

She Don't Lie

HARMONY NEAL

My original, California birth certificate reads: Cocaine Comfort Neal. That should be a joke but isn't. I was born in 1979, just before the cocaine-riddled '80s. My mother says she named me after the Eric Clapton song. Before that, she said a baby book told her "Cocaine" means "our possession," which was beautiful. How do I begin to address the problems in these claims?

I try to make sense of my original name and consider the fact that my mom isn't generally a liar. She did raise my younger brother and me to believe she and my father were good Christians, with an implication they'd always been so. No, they were drug-addled adolescents when they met and married. They listened to rock 'n' roll, had sex, watched TV, and did all the things I was forbidden growing up. I think my mom was born again after I was born, and my father grudgingly accepted this fact and played along. I was the dupe until high school; and sometime after I outgrew the ruse and religion, my mother told me she named me after the Eric Clapton song. Or that's how I remember it.

Consider this: I am now dubbed Harmony Hope Neal. "Harmony" after the Elton John song. I buy the Elton John

reference, and it certainly adds some credence to the Clapton claim. Comfort, Hope, these things I cannot easily explain, and depending how you want to interpret "Comfort," it either reinforces the Eric Clapton story or shoots it down. Cocaine, as a drug, would not be described as "comforting" by most users, so perhaps I was named after an Eric Clapton song, and maybe, just maybe, my mother did find some weird, new-agey baby book that contained an entry for "Cocaine." Maybe.

I was in high school the first time I tried cocaine. We lived in "family" housing on Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville's campus, near St. Louis, which I'd heard was a bad, bad area to live in, very dangerous. We arrived to find college kids and teenage skateboarders. My brother fell in with the skateboarders, and since I was falling out with the people in my own grade, I sometimes hung out with them. My brother and I were walking down the tree-lined path from the apartment complexes to campus proper when we ran into a guy who sort of knew my brother, and he offered us free coke. We said, "Sure!" being the drug people we were becoming. There wasn't much of it; I think only a line or so each. We snuck behind a largish elm, dutifully rolled up a dollar bill as we'd been instructed by the media, and snorted it straight from the baggie. We waited, wondered if we'd snorted something else entirely, baby laxative or battery acid, decided we felt slightly different, a little happier, and we knew one thing for certain: we wanted more.

The single most distinguishing factor with cocaine is it makes you want more. I bought it a few times in college. The first time, I snorted a line, and then another a few minutes later, and then called my brother long distance to let him know that we had indeed snorted coke all those years before, and that as far as I could tell, all coke did was make you want more coke.

It's a subtle high. You feel a little happier and a little more alert and you definitely, definitely want to snort more.

I think that's because the high is delicate, and most drug people are used to an obvious high. With weed your high can be anywhere from mellow to zoned out, but you always know you're high. It's the same with alcohol or meth or LSD or opium: you know you're high. You can tell a difference. Your perceptions change. With coke, you stay you; your brain works the same, except for a constant nagging that says, "Just a little more."

I mostly smoked pot in college. Or I mostly got drunk, depending on which semester you want to observe. I had many friends, something I wasn't used to, and my room was always the hangout place since you could watch TV, smoke cigarettes, raid my mini-fridge full of stolen juice and soda from the campus café where I worked, and you could always, always smoke pot. It wasn't usually my pot. I've never purchased weed with any regularity, and I never thought anything of it until I was having a conversation with a friend freshman year about that fact, and my almost-boyfriend interrupted with, "So you're saying you're proud to be a mooch?" I hadn't thought of it that way. Weed was always around, and the people who had it always wanted to share.

The rest of this essay is available only to *New Letters* subscribers. Use our "Comments" box to request that the issue with this essay start your subscription.

[Click here to join us as a *New Letters* subscriber.](#)