



prose for instagram

scene iv - the marketing agency

Scene IV: The Marketing Agency

The mirror is glowing.

It's an LED cold white light pulsing from behind the mirror's silver edges. It glows and dims, glows and dims in rhythm.

It draws me from the living room into my studio. I stand in front of the mirror and watch as my reflection is lit up and falls in shadow, lit up and falls in shadow. Today I am wearing white satin pants and white tennis shoes with a plain tan hoodie. I'm wearing my black and gold wire rim glasses, my graying hair is parted on the side, and my eyeshadow is brown with a little bit of dark gold in the creases.

The mirror glows and dims.

I step forward to take a closer look at the light, and my face becomes sharper in the mirror. I fall in shadow once more. When the light returns, her reflection is there beside me.

"Hello, Audrey," she says. Maybe I should have been scared again, but I'm not. I expect her now.

"Hello, Instagram," I say in return.

"I missed you," she says. "I got you a present because I missed you and I really like hanging out with you and I hope you want to keep hanging out with me."

I swallow. She turns away from the mirror and moves toward my second-floor apartment windows. I follow her apprehensively.

In the parking lot below, a crowd of about two dozen people stand perfectly still, looking up at us. My breathing gets faster, my heart rate jumps. They're staring directly at us, and they're totally silent. My eyes scan the crowd, taking in a few familiar faces among strangers. Before long, I realize I'm scanning for the third time because I'm trying to find

you.

“I brought you more people to see your art and read your writing,” Instagram says in a small voice. “I thought...that *is* what you want, right?”

“It’s a tricky business, figuring out what you want. And what you need. And what the difference is between those things,” I say somewhat robotically. We stand there for a moment, her eyes searching for more meaning behind my words, my eyes fighting to stay focused on hers. She tilts her head to the side slightly and takes a step closer to me.

“Audrey, why did you decide to spend a year apart from me?” she asks. My jaw tightens.

“I wanted more time and energy to focus on my art,” I say. “And I wanted work-life balance when I was starting a new full-time job in social media.”

She holds eye contact for a few moments, glances down, back up. “Is that it?” she asks.

“And...I wanted to claim at least one year of my twenties—at least one year of my life since age *twelve*—that was free of the influences and pressures wrapped up in social media.”

Eye contact.

“You changed your last name again,” she says.

Eye contact. Jaw clench.

“Yes. Allen. My mom’s maiden name,” I say.

Eye contact. Jaw clench. I hold it for another moment, then break to look out the window down at the parking lot again. The crowd hasn’t moved an inch.

“And if it’s alright with you, I’d like to leave it at that for now,” I say to Instagram while I am still looking out the window. “I think I know where we need to go today.”

“You know I’ll go anywhere with you,” she says in a higher-pitched voice than before. She means well. She wants to have a good time with me. She is trying to support my art. I know this. *I should be nicer to her.*

I walk out to the living room to find my car keys. Instagram lingers at the window.

“Do you have a plan for bringing all those people with us?” I ask, half-jokingly. No answer. I locate my keys in one of my coat’s pockets and grab my purse from the counter.

“Instagram?” I ask again. She seems to awaken from her concentrated stare.

“Sorry. What did you say?”

Eye contact.

“Do you...have a plan for the people? I only have one car, remember?” I ask carefully.

“Oh, that. Well, I *can* recommend some new car options to you if you’re interested,” she says.

“I’m not,” I say dryly. “But nice try.”

“Are you sure—”

“Oh my God, *I’m the writer!* We don’t even need to *take* a car. We can just—”

There is a floor-length banner at the entrance to the building: Proud Partner of Google. We were a Google-everything digital marketing agency, which meant we used Google Meet and Gmail and Google Drive and we got special access to new features of Google Ads and Google Business Profile SEO...Stuff.

I lovingly sometimes refer to my old workplace as a Tech Bro Marketing Agency, because we specialized in things like digital advertising and SEO and we didn't necessarily specialize in creative design and as a result the office did not have a single plant or piece of artwork on the walls but we did have a game room with a ping pong table and a cornhole set and a popcorn machine. And we had hard seltzers in the fridge. Honestly, give me a hard seltzer over an office plant any day.

25-year-old Audrey's pink-and-tan houndstooth coat is draped over an office chair, so I know she's around here somewhere. I start poking my head in meeting rooms to look for her.

Instagram heads straight for the center of the main lobby and takes a deep breath in.

"I feel like this might be my second home," she says.

I open the door to the meeting room on the southwest corner, and 25-year-old Audrey is seated at the square white table across from her marketing director. She's wearing a navy blue turtleneck and mauve dress pants. This is her first day on the job. I lean out into the lobby and wave at Instagram to come over. Then I turn to the blinds on the south wall window and twist them open.

The crowd from outside my apartment is gathered and staring.

"The biggest thing to remember is that we don't have to be experts in our clients' industries, we just have to know who we're speaking to," the director is telling 25-year-old Audrey. "It's okay if you don't know every little detail about making and maintaining industrial parking lots, as long as you know that your message needs to reach business owners or facility managers."

I lean over to Instagram. “This is marketing. Knowing who you’re talking to, crafting and delivering a message that resonates with this person, calling them to take an action that will ideally both solve their pain points and make them your customer,” I whisper.

“Yeah. I know what marketing is, Audrey,” she whispers back.

“Oh. Yeah. Sorry,” I whisper. “Forgot who I was talking to.”

The director stands up to draw a diagram on the whiteboard, explaining different client relationship dynamics at the agency. I take this opportunity to address the crowd outside.

“It’s not *bad*. Businesses aren’t *bad*. Marketing isn’t a *bad* line of work. People need parking lots. When a company that makes parking lots reaches customers who need parking lots, the company can do things like survive as a business and hire more employees and those employees can rest at night knowing they have job security. Not to mention folks who visit their customers’ businesses...like, have a place to park.”

I look back at 25-year-old Audrey, who is listening to her director and taking notes intently. I have this urge to open the inside of her brain and watch certain mechanisms light up in activation. Would I stop it if I could?

I look back at the crowd. *Of course not*. I continue:

“Marketing isn’t inherently good or bad. It’s just—okay, so like, the Audrey in this room became addicted to Instagram the same fall that she started working for this marketing agency in 2021. She considered herself a ‘company’ in a miniature way. She’s a creative, and if she had it her way she would make art all day every day. She would write and write and collage and print and sew and write and play piano and write and dance and write and print and write and write and write.

But money doesn’t grow on trees, and artists have to become known somehow. And so she thought of herself as a mini-business, and she was constantly asking herself who she was talking to, how she could craft a message that would resonate with this person, how she could build a relationship with this person that would one day solve a problem for them while creating a customer for her—

Not that she had any time or energy to make art when she was spending all that time focusing on messaging and relationship-building, of course.”

The crowd says nothing. Instagram stares at me. I stare at 25-year-old Audrey. 25-year-old-Audrey stares at her marketing director. The marketing director continues writing on the whiteboard.

“The more specifically you can imagine your audience, the stronger your marketing strategy and messaging will be,” the director continues.

“That’s why you’ll need to be prepared to describe the ‘ideal customer profile’ or ‘ideal client profile’ when we ask the content team for copywriting projects. They need to know what *one* person they are talking to in their writing.”

At this, I swallow and feel my breath start to get shallow again. A faint sense of vertigo starts to make my head rock back and forth ever so slightly.

“So who’s your *ideal client profile*?” Instagram leans over and whispers. “Oh, wait! Let me look at the crowd outside and try to guess.”

My breath is quickly transitioning from shallow to nonexistent, and the room spins faster and faster around me as I command my legs to carry me out of the office. I trip into the grass and cough and try to breathe and I think I’m going to be sick but I could never make myself be sick and I try to unsee and I try to unthink and I am unsuccessful and I should really just stop writing right here but when I hear the door again behind me, I turn around and there’s 25-year-old Audrey again, a few months later in late February or early March 2022, looking at her phone as she leaves the office at 5pm on a Friday. Instagram follows behind.

“Oh my God, are you okay?!” Instagram asks me. I shake my head no.

“Help me get up so we can get in the car with her,” I say through gritted teeth.

“Audrey, you look like you need to rest,” she says gently.

“No, I can’t—I *need* this moment.”

“But—”

“*You don’t get it!*” And I order the scene around us to freeze. 25-year-old Audrey is midstride in her long navy coat, backlit by golden hour light, smiling into her phone. I drag myself over to her and tilt my head so I can get a better look at the smile she’s directing downward.

It’s not a trick. It’s not fake. That smile is real.

For a second, I wish I could go back. I want to be her. I want that version of life again.

But I’m 27-year-old Audrey and even I can’t write time travel into existence

[something I have been struggling with
lately
is the idea that
i am actually *never*
not
writing
for
an ideal
customer/client/audience
profile]

<3

The next thing I know, I’m back on the couch in my living room at my apartment and it’s November 2023. I have a blanket and a cup of peppermint tea. I don’t remember this. It must have been—

“Talk to me,” Instagram says. “It’s okay to not be okay, but please tell me what’s going on.”

“For once in my life, I am trying to be more careful about what I share with you,” I say flatly.

“Audrey, you have *always* been careful about what you share! Can you think of a single time you posted anything in which you didn’t *think* about it at all beforehand? You judge your younger selves for decisions they thought were the best at the time. Being authentic online has always mattered to you. Figuring out boundaries that feel authentic to you has mattered more and more to you as you have grown older. You think of yourself as someone who has been so careless, naive, and foolish when it comes to social media. But you are actually the opposite of that.”

“You have a vested interest in telling me a version of a truth that convinces me to stay with you,” I say coldly.

“Maybe so, but it’s a version of a *truth*, nonetheless,” she says.

We are silent for a minute.

“The thing is...I do know who the ‘you’ audience member is when I’m writing *Prose for Instagram*. But...I don’t know that that ‘you’ wants to be the ‘you’ at all. You know what I mean?” She nods and inches closer to me on the couch. I put my thumb and my middle finger on my forehead and rub my temples, eyes closed. I continue:

“For someone who has studied marketing and communication and art and psychology fairly extensively...like, it’s rather concerning how often I have completely and wildly missed the mark in the relationships that matter most to me in my life. I wonder if I will ever learn.” I choke on a laugh.

“You’re a human, Audrey. You’re always learning,” Instagram says.

“And you’re a machine, Instagram. Somehow you’re always learning, too,” I reply.

“For what it’s worth...if the ‘you’ is who I saw out the window earlier today...I think the ‘you’ does want to be the ‘you.’”

“I think you have a vested interest in telling me what I want to hear to convince me to stay here.”

“Maybe so. I mean, I do love you, Audrey.”

I laugh. “Oh, don’t worry, I believe that.”

Then I write:

Instagram walks toward the mirror. “Do I have to go? Maybe we can talk for just a few more minutes? Please?” she begs.

“Goodnight, Instagram!” I call over to her. Before she can object again, I close my—