

HOUSSAM ALISSA

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## *The Trojan Horse*

My older brother's handsome, reassuring face smiles down at me from billboards, up at me from my phone screen, is handed to me as I leave the train station by masked leafleteers on my way to St Agatha's Church Hall. They've airbrushed him, removed the skin imperfections and de-aged him; he could be an advert for shampoo and toothpaste and razor blades all at once. It's his face, but not his face. I crumple up the flyer and bin it, resisting the urge to snatch the stack of remaining flyers from the volunteers and do the same with them. But as Monday's events demonstrated, I'm too much of a coward and I love my brother too much to hurt him. And if I'm honest, what I was truly angry at was seeing video of my own face plastered across my social media, beaming and laughing whilst behind it I shrivelled.

On Monday night, I relapsed after nearly a year's sobriety. I drank for most of Tuesday, too. I had a zoom call with my sponsor yesterday and I'm getting myself back on track. Today is a new day.

It began when my sister face-timed me a week ago, fuming that I had 'pulled out' out of the magazine piece the following Monday. The connection was terrible but I could make out her characteristic glower in the blocky orange mosaic of her face on my phone screen. I explained patiently that I could hardly pull out of something I hadn't agreed to in the first place.

"Dan needs your support," she fumed. "Whatever you have, reschedule it. Try not to be so bloody selfish for a change."

Like most conversations with family, the call consisted of much character assassination in both directions. As a barrister, Allison was exceptionally well-practised at this.

“I have the ‘dentist’ then,” I lied, using my code for AA meetings. I don’t like lying. One of the big epiphanies I’ve had in recent years of therapy is that I, like many others, have spent most of my life living in a way that is not aligned to who I truly am and the values I hold dear. After years of hiding behind a fake, people-pleasing persona—with all the misery and self-hatred that’s brought me—I’ve finally managed to construct a sense of who I am and what I stand for; and I have pledged to live by that come hell or high water. Going to the house to tell fibs for this magazine piece threatened to compromise what I’d worked hard to build.

“Skip it this once. I’m sure you’ll survive another week.”

For a moment, I considered telling her the truth, that I could not support our brother in this. But it would get back to him, and I don’t think I could stomach upsetting him like that. So I made up a lie. I had chosen my AA meetings as they’re a sensitive area that people usually don’t like to intrude upon. Not Allison.

“I’m sorry,” I lied again. “I just can’t make it. Besides, he doesn’t need me. Or you. He’s ahead in the polls, he’s going to win.” In seven days my brother would be the MP for Buckley & Aldersham, magazine piece or not.

In truth, the magazine interview was completely unnecessary. There was already strong public support for Dan’s campaign, which was putting front and centre the preservation of the local environment.

Buckley & Aldersham is as green as it is middle class. The idea for the magazine feature was Sunil’s, Dan’s Campaign PR Chief, a bundle of writhing nerves contained within a Superdry hoodie. When my brother’s rival Maggie Huttleston accused him of being a ‘carpet-bagger’ who had ‘swooped in from his riverside duplex in Richmond’ as part of a ‘cynical power grab’, Sunil shit himself and arranged the interview with a local magazine. It was ostensibly to be a feature piece on us three siblings and our late father, a bootstrap working class success story who had owned a string of pubs in Buckley & Aldersham. But the article was a Trojan Horse, intended

to smuggle in a puff piece on Dan. Its purpose was to showcase his connection to the area (in which he'd been born and spent over half his life) and to give him an extra publicity nudge ahead of that week's polling day. A pointless waste of time, but everyone was now fully sold on the idea. Sunil because he considered it a 'critical counter-riposte' to the Huttlesstone Campaign. Dan because he saw Sunil as some sort of divine oracle and would bathe in sludge if Sunil thought it would 'play well'. Allison because of her drive to gain ever-more proximity to power and to have her photo in a glossy magazine. The magazine editor because he because he was packing serious wood for Dan and his environmental pledges.

And naturally, everyone expected me to be there, like the good little brother I am.

"It's just *photos*," Allison assured me. "You won't be interviewed or anything. Dan and I will be handling the story. Just sit there and look pretty. It'll scan badly if you're not there."

She tried adding pressure, tried appealing to reason, tried stroking my ego, I still said no. So she lost her cool.

"What a selfish little man. Do I have to remind you of all the things Dan's done for you?"

My sister loves Dan almost as much as she hates me. I hung up as she launched a volley of abuse down the line, the swarm of pixels convulsing angrily on screen. It felt good. The thing is, I'm not even sure if she really believed I had to be there. For Allison, bending people into submission until they break to her will is one of her happiest pastimes.

And given the resistance I always put up, I'm one of her preferred species of game. For the rest of the day I ignored the barrage of WhatsApp messages pinging angrily away on my phone. Later that evening, Dan phoned me up. We had a lovely catch-up and at the end of the call he asked me if I would be free on Monday for the magazine interview but no worries if not. I somehow found myself saying yes of course, and was there anything in particular I should be wearing?

The magazine piece was taking place at our old family house; now Allison's family house. As instructed, I had taken a COVID-test

before I showed up, sanitising on entry whilst the masked magazine crew brought in black trunks containing lighting equipment. The interior of the house was all varnished oak surfaces and *objets d'art*. The kitchen was sleek and spot-lit with glinting chromatic appliances. Beautiful, inauthentic. When we were kids there was a scummy carpet where the glistening floorboards now lie, and the kitchen walls and ceiling were stained yellow from the deep-fat fryer. Allison had done the place up, filling it with buttoned leather armchairs and oil paintings. There was a genuine log fireplace in the lounge, and the house now looked like a Lord & Lady's residence, or where a barrister of considerably greater wealth and influence than my sister might have lived. Dan was in the study with Sunil, running over the social media 'assets' for his campaign on the latter's Macbook.

"Mark," Dan greeted me as I entered, shaking hands and hugging me as Sunil scarpered off with his Macbook. "Thank you so much for coming. I am *so* sorry for being such a dreadful egomaniac." He was wearing a jersey and jeans, a calculatedly casual look.

I laughed and dismissed his concerns, telling him it was my pleasure. When Dan talks to you, you have this feeling that you're the only person in the room he truly wants to be talking to. Everything else, everyone else, fades away.

"They got rid of our bunk I see," he said with a smile as we left the study and went downstairs, his arm around my shoulders.

When we were little, Dan and I used to share a bunk bed in what was now Allison's study, even though Dan was four years older than me. As the eldest, Allison had her own room, a box room with My Little Pony wallpaper that would eventually grow obscured with Metallica posters and photos of her and her friends on school trips abroad. Dan got the top bunk. We shared our toys and comics. Before I had my own allowance, he used to let me have his duplicate football stickers that he couldn't trade off at school. I never loved football like he and my dad did, but I tried to. When I was ten he showed me a *Mayfair* magazine he'd traded with a friend at school for a bottle of cheap gin he'd stolen from our parents' drinks cabinet. Under the covers, I saw my first images of naked women by torchlight. We went to the same

secondary school together where Dan was a prefect and an athlete. He had no interest in actual politics as a teenager, but even then people had a sense that was where he might end up—in his leaving Yearbook he was voted ‘Most Likely To Be Prime Minister’. He was one of those students who was popular both with the teachers and with his peers. He got good grades and was the star of both the football and the athletics team. I, on the other hand was a nobody, not even held in enough contempt to be bullied with any regularity. A C-student. Where my brother had won a scholarship our father had to pay fees for me—something he would remind me of regularly on the drive home from parents’ evenings or when I came home with a dismal report. I wasn’t my father’s favourite. When he laid into me though, Dan would leap to my defence. Allison would observe from the sidelines in silent, smug judgement, perking up and smirking when my dad would gesture her way to show me what a positive example looks like. She was top of her year at her girls’ school. We went to the boys’ school of the same name, though our single-sex regime didn’t stand in the way of Dan getting female attention. From his GCSE years, there was always a band of girls in the uniform of another school waiting opposite the school gates for Dan and his clique to come out. You could watch them dissolve into smiles and giggles as the two groups merged and headed out into town, backpacks slung over their shoulders. If Dan ever saw me walking home while he was with them, he would never ignore me as you’d expect some brothers to do. He’d always wave to me from across the street, or sometimes, after a quick check for traffic, would jog across the road and catch up with me for a quick chat. The boys and girls in his group would stand there waiting for him to return. A couple of times he took me with them when they went to the cinema. Unsurprisingly, he was chosen Head Boy in his final year. Gradually, I began to benefit from his stardom, tagging along with him to the odd house party or pub visit. I was still an outcast and a weirdo, but I began to watch my brother and learn to mimic his mannerisms, the way he put his hand on people’s shoulder and laughed with gusto at their jokes, the types of witticisms he made. I became a bit less of a nobody, although my identity was very much ‘Dan Fletcher’s little brother’. Even after he left for university, the teachers would see me

as little more than a faint echo of Dan. Unfavourable comparisons to him were a favourite weapon of theirs to wield against me, for all the good it did. In his final year, on top of being Head Boy, Dan also won his House cup. It was a resounding success with which to end his secondary school career. He didn't get into Oxford or Cambridge as had been hoped by many of the teachers, and so didn't get his name embossed in gold on the walls of our assembly hall. But his name was carved ethereally into the collective memory of the school, as one of the Great Boys of its history. He was less of a star at university, though he did well enough, completing a degree in Economics and gaining some modest recognition on the sports teams there. He surprised everyone by going to Sandhurst after graduation. He served in Afghanistan in the Household Cavalry Regiment, leaving the Army four years later with the rank of Captain and having been awarded the Distinguished Service Cross. He worked in public affairs institutions for a few years before eventually entering politics, where he was now standing for election as the MP for his hometown of Buckley & Aldersham. And barring a miracle from God, he would win.

The make-up artist lightly powdered my face while Dan charmed the magazine crew. Allison arrived from putting on her own face and came down dressed in a smart lilac suit with a large dragonfly brooch on the lapel.

"You're not late for once," she observed, giving me a peck on the cheek. Masks off, the three of us entered the lounge. They took photos of us seated on the burgundy settee which they'd positioned to have the fire crackling in the background (and Allison's published novel standing prominently on the mantelpiece). It took about an hour in various poses. Some dignified and serious, some silly—pulling faces, pretending to have a pillow fight with one of the cushions. Evidently, they wanted to recapture a sense of us playing together as children, letting our hair down, being a family. A more accurate photo might have had Allison punching me in the arm to get me off the TV so she could watch her programme, with Dan pilfering liquor from one of Dad's pubs to split with his mates. But I guess that wouldn't quite capture the 'messaging' Sunil was

going for. After the lounge photos they decided they wanted some ‘natural’ shots, so they staged one batch in the kitchen where Dan was making us tea while we all had a jolly laugh about something, and another in the garden of us all playing frisbee with Allison’s Labrador (Sunil, afraid of dogs, remained safely inside watching through the conservatory doors, endorsing the decision to get the dog involved as an ‘excellent shout from an optics standpoint’).

By the end of the shoot, my cheeks were aching from hours of fake grinning and I wanted to collapse into a heap. Dan and Allison had a much easier time of things, either because they were genuinely enjoying themselves or because they find it much easier than me to slip in and out of social masquerades. Both of them had jobs that required them to change visage suddenly, to move seamlessly from charming to assertive to impassioned to tearful.

“Exhausting,” Dan remarked jovially, but he didn’t look remotely tired.

Allison made us all some coffee, and contrary to her assurances that no questions would be asked, questions were asked. To Allison, lying is a morally neutral tool to be deployed as expedient. Much of the questioning was directed at Dan about his campaign pledge to ensure Buckley Park was granted national heritage status and thus protection from the encroaching real estate developers. There was much fawning and obsequiousness. Naturally, Allison and I were asked about our own support for Dan’s campaign and somebody had the *genius* idea to film short video clips of us ‘for the website’ that could also be repurposed for Dan’s campaign. The prospect delighted Allison, and Sunil practically came on the spot at the promise of the additional ‘collateral’ that could be proliferated across social media.

“I’m not sure,” I found myself saying, as Allison brought the coffee into the lounge. All eyes turned on me, and my sister froze with the tray in her hand.

“Not sure about what?” Carla, the interviewer, asked.

“About doing the video segments.” I shifted uncomfortably on the settee. “I thought we were just doing photographs. I didn’t know

we were talking about the campaign.”

“It wasn’t the plan,” Allison fibbed, handing out the coffees. “But it’s a great idea, isn’t it?” she asked the room, eliciting a babble of assent.

“I don’t know,” I said, feeling the warmth of the fire against my neck. “I don’t know if I’m comfortable.”

“Rubbish,” Allison snapped, putting the empty tray down on the table as Carla and the photographer exchanged uncomfortable glances.

“It’s fine,” Carla said. “Absolutely not a problem if you’re not comfortable, we’re happy to just go with Dan and Allison if you’re both still keen?”

“No, it’s *not* fine,” Allison said hotly.

“Allison,” Dan said from his standing place at the window, a note of warning in his voice. “If he doesn’t want to do it, he doesn’t have to do it. Mark, it’s fine. It’s not important.”

“Yes, it *is* important, Dan. All the things you’ve done for him. We had to drag him here kicking and screaming, and now he can’t be arsed to say a few bloody words for his own brother’s campaign?” She shot me a savage look. “Go on, what’s your excuse this time?”

I felt my brow turn damp. A couple of crew members made themselves scarce. I didn’t have an excuse. How was I supposed to explain to them my reluctance to support my brother, a loving family man who was running on a ticket to keep our county green and abundant with wildlife? A man who’d saved my life after my attempted overdose when I was twenty-one; who had stayed with me every day in the hospital until I had recovered, and who’d never once thought to shame me for it. I still remember waking up not knowing where I was, and the sudden sense of relief when I felt Dan’s hand on my shoulder. And now here I was, with the camera lens staring into me from one angle and my sister’s glare skewering me from another, as she waited for me to speak in my defence. Even Dan, my only advocate, couldn’t hide an expression of curiosity on his face as to why his brother writhed so at the prospect of a few warm words. I looked down at my shoes, wordless.



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There's a saying misattributed to the Japanese that every person has three faces: the first face, you show to the world. The second face, you show to your close friends and your family. The third face, you never show anyone. I know this third face, I feel it within myself, the one that that has unflinchingly surveyed the most depraved of my sexual fantasies, the most violent of my urges, the ugliest of my prejudices. The face I had long striven to keep veiled. But this third face is ever searching for opportunities to escape, to slip free of its guards and reveal itself to others, if only for a heartbeat.

When I was fourteen and Dan was in his final year of sixth form, my dad took us both to a football game. Dan was in his final year of sixth form at the time. It was our team playing in the semi-finals of a major national tournament—the farthest we'd ever gotten after a surprise streak of victories. We turned up in style, wearing the kit and our faces painted in their colours, red and white. We fitted in well amongst the scarves and banners and other faces smeared in war paint. We chanted the team anthem, booed when the opposing team stepped onto the pitch and lost our minds when our team did the same. It was the first time I felt the raw, tribal energy of football, the sense that this was not just a game, but that we were warring armies and everything counted upon our victory. Even with my limited interest in the game, I felt my blood rise when we scored our first goal and my entire world erupted in screams and cheers.

A fat shirtless man with the team's logo tattooed on his chest hugged me. It was exhilarating. If our team won, we would get through to the final—a once in a lifetime event. We were 1-1 as the game inched into its last few minutes of added time. Hands were clasped to faces on both sides; the tension was excruciating.

And then everything went wrong. A misunderstanding between the linesman, the referee and the players on an offside call caused our team to stall, thinking that play had been stopped, while the other team continued on to score their winning goal. It had been a bad decision, poorly handled, and it caused an uproar on our side. Fingers were pointed by our players as they surrounded the referee. Fans were spilling out onto the pitch, and all around me our united tribe had melted into an ocean of rage. The fat man who hugged

me had turned red and was screaming so hard I thought he'd burst. Seats were wrenched from their brackets and fights broke out.

"Go. Now," my dad urged. We headed for the exits but were not the only ones doing so. I lost my dad and Dan in the crowds that were bottlenecking our escape. I was sure it was only a matter of time before I would be trampled underfoot. Not far from where I was standing, part of the stadium wall gave in and I heard screams. I managed to force my way out, and found myself in the middle of a warzone, where fans in red and fans in blue were at each other's throats. I prayed that Dan and my dad were ok. I found my dad first and was alarmed at how frightened he looked. Neither of us knew where Dan was. We searched, and when we found him I wish we hadn't. He had gotten into a brawl with three black men from the opposing side, who were now surrounding him. Ignoring my dad's command to stay put, I screamed Dan's name as we both ran closer, but he didn't hear. Then, two fans from our side grabbed a hold of two of the men accosting Dan. Dan wriggled free of the grasp of the third, and knocked him to the ground. For a moment, I was relieved. But I felt my stomach turn as I saw Dan bring his foot up into the air, and bring it down upon the man's head once, and then a second time, and then a third. My dad caught Dan's arms and pulled him away just in time to prevent the fourth blow. The man now lay on his back, his face coated in blood and his eye beginning to swell. His lips moved slowly as though he were murmuring in his sleep. But what truly terrified me was not his face, but Dan's.

The boy my dad was pulling back was not Dan, the handsome Head Boy of our school. His face, red with our team colours, was contorted by murderous rage, his eyes bulged demonically, spit sprayed from his mouth as he shrieked, "Fucking kill you! Black fucking cunt! I'll cut your fucking throat!" He screamed like that until my dad pulled him far away and gave him a slap around the face before we fled the carnage. No one spoke in the car journey home.

At home, we went to bed and for once Dan and I said nothing to each other as we lay in our bunks. Eventually I stopped trembling and slipped in and out of a broken, jagged sleep, where all I saw was Dan's livid eyes and his bared teeth, and in my dreams I heard the crack as the man's skull fractured. The next day at breakfast,

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everything was normal and no one ever brought up what had happened the evening before.

Had I seen Dan's true face that day, the one no one was supposed to see? Or had I witnessed the momentary possession of a frightened teenage boy placed in the throes of a terrifying and traumatic situation? I'll never know. But in the years that followed, I caught more glimpses of that face. Many times late into the night after Dan and I had been drinking heavily, he would make a passing remark on a race, a religion, a sexual identity.

If ever I reacted in discomfort or uncertainty, Dan would laugh and tell me he had just been joshing, and the subject would change. He could slip on that smile quick as a magician conjuring a dove from thin air, and make it disappear just as quickly.

Nor will I ever forget Dan's stag party, when a drunken row erupted between him and one of his old army friends. Nobody loved Dan like his army friends; they spoke with admiration and respect for the heroism he'd shown during a fourteen-hour firefight in Kandahar as they awaited air support. They were more loyal than brothers. But on that night, the gentle but sullen giant called Callum got into a quarrel with Dan. I can't remember what started it—something trivial—but I remember as Callum stormed off out of the venue, he stuck his sweaty, bleary-eyed face in my own, and said something that terrified me.

"Your brother is a fucking *murderer*. Remember that." And he left.

Was there any truth in what he said? Had something happened in Afghanistan, or were these the bitter, drunken ramblings of a man who bore a grudge against my brother? I doubt I'll ever know the truth of the matter—Callum died a few years later and Dan's other army buddies would never betray his loyalty, no matter what he'd done. But I never forgot what Callum had said that night. And something about the cool way Dan had watched his comrade storm out that night, the ghost of a smirk on his lips, had given me the chills. Once again, I glimpsed something that did not fit with the brother who used to gift me his shiny football stickers. It was as though I had gained access to a crack in his charming, polished

exterior and seen something ugly within that I now know must be kept away from any kind of power at all costs.

I considered for a moment telling the truth to everyone gathered in the lounge. *You promised to live up to your values, never to compromise on who you are or what you stood for. Well? Here's your moment.* My throat went dry as I looked from face to face, squirming for what felt like an eternity. Dan's curious look turned to one of concern, Allison's eyes narrowed. *Tell them the truth.*

I nearly did. So nearly.

But then Dan laid his hand on my shoulder and I choked on the words.

"Of course I'll do it," I croaked, eventually. "Sorry. I'm being stupid."

"Mark, you don't have to if you're not comfortable," Dan said softly.

"Don't be daft," I whispered, as I put my hand over his. "I've got you, bro."

And so the cameras rolled and I gave Dan and his campaign my full-throated endorsement, urging the public to cast their votes in favour of my big brother, the only candidate who would protect our beloved park and ensure Buckley & Aldersham remained a green and happy place for all to live.

I went home a few hours later feeling sick. That evening, I bought a litre of vodka from the Tesco Metro near my flat and drank till I passed out around five in the morning. When I awoke the next morning, my news feed was filled with ads of my own face, cheerfully exhorting to the world that my brother was a man to be trusted and to whom they should hand political power this Thursday. I vomited in the toilet, and went to the shop to get some beer.

I screwed up. Some say there's no shame in it, but I disagree. I am ashamed. But shame does not have to be permanent. This week has not been a good week, but today is a new day, and I will choose to make it a good one. I arrive at St Agatha's Church Hall and under the gaze of the many faces of my older brother I enter by the sign that reads POLLING STATION. Volunteers in the courtyard are

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handing out flyers and interviewing people; vote for Dan Fletcher, I'm told. It doesn't matter.

He'll win. He was ahead anyway, and the magazine feature and the associated social media campaign had given him the decisive lead he needed. Sunil had written excitedly to thank me for my role in the proceedings. I didn't reply.

Voters in masks are sanitising outside, going in one at a time. With a squirt of gel I cleanse my hands and as I enter the hall they cross out 'Mark Fletcher' on their list. No one asks if I'm a relative of the candidate. My face covering is stifling, and once inside the privacy of the booth, I pull down my mask and allow myself to breathe freely. My face feels reborn in its nakedness to the cool, clear air. I open up the ballot paper, and with the little pencil I place a cross beside Maggie Huttleston's name. Pulling the mask back over my face, I drop the ballot paper in the box and leave the church. The weather is beautiful and I decide to take a nice long walk in Buckley Park, alone with my thoughts.