

**Name:** Georgia Bowan short story: A creative response to Murakami's  
"Sleep" from "The Elephant Vanishes"

I haven't been sleeping since my wife disappeared two weeks ago.

Sleep was never a problem for me. As a child, my mother told me I slept like a rock hitting the bottom of the ocean. I never dreamed. Or, if I did dream, I never remembered.. My sleep was always enough. After marrying and having my son, a good night's sleep became essential to my way of living. My dentist school friend and I opened our own dental surgery. Routine set in. I woke up, went to work, came home and slept. I always slept well. But since my wife went missing, I haven't slept at all. I lie in bed and think. Thoughts clog my brain and the headaches begin. Pills don't help. I don't drink. All I can do is wait. Wait until my wife comes home so that I can sleep again.

I wonder if she has been kidnapped. Or if one night she was stolen from the house by a band of criminals. I'm not a very imaginative man. That's all I could think of. It's the only explanation. Her car was gone. Maybe she had gone to get it fixed and was abducted. Maybe she went for a drive and crashed. A midnight drive? My wife never drives at night.

When the police came to see me about her disappearance, there was nothing I could tell them that might help. There was no logical explanation.

"When was the last time you saw your wife the night she disappeared?" the policeman asked, a notepad and pen in hand.

"She was brushing her teeth at the sink."

I remembered this because I had passed her reflection in the mirror and noticed how her skin seemed younger and fresher than usual. Must be swimming.

"We were on our way to bed."

"You say she was brushing her teeth? Was this something she usually did before going to bed?"

"Yes, of course. It's routine. She brushes her teeth every night before bed. She's always taken good care of her teeth."

My wife was quite pretty. Not gorgeous or breathtaking but still attractive. After years of sleeping next to her, I became so used to her thin lips and mud coloured eyes that they stopped defining her. Now I can't even picture her face. All I can think of is her hair. She had dark hair that was coarse and cut off at her shoulders. I would find thick strands of it on my pillow, or in the bathroom sink, or on the walls of the shower. Apart from that, nothing she did ever bothered me. Sometimes she would leave her books lying around which did irritate me.

But I would just put them back on the shelf. She was a good mother and a good wife. I have no good explanation for why she vanished.

The policemen had more questions..

“Did you notice anything different about your wife the night she disappeared?”

I shook my head. “Nothing comes to mind. She’s always been normal.”

“What do you mean ‘normal’?” the other officer asked.

I pushed my glasses up my nose and sighed. “She’s always the same. She cooks and cleans and takes our son to school. She makes me dinner, reads and goes swimming at the gym. That’s her normal life.”

“And she didn’t seem like she was acting strange that night?”

One thing had been slightly off about my wife the night she vanished. I had come home from work at my normal time when I saw the single bottle of brandy we owned was open and missing a milliliter or so. I don’t drink alcohol because the thought of liquor rotting my teeth made me sick to the stomach. My wife must have drunk it. She hadn’t drunk in years though. I had made her quit when we first married because when she drank alcohol it left a sickening smell on her breath. She had never complained. And she looked healthier and slimmer after. Why would my wife one day open a bottle of brandy that had gone untouched for years?

“Did your wife say anything to you the night she went missing? Anything that might help us understand where she is?” the first detective asked, scribbling in his notepad.

“Nothing.”

“Could she have gone to be with another man?” This intrusive question surprised me.

“Excuse me?”

“Is there any possibility she went to another man’s house?”

My brow furrowed. “She doesn’t know any other men.”

“Could she have gone to a friend’s house?”

“She doesn’t have any friends.”

The detective raised an eyebrow. “No friends at all?”

I shrugged and adjusted my glasses again. “If she did have friends, I would know.. She sees me and our son. Nobody else.”

"I see." The detective gave his partner an odd side glance. "Is there any chance your wife could have left or run away?"

Sleep was never a problem for me. I slept heavily and long. My wife on the other hand, I have no idea about. She would put our son to bed, read him a story and then go to bed when I did. In the mornings she was awake before me. She had household jobs to do. Food to cook and surfaces to clean. Other than that I don't know what she did. Maybe she didn't have any hobbies. I never asked. There was no chance my wife would have run away. Her life was perfect. She had a successful husband and an adorable son. What more could she want? The detectives told me they would keep searching for her.

I know she's out there somewhere, wishing she hadn't gone out on that night. Wishing she had stayed home and read our son another bedtime story. Wishing she had gone to bed like she usually does. I know she's out there somewhere, wishing she was home.

After the police had gone I put my son to bed and went to sit in the living room. On the coffee table sat a book. "*Anna Kanerina*." I reached out and pulled the heavy book onto my lap. I opened the first page. A few crumbs of dark chocolate sat in the page crease. I was confused. Our family never ate chocolate, I pushed my glasses up my nose and began to read.

I haven't been sleeping since my wife disappeared two weeks ago. Nothing helps.. All I can do is wait for my wife to one day return again, and then I know I will sleep again.

Rationale:

*The Elephant Vanishes* is a collection of short stories written by Haruki Murakami and was published in 2009. Each short story follows a different storyline. One of the stories in *The Elephant Vanishes* is called "*Sleep*" The story follows a woman who stops sleeping and begins to realise she is not happy with her everyday life. The underlying meaning of this story is that when the woman stops sleeping, metaphorically she wakes up from her life that she wasn't truly living. My creative response is a short story explaining the events following Murakami's "*Sleep*" It is written from the point of view of the husband of the main character, as his voice was not heard in the original story. I included themes used in the original story such as loveless marriage, man controlling woman and the effects of sleep.

When reading *Sleep* by Murakami, the theme of a loveless marriage reached out multiple times and was prominent. I decided to further explore this idea in my creative short story through the eyes of the husband, a character who originally had no voice. In Murakami's "*Sleep*", the wife's relationship with her husband is not dysfunctional nor passionate. The wife explains this through the idea that she cannot remember her husband's face. "*I once tried to draw his picture, but I couldn't do it. I couldn't remember what he looked like. I sat there holding the pencil over the paper and couldn't make a mark. I was flabbergasted. How can you live with a man so long and not be able to bring his face to mind?*" Here the main character

explains how, even though she has been married to her husband for many years, she cannot picture what his face looks like. This shows she isn't truly familiar with him as a person and doesn't connect with him on a physical level. In my short story I wanted to expand on this idea of struggling to truly picture a lover's face. From the husband's point of view, I created a similar relationship without passion. *"Now I just can't picture her face, all I can think of is her hair. She had dark hair that was coarse and cut off at her shoulders. I would occasionally find thick strands of it on my pillow or in the bathroom sink or on the walls of the shower. Her hair got everywhere. Apart from that, nothing she did ever bothered me."* Here the husband explains how his wife's hair often irritates him. He describes this in great detail which shows he thinks about it often. The husband also does not mention anything positive about being married to his wife, making readers wonder if he even liked being married to her. The face he is unable to picture his wife relates to the original story and the idea that neither character truly knows each other.

Another prominent theme in Marukami's *"Sleep"* was the intense control that the husband had over his wife. In the original short story, the wife is expected by the husband to cook, clean and look after their child without question. She continues this cycle everyday until she realises her life is going nowhere. *"So, then, what was this life of mine? I was being consumed by my drives and then sleeping to repair the damage. My life was nothing but a repetition of this cycle. It was going nowhere."* When the main character stops sleeping, at night she begins a secret life where she can do what she likes without her husband knowing. The nights are for her to be free and do as she wants without her husband's usual control over her life. The woman drinks alcohol, eats sweets and spends hours reading *"Anna Karenina"*. The husband does not permit these things so when the woman practices them she is escaping her life to experience freedom. *"I wanted my freedom: that's what I wanted more than anything."* The idea that the woman cannot do what she wants and must therefore pursue her wishes in secret shows how controlled her life is by her husband. In my creative response the husband finds out about his wife's secret habits and is confused as to why she would keep a secret life. *"She hadn't drank in years though. I had made her quit when we first married because when she drank alcohol it left a sickening smell on her breath. She had never complained though. If anything, she looked healthier and slimmer after."* Here the husband explains that he doesn't understand why his wife would keep secrets from him as he expected she enjoyed her life. This shows he doesn't really know his wife at all.

Marakumi's short story explores the effects of sleep through his characters. As the woman stops sleeping she begins to feel more happy and healthy. The time she has to herself is spent indulging in things that make her feel good, while her family does not notice at all. *"They didn't know a thing. They believed that the world was as it always had been, unchanging. But they were wrong. It was changing in ways they could never guess. Changing a lot. Changing fast. It would never be the same again."* Here the woman explains how her life has changed drastically since she has stopped sleeping, while her husband has no idea. I decided to contrast the positive effect of not sleeping on the character with the negative effect that lack of sleep has left on the husband. *"I lie in bed and all I can do is think. The thoughts clog my brain and the headaches begin. Pills don't help and I don't drink so all I can do is wait. Wait until my wife comes home so that I can sleep again."* Here the husband has stopped sleeping ever since his wife's disappearance. He is described to have good sleeping habits in Marakumi's story, so I decided to explore his sleep habits after his wife left. Unlike his wife who thrives off not

sleeping, here the husband's lack of sleep leaves him feeling sick, unhappy and unwell. The wife enjoyed not sleeping because it gave her time to be herself while the husband wishes to go back to how his life used to, he wishes to go back to being asleep both metaphorically and literally.

Haruki Marukami's "Sleep" includes themes like loveless marriage, man controlling woman and the effects of sleep. In my creative response I built on Marukami's original ideas and developed further the themes through the point of view of the main character's husband after her disappearance.