Pinch Me
A story by Wesley Osler

It is a normal day in a small, unremarkable suburb. The year is 1975. A child rides down the street on a bicycle, an ice cream truck can be heard in the distance. Summer is in full swing, as the birds fly overhead, and the feel-good hit of the season blares on the radio. “I love my honey, yes I do, my love will go on, yes it’s true,” a singer croons. An air conditioner clicks on in the distance. The current time is 3:25 PM, July 18th.

The citizens of the small, nameless town are bracing themselves for the night to come. They have always braced themselves for night, when they would have to watch that which they feared. The show would always start at 6:35 PM, and they lived in constant fear of 6:35 PM. It wasn’t that they were afraid of the time itself, but as 6:35 approached, fear overtook their collective thoughts. Tonight was no different, and panic began to take hold over the Myers household.

It is 6:30 on the very same Friday night, July 18th. The all-American family is gathered on the sofa after dinner, preparing to watch the show. They are just finishing a scientific documentary on the Sahara desert’s wildlife. The time is now 6:35, and the TV flickers, as all TV’s in this town do at this time. Everyone is watching. The screen flickers to a nearly-empty room, held within are two occupants. One, a man dressed in a suit looking slightly disheveled. He’s lost his jacket as well as his tie, and is bound to a metal chair. The other occupant is a tall man with a simple gray mask covering his face, the mouth twisted into a sort of grotesque smile. The masked man is holding a large belt sander. No words are exchanged between the two. The sander is turned on, its sound is deafening in the quiet, concrete room. The noise seems to leak through the television in the family’s living room. Without provocation, he rams the sander into the man’s left shoulder. He cries out in pain, but he cannot form the words to protest. Blood begins to stain his white shirt and khaki pants, splattering all over his casual business shoes. The masked man is careful to keep blood off of himself. The left shoulder finished, he moves onto the right. The bound man is weeping. The camera zooms into his eyes, it is easy to see his pain. His mouth is unbound, but he cannot form any words to beg or plead. The masked man puts down the belt sander, and exits the room.

Another person comes in, nobody is sure of their gender. They, too, wear a mask; this one a dark red face that is fixed in a permanent grimace. The viewers around town have seen this person before, and they were terrified of them. The grimace-masked torturer walked over to the bound man. He is kicking and screaming, his earlier pain forgotten, trying desperately to escape his bondage and flee. His efforts are futile. They walk over to the bound man, and after ruffling his hair, they leave. They return only a minute later, holding what seems to be a coffee mug. They turn to show the audience what is in the cup. It is filled with drain cleaner. Others have walked in with the genderless torturer, but they are not facing the camera. They untie the man’s hands and feet, and gently place the cup on his lips. A tune starts to play as they force him to consume the mug's contents. It’s the same tune that was on the radio earlier today, while children were chasing after frisbees and the ice cream truck sounded its bells around the city. The catchy interlude
swells as the man has the cleaner forced down his throat. “I love my honey, yes I do.” He begins to kick and scream, but his screams are quickly silenced as he convulses and falls from the chair. He is lying on the ground now. He has been thrashing restlessly for 5 minutes since he consumed the vitriol. He has stopped moving. The genderless torturer, their face still hidden in a dark-red mask, fixed into a grimace, crouches down to check the man’s pulse. He is dead. The screen goes black, and the words “JAMES CORY, AGED 32” flash on the screen. The show is over. The father gets up from the couch to turn the lights on. The children are weeping, screaming with horror at the scene they had just witnessed. The mother comforts them. “There there, honey it’s okay. This is just a part of life,” she says reassuringly. “It could happen to any of us,” the father interjects, his voice subdued and silent. He had worked with Cory; he was an average citizen, no different from the rest of the community. But he was the one to be in the show that week. Next week it could just as easily be him, his wife, or even his children. However, they would never know until the show began.

This was a fact of life in this small, forgettable town. The daily program had always done this type of thing, and they were powerless to stop it. Their bodies would not let them speak to outsiders about the practice, and they could only talk about the program in the 5 minutes after it ended. Until then they were forced, by unknown powers, to exist mundanely. The mother would get up and continue cleaning up dinner, the father would go to the porch and smoke his pipe. The children, though they would sit and contemplate what they had seen, are physically unable to, and they get up to go back to their game of hide and seek. They will continue as if nothing ever happened, until 6:35 tomorrow comes to their television screens, and they will be forced to see another tortured and killed. In this senseless tradition, no meaning or purpose is upheld. It has always been, and it simply always will continue to be. Such is just a fact of life in this small American town. The date is July 18th, 1975, and on this day all remained as it was.