

The Night Porter

Dutch lived under the “D” in the “Hollywood” sign, in a castle. The castle had a moat filled with teal-blue water, chandeliers, suits of armor, Jacuzzis. The place was rented out for music videos, for adult movies. It’s where Katy Perry, coyly peeking out over a fan in a tiny gold lamé dress, declared that she kissed a girl and liked it. It’s where Tom Petty filmed “Into the Great Wide Open,” with Johnny Depp in the lead role motorcycling down the long driveway of the house. In typical nonsensical 80’s-music-video fashion, the music video is cut with scenes of a Mad-Hatter-looking Tom Petty presiding over The Heartbreakers, miniaturized, drumming on school supplies, playing guitar amidst books, pencils, a compass.

Living in that house was like that: like being Alice, miniaturized, wandering through the outsized furniture. Dutch’s job was to care for the birds: some peacocks (“they’re okay, just loud”), emus (“*hate* the things”), and one parrot, who had a tendency to mimic the already shrill voice of April, the mother of the house, at inordinate hours of the night. He lived in the castle with April, her husband Chuck, and their children, Adam and Eve—a veritable little Eden in the Hollywood Hills, where shame hadn’t yet been discovered.

They threw parties—and they were *parties*. They would invite twenty people, and a hundred would show. They would invite fifty, and three hundred would be thronging through the house, perched on windowsills, lounging in couches, railing lines of coke off the furniture. And the girls that came—well, the girls were unbelievable. It was in LA that he met the three girls he should have married. He also met the girl he actually married, Kelly, a Green Card marriage, though they really were in love for a little. The night of their wedding is the first time he did coke. He didn’t yet know her last name. In photos from that night, a young Dutch, happy to the point of delirium, beams at the camera, while—

“Dutch,” I said. “I think I maybe have to go, for tonight,”

He blinked. It was a little past 4 in the morning.

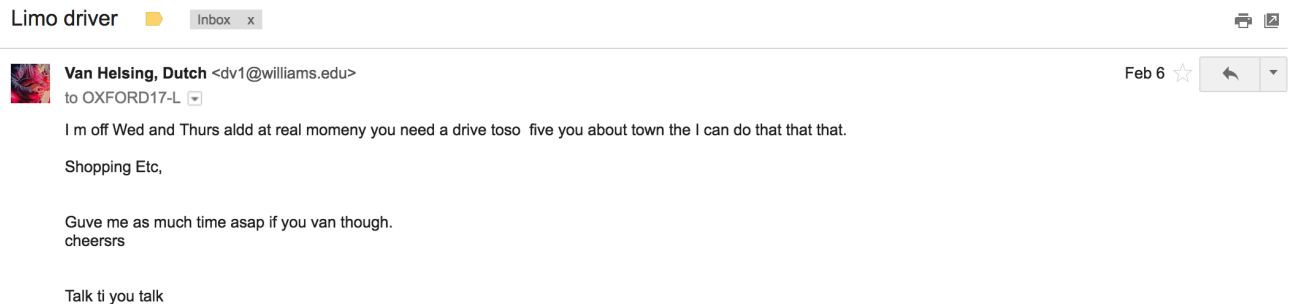
“Oh,” he said. He sat up quickly and grabbed his keys, which jingled loudly, startling me. “Well I’ll walk you home. It’s time I did a check anyway.”

This is the sixth year that Dutch has been the night porter. He works five nights on, three nights off. His hours are 10:30 to 5:30—that is, PM to AM. Every half an hour or so, he makes a round through the houses. He’ll leave his office in 2 Lath, turn right, to 4. He’ll walk past his Jaguar, unlock the gate. Walk down the narrow alley, enter the side of 4. Through the common room, strewn with the detritus of the day—homework, a glass of juice, a sweater draped over a chair—but uninhabited, like a home quickly abandoned during a catastrophe. A quick check of the windows: closed. Then up the stairs. More windows: closed. He checks the fire extinguishers. They’re fine. Back into 2. Through the library, turning off lights. Still not a soul. Into the ground floor kitchen. “These are the problem windows,” he says, closes them. Through the garden path, the lights that line it flickering uneasily. The flowers look strange at this time of night, limp, dark. The director’s house, that magnificent house with its many windows, is dark, silent, withdrawn. He continues down the alley of 145, shines a flashlight into the window of Lance’s kitchen. It’s only at a particular angle that the beam hits the fire extinguisher, but Dutch has this down to a science. Into 145. There’s a door underneath the staircase; he unlocks it, crawls into it, crawls out. Checks the fire extinguisher. “I don’t think any fire extinguisher has been used in all my time here,” he says. How many are there? “28.” But he has to check. Into the common room. Out of the common room. Into Keri’s office. Out of Keri’s office. Up the stairs.

My room is here. “Well,” Dutch says. “If you change your mind, I’m around.” Every time, he says this. Real casual, but with the same cadence each time.

Dutch leaves us gifts sometimes. A bottle of good whiskey in one of our first weeks here. Once, egg custard tarts he baked himself. I tried to buy him a gift once, too, back in January. A box of nicer chocolates I found at M&S, on sale. But I left them in the common room too long, and they were picked off.

Sometimes he sends strange emails. Nobody in our program sends *good* emails, really, but Dutch—well.



I think he's talking to me, though, in that email. One night, doing a round, he walks into the common room. I'm working and eating seaweed. It must've been like 3 in the morning. "Is that seaweed?" he says.

"Yeah," I say. "Want some?"

He demurs— "No, no, I don't want to take your food."

"It's no trouble," I insist. "I have like eight packs."

He takes one, thanks me. If I want to go get more, he tells me, he can drive me on his day off. Limo driver.

He's generous like that. When we talk he'll offer me snacks—a pack of pretzels, a clementine. "It makes sense that he has lived such a crazy life," Mac says to me about Dutch. Mac's a medic who's been at our program almost as long as Dutch has. "Because he is so nice, and so friendly, and likes talking to people. And LA in the 1980s was such a different time."

I didn't drive with Dutch to get seaweed. I must have been busy with a paper or something. Later, I told him I'd get him some myself. But the Korean grocery store is all the way in Cowley. At some point it felt like it was too late to get it, felt like it had become more forced of a gesture than it was ever supposed to be. So I didn't get it.

Dutch has talked about quitting. One night, while a bunch of us were playing Bananagrams in the common room, Dutch walked in. "Is Gretchen around?" he asked us.

Dutch has large eyes that bug out slightly, a hooked nose, and a wide, expressive mouth, and now he looked determined and a little nervous, with a hand in his short grey hair. We murmured that we hadn't seen her. "I need to find her," he said, mostly to himself, already turning around and starting to walk out. "I need to hand in my two weeks' notice." We looked around, wondering if we'd heard him correctly. Then he came back in. "That stays in this room," he said. We murmured that it would.

But weeks later he was still around.

"On my last day," he said to me, sitting in his office one night, "I'm going to tell her about Jason."

"Her" is Gretchen, our program director. "Jason" is our other night porter, who has a calf tattoo of the Norwich F.C. crest, and sometimes wears green basketball shorts with the same logo. He works three nights on, five nights off. He sleeps on the job, without marking down his hours, infuriating Dutch. "I told her once," he tells me, still meaning Gretchen. "But she kept asking me these questions, like she didn't believe me. She said, 'How do you know?' I said, just look at the facts, and how they add up. When I'm in my office, I leave my

door open, because I want to make a warm, welcoming environment for the kids. And I told them—it gets cold, here, in the winter, and, and still, they didn't do anything—and when he's in there, the door's closed? Why? Because he's sleeping! And I know he's saying things, to Keri, to Gretchen, about me, to make me seem like I'm, I'm untrustworthy." He groans. "I'm not saying he should be fired, but—" he lifts his hands up, palms up, imploringly— "but if they knew, they would, they would—well, they would. And now Gretchen, it's like she's making excuses for him. It's just not *fair*."

This is the one thing that seems to get Dutch really riled up. It's about respect; Jason will mess something up and Keri, our program administrator, will email the both of them, as if he had done it too. And Dutch *knows* that Jason sleeps. When Dutch first got the job, Jason showed him the closet in the office, where he keeps blankets, and a little TV. "For if you're bored, or if you want to sleep," Jason told him. "Don't worry, I do it all the time."

Dutch's face contorted with disdain even recollecting the incident. He takes his job seriously—one night, I walked in to interview him. He was exhausted that night, having worked that same day.

"I don't know—I don't—you—you might have to poke me tonight, because I'm tired," he said.

"Let me know if you want to go off duty for a little bit," I say to him.

"Go off duty?" he said, blankly.

"Like—sleep."

"No, no, I—I won't be sleeping," he said, sounding a little offended. "I'm gonna be up all night."

When Dutch was a little kid, he wanted to be a train conductor. He doesn't really remember why— "It's just something little boys want to do," he said.

What was it about trains? They went down a track, I thought, a pre-determined path. Around and around. All you had to do was engage the throttle: just go. A train, more than anything else, is directed force, the vehicle of mechanical order. And Dutch is kinetic, manic, a man of propulsion.

There's little chance a toddler-aged Dutch was thinking any of this while he pushed toy trains around the track. But he must have desired, in his life, something like order.

"My parents," Dutch told me, "should never have gotten married." He sighed. "My mother loved foreign-looking, exotic men. She married my father out of spite." His mother is British; his father is Indian. They split up multiple times— "they should've split up the day they got married. They should have split up before that." His mother then dated Nick the Greek, as Dutch and his sisters nicknamed him (he was from Cyprus), a Uruguayan man with whom she had a daughter, and Sammy the Egyptian, whom she married the same week she and Dutch's dad split up for the final time.

"My father's family name is 'Chiragh,'" Dutch said. "It means 'light,' in Sufi, or 'flame.'" He chuckled. "And I—I've burnt out, I think."

In LA, Dutch ate shrooms, dropped acid, smoked weed. He drank, obviously—but coke was his drug of choice. Other people on coke became manic, but Dutch was already manic. Coke calmed him down. But it soon got out of hand—at his worst, he could kill an eight ball in a weekend. He and Kelly fought; he tried to quit. It was hard, but ecstasy helped wean him off. But then the drinking started in earnest. He was ticketed for two DUIs in a week. He lost his license. He and Kelly broke up, and Dutch went back to London.

He got a job in Oxford, at a pub called the Angel, at St. Clement's. The pub owners, curious, asked where he lived. "Just up the street," he said. They asked him why he stayed so late, why he arrived so early. "My house doesn't have very many rooms," he said. He was living in a tent. The pub owners were kind to him, and he moved in with them. But soon

he sensed that his presence was chafing, that they needed a break from him, but were too nice to say so. He moved out. "I wasn't getting super drunk every night, but in the morning, I didn't feel so good," he said.

He enrolled in a full-year course in Kingston, in London, that covered all the fundamentals of managing a bar. He worked there a month, getting wasted. He hated it; he was lining up another job. "You look terrible," one of the girls told him at work, after a rough night. "Go home, I'll cover you." He took a train up to Scotland, to interview for the job. He got a phone call: "Where are you?" Seventeen hundred pounds were missing from the safe.

He was in Scotland, in the Highlands. "Loch Ness," he said. "That's the place for me." It most certainly was not. They didn't tell him in the interview that the pub had a terrible reputation, that everyone in the village was an alcoholic, that it was the type of place where nobody wanted to go home at night. They reviled the English there, and the patrons hissed slurs at him. The flat they provided him was literally decrepit, with stains on the ceilings and holes in the walls. When he put in his two weeks they gave him twenty-four hours to move out. He kicked another hole in the wall in frustration. They sued him over it, and he had to go to court.

He went to go, as he put it, "fuck off in India." He planned for six months to a year, came back in eight days. He was drinking like mad, and was afraid of being broke, stranded on a different continent.

He got a grant from Ruskin, to study history, and then he drank it away. He didn't get it again.

His friend opened a pub in Oxford, on Osney Island, hired Dutch, fired him soon after. "I knew you drank," his friend told him. "I didn't know you drank like *that*."

It was 2011. It was the first time he heard the word "alcoholic" applied to him.

God knows there are better vehicles to be on, when things are going off the rails, than a train. Dutch had, up to this point, pretty much been living on automatic, trusting that the tracks led somewhere, that things would work out.

Things took him to the LA YMCA, where he worked and met his best friend, Jez, who introduced him to Kelly, who married him, and got him his green card. Things took him to the Hollywood Castle, where he discovered coke; things took him to ecstasy, which saved him from coke; to drinking, which drove him into a despair that would last decades. Things sent him to Scotland, to rehab, and then to us. But somewhere in the middle of that, things also sent him to Hiromi, and if he hadn't been on such a ride, if he'd been able to take things into his own hands, things might've turned out differently.

It happened like this: Brian from London was visiting for a month. He was out on the beach and somehow got talking to these three girls. He came back, told Dutch that he'd met a couple girls, that they wanted to hang out, did Dutch want to come? Sure—they brought a cooler full of beers and met these girls at their apartment. They were from Japan, and they were on some sort of honeymoon. One of those girls was Hiromi.

She couldn't speak English very well. He couldn't speak Japanese. Soon she went back to Kyoto.

Later, she called him, out of the blue. She was coming to LA, she said. Just for a couple days.

He picked her up at the airport. She had gotten an abortion, she said. He held her. They spent a couple days together. Then he drove her back to the airport.

He lost her address somewhere in the shuffle, and that was it for them. It was bad luck, bad timing.

Hiromi, I believe, meant a lot to Dutch. It was partly because they were a victim of circumstance: they lost touch but never really fell out. I have to admit I wondered how real this relationship could have been—he hadn't known this girl for a long time, after all, and

they couldn't even speak the same language. It's easy to make more of someone you didn't know all that much of.

But I believe it's more than that—she came back, and called him, in a vulnerable time. “Why me?” he said to me.

Who knows? For reasons that transcended, well, reason, she *chose* him, that radical act.

It wasn't always for lack of trying that things happened as they did. Dutch *tried*. But sometimes it still didn't work out.

It was 2001. It was a natural progression, from his train conductor days, through his love of cars (photos through the years see him beaming next to various cars he'd owned), to piloting planes: Dutch wanted to fly.

He was living in Virginia. He had been going to flight school, and had been really enjoying it. He nursed dreams of becoming the pilot of a tourist plane, one of the ones that flew into the Grand Canyon, say. Or a sea plane, over the ocean, maybe in Canada. “It was a thing that really, ugh—I wanted to *do* this,” he said. “Even though I was working in a job that most people in the world would think would be a dream job, working in the movies industry in Hollywood, it didn't turn me on, you know. It was just a job. It was just as exciting for me as coming here. This is probably more exciting.”

He was most of the way through flight school, had just a couple more lessons to go before he could take the certification test. He scheduled one for September 12th of that year. On September 11th, two planes crashed into the North and South towers of the World Trade Center. The world was never the same, etc. Dutch did not complete his flight certification. He had tried, but it was out of his hands. The *timing*.

He set his sights lower: a commercial driver's license. The day he attained it is one of his happiest. In his license photo he's beaming, his cheeks rosy.



Dutch's Virginia Commercial Driver's License

But it was a quick downward spiral from there. It was at this time that his drinking really ramped up, that he and green card Kelly split up.

In 2004, Dutch changed his name. Kevin David Harris became Dutch Harris.

In 2011, drunkenly, he changed it again, became Dutch Van-Helsing. Van-Helsing? “I just thought it was cool,” he said.

“You can just do that?” I asked, perplexed.

“You could just do it online,” he shrugged. “I could change your name.”

I loved that—that he just up and became someone else. Slipped out of his parents' name, sloughed off the skin of that treacherous marriage. Shed it like a bather, stepping into the water, becoming clean.

He tried. Of course, getting away was never so easy—and getting clean was even harder. He had a new name but the same drinking problem. His UK license—he had to get recertified after the double DUI—is terrifying, his face lined, the bags under his eyes etched into his sagging skin. While the signature on his Virginia Driver's License is loopy and free, the picture of ebullience, the signature on his UK license is small, neat, reserved, the way one would sign a stranger's name. And of course it was a stranger's name—a stranger's name and a stranger's face, haggard, ravaged by alcohol. He looks older in that photo than he does now.



Dutch's UK Driver's License

I asked Dutch, once, about his favorite year of his life, thinking it would be a year of childhood, dreaming about trains, the year he got his first car, a year of Hollywood debauchery, maybe the year of Hiromi. “2011,” he said. He didn’t even have to think. “The year I got sober.”

Dutch saw the ad for this job on gumtree or dailyinfo.com, he forgets which, and applied. He got an interview. Even then Keri, the program administrator, didn’t like him, but Katie, the director at the time, did, and he got the job. “It was hard,” he mumbled. He meant, I think, even attempting to apply for things. He had been in rehab, and had gotten into the rhythm of things: biking down Banbury Road (he wasn’t allowed to drive), having his meals prepared for him. A pleasant routine. Or if not a pleasant routine, just a routine, which was pleasant, considering how he had lived. “You just get comfortable,” he said.

You just get comfortable. “I should quit,” Dutch said, shaking his head. His feet were on the table, and his monitor played some documentary that continued, muffled, in the background. “I should really quit.” He ran his fingers through the sides of his hair, then stretched out, talking through a yawn: “but it’s hard, once you’ve gotten used to something,” he continued, the yawn muddling his words, “to stop.”

I’ll be honest: I don’t like Jason, the other night porter.

When my boyfriend visited, once, we were cooking; he put bread in the toaster, and it set off the fire alarm. Jason walked in a bit later. “What’s happened here?” he said to us.

Marcus, being a visitor, being shy, said nothing.

"We set the fire alarm off," I said. "But it's fine now."

He grunted. "Next time, leave the cooking to the men, yeah?" he said to me.

I made some sort of noise of agreement before I registered what he said.

"Fuck that guy," I said, audibly, just as he was leaving.

"Shh—" Marcus said, sharply. "He can still hear you."

"I don't care," I replied.

A couple minutes later Jason walked back in, pretended to check the air conditioner or something. "By the way," he said to me. "I was kidding earlier. So you can calm down."

"I used to feel that way too," Penny said. We were in the computer lab; she was wearing fuzzy slippers and had her laptop in her lap. "Until I realized, he's a dad."

"Yeah," Luca chimed in from across the room. I swiveled around to face her.

"Honestly, I've always really liked him. I just feel like he likes me. Like when he sees me, he'll just have this warm smile on his face. And he remembers when I have tests and stuff."

"Really?" I said, incredulous. This was not the Jason I knew. "Well, I've called him, when I've gotten locked out. And he's taken, like, half an hour to get here. So he's clearly coming from home. And Dutch is always here." In case it wasn't clear, I've always liked Dutch.

"Yeah, but Jason's a *Dad*," Penny insisted. "It kind of changes things. He's doing this to make a little extra money for his daughter."

"He has a daughter?" I mused. "I didn't know that." I supposed I wouldn't, since I didn't like him, and didn't talk to him.

"Yeah, she's like nine," Penny said. "You've met her, right?" she asked Luca, who shook her head.

"No, but I've heard him talk about her," she replied.

A nine-year-old daughter. I couldn't picture her as more than a small hazy shape next to Jason's large, grizzled frame. But still, it changed things.

"And Dutch honestly takes his job too seriously," Penny continued. "We really don't need anything more than for them to unlock our doors occasionally. So who cares whether they're in or not?"

I said nothing. I thought of the absolute trust of small children, how they sleep through the night, knowing somewhere, somehow, that their parents are looking after them. Was all we needed a locksmith, someone to occasionally open our doors? Or had we always slept easy, knowing that someone kept vigil?

Jason went home to his daughter, sometimes when he was supposed to be working. Dutch didn't have any children.

"Once, he asked me for a shoelace," Sam said. We were in the common room, and he was sitting backwards in a chair, resting his chin on the seatback.

"Oh, god," said Penny.

"A shoelace?" I said.

"I don't want to draw any conclusions," Sam said, raising his hands.

"Wait, but what's the implication?" I asked.

Penny mimed a syringe against her forearm. "Oh," I said.

"Yeah," Max nodded, his brow furrowed. "And another time," he added, "I went in there, just to talk to him. And there were these spoons, lined up on his desk. And I don't know why else you'd line up spoons like that."

I was supposed to go to AA, to Alcoholics Anonymous, with Dutch. He first mentioned it one night, early in our talks, when we were doing a round.

“Can I come?” I asked.

“Oh, yeah,” he said. “It’s Sunday. People bring their friends and stuff, and you can just sit there.”

“Maybe not this week,” I said. “I’m gonna be at the Lake District. Are you going next week?”

“Yeah, yeah,” he waved. “We’ll talk when you get back.”

I realize now that our just missing each other didn’t start there. It started with the seaweed. It continued with the chocolate. And it never really stopped. At the beginning of our talks, I texted him:

hi, it’s lisa

Then, the next day:

i’m thinking of going out tonight so i’m not sure i’ll be able to stop by tonight

but you’ll be around tomorrow night?

Then, two days later:

ten minutes ish?

or is that too late?

Two days after that—you get the point.

When I got back from the Lake District, we made plans to go to AA again. Then, a text from Dutch:

Hi lys. Not gonna make tonight. I’ll see you at start of shift though.

No problem, I said. A day or two later, I texted him:

finally got my draft back, would want to talk again sometime soon

are you free tonight? otherwise i can call you in the next couple of days

also are you still going to aa tomorrow?

No response. I started to get desperate:

just let me know—im gone wednesday through monday next week

He sent me an email, with the subject line “Sorry.”



Van Helsing, Dutch

to me

May 29 (8 days ago)




Hi there. Stinking flu has forced me to cancel everything today. See ya Fri.

 **Lisa Zhang** <lyz2@williams.edu>
to Van ▾ May 29 (8 days ago) ☆ ↶ ▾

Oh no! Do u need anything? soup, etc...

Sent from my iPhone

 **Van Helsing, Dutch**
to me ▾ May 29 (8 days ago) ☆ ↶ ▾


Thank you seetheart.

I have stuff in. I just started shaving and all of a sudden realised that I am not working tonite !! What an idiot I am. Anyway I feel ok. There is a nice meeting somewhere out of town at lunch time. It's in a small village somewhere. If I go do you want to come along for the experience ? .

Let me know. If you need to ask me any thing call me anytime.

Cheers , **Dutch**.

p.s. If you can see Marco right now **van** you tell him to call please. Many thanks and tell him he is a (from the movie Clerks) tell him he is a " Pickle F****r "excuse the lingo.

 **Zhang, Lisa** <lyz2@williams.edu>
to Van ▾ May 29 (8 days ago) ☆ ↶ ▾

I would love to! I am taking a bus out of gloucester green at like 2:15PM but if it's before that I would love to go with you!

I will definitely want to talk in the next couple of days. would you rather call me or me call you?

Thanks so much **Dutch!**

Also if I see him I will definitely tell him haha

At 1:21 AM:

 **Van Helsing, Dutch**
to me ▾ May 30 (7 days ago) ☆ ↶ ▾

Sorry for the delay. My bloody phone is not telling me when I get a email .

 **Zhang, Lisa** <lyz2@williams.edu>
to Van ▾ May 30 (7 days ago) ☆ ↶ ▾

No problem—but what about tomorrow?

At 2:48 AM:

 **Van Helsing, Dutch**
to me ▾ May 30 (7 days ago) ☆ ↶ ▾

Refresh me . What about tomorrow ?

 **Lisa Zhang** <lyz2@williams.edu>
to Van ▾ May 30 (7 days ago) ☆ ↶ ▾

oh, sorry—when's the out of town aa meeting?

Sent from my iPhone

At 6:27 AM:

 **Van Helsing, Dutch**
to me ▾ May 30 (7 days ago) ☆ ↶ ▾

Hi there. I have to check as I have not been to that one in a few years,. I think its in the pretty village of burford. ,

I will check the AA site and see what on .

I'll be baaaaaaaaaaaaack !!

The next day:

 **Lisa Zhang** <lyz2@williams.edu>
to Van ▾ May 30 (7 days ago) ☆ ↶ ▾

Hi

Boarding a plane now—be back monday

Sent from my iPhone

That night, he texted me.

Hi there. Are you up

?

Yes, I said. He called me. “Hi,” he said. “Are you around?”

“Hi,” I said. “I’m in Barcelona, remember? I told you.”


“Oh!” He said. “I didn’t know that!” We chatted about Barcelona; he told me he collected magnets, that if I saw a really cheesy one, if it wasn’t too much of a hassle, to please pick it up for him. I said of course; chatted a little, promised to meet after I got back, hung up.

An ill feeling had begun to settle in. No way he had missed or misread so many of my messages—what were the chances that he’d call, after such a sustained silence, mere hours after I’d left the country?

When I got back, I messaged him.

**i’m back!
call me whenever you can
so we can talk today or go to aa tomorrow or both!**

I was beginning to sound crazed, and I knew it, but I couldn’t restrain myself. I emailed him:

Zhang, Lisa <lyz2@williams.edu> Jun 5 (1 day ago) ☆  



to Dutch 


Hi Dutch

Will you be in today? Are you going to AA tomorrow?

Let me know!

He wrote back:

Van Helsing, Dutch Jun 5 (1 day ago) ☆  

to me 

I can't make an AA until Sat at the earliest. That is a good on at lunchtime. I am in on Friday night.

Off to bed now. see ya soon.

I was baffled. I was leaving, literally leaving the continent, on Saturday. I’d told him that before—did he know that? Was it a massive coincidence, that he seemed only to be free when I wasn’t—or had I just pressed too hard? I was beginning to sound ridiculous; I was beginning to feel ridiculous.

But I *knew* he wanted to talk to me, or at least I was pretty sure I knew. There was something about being up precariously late that was conducive to intimacy. We had gotten close to each other though these talks. At some point I had offered to help him write his CV; at some point he had offered to drive me to the airport.

When we spoke, earlier on in the night, sometimes other students would meander in. “We’re doing a therapy session,” Dutch joked once. He was sitting under a little halo of light, with his legs propped up on the desk, leaning way back in his chair with his fingers interlaced behind his head. “Lisa Freud,” he said, nodding toward me.

And when we took a hiatus, while I wrote my draft, he stopped me once, in the stairwell of 145. I asked him how he was—oh, fine, alright, not great; he thought he was coming down with something. “I’ve been feeling a little sick,” he said. He sat down on the stairs. I took it as a queue to sit down too. People were in the common room watching a

movie, and the sound bled out over our conversation. "There's more, you know," he said. "There's more that I didn't tell you, that you don't know."

I asked him if it was what we had been talking about that had made him feel sick.

"No, no," he said. He thought he had the flu. Then he thought some more. "Well, maybe, actually," he said. "But I was the one who told you."

"But I was the one who asked," I said.

He paused, then nodded.

I thought back to an incident, earlier on:

I had told Dutch I'd be over later; I'd made plans to Skype Marcus. We Skyped; we fought.

It was almost four in the morning.

I was sad, and tired, and strangely paralyzed. I sat in bed and looked out the window. No cars passed. It was dark outside. The tree outside St. Clare's had flower blooms in its branches.

It was past four in the morning. I hated myself because I wasn't doing anything and I yet I wasn't going over; I hated myself because I could go over right then and knew I wouldn't.

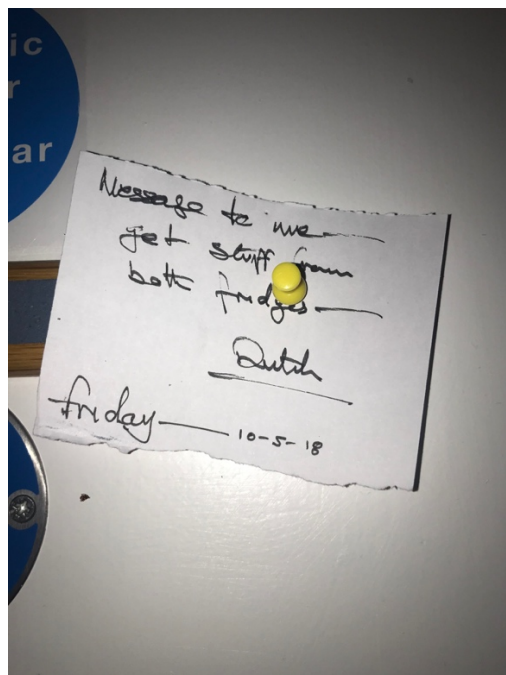
It was five, or around five—time stood still at these hours of the night. Time was stale, purgatorial. I stood up. Fingers trembling, I put on my jacket, zipped it up, picked up my keys. The keys jingled softly at the force of my trembling.

I went down the stairs, moving slowly, oddly. I opened the door; I walked down the alley of 145. The lights flickered eerily. The badminton net seemed to swoon. The only sounds were my soft keys and the earliest birds. I tried to enter 2 but pulled instead of pushed; the door clanged unhappily. Into 2. Around the corner. Dutch's office. Closed. I'd just missed him.

The timing, the timing.

I felt something in me sink, retreat.

On his door was a letter:



The letter on Dutch's door, Friday, May 11th 2018

He'd signed it "Dutch," as if it could have been anyone else, as if reaffirming the subject of that word, "me." There was something sad about that to me, how self-contained it was. I had the thought that I could have been there and he wouldn't have written the note.

I was entering a hallucinatory mood. Friday, the tenth of May. The tenth was a Thursday. But of course living at night you inhabited a strange middle space, straddled dates measured by daylight.

This time of night was a no-time, a time for pure waiting. I was so tired that I wasn't tired anymore. I had passed some bodily barrier, breached new internal territory. I stared at the note for an unparticular amount of time, thinking strange thoughts. I was thinking about seaweed.

I was in a sort of fugue state. When I took a step it felt alien. I floated. I went into the kitchen, pored over the refuse of a lived day. A pan on the stovetop. Washed knives on the drying rack. I wandered into the library and turned the lamps on and then off. I poked a purple chair and watched the way it gave, marveled at its resolve.

I went outside; outside buzzed. A lonely bike went down Banbury, its lights shining in the half-dark. I looked at St. Clares, across the street. I looked up. The sky was dark-ish still but things were just beginning to cast shadows, and at the edge of the horizon the sky was yellow-white with just the inkling of light.

I turned and went down Banbury, and stood outside 145. I looked at my own room, from the outside, all lit up, and felt a profound sadness, felt a stranger to myself.

Then I entered.

I'd felt like I'd let him down. I'd looked for him and did not find him; I suppose some part of me thought he looked for and did not find me.

The next night, I came to his office, apologized profusely. But he forgave me with an easiness so casual and so complete it seemed no sin had been committed in the first place. I felt foolish. It occurred to me that this closeness I had felt, this sense of symbiosis—the wandering among the furniture, thinking that I must have felt as he did, feeling myself the ghost of him, him the ghost of me—was extrapolation, projection, the hallucinatory machinations of my particular mind.

Part of me, I have to say, conceived of this paper as something like a gift, a cerate, a surrogate for the missed seaweed, the missed chocolate, for every time I cut a conversation rudely short, thinking there was something more urgent, more important. I wanted to write with equanimity, to let him tell me his story, on his own terms, in his own way—come what may. But I don't think I internalized fully the fugitive nature of my own position. I could have spent every night I had talking to him until he went home at dawn—but I would still be the first to leave.

I had an image, in my mind, a twisted, Twilight-Zone-esque image of a miniature Dutch, sitting at a platform, waiting for a toy train that cycled along an oval track. Little passengers would file into the tiny cars, the train would go around and around, and then they would file out, for the next batch to enter. And still Dutch waited. This manic man, this man of such energy, who loved vehicles because he loved *motion*—was in stasis. He was waiting. We came, each year, spilled out at the beginning of the year and filed back in at the end; he waved hello and goodbye, hello and goodbye. Late at night, time stood still—and he was the night porter.

The job was not a single 5AM jaunt through the premises, poking the furniture. It was not even staying up very late many nights to talk and take notes. The job was waiting, waiting for so long that waiting took on physical presence. It was doing that alone. It was impossible for me to understand.

Time for me didn't work like time for him. I knew I was leaving at the end of the year; I knew I had a deadline, which imbued the project and each meeting with an urgency, a

vitality, that he could have felt no equivalent for. I thought of this paper as a gift—but he was doing me a favor. So much for Lisa Freud.

“So your ID picture,” I said to Dutch, on the last night we spoke in person, my last night in Oxford. “It’s dated from last year?”

“My driver’s license? Yeah.”

I’d noticed, putting the story together, that the dates didn’t quite line up. I’d thought the photo was taken in the grips of his alcoholism. But it was dated 2017, six years into his sobriety. “Oh,” I said. “I thought you were saying that it looks like that because you were, like, drinking.”

“Nah,” he said. “It’s just a really bad picture.”

“Is it possible that it was *taken* earlier and they used the same picture?” I pressed. I *wanted* it to be true, because it was evidence, evidence of what I thought his life to be. Clear, easy, linear: he wasn’t drinking, he looked good. He was drinking, he looked bad.

“I guess,” he said, doubtful. “I can’t really remember. I think it’s just an awful picture.”

Despite all the plans we ever made—to go to AA in the pleasant village of Burford, to meet in his house, in town—I had never ended up even once seeing him in daylight. I wondered if maybe both of us had subconsciously made that choice. Night time, no time, was our time, when we were always surprised by what the clock read, no matter the hour. Daylight, for the two of us, was strange, our intimacy melting away like dew in mid-day heat.

I didn’t know if he went to AA. I didn’t know that he didn’t. I didn’t know anything of what he did in the daytime, except for what he told me, and he knew as little of me. I thought I knew, and I knew what I thought; but little details, like the year his ID photo was taken, complicated that understanding. Even with the luxury of having Dutch, his willingness to speak to me, his openness, his generosity, I knew I had in some way gotten him wrong. I felt, in writing, the force of his real, lived life, bristling indignantly beneath the surface of my narrative.

We were in Dutch’s car, once. He drove a beautiful Jaguar XJ8, with a soft beige leather interior and an engine that purred. We hummed down the highway. We were going to get snacks.

“I think this job has made me older, faster,” he said thoughtfully. “I thought I was going to be 58 this year. Turns out I’ll be 57.” He chuckled darkly, then continued. “It’s made me more unusual. I’ve become more... I prefer working by myself.”

We pulled into a gas station parking lot. “But I need to do something else now,” he said. “I have to find something before I,” he fumbled for his wallet, “before I get too old.”

He killed the ignition.

We went into the 24-hour M&S. Dutch sang little ditties about the things he put into his basket. “Soup, soup,” he sang, hunting for soup. “Do you have soup?” he asked a worker walking past, who waved him in a vague direction. “Mmm,” he said, looking at the display. “But they don’t have the... I wonder if... hm...” he said, trailing off.

He kept up an essentially continuous stream of chatter, maybe for my sake, more likely to keep himself entertained. We zigzagged through the aisles in no apparent order. “Ah!” he said. “But here’s the soup!”

He went and found the worker from before. “Excuse me,” he said, trying to be helpful. “There’s soup, right over there, just so you know.” The worker nodded wearily, clearly not caring in the slightest.

He brought his things to the register. “How’s it going, boss?” Dutch asked the cashier.

“Oh, you know,” the young man behind the counter said. “Night shift.”

“Oh yeah,” Dutch said, making noises of agreement. “Yeah yeah yeah.” I looked between them. I couldn’t tell if they knew each other; Dutch treated everybody like an old friend.

“The car’s looking nice,” the cashier said.

“Just washed it myself!” Dutch said, proudly, picking up the plastic bag.

“Hang in there, Dutch,” the cashier said.

“You too, Andrew.”

We walked through the parking lot. Dutch was talking about Jaguars; he’d owned a couple, and this one was his baby.

“Wow,” I said, interrupting him. He looked over. “That color,” I said. The car was gleaming, serene, gorgeous.

He smiled. “Midnight Blue,” he said, in a singsong voice.

I’d always thought the car was black; it was perpetually parked outside 4, where no light ever caught it. Under this gas station fluorescence, though, this false light, the car glowed, shimmered livelily. A gas station parking lot during the graveyard shift: the last place I thought I’d see something that moved me.

Midnight blue—a fitting name for a night porter, maybe, but not for this blue, radiant and deep. This deserved better.

The sky was midnight blue too. It was late night, a nothing time, but in just a few hours it would be light. The clock would start ticking again—a blessing or a curse, for one who waits.