The Cage  by Martin Raim

There was no way out.
The walls of his cell were built of thick cement block. The huge door was made of steel. The floor and ceiling were made of concrete, and there were no windows. The only light came from a light bulb that was covered by a metal shield.

There was no way out, or so it seemed to him.
He had volunteered to be part of a scientific experiment and had been put in the cell to test the cleverness of the human mind. The cell was empty and he was not allowed to take anything into it. But he had been told that there was one way to escape from the cell, and he had three hours to find it.

He began with the door. It stood before him, huge and gray. The three large hinges on the door were riveted into the wall and could not be removed. The door itself seemed too big for the small cell and for a minute he wondered if it had been put up first and the rest of the cell built around it.

Finally he turned away from the door and looked around. He tried pushing against the cement blocks to see if any of them were loose. He searched the floor for a trap door. Then he glanced up at the ceiling. The shield! The shield around the light bulb! His mind raced. The metal shield could be used as a tool – the tool he needed! He had found the way to escape!

He moved under the shield and looked closely at it. One good strong pull would free it, he decided. He reached up, grabbed hold of it, and pulled. But the shield stayed attached to the ceiling. He grabbed the shield again, twisting it as he pulled. He felt it rip free, and he fell to the floor clutching his treasure.

The shield was shaped like a cone and had been fastened to the ceiling by three long metal prongs. These prongs were sharp. But they were not strong enough to cut through steel or concrete or cement.

He felt a hopelessness creep over him. He could find no use for the shield as a tool. The shield was not what he needed to get out.

Then he had a brilliant idea. True, the metal prongs of the shield could not cut through the steel door or the concrete floor or the cement blocks in the wall. But the prongs might be strong enough to dig out the mortar that held the cement blocks in place. He pulled off one of the prongs and scraped hard at the mortar. The mortar crumbled into powder. His idea worked! If he removed enough mortar, he could loosen a couple of the cement blocks, then push them out, and escape!

He selected two blocks near the door and set to work. The prong dug into the mortar and sent it flying out in a steady stream. The prong was just what he had
needed. Now he was sure he would escape. But his hand made a sudden careless
twist, and the metal prong broke into two useless pieces.

At first a wave of anger stunned him. Then he remembered that the shield had
two more prongs. He pulled off another prong and went back to work. He decided he
must be more careful – nothing must go wrong. There was still plenty of time left.

Soon he had chipped out four inches of mortar. But the jagged edges of the
cement blocks had torn the skin off his knuckles. His hands were bleeding from a
dozen burning cuts. His back and shoulders hurt from the strain of working in one
position. The mortar dust blew into his eyes and down his throat. The work dragged
on, slower and slower.

Suddenly the second prong broke.

For a minute he welcomed the excuse to stop working. But the thought of
failure sent him back into action. He pulled off the third and last prong and went to
work again. He was a man who did not like to lose – he had to win.

At last he broke through. He had dug out enough mortar so that now he could see
light between the cement blocks.

With a spurt of energy he chipped away at the rest of the mortar. Of course there was a way out. He had found it, hadn’t he? He had proved that a clever mind could solve any problem. That’s how he had done it – with his own cleverness.

At that instant the third prong snapped in his hand.

He stared at the useless pieces. Then in a blind rage he slammed his fist against
the wall.

Behind him the door of the cell opened slowly. His time had run out. His part of
the experiment was over.

He was not allowed to talk about the experiment or about his plan of escape. However, he was sure that he could have escaped. He was convinced that he almost had.

Actually, he had not even come close.

The shield had been put around the light bulb only as a shade for the light. The metal prongs were not meant to be used as a tool.

The man had been clever, but he had let his cleverness sidetrack him. If he had not been so quick to use the shield as a tool, if he had not spent all his time chipping out the mortar, and if he had not stopped searching the cell, he might have found the real way out. He might have discovered that he could have left the cell as easily as he had entered.

For the huge door had never been locked.