

Hourglass

by Linda Sharps

He sits, slumped on the rain-slick curb. He's got twelve minutes, according to the scuffed Rolex on his wrist. But he doesn't move. He sits, head down, his coat dirtied by the street. Waits.

For Rent. The sign had caught his eye. He'd been walking towards the bus stop, his breath a smoky plume in the cold late afternoon air, when he saw the sign propped in a grimy basement window. Something about its rough-hewn look - its faded hand lettering, the crumbling edges of the cardboard - appealed to him. It looked anonymous. The sort of sign that went down when someone moved in, went back up when they moved out. Doesn't matter who lived there, the sign didn't give a shit.

They didn't really give a shit at the Y, either. But it was time to move on. He'd been there too long.

A worn, colorless woman took his money. She didn't ask questions. He moved in his meager belongings later that same day, learning the hard way that he had to duck his head when stepping into the apartment from the hall.

One room: a bed, a couch, a table that creaked in protest when you leaned on it. A small, but serviceable bathroom. No kitchen to speak of, but he didn't much care about that.

On that first night, after he'd put away his clothes, his books, and carefully placed his gun within reach of the bed, he poured an inch of Jim Beam into the cracked plastic cup he found in the bathroom. Drank, added another inch, then sat on the couch.

"Home," he said out loud, then immediately wished he hadn't - he didn't like the shrill note in his voice. He drank, added another inch. "For now."

Days went by much as they had been, one blending into another. He read. He walked at night. He drank. He tried not to think about his emptying wallet.

Don't think about the money you left.

Don't think about Chicago.

He found himself jerking off in the shower one morning, chasing a joyless orgasm, and for the first time he cried. A nobody, a cipher, this solitary activity in lieu of anything real. His own hand, nothing more.

Don't think about her.

Don't think.

In the shower, looking down at his nakedness. His vulnerable self. And the ridged scar tissue running up the inside of his arm. The carved letters: GREED. So he never forgot. So he could never escape his most basic sin.

He'd been at the basement apartment for almost a month when the package arrived. When he looked back on things, he supposed that he had allowed himself to actually believe he'd gotten away with it. That he'd been smart enough. That he'd covered his tracks. When the package showed up - brought grudgingly downstairs by the uninterested landlady - with not only the apartment address, but his real name neatly printed in capital letters across the top...he'd felt something akin to a fierce physical blow. Something like shock. And something like shame.

Shame for allowing himself to feel hope. Shame for not knowing that they were

just biding their time with him.

He set it on the groaning table and stood for a moment, unsure. Small muscles at the base of his spine jumped, and he could hear the ragged sound of his breathing in the quiet room.

Every instinct in his body told him to run, to leave, to never come back, to keep moving.

Don't think.

With numb fingers, he peeled back the plain brown wrapping. He opened what turned out to be a shoebox with something inside. Something wrapped in newspaper. He tried to pull apart the paper, but it was tightly wound around whatever its contents were.

Don't think.

He lifted out the wrapped object and started ripping at the newspaper when something sharp sliced into his forefinger. Cursing, he gave the paper a yank, and it fell open.

Sand. Everywhere. Pouring onto the floor, running through his fingers and sticking to the blood.

He stood, holding the broken glass pieces, the torn newspaper, until the sand stopped. Until he could get his breathing under control. Until he could put the shattered hourglass on the table, walk to the bathroom, pour water on his hands. Until he could pick up the bottle of Beam and swallow.

The next day, greeted by sickly winter sunlight and a pounding head, he lay motionless on his bed. He thought about all the faceless others that had claimed this bed as their own. He thought about the sign being propped back in the window after he was gone. No one giving a shit.

The steel of his revolver felt cool, and he laid it against his cheek. Touched it to his forehead. Waited. Thought, *I can't*.

Later, he sat at a busy coffee shop, his things packed into a duffle bag and sitting beside him. Everything had the overly bright frenetic feeling of a fever dream. Noises hurt his ears. He sat at a table tucked in the back, and he thought of nothing.

"Mister?" Startling him, coffee sloshing over the edge of his cup. A young girl, handing him a mobile phone. "This is for you."

He stared at her outstretched hand. "Who is this from?" he said, in a curiously flat voice.

"I don't know. Some man," she said, gesturing behind her. The hustle of the café, people milling around, no one he recognized, no one looking in their direction.

"Here," she said, impatiently.

He took it. The girl turned to skip away, stopping suddenly to flash him a sweet, gap-toothed smile. "Bye, mister!" she called, and was gone.

The phone rang.

Don't think.

The phone rang.

Don't think.

The phone rang. He inhaled. Exhaled. Answered it.

That was four hours and forty-eight minutes ago exactly.

Somewhere, a clock is striking the hour. The peals of a bell echoing down the

darkened city streets. And it's like a movie - a bad one, where everything is too coincidental and rings false - when the long black car pulls up in front of him, almost silently.

It's time for this to be over. It's time to pay. It's time to stop running.

As the car window slowly rolls down, he whispers one word, and closes his eyes.

Linda lives in the Seattle area, where she spends her time working, writing, and chasing her 2-year old son Riley. She greatly enjoys Warren Ellis comic books, movies featuring zombies, long-wearing lipstick, and Starlight mints.