



The Family That Couldn't Sleep: Unravelling a Venetian Medical Mystery

By D T Max

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The Family That Couldn't Sleep: Unravelling a Venetian Medical Mystery

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Can there be a nastier way to die than from a chronic inability to sleep? How this appalling affliction killed dozens of members of one aristocratic Venetian family over the last three centuries only to emerge in the 1990s as the key to the hunt for the cause of a cluster of diseases - including Mad Cow, Alzheimer's and scrapie - is the utterly compelling, surprising story told here. This work is for readers of cultured science writers like Jared Diamond, Steve Jones and Stephen Jay Gould, but also fans of Oliver Sacks and Alain de Botton. In 1765, Venetian doctors were stumped by the death of a man who had suffered from chronic insomnia for more than a year and spent his final months paralyzed by exhaustion. Over the next two centuries, many of his descendants developed the same fatal sleep-stealing symptoms, and their loved ones were forced to witness a most excruciating lingering death, whose cause continued to baffle the experts until the 1990s when their sickness was recognized as a rare heritable disease. In this atmospheric and groundbreaking work of detection, Max tells the history of the rogue condition that has blighted one unlucky family for generations.

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