

Cocoons

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On tiptoes, Tommy sneaked quietly, secretly down the long tunnel of darkness. A distant, dim flicker of light beckoned him onward. He eyed it curiously, suspiciously, wondering what it could be, if it threatened him. No matter, whatever the menace ahead, he would not turn back.

"Tommy! Tommy!"

Casting a fearful glance over his shoulder, Tommy quickened his pace. Nothing behind him but darkness, yet out of that horrid black his mother's voice came.

"Tommy, please come back!"

He began to run toward the light and away from that voice as fast as he could go. Though his feet were bare, he could feel no floor, and that vaguely troubled him; nor could he see any walls or even a ceiling. Just a long tunnel of darkness and that small, wavering light.

"Tommy, you come back here this instant, you hear me?"

His mother's scream rocketed down the tunnel after him, smashed him in the back like a giant hand, and sent him toppling. Tommy screamed his own high-pitched scream of terror. Head over heels he tumbled through the blackness, out of control, scrambling for any handhold or foothold, finding none.

"Tommeeeeeeeee!"

Covering his head protectively with his arms, he drew his legs up into a fetal ball, afraid to answer, afraid she might find him even here. Yet, he continued down that tunnel, no longer running, but falling—floating actually toward the little light, which he could see just over the tops of his bare knees.

His mother continued to call, but her voice faded and faded away. A sound like weeping almost caused him to look back again, but fear flooded his small heart, drowning that impulse. Stubbornly, screwing up his face, he pressed his palms against his ears to shut out the last quavering echoes of his name.

The distant light grew brighter, closer. It held a warm, yellow color, an inviting golden glow. He felt better, braver when he looked at it. "Pretty," he murmured so low he was sure no one could have heard him. He put out a hand toward it.

As if in response, the light reached for him, becoming brighter, warmer still. The darkness melted like wax, and Tommy gave a little gasp.

He wasn't falling at all. Instead, he found himself standing in a strange, but pleasant, room of overstuffed velvet chairs and tall, slender-legged tables, a huge old desk, and a big wooden cabinet. A thick purple carpet tickled the soles of his feet, and a smell like old pipe tobacco teased his nose. Shelves lined the walls, full of mysterious books, and a fire—the light that had beckoned him?—crackled merrily in an enormous fireplace.

Immediately, he dived behind a chair and crouched out of sight. For a long time he hid, holding his breath, trembling, afraid to look out. He listened for a sound, any clue that some grown-up was in the room with him. Finally, gathering a tiny measure of courage, he peeked over one of the chair's plushly upholstered arms. Slowly, he stood up.

"Alone," he whispered, wiping his brow with relief.

Walking to the fire, he hugged himself nervously. Fear gave way to a growing wonderment. It was a magnificent fireplace with a gleaming oak mantel and a huge mirror stretching above it to the ceiling. But gazing into the flames he wondered, who fed the fire?

Once again, fear seized him and he began to shiver. Someone had to be around. Someone must live here. They'd be mad to find him standing in the middle of their house. They'd think he broke in, that he'd done something wrong.

He'd better get out quick while he could!

But the room had no doors. No windows, either. Tommy whirled about nervously, clenching and unclenching his fists, his heart hammering. *I can't get out!* he thought, in a panic. *I can't get out!*

But then he thought, *No one can get in!*

He relaxed considerably. In fact, he began to feel quite safe and secure. Little by little, he started to explore the room. He sat in the velvet chairs, enjoying the lush cushions that sponged up against his bottom. He ran his fingers over the smoothly polished surfaces of the tables. He pulled several books from the lower shelves and ran his hands reverently over their cloth-bound spines and covers.

He turned his gaze upward toward the highest shelf. He would need a ladder to reach it. And every wall had shelves just like this, all full of books. Hundreds of books, thousands! "I may come to like this room very much," he whispered to himself, looking around. "If I don't starve."

He put a hand to his stomach. He was not hungry yet, but he thought he might be soon. Maybe he'd find some candy in one of the desk drawers or in that big cabinet.

The cabinet stood in one corner. It had two tall doors with gleaming brass handles that he could barely reach and a single narrow drawer at the bottom. Rising on tiptoe, he caught hold of the handles and flung the doors open.

It was not a cabinet, but a wardrobe, and a suit of clothes hung on the only hanger. They were peculiar clothes, though. The soft brown pants and jacket were made of velvet like the chairs, and the crisp white shirt had ruffles all around the neck and sleeves.

Pinned to the jacket's lapel, he found a handwritten note that said, *Wear me.*

"No way," he said, making a disgusted face. He knelt down in front of the drawer. Maybe he'd find some jeans and a T-shirt inside. Instead, opening it, he found some funny-looking slippers and a pair of silk stockings. Frowning, he glanced up at the suit on the hanger. "Maybe it's a Halloween costume," he said doubtfully.

On the inside of one of the doors was a narrow mirror. Standing up, he looked at himself, and his frown deepened. A dark bruise discolored one eye and the whole right side of his face from his jaw to the edge of his unruly blond hair. More bruises showed on his ribs and shoulders, and the scar of a cigarette burn glowed lividly on his left forearm.

For a moment he stared at the skinny nine-year-old boy in dirty underwear that he saw in the mirror. Then tears began to leak from his eyes, huge wet tears that streamed down his face and fell to the rich carpet. He didn't make a sound, not even a sob, though, and quickly he wiped the tears away.

His parents didn't like it when he cried. Bad things always resulted. And even if he was alone right now, it was better to stifle his crying.

He blew his nose and wiped his hand on the backside of his briefs. Abruptly, he noticed an unexpected wetness under his feet. He wiggled his toes. The carpet was soaked. A fine sheen of salty tears covered the entire floor!

Tommy watched wide-eyed as one of the velvet chairs, buoyed on the shallow pool of his tears, floated slowly by. He shot a glance toward the lowest bookshelves, relieved to discover the books were safe.

"I'd better put on those shoes after all," he murmured, shaking water from one foot as he lifted it. "And the rest of those weird clothes, too."

He wriggled into the shoes and the outfit, surprised to find how well it fit him. Still, brushing his hands over the ruffled collar around his throat, he thought, *I look like a geek. Who wears this stuff?*

The trousers fastened with little buttons around his knees. Frowning hopelessly, he adjusted the fastenings and tried to tug the hems lower. Without warning, the slick soles of his shoes slipped on the tear-drenched carpet, and he tumbled backward into the wardrobe. The doors slammed shut.

Tommy screamed in the darkness, panic filling his mind, his heart racing in terror. "Let me out!" he cried, banging his fists and heels on the old wood. "Daddy, let me out! Let me out!" He grew suddenly silent and hugged his knees to his chest. *Don't shut me in again,* he pleaded wordlessly.

One of the wardrobe's doors popped open a crack. The ribbon of light that shimmered on the edge

had a new quality. Shivering, Tommy sat up, leaned forward, and put an eye to the opening. He pushed the door wider.

Sunlight streamed down through the leafy branches of sweeping trees to dapple the ground. The sky above was bluer than blue, and a pair of fluffy white clouds sailed on it like ships at sea.

A light, warm breeze blew on Tommy's face as he stepped out. He caught another glimpse of himself in the mirror. "Wow, this is more like it!" he exclaimed softly at his image. His weird clothes had changed into jeans and a white T-shirt, and on his feet were brand new Nike hi-tops.

But how had they changed? And how had the wardrobe come to this meadow? He backed up a few paces, puzzled. The wardrobe looked like it had been standing there for ages. In fact, it looked like someone had been using it for a house. A small white picket fence surrounded it, and a garden of flowers grew to one side. A mailbox even stood out front. Yet, it was plainly just a wardrobe.

Tommy backed suspiciously away; then turning, frightened again, he began to run blindly. Holding back his tears, he cried inside as he dodged past trees and jumped over bushes, and ducked under low-hanging limbs in reckless flight.

At last, breathless, he collapsed. Lying on his side in the grass, he pressed his face against his knees and squeezed his eyes tightly shut. Though he fought against crying, his small body shuddered with deep sobs.

After a while, he stopped. Maybe he slept a little. He wasn't sure. But an oddly pleasant smell wafted under his nose, and he had the feeling he wasn't quite alone. Carefully, he peeled one eye open, then the other. Unmoving, he scanned as far as his field of vision allowed.

A trio of white smoke rings rose languidly into the air from just above his head. Tommy craned his neck to scan quietly around some more. It appeared that he had collapsed in the shadow of some kind of giant mushroom. Another trio of smoke rings drifted by.

Fear gave way to curiosity. Tommy uncurled slowly and stood up. A tuft of blond hair, then his forehead, then his large brown eyes rose over the mushroom's edge.

A plump blue caterpillar, sitting up in an unlikely position, puffed nonchalantly on a hookah while it knitted away at a shimmering silver cloth with its lower hands. The needles flew at a rapid pace, and the cloth grew even as Tommy watched. He could not tell exactly where the thread came from.

"Oh, gross!" Tommy muttered to himself in amazement. "A smoking worm."

Turning huge eyes upon him, the caterpillar winked. "Quite unique, don't you agree?"

Tommy jumped back, surprised and a little frightened to find the creature could talk. "Who are you?" he asked in the barest of whispers.

"Why, whoever I want to be," it answered curtly. "It depends on my mood, and the direction the wind is blowing, and whether there was one ring around the moon last night, or two, or three." Pausing, it inhaled deeply from the hookah again. "Want some?" it offered politely.

Tommy shrugged and looked at his shoes. "I'm supposed to just say no." He swallowed nervously. "Can you tell me where I am?"

The caterpillar rolled its eyes left to right, up and down. "Here and there," it said. "Everywhere and nowhere. Where do you think you are?"

"I *was* in a hospital," Tommy murmured in a low voice, feeling confused and fearful once again as he remembered a word: "coma." He'd heard it as if through a thick curtain, from far away, just before he'd fled from his mother into that dark tunnel with the inviting light at the end. He didn't know what the word meant, yet it scared him. "But I can't be there and here at the same time. You must be a dream."

The caterpillar smiled thinly. "Perhaps it is you who are the dream," it suggested, waving the hookah in a grand gesture.

Tommy cringed, covering his head as the pipe swung his way.

The knitting needles stopped. The caterpillar leaned forward in concern. "My, you are a pretty sight," it said. "All black and blue. Almost as blue as me. It's rude of you to be prettier than me, you know."

Tommy blushed with embarrassment. The caterpillar hadn't tried to hit him with the pipe at all. Straightening, he put on a sheepish face. "But you're only a bug," he said.

"A bug?" The caterpillar bristled indignantly. Inhaling deeply from his hookah, he blew three smoke rings. They settled over Tommy's head and oscillated up and down his form before dissipating. "A bug, indeed! Well, I am a bug with a future!"

The knitting needles resumed their clacking. The caterpillar worked at a furious pace, and the silver cloth grew by several rows.

Feeling ignored, Tommy asked in his softest voice, "What are you knitting?"

The caterpillar gave him a stern look. "Speak up, young man. You must learn to speak up. If you don't speak up, how shall anyone know you are there?"

Tommy pushed out his lower lip at this scolding, and his voice became even softer, a bare murmur. "I don't want people to know I'm here," he answered. "I just want them to leave me alone."

The knitting needles stopped again. The caterpillar looked at Tommy for a long time before he spoke, and Tommy began to squirm.

"Except for the occasional passing girl or boy," it said finally, "or a dormouse or that damnable Cheshire Cat, I've been very much alone on this mushroom for a long time." It jabbed the hookah in Tommy's direction. "Believe you me, being alone is not all it's cracked up to be." It took another puff from the hookah and exhaled the fragrant smoke in a long stream. "If you really wanted to be alone, why, you'd have passed me right by without so much as a hello-how-are-you. So the question is, if you don't *really* want to be alone, what do you want?"

Tommy scratched his head, inwardly irritated with himself. He'd felt stupid before, but never in front of a caterpillar. "I know I don't want to go home," he said.

The caterpillar nodded. "Then stay right here just as long as you want—nobody will make you leave." Finishing off another row, it set the needles aside, broke the threads and tied them off. "Excuse me for a moment," it said suddenly. Several pairs of hands shook and fluffed the silver cloth. Then, with an adroit movement, the hands flipped the cloth high into the air.

Like a glimmering piece of gossamer, the cloth settled lazily down over the caterpillar, draping him completely. The hookah disappeared just under the cloth's edge, and gray smoke filtered from beneath. The caterpillar coughed, "Guess I'll have to give this up now," it said in a somewhat muffled voice.

"Wow!" Tommy exclaimed, staring at the gleaming shroud with a sudden realization. "Is that your cocoon? I thought you made it from spit, or something!"

"Please!" the caterpillar answered disdainfully, giving a little shiver under its blanket. "I am far too sophisticated and well bred a caterpillar to go spitting all over myself. And the proper term is not cocoon, but chrysalis."

Leaning on the mushroom, Tommy reached out and touched the cloth. It felt silky, cool against his fingers as he gently stroked it.

"Ooh, that's good!" the caterpillar said. "A little higher on the left. Yes!"

"How long are you going to be in there?" Tommy asked curiously as he continued to rub where directed.

"Until I'm ready to come out," the caterpillar answered matter-of-factly. "One should never emerge from one's cocoon until one is perfectly ready."

Tommy paused. "I thought you called it a chrysalis."

Inside the silver cloth, the caterpillar shrugged. "Cocoon, chrysalis, whatever. At a time like this, semantics lose their meaning." Another cloud of smoke seeped from beneath the cloth's edge, stinging Tommy's eyes. He backed a step away as the caterpillar sighed. "It is so warm and secure in here. Quite snug and comfy."

Tommy hung his head. Sitting down on the ground, he plucked a blade of grass and idly shredded it. "I wish I had such a nice cocoon," he said.

"But you do," the caterpillar laughed. "And you're in it now."

A strange commotion began under the silver blanket. The hookah suddenly slipped from under the edge, streaming a small thin trail of smoke from its lip.

"I don't understand," Tommy murmured as he watched.

"Everyone has a cocoon," the caterpillar replied. The silver blanket shivered and stirred and quivered as if some kind of wrestling match were going on beneath. "Some people have lots of cocoons."

Tommy scoffed and tore at another piece of grass. "You just think that because you're a caterpillar," he accused dispiritedly.

"Oh, my!" the caterpillar exclaimed. "Would you mind? Grab a corner there and give it a yank!"

Tommy rose to his feet and, grasping a corner of the silver cloth, he pulled the blanket away.

A wondrous, large-eyed butterfly perched on the mushroom, fanning wings of black and blue and gold and silver, where the caterpillar had been. "Not bad!" it said in the caterpillar's voice. "Not bad, if I do say so myself." It gave a longing look at the hookah lying nearby. "Again," it asked, looking from the pipe to Tommy, "would you mind? Just one last time—for auld lang syne, as they say."

Tommy noticed that the caterpillar's hands were gone, and the butterfly's legs could not grasp the pipe. Carefully, he raised it to the butterfly's lips.

"Thank you," the butterfly said. Inhaling for a final time, it blew three final smoke rings high into the air. Together, butterfly and boy watched as the rings sailed away like clouds into the blue sky. "And now we put aside old things to seek new wonders."

"Let me come with you!" Tommy cried, suddenly frightened at the thought of being left alone.

The butterfly winked one large eye. "You have no wings yet," it said. "But in time, perhaps. In time."

It sprang into the air suddenly. Testing its wings, it circled over Tommy and the mushroom. Then it climbed higher and fluttered away above the trees. Tommy watched, his mouth agape, and the butterfly's voice came back to him, singing:

*Full leisurely we glide,
Our wings are open wide;
The beauty kept inside
Nevermore to hide—
Nevermore to hide!*

Tommy listened until only an echo of the song remained in his head. For a moment, he stood expectantly watching the treetops, but the butterfly didn't return.

Alone again, he felt a too-familiar sense of abandonment. A single tear glittered on the lashes of one eye, but he brushed it away, stubbornly refusing to cry. After a while, he sat down on the grass and ripped up yet another blade of grass, and tried to think what he should do next.

Then his eyes fell upon the beautiful silver cloth lying upon the lawn. Gathering it, he hugged it against his chest and face and wrapped its silky smoothness around his shoulders. The sense of abandonment faded. The caterpillar—that is, the butterfly—had left him something.

Slowly, he got to his feet and stared at the mushroom. A sudden urge possessed him, and with a little effort, he climbed up on top of it and settled himself in a cross-legged position. *How different it all looks from up here!* he thought as he gazed about.

His hand brushed the hookah. A bit of smoke continued to seep from its lip. He looked nervously at the hookah, wondered what exactly it contained and if he dared to try it. "In time, perhaps," he said with the tiniest smile, doing his best to mimic the caterpillar's voice as he fingered the slender pipe. "In time."

He thought about the caterpillar—really such a shriveled, blue little thing—and how it had transformed. There was something to contemplate, and he would figure it all out in time. He wondered what it would be like to open his own cocoon someday and find a splendid pair of wings.

In time, perhaps he'd learn.

Dreaming of that, he drew the silver cloth closer about his shoulders and huddled down inside its folds. For now at least it was enough to feel warm and secure, snug and comfy, and to know that the butterfly was out there somewhere, waiting for him.