



prose for instagram

scene ii - the track above the treadmill

Scene II: The Track Above the Treadmill

The year that I first created an Instagram account was also the year that I started running.

I was a dancer for most of my childhood and teenage years. I liked jazz and tap and ballet for the *art* and for the *music* and I liked that the point was to communicate *emotion without words* and I liked the challenge of making something *painful* look *effortless* and *beautiful*.

I started running when I was sixteen because I liked the *stress relief* and *choosing my own music* and I liked *being outside* and feeling *wind* and *rain* on my face and I liked the challenge of trying to beat my best pace and I liked that I didn't have to look in the mirror as I raced against myself.

Something I have been struggling with lately is the idea that I am actually *never* not running.

Because even when I'm not on the trails or the treadmill...even then I am metaphorically running from and running toward something, always.

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When I mentally transport myself back to the rec center on my college campus and remember running on the treadmill in order to write about running on the treadmill, I can zoom out from myself and imagine the surroundings outside of me. In my 27-year-old imagination, I can leave the memory of existing in my 21-year-old self's body and float upward to the track that lined the third floor and overlooked the cardio equipment. I can lean over the edge of the track and watch my younger self from above.

In this imagined reality, I'm not alone on the track.

I can sense her in the periphery of my vision as she jogs around the elevators and loops around to the stretch that leads to where I am standing. I can feel her ponytail swish back and forth at an exact rhythm, like a pendulum, a ticking clock. She is wearing matching red-orange leggings and a tank top. Yellow tennis shoes. A purple silk scrunchie. As she gets closer to me I can tell that not a single drop of sweat has interfered with her makeup, and when she speaks her breath is perfectly normal—as if she hadn't been running at all.

“Funny seeing you here!” she says in that *on-brand* high-pitched tone.

“I should have known you would be here,” I say in my normal voice. I let my eyes wander back to 21-year-old Audrey. “I know this place has good writing hidden somewhere, but all I have are these little pieces that aren't connecting.”

I feel her eyes scan me up and down. She doesn't say anything. I continue.

“This is the most difficult piece of writing I've attempted all year, you know. To write about social media...to write about you is to write about—” I choke on a half-bitter laugh as I tear my eyes away from the scene below to look at her. “Pretty much everything. I have to write about writing and running and high school and college and art and work and marketing and human connection and creating relationships and the transformation of relationships and home and growing up and community and family and how I understand who I am and *does any of it even matter!*”

She still doesn't say anything. Her eyes haven't left me. I lean my elbows on the railing and watch 21-year-old Audrey run for a moment. I can tell she's breathing the way she was taught in cross country in high school. In through the nose, out through barely parted lips. I make my breath match hers. I have this half-crazy thought that she'll look up at me and know an older version of herself is with her. She picks up her phone to change the music. She looks down, and then straight ahead again. I clench my jaw.

“This is the most difficult piece of writing I’ve attempted all year,” I repeat. “And sometimes it makes me sad...because I’ve finished prose chapters for human people that have practically written themselves because it was so natural. But for you...” I trail off. She steps closer to me and leans into the railing.

“But I’m not human, Audrey. It is different for me,” she says gently.

“I know you’re not human. I know I personified you so that I can try to understand you better but I know that ultimately I am the writer of the personified version of you so anything you say actually really comes from my own brain and that’s why I joke more and more often these days that I might truly be going *mad*.” I’m grinning by the end of my sentence.

“You’re an artist, Audrey!” she laughs. “I hear that’s part of the deal.”

“*You* don’t make that any easier.”

“Says the girl who is depending on my very existence for this project!” she replies. We smile at each other and hold it for a few seconds.

“Do you like the purple silk scrunchie, by the way? Because I could write it pink or red instead.”

“I like purple silk.”

We look back at 21-year-old Audrey. I swear I can hear the song in her headphones from up here. “Searching for a Feeling” by Thirdstory, the first song on the album *Cold Heart* that came out in March 2018. Just a few months before I/she went to New York for my/her internship the summer before senior year. As the song reaches the bridge, the Audrey below us pushes the pace button to go faster and she looks up at the track and I stand up straight and try to make out as many details of her face from my vantage point—a hundred feet, six years away.

She’s running too fast—her neck can’t take that angle for more than a moment or two. I clench my jaw. She’s here and not here, she’s me and not me. *How does my imagined personification of Instagram feel more accessible to me than my own former self?*

“She’s probably thinking about sharing that song with you on her story,” I say. “Hoping someone will tap it and listen and read the lyrics and understand what it means to her without her having to explain what it means to her. That Audrey is running *away* from her younger selves and internal warfare and she is running *toward* her summer internship in New York and the idea that some kind of long-lasting satisfaction will stay with her in the fall following and so she will be a Changed Person who has Found what they have been Looking For. Including, ideally, a beautifulsmartcreative set of photos, and locations, and captions to share with All The People.”

Instagram purses her lips and tilts her head slightly.

“It sounds like she is running toward you.”

At this, I turn my head slowly to meet her eyes. The opposite of mine. Golden hazel on the edges. Blue-green halo in the middle. I stand there until the song on repeat leaves my head and there is silence again. Below me, I can sense that 21-year-old Audrey is slowing to a walk, having finished her goal time or distance for that day’s workout.

I don’t say anything. I know it’s just my imagination and I can visit this Audrey anytime I want, but I feel an urge to jog around the track and run down the stairs to see her more closely *right now*.

The Audrey below me gathers her jacket and keys and starts walking toward the exit. I brush past Instagram and run in the direction from where she came a few minutes ago. I’m cutting it close. 21-year-old Audrey is nearly to the front doors by the time I reach the bottom of the spiral staircase. Her ponytail is swishing at a discombobulated rhythm. I sprint after it and run through her—I’m the *writer* and this is just a *story*, remember—smack into the glass doors and spin around.

As she reaches for the door handle, she looks straight ahead and smiles. Those are my eyes and not my eyes. This is me and this is not me. I can be with her and yet I cannot be with her. She can see me and yet she cannot see me—

She walks through me, out the doors, out down the concrete steps to campus and the long journey to her car in some far-flung parking lot.

always a parking lot

...I think with a small smile.

The further away she walks, the more the scene melts, and I become aware of my laptop and my couch in my 27-year-old self's apartment living room in November 2023. Freshly washed hair. Lamp light shining from the left, where the schoolroom windows line the west wall. My blanket with quotes from literature that my mom gifted me one Christmas back in high school.

I can't help but feel the presence of a future Audrey in this very room with me, as I think about and write for Instagram as my 27-year-old self.

I know I am running toward that deeply emotional, always artistically hungry, somewhat genuinely *mad* future Audrey. I can write her

And yet I cannot write her.