

## Don't Pretend You Don't Know

### AWAKENING

Her first morning waking up in Oaxaca, she holds a drinking glass over the open flame of the gas burner to heat water for coffee. She can't tell if this is genius or unspeakably stupid. She wonders if the glass will suddenly explode and send glass shrapnel into her chest, belly and eyes. She doubts it, but still, it's a thought. She wonders if the bottom will crack off and melt onto the burner itself, rendering both destroyed. This feels more likely to happen, and less likely to garner sympathy with Emilio, Christian and Omar, her Airbnb hosts or, as they put it, sitting all around her in the jangling little Renault Clio from the airport the day before at dawn, her *familia mexicana*. They're the ones who didn't think she might need pots, or a wardrobe, or shelves, or a table and chairs, or even a cup. They have either taken minimalism to its absurd end, or they're exceptionally tight.

She holds the glass at a tilt, but still manages to lightly burn the skin of her thumb. It's only 5.30 a.m., and she wants to write since, apparently, that's what she came all this way to do, but it is cold before sunrise in Mexico, and she can't write without the warmth and caffeine of strong coffee. At least, that's her justification. There are a lot of

preambling justifications before she can get going, and even after she goes through them all, there's no guarantee.

As she stands over the flame, watching the first small bubbles form, rise and disappear, she thinks about the loose-toothed man with eyes facing two different ways – both the wrong way – hovering outside the front gate of her apartment building last night. He strained his head around to watch her enter and she, also looking back, caught him watching before he snapped his head behind the wall, out of sight. She checked behind when opening her apartment door, and listened out. As soon as she got inside, she triple-locked it. One of the locks, she noticed, looked as though someone had once tried to kick it in – the wood around it was flaking. She also locked her bedroom.

Now she hears a few groaning engines starting up, the rumblings of the buildings, pipes and brick-aches, a plane overhead maybe, but not much else. That weight the air has, she thinks, heavy with dreams and stillness, when all around people are sleeping. As she was waking, at around 5 a.m., a man in the apartment next to hers coughed intermittently, little guttural expulsions, and every now and again gathered phlegm in his throat thickly, and spat. She wondered if he was spitting on the floor, or had some sort of system. Newspapers laid out, maybe. Then she heard shuffling, and the strong, definite stream of a man pissing into the water of a toilet bowl, and she felt an old, familiar pining for the men she's known – the safety of them. Her father, bustling downstairs somewhere, one of her many uncles, off to fix a fence or a car, or a boyfriend, soon coming back to bed, skin cold and dimpled from the world.

She loves the sound of men pissing, she decided, and formulated half-asleep thoughts about this, lying tightly

foetal on one side of the double bed. Unformed, dreamy thoughts of how to write about it, what its significance might be. Then the man started his jazz-coughing again, punctuated with those thick, throaty ejections of phlegm, and, remembering herself alone, in an unfamiliar place, she felt the warm comfort seep from her belly, and decided to get up.

She swaps hands and sucks her hot, slightly hardened thumb. It tastes sweet. When the glass is too hot to hold any longer, she removes it from the flame and stirs in two heaped teaspoons of granulated coffee she bought cheap in the little OXXO shop across the road yesterday afternoon, after landing. Coffee, milk, oats, natural yoghurt, toiletries. She thinks now of that strong smell the OXXO shop had; the rotating hotdogs and the coffee machines and an unidentifiable milky sweetness, a bit like Yakult yoghurts. This, she will grow so accustomed to, she will forget to smell it. Much like the garbage piled on the roadsides, the sewage floating up on hot days from the grates, the stench of raw meat wafting from the taco stands, the scent of maize lacing all the cobbled streets.

She had to hunt for bananas, since none of the corner shops she tried had fruit or vegetables – instead, they seem to prefer produce that can sit on the shelves for weeks and years: nachos, moist little packages of cakey treats, stuffed to the brim with preservatives, beers, fizzy drinks and tinned goods. Finally, she found a market just around the corner from her apartment building, swarming with sounds, colours and bodies. Never before, Lucy thinks now, had she been in a place so packed tight with bodies so utterly unlike her own. Never before, at least not when entirely alone, had Lucy been so apparently the foreigner, the visible outsider. Their eyes seemed to ask Lucy what

## PARIS SYNDROME

on earth she was doing there; the women, unimpressed; the children, curious; the men, hungry. But, she tells herself, admonishing her weakness, she will grow used to this. This is what it is, to be in a foreign country. This is what she came for.

That market, she thinks now – it shall be the first of her known places. Finding known places, regular spots, is one of her greatest pleasures, when arriving somewhere new. She arrives in new places a lot, and understands that it is the creation of little routines that makes this bearable. It is finding faces that recognize yours, and, after a few visits, smile, say hello, maybe comment on the weather. Otherwise, Lucy knows, a person could very soon drown in lostness.

She yawns, her whole body suspended up, up, up, then sinking back. She is tired, and looking forward to her coffee. She is proud of her ingenuity in making it, and smiles a little to herself, as she pours in the milk, watching it turn from black to swirling, pale brown, before taking her first sip.

## CARLOS

Carlos is smaller even than your average Mexican. His body is tight under his clothes – stocky, but tight. He appears healthy, although his skin glistens more than it ought. He has wide eyes – almost like a child's toy, a Furby maybe – and a nervous face, one equally prepared to smile or flinch. He spots her from the street. She is two storeys up, sitting on the restaurant's balcony with a beer and a book. It is her second day in Oaxaca. Next thing he is beside her. He wants to introduce himself. He can speak

*Don't Pretend You Don't Know*

English, you see. Carlos is proud of his education and his travels and his interest in literature. He came from nothing and yet here he is. He is an avid reader, he tells her. He is proud, too, of his confidence in coming up to speak to her. He doesn't say this but it's clear. He has the demeanour of someone who believes themselves to have recently overcome the curse of ugliness. He holds his small body well. He stares at her as though he does not quite believe in her face.

Carlos tells her of his trip to Ireland. He takes his phone out of his jeans pocket to show her photos of him smiling in a beanie cap and scarf and zipped-up rainproof coat before green cliffs, beside water, in green fields with sheep, before other cliffs, green, also with sheep. 'Is very green, Ireland.' She agrees. She tells him, unthinking, that Mexican people look wrong in rain gear and he sort-of laughs, not quite comprehending, wary of insult. Now she must be friendlier than she'd like to compensate. She sips her beer. She is still limply holding her book, keeping her page with her thumb. If she puts it down completely, he's in, so she is careful not to do so.

Carlos's hair is slicked and his black button-up shirt has a slight sheen to it, not unlike his skin. Had she passed him in the street without interaction, she might have assumed he was gay. He tells her he is a world-class cumbia dancer and offers to give her lessons. He tells her that he taught classes when he lived in Canada, but that actually now he is a botanist. She raises her eyebrows and tries to appear moderately impressed. She thinks but does not tell him about how she once wanted to become a gardener – she doesn't want to encourage connections between them.

He is carrying a book on plant life in his hand which he shows her, telling her of his fascination with natural

medicine. He tells her the Zapotecs, the ancient people from this region of Mexico – has she heard of the Zapotecs? *Bien*, yes, well, they understood the medicine in the plants all around and used them, but much of that knowledge has been lost or is only remembered among the traditional people, the people outside the cities. His ancestors are some of those people, he tells her. They still live there now at the edges of the woods at the base of the mountains, he says, pointing. Maybe she would like to come and see his village some time?

The sun is beating down on them and, mixed with the conversation and the beer and all the general startling newness, it is wearying her a little. She can hear the voices of the people walking down below, down where he had been, wafting up to meet them. They mostly speak in Spanish, but every now and then she can discern US-inflected English. It is the most central street in the city, and from the balcony it is possible to see Santo Domingo, and beyond the great church, all those lushly green sky-piercing mountains towards which Carlos is pointing now but not looking. He is looking at her.

She has not yet grown accustomed to their beauty, those mountains, and can't keep her eyes from darting towards them from her book, and now from Carlos's hopeful, wide-eyed face. He tells her he lives in a house there with all his family – his parents and his *abuela* and all his brothers and sisters, and now some of their children too. She smiles and he, gesturing to the empty chair opposite, sensing his having landed on a subject compelling enough to engage her, asks may he sit down. She baulks, picturing his hands reaching below the table for her leg, or worse, the two of them simply conversing for hours. Sitting up straighter in her own chair, she tells him

that actually, sorry, but she was in the middle of reading and writing and she really should continue. She watches him deflate, his shoulders visibly lowering, but he says he understands, of course. He then continues to stand beside her, blocking the only way off the small balcony back into the shadowed restaurant.

There is no one else in the restaurant. It is early evening, and the two waitresses, older skinny Mexican ladies, stand around chatting, leaning on the counter with cleaning rags hanging loosely from their hands. Pop music plays – now it is ‘Malibu’ by Miley Cyrus. Before that it was ‘Shake It Off’ and before that, ‘Cry Me A River’.

Carlos asks her what is she writing – is she a journalist? And she says no, no, she has actually been writing poetry today, but she usually writes essays.

‘For the newspaper?’

‘No, no, eh, for magazines or, eh, books, maybe, but mostly just for me ... I am going to write about here, about Oaxaca.’ Over the coming months Lucy will always say this when asked, both to justify her being there, seemingly just lounging about – *classic* imperialist – and to hopefully make them implicitly understand that she isn’t rich; that it is a sort of working holiday, even though she has no idea if she’ll ever manage to actually write about any of it, and certainly won’t ever earn any money from it; and even though, in their terms, she probably *is* rich. But saying it aloud – that she’s there with the implicit intention to write something about it, something presumably significant, shoots arrows of anxiety straight into her belly.

She takes the last swig from her bottle as his eyes widen even more. Carlos leans forward a little over her and says, breathlessly, that he too writes poetry. He is standing so close to her now that she can smell his masculine,

## PARIS SYNDROME

incense-like deodorant wafting up from his stocky torso and underarms. There is a pause.

'That's great,' she says, forcing a smile. She is suddenly overwhelmingly tired and wants nothing more than to go back to her cool single bed, to climb between the white sheets and sleep. 'That's really great.'

## EARTHQUAKE I

Standing by the bed, ready to resettle, she feels one of those little itches on her left hand and looks down to see a tiny maggot lurching its way up beyond her thumb toward her wrist. She flicks it off in a panic and checks for another, or a bite mark – anything, anywhere on her skin. It must've come from the bin she'd tied up and put in the hall. It was starting to reek. Could they burrow into skin? Could it have lain something, infected her somehow? Do maggots do that in Mexico? Probably. She scratches furiously, leaving red streaks, and studies all up her arms, turning them over and over, storm still raging outside. No sign, no marks, but that means nothing. It could still have gotten her, could still get her even now. She regrets flicking the maggot away and turns on all the lights to find and kill it. But she can't find it; it is impossible to see the tiny white creature against the huge white tiles. Maybe it has burrowed into the sole of her foot? Some delicate place below her ankle? Finally she gives up and climbs into bed and lies there in the dark, listening to the thunder and the heavy rain, remembering the photo on her newsfeed of the bridge to the airport in Oaxaca flooding, cars submerged up to their roofs. She imagines the maggot crawling up the bedsheets to find her, to burrow in between her toes. She



*Don't Pretend You Don't Know*

has been in Mexico exactly a week. She's alone, unnerved and exhausted.

Awakened by the shaking. She doesn't really understand. Whole room shaking, the noise of it the worst thing, she'd realize afterwards. No space for thought now, too much shaking. The rumbling inescapable noise of it, like the whole world is raging. That, and feeling utterly out of control – helpless to stop it, her whole body shaking, her limbs, unable to grasp, to stop, please, out of control, the shaking.

It is, she would tell people later, like very bad turbulence on an aeroplane, except that it is everywhere.

When it finally stops, the silence is eerie. All she can hear is a child crying down the street and the rain still falling, but lightly now, pattering against the corrugated roofs all around her. The rest of the world seems to be listening out too, waiting for what next. Nothing, she thinks. Nothing, stop being silly. A storm, just a storm, nothing, she tells herself. She forces herself to believe it was just the thunder, that she is being ridiculous, and makes herself go back to sleep and not think about it; the shaking, the flooding, the maggot, still coming, always coming to get her.

She is awakened again, this time to her phone vibrating on the small wooden bedside table. Groggily, she picks it up, the brightness of the screen a shock in the blackened room. Missed WhatsApp calls from her father, and a text:

Dad: You ok after that strong earthquake?	(2.10 a.m.)
MISSED VOICE CALL	(2.16 a.m.)
MISSED VOICE CALL	(2.32 a.m.)
MISSED VOICE CALL	(2.36 a.m.)
MISSED VOICE CALL	(2.49 a.m.)
MISSED VOICE CALL	(3.16 a.m.)

## PARIS SYNDROME

Her: Hey (3.17 a.m.)  
Her: Sorry asleep! (3.17 a.m.)  
Her: Yeah I'm okay! (3.17 a.m.)  
Dad: Jesus. News full of earthquakes (3.18 a.m.)  
Her: Here or everywhere?? (3.18 a.m.)  
Her: It just shook the room like mad (3.18 a.m.)  
Dad: Always text after natural disasters,  
u feckin eejit. (3.18 a.m.)  
Her: I didn't know it was a big deal! (3.18 a.m.)  
Dad: Biggest Mexican earthquake in a century,  
all over the news here. 14 dead. (3.19 a.m.)  
Her: WHAT (3.19 a.m.)  
Her: Holy shit!!! (3.19 a.m.)  
Her: Oh my god!!! (3.19 a.m.)  
Her: That's scary (3.20 a.m.)  
Her: Jaysus (3.20 a.m.)  
Dad: Off the coast of Chips ass and Oaxaca  
(3.20 a.m.)  
Dad: Ducking autocorrect, \*Chiapas (3.20 a.m.)  
Dad: \*FUCKING, Christ (3.20 a.m.)  
Her: Wow (3.20 a.m.)  
Dad: Check about tsunami warnings (3.20 a.m.)  
Dad: Are you far from the coast? (3.21 a.m.)  
Her: Yeah (3.21 a.m.)  
Her: Yonks away I think (3.21 a.m.)  
Her: You're freaking me out though (3.21 a.m.)  
Dad: 54 miles off the coast there, 8.4 (3.21 a.m.)  
Her: 8.4 what? (3.21 a.m.)  
Dad: If ur ok, that sounds like u are ok (3.22 a.m.)  
Dad: Magnitude (3.22 a.m.)  
Her: Oh wow (3.22 a.m.)  
Her: Jesus. That's acres (3.22 a.m.)  
Her: \*scary (3.22 a.m.)

*Don't Pretend You Don't Know*

Dad: Sorry, 3 confirmed dead. (3.22 a.m.)

Dad: Not 14. That was the recent storm (3.23 a.m.)

Her: The storm in Mexico?? Or that hurricane?  
(3.23 a.m.)

Her: It's been stormy here but just mad rain  
(3.23 a.m.)

Dad: Check online. Sounds like ur safe. Susan called  
and I've just been trying to find out more online  
(3.24 a.m.)

Her: Well tbh it's half three, I'll sleep now and look into  
it in the morning (3.25 a.m.)

Dad: Waves up to 10 feet expected after quake  
(3.25 a.m.)

Her: Stop dad!!!! (3.25 a.m.)

Her: Jesus fucking Christ (3.25 a.m.)

*SANTIAGO I*

Lucy meets Santiago in the one small record store in Oaxaca. He is passive-aggressively polite to two tourists from the States, both with different Asian origins (perhaps Indian and Chinese), both small and pretty, both with performatively flirtatious American voices. They are asking Santiago in a teasing manner for a discount on a record they want to buy, and he, smiling with only his mouth, says it is not up to him, it is not his store.

'So, like, you just work here?' the Indian-looking girl with ombré hair asks with seeming disbelief. She is wearing only short shorts and a crop top, while her friend sports a floral low-cut summer dress, a top bun and a nose ring.

'Yes, I just work here,' Santiago says carefully, looking directly into her eyes.

'Aw, man,' she persists, leaning herself slightly across the counter towards him while her friend giggles behind her hand, 'can't you just gimme, like, a few pesos off maybe?'

One of the girls has a Calvin Klein backpack and both wear pristine Nike sneakers. Santiago has dark skin and a slight frame with apologetically curved shoulders, darting eyes, thick lips and a crop of curly hair.

'No, sorry,' he says blankly. When the girls wait, expecting some further explanation, he shrugs and then averts his eyes to the computer screen on the counter.

When the girls leave, having bought nothing, Lucy – who just that morning on Skype was advised by her mother not to let herself become too isolated (since loneliness is, she must admit, already beginning to discolour her vision, giving everything in Oaxaca a deep, reddish hue, as though there is too much blood in her head, perhaps worsened by the constant, ebullient sunshine) – resolves to speak to him. She wants to engage with him, partly for herself and partly to identify herself as different to those awful gringo girls.

She picks up a Coltrane record, sighs, studies the back and returns it. She does the same with a Chet Baker record. From the corner of her eye, she confirms that Santiago is watching her, although he is pretending to do something on the computer. As the song playing on the shop's stereo system ends, he darts out from behind the counter, grabs a record, and sticks it on the player. He turns it up, then twists his body around towards her, his feet still facing the player.

'Mexican jazz, from Oaxaca,' he tells her, pointing upwards, when the first blasts of the horn kick in. Lucy smiles and raises her eyebrows enthusiastically to convey

her 'listening face'. Returning quickly to his space behind the counter, conscious of how she is nodding her head along gently, Santiago starts to tell her something else, but the music is playing so loudly that he has to shout across the small shop, and so Lucy comes over to him at the counter at the same time as he darts back out again towards her, tripping slightly on a box of CDs on the floor. They meet in a rush and then, in sudden proximity, smile shyly.

Up close, Lucy is almost a head taller than Santiago. He wears loose-fitting jeans like a teenager in the nineties, tattered old dress shoes of ruddy brown leather, and a tan-coloured airtex t-shirt. He leans up and in towards her ear, not too close, nervous, warmth of skins, cupping his mouth.

'Friends of mine, the jazz – it's a sort of, eeh, how do you say, "fusion"?' He leans back out to face her and raises his voice further. 'Latin rhythms, see, cumbia, there, hear that? ¿Sí? The beat and jazz, Mexican brass, all coming together, you see?'

Lucy nods, smiles, nods. She says it sounds amazing, wow, amazing, and Santiago, staring at her, his face indicating 'listen now, this bit', pointing up again at the music filling the warm cramped air of the shop, smiles too.

The sound crescendos to a heady end, and in the pause before the next track, Santiago speaks quickly: 'You want to come to a gig tonight, maybe? Jazz in La Nueva Babel, a friend of mine, friends of mine, we could go see?'

'Yeah,' Lucy says, flooded with the relief of acceptance, of prospective companionship, of not being alone again this night. 'Yeah, sounds great, yeah, thanks ... I'm Lucy, by the way.'

## PARIS SYNDROME

'Santiago,' he says as the next song starts up, brass and cymbals flaring. He is grinning widely. She proffers her hand and they shake. His palm is soft and clammy.

### DOG

That female dog with all those drooping tits, the one who lives on her street, who followed Lucy to the *lavandería* that day – she sits now just below the apartment block entrance in direct blasting sun, too tired to move. The skin around one of her eyes is red and sore and rotting. As Lucy walks by, she sees the dog's side inflate and deflate quick in the noontime heat and, shocked at the sight of her suffering, Lucy feels as though she wants to cry. She cannot believe the openness of the dog's pain, right there in the street, and she wonders, walking on, what she should do (bring her to the vet maybe?) while knowing really, reaching the apartment building's front door and turning the key in the lock, that she can do nothing. For a while, putting away her groceries, the image bothers Lucy. She puts on a podcast, and dispels it from her mind.

### LA POPULAR

La Popular restaurant and café is open to the world on two sides, supported only by a pillar at the building's corner. Breezes rustle through, scents and sounds. Dogs sit and sprawl on the warm pavement out front, dozing, biting ticks on their haunches; the younger ones alert, ears pricked, hoping for scraps. The café is positioned on the sloping corner of Jesús Carranza and Calle de

Manuel García Vigil, overlooking the trickling end of the aqueduct in front of Templo del Carmen Alto, built with greenish-hued cantera stone mined from the surrounding mountains and used all over Oaxaca. This church in turn stands just up from the open-air market selling local weaves and trinkets to tourists: necklaces, brooches, hand-blown hash pipes, dreamcatchers and pirated DVDs.

Before entering La Popular, Lucy quickly scans the room for faces she might know, good or bad; acquaintances, vaguely recalled faces from bleary nights out and then, if all is clear, she steps in to find a table, a chair, a space. For the rest of the evening she can sit and be admired by passing eyes and enjoy and despise it, and talk to whomever happens to be accompanying her this time. (Company in this place for Lucy is simply a means to drinking more and hearing herself say impressive-seeming things aloud – or, in truth, just hearing herself speak aloud at all, the vibrations of sound on the warm night air a confirmation of her continued existence in the world.)

There are three plain waitresses and one beautiful one. Lucy always hopes to get the beautiful one because Lucy is an artist of sorts, or something, and so she appreciates aesthetically pleasing things. Watching the waitress approach, smiling, Lucy smiles too, feeling a special kinship, and tries to decide what it is about her that makes her so astoundingly attractive. As the waitress hands her the menu and wipes down her table, Lucy decides that it's her eyes, or her nose, or her lips, or her ass bending over there, or her small round breasts, or her teeth maybe ...

Lucy has always admired beauty, but she is beginning to notice that there is something different in how she admires women here in Mexico. She appraises them in a way she had previously reserved for paintings, or

bouquets in vases, or prettily arranged plates of food. It is as though, Lucy realizes uneasily, she is considering whether or not to purchase or consume them. She seems to be *leering*. She has, more than once, had to stop herself from whistling under her breath.

Lucy orders a Victoria and an *espadín* and then, calling the beautiful waitress back, a glass of water, in an attempt to pace herself. This rarely works, but it looks mature and besides, is probably good for her skin, or something. The room is low-lit at night (which is the only time Lucy goes, because in daylight she resolutely forswears both drink and people) and buzzing with conversation, and there are paintings and photographs by local artists covering the walls.

Sometimes if there are too many people in La Popular, Lucy and whomever she has brought with her must share a table with strangers, which is welcomed or resented depending on whether she is the one joining or being joined, respectively.

Lucy is always with a man. All of her friends in Oaxaca are men because they are the ones who come up and talk to her, and all of these men have pictured Lucy fucking them. She knows this because they make it painfully clear, usually three *espadines* in, or after some cocaine, or maybe after just a couple of beers.

The one she was with in La Popular the other night, Rafa, asked her how often she masturbates. She had been talking about Virginia Woolf. When she told him daily, he grinned and told her, using a hand gesture like a giddy Nazi salute, that in that very moment he'd gotten an erection and that it was pointing right at her. Rafa has a successful mezcal and general lifestyle brand that organizes music festivals all over Mexico to which he has



invited Lucy to accompany him. He is very into money and *cosas* and technology and has a smart-vaping device especially for his weed. The first time Lucy agreed to let him buy her dinner (a six-course tasting menu in one of Oaxaca's top restaurants), he told her he wanted to take her to Paris to see the Eiffel Tower, and she had to pretend she was choking on her *mole*.

Lucy felt the hand gesture, which had been grand enough (sweeping towards her across the table, almost knocking his glass of Mexican red) was a little optimistic – Rafa is small and heavy and wears very tight, very revealing jeans. But she just laughed flirtatiously and drank some more and hated him enough to let him pick up the tab, again, which is what she's learned to do here to attempt to justify submitting herself to these demeaning dynamics and thus to control her rage. When he then insisted on walking her home and when, as she was saying goodnight, he put his foot in the door and lunged forward to steal a kiss, simultaneously trying to feel her up, she had to lie that she had her period and assure him, coquettishly, maybe next time, next time.

If Lucy has cocaine with her in La Popular, in her skirt pocket perhaps, she will, once the drinks have been served – a respectable, carefully calculated amount of time after arrival – excuse herself to go take some in the bathroom. Cocaine makes Lucy feel incredible, free, without fear or anxiety, and she eats less and feels less sleepy so it's a win-win, other than all the depression and all that adverse health stuff down the line. But in Mexico, Lucy is not living for down the line. She is only just coping with the days, the hours, the minutes as they come. If she makes it to the end of the trip, if she makes it home, that shall be more than enough – more than she feels she deserves. For

now, in La Popular, the night is only the night and she is still relatively young and doesn't have any other time – no past or future beyond surviving as well as she can in the right here right now – to consider.

Other than Rafa, Lucy's friends here are mostly male visual artists or musicians and so, once she has stripped away enough self-awareness with the *espadín* or cocaine, she talks openly and pretentiously about art and her intentions and her ideas and dreams and pretends to be far more successful and together and productive than she really is. This is Lucy's self-narrativization in full swing. It is – if she were able to watch herself from above – pathetic and embarrassing. But she resolutely avoids watching herself and so has (mostly) no idea. At least not until the mornings after.

She doesn't, for example, ever mention the five-hour lie-down she had that day to watch Tasty videos and listen to podcasts while swiping idly through Tinder in her little single bed, just to avoid working on a shitty poem. She doesn't mention the spots on her arse or how hairy she is or the family-pack of tortilla chips she wolfed in bed the other night either.

As the men pretend to listen, subtly checking their phones or glancing surreptitiously around the room for other people they might know, Lucy talks about what she thinks art ought to be – a seeking and accessing of universal truths, a way to know ourselves better through others, to startle one another into a recognition of what we didn't know was true of ourselves – and she tells them that this is what she is trying to do. Even hearing herself say it she sometimes feels kind of sick, but she puts this feeling down to thirst and so drinks some more, which works, since it also drowns out the sound and meaning of her

*Don't Pretend You Don't Know*

own empty clichéd words. Eventually she shuts up, and then all there is to do is wait until it is time to go home, which she does when the night begins turning either sadly or menacingly sexual.

Either that or, depending on the male artist friend, he will take her ideas as a prologue to his own, and the rest of the night shall be him talking and talking and talking and feeling no shame at all. When the night goes this way Lucy can be comforted in remembering, sipping and nodding along, that no matter how awful a person she is, she's probably not the worst.

*VISITING THE ARTISTS' STUDIOS*

Visiting Pedro's studio, the first word she learns is *dolorosa*. She has been asking about pain because this is what one does when entering an artist's studio. Art, she thinks, is a show, really, for all that other stuff. Like love or loneliness or being overwhelmed by nature or mortality. Or fucking, of course. A way to talk about to access to share to distract from to kill time until getting back to all that other stuff. But *especially* fucking. She is not sure if this idea of art is insightful or radiantly stupid, but in the moment, in the heat, in the studio, she really doesn't care. She thinks it's because she is lonely and horny, tired and scagging from all the cocaine and mezcal and half-comprehended conversations in Spanglish the night before. Right now, there is nothing in the world Lucy wants more than to be touched – touched in a way that reminds her body of the existence, somewhere, of love.

She learns 'painful' from the smiling fat woman with eight languages. She knows the woman has eight languages

because Pedro (the artist she is supposed to be visiting to write about his work – only twenty-four, pleasant, warm, from Mexico City, here on a scholarship to draw) tells her so in his own broken English. The fat woman is an artist too, apparently, with a tattoo (don't stare) in faded red and blue in the centre of her décolletage pointing down between her breasts (it is hard not to stare).

They don't know – these artists, here in the sunny studio, making pleasantries – about all the times Lucy has been fucked just next door. It is funny, she thinks, standing there in the friendly heat, surrounded by such earnest art, to imagine all that filthy coke-fuelled fucking. On the couch, on the mattress, on the floor. Juan, whose studio is next door, is an artist too, although all she's ever seen him do is drink and snort and fuck. She knows he is an artist only because of his having a studio, because of how he is treated like a god everywhere he goes in the city, and finally because of a video clip he showed her, still sweating, lying on the floor right after the first time they fucked, of his being introduced to camera by a towering Anthony Bourdain for an episode of his TV show being shot in Oaxaca.

Lucy and Juan started sleeping together two weeks before she visits Pedro's studio and it has proved an enormous relief to her. They do not care for one another, are destined to quickly forget one another, but sleeping with Juan has prevented Lucy's body from closing in on itself. Now all of Lucy's drunken nights either start or end with Juan on top of her, or on his knees behind her, grunting and thrusting. The sex is not good, not at all, but it is warm, and it is a means to being touched, touched deep, and for now this will have to be enough.

Pedro is a friend of Juan's but he does not know they are fucking. It is easier to keep it a secret. This is because

Lucy needs to fuck Juan for her body, but if the others were to find out they would lose interest in being her friend, and she needs their friendships for her heart and mind. It is a delicate balancing act. Now Pedro is rifling through sketches to show her, stored in a black folder down behind a large grubby table. He tells her he sleeps only three hours every night, here in the studio. His grant does not cover room and board. If he doesn't manage to sell any work to the wealthy gringos who wander through, he must live on just two hundred pesos a week, which works out as about eight or nine euro.

Later – when they are eating clear soup with chunks of meat, and warm maize tortillas for dipping, and salsa and limes to squeeze in, at a long plastic trestle table covered in colourful linoleum cloth for Juan's birthday celebrations (in yet another friend's studio, this one just across the road) – Pedro tells her conspiratorially that he sees a therapist, based back in Ciudad de México (these days he speaks to him by phone), and that his art is *oscuro*, *muy oscuro*. She hadn't really noticed but she nods, yes of course, dark, very dark. He smiles, believing her to understand him, and reaches across the table into the crate of twenty-four to grab out two more cool sweating bottles of Modelo. He opens one with his key chain and hands it to her before opening his own: ¡*Salud!* It is only then Lucy realizes that he is convincing himself he is falling in love with her. Juan, sitting at the other end of the table, watches their interaction and smiles.

Pedro is soft and gently creased when smiling – which is most of the time – and full of the belief and hope of youth that she is in the process of losing. That belief that things will undoubtedly be fine. Good, even. It is startling for her to bear witness to – Lucy had forgotten what it

looked like, all that blind, fretless hope. She finds herself blinking a lot up close to him. Later, when the dregs of day have descended into black Oaxacan night, all stained and flavoured with desire and brass and mezcal, when Pedro actually tells her he loves her, she will tell him he is too young and he genuinely won't understand, and the irony will be that he won't understand because he is so young.

The very first time they met, Lucy told Pedro (drunk-enly, obviously) that she would write 'a poem of his art' and so here she is. She just said it so he would take her seriously and understand she wasn't just another western slut. But he believed her and thought she meant it seriously (she hadn't then taken into account that he is young, and so still believes things that are said) and now she supposes she'll be forced into the act of actually fucking writing something.

Back in the studio, she studies Pedro as he takes out his *dibujos* for her to see and she knows – watching his careful motions, his gentle consideration, those soft kind hands – that she could eat him up.

'Is "dry point". Is with ink, see? *Sí* ... I like my, ah, process ...'

The music in the studio too is soft and rhythmic and Latin American and all so desperately *pleasant*. It makes Lucy itch, and this makes her think again of being fucked hard on the floor by Juan – just next door, just the night before – and she marvels at how close to pleasant the purely ugly, the desperate, the painful and awful can be, lurking right there, through thin skins and walls. Then, as Pedro scrolls through Instagram on his phone to show her more of his work, just as a siren streaks by up the road outside, she realizes that she's being silly, that it isn't a marvel at all. That this is at the heart of most things,

actually – their constant proximity. Life and death, all of it. The whole thing is just more stark here, she thinks, more bristlingly violent, and so harder to ignore.

'Black hole, *sí*? *¿Cómo se dice en español?* *¿Qué?* *¿Cómo se escribe?*'

She must make it look like she is taking useful and important notes for her upcoming, breathtaking poetry: '*Sí*, okay; H-O-J-O N-E-G-R-O? *¿Sí?* No? Oh, eh, okay, could you ...? H-O-Y-O N-E-G-R-O? Ah, okay, *¡hoyo negro!* *Entiendo, okay, bien, bien, gracias ... tu símbolo, sí, entiendo, muy interesante.*'

How many times can she say '*muy interesante*' before she seems like she's taking the piss, she wonders?

Oaxaca is all artists' studios, especially the street she is currently on, Porfirio Díaz, which cuts right down through the heart of the historical centre of the city. Studios and cafés and churches and bars for getting lost in afterwards. Living here she has been drinking too much and this along with the heat has made her perpetually confused and even writing this she is drinking again. After all, she thinks (again and again and again): surely there will be a time after now when things are supposed to get better?

Pedro is clearly enjoying talking *Art* to her in the studio, although they do not speak the same language and it is something of a struggle. Still, there is some strange comprehension. Perhaps, she thinks, feeding off his optimism, their mutual understanding is being enhanced by the shortage of language to muck it up between them. Grunts, smiles, loose gestures. Lots of nodding. He seems to believe in her, to treat her as a fellow artist, although whether due to race or language or gender or ego (or all the echoing other stuff), he does not ask her anything about her writing in return. Perhaps because he couldn't read it

## PARIS SYNDROME

anyway, being written in English, or perhaps because he just isn't really interested.

But it doesn't matter, she thinks. Not now, not here. She is just happy to be in company – to be safe. Besides, she reasons, we are all selfish in different ways, performing in different ways to get what we want. She is nodding along with him, smiling. She knows. She is selfish too, performing too. It's terrible but also refreshing, in a way. A relief, listening to the young artist explain the meaning of his works, to not be, in this self-interest, alone.

Sometimes we simply fulfill our prescribed roles, she thinks, cooing over a large sketch he holds up under the window's light. And right now, for him, she is the admiring woman. If she were to allow him to enforce it upon her, she would become a sort of semi-intellectual muse. Another kind of mirror. Oh well, she thinks. For now, she is too tired to fight. And too alone here. All she has the power to do, here in Mexico, is to appear to acquiesce while, at best, quietly taking note.

## *HORSE*

On the bus through the mountains for a weekend on the coast, Lucy sees a horse in an enclosure no more than three times the length of its body, a strip between the road and the mountain's edge. Its front legs are tied together with rope. It is trying to move forward and is lurching, hooves tied tight together, and getting nowhere. And before Lucy can even really register, the bus has sped past around a corner and she doesn't know what to do, she doesn't know what to do, should she say something? But how, in Spanish? And what would they do? What should Lucy



*Don't Pretend You Don't Know*

do? And the moment passes the bus speeds on they are already too far now and she doesn't have the language and what would they do anyway and so she does nothing. She does nothing. She puts on some music and tries to banish the image of the horse, hooves tied together, in that small enclosure, getting nowhere – lurching along in pain and getting absolutely nowhere – from her mind.

*SANTIAGO II*

Santiago invites Lucy to a birthday meal for one of his many aunties, being held in his parents' house. Lucy meets him at the old aqueduct which he has been wanting to show her.

'Beautiful, no?'

Lucy has already seen it, but she doesn't want to ruin it for him, and so she marvels.

'You want a photo?' Santiago asks, unconsciously imitating someone holding up a camera.

'No, no, that's okay, I don't like having my photo taken.'

'What? Why?!' Santiago makes a point of looking disbelieving, eyebrows arched. 'I thought all ladies liked, no?'

He is half-joking. He winks. Lucy has grown used to this mild chauvinism in Mexico and pretends to laugh along.

'Haha, no no, I don't ... I don't know, I guess I never look as good in photos as I'd pictured myself.'

'Ha,' Santiago laughs forcefully, dropping his hands, 'of course.'

It is extremely hot out, thickly silent but for distant engines and the hum of insects. The water in this part of the aqueduct runs weak and discoloured, although it

ought to be flowing heavily. Lucy thinks of the rivers of home, the waterfall in the Devil's Glen in Wicklow where, at the base, she and the dog swim naked in summer when there's no one else around, her clothes strewn in a messy pile on the warm grey rocks.

As they walk, Santiago tells her loose, general facts about the Spanish and their arrival in Oaxaca, emphasizing the violence. He intersperses this account with stories about himself. Over the month or so since they met, Lucy has learned that Santiago loves nothing more than talking about unhappy things, and that this category includes himself: his wasted potential, his unappreciated talents, and all the myriad ways in which he has been wronged. He hates lots of things that it has never occurred to Lucy to really think about. But then, as Santiago patiently explains, Lucy does not have to think about these things because she is a beautiful white woman. He, on the other hand, is a Mexican man – not only that, but his father is a *mexicano negro*, a black Mexican.

His father, Santiago has told Lucy more than once, is a descendant of the African slaves brought to Mexico, and still looked down upon by other lighter-skinned Mexicans. 'See, the Pope, he told the Conquistadors – do you know "Conquistador"? ¿Sí? Yes, sí, see the Pope told them that Mexican people, that they have souls, sí? And so they could not make us into slaves, the *mexicanos*, and so they had to bring the Africans here, to be slaves here too, sí? And my father, his family, they come from those slaves, that is why I am so dark, you see? See, just look at you and I!' Santiago holds up his arm. Lucy, uncomfortable, holds up hers alongside. She has known many men like Santiago – embittered men, self-pitying men, men who feel as though the circumstances of the world prevented them

from being the kings they ought to be – but she has never before had to take race into consideration in her dealings with any of them. Santiago makes race an ever-present, glaring issue and, it being too delicate for her to dismiss, Lucy is forced into a wary pity for him.

Santiago's forearm, she notes, has two long pinkish scars at a forty-five degree angle from one another. She wants to ask him about them but something prevents her.

'See?' he persists, excited, rubbing his arm against hers slightly in a way that, if pressed, he could claim was due to the motion of their walking. 'My mother, she is like you, she is Mexican, but she is very white, *sí*, like you – you will see.'

Lucy lowers her arm. When the path narrows on the bridge over the aqueduct, he goes first, and she, walking behind him, sees the sweat patch spreading across his pale blue t-shirt from the base of his back. Down below them, trees flourish along the banks, their canopies coming up to meet their feet. Lucy listens vacantly to the unfamiliar song of small birds darting between their red and purple flowers; song that is then drowned out by the building up and softly fading sound of a motorbike engine speeding past them, carrying a man, woman and child. After they cross, Santiago veers uphill to the left and they enter a cobbled street lined with squat shadowy houses. A dog barks angrily from a rooftop across the road, startling Lucy. She looks across and sees but cannot hear a woman talking into her phone, standing half-observed in the shade just below it. The dog and the woman stare at Lucy and Santiago, who stare back, an anomalous pair made stranger by the heat.

After they have passed by the woman – who, Lucy sees, looking back at her as she steps out from her place in the shade to better watch their ascent, is young, in her

early twenties maybe, with dyed blonde hair, thickly black-lined eyes, low-rise tight jeans with diamanté at the hip, a purple V-neck t-shirt, also tight, and black, strappy heels – Lucy, feeling herself burning, thirsty, mumbles something about Santiago being lucky he doesn't have to wear sunscreen. He, who had been lighting a cigarette between his lips, makes a point of stopping in his tracks, forcing her to also stop a few paces ahead, to look back at him, and to see his eyes widen in faux-disbelief, before simply shaking his head slowly, at the wrongness of her statement. She, growing a little weary, gives him no reaction, instead looking past him down the hill towards El Centro, feeling the sweat bead on her brow below her fringe, the warmth rising from the road, the haze, before turning and continuing on. He holds out a moment longer, willing a stronger reaction, a small and righteous scene, then relinquishes and walks briskly to catch up. Ultimately, their friendship means far more to him than it does to her.

'What should I bring?' Lucy asks after a few minutes of silence, rooting in her shoulder bag for her water bottle as she walks, feeling herself still not quite ready to look directly at him, to forgive him, although for what exactly she isn't sure (it is hard to think clearly, she reasons, in this heat).

'Oh, nothing, nothing, you do not need!' Santiago says, sucking in and then waving his cigarette in his hand dismissively, trailing smoke.

An old bow-legged man, carrying a blue plastic bag filled to bursting with oranges, emerges from the cool darkness of an alleyway to their left, making Santiago flinch. Lucy suppresses a smile. The man is dressed in a tucked short-sleeve button-up and slacks. He pauses,

looks at them a moment, then tips his hat to Lucy, indicating politely for them to walk on. After a few seconds, she can hear the creak and wheeze of his old body shifting into motion behind them.

Insisting she could not turn up to his parents' house empty-handed, Lucy stops at a strip of small rickety shops including a florist, a laundrette, an abandoned dust-filled shoe shop with bare mannequin feet still displayed in the window at jaunty angles, and an OXXO store. She picks up a bouquet of yellow roses (which, Santiago immediately informs her, were wildly overpriced, but still, yes, good, very good, very generous of her) and, on his recommendation, a six-pack of Corona, which he promises his parents would prefer to the bottle of wine Lucy had originally picked out.

When they get to the party, Santiago's demeanour immediately changes. He becomes sulky and strangely reticent, not unlike a moody teenager (he is thirty-four) in the presence of his various aunts and mother. His father remains upstairs, only coming down to collect a plate of food, nodding without smiling to Lucy and Santiago, and waving vaguely towards the women around the table. In turn, the women (his mother and all six of his sisters), speaking in loud, enthusiastic Spanish too quick for Lucy to follow, utterly ignore him. Later, Santiago tells Lucy in English, which the women can't understand, that his father used to beat his mother when he and his brother were kids.

His brother, he tells her, now lives in California, and has invited Santiago to go too, has offered to get him construction work. But Santiago hates stupid Americans, and doesn't want to work construction, and also doesn't really like his brother.

'I love him, you know, because he is my brother, but we are not the same – he is more, how you say ... he does not read books, like me. He does not love jazz, music, art, all these things, you see, like you and me, see? He has pale skin too, like hers,' Santiago adds in almost a whisper, tipping his bottle towards the fair-skinned figure of his mother, standing at the head of the table, ready to dish out food from a large clay pot she has just carried in from the kitchen.

His mother brings out many steaming pots and dishes over the course of the evening and, smiling graciously, laughing and chatting in Spanish, tops up glasses and refills waning plates. Not once does Santiago ask if she needs any help, nor does she ever ask him.

Over the course of the next hour, Santiago drinks five of the six-pack of beers Lucy has brought, while she, ashamed to say yes to the proffered wine without having brought any herself, sips the sixth. When they have eaten his mother's gazpacho, homemade shrimp tacos and the caramel panna cotta made by the fattest of the aunties for dessert, alongside strong black coffees, Santiago – who skipped the coffee and is growing louder, more brash, and increasingly expansive in his movements – rushes off to his bedroom to retrieve his accordian. Returning to his chair with a screeching thud against the white-tiled floor, legs spread wide, he starts to play traditional Mexican gypsy-style music. It is too loud to continue conversation, and so, after a time of polite listening, realizing that he is not now going to stop, his aunties and mother clap along, click their fingers, trill their tongues, and finally – shrugging across the table at one another in good-natured resignation – pull each other up to their feet, to dance in pairs, cumbia moves, all hips and arms and laughter, in the tight shadowy corners around the table.

*Don't Pretend You Don't Know*

It is at this point in the evening that it becomes clear to Lucy that Santiago's mother, his aunties, perhaps even his father hiding away upstairs, are all used to this behaviour from him – that he is treated by them delicately, as someone known to be gently problematic. Soon after she finds an excuse to leave, and insists to Santiago, standing too close to her in the narrow hallway, that she will be fine to walk home herself – that no, really, she would prefer to walk home herself. He gives her an unfocused, pointedly questioning look, shrugs, and shuts the door with a bang behind her without saying goodbye.

That night – lying in bed, tired, showered and relieved to be alone – Lucy receives, toppling one upon another, eight apologetic messages from Santiago telling her that he is so sorry, that he is never normally like that, that he was not a gentleman, that he was too loud, can she ever forgive him, and she, startled, spends the next half hour reassuring him of what a lovely time she had, until he is somewhat appeased and she is free, at last, to fall asleep.

*GUN*

One night, over two months into her stay, Lucy leaves Rafa's house to go meet Juan. She had been smoking weed with Rafa's ridiculous smart-vaping device (which, for reasons Lucy still can't comprehend, could hook up to his smart TV and be controlled by remote control) and watching Netflix when Rafa started running his hands across her body. She'd told him she was tired and ran out before he could find his shoes.

Juan is drinking mezcal and beers on a rooftop bar with some old friends from the outskirts of the city. Friends

from his life before he became a 'big shot artist'. He has been texting her asking her where she is, and she loves this, this being wanted by him, and she tells him she's coming now, wait, she's coming, she's coming.

When she gets there, she sees Juan and four other men sitting around a table at the edge of the rooftop with a view overlooking Santo Domingo. It is truly beautiful. As Lucy walks in, the small French DJ, the only one bopping away to the techno tunes, purses his lips at her. She joins the table and Juan, trying to hide how drunk he is, carefully kisses her cheek.

The friend sitting directly across from Lucy, a bald man, maybe in his late forties or early fifties, has his head down on the table. Sensing a new presence, he raises himself up and focuses his bleary eyes on Lucy. On his upper-left cheek is a teardrop tattoo. He does a double-take. He lunges at her and she darts back. Sorry, sorry, excuse me, he says in Spanish, waving his hands. He has misjudged his motion. The other men, half-watching, laugh and tease him in Spanish that Lucy doesn't understand. He wipes his mouth where a little spittle has escaped from when he was lying on the table. Then he moves to take Lucy's hand. Lucy allows him to do so, shakes, then pulls her hand back. He looks confused. He asks her who she is and she says her name is Lucy, that she's a writer from Ireland. Leaning into her, pretending he can't quite hear, he says okay, but who *is* she, and she says that she's with Juan. At this, Juan looks over from his conversation a little blurrily, smiles, and rubs her back. The bald man's eyes travel slowly from Lucy to Juan, Juan to Lucy, and then harden unhappily.

At that moment, one of the young boys selling sweets, condoms and single cigarettes comes around to their table.



The bald man is overcome with a bright idea. He grabs the boy's arm before he can move away and fumbles to extract his wallet from his pocket. He buys Lucy a round strawberry lollipop. Lucy, who at this stage has turned towards Juan, feels the bald man's hand take her shoulder a little too forcefully, and turns with a start to find the lolly held right up to her face.

'Oh!' she exclaims, and the others around the table, noticing the interaction, again burst out laughing. There is a pause. 'Em, oh, thanks!' She takes the lollipop and holds it a moment, acknowledging the gift, before putting it down on the table.

'You no want?' he asks her, seeming annoyed.

'No, sorry, no, *el azúcar*, the sugar ... ¡*Pero gracias!*' Lucy says, smiling as sweetly as she can manage, before tilting her body back toward the safety of Juan. She is not about to start fellating a lollipop. She is excited to leave, to get away from this old drunk and for her and Juan to go to bed together. But with Juan, as with Mexico, there is always one more drink, just one more.

The conversation lilt on slowly, with long pauses in which the men check their phones or swig their drinks or nod to men at other tables whom they know. All of a sudden, the bald man perks up again and takes a new-looking iPhone from his leather jacket pocket.

'You and me, we, we have picture,' he says, gesturing at Lucy to join him. He stands up expectantly, holding the iPhone ready.

'No, no, haha, *gracias,*' says Lucy, waving her hands and shaking her head. The last thing she wants is to give this guy an excuse to press himself against her.

His expression changes. He is frowning at her now. '¿*Que?* What? No, you and me, now, photo, come here,

photo, *sí*.' He gestures more quickly, as though instructing a particularly dim child, or an animal maybe.

'No,' Lucy says, her will quickly materializing like a shield before her, made from diamond-hard quiet rage. '*Gracias, pero no quiero una foto.*'

He stops moving, and stares at her. The other four men around the table are silent and still now, not drinking, just watching. There is a mounting knife-edge tension and Lucy can feel it, she understands, but in this moment she does not care. She will hold her ground no matter what. Fuck him, fuck this, fuck all of them.

'No?' he whispers menacingly, swaying a little on his drunken feet.

'Nope!' Lucy replies, staring straight back at him.

There is another held breath of silence, and then the bald man gesticulates to Juan. In Spanish he says: 'If she won't come to me, you come here and take the photo and I will go there to where you are.'

Juan hesitates and Lucy, feeling his hesitation, turns to him and whispers that if he even thinks of moving, she'll kill him. She means it, she says, unblinking – she'll kill him in his sleep.

He raises his eyebrows, goes to smile but, sensing her desperate rage, turns back to his friend. He sits up a little straighter in his seat, and says in Spanish: 'No man, sit down, relax – she doesn't want to be in the photo, she doesn't like photos, just relax, chill, sit.'

The bald man stares at Juan a moment, disbelieving, and then lunges across the table towards Lucy again. Juan and the other men at the table all jump up to hold him back, but mid-lunge the bald guy, perhaps realizing himself outnumbered, tilts back and falls down into his seat, scraping the leg of the chair against the roof's cement floor.

The other men remain half-standing, unsure, and the bald man forces a laugh, staring at Lucy, and mumbles something in Spanish – something along the lines of ‘Okay, fine, the lady doesn’t want a photo, fine’. Lucy nods, says nothing, but her chest is on fire. She wants to cry, and she also wants to take a knife, cut off this guy’s dick, impale it on a lollipop stick and force him to suck it bare.

A few minutes later, when the other guys are chatting again and Lucy is considering giving up on Juan and going home alone to eat mashed banana on toast and listen to an *In Our Time* podcast in bed instead, the bald man cautiously rises to his feet again, holding his chair for balance, and takes out his phone. There is a collective sucking in of breath before he says: ‘Okay, okay, you take us then?’ He is addressing Lucy, gesticulating in a circle at the other men with one hand, and with his other hand holding his phone out towards her. ‘You take us photo, *sí?*’

Lucy exchanges a look with Juan, who raises his eyebrows again. ‘Okay, sure,’ says Lucy, fed up but also, in a depressing way, amused. ‘Sure, why the fuck not.’

‘*Sí, sí,*’ he says, watching her and grinning. He motions for all the others to gather around him, barking faux-jovial instructions in Spanish, and so Juan and the others clamber to their feet and walk around to him, all five of them standing close, doing drunken Mexican-macho poses: hoods up, chins up, devil horn signs with their fingers.

Just as Lucy is about to take the picture, the bald man lifts his backpack up from his seat and, using his body to block the other guys from seeing, takes out a gun which he points straight at Lucy. Lucy, who had been in the middle of counting down from three, stops. She is holding the phone out before her, and there, in the screen, and in real life, is a gun, a silver, boxy handgun, pointing right at her

stomach – pointing right at where her womb must be, she finds herself thinking.

She looks up into the bald man's sadistic, drunken eyes, staring right back into her, and she holds his gaze, silently and unflinchingly pouring into it every ounce of hatred she has inside her, all the rage she's ever had, built up for years and years, a silent piercing scream sent to him straight from the bullet-hole centre of her. She holds his gaze for just long enough to let him see, to let him feel it, before – smiling pleasantly and batting her eyelids as prettily as she knows how – she resumes her countdown: 'Tres, dos, uno ... *CHEESE!*'

### *HANDS, MOUTH, TONGUE*

Interestingly, when Lucy is finally attacked in Mexico, that night walking home by the outer wall of the church grounds in Xochimilco, five minutes from her home – a warm night, a pleasant, humming night – she is not shoved against the wall as she tells people she was, afterwards. Apparently, according to the account of it in her journal, written the moment she gets home – still out of breath, skirt torn where he shoved his fingers in her crotch, neck still wet with saliva from his licks, his mark-leaving bites – that detail is an embellishment.

The thing is, Lucy actually *remembers* it happening that way now, because she has told it so many times, and has told her mother, her few trusted friends – told herself, in repeating it in her mind, over and over – that she was shoved against the wall. This seems now, Lucy thinks, like nothing more than a small assertion of unconscious will, a human peccadillo in the face of the reality of the situation;

a situation that actually happens to Lucy, that is forced upon Lucy, disgusting and frightening and beyond her strength to control or to prevent.

*CHIPMUNK*

Lucy is spending the weekend in a house in Puerto Escondido, a village on the coast. It is off-season, so she has the whole place to herself. She sits in the garden overlooking the ocean. The garden is hidden from any neighbours and so she lets the towel that was wrapped around her body fall to the grass. As she snoozes, thinking of nothing, the small squirrel-like creature who she had been studying in the flowerbeds at the garden's edge earlier that day, who has been studying Lucy back, comes over to her in fits and starts, fluffy tail curling and jolting, and hides itself in the folds of towel down to her left. It wraps itself in it, and Lucy can hear it muttering and squealing in delight. She, too, is delighted, and she chats to it about the light, the sea, other things.

After half an hour or so Lucy reluctantly rises, careful not to disturb the towel over her little friend, and walks inside to pee. She tells it not to worry, she'll be back in a minute. Inside, she checks her phone, charging on the bedside table, and there is a message from her father: 'love you kiddo, hope all's sweet with you, x'. She decides to take a photo of the sunset for him, and of her new best friend, which, she decides, is a chipmunk. She and her father are both equally crazy about animals, and when she is home they can wax lyrical for hours upon hours about the sheer amazingness of the dog.

Still naked, she goes back outside, and immediately sees an ugly huge raccoon, with one damaged eye, pale

blue, stalking near her empty chair. Her heart rises, panicking. She sees, through the towel, the little body of the chipmunk quivering as the raccoon approaches, sniffing. She shouts, her voice breaking a little, and stamps her feet, but she too is scared when it looks at her, and she finds she is not moving any closer. She doesn't know what to do. She turns to find something to throw but when she turns back, the chipmunk, thinking itself abandoned, has made a run for it, and the raccoon has leapt into action, and Lucy cries out but it is too late, the raccoon has it just before the edge of the garden, just before the cliff that leads down to the ocean. The little chipmunk, struggling, is grasped between his claws, and it is squealing, crying out, it is piercing, and Lucy's heart is tearing, she is gulping for air, she can't believe this is happening.

In one hand she holds her phone, and in the other she has picked up her shoe, a Nike trainer, but she doesn't know what to do; if she throws it, she will probably miss anyway, and then it may go over the edge of the cliff; and then, she reasons, she'll only have one shoe; and just as she decides to throw it anyway, the raccoon takes the chipmunk firmly in its mouth and, glancing at Lucy, pads quickly off to the side and through the brush to some place down the cliff, out of sight. Lucy could see the little chipmunk's fluffy tail hanging, swinging side to the side, from the creature's jaws. And now she can hear the cries of it, being eaten alive. Tears streaming, she half-heartedly throws the shoe, although she doesn't know why – to know that she did maybe, to be able to say that she did this at least, in the inevitable retelling. But she throws it so gently that it barely reaches the middle of the lawn, let alone the edge.

In a state of shock – still able to hear the desperate sounds of the squirrel crying, being torn apart, her little

*Don't Pretend You Don't Know*

friend – she proceeds, dazed, to walk to the edge of the cliff, raise her phone and take a photo of the sunset before it fades to darkness, to send to her father back home. ‘Wow, paradise!’ he replies.

*EARTHQUAKE II*

There are two more significant earthquakes while Lucy is in Oaxaca. The first of these happens while she is at her kitchen table writing in her nightdress. It is around noon. She finishes her sentence before stumbling outside, hands to the walls for balance, and stands on the street until it stops. More than anything, she is irritated at having been disturbed. Car alarms are going off, dogs barking, voices yelling. A woman weighed down with two heavy shopping bags trots as quickly as she can past Lucy down the street, no doubt to see if her home has been damaged. Perhaps, Lucy thinks, she has left an infant sleeping.

The guys in the garage up the way are smoking out front. When Lucy emerges they smile at her, shrug at the earthquake, whisper to each other and then smile down her way some more, teeth bared. She covers her chest with crossed arms and faces away. As soon as the rumbling ends, she goes back inside. She doesn't know about aftershocks or, if she does, she decides she doesn't care enough.

Later, down at the market stall where she eats her torta for lunch most days, the TV that hangs in the corner above the drinks fridge will show the wreckage from Mexico City: the death toll, footage of skyscrapers shaking and tumbling, the smoke, people running and crying and,

repeatedly, images of a playground – where children had just been evacuated from inside – suddenly collapsing beneath their feet.

*EARTHQUAKE III*

The last noteworthy earthquake Lucy experiences happens a few nights before she is due to leave Oaxaca for good. It happens in the night, much like the first one, but this time she runs out of her apartment and down into the street as fast as she can. The bottom step of her apartment block has crumbled away and, stepping over it, she hears herself whimper aloud.

Outside, children wrapped in blankets wail in their parents' arms, dogs bark on leashes, people chatter nervously, shifting and staring around from clustered groups, and old women in long cotton nightdresses, hair askew and leaning on the arms of young men, cry silently into handkerchiefs. This time, Lucy finds to her surprise that she is crying too. She doesn't want to be here anymore. She doesn't want to be alone in a place where even the earth can't be trusted. She waits on the street until the very last chattering stragglers have gone back inside. The sun is just beginning to thin out the darkness of the sky into a deep and fervid indigo – a colour so beautiful it seems to Lucy discordant, seen after the night's events. Turning to re-enter her apartment building, she hears the first birds' waking song and finds the sound unreal.

Inside, Lucy switches on all the lights, then gathers up her passport, phone and wallet and puts them in a clear ziplock plastic bag, propping it up against the serviette holder in the middle of the kitchen table. She considers the



*Don't Pretend You Don't Know*

bed a moment, swaying, then turns back to the kitchen, makes a pot of coffee, and sits down: not reading or writing, not doing anything, in fact, other than staring vacantly at the ziplocked package, thinking about what home – that place so far off, that still place, cool and green and quiet – might, at that moment, be like.

SANTIAGO III

Two weeks after his aunt's birthday celebration, sitting in La Popular, Santiago tells Lucy that reading her writing was the first indication he ever had that women had the potential to think like men. He means to be as intelligent as men, as well as to be rational and funny. He says this like he is joking but he is not. To justify the terrible things he says, Santiago opens his sentences with 'I know I am an asshole, *but ...*' Now that he has discovered that Lucy might have some intelligence lurking under her white skin, he speaks a little differently. He sits up straighter. Now he is intrigued and a little frightened by Lucy, and approaches her with the tentative curiosity of a dog sniffing in circles around a coiled snake.

One night, towards the end of her stay in Mexico, Lucy goes out dancing and runs into a friend of Santiago's, with whom she dances some more, and laughs, and snorts cocaine through a two-hundred-peso note (the green one with a nun on it) from the top of a toilet cistern in the secret social club downtown called Patio, a place where Lucy has become a weekly fixture. The next day, Santiago – who has become one of Lucy's closest friends in Oaxaca, in spite of his underlying sexism; his hatred of foreigners; his hatred of Mexicans, especially of *fresas* which is

## PARIS SYNDROME

his term for Mexican yuppies (meaning 'strawberries'); and his resentment of, concordantly, the general successes of others – texts Lucy, and asks her how her night went. She, still lying in bed, reading a novel, says fun, fun, and then mentions having met his friend out – what's his name again? – and says something about what a nice guy he seems to be. This is Santiago's reply:

Fuck	(12.02 p.m.)
I'm gonna beat the shit out of him	(12.02 p.m.)
It is not about you	(12.02 p.m.)
It is about you	(12.03 p.m.)
But he is supposed to be my friend	(12.03 p.m.)
I have beaten people for him	(12.03 p.m.)
For	(12.04 p.m.)
Sorry, Lucy.	(12.06 p.m.)
This guy is being an asshole	(12.06 p.m.)
He is interested in you	(12.06 p.m.)
Aswell	(12.08 p.m.)
Lucy	(12.12 p.m.)
Did you ever stopped to think that I was interested in you as a woman?	(12.13 p.m.)
How can you tell me you like my friend	(12.13 p.m.)
Even as a friend	(12.14 p.m.)
I know what that means	(12.14 p.m.)
It is pure logic	(12.14 p.m.)
I told him you are crazy	(12.15 p.m.)
BTW he told me he fucked you	(12.21 p.m.)
That is why I got so mad	(12.21 p.m.)
I respect you	(12.22 p.m.)
Lucy	(12.23 p.m.)
Sorry for going so crazy	(12.28 p.m.)
Lucy	(12.37 p.m.)

*Don't Pretend You Don't Know*

Later, Lucy would find out from another friend that when Santiago was a teenager he killed a guy, something to do with drugs, and that the real reason he had come back to Oaxaca from Mexico City two years before wasn't to take care of his mother, like he'd told Lucy, but due to a restraining order he'd received for beating the shit out of his girlfriend. Apparently, the friend told her, scanning the room and whispering into her ear, the girlfriend had needed nine stitches above her left eye.

A few days later, Lucy flies home to Ireland, fingers tightly gripping the armrests as the aeroplane takes off.

*AWAKENING (contd.)*

That first morning, and the dawn begins to filter through the opaque glass windows. Men out in the corridors shout what she hears as the word *huevos*, but she's sure is not. They are probably selling water, or bread, or ice maybe. Or maybe it's a warning of some sort.

Her first glass of coffee is finished, and she wants another. It worked, the experiment of the glass, it was sufficiently tasty and warm, and she feels the beginnings of a buzz. Things are looking up. She is not really writing yet, more coasting through articles, flipping through books, but she believes herself to be on her way. She is waiting for an idea to hit her.

She stands over the cooker again, more relaxed this time – a pro – and as one hand holds the tilted glass over the flame, the other scrolls through her phone. Titbits of news, recipes, dog and cat videos, photos of two best friends in a hot tub in the west of Ireland, a voice message from her father, another voice message from another friend, living

## PARIS SYNDROME

in New York, requesting photos of the Mexican food she eats that day.

Reading absentmindedly, something about Trump's hair now, a little video of it blowing in the wind as he boards an aeroplane, the glass in her right hand suddenly explodes. Water splashes out the gas flame with a hiss. She gasps, but doesn't move. It is a mixture of the two scenarios she pictured; no shrapnel in her belly, but also more widespread and shattered than the bottom of the glass simply plopping off neatly. She stands still a moment, adjusting to the new situation, then she places the warm, now brittle-feeling neck of the glass into the sink. The cracked bit at the bottom is scalding, and hisses when it touches against the wet, cold metal of the basin. She hadn't noticed it getting so hot. Lucy turns off the gas, and considers the wreckage. The remnants are still steaming, and so she'll have to wait to tidy up. Well, come on, she thinks. She knew it was going to happen, really. It was inevitable. She's neither disappointed nor relieved, but is, even as she tries not to openly acknowledge the feeling, a little disconcerted. Did she really put a glass directly into a flame? What could she have been thinking? The men beyond are getting louder, getting closer. 'Don't worry, it's okay, you're okay.' She only realizes after she hears it that it's her own voice speaking.

## *DUST*

Sometimes, Lucy remembers now, on especially hot afternoons – those afternoons too hot to do anything else – she would sit out in a chair in front of a café in the Zócalo, or on a bench up by the Guelaguetza stadium on the hill,

*Don't Pretend You Don't Know*

and watch the soft movements of all the endless dust that coats the streets of Oaxaca. In an instant, picturing it, even now she is there she is with it she is swirled away; swirled a white dust into all the adobe mud walls into fields of maize, into the open windows of all the cars parked along the roads, into the hair the mouths of all the lovers in all the backseats, into the children's playground the funnel of their instruments pouring out brass in the mornings before school, into the swollen eyes and ears the fur of all the full and hungry animals and into the vats in which they ferment mezcal; into the paint of all the artists, the studios and the drying murals in the streets she swirls her way into all that coke and gets sucked up all the people's noses and slicked onto pretty ladies' gums; she circles around the warm walls of Santo Domingo as the bells clang heavy through thick noon air and gets blown and kicked down to the markets – so much dust! – into the ladies shouting 'empanaaadaas' and a little of her is caught and settles in the fish tanks or gets embedded in all that pungent leather, sandals, satchels, boots and briefcases; some of her is kicked up by passing feet and swirls and lands on the pigs' trotters, the feathers of the chickens and on the curling strands of the tentacles of an octopus unfurling across the ice, a little speck of her in every sucker. The last of her is carried on those gentle winds into the surrounding mountains to dance around the woodlands, on and on around circling the valley, coating gently all the leaves, the animals and walkers and teenage drinkers, she is dusted silently falling across all the quiet, struggling rapes, pinned bared legs kicking up leaves, dirt in hair, hands over mouths and, in the evenings, she finds her way into the deep creases in the faces of the old tortilla-sellers, those women who've lived there their whole lives, who've known nowhere and

## PARIS SYNDROME

nothing else, emptied baskets loose-balanced on their heads, long thin plaits swaying down behind their thighs, plodding slowly home; darkness seeping through, frowning, frowning, weary, a silent sigh, through all that dust returning dust to home.