An Empty Building

A cocoon. That is what he thought of it as he fell asleep. He was like a worm inside a cocoon. He felt safe; at least as safe as one could feel under those conditions. For the first time in a long time he allowed himself to sleep and to dream. It has been a long time since he had dreamt. He could not dream before because he could not permit himself to sleep that deeply. But tonight, he slept and, tonight, he dreamed.

Pop! Pop!

Suddenly his eyes flashed open. He was awake. What was that noise? Did he dream it? For the longest time he had slept lightly, awaking at the slightest sound. For the first time, in a long time, he felt he was safe enough to allow himself to fall into a deep sleep. Now he was awakened, shaken out of sleep by a strange noise.

Pop!

There it was again. That was no dream. That was real.

He froze in place. He refused even to breathe. It sounded like a firecracker, he thought. Or a gun shot. Yes, he decided, that was gunfire. Though he had never fired a gun, he knew what gunfire sounded like. He had heard it in the neighborhood he grew up in.

target practice only to realize it was not the carpet that stopped the bullets but him?

He waited and waited. There was no more noise. No voices. No more pops. He wondered, *Was it safe?* The real question was what was he going to do? Was he going to leave the safety of his cocoon or stay there until morning?

Morning. That was a distant thought. From the reflections on the walls in the room he was in, he could tell it was still night. *What time was it anyway? he pondered.* He had a watch, but it was not one of those that could light up in the dark with the press of a button. He would need light to see the time. However, he was too afraid to stick his hand up above his hiding place so the light from the streetlights flowing in through the bare windows could illuminate the face of his watch.

He knew he couldn’t stay there forever. That was obvious. But should he wait to be sure the way was clear? How long should he wait? What if someone entered the room he was in? If he were to leave, which way would he go? For that matter, where would he go? Would he look for another building? Walk the streets until morning? As he thought these things over, one thing became clear. He had to leave.

He listened. He heard nothing. All was quiet. Not even a car could be heard passing on the street below. How strange? *Wasn’t New York City supposed to be the city that never sleeps?* he thought to himself. Yet, all was quiet. Maybe too quiet.
“Ok, now you’re letting your imagination run away with you,” he rebuked himself. He took a deep breath then slowly began getting up from his pallet on the floor. He stuck his head out from behind his hiding place. He felt shocked, then relieved, by what he saw there.

Nothing.

The room was empty. No cops, no thugs, no one pointing any guns at him. In fact, the room was totally empty. The large loft-like space was totally bare. Everything was removed. The blinds from the windows. The office furniture. The light fixtures. Even the carpet from the floor. Well, it was removed from the floor, but fortunately for him, not from the room. It was what he had used to build his hiding place, his cocoon. He had reshaped the carpet that was lying on the floor into a mound. In doing so, he could get behind it and sleep. To any observer, it would just appear to be used carpet pushed up against the wall.

When he was looking for a place to stay where he would not likely be harassed by police or muggers, he thought of finding an abandoned building. If he could find one that looked relatively safe maybe he could go high enough up that the likelihood of being messed with would be highly improbable. When he had found the room with the carpet bunched in the corner of the room, he thought he had hit the jackpot. He knew had found his home for the night. All he needed to do was to move the bunched-up carpet far enough from the wall for him to get behind it. The mound would shield him from prying eyes should
anyone else enter the building, or the room. Yes, this would be a good place to hold up for tonight, and for a couple more nights, if he was lucky.

The building was five stories tall in an industrial office area. It had been vacated long ago and hopefully forgotten, at least by the police, and the drug dealers. There were three types of people he hoped to avoid—police, pimps, and pushers. Cops harassed the homeless because it was the thing to do. Pimps and pushers harassed the homeless because they needed cheap labor they could intimidate. Then these harassed people would become beholden to them, the pimps and the pushers, because they would be their source of food and shelter. It is surprising what people would do for food and shelter.

He had not gotten to that point yet and was hoping not to. Though he had been in New York only a few days, so far, he had managed to avoid all three. If he was to continue to avoid them, he knew he had to move on. The sooner, the better.

Cautiously, he got up and grabbed the duffle bag that doubled as his pillow. In it, he carried everything he owned and everything he needed. He held up his watch and checked the time. It was three in the morning. Great. At least he got four and a half hours of sleep. That is more than he got at other places sleeping all night, as he was constantly being awakened by every that reached his ear.

He walked as silently he could toward the door. Really, it was a doorway because the door was gone, too. He poked his head outside into the hallway.
Empty. Both ways. Still there was silence. Could the shooters still be here? He doubted they would still be here and not make any noise. They obviously were not worried about the gunfire. So, why would they worry about being silent now? They wouldn’t be, he concluded. So, which way to go? Going to the right would lead toward the stairwell and outside. Going left would lead towards the direction from which the gunfire came. The way to go was obvious.

He went left.

Though it was mid-October and quite cold in the building, he was sweating. What was he doing? Common sense would tell any reasonable person to leave, to get while the getting was good. Yet, he was curious as to what woke him.

“Don’t you know that curiosity killed the cat?” he whispered to himself. Who said that anyway and did they even have a cat? he mused.

Further down the hall there were two doorways that opened on the right. He cautiously looked in the first doorway. He saw nothing. It looked very similar to the room he just exited. Bare walls, bare windows, bare floors.

He walked down to the next doorway and looked inside. What he saw almost took his breath away. Sitting against a pillar in the middle of the room was a man, at least the figure of one.

He reached into his duffle bag and pulled out his pen light. He turned it on and pointed it toward the figure.
He inched closer into the room. What he saw made him stop dead in his tracks.

The figure was slumped against the pillar. His head was bowed on his left breast. He had three bullet holes in him. Two in the chest and one in the forehead. His hands lay limply by his sides. He was wearing blue jeans, a Hawaiian shirt, and a denim jacket. Blood had begun to pool on the floor around the body—that is if you could call it blood. It was purple!

"Ok, this was getting weird," he thought as he backed out the door. "Too weird." He turned and began to walk quickly back down the hall. For sure he had to get out of there. It would not be long before the cops showed up. Once they had discovered the body, they certainly would search the entire floor, even the entire building, and find him. There would be questions to be answered, stories to be told, and he had no desire to do either.

He hoped he had not stepped in the blood. If so, there was nothing he could do about it now. Did he leave any DNA on the carpet that served as his cocoon? He had seen enough CSIs and Law and Orders to know that the police would capture any DNA and try to see to whom it belonged. It didn’t matter anyway. His DNA was not in any database anywhere, as far as he knew.

He went down the hall and through the stairwell door. He descended the stairs and exited the fire door on the first floor. He stopped in his tracks. The floor was empty just as it was when he came in. It was devoid of everything except some broken blinds on the windows which allowed a little light from the streetlights to enter in.
Was anyone watching? Did it matter? He could not stay. But which way should he go? Should he go out the front? The doors were locked from the outside, but he could still exit by pushing the release bars on the door. “The people who killed the man, the thing, upstairs may be outside waiting to see if anyone exited the building after them,” he thought aloud. Then again, he could go out the back. But what if that was the way they came in so as to not be seen? he wondered to himself.

This was ridiculous. If he did not make a decision, he would be standing there arguing the pros and cons of either direction when the police arrived. He had to leave and that was that. Either direction would work. The front was closer. The front it is. If there was someone there, he would have to deal with it at that time. If he was caught going through the back, he would look more suspicious than he already did. At least this way, he could feign ignorance. He could say he was just passing through the building, that he had never even been upstairs.

As he pushed the door release bar. The door opened with a soft creak. He exited the building. The cold air hit him like a bat. It took his breath away.

“It must be 20 degrees below zero out here,” he muttered.

At least the streets were clear. There were some cars along the street, but they appeared to be vacant. He looked left and right. Nothing.

He pulled the coat he was wearing tighter around him and raised the collar to cover his neck. He reached into his duffle bag and pulled out a knit cap and put it on his head.
He had no idea where he was going. When he came to New York, he had no plan. He just knew he had to get away from small town Arkansas. Now, he was in New York with no friends, no money, and no ideas. He was dodging the police, the pushers, and the pimps. He thought he found a place to hang out for a while. At least until he could formulate a strategy. Now that plan was shot—no pun intended.

As he crossed the road and headed down the sidewalk, a line from one of his favorite movies crossed his mind. It was from the film Casablanca. He had watched it during his ‘classic films’ phase. He took the words of Rick Blaine, the bar owner, and adjusted them to fit his situation.

"Of all the buildings, in all the cities, in all the world, they come into mine."