VINTAGE

THE WONDER

DIANA EVANS

Contents

About the Book

As a child Lucas assumed that all children who'd lost their parents lived on water. Now a restless young man, and still sharing the West London narrowboat with his down-to-earth sister Denise, he secretly investigates the contents of an old wardrobe, in which he finds relics from the Midnight Ballet, an influential dance company of the 1960s founded by his Jamaican father, the charismatic Antoney Matheus.

In his search to unravel the legacy of the Midnight Ballet, Lucas comes into contact with people who were drawn towards Antoney's bright and dangerous star. He hears of hothouse rehearsals in an abandoned Notting Hill church, of artistic battles and personal betrayals, and a whirlwind European tour. Most importantly, Lucas learns about Antoney's passionate and tumultuous relationship with Carla, Lucas's mother, and the events that led to his father's final disappearance.

Vividly conjuring the world of 1950s Kingston, Jamaica, the Blues parties and early carnivals of Ladbroke Grove, the flower stalls and vinyl riflers of modern-day Portobello Road, and the famous leap and fall of Russian dancer Vaslav Nijinsky, Diana Evans creates a haunting and visceral family mystery about absence and inheritance, the battle between love and creativity, and what drives a young man to take flight . . .

About the Author

Diana Evans was a dancer before she became a writer and critic. Her first novel, *26a*, received a Betty Trask Award, a nomination for the *Guardian* First Book Award, and was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Best First Book and Whitbread First Novel of the Year Awards. It was also the inaugural winner of the Orange Award for New Writers. She lives in London.

Also by Diana Evans

26a

‘The most dazzling depiction of the world of dance since *Ballet Shoes*’
Kate Saunders, *The Times*

‘Evans . . . writes with eye-catching fluidity, gracefully pirouetting between Notting Hill in the 1990s, and the Caribbean a decade earlier’
Sunday Times

‘Diana Evans brings a style and technique to *The Wonder* that enhance the reader’s immediate pleasure, and it is sustained throughout by her flair for the colourful phrase, for attention to detail . . . The story is complex, clever, seamlessly achieved, its many currents blending in harmony, sometimes in conflict, to recreate that sense of randomness and accident that resemble the truth of life in the chancy present . . . The author’s passion burns on the page, along with an almost tactile relish of the act of writing itself’
Scotsman

‘*The Wonder* embraces its theme with great heart. It’s hard not to be seduced by its talented, difficult hero’
Financial Times

‘Evans interweaves the strands of her three-generation narrative with an exhilarating sense of place and period. Her evocations of Fifties Jamaica and Notting Hill in the Sixties and half a century later are vividly realised . . . *The Wonder* itself leads the reader into a glittering imaginative realm’
Daily Telegraph

‘Sparkles with mood, music and the sway of street life’

Marie Claire

‘*The Wonder* . . . draws deliriously on the sensual, free-form poetry of ballet . . . it eloquently maps the demographic shifts that have turned Notting Hill from a Caribbean cultural hotbed to chichi boutique central’
Metro

For Meadow Oshozoway
and Derek

DIANA EVANS

The Wonder

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

PART ONE

1

When Lucas was a boy, asleep in his cabin on the Grand Union Canal, he had a recurring dream. There was the sound of galloping and a change in weather. Sudden wind shook through the sycamore trees that lined the surrounding streets, then into the room came a man dressed head to toe in black, with coat tails and a hat, and large, priestly hands. He lifted Lucas in his arms and took him out into the night.

It felt very much like flying. They sped up Ladbroke Grove and over the dividing hill and Lucas felt fast and warm in the cave between the man's torso and the horse's soft brown neck. The coat tails whipped in the wind. They passed through barley fields as the pigeons turned to nightingales. Everything was different, the Westway gone, the Portobello Road less travelled; on and on they went without direction or conversation until speed became home. There was not a stretch of canal for miles out here, not an absence or a cemetery stone, so when Lucas woke up, windswept, in the place he called home, in the ramshackle houseboat with its questions and sideways slant against the bank, his disorientation was greater than before. Horseback seemed the surer place, and he'd wait earnestly for the coat-tailed stranger to return.

It came to be that whenever he thought of his father he did not think of Antoney Matheus, but a highwayman, who

came for him in the depths of sleep and changed the look of the world, as only fathers can. It was easier that way.

One April morning shortly after his twenty-fifth birthday, he was woken by this dream, which had not recurred since the time of his grandmother's death nine years before. It left him with the same feeling of disorientation, the more for its impromptu arrival in his adult mind, and its poignancy increased when he opened his eyes. He was lying on the left-hand side of the queen-size bed he still shared with his sister Denise. His feet were hanging off the end of the mattress as he hadn't stopped growing until he was six foot three. Around him were grooved wooden walls, cool to the touch, inclining on their ascent from the gunwale, masking cupboards built into every conceivable space to make up for lack of it – linen above his head, clothes in a pull-out next to him, a drawer beneath containing Denise's handwritten accounts. The cabin was eight foot two inches wide and the ceiling at its highest point five foot nine. Lucas had a stoop in his upper back from habitually bowing his head.

Most oppressive of all was an antique cherrywood wardrobe which loomed at the end of the bed. The only piece of free-standing furniture in the room, it contained items belonging to his parents – his mother, Carla, who had died when he was a few months old, and his father, who'd allegedly drowned. According to a long-standing rule designed to quell Lucas's childhood fears, the wardrobe was never opened, thereby preventing the vapour of the ghostly, rotting things inside it wafting into his and Denise's nostrils as they slept, causing nightmares. Indeed on the rare occasions Lucas had peeped inside out of curiosity, a bitter tree smell had slunk out from the darkness within, cutting his nerve and making him step away. It was time for a different waking view, a clear, open road, the inside of a girl's bedroom maybe. The twentieth

century was drawing to a close. The Conservatives had come and gone, so had Tupac and Biggie. Sizzla Kalonji was taking over the reggae world yet here Lucas still was, staring at the same disturbing inanimate presence inches from his feet, blocking his path to the future. He had recently suggested to Denise that they empty the cupboard and decide what to do with its contents, but she'd responded curtly, saying she didn't see a reason to tamper with things.

Denise, a florist, had left for work hours ago, having neatened her pillow precisely. It was a bright, pink-blossomed morning. Winter had clung to power, and spring had begun that year with high chill winds, lifting the blossom off the branches and bringing it down to rest at road edges, in ravishing pools at the base of the sycamore trunks. Lucas had nothing in particular to get up for other than to finish reading the latest issue of *Touch* magazine, so he closed his eyes and concentrated on the rocking sensation caused by a passing vessel, which always made him imagine he was on an open sea bound for Jamaica. Today it was difficult. In the receding waves of the dream he was more aware than usual of the wardrobe's oxidising brass handle rattling with the movements of the boat, a sound, like the ticking of the bedside clock or the creaks in the walls, he'd become used to not hearing. He turned onto his back, venturing with his long skinny leg across the delicate centre divide that Denise was so astute in maintaining. The bed was a wide warm country when it was all his own. They'd shared it ever since their grandmother had gone (when Lucas was twelve, Denise sixteen), in the beginning as a kind of comfort, especially during thunderstorms, now in the hold of a fossilised, seasick habit. However much he spread out this morning, though, he couldn't shake the feeling of being stifled. Coat tails whipped in the wind. The wardrobe rattled. He got to thinking about Edwin Starr, whom he'd met the day before

yesterday in St Albans. In this crowded state of mind, as the Friday traffic passed along Ladbroke Grove outside, he was relieved to feel himself slowly but surely becoming aware of something else – something soothing, a sweet distraction, that thing you can always rely on to take you elsewhere. A lazy, yet willing, matutinal arousal.

Lucas always hesitated at these moments. He was afraid of leaving traces and lethargic at the thought of washing sheets if he did. For a time his hand rested coyly on his inner thigh, but then he decided to go with it, a quick, six-minute ride, to start the day, to settle his head. He'd developed a clever technique over the years that involved throwing off the sheets just before the point of emission and aiming himself upwards towards his chest so that the spray was restricted to that area. For this reason he always removed his T-shirt beforehand. He set out cautiously, with a picture in his mind of Lauryn Hill, whom Denise had refused to let him put on the wall. He wasn't expecting much, not fully committed to the prospect of clean-up, so he was taken by surprise by a sudden shooting, generous charge that made him yelp, necessitating a particularly urgent clearance of linen so that one of his feet got twisted in the sheets. This meant that he missed the best bit. He lay there afterwards, chest-sprayed, cheated, exhausted, wondering as he often did whether it had really been worth it, and whether Denise, somewhere in flower world, had sensed it.

If you passed that spot back then you might have seen it. If you walked eastwards from Harlesden along the towpath almost to the Ladbroke Grove crossing, perhaps sat down on one of the benches there and looked across to the opposite bank, you might have seen a fifty-foot narrowboat of faded green leaning slightly to its left (this was because of the wardrobe). Her name was Silver, written in sloping letters on one side by the previous owner. There were

portholes along the saloon. A handrail lined the bow. A pair of corroded ornamental dragons glared out from either side of the dwarfish cabin doors. It was a relic of a thing, with paint peeling off the steel and a useless, rusted tiller at the stern. It looked, in fact, despite the fresh flowers at the windows, as if it might be sinking, it had been there for such a long time. Lucas and Denise did not know what it was to live on land or to have a front door that could be accessed without first stepping onto a deck, and rocking a little. They didn't know what it felt like to open that front door to an Avon lady or a British Gas salesman or a Jehovah's Witness, because the Avon ladies and the British Gas salesmen and the Jehovah's Witnesses did not have the key. Only if you were a water gypsy with licence to moor at that particular spot, or a friend of one of the water gypsies, were you allowed through the high black gate that separated the towpath from the street.

There were obvious advantages to the situation (hardly any junk mail, less exposure to the impertinences of capitalism) but Lucas often wondered what it would be like to talk about gas prices, or the existence of hell, to a chatty stranger on solid ground. He was unlike most boat-dwellers in this respect. The majority of boat-dwellers have one belief in common – water is freedom. When you've tired of a view or you do not wish to be found, when you long to nestle at the shoulder of another urban shore, you simply untether yourself and sail away. You take the murky liquid road at four miles an hour and do a left into Camden, or Bethnal Green, or you go further out, towards the country, and discover new kinds of silence. You go, you go, you disappear. What better way to become invisible than to erase your home, to leave no trace of yourself in sight? What a joy it is to live with just the possibility of such a thing.

This was not how it was for Lucas. This was a permanent, inadvertent mooring with no comparison to a

concrete past. He was born on the water, and raised by his grandmother on the same spot. He used to think that all children who'd lost their parents lived on boats, that it was part of the experience of being an orphan – either that or you went to a children's home, where there were probably fewer spiders but no grandmothers or other advantages. Toreth was a caring, garrulous woman of Welsh descent and had helped Lucas through thunderstorms with her dream-inducing story of Peterjohn the highwayman, who'd had nine children and belonged to the bygone age when Portobello Road was just a rough country lane. She and Lucas used to sit on the bow together in fine weather while Denise was absorbed in some kind of gardening activity on the bank. When Toreth was in deep storytelling mode, and if there was a good sunset, she'd sometimes tell another enduring tale, the one about how the boat had got there in the first place, the only story she ever told that featured Lucas's dad. It took place in 1969, in October, on a day whose evening had also seen a remarkable sunset.

Antoney, Toreth would explain, was a man given to 'suspicious' disappearances. On that day, during one such disappearance, he bought Silver from a musician friend of his in Greenford for two hundred pounds, then sailed her down the Grand Union at maximum speed having never driven a boat in his life. He waved at passers-by en route, drinking white rum at intervals from a flask given to him by one of his 'silly little groupies'. Choosing this spot, diagonally opposite the Kensal Green gasworks, he introduced Carla – Toreth's daughter – to her new home with a bleary triumphant look in his eye. 'You want property?' he said. 'Here's property. How about it?' Carla was heavily pregnant with Denise at the time, on the lip of labour. She was hot and dizzy and dangerously in love. She stepped onto the sleepy sunstruck deck and sat down on a metal chair. 'Antoney,' she said, 'you'll be the death of me.'

That was the day Denise was born, in fact, which was what this story was actually about, for Toreth thought that Denise, with her precocious interest in flowers, could be the reincarnation of a much-loved florist of the time called Emily Kirk, whose funeral Toreth had attended that very same day in 1969. Emily, or Em as she was known, had been selling flowers in Portobello Market for more than sixty years (‘All fresh, sixpence a bunch!’ Toreth would demonstrate) so the funeral was a local event. In the traditional stallholder custom the long and winding cortège travelled down Portobello Road at round about the same time as Antoney was sailing the boat from Greenford. As it passed, the stallholders stopped their work and bowed their heads in respect. Later, as the sun set remarkably and Em drifted into history, Carla was helped up the towpath slope by Antoney in the early agony of dilation. They made it to the hospital just in time. Death had left possibility in the air. There were flower thoughts in the night wind, memories of foliage and further work to be done, and in a miracle of concurrence, Denise pushed her way out into the world with a certain resolve.

‘Is that really true, Gran?’ Lucas would ask when she’d finished telling the story. ‘Of course it’s true!’ she’d say. ‘I’d never lie to a child.’

Those were happier times. Toreth saw out her last years in a nursing home in Hanwell after suffering two strokes, seven months apart. The day she moved in, she gave Lucas a wistful wet kiss and said to him from her crumpled lips, her voice slower than it had once been, ‘It’s hard for you, sweetheart, all alone in being a boy. Keep your eyes on a straight place.’ He hugged her for a while, revising the smell of aniseed off her neck, then he and Denise had returned to the boat alone. Lucas was bereft. Denise was stoical. She closed the cabin doors, leaned against them with her fingertips joined at the small of her back, and accepted her fate with dignity.

‘Well,’ she said. ‘It’s just us now.’

‘Are we staying here?’ Lucas asked.

‘Of course we are. Where else?’

They were forgotten, it seemed, like the steps of a dance by people who don’t dance. Survival was paramount, and Denise set with increased ferocity to her work. Pretty trips along the summer canal did not come into it. Water was not freedom. The boat had not been sailed in a long time.

They lived on board with approximately two thousand spiders, who wove webs in the window frames and raised children of their own. Lucas was three inches taller than his father had been and of a vastly different physique. His legs and arms were lanky and pole-like, his knees were sharp – in his school years he was known as ‘Longboy’, ‘Highrise’, and ‘Spoon-in-mug’. He was a bad eater. He liked late-night nachos and sherbet pips. Where his father’s sinewy forearms had deemed him irresistible in a short-sleeved shirt, Lucas had thin wrists and elongated hands and, with his large flat feet, dancing did nothing for him. However, he took after Antoney in the eyes, which were brown and birdlike and tended to linger with intensity. He wore his hair close-shaved, bringing out a humble, greasy-nosed prettiness that retreated when the hair grew out. His smile was uncertain. A fleeting girlfriend had once told him he had nice ears.

On Tuesday and Thursday afternoons he worked for no pay at *West*, a local music magazine, but on Fridays adhered to his routine timeless drift, which always began with Scarface. After tidying up the bed he had a complicated bath in the half-size tub and applied Lynx deodorant. Then he entered the saloon through a tattered wine-coloured curtain and went over to the stereo, where Scarface waited with his deep, macabre voice. He was Lucas’s favourite rapper of all time. Hailing from Houston, Texas, he was the first one, the only one, to explore the four

dark walls of the mind while keeping a hold on the mellow East Coast cool. Lucas had often discussed this summation with Jake, his long-time spar, a friend of a water gypsy, but Jake was wary of showering an American rapper with too much praise, committed as he was to the advancement of the UK scene, which was currently being eclipsed by garage. Listening to Scarface was for Lucas a private glory he never got tired of. Over the years he'd compiled multitudes of tapes with his songs arranged in different orders, different progressions of rhythm and thought, sometimes combining the solo work with the earlier Geto Boys tunes as well as those of other artists, to see how they rolled together. The tapes were labelled in various colours of felt tip and arranged on a shelf according to code and category. In the back pocket of Lucas's jeans was a fold-worn piece of paper containing the lyrics, copied out by hand, to one of Scarface's songs, 'The Wall', on which he now released the play button.

> *It's fucked up, I'm looking at myself in the mirror*
> *I'm seein' something scary, it's blurry make it clearer*
> *I got a funny feeling that today will be the day . . .*

The music filled the space and bounced off the timber walls. Like the bed, the saloon was also divided into two. Here on the left was where Lucas lounged on his giant Moroccan floor cushion, there on the right was where Denise would sit later when she got home from work, in Toreth's side-split bluebell armchair. At one time their mother had also occupied this chair (Denise had memories of sitting here on her lap as a very small child). On a mantel next to the chair, below the spidery window, was a photograph of Carla at the age of twenty-one, a close-up beauty with a narrow face and enormous eyes – 'eyes big enough to walk across', Toreth used to say – and a mass of

thick, foresty hair which she'd inherited from her father. She was looking straight into the camera with a satisfied, mischievous expression, her hand at her collarbone, revealing half-varnished, half-chipped fingernails. Lucas and Denise had grown up with this daily image of her. In private interludes, Toreth would take the photograph in her hands and kiss it, or weep over it, and for some years after Carla's death a favourite dress of hers, a scarlet, beaded flapper, had hung mournfully on the side of the cherrywood wardrobe, until Denise had one day snatched it down and thrown it inside. There had never been such mourning for Antoney. There were no pictures of him on display. Apart from Toreth's comment that he'd had 'a hat face', Lucas had had no real idea what his father looked like until he was ten, when Denise gave him a photograph to stop him asking questions. In the photograph Antoney was dancing, a handsome man with high cheekbones, barefoot and bare-chested, posed mid-motion on a parquet floor. The writing on the back said 'Shango Storm, 1968'. Lucas had been in no doubt as to where the photograph, with its bitter tree smell, had come from.

Beneath the gunwale on his side of the room were some of Antoney's records, artists such as Beny Moré, Sam Cooke and Robert Schumann. In Denise's absence Lucas would sometimes play a scratchy old Sam Cooke song about a man who was born by a river in a little tent, and imagine Antoney soaring gracefully over the canal on Cooke's boundless velvet note. He had always been fascinated by the idea of his father being a dancer. While browsing in a bookshop once on Portobello Road he'd come across an entry about him in an out-of-print hardback called *Stage Explosions of the Sixties*. 'Antoney Matheus,' it read, 'Jamaican-born dancer and choreographer, founder and artistic director of the applauded black dance troupe The Midnight Ballet, which also featured West End star Ekow Busia.' Lucas had asked the shopkeeper many times

for more information on the subject. He'd searched through the dance books, the Caribbean books, the theatre books, the video section, but there was nothing else, which in one sense he was glad about. He wanted to know more but was afraid of what he might find. He was afraid of tipping the watery balance of the known world.

Yet lately he had yearned. He wanted guidance. He was in a shaky place. He was becoming aware that something happened to you at twenty-five, when you were no longer twenty-four. He was not sure what, a kind of dismantling, a poltergeist in the mind. He stood on the left-hand side of the saloon, running his eyes over the records, the armchair, the picture of his mother and the cabin doors. Anywhere he was on the boat he bumped into his parents, and unlike Denise he could not ignore them, especially not today. What had been their conversations, here in this room? Had they been happy together, had they been secure in themselves? It sometimes felt as if they might step back on deck at any moment, she in her beaded dress, he in a trilby, and say something ordinary like, Hello, son, look how tall you are. He'd imagined it often, Antoney appearing like that and saying those exact words. He wanted to discuss with him the numbers and the years, the feeling of being braced in this decade of perplexity. At the end of this ten-year stretch was the chasm between twenty-nine and thirty, which many men have not altogether survived. What was it like for you? he wanted to ask. To sit down with his father and say, What did you do when you got here, and didn't know which way to go?

According to an article Lucas had come across in a psychology magazine last week at the Indian newsagent where he bought his sherbet pips, the mid-twenties are, for men, the most productive, decisive, daring and transformative episode of one's life, a time when the leanings engendered during childhood and education reach

a point of ‘hyperdefinition’, which thus guides the man – intellect, body and spirit – into his intended place in the world. He commits to his career. His frame fills out. He usually finds his spouse. ‘We might look at it,’ wrote this Dr Glenda someone, pictured in the corner in old-fashioned glasses, ‘as a brilliant, flag-flying train that comes for him just as he’s ripe. But if he *misses* that train – here’s the point – if for any reason he is prevented from getting on that train, this is where problems can develop, psychological problems, anxieties, depressions, that can often endure into his later life.’ The doctor did not mention whether if you missed the train it came back for you at another date.

On relating this to Jake, Lucas was told, ‘That’s bollocks, man, train what. Flags? I bet they’re talking about the Union Jack.’

‘It doesn’t matter what flag,’ Lucas had said. ‘It’s about the train, innit.’

‘It always matters what flag, blood.’

Jake had then gone on to give a short lecture on colour-coded nationalism. The two of them were passing a joint back and forth in his room in a shared house on Basing Street. They’d known each other since primary school, had spent many afternoons of truancy hanging out in the courtyard of a derelict church round the way.

‘Look at you, though,’ Lucas said to him, ‘You could say you’re already on it.’

‘On what?’

‘The train. You know where you’re going, what you want, with your music and that. You’ve got a plan.’

At this point Jake had sat forward on his usual chair next to his decks. Lucas viewed his muscular arms, so unlike his own. ‘Yeah. I’ve got a plan, certainly.’

‘Yeah. So you’re safe. You got nothing to worry about.’

‘What you worrying for?’

‘I’m not worried.’

‘Life’s short, mate.’

‘That’s it.’ Lucas took a long pull. The smoke hit the back of his throat with a silent thud and a tiny pain. ‘But some people don’t have a plan. I bet Mikey didn’t have a plan.’

‘Mikey’s Mikey,’ said Jake. ‘He was always on a peculiar tip. Even at school he was like that, coming out with that cultish shit – remember the stuff about the World Bank? The boy was odd.’

‘Everyone’s odd,’ Lucas said after a pause.

‘No, I mean *odd* odd.’

‘It could happen to anyone, though. One day—’

‘Look, star, I ain’t having no white van come throw *me* in the sack. You know what they do to Negroes in those places?’

‘Suppose I’ve already missed it,’ said Lucas.

‘Missed what?’

‘The *train*.’

‘Jeez, man, fuck the fucking train – where d’you get this stuff? People write down any old flake and a sucker like you comes along and gets jumpy . . . It’s an interesting idea, though, I’ll give you that. Definitely a changing time us guys are going through, but I don’t see it as no train exactly. I see – what do I see? A racetrack. Yeah. A racetrack.’ Jake stood and began using his arms for emphasis, walking up and down the room, the moon at the window. ‘We’re on the first straight, right, about a third of the way in, we’re sprinting along, with shiny foreheads ’cause we’re sweating. Ahead of us is the bend where it gets all hairy, and everyone wants to make a mark on things before then, before we start losing the juice, you get me? But listen, Luke – this is Oprah knowledge now so listen. Every guy in that race better be looking at himself and no one else. He can’t watch where he is in the race, how far he is compared to the others, because then he’s gonna fall back. He’s got to concentrate on his *own* stride,

and sit with it. All you need, blood, is to find your *stride*, your *thing*, that thing that makes you hot, you know, whether it's the journalism, that furniture thing you were on about last month, whatever it is just *stay* with it. Don't be changing your mind every five minutes.' He put his hand out to receive the joint. 'Now, get your clueless doc to hyper-definitionite *that*.'

Jake's place was one block parallel to Portobello Road where Denise ran her stall. Lucas often ended up there after having spent the afternoon in the vicinity. When he got tired of the boat he would mosey up the towpath slope, let himself out through the gate and cross Ladbroke Grove towards one end of the long, slender market street, West London's Yellow Brick Road, where tattooists rubbed shoulders with bar staff, vinyl junkies, tramps, hostel dwellers, beauties, artists, fashionistas, babymothers, yuppies, students, film crews, tourists, fruit floggers, Caucasian Rastafarians, nuns, drug dealers, art dealers, more tourists, Buddhists, babyfathers, teenage Woolworths employees, psychotherapists, kinesiologists, transvestites, Julia Roberts, OAPs, philanthropists of the Salvation Army, poodles, crack addicts, press officers, homesick islanders, washed-up activists, and sellers of Spanish olive oil. This was where the Grove's heart beat fastest, where the clearest signs could be seen of the sweep of gentrification that was surging across the city, turning ghettos into hotspots and sending them shooting way out of the hemisphere of the average native househunter. South of the Thames this could be seen most of all in Brixton; northside it was here in the Grove, another historic riot site, bordered on the one side – Lucas's side – by Harrow Road, realm of the six Avenues, and on the other by Holland Park, where life was somewhat shinier. A wavering architectural journey was made between each point, from old discoloured terraces and flat-roofed social housing free of stamp duty at the northern end, to shapely urban mansions with Roman

pillars at the other. It was a historical distinction disregarded by pigeons.

Portobello Road was flanked in the streets leading off it by five-tiered ice cream-coloured houses and exclusive communal gardens. A rash of coffee shops was spreading along its length as if England had only just discovered the stuff, as if the return of Labour had given people more to talk about. Lucas was hopeful of the things Tony Blair might be able to do to stop the capitalists poncifying the street with their novelty boutiques and aubergine-décored teashops, their leather watering cans and expensive psychedelic toasters, useless things, the empty offerings of the practice of making money off making money. The place was losing soul, losing its integrity. It was easy to feel, a guy like him, walking along in his skullcap and worn-out Reeboks, as if he no longer belonged here. He was a rough edge, insignificant, useful only in his ethnic contribution to the area's general feel of being interesting.

Most of the time he hung out in the Tavistock Road precinct by the Westway flyover, where his skateboard had been sliced in two by a fat white boy when he was ten. The sherbet-pips newsagent was on the corner. They served the pips in a white paper bag, the traditional way, and weekday afternoons schoolchildren were only allowed to enter the shop in pairs, the owner's nephew acting as bouncer. If not here Lucas would be further up the street outside Honest Jon's, where Jake spent a lot of time flicking through records. Jake had talent as well as drive and vision. So far in his career as a record producer he'd spawned three underground hits (one 'stolen' by a dance act from Devon), which had formed a queue of baggy-trousered rappers wanting his attention. One of these was MC Crow, another Honest Jon's flicker and Portobello hanger, who'd had flings with the tweed-skirt seller opposite Harvey's Antiques, the scented-candle girl, and the Chinese-tops woman who

migrated from Camden on Saturdays. There was no denying that Lucas was quite hugely intimidated by this.

The search for Lucas's 'thing', as Jake had coined it, was what had initially brought him to seek employment at *West*, which was based on Talbot Road, a turning off Portobello with a history of soap-box protest that tended to attract these kinds of short-lived cultural ventures. They used expensive rainforest-saving paper that would prove to be their downfall. The five members of staff worked around a large, oval table and were used to listening to each other's telephone conversations. As Lucas had informed Finn, the editor, at his interview in the café downstairs, he was suited to this kind of career because he could spend a whole day just reading magazines, you know? 'I like the lists,' he'd said, 'Have you seen the lists they do in *Touch*?' The 'Reggae Ten', the 'Hip Hop Ten', the 'Drum & Bass Ten', Trevor Nelson's 'Rhythm Nation Most Played', 'What We Listened To While We Did This Issue', 'The Touch Guide to The Real Spice Girls'. 'You should check it. They did this wicked piece on Mark Morrison once, by a guy called Darren Crosdale – have you heard of him?' Lucas was nervous. He went on to recite a clause from the article – 'languished at her Majesty's displeasure' – and to explain how just that one line had made him want to go into journalism. He used to write lyrics but he wasn't any good at it (this had indeed been confirmed by Jake, who'd implied that his similes were on the same level as Main Source's 'you treat me like a burnt piece of bacon'), so he'd thought that maybe he could write articles, reviews, whatever. 'I could do your lists.' He had many of his own, 'The Ultimate Scarface Compilation', the 'Top Ten Middle School Rappers'. When Lucas had finally stopped talking, Finn, a photographer with long hair and thick eyebrows, the son of an academic, had been tempted to ask him why he didn't just go and ask for a job at *Touch*, but he was afraid this would bring on another rambling monologue, so

he'd told Lucas to come back the following Tuesday afternoon.

That was in January. Three months later his role hadn't advanced much beyond the opening of post or the fetching of doughnuts to relieve the five o'clock munchies on deadline days. Denise regularly pointed out that he was too old to be a work experience. In his defence Lucas would remind her that *West* had let him do a list, 'The Five Best Record Shops in the West'. And there was also the occasional important 'mission', further signs of a valued volunteer, a future recipient of salary. Finn sometimes sent him to Subterranea, a local nightclub, to cover gigs (usually the ones no one else wanted to do). Lucas enjoyed the feeling of being 'sent'. He might take Jake along and show off his plus-one, and during the performance he would stand close to the stage, to one side, absolutely still, studying the musicians with a sober expression and scribbling things in his notebook. He was remarkably slow in delivering his reviews. The words never came out as he wanted them to. He had to write by hand, sitting alone on his floor cushion slightly stoned, otherwise it didn't feel right. Two or three weeks later Finn would receive an A4 sheet of lined paper folded into four, providing a thoughtful, esoteric, detailed yet vague, two-hundred-word account of a gig he could no longer remember, signed at the bottom by Lucas Matheus, in green ink. Only one of these had been published. The cut-out was on the wall of the saloon, on Lucas's side.

It was *West* that had 'sent' Lucas to St Albans the day before yesterday to meet Edwin Starr. In composing his magazine, Finn tended to lean away from the commercial music scene (he despised Robbie Williams with a passion) towards the charismatically obscure, the nostalgic, the 'grainy'. Had he had more time during Lucas's interview he might have matched his applicant's enthusiasm for lists with his own for 'Where Are They Now?' features. Motown

had been a mighty scene – the force of Berry Gordy, the fizz of the Supremes and Martha and the Vandellas, the moulding of Marvin Gaye. Edwin Starr had secured his place in history during that time with his anti-Vietnam hit 'War'. And where was he now? He lived in Nottingham. He was a Butlins and Pontin's favourite, still playing up and down the country for lovers of northern soul. He and Martha were doing a reunion concert together at the Alban Arts Centre, so Finn sent his senior journalist, Melissa, to interview him before the show. Lucas was allowed to go along for the ride.

Thinking about it now, there was no reason why Edwin Starr and Antoney Matheus should have known each other. They both belonged to showbiz but different worlds thereof. Lucas didn't even remember thinking about his father on the train to St Albans on Wednesday. He was too busy being prepped by Melissa, a bleached-blonde with a charged and televistic style. 'What I do,' she'd told him, 'before I go in? I have a really strong black coffee, loads of sugar, and I say to myself, "Take it to the bridge!" right? You might want to think up your own catchphrase' – here, another suggestion of salary – 'but that's the idea, yeah?' Antoney could not have been further from Lucas's mind, or so he thought, as he'd racked his brains for a motto of his own, eventually deciding on a line from *Things To Do In Denver When You're Dead*, which he'd seen thirty-seven times at Jake's (he and Denise did not own a TV). The line was 'For Cynthia. Do it, for Cynthia', as spoken by Christopher Walken. Melissa said he could ask one question and one question only, the rest of the time he should watch and learn. It was nothing but coincidence how Edwin had behaved towards him. He was still embarrassed at how flustered he'd become.

The Alban Arts Centre was a sterile, red-brick building in the town centre. They found Mr Starr in his dressing room, wearing a baby blue tracksuit and pumps without

socks. He greeted them both with warm handshakes. Then he looked way, way up into Lucas's birdlike eyes, and he'd said to him these exact words, 'Hey, look how tall you are,' followed by a laugh. A sweat broke out on the back of Lucas's neck. He pictured his father stepping onto Silver's deck with his ghostly feet. Throughout the interview he was convinced Edwin was glancing at him in a curious way. The singer talked about the sixties, what a great time they'd all had back then, a time without limits, where it seemed as if anything was possible, good and bad. Melissa asked him whether he'd known Jimi Hendrix and he said he had, Jimi was a nice guy, one of those freaks of nature. Lucas had calmed down by now and he'd listened, hypnotised, enjoying the older man's sweet and hefty smile, the ease and authority with which he spoke. He began to imagine his father moving through that world. Had it felt like that to him, that life was limitless? Would Antoney be anything like Edwin if he were alive today? Would he still inhabit dressing rooms, wear tracksuits? Would he be kind like this? Just as he was asking himself these questions, Edwin had then paused mid-sentence and said, 'You look so familiar, son. Do I know you from somewhere?' At this point Lucas had dropped his pen.

A deep, shaky breath. Melissa gave him the sign that this was a good time for his question. Peering into the older man's face, the soft eyes and moist skin, feeling foolishly certain that there was some connection between them, he asked, with great trepidation, behind this one question all the others waiting: 'Mr Starr. Did you ever come across, back then – did you know a guy – have you . . . ' Melissa ruffled the pages of her notebook. Edwin continued smiling sweetly. ' . . . Have you ever heard of a dance troupe called – the Midnight Ballet?'

Edwin's face immediately lit up. Lucas was ready to bawl. Edwin put his hands on his chubby thighs, about to speak. But then he looked away, as if surprised by some

other thing. Uncertainty swung to and fro on his face. He scratched his ear, patted his thighs, and looked back at Lucas. ‘You know, son?’ he’d said at last. ‘I don’t believe I have.’

Lucas now stepped out onto the bow. The noon sun was encased in cloud, the temperature warm. Scarface was prowling through a beautiful track sampled on the Commodores’ ‘Easy (Like Sunday Morning)’, but Lucas’s mood remained unsettled. Even out here he was claustrophobic. The cherrywood wardrobe rattled inside his head. He could hear its creaks, smell that bitter smell. Yesterday he’d visited the bookshop again, and had stared at the Antoney Matheus entry for a ridiculous length of time, until he could see faces in the loops of the letters. He didn’t want to believe his dad was wicked. He’d never wanted to go along with the general consensus that he was a bad man, boozy, neglectful, his grandmother’s subtle insults, Denise’s rare echoes. ‘He was no good, all right?’ she’d told him in a heated moment when they were children. ‘He didn’t try and look out for us after Mum died. As far as I’m concerned we never had a dad.’ It was too easy, too closed. He wanted to believe that Antoney was good.

On weekday mornings before school Lucas used to stand out here on the bow and watch a tall, broad-shouldered man walking along Ladbroke Grove, holding the hand of a little boy. He would never forget them. The boy was in uniform and carrying a satchel. They’d looked like each other, more than in their faces. Even though the boy took quick, fidgety steps, with the occasional bounce, and the man’s strides were calm and extended, there was a point at which they’d met and reflected one another. They were two different stops on a single journey. The man had a proud disposition and long, neat dreadlocks, always tied back. He would pass himself on to the boy, who wore the beginnings