

Ode to Elisabeth

While travelling through America I met an extraordinary number of exceptionally kind and generous people. Elisabeth was one of those. Elisabeth was new to couch surfing. She had done as so many do - joined and temporarily forgotten about it. She had nothing in her profile. No background, no details, no photo.

I was planning to drive through Nebraska and had randomly selected a smattering of less visited places to see. Couch surfing hosts were hard to come by in these areas. Having never had a bad couch surfing experience I was letting my guard down and staying with more unusual people and people who had not hosted before so had no references. I glanced at Elisabeth's recently created empty profile and thought "Ah why not?". Throwing security concerns to the wind I sent her a message not expecting a reply. "I notice you joined couch surfing recently and you may not be active," I wrote, "...but I am heading over your way and was wondering how you'd feel about hosting?"

Elisabeth responded quickly and enthusiastically and we exchanged email addresses. She sent me photos of herself, the house and Dexter the dog to reassure me and was overwhelmingly excited at my visit. This attitude was contagious.

When I drove up the driveway, Elisabeth was there waiting for me with a friendly smile. She had a lithe, wiry physique and twinkling eyes, glinting with a hint of mischief. She handed me a glass of wine and showed me to my room so that I could freshen up. My room within the lovely villa had a four poster bed and an ensuite bathroom which Elisabeth had thoughtfully stocked with guest toiletries and big fluffy towels.

Outside we sat at the table she had laid with a selection of wine, grapes, breadsticks and cheese and we got to know each other. She moved to Henry, Nebraska population 143, for a relationship that didn't work. She is far more liberal and eclectic than the local farmers so struggles to make friends here but with a dog, cats, a couple of horses and her savings tied up in the house, a move is no simple feat. The house is on the market but no movement at this stage. I get the impression that she joined couch surfing, as many do, as a way of evading loneliness. We bonded immediately, talking non-stop as we sipped and nibbled.

When I woke in the morning and stumbled bleary-eyed into the kitchen Elisabeth was already awake and off giving the horses some exercise. She had laid out a breakfast spread for me on the lid of the stove, with a framed scenic photograph to accompany and a light trained on the feast to draw my attention.

Later in the morning we decided to drive to Wyoming and go walking in Fossil Butte National Park. We took Dexter and roamed around and over the rocks, getting lovely views. We still had plenty to say to each other. I already knew that I was going to be sad to say goodbye to her the next day.

The next morning after another beautifully composed breakfast Elisabeth showed me one of the quirkiest elements she had incorporated into the house. It is a bizarre collection of religious icons interspersed with birds nests shelved in an arched bookshelf. We laughed at the irony as both of us are atheists.

Throughout my extended travels I received sporadic mail from Elisabeth regaling me with Dexter's latest antics or the tales of her latest couch surfers. Now that she had completed her profile and had a reference from me she was receiving more requests.

She proclaimed none of them rivalled me in terms of a bond. I talked about her so fondly that one of my later hosts, Rob, made the effort to visit her while he was in that part of the state.

Not long ago I received a message from Rob. Elisabeth was taken into hospital with a virus. She was pronounced brain dead within a week and taken off life support a few days later. This wonderful vibrant woman is gone. She has been on my mind a lot since I heard. I only knew her a short time but I'm grateful that I had that fleeting moment in time. I'm not as grateful for the reminder of the unpredictability of life but it makes me aware that every day is special. I resolve to take each day as it comes and try not to take a breath for granted. I never want to be accused of a life half lived. It also makes me value the moments we have with friends both new and old. Perhaps that is why death is here...to remind us to live and love.

For Elisabeth, who loved to laugh.

