

The Google Questions by Alan Pearce
Sample

Sleepy?

The first thing that hits you when you come out of a coma is thirst. Not the namby-pamby common sort of thirst but another kind; one that prompts a tortured scream as it drags you beyond panic and hurtling towards madness. I struggled to call out.

'Tea!'

The immediate clatter of a tray hitting the floor caused my heart to miss a beat.

The second thing that hits you is the light. I had to squint hard to make out a small figure in white hopping from foot to foot.

'Oh, my God!' said the small figure in white. 'You're awake!'

'Tea?' I croaked

Then she was gone. The door opened and closed and swung on its hinges, and I began a slow exploration of my mouth with a tongue resembling leather. I was marvelling at the unfamiliar smoothness of my palate when the door swung open again and I sensed someone standing over me.

'Hello! You're not awake are you?'

I reluctantly peered through my left eye and nodded at a man in white.

'Who's put him on benzodiazepines?' he asked above the rustling of notes.

'It says here 30 megs of Zolpidem every six hours, doctor. He's already had four lots.'

'First I've heard of it. Who ordered it?'

'I can't read the signature.' I saw the flash of a clipboard. 'What do you make of it?'

'Bugged if I can read that.'

I could see that he was going to peer into my face so I squeezed my eyes back shut. Then he pulled back first one eyelid and then the other and shone a bright light from a very small torch. This hindered my vision a little longer.

'Sod it!' hissed the doctor. 'You'd better page Mrs Torrance, and rush him down for a PET scan. I want to take a squint at his frontal lobes as quick as you can.'

I tried to move my hands and found that I couldn't. I tried to move my feet and found them similarly restrained.

'Nothing to worry about, old chap,' smiled the doctor. 'You're safe and sound in there. Nice and comfy is it?'

I tried to shrug.

'You know,' he came and squatted beside my cocoon. 'You really shouldn't be awake just yet. You're not ready. Why don't you just close those eyes again and drift off back to sleep.' His voice was a gentle purr. 'Safe and sound.'

I felt my breath catch in my throat.

'You are feeling sleepy,' he told me. 'Very sleepy. Go back to sleep.'

But, try as I might, it just wouldn't happen. This in retrospect could be described as unfortunate.

I croaked again, *'Tea!'*

What happened to July...?

'Hello, Mr Smith. My name is Torrance. Pamela Torrance. May I sit down?'

'Please.' I suddenly noticed the chair beside my new bed.

'How do you feel?' she asked.

'Rather vague.' I gave a wan smile. 'No one's told me anything. I've got the most appalling headache, my throat is incredibly sore...'

'That will be from the tracheotomy.'

'...and I ache all over. It's not unpleasant, more like having been down the gym.'

'And do you know where you are?'

'I could hazard a guess: hospital?'

'Not precisely,' smiled Pamela. 'You are at the Thomas Westbrook Clinic.'

'Really?' I involuntarily cleared my throat. 'Who's paying for this?'

Pamela gave a short laugh. 'We're a private research clinic. Sleep disorders, hyper-sleep, comas, that sort of thing.'

I was compelled to ask: 'What? I've been in a coma?'

'Yes, you have.'

I have a habit of chewing my lip. I chewed as a rush of questions came tumbling from my frontal lobes. Pamela sensed my confusion and held up her hand.

'I know,' she told me. 'There's a lot to take in. You've been in an accident. Do you remember?'

'No.'

'What is the last thing you do remember?'

'Waking up.'

'Do you know the date?'

The vague notion came to mind that I was on my way to a job interview. 'I have an appointment.'

'Well, you don't need worry about that.'

'What is the date, then?' My skin began to tingle. 'Have I been here long?'

'Wynton,' Pamela lowered her voice. 'You don't mind if I call you Wynton, do you?'

'No.'

'Wynton. Today is Wednesday, November 24.'

'Oh, yeah?' I felt rising hysteria. 'What happened to July...August...September...?'

'Wynton, today is Wednesday, November 24, 2010.'

'Two-thousand-and-ten?' I stiffened briefly and then flopped back against the pillow, staring at the ceiling. I tried hard to think. '*Five years!* You are fucking kidding me!'

'I'm sorry!' I heard Pamela suddenly scrap back her chair. 'I would ask that you moderate your language. Please.' She paused and took a deep breath. 'Now, do you know why you are here?'

'I've been in an accident.'

'Yes, you have. You've been very lucky.'

'What sort of accident?'

'Do you not remember any of it?'

I shook my head.

'Nothing at all?'

'I had a job interview.'
'You were in an explosion.'
'Was I?' My teeth gripped my lip.
'Lots of people died.'
'And I survived?'
'You survived.'
'Well, fuck me!'

No friends or family

'Hello, Mr Smith. What, no smile this afternoon?'

I returned to a common theme. 'I'm bored. And call me Wynton.'

The clinic had no TV or radio because it interfered with the equipment, or so they said. What I did have were piles of old newspapers and magazines. When you go through so many - knowing everything laid out before you happened in the past – you are left with a sense of detachment. I felt like an archivist pouring through recent history and I found it impossible to care. There was another side, too. I felt robbed. I would never get the missing years back no matter how much I read about them, and I felt resentful. You might also say that I had missed the last really happy years for most people before everything went pear-shaped. I wanted to erase, not study the past. I had made some mistakes. I could put my old life behind me. My coma had been my chrysalis. This was my personal Year Zero.

'How about a book?' I gave hopeful smile. 'Is there a library here?'

'When we've only got one conscious patient?' the nurse laughed. 'What do you like? What do you like to read?'

'Steinbeck, Cormac McCarthy, Murakami, Clarkson...'

'Okay. I'll find you something.'

I had seen her two or three times over the past week. It only felt polite to ask her name. She turned towards me and pulled her shoulders back. 'Juwairiyah.'

'Ju-wairi-yah?'

She laughed.

'It's my shrivelled tongue.' I showed it to her. 'It doesn't just trip off it.'

'You and everybody else.' She bent and tugged my bed sheets tightly back beneath the mattress. She said I should call her Julia.

So I smiled again. 'Julia. How do I look to you?'

'How d'you mean?'

'Well,' it was hard to know where to begin. 'I've never had a six-pack in my life.' I pulled back my gown and patted my unusually firm stomach. 'I never exercised, aside from squash occasionally. Suddenly, I look like one of those guys from Calvin Klein's underpants, but not so gay. Something's changed. What?'

Julia had a cute way of expressing confusion or doubt. She raised her shoulders and stuck out her chin, a downcast turn to the mouth.

'I'm 35,' I told her. 'I didn't even look this good when I left school.'

My eyes were drawn to the slender arch of her back. I liked to watch her take readings off my monitors. She noted them down on a clipboard. 'Did they tell you much about the bombing?' she asked.

'Yeah.' It seemed self-evident. I patted the papers strewn across the bed. 'The cops helped me remember most of it. Over and over. The same stuff endlessly.'

I tapped the top of my head. 'Frankly, I've had it up to here.' Even my hair had a lustre and quantity previously unknown. 'I just want to get out now and start afresh.'

'You've not had any visitors.' This had peeved me. 'No friends or family,' she added. 'Who's going to look after you when you get out?'

'Beyond the immediate future?' I wasn't sure but I had a feeling that things would sort themselves out.

'One woman came to see you, just after they moved you here.'

'Who? What'd she look like?'

'Blonde, bit chubby.' Julia turned aside and busied herself with the trolley.

'Lauren,' I told her. 'She only came the once?'

'Just the once. Who's she?'

'Lauren's my girlfriend.'

'Not much of a girlfriend, just coming the once.'

'I guess not.'

'What about your parents?' she asked.

I began the pat routine. 'My mum died three years ago.' And then I had to correct myself. 'Eight years ago.'

'And your dad?'

I told her we don't really get along. 'I was adopted.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Nothing to be sorry about. They were wonderful, really. But dad went a bit weird when mum died. We've not spoken since.'

'Oh.'

'Anyway,' I made light of it. 'He went back to New Zealand. He married again. That's it.'

'Friends?' she asked.

'Yeah.' I found myself looking to the ceiling. 'Friends from work, and stuff. I only moved down to London...six years ago.'

'So what,' she asked. 'You've got your own place?'

'I've got a flat in Paddington.'

'You own it, right?' she asked, suddenly concerned. 'It's not rented?'

I had paid the mortgage off with the money mum left me; a sore point with dad. I kept it simple.

'Good,' she smiled. 'You'll get back on your feet. And you're bound to get compensation.' She paused. 'Okay, it's not in the news anymore – you'd have trouble selling your story – but you're bound to get compensation. You'll be all right.'

She handed me the usual two cups off the trolley. One contained five different coloured tablets and the other a ridiculously small quantity of water.

'You had lots of other visitors,' she told me.

I stiffened. 'What, when I was in my coma? Who?'

'Police and other official types. They swabbed you for DNA dozens of times, took your fingerprints, photographed you, prodded and poked you. They even took plaster casts of your feet! You were our star patient for months.'

Having kittens

'Wynton, you have visitors.' I looked up to see Julia. It's easy to spot a policeman once you've seen a few. I could tell before they were even through the door.

'Hello, Mr Smith. They said it was all right to come in and see you now.'

I tried to smile and be polite. 'You won't mind if I don't get up. I've just spent the whole morning in physio.' I stretched back on my daybed.

'We won't keep you long, promise. I'm DS Crosby and this is DC Heath. We haven't met before, not when you were conscious, anyway.' He laughed.

'There's just the one chair.' I nodded towards the window.

'Not a problem.' The detective sergeant sat and unclasped his briefcase. 'How are you getting on, anyway?'

'Yeah, not so bad.'

'We just thought we'd see how you are.'

I knew this wasn't likely but I said thanks.

'How are they treating you, then?'

I told them about all the food and the exercise; that I was ready to face the world again. 'I'll be going home soon.'

'Oh, that's excellent,' said the DS.

'Excellent,' echoed the DC.

'Well,' continued the DS. 'You look pretty good for someone who's been in a coma for five years. Remarkably fit even. What's it like then, being in a coma? Are you aware of anything?'

I told him that I get flashes of things. 'Just the other day I got a flashback of being prodded and poked around, being fingerprinted and having my photo taken. And all while lying helpless with my arms strapped down.'

'Fancy that.' The DS began to pull papers from the briefcase. 'So you'll be going home soon?'

'That's right.'

'Everything sorted for you?'

In truth, nothing had been sorted so I just nodded.

'Do you have any more questions?' asked the sergeant.

I knew we would get to the bombing soon enough but somehow it seemed disrespectful to admit that the whole thing bored me senseless.

'It's all a bit of a blur.' This was my regular line and it was fairly honest. 'I didn't even remember being on a bus at first but your colleagues helped fill me in. What with the photos and all, it came back to me.'

'You were on your way to a job interview, I understand?' asked the DS.

'That's right. On the other side of Waterloo Bridge.'

'But the number 30 goes nowhere near Waterloo Bridge, does it?'

We both knew this but it meant my explaining again the confusion of the day and I just couldn't be bothered, so I shrugged.

'And you sat upstairs, you said?'

'On the bus? I always sit upstairs. I never sit downstairs if I can help it.'

'Why is that?'

'I prefer upstairs, I suppose. You can see more.'

‘And when you made your way to your seat at the back, did you notice the other passengers?’

‘It’s hard to say...’

The policeman gave a patient nod. ‘I know you’ve been asked all these questions before but there’s always the chance that you might remember more; that in time you’ll develop a clearer picture. We want to make sure we know about it if and when you do.’

‘All right.’

‘So, do you not remember this man?’

I lent forward and helpfully looked at the photo. ‘Hasib Hussain. No, I didn’t see him.’

‘But you’ve seen this man before?’

I told him I had seen the photo no less than a million times.

‘And my colleagues have shown it to you?’

‘Not less than a thousand times. Do you not share information?’

The detective pulled out more photographs. I wanted to scream. ‘And do you recognise these people?’

‘Look, I lost five years. I didn’t lose my marbles. I can name every single person in every one of those photos.’ I pulled at the stack pouring from the briefcase. ‘That’s Giles Hart,’ I told him. ‘He sat a few rows in front of me, apparently.’

‘And you remember that, do you?’

‘I can visualise it.’

‘And did you speak together?’ asked the detective.

‘I don’t think so.’ I tried to conjure up the scene. I have developed a memory of being on a bus going nowhere. ‘There were lots of sirens.’

‘And what was going through your mind at the time?’ The question made me wonder. I took a guess: ‘I was having kittens about missing my interview.’

It was some time later that I noticed the carrier bag.

‘Are those my things?’ I asked.

I watched the DS turn to the DC, who stood near the door. He came forward and dumped the contents straight onto my outstretched legs. I looked down on a small collection of clear plastic bags. ‘I know my clothes were shredded but I was hoping to get my shoes back.’

‘I can check,’ said the DC.

I gathered up my Zippo and my flat keys. ‘Thank god. I was wondering how I’d get back in. What about my watch?’

‘It’s not there?’

‘No. And where’s my BlackBerry? My whole life’s in there!’

‘I’ll have to check.’

I pulled my wallet free of the transparent bag. But I had to ask. ‘Any money still in it?’

‘You’ll have to check,’ said the DS.

Why is everybody Polish?

'Wynton, we should go down now and wait for your taxi.' Julia stood in the doorway. 'Are you sure you don't want one of the porters to come with you?'

My emotions were all over the place. I was obviously glad to be getting out of the clinic and I was positively drooling at the prospect of sleeping in my own bed. The flat had been my life-raft after mum's death and the fallout with dad. But what would happen the next day when I woke up? Would I be paralysed with indecision? I couldn't face the prospect of work, and I knew bills would have to be paid. In truth, I was scared.

'Hey, it's no problem.' I tried to look brave and determined. 'I've got my keys. All I've got to do is let myself in.'

'You want to hope the door isn't jammed with junk mail,' she told me.

I laughed. 'It's a communal entrance.'

Julia handed me a slip of paper. 'Here's my mobile. I get off at five. If you've any problems, call me. Okay?'

I folded the paper and dropped it in my pocket. I looked down at my borrowed clothes. 'I'll let you have these back as soon as I can.'

'Keep them,' she smiled. 'I'm sorry they're not a perfect fit.'

This was true. As well as everything else, I had the odd feeling that I had grown in height somewhat. The trousers which ended several inches above my yellow flip-flops accentuated the sensation.

'Watch you don't slip,' Julia laughed. 'It's been raining.'

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Oh, joy! A delicious sensation of relief flooded through my veins as the key turned in the lock. The communal hallway was shabbier and the carpet a little more threadbare. I bounded up the stairs and stood outside my front door. I was surprised to see that it was no longer a deep green but now a glossy white. I was also surprised to find that my Yale key did not slip into the Ingersoll lock. The blood in my veins turned icy. And then the door opened and I had a further shock.

'What you doin' - tryin' to get in my flat with those keys?'

'Your flat?' I had to steady myself and quickly lurched forward to clutch at the doorframe. I noted panic on her face in the instant before the door slammed. I looked around the hallway.

The woman's voice came muffled from the other side of the door. 'My flat. Yes. What d'you want? What you doin' with them keys?'

I felt horribly faint. I needed to sit down and I allowed myself to slide down the wall. I touched the worn carpet for reassurance, feeling its fibres electrify my fingertips.

'What flat d'you want?'

'Flat D,' I told her.

'This is flat D. What's your business?'

I took a series of deep breaths and called out: 'Have you lived here long?'

'Long? Yes,' she answered.

'Less than five years?'

'What is this?'

'This is my flat,' I told her.

'Your flat? I don't think so.'

I tried to will myself back into a coma. I kept my eyes shut and worked to regulate my breathing. Then the door opened and a waft of stale smoke forced its way out of my flat. I opened my eyes and looked up.

'Is your name Smith?'

I nodded.

'W. T. Smith?'

'Yes.'

'Then I have a lot of mail for you. You've caused me lots of problems. You must have plenty of bad debts. There's been no end of bailiffs and debt collectors coming here! Demanding this and demanding that! Hold on. Stay put.'

I pulled myself to my feet and looked in. The woman stood deep inside my hall cupboard. She came back with a large carrier bag stuffed with papers.

'This is all for you. I didn't know to keep it or not. Here. Take it.'

And then she slammed the door in my face for a second time.

*

Having pulled myself together my first thought was to find a hotel. That led to my checking my bank balance at a hole in the wall. I slipped a card into the machine.

Please consult your branch

The card did not come back out.

I felt strangely exposed in my beachwear on the cold, wet pavements. 'Drink,' I told myself. 'Collect your wits. Think this through.'

I thumbed through the notes in my wallet.

*

'I'm sorry but I'm going to have to ask you to leave.'

I could not believe the man was speaking to me. I looked up from my pint and chaser and the pile of papers.

'It ain't you that suffers, mate. It's us. Out you go.'

I remember looking for somewhere to flick my ash.

'*Out!*'

'What about my drinks?'

'You should have thought of that first.' He gained my full attention by suddenly gripping my arm and tugging me out of the chair.

Outside in the rain I clutched my Tesco carrier bag and, for a brief moment, seriously considered crying.

*

'I'm in a fix, Julia.'

'Where are you now?' she asked.

'Paddington.'

'Can you meet me outside the Coach and Horses at Greenwich Market in two hours?'

'How do I get there?'

'You don't want to go by bus, right?' she asked.

'No, I don't.'

'Then take the Tube to Bank and get the Light Railway to Greenwich. Ask when you get there.'

'Julia, you can't smoke in pubs anymore.'

'I know.'

'Julia?'

'Yes?'

I had to ask. 'Why is everybody Polish?'

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