

David King

MYTHS OF THE K MART

It is winter. Mark peers at his watch. Eight twenty five. In five minutes, he will be allowed in the K Mart. When he leaves the store, around five thirty, the light will be as faint as it is now. He smiles dryly to think that the K Mart authorities are dependent on the position of the sun. But staff are allowed in the store both earlier and later than customers. He feels slightly superior.

The K Mart at which he is a casual is unique in that some days it becomes one of the ball-and-maze games which are sold at the toy counter. These are the only days he enjoys. He loves pressing his back against the plastic wall, hearing a sinister rumbling; and then watching Mrs Salom's face pale as the metal ball careers towards her.

Today, unfortunately, is probably not one in which the K Mart will be the maze-game. Resignedly, he again checks the time, sees it to be eight thirty, enters the parting glass doors, and approaches his counter.

He is here before Mrs Salom, his superior, of course. Idly, he stares up at the corrugated passage that is the air-conditioning duct. It reminds him of a stiff earthworm. Once, someone had said his manner was stiff, but that was only because he was widely read.

Mrs Salom is already drawing near. He loves taking the rise out of her. A lean woman, with a wrinkled neck, she has iron-ore coloured hair, which is always in a top-knot. The sleek, shiny hairs are like those on a Christmas tree decoration.

She regards him resolutely. "Morning, Mark. Standing by doing nothing I see." She points. "That display needs seeing to. Rise and shine!"

Piqued, he tries to sound urbane. "All right. I'm not pressed for time, right now."

She passes over this. "Well, you can start by taking that mannequin back to the red light stand. How it got here I can't think." She indicates a mannequin in the aisle. Its base is against a Vulcan heater. He stirs. He likes handling mannequins — even goosing them. Why is his sex drive so dominant? He's never been able to talk openly to girls; they're always involved with religious groups. He's been out with only one: Kaylene. But that was a crush, not love. From the corner of his eye he sees Mrs Salom is not looking; he snakes out his left hand and grasps the mannequin's calf. Immediately, he feels guilt. Is he normal?

Clearly, it would be abnormal to lay a dummy, but nothing else, surely. He shakes his head. Sometimes he cannot fathom himself.

He seizes the mannequin, rams it forwards. It grazes the heater. He draws in some air, put out. If only he had some other position! Perhaps he could work in the bar over the road. No; his father has told him that alcohol is a drug of dependence. But that was just because he was a miner. All miners were "in their cups", as his mother says.

Suddenly, he pauses. He can hear a dull sound, like that in a bowling alley before a strike.

He was wrong! The K Mart will be the maze-game today!

Entranced, he stares into the corners of the building, waiting for the walls to become the familiar shade of asparagus soup, or pus.

One by one the counters become plastic. Racks of clothing fuse into one another, forming clear passages. Mrs Salom turns, and sighs. She knows what will happen. He begins to crow, as she darts into the aisle, glancing to her left, her right, trying to spot the ball. She ducks as the layer of colourless plastic forms over the passage.

And then he sees the ball. As always, it is massive and awe-inspiring; it is thundering down the passage that led to men's wear. Mrs Salom staggers, but nips into a side passage, just in time. He runs after the ball, hooting with delight.

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"What are you trying to do to me? You'll have me in an early grave!"

Mark stares ahead, astonished. Surely the old pain isn't blaming him for the maze-game. No; that was yesterday morning. There has always been a mutual understanding that there will be no allusions to the maze-game. What, then, is she going on about?

She points to the wool display, where old ladies are running worn claws over sky-coloured yarn. "I told you yesterday to sort out the colours! How can a customer find the colour they're after if they're all mixed up?"

"The shop lifters don't seem to have problems." Often he has seen grannies coolly pocket lumps of wool. His usual response is to smile accommodatingly at them, cheered that the old souls are able to beat the system. He would never attract the attention of Esteban, the store detective: there would only be a scene. Besides, Esteban is thick: once, he had asked him whether he wanted a cup of tea, and he had replied, "Que?"

"... the whole point of your life, to needle me? How dare you address me like that!"

“Oh, get knotted.” He stalks away, edgy. He doubts that even the maze-game could save him today. Why is he always lumped in with idiots? Perhaps they’re necessary, so that those who aren’t become more noticeable. He regards the stationery counter. Nearby women are passing over last summer’s gilt-framed sunglasses. Their panes are almost circular. He sighs.

Hands seize him; he is whirled around, sees a tomato topped with steel wool: an incensed Mrs Salom.

The walls become green. There is a sound like thunder. The hands release him.

He is astounded. He had thought the maze-game’s apparition even less likely today than yesterday. But Mrs Salom is haring for the book section, so it must be coming. He watches, entranced yet disconcerted, as she peers from behind a stand of Readers’ Digests.

The ball rumbles round a corner, bears down on her: but then it swoops upwards! Soon it is above the ground floor, soaring higher into the matrix of three dimensional passages which has suddenly surrounded him like some crystal hive.

What has caused the change to three dimensions? Absorbed, he wanders among the passages, staring up through the thick colourless plastic. How many storeys are there? Thirty? Perhaps an infinite number! Mrs Salom is now on the fifth one, but the ball has shot straight to the eighth. Clearly it will land near that well just in front of her.

He smiles darkly. She will have difficulty eluding the ball now.

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The following morning he feels out of sorts. He can think only of the change to the maze-game. For the first time, he wonders whether it is real, or has any meaning. But of course it doesn’t; he knows from the lyrics of new wave groups that life is meaningless. He becomes aware of the beat from the stereo section.

Mrs Salom says something, but he can’t follow what. Several times already today she has ticked him off, and he has hardly noticed. Perhaps the maze-game will appear soon.

Perhaps the ball will kill her.

And then around him is the three-dimensional matrix. He starts. Maybe he has merely to will the game into existence! But where is Mrs Salom? He looks around: and sees her on the fourth layer, right in one corner. The ball is on the second, zig-zagging up.

He approaches a well, and begins to climb. It is a trial; he has to pause to draw in some air. Then he looks down: and sees that he is

above what was the lay-by counter. The passages are like the creeks of some geometric map. Is the maze-game, then, a map of the K Mart? No; the maze-game is more important than the K Mart. Perhaps in the real world the K Mart is merely the set of instructions that enables the toy counter maze-game to be solved. Maybe both conjectures are true! Maybe, in the real world, one is supposed to use the maze-game as a map or atlas to explore the K Mart, so that one is sufficiently familiar with the K Mart to solve the maze-game. So the K Mart is a legend! He touches his finger-tips, and then recalls Mrs Salom.

Fortunately, she has descended to the third layer, so there will be fewer tiers to climb. The ball is on the fifth floor; perhaps it will drive her down to his level. He edges forward, so that he is directly beneath her. Guiltily, and slightly revolted, he stares up her dress. He sees folds of cloth, like the lace around a mushroom stalk. He closes his eyes.

Suddenly, he hears a cry: and she is hurtling down a shaft. She strikes the ground floor, and is still. The ball slows as it reaches the shaft. Then it shakes slightly, and begins to roll backwards.

He is disturbed. The ball is after him! But why? Soon it will be close.

He projects himself on to the next layer, looking behind. He wonders suddenly whether he will have to spend whole days darting among the clear passages. If only he had been a store detective! But he hadn't had the papers. Too many rules — like the K Mart itself: invisible borders, nets determined by tills. He begins to run. His mind feels increasingly disjointed, shot through by rays diffracted from memories of the steamy window of the rotisserie, seas of fleecy waistcoats ramming through the doors. And now they are out into the carpark, shooting into the air across Richmond Road, across states to escalate in inflation projections at Canberra!

And then the ball crashes through the plastic on his right.