

Norwegian Wood



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF HARUKI MURAKAMI

Born in Kyoto Prefecture to parents who both taught Japanese literature, Haruki Murakami grew up in several cities on Japanese main island of Honshū. After studying drama at Waseda University in Tokyo, Murakami and his wife, Yoko, opened a coffee-and-jazz bar which they operated together for nearly a decade. In his late twenties, Murakami—inspired by the work of Raymond Chandler, Kurt Vonnegut, and Richard Brautigan, among others—began writing fiction. He completed his first novel, *Hear the Wind Sing*, in just 10 months, and published it to great acclaim in 1979. As Murakami continued writing and publishing fiction, his novels began to transform from autobiographical coming-of-age tales into more surrealist, speculative, operatic works. After publishing the sci-fi novel *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* in 1985, Murakami returned to realism with 1987's *Norwegian Wood*. The novel struck a chord with Japanese culture and sold millions of copies, catapulting Murakami to international fame. Murakami's best-known works include *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, *Kafka on the Shore*, 1Q84, and the memoir *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*, a chronicle of his experiences as a marathon runner whose title is an homage to one of Murakami's major literary influences, Raymond Carver. The recipient of prizes and awards such as the Gunzo Award, the Word Fantasy Award, the Franz Kafka Prize, and the Jerusalem Prize, Murakami's work has been translated into over fifty languages and adapted widely for stage and screen.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Norwegian Wood is set in the late 1960s—a time of global unrest and desire for revolution and social change. At Toru's Tokyo university, leftists push for the destruction of the entire concept of the university as an institution of and for the privileged, echoing the May 1968 student riots at the Sorbonne in France. Students around the world felt that their lives as cogs in a larger capitalist machine were impoverished economically, politically, sexually, and psychologically—"the student is the most universally despised creature," reads the seminal French pamphlet *On the Poverty of Student Life*. While student protestors at Toru's university, echoing the complaints and demands of their French comrades, take over classes to pass out pamphlets and decry the state of the modern university, Toru himself remains politically neutral and profoundly disaffected. Even as revolution and social change grip the entire world, Murakami shows, the effects of profound grief and loss can prove to be isolating forces that numb one to

the demands and possibilities of change.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The realism of Raymond Carver (*Cathedral*), the existential despair of Franz Kafka (*The Metamorphosis*), and the cheeky, provocative songs of The Beatles' 1965 album *Rubber Soul* all served as aesthetic inspiration for the idiosyncratic yet hyperreal atmosphere of *Norwegian Wood*. Gilbert Adair's 1989 *The Holy Innocents*, published just two years after *Norwegian Wood*, explores a similar setup, tracing the lives of three university students in the late 1960s whose personal dramas, romantic entanglements, and insular intimacy blind them to the revolution taking place around them. The novels of Kōbō Abe, a Japanese writer famous for his surrealist works, also serve as inspiration for *Norwegian Wood*—if not topically, then thematically. While *Norwegian Wood* contains no elements of magic, surrealism, or absurdism and lingers strictly in the realm of reality, Abe's many works are concerned with human isolation (and especially the isolation of men) within larger society—a problem that most definitely plagues the disaffected, aloof, hyper-serious Toru Watanabe in *Norwegian Wood*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Norwegian Wood
- **When Written:** Mid-1980s
- **When Published:** 1987, with English translations published in 1989 (Alfred Birnbaum) and 2000 (Jay Rubin)
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Novel
- **Setting:** Tokyo, Japan
- **Climax:** Toru learns that Naoko has committed suicide by hanging herself in the woods—just as she seemed to finally be getting well enough to leave the Ami Hostel and join him in Tokyo.
- **Antagonist:** Grief, despair, suicide
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Titles in Translation. While the title of the Beatles song "Norwegian Wood" cheekily refers to a kind of pinewood paneling commonly used in 1960s décor, the title of Murakami's novel in the original Japanese uses the Japanese word for "forest"—*mori*—rather than the word for hard wood or wood paneling. The word *mori* doesn't just have significance in Japanese, however—*mori* is also the present infinitive conjugation of the Latin verb *morior*, which means "to die." The

novel's title, then, winks not only at popular culture but also at themes of coming of age as well as grief and suicide, suggesting that adolescence—and all its attendant despairs and difficulties—is a dense and deadly “wood” one must navigate.



PLOT SUMMARY

As thirty-seven-year-old Toru Watanabe lands at the airport in Hamburg, Germany, the plane he's on begins playing an instrumental cover of the Beatles' “Norwegian Wood.” The song hits Toru hard, and he finds himself flung back into memories of his youth.

In 1968, Toru is a freshman at Waseda University in Tokyo. The school is in the throes of a student revolution, but Toru avoids politics as he settles into his dorm. One afternoon, Toru runs into Naoko, an acquaintance from his hometown of Kobe. Naoko is the former girlfriend of Toru's best friend from high school, Kizuki, who killed himself during their senior year. Toru and Naoko spend the afternoon walking and talking, but their conversation never drifts to the topic of Kizuki. As the months go by, Toru and Naoko meet every Sunday. Though they grow close, they still never discuss Kizuki. In spite of his friendship with Naoko, Toru feels aimless in other aspects of his life—his only other friend, Nagasawa, is a hyper-motivated student with hopes of joining the Foreign Ministry, a fact which makes Toru's ambivalence seem even more profound. Nagasawa, a serial womanizer, starts inviting Toru out on the town to get drunk, pick up women, and bring them to hotels for sex. On Naoko's 20th birthday, Toru goes to her apartment to celebrate with her. Naoko is in a strange mood. She spends the evening talking nonstop, with extreme rapidity. When the perturbed Toru tries to leave, she breaks down in tears. She begs Toru for comfort, and the two have sex. Toru is surprised to realize Naoko was a virgin. Toru asks Naoko why she and Kizuki never slept together and Naoko breaks down once again. Toru doesn't hear from Naoko for weeks. He visits her apartment and learns she's moved; he writes her at her parents' house in Kobe but doesn't hear back. In July, Toru at last receives a letter from Naoko explaining that she's moving to a sanatorium in the hills of Kyoto.

In September, classes begin again. Early in the semester Toru meets a vibrant girl from his History of Drama class, Midori, when she asks to borrow his notes. Though Midori is a bit flaky and misses the meeting she arranges to return Toru's notes, Toru finds himself interested in her. The two begin spending time together—even as Toru continues writing to Naoko. One afternoon, after Midori cooks lunch for Toru, the two share a kiss on her rooftop. Toru tells Midori that he likes her but is involved in a complicated romantic situation. Midori says that she has a boyfriend, anyway, and the two agree to just be friends.

A few days later, a letter arrives from Naoko. She explains life at

the sanatorium, Ami Hostel, and describes the beautiful **wooded** landscape, the emphasis on physical work in the property's lush gardens and animal sanctuaries, and the ensconced atmosphere. She tells Toru that she's ready to see him. Without hesitation, Toru packs a bag and begins the journey to the hostel. Upon arriving, Toru meets with a woman whom he believes is Naoko's doctor—but soon, “Doctor” Reiko Ishida reveals that she's Naoko's roommate. She's called a “Music Doctor” because of her skills at piano and guitar, and further explains that at the Ami Hostel, the lines between doctors and patients are blurred—all patients have the responsibility of caring for one another. The paramount value at the hostel, Reiko explains, is honesty, and asks Toru to agree to be vulnerable and open with Naoko heal. Toru agrees, and Reiko brings Toru to her and Naoko's room. That night, Reiko plays guitar while Naoko and Toru talk about what happened between them. Naoko eventually admits that she's afraid she's unable to truly love anyone and breaks down in tears. Toru and Reiko go for a walk, leaving Naoko alone to process her emotions. While walking, Reiko tells Toru about her own past. Once a promising pianist, Reiko's mind snapped days before a big competition. She spent time in and out of mental hospitals, eventually recovering enough to begin teaching. She married one of her students, a man her own age, and they settled down happily—but when Reiko took on a young schoolgirl as her new pupil, her life took a turn for the worse. Reiko suggests they go back and check on Naoko, promising to finish her story the next day.

Back at the room, Naoko apologizes for her outburst, and the three of them get ready and go to bed. In the middle of the night, Naoko comes to Toru's bedside, unbuttons her nightgown, and reveals her naked body to him. In the morning, she appears—or pretends—to have no recollection of this. Reiko and Naoko bring Toru on a walk through the mountains. Reiko stops for coffee at a small shop, urging Toru and Naoko to spend some time alone. In the woods, Naoko brings Toru to climax using her hands before revealing that her sister, too, committed suicide as a teenager—Naoko found the body. She urges Toru to live his life without her, stating that she's too damaged to love another person, but Toru promises to wait for Naoko. That night, Toru and Reiko go for another walk and Reiko finishes her story. She explains that her pupil was a pathological liar who seduced Reiko by pretending to be sick, wheedling Reiko into the bedroom, and performing sexual acts upon her. Reiko cut the tryst off—but her enraged pupil spread rumors that Reiko had raped her. At that point Reiko's mind snapped again and she retreated to the Ami Hostel, where she's been since. Reiko says she's afraid to reenter the world, but Toru tells her he believes in her. The next morning Toru returns to Tokyo, feeling a little sad himself about returning to the “outside world.”

The next day Toru runs into Midori, who invites him out. The

two of them drink heavily and Midori expresses her desire for Toru. Toru laughs off her advances, but when she asks him to get together again on Sunday, he accepts her invitation. On Sunday, Midori comes to Toru's dorm to pick him up. On the walk to the train station, Toru asks Midori where they're headed, and she reveals that they're on their way to visit her father in the hospital, where he's dying of a brain tumor. Midori casually apologizes for lying about her father—she'd told Toru he lived in Uruguay. Mr. Kobayashi is profoundly ill and barely able to speak. Toru, impressed by Midori's bedside manner but sensing how worn out she must be, offers to spend the afternoon looking after her father. While Midori is out, Toru cares for Mr. Kobayashi, who cryptically mentions something about Midori and a ticket to the Ueno Station. When Midori returns and Toru asks her about the message, Midori recalls running away from home as a child and departing from the Ueno Station before her father brought her home. Midori tells Toru that her father was probably asking Toru to take care of Midori and asks him if he's going to. Toru promises Midori he'll always care for her. A few days later, Midori's father dies, and Midori stops coming to class. Distressed by her absence, Toru begins writing to Naoko again.

Over the next several months Toru continues seeing Midori and writing to Naoko. At the winter break, he goes to visit the Ami Hostel. He and Naoko engage in sexual activities in the little alone time they manage to steal, and Toru asks Naoko to move in with him when he gets an apartment of his own in the spring. Naoko expresses concern about being able to emotionally or physically participate in a relationship, but Toru promises to wait as long as it takes. Toru returns to Tokyo and rents a new apartment in a suburb shortly after the new year. He writes to Naoko about the move but fails to tell Midori—when he finally does call Midori, Momoko answers and states that Midori is angry about Toru's failure to communicate with her for several weeks. Months go by—Toru hears from neither Naoko or Midori and spends most of his time alone.

In April, a letter from Reiko arrives explaining that Naoko is in a fragile state and may be moving to a specialized facility. A few days later, Toru hears from Midori, too—she tells him she's ready to talk. A few days later, the two reconnect and spend the afternoon eating lunch, shopping, and catching up. At the end of the afternoon, Midori hands Toru a letter. He reads it on the train—the letter, written while the two were sitting on a park bench that very afternoon, expresses Midori's frustration with Toru's aloofness and his failure to genuinely open up to her. She tells Toru she doesn't want to see or speak to him anymore. In May, Reiko writes Toru to tell him that Naoko, who has been hearing voices, has been transferred to another facility. She includes Naoko's new address, and Toru writes to her there, though he doesn't hear back. One day in June, Midori approaches Toru after class and tells him she's ready to talk. She invites him to lunch at a department store, and, after

eating, tells him she's in love with him. Toru admits he loves Midori, too, but still can't "make a move" toward being with her because of his situation with Naoko. Midori warns Toru that if he doesn't recognize that he has a chance with a "real, live girl" and choose to be with her, he'll lose them both.

In August, Toru receives word that Naoko is dead—a letter from Reiko explains that after during a visit to the Ami Hostel to collect some of her things, Naoko slipped off into the woods and hung herself. Torn apart by grief, Toru writes to his employer and to Midori telling them that he'll be away for a while, then packs a bag and boards the first train out of Tokyo. Over the next several weeks, Toru wanders from village to village, aimless and penniless, dogged each night by horrible visions of Naoko telling him that death isn't so bad and inviting him to join her. After a chance encounter with a fisherman who has also lost a loved one, Toru realizes he needs to pull himself out of his grief. He heads to the nearest train station and buys a ticket back to Tokyo.

Soon, Toru hears from Reiko—she is planning on leaving the Ami Hostel, and wants to know if she can visit Toru on her way north toward a new life. Toru agrees, and happily meets Reiko at the station the following day. She tells him of her plan to teach music at a school in Asahikawa, a village in the far north of Japan. That night, the two of them hold their own ceremonial funeral for Naoko, playing her favorite songs, including several renditions of The Beatles' "Norwegian Wood," late into the night. After the little ceremony, Toru and Reiko have sex, and the experience is joyful and ecstatic. The following day, Toru brings Reiko to the train station and promises to visit her one day. Toru rushes to a payphone and calls Midori. When she picks up, he tells her he's finally ready to be with her—she is all he wants in the entire world. After a pause, Midori asks Toru where he is. As he looks around at the "shapes of people" walking by all around him, he experiences a profound moment of confusion and calls Midori's name, shouting for her from a "place that [is] no place."



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Toru Watanabe – An aloof, uncertain young man, Toru moves from his hometown of Kobe to Tokyo to study at Waseda University shortly after losing his best friend, Kizuki, to suicide. Toru's worldview is formed by the desire to maintain a distance from other people so as not to get hurt again. As a result, Toru is never fully committed to anything: in his relationships with Naoko and Midori, he struggles with guilt and indecision as he's torn between his love for both of them. In his studies at university, he chooses to be a drama major at random and ignores the student protests around him. He takes odd jobs to make ends meet and blows off steam each weekend by going

out with his dormmate, Nagasawa, to pick up women—even though it's rare that Toru actually enjoys sleeping with the girls. Toru claims that he wants to live his life with “intensity,” yet finds solace only in loneliness. Toru claims to love both Naoko and Midori, but his inability to commit to either of them demonstrates that his fear of action is greater than his feelings. Ultimately, Toru finds his decision made for him: after waffling for the better part of two years between Midori and Naoko, Naoko takes her own life in the **woods** beyond the sanatorium where she's retreated to recover from her depression. Overcome with grief, Toru takes to the road for several weeks. He returns to Tokyo only after haunting visions of Naoko, beckoning him to join her and Kizuki in death, become too much for him to bear. By the time Toru decides to accept Midori's love and tell her he's ready to commit, he finds himself unable to recognize the world around him—the “shapes of people” on the street alienate and confound him. Toru's guardedness and self-imposed isolation shield a much deeper interior life—Toru is interested in learning how to be a good person but is so afraid of what it would mean to participate in his life that he often ends up failing to do what's right. Even in the future, as Toru narrates the story of his youth from a hotel in Hamburg, Germany, it is clear that the older Toru, too, is obsessed with memory and nostalgia, trapped in his longing for times and feelings gone by.

Naoko – Toru's primary love interest and a close friend from his youth in Kobe. Naoko is quiet, demure, sensitive, and esoteric. Toru loves spending time with her, even when all they do is walk around Tokyo, barely talking. Though Toru and Naoko develop a deep friendship later in life after they run into each other in Tokyo by chance, there are certain topics they never discuss, such as the suicide of Kizuki, Toru's best friend and Naoko's boyfriend. On the night of Naoko's 20th birthday, when Toru goes over to her apartment to help her celebrate, Naoko is in the throes of an apparent nervous breakdown. Still, when she turns to Toru for physical comfort, he has sex with her—and realizes she has lost her virginity to him. When Toru asks why Naoko never slept with Kizuki, Naoko weeps and refuses to talk to Toru. Naoko soon leaves Tokyo for a sanatorium high in the hills of Kyoto. There, she begins her road to mental recovery in the peaceful, nontraditional environment of the Ami Hostel. Each time Toru visits her they enjoy deep talks—and, occasionally, sexual acts—with each other, and Naoko's roommate and friend, Reiko, helps her to embrace radical honesty as a road to healing. Early in the autumn of 1970, just as Naoko seems on the brink of recovery—and poised to move to Tokyo to live with Toru and be his girlfriend at last—she takes her own life, hanging herself in the **forest** just beyond the Ami Hostel. Naoko's death shatters Toru, but after he mourns her by traveling aimlessly in the countryside for several weeks, he realizes he can't ignore life. Beautiful, emotional, and constantly endeavoring to understand and heal her demons, Naoko is, in many ways, the emotional center of the novel—all of Toru's

decisions revolve around his desire to find a way to be with her even as she descends steadily down into her despair, becoming irretrievable even to those who love her best.

Midori Kobayashi – Toru's secondary love interest, Midori, is a bright, talkative, adventurous student at Waseda University. A free-spirited drama major who says whatever is on her mind—most of the time, at least—Midori is Naoko's polar opposite in almost every way. Dramatic, provocative, and opinionated, Midori strikes up a friendship with Toru after borrowing some class notes from him one afternoon. Toru finds himself charmed by her easygoing nature, emotional openness, and ability to talk about the traumatic events in her past with humor rather than gravity. Midori attended a private girls' school which left her feeling bitter and disdainful towards the upper-middle class—she is grateful to study at a public university where she can be around people like her. Midori helps to run her family's shop, the Kobayashi Bookstore, and tells Toru that her father has been living in Uruguay since her mother's death from a brain tumor years earlier. Toru eventually learns, however, that Midori's father, Mr. Kobayashi, is actually in a local hospital, dying of the same malignancy that took her mother's life. In spite of all the loss she's faced, Midori opens her heart to Toru again and again, and seeks to fully enjoy her own life. In this regard, Midori struggles to teach Toru that he doesn't have to be aloof and disconnected in the face of the losses he's suffered—rather than resign himself to grave ponderings about death, everything about her suggests, she should instead radically commit to living while he's able to do so. Ultimately, the novel remains ambiguous as to whether Toru ever lets Midori get through to him and whether they're able to pursue the relationship they both seem to want—though Midori is frustrated by Toru's constant prioritization of Naoko over her, it seems as if she might be open to reconciliation, and yet by the novel's end Toru is so bewildered and isolated by everything he's been through that he may very well be unable to even recognize the vital, vibrant Midori any longer.

Reiko Ishida – Naoko's roommate at the Ami Hostel who becomes both her and Toru's close friend. A woman in her late thirties whose lifelong battle with depression has caused her to “snap” and lose her mind several times, Reiko has a kind, frank, congenial demeanor but is hiding a dark, traumatic past. In spite of her own fears about living in the world and participating in life—fears that mirror Toru's and Naoko's but run much deeper—Reiko is happy and at peace with herself and determined to share her gift of music with those she loves. An accomplished guitarist and former piano prodigy, Reiko eventually reveals to Toru that a sordid incident from her past, in which one of her young piano pupils seduced her, then claimed Reiko raped her, has torn Reiko from her life and made her too ashamed to rejoin society. By the end of the novel, however, after Naoko's suicide—and with the support of Toru's friendship—Reiko decides to live in the “real world” and take a

job in the far north of Japan in a town called Asahikawa. Reiko travels to Tokyo to stay the night with Toru, and she tells him that Naoko left her all of her clothes. The two of them mourn Naoko by playing her favorite Beatles songs all night, and then have sex. The next day, Reiko leaves for Asahikawa, and Toru bids her a tearful goodbye, promising to visit her soon. Asahikawa is a spiritual place in Japan, often viewed as the door between the world of the dead and the world of the living—a more avant-garde interpretation of the novel suggests either that Reiko, too, is planning to kill herself and journey to the realm of the dead along with Naoko and Kizuki. Or, it could be that Naoko, in bestowing her “clothes” upon Reiko, somehow possessed Reiko’s body after her death and has finally achieved her desire to enjoy sex with Toru once again before departing at last to the spirit world. Jovial, talented, and often lewdly or provocatively funny, Reiko represents an externalization of Toru’s fears about participating in life to the fullest and making himself vulnerable to others in spite of what the costs may be down the line.

Kizuki – Toru’s best friend and Naoko’s boyfriend, Kizuki, is not an active character in the novel—he is already dead of suicide when it begins, having taken his life during his senior year of high school. Kizuki, then, is more of a symbolic character, representing the inscrutable, dangerous pull of suicide and the desire to escape life through death. Kizuki’s sudden death is a constant reminder to Naoko and Toru that the living can be unexpectedly claimed by depression and death at any time—a prospect which frightens them to their core and influences the way both of them live their lives.

Nagasawa – One of Toru’s dormmates and friends in Tokyo. A serious student and an even more serious womanizer, Nagasawa is smooth, slick, and charming. Though he has lofty dreams of a future in the Foreign Ministry and a lucrative career, Nagasawa struggles to be a decent human being, viewing his weekly exploits picking up women as a kind of game while ignoring or actively hurting his loyal, sweet girlfriend, Hatsumi. Nagasawa is brilliant and studies several languages at once—he is determined to prove himself through his intellect, succeed wildly in his career and in money-making, and go on to bigger and better things. Nagasawa is Toru’s polar opposite in that he participates, perhaps, too much in the world—his constant seductions, obsessive study habits, and intense but mainstream visions of success make him seem, very often, like a hamster on a wheel, unable to rest for even one second as he pursues some invisible, perhaps unreachable goal.

Hatsumi – Nagasawa’s girlfriend. A chic, pleasant, mild-mannered young woman, Hatsumi masks her unhappy interior by dressing well and maintaining an air of calm collection. Deep down, however, Hatsumi is full of rage and grief over her failing relationship with Nagasawa and her indignity in the face of his many infidelities. At the same time, Hatsumi genuinely loves Nagasawa and seems unable to extricate herself from their

partnership. Toru reveals, in a brief flash-forward, that, after graduating from university and marrying another man, Hatsumi takes her own life.

Storm Trooper – Toru’s roommate in the private dorm he lives in upon first arriving in Tokyo. “Clean-crazy,” stuttering, and obsessed with timeliness, exercise, and regimentation of his routine, Storm Trooper serves as a kind of comic relief throughout the novel as Toru tells comical stories about him to entertain and amuse his other friends.

Mr. Kobayashi – Midori’s father. By the time Toru meets Mr. Kobayashi, he is in the hospital, dying from a malignant brain tumor. Mr. Kobayashi is quiet, hoarse, and deeply ill—a far cry, Midori says, from the man he was when he was healthy, a man who loved his wife above all else and worked hard every day of his life to support his daughters and pay back his loans.

Reiko’s Pupil – A former piano student of Reiko’s. A schoolgirl of 13, Reiko’s pupil demonstrated intensity and vibrancy in her music-making, and Reiko decided to take the girl on in spite of her lack of technique. The two of them enjoyed a close friendship, but Reiko always felt suspicious of and unsettled by the girl’s strange, extreme beauty, and the ways in which her stories often didn’t add up. One afternoon, Reiko’s pupil attempted to seduce Reiko, performing sexual acts on her until Reiko smacked her in the face and ordered her to leave. The vengeful girl spread lies about Reiko throughout the neighborhood, claiming Reiko was a lesbian who had molested her. Reiko’s pupil appears only in flashbacks, and yet represents one of the novel’s most disturbing, vivid characters. Reiko, having been pulled in by the girl’s preternatural beauty and false kindness, is afraid of participating in the world again because of how badly she was fooled—and how her pupil forced Reiko to confront her own dark desires which she is afraid of experiencing again.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Itoh – A friendly art student whom Toru befriends after moving to his new apartment in the suburbs of Kikchijoji.

Momoko – Midori’s sister.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



MEMORY, NOSTALGIA, AND REGRET

At the beginning of *Norwegian Wood*, 37-year-old Toru Watanabe is flung backward into memory and

nostalgia when he hears a version of The Beatles' "Norwegian Wood" playing on an airplane loudspeaker. His immersive retreat into memories of the Tokyo of his youth and all that happened to him there is somewhat reluctant, and yet the sharpness of his memories from this time is astounding—soon, it becomes clear that these memories are the most important of his entire life. Ultimately, Murakami uses the mixture of painful and pleasurable memories Toru recollects to show that feelings of nostalgia and regret can often be intermixed and muddled within one's memories—sometimes, even, to the point of these two different emotions becoming indistinguishable from each other.

The world of *Norwegian Wood* is one based on memory. Toru's recollection of his formative years is precise and near-perfect, yet also tinged, at various times, with the hazy wash of nostalgia and the sharp, uncomfortable pain of regret. As Toru's memories rush back and mix together, the delineation between these two modes of memory often becomes blurry, rendering difficult moments more beautiful and pleasant ones more tense than they may have been in reality. "Eighteen years have gone by, and still I can bring back every detail of that day in the meadow [...] It almost hurt to look at that far-off sky." So begins Toru's journey his past, spurred by hearing a rendition of "Norwegian Wood" as his flight touches down in Hamburg, Germany. From the very first lines of the story-within-the-story of *Norwegian Wood*, Murakami illustrates the simultaneous pain and ecstasy of memory. Toru admits that while he was living in the moment back then, the scenery of the day he's recalling was just scenery—now, though, it is "the first thing that comes back." He remembers minute details brilliantly and reverently, but when it comes time to populate the scenes of his memory with the people who inhabited them, he's full of guilt and regret over not being able to summon faces, feelings, and other details so easily. This early scene sets the stage for the way memory is handled throughout the rest of the novel. Toru recalls a beautiful, brilliant meadow and a sky so beautiful it "almost hurt to look at"—in the physical realm of this memory, beauty and pain are practically indistinguishable. Yet as Toru begins filling in the blanks of this memory in the meadow, the bleak details press up even more closely against the inexplicable feelings of happiness and hope. The meadow is a place where Toru used to walk with his friend and romantic interest Naoko while she was housed in a sanatorium in the **forested** mountains beyond Kyoto, cut off from the rest of society as she attempted to heal from the depression that would eventually claim her life. The conversations Toru and Naoko had in the meadow on the day Toru is remembering were dark and full of fear—jokes about falling into a deep well at the edge of the clearing, shared distress about the impossibility of truly watching over and caring for another person—and yet Toru's physical memory of the meadow is bright and pleasant. In this way, Murakami entangles nostalgia with regret, creating a surreal, idyllic soundstage upon which the unpleasant, hard facts of memory

are then played out.

Murakami also shows how, in addition to sharpening memory in odd ways, nostalgia and regret also have the potential to dull or corrupt memory. Well past the midway point of the novel—over the course of which Toru Watanabe has described, in detail, the people, places, and conversations that defined the tail end of his teenage years—he writes, rather offhandedly, that remembering the year 1969 feels like getting stuck in a "deep, sticky bog" filled with "endless swampy darkness." Though the memories he's relayed thus far are seemingly accurate, detailed, and full of both sensory and emotional detail, Toru admits that wading into these memories often feels difficult, dangerous, or taxing. Toru is able to summon incredibly specific details—but admits that doing so requires a lot of mental and emotional work and a lot of time. It makes sense, then, that he would compare wading through the memories of his most formative years to struggling through a dense swamp or a profound darkness. He is essentially rebuilding his youth from the ground up, retreading painful memories and attempting to sift through the complicated feelings of regret and pain he feels at some memories while indulging the happiness and hope he feels at others. Murakami uses Toru's journey through the "swamp" of his past to show that while details, conversations, and descriptions may be easy to summon, the feelings behind those acute memories are not so easily retrieved. Toru finds even his happy memories with Naoko tinged by the pain of her death that has echoed through the years, while some of the saddest memories in Toru's life—caring for Midori's dying father, bonding with the troubled Reiko, and battling his own loneliness at home and at work in Tokyo—feel more hopeful and bright than objectively happy instances from his past do. Murakami thus demonstrates the strange but profound admixture of such feelings from one's memories, using Toru's confusion at his own feelings to illustrate just what a confounding, mysterious realm memory often is.

As Murakami muddles the ideas of nostalgia and regret, softening the hard lines between them or blending them into one emotion altogether, he ultimately suggests that nostalgia and regret can (and often do) exist side-by-side in one's memory of a single moment—making memory a realm both familiar and inhospitable, captivating and repellent. These extremes and opposites, Murakami argues, are what make the world of one's memory such a compelling place, and what bring one back to one's past again and again.



SEX AND LOVE

Norwegian Wood is a coming-of-age novel, and as Toru Watanabe grows older and grows up, his experiences with love and sex inform the kind of man he will be. Torn between Naoko, a troubled girl from his past, and Midori, a bright and vibrant student at his university in Tokyo, Toru finds himself struggling with lovesickness yet

unable to define what he wants out of love or why. Throughout the novel, Toru and other characters experiment with relationships and sex in an attempt to discover themselves and their place in the world, with both positive and negative outcomes. However, Murakami doesn't give a definitive opinion on sex and love—his argument is not that sex and love are benign, healing forces or painful, destructive ones. Instead, by examining how romance and sexuality affect all of his major characters, Murakami shows just how impactful and transformative sexual or romantic relationships can be.

The unpredictable forces of sex and love shape the lives of *Norwegian Wood's* three central characters: Toru, Naoko, and Midori. Their shared and separate experiences show that sex and love, central and powerful forces within the human experience, can also be destructive in the lives of those who mishandle or abuse them. Much of the novel is concerned with the love triangle in which Toru finds himself. He is torn between his serious, almost grave love for the chronically depressed Naoko, a childhood friend whose shared grief over their beloved Kizuki's death bonds them together, and his bright, enthusiastic interest in the irreverent, daring, and the highly sexual Midori. Toru finds himself turning to one-night stands to relieve his physical desire while waffling emotionally between his feelings for the two women in his life, nearly derailing his life in the process. Toru and Naoko are old friends whose shared grief bonds them deeply. Their friendship turns sexual when, on the night of Naoko's 20th birthday, she breaks down and turns to Toru for physical and emotional comfort. Naoko loses her virginity to Toru that night, and leaves Tokyo for a mental sanatorium, the Ami Hostel, soon thereafter. When Toru visits her at the Ami Hostel they engage in sexual relations (but not intercourse) several times, and Naoko comes to Toru's bedside in the middle of the night to show him her naked body. At the same time, Naoko lives in constant fear of the idea that she'll never be able to have sex again—and Murakami suggests that Naoko's framing of sex as an act she must submit to or prove herself through is, ultimately, so exhausting and destructive that it causes her to take her own life.

Toru's relationship with Midori is mostly platonic, though he admits he is emotionally and romantically drawn to her and though they share a kiss here and there. Toru knows he can't be with Naoko as long as she's away at the sanatorium, and though he yearns for the intimacy and love they share, he finds himself nourished in equal measure by the exuberance, frankness, and openness that defines his relationship with Midori. Midori loves going to pornographic films in Tokyo's busy Shinjuku district and embarrassing everyone around her by wearing obscenely short skirts to provoke a reaction. She is bold where Naoko is quiet, adventurous where Naoko is reserved, and, essentially, provides Toru with another perspective on the possibilities of romance. Whereas Toru's relationship with Naoko allows him to feel serious, deep, and connected to his past, his relationship

with Midori allows him to feel the freedom of the future's possibilities. While sex and the fear of it are part of the reason Naoko chooses to take her own life, the possibility of happiness in both sex and romance with Midori is what actually brings Toru back from the brink of his own suicide. He chooses the vitality Midori represents over the darkness Naoko represents, and this decision ties in metaphorically with the ways in which sex and love have the power to destroy lives—but also to heal them.

Other characters, too, find their worlds rocked by sex and love, both physically and emotionally. Toru's dormmate, Nagasawa, is a serial womanizer who engages in weekly one-night stands in spite of the fact that he's been in a relationship with the demure, traditional Hatsumi for most of their tie at college. Ultimately, after breaking up with Nagasawa and marrying another man, Hatsumi kills herself. Though Nagasawa and Hatsumi are minor characters, Murakami uses the ways in which sex tears them apart—when it should bring them together—to show just how unstable and destructive sexual relationships can be. Nagasawa sees sex as a game, while Hatsumi sees it as a sacred bond. Their divergent attitudes toward sex are very different, but the way in which they let sex control them is much the same, and both of them ultimately suffer for it. Reiko Ishida, Naoko's roommate at the Ami Hostel, finds herself divulging to Toru the secrets of her dark backstory in which an unfortunate sexual encounter devastated her entire life. One of Reiko's classical piano students, a 13-year-old pupil, lied her way into Reiko's home and seduced her one afternoon using wiles and tactics far beyond the realm of what any schoolgirl should be able to grasp. Reiko's painful experiences with sex—experiences that ruined her reputation, her family life, and her trust in herself—have turned her into a person so afraid of human connection that she's stayed at the Ami Hostel for upwards of seven years. When Reiko does finally leave the hostel after Naoko's death, she travels to Tokyo, where she and Toru sleep together. The act is joyful and sensual and serves to represent Reiko's leap of faith in leaving the hostel. A terrible sexual encounter derailed Reiko's life—but at the end of the novel, as she seduces Toru, she reclaims agency over her own sexuality.

Sex and love, Murakami concedes, define and shape many peoples' lives and identities. By showing how Toru, Midori, Naoko, and several other characters have their lives saved, doomed, and derailed by desire, Murakami forms *Norwegian Wood* into a cautionary tale about the dangers of romance—while also making room for the possibility that when shared mutually and cared for correctly, sexual relationships have the power to heal and transform a human life.



DEATH, SUICIDE, GRIEF, AND EXISTENTIALISM

Though only 19 years old throughout most of the

events of the novel, Toru Watanabe encounters a staggering number of individuals—many of whom are his age or younger—who are either grieving a loved one, dying themselves, or seriously contemplating taking their own lives. Beginning with the unexpected, gruesome suicide of his high school friend Kizuki, Toru finds himself practically surrounded by death. As Toru watches his friends Naoko, Hatsumi, and Midori struggle with (and, in some cases, succumb to) their grief, Murakami suggests that everyone, at some point, must face down the deeply existential dilemma of whether to continue living and participating in a cruel, chaotic world, or to escape into death.

The world of the dead and the world of the living are in constant competition with one another throughout *Norwegian Wood*. The two realms tug unceasingly at Toru, Midori, and Naoko, forcing them to choose between the pain of living and the escape of death. Influenced—or haunted—by the deaths they've witnessed, the three main characters struggle to understand the point of living, and dive deeper and deeper into existentialism as the novel unfolds. Toru Watanabe is shocked when his best friend, Kizuki, commits suicide without warning at the age of 17. Toru is shaken by the loss of Kizuki, the first major death he's experienced. As Toru heads off to college, he finds himself ruminating almost endlessly about the thin veil between the world of the living and the world of the dead. "Death exists, not as the opposite but as a part of life," Toru finds himself thinking early on in his college career. He has been rattled by the pull that death exerts upon the living—but is, at a relatively young age, able to understand a profound and frightening concept. Death is not life's opposite or endpoint, necessarily, but a fabric woven through the very structure of daily life—something that must be contended with and pushed back against time and time again.

As the novel progresses, Toru encounters more and more experiences with death that only remind him of the fact that there is a constant struggle between the world of the dead and the world of the living—a struggle compounded by the grief, confusion, and hopelessness of coping with death. Toru watches his friend Midori nurse her father day after day in the hospital, and even helps her care for the dying man one day. Midori, who has already lost her mother, admits to feeling a certain "relief" at the idea of her parents dying and their suffering coming to an end. This admission allows Toru to once again reframe his concept of death and see it less as a predator upon the living but a kind of escape. The second death in the book doesn't actually occur within the timeline of its events—rather, Toru flashes forward into the future to report that Hatsumi, his dormmate Nagasawa's girlfriend, would take her own life several years after graduating from university in a grisly, bloody way. Toru states that the death of Hatsumi—a girl he only met a couple times—nonetheless shook him so profoundly that he never again spoke to Nagasawa, her two-

timing boyfriend whose callousness Toru believes motivated Hatsumi's suicide. Toru knows that life is a constant struggle against the pull of death—the idea that Hatsumi succumbed to that struggle makes Toru angry toward the one person he believes pushed her into death's escape.

The most significant death in the book occurs toward the very end, when Naoko—who seemed to be on the verge of recovery from her depression at last—hangs herself in the **woods** on the edge of the Ami Hostel's property. Naoko's grief over Kizuki's suicide, her own fears and insecurities about sex and love, and her uncertainty about living and subjecting herself to more pain and suffering ultimately reach a boiling point, and she takes her own life. Toru's grief at the news of Naoko's death is immense and uncontainable. He had been waiting for Naoko to get better, stoking the hope that they'd be able to make a life together in spite of their shared grief and increasing existentialism. After Naoko's death, Toru leaves behind his studies, his friendships, and his burgeoning relationship with Midori to travel the countryside aimlessly. While drinking to excess, sleeping outside, and wandering from village to village over the course of a month, Toru finds himself assaulted by visions and dreams in which Naoko appears to him and talks to him about death. "Death is nothing much," she says to him in one such vision; "things are so easy for me here." Murakami shows Toru himself struggling against the pull of death. His best friend and his lover have both taken their lives, and so the idea that death is the better, safer choice eats away at him, and he seriously flirts with ending his own life. Ultimately, Toru chooses to go on living—but at the end of the novel, he still finds himself haunted by the chasm between life and death, stuck in a "place that [is] no place," unable to fully enjoy the swarming, thronging city life around him.

"By living our lives," Toru ultimately concludes, "we nurture death." Having lost Kizuki and Naoko to suicide, Toru struggles, for much of the novel, to see the larger point of continuing on in the "real world." But in the end, Toru is at last able to accept that existentialism is a part of life. By realizing that he'll always be torn between the world of the dead and the world of the living, Toru is able to adopt a kind of nihilism that allows him to commit to continuing on—even if, from time to time, the waves of death lap at the shores of his life.



TRUTH, LIES, AND COMMUNICATION

The way characters communicate with one another throughout *Norwegian Wood* is at once exciting and enigmatic. Murakami's characters find themselves entangled in webs of lies, half-truths, and miscommunications. Sometimes they lie to one another deliberately in an attempt to mask their true feelings or circumstances, but other times, there are inexpressible or existential reasons why real, open, honest communication is simply impossible. As the novel's characters struggle to get through to one another (or

deliberately work to remain alienated), Murakami argues that people can only genuinely know and understand one another through honesty, radical openness, and a commitment to transparency.

As the characters in *Norwegian Wood* attempt to find solace in their relationships with one another, they are constantly forced to confront the ways in which lies, half-truths, and miscommunications derail and even decay their abilities to truly commune with another person. Ultimately, Murakami shows the sweetness in the fleeting moments of clarity, transparency, and communion his characters do get to experience—while also highlighting the painful reality that, more often than not, humans deliberately seek to make themselves unknowable to one another. Toru and Midori's relationship is one of the novel's most interesting examinations of the shadowy line between truths and lies within a friendship or romance. When Toru and Midori meet, Toru is immediately struck by Midori's long-winded wordiness, her absolute frankness, her bawdy sexual ribaldry, and her emotionally fraught stories of childhood. Midori seems like an open book—and, compared to the inscrutable, introverted Naoko, she is a breath of fresh air for Toru. Their relationship seems casual, open, and honest, and they regularly communicate about their feelings just as easily as they trade stories from their pasts. Toru soon discovers, however, that Midori has been lying to him about something major for the entirety of their friendship: Midori's father, Mr. Kobayashi, is not retired and living in Uruguay, as she once told him—he is dying in a local hospital, the victim of a malignant brain tumor. Midori unveils this truth as if it's no big deal and apologizes only offhandedly for lying. Toru and Midori's relationship is dogged by failure of communication in other ways. For instance, when swept up in feelings and doubts about Naoko, Toru walls himself off from Midori and doesn't even tell her he's moved apartments. Midori is furious and refuses to see or speak to Toru until she's calmed down, at which point she still finds him too closed-off and writes him a letter denigrating his self-obsessed, self-contained ways. Midori clearly takes pride in her own openness, whether or not it's an affect engineered to make her seem more emotionally available than she really is. She demands the same of the significant people in her life, demonstrating that while she may still be struggling with certain aspects of communication and truth, she is striving for transparency, openness, and honesty.

Toru's relationships with Naoko and Reiko, too, center around the practical and emotional difficulties of communication—especially when one's relationship or friendship is dogged by issues of grief or mental illness. Toru is devastated when Naoko—his friend and, later, lover—leaves Tokyo for a sanatorium in the hills of Kyoto. After a frustrating and drawn-out written correspondence with Naoko leaves Toru wanting more of an explanation for what's happened between them, he visits her at the first opportunity he gets. At the

private, quiet Ami Hostel, Naoko's roommate, Reiko—a veteran patient—explains that the most important, valued part of life at the hostel is complete openness and honesty. Long talks and the divulging of secrets are hallmarks of daily life at the hostel, and Reiko warns Toru that if he wants a relationship with Naoko, he must be prepared to lay it all on the line and be honest about everything in his life—in exchange, she, too, will uphold the values of honesty and transparency. Even after Toru and Naoko embark on a new phase of their relationship—separated by distance but engaged in near-constant written correspondence and bound together by their commitment to honesty—Toru struggles to really uphold the values to which he's pledged himself. He pursues an increasingly intimate friendship with Midori, engages in one-night stands, and struggles with looming moral and existential questions in his friendships as Tokyo undergoes social revolution. Though Toru writes to Naoko weekly (or even more often) his letters offer very little insight as to his emotional state even as they describe in detail the mundanities of his daily life. Toru wants to communicate with the women in his life with integrity and openness, but often lets himself prioritize the mere appearance of transparency over actual emotional honesty.

At its heart, *Norwegian Wood* is a novel about the perils—and the rewards—of surrendering to vulnerability and attempting to form a real, lasting connection with another person in the face of grief, doubt, and the temptations of solitude. As characters struggle to overcome their fears of intimacy, Murakami shows just how fleeting and ephemeral real connection often is—while also suggesting that truthful, honest communication is the key to enlivening and extending one's bond with another person.



EDUCATION

Toru, Naoko, and Midori are all university students in Tokyo during the late sixties and early seventies. All three of them—along with their friends,

roommates, and classmates—have been told that a formal education is one of the most important things in the world and have spent their entire youths preparing for the rigors of academia. Once enmeshed in the worlds of their universities, however, the three of them find that the promises of education's benefits and advantages have been false all along, and that meaningful learning demands much more real-life experience than book-learning or test-taking. Ultimately, Murakami argues that real education doesn't happen in the classroom, but rather in the wider world—and even within the depths of one's innermost self.

Throughout *Norwegian Wood*, Murakami's characters struggle with the realization that their educations ultimately look very different than the ones they were promised. Amidst student protests and widespread revolt, changing social and sexual

mores, and the throes of existentialism, Toru, Midori, and Naoko all find themselves securing their educations in decidedly nontraditional spaces. Toru has come to Tokyo to pursue an education—but as classes begin, he chooses his major, drama, at random. Toru submits to his education in a passive, almost compulsory way. As the students around him become swept up in the revolution sweeping the globe throughout the spring, summer, and autumn of 1968, Toru remains aloof from their struggle and uninvolved in their protests against the very structure of the university itself.

Toru's education ultimately becomes less about what he's learning in the classroom than what he's learning about himself, his relationships, and his vices. His lectures are often interrupted by student protestors, and Toru finds himself struggling to pay attention in class as his romantic problems with Naoko and Midori intensify. Toru meets few friends in his classes or around campus and refuses to participate in academic or extracurricular activities, instead scrounging up a social life through his friendship with Nagasawa, a serial womanizer who takes Toru out on the town weekly in search of one-night stands. Toru struggles to find the real-life application of the ancient Greek dramas he's studying and, as Nagasawa daydreams of making big money and studies hard for exams that will allow him entrance into the Foreign Ministry, Toru skates by with mediocre grades and takes odd jobs, never once giving thought to a career. Toru's academic education doesn't fail him—he fails his academic education, quickly subscribing to the belief that life, not school, must be his teacher. Toru's burgeoning existentialism turns to nihilism as he shirks the social and academic responsibilities of being a student. He knows his parents are spending everything on his education, and yet is unable to even affect the pretense of being interested in what he can learn within the walls of a university.

Midori enters the same public university as Toru, grateful to be done with the stifling private school she attended throughout her youth. Away from her rich high-school classmates for the first time and able to meet other people like her, Midori, too, finds herself reconceiving of what education means. For Midori, too, it is her extracurricular trials and tribulations that form her "education." From dealing with her father's death—just a couple of years after the death of her mother—to selling off her family's business in its wake, Midori finds herself contending with problems that few of her classmates have even had to consider. Midori, like Toru, is studying drama, and like Toru, she seems to have no real sense of where her studies will take her in terms of a career or a future. Unlike Toru, however, her decision to study something impractical seems deliberate rather than random. Midori knows, from her background at an elite yet snobby and miserable private school that the trappings of education don't actually equate with one—she knows she must make her own way in the world and be her own teacher.

Naoko moves to Tokyo with no big career prospects or

academic dreams, but she enrolls in a university, just like Toru does. Before the end of her first year, however, Naoko's studies are derailed when she suffers a major depressive episode and retreats into the hills of Kyoto, where she checks into a sanatorium to begin healing. Naoko's "education," too, is decidedly nontraditional. She learns not from books or lectures but from the people around her. She occupies herself with simple but rigorous tasks: gardening, tending animals, and helping her fellow patients maintain the integrity of the lush, **wooded** place that is their retreat from the outside world. Naoko learns about honesty, openness, and the need to confront her emotions from her roommate, Reiko, and learns about communal responsibility from the other patients. Naoko reads, studies guitar, and takes French classes at the Ami Hostel. In doing so, she finds a way to continue with a more traditional education even as she allows for the possibility that her education is (and always was) meant to include much more than simple book-learning.

Ultimately, none of the characters in *Norwegian Wood* follow the paths to education they once thought they would. Finding the university to be an unstable, unreliable, and perhaps even evil institution, they are forced to consider alternative forms of "education" as they learn lessons about themselves, one another, and the harsh cruelties of the real world.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



FORESTS AND WOODS

From the title of the novel, inspired by a Beatles song, to the quiet mountain forest where Naoko retreats in an attempt to heal her depression, *Norwegian Wood* is full of references to forests and woods. Throughout the book, these areas symbolize the dense, shadowy realms of both adolescence and mental illness. The novel's title in Japanese is *Noruei no Mori*—a translation of "Norwegian Wood," the name of a popular Beatles song which Toru, Naoko, and Reiko all love. However, while the Beatles song makes reference to the tacky Norwegian wood paneling which decorates the apartment of a young woman its speaker attempts to sleep with one night, the word *mori* in Japanese refers not to wood as a material product but to a living wood or forest. *Mori* is also a conjugation of the Latin verb *morior*—"to die." The novel's title, then, is the first and most major instance of wood serving as a symbol: the name of the book itself forecasts the dark connection between forests and death.

The "wood" of the book's title is the forest of Toru, Naoko, Kizuki, and Midori's difficult youths. Coming of age in the context of the novel is not the process of growing older and

wiser, but rather struggling against the pull of existentialism and suicidal ideation to merely survive, rather than giving into depression and ending one's life. While Toru and Midori live in the bustling city, Naoko is far away in a mountainous forest living at the Ami Hostel, healing the depression that has overtaken her life in the wake of both her sister and her boyfriend, Kizuki, having committed suicide. Toru visits Naoko in the woods several times, but always returns to Tokyo—symbolically, though he feels the undertow of depression pulling at the corners of his life, he is always able to overcome it and pull through. Naoko, however, is terrified to leave the woods and return to society—ultimately, she is unable to make a decision about what to do and hangs herself deep in the woods surrounding the Ami Hostel. Naoko is a victim of the woods, unable to traverse the forest of her depression. Toru and Midori, on the other hand, are able to metaphorically make it out of the woods, pushing through the murky copse of their late teens and finding a way to live in spite of the sorrows and difficulties that tug at them.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Norwegian Wood* published in 2000.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☛ Memory is a funny thing. When I was in the scene, I hardly paid it any mind. I never stopped to think of it as something that would make a lasting impression, certainly never imagined that eighteen years later I would recall it in such detail. I didn't give a damn about the scenery that day. [...] Now, though, that meadow scene is the first thing that comes back to me. [...] And yet, as clear as the scene may be, no one is in it. [...] Naoko is not there, and neither am I. Where could we have disappeared to?

Related Characters: Toru Watanabe (speaker), Naoko

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

In the opening lines of the novel, Toru Watanabe is flung back into memory after hearing The Beatles' song "Norwegian Wood." He remembers a day in a meadow spent with a girl he once loved, Naoko, but as he retreats into the memory he is amused—and confused—by the strange way the remembrance comes back to him. As Toru describes the memory, he finds himself able to bring back the scenery all around him rapidly and easily but struggles to people the memory with images of himself and his former lover.

"Where could we have disappeared to," he wonders, the question tinged with sorrow and yet a kind of reverence for the ways in which his mind has paved the memory over throughout the years. As the novel progresses, Toru will delve deeply into specific memories of places, people, and conversations as he recreates the Tokyo of his youth. This passage, however, sets up the idea that perhaps Toru is not the most reliable narrator. It also throws into relief the novel's theme of memory, nostalgia and regret—for instance, even though Toru recalls in this passage a bright scene in a meadow, there's something ineffably, profoundly sad about the memory. Memory, Murakami will argue, often intermingles nostalgia and regret until the two emotions are barely distinguishable from each other.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☛ "Do you think we could see each other again? I know I don't have any right to be asking you this."

"Any right?" What do you mean by that?"

[...]

"I don't know... I can't really explain it," she said. [...] "I didn't mean to say right exactly. I was looking for another way to put it." [...]

"Never mind," I said. "I think I know what you're getting at. I'm not sure how to put it, either."

"I can never say what I want to say."

Related Characters: Toru Watanabe, Naoko (speaker), Kizuki

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Toru has just run into his high-school acquaintance Naoko while wandering the streets of Tokyo. Naoko is the former girlfriend of Toru's best friend from high school, Kizuki, a bright young man who killed himself without warning at the age of 17. As Naoko and Toru connect again in a new city, they find themselves drawn to each other yet united in their shared difficulty to express themselves. As Toru and Naoko's relationship deepens and their attraction to each other grows, the communication blocks between them, too, will become more and more serious. This passage foreshadows the intense issues Toru and Naoko will have when it comes to confronting the shared traumas of their past or fully revealing themselves to

each other honestly and openly. As they struggle for words here, they claim to know what the other is trying to express—but as the novel goes on, it will become clear that Toru and Naoko are not quite as much on the same page emotionally as they first seem to be.

☛ The night Kizuki died, however, I lost the ability to see death (and life) in such simple terms. Death was not the opposite of life. It was already here, within my being, it had always been here, and no struggle would permit me to forget that. When it took the seventeen-year-old Kizuki that night in May, death took me as well.

Related Characters: Toru Watanabe (speaker), Kizuki

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Toru reflects on the sudden and unexplained suicide of his high school best friend, Kizuki. After an ordinary afternoon together at the pool hall, Kizuki went home and killed himself by flooding his car with carbon monoxide. The incident rocked both Toru and Naoko's worlds, and though Toru doesn't know what's going on in Naoko's head, here he explains in detail how Kizuki's death forever transformed his own worldview. Dealing with Kizuki's suicide forced Toru to realize that death is a part of life—not its “opposite.” Toru believes death “took” him the same night it took Kizuki—by this, he means that his ability to see death as a faraway realm was forever shattered by the loss of Kizuki. As the novel unfolds, Murakami examines how those who have had to witness or process the deaths of loved ones often find themselves, too, consumed with thoughts of death and curiosity about what lies beyond life—often to the point of having their whole lives overtaken by grief, existentialism, and suicidal ideation of their own.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☛ I can't seem to recall what we talked about then. Nothing special, I would guess. We continued to avoid any mention of the past and rarely mentioned Kizuki. We could face each other over coffee cups in total silence.

Related Characters: Toru Watanabe (speaker), Kizuki, Naoko

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Toru reflects upon memories of his deepening friendship with Naoko during their freshman year at university in Tokyo. Though Toru and Naoko share a lot of things in common—they come from the same hometown, they are mourning the same loss, and they have both come to the big city to escape their pasts—they never discuss their feelings or fears with each other. This inability to connect or communicate will follow Toru and Naoko throughout their entire relationship and come to define the way Toru moves through the world more largely. As Toru and Naoko suppress their feelings, emotions, and speech, Toru begins to believe that no one else wants to hear about what's going on inside of him, either. As a result, over the years, Toru becomes more and more aloof, disconnected, and lonely. Toru and Naoko's relationship may have always been doomed on a more existential level, but here, Murakami shows just how much time they wasted—and how much damage they did to each other—in failing to open up to each other for so long.

☛ I had no idea what I was doing or what I was going to do. For my courses I would read Claudel and Racine and Eisenstein, but they meant almost nothing to me. I made no friends in classes, and hardly knew anyone in the dorm. [...] What did I want? And what did others want from me? [...] I could never find the answers.

Related Characters: Toru Watanabe (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

Toru's existentialism deepens profoundly as he spends more and more time at school. Toru has randomly chosen a drama major, unsure of what he wants to be, and has chosen social isolation in spite of the many opportunities for individual and group friendships all around him. Toru believes that his aloofness from the world around him is a saving grace which will prevent him from getting hurt in friendships or relationships—but as his loneliness increases, he finds himself spinning in circles and pondering huge questions to which he can't seem to find the answer. Toru's emotional

isolation has come at the price of an increased propensity toward unhappiness and existentialism. While he's protected from the complications and entanglements that accompany friendship and romance, he's tunneling deeper and deeper into himself and running into new, even deeper problems. This passage also shows the ways in which the education Toru is receiving is not just about book-learning and test-taking—his experiences at university are educating him about the loneliness of being alive and the difficulties of communicating with others.

☝ I felt as if the only thing that made sense, whether for Naoko or for me, was to keep going back and forth between eighteen and nineteen. After eighteen would come nineteen, and after nineteen, eighteen. Of course. But she turned twenty. And in the fall, I would do the same. Only the dead stay seventeen forever.

Related Characters: Toru Watanabe (speaker), Kizuki, Naoko

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

As Toru heads over to Naoko's apartment to help her celebrate her 20th birthday, he finds himself full of sadness and nostalgia. In this passage, he expresses the wish that the two of them could remain in their late teens forever, never growing apart from Kizuki by more than a couple of years. Toru of course knows such a thing is an impossibility—but there is a part of him (and, he recognizes, a part of Naoko) that fears aging. If he and Naoko get older and enter their twenties, he reasons, they'll start to forget Kizuki and leave him further and further behind with each passing day. Toru and Naoko's grief is so profound and unending that they'd rather stymie their own lives and remain endlessly, tragically devoted to Kizuki's memory than admit the inevitability of moving on from grief and loss. Murakami suggests that Naoko and Toru's nostalgia for their time with Kizuki is so overwhelming that it prevents them from making new connections and leaps in their adult lives.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☝ Hey, Kizuki, I thought, you're not missing a damn thing. This world is a piece of shit. The assholes are earning their college credits and helping to create a society in their own disgusting image.

Related Characters: Toru Watanabe (speaker), Kizuki

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

When Toru returns to Waseda University in the fall for the start of his second year of school, he finds that the violent student revolution which swept up so many of his fellow classmates has been effectively quashed. The worldwide movement to dismantle the structure of the modern-day university has failed, and Toru's revolutionary classmates have returned to lectures with their tails tucked between their legs. Contemptuous of their failure, bitter about his own struggles at school and in his personal life, and steadily missing Kizuki, Toru's existentialism begins to verge on nihilism. He doesn't say in this passage that he wishes for death, but he confesses to feeling angry at and dismissive of the world around him and is perhaps wishing for even a temporary escape from its difficulty and hypocrisy. Toru's education is a letdown so far, and, because of his unresolved grief over Kizuki, he's finding himself unable to muster the enthusiasm or hope needed to take his education into his own hands.

Chapter 6 Quotes

☝ By the time the number of curves began to decrease to the point where I felt some relief, the bus plunged into a chilling cedar forest. The trees might have been old growth the way they towered over the road, blocking out the sun and covering everything in gloomy shadows. The breeze flowing into the bus's open windows turned suddenly cold, its dampness sharp against the skin.

Related Characters: Toru Watanabe (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

As Toru makes the long journey from Tokyo to the Ami Hostel in order to visit Naoko for the first time in several months, he finds that the trip takes him, by bus, through a "chilling cedar forest." The novel's central symbol, forests and woods, comes into play here physically for the first time.

A symbol of the figurative “forest” of adolescence—a strange, difficult realm that must be traversed in order to reach adulthood—the woods around the Ami Hostel threaten to claim Naoko just as the “forest” of Kizuki’s own youth claimed him and drove him to suicide. There is a coldness but also a peace to the woods, and, as Toru travels through them, he finds himself feeling relieved and calm even as he looks out on the “gloomy” shadows around him. The woods are an alluring place to be, just as the pull of death is, to both Toru and Naoko at various points throughout the novel. Both Toru and Naoko will have to navigate—separately and together—the “woods” of their grief if they want to come out the other side, though they’ll often find the temptation to stay put and stop moving forward overwhelming.

“You’re one of us while you’re in here, so I help you and you help me.” Reiko smiled, gently flexing every wrinkle on her face. “You help Naoko and Naoko helps you.”

“What should I do, then? Give me a concrete example.”

“First you decide that you want to help and that you need to be helped by the other person. Then you decide to be totally honest. You will not lie, you will not gloss over anything, you will not cover up anything that might prove embarrassing for you. That’s all there is to it.”

Related Characters: Toru Watanabe, Reiko Ishida (speaker), Naoko

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

As Toru arrives at the Ami Hostel, he meets with a woman who he believes, at first, is Naoko’s doctor—but who he quickly learns is just another patient at the hostel. Toru is put-off at first, but as Reiko explains the inner workings of the sanatorium to him, Toru comes to understand just what is demanded and expected of both patients and their guests. The Ami Hostel revolves around total and complete honesty—there is no room for lies or half-truths here. Since Toru and Naoko have built the entirety of their relationship on a foundation of skirting and avoiding the core incident that has bound them together—Kizuki’s suicide—the unique honesty policy at the hostel seems like a profound challenge for both of them. Toru and Naoko have lived contentedly with the half-truths and outright lies between them for a

long time. Now, however, the environment of the hostel is about to open up the channels of communication between them and force them to bring out into the open all they’ve been hiding.

“That song can make me feel so sad,” said Naoko. “I don’t know, I guess I imagine myself wandering in a deep wood. I’m all alone and it’s cold and dark, and nobody comes to save me. That’s why Reiko never plays it unless I request it.”

Related Characters: Naoko (speaker), Toru Watanabe, Reiko Ishida

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 109

Explanation and Analysis

As Naoko, Reiko, and Toru spend time together in Reiko and Naoko’s room at the Ami Hostel, Reiko—an accomplished musician—regales them with song after song played on her trusty guitar. Naoko’s most-requested song is The Beatles’ “Norwegian Wood,” her favorite of all time. Even though Naoko loves the song and begs Reiko to play it frequently, as she listens to it one evening, she admits that it makes her feel sad and lonely. The song’s title is also the novel’s title, and while the “wood” in the original song refers to cheap wood paneling that was a popular design choice in the 1960s, the “wood” of the novel’s title represents more of an actual forest, no doubt owing to Naoko’s description of her feelings in this passage. The Japanese word for forest, *mori*, shares linguistic similarity with the Latin verb *morior*—“to die.” Thus, woods and forests are, throughout the novel, a symbol for the pull of death and suicide. Naoko’s melancholy interpretation of the song “Norwegian Wood” speaks to the idea of the woods as a place of darkness, loss, and loneliness.

“The dead will always be dead, but we have to go on living.”

Related Characters: Naoko (speaker), Kizuki

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 111

Explanation and Analysis

While Toru is visiting the Ami Hostel, he learns about the honesty policy that is of paramount importance to both patients and visitors. He does his best to be honest with Naoko, and in this quotation, she announces her intent to be as honest as she can with him, as well. Naoko is about to explain the history of her relationship with Kizuki, a subject she's stayed away from for so many years for fear of dishonoring Kizuki's memory and the profound connection they shared as best friends and lovers. Now, though, Naoko admits that she understands what she's been doing to herself in refusing to talk about Kizuki for so long. The dead are dead, and always will be—there's nothing she can say or think about Kizuki anymore that could possibly harm him. In keeping herself from forming new friendships, relationships, experiences, and insights in the name of protecting Kizuki, Naoko is resigning herself, too, to the land of the dead and refusing to participate in the world of the living. This succinct sentence sums up Naoko's intention to start participating more fully in her own life—and is also a call to action for Toru to do the same.

☝ She exposed her nakedness to me this way for perhaps five minutes until, at last, she wrapped herself in her gown once more and buttoned it from top to bottom. As soon as the last button was in place, she rose and glided toward the bedroom, opened the door silently, and disappeared within.

Related Characters: Toru Watanabe (speaker), Midori Kobayashi, Naoko

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout the novel, Toru finds himself torn between his desire for two women: Naoko and Midori. One of the major differences between the two women is the way they communicate. While Toru and Naoko's relationship is built on silence and secrets, Midori is an open book. Frank and funny to boot, Midori has no problem talking about any old thought that passes through her head—even when her thoughts are provocative, sexual, or uncanny. In this passage, just hours after divulging many hidden secrets and feelings to Toru, Naoko comes to his bedroom in the middle of the night and reveals her naked body to him for several minutes. This moment represents another kind of vow Naoko is making to try to be more open with Toru. Though it

is wordless and silent, in showing him her body she's trying to tell him, as best as she can, that she wants to share herself with him—even if she still has a lot of physical and emotional work to do before she's ready for a real relationship.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☝ “What marks his plays is the way things get so mixed up the characters are trapped. Do you see what I mean? A bunch of different people appear, and they've all got their own situations and reasons and excuses, and each one is pursuing his or her own brand of justice or happiness. As a result, nobody can do anything.”

Related Characters: Toru Watanabe (speaker), Midori Kobayashi, Naoko, Mr. Kobayashi

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 190

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Toru is watching over Midori's ailing father, Mr. Kobayashi, in his hospital room while Midori goes out for a walk and a rest. In order to keep the man occupied and in good spirits, Toru begins talking to him about what he and Midori are learning about in their History of Drama class: the plays of Euripides, an ancient Greek tragedian. Toru is also, however, unwittingly describing his own romantic entanglements with both Midori and Naoko, and the ways in which they are all “trapped” in “their own situations and reasons and excuses.” Even though Toru is able to talk about the work of Euripides with authority and fluency, he fails to see how the situation applies to his own life with any real clarity—in this way, he is much like a character from a Greek tragedy himself. This passage ties in thematically with the novel's nuanced view of education, showing that the things Toru is learning both in and out of the classroom are feeding one another, and yet also shows Toru's failure to be able to communicate the truths at the root of his complex emotional problems and entanglements.

☝ A week went by, though, without a word from Midori. No calls, no sign of her in the classroom. I kept hoping for a message from her whenever I went back to the dorm, but there were never any. One night, I tried to keep my promise by thinking of her when I masturbated, but it didn't work. I tried switching over to Naoko, but not even Naoko's image was any help that time. [...] I wrote a letter to Naoko on Sunday morning.

Related Characters: Toru Watanabe (speaker), Naoko, Midori Kobayashi

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 197

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Murakami shows Toru engaging in one of the major patterns he repeats throughout the novel as he struggles to choose between Naoko and Midori and wrestles with his feelings for both women. When Toru fails to hear from Midori in the days following her father's death, he becomes increasingly fixated on and obsessed with her—even going so far as to focus on her as he masturbates one evening, a thing she'd asked him to do but which he felt self-conscious and conflicted about agreeing to. When he is unable to get through to Midori and receive attention from (or give attention to) her, he turns, instead to Naoko, thinking of her sexually and attempting to get in touch with her instead of Midori. As Toru flip-flops between his profound but very different feelings for each woman again and again throughout the novel, Murakami shows how powerful Toru's emotions around sex and love are.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☹☹ I felt guilty that I hadn't thought of Kizuki right away, as if I had somehow abandoned him. [...] The things that his death gave rise to are still there, bright and clear, inside me, some of them even clearer than when they were new. [...] I'm going to turn twenty soon. Part of what Kizuki and I shared when we were sixteen and seventeen has already vanished, and no amount of crying is going to bring that back. I can't explain it any better than this, but I think that you can probably understand what I felt and what I am trying to say.

Related Characters: Toru Watanabe (speaker), Hatsumi, Naoko, Kizuki

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 218

Explanation and Analysis

After going to a pool hall with his friend Nagasawa's girlfriend, Hatsumi, Toru is shocked to realize that he doesn't even make the connection between playing pool and mourning Kizuki—who took his own life right after losing a pool game to Toru several years ago, though the incidents were unconnected—until halfway through the game. As

Toru writes a letter to Naoko about the pool game, he attempts to work through his guilt about his changing memories of Kizuki. Once, mourning Kizuki was the central focus of Toru's life: he left Kobe, swore off new friendships, and affected an aloof, disconnected personality in order to make more room in his life for grief and prevent encountering anything that might distract from (or add to) it. Now that several years have passed, however, Toru finds himself naturally moving on. He and Naoko have both been afraid to abandon their memories of Kizuki, but as Toru writes to her now, he suggests that there must be a way for them to honor their dead friend without devoting the rest of their lives to mourning.

Chapter 9 Quotes

☹☹ “Know what I did the other day?” Midori asked. “I got all naked in front of my father's picture. Took off every' stitch of clothing and let him have a good, long look. Kind of in a yoga position. Like, ‘Here, Daddy, these are my tits, and this is my cunt.’”

“Why in the hell would you do something like that?” I asked.

“I don't know, I just wanted to show him.”

Related Characters: Toru Watanabe, Midori Kobayashi (speaker), Mr. Kobayashi

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 229

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Midori takes Toru back to her apartment after a long night out on the town. She shows him the Buddhist altar where she and her sister have placed a picture of their recently deceased father and regularly light incense to honor his memory. As she does, she tells Toru about stripping naked and showing off her body to her father—much to Toru's horror. Midori is radically open, honest, and unafraid to speak her mind, especially when it comes to matters of sex. Throughout the novel, Midori's sexually frank speech has become more and more frequent, and her increased ribaldry corresponds directly with her grief, anxiety, and insecurity as her father sickens and passes away. Midori uses sex and her constant communication about the subject as a way of distracting from her grief. Murakami portrays sex and grief as two of the most powerful forces in the world, and in this passage, he shows how his characters frequently use sexual speech or acts to distract from their feelings of sadness, loneliness,

and hopelessness.

Chapter 10 Quotes

Thinking back on the year 1969, all that comes to mind for me is a swamp—a deep, sticky bog that feels as if it’s going to suck my shoe off each time I take a step. I walk through the mud, exhausted. In front of me, behind me, I can see nothing but an endless swampy darkness.

Related Characters: Toru Watanabe (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 236

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Toru writes that his memories of the year 1969 are “swampy,” dark, “sticky,” and hazy. Even though Toru is able to recall the events of the year with startling precision, there’s a part of him that feels exhausted as he looks back on the past, as if he’s retrieving his memories through a dense fog. This passage demonstrates the novel’s theme of memory, nostalgia, and regret, and also touches on the theme of death, suicide, grief, and existentialism. Though Toru’s memories have sharpened, in some ways, with the passage of time, the emotional labor of retrieving such a vast store of memories—many of which are painful and tinged with sadness—has made the world of his memory a dense, unwelcoming realm. Toru is profoundly exhausted by the weight of the memories he’s collecting as he attempts to tell his, Naoko, and Midori’s stories.

“Let me just tell you this, Watanabe,” said Midori, pressing her cheek against my neck. “I’m a real, live girl, with real, live blood gushing through my veins.”

Related Characters: Toru Watanabe, Midori Kobayashi (speaker), Naoko

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 263

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Midori has just told Toru, once and for all, that she is in love with him. Though the two have shared an intimate friendship for a long time and though Midori has tried coming onto Toru many times, she’s never expressed

the true depths of her feelings quite so frankly. When Toru hears what Midori is telling him, he reciprocates her feelings but tells her he’s not ready to commit to her given how complicated his situation with Naoko is. Midori, who doesn’t know many details about Naoko but is at least aware that she’s physically and emotionally unavailable, begs Toru to take advantage of the “real, live” girl in front of him. Naoko has, for Toru, always represented death, while Midori has represented life. Midori now begs Toru to accept the vibrance, love, and vitality she’s offering him, her words tying in thematically with the novel’s suggestion that sex and love have the power to transform a life while also highlighting just how deeply grief, existentialism, and fear pull people apart.

Chapter 11 Quotes

The memories would slam against me like the waves of an incoming tide, sweeping my body along to some strange new place—a place where I lived with the dead. [...] There Naoko lived with death inside her. And to me she said, “Don’t worry, it’s only death. Don’t let it bother you. [...] Death is nothing much. It’s just death. Things are so easy for me here.”

Related Characters: Naoko, Toru Watanabe (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 273

Explanation and Analysis

After Naoko’s sudden suicide, Toru, torn apart by grief, decides to travel alone throughout the Japanese countryside for several weeks. He sets out hoping that in getting some distance from Tokyo he’ll be able to learn to cope with Naoko’s loss—but out in the country, Toru finds himself experiencing terrible dreams, frighteningly warped memories, and dark visions. In many of these moments, Toru finds himself face-to-face with an apparition of Naoko who tells him how “easy” death is and, seemingly, tries to beckon him to join her. Naoko often reported feeling Kizuki trying to talk to her from beyond the veil of death, inviting her to join him there—now, Toru must face down the very thing Naoko once warned him about. Toru is more isolated, lonely, and confused than he’s ever been, and the idea of joining Naoko in the peaceful realm of death is tempting, yet Toru knows that he can’t uphold his responsibility to Naoko even after she’s dead. To do so would be to completely drop out of his own life—something he is, in spite of his grief, not ready to do.

●● Gripping the receiver, I raised my head and turned to see what lay beyond the telephone booth. Where was I now? I had no idea. No idea at all. Where was this place? All that flashed into my eyes were the countless shapes of people walking by to nowhere. Again and again, I called out for Midori from the dead center of this place that was no place.

Related Characters: Toru Watanabe (speaker), Reiko Ishida, Midori Kobayashi

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 293

Explanation and Analysis

In the novel's final lines, Toru bids an emotional goodbye to Reiko and then immediately goes to a nearby payphone to

call Midori. Reiko has been urging him for months to follow his happiness and give his relationship with Midori a chance—in spite of his feelings of loyalty and responsibility towards Naoko. Now, Toru, having closed the chapter in his life that involves that responsibility, feels ready to begin in earnest with Midori. When he calls her and begs to see her, she asks him where he is. But as Toru looks around, he finds himself with “no idea.” As “shapes of people” swarm around him, he feels a profound sense of disorientation. He's not just physically lost, but existentially lost. Even though his struggle to choose between Naoko and Midori has come to an end, Toru isn't done processing the complicated emotions the last several years of his life has created within him. He is in a place that is “no place” as a young adult: an in-between state in which there are endless terrifying possibilities.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

Thirty-seven-year-old Toru Watanabe is on a plane to Germany. As the 747 touches town and cold November rain falls on the tarmac, the plane's speakers begin playing an orchestral version of the Beatles hit "Norwegian Wood." The song, which always sends a "shudder" through Toru's body, hits him "harder than ever," and he places his head in his hands. A flight attendant approaches him to ask if he's all right, but he insists he's just dizzy. The plane arrives at the gate, but as passengers stand from their seats and retrieve their bags, Toru remains motionless, caught up in memories of Autumn 1969—the fall of his 20th birthday.

Toru looks back on a memory from 18 years ago—a fall day he spent in a meadow with a girl named Naoko. Though nearly two decades have passed, Toru can summon nearly every detail: the blue of the sky, the feeling of the wind, and two birds he and Naoko saw on their walk. "Memory is a funny thing," Toru thinks; though he barely paid attention to his surroundings in the moment, the scenery has become impossibly vivid over the years. Toru knows he is growing more and more distant with each passing day from who he and Naoko used to be, and now, in Hamburg, feels compelled to write their story in order to fully understand it at last.

Toru thinks back to the day in the meadow, remembering more and more details—such as when he and Naoko discussed a deep well that was rumored to be off the path at the edge of the field. Naoko contemplated aloud how horrible it would be to fall into the well, talking about the slow death one would surely die in its depths. Toru remembers telling Naoko that all she had to do to avoid the well was to stay close by his side. Naoko, he remembers, stated that it would be impossible "for one person to watch over another person for ever and ever."

Toru assured Naoko that her problems would soon be over; one day, he said, she wouldn't need someone with her round-the-clock. Naoko, however, insisted her problems ran deeper than Toru realized, and wondered aloud why he'd chosen to fall in love with her. After walking on in silence, Toru remembers, Naoko apologized for her cold words, then told how grateful she was that he'd come to visit her. Toru swore to Naoko he'd never forget her.

The novel's early lines introduce several important motifs. In addition to grounding its title in the song "Norwegian Wood" and its significance to its central character, the opening scene also establishes the importance of memory, nostalgia, and regret, and shows just how strong an effect Toru Watanabe's past still has on him after all these years.



As Toru unpacks this vivid memory from his past, he's confused and, in a way, delighted by the strange rules by which memories operate. The vividness of the scenery inspires both reverence and sadness within Toru—the emotions he feels about this memory in particular have blended together so that his true feelings are practically inscrutable.



As Toru delves further and further into the memory, going beyond its sunny surface, it becomes clear that the memory is tinged with darkness, fear, and uncertainty. Naoko's fear of falling into the "well" represents her fear of death, and yet her fascination with the well speaks to her fascination with death itself. This passage also introduces Toru's deep sense of responsibility for Naoko—a feeling that will, in retrospect, be revealed as the driving force behind many of his choices in his young adulthood.



Toru's loyalty to Naoko—and Naoko's repeated insistence that Toru try to move on, forget her, or leave her be—represents a recurring emotional struggle between the two of them, a tense expression of their shared self-loathing that will come to define their relationship.



As Toru writes, he feels full of dread and worries that he is remembering things incorrectly. Still, Toru concedes that wrangling even half-formed or imperfect memories is the only way he has of honoring his promise to Naoko. In fact, all the times he's tried to write his and Naoko's story before, the details have been too sharp and held him back. Now that things are slightly blurrier, he has found, he is able to understand Naoko better. He realizes that she asked him to remember her precisely because she knew his memories of her would fade one day. Toru is overcome with "unbearable sorrow" as he admits what he has known all along: that Naoko never truly loved him.

This passage demonstrates Toru's reasons for returning to this part of his life and committing it to the page. He wants to understand it more deeply, to preserve it in time, and to confront, at long last, the truths he's been avoiding articulating all his life. Toru doesn't lie to himself or hide in half-remembered delusions any longer: he's finally ready to face his past.



CHAPTER 2

Toru thinks back to his freshman year of college in Tokyo 20 years ago. Because Toru is new to living alone, his parents arrange for him to live in a private dorm with a roommate. Toru describes his dormitory complex in painstaking detail, remembering the towering tree out front of the building and the sounds of his fellow students' radios playing through their open windows. The complex is bustling and busy and has "everything you could want"—the only problem is that it is run by a "fishy foundation" with right-wing politics.

Just as Toru was able to remember the meadow in sharp, painstaking detail, so too is he able to recall seemingly banal or small details about his early days in his first dormitory. He describes it with a sense of nostalgia—even as he recalls the sense of unease and suspicion he felt about living there.



Toru's all-male dorm is filthy and stinking, and many students keep pornographic posters on their walls. Toru's room, however, is "sanitary as a morgue" due to his cleanliness-obsessed roommate, nicknamed "Storm Trooper" for his regimented preoccupation with keeping things clean, neat, and orderly. Storm Trooper is a nervous geography major with an occasional stutter who dreams of making maps one day. Toru, on the other hand, is majoring in drama, but tells Storm Trooper that he has no real attachment to it—he picked drama, he says, because he might as well have picked anything.

Storm Trooper is the first person Toru meets who serves to highlight and underscore his own aloofness and ambivalence. While Toru picks a major at random, with barely a second thought about his future or a practical career, Storm Trooper is obsessed with organizing and planning every single aspect of his life. Toru is barely a participant in his own life, while those around him are determined to take advantage of every opportunity to the fullest.



One Sunday morning, on the train, Toru is surprised to run into Naoko, an acquaintance from back home in Kobe. They have not seen each other in a year, and Naoko has become very thin. After running into each other, they decide to spend the afternoon together walking through the city. Toru regales Naoko with tales of Storm Trooper and his ridiculous early-morning exercise routines but is unsure of what to say to her during breaks in the conversation—though they often spent time together in high school, they have little to say to each other now.

There is clearly tension between Toru and Naoko—something unresolved from their shared past sits heavy between them. Toru's comment about Naoko's severe drop in weight also shows that she may be going through something, trying to transform or shrink herself in her new life in Tokyo.



At the end of the walk, as the two part ways, Naoko asks Toru if they can see each other again—even though she says she has no “right” to ask Toru for such a thing. Toru is confused by her statement, and Naoko admits that she’s had trouble expressing her feelings lately. Toru says he knows what she means and tells her he’s always free for a walk on Sundays.

As he heads home, Toru thinks about his past with Naoko. The two met in high school: Naoko was the girlfriend of Kizuki, Toru’s only friend. Naoko and Kizuki were next-door neighbors growing up and had been close since childhood—there was never a time, Toru says, when the two weren’t a couple. Toru believes Naoko resents him because he was the last one to see Kizuki alive. On the last day of Kizuki’s life, he and Toru cut classes to go shoot pool at a local billiards hall. Kizuki was oddly quiet that afternoon and lost the game, but Toru had no clue that Kizuki would, after their match, go home, tape a rubber hose to the exhaust pipe of his car, and commit suicide without leaving a note behind.

Toru found himself “unable to find a place for [him]self in the world” in the wake of Kizuki’s death. Toru got a girlfriend and slept with her for a few months, but soon lost interest. He applied to and was accepted by a good university in Tokyo, but barely felt any excitement about the prospect of attending. All he wanted to do in Tokyo, Toru says, was create “distance between [him]self and everything else” and make a new life where he knew no one. Toru says that after Kizuki died, he began to see death “not as the opposite [of] but as a part of life”—something that was already within every being at the time of their birth and would stay with them always. Death could take Toru at any moment, he realized, and by the time he got to Tokyo, “everything revolved around death.”

CHAPTER 3

Every Sunday Toru and Naoko meet up to walk the streets aimlessly. They often stop for food and coffee and talk—but neither of them ever says a thing about the past or Kizuki. Sometimes, Naoko cooks for Toru at her apartment—he is shocked by the sparse nature of the space, and soon begins to suspect that Naoko has no other friends or pastimes. Toru realizes that Naoko, like him, has come to Tokyo to escape.

Toru and Naoko both tacitly admit in this passage that they’re each struggling with something. The idea that they find it difficult to communicate with each other, but long to keep trying, forecasts a pattern that will come to define their relationship.



This passage reveals the truth of Naoko and Toru’s connection. They are bound together by their grief over the loss of Kizuki, but at the same time, completely isolated in that grief because of their very different relationships to him. Toru feels a sense of guilt that he and not Naoko was the last to see Kizuki, and knows that Naoko, too, must feel guilt and confusion about Kizuki’s sudden and completely unexplained choice to take his own life.



This passage further reveals the ways in which Kizuki’s death has affected Toru’s life. Toru’s entire personality and many of his choices have been influenced by Kizuki’s death. He wants to wall himself off from others to dull the potential pain of losing another friend—and, at the same time, feels haunted by the idea that death is at the center of all life. Toru doesn’t know how to cope with his burgeoning existentialism and confusing emotions—but at least now that he’s reconnected with Naoko, he has someone who knows who he is, where he’s coming from, and perhaps a bit of what he’s feeling.



As Toru and Naoko grow closer, he begins to understand that she has developed many of the same coping mechanisms to deal with her grief as he has. Neither of them breathe a word about Kizuki, and they’ve both worked hard to isolate themselves from new people in their new city.



As spring turns to summer and summer turns to fall, Toru and Naoko grow closer and closer, yet still never bring up their shared past. They only ever discuss trivialities or exchange funny stories about their lives at college. Naoko and Toru continue their walks even through the winter, and on each outing, as Naoko clutches Toru's arm for warmth, he can't help but think that she needs "the arm of someone else." Sometimes, when Toru looks into Naoko's eyes, he feels she is "trying to convey something" to him that she can't put into words.

As Toru turns 19, he is uncertain of what he and Naoko are doing with each other, and what he himself is doing with his life more generally. The books and plays he reads for school mean nothing to him, and he can't think of a profession he'd like to attempt. When Toru tries to talk to Naoko about his aimlessness, he struggles to express himself, and often cuts himself off.

The only book Toru finds any solace in is [The Great Gatsby](#)—an old favorite he's reread several times. One day, while reading *Gatsby* in the dining hall, Toru is approached by Nagasawa, an older student who lives in his dormitory. Nagasawa is studying law at the prestigious Tokyo University, and though Toru is intimidated by him, they bond over their shared love of the book and become fast friends. Nagasawa comes from a prominent family and is on the fast track to a cushy life and a good job. Toru is shocked that Nagasawa wants to be his friend, but soon accepts that Nagasawa likes Toru precisely because of Toru's own indifference to Nagasawa's charm.

As Toru and Nagasawa become closer, Toru finds himself conflicted. Nagasawa is charming and fun, but also has a malicious streak and regularly brags about having slept with over 70 women. When Toru tells Nagasawa he's only slept with one person, Nagasawa takes him out on the town to pick up girls, and soon the two are going out each weekend to get women drunk, bring them to hotels, and have sex with them. Toru doesn't care about any of the girls he sleeps with, and even starts to feel revolted with himself after several weeks. When he asks Nagasawa if he feels the same way, Nagasawa admits he, too, is disgusted by his own behavior, but doesn't really care to stop—even though he has a steady girlfriend, Hatsumi.

Toru feels himself developing strong feelings for Naoko. But as he grows more and more attached to her, he feels two conflicting things: guilt over their burgeoning relationship, and fear that when she holds his arm or looks into his eyes, she's imagining Kizuki and not even thinking of Toru at all.



Toru wants to talk about the feelings of distance, aloofness, and dissociation he's feeling—but because he and Naoko rarely talk about anything of substance and definitely never discuss their grief, he doesn't feel comfortable turning to her.



Toru finally begins making friends and slowly letting people in. However, the first person he chooses to befriend is someone with whom Toru has very little in common other than shared literary tastes: the two young men have an age gap, attend different schools, and have dissimilar interests and aspirations. Even when Toru expands his horizons, he's careful not to be too vulnerable and befriend someone with whom he's actually likely to form a meaningful connection.



Unable to act upon his burgeoning feelings for Naoko, Toru seeks solace in meaningless one-night stands. He longs to communicate with someone else and express his feelings of desire. But just as he makes friends with someone he doesn't really like, he pursues sex with women he's not really attracted to or interested in to avoid the pain and vulnerability that comes with real connection.



Toru gets a job at a record store around Christmastime. He and Naoko exchange gifts—neither of them returns to Kobe for winter break, and so they spend the days together cooking and hanging out at Naoko's apartment. In January, Storm Trooper comes down with a terrible fever, but recovers almost spontaneously after Toru spends days nursing him back to health. In February, Toru gets into a fistfight with another dorm resident, and thereafter he feels awkward about spending too much time in the dorm. When the term ends in March, Toru's grades are mediocre, but he doesn't much care. He has been in Tokyo a full year.

In April, Naoko turns 20. Toru's own birthday is coming up in the fall, and he wishes that he and Naoko could spend eternity turning from 19 to 18 and 18 to 19—nevertheless, he decides to help Naoko celebrate by bringing a cake to her apartment. Naoko's behavior is erratic and strange, and she talks rapidly and ceaselessly for hours. Toru grows increasingly uncomfortable, and, around eleven, tries to excuse himself. Naoko bursts into tears, crying so forcefully that her body shakes. Toru takes Naoko in his arms.

As Naoko cries into his arms, Toru senses that Naoko wants to sleep with him and begins slowly undressing both of them. They kiss and touch each other, and soon Naoko begs Toru to put himself inside of her. As they begin having sex, however, Toru finds himself surprised—Naoko is a virgin. After they both orgasm, Toru asks Naoko why she and Kizuki never slept together in all their years as a couple. Naoko begins weeping again and cries herself to sleep.

In the morning, Toru tries to talk to Naoko, but she feigns sleep until he leaves her apartment. He writes a note before he goes asking her to call him. After a week, however, Toru still hasn't heard from Naoko. Worried, he goes to her apartment to find that she has moved. Toru returns to his dorm and writes Naoko a letter expressing his desire to talk to her so that both of them can understand fully what happened between them. Toru admits that he probably shouldn't have initiated sex with Naoko, but believed in the moment that it was all he could do.

The fall and winter pass quickly—Toru is relatively happy, and even though there are problems and hiccups here and there, Toru's proud of himself for getting through his first year of university. The things Toru remembers from this period of time are, tellingly, not the things he's learning or the time he's spending in class, but the things that happen outside the strict bounds of his university education.



Naoko's 20th birthday is clearly a difficult milestone not just for her, but for Toru as well, no doubt owing to the fact that with each year they age they feel more and more guilt about leaving Kizuki behind, as he is forever 17 in death. While Toru privately wishes he and Naoko could stay teens forever, he doesn't share this feeling with Naoko—and because they don't communicate, they don't have any way of comforting one another. As a result, Naoko has clearly built her emotions up to a breaking point.



Toru and Naoko finally act on their feelings for each other—but again, the disastrous way things fall apart immediately after shows how their failures to communicate are hurting their relationship before it has even had the chance to really begin.



Toru begins to worry that he has somehow hurt or violated Naoko—but again, because the lines of communication between them are so profoundly broken, he has no way of expressing his guilt or asking her how she herself really feels about what happened between them on the night of her birthday.



Weeks pass as Toru waits in vain for an answer to his letter, which he sent to Naoko's home in Kobe. Everything around Toru feels hollow and unreal, and even when a student uprising begins in May, he has trouble feeling anything. Campus closes due to the student strike and Toru takes a job at a trucking company. Other than the people he meets at work he sees and talks to hardly anyone but Storm Trooper. In June, he writes Naoko another letter, but sending it only makes him feel worse. He tries to go out with Nagasawa to pick up some girls, but even as he sleeps with multiple women each weekend, he finds himself unable to think of anyone but Naoko.

In July, Toru finally receives a letter from Naoko. In the short missive, she tells him that she has decided to take a year off from school. She begs Toru not to blame himself for her meltdown, saying she's felt it coming on for a long time. She is planning to move to a sanatorium in the hills outside of Kyoto. She closes her letter by telling Toru that though she's grateful for his friendship, she's not prepared to see him anytime soon. She promises to write as soon as she is.

At the end of July, Storm Trooper, who is packing to go on a summer holiday, gives Toru a firefly trapped in a jar as a goodbye gift. After dark, Toru takes the firefly up to the roof and examines its weak glow. Worried that the firefly is on the verge of death, Toru twists the lid open and lets the insect out. It takes a long time to spread its wings in flight, but eventually, it buzzes away. Even after it goes, Toru feels its pale light lingering inside of him.

CHAPTER 4

Though students all around the world are rioting in attempts to "dismantle" the universities, over summer break, the protests at Toru's school are disbanded and the leaders of the movement arrested. Toru doesn't feel anything about his classmates' failure, and when he returns to school in September to find the university in perfect shape, even starts to feel contemptuous of their failed attempts at revolt. "Kizuki," Toru thinks to himself, "you're not missing a damn thing. This world is a piece of shit." Toru believes college is "meaningless," and that all he can do is suffer through his remaining years of boredom. Storm Trooper does not return to the dormitory, and Toru is grateful for the chance to live alone.

Toru is unable to focus on the details of his real life as he awaits Naoko's answer. Part of him is lovesick for her—but there's a part of him that also wants to be absolved for his actions and told that isn't responsible for adding to Naoko's troubles.



Naoko's letter absolves Toru of his guilt, but it isn't necessarily the response he wanted. Naoko is clearly not ready for life on her own in the big city, and as it becomes clear that she's unable to solve her problems on her own without professional help, Toru realizes the gravity of what she's going through.



Toru's poignant moment on the roof with the dying firefly represents his sorrow over losing Naoko. He feels hopeless, confused, and lonely, as if the figurative light Naoko brought into his life has been extinguished just like the firefly's light.



Toru's depressed existentialism turns to outright nihilism as the new school year begins. He seems to almost take pleasure in his classmates' failure to change the status quo—he has no faith in the world he lives in and has nothing he's looking forward to. Aloof, adrift, and alone, Toru hardens himself to the struggles of others.



One Monday, after a History of Drama lecture, Toru goes to a restaurant near campus to eat lunch. While he's eating, another group of students comes in and sits at a nearby table. Toru notices that one of the students, a girl with a pixie cut and large, dark sunglasses, keeps looking at him. Soon the girl approaches Toru and asks if she can sit. Toru asks if they know one another. The girl tells Toru that she's in his History of Drama class. Toru recognizes her, realizing she's recently gotten a drastic haircut. Toru compliments the change, and the girl exclaims that he's the first guy to tell her he likes it—most men, she says, hate when women have short hair.

The girl asks Toru why he never answers to his name during roll call, and Toru says he often doesn't feel like it. The girl mocks Toru's "tough" demeanor. The girl, noticing that Toru is wearing green, asks him if he likes the color green. Toru says he doesn't especially like it—he'll "wear anything." The girl once again mocks Toru's aloof demeanor, then introduces herself as Midori, which means "green" in Japanese. Midori's friends wave her over—their food has arrived. Before rejoining them, Midori asks if she can borrow Toru's notes from class. He hands her his notebook, and she tells him that if he meets her here at noon the day after tomorrow, she'll return it to him and buy him lunch for the favor.

On Wednesday at noon, however, Toru finds no sign of Midori at the restaurant. He waits for her while he eats alone, but after an hour gives up and heads to class. After his German lecture he goes to the student affairs office and looks Midori up in the directory. Her learns that her surname is Kobayashi and looks up her phone number. When he calls it, the Kobayashi Bookstore answers. Toru asks if Midori is at the store, and the voice on the other end says she's "probably at the hospital." Toru hangs up, confused, and returns to his dorm room to read.

Later that afternoon, Toru goes to Nagasawa's room to return a book. The two of them eat in the dining hall, and Nagasawa tells Toru he's recently taken a round of upper-level exams—if he passes, he says, he'll take Toru out to a fancy dinner in October. As Toru asks Nagasawa about his career aspirations, the two discuss the values they want to employ as they move through life. They move from the dining hall to a nearby bar as the conversation continues. While Toru says he has no real aspirations in life, Nagasawa says he wants to prove himself as a "gentleman."

Toru has been so disconnected from everything around him that he doesn't even recognize one of his own classmates when she approaches him at a restaurant. After she jogs his memory, he realizes who he is, but his failure put two and two together at first shows just how little attention he's paying to ordinary details of his everyday life.



Midori seems to find Toru's "tough" or disinterested affect amusing and doesn't seem to really buy how little he's invested in the world around him or even his own choices. Midori's need to borrow notes because she's missed class foreshadows her flighty, flaky nature. It also suggests that she's genuinely struggling to keep up with her studies as opposed to Toru's complete disinterest in his own education.



Midori seemed, at first glance, like an open book. As Toru looks into her, though, he finds that she may be hiding more than she seems to be. The detail of Midori being at a hospital seems like an odd but insignificant detail to Toru now—further emphasizing his passivity and disinterest—but will prove to be important later.



Toru and Nagasawa's discussions about their futures show just how different their interests are. Nagasawa seems to want to be something he isn't and is okay with admitting it and revealing that vulnerability. Toru, on the other hand, claims he doesn't want anything out of life at all—an attitude that seems like yet another one of his defense mechanisms.



The next week, Midori isn't in History of Drama. While waiting for the lecture to begin, Toru pulls out a notebook and writes a letter to Naoko, telling her about his summer but admitting that "everything seems pointless since [she] left." Toru asks Naoko if he can come visit her so that they can take a long walk, side-by-side, like they used to. A few minutes into the lesson, Midori enters the classroom and sits down next to Toru. She slides his notebook to him—inside is a note asking him if he's mad about Wednesday. When two student protestors in helmets enter and matter-of-factly inform the professor that they're taking over the lecture to announce a new strike, the professor leaves the room, and Toru and Midori hurry out after him.

Midori and Toru go to a restaurant and Midori apologizes for missing their lunch date on Wednesday. Toru tells Midori about calling her house, getting the bookstore, and being told she was at the hospital. Midori says she doesn't want to talk about the hospital but promises to tell Toru everything next time they get together. After lunch, Midori and Toru walk through the neighborhood, and Midori shows Toru her old all-girls high school. She points out a cloud of smoke coming from the main building and tells Toru the smoke comes from the burning of sanitary napkins.

Midori tells Toru about her high school experience at length and in great detail, describing the embarrassment she felt at being one of the only middle-class students at a school full of wealthy girls. While her classmates were being driven to and from school by hired chauffeurs, Midori was helping out her family's small bookstore, a tiny neighborhood business that sells mostly magazines. Toru tells Midori that he, too, comes from an average background and works a job at a record store to help with expenses. Midori invites Toru to come visit her at home and see the bookshop on Sunday, and Toru accepts. Midori draws Toru a map to her house, and Toru promises to arrive at lunchtime.

Sunday morning, Toru takes a streetcar to Midori's neighborhood and follows her map to the Kobayashi Bookstore. Inside the apartment above the bookstore, Toru finds Midori busy cooking. He drinks beer and watches her nimbly move from dish to dish, boiling and pickling and frying up their lunch. When Midori is finished, she lays out the "delicate" Kyoto-style cooking and Toru hungrily begins eating. Toru asks Midori how she knows to cook so well, and Midori explains that her parents never cooked for her and her sister, Momoko, when they were younger. The young Midori, sick of takeout, purchased a huge cookbook and taught herself how to make everything in it. She spent all her allowance money on pots, pans, and knives, determined to have the best materials possible.

This passage establishes a pattern that will repeat throughout the novel as Toru finds himself increasingly torn between Naoko and Midori. When Midori isn't available, his feelings for Naoko intensify, and he tries reaching out to her. He will later do the same thing when Naoko is unavailable, and Midori becomes the one who seems more attainable and thus attractive.



This passage establishes another recurring pattern throughout the novel as Midori, on a walk through the city, peppers Toru with strange and slightly indecent facts. Toru tries to replicate his old relationship with Naoko in his new relationship with Midori—even as he is constantly reminded of how radically different the two women are, and how irreplaceable one is with the other.



While Toru and Naoko walked the city for months, barely speaking to each other, on Toru's very first outing with Midori she feels comfortable sharing personal, intimate details and difficult opinions with him completely unprompted. Midori is vibrant and open where Naoko is quiet and reserved.



Midori surprises Toru with both her impressive cooking skills and her continued, refreshing openness about her past and her present alike. Midori is someone who confronts problems in her life and seeks to better them as opposed to Toru, who's so ambivalent that he's content to let bad things fester and good things slip by as he focuses only on himself.



Midori tells Toru that when her mother died a couple of years ago, it was a “relief” to take over the family budget and buy the things she wanted. Toru asks how Midori’s mother died, and Midori explains that her mother died a slow death from a brain tumor. Midori apologizes for leading the conversation down a dark path, then picks at her food and lights up a Marlboro. Toru says he recently quit smoking because he doesn’t like having something “control” him. Midori puts her chin in her hand and remarks, again, about Toru’s strange aloofness.

After lunch, Toru helps Midori with the dishes and asks about her family. Midori explains that her sister, Momoko, has a fiancé whom she’s always out with, while her father has moved to Uruguay. Midori goes on and on about how, after her mother’s death, her father was plunged into sadness, and even admitted he wished that Midori and Momoko had died in his wife’s place. Midori says that though she was hurt by the comment at the time, she now finds it romantic to think about how much her father loved her mother.

As Midori and Toru enjoy coffee and some conversation, they hear sirens approaching. They go up to the roof to see that a nearby building is on fire—huge clouds of smoke are rising from it. Midori explains that the building, which once housed a small business, is empty and defunct. As firefighters begin putting out the blaze, Toru suggests Midori pack up her valuables in case the wind shifts and blows the fire in her building’s direction, but Midori insists that if the building caught fire she’d stay inside and burn up. Toru looks into Midori’s eyes, trying to determine if she’s joking or not, but her gaze remains impenetrable. Toru tells Midori that if she’s staying, he’s staying. The two of them bring some pillows and beers up to the roof, along with a guitar, and play music as they watch the fire.

Toru pokes fun at Midori for wanting to die in a fire, but Midori says she’d rather burn up than die a death that “slowly eats away at the region of life.” Midori leans against Toru, and the two share a kiss. After they break apart, Midori gently tells Toru that she’s been seeing someone and asks if Toru has a girlfriend, too. Toru says he is entangled in a “complicated” situation, but still wants to see Midori on Sundays.

The next day, Midori is not in History of Drama. After class, Toru eats lunch alone and then does some people-watching on the quad. He feels saddened as he watches his happy classmates going about their lives, realizing that he hasn’t really been a part of anything in the years since Kizuki’s death.

Though Naoko and Toru could never discuss their past losses—or present emotions—Midori has no problem revealing the depths of her feelings, even when they’re inappropriate or controversial.



Midori also thinks of pain very differently from the ways in which Toru and Naoko do. Confronted with her father’s cruelty and vitriol, Midori chose to see the beauty in his intensity of feeling and try to understand the roots of his grief.



For all of Midori’s fast talking and loud, funny opinions, this passage shows that she is capable of real grief. The existential moment in which she says she’d choose to burn alive in the fire—and in which Toru says he’d stay by her side—shows that the two of them are already drawn to each other on a deep emotional level, even as they enjoy teasing and making each other laugh.



Toru and Midori share an intimate moment after they bond over their shared fear of the idea that death “eats away” at life. Even though they’re both involved with other people, Toru and Midori are clearly drawn to each other and decide to pursue a friendship—they’re too intrigued by each other not to.



Midori’s vitality is helping Toru to see the ways in which he’s shortchanged himself by approaching his own life, friendships, and education with ambivalence.



That Saturday, Nagasawa comes to Toru's room and invites him out on the town. The two of them go to several bars trying to pick up women but have bad luck. As the night grows late, Nagasawa goes over to Hatsumi's while Toru stays out. He sees a late-night showing of *The Graduate* and then, in the early hours of the morning, goes to a coffeehouse. He meets two girls there who want to get drunk, one of whom is going through a bad breakup. Toru agrees to accompany them to buy alcohol. After one of the girls goes home for the night, Toru takes the other to a hotel, and the two of them have sex.

Toru wakes up in the early afternoon feeling strange and lightheaded. He showers, shaves, and has some breakfast at the hotel, puzzled by the dreamlike events of the night before. He tries calling Midori, but she doesn't answer, so he takes a bus back to his dorm. In the mailbox, there is a special delivery letter waiting for him—it is from Naoko.

CHAPTER 5

Toru sits down on his bed and lets a wave of emotions wash over him as he reads Naoko's seven-page letter. In the lengthy missive, she writes that she has been at a sanatorium in the mountains for nearly four months. She has been thinking a lot about Toru and has decided that she treated him unfairly. Her poor judgement has hurt both of them, and the therapy she's been receiving at the sanatorium has helped her to see how her flaws affect others. Naoko believes she is much closer to recovery than when she arrived.

Naoko describes life at the sanatorium, which is called the Ami Hostel. It is quiet and calm in the **forested** mountains, and patients are ensconced in nature. Naoko plays sports, harvests fruits and vegetables, and enjoys music and knitting in her leisure time. The problem with the hostel, Naoko says, is that it's so peaceful that no one wants to leave. Naoko's doctor, however, believes it's time for her to resume her relationships with people from the "outside" world. Naoko encloses a map of the route to the sanatorium and invites Toru to visit any time. After reading Naoko's letter a couple times, Toru calls the Ami Hostel and asks if he can visit the following day. A receptionist gives him the go-ahead, and Toru packs a bag right away.

Perhaps due to his burgeoning fear that he hasn't participated enough in his own life, Toru tries to milk the most he can out of a doomed evening. He winds up having rote, uninspired sex with yet another anonymous young woman—perhaps even adding to his existential crisis rather than aiding it.



Yet again, Murakami shows how Toru is always torn between wanting attention and affection from Midori and Naoko—often within the very same moment.



Even though Naoko is writing from a sanatorium—a place that carries negative connotations—the actual content of her letter is positive and hopeful. She's learning how to recognize her own mistakes, feeling more like herself, and has not abandoned or forgotten her feelings for Toru.



This passage introduces the Ami Hostel as a kind of metaphor for the tug-of-war between the world of the living and the world of the dead. The sanatorium is surrounded by forests, a symbol of death throughout the novel, and is so calming that people don't want to leave. The realm of death is represented similarly throughout the novel: an alluring place which offers solace from the pain, suffering, and simple inconveniences of everyday life.



CHAPTER 6

On Monday morning, Toru tells his dorm head that he's taking a short hiking trip for a couple of days, then heads to the Tokyo Station and boards a bullet train to Kyoto. Once there, he takes a bus to the northern suburbs and, from there, another bus that will take him deep into the mountains. As the bus drives down the winding mountain roads through a dense cedar **forest**, Toru feels a bit carsick. Every once in a while, the bus passes through a clearing and arrives at a village. After passengers disembark, the bus heads into the forest once again. Soon, Toru is one of only four passengers left on the bus, and by the time he reaches his stop, he is in a truly rural area.

Toru disembarks from the bus and follows Naoko's map. Soon he reaches a sign which indicates that the Ami Hostel is near. He walks to the guard gate and, after ringing a bell, summons a gatekeeper who lets Toru onto the property and tells him to ask for Doctor Ishida in the main building. Toru wanders the idyllic grounds until he reaches an old country house. Inside, a receptionist invites Toru to sit and wait for Doctor Ishida. As he sits on a couch, he marvels at the quiet surrounding him.

Soon, an older woman approaches Toru. She sits beside him on the couch, takes his hand, and examines it. The woman has many wrinkles on her face, though she appears to be only in her late thirties. Her hair looks to have been recently chopped, but its wild style suits her. The woman asks Toru if he plays any instruments, and Toru says he doesn't. She takes a cigarette from her pocket and lights it, then tells Toru that she wanted to talk with him before letting him meet with Naoko. She invites him to join her in the dining hall for some lunch.

As Toru enjoys his delicious lunch, prepared entirely from things grown and harvested on the Ami Hostel's property, the woman tells Toru to call her Reiko. He asks if she is Naoko's doctor, and Reiko explains that though the others call her "Doctor Ishida," it's only because they think of her as a "Music Doctor"—she is, in fact, another patient who has been at the hostel for seven years, and is Naoko's roommate. Reiko begins describing the "unusual" workings within Ami Hostel.

Toru's journey to the Ami Hostel through a thick, foggy forest represents a microcosm of the larger journey he's on through his own adolescence. Forests in the novel represent the difficulty of traversing adulthood intact and alive, ignoring the pull of death's release—Toru's journey in this passage represents that winding, sickening adventure on a smaller, more digestible scale.



Toru is immediately calmed and comforted by the atmosphere at the Ami Hostel. Even though he's not a patient, he can see right away what a powerful and alluring place this is.



Toru meets with the woman he believes is Naoko's doctor and is surprised but warmed by her gentle demeanor, her nontraditional approach, and her sensitivity to individuals. This individual likely challenges Toru's preconceptions about life in a mental sanatorium, as the doctor is casual and inviting rather than overly serious or intimidating.



The realization that Reiko is not a doctor, but a fellow patient, shows Toru that things at the Ami Hostel are not always what they seem to be. The place takes a truly unique and nontraditional approach to healing.



The place is not, Reiko says, as much about treatment as it is about convalescence. There are doctors on staff to analyze and talk with patients, but the gates of the property are wide open, and people are free to leave at will. While the model at Ami Hostel doesn't work for everyone and some patients need to leave to seek special treatment, many benefit from simply being around other patients and experiencing a normal daily routine. Patients help one another to recognize, understand, and assume accountability for their flaws, and total honesty is a paramount part of patient life.

Toru stops Reiko and asks her why she's been at the hostel for so long, since it seems to him that there's nothing wrong with her. Reiko explains that she has nothing waiting for her in the real world, and after so long inside, worries she'd be overwhelmed by the world if she left.

Toru asks how Naoko is doing, and Reiko says she's "headed in the right direction" but laments that Naoko didn't get help for her problems sooner. When Toru asks what kind of problems Naoko is working through, Reiko says he should ask Naoko herself. Before he can see her, though, Reiko says Toru needs to understand one of the rules: visitors aren't allowed to be alone with patients, so Reiko will need to observe Naoko and Toru's interactions. Reiko tells Toru not to feel self-conscious around her—she already knows everything there is to know about what happened between Toru and Naoko. Reiko says she's hopeful that the three of them will be able to "help each other." When people open their hearts to one another, Reiko says, they always get better.

Inside Reiko and Naoko's apartment, Reiko shows Toru to a sofa bed in the living room and tells him she's going off to do some work until five. After that, she and Naoko will both come back to the room. Reiko leaves the room and Toru dozes on the sofa bed, and after a while, Naoko comes into the room by herself. Even though they're not supposed to be alone together, Naoko says, she's snuck off to see him so that they can have a moment for just the two of them. Naoko approaches Toru and presses her face into his neck for a moment, then leaves the room again. Toru falls into a deep sleep, comforted by the sense of Naoko's presence all around him.

Around five thirty, Naoko and Reiko return to the apartment. Toru greets Naoko as if he's meeting her again for the first time. The three of them talk and tell stories for a while before heading down to the dining hall for supper. Toru is surprised by the pleasant atmosphere and polite conversations happening all over the dining room—it is not what he expected out of a visit to a sanatorium.

The fact that Naoko has come to place where total honesty and emotional accountability are major pillars of daily life must be a challenge for her. But the fact that she's thriving in such a place shows that she's trying to make sense of her past, hone her communication skills, understand her grief, and move forward in her life.



The Ami Hostel has a peculiar hold on its patients. It is so comforting that few want to leave and return to the real world. This, again, suggests that the Ami Hostel is a kind of metaphor for the protection that death or purgatory offers.



If Toru is off-put by how much Reiko—a total stranger—knows about the intimate details of his relationship with Naoko, he doesn't say so. Reiko seems to truly believe that honesty and openness are the key to recovery, and Toru is, it seems, willing to do anything he can to help Naoko get better—even if it means being open to vulnerability.



As Naoko and Toru reconnect, their first meeting in months is sweet, tender, and tinged with a nostalgia for each other that is both emotional and sexual. While in Tokyo they had the freedom to be alone together all they wanted, but an emotional barrier that didn't allow them to really connect. Here at the Ami Hostel, they find themselves in the reverse situation. Their walls are down, but there are restrictions on how they can express themselves and explore this new chapter in their relationship.



Toru continues to be surprised by the atmosphere at the Ami Hostel. It's a place of openness and communication where people are free to be themselves and behave as they please—the opposite of the guarded, isolated existence Toru has been leading at college.



After dinner, Toru showers in the apartment while Reiko and Naoko visit the communal bath. He sits in the dark waiting for them to return, admiring the bright moon and stars through the window. When the women return, Naoko lights some candles and Reiko pours everyone some wine. Reiko takes out a guitar and plays some Bach, then asks if Naoko has any requests. Reiko tells Toru that Naoko is always begging her to play The Beatles. Naoko requests some Beatles songs, including “Norwegian Wood”—her favorite, she says, even though it often makes her feel sad, as if she’s wandering alone in a deep **forest**.

As Reiko continues playing, Naoko and Toru talk about their lives. Naoko asks a lot of questions about school and Tokyo, and Toru tells her about his friendship with Nagasawa—and Nagasawa’s serial pursuit of women. Naoko says he sounds like a “sick” person. Toru tries to tell Naoko how brilliant Nagasawa is and how ordinary he himself feels in comparison. Naoko assures Toru he isn’t ordinary, which is why she slept with him in the first place. She asks him how many girls he’s slept with since, and when he tells her he estimates about eight or nine, she chides him for his promiscuity. Toru explains that he was hurt and lonely, and believed Naoko still loved Kizuki more than him.

Naoko tells Toru, at last, why she and Kizuki never slept together. She explains that though they tried to have sex, it never worked between them—Naoko says she couldn’t get aroused, and that her body “never opened to him.” They engaged in other sexual activities but never had intercourse. Naoko says that she now believes her close, almost symbiotic relationship with Kizuki prevented her from being able to love other people. Naoko begins sobbing violently. Reiko takes Naoko in her arms and calmly suggests Toru go for a walk for about 20 minutes. As he leaves, she winks at him and reassures him that Naoko’s tears aren’t his fault. Toru goes outside and walks through the moonlight into the **woods** beyond Naoko and Reiko’s building.

Half an hour later, Toru returns to the apartment to find Reiko playing guitar on the floor—there is no sign of Naoko. Reiko tells Toru that Naoko has gone to bed for the night and offers to take Toru on a walk so they can talk a little. Toru and Reiko head outside and walk down the paths around the property, discussing their interests and making small talk. Toru asks if he hurt Naoko or asked her too many questions. Reiko insists it’s better for Naoko to cry and emote rather than keep everything bottled up, since people have to confront their emotions if they want to heal.

In this passage, Naoko draws the novel’s first concrete connection between the song “Norwegian Wood,” the imagistic symbol of woods and forests, and the feelings of loss, solitude, and grief.



As Toru and Naoko start talking, they communicate more openly about several things in their relationship than they ever have. They dredge up the ways they’ve hurt one another but are given the chance to explain themselves and ask the other person to justify their own actions, as well.



This passage introduces Naoko’s fears about sex, which will recur throughout the novel as a major obstacle to her and Toru’s relationship and serve to represent her larger fears about intimacy with another person. Shortly after she confesses her troubles to Toru, he takes a walk through the woods, an environment whose imagery ties forestry—the novel’s symbol of death and loss—to Naoko’s fears of sexual intimacy, suggesting that Naoko is caught in a feedback loop. Her sadness over Kizuki’s death has created a fear of intimacy which manifests physiologically. That her inability to connect sexually with other people or get aroused makes her incredibly insecure and is tied to painful memories suggests that this problem could lead to serious consequences.



Toru is so unused to hearing about Naoko’s feelings—or sharing his own with her—that he worries they’ve done something wrong or shared too much. Reiko, however, insists that pain is healthy, and communication is necessary even when they’re both uncomfortable.



Reiko warns Toru that if he truly wants to be with Naoko, he may have to wait a long time for her to recover. She asks Toru if he loves Naoko enough to wait for her, and Toru admits that, like Naoko, he doesn't know what it really means to love someone else. He confides in Reiko, however, that he believes he and Naoko "have to save each other."

Reiko says she understands Toru's dilemma—she was once a 20-year-old herself. Reiko begins reminiscing about her life. She explains that she trained from childhood to become a concert pianist. Her senior year, however, just before a major competition, a finger on her left hand became paralyzed. Though doctors could find nothing wrong with the finger, one suggested Reiko was having a physiological response to pre-competition stress and urged her to recuperate away from school. As Reiko attempted to forget about piano, however, she began to believe she was nothing without it, and her mind snapped. She spent two months in a hospital, and upon getting out, was told she didn't have the fortitude to be a concert pianist.

After several stints in and out of mental hospitals, Reiko began taking on students at home. Soon, one of her pupils, a man just a year younger than her whom she'd never touched or even kissed, asked her to marry him. Reiko said she'd need to see him regularly to decide, and after three months of dating, Reiko accepted the kind and generous man's proposal. Though his well-to-do family disowned him after finding out about Reiko's background, Reiko and her husband were happy, and she believed that as long as they were together, her mind would never snap again.

When Reiko was 31, her daughter had just entered kindergarten, and Reiko decided to start playing again. She found that playing made her happy again, and when a neighbor asked about lessons for her 13-year-old daughter, Reiko agreed to take the girl on as a pupil. The girl was angelic, precocious, and unusually beautiful—but Reiko didn't yet know she was a pathological liar who would soon prey upon Reiko.

Toru's uncertainty about his love for Naoko is not so much about her specifically but about his own failures to know what it means to connect and share intimacy with another person. Nevertheless, he feels that he and Naoko must help each other, throughout their lives, to understand how to do just that—and in a way, he's right.



Reiko has clearly internalized the Ami Hostel's values of honesty and openness very deeply. She shares her backstory with Toru, showing that she, too, knows what it is like to be controlled by an anxiety, limitation, or insecurity—it's obviously why she and Naoko share such a close bond.



Reiko has known suffering, self-doubt, and the intense and unfair judgement of others—and yet she has managed to retain her kindness, openness, and willingness to trust and invest in others. Reiko is radically open, just like Midori, and completely unlike Naoko and Toru.



Reiko's story takes a dark turn, but she chooses to end it on a cliffhanger. It's clear that as things veer into difficult territory, even Reiko has reservations about how much she should reveal, especially to a stranger who isn't even a patient at the hostel.



Toru asks Reiko to go on with her story, but Reiko suggests they check on Naoko. Reiko promises to finish the story tomorrow. Back at the apartment, Naoko is sitting on the sofa. When she sees Toru, she apologizes for frightening him. Toru sits down, and the two of them discuss Kizuki. Naoko tells Toru that as she and Kizuki, who had been together since childhood, grew older, they both found themselves fearing adulthood and responsibility. They were too close, too codependent, and didn't believe they could thrive on their own. Naoko tells Toru that he was, in many ways, both her and Kizuki's only friend and connection to the "real" world.

After their intense discussion, Reiko makes Toru and Naoko some cocoa, and then all three of them get ready for bed. Toru falls asleep quickly on the sofa bed but wakes up in the middle of the night to find Reiko sitting at the foot of the bed. As she and Toru lock eyes, she begins unbuttoning her nightgown. Toru stares at Naoko in the moonlight, marveling at her body. After a few minutes, Naoko rebuttons her nightgown and returns to the bedroom. Toru lies awake the rest of the night, unable to sleep.

In the morning, Reiko steps out of the room while Naoko makes breakfast. Naoko asks Toru how he slept, noting that his eyes are red. He tells her he didn't sleep very well at all and asks how she slept. Without any cheekiness, she replies that she slept "like a log." As the morning goes by, Toru helps Reiko and Naoko with their chores and wonders whether he really saw Naoko last night, or whether her appearance was part of a dream.

After lunch, Toru, Reiko, and Naoko check out with the guard at the front gate and head out on a trail up into the mountain **forest**. The steep trail winds Toru, but Naoko and Reiko press on easily. Eventually, they arrive at a plateau, and soon after, pass through an abandoned village. There is only one house in the village that's occupied, a coffeehouse where the three stop to rest and have a snack.

After a while, Reiko suggests Toru and Naoko go for a walk. Though they aren't supposed to be alone together, she says she'll keep their secret—she knows there are probably things they'd like to talk about in private. As Naoko and Toru head out, Naoko hangs on Toru's arm and apologizes for crying the night before. Toru tells Naoko it's okay—all he wants is to be able to understand her.

Naoko continues opening up to Toru about Kizuki—the topic that has been the elephant in the room for the entirety of their relationship. Though Naoko struggles to explain the unnaturally close relationship she and Kizuki shared from childhood, she tries her best, and is eventually able to get across just why Kizuki's loss was so intensely devastating for her. He wasn't just a boyfriend—he was something much more.



When Naoko appears to Toru, he's uncertain of whether or not what he sees before him is really happening. Naoko has been so shy and reserved for the entirety of their relationship that the idea she'd bare herself to him so vulnerably is shocking—but at the same time, if it's really happening, it's clear that Naoko has made strides at the Ami Hostel in terms of learning how to share herself with another person.



Even though Naoko seems not to remember the events of the night before, Toru is aware that she could be putting him on. His need to know whether he imagined her or really saw her begins to claw at him throughout the morning.



Toru, Reiko, and Naoko all journey into the forest together—a simple walk, but also a symbolic journey which suggests they're all trying to navigate the depths of their grief and survive the pain they've been dealt.



Reiko wants to help Toru and Naoko work through their issues—so much so that she's even willing to help them bend the rules of the Ami Hostel, rules she clearly takes very seriously herself.



As the two of them continue walking, Naoko confesses that she sometimes fears she'll never get better—sometimes, she says, she believes she can feel Kizuki “reaching out for [her] from the darkness.” Toru and Naoko reach a meadow and sit down in the grass. Toru holds Naoko close, and they share a kiss. Naoko tells Toru that they'll have to wait to sleep together, but in the meantime, reaches into his pants and strokes his penis until he orgasms.

Naoko and Toru continue their walk. Naoko begins telling Toru about another trauma from her youth—her older sister's suicide. Naoko idolized her smart, capable older sister, but at seventeen and without any warning, Naoko's older sister hung herself in her bedroom. Naoko, then in sixth grade, was the one to find the body. Naoko also tells Toru that a year after her sister's death, she learned that her father's brother committed suicide when he was young, too. Naoko has come to believe that there is something in her blood is making her depressed and warns Toru that he should move on. Otherwise, she says, she might “tak[e him] with [her.]” Toru says he'll wait for Naoko and promises her that when she's ready to leave the Ami Hostel, she can come live with him.

Back at the apartment that evening, Toru and Naoko play cards while Reiko serenades them on the guitar. After a while, Reiko asks Toru if he'll take a walk with her to pick up some grapes from a neighbor. After getting the grapes, Toru asks Reiko if she'll resume her story from the night before, and she agrees. Reiko tells Toru to head for a storehouse near the tennis courts, and, after settling in and lighting a cigarette, Reiko picks up where she left off.

Reiko explains that she was giving her new pupil lessons every Saturday morning. Reiko was a good teacher, but because her new student was “nothing special” technically, Reiko knew the girl would never be a professional musician. This took even more pressure off the lessons, and Reiko came to enjoy spending time around her new student and helping her experiment with different ways of performing different pieces. The girl soon proved herself to be a star pupil—though she was not technically perfect, she played with passion and personality. After lessons, Reiko and her student would have tea and talk—but Reiko had no idea that her pupil was manipulating her and lying about everything.

Throughout the novel, sex and death are often intertwined in peculiar and upsetting ways. In this passage, Naoko speaks of Kizuki's voice seeming to call out to her from the realm of death, begging her to join him, just moments before she brings Toru to climax.



As Naoko begins to open up more and more to Toru, she peels back the layers of her life and reveals the true depths of her trauma. Kizuki's suicide is not even the defining loss of her life. Having discovered her sister's dead body shortly after her suicide, and then later realizing that there is a history of suicide in her family, has suffused Naoko's entire life with an atmosphere of death. Tragedy seems to follow Naoko, which gives her the terrible sense that she, too, must be fated to take her own life.



Though Reiko cut her story off at a crucial moment, this passage makes clear the fact that she wants to share her whole story with Toru—she sees him as a friend and as a person who can be trusted.



Reiko, too, is someone who has had trouble in the past with letting herself be open to other people for fear of revealing her true self. As she continues her story, she shows how she let in a person who seemed to be a friend and mentee, but who would ultimately come to betray Reiko, likely causing her to question herself.



One afternoon, in the middle of her lesson, Reiko's pupil said she felt sick and began sweating. Reiko brought the girl into her bedroom and helped her lie down. Reiko's pupil asked Reiko to stay with her, and Reiko agreed. Then, the pupil asked Reiko to rub her back. Once Reiko began doing that, the pupil asked Reiko to take her bra off, claiming it was hurting her. Reiko's pupil began crying and telling Reiko how much the lessons meant to her, painting a horrible picture of her own home life. As Reiko comforted her pupil, her pupil began touching Reiko's breasts and pulling off her clothes. Reiko felt as if her pupil "had cast a spell on [her]" and felt powerless to resist the young girl's advances. Reiko pauses to admit that she's embarrassed by the story, but when Toru tells her not to be, she continues on in great detail.

Reiko describes how her pupil touched her, inserted her fingers into Reiko's vagina, and even performed oral sex on her. Reiko cried as the strange seduction was happening, miserable but at the same time feeling in "paradise." Eventually, Reiko smacked the girl in the face. Her pupil tried to convince Reiko to continue with the encounter, but Reiko hurriedly dressed. She told her student to leave and never come back, at which point her pupil's eyes turned flat, dead, and lifeless. As her pupil gathered her things and left, the girl accused Reiko of being a closeted lesbian, and warned her she'd never be able to hide the truth.

The following Saturday, Reiko's pupil did not show up for her lesson. After several weeks went by, Reiko was relieved that her pupil had disappeared from her life but could not escape a creeping sense of dread. Soon, Reiko began to realize that her neighbors would stare at her and whisper about her when she left the house, and soon, a friend visited to tell Reiko that rumors were swirling about how Reiko had tried to seduce her piano student. What's more, Reiko's pupil's parents had looked into Reiko's background and found out about her hospitalizations.

Reiko told her husband her version of events and was relieved to find that he believed her. Reiko begged her husband to move their family out of the neighborhood right away, but he expressed reluctance to move so quickly. Reiko warned her husband that she felt she'd soon snap again—still, he urged her to wait until a more opportune time to sell their home and move. In the meantime, Reiko tried to commit suicide. She woke up in a hospital room, and though her husband promised he'd stay with her, Reiko filed for divorce—she didn't want to subject him to the burden of being married to her any longer.

Just as Reiko felt helpless once her pupil began seducing her, torn between a mixture of shame and pleasure, it is clear as she relays the story that her memories, too, are tinged with a strange blend of both nostalgia and regret. Reiko really cared for her pupil—and was obviously, to some extent, attracted to her—but at the same time now feels only anger, sadness, and betrayal when she thinks of the girl who ruined her life.



Reiko's story is odd, to say the least. Sexually explicit, taboo, and tinged with a mix of fascination and shame, it's clear that Reiko has told this story many times. Reiko was the teacher—but it's clear that she is the one who received an education in how cruel and deceitful people can really be.



This passage shows how, unfortunately, Reiko's neighbors (and the pupil's defenders) used her history of mental illness against her, perpetuating a harmful stigma and refusing to grant Reiko any generosity or understanding.



Reiko is yet another character in the novel who is revealed to have ties to suicide—though her attempt failed, Reiko has known a time in her life when she wanted to die. For this reason, perhaps, her connection with Naoko is even more meaningful; she can relate to the ways in which dealings with suicide have traumatized Naoko.



Reiko stubs out her cigarette and tells Toru that her terrible past is the reason she's so afraid to leave the Ami Hostel and reenter the world. Toru tells Reiko he believes she can do it, but Reiko offers only a weak smile in response.

Back at the apartment later that night, after Naoko and Reiko have gone to bed, Toru is surprised when Naoko enters the living room and crawls into bed with him, claiming she can't sleep. The two of them kiss, and then Naoko heads back to her room.

In the morning, after breakfast and chores, Toru packs up his things. He walks with Reiko and Naoko to the front gate of the property, where they bid him goodbye and wish him safe travels. As Toru leaves the Ami Hostel and walks through the **woods** to get the bus, he is overcome with a sad feeling: he is "in the outside world" again.

Back in Tokyo, Toru drops his things in his dorm and heads to work at the record store. Throughout his shift, as the shop floods with drunken customers, Toru feels his head becoming fuzzy. He wonders what he's doing in Tokyo at all, and what everything means. Toru's boss crudely talks to him about his recent sexual conquests, and Toru listens grimly. After his shift, Toru returns to his dorm and crawls into bed, where he masturbates as he thinks of Naoko.

CHAPTER 7

The next day, Toru runs into Midori. She tells him she's been trying to call him for days, and Toru explains he's been out of town. Midori tells Toru he looks "spaced-out," like he's "seen a ghost." She invites him to go for drinks with her after his next class, and Toru agrees. After class, Toru and Midori find an underground bar and start drinking. As Midori gets drunker and drunker, she speaks to Toru in an almost stream-of-consciousness manner about the thoughts flying through her head. She says she wants to give everything up and go to Uruguay and invites Toru to come with her. She says she wants a "pile of babies," then describes in great detail her sexual fantasies about Toru. Toru is bashful, overwhelmed by her frankness.

Reiko has bared her soul to Toru, and now admits the cherry on top of her sad story, which is that she's too afraid of being hurt again to function in the real world.



Naoko's second late-night visit to Toru's bedside seems to suggest that the first one did really happen as well.



As Toru traverses the woods surrounding the Ami Hostel, he admits that he's sad to leave them—but the difference between Toru and the friends he loves who are trapped within the Ami Hostel is that he chooses to leave in spite of his fears and insecurities about living in the real world.



After three days in the Ami Hostel, Toru's readjustment to the "outside world" is disorienting and fraught. He doesn't like the coarseness and loudness of Tokyo, and finds himself both repulsed by the crude, unthinking expressions of sexuality around him and helplessly aroused by his own thoughts of Naoko.



Though Toru doesn't tell Midori anything about the intense time he's been going through, Midori has no problem telling Toru about every little thought that passes through her head. This represents the inequity in their relationship dynamic—while Midori is open and vibrant, Toru is closed-off and aloof.



After five rounds of vodka and tonics, Midori and Toru leave the bar and walk through the streets of Tokyo. Toru says he's enjoying hanging out with Midori—she's helping him feel “a little more adapted to the world.” Toru walks Midori to the train station, and as they bid each other goodbye, she loudly describes yet another sexual fantasy in which she and Toru are captured by pirates, stripped naked, and locked together in a brig. Toru is still embarrassed, but when she asks him to hang out again on Sunday, he agrees.

On Sunday morning, Midori comes by Toru's dorm to pick him up. She is wearing an impossibly short skirt and complains that all the men in Toru's dormitory have been staring at her. She asks about the masturbation habits of Toru's dormmates. Toru says Midori should ask her own boyfriend about how men masturbate, but Midori continues pressing him, and asks if Toru has ever thought of her while pleasuring himself. Toru says he hasn't—he thinks of Midori as a friend. Midori says she longs to be in at least one of Toru's sexual fantasies and begs him to think of her, just for a second, the next time he masturbates. Toru reluctantly agrees to humor Midori but quickly tries to steer the subject away from sex.

Toru and Midori get on a train bound for another neighborhood. When Toru asks where they're going, Midori tells him not to worry about it. As they get off the train and begin walking, Midori talks about school, lamenting how pointless she sees so much of education to be. Midori is fed up with the “phonies” and faux revolutionaries within the university—all she wants to believe in from now on, she says, is love. Toru again asks Midori where they're going, and Midori answers that they're on the way to visit her father in the hospital. Toru is shocked and points out that Midori said her father was in Uruguay. “That was a lie,” Midori says blithely, and tells Toru that her father is not far from death—he has a brain tumor, just like her mother.

Toru and Midori arrive at the hospital and go to Midori's father's semiprivate room. Mr. Kobayashi is a small, frail man whose head is wrapped in bandages. His eyes are bloodshot and half-open, and he has trouble focusing them. Though Midori tries to talk to her father, he can barely speak. Midori examines a bag of things her sister has recently brought for their father, and laments that Momoko packed raw cucumbers for the dying man to eat.

Even though Toru isn't ready to share everything with Midori yet, he concedes that her vibrancy and frankness is helping him feel better—like the world's multitudes are enjoyable rather than just overwhelming. Midori's openness about her sexual desire, too, stands in stark contrast to Naoko's timid expressions of desire.



Midori is open about her own sexuality and curious about that of others. Whereas sex always felt like a taboo discussion for Naoko and Toru throughout their friendship—and still, to a degree, feels difficult to talk about even though they have a sexual relationship—there's nothing Midori won't say.



Even as radically open as Midori is, this passage shows that she still has her secrets—for the duration of their friendship, she's been lying to Toru about her father. Even as she admits the truth, she doesn't seem weighed down or particularly guilty about the lie, tacitly showing that lying was not malicious or ill-intended, just what she needed to do for herself at the time.



This passage makes it clear that while Midori has a capable sister around her age, she is still the one working as her father's primary caregiver. She's shouldering the burden of caring for him through his illness, facing down death every day.



Midori and Toru walk down the hall to the TV room to have a cigarette. Midori conspiratorially tells Toru that everyone in the hospital has been staring at her short skirt—but she doesn't mind, since perhaps “the excitement helps them get well faster.” Midori begins opening up to Toru about her father. She explains that while he's a weak man, he's tried to live his life “with all the intensity he could muster.” She apologizes to Toru for lying to him and for bringing him to the hospital under false pretenses, but asks if he'll stay with her a while longer. Toru says he'll stay all day if Midori wants him to.

Midori asks Toru about his girlfriend, but Toru says he doesn't think he could explain the situation very well. Midori says she has a guess about what's going on—she believes Toru is sleeping with a wealthy married woman who “likes to do really yucky things.” Midori describes all the sexual things she imagines Toru and his rich older girlfriend doing. Toru tells Midori she's been watching too many pornographic movies. Midori says she loves porno flicks and asks Toru to take her to a porno theater soon.

Toru and Midori return to Mr. Kobayashi's room and meet with his doctor. The doctor doesn't have any particularly good news for Midori, but upon seeing her short skirt, he jokes that one day they'll have to open her head up, too, and see what's “going on” inside. After the doctor leaves Midori tries to feed her father some lunch, but the feeble old man refuses to eat. Midori and Toru go down to the cafeteria themselves. Toru isn't hungry, but Midori wolfs down a full plate. She explains that people who are new to hospitals are reluctant to eat because they're not used to the environment, while people who spend a lot of time in hospitals caring for their relatives know it's important to eat as much as one can whenever one gets the chance.

Midori explains that she and her sister each visit the hospital several days a week, but Midori does more work and comes more often. Toru, overcome with compassion for Midori, tells her she should go out and take a walk for an hour or two to clear her head and enjoy having no responsibilities for a while—he offers to take care of Mr. Kobayashi in her place. Midori, grateful for the chance to spend some time alone, takes Toru back to her father's room, explains that she's going out for a little, and leaves.

Midori is dealing with a tremendous burden, and yet remains upbeat, hopeful, and provocative as ever even in the midst of a profoundly difficult time. She speaks of her father living with “intensity,” a way of being that Midori herself has clearly taken to heart.



Midori clearly has insecurities about Toru's other romantic involvement. To make up for the embarrassment of being unable to connect with him about the truth, Midori makes up a lewd story to lighten the mood—just as she asked dirty questions on the way to the hospital to distract from what was coming.



Midori is clearly well-adapted to the environment at the hospital. She likes joking with the doctors—both to lighten their moods and her own—and has gotten used to the macabre nature of her daily tasks. She's able to focus on her own survival and on making things tenable for herself—something with which both Toru and Naoko struggle.



Toru sees how hard Midori is working—not just in terms of taking care of her father, but in terms of working overtime to keep her own spirit bolstered. He wants to give her the gift of just a little relief.



While Toru sits at the bedside of the sleeping Mr. Kobayashi, the wife of Mr. Kobayashi's roommate whispers to Toru that Midori is wonderful, devoted, and kind. She warns Toru that he'd better treat Midori right and never let her go. After the woman leaves the room, Toru is left with the two sleeping patients, and his thoughts drift to Naoko. He wonders again about the night she came to his bed and showed him her body—he still can't determine if it was real or a dream.

Soon, Mr. Kobayashi wakes up coughing. Toru helps him spit his phlegm out, wipes his brow, and gives him water. Toru manages to feed Mr. Kobayashi some hospital food, and Mr. Kobayashi reluctantly chokes the stuff down. As Mr. Kobayashi rests, Toru talks to the man about his usual Sunday laundry routine and describes the things he and Midori are studying in school. He talks about Euripides, and how in all of his plays, "things get so mixed up the characters are trapped," unable to get through to or help one another.

Soon, Toru starts to get hungry himself. He washes the cucumbers Momoko brought and begins eating bites of them wrapped in *nori*, or seaweed, and dipped in soy sauce. Soon, Mr. Kobayashi says he wants some, too. Toru helps Mr. Kobayashi eat little bites of cucumber and *nori*, and Mr. Kobayashi remarks how good the food tastes. After Mr. Kobayashi is finished eating, Toru helps him relieve himself. Mr. Kobayashi begins muttering something about Midori and a ticket to the Ueno Station, but Toru can't figure out what he's saying. Toru assures Mr. Kobayashi he'll take care of the ticket for Midori, and soon, Mr. Kobayashi falls asleep.

Midori comes back to the room a little after three and tells Toru that she's feeling better. Midori is impressed that Toru got her father to eat, but Toru tells her Mr. Kobayashi was easy to take care of. Midori says that a few weeks ago, her father was wild and angry, throwing things and cursing her—she knows, though, that it was all part of his sickness. Toru asks if getting a ticket at Ueno Station means anything to Midori—she thinks for a moment, then says that when she was little, she tried to run away from home, taking a train from Ueno to Fukushima to visit an aunt. Her father had to come collect her and bring her home. Toru says Mr. Kobayashi was muttering about the Ueno station, and Midori says he must have been trying to ask Toru to take care of her.

In this passage, Toru engages in his familiar pattern of resorting to thoughts of Naoko when his feelings for Midori become too intense or frightening to manage.



Toru's seemingly benign discussion with Mr. Kobayashi, meant simply to pass the time and comfort the man, is actually intense and directly related to the problems Toru is having in his own life. He's implicitly comparing his own love triangle to a Euripidean tragedy—he, Midori, and Naoko are "mixed up" and "trapped" in the web they've created.



Toru is good at caring for Mr. Kobayashi, and even gets the man to push through his compromised appetite and enjoy food for the first time in a while. Mr. Kobayashi clearly trusts Toru and wants to communicate with him, but the men are mostly unable to understand each other.



Midori's recollection of running away from home is sweet and has a happy ending, but it must have been a painful, difficult day for both her and her father. This passage shows that people other than Toru also engage in revisionism in their memories, recategorizing and repurposing their pasts to fit their presents.



Around five, Toru tells Midori and her father that he has to leave for work. Midori walks Toru to the lobby and thanks him for his help. Toru says he'd be happy to come back and take care of Mr. Kobayashi any time. Midori reminds Toru of his promise to take her to a porno flick soon. Toru rolls his eyes and tells her to pick him up the following Sunday so that they can come back and visit with her father. On Friday, however, Midori calls Toru to tell him that her father has died. She tells him not to come to the funeral—but begs him to look up a “really disgusting” porno flick for the two of them to go to soon. She promises to call Toru up, but after a week, he has gotten no word from her and hasn't seen her in class.

Throughout this passage, as the days go by, Midori continues engaging in her patterned behavior of distracting from deep emotional pain or uncertainty by being provocative or talking about sex. She wants to provide the illusion of openness and nonchalance—even if she may be falling apart on the inside.



The following Sunday, Toru writes a letter to Naoko. He tells her that while he misses her all the time, he is trying to “go on living with all the energy [he] can muster.” Toru steps out to mail the letter and buy some lunch, then returns to his dorm and tries to study—but he is unable to concentrate on his book and keeps thinking of Midori and her father. Doing so puts him in a terrible mood, and he tries to distract himself by going out and running some errands. As he sits drinking in a jazz café, he wonders how many more lonely Sundays stretch ahead of him still.

Again, Toru focuses his energy on one of his girls when he's unable to get attention from the other. With Midori missing in action, he turns to Naoko. In his letter to her, Toru claims he's trying to live his life to the fullest, but when faced with the facts, it's clear that he's lonely and uncomfortable with himself. His Sundays used to be spent with Naoko and then with Midori—now, he's facing the prospect of spending them alone.



CHAPTER 8

Halfway through the next week, Toru gets into an accident at work—he slices his palm open on a glass partition and has to go to the hospital for stitches. As he wanders home in a daze, he decides to visit Nagasawa. Nagasawa tells Toru that he's passed a major Foreign Ministry entrance exam and suggests the two of them go out with Hatsumi to celebrate at a nice restaurant. Toru is worried that dinner will be “Kizuki, Naoko and [him] all over again.”

Toru doesn't want to fall into old patterns—his friendship with Kizuki and Naoko proved disastrous and traumatic for them all, and he now fears he's in danger of becoming a third wheel to yet another dysfunctional couple.



On Saturday, Toru joins Nagasawa and Hatsumi at a fancy French restaurant. The three of them eat and drink lavishly, and Hatsumi tries to set Toru up with a girl from her college. Nagasawa says that Toru already has a girlfriend, even though he won't breathe a word about her. Toru replies that the situation is complicated. Hatsumi says it's a shame that things are difficult—she wishes the four of them could double date. Nagasawa makes a lewd joke about Hatsumi wanting to swap partners, then begins describing in detail a time when he and Toru slept with a pair of girls and switched off halfway through the night.

Hatsumi is fully aware of the fact that Nagasawa is always running around on her—but being subjected to listening to his crass jokes and details about his sexual encounters seems over the line, even for a couple with a predetermined arrangement.



Hatsumi rounds on Toru, asking if he enjoys sleeping with random girls. She demands to know why, if he loves his girlfriend, he would sleep with other women. Toru struggles to come up with a response, and finally declares again that his situation is “complicated” just as the food arrives. Even as the waiters set the entrees on the table, however, Hatsumi continues grilling Toru, telling him she doesn’t believe he really enjoys sleeping around. If he really loves his girlfriend, she says, he should be able to control himself. Nagasawa interrupts and tells Hatsumi she simply doesn’t understand the sexual needs of men. Hatsumi demands to know why she’s not enough for Nagasawa. Nagasawa chides Hatsumi for making their guest uncomfortable.

Dinner and dessert continue awkwardly, and the three of them don’t speak much more except about the food. Just before the check comes, Nagasawa tries to bring the discussion up again and defend himself, but Hatsumi shouts at him, and he quickly calls for the bill. After dinner, on the street, Nagasawa hails a cab and opens the door for Hatsumi to get in, but she says she doesn’t want to spend any more time with him and would like for Toru to take her home. Nagasawa warns Hatsumi that while Toru seems like a nice guy, he’s “incapable of loving anybody.”

Nagasawa’s cab drives away, and Toru hails one for himself and Hatsumi. He asks if she wants to go home, and she says she doesn’t. He suggests they get a drink somewhere. As the cab drives through the streets, Toru looks at Hatsumi’s face and finds in it an ineffable quality “that could send a tremor through your heart.” He tries to put his finger on Hatsumi’s special energy, but is unable to—however, in a flash-forward, Toru reveals that the answer would come to him a dozen years later.

Many years later, at a pizza parlor in Santa Fe, Toru is watching a sunset when he feels himself flooded with understanding of the feeling Hatsumi aroused in him that night. He describes it as “a kind of childhood longing” that would always remain perpetually unfulfilled within him. Toru nearly bursts into tears in the middle of the restaurant thinking about how, just four years after Nagasawa left Tokyo, she killed herself, slashing her wrists with a razor blade. Nagasawa wrote to Toru to tell him of Hatsumi’s death, but Toru ripped the letter up and never wrote to Nagasawa again.

This passage makes clear the fact that while Hatsumi submits to Nagasawa’s rules for their relationship, she’s not happy about them and is desperate for him to change. She tries using Toru to explain Nagasawa’s behavior, failing to see how Nagasawa’s promiscuity is not her fault and that he alone is responsible for his own decisions.



Hatsumi, fed up with Nagasawa’s behavior, tries to turn the tables on him and make him jealous. Her plan works, and Nagasawa’s biting comment about Toru’s emotional unavailability shows that he does know his friend better than he seems to.



Being alone with Hatsumi fills Toru with a great depth of feeling. He’s sexually aroused, but seeing her in such a vulnerable state stirs something in him that will take him years to be able to name.



The enigmatic “childhood longing” Toru describes witnessing on Hatsumi’s face in the back of the cab—and, as a result of its intensity, feeling himself—speaks to Toru’s own inscrutable desires and longings for ease, companionship, and innocence. The revelation of Hatsumi’s tragic end demonstrates Toru’s existential theory that death is a part of life, not its opposite.



Toru and Hatsumi arrive at a small bar where they drink several rounds. Hatsumi suggests they go to a pool hall—though Toru hasn't played since the day of Kizuki's death, he agrees to go. He has trouble playing due to his sore hand, but finds himself impressed by Hatsumi's calculated, capable shots. After the game, Toru complains about his hand, and Hatsumi suggests he come back to her apartment so that she can change his bandage for him. She used to do volunteer work at a hospital, she explains, and knows all kinds of wound care.

At Hatsumi's apartment, Hatsumi pours the two of them beers. As she changes Toru's bandage, she asks him what he thinks she should do about Nagasawa. Toru, answering honestly, tells Hatsumi she should leave him and find someone better. Staying with Nagasawa, he says, will only "wreck" her. Toru tells Hatsumi that he cares about her and wants her to be happy, but fears she'll never be able to find happiness with Nagasawa.

Hatsumi admits that she doesn't think she'll ever leave Nagasawa—all she wants is to be a wife and mother and doesn't feel able to do anything but wait for him to come around to her. Toru admits he's envious of how sure Hatsumi is about her love for Nagasawa. After finishing his beer, Toru leaves. On his way out of the apartment he catches a glimpse of Hatsumi picking up the phone, presumably to dial Nagasawa. This the last time, Toru says, that he will ever see her.

The next morning, Toru drinks coffee and listens to jazz records while he watches the rain and writes a letter to Naoko. He tells her about the cut on his hand and about the disastrous evening with Hatsumi and Nagasawa. As he writes about shooting pool with Hatsumi, he finds himself writing about the afternoon of Kizuki's death, and the last pool game they ever played. He admits, in the letter, that he didn't actually think of Kizuki until after the first round with Hatsumi was already finished—he feels a little guilty about the idea that he might be abandoning or forgetting Kizuki but is also beginning to understand that it's okay to move on.

Toru goes on to tell Naoko that the feelings Kizuki's death created within him are still "bright and clear." Though the friendship they shared as younger boys has vanished and can never be retrieved, Toru is trying to let himself accept that fact rather than remain in a state of mourning. He tells Naoko he hopes she can understand what he's trying to say—she is the only person on earth, he believes, who possibly could.

Toru and Hatsumi's pool game foreshadows Hatsumi's death, even though it won't come to pass for several years. Just as the last time Toru saw Kizuki they shared a pool game, he and Hatsumi share one on the last night they'll ever see each other.



Toru is able to easily give Hatsumi advice about her difficult romantic situation—but at the same time, he can't seem to solve or even understand his own.



Even though Hatsumi and Nagasawa are locked in a painful, dangerous situation, one thing is certain: Hatsumi is sure of her love for Nagasawa. Toru, who can't (or won't) even begin to understand his feelings for Naoko or Midori, is envious of how well Hatsumi knows her own heart.



Toru feels guilty about moving on from his grief over Kizuki's death. He and Naoko have perhaps come to see their perpetual state of mourning as a kind of reverence, or even a balm against the demands of the "real" world. Toru is starting to realize, however, that the longer he spends dwelling on the past, the harder it will be to make any type of future for himself.



Because Toru and Naoko's communication about their grief has been so stilted and rare, he's not sure how to fully express himself to her—but at least now, due to the influences of both Midori and Hatsumi, he's willing to try.



CHAPTER 9

On Monday, Midori is not in class. Toru wonders what's going on with her and where she is. A few days later, he bumps into Nagasawa in the dining hall. Nagasawa apologizes for his behavior at dinner and tells Toru that Hatsumi relayed Toru's advice that she should leave Nagasawa. Nagasawa admits that he, too, believes Hatsumi is too good for him.

That next evening, Toru is awakened from a deep nap by the ringing of his phone. He picks it up and finds that Midori is on the other end, asking if he wants to go out. After setting a time and place to meet, Toru hangs up the phone, gets ready, and heads out. He meets Midori at the underground bar they visited last time and orders a drink. Midori explains that she's just gotten back from a long trip: first she went north to Nara with her boyfriend, and then went south to Aomori alone.

Toru asks Midori about her father's funeral, and she explains blithely that funerals are a "piece of cake" compared to caring for a sick person—especially for her and her sister, who've had so much sickness and death in their lives. After the funeral, she and her sister got drunk together and decided to close the shop and enjoy their lives for a little while. Momoko decided to stay at home with her fiancé, while Midori went to Nara with her boyfriend intending to "fuck like crazy" for a few days. But Midori got her period as soon as they arrived, and, after a big fight with her boyfriend, they parted ways. Midori hasn't seen him since and admits that the whole time she was traveling around, she thought of no one but Toru.

After drinks, Toru and Midori go to a run-down porno theater in the busy Shinjuku district. They watch a dark S&M flick, and Midori cheers along as the violent action on-screen unfolds. At intermission, Midori looks around the theater and remarks how charmed she is by the idea that every man inside it has an erection. After the second movie bores Midori she asks Toru if they can leave, and they go to another bar for more drinks. After they leave the bar, Midori needs to use the bathroom. Toru pays for her to use a public toilet but is worried when she doesn't come out for a long time. Eventually Midori emerges and admits she fell asleep on the toilet. Toru suggests that it's time for her to go home, but Midori says she doesn't want to, then asks Toru to take her to a disco.

Though Nagasawa spoke cruelly to and about Toru when he felt threatened, in the light of day, he's able to admit that Toru is right about him.



Midori has been out of touch for a long time, but now is ready to pick up with Toru right where they left off. She's as open as ever, demonstrating that she still wants to share intimacy with Toru.



In this passage, Midori again uses a crass depiction of her sexuality in order to distract from emotion. Clearly, whatever happened between her and her boyfriend in Nara hurt her—but she chooses to make a joke of it as she relays the story to Toru. Midori is again projecting openness and honesty, but in reality, perhaps concealing some deeper truth.



As the night goes on, it becomes clear that Midori is in a strange state. She's obsessed with staying on the move and distracting herself from her feelings with hard drinking and violent depictions of sex. Even when she falls asleep on a public toilet her spirit isn't rattled, and she's determined to press on without stopping to deal with her grief or pain.



As Midori dances, her mood improves—but soon she says she’s hungry. At a nearby restaurant, Midori eats six slices of pizza. Toru offers to take her home, and the tired Midori at last agrees. Back at Midori’s apartment, Midori shows Toru to their family’s Buddhist altar and tells him that the other day, she placed her father’s picture on it and got naked. Toru asks why Midori would do something like that, and she tells him simply that she wanted to show him “the daughter [he] made.” Plus, she admits, she was slightly drunk. After Toru lights some incense, Midori bids her father’s picture goodnight, and adds that she hopes he and his wife have been reunited in heaven and are “really do[ing] it.”

After taking turns in the bath and changing into pajamas, Midori and Toru spread out a mattress in front of the altar and lie down together. Midori asks Toru to say something that will make her feel good. He tells her she’s cute. Midori asks Toru if he’ll take care of her, and he promises that he will. Toru holds Midori until she falls asleep. Unable to sleep himself, he gets up from bed, drinks a beer, and stays up reading throughout the night. In the morning, he leaves Midori a note and heads home, falling into a leaden sleep as soon as he hits the mattress.

As the weeks go by and October turns to November, Toru and Naoko continue exchanging letters. Naoko says she often feels lonely, and that when she hears the **trees** swaying in the autumn wind, she believes it is her sister and Kizuki trying to talk to her—they must be lonely too, she thinks. Three days after his birthday, Toru receives a package from Naoko containing a maroon crewneck sweater. Both Naoko and Reiko have enclosed letters in the package explaining that they worked on the sweater together and wishing Toru a happy 20th birthday.

CHAPTER 10

As autumn turns to winter, Toru feels as if he is slogging along through time. Though everyone around him is talking about revolution, he doesn’t see any real changes occurring and doesn’t feel anything meaningful happening in his own life. He continues going to classes, working in the record store, writing to Naoko, and hanging out with Midori, who has moved into a new apartment in a more upscale neighborhood along with Momoko. He avoids going out with Nagasawa—Hatsumi’s words got to him, and he is trying to be loyal to Naoko.

Again, as Midori confronts her father’s picture on their family’s altar, she mitigates her feelings of grief or despair—whatever they may truly be—by making raunchy sex jokes and affecting a casual, aloof demeanor. Perhaps the reason she’s so drawn to Toru is because he does seamlessly what she struggles to do: appear genuinely disaffected toward everything that comes her way.



Even though Toru clearly cares for Midori, and though Midori is eager to seduce him, he is careful not to let himself even fall asleep beside her. Toru is afraid of betraying Naoko, to be sure—but he’s also afraid of what a real, committed relationship with Midori might mean, or how it might force him out of his old habits.



Even though Naoko and Reiko send Toru a sweet birthday present, Naoko’s letters seem to suggest there’s something darker going on beneath the surface. Hearing Kizuki’s voice in the trees—an ongoing symbol of death in the novel—and being unable to finish knitting a sweater show that Naoko is probably not doing very well at all.



As time goes by, Toru is trying to juggle all his conflicting emotions and responsibilities. He’s done with sleeping around—but the very foundation of his relationship with Midori threatens what he has with Naoko, and yet he’s determined to toe the line and make both women happy.



At the winter break, Toru goes to Kyoto to visit Naoko and Reiko at the Ami Hostel. The mountains are beautiful and blanketed in snow, and the three of them spend their days hiking through the **woods**. The visit is enjoyable, but Toru notices that Naoko is incredibly quiet for most of it.

One afternoon, Reiko leaves the apartment to do some chores. As soon as Naoko and Toru are alone, they kiss and grope each other, and Naoko again uses her hands to bring Toru to climax. As they lie down holding each other afterwards, Naoko asks if Toru has slept with anyone else. He says he hasn't, and, as a kind of reward, Naoko performs oral sex on Toru until he orgasms again.

Toru tells Naoko that he's planning on moving out of the dorm at the end of the school year and finding a new apartment. He asks Naoko if she's ready to come to Tokyo, reminding her that the longer she stays at the Ami Hostel, the harder it will be to leave. Naoko doesn't answer him, and Toru tells her to take her time in making a decision, as his home will always be open to her. Naoko confesses that she's worried about her inability to get aroused—she says she's afraid she'll never be able to have sex again. Toru promises that he'll help her figure things out. After three days at the hostel, Toru departs with the promise that he'll come back to visit in March.

1970 arrives, and Toru feels relieved to put both the '60s and his teenage years behind him. He passes his final exams with ease, but in the weeks leading up to and following them, political tensions in the dormitory begin leading to small fights between some residents every day. Toru decides he needs to get out of the dorms. He quickly finds a small cottage to rent from a kindly landlord in another neighborhood. Toru describes his new apartment in a letter to Naoko, mentioning the spacious verandah and the neighborhood cats that gather on the lawn. He asks Naoko to come to live in Tokyo starting in April—he believes springtime is the best time to start new adventures—and offers, again, to come back to the Ami Hostel in March to visit.

Toru's second visit to the Ami Hostel is described in sparse detail. It's clear that Naoko is deteriorating, and her declining wellness is represented visually by snowy walks in the woods—she is flirting more and more, perhaps, with the idea of death.



Naoko continues trying to sexually please Toru even in light of her erratic emotional state. Naoko believes sex is a straight road to deeper intimacy and is determined to keep Toru happy—and hers—by offering him whatever sexual contact she can.



This passage delves more deeply into what the last passage illustrated physically: Naoko's insecurities about sex and her ability to perform are deep, intense, and debilitating. She wants a life with Toru, but her fears of failing him sexually are either so profound as to keep her hidden in the Ami Hostel, or a physiological cover for more deep-seated fears of living in the "real" world and subjecting herself to all that comes with it.



Several big changes come into Toru's life in quick succession, yet he seems to field them with ease and almost indifference. All he can really focus on is the prospect of Naoko coming to Tokyo. He seems determined to assure her (and also to make himself believe) that if she can just get herself well enough to leave Ami Hostel, everything will be okay.



Toru fixes up the cottage and builds himself a desk and some shelves. He also adopts a stray all-white kitten and names her Seagull. To help pay for his moving expenses, Toru gets a job as a painter's assistant. One day, while working, he thinks about Midori and realizes he hasn't reached out to her in nearly three weeks; she doesn't even know he's moved. After work, Toru heads to a phone booth to call Midori, but Momoko picks up and explains that Midori is too angry to talk. Toru begs to speak to Midori, but Momoko says that once Midori gets mad, she stays that way, "like an animal." As Toru hangs up, he feels guilty for not telling Midori about his move. Though they're not lovers, they do share a deep intimacy, and he is angry with himself for hurting her so callously.

Toru spends the whole spring waiting for answers to letters he's sent to Midori and Naoko, but neither of them write him back. Toru passes the weeks largely in solitude, fixing up his cottage and helping his landlord trim, prune, and mow the lawn. The landlord, in exchange, gives Toru permission to take anything he'd like from an old storage shed, and Toru finds a guitar inside. After repairing and restringing it, Toru spends his time playing music for himself in the evenings and enjoying a quiet existence.

In April, Toru gets a letter from Reiko. The letter explains that Naoko has had trouble writing, and so Reiko has offered to write Toru in her place. Reiko delivers the bad news that Naoko's condition is not very good—she has begun to describe voices talking to her even as she struggles to form even sentences of her own. Reiko says that though there are doctors on staff at the Ami Hostel, it's not a specialized hospital—she fears Naoko will have to transfer to another facility if she gets any worse.

Reiko's letter sends Toru into a deep depression which lasts for several days. He can't understand why someone as lovely and kind as Naoko is doomed to suffer such a terrible illness. He spends the better part of three days lying around his house, hardly able to even eat. After three days, Toru receives a letter from Midori. In the letter she admits how much she misses him and asks him to join her for lunch on campus in a few days. Toru knows that he has to snap himself out of his depression, and, in preparation for meeting with Midori, he shaves, does laundry, goes grocery shopping, and exercises.

Toru has been so focused on dealing with all of his own problems entirely by himself—and on helping Naoko to work through hers—that he's neglected Midori. He's been trying to downplay how much Midori means to him—and how much he means to her—for a long time now but is at last forced to confront what the friendship they've built actually is.



Though Toru is sad and lonely during this period of time, the older Toru's memories of it seem gentle and peaceful. This demonstrates the ways in which nostalgia changes memory by corrupting or enhancing it as the years go by.



The bad news about Naoko is painful for Toru to hear, but not entirely surprising given all the struggles she's been hinting at having had recently. Nonetheless, Toru is devastated by the idea that Naoko is even further from recovery than he thought.



Deep in the throes of sadness over Naoko, Toru receives a kind of life preserver when Midori reaches out to him. Again, Murakami shows Toru engaging in a pattern of switching between Naoko and Midori over and over, unable to choose between them.



As the days go by, Toru worries incessantly about Naoko. For so long, he'd thought she was steadily getting better—to realize that she isn't has thrown him into a tailspin, and he doesn't know how much longer he can wait for her to recover. At the same time, Toru doesn't want to turn his back on Naoko like Kizuki did in killing himself. As Toru imagines conversations with both Kizuki and Naoko in his head, he finds himself torn between his "sense of responsibility" to his own future, and that same sense of responsibility to the people and memories from his past.

Toru meets up with Midori, who remarks on his emaciated appearance as soon as she sees him. Over lunch, Midori apologizes for icing Toru out, and Toru apologizes for failing to let her know about the move. Midori, he says, is the best friend he has, and he doesn't want to lose her. Midori says she's grateful for Toru's friendship, too—but that if he wanted to sleep with her, she'd "probably do it with [him]."

Midori and Toru spend the entire afternoon together visiting a bookstore, a game center, a coffee shop, and a park. While sitting in the park, Midori tells Toru she's thirsty, so he goes off to get them some sodas. When he comes back, he finds her writing in a notebook. A little after three, Midori says she has to go meet her sister, and Toru walks Midori to the train station. As they're saying goodbye, Midori pulls a piece of paper from her pocket and gives it to Toru, telling him to read it when he gets home.

On the train, Toru opens Midori's letter and reads it. In the letter, which she wrote while Toru was off buying them sodas, Midori tells him how terribly he treated her all afternoon. He didn't notice her new hairstyle or her cute outfit. Midori says that having to meet her sister is a lie—she was planning on spending the night at Toru's new place, and even packed her pajamas and toothbrush in her bag, but he never once mentioned inviting her over. Midori says she's not mad at Toru, just sad for him. He helped her when she was going through problems, but now that he's having troubles of his own, he's "locked up in that little world of [his.]" Midori ends the letter by telling Toru he's "as sensitive as a steel plate," then adds a post-script telling him not to speak to her in class.

As soon as Toru gets off the train, he tries to call Midori from a payphone—but no one picks up at her apartment. After ambling around the neighborhood and eating dinner, Toru heads home and tries calling from there, but Momoko picks up and says that Midori hasn't come home. Toru sits down to write to Midori but struggles to come up with the right words, so he decides to write to Naoko instead. In the letter, he writes that he thinks all the time about the last time Naoko touched him.

This passage encapsulates the very core of what Toru has been struggling with throughout the entire novel. He feels afraid of abandoning his memories of his lost loved ones—but in his attempt to honor those memories, he's done a huge disservice to himself and failed to participate fully in his own present. Toru is stuck this way, unsure of how to unlearn the patterns he's come to inhabit.



Midori, as she always does, continues to couch her deeper emotions in shallow or casual sexually tinged jokes. She wants to reconnect with Toru, but given how badly he's hurt her, she's afraid of being fully emotionally honest with him.



Though Toru and Midori spend the afternoon together enjoying one another's company, they do very little talking. While there was a sense of comfort in the quiet afternoons he used to spend with Naoko, the silence here (given Midori's outgoing nature) makes Toru fear that he's done something wrong.



Midori has major issues with Toru. She wants to get through to him and is constantly opening herself up to him but is always disappointed by how self-absorbed and closed-off he is. She wants to help him sort through his problems, but he won't let her, and she's frustrated beyond belief. Although Toru likely distances himself from people in order to protect them—and himself—from emotional pain, this behavior backfires and hurts the person to whom he's closest. Midori takes a stand as she gives Toru this letter, explaining that she's unwilling to put up with any more embarrassment or disappointment.



Again, unable to get in touch with Midori, Toru turns to Naoko to try to express himself. His sexual frustration with both women is reaching a peak, and his letter to Naoko is tinged with hazy reminiscences of their physical intimacies.



The next day, Toru takes a job waiting tables at a small Italian restaurant near his apartment. He tries calling Midori's apartment again, and again Momoko answers. She reports that Midori has not been home since the day before, and that she is beginning to get worried. On Wednesday, though, Toru sees Midori in class. She is in the last row wearing dark sunglasses and talking with another girl. Toru approaches her and asks to talk to her after class, but Midori says she doesn't want to talk to Toru.

Toru doesn't talk to Midori for the rest of April and spends most of the month alone. He doesn't hear from Naoko or Nagasawa, either, and he even starts to miss his old roommate, Storm Trooper. As May arrives, Toru feels a lonely "trembling" in his heart. Toru does make friends with another student, Itoh, whom he meets through his job at the restaurant. Itoh is a painter who has similar taste in books and music to Toru, and the two of them bond over their girl troubles and their artistic preferences. One night, after getting drunk with Itoh, Toru calls Midori in a fit of loneliness and she finally picks up. He begs her to speak to him, but she tells him he has to wait until *she* feels like talking to *him*.

In the middle of May, Toru gets a letter from Reiko. Reiko reports that Naoko's mother came from Kobe earlier in the week for a meeting with the doctor, after which it was determined that Naoko needed to move to a "real hospital" to receive more intensive treatment. Naoko has become "tremendously unstable," Reiko writes, and must be supervised at all times. She is still hearing voices and has begun isolating herself from other patients. Reiko says she will be sad to see Naoko go, but believes deep down that Naoko needs more help than the Ami Hostel can provide. By the time Toru reads her letter, Reiko writes, Naoko will already be at a new hospital. Reiko includes the address of Naoko's new facility but says she hopes Toru will still write to her, too.

Throughout the month, Toru continues writing letters to Reiko, Naoko, and Midori. He begins to feel as if writing letters is the only thing "hold[ing] together the pieces of [his] crumbling life." He continues going to classes and working at the Italian restaurant and maintains a friendship with Itoh. In the middle of June, Midori sits down next to Toru one day after class and asks him if he likes her new hairstyle. Toru says it is "great enough to knock down all the trees in all the forests of the world." Midori smiles and invites Toru to lunch.

It's unclear where Midori is staying or what she's up to, but Toru's curiosity means nothing to her. She's not interested in talking to him and has reached a breaking point in her relationship with him.



Toru is profoundly lonely throughout the spring months. Over the years, he has perfected the art of walling himself off from others and thriving in moments of solitude—but that behavior is clearly no longer working for him, and he finds himself longing for the company of anyone who will pay him attention.



Naoko's rapidly decreasing mental state worries Toru. He has been waiting so long for Naoko to recover so that they can be together, always believing she'd soon be ready for him. Now, though, he's starting to realize that Naoko's problems run deeper than either of them knew—and that he may have been waiting for her in vain all this time, perhaps even exacerbating her condition by pressuring her to get well.



Toru has clearly learned a big lesson about communication and openness. As Midori approaches him after many months of silence, she puts him up to a kind of test to see if he'll flatter her and express his feelings for her. He passes with flying colors, earning himself yet one more chance with Midori.



Midori and Toru go to a department store to eat a special bento lunch—Midori complains that when she was a child, her parents never took her to department stores. After eating, they head up to the roof in spite of the fact that it's raining. On the roof they walk around beneath their umbrellas, and Midori asks Toru to explain what's been going on with him the last several months. Toru explains that he's been sad and foggy, but that his sadness has been even worse without Midori. Midori says she's missed Toru like crazy—she grew angry with him, she says, when she realized that he was spending all his time thinking about another girl.

Midori tells Toru that she broke up with her boyfriend after he gave her an ultimatum—him or Toru—on the last day she saw Toru. Toru asks why Midori would have chosen him, and Midori, calling Toru an idiot, tells him that she's in love with him. Toru admits that he loves Midori, too, but can't "make a move" because of another girl. Midori asks Toru if his girlfriend loves him, and Toru is forced to admit that he really doesn't know.

Midori tells Toru that she is a "real, live girl" who loves him and would do anything for him. She warns Toru that if he doesn't want to be with her, she won't wait for him—and if he does, she expects him to be with her and her alone. Toru drops his umbrella, embraces Midori, and kisses her. After they break apart, he invites her back to his place.

Back at Toru's cottage, Toru and Midori take turns showering and changing into dry clothes. They drink coffee and talk, and Midori asks Toru if there's anything about her he wishes he could change. He tells her there isn't a thing. They get into bed together, kiss, and talk some more about everything and nothing. Eventually Midori says she wants to have sex with Toru, but knows he probably wants to wait until his other situation is sorted out. Toru says that while he also wants to sleep with Midori, it "wouldn't be right" just yet. Midori takes off her underwear and tells Toru to masturbate into them, and he does.

That evening, Midori goes grocery shopping and cooks dinner for the two of them. After they eat dinner Midori goes home, and Toru thinks about his feelings for her. He acknowledges that he's known he was in love with her for a long time but could never admit it to himself—he has an intense desire for her and wants to be with her but doesn't know how to abandon Naoko. He decides to write to Reiko for advice. In his letter, he tells her about the recent developments in his relationship with Midori, comparing his "quiet and gentle" love for Naoko to his "throbbing and shaking" love for Midori. He begs Reiko to tell him what to do.

Even after all Toru has put her through, Midori is still able to be open and honest with Toru about every aspect of her life—her childhood, her present, and her complicated, multifaceted feelings. Toru's ability to open up in this passage shows that Midori is having an effect on him and helping him to embody some of her honesty and fearlessness when it comes to emotions.



Midori is willing to put it all on the line for Toru and choose him over everyone—but Toru can't quite do the same for Midori yet. In trying to be fair to both her and Naoko, he's really just doing them both—as well as himself—a huge disservice.



Midori's plea to Toru begs him to recognize that in waiting around for Naoko, he's lingering in the realm of death. Midori knows how vibrant and lively she is and how greatly she could improve Toru's life, if only he would let her.



Toru begins opening up to Midori and exploring what it would mean to be physically, sexually, and emotionally vulnerable with her. He doesn't want to hurt her—but his desire to protect, nourish, and love both her and Naoko is an impossible one.



This passage shows that Toru isn't really the aloof, disaffected, emotionally unintelligent man he pretends to be. He's actually very in touch with his feelings—he's just profoundly afraid of them. In writing to Reiko for advice he's demonstrating openness and vulnerability—he's just not really expressing those characteristics to the right person (or people) yet.



Several days later, Reiko writes back and says that Naoko has improved greatly in her new facility—the two of them spoke on the phone just the other day, and Naoko is already looking forward to coming back to the Ami Hostel soon. Reiko says that her advice to Toru is simple: he needs to give himself over to his feelings for Midori and see where things go, but spare Naoko the pain of telling her about any of it. Toru, Reiko says, is “a great source of strength” for Naoko, and she’s too fragile right now for that to be disturbed. Reiko says she understands Toru’s attraction to Midori, and that he can’t put his life on hold for fear of hurting other people. She closes her letter by expressing her hope that one day, she will be able to play her guitar for both Toru and Naoko again.

Reiko is Naoko’s friend and roommate, but she has become close with Toru, too. As a result, while she may have a strong sense of loyalty to Naoko, she doesn’t discourage Toru from following his own heart, even if doing so means potentially hurting Naoko. Reiko has really committed to honesty and truth in her life.



CHAPTER 11

In August, Naoko dies. Reiko writes to Toru several times, expressing her grief and urging him not to blame himself. Toru, however, is unable to answer her letters. He attends Naoko’s funeral in Kobe, but, upon his return to Tokyo, decides he needs to leave the city. He spends several days going back and forth from the movies, seeing everything new, and writes letters to his landlord, his employer, and Midori, telling them all he’ll be away for a while. He begs Midori to wait for him, though he doesn’t explain what has happened or where he’s going. After withdrawing all his money from the bank, Toru goes to the Shinjuku Station and takes the first train out of town.

Naoko’s abrupt death comes on the heels of a letter which seemed to describe her profound improvement, suggesting that Reiko was perhaps lying to Toru in her last letter in hopes of encouraging to take charge of his own life without worrying about the increasingly unstable Naoko. Naoko’s death catches Toru completely off-guard and guts him to his core. He feels the only way he can cope is by removing himself from society entirely to give all his energy to his grief.



Toru’s travels take him all over the country, but he has no real sense of where he is or where he’s going at any given time. He barely pays attention to the names of the towns and villages he passes through as he takes buses or hitchhikes all over. He bathes and shaves rarely and mostly sleeps outdoors in a sleeping bag. One day, he calls Midori, but when he refuses to tell her where he is or what he’s doing, she hangs up on him. Toru cannot bring himself to accept the truth of Naoko’s death, and finds himself haunted by images of her each and every night. Occasionally, he has visions of Naoko telling him how nice, peaceful, and easy death is.

Toru has spent so many years grieving Kizuki’s loss and failing to fully participate in his own life that now, as he sinks to new depths, he finds himself almost numb to the siren call of death. His visions of Naoko are upsetting and disturbing, and yet Toru resists the idea that he could actually join her in the realm of death—perhaps because of his lingering feelings for Midori, palpable and strong in spite of her anger towards him.



One evening, Toru is crying on the beach when a kindly fisherman approaches him and asks what’s wrong. Toru answers without thinking that his mother has died. The fisherman empathizes with Toru’s grief, stating that he, too, has recently lost his mother. Toru accepts a cigarette, some food, and even money from the fisherman. But as the man walks away, Toru is overcome with pain and self-loathing. He realizes he needs to return to Tokyo, so he pulls himself together, gathers his things, and walks to the nearest railway station. At the station he buys a newspaper and, upon seeing the date—October 2nd, 1970—realizes he has been traveling for an entire month.

Toru has allowed himself to indulge his grief over Naoko and sink to the lowest depths he’s ever hit. After seeing another person, however, living on and being generous in spite of their grief, Toru realizes he needs to stop toiling in the half-life he’s created for himself and return to the world of the living.



Toru is slightly depressed to realize that he is returning to Tokyo in much the same state as when he left: grieving Naoko, longing for Midori, but afraid to abandon either girl. Toru returns to his cottage but doesn't leave the house for several days. In his depressed, wild state, he finds himself having conversations with Kizuki, congratulating his old friend on "finally [making] Naoko [his.]" Kizuki and Naoko, Toru realizes, have both succeeded in dragging him "into the world of the dead."

On his fourth day back in Tokyo, Toru receives a letter from Reiko—she says she hasn't been able to get in touch with him and is concerned for his well-being. That night, Toru calls Reiko at the Ami Hostel and tells her he's all right. Reiko asks if she can come visit Toru the day after tomorrow—she is leaving the Ami Hostel, having decided it is finally time for her to move on. Toru is shocked, but happily agrees to meet her at Tokyo Station the day after tomorrow.

Two days later, Toru arrives at Tokyo Station to meet Reiko and spots her in the crowd almost immediately. He's comforted by her familiar, wrinkly smile, and is happy to see that she has her guitar with her. On the way back to Toru's neighborhood, Reiko confesses that she's terrified of being out in the world and has no idea what to do. Toru assures her that she'll be fine—her strength has taken her this far. Reiko admits that her strength isn't what got her out of the Ami Hostel; if Naoko hadn't died, she says, she probably would have stayed forever.

Toru asks Reiko what she's planning on doing, and she tells him she's going to Asahikawa, a town "way up in the wilds" of Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost island. She is going to teach at her friend's music school, and while she's relieved to have a job, she's not particularly excited about the location. Toru says he's been to Asahikawa—it's "got its own special atmosphere." Reiko asks Toru if he'll come visit her there, and he says he will. Reiko asks if she can stay with Toru for a few days, and he says she's more than welcome. He promises he'll do anything he can to help Reiko readjust to the world.

On the walk from the station to Toru's cottage, he feels a familiar sensation walking beside Reiko. After several blocks, he realizes that walking with her feels just like walking the streets with Naoko used to feel. As they stroll Toru senses a hint of autumn on the breeze and realizes fall has arrived, "increasing the distance between [him] and the dead" even further.

Even though Toru is back in the "real" world, there's a part of him that still feels he'll never truly escape Naoko and Kizuki's pull on him. He's gotten back to reality and stopped grieving so intensely but can't shake the feeling that the losses he's endured are still changing him in ways he can't yet see or know.



Toru is surprised by Reiko's sudden decision to leave the Ami Hostel after so many years but is ready and happy to support his friend in any way he can. While Naoko didn't make it through the "woods" of her grief, Reiko at last has—and that makes Toru relieved and glad.



Toru is proud of Reiko finally getting out of her comfort zone and leaving the Ami Hostel—but she insists that Naoko's death, traumatic and final as it was, is what spurred her to leave. Without the reality check of losing Naoko, Reiko admits, she might never have left. This speaks to how deep the bond between the two women truly was and shows that it is possible to cope with grief in a healthy and proactive way.



According to Japanese lore, Asahikawa, located in the far north, represents a kind of gate between the real world and the spirit world. As Toru and Reiko discuss this place, then, their seemingly benign conversation becomes tinged with deeper meaning. Reiko is bound for a place that represents death and the afterlife, which could suggest that she, like Naoko, is drawn in by the release of death. Toru's having "visited" there, too, may have either practical or more metaphysical roots.



Toru feels both closer to and more distant from Naoko than he's felt in a long time. He's haunted by nostalgia for her and memories of her, yet at the same time, realizes that life is carrying him onwards and away from her with each passing day.



Toru and Reiko arrive at his cottage, and Reiko goes to visit Toru's landlord to bring him a box of sweets and introduce herself—she wants to be a good guest. After visiting with the landlord, Reiko returns and joins Toru on the porch. She lights a cigarette and tunes Toru's guitar, then asks him if he likes her blouse. He says he does, and Reiko reveals that it's Naoko's. The two of them were the same size and often traded clothes. In fact, the only "suicide note" Naoko left, Reiko says, consisted of one line scribbled on a pad: "Please give all my clothes to Reiko."

Reiko asks if Toru wants to hear about the end of Naoko's life, and Toru asks her to tell him "everything." Reiko reveals that after her last letter about Naoko, in which she told Toru that Naoko seemed to be improving, Naoko's mother called Reiko to ask if Naoko could come for a visit at the Ami Hostel to pack up her things. Reiko agreed, and the next day, Naoko arrived. Reiko was pleased to see that Naoko looked healthy and was able to smile, joke, and laugh. Naoko seemed to have a real desire to get well, and even expressed interest in living with Reiko in the "real world."

Reiko helped Naoko sort through and pack up her things and found it odd when Naoko decided to burn her diary and letters, but figured it was a part of Naoko's decision to move on and get well. After dinner, Reiko played Naoko all her favorite Beatles songs, and then Naoko began to describe, unprompted and in great detail, the night she and Toru had sex on her 20th birthday. Naoko described her and Toru's lovemaking in reverent terms—but at the end of the story, admitted she feared she'd never be able to have sex again for fear of letting another person "violate" her, then broke down in tears. Reiko helped Naoko calm down, bathe, and get into bed, and the two of them went to sleep.

In the morning, Reiko says, she woke to find that Naoko was gone and had taken a flashlight with her. Reiko found Naoko's sparse note and then gathered a group together to search for her in the woods surrounding the dormitories. After five hours, the search group found Naoko—she had hung herself in the **forest** using a piece of rope she'd brought to the hostel.

The idea that Naoko left all of her clothes to Reiko—and that Reiko is happily wearing them—creates a physical and indeed emotional semblance between them, one which no doubt both intrigues and confuses Toru. The act of Naoko giving her clothes to Reiko also has a darker spiritual connotation, and some readings of the book suggest that the symbolic transfer of clothes speaks to Naoko's having spiritually or even physically possessed Reiko as her last act on Earth.



Reiko's recollection of the last few days of Naoko's life is tinged with hope and happiness, showing that either her nostalgia has altered her memories of Naoko, or that Naoko was purposefully affecting brightness and levity to distract from her real plan.



This passage suggests that Naoko's grief over the many deaths she witnessed in her life were the sole cause of her own suicide. Her fears of sex and intimacy were profound and debilitating, and the fear that she wouldn't be able to perform sexually (or emotionally) ever again led her to see sex as a burden and a violation. At the same time, Naoko felt pressure to accept sex as a part of life—unable to reconcile the idea that she'd have to submit to something that caused her so much pain and uncertainty, she took her own life.



Naoko ultimately took her own life by hanging herself in the forest outside the Ami Hostel, cementing the symbol of woods and forests as realms of despair and death.



Reiko requests a special dish, sukiyaki, for dinner, and goes with Toru to the store to buy all the ingredients. She helps him prepare dinner, then plays guitar while it cooks. Toru asks her if she's planning to see her family before heading north, but Reiko insists she isn't—she's "all through as a human being," and the important parts of her are dead. Toru, unsure of what to say, tells Reiko she looks nice in Naoko's clothes.

Some Murakami fans and scholars have suggested that there is a reading of the final chapter which allows for the possibility that Reiko is, during her visit to Tokyo, either on her way to her own death, dead already, or possessed by the spirit of Naoko. The way she speaks about herself here, as if she's already half-dead, lends credence to that reading—but also, on a practical level, shows just how exhausted Reiko is after years of trying to outrun her past and herself.



After dinner, Reiko asks Toru about Midori. Toru tells her that he loves Midori but can't stop feeling as if being with her would be a betrayal of Naoko. He and Naoko were together so long "at the border between life and death," bound by Kizuki's loss. Toru feels he turned his back on Naoko when she needed him but can't help wondering if Naoko would always have chosen death. Reiko warns Toru that if he hurts Midori again, the wound he creates may be too deep to fix.

Toru has spent so many years mourning Kizuki, and now seems poised on the brink of doing the same with Naoko. Reiko warns him against putting his life on pause to mourn the dead, however, and suggests that if he falls into grief's trap, he may lose out on a chance at true happiness.



After a visit to the public baths, Reiko and Toru return home and decide to have their own little funeral for Naoko. Out on the verandah they pour wine and light matches. Reiko takes out her guitar, announcing her intention to play every song she knows. Reiko plays a ton of Beatles songs as well as some classical music and jazz standards. Toru and Reiko continue drinking as Reiko plays over 40 songs. For her final song, number 50, she decides to play Naoko's favorite, "Norwegian Wood." When she's done, Reiko puts her guitar down and asks Toru if he wants to have sex.

Reiko and Toru's makeshift funeral for Naoko shows how much they both truly loved her—and that neither of them wants to forget her. Reiko plays Naoko's favorite song, "Norwegian Wood," several different times, turning the tune—a darkly nostalgic one—into something celebratory. Woods and forests have been a symbol of death throughout the novel, but as Reiko strums the song, they recur here as a sweet ode.



Toru and Reiko head inside and begin making love. Toru feels that sleeping with Reiko is "the most natural thing in the world." They have sex four times, talking and laughing through each round of lovemaking. At the end of the night, Reiko asks Toru to tell her she's "done enough to last a lifetime," but Toru tells her that there's no way of knowing that.

Reiko and Toru share intimacy and ecstasy—but at the end of their lovemaking, Reiko essentially asks Toru to release her from the idea that she'll have to be intimate ever again. This sentiment echoes Naoko's own sexual anxieties, calling into question whether Reiko is, perhaps, possessed by the spirit of Naoko—or has simply absorbed Naoko's own neuroses. Either way, it's clear that Reiko is still afraid of getting hurt even after baring her body and soul to another person after so many years. Toru can't promise her she'll never be hurt again, but also doesn't seem to believe that intimacy equals pain anymore.



The next day, Toru walks Reiko to Ueno Station so that she can take a long train ride to Asahikawa. He promises to visit her soon and write to her in the meantime. Reiko tells him that she's scared, but he assures her that she'll be more than fine. Reiko begins crying and promises Toru she'll always remember him and Naoko fondly. Toru kisses her, aware that people around them are staring but impervious to their glares. The two of them are alive, he reasons—they must make use of that fact.

After saying goodbye to Reiko, Toru calls Midori from a pay phone. He tells her he needs to talk to her right away—there are “a million things” for them to discuss, but all he wants in the entire world, he says, is Midori. Midori is silent for a very long time before asking Toru where he is. Toru ponders the question. He has no idea where he is, and as he looks around at the “shapes of people walking by to nowhere,” he calls out for Midori from the “place that [is] no place.”

Again, Asahikawa is a place with spiritual and metaphysical connotations in Japanese lore. Given the fact that Reiko is apprehensive about traveling there, more metaphorical or avant-garde interpretations of this moment suggest that Reiko has no job lined up and is planning on taking her own life—or, again, that she's even the spirit of Naoko in disguise, heading off to rest after fulfilling her wish to have one last encounter with Toru.



The novel's chaotic ending scene shows Toru at last making a concrete decision and steering his life in a certain direction. As he does so, however, the fear—or perhaps exhilaration—of doing so is so overwhelming that he seems to dissociate or lose track of his surroundings. Toru still seems uncertain of his place in the world, unmoored from those around him, and frightened of being alone—but there's also a glimmer of hope for him, symbolized by his decision to call out for Midori rather than suffer alone.





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