

Traditional Happiness

Hanna Chau | Short Story

The boys and girls lined up against the wall in order from youngest to oldest. The only words in the room were scrawled in blood-red ink on a banner stretching from one end of the wall to the opposite: **The Annual Competition of Pain.** Under the headline read miniscule words, Requirement of Pain must be physical or mental suffering imposed on the competitor. Competitor must be five to fourteen years old in order to compete. A bell rang. Shoes scuffled in nervous anticipation. The first two in line took ten steps toward the centre, in front of three judges. A member of the audience (one out of 3,006) flipped a coin. The first boy was to begin. He cleared his throat and said, “When I was five, I was raped by my father. He did this for the next eight years until I finally moved out to a shelter. There, I was continually verbally assaulted and had to beg for even a drop of water to drink.” The judges asked if he had any proof. The boy looked down. Shook his head. Then it was the girl, second in line, who was next. She did not speak at first, only pulled up her sleeves in order to reveal a galaxy of bruises up and down her arms. She twisted her elbow to present the cigarette burns embedded in its center. There was no visible white skin on her arms, only barely fading scars or bruises. Though she was prepared to speak, this was unnecessary. The judges had made their decision.

They blew the whistle and another audience member like a referee in a soccer game, pointed to the right side of the floor, towards the girl, deeming her the winner of this round. She had to get back at the end of the line.

The boy was forced into a dark room under the stairs of the oblivious audience. No one knew what happened to the losers, only that they were sent back home with even darker circles under their eyes. The next two people in line were both girls. Again, a coin was flipped and the girl with short hair was to go first. She said she was kidnapped at the age of six and forced to live in the basement feeding on her own hair follicles and a hamster’s decaying body. The judges asked for evidence and she presented a newspaper clipping with a face of young child resembling hers on the front. She also showed the red marks on her wrists where the chains were held.

The next girl was more nervous. She claimed each of her parents was shot in front of her by strangers on the street. Each at a different time. She said how when she closes her eyes at night, all she sees is red. How every stranger, ever human being looked like a monster with a gun in their pockets, their fingers held loosely on the trigger. She said how she wishes death would take her, but the government would not allow it. At this,

the judges stopped her. The whistle blew. They decided it was a tie – both girls were to get back in the line, in different positions than before so they can face a new competitor.

It went on and on like this for hours. Stories of rape, abuse, neglect, suicide, insanity, depression, hatred and murder whispered on the stage while the audience (consisting mostly of adults) ate their burnt popcorn and took breaks for the bathroom. Clapping was not allowed until the end, when the judges have found their winner – the child bearing the most pain in the entire state. The prize was rumored to be a procedure that ostensibly removes any and every painful thought or experience the person had endured. It was said to have the power to make the most miserable into the most happy. Because is that not what every individual on Earth seeks? Happiness? Nobody knows if the procedure is true since nobody ever encountered a winner of this competition before.

The only real winner witnessed was from the first annual competition, back almost fifteen years ago. His name was Horace and he was a homeless man who lived under a bridge. When anyone came to visit or spy, they would only see a smile stretched from one end of his mouth to the other, as if it had been stitched on without his consent. He only spoke two lines of dialogue: “The birds! The birds! Make way for the birds!” and “Be happy. Be happy. They are always watching.”