

My Neighbor Totoro, Chapter 1
The New Old House

The little blue three-wheeled truck drove along a country road. Dad, spectacle-clad and wearing his signature white hat, sings happily in the front seat, "May and May, riding along in May!" Uncle Fujiyama sat in the driver's seat next to Dad and stared straight ahead with both hands on the steering wheel.

"Onward!", he chimed in.

Satsuki leaned out from the back of the truck, her face shining in the sun.

"Dad, you and Uncle Fujiyama should have some caramels!"

She gave him two pieces of caramel wrapped in paper.

"Oh, that's very thoughtful of you!"

The trike putted merrily along in the shining sun under the big dome of a blue sky, past wheat fields that looked like a green ocean that went on for as far as the eye could see.

Puttputtputt! Ratatat tat! Bang!

The truck was shaking back and forth so much that Satsuki was afraid the caramels would fly right out of her mouth.

"Un-cle Fu-fu-ji-ji-yama!"

"How's it going back there?" he shouted over the loud engine.

"H-h-how much farther? Sorry, everything is shaking!"

"It is a country road, after all!"

"How m-much farther is i-it?"

Dad laughed, "You better hold on! We don't want you falling out!"

"I-I'm f-fine!"

"It's about 15 minutes to the bus stop near the house," Uncle Fujiyama chimed in.

Dad wiped the dust off his glasses with his shirt. "We should be there in about twenty minutes."

"Yay!", Satsuki cheered. She ducked back down under the writing desk where her little sister Mei was hiding on the floor of the truck. Dad and Uncle Fujiyama started up their singing again.

"May and May in May..."

"Onward!"

Dad and Uncle Fujiyama were archaeologists together and had been close friends since high school. They went with each other on digs and even wrote reports together. When one of them needed help, the other would pitch in without a single complaint.

Yasuko, Satsuki and Mei's mother, had fallen ill with tuberculosis a year ago, and was now at the hospital to recover. When the time came for her to go to the hospital, Uncle Fujiyama himself took her there.

Now, the rest of the family was moving to a new house close to the hospital; Satsuki was very happy about that.

The doctor said that Yasuko could leave soon and get better at home, so they were moving to Matsunogo, a village close by the hospital.

Satsuki was so happy she couldn't contain herself. As always, Uncle Fujiyama came to lend a hand. He's not a very good singer, though, so instead of singing along with Dad, he'd just shout "Onward!"

It was a Saturday morning in May, and Summer was right around the corner.

Satsuki couldn't believe how big and blue the sky was, but the road was rough and bumpy and kept going on forever. The breeze brushed by the wheat, and the sun glinted off the gold and green stalks. The trike, piled high with all their furniture and belongings, rambled down the road as the wind blew around them.

"May and May, in May!"

"Onward!"

In Japanese, the traditional word for "May" was "Satsuki", so Dad's song was a bit of a funny play on words. Dad also named Mei after the month of May, so May and Mei were moving to a new home in May!

"Onward!", shouted Mei as she tried her best to unwrap a piece of sticky caramel. The space under Dad's writing desk was plenty big enough for her to hide under. It didn't matter that the trike was rumbling and bumbling down the road; Satsuki had tucked some pillows and cushions around her to make it even more comfortable.

"I'll open it for you, Mei, hand me the caramel," Satsuki offered.

"It's okay."

"You can't do it yourself!"

"I'm okay!"

"It's way too shaky back here."

"I'm okay," said Mei. "Everything is okay!" She popped the caramel in her mouth with the paper still stuck to it and chewed.

"I bet that tastes terrible!"

"I'm okay. It tastes fine!"

Mei was small and thin. She almost looked as if she wasn't eating enough. She wore her hair in pigtails on either side of her head. Her hair stuck out behind her ears in such a way that really made her head stand out. Her eyes, though thoughtful, weren't quite as big as Satsuki's. Mei's nose is round, and her teeth are a little crooked – not white and straight like Satsuki's – but she was still strangely cute. When she smiles, her lips curl up slightly, her cheeks poke out, and her dark eyes sparkle brightly.

"I could've peeled it clean for you, Mei."

"Everything is okay!"

The sisters' mother had been in the hospital for an entire year. Satsuki is seven years older than Mei. She reads a lot, and was stronger and faster than any other kid in the neighborhood.

"I peel the cama-mell by myself! I'm already a big girl!", Mei proclaimed.

Even though she was only four years old, Mei was determined to be just like her big sister.

"Hide, Mei! Keep your head down!", Satsuki suddenly shouted.

Mei, startled, ducked her head under the writing desk. "What happened? What's wrong?", Mei asked.

"A policeman!", Satsuki replied.

"Oh no, police!" Mei squeezed her eyes shut tight.

Clang-clang! Ratatat-tat! The truck continued down the country road as loud as ever.

"Satsuki...", Mei whispered, unable to bear the suspense.

"Shhhh!", Satsuki responded.

"What if he catches us?!"

“Shut up!”

Ratatat-a-tat, puttputt! The truck rambled down the country road without showing any signs of slowing down.

“Please God,” Mei whispered to herself. “Please, Daddy. Please, Mommy, Satsuki. Help me, please don’t let them put me in jail!”

Satsuki suddenly poked her head out of the truck and started waving.

“No, Satsuki! What are you doing?!” Mei pleaded.

“Look, Mei! It’s not a policeman, it’s a postman!”

Mei and Satsuki sighed a breath of relief as the postman waved back.

Mei leaned out of the truck as well. “Look, a cemetery!”

“Where? Where? Look, Mei, a big crow!”

All of a sudden, Mei became serious again. “Satsuki, if that was a policeman, would we have had to go to jail?”

“I don’t know, maybe we’d just have to pay a fine or something.”

Before they left, Aunt Kyoko had told their father that the amount of furniture and luggage bulging out of the back of the truck would be enough to get them fined.

All of their bedding, a kitchen cupboard and round dining table, a bicycle, a big bench, the pots and a kettle, tea, food, their umbrellas, the laundry bin, hundreds of books, documents, Dad’s archaeological tools, alongside Dad’s writing desk and the two little girls hiding out underneath it were stuffed into the back of Uncle Fujiyama’s little truck.

“It’ll be fine, I think”, Dad and Uncle Fujiyama kept repeating to each other as they stuffed the truck full to the brim. Satsuki and Mie’s grandmother even said that the truck looked like a burst pomegranate, it was so full of their belongings. Their mother had grown up in an old house in Terashima near the heart of Tokyo, with a huge cherry tree rising above the fence. Satuski and Mei lived with their parents on the second floor. Now, they were headed for Matsugo and would no longer be surrounded by relatives.

Satsuki and Mei begged their father to climb into the back of the truck.

“I think you’ll be fine, the front of the truck is full, anyway,” said Uncle Fujiyama. Dad agreed, but Aunt Kyoko did not.

“You put your children in the back of the truck! If you get caught, the police will haul you to jail and make you pay a fine!”

Aunt Kyoko turned to Mei and Satsuki. “Keep an eye out, you two. If you don’t want to get caught and go to jail, you have to hide!”

As she hopped in the back of the truck, Satsuki’s heart was pounding with worry that her aunt might make them get out and drop them off at the train station instead.

Satuski had nothing to fear, though, since dad was a lecturer at the University and wrote long reports with lots of words in them. Compared to Aunt Kyoko, though, he was very quiet. “Don’t worry, they’ll be fine! I packed them in there quite carefully.”

Clang-clang! Rattatat-a-tat-tat!! Puttputtputt!

And with that, the three-wheeled truck was off down the road with Satsuki and Mei in tow.

When Yasuko got sick, Aunt Kyoko had told their father that his wife wouldn’t be in the hospital if he weren’t so careless.

"That's so stupid," Satsuki, who had overheard them talking, thought. "Dad is a good and kind person. Mom got tuberculosis because of bacteria; it wasn't Dad's fault at all. I don't like Aunt Kyoko at all!"

Satsuki leaned her head out of the window and yelled toward her aunt, who had to be far down the road by now. She then threw her head back and laughed as loud as she could.

"Ha-ha! Look at these big, beautiful, beautiful trees!"

The truck continued to shake and sway back and forth down the road. Everything they could see from the back of the truck looked shiny and new. The beautiful things, the dirty things, the interesting things and even the uninteresting things were all fascinating to Satsuki.

"Satsuki, look! A little store!", Mei cried.

"Oh, wow, it's so old and worn down!"

The truck threw up dust behind it as it sped down the road lined with plum trees. It passed a bus stopped in front of an old general store called 'Tsuruya', evident from the signboard on the shop.

Ratatat-tat! Putt-putt!

Dad reached back and slapped the side of the truck. "That's the bus stop!", he said. "We're almost there!"

"Inari Shrine?", Satsuki shouted back. "Is that the name of the stop?"

Satsuki wasn't sure if she read the characters for 'Inari' correctly.

"That's right, Inari Shrine! There's a cute little shrine up ahead."

It didn't look all that cute to Satsuki, though. The red paint was peeling off of the torii gate and the shrine itself was a murky brown and black from years of being exposed to the elements. Dusty cobwebs that look like they've been there for a hundred years hung everywhere.

Satsuki and Mei were anxious to see what their new house would look like as the truck continued bumbling down the road through a shady grove until they emerged into a large, bright clearing.

"Okay, you two!", Dad shouted. "We're here! This is Matsunogo. Don't you think it's beautiful?"

"Wooow!", answered Satsuki.

"Wooow!", Mei answered, exactly like Satsuki.

The sisters didn't say much after that. They leaned out and shyly looked over the fields of Matsunogo from the top of the truck. Beneath the bright white clouds, the purplish-blue sky shimmered, and a line of birds crossed overhead. Small groves of trees were scattered as far as the eye could see between the rice paddies. On the green grass of the footpath, dandelion flowers spread out like tiny little suns. The wind whispered through the fresh, clean air. Now and then, you could hear the soft mooing of a cow in the distance.

The truck continued puttering along, though just a bit slower now.

Dad had asked them if it were a good place to live, but Satsuki and Mei weren't quite sure yet. Everything was so new and different.

"There's nobody here, is there?", Mei asked.

Satsuki pointed to some farmers working in the rice paddies. "There they are, look over there, in the rice paddies!"

"There aren't any kids like us though," Mei replied.

Satsuki decided that she would have to see the school and their new house and a lot of other things before she decided if it was really a good place to live or not.

"There really aren't any kids," Satsuki said.

"Maybe they all went to school," Mei said hesitantly.

"Yeah, that must be where they all went."

Strangely enough, as soon as Satsuki said that the truck suddenly stopped right alongside a little boy. Later, her father told her that his name was Kanta Ogaki, and he was a fourth-year student and that he is the grandson of the lady who was taking care of the house that he had rented. After Dad said hello to the landlord, the truck clattered again down the gravel road that was a bit easier than the dirt road they were on before.

"Dad, are we almost there?"

"Yep, almost there!"

"How many minutes left?"

"Only about two or three more minutes now."

Satsuki watched the little boy get smaller and smaller as they drove on; he was still watching them from the embankment.

"Dad?", Satsuki asked.

"What's up?"

"That boy, he looked like a fourth grader, didn't he?"

"I'm not sure."

"If he's in the fourth grade, he'll be in my class."

"Is that so?"

"Dad, that boy didn't say hello, did he?"

"He's probably just shy."

"Really? But why isn't he in school? It's Saturday."

Uncle Fujiyama kept his gaze straight ahead. "The schools around here are all closed this time of year for rice planting."

"A vacation day just to plant rice? Is that really a thing?"

"It's only for a few days, but it's worth it."

"Alright, we're here!", Dad shouted happily.

A little stone bridge arched over a small stream that ran along the side of the road.

"Is this river our river?", Satsuki asked gleefully.

"I suppose you could think about it like that!", Dad replied.

Satsuki was astonished. "Even the fish, too?!"

The stream rambled alongside the road that led to a stone gate and a narrow pathway that sloped steeply up through the trees.

"Come on, Mei!"

Satsuki ran under the beautiful green ceiling of tree branches that stretched over the pathway.

Dad said she'd find the house when she got to the top of the path.

The house suddenly appeared in front of Satsuki, as if it were floating. It almost seemed like it was sadly shrinking back a little. The house was surrounded by the wild young weeds of early summer. It looked as if it were about to start floating away, like a melancholy sailing vessel that had sailed through too many storms.

Mei caught up with Satsuki before she knew it.

"It's so worn out!", Mei exclaimed.

The house was in disrepair and looked almost as if it were haunted.

"It really is worn out," Satsuki replied.

"Yea, it really is worn out!" Mei shouted back.

Oddly enough, the look of the strange, worn-out house caused them to start laughing as their voices and laughter bounced happily off the walls.

"I like this house!", shouted Satsuki.

"I like this house!", shouted Mei, just like Satsuki.

The house was once painted brown, but the paint had weathered to grey from the rain and wind. The tattered red tin roof was dilapidated and pockmarked with rust. The shutters were shut tight, and the windows were frosted with dust. The more the girls looked at it, the shabbier and shabbier the house seemed.

The girls walked around to the south side of the house into the garden and found an old wisteria trellis. The trellis was completely rotted and eaten away by insects and looked like it might collapse any second.

Satsuki gave the trellis a good shake. The trellis swayed and a deluge of paint flakes fell from the lattice.

"Oh no, the paint is coming off!"

"Satsuki, this looks like its going to come down!"

Mei, always eager to imitate Satsuki, pushed the pillar with her small hands. Not only paint rained down on their heads this time, but small wood chips came with it.

The two of them ran away laughing and began searching the garden.

The garden was a surprise, too. It was unlike any well-kept garden because it had been neglected for such a long time. They could hear frogs chirping in the grass. The remnants of a small pond could be seen surrounded by stones in the corner of the garden. The wind swayed purple irises growing among the weeds and zinnias so red they looked almost poisonous.

"I bet ghosts come out here to play," said Satsuki, and she did a somersault in the grass.

She looked up to see a monstrous tree towering over her, swaying heavily in the wind like the wings of a giant bird.

Satsuki was very impressed by the massive tree. "Mei, look at that tree! It's huge, isn't it?"

"Ahhhh," Mei couldn't hold it in anymore. "Choo!!!"

Mei had been looking up at the big, blue sky for so long that her nose started to itch.

As Satsuki and Mei stood looking at the tree, their father started opening the shutters from inside the house.

"Look, Dad! There's a tree that looks like a ghost!"

"Ahh, that's the Tsukamori camphor laurel tree."

"Tsukamori?"

"Yep, that's the name of the woods."

"So it's a camphor laurel tree?"

"That's right!"

"That's an amazing tree, Dad."

"I think it's about 30 meters tall."

"It looks like a ghost, doesn't it?"

"That's right. Well, it's kind of a ghost in a way. That tree has lived for hundreds of years."

"Cam-phor Lor-rel." Mei was sounding out the name of the tree as best as she could. "Cam-phor Lor-rel!"

Satsuki turned toward the tree, put her hands together, and bowed properly.

"Hello, Mr. Camphor Laurel! My name is Satsuki Kusakabe, and my family will be taking shelter in this house. I am in the fourth grade, and I am a cute, energetic child. Please be kind to me!"

Satsuki and Mei turned and ran to their father who was still opening the shutters.

Satsuki leaned halfway into the hallway and peered into the house for the first time with her sneakers still on. With each shutter Dad opened, the musty room got brighter and brighter.

"Hmmm..." something on the floor caught Satsuki's eye.

"What happened?" Mei asked.

"I'm not sure, I saw something shining."

Satsuki stepped into the house and scuttled across the floor on her knees; her father always scolds her for leaving her shoes on in the house.

"There! I got it!"

"What did you got?!"

"It's just an acorn."

"Wow, that's nice!"

Satsuki found another cute, round acorn that glowed green near the opening of the tatami room and showed it to her dad.

"Green acorns in May? That's odd. Acorns are supposed to be brown at this time of the year."

Dad was about to say more, but Uncle Fujiyama shouted from the yard.

"Hey, Kusakabe! Where do you want me to put this?" Uncle Fujiyama was holding a heavy gramophone in both arms.

"Sorry, sorry! Just a second and I'll open the door to the house!"

Mei tugged at Satsuki's skirt.

"Hey, what's wrong?", Satsuki asked.

Mei folded her slender hands covered in small scabs and held them in front of Satsuki's eyes.

"I got an acorn, too."

"Satsuki!", Dad shouted. "Open the back door with this key!"

"Okay!"

"I'm coming, too!"

As they walked around the house toward the back door, Mei mentioned that the acorn she picked up had fallen from above.

"My acorn is green and shiny, too!"

"It came from the ceiling?"

"Yeah!"

"That's odd, isn't it? There shouldn't be anyone in the house at all. Are you sure it wasn't Dad?"

"No, he was in the garden."

Who gave Satsuki and Mei the green acorns? Dad thought that acorns should be brown this time of year. Satsuki looked at the acorn in her hand – it was still glowing green.

"Is there something hiding in the house?", Satsuki wondered. "It could be a mouse or a squirrel... or even a ghost! Hmm, no way!"

But Satsuki remembered feeling something staring at them and watching them when they first went into the house. Maybe the walls of the house were staring at them, or an eyeball somewhere in the sky! Or maybe the mint or pampas grass growing outside, looking at them and watching them.

Satsuki giggled and said, "Is there anyone in there?" She knocked on the side of the house.

Of course, the house didn't reply.

The sun gleamed down from the empty sky and bathed Satsuki and Mei in light. Somewhere in the distance, they could hear the sound of a Tokyo Electric Railway train passing by.

Mei grabbed Satsuki by the hand, which was rare indeed.

"What would you do if there were ghosts here?", Mei asked.

Satsuki thought that Mei might be scared, but instead Mei seemed to be giggling with amusement. Satsuki let go of Mei's hand and unlocked the back door.

"I would ask them what they're doing!"

As soon as Satsuki opened the door, the entire kitchen began to shake. The kitchen was full of fluffy, moving things that were blacker than poppies.

Due to the sudden darkness, Satsuki couldn't see much of anything. The whole room seemed to writhe and twist in front of her. In an instant, the pitch-black kitchen turned into an ordinary, grey and dreary kitchen. The fuzzy things – a cloud of dust or maybe a swarm of bugs - had all gone away and left a stunned Satuski behind.

Satsuki glanced around the kitchen and then looked at Mei.

Mei's eyes were so wide she couldn't blink. She must have seen them, too!

When Satsuki saw the state of Mei's face, she started giggling and pinched her lightly on the nose.

"Ghosts!" Mei pushed Satsuki's hand away. "This house has ghosts!"

"Are you sure? Maybe it's just bugs or something."

"No, that was ghosts! Is it okay if I catch them?"

"Why not? They're ours," Satsuki shrugged.

"Alright, Satsuki, let's scare them out by yelling as loud as we can!"

The sisters rushed into the kitchen screaming at the top of their lungs. They threw open every door and even searched in the small bath in the bathroom next to the kitchen and they didn't find a single thing. It was as if the weird black fluffy things had never existed at all. No matter how much they searched, the space between the floorboards were all empty.

"That's very strange," Satsuki said. Where did they all go? Or were my eyes just playing tricks on me?

"Come out, ghosts! Come out!" Mei was still searching for them. "Please? I just need one of you. Please come out!"

"Soot sprites, that's what they are!"

Satsuki and Mei were telling their father about what happened when they heard a troubled voice from the tea room.

"Soot sprites?" Satsuki couldn't help but look toward the voice.

"They all ran away in a panic, didn't they?"

"This is Mr. Ogaki's grandmother," Dad said. "She's been taking care of the house."

"Hello, I'm Satsuki Kusakabe!"

"Hello, you can call me Grandma!"

She took the hand towel from her head and folded it up.

"These are two such cute and beautiful girls. You really have good children!"

Satsuki immediately felt drawn to this gentle-looking grandma from the old country.

"Don't pay any mind to the soot sprites, they won't do you any harm." She turned to Dad. "It's too bad, I have rheumatism and can't move around as much as I want. I didn't even know what to do with the house when I got up today. I'm sorry, I'd have had the house dusted and aired out! This old house is a real monster, it's so shabby."

"No, not at all!" Dad said. "I thought it'd be much dustier, it's actually very clean!"

Dad didn't seem to want to pay any more attention to the soot sprites. He hurried back out to the trike to bring in more stuff.

Grandma went into the kitchen to fill a bucket of water and brought it back into the tea room.

She looked at the girls as she wiped down the floor with a wet cloth.

"I heard your mother was sick, so I was almost expecting her daughters would be pale and weak as well. This house was originally built as a vacation home for the sick and was built for the purpose of healing. A long time ago, when I worked as a maid in this house, the original owner's wife had tuberculosis, just like your mother. Her husband built this house because the hospital is not far away, and it's famous for helping people with tuberculosis and because Matsunogo was her favorite place." When Dad visited to ask about renting the house, Granny was doubtful. Her employer had died there, and the house had lain uninhabited for nearly twenty years. The forest overshadowed the house and the garden outside. It was no mystery why the local children thought it was haunted, it looked so harsh and desolate.

"Can I ask you about the soot sprites?", Satsuki inquired. "Are they this big?" Satsuki made a circle about three centimeters in diameter with her hands. "They're round, like balls of dust, and fuzzy like caterpillars, right?"

Grandma stood there for a minute, lost in thought.

"They're quick to run, aren't they? When I saw them, they ran away faster than I could blink."

"They are," Grandma replied.

"Really fast, right?"

"Just like a B-29."

"You mean they can fly?"

"Of course they can, didn't you see them?"

Grandma paced back and forth in the tea room as she talked. Satsuki followed her and carried rice scoops and other knickknacks. Mei also clung to Satsuki's skirt with one hand and sucked her other hand's thumb as they walked back and forth with Grandma. There was something about Grandma that Mei didn't like. She was wrinkly and tanned from the sun; she had a mole over one of her eyes and was much different than Grandmother Terashima.

"The older and older the house grows, the more the soot sprites settle in."

"Do they like old houses?"

"They like old worn-out places with nobody in them."

"Are they ghosts?"

"Well, maybe not ghosts but they are creepy."

"Has anyone ever caught one?"

"I'm not sure."

“Grandma, you’ve seen the soot sprites before, right?”

“I have.”

“That’s why you know about them! When did you see them?”

“It was when I was about the age of the someone-hiding-behind-your-skirt!”

“Where? Did you see them in this house?”

Grandma raised her hands that were as cracked as dry mud and scratched her head full of coarse gray hair.

“At that time, this place was still part of Tsukamori’s bushes and forest.”

Mei couldn’t hold it in any longer. She popped her thumb out of her mouth and said, “So where did you see them?!”

“At my grandma’s grandma’s house.” Grandma looked at Mei and thought she was cute. Then, just as Mei was about to speak, she popped her thumb back in her mouth and hid behind Satsuki again, clutching her skirt.