

LEVELED Book • T

Carlos's Puzzle



Written by Dina Anastasio • Illustrated by Joel Snyder

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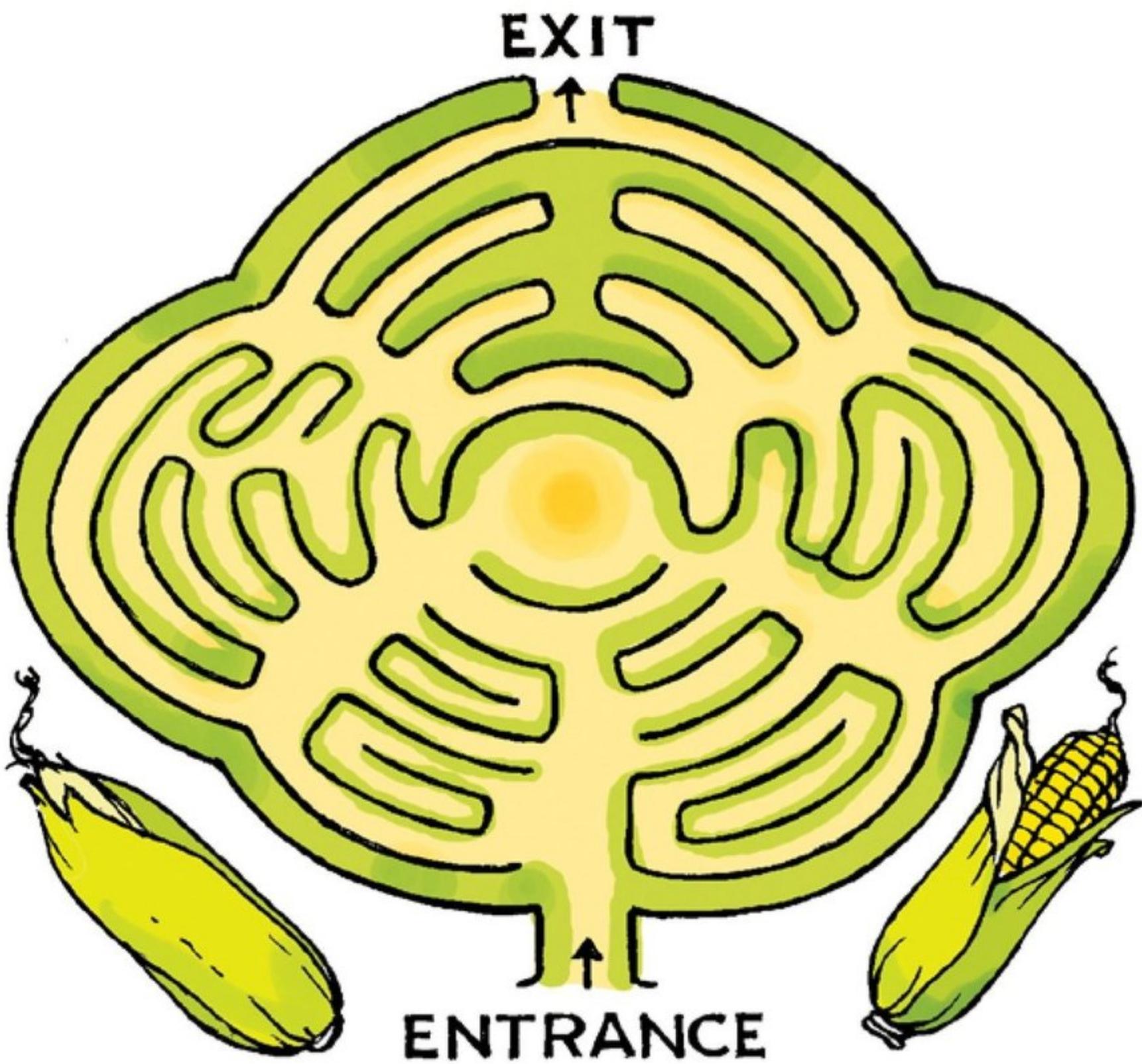


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Carlos

Carlos first heard about the maze on a cool afternoon in autumn. He liked nothing better than working his way through mazes. In fact, he was an **expert** at finding the path from beginning to end without getting lost. He knew many of the tricks maze makers used to **disorient** people trying to find the solution to their puzzle.

He was in the kitchen creating his special ham sandwich with ham, lettuce, onions, pickles, mayo, mustard, and peanut butter, when his mother came in with Alf. Alf barked once, wagged his tail, panted at the ham, sat down, and stared up at Carlos.



Alf knew that Carlos would feed him because Carlos always fed him. Carlos did everything for Alf. He filled Alf's bowls, took him for walks, and brushed him when he was matted. He even let Alf sleep beside him. Carlos tossed Alf a small piece of ham and went back to creating his **masterpiece**.

"Have you told Javier yet?" Carlos asked as he folded his sandwich together and took a bite. Javier was Carlos's big brother, and he had no interest in mazes whatsoever.

"Not yet."

"He'll hate it, you know. If it doesn't have something to do with sports, well, you know what I mean."

"I know he won't be thrilled," Mom said as she worked, "but we went to the Sportsplex for him. This time we're doing the maze for you."



Javier

Javier burst into the kitchen as Carlos was putting the dishes into the dishwasher. Javi was wet, loud, and **invigorated**.

“I did it again!” he boomed, as he opened the refrigerator door and yanked out the ham. “Make me a ham sandwich, little bro, because I am the man. I am king of the playing field with three base hits and a home run, and I deserve a reward.”

Carlos considered telling his brother to make his own sandwich when his mother stepped in and told Javier that a big star like him was perfectly capable of making his own sandwich.

Javier had long ago convinced his little brother that the things Carlos was good at didn’t matter. Carlos got better grades in school, he was an expert chess player and an excellent cook, and he was brilliant on the computer. Javier could not care less.

“Play chess with me, Javier,” Carlos would say.



"Chess? Why would I play a boring game like chess when I could be hitting home runs or making touchdowns? Let's go out and throw some passes, little bro. Or are you afraid you can't catch anything I might throw your way?"

As Javier ate his sandwich, he learned of the family's trip to the maze. "What's a corn maze?" Javier asked through a mouthful of his monster sandwich.

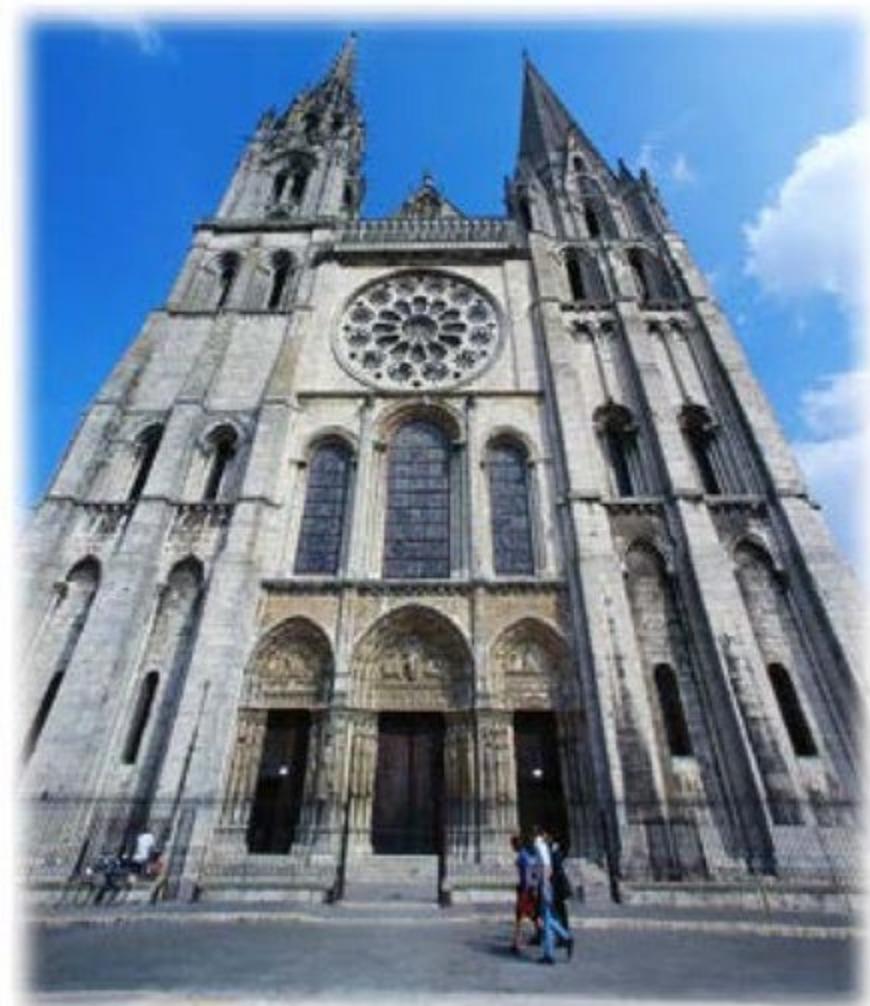
"They're like the mazes in my puzzle books, only 3-D and made by cutting paths through stalks in cornfields," Carlos explained. "Some of them are based on hedge **labyrinth** designs that are hundreds and hundreds of years old. Most of those are easy to walk through," Carlos added. "Some are more modern in design, take up **acres** of land, and take hours to solve. The one we're going to is supposed to be difficult, but not **impossible**."

"Sounds fascinating," Javier muttered sarcastically. "I'll stay with a friend."

"We're all going," his father said firmly, and the boys knew that was that.



This eleven-circuit labyrinth was created in the year 1200 at Chartres Cathedral, near Paris, France.





The Contest

That night before bed, Carlos came up with a plan and discussed it with Alf.

"So here's my plan, Alf. I'll challenge Javi to a contest. The first one through the maze will be the winner. He's faster, but I'm smarter, so I think I can beat him."

Javier was on his bed in the room he and Carlos shared, lost in the tinny music that was leaking from his headphones. After a while, he took off the headphones and sat up.

"So, little bro," he said. "If I have to go to this boring maze, maybe we should make a contest of it to make it more exciting."

Carlos couldn't believe his big brother was really going to suggest the exact same thing he had just thought. He couldn't have planned it better.

"How about if we say the last one through the maze does all the chores in the house for a month?" Javier continued.

"Hmm . . . well, okay," Carlos said, trying to sound calm.

"It's a deal then,"
Javier agreed,
and then he
laughed.





Carlos and his family piled into the car the next afternoon to drive to the farm with the corn maze. When the people were settled, Alf crawled in and promptly fell asleep on Carlos's feet.

As Dad drove to the farm, Javier mentioned the contest at least ten times. He set up rules and **boundaries**. He reminded Carlos to prepare for a very long, exhausting month of chores, and told him over and over again that he had no chance of winning.

Carlos didn't answer Javier, not even once.

The Maze

Finally, the family arrived at the bustling farm, and Carlos could begin to put an end to Javier's boasting. All around them, people were ducking through rows of apple trees carrying paper bags full of apples they had just picked. Still others struggled to carry freshly picked pumpkins to their cars. Javier, Carlos, and Alf ignored it all and headed straight for the corn maze.

At the entrance, the brothers waited their turn as dozens of people stepped into the maze to try their wits at finding its solution. The trio inched closer and closer. Alf panted heavily in **anticipation**.





“One, two, three, go!” Javier shouted as soon as it became their turn. Javier took off, disappearing quickly onto the first path to the right that cut through the tall, brown corn stalks.

Carlos and Alf did not move. Carlos was thinking, and Alf was waiting.

“Okay, Alf,” Carlos finally said. “This may be one of the most difficult mazes we’ve ever tried, but we’re clever. We can beat it. Javi will try to race through the maze, but that’s not the way to win. Our **strategy** will be to take our time and think about each of the paths.”

Carlos started out with Alf following close behind. He knew the maze was created to make a picture of an apple tree full of fruit from a billboard he had seen from the car on his way here. His experience with other mazes told him that the maze's start was probably at the base of the tree's trunk, and that there were most likely three possible paths through the maze, each with its own exit at the top of the tree.

It didn't take Carlos long to remember where he had been or to figure out the correct paths. After about ten minutes, he knew he had to be close to the exit. He couldn't believe he had solved the maze so quickly.

Then Carlos came to a dead end. He quickly retraced his steps to the **crossroads** where he had taken the left fork and instead took the right. As Carlos moved on, finding his way, turning back, considering his options, he could imagine his brother thrashing around in the middle of the maze.

Carlos knew he could easily win this contest now. He was so close to the exit, but he thought he could also hear Javier. Then he chuckled as he heard Javier shouting about how unfair it was that he had found himself in a dead end for the third time.

It took Carlos about another five minutes before he saw the exit in front of him. Carlos raised his arms in victory and started to jog to the finish feeling much like Sylvester Stallone in *Rocky*. Carlos could hardly believe it. His big brother would have to respect his win, and Javier would be doing his chores for a whole month. He felt like he was floating.



The Dilemma

And then Carlos heard Javier again. This time Javier was yelling. He almost sounded panicked, but Carlos couldn't be sure. What should he do? What if Javi was trying to trick Carlos to keep him from finishing the maze? Carlos was in a **dilemma**. He could take the final steps to the exit and win and forget about Javi. Or he could jeopardize his win, believe Javi was in trouble, and go back to help him. He could even stay where he was and hope that others in the maze would help his brother. Carlos stood there and looked down at Alf.

Then Javier started calling for help and saying, "Seriously, bro, this is no joke!" Carlos felt Javier must be hurt. He had to do something, so he retraced his steps. He checked the maze paths near Javi's cries, but he didn't find Javier. He then went back to the next **junction** and went right because he had come from the left. As the path looped in front of Carlos, he could see Javier's running shoes sticking out from where the corn curved.



Javier looked like he had been trying to pull himself up, but had twisted his ankle badly in a hollow worn in the dirt path.
“So, little bro, you got here fast,” Javier said, cracking a grin. “You must not have been too far ahead of me.”

“Let’s just get you out of here,” said Carlos as Javier threw his arm around Carlos’s shoulders to support his weight.

As they walked, Javi boasted about how he was running down the path with his mind on the exit so he didn't see the hole. He was going so fast, and it was such a surprise. "Not even Hercules could have stopped himself from going down."

"Crash and burn," Javier said. "It was a fantastic wipeout!"

"I'm glad you weren't too far ahead," he continued. "I tried to walk, but when I tried to put weight on my ankle, it just gave out. I surely wasn't going to hop all the way out."





The Win

“Actually, big bro, I was almost out when I heard you yelling,” Carlos said quietly.

Javier looked up. He could see the exit clearly. His storytelling had distracted him from the fact that they were still inside the maze and still in the contest.

“Well, what do you know?” Javier said, looking his little brother in the eye. “It looks like I’m doing chores for a month.”

Carlos saw the flash of pride in Javier’s eyes before it disappeared. That was better than winning.

Glossary

3-D (<i>adj.</i>)	short for three-dimensional; an object that is not flat but has depth (p. 8)
acres (<i>n.</i>)	a measurement of land almost equal to a football field (p. 8)
anticipation (<i>n.</i>)	the feeling of expecting something to happen (p. 12)
boundaries (<i>n.</i>)	the limits of where you can go or what you can do (p. 11)
crossroads (<i>n.</i>)	roads that pass through each other (p. 14)
dilemma (<i>n.</i>)	a tough decision between two choices that are equally unpleasant (p. 16)
disorient (<i>adj.</i>)	to confuse someone about where they are (p. 4)
expert (<i>n.</i>)	someone who is really good at doing a certain act (p. 4)
impossible (<i>adj.</i>)	not possible (p. 8)
invigorated (<i>adj.</i>)	to be full of energy (p. 6)
junction (<i>n.</i>)	a place where roads come together (p. 16)
labyrinth (<i>n.</i>)	a maze; paths that are connected in a confusing way (p. 8)
masterpiece (<i>n.</i>)	an impressive work of art (p. 5)
strategy (<i>n.</i>)	a plan for winning a contest (p. 13)

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