

Serious Faces

The curtains were torn apart abruptly. It was as if they were in an arduous argument. It was as if they were heavy eyelids parting with one another after a long night of not remembering anything. The window wedged between the torn curtains revealed nothing - an ignorant pupil observing the world for the first time. Abigail pressed the palm of her hand against the icy glass, accepting the tantalizing sensation of outside's abnormally bitter air. Her steady glare fixed itself upon the stillness of the outside world. The motionless leaves, the chilled grass, the vacant driveways. She traced the edge of the curb with her ignorant pupils, unable to locate the beginning or determine the end of the cemented street linings in the seemingly palpable darkness.

She quickly turned her back on the window, frustrated by the stillness of her universe, and allowed herself to greet an equally unpleasant hellscape. She was alone in her boyfriend Laurent's bedroom. And she was waiting. Waiting for the shy wind to disturb the motionless leaves. Waiting for Laurent to hurriedly open his bedroom door to greet her. Waiting for the earth to complete millions and millions of more rotations.

But even though time whirled and danced all around Abigail, she felt as though the earth stood still. She glanced at her phone's screen, illuminating the time, reminding her that the world was still moving. But Abigail stood with her back turned from the window and stared at Laurent's perfectly made bed and elaborate wall coverings for what felt like millions and millions of minutes. The only light in the room was the dim glow from outside and the harsh light from a small desk lamp in the far corner of the room. Abigail hardly noticed that flurries of snow began to fall from the sky.

Abigail walked towards Laurent's bed. She thought about all of the nights where they had held each other. She thought of how he would fill the hollow crevices of her mind. She thought of all of the kindness he would pour into her. All of the jokes he would heedlessly drop in her lap. All of the silent and slow movements that glued their fragmented interactions together. His words were the pieces of tesserae in a mosaic archway. But now, she existed in a world where the tiny pieces of glass were cracking, and the welcoming archway, crumbling.

Abigail sat at the edge of the bed. She placed the palms of her hands against the full, plush texture of Laurent's blanket, and thought about how warm it must feel underneath. How safe it must feel to be hidden and tucked away from the cruelties of winter's chill. But she was not graced with the blanket's protection any longer. Now, she felt smothered by it.

Abigail suddenly felt as though the bed was made out of sheets of steel, pillows of metal, a blanket of iron. And it all felt cold. Overwhelming. Abigail jolted to her feet in one swift motion and silently moved back towards the cold window showcasing the soft snowfall and the vacant lots. She touched the coarse curtains and closed her eyes. She stood, with her hand tugging on the coarse curtain, and placed her forehead on the cold windows surface. She felt a

cold pulse run through her body. First her face, then her neck. She felt goosebumps form on her arms and struggled through an aching pain in her chest. She stood motionless, forehead pressed against the window, for five minutes (or was it five hours? Abigail was unsure). And with the chill and the subtle pain came the realization that Laurent was not returning. Laurent did not want to be with her. Laurent is with someone else.

Laurent is with someone else.

Abigail shifted the coarse curtains between her fingertips, reminding herself where she stood in the universe. But she didn't want to feel the coarseness between her fingertips, and she was beginning to feel dizzy with the realization that the universe was still spinning. She tightened her soft grip around the curtain's edge and tugged at the curtain from where she stood as if the curtain was her only hope of remaining upright. Abigail did not want to break the curtain rod, but the cruel idea popped into her head as she stood underneath. Abigail's friends would often speak about how therapeutic letting out anger could be. They would speak about the benefit of their kickboxing classes, how they would channel their anger through the repeated swinging and kicking of punching bags. And with this thought, Abigail's mind circled back to her younger years, where she would scream at the top of her lungs when no one was home just to release some pent up anger. She thought of how she would gather the anger inside and just erupt in blatant fury, and how exhausted and relieved she would feel afterward. And before she knew it, she pulled on the curtain's edge until she heard the silver rod lining the wind-chilled window break in half. As her grip on the curtain loosened, Abigail closed her eyes, refusing to watch the limp curtain as it fell to the floor and gathered around her ankles.

Laurent is with someone else.

Abigail's body was draped over the fallen curtain, and she felt her tear ducts begin to swell. Within seconds, the tears poured down her face and stained her bright cheeks. Abigail's face was strained, the pain of the evening was written on her cheeks, and there was still no indication that Laurent would be returning.

But Abigail didn't want to think about Laurent with someone else. She simply just didn't want to acknowledge the cruelty of her reality. The reality that she was alone and that Laurent didn't want to be with her. So instead of facing her cruel reality, she stood up and stumbled towards the nearest wall. Her hands fumbled on the wall's surface as she tore the poster that was taped to the plaster. She held the thin, glossy paper in her hands and ripped it in half, in fourths, in sixths, letting each severed piece fall to her sides. She contorted her right hand into a fist and threw it towards the newly bare wall. She continuously pounded her hand on the wall until it felt tender. Until it burned. She wished she was wearing kickboxing gloves to lessen the blow.

She opened the door of the mini-fridge and quickly tossed out all of the contents. Water bottles, assorted flavors of Gatorade, leftover boxes from diners. She threw them across the room and felt the instant gratification of watching them disappear amidst the mess. Once she was finished emptying the refrigerator of all of its blatant contents, Abigail grabbed the appliance by its core and turned it on its side for no other reason than to inflate the disarray. And from the fallen fridge, she moved to the tidy dresser beside it. In a hurry, she removed each drawer from the chest and poured all of the clothing onto the floor. She watched the parade of undershirts and button-downs drop to the ground as a maniacal grin spread across her face. Her eye caught a plaid shirt as it lingered on the top of the pile of clothing. She grabbed the shirt and held it in front of her, each arm stretched outwards on either side of her body. She toiled over the shirt,

tugging at its opposite ends. Abigail screamed as she strained her arms in an attempt to tear the shirt in half. She was failing. She imagined she was tearing at Laurent's skin. All she wanted was to inflict harm, to make him feel pain as severe as hers.

Abigail threw the shirt to the floor in frustration, but her unabated desire for destruction and malice dominated her fogged mind. She quickly locked her eyes on the tidied desk in the far corner of the room. It was small, it was made out of dark wood, and it was seemingly antagonizing her with its complacent stillness. Abigail hurriedly stepped towards it, and with each foot's forward movement, she felt a piece of her consciousness systematically leave her. Abigail's mind kept returning to the thought of Laurent with someone else. *Was his body draped over hers? Was he whispering loving words into her ear?* With each new thought, Abigail became more and more angered, and was now finding it harder and harder to control her hurried and violent actions. By the time Abigail's body reached the wooden desk, her consciousness loomed above her ominous frame, observing her actions with concern and wonder. And this separated consciousness swirled around the air in a panic, feverishly trying to interject and stop Abigail's irrational agenda, but was ultimately unable to intervene.

Like a puppet being controlled with marionette strings, Abigail's arm raised from her side and she grabbed the metal stem of the dull desk lamp with her clumsy hand. Abigail weighed the lamp in her palm, her right hand now tightly gripping its svelte rod. Abigail examined the elegant and simple shape of the lamp. The slight curve of the metal, and the way it perfectly met with the semi-translucent shade. It seemed light. It seemed easy to throw. And without a second thought or consideration, Abigail raised the slender lamp above her head, she craned her neck towards the empty ceiling, and with a long and sad scream, she aimed the lamp towards the adjacent wall

and watched it fly. She heard a dull thump, and the subtle light went out. The darkness crawled through the room and swallowed the disarray.

Furious with the new darkness, Abigail half-heartedly and blindly grabbed everything on the desk in front of her. Abigail felt what she assumed to be pencils. She cracked them in half and discarded them on the floor, then continued to reach for miscellaneous items in the darkness. She moved her hands feverishly over the surface of the desk until her hands found the bulky, rectangular object she didn't even realize she was looking for. Her eyes, now adjusted to the room's tangible darkness, squinted to examine Laurent's slender laptop,

After a few moments of contemplation, Abigail opened the laptop to reveal a bright home screen. The light projecting from the computer was harsh against the dark room and forced Abigail to squint her eyes as she viewed the screen. The screen read "Laurent's computer," with a minuscule photo of Laurent sitting on a beach, perched on a chair sinking in the sand. His blonde hair looked red against the warm rays of the sun. Abigail resented the smile stretched across his face. She hated the fact that he looked so happy, and hated the fact that she wasn't. She resented her inability to make Laurent happy. Abigail resented how his gaze always held a tinge of seriousness whenever she was around.

A few quick moments passed. *Were their bodies wrapped around each other? Was he kissing her ear as he was gently stroking her arm?* Abigail balanced the laptop in her hands, *fuck him*, and slammed it against the desk. Once. Twice. Three times. She slammed the computer against the desk with all the strength that she could muster and felt great satisfaction in hearing the metal hit the wooden desk. After various swings, Abigail stood still, exhausted. She held the laptop screen up to her eyes and squinted. Her eyes adjusted to the light. The illuminated screen

was shattered into thousands of pieces. The small photo of Laurent, smiling innocently amidst a landscape of sand, now almost indistinguishable. Abigail tossed the laptop lazily on the floor and walked towards the bathroom. There was no door separating Laurent's bedroom with his on-suite bathroom. Abigail stood in the narrow doorway and looked towards the vanity. There was a toothbrush lying flat on the counter, right next to a soap dispenser, face wash, and toothpaste. Abigail looked into the mirror that hung directly above the sink and stared deeply at her reflection for the first time that night. Her hair, originally placed in a high ponytail, hung loosely by her neck. Her eyelids, which were lined perfectly with black eyeliner and mascara, were smudged with opaque blackness. Dark circles hung underneath her eyes like crescent moons. The remnants of her black makeup revealed that she had been crying for a sizable portion of the night. Her blue eyes, which normally were lighter in the sun, looked dark and stormy. Abigail stared deeply into her almost unrecognizable eyes for what seemed like an eternity. There was a new harshness within them, a frightening, faint glow that masked all other emotions. Her thick eyebrows, which were normally held high and reflected a notion of surprise and enthusiasm, now looked as if they were stitched on her forehead in an entirely new way. They were more menacing now, even villainous. And her clear, olive skin was now flushed red as if she applied layers and layers of blush upon her cheekbones. But what startled Abigail the most as she gazed upon her hazy and angry reflection was that she looked scared. She was terrified of what she was doing but was unable to stop.

Although Abigail's appearance shocked her, she was familiar with her current startled reflection. Abigail thought back to her childhood. She would spend hours in front of a mirror contemplating her face. When she wasn't in front of a mirror, she would find herself straining to

dissect the facial expressions of her parents. She would know what kind of mood her father was in just by glancing at the shape of his eyes or the position of his mouth. Tight lips and a furrowed brow, *better stay quiet and out of sight*. A relaxed jaw and wide eyes, *it is safe to offer a hug and a kiss*. Abigail could decipher her mother's emotions just by glancing at her gaze. Distant and dull eyes signaled to Abigail that danger was ahead. *Dad must have insulted her again, better stay in my room. Do not speak. Do not stir*.

Abigail often found herself attempting to mimic the facial contortions of her parents. For hours she would try on different faces like eager shoppers would try on hats. At one in the afternoon, she would wear her "Sad Face." A slight pout, tears crowding her tear ducts and eventually running toward her chin. At two, when she grew bored of being sad, she would try her "Happy Face." A wide smile would reveal her small and gapped teeth, her eyes revealing genuine joy. At three, she would test her "Angry Face." At four, she would wear a face of disgust. At five, there was fear. Head tilted downwards in apprehension. Finally, at six, she would always settle on her "Serious Face." After many trials, Abigail had found that a serious disposition was the safest when it came to the volatility of her father's mood.

Every night, Abigail would sit on the steps near the front door and pretend she was the host of an evening gameshow. As soon as she heard the light jingle of keys from outside and saw the doorknob turn, she would imagine she was spinning the "*Wheel of Emotion*." If the wheel landed on "Happy," she would be greeted with an elated smile and a big kiss. She was granted safety for the night. If the wheel landed on "Boredom," she would be ignored and dismissed. If the wheel landed on "Anger," she would quickly run upstairs to her bedroom in avoidance (maybe even fear). Unsure which emotion would prevail, Abigail was always prepared with her

“Serious Face” plastered on her skin like a mask. Did her parents also try on different faces? Were their interactions rehearsed beforehand and subsequently spread out on top of the kitchen table each night like cue cards?

Abigail was never one to feel fear. She was never one to quiver at the sight of blood on a movie screen. She was never one to hide her eyes when a doctor approached her bare skin with a slender, lithe needle. However, she feared something far less tangible: the fickle nature of humans.

At the present moment, Abigail glared at her reflection and realized that she was drowning in fear. She was afraid of the darkness that surrounded her, of the thoughts that were circling in her head, and the idea of Laurent’s soft voice pouring into someone else’s ear. But, mostly, she was afraid of herself, and all of the destruction her hands currently craved.

Abigail picked up the tube of toothpaste that was placed mindlessly on the countertop. She gripped the tube tightly as if she was trying to memorize its exact shape. She couldn’t get the idea of Laurent with someone else out of her head. What face will Laurent wear once he stepped into his bedroom to see the space in such disarray and turmoil? Abigail thought of his deep-set eyes that hide almost all emotion. She thought of his pursed lips, and the silent demeanor he so often upheld. Abigail thought of the three years that she knew him, and how little he would share with her and the ones that he cared about. He never revealed his true emotions. Laurent would often share stories of his childhood, but the stories he’d tell hardly revealed the intimate details Abigail desperately craved to hear from him. Abigail imagined that Laurent would greet her with derision. A hurried entrance, a quick glance, a cautious retreat. No words, only a seething gaze.

How would Laurent react when he walked through the door? Abigail gripped the tube in her right hand. She watched the toothpaste squeeze out of the tube and slowly drop into the sink and onto the countertop. Would Laurent scream? Would he remain silent? She continued to tighten her grip around the tube of toothpaste until it was empty of all contents. She looked at the counter and saw the entire porcelain surface was covered with bright blue paste.

Abigail marveled at the absurdity of the situation.

She took her hand and smeared the toothpaste across the countertop. A petty act of spite, she decided.

She heard the faint sound of the front door opening. Abigail froze, unable to process the potential confrontation that she was about to live through. The reality of the situation had immediately set in. Abigail's anger quickly faded into complete and utter fear. She watched as the bedroom doorknob slowly turned. Abigail found herself spinning the "Wheel of Emotion" once again. Abigail began to feel warm, and before she knew it, relentless tears began to pour down her face as Laurent slowly opened the door to his bedroom.

There was a pause.

Laurent looked around at his room. First, the torn posters crumpled on the floor. Then, the upturned refrigerator. The assortment of clothing sprawled out in every corner. The broken light, the destroyed desk. His eyes followed the destruction until his eyes met Abigail's shaking hands.

There was silence. Almost unbearable. Always expected.

“Laurent?” Abigail managed to speak the only words that she could think of. “I got carried away here,” Abigail limply pointed to the desk in the corner, shaking her head in disbelief.

Laurent stood motionless. His eyes remained on Abigail, but he hesitated to look into her eyes.

Abigail moved closer to him, unsure of how to read his silence. In the past, Abigail had been able to dissuade Laurent’s feelings of anger towards her with a soft smile and upward glance. Up until that point, it had always been easy to avoid confrontation; Laurent never harbored much anger towards her. However, in the nearly dark room, Abigail felt little hope that the situation would be remedied by one tender glance. She inched closer. Although Abigail had been seething with anger while she was alone, the night's events seemed dull and pointless as soon as she saw Laurent.

“What are you doing here?” Laurent’s expression was blank.

Abigail continued to inch toward Laurent, “I was waiting for you to come back.”

“Get out,” Laurent stood in the doorway of his disheveled room. “Get out. I don’t want to look at you right now.”

“Can’t we just talk about this? That’s all I want,” Abigail’s voice sped-up. The thought of Laurent dismissing her was sending her into a panic. “We need to talk about what happened, don’t you think?” Abigail was begging.

“What is there to talk about?”

“You? And that girl?”

“She is my friend, nothing more. Nothing happened.” Laurent walked through Abigail. She consequently lost her balance and almost fell to the ground.

Once she regained her balance, Abigail remembered how angry she was. “And you expect me to believe that?” Abigail scoffed and put her hands on her hips, “*Friends!*” Abigail didn’t mean to shout, but it was too late to forge the illusion of composure.

Laurent didn’t respond and continued to walk towards the bathroom. His eyes surveyed the mess as he walked.

“I’m not *blind*, Laurent!” She gained more confidence with each word she spoke. “Do you honestly think that I have no idea what you do? Do you think I’m an idiot?”

“What part of *friends* don’t you understand?” Laurent’s back was still turned. It was shocking how calm and even his words were.

“Great, Laurent. You think I’m an idiot right? You think I’m completely oblivious,” Abigail shrieked as she stalked towards Laurent.

“Oh, I don’t think you are an idiot,” Laurent protested as he turned his head slightly towards Abigail’s direction, “I think you are out of your mind.” He let out a gentle laugh.

“Oh, right. Thanks for that,” Abigail shook her head violently. “It just sounds so pathetic when you continue to lie to me about this.”

“You know what sounds pathetic right now?” Laurent began to pick up his scattered clothing and tossed them into his laundry basket, “you.”

Abigail hesitated, unsure of her next retort. Laurent saw his opening and continued. “And regardless of what happened tonight, how can you do *this*?” Laurent motioned towards the

disheveled state of his room. “It’s psychotic. Now, can you just leave? I don’t want to deal with this right now.”

“No,” Abigail exclaimed sharply. “I want to talk to you.”

“I don’t want to talk. I just would love for you to leave, Abby. You’re acting crazy.”

Angered, Abigail sat down on Laurent’s bed, hugged her knees, and stared at the wall to hold her ground. Then, “*You* are the crazy one. *You* are just a sociopath unable to love anything or anyone.” Abigail was boiling now, “not even yourself.”

“You are joking,” Laurent dropped the laundry basket and the assorted mess of clothing in his hand and walked towards Abigail. He looked into her eyes with a familiar fierceness. For just a moment, Abigail thought that the night - the relationship, the destruction - could be salvaged. She envisioned Laurent tucking her hair behind her ear. She wished that he would stroke her cheek and kiss her lips. Instead, he placed the palm of his hand on her arm and gripped her tightly to pull her off the bed. Abigail felt as though her arm was being pulled from its socket. Instead of collapsing, Abigail used all of her strength to remain on the bed, despite Laurent’s strong pull. However, she quickly capitulated, unable to sustain her firm stance. Abigail fell to the floor as Laurent continued to drag her body across the room, through the hallway, and towards the front door. Abigail felt the burn of the carpet against her skin.

Abigail’s body squirmed on the floor as she tried to lessen Laurent’s tight grip on her arm. “Let. GO,” Abigail screamed, nearly breathless.

Laurent’s eyes lightened, realizing his cruelty. He released his grip, allowing Abigail to stand up, straighten her clothes, and back away from him.

“I shouldn’t have,” Laurent began.

“You want me to leave that bad,” It wasn’t a question, but a statement. A stern acknowledgment that the interaction was over, and should have ended before the night even began.

“Yes,” Laurent ran his right hand through his hair, a nervous habit. A habit that Abigail had grown to admire, one that she had grown to adopt.

“Fine. You win. I’ll go,” Abigail stepped towards the front door. “I’ll leave.”

Her hand reached for the front doorknob but lingered as soon as she touched the silver handle. “But,” Abigail’s voice faltered, “I want an apology. I deserve that much.”

“What am I apologizing for?”

“An entire relationship built on bull shit, maybe. That’s a good start, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Oh calm down. Stop being dramatic,” Laurent laughed, clearly amused by Abigail’s comments.

“Right,” and with a soft sigh, Abigail turned the silver doorknob and stepped out into the cold air for the first time in an hour. Heavy snowflakes fell from the sky, and the ground was covered in a thin layer of plush white. There wasn’t much light on the street, but the bits of snow that were illuminated displayed a slight sparkle.

Abigail’s footsteps left marks in the fresh snow as she moved forward in the darkness. Each step she took was matched with a slow sigh. Abigail did not realize how much energy she exerted until she was faced with her seemingly treacherous walk home. There was a streetlamp in the near distance, its light extending five feet in diameter around its base. As Abigail walked towards the street lamp’s inviting glow, she remembered all of the light she stole from Laurent’s

room only moments earlier. She slowly reached her right arm towards the street lamp. Without a moment passing, Abigail's hand was delicately placed within the street lamp's eminent light. First her hand, then her arm, then her body. Abigail was now engulfed in one of the only patches of light on the empty street, and the only thing she had the energy to do was stare at her hands. She stretched her arms in front of her body, palms turned towards the sky. The white snow swirled all around her body. The night air was cold.

Abigail's mind began to ache with sudden understanding. *Laurent wants to be with someone else. Laurent is gone. Laurent wants to be with someone else. Laurent loves someone else.* These words and phrases pinwheeled in her head as she stood motionless in the light. For the first time that night, Abigail's anger was replaced with a bitter sadness. Her whole body began to shake as the cold air hugged itself around her body. Abigail tilted her head back and looked towards the eye of the streetlamp, contemplating her recent, violent actions.

"I'm so, so sorry," Abigail whispered towards the light, slow tears rolling down her cheeks, choking as she spoke to herself. "It's all over," gasping now, "done."

Abigail began to walk again. Each step paired with a sigh, she returned to the darkness, feeling feverish waves of anger collapsing into her brief clarity.