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HARUKI MURAKAMI
**NORWEGIAN
WOOD**

TRANSLATED FROM THE JAPANESE BY

Jay Rubin

VINTAGE CLASSICS

INTRODUCTION

‘I Began Writing this Novel in Mikonos, Greece’

With *Norwegian Wood* I couldn't decide on a title until the very last moment.

This was unusual for me. Most of the time I decide on a title before I begin writing a novel, and construct the story to fit the title, which was true of *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, *Kafka on the Shore*, *1Q84*, and *Killing Commendatore*. First comes the title, then I put my imaginative process to work to see what sort of story would germinate from that. To me this is one of the pleasures of writing novels.

But this wasn't true of *Norwegian Wood*. I started writing the opening of the story and got totally engrossed in writing, and once I did, I didn't have time to consider the title. It was only when I finished writing the book that I sat down to really consider what title to give the work. But I couldn't easily come up with one. The one I liked the best was *A Garden in the Rain*, but that felt a little too subdued. I needed something more upbeat. Unsure what to do, I had my wife read the manuscript, and asked her what title she thought I should give it. "There's only one choice," she replied. "*Norwegian Wood*."

I'd considered *Norwegian Wood* as a possibility myself but resisted the idea of appropriating the title of a famous Beatles song. I loved the song, of course, but felt uncomfortable

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drawing on their popularity. But once my wife told me that, I agreed. That was it, the only choice. I went back and wrote the title *Norwegian Wood* on the first page of the manuscript. Half of me felt resigned, like I had no other choice.

I began writing the novel on the island of Mikonos, in Greece. My wife and I were living in a rented house there. It was winter (this was in 1986), the off-season in Mikonos, so there weren't many tourists, most of the shops and restaurants were closed, and rent was naturally pretty cheap (one-third of what it was during the high season). It was perfect for somebody like me, who likes a quiet place to work with minimal distractions. In the mornings I'd write my novel, then go jogging around the island, and in the afternoon I'd stroll through town and play with the cats (there were tons of cats on the island). In the evening I'd relax at one of the local bars. I studied Greek, too. At the time there were hardly any other joggers on Mikonos, and when locals saw me, they'd often call out, "Hey, how come you running? You have something to do?" "Here," they'd say, "why don't stop and you have a little drink?", inviting me to join them for a glass of ouzo. I have a lot of good memories like this.

At any rate, that's where I started writing the novel. I bought a notebook and wrote in it in pen. A convenient combination, since as long as you have a notebook and pen you can work anywhere. And I did just that, writing on tables in cafes, at little desks on ferry boats, in bed in cheap hotels, while sitting on park benches. That notebook accumulated all kinds of stains on it – coffee, tomato sauce, you name it.

We left Mikonos in the spring, before the flood of tourists returned, and moved to Rome, where we rented an apartment in a building called Villa Tre Colli on a hill in the suburbs. The outside was impressive, but inside the place was, shall we say,

solid but showing its age. The views, though, were amazing. You could see the River Tiber meandering below, glittering silver in the light. There I totally focused on writing my novel. Unlike in Japan, I had no other distractions and could concentrate solely on writing. So I was able to finish writing the novel in under six months, in the spring of 1987. The same spring was the Bologna Children's Book Fair, and the editor from my Japanese publisher, Kodansha, attended so I managed to hand over the completed manuscript to her to take back to Japan. Considering the state of the Italian postal service back then, I figured it was too risky to mail it.

Spring in Bologna was gorgeous. Once the manuscript was safely in her hands, I enjoyed some Tuscan wine and Central Italian home cuisine. (I discovered a nice little family-run trattoria on a back street and ate there every night. Each time I did the bill got cheaper.) Now that I'd managed to complete the book, and was pleased with what I'd done, I was in a happy mood.

The novel was published in Japan in the fall and became a record-breaking bestseller. I figured it would sell well, but never imagined it would do as well as it did. The book sold so many copies (sold *too* well, maybe), that it caused a bit of an uproar in Japan, but this was while I was living in Rome, far from Japan, and I didn't directly experience what this hue and cry was like. There was no internet at the time, and hardly any news in Italy about Japan. Maybe I should be thankful for that.

What I wanted to do with this novel, *Norwegian Wood*, (or maybe just ended up doing) was to write a 100% realistic novel in 100% realist prose. All the novels I'd written up till then had stories that parted ways with reality, in part surrealistic, somewhat close to magical realism, perhaps. The style was sort of a pop style, and symbolic. Most mainstream critics slammed me for this.

Whether criticized for it or praised, I think I effectively used my own writing style, my own style of storytelling, but little by little the thought grew in me that I wanted more. I was about to turn forty, and when I thought about my career down the road it felt like it was time to leave my comfort zone and shake things up a bit.

In that sense, then, writing this type of straight love story (or something like it) was a challenge for me. Writing a novel that stuck to realistic prose to the very end, my attempt at climbing up into the ring with the so-called mainstream writers, taking them on directly. And this challenge yielded some decent results.

But in Japan the attacks on this book, and on me, were quite harsh. One reason might be that the book sold too well (around two million copies of the two-volume hardcover set). The literary establishment's resistance to me became even more severe. There was also a lot of criticism along the lines that I'd taken a literary step backward. I'd wanted to challenge myself by writing a realistic novel, but many saw this instead as a *retreat* or a *decline*. I felt attacked from both sides.

Still, for me, writing this novel, and having so many people like it, felt fulfilling. I grew more confident, knowing I could hold my own in a 100% realistic story and style, and was able to set about writing my next work, the novel *Dance, Dance, Dance*. In that sense *Norwegian Wood* was, for me as a novelist, an important memento. Afterwards I had the distinct feeling that I'd taken my writing to a new level.

To tell the truth, I never reread the novel after it was published (I'm embarrassed to), and frankly don't remember very well what the book was all about . . .

(Translated by Philip Gabriel)

第 1 章

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 centre 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

pupils a heavy, black liquid swirled in a strange whirlpool 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 marvellous, 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 favours?"

"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.

第 2 章

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-storey concrete dorm buildings facing each other on