

## A MILLION NIGHTS

*By Steven Carey-Walton*

A woman, arms stretched for balance, tip-toed on the man's back, crunches and pops following each step. She glared at Brian through feathery bangs and twirled. Sweat dribbled down the grooves of her back, cut into her skin by a red sports bra. The fireplace crackled and made the room dangerously cozy. Leaving would take determination, and Brian would rather melt into the leather seat than have to move. Who has an in-home masseuse but no in-home heating?

The man, squished into a massage chair, spoke out the side of his mouth, his lips moving like a fish's. "My story's over. I'm on the epilogue."

"Couple of kids and a swimming pool?" Brian said.

He grunted, dismissed the woman, and sat up, stretching his muscles. His kempt beard dangled like a black icicle. "What's it like for you?"

"You know." Brian flicked his head at the pictures on the wall: the man—and his beard—posing with the UN; flying down the back stretch in a formula one race car; doing a spacewalk, Earth in the background.

"I knew," he said. "But I sleep now."

"Is that possible?"

He nodded. "So, please, remind me. What's it like?"

"It's like" —Brian dribbled his fingers on the sofa's armrest— "I'm playing a board game— Candy land—with my siblings. And every time they go to the bathroom or grab a snack, I move my game piece a space closer to the finish. It's not cheating because they don't notice. But when they answer the phone or get another soda, I move my piece. So after a while, I'm so much further ahead."

The man dropped his towel and pulled on a pair of mango yellow skivvies, adjusting his junk to get the bulge as globular as possible. "A well-rehearsed answer."

"Excuse me?"

"What do you use the time for?"

"Well, first, I—"

"That was rhetorical. Let me guess." He stroked Brian's palms. "Callouses and a svelte bod" —cupping a pec— "gym rat." He circled Brian and spoke in tongues.

Brian responded in Arabic, French, and Mandarin Chinese.

"Impressive," he said. "But what about the rest of the time?"

"I—"

“No, no. We’re still playing.”

Brian stood straight and slicked his hair, wet with perspiration, to the preferred left side.

“Not a craftsman—nails are too clean. Not into cars. No offense,” he said, peering out the window at Brian’s ’98 Honda Civic, missing a side mirror. “Again, sorry, but you’re obviously not into fashion, or fishing, or gardening. What do you do?” His legs were splayed, crunchy chest hair covered the surface of his skin like a rain cloud. “The game’s over. Answer me, please.”

“I’m a researcher,” Brian said. “A scientist.”

“I recognized your face. You’re famous.”

“Only in academia.”

“I will not tolerate humility. Everyone knows you. You’ve done soft profiles” —thrusting his pelvis— “hard profiles.” He charged over to the hearth, scouring through a bin of newspapers and instructional manuals. “Look at you.” He pointed at the cover— a photo of Brian in a lab coat—flipped open the magazine and read: “Brian Sharpe, a double PHD, is fluent in five languages, trains for triathlons, is married to fellow scientist, Rachel Stone, and is the world’s leading sleep expert. But what’s his secret for such production? Dr. Sharpe is slated to publish a paper at the end of the year that will make human energy an accessible utility.”

Brian rocked to the beat of his accomplishments, a song he never grew tired of hearing.

The man tossed the magazine in the fire. “You thought you were the first one?”

“What?” Brian crossed his arms. “Of course not.”

“You never wondered why no one talked about your amazing way to live? You never thought about the recommended eight hours of sleep, the soft mattresses that are actually terrible for our health, or the tempur-pedic pillow business and how it’s all bullshit?” He wrapped himself in a robe, strolled over to a waxy wooden table, and rang a bell. A servant appeared. The man ordered cognac.

“At once, Mr. Niedermeyer,” the blonde, bow-tied servant said.

*Niedermeyer*. He didn’t look like a Niedermeyer. More of an Alejandro, or an Andrea. Someone who spent summers alphabetizing their wine cellar.

“Whether you take it or they do,” the man said. “Your life is over.”

The drinks came before Brian could reply. Niedermeyer opened a box, took his time selecting a cigar, cut the tip, and blew life into it. “Enjoy.” A flume of smoke crept from his mouth. “Enjoy your wife.”

“My wife?”

Niedermeyer rubbed his ring-less fingers. “Come to terms with it.” He ashed his cigar and sighed. “Be grateful you don’t have kids.”

“You said The Society wanted to help—“

“Go to sleep. Pretend it was a bad dream.”

“Dreams are our unconscious telling us to wake up.”

“Shhh”—finger to his lips— “that’s The Society’s secret sauce.”

“I’m going to publish my paper. People will listen to me.” He stood, but lightheaded from the cigar, banged his knee against the table, spilling his drink.

Niedermeyer gave the bell a shake and the mess disappeared.

“Don’t you get it?” Brian coughed, undercutting his confidence. “I have leverage.”

Cognac erupted from Niedermeyer’s mouth. His laughter drowned out the ringing, and the servant, slow to arrive, bundled his master in a clean satin robe. “The magazine didn’t say you were funny.” His eyes were serious, as serious as he could be, wrapped up like a burrito. “But maybe you’re right. Where is the paper?”

“My research?”

Niedermeyer ambled over to the cigar box. “USB? Hardcopy.” He dragged a fresh cigar under his nose.

Was he going to smoke another one? The cognac and cigar made Brian’s stomach tumble and his head spin. He thought he had smoked it wrong, or swallowed ash, his mouth felt so dusty.

“Email” —sniff— “floppy disk. You still use those?”

“I backed it up,” Brian said. Niedermeyer glanced at the bell. What did he need now? A third robe? Another cocktail?

“Yeah? Whereabouts?”

“It’s safe.”

“I don’t doubt it.” He shut the box and peeked at the clock. “But generally speaking, where?”

“Generally speaking?”

“Where does a scientist keep his priceless work?” He was looking less and less like an Alejandro and more like a Niedermeyer. “At home under his nose, at the office, on his person?”

“Well—” but the words didn’t form. The tickle in Brian’s throat become a blockage.

Niedermeyer rushed close, robe dropping, and put his ear to Brian’s mouth. “Tell me—” pressing their foreheads together— “where is it?” He whined. Pleading.

The servant and the masseuse surged in. *Thank, god*, Brian thought, *they must be medically trained*, but they dragged Niedermeyer away, his mango crotch gyrating in the air. “More time. Please. I had him. Please. One more minute.”

The blonde servant put Niedermeyer in a choke hold. “You had till the sedative set in.”

He garbled out names of girls until his face went blue. Not dead. But he was right—he did sleep again.

Blurred hands checked Brian's airway and carried him... somewhere.

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Besides the leg, arm, and head restraints, Brian was comfortable—like lounging in a dentist's chair.

Below, three rooms were separated by two-way mirrors. Niedermeyer was on the left and saw into both rooms. Two girls, in the middle room, could see into the third room, where a middle-aged woman was strapped to vertical board.

“The Society is merciful,” a voice said from a loudspeaker. “We will give you a chance to spare your daughters...from witnessing your wife's death.”

Niedermeyer's face was that of a muted opera singer. He pounded the thin mirror separating him from his girls, but they didn't flinch, they saw only their mother.

Another man and the blond servant entered the wife's room, wheeling in a giant contraption. They plugged in the power cord and locked her ankle in a vice. The servant slapped himself and left, returning minutes later with an industrial sized box of plastic wrap. He cut a wide piece and spread it on the floor like a picnic blanket.

“Are you going to fail your family again?” the voice said.

The smaller girl refastened her Velcro sneakers. Her older sister's headband, a crooked plastic butterfly attached to it, glittered under the fluorescent lights.

The men argued for a bit, tapped their earpieces, and looked up.

“They are wondering,” said the voice. “How you like your meat cut?”

The machine rattled. The men set the dial to one, and together, slid the guard holding her foot over the spinning blade. Her screams were pumped in through the speakers.

“That's an eighth of an inch,” the voice said, as the men stretched her bloody rag of skin. “Let's skip to a thicker cut.”

The grinding sound dug into Brian's ears; he prayed the machine would break, but after a short stall, it cleaned off another curled slice, Achilles to toes. The man displayed the piece neatly on the plastic wrap.

The girls quivered, the yellow puddles they stood in rippling.

“Aren't you being selfish?” the voice said.

The older girl wrenched her sister around but when their mom screamed again, they both turned back to watch.

“Dial's all the way up.”

A thick bone-in steak slapped against the plastic sheet.

Niedermeyer lunged forward, hammering his head against the two-way mirror. Men rushed in and restrained him; his life was not his for the taking.

“Say the words,” the voice said. “Save them the agony. Say it.”

“Fine,” Niedermeyer yelled, his voice supplanting his wife’s screams on the speaker. His daughters, in recognition, hoping daddy was there to save them, exchanged an optimistic glance. “Do it.”

“Do what?” the voice said, innocently.

“Kill them”

“I’m sorry, who?”

“My girls. Kill my fuckin’ girls.”

The younger one nuzzled into her sister’s chest. A green gas filled their room. Niedermeyer stopped resisting. When the gas faded, his daughters, skin purple, blood pouring from their eyes, noses, and ears, staggered and collided with each other. They convulsed like freshly caught fish. Men in gas masks carried them out on a stretcher.

Niedermeyer fainted but was slapped awake. His shirt was a baby’s bib drenched in cognac colored puke.

Men barged into the wife’s room, dumping the corpses in front of her. Her eyes spun like globes to her shin-less leg, the deli-style cuts of her flesh, and her dead children.

The blinds closed.

“Messy business. But he had his chance,” the voice said.

Brian had no appetite for oxygen, but forced himself to breathe.

“Now, you have your chance. Destroy your work and endorse a new project: The Secret Power of Sleep.”

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Brian dashed home, avoiding the men in paper caps and stained aprons selling links of bratwurst and ground beef, their businesses seemingly three to a block.

Sleeping pills. Carbon monoxide poisoning. Drowning. A billboard for onesies settled it: *Everything she would wear would be a moment in their relationship: the rhinestone ‘R’ necklace—a secret Santa present back when they were colleagues; her diamond engagement ring; and a pajama set—a boring, grown up gift; the gift she had liked the most. He’d straddle her legs, and catching his tears before they fell on her face, smother the life from her with a decorative pillow. She would kick a bit, but not much. If muffled sounds escaped, he’d picture Ms. Niedermeyer’s sawed-off leg, and push harder. Quicker than expected. She had always been such a deep sleeper.*

He fumbled with the door, fingering the USB on his keychain. On the counter was a note from Rachel, as illegible as a doctor’s prescription, decorated with hearts and stars. He read it,

pausing where she would have giggled and lost concentration. She was a living laugh track, sabotaging lab decorum and pissing off her supervisors.

The Society wouldn't have let him live unless he, himself, was a threat.

Synapses snapped together like railroad tracks. Get the paper to the public. No time to publish. Can't trust the Scientific Journals anyway. Who could he trust? Not his alma mater. Can't sleep eight hours a night and get into Harvard. Out too were the authorities and local politicians. Who does he know?

Eastbank!

Brian fired off an email to Eastbank's agent, listing the magazine covers he graced, and mentioning, in the body and in the closing, his historical, pending breakthrough paper. He insisted Eastbank's energy levels were abnormal and would love to do a live interview with him after a game.

Next, Brian searched for flights to Missouri. He booked a redeye and messaged Rachel to see if she wanted to visit her folks since he would be busy preparing for Eastbank. Her text was wordless, all kissy faces and hearts.

Brian refreshed his email a dozen times an hour until Eastbank's handlers agreed to a meeting.

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Ryan Eastbank bounced on a treadmill. A canister collected his bubbly drool, and wires measured the electrical activity of his heart. His agent and bodyguard sat by the door, playing a silent game of Rummy. Brian wiped his non-prescription glasses with the sleeve of his lab coat and studied the monitor like it was arcane abstract art, not recording a data point, pen tucked behind his ear.

"My agent told me about your work." Eastbank toweled off and folded his legs to fit into his director's chair. "We share a similar passion," he said, hiking his eyebrows.

"We do. I've never told anyone this, but you were my inspiration." Brian pressed play on his laptop.

In the video, a sweaty Eastbank towered over a perky sideline reporter. His stats flashed below: 50 minutes, 47 points, 12 rebounds, 13 assists, and perfect shooting from the free throw line. The reporter asked about his limitless energy. "Being tired is a mind state," Eastbank said. "If you believe you aren't tired, then you aren't."

"That's when I was a rookie," Eastbank said. "I was so skinny."

"Do you still believe that?"

"I've bulked up."

"About your mind state?"

He spied his agent, busy dealing the cards, and winked. "It's my edge."

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*“As you said, you believe tiredness is a mind state?”*

*Answer.*

*“So would you say fatigue is an implanted human condition?”*

*Answer.*

*“Then why do we need rest?”*

*Answer.*

*“Interesting. How much do you sleep?”*

He closed his notebook. Eastbank and the audience would follow each question like crumbs on a trail until they arrived at the same conclusion Brian had reached years ago.

The phone rang.

“Dr. Sharpe.” The voice was familiar. “There’s been an accident.”

“We got t-boned at an intersection.” The agent looked like a newborn, eyes wet and swollen, blood smeared on his hairless head. “Mr. Eastbank took the full impact.”

The doctor called the agent into his office, and recognizing Brian from a medical journal, invited him in as well. “Mr. Eastbank has suffered catastrophic injuries. The left knee cap is cracked down the center, and his tibia is completely shattered. His right leg was trapped under the front seat. We had to amputate below the ankle.”

The agent collapsed into a vacant gurney and sobbed into a pillow. His phone buzzed with calls from family members and teammates.

“Would you like to stick around, Doctor Sharpe? I understand you had an interview planned.”

Ms. Niedermeyer’s foot hung in Brian’s mind, thinly sliced and dripping blood. “I’ll let him be with his family.” He had a contingency plan. It wasn’t ideal. But what plan C was?

His Honda Civic putted past darkened homes. Inside, parents tucked in children. Spinning mobiles hovered over cribs. Half-finished novels rose and fell on sleeping chests. It was Friday. Soda-chugging kids and binge-drinking adults hosted different kinds of slumber parties.

Brian’s storage units were conjoined. On his keychain, attached as always, was his USB containing his research paper.

The copy machine gurgled to life. While it spat out batches for manual publication, Brian unlocked a drawer and reread the original hardcopy.

He could stay up for a million nights and— unless he invented a time machine— never know why humans started sleeping. He hypothesized that mothers couldn’t produce enough milk

to feed their babies over 24 hours. Or, was it for safety? Sleeping toddlers couldn't wander off a cliff or into the jaws of a predator.

He could hear Rachel, all the way from Missouri, in her mocking tone, say, "*damn, you hate kids.*"

Sleepless savants had appeared throughout history: Edison, Tesla, Da Vinci, Voltaire. Prolific artists and writers like Picasso, Van Gogh, María del Socorro Tellado López, and L. Ron Hubbard had this edge, this secret sauce.

Brian would join them in history. Rachel was safe. All he had to do was expose The Society. Dive on the grenade, limbs sailing off in all directions, but his legacy would remain. He would birth the second Renaissance.

An alarm rang out. Emergency lights and a throbbing siren pulsed in unison. He crammed the copies into a briefcase and fled for the back door. A man, wearing a gas mask, clutching a baton, one second cloaked in red light, the next camouflaged in darkness, blocked the emergency exit.

Brian skirted by rusty roll-up doors. Did someone else use these units as a hideaway? He couldn't be the only one. But his knocks were sonar waves, sending his location to his assailant. He crouched where the light didn't reach and held his breath.

A smacking sound. Baton against palm. Strands of blond hair poked out from his gas mask. His forearm veins were clogged pipes about to burst. He was no one's servant.

Brian double backed to his unit. He knew these halls; he had explored them countless nights, thinking.

*Whether you take it or they do?*

He had figured it out before he had ever met Niedermeyer. Because really, when you finish your lap of life, do you just keep running? What do you do when every adventure on your bucket list is crossed off?

The exit was 50 yards away. Though grateful for his brisk mile time and bench press, he wished he had completed combat training.

*Down the fire escape. To the parking lot. And then what? Got a full tank of gas. Dump copies of the paper out the car window? If that's what it takes. He pressed the briefcase to his chest, key in hand, and took off.*

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He awoke to whistles. A TV showed the dying seconds of a basketball game.

"Hey." Rachel muted the TV and kissed his hand. "I'll get the doctor."

*You should be in Missouri,* he tried to say.

A bespectacled reporter interviewed Eastbank, another monster stat line floating under his face. Closed captions flashed across the screen.

*"An incredible performance. What gave you the extra juice tonight?"*

*“Got a good night’s sleep, ate my veggies, and had a pregame nap.”*

“You gave us a scare,” the doctor said.

Brian tried to brace himself, but his arms were strapped down.

“Easy,” the doctor said, his face hidden behind a surgical mask. “You’re safe, now. Your wife made sure of it.”

He grabbed Brian’s head and shined a light into his pupils.

Brian jerked to the side. On the table was his phone and wallet. No keychain, no USB. On the love seat in the corner, the mouth of his briefcase hung open and empty. He moaned and stared at Rachel with unlidged eyes, rolling his head, reproducing stroke symptoms to serve as a physical distress call.

“As you can see, Ms. Stone, sleep deprivation is serious.” The doctor sat beside Brian and took his hand. “Your wife was worried about you, Mr. Sharpe, and she made a choice. She noticed you had been staying up all night, muttering and typing gibberish on your computer, sneaking out to that storage unit in the unsavory part of town. She thought you were sleepwalking.” He laughed and faced Rachel. “In fact it’s not dangerous to wake a sleepwalker. Just a silly myth.”

Brian saw in the window’s reflection that he wasn’t in a hospital bed, but in a dentist’s chair.

“Gee, you’re shaking pretty good,” the doctor said. “I’m going to administer something to make the sleep come easy.”

“I think that would be wise, doctor,” Rachel said.

“Let’s let him rest and get you something to eat.” The doctor placed a hand on her lower back and led her out the door. “We make a great sandwich.”

Their fuzzy outlines trailed off; his eyelids too heavy to lift.

And when the blackness cleared, all that was left, as if on a loop, were decorative pillows, yellow underwear, meat slicers, and purple children.