

october 20, 2022

in retrospect. allyson wu

people always tell me we look the exact same.

i mean, not much of a surprise there; i suppose we are the same person, after all. but there's a certain detachedness that typically comes with analyzing your past self — a filter of sorts, you could say, a reminder of the present — and it all falls away every time i pull up an old photo and someone says my smile's never changed.

perhaps hearing that is only so jarring because i constantly seem to be distancing myself from who i once was. working towards change. my rationale for that is that i am an ever-shifting collage, an chromatic kaleidoscope of those ideas and people that matter to me. as those concepts evolve, discard parts of themselves like snakes abandoning their own skin, so do i.

i could keep going, but i'd just continue using a whole lot of fancy words simply to say i outgrew you.

all of you — the toddler with granny glasses and a shoulder length haircut that grew out and never returned. the gangly preteen, a little too tall for her age, whose biggest worry was her upcoming geography quiz. the niner, all sparkly eyes and idealistic unrealistic fantastic dreams, who genuinely believed staying up until two am was the gutsiest thing she'd ever do. the girl from last summer, a tiny bit naive, with the smile you could almost fall in love with if you looked at it for too long. every last bit of the past.

it's not you, it's me, i swear! you're a good kid, i promise. really. i know you do your best. which is why i'm sorry for feeling a flash of something almost resembling disgust each time somebody compares us. i just want to be different from myself; i'm sure you understand. after all, you're a shape-shifter too, with an uncanny talent for molding yourself into exactly what others want from you. no one gets me like you do.

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normally, people write letters to their future selves, rather than their past. you of all people should know this, given the amount of emails i've gotten from one, two, three years ago. ("happy birthday! you deserve to be loved," you wrote once. that one's my favourite.) but this time, i figured it wasn't fair to keep taking and never giving back. to leave you in the metaphorical dust — to move ever-forward without any care towards the days already gone by. there are things i want to tell you.

here's something to the toddler. you will be tall, taller than you can imagine right now, and you'll stop wearing those glasses you passionately resent. you don't need to be scared of contacts. like most things, they stop hurting after you get used to them. you'll still love the smell of freshly-baked cookies, but now you can whip them up yourself. you do this often. you'll grow out your hair, grow into your toothy grin: mom eases up, and you'll even dye your hair bright pink. can you imagine! it looks awesome, i promise. i'm sure you'll love it.

to the preteen. you will learn (the hard way) to cherish your friends while you have them, because wholehearted promises to stay in touch can and will fizzle out all too quickly. middle school flies by, and nothing lasts forever — let's just keep it at that. what you have now will become all the more precious when it's gone. stay carefree in the meantime: in the grand scheme of things, that 75 in gym printed on your report card does not matter. (though, i can't lie. i am still quietly peeved about it, years later.)

to the niner. you will become one of the seniors you admired unconditionally, and you will realize how much damn work it is to juggle everything all at once. but it's worth it, most of the time — i see a glimpse of your eagerness in the eyes of this year's niners, and i pray that they adore me as much as you adore your seniors. growing up comes with more late nights than you'd like, by the way, so get eight hours while you still can. no, you haven't been to a party, gotten drunk, or pulled an all nighter yet. yes, you're president of a club and have an average in the high 90s. i can only hope i am the paragon of nerdiness you always wished to be.

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and finally, to last summer's girl. you will soon realize that you and him are not meant to be, the way you always thought you were, that together the two of you are brilliant fireworks: ephemeral, incandescent. you burn too bright and too quickly. it will take a few months for your heart to not drop when you see him; but sooner than expected, lanky limbs and a sheepish grin will find a home in the hollow that he left. you're wilder and kinder than i am, and often i try and fail to replicate your whimsy. but i am more stable than you now, a little more secure in my self. this i am glad for.

now i could go on, spew some one-size-fits-all motivational speech directed back in time — oh, allyson, love yourself, i've always believed in you! — but i won't. it's about time to let the past rest, and you with it. in retrospect, despite what i'm fond of telling myself, we are so much more similar than i'd like for us to be. and i mean this beyond the superficials of our unalterable smile, or our identical facial bone structure. the toddler's exuberance, the preteen's uncertainty, the niner's keenness, last summer's daydreams: no matter how much i may move to distance myself, you shape me at our core. so thank you, genuinely, for making the mistakes that make me who i am.

bye for now. trust me, you'll turn out just fine.