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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.

He woke up one April morning shortly after his twenty-fifth birthday having had 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 just-