

# NATIONAL BALANCE

By Graham Masterton

5999 words

Michael was stirring aspidistra soup in the kitchen of his restaurant when two officials from the Home Office came in to tell him that his wife had ceased to exist.

One of the officials was short and podgy, with a thinning comb-over and a scarlet face that looked as if it had been sand-blasted. The other was tall and lugubrious and kept swaying like a poplar tree in a morning breeze. Both wore bronze Puffa jackets that were still sparkling from the rain outside.

'What the hell are you talking about?'

'You are Mr Michael Chandler, of The Dentures, Boxtree Road, Streatham SW16?'

Michael turned off the gas. 'Yes.'

'And your former wife was Susan Chandler, of the same address?'

'What do you mean – *former* wife? She is my wife.'

The short podgy official took out an identity card and held it up in front of Michael's face. 'I assume you know about the National Balance Act?'

Michael's assistant Hamid stopped slicing the badger steaks that he was preparing for tonight's special. He came around the counter and stood beside Michael, with his arms folded. Although he reached only up to Michael's shoulder, he was broad-

shouldered and muscular. His hair was twisted up into a black man-bun and his nose was broken from elbow-boxing.

'I heard of this,' he said, with a hint of aggression in his voice. 'But it is not law – only talk.'

'Well, I'm afraid that it *is* law now,' said the short podgy official. 'It was ratified three weeks ago although it wasn't publicised for the sake of public order.'

'What do you mean – "ceased to exist"?' Michael demanded. 'That's my wife. She can't "cease to exist". We've been married for eleven years and she's perfectly healthy.'

'That's as may be, Mr Chandler, but she was on the list, and if you're on the list, there's nothing that anybody can do it. There's no appeal. An individual who doesn't exist doesn't exist, so they can't lodge an appeal.'

Michael wrenched off his apron. 'Where is she? What have you done with her? If you've hurt her in any way at all –'

'She wasn't hurt, I can promise you that. But I can't tell you where she is because there's no such person.'

'Are you out of your mind? If you don't tell me what you've done with her and where she is, I'm calling the police right now.'

'You still don't understand, Mr Chandler. The police won't be able to help you because they can't go looking for somebody who never was. We're extremely thorough, I have to tell you that. You won't be able to find a birth certificate in your non-existent wife's name. Neither will you be able to locate any school reports, employment records, tax details, bank account or credit card statements. Nothing.'

'I have our marriage certificate. I have letters from her. I have Valentine cards. I have photographs. Hundreds of photographs. Look – I have pictures of her on my phone.'

Shaking with anger, Michael tugged out his phone and prodded the app for his photo albums. As he swiped through them, though, he couldn't find a single picture of Susan. There were twenty or thirty pictures of their holiday last September in Barbados, but in every picture he was standing alone. Sunbathing by himself on the sand; lifting a bright crimson cocktail; sitting on the hotel terrace, smiling. But always alone.

'You've hacked my phone. You've photoshopped her out of every picture. You bastards. This is insane.'

He flicked across to WhatsApp. There was no trace of Susan's address, and no email address for her, either, on Hotmail.

He stood staring at the two Home Office officials, so bewildered and shocked that for a few seconds he was unable to speak.

Then he said, 'Get out. Get out, both of you. I'm going to report you for this. I'm going to have your guts for garters. Just get out.'

'Very well,' said the short podgy official, completely unruffled. 'We're quite used to a response of this nature, Mr Chandler. There's only one thing I have to do before we leave, though, and that is formally to remind you of the terms of the National Balance Act. In order to alleviate the pressure on the population and the public services of the United Kingdom, for every immigrant granted asylum from another country, one member of the British public will cease to exist, thereby maintaining the population at a constant level. Particular consideration is of course being given to improving the

diversity of the population, so priority will be given to immigrants of varying ethnic origins, non-Christian faith, and differing sexual identity.'

The officials turned around and left, talking to each other as they made their way through the restaurant. Michael said, 'Hamid – I'm closing down for today. I have to go home right now and find out what's happened to Susan. This is lunacy. It must be some kind of a practical joke.'

'If it is a joke, Mr Candlemaker, then it is a joke in the worst of taste,' said Hamid. Whatever anybody's name was, Hamid would always translate it into its historical origin. 'He who laughs hysterically at the desperation of others will surely have his sides split when it comes to the day of ultimate reckoning.'

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Michael drove home to Boxtree Road and parked his Ford Rocket outside their large semi-detached house. As he was making his way up the crazy-paving path to the front door, his neighbour Major Broughton came past, in his usual brown herringbone overcoat. His Afghan hound lifted its leg against Michael's gatepost and doused it with a copious stream of urine.

'You're home early, old chap!'

'Yes, John. Bit of a crisis. Sorry, can't talk.'

'Totally understand. It's nothing but one crisis after another these days. The shortages! The power-cuts! Did you see the news this morning? The lorries are tailing back all the way from Dover to Hemel Hempstead! And do you think that Tesco had any dandelion cheese left?'

Michael unlocked his front door and went inside. The hallway was chilly and smelled of dust and dry rot. The whole house was silent, which it had never been when Susan was at home, because she liked to keep the television muttering away in the background.

'Susan?' he said, softly, although he knew that he wouldn't get an answer.

He went into the living-room first. It was furnished with a bulky three-piece suite, in beige corduroy, and the walls were crowded with framed family photographs. Through the French windows Michael could see the York stone patio and the birdbath, but there was no sign of the Gro-bags in which Susan was cultivating edamame beans, and beside the white cast-iron table there was only one chair.

He went over to the beige-tiled fireplace. His reflection approached him in the mirror over the mantelpiece, and its expression was so emotionless that it could have been another man approaching him from another room. He stood and stared at himself for a moment, breathing slow and deep, summoning up the courage to look at the family photographs.

The largest was their wedding photograph, taken on that gusty March day when they had emerged together from St Tofu's church, Michael holding onto his fedora and Susan trying to stop her veil from flying upward. The photograph was still there, and all the guests were just as Michael remembered them, and Michael was there, too. Standing arm in arm with him, though, with one eye closed against the wind, was the lady vicar, the Reverend Willifred Uterus. There was no sign of Susan, not even in the background.

Every photograph in which Susan had appeared was the same. She had been completely erased from all of them, and in her place there was either another person, or a tree, or an animal.

Michael trudged upstairs. He knew now what he was going to find but he still had to look to see if there was any trace that Susan had existed. In the bedroom, when he slid open the wardrobe doors, he saw that his own clothes hadn't been touched, but that all of Susan's dresses and jackets and skirts had disappeared. Even her quilted hangers had been taken.

The drawers of her dressing-table were empty, too, and the indelible pink stain where she had spilled her foundation had miraculously vanished.

He drew back the green candlewick bedspread and buried his face in her pillow. She had always sprayed on essence of travellers' joy before she went to bed, but now her pillow had absolutely no perfume at all. Somehow, they had eradicated even the smell of her.

He checked the bathroom and the two smaller bedrooms, as well as the lavatory and the airing cupboard. Everything of Susan's had gone – her towels, her toothbrush, her razor, her yak-fat body lotion. He could find nothing that proved she had once been living here, and that she had once been his wife.

He sat at the top of the stairs with his hands cupped over his face. He didn't want to see any more. He didn't want to know any more. Without Susan, he felt as if the Home Office had emptied not only her wardrobe but his whole world, too. He wasn't even a widower, because widowers have graves to visit, or ashes, or recordings of long-ago laughter, and widowers always have pictures.

His front doorbell chimed. At first he ignored it, but it chimed again, and then again, and after the fifth chime he climbed slowly down to the hallway and opened the door. It was Hamid, wearing a tight navy duffel-coat. He was holding up a paper bag from Ethnic Wines & Spirits.

'I have brought you a bottle of gin, Mr Candlemaker, in order to mitigate the pain of your loss.'

'Come in, Hamid. That's very thoughtful of you, but I'm numb enough already.'

He led Hamid through to the living-room and they sat on the corduroy sofa together. They said nothing at first, but after a minute or two Michael stood up and went to the kitchen and came back with two glasses. He opened the bottle of Sainly Gin and poured them each a large measure.

'Here's to non-existence,' he said. The gin smelled of wet laundry.

'I am thinking, Mr Candlemaker, that whatever the efforts of the Home Office, your wife can never be utterly eradicated. She exists still in your memory, which they cannot erase.'

'Don't count on it, Hamid. They'll probably come sneaking into the house when I'm asleep and give me a lobotomy.'

'If you are devoutly religious, you will believe that she survives in heaven, or some other hereafter. Or that she has been reincarnated as a vixen, or a cormorant.'

Michael shook his head. 'I was brought up a Christian, but then my twin sister was killed. A window-frame fell on to her in Oxford Street. I turned to the Bible for consolation and it was only then that I realised what a collection of poisonous ignorant primitive rubbish it actually is.'

Hamid laid his hand on Michael's arm. 'Ah yes, but even if you are not religious, and you do not believe in heaven, it is scientific fact that no matter what happens to us, our atoms survive. Our atoms are constantly streaming from place to place, and they come together only momentarily to make you, or Susan, or me. The *me* that you see sitting beside you this afternoon, Mr Candlemaker, is not the same me who was born and educated in Pakistan. It is not even the same me who first came and applied to you two years ago for work in your kitchen at the Deluded Brill. The atoms that made *those* Hamids have all flowed away, and the same has happened to your wife's atoms. In order to delete her existence completely, the Home Office would have had to track down every single one of the atoms and split them. You cannot obliterate even one human being totally with setting off the biggest nuclear explosion that ever was.'

Michael stared at him. 'How do you know all this?'

Hamid gave a coy, sideways smile. 'Before I decided to become a chef, I was trained in the Pakistani nuclear programme. I was taught how to destroy the world. But -- I decided that I would rather feed the world than destroy it. Even if some maniac does choose one day to unleash Armageddon, at least I would have given a reasonable number of people a tasty last supper.'

Michael sat and thought for a while, taking occasional swallows of gin.

'It's no good, though, is it?' he said at last. 'The Home Office may not have been able to find every one of Susan's atoms, but there's no way that I can, either. How can you find something you can't even see?'

'That is not what I am suggesting, Mr Candlemaker. All I am saying is that somewhere on the wind, your Susan still exists. You may not be able to hold her in your



arms again, but you will be breathing her in through your nose, and who can get closer than that?’

Michael’s eyelashes were crowded with tears, and his lips puckered. Hamid laid his hand on his shoulder.

‘Every living creature has a different reality. For all it knows, the wasp that is drowning in your washbasin could be drowning in the Atlantic. Does that make its death any less dramatic?’

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A month went by. There were days when Michael felt like closing down the Deluded Brill and driving far away and never coming back. Somewhere like the Aran Islands, where he could sit alone on a rock and watch the Atlantic rolling in, with or without wasps.

However he found it easier to cope with his grief if he continued to work, and invent new dishes. It was much more difficult to think about Susan when he was blending a mixture for a yew and hamster sauce, or making sure that his kestrel’s-beak soufflés didn’t fall flat. Every night he would return home to The Dentures exhausted and half-drunk. Once he had climbed into bed he would put on headphones so that he could listen yet again to Bizet’s Creaking Door Chorus, which made it impossible for him to wish for anything, except for it to end.

On the first day of March, though, his next-door neighbour Bill Twill came into the restaurant. Bill was about forty-five, bald except for some wildly straying blond strands. He had been a goat juggler until the Vegan Performance Act had been passed, but now he paid his mortgage by doing odd jobs, such as painting soffits and sculpting butter, because he had always been artistic.

He knocked on the open kitchen door. 'Michael? Haven't caught you at a bad moment?'

Michael was flambéeing a panful of chopped pony livers but as soon as the flames had died down he beckoned Bill to come into the kitchen. Bill came and stood close to his shoulder as he carefully tipped the livers into a trayful of vol-au-vents.

'I love watching a skilled man at work,' he said. 'I don't care what they're doing. Plastering a ceiling. Draining a pustule. It's pottery in motion.'

Hamid was grating horseradish. 'It is *poetry!*' he laughed.

'I agree,' said Bill, gravely. Then he said, 'Michael...I've seen something and I didn't know if I ought to tell you about it, but in the end I decided I would because to be frank with you I found it extremely disturbing.'

'What is it, Bill? Don't tell me my overflow's leaking again.'

'No, nothing to do with your house. But this morning I went to the Tate to see that new exhibition of circus paintings. Bit of nostalgia, I suppose, for the old goat-juggling days. While I was there I went and took a shufti at that Derby Day painting. Do you know the one? Derby Day in eighteen fifty-six by William Powell Frith. One of my favourites. That's when painting was painting and not your splodges.'

'Can't say that I know it, Bill. Mind out, this pan's hot.'

'It's a magnificent painting. Huge. Hundreds of people in it – you know, spectators, entertainers, bookies, gypsies. But here's the thing: there's a very posh-looking woman sitting in a carriage underneath her parasol, on the right-hand side of the painting, and I don't exactly know how to put this.'

Michael stopped beating eggs and put down his whisk.

'Go on, Bill. What are you trying to tell me?'

'It's Susan, Michael. She's the absolute spit of Susan. I know that sounds bonkers, but I stared at it and stared at it and there's no doubt in my mind whatsoever.'

'Bill – she may look like Susan – but when did you say that was painted? Eighteen fifty something?'

Bill reached into his anorak pocket and pulled out his phone. He jabbed at it five or six times and then he handed it to Michael.

Michael wiped his hands, took it, and held it up. The picture showed a young woman in a white-and-yellow dress, sitting in a shiny black landau under a small white parasol. She was studiously ignoring a leathery-faced old gypsy woman in scarlet, who was leaning into the landau, holding out her hand for money. The young woman had rouge-red cheeks, which Susan had never had, but the resemblance was so extraordinary that Michael felt as if a torrent of ice-cold woodlice were running down his back inside his shirt.

'It's a coincidence, Bill. It has to be.'

'Ah, that's what I thought at first,' Bill told him. But he reached out and took his phone back, and then he jabbed at it again.

'That picture you've just seen...that's the one I took. But when I got home I looked up the painting on your Google, to make a comparison. Here.'

Michael's mouth felt dry. Hamid could see that he was upset, and came across the kitchen, frowning, still holding his cleaver.

The Google version of the Derby Day painting was identical to the photograph of it that Bill had taken, except that the young woman in the landau didn't look like Susan at

all. The shape of her face was oval, with a receding chin; her eyebrows were thicker; and she had a more prominent nose, with a slight bump in it.

Michael showed the two pictures to Hamid.

'I don't understand this,' he said. 'How could this possibly happen?'

Hamid shook his head. 'I have to agree that the woman in this picture does look so much like your wife, Mr Candlemaker. And it is not as if you are hallucinating. I see it, too. You remember what we were speaking about, how nobody can ever be rubbed out of existence? Somehow your dear wife's likeness has appeared in this painting. I once saw my late grandfather's face in a rock when I was walking in the Margalla Hills near Islamabad. Perhaps this is how all of us reappear, after death. Perhaps we should look for the features of our deceased loved ones in wallpaper, in the bark of trees, in paving stones.'

Michael said, 'This *is* Susan. This is one hundred percent Susan. Somebody has tampered with this painting and changed this woman's face to look exactly like her, and I want to know who did it and I want to know *how* they did it. I'm going to the Tate right now, Hamid. Can you manage on your own? I can ring Josh and get him in to help you.'

'Are you sure this is wise? Will you not be causing yourself even more grief than you are suffering already? If a man hits his thumb with a hammer, he does not ease the agony by throwing himself into a blackberry bush.'

'Hamid, I have to see this for myself. You can take the stag's-antler pâté off the menu if you like, that will give you more time. I don't think our working-class customers were ever very comfortable with it, anyway.'

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It was raining hard when Michael arrived at the Tate, so that the Thames was shrouded in a light grey mist. He could hardly see the shoals of orange rented pedalos, although he could distinctly hear the frantic shouts of their pedallers, as they tried to avoid bumping into each other.

Once inside the gallery, he made his way stiff-legged to the room where the Derby Day painting was hanging. There was nobody else in the room except for an elderly Japanese couple who were peering intently at a tiny still-life of cucumbers and discussing it in breathy Japanese.

*'Kyūridesu ka, soretomo gākindesu ka? Wakari nikuidesu.'*

Michael approached the Frith painting slowly, his attention already focused on the woman in the white-and-yellow dress sitting in her landau. Even from halfway across the room, he could see that she was Susan, and when he came right up to the canvas he was sure of it. The likeness was so overwhelming that it could have been a photograph.

'Susan,' he said, under his breath. 'Susan, can you see me? Can you hear me, Susan? Please...give me a sign, my darling. Anything. A wave. A nod. A smile. A blink of your eyes. You don't know much I miss you, Susan. *Please.*'

The Japanese couple turned and stared at him.

*'Watashi wa kare ga kyōjindenakereba naranai to omou,'* said the husband. He took hold of his wife's arm and shuffled her out of the room.

Michael stood in front of the painting for more than ten minutes, occasionally moving from side to side to see if Susan's eyes were following him. She gave him no response whatsoever, any more than she was giving to the scarlet-dressed gypsy woman who

was accosting her for change. All around her, the Downs were crowded with race-going punters all dressed in their finery, as well as acrobats and pie-sellers and assorted Epsom riff-raff. In the distance, the grandstand was filled with hundreds of spectators, and beyond that, Michael could see as far as Cobham and Painshill.

‘Susan – I’m going to stay here all afternoon if I have to – *please*, Susan, just let me know that you’re still alive.’

He waited for nearly a quarter of an hour longer, silently mouthing her name over and over, pleading with her. A gallery attendant appeared in the doorway and stared at him for a while, but then he obviously decided that he was harmless, and strolled away.

He was about to give up when Susan dropped her white glove out of the landau onto the ground. He saw it actually fall, and his heart almost stopped. A painted glove fell out of her painted hand and down to the painted grass. And what had Susan always done, at a drinks party or a dinner or a local preservation society get-together, when she was bored? She would never say a word, or even look at him and raise her eyebrows. She would drop her handkerchief. Dropping her handkerchief meant *get me out of here, as quickly as you decently can*.

‘Oh, Susan. Oh, my God. You *are* alive. Don’t worry, my darling. I’m not leaving you here in this painting, my darling. I’m taking you with me.’

He looked over his shoulder to make sure that the room was deserted, and that nobody could see him from the next room, either. Then he took a snap-off craft knife out of his raincoat pocket and carefully positioned the point above Susan’s parasol. He was just about to cut into the canvas when he heard the squeaking of crêpe-soled shoes on

the parquet floor behind him. A husky voice called out, 'Hey! You there! What do you think you're up to?'

Michael quickly pushed the craft knife back into his pocket, slicing the tip of his index finger as he did so. A bulky man in a beige corduroy jacket almost the same colour and texture as Michael's sofa came striding up to him. He had black thick-rimmed spectacles and a mess of tangled grey hair and a bulbous, bifurcated nose.

'I hope I didn't see you trying to vandalise that picture, did I?' he said, coming up to Michael and standing uncomfortably close. His breath smelled of walnuts.

'No, of course not, why would I? I was admiring it, that's all.'

'What's that in your pocket? I saw you put something in your pocket.'

'Nothing,' said Michael. He took his hand out of his pocket and held it up, but his finger was smothered in blood.

'You were going to vandalise it, weren't you? Right – I'm calling for security. And don't try to deny it, because they'll have you on CCTV.'

'I wasn't going to vandalise it. I just wanted to cut that one woman out of it.'

'Oh, I see. And you don't call that vandalism?'

'She's my wife. I know you'll probably think I've gone mad but she's my wife. They took her away five weeks ago under the National Balance Act. They told me she'd ceased to exist but she's here, in this painting. That's her.'

'You expect me to believe that?'

'Like I said, you'll probably think that I've totally lost my marbles, but it *is* her. She doesn't even look like the woman in the original painting. I can prove it to you.'

'I believe you.'

Michael stared up at him. His glutinous brown eyes were hugely magnified by his glasses and the hairs in his nostrils looked as if spiders were hiding up his nose.

'You believe me? Really?'

'Yes. I believe you. And the reason that I believe you is because I'm responsible.'

'I don't understand.'

'Well, that doesn't surprise me. The emulsification of atoms is not the easiest of scientific procedures to get your head round. But I can assure you that I was I who prepared your wife for inclusion in this painting, and your wife is not the only one. Eleven other characters that you can see here are people who have been atomised under the National Balance Act, and there will be more. It was chosen as the ideal painting because of the number of people in the crowd and because Frith was such a representational painter. One could hardly hope to hide anybody's face in Picasso's Guernica, for example.'

'I think I'm dreaming this. Are you really telling me that you can put real living people into paintings? That you put my wife into this painting?'

The messy-haired man sniffed and nodded and turned towards the picture. 'There – ' he said, ' – that fellow in the smock, I did him. That woman next to him, in the orange. And that fellow in the red coat, waving his arm. They're all National Balancers. And him with his back to us, in the maroon coat and the top hat. He's one, too.'

Michael said, 'I'm not sure I can take this.' He went over to the seats in the centre of the room and sat down, and the messy-haired man came and stood next to him.

'As I told you, it's a process called atomic emulsification. It's done with a Sanford-Bugle nuclear disperser. Usually this will disassemble the atoms of any solid objects, or



in this case human beings, and allow them simply to fly away randomly into the atmosphere. But my speciality is to blend those dispersed atoms with other media, such as liquid alabaster, or molten bronze, or oil paint. This means that all the atoms of the original object, or in this case human being, are retained in their entirety, but in a malleable form.

'The process is even named after me – the Leonard Homefyre Process.'

Michael nodded towards the Derby Day painting. 'So she's there, my wife, all of her. All of her atoms, anyway?'

'Indeed. And there she will remain. A most attractive young woman, if I may say so.'

'Can she feel anything? Is she conscious at all? She's not in any pain, is she?'

'This is still questionable. There's no reason for me to believe that National Balancers suffer any physical trauma. But there is some evidence that they might retain at least a modicum of their senses, once emulsified. That's something I'm still working on.'

'Is it reversible? I mean – could you bring her back to life, the way she was before you mixed her up with oil paint?'

'Oh, yes. I'm not saying it's easy, and the result is not always one hundred percent satisfactory. But, yes, it can be done.'

'So you've done it before?'

'Yes. Three times. The first one was what you might call a bit of a mix-up, but the other two were reconstituted quite well.'

'Then if you can reverse the process, do it for Susan. Do it for my wife. I can pay you. I can pay you whatever you want.'

Leonard Homefyre sucked in his breath through gappy brown teeth.

'I'm deeply sorry, Mr – Chandler, isn't it? I remember from your wife. I was instructed to emulsify her by a Home Office directive. If I were to reconstitute her...well, it would be more than my career's worth. If some of the stories that I've been hearing are true, it would be more than my life's worth.'

'I'm sitting here begging you. I won't say a word to anyone. I mean, who's going to know? There'll be still be that woman in the painting, won't there, and Susan and I could move to another part of the country, or even abroad.'

'I feel for you, Mr Chandler, I really do. But the Home Office...they have their agents everywhere.'

Michael thought for a moment. Then he stood up and walked over to the painting. The glove was still in the grass.

'What if you did the same to me, so that I could join her?'

'You mean, emulsify *you*? Are you serious?'

Looking at Susan sitting in the landau, Michael's throat tightened up so much that he could barely speak. 'I love her, Mr Homefyre. She's my life.'

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When Hamid arrived at the Deluded Brill the next morning, he was surprised to find that the front door was still locked and the blinds were still drawn down from yesterday evening. He had his own keys and so he let himself in and walked through the gloomy restaurant to the kitchen. It was chilly in there, and it smelled of yesterday's onions.

There was a large envelope propped up on the counter. He took off his brown bobble hat and opened it. Inside was a handwritten letter and Michael's snap-off craft knife.

'My loyal friend Hamid, I have chosen to join Susan in the painting of Derby Day. I won't explain to you how this was done, but trust me when I tell you that it's true. All I ask is that you visit the Tate Gallery in a week from today, and recognise me in the painting. If I give you the slightest sign that I am stressed or unhappy, take this knife and cut both of us out of the painting. After that, contact Mr Leonard Homefyre at the address below and tell him what you have done. Ask him to reconstitute us. He will know what you mean. If he refuses, then burn us. We would rather die together than live apart. In that event, our house and this restaurant are both yours. Gratefully and sadly, Michael.'

Hamid pressed the letter against his heart. 'Oh, Michael. Even when a man or a woman are reduced to clouds of smoke, they can never escape this Earth.'

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On his third night inside the painting, Michael began to feel that he was losing his mind. He was standing in an open carriage, wearing a top hat and a tight grey waistcoat, peering through a pair of binoculars. Through his binoculars he could see only the empty room in the Tate Gallery, even though in real life he would have been focussing on the horses racing around Tattenham Corner.

He could hear, and he could see, but he was unable to move. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Susan's landau in front of him, but Susan was hidden by her parasol, and even though he had tried calling out to her, she hadn't and probably couldn't turn around – even at night, when the gallery was empty, and there was nobody to see her.

In the painting, it never grew dark, and the wind never stopped blowing across the Downs, and the roaring of the crowd never died down. He would never die, either. He could be standing in this carriage for hundreds of years to come, driven mad by the thudding of racehorses' hooves and the endless cries of ' *eather! Lucky eather!*'

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On the seventh day, Hamid appeared in front of the painting. He was wearing a long black coat and he looked sad and worn out. Michael wondered if he had closed the Deluded Brill or tried to continue running it on his own.

Hamid frowned closely at the painting and said, 'Michael? Are you in there? I can see Susan but which one is you?'

It was then that Michael realised that, with his binoculars in front of his face, Hamid couldn't recognise him. He gritted his teeth and strained, and strained, but he couldn't release his grip on the binoculars.

'I can't see you, Michael, even if you're in there. I'm sorry.'

Hamid had already started to turn away when Michael jolted his head back, so that his top hat dropped off. Hamid turned back, his mouth open in shock.

'Michael? Is that you?'

Hamid looked around the room, and then he took out the craft knife and approached the painting with it lifted high, breathing as if he had been running.

'I will save you, my friend! You and your Susan! I will save you!'

He was about to stab the point into the painting close to Michael's shoulder when – through the distorted vision of his binoculars – Michael saw two gallery attendants

running into the room. Without a word they seized Hamid's arms and dragged him away.

'I have to save my friends!' shouted Hamid. 'I implore you! I have to save my friends!'

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Susan was woken by the doorbell chiming. She sat up and looked around the bedroom, unsure of where she was or what time it was, and where was Michael? The doorbell chimed again, and again, so she climbed out of bed and went over to the window. When she drew back the curtains, she saw two men in Puffa jackets standing outside the porch, one short and one tall, and they had the look of men who were going to stay there until she opened the door.

She put on her dressing-gown and went barefoot down to the hallway.

'Who is it?' she called out.

'Home Office, Ms Brightwell.'

She opened the door. It was chilly and grey outside, and dry leaves were rattling across the crazy paving.

'What do you want?'

'We've come to fetch you these, Ms Brightwell. Your birth certificate, your school reports, everything that was confiscated when you temporarily ceased to exist.'

The podgy man handed her a large blue plastic folder.

'You were lucky, there,' he told her. 'That chap Hamid Bukhari who worked at your restaurant, he was deported, so that made room for you again. National Balance, that's what it was, Ms Brightwell. National Balance.'

'My name's not Brightwell anymore. It's Chandler. I'm Mrs Chandler.'

'I don't think so, Ms Brightwell.'

'Ask my husband, Michael Chandler.'

'Sorry. There's no such person. Not any more, anyway. He's ceased to exist.'

With that, the two officials walked off, talking to each other. When they reached the front gate, the tall one laughed.

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