

# The van Wildensten Party

## by MJA Smith

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The business class ticket from Heathrow to JFK and a typed itinerary had landed on my desk in an internal envelope.

I'd been working at the paper for three years, culminating in writing small pieces on second-tier social occasions – not the Z-list falling-out-of-nightclubs pieces, you understand; they were covered off by a tabloid somewhere else in the group. And neither was I covering the ultra-elite parties that went on behind closed doors in Kensington and Chelsea; they were the exclusive domain of Errolyn de Froem, the social affairs editor, a crusty old crone who despised not only every word I wrote but my very being also.

I hadn't planned on being a journalist, but I'd ended up as one, albeit not a terribly good one. After leaving Cambridge I stayed in the city, became a tour guide and existed through the winter by working in any restaurant or bar that would have me; my parents tolerated, indeed funded it via handouts when my rent was due, but always on the assumption that I'd do something 'proper' when I'd scratched that itch. My father wanted me to work for his firm, but I had no desire to work in manufacturing; it all formed part of a mild rebelliousness that I'd found far later than most people.

Instead, my mother talked to one of her old university friends, who worked as a features editor for *The Times*, and the next thing I knew I was being interviewed for a basic admin job that essentially involved lots of running for coffee and occasionally proof-reading pieces that the freelancers and staffers had submitted. The usual inexplicable twists and turns of fate ensued and one day I was asked to write a short piece on an end of year party I'd attended as a last-minute stand in, and the next thing I knew I was working for Errolyn, a cantankerous old battleaxe who resented my ascension to prominence after barely any time at the paper almost as much as she detested my unkempt appearance and disdain for established social etiquette.

Struggling to make a positive impression on Errolyn during my first week with her, my mother's friend stopped by to check on how her protégé was getting along; when I told her how unpleasant I was finding things under de Froem she told me to be patient, and that my appointment was just what would be required to blow some of the cobwebs from the traditional corners of the paper. I felt a bit better after that, though I still felt clueless.

Over the coming weeks and months, Errolyn and I struck up an uneasy alliance, and one that seemed mutually beneficial. She was able to wriggle out of events that she felt beneath her, particularly those attached to audacious young footballers or Mayfair nightclub openings, where she felt either out of her depth or above the event itself. Me, I benefited from her eloquence and sartorial knowledge – how to hold a champagne flute correctly, how to button a three-button suit depending on the occasion and the impression sought, how to address dignitaries, that kind of thing – none of which were remotely useful for the events she sent me to, but she seemed to take great pleasure in passing her wisdom on. Once, her 'plus one' was hospitalised on the morning of a grand black-tie charity dinner at the Dorchester, and at the veritable last minute, and with evident discomfort, Errolyn invited me. She took one look at the tatty dinner suit and pre-knotted bow-tie I brought in during the afternoon, relics from student balls and mothballed ever since, and almost wept. Despairing, she said it simply wouldn't do, whisked me off in a taxi to Jermyn Street where, two hours later I walked out of a tailors carrying a new, well-fitted dinner suit. It would have taken months to pay Errolyn back, were it not for her waving her hand dismissively; the cost of me looking shabby as a guest at her event, she characteristically told me, was far higher than the cost of the new suit.

I was wearing that same suit that evening, standing as I was in the shadows on the corner of the next block to the van Wildensten mansion smoking a cigarette and watching limousine after limousine drop guests off, observing drivers and doormen opening the car doors, nodding their heads reverently at their husbands and holding out hands for their fur-coated wives and mistresses.

The van Wildensten party was something of a mystery to me. According to Errolyn, a representative from our paper had been invited to the event since the van Wildenstens, Dutch bankers originally, had settled

in New York in the eighteenth century. They had connections to the Stuyvesants and other wealthy Manhattan forebears, but, as philanthropists of the highest order and historical figures of some note, were relatively unknown outside of the upper echelons of Upper East Side society; indeed, our paper had not published a review of the van Wildensten party for around seventy-five years, but nevertheless we were still invited each year, and each year someone from the paper went. This, to my questioning self, seemed wasteful on our part, until Errolyn told me that the van Wildenstens paid for our representative to go. This explained why, instead of the third-tier hotels our PAs were ordinarily mandated to book for us, I was staying at the Carlyle. Tradition trumped austerity where the van Wildenstens were concerned.

Errolyn had been due to attend the party, but about a week before had been struck down by a mystery illness and had been ordered to rest by her doctor. Reluctantly, she cancelled all of her engagements where she could, but the van Wildensten party was one that couldn't be declined for historical and traditional reasons, and so I was unexpectedly in the frame for perhaps the most sophisticated event I'd ever been to without her.

In my room at the Carlyle was a note bearing the van Wildensten crest advising that a car would be waiting for me at 8.00. To me this seemed a pointless extravagance, given that the van Wildensten mansion was just around the block, but also because I felt so, well, junior and unworthy.

I had a few hours to kill, so I went for a jog in the park, but the chilly November air hurt my chest, so I gave up and took a walk instead. I grabbed a filthy coffee from a stall at the Columbus Circle exit that made my head spin, then wandered back to the Carlyle and took a nap in front of CNN. I showered at about seven, went downstairs for a confidence-boosting gin and tonic in the bar, and then waited for the car.

I asked the driver to drop me off a block or so up from the van Wildensten mansion. A young Chinese-looking guy, he merely nodded and didn't ask any questions, his discretion no doubt well-earned. I wanted to wait for the main guests to enter the party, so as to slip in at the back and remain relatively unnoticed. I stood under a street-lamp on the next corner taking drags on a cigarette, alternately looking at the shadows that seemed to be creeping toward me from the direction of the park and keeping a watchful eye on the guests emerging from their cars.

Finally, at about 8.20, it seemed that the last car had jettisoned its rich cargo into the party, so I stubbed out my third cigarette, retrieved my invitation from my dinner jacket pocket, popped a Mentos into my mouth and approached the doors to the mansion.

It was precisely as I'd expected it to be: huge chandeliers, massive oil paintings, large ceramic vases filled with pampas grass, a sweeping marble staircase rising to an ornate ballroom where a chamber quartet were playing, gaggles of well-dressed guests greeting one another with kisses on cheeks and guffawing at anecdotes, no doubt wheeled out and dusted off for the evening. A glass of champagne was thrust into my hand and I found myself edging toward a corner from whence to observe the party as a spectator.

I feasted on delicate canapés and was just helping myself to another of the pale meat blinis when I noticed a woman looking over at me from behind the waiter. While I inexpertly and messily shovelled the canapé into my mouth, she wandered over to me, smiling. I felt like a slob, frantically wiping *crème fraîche* from the corner of mouth and hoping to God that I hadn't dropped any down my dinner suit.

She was beautiful, there was no better way to describe her. The emerald dress she was wearing looked like she'd stepped out of a Hollywood movie from yesteryear, shimmering and floating across the room to where I was standing. Everything about her screamed perfection, her bright white teeth, her lightly tan skin, her asymmetrically cut brown hair. If she'd been wearing a crown it would have looked entirely correct, so regal did she appear. A Park Avenue princess, I thought.

I was incredibly, painfully unconfident around beautiful women and I had been since my teenage years; as a bespectacled and slightly chubby youth I was rebuffed on many occasions by the objects of my teenage lusting, always girls who were out of my natural league. On the day of the van Wildensten party, despite having gotten in shape, ditched the specs and swapped them for contact lenses many years before, the familiar inferiority and panic made me long to be invisible.

'Hello,' she said stridently, flashing that arresting smile at me. 'I'm Emily van Wildensten.' Shit, I thought to myself, she practically is a princess. 'And you are?' She outstretched a toned arm as she said this, her delicate hand hanging there expectantly for a handshake, a bracelet that probably cost more than our paper's annual turnover slipping imperceptibly toward her slightly bent wrist.

'Hello,' I managed weakly, shaking her hand and trying not to combust at the touch of her smooth hand on mine. 'I'm Thomas Anderson, from *The Times* in London.'

As soon as she heard my accent, suddenly so incongruous in this environment, she erupted into a cascade of riotous giggles that drew the unwanted attention of what felt like everyone else in the room. I felt myself going crimson and became deeply focussed on the uneven shine of my shoes. If the music had stopped and the musicians had stood on their chairs to catch a glimpse of what was causing such a commotion, I wouldn't have been at all surprised.

When I looked back, Emily was beckoning over another, similarly alluring creature, the diaphanous gown she was wearing billowing and swelling like a cruising jellyfish. It was a ridiculous dress, but it leant itself perfectly to this audacious occasion.

'He's *British*,' Emily squealed, her exterior maturity and elegance suddenly replaced by a girlish innocence that would have been perfectly suited to any mall, anywhere in America, any weekend of the year.

'We love the British accent,' exclaimed the other divine creature, and I momentarily considered correcting her State-side parochialism, but resisted. She introduced herself as Hannah van Wildensten, Emily's older sister and, not for the first time that evening did I wish I'd done more – indeed some, any – research on the van Wildensten family.

Emily beckoned over a waiter and soon glass after glass of champagne was being thrust into my hand. After a while I began to feel like the parquet beneath my feet, and with it the lower part of my body, was turning to mere pools of liquid colour as my focus blurred. I wondered if I actually was swaying like a tree in a breeze, or whether it was just my mind playing tricks on me. Measuring time by glasses drunk, after six or seven the sisters had more or less exhausted their conversation with me about London. That conversation had me say next to nothing, the radiant van Wildenstens loquaciously detailing events, boutiques and restaurants they'd visited, none of which my social class would entitle me to even have heard about, even considering where I worked at the paper. They had moved the conversation on to Continental Europe generally, as seemed to happen whenever I spoke to Americans. The small scale of our island always appeared to baffle them in the face of the sheer enormity of the United States.

Finally, one of the siblings suggested they show me the house. Relieved at the opportunity to move again, and freed of the need to appear interested in their high society recollections no matter how temporarily, I ditched the champagne flute and hastily grabbed a handful of the meat canapés, no longer principally concerned with manners or dignity.

I want to say that I soaked up the richness of the furnishings, took in the dignified van Wildenstens portrayed in the paintings and the ornate fabrics throughout the mansion's many rooms, but childhood memories of being dragged around National Trust properties replete with old ladies and their blue rinses – and being by now completely drunk – prevented me from being impressed. From one of the sisters I did glean that the house was now more or less a museum, albeit a private one, and that the family members now lived elsewhere in Manhattan, and I imagined the sleek penthouses and duplexes that I'd have much preferred to be inside right now.

Room after room began to look the same, and I began to feel like I wasn't really moving at all. I felt sick, and so when Emily produced a key from her purse and unlocked the keys to her grandfather's special drawing room, retrieved three tumblers and a dusty bottle of vintage cognac, I couldn't have felt more nauseous. I suddenly became acutely aware of the dryness in my mouth where slivers of chewed food lay between my teeth and an uncomfortable feeling deep in the pit of my stomach, a sure and familiar signal that at some point I was going to need to vomit. All I wanted was a glass of water, not more booze, but the cognac was probably worth a fortune, and it seemed ungracious to refuse.

Emily turned on a few lamps, illuminating the centre of the vast room, which was more like a modestly-proportioned gentleman's club than any drawing room I'd ever seen before. I accepted a cigar even though I detested them and slumped into an enormous padded leather chair and took in my surroundings. The van Wildenstens, puffing away on their cigars like it was something they did every day, continued with their tales of Europe; having eaten and shopped across Italy and Germany we were now in Prague, so I knew we didn't have much further to go. I considered telling them that the only time I'd been to Prague was for my brother's stag do, but somehow tales of Czech lap dancers and throwing up on the Charles Bridge didn't seem appropriate in the surroundings.

I was beginning to lose my grip on my senses and better judgement when something caught my eye and made me jump up animatedly.

'Oh my God! Is that real?' I blurted, interrupting a story about the tenderness of the aged beef at the restaurant in the Four Seasons. I strode over to the far wall where, above a series of bookshelves, each

covered with dusty antique books, were the heads of, variously, a baby elephant, a lion, miscellaneous gazelles and numerous primates; and those were just the ones I could see in the low light from the lamps. Once aware, I could now make out the form and shadow of many others around the room. I'd never seen anything like it before.

'Those are our grandfather's hunting trophies,' said one of the sisters, who were now standing either side of me. One moved away and flicked on the main lights. Suddenly illuminated, the room offered up a clear view of how many of these so-called trophies grandfather van Wildensten had won, since almost every available space on the walls was covered with animal heads of every recognisable type, some posed with mouths opened in perpetual growls, lips pulled back over their sharp teeth, while others were placid, almost as if they had been shot without any warning, accepting the projectile which had taken their corporeal existence almost benevolently. Hundreds of pairs of black, lifeless eyes stared down at me and I felt awkward under the dead gaze of so many creatures.

'He must have been some hunter,' I mused, somewhat redundantly in the face of so many kills.

I noticed the siblings looking at one another, as if allowing something silent, some secret code, to pass between them.

'He was,' said one soberly, 'but there are other trophies too. Would you like to see them?' Something about the way she said this made the room feel colder and I began to wish that I was back over at the low table swigging the cognac, the effects of the night's alcohol disappointingly now absent from my system.

I found myself agreeing, even though something told me very definitely that this was a mistake. Hannah took my hand, causing minor ripples of excitement in my body at her velvet touch, and she led me over to one of the book cases; she pulled out one of the books and a hitherto hidden door swung open. I didn't think at the time how much like an episode of Scooby Doo the evening had quickly become. A hidden door made complete sense to me then.

'This,' she announced grandly, 'is grandfather's real trophy room.' With her chin proudly raised, she hung back slightly, so as to let me look inside. She didn't look inside herself, I noticed. Emily was abruptly nowhere to be seen.

I went into the room.

I instinctively found the light switch.

I couldn't make out what I was seeing at first, then it rapidly became obviously, and horribly, clear.

I was sick, so sick that my stomach ached violently.

I didn't want to look, but it was as if invisible hands were holding my head, fingers on those hands prising my eyelids apart, forcing me to take in what I was seeing.

Another violent bout of sickness brought me to my senses, and, wrenching myself away I retreated to the drawing room, hanging onto the edges of the book shelf to support my weakened frame, trails of half-chewed food and stomach acid unavoidably spattering onto my dress shirt.

Hannah was sat hunched over a table snorting haphazardly-chopped lines of coke from beneath a veil of her own hair. Completing the third line she sat back upright, flicked her hair languorously behind her ear, sending crumbs of white powder onto the floor, and looked at me vacantly, no evident spark of recognition in her gaze at all.

'Why – ' I started, but the blank expression on her face made it pointless trying to get through to her. The dim, threatening light from the secret room, the myriad dead eyes looking down at me from the animal heads, Hannah's similarly empty irises, all drove me out of that room; as I exited hurriedly, she began to cackle uncontrollably.

I traced my way back through stately rooms, the strained laughter growing more and more distant and with it the vividness of the horrors I'd just seen in the hidden antechamber. I found the stairs and passed Emily van Wildensten on one of the steps, lying unconscious and spread-eagled like a car crash victim, a thousand dollar shoe several steps below her and her dress twisted around and hitched up messily in a fashion that Errollyn would have found deplorable. I didn't – couldn't – stop.

Downstairs, the party seemed louder than before. Music and conversation vied for supremacy and the sharp rush of noise to my ears made my sense of disorientation greater still, the weakness in my legs now so absolute that I feared I would collapse. I stopped one of the waiters and asked for a glass of water. He took a look at my ashen face and pointed in the direction of a room at the far end of the ballroom which I staggered toward gratefully.

I was just about to push open the double doors when a huge security guard appeared and blocked my

passage.

‘Please,’ I said, quietly. ‘I just need some water.’

‘You can’t come in here,’ he responded coolly. ‘Yo Alfonso! Get this dude some water,’ I heard him holler in the direction of one of the waiters then crossed his arms over his enormous chest and stared at me fixedly.

I found a seat by the doors and sat down. The doors periodically swung open and then closed again as waiters pushed through with empty and replenished plates, trays and glasses. The steady rhythm of the flap-flap-flap of the doors was strangely comforting, and, once the water arrived, I found myself relaxing slightly, allowing the images I’d seen start to dissipate and recede.

I began to question what I’d seen, started to believe that I’d been mistaken, that it was simply excessive alcohol playing havoc with my senses. I’d drunk far more than I was accustomed to, and when I played back what had happened in my head, it took on an incredulousness that should have been obvious. Why, I reasoned, would the van Wildensten sisters approach me of all people at this party? Why would they spend so much time with me when I was clearly not responding at all to their conversation? But most of all, why, after finding out almost nothing about me, would they feel compelled to take me to surely the most secret room in the entire house and show me things that would be so damning to their family were they ever to leak out? Especially since I had told them I was a journalist?

No, I thought to myself, none of that made the smallest amount of sense, yet it seemed so vivid to me at the time. Now far calmer, I upended the glass of water into my mouth and stood up, handing the glass to a waiter on his way past me.

As he walked through the double doors, my eyes involuntarily followed him. The doors continued their perpetual movement with waiters entering and leaving the kitchens, so much so that if you relaxed your stare, the view of the kitchen was clear and undisturbed, like an image in a flick-book or a zoetrope, the doors near enough invisible if you focussed on the middle ground hard enough.

My gaze alighted upon something on the counter top in the centre of the kitchen that I couldn’t take my eyes off. I didn’t want to believe what I was seeing, and the horrors of earlier in the evening were suddenly proven to be very real indeed.

Lying there were the remains of a person, what was left of its skin and flesh so burnt to a crisp as to render the ethnicity and sex of the wretched corpse indeterminate, its dismembered limbs piled haphazardly and disrespectfully next to its misshapen, charred head, empty eye sockets pointed skyward. A chef with his back to me was picking up the limbs, shaving off any residual flesh and muscle into a plastic tub and discarding the bones into an overflowing black refuse sack. Waiters milled around, seemingly oblivious to what the chef was doing.

A gnawing feeling in the pit of my stomach reminded me of the canapés I ate earlier in the evening, the provenance of the pale pink meat that I couldn’t identify now terrifyingly obvious. The urge to vomit was quick and intense but a looming presence in the foreground prevented me from retching. It was the security guard again. He reminded me, this time more firmly and more threateningly, that I couldn’t go into the kitchen. In spite of his threatening demeanour, I felt an urge to be sarcastic and tell him that after seeing that I wouldn’t want to go in there anyway.

Instead, instinctively, I jumped to my feet, dodged past him and ran toward the assembled guests.

‘Stop!’ I yelled, as loud as I could despite the barrage of intense and impenetrable noise from the party. ‘You’re eating human flesh!’

A few guests glanced around, an old man looking down at me through his pince-nez, his mouth hung slightly open in what I assumed to be disbelief at what I’d just shouted. Instead, he shook his head and popped another small canapé into his mouth. Sensing the security guard looming behind me, I tried to run further into the centre of the throng of people, urging people frantically to stop eating, smacking canapés out of reluctant hands wildly, all without a single acknowledgement of what I was insistently telling people. A group of men and women shook their heads disapprovingly and I stopped running, out of breath, beaten.

I was punched quickly and artfully in the small of the back, falling in a tangled heap onto the smooth varnished wooden floor. The security guard apologised to the disapproving guests, picked me up by the collar of my shirt and dragged me off to the kitchen where he and three other guards set out raining punches and kicks upon me. I assumed that I blacked out.

I came to in my hotel room, not knowing how I’d got there. I was lying in the middle of the bed with

the sheets pulled up to my neck. I don't know why, but the sight of my dinner suit hanging neatly on a hanger on the wardrobe door handle caught my gaze and I stared at it absently while contemplating getting up, even though every sinew in my body seemed keen to resist.

Struggling to sit, I became aware of a throbbing feeling in my head and a searing pain in my nose, under my eyes and in my ribs. I swung my legs out of bed and walked painfully to the bathroom, trying not to notice the bruises on my body as I passed the mirror, the colours of which looked like the sheen of oil on the forecourt of a petrol station. I showered, wincing at the pain of the intense jet of water causing sharp temporary crenulations on the bruises and only then decided to take a look at my face in the mirror. Wiping away the mist I almost didn't recognise the countenance staring back at me since it was so swollen and blotchy. Dried blood filled both nostrils and the black eye looked like it would last for weeks. The shape of my nose was no longer familiar, and I could only assume that it was broken.

Wrapping a towel around my waist I hobbled back to the bedroom. I sat on the edge of the bed and wept silently at the recollection of the night before, wondering what to do about something that I was now complicit in, along with all the other guests. I'd grabbed handful after handful of the meat canapés, not knowing that I was eating the roasted flesh of another human being. The realisation prompted me to start packing with an urgency I'd never experienced previously, even though my flight wouldn't leave for several hours and despite the protestations of my damaged body. I just wanted to be away from there.

As I picked up my journal from the desk I was aware of a small piece of paper sticking out of the top of one of the back pages, which fell gently and slowly onto the floor. When I retrieved it, tears forming at the corners of my eyes with the effort of movement, I read the words on it in thick black pen and broke out into a cold sweat. I found myself needing to sit on the edge of the bed again to draw breath. Somewhat predictably the note said 'Stay away and shut the fuck up or next time it will be you.'

I thought about calling the police, but the threat in that note was sufficient to make me think twice. Instead I continued packing, even more hastily than before, checked out nervously while avoiding the appalled and enquiring eyes of the receptionist, and caught a cab to JFK. Throughout the flight I couldn't eat, sleep or think about anything but the night before and what I'd inadvertently participated in.

At work the following week, I ran into Errolyn while I was making my way in.

'Thomas?' she said, my name issuing out of her mouth like even forming the word was distasteful to her. 'What on earth happened to you?' She pointed at the black eye, still angry and swollen after the few days off I'd taken after getting back from New York, then retracted the digit theatrically.

'Oh, you know, rough weekend,' I lied. 'Rugby match.' She looked at me, disapprovingly, and I thought just a smidgen disbelievingly and looked away quickly.

As we walked back to the small corner of the office occupied by our department, she grabbed hold of my arm and whispered, almost conspiratorially, 'How was the van Wildensten party? Don't they serve the most exquisite canapés? They're like nothing else I've ever eaten.'

I choked on the sip of too-hot coffee I'd just taken and nodded mutely. I'll never know whether she knew the secret of just why the canapés at the van Wildensten party were unlike anything she was likely to eat.

As we sat down she leant across the desk, the overbearing smell of her Penhaligon perfume causing my eyes to water slightly. 'By the way,' she said, 'I don't wish to disappoint you, but the editor has decided not to run a story on the party this year. It's the same every year my dear Thomas. Rest assured, I've tried my best to convince her otherwise, but it seems she doesn't consider it to be relevant today. So we'll just have to keep the taste of those delicate little morsels to ourselves.'

I smiled mildly, relieved. 'Never mind,' I said. 'Next year maybe.'

I harboured no ambition whatsoever to go back to New York again after the van Wildensten party and the sense of fear with which I'd departed, the threat on the note still at the forefront of my mind in the months that followed, but in time its horror began to fade.

A few years after the nightmares following the party had retreated, having by then moved out from Errolyn's department into the new media section – an area of the paper that I was even less suited to than the events pages – I met Terrie, a pretty university girlfriend who I hadn't seen since I graduated, and we rekindled our nascent romance. I never told her about the van Wildensten party or my intense discomfort with going anywhere near New York again, and so, when she booked a surprise weekend in Manhattan to

celebrate our first wedding anniversary, I was unable to protest my aversion to the city. I delivered one of those wan smiles that I thought made me look pleased, even though I was anything but.

She noticed how fidgety I was on the flight and enquired as to why I seemed so unsettled. I merely responded that I didn't enjoy long flights, something that was quite plausible given that we'd only flown short haul into Europe by that point. She ordered some champagne, thinking that this would calm my nerves, but I remained on edge once we'd landed and right up to the point when we checked into our Midtown hotel.

During the course of the weekend my feelings toward the city and my earlier experience began to change. I once again saw the vibrancy and mean-spiritedness that had so captured my imagination in my early twenties, and I began to lighten up. We did the usual tourist things, and wound up on our last day killing time in Central Park before needing to head over to Newark. I know it barely seems credible, but despite my proximity to the worst thing I'd ever experienced, I didn't think about the van Wildensten mansion that day at all.

That all changed when we left the park and wandered along 79th Street toward Park Avenue, where fatefully I found myself once more facing that very house. I had a curious feeling that all else had disappeared and that the only things that existed in the world were that house and me, standing on the sidewalk staring grimly at the beautiful, but tainted, building; the building, in turn, staring hard back at me, taunting and goading me.

'Wow,' said Terrie, interpreting my slack-jawed expression as one of awe. 'That's some house.'

'Uh huh,' I managed, paralysed with fear.

'Shall we go in?' she asked.

I was going to respond that we couldn't just sidle up to the door of a private house because we liked the look of it and ask to take a look around, when I noticed the signage above the door that indicated that this was a museum.

At first I thought that I had the wrong house, but a glance along Park Avenue found the street corner where I'd stood smoking cigarettes that night. A convenient passing town car provided further confirmation, just for effect I thought. At Terrie's insistence I had given up smoking a year before, but right now the temptation to unwrap a pack and light up was very strong.

'Come on, let's do it,' said Terrie.

Numbed by seeing the building again, she took my hand and dragged me over a crossing to the entrance where we joined a small queue. I protested that we didn't have enough time to spend here because of the flight, until Terrie reminded me that we didn't even need to be at Newark for another three hours, giving us plenty of time.

A museum worker pushed a flyer into my hand, presumably to occupy us while we waited, which provided a brief history of the house and the family who had owned it. The pamphlet explained that the house had been owned by the van Wildensten family since it had been built in the nineteenth century but that the family had decided to gift the house to the people of New York City, an act which the blurb went on to say reinforced the family's altruism and legacy of philanthropy.

'Are we supposed to have heard of them?' asked Terrie, flipping the leaflet back and forth as if the answer to her question would reveal itself somehow. I shrugged, but Terrie wasn't looking. She didn't ask again and instead handed the leaflet to me.

The museum's sales pitch promised visitors a unique opportunity to see inside a wealthy Manhattan family's preserved home, to see the grandeur of the ballroom and to explore the extravagance of the main study and library. Reading of that final visitor attraction made me sweat profusely.

'Tom, are you okay?'

'I don't feel right,' I managed.

'You'll be fine. Stop thinking about the flight. I *know* you.' she replied, punching me playfully on the arm. I smiled weakly. She didn't really know me at all, I thought to myself. No-one did.

A rising wave of panic gripped me with every step we took toward the entrance, now familiar from the night I came here before, in spite of the changes to make the place a museum. Suppressed memories of that night flowed back to me, almost as if I'd broken a dam in my mind that now allowed these recollections free reign to place themselves once more at the forefront of my awareness.

'I need some water,' I managed as we passed through the entrance, before the ground came up in slow motion. I blacked out.

I awoke to find myself sitting on a chair, a glass of water being offered to me by a friendly-looking security guard. I forced a grateful smile and took a sip of water. I became aware of the flap-flapping sound to my left and wasn't at all surprised to see the swinging doors to the van Wildensten kitchen.

I looked through the doors into the middle ground, once again perfectly stable as staff walked in and out of the kitchens. But instead of the pathetic, stripped skeleton of my worst nightmares, there were chefs chopping vegetables and cooking sauces in huge pots. The relief was instant.

'You passed out, Tom,' said Terrie, who was kneeling beside me, stroking my hand gently. I nodded, mutely.

'Are you okay now, sir?' said the security guard. I nodded again.

When I had recomposed myself, a member of museum staff approached us and offered us complimentary tickets to the house, and a free meal in the *vegetarian restaurant* up on the third floor. I almost laughed at that; the irony was simply too great.

Terrie took the tickets, and we began the tour while I hoped desperately to pass out again so as to avoid the onslaught of images and recollections forcing themselves into my vision. The memories were now so strong that it was almost as if I'd only been there the day before. The ballroom, the sweeping marble staircases and the many elegant bedrooms were as recognisable as my own home. Except that the house I was in today was sanitised somehow, the visitors walking around with their headphones listening to the obligatory audio guide and pointing at the fine fabrics and items of furniture. Me, I was suddenly and inexorably driven toward only one destination – the study.

I felt my pulse racing as I took Terrie's hand and moved us through the rooms swiftly, dodging sluggish visitors and causing Terrie to wonder aloud why I was trying to rush through the house, that we still have ample time. I stopped at the entrance to the study, its door pushed open and a cable barrier strung out from the door-frame to allow visitors a few feet inside. A member of museum staff sat just across from the doorway, reading a newspaper. I looked at the narrow view of the room afforded by the door-frame, could make out the animal heads on the walls, the rows and rows of books, the leather chairs where I'd drunk that cognac. A clear Perspex-covered sign next to the door-frame advised that because of the fragility of many of the books, visitors were not permitted in the room itself. Fuck the fragile books, I thought manically. There was another reason why no one was allowed in.

Halfway up the left wall my eyes came to rest on the bookshelf etched so clearly in my memory, behind which I knew indescribable horrors lurked. I felt an urge to achieve some sort of closure on the events of that night, a need to see once again those things which had haunted me so these past years.

I let go of Terrie's hand and stepped calmly over the barrier into the study. The guide, absorbed in the newspaper, failed to notice me until I was past the leather chairs and facing the bookshelf which I knew led the way to the antechamber and the dark secrets of the van Wildensten family. I tried desperately to find the book that Hannah had pulled on that day to release the door. I berated myself for not paying more attention that night as I ran my hands along the shelf manically. I tried to ignore the protestations of both the approaching tour guide and Terrie, still stood at the room's entrance, imploring me to stop behaving like a lunatic.

I kept pulling at books, trying to brush off the hand which kept trying to rest on my shoulder. Finally, my hand found purchase and the secret door swung open onto an empty chamber, no traces whatsoever of the macabre legacy the van Wildensten sisters had let me witness that day. I breathed an intense sigh of relief, hot tears suddenly releasing themselves from my eyes while a grin spread across my face. It was just a nightmare, just a stupid alcohol-induced nightmare.

The hand on my shoulder suddenly tightened into a firm grip that was sufficient to turn me around.

*(But that doesn't explain the bruises –)*

I found myself face to face with the massive security guard who'd led the beating administered to me on the night of the van Wildensten party.

*(– and that doesn't explain the body in the kitchen –)*

Behind him were a collection of other security staff and museum workers, each of them looking anxious, and Terrie, tears streaming down her face.

*(– and why would there be secret door with nothing behind it?)*

'But – ' was all I could manage before the security guard marched me out of the study, through the stately rooms, down the staircase and out onto the street.

'Motherfucker,' he breathed into my ear angrily, loud enough for me to hear but imperceptible to the

inevitable crowd of tourists, some with camera phones raised up to capture the scene, out on the side-walk. 'I fucking *tole* you never to come back here. If I see you here again I fucking swear I'll kill you.'

With a final shove I landed on the side-walk, the back of my skull bouncing off the asphalt. I struggled up on to my elbows and watched the guard climb the steps into the museum, effortlessly brushing aside Terrie, red faced and seething, as if she were a speck of lint on his suit jacket. She screamed a futile expletive at his back as he climbed the stairs while I clambered up on to my feet, rubbing the bruise on the back of my head and wondering if I had a concussion.

'Tom, what the hell was that all about?' she shouted at me. I heard the click of a camera and a giggle from one of the spectators.

I said nothing as I stood up, waiting for the dizziness to send me back to the paving slabs and somewhat disappointed when it didn't come. I said nothing in the cab on the way back to Newark.

I said nothing on the flight back to London and said nothing at all when Terrie packed her bags and moved out of our flat the next day.

The nightmares from a few years before returned swiftly and viciously.

Each night I would wake abruptly from recurring dreams where I endured that moment when Hannah pulled the book and opened the door to the secret room, seeing once again the bell jars containing the disfigured and shrunken heads and the stretched human leather pinned to the walls. In the dreams I would trip over piles of human skulls just beyond the threshold of the door and fall forward toward the shelf of human heads, briefly catching a glimpse of my own distorted face in one of the jars before crashing into the bones littered on the floor and I would wake, screaming, sweating and crying profusely in the dark.

I began raiding my mother's medicine cupboard for sleeping pills and began drinking heavily just to knock myself into as peaceful a sleep as I could manage, waiting in vain for the nightmares to fade once again into the corners of my consciousness.

With my work beginning to suffer from my disturbed sleep and persistent hangovers, and expecting the sack, I resigned from the paper to go travelling. I had no particular plan in mind; it was just an opportunity to drift. I'd start in Asia and come back via Eastern Europe. There were no time scales, and I'd stay away from England for as long as the money would last. I'd think about employment and divorce when I returned, and hope that time out from my life would cleanse me of the flashbacks that plagued me day and night.

Errollyn, by now frail and barely at the paper, stopped by on my last day and said farewell. Even though I hadn't worked with her for a few years, she occasionally stopped by our section, often for no other reason than to castigate me for not wearing a suit or for not shaving. The rest of our section thought she was prehistoric.

'Thomas, Thomas. Why *travel*?' she enquired, her speech faltering as if even this short sentence was difficult. 'There's so much to see in this country without going to bloody Asia. Come now, won't you reconsider?'

The reasons for wanting to get away from London, the UK and Western culture were quite obvious to me.

I associated the van Wildenstens with everything that was wrong with the upper classes in our society, the way they were protected from the law and how they could, literally, get away with murder and face no reprisals whatsoever. Serving human meat at a party was just the van Wildenstens taking their position to what they regarded as the next natural level; they had enough money to buy anything and anyone and no-one could or would think to stop them at all. If you had access to everything, how else were you going to demonstrate you were more wealthy and powerful than the next family? Casual cannibalism was the van Wildensten's response to the dilemma. Like their counterparts, the van Wildenstens already had the most expensive houses, boats, art and wine, but no-one could touch the dishes they served at their parties. As shocking as it was, I saw it as the logical denouement of Western ambition in the twenty-first century.

'Let's just say that I think I've had too much of a taste of Western society.' I replied. I hoped she'd never fully understand the pun.

'Oh, the youth of today. They never appreciate just how good they have it, always looking for something purer.'

'Will you be going to the van Wildensten party this year?' I asked.

‘Of course!’ she exclaimed. ‘I wouldn’t miss it for the world.’

‘Goodbye, Errolyn,’ I said, turning my attentions back to the box I was packing.

Errolyn harrumphed and set off for her desk, where I knew her latest protégé, a dour young girl ripe for the de Froem school of etiquette training, would be waiting to hang off Errolyn’s every word.

Asia failed to impress me but mostly because I went with only the vaguest notion of what I wanted to do; an ideal was all I had. Consequently I gravitated toward major cities, all as one rapidly Westernising, and all providing little of the tonic that I’d hoped to find.

I spent some time in Hong Kong and Shanghai, a couple of days in Tokyo until my head could tolerate the neon no longer, and attempted to become a sun-bleached drop-out surfer in Thailand, but I just couldn’t settle at all. So I flew to Moscow far sooner than I’d intended and started working my way back to England, a crushing sense of disappointment in myself for not planning things better before I left. What was originally envisioned as something that would last a year, maybe longer, was looking like three months at best, six months tops. All I found, wherever I went, were the same gadgets, the same aspirations and the same Western sensibilities that I’d tried to find relief from.

It was December and I was in Belgrade, staying in a hostel opposite the station. I’d gone out for breakfast at a café around the corner.

For all of those anti-Western reasons, I’d lived in an enforced news blackout since I left England. The policy worked, mostly. From time to time I’d find myself in a bar, watching sports or just sitting in a café where there was a TV in the corner when a news bulletin would come on and even in a strange language it was possible to glean the general gist of what was going on in the world. That and the fact that long, drawn out debates with other English travellers in the various flea-pit hostels I wound up in on my final sojourn around the Balkans would inevitably lead to some sort of amateur debate about current affairs.

That December morning, for some inexplicable reason, I noticed the familiar masthead logos of English newspapers on a stand outside the newsagents I’d been buying cigarettes from since I’d moved into the hostel, and, feeling a sudden and unexpected warmth toward home, decided to purchase *The Times*.

I flicked through the pages of my old paper, disdainfully and unsuccessfully trying to see if I could credit some of the articles to people I previously worked with while smoking a Morava and eating a plate of bland and watery scrambled eggs. I stubbed out the cigarette and was on my last mouthful when my eyes alighted upon a small article in the international news section. It was a tiny piece, totally insignificant in size and ordinarily I’d have thought of it as mere filler, but I read it avidly.

#### **Waiter in high society 'cannibalism' claim**

New York Police Department are investigating the claims of a catering waiter that human flesh was served at parties held at the family home of an eminent Manhattan family last month. The family have issued a denial. The head of the police investigation refused to comment, and advised that the family were co-operating fully with the search of their former Upper East Side home.

There was no doubt in my mind that the family referred to in the article was the van Wildenstens. The piece brought back, once again and all too vividly, the memories of the party and the visit Terrie and I had made to the museum last year.

I contemplated contacting the police in New York to tell them what I’d seen and the beating I’d received in return, but the note and threats from the security guard forced me down a route of fear-induced impotence. That and the fact that I was so drunk that night in Manhattan that no-one would believe me anyway. I barely believed it myself at times.

Over the next few days I scanned the US newspapers feverishly for any further or more detailed mention of this investigation, hoping that reports would make someone come forward to corroborate the story but, finding none, I stopped buying the newspapers again and smoked more cigarettes, only occasionally wondering whether a call to the NYPD would be a good idea.

Budapest, about a month later. In a bar opposite Nyugati station I picked up a discarded a several days-old British newspaper, and once again I elected to check in on the events of the world.

Though not a believer in fate, I wasn’t especially surprised to find another article in the international

news section.

### **Cannibalism waiter found dead in apartment**

The waiter who claimed in December that human flesh had been served at the annual party of a wealthy Manhattan family has been found dead in his apartment. The New York Police Department confirmed that the gentleman in his twenties had overdosed on prescription medication for clinical depression, and had a history of mental illness. The man, who has not been named had also served a jail sentence for extortion.

A spokesperson for the New York Police Department stated that they have now concluded their investigations into the claims against the eminent Manhattan family. Detective Ted Lieberman, who had been leading the investigation, issued a statement that no evidence had been found. A full apology has been issued to the family, who have remained anonymous throughout the investigation. In a short statement from the family, they were said to be pleased that the claims had been found to be unsubstantiated and would be holding their annual party as normal next year.

I closed the newspaper, folded it neatly, shuddered slightly and ordered another vodka. If you drink enough the nightmares will stay at bay, I thought to myself.

A few weeks later I arrived in Prague, which I'd decided would be my final stop before catching a flight back to London. By now I was ready to go back home. I'd experienced cities and large towns, all of which were undergoing gentrification projects of one description or another, and all of which were looking depressingly Westward in their aspirations. Tall office and residential towers were rising skyward, each one labelled with some ubiquitous English word that aimed to engender a resonance with changing expectations. My attempts to disengage from Western wiles were altogether thwarted, plus I'd realised all too late that I hated travelling. Most importantly, my father, suffering the final throes of terminal pancreatic cancer had emphatically urged me to come back to England and take the reins of the family business. It was a surprise to myself that I'd agreed, but the time felt right.

Having slummed my way around hostel after hostel and subsisting on diets of nasty cigarette brands and local vodka, I decided that I deserved some luxury before I went back to the UK, so I booked a night at the Four Seasons and was on my way there when I passed my reflection in a shop window. I heard Errollyn de Froem's voice in my head telling me that I looked like a vagrant and that I couldn't *possibly* show up at the Four Seasons looking like that. I'd grown an imperfect beard for the first time in my life which made me look, I thought, like a beat poet but which actually gave me the look of a tramp. I smirked, found a barbers where I could get a haircut and a shave, bought some fake Ralph Lauren chinos and a polo shirt from a store and made my way to the hotel. There was little I could do about my frayed backpack and its cigarette burns, but I couldn't work miracles.

At the time, I had genuinely forgotten about the van Wildensten sisters telling me of how wonderful the hotel and its restaurant were, but I must have remained subconsciously aware of that conversation when I'd decided to stay there. Consequently it wasn't a terrible surprise to me the following morning when I passed Emily van Wildensten in reception. There was no double take on my part, no failure to recognise her; even with the passage of time I knew instantly who she was. She was dragging a muscled, slick-haired man in a dinner jacket toward the lifts, the pair of them grinning lasciviously before Emily started giggling drunkenly. I presumed they were only just leaving the bar from having been there all night. Given her condition, I was sure she wouldn't have even been aware of my presence. I watched them disappear in the lift, catching a final image of him sticking his tongue down her throat forcibly as the door quietly drew together.

I was on my way to check out at the time, but seeing the younger van Wildensten sister made me change my plans. I asked the stiff guy at reception if I could possibly stay another night, to which he said 'Of course,' and offered me the most exorbitant rate imaginable for an additional night's stay. I blamed the rucksack slung over my shoulder.

'Are the couple that just got into the lift staying here?' I asked as he was grumpily preparing my new

paperwork, not expecting the snooty Swiss receptionist to elicit anything.

‘You mean the *enfants terribles*?’

‘Er –’

‘If you mean the young couple that just got in the lifts, then yes.’

‘Penthouse suite I expect,’ I mused.

The receptionist grinned as he handed me back my key card. ‘Why of course, sir. We like to look after our *wealthiest* clientèle Mr Anderson.’ By which I knew he meant I wasn’t anywhere near the top of the hotel’s social scale to justify special treatment.

I went back to the room I’d only just vacated, where the maid was already engaged in the act of stripping down and changing my sheets. She didn’t speak English which rendered my attempts to explain that I actually wasn’t leaving today after all much harder, but judicious hand motions and my frantic waving of the new reservation slip eventually got the message to sink in.

Once she’d gone, I sat at the desk and pondered what to do.

A confrontation with Emily was, I figured, a possibility, but one without purpose. What was she going to do? Admit everything? It was highly unlikely. My situation would be no different to the waiter who had tried to lead the police to the van Wildenstens, and pretty soon my parents would find themselves attending my funeral, after I’d somehow overdosed on meds. Nevertheless, attempting to speak to Emily must have been on my mind when I decided to stay another night. If I wasn’t intending to do that, why hadn’t I just gone ahead and left?

Lacking a plan, I decided to take myself off to the Kafka museum and hoped that the solution would reveal itself during the course of the morning. Judging by Emily’s drunken state I figured she was probably unlikely to surface until at least lunchtime. Quite why I thought a trip to the museum would help seems questionable now, given that Kafka’s protagonists always lacked awareness of what was actually happening to them, but it made sense to me at the time.

Later, thwarted and still as clueless as before, I plodded back to the hotel and sat on a stool at the bar where I ordered a Manhattan, the choice of drink a product of spending too long that day thinking about the party in New York.

I was on my fifth – my plan being by then inebriated inaction and an early check-out in the morning – when a female voice next to me ordered a takeaway double-shot latte from the barman. It was Emily, sylph-like body clad in figure-hugging running gear, a light perspiration on tanned skin. Her hair was scraped messily into a high ponytail and her face was blotchy and free of make-up, her attention focussed on a BlackBerry.

‘It’s Emily, isn’t it?’ I said, before I’d even realised that I’d opened my mouth. She looked up from the tiny screen, surprised and perhaps a little affronted.

‘Do I know you?’ she asked, frowning. I thought maybe she’d have recognised the English accent that so titillated her and her sister at the party, but if she did she hid it very well.

‘We met once at your family party in New York.’

I looked for any spark of recognition, knowing full well that I was just one of many people who would have been at their parties over the years.

‘Oh... I’m sorry, but I really don’t recognise you.’ Her latte arrived and she took a sip. ‘I really must be going. I hope you *understand*. I hope you enjoy your cocktail.’ Ever the polite princess, I thought to myself as she nodded subtly toward my perspiring glass.

‘Of course,’ I said, biting my lip. She turned and walked away, sipping noiselessly from the latte while still scrolling through messages.

Fuck it, I thought, I have one chance to say this.

‘If it helps you remember, you showed me your grandfather’s so-called trophies. Not the animals, the other ones.’

She stopped in her tracks, took a sip from her coffee cup and turned around slowly.

‘I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ she replied, quietly.

‘Of course you do,’ I said, more confidently. ‘You remember – the cognac, the secret room behind the bookcase...’

‘What do you want from me?’ she asked in an icy whisper, glancing worriedly at the barman who was either not listening or just being discreet. Emily’s beautiful face was made ugly by a sneer and frown. ‘Money? Is this blackmail?’

I wasn't sure entirely what I was trying to achieve. A sense of closure on the effects that the van Wildensten party had on me, I guess. Proof that I hadn't invented the entire thing subconsciously as part of some sort of psychotic episode. An apology perhaps, an acceptance that she knew it was beyond wrong. Or perhaps even an acknowledgement that they'd had the waiter killed to silence him.

I slipped off the bar stool, letting one foot touch the floor before the other. Emily stood a few steps away, defiant and upright, although I thought I could see traces of fear in her eyes.

'I just want you to admit that it was all true. You know, the things you showed me in that room, the corpse in the kitchen they were carving up to serve to the guests. Human trophies and casual cannibalism at the Manhattan home of the esteemed van Wildenstens. That's all. I hope *you* understand.'

'That's... ' Emily managed. I was staring fixedly into her eyes, looking for traces of acknowledgement. She blinked, moistness spreading from the corners, creeping quickly toward her irises. Her breathing quickened momentarily, until finally she regained her composure, as I would have expected someone of her standing and training to do.

'Utterly absurd,' she replied, at last, her ponytail swishing as she turned and walked away. 'I don't know what you're talking about.'

I stood there for a moment or two, watching the Lycra-clad form of Emily van Wildensten retreat back to reception and allowed a small smile to develop at the edges of my mouth. The admission was subtle, I thought as I returned to my stool, but somehow enough.

I drained the last few drops of alcohol from my glass.

'Another Manhattan, sir?'

'Why not?' I said, now smiling more contentedly.