

## The Cocoon

For two months Chris Allis could think of nothing but the cocoon. He did not know where the idea came from, only that it came, and that now it would not go away. Secretly, he treasured it. Yet at work and during other social obligations, always when Chris wanted least to be distracted from pressing tasks in his life, the cocoon emerged enormously in the center of his mind.

At first Chris believed he was ill, that the cocoon was an internal mirage or the fanciful symptom of a physical threat developing in the tissue of his brain. He wondered did he possibly have a tumor, was he newly cancerous? These concerns motivated Chris Allis to seek two directions of medical opinion. On the one hand he visited neurologists, before whom he extended his arms at his sides, reached inward to touch his nose while his eyes were closed, and in every instance finished the visit by flapping his arms several times although no one asked him to. On the other hand, Chris visited psychiatrists, the various preliminary diagnoses of whom were so incompatible from one to the next as to confound Chris completely, as if he were staring at a resplendent stained glass window in expectation of seeing only one color before his eyes. This unexpected impression remained with Chris Allis long after he decided against further medical assistance. He did not know exactly what to make of the impression, except that it stuck, so eventually he decided to test it against his faith.

Like many of his contemporaries, Chris became religious mostly when he was worried about something. It was in that frame of mind, after puzzling over

the persistent appearance of the stained glass in his thoughts and now in his dreams as well, that Chris tip-toed sheepishly into church and, before his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, groped his way to a bench in the rear of the congregation. On the inside the church, and almost any church, was completely unfamiliar to Chris, who did the majority of his occasional praying at home with his arms folded across his reclined chest like an embalmed corpse. He had not expected the building to be empty, the air to be stale. Yet these discoveries, after a suitable time for adjustment and acclimation, did not detract from Chris's experience, but enhanced it. Chris felt terrifically alone and composed, as if nothing superfluous were stirring within him to steal his attention. A sensation of profound awe overcame him as his eyes gradually pierced through the darkness to observe, like a white phantom fluttering overhead, an enormous plaster crucified Jesus with its arms spread extremely outward and its hands nailed to its cross like a butterfly's wings on a display board.

Upon recognizing this icon, Chris Allis immediately crossed himself and muttered several Hail Mary's he did not hear himself vocalize. Then, like a pilgrim bewitched by the sight of the Holy Land, Chris Allis rose to his feet and more floated than walked to the front of the church. There, he gazed upward at the crucified Jesus and wept at it as a transparent reflection of himself. He stared at the thin, strong arms, the sagging, remarkable ribcage. A deep sense of connection revitalized him, put a complicated buffer of perspective around his current experience, helped him momentarily to forget his troubles. Yet his departure from the church would not fully comply with that easy remedy, and

Chris Allis was forced, upon turning around to exit the cavernous building, to stand face-to-face with his original reason for coming inside: the circular stained glass window far above the entrance.

It would be fitting to refer to the window as a mandala on account of both its large, circular shape and its effect of pulling Chris Allis inward into charged psychic contact with his secret self. As he stood before the window, feeling somewhat victimized or else infused by it, Chris had the incontrovertible insight that he was again seeing himself in some way. However, unlike the experience with the crucified Jesus, in relation to which Chris felt a cathartic identification, toward the window he felt a terrible dread, as if before him was a symbolic map to his future and he could not quite read it or follow it. Yet it was obvious to Chris Allis that to follow the window was the only valid response to the notion of cocoons that was taking over his inner life.

"What am I to do?" Chris Allis asked the shining window, whose biblical imagery centered on either the Armageddon or the original chaos, Chris could not tell which. There were angels floating at the periphery of the window, as if a snapshot had been taken in glass as they turned world history around and around. Chris waited silently for an answer to his question, but never received one directly. The church continued to languish in its own afternoon shade, disclosing nothing of clear importance. It imparted its messages as elusive hints, which primarily took the form of fleeting patterns of light and dark on the mandala's impassive face, as clouds, or possibly messengers of God, worked the illumination from far behind in the sky.

That day of visiting the church was a turning point for Chris Allis in his relation to the cocoon in his thoughts. He became aware, immediately upon returning to the sunlit secular world, that he needed to do something physical to provide a balance for his weighty inner experience. In particular Chris decided, while lunching uncharacteristically on exotic bitter greens and milkweed, that an actual cocoon might somehow help him in his quest to understand things. With that vague goal in mind, Chris abandoned his grassy lunch in mid-chew and absent-mindedly fluttered away from his outdoor table at the small café without paying for or even requesting his bill. In fact, at the first pedestrian stop light he reached, Chris was surprised to find in his mouth an unfinished leaflet of Arugula, which at first he mistook for an enzymatic coating across his tongue. This sensation triggered a short panic in Chris, who believed he was finally exhibiting the first clear signs of a terrible metamorphosis. Without waiting for the stop light to turn green, he ran into the street, bounced lightly off the radiator grill of a Mercedes as it glided to a halt on silent anti-lock brakes, and swallowed hard at the far curb with his heart racing. It was then that Chris realized he was still eating his salad and that his tongue was not changing. The leaflet slid free to a new position between his upper and lower jaw, and for all its suspicious bitterness, the resumed chewing of it and eventual spitting of it onto the sidewalk confirmed its true nature.

This seizure not only rattled the nerves of Chris Allis; it also embarrassed him. In the wake of it, he became far too self-conscious about his behavior to follow through on his original idea of intentionally seeking out an entomologist

and confessing his situation for the sake of acquiring a cocoon. He might have revised the plan, which was idealistic anyway. That is, Chris Allis might have approached an entomologist, but not revealed the troubled secrets of his heart during the encounter. After all, there were other, and easier, ways to trade in cocoons. Why not simply purchase one with a stiff upper lip: trade one's money for the petrified specimen, drop it into an accommodating sports coat pocket, and be on one's way? Yes, that furtive exchange possessed a definite spiritual economy as well as an appealing romanticism reminiscent of hard-boiled detective novels and black market adventures. Yet Chris had to admit upon considering it how much more he desired the expertise of the entomologist than the actual cocoon. "No, I do not want to own one," he claimed, "I am only concerned with the facts. Then again a cocoon is the bluntest fact of all about cocoons in general. Then again, how will I understand one alone? Then again. Then again." And thus began a long series of runaway, illogical, associative leaps that eventually carried Chris Allis almost blindly to the zoo instead of a more formal collector.

Once there he began to understand why, and the reason surprised him. Strange as it was to own the feeling, Chris Allis was afraid of entomologists. He did not want to be anywhere near one. The truth of that sentiment was apparent to him in the degree of relief he experienced over winding up at the zoo rather than his original objective. "I am understanding myself via degrees of discomfort," Chris Allis noted with an odd wonder for the idea. "Because the zoo feels threatening too," he concluded. In this way his logical faculties resurfaced

rather unexpectedly and Chris Allis understood how much more wildly opposed to bug hunters he was than to bug and animal caretakers, who also upset him. It was a complicated churning of the mind, and Chris let it go to continue his pursuits.

Specifically, Chris Allis was in pursuit of an exhibit about caterpillars. He wanted to observe them during the pupa stage, at which time they retreat into cocoons and die for the sake of life. It was a hard act to find, particularly because Chris was not feeling his normal self. As he stepped to the map of the zoo located just within the admission gates, he could not recall if he had paid for a ticket or meandered in as part of a disorderly head count of school children. What's more, he could not read the map very well; its monochrome concentric circles conspired to stir up a deep vertigo within Chris, as if he were standing at either the bottom or top of a dizzying, narrow well. Meanwhile at the end of this extended tunnel, Chris saw a vague light about the size of a pinhead. This sensation continued until Chris realized he was not looking at the map anymore, but following at an inconspicuous distance behind a pack of children and two chaperons. Were the children the source of the light?

Chris Allis recognized he was confused, and decided to follow the children for no other reason than a total lack of will to do otherwise. In that sense, he was not deciding anything, but complying with decisions that occurred beyond his control. It was another fateful moment for Chris in that his submission to these mysterious external directives resulted in his prompt arrival to exactly what he sought--namely the insect exhibit, which resided in a small,

remote facility within the gates of the children's petting zoo, and would probably have evaded Chris for much longer on any other day. As he arrived, he sank into a deep and sudden exhaustion, which enervated his limbs and required of him that he lay perfectly still on the nearest stretch of turf the better to regain his lost strength. It was then he found himself praying in his usual fashion with his hands across his rising chest.

"Please God rid me of these cringing stubby legs. Let me sleep forever apart from them and the thick fibers of hair that bind me like a worm in a casement. My soul is the secret formula of flight. My arms are really wings." Chris repeated this odd injunction silently within himself several times, each time a little more clear about what exactly he was asking for, although he did not know why he was asking for it. Nor was he aware of how God might grant it, or when. When Chris opened his eyes, he imagined the favor might already have happened, and stretched his arms from his chest to test the possibility. His arms were very limber at that moment, much more limber than Chris expected given the suddenness of his sleepiness. Or perhaps sudden sleepiness concludes with sudden sprightliness as a matter of symmetry. Chris could not say one way or the other. Nevertheless, he knew his arms were unfolding too easily really to be embryonic wings. There too were his disappointing fingers, wriggling stupidly in the fresh afternoon air. And his legs only furthered his disappointment. If anything, they now appeared to Chris Allis as stubbier than ever on account of drawing attention to that attribute.

As if nothing had happened (for in one critical way, nothing had), Chris Allis sat up and then easily raised himself onto his usual legs and resumed his usual manner of locomotion: walking. He was too disappointed to care much what lay ahead of him, and therefore only went through the motions of caring when for the most part he did not care. Arriving to the exhibit most relevant to his visit, Chris was hardly surprised to see that currently the zoo offered only Monarch butterflies, the stark beauty of whose wings at first only slightly ameliorated the sadness associated with a total absence of caterpillars and things fully terrestrial. It crossed the mind of Chris Allis that it probably wasn't caterpillar season, if such an interval existed, and that like it or not, in his usual manner of egregiously missing the point, Chris was completely out of step with nature, especially in his delusions. "What have I done to deserve this stupid fate?" he asked himself, and soon fell to reading an informational placard.

It turned out that Monarch butterflies were responsible, during the high season of their birth, for so cluttering up major roads in some North American states that traffic accidents became a serious concern for hapless, admiring travelers. This possibility made Chris Allis chuckle to himself as he read, as if one effect of his rising disappointment was a disgust for all humankind. "Serves them right," he declared, drawing the brief attention of a nearby boy, who gazed upward at him quizzically and then restored his gaze to the idle butterflies, who clung to perspiring branches beneath the warm lights inside the habitat. This semi-artificial environment infuriated Chris Allis, and he remarked to the boy that Nature loves her creates far more kindly than humanity does, in response to

which the boy again gazed upward at Chris, but this time concluded the interaction by sliding two leg's-widths away. Chris resigned himself to a restored alienation and peered through the glass.

It was his own reflection there that triggered the rush of insights. At first Chris saw only the twin fangs of his forehead as it ate away at his hairline. He observed the hollow recesses of his cheeks and the pale torpor of his skin. He lamented how discouraged he appeared. He even closed his eyes for a moment to feel deeply sorry for himself. However, when he opened his eyes again, perhaps on account of a shift in his plane of focus, Chris Allis also became aware that the reflection of himself on the glass was a means of superimposing himself on the chamber of butterflies, so that, at least obliquely, there existed in this pairing a connection between the man on the outside and the creatures within. "There I am," Chris confirmed of himself, pointing, seeing himself point. "That's me among the butterflies." The recognition was uplifting for Chris Allis and he steadfastly clung to it by standing totally still, as if indulging a shrewd superstition that moving and reflecting eradicated each other.

Thus arrived the final insight for Chris Allis, who stood perfectly still the better to experience it. Stillness was the answer. But not just any stillness. Chris had been very still, for instance, when he laid down outside the Insect House and prayed. Apparently prayer itself was too much movement, as was the motion created by the effort to relax; in that quest, the breathing becomes slow, but full, distending the lungs and abdomen, which rise and recede to great

distances beyond their normal resting position. No, the stillness in question was far stiller than that.

Pursuing it experimentally, Chris Allis locked his arms at his sides and expelled all the air from his lungs without drawing more in. He withdrew his chin into his neck and relented blinking. As his fingers were slightly trembling, he locked them tightly together, slightly cupping his hands. In the glass before his eyes, Chris Allis observed a reflection of himself that was ghostly for both its faintness and its stillness. Beyond it lay the docile butterflies beneath the heat lamps. Chris Allis shifted his focus from himself to the inner habitat. This mild action caused no movement whatsoever of his rigid body, but effected the butterfly sanctuary with the same force as an open assault against its tranquility. All at once the butterflies burst into simultaneous, kaleidoscopic flight, as the placard suggested they do in the wild. Their wings beat the air with a combined force of numbers that visibly shook the green, dewy leaves and branches in the exhibit long after they should have recovered from the mass exodus.

Yet the butterflies swirled and swirled before the wide, charmed eyes of Chris Allis. In a loose pack, they made repeated laps around the furthest recesses of their cage, blurring together into a single, much larger creature. To Chris Allis they looked like a sentient, animate cloud during sunset. Chris was reminded of the voice in the whirlwind in the Book Of Job, and he wondered to himself was he worthy of whatever communication might stir from within it.

This question had hardly formed for Chris Allis when the butterflies suddenly broke apart again and spread across the entirety of their limited

confines. This formation was what the placard described as the cause of the traffic accidents. It was akin to a nearly opaque curtain of butterflies. And given their abundance, there were presently enough of them to fill the glass wall in front of Chris Allis very fully. Why they rushed against that glass wall and all simultaneously thumped it with their wings Chris would never quite know. As he watched this surprising behavior, he did not wonder about why. He was too overwhelmed by the likeness of the butterflies to the stained glass window in the church from earlier that day. Chris Allis saw biblical scenes unfold before his eyes in the living geometry of the butterflies' wings. He saw Jesus being led to the crucifixion in possession of his own instrument of death. He saw Mary Magdalene weeping at Jesus' crucified feet. He witnessed the Roman sentries as they pulled Jesus from the cross and stabbed him in the ribs with a sword to confirm and disparage his death. Then Chris Allis was again face-to-face with the indecipherable illustration at the center of the stained glass window. Was it the Apocalypse or the original chaos or both? Chris was extending his original question to include that dual possibility when the heat lamp in the butterfly habitat seemed to burst forward with light like a sequence of supernovas. For a second the butterfly wings glowed almost radioactively, revealing intricate crystalline infrastructures that pulsed. Then the whole world went blacker than outer space and Chris Allis collapsed on the Insect House floor in a light seizure.

When Chris Allis awoke, he was inside the butterfly cage, watching a team of paramedics beyond the glass. The team was leaning over an inert body, measuring its pulse at the neck and wrists. The school children were all gone,

and the Insect House seemed especially empty of general visitors. The paramedics lifted the inert body on a shared count of three and placed it with only moderate gentleness on a mobile bed no bigger than a stretcher. Then they wheeled the stretcher around a corner and disappeared from sight. A final paramedic lingered by herself for a moment, gazing at the butterflies with an almost wistful look in her eyes, as if recalling a peaceful moment from her childhood or a recent vacation. Chris Allis watched the memory fade from her eyes before she turned away from the butterflies and chased after her colleagues with a sudden spring in her step. She must have pushed through the swinging door around the corner with especial vigor, for shortly after her disappearance a fluttering of light and shadow appeared on the wall opposite Chris, and then nothing at all.