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*Five Signs
of Disturbance*

Back in the city, she is alone most of the time. It is a large apartment that is not hers, though it is not unfamiliar either.

She spends the days by herself trying to work and sometimes looking up from her work to worry about how she will find a place to live, because she can't stay in this apartment beyond the end of the summer. Then, in the late afternoon, she begins to think she should call someone.

She is watching everything very closely: herself, this apartment, what is outside the windows, and the weather.

There is a day of thunderstorms, with dark yellow and green light in the street, and black light in the alley. She looks into the alley and sees foam running over the concrete, washed out from the gutters by the rain. Then there is a day of high wind.

Now she stands by the door watching the doorknob. The brass doorknob is moving by itself, very slightly, turning back and forth, then jiggling. She is startled, then she hears a foot shuffle on the other side of the doorsill, and a cloth brush against the panel, and other soft noises, and realizes after a moment that this is the doorman who has come to clean the outside of the door. But she does not go away until the doorknob stops moving.

She looks at the clock often and is aware of exactly what time it is now, and then ten minutes from now, even though she has no need to know what time it is. She also knows exactly how she is feeling, uneasy now, angry ten minutes from now. She is sick to death of knowing what she is feeling, but she can't stop, as though if she stops watching for longer than a moment, she will disappear (wander off).

There is a bright light coming from the kitchen. She did not turn a light on there. The light is coming from the open window (it is late summer). It is morning.

On another day, the early, low sun shines on the park across the street, on the near edge of it, so that one bare trunk, and the outer leaves of the trees on this side of the grove, are whitened with sunlight as though someone has thrown a handful of gray dust over them. Behind them, darkness.

Before her as she stands at the front window looking

out at the park, the plants on the window sill have dropped some of their leaves.

She knows that if she speaks on the telephone, her voice will communicate something no one will want to listen to. And she will have trouble making herself heard.

In the midst of the random noises from the courtyard (she catalogues them in the evening: the clatter of dishes, an electric guitar, a woman's laughter, a toilet flushing, a television, running water), suddenly a quarrel begins, between a man and his mother (he shouts in his deep voice, "Mother!").

She thinks, having come back after some years, that this is a place full of difficulty.

She watches a great deal of television, even though there is very little that she likes and she also has trouble focusing the picture. She watches anything that comes in clearly, even though she may find it offensive. One evening she watches one face in a movie for two hours and feels that her own face has changed. Then, the next night at the same hour, she is not watching television and she thinks: The hour may be the same but the night is not the same.

Later, when she lists and counts the signs of disturbance, at least two are associated with the television.

Now she can't put it off any longer. She has to go out and look for a place to live. She doesn't want to do this, because she doesn't want to say to herself that she

really has no place of her own. She would rather do nothing about the problem and stay inside this apartment all day.

Several times she goes out to look at apartments. She can't afford to pay much, and so she looks at the very cheapest apartments. She looks at one above a candy store and one above an Italian men's social club. The third one she looks at is nothing but a shell with a large hole in the floor of the back room, and the garden is overgrown with brambles. The real-estate agent apologizes to her.

She is glad when it grows too late in the afternoon to look at anything more and she can go back to the apartment and watch television and eat and drink.

She often cries over what she sees on television. Usually it is something on the evening news, a death or many deaths somewhere, or an act of heroism, or a film of a newborn baby with a disease. But sometimes an ad, if it involves old people or children, will also make her cry. The younger the child is, the more easily she cries, but even a film of an adolescent will sometimes make her cry, though she does not like adolescents. Often, after the news is over, she is still catching her breath as she walks out to the kitchen.

She eats dinner in front of the television. After another hour or two she begins drinking. She drinks until she is drunk enough so that she drops things and her handwriting becomes hard to read and she leaves out some

of the letters from certain words and has to read all the words over again carefully, adding the missing letters and after that printing some words a second time above the illegible script.

She is forgetting the idea she had about moderation. She does the dishes so wildly that soap flies everywhere and water splashes on the floor and the front of her clothes. During the day she washes her hands often, rubbing them together briskly, almost violently, because she feels that everything she touches is coated with grease.

She stands by the door and hears someone whistling in the marble lobby.

One day she sees an apartment she is willing to take. It is not very pretty, but she is ready to take it because she wants to have a home again, she wants to be bound to this city by a lease, she doesn't want to go on feeling the way she does, loose in the world, the only one without any place. She imagines that when she moves in, she will have a party. She signs some papers. The agent will call her later and tell her whether the deal has gone through or not. She walks home and shops for food with a sort of forced tranquillity, as though if she moves too quickly something will break. She continues to move this way, gently, with deliberation, the rest of the day. Then, later in the evening, the agent calls and tells her she has lost the apartment. The owner has de-

cided suddenly not to rent it. She can hardly believe this explanation.

Now she is sure she will never find a place to live.

She lies in bed with a bottle of beer. She finishes the beer and wants to put it down. She can't put it on the bare wood of the bedside table because it will leave a mark, and the table is not hers. She puts it on a book, but the book is not hers either. She moves it to another book, which is hers, a song book.

Then she gets up because she sees that the clothes she took off earlier are heaped on a chair. She wants to lay them out straight in case she decides to wear them the next day, and she lays them out, but since she is quite drunk they are not straight, as she can see. She is drunk because she has had two bottles of beer, a glass of Drambuie, and then a third bottle of beer.

In spite of being drunk, she can still hold on to some things in her mind, though with an effort. She sees how well she is holding on to things and thinks that she is still smart. She thinks about how her smartness doesn't seem to count for much anymore, the way it used to. Her smartness has counted for less and less as she has grown older. She lies there in the dark trying to pull herself together. She can feel this is a cliff edge, this return. Now it is after two in the morning, but she can't let herself fall asleep.

On the white side of a truck, a dark blue eagle with its wings raised. Watching for it, she sees, outside the window, the mail truck pull up by the hydrant. She sees the mailbag tossed out of the truck onto the sidewalk and the handyman of the building drag it across the sidewalk and then stand holding it by the neck while he talks to another handyman and she grows angry as she watches because there may be a letter for her in the bag.

She is told about an apartment in a nice small street, but she won't look at it because she is also told that on the floor below lives a retarded man and his father and they argue and shout and she would have to listen to that.

The day is dark again with the threat of rain. In the yellow light she sweeps up the dead leaves of the houseplants and waters the pots. On this day there is more order.

In the dining room she pushes upright the heavy books that have been leaning far over to one side on the shelves and sprawling open for so long now that their covers are warped out of shape. There is another bookcase in the living room, with glass doors, and on top of it a clock that hisses every time the second hand passes a certain point. Now she walks down the hall, straightening more books as she comes to them. The hall is long and dark, with many angles, so that around every bend more hallway opens out and this hallway seems to her, sometimes, infinitely long.

In the bedroom, where she watches television, she can often hear the sound of a string quartet or some other classical music. It is a small sound, but perfectly clear. When she first heard it, she wondered if there was a radio somewhere in the room, turned very low. She walked slowly around the room, listening. The walls of the room are dark, the windows are shaded, and there is a large low bureau of scratched green wood with a mirror above it into which she looks again and again, as she also looks into the three long mirrors on the three doors of the closet. The music was coming from the radiator, which stands below a framed photograph of a bearded man; he is the classicist whose books were falling over in the other room. She put her ear down near the radiator and found that the music was coming from the knob. Now she sometimes lies on the bed listening to the music. It is just low enough so that it doesn't stop her from thinking.

One day a fly walks over her hand and she feels that the fly is a friendly presence. The same day, she wants to stop a policeman in the street and talk to him. Then that impulse passes.

She decides to call several people. She tells herself she has to talk to some people. She is worried, and then she is angry at herself for worrying, for always thinking about herself and for always looking at the world so darkly. But she doesn't know how to stop.

She reads a book about Zen and she writes down on

a piece of paper the eight parts of Buddha's eight-fold path and thinks she might follow it. She sees that it mainly involves doing everything right.

Even though it is late enough to go to sleep she has something more to eat. Cereal, then, after the cereal, bread and butter, then marshmallows and other foods. She turns over onto her stomach and looks at the covers of some books. She can go on reading now without eating. Her stomach is so full that she can't lie on it comfortably, and she feels as though she were lying on a rock or a bundle of sticks. She has filled her stomach as though she were filling a knapsack or a boat for a long journey. It will be slow and hot, and she will wake and sleep again several times and have uncomfortable dreams, or there will be no sleep but hard questions. No tears, though.

The rain continues to fall steadily just beyond the sound of an air conditioner. It is a soft drumming with an occasional louder splat into the courtyard.

She can't fall asleep. She lies with her ear on the mattress and listens to her loud heartbeat, first the rush of blood from her heart, which she can feel, then a split second later the thump in her ear. The sound is *shethump*, *shethump*. Then she starts to fall asleep and wakes again when she begins dreaming that her heart is a police station.

Another night it is her lungs; she shuts her eyes and her lungs seem as large as the room, and as dark, and

enclosed in a fragile shell of bone, and in one dark lung she is crouching and the wind whistles around her, in and out.

Some things in her behavior now strike her as odd. Then something happens that should frighten her, but she is not frightened.

The way it happens: at the end of the day she turns on the news and immediately she is addressed eye to eye, with almost unbearable intensity, by a male newscaster. He is the first person who has spoken to her all day. Shaken by these few minutes of direct address, she goes out to the kitchen to make an omelette. She mixes the eggs and pours them into the pan, where the butter is beginning to burn. As the omelette forms, it bubbles and chatters, making its own violent kind of noise, and she suddenly thinks it is going to speak to her. Bright yellow, glistening, spotted with oil, it is heaving gently and subsiding in the pan.

Or rather, she doesn't expect the omelette to speak, but when it doesn't articulate something she is surprised. But when she later thinks of what happened, she sees that really she suffered something like a physical assault. The muteness of the omelette emanated from it in a large balloon and pressed against her eardrums.

But it is not this incident, but the very latest sign of disturbance, on the highway, that frightens her enough to make her list and count up the signs of disturbance, though even then she cannot always decide whether

what seems to her a sign of disturbance should be counted as such, since it is fairly normal for her, such as talking aloud to herself or eating too much, or whether it should be counted because to someone else it might seem at least somewhat abnormal, and so, after thinking of ten or eleven signs, she wavers between counting five and seven signs as real signs of disturbance and finally settles on five, partly because she cannot accept the idea that there could be as many as seven.

She hopes this is all just the effect of exhaustion. She thinks it will end when she finds a place to live. She will not care very much what sort of place it is, not at first, anyway. Now there are two choices: a light and roomy apartment in a neighborhood she thinks is dangerous, or a cramped and noisy railroad flat in a part of town she likes.

What happened was that coming up to a line of toll booths on the highway, she had three quarters in her hand. The toll was fifty cents so she had to keep two quarters in her hand and put one back. The problem was that she couldn't decide which one to put back. She kept looking down at the quarters and then up again, trying to drive at the same time, coming closer and closer to the toll booths, veering left toward the center as though she knew that she might have to stop. Each time she looked down at them, the three quarters separated into groups of one quarter and two quarters, but each time she was prepared to put one back it appeared

to her as one of a pair, so that she couldn't put it back. This happened over and over again as she rolled closer to the booths, until finally, against her will, she put one quarter back. She told herself the choice was arbitrary, but she felt strongly that it was not. She felt that it was in fact governed by an important rule, though she did not know what the rule was.

She was frightened, not only because she had violated something but because this was not the first time she had for some minutes lost the capacity to act. And because although she had managed, in the end, to put one quarter back, drive up to the toll booth, pay the toll, and go on where she was going, she might just as well not have been able to make any move and might have stopped the car in the center of the highway and remained there indefinitely.

And further, if she had not been able to make a decision about this one small thing, as she might not have, then she might not be able to make a decision about anything else either, because all day long there were such decisions to make, as whether to go into this room or that room, to walk down the street in this direction or the other, to leave the subway by this exit or that one. There were many ways of reasoning through every decision, and often she could not even decide which way to reason, let alone make the decision itself. And so, in this way, she might become entirely paralyzed and unable to go on with her life.

But later that day, as she stands waist high in the water, she thinks that she is right: all this is probably nothing but exhaustion. She is standing without her glasses waist high in the water on a rocky beach. She is waiting for some sort of revelation, because she feels a revelation coming, but although various other thoughts have come, not one of them seems much like a revelation to her.

She stands looking full into the gray waves that come at her crossed by a strong breeze so that they have hard facets like rocks, and she feels her eyes washed by the grayness of the water. She knows it is the greater disruption of her life that is disturbing her, not just the homelessness, but finding a home will help. She thinks that all this will probably come out all right, that it won't end badly. Then she looks out at the smokestacks far away and nearly invisible across the sound and thinks, though, that this was not the revelation she was waiting for either.