

Boxes of Light

It was late, nine, maybe ten o'clock, when the van nosed up to the Yippie headquarters at #9 Bleeker St. Just shy of the Bowery, the neighborhood was then the heart of New York's skid row. We hustled boxes inside without asking what was in them; I was there to square up with Dana Beal for the four pounds of Jamaican he'd fronted me after the July 4 smoke-in in D.C. A quick razor, the seam gave; glossy paper flashed, and the room changed. High Times. Cannabis, our deeply beloved, much maligned plant, rendered in a slick, confident magazine alongside stories about the new culture we were building in basements and parks. In 1974, magazines were where America decided what mattered. To see ourselves there, inked, photographed, worthy of attention, was a jolt of validation we'd never had. We laughed, we cheered, we passed pages like joints. Something underground had just stepped into the light.

A few weeks earlier, I'd been a D.C. kid lucky to be drafted into the Yippie scrum on the National Mall, moving people and gear and hundreds of joints on Independence Day. After the rally, Dana handed me the four pounds and told me to make something of it. I did. I sold it clean, came back to New York to pay him, and just happened to be there when the first issue of High Times landed.

The Yippies I'd entered were less an organization and more a freewheeling constellation of radicals, rebels, dealers and runaways. The legend ran back to '68, with Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin; the scars ran forward from the 1972 Miami convention, when factions split and a breakaway crew called the Zippies made their stand. Tom Forcade, the name behind that faction, hovered as rumor, spoken of only in whispers and innuendo, had now surfaced in New York with High Times.

Before that night, good information about cannabis was like contraband itself. What passed for "education" was Reefer Madness-style drug-war hysteria: all the real information about cannabis had been carefully scrubbed from school and county libraries. As a young teenager, I used to hitchhike to the University of Maryland, sneak into the library stacks, and thread microfiche reels to read 19th-century articles; doctors and researchers writing in plain daylight about the plant before it was demonized. So when High Times landed, it didn't just flatter our scene. It broke a famine.

High Times also flipped the script on who got to speak. There it was: a dealer interviewed like a professional (respectful questions, straight answers) and a *lady* dealer at that. For a generation force-fed scare films and pseudo-science propaganda, that tone was revolutionary. The magazine treated our work as work, our judgment as judgment. And it widened the frame beyond getting high: an early piece on hemp paper pointed to a future where the plant was fiber, fuel, food and medicine. That combination—respect for the people and respect for the plant—cracked the prohibitionist lens like safety glass.

Meanwhile, my lane widened. The deeper I got into the Yippies, the deeper I got into the trade. New York had a variety that D.C. didn't; exotics you simply couldn't find at home. Colombian

Santa Marta Gold, the color of sunrise, piney and resinous; bricks of sticky sweet Thai sticks; fragrant Nepalese temple balls; little linen sacks of Lebanese hash, and deep red Cherry Oil. I started carrying those rarities back to my hometown, and the business clicked. I wasn't a small-time dealer piecing out grams anymore; I had access. Each run back to D.C. grew my base, sharpened my skills, and stitched me tighter to a network I hadn't known existed. In a way, the magazine was a mirror held up to that ascent.

It seemed uncanny at first. Every issue, High Times proudly rolled out a monthly centerfold. Playboy style, but cannabis: lush light, clever settings, trichomes gleaming. And like clockwork, four months after a load passed through my hands, those exact goods would be featured in the centerfold. Not similar: the same. It happened three or four times in a row until coincidence felt silly. Yippie back-room commerce and High Times glossy pages were reflections of the same current.

It took me a year to see the whole pipeline; to learn that four months was the exact period of time that it took to publish each issue, to become trusted enough to understand that Tom wasn't just writing about smuggling weed, he was doing it too and at a very high level. I'd catch a small slice of those very big loads, and it was like stepping onto an express track. Most of the profits went back into DC Yippie; we rented an old townhouse, filled it with a wild assortment of weirdos, renegades and fugitives; and used it as a launch pad for what, over time, grew into the modern cannabis freedom movement.

Fifty years on, I still feel the impact of that first reveal: the smell of the wet boxes, the sound of the opening razor, the sudden knowledge that our underground was stepping onto America's main stage. High Times didn't create the culture that we lived, but it amplified and illustrated the culture, mirrored it back to us, and put a respectful frame around it. For a kid from D.C. trying to find his way, that mattered. It said our world belonged in the light.