How a Japanese Novelist Guided Me to My Soul’s Depths in Wartime



A couple of weeks into the Israel-Hamas War, I dreamed that my army base was a building with endless mazes of stairs and hallways. Flustered and lost, I opened door after door, trying to find my room, only to find unfamiliar faces. I eventually opened the correct door and saw my bag’s contents of uniforms and books scattered across the floor. I broke down crying.

“All of this feels like some weird and surreal dream,” I wrote in my journal the next day. “The world is turning upside down, imploding and exploding. And here I am, deep in the madness, in the apple of its eye.”

My first five months of reserve duty were filled with dreams: confusing dreams, painful dreams, dreadful dreams. More than once, I dreamed of the American-Israeli hostage Hersh Goldberg-Polin. These dreams tormented me at night, but I was strangely grateful for them, even the ones I could not remember.

I often felt lost and overwhelmed in reserve duty, like I was teetering along a pitless abyss. October 7 was my first time called up to reserve duty, and it came without any warning. During those first few weeks, it often felt hard to breathe; there was nowhere I could go to think, let alone cry. It did not help that we barely had any cell service and still could not comprehend Hamas' attack and what would become of Israel. All I knew was in front of me: a daily patrol schedule and a cramped, smelly room. But when exhaustion overcame me in between my shifts on guard duty, my eyes would flutter shut, and I would hear a voice within me continuing to whisper dreams that whisked me away from my reality of war. They never made sense. Sometimes I was scared, fleeing for my life; other times I was amused, and happy; or, even hopeful. I embraced the solace in the escape.

In my waking hours, I found other means of respite: the fiction of Japanese author, Haruki Murakami.

I was first introduced to Murakami when my mom gifted me *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*. As a distance runner myself, I felt a connection to this author, and reading this memoir (which I did a number of times) introduced me to Murakami the man. Only a number of years later did I meet his fiction when, to my luck, I picked up two of his novels at local lending libraries. It did not take long before his writing hooked me.

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From the first pages, I could feel the nonchalance of Murakami's language, thanks to his wonderful translators (specifically Jay Rubin and Philip Gabriel). His books, which distinctively blend Western cultural references with Japanese settings, read so casually, emphasizing authenticity. This was contrasted by Murakami's unique magical realism, where the magical organically grows from the realistic world he creates, making even the absurd seem natural. All of this sets the scene for his characters. They are often loners in search of something to fill the void in their lives.

I needed that escape during reserve duty.

Devouring Murakami's books transported me into his world where reality meets the magical and the absurd. There, certain people can speak to cats, the bottom of an empty well is a gateway to the "other side," and a late night ride on a Ferris wheel can split a person in two. His stories confused and captivated me, taking me on nonsensical adventures far away from the here and now, as if I was in a waking dream. Like his protagonists, I was in search of something, anything, to fill this void. Reading his novels seemed to show me the way.

Murakami's fiction and my own reality soon started to intertwine. His literary motifs, which suddenly began appearing in my life, gave me access to his world of magical realism. I greeted cats as they passed me by, in hope of a response; I peered down ancient wells, imagining myself climbing down into other realms; I spotted Ferris wheels on my way to base, wondering if I might split into two.

Sometimes I imagined myself riding atop those Ferris wheels, watching another me down below. From that new vantage point, I could see into my self's broken heart, mired in frustration and hopelessness. My heart broke looking at him, seeing his emotions and dreams buried deep inside him. "Let it out!" I would want to shout, but in his eyes I could see his despair, feeling as though he was just a cog in the machine.

Those moments of reverie blurred the boundaries of my reality. Looking around me, nothing made sense—not in my real life, not in my dreams, and not in Murakami's world. Somehow, all of that was okay. It was okay to be confused and bewildered, okay that everything was so absurd.

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This revelation often left me distraught. What difference would a change in perspective actually make? I still did not understand how I could dare to confront the senselessness all around me.

My first step was to realize my utter lack of control. I could not choose the time or place, nor the people I faced. Nevertheless, unlike in my dreams and between the pages of novels, I could not simply surrender to the madness with a willing suspension of disbelief in this warped reality I was living. Instead, I had to embrace my role in this ongoing story. While so much was out of my control, only I had the agency to give my life meaning.

In searching for this meaning, I decided to perceive this surreality through the lens of Murakami's magical realism. It allowed me to approach the most frustrating and menial tasks with a renewed sense of purpose. As often happens in Murakami's novels, it is unclear where actuality ends and imagination begins. It is between these blurred lines that one begins to confront reality. In an attempt to untangle its complexity, one arrives at the soul.

This was the very soul I could hear whispering to me on those dark and lonely nights, the soul that dreamed nonsensical dreams and elicited deep, hidden emotions. I realized then that, amidst the ever-present danger that had become of my life, I had forgotten my soul after so many nights stationed beneath the open sky. Yet, my soul had not forgotten me. Even when I was overcome with despair, my soul continued murmuring from the depths. Feeling these stirrings, I closed my eyes and stepped into this trance.

In the haze of my very being, where actuality meets imagination, I discovered my soul's abode. All of my emotions were tangled up like a ball of yarn, and my soul labored to untangle it. Seeing it all up close, I could not hide from the emotions that overwhelmed me. Fear, hopelessness, rage—I had to confront them, meet them face to face. I watched as my soul combed through these feelings and memories, masterfully capturing the complexities. Handing me the work-in-progress, my soul invited me to take a peek. At first I was afraid. Did I have the courage to face this truth? My soul held me close, and in that moment I was comforted knowing that even the roots of my deepest pain were essential to my being. All of it made me, me.

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Waking up, I realized that the story that is my life does not need to be sensical nor linear. It can be absurd, surreal, or even magical. I can choose to speak to animals, cross over to different realms, or even split my soul in two. The very fact that I cannot control so much is its own kind of magic. With untold characters, events, and emotions in life, the questions become: Why has this thing or person entered my life, and how will I include it in my story? So much in this life is uncertain and unknown, frightening, and painful. Rather than accepting it airily or allowing myself to detach, I learned to embrace it.

About a year and a half has passed since I dreamed of desperately roaming the labyrinth of my army base. Yet, often I feel as though I am still there, searching those hallways. While I am ever grateful for my time at home and for the blessings in my life, not a day goes by when my heart does not break from the pain of this mad, mad world. Rather than search for an escape, I step into the reality where pain meets joy and despair meets hope. In this world where magic and madness coexist, I have learned that my soul's resilience is the greatest wonder of all—a truth more profound than any dream Murakami could write or any war could shatter.

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