

"[Murakami belongs] in the topmost rank of writers of international stature."  
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NORWEGIAN  
WOOD

A VINTAGE INTERNATIONAL ORIGINAL

H A R U K I M U R A K A M I

Author of *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*

## Haruki Murakami Norwegian Wood

I was 37 then, strapped in my seat as the huge 747 plunged through dense cloud cover on approach to Hamburg airport. Cold November rains drenched the earth, lending everything the gloomy air of a Flemish landscape: the ground crew in waterproofs, a flag atop a squat airport building, a BMW billboard. So - Germany again. Once the plane was on the ground, soft music began to flow from the ceiling speakers: a sweet orchestral cover version of the Beatles' "Norwegian Wood". The melody never failed to send a shudder through me, but this time it hit me harder than ever. I bent forward, my face in my hands to keep my skull from splitting open. Before long one of the German stewardesses approached and asked in English if I were sick. "No," I said, "just dizzy." "Are you sure?" "Yes, I'm sure. Thanks." She smiled and left, and the music changed to a Billy Joel tune. I straightened up and looked out of the window at the dark clouds hanging over the North Sea, thinking of all I had lost in the course of my life: times gone for ever, friends who had died or disappeared, feelings I would never know again. The plane reached the gate. People began unfastening their seatbelts and pulling luggage from the overhead lockers, and all the while I was in the meadow. I could smell the grass, feel the wind on my face, hear the cries of the birds. Autumn 1969, and soon I would be 20. The stewardess came to check on me again. This time she sat next to me and asked if I was all right. "I'm fine, thanks," I said with a smile. "Just feeling kind of blue." "I know what you mean," she said. "It happens to me, too, every once in a while." She stood and gave me a lovely smile. "Well, then, have a nice trip. Auf Wiedersehen." "Auf Wiedersehen." Eighteen years have gone by, and still I can bring back every detail of that day in the meadow. Washed clean of summer's dust by days of gentle rain, the mountains wore a deep, brilliant green. The October breeze set white fronds of head-high grasses swaying. One long streak of cloud hung pasted across a dome of frozen blue. It almost hurt to look at that far-off sky. A puff of wind swept across the meadow and through her hair before it slipped into the woods to rustle branches and send back snatches of distant barking - a hazy sound that seemed to reach us from the doorway to another world. We heard no other sounds. We met no other people. We saw only two bright red birds leap startled from the center of the meadow and dart into the woods.

As we ambled along, Naoko spoke to me of wells. Memory is a funny thing. When I was in the scene I hardly paid it any attention. I never stopped to think of it as something that would make a lasting impression, certainly never imagined that 18 years later I would recall it in such detail. I didn't give a damn about the scenery that day. I was thinking about myself. I was thinking about the beautiful girl walking next to me. I was thinking about the two of us together, and then about myself again. I was at that age, that time of life when every sight, every feeling, every thought came back, like a boomerang, to me. And worse, I was in love. Love with complications. Scenery was the last thing on my mind. Now, though, that meadow scene is the first thing that comes back to me. The smell of the grass, the faint chill of the wind, the line of the hills, the barking of a dog: these are the first things, and they come with absolute clarity. I feel as if I can reach out and trace them with a fingertip. And yet, as clear as the scene may be, no one is in it. No one. Naoko is not there, and neither am I. Where could we have disappeared to? How could such a thing have happened? Everything that seemed so important back then - Naoko, and the self I was then, and the world I had then: where could they have all gone? It's true, I can't even bring back her face - not straight away, at least. All I'm left holding is a background, pure scenery, with no people at the front. True, given time enough, I can remember her face. I start joining images - her tiny, cold hand; her straight, black hair so smooth and cool to the touch; a soft, rounded earlobe and the microscopic mole just beneath it; the camel-hair coat she wore in the winter; her habit of looking straight into my eyes when asking a question; the slight trembling that would come to her voice now and then (as though she were speaking on a windy hilltop) - and suddenly her face is there, always in profile at first, because Naoko and I were always out walking together, side by side. Then she turns to me and smiles, and tilts her head just a little, and begins to speak, and she looks into my eyes as if trying to catch the image of a minnow that has darted across the pool of a limpid spring. It takes time, though, for Naoko's face to appear. And as the years have passed, the time has grown longer. The sad truth is that what I could recall in 5 seconds all too soon needed 10, then 30, then a full minute - like shadows lengthening at dusk. Someday, I suppose, the shadows will be swallowed up in darkness. There is no way around it: my memory is growing ever more distant from the spot where Naoko used to stand - where my old self used to stand. And nothing but scenery, that

view of the meadow in October, returns again and again to me like a symbolic scene in a film. Each time it appears, it delivers a kick to some part of my mind. Wake up, it says. I'm still here. Wake up and think about it. Think about why I'm still here. The kicking never hurts me. There's no pain at all. Just a hollow sound that echoes with each kick. And even that is bound to fade one day. At Hamburg airport, though, the kicks were longer and harder than usual. Which is why I am writing this book. To think. To understand. It just happens to be the way I'm made. I have to write things down to feel I fully comprehend them. Let's see, now, what was Naoko talking about that day? Of course: the "field well". I have no idea whether there was such a well. It might have been an image or a sign that existed only inside Naoko, like all the other things she used to spin into existence inside her mind in those dark days. Once she had described it to me, though, I was never able to think of that meadow scene without the well. From that day forward, the image of a thing I had never laid eyes on became inseparably fused to the actual scene of the field that lay before me. I can describe the well in minute detail. It lay precisely on the border where the meadow ended and the woods began - a dark opening in the earth a yard across, hidden by grass. Nothing marked its perimeter - no fence, no stone curb (at least not one that rose above ground level). It was nothing but a hole, a wide-open mouth. The stones of its collar had been weathered and turned a strange muddy-white. They were cracked and chunks were missing, and a little green lizard slithered into an open seam. You could lean over the edge and peer down to see nothing. All I knew about the well was its frightening depth. It was deep beyond measuring, and crammed full of darkness, as if all the world's darknesses had been boiled down to their ultimate density. "It's really, really deep," said Naoko, choosing her words with care. She would speak that way sometimes, slowing down to find the exact word she was looking for. "But no one knows where it is," she continued. "The one thing I know for sure is that it's around here somewhere." Hands thrust into the pockets of her tweed jacket, she smiled at me as if to say "It's true!" "Then it must be incredibly dangerous," I said. "A deep well, but nobody knows where it is. You could fall in and that'd be the end of you." "The end. Aaaaaaaah! Splat! Finished." "Things like that must happen." "They do, every once in a while. Maybe once in two or three years. Somebody disappears all of a sudden, and they just can't find him. So then the people around here say, "Oh, he fell in the field well'." "Not a nice

way to die," I said. "No, it's a terrible way to die," said Naoko, brushing a cluster of grass seed from her jacket. "The best thing would be to break your neck, but you'd probably just break your leg and then you couldn't do a thing. You'd yell at the top of your lungs, but nobody would hear you, and you couldn't expect anyone to find you, and you'd have centipedes and spiders crawling all over you, and the bones of the ones who died before are scattered all around you, and it's dark and soggy, and high overhead there's this tiny, tiny circle of light like a winter moon. You die there in this place, little by little, all by yourself." "Yuck, just thinking about it makes my flesh creep," I said. "Somebody should find the thing and build a wall around it." "But nobody can find it. So make sure you don't go off the path." "Don't worry, I won't." Naoko took her left hand from her pocket and squeezed my hand. "Don't you worry," she said. "You'll be OK. You could go running all around here in the middle of the night and you'd never fall into the well. And as long as I stick with you, I won't fall in, either." "Never?" "Never!" "How can you be so sure?" "I just know," she said, increasing her grip on my hand and walking along in silence. "I know these things. I'm always right. It's got nothing to do with logic: I just feel it. For example, when I'm really close to you like this, I'm not the least bit scared. Nothing dark or evil could ever tempt me." "Well, that's the answer," I said. "All you have to do is stay with me like this all the time." "Do you mean that?" "Of course." Naoko stopped short. So did I. She put her hands on my shoulders and peered into my eyes. Deep within her own pattern. Those beautiful eyes of hers were looking inside me for a long, long time. Then she stretched to her full height and touched her cheek to mine. It was a marvelous, warm gesture that stopped my heart for a moment. "Thank you." "My pleasure," I answered. "I'm so happy you said that. Really happy," she said with a sad smile. "But it's impossible." "Impossible? Why?" "It would be wrong. It would be terrible. It - " Naoko clamped her mouth shut and started walking again. I could tell that all kinds of thoughts were whirling around in her head, so rather than intrude on them I kept silent and walked by her side. "It would be wrong - wrong for you, wrong for me," she said after a long pause. "Wrong how?" I murmured. "Don't you see? It's just not possible for one person to watch over another person forever and ever. I mean, suppose we got married. You'd have to work during the day. Who's going to watch over me while you're away? Or if you go on a business trip, who's going to watch over me then? Can I be glued to you every minute of our lives? What

kind of equality would there be in that? What kind of relationship would that be? Sooner or later you'd get sick of me. You'd wonder what you were doing with your life, why you were spending all your time babysitting this woman. I couldn't stand that. It wouldn't solve any of my problems." "But your problems are not going to continue for the rest of your life," I said, touching her back. "They'll end eventually. And when they do, we'll stop and think about how to go on from there. Maybe you will have to help me. We're not running our lives according to some account book. If you need me, use me. Don't you see? Why do you have to be so rigid? Relax, let down your guard. You're all tensed up so you always expect the worst. Relax your body, and the rest of you will lighten up." "How can you say that?" she asked in a voice drained of feeling. Naoko's voice alerted me to the possibility that I had said something I shouldn't have. "Tell me how you could say such a thing," she said, staring at the ground beneath her feet. "You're not telling me anything I don't know already. 'Relax your body, and the rest of you will lighten up.' What's the point of saying that to me? If I relaxed my body now, I'd fall apart. I've always lived like this, and it's the only way I know how to go on living. If I relaxed for a second, I'd never find my way back. I'd go to pieces, and the pieces would be blown away. Why can't you see that? How can you talk about watching over me if you can't see that?" I said nothing. "I'm confused. Really confused. And it's a lot deeper than you think. Deeper... darker... colder. But tell me something. How could you have slept with me that time? How could you have done such a thing? Why didn't you just leave me alone?" Now we were walking through the frightful silence of a pine forest. The desiccated corpses of cicadas that had died at the end of summer littered the surface of the path, crunching beneath our shoes. As if searching for something we'd lost, Naoko and I continued slowly along the path. "I'm sorry," she said, taking my arm and shaking her head. "I didn't mean to hurt you. Try not to let what I said bother you. Really, I'm sorry. I was just angry at myself." "I suppose I don't really understand you yet," I said. "I'm not all that smart. It takes me a while to understand things. But if I do have the time, I will come to understand you - better than anyone else in the world." We came to a stop and stood in the silent forest, listening. I tumbled pinecones and cicada shells with my toecap, then looked up at the patches of sky showing through the pine branches. Hands in pockets, Naoko stood there thinking, her eyes focused on nothing in particular. "Tell me something, Toru," she

said. "Do you love me?" "You know I do." "Will you do me two favors?" "You can have up to three wishes, Madame." Naoko smiled and shook her head. "No, two will do. One is for you to realize how grateful I am that you came to see me here. I hope you'll understand how happy you've made me. I know it's going to save me if anything will. I may not show it, but it's true." "I'll come to see you again," I said. "And what is the other wish?" "I want you always to remember me. Will you remember that I existed, and that I stood next to you here like this?" "Always," I said. "I'll always remember." She walked on without speaking. The autumn light filtering through the branches danced over the shoulders of her jacket. A dog barked again, closer than before. Naoko climbed a small mound, walked out of the forest and hurried down a gentle slope. I followed two or three steps behind. "Come over here," I called towards her back. "The well might be around here somewhere." Naoko stopped and smiled and took my arm. We walked the rest of the way side by side. "Do you really promise never to forget me?" she asked in a near whisper. "I'll never forget you," I said. "I could never forget you." Even so, my memory has grown increasingly dim, and I have already forgotten any number of things. Writing from memory like this, I often feel a pang of dread. What if I've forgotten the most important thing? What if somewhere inside me there is a dark limbo where all the truly important memories are heaped and slowly turning into mud? Be that as it may, it's all I have to work with. Clutching these faded, fading, imperfect memories to my breast, I go on writing this book with all the desperate intensity of a starving man sucking on bones. This is the only way I know to keep my promise to Naoko. Once, long ago, when I was still young, when the memories were far more vivid than they are now, I often tried to write about her. But I couldn't produce a line. I knew that if that first line would come, the rest would pour itself onto the page, but I could never make it happen. Everything was too sharp and clear, so that I could never tell where to start - the way a map that shows too much can sometimes be useless. Now, though, I realize that all I can place in the imperfect vessel of writing are imperfect memories and imperfect thoughts. The more the memories of Naoko inside me fade, the more deeply I am able to understand her. I know, too, why she asked me not to forget her. Naoko herself knew, of course. She knew that my memories of her would fade. Which is precisely why she begged me never to forget her, to remember that she had existed. The thought fills me with an almost unbearable sorrow.

Because Naoko never loved me. Once upon a time, many years ago - just 20 years ago, in fact - I was living in a dormitory. I was 18 and a first-year student. I was new to Tokyo and new to living alone, and so my anxious parents found a private dorm for me to live in rather than the kind of single room that most students took. The dormitory provided meals and other facilities and would probably help their unworldly 18-year-old survive. Expenses were also a consideration. A dorm cost far less than a private room. As long as I had bedding and a lamp, there was no need to buy a lot of furnishings. For my part, I would have preferred to rent a flat and live in comfortable solitude, but knowing what my parents had to spend on enrolment fees and tuition at the private university I was attending, I was in no position to insist. And besides, I really didn't care where I lived. Located on a hill in the middle of the city with open views, the dormitory compound sat on a large quadrangle surrounded by a concrete wall. A huge, towering zelkova tree stood just inside the front gate. People said it was at least 150 years old. Standing at its base, you could look up and see nothing of the sky through its dense cover of green leaves. The paved path leading from the gate circumvented the tree and continued on long and straight across a broad quadrangle, two three-story concrete dorm buildings facing each other on either side of the path. They were large with lots of windows and gave the impression of being either flats that had been converted into jails or jails that had been converted into flats. However there was nothing dirty about them, nor did they feel dark. You could hear radios playing through open windows, all of which had the same cream-coloured curtains that the sun could not fade. Beyond the two dormitories, the path led up to the entrance of a two-story common building, the first floor of which contained a dining hall and bathrooms, the second consisting of an auditorium, meeting rooms, and even guest rooms, whose use I could never fathom. Next to the common building stood a third dormitory, also three storeys high. Broad green lawns filled the quadrangle, and circulating sprinklers caught the sunlight as they turned. Behind the common building there was a field used for baseball and football, and six tennis courts. The complex had everything you could want. There was just one problem with the place: its political smell. It was run by some kind of fishy foundation that centered on this extreme right-wing guy, and there was something strangely twisted - as far as I was concerned - about the way they ran the place. You could see it in the pamphlet they gave to new students and in the dorm rules. The

proclaimed "founding spirit" of the dormitory was "to strive to nurture human resources of service to the nation through the ultimate in educational fundamentals", and many financial leaders who endorsed this "spirit" had contributed their private funds to the construction of the place. This was the public face of the project, though what lay behind it was extremely vague. Some said it was a tax dodge, others saw it as a publicity stunt for the contributors, and still others claimed that the construction of the dormitory was a cover for swindling the public out of a prime piece of real estate. One thing was certain, though: in the dorm complex there existed a privileged club composed of elite students from various universities. They formed "study groups" that met several times a month and included some of the founders. Any member of the club could be assured of a good job after graduation. I had no idea which - if any - of these theories was correct, but they all shared the assumption that there was "something fishy" about the place. In any case, I spent two years - from the spring of 1968 to the spring of 1970 - living in this "fishy" dormitory. Why I put up with it so long, I can't really say. In terms of everyday life, it made no practical difference to me whether the place was right wing or left wing or anything else. Each day began with the solemn raising of the flag. They played the national anthem, too, of course. You can't have one without the other. The flagpole stood in the very center of the compound, where it was visible from every window of all three dormitories. The Head of the east dormitory (my building) was in charge of the flag. He was a tall, eagle-eyed man in his late fifties or early sixties. His bristly hair was flecked with grey, and his sunburned neck bore a long scar. People whispered that he was a graduate of the wartime Nakano spy school, but no one knew for sure. Next to him stood a student who acted as his assistant. No one really knew this guy, either. He had the world's shortest crewcut and always wore a navy-blue student uniform. I didn't know his name or which room he lived in, never saw him in the dining hall or the bath. I'm not even sure he was a student, though you would think he must have been, given the uniform - which quickly became his nickname. In contrast to Sir Nakano, "Uniform" was short, pudgy and pasty-faced. This creepy couple would raise the banner of the Rising Sun every morning at six. When I first entered the dormitory, the sheer novelty of the event would often prompt me to get up early to observe this patriotic ritual. The two would appear in the quadrangle at almost the exact moment the radio beeped the six o'clock signal. Uniform was wearing his uniform,

of course, with black leather shoes, and Nakano wore a short jacket and white trainers. Uniform held a ceremonial box of untreated paulownia wood, while Nakano carried a Sony tape recorder at his side. He placed this at the base of the flagpole, while Uniform opened the box to reveal a neatly folded banner. This he reverentially proffered to Nakano, who would clip it to the rope on the flagpole, revealing the bright red circle of the Rising Sun on a field of pure white. Then Uniform pressed the switch for the playing of the anthem. "May Our Lord's Reign..." And up the flag would climb. "Until pebbles turn to boulders..." It would reach halfway up the pole. "And be covered with moss." Now it was at the top. The two stood to attention, rigid, looking up at the flag, which was quite a sight on clear days when the wind was blowing. The lowering of the flag at dusk was carried out with the same ceremonial reverence, but in reverse. Down the banner would come and find its place in the box. The national flag did not fly at night. I didn't know why the flag had to be taken down at night. The nation continued to exist while it was dark, and plenty of people worked all night - railway construction crews and taxi drivers and bar hostesses and firemen and night watchmen: it seemed unfair to me that such people were denied the protection of the flag. Or maybe it didn't matter all that much and nobody really cared - aside from me. Not that I really cared, either. It was just something that happened to cross my mind. The rules for room assignments put first- and second-year students in doubles while third- and final-year students had single rooms. Double rooms were a little longer and narrower than nine-by-twelve, with an aluminium-framed window in the wall opposite the door and two desks by the window arranged so the inhabitants of the room could study back-to-back. To the left of the door stood a steel bunk bed. The furniture supplied was sturdy and simple and included a pair of lockers, a small coffee table, and some built-in shelves. Even the most well-disposed observer would have had trouble calling this setting poetic. The shelves of most rooms carried such items as transistor radios, hairdryers, electric carafes and cookers, instant coffee, tea bags, sugar cubes, and simple pots and bowls for preparing instant ramen. The walls bore pin-ups from girlie magazines or stolen porno movie posters. One guy had a photo of pigs mating, but this was a far- out exception to the usual naked women, girl pop singers or actresses. Bookshelves on the desks held textbooks, dictionaries and novels. The filth of these all-male rooms was horrifying. Mouldy mandarin skins clung to the bottoms of waste-paper