Cooking Cannibals

Robert Kroll shifted his hands, rubbing the outer side of his wrists against the metal of the cuffs, hoping to scratch out the tremble that infected his fingers. He focused on singular objects throughout the back-stage. Combinations of perfectly crafted food props lay strewn on a portable marble counter, each with an overhang displaying a menacing array of cooking utensils. The thought that these would soon be working his flesh didn't effect Robert's mindset as much as the roaring crowd that lay past the curtains. An entire room full of people with one sole notion in their heads, that he was a monster. Their leader was the host of everyone's dream. Dressed in a tight black shirt, overlaid with a blue scale suit and tie which reflected the stage lights centered on, giving him an almost heavenly gleam that permeated even into the back-stage. The host was known to be blessed with the voice of an angel and the charm of the devil.

Robert never really watched the show, but everyone knew it. A cooking show that invited celebrity cooks and figures alike for an interview that would end with the host attempting to cook the celebrities signature dish, ranging from a delicate salmon en croute to a PB&J, and present it to a team of comically inclined judges. The show had quickly swept the world, gaining enough popularity to gather leaders from all over into it's violet colored stage. Today though, it was airing a special one time event. The guest was a cannibal recently caught by authorities and brought from the execution chair to the show. The dish would be the cannibal himself. The first, live on
television, legal consumption of human flesh, and Robert was the star of it all. The cannibal and villain.

A click from his wrists jolted Robert back into focus as his cuffs came off and he felt a large rest on the square of his back.

"Do anything stupid and you're dead in a second." The voice of the balding guard that had escorted Robert throughout the theater maintained a threatening calmness. Robert responded by lifting his freed wrists and carefully examining the suit in a show of calm. It was orange scale with a matching tie over a white shirt. The same set as the host host. Jailhouse chic his designated assistant had called it, while carefully trimming Robert's dark beard to leave just the slightest bit of stubble.

"I'm just here to please the audience" Robert gave a coy look to the bald guard in another attempt at faux confidence, but was met with silence and a slight look of annoyance. Roberts tremble betrayed him again. Suddenly heavy trumpets sounded overhead and Robert recognized his cue to enter as the host boomed from atop the stage.

"And here he is! The man-eater of the hour, Mr. Robert Kroll! Come on up sir, don't worry, I don't bite... yet." The host let out a soft growl that he flourished with a wink to his TV audience. Robert strutted on stage, just the way the assistant had taught him, a confident gait with a slight crook to his smile. He eyed the audience, hoping to see a friendly eye, a sympathetic gaze, but was met with only a theater of cold eyed jeers. They looked at him like the main act of a circus show, with a mixture of bewilderment and dread. Each of their thoughts seeming a far distance away from his own. A cold chill fell over Robert as the reality of how alone he was on the stage.

With a few more clever cannibal quips, Robert felt the hosts voice, accompanied by the guidance of the guard's large hand, shuffle him into one of the two large, violet, velvet chairs that
sat across from each other over a long marble table. Each chair was angled slightly to allow full access to the audience. Robert sat stiffly, on the padding, his legs crammed together as his weight leaned towards the edge of the chair. The host eyed him up for a moment and began with a string of compliments. Relishing Robert's matching suit, and taking time to note how Robert's styled black hair balanced perfectly with his own white. He danced with the comfort and compliments, and Robert felt him eye up every muscle of his body for a sign of complacency. When that moment came, as Robert took the time to ease himself in, the host struck with the host began the interrogation.

"So," the host began, leaning in towards Robert slightly, a wild smile complimenting a malicious flicker in his eyes, "enough of the pleasantries. How'd ya cook 'em." Robert felt his tongue catch in his mouth as the audience leaned in like their leader, the same glare in their eyes. Trying desperately for a humorous note, something to connect with them, he said "Well, I just did what anyone does when handling humans. Looked up a good beef recipe and ran with it."

A moment of silence followed as the words fell. The host glared at him. "That's it?" He asked, leaning back into his chair. "Well folks, there goes the cooking section of this interview." The host gave an aside to the audience which was met with jeering laughter. Robert eyed the room, a look of bewilderment on his face as his head dropped and a flush started to spread. His mind began numb and he felt the host ready to strike again.

"So if we aren't going to get cooking advice from you, I guess we'll just have to learn about you. I mean who doesn't want a meaty conversation with a cannibal." More laughter from the crowd. "Now tell me Robert," Robert's eyes met the hosts "who was the first."

Robert told of his first one. It was while driving to a new client, he was a traveling salesman, a note that was met with the host's comment of "How convenient". Robert instantly
fought back against this with a rush of words. He was a travelling salesman long before he was a cannibal. He had always wanted to be a travelling salesman, not shackled by the restraints of complacency, always traveling, experiencing. But Robert quickly saw the fruitlessness of convincing the audience otherwise and in defeat, continued. He was traveling to a town, a smaller one out in the country, when on one particularly abandoned road, he saw a body of a woman hanging from a tree. A tight noose was around her neck and though she was dead, something about made it easy for Robert to tell that her death was recent. He had stopped the car, remembering a feeling of shock from suddenly being confronted with death, but he also remembered being more calm than he thought he would. Suddenly, a pounding curiosity took over him. He was used to these notions of curiosity, and this was no different than most. A pressing want in the back of his head, easily dismissed if he desired, but so gratifying if appeased. He looked at the body and came to a conclusion. If she's already dead, what difference does it make.

The host interrupted his tale with a laugh "Now Robert, you wouldn't happen to be insisting that we're doing the same as you." Robert felt his mind retreating further back. The audience glared down on him, the host pressed further. He was asked about his first kill. It was a homeless man in a back alley next to one of his hotels. Suicidal and deprived of joy. Robert had been eating suicide victims for a while at that point, but there were none around, so this time, he helped someone along. He had a gun, always thought it was necessary for that much travel, so he took it and shot the man. He didn't feel much when it happened, probably the look in the man's eyes helped. Rather than begging, it was a simple thank you. Robert saw that look a few more time, but he soon got off the depressive ones. Too many drugs. Not that he hadn't tried them, but he didn't want them in his food.
The host continued to pry loose all of Robert's inhumanities. Robert felt himself giving in, slowly seeing any hope of humanity fading. The audiences eyes grew further, colder. Their laughs harder. He began to talk about the ones that didn't want to die, the ones that begged and how he did it anyways. The host sunk further, trying to rip out any reason, any remorse, any hope that he could break Robert until the host finally just yelled "Why?"

In that moment, Robert stopped. With all his muttering and confusion, all the thickness that had clouded his head, he had, up till this point, never wondered why. He had always just done, allowed it to become an instinctual part of his life from his first one. A rabbit hole that let him slide on in with no rhyme or reason.

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and let his entire body drop. His arms slid across the sides of the chair, hanging as if dead. His head flopped back, folding over the top of the chair so that he faced the ceiling, his back following as it sunk it to soft padding. He felt the crowd stifle and silence, the eyes of the host gazing and judging his every movement. "Do you remember the first time you spent your money." He began, speaking into the stale, quiet air. His voice was mellow, calm. His years of sale finally coming back. He could almost taste the audience lurch from the change. "And I mean your money. Money from that first real job, the one that you worked your ass off for God knows how long getting. Do you remember that first purchase from that first paycheck? It was probably small, I know people dream of getting some grand thing, like a car, or start a mortgage or some shit like that, but usually, it's small. Mine was a candy bar. Kit-Kat. Got one of those overpriced two dollar ones, mid shelf, right at the counter of a 7-Eleven. I just walked in, saw it, wanted it, and got it." He paused let himself be soaked by the memory. He could feel the nostalgia seeping from him as each detail came back. The broken sign that made the store read 7-El v n. The glaze eyed clerk who struggled to aim her fingers at their appropriate destination on
the small screen that controlled their transaction. The crunckle of the wrapping as his fingers confirmed their target. He cracked open his eyes and let the stage lights above flood them as he began again.

"I kinda freaked out at first honestly. I mean, I just spent two bucks on a single fucking candy bar. I was wasting that hard earned money on nothing! So there I was, some random street corner, in front of some random convenience store, clutching a receipt and a fucking Kit-Kat bar, desperately checking my bank balance on my phone and about ready to return a candy bar. I remember that feeling, that one you get when you know you screwed up. The little tingle that you get on the tips of your hair. That bit of a pound on your brain. But then, I saw the bank, and it was almost the exact same amount of money as when the paycheck got deposited." He stopped.

His body loosened, his muscles seeming to flow with each command. He let his right index finger slowly stray with it's arm, tracing its way up the side of the chair, experiencing each tuft of pile as if for the first time until it began methodically shifting a particular bunch that lay just over the edge of the arm-rest's curve. The arm's elbow descended upon where the rest met the back as his own back straightened and shifted upon the relaxed arm, letting his left leg be ripped from where his own weight had glued it, and float up till it rested atop his knee. His other elbow fell in line with the right, yet the arm went up as his fingers contemplated the slightest stubble that had formed on his chin. His head returned to facing forward and his eyes met the hosts, who had a singular raised eyebrow and a half-cocked smile as if trying to laugh at him. Yet for the first time, as the memory came out, Robert felt a sense of calm envelop him. The urge to fight the notion of the villain faded, and he felt a solid idea form in his mind: let them understand. He took a deep breath and began again.
"I think people start to learn something about consequences in those moments. I always thought of this when selling, people look for an effect, a draw back, something that tells them they did wrong besides just a nag in their heart. When you don't see your wallet being hit, you think 'why not buy more', you think the world should prove you wrong. I was like that with candy bars. It became a habit. I started to buy one almost every day at whatever convenience store I found in whatever town I was. I was looking for proof, looking for consequence, and I kept doing it and I kept finding nothing. So when I ate that first guy, I hounded the news. I expected there to be a thing, a missing person report, a manhunt. I wanted consequences, I wanted someone to prove I had done something wrong. There wasn't. When I got the first kill. Nothing. Nothing telling me no. The streets weren't smaller, people weren't quieter. Some days felt happier, brighter. So then until that moment when I got caught, I kept looking for it. That consequence, proof that I'm a monster."

"And here I am! Your administrator of justice!" The host interrupted throwing his hands in the air and his head back as if to preach to the heavens. The crowds erupted on call with a fervor, yet as their voice grew, and as the host continued to sing and praise up a storm, Robert felt the singular moment in the hosts eyes, where he the slightest bit of fear and recognition had broken through the crafted face. "Well if consequences are the only way to teach this bad bad man a lesson, I say we stop our fun for now and give him one! Don't you audience?" Robert focused once again on the host's voice, with it's hop and seduction that pervaded every word, recognizing that it was a call for his end.

The host gave Robert a small wave goodbye and felt the hand of the bald guard pull him from his chair and begin to escort him offstage. As Robert took his final step from the comforts of the velvet stage, he gave a final glance to the audience. Amidst the cold eyed claps and cries that
dominated the room, Robert felt a few sideways glances, a little warmth in a few random eyes. For
the first time that night, Robert felt the feeling of familiarity come from even just a few individuals.
He was then quickly shuffled to a cramped, cement room below and behind the stage. Robert could
hear the list of sponsors be sung throughout the auditorium. Something to entertain the live
audience during the regularity scheduled advertisement break. That feeling he felt, leaving the
stage accompanied Robert's last thoughts, as he felt a prick on the back of his neck, a wave of heat
pass through his body, and his consciousness fade from the electric shock. The final consensus
about his existence, was that his meat was too stringy.