

Issue 09

Noon

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Niko wears jacket by JUNYA WATANABE from HIGHER STUDIO, swimsuit from CONTEMPORARY WARDROBE COLLECTION
socks from SOCK SHOP, shoes stylist's own

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 than 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.

The true consequence of past inaction is I barely remember any of it.

There's only one evening I can recall from back then with any sort of cohesion now. It was the wildest night in my teens, but my parents were sleeping upstairs. I was in my pyjamas, with twin mountains of benzoyl peroxide caked over the spots on my chin and my hair in a bulbous French braid. I was part of a chatroom called '451 degrees'. Yes, after the Ray Bradbury book. We called each other 'burners', because there was no connotation then, of that festival in the Nevada Desert. The chatroom itself was vaguely connected to an MTV program that I usually had playing in the background on the TV behind me. It got busy on the weekends (no homework). That evening it was Abnegation80, fluxcapacitor, Cherryette, PlatypusRex, sunshinecore, t333m, xbaysidex, sundaemorn, flufanutter, eurydiccxe, BeWitchingly, crepuscul4r, B6nn18, and elliezahbest (me.) Maybe there were several others, the names of which, I can't recall now. Lurkers and newbies. Newbie-lurkers. Or lurker-regulars who spent more time in private chats. The reason I can recall all those screennames now is that I printed out the conversation at the very end. That's right – I even fired up the old laserjet. That's how wild it was. I knew I had to remember it and where I was, I couldn't take photographs.

Two days after Christmas 1996. *Scream* was in theatres. A few of us, in suburbs along the Acela corridor, were snowed in. Outside there was the silence that hovers above a foot of snow in the hours before the plow. All the sound of civilization is suppressed when it snows hard like that. So peaceful. No traffic of course, but even the buzz of the street lamps was absorbed in the powder. Silence. I remember thinking, as I looked out the window at the snowy clumps in the night, that the internet was silent and hollowed out the same way.

In the chatroom, fluxcapacitor, who always had a bizarre sense of humor, was egging on Cherryette. At first we couldn't tell that he had zeroed in on her because everyone else in the room was doing their own thing. BeWitchingly, sunshinecore, and B6nn18 had a weird word game they would play for hours and hours. BeWitchingly might type something like 'freezer door, apricot, loose glove'. Then sunshinecore would type something like, 'icebox, sticky hardbake, wool socks'. Then B6nn18 would add something like, 'saturn, paddle plant, beachplum'. No one could figure it out until we realised there was nothing to figure out. No secret code at all. They were just listing words they liked, nouns – baseball, pastilles, hovel, elixir, treble clef, borzoi, viaduct, vodka sauce – whatever. Maybe they didn't even like the words. Maybe they typed the words to remember these things. I guess they were poets? Most of us ignored their word game because there was so much else to read. We called it a 'waterfall state' – that's when you could hardly keep up with the conversation on the screen because people were talking so fast and all at once. Typing so fast. I would type a lot of nothing. It was shouting into the void. But that's the context for what was happening, how we had the sense something was odd between fluxcapacitor and Cherryette without really following what they were saying. His comments landed with barbed ambiguity. On some level, I knew something was strange, something about it was eerie and off, because they did not take their conversation to private messages.

A similar sense – notional, partly unknowing – drives the pronouns I use for either of them. I understood fluxcapacitor was a he, and Cherryette was she, out of the wash of information that was exchanged over time. Assumptions like this were the foundation of our interactions.

The wordgame stopped. Then waterfall stopped. Lulls like this happened from time to time, but here it felt deliberate, like a dance floor crowding aside to make room for a featured pairing under a spotlight. It was just the two of them, back and forth. Flirting? Fighting? Something was going on:

FLUXCAPACITOR
Do you like scary movies, Cherryette?
CHERRYETTE
i already told you i don't.
FLUXCAPACITOR
I know you do.
CHERRYETTE
Oh?
FLUXCAPACITOR
what is on the tv
CHERRYETTE
what?
FLUXCAPACITOR
yr tv right now. that is some scary movie i see
CHERRYETTE
i'm not watching tv
FLUXCAPACITOR
Then who is watching that scaryass movie.
CHERRYETTE:
what
FLUXCAPACITOR
in the window.
CHERRYETTE
Could be anyone.
FLUXCAPACITOR
but I see you.
FLUXCAPACITOR
ingham sweater. Right?
FLUXCAPACITOR
ingham. Or is that houndstooth...
FLUXCAPACITOR
some houndstooth shit. That's you.
I see you.
Out my window.
ABNEGATION80
Knock it off, fluxcapacitor

Then Cherryette logged off.

AOL had a sound effect when someone left the chat. It sounded like a door closing, not a slam, but rickety, like the door was loose, like the hinge was rusty. Like you might get locked in or locked out. Normally when someone left a chat, I was phasing out anyway, hardly listening to the computer sounds, but this time the sound effect was an interruption, in shrill contrast with the snowy quiet outside.

Then it was quiet in the chatroom again. No one was typing at all. Soon BeWitchingly, sunshinecore, and B6nn18 started up again – oboe, scrippage, gabardine, carbon, celeriac, sliding bevel, rusty dinghy. sunshinecore even typed ‘houndstooth’, as if it just came to her, with no prior reference.

Then fluxcapacitor started typing ellipses. He took up the whole chat screen with periods, posting them seven at a time, and interrupting BeWitchingly, sunshinecore, and B6nn18 and the handful of others that were chatting. He was like a peacock of three dots. So odd. Dot dot dot dot. Finally he typed something. Words. To me.

FLUXCAPACITOR

i’ve seen you elliezahbest.

What?

FLUXCAPACITOR
eating alone at lunch. I've seen you

He continued.

FLUXCAPACITOR
sometimes you go outside for lunch.

I typed nothing.

FLUXCAPACITOR
dark haired girl.
I know who you are.

How did he know?
'Where is Cherryette?' I typed.

All the chatting in 451 Degrees stopped. My heart started pounding. I sent a private message to my internet boyfriend at the time, Abnegation80 (We never met, but chatted privately for hours and everyone in the chatroom knew us as a couple. I had another internet boyfriend at the time, Ross5, which is somewhat complicated to explain, anyway, he wasn't online that night for whatever reason.) I didn't print out our private chat so this is all coming from my vague memory. 'He's bullshitting you,' Abnegation80 said, or something like that. He was convinced it was a prank. But I was spooked. 'Just logoff. I'll keep an eye on the room,' he said. PlatypusRex and eurydicce picked up the conversation meanwhile. They were talking about their favorite albums. I slumped back in my chair and stopped typing. Then there was an update.

T333M

Burners. Listen to me. There's been an accident. I know Cherryette IRL. We go to school together. She's in the hospital now. It is serious.

What?

Everyone typed their surprise and concern all at once.

T333M I can't say any more yet. We aren't sure if she's going to make it.

I felt shaky. I looked out the window at the dark street and the snow blanketing the pavement out there. I wondered if snow discourages a potential serial killer, or if precipitation is an occasion to get away with a crime. If someone had walked through the yard only moments before, their footprints would have been lost to the flurries and wind. I took a break for the bathroom. I pushed the shower curtain all the way to the left as soon as I shut the door behind me. Was there... someone... watching? My heart was beating so fast. I thought about taking a bath to get my mind of this nonsense. I vowed I would never use the internet again, but I knew I would only break that vow as soon as I towelled off. I went back to the computer. 451 Degrees was all silent. No one typing. One minute turned to five minutes. My internet break was all of five minutes. Then I typed... 'W. T. F????!!!!'

'Hello. Anyone here?'

More silence.

It was midnight. And at the dot, Cherryette reappeared in the room.

FLUXCAPACITOR
Boo!
CHERRYETTE
this is the ghost of Cherryette typing.
hides under white sheet with eye holes cut out
T333M
it's the ghost of chatrooms past

I laughed so hard that the dog woke up and started barking.

FLUXCAPACITOR
look at your tv screen... if you dare.

MTV continued to play on the screen behind me. I turned the sound up, but not too loud. Didn't want to wake my parents. There were a bunch of kids in a club dancing to Coolio. Behind them, moving really slow, but still on the beat was a guy in a Scream mask. He held up a sign. It was red marker scribbled on what looked to be the inside of a cereal box. It said '451 Degrees. U R Next.'

There must have been two of them. Or fluxcapacitor was a friend of the guy in the mask? There were no smartphones back then, so who knows the choreography. But it seemed like magic to me. Some guy, I never ever met, although I talked to him for hours almost every day, just crawled out from the letters he was typing in a chatroom and emerged on my TV. Right there on the dusty moire of the screen.

The chatroom was a waterfall again. It was a waterfall of exclamation marks. Everyone in the room typed them out:

```
T333M
!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
CHERRYETTE
!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
SUNDAEMORN
!! !! !! !! !!
T333M
!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
CHERRYETTE
!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
CHERRYETTE
!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
ABNEGATION80
!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
B6NN18
!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
SUNDAEMORN
!! !! !! !! !! !! !! !! !! !! !! !! !! !! !!
PLATYPUSREX
!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
ABNEGATION80
!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
SUNSHINECORE
!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
T333M
!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
EURYDICCCE
!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
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I felt euphoric and connected in the waterfall of exclamation marks. And I have the print-outs to remind me. The rest of my memories of 451 Degrees are as impossible to access as a dream after twenty years. Reality covered over my online experiences, and the memories evaporated to essence. What happened then was transpirational but invisible, like footprints in the snow before a warm day.