



prose for instagram

scene vii - the playlist

Scene VII: The Playlist

The tunnel is pitch black, and as soon as the last dressing room vanity light melts away, three-year-old Audrey whimpers like she's going to cry. I move toward the sound until I can hold her hand and pull her next to me.

“You're okay, Audrey,” I say soothingly. “All the darkness is just Spotify's *branding*. We actually like it here! You like music, right? That's how you go to sleep every night, right? I bet if we're really quiet, we can start to hear it. Let's listen.”

She stops crying and we listen as “Buzzcut Season” by Lorde starts to play. I pull three-year-old Audrey a little closer and point her shoulders in the direction of the sound.

“There—in the distance, Audrey, can you see them? Can you see the little green lights that flicker to the music?” I ask. I feel her head nod up and down yes. “You'll be our leader. Crawl through the tunnel toward the green lights, and we'll be right here behind you.”

I nod to the 25-, 24-, and 23-year-old Audreys to follow her, and then Instagram and I go last.

“God, I can't believe I'm actually bringing you here,” I say to Instagram once the others are out of earshot. I half-laugh, half-cough. “Why am I, like...kind of nervous?”

“You used to share songs and playlists to your story all the time,” she replies.

“I still have a highlight reel on my profile called music,” I say. But then I hear a rush of murmurs from an audience rise louder than the flickering green lights, and I remember to add, “At the time I am beginning this scene at about 8 PM on Tuesday, November 28, 2023, there is still a highlight reel on my profile called *music*.”

The tunnel has grown big enough that we can stand and walk the rest of the way now. Instagram's eyes scan me up and down.

“You were talking to a whole group just then,” she observes. “Not only the ‘you.’” I swallow.

“Oh, right. Well...the thing is, I have an idea for this scene. But, um... it would be pretty risky. I haven’t decided yet if I’m going to go through with it.”

“Totally...I see. Yeah, there’s definitely a chance you could decide to *let the rabbit run by.*”

I laugh once at this. We keep walking forward. The green lights flicker bigger and brighter until they stay on, becoming lamps on the dark walls of a hotel room.

The furniture is shiny black and the linens are a warm medium gray and there are a few white accent pillows on the bed and on the couch. On the coffee table, the coasters are miniature records and the accent tables are made to look like tapes.

But the star of the show is the art on the walls.

There, on one side of the room, a framed album cover for Lorde’s *Pure Heroine* floats just off the wall. The only thing keeping it from falling to the ground is a green glow behind it. As the glow fades with the last few seconds of “Buzzcut Season,” the album reattaches itself to the wall.

I have a fleeting wish that 26-year-old Audrey had been here to hear that song.

To the right, a framed album cover for the soundtrack to *The Great Gatsby* lifts off the wall, and a green glow grows behind it as “Together” by The xx starts to play.

“Originally, I had those two switched in this playlist,” I explain to the room. “But then when it felt most natural to open this scene with 3 being scared of the dark, I thought the beginning of ‘Together’ might be too scary for her. And anyway now that we’re here, I can fast forward—”

I walk over to the album cover on the wall and raise my right hand, as if to touch the glass frame. But once my pointer finger is an inch away, a white dot on a horizontal line materializes, and I can drag the dot to 3:39 in the song.

“This minute—3:39 to 4:39—is the best because of the violins,” I say. I glance over at three-year-old Audrey to check if she’s scared. But she is perfectly still on the bed, eyes glued to the source of the sound, completely rapt.

Until—a flash of red-orange lavender seafoam from out the window.

“No...it can’t be here already,” I say to myself more than anyone else. I back up and spin around to face the hotel room door. I take a deep breath in as I place my left hand on the door handle, hold it for a moment, and then force my breath out as I open the door and step into the hallway. Red-orange lavender seafoam everywhere everywhere.

I look back at the door, where *playlist for instagram* is engraved on the front. I can feel the red-orange start to physically pull me down the hall, but I manage to resist it long enough to poke my head back in the hotel room and wave at Instagram for her to follow me.

“The rest of you...just stay here for now, okay? Or if you get bored, the adjoining room is *gratitude, grounding* and nothing bad can happen to you in there. But don’t let her—” I nod in the direction of three-year-old Audrey—“wander any farther, because *we love a good psychological thriller* is on the other side of that and I don’t think she’s old enough for it yet.”

Instagram meets me at the door and follows me into the hall.

“Are we going where I think we’re going?” she asks as she shuts the door behind us. I take one last look at a door a bit farther back—*predicting wrapped 2023*.

“Yes,” I tell her. It is quiet, except for the murmurs of the audience. “I am continuing to write this scene on Wednesday, November 29, 2023,” I add. Instagram doesn’t ask why I said it.

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The red-orange door says, “Hello Audrey Allen. It’s Wrapped time. Ready? Let’s do this.”

I swallow, then open the door. My immediate nausea somehow originates from the back of my eyes when “Herman’s Hustle” from the movie *Babylon* starts to play. 101 genres. 5,721 songs. 51,762 minutes. 35 days nonstop.

The next part of the entry hall is bathed in lavender light. My facial expression doesn’t change at all when I learn that my top song of the year was “Misunderstood” by BANKS, because I have absolutely no surprise. I was in her top 0.05% of listeners, as it turns out.

“You played it 346 times this year, starting on August 3. And it still sounds perfect.”

It’s these lines from **August 3, 2023 - i am considering letting myself go mad** in my head now:

*i want to play the song that feels like it’s saving me on repeat
i want to play it 58 times today
i want to clench my jaw in the mirror and remember i have a skull
underneath my skin*

My personality is Time Traveler because I “travel back in time and listen to songs on repeat, again and again. The best tracks never get old.”

So in other words: *I’m Jay Gatsby.*

“Same time next year?”

And then I’m at the end of the entry hall, and this hotel room looks exactly the same as *playlist for instagram*, but the ceilings are much higher to accommodate five times the amount of wall art, and the windows are taller too. It’s the presidential suite: *My Top Songs 2023.*

Out the cold glass window, I can see red-orange and lavender and seafoam green lights float off from other wings of the hotel out into the sky. It reminds me of that scene in the Disney movie *Tangled* when the kingdom sends off the lanterns to honor the missing princess's birthday. But from this vantage point, all the lights are blurry to me—all the screenshots imagined—because of course I'm not on my personal social media this year, and because—

Well, a lot is different this year.

I stand at the window, staring off into space, and Instagram walks up next to me.

“Look, everyone is posting their stories now,” I say absently.

“Would it make you feel better to show me your top songs in here? In the pages, when it's still just us—” she catches herself, and looks at me sharply.

“You're a fast learner,” I smile. “Hard to forget about the audience once you're aware, isn't it?”

“Do you still think the ‘you’ doesn't want—”

“The ‘you’ is the ‘you’ regardless,” I tell her. “Where there's an artist, there's a muse. But the way the story is developing...I *can* see a possible ending in which we keep gathering these younger Audreys in each scene, and then there are enough of them at the end that I can seat them front row in the theater, and *ta-da!* I become my own ideal audience.”

I can feel that Instagram is still looking at me, and I turn my gaze from the window to continue.

“The problem with that ending, however, is that I have this one memory from a college art professor that will never leave my brain. At the end of my junior year, I pitched this body of abstract black-and-white self-portraits for my senior capstone art exhibition that was about my ‘personal psychological struggles’ and I thought I could leave it at that.

But my professor looked at me and said, ‘You are allowed to make art that is just for you; in fact, I hope you do. But in the case of your senior exhibition, your art is *definitely* going to be seen by an audience, and so you *must* consider what you want to say to that audience and why.’

The problem is I can’t *actually seat* my former selves in front of my Instagram account, just like I can’t *actually deliver* a printed prose package to you, Instagram, because you are an imagined character born of my own mind, and so too my former selves are just imagined characters born of my own mind.”

She stays silent.

“And so here is the point in the thought loop in which I can’t not consider that I’m asking *real people* to read this...and the strongest copy is written for one *~ideal client profile~*, and so it’s highly likely that the ‘you’ is the ‘you’ whether or not the ‘you’ wants to be the ‘you’.”

“What does that mean for the ‘you’?”

“Ah, yes. The call to action, the CTA. For a question like that, I’m going to need a drink. Have you heard of The Search Bar?”

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I read the menu—my most recent Spotify search history—to Instagram.

“American Horror Story: Coven (The Soundtrack). American Horror Story Intro Themes. “Intro” by The xx. Frédéric Chopin. *i will feel confident and sexy if it is the last thing i do*. The Sound of Music (50th Anniversary Edition). Under the Mistletoe (Deluxe Edition). Alanis Morissette. “Reasons I Drink” by Alanis Morissette. *spooooooky season edition (the playlist)*. Black Swan (Original Motion Picture Soundtrack). “I Fall Apart” by Post Malone. “I Fall Apart - Recorded At Electric Lady Studios” by FLETCHER. *religious trauma girlies*. “If I Believe You - Live From the 02, London” by The 1975. “Anti-Hero (feat. Bleachers)” by Taylor Swift. “Anti-Hero - Acoustic Version” by Taylor Swift. Frank Sinatra Christmas. Annnnnnd that’s it, that’s the end of the menu. It must be seasonal.”

She crosses her right leg over her left, and I cross my left leg over my right. She blinks twice slowly, and I blink twice quickly.

“Personally I’m torn between ‘Reasons I Drink’ for its cleverness and ‘Black Swan (Original Motion Picture Soundtrack),’” I say. I look to the right, and then down, and then at the bar, and then bring my eyes back. “But then again, we know I’ll get ‘Black Swan’, right?”

Instagram tilts her head at me and blinks again.

“I would say I can’t decide, but it’s not my decision, anyway. Right, Audrey? Since you’re the writer?” she asks with a hint of bitterness.

“Anything I give you will taste good to you, right, Instagram? Since you’re the machine,” I answer sharply before turning to the waiter to order. “She’ll have ‘Anti-Hero - Acoustic Version’ by Taylor Swift.”

Meanwhile, back in the Audrey wing of the Spotify hotel, 25 tends to her community-built playlists that were created in collaboration with her Instagram audience back in 2022:

hyping myself up to do things that scare me
relatively happy and a little bit sad
is it obvious i got my drivers license in the 2010s
GNO 🤠🌸🌟💋🍷

“One day, *I’ll* work for Spotify’s marketing department and *I’ll* be the one who gets to plan Wrapped every year,” she says to herself in the mirror. “*Don’t* underestimate me.”

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Meanwhile, 24 and 23 wander up and down the hallway, opening doors to check which playlists are which. They don’t recognize much anymore, since 27-year-old Audrey (aka me, the writer of the story) has rebranded every single playlist except for the list above.

Finally, exhausted, they crash on the couch in the sitting room—Liked Songs—and find their favorites. *The best tracks never get old*, after all.

23-year-old Audrey plays “State Lines” by Novo Amor—her #1 song of Wrapped 2020.

24-year-old Audrey queues “Repeat” by Julien Baker—her #1 song of Wrapped 2021.

“Next year is easier and harder, better and worse, but mostly easier and better,” 24 says to 23.

Three-year-old Audrey runs into the room and climbs on the couch to sit in 23’s lap.

“Try to let yourself have as much fun as you can, because it only gets easier and harder, better and worse,” 23 says to 3.

In the corner of the sitting room is a desk with one of those old PCs that are always installed off to the side in hotel lobbies. And in front of the desk is a shiny black faux-leather oversized desk chair. And the chair spins around, *dramatically* of course, to reveal 18-year-old Audrey with Spotify pulled up on the computer behind her. She is wearing a gray beanie that was purchased at Caribou Coffee on K-State's campus during a college visit in high school, back when she thought she would stay in Kansas after graduation and major in English and focus in Creative Writing.

“It’s all thanks to me that you’re here, you know,” she says, and gestures to the room and the hallway with all the doors. “I’m the one who first started building this place.”

“Thank you, Audrey,” 24 says dutifully. “We still have most of your original contributions to this room, I think.” The wall art rearranges itself so that the earliest tracks—from December 2014—are first in line.

“‘Work Song’ by Hozier is the best song to *ever exist*,” 18 says adamantly. “You know I lied to my parents that I was going to his concert with a group of friends when really I went by myself?”

“Yes, we know,” 24 and 23 say in unison. They smile at each other. 23 continues, “What I want to hear you talk about is the end of the mix CD era when Spotify came along.”

“No—mix CDs will *never* be over! You can’t play Spotify in the car! And nothing will *ever* compare to, like, trying not to smudge the Sharpie when you’re writing the song list on a CD. Obviously, I need my handwriting to look good for my friends when I make them mix CDs.”

24 and 23 smile at each other again.

“We’re not so different, you and I,” 25-year-old Audrey laughs as she enters the sitting room, having finished linking her collaborative Spotify playlists to her personal website. “Did you know I started a new Twitter presence this year as an ode to you?”

“Oh, God. That makes me nauseous. But I guess...life gets better, then?” 18 asks.

“It gets better and worse, easier and harder,” 25 replies.
“That’s just existence.”

“I’m *so* glad I chose it,” 18 smiles sarcastically.

Three-year-old Audrey tugs on 23’s sleeve and whispers in her ear.
“She wants to hear this song again,” 23 says to the room. “Can someone put it on repeat?”

“Why, of course we can!” 18 half-sings. “It’s *definitely* the best song to *ever* exist.”

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Back at The Search Bar, Instagram and I sip our martinis.

“You know I was thinking the other night that I would actually *die* for my art? I know it’s dramatic. Here, I’ll write myself into a black beanie and my black-and-gold wire-rim glasses and heavy eye makeup to add to the aesthetic—not that I need to, because my #1 song of the year was ‘Misunderstood’, after all.”

Instagram laughs once at this.

“I’m serious, though,” I continue. “Like, if someone was threatening to delete, burn, erase everything I’ve ever created or written, and they said it’s me or my art, I would ask them to hand over a shot glass filled with poison and I would say ‘Cheers!’ and that would be the end of me.”

“But is anyone actually going to do that? It feels like you’re avoiding the CTA,” she says.

“Of course I’m avoiding the CTA...I don’t suppose you have any automated suggestions over there from which I could make my selection,” I say dryly.

“Double-tap if you agree, save this for later, DM me for the link, follow for more, share so others can learn too, comment with your favorite emoji—”

“Jesus Christ,” I cut her off. “Again, give me a shot glass of poison before I ask my audience to *comment with your favorite emoji*...not that my portfolio of how I used to encourage engagement on my posts is the most original copy that’s ever been written, but still. I gave it what little creative energy I had to give at the time. I would like to *think* that I have more creative energy to give now, though.

And anyway...does there *always* have to be a CTA? What if I don’t want to play the mind-controlling puppet master? What if I just want to be myself, and I want the audience to be the audience, and however the audience naturally reacts is what’s meant to be?”

Instagram looks at me. “So you’re not like Gatsby, after all. You’re not trying to repeat the past.”

“Unless the past gets repeated anyway because we’re all trapped inside ourselves and we will never not be who we are.

When I was younger, I tried my best to be myself...it just turned out I didn’t know myself as well as I thought. But also...getting to know ourselves requires a lot of time spent participating in the pinball machine that is human existence. I’m different now, but I’m also the same. *Multiple opposite things can be true!* It’s like 28-year-old Audrey warned me in Scene V—I can only do so much to write the future into existence. That was my Achilles’ heel in high school and in college and after college and now and it will continue to be one of my biggest weaknesses—it will continue to get both easier and harder—*until the day I die.*”

Instagram raises her eyebrows slightly.

“You know my biggest complaint with My Top Songs 2023, outside the top five? No *Swan Lake* to be found anywhere. That is just simply false,” I say, ignoring her look.

“Audrey...” she starts.

“You forget that death can also be *metaphorical*, Instagram. Once Nina unlocks the power to perform as the Black Swan, her former self as only the White Swan must die. We die and are reborn again and again in one lifetime. But most people I know wouldn’t dare delete any of their social media accounts, including myself. Well, except for The Great Twitter Shutdown of 2015.”

“I’m still glad you didn’t do the same thing with me in 2023,” she says.

“I wanted to. Believe me, I wanted to delete *all* of my social media in February. But time and distance have created an opportunity for me to do something I never would have been able to do back then, because now I can see social media with new eyes that are also the same eyes I’ve always had,” I answer.

She looks at me, and I look at—

*i could die at any time, you know
until then i am
i am pretty sure i don't even really have a choice.
choice isn't as real as i thought, anyway*

“So the CTA,” she says. I breathe in. And out.

“I still think the CTA should be whatever feels natural to the audience member. Maybe the CTA is just to think and feel. In what ways are you dying? In what ways are you being reborn? It gets easier and harder, we change and we stay the same.” I half-laugh once. “Spotify Wrapped is actually a decent example of this.

It would be interesting to, like, assign colors to songs that have shown up on your Top 100 two years in a row, three years, four years. And different colors for songs that are new this year. And if you mapped it all out in a chart every year, could you actually see yourself transforming and solidifying, transforming and solidifying?”

“Is that why you chose to spend one year away from me?” she asks.
“It’s kind of like Wrapped?”

“One year felt significant enough for my brain to really change. I had been on social media for fourteen years—more than half my life. One year away seemed like it might not be long enough, to be honest. But I will say this: part of the success of Spotify Wrapped does depend on the anticipation that is built up—” *eye flash for the camera :)*
“—from it being an inherently annual campaign.

Sometimes I don’t understand why Spotify hasn’t built out its own capacity to be a standalone social media platform—not that we need another one—but then I also think, Wrapped is successful because in theory, we haven’t been watching each other’s music all year.”

“In theory?” Instagram asks.

I smile.

“Oh look, new items added to The Search Bar menu! Your Top Songs 2016. Your Top Songs 2017. Your Top Songs 2018. Your Top Songs 2019. Your Top Songs 2020. Your Top Songs 2021. Your Top Songs 2022. Your Top Songs 2023.”

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Back in the Liked Songs sitting room, it’s 24-year-old Audrey’s turn to quiz her 18-year-old self.

“So when you were in high school, you didn’t have Instagram stories yet. But I want to know, like, when you made mix CDs for your friends, can you remember picking certain songs because you hoped that the person who listened to the CD would gain a deeper understanding of who you are? Or, like, something would happen because of the songs you picked to share with them?”

“Mix CDs are *art*,” 18 answers. “I *always* think about the person who will be listening, what songs will probably hit them, and obviously the order of the songs matters, too. I guess I think it’s a way to get closer to people. Sometimes talking isn’t enough, you know?”

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And so here you go—I could not imagine skipping a year of sharing my Spotify Wrapped just because it’s 2023 and life is so different now. Life is also exactly the same.

Top #5 Songs of 2023:

“Misunderstood” by BANKS
“Gemini Feed” by BANKS
“doomsday” by Lizzie McAlpine
“Voodoo Mama” from the *Babylon* soundtrack
“Welcome” from the *Babylon* soundtrack

Top #5 Artists of 2023:

BANKS
Taylor Swift
Julien Baker
Justin Hurwitz
The Chicks

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Back in the *playlist for instagram* hotel room, it’s all of us—including 18-year-old Audrey. The next album to lift off the wall and glow green is the 2013 *Alice in Wonderland* soundtrack.

“That’s our cue,” I tell the group. “The scene is transitioning. For this one...I know it might seem séance-y, but I need all of you to close your eyes. Close your eyes and think about something you wrote this year. It could be anything, a card, a poem, a tweet, even an iMessage...just think about it with as much gratitude as you can possibly summon, that you were able to bring it to life.”

“This is pretty séance-y,” 25 says. “Where are we going, exactly?”

“The library of everything I’ve ever written,” I say. “Let’s hope no one is there threatening to burn it down. Since I already revealed that I would give up my life to save it without hesitation.”

25, 24, 23, 18, 3, and Instagram all look at me. I lock eyes with 18. “We’re not so different, you and I.”

This time, the melting spirals—so we feel the darkness spin closer and closer to us. The last thing I see is, of course (what else would it be?), the green glow behind the Alice album.

it's only a matter of time

*i am pretty sure i am
letting myself
go
mad*