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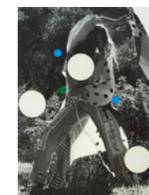
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Users (Joanne McNeil)

I have come to the conclusion that a fallow youth has an upside, that grim nothingness is inoculation from a future hyper-dwelling in memories of escapades from the past. Well. For me, at least.

Here in New York, I know women from pilates class or dinner parties who might recount, quickly, some fabulous occasion that happened fifteen, twenty years prior, in the fading neon years, when the World Trade Center was still standing, life was untroubled and society was easy. They were lounging by a pool or pool table, they tell me. Someone's dad was a producer, whatever that means. It was his place and he was out of town. Or it was the hotel room of an actor in all the magazines then, like Jonathan Rhys Meyers or even Leo. Maybe Leo paid for the drinks. He spilled a drink. Or Leo was in the movie they watched at the hotel room. A suite, probably. Leo in all his Leo-ness is the raw essence of these bright, desperate memories. Someone lost something or they blacked out from drinking. A dress was torn, maybe. A broken heel or a case of mistaken identity due to a fake ID. Mislaid plans and frazzled but not unglamorous complications churned a vibe of nostalgia into a story with a beginning, middle, and ending. They walked home barefoot. Or they hitchhiked back home. They got home and lived to tell it. The memory was vivid and deeply felt, but I can't connect. I think they tell me because I look like I could identify the texture of it, recognise it and infuse it with recollections of my own, but I usually stop paying attention before the storyteller has wrapped up.

I used to feel inadequate in these conversations. I assumed I missed out something. I never had a glamour-bad youth. I was never Leo-adjacent, let alone Leo-perpendicular. But it is okay. To be a complete and total loser shut-in as a teenager is a vaccination against the reminiscence bump. Or maybe it is me. Maybe I have no way to engage in these conversations because I experienced nothing similar at that age. I wasn't wild. I was boring. I remember then I was hating myself, fitting in nowhere, trusting no one, believing in nothing, while glued to a keyboard and bulky desktop computer night after night. I wasted these vital years, hours really, precious blinks, gone before I could appreciate what I was and what I had. Instead of a youth in the world, I was a stationary perpetual end-user of a machine.

