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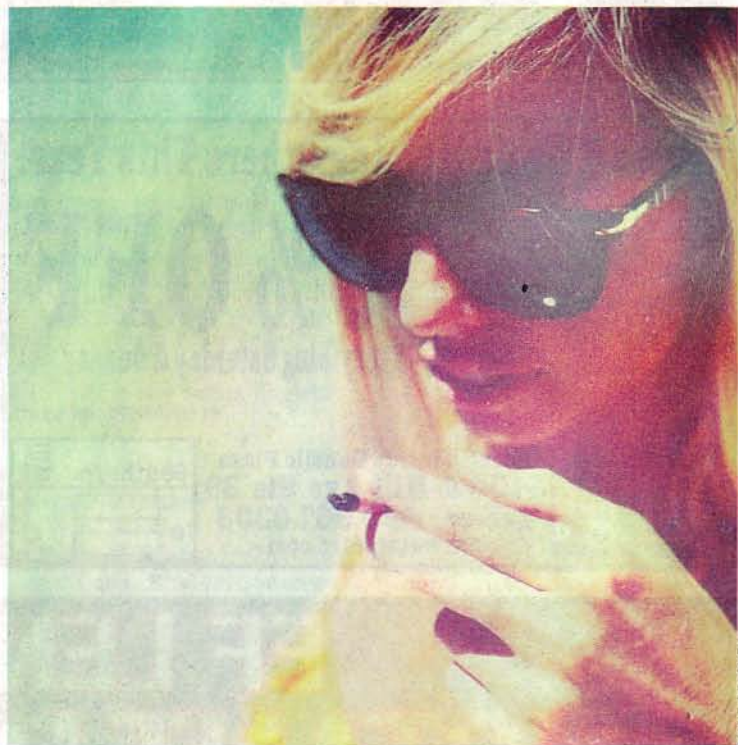
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Dope Name

There is nothing quite as lasting and personal as a first name. It is considered dreamily in the months before birth and remains on a tombstone long after departure. It is one of the first gifts you receive. If you have been given a problematic name there are only two people to blame: your parents. I was born in 1971, a year when the most popular name for baby girls was Jennifer. My parents brought me home from the hospital, though, with the name Sativa. For those of you who don't know, my name comes from *cannabis sativa*, the Latin words for a particular strain of marijuana. Reefer. Ganja. Cheeba. Pot.

The day I was born, my parents were a pair of longhaired flower children. My name is a legacy of their guilty pleasure — a mild rebellion executed from the safety of the ASU campus. But if my birth is where their

rebellion peaked, it is also where it started to slowly wind down. My parents soon retreated into a more practical and conventional life. I, however, had been indelibly marked. When I am 80 years old, I will still be named after an illicit drug.

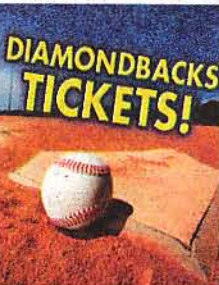
As a kid, I knew that my parents and I didn't tell some kinds of people the true origin of my name — elderly people, teachers, church-y people, people who didn't look like my parents. I developed an eye at an early age for whom it was okay to tell and whom it wasn't. I developed a "consciousness" — the ability to sort people in to two camps: the clued-in and the clueless. It's debatable whether or not this was the best barometer to put in the hands of a 7-year-old.

When I was a kid, I told the others a variety of stories that changed to suit the moment. Ones that I was fond of were that I was named after a flower (close to the truth), that my name was Russian, that it was Indian, or that my parents just liked the way it sounded. **continued on page 34**

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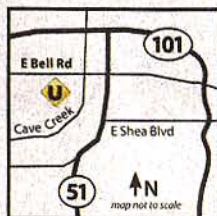
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Dope Name

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When I got a few years older sometimes I said it meant “cultivated,” (which was also not far from the truth). In Latin, I learned early on by looking in dictionaries that the word *sativa* actually does mean “cultivated,” and the Latin name for rice (*oryza*) is followed by *sativa*, too. This, however, is such a little-known fact that only a few horticulturists or Latin scholars might approach me with this knowledge. In truth, there seem to be far more marijuana smokers out there than Latin-speaking botanists.

I’m not overly fascinated with drug culture, probably because my name has been the running gag of my life. On the other hand, I can’t totally dismiss it, either. I do know this: Being in your 20s and being named after pot is different than being middle-aged and named after pot. The boil-down in your 20s is a lot of offers to get high. As an older adult, it can sometimes feel a bit trickier.

When people ask, “What does it mean?” I’m left with a dilemma. Should I tell the truth and risk a negative reaction or should I lie and avoid the subject? Imagine all the places it inevitably likes to pop up when it’s not wanted: in job interviews, in doctor’s consultations, meeting with your bank manager. What do you tell your boss? Your kid’s teacher? The landlord? Your insurance provider? The TSA officer at the airport? Will it give them a negative impression? The cute guy or girl who just struck up a conversation with you? Will it make them like you more or less?

For many people, my name is unheard of and the meaning obscure, and so it is often mispronounced or mangled. In the rural town where I grew up, my name was always sure to stick out. Sometimes I craved anonymity — who wants to be the only one in school with a name nobody’s ever heard of before?

I couldn’t have been more than 6 or 7. I was sitting in the hot sun on silver metal bleachers with my Uncle Tom waiting for municipal swimming lessons to start at the city pool. This was Arizona, so even though I was just a kid, I’d already learned to throw a towel down on anything before I sat on it, for fear of burning my ass off.

Tom was my mom’s brother, but there weren’t that many years that separated us, so he was more like my big brother than an uncle. Why he was my chaperone that day I can’t remember — he was probably only 13 or 14 himself. But there we were sitting in the bleachers waiting for them to call my name to start swimming lessons. I was feeling nervous, but it wouldn’t have done any good to tell Tom that. He sure wasn’t going to reassure me. He would just jab a finger in my rib cage or taunt me with scaredy-cat faces.

Because this was small-town Arizona, the summer swimming lessons were led by the high school football coach — a man with an unusual amount of authority and a round, big, bald head and matching stomach. He was barking instructions in polyester coach shorts and flip-flops, a whistle hanging around his neck.

The coach stood on a stepstool behind a chain-link fence on the other side of the bleachers and started calling out names of kids, checking them off on a clipboard and telling them to head to the shower room to get ready for class. I was squinting in the sun waiting for my name to be called, butterflies in my stomach. Then, at full volume, he yelled out, “SALIVA PETERSON.” At that age, I didn’t even know that saliva means spit, but I knew it couldn’t be good because Tom had nearly fallen off the back of the bleachers from laughing so hard. So much for slipping through unnoticed.

Funny enough, as an adult, I’m okay with my name. Despite being the running joke of my life, I think it has certainly given me a slightly different perspective than I might otherwise have had. You would not be the first, nor the 25th, person to ask me if I would like to get high. No, I do not have a sister named Cannabis, or Indica, or Sensimilla, or Mary Jane. I do not know whether my parents were literally high when they decided to name me. Do you know whether your parents were in some way stoned when they decided to name you? They were probably high on something — merlot, religious fervor, romantic idealism?

But one thing’s for sure, it could have been worse. *Sativa* sure rolls off the tongue a lot more beautifully than lysergic acid diethylamide.

FOR MANY PEOPLE,
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