

1.

(2004)

BOURNVILLE.

BIRMINGHAM.

A bright morning about to breach into afternoon and Travis Barnes is thirteen and still in bed. Or rather he is on bed, on the futon that crunches itself up into a sofa after it has been bed at his dad's house. It is midday, morning to Travis. He stays up late on Saturday nights to watch the wrestling, which last night went on till gone four because it was *Judgement Day*, a pay-per-view event that ended with Eddie Guerrero's face a mask of genuine blood, the result of some secret blading, which he botched.

Trav's dad, Lawrence, had said he wasn't going to pay £15 through the Sky box for it, but he always does, every month or so, when Travis stays up to watch *Summerslam* or *Wrestlemania* or the *Royal Rumble*; to watch *Unforgiven* or *No Way Out* or the *Survivor Series*. Sometimes his dad joins him, not because he especially likes wrestling, but so he can spend a few extra hours with his son, who goes back to his mom's for a working-week on Monday.

An old Saturday at Dad's would primarily be football-filled: kicking a ball around in the morning, shopping for football things in the afternoon — boots, kits, shinpads; figures, Subbuteo, stickers — *Match of the Day* at night, and then down to the less important (but still deeply important) business of the wrestling. If the wrestling wasn't on, or that month's storyline was a bit shit, then it was videos, fat VHS copies — ex-display cases Lawrence picked up from Leisure Time Video as it elbowed its stock to make way for the arrival of DVD — of films that Trav was not supposed to watch: *Terminator 2* (also subtitled *Judgement Day*), *Total Recall*, *Commando*, *Predator*. Then, when those tapes were exhausted, which they would never truly be, but at least when a break was required from them, like after six consecutive weekends of *Commando* and its catchphrases, it was some of Lal's favourites, again films that a thirteen-year-old shouldn't watch, at least not according to the certificate in the corner, again films that stayed with Trav in the unique way that the art of your youth does, when it comes with the added thrill of the verboten to boot — films like *The Deer Hunter* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia*.

Now, Lawrence, who used to stay up all night with his son, goes to sleep early and puts one of them on for Trav, who watches the film next to him till twelve, after which he goes next door to the futon and collapses it into a bed and watches the wrestling there on his stomach, his head propped up on his elbows, his chin dipped into the V of his hands.

Throughout the night, he hears his father's coughing, which only recently became a thing. It is wet, the coughing, and constant (sounds like it's powered by petrol). If his father starts coughing in the night, he'll still be coughing in the morning. Travis knows his dad has cancer, or had it, only it was cancer of the leg, or something, and they lopped it off, this cyst thing the size of a peach stone on his thigh, and he had this mad skin graft, and now there's a wide jagged circle-slash-scar on his femoral shaft, like an outline of a lake on a map, and it's depressed slightly, as if his skin has gone down a step, and it's pale white but looks sore but the fact that it's there means the cyst has gone, now; the cancer has gone. They took the spare skin from his arse.

The morning in question though and Travis cannot hear his father's coughing. It is getting on for half twelve, now, one o'clock, but it's not a concern that Lawrence isn't up yet, ambling around the house. Even with his earlier bedtimes, Lal is not exactly a morning man, at least not lately. The years of waking at five, six in the morning — to lay foundations, to get to the yard for opening, to be done in time to pick Trav up from school on a Friday — are over, and Lawrence, now he can't work, can, appointments permitting, get up when he likes. (The cancer has at least afforded him that.) Never mind that he sometimes can't get out of bed until he's been awake for an hour in pain, it still just about beats getting up on another bastard morning to go and lay slabs, cash-in-hand, in the cold. After all, the cancer got him the house they are in now — a bijou semi-detached in quiet, leafy Bournville — whereas his back-break work for the council, for the Irish, for the posh lot on the Edgbaston Road, where he would lay coloured brick in patterns for their cars, plural, to park on, never once looked like breaking him out of the third-floor flat he'd had for years on Burdock Street.

Travis switches on the TV, unconcerned. Dad is tired, it's Sunday, it's hot outside but his father's room, at the front of the house, is blocked by a big elm tree in the front garden, which blankets it three-quarters in shade. Lal probably got up at like nine when Trav was conked out, and felt the heat, beamed down from the centre

of a cloudless sky, and thought, Sod it, I'm going back to bed. And they'd had this silly argument, as well, the night before, about a pair of basketball trainers (trainers which now hang on a nail above my desk, yellowing like teeth). Basically, Stella, Trav's mom, had bought him a pair. Then he went to his dad's on Saturday and Lawrence wanted to take him to Town to buy him some as well — we'd recently got into the game after seeing the Harlem Globetrotters at the NIA; both parents were eager to kit Trav in the requisite clobber — not knowing about the pair Stel had already bought. (This is the stuff separated parents fight over when you're too skint for things like custody, see.) Scared of the aggressive competition the trainers would cause — there had been a similar incident with the new Manchester United home shirt (Lal was born in Ireland, where United are a religion; Trav suffered much jocular abuse at the hands of Villa and Blues fans, who told Trav he was a raging glory hunter) — Trav tried to call Stella on the sly and explain that he was going to Town to buy some more, but not to worry, he would wear both of them equally, one for training and one for games with our new team, the South Birmingham Blazers. Lal could hear his son upstairs on the phone, though; leaned closer to the stairwell to listen; heard Trav mumbling something to his mother.

When Trav came downstairs afterwards, Lal asked what *that* was all about; what could he tell his mom that he couldn't tell his dad? And Trav, terrified now of the trainer talk and what it would blow up into — and too flustered to think of a lie — said he just couldn't answer that question, a snub that killed Lawrence both physically and spiritually, Trav thought, with time. (Father and son went to bed without saying goodnight or sorry, and the next morning, when Trav was trying to slap his dad awake, he saw a pyramid of pill pots on his bedside table. In his confusion, he assumed suicide. (*The cancer was gone*, he wrote.) From then on, he wore that night like an in-house hairshirt.)

Anyway, if Lawrence wasn't up, nor would Travis have to be — he was free to flick through the channels and put unimportant things like breakfast or lunch to the back of his mind. And he was tired, this morning, Trav. *Judgement Day* finished at four but, shocked still by the mess on the ring's mat at the end (it looked like the scene of a fatal bullfight), Trav was on a high till at least five — every time he closed his eyes he saw chokeslams and powerbombs, heard their thwack and spring on the microphoned mats — at about which time he fell into one of those sleeps you can remember falling into, like you didn't just go to bed and close your eyes and slip into

it, the sleep, but instead slowly succumbed to the need for it, like it was incremental, like first I close my eyes, then I think about stuff, then the stuff becomes stranger, and you can taste it in your mouth, almost, like your head is filling up with a language it hasn't yet learnt and your lips are trying to speak it. Then an odd blackness, then actual dreams, about men in white suits breaking their ankles on wet-brown river rock while they are chasing you. Then awake with a jolt, popping up like a spike on a seismograph. This was how Trav described it, and his mouth is still dry and aching now, as he flicks through the channels, eventually settling on #146, Trouble, which shows bad American sitcom and is playing *My Wife and Kids* when the telephone rings.

It's me. It's Sunday and it's hot and I want to do something. I want to kick a ball around or go brook-jumping or add to our den in Manor Park, which is really coming along since we started lifting breeze blocks and pallets from the new housing estate behind it. My mom, not yet bedridden by the Graves' that will kill her, is having a barbeque with all my aunties and uncles, but I don't have to go. I can spend it with Trav instead, if I want, as long as Lal doesn't mind (he never does). He'll drop us off at the park — a different one, the little one that's more of a walk-way from Woodbrooke Road to Bournville Village Green — or even stay there with us, sit in the sun with a wet flannel on his leg wound while we try and send Hollywood passes in gorgeous perfect arcs across the finally-green grass of the walk-way's play area, which is affiliated with Cadbury World and purple because. We could meet up with some lads from our school, also owned by the Cadbury lot, and those lads might even have girls with them, birds from two years above who smoke and spit, who play games with torn-off bits of plastic bag called Suck & Blow, where you place a palm-sized circle of shopping bag over your lips and breathe in so that it straps itself to your mouth like a surgical mask, and then you press it against someone else's mouth, who should ideally in turn inhale the bag onto their own gaping mouth, and so on and so forth round the chain until someone faffs it and the wet plastic flutters to the floor between the canyon of two chins. The pair involved in faffing then have to kiss, properly, without the bag.

We'd never been invited to play this game — those kind of kids tended to enter the park just as me and Trav were leaving — but today, on a day like this, you never know: there might be someone in the group just sound enough to acknowledge me — maybe they know my brothers? — just all right enough to ask us to stay, play; shout,

Oi, gis a touch, and so then when I dink an impudent little chip over the orange hoops that crown the top of the thigh-high purple gate to the play area's playground, a chip which lands right on Dwayne Dcaccia's instep, a chip to which he simply says *Ball* as he controls it and shifts it onto his other foot before shunting it under the swings to TJ Forbes, who boots it into the phalanx of gum-chewing girls who have situated themselves on the other side of the area in order to gossip and smoke, when I've done that, and they've seen that I myself am sound, and Travis, by extension, he is sound too, when they've seen this they will say, Come, let's knock it around a bit, before introducing us — after already introducing us to cigarettes and the Year 10 trio of Shauna/Chantelle/Shanice — to our own initiation game of Suck & Blow, startling debuts that would ultimately lead to my second kiss (Shauna), and Trav's first (also Shauna).

None of this was likely, of course: me and Trav were neither popular nor un-, neither bullied nor completely safe. It all depended, and it was probably the saving grace of playing, and being half-good at, football — and later, in my case, basketball — that kept us safe through Years 7, 8, and 9. We were never really going to be asked to join Dwayne Dcaccia and TJ Forbes and Jim Rolls-Tyson in a game of anything, but at the same time we didn't have to fear walking past them (it wasn't completely out of the realms of possibility that they might just randomly add us to their ranks, then, which were always changing anyway: they had one lad in my form hang round with them for a whole month on the sole basis that, when they pushed him up a wall in the corridor outside the remedial unit and said, Oi, Tom, do you wank then, or what? he answered, uniquely and to their surprise, Yeah, I do (he thus became Thomas the Wank engine)).

What I'm trying to say is that it was warm and it was Sunday and we didn't have school and provided I could find something to do with Travis — and Lawrence didn't mind — I wouldn't have to go to my Aunty Sharon's house and watch my mom get rum-drunk with all her ugly friends to the sound of UB40 while I'm forced to babysit my stupid mouth-breathing cousins who don't like football or wrestling or Xbox or anything. (They collected *Yu-Gi-Oh* cards, for fuck's sake.) So now I really just need Trav to pick up the cordless house phone, which I know is cradled in a holster on the floor of Lal's room because the downstairs phone, Handset 1, is too far away to answer if he is upstairs and it rings.

I'm about to ring off when Trav answers.

My dad's still asleep, he says, but I'll go wake him up in a minute. Na — he won't mind, does he ever?

Yeah, true-say, I say.

We arrange for my mom to drop me off at Trav's, then we'll do whatever and Lawrence will take me back later. Standard Sunday procedure. Only my mom knows that she's going to be out all afternoon, and pissed, so she just needs to confirm that it's definitely okay with Lawrence, like because she won't be able to just come get me whenever she needs to, and so I'll most likely have to be there all day, until the evening, when one of my brothers will be home to let me in.

It's fine, man, just come over, Trav says.

Okay: fine. I'll double-check. I'll double-check and I'll ring ya back.

Half an hour later he does ring me back.

Only it's Stella.

And she's saying, in a wobbling voice that's doing its best to stay solid, Hello, Jay, mate, it's Stel. And before I can be like, O, alright Stel, didn't know you were — she tells me — bluntly, beautifully— that Travis's daddy is dead. That's what she says, *daddy*. Not Lal or Lawrence or the less-heard Larry. Not even 'Trav's dad'. It's daddy — Trav's daddy. I'm about to say something back when, sensing that she knows I won't know what to, Stella tells me that I don't have to say anything, just to tell my mom and then she will get Trav to call me when he's feeling a bit better. She says it like that, *when he's feeling a bit better*. I say okay and put the phone down and run to my mom, who's putting a big gold hoop in her ear in the mirror in the living room when I tell her dazed that Trav's dad is dead. She grabs me and holds me and says Oh dear lord and What do you mean and How and When and What do you mean he's dead, he can't be dead, are you sure he's dead? Then, when I assure her, she holds me and rocks me and kisses my skull through my hair and asks in a soothe if I know what happened? I say I don't know what has happened, but that it was Trav, I think, who found him. It must've been — there was no one else in.

And with that she looks up at the living room's ceiling, crop-circled as it is with yellow smoke stains and spreading cells of grey damp, looks up and says, as if in supplication — and despite the fact that we weren't religious — a mixture of the words Lord and God and No.

At this point, Trav is sitting on a little wall of iroko border roll that Lawrence had built in order to delineate the lawn and the rest of the lawn (which goes up a

step), wondering what's happening. An hour ago he was halfway through asking his father — starting his sentence in his room before hopping two steps on the landing carpet and crossing the threshold into Lal's — if it was okay if I came over for the day, if he could drop us to the park or take us swimming or something? and now he is sitting with his head in the crook of his arm and the arm on the knock of his knee and two sets of hands on his scrawny back while twelve yards away his mother makes call after call — to doctor, school, undertaker; to Pippa, Big Nev, me — on the islet of slabs that curve out from beneath the back room's sliding doors.

She had run in, Stella, through the back gate that Kevin, her partner, Trav's step-dad, first on the scene, had left open, run in and gone straight for the kitchen door that led to the garden when she heard Travis, her little Travis, howl the word *Mom* at an unnatural volume. It wasn't her Trav's voice, however, it was an animal's. A pleading bleat. A bark. A little boy needing his mother more than ever and then he sees her bolt through the back gate and she's about to miss him — he's sat down on the wall, Kev walked him over to it, said, Come on, kid, let's go sit in the garden, he loved this garden, didn't he, your dad? — about to run right past him and up into the horror house and so Trav wrenches up some noise, some black atonal imploration that somehow mangles itself into the word *Mom*. And she sees him — them — on the little wall and spins on her heel and runs over and swoops Travis up into her arms, onto her chest, and says nothing more for a minute other than shush, shush, shush. Shush — Mommy's here.

Mommy's here but now she's there, on the slabs, in full-on Stella mode. She has left Trav with Kevin and Up-the-Road Mark (despite the fact that there isn't another Mark in Stel's or any other of the Square's avenues and groves), who drove Stella to Lawrence's house on Elm Avenue when she got the call from Kev saying she needed to get here, quick; get Mark to drive you — I think he's in.

He was in, and now he sits on the wall with Kev and Trav, his hand on Trav's quivering shoulder, not really knowing what to do with himself and so saying — stupidly, he thinks when he is back home later and telling his wife what happened — saying that it really was a nice garden he kept.

Trav hadn't wanted to let go of his mother, but, in one of the last truly sober moments of her life, she left her son on that wall, safe with Kevin, and said that she couldn't leave him up there, like that, could she? couldn't leave Dad up there like that. Mommy needs to make some arrangements, okay? — I'll just be over there.

But first she needed to go up and see him, the father of her only child. Her childhood sweetheart. Her best friend until things went bad. Her best friend again when she found out he had cancer and broke down in the kitchen of the flat on Burdock Street. He broke too, then they laughed, then she ruffled his hair and said, Fucking hell, Lal, I can't imagine you *bald*. Now what she couldn't imagine was him dead, this man she had known since she was sixteen. She'd tried to, in the two years since his diagnosis, tried to imagine what would happen and what she would have to do if Lawrence didn't 'beat it'. Then he did beat it, kind of, and after the cyst was removed all thoughts became post-cancer and positive and forward-looking. Forward-looking towards the capital-F fucking Future, mate, with your dad on the mend and in a house he loves and up and about and even looking for work again.

Now she stands over him in the only room of his she had never before been in. He is on the bed, on his back (the paramedics had turned him over), tape and discards essayed all around him. She gets down on her knees, places her palms flat on his chest, and for the next half an hour stays in there and talks to him. What she says we'll never know. When she leaves, she kisses his eyes. Her tears drip down onto his face, so it looks like he's been crying, and she wipes them away with a tender drag of thumb before saying goodbye into his neck. She tells him she will love him, always, and that Travis will do him proud. Then she bites his shoulder and kisses his blue lips and runs out of the room, nodding at the paramedic waiting on the landing, saying it's okay to take him away.

Stella runs out of the room an hour and a half after Travis had run into it, her son bouncing and bounding in a way intended to gloss over the whole stupid argument yesterday and go straight fresh into Sunday, a gloriously hot Sunday to be spent in the park or swimming or something or anything, really, Dad, I don't mind, and I'm sorry about Mom, alright, she bought me trainers and you were buying me trainers and I just didn't want to turn another thing into another competition again, now wake up, *lazy*, Jay's coming round, oh, yeah, is it okay if Jay comes r—. And on that Travis saw the colour of his dad's back, *branching, marbled, ivied in what looked like pale biro or larkspur*, per Trav's diary, but actually best described as blotchy.

When he first went in to get the phone, he had only glanced at Lal, glanced and saw him asleep, facing the window, away from him. He had run in and grabbed the phone from its holster and glanced and ran back in one unbroken moment. He



had been in the room and his dad was a penalty away and he was dead and Trav was right there next to him, moving past him to get to the phone. His dad was dead and Trav was in the room with him and Travis left the room never thinking. He had seen his dead dad's dead body and done nothing. He had seen his father's cadaver and ignored it in order to answer a phone call. His daddy was dead and he'd seen him dead but still he didn't know, spoke about him on the phone as if he were still alive and coughing, soon to be woken up by a hop-skipping Travis who would scamper into his room and jump on his bed and ask if it was okay if I came over again? To play. Never would he have thought that the next time he saw his father he would be pounding on his chest and lifting his arm up like a wrestling referee trying to determine if the bloke in the submission hold is out or not. In wrestling, the arm falls twice to the mat leadenly before sparking into life on the third descent, stopping short of the canvas to halt and hover above it, to vibrate and pulsate and slowly then suddenly shoot back up into the air as the wrestler begins to break out of the hold. In wrestling, this is what's known as a comeback spot, used to build tension. In real life, however, the arm falls no matter how many times you pick it up and drop it. There is no response and no spark — just a heavy arm falling heavily.

After doing the arm thing, the eye thing — where Travis tried to continually pry open Lal's eyes only to have them chew shut each time, like a camera with a faulty aperture — after slapping his father and screaming into his face, after prodding him, pushing him, trying to push him onto his back in the hope that the sudden touch of the mattress on his shoulders might signal the end of a dream in which he was falling — trying to push him forward, too, Trav's hands architectureless on his dad's slab-cold back — after punching him, literally punching him with closed hard fists into unresponsive flesh that left brief pale mints of knuckular imprint on his father's waxen skin, after further slapping and screaming and begging, after realising nothing was going to work because his father was ashen and cold and peaceful, after all of this, Travis knew it was time to act.

This was the end of the blur that was the finding of his father's body. The end of the hallucinogenic, death-trip, wall-wobbling experience of seeing his father and touching his father and beating him like meat to try and wake him up.

This was the snap, the blur beginning to clarify, the blur spreading out over time like a brushstroke.