

How to Live With a Host Family

There's really only one rule: Do the dishes. This is a lesson learned from my second Dutch host family, the Huismans. Actually, they were my fourth family. When I arrived in Holland in July, sixteen years old and fresh off of what may as well have been a real farm in Michigan, my first host-family-to-be, the van Lammerens, were on holiday at the seaside. So I stayed a month with the van Eses, a young couple with a baby, and two weeks with the van Vliets, a happy, chaotic family, before settling in for four months with the intimidating brown-and-beige-toned van Lammeren family. Their gracious home of deep, silent carpet and silver knickknacks was the antithesis of the rambling, scarred old farmhouse I'd left behind, and Bregje, their sixteen-year-old daughter, with her brown chipmunk cheeks, aggressively long mascara'd lashes, and high-heeled boots, fancied herself very different from me indeed. She smilingly pooh-poohed my initial awkward offers in stilted Dutch to help with the after-dinner cleanup until I stopped offering, and then muttered darkly to herself as she banged pots and pans around in the sleek sink I was unsure how to operate anyway. One of the many things she would complain about in her tantrums to her parents was my laziness. "I have to do *everything!*" I would hear her shriek while I was holed up in "my" room upstairs. "She just sits in her room!"

So when I arrived just before the New Year at my second *official* host family's house, I was determined that things would be different, that my time in this house would not end with being sat down on Christmas night by my host mother and told that they had been very disappointed with their first-time experience of hosting a student and wouldn't be trying it again. I spent three months with Thijs, Jelly, Eltje, and Diederik, and dried the

dishes every night while Eltje (the daughter, 17, tall, blond), or Diederik (the son, 14, tall, blond), washed them. It was over their small old sink, drying dishes with a wet rag, that I became their sister. It was there that I really learned to speak Dutch, after months of painful conversation at the van Lammerens'. "Ooh, tell me of the new boyfriend of you," I asked Eltje. "Is he very *spierlijk*?" "*Spierlijk!*" they screamed. "*Spierlijk!* Did you hear that?" (Was he muscle-like? I had asked.) Another night Diederik teased me until I shouted, "Shut up, Diederik, *je maakt me gek!*" They dissolved into laughter again, and explained that what I'd said—you're making me crazy—really meant that he was turning me on. I learned a lot of dirty Dutch over dishes. And it was over dishes again another night, this time with Jelly, that my host mom, who'd noticed how quiet I'd been over dinner, asked if everything was all right with me. "With *me*, yes, with me everything's good, with me at least," I said, and then told them I'd found out earlier that day that a friend of mine back home had died. Jelly put down the plate she was washing, Eltje stepped in to finish, and my host parents, Jelly and Thijs, hugged me while I cried. I hadn't hugged—or cried in front of—my own parents in years.

Since the Huisman's I've known, in every other family I've spent time with: dishes are the key. You usually have to make them let you do them. They'll say it's fine, don't worry, go make yourself at home, go watch TV in the living room. You have to insist. Tell them that you *love* to do the dishes, that it would really make you happy—make them feel like they're doing you a big favor. Make them feel really guilty if they don't let you. And over time, with dishes, you'll stop being a guest in their house and start being a part of the household itself. You'll know you're successful when they stop thanking you.

It's got to be the dishes, too. Dishes are the one household chore that never varies in its execution from country to country. Laundry or cooking, even regular vacuuming, you could really invade personal space or upset delicate balances (not to mention ruin foreign machinery and materials). But nobody really likes dishes or feels possessive over doing them—well, except my current host father here in Baltimore. I rent a room from a 60ish couple in the city who love to cook for me as much as I pretend to love to clean up the dishes for them. Steve, my new dad, is very particular about how things are positioned in the dishwasher, but I've really absorbed his system and he's accepted that he has no choice. And true, my Costa Rican mother, Marta, was initially very anxious about letting me at her new silverware, but she came around, too. I explain to my families that I grew up cleaning—my parents rented out cottages by the week to escapist Up-North vacationers, and my six sisters and I were the official housekeeping staff—and it feels only natural and right to me. "Please," I say, "don't you want me to feel at home?"

They all bend eventually—some more readily than others. I spent two consecutive summers post-high-school-graduation, after my family had moved away from the old farmhouse, with a rather chaotic family in northern Michigan—the father ran not only a ski pole business but also a natural foods packaging company out of the house. I took my friend's room in her parents' house while she was off for the summer and rode my bike eight miles every day to look at my old house and monitor the trimming of the cottonwoods in the front yard or the new paint job on the barn, and then rode the eight miles back, without ever telling my new family where I'd been. Pre-bike-ride, my day started with a massive clean on the kitchen, which had invariably been left looking as though someone had knocked over every canister and container in the fridge and cupboards (with a ski pole,

perhaps?). I didn't mind, as I was living there for free and considered scrubbing smoothie drippings and mouse droppings off the top of the cupboards my rent. The Edwardses were so shocked and thrilled by what they saw when they returned home from work every day, however, that I was soon called upon at all hours to perform what they thought of as insurmountable tasks. "Sarah, sweetie, could you please take a look at this pan?" Lissa, my mother, would ask. "You're the only one who knows how to get this darned oatmeal off." "I don't know *how* you manage to get the blender so clean," Mimi, my grandmother, would say. "You're a treasure! Would you take a look at my microwave? It's hopeless!"

Lissa was against cleaning on feminist principle, she explained to me. Though I usually had the cleaning done long before they got home, I was on my hands and knees scrubbing the floor one day when she blew through the door, dropping files and tripping over some jars of granola rolling around in the doorway. She stopped and threw her purse dramatically to the floor. "*Sarah!*" she cried, horror ringing through her voice. "What are you *doing*? Get off that floor! Oh, no, no, no!" She explained that she had sworn to herself as a young woman, after a lifetime of watching her mother "fulfill her gender role," that she would never get down on her hands and knees and scrub a floor. "I use this sponge mop," she said, getting out a tired and terrified looking grey sponge with mold and hair clinging to it. I think she got an inkling of for the first time of what exactly I was doing in her kitchen to make it look that good, and it wasn't just swabbing a bit of oatmeal off a pot here and there. She started to protest, even to make some efforts to pile the dishes in the sink before she left in the morning rather than leave them on the floor or the TV.

This is a pretty extreme case, though. Usually, you really need to convince them to let you do the dishes, and go to lengths to force it if necessary. In Vancouver, where I spent a winter with a red-headed goddess in her fifties named Dixie and her daughter Elly during my first lost year after high school, I took to speed-eating so that I was the first to leap up from the table and start filling the sink while they were still buttering their bread. "Ah, Sarah, don't, love," Dixie would say, and I would shout through the steam, "Oh, well, since I'm done, though!"

They yield guiltily, and hover while you cheerfully scrub, saying, "Come on now, let me finish up. Go relax in the living room. Make yourself at home." What they don't get is that living happens in the kitchen, and that I feel more at home in front of their sink, gossiping while I pass plates to be dried, than I ever could perched on the sofa in the living room while they force the remote on me and urge me to choose the programs I like on TV. Part of it is that after years of being the servant, I don't know how to be the guest; most of it, though, is that dishes are a way to trick a family (and yourself) into thinking you've always belonged there. It's a way to break yourself in till you're as familiar a sight in the kitchen as the limp dishtowel you use to dry their fine china or Technicolor Fiesta Ware or square Ikea plates. Look at her, sliding plates into cupboards as if she's always known exactly where they go!

Very, very rarely, perhaps one in a million times, you may find yourself with a family that doesn't need to be tricked, in a home you must have inhabited in a previous life, like my third official (but really fifth) Dutch family, the Bleijenbergs. Maybe it was because I'd already been in the country for a while, and my Dutch was near-fluent by then, and I was

better at being an adopted child, but although all of these things undoubtedly helped, I'm inclined to think that even if I had arrived in their family fresh off the boat, we would have fallen in love the same way. After a year of politeness, disguised so that even I believed my claims to be delighted by the hundredth taste of vile raw herring or cold showers, I found myself at lunch with Jos, my mild, dry father, Irene, my sparkingly warm and exuberant mother, and my blue-eyed, shy-smiling sisters Marielle and Ryanne, chattering with my mouth full and snort-laughing in the first hour of my stay in their house. I forgot to excessively compliment the meal as usual, even to sip the hated tomato soup that was in front of me. When they noticed at the end of lunch that I had a full bowl left, I came to my senses and rushed to spoon it up. "Well, don't eat it if you don't like it!" Irene said. "No, no, I do, I—" I looked around into all of their earnest, amused faces. "I don't," I said. "I hate soup. I'm so sorry!" They laughed. "*Wat een mafkees,*" they said fondly. "What a weirdo."

I never really thought about the dishes with them—I did them, and I still do them whenever I visit them, and they have never tried to stop me. I'm not sure they've ever really noticed that I perhaps shouldn't be there, helping put plates away. Jos, Irene, Marielle, Ryanne—they were my family before I brainwashed them by washing dishes.

In every other family, though, I had to wash my way in. Whatever they tell you about just "being at home" or "being yourself," you really can't. You can't leave your towels on the floor or turn your music up as loud as you like or grunt replies to questions when you're in a certain mood, because these people do not have to love you. They aren't your parents, no matter how much you need them to be, so you have to make yourself their child first. Do it with dishes. Trust me. It'll work.