

What the Night Takes

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Introduction

Sleep is supposed to be the one fundamental thing in human existence that absolutely cannot be bought.

You can purchase the perfect, sterile environment for it. You can buy a sprawling, custom-built mattress that smells faintly of high-density memory foam and expensive factory plastic. You can buy a vast, temperature-controlled room where the air is filtered until it tastes like absolutely nothing. You can buy velvet blackout curtains

that swallow the aggressive, bleeding neon light of the city. You can buy the profound, insulated silence of a high-rise penthouse, or specialized electronic machines that hum with a manufactured white noise—a rushing, static sound designed to mimic a distant ocean or falling rain. You can buy heavy, chemical sedatives that taste of bitter chalk and force your nervous system into a localized paralysis, offering a temporary, gray escape from the crushing demands of the waking world.

But true sleep—the deep, restorative plunge into the dark purple waters of the subconscious, where the mind heals and dreams bloom with vivid, unbidden colors—has always remained stubbornly, fiercely personal.

It is organic. It arrives only when it chooses, creeping up like a soft, heavy woolen blanket over the shoulders. It refuses categorically when the mind is crowded, fighting back with a rapid, thudding heartbeat and the coppery taste of anxiety in the back of the throat. And when the harsh, yellow light of morning finally breaks through the window glass, whatever happened during those quiet, shadowed hours belongs entirely, exclusively to the person who closed their eyes. The scent of a phantom ocean, the terrifying roar of a dream-monster, the sudden, brilliant flash of a forgotten childhood bedroom—these remain locked within the solitary vault of the skull.

Until a desperate, exhausted man named Sunil Sharma discovers a way to change the very chemistry of that rule.

After arriving in the vast, unforgiving sprawl of Australia with little money, two suitcases smelling strongly of mothballs, and few possessions beyond a desperate hope, Sunil finds himself caught in an impossible, terrifying biological phenomenon. Driven to the absolute brink by the bone-crushing fatigue of manual labor—his

days defined by the blinding yellow glare of warehouse lights, the deafening screech of forklifts, and the sharp, metallic smell of diesel exhaust—his body fundamentally rebels.

He discovers that a concentrated portion of his deepest, most restorative sleep can physically separate from his body. It condenses, pulling itself from his pores, into a heavy, viscous liquid.

Stored inside tiny, fragile glass vials, the substance does not look like human biology. It glows with a faint, bioluminescent silver-blue light, casting long, wavering, ghostly shadows against the peeling yellow wallpaper of his squalid apartment. It is freezing to the touch, radiating a localized chill that bites into the pads of the fingers like a shard of dry ice. And it possesses an impossible, terrifying property: it can instantly transfer the profound, physical restorative effects of a full night's sleep to anyone who consumes it.

At first, the discovery seems like nothing short of absolute salvation.

There is a vast, hidden market of people desperate for the one thing their money has failed to secure. Exhausted, hyper-caFFEinated executives whose offices smell of stale espresso and sheer panic; frantic, trembling professionals who measure their lives in billable seconds; grieving parents whose bedrooms have become echoing, terrifying chambers of loss—people whose chaotic lives have left absolutely no room for ordinary, organic rest are willing to pay extraordinary, astronomical amounts for what Sunil can quietly provide.

The illicit business grows silently, thriving in the encrypted, digital shadows. Sunil's financial problems evaporate. The heavy, suffocating anxiety of poverty is replaced by the crisp, intoxicating rustle of polymer banknotes and the silent, digital chimes of

offshore wire transfers. His family back home benefits, their lives transformed by a river of sudden wealth. His future, once a terrifying, blank gray wall, begins to look brilliantly, securely illuminated.

But every miracle forged in desperation carries a devastating, hidden price.

The sleep Sunil forcefully extracts from his own biology does not leave him untouched. It is not merely empty, chemical time. Along with the physical restoration, the glowing vials inadvertently carry the raw, unfiltered fragments of his very soul. They carry the sharp, vivid shards of his dreams. They carry his most intimate emotions. They carry his core memories.

The wealthy buyers receive far more than mere biological rest. They receive a jarring, deeply intimate sensory experience. When they consume the freezing liquid, they sometimes wake with the phantom taste of a winter festival sweet lingering on their tongue. They might experience the sudden, overwhelming scent of crushed jasmine from a courtyard they have never visited. They might hear a fractured, repeating audio loop of another person's sister laughing. They experience the terrifying, beautiful pieces of another person's childhood, another person's crushing grief, another person's profound love.

And as those pieces are consumed by strangers, Sunil begins to lose the very memories that constructed the architecture of his identity.

At first, the neurological losses seem trivial, easily dismissed as the ordinary forgetfulness of a busy man. A random street name fades into static. The specific, vibrant melody of an old folk song becomes

a muted hum. The exact, peeling cobalt-blue color of a childhood gate washes out to a dull, unrecognizable gray.

Then come the catastrophic erasures. The memories that cannot be replaced by photographs or second-hand stories begin to dissolve. He loses the auditory memory of his sister's explosive laughter. He loses the visual map of his mother's weathered face. He loses the deep, resonant sound of his father's stories, the ones told over the sharp scent of burning charcoal. The entire emotional geography of the home he left behind evaporates, leaving behind a cold, terrifying void.

The more financially successful Sunil becomes, the less of his actual humanity remains. His bank accounts swell, but his mind hollows out, transforming into a sterile, echoing white room stripped of all sensory joy and sorrow.

This is the story of **What the Night Takes**. It is a chronicle of the hidden, devastating price of modern convenience, the brutal commodification of human experience, and the dangerous, intoxicating belief that absolutely everything valuable in the world can be isolated, quantified, and measured in money. It is a journey bathed in the harsh, buzzing fluorescent lights of illicit laboratories and the warm, fading amber glow of lost memories.

It asks a simple, but profoundly unsettling question, one that smells of sterile glass and tastes like ozone:

What would you be willing to permanently sell, to tear from your own mind, if you could turn your own rest into a luxury product?

And when you finally realize exactly what the night takes in return, what will actually remain of you?

Chapter 1 — Batch 001

The first vial was no larger than a perfume sample, but it felt as heavy as a lead weight in his palm.

Clear glass. A squeaking rubber stopper. A plain white paper label with ink that had already begun to bleed from the sweat of his fingers.

REM – 47 minutes – Batch 001

Sunil Sharma held it up to the late-afternoon light in the small, cramped kitchen of his rented unit in the western suburbs. The sun was a dying, bruised orange, filtering through a cracked window blind covered in a thin film of cooking grease. As the amber light hit the tiny glass cylinder, the liquid inside caught the rays, refracting them into faint, shivering prisms of silver and pale blue against the peeling yellow wallpaper. It looked like water, slipping from side to side with a lazy, heavy viscosity.

It was not water. It was colder than water, radiating a localized chill that seeped through the glass and bit into the pads of his fingers.

Three weeks earlier, Sunil had arrived in Australia with two battered faux-leather suitcases smelling faintly of mothballs, a borrowed mobile phone with a cracked screen, a plastic folder of crinkled immigration documents, and the naive belief that the hardest part of migration was getting through the blinding white fluorescent glare of the airport with everything intact.

He had been entirely, foolishly wrong. The difficult part had begun the moment the automatic sliding doors of the terminal had hissed shut behind him, plunging him into the humid, exhaust-choked air of the taxi rank.

For the first few weeks, he slept in a suffocatingly cramped room shared with two other men from his village. The room constantly smelled of stale sweat, damp towels, and the sharp, metallic tang of cheap instant coffee. One man worked night shifts at a commercial bakery; he always returned smelling of burnt sugar and yeast, collapsing onto his mattress with a heavy, wheezing sigh. The other snored with astonishing, rhythmic determination—a deep, guttural sound that seemed to vibrate the very floorboards. There was a rusted metal fan wedged into the window frame that rattled violently, emitting a high-pitched squeal whenever the hot northern wind changed direction. Above them, somebody in the building seemed to drag a heavy, iron-legged chair across the linoleum floor every single night at exactly two in the morning, a screeching sound that set Sunil’s teeth on edge.

Sunil worked wherever work was available, letting the desperate need for money override the screaming protests of his muscles. His days became a blurring kaleidoscope of sensory overload: the diesel-choked roar of early morning bus rides; the blinding, dizzying yellow of warehouse shifts where forklifts beeped incessantly; the dry, static-filled hum of cheap international phone calls; the taste of lukewarm, sodium-heavy noodles eaten out of styrofoam cups; and the endless, crushing weight of gravity on his spine.

His mother always asked the same question, her voice rendered tinny and distant by the cheap phone speaker.

“Are you eating properly?”

Her voice carried the background noise of home—the familiar clatter of brass pots, the hiss of frying onions, the distant trill of a street vendor’s bicycle bell.

His father asked about work, his tone gruff, layered over the static.

His younger cousin asked whether the city was really as clean as people said, imagining streets paved with gleaming white stone instead of the chewing-gum-spotted asphalt Sunil trudged across daily.

Sunil answered all three with quiet, measured lies. He did not tell them about the aching joints, the blistered heels, or the way the sheer exhaustion made his vision swim with gray static by mid-afternoon.

Then came the night of the first extraction.

He had worked a brutal double shift loading crates of ceramic tiles. By the time he reached the apartment, his boots felt like they were filled with wet cement. He climbed the narrow, carpeted stairs—which always smelled faintly of cat urine and damp wool—without removing his shoes. The apartment was stiflingly hot, the air thick and stagnant. He managed to eat half a packet of dry, chalky biscuits, the crumbs sticking to the roof of his mouth, and collapsed onto his thin mattress before he could even reach down to pull the scratchy acrylic blanket over his legs.

He remembered only one dream.

Rain. A torrential, deafening monsoon rain. The smell of parched, baked earth suddenly drinking in the water—petrichor, rich and blooming. A sprawling green field, the blades of grass bending under the weight of the downpour. And somewhere, hidden beyond the dark, swaying silhouettes of banyan trees, the deep, resonant *gong* of a bronze temple bell, vibrating through the humid air.

Then, an absolute, heavy nothingness.

When he woke before dawn, the room was cast in the bruised purple light of early morning. He felt unusually, impossibly rested. His mind was sharp, the persistent fog of fatigue completely eradicated. His muscles felt light, fluid, devoid of the lactic acid burn that had plagued him for weeks.

His roommates were still asleep, their breathing synchronized in a low, rumbling cadence.

The first thing he noticed was the light.

Something faintly silver-blue, like the glow of deep-sea algae, illuminated the hollow of his left palm. The light was soft, pulsing rhythmically in time with his own heartbeat, casting strange, elongated shadows of his fingers against the bedroom wall.

Sunil froze. The breath hitched in his throat.

There was a pool of liquid resting on his skin. It was heavier than sweat, cooler than blood.

He slowly lifted his hand toward the water-stained ceiling. The liquid trembled, a bead of pure, luminous light, but it did not run between his fingers. It held its surface tension with unnatural strength.

For several agonizing seconds, all he could hear was the frantic hammering of his own pulse rushing in his ears. He wondered whether he was still dreaming, whether the sheer exhaustion had finally fractured his mind.

Then, the pool cooled, dropping in temperature until it felt like a shard of melting ice. The bioluminescent glow weakened, fading from bright silver-blue to a dull, translucent gray, until the liquid thickened and settled.