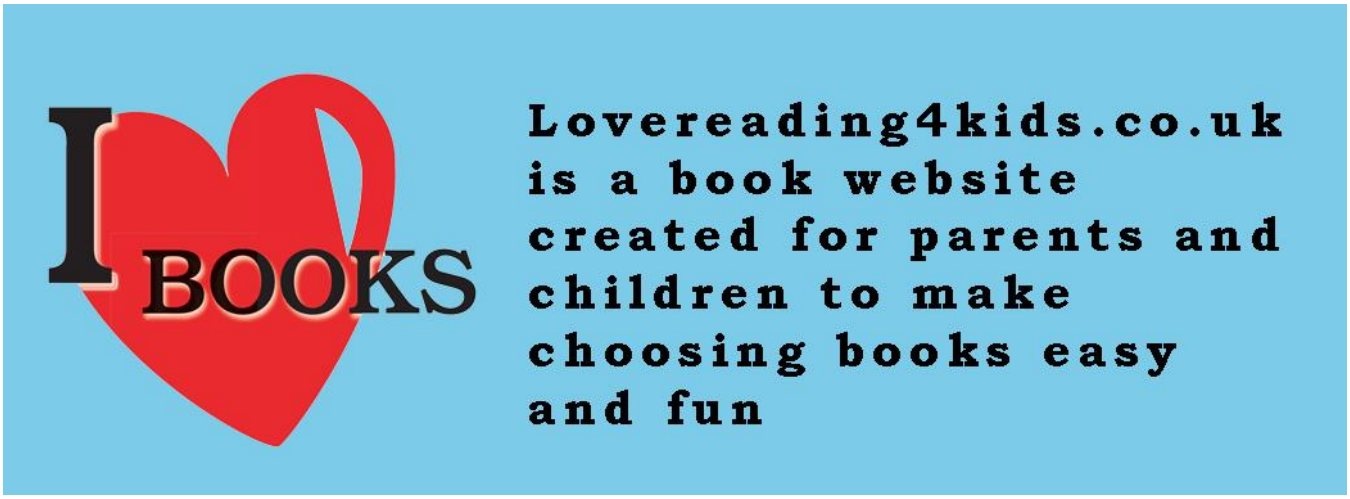


Opening extract from

Twenty Questions for Gloria

Written by

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Q1: Let's start at the beginning, shall we?

Detective Inspector Katharine Ryan:

This interview is being audio- and video-recorded with parental consent and the agreement of the interviewee. We are in Interview Suite 1 at Litchbury Police Station on the 14th of June. Time, 10.12 a.m. The interview is being conducted by myself, Detective Inspector Katharine Ryan, of the West Yorkshire Police Service. Also present, for the purposes of Interview Support of a juvenile, is the interviewee's mother. Can you state your name, please?

Mrs Elizabeth Ellis:

Oh, yes. Liz – I mean (Clears throat) Mrs Elizabeth Mary Ellis.

D.I. Ryan:

Thank you. I am interviewing… Could you please say your full name?

Gloria Ellis:

Gloria Jade Ellis.

D.I. Ryan:

That's great. How old are you, Gloria?

Gloria:

Fifteen. Sixteen in October.

D.I. Ryan:

Are you happy for me to call you Gloria? Only, your mum calls you Lor, so—

Gloria:

Gloria is fine.

D.I. Ryan:

Right. OK, as I've explained, Gloria, this is an interview, not an interrogation. You're here of your own volition, your own free will to—

Gloria:

I know what "volition" means.

D.I. Ryan:

I didn't mean to sound patronizing, I just want to make sure there are no misunderstandings about the nature of what we're doing today. So, as I say, you're here of your own volition to help us figure out what's been happening. That's all. Are we OK with that?

Gloria:

(Nods)

D.I. Ryan:

For the recording, please.

Gloria:

Yes, I'm OK with that.

D.I. Ryan:

Excuse me. (Presses intercom button) Are the levels OK, Mike?

Recording Technician:

(Voice only) Yep.

Gloria:

The recording guy is called *Mike*?

D.I. Ryan:

How many times you been ribbed about that, Mike?

Recording Technician:

Eight hundred and sixty-three. That's just this month. (Laughter)

D.I. Ryan:

Believe it or not, we have a Sergeant Pete Sargent and a dog-handler called David Barker.

Gloria:

You're making that up.

D.I. Ryan:

10.15 a.m., interviewee accuses interviewing officer of lying. (Laughter)

OK, this is all good. So, Gloria, thank you for coming in this morning. You've been home less than twenty-four hours and I imagine the last thing you want to do is sit here going over everything and answering a pile of questions. You too, Mrs Ellis – I appreciate your co-operation.

Mrs Ellis:

We just want to know what he—

D.I. Ryan:

It must be so good to have her back.

Mrs Ellis:

It is. It is. (Snuffles) Sorry, I promised myself I wouldn't do this.

D.I. Ryan:

Take your time.

(To Gloria) How about you – glad to be back with your mum and dad?

Gloria:

(No response)

D.I. Ryan:

You certainly look a lot better for a decent night's sleep, a shower and a change of clothes.

Gloria:

Look, I know you have to be friendly, win my trust and all that, but d'you think we could—

D.I. Ryan:

Rapport, they call it. With someone your age, I'm supposed to ask what music you're into, your favourite movie, your best subject at school. Your hobbies.

Gloria:

I make my own earrings. You want to talk about that?

Mrs Ellis:

Lor, why are you being like this? She's on *our* side.

D.I. Ryan:

No, Gloria's right – we should cut the crap and get on

with it. Get you out of here and back with your family as soon as possible.

OK, let me just explain the process. In a moment I'm going to ask you to tell me all about the events of the past fifteen days. Take as long as you like. While you're speaking, I won't interrupt or ask questions unless I have to, just to make sure I've got things straight in my head. OK? We'll have regular breaks, of course. And you can call a time-out at any point if you're tired or it all gets a bit too much.

Good. So, one last thing. I have to be clear that you appreciate how important it is for you to be totally honest with me today. Try to recall as much as you can, as accurately as you can, yeah?

Gloria:

The whole truth and nothing but the truth. (Crosses her heart) So help me, God.

D.I. Ryan:

I'm being serious.

Gloria:

Me too.

D.I. Ryan:

The thing is, people have been very worried about you. Your mum, your dad. All of us. A girl your age goes missing for as long as you did… Well, you can imagine what we thought. And we're so pleased and relieved that you're back with us. But if we're to make sense of it all,

I need you to take me through everything that happened to you while you were gone. Step by step.

Gloria:

He said you'd do this. Get me to play the victim.

D.I. Ryan:

No one's getting you to… That's not what we're doing here, Gloria. We have fifteen days unaccounted for. Fifteen blanks. I can't fill in those blanks without your help. That's all.

Gloria:

(No response)

D.I. Ryan:

Do you think you can do that for me?

Gloria:

(No response)

D.I. Ryan:

Just … say it like it was. In your own time, in your own words. Yeah?

Gloria:

(Shrugs)

D.I. Ryan:

Gloria?

Gloria:

(Nods) Yeah.

D.I. Ryan:

Excellent. So. Let's start at the beginning, shall we?

Q2: How can you disappear from yourself?

D.I. Ryan doesn't look like a detective, in her ripped jeans and trainers and black short-sleeved Dorothy Perkins top. The outfit must be for my benefit, to put me at my ease. I read somewhere that when children give evidence in court, the barristers and judge take off their wigs and gowns to appear less intimidating. The room's playing its part, too. On TV, it's always bare walls, hard seats and a lightbulb behind wire mesh. This "interview suite" reminds me of a hotel reception: a triangular coffee table, comfy purple chairs, a leafy plant in a tub, art prints on the wall and a blue-tinted water dispenser that stands in a corner like an ice sculpture.

I'm so tired I could curl up and go to sleep. It's going to take more than one night in my own bed to wipe out the last couple of weeks.

Imagine their expressions if I called a time-out now, before we've even begun.

For all her smiles, D.I. Ryan looks frazzled, edgy. She wants to find him, bring him in. But first she's got me to

deal with. She tells me to take as long as I need, but I can taste her impatience. Mum and Dad are the same. Not that they've been interrogating me since I got back – the police probably told them to lay off the questions. The questions are there, though, hanging unspoken in the air. Meantime, they make do with holding my hand, squeezing my shoulder, rubbing my back, kissing the top of my head, asking if I'm OK, if I want anything to eat or drink, if I'm warm enough or too warm, or telling me how good it is to have me home. That's when they're not staring at my fake-blonde hair like they're trying to figure out if I'm an impostor pretending to be their daughter. Or simply gazing at me the way I imagine they did when I was a baby.

During one of my naps, I half-woke to see them in the bedroom doorway, Dad's arm round Mum's shoulders, watching me.

I just want to be left alone. I can't say that to them.

They were afraid I was gone for ever. Then I turned up. It's a miracle. *I'm* a miracle. And they can't quite believe I won't vanish again.

It's funny, I never thought of myself as missing. How can you disappear from yourself?

I did make a start at explaining things yesterday, at home, once the police doctor had given D.I. Ryan the go-ahead to speak to me.

It wasn't what they thought, I tried to tell her.

That didn't get me very far. It hardly helped that I slurred

like a drunk and couldn't string two sentences together. I was exhausted, she decided. The interview could wait.

"We'll try again tomorrow, when you're fresher. Less confused." D.I. Ryan sounded like a teacher who suspects a student is lying but is giving them another chance to tell the truth.

I was in bed by the time Dad showed her out. I overheard him ask if she thought I was in post-traumatic shock.

"It's possible," came her muffled answer. Then something I didn't catch.

"Did the doctor … examine her?" Dad said. "You know, properly."

I thought I'd missed D.I. Ryan's reply, but she must've just taken her time answering. "No," she said. "I can't authorize that until we know whether the boy did anything."

"You're not seriously telling me you think he *didn't*?"

"Mr Ellis, I'm saying we need to hear it from Gloria."

Then the front door opened and the hallway echoed with the clamour of the reporters, photographers and camera crews behind the barrier across the street from our house.

I nuzzled down under the duvet, shut my eyes, and imagined myself somewhere else.

Apparently, while I was away, I'd gone viral at *#wheresgloria?*.

Yesterday evening I was watching the TV news and a reporter was doing a live report from outside our house. If I'd gone over to the window and pulled back the curtain, I could have waved to myself. It's weird and a bit scary to

think of so many people missing me, worrying about me, looking for me. When my parents showed me some of the stuff online and in the newspapers, it was as if I was reading about someone else. Some other Gloria.

But that's me, now. That's become my story.

Only, "Where's Gloria?" has become "Where *was* Gloria?" And "What did he do to Gloria?" And "Where's the boy who took Gloria?"

Where *is* he? It's all I can think about. Every minute since it ended.

D.I. Ryan wants to hear it from the beginning. The first of the fifteen days, I presume she means; the day I went missing. It started a couple of weeks before then, though.

It started with an appearance, not a disappearance.

It was a regular Monday morning at school and the tutor room was lively, with start-of-the-week blues drowned out by the chatter of what-did-you-do-at-the-weekend? Mr Brunt had just taken the register. The windows were open, letting in the drone of a lawnmower from the school field and the scent of cut grass. It had set off Tierney's hay fever. Even with red eyes and a snotty nose, she's still pretty. Like a grief-stricken princess. She sneezed three times, all over our desk.

"Thank you for sharing those with us, Tierney," Mr Brunt said. "If you have any more lined up, please turn

around – the chaps in the back row missed out that time."

I'd like to say there was a sign, an omen – sunlight bathing the room in a strange aura, a blue butterfly fluttering in through the window and settling on my sleeve – but there was nothing like that. I don't recall what I was thinking about (forgotten homework, probably, or whether Mum had signed my planner), or my mood (switched off, I expect; wishing away the day, the week), but it seems bizarre that those moments weren't electrified with anticipation.

Mr Brunt clapped his hands, as he always does ahead of class announcements. As usual, he followed the clap with, "Right then, 10GB, listen up."

The whole time he's been our form tutor, Mr Brunt has worn nothing but variations of brown (suits, ties, shoes, socks, the occasional sweater). Even his white shirts have turned beige. He must have been teaching since the days when desks had inkwells.

He barely got started on his announcements that morning before the door opened and a boy let himself into the room. Tall and gangly, with very black, very fine, very straight hair down to his shoulders. Dusky, in a Mediterranean-meets-the-Indian-subcontinent kind of way. But for his height, his boy-sized nose and the scruffy stubble on his chin and upper lip, he might have passed for a girl. It wasn't just the long hair; there was something feminine in his manner and the way he moved. A kind of grace. His school uniform was way too small for him, exposing two stripes of hairy shin and a

pair of knobbly wrists encircled in numerous multicoloured bangles.

He hadn't knocked before coming in. Mr Brunt wouldn't like that.

"Who'd he?" Tierney whispered through hay-feverish nostrils; not a, *Wow, he's cute*, more of a *Who's this freak?*

One or two people sniggered.

He was tall enough to be Year 12 or 13, but he wouldn't have been in uniform if that was the case. I didn't recognize him, anyway, and I'm sure I'd have remembered him if I'd seen him around school. The guy showed no trace of self-consciousness. Head held high, he surveyed the room with an easy confidence.

"Shall we try that again, young man?" Mr Brunt said.

I thought he was going to ignore the question. At last, with a half-smile, he turned to the tutor. "Try what again, sir?"

Posh-spoken, polite. If he had any idea what he'd done wrong, he didn't show it.

Mr Brunt was a few centimetres shorter and seemed displeased by having to look up at him, as if the boy was to blame for it. The teacher pointed. "The door."

The new arrival looked genuinely perplexed. "What about it?"

"I'd like you to knock on it before entering my tutor room."

"But I'm already in your tutor room."

"Then could you please go back out, knock on the door, and come in when I say so."

"I could very easily do all of those things, but – if you don't mind me saying so, sir – it would be a poor use of my time. And yours, for that matter."

An odd sound escaped Mr Brunt's mouth. The rest of us were utterly silent and still.

The boy continued. "You've already established that you prefer people to knock before entering – fine, point made, I'll know for next time – so what you're doing now is attempting to assert your authority over me through a process of ridicule." He shrugged. "So, no."

Just like that: No.

I didn't dare breathe or so much as glance at Tierney, sure if I caught her eye I'd burst out laughing. In any case, I couldn't tear my gaze from the two figures at the front, face-to-face like boxers at the start of a fight. Or lovers in a TV drama. That was it: there was no aggression in the boy's tone or body language; he was relaxed, almost seductive. As I sat there, enthralled, I pictured him leaning forward to kiss Mr Brunt on the lips.

As if he'd had the exact same thought, the form tutor took a half-step backwards.

Unlike some teachers, Mr Brunt doesn't tend to lose his temper with us, individually or as a group; I don't think I've heard him shout. Not properly. But we know where he draws the line and there's no doubt when we've crossed it. That

morning, though, he seemed bewildered. A confused old man who'd gone walkabout from a care home and somehow found himself in a room full of teenagers.

"You're, you … what did you … this is totally … young man, I want you to…"

He must have started the sentence ten times. Then he gave up trying to get the words out and simply stood there – shoulders sagging, head tilted to look up into the boy's face – as if awaiting further instructions. It was shocking to see him like that.

The boy rescued him.

"We haven't got off on the right foot, have we, sir?" he said, still wearing that half-smile. He offered his hand. "Hello. I'm Uman." He pronounced it *Oo-maan*. "You must be Mr Brunt."

The form tutor stared at the hand like he'd never seen one before. Maybe he'd noticed all those bangles – a flagrant breach of school dress code – and was debating whether to confront the boy about that, too. "Uman?" he repeated.

"Padeem. Uman Padeem."

Mr Brunt frowned, then took the hand and shook it, or at least allowed his own to be shaken.

Still holding the teacher's hand, Uman Padeem said, "I'm the new boy."

I've seen the effect Uman has on people many times since then, but that morning it was almost literally unbelievable –

as if the episode had been staged, with the form tutor and the new boy in cahoots to play a practical joke on the class.

"What's wrong with Brunt?" I whispered to Tierney.

She just shook her head.

"Tier, he looks like he's been drugged."

"Or hybdodized."

"Or *what?*"

"*Hyb-do-dized.*"

"That's what I thought you said."

In the hours and days that followed, this was one of the theories about Uman Padeem's "effect" – that he cast a hypnotic spell over people. In that tutor room, though, all we could do was watch – bemused, awestruck – as Mr Brunt capitulated.

"New boy?" he said. "I wasn't inform— Let me check if I have…" He went over to his desk and fumbled at his computer. "You sure you're meant to be … ah, yes, here we are."

When he'd finished reading, he stood up. Straightened his tie. Studied Uman with the strangest expression. I know what it conveyed, now, but back then I couldn't read it at all.

"Well," he said, raising a hand towards the rows of desks, "you'd better join us. Uman." He spoke the name as if testing it. "And, um … welcome to 10GB."

"Thank you, sir."

Whatever he'd read on that PC, the confrontation over Uman's failure to knock before entering the room was no longer an issue. The new boy had defied the teacher,

spectacularly, and got clean away with it. I'd have expected him to look smug; most of the other boys in the class would have taken their seat with a smirk and a swagger if they'd pulled a stunt like that. Uman, though, had erased all trace of a smile from his lips. If anything, he looked sorry for Mr Brunt.

"There's a spare seat by the window," the form tutor said, pointing. "Next to Luke."

Uman Padeem glanced in that direction. Then he cast his gaze about the room, as he'd done when he first came in. This time he seemed to look more closely, as if assessing us one by one. His attention settled on our desk. First, on Tierney. Then me. Then Tierney again. I am *so* used to that. He can only have looked at me for a couple of seconds, but it felt longer. His face gave nothing away. I willed myself not to break eye contact.

Who the hell do you think you are? I distinctly recall having that thought as he stared at me; he might have messed with Mr Brunt's head but he wasn't going to mess with mine.

The odd thing was that, during his visual trawl of the room, none of us said a word; Mr Brunt, too, simply stood patiently beside him, waiting for him to finish whatever he was doing. What *was* he doing? I'm not sure any of us knew, but, despite its bizarreness, there seemed to be a general acceptance that he was perfectly entitled to do it.

Eventually, Uman moved. With a long-legged stride that somehow managed to be both ungainly and graceful at the

same time, he picked a route between the desks.

Until he came to ours. Specifically, to Tierney's half of it. Of course.

"Hello," he said to Tierney. "What's your name?"

"Tierdey."

"Well, Tierdey, would you mind—"

"Her name's Tier-*ney*," I cut in. "With an 'n'."

Uman looked at me, with that half-smile in place again, then back at Tier. "Tier-*ney*, can I ask you to sit over there with Luke, please?"

Her expression was priceless. "Are you habbing a larp?"

"Is she speaking Danish?" Uman asked me.

"Hay fever," I said.

"That's a *language*? Wow, we never got past Latin and Mandarin at my last school."

That was actually quite funny, but no way was I going to show it. Anyway, who learns *Latin* these days? And what kind of school offers Mandarin?

I looked at Mr Brunt, wondering if he would intervene. Clearly not. Like the rest of the class, he just watched the scene unfold as if fascinated to see how it would end.

"So, Tierney with an 'n'." Uman nodded at the empty seat next to Luke. "How about it?"

"Doh way! Why should *I* hab to moob?"

"Because your friend looks by far the most interesting person in the room and – with all due respect to Luke – I'd prefer to sit with her."

* * *

Uman Padeem brought many surprises to 10GB that morning, but none greater than this: Tierney collected up her stuff and went over to sit with Luke.

I summarize this episode without interruption from D.I. Ryan. But she cuts in with a question now. Can't say I blame her. It's exactly the question I would ask at this point. It's the one I asked myself at the time – and Uman afterwards – without ever really producing a satisfactory answer.

"Gloria," she asks, "why did he choose you, do you think?"

"I don't know."

"You have no idea? You never spoke to him about it?"

"What, you don't think I'm 'interesting' enough for that to be the reason?"

Mum *tsks*. D.I. Ryan says, "You must have thought about it a lot since then."

"Does it matter *why*?"

"It might be a factor, yes."

"A factor."

"For his motivation."

Before I reply, I take a slug of water. I study her tanned kneecap through the rip in her jeans, the dusting of tiny blonde hairs. "He chose me because he chose me. That's all."

I just stop myself from adding, *Who knows what draws one person to another?* I don't think she'd appreciate a philosophical

soundbite from a schoolgirl some thirty years younger than her.

Love at first sight, Tierney reckoned. But it wasn't that. With a choice between me and Tier – between me and most other girls in that room – what guy would pick me? I was never under any illusion that he even fancied me at first sight, let alone loved me. To be honest, it took me a while to figure out if he actually *liked* me. Or whether I liked him.

After Uman's explosive arrival in the tutor room, the remaining time before Mr Brunt dismissed us was an anticlimax.

Uman sat next to me. But he said nothing. And he did nothing, apart from have a coughing fit. Sometimes boys – less often, girls – will cough to disrupt a lesson; working as a team, taking turns, driving the teacher to distraction, but making it hard to prove they're doing it deliberately. Uman's coughs seemed genuine. (*Were* genuine, I know now.) They had the effect, though, of jolting poor old Brunt even further out of synch. As we filed out for first period, he asked Uman if he'd mind staying behind for a quick word. If that was OK. When Uman agreed, Mr Brunt's face was a mime of surprised relief that the boy would do as he'd been asked. The form tutor almost looked grateful.

As I reached the door, Uman called after me. "Wait for me in the corridor, yeah?"

"Wait for you in the corridor, *no*," I answered.

Really, he was something else. I left the room without a

backward glance and headed off to class (English, I think), hurrying to catch up with Tierney.

"What was that all about?" I asked.

"I doh – wadda dodal weirdo."

"No, *you*. Giving up your seat for him."

Tierney pulled her *so what?* face. "Doh big deal, really."

I let out a laugh. "Tier, that was so not like you."

"He'd dew."

"I know he's new but that doesn't—"

And so on. It was obvious, despite her trying to shrug it off, that Tierney was thrown by what had happened – what she'd done but, also, why she'd done it. She looked just as confused as Mr Brunt.

"Who is he?" I heard someone ask behind us. "Where's he come from?"

Uman Padeem was all anyone could talk about, the babble of our voices echoing along the corridor as class 10GB dispersed.