**Gathering Dust**

‘Noooooo, please. No, I didn’t do it. It-it wasn’t meee!’ he screamed, with a cacophony of strangled cries escaping all at once from his mouth, imploring for help. A swift, harsh kick at his back halted his cry. The waves of excruciation reverberated through his shuddering figure, finding its way towards the mouth – obliging it to shut.

Blink. Closing his eyes to block out the flickering light, he was taken back to a happier time. ‘But why, why? Please, just one more cookie!’ his daughter, Ella, had begged, looking up at him pleadingly. Her small inquisitive head that tilted slightly upward emanated with persuasion; no one could reject those sparkling blue eyes – bewitching. Wisps of deep youthful hair framed her plump cheeks. So full of life. A bubble of joy. In admiration, the man glared down at her, absorbing the sweet giggle that escaped from those pale rosy lips. He could not comprehend that feeling, the utterly hypnotizing quality that made him miss Ella so much. That was before they came…

Now, in the harsh light of the cell he pleaded: ‘No. Please. Just once more. Let me see my daughter!’ This choice, he regretted: another excruciating kick. This time he obeyed.

Blink. Walking by the rows of houses, he and his wife had gone to collect little Ella from her first day at school. They were walking, he remembered, since the car’s engine needed to be fixed. He had let himself drop his shoulders and smile, escaping from every-day worries, feeling in place and sunny. And yet he felt eyes on his back somehow, forcing him to snap back every minute. Just to check. Perhaps it was only their stretched shadows that he had seen from the corner of his eye, but despite his repeated efforts to tell himself this, he had found himself spinning into an abyss of paranoia…

In the corridor of his cell, blisters emerged upon his foot, while the two brute-like men of bulk dragged him backward as a bear would haul its conquered prey. Two twigs of flesh - his dangling feet - led a trail of smudged vermillion from the bleak cruelty of the pot-holed concrete floor. Attached, were his recumbent, futile limbs that dragged along likewise - they had long been defeated to run, never mind resist. The torn trousers that hung off his ribs and vanishing hip baffled him. Before they came, he had kept eating and eating, but the red pointer of the bathroom scale had kept ticking left. Tick. Tick. Tick. It was as if his life was deteriorating before him. Tick. Tick. Tick. Numbering his days.

Blink. The fights and shouts came rushing back to his mind. He saw his wife maddened by his obsessive paranoia. What could he have done? How could he have stopped the insanity that he felt? And yet beneath his pretence, he had known it was not insanity, he had known they were watching. At the supermarket, he always bumped into the same face. Walking to work through the chilly breeze of winter, the sun was hidden, but still a dark shadow had followed his steps…

Battered faces, gathering dust, now glared up to the sound of his shrieks. It was a scene that was all too familiar to these prisoners. So familiar to some that they barely twitched their eyes. In many, the old shock that would penetrate their souls had long disappeared. Only the newcomers froze in utter astonishment of the merciless actions as their eyes followed the three men until they were a mere three dots. Behind the curtains of their cells, endless stubborn bars of steel, the audience perched, acting as the two borders of the endless stage between them. They forever glared, as the spotlight flickered, at the same, familiar scene.

Blink. This morning, he had held on tight to his daughter’s hand. He had been late to work and was desperate to get her to school quickly before rushing off. The stress from imagining his boss’s reaction had tormented him all the while, as he nervously attempted to also soothe Ella. It was show-and-tell day, but she had forgotten to bring her four-leaf clover. All at once he felt he couldn’t breathe. He had looked around for help, but Ella had vanished. Their shadows had transformed into two men. He couldn’t make out a police badge. Who were they? Where was she? A pain grew in his back. Was that why he couldn’t breathe? He was thrown. Into a car? Something was trickling down his face. Blood?—

Coming to his prison cell, he stayed in the position that the two men left him, finding a friend in the cool ground that numbed his pain, tasting the rancid odour. This pain was not of the blood that leaked out of him but of the endless image of his daughter in his beaten eyes. And yet it was a relief not to feel constantly exposed, or onstage, the way he had. The hinges gave one final scream in an attempt to free him, preceding the loud clang of metal.

But why?