

My Name Is Elizabeth Lansford, and I've Lost Something

by Colin D. Smith

My name is Elizabeth Lansford, and I've lost something. That's the first thing that jumps into my head as I stand in the doorway of my bedroom, and it won't go away. It's like my brain's afraid of forgetting it. But I know my name, already—I'm sure I do. As for losing something—well, I suppose that's possible. My mind's a bit blurry at the moment. In fact, my head's spinning; I feel giddy. Like I've just woken up from a really deep sleep and I'm still groggy. *My name is Elizabeth Lansford*—yes, I know! I need some water, or perhaps some iced tea. No... *and I've lost something.* Okay, I need to look for something I've lost. Maybe if I find whatever it is, my head'll leave me alone and I can get on with my life.

So, what is it I've lost? And why is it so important? Is it to do with school? I don't remember losing something from school. Is it something big, something small—where is it likely to be? Nothing comes to mind. Just a feeling that I'll know it when I find it. I look around, making a slow sweep of the room. Nothing looks particularly strange. Everything seems to be where I left it. There's my bed—unmade, of course. My pajamas are on the floor. I don't remember dumping my pajamas on the floor, but that sounds like me. Okay, so I'm not very tidy. That's what Moms are for. Sure, she'll complain—but she'll pick them up, perhaps even make my bed. And then yell at me for being such a slob. What can I say? Life's busy. Besides, the room'll just get messy again.

I walk over to my desk. Now that's odd. My laptop's open and on. It looks like I was in the middle of something. A copy of Hamlet sits beside it, open but face down. I read the text on

the screen: “therefore Ophelia appears to be driven into madness because”—and that’s where it stops. Why did I stop mid-sentence? What’s this paper about anyway? I don’t remember the assignment. I don’t even remember reading Hamlet. Is this a dream? Or am I just not remembering?

My head feels fuzzy for a moment. There’s a mug of coffee on the other side of my laptop. It’s half-empty, and it looks to be cold. Really cold. Did I get some kind of major caffeine high and pass out? The light-headed feeling returns. This doesn’t really feel like a caffeine high. What’s going on? What day is it? It must be a week day—the house is empty, so Mom and Dad are at work, and Janie, my sister is in school. So why aren’t I in school? Perhaps I was working on this paper, passed out—but then why didn’t Mom wake me?

I walk over to the calendar hanging over my bed. The cute little kittens on the picture make me smile. That’s why I got this calendar. Those little fluffy faces and big eyes get me every time. I especially like the grey bundle of fuzz in this month’s picture. He’s playing with a ball of yarn, holding it between his four paws, his eyes and ears just visible above the ball. Awww! I look at the calendar part where I’ve crossed off the days that have passed. The first uncrossed day is the eighth—a Thursday. So it *is* a school day. Did Mom forget me?

I return to my desk, looking for clues to piece back my memory. Behind the copy of Hamlet is a picture of me and my BFF Gillian. I’ve known her since Kindergarten. The picture is of us in New York where we went for a class trip last year. Mom really didn’t want me to go—scared of me getting mugged, raped, robbed, or shot, I think. I guess she was just being Mom, but it took ages to get her to agree. Dad wasn’t nearly as bad. He said it would be “good experience.” Then he droned on about his “life changing” trip to Israel in twelfth grade that

inspired him to join the Army. At least he was on my side. It's amazing what you can put up with from your parents as long as they agree with you. Anyway, I don't know about "life changing," but me and Gillie had an awesome time. We took pictures from the top of the Statue of Liberty, we cried at Ground Zero, and we even went to a Broadway show. I feel a pang of sadness followed by a deep ache, like a kind of longing. That's not right. Memories of Gillie and New York usually make me happy—that's why the picture's there, for when I'm doing my homework.

How come I can remember Gillie and New York, but I can't remember the last twenty-four hours? What the heck is going on here? And where is this thing I have to find? Perhaps if I find it, I'll get some answers. I look under my bed, on my desk, and I go to look in my dresser, but I'm overwhelmed with a feeling that this thing is too big to be in a drawer. It's something that I'll see in plain sight, and I will know it immediately. If that's the case, it's not in my room, so I leave.

The house is very quiet. I must be affected by the quiet because I can't even hear my own footsteps. It's funny how quiet places do that to you—make you feel like you have to be quiet. Like libraries, or churches. All I can hear is the soft hum of the air conditioning. Is it already warm enough to run the AC? Perhaps Mom turned it on when she left this morning. In which case, I must have been here this morning—and she must have known. Surely she wouldn't have turned on the AC when the house is empty?

My parents' bedroom door is open, so I take my search there. Of course, it's tidy—probably the tidiest room in the house. Mom's a bit of a neat-freak. She's always getting on at me and Janie to keep our rooms tidy, but she'll always do them for us if we don't. I think she

just can't stand the sight of mess, and would sooner do it herself than have to look at it. The neatly-made queen-size bed has nothing on it but pillows, sheets, and a cover. Their furniture has nothing on it except what you would expect to see on bedside tables, dressers, and chairs.

A large wedding picture hangs on the wall next to the bed. They married back in 1989. Mom's hair was all big and curled and blond—I definitely inherited her blond hair—but her dress is absolutely beautiful. She still has it, and I've claimed it for when I get married. Janie wasn't happy about that, but I told her that's what she gets for being the second-born. She'll just have to have it after me, which means she can't get married first. Since she's ten and I'm fifteen, I don't think there's any chance of that happening.

Dad looks good in the picture too. He's all dressed up in his uniform, looking all smart and handsome. Mom says his whole regiment came out for the wedding. Imagine that—a church full of ripped young guys in uniform. Mmmm! I notice their closet door is open, but it's dark inside and appears to be full of nothing but clothes.

The next room to check is the bathroom. Sink, toilet, and bathtub. Nothing much else to see. I look around the shower curtain just to make sure there isn't something in the bathtub. There isn't. And there's that light-headed feeling again. Only this time it's stronger. Wow—is this some kind of drug? Did I take something last night, or this morning? I'm not a junkie, am I? If I can remember my Mom's stories of their wedding, you'd think I'd remember being a crack-head. That would seem somewhat important. I check the trash can. There's an empty bottle of Nyquil on the top. Perhaps that's what's wrong with me—I downed a whole bottle of Nyquil. Or perhaps I'm sick and I had the last of the Nyquil last night. That would explain being at home today. But does it explain this weird feeling? I thought colds made your head

stuffy, not like it's full of helium. In any case, whatever I'm supposed to be looking for is not here.

The last place I can think of to look is Janie's room. I can't imagine what would be there that I've lost, that's big enough to be seen in plain view, and I would know when I've found it. Janie's room has everything I would expect to find in Janie's room—her Barbie doll house, and various dolls on the floor, along with some dress up clothes and a roller skate. Mom is going to have a fit when she sees this—especially the roller skate. She's warned her about leaving them lying around. Thanks, Janie, for having a room worse than mine! Oh, and then there are her stuffed animals that line her bed and just about every other surface she can find. Half of them were mine, but I gave them to her a few years ago when I turned thirteen. I'd just become a teenager, so I had no use for them anymore. I did keep a couple of the most important ones—sentimental reasons, of course. “Bunnie” helped me through a particularly emotional crisis not long ago when Mark Baker broke up with me. He was my first real boyfriend. We were solid for about six months then he dumped me for no reason. That was bad enough, but then I saw him making out with Mary Coulson a couple of days later. Jerk. Yeah, I cried on Bunnie's shoulder—a lot—but I got over it.

I'm confused now. Janie's room drew a blank. Perhaps it's downstairs. I wander toward the stairs—yes, wander. The fuzzy feeling is worse and I'm really feeling like I'm high on something. It's like when I had a kidney stone and they gave me pills for the pain. That stuff was so good I was floating all the way home from the hospital. That's what it's like now. Kind of dizzy, kind of floaty. And strangely peaceful.

I get to the top of the stairs and I can see the front door. It's open, and it looks like the wood's splintered around by the lock. Oh crap. We've had a break in. My heart's racing now. Are they still here? I listen for noise while slowly moving down the staircase. I'm not making a sound; probably nerves and trying not to draw attention to myself. As I get further down the stairs I notice a roller skate not far from the open door. It's the other one of Janie's skates. What's that doing there?

Then I see it. Plain and obvious, just like my mind said, right at the foot of the stairs. She's lying all crumpled on the floor, her blond hair scattered around her head. I get closer to her. Every part of me is tingling, telling me I've found it. I've found what I lost. I try to nudge the body with my foot to see if it's alive. My foot doesn't really make contact; it just sort of sinks in and then passes through.

There's a mirror in the hallway directly in front of me. I don't want to look at it, afraid of what I'll see. I've already got a pretty bad feeling about this, but I look up at the mirror anyway. I can see the wall behind me. And there I am, faintly outlined, barely visible in the afternoon sunlight.

I look down at my lifeless body sprawled around my transparent feet. That's me—and I'm... dead. I look up again at my shadowy reflection in the mirror.

"I suppose this explains the floaty feeling," I wonder aloud, noticing for the first time that my feet are hovering an inch above the floor.

"I suppose it must," says a man who seems to have appeared out of nowhere. He's wearing a kind of blue colored suit—it's hard to tell because he's standing in front of the door, and I can see right through him. But he's not as transparent as me. I gasp. "I'm sorry, I didn't

mean to startle you... Elizabeth, isn't it?" He speaks with a British accent, and he's consulting something that looks like an iPad.

"Y-yes, that's me," I say. My head is really starting to spin now. If it wasn't bad enough finding my dead body at the bottom of the stairs, now I've got British ghosts appearing in front of me. "Who are you?"

"Patrick, Miss Lansford. I'm just stopping by to fill you in a little on what's happening."

"I'm dead," I say. "How that for catching up?"

"Good," he smiles. "I'm glad you've recognized that. You wouldn't believe how many people use up their last few precious minutes in denial."

"Last few—?"

"In a moment," he says. "First, how are you coping?"

"Coping?"

"How are you coming to terms with death?"

"I just found out," I say. "It's a bit of a shock—I mean, for a while there I was sure I was alive. I guess I'm—relieved? I mean, I was worried I was insane, or a drug addict, but it turns out I'm just dead. That sounds wrong. Should I be sad? Grieving?"

"Not necessarily," he says, shrugging his shoulders. "Of course, you're just in the transition phase."

"Transition phase?"

"Yes. You have about twenty minutes after death to linger in this world before you are taken to the next."

"What, Heaven?"

“Perhaps. Not my call. Above my pay grade, as they say.” He flashes a grin.

My mind begins to race. “Twenty minutes?”

“From time of death. You probably have about ten left now.”

“Ten minutes? To do what?”

“Oh, I don’t know. To each his—or her—own.”

“Can I leave a note?” I feel a horrible tug in the pit of my stomach. “Janie... Mom... Dad—can I talk to them? See them?”

“No. You’re no longer flesh and blood. You can’t be seen, and neither can you affect anything here.”

“What do you mean?”

“You can’t pick up or move anything physical. And physical eyes can’t see you.”

“So what am I supposed to do?”

“I don’t know. Prepare yourself for what’s next, perhaps?”

“And what’s next?”

“Again, that’s not up to me.” I must have a pretty anguished look on my face because his eyes don’t seem quite as stern anymore. He sighs, reaches inside his jacket, and pulls out a notepad and pen. “Here,” he says, handing them to me.

“What’s this for?” I ask, taking them. “Can my family see what I write with this?” He shakes his head.

“Look at them. They’re not material; they’re insubstantial—like you. That’s why you can see them and touch them; but flesh and blood can’t.”

“So what good are they?” He gives me an uneasy smile.

“It’s not a proven fact,” he says, “but I’ve heard that if you write a message with that, and you put enough of your heart into it... well, let’s just say your feelings can reverberate into the material realm.”

“In English, please.”

“Your family might feel your words. Perhaps in the form of an impression that represents the things you say. They’ll sort of linger about the house.” I look at the pen and paper.

“I suppose that’s better than nothing. Thanks.”

“You’re most welcome, Miss Lansford. Now, I must be off. You only have a few minutes left before you’ll be on your way too. Use them wisely.”

“Okay. Good—” He’s gone already. I feel a slight tremor, but it’s not the ground. My body, spirit-body, whatever, is shaking.

I take the pen and paper into the living room. The clock on the mantle says it’s nearly four. Mom will be home with Janie soon. I pace around the room making circles around the large coffee table. What to say? I don’t have time to think. I just write.

Dear Mom—I just want you to know that I love you, and I’m so sorry you had to find me this way. I think it was an accident, so don’t feel bad. And I don’t blame Janie, even if it was her roller skate. Don’t be too hard on her. I’m not sure what’s going to happen to me now, but I’m not suffering, so don’t worry about me. Just worry about making sure Dad and Janie are okay.

Dad—I love you too, and I know you can’t always be around, what with being in the Army, but I’m really proud of you. And I’m sorry for telling people you “play soldiers.” That

sounds really disrespectful, and I don't mean to put down your job. You're the best Dad I could have wanted. Look after Mom and Janie.

Janie—I'm sorry for being so snappy with you so much. What I wouldn't give to hear you talk now, and to be able to tell you how much I really love you and hear your silly stories. And now I never will, and—

I'm crying now. I mean, real tears are streaming down my cheeks. Well, they feel real to me, even if they're just spirit-tears.

—take good care of Mom, and, of course, the wedding dress will be yours now. I'm sure you'll look beautiful. And will someone let Gillie know that she's the best BFF I could ever have asked for, and I will miss her sooooo much. And—

I hear a car pull up outside. My heart skips. The tremors intensify. I'm getting very light-headed now... and floaty... and I can hear car doors slam. I make my way toward the hallway, but something's happening. I can't seem to move. It's like I have no control over what I'm doing. Footsteps. I hear footsteps on the driveway. No... everything's starting to fade... it's like someone's turning up the brightness on the television.

“Come on Mom,” I hear Janie saying. “Hey, why's the door open?”

No, Janie! Don't be the first to see... JANIE!

The last thing I hear as the world fades away is Janie screaming my name.