

TEN PROTAGONISTS

WRITTEN BY
OTTESSA MOSHFEGH



FEATURING
CAREY MULLIGAN

PRADA

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TEN PROTAGONISTS

Patricia

Most people expect me to be a quiet type. Someone who sits in dark corners, blending into the wallpaper. I can do that when I have to – that is my job in many ways, to be invisible, to be neutral and unassuming, just a voice connecting other voices. But it's not my natural disposition.

I have a theory that minor misunderstandings bring people closer together, and closer to the truth. Friction makes life interesting, sharpens the edges of a conversation. When I'm working a corporate job, it's a big relief when someone curses, when a single sparkflies. I like it. Finally there is some drama, something to hold onto.

Occasionally I allow myself to make little mistakes when I'm translating. For instance, last week, a French animator was pitching an idea for a new monster character to some execs: "Il doit être imposant, comme une montagne, infranchissable," he said, his voice glitching a bit, his face freezing and unfreezing on the screen.

PATRICIA

I knew what he meant was, “He should be imposing, like a mountain, insurmountable.” But instead I said, “He should be like a mountain, difficult to digest.” Did it make any difference? I have no clue. But at least the execs on the call had to pause and think. They got curious. They had to inquire. “What exactly do you mean?” What more could you ask for than curiosity? What was really at stake, anyway?

Designers and execs have the same conversations over and over again, I find. Players want hyper-realistic dialogue and intricate plot twists that relate to real-world scandals of the day, they all agreed. But what about this character’s hair? And this music? An animator can spend years perfecting the angle at which a pixelated knight swings his sword around in a victorious flourish at the end of level seventeen, or what not.

I didn’t enjoy the work, but it felt manageable, just what I could handle. It had been a dramatic summer, so being invisible, disembodied, felt like a relief; I kept my camera off while I lounged on my new sofa with my old laptop, listening and speaking in different languages for hours while I looked out at the view of the city. I still don’t have much furniture here but the sofa is very comfortable. I sleep on it some nights, but in the mornings, I have vertigo.

I had always wanted a flat in a high-rise, and finally I have one. It’s helpful to feel that I’m above it all, especially after John and I split up. When I look down from the balcony, the city looks so small. Black cabs like toy cars. Tiny little trees. All night, honking cars and sirens float up and in through the one small window that opens. The distance these noises must travel warps them to sound like birdsong. I really don’t mind living in the middle of the city. John wanted peace and quiet. He wanted fresh clean air.

PATRICIA

He's missing it, I thought when I first moved in, looking out at the early morning fog rolling out like a blanket. All I could see was the toiling look of clouds, like I lived in an angry heaven.

I had an odd schedule working for PlayerVidz – department heads lived in different time zones, different continents. Sometimes I worked in bed. French to Japanese. Then Korean to Swedish.

The company had kept me on for two extra months, and after that long I was anxious to get out into the world again. I'd had a few job offers to teach English and I thought it would be good for me to be around children. I was going to quit soon. But then, very late one night, an assistant called and asked if I'd meet Mr. Smith* at a small café near the Kita-Senju train station in Adachi the next morning. It was a strange place for an American CEO to take a meeting, but the café was near enough to my flat that I could walk.

All I knew of Mr. Smith was that he was always traveling, just a blur of skin and a dark grey suit, a very tired blue eye and an occasional still shot of the corner of an anonymous hotel room when he set his phone down for a moment. I was sure he didn't even know my name.

It's a fine art, being an interpreter. I wield an inordinate amount of power and responsibility to communicate precisely, efficiently, with the correct emphases, the right shades of nuance. If I have had even a sip of alcohol, my objectivity is spoiled; I can't trust myself to get the words right. I sometimes even worry about how too much caffeine might affect me. That morning at the café in Adachi, I ordered peppermint tea. Mr. Smith, when he appeared, was taller than I thought, his navy blue suit tailored to cover his ankles.

He spoke in the way of business people as if everything he said was both urgently important and he had all the time in the world to tell you about it. The job, he said, was confidential. His wife was

PATRICIA

Japanese and had fallen into a coma a month ago while visiting her parents in Osaka. Now she had awakened, but her English was gone. All he wanted was a conversation with his wife. He wanted to make sure she still loved him.

Though it pushed the bounds of professionalism, I was interested, so I said yes. We took a hired car to Osaka, and met with his wife in a conference room. The new smell of paint was heavy. The wife was small and tired looking, but smiled at me and told me she was glad I was there.

She had not lost her memory, she told me. She had only lost the language. She seemed in a hurry to speak before I translated, so I waited for the whole story. She explained that their marriage hadn't been happy for many years. Mr. Smith had neglected it, working and traveling had been his only pursuits. She hoped there was a way, now, here, that they could start over. That they could get to know each other again.

I told Mr. Smith everything as she said.

*Not his real name.



TEN PROTAGONISTS

Alina

According to the algorithm, you and I are incompatible. I shouldn't enjoy meeting you; it shouldn't be a pleasure at all. The app marked our match percentage low, a warning to swipe left. But then, I've always had a weak spot for glitches and improbable odds. I know the underpinnings of how these algorithms work. I know exactly what I'm looking at when I see my own personality broken down into a coded profile, a predictive model that thinks it can map out my taste in love. And yet, I still get this strange thrill when something goes against the model's prediction.

I grew up around probability. My father was a gambler, professionally. I'd watch him run numbers, calculate odds in his head, watching patterns in the flow of cards. And my mother? A poet, of all things. Together, they raised me to think about systems both as fixed patterns and as unpredictable art, more fluid than most people realize. Maybe that's why I'm here, sitting across from you,

ALINA

allowing myself to wonder about something as laughably unreliable as online dating.

Our data says we shouldn't work. But that's the point, isn't it? That's what I like about these low-quality apps that match you with people you'd never click with on paper. I know the apps that rely on compatibility models and behavioral cues. They track how you linger on a profile, record how many messages you exchange, and study your interactions, all to suggest what might make you "happy."

But I don't want predictability. It's a dull kind of love, really – machine-learned and curated, optimized for successful outcomes. To me, the fun part is meeting people I shouldn't like, people who glitch in my world, who scramble the data, and make me reconsider the whole model. Which brings us here.

You're sitting across from me, sipping your tepid oolong, staring intently, like you're reading source code in my face. You're asking me questions that feel designed by the most predictable machine learning model, plodding from my favorite books to my childhood memories. I answer with polite efficiency. It's charming in a way. There's a strange beauty in how formulaic this is, how it runs down the checklist in that calm, predictable way. "Do you have any siblings?" you ask, and I give you a simple "Yes." I think about how the app would store that answer as another data point, a piece of my personality in its dataset.

I've always had an ambiguous relationship with data. I love it, professionally, but I don't trust it with my life. The absurdity of it all – romance reduced to algorithms and codes – is something I think about on a daily basis. When I fantasize about love, it's always in black and white.

ALINA

My mother says that when I'm ready to settle down, my vision will accentuate the positive, no matter where I'm focusing my eyes: I'll immediately see the person to whom I'm supposed to commit in high definition, bright and obvious. Should I believe her?

She's the type to say things like that, deeply confident that love reveals itself to those who are willing. But the idea seems absurd to me. I don't believe in sudden clarity.

It's a strange thing, being single and enjoying it. People think it means I'm avoiding something or waiting for some grand revelation.

Your eyes scan the room with mild interest. You're a good partner, probably – stable, organized, the kind of person who keeps tabs on your personal finances and knows what's in the fridge. You're probably optimized for a linear life. Me? I'm more interested in the back doors, the network loopholes, the security breaches. I like the edges of systems, the places where things go rogue, slip through without raising a flag. Love, if it exists, has to be something like that. Messy, unintuitive.

I look at you, wondering if you're one of those people who could ever see it that way. You seem too organized for that. Your voice has a steady cadence, no pauses, no uncomfortable silences. I think about what we'd be like together: you cataloging our groceries, maybe even syncing them to the smart fridge. Me leaving my laptop open, projects half-finished, ideas scattered like errors in the code. I imagine you insisting on "communication" and "structure," while I'm over here, fascinated by how confusing it could all become, how one errant variable could throw our little romance into chaos. I can imagine a thousand ways things could fall apart between us.

You ask about my job, which is something I can answer in concrete terms. "I'm a programmer," I say. You nod, predictably,

ALINA

like I've just described something simple, a nine-to-five gig that churns out lines of code. It's what people usually think. They think programming is a science, like it's all zeros and ones, predictable outcomes, problem-solving. They don't see the art in it, the way each line of code builds something – stable, sure, but sometimes so fragile.

It's like dating, in a way. You think you've built something solid, but one wrong input, one miscalculation, and the whole thing breaks apart, becomes something unrecognizable. And here's the part that keeps me coming back: the glitches, the things that refuse to fit the model. You, sipping your tea with a seriousness that seems almost robotic. My phone buzzes with another match, someone else marked for me by the app's formula. It's another opportunity for the network to search for the best fit, the next optimized suggestion. But I know better.

I glance up at you and smile. "It was a pleasure meeting you," I say, feeling a slight rush of satisfaction at how improbable it all is.



TEN PROTAGONISTS

Fannie

I grew up on our family's farm, descendent from generations who built their lives on predicting the weather and acting accordingly. We were landlocked by fields and hills. The biggest body of water I'd known as a child was a lake with muddy edges and weeds. I couldn't swim across it, but I could see the banks of the far shore if I squinted.

The first time I saw an ocean, I was sixteen years old. This was on a school trip to the coast. All the other kids were rolling up their pants to wade into the water. But I remember standing on the beach and feeling like I'd been swallowed up, like the sky and the water had merged into one massive, endless thing that stretched out past the edges of my vision. The ocean was so enormous, I couldn't see it.

So I took a picture with my disposable camera.

It was nothing spectacular, and yet sometimes I think it was the best photograph I'll ever take. It came out very grainy and

FANNIE

overexposed, just a streak of grey sand at the bottom of a field of blue. It was a shocking discovery, the infinite. I'd had no idea it was possible to grasp something so huge.

Now, as a photographer, I chase that feeling of standing in awe. I've been inside volcanoes, atop glaciers, soared over mountain ranges in helicopters. I primarily take pictures of nature. People are too dishonest. I'd go crazy trying to take a good picture of a person, I think. I shoot mostly digitally now, and I prefer to present my work on slides, not printed. The image is more alive when it is beamed through space, projected on a wall. And you get the sense that you could touch it. Try putting your hand out, see what it feels like. A misty dawn on a prairie or a glowering mountain of parched dirt and rock. You can feel the light on your skin, but you can't touch it.

My grandfather went blind in his sixties after a stroke, but he kept on walking the fields at dawn, feeling the ground, smelling the air. He could say whether the corn was ready to be picked by the feel of its shadow across his face. He knew the land by heart, walked with no cane and never stumbled. He could say when the rain would start and stop, when the first frost would arrive. He saw things in his mind very clearly.

“What do you see?”

“I see golden fields stretching wide under a lavender sky, the last light of dusk like a dim flame on the range. You can smell those wildflowers and the warmed earth. I see swarms of bugs floating across the horizon in soft grey clouds.”

“What else?”

“A single dirt road winds through our tall grass, leading to the worn wooden fence and a cluster of trees – the walnut and oak.

FANNIE

Oh, now it's getting dark... Today was a perfect spring day, and tomorrow will be similar. But not the same. It's never the same day twice."

I would place some tiny object in his palm, a stone or a feather, some small totem that he could feel with his fingers and identify.

"A young acorn, chestnut-bright and smooth as polished stone. The cap wears a crown of speckled earth, the color of moss and old bark. If I hold it up to the light, the sunset glints off the shiny surface. It shines like a mirror, doesn't it? You can see every shade of sunset pink."

If he wasn't exactly right, I never let on. He would take my pulse to see if I was lying. Two fingers at the throat, his head down in concentration. My pulse has always been very quick and light. He called me his "hummingbird."

A few years ago, I was in Finland and decided to rent a car and drive out with my camera to see the northern lights. It was so cold out on the ice, I couldn't keep still. The lights were just beginning to appear as faint green ribbons curli-cuing across the sky. I had my camera ready, but I felt this urge to just watch, to let the moment settle over me. If I took the picture too soon, the lights would vanish. That was how it felt.

So I closed my eyes. I thought of my grandfather as I pointed my lens upwards. I could feel my pulse skipping fast in my throat. I imagined I could feel the lights undulating over me. I strained to feel them, lens drifting, waiting, waiting.

Every cold front, every pressure drop and electric charge in the air before a storm, is invisible. We can only feel them.

I waited until the image was clear in my mind, until I could feel it. I took the photo. I took only one. That was enough.

Then I turned off the camera and packed it away. I got in the

FANNIE

rental car and turned up the heat. I stayed and watched the lights until they disappeared.

I didn't look at the photo for weeks, not until I was back in my studio and I'd uploaded all of the images from my trip. The green lights appeared all of a sudden, a single frame inside a mess of daytime photos. And I thought, yes. That's how I felt, standing there, looking up at the lights and the way they seemed to breathe across the sky. Like I was holding something so delicate, so fleeting, I might scare it away.



TEN PROTAGONISTS

Eleanor

Over the last several months, I have lived in the otherwise unoccupied penthouse apartment of Ms. Lavinia Moore. She hired me last fall to manage her vast art collection. I met her only once—she died just several days later. But she showed me the extent of her collection in the many rooms of the apartment, much of it inaccessible for decades as the woman had collected and stored her treasures not to display them, but for safe keeping. Art and artifacts. Gifts and mementos, keepsakes, treasures. The woman lived to ninety-six. She was an avid traveler, a life-long bachelorette, and she had no heirs. Not one.

She seemed satisfied that I would do a good job. She paid me up front, in cash. I can't say exactly what sort of agreement we made, but I signed it. Since then I have been sleeping in her bed, eating off her chipped china, dabbing on her strange perfume.

ELEANOR

People must think I'm preparing for an auction of her personal effects and organizing an exhibit of her art collection. It's true that on all the paperwork, my title is "archivist." And yes, I have been very busy cataloging each item among her possessions. I photograph each one. I write very careful descriptions. A watch that has held time through two hundred years. A stone pendant that once belonged to an ancient healer, stained with the oils of a thousand people's skin. There was a jade amulet, a very tiny thing, and yet it weighs more than a brick. It seems that this work didn't begin with me. There is a stack of leatherbound ledgers under the four-poster bed. The penmanship varies. I think the ledgers should be counted as part of the collection. Even me now, I think. I'm part of it.

I've found that I work better at night, so I've been sleeping during the days, always a thin, dreamless sleep with the window open to the sparkling of the sun and children playing, riverboat whistles, the flapping wings and coos of the doves that like to rest on the terrace. In the evenings I wake and take my tea to the drawing room where I've cleared a space to walk and sit. From there, I can look out the windows at the river. I spend an hour at the window as the sun goes down and focus on the water. I practice redirecting the currents with my mind. It's important that one exercises a talent so that it doesn't atrophy. I keep my power very finely tuned. I trace the curves of the current, and I imagine that it shifts in response to my gaze. A gentle redirection, like slipping my hand into someone else's dream and steering them sideways.

Some of the objects I handle are very precious and potentially dangerous. It concerns me that one of them might fall into the wrong hands. The doormen have assured me that security is sound. Still, at night while I work, there's often a rattling at a window that I cannot locate. I think there are other people living here sometimes,

ELEANOR

not ghosts, but strangers she brought. Her photo albums are incredible. She must have met a million people.

It's important that each little thing is handled as a priceless object. To hold it any other way would be disrespectful. I carry this shark tooth, or this glass paperweight, or this painted figurine as though I'm delivering a glass of wine to a saint. An offering. I hold it very still as I walk; I try my best not to let any energy spill.

And it's important that I remain detached, an observer, a messenger. If I stare for too long, or grow to love an object, I lose my ability to hear its history. I'm not as scholarly as people think; I'm well-educated and well-informed, but my real talent is my natural ability to intuit the precise provenance of an object, whether it's an old man's hat or an ancient scroll. I open myself up like a channel, and the thing tells me where it came from.

If I had wanted to, I could have chosen the ability to fly or see through walls or stop time. But those talents aren't very useful; they don't allow me access to any wisdom, at least in my opinion. I find it jarring to see a human being do inhuman things, like climb up a wall like a spider. Being human is its own phenomenon. I've never cared for stories in which superheroes wield their talents like blunt instruments, slashing through problems or magically zapping away obstacles in a flash of light or fit of fury.

Tonight, I hold a dusty purple crystal in my palm. I've opened the French doors to the balcony so that sharp cold air comes in. The crystal catches the moonlight, and I let myself imagine its original source. It was mined in a cave of volcanic rock many centuries ago. It once rode in the crown of a queen. It is amethyst. It can repel misfortune. It will sober you up if you touch it with your left hand.

I measure its size. I place it on the scale. I write down all that the amethyst tells me. And then I keep going.

ELEANOR

How does an object communicate? You must allow yourself to imagine it, a silent, unfamiliar voice speaking to you in your mind. Now listen carefully. I listen carefully. That is my superpower. I listen.

Power should be a quiet thing.

Imagine shadows, how they lengthen and shift but never demand your attention. They are quiet and unassailable. I've come to think of my special ability in the same way.



TEN PROTAGONISTS

Victoria/Veronica

My twin sister turns into someone else at night now.

I started noticing things when the weather turned and the clocks leaped forward. The days were darker, and her breathing changed. Like thin smoke off a fleck of burning amber. Something was wrong. I thought maybe she had pneumonia.

“I’m fine,” she insisted.

She had been going out every night and staying out later and later. When she came home – three, four in the morning – I noticed that the rhythm of her breathing changed, first of all. It worried me. Our whole lives, day or night, her breathing had always been the same as mine. Synchronized, perfect. We were the same in this primary way. We had different freckles – that’s how some people had told us apart. I have a scar on my chin from a car accident in Bali. She has a scar on her chin from a car accident in Budapest. Sometimes I’d sleep on the floor in the hall outside of her room – she kept her door locked – hoping my breath would inspire hers.

VICTORIA/VERONICA

She stayed in bed until sunset. Her eyes had a new slick glare across them. She smelled like honey and window cleaner to me.

“What’s the matter with you?” I asked her.

“Nothing’s the matter,” she said, pulling down the blinds in her room.

Her bed was unmade. I went to fluff her pillows but she stopped me.

“Don’t,” she said. She looked like she was going to explode.

“Tell me the truth, what’s going on? Did you meet somebody?” I asked her.

We had taken an oath, years back, never to fall in love. We agreed that we preferred to live single lives and only date casually, usually doubles. It had always been that way with us. People come and go. We love them for a night or two, a few days of small mysteries, but it’s never more than that. Neither of us has ever needed more. But in that cold month of autumn, she’d grown distant.

“Did you?” I implored her.

She broke into a very intense smile. She laughed, then stopped herself. Then looked at me and laughed again.

“What’s so funny?”

“You have no idea, do you?”

“I was worried about you. You’re never home, and I have nobody to talk to. And when you’re here, you barely breathe.”

I’d touched a nerve, apparently. Her smile vanished and turned into a sneering look of disgust. She snatched her pillow from my hands. She winced at the window and, adjusting the blind, said simply, “We are different people now.”

At night now I struggle to lie awake. I try to wait for her, or wait to hear her in the hall so I might dash out after her. I never manage to. I wake up in the night and she’s gone.

VICTORIA/VERONICA

While she's gone I focus on the feel of her in my teeth, in my bones, like a tugging from somewhere else, a heartbeat echoing miles away.

Some days I wake up singing a song I've never heard before.

When we were children, she'd always been the first one awake, watching the sky shift, the black thinning into gray, her face at the window as the world opened into day. We were forced to share everything. The bed. The room. The air. When she woke up, I woke up. Things had to be even between us. It was maddening sometimes. How many times did we compare our scoops of ice cream. Or bowls of soup. And this went on and on until we moved out and thought we could grow up and grow away from each other.

During the day while my sister sleeps it's my turn to leave the house. I have been getting tan in places, the backs of my hands, my forehead, my shoulders. My freckles have multiplied while hers have paled. Last week I lingered on the edge of a fountain, the white stone burning me through my jeans, my face to the sky. I let myself get a sunburn. That evening, I showed my sister and when she touched the feverish skin I thought maybe her icy fingertips grew a little warmer.

Whereas it used to feel easy, now my breathing feels labored. Harder, as if I'm breathing for two sets of lungs. One body can't sustain this, I think. That's why we were made into two.

"I want you to stop what you're doing," I told her as she snatched her hand away from my red forearm.

"It doesn't work like that. I'm changing," she said simply, with a shrug. She turned to the mirror above her vanity. "I've been changing all this time. My DNA, my bones, my blood. My transformation is almost finished."

"What are you now, a vampire?"

VICTORIA/VERONICA

“If that’s what you want to call it.”

“I don’t believe you,” I said, because the way she was talking to me while she fixed her hair made her seem like an actress, as if she had been practicing these lines all day.

Then one night, I’m in bed, and I feel something sharp, a sudden, twisting pull. I wake to feel her absence in a way I never have before, like the room has gone dark, the air gone cold. For the first time, I wonder if I’ve lost her, if this feeling is the end of us.

I wait up for her on the front steps, the panic and the cold concrete keeping me awake.

I see her before I hear her. Her figure an eclipse, darker than the dark down the sidewalk. Her skin is pale, almost blue, her eyes glassy and strange. She sits down beside me. I listen for her breath, I wait and wait. But she doesn’t breathe at all.

Just as dawn breaks, she goes inside.

We keep on like this. Taking shifts, seeing each other in the in-between hours, fleeting moments in doorways, in the kitchen, in the hall, on the stoop. I wonder what our neighbors think.

“It’s like there’s only one of us,” she says. “I’m the real me, and you’re the part that watches.”

I nod. My sister, the day’s shadow. My sister, the dark side of the moon.

I don’t struggle to fill my lungs anymore.



TEN PROTAGONISTS

Tara

My work isn't concerned with progress or building toward some perfected future; on the contrary. I believe the answer lies in unraveling the complexity that has evolved on this planet, guiding it back toward its simplest, most manageable state: single-cell organisms. Some would call that vision morbid, monstrous. I call it mercy.

Until recently, I was spearheading some very important research at an esteemed university laboratory. That was before certain "events," which, for the sake of this account, are unnecessary to elaborate on. I was dismissed without ceremony, banned from the facilities, and stripped of the grants that had fueled my research. I'd rather not get into. But I will tell you that one of my biggest discoveries has to do with the integrity of matter. As it turns out, reality is far flimsier than we'd like to think.

TARA

I wake each morning and see the planet as if it's crumbling beneath a thin shell of normalcy. Nature, I think, is both elegant and apathetic, hurtling us toward a primitive end. People go about their days in their tight routines, unaware of their fragility. Their skin, bones, minds—they're constructs of will, glued together by belief. We're taught to believe in the physical laws that govern our world, to view them as unbreakable. But belief is a dangerous material, as I've come to learn.

I was born into a family of pragmatists. My parents were engineers – my father designed bridges, my mother worked in aerodynamics – and their conversations were always centered on structure and motion. As a child, I often felt as though I was their experiment, an organism to be carefully guided but ultimately left to its own devices. I spent hours dismantling toys to see how they worked, then abandoning them once the mystery was solved. I was drawn to puzzles and problems with tangible solutions. I preferred the steady logic of pieces clicking into place over the ephemeral chaos of make-believe. I loved school, especially science class, where facts could be proven, questions could be answered. But as I grew older, I began to see the limits of this way of thinking. The deeper I delved into biology, the more I sensed that life itself was not bound by the rules we assigned it. Complexity, I realized, was both wondrous and burdensome.

During my adolescence, I would sit in my room for hours, not building models or conducting experiments, but taking apart strands of thread, unraveling sweaters, peeling layers from the objects around me. It was soothing, that return to simplicity. I didn't know it at the time, but this inclination to dismantle rather than create would define my life's work. When I chose cellular devolution as my focus in graduate school, it wasn't out of some grand ambition to change the world. It was a matter of instinct, of following a

TARA

thread I had been pulling at for years. I rarely think of my childhood now, though I suppose it shaped me more than I care to admit.

The integrity of matter is a myth, one we've clung to out of necessity. People believe that the ground beneath their feet is solid, that the objects they touch have substance. They believe their bodies are stable, real. But they're wrong. Everything we see and experience is an illusion stitched together by mere agreement. My experiments proved this over and over. Under the right conditions, what we perceive as reality can dissolve like sugar in water.

I stumbled upon this discovery by accident, initially setting out to study cellular devolution. I aimed to break down the complexities of higher organisms, to reverse-engineer their DNA to a simpler form. But something strange happened: as I worked, I noticed inconsistencies in the physical materials I was using. Tissue samples began to shift in strange ways, like water taking unexpected shapes under wind. Cellular walls seemed to grow less distinct, almost as if they were waiting to be asked to dissolve. The instruments I used to observe these phenomena started to behave strangely, too, responding to stimuli I hadn't introduced.

I began to catch glimpses of what lay beyond the veil. A tear here and there. It's difficult to describe the sensation – it's like feeling the bones of reality exposed, a scaffold that could dissolve with the slightest touch. In those moments, the world feels unbearably thin, as if one could reach out and push a finger through the wall that separates existence from nothingness. Our understanding of existence is a kind of blindness, a refusal to see that everything around us is weak, on the verge of collapse. I want to be a catalyst. And I was making progress.

The university's abrupt decision to pull my funding and eject

TARA

me from my own lab was not a shock. The official reasoning the university gave was vague: they called my methods “unethical,” my theories “untenable.” But I know it was fear. If my research continued, it would render the entire biology department useless. A fantasy.

The loss of funding for my experiments doesn’t concern me. It’s just a matter of time. All systems will eventually revert to their simplest state. I have all the tools I need. My mind is a repository of knowledge they can’t erase. I’ve collected data, gathered enough material to continue my work independently. Let them believe they’re safe, that I’ve been neutralized. I can wait. I’m impatient, but I’m loyal to my beliefs.

People have often asked me if I feel any guilt for my intentions. I feel none. I refuse to be shamed for my courage. A reversal, a return to simplicity, is not an act of destruction but of healing. I envision a world of microbial calm, where the cacophony of human progress is finally silenced. No cities, no machines, no people. Just quiet and balance, every element existing in harmony.



TEN PROTAGONISTS

Tabitha

The fever arrived abruptly, a force both violent and indifferent, interrupting my freshman spring break as if to make a point. And it did. I remember lying in my childhood bed in my parents' house, trapped within the heat of my own body, unable to distinguish where the fever ended and I began. In that state, I was unmoored from all that seemed certain: time collapsed, space curved, and the boundary between me and the world blurred. It was very magical and real. I emerged days later, weakened, but changed. Though it took me longer to realize the extent of it.

I did not go back to college. Studying physics had once seemed to provide the most precise framework for understanding the universe, but after the fever, it felt insubstantial, like a net woven too loosely to catch what mattered. I no longer cared about equations or proofs; they felt sterile, empty of the vitality I'd felt when I was sick. What stayed with me, however, was a preoccupation with

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movement – how every gesture, every force, seemed to belong to a greater choreography, one whose rules were felt rather than written. It was in this fascination that I discovered puppetry. To animate a lifeless object, to guide it through the air as if granting it its own will, was an act both playful and profound. It was not mastery I sought, but the tension between control and freedom, between the visible strings and the illusion of autonomy.

I met the girl, my future protégé, at a garden party on a bright spring afternoon. I'd come alone. As if that wasn't enough, I'd ambled away from the other guests huddling together under the cool shade of an enormous magnolia tree. I stood in a stalky ray of warm sun on the lawn.

I felt the girl's presence before I saw her, the cool shadow of her body cast against mine. She looked a little uncertain, as though she hadn't quite realized she'd crossed the lawn toward me.

I raised my glass and said, "Cheers."

She clinked her glass against mine, and in that instant, I sensed that something about her had been triggered, a shift in her awareness. It was immediately clear to me that she lived in the city. She had the cool and unguarded calm of someone who knows how to hail a cab and trudge against a dense crowd. I didn't know her, I didn't know who she was, but I recognized her. We recognized each other.

"Cheers," she said.

We spoke very briefly then. She seemed cautious, her questions careful, as though testing the waters of a deeper conversation.

I told the girl about my fever, about the revelations it had brought me. I explained how I had come to understand movement, not as a series of discrete actions but as a negotiation with the forces that shape us – gravity, inertia, desire. Her expression was one of

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polite skepticism, but she did not dismiss me outright. Instead, she gestured toward the magnolia tree, where someone was raising a toast. We walked across the lawn together, our conversation unfinished, though it was unclear who had chosen to leave it that way.

That night, on the train back to the city, she sat across from me, her reflection faint in the darkened window. She asked what I did, and I told her, “I run a puppet theater.” Her response was a slight tilt of the head, an almost imperceptible narrowing of the eyes. “I’m working on a production of *Lysistrata*,” I added, and explained that the Aristophanes play was about an army of women who band together to end a war.

“An army of women,” she said. “How many puppets does that take?”

“It’s a small cast, actually. And it’s a fascinating play,” I went on, “about women who withhold sex from their husbands. They refuse, you know. It’s about women refusing to yield.”

The girl looked only mildly impressed.

“I’m celibate,” she said next. “Most of my friends are, these days.”

“But you’re so young,” I said stupidly as the conductor approached.

“Exactly,” she replied, and rifled through her small clutch purse for her train ticket. “Too young to center our lives around anything but ourselves.”

One evening soon thereafter, before the lights in the theater went out, I glanced into the crowd and saw her again, the garden-party girl, sitting alongside a young man – her brother, I presumed. It was so jarring to me for some reason, I lost my concentration several

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times during the performance. Strings got caught. Limbs tangled. I fell out of sync with the music. All that I had practiced a thousand times suddenly felt very strange in my hands.

A few days later, a friend forwarded me a link to the girl's blog. She had written a very enthusiastic review:

“No performance is perfect, and it shouldn't be. What will always distinguish us from humanoid machines, from pre-programmed androids, even from AI-generated clones, are our human imperfections. Our inconsistencies. It's what the artist does best, she leans into her mistakes, the slips, the stumbles...Some people, especially children, find puppet theater frightening. Because it asks us to think, I'm alive. But what does it mean to be alive? As if to grant us mercy from our fear, the puppeteer did not hide from the audience. There's always a hand in the frame.”

I thought it was very wise of her to point that out. You should never be hidden from your own art.



TEN PROTAGONISTS

Cecily

Every night, I sit in the wings just far back enough that the stage lights don't touch me, waiting in the dark in the same costume and makeup again and again. I can see the long, trailing seams of the backdrops, props, bits of scenery leaning against the walls. The floor is littered with chalk marks and stray bits of tape, directions for feet that come and go like obedient ghosts. The stagehands respect the silent darkness behind the curtains as though it sustains them. Hands adjusting ropes. Whispers nothing more than shy breaths. I like to watch them move, padding softly onto the darkened stage while the actors step off, wet with sweat.

Amelia plays the lead. I have memorized how she does it, every line, every inflection, the way she walks onstage, like she's barely keeping it together. Like she's in love with the moment, and as soon as it's over she wants to go back there and feel it again, and again.

CECILY

That thrill. And every night she does it exactly the same way.

I haven't had the chance to do it for an audience yet. I may never get the chance. I'm just the understudy. But I'm ready. And being ready is the purest state of existence. And the most mysterious.

The costume I wear is just like Amelia's, a gown identical to the one she slips into each night. The makeup is her makeup, too – applied carefully so I look as though I'm holding back tears or hiding some truth that will catch fire when the lights hit me. I don't take any liberties with it. I'm her shadow, and it has to be precise. Sometimes, in the mirror, I think I look like I'm mocking her. But Amelia never looks at me. She keeps her eyes forward, her mind already halfway through her lines, her body moving through its marks like a machine. I know Amelia's act so well.

She has messed up a few times – anyone would. She skipped a word or she missed her cue by a half second, little things that only I would notice. I remember the massive rush of adrenaline I'd feel. This is it, I thought in the moment until Amelia found her way back. She never lost control. Sometimes I repeat in my mind, "Mess up." As if I'm playing with fire. As if my mind could make Amelia stumble. Just the thought that she might trip and fall, and she might. Even just the thought of it can thrill me. Even on my nights off.

Once, Amelia and I leave the theater at the same time, both bustling towards the stage door, springing into the night air, the bite of real wind sweeping out the stale taste of the fog machine.

I let her slip ahead of me and she does, without seeing me.

Breathing just right, my steps lock in with hers, the gait I've studied to perfect imitation. It's so easy. When she shifts her bag up her shoulder, I shift mine, nearly in time. I'm ready, I'm primed and when she shakes her hair from her face I'm doing the same, in unison.

CECILY

Abruptly, she turns a corner and the spell is broken. All the rest of the way home I can't shake the feeling I'm Amelia's shadow come loose.

I won't cross this line again, but the next day at the theater I feel a hint of pride, a sense of completion, the same satisfaction I used to feel in high school when every test question made sense.

After the next performance, I stay behind after everybody's gone home. I walk out onto the empty stage, a weird afterglow hanging in the air. I like to let the silence frighten me. I get no applause; I get no curtain call, and I know I'm lucky that I can still feel stage-fright. I get to stay perched on the edge of something dangerous.

My father was a machinist. His whole life he worked with heavy, dangerous machines. He used to say he liked the sound they made when they were at rest, as though they were taking a breath, waiting for the next shift. He'd come home every night, sit down at the kitchen table, hold up his hands, and announce, "I'm still intact."

That has always resonated in me very deeply.



TEN PROTAGONISTS

Betty

I've designed homes for all kinds of people, but the family in Township #243 was unusual. They were two parents in their late thirties, both with soft features and nervous hands, and their adopted son, Max. He was only five.

Like his parents, Max was a bit high-strung. All three of them had a weird habit of nodding along anytime I spoke, as though they were all agreeing, they were all onboard, as though nothing I could say could ever deter them from having complete faith in me. They'd seen my work on a magazine cover, they said. "We knew we'd never forget it."

We met in their kitchen, a clean, modern space that held nothing memorable.

"I want a house that Max can grow up in, a place that will follow him throughout his life, like a friend," the mother explained.

I nodded along, trying to understand what they meant. "You

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want a house for him to grow up with,” I said slowly, weighing out the words as I said them.

“So he doesn’t forget where he comes from,” the father said.

“A home for future memories,” I said.

The father shrugged and nodded—maybe I was only half right.

Usually, people wanted homes that echoed their pasts. But here were two people looking to remember the future. They both had strangely small eyes, as though they were perpetually squinting. The little boy’s eyes looked more normal.

I always start with light. Memories need light to grow. They need space to linger and drift. Aerial spaces are preferable; memories prefer high ceilings so that they can echo and thicken. Hallways must be very narrow, however, because memories can only move from room to room in a single file.

Of course, every memory is different. I design based on my personal experience of the space, what I can feel being remembered there, either now or later. People often mistake this practice for some kind of intuitive skill, but it’s simply my craft: knowing how to create space that recalls the past while hinting at something eternal. Of course it’s subjective: Architecture, after all, is a feeling art as much as it is a practical one.

“Do you think we’re strange?” the mother asked me. “Do you think we’re being overbearing?” She looked worried again.

“No, not at all,” I replied.

Both parents visibly relaxed, the mother’s hands loosening from around her teacup, the father letting out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding. Max looked at me curiously, his fingers tapping along the tabletop as if it were a piano.

“What’s your favorite memory, Max?” I asked.

“Oh no, no—” the mother interrupted.

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“Max doesn’t have those kinds of memories yet,” the father explained.

“He remembers things he learns in school,” the mother said, “but nothing else.”

I looked at Max a little more closely. He was eyeing the couple apoplectically as he tapped on the table. When he saw me staring, he stopped. He seemed to relax completely. He turned to me as though I’d just walked in and sat down. He yawned.

“That’s why this is the perfect time to remodel,” the father said. “So he can live with new memories of all three of us together here.”

“Can I see his room as it is now?” I asked.

They shook their heads ‘no.’

Max’s room would have to be entirely new construction, an addition to the main body of the house. His parents gestured sweepingly to the backyard. They weren’t attached to the yard, they said. I could take up however much space I needed.

Max slid down off his chair.

“Where are you off to, Max?” his father asked him.

Max paused, looked down at his feet.

“I forget,” he said.

“This is Betty,” his mother said for the third time as she lifted Max up onto her lap. “She’s going to make our house something to remember.”

That week, I drew up some initial plans for Max’s new bedroom – big and square with a lot of closet space, a place for a desk with a good view of Highway X-10, built in shelves and drawers, generous windows that would pull in morning sun and spread it around everywhere.

The bed would have to grow with the boy, and so I designed a sleeping-nook with wood paneled walls that could be pushed out,

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folding accordion style. A safe and private space, with room to expand. Wood grew, after all, or had grown. It could wear and polish, expand and contract. Memories can be ingrained in wood.

Max would have to walk through the hallway every day from his bedroom to the main wing of the house, passing familiar pictures hung on the wall, or a row of his favorite things lined up like sentries. Personally, I don't like to focus on the past. I don't want my memories lingering around me, I don't need them to keep me company, or to comfort me as if it would make me happy to be constantly reminded of what I will never get back. To "live memorably" is a strange way to live.

I prefer blankness, the space. When I look out over the city from my window, the lights tiny and far below, I feel just a little above it all, like my thoughts are free to float and move. It's peaceful, really. I don't like clutter. I don't like collections. If I can't remember something, I probably don't need to, I think. Anything I might need to remember or refer to – anything practical, like information – is all stored on the Cloud. It could all crash, all those files and data could disappear forever, but I'd still be me. It's important for me to be detached, my hands as clean as a surgeon's – my designs feel pure this way. People tell me that when I enter a room, it gets bigger.



TEN PROTAGONISTS

Rachel

Have you ever been in free fall and stared up at the stars and thought, Is this it? Like an astronaut cut loose from the tether, slowly drifting off, Is this it for me?

It was like that with Freddie when we were first together. Untethered and drifting.

I remember one night we drove up to his lodge in my brother's old Spider, top down. It was early summer.

We'd had an enchanted evening, like they say – the city at its best, with everything too bright and close, like the whole world was leaning in toward us. The moon hung low over the valley, lighting the road up the mountain just enough so we could see how close we were to the edge.

I was driving, so it was my fault. It would have been, I mean. I knew I was taking the turns too fast, but Freddie's warm hand was

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on my neck, and my hair was whipping in the warm wind, and we were laughing, I remember, and our laughs echoed up against the rocks of the mountain and back down again, like it was all ours – the moon and stars, the mountain. It was like that with Freddie. Scary how far that can take you, thinking you own the whole world.

I turned to look at Freddie, caught a snapshot of his profile against the pale smoke of dry dirt kicking up in the taillights, and I thought, If this is all I get, I could be happy...Then a rabbit hopped out in front of me and the curve of the road rose dramatically upward, and the Spider nearly slipped off the edge – two wheels skidding into thin air, the laughs still echoing down. Somehow I turned the wheel in time. Just a split-second more and we would have been adrift.

Later it scared me because I thought I had done it on purpose. Because I'd had the thought: I'm happy. Because sometimes just the thought of that is enough to cut you loose.

Freddie never let on that he even noticed my moment of panic on the mountain. If he did notice, he never acknowledged it. Perhaps he was trying to spare me the humiliation of nearly driving us off a cliff. I envied him for how easily he drifted through life, toward me and away and how little he seemed to consider the consequences of anything. As though his life would go on forever. I've polished the memory of that moment so much in my mind, it's something I can hold and examine from every angle. Each time I do, I can feel the thrill and the dread of it again. How close I came. And it wasn't about Freddie. It was about touching the inevitable, then backing off.

That was what things were like with Freddie. He lived on the skin of things, for the easy anecdote and satisfaction – every day

RACHEL

and every night had to end well. It was very simple. Eventually, we went our separate ways, as people do.

“Love” is a hackneyed thing, and the thrill of it doesn’t last. As it shouldn’t. I’m right about all this, you can trust me. I come from a long line of opportunists, mostly very intelligent people who spotted a growing instability, and then provided an avenue by which that instability might stabilize. They made nice profits. Industrialists, bankers, explorers, inventors, presidents of esteemed institutions of advanced education, these were my predecessors. It is in my blood to be proactive and enterprising, and to make prescient decisions. I can’t help it. So I know what I’m talking about. I was driving. I was the one in control. It was a thrill of a lifetime and Freddie didn’t even notice.

A few years later, I’d been driving in the desert, alone, when I passed a sign for a ghost town – Hawk’s Landing, or something like that – and felt the itch to veer off, to let the road get away from me. I let it. I had nowhere to be, nobody was expecting me.

I believe that everyone should, at some point in their lives, get stranded. Or at least get lost. Go missing. Such an experience should boil you down to your most fundamental strengths.

Because isn’t that the whole point of being alive? To come to know oneself?

The GPS signal faded within minutes, the highway shrinking to a thread in my rearview mirror. I drove until the track turned to gravel, then dirt, and finally to nothing at all. Just desert stretching unmarked for miles, the mountains standing stark and indifferent against the horizon.

I didn’t panic – at first. I was drawn in by the wildness of it, by the way, everything looked untouched and eternal. Freddie would have laughed, seeing me out there, miles from the world. “If you

RACHEL

appear somewhere and nobody sees you, do you exist?”

The answer is yes.

By the time the sun set, I knew I was truly, dangerously lost. I sat in the car, staring out at the darkening desert, and felt a familiar exhilaration rise in me. I didn't know what would come next. I was alone, miles from anything, alone.

When I turned on my headlights, I saw them – a field of bright hummingbird yucca. Those small, brutal sprigs of red flowers that grow on tall stalks. They hovered and shimmered in the desert wind across a gray landscape, spreading all around me. And in the near distance, the sudden drop off of a cliff. It was as if those flowers had come to stop me, to say, “You have arrived.”

Anything can be a road.

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ABOUT OTTESSA MOSHFEGH

Otessa Moshfegh is the author of six books of fiction including a short story collection, *Homesick for Another World*, the cult favorite *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, and Booker Prize-nominated *Eileen*, for which she also co-wrote the film adaptation starring Thomasin McKenzie and Anne Hathaway. Her most recent novel, *Lapvona*, was a *New York Times* best-seller. She lives in Los Angeles.