For a tiny but revealing snapshot of Canada’s year-old legal marijuana industry, one would do well to travel to the village of Celista on the north shore of Shuswap Lake, just north of the Trans-Canada Highway in south-central British Columbia. Like much of rural B.C., the Shuswap is a spirited dreamscape of towering evergreens, mountains under snow as late as June and alpine pastures strewn with lupins and wild rose. This epic tract of the planet is spotted not just with million-dollar homes and successful livestock operations, but with tumble-down homesteads littered with wrecked refrigerators and battered half-tons. The land supports rustic survivalists and self-taught artists and ecologists, many of them pot smokers who can roll a reefer with one hand and who store their paraphernalia not in a cigar box but in a 30-litre picnic cooler, with compartments for bud shears, a weigh scale and half a dozen versions of the vaporizer and bong.

Drive west on Line 17 from Magna Bay on the east boundary of Celista and turn north onto Garland Road, and you soon reach a clearing that in another era would have supported a 100-acre farm or an abundant patch of forest. But in an age of amped-up capitalism, it has, instead, been bulldozed clean, its trees cut and burned, its wildlife chased, its eco-aesthetic character reduced to exactly what meets the eye: a strikingly ugly pot-growing operation sanctioned by a government that so far has struggled for command of the legal marijuana industry. Perhaps the key evidence of that struggle is that, a year after legalization, Canadians are still spending more than $100 million a week on illegal pot and pot products, as compared to just $22 million on the legal stuff.

The property is owned by Liht Cannabis of Kelowna, and at the moment it supports two sprawling metal bunkers, each big enough to house a 30-litre bowling alley. Eventually, there will be 10 such buildings — without a window among them or a single architectural nicety. The promise of the company that their ruthlessly featureless pot mill will set a new standard for progressive environmentalism is perhaps best understood as a kind of metaphor for the larger disjunctions of government-controlled pot — this because in constructing its first two buildings, Liht has violated not just the province’s Agricultural Reserve Land rules but a primary principle of contemporary ecological management: in spreading concrete, it has suffocated to death 20,000 square feet of soil that at one time was as intrinsically alive as any forest.

If you accept the opinions of those who have been using and dealing pot since the days of the $15 lid and $5 nickel bag, the grass that will eventually come out of this place — grass of a sort that is already coming out of more than a hundred such facilities across the country — will be as lacklustre to smoke or ingest as the buildings in which it is grown are dispiriting to look at. “It’s buck-a-beer pot,” says a seasoned local consumer of medical marijuana. “The problem is that everybody around here is into cognac.”

What throws the facility into sharper perspective is that on a nearby side road, in the shade of the forest, in the secrecy of the mountains — in the knowledge and intimacy of a few committed clients — there exists a Littlepian paradise, governed by a pot queen named Camilla, a gentle-faced free-spirit and grandmother, who has become an undisputed expert in the loving cultivation of high-grade marijuana.

To reach Camilla’s grow-op, perhaps a hundred metres from the doublewide trailer in which she lives, you step east along a path through dense cedars and hemlock — arriving eventually at a nondescript storage unit, the interior of which is a pair of jungle-temperature rooms, fragrant with greenery, misted as if by rain and as bright as a tanning salon. The space, which can accommodate three people standing plus the crop, houses a dozen giant plants of Green Crack and Rock Star marijuana, hydroponically grown, their swollen buds laden with everything that boosts pot to its maximum potential as a stimulant, a soother, a healer or whatever you perceive it to be.

Camilla and her operation represent 60 years of the community’s most knowledgeable and attentive cultivation. And those who appreciate a good product can obtain it from Camilla perhaps 20 per cent cheaper than they would if they went online or walked into a legal dispensary, where prices across Canada range from $6 to $20 a gram, depending on quality, but where these days customers are unlikely to get much decent weed at all, because there are shortages to the point of absurdity across the country.

When I was asked to write a feature on Canadians and marijuana in an age of legalization, I immediately determined...
that, whatever else the piece became, I would attempt to write it without moralizing or apologizing; and would spend as little time as possible discussing marijuana as a stock-market commodity or the sagging nuggies of governmental regulation or distribution — because, by my tally, unscientifically calculated, there have already been 10,000 media pieces on these topics. A writer friend notes that the surfeit of predictable pot writing has become a harsher indictment of pot culture than has bad weed or ineffective governmental policy.

What was left to write about, I found myself thinking, was the actual plant itself, with its THC and CBD, the former the psychoactive chemical that gets a person stoned, the latter a more benign agent — of healing, of modulation, a kind of herbal prayer for whatever it is your ailing body might require. I would write about that and about the Canadians who consume pot, some of them since the days of Valdy and gummy bears and Khalil Gibran (“if you love somebody ...” etc.) and about the intimate relations between the two, which is to say the consumer and the consumed.

I would pass along stories gleaned from folks who have taken risks for pot, have spoken honestly and without fear about what marijuana has meant to them, about what it is we want or require from marijuana and, more importantly, what marijuana at its best has to offer us. Such considerations are surely the true nexus between Canadians and legalization (as opposed to, say, how much money governments and investors can amass in growing and selling the stuff) and are hence a kind of armature for the progress of the industry.

But first let us return briefly to the back roads of the Shuswap, an increasingly testy microcosm of the evolving conflict between industrial production and the artisanal quality that our most demanding consumers seem to feel is their national entitlement. And why not? Especially when it is cheaper than the industrial stuff. And more available.

“And they know what they’re getting?” says Wally Coyne, a native Calvinist, who dealt pot for a living in that city for 30 years. “The little guys are the folks who have been supplying the country’s most demanding smokers for decades. Think food?” he exclaims. “Who in their right mind would argue that the big producers, with their fertilizers and herbicides and GMOs, are going to give us healthier vegetables than the little organic union and carrot growers at the farmer market?” Coyne describes lining up recently at a legal British Columbia pot store that was rumored to have received a shipment of high-grade product, only to find the grass tainted by visible mould.

“One storyteller, my friend Ian Kudelka, smoked her first joint in 1970, at the age of 19, as a member of the cast of HAIR, at Toronto’s Royal Alexandra Theatre. Pot would eventually influence her writing of three nationally acclaimed one-woman shows, including Circas Gnob, which has been playing on Canadian stages since its debut 40 years ago at Toronto’s Theatre Passe Muraire.

She says, “If you were to ask me what pot has meant to me, I’d tell you about a single explosive moment in Calgary back in the mid-1980s.” At the time, Kudelka had two children under the age of three, was financially dependent on her spouse and had no transportation of her own. “On one of the coldest days of mid-winter, my husband announced he had an affair with my good friend — which just totally devastated me.”

For days, says Kudelka, she couldn’t sleep, couldn’t eat, couldn’t work — was barely functional as a parent. “On a day when I didn’t think I could hold on much longer, my husband came over and handed me a joint of such expeditiously good pot that in the instant I took my first deep toke, I felt a kind of dooryard of light open above me. It was as if the breath of God came through that door, right down into my heart. I thought, OK — I’m in the hands of a Loving Creator, and I knew we could cope, in that horrible winter, in that lonely town, under those terrible circumstances. I’m not saying the pot created the light, which was always there. But it allowed me to see and receive the light. Opened my heart. Marijuana is a sacred medicine that way. It’s right at the centre of the Indigenous medicine wheel. It’s the THC. Some people think of it as a kind of guardian angel, letting you know you’re not alone.”

Another friend, a nationally known political scientist and media correspondent, told me that while he was writing the dissertation for his PhD back in the early 1970s, he would go to his carrel in the library of a large Canadian university, roll and smoke a reefer and get to work. As he viewed it, the grass significantly increased his capacity for making expository connections and thereby writing the book that would make of him a venerated and sober-minded analyst of the Canadian political scene.

I relate the professor’s story, in part, because he refused to allow me to identify him. He was concerned he would be seen as an advocate of marijuana among his students, prompting me to ask if he didn’t suspect that many of his students were already using the drug, and to wonder if perhaps openness with them, in a time of legalization, would be a better legacy than hiding the fact that, like them, he was a human being with human appetites and vulnerabilities. Furthermore, was pot, creatively and sustainably used, still something to be repudiated or feared or stigmatized — essentially after the long battle to get it legalized?

“People have been lying about it for so long, they can’t stop,” says Jason Beattie. “In the past, there was no place for the truth. But now there is. And they’re still talking. Which is a kind of lie unto itself.”

Beattie says even his five-year-old knows about his use of medical marijuana: “I told him what it is and why I use it — I don’t smoke around him. But not to explain marijuana use to children — let alone teenagers or university students — is just so grossly hypocritical.

I would pass along stories from folks who have spoken honestly and without fear about what marijuana has meant to them, about what it is we want or require from marijuana and, more importantly, what marijuana at its best has to offer us.
“People destroy the planet in front of their kids, fill the oceans with plastic, go to war — and consider it business as usual. Just don’t tell them you use a little THC to lower stress or CBD to alleviate your arthritis. This is how the cycle of denial and fear gets perpetuated.”

Indeed, it is that hypocrisy, more than anything, that seems to play on the thoughts of those concerned with marijuana’s past in Canada, and on its course into the future.

Rosie Rowbotham, who famously served 20 years in Canadian penitentiaries for peddling marijuana during the 1970s, pointed out recently in The Guardian that several former police officials in Ontario, including Julian Fantino, the former Toronto police chief, and Ken Derry, the former deputy chief — plus several high-level politicians who once supported harsh sentences for possession of marijuana — are sitting on the boards of large Canadian marijuana production companies. Gary Goodyear, for example, was one of the Harper government’s most vocal and draconian critics of marijuana use, and is now vice-president of Alcalà Health, a marijuana producer in Vaughan, Ont., and has become an open proponent of the weed he once denounced.

The gist of Rowbotham’s criticism was that not independent growers should replace the erstwhile politicians on these boards, but that the former might at least be consulted, and that it would be nice if they weren’t vilified for continuing to supply a market that the official industry, for all its resources, has so far been unable to supply.

Meanwhile, anyone in need of a good palate cleansing where hypocrisy is concerned will appreciate the story of David Syme, who had his first epileptic seizure in 1976 when he was 15 and living in Thsunder Bay, Ont. At the time, he was the quarterback of the Churchill High School football team and one of the best young hockey players in the area. When his hockey career would end three years later as a member of the Barrie Colts, when the effects of his epilepsy became insurmountable. In the years since, Syme, now in his early 60s, has suffered hundreds of seizures — each leading mini- mally to a fall, often face first, onto concrete or rock or down stairs. The result has been dozens of broken bones, including at least 10 facial and skull bones — as well as lost teeth and periods of lost memory.

“At one point for nine months, I couldn’t remember what my children looked like,” says Syme, the worst of whose epileptic traumas hit him when he was 26 and fell off a roof while working as a carpenter for his brother. He spent days in a coma, and the next year lying on a couch at home taking pain medication his doctor told him was the equivalent in strength of heroin.

“I’ve pretty much taken every pain medication you can take, including opiods and morphine. The problem is, first, that they dull your mind and, second, that their effects diminish with time; you need more and more. And the doctors won’t always give you more.”

Nor were doctors in the early years of Syme’s illness sympathetic to his tendency to self-medicate with marijuana or, later, his requests for a prescription.

“I’d go into the emergency ward in such intense pain that I’d be on the verge of taking my own life. And they’d treat me like some addict, sometimes abu- sively, and send me home.”

So, he began to seek a medical licence to go by his being shunned from one doctor to another. “Nobody wanted to take responsibility for prescribing something as stigmatized as weed, even though it was the only thing that helped me,” he says.

While Syme’s current doctor is sympathetic and perfectly willing to pre- scribe marijuana, Syme still does not have a prescription. “For one thing,” he says, “there are no storefront operations in Woodstock where I live.” For another, he can’t buy online, because pain medi- cation has so messed with his cognitive skills and memory that he can’t use a computer. But he is a tough dude, about to embark on growing a few plants of his own, as he has in the past, and continuing to score an ounce or two as he needs it.

“There are certain things in life you can’t understand unless you’ve experi- enced them,” he says. “Pain is one of them. It can get so severe, you want to die — even doctors don’t always get that. So, you build your own defences. For me, marijuana has been one of those. It’s an equalizer — sometimes the only one I’ve been able to count on. I owe a lot to it, and to those who grow and sell it illegally. It’s allowed me to live as long as I have.”

Charles Wilkins is the author of 15 books. His last story for Canadian Geographic (“Trash Nation,” May/June 2017) won a gold National Magazine Award for long- form feature writing. It also continues to be one of the most-read stories on cangna.ca.

IN PLOTTING these paragraphs, I real- ized I would be remiss if I did not offer at least a word on my own modest history with weed, which began during the Summer of Love, 1967, when I spent the months from May to September burying the dead in Resthaven Memorial Gardens in the east end of Toronto. It was a place where the gravestones were carved with a care- fully tended patch of marijuana in the back acres, and we considered it not just permissible but necessary to be at least modestly raped as we lowered this corpse or that into the ground.

My consumption reached its com- bined zenith and nadir in July of that year, when during a three-week grave- digger’s strike I sat for eight hours a day, surrounded by a growing pile of collins and a shrinking pile of weed, in an old parka, in a heavily refrigerated chapel with locked doors, my presence in that lurid nightmare fulfilling the cemetery’s legal obligation to “secure by active guard” all unburied corpses in its care.

All of which storytelling is just jack- potting, of course, if it does not at some point lead back to questions about what it is we want from marijuana, what marijuana has to offer, and the way in which open and healthy answers to such questions might best be used to shape our intelligence and future regard- ing the drug.

A year into legalization, no one has a tighter perspective on these concerns than the free-spoken owner of Fritz’s Cannabis, an online edible store currently making waves in Toronto for its philoso- phy in “wellness,” its attention to the accurate dosing of ingredients and its scrupulous avoidance of product contami- nation. When Fritz and his wife went into business four years ago, it was Fritz says, to fill a perceived gap in the market for well-made, accurately dosed edibles. His earliest products contained all-star ingre- dients such as Rice Krispies and Fruit Loops. A pile of 25 edibles was baked into the Rice Krispie squares in measured portions of actual weed. “At the time, there was no talk of legaliza- tion,” says Fritz. “Certainly no sense of a coming bonanza.”

Today, rather than bales of grass, Fritz and his wife use marijuana extracts and distillates — “we can dose and label them almost to the molecule.” But because the specter of inaccurate dosing (and the pos- sibility of overdosing) is still a kind of curse on the market, edibles remained illegal after the initial legalization. Fritz and his wife, if caught selling their prod- ucts, could spend up to 15 years in prison. (Fritz will not meet licensing require- ments even when the sale of edible mari- juana becomes legal in December 2019.)

All of which means you don’t call Fritz for information; he calls you — if you manage to reach him, via the company website, at his secret location somewhere in Greater Toronto. A half-hour of conver- sation with him reveals, among other things, that he is a honest and articulate pragmatic in his early 40s — a man so diligent in the details of candy-making, safe products and timely delivery that after a few minutes of chit-chat one begins to imagine him less as a drug criminal (which officially he remains) than as a sort of production engineer on the goodies conveyor at Santos’s workshop.

The image crumbles somewhat as Fritz describes picking up the illegal extracts and distillates, under sketchy circumstances, from folks he hopes are not thugs or cops, in dark parking lots, at night — sometimes handing over many thousands in cash to “guys whose names I don’t even know.”

Before any application of potency to product — “distillate to date square,” as one consumer put it — Fritz sends all psycho-active ingredients to a lab in Vancouver, which analyzes them for, among other things, pesticides, herbicides, heavy metals and opioids. “I’m not saying there aren’t other producers doing things safely,” he submits, “but I hear about a surprising number who are not. Fortunately, in a self-regulating market, they don’t last long — word gets around.”
For all the precautions, Fritz has amassed no brownie points with the authorities. He says, in fact, the pressure on him has increased since legalization. “Our competition used to be other people selling edibles [There are 100 or more online dealers in the country —Ed.] Now we’re eating the government’s lunch, too. And they don’t like it. The sad truth is we know what we’re doing, have figured it out as entrepreneurs, and they don’t want us around. And really won’t want us around when they get the authorized edibles market up and running.”

And yet, in all, it is not regulation that drives Fritz crazy; it’s what he calls “the misunderstandings” about marijuana among those who “know nothing about the evolution of the cannabis industry in Canada” but who continue to believe mari­juana is still primarily about one thing: getting stoned — about potheads escap­ing their lives. “You’d think it was heroin they’re talking about, when in fact there’s been a real shift away from THC-edibles and experiences and toward CBD products for treatment of, say, ADD and anxiety.”

As much as anybody, Fritz and his wife have helped facilitate that shift. During the past two years, they say, they have sold more than 250 free packages of CBD products to those who request them for any variety of psychological or physical ailments. “We also offer our CBD stuff free to anyone without a driver’s license, or alcohol, for as long as they need it. We’re definitely not doing it to get rich,” he allows. “The hassles are not worth the money most days. On the other hand, we’ve heard emails from people saying they’ve been able to come off oxycodone or Xanax because of us. And that is a huge reward in itself.

“You shouldn’t put what I’m going to tell you in your story; it’s too controversial — but I had contact from a mother in Nova Scotia who said, ‘I want to try to help my non-verbal autistic child,’ and she asked us to send a certain CBD product. I said we can’t; we’re not doctors — we can’t recommend things and then sell it, so we did; and she gave a microscopic dose to the child, and before long he began to say a few words. We have a friend who has an 11-year-old with autism and has violent outbursts; and she started putting a tiny bit of CBD in his milk: and a couple of weeks later she had a call from the school, saying ‘We’ve been seeing a big difference in D. He’s so much calmer and more cooperative.’

The approach is most certainly unconventional. Probably criminal. [So, too, is the practice of giving brandy to teething babies — Ed.] But to properly contest or corroborate it is so far beyond the scope of these paragraphs that I am resigned to reminding readers of the well-researched evidence that marijuana consumption can impair brain development in adolescents and teenagers (see “Cortical Thickness in Adolescent Marijuana and Alcohol Users,” published in Developmental Cognitive Neuroscience, April 2015). Becky Erin, a 36-year-old Toronto health worker, says, “Actually, it’s not pot I worry about from my adolescence. It’s all the other chemicals I put into my body, looking for a high.”

“Cannabis around children requires good parenting,” says Jason Beattie. “Just like alcohol or a lot of other poten­tially toxic substances.”

Meanwhile, adults are as likely to go away with marijuana. Diane C., a psychiatric nurse in British Columbia, says the hospital where she works has seen numerous cases of adults suffering psychotic episodes after ingest­ing too much marijuana.

I personally know four adults, all in their 60s, who during the past two years have taken one too many, have passed out and hit the floor hard.

Jean S. of Gravenhurst, Ont., acknowled­ges with a laugh that she once smoked a reefer as she prepared Christmas dinner, passed out and wak­ened just in time to see the turkey being carved. But she will also tell you about her years as an elementary school teacher in northern Ontario, when she was so blitzed and fed up with powerful pharmaceuticals for treatment of anx­iety and migraines that marijuana became the only medication she could count on to stay sane.

“For years I taught school on those soul-killers,” she says. “They eliminate the pain, but eliminate all the other feel­ings, too. Sometimes I’d think I’d been better all along just smoking and teaching at the same time.”

Doug Fleegel, who recently retired from his career as an electrician with Ontario’s Ministry of Transportation, never smoked grass on the job. He believes the mistake people make with marijuana is to smoke or ingest it and then try to direct its influ­ence into whatever it is they’re doing.

“When you smoke,” he says, “you have to let the cannabis tell you what its message or direction might be. And it will. We have cannabinoid receptors built right into our neural tissues. It’s possible we’ve just been seeing cases of adults suffering psychotic episodes after ingest­ing too much marijuana.

As I gathered material for this story, I asked myself several times if I might best get a view from “the other side” — from the policemen and cops, the therapists and medical doctors, those who potentially con­tinue to see marijuana in a more skep­tical light than many of those I consulted. And I kept coming to the same conclusion: that the folks who speak to the story are already “the other side.” And that basically, for two years now, we’ve heard few folks except for the politicians and police and therapists.

And the endless professional commen­tators and opinion-makers. And those obsessed with investment.

Fortunately, decriminalization has not happened entirely at the expense of pot’s remaining grace notes and rituals. Jan Kudelka observes, for example, that “there is still something wonderful about a perfectly rolled joint.”

Pierre Berton thought so, too. In 2004, he appeared on The Rick Mercer Report. On CBC TV that day, the host asked the reefer smokers that he acknowledged often got him through a night of writing.

“Unfortunately, the communality of pot rituals has changed,” says Kudelka, “what with vaping pens, and all — you don’t pass the joint the way you do a joint. You take it, you put it back in your pocket. You’d never smoke a joint without passing it — I mean it’s buming, you can’t just put it away. My friend David Petersen used to point out that every time you pass a joint held between the tip of a finger and your thumb, the coming together of the two loops makes the infinity sign. So, there’s this symbolic replication — something univer­sal and shared. Which is kinda nice.”

And which takes us back to a mountain road in Costa Rica, where Queen Camilla has returned from her grow-op in the woods, and sitting on the porch of her double­wide, rolling a reefer. Friends who have joined her are looking out across a clearing to where pot used to be grown in the woods, and where harvesters would camouflage themselves when RCMP heli­copters flew over looking for illegal opera­tions. (Today, by comparison, an RCMP officer advises Lilih Cannabis; and Ra’ Soucar, the former RCMP deputy com­missioner who once handled drug enforcement courthouse-side, is on the board of directors of Aleafia Health.)

“Good pot is not about industrializa­tion,” says one of the Queen’s friends. “It’s about…”

“Love!” blurts Camilla, and everybody laughs. She says her ex once told her she knew nothing about growing marijuana. “But I do,” she says. The beatific looks on the faces of those around her would tend to support her claim. Someone declares that whatever else the pot industry might or should be, it “shouldn’t be a bunch of metal bars, run by people who used to throw pot smokers in jail.”

Camilla announces that she is consid­ering applying for a job at the Liht plant. “It’d be nice to make some money from this stuff for a change. You never know, I might learn something,” she says.

“Like what?”

“Probably a lot of stuff that I don’t want to know.”

By this time, the sun is setting. The air is cooling. Up the path, in the twilight, in their hydroponics trays, the marijuana plants are enjoying their own ver­sion of coming darkness — under 12,000 watts of white light. “They grow so fast,” says Camilla, “that if you listen closely you can hear their cells divide.

Everybody listens closely. A nighthawk swooshes low over the porch. It is not the sound of marijuana cells dividing, but it is a nice sound — richly amplified by the moment. And by everybody’s commit­ment to keep listening.

“The names of some sources have been changed to protect their identities.” —Ed.