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MR. REESA

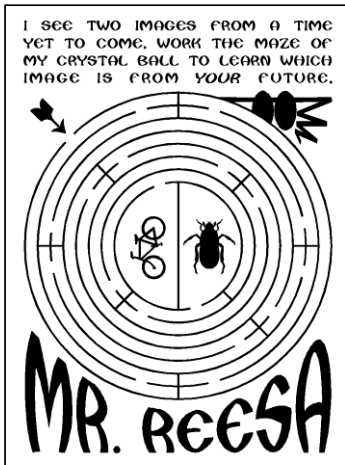
Darcy sat in the train car and looked out the window at the landscape flickering past. So did the people around her. Except for one man. He was looking at the floor and she suspected there was something on it that was in one of today's mazes. A couple of dozen fresh images were released each morning, and maybe a piece of debris on the floor looked like one of the pictures in the new batch.

She wondered if Mel was all right. He drove the car on to work after he dropped her off to catch the train to the city, and she hoped he would pick her up that evening. She'd been forced to take a taxi when he missed her one day last week, but that kind of thing rarely happened. They were pretty careful about the mazes. They'd disconnected their home computer from the internet early on in the crisis and planned their free time so they wouldn't run into a maze when they were out. But they both worked around computers—he at the bank and she at the insurance company—so they risked exposure daily. Exposure to Mr. Reesa.

Darcy remembered when the Mr. Reesa mazes first appeared. One day they just popped up on every computer hooked to the internet, and the next day life was like some crazy TV show about a parallel universe.

The maze panels were three-part, with a base that said "Mr. Reesa," a crystal ball in the center, and some writing stretched across the top. The writing represented the thoughts of Mr. Reesa, a spiky-haired character whose big, dark eyes peered over an upper corner of the ball. Everyone in the world knew his instructions by now: "I see two images from a time yet to come. Work the maze of my crystal ball to learn which image is from *your* future." Famous words that had been translated into dozens of languages, and just below them

you entered the maze and snaked your way in through rings of diminishing size until you reached



the center. It was split in half and contained side-by-side drawings of two different objects. The one you arrived at was supposed to have special meaning in your life that day, and after you worked the maze you watched for the real-life counterpart of your image. Some days you found it and some days you

didn't, and on the days you did you couldn't help but stare at it. And stare at it.

No one was sure how the mesmerism worked, or where the mazes came from. When they first appeared in the U.S. there was some talk that it must be a cyberattack by another country, but they showed up worldwide all at once, so that didn't make sense. The prevailing opinion now was that they were the product of artificial intelligence.

Whatever their origin, the world went to hell pretty quickly after they appeared. The initial die off of incapacitated people was staggering, and industrial and agricultural productivity nearly came to a stop.

Different nations handled the problem in different ways. In America the government shut down the internet, but then the mazes appeared in print. For a price you could subscribe to services that delivered a maze a day. The government eventually outlawed the services, but that didn't stop people from getting their daily fixes. They began printing out and swapping Mr. Reesas they'd saved on their computers. The fact that

the mazes weren't current didn't seem to matter to the users, and the streets grew littered with old printouts collecting around the ankles of more and more zombies.

So the government turned the net back on and tried to gain control of the situation by putting out Mr. Reesas that were tied to a lottery-type cash giveaway. And the scheme was working, more or less. You only saw the new mazes now, the government mazes, but there were some glitches.

The train stopped. Darcy crowded out through the nearest door and set off on her two-block hike.

As usual people were frozen here and there. They tended to cluster around objects shown in the mazes, and she saw a group gathered around a corner mailbox. Another group was fixated on a bicycle parked in front of a deli. She was surprised that a mailbox and bike had made it into the mazes that morning. The government had promised to use less common items, and she supposed the person responsible for making today's choices would get a good dressing down.

Darcy found the front door of her building blocked by a knot of people. She pushed gently into them, and as she did she looked down at the sidewalk to see what they were staring at. It was an insect. A beetle. It moved slowly, but she knew that it and the group following it would be far away by quitting time. The group would also be ten times larger, but then a licensed disengagement officer would come along to blindfold everyone so they could begin the slow process of coming back to their senses.

In the lobby of her building Darcy saw a security guard staring openmouthed at a large watercolor on one of the walls. The painting was a rustic scene she'd paused to look at on occasion. She couldn't imagine what was in it that would mesmerize anyone, so she stopped to check it out. She followed the line of the guard's gaze, and there, down near the

bottom of the frame, was a detail she'd never noticed before. Just a few little brush strokes made up the figure of a man riding a bicycle along a tree-lined trail. The guard was staring at the bicycle. Darcy moved on to the elevators and reminded herself to avoid the picture on her way home, if she got snared by the maze with the bike in it during the day.

The people in the elevator car seemed at ease, but Darcy knew they must all be wondering if they'd make it home at their usual times. She recognized two as Mr. Reesa victims from the last time she worked late. Whenever she stayed past normal business hours she saw blindfolded people on her way out of the building.

The office hummed with activity. Darcy went to her cubicle and turned on her computer. She checked emails and memos, and then she called Mel. He was safely at work thank goodness, and she reminded him to be careful of the internet. He told her to do the same, then after they hung up she grabbed her coffee mug and headed for the break room.

Nick Waffers was at the snack machine. He was standing with his change in his hand and looking in through the machine's glass front. Darcy said good morning but he didn't answer. He was probably trying to choose between the two dozen types of candy bars. Poor Nick, Darcy thought as she poured a cup of coffee from the coffeemaker. He was on the last notch of a belt he bought six inches too long just a few months before. She started to suggest one of the machine's diet snacks but didn't. Nick's waistline was his own concern.

Darcy returned to her computer and opened a file, her first case of the day. The company she worked for carried a health and accident policy on the claimant, but there was some question as to whether his claim was legitimate. Or so the field agent noted in her report. The agent said the man should have been able to jump out of the way of the

car that hit him, but he told her he'd been rooted to the spot. The agent wrote, "He says he got stuck staring at a piece of gravel shaped like a woodchuck from a Reesa maze. Case reminds me of one where a woman said she got beamed while looking at a cloud shape. Hard to argue with that one because clouds blow away so fast." Gravel should have been easier to work with than clouds, Darcy thought, since a rock wouldn't change shape, but the agent couldn't locate the man's piece of gravel. "They all look the same to me," she wrote, and then her final note said, "The driver shouldn't have been in the flowerbed anyway but he got Reesa'd too. So does our boy have a claim or what?"

Darcy vaguely remembered another case involving a piece of gravel shaped like a maze image. It had something to do with a futon, but she couldn't remember the details so she logged onto the internet to do some research.

Once the connection to the net was established she felt a tingle because she was so close to Mr. Reesa. Just a couple of clicks away. The mazes first appeared as automatic pop-ups but the government was able to stop that, and now you had to actively seek them out. She hesitated, tempted by the chance at the cash giveaway, but after a moment she shook off the urge and went about her business.

She searched the usual sites for something she could apply to the gravel case, and she found the familiar old precedents for mold-on-bread images and image-shaped carpet stains. But nothing on gravel. The closest she came was a court case involving a farmer who claimed entrancement by a rock after he saw an image of a heart in a maze. He said the rock made him think of his wife's hard heart, and an insurance company refused to pay his medical bills when he dropped his chainsaw on his foot. The judge presiding over the case disallowed the claim ("The plaintiff has not proven the alleged 'hardness' of his wife's heart"), but then the wife

laughed out loud in court at her husband's misfortune and the judge reversed his decision.

Darcy disconnected from the internet and contemplated what to do. Her company had been hemorrhaging money on payouts ever since Mr. Reesa appeared, so there was a *lot* of pressure on the adjusting department to disallow claims. She wished there was a way to disallow this one, but she didn't see it. She read through the file a second time. Nothing. The man would collect unless she got creative. She would have to twist things a bit, or no—she could say the *claimant* was twisting things. As proof she could use his statement about the woodchuck. He said he was mesmerized by a piece of gravel shaped like a woodchuck, which was a kind of rat really, as in, "I smell a rat," and she could argue that he was subconsciously telling the insurance company he was lying.

Darcy sighed and drummed her fingers on the desktop next to her keyboard. She knew her superiors liked hard evidence and not amateur psychoanalysis, but the subconscious confession angle was the best she could come up with. If nothing else it would delay a payout, and the people upstairs couldn't object to that. In the recommendations box she detailed her woodchuck/rat argument, then she typed, "Before settlement is made, I think the claimant should visit a shrink to determine if he's telling the truth." That would have to do. She sent the claim on up the line and went to work on another.

She plowed through several more cases and got one for hail and one for flood damage, but the rest were Mr. Reesa related. It was obscene how much money the company was losing. She did what she could to stop it, and then a couple of hours had passed and her stomach growled. Snack time.

On her way to the break room she passed her friend Rhonda's cubicle. Rhonda was gone, but her

computer was on and its screensaver wasn't activated. A breach of company policy. Employees were supposed to switch on their screensavers whenever they stepped away from their desks. Darcy ducked into Rhonda's cubicle to take care of the problem before anyone else noticed.

And there was Mr. Reesa, dark eyes peeking out from behind the file Rhonda had been working on. Darcy couldn't help herself. She clicked on the maze and the next thing she knew she was through its convolutions and entering the center on the side containing the image of a dinosaur. She wasn't that familiar with dinosaurs but the one on the screen was the tall kind with big jaws and big hind legs. One of the bad guys from the movies. A dinosaur was a good image to put in the maze; it was obscure and couldn't *possibly* affect a person going about everyday life. Darcy activated Rhonda's screensaver and went on to the break room.

A half-dozen people were clustered in front of the snack machine. Nick Waffers was still standing where she'd last seen him, with his change in his hand, and one of the other employees was holding some change, too. But the rest weren't. They stood staring at the machine empty-handed and blank-faced.

Rhonda was in the group and Darcy went to her. She intended to pull her aside and tell her about the screensaver, but then she glanced at the snack machine and a bag of candy caught her eye.

The bag was the only one on its rail, a long screw that turned until the selected item dropped off the end and fell into the dispensing tray below. There were maybe fifty different kinds of snacks in the machine, but the candy bag stood out because it was mirror silver and painted with brightly-colored pellets. It also stood out because it had a small dinosaur in one of its corners. The dinosaur was a different type than the one in the maze, but it was still a dinosaur. This one looked like a fat lizard.

Darcy's thinking grew sluggish. She turned until she was facing the machine full on, and as she stared at the bag of candy she felt her sense of time turn fluid and wash away her cares. All she could think about was the lovely dinosaur on the corner of the bag.

Occasionally she felt other people crowd up behind her, and then after a while a man's hand reached forward and dropped some change into the machine's coin slot. Darcy tensed and felt the bodies around her tense too. The hand pressed a button. Most of the time the rail screws turned smoothly and deposited their items without delay, but sometimes they hesitated, and the machine hesitated now. Endlessly. And in that eon a fear seized Darcy. What if the hand had selected the bag with the dinosaur on it? It was the last one on the rail and if it dropped into the dispensing tray, what then? What would she do?

The machine made a little grinding sound and Darcy was relieved to see the rail holding a bag of peanuts begin to turn. The bag dropped with a thump into the tray and the hand took it and withdrew.

The bodies around Darcy relaxed and she went back to watching the silver package with the dinosaur in the corner. The package swung slightly after the mechanical action of the machine. She watched it swing and swing.