

CAN YOU GUESS THE AUTHOR?

Day 1 clue:

**She and her
books have won
numerous awards**

'This is definitely a book both women and
men need to read. I truly adored it' —
Gem, goodreads

I.

The Woman Who
Slowly Disappeared

1.

There's a gentle knock on the door before it opens. Nurse Rada steps inside and closes the door behind her softly.

'I'm here,' the woman says, quietly.

Rada scans the room, following the sound of her voice.

'I'm here, I'm here, I'm here, I'm here,' the woman repeats softly, until Rada stops searching.

Her eye level is too high and it's focused too much to the left, more in line with the bird poo on the window that has eroded over the past three days with the rain.

The woman sighs gently from her seat on the window ledge that overlooks the college campus. She entered

this university hospital feeling so hopeful that she could be healed, but instead, after six months, she feels like a lab rat, poked and prodded at by scientists and doctors in increasingly desperate efforts to understand her condition.

She was diagnosed with a rare genetic disorder that causes the chromosomes in her body to fade away. They are not self-destructing or breaking down, they are not even mutating — her organ functions all appear perfectly normal; all tests indicate that everything is fine and healthy. To put it simply, she's disappearing, but she's still here.

Her disappearing was gradual at first. Barely noticeable. There was a lot of 'Oh, I didn't see you there,' a lot of misjudging her edges, bumping against her shoulders, stepping on her toes, but it didn't ring any alarm bells. Not at first.

She faded in equal measure. It wasn't a missing hand or a missing toe or suddenly a missing ear, it was a gradual equal fade; she diminished. She became a shimmer, like a heat haze on a highway. She was a faint outline with a wobbly middle center. If you strained your eye you could just about make out she was there, depending on the background and the surroundings. She quickly figured out that the more cluttered and busily decorated the room was, the easier it was for her to be seen. She was practically invisible in front of a plain wall. She sought

out patterned wallpaper as her canvas, decorative chair fabrics to sit on, that way her figure blurred the patterns, gave people cause to squint and take a second look. Even when practically invisible she was still fighting to be seen.

Scientists and doctors had examined her for months, journalists had interviewed her, photographers had done their best to light and capture her but none of them were necessarily trying to help her recover. In fact as caring and sweet as some of them were, the worse her predicament got, the more excited they became. She was fading away and nobody, not even the world's best experts, knew why.

'A letter arrived for you,' Rada says, stealing her from her thoughts. 'I think you'll want to read this one straight away.'

Curiosity piqued, the woman abandons her thoughts. 'I'm here, I'm here, I'm here, I'm here,' she says quietly, as she had been instructed to do. Rada follows the sound of her voice, crisp envelope in her extended hand. She holds it out to the air.

'Thank you,' the woman says, taking the envelope from her and studying it. Though it's a sophisticated shade of dusty pink, it reminds her of a child's birthday party invitation and feels the same lift of excitement. Rada is eager, which makes the woman curious. Receiving mail is not unusual, she receives dozens of letters every week from all around the world; experts

selling themselves, sycophants wanting to befriend her, religious fundamentalists wishing to banish her, sleazy men pleading to carry out every kind of corrupt desire on a woman they can feel but can't see. Though she'll admit this envelope does feel differently to those, with her name written grandly in calligraphy.

'I recognize the envelope,' Rada replies, excited, sitting beside her.

She is careful in opening the expensive envelope. It has a luxurious feel, and there's something deeply promising and comforting about it. She slides the dusty pink handwritten note card from the envelope.

'Professor Elizabeth Montgomery,' they read in unison.

'I knew it. This is it,' Rada says, reaching for the woman's hand that holds the note, and squeezing.

2.

'I'm here, I'm here, I'm here, I'm here, I'm here,' the woman repeats, as the medical team assist her with her move to the new facility that will be her home for who knows how long. Rada and the few nurses she has grown close to accompany her from her bedroom to the awaiting town car that Professor Elizabeth Montgomery has sent for her. Not all consultants have gathered to say goodbye, some absences are a protest

against her leaving after all of their work and dedication to her cause.

‘I’m in,’ she says quietly, and the door closes.

3.

There is no physical pain in disappearing. Emotionally is another matter.

The emotional feeling of vanishing occurred some time ago, in her early fifties, but she became aware of the physical dissipation three years ago. The process was slow but steady. She would hear, ‘I didn’t see you there,’ or ‘I didn’t hear you sneak in,’ or a colleague would stop a conversation to fill her in on the beginning of a story that she’d already heard because she’d been there the entire time. She became tired of reminding them she was there from the start, and the frequency of those comments worried her. She started wearing brighter clothes, she highlighted her hair, she spoke more loudly, airing her opinions, she stomped as she walked; anything to stand out from the crowd. She wanted to physically take hold of peoples’ cheeks and move them in her direction, to force eye contact. She wanted to yell *Look at me!*

On the worst days she would go home feeling completely overwhelmed and desperate. She would look in the mirror just to make sure she was still there, had to keep reminding herself of that fact; she even took

to carrying a pocket mirror for those moments on the subway when she was sure she had vanished.

She grew up in Boston and moved to New York City. She thought that a city of eight million people would be an ideal place to find friendship, love, relationships, start a life. And for a long time she was right, but in more recent years she learned that the more people there were, the lonelier she felt because her loneliness was amplified. She's on leave now, but worked at KPMG, a financial services company that employs 150,000 people around the world in 156 countries. Her office building on Park Avenue has almost three thousand employees and yet as the years went by she increasingly felt overlooked and unseen.

At thirty-eight she entered premature menopause. It was intense, sweat saturating the bed at night, she'd often have to change the sheets twice a night and felt an explosive anger and frustration inside. She wanted to be alone during those years. Certain fabrics irritated her skin and flared her hot flushes, which in turn flared her temper. In two years she gained twenty pounds. She purchased new clothes but nothing felt right or fit right. She was uncomfortable in her own skin, felt insecure at male-dominated meetings that she'd previously felt at home in. She felt that every man in the room knew, that every person could see the whoosh as her neck reddened and her face perspired, as her clothes suddenly stuck to

her skin in the middle of a presentation or on a business lunch. She didn't want anybody to look at her during that period. She didn't want anyone to see her.

When out at night she watches beautiful young bodies in tiny dresses and enormously high-heeled shoes writhing to songs that she knows and can sing along to because she still lives on this planet even though it's not tailored to her, while men her own age pay more attention to the young women on the dance floor than to her.

She is still a valid person with something to offer the world, yet she doesn't feel it.

'Diminishing Woman' and 'Disappearing Woman' the newspaper reports have labeled her in their headlines. At fifty-eight years old she has become world news, specialists have flown in from all around the world to probe her body and mind. Many have left, all unable to come to any conclusions, though many papers have been written, awards rewarded, plaudits given to the masters of their specialized fields.

It is six months since her last fade, she is merely a shimmer now, and she is exhausted. She knows that they can't fix her; she watches each specialist arrive with enthusiasm, examine her with excitement, and then leave weary. Each time she witnesses the loss of their hope, it erodes her own.

As she approaches Provincetown, Cape Cod, the address of her new destination, her uncertainty and fear make way for hope at the sight before her. Professor Elizabeth Montgomery waits at the door of her practice, which was once an abandoned lighthouse but now stands as a grand beacon of hope.

The driver opens the door. The woman steps out.

‘I’m here, I’m here, I’m here, I’m here,’ the woman says, making her way up the path, to meet her.

‘What on earth are you saying?’ Professor Montgomery asks, frowning.

‘I was told to say that, at the hospital,’ she says, quietly. ‘So people know where I am.’

‘No, no, no, you don’t speak like that here,’ she says, her tone brusque.

The woman feels scolded at first, and upset she has put a foot wrong in her first minute upon arriving, but then she realizes that Professor Montgomery has looked her directly in the eye, has wrapped a welcoming cashmere blanket around her shoulders and is walking her up the steps to the lighthouse, while the driver takes the bags. It is the first eye contact she has had with somebody, other than the campus cat, for quite some time.

‘Welcome to the Montgomery Lighthouse Advance for Women,’ Professor Montgomery begins, leading her into the building. ‘It’s a little wordy, and narcissistic,

but it has stuck. At the beginning we called it the “Montgomery *Retreat* for Women” but I soon changed that. To retreat seems negative; the act of moving away from something difficult, dangerous or disagreeable. Flinch, recoil, shrink, disengage. No. Not here. Here we do the opposite. We advance. We move forward, we make progress, we lift up, we grow.’

Yes, yes, yes, this is what she needs. No going back, no looking back.

Dr. Montgomery leads her to the check-in area. The lighthouse, while beautiful, feels eerily empty.

‘Tiana, this is our new guest.’

Tiana looks her straight in the eye, and hands her a room key. ‘You’re very welcome.’

‘Thank you,’ the woman whispers. ‘How did she see me?’

Dr. Montgomery squeezes her shoulder comfortingly. ‘Much to do. Let’s begin, shall we?’

Their first session takes place in a front room overlooking Race Point beach. Hearing the crash of the waves, smelling the salty air, the scented candles, the call of the gulls, away from the typical sterile hospital environment that had served as her fortress, the woman allows herself to relax.

Professor Evelyn Montgomery, sixty-six years old, oozing with brains and qualifications, six children, one divorce, two marriages, and the most glamorous woman

she has ever seen in the flesh sits in a straw chair softened by overflowing cushions, and pours peppermint tea into clashing teacups.

‘My theory,’ Professor Montgomery says, folding her legs on to her chair close to her body, ‘Is that you made yourself disappear.’

‘I did this?’ the woman asks, hearing her voice rise, feeling the flash of her anger as her brief moment is broken.

Professor Montgomery smiles that beautiful smile. ‘I don’t place the blame solely on you. You can share it with *society*. I blame the adulation and sexualization of young women. I blame the focus placed on beauty and appearance, on the pressure to conform to others’ expectations in a way that men don’t.’

Her voice is hypnotizing. It is gentle. It is firm. It is without anger. Or judgment. Or bitterness. Or sadness. It just is. Because everything just is.

The woman has goosebumps on her skin. She sits up, her heart pounds. This is something she hasn’t heard before. The first new theory in many months and it stirs her physically and emotionally.

‘You can imagine many of my male counterparts don’t necessarily agree with me,’ she says wryly, sipping on her tea. ‘It’s a difficult pill to swallow. For them. So I started doing my own thing. You are not the first disappearing woman that I’ve met.’ The woman gapes. ‘I tested and

analyzed women just as these experts did with you, but it took me some time to realize how to correctly treat your condition. It took me growing older to truly understand.

‘I have worked and written on this extensively, that as women age they are written out of the world; no longer visible on television or film, in fashion magazines, and only ever on daytime TV to advertise the breakdown of bodily functions and ailments, or promote potions and lotions to help battle aging as though it were something that must be fought. Sound familiar?’

The woman nods.

She continues. ‘Women are represented in television as envious witches who spoil the prospects of the man or younger woman, or as humans who are reactive to others, powerless to direct their own lives; moreover once they reach fifty-five, their television demographic doesn’t even exist. It is as if they are not here. And when treated as such, I have discovered women can internalize these realities. My teachings have been reduced to feminist rants but I am not ranting, I am merely observing.’ She sips her peppermint tea and watches the woman who slowly disappeared, slowly come to terms with this reality.

‘You’ve seen women like me before?’ the woman asks, still stunned.

‘Tiana, at the desk, was exactly as you were when she arrived two years ago.’

She allows that to sink in.

‘Who did you see when you entered?’ the Professor asks.

‘Tiana,’ the woman replies.

‘Who else?’

‘You.’

‘Who else?’

‘Nobody.’

‘Look again.’

5.

The woman stands and walks to the window. The sea, the sand, a garden. She pauses. She sees a shimmer on a swing on the porch, and nearby a wobbly figure with long black hair looks out to sea. There’s an almost iridescent figure on her knees in the garden, planting flowers. The more she looks the more women she sees at various stages of diminishment. Like stars appearing in the night sky, the more she trains her eye, the more they appear. Women are everywhere. She had walked right past them all on her arrival.

‘Women need to see women too,’ Professor Montgomery says. ‘If we don’t see each other, if we don’t see ourselves, how can we expect anybody else to?’

The woman is overcome.

‘Society told you that you weren’t important, that

you didn't exist, and you listened. You let the message seep into your pores, eat you from the inside out. You told yourself you weren't important, and you believed yourself.'

The woman nods in surprise.

'So what must you do?' Professor Montgomery wraps her hands around the cup, warming herself, her eyes boring into the woman's, as though communicating with another part of her, sending signals, relaying information.

'I have to trust that I'll reappear again,' the woman says, but her voice comes out husky, as though she hasn't spoken for years. She clears her throat.

'More than that,' Professor Montgomery urges.

'I have to believe in myself.'

'Society always tells us to believe in ourselves,' she says, dismissively. 'Words are easy, phrases are cheap. What specifically must you believe in?'

She thinks, then realizes that this is about more than getting the answers right. What does she want to believe?

'That I'm important, that I'm needed, relevant, useful, valid,' she looks down at her cup. 'Sexy.' She breathes in and out her nose, slowly, building confidence. 'That I'm worthy. That there is potential, possibility, that I can still take on new challenges. That I can contribute. That I'm interesting. That I'm not finished yet. That people know that *I'm here*.' Her voice cracks on her final words.

Professor Montgomery places her cup down on the

glass table and reaches for the woman's hands. 'I know you're here. I see you.'

In that moment the woman knows for the first time that she'll come back. That there is a way. To begin with, she is focusing on her heart. After that, everything else will follow.