STEP FOUR

By Linda S. Buyer

The door to my apartment closed automatically behind me, bumping my ass as I stood in the doorway, contemplating the accusatory empties and overfull ashtray on the coffee table I can only see the legs of. Bottles like toppled bowling pins were scattered around the long folding table pushed up against the wall in the “dining room”, which shared the space with my “office,” “living room” and one-wall kitchen. The dishes piled in the sink across the room are from last time I cooked, last week sometime. Stomach’s already on fire, and that pan from the scrambled eggs smells rancid. Need to take some of those antacids I just bought.

I can hear my clean-freak stepmother sneering, “Only animals live like that.” Stuck up bitch. Easy for her. She’s got a cleaning lady. Nobody sees or smells the mess here but me, and I’ll stop smelling it in a minute.

Good to be home. Exhausted, legs ache. Have to get off my feet. They look like an old person’s, flesh clouds above my shoe tops. Maybe I should see a podiatrist? Stop wearing heels?

I need to sit down. Feeling a little light-headed. Too busy playing catch-up at work to get lunch. Haven’t been hungry lately anyway, and I like the way it looks. Almost back to my college weight.

First, mail … another overdue bill from the dentist for these stupid dentures. Four years, and not paid off yet. Credit card. Pretty much all liquor store deliveries. Need to pay this one. Collection notice from the hospital. The US is so fucked up. We have the most expensive health care system in the world. Not my fault I have bad teeth. Or that I got mugged. I wouldn’t be in debt if we had socialized medicine like every other civilized country.

Tossing all the mail except my 401K statement on the square folding table under the TV, I grab the clicker. What’s that asshole Trump up to today? Always good for a laugh.

I consider the bottle in my hand. Only alkies drink from pint bottles. Need a glass.

That used glass on the drainboard’ll do. Nothing but Smirnoff’s been it. Vodka’s sterile.

Ohhh, that’s better. Takes the edge off. First one always burns though. A handful of these antacids‘ll fix that. Sit down. Let’em kick in.

Eighty-one thousand, four hundred and twenty-seven dollars, twelve cents. Won’t be long now ‘til there’s enough money in this 401K to take early retirement and move to Hot Springs. Arkansas’ supposed to be a great place to retire. No more slogging through this goddamn snow. Wouldn’t feel so crappy if I wasn’t so cold all the time.

Cheaper to live there. I’ll buy a house. Junior Producer for one of the biggest advertising firms in the city and I can’t even afford a stupid condo here in Chicago. If I had a house, I’d invite people over. Make new friends.

My house’ll have a big wraparound porch and I’ll host Sunday night suppers every week. Make my famous chili, guests can BYO. We’ll eat, then sit out on the porch drinking and making music under the stars. I’ll be dating a handsome, fit, sixty-year-old guy and he’ll be close to his grandkids. He’ll be a guitar player too and we’ll get them kid-size guitars and teach them to play.

Yeah, and unicorns will fart gold coins into this IRA. With my track record, he’ll be estranged from his kids and never have even met his grandkids. Better anyway. Can’t get hurt if you don’t get started.

What a shit day. Shit week really. In fact, been crap for the last three weeks, ever since I didn’t get the Senior Producer job. Just thinking about it pisses me off. When Simpleminded Scott retired, that should’ve been my job. I have seniority.

Another Smir’ll take the edge off.

Need to make notes for that meeting Adamson scheduled for tomorrow. Can’t let him know I’m drinking again. Four years ago, he said “no more chances.” Gotta make it sound like I’m on top of everything.

What’s to report? One. EarthWorld’s commercial is halfway done. Story boards are ready for their narcissistic asshole CEO’s approval. Sure to want changes. Always thinks he knows better than the Art Department. Two. Triangle Systems’ changes means their commercial is going to cost more than Adamson originally estimated. He’ll have to go back to them with a new estimate. Art Director says twenty-five percent more. Their stupid fault for changing the tagline. Whole commercial needs to be reshot. What else? Oh yeah. Three. Randy Ronnie’ll be on maternity leave starting at the end of October. We’ll have to hire at least two freelancers to replace her for the holiday season. Wonder if the freelancer we hired last year, that she was so hot for, is the baby Daddy? He was good. I’ll see if I can get him again.

I should write this down. Handsy Andy’ll be impressed if I come in with an “agenda.” Idiot. Must be paper around here somewhere.

Opening the desk drawer to look creates a waterfall of the plastic Smirnoff bottles I had carefully pyramided on the desktop. So much for having stacked them out of the way. Too much trouble to pick them up. Kick ’em under the sofa for now.

Better. And now, a little more voka as a reward for cleaning up!

I was so pished when Handsy Andy told me Whizbang Willy got the promotion instead of me. Only two years out school and they promoted him over me to Senior Producer. Just because I’m a woman. I’ve been their go-to for five years!

Maybe I should’ve bought two vokas when I picked up the antacids? I could go now. Won’t feel like it later. Already don’t feel like it. Too cold now the sun’s down, and I really don’t feel good. This pint’s going fast. Foremost delivers. I’ll call. Maybe call-in sick tomorrow?

Might make him sucpicious. Can’t do that. Last time they put me in the Employee Assistance Plan and said they’d keep me if I followed it. Better make the stupid lisht.

Oh Jeez. This isn’t blank paper. It’s the Resentments worksheet from that AA group they made me join. What a joke. Give m’self over to a higher power?! Don’t even believe in God. Knew from the start it wouldn’t work. Did all twelve stupid steps though. Fake it ‘til you make it. Everyone said, “Just do the steps and it’ll work.” Worked until they promoted Willy over me.

All started with seeing Caroline again. She doesn’t know I’m in AA, so when she hit town, she asked me to meet her at Simon’s just like old times. Was gonna have just one. My favorite bar with my old next-door neighbor. Perfect timing too. The day Whizbang was promoted. That was … how many empties? One, two, four, …, thirty-three pints ago. Not counting the ones I put in the garbage before I realized the landlady might not renew if she saw them.

I just can’t quit smoking and drinking. Mom said she didn’t drink while she was pregnant with me, but mom lied all the time. Great start in life. Both parents smoked in the house, and the car, and everywhere else, when me and Jenny were growing up. That and drinking with their poseur friends, all self-deluded into thinking their molehills were mountains, was pretty much what they did. Couldn’t fool mom’s liver. I’m a junior in college and she’s dead of cirrhosis. Bad genes plus bad examples equals me and my broken brain.

Our place was always a pigsty. Stunk of all those cats she and Jenny kept rescuing. If she’d taught me to keep house this place wouldn’t be such a mess.

Where’d I put the voka? Whoa … don’t turn so fast! You’d think I was on blood thinners I bruise so easily these days.

I hate this apartment. Fifty-five years old. Living in a two-room basement apartment. All my old friends have houses, and spouses, and kids, and successful careers. Jillian, my used-to-be-best friend, fucking married Freddy after he dumped me. Those should be my kids. I tried, but, sober’s like living in black and white. *I’m* better when I drink. Funnier. Smoother talker. Can’t talk to people sober. Because of Jillian, Freddy, who I brought into the group, is friends with all my old friends and none of ‘em talks to me anymore! Just ‘cause I messed up a few times when I was drunk’s no reason to cut me off. They were mine first. Shit, me and Leslie and Jillian went to kindergarten together.

Need to get away from here. Start over in Hot Springs. Find some new drinking buddies, a new band. That good-looking grandfather.

Smir tastes *so* good. A couple more of these antacids though. Seems weird to be getting a little pot when I’m losing weight, wonder if it’s related to whatever’s going in my stomach.

Back to Andy’s list. What was I going to say? His last message was, “It’s imperative we talk.” Scheduled damn meeting for nine AM tomorrow. Last time, he said if I was ever drunk on the job again, that’d be it. I wonder if he knows I never came back to the office after lunch Tuesday?

Just going to sit and have a cig and another voka. Then I’ll make a stupid agenda. I write so much better when I’m a little lubricated. Freddy, asshole, never thought so. But, what’s an accountant know about writing?

Ahhh. That’s better. Pra’ly shouldn’t have ordered that second bottle… need to convince Andy I’m sober.

I hate people who can have just one. I can’t. I love to drink. Once I start, I never want to stop. I always think I can have just one. Next thing you know, I’m running into a dumpster and knocking my teeth out. Gotta believe that dentures are a lot more common in Hot Springs. Guys there won’t be as freaked out as Chicagoans. Yeah, and the chauffeur will be around at eight to make sure I’m at the meeting on time. All guys want young, tight-assed babes…who’d want me?

Le’s see… Ashtray one more time? Looks like that Jenga game Jenny and me used to play when we were little. If it collapses, so what? Only me to see the mess.

How’d Jenny quit? Maybe her brain’s not broken like mine. She’s older. They gave all the good genes to her. *She’s* been sober for decades. Quit when she started college. Married, grown kids, first grandchild on its way. Makes *really* good money. Why her instead of me? She went to film school in LA and abandoned me. Never came home again. Been working at Paramount Pictures ever since. Could’ve gotten me a job. Wouldn’t even try. “You’ll fuck up and make me look bad.”

Something’s wrong. Stomach still hurts. Should eat one of those Speedway subs I brought home last Tuesday. Something to soak up the Smir. Not hungry though. Need to get out of these clothes. I’ll just lay down on the couch. Watch the news.

What’s wrong with me? Feel so weird. Maybe I should call someone? My fairy godmother? Everyone else abandoned me.

Can’t they talk about something else? Yeah, the House sent the charges to Senate but there’s no way they’re going to impeach him. Yada, Yada, Yada. Makes my stomach hurt. A couple more antacids.

I should contact a realtor in Hot Springs. Look around in the spring. Find their Simon’s. Meet some people. Fresh start. Too tired to look up realtors now. Tomorrow.

Need to watch something else. Must be something better than this clown show. Ah, *In Treatment*’s on. Just *so* tired. I should get up and go to bed.

Doorbell. Must have dozed off.

“You okay lady? You look a little unsteady.”

“Me? I’m fine. Fell asleep waiting for this Smirnoff. You woke me up.”

Funny, not sure I want any. I think I took too many antacids. Going to throw up.

What’s that?! Looks like coffee grounds. I haven’t eaten anything that looks even vaguely like that. Could eggs turn into that? Maybe I should call 911.

How much of a fool will I feel like if I call and it’s just indigestion? And I end up with another huge medical bill? I’ll wait ‘til morning. See how I feel then.

Really bad stomach flu’d be a good excuse for missing that meeting though …

Can’t afford to lose this job.

Should go to bed.

TV off first.

Maybe one more cigarette?