Cannibal Confessions

 Oscar stares at himself in the rearview of his parked 2001 Sedan. A collection of fast-food exhume lay like a snapped cinnamon stick, infusing the cold velvet seats with smells of artificial meat and cheese. Tumbleweeds of butcher’s paper fuse into this collage with remnants of stringy cold cuts, forgotten in a mad flurry of dancing fingers that still smell like processed ham and roast beef, the former of which is Oscar’s favorite. There is a ramekin sized plastic container in the cupholder full of the run off hemoglobulin from a steak that he ate right out of the package after a stressful day at the office. The plastic wrap is pink and tossed in a grocery plastic bag that Oscar remembers now has yet to be taken out.

 Outside the snow falls with grace, silent-night style. There is a peaceful Arctic between him and the YMCA. Orbs of light create a yellow radius of snowflakes, but other than these alien spots of illumination the parking lot is empty, and it is this emptiness that Oscar feels foolish. *Of course*, he thinks, *of course I’d be someone to come out here because some people on the Internet told me too. Bet this is some joke by some punks. Nice one Oscar, and now you’re stressed and got the cravings and there is a couple drops of the steak blood left and maybe you can bribe the pizza-face teenager at the diner to give you a raw patty again.*

Oscar opens the door once his stomach begins to rumble. A dumpling of stagnant cold cuts tumbles out and in comes the icy plume of winter. Already he is walking away from his car, his silhouette outlined by the resting headlights of the Sedan, following the path down to the YMCA, which, as he moves closer, appears more inviting than he anticipated. It was certainly warmer there and it is here. If this whole thing is a joke, then it is Oscar’s fault for believing it, and perhaps it’ll serve a freak like him right. Perhaps he deserves it. But maybe…maybe it isn’t, and it is this desperate hope in which Oscar clings.

 He wonders who *Casual Strummer 566* is, recalls all the horror-stories of being catfished on the Internet, his shock being captured on camera, the next meme that all the kids make fun of because they do not know, just *do not* know the mental calculus is requires to not give into your addiction. At least smoking is socially frowned upon, but acceptable…and at least meth and heroin can be pushed into the “sob story” narrative. But *this*…what Oscar dreams about, what he craves after a long day, a bad date…

 Oscar arrives at the YMCA and is genuinely relieved to find the door unlocked. Cafeteria lights shine on him accusatorily as he enters, but he is glad to be inside and warm. He sees a handwritten note with an accompanying arrow pointing to one of the breakout rooms: *CC is in Meeting Room 107*. “CC” stands for Cannibal Confessions, and Oscar is still not certain if this is one giant joke. Memories of binging in the glow of the open refrigerator, cold and vulnerable in his He-Man jammies, eating the raw turkey that was meant for Thanksgiving in ’82 gurgle in his psyche. The time when he had finally found a girl who likes him back and she broke it off after finding him tasting the droplets of blood that fell from her nose during one of her chronic nosebleeds. Or another time when grandma died, and Oscar can recall the exact thoughts that twisted him like some sort of mental hijack: *she’s already dying, she won’t know.* Another recoils as he ate the scab of a stripper during a lap dance, forgetting where he was.

 A mismatched group of people look at him as he enters and carefully closes the heavy wooden door behind him. He waves hello and helps himself to the canteen of coffee on the table. He sits in the circle, subject to the stares of what Oscar assumes are older members of the group, happy (*hungry?*) to see a new member of their ever bourgeoning, and secret, shame flock. The heavy lights do not flatter anyone in the room, but as Oscar looks around, he thinks that the population of the group to be a statistical representation of all the random and weird body types that people *would* think someone who has cravings for flesh has. No ghouls here, just average people wearing average clothes, as if a claw machine plucked every fifth person at a Walmart and dropped them here.

 They go around in a circle. A man wearing denim from head to toe introduces himself as William, the host of Cannibal Confessions. Quinn works in accounting at a construction company and her dark skin jiggles in the folds of her double chin when she smiles. Ben is retired and smokes meats for the local farmer’s market. Janine is a mother of two and is unique in that she is related to a surviving member of the Donner Party, even though most of the children were orphaned after the event. Oscar figures she’s the closest to a celebrity this corner of the community could probably get, well, sans Jeffrey Dahmer.

 Oscar introduces himself and tells everyone that he was invited here via an online message board by the user *Casual Strummer 566*. He looks around, hoping to attach a face to a name. There are no takers, but as William begins to open his mouth the door opens and a woman with fair skin and a sherbet-colored bomber jacket steps into the room. She settles into the chair across from Oscar, reveals patches of scars along her forearm.

 She looks at him and says, “You must be Oscar. I’m Mary Beth. *Casual Strummer 566*.”

 “Didn’t know you play guitar, Mary Beth,” Ben asks.

 “Casually,” she says, “sorry I’m late everyone. I was having cravings. I felt a little embarrassed to come inside in that state.”

 “All that matters is you came in,” William says, a smile underneath his cowboy mustache.

 Aside from the introductory rules framed as a reminder to all members (no advertising, keep anonymous, only recruit if you believe someone needs help, keep addresses hidden, etc.), Oscar does not feel like a newcomer. The stories of everyone else make it easier for him to open up. And the coffee helps. God, so much coffee. He wonders why there are so many canteens of coffee for so few people, and now he sees why. Quinn says that sometimes she lingers in the butcher’s section of the Shoprite for the dopamine rush. Ben says that sometimes, when he is especially manic, he’ll chew on some homemade jerky and wish it was a forearm or thigh. Janine caught her children watching “Silence of the Lambs” and sympathizing with Lector, and she fears that her own genetic history of situational cannibalism might have warped into a genome of addiction, of which Oscar can sympathize, coming from a family of alcoholics. Mary Beth says that she has tried cutting her addiction for raw meat cold turkey (pun intended, she says to everyone’s relief) and, like clockwork, failed. She has since been eating live mice that she has to buy from pet stores all around town, using excuses that her pet snake is growing, no, that she has two pet snakes, no, that she is a researcher, no, she recently has a love of mice and wants to free them, no, she…

 When it is Oscar’s turn, he does find the strength to be vulnerable difficult by default, but he looks at the eyes of the others, gets caught in Mary Beth’s crystalline stare, glazed over with the summoned emotional defenseless of having spoken about her recent experiences. He tells stories of his childhood, of his college years, of working now at a dead-end office where he has nothing to do sometimes *except* get cravings.

 “For example,” he says, “I hate my boss, and when I get in those states, I think how great it’ll be to humiliate that asshole by turning him into a hamburger, but I see how he eats. All fast food and candy. He’d taste like blubber and gasoline. The only way I can rationalize not sinking my teeth into him is that I see his diet.”

 “Amen,” says Quinn, sipping her third cup of coffee.

 “We call that ‘sizing up’,” William says, “it’s good to have a joint vocabulary for these kinds of things.”

 “Sometimes it’s the diet that really turns me off. Hell, even *normal* people eat processed shit,” Ben says, “all that fast food, GMO business.”

 “Hey,” William says, “what’s the first rule here?”

 “We’re all normal,” everyone says in unison, like a chant.

 Oscar finds himself holding back tears, although he feels silly that he is even getting emotional at all. They turn to him, look at the emotionally stoic face held together with band aids and a second cup of coffee. He understands the prompt.

 “I’m normal,” he says.

 “Welcome to Cannibal Confessions,” William says, “we hope to see you next week.”

 Afterwards everyone goes out to the 24 hour diner. Oscar is invited but he has had enough emotions for one night. It is a healthy departure, a ritual of stability that Oscar knows he can rely on in the coming weeks. Ben makes him promise to come back next week and Oscar complies, feeling empowered by this action. He stands outside of the YMCA, hands in pockets, watching the snow fall. He lives in a suburban town, right off the highway. It’s nice to not see those campy red-and-green Christmas lights in any direction for a change, to mentally revert the cultural landscape to “default”. It just turned December, too. One would think that the spirit would stop trying to encroach.

 Mary Beth stays behind to light a cigarette, which she pulls from the marshmallow depths of her insulated bomber jacket. Cupping the flame to her face, she looks mysterious, both haunting and haunted. Never in a million years would he figure someone as pretty as she to be reaching out to Internet strangers on Reddit about such a turbulent addiction. Well, all addictions are turbulent. *Taboo* is more apt.

 “No diner?” Oscar asks.

 “Not dinner,” she says. With her cigarette lit she begins to disappear into the void of the parking lot.

 “Thank you,” Oscar yells, and Mary Beth turns. He says, “You know, for inviting me.”

 Mary Beth stares at Oscar from the expanse, her jacket dotted with powdered snow, smoke exhuming from her like the exhaust from a cozy cabin. “Yeah. See you next week.”

 Oscar returns to his car feeling elated, conscious of the good fortune that has befallen him. While he wishes that Mary Beth, *Casual Strummer 566*, was a little more personable, he figures that anyone navigating internet chat rooms might be more comfortable through the interface of a screen. Oscar feels as if he is in an exclusive club. It feels good to belong to something.

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 The next week, Oscar tells everyone that he caved and ate raw steak outside of a parking lot, and that he feels horribly guilty for it. Quinn says *amen,* William says that if Oscar’s definition of “caving” is prying into a cold and bloody steak, then he is in a good spot.

 “Cravings are natural,” William says, one denim leg crossed over the other.

 Eventually the invasion of Christmas makes its inevitable swing into the conversation. Mary Beth says that Christmas is difficult because she does not like any of the food she is served or must serve, says her grandma’s Christmas ham tastes gristly and just plain incorrect. William says that his family left him after discovering his addiction, and that he spends Christmas volunteering at the homeless shelter down on Tulip ave, says that it’s easy to ignore “sizing up” those less fortunate. Ben says that he is also disconnected from his family, having been given a restraining order for attempting to eat his toddler child in the 80’s, and has not seen or heard from anyone since. Oscar would have thought Ben would have shed a tear at telling easily the most shocking of Christmas experiences, but Ben assures everyone that LA was a strange time back then, and he has long forgiven himself because he has no other choice.

 “It’s an animal psychology,” he says, shaking his head, “can’t keep a parent guinea pig with its offspring. Hamsters, too.”

 “But we aren’t hamsters, we’re humans,” Quinn says, looking outside at the fleeting snow.

 “Yes,” Ben pulls out some jerky from the inside of his jacket. “But sometimes I feel more than beast, less than man.”

 Janine says that her children joked about putting a trap near the cookies for Santa, so that they can try and eat him, and Janine says she is embarrassed because she entertained the very same thought throughout the day, to the point of salivating.

 “Are we talking mall Santa, or like, regular Santa?” Oscar asks.

 “Mall Santa probably tastes like cigarettes and French fries,” Ben says.

 “Lord help me,” Quinn sighs.

 “Real Santa probably tastes like peppermint patties or something,” Mary Beth says from a perch near the open window, a pyre of a cigarette hovering over her fingers.

 “He’s a giant man with a lot of energy,” Oscar posits, “so he’d probably taste like reindeer too.”

 “Had reindeer once,” Ben says, “it’s stringy.”

 “Heard that too,” Janine says. Then she stops, rubs her temples. She begins to cry. “See? See how it gets to us? I can practically taste the iron on my tongue, the resistant *squish* of a calve. This is not a good way to raise my children. I don’t…I don’t want to wake up out of some stupor with my son’s half consumed. I don’t want to be a monster!”

 Ben twists his face, spittle of jerky falling onto his beard. “Did you look at me when you said that? Are you calling me a monster for trying to eat my kid? Call me whatever you want, I’ve been called worse. At least recognize that I’m trying to better.”

 William raises his voice, snapping everyone to attention, “Enough, please! Listen, holidays are hard for everyone. It’s alright to vent. Necessary, even. As for the ‘m’ word, Janine, you know the rules.”

 “No one is a monster,” everyone says in unison, Oscar’s voice joining the mantra.

 The weekly session ends. Everyone makes their way to the diner. Oscar joins this time before he can confirm if Mary Beth is coming with, and when he finds out that she usually sulks outside of the YMCA to light a cigarette, he finds himself on the precipice of joining his new friends or spending what minimal time he can alone with Mary Beth. He has found that he thinks about her more often than he ever thought about anyone lately, and before coming into CC he rereads all their Internet correspondences. The messages between *Casual Strummer 566* and *A Curious Latte* could be seen as flirtatious, right? Oscar hopes that he is not misreading her good will and will forever be in Mary Beth’s debt for throwing this buoy out to him, however morose she appears to be.

 Although Oscar does admit the diner is fun. Everyone buys their burger or pork chop incredibly rare, and it makes Oscar feel less like a freak that everyone is doing it. They tell him to never order chicken because a rare steak is socially acceptable but ordering chicken sashimi is not. Don’t drink the steak blood with a straw; sop it up with a piece of white bread because it is tasteless (Janine says that she prefers rye dipped in blood, like a sauce). They talk about representation of cannibalism in movies, and how this propagates a stereotype that puts cannibals on the level with serial killers, not cheesy movie monsters.

 William says, “Dahmer is more frightening than Dracula because he is real. You can compartmentalize movie monsters as just that, monsters. But cannibals…they seem even more frightening than serial killers at times. People can tap into the motivations for cannibals.”

 “Hunger,” Quinn says, sipping her milkshake.

 “Addiction,” Oscar adds, sopping up the rest of the hemoglobulin with a piece of untoasted white bread.

 The next week everyone goes to the 24-hour diner and as Oscar has come to expect, Mary Beth remains behind. After coming home, he decides to message her on the same chain that brought him to Cannibal Confessions in the first place. He writes to her but receives no response until a couple of days later. He invites her to get coffee one morning if she is available.

 He finds her by her sherbet bomber jacket and a rising dumpling of smoke from the bench. Two coffees, one with sugar for him and black for her, warms his hands in the winter morning air. Crystalline eyes watch a couple walking hand in hand down a path, darting from this to a puppy playing in the park, to a family having a little picnic.

 Oscar sits next to her and hands her the cup. Mary Beth is not one for tacit conversation, which he can appreciate. She works as a bartender a couple nights a week at *Discos* and during the day she assists a local art gallery, which surprisingly takes a lot more work. He is comforted by her strange, cold attitude, surprised at all that someone seemingly on the fringe of society would orbit her life around a stable community like Cannibal Confessions.

 “I know,” she says, “I even *look* satanic enough to be a cannibal. Like I follow Manson or something.”

 “Not with that sherbet jacket you don’t,” Oscar says. Then he asks: “If CC is so important to you, so much so that you found me, why don’t you ever come to the diner with us? I understand you’re more introverted, but…”

 Mary Beth shies away. “When you all go out, you validate your addiction. Eat your undercooked hamburgers, complain about how the food is bland, have a laugh over it. I struggle every day with my addiction. I’d rather eat cold cuts in the car outside of the YMCA.”

 Then, Oscar asks, “Have you fallen off the wagon, recently?”

 “That’s an AA term.”

 “William hasn’t made a CC term for us to use,” Oscar says.

 “CC is a group of people who have beaten their demons and keep them at bay with a very large stick, Oscar. Of course, there is no term for ‘falling off’ because no one does. You hear them, Ben and Quinn and Janine, all revealing their regrets for actions taken past. But never how presently, by the hour, by the minute *yearning* for human meat. Even you, *A Curious Latte*, are able to temper your addiction.”

 Oscar shakes his head, “I was lost too, until you recruited me. I feel better now. Normal, even though William says that we shouldn’t use that term in that context.”

 “Normal, h a!” She says, eying an elderly couple dressed in matching grey, “Look, CC is the only support group that I can find that hasn’t laughed me out or worse, tried to incarcerate me. I’m not going away.”

 Oscar relaxes and then asks if she has fallen off the wagon again. This has a new implication. While alcoholics. smokers, and addicts who succumb to their demons unmistakably hurt themselves and their families, ultimately their impact is more personal. The only death involved is their own. With cannibalism, and Oscar shudders to even think through this process, it involves the actual death of another human, or a well-timed visit to morgue with an ice pick and a parka. *Or waiting for your grandmother* *to die, her skin only warm from her last pulses of blood*.

 Mary Beth shakes her head, “No, but the urge is strong. Very strong.” Oscar deflates. They continue to talk about their lives, small talk really, and after another hour Mary Beth says, “I’d invite you over for another cup of coffee or tea, but I’m afraid of what I would do. That’s how bad it is. I’m afraid of…becoming primal.”

 *You can be primal*, Oscar thinks, replaying the fantasizes long exercised in the previous weeks. Instead, he says, “I appreciate your concern. I’ll see you next week.”

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 It is a month before Christmas and the holiday cheer has begun to sweep into the streets. Oscar cannot go grocery shopping without being reminded of Santa Clause. Looking forward to CC is what gets him through his lonely days at home. Sometimes he’ll get a text from someone from group needing support after a bad day, their psyches hanging on a digital thread, and in a way, Oscar feels honored to be a sponsor. There are times during the week when Oscar feels particularly stressed and wants nothing more than to eat raw flesh. It is not the consumption of raw flesh which makes Oscar afraid of himself, rather it is the lengths in which he feels go to feel satiated, and at what lengths he will go before he cannot return that frighten him.

 A week later Oscar is staying late for the “optional” office Christmas party. The conference room is bathed in a cascade of red and green lights. An innocent missile toe is underneath the threshold of the Plexiglas door. There is non-alcoholic eggnog and cider next to a plastic Christmas tree decorated with ornaments constructed with office supplies. He is in the corner, eating some cookies, allowing himself to wish that it was a breast of Zoe, the vegan secretary, or even Thomas, the young data analyst who runs marathons, just as how it is alright to embrace the inevitable cravings of a cigarette between two yellow stained fingers if you don’t act on them. William says that it is alright, that it’s natural.

 He cannot stop looking at the clock. Confessions starts in an hour, and Oscar feels anxious that he will miss the meeting. His coworkers try engaging him in conversation, but he knows he is being awkward. He is starting to salivate, smelling the perfume from Veronica in Marketing, which smells like peppermint. She is healthy, Oscar thinks, so theoretically she would taste good, and if we are going with the ritualist cannibalism route then eating her brain might impart on Oscar some mental power from her M.B.A. from Columbia. He uses the first gap in conversation to excuse himself to the bathroom, where messages, for whatever reason, Mary Beth. He is not sure why, as she never answers anyway, but as he rests his sweating head on the metal stall door his phone vibrates.

 Her message: “I see red.”

 His message, typed amidst a dropping heart: ‘Tell me where you are, I’ll come to you.”

 She responds with her address, which is near the park they met up at a couple of days ago.

 Oscar steps out of his stall, faces himself in the mirror. His eyes have adopted blood shot quality, his jaw moving like a tooth grinding animal. Thomas comes out of the bathroom stall and begins to wash his hands, lean forearms rubbing against one another, muscled thighs that would be delicious in a brazed stew. He wears red and green tinsel around his neck and Oscar imagines herbs and spices on his grass-fed pectorals. Thomas nods at Oscar, wishes him *happy holidays* and occasionally glancing at Oscar from the side. Oscar splashes cold water on his face and runs out of the bathroom, his loosened tie flopping over his empty, gurgling stomach. He passes coworkers in Santa caps, his boss wearing a Santa clause outfit, and moves through cubicles lined with fake tufts of snow and garland. His boss tries to get ahold of him, but Oscar keeps moving, his mouth salivating, the smells of cinnamon and cider now making Oscar think of a minced-meat pie made from the young interns, their girlish and supple bodies still undeveloped like veal. He wants, no *needs* to make it to Cannibal Confessions. Someone can talk him out of these intrusive thoughts, perhaps even lock the doors to the YMCA from the outside, make him wait it out like a user going through withdrawal.

 He steps out into the parking lot, the feeling of his coworkers, who already think he is a little strange, still marked on his back. He hears his boss demean Oscar’s neuroticism underneath his fake beard, eliciting laughs. Oscar does not care. His dress shoes crunch into the snow, cold and damp. He takes off his parka. It feels like it he is burning fat, becoming trim. Oscar looks back, sees some coworkers through the window, thinks of tribesmen with spears hunting gazelle, not with speed but with patience. Man is a hunter, and its claws are attrition and a mind for tools and traps, and Oscar feels his heart beginning to beat, thumping atop his empty stomach, keeping the acid reflux of a starving body at bay.

 His car zooms into the slush, his way candied by red and green auroras, watched by plastic glowing lawn ornaments of rosy cheeked Santa and Jesus in his little crib. Plastic icicles camouflage with real ones, forming rows of teeth to either side, as if the street itself were a great jaw. The snow looks like powdered sugar, just like the night when Oscar was a child, leaning over his grandmother, the first time he has ever seen a dead body, thinking, perhaps, that no one would notice a piece missing…

 A red light stops Oscar and he sits while his car rumbles and leaks exhaust, thinking that even without the spirit of the yuletide his life is determined by red and green lights. To the right is the YMCA, with Cannibal Confessions about to meet in twenty minutes. He could make it there, tell William and everyone that Mary Beth is about to go feral, although then it would be up to how fast the rest of them can get there in this horrific, candy colored slush. Bathed in the red gloss of the traffic light, Oscar pulls out his phone and texts the group Mary Beth’s address. It is against the rules to disclose addresses, but he is willing to stake his own membership at Cannibal Confessions to make sure Mary Beth does not fall into her demons, and (not *or*) worse, commit some heinous act. He sends the text and turns right instead of left, zipping through name brand pharmacies and convenience stores that still have teenagers lingering outside, even in the cold.

 It is here that Mary Beth resides, in a street with busted windows, cracked pavement. Parking is a nightmare, but he manages to sidle up his tiny car in between two snow-stuck minivans. He runs down the street, stamping his feet on the unpaved sidewalk, one arm over his face to shield from the onslaught of the Christmas blizzard. There is the glow of the Yuletide lurking in the distance like a bioluminescent monster occupying main street. The light pollution carries all the way to the darkened, cracked windows of these flimsy, subsidized housing plots. Fake wreaths trees line every other door like talismans.

 The storm makes it hard to see more than ten feet in front of him, but Oscar is trailing the houses by the mailbox numbers. In the distance he sees a large man also braving the elements, shoulders hunched forward, hands in a big cloak. At first Oscar thinks it is just another unfortunate traveler such as himself, but soon he wonders if he is following him to Mary Beth’s house. Hurrying his pace, he sees the man turn a hard right and walk up her dilapidated porch. If Mary Beth says she’s seeing red, maybe she invited someone over from the bar she works at to get “primal”, as she said. This thought pains Oscar for more reasons than the obvious; he is a jealous that the man gets to experience a feeling, however much of an entrapment it is into Mary Beth’s Venus fly trap jaws, to believe he is coming into her bed on a warm night.

 He rushes forward, feeling foolish now, thinking that perhaps Mary Beth is having some withdrawal from her urging for Human flesh and he really is interrupting a nighttime rendezvous. The embarrassment is starting to chill his bones even more than his damp socks and as he steps on the cement slab of her porch he falls to his knees, cushioning himself on a tuft of snow blanketing the remains of a failed flower bed. He spots red splatter on his boots, instinctively checks himself for any open cuts, and realizes this is not his blood, confirming his own footprint imprinted atop the warm pool of coagulate at the steps. The door is open like a necrotic mouth; a red handprint pressed against the door frame like a tongue. Oscar Mary Beth’s dark, damp house, ripping a lamp from its socket to hold as protection.

 There, in the middle of the living room, lay Santa Clause on a blue tarp. A black sunspot splotches against his dark crimson cloak. Snow has already melted in little crystals, dotting the space around him with a growing pink puddle. His beard is sticky with blood, matted against his chest. Oscar bends down and inspects Santa Clause, checking for his vitals even though he knows the answer. Flashes of delirium tap onto his psyche like the snow pattering against the windowpane, and he thinks *perhaps Santa is real?* then sees straps for a fake beard, the smell of aftershave permeating through the rotting smell of Mary Beth’s house and the man’s open wounds. The blood smells like copper and Oscar feels his stomach tightening, salivating like one of Pavlov’s pups.

 Oscar rips the tacky beard from the dead man and sees Ben’s absent eyes, his own scratchy beard. Teeth nettled with the black crust of regurgitated innards. He pulls out his phone, wonders exactly how Ben had gotten here to fast, and sees that he texted the group back that he was running late anyway, and it’s no problem for a slight detour. Oscar falls onto his behind, the open door assaulting the room with spittle of snow, splotches of blood on Oscar’s hands and knees.

 Mary Beth is leaning on the threshold, watching him. She is no longer wearing her bomber jacket and instead wears a painter’s smock. Blood drips from the steak knife in one hand. In the other she holds an array of paper towels, plastic containers, and silver utensils. A vampire trail of blood flakes down her chin.

 “Oscar, I’m glad you came,” she sits next to Ben’s body, the tarp crinkling underneath her.

 She seems unfettered by the cold bursts of air coming from outside, the asteroid belts of Christmas lights lighting up the fences across the street. She tears open Ben’s Santa Claus robe by the chest and Oscar still cannot help but interpret the raw force of her hunger, of how she rips over the buttons and zippers, as erotic. Canyons of gashes line Ben’s body like leeches, evidence of a multiple assault, which, for a smaller girl like Mary Beth, seems like a necessity to take down the reformed giant that was Ben.

 “That could have been me!” He says, his legs frozen in shock, his nose perked at the scent of Ben’s exposed chest cavity. Iron, copper, hemoglobulin. Rosemary, lemon zest, paprika.

 “But it wasn’t,” Mary Beth says, “On the bright side, now we can share. I’ve always wanted to have dinner with you. I took some old wine from *Discos*. I can get that if you like.”

 She begins to strip Ben of his crimson pants. She struggles with the boots and does not ask Oscar for help, and when she eventually, with all her strength, rids the pants and boots she goes to Oscar’s side of the living room and shuts the door, ignoring Oscar’s wince at her approach. The living room immediately settles into a temperature equilibrium.

 “But…you were planning on murdering me. If I got here first…”

 Mary Beth takes the chef’s knife to Ben’s inner thigh. She grits her teeth trying to hack through the hair and blubber and instead relents, pulling the knife like a sword in stone and exchanging her blade for a large, steel bread knife, hoping to use the ridges to saw.With surgical precision she begins to cut away layers of Ben’s thigh, at first the pale skin, then layers of white fat, and eventually the beet red sinews stripped like canyons of a topographical map with a fragment of exposed bone winking at the very bottom. She peels away flanks of uncooked thigh bacon and holds them up for inspection.

 “I’m sorry, Oscar,” she says, “I was hungry, is all. I’m sure you can understand. Had it been you on the other end I have no doubt that you would have done the same. If it’s any consolation I also liked Ben, even though he tried to eat his young.”

 **Oscar, looking at the stripped pieces of meat, dripping with blood and littered with stubborn pebbles of bone, admits to himself that Mary Beth is right. This is precisely why he hates himself, and why he constantly struggles with his own demons, his own battle with mortality, with tribalism, withholding himself from participating into the primal, animalistic food chain. This is exactly why a community like Cannibal Confessions is necessary, not to rid themselves of their demons but to accept their neurological afflictions that are so out of synch with society. If Oscar had “fallen off the wagon” in the same manner as Mary Beth than he would have expected his tribe to come and save him from moral oblivion too.**

 “It’s Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs,” Mary Beth says, putting a strip of Ben into her mouth, lumps rising in both cheeks as she shuffles the morsal around, her eyes arrested in bliss before swallowing. “You know, like psychology 101. It’s a pyramid, with ‘self-actualization’ on top, so, like, your ideal self. At the bottom it’s ‘physiological needs’. Food, water, shelter. You can’t actualize without food.”

 “And what about Cannibal Confessions? Our support group that I know you need as much as I?”

 “Community is only the middle rung. No matter how much you love your family, if you are stranded in the mountains, you’d draw straws and hope it’s you eating your brother and not the other way around.”

 “Like the Donner Party.”

 “Like the Donner Party.”

 “At the end of the day, no matter how bad or good it is, Ineeded to eat, Oscar. You should too.”

 She slides a paper plate across the floor, stopping short at Ben’s limp heel. Oscar looks at the slivery, shining strips, beginning to imagine how they would taste as a tartar, or carpaccio, or even just now, morsels popped into his mouth…then he remembers that the rest of the Cannibal Confessions group will be arriving soon, and he cannot have them accept the shock of his falling wayside in addition to Mary Beth’s succumbing and Ben’s murder. Like dominos, if Oscar submits then won’t it be easier for the rest of them?

 She begins cutting Ben’s calf and puts slabs into plastic containers. Blood is falling down her hands like little ruby comets. She wears a bib of gore, eating as she packages. She glances at Oscar and his apprehension.

 “Go on, take it. I can get the wine if you would like.” When she sees his paralysis, she lurches forward and moves the damp paper plate the rest of the way, pushing it to Oscar’s boots at the other end of the tarp. Ben’s legs look like pieces of uncooked chicken. She continues, “It’s an apex predator thing, one could say. See, we never talk about that in CC. We never talk about the anthropological implications of cannibalism. Maybe those who crave human flesh have a certain, like, alpha gene or something. Did you know the Mayans believed that consuming flesh meant obtaining their thoughts, energy, mana?”

 “Yes, actually,” Oscar says, biting his bottom lip, “although, I don’t believe there are any exceptional qualities about Ben that I would want to absorb.”

 “At the end of the day, he’s meat.”

 “That could have been me,” Oscar says again.

 “But it’s not,” Mary Beth says, moving now from the stripped shins, the bones white as snow, and moving to his arms.

 He thinks of Thomas’s running body and how he would love that physique for himself, or Veronica’s intellect and perseverance. He keeps flexing his fists to keep a flow of energy moving through his body, tries to ignore the gurgling of being famished, the seductive smell of copper emanating from the pink globs. He reaches to the plate, snaps his hand back.

 He speaks to say something, *anything* to distract his mind. “I told the rest of the group to meet us here. I said you were about to commit something heinous. This is your last meal.”

 Oscar holds onto the lamp in case the news strikes Mary Beth to take action with her knives. He feels as if he is in a den, watching a monster feed on his friend, careful not to provoke it more than he already has.

 He adds: “You are already going to jail for murdering Ben, but you don’t want to go to jail for eating him.”

 “Well, if I’m going to jail, then I might as well eat him.” She licks her fingers like barbeque sauce from ribs. Then she proceeds to continue to strip his flesh from his arms and pectorals that have gone flabby with age. “It’s a part of the food chain, you know, Ben tried to eat his kids. We ate him. Animals don’t understand morals. They only understand eat or be eaten. You should eat.”

 Mary Beth grunts and strains to push Ben’s Swiss-cheese body on the remains of his open cavity stomach. The tattered remains of the Santa Clause robe have become fused to the exposed sinews and muscle. Mary Beth begins to cut away the pieces of the cloth with whole chunks of Ben’s back and buttocks, slicing manically, hurriedly. She wipes her hands on her jeans, no longer caring about keeping it all contained on the tarp. Instead of delicately placing it in a container, she lifts it to her lips and chomps, moaning in a way which, in a different world, Oscar would have found arousing.

 Oscar finds himself holding the plate, sniffing the copper, tasting the aerated blood through his nostrils. His stomach lurches and gurgles. Mary Beth notices his struggle. She swallows a piece of Ben’s lower back and stares at Oscar over Ben’s mauled lump of a body, face covered with blood and gnawed intestine like war paint.

 “You want to eat,” she says, “then eat. No one will know except me.”

 “I can’t, I won’t,” Oscar says.

 “You want to. CC is coming soon. Then, I’ll be shipped off to the loony bin by people who fear me, fear us. But you can eat. No one will know. I won’t say anything, Oscar.”

 “No,” he shakes his head, gulps down a torrent of saliva.

 “Just a bite,” she says, tossing a fragment of Ben over the tarp.

 It moves in the air like a deflated balloon. Instinctively Oscar catches it, and this, he knows, is what will send him over this carnal abyss. He feels its sliminess, how it feels like cold uncooked chicken, imagines how it would feel underneath his teeth, slithering down his throat like eating an oyster.

 “How can I trust that you won’t say anything?”

 Mary Beth picks at her teeth before digging further into butchering Ben. With her mask of blood and smock of gore, she looks like she is in some reverse surgery. She says, “We are different species, you and I. Apex predators and everyone else is a rung on the food chain. If we both go to jail, who will propagate? Janine has a couple of kids that are hinting towards cannibalism. *Hinting*! Can you believe that? She is starving those children, Oscar. Starving them. I made my bed. I could not contain my hunger. And I can see it in you, too. Every couple of years you try to hold that door at bay…until one day you hear a knock. You know what it is although you won’t admit it. Then you hear it again, and again. How long has it been since you’ve satiated yourself?”

 Oscar looks away. “These past couple of years have been difficult.”

 “If tonight did not happen, I promise in a couple of months it would have been you on the other side of this snafu. The only difference is that you don’t have a get out of jail free card. Think about it. You deserve to eat. You *need* to eat. I’ve granted you an all-you-can-eat buffet and his name is Ben. For one night you can feast and give into the carnality that the others are trying so hard and pathetically to suppress. A night without all the social hang-ups that our nourishment has programmed into you.”

 Mary Beth stares at Oscar. Her silence is almost like permission. For reasons that Oscar cannot comprehend, he puts the slick piece of meat into his mouth, his eyes connecting with Mary Beth, as if they had just completed a ritual. A dopamine rush envelops Oscar into a near coma, his eyes rolled back, the gamey, raw taste of Ben’s butchered calf tasting of iron and pure protein. Slimy coagulate travels via streams of blood into the pockets of his cheeks like logs in a river, coating each tastebud, morphing into mush underneath his enlarged canine teeth. He holds his head back, his body warm, licking thick droplets off his fingernails, afraid to lose any of it. In the back his mind Oscar knows he has fallen into the trap, both Mary Beth’s his own morale battle, but Ben, the meat, just *tastes so good*. Another part of his psyche screams at himself from behind a muted glass window, insulting him for thinking that savagely eaten cold cuts and raw diner burgers would be sufficient to trick the one part of Oscar that is real and authentic. Underneath the coagulate and raw sinews, Oscar tastes notes of cheep beer and T.V. dinners. Not even a good cut, like Thomas the runner or Veronica the intellectual. But a cut enough, and any steak was better than no steak.

 Mary Beth smiles, “Thank you for having dinner with me.”

 She puts more pieces of Ben on another plate and hands it over his mangled body, which at this point is more raw sinew and exposed muscle than body. Oscar grabs the plate over the cavern hawked in Ben’s back, his spinal cord bent into a strange shape, the aroma of his exposed organs beginning to stink, sacs of purple and pink and blue flattening like slowly deflated balloons.

 “You should save the liver,” he says, “it’s really good cooked with thyme and butter.”

 “I won’t be around to eat it,” Mary Beth puts the liver in a plastic container. She makes a point of showing to hide it underneath a couch with exposed springs and clouds of mushrooming cotton.

 Oscar takes his second serving, and before long he is on his third, and his fourth, now encouraged to gorge as much as he can in this winter night, fearing with every bite that he will hear a car door of the others approaching to apprehend them both. A part of Oscar feels bad for Ben, who did not deserve this, but this empathy is quickly overridden with the fact that Oscar could have been stabbed to death had he been a little swifter. Besides, Oscar thinks, Ben is already dead…it is not like Oscar committed some divine crime against another lifeform. Might as well eat it. Him. It.

 Oscar is in his fifth helping of Ben when Mary Beth reminds him in a stroke of irony to “clean up”.

 “They’ll be here any minute. Your face and fingers are starting to look like mine,” she says.

 Oscar inspects himself, tastes the globules of meat clinging onto the insides of his chin like jerky. His fingers look dipped in Easter Egg paint; so red that it’s gone pink. An urgency strikes Oscar like cold water. His stomach feels gorged and distended, and he picks himself up from the floor and wets some paper towels in the kitchen. It does not clean the DNA of Ben from his lips and underneath his fingernails, but aesthetically he looks good as new. Now all he needs is to emulate shock.

 From the other room Mary Beth’s moans of pleasure and the sounds of her chewing glide through the house. On the refrigerator he spots a calendar marking bartender shifts at *Discos* as well as the weekly meetings for Cannibal Confessions, marked with red ink. Oscar leans in closer, sees not only a star in the corner of today’s date, but also other stars scattered through the squares, some with meetings of different colors. Cannibal Confessions meets on Wednesdays. Anthropophagite Anonymous meets on Mondays, Exhausted Eaters on Fridays. He opens her refrigerator and sees a plastic castle of raw meat and the occasional vegetable. The door is full of an array of sauces.

 Oscar appears in the threshold, sees Mary Beth hunched over the bloody tumbleweed of Ben’s body. She is lurched forward, shoulders hunched, audibly munching, shoving whatever she can get into her mouth before she’ll starve. A woman eating her last meal.

 “Can I ask you a question,” Oscar says, not as a question.

 “Mhm,” is all Mary Beth replies.

 “Why did you invite me to the Cannibal Confessions? Why did you seek me out, befriend me, put me in a position to heal myself? Why me?”

 She looks over her shoulder, a tendon hanging from her lip like a piece of spaghetti, and says, “Because no one would miss you.”

 Oscar shouts, “You’ve been grooming me. Planned on my willingness to help. I…I had a crush on you, Mary Beth!”

 She says, “Well, had you not called the others we could have gorged ourselves on Ben here and cuddled in each other’s arms, fat and tired, like little Tasmanian devils. Instead,” there is the opening and closing of car doors in front of the house, “here they are. Our group. Make sure you clean yourself up totally, Oscar. There is still blood spatter.

 He looks at himself, sees a bib of lumpy gore trailing from his chin to the buttons of his shirt. Instinctively he sees Mary Beth’s sherbet bomber resting on the back of a kitchen chair and he slides himself in it. It fits him perfectly.

 Mary Beth, seemingly knowing that Oscar is feeling his way into her jacket, says, “Like a hunter wearing the buffalo’s skin. He thought he was my boyfriend. That jacket was *earned*.”

 “Thank you, Mary Beth,” he says.

 “Thank you for accepting my apology,” she says, wiping her mouth.

 “For planning to kill me?”

 “No,” she says, “for turning you into me.”

 “That’s the thing,” Oscar says, stepping over Ben’s fractured remains and heading towards the door, “I don’t think we’re that similar, you and I.”

 He bursts out of the house, falls off the porch after slipping on the blood slicked ice. Janine and Quinn come to his aid. They are wearing silly elf hats; Janine’s complete with pointed ears. William wears a necklace of flashing red and green lights, matching the illuminated city at the other end of the park. Oscar feigns incoherence, gasping, crying, half authentic and half exaggeration. William opens the door and steps out, his eyes wide, his mouth an open black whole underneath his handlebar mustache.

 He is speechless, just as Oscar was an hour ago.

 “Ben,” he says, “oh, Ben. Mary Beth…she…”

 “No,” Quinn says, pulling off her cap and holding it to her chest.

 Oscar regains his footing. He says, “I tried to stop her.”

 “We know,” Janine says, one arm around his shoulders.

 They go into the house together. Mary Beth sits on the tarp, hair crazed, and nose pointed to the ceiling. Blood curtains her face and chest of her smock. Ben’s excavated body is before her like an offering.

 Oscar sits on the porch, his stomach settled, eyes glazed over. The group members occasionally check on him, thinking he is in shock, when he is in a state of satiated bliss. He sees Quinn batting tears from her eyes, saying that at least Mary Beth could have kept *something* left. Thirty minutes later the red and green Christmas glow is complimented by sapphire, and the police arrive clad in parkas, snow crusted on their shoulders, their badges glinting. Oscar watches as the officers enter the house and get spit out, their psyches fractures, pools of viscous brown vomit looking like melted fruit cake over the splinter laden railing. The officers take statements, Oscar gives his best story: he arrived after Mary Beth consumed Ben, that she was in the same drunken stupor that she is now.

 The officers asked how everyone new one another, William answered that they were a local AA branch.

 Handcuffed, bathed in emerald, ruby, and sapphire, Mary Beth walks with her head held high, her eyes glazed over, a surgeon’s mask of coagulate peppered with fragments of Santa Claus’s tattered cloak. Oscar swears she winks at him as she passes.

 The following week Oscar decides to stay home after putting in his resignation letter at work instead of going to Cannibal Confessions. He will be moving in a couple of days, his town becoming increasingly claustrophobic. People are starting to recognize him around town, twisting the narrative in a way that small neighborhoods do. Oscar has heard all variations; he and Mary Beth were dating and planned to kill Ben from the beginning, Mary Beth’s surfaced experiences of severe child abuse led her to becoming psychotic, living in her dilapidated, welfare home where she studied twisted anthropology, Oscar and Mary Beth were vampires…it is enough to make anyone feel trapped in the threshes of their home. This is not the only contributor to Oscar’s discomfort, for even though the remaining members of the Cannibal Confessions still meet, are in fact stronger than ever due to their joint trauma, Oscar cannot stand to face them. Occasionally he will get texts from them, asking he if is alright, but Oscar is intentionally short with them, hoping to keep them at bay.

 He stands and navigates through cardboard canyons of moving boxes. He opens his fridge for a beer, moves some old containers that he needs to throw out. His fingers graze upon the plastic container with Ben’s liver in it, taken before the undertaker scooped the waxy remains of Ben’s body with an ice shovel. Mary Beth saved it for him, he knew, and while he has no intention to eat it, he decides to hold the meat, almost like a pendant, a memento of that awful night, a reminder that he can stoop as low as Mary Beth if he allows himself.

 He sighs, half chuckles to himself, knows he will never allow himself to fall into this darkness again. He grabs his beer, but not before his fingers linger over the plastic container, the purple filet waiting to be consumed or to rot.