

MOUNTAIN GROWN

Tom Wayman

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I'm a mite afraid nobody will attend the meeting I've organized, plus snow starts falling mid-afternoon and doesn't look like it will ever stop. But the promise of free gourmet beers and the threat of the new legislation south of the border brings them out in droves. By the time I call the gathering to order, more than sixty people in ones and twos have pulled open the Vallican Whole's wooden doors, stomped snow from their boots and brushed the snow off their parkas and ski jackets in the entrance vestibule. The Whole isn't the cheapest venue around—I could have booked something at the Hume Hotel in Nelson, or one of the local community halls. But the Whole's cachet as the hippie community centre is a real plus, considering who I've invited, and the place is large enough to hold everybody, as well as being right here in the valley.

I have Donna behind a table down at the main doors with the list of invitees, for security reasons. Once the arrivals' names have been checked off, and they climb the stairs into the hall, chairs for about seventy-five are set out facing a screen for my presentation. Along one wall I've got two big tables covered with white paper, an array of beers and Charles behind the tables dipping into one of six portable coolers filled with ice and bottles, depending on what brand the arrivals want to try. Stacks of plastic glasses are on the table, though hardly anybody is drinking out of anything but a bottle. On the wall back of Charles is one of my advertising banners from when we have a booth at garden shows or the Nelson street market: WAY TO GROW! GARDEN SUPPLIES. The skunky scent of marijuana, outgassing from the arrivals' clothes and outerwear, starts to fill the hall. "Eau de Kootenay," as a customer of mine termed it after another customer positively reeking of weed left the store.

Donna thought the meeting was a crazy idea. "Look how much it's costing you: renting the Whole, giving away expensive booze, paying Charles overtime to work the evening. Why not just talk about your crackpot scheme to them one at a time?" I pointed

out these expenses are an investment, not a loss. Financial acumen isn't her main attraction. Me, I'm a natural with money, which is how I launched Way to Grow. I'd been at loose ends between girlfriends about eight years ago and had travelled up to Nelson from the Coast for a week-long yoga intensive. I'd seen a poster about the workshop. Ever been to a yoga class? You should try it: chicks dig yoga. After a few days of checking out the talent at the intensive, and meeting a bunch of people around town, I could see that besides boasting some hot mamas, the West Kootenay is a gold mine for growing dope. And if I know one thing, it's that in a gold rush you want to sell shovels, not dig for gold. Most people go broke at the latter. Sure, a tiny number of them strike pay dirt. But like the lottery, statistically, practically, realistically *you* aren't going to win. Plus those who do hit the jackpot generally ruin their lives: they can't handle it. Take it slow and steady, flog them shovels, is my motto. You'll end up rich and by the time you do you'll have learned how to properly handle all that filthy lucre.

After the yoga workshop, I went back to Quadra Island, sold my funky coffee shop and set up Way to Grow! in South Slocan, within easy reach of Castlegar, Nelson, the valley. Hydroponics, grow lamps, security systems, everything for the grower. And enough regular garden supplies to be legit, too. Not that selling grow paraphernalia is against the law. Yet. But you never want to draw too much attention to yourself. If you know what I mean.

That same yoga class is where I met Donna. To this day she's sure that true love is what led me to shut down my old life on Quadra and move to the Koots to be with only her. I wouldn't have her believe anything else. I know that's what she tells her friends, because I had a little number with one of them, Kaycee, a couple of years ago. Spacey Kaycee. What a bod. Actually, Donna's pretty good-looking herself, if I do say so. And she's good with my kids, who are now, what, nine and eleven? I get them summers for a couple of weeks and most Christmases if Donna and I aren't away in Costa Rica or someplace toasty. Donna really plans out the kids' visits: stuff they might like to do, places to go. She's got parenting chops I'll never have in a million years. Even though she's never had kids of her own.

But you've heard of the downward dog pose? In yoga? When it comes to chicks, I'm the original downward dog. Can't get enough of that *mm-mm-mmm*. I'm telling you, garden supplies are almost as good a chick magnet as yoga. In the store, you talk to some honey about nurturing little plants: I mean marigolds or echinacea or cukes, not

bud. Their eyes get all dewy while they're clutching their little pots of lettuce starts or foxglove or rosemary. They can tell you're sensitive and caring. That's how I met Marcia last spring. After she'd dropped by the store about four times, I suggest I drive out to her place and see her garden first-hand: conduct a soil test and recommend a fertilizer. A cup of tea later we're in her bedroom going at it like crazed monkeys. She'd like me to leave Donna. Marcia's never said as much, but I know because her best friend is married to a good customer of mine, Bart. He and I used to be in the same men's group in the valley. So when I run into Bart I get all the lowdown. Sometimes this valley is too small. I'm not in any hurry, though, to bail on Donna. Marcia pretty much agrees with everything I say, which is flattering, but Donna is like the loyal Opposition. In business, sometimes you need to consider a different point of view. Think of those young MBAs who ruined Westinghouse, WorldCom, you name it. Idiots who were so full of themselves they couldn't listen to what people who'd been in the business for decades, or the customers, were saying.

Despite Donna's opinion, I knew my night at the Whole was a fabulous idea. Make the pitch where the boys can see others listening. They'll be drinking my beer so at some level they owe me. That's psychology. Then, after my spiel, I'll field all the scoffing questions and negative comments I'm sure to land, since most of these guys are morons. Then they witness somebody step forward. That move is costing me, too, though just some grow lamps. Donna, thank God, doesn't know about *that* expense. Hey, I read once that when Elvis first performed, Colonel Parker paid all these teenage tighties to scream. That got the ball rolling: people are pretty much sheep. And Jordan is a guy I can trust to keep his mouth shut. Still, the bulk of the crowd will go home full of beer, bullshit and bravado about what a dumb plan I've proposed. Then, starting tomorrow, one by one they'll be dropping by my store to sign up.

"Why rent the *Whole*, though?" Donna had asked. "It's more expensive than one of the community halls."

She's right, of course, but Slocan Park Hall or Winlaw Hall have pretty straight contact people, and I didn't want somebody hanging around my meeting who would make the boys nervous. I also had a more grandiose reason, and that's the one I shared with Donna.

"Tradition."

"Tradition? What's this, *Fiddler on the Roof*?"

I reminded her that construction of the Vallican Whole was a significant moment in the valley. In 1971 a bunch of hippies met and decided to put up their own community building on some land in Passmore, modelled after the Doukhobor and community halls all through these valleys. The freaks applied for and received funding from some federal youth program, and as you can guess work proceeded rather slowly since they had no idea what they were doing, other than how to ingest certain illegal substances. For quite a while the only physical manifestation of the hall was a hole dug in the ground for the basement. Straight folks used to laugh about the Vallican Hole, saying that was about the best that hippies could do. But when the freaks got it together and the building finally opened in 1975, they kept the derisive name, only adding a letter to emphasize that, love 'em or hate 'em, hippies were part now of the whole valley community.

The construction of the Whole represented a big change, I told Donna. Before the building went up, people around here maybe thought the hippies, draft dodgers, back-to-the-landers were a bunch of transients, who would blow through the valley briefly and within a few years be back in San Francisco or Toronto or Detroit or Vancouver. The Whole said: "We're here to stay." The paradigm shift I was going to lay on everybody at my event, I assured Donna, was as momentous a change in the valley as the hippies erecting the building. She just rolled her beautiful eyes.

As people climb up the stairs into the hall, I'm over by the beer tables shaking hands, fist-bumping and high-fiving, making sure everybody selects a brew they like. Schmoozarama. Charles is a good worker in the store, and he's just as solid here, going full out dispensing the beer. After a while, a bearded young guy with dreadlocks I don't know approaches me—this was an invitation-only event, but I had told the growers to spread the word to folks they trusted, although pre-registration was definitely required. Beardie inquires if my name is Alan. When I plead guilty, he informs me that the lady down in the entranceway asked him to tell me to go down there, that there's a problem.

I head for the stairs. Nearly everybody who has already arrived is as freaky looking as you'd expect: dreads, sashes, embroidered jeans, toques, long hair, beards, face hardware, tattoos. In short, the swelling crowd mostly sports the official grower look that's a cross between hippie, Rastafarian and wannabe ghetto rap star. A few folks, however, are just dressed country pie: jeans and checked shirt, maybe some chainsaw-maker-branded suspenders.

Two-thirds of the people crowding into the hall are in their twenties and thirties, but there's lots of folks my age, too, or even older: fifties, sixties. Old Man McKay is here with his two sons: all of them drive logging truck, hard-working guys, and they all grow, too. Steady customers of mine, once we resolved that little disagreement about some seeds I sold them they claimed were defective. Dad McKay has a truck and the boys, Donny and Alvin, share another rig: Alvin is a heavy equipment mechanic for the highways contractor, but drives on his days off. The family are straight arrows: McKay's wife Irene, the boys' mom, is on the credit union board and the school board and was a sparkplug in the group that got the seniors' home built at Passmore. When the family grow op on their land up behind Silverton was busted, and Dad and the boys were popped, some people wanted her to resign. She claimed she had no idea what the rest of her family was up to. That was her story and she was sticking to it. Old Man McKay took the rap himself and got house arrest except for going to work and eventually life went back to normal.

I navigate through the knots of people standing talking and drinking, and scoot down the stairs to see what Donna wants. At the table is a baby-faced guy, stocky, medium height, clean-shaven, late thirties or early forties, wearing sharply creased pants and a V-neck sweater over a button-down shirt. Three metres away I can pick up the sickly reek of cologne, as if he's a high school kid who doesn't know better and has drenched himself in Axe. His appearance just screams *cop*. Donna tells me his name isn't on the list.

"Good evening, officer," I say to him. "This is a private party, but what can I do for you?" He gives a half-hearted laugh and then starts to assure me that he's in the loop, part of the scene, reeling off four names that he says encouraged him to attend—major players. One of his references is already here, so I ask Mr. Green Team, as the Mounties around here like to call their dope squad, to wait where he is. Upstairs among the drinkers I find who I'm looking for, and when I begin to describe the guy who just showed up, his verifier starts to laugh. "Roger," he says.

"That's his name?" I ask. He swears that Roger is a conduit between a number of locals and some coastal wholesalers with a fondness for motorcycles. I ask my informant to accompany me to the door to positively ID the newcomer, which he does.

As the two start up the stairs together Donna gives me a look that says *I hope you know what you're doing*. I shrug: too late now to change course.

The next twenty minutes are more schmooza-palooza for me, lots of laughing and kidding around. I keep one eye on the stairs, though, and people are still trickling in. This is the Kootenays, after all, where a lot of people would be late for their own funeral if they could swing it. Every so often I thread my way downstairs to check in with Donna to be sure she's okay. Once she's chatting with Tricia Olsen, a hard-bitten woman in her fifties, slim as a fence rail with muscular arms and a permanent big grin, whom everybody likes. Tricia runs a small herd of cows on her acreage as well as operating a fence-building business mostly by herself. One of her barns is entirely set aside for a grow show. I get a hug from Tricia that leaves me checking my ribs as I head upstairs once more.

Another time I peek down at the entrance desk, however, and Donna is deep in conversation with my former men's group buddy Bart, whose wife, you'll recall, is the bosom pal of my current sideline, Marcia. Bart has parked his butt on the desk, and the two of their heads are close together as they talk, both with intense expressions. My sphincter tightens right up. To begin with, I wasn't even aware Donna knew Bart, other than me mentioning him as part of the men's group, back when I was involved. Come to think of it, maybe there was a potluck or two that included the womenfolk, but mostly what the group did was strictly No Girls Allowed. Donna and Bart is not a linkage I want to encourage. All I need to hear is, "Bart and his wife want us to come for dinner next week. Sounds like fun." Worst will be if Bart inadvertently let the cat out of the bag with regard to me and Marcia. I'm jolted by the thought that he might have forgotten to associate Donna with me, and could say something that arouses Donna's suspicions. Say what you like about Donna, she's not dumb. I start to sweat, watching them chatter away with such concentration. I tell myself to keep calm. They could be talking valley politics, or road maintenance, or cross country ski techniques. "The wicked flee when no man pursueth" is one of the few bits of the Bible I remember from Sunday school. But the last thing I need right now on the very cusp of making my presentation is a revelation of my little number with Marcia, accompanied by the loud, histrionic and generally unpleasant domestic fallout guaranteed to immediately ensue.

I square my shoulders, trip down the stairs with a smile pasted on my cake hole and break up Donna and Bart's little party with a big arms-extended welcome to my old amigo Bart. Turns out the duo were exchanging zucchini recipes, not vital data concerning my infidelity, and I break into a sweat again, this time of relief. Luckily, a

couple more bozos come through the front door at this moment, and I seize the opportunity as Donna gets busy checking their names to whisk Bart up the stairs with me while I babble on about the thirty-seven kinds of beer assembled for his tasting enjoyment.

I park him in front of Charles and his trusty bottle opener, and return to glad-handing the crowd. While I'm doing so, one part of my brain is whining, "Why do you complicate your life like this? Don't you have enough going on, implementing this project that will make you simultaneously rich beyond your wildest dreams and more popular than John Lennon? Imagine how you'll be rewarded when the grateful populace, or at least the dope-growing portion of it, finally understands what a benevolent genius has been living unheralded in their midst. Why do you also need to get involved with extramural pussy?" And another part of my brain is retorting, "Extra pussy has always been the prerogative of genius. Your ability to juggle successfully an overload of details that would stagger an ordinary person is precisely what defines your genius. Use it or lose it: if you don't have far too much happening, you might as well give up and start watching four point five hours of television a night, or whatever the abysmal national viewing average is."

Spacey Kaycee's term for my inclination to ride the edge was "negative excitement." Some term she picked up from her time in AA, as it turned out.

Eventually the voice in favour of multitasking wins the debate, as usual. But then a face I recognize as an intermittent customer of Way to Grow! interrupts a conversation I'm having with Old Man McKay about the playoff prospects of the Calgary Flames. The interloper asks, "When's this fucking thing going to start?" So I know it's time. I lope down to the entrance again and tell Donna I'm going to begin. I open the front doors where, sure enough, four or five guys on the porch are sharing a doobie. I call them in. Then it's up to the hall, and shout that everybody should grab a seat, we're about to get underway.

People are having a good time with the beer social, so I'm more or less ignored at first. Water has pooled on the floor here and there, having melted from people's boots, but that's normal at a public gathering in winter. I slip between the assembled chairs to where the laptop and video projector are set up, and click them on. A photo of the valley in summer projects onto the screen, a paradisiacal image of green mountainsides as backdrop to leafy birch and cottonwood branches overhanging the lazy river. I chose

this shot to put people into the mood of laid-back good-vibe days. Donna, bless her, has followed me upstairs and now flicks the hall lights off and on a few times, then configures the lighting so most of the illumination is up front where I'll be speaking. The clumps of talkers slowly peel themselves away from the beer tables and amble across the room to find places to sit. The noise of talking amplifies as they file into the rows of chairs, and then diminishes as the crowd settles. I'm standing at the front, and Donna is in position at the laptop.

After welcoming everybody, I run over the security precautions. Everyone present was personally invited, or otherwise vetted by invitees. The core list of people selected to attend was drawn up in consultation with a few trusted and respected names in the valley. I repeat what the written invitation they received said: they have been invited because of their reputation as important and influential figures in an industry that, according to many impartial sources, is the main economic generator for the region, surpassing in revenue lumber, mining and smelting combined, and bigger than health care and all other government employment.

"In the unlikely event," I continue, "that any police spies have been included among those invited, I'll stress that no one here to my knowledge is engaged in any illegal activity. All of you are simply local citizens concerned with the present situation and future possibilities of a vital component of our regional economy." That statement nets a big laugh.

I signal, and Donna brings up the next PowerPoint slide, a list of initiatives in US states to legalize aspects of marijuana possession or growing. I briefly summarize the info on the slide, then launch into my spiel.

"The trend is clear, as everyone in this room is aware: state after state has begun legalizing, or minimizing the penalty for, simple possession. The next inevitable step is a tax grab by cash-starved state, county and municipal governments who will legalize, control and tax the production of weed. At the moment, all this is illegal under US *federal* law. Yet how long can the feds hold out if a significant number of states and cities are rolling in money obtained by legalizing and regulating the industry? And as the US goes, so goes the True North Strong and Free."

Donna puts the appropriate slide up on the screen. "In Canada alone, as you see here," I continue, "the potential dollars at stake according to the best law enforcement

guestimates indicate that, compared to pot, current government legalization and regulation of lotteries is a puny source of income.”

Up comes a bar chart showing every current provincial and federal source of income. I can't resist underscoring how what is a crime today is good business tomorrow. “As you know, lotteries were once entirely illegal. For example, when I was a kid, selling an Irish Sweepstake ticket was a crime in Canada. And in the US In fact, forty years before the Irish Sweeps were even inaugurated, the US Congress in 1890 outlawed using the mail to buy or sell any kind of lottery ticket. Today lotteries, as these charts show, are a significant income stream for governments.

“However,” I caution, adopting my most serious face, “the question remains whether the small weed producer is likely to benefit from legalization. Or will you, uh, that is, will the small producer be squeezed out in favour of large corporations who are better positioned to, shall we say, bestow campaign contributions on the men and women at the various levels of government who will decide how the details of decriminalization play out? Never underestimate the speed with which a profitable free market business sector can go into the dumper due to government fiat or mismanagement.” I give Donna a nod and up comes a screen with dollar and employment graphs illustrating the sad tale of the Ontario tobacco farmer and the Newfie cod fisherman over the past half-century.

“You might imagine—” I try to counter an argument I've heard raised several times when the boys are chewing over the implications of legalization “—that even if the big corporations take over, you can sell your crop to them. But you'll agree with me, I'm sure, that once the stuff becomes legal, how it will be priced is not at all clear. That is, will the small grower be able to survive financially? Will the corporations not inaugurate their own production? I'll remind you that, with the rise of agribusiness, the small food-farmer is deeper in debt than ever. Most have to take non-agricultural jobs to make ends meet, if they aren't squeezed entirely off their land. If you can't make a living as a grower, what marketable skills do you have to put food on your table, never mind a new Lexus in your garage?” Dead silence at the last comment. Which is good: they're thinking. “Especially in today's depressed economy?”

I pause and survey the crowd. Rows of eyes watching me. I haven't said anything they haven't thought of themselves in the black of night. “What to do?” I look around

the room, meet a few eyes, milk this pause for all it's worth, let the perilousness of their long-term prospects sink in. "What to do?"

A stir in the assembly. Nobody says anything, to me or each other, but they shift uneasily in their seats. A few take a pull on their brewskis.

"Not to worry, men. And woman: Tricia." General laughter: a tension breaker. "I've given this a lot of thought," I continue, a concerned expression plastered on my face. "I've consulted at length with various experts, as I'll reveal in a few minutes. The route out of the morass that looms ahead of us, I'm convinced, the solution to the irrelevance and bankruptcy that is likely to be the lot of the West Kootenay small producer swept aside by changes in the industry, can be summed up in a single word. Coffee."

A crescendo of murmuring starts, including a few people pointing at their heads with an index finger while they rotate their hands, indicating to someone seated beside them that I've lost my marbles. But I persevere. "I'm going to show you—" I override the increasing noise "—the benefits of starting to shift production from grass to high-end arabica coffee beans. First I want to—"

An arm is lifted and waving in the crowd, like a kid's at school. It's the chunky gatecrasher with baby face and V-neck sweater. "Excuse me," he calls, his arm still up. "Excuse me."

An adage from years in business flashes into my brain: the customer you go out of your way to help is invariably the one who causes the most trouble. No good deed goes unpunished. "Yes?"

Baby face—what was his name? Ronald? Robert? *Roger*—stands. "I'm so sorry to break in," he says, with a mirthless half-laugh, as though mocking his own audacity. "I just felt I had to correct something you said. Hope you don't mind." The thin laugh again.

"You have a question?"

"Thank you." His face swivels to take in the crowd on both sides of him. "Umm, I think maybe you painted a rather bleak picture of our industry. Possession of cannabis for personal use may be legalized here and there in some jurisdictions. But in my view, we're a long, long way away from the small grower being obsolete. I've been assured—"

Applause breaks out a couple of places in the room. I try to note who is clapping, but I'm too late. Somebody shouts, "Right on" and Bart, the treacherous weasel, yells agreement: "Totally."

Roger looks left and right, ducking his head modestly. "Thank you. I want to mention I've been assured by associates of mine who are vitally involved in the industry that no matter what any *government* does, they're interested in continuing to purchase your product. Of course, like you said, Alan, nobody here does anything illegal."

A brief laugh.

"My associates," Roger resumes, "don't only spend their time riding motorcycles. In conversations I've had, they stress that they will find a use for crops from the West Kootenay for a long, long time to come." He produces another half-laugh. "Thanks, Alan. That's all I have to say."

He sits down amid a buzz of talk and scattered applause. Somebody yells, "Good to hear, Roger."

Another voice, one of the McKay kids, calls out over the ambient chatter, "He's right, Alan. Change might be coming, but it ain't nothing we can't handle."

A few shouts of approval from various parts of the hall, and another increase in the background decibels of talk. I figure I better counter this idea fast.

"People who grow spend a lot of time, effort, money and brain power," I pronounce loudly, wishing I'd arranged to have a PA, "to try to stay one jump ahead of the cops, right? A percentage of folks nevertheless get busted and lose their crop. That's not going to change in the short term. In fact, wouldn't you agree the horsemen are getting more sophisticated? How many people still grow outdoors? Didn't overflights and colour spectrum analysis have something to do with that change? And the new smart meters the power companies are installing are directly intended, they tell us, to pinpoint power theft, a mainstay of lots of indoor grow shows. BC Hydro and Fortis claim that smart meters can tell who is stealing power, or who is using a lot of power at a time of day that isn't normal for such usage. This pronouncement might be just scare propaganda. But what if it's not?"

The room is abruptly quiet again. Faces are paying attention. "Some of you older folks like Roger here maybe are gambling you can finish your careers before the industry is substantially transformed. You might be kidding yourself. Who here can say that the new medical use legislation in California, for example, bringing in not just

permits for own-use and medical cultivation, but also launching the development in that state of specialty strains, hasn't already hurt prices and demand for Kootenay product? Think back even five years."

The hall remains dead silent. "That's just short-term, too. Not that what I'm proposing can be done overnight. But those who don't start now to switch over from bud to coffee will be like those Ontario tobacco growers who were certain the drop in demand for ciggies and cigars was temporary. Which McDonald's do you think those farmers are working at today? Especially since they couldn't even get hired for factory jobs when their farms went under, because everything is made in China now."

Bill Sevastapol, a grower from Lemon Creek who has never bought anything at my store, bursts out in a voice vibrating with resentment: "Yeah, yeah, but how the fuck can we grow *coffee*? Coffee comes from Central and South America. Or Africa. You know: *hot* places?"

Big laugh. Another mocking shout: "Mountain grown." A joking voice, pretending realization: "Wait a minute, we're *in* the mountains." More hee-hawing.

Laugh it up, chuckle-heads, I don't say. "I'm glad you asked that," I state. "I'm going to explain next how coffee is grown. But first there's something else you need to be conscious of while we're considering the long-term. You think a lot of people are into weed? Millions of people everywhere, your ultimate customers? Dig this: coffee is the second largest commodity sold in the world, second only to oil. The market for coffee is hundreds if not thousands of times larger than for smoke. Many people light up, but *everybody* drinks coffee."

I nod to Donna, and in the renewed stillness the next screen shows the world's primary coffee producing areas. "Coffee is presently grown outdoors," I intone, "between the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn. As for 'mountain grown,' a supposed positive characteristic of some coffee? That's a complete shuck. Arabica beans are *all* grown between four thousand and six thousand feet. The plants' prime growing environment is twelve-hour days and twenty degrees Celsius, which is why coffee is grown high up and in the tropics: that's where the required combination of light and temperature is found. The plants also like rain, and volcanic or other rich soils. You can grow robusta beans lower down the mountains, but robustas produce shit-coffees even though they generate more beans per tree. And why would anybody want to raise robustas, especially now when more consumers are used to a good-flavoured—"

“How high are *we*?” somebody calls.

Laughter again, accompanied by a hooted: “I don’t know about you, brother, but I’m pretty high.”

The first voice again, annoyed. “I didn’t mean that. What’s our elevation?”

“Nelson is about two thousand feet. Six hundred metres,” Old Man McKay contributes.

“That means we’re too low to grow coffee, doesn’t it?” the guy sitting beside Bart wants to know.

“Hold on,” I tell them. “Let me finish. The real—”

“Hurry up,” a voice suggests. “I’m getting thirsty.”

Widespread hilarity. “The quicker I’m done,” I say over the guffaws, “the quicker you can get another drink.” I gesture toward the beer tables. As if on cue, Charles waves.

“‘Mountain grown’ as I mentioned—” I pick up the build of my argument “—applies to all arabica coffees. The real dispute these days is between shade-grown and full-sun-grown coffee. Coffee raised in the shade of the forest canopy, in the understory, has the best taste and is the traditional way to grow. All you eco-freaks know why forests are necessary for bird life, biological diversity and all that good stuff. What’s been happening, though, is—” I signal, and Donna brings up the slide of different shade categories “—extensive deforestation in order to grow coffee in direct sunlight. Coffee plants in open areas can be crowded together for better yields. But besides ecological impact, sun-grown coffee beans don’t make as good coffee. Coffee raised this way also requires chemical pesticides and fertilizers that shade-grown plants don’t. And you know what’s wrong with—”

“So we can grow coffee on the clear-cuts?”

Laughter. Before it trails off, Bruce Sherbinin shouts, “If we’re in trouble because corporations are going to take over, how is it any different with coffee? Won’t Starbucks and the other mega-corporations just control everything?”

Sherbinin. An operation up McKean Road in Winlaw so small he might as well be growing on a windowsill. But I have one of my strokes of genius—an idea I hadn’t thought of when I prepared my talk. “Think wine,” I tell Bruce. “The wine industry in the Okanagan was just about nonexistent twenty-five years ago. A few growers started by selling grapes to the makers of plonk. Then someone realized there was a demand for estate wineries, that more money could be made producing classier, smaller volume

wines. Result? An explosion of wineries and of free-standing vineyards, too. Right about when the fruit orchards were in trouble due to competition from imports, the demand for upscale BC wines stepped in to save the day. Provided, of course, you were an orchardist willing to make the shift to—”

“Screw coffee,” someone suggests. “Let’s all grow wine.”

A surge of applause, cheers, hoots. I wait until the noise starts to taper off.

“You *could*,” I suggest. Mr. Reasonable. “If you knew anything about viticulture. And if wine grapes would grow in our region. Which they won’t. That’s why—”

“Doesn’t sound like coffee will grow here either.” An objection from a different corner of the hall. “It’s not exactly tropical outside.” Much laughter. “And from what you’re saying—” the voice more confident now that the room has approved of his humour —“our elevation is too low.”

“Ah,” I respond. “You bring me to the crux of the evening. Donna, if you please?” She gets up the slide with the greenhouse schematic.

“Gentlemen, behold the future,” I declare. “Remember what I said about elevation and geography only having to do with keeping the little plants happy with twelve hours of sunlight and a steady twenty degrees? You folks may not know dick about grape-growing. But any of you with an indoor operation, and that’s most of you, do know lots about control of temperature and light. Sorry, I don’t mean ‘you.’ Whoever is growing. But you know what I mean.”

The room fixates on the drawing. This moment in the absolutely still hall is my payoff: hours and hours of research on the Net, a zillion phone calls, three trips to Vancouver to meet with suppliers, big-scale roasters and more. Plus contracting with a flaky Nelson artist for this illustration: greenhouse dimensions, coffee shrub layout, irrigation and heating setup, ventilation fans.

“You’ll agree this greenhouse layout looks rather familiar,” I point out. “Except for the retractable cloth gizmos up top. Shade-grown coffee needs 35 to 65 percent shade for maximum effect. The experts think shade increases bean ripening times, improving the taste. Did I mention that coffee is actually a fruit? That the plants produce what are called cherries, inside each of which are two coffee beans? Anyhow, depending on the weather you can deploy the shade cloth or not.”

I can almost hear the wheels churning inside the dreadlocked-and-toqued heads. Smoke is pouring out of ears as they try to assess what I’m saying, what’s on the screen.

Their synapses may be clogged with resin like the inside of an old hash pipe, but I can sense repeated attempts to get them to fire. Now to set the hook.

“That’s it in a nutshell, boys. My beautiful assistant and myself both have handouts

—“ I hold one up “—providing prices for coffee plants, and for specialty products like the shade cloth. I assume you are familiar with the other indoor growing costs, though these are listed on the handout, too. The info package I’ve prepared also has some likely return on investment estimates, which you’ll see are quite favourable. I won’t bullshit you: this isn’t the quick buck that weed is. But if you factor in increasing pressure from the nation’s finest in the short haul, plus being bypassed by post-legalization corporate growers in the long haul, you’ll see the idea makes sense. These plants take three to five years to come on stream, so the sooner you begin to shift over, the quicker you’ll be making legit money. *Big money*, if I dare say so. The whole trend—”

“You’re not known to be in the running for Good Citizen of the Year, Alan.” Sherbinin again. He’s rewarded with a huge laugh, and he grins briefly in acknowledgement. “What’s in it for you, with all this? Why do I feel you’ll be raking in serious dollars whatever happens to the rest of us?”

More hee-haws, and applause.

“I’m a businessman,” I admit. “But so are you, or people you’re acquainted with. I’ve done the research, I’ve made the contacts, I can supply you with advice, or contacts if you want to check out this stuff on your own. I’d be happy to sell you the coffee plants, and otherwise assist you to get started. You already know I offer everything you need for greenhouses. I can give you the names of processors who are interested in buying West Kootenay beans, or I can act as your agent and sell them for you. Needless to say, you’re free to keep on as you always have, and be squashed like a bug as the economics of how you’ve made your living completely change. But, yeah, I probably understand the coffee market better than you at this point. So I have a better idea of what you should be getting for your—”

“How much per kilo *would* we get?” a voice interrupts.

“It’s not that simple. Coffee prices—” I begin, but jeers erupt from a few corners of the room.

“Look, for those of you who can read, I spell out, *as* I’ve mentioned, likely rates of return on these handouts.” I flourish one. “Coffee base prices have been on a steep

upward slope since the start of this century. My estimates are based on where they're likely to be in three years and five years, since, as I say, even if you plant tomorrow you're not going to be seeing a return for three to five years. But—" I speak louder over an increasing level of talk in the room "—the coffee world is changing, too. Only in this case, to the benefit of the small producer. Some of you are old enough to remember the consumer shift from blended Scotches, which emphasized consistency of taste, to single malt Scotch, each of which has a recognizably better but unique taste."

The mention of expensive Scotch dampens the side conversations. When these folks juice, they have a fondness for pricey single malts. Most in the room are listening again. "Coffee drinking is heading the same way. Even Starbucks tells you the origin of the beans they've blended for the garbage coffees they flog. A one-off local roaster like Oso Negro in Nelson does exactly the same. The trend is—" troublesome Roger's arm is waving in the air again "—people soon are going to walk into a coffee shop and ask for a coffee from a specifically sourced bean, a named bean grown in a specific country, or even from a particular grow op, sorry, farm. Just a second, Roger. Last slide, please, Donna."

On the screen is the clincher. "Look at this. Sourced beans that customers request can sell to roasters for ten times the general market price for coffee. And the market price itself is rapidly rising, as I've said. So the price you'll get from your coffee depends on which beans you grow. Below the bar graphs, that's a photo of new hybrid cultivar that one supplier I represent claims is perfectly adapted for greenhouse growth. When I mentioned to him my idea that I've been explaining to you good people this evening, he turned out to be way, way ahead of me. Great minds think alike. The supplier—" a universal groan fills the hall, which I ignore.

"The supplier already had been developing an arabica designed for the discriminating customer of tomorrow, yet a plant that thrives in an artificial environment. They call this cultivar 'cascadia.' They poured me a cup of cascadia coffee, and I have to say it's hard to go back to even Oso Negro's best after that. Of course, cascadia is only one of several plants I can set you up with. The others have a longer track record, although my money's on this one." Roger's hand has started pumping energetically in the air like that of a Grade 4 keener who is sure he knows the answer to some teacher's question, or else a kid who really needs to go to the can. "Roger?"

He climbs to his feet. "Sorry to interrupt again," he begins, ducking his baby face deferentially and issuing his half-laugh. "But maybe I don't understand? You say the small producer has done better as the market changed for wine, scotch and coffee? But people should stop growing cannabis because the small producer will disappear if the market for cannabis changes? Why wouldn't the small producer in our industry *benefit*, like with wine or Scotch? BC Bud is already a desired commodity among connoisseurs, I think." He sits down.

"Fucking-A," and several other shouts of approval lift on a thunderous wave of applause toward the rafters of the Vallican Whole. I have a couple of simultaneous thoughts. One is: can I identify a slight lisp in Roger's voice that wasn't there before? Hopefully an indication of stress? Did he really say, "BC Bud ith already a dethired commodity among connoitheurth"? Could Roger's latest attempt to screw me be a product of worry, a desperate rearguard effort as he senses the boys are leaning toward adopting my idea? The second thought I have is that when this is over I am going to kill, via slow dismemberment, first this turkey and then whichever assholes invited him to attend my pitch.

"The difference has to do with effect," I manage to interject into the chatter ballooning throughout the hall. "Effect," I repeat, while I wait for the racket to fade a little. "With wine, Scotch and lately with coffee, customers have learned to tell the difference between plonk and a varietal with definite qualities that they enjoy. Everybody in this room can distinguish between a Starbucks coffee and one from Oso Negro, correct? On the other hand, to be honest, a stone is a stone is a stone. As long as smoke isn't so harsh as to burn your throat, who cares what it's called? That was true of the market forty years ago, and it's true today. I don't see any sign the situation will be different in the future."

Roger's arm is waving in the air again. I press on. "Most important, though: it's not hard to grow your own grass. Especially when it becomes legal. Tend four or five plants in your garden or apartment balcony, pluck a few leaves now and then, dry some for the winter and you're set. That's the future small grower: the individual consumer. In contrast, people are not going to distill their own single malt, or grow their own coffee. A few people will make their own wine, or, mostly, pretend to do so at a U-brew place where the owners do 95 percent of the work. But that wine isn't very good, or at least, not good enough to be a threat to the small estate wineries. Whereas people can get

satisfactorily ripped on the fruits of their own labour. That's why small coffee producers have a future while small weed producers do not."

I hear applause from one source: my man, Jordan, finally springing to life to earn his grow lights. "I'm sold," he announces to the room. "How do I sign up?"

"Just come talk to me," I say, smooth as silk. "Now, I've bored everybody long enough, but there's still beer left, isn't there, Charles?" He nods from behind the tables. Roger's hand is still madly oscillating. Is there an armpit equivalent to carpal tunnel? "Stick around if you have more questions, and please pick up one of these info sheets from either Donna or me." Donna, on cue, kills the computer and the screen goes white. "I'll have them in the store, too, of course. Thanks, everybody, for coming out and listening. And drink up, unless you're over the legal limit."

The last brings a good-natured laugh. People stand and stretch, blabbing with each other as most of them amble toward the side of the hall to see which beers remain. I'm suddenly weary. My optimism, I'm aware, is draining away. Growers are quick-buck, live-for-the-moment types, I note gloomily, and coffee requires more forward thinking. Anybody who picks up my handout is sure to grasp the required scale of the conversion project if his brain is still functioning. Multiply the pounds of beans a single coffee bush produces times the wholesale bean price, and the return is considerably less per plant than weed. You aren't going to make a living from a basement grow show of coffee. But, as I stress on the info sheet, you don't *have* to grow it in a basement hidden from the relentless eye of the law. You can build multiple greenhouses on your acreage, and don't have to worry about neighbours or jealous colleagues ratting you out or ripping you off. You don't have to hide electrical usage to heat the greenhouses. Plus there's no risk of having your whole crop busted. Still, given the brain power of most growers, my entire venture is probably doomed.

I try to shake off the negativism, to Velcro a smile on my face before stepping over to the clusters of people by the beer tables to receive some feedback. Maybe one or two of the more adventurous sort will buy into it. Which is better than nothing. "Why don't you grow coffee yourself to show them how it's done?" Marcia had asked me when I'd mentioned the idea to her. "You know, be a role model, like a demonstration forest?" That's the difference between Donna and Marcia. Donna understands that the only way to get rich is to sell those shovels, and never be tempted to start digging in search of the mother lode.

Donna can read my moods, too, and suddenly she's standing beside me holding out a beer. I take it gratefully and knock about a quarter of it back. "You did good," she says as I lower the bottle from my mouth. She leans in to peck my cheek. My frame of mind considerably brightens when I see standing behind her two young guys shifting their weight from leg to leg, fingers pulling at the labels on their beer bottles, obviously waiting to talk to me. A few seconds later they're holding copies of the info sheet, and I'm walking them through the deal one more time. I know one of them, the husband of a yoga instructor here in the valley I've taken classes from, and remember he was laid off when the sawmill at Slocan shut down. So the concept of economic changes putting your livelihood at risk isn't foreign to him.

The boys I'm talking to don't commit, of course, but when we're done I can tell they're mulling the prospect over. This evidence that my presentation didn't fall entirely on deaf ears cheers me up even more. My smile is genuine as I saunter over toward the beer drinkers.

Too late I see baby-face Roger detach from where he has been holding forth earnestly to a couple of guys taller than him. "I hope you didn't mind me asking my questions," he starts, in that self-deprecating manner which I can tell is completely phony. "You're on to an interesting scheme, though I don't quite see how it could work. But I've taken one of your handouts—" he pulls a folded paper out of a rear pocket of his slacks to show me, before stuffing it back "—to study. Oh, and before I forget." He pauses for just a microsecond too long. "Marcia says hi. I grew up in New Westminster with Bart. You know Bart, right? He knows you, anyway. His wife is good friends with Marcia, and I was over at Bart and Andrea's for supper last night. Marcia was there, too. When I mentioned I was going to attend your event this evening, she said to be sure to say hello."

Roger's face is expressionless. I can't tell if he's trying to let me know that he's aware of my fling with Marcia, that it was talked about over dinner. Is he vaguely threatening me with disclosure? Or is he just making a pathetic attempt at connection? I have a flash that he's the kind of creep who likes to have a dossier of information on everybody, especially how people are vulnerable. Just in case those details ever come in handy.

"Be sure to say hello next time you see her," I shoot back. "She's a good customer, and I like to keep my customers satisfied." The last is just in case he has the hots for her

himself—she *does* have a body that won't quit. Why not rub it in that I'm getting a piece off her and he isn't? "Now if you'll excuse me."

"Actually, I do have one more quethtion," Roger begins. "How could coffee—?" But I step past him toward where Mickey Vosin and three other older growers are deep in conversation. I interrupt them with my smile and "well, what do you gentlemen think?"

"Alan, your idea is completely full of shit. Here's why," Mickey begins, bluster being his modus operandi, especially when he's in the wrong. But I'm happy to half-listen to him repeat some of the objections I've already dealt with in the meeting, while I chew over one more time whether Roger really could make trouble for me with regard to Marcia. Or in some other way. I'm also wondering whether five years from now I'll be recognized as the far-sighted founder of the thriving West Kootenay coffee industry, or I'll still be flogging grow mixes and irrigation systems for two-bit dope operations. Also seedlings, wind chimes and plant pots for the general public.

I decide it's a win for me in either case, like with Donna and Marcia. If you can't take a few chances, step out of the well-worn path that leads ahead, you're going to end up living somebody else's dream of what your life should be like.

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First published in The New Orphic Review; published in The Shadows We Mistake for Love (2015)