

Overcoming The Shadows of The Past In Murukami's *Norwegian Wood*

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Abstract: *The novel Norwegian Wood is thus about the burden that the dead exert on their survivors and the fact that life is meant to be spent caring for the living rather than the dead. Naoko is unable to overcome Kizuki's suicide while Watanabe eventually realizes life is wasted spent pining after the dead and overcomes Kizuki's and Naoko's death and moves on into a new lasting love relationship with Midori who in her lively and vivacious ways is a refreshing respite from the mentally perturbed Naoko and whom Watanabe finds warmth and healing. However much Watanabe tries to heal Naoko of her past with his love, she cannot overcome the trauma of the lifelong bond she shared with Kizuki who was her childhood friend and soulmate. Her trap is Kizuki's bond with her and his traumatic suicide which she cannot escape and forget, leading to her eventual suicide.*

Keywords: *Murukami, Past, Suicide, Trauma, Romance*

A 37-year-old Toru Watanabe has just arrived in Hamburg, Germany. When he hears an orchestral cover of the Beatles' song "Norwegian Wood", he is suddenly overwhelmed by feelings of loss and nostalgia. He thinks back to the 1960s,

when so much happened that touched his life.

Watanabe, his classmate Kizuki, and Kizuki's girlfriend Naoko are the best of friends. Kizuki and Naoko are particularly close and feel as if they are soulmates, and Watanabe seems more than happy to be their enforcer. This idyllic existence is shattered by the unexpected suicide of Kizuki on his 17th birthday. Kizuki's death deeply touches both surviving friends; Watanabe feels the influence of death everywhere, while Naoko feels as if some integral part of her has been permanently lost. The two of them spend more and more time together going for long walks on Sundays, although feelings for each other are never clarified in this interval. On the night of Naoko's 20th birthday, she feels especially vulnerable and they have sex, during which Watanabe realizes that she is a virgin. Afterwards, Naoko leaves Watanabe a letter saying that she needs some time apart and is quitting college to go to a sanatorium. Naoko is haunted by the past and cannot overcome the past and the deep friendship she had shared with Kizuki.

She eventually descends into psychosis and suicide because she cannot overcome the trauma of Kizuki as well as her sister's suicide. Despite repeatedly trying to start over with Watanabe and saying she feels

for Watanabe, she eventually is unable to overcome the deep scar of Kizuki's suicide as he was her childhood friend and lifelong soulmate. She eventually tells Watanabe though she had tried to make love with Kizuki repeatedly, she was unable to get sexually aroused by Kizuki and their attempts at sex always failed but when she had sex with Watanabe on her 20th birthday, she was very much sexually aroused by his appearance and had no problems feeling sexually stimulated in their intercourse later.

However despite managing to get sexually aroused by him, it is Kizuki and his memory which will eternally haunt her, eventually leading her to take her life to escape the trauma. However much Watanabe tries to heal Naoko of her past with his love, she cannot overcome the trauma of the lifelong bond she shared with Kizuki who was her childhood friend and soulmate. Her trap is Kizuki's bond with her and his traumatic suicide which she cannot escape and forget, leading to her eventual suicide.

These events are set against a backdrop of civil unrest. The students at Watanabe's college go on strike and call for a revolution. Inexplicably, the students end their strike and act as if nothing had happened, which enrages Watanabe as a sign of hypocrisy.

Watanabe is befriended by a fellow drama classmate, Midori Kobayashi. She is everything that Naoko is not — outgoing, vivacious, and supremely self-confident. Despite his love for Naoko, Watanabe finds himself attracted to Midori as well. Midori reciprocates his feelings, and their friendship grows during Naoko's absence. Midori is a refreshing respite from Naoko and though she has a father who is absent and is actually paralysed in hospital suffering from brain cancer, she is sturdy

and self-confident and everything Naoko is not, outgoing and self-confident as well as untroubled mentally.

Eventually Watanabe is to be weaned off his unhealthy sense of responsibility to Naoko through her refreshing presence where she is not self possessed and burdened by an unhealthy past like Naoko even though she does have her own burdens- a father paralyzed with brain cancer but which she does not carry heavily on her shoulders like Naoko and indeed her warmth and cheer eventually win Watanabe's heart because he realizes Naoko will never truly be his because she is haunted by memories of Kizuki and his suicide. The novel ends with the hope of a long term relationship with Midori with Watanabe professing his love for her and she responding by asking him where he is which he contemplates, with the novel ending on a note of hope for a new relationship with Midori.

Watanabe visits Naoko at her secluded mountain sanatorium near Kyoto. There he meets Reiko Ishida, an older patient there who has become Naoko's confidante. During this and subsequent visits, Reiko and Naoko reveal more about their past: Reiko talks about the cause of her downfall into mental illness and details the failure of her marriage, while Naoko talks about the unexpected suicide of her older sister several years ago.

When he returns to Tokyo, Watanabe unintentionally alienates Midori through both his lack of consideration of her wants and needs, and his continuing thoughts about Naoko. He writes a letter to Reiko, asking for her advice about his conflicted affections for both Naoko and Midori. He does not want to hurt Naoko, but he does not want to lose Midori either. Reiko counsels him to seize this chance for

happiness and see how his relationship with Midori turns out.

A later letter informs Watanabe that Naoko has killed herself. Watanabe, grieving and in a daze, wanders aimlessly around Japan, while Midori — with whom he hasn't kept in touch — wonders what has happened to him. After about a month of wandering, he returns to the Tokyo area and gets in contact with Reiko, who leaves the sanatorium to come visit. The middle-aged Reiko stays with Watanabe, and they have sex.

It is through this experience, and the intimate conversation that Watanabe and Reiko share that night, that he comes to realise that Midori is the most important person in his life. After he sees Reiko off, Watanabe calls Midori to declare his love for her. Midori asks, "Where are you now?", and the novel ends with Watanabe pondering that question.

The novel *Norwegian Wood* is thus about the burden that the dead exert on their survivors and the fact that life is meant to be spent caring for the living rather than the dead. Naoko is unable to overcome Kizuki's suicide while Watanabe eventually realizes life is wasted spent pining after the dead and overcomes Kizuki's and Naoko's death and moves on into a new lasting love relationship with Midori who in her lively and vivacious ways is a refreshing respite from the mentally perturbed Naoko and with whom Watanabe finds warmth and healing.

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