

New Nonfiction from Sarah Haak: “Assimilation”

My

husband has downloaded a sleep cycle app for his phone. Every evening he tucks

the phone into bed with him, under the sheets so it can measure how many times

he moves during the night, and when he enters deep sleep. In the morning, the

app displays a dark graph full of his various sleep-cycle transformations.

Except, since we’ve started sleeping together again after more than a year

spent apart—he in boot camp and then a Special Operations nine-month training

program; me in different places but always waiting—he isn’t sure the app is

calibrating to his cycle alone anymore, and he begins to worry it is including

my movements with his.



Photo by Arthur Debat – Getty Images

Every night the sleep cycle app dictates when we get into bed, and every morning it shows whether we did the right things the day before. Every curve on the graph tells a tale. The little ones in the beginning, tiny dips through an otherwise straight line, tell my husband he waited too long to get into bed. If only we had eaten dinner earlier, or maybe if we had not had chocolate for dessert, he might have made a shorter line, might have descended into sleep, and then deep sleep, faster or better. If only the bed we're sleeping in were bigger so we didn't touch, but the extended-stay hotel where we live awaiting our orders doesn't have any other rooms.

The larger curves are more troubling to him, though—I can tell by the way he studies his phone in the mornings with a frown—the peaks that rise and carry him awake. Those occur between the hours of 1:00 and 3:00 am. During those times, the graph usually shows a vast mountain of consciousness, my husband sometimes cresting ever so slowly upward, and other times shooting straight up into awake. Before he left for

training, when I could feel him restlessly fidget in his sleep, I would reach out and touch his face, or maybe even pull him to me and comb my fingers through his hair. But now his hair is buzzed regulation-short. Now he dreams of gunshots and being chased, and he thrashes and shouts in his sleep and moves away from me when I touch him, curling into himself on the other side of the bed. Now he is full of heat at 2:00 am, so warm I have to peel the blankets back from my skin, which always wakes him. In the mornings, he looks at me earnestly and asks what he can do to help me sleep better.

When the graph shows 95% sleep quality, things are good for the day. When the graph shows 45%, things are not. He decides we need to drink less wine and shut off all screens an hour before bed. No more funny shows to take some of the tension away. We need to exercise before 10:00 am and eat three meals a day. We need routine and consistency. We need to resolve difficulties earlier in the evening or maybe not at all.