

The Cloud Factory

*There is a factory clouds are made in
They make'em big and blue
The factory eats you, it swallows you whole
It fills you with conceit
And never lets you leave
If you ever dream, at the end of the day
That you're gonna live as a free man
There's no hook, no sinker, no line
And you will never leave
The cloud factory*

*It's sad if you never leave you believe what you see
And you follow the lead, but the eyes, they deceive
There is nothing to see but cloud factory dreams...
But hey, isn't it fun at the end of the day
When everyone looks like me?
Swallowing pints of stale apathy
Having dreams where I would be
without the factory*

- Sonata Arctica, « The Cloud Factory »

1

“There is a factory clouds are made in...”

I will go. I am resolute. Terrified, but resolute. If I do not have the courage to leave now, I will never have it in my entire life. I shall leave that scribbled note fly away with the wind, fly beyond the clouds towards whatever fate awaits me. Even if I find death and oblivion on the other side of this cloudy wall, my story might reach the outside world, instead of being lost with the passing generations. To you who read this: if you happen to live around the Factory too, then my experience might help you take the same decision. If you have never heard about the Factory, then it means there is something and someone beyond the clouds, and I look forward to meeting you one day.

My name is Jayu, and I have spent the eighteen years of my life in Town 27, waiting to be old enough to work in the Factory. We all live for the Factory. Town 27 is one of the villages in its vicinity, one of the many sources of its workforce. Lost in an infinity of dust where no animal ever sets foot and no plant ever grows, not far from Town 97 and Town 53, my village is a small community of two hundred inhabitants. Two out of three work in the Factory, the others are children waiting for their turn to come. Until recently, I used to live with my father, who has taken care of me and taught me to read and write when my mother died. I know him less than I would like to, for he was already employed in the Factory when I was born. The only time I could speak with him was at the end of the day, when he came home exhausted, gloomy and dejected. He looks just like any old man I know, with short gray hair and a shaved face. The only clothes he possesses are those the Factory provides its employees with, these brown, shapeless pieces of rag. Come to think of it, I suppose that I, too, looked like any brown-haired young boy in town – it is not in our nature to try to stand out around here. We are born, we live and die for one single purpose : to keep the Factory working.

The Factory, the Cloud Factory. The center of our existence. That gigantic metal monster, sprawling across miles and miles of desert in the middle of the known territory, that swallows thousands and thousands of workers every morning and spits them back every evening. As workers, we are given some food and a house to sleep in. No one knows what is manufactured there or why, and no one really cares. Or rather, we all do at one point in our lives, but we soon forget that question when we understand that we will never have an answer. The only things that we know for sure to come out of the Factory are the clouds, the big yellow clouds that rise up in the sky and then fall back down on Earth, forming that inscrutable wall around our territory. This is why we call it the Cloud Factory, for want of a more precise name. What lies beyond the clouds is the question that always accompanies us, and that I shall soon be able to answer, for I am leaving tonight. I know I am not the first to go. I saw several people depart from this forsaken place, but none has ever come back to confirm there is a world on the other side.

What I am going to tell you is what led me to leave. What matters in the end is not what actually lies beyond those clouds, but the leap of faith itself. In the last few days, I have spoken with a couple of people who have helped me gather the courage I lacked, but my need to go is not rooted in these conversations. It lies in the dreams and questions I had, like everyone else, when I was a kid. The stories we invented for each other, about the endless wonderful things that reside beneath the cloudless sky that certainly lies beyond the wall, the questions about the world and the way it works, and the dreams of witnessing and understanding it all. However, I never questioned the fact that I would end up working in the Factory until yesterday, when on the eve of my first day there my father came home deeply troubled and demanded that we talk man-to-man.

2

“Like silence breaking sound”

Puzzled, I watched my old man take a wooden seat near our old kitchen table and pour himself a glass of Soju, the worker's alcohol. Surprisingly, he then filled another one and gave it to me, all the while avoiding my eyes.

'What's the matter?' I asked, increasingly disconcerted.

He stood silent for a little while, staring at the cracks in the table wood without seeing them. His right hand was so contracted around his glass that I feared it would break, but he suddenly drank it all.

'Tomorrow's your first,' he said, finally looking at me.

'Yes. Yes, it is. How do you think I should behave ? Does it matter ? Will I...'

'Jayu... Stop babbling and listen to me for once. Do you really think it's exciting to work there?'

As scared as I was by his seriousness, I gave an honest answer:

'Well... You never talk about it, but you don't seem happy with your life. I suppose your work is boring and repetitive.'

He sighed and looked through the window. Nothing else than clouds to color the horizon. Yet his expression, as he considered them, was not one of disregard, but rather of hate and regret. I had an inkling of the point he was trying to make.

'You see, when I was precisely your age, I had one question going round and round in my head, one question important and yet unanswerable to the point it almost drew me mad. I bet you know what I'm talking about.'

'What's beyond the clouds?'

'What's beyond the clouds indeed...!' he nodded.

'Do you know now?'

He shrugged, filled another glass and emptied it immediately.

'How could I? I've spent the last twenty bloody years doing the same stupid thing day after day. Look at me, boy. All you see is a hollow body. I am left with less consistence than the clouds themselves. All my dreams, all my curiosity, and any

wonder I ever felt have long disappeared. My life has become a frozen colorless picture, and I'm responsible for letting that happen.'

'Can I help you?' I asked tentatively.

'Never mind me. I'm lost, drowning in my regret, in Soju. I'm bound to end my life as miserably as I consented to live it, eaten by the Cloud Factory. But you are still at the crossroads. I was watching you draw and write in that notebook of yours the other day, with such serenity I can never regain, and it made me cry. I can't let you repeat my mistakes and destroy all that you're not even aware of possessing.'

His eyes were now wet and full of a dreadful expression, one that described better than any word the contempt he had for himself and his lifestyle.

'You want me to flee,' I summed up.

'Yeah. I hope you will have the courage to do what I couldn't do when I was in your situation: pack up your things and cross the clouds to seek a better life. Now is the time. If you ever set foot in the throat of the Factory, it will digest you and melt you along with thousands of others so that you will never be able to think by yourself again.'

'Dad, you know as well as I do that there's probably nothing behind the clouds. The Jeagal brothers left, and so did old Howan, and none of them have ever been seen again. Don't you think they would have come back to tell us if they were still alive?'

'I hear reason and pragmatism in your voice, my son, and my heart bleeds. I have waited too long. That steady but dull life has already begun to corrupt you. Yes, I know very well that no one ever comes back, and I know of many more friends who departed. But I still cherish a faint hope. Maybe life is so amazing there that they completely have completely forgotten about us. Maybe there is another country, with laws that forbid anyone to visit us. Maybe there is a steep slope just behind the cloudy wall, one that you can descend but not climb back up. I don't know, I don't know! But everything is possible.'

I remained silent. How many times had I wondered about it all? I had invented thousands of reasons for which all these people could be held back. But all this was just a child's fantasy. I was going to officially become an adult the following morning. Now was not the time to dream about an outside world, and even less to throw my life away by attempting to cross the clouds.

'I see I'm not convincing you,' he sighed again. 'But maybe I have sown the seeds for your enlightenment. When you go for your first day tomorrow, please do something for me: keep your eyes wide open, as a child would do. Then maybe you will see, and it will give you the courage to do what must be done.'

I nodded my assent and promptly left him with his bottle of Saju. I was slightly irritated that he should make the most important step in my life harder to take, but I reckoned his speech echoed some fears and questions that I had been carefully avoiding for a couple of years. As the night went on, the idea of leaving grew more and more present and real, and in the morning I woke up with a large crack in my resolution. I even considered leaving immediately while I was still dizzy from sleep, but rationality quickly caught up on me. I had a job to attend, and a role in society to play.

But I would keep my eyes open.

“And you follow the lead”

The sun was not even up yet when I joined the endless column of brown-clothed workers stretching across miles and miles of desert, all walking slowly towards the huge metal doors forming the east entrance of the Factory, all carrying a bag to bring back food to their homes. Those bags, I realized, were why they kept waking early and doing what they were told. No need for a complicated registration system: people went, or they couldn't live.

As a child, time and time again I had had the occasion to observe the Factory from afar. I had even tried, once or twice, to go all around it. I had failed, for there was no "around" the Factory – it couldn't be described as a simple disc, its tentacles spread in every direction on unknown distances. I had watched dozens of chimneys spewing out their thick gray-yellow clouds and wondered about the role of every section I could distinguish. Today was the day I would finally answer some of these questions, and just that was enough to trigger my excitement.

The flow of workers scattered upon reaching the door as each of them took a different corridor. I stood in the hall, not knowing where to go, and soon spotted a few other people my age looking just as lost. Good, so I was probably not doing anything wrong. I guessed someone was going to come and collect us, introduce us to the place and explain what our job was.

Minutes went by, the flow slowly ran dry. There were only eight of us waiting in that hall, not knowing where to look at, what to do or how to stand. I had chosen to examine the walls and ceiling, but there was not much to see. Bare concrete, gray, ugly and... functional, I suppose. There was no seat in the hall, no ornament of any kind, nothing to attract the attention – not even the slightest touch of colour. Well, why would there be? That hall was not meant to look comfy and welcoming, it just led to proper working places.

'Your attention please?'

A man with short black hair had just popped out of some hallway, carrying a notepad and smiling rigidly. Something about him was not right, and it took me several seconds to work out what: his clothes were black and clean, unlike the usual weary brown. Not a worker then, but some kind of administrator. We gathered around him, waiting for instructions.

'All right, the eight of you are all here,' he remarked, writing a short word on his pad. 'Sometimes newcomers decide to follow some corridors at random, and it takes me the whole day to find them. Good, then let us not waste time: here are your personal assignments, with directions on how to get to your working places. Food is distributed at noon and at seven. I trust you to give it your best.'

He handed each of us a piece of paper. On mine was a map and the mention: "Nut and bolt D-12-L". An arrow on the map indicated that I had to take the corridor on my left, continue forward for five minutes, and look for the third room to the right. I understood that I was not going to visit the whole factory today, and maybe not ever.

'Is that our daily assignment?' asked a girl next to me. 'What about tomorrow?'

'Daily assignment?' repeated the administrator, genuinely surprised. 'My, no, it is the final one. Tomorrow will be the first day of some other young people, you see, and there is no time to give every worker a different assignment every morning.'

'Yes... Yes, of course.'

There was the suppressed shadow of a disappointment on her face, and I knew why. None of us had thought they may receive some special treatment, yet to be so quickly assigned to an unsignifying task for the rest of our days... In her mind, as in that of every eight of us, was this unvoiced, almost unconscious complaint: I'm worth better than that. Except we were not. The shattering of this illusion – our personal importance – was the very first step into adulthood, a painful but necessary one.

And yet...

As we all nodded and began searching for our workplace, I could not help feeling depreciated, even insulted. The mention on my piece of paper strongly suggested that I was going to put the same nut and bolt in place ten thousand times a day, every day of every week of every month of every year in my life. It was a blood-curdling thought, more powerful than the perspective of death. I could not be summed up this way. I was more than a nut and a bolt – or at least, I did not want to become nothing more than a nut and a bolt. Adulthood had nothing to do with it. It was a matter of self-respect.

But what could I do? Was that enough to leave it all behind out of displeasure? Was there nothing I could do to have a more entertaining job? No, probably not. I was only a grain of sand in a big hourglass, I had to move in concert with the multitude of others. I could feel the noose tightening around me, but I still had the feeling that I could find a way out, should I decide so. I was not going to run away so easily, but I would not go where I was supposed to either. Nuts and bolt, no thanks. There was a factory to visit here. If I did not seize this chance, I was sure I would later regret it.

Crumpling the sheet, I turned left in an unknown corridor, then left again, and proceeded to lose my way in the belly of the beast. Behind every door I opened, there were two dozen people sitting near a conveyer belt, screwing or unscrewing a little something in place on each piece vomited by the belt, again and again. And even though I tried to follow the same conveyer belt, no pattern appeared, and at the end the belt simply disappeared in another section of the Factory, preventing me from knowing what was manufactured in the end. Nothing I saw was quite as exciting or as satisfying as I thought it would be. I slowly became aware that the Factory did not want me to understand it, to visit it, to uncover its secrets. That was not my role. I could wander in these corridors all day and find nothing else to do than return to my designated place and do as I was told.

But all at once, my attention was drawn by one peculiar door at the end of a hallway. There were the letters "ADMIN" engraved on it. Without thinking or knocking, I turned the handle and went in.

4

“Irony shall be the justice you find”

'Yes?'

A middle-aged woman was staring at me with curiosity from behind her desk. Her hand was still holding the pen with which she had been scribbling on a sheet one second before. She was wearing discreet glasses and a black suit matched with her short black hair. Maybe that was some sort of fashion amongst administrators. Her voice was gentle but full of authority, and she seemed more amused than angry to see me here, so I cleared my throat and stammered:

'I... Would like to speak with you, Miss, if you don't mind.'

She reported her attention to her paper and resumed her writing. I stood there, determined not to turn back now that I had come this far, awaiting her reaction.

'First day here, I suppose?'

'Yes. How did you...'

'Your eyes. There is more emotion in them than there should be.'

More silence. Focusing on her hand, I noticed that it was way cleaner than any hand I had ever seen – cleaner than those of the kids playing in the dirt, and of course cleaner than those of brown-clothed people.

'I have no time to devote to you,' she eventually said. 'You should go back to your job before I report your wanderings.'

'What is so time-consuming?' I asked, wondering why I suddenly felt so bold.

She stopped writing, staring at her paper pensively. She slowly put down her pen and looked up into my eyes.

'Nothing, now that you ask. Well then, what do you want to know?'

'What is produced in this factory?'

To my great surprise, she shrugged.

'How should I know?'

'Well. You are supposed to administer things around here.'

'Do you have any idea how large this place is?' she replied. 'If you tried to reach its end, you would starve before being half way there. Production lines meander through the whole factory so that nobody can follow them, and they end up in a place I don't even know about.'

'But then, what is the point of all this? I mean, we live with nothing but food and drink. Nothing I know of comes from these production lines, and yet we work. What for?'

'Is it important to know? The Factory is necessary. The system works as it is. There is no questioning a system that allows thousands of people to survive in this forsaken world.'

'No way, stop making fun of me. Something is being manufactured here, for someone, and the food we receive has to come from a place that is not a desert. You are the boss here, you should know who we are working for!'

'The boss? I am merely a small, insignificant boss – the boss of the subsection

of a subsection of the east part of the Factory. I have a superior, who has one too, and on it goes until the top of the pyramid, except this top is lost in the mist. My job is to fill papers to say how perfectly well things are going in my subsection, and nothing more. I am not running anything: things run themselves without me.'

I was dismayed. There was a truth, an absolute truth, and that woman seemed absolutely not interested in uncovering it. Did I really need to find it all by myself? Was there no one to reveal something that was proven to be true?

'Then I suppose you won't be able to tell me if there is something behind the clouds.'

'Indeed. You are planning on leaving us, aren't you?'

'Increasingly so.'

'I knew it. You have blue eyes.'

'Huh? My eyes are grey.'

'No. That colour is called blue, but it does not exist in this world anymore. They say it used to be the colour of the sky when there was no cloud to mask it. The only touches of blue left in our fading world are the eyes of some rare young people. They were born with something of the sky inside, and it calls them.'

I shook my head.

'Nonsense. You are only saying so because *you* lack the will to leave.'

'Do I need a reason to try to stay alive?'

'You need a pretext not to question your behavior.' I suddenly felt bored and frustrated. 'I've had enough talking with you. Have a pleasant day, and be informed that I may not show up for work tomorrow.'

'Fine, leave if you want to. But let me tell you this after my own heart: there is nothing beyond these clouds. You will gather all the courage in the world to run to your own doom, believing that in doing so you are better than us, but in the end... Irony will be the only justice you'll find, and regret will be your only companion in death. Be warned.'

I left the room with no reply.



“Swallowing pints of stale apathy”

I leaned against the corridor wall next to the door I had just slammed, and wondered what to do next. That woman had made it clear that resuming my investigation would be pointless. I had discarded the written instructions to reach my working place, so there was no way back. I could give vent to anger and indignation, swiftly pack up my things and leave before sunset, but the last words of the administrator echoed like a bad omen in my ears. Despite all I had seen that day, everything still suggested that leaving amounted to dying a lonely and stupid death somewhere beyond the clouds. But if I did not go, what other option had I left but to accept the lifestyle that was forced on me? How could I possibly find all these workers despicable if I did not prove myself better?

As I wandered, lost in my thoughts, a bell suddenly started to ring across the Factory. A few minutes later, workers began coming out of their rooms, firmly holding their bags of food. End of a day's work. Any activity would stop until the next morning, so there was nothing more I would learn this evening. I decided to follow the flow towards the exit and to resume thinking in the peace and quiet of my father's home.

Nearing the east door of the Factory through which I had got in that morning, I heard what I certainly did not expect to hear in such a place: someone humming. An old man was sitting outside in the dirt, against the door. He was watching people leave, drinking the Soju his bag contained and singing aloud. His very long beard was falling all the way to the ground between his thighs, his eyes were veiled by cataract, his patchy hair brushed against his shoulders and he seemed to be just skin and bones. Yet, something about that old man was disturbing enough for all the workers to hastily go by, carefully avoiding to lay eyes on him.

Slightly puzzled, I stopped and listened to his tune. There was no proper word in it, he was just muttering some *la la la* that sounded like a nursery rhyme, and I found it quite creepy. His damaged eyes were staring into the emptiness in front of him. Holding back a shiver, I turned around and that was when he called me back, half giggling.

'Why do you look so sad, kid?'

He had not turned to face me. I guessed his cataract was so mature that he was almost blind. I pondered about leaving him to his Soju and his madness, but talking to a drunken old man could do no harm.

'Because I'm cross. Why are *you* looking so merry?'

He gestured towards the flow of workers.

'Look. All brown. All alike. And me, too! Isn't it fun? Isn't it the utmost fun, when at the end of the day thousands and thousands of them look exactly like me?'

'No! It is not fun at all!'

He stopped giggling and slowly shook his head.

'No. It is not.' A short blank. 'Why are you cross?'

'I came here hoping to understand what is manufactured in the Factory, but there seems to be no way to know.'

'Oh? You want to know, do you? But old Pungja can tell you, boy. Old Pungja has been on this earth for longer than he should, and knows more than he would like to.'

My heart skipped a beat. I came closer to his alcohol-smelling face, fearing to miss a single word he was going to say.

'Really? What is it? Go on!'

He leaned a bit forward and whispered in my ear: 'The Cloud Factory produces clouds. Nothing else.'

I took me several seconds to fully assess the power of his words. Nothing but clouds. The Cloud Factory produced nothing but clouds.

'It can't be!' I finally reacted.

'And yet it is, boy. We work to make the clouds that imprison us here. Or rather, the clouds don't, but our own fear do. Build a wall around a group of men, and one day they will tear it down and escape. But put a smokescreen and let their fear do the rest, and you can be sure that they will remain here for as long as you want.'

'But what's the point?'

'Is there necessarily to be a point?'

What he implied was too terrifying to be true. My life, the lives of all these brown-clothed people, as well as our work and the Factory itself, would be pointless. Just a well-oiled machinery, running without purpose.

'Do you have any evidence?' I gasped.

'Evidence?' he burst out laughing. 'Kid, do we seem to live in a world where you can prove your intuitions? I have no evidence, but this is the way it is. Everything points in that direction. Don't you feel it? Somehow we are doomed to stay in this deserted place, drinking Soju, losing our humanity, dreaming of where we could be without this bloody Factory and what we could do if we had a real life. Face the hard fact: your existence was doomed to be a meaningless failure before you were even born, and will remain so until you die.' Silence, and then he started laughing hysterically again: 'It's such fun! Such fun!'

'Stop it!' I snapped. 'You're no better than that woman. You make up theories and claim they are true. Can't I find just one truth here? Just one thing that is not drifting from the paranoia of an old madman?'

'Of course not. Not in this place. There is no truth here. Just versions of it, and belief. If you want a truth, you will have to go find it yourself, outside the borders of this land of deceit and lie. Cross the clouds, boy. Then you will know, and your life will get some meaning. Meanwhile, you will be the shadow of a human being in the shadow of a world.'

'If you say so, why are you still here?'

'Because I'm afraid I may die, basically.'

Yes. Seems like it always comes down to this.

'But are you?' he added.

That question took me off guard. Until then, I had never questioned the value of my own life and my will to preserve it. But he was right, living in a dummy system was bad enough in itself, but *not knowing*... I did not want such an existence. I had been talking about truth for hours, and now was the time to decide whether my resolve

to find one was strong enough to put my life on the line. Was it? Did I need it that much? Couldn't I be content with a life of ignorance but security?

'Tell me, what colour are my eyes?' I suddenly asked old Pungja.

'Grey, I suppose.'

'You suppose?'

'Well, yes... What else could that colour be?'

I took a deep breath, gazed at the cloudy sky for a while, and took a decision.

'That is what I am going to find out.'

6

“You're gonna live as a free man”

So we have come full circle. I am sitting at the kitchen table while my father is sleeping, writing this story before leaving. He knows my purpose, and is happy I found the courage he once lacked. My bag is ready. I should stop writing now, but writing delays the scary moment of my departure. You may think that given all I have heard and seen today, my resolve would be strong enough to wipe away any fear. Somehow it is: I may well be afraid, I am still leaving. In the meantime, there are some last few words I would like to share with you.

Some concepts transcend individuals like me by their importance, such as liberty and happiness. But understand me well: I am not in search of either of these. Life around the Factory may be a sad, horrible thing, in which both liberty and happiness are drowned in boredom, in routine and of course in Soju. We all dream of something better, a kind of haven beyond the clouds, and I would be very happy to find it, but hoping so would be unrealistic. The only thing I am sure to find is truth, and truth, too, is one of these concepts that naturally belittle you.

I don't care if I die. I don't even care if I live. I will be content the second I come through on the other side of the cloudy wall and witness what is there. I am but a short-lived, weak and unimportant human being. Yet the moment I come within touching distance of truth, I will feel more alive than anyone in this country has for centuries.

You have borne with my story all along, and I am sorry to leave you with so many matters unresolved. You won't know what the role of the Factory is, nor what colour the sky actually is... Will I find only irony, as foretold? I won't tell you the truth, but I have told you the desire to seek the truth, and that, I reckon, is the most important thing one can ever hope to achieve.

I have nothing more to say. Time to go. See you one day, I hope. Until then... Keep your eyes wide open.