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LUX SANCTUARIUM

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Stella and her husband Ben lived in a hippie-like community in a not-so-distant future. In this community, they lived with a spiritual leader, Lux, who guided their lives through her teachings in daily worship services and a balanced diet, containing only natural teas and supplements. Everyone lived happily and healthily, until Stella fell ill, vomiting several times a day and lying in bed. She refused to eat or drink because of her constant upset stomach. Her husband Ben was worried, but since she had just gotten her period, they thought she was just still having PMS or a virus and that it would all pass in a few days. Despite the debilitating nausea and lack of appetite, Stella tried hard to take the teas and vitamins that her leader recommended as a cure for any discomfort. Unfortunately, they made her even more nauseous and she would vomit immediately after taking them. Stella was heartbroken by the concern that her condition caused to her beloved husband. Eventually, she thought it would be wise not to mention that the teas and supplements were making her vomit more. It would surely pass soon and it wouldn't matter if Ben knew about it.

In those days and moments when she was sick, Stella began to realize that the way they lived was not at all natural. Her period came strangely; it wasn't as usual, with a heavy and painful flow. She had exchanged the supplements for sugar tablets and the medicinal teas for a tea made at home with herbs from her garden. She began to find it a little strange the way Ben didn't dispute anything the leader told him. And then Stella thought: what's the point of having a leader?

One afternoon, when she was feeling a little better, she decided to visit her husband's brother, Marco. He had been a great opponent of the system in the past; he was an anarchist, a rebel. However, thanks to his older brother, he became enlightened with Lux and her philosophy, radically changing his view on how he should live. Marco

eventually accompanied Ben and Stella to live in the community. Even their widowed father was convinced that a carefree and natural life in a remote town was all the family needed to live well. In time, Marco became Lux's right-hand man, and he had a lot of influence on making decisions for the community's common good.

When she asked him about the way they lived, she also talked about her emotions and conflicting opinions. Marco quickly reassured her and said that, as soon as she got better from the virus, all of this would go out of her mind. Marco then made a proposal to Stella so that she could be sure in the future that everything was okay. In his home office, he opened a drawer and gave her a small digital camera. It was a very small camera, a little bigger than a credit card and a little thinner than the width of an index finger. Stella, extremely surprised, asked him how it would be possible for her to use the camera since everyone in the community had taken a vow of digital exclusion. (Lux said that digital hygiene was the first step towards mental and physical hygiene to live well and healthy.) Marco then smiled and said yes, in theory no one could use the camera, but Lux and her closest associates, since they were in a more advanced state of mind, they were able to use technology in a controlled manner and with a goal for the greater good. He himself used cameras to photograph and film the community's daily life. At the end of the month, Lux would collect the cameras and edit photos and videos as material for lectures and websites in the secular world in order to show proof of how to live better. All of this was paid for by her followers; everyone practically made a vote of confidence in their leader and handed over all their property and money to her. After all, none of this was necessary in the community: everyone got houses and lived off what was planted and raised there. Lux needed this financial help to pay for her trips to the secular world, where everything had a price and technology reigned supreme.

A little reluctantly, Stella accepted the idea. After a brief tutorial on how to operate the camera, she put it in her pants pocket and really nothing was noticeable; it was impossible to notice the camera in her pocket. Stella didn't know exactly what to film or photograph, but she thought it would be good to practice and understand the features of the equipment by taking some videos and photos of herself.

Arriving home, since she was alone, Stella decided to start practicing right away. She clumsily turned on the camera and, after a few attempts, managed to get it in focus and made a video talking about how she lived in the community and how she had positive thoughts about her illness. Then her husband came home and she quickly threw herself on the bed, ending the video and hiding the camera under her pillow. Ben was happy to see that she looked remotely better and then brought her tea and supplements. Thankfully, Stella had flushed her supplements down the toilet and replaced the tea with the garden tea earlier, since her husband had brought them to her in bed and she couldn't replace them. Ben, pleased, said he would take a quick shower and be right back to take care of her. The moment he turned on the shower, Stella got out of bed and hid the camera in a pair of socks inside her dresser drawer.

The next day, since she was still quite nauseous, Ben went out without her again, but not before bringing her the supplements and tea. He said he was confident that Stella would get better soon. This was the fourth day she had been like this, and these viruses didn't last more than a week, according to Ben, at least. Some time later, she got up and took the camera she had hidden the night before. She made another video of herself talking about how she was that morning, and started taking pictures of the community. Later, she made a video in the early evening, before her husband arrived back home. And she did this for a week, every day without fail.

Each time, Stella felt more out of herself, as if she were waking up in someone else's body. The nausea came and went; sometimes she

was in bed and other times it seemed like nothing was wrong. She thought that since she had improved somewhat, there was no point in going back to the teas and supplements and no more videos. What harm would it do to take a break from them all? That afternoon, she was feeling very nauseous, and after making her last video, she decided to watch what she recorded so far. After that, she was going to delete all the videos before giving the camera back. Marco, after all, was right and she was imagining things. She then watched all the videos in sequence and something alarmed her: how much her face had changed. On the first day, she noticed her pupils were more dilated, her face practically expressionless, as if she were anesthetized in a fixed muscular position. A distant look, with glassy and empty eyes. With each passing day and each new video, those began to diminish and then Stella understood the sensation of being in another body was real. In the last video, today's, she saw her pupils at a normal size and her face had its expression back: sad, droopy and depressed. It seemed like she had woken up from a deep and dormant sleep in a world of pain and mental confusion. Besides the nausea and the virus, what else had changed that week? Could it be that she was sicker than she thought... Suddenly, like a punch in the stomach, bringing that feeling of falling into an infinite void, an answer came: she wasn't mysteriously sick... she was sick because of the teas and supplements! She's not only sick, she was poisoned... and she's detoxing her body!

Stella hurriedly returned to her brother-in-law's house and decided to tell him everything that had happened that week. She showed him the videos and told him what had happened when she stopped taking the teas and supplements. Marco laughed at first, thinking that perhaps the woman was delirious because of the mysterious virus. He watched the videos and said that perhaps she was different because of the disease. Stella insisted that this was not the case and suggested that he also stop taking the teas and supplements for a

week and, like her, film the process twice a day. She took more sugar pills and tea from her garden out of her bag so that he could do the same. Marco suddenly became serious and saw that she was not joking, that she really wanted him to take honey tablets instead of the real supplements. How could Lux's kindness in sharing those with them be a hoax? And this baseless plan of Stella's? The woman then counters by saying that he has nothing to fear in case she is indeed wrong. All can be done in secret if she will be proven wrong, they will return to their previous lives without any problems, they just need to take the real teas and supplements and all will be “normal” again. If Stella was wrong, Marco had to prove her wrong. He reluctantly agrees with Stella and says that he will follow the plan to the letter and, in a week, nothing will have happened.

During that week, Stella continues to take the fake tea and supplements, waiting to hear what Marco will say. At the end of that week, Stella returns to find out what happened and finds her brother-in-law distraught and dismayed. Marco tells his sister-in-law that she was right and the same things that had happened to her happened to him! They needed to do something about it, they had to leave the community and look for information in the secular world: what was Lux doing that she needed to drug her followers?

While the two of them came up with a plan and met up at times when Stella was not suffering from debilitating nausea, she also decided not to tell her husband about everything. Instead, she changed his tea and supplements for the fake ones, so that he would gradually regain his consciousness as well. The videos that she and Marco already had would be enough, because they thought that if they gave the camera to Ben now, he would probably take it to Lux, thinking that his wife and brother had lost their minds over some baseless nonsense.

Throughout the week, Stella began to plant the idea in her husband's head that he was also a little sick and that he could stay

home more during that week to rest. Meanwhile, she and Marco participated in everything regarding the community, as if nothing was happening and, at the same time, they planned ways to leave that place without fuss when the right time would come. They wrote down departures and arrivals of Lux, her advisors, occasional suppliers and admirers from the secular world, thinking about how they could use the information to their advantage. At home, it was clear that there was a turbulence in Stella's husband's expression and day after day, Ben seemed more filled with the same pain and doubt that she had seen in her own eyes before. The end of the week came, the time to come clean and tell Ben everything. Marco, with the excuse of visiting Ben and seeing if he had improved from his sickness, would help Stella with the revelation. What they didn't expect after coming clean was that Ben, in addition to not believing them, also thought that his wife's virus had passed on to him and to his brother, and that by stopping taking the teas and supplements, they had made the situation worse. How could Ben refuse to see what was happening? He was blind and didn't want to see! He had been brainwashed and drugged for longer, and he was an older follower than them! He had cut ties with the rest of his family and eventually brought his then-girlfriend, now his wife, then his father, and finally his brother. His devotion and gratitude to Lux was as deep as his denial to them being all used to fund the sanctuary project. That the reality was they were actually in a cult.

Ben took Stella's camera and quickly ran out of the house towards their leader's mansion, where the community's main office was located. It was where Lux and her advisors worked when they were not at the Temple of Health or traveling to the secular world finding new converts.

Following him, his wife and brother ran desperately, trying to make Ben change his mind. But he ran faster and faster to the point that it

became impossible to keep up with his tall, strong legs, running as if he were an antelope fleeing from a lion in the savannah.

Upon reaching the front of the mansion, Ben suddenly stops and turns his back. He sees his wife and brother still running desperately. Stella is getting behind, vomiting and falling to the ground. Marco goes to Stella to help her and Ben runs back to meet them both. Ben tells his brother, who is holding Stella almost unconscious in his arms, that they are all sick, but she is sicker. Only the leader Lux can help them. Marco, defeated and moved by his brother's pain and the state of his sister-in-law, agrees with that. The two men take Stella to the mansion's portico and ring the bell.

Quickly, the three are helped by many people who were doing various jobs at the entrance to the mansion. Then, Lux's personal aide arrives and promptly recognizes Ben as one of the members of the leader's inner circle and practically part of her family. Lux was called and, while they placed Stella semi-conscious in a kind of infirmary, Ben told everything that was happening to a concerned Lux who had arrived a few minutes earlier.

When Stella woke up, she was in a guest room in the mansion. A guest room is a way of saying it, because what guest room doesn't have a doorknob on the inside, but on the outside? She immediately understood what had happened: she was trapped, probably by Lux's orders, to contain the information she had discovered from the others who lived in the community. When she sat up in bed, she saw that her husband was sitting in an armchair in the opposite corner of the bed. Ben's expression was solemn and thoughtful. When he realized that his wife had woken up, he calmly got up from the chair and sat on the opposite end of the bed from where she was. With his head down, without looking at Stella, as if he seemed ashamed of what he was going to say, he simply said that his wife was right. Everything he was told earlier was all true and he should have trusted what she said, like Marco, who didn't doubt it. Now it was too late, they had already taken

his brother somewhere in the mansion to be interrogated. They are accusing him of starting all this and that Ben and Stella are accomplices, that they were sabotaging evidence against Lux and the community. Visibly shaken, he throws himself into Stella's lap and cries profusely. In tears, he asks where his brother could be and if they will be next.

Stella, trying to absorb everything Ben had just told her, takes advantage of the brief moment in which she physically feels better and quickly begins to analyze where the two of them are. The bedroom door really only opened from the outside, which means they are unable to leave. The windows were also not an option, as they were sealed shut and could not be opened. She thinks that if the windows do not open and there is no air conditioning unit in sight, there must be some central air duct. Looking around the room, she finds the air duct in the ceiling, above the window. In the bathroom, another sealed shut window. Ben seems to think they are trapped but a newly quick-witted Stella, much like she used to be in the past before all this cult stuff, has an idea that can save them.

Stella rapidly explains her plan: Ben needs to break the bathroom window glass so that it looks like they tried to escape through there. He needs to be quick, because the noise will attract attention and then someone will come to see what's going on. Stella will try to block the door with some furniture, but that will only buy them a small amount of time. While her husband breaks the window, she will have already climbed onto a chair and jumped into the air duct. By the time her husband opens the window enough to mimic someone getting out, he will then enter the duct as well, put the chair away, closing the duct in order to hide where they truly were. Then they go to try to find Marco, who is most likely being interrogated somewhere.

That's exactly what they do, Ben had some difficulty breaking the bathroom window, but it really did look like they had tried to escape through there. The final blow to the glass will make the necessary

noise and he has to be quick after that. Now, while security guards and assistants look for them outside, they hide in the air duct and start looking for his brother through the other entrances in the long duct. At some point, Marco will be alone and then they can bring him to the duct. Stella has the impression that, in the days when she was taking pictures around the lot, she had seen a central air vent near a tunnel. Marco could probably know where that tunnel led to and they would escape through there. Eventually, after a few minutes, they reach the right air vent where Marco is still being interrogated.

Lux is the one interrogating him and this is a bad sign. She is holding the camera with the photos and videos that were taken as evidence against her. When looking at the contents, Lux simply smiles and informs her former friend Marco that they were not the first to discover such a thing. But they could hopefully be the last. Lux is pacing around the room, while she explains that the solution to a serious problem is usually the simplest: Marco and his family decided to return to secular life. That is what they would tell the community. Marco freezes and he remembers having heard similar stories before. Since they learned never to question the wisdom of their leader, the stories remained that way and no one gave another thought about the ones who were weak and left. Due to the lack of cell phones and internet, no one followed anything that was being said about them in the secular world. Technology, as the main enemy of the community, was essential for everything to be in Lux's favor. When Marco looks at Lux, she understands that he connected the dots and said that she expected nothing less from him. Suddenly, she takes a gun from her belt, shoots him at point blank range on the head, and takes the life of her former friend as if it were nothing.

Stella and Ben watch in terror as it happens, unable to do anything that does not endanger their lives as well. In shock, they follow through the air duct, silently crying over the loss of their beloved family member. Ben thinks about his father, who is also in the community,

oblivious to all the confusion and barbarity that plagues his family, all originating from the wise Lux who had welcomed them with promises of peace and a happy life.

In almost complete silence, the two navigate the tunnel and Stella, with Ben's help, manages to pull the exit cover. They take a peek outside, and it seems that the search parties are not there, but rather more towards the forest near the community and Lux's mansion. Quickly, the two see what looks like a basement door to a bomb shelter on the other side of where they are. Getting out and reaching for the door is an absurd risk, because neither of them knows where this tunnel will lead them, or if it is indeed a bomb shelter without a way out. It could be a trap or it could be freedom. They feel that they have no choice after the cold-blooded murder they just saw Lux commit, so they join hands and, together, choose to follow the path to freedom.

That tunnel must have been used in other times for smuggling goods or slave trading. It was clearly in disuse and Lux, with the arrogance of having everyone under her control, did not bother to close the passage. That was the couple's luck. Upon exiting the tunnel, it seemed that they were far away enough from the community that they felt safe to walk beyond the rural area they were in, until they saw a ranch or town. After walking a lot and Stella vomiting a few times, Ben had to carry her on his back, as she had lost her strength. Upon picking her up, he felt that her belly was a little swollen and panicked, thinking that Stella was really sick due to all the lack of medical care and the natural remedies from Lux. He began to walk as quickly as he could and eventually found a small town where he quickly managed to get help for his wife, who visibly looked very sick.

At the small hospital, both Stella and Ben were treated. He only had some lacerations on his arms and hands from breaking the window before. Stella was severely dehydrated and was receiving intravenous fluids while she tried to regain her strength. Due to

exhaustion and stress, the doctors let Stella sleep and Ben was called to talk to the police officer that was on his way. Upon their arrival, a nurse quickly called and asked for the police to come as soon as possible. Hours later, after Ben had given his statement to the police, Stella woke up and was feeling better. The fluids probably helped. A doctor came to talk to them and said they could be relieved. The reason for the vomiting was hyperemesis gravidarum, which causes nausea and vomiting that is more intense than normal during pregnancy. It was nothing serious. The couple was in disbelief that Stella could be pregnant; after all, she just had her period. The doctor then told them that the tea and supplements may have made the situation worse, but without being able to test the substances, it would be difficult to know what they could really be causing. The couple was in shock, now for a happy situation, but they couldn't shake off the sadness of having lost someone in the family. Ben, with tears in his eyes, hugged Stella and said he was sorry for not having been able to save his own brother. She said it wasn't either of their faults, but Lux's. The two still had hope that Ben's father would be saved and that Lux would pay for her many crimes. In an unfair world, they knew that the real chances of this actually happening were slim and that justice would not always be served; but nothing would stop them from at least trying. For Marco, for their unborn child and for everyone who still lived in Lux Sanctuary.