

Jobs. Good Jobs.

Nothing's simple in the vineyard

On some level I knew it wasn't going to work out when the manager of my new job asked me if I could give her a second emergency contact phone number—someone to call besides my wife, in case the bobcat who had been patiently picking off some of the resident poultry decided to up the ante and go for larger fare, or the orchestrators of the illegal pot-growing operation, recently discovered out beyond the vineyards, decided one day to start taking hostages in exchange for safe passage into Mendocino county.

“Hmm . . . like my mom?” I asked.

“If you wish,” she responded.

“Sure,” I said, “but you could only call her for minor emergencies—like infected hairs, or a really bad sunburn, that sort of thing—she is eighty-two, you know.”

In most circumstances in my life, this obvious attempt at humor and levity would have, at the very least, met with a polite chuckle—a gracious nod to the effort that one has made to lighten a particular moment, even if that effort had been less than fully realized. Here though, my remark was swept aside as if unspoken and with thinly disguised annoyance, a second request was made for an additional emergency contact phone number.

“This is going to be tough,” I thought to myself, “it really is—for both of us,” suddenly sorry that I would undoubtedly be bombarding this poor soul over the course of our professional working relationship with countless unwanted attempts to make her laugh. This apparent incompatibility, in and of itself, was not enough to sour me on the job, however—after all, I'd met plenty of people in my life who hadn't thought I was funny. I even dated a few of them (for reasons best left to a pedigreed professional with a spiral notepad and leather couch). In every other way my new manager was seemingly a lovely person—kind, generous to a fault, and accommodating. No, what sealed the fate, so to speak, of my new job were the ATVs.

Vineyards are big places. They consist of row after row of neatly manicured and trellised grape vines coursing over the contours of the land, seemingly oblivious to concerns of slope, marching up and down the rises of the Napa Valley foothills like obedient columns from Caesar's legendary legions. Access to all the far-flung outposts of this

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empire of wine is provided, by and large, courtesy of the ATV, that boisterous vehicle of teenage restlessness, here domesticated for its predilection for traversing sometimes difficult terrain, quickly and easily. One of the first tasks of my new job was to master the operation of the two resident ATVs the estate owned. Although I was not being hired to work in the vineyard, per se, the ATVs had numerous uses around the gardens, grounds, and orchards, and I would be expected to use them whenever necessary. So, after some embarrassed fumbling of gears, and a period of furtive stopping and starting—akin to an unwelcome case of inebriated hiccupping, until the correct amount of throttle to use was discovered—I was soon on my way, barreling down the graveled, tree-lined,



PHOTO BY GUY FOSTER

and shade-speckled roads with, if not the boyish aplomb of youth, an ableness nonetheless.

Now, an hour of jostling, bouncing, and jiggling may be, to most, an adrenaline-tinged amusement, but to me it was something quite different. Nearly three years ago, in a remote section of northern New Mexico's Carson National Forest, while harvesting dead wood for fence posts from a section of forest devastated by the pinyon bark beetle, the top portion of one of the trees broke off—striking me on the head. And I have to say, if you are ever in your lifetime presented with a choice about this, I would strongly advise an unwavering course of action to prevent said tree from hitting said head. Other than the initial amazement that one is, in fact, not dead after such an encounter, there is nothing to recommend it. Once an impact great enough to cause the skull to strike the fragile tissue it encases occurs, there is, like a lost virginity, no going back. Repairs are made, neuronal networks are reorganized, but the brain will never regain the original vigor and elasticity of the pre-concussive state, and will be forever susceptible to further injury.

Dismounting from the ATV, my speech slow to form and slightly slurred, my gait unsure and unsteady, I knew I had crossed the imaginary line that my now fragile brain—with its circuitry pruned, but not for strength and productivity like the vines I had just been whizzing past—was ill-equipped to tolerate. Like myself three years previously, my new job was then and there concussed—and ultimately, there would be no going back to it.

Perhaps it was prescient that during my drive down from Washington state to Napa, I had listened to John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath," that epic narrative of forced wandering in which the idea, and the ideal, of California play such a prominent role. The promise of "jobs, good jobs," pushes the Joads and hundreds of thousands like them westward, driven from their lands by poor soil and greedy bankers. I, too, was in flight, away from two years of unemployment—looking for a job, any job. And in this, I imagine, I was not alone. With a national underemployment rate stuck, according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics', at around 16 percent over the past two years, and with home foreclosures at historic highs, I wondered about all the modern-day Joads being created—pushed out of their homes, unable to find work, government assistance running out—where do they go? Where do we go? Toward jobs. In my case, like the Joads, toward California.

By the time the Joads arrived, during the Dust Bowl migration of the 1930s, California, the place, was “all bought up” and remains so today. Land here has either already been intensively developed or is in large-scale commercial agricultural production. In Napa, where I was headed, that meant one thing—wine.

Although Napa arrived a little late to the scene (archeological evidence suggests that the first properly aged wine originated about eight thousand years ago in what is now the modern Republic of Georgia), the combination of a favorable climate and the setting aside of some thirty-eight thousand acres for permanent agricultural use in 1968 have made the area one of the preeminent wine-growing regions of the world. It’s no surprise, then, that wine grapes are big business here. With \$5 billion in annual revenue, they are California’s second most-valuable agricultural commodity. In Napa, where the majority of that crop is grown, a ton of grapes can fetch upward of \$4,000. Compare that with the going rate for a ton of Fresno grapes—\$260—and you start to have an appreciation for the reverential esteem in which Napa Valley grapes are held. But for all the abundance, there is an unease here as well. Bankruptcies and mortgage defaults are at an all-time high—and consolidation of smaller, privately owned vineyards into larger corporate holdings is occurring with startling rapidity. Add to that mix the almost certain dislocation of the delicate Napa Valley climate by global warming, and the patina of unworried affluence begins to show itself for what it is: brittle, and potentially hollow—and perhaps just one more example of the reckless denial that has come to typify our current age.

The most important crop in California, however, in terms of revenue is, by far, marijuana. Statewide, it is a \$15 billion a year industry, and growing. Here in Napa, it is second only to grapes in economic significance, bringing in about \$350 million annually. But, in spite of its undeniable economic muscle, it still largely exists in the shadows, both legally and geographically—a point which was soon to be brought home to me on my very first day in the state.

Not long before I arrived, on the estate in which I was newly hired to work, a discovery was made in a wooded area just beyond the sun-soaked vineyards. Six lines of irrigation hose leading off in different directions were found emanating from an all but forgotten cistern. Those hoses led to areas being prepared for marijuana cultivation. Since,



PHOTO BY JENS DAHLIN

however, no crop had been started yet, the county sheriffs who had been called to inspect the operation took no actions to confiscate the equipment. Upon receipt of this information, in a sort of informal pre-work orientation with my manager over tea and avocado sandwiches topped with homemade pickled fennel (delicious, by the way), I was, to say the least, surprised. I especially found the live-and-let-live approach to law enforcement in evidence here somewhat peculiar. The officers would, they said, come back to check up on the operation nearer harvest time, but until then, the landowner (and their employees—i.e. us) would be very much on our own.

“Carry a gun,” they advised. “They’ll be armed; it would be better if you were too.”

To the police, it was a fairly common occurrence, vineyards being favored locations for illegal grow operations owing to their proximity to water, the ready availability of irrigation equipment, and the presence of skilled horticultural workers. But I’m not so sure the picture I had of growing Swiss chard and tending fruit trees in what I thought to be a somewhat bucolic Napa included holstered weaponry—in fact, I’m sure it did not. Thankfully, in this my manager and I were of like minds, and so she had, so far, resisted the call to arms. But the hoses were and are still there. And so is the danger. Three people were killed at grow camps the previous year, all growers slain during raids by police as part of the thirty-year long CAMP (Campaign against Marijuana Planting) Program. When next year’s raids start up again in August, there will, undoubtedly, be further violence.

When the raids do happen, though, I will not be there. Seven days into the job, my head still reeling from my stint

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on the ATVs, I broke the news to my manager that due to the damage to my brain that had occurred, and might in all likelihood recur in the future, I would be resigning. And I can't tell you how disappointing it is to write these words. Back in December, a week before Christmas, when my wife and I learned that I was going to be offered the position—we cried. It had been a little over two years since I had been laid off from my job. My position as a department head at an organic seed company had been eliminated due to a corporate restructuring. With my ninety-nine weeks of unemployment insurance exhausted, all the future held for us before the offer was made were food stamps and a continued reliance on family for housing. Now, we believed that my two years of unemployment, and along with it our uncertainty, our fear of the future, would be but a

memory—that period of our lives that we got through—the bridge that connected one settled bit of security to the next. But instead of signing a lease on a rental house and making a reservation for a moving truck, I was back on the 101, headed north—headed home.

For the Joads, the real California was a place of hardship, regret, and loss—but also a place that tested and deepened their humanity. And while I in no way endured, in my two weeks, the same sort of trials and tribulations that they did, the journey had taken something away from me that I couldn't get back—the job, obviously, and all that it represented—but something else too. I was forty-five, with a recurring brain injury. I could no longer do the sort of work for which I was trained. Where did that leave me? Adrift, in search of a new identity—disoriented, but also possessing a sort of hard-won sense of opportunity that was no longer contingent upon false hopes. California had taken something away, that's true, but it had also given me something new—and perhaps that is what California, the place and the idea, does for people. And maybe that's enough, sometimes. **B**