

The Plan of the Cube / short story /

Hans Jeppson

Desire planted a seedling. That machine arrived on *Fourday*: sleek, blocky, efficient. Its unbiased mechanical arms worked tirelessly. Glaring across the way, *I hated it*. Do we work for nothing? Are we not sufficient? We can't be replaced by machines.

Jeremiah, my neighbor, brought to my attention that my hatred was misplaced and void. Machines can't *feel*, can't comprehend my delusional rivalry. It's just doing what's instructed. Wasting my efforts despising it was exactly *why* they sent it.

Emotions are distractions; there's work to be done.

Growing up in the *Cube*, I was told my future job was the most important. *Snake-Milking* was the heart of the *War*: meticulous, focus-heavy work. Called for no breaks, and the utmost concentration. Raising serpents for venom was key to the battle. The *SM-Block* was more spacious than other districts I'd grown up in. My friends from the Education-District got different jobs; I never saw them again.

The *Cube* raised us from birth to aid our country during wartime—for the last ten thousand years.

Time is a commodity. We had a duty to the people-upstairs. *For Russia*. They had saved me from the wasteland, I owe them my life. The time that I was gifted should be spent serving my country; although, it wouldn't be a waste spending an hour of my designated sleep-time sketching.

Other than traditional drawing—such as blueprints, designs, and models—art is heavily frowned upon. No one would mind, however, if my secret blueprints for a new machine had major flaws. Fantasizing its combustion, due to the defects I implemented in the hypothetical design. Yet shame rose for wasting my sleep. *Emotions are distractions*. I tore up the designs and ate the scraps. Still, the desire grew. The more I suffocated it, the more its claws branched out. *Blossoming hatred*.

Every *Sevenday*, two men come through a white overhead-sectional door to collect barreled venom. They cart it away and don't return until the next cycle. Nobody goes through those doors except them. We never initiated conversation, we never bothered to try. Our focus remained on our work, not on that of others. *Conversation is pointless*.

Weeks with that robot passed: glancing at it, picking up snakes, holding their jaws open, then letting the venom drip. One day as I entered the Extraction-House, she was gone. They had wheeled her off in the night. I was glad; our work was ours again. We were doing our duty. *Sufficiently*.

However, the empty space in the corner of the room was loud. Something about her absence bothered me. It shouldn't have, but I may have enjoyed hating her. The feelings of anger were...

New.

Dangerous.

Exciting.

The rush dissipated as I continued to look up at the spot where she was, still expecting her to be there.

There was an emptiness where she used to be stationed. I thought the feeling would go away; it didn't. *The void remained.* The desire dug roots into my foundation. Desire for something personal. *A purpose.* One beyond my life in the SM-Block.

However, the Americans atomized everything outside the Cube during the Ten-Thousand-Year War. Russia was dust and ashes; although, we didn't let them get away any easier. The outside is a wasteland. *My wants are selfish.* If I'm to guarantee a better future for generations to come, there's work to do.

Jeremiah inquired, "Did your snakes not produce quota?"

"Everything's in order. Why?"

"You have a look on your face. I've never seen it before. *Upset.*"

This statement bothered me. I was not *upset*. I was not *sad*. Emotions are a distraction. Emotions are...

New.

Dangerous.

Exciting.

When I built up the courage, I asked him, "Are you ever curious about what happens to our venom?"

"No?" Simple, obedient, and slightly confused. He was much older than I, and was very skilled in the craft; this brought him much respect among our co-workers,

"That doesn't concern us."

"I'm not asking for complications, I'm asking for understanding."

"*Wonder breeds complication!*" He quoted from a lecture we must have both heard in our youth.

"Well, maybe some feelings are by nature: *complicated.*"

"You know the plans." He stayed focused on work as he replayed shared lessons, "They always know what's best. Americans destroyed the world. It's our job to aid the war effort. We must trust the people-upstairs. *That's it.*"

"How do you *know* that?"

"I..." he caught his composure almost as soon as he lost it, "They know best."

"Who's to say what's best for *you*, is for *me*?"

He stopped his work—which I'd never seen him do—and looked up. He said sternly, "We were saved from the War. It is our *duty* to repay our life. No more of this talk."

I was quiet after that. Cycles passed, suppressing my bubbling innards. Feelings were grotesque. Monstrous. Satanic. Yet, temptation boiled to burst. Instead of sketching out the robot, which invaded my thoughts; late at night, I drew a man. Not an anatomy, or diagram, but a man standing. The pencil and my hand flowed, *uncomfortably loose*. When shading green into his shirt, something bent too far, snapping inside myself.

It terrified me.

Before I ground the paper to dust, clar-

ity rang out. I liked my drawing. I was strangely fond of the color green. Why should it be disposed of? Yet, shamefully, I hid it under my bed.

My thoughts were constantly drawn to other possibilities. Could I sketch my character a pet? Perhaps a dog? *No, no*—that's too much.

Says who? Who decided my art was anything but beautiful?

Then, a horrible idea struck me: *Leave*. I couldn't.

Why?

Because I have a duty.

What exactly is your duty? What is my purpose? Where's the goal?

I planned on leaving Sevenday. When the men come through the door, I'll go with. I would find our purpose. Curiosity was a disease, an addiction, plaguing my every thought, caught in its maw of wonder and complication.

Escaping my cubicle after lights out, I hid where I could see the door. Waiting for hours, my eyes grew heavy. While I slept, I saw things: moments or inventions half-lived, things only known in my sleep. Sounds that don't exist, people I've never met. Fun, terrifying, sad. The door rattling awoke me. No memory of my colorful vision remained.

The two men walked out to collect the venom we'd prepared in stacked barrels. About to run away, I froze as a hand landed on my shoulder. *Fear struck like a lightning bolt*.

It was Jeremiah. Furious, he whispered harshly, "*What are you doing?*"

Surprisingly, my fear became courage, "I'm

not going to let people decide what's best for me anymore. I am leaving."

At first he was shocked, but then became momentarily thoughtful. He replied, "I am coming with you. Only to prove your silly ideas wrong. Knowing what's best I'll keep you out of trouble."

Crouched, we waited for the men to turn away. Once our chance presented itself, we ran through the door into the dark.

The two noticed immediately.

Before I understood what was happening, the doors behind us were closing, alarms blaring. The room became red. We'd found ourselves cut off from our old world. Surrounded by incomprehensible shouting. *Fighting*.

Unable to react fast enough for one man's fist to meet my jaw: I'd discovered the floor. He lifted his foot, surely to kill me. Before he crushed my head, the air exploded. He toppled over. Jeremiah had taken the first man's gun—who had been pounded into the concrete. *Gut squeezing*.

Keeping the gun trained on the wounded second man, he helped me up.

The man began to beg for his life in a language we didn't speak. It sounded like sand, flowing in arches. I came to a realization Jeremiah had many moments earlier.

"It's an *American*."

"A spy. Must have infiltrated the system." Jeremiah aimed, "*This is our duty*."

"Don't!"

"What?"

Death. My heart clenched and pleaded with ache. Hand-on-shoulder—remembering

my own fear, I couldn't imagine this man's visceral agony. Jemimiah continued, "The Americans destroyed our world! He's one of them, a monster!"

"He is a man, like me!" I defied. "He's us! Can you not see? Look in his eyes!"

Jeremiah hesitated, lowering the gun.

Suddenly, the man rustled. *BLAM!* Lights flashed.

Horror flooded my skull; the man had reached for his gun. Jeremiah killed him where he was, unfortunately catching a bullet himself. More blood than I could envision.

I rushed to his aid, "I'll find a way to open these doors; they can help you at home."

Before I took more than a step, Jeremiah muttered, "No."

"You need help! You'll die!"

He handed me the gun, familiar clarity in his eye. "Fifteen years spent there; I won't spend my last hours there too. Take me to the top. *Show me it was worth it.*"

I hesitated, but who was I to deny his choices? Bandaging came from the dead man's clothes. I heaved his arm over my shoulder, hobbling down the concrete halls. Red flashing lights persisted, but the blaring screeches stopped.

We passed through stone hallways and large metal doors. Then the walls became white again, the ceiling low. Turning the corner, there was a window overlooking little ants. *This was our block.* I'd never noticed this overlook before; it must've been hidden from the inside.

Our neighbors—the only people we

had—continued working tirelessly. Uncaring of our sudden disappearance; they had a duty. Emotions were distractions. *Ants.*

Nevertheless, we pushed forward up flights of stairs. One step at a time, until it became dragging. His feet tried to move, but energy was low. We'd traveled for a long while, time to rest.

I didn't sleep, my mind remained fixed on the face of the dead man; however, Jeremiah attempted to sleep, but awoke from visions similar to mine. *Afraid.* Tormented by his rest.

We eventually reached the next floor. Each breath, each step: *agony.* He slipped in-and-out of consciousness.

"I... can't..."

I couldn't help but believe him. In an attempt to keep him going, I propped him against the wall, showing him my drawing of the green-shirted man. He grabbed it weakly, his pale face gave an expression that was neither discouraging, nor stone-faced as he'd been recently.

Jeremiah smiled.

"I've never seen that look before." I chuckled, tears welling.

"Don't let them take this from you," he whispered.

That was an odd statement; *what would they do if they got hold of my drawing?* Nevertheless, I entrusted Jeremiah with it now. Folding the paper, I stuffed it into his shirt pocket. *He seemed to enjoy it more than me.*

We continued.

After this, we entered a large stone

room. Massive glass towers loomed over us as we progressed through the expanse. Barrels. Each held thousands of gallons of clear liquid—*venom*. As pillars passed by us, I caught a glimpse of a packaging date.

“These were stored twenty years ago.”

The label behind that: *years older*. A store-room with more venom than we’d make in

lifetimes. We left quickly. My mind rejected the idea. Jeremiah felt heavier after that moment.

Dragging him across halls. My strength, my willpower: *strained*. Resting only for mere moments.

Heaving him along as a maroon trail followed. Arriving finally at two large red doors. Sweat and blood covered my face as I burst into the room.

A man in a suit stood, surprised.
“What?—”

“Are you in charge here?”

“Yes...”

“Then tell me...!” I dropped Jeremiah’s corpse, raising the gun.
“*What’s my purpose?*”

A mocking smile cracked, “Your what?”

“Don’t laugh!” I sobbed. “You have more venom than you could possibly need! Why am I here?”

“You obviously don’t understand that’s the point.”

“*Give me the truth!*” I waved the gun, his hands raised.

“You want the truth?”

Nodding, I failed to keep my composure.

“*It’s busy work.*”

Ten-thousand years of effort began to crumble.

“Then... what’s my purpose?”

“Purpose?” He didn’t seem sure how to answer, “Work, then... Die?”



The Lake / photography /
Madelyn Balthazor

Duty.

Desire.

Choices.

Jeremiah's wish.

Fabrications?

"What about the Americans? Those men!"

"What language do you think you're speaking?"

"Russian."

"You're speaking *English*. They were just as American as you are Russian. There are no nationalities here. *Just pieces of the Cube.*"

"But... The Ten-Thousand-Year War? *I don't believe you!*"

"The War *ended* ten-thousand years ago. *What...?*"

"Then—then what was it all worth?!"

"Before World-War IV, world governments met, deciding the only way to preserve humans—without inevitably annihilating earth—was mass-sedation on a global scale. *The Great Pacifier*. The Cube."

"No... No! There's a wasteland!"

"We're an invasive species on our own planet. Earth's *thriving* without us; lush forests, blue skies, clear oceans."

My desire fell apart; I was left frozen. The gun slowly lowered to my side. He pitied me, "Put down the gun. If purpose is what you're looking for, rumor says the man-upstairs is sick, in need of a successor."

"*Man-upstairs?*"

"I'm going to take his place—if you'd want to take mine as *Quadrant Overseer?*"

"So, I'm suddenly in charge? That's it?"

"Don't think you'll gain the power to

change anything, or do anything other than another mindless task. There's no mas-termind here, only automation. Free men cause destruction. *The Cube chooses for them.*"

Just another ant, working. Purpose is just something I imagined in one of those visions. *Those things don't exist here.* What's left is an empty corner. Nothing was missing, because nothing belongs there. Perhaps I was better off working back home.

Home. *That robot*. What did Jeremiah say? *She's just following orders*. I hated her dearly. Uncaring, unbiased, obedient.

Looking down at the gun, then to Jeremiah's pocket where the green-shirted man remained. That feeling I'd received drawing returned. Jeremiah's words echoed:

Don't let them take this from you.

I am no robot. I cannot be replaced by a machine. Automation is for the mechanical. Emotions are complicated... *human*.

Who are they to deny my choices? I cannot desire a purpose; my purpose is what I alone desire.

Gun raising once more, I defied, "They can choose for themselves."

I killed him where he was. *It'll be worth it. I promise.* ♦