



# MY NEIGHBOR TOTORO

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The little three-wheeled truck rolled along the country road.

"May and May, riding along in May," Tatsuo sang cheerfully. His white cap was pushed back on his head. "On the way to Happy-Go-Lucky Forest..."

Uncle Fujiyama was planted next to him in the driver's seat. He gripped the steering wheel with both hands, stared straight ahead, and chimed in, "Onward!"

Satsuki leaned out from the flatbed behind the cab. Her face was shining. "Daddy, here's some caramel for you and Uncle." She gave him two pieces of caramel wrapped in paper.

"Oh-ho, that's very thoughtful."

The three-wheeler putted merrily along in the sunshine under the blue dome of the sky, past fields of wheat like an ocean of green that stretched as far as the eye could see.

*Putt-putt. Rattle-bang. Bump-squeak putt-putt.* The truck was jolting and swaying so much, Satsuki was afraid her caramel would leap out of her mouth.

"U-u-u-uncle Fu-Fu-Fujiyama..."

"How are you doing back there?" he yelled over the roar of the engine.

"H-how much f-f-farther is it?"

Tatsuo laughed. "Better hold on, unless you want to fall out!"

"I-I'm fine!"

"About fifteen minutes to the bus stop by the house," said Uncle.

Yasuko, Satsuki and Mei's mother, had contracted Tuberculosis a year ago. Now she was at the sanatorium at Shichikokuyama Hospital. When the time came for her to go, Uncle Fujiyama took her there himself.

Now the rest of the family was moving to a new house. Things were going to be better and Satsuki was very happy.

The doctor had said that Yasuko could leave the sanatorium and get better at home. So they were moving to Matsugo, a village that was so much closer to the hospital.

Satsuki was so happy she was fit to burst. And as always, Uncle Fujiyama came along to lend a hand. He wasn't a very good singer though. All he could say was "Onwards!" He was famous for his terrible singing.

Saturday morning, in the month of May. Summer was just around the corner. The sky was so blue. And so big!

The road was lumpy and bumpy and it kept going on and on!

The breeze caressed the wheat, and the sun flashed off the rippling stalks, gold and green. The three-wheeler, piled high with all their furniture, banged and bumped along the road as the wind blew playfully.

"Onward!" cried Mei, as she worked to peel the wrapper off a piece of caramel. Mei was very small. The leg well under Tatsuo's writing desk was more than big enough for her to hide in. It didn't matter whether the three-wheeler jumped up and down or side to side, she was just fine. Satsuki has carefully piled pillows and cushions around her. This made things even more comfortable.

"I'll do it for you, Mei. Give me the caramel," Satsuki said.

"I'm okay."

"You can't unwrap it yourself."

"I'm okay."

"It's too shaky back there."

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

"I bet that tastes awful," Satsuki remarked.

"I'm okay. It tastes good."

Little Mei was quite thin. One would almost have thought she wasn't getting enough to eat. Her fine hair was gathered in pigtails to either side and stuck out behind her ears, making her look like she was all head. Her eyes were serious and smaller than her sister's. Her nose was round and her baby teeth were gappy, not like Satsuki's straight white teeth. But in a mysterious way, she looked adorable. Her cheeks dimpled and her dark, shining eyes looked at you steadily.

"I could've got that paper off for you, Mei."

"Everything is okey-dokey."

Two sisters, Satsuki and Mei. Their mother had been in hospital for a whole year. Satsuki was seven years older than Mei. She loved to read, and she could run faster than anyone at school. Everybody agreed that when it came to a fight, Satsuki Kasukabe could hold her own against any kid in the neighbourhood.

"I can take the paper off the cama-mel myself. I'm a big girl now." Though she was only four, Mei was determined to be just as independent as her big sister.

"Oh no!" Satsuki yelled. "Hide, Mei. Keep your head down!"

A startled Mei shrank back under the desk.

"What happened? What's wrong?"

"A policeman."

"Police!" Mei squeezed her eyes shut.

*Putt-putt, bang, putt-putt.*

"Satsuki!" Mei whispered. She couldn't bear the suspense.

"Shhh!"

"If he catches us, will we go to jail?"

"Be quiet!"

*Putt-putt, pop putt pop-pop.*

