mexico. Maria still has children in Tijuana.

"It's not me I worry about," she says. "It's my sons that they will kill if they think I would testify against them."

A local police car makes a sweep past, curious about what we are doing. Rader gets out and flashes his badge. The cop nods and drives off. Tears streak Maria's face.

Then her phone rings. It's her boyfriend calling from jail. She switches the call to loud-speaker. I still my breathing, but not my pulse, which rattles like a jackhammer. He talks Spanish in a gentle, cooing, undulating tone like waves on a seashore, except the message he has is thick with menace.

"I might stop breathing and then you might too," he says.

Maria hangs up the phone and, with a sharp intake of breath, sobs audibly. She refuses to help the police because of the risk to her children in Mexico. We drive her back to a safe place, circle round to make sure we are not followed in classic counter-surveillance and then stop to debrief.

"She'll be dead in a year," spits Rader, upset at her predicament. "Her whole life has been ruined because of this dirty little thing called marijuana. We got guns and helicopters and I can't help her. She is imprisoned by evil men and is sacrificing herself for her kids who are 800 miles away."

Rader throws his arms against his sides in disgust.

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**ON A DUSTY, DEAD-END BACK STREET IN** Ivanhoe, a gang-infested town northeast of Visalia, Guadalupe responds with barely suppressed rage as the marijuana-eradication team hacks down the towering marijuana plants in his back yard. Dressed in baggy black shorts, an oversized white T-shirt and an askance baseball hat, Guadalupe is part of the Sureños, a gang with its roots in southern Mexico. Two steel studs stick out of his lower jaw. He has a tattoo on his right arm – 798, the area code for Ivanhoe – and 5150 on his right forearm. That’s police code for “crazy”, or *el loco*, Guadalupe explains.

## The doctor’s secretary says that I am now a ‘patient’ and eligible

“I’m pissed, man,” he scowls on the porch of his dilapidated house, other gang-bangers rocking on chairs near a rusty weights bench. They eye their pit bull Lucy, grinning when she snarls at the deputies dumping bushels of marijuana into a truck. “People round here are crazy,” he continues. “They shot a cop here not long ago. After all this, some crazy shit is gonna happen tonight.”

“We put a lot of effort into that, man,” Guadalupe mourns, having lost his income and his investment. “That cost \$2,000 buying the plants [and] fertiliser.” With 87 plants potentially yielding 6lb each, the total grow might yield as much as \$1.6m (£1m) if it is trafficked. Guadalupe says that next time he is going to pick a strain of marijuana that only takes three months to grow and harvest.

The back yard of the house next door is also thick with ten-foot marijuana plants of the sativa strain, one of the most potent. The plants leave a viscous residue on my hands when I touch them. The house is derelict and abandoned, the yard tended by an old Mexican man in a baseball hat. He admits that he was asked to grow the marijuana for someone else he won’t name. He just says that they helped him get a doctor recommendation. It is nailed to the hoarding in front of the yard.

“It’s bullshit,” says narcotics cop Chad Rhyman, a tough, no-nonsense undercover

detective who has risked his life on drug buys and has “*Primus Inter Pares*” – “First Among Equals”, the motto of Step – tattooed on his arm. “There’s no reason these guys need marijuana; there is nothing wrong with them.”

He points to the guys in the stoop standing with Guadalupe. “What’s wrong with you that you need marijuana?” One says he hurt his knee playing football. Rhyman spits on the ground. “See, like I said, bullshit. What do they go to the doctor and say, ‘Hey, doc, my testicle’s lying the wrong way, can I smoke marijuana?’ What a joke!”

The 87 plants in the back are a cross-cloned type of sativa mixed with indica. I go back to Guadalupe and ask about the involvement of the gang in medicinal marijuana.

“Everything here is connected to gangs,” he states, flatly. “Everything.” He pauses. “But what you really have to worry about now is the cartels. They are everywhere.”

I ask him about this again when he is standing with his homies. He realises he may have said too much. “That’s happening in Mexico, not here.” His friends stare blankly ahead.

No one knows this better than David Padilla, 58, a quietly spoken man with a white beard and deep lines etched into his pinkish, walnut-hued face, evidence of a life spent in the fields as a *vaquero*, or cowboy. We meet in the office of homicide detectives Gary Hunt and Frank

But Moises was headstrong. He ignored his father and said that he would send money back to his mother who still lived in Mexico. Once he had made his fortune from marijuana, he declared proudly, he would buy a ranch and a huge four-wheel-drive truck. Moises would disappear up in the mountains for months at a time, calling his father only occasionally to say that he was OK. Ernesto would pay him only \$500 to \$1,000 (£330 to £660) every now and then, promising that when the crop was harvested, Moises would get rich with his share. Then disaster struck. The grow was raided by the sheriff and all the plants eradicated. Moises was never paid for his work.

The following year, Moises returned to a grow in the mountains. Ernesto was making big money, sending packets of cash back to Mexico in false compartments of big white trucks, the favoured mode of transport for cartel gunmen. He was also buying up property in San Diego. Rumours started to circulate in the community that one reason Ernesto’s wealth was growing so exponentially was because he killed his mountain workers. It was said that he buried them in the mountains and refused to share any of the profits. Moises grew more suspicious when he was not paid for months.

On 29 October 2011, Moises, along with his brother, went to a medical marijuana farm in Pixley to confront Ernesto about payment for



**THE CENTRAL CALIFORNIA MEDICAL CLINIC** in Visalia stands in a modest strip mall comprising a Chuck E Cheese’s, at which a car load of soccer moms drop their children for a birthday party. I’ve heard from one of the team’s informants, a former marijuana dealer who had “gutted” a Mexican gang member who opened fire on him with an AK-47 at

a notorious gas station in Porterville, a hub for illicit drug deals. I want to get a medicinal marijuana card to smoke the sacred herb myself and this is the place to go. In a modern office foyer, doubling as a doctor’s waiting room, a spiky-haired girl dressed all in black with tattoos littering her arms greets me with her sunglasses perched atop her head. A sign behind her says: “Cash only.”

First I have to fill out a questionnaire detailing my ailments. I am, as far as I know, a fit, healthy man. I say I have mild headaches. The waiting room is filled with young men, some of whom sport askance baseball hats, baggy shorts and tattoos. There is a young, chubby couple, a man with a sweaty beard and a woman with lank red hair. Their daughter sits between them, swinging her legs under her chair.

I am ushered into a small, windowless office where Dr Howard Kerr Ragland Jr sits slumped behind a small glass desk, so that his neck is level with the computer. He has a wood-ash-coloured beard and looks as if he needs a chiropractor from his hunched posture.

“So do they have marijuana in England?” he asks, desultorily. I say yes, but that, medicinally, I am not sure where the law lies. He asks what part of England I am from as he scrawls on a piece of paper. When I reply, “Suffolk,” he shrugs before wordlessly handing me a

made with ganja. I consult WeedMaps, the premier website for dispensaries, and head to the Tulare Alternative Healthcare dispensary in the next town over. On a quiet backstreet in a tiny town, just opposite a modish coffee joint, is a glass-fronted dispensary. I ring the buzzer and a 20-something man with white skin and piercing blue eyes ushers me in. On the wall is a sign stating: “Do not open your medicine in the car outside,” plus posters of Bob Marley and a psychedelic picture called Mountain High.

“Every time I look at that, I see something new,” says the man.

He asks to see my doctor’s certificate. Shortly afterwards, I am guided to the back. Off to one side is a room containing a large glass display case. On the wall opposite is a bewildering smorgasbord of marijuana choices from indica strains, which feature pineberry. In the hybrid strains there is blue dream, one of the menu’s *crème de la crème* options. In the display cabinet are varying types of hashish.

“Can I help you?” said the “bud tender”, a wrinkled, etiolated woman. I opt for a couple of “house joints”. “They are a mixture of our best stuff,” she declares. “Don’t smoke it driving,” she scolds, with a chuckle. “But people do.” She winks.

Two neatly rolled joints are put in a little sealable bag and then in a brown paper bag. I put them in the glove box of my rental car.

## to grow 12 plants legally. I hand over \$80 in cash for a certificate

Even the men on the Swat team see some use for marijuana. “Sure, I tried it once when I was in high school,” offers Jim Franks. “It didn’t do anything for me, I have to say. But look, yes, I believe there are medicinal uses for it and I understand that.”

In 2010, Demecio Holguin was called to an address where a 50-year-old woman was wasting away due to cancer. Her skin was like parchment and she looked as if she were in her seventies. She had several plants over her medical recommendation. Holguin said she had to move them inside and didn’t press charges as he could have done.

“I felt bad for her,” he says. “But she was the only person in all the years I have been doing this who was using it for the purpose that 215 was passed for. The rest? Well, people just want to get high. Legalisation will just mean that this stuff is grown everywhere. Do you think the cartels are going to start paying taxes?”

A countervailing view is held by a former deputy chief of the Los Angeles Police Department, Stephen Downing, who now works with a group called Law Enforcement Against Prohibition.

“I started when Nixon declared the war on drugs. We did our show-and-tells to the media and it was a big deal to have a couple of kilos of heroin, a couple of handguns and two or three thousand dollars of cash. Today it is a

warehouse full of dope, pallets with cash in the millions of dollars, and tens of thousands of war-level weapons. So we haven’t done anything different. We’ve done that for 40 years. It’s a complete failure.”

He dismisses reputed links between the medicinal marijuana industry and drug cartels as “myth making”. When it was first banned, says Downing, it was because of a race-based myth that “people of colour, Mexicans and African Americans smoked the devil weed which caused them to rape white women”.

He concludes: “Now we have discounted the theory that marijuana makes people of colour rape white women. But now we have found other ways to generate fear. One of those ways is to say that the cartels are taking over the medical marijuana industry.” However, he does concede that the cartels now control the distribution of drugs in the US.

Downing draws parallels with the prohibition of alcohol in the Twenties and Thirties. “When we had alcohol prohibition, we had a 13-year run of the most violent crime this country had seen. When we ended prohibition, that violence abated and it continued down[wards]. That is until we outlawed drugs with the Controlled Substances Act and the war on drugs has increased the violence again back to record levels.