

Cupid's Maze

Mark Souza

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Cupid's Maze

By Mark Souza

Sean gazed out the windshield at a low ceiling of winter clouds sagging over an ocean of dead corn. The flaxen and gray landscape of straight lines and right angles repeated mile after relentless mile creating an uneasy feeling of déjà vu. The car hummed on cruise control over a strip of asphalt slicing a furrow across the bleak Kansas landscape. Ahead, the road seemed to narrow until it disappeared at the horizon. Sean remembered a term from perspective drawing for where all lines converged at infinity. They called it the vanishing point.

He looked over as Janet pushed her hair back, hooking it behind her ears to keep it out of her face while she read. Her blue eyes wove back and forth across the page, her expression changing as the words conjured images in her head. Sometimes she even laughed aloud. Her mind resided in a different place, a better place. Maybe the sun shone in her world. Maybe there were hills and trees. Meanwhile, Sean dealt with the numbing monotony of the Great Plains. It hardly seemed fair.

“What’s the State tree of Kansas?” Sean asked. Janet looked up, but before she could answer, he blurted, “A telephone pole.”

“Ha-ha,” she mocked. She dog-eared the page and set the book in her lap. “That stopped being funny a hundred miles ago. But go ahead. Get it out of your system now, because it sure won’t play with my folks.”

Corn stalks whizzed by in a blur giving an impression of speed which seemed at odds with a stationary horizon and repetitious landscape that hadn’t changed in hours. It felt as though they were trapped on a treadmill with the same scenery scrolling past without end like the backdrop in a stage play. “I didn’t think I’d miss them,” he said.

“Miss who?”

“Telephone poles. I haven’t seen one for about an hour. And I haven’t seen another car for nearly as long.” He glanced at the gas gage. The needle teetered past the halfway mark on its inexorable fall toward ‘E’. “Are you sure we aren’t lost?”

Janet glanced at the dashboard. “Not according to the GPS.” She folded her hands over her book and gazed at the ring on her finger. A satisfied smile spread across her face.

“I haven’t seen a house in a while, either,” Sean said. “And what’s with all this corn? The ears are still on it. Why hasn’t it been cut down and harvested?”

“How should I know?” she said.

“It’s your state.”

“Uh, well, I don’t want to bust your balloon, but we don’t all farm. There’s supposed to be a Federal research farm around here someplace. Maybe it’s a part of that.”

“Research? What about corn needs researching?” Sean asked. “Pick, boil and eat. It’s nature’s perfect food.”

“They’re doing genetic stuff to enhance resistance to drought and pests, and to increase yields. I think they’re also working on alternative fuels.”

“In other words it’s a boondoggle,” Sean said. “My tax dollars dumped into a Kansas corn field. Sure. Why not?” He scanned the scene outside and shook his head. “How do people live like this? I’d put a bullet in my brain.”

“It’s not so bad,” Janet said.

“No, it’s a real garden spot. Cut down all this corn and it’s view property in every direction. Look south and see Oklahoma. Look north and see Nebraska. I can’t understand why people aren’t flocking here in droves. And the roads. The military could use them to calibrate lasers. Look.” Sean lifted his hands and braced them against the headliner as the car raced ahead.

Janet shot a hand across the gap and grabbed the wheel. “Knock it off, Sean. Please keep it together. It’s just for a weekend.”

Sean took back control and nodded. “It’s going to be a long two days. Your father hates me.”

“No he doesn’t.”

Sean turned toward her, a skeptical look on his face.

“Okay,” she said, “but it’s not you. It’s your major.”

“What’s wrong with sociology?”

She smiled as if it should be obvious. “To Dad it’s not practical. He thinks it’s wasted money and smells of bleeding-heart liberalism. He wonders how you’ll get work and pay off your loans.”

“Yeah, like I said, he hates me.”

“He’ll come around. What choice does he have? It’s my mother you need to worry about. She’s the real power behind the throne. Win her over, and you’re in.” Janet plucked a pink envelope off a heart-shaped box of candy sitting on the rear seat. “You still haven’t signed Mom’s card.”

“I will. I just haven’t thought of anything pithy to say.”

“Promise you’ll do it when we stop for gas, pith or no pith.”

Sean nodded.

“Pinky swear?”

“Pinky swear,” he assured.

Janet placed the envelope on the dash. Her left hand lingered in the weak light near the windshield while she admired the diamond trapped in the prongs of her ring. “How long do you think it will take her to notice?”

“If you keep sticking your hand out that way, I’d say about three seconds.”

“I haven’t been that obvious, have I?”

Sean tried to hold back a grin. “No, not you. Never!”

Janet pulled her hand back and stuffed it beneath her thigh. “My second husband is going to be nice to me,” she said.

Sean laughed. A pungent odor filtered through the vents. “That sure brings back memories,” he said. “Do you smell that?”

“Smell what?”

“Come on. It smells like a summer frat party.”

“I still don’t...”

“Whoa, check it out.”

Janet followed Sean’s gaze out the passenger window. A mile-long, black scar stretched back from the roadside. Corn stalks singed to nubs studded scorched earth.

“I guess in Kansas that qualifies as a forest fire,” he said.

“Some motorist probably tossed a lit cigarette. It happens all the time,” she said.

“Speaking of cigarettes, please don’t smoke this weekend. Not in front of my folks and not in their house.”

“You already told me twice,” Sean said. “Relax, I packed patches.”

A hundred miles from her parents’ place and Janet was already getting wound up. She’d fret all weekend, worried about what her parents thought of their soon-to-be son-in-law. Sean could hardly wait for Monday and a return to the university and normalcy. How quickly he tired of playing the perfect fiancé.

He spotted a sign nailed to a stake next to the road. “Hey, a free corn maze ahead. Let’s stop.”

Janet shot him a pained look. “But we’re making good time.”

“Exactly. I’ve been driving for hours and I need to stretch my legs. We’ve got plenty of time. Besides, I’ll finally get to sample some of those down-on-the-farm, Kansas-style, good times you brag about. It’ll be fun.”

Janet sighed and put her book in the glove compartment. “Sure, why not. I guess I could use a good stretch too. But we can’t stay long. My folks are expecting us for dinner.”

Sean turned off the highway onto a strip of rutted dirt carved through the corn. Weeds scraped along the undercarriage as the car bounced over the two-track. The lane opened into a circular parking area ringed with cars. “Wow, who knew it would be so popular?” he said.

Outside, frosty air turned Sean’s breath into a milky plume. He zipped his jacket up to his chin and stuffed his hands in his pockets. “Brisk.”

Janet looked suspiciously at the sky. “I think it’s going to snow tonight.”

“Look at all the out-of-state plates,” Sean said, “New Mexico, Nevada, Colorado, there’s even one from Maine. Weird. No traffic on the highway and yet practically a traffic jam in here. No doubt about it, people love a good corn maze.”

Janet stood at the center of the clearing, arms folded across her chest. “Are we doing this or not?”

“Sure, I’m right behind you.”

A column of twisted corn stalks lashed together with white cord formed an arch over the maze entrance. Next to the arch stood a post with a wooden box nailed to it. The box had a hinged top padlocked closed with a slot cut into it and the word DONATIONS painted across the front. Above that, a plastic receptacle held Xeroxed maze maps.

“Do you have any money?” Janet asked.

“The sign on the road said it’s free.”

“Don’t be a tightwad, Sean. Farmers don’t make a lot of money.”

Sean swore under his breath and dug out his wallet. “A five is as low as I have. Do you have any singles?”

Janet snatched the bill from his hand and stuffed it into the slot. “You can afford it.” She reached up and took a map.

Sean tried to grab the map away but Janet slapped his hand. “We don’t need no stinking map,” he said. “Where’s your sense of adventure?”

She gave him a weary look. “You ever been in a corn maze, city boy? You’ll thank me later.”

He glanced at the Xerox. “Ah, how romantic, it’s in the shape of a heart for Valentine’s Day.”

Inside the maze, ramparts of cornstalks towered over their heads. A breeze stirred through the field rustling leaves in a swell like an onrushing wave. In the distance crows cawed. “This is spooky,” Sean said. “Listen to how quiet it is. Isn’t it odd?”

“Odd how?”

“There must be at least twenty cars parked in the lot. You’d think we’d hear someone.”

“These things can be huge, and you’d be surprised how well a corn field muffles sound.”

“Whatever you say, you’re the corn expert,” Sean said. “Lead on, Pocahontas.”

Janet negotiated the corridors, eyes splitting time between the maze and Xerox. She twisted the map with each turn to keep it oriented with their direction of travel. After a few minutes she came to an intersection and stopped. She turned to check the path behind her and then peered ahead again. "This isn't right."

Sean leaned over her shoulder to study the map.

"We're supposed to be here," she said, "but this doesn't match up."

Sean checked the spot where her finger pressed the page, then the corridor behind them and the intersection ahead. He rotated the sheet ninety degrees. "You just have it turned the wrong way."

"I swear I've been keeping track. It's the map. Maybe we should go back."

"But we just started," Sean said. "Give me that. I'll navigate for a while."

Janet crinkled her nose in anger and jammed the map into his chest. "Be my guest."

"Hey, don't be like that. I didn't mean anything by it?"

"No, of course not. Everyone knows girls can't read maps, right?"

"That's not what I meant." He opened his arms to embrace her.

"Don't," she warned. "Just lead on and give me my space for a while."

Sean maneuvered through the maze's twists and intersections tracing each turn on the map with his finger. Janet followed close behind, her anger a tangible force prickling his skin like ozone before a lightning strike. In the distance crows squabbled. When silence enveloped them again, Sean felt the same uneasiness he'd had at the entrance. *Where were the people?* Why hadn't they heard sounds of conversations, the laughter of children? Janet cleared her throat and he looked up. The corridor ahead ended at a wall of corn – a dead end.

Janet grinned. "Are we in India yet, Columbus?"

Sean scratched his head and stared at the map. "Heart-shaped, my ass. This thing is a piece of crap."

"Wow, where have I've heard that before?"

"Okay, you were right, I was wrong. Let's just wing it and bust through this thing."

Janet folded her arms over her chest and shook her head. "I say we go back."

"Come on, don't be a sissy. We've only been here half an hour. Let's give it a shot. We're bright people. We can do this."

"Fine. Whatever you say." Her tone carried all the subtlety of a rattlesnake's buzz. She'd give him a little slack, but Sean knew if something went wrong, the noose of blame would quickly jerk tight.

Sean set a quick pace, slowing only to bend cornstalks at intersections along their course. "An old Boy Scout trick," he explained.

"You were never a Boy Scout."

"How do you know? They had Scouts in the city."

"Ooo, trailblazing the wilds of Central Park. I feel safer already."

When they hit another dead end, Sean broke off a stalk and laid it across the entrance. "So we'll know not to go that way if come past here again."

He trudged on, watching for bent stalks or signs they were wandering in circles. Though only a subtle change, he noticed a shift in the diffuse quality of the light. Behind the clouds, the horizon gnawed away at the sun. It would be dark soon. Janet kept pace behind him, silent other than the crunch of her feet on cornstalks. When her hand slipped into his, he knew she was worried too. He stopped and looked around.

“Why don’t we back track out of here,” he said.

Janet smiled weakly, “I’m all over that.”

Sean tried his best to remember the route. He scanned the corn for the markers he’d left along the way. After only a few minutes, he’d lost the trail of bent stalks. Ten minutes later he knew they were lost, though he didn’t admit it to Janet. Sean caught a whiff of something foul on the breeze. “What a stench.”

Janet pinched her nose, “Yeah, it’s pretty heinous.”

“I may be a city boy, but I know the smell of death.”

“It’s probably a critter.”

“A critter? Is that country talk? What kind of critters live in corn fields?”

“Nothing scary,” she assured, “mice, rats, raccoons, deer. Stuff like that.”

“What eats the deer?”

Janet chuckled, “Hunters.”

“Just hunters?”

“And maybe coyotes.”

Sean stopped. “Coyotes? They’re like little wolves, right?”

She swatted his arm. “Is my big, brave Boy Scout afraid of coyotes? Don’t worry, they’re nocturnal.”

Sean stood on his toes and tried to peer over the corn. “This is stupid. What I wouldn’t give for a telephone pole, a tree, some sort of landmark. Without the sun, I can’t even tell what direction we’re going.” He looked at his watch. “Shit. We’re going to be late for dinner.”

Janet’s expression hardened. “You promised. My parents are going to be pissed.”

“I’m sorry, baby,” he said. He kissed her forehead, but when he pulled away, the frown lines were still there.

“Why don’t we call for help?” she suggested.

“Who would we call?”

“911.”

Sean rolled his eyes. “And how would that go? *911, state your emergency. We’re stuck in a corn maze. A corn maze? Yes, a corn maze. Where is this corn maze, sir? Uh-I have no idea.*”

“Tell them it’s the big heart-shaped one off Highway 36. Someone will know.”

“That isn’t what 911 is for.”

She glared at him. “Then call my folks.”

“All right, all right, I’ll call 911.” He pulled the cell phone from his pocket and punched in the numbers while considering how foolish he’d sound. When he hit ‘send’, a warning flashed on the screen. “No signal. Of course. Who’s going to be stupid enough to build a cell tower for one guy on a tractor? It’s still tin cans and string in Kansas. I love this place. Any other great ideas?”

Janet shook her head.

Sean cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, “Is anybody out there?” He listened. Dry corn leaves rustled softly in the distance. “What’s wrong with people? Why doesn’t anyone answer? Did I breach corn maze etiquette?”

“I don’t know.”

“Hey,” he yelled, “We need a little help here.” A flock of crows rose from the stalks. “Look,” he said. “Birds migrate south, don’t they? We can follow them back to the highway.”

“Crows don’t migrate, Sean. Anything that does left months ago.”

The flock swirled and settled back into the corn. He fished through his pockets and found a lighter. “I have an idea.” He flicked the roller. Sparks ignited fuel. He held the orange flame close to his eyes and gazed at it. A smile spread across his face. “I say we torch this place and walk to our car through the ashes.”

Janet grabbed his hand. “Don’t even joke. This field is tinder dry. It’ll go up like a roman candle and take us with it. Remember the field we passed?”

He killed the flame and shoved the lighter back in his pocket. “It was just an idea.”

Janet wrapped her arms across her chest and her teeth chattered. Sean pulled her close and held her. “I’m sorry. This isn’t how I wanted us to spend Valentine’s Day.”

“It’s not your fault,” she said. “It sounded fun at the time. At least we’ll have a story, right?”

“Okay, I’m done messing around. Let’s cut through the rows in a straight line until we hit the highway or the parking lot. It’s only corn, right?”

“Yeah, but which direction?” Janet asked.

“Does it matter? We just go until we’re out.”

“Yes, it matters. These fields go on for miles. If we go the wrong way we could really get lost. It’ll get wicked cold tonight and I, for one, don’t want to spend the night outside.”

Janet pressed her face into Sean’s chest. He felt her rack as she began to sob. He stroked her hair and let out a long sigh. “Listen, the rows run parallel to the road, something I noticed when we turned off the highway. I say we walk perpendicular to rows. If we go thirty minutes without hitting the road, we know we made a mistake and turn around and walk the other way until we’re out. Sound like a plan?” Janet wiped her eyes and nodded. “Pick a direction.”

Janet looked around and then extended an arm. “That’s my best guess.”

Sean smiled, “Then that way it is.” He pressed his palms together like the tip of a plow, and wedged through the stalks of the maze wall. As he stepped through, something cut into his shin and he tripped. A fine, white cord twisted tight around his pant leg. He tried to tug it off. It stuck to his hand.

“What the hell?” He pulled harder but his hand stuck fast. “Janet, get this thing off me.” She reached down. “No, not with your hands. There’s something sticky on it. See if you can find a stick or something.”

She left and came back a minute later shaking her head. She knelt beside him and scraped her fingers through the dirt and dumped handfuls of soil on the cord, covering his pant leg and hand until a layer of dust coated the cord. She poked it tentatively. When her finger didn’t stick, she grabbed on and lifted with all her might. The cord popped free and Sean scuttled into the next row and sat in the dirt. “Is this how farm boys get their kicks? Well it isn’t funny.”

“I don’t know what this is,” she said.

Sean stood and examined his pants. A line of dirt marred his trouser leg. “These are ruined.” He brushed at the stain and his finger caught in stickum. He tugged and jerked

free. “What is this? Who the hell sets snares in a corn field?” Janet’s eyes were uncertain. Sean saw fear in them. “Now that we know,” he said, “let’s stay alert.”

Sean busted through the next wall and discovered more cords. He bent corn stalks over them like a mat and stood on the stems to keep the strands pressed to the ground while Janet crossed. The lines tugged and pulsed under his feet. “Janet, come here. Feel this.” Janet placed her foot next to his. Her mouth gaped open. “You feel that, right?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Someone is out here playing with us. I don’t know what their game is, but let’s keep moving and stay as quiet as we can, okay?”

Janet nodded.

Sean tried to keep the corn from rustling as they cut through the next wall. The cords, initially still, started pulsing soon after being covered. It was the same at the next wall. He pulled out his keys and opened the small pocket knife he used as a fob and cut the lines. Not having to lay stalks over them made the going faster and quieter.

In the corridor Janet froze like a deer. “Did you hear that?” she whispered.

“Hear what?”

“Listen,” she said.

“I don’t hear anything.”

“There.”

Sean nodded. “Someone’s following us.”

“And he’s getting closer, Sean.”

Sean took her hand and stepped into the corn, cutting cords as fast as he could. Stalks cracked a few rows over. They were being overtaken. Cutting through the rows took time Sean felt sure they no longer had. He grabbed Janet’s hand and dashed down the path making a series of quick turns to lose whoever stalked them. It didn’t work. Janet’s grip slipped.

Sean looked back. Janet was flagging. When he looked ahead, he was hurtling toward a wall of corn. Another dead end. He skidded to a stop. Janet, her eyes locked on the trail behind her, didn’t see the dead end and ran headlong into the wall. She hit and tumbled into the stalks, coming to rest on her back, her legs tangled in sticky white cords. Janet panted, out of breath. Their pursuer closed in. From the sound, Sean judged he was already at the entrance to the dead end. He bent down to cut Janet free.

“Go,” Janet gasped. “There’s no time. Get help.”

Corn stalks snapped close behind him. Sean side-stepped through the corn, dodged a pair of sticky strands, and found himself in the next corridor. Through gaps in the maze wall he made out a dark shape the size of a Saint Bernard approaching, scurrying in quick spurts. It was no farm boy. It wasn’t anything he’d ever seen before.

Janet screamed. The sound, feral and desperate, flooded his ears and sent a shudder through his chest. He froze. Before he could react, the dark thing retreated and Janet skidded across the dirt. He stepped back through the row in time to see Janet disappear around the bend, dragged on her back by a cord lashed to her legs. He barely heard her screams over the hammering of his heart. He struggled to catch his breath and braced his hands on his legs while he thought of what to do. *Get help.* That’s what Janet said. She was right. It was getting dark.

Scrapes in the dirt traced Janet's path. He followed them to the intersection. The marks rounded the corner going right. He looked left, the way to help and hope. Or was

it merely another dead end? The only thing he was sure of was it led away from the *thing*, and away from Janet. Which direction was the right choice? Did it really matter? He knew there was only one decision he could live with. He followed Janet's tracks deeper into the maze, his Swiss army knife and its pitifully short blade poised in front of him.

He never really saw the thing that dragged Janet off, but it was at least as big as a man and moved unlike anything he'd ever seen. His pathetic knife was nearly worthless as a weapon. Janet had teased him at being afraid of a pack of coyotes. Coyotes paled in comparison to what he saw take his fiancé.

The scent of death grew stronger as he followed Janet's trail deeper into the maze. Night settled in like a roosting hen leaving only a faint band of gray on the horizon. Ahead, the maze opened onto a small clearing. Sean paused. On the far side, scarecrows lashed to corn stalks stood in a row. Crows perched defiantly on their shoulders. In the waning light they looked like pirates standing watch. When he moved closer, he realized they weren't scarecrows. They were bodies in various stages of decay. Men and women desiccated like raisins, mouths agape, eyes sockets empty.

Behind the sentries stood a cluster of corpses, wrapped neck to knee in dingy cocoons. Neatly stripped of flesh, little more than bones remained. He spotted Janet among them. Encased in a fresh, white cocoon, Janet's feet dangled inches above the ground, head slumped forward, blond hair draped over her face. She hung motionless. Was she... ? He couldn't let his mind finish the thought.

He searched for the thing that took her and saw no sign of it. It felt like a trap with Janet as bait, the open expanse between them a killing ground. Was it waiting just behind the stalks? The knife blade jittered in his hand tracing out his fear like a seismograph needle.

"Janet," he whispered. She didn't move. He called to her again a little louder. She raised her head.

"Sean?"

"Keep your voice down, honey. Where is that thing?"

"I haven't seen it for a while. Get me down before it comes back."

Sean rushed across the clearing, head swiveling for signs of trouble. The crows took flight and scattered protesting all the while. He knelt at Janet's feet, nerves on edge, and sawed at the cocoon with his knife.

"I'm so sorry," he said, his throat choked with guilt. "I never should have left you."

"If you hadn't, you'd be up here with me. Just get me down."

Sean managed a slit in the edge of the cocoon next to her calf. The strands were tough, the going slow. Adhesive collected on the blade like gum. He swiped it in the dirt to clean it off and started sawing again. Janet yelped.

"Did I nick you?"

"I'm not sure. I think so," she said. Blood trickled down her leg. "Shit, something's moving in here. Hurry. Get me out."

Sean slashed and stabbed at the cocoon with the tiny knife.

Janet's eyes widened. "Faster, they're all over me."

"I might cut you."

"I don't care. Just do it! Do it now!" She shrieked and thrashed. "My God, they're biting me. Hurry!"

Sean hacked. Janet kicked and twisted. Sean hesitated afraid he'd stab her. Something fell from the cocoon, ricocheted off his hand, and thumped to the ground. An eight-ball-like sphere glistened next to his knee. Long, insect-like legs unfurled and the sphere pressed itself off the dirt exposing a pair of curved fangs. It looked like no bug Sean had ever seen. He jerked the knife down burying the blade into it up to the handle. The thing squirmed and trashed with astonishing strength and managed to twist a leg over Sean's wrist. Sean shook his hand and flung the knife. The bug hit the ground with the blade still imbedded in its back and climbed up Janet's leg into the cocoon.

Janet screeched as if ablaze and incapable of anything else. Bugs poured from the cocoon covering her head and legs. She fought and writhed. Sean staggered back. Her eyes implored him to do something. He couldn't move. The swarm covered every exposed inch of Janet's skin. Her thrashing slowed and finally stopped.

Bugs spilled from the bottom of the cocoon and rushed toward Sean in a hungry stream. He ran. He ran until his legs ached and lungs burned, and still he ran. He didn't stop until he had no choice. He walked and wheezed for a while trying to catch his breath and broke down crying.

When he heard movement nearby he ran again, ashamed by how quickly fear had trumped his grief. It might have been the wind, but then again, maybe not. This time he didn't manage to run far. Adrenaline exhausted, strength gone, his limbs quaked as he struggled for air.

In the dying light, he spotted the arch and staggered toward it. At the entrance he looked back at the maze. Janet's parents would be waiting at the restaurant by now, angry and starting to worry. His cheeks began to sting as tears welled in his eyes again. He fumbled through his pockets for the car keys and found the lighter. He snatched the maze maps out of the container and wadded them up, wringing them tight in his hands. The lighter took on the second try. He lit the maps and used them as a torch to set the arch ablaze. The corn burst into flame as Janet warned it would. He started several more fires along the outer wall as insurance until the burning maps finally singed his fingers. The blaze took off pushed by an easterly breeze and surged deeper into the maze. Flames washed the parking area in a dancing orange glow. Sean swiped tears from his cheeks with his sleeve.

Fire and smoke rose high into the evening sky. Sean felt no sense of satisfaction or relief. He shuffled backward to his car while watching the flames race across the field. Someone would spot the fire and call it in. Police and fire crews would come. Sean planned to wait on the road to block them from quenching the blaze. The flames had work to do. He would keep the responders at bay until the last stalk of corn burned.

What would he say about Janet? How could he face her parents? And what about all the other bodies in the field? There was so much to explain, so much that couldn't be explained, and so much that wouldn't be believed. None of it seemed to matter at the moment. But at some point it would. Someone had to be held accountable. And eyes would turn to Sean. As he unlocked the car door, something tightened around his legs. He looked down. A white cord encircled his ankles. The line jerked taught and swept him off his feet. He hit hard knocking the wind from his lungs. A dark shape the size of a large dog scuttled between the cars and dragged Sean into the corn.

Cupid's Maze Tidbits

The primary inspiration for this story was a Halloween trip to Bob's corn maze, a local favorite in Snohomish County, I'd made a few weeks earlier with my youngest daughter. The maze wasn't that large. It, too, had maps at the entrance, but unlike Sean and Janet's maze, there were plenty of landmarks for navigation. We live in hilly country with lots of tall trees. A tall cottonwood was our North Star back to the parking lot.

I thought it would only take half an hour or so, but I was wrong. Surprise, surprise, the map was useless after the first ten minutes. But we still had our cottonwood to show us the way out. After forty-five minutes of getting nowhere, I started using the trick of bending stalks at intersections to point the route we had selected the first time. It didn't help. It took another two hours to find our way out.

It started me thinking. What if the corn was taller, the maze much bigger, and in a region without landmarks? What if it was a cloudy day without even a sun to use as a compass? And what if there was no one else in the maze, only the sound of rustling corn and impatient crows. Now, what if there was something else in the corn, something dangerous and deadly.

The beginning of the story closely parallels the trip I took with my wife (then fiancée) to meet her folks to announce we were engaged. I wrote the story during lunch breaks at work. When I needed names, I noticed a pair of coworkers talking. Sean was fine with being in the story. Janet will never forgive me for making her dinner for a brood of hungry spiders.

About the Author



Mark Souza lives in the Pacific Northwest with his wife, two children, and mongrel beast-dog, Tater. When he's not writing, he's out among you trying to look and act normal (whatever that is), reminding himself that the monsters he's created are all in his head, no more real than campaign promises.

Upcoming Titles

My novel *Robyn's Egg* will be released in the spring of 2012

A collection of my short stories, *Try 2 Stop Me*, will be released in September of 2012

Other **FREE** short stories coming soon:

Appliances Included

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The Diary of Horatio White

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An Excerpt From

Appliances Include

By Mark Souza

Mary Givens struggled to keep the excitement off her face so she could maintain the air of a skeptical buyer. She and her husband, Lou, followed the realtor room to room nodding and dwelling over every flaw. Whenever Mary made eye contact with Lou, he'd arch an eyebrow and give a shrewd frown as a reminder of their powwow in the car. Outside the brownstone beforehand he'd warned, "The happier we look, the more the price will go up. Keep your game face on."

The real estate agent looked trim and professional in her red blazer and black slacks. Her smile came easily though it seemed overly rehearsed and never quite reached her eyes. She had a knack for knowing how long to spend in each room and when to back off so Mary and Lou could talk.

The tour ended in the laundry room. It was spacious with high ceilings and ample built-in cabinets. A large washer and dryer sat opposite a window looking out on the alley. The agent turned and extended an arm to draw their attention to the machines like a game show model. "All appliances are included with the house."

"How old are they?" Mary asked.

The realtor's smile faded a bit. "I'm not quite sure. But they are industrial quality and have been impeccably maintained."

She swung open the dryer door for Mary's inspection. Mary bent down and peered inside. The stainless steel drum sparkled. Her face reflected off the mirror-like surface at the back. Mary furrowed her brow. "I do worry about the energy rating of such old

machines. In fact, I have concerns about the plumbing and electrical in general. Older buildings have a habit of turning into a homeowner's nightmare. How old is this place and what's its history?"

The agent smiled and seemed eager to answer. "The building was erected in the middle of the nineteenth century and has housed a variety of businesses. About ten years ago, it was converted into a residential dwelling. It was gutted down to the brick and built back up. All the systems, windows and insulation are modern and up to code." Her eyes darted back and forth between Mary and Lou. "Why don't I give you two a little time to discuss? I'll be in the kitchen."

As soon as the door closed and they were alone, Lou broke into a grin. Keeping his voice low he asked, "What do you think?"

Mary tried to restrain her glee. "It's incredible, but it's way more house than we need."

"Yeah, but it's half the price of places half the size. We can grow into it and we'll make a fortune once we sell."

"Grow into it? Are you saying we can have more kids?"

Lou nodded. "Do you want the house?"

"Are you kidding?" she said. "Yes."

Mary loaded plates and dishes from boxes into the kitchen cupboards still in disbelief that this was their new home. Hank, her four-year-old, played with Taffy on the floor. The boy ran in circles dragging a small truck on a string and the orange tabby chased behind. Hank burst into giggles whenever the cat pounced on the truck. The cat would gaze at its prize confused that it was no longer alive. It was Taffy's confusion that tickled Hank.

Laughter came easily to her son, something she was sure he inherited from his father. The resemblance was remarkable, the dark curly hair, the olive complexion, the dimples. He was daddy's little boy. The only parts of herself she saw in him were his blue eyes and quick, German temper.

Hank ran out of the kitchen and the cat darted after him swatting at the truck.

"Stay away from those stairs, little man," she called.

Lou walked into the room proudly twirling a hammer on his finger like a classic movie gunslinger. He caught the hammer head in his hand and pointed the handle at her like a pistol. "Don't you fret pretty lady, he'll be okay. I got yonder kid gate installed." He leaned in and pecked her on the lips.

Mary wrapped her arms around his waist and pulled his body tight to hers. "You can do better, Sheriff."

"How much better do you want?"

"I don't know, something passionate and maybe illegal in Alabama."

Lou gave her a crooked smile. He laced his fingers in her hair and drew her close. She tipped her head back and closed her eyes. Lou's stubble singed her chin as he pressed his mouth to hers. He playfully tugged at her lips with his teeth and delicately probed with his tongue. Her weight settled into his arms and it felt as though she was floating. When he pulled away she gasped for air. "Better?" he asked.

Mary opened her eyes. "Uh-huh. In fact, if you don't follow up on that tonight, I'll be awfully disappointed."

She felt a tug at her jeans. A small voice called, “Mom? Mom?”

She smiled ruefully. “Are you sure you want another one?”

“Mom, Taffy's gone.”

“It's okay, she's just hiding. She'll come out when she's ready.”

Hank jerked at her pant leg again. His voice rose in pitch and had an edge that usually signaling the onset of a tantrum. “Taffy's gone.”

She shot a look at Lou that was almost pleading. “Do you want to take this one? If I don't get all this put away, we don't get dinner.”

Lou shrugged. “No problem.” He tousled his son's hair. “So what's up, sport?”

“Taffy dist-appeared.”

“I got that part. Why don't you show me?” Lou reached out and Hank wrapped his hand around one of Lou's fingers. Mary watched as the boy towed his father out of the room.

Lou returned a few minutes later carrying Hank. The boy clutched onto his father like a starfish, his face buried in Lou's chest while he sobbed.

“I can't find the cat,” Lou said.

“It's here someplace,” Mary assured. “The place is a mess. It probably found someplace quiet to hole up for a while.” She searched through the boxes. “It's been a long stressful day for everyone,” she said. She found what she was looking for and handed the can of cat food to Lou in exchange for her son. “She hasn't eaten yet. Open that and see what happens.”

Lou searched for the can opener while Mary soothed Hank and stroked his hair. Lou searched for the can opener while Mary soothed Hank and stroked his hair.

While doing laundry the next morning, Mary noticed the cat food was untouched and the litter box unmarked. She didn't start to worry until that afternoon. It felt silly to bother Lou at work but she did.

“You don't think Taffy might have found a way outside do you?”

“She's still missing?”

“Yes. Could you do me a favor? Stop by our old place just in case. Sometimes cats return to their old haunts if they get the chance. I don't know how she could have gotten outside, but it's worth a shot. Thanks. I'll see you soon.”

When Lou came home, Mary met him with expectant eyes. He subtly wagged his head at her unspoken question hoping Hank wouldn't catch on. He did and began to wail. “I want Taffy.”

Mary picked up her son and sat with him on the sofa. She tried to comfort him. She assured they'd find his cat and rocked him until he fell asleep.

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