A Latte in The Hague

It all started with a trip to The Hague. I was on spring break from school in London and was coming to town for a week to tour the international law courts with the Grimshaw club (LSE’s International Relations society). Aboard a bus traveling from Brussels, this trip was the last leg of my three-week spring break journey and I was slightly dazed, not much in the mood for the discomforts of travel. The day was gray and tired, occasionally spitting down rain at you, but only enough so you were mildly upset yet not totally annoyed. When the bus arrived at The Hague, I clumsily ambled out onto the road and haphazardly gathered my things. I was goggier from the journey than I had realized. Some caffeine and sustenance were definitely needed, and thus I set off down the road in search of a café before checking in at my hostel. Whoosh! I was instantly taken aback. A sudden gust of wind and the Ding! of a bell had just passed. It was a biker speeding by; I had stepped directly into the bike lane. I should have remembered, I was in Holland, after all.

The area surrounding the station was modern and industrial feeling, but as I progressed into town the landscape became quite lovely. The streets transformed into narrow and winding roads of brick. The buildings began to appear more Dutch, skinny and tall, all clustered among one another, with large windows lining the front. It looked as if I had walked into a fairytale land. Banners stretched across the streets from above, donning the vertical red, white and blue stripes of the Dutch flag. Nestled between the banners was a black, hallow crown. It was to be the first Koningsdad, or King’s Day, Holland had seen in 124 years (During those years a Queen was reigning, the day was celebrated as Koninginnedag, Queen’s Day).

At last I had found a promising prospect for a café. It was a corner shop, with window booths lining the perimeter. The warm burst of air that greeted me as I entered was instantly welcoming. The place was crowded, but fortunately I was able to snag the last window seat. It was dimly lit, with wooden booths and floors, giving it an Earthy feel. It was the perfect place to regroup after a long journey. After the perky, redheaded waitress had come around and taken my order with her dainty, pale hands, I averted my gaze and began staring out the window. Despite the glum weather, people were still going about their days as usual, strolling by with shopping bags or gliding by on bikes. For an instant I felt guilty about being bound up inside. The waitress came to deliver my latte, and I resumed my window gazing.

A few minutes later, a man entered the café, made apparent by the quick chill of air from outside he had let in. The dining area was still crowded. He scooted by a few tables before stopping at mine. “Mind if I sit here?”

“No,” I said, although I don’t think I was convincing enough to hind my annoyance. I wasn’t much in the mood for conversation or company. Suffice to say, it was suitable for him, and he slid into the booth. His English was clear, yet I could tell it wasn’t his first language. I was never any good with accents though; I couldn’t guess where he was from. Now that he was closer, I could make him out better. He had olive skin and a full head of white hair. Accompanying his hair was a matching white beard, a crooked nose and small, dark eyes. He was well dressed, wearing a crisply pressed heather-gray suit with an equally-as-pressed light blue shirt and burgundy tie. He was handsome, or he was at one time.

“Do you live here?” he said in jest, striking up conversation.

“No, I’m here on a school trip visiting the international law courts.”
"Where do you study?"

"The LSE in London." This quick, back and forth form of questioning was generally annoying, yet I didn’t mind it in this case as it didn’t involve much thought. The man had paused briefly to order from the waitress as she came round. He ordered himself a latte and a Coke, and seeing that I’d already had a latte, just got me the Coke.

"Thanks," I offered. He shrugged.

"Are you from the U.K.?”

"No," I confessed. I was always fascinated when people could not tell that my accent was not English. Did they not hear that my short, choppy accent did not exude the mellifluous flow of British English?

"Then you must be from the States," he concluded. Now he had gotten it.

"Yes."

He paused again to collect his order from the waitress. He set my Coke in front of me. “Thank you,” I replied again, and again he shrugged, as if to say, Really. It was nothing.

"You know," he began. I could tell he was beginning a long tangent. It is so important to travel when you are young. You will find that things are not always what they seem. Here you are, from America studying in Europe, and I’m sure you’ve found some differences. I just arrived here from Iran yesterday, but I’ve had my experiences living in the west. Democracy," he said in an almost humorous tone, yet I could tell he meant no offense. He gestured outside to the view I had been admiring before his arrival. “Look at this city. There’s so much money here. Isn’t that really what democracy is about? The rich get what they want? There’s so much stress on materials and showing of wealth. It seems wasteful.” Again, I examined the quaint streets of The Hague. Did I miss something when I thought they were so beautiful?

To my delight, I was enjoying listening to him speak. And, I had realized, perhaps, why this man had been so dismissive about buying me a Coke. The simple act of buying a Coke, something I attributed to him spending his money on me, was something so meaningless to him. He did not care about the money. Yet, it seemed ironic. He was condemning the showing of wealth, yet here he was in an expensive looking suit. I was puzzled. Perhaps he just believed in looking nice. I realized it had been a while since either of us had spoken. But he had given me a lot to mull over.

"Well, every system definitely has its flaws." That was the best I could answer. He was unaffected by my meager response, and probably wouldn’t have minded if I did not respond at all. He continued.

"When it comes down to it," he went on, "We are always a product of our environments. I was raised in a manner that caused me to believe in this way. Some things are just in our blood. Say, have you been Scotland?" I could gladly confirm that I had. "I’ll give you an example, then. The Scottish, the Irish and the Americans are the three most well known whiskey producers in the world. But do you know whom does it best? The Scots. There is nothing better than a great Scotch. And I’ve narrowed it down to no other explanation than it’s in their blood. It’s what they will do, and its how they will be.”

At this point I was truly submerged into this conversation. How nice it was to meet this intriguing man at the pit of my traveler’s blues. I was fascinated by how we could both arrive in the same city and conclude something so wildly different. Me, in awe of its beauty, and him, in noticing all the money that went into it that could have been used differently. Yet, if you asked him, it was all because it was “in our
blood." This, in a nutshell, is the epitome of the benefits of travel: meeting new people and learning of new views. I knew I’d probably never see him again, but that was alright: we’d crossed paths, and in that moment the world got a little smaller as two people from opposite sides of the Earth, him from Iran and me in America, met in The Hague over a latte.

Suddenly, I caught sight of the time. I should have been at my hostel fifteen minutes before. I bid the man adieu. It had been a pleasure. Before I knew it, I was out on the brick lined street again. The sun had gone down significantly since I’d last been outside, and the dim lights of the windows were dancing around in the puddles from the rain earlier. I was rejuvenated from my thoughtful conversation and ready for my final week of travel. Off I went. Whooosh! For the second time, I narrowly averted being hit by a biker. Cycling is definitely in the Dutch’s blood, that’s for sure.