

Totto-chan

The Little Girl at the Window



The
Sequel

Tetsuko
Kuroyanagi

Translated by
Yuki Tejima

Over the years, numerous people have expressed to me how they would love to read about what happened in the ever after of *Totto-chan: The Little Girl at the Window*, which I wrote over four decades ago. In my mind, however, nothing I might write could be as interesting as what I'd already committed to paper, since no other period of my life has been as thrilling as the time I spent at Tomoe Gakuen. But gradually, I came around to the view that if there are this many people curious to hear about the next chapters in the life of someone such as myself, perhaps I might do well to tell that story.

It has taken me forty-two years to say, "Let's give it a go."

Totto-chan

The Little Girl at the Window

The Sequel



Totto-chan

The Little Girl at the Window

The Sequel

Tetsuko Kuroyanagi

Translated by
Yuki Tejima



KODANSHA

Illustrations: Chihiro Iwasaki

Copyright © Chihiro Art Museum (Chihiro Iwasaki Memorial Foundation) 2025

Photos: From author's personal collection (excluding [this page](#)), provided courtesy of KODANSHA LTD.

Music:

Koran Jogakko no kouka (St. Hilda's School Song): Lyrics by former headteacher of St. Hilda's School Shun Tomita, printed courtesy of KORAN JOGAKKO (St. Hilda's School)

Shuppatsu no uta (The Departure Song): Composed by Tadashi Iizawa, Lyrics by Tadashi Hattori

Nijuushou (Duet) [Also known as *Tetsuko no heya no te-ma* (Tetsuko's Room Theme Song)]:

Composed by Taku Izumi, Lyrics by Keisuke Yamakawa *Tokyo Rhapsody*: Composed by Masao

Koga, Lyrics by Yutaka Kadota USED BY PERMISSION OF JASRAC LICENSE NO. 2504059-501

Translation: Yuki Tejima

Editing: Alexandra McCullough-Garcia

Production: Shirley Fang

Proofreading: Justin Maki

Zoku Madogiwa no Totto-chan ©2023 Tetsuko Kuroyanagi.

All rights reserved.

Published in Japan in 2023 by KODANSHA LTD., Tokyo

Publication rights for this English edition arranged through KODANSHA LTD., Tokyo

Published by Vertical, an imprint of Kodansha USA Publishing, LLC

Ebook ISBN 9781647295660

Hardcover ISBN 9781647294571

The authorized representatives in the EU for product safety and compliance are Marko & Daniel Novkovic; eucomply OÜ; Pärnu mnt 139b-14, 11317; Tallinn, Estonia;
hello@eucompliancepartner.com; +33-7569-0241

First Edition

Kodansha USA Publishing, LLC

25 E. 22nd St.

New York, NY 10010

www.kodansha.us



KODANSHA

a_prh_7.3_153843998_c0_r0

CONTENTS

Preface

Chapter One: We're Cold, Sleepy, and Hungry

The Happy Days

Window Shopping in Ginza, Skiing, and Swimming

Are My Legs Different Lengths?

The Caramel Vending Machine

Books Are Friends

Fifteen Soybeans

Guilt Tastes of Dried Squid

"Draft Notice Has Arrived."

A Comrade from the First Infantry Regiment

Daddy's Send-Off

The Great Tokyo Air Raid





Chapter Two: Totto Evacuates

All Alone on the Overnight Train

I Need to Go Pee Pee

“Mother!”

The Legend of Christ

The Great Renovation of the Apple Hut

Mother’s Heroic Efforts

“Draw a Jinjokko!”

Narrow Escape from Death

Memories of the Produce Market

Totto Dangles from the Train Tracks

“I Want to Go Back to Tokyo.”

Chapter Three: Our Duty It Is to Bloom

Hymns and a Wooden Gong

Our Duty It Is to Bloom

A Broken Heart

Rose Kanetaka

An After-School Flutter

The Teachers of St. Hilda's School

The Jiyugaoka Cinema

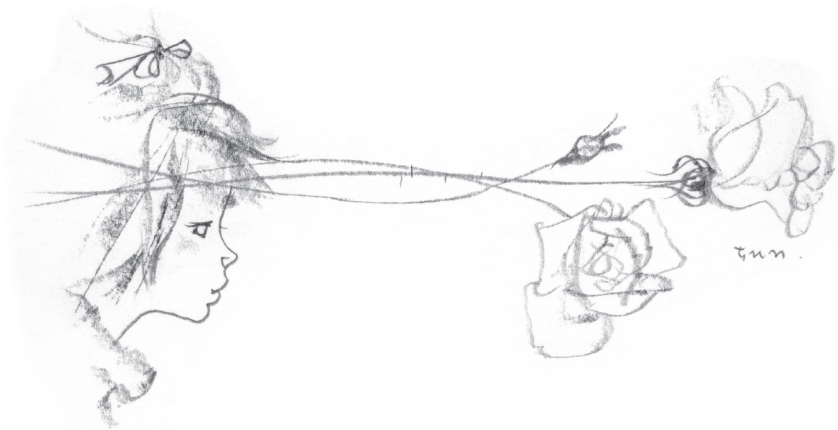
"I Want to Be an Opera Singer."

Losing Her Way

Daddy's Return

To Be a Good Mother





Chapter Four: Totto Becomes an Actress

A Wind-Up French Doll

A Strange Voice

“Where to, Totto-sama?”

The Tearful Table-Read Room

Yanbo, Ninbo, Tonbo

Work and Marriage

“Are You a Girl or a Boy?”

How to Stay Healthy Until You Die

Big Brother

Attending Bungakuza

The Departure Song

Postscript

Acknowledgments

About the Author

Preface

To this day, whenever I spot a German shepherd walking down the street, I find myself calling out softly, “Rocky!” I then laugh to myself, knowing it could never be him, as Rocky lived with us when I was just a little girl.

Rocky was my best friend. But then one day, he disappeared from our home. I learned only recently that healthy German shepherds were rounded up by the Japanese military during the war to be trained for service in combat. The very thought that Rocky might have been sent to a war zone still brings tears to my eyes.

—

In *Totto-chan: The Little Girl at the Window*, I chronicled my elementary school days attending Tomoe Gakuen. My reason for writing it was that I believed the educational methods of headmaster Sosaku Kobayashi needed to be documented in some way. To my astonishment, the book became a bestseller and was read by many, many people—including children—around the world. Though it was published in 1981, some forty-two years ago, I am still on occasion called “Totto-chan,” which fills me with joy.

During a visit to Tanzania, I thought I heard the village chiefs saying “Totto” numerous times as they called for people to gather around. This mystified me as it happened in every village, but I was sure the chiefs could not possibly all know my name. Imagine my surprise, then, when I discovered that *mtoto*, which sounds similar to Totto, means “child” in Swahili. What a coincidence!

As a young girl, I had difficulty pronouncing my given name, Tetsuko. Whenever I was asked, “What’s your name?” I always replied, “Totto!” That was how I came to be called Totto-chan. As I grew older, I became

known to most people as Tetsuko-chan, but my father continued to call me by the nickname Totsky (his boyish take on Totto) well into my young adulthood. If not for his reminder of my childhood nickname, I may have forgotten it altogether. It is thanks to him and “Totsky” that I can still recall my years as Totto-chan.

—

Totto-chan: The Little Girl at the Window ends when my family and I evacuate to Aomori during World War II, a few days after the Great Tokyo Air Raid of 1945. Over the years, numerous people have expressed to me how they would love to read about what happened in the ever after of that book. In my mind, however, nothing I might write could be as interesting as what I’d already committed to paper, since no other period of my life has been as thrilling as the time I spent at Tomoe Gakuen. But gradually, I came around to the view that if there are this many people curious to hear about the next chapters in the life of someone such as myself, perhaps I might do well to tell that story.

It has taken me forty-two years to say, “Let’s give it a go.”

Chapter One

We're Cold, Sleepy, and Hungry



The Happy Days

“Starting tomorrow, we’re having bananas every morning!” Daddy declared one day.

He had heard somewhere that bananas were good for the body. While they are easy to come by these days, bananas were an expensive luxury when Totto was a young girl. For years after the war, children were only given the fruit if they fell ill. Totto couldn’t remember another time when she greeted one of Daddy’s declarations with such delight.

Along with their gentle, charmingly curved shape, bananas are a sunny color that brings a smile to your face. Easy to peel, the fruit inside is creamy and, best of all, sweet. From that day onward, bananas appeared on the breakfast table every morning.

Meals at Totto’s house, she came to understand, were slightly different from those at other households. Before the war cast a significant shadow over their lives, back when food was still plentiful, Totto’s family enjoyed mainly Western-style dishes. Breakfast always consisted of bread and coffee. Each morning, Daddy placed coffee beans inside a square wooden box and turned the metal handle around and around to grind them with a loud *crrrrunch*. Afterwards, the beans gave off the most wonderful aroma of coffee. As a rule, fresh-baked bread was delivered daily to their home from a bakery by Senzoku Station. Daddy’s favorite was the round French bread that was crunchy on the outside and shaped like a rotund bottom.

Meat dishes were served on nights when the whole family gathered around the dinner table. Daddy loved beef most of all, so Mother seared it in a frying pan or grilled it on the stove, preparing the cuts of meat in a variety of ways so they never tired of it. Meals in most Japanese households at the time typically centered around broiled or simmered fish, but thanks to Daddy, Totto was able to relish tasty meat suppers every day. It was too bad, though, for Mother and Totto’s brother, who was younger than Totto by two years; they preferred fish.

Daddy was a violinist and concertmaster for the New Symphony Orchestra (now the NHK Symphony Orchestra). Nicknamed “the Japanese Heifetz” after the great Russian violinist Jascha Heifetz, he was busy all year long playing in regular concerts, regional performances around the country, and studio recording sessions. He once even earned the distinction of “Japan’s top performing musician.”

Totto was astounded to learn that it was none other than the legendary composer Beethoven who first brought her parents together.

One year, as December drew to a close, Daddy and his orchestra friends planned an end-of-year performance of Beethoven’s *Symphony No. 9* at Hibiya Public Hall. They had to sell tickets to fill the venue themselves, which made the Ninth Symphony the perfect choice. The final movement of the symphony features a chorus, and it was common at the time to cast local music school students as the singers. That saved the organizers from having to pay professional choralists, which they appreciated, and since the students raced against each other to sell the most tickets, the house was filled in no time.

One of the chorus members for that performance was Mother. She was a student at Toyo Conservatory of Music (now Tokyo College of Music), and this concert was how she and Daddy met. Daddy was instantly drawn to the radiant figure Mother cut in her green knit jacket and skirt and her matching beret, all of which she’d made by hand. He invited her for tea at the Nogizaka Club, a café on the ground floor of his apartment building. The two hit it off and talked about a great number of things. Fortunately for Daddy, he was also quite handsome.

Into the wee hours they chatted, forgetting all about the time. Before they knew it, the trains and buses had stopped running for the night, so Daddy invited Mother to his apartment upstairs. She was living a few miles away at her uncle’s house in Kojimachi, from which she commuted to the conservatory, but it was too late to call home. Everyone in the house would

be asleep. There was nothing for it. Mother followed Daddy to his apartment.

Later, Mother talked about how silly she'd been to go with him—at twenty, she should have known better—but perhaps she had been a bit pleased that this handsome concertmaster was expressing an interest in her. Either way, if Beethoven had never composed *Symphony No. 9*, Mother and Daddy may never have met, and Totto may never have been born. The world works in wondrous ways.

Mother and Daddy began their life as newlyweds in Nogizaka, and Totto was born in a hospital nearby. But because Daddy's orchestra rehearsed near Senzokuike (currently in Ota Ward), they decided to move to a house in Kitasenzoku, a neighborhood directly to the north, so that he could walk to work. Before the war, Totto lived there with Daddy, Mother, her younger brother, and Rocky. It was during their years at this house that Totto's second younger brother and younger sister were born.

Their house had a modern design with a red roof, white walls, a patio, and hardwood floors, and the family slept on beds instead of the more traditional futon mattresses. They also had a little pond in the yard with floating water lilies and a grape trellis over the patio. Every autumn, the vines would produce an abundance of sweet, delicious fruit. Once the war began to escalate and food supplies grew scarce, Daddy used the trellis to grow kabocha squash. He was quite successful, and the family cheered the results.

The house also had a greenhouse where Daddy kept orchids and roses that he tended meticulously every morning. "Totsky, come here," he would sometimes call out, and Totto would trot over to help. Her job was to pluck the small rose beetles, with their snouts like little elephant trunks, from the sprouts and buds.

Totto's clothes were all hand-sewn by Mother. Their designs were original and innovative, nothing like the clothes found in shops. Mother

said she referred to sewing books that had been imported from overseas to make them, but her creation process was like no other. Whenever she came across a bolt of fabric that she thought would make a nice garment, she would throw a length of it over Totto's head and snip, snip, snip away with scissors to cut it down to size. She then swiftly stitched the pieces of fabric together and in no time flat, a new outfit would be completed.

"You're a magician!" Totto exclaimed whenever Mother presented her with a new garment. Totto wasn't sure what that method was called—draping, perhaps? Whatever it was, it left her in awe every time.

Mother had a knack for such creative tasks, whether it was sewing or cooking, and she seemed to enjoy the process. At Totto's school, Tomoe Gakuen, the children went through a phase where, instead of simply opening the lids to their lunch boxes at lunchtime, they took to flipping them over and eating their lunches upside-down. While it lasted, all the children asked their mothers for lunches that looked like pictures from the bottom up.



With Daddy (Moritsuna), Mother (Cho), and younger brother (Meiji) in the family's yard.

Mother excelled at making these “picture lunches.” She’d fill Totto’s lunch box so that when it was flipped over, the colors and shapes of the rice and side dishes transformed into a little girl’s face, for example. The results enthralled Totto’s schoolmates, who would cluster around her at lunchtime and squeal, “Let us see! Show us!” While seemingly modern, lunches with character designs in the food, now called *kyaraben*, actually trace back to before the war.

Senzokuike Park provided the ideal play spot for children in Totto's neighborhood. Its name, a combination of the characters for "foot-washing" and "pond," is said to originate from an instance when the Sage Nichiren, a greatly influential Buddhist priest and philosopher, washed his feet there in the spring water during the Kamakura period in the thirteenth century. The park's eponymous pond was so clear that you could see right through to the bottom. Encircled by a dense grove of trees, it had an impressive arched bridge—from which Totto fell in twice. Both times she had been lying flat on the bridge, one arm outstretched toward the water in hopes of catching crayfish. Thankfully, she was helped out onto dry land right away. The park itself was surrounded by shrines and shops, as well as the graves of nineteenth-century statesman Katsu Kaishu and his wife, and was always full of families on weekends.

In the children's playground, called Chinkara-En, there was a slide that rose about fifteen feet off the ground. Neighborhood children flocked to it in the late afternoons and slid down its slope over and over, shrieking in delight, until the sun disappeared and darkness settled in. Careening down the slide made Totto feel as though she were riding on an elephant trunk, or a cloud, or something else very special. Whenever her turn came, she would shut her eyes and take off, imagining "Elephant trunk!" or "Cloud!" or "Magic carpet!"

Naturally, she also enjoyed keeping her eyes open to watch the cityscape that stretched out before her disappear with a *swoosh*. Each season brought darker or lighter tones to the sky and clouds of differing shapes. Near the end of every summer, towering cumulus clouds seemed to suddenly give way to a thin veil that covered the sky. "Oh, there goes the summer," Totto would think wistfully as she flew down the slide, imagining she was a fairy and the veil of clouds a flowy cape.

Near Chinkara-En was a mansion that appeared to be empty. Totto and her friends often snuck into the house and chased each other around the tatami-matted rooms. She would not learn until much later that it had been Katsu Kaishu's second home, where he spent his final years in comfortable repose. He was even said to have welcomed the famous samurai and

nobleman Saigo Takamori there for a convivial chat. And yet, in a sign of how truly carefree pre-war times were, the neighborhood children were at total liberty to scurry around in this distinguished mansion—barefoot, of course. Totto couldn't recall an occasion when she was scolded for tearing through the historical home or playing tag or hide-and-seek inside it with her friends.

Not until she saw the historical drama series named after Katsu Kaishu that ran for a year on the national public broadcast station did Totto find out about the important discussions that had been held in that mansion. Watching the Katsu Kaishu figure come onscreen, she felt as though she'd been reunited with a long-lost uncle.

Window Shopping in Ginza, Skiing, and Swimming

“Totsky, I’m taking you to Ginza once a year,” Daddy announced at one point.

Totto didn't know what had come over him, as he usually only went into town with Mother. But every year after that, he followed through on his promise without fail.

Their day in Ginza, then as now one of the most fashionable neighborhoods of Tokyo, began with a trip to Shiseido Parlor where Daddy treated Totto to half-moon scoops of ice cream served in a silver cup. It might have come with a wafer on the side. Totto took her shiny spoon and carefully lifted each bite of ice cream to her mouth, then savored the way the cold texture and sweetness spread from her tongue all the way to the top of her head. She felt like the happiest girl in the world.

Following the frozen treat, they strolled down the main street, Ginza Dori, admiring the window displays and popping into a few stores along the way. Because Daddy wasn't used to spending time with children, if Totto so much as glanced at an item on a shelf, he would ask, “Do you want it?” and try to buy it for her.

“Hmm, it's not that I want it, exactly. Sometimes I just like to look,” thought Totto. But she understood that for her father, who was singularly

devoted to the violin and Mother, it was difficult to imagine the inner workings of a little girl's heart. Still, she couldn't bear to hurt his feelings by turning down his offers, so she made it a point only to sneak glances at the window displays out of the corner of her eye without ever coming to a full stop.

Their visits to a toy store called Kintaro near the Mitsukoshi Department Store, however, were a different story. They went there specifically for Daddy to buy Totto a toy. One of those presents, which she selected after painstaking deliberation, was a peep box with eyeholes through which you could see pictures that seemed to move like the films at the cinema.

After that, Totto and Daddy would walk to the movie theater on the basement floor of Nihon Gekijo (now called Yurakucho Mullion), she carrying her new toy in its box and he with the air of a father proud to have bought his little girl a gift. There they watched Popeye and Mickey Mouse films before taking a taxi home. These Ginza dates with Daddy continued every year until the war grew more turbulent and sapped all fun events and delicacies from Totto's world.

Looking back now, Totto can see that she led a rather blessed childhood.

In the winters, she and her family traveled to the Shiga Highlands, a popular tourist destination with a cosmopolitan flair that was filled with visitors from Shanghai, Hong Kong, and various European countries. These trips began when the conductor Hideo Saito, who had a second home in the highlands, invited Daddy to perform there with him. Saito, famous for having taught the internationally-renowned conductor Seiji Ozawa, was also an established cellist in his own right. He and Daddy were in a string quartet together.

As Totto stepped with her family into the hotel where they would be staying, she was struck by the warmth of the heated lobby. In fact, the entire hotel was warm, including the dining room and every last inch of the hallway—even the lavatories! She noticed a waiter from the dining hall digging up a type of yellow vegetable from the snowy ground outside. The

crunchy vegetable was called *celery*, he said. Tasting it was a first for both Mother and Totto.

The Shiga Highlands recitals were held in a hotel reserved for international guests. Nearly every night, a dance party would be thrown for the guests and Daddy would play them his violin. The main draw of the trip for him, however, was the skiing. He had become quite taken with the ski resort and brought his family along any time he was asked to perform there.

There were no ski lifts on the slopes back then. Once you fastened on your skis, you had to climb up the hill on your own two feet. Totto, wearing nothing more thermal than a pair of trousers under a thick winter dress, wandered to and fro across the slope on children's skis. For her part, Mother skied with a green silk winter scarf wrapped around her head. Apparently, she had chosen it simply because she'd thought it would look lovely flowing behind her in the wind!

Perhaps because there were very few children on the slopes, foreign tourists often caught sight of Totto and exclaimed, "So cute!" Totto couldn't understand them, but knew implicitly that they were paying her a compliment, so she always replied, "Thank you." It was the one thing she knew how to say in English. Whenever a tourist called out to her, she tipped her head and repeated the phrase.

One day, a young skier with clear blue eyes approached her with a smile and made a gesture to the effect of, "Would you like a ride on the front of my skis?" Hesitant to accept an offer from a stranger, Totto asked Daddy, who stood nearby. "May I?" Daddy grinned and said, "Why don't you give it a try?"

As if she'd saved her very best English for precisely this moment, Totto gave the skier a "Thank you very much!" and started trekking up the slope behind him.

Once they'd climbed a good distance, the man placed his skis together and had Totto sit on top of them with her knees drawn up. She hardly had a chance to wonder what would happen next before she was carried away, sailing down the hill on the skis.

Right, left, right, left they descended, faster and smoother than on any slide, with a gentle rhythm that soothed her like a rocking cradle. It was absolutely wonderful. Totto felt as though she could take off into the sky at any moment. All the while, the skier supported her from behind to keep her from rolling off.

Totto marveled at the man's choice to place her on his skis instead of carrying her or letting her ride piggyback, and suspected it was a feat that not just anyone could manage. It came as no wonder, then, when a hotel employee later told her that the man was a famous skier who had even appeared in American movies. Totto couldn't help but feel a little proud that a world-famous skier had given her such special treatment.

In the summers, Totto looked forward to visiting Daddy's brother in Yuigahama, Kamakura, where the days were spent swimming at the beach. Her uncle, Shuji Taguchi, was a famous documentary cameraman known as Shu Taguchi. He traveled often to take footage of combat zones, and after the war he leveraged his photographic expertise to pursue a career in educational films.

Totto's uncle once gave her a black-and-white stuffed bear as a souvenir from New York. She would learn much later that the animal was called a *panda*, and that these bears were a cultural phenomenon in America at the time. The panda craze began when an American woman decided to fulfill her late husband's dearest wish. An explorer, he had longed to find the bear, which was then believed to be an imaginary creature. The woman traveled to Sichuan, China, in search of the panda and came upon a cub rather easily in a bamboo grove. She is said to have then disguised the little cub as a pet dog and flown it across the world to the United States, where the animal was placed in a Chicago zoo. It became an instant sensation, and panda merchandise soon flooded gift shops all over the country.

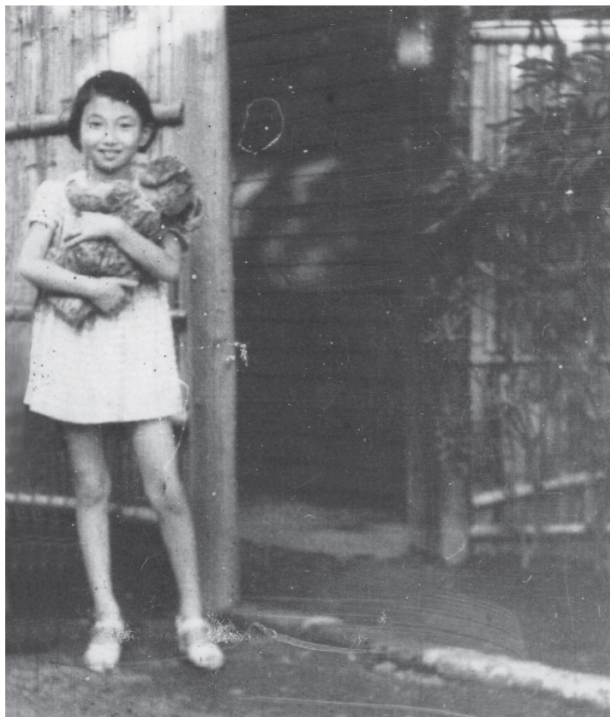
Totto, however, knew none of this. Her only thought was, "Oh, I suppose some bears are black and white." But her stuffed panda would

become a lifelong friend.

Mother always donned a bathing suit at the beach in Kamakura, even though the majority of Japanese women at the time simply swam in their undergarments. Their chests often showed through their garments when they came out of the water, but no one seemed the least concerned. Most of the women were middle-aged. Totto was awed that they weren't afraid to show off their busts, but that was simply the norm back then.

Are My Legs Different Lengths?

The year before she was to start elementary school, Totto awoke one summer morning with her right leg throbbing.



At the entrance to Uncle Shuji Taguchi's home.

"My leg was hurting last night!" Totto cried.

Mother stopped making breakfast at once. "Goodness! We should see a doctor right away!"

Mother was always quick to decide at times like this. Totto, however, didn't want to go to the hospital, so she racked her brain for any excuse to get out of it.

"Actually, um, I must have hit it on something yesterday when I was doing somersaults."

But Mother would not hear of it. She clasped Totto's hand and brought her to the nearby Showa Medical College Hospital (currently Showa University Hospital), where a high-spirited doctor inspected Totto's leg. The longer he continued his examination, the darker his sunny expression clouded over.

"Let's get you admitted at once."

Without knowing what was happening to her body, Totto was rushed over to a bed and made to lie down. Quick as a wink, she was wrapped from the tips of her toes on her right foot all the way up to her waist in bandages soaked with a gooey plaster. Totto had apparently contracted a disease known as tuberculous coxitis, which meant the bacteria *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* had entered her bloodstream and caused inflammation of the hip joint. Left untreated, the disease would damage the cartilage on the joint surface and could eventually lead to bone destruction and the joint fusing in place.

Once the cast dried, the doctor proclaimed, "Top-notch! Top-notch work!" as he gently rapped Totto's leg. Totto felt as though she'd been transformed into a doll. Not being able to move her body was a new experience, and at first she imagined that lying down all day would be rather easy. She didn't take it very seriously until the doctor led her to a hospital bed and sternly warned her she must never leave it.

Totto didn't know that he had told her mother, "Your daughter may need crutches for the rest of her life."

This was Totto's first stay in a hospital. Her cast prevented her from being able to turn over in bed, so when she couldn't sleep, she had no choice but to stare at the ceiling the whole night. It wasn't all bad, though. Daddy and Mother visited each day and took care of her every need, and Totto spent a lot of time reading the books that Mother brought her. She

also kept a doll or stuffed animal in each arm and liked to have them tell each other stories on her belly.

At mealtime, either the nurse or Mother would cut up Totto's food into bite-size pieces and bring them to her mouth. The hospital food tasted terrible, especially compared to Mother's cooking. Totto most disliked the soy-simmered *koya-dofu* (freeze-dried tofu) that came as little cubes, but it was nutritious and so showed up quite often on her food tray. Whenever she heard that *koya-dofu* was on the menu, she would sigh and think, "Not again..." as she slowly lifted her head from the pillow to glare at the softened brown cubes. She would then ask the nurse for chopsticks and press them down on the tofu, squeezing out the soaked-in broth from the cubes while grumbling in her head about how much she didn't want to eat them.

The nurse, seeing Totto earnestly draw out the broth from the tofu every time the dish was served, must have thought she loved it.

Totto was in some ways a very unlucky child. During her stay at Showa Medical College Hospital, she also came down with scarlet fever, an infectious disease that often afflicts young children. With her leg still in a cast, she was transferred from Showa to the nearby Ebara Hospital, which specialized in infectious diseases, to be quarantined. The disease made her run a high fever. Red spots sprouted all over her body. Her throat throbbed. But even at times like these, Totto found ways to amuse herself. Once she began to recover, she took to peeling off her dead skin in big pieces, like a molting snake. The skin on her hand slipped off in the shape of a glove. It was tremendously itchy, but also quite entertaining.

Totto's younger brother Meiji-chan soon caught scarlet fever as well, making things rather difficult for Mother and Daddy. Mother had to remain bedside to care for both children, so Daddy rode his bicycle every day to buy them food from one shop or another to eat at the hospital.

But Totto's bad luck streak was far from over.

Almost as soon as she had recovered from scarlet fever and was transferred back to Showa, she contracted chickenpox. When it rains, it pours. Chickenpox is also infectious, which meant that Totto had to do an about-face back to Ebara Hospital. Her leg was still immobile, and it seemed like her cast would not come off anytime soon.

The chickenpox itched so terribly that Totto wanted to cry. It was summertime, too, which only made things worse. Red itchy spots appeared all over her body, and while she could scratch or apply anti-itch cream to other areas, the bumps under her cast, which became unbearably sweaty and sticky from the heat, were impossible to reach. She tried inserting a stick between her skin and the cast to get at them, but did not have much luck.

Daddy noticed his daughter's distress and brought her a ruler from home. Totto slowly slipped the flat surface of the ruler under her cast. This time, she managed to get close to the itchy spots.

"Daddy! It works!" She clapped happily, grateful to her father for carving out time from his busy schedule as a violinist to help. She still couldn't reach the spots that itched most, such as the backs of her knees, but she simply had to tolerate that.

The cicadas of late summer had already begun to cry outside Totto's hospital window when at long last the day to remove her cast arrived. After being squeezed inside the cast for months, Totto's right leg had become quite thin, and because Totto had grown while in the hospital, her left leg was now slightly longer than her right.

"Hmm, are my legs different lengths?" Totto asked when the doctor took off her cast. She looked at Mother, Mother looked at her, and the two burst into giggles. They had to do something, though, or Totto would not be able to walk evenly. Once out of the hospital, she frequented the chiropractor and visited the hot springs in Yugawara, Kanagawa Prefecture, to soak in the healing waters, concentrating on what would now be called rehabilitation.

Totto was accompanied to Yugawara by Daddy's mother and a young caretaker. When Totto darted across the tatami-matted floors, her grandmother did not tell her to quiet down. Instead, she simply stated, "I

cannot abide that sound.” This frightened Totto so thoroughly that she kept as quiet as a mouse for the rest of their stay.

Daddy and Mother were waiting for Totto at Shinagawa Station when she returned from Yugawara. She hopped off the train and raced over to her parents, only to find them in tears. Why were they crying? Weren't they happy to see her? She had no way of knowing that they had been warned about her possibly needing crutches for the rest of her life. And here she was, sprinting toward them. Only as an adult did Totto come to understand how joyous that moment had been for them.

Totto's right leg grew to be as long as her left leg, and she could walk and run. She was a very lucky child.

The Caramel Vending Machine

Soon, Totto began elementary school.

It was in the middle of first grade that she started attending Tomoe Gakuen near Jiyugaoka Station, but she had also been taking piano lessons since age five. Once a week, she rode the train from Kitasenzoku to her teacher's house in Shibuya, transferring lines along the way.

Something at the bottom of the stairs at Ookayama Station where she switched trains always caught her eye: a vending machine that sold Morinaga-brand caramels. At the time, there was very little to do or see around Ookayama Station aside from the Tokyo Institute of Technology, and Totto never did discover why this remote station had such a sophisticated vending machine. The apparatus had a thin slot into which you could drop a five-sen coin. Once you inserted the money and pressed the button, the machine was supposed to dispense a small rectangular box of caramels. But perhaps due to the shortage of foodstuffs the country was starting to experience, no caramels ever popped out.

It never occurred to Totto that food scarcity could be to blame for the empty vending machine, so every week she walked right up to it and, full of anticipation, inserted her money, pressed the button, then waited for the caramels to drop. But the only thing she ever got was a *clink!* as her coin fell back out into the tray for change below.

“I don’t need my money back. I just want the caramels!” Totto thought. She shook the machine from right to left, front to back, but there was no sign of the sweets. Oh, how she longed to see a box drop! She gave the machine a good shake every time she went to piano lessons, hoping that that day, it might be fixed.

She wondered later if the machine was a prototype made by a Tokyo Institute of Technology student.

Once in a while, Mother came along to Totto’s piano lessons. On those days, Totto had much more to look forward to than the caramel vending machine as Mother would take her to a diner near Shibuya Station after class and ask Totto what she wanted. “Ice cream!” she invariably replied.

One such day, Totto and her mother crossed the famous Shibuya intersection in front of the statue of the loyal canine Hachiko and stepped into their usual diner, a large restaurant near what is now the Shibuya 109 shopping mall. Whereupon they were asked to share a table with a young soldier who was eating alone. Ice cream smeared all around her mouth, Totto chatted away happily with Mother. The soldier finished eating, stood from his seat, then smiled at them.

“Here, take this,” he said, and handed Mother a slip of paper that read *Meal Ticket*. Food was becoming increasingly difficult to come by, and tickets such as these were required to dine in some restaurants. Totto had never seen one before.

“Oh no, we couldn’t. It’s much too valuable,” Mother demurred, trying to return the ticket, but the soldier pressed it into her hand and walked away.

Totto often thought back to this moment, even after the war. Had the soldier been eating by himself because he was about to leave for duty? Did the sight of Totto and Mother enjoying some ice cream remind him of his little sisters or young relatives? Was that why he gave Mother his meal ticket? Had that soldier returned home in one piece?

The war with the United States broke out toward the end of that year.

Somewhere along the way, Totto stopped going to piano lessons.

—

Before the war with America began, the family—with the exception of Daddy—visited Mother's hometown in Hokkaido, the northernmost island of Japan. It was Mother's first trip home since getting married.

On their way back to Tokyo, they took an Ueno Station-bound train from Aomori, the mainland prefecture directly south of Hokkaido across the Tsugaru Strait. Totto pressed her face against the window and watched the scenery zip by. Two middle-aged men seated in front of her were having an animated discussion about horses. "That chestnut mare was a winner," one said. "I shoulda bought that colt—it was goin' for cheap," the other regretted.

Not long after the train departed, the landscape filling the window suddenly turned bright red. Apple orchards.

"Apples! Apples!" Totto cried. Mother also let out a squeal. The bright red fruit was growing everywhere. It looked so beautiful, and so delicious, that Totto and Mother couldn't help but swoon.

"What shall we do?" Mother said. "We can't very well get off the train here."

Just then, one of the men in front of them asked, "You want apples?"

"Oh, yes! We would love some apples! We haven't been able to find any in Tokyo for quite some time. They aren't available anywhere."

"We're getting off at the next stop, so how 'bout this. Why don't ya write down your address for me? I think I can help."

Mother quickly tore a page out of her notepad and jotted down their address in big letters. She handed the memo to the man, who tucked it into his pocket and hurried off the train with his companion at the next station.

About two weeks later, fresh apples arrived at Totto's house, just as the man had promised—two large wooden crates of them. The bright red fruit peeking out from the chaff looked wonderful, and they were so sweet and delicious that they nearly brought tears to Totto's eyes.

That was how Mother became friends by letter with the apple gentleman. His name was Mr. Numahata, and he evidently ran a large farm in Suwanotaira in the eastern Sannohe district of Aomori Prefecture. Later on, he also sent potatoes, kabocha squash, and many other vegetables to Totto's family.

Once, Mr. Numahata wrote Mother asking if his eldest son could stay at their house. The son was moving to Tokyo for university and had no place to live. Mother agreed, but the young man was drafted right before he was scheduled to come to the big city. Less than a year later, they heard he had died in battle.

Even after the war, whenever Totto saw news footage of college-aged draftees marching in uniform, she kept her eyes peeled for a glimpse of the young student who was meant to have stayed with them.

Books Are Friends

Daddy was the reason that Totto became such a big reader. Though he left Mother mainly in charge of raising the children, he seemed to believe it was his job to read to Totto. Each night after she crawled into bed, Daddy would appear with a book under his arm as if he had been waiting for his cue and pull up a chair next to her. This was the sign that he was about to start reading.

He mostly read her novels, even though Totto was still at an age where children's books might have been more suitable. Each night, he took her little by little through titles including *Cuore* (Heart) by Edmondo De

Amicis and *Little Lord Fauntleroy* by Frances Hodgson Burnett. Totto was especially taken by *Cuore*.

Totto knew Daddy was doing his best, but she did not think he was very good at reading aloud. Eventually, she decided that when she got older, she would become a wonderful storyteller so she could read bedtime stories to her own children.

Books also helped Totto greatly during her stay in the hospital. As long as she had something to read, she was able to take her mind off the pain, itchiness, and fear. Perhaps it was a blessing in disguise that she was forced to extend her hospital stay, for it was then that she became an avid reader. By the time she was released from the hospital, she was ready to move on from picture books and children's stories and start to peruse Daddy's bookshelves.

Totto still vividly remembers the experience of reading *A Dark Night's Passing* by Naoya Shiga for the first time.

"Let's see," she said, picking up the brown-covered book and flipping through a few pages. Daddy's books were all thick and heavy and had no pictures, no matter how many pages you turned. The print was small, too, but as it was customary at the time for the words written in *kanji*, or Chinese-derived characters, to come with accompanying ruby annotations, she was able to pronounce most of them if she read slowly. And while there were no illustrations, the characters in the story were all described in such great detail that Totto enjoyed picturing their clothing and hairstyles in her head.

Noticing how happy reading made Totto, Daddy and Mother bought her a complete set of a literary anthology for children called *Nihon Shokokumin Bunko* (Literature for the Younger Generation) which included more than ten volumes. Totto was particularly fond of the one containing notable works of world literature. It featured a rather sophisticated collection for a children's series, including works by Leo Tolstoy, Romain Rolland, Karel Čapek, and Mark Twain, along with the poems of Carl Busse and an autobiography of Benjamin Franklin.

Totto's favorite among these was *Dot and Anton* by Erich Kästner. The friendship in the story between the rambunctious rich girl named Dot and the poor but kind boy named Anton who looks after his mother captivated her imagination.

At Totto's house, the children were forbidden from buying snacks without permission, but they were allowed to put books on their parents' tab. Totto would go to the bookstore and pore over the tightly packed shelves, taking one volume out at a time until she found a winner. The next step was to approach the man behind the counter and ask, "Would you add this to my parents' tab, please? My name is Kuroyanagi," before racing home with the book tucked under her arm.

At some point, however, the shelves at the store began to undergo a drastic change. Empty spaces started to stick out conspicuously, like missing teeth on a comb. This, too, was due to the war, as the paper on which books were printed fell victim to wartime shortages, leaving publishers unable to produce new ones. It broke Totto's heart to see the bookshelves emptier and emptier with each successive visit.

One day, Totto stopped by the store on her way home from school to find the shelves nearly empty. It was almost as if the shop were selling bookshelves rather than books. The children's section was especially sparse. Still, Totto scrutinized the slim pickings huddled at the end of the shelf until she found a collection of stories in the *rakugo* comedy tradition.

"Oh well," she sighed, expecting little. But to her surprise, the book was wonderfully entertaining.

One story was about a dim-witted homeowner who sets traps around his house to keep robbers away, only to end up getting caught in them himself. Another told the tale of a rich young woman who can't find a husband because she is always breaking wind. She finally marries, but on her wedding night lets out a bigger blast than ever before. The wind blows her bridegroom out of bed and spins him around their sleeping chambers seven

and a half times before knocking him unconscious. Every character in the collection was wacky and had their own share of silly quirks. They filled Totto's heart with laughter and a renewed admiration for the magic of books.

Fifteen Soybeans

Tokyo winters during the war were much colder than they are now.

"We're cold, sleepy, and hungry," Totto and her friends took to chanting as they walked to and from Tomoe Gakuen. They sometimes added a simple melody, too, and sang it as if it were their very own theme song.

While the rationing of rice had begun before the Pacific War, it didn't take long once the fighting commenced for restaurants to start shutting their doors one after the other. As the war stretched on, rice rations turned into distributions of sweet potatoes, soybeans, corn, and coarse grains.

By the time the rice in Totto's lunch had been entirely replaced by soybeans, her hunger became almost unbearable. Come Sports Day, it seemed as if the white rice in everybody's lunch boxes had vanished all at once. Totto thought back to the sweet *inari* sushi her mother had made her the previous year and felt crestfallen.

—

Totto was about to leave for school one chilly morning when her mother handed her an envelope containing fifteen soybeans that she'd roasted in a frying pan.

"Now, listen to me. This needs to last you the whole day." She placed the envelope in Totto's palm. "Don't gobble it up at once. There won't be any food for you when you come home, so really think about when and how many you eat throughout the day."

Totto let that sink in. Starting today, this would be all she had for lunch. And no matter how hungry she was, she couldn't afford to finish it in one sitting.

“Drink lots of water with these. It will help to fill your stomach,” Mother repeatedly reminded Totto.

“Fifteen soybeans...I suppose I’ll have three for breakfast,” Totto decided, and popped one in her mouth on the way to school.

Crunch, crunch.

She chewed slowly with her molars, but the soybean was gone in no time. On to the second.

Crunch, crunch.

Again, gone in a flash. Just one more.

“And that’s three,” she sighed. Once she got to school, she drank plenty of water as Mother had instructed. “Those three beans will soak up the water and get nice and big,” she thought to herself as she imagined the soybeans expanding in her stomach. Totto tucked the envelope into her trouser pocket. She had only twelve soybeans left.

Right around lunchtime, they were in the middle of class when a siren sounded to warn of an air raid. Totto and her classmates took refuge in the bomb shelter in a corner of the schoolyard. With the bunker door closed, the shelter became pitch dark. The children held their breaths and stayed quiet in the beginning, but they soon grew restless and started to pass the time by whispering to one another.

“I had ice cream once,” somebody said.

“Oh, me too!” Totto piped up.

As they waited impatiently in that dark shelter for the siren that signaled the end of the alert, Totto couldn’t stop thinking about her soybeans. Unable to bear it any longer, she reached inside the envelope and placed two beans into her mouth, taking great care not to drop them.

Crunch, crunch, crunch.

That only whet her hunger even more. She longed to scarf down the rest of the bunch, but knew that if she did, she would have nothing left for the rest of the day. “Not now, not now...” she silently repeated, willing herself to show restraint. Then a thought occurred to her. “I still have ten soybeans, but what good will they be if a bomb falls on this shelter and we all die? Maybe I ought to eat them while I can.”

She had another thought. “What if we don’t get hit here, but a bomb burns down my house? What if when I go home, I find out that the house is gone, and that Daddy and Mother are dead? What shall I do then? Perhaps I had better eat the ten soybeans now, after all.”

Such worries spun around and around in her head, filling her with sorrow.

“I do hope our house hasn’t burned down...”

She ate two more soybeans.

The all-clear siren sounded a while later, and Totto and her schoolmates were finally able to crawl out of the shelter.

“We’re finished for the day,” the teacher said. “You may all go home.”

But the closer Totto got to her house, the more frightened she became that it would no longer be standing. Thankfully, she found her home looking just as it had when she left that morning.

“Phew. The house hasn’t burned down, and Mother and Daddy are alive. And I still have eight soybeans.” A wave of relief passed over her.

On nights when Totto was so famished that she couldn’t sleep, she drew pictures of her “dream menu” items. Mother had invented the game. To play, you sketched the foods you wished to eat and then went through all the motions, giving thanks for the meal, munching mouthfuls of air, asking for seconds. I’ll have another! Over and over, they drew pictures of sweet egg omelets, grilled meat, and other fancies, and pretend-chewed them all.

Eventually, the distributed rations were reduced to something called kelp noodles. To make them, thick kelp that had washed ashore was ground into powder, combined with the starchy vegetable konjac, and rolled into thin noodles that resembled udon. Totto didn’t like them because they reminded her of frog eggs, but there was nothing else to eat. And since the family had already run out of condiments with which to season anything, they simply had to boil the frog eggs and slurp them down as best they could.

One winter Sunday, Totto headed out for the Sunday School at Senzoku Church which she had been attending since she was a little girl. It was drizzling lightly and the air was very cold. As she walked, she murmured her usual “We’re cold, sleepy, and hungry” chant that somehow always helped her feel as though she were on a special excursion.

An icy wind was howling, causing a few tears to trickle down her cheeks. She must have been making a strange face, too.

“Hey, you!” a policeman barked at her. “Why are you crying?”

Totto wiped away her tears and replied, “Because it’s cold.”

“Think about the soldiers at war!” the policeman shouted. “They don’t cry just because it’s cold, and neither should you! Stop that at once!”

His anger stunned Totto. Apparently, wartime meant no crying, either.

“I don’t want to be yelled at again,” she thought. “And if you can’t cry when you’re at war, then I won’t cry anymore, even if I’m cold, sleepy, and hungry. The soldiers have it much, much worse than me.”

That was the best Totto could do.

Guilt Tastes of Dried Squid

Totto began to notice long lines popping up all around town. As soon as people heard that a shop had stocked new items, they immediately got in formation. It didn’t matter what was being sold; people stood in line because they felt they had to. They could not afford to miss out.

“I finally made it to the front of the line, only to learn that we were waiting to pay respects at a funeral!” Mother had said once, recounting a story that could have come straight out of a comic *rakugo* performance. Totto hooted with laughter. That was back when shops still had some products to sell, and Totto’s family felt secure enough to turn mishaps like Mother’s into funny stories.

It was around this time that it happened, near Jiyugaoka Station. Totto was on her way to board the train back from Tomoe Gakuen when in front of the station she saw a soldier, surrounded by his family and community, saying his farewells before departing for duty.

“Oh, that man is going to war.”

No one close to Totto had yet been claimed by the draft, so it was hard for her to imagine how the people gathered that day felt, but they all appeared to be holding in their emotions.

“Wave this flag, will you?”

Someone handed Totto a small Japanese flag along with a thin strip of roasted dried squid. She looked up to see a man she didn’t know smiling down at her.

“Why did he give me a piece of dried squid?” she wondered. “Is that what you get when you wave one of these flags?”

Totto was ravenous, of course, so she took the flag and crispy treat. Mother had taught her never to accept things from strangers, but she was too hungry to resist. Glancing around, Totto saw that all the adults and children were waving their flags and cheering “*Banzai!*” for the soldier.

Totto concluded that she must have been right, and that the squid was a reward one received for waving these flags. She joined in, yelling “*Banzai!*” and swishing her flag back and forth as vigorously as she could. Eventually the farewell ceremony ended, the soldier disappeared into the station, and the people with flags went their separate ways. Totto waited until everybody had left, then quickly stuffed the dried squid in her mouth.

From that point onward, she looked forward to the days when people gathered at Jiyugaoka Station to see soldiers off. Tomoe Gakuen was within a stone’s throw of the train stop, so any time the calls of “*Banzai!*” reached Totto in her classroom, she slipped out and sprinted toward it, even if class was in session. Tomoe’s rules were not strict in this regard, and she was never reprimanded for leaving the classroom.

Totto fervently waved the little Japanese flags for the soldiers headed to war and lost herself in happiness as she chewed away at the strips of squid that earned her.

But then at some point, no matter how fervidly she waved her flag, the squid strips did not materialize. The rippling effects of the food shortage had reached even these send-off ceremonies. Once Totto learned that she

would no longer receive any squid, she became deeply disappointed and stopped attending the affairs.

But she never forgot the taste of those roasted rewards.

Daddy was drafted to North China in the late fall of 1944. Following Japan's defeat, he would be held in a Siberian prison camp before being sent home to the Kitasenzoku house where Totto and the family waited at the end of 1949. Many more of Totto's favorite people were also shipped off to serve, including Uncle Taguchi who'd told her stories of America.

Some soldiers came home after the war, but others did not. Though Totto didn't fully understand at the time, she later learned that raising her arms and yelling "*Banzai!*" in exchange for dried squid was something she should never have done.

Totto wondered how many of the soldiers she had feted at Jiyugaoka Station made it safely back to Japan.

She had only waved and whooped because she was desperate for dried squid. But the soldiers might have seen Totto and told themselves they were fighting for the sake of young children like her. If any of them had gone to war and died believing so, then Totto bore part of the blame for their deaths. In cheering them on out of hunger for squid, she had betrayed them.

As an adult, Totto came to realize the significance of what she had done and felt deep remorse for waving the small Japanese flags. Under no circumstances should she have sent people off to battle with cheers of "*Banzai!*" Regardless of how hungry she was, it was irresponsible—and made her culpable. She would have to bear that guilt for the rest of her life.

"Draft Notice Has Arrived."

In the spring of 1944, two and a half years after the start of the Pacific War, happy and sad events occurred in quick succession for Totto's family.

The happy event was the birth of Totto's younger sister Mari-chan in April. Totto now had two brothers and a sister. In May, however, her younger brother Meiji-chan passed away from sepsis. Up until shortly before his death, he had been perfectly healthy, happily attending school and bringing home excellent grades. He played the violin well, and he and Totto were inseparable. Totto later learned that a single vial of penicillin could have saved him.

Strangely enough, no memories of Meiji-chan's death stayed with Totto. In fact, she couldn't seem to recall her brother at all. Mother would say, "Don't you remember? You two used to walk to school with your arms around each other's shoulders." But Totto simply couldn't, even though they had apparently been very close. Photographs didn't spark anything for her, either, other than an "Oh, so this is what he looked like." It may very well be that Totto, unable to accept Meiji-chan's death, had chased all memories of him out of her mind—including any recollections of Mother and Daddy mourning the loss of their son.

Mother later told her that before taking his last breath, Meiji-chan had prayed in a clear voice, "Dear God, I am going to heaven now, but please make sure my family lives in peace and happiness."

That summer, Mother made the decision to evacuate the family out of the city. But she first needed to find a place for them to go. Daddy was born and raised in Tokyo and had no relatives in the countryside, and Mother's hometown in Hokkaido was much too far. So she left Daddy in Tokyo temporarily and took her three small children on a journey to find a rural town in which to wait out the war.

The first option she considered was the city of Sendai in Miyagi Prefecture. Mother's father, Totto's grandfather, had graduated from the Tohoku University School of Medicine located there and become a doctor, giving them some degree of connection to the city. Mother stepped off the train at Sendai Station with Totto and her siblings in tow and circled it once.

But she knew right away. “This place won’t do. There will be air strikes here.”

She was right. The following July, B-29 bombers launched an air raid on Sendai that burned the whole city to the ground. Perhaps growing up surrounded by nature in Hokkaido had helped Mother develop a sort of animal instinct when it came to danger.

Crossing Sendai off the list, Mother next took the family to Fukushima, the capital of Fukushima Prefecture. Upon arrival at the city’s station, she asked several passersby if they knew of any places around the area where they might be able to find long-term lodgings.

“How ’bout Iizaka Hot Springs?” someone suggested. So Mother and the children took a lengthy and bumpy bus ride to the hot springs district of Iizaka.

There was not a single visitor there. Totto remembered her stay at the hot springs in Yugawara to rehabilitate her leg. Hot steam had risen from the ground all about the town, and adults and children had strolled around, flushed and happy. The place had brimmed with energy. She was taken aback by how different it felt here. Upon reflection, however, it only made sense; the war was escalating, and no one could afford to take a leisurely trip to the hot springs.

Mother and children walked from one establishment to another, hoping to find a place that could accommodate them, until finally one inn owner offered to rent them a room. “Isn’t that wonderful?” Mother said as she squeezed Totto’s hand, relieved. But Totto was too busy staring to notice.

What were the baggy, burgundy bottoms this kind man before her was wearing? They were neither trousers nor underwear, and looked more like a longer version of the bloomers Totto and her classmates wore to school. The owner seemed to be taking a break to enjoy the evening cool when Totto and her family arrived. Standing there in his droopy bloomers and fanning himself with a paper fan, he reminded Totto of a zoo animal on its two hind legs.

Unable to contain her curiosity, she asked, “Mother, what are those bottoms that he’s wearing?”

“Those are called *sarumata*,” she whispered back.

Totto nearly laughed out loud. *Saru*, in Japanese, means monkey. “You’re right! His legs look like monkey legs!” Thinking back now, the man’s clothing may have been on the slovenly side for an adult, but Totto loved the ring *sa-ru-ma-ta* had to it. She also felt that if they stayed here, she might encounter a world much different from Tokyo, with its own fun and quirky people, beautiful nature, and animals she’d never seen before.

The room the innkeeper offered them was spacious and splendid. It seemed food would also be much easier to obtain here than in the city. Deciding that this would be their new temporary home, Mother sent a telegram to Daddy in Tokyo.

Daddy’s reply came right away. Mother’s face paled as she scanned the telegram. They packed up their belongings and returned to Tokyo immediately. Mother wore a serious expression the entire ride home. Totto learned later that the telegram read: *Draft notice has arrived*.

A Comrade from the First Infantry Regiment

Totto was awakened in the middle of the night by a sound she’d never heard before. It was her mother, sobbing convulsively in a corner of the room, her shoulders trembling. Totto heard a low rumble, as though a vibration deep inside Mother’s body was thundering to the surface. Daddy seemed to be crying next to her as well.

The next morning, Totto asked Mother what was wrong. Her expression unchanged, Mother said quietly, “Daddy is going to war.”

Military service was compulsory in Japan at the time. When Daddy was twenty years old, he had taken the required physical examination and received a Class III designation, the third out of five levels. Class I was for the most physically fit and competent conscripts, followed by Class II for the young men deemed less suited to some roles but still acceptable as reserve soldiers. Daddy’s Class III classification meant that he had narrowly qualified for service but was not fit for battle and could thus return home.

It was likely his height that Daddy had to thank for having managed to avoid the draft up to that point. He was tall and thin for men of his generation, and because taller men didn't fit into standard-issue military uniforms, they were often designated Class II or III. In fact, it was generally understood that men in Class III, the step just above disqualification for duty, would not need to go to war at all. The situation must have been quite dire for men in Daddy's classification to receive draft orders, also called "red papers."

Mother later told Totto that the composer Kosaku Yamada had gone to great lengths to try to keep Daddy from being drafted. "He's an essential figure of the Japanese music industry," he'd argued. "Is there no way we can keep him from having to go to war?" Before getting married, Daddy had played in the Japan Symphony Orchestra which Mr. Yamada had founded, and the composer had taken him under his wing. But by the time Daddy faced the draft, a great many orchestra members had already been called up, and performances of the "music of the enemy" were prohibited; it would have been impossible to put on any classical concerts even if they so wished.

Daddy occasionally received requests to play military music, but he definitively declined them all. His pride as a musician would not allow him to accept. He had been promised rice, sugar, and sweet treats for his performances, but no matter how severe the hunger his family suffered, he would not compromise his morals. Mother supported him, simply saying, "You needn't play if you don't want to." She never asked him to go against his principles for the sake of the family, which always amazed Totto.

Daddy's send-off ceremony took place in front of their house. Women in matching white *kappogi* smocks and National Defense Women's Association sashes as well as middle-aged men wearing the national uniform came and distributed small Japanese flags to those in attendance. Daddy stood at the center of the crowd looking very uncomfortable in his military attire. He bowed repeatedly, seeming quite abashed and appreciative, as everybody raised their arms and gave three cheers of "*Banzai!*"

Totto had never before seen her father surrounded by so many people without a violin in hand. But while the war appeared to be worsening, nobody knew the true severity of the situation, so the mood was not one of great despair. That, at least, was a small blessing.

Daddy joined the First Infantry Regiment of the Japanese Army, which was based in the Roppongi area currently known as Tokyo Midtown. Not one week later, Totto and her family were notified that he would be leaving shortly for the front and invited to pay him one final visit.

“We shall get to see Daddy!” Mother chirped. Somehow, she managed to find celebratory red beans for the occasion. Then, using the rice they had been allotted by the military when Daddy was drafted and the little sugar she had saved at home, she made *ohagi* rice cakes filled with sweetened red bean jam. The treats weren’t very sweet, but as even bland *ohagi* were impossible to come by at the time, these were an almost unheard-of luxury.

Mother then led Totto, her younger brother Noriaki-chan, and her newborn sister Mari-chan to a photography studio to take a family portrait for Daddy to carry with him. Totto had never had her photograph taken in a studio before.

For the photo, Mother braided her hair and wrapped it around her head, and donned what looked like a pinafore dress but was in fact a pair of brown *monpe* work trousers that were loose around the hips and slimmer by the ankles. Little Mari-chan sat on her lap. Four-year-old Noriaki-chan stood right next to Mother in hand-knit shorts, a sweet, boyish expression on his face as he held his younger sister’s hand. Totto wore her very best—a white blouse and black pants—and had her soft hair parted in the middle and pinned back. But although they had gone out of their way to have a studio portrait taken, no one in the photograph was smiling.

On the day they were to see Daddy, Totto and her family brought the *ohagi* sweets and the portrait with them to the First Infantry Regiment barracks.

The place was bustling with families by the time they arrived, but they spotted Daddy right away.

“Father!”

“Totsky!” Daddy shouted and ran over.

Totto could hardly believe her eyes. Her father’s head had been shaved into a buzz cut and his khaki military uniform was already looking threadbare. On his feet, he wore gaiters over two-toed, rubber-soled *jikatabi* workmen’s boots. Totto was used to him leaving the house in a sharp suit and seeing him shine onstage in a tailcoat tuxedo and sparkling patent-leather shoes. This man was unrecognizable from the Daddy they knew. Mother’s eyes brimmed with tears. Though Totto didn’t notice, Mother told her afterwards that a beer bottle had hung from Daddy’s waist in place of a proper canteen.

“This is a comrade of mine,” said Daddy with a carefree smile as he introduced a fellow soldier who had apparently been the proprietor of a fresh fish shop before joining the regiment. By no stretch of the imagination a sociable man, Daddy was exceptionally shy and usually stuck to Mother like glue. But here he was, calling the fishmonger a comrade.

It surprised but also relieved and gladdened Totto to see that Daddy was better at adapting to change than she’d thought. She had been most concerned that his life as a soldier would be lonely. It comforted her to know that her father, a man who loved chatting with his family but rarely spoke to strangers, had made a friend. Even better, this friend was not a fellow musician he’d met through work, but someone whom he’d gotten to know and like by chatting about everyday things.

“Thank you for looking after my father,” Totto said to the fishmonger in her most sophisticated voice.

“I’m the grateful one,” the fishmonger replied, smiling. He appeared to be rather younger than Daddy.

Daddy, Mother, Totto, and her younger brother and sister bid goodbye to the friend, who was also expecting relatives to arrive, and went to sit in an open field by the barracks. Mother handed Daddy the shiny new family

photo. He took a good long look at the photograph and whispered to Totto and her siblings, “Isn’t Mommy beautiful?”

Totto’s heart skipped a beat. “Mommy” and “Daddy” were English words used by the enemy country, which meant that in public they now needed to use the Japanese words for “Mother” and “Father.” Thankfully, no one was around to hear them. Daddy tucked the photo into his chest pocket with great care and turned to the children. He curled his fingers into a ball and stuck his thumb up toward the sky in a familiar gesture resembling the “Like” button we now see on YouTube, one he had picked up while working with various international musicians.

People think nothing of it these days, but back then, Daddy was most likely the only person in Japan who gave a thumbs-up to express approval.

Totto and her family talked about a great many things that day. Daddy took a bite of the *ohagi* and sighed happily, “I haven’t had anything this delicious in a long time.” He was in much higher spirits than Totto had imagined he would be.

Before they knew it, their visit had come to an end and Daddy was walking them to the front gate. Totto wondered if they might be able to see him again if they returned another day. Daddy waved goodbye. Just as he began to turn toward the barracks, Totto yelled a silly phrase she and her family liked to say: “Too-da-loo, triangle! See ya, see ya, square!” Daddy smiled, raised both arms this time, and gave them an even bigger wave. Totto and her family waved back with everything they had.

—

As they bid Daddy farewell and started to leave the premises, an important-looking man in a crisp military uniform slid over and whispered in Mother’s ear, “Your husband’s unit will depart from Shinagawa Station in one week on the eight o’clock overnight train.”

Mother was taken aback. “Is that true?”

“But you won’t be able to access their train’s platform. You’ll be seeing them off from a different platform some distance away,” the officer said

before gliding off as though nothing had happened.

Mother instructed Totto and her siblings to stay put and went back through the gate to inform Daddy that they would go to Shinagawa Station on the night of his departure. They agreed that he would wave a folding paper fan with the Japanese flag which he'd received from the military so that they could spot him from a distance among the soldiers.

To this day, Totto does not know why the officer approached Mother to let her in on the secret. Was it because Totto and her family had looked so heartbroken? Or because Mother was so beautiful? Regardless of the reason, what mattered was that he had told them.

Daddy's Send-Off

The night of Daddy's departure, Mother asked the neighbors to look after little Mari-chan and Noriaki-chan and took Totto with her to Shinagawa Station. There was a blackout in effect and the station was completely dark.

About twenty other families had gathered there to bid their loved ones farewell. From the Yamanote Line platform where they had been instructed to stand, they could see soldiers in the distance streaming onto the overnight train. But it was too dark and they were too far away to be able to tell the men apart.

Totto knew Daddy was somewhere in the crowd and that he would signal to them with his paper fan. "Father!" she shouted at the top of her voice, waving toward the blur of soldiers. The other families also called out and waved in much the same fashion.

And then, all at once, the soldiers aboard the train opened their fans—each one exactly alike—and started to wave them. Mother and Daddy had been gravely mistaken in thinking the fan would help distinguish him.

Totto knew this might be the last time she ever saw her father and was desperate to catch a glimpse of him. She wanted him to have an image of herself and Mother on the platform to keep in his mind. Frantically they searched and waved to a soldier they thought could be him. The man waved back, but then they saw a different soldier who they thought could be

Daddy and waved to him as well. *That* person also waved back. The people around them on the platform were just as frantic. “Is that Father? It must be, right?” and so on. In the end, Totto and Mother noticed one soldier waving his fan to a unique rhythm and decided that he must be Daddy. Whenever they waved at him, his fan appeared to swing more wildly than the others.

All too soon, the train started to inch forward. Totto and Mother kept waving with all their might as they raced after it to the very end of the platform, bumping into other people along the way.

Then, the train vanished into the night.

“That had to be Daddy,” Totto and Mother said as they walked through the underpass of Shinagawa Station. It was even darker in the tunnel than on the platform. Soon they heard the crunching of boots over gravel and realized a different troop of soldiers was approaching.

Totto tried to clear the path for the marching men, but fell into a gutter on the side of the road. She stood there, soaked to her knees in the darkness, as the soldiers trooped past, inches away.

“Mother!” Totto screamed. At that moment, from the resounding column of marching soldiers a voice yelled out, “Tetsuko!”

Totto looked up and saw—Daddy! Standing right in front of her! His unit was on its way to the platform, where another train waited. Totto wondered if she was dreaming. Without thinking, she reached for Daddy’s hand and knew it at once to be the big, strong hand with the long fingers that she loved so dearly.

“Mother! It’s Father!” she shouted.

Mother rushed toward them, astonished and overjoyed. But they could only exchange a word or two before Daddy had to hurry back to rejoin the ranks. He resumed marching, and Totto and Mother returned to the Yamanote Line platform once more to see him off.

The platform was still too dark to make out any faces, but Mother reassured Totto, “Don’t worry, dear. I told Daddy to wave his fan like a

conductor so we know that it's him."

Just as Mother said, when the soldiers started to wave their fans in unison, one man swung his arms up and down in the manner of an orchestra conductor. Totto and Mother waved back for all they were worth. This time, they knew for certain it was Daddy they were bidding a proper farewell.

If Totto hadn't fallen into the gutter and screamed for her mother—or, rather, if the timing of Totto's fall and Daddy's unit marching past had been off by mere seconds—Totto and her mother would have gone home believing that the stranger they'd seen off had been Daddy. And Daddy, for his part, would have departed for war waving toward the platform after Totto and Mother had left, believing they were there.

Adults often admonished Totto for her tendency to pick the most dangerous paths, walking down streets with holes in the ground or roads with ongoing construction. But on that night, Totto wanted to pat herself on the back. Reuniting with Daddy at Shinagawa Station felt like nothing less than divine intervention.

—

Totto wondered if Daddy had called her Tetsuko, her given name, instead of his usual "Totsky" that night because he was embarrassed about what the other soldiers might think. They only ever received one postcard from him following his departure. It had the words *Military Mail* stamped on it in red and contained just a few short, nondescript lines: *I hope everybody is doing well. Father is hard at work serving the country. Please take care of yourselves.*

The letters were censored and he likely could not write anything more.

After this postcard, all correspondence with Daddy ceased.

The Great Tokyo Air Raid

A deep hole in the middle of the backyard greenhouse served as the family's bomb shelter. Daddy and Mother had dug it themselves, so it

wasn't very large, but every time the air-raid siren sounded, the whole family huddled inside the shelter and held their breaths. Air raids in Tokyo suddenly escalated around the time Daddy left for duty. Each day, B-29s pummeled a different area of the city with bombs.

On that particular night, the siren sounded and Totto and her family scrambled into the shelter as they always did. The hour was late, likely past midnight. Hiding in the shelter had become a nightly occurrence and everyone was sleep-derived. All Totto and her family could think about was the siren that would lift the alert.

But that night, something felt different.

Outside, it was extraordinarily bright. Peering through the cracks in the shelter, Totto saw the sky drenched in red. She had seen it burn red from the fires ignited by incendiary bombs numerous times before, but that night it had a terrifying glow.

It was so bright, in fact, that Totto darted out of the shelter and into the house to retrieve her school bag, from which she took out a book and opened it in the middle of the yard. She could read every word. For it to be this well-lit in the middle of the night could only mean one thing: There must be a massive conflagration in the next neighborhood over. Totto called to Mother in the shelter, "Mother, it's so bright out here that I can read my book. I think Ookayama is on fire!"

Mother climbed outside and gave the burning sky a long look. "It's all right," she stated confidently. "Nighttime fires appear closer than they really are. We'll be fine."

Totto didn't know where Mother had learned this, but hearing it did calm her nerves a little.

They spent the night cold and hungry, without sleeping a wink. The next morning, a man from the neighborhood association came to their house and found them completely exhausted.

"We need one man per household," he said. "Please bring a shovel."

"My husband has been called up. There are no men in this house."

"May we just borrow a shovel then?"

"Of course. What's happening?"

“Much of downtown burned to the ground in the air raid last night. It sounds like there were many casualties, so we’re going to help with the bodies.”

March 10th, 1945. Some three hundred B-29s rained incendiary bombs on the eastern Fukagawa and Hojo areas of Tokyo, killing nearly one hundred thousand people in a single nightmarish night.

The Great Tokyo Air Raid.

That was what had caused the glowing red sky, which still remains etched in Totto’s mind. Even today, it takes about an hour by train to travel from Totto’s then-home in Kitasenzoku to the affected downtown areas. The fire was a great distance away, yet Totto’s own backyard was lit brightly enough for her to read as though in broad daylight. One can only imagine how absolutely hellish the attack must have been.

After the war, documents revealed that the United States had decided dropping incendiary bombs on Japanese houses, which were made of wood and paper, and burning them to the ground would be more effective than blasting buildings with explosives. The B-29s staged their attack over the city in groups, unleashing firebombs that were meant to burst into multiple flaming pieces so as to maximize the spread of the blaze.

Mother decided then and there that it was too dangerous for the family to remain in Tokyo any longer.

“We’re moving to the countryside as soon as possible. Let’s see if Mr. Numahata, who sent us the apples and vegetables, can help.”

—

The family began to prepare for their evacuation. They first had to comb through their personal belongings and whittle them down, since they could only carry so much.

Totto had two prized possessions. The first was a large teddy bear that Daddy had brought back from Manchuria, where he had performed in a concert tour commemorating the 2,600th anniversary of the founding of the Japanese Empire. During that trip, Daddy was asked to play for Puyi, the

last emperor of the Qing dynasty, who would later become emperor of Manchukuo. Totto named the bear Kuma-chan (*kuma* means bear in Japanese).

Her second treasured item was the black-and-white stuffed bear Totto's uncle had bought for her in America when she was younger. She always put the bear in her backpack and huddled with it in the shelter during air raids, and she was adamant about taking it with her to the countryside. Mother said that Kuma-chan was too big and needed to be left behind, but the black-and-white bear Totto could bring.

Mother pared down her belongings to a few family photos as well as pictures, programs, and other mementos of Daddy's past concerts. Once the items were ready to be packed up, she took a pair of scissors and started cutting away at the Gobelin fabric that covered the living room sofa in a lovely rococo pattern. This she used in place of a traditional *furoshiki* wrapping cloth to bundle up their belongings for transport. Filled with all their most precious items, the bulging Gobelin-fabric bundle ballooned to resemble Santa Claus's bag.

"Wait for me here, all right? I'll be back before too long."

Totto sat Kuma-chan in Daddy's chair and, with her family, left the Kitasenzoku house behind.

Chapter Two

Totto Evacuates



All Alone on the Overnight Train

Chugga-chugga. Chugga-chugga.

The train rocked Totto as it chugged along in the dark, bound for Aomori Prefecture. She could see nothing at all through the window. Totto was perched in the middle of a two-seater bench. At her sides were not her mother, Noriaki-chan, or Mari-chan, however, but a middle-aged man and woman, neither of whom she knew. She was all alone. In her right hand, she clutched the train ticket Mother had given her as well as a note that read: *Ueno, Fukushima, Sendai, Morioka, Shiriuchi.*

It was the middle of March in the year the war would end.

That morning, Totto had headed for Ueno Station with her mother, her brother Noriaki-chan, and her sister Mari-chan, who was not yet one. The station was swarming with people and the ground rumbled as adults with armfuls of luggage jostled to get toward the train entrance gates. Mother carried a bag on her back and Mari-chan in a baby sling in front, while holding Noriaki-chan's hand with her left hand and another large bag with her right. Totto tried to take her little brother's free hand, but a stranger ran into her and nearly knocked her down, yelling, "Out of my way!"

"Mother!" Totto screamed.

"Should we get split up for any reason, do what you must to board the train bound for Aomori. Be sure to get off at Shiriuchi Station. That's where you'll find me, Noriaki-chan, and Mari-chan." Mother handed Totto the train ticket and memo with the station names: Ueno, Fukushima, Sendai, Morioka, and Shiriuchi (now called Hachinohe). She looked frightfully serious.

It was nearly impossible to get from the entrance gates to the platform. Totto tried to stick close to Mother, but the crowd squeezed in around her like a vice and before she knew it, she was surrounded by unfamiliar

middle-aged men. All sorts of bags smacked her painfully in the face and made it difficult to breathe. She felt less like she was walking on her own two feet and more as though she were being carried along by a crushing stream of luggage. It was terrifying.

Her mother and siblings were being pulled farther and farther away. Totto didn't know what to do. As soon as the train came into view, all the adults pressed forward with renewed speed.

“Eee!”

Totto was sent flying across the platform and fell flat on her behind. She turned toward the train and saw people shoving each other aside to wedge themselves onboard or throwing their bags in through the windows, then climbing in after.

It seemed Totto's mother and siblings had made it.

But what should she do...?

The station attendant's voice echoed across the platform to announce the train's departure. Just then, Totto spotted Mother through a window. Their eyes met.

“We'll be waiting at Shiriuchi Station.”

Totto knew that was what her mother mouthed.

Filled far beyond capacity, the steam train emitted a low whistle and pulled out of the station. The platform, which had been flooded with people moments earlier, all but emptied out.

—

“When is the next train to Aomori?” Totto asked a station attendant who appeared terribly busy.

“There aren't any extra trains today, so the next one won't be until eight o'clock tonight. Are you going to Aomori by yourself, little lady?”

“Yes. I couldn't get on the last train, so I promised my family that I would meet them at Shiriuchi Station.”

“That's tough,” the attendant said with sympathy. “Look, I'll let you know when it's time to head to the platform. Just don't go far.”

The Tohoku Line was apparently running nonstop, shuttling passengers back and forth between Tokyo and the northern area of mainland Japan known as the Tohoku region. Inbound trains arrived and emptied out, only to fill up immediately with new riders and depart. As Totto sat in a corner of the platform and waited for the Aomori-bound train, she saw others set off for places like Utsunomiya to the north of Tokyo and Shirakawa to the west. Over and over, the platform was overrun with people, then cleared out between departures.

Totto watched the crowds come and go. Eventually, day gave way to night.

“It’s almost time. You can get in line over there. Travel safely,” the station attendant from earlier told her. Totto did as instructed and took her place at the front of the line on the platform. Before long, she heard thundering footsteps and turned to see a wave of people rushing toward her.

“Not again,” she thought, bracing herself. A woman next to her advised, “Plant your feet on the ground so you don’t get knocked down.” Totto looked up to see a middle-aged woman with cheeks as red as apples smiling down at her.

The instant the doors to the train headed for Aomori opened, Totto gave a little shout and leapt into the car. People poured in behind her and pushed her down the aisle toward the very back. Just as she feared she would be crushed, the apple-cheeked woman snatched up her hand and made a snug little space for her in the middle of a two-seater bench.

“You’re a skinny girl. You can fit right here,” she said, holding Totto close.

Totto scanned the train and saw six adults in every four-person bench box, with two or three more passengers on the floor by their feet. The aisles, too, were crammed with people. Totto was fortunate to have gotten a seat, as every available spot and every inch of floor space was filled within seconds.

The steam locomotive blew its powerful whistle. Totto heard the grinding of machinery as it began to leave Ueno Station and crawl forward in the dark, north to Aomori. They were scheduled to arrive in Shiriuchi a

little after noon the following day. Would Totto be able to find Mother and her siblings?

Weighed down by its heavy load of passengers and their fears, the train slowly picked up speed.

I Need to Go Pee Pee

No one spoke on the train.

For fear of an air raid, a blackout like the one at home was in effect on board, too. It was early spring and still very cold, and Totto was hungry, so she thought she might as well try to sleep. She'd been fortunate enough to find a spot to sit, after all. But the seats were made of hard wood, and with the constant vibration of the train traveling up from her feet, her bottom soon became quite sore.

Her nerves didn't help, either. No matter how tightly she shut her eyes, she couldn't drift off to sleep. Totto gave up the attempt and opened her backpack to stroke her favorite black-and-white stuffed animal. It was the softest thing she had brought with her, and touching it helped to calm her a little.

Whenever they stopped at a station, more bags came flying in through the windows, followed by another gaggle of people who climbed aboard with apologies. The train pulled up to a new station every ten minutes or so; each time, Totto braced herself, heart racing, for someone to come crawling in through the window by her seat.

Soon, she noticed that passengers were also climbing *out* of the windows, bidding "Good day" as they left. Those seated on the floor nearby helped pull people in from outside and pass bags to those who were disembarking. The air had been fraught with tension when the train first departed Ueno Station, but once passengers had settled into their spots, the mood became one of surprising cooperation.

Totto needed to use the toilet. She knew from her last trip on the Tohoku Line, when the family had traveled to Sendai and Fukushima to look for a place to wait out the war, that there was a lavatory at the end of the car. But would she be able to make it there and back in this crowd?

The woman who had shared her window seat with Totto saw her squirming and asked, “What’s wrong?”

“I need to go pee pee.”

The woman’s cheeks, rosy as an Aomori apple, flushed even brighter.

“I’ll show you how when we get to the next station. Can you hold it until then?”

“Yes.”

“You just do your business out the window while the train is stopped. Don’t worry, I’ll hold your hand.”

What?! Did she say, “out the window”? Totto wasn’t sure she could do something so embarrassing. Quickly deciding that she couldn’t, she stood from her seat and headed for the lavatory.

“I’m sorry. Excuse me. Please let me through.”

Totto weaved through the people seated on the aisle floor. The light on the train was terribly dim and she couldn’t see her feet. “If only we could take this roof off,” she thought. “It would be a hundred times brighter under the moonlight.”

All the passengers were kind and called out to one another before her.

“Hey, let her through.”

“Got a girl coming down.”

One man made way for her and asked, “Are you by yourself?”

Totto was in fact alone, but thought she might get kidnapped if she told the truth. Terrified of never seeing her family again, she lied, “No, my big brother is in the next car over.”

One of Totto’s greatest fears as a child was to get kidnapped. But while the kidnappers in her imagination wore red capes, none of the people on the overnight train were dressed in anything quite so fashionable.

At long last, she made it to the lavatory. But one look was all it took to drain her of hope. The door was wide open and every inch in front of it and

within was crammed with people. She simply couldn't bring herself to say, "I'm sorry. I need to use the facility. Can you please move?" There was even a man squeezed between the toilet and the wall.

This won't do, she thought, and returned to her seat, repeating "I'm sorry" and "Excuse me" all over again.

"Were you able to go?" the kind woman asked.

"No. It was full of people."

"What did I tell ya?" The woman grinned.

—

A few minutes later, the train pulled into another station.

The woman shot up from her seat, thrust the window open, pulled down her *monpe* work trousers and stuck her bare behind out into the open air.

"See? This is how you do it."

Hissssssss.

Totto heard a forceful spraying sound out in the darkness. From inside the train car, the woman's pale thighs appeared to glow softly in the moonlight. Her knees were right next to Totto's face. As Totto sat stunned, the woman quickly pulled her trousers back up. It all happened in the blink of an eye.

"No one can see you in the dark," she reassured, nudging Totto's head out of the window. Totto looked to the left and to the right and spotted numerous round white protrusions poking out from the side of the train.

"We don't stop for very long at each station, so you'll have to try it at the next one."

This was no time to be embarrassed or ashamed. Not a soul would care if Totto did her business out of the window. She wouldn't be scolded for it. In fact, trying to hold it in only to have an accident inside the train would certainly cause much more trouble.

When the train pulled into the next stop, the woman wordlessly opened the glass and moved over so Totto could sit by the window. Totto pulled down her *monpe* and stuck her rear outside. The woman held her hand all

the while so she wouldn't fall through. Totto clutched the window frame tightly with her other hand.

A chilly breeze grazed her bottom.

Hissssssss.

She let loose and heard the spray hit the train wall. No one but the woman holding on to Totto so much as looked at her.

For the first time in her life, Totto relieved herself outside of a bathroom. But she wasn't embarrassed in the least.

Imagine, peeing from the window! She had to tell Mother about it tomorrow!

Her family would be arriving in Shiriuchi in the morning. She wondered where they were at this very moment. Was Noriaki-chan being a good boy? Was Mari-chan crying?

As such thoughts circled in her mind, Totto drifted off into a deep sleep.

“Mother!”

Totto was having a nightmare.

The woman with the apple cheeks tapped her shoulder to wake her. When Totto opened her eyes, she saw a magnificent sunrise pouring in through the window.

The kind woman got off the train at Morioka Station. Apart from the bathroom incident, she and Totto hadn't exchanged many words throughout their ride. Even as a child, Totto could sense that everybody on the train was occupied with their own worries, so although she had all sorts of questions, she mostly kept them to herself.

Before the woman disembarked, she retrieved an object wrapped in crinkled newspaper from her bag and set it on Totto's palm. It was a boiled potato. As the train crawled out of the station, Totto took a good long whiff of the potato. She nibbled off a bit of the end. It tasted so delicious and felt so lovely and soft that she completely lost herself in the snack. It was only after she'd finished it that she noticed the gaze of the man sitting in front of her. Suddenly shy, she apologized for her rudeness.

Outside the window stretched a vast expanse of brown fields. Though the snow on the ground had recently melted, it still lingered in the far-off forests and mountains, which were a much deeper shade of green than any in Tokyo.

The train made a stop at Suwanotaira Station, which was very small compared to the others they had passed along the way. Totto vaguely remembered that this was where Mr. Numahata, whom they had met on the return train ride from Mother's hometown several years prior, had disembarked. She wondered why Mother was taking the family to Shiriuchi and not Suwanotaira when their goal was to reunite with him. The train let out a loud whistle and started off once more.

A half hour later, they arrived at a bustling station with multiple platforms for making transfers.

“Shiriuchi! Shiriuchi!”

No sooner had Totto heard the announcement than she sprinted off the train, overjoyed at the prospect of seeing her mother, brother, and sister.

A chilly wind brushed against her cheeks. She took a deep breath and thought the air tasted cold, piercingly clear, and unlike anything she'd ever experienced before.

She followed the arrows on the station signs and crossed two railroad tracks. Just then, she heard a familiar voice call out, “Tetsuko!”

There were her mother and siblings, standing right outside the gates! Totto handed her ticket, which she'd put in her pocket for safekeeping, to the ticket collector and raced toward them with tremendous speed.

“Mother!”

Her mother was carrying Mari-chan on her back and holding Noriaki-chan's hand. She opened her other arm and welcomed Totto in an embrace. An entire day had passed since they were separated at Ueno Station.

“We arrived in the morning, so we went to the market to buy some food,” Mother said, then showed Totto a few *onigiri* rice balls made with

barley and brown rice wrapped in bamboo peel.

“Wow!”

Totto hadn't seen *onigiri* made with real rice in some time. It wasn't white rice, but she was delighted all the same.

“Let's eat over there on that bench. This station has a bathroom, so go and wash your hands in the sink. And drink some water, too. Take Noriaki-chan with you.”

As the family savored the *onigiri*, which had large pickled plums in the center, Totto filled her mother in on the many things that had happened on her train ride. She told her about how the train had been packed wall-to-wall with passengers; how people had crawled in and out of the windows; how she hadn't been able to use the bathroom; how the woman had taught her to do her business out the window—and how she'd seen many other pale round bottoms sticking out of the train, too; how beautiful the morning sunrise had been; how the woman had given her a boiled potato to eat.

“Lucky! I want a potato,” Noriaki-chan said enviously.

“Didn't you see the market, Noriaki-chan? Unlike in Tokyo, it's safe here and there is plenty of food. Once we find a place to live, I'll work hard so you can eat until your belly is full,” Mother soothed him. “You just need to hang tight for a bit longer, dear.”

They were all exhausted after their nearly twenty-four-hour train ride.

“We're staying at an inn tonight, so get lots of rest. Tomorrow, we'll go and see Mr. Numahata.”

Mother had made arrangements for the family to stay in a nearby inn while waiting for Totto to arrive. Totto had felt so alone and afraid on the train, but now she had Mother by her side, and Noriaki-chan and Mari-chan were smiling happily. There were no air-raid sirens to be heard, either. Here she might be able to call her mother whatever she pleased without being shunned for using the “language of the enemy.” Totto thought that perhaps here, unlike in Tokyo, they might be able to lead ordinary lives again.

The Legend of Christ

“There’s one place I’d like to go before we head to Mr. Numahata’s house,” Mother said when Totto awoke the next morning.

There was apparently a village called Herai, about a two-hour bus ride away, where the “Tomb of Jesus Christ” was located. Totto recalled her mother mentioning when they were in Tokyo that Mr. Numahata’s home was close to the site. According to local legend, the man crucified on the hill of Golgotha was not, in fact, Jesus, but his younger brother. The real Jesus had secretly fled to Japan and lived in Herai until the age of one hundred and six. Mother didn’t appear to believe the story, but she explained to Totto that she felt called to the spot none the less.

Mother was a Christian, and since they had traveled so far anyway, she wished to see the place that had given birth to the legend. Of course! That was why they had come to Shiriuchi instead of going directly to Suwanotaira. Another mystery, however, remained: Why would Jesus Christ choose to live in a town where everyone spoke in the thick Tohoku dialect?

From Shiriuchi to Herai they took a bus whose front end stuck out rather like a hippopotamus head. It inched forward near full capacity, carrying many locals and their large bags. Everyone stared curiously at Totto and her family.

“*Otsuru, otsuru!*” passengers called out at their stops as they made their way from the back of the bus to the front. At first, Totto thought they were saying “*ochiru*,” as a warning that they or something else was about to fall, but then she realized it was the locals’ take on the word “*oriru*,” which means “to disembark.” Another fright came when the bus attendant announced, “Please wait for passengers to die before boarding the bus”—but that was only because the local term for “pass” sounded similar to the word Totto knew for “die.”

No matter how deep into the mountains they went, there always seemed to be another rice paddy or vegetable field around the next bend. Totto was

still reeling at the discovery that there were people farming at such great heights when she saw a horse plodding along, led by its reins, carrying vegetables that hung from both sides of its body.

“Look! A horse!”

Horses were Totto’s third-favorite animal, right after dogs and foxes. She had once ridden in a horse-drawn carriage with her grandfather who was a doctor in Hokkaido, but this was the first time she’d seen a horse hauling goods on its back.

She poked her head out of the window to watch the creature, only to see what looked like large round dumplings plop to the ground from its rear. “Ew!” she blurted out. The man who sat behind her laughed uproariously. “What, never seen a horse before?” When she looked again, she spotted a trail of droppings, first big, then small, in the horse’s wake. They looked rather like balls of straw that had been hardened with dirt.

Totto kept wondering as they traveled along why people in the olden days had thought to live so deep in the mountains. It puzzled her every time the bus went up and down another hill, every time another passenger disembarked. Many of her fellow riders were elderly and bent over at the waist. Everyone wore the loose-fitting *monpe* work trousers, and some had hand towels around their necks while others had them wrapped around their heads. Their hands were all brown and wrinkled, with thick fingers—the hands of people who knew hard labor.

Totto and her family stepped off the bus at the stop that was said to be closest to the Tomb of Jesus. Not knowing where to go from there, they knocked on the door of a nearby house.

“Hello! Pardon me. We’re hoping to visit the Tomb of Jesus. Can you show us which way to go?” Mother called out at the entrance. A deeply sunburnt man trudged toward them from the back of the house.

“My, you came all this way with these children! The tomb’s close by. Here, I’ll show ya,” he offered, apparently quite used to such requests, and kindly suggested that they leave behind their bulky belongings.

Mother put her bags down and fastened Mari-chan to her back. Totto and Noriaki-chan took each other by the hand and started up the hill. As

they walked, the man explained how before the war, visitors used to come from all around the country to pay their respects. He also told them about some local customs in Herai that shared similarities with Christianity.

“See, o’er there,” he pointed.

Following his finger, they saw a long, winding path leading up a small hill.

“There’re two burial mounds up there. One on the right’s for Christ, an’ the one on the left is for his younger brother Isukiri.”

Mother walked slowly up the stone steps. Someone had placed wildflowers on the mounds. She gazed at the one on the right, clasped her hands together in prayer at her chest, closed her eyes, and whispered, “Amen.” The sun shining on her back made her hair, which she’d pulled into a ponytail, appear to glitter. Beyond the graves was a cliff and they could hear a brook flowing nearby. The chirping of many little birds filled the air.

It was a moment of true peace. Totto stopped caring whether they were standing in front of the real tomb of Jesus Christ. A war had started, Meiji-chan had died, Daddy had been called up for duty, and they had been forced to leave their beloved house in Kitasenzoku with all the memories it held. They were not allowed to pray, complain, or cry, no matter what difficult circumstances befell them. But here in front of the grave, Mother looked totally serene.

The war would end one day. And they would all be able to live together as a family again.

Watching Mother pray, Totto felt a surge of energy she couldn’t quite explain. She wondered if Jesus Christ had in fact come to Japan. Totto had attended Sunday School since she was a child, but she had never heard of such a thing. She didn’t say anything to Mother about it, though.

As they descended the hill, they saw the kind man and a woman who must have been his wife waiting for them at the bus stop. The woman waved. At her feet were Totto and her family’s luggage. Clearly, the couple had estimated how long it would take for the four to return and carried their bags to the stop so they wouldn’t miss the bus.

“Thank you very, very much,” Mother bowed. Totto took it as a sign of good things to come that the first people they encountered in this unfamiliar place had been so generous. She, too, bowed to the smiling couple, then hopped aboard the bus.

As it happens, the tombs of Jesus Christ and his brother still exist in Herai today and have evidently become a popular tourist destination.

The Great Renovation of the Apple Hut

Mother grew increasingly jittery as the bus approached Shiriuchi. She checked her reflection in a mirror, fixed her hair, blew her nose, and read and reread the letters she’d received from Mr. Numahata. That’s when it dawned on Totto. Mother’s voice sounded bright as she said, “We’re nearly at Suwanotaira!” but she must have been nervous about whether Mr. Numahata would welcome their family.

Even Totto knew it was unreasonable for a mother and her children to appear at someone’s doorstep unannounced, when there was not even a blood relation. But in the three days since departing Ueno, Totto and her family had been helped by a great number of people. They could never have come this far, could never have put their hands together at the tomb of Jesus Christ, had they tried to do it all themselves. Totto could only pray that Mr. Numahata would allow them to stay.

They got off the bus in front of Shiriuchi Station and checked the schedule for the Tohoku Line. If all went well, they would be able to make it to Mr. Numahata’s station before sundown. “We decided to ask Mr. Numahata for help, so that’s exactly what we shall do,” Mother said, as though trying to reassure herself.

Suwanotaira was situated three stations away. Upon arrival, they showed Mr. Numahata’s address to a station attendant who pointed them in the general direction and told them it would take about thirty minutes to

reach the house on foot. Shortly after they set off, they came to a structure that looked to be a produce market. Totto spotted a bright red apple that had fallen into a ditch in front of it.

“Ooh! An apple!” Totto cried. She rushed to scoop it up, but Mother interjected, “If an apple has been left on the ground here, in a place where so many people come and go, don’t you think there will be more at Mr. Numahata’s farm? And in better condition?”

“I’ll throw it away if we find a better one!” Totto rebutted, but upon closer inspection, she saw that the apple was rotting in some spots and starting to brown. Still, Totto kept a firm grip on it as she walked to the head of the group. Carefully, so as not to get lost, she led her family down the route the station attendant had instructed them to follow. It soon got dark enough that they had to rely on the light spilling from the windows of the homes along the path. How wonderful it was not to have to worry about air raids! Finally, they came upon a large house that could only belong to a farmer. This was Mr. Numahata’s home.

“Hello! Pardon me!” Mother called.

A woman whom they took to be Mr. Numahata’s wife came to the door. “Our name is Kuroyanagi, and we’re here from Tokyo. We were very grateful for the apples and vegetables that you sent to our home,” Mother said by way of introduction, then began to explain why they had come. Moments later, Mr. Numahata emerged and said, “The details can wait,” then invited them into the house. Relieved, Totto set down her apple outside the front door.

Even though the family of four had shown up without any warning, they were treated to a lovely dinner of white rice, soup, grilled fish, pickles, and fruit. As she savored the taste of white rice for the first time in ages, Totto thought that perhaps her mother had been concerned for nothing. Mari-chan, who was having white rice for the first time in her life, kept asking Mother, “What *is* this?”

“Do you know of anywhere the four of us might be able to stay? Even a shed would be wonderful.”

Mother described their circumstances in detail and put her whole heart and soul into the request for assistance. That night, Totto and her family slept side by side at the Numahata home.

Next morning, Mother got down to work. The children couldn't go to school without a home, so she and Mr. Numahata knocked on the door of every house in the neighborhood to see if they could find a place for the family to live.

At long last, Mother was given permission to make use of a hut located on an apple farm. The small structure, situated in the middle of an orchard, was meant for organizing and boxing apples for shipping, as well as keeping an eye out for fruit thieves. The space was approximately 130 square feet. It had a straw-thatched roof and planked walls that were full of gaps, and its only source of light was a kerosene lamp. But Mother chirped gaily, "Isn't it lovely how the sun streams in through the windows and ceiling?" This must be what people mean when they say it all depends on how you look at things, Totto thought, impressed. "We were fortunate enough to borrow futons and kitchen items. There's a big river nearby, and we can get drinking water from the lumber mill. This will do nicely."

Mother was brimming with motivation. She threw all her energy into renovating the hut, putting her magic touch on full display. First, she flipped over an apple crate, lined it with cotton and straw, then covered it with the Gobelin fabric she had used to wrap and carry their belongings from Tokyo. Then she nailed the fabric to the top of the crate and let the left-over lengths drape from the sides as frills. Voilà: a fashionable rococo-style chair.

Next, she transformed a sheet gifted to them by a neighbor into a fine wall tapestry by painting it light green and drawing numerous apples on it. One part of the floor, which stood about three feet off the ground, she converted into a children's bed. And just like that, the dreary apple hut was reborn as a home, complete with the charm of the family's Kitasenzoku house.

Following the living-space renovation came the garden. “It’s time to make a farm!” Mother said as soon as the snow melted. Mari-chan was all smiles from her spot upon Mother’s back while Totto and Noriaki-chan helped to till around the house. Mother brought home vegetable seeds and seedlings, then sowed and planted them around the garden. It was springtime and Totto enjoyed the tasks, which reminded her of her days at Tomoe Gakuen.

“What kind of flowers will bloom?” she wondered. “What vegetables will grow? How are my Tomoe friends doing?”

Working in the garden, Totto looked up to the sky and thought she heard Tomoe Gakuen headmaster Mr. Kobayashi’s voice from above the clouds.

“Let’s all do this together.”

Mother’s Heroic Efforts

It took almost no time for Mother to secure a job at the local farmers’ cooperative. From the apple hut window she had noticed people walking into the building with loads of vegetables on their backs and decided that she would join them.

“I’ll be paid, of course, but I might also be able to bring home produce that can’t be sold, such as crushed apples and potatoes,” she said.

Mother had never held a job before, but she was fearless.

When asked in her interview, “Can you use an abacus?” she replied, “Yes, I can,” even though she had dropped out of music college to get married and had never learned to use the calculating tool. She was hired on the spot. To her great relief, she later learned that the abacus would be used mainly by people in the accounting department.

The salary Mother received for doing miscellaneous work at the cooperative wasn’t enough to feed the whole family, however, so she also toiled away at night to make clothes for neighbors, turning to style books and magazines for reference. Everything was stitched together by hand as she didn’t own a sewing machine, but even Totto could tell that the garments Mother made were lovely.

Early on in their life in Aomori, Totto broke out in boils all over her body as a result of malnutrition from having subsisted almost entirely on kelp noodles. She was also hurting from paronychia, a purulent infection of the fingers and toes caused by bacteria that attack the cuticles and nail folds. This, too, was a symptom of malnutrition. Few people are inflicted with paronychia these days, but the inflammation is excruciating. Still, Totto gritted her teeth and tried to bear the boils and the pulsing pain of the nail infection. A trip to the doctor would not have provided any relief, as medicine was impossible to come by due to the war. She was far from alone in her suffering, though; it was a fact of life for everybody.

Mother could see that Totto needed more protein. Together the family filled two baskets with fruits and vegetables that had been grown in Suwanotaira and took several trains until they reached Hachinohe Port, whereupon they approached the fishermen and introduced themselves. “Hello, we’re here from Tokyo. We were wondering if we could exchange our vegetables for some of your fish.” The locals replied generously, “Sure, take whatever ya need,” trading their fresh catches for the produce.

No sooner had they returned home than Mother got to work simmering the seafood. Because Totto’s father greatly preferred meat, Totto had never had much in the way of fish. The head and the tail took an especially good deal of courage to try. Fearfully, she brought them to her mouth, only to discover with relief that they were rich in fat and delicious. A mere three days after the family started incorporating fish into their diet, Totto’s boils began to disappear; in just ten days, she had fully recovered. Oh, the wonders of protein!

Reflecting back on it now, Totto realizes that Mother’s ability to adapt to this new environment was truly remarkable. It was thanks to her that the family succeeded in building strong bonds with their neighbors and that Totto and Noriaki-chan managed to acclimate to their new life.

She would say to the children, “Whenever you visit someone’s house and they invite you to stay for dinner, make sure you gratefully accept.”

This confused Totto. Back when they lived in Tokyo, her mother had always instructed, “No matter how much people insist that you stay, you must tell them you will eat dinner at home.”

“But didn’t you say we must never accept a meal from another family?” Totto asked. Mother replied promptly, “Meals at other people’s homes are more nutritious than what I can give you here.”

This was undeniably true. The dinners Mother made in the apple hut often consisted of flour dumpling soup with plenty of vegetables, or steamed potatoes. They sometimes ate soup with crushed Nanbu senbei—a staple rice cracker in the region—and every so often they had simmered fish. These were heavenly meals compared to what they’d been eating of late in Tokyo, but they hardly ever had white rice, and eggs and chicken were entirely out of reach.

Little Noriaki-chan took Mother’s advice to heart and began heading out shortly before dinnertime to visit his friends’ houses. He was five years old, adorable, and charming, so people unfailingly asked, “Why don’t you eat with us, little boy?” This made Noriaki-chan a very happy camper, treated as he was to a wide variety of food.

Sometimes, Mother would say to Totto, “Go find your brother, will you? I’m sure he’s having dinner nearby.” Totto would find him sitting around a sunken hearth in a neighbor’s home, delighting in his dinner. In such cases, Totto would choose to squat outside and wait for him to finish. Totto was also ravenous, of course, but couldn’t bring herself to say, “I want some, too!” When Noriaki-chan left the house, she would greet and thank the neighbors, then lead her brother home. The more Noriaki-chan benefited from such generosity, the more his nutrition, and his health, visibly improved.

“Draw a Jinjokko!”

Totto started attending school in Sannohe, which was one train stop away from Suwanotaira. Only seven trains ran between the stations per day. In the mornings, she walked twenty minutes from the apple hut to Suwanotaira

Station, rode the train for five minutes, then walked another thirty minutes from Sannohe Station to her school. There were very few buildings around the station back then, and the closest shops and houses were some distance away.

The town of Sannohe spread out from the base of the hill where Sannohe Castle once stood when the Nanbu clan ruled the region in the sixteenth century. That was where Totto's school was situated, though there was little for her and her peers to study at the time. Instead, the students spent most of their days doing volunteer labor such as making bags out of paper and tending to farms.

On her first day of school, Totto felt all the children's eyes on her as she took a seat. They peered at her from afar, curious about the newcomer. Totto considered how she might become friends with her classmates. After turning over many ideas in her mind, she decided to open her notebook and draw.

A few girls came up to her desk and said, "Draw a *beko*!" or "Draw a dog!" in their Aomori dialect. Totto understood that *beko* meant cow, which she drew as best she could, though she was not a particularly good artist. The resulting sketch was a rather skinny creature, but the girls seemed impressed. "Yer good!" they exclaimed.

"Phew!" thought Totto. "It looks like I'll be able to make some friends." But then one girl said, "Draw a *jinjokko*!"

A *jinjokko*? What in the world is that? Totto had never heard the word before. But she could not ask for clarification for fear that she might ruin the friendly atmosphere she'd worked hard to cultivate. She pondered for a little while, then handed the notebook to the girl and said in her best Aomori dialect, "Draw me yer *jinjokko*!"

The girl started to sketch. Totto peeked over her arm and saw that she was drawing a doll with a bob cut. So *jinjokko* was what they called a doll in Aomori!

Her plan was a great success. When Totto's turn came, she drew a doll with a ribbon in her hair and was once again met with impressed sighs.

And that was how Totto was able to make new friends. It was difficult at first to understand what they were saying, but within a week she had mostly deciphered the dialect. The girl who asked Totto to draw a *jinjokko* became one of her closest companions. She was sweet and smart, and the two spent all of their time together.

Often during class, Totto and her classmates put together paper bags meant for use ahead of harvest to protect apples from insects. Some children grew bored of the work and scampered off, but Totto kept at it, even when she was the last one left in the classroom.

You would take loose pages of a magazine and smooth the frayed edges with your fingernails, lay a few pages down so that they were slightly staggered, apply a thin layer of glue to each sheet, then fold them individually into bags. “Aren’t you tired of that yet?” her classmates would always ask as they left, to which she invariably replied, “Not at all!” in her newly-acquired Tohoku accent.

The students were also charged with carrying the contents of the nearby slurry pit to fields atop the hill. Surprisingly, Totto didn’t mind the work. In fact, she was often one of the first to volunteer, but she always preferred to hold the front end of the carrying pole. She worried that if she was in the back and they tripped and fell, she would get soaked with the sewage in the bucket.

Her fears proved well-founded. One day, the rope of the carrying pole snapped halfway up the hill and the girl holding the back end got drenched in slurry. Totto felt so very sorry for her as she led the girl back to the teacher at school.

—

Only the plum blossoms had been in season when Totto and her family first evacuated to Aomori in March, but by the end of April, a wide array of flowers suddenly burst into bloom.

Totto’s friends invited her to Shiroyama Park, a famous cherry blossom viewing spot in the Sannohe Castle Ruins. The park was teeming with

people by the time she arrived.

“They usually have food stalls selling *amazake* (sweetened sake) drinks and sweet dumplings, but all of that is gone because of the war,” one of her friends explained.

Several times bigger than Senzokuike Park, Shiroyama Park boasted Somei Yoshino cherry blossoms much like the ones Totto had seen in Tokyo. Once the delicate pink Somei Yoshino petals fell, the fuchsia Yaezakura cherry blossoms came into their splendor, followed by the yellow Gyoiko blossoms. Totto was quite taken by the charm of the Yaezakura and Gyoiko cherry blossoms, whose petals resembled dainty frills.

The people of Sannohe seemed to have a special connection to Shiroyama Park. Even Totto’s teacher, who never spent a great deal of time on history lessons, would occasionally take out all sorts of materials to teach the children about the castle and the park. He told them what the castle used to look like, where the houses of vassals had stood, and what strategies had been employed to drive away encroaching enemies. One of his texts had an illustration of Shiroyama that was shaped rather like a slug. In the spring, when the Somei Yoshino cherry blossoms were in full bloom, the slug’s back became fluffy as though covered in light pink clouds.

After the cherry blossoms came the white apple flowers. In June, when the flower petals fell and were replaced by the small fruit, it was time for the paper bags that Totto and her classmates had pasted together.

The region was also well-known for growing cherries, and Mother would sometimes bring misshapen fruit home from her job at the cooperative. They may have looked a little strange, but they tasted just like regular cherries, and Totto was always thrilled to see them on the table.

—

Totto once went to Shiroyama Park by herself and tried to picture what it must have been like when the castle still loomed over the town, what vistas it might have commanded. The castle must have had a stunning view of the

paddies and fields, she imagined, and reflected on the scenery she'd taken in from the bus window on the way to the Tomb of Christ. She had wondered then why anyone would choose to live so far up in the mountains, but now she understood. These people had a strong bond to the land of their ancestors.

Having a hometown was a wonderful thing.

"I miss Tokyo. When will I be able to go back?"

Totto had made new friends and was quite adjusted to her life in Aomori. But sometimes, when remembering the big city and her family's Kitasenzoku house, she would think in her Aomori dialect, "I wanna go home." There was no fear of air raids here, but their current lifestyle could not afford them the freedom they had enjoyed back in Tokyo.

It was around this time that Totto learned their Kitasenzoku home had burned down in an air raid.

Narrow Escape from Death

Once they had finally settled into their life in Suwanotaira, Mother started to exchange letters with the family of her uncle in Kojimachi, Tokyo, with whom she had stayed while attending music college. Her uncle had suffered a brain hemorrhage and the family was hoping to move to the countryside. Would Mother be able to help them find a place to live by her?

Mother spared no effort and presently found her relatives a home. About a month later, her uncle arrived with his family of four. But that was only the beginning. Many other members of Totto's family also wrote to Mother for help, and by the summer, over ten relatives had assembled in Suwanotaira. Everyone was born and raised in Tokyo and had nowhere else to go to evacuate.

In the summer of that same year, Mother's father, Totto's grandfather, who lived in Takikawa, Hokkaido, passed away from a heart attack. Mother received the news via telegram and immediately rushed to get herself and her three children on a north-bound train to start their trek to Hokkaido.

Back then, traveling between mainland Japan and Hokkaido meant putting one's life on the line, as the Seikan Ferry that crossed the Tsugaru Strait to and from Aomori and the port city of Hakodate was an easy target for bombers and submarines. To make matters worse, tickets were tremendously difficult to come by. Totto and her family spent the night in a passageway for transfers between the train and the boat, and somehow managed to board the ferry the next day.

Once in Hakodate, they got on another train and traveled several more hours until they finally reached Mother's parents' house in Takikawa. Totto's grandfather, a doctor, had already been cremated, but there was quite a lot for Mother to take care of with the house and the business, so they remained in town for a stretch of days. Mother must have thought long and hard about what to do next. As the eldest daughter, it was her responsibility to care for her mother. After much contemplation, she decided to bring Totto's grandmother back with them to Aomori.



Totto wore a hand-me-down school uniform that used to belong to a relative.

Grandmother was a rather curious person. The daughter of a wealthy family, she had attended a missionary school in Sendai during the Taisho period and was raised with the understanding that she would not be permitted to marry into a family where she would need to cook or clean. In the end she married a doctor, which meant she could continue her affluent lifestyle. A very mild-mannered woman who read from her Bible every free moment she had, Grandmother greatly disliked cooking and doing laundry. Fortunately, she had nurses and housekeepers to help her with that.

The family of five—Mother, Grandmother, and the three children—made it safely back to Hakodate Station only to find another massive crowd waiting to board the ferry bound for Aomori. Some people were sitting around on newspapers. “We ain’t been able to get on for three days,” they lamented. Others cooked food on small charcoal grills.

Totto and her family held hands at all times. They wore protective head-coverings known as air-raid hoods and huddled together everywhere they went. Grandmother murmured a continuous stream of prayers, constantly clutching her Bible close.

Once they finally boarded the ferry, the captain decided for some reason to strike up a conversation with Totto. “You better hope we don’t come into contact with any of the naval mines that’ve been placed underwater by the enemy,” he said, “or this ship’ll sink like a rock.” This frightened Totto so terribly that her eyes remained glued to the water’s surface for the remainder of the trip.

Mercifully, they were able to cross the strait to Aomori without encountering any naval mines. Upon arrival, however, they found the Tohoku Line platform from which they would need to take a return train home absolutely packed with people. The schedule had gone haywire, and though they waited and waited, there was no sign of their train. After many long hours, they were informed that a direct train to Suwanotaira would not arrive until the following morning.

“There’s not much we can do now,” Mother said. “We’re all tired, so let’s spend the night here in the station and catch the first train in the morning.”

A different locomotive pulled into the station as she spoke. Totto felt an urgent need to board it, though she couldn't explain why.

"Mother, let's take this train."

"We can't," her mother quickly replied. "This only goes to Shiriuchi."

"Then let's go to Shiriuchi."

"But look at all these people. There's no guarantee that we'll be able to board a train home from there."

Totto usually obeyed her mother, but something told her that they simply must depart Aomori Station as soon as possible.

"We can walk from Shiriuchi to our house if we have to. It's not that far!" Totto insisted, grabbing hold of the iron handle on the railcar door. "Let's go, let's go, let's go!" she whined, quite immaturity. Taken aback by this uncharacteristic show of stubbornness, Mother gave in. The five of them stepped aboard.

The sun had long set by the time they arrived in Shiriuchi. There they spent a sleepless night in the station's tiny waiting room, unsure when the next train to Suwanotaira would come.

At some point, they felt a faint rumbling beneath them. They later realized that this had been July 28th, the day of the Aomori Air Raid, when B29s dropped tens of thousands of incendiary bombs, killing over a thousand people and burning down a large swath of the city. There was no telling what would have happened to Totto and her family had they stayed at Aomori Station for the night. Totto shuddered at the thought of them scrambling for their lives in an unfamiliar town.

Having narrowly escaped their deaths, Totto and her family were able to board a train in Shiriuchi and somehow make their way back to Suwanotaira. To this day, Totto cannot explain why she felt the need to ignore her mother's instincts, on which she relied on every other occasion, and insist they take that train.

Memories of the Produce Market

August 15th, 1945. Suwanotaira Station was abuzz that morning as adults spoke to each other in hushed tones.

“I hear there’ll be a major announcement on the radio.”

Shortly before noon, they all headed toward the station. Curious, Totto joined the group walking over from the produce market.

Under the glare of the blazing sun, they huddled around a radio in a shop and held their breath to listen to the emperor speak. Totto stood outside the circle and strained to hear, but couldn’t make out a word.

The radio announcement ended. “Guess the war’s over,” the adults murmured amongst themselves. Totto tugged on the shirt of a man nearby and asked, “Is the war really over?” The man nodded, looking perplexed.

Totto had to tell Mother right away, but her mother was working at the cooperative that day. Not sure what to make of the news, she decided to go to Mr. Numahata’s house to ask if it was true. She ran and ran and arrived completely out of breath.

“Mr. Numahata! Is the war really over?”

“Yeah, it’s over.”

“Phew,” Totto sighed, feeling at first more relief than joy. This meant there would be no more air raids, and Daddy would come back, and they might be able to go home to Tokyo. The more she thought about it, the more her relief turned to happiness.

Totto left Mr. Numahata’s house and skipped the whole way back to the apple hut.

—

The war had ended, but Totto and her family had no house in Tokyo to return to.

Instead, they moved from the apple hut to a tenement row housing complex near the station, as torrential rain had caused the river near the apple orchards to overflow and flood their hut. Their new home stood much closer to Suwanotaira Station and right next door to the produce market. It

also made for a shorter trip to school every day, which suited Totto quite well.

Many people traveled from great distances to buy fresh produce at the market, often on the first train of the day, from as far away as Tokyo. One morning, Totto left her house to go to school when she found herself face to face with a man of small stature. He had come to buy food at the market next door and looked like he might be from Tokyo.

“Might you be able to cook this rice for me before my train leaves late this afternoon?”

In his hand he held a burlap sack which must have contained the grains of uncooked rice. The sudden request caught Totto off guard, but she called for her mother and said, “This gentleman wants to ask you something,” then headed to school.

On her way home that day, she spotted the same man at Suwanotaira Station carrying a large basket on his back. “Mother, did you cook the rice for that man?” she asked upon arrival.

“I did,” Mother answered.

Although the war had come to an end, rice was still being rationed, and people who worked at a distance from their houses often carried a serving in a mess tin and asked people to cook it for them wherever it was they were headed. They could cook it before leaving home and make rice balls to carry around, but depending on the weather, those could easily go bad. People had to get creative to make the most of their precious rice.

As Totto set off for school the next morning, she saw four or five more middle-aged men forming a line outside their home.

“We heard that you cook rice here. Can we ask you to cook ours, too?”

From that day onward, Mother continued working at the farmers’ cooperative while also volunteering her time to cook rice. She would mold it into rice balls and wrap them in bamboo peel, then hand the *onigiri* back to the travelers in the early evening. It would have been nice if Grandmother could help, but Totto’s grandmother had never once cooked rice in her life. She was the only adult Totto had ever encountered who did not possess that skill.

Mother didn't try to teach her mother, however, and instead scraped together time to cook and fix the rice balls herself for these travelers from afar who had come to purchase fresh produce. Though many offered to pay for her services, she would not dare name a price. Seeing her hesitation, people often left a little money as a gift.

Once this became a regular occurrence, Mother made a decision. Rather than continuing this volunteer service, she would prepare the rice along with some miso soup and broiled fish and serve it all as a meal. Mother was about to start her own small business.

—

Available to cook rice.

Mother wrote the words on a piece of paper and posted it on their door. She procured a small charcoal grill, pot, cutting board, knife, and dishes, and decided to turn the dirt-floor entrance of the row-house unit into a little diner. The produce market was becoming busier by the day since the end of the war, but there were still no places for shoppers to eat. Mother's diner was an immediate hit.

The fish that she cooked and served she purchased fresh every morning from the fishmongers who came from Hachinohe to sell their catch. Wanting more than what they had to offer, Mother also took the train to Mutsuminato Station to buy ingredients such as squid, which lasted longer than fish. In front of that station was a market street called Isaba where people in the fishing industry gathered to peddle their goods.

Totto accompanied her mother on several occasions to help with the shopping. To get to Mutsuminato, they transferred to the Hachinohe Line at Shiriuchi and rode for four stops. When the transfer did not go smoothly, it could take over an hour each way, but the trip was well worth it. As soon as you stepped out of the station, there were shops—often mere boards lined with goods—up and down the street selling fresh fish, clams, and salted and dried seafood. Totto loved this lively street where fresh seafood abounded.

What she found interesting was that the people selling food at the market were mostly middle-aged women called *katcha*, or “mother” in the local dialect. It was generally accepted that fishing was a man’s job, but after working all night on their boats, the men were exhausted. When they returned in the morning, they would sort out the fish and the rest of their catch, but then it was time for the women to step in.

All of the Isaba *katcha* in Mutsuminato were kind and brimming with energy, and they generously shared their knowledge about which fish were in season and how best to cook them. Totto couldn’t help but marvel at how strong and self-sufficient Mother had become when she saw her negotiating with these women, asking, “If I buy multiple, will you lower the price?”

So it was that Mother’s business allowed her to kill two, even three, birds with one stone; while earning an income with the diner, she would also pick up wisdom from the *katcha* at the market and collect news about Tokyo from her regulars.

Presently, Mother began to show her skills as a vendor of all goods, progressing from cooking and serving meals to selling vegetables, fruit, seafood, and any other foodstuffs available on the market. This new business yielded a daily flush of cash income. Once, in the middle of the night, Mother was awakened by the sounds of Grandmother flattening out the bills and bundling them with rubber bands.

“You’re a Christian. Aren’t you meant to lay up your treasures in heaven?” Mother teased, amused by the sight of her mother counting the cash. Grandmother grinned and replied, “Money is something we ought to be grateful for.”

“Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven” was Grandmother’s favorite refrain. Totto wondered how thick the wad of bills must have been that it could bring temporal joy to even this devout Christian.

—

A playhouse once went up in a corner of the produce market.

The first spring following the war, the bridge over the river was submerged due to snowmelt and collapsed clean in the middle. The Tohoku Line had no alternative but to suspend service, causing a traveling theater troupe that was headed to a nearby big city to make an unplanned stop in Suwanotaira.

The troupe was none other than the Takarazuka Revue, a company famous for putting on shows in which women actors performed all the parts, including those intended for men. This detour happened during their traveling production of *An Actor's Revenge*, in which Misayo Minatogawa, their troupe leader and top star at the time, played the male lead.

The playhouse had a makeshift, handmade stage. There were no theater seats, of course, so the audience had to sit on straw mats on the market floor. Nevertheless, each performance was packed with people. Totto went to see the show nearly every day, either on her own or with friends, cheering on the performers from the very first row.

Truth be told, Totto enjoyed the opening performance more than the main show. A middle-aged man wearing brown-and-white spectator shoes played the accordion and sang a tune called “Tokyo Rhapsody”:

On nights when flowers bloom and nights when they scatter, Beneath the willows of Ginza

Ginza was where Daddy used to take Totto on their once-a-year outings. Listening to the man sing to the tune of his accordion, the memories of enjoying ice cream at Shiseido Parlor, shopping for toys at Kintaro, and watching films on the basement floor of Nihon Gekijo came flooding back.

“I know Ginza!” Totto thought as she did her utmost to keep the tears welling up in her eyes from spilling over. She considered telling the friend at her side how she missed that familiar corner of Tokyo, but the girl was always so nice to Totto and she felt as though unburdening herself would amount to a kind of betrayal. She kept her mouth shut.

As the train track repairs dragged on, the man with the funny shoes continued to sing, “On nights when flowers bloom and nights when they scatter,” and Totto sat enraptured in the front row each time, applauding him with her friend.

One day, Totto returned from school to find two visitors in her home. She recognized the man as the accordion player in the colorful shoes, but she couldn’t place the slender woman at his side. As it happened, she was the troupe leader and the star of *An Actor’s Revenge*. Totto had never seen her without her wig or her white face paint.

Mother had been chatting with the guests. She turned to Totto with an indescribable look on her face and said, “These two have come to see if you have any interest in joining their troupe. They say that you have what it takes to succeed as an actor, and that if I allow you to join them, they will make you the troupe leader someday. What do you think?”

Though Totto could not fathom why, these people had evidently come to scout her. “That sounds like great fun!” was her first thought. But she quickly remembered that she was only in junior high school and that she didn’t have a way to confer with Daddy since he was in Siberia. Regrettably, she had little choice but to decline their offer.

Once the Tohoku Line finally got up and running again, the troupe departed for the big city, the playhouse was torn down, and Totto soon forgot all about it.

It wasn’t until twenty years later, when invited to appear on a morning television program called the *Hiroshi Ogawa Show*, that she remembered the troupe leader. The show featured a segment titled “Someone from My Past” where guests could name a person they wished to be reunited with, so Totto asked the staff to track down this woman from her childhood. She wanted to meet the person who had seen something special in that grubby little girl in ratty clothes.

Totto’s heart fluttered with anticipation on the day of filming. Sadly, she learned that Misayo Minatogawa had already passed away, but she was connected to Misayo-san’s husband via telephone from the studio. Back when Misayo-san was still well, he shared, she’d caught a glimpse of Totto

on television and exclaimed with delight, “That’s her! That’s the girl! I *knew* I was right about her!”

Totto had wanted to express her gratitude to the woman who had spotted her in the crowd when she had nothing but the clothes on her back. And though she was disappointed not to be able to say thank you in person, the thought that Misayo-san had seen her on television gave Totto some comfort.

Mother continued to work at the cooperative while also doing farm labor, sewing clothes, and caring for her relatives. Her job was never done and she hardly had any time to sleep. And yet, at some point, she began to put on her best clothing and leave the house in the evenings, too. People had somehow discovered Mother’s wonderful singing voice and began asking her to sing at wedding receptions and other social gatherings.

Given her background as a vocal student in music school, Mother’s true wish was to perform arias from different operas, but instead she delighted audiences with her vocal range while singing “*Hanayome ningyo*” (Bridal Doll), “*Hamabe no uta*” (Song of the Seashore), *Yoimachigusa* (Evening Primrose), and other folk hits. “Thank you! Thank you!” people would exclaim as they showered her with gifts on her way home.

These gifts were Mother’s main target. At a time when no sweets were otherwise available, the wedding gifts often included pink-colored treats called *mijinko gashi*, made with sweet glutinous rice flour and shaped like celebratory sea bream. The desserts delighted Totto and her siblings, and they all waited eagerly for Mother to come home so they could dig in.

Every time the sweet fish appeared before them, they squealed with joy.

Totto Dangles from the Train Tracks

To travel to and from school, Totto rode the train for one stop between Suwanotaira and Sannohe stations using a monthly student commuter pass

that she hung from her neck in a case.

“Keep this around your neck. You mustn’t ever take it off,” her mother warned her time and again.

One afternoon after classes let out, Totto and a friend waited and waited at Sannohe for the train home, but saw no sign of it. It was not unusual for the trains to be delayed, so the two decided to play cat’s cradle to pass the time. Totto noticed that the string attached to her pass case was the perfect length and took it off to use for their game. With it, she wove various complicated shapes between her fingers, including frogs and railroad bridges. When the train finally came, she and her friend wanted to keep up their game during the short ride to the next station, so Totto continued to hold the pass case between her lips as they played in the swaying railroad car.

The two deboarded at Suwanotaira, flashed their passes at the exit gate, then started walking home, happily chatting away. By this point, Totto was holding her pass in her hand. They came to the path where they usually said goodbye, but Totto wasn’t quite ready to part ways just yet, so she walked to the foot of the bridge closest to her friend’s house, then waved and said, “That was fun. See you tomorrow!”

Two large, looming pine trees stood at the foot of the bridge. Totto’s friend crossed the bridge, then turned and waved. Not one to be outdone, Totto waved back even bigger. Just then, something fell out of her hand and fluttered into the river.

“What was that?” No sooner had the question crossed her mind than Totto realized it was her train pass—the same precious pass she had promised Mother she would never let off her neck! It soared through the sky, then landed on the surface of the river, where it momentarily floated like a buoy before being swallowed up by the current and sinking to the bottom. The river flowed fast, and it was starting to get dark, so Totto could do little but give it up for lost.

Once home, she came clean to her mother about the pass. “Didn’t I tell you to be careful?” Mother reproached her. “We can’t buy you a

replacement until next month! From tomorrow until then, you'll simply have to walk to school."

Things were still in a state of chaos following the war, and monthly passes were only sold at the beginning of every month. Mother tried to negotiate with the station attendant regardless, but they were unable to bend the rules. Totto would have to start walking the three miles from Suwanotaira to Sannohe each day to get to and from school.

Totto had an idea. The path to school was long and winding, and she feared she might lose her way if she took it. But there was no chance of her getting lost if she walked along the train tracks. She'd once heard adults saying it only took about an hour to walk the line between the stations, so that was what she decided to do. This meant that she would have to share the path with trains, of course, but Totto had the inbound and outbound schedules memorized. Whenever a train came, she could simply move to one side and wait for it to pass before starting on her way again.

At the time, there were not enough clothes or shoes to go around, and Totto had only wooden *geta* sandals to wear to school. She woke up an hour earlier than usual and click-clacked with them over the railroad ties from Suwanotaira to Sannohe. Once at Sannohe Station, she met up with her friends who had come by train and they walked the rest of the way to school together. The three miles home were more tiring than the three miles to school, but she mustered the energy every afternoon to clack, hop, and skip her way along the tracks.

—

But then, one day.

Totto was crossing the railway bridge just before Suwanotaira Station when she heard the sudden blare of a steam locomotive whistle. An unscheduled freight train was barreling toward her. Beneath the bridge roared a river that was not only forceful, but also looked quite deep. Totto knew there was a small evacuation space in the middle of the bridge for rail

construction workers. Disastrously for her, the floorboard had broken and been removed, so she would find no safety there.

With only seconds to plan her next move, Totto ducked under the tracks and hung with both hands from one of the railroad ties. The freight train thundered right above her head. How many cars did it have? It seemed to stretch on for an eternity.

Totto was never very good at the monkey bars, but she had come up with a game at Tomoe Gakuen where she hung from a bar with one arm for as long as possible, pretending to be a cut of beef hanging in a butcher's refrigerator. The Beef Game. Perhaps that game had given her some upper-body strength.

At long last, the freight car passed. Totto tried to climb back onto the tracks, only to find that she had no feeling in her hands. They had fallen asleep. Now the panic set in. Desperately she lifted her legs, hooked her schoolbag to the crosstie, and somehow hauled herself up above the tracks while also managing to keep her *geta* sandals from falling by clenching her toes. Down below, the river water whirled violently as it made its way toward the Pacific Ocean—without Totto. She let out a tremendous sigh of relief.

The next month, Mother bought Totto a new train pass. Totto carefully placed the pass in its case and secured it firmly around her neck.

“I Want to Go Back to Tokyo.”

As life in Aomori fell into a comfortable rhythm, Mother began to think about the possibility of moving back to Tokyo. Even if they were to return, however, their house had burned down and they had no place to live. With so many things to consider, Mother didn't quite know where to begin.

For starters, she decided that she would go and check on the situation herself. The first time she went to the Kitasenzoku area where their home used to be, she found many people still living there in air-raid shelters and barracks made of reclaimed wood and tin sheets. On her second trip, she

was able to track down a carpenter they used to know and ask him to build them a house as soon as she could gather the funds.

Next, she had to devise a plan to earn enough money for the construction. Her diner was a great success, but the income it generated would not be nearly enough. Her only other avenue for the time being was to sell vegetables and seafood. As Mother steadily grew her list of regular customers, some learned that she was from Tokyo and asked, “Can you get more of this or that in the city on your next trip?” Mother thought of her diner customers from Tokyo, who knew much more about business than she did. Perhaps if she contacted them, they might be able to teach her a few things?

“I ought to be able to bring in more money,” she concluded, “if I take orders for things that are only available in Tokyo and go to purchase them myself, rather than simply selling fish from Hachinohe.”

Mother started collecting orders from the residents of Suwanotaira and Sannohe and was quickly inundated with requests. The most sought-after items were garments such as kimonos, workmen’s two-toed, rubber-soled *jikatabi* boots, short *hanten* winter coats, *kappogi* coverall smocks, and aprons. Some people also asked for things like dictionaries, jewels, and watches.

Whenever Mother traveled to Tokyo to procure these goods, she would fill her backpack with grilled soft-dried squid that had been caught and prepared in Hachinohe. It was relatively compact and took no time to offload in Tokyo, where food was still scarce. Drawing on advice from various sources, she combed through pawn shops for the items on her shopping list and learned how to find forfeited watches, jewels, and similar items of good quality at low prices. She then brought these back to Aomori and sold them for a pretty penny.

During this period when Mother was making frequent trips between Suwanotaira and Tokyo, some news came in that filled Totto and her family with hope. A newspaper article reporting on Japanese prisoners of war in Siberia read: *Included among those detained is New Symphony Orchestra concertmaster Moritsuna Kuroyanagi.*

“Daddy’s alive!” they rejoiced.

However, they also heard a rumor that Daddy had tried to flee and had been shot.

“Not to worry,” Mother reassured the children. “Daddy wouldn’t dare do such a silly thing. I’m certain that he’s waiting patiently to be released so he can come home.”

Mother’s conviction never faltered, regardless of what dreadful rumors she heard. Believing that her husband was safe, she threw all her energy into her procurement business and deposited every little bit of cash she made into the bank to save for the house reconstruction. Totto believed that her father was safe, too, of course.

—

One year after the war ended, amidst another sweltering summer, Mother sat Totto down and said, “Tetsuko, I have something to discuss with you. Would you like to attend a girls’ school in Tokyo?”

“A girls’ school in Tokyo?”

Totto had been planning to matriculate to St. Hilda’s School in Hatanodai, Tokyo, after graduating from Tomoe Gakuen. The missionary school was across the street from Senzoku Church, which Totto had attended since she was a child. In fact, before Daddy was called up, he and Mother had already begun discussing the possibility of her enrolling there. Mother told Totto that she had run into a friend on a recent trip to Tokyo, and that her friend had agreed to let Totto stay in their home while attending the school, if she so chose.

“I know that your interests lie in music, dance, and English, but I’m afraid you won’t have the opportunity to pursue them here. If you would like, you can attend St. Hilda’s School from my friend’s home. I’ll go with you to do the paperwork. Then, once I have a little more money saved, we’ll be able to build our house in Kitasenzoku. What do you think?”

The bright red apples, the cherry blossoms at Shiroyama Park, the bustling energy of the produce market, Mr. Numahata, her school friends...

Totto loved them all dearly. But she couldn't deny the niggling suspicion she had felt the very first time she visited Shiroyama Park in Sannohe that this was not where she truly belonged. That doubt had lingered in her mind ever since.

"I want to go back to Tokyo," Totto replied in a small voice.

It was the middle of summer vacation, so Totto was unable to tell her friends that she was transferring to a school in Tokyo. She wished to at least share the news with her closest friend, but she never got the chance as Mother declared they would be setting off the very next day.

Totto felt terrible for not being able to say goodbye.

—

In later years, however, whenever Totto traveled to the Tohoku area for a theater performance, she made sure to meet her friend for tea in Hachinohe where she still lived. The last time they saw each other, her friend had become a grandmother and great-grandmother, but they both still remembered the day they met and how they'd wiped the classroom windows and talked about so many wonderful things.

Chapter Three

Our Duty It Is to Bloom



Hymns and a Wooden Gong

Totto and her mother chatted the entire train ride from Suwanotaira to Ueno Station.

“Half of me is thrilled, the other half is rather worried. I’ll only be alone for a little while, right? I’m excited to be able to read lots of books, but I do wish our whole family could live together.”

“We ought to be able to have our house rebuilt next year, so it won’t be too long,” Mother reassured her. “Besides, you’ll have a great education at St. Hilda’s School, and now that Grandmother can look after Noriaki-chan and Mari-chan, I can throw all my energy into this business and saving money. We all simply need to put in our best effort and we’ll be together before you know it.”

“I wonder when Daddy will be home. We won’t be the whole family without Daddy.”

“Don’t worry, dear. I’m asking around and trying to gather as much information as I can about Daddy. He’s doing his best in Siberia. We just need to wait patiently for him.”

As Totto cheerfully stuffed her cheeks with a soft *onigiri* made with freshly-harvested rice, she saw the confidence radiating from Mother’s face and was filled with a sense of security. Everything would surely be all right.

Totto hadn’t been back to Jiyugaoka in some time. Mother searched through the various stands and stalls outside the station to outfit Totto with the everyday items she would need in her new Tokyo life.

“The official St. Hilda’s School uniform is a pinafore dress, which I’ll sew and have ready by the next time I see you. Make do with what you have in the meanwhile,” Mother said, then set off to fulfill the orders from her customers up in Aomori. Her last stop was a pawn shop someone had recommended where she negotiated for various items. The empty backpack with which she’d started was full in a flash.

“I think I’ve managed to find most of what I needed, and I can sleep on the overnight train,” she told Totto, explaining that she would make the

return trip to Suwanotaira that same day. Heading back toward Ueno Station, they went to her friend's house where Totto was to stay. "It will only be good things from here, Tetsuko. I'll be back in Tokyo before you even notice I'm gone. Until then, I want you to take good care of yourself."

Not too long after, Mother had enough money saved to hire the carpenter to build them a house, as promised. She insisted on only two things: that the new house have a red roof and white walls, just as before.

And so it happened that Totto began attending St. Hilda's School.

Established by the Church of England in 1888, the all-girls school had originally been housed in a beautiful Western-style mansion. Three months before the war ended, however, the mansion had burned down in a particularly devastating air raid. Ever since, they had been conducting classes in the next town over, in a rented building on the grounds of Joshinji Temple, more commonly known as Kuhonbutsu. It struck Totto as quite odd for a missionary school to hold class at a Buddhist temple, but she knew Kuhonbutsu well from her Tomoe Gakuen days, and more than anything she was delighted to be able to spend time there again.

Kuhonbutsu held a special place in Totto's heart. It stood about ten minutes by foot from where Tomoe had been, and used to be the most common destination for the walks on which the school's teachers sometimes led their classes. There were all sorts of intriguing sights on the temple grounds: a large rock bearing the footprints of a long-nosed, winged *tengu* goblin, a dark well into which a shooting star was said to have fallen, two bright red guardian Deva Kings at the gate, and a statue of King Enma, the master of the underworld, who, according to legend, yanked out people's tongues with pliers...It was almost as if the temple had emerged from an ancient Japanese folktale.

Totto also knew why Joshinji Temple was commonly called Kuhonbutsu, which is written with the Chinese-derived characters for "nine," "item," and "Buddhism." A Tomoe teacher once taught them that it

came from the nine Amida Buddha statues on the temple grounds, divided evenly amongst its three Buddha Halls.

The moment Totto spotted the temple's large ginkgo trees, she wanted to squeal, "Oh, how I missed you!" Of all the things she had been reunited with in Tokyo, these trees filled her with the most nostalgia. She and her friends used to eat the ginkgo nuts that grew on them every fall. The nuts, or *ginnan*, had a strange, pungent smell, but were delicious once roasted and peeled.

St. Hilda's held its classes inside a two-story wooden structure they called the lecture hall. Before the all-girls school moved into the space, it had been occupied by the Maedayama clan of the Takasago stable of sumo wrestlers, whose home had also been destroyed in the Great Tokyo Air Raid. By the time Totto and her classmates arrived, the *dohyo* ring where the wrestlers practiced had been removed. "What fun it would be if they were still here," Totto thought wistfully.

Totto removed her wooden *geta* sandals at the entrance to the lecture hall and stepped inside.

"Good morning," she murmured as she hesitantly opened the *fusuma* sliding door that led to a large tatami-matted room. There appeared to be more rooms beyond the sliding doors at the other end. In true temple fashion, the space was encircled by a hardwood corridor. The structure also had a second floor, however, which Totto found rather unusual.

Totto had been informed that a worship service would be held before classes began, so she waited by the piano that sat on the wooden floor. A group of students soon came in and immediately started to remove the far *fusuma* doors. Before Totto knew it, the room had expanded to twice its original size. Students continued to stream in, calling out, "Good morning!" to one another, each with a well-worn hymnbook in hand. Clearly, they would need them to sing during the service. Totto scrambled to retrieve her own book from her bag and line up behind the other students.

Though the official school uniform was a pinafore dress, no one in attendance wore the full proper ensemble. Instead, they all made do with white blouses and whatever appropriate-looking bottoms they could

manage. After about a hundred students had lined up inside the tatami-matted room, the door by the entrance slid open. In walked the school chaplain, dressed in long black robes and a distinctive white stand-up collar, and began the worship service amid a respectful silence.

It had been years since Totto last sang a hymn, and never quite like this. At the Senzoku Church Sunday School she used to attend, they had always been accompanied not by a piano but by an organ. While singing to the tune of a piano felt a little different, the first few notes of the instrument moved Totto so deeply that she couldn't help but feel excited despite the solemn mood of the service. "Music is truly lovely, isn't it?" she thought to herself as she sang along dreamily. Before long, though, she was interrupted by sounds and voices she wasn't accustomed to hearing.

"Na-mu-ami...Na-mu-ami..."

Thump, thump. Ding!

She had almost forgotten. They were in a Buddhist temple.

Contrasting waves of melodies and rhythms lapped over each other in Totto's head. The crystal-clear voices of teenage girls sent the hymns soaring to the heavens, while the sutras reverberated in the low, resonant voices of elderly monks who seemed to know all there was to know in the world.

After the service concluded, Totto was summoned to the front by someone she gathered was a teacher.

"Everyone, this is Tetsuko Kuroyanagi. She will be joining us as of today."

"Hello." Totto bowed to the entire student body.

The teacher turned to her. "Please help return this room to its original condition, then follow those students over there upstairs."

The "students over there" waved to Totto.

"We have to partition the rooms before we start class," they said when she joined them. "This is a wooden building and if everyone goes upstairs at once, the weight causes the frame to sag and makes it impossible to put the sliding doors back in place. That's why we must replace and close the doors first and then go upstairs," explained a bright-looking student with

her hair in twin braids. “Will you hold that side, Miss Kuroyanagi?” All the girls worked quickly to return the sliding doors to their original positions, creating several smaller rooms which were evidently used by one grade each.

The chanting also seemed to have concluded, and Totto could now hear birds twittering away. First, it had been the piano and the hymns, then the wooden gong and the chants, and now, the chirping of birds. She could also make out the clangor of construction nearby, as well as the familiar clanking of the railroad crossing bars.

Totto was back in Tokyo!

Our Duty It Is to Bloom

“Ladies!” That one word from their British teacher was how every English lesson began.

Totto and her classmates retrieved sitting cushions from the classroom closet and sat on the floor, four to a table, using every last bit of space in the tatami room. It made Totto giggle to be studying this foreign language in such a traditional Japanese temple school setting.

Their teacher was much older than Totto’s mother. She wore her long hair parted in the middle and styled into twin braids wrapped around her head like a headband. Standing at the front of the room, she would greet them with a resounding, “Ladies, good morning!” Her strong British accent seemed to radiate pride in its distinction from the English that Americans spoke. Its crisp rhythms reminded Totto of the crack of a whip and unconsciously prompted her to sit up straight. “This may be rather tough,” she thought.

But no one was about to slow down for Totto. In fact, the teacher refrained from using any Japanese at all; she simply directed her students to memorize her words, or something to that effect. Totto’s classmates worked hard to copy her, so she did her best to copy them. Usually clad in a white blouse and a brown tweed jacket over a long skirt, their teacher looked the picture of a typical English noblewoman with her tight corset that cinched

in her waist. Her whole body seemed to exude energy with every word she spoke, which intimidated Totto.

At first, Totto worried that it would be very trying to follow the pace of these English lessons. But, bolstered by memories of how she had picked up the local Aomori dialect, she focused on replicating the sounds she heard until they rolled off her tongue. Before long, she found herself keeping pace with the rhythms of spoken English as well.

In time, she began to enjoy the process of learning something new, even if only by rote memorization. For this she credited her spirited teachers, who showed by example what it meant to live each day with one's head held high. Totto wondered if that was the British way.

None of the Kuhonbutsu buildings were heated. Whereas the classrooms in Totto's old school far to the north in Sannohe had been equipped with woodburning stoves and were quite warm, the cold drafts in this Tokyo building that had formerly housed a sumo stable left it frigid. Everyone wore their overcoats in class.

The British teachers all dressed in suits, but what interested Totto most were their socks, which she had ample opportunity to study since shoes were not allowed in the tatami rooms. True to their English tradition, the women favored thick, brown cotton socks. Meanwhile, some of the more stylish of the Japanese faculty wore nylon stockings, which were considered the height of fashion at the time.

—

Totto excelled in a class called Chorübungen, named after a method developed in Germany for teaching students to sing from choral sheet music. Totto and her classmates were assigned either the lower or higher voice parts of a piece, and while some quickly lost track of their part and switched over to the other, Totto was good at sticking to her portion of the score. The European influences in these music lessons as well as the English classes at her new school reminded Totto a little of Tomoe Gakuen.

What with all the standing and sitting, and the bringing out and putting away of desks and tables, the straw tatami mats in the classrooms soon wore out and started to fray. It didn't help, either, that the students often absentmindedly plucked at the fiber from which the mats were woven whenever they grew bored in classes like Christianity or algebra. The plucking was especially widespread during exams. By the time they were over, the mats were nearly ruined. One could almost measure how difficult the tests had been by the degree of damage to the tatami.

Totto was, of course, one of the habitual offenders. From her seat at the front of the class, mere inches away from the teacher, she liked to make long strands from the straw she'd yanked out of the tatami, tie one end to a nearby desk leg and the other around the teacher's ankle, then watch excitedly to see what would happen once the instructor tried to walk away. But no matter how many times she attempted the trick, the strands snapped easily and the teacher never toppled over the way Totto pictured in her mind. Totto was now in junior high school, but her propensity for causing trouble during class had evidently remained unchanged since her days at Tomoe Gakuen.

—

Years later, Totto wrote a passage for the St. Hilda's graduates magazine containing the following line: "Though I never studied and got terrible marks, the spirit of our school song has always stayed with me and inspired me to try to live by its words."

Totto was fond of the hymns sung during worship services, but she absolutely loved the school song:

*Deep in the mountains,
Fragrant thoroughworts perfume the air
Planted in the garden,
So, too, shall they blossom there
Though fate decides when and where,*

Our duty it is to bloom

The phrase “our duty it is to bloom” became something of a motto for the students.

As Totto grew accustomed to her new school, she made more friends and, on occasion, visited their homes after classes let out for the day. While young girls today tend to squeal over idols or discuss the latest fashion trends, Totto and her friends often chatted about their dreams for the future, asking each other, “What would you like to do with your life?”

It is certainly true that there was little else to do for fun at the time, but St. Hilda’s students’ focus on the future may have reflected the impact of having internalized this “duty to bloom.” Even Totto, who did not much care for studying, was always ruminating in the back of her mind about how she might one day “bloom” to her full potential.

Many women back then chose to “bloom” through marriage. One day, Totto’s homeroom teacher Miss Shinobu Aoki bade farewell to the students gathered at the morning assembly. She would soon be wed and would thus be leaving her post. Totto wondered if Miss Aoki had given up teaching so that she could marry. The thought saddened her terribly.

Ever since she had been scolded by that police officer years earlier for crying and chanting, “We’re cold, sleepy, and hungry,” Totto had gritted her teeth and held back her tears during even the most dreadfully trying situations. But on this day, she sobbed just as loudly as her classmates. Their beloved teacher was getting married. And because she was getting married, she could no longer teach.

But even these tears, which Totto and her classmates shed openly, may have represented a kind of freedom they had reclaimed. No matter when or where Totto cried now, no officers would ever reprimand her for it again.

A Broken Heart

Totto was a parishioner of Senzoku Church for nearly twenty years, from when she was a young child to when she could no longer attend services

due to her busy work schedule at the public broadcaster NHK (*Nihon Housoukyoku*, or Japan Broadcasting Corporation).

One Christmas before starting elementary school, Totto and the children at the church put on a Nativity play that began with the birth of Jesus in a stable. A bit precocious for her age, Totto was assigned the role of Jesus Christ. But then, during one rehearsal, she stuffed a piece of paper into the mouth of a child who was playing a sheep and ordered, “Go on, eat.” She had heard somewhere that sheep liked to eat paper. “Jesus Christ must never be so violent,” she was reprimanded, and removed from the role.

It was then Totto’s turn to play the sheep, which proved a much more boring part. “Give me some paper! I’ll eat it!” she hissed to the new Jesus. After another scolding, this time for making too much noise, Totto was deprived of that role as well.

Totto also vividly remembers caroling during Christmas while the war was still raging. She and her fellow church choir members walked from house to house, darkened due to the blackouts, and sang hymns outside congregation members’ doors and windows. In exchange, they were given warm sugar water, steamed potatoes, and corn bread. Sugar was an extravagance at the time; the people in the homes must have specially set it and the other treats aside just for these carolers. Totto made an effort to join as many caroling outings as she could.

Now that she was back in Tokyo, Totto went to church four times a week. The home where she was staying was within a stone’s throw of Senzoku Church and everyone there treated her with great kindness. Apart from Sunday School, Totto attended congregation member gatherings on Tuesdays, prayer meetings on Wednesdays, and Bible study on Fridays.

There came a day when the Sunday School organist left the position and the church began their search for a replacement. Totto rushed to the elderly head priest as soon as she heard the news and pleaded, “Please let me do it!”

The priest smiled. “That would be wonderful, child, thank you.”

Totto was over the moon, for she had a secret crush on the church’s other pastor—a young and handsome associate priest. While she was by no

means an exceptional organ player, she was decent and passionate. Moreover, if she became the church's regular organist, she reasoned, she would be able to meet with the associate priest to discuss and select the hymns for Sunday School the following week. The prospect of speaking to him one on one thrilled her. It sounded so terribly sophisticated.

The young pastor had recently been discharged from the Naval Academy and was staying next door to the church in the elder priest's home. Totto, too, was staying nearby in her mother's friend's home, and it delighted her to have this in common with the object of her affections.

Every visit to the church promised a moment with the associate priest, who was tall with kind eyes and wore rimless glasses. His hair could at times be a bit messy, as though he had just woken up, but that only added to his charm. He was also wonderful at leading prayers or giving sermons whenever he stepped in for the elder pastor. In fact, there were too many things that Totto adored about him to list, but most of all she loved the sound of his voice. Totto was far from his only admirer, however; during his tenure, the church experienced a significant boost in new memberships.

Once, the associate priest took Totto and a few other parishioners to pay a sick visit to an ailing congregant. Totto didn't know the person well and it was freezing outside, but the thought of spending time with the associate priest warmed her all over and made her forget entirely about the cold.

But then one day, the church members were abruptly notified that the associate pastor would soon be transferred to a church far to the west in Hiroshima. What really crushed Totto were the words that followed: "I hear he's getting married!"

The pastor's fiancée, who was beautiful and much older than Totto, also lived in the neighborhood and attended the church four days a week. And yet, Totto hadn't so much as noticed this dangerous competition.

"Oh no..." Totto despaired. "What shall I do now?"

She wanted at the very least to give the associate priest a gift by which to remember her. She hadn't any money, however, or any idea of what to give him. Despondently she trudged back to her house with her head hung low. That's when she spotted something very curious on the ground: a small

branch with fluffy, perfectly white puffs. It looked almost as if marshmallows had been pasted to it.

How beautiful! Totto put the branch in a small box and tied a ribbon around it. It made the perfect gift.

On his final day, Totto went to Tokyo Station to see the young pastor off. She wore a white blouse, trousers made of Gobelin fabric, and red shoes. The white blouse was something that Mother had crafted out of a parachute discarded by the military and distributed to civilians in Suwanotaira. The Gobelin fabric of her trousers had originally covered the sofa at their house in Kitasenzoku. It was the same stretch of fabric Mother had used to transport their possessions when they evacuated to Aomori and later repurposed to decorate their Suwanotaira home. In Mother's hands, it had now been transformed into a fine set of trousers.

For the red shoes, Totto took a pair of white trainers that had been distributed by the government in Tokyo and had them painted red at a paint shop. The shop owner warned her that the paint would crack when it dried, but that didn't deter Totto. She'd been captivated by the red ballet slippers she had seen in a movie and wanted shoes just like them. In the end, the paint did immediately crack, as the owner had said. Still, red shoes weren't available anywhere else at the time and Totto was rather proud of hers.

She handed the farewell token to the departing priest at Tokyo Station, jokingly presenting it as "a gift from outer space." As the train chugged away, she waved the pastor goodbye with her fellow church members until she thought her arm might fall off.

Years later, Totto appeared in a regular segment of the *Hiroshi Ogawa Show*—the same program that had sought out the wonderful troupe leader from Totto's youth—that reunited guests with their first crush. This time, she was connected to the associate pastor himself over the telephone. He had since left the priesthood and joined, of all things, the Japan Self-Defense Forces (the military replacement that was created after the war).

Totto's former crush remembered her farewell gift. Unfortunately, the little white balls she had thought resembled fluffy, sweet marshmallows were in fact the eggs of praying mantises, which Totto abhorred. Once in

Hiroshima, the young man had opened the box only for countless freshly-hatched larvae to come crawling out. Totto heard the story and nearly fainted.

Construction finished on the new house with the red roof and white walls near Kitasenzoku Station, and Mother, Grandmother, Noriaki, and Mari returned from Suwanotaira. Totto was overjoyed to be reunited with them. Finally, the family of five could live together again.

Now they only needed to wait for Daddy to come home.

Rose Kanetaka

At St. Hilda's School, Totto and her classmates received something called LARA (Licensed Agencies for Relief in Asia) supplies. For several years after the war, various religious organizations and charities in America gathered food, medical and school supplies, clothes, and the like, and shipped them to Japan. These donations were laid out on a few tables in the manner of a little market, and Totto and her classmates were given the opportunity to try on the garments and select whichever item they wished to take home.

It was wintertime and most everyone opted for pieces of warm clothing. But tucked behind all the school supplies, Totto spotted a fluffy stuffed rabbit and knew instantly it was what she wanted. She and her peers were desperate for anything that felt soft and fluffy, or that was festooned with sparkles and frills. From that day onward, she never left home without the rabbit.

As Christmas neared, the school held its annual bazaar for which the students were instructed to craft handmade items. Totto used her black-and-white stuffed bear—which had been by her side throughout her evacuation—as a guide and stitched together a small teddy bear that fit in the palm of her hand.

Some students unraveled sweaters that were no longer being worn by family members and used the yarn to knit children's socks, while others made soft Japanese treats from stewed sweet potatoes, thinking that such snacks would be more appreciated. Watching people purchase their hand-made creations gave the young ladies such a satisfying thrill. The sweet treats proved to be an especially huge hit and sold out in no time at all.

The greatest excitement of the day, however, was sparked by the appearance of one particular graduate.

Her name was Rose Kanetaka, though she was perhaps better known by her pen name, Kaoru Kanetaka. A traveler, journalist, and essayist, she may be best remembered for her travel documentary television program *Kaoru Kanetaka: Sekai no tabi* (The World Around Us). The show began in 1959 and aired for thirty-one years, during which she ventured to over 150 countries and shared the wonders of the world as reporter, narrator, and producer.

“Rose Kanetaka is meant to come to the bazaar today!” The rumor spread through the bazaar in the blink of an eye.

Rose was a recent graduate of St. Hilda's and not yet famous beyond the school, but the students all knew and admired her. They had never seen a more beautiful and fashionable woman. Oddly enough, everyone carried their own duplicate of a picture of Rose that one enterprising individual must have had reprinted. Even Totto had a copy tucked into her bag. The woman in the photo had the most marvelously prominent features and bright, round eyes that made one wonder if she was even real.

As the time approached for Rose's arrival, the students gathered around the front gate of Kuhonbutsu to greet her. Some gripped her photo in their hands as they waited with bated breath. Presently they spotted a tall woman with a large bag walking toward them.

“Miss Kanetaka!”

“Miss Rose!”

Even the usually reserved upperclassmen called out Rose's name until their cheeks flushed bright red.

Rose's presence took Totto's breath away. Those large eyes, those rose-colored lips. Her hair, plaited into thin braids, was pulled back with a hairband. She wore a wool coat with a fur collar that swayed elegantly in the breeze over a smart trouser suit. Her flared bell bottoms were of the style that seemed perfectly suited for a young Western man. Totto later learned that the teachers gave Rose a scolding for her sartorial flair, particularly the fur coat and the bell bottoms. The school could be a bit picky about these things.

"Good day," Rose called out as she stepped through the front gate. Totto joined her classmates in scurrying after her and saw that the recent graduate was wearing high heels.

Rose had brought items for the bazaar as well. After they sold out, she gave the proceeds—by far the most anyone raised that day—over to the teachers and glided off like a passing breeze. One student followed Rose around taking photographs. Naturally, Totto later asked for copies of those snapshots.

Nearly thirty years later, Rose Kanetaka made an appearance on Totto's long-running talk show *Tetsuko's Room*. They reminisced about the bazaar, of course, but the story that remained with Totto ever after had to do with Rose's adventures.

"You traveled to Africa on one episode of *Sekai no tabi*," Totto began, working up to a question she'd been wanting to ask for years. "And perhaps it was an expression of friendship on the part of the village chief, who put something into his mouth, chewed on it, then took it out and presented it to you. You then immediately..."

"Ate it to show that I hoped to be friends, in case there was any doubt of my intentions. There seemed to be some concern that I might be looking down on them, and this helped ease that worry."

In later years, Totto would be appointed UNICEF (United Nations International Children's Fund) Goodwill Ambassador. She traveled around the world in that capacity visiting children—many on the brink of death—in hospitals, refugee camps, and the like. Totto would wrap her arms around these children during each visit, and while traveling between destinations she would think about her fellow St. Hilda's graduate. Even now, she feels that Rose passed an important baton to her, one that's inspired her to keep running ever since.

An After-School Flutter

About a year after she started attending St. Hilda's School, Totto received her very first love letter.

It happened after school while she was waiting for her train to pull into the station. The trains in Tokyo never ceased to amaze her. There was no need to memorize the schedule, as all she had to do if she missed a train was wait on the platform for the following one, which was sure to arrive in under ten minutes. In Aomori, failing to catch a train would mean a two-hour wait.

On that particular day, Totto was waiting on the platform alone when an unfamiliar boy in a junior high school uniform ran up to her.

"Excuse me..."

The boy's head was bowed and she couldn't see his face, but he looked so terribly fidgety that she came straight to the point.

"Can I help you?"

Without a word, the boy reached into his bag, retrieved a white envelope, then held it out to her. No sooner had Totto taken the envelope than he turned on his heel and sprinted away. Totto blinked in surprise about five times. By the time she knew what was what, the boy had disappeared from the station.

"Could this be a love letter?" she wondered.

Totto went home and opened the letter, her heart aflutter. The envelope was sealed so securely with glue that she had to force it open and

accidentally tore the triangular flap in the process. “Well, all that matters is that the letter is intact,” she reassured herself as she took it out carefully and started to read.

To my fresh-steamed sweet potato...

At that very first line, the fluttering in Totto’s heart turned to fuming rage. “Now wait just a minute! Who in the world would address a love letter—if that’s what this is—to their ‘fresh-steamed sweet potato’?!” Totto knew that she was no great beauty, but surely there was a more romantic way to open a letter. “How heartless!” She ripped it up without reading another word.

After some time had passed, however, Totto started to think that maybe the expression wasn’t so awful after all. The country was still suffering from a food shortage, and this was not Aomori, where produce grew in abundance. In Tokyo, a “fresh-steamed sweet potato” still counted as a proper luxury. Perhaps sweet, fluffy, freshly steamed sweet potatoes were the lad’s favorite food. For all she knew, likening Totto to his preferred treat may have been the highest compliment he could give. Alas, Totto was still a teenager and not yet equipped to read that deeply into it.

Nothing about the boy’s appearance or his handwriting survived in Totto’s memory. All she can recall is that he was wearing a school uniform. The shock of being called a “fresh-steamed sweet potato” was so great, it wiped every other detail from her mind.

Totto had always had an affinity for handwritten letters, ever since she was a young girl.

The first letter, or rather the first postcard, she ever received was from her grandmother on her father’s side, with whom she had spent time at a Yugawara hot springs resort to rehabilitate her leg. *I have your pagodite stone, which you have forgotten to take home with you, her grandmother wrote in her beautiful penmanship. Please come by any time to retrieve it.* Totto had just entered elementary school, and she and her friends used the

greyish-green pagodite like chalk to draw pictures on the ground. Seeing a postcard addressed specifically to her made Totto feel terribly sophisticated.

During the war, Totto read from a series called *Nihon Shokokumin Bunko* (Literature for the Younger Generation), which included works of world literature. As mentioned earlier, she loved *Dot and Anton* by Erich Kästner, but she also appreciated Anton Chekhov's letter to his brother, in which he wrote that it is important to "ache for what is not visible to the naked eye." Totto felt she understood the kindness of which he spoke, but in order to be a kind person, she thought she needed to be more knowledgeable about the world. And in order to gain more knowledge, she needed to read more books.

When she was about eighteen, Totto worked up the nerve to write a letter to Erich Kästner's translator, the German literature specialist Kenji Takahashi. She could hardly believe it when he sent her a heartfelt reply that became the beginning of a lovely correspondence. She was beyond delighted when Mr. Takahashi penned in one of his letters, *Let us always sign off with: And the magic word is Kästner*. The works of Kästner, which never wavered in their opposition to the Nazis, made Totto laugh but were also memorable for their cutting satire.

Some time later, thanks entirely to Mr. Takahashi, Totto received a letter from Kästner himself. The one and only! This correspondence with Mr. Takahashi was the first of many such experiences which taught Totto that when a letter is written with one's whole heart, it is certain to reach the person for whom it is intended.

Totto also once received a letter from Astrid Lindgren, author of the *Pippi Longstocking* series. When the English translation of Totto's book, *Totto-chan: The Little Girl at the Window*, was first published, Totto was determined to have Astrid Lindgren read it, so she sent the author a copy along with a letter. The handwritten note that she received in reply read, *My eyesight is poor, and I am unable to read the book myself, but I look forward to having my daughter read it aloud to me*. Totto was on cloud nine. For years she kept the letter under the glass top of her desk so that she could reread it anytime.

It saddened Totto to read in the newspaper of the author's passing at the age of ninety-four. Still, what an incredible life! She felt strongly that Pippi's vibrant personality could only have come into being through the great creative force that was Astrid Lindgren.

One day, Totto had an after-school visit at a friend's house. The friend then offered to walk Totto halfway home, so the two set off for Nagahara Station on the Ikegami Line. On their way, they encountered a young man sitting on the side of the road with a hanging cloth sign that read, *Palm Readings Available*. Totto gave him a curious look.

"What do you say?" the young man said. "I can read your palm."

This shocked Totto. To her, palm-readings were only for adults, and she was still just sixteen. The young man was of a smaller stature and in his tattered gray kimono, he looked the way most Japanese people did back then: pale and malnourished. But he seemed kind.

Totto suddenly felt adventurous and decided she simply must have her palm read. She checked the sign to see how much it cost and realized she had just enough allowance left for a reading. Her friend seemed hesitant as she inspected her own wallet, but Totto talked her into it. She then stuck out her hand. "Yes, please."

As usual, Totto was carrying the stuffed rabbit she had found among the relief supplies delivered to St. Hilda's School. It was now one of her most cherished possessions, much like the black-and-white stuffed bear that her cameraman uncle had brought back from overseas.

Totto held out her free hand. It was stained with an embarrassing amount of dirt, as Totto had a habit of touching all sorts of things on her walks. How mortifying, to have her palm read when it was this grimy! No wonder her mother was always reminding her to wash her hands.

But the palm reader didn't seem to mind. He took Totto's hand and peered at it through a magnifying glass, then slowly released it. "Let me examine the other hand."

Totto tucked her rabbit under her other arm and stuck out the hand that had been holding it. This one was even grubbier.

“I’m sorry my hand’s so dirty,” she apologized. The palm reader chuckled. “It’s no trouble.” Carefully he inspected not only her palm, but also her nails and the sides of her hand before gently letting it go. He then looked Totto straight in the eye and said, “You will not marry for a long time. A very long time.”

Totto and her friend exchanged a glance and laughed. Marriage seemed a far-off proposition for a sixteen-year-old girl. Why did he feel the need to tell her it would not be coming soon? But the palm reader pushed past their laughter and continued in a serious tone, “Money will not be a concern for you. And...” he said slowly, checking her palm once more, “your name will become known far and wide.”

“Far and wide?”

The palm reader cleared his throat, seemingly lost for a reply. “That’s what I’m seeing. Though to be honest, I don’t know what it means.” He then added, “I recommend praying to the deity Inari.”

This made Totto laugh harder still. She had been raised in a Christian home and was now attending a British missionary school, yet this man was telling her to pray to one of the primary Shinto gods. Seeing that Totto could not stop giggling, the palm reader confidently but kindly repeated, “I do believe it will help you.”

By the time Totto thanked him, paid for the reading, and started off toward the station, it was growing dark. As soon as she arrived home, she reported the results of her reading to Mother. “My name is going to become known far and wide.”

Mother was making dinner. “Oh, goodness,” she murmured as she peered into a pot. “I hope you don’t get into some sort of trouble and have your name on the front page of all the newspapers. Promise you’ll be careful, dear.”

Years later, Totto made an appearance on the popular Saturday night NHK television show *Yume de aimasho* (Let's Meet in Our Dreams). It was New Year's Eve, and she joined superstar singer Kyu Sakamoto, known for singing "*Ue wo muite aruko*" (Walk with Your Head Held High), a world-famous song that came to be known as "Sukiyaki" in English, as well as legendary lyricist Rokusuke Ei, who penned the smash hit's lyrics, and beloved actor Kiyoshi Atsumi, star of the popular *Tora-san* movies, in making their annual visit to the Toyokawa Inari temple in Akasaka. The temple is also home to Benzaiten, the goddess of the arts, and is said to bring good fortune to those in the entertainment world.

As she put her hands together at the temple, Totto realized that she was praying to an Inari deity, just as the palm reader had said. He had been right all along.

The Teachers of St. Hilda's School

With the exception of the principal and the chaplain, the teachers at St. Hilda's School were almost all women. More than half were themselves graduates of the school, and they took great pride in it. They were always telling restless pupils such as Totto to "behave like a proper St. Hilda's student."

One teacher who stands out in Totto's memory is Miss Toki Shihozawa. She taught English and Bible study, and was also a graduate of the school. Due to St. Hilda's close affiliation with England, it was heavily scrutinized by military authorities during the war. Miss Shihozawa, who had once studied in the U.K. and was viewed as an Anglophile, came under suspicion of leaking insider information through the church and was investigated as a possible spy by the military police. Fortunately, Miss Shihozawa overcame that dreadful experience, but by the time she resumed teaching in accordance with her Christian beliefs, she had become incredibly strict.

"Miss Kuroyanagi, please come see me after class," she said, stopping Totto after worship service one morning. Totto couldn't recall having done anything that would land her in hot water. Still, she dragged her feet across

the arched bridge on campus to the faculty room. Upon arrival, Miss Shihozawa admonished her, “You were talking very loudly to a friend at the train station yesterday. St. Hilda’s School students are not to speak in such disruptive voices.”

The teacher’s tone was not harsh, but she had a commanding way about her. Totto could only reply, “I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

Totto also remembers an episode from the annual bazaar which Miss Rose Kanetaka attended. The proceeds from the event were donated in their entirety to special education schools, institutions for children, nursing homes, and centers for leprosy care, but some teachers wondered if a portion of the money couldn’t be spent on their own school. Miss Shihozawa is said to have responded, “What you’re proposing is a bargain sale, not a bazaar.” She was right: One of the dictionary’s definitions of the word “bazaar” is a fair for the sale of articles for charitable purposes.

The most popular teacher at the school was Miss Yaeko Goto, called affectionately by the nickname “Miss Go-chan.” Likewise a St. Hilda’s graduate, she had returned to her alma mater to teach English. She was passionate about the gardening club and had apparently created flowerbeds among the ruins of the school’s fire-ravaged campus.

Miss Go-chan had many unforgettable sayings, such as:

“There is joy in having plenty of things, and joy in having nothing at all. It is a blessing to know both,” and “You will make many friends throughout your life, but none more precious than the ones you make at this school.”

She was also known for frequently looking words up in the dictionary. The sight of her poring over its pages stayed with students for years afterwards and served as an example that Totto and her peers made a mental note to try and follow.

—

There were some teachers at St. Hilda’s of whom Totto was not nearly as fond.

Chief among them was a new male instructor who had arrived to teach mathematics. He was one of very few men at the school, and the students couldn't help but tease him a little about it. Totto simply didn't get along with him. Once, when he opened the floor to questions during class, Totto asked, "Why must we learn algebra? When will we need it in our lives?" Algebra was one of her least favorite subjects.

The teacher thought about it and replied, "I'll have an answer for you tomorrow." The next day, he said, "If you understand geometry, you won't need to climb a tree to know how tall it is. And you'll be able to calculate the length of a bridge without crossing it."

"Hmm, I suppose that is important," Totto thought.

To Totto's great disappointment, he then continued, "However, I don't know what use algebra serves."

There was once an incident surrounding new textbooks which were distributed to the students. Totto told this teacher that she hadn't received hers yet, and he gave her a reply that she knew to be patently untrue. So, on her next math test, she wrote, *You are a liar. Teachers should never lie to their students*. When Totto got her test back, her score was marked with a big, red -10. Minus ten out of one hundred. To protest, Totto refused to look the teacher in the eye from then on.

A few days later, he stopped her in the hallway. "Miss Kuroyanagi, I gave you a minus ten on the last test, but I see now that it was inappropriate of me. I would like to rescind that score."

Totto assumed he must be feeling sorry for what he'd done. "What will my score be, then?" she asked.

"It will be zero points instead of minus ten."

"In that case, I'll keep the minus ten."

Totto told a friend about how much she disliked this teacher. "Perhaps it's not the teacher," her friend suggested. "Perhaps you simply don't care for mathematics. Remember with our last teacher, you yelled to everyone in class, 'Let's all turn our tests in blank!' "

Had she really said that? Totto couldn't recall.

The Jiyugaoka Cinema

Going to the movies provided the main form of entertainment for the Japanese public shortly after the war. But while Totto had gotten to see a traveling theater troupe perform in Aomori, she had never once been to the local cinema. That was why, when she learned she would be returning to Tokyo, she could not wait to go to the movies again.

The movie theater in her neighborhood was called Nanpuza, meaning “Southern Wind Theater,” and had palm trees planted in front that lent it a fittingly tropical air. Located between Jiyugaoka Station and Tomoe Gakuen, it was just a minute’s walk from the train. Totto often ran to see a movie there after school, either by herself or with school friends who shared her love of films.

The owner of Nanpuza was said to have worked for the military and converted an aircraft hangar which they gave him following the war into a theater. Long and cylindrical, the structure looked similar in shape to a *kamaboko* fishcake, which was how it came to be known as “Kamaboko Theater.” People back then excelled at recycling and repurposing. One need look no further than Tomoe Gakuen, which had held classes in retired railroad cars, for another example.

Totto adored this theater as it was known to play new releases from overseas. Though St. Hilda’s rules forbade students from going to the movies after school, Totto and her friends often stole away when their teachers weren’t watching and scurried over to the theater to catch the latest films.

One day, Totto discovered that many of her teachers were also fans of the theater. The latest installment in a popular series had just begun to screen, and the cinema was packed with people. Totto and her friend were desperate to get in. The ticket-taker told them there were no more seats, but they decided to go anyway and join the crowd in the standing-room section at the back of the theater. There they were, waiting in the dark, when a woman who’d come in late bumped into Totto’s shoulder.

“Pardon me.”

Totto and her friend recognized the voice. Just then, the light from the screen illuminated the person's face.

"Oh!" Totto blurted out. It was Miss Go-chan.

"Shhh!" The popular teacher put a finger to her lips, patted Totto and her friend on the shoulders, then walked further in without another word. To Totto, that gesture felt like a secret message: "I won't speak of this to anyone if you don't. Let's just enjoy the movie."

The film they watched that day was from the popular *Road to...* series starring Bob Hope and Bing Crosby. Totto couldn't remember if it was *Road to Singapore* or *Road to Utopia*, but it was a musical comedy featuring the adventures of this eccentric pair traveling around the world.

Totto was captivated by the way Bob Hope delivered his lines. Immediately following the screening, she got to work trying to imitate him. She performed the impersonation the next day at school, delighting even those of her friends who had not seen the movie. It occurred to Totto that Miss Go-chan would probably laugh even harder at the joke. But then she remembered the teacher's pat on her shoulder and decided to keep the impersonation to herself.

—

Totto became an increasingly avid film fan with each passing year, and she soon began frequenting a theater in Ebisu that featured a lineup of European movies. Once, she learned that the following day, the theater was going to host a marathon screening of eight classic French films that would run from eight in the morning to nine at night. "I'll have to stay late at school tomorrow to prepare for an event," she lied to Mother so that she could go.

It was during this time that Totto saw a film that would change the course of her life: *Tosca*. Based on the famous Italian opera by Giacomo Puccini, the movie is a tragic love story between tempestuous opera singer Floria Tosca and her lover, a painter called Mario Cavaradossi. Totto was mesmerized by the heroine's voice and costume, from the very first scene

where Tosca visits Cavaradossi in the church to the final moment where she flings herself over the precipice of Castel Sant'Angelo.

Tosca initially appears onscreen concealing her face elegantly behind a large paper fan and singing in a lovely, clear soprano. Her magnificent dress, adorned with lace and ribbons, has a plunging neckline; a diamond necklace nestled on her bosom sparkles with every sway of her body. The many ringlets of her hair are festooned with flowers.

How stunning! It all seemed like a dream to Totto, who had very few clothes to wear after the war ended, and stirred every last one of her senses into a frenzy.

That's when she made up her mind. "I'm going to be like her!"

"I Want to Be an Opera Singer."

As a child, Totto had dreamt of becoming a spy, a street musician, and a person who sells railroad tickets. After seeing a performance of *Swan Lake*, the dream had changed to becoming a ballerina. She had once also declared to Sosaku Kobayashi, headmaster of Tomoe Gakuen, "I'd like to teach at this school when I grow up. I really would." Alas, her beloved Tomoe Gakuen had burned down in an air raid. Now a junior high student, Totto seemed to have lost the penchant for such detailed dreams of her future.

However, Mother had said to her, "I want you to have the opportunity to study whatever it is your heart desires." Totto simply needed to find whatever "it" was, but she was prepared to wait.

That was when she saw *Tosca*. As if out of thin air, a new possibility suddenly appeared. The life of an opera singer seemed chock full of everything Totto loved. Without so much as stopping to consider whether she possessed the required talent, she decided on the spot that that was what she would become.

"God gives each person one gift in which they excel. Most people, however, never realize their talent and spend their whole lives pursuing an unrelated career. People such as Einstein and Picasso are rare instances in

which talent and career happened to overlap,” someone told her right around the time of her fateful encounter with the *Tosca* film.

Totto did not have a clue as to what her one talent might be. After hearing that, however, she believed that the greatest task of her life would be to discover this gift and devise a way to connect it to a fruitful career.

Deciding to be an opera singer was one thing, but Totto had no idea where to begin. What did she need to learn, and where and how should she study it? When she asked her friends at St. Hilda’s, they suggested, “Music school seems like the best place to start, doesn’t it?” Mother had been studying at a music school when she met Daddy, so the first thing Totto did was to tentatively broach the topic with her. “Mother, I think I would like to become an opera singer...”

Mother replied in the same manner she always did. “Oh? That sounds like a lovely idea.”

There was no time to waste. Totto was in her fourth of five years at St. Hilda’s School, but it was a transitional period for education in Japan. Schools were beginning to integrate into the 6-3-3 system of six years of elementary school, three years of junior high school, and three years of high school. Until then, junior high and girls’ schools were five years, but plenty of students graduated after four and matriculated to institutions of higher education.

Totto began to consider graduating from St. Hilda’s School at the end of her fourth year and moving on to music school. The sooner she began specialized training, she reasoned, the faster she would improve, and the closer she would get to landing her first opera role. This admittedly simplistic reasoning was a direct byproduct of Totto’s experience with the wartime rationing system. All those long lines! In Totto’s mind, the sooner you claimed your spot in line, the faster you received your rations. She had been programmed to think of everything in life as first come, first served.

Consequently, Totto scrambled around Tokyo visiting various music schools and trying to negotiate her way in. “I would like to enroll in your school,” she would say, to which some schools frankly replied, “How much can you donate?” Following the war, many institutions of higher learning

needed to rebuild their campuses as well as update their curricula in accordance with the new education system and the like, so accumulating funds took first priority.

Totto didn't know too much about money, but she came to understand that the amount of her donation would determine whether she was accepted. Sadly, she could do little but reply, "I haven't told my father about my plans to test for your school, so I'm afraid I can't donate anything." She wasn't lying. Mother had shared with Totto that Daddy didn't believe women should get jobs, let alone become singers, only to be crushed by society's pressure on working women.

Of all the Tokyo schools she visited, the only one that did not request a donation was Toyo Conservatory of Music, the same college Mother had attended. Totto took the entrance exam, passed, and presently enrolled as a student.

Almost as soon as she began attending the school, however, a shocking revelation nearly bowled her over. As it happened, the magnificent singing voice in *Tosca* belonged not to the lead actress, who was only pretending to sing onscreen, but to a different singer entirely! "No wonder. They say all sopranos are ugly and all tenors are airheads, right?" quipped a boy, one of Totto's new classmates. She wished he hadn't.

Totto's aspiration was to be a soprano singer.

Losing Her Way

Toyo Conservatory of Music was located in front of Kishimojin Temple in Zoshigaya, a quiet corner of northwestern Tokyo, and about a fifteen-minute walk from Mejiro Station. After enrolling in the school, Totto continued to make a concerted effort to watch as many operas as she could. Soon, her broad dream of becoming an opera singer evolved into more concrete goals around performing specific arias or songs she fancied.

At the top of the list was the Queen of the Night aria from Mozart's masterpiece opera, *The Magic Flute*. Considered one of the most

spectacular arias of all time, the coloratura soprano piece requires a singer to roll many notes in quick succession.

“Aaaah ah hah hah hah hah hah hah hah!”

Totto tried it once when she was alone, and found that she could hit the high notes without overexerting herself and roll her voice as required.

“I want to master the coloratura soprano,” she decided.

—

By the way, the instrumental title song of Totto’s long-running television program *Tetsuko’s Room*, which began years later, originally came with lyrics that included the word “coloratura:”

*When you sing a high note
When you let out a laugh
Wasabi, karashi, pepper
When it comes to cigarettes
But as for those lovely drinks*

*Be careful not to cross your eyes
Let it always be in coloratura
Take care not to use too much
Let them never, ever your lips touch!
Those you simply cannot quit!*

Initially written as the theme song of a concert titled “Improvisational Music Theater” in which Totto performed with soprano singer Yuko Shimada, the tune featured a splendid coloratura flourish at the end. The lyrics were written by renowned lyricist Keisuke Yamakawa and the music by composer Taku Izumi. When the production staff of *Tetsuko’s Room* asked Taku Izumi to pen the title song for the new daily television program, it became apparent that this thirty-second number was the perfect fit, and the producers quickly decided it would open the show. Totto highly

recommends everyone try singing these lyrics to the tune of her show's theme song.

At her music school, Totto received voice lessons from Futaba Takayanagi, a soprano star who sang with the Fujiwara Opera. Unfortunately, Miss Takayanagi was not a coloratura soprano, so Totto decided to search beyond the school for a teacher who was. She considered asking Mother for advice, but decided she had better take care of it herself. She was no longer a child, after all.

The first person who came to mind was the renowned soprano singer Kiyoko Otani. Totto looked up Miss Otani's telephone number, called her, and was astonished by how easily she agreed to meet. She took down the address to Miss Otani's home, which also served as her studio, and made the short trip over from Toyo Conservatory of Music.

A grand piano stood in Miss Otani's living room. The singer had deep-set eyes which she accentuated with bold eyeliner and wore red lipstick and a long, flowing, dress-like garment. She was the epitome of elegance, even as she gave voice lessons. Her onstage persona seemed to flow seamlessly into her real life. Totto wondered if that was part of her allure.

Miss Otani was known for performing in the Italian opera *La traviata* as Violetta, a role that seemed to have been made for her. But Violetta's soprano aria "*Sempre libera*" simply didn't captivate Totto in the way the high trills and leaps of coloratura pieces did. Sadly, Miss Otani was not a coloratura soprano, either.

Totto now knows that there exist only a limited number of coloratura soprano arias, one of which is sung by the Queen of the Night in *The Magic Flute*. Given that the opera had not yet been performed in Japan at the time, perhaps it was not surprising that Totto had such difficulty finding a coloratura teacher.

Totto's music school also offered classes in Italian and German. Learning proper German pronunciation was essential to singing the Queen

of the Night aria, and a strong linguistic background was a requirement in performing operas.

Totto could only imagine the challenges the school faced in providing all its classes. While language courses could be taught simultaneously to large groups, vocal instruction required separating students not only by gender, but by high and low parts as well. Instruments were also needed, which meant the school had to purchase pianos, violins, cellos...the list seemed unending. Totto was in no position to demand, "I don't want to study anything but coloratura!"

Nevertheless, she found it increasingly difficult to concentrate on her studies as the divide between what she wanted to sing and what the teachers selected for her widened by the day. Her dreams seemed ever more out of reach. Though this was hardly an appropriate alternative, she began to slip out of her lessons—through the classroom window, no less—to watch movies in nearby Ikebukuro.

The further Totto got into her musical education, skipping school, paying real attention only to the odd class, and occasionally going to Miss Otani for singing lessons, the harder she found it to disregard the seed of doubt that was beginning to take root inside her. Many of the music school's upperclassmen were far better singers than Totto, but even they proved unable to find work as opera singers; some married, became music teachers, or secured jobs in music-related companies instead. Their examples gave Totto a peek into the harsh reality of the world of opera.

Totto had one friend who was studying cello.

"May I borrow your cello for a day?" she asked. "Sure," he easily agreed.

Totto was initially proud of how sophisticated she imagined she looked carrying the large cello in its case. The shocking weight of the instrument, however, soon brushed that away. It didn't help that the Yamanote Line circling Tokyo that Totto took home was always packed in the evenings.

She didn't know if she had the nerve to carry something so bulky on the rush-hour train.



At the graduation ceremony for Toyo Conservatory of Music.

“This may have been a mistake,” she thought, but there was no going back. She managed to make it to Meguro Station, then transfer to the Mekama Line. All sorts of people bumped into her on the train. Such a stick-thin young woman hauling a massive cello must have made a rather silly sight.

By the time she made it home, Tutto was bone-tired and full of regret over having borrowed the dreadful thing. Still, she had brought it all this way, so she felt she might as well give it a try. She found a chair that looked to be about the right size and got into proper position. Perhaps this wasn't so bad after all.

Tutto held down one of the instrument's strings with a finger on her left hand. My, was it tight! Not to mention far thicker and harder than she would ever have imagined. After only a few seconds of pressing the string down, her hand started to ache and a deep crease formed in her finger. This

simply would not do. In less than three minutes, Totto's dream of becoming a cellist had crumbled.

She returned the cello to her friend the next day.

"How was it?"

"Silly of me to think I could learn to play the cello in one day."

In *The Magic Flute*, the prince Tamino and bird catcher Papageno play the titular magic flute and ring enchanted bells to confuse and vanquish their enemies. Totto was convinced that anyone who managed to master an instrument was a magician in their own right. But though her father was an accomplished violinist, she had unfortunately not been blessed with any such talent. To wit, she'd been taking piano lessons since the age of five and still couldn't play more than "Chopsticks."

A Toyo graduate who was now a member of the Fujiwara Opera informed Totto that the opera director Yoshio Aoyama was searching for a production assistant for his upcoming rendition of *Madama Butterfly*. Totto had no understanding of what such an assistant did, but she recognized this to be an extraordinarily rare chance to see an opera production up close and applied for the position. Mr. Aoyama knew and respected Totto's violinist father, so it took no time to make the arrangements.

"Who knows?" Totto mused. "Perhaps I could even become an opera director myself." She loved the opera and was well-versed in the art for someone her age, having seen numerous productions. And while it may be true that few people in the world are able to make full use of their talents, Totto didn't yet know what her talent *was*, so she felt it was important to say yes to any opportunity that came her way.

Whenever Mr. Aoyama asked, "What do you think about this?" she gave her honest opinion. And when he said, "Could you run and get that for me?" she'd rush over to retrieve whatever he'd requested. All day she bustled about running errands, but she couldn't be sure whether any of it was useful. The production of *Madama Butterfly*, however, proved to be a

great success. An opera company in New York City would later incorporate Mr. Aoyama's direction of the climactic scene into their own rendition of the show. It remained in their production for many years, throughout which it continuously brought audiences to tears.

Reflecting on Mr. Aoyama's work all through the lead-up to the show, Totto concluded that his job was, in a word, to make decisions. He choreographed the singers' movements, decided how the music would be played, chose what the costumes would look like, determined how the set would be designed. All theater directors need to know everything there is to know about a work, of course, but Mr. Aoyama's mastery was without parallel. Totto worried she would never even come close.

She found herself wandering through a maze that seemed to have no exit. Where in the world did her true talent lie? During this anxiety-ridden period, Totto found great comfort in the hot bowls of ramen she ate at lunchtime and after classes—and sometimes even during class, when she could slip away.

She only discovered the delicious dish after enrolling at Toyo Conservatory of Music, which had a small restaurant near campus called Takaraken that served the tastiest bowls. The intimate, casual Chinese diner sold their bowls of ramen for thirty-five yen each and took pride in their handmade noodles. And my, were they delicious! Totto was convinced she had never tried anything so scrumptious in her life. She also loved the way the aroma of the broth tickled her nose every time she slid the restaurant door open with a rattle.

The seats at the counter provided a front-row view of the owner painstakingly preparing the fresh noodles. A thick bamboo pole protruded from a hole in the wall and hung directly over a table for stretching out the noodle dough. The owner would hook one leg over the pole and, with his body weight, press it down on the circular disk of dough that lay below to flatten it. At times, he would use his heel to roll the bamboo pole expertly back and forth over the dough like a rolling pin and stretch it out.

Tunk, tunk, tunk.

The rhythmic thumps of the bamboo pole echoed like a percussion instrument. Once the dough had been stretched so thin that it seemed to holler, “I’m sorry, this is the best I can do!” the owner folded it up and began slicing it from one end into thin noodles.

Totto adored watching the owner work and listening to the sounds that seemed to promise a delicious treat. But, of course, nothing beat the taste of the ramen itself. She dropped by the restaurant nearly every day for a bowl.

Sometimes for lunch, she would sit with her friends on a bench at Kishimojin Temple and snack on roasted sweet potatoes as they chatted away. Kishimojin is known as the goddess of birth and childrearing, so every day many women with large bellies came to the temple to pray for a smooth delivery. Some young expectant mothers were accompanied by what appeared to be their own mothers, while others strolled in with several small children in tow as if to say, “It’s me again!” Sometimes a woman would run up wearing a stone-cold expression, quickly say her prayers, then scurry off. Once, Totto and her friends spotted a dog with a big belly scampering across the grounds. The sight of it made them burst into laughter.

Daddy’s Return

Five years had passed since the day Daddy was called up. Then, in the fall of 1949, a postcard from him arrived that read: *I will return to Japan at the end of December.* The family danced around and rejoiced. Grandmother even stopped the mailman to give him a small envelope with a tip for bringing such happy news.

The repatriation ships carrying returnees from labor camps in Siberia were to arrive at the port city of Maizuru in Kyoto Prefecture, along the shore of the Sea of Japan. From there, the former detainees were to board trains that would take them back to their hometowns. There was a liaison office at the port for families, and Totto knew that if she wrote a letter addressed to the office, it would find its way to Daddy. She wrote:

Dear Daddy,

Welcome home. Thank you for working so hard to survive the war. Everyone in the family is doing well and looking forward to your return. Your house is in the same location as before, in Kitasenzoku along the Oimachi Line. It has a red roof and white walls. Please hurry home.

One morning at the end of December, a woman who worked at the nearby pharmacy ran to Totto's home and told Mother, "I heard on the six o'clock news this morning that your husband has returned!"

Daddy was finally coming home. Noriaki was nine, and Mari, who was born in the spring of the year Daddy went to war, had turned five. She had no memory of him. The years Daddy had been away felt like an eternity to Totto and her family, but considering that the repatriation of detainees from Siberia is said to have continued from 1947 to 1956, perhaps he was one of the lucky ones.

The whole family went to meet him at Shinagawa Station. Daddy stepped off the train, carrying a violin case close to his chest.

"Totsky! Look how big you've grown!"

Daddy looked exactly as he had five years ago. Totto's heart nearly burst with joy and the warmth of fond memories.

That night, the whole family broke bread together for the first time in years. On the menu was, of course, Daddy's favorite dish: steak. Before being drafted, Daddy had never once done any work in the kitchen. And yet this time, when the meal was over and the housekeeper came to clear his plates, he rose quickly and said, "Thank you, but I'll do it myself."

The sight of Daddy washing the dishes shocked them all. Even Mother watched on with wide eyes. Clearly, Daddy had become accustomed to cleaning up after himself in the internment camps. The housekeeper was at a loss, but Mother simply laughed and said, "Oh, let him do it. It will only last two, three days." She was right. Within the week, Daddy reverted to old form and stopped doing any housework.

Daddy's work friends and acquaintances visited the house one after another, making the home lively for quite some time following his return. In short order, Daddy was welcomed by the Tokyo Symphony Orchestra as their concertmaster. He had made his comeback as a violinist.

Everything seemed to return to the way it was before. But whenever the conversation turned to the military or the camps in Siberia, Daddy grew uncharacteristically reserved.

"What did you do in Siberia?" Totto asked.

"I went from camp to camp in a truck that had no roof, even though it was bitterly cold—about four degrees below zero—and played the violin." He did not elaborate any further. Totto could only imagine the difficulty he must have endured to be unable to share it with even his children.

Putting two and two together from the snippets that Daddy told Mother, his Siberia experience went something like this. The troop to which Daddy belonged was captured by the Soviet army, who took away their weapons and sent them all to an internment camp in Siberia. There they were forced to work in coal mines under dreadfully harsh conditions. The one good meal they were given each week consisted of a small portion of gruel made from various grains, with pickled cucumber and salted herring on the side. But because Daddy disliked fish, he couldn't even eat the herring.

Many Russian civilians had also been sent to work in the mines, and Daddy became acquainted with one of the older women. "Do you have a family?" the woman asked, so he showed her the photograph he kept close to his heart. She looked at it and communicated via gestures and fragments something to the effect of, "You have a beautiful wife and children waiting for you. Don't you try to escape this place and get shot. You need to live. For your family." Her message gave Daddy great hope during a very dark time.

One day, he was summoned to the office of a high-ranking Soviet official.

“I hear you’re a famous violinist in Japan. From now on, you are to visit the Japanese camps and perform for them.”

Evidently, there had been vociferous calls from Japanese detainees to hear songs from their native land to help soften the hopelessness they felt about their chances of ever going home. Daddy was provided a violin, and with fellow comrades who could also play music, he formed a group that began to perform inside a few different Japanese labor camps. The group played pieces like “*Kojo no tsuki*” (The Moon Over the Ruined Castle) and “*Humoresque*” to roaring ovations. Whenever Daddy received requests for songs he did not know, such as “*Tokyo Ondo*” (Tokyo Song) or “*Oka wo koete*” (Over the Hill), he would ask the men to sing the tune a few times so that he could jot down the notes and make impromptu sheet music.

Daddy and his fellow musicians were forced to ride in the backs of trucks and travel for hours on end over snow-covered tundra in temperatures that fell to minus four degrees Fahrenheit, which Totto imagined to be absolutely brutal. Still, she felt proud of her father for helping to bring people a little comfort.

Daddy had declined all requests to play military tunes before going to war, but in Siberia, he gritted his teeth and performed anything that the detainees requested. After returning to Japan, he was stopped on the street in Tokyo more than once and told, “You played the violin for us in Siberia. Thank you.”

“Why don’t you go to Moscow and teach at a music school?” a Soviet officer suggested after Daddy had been playing the violin in Siberia for some time. Daddy considered the proposal, which came amidst rumors that all the Japanese women back home were now married to Americans. But he refused to believe those reports and turned down the offer.

Totto understood that many detainees perished in these internment camps from the cold and malnutrition, and she felt incredibly grateful that Daddy had made it home. It was a good thing, too, for if he had died in Siberia, Totto would have likely spent the rest of her life filled with resentment for whoever had driven him to his death.

Tucked safely into the chest pocket of Daddy's coat when he returned from Siberia was the family photograph they had given him at the barracks, on the day they went to him bearing *ohagi* sweets shortly before he was sent to war.

To Be a Good Mother

At school, Totto looked around and noticed that many of her classmates had already secured jobs. The posts themselves varied greatly, with some finding employment at record labels or as music teachers and others joining the Fujiwara Opera, but all of the recently hired beamed whenever they spoke about their post-graduation plans. Unlike Totto, they had been doing more than gobbling down ramen and roasted sweet potatoes.

One such classmate was Koichi Miura, who would later become famous with his hit song "*Odoriko*" (Dancer), among others. As graduation neared, he was gearing up to make his professional singing debut and had already recorded his first song. When Totto realized she was the only one who didn't seem to have plans for the future, she grew terribly disconsolate.

On her way home from school one day, she noticed a poster on a telephone pole that read:

Puppet Show of The Snow Queen to be Held at Ginza Kojunsha Hall

"Wow, a puppet show in Ginza?" she thought. "I wonder what those are like." These days, puppet shows are easy to find on television, so almost everyone is familiar with them, but at the time, Totto couldn't even imagine what they entailed.

What Totto did know was that *The Snow Queen* was a fairy tale written by Hans Christian Andersen. The idea of this entirely unfamiliar kind of performance intrigued her, and she felt drawn to the neighborhood where it would be held: Ginza. That was where she and Daddy had gone on outings when she was a little girl, the same place she'd heard sung about in the

lyrics of “Tokyo Rhapsody” while in Suwanotaira. Totto felt a bit nervous about going to see the performance alone, but she gathered her courage one Sunday afternoon and headed to the venue.

Kojunsha Hall was teeming with children. Soon, happy music began to fill the hall and a cheerful, plump woman appeared at the front of the auditorium with a puppet on each hand, one of a girl and the other a boy. She gave a bow and then ducked below the puppet stage so that only the dolls remained visible. It was time for the performance to begin.

Totto shifted slightly in her chair to try and get a peek at what the puppeteer was doing beneath the stage. From her seat off to the side, she could see the woman kneeling low and moving the puppets above her head. The performer sang and talked in children’s voices, running them from one side of the stage to the other, making them hop up and down, acting the story out all by herself and positively dripping in perspiration. The children in the audience sat on the edge of their seats, bursting with curiosity, smiling and laughing and applauding so hard that it seemed as though their hands might fall off.

It was nearly time for the climax of the story when the Snow Queen orders the boy Kai and his friend Gerda to do something terrible. “Oh no!” and “That’s so mean!” the children watching whispered. Hearing them, Totto was overcome with an inexplicable emotion, one that felt distinctly different from the rush she’d experienced when she first watched *Tosca*. It was a warm, gentle sensation that made her feel as though she were reuniting with a long-lost friend.

The puppet show ended to thunderous applause.

As she walked back to Shinbashi Station after the event, Totto wondered if she might be able to do what the woman had done. What if, instead of performing in front of a large audience, she could learn to put on a show for her own children?

Perhaps influenced by the self-consciousness she felt at seeing her music school friends secure jobs before her, Totto began to think less about becoming a “career woman,” so to speak, and more about whether marriage could be a viable alternative.

“Once I get married, I’ll have children, of course. And while there may be lots of mothers who can clean the house, do the laundry, and cook meals, I don’t expect there are many who can put on puppet shows for their children.” Totto reveled in the daydream on her way home. “Full performances like the one I saw today might be out of reach, but could I learn to read wonderful bedtime stories to my children? Yes, I suppose I could. In fact, that’s exactly what I’ll do: become a mother who reads splendid bedtime stories!”

The first step would be to get married, but Totto’s imagination skipped straight over that part and conjured up images of her small children peeking out from under their bed covers. She could almost hear them giggling already.

Totto had no way of knowing at the time that the show she’d seen was produced by shadow puppet master Seiji Fujishiro, then an up-and-coming artist, or that the music was written by composer and conductor Yasushi Akutagawa, one of the leading Japanese composers of the post-war era, or that the all-male chorus was the groundbreaking and influential quintet Dark Ducks before they made their professional debut. But the high-quality production undoubtedly changed the course of Totto’s life and career.

Totto went home and gushed to Mother about how the puppeteer had put her whole heart and soul into the performance and how much the children had loved it. She then asked, “Do you think there are any schools that can teach you to read aloud and put on puppet shows?”

“Perhaps. Why don’t you check the paper?” Mother suggested.

So Totto opened up the newspaper, that day and that day only.

As NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation) moves into television broadcasting, we are seeking actors to perform various onscreen roles. Candidates need not be professional actors. Those participants who pass the entrance test will receive training from the best teachers for one year, after which a select few will be signed as exclusive NHK actors. Please note that only a limited number of positions are available...

What a coincidence! Totto came across the advertisement in the middle of the page and instantly knew that it was meant for her. She hadn't the faintest idea what "television broadcasting" was, but she thought learning to read lines would help her become a first-rate storybook reader to her children at bedtime and a good mother.

Totto mailed a copy of her resume to NHK without mentioning it to her parents. A few days later, she received an envelope from the broadcaster by post. Perhaps it held her acceptance letter? She cut open the envelope and found...her own resume. Attached was a note that read something to the effect of: *We asked that you submit your resume in person. Why did you mail it?*

What a blunder! Totto briefly considered giving up on the idea altogether, but the submission deadline was still two days away. She had time. That same day, Totto marched over to the NHK building, which was located next to Hibiya Public Hall in the heart of Tokyo, and handed in her resume. In exchange, she was given a card with the number 5655 on it. "Goodness," she marveled, "are *that* many people taking the entrance test?" The newspaper advertisement had said that only a limited number of positions were available. But how many was a limited number?

Totto pondered this question the whole way home. "What does it mean when a company says they will hire 'a limited number' of people?" she nonchalantly asked Daddy upon arrival. "That term is used when the employer hasn't decided on a certain number of people to recruit and will instead make an offer to anyone suitable for the position," he explained.

And so the entrance test began. It consisted of several rounds. The first round was to say the tongue twister *akamakigami, aomakigami, kimakigami* (red rolling paper, blue rolling paper, yellow rolling paper) as quickly as possible, which Totto did handily. The second round was a written test, and here Totto made another blunder. This portion of the exam was held at Meiji University in Ochanomizu, but Totto mistakenly went to the NHK headquarters near Shinbashi, almost an hour's walk away. When she first realized her error, she thought perhaps she had better give up then and there.

But as she trudged toward Shinbashi Station, she suddenly remembered that she kept a valuable one-thousand-yen note tucked into her train-pass case.

Totto hailed a taxi and showed the driver the bill. “Would this be enough to cover the fare to Meiji University?”

“Sure.”

“Then, please and thank you!”

At the university, a staff member waved Totto in with a “Hurry! Hurry!” In the end, she slid safely into the testing venue just five minutes late.

The first section of the written test instructed, *Please draw a line between the related items in the top and bottom rows.* You needed to find twenty pairs.

Totto immediately recognized some of the pairs, such as “*Carmen*” and “Bizet,” and “Isamu Noguchi” and “sculptor.” But she had difficulty with pairs related to broadcasting and theater, such as the winner of the broadcasting category of the 1952 National Arts Festival. Unable to help herself, Totto leaned toward the bespectacled man next to her and whispered, “Excuse me, can you help me with this?” The man looked her square in the eyes and flatly said, “No.”

Well, of course not.

The second section of the exam required test-takers to explain the meaning of Japanese four-character idioms, which Totto found relatively manageable. In the third section, she was asked to write down the names of NHK radio programs she had listened to recently. Over the New Year holiday, Totto had tuned in to an annual program featuring a performance of the *koto* (a traditional Japanese stringed instrument) by the famed Michio Miyagi, accompanied by Daddy on violin. She wrote in big letters, *A koto-and-violin duet of “Haru no umi” (The Sea in Spring) featuring Michio Miyagi.* She chose not to include her father’s name as she was taking the test without his knowledge. As an addendum, she wrote, *I thought the beautiful piece was perfect for the New Year.*

The final section of the test read, *Please list your strengths and weaknesses.* Finally, a question that would allow the recruiters to get to know who she was! Totto tightened her grip on her pencil. For her

strengths, she immediately jotted down *honest*. That was how her mother always described her. She then tacked on *kind*, and added, *That's what my friends tell me*.

Totto wrote and erased her answers so many times that she caused her answer sheet to tear. Test-takers who finished early turned in their sheets and left the lecture hall. The man Totto had asked for help earlier said “Bye” as he stood to leave. “He might be rather nice after all,” she thought with a pang of guilt for having bothered him.

For her weaknesses, she tried to come up with an answer that could also be considered a strength, depending on the angle. Unfortunately, she couldn't think of anything beside “eats a lot” and “messy.” After much consideration, she wrote:

I can't say for certain if this is because I am an optimistic person, but I tend to forget things easily. My mother sometimes says to me, “I ask this out of curiosity, but weren't you weeping a few minutes ago over your most recent mistake? Yet now, here you are chomping away on those rice crackers and laughing your head off. Do you even remember crying at all?” On reflection, I realize I've completely forgotten about whatever happened. I also immediately lose sight of things like the lessons I learn from mistakes or the concerns I need to address, which is why I believe this to be a weakness.

Time was up. As Totto stood from her seat in a hurry, she scanned the lecture hall and saw that it was nearly empty.

—

For whatever reason, Totto passed that test, too.

Before moving on to the third round, Totto confided in her mother that she was taking the entrance exams for NHK, saying that she wanted to join the company so she could read picture books to her children. She begged Mother not to tell Daddy, because she knew he would object. Thankfully Mother understood, and Totto felt a little lighter knowing she was no longer alone in her fight.

The third round of testing involved pantomiming, which Totto had never done before, so she did her best to imitate the people who went before her. Curiously, this made the examiners burst into laughter. The fourth round of testing was singing. “Your resume says that you were enrolled in the vocal course of your music school. Are you sure that’s correct?” the examiner asked, clearly doubtful. That worried Totto, but she made it past that portion as well and moved on to the final round: an interview.

At the interview, Totto was asked why she was applying for the position. “Because I want to be a good mother,” she replied. The interviewers laughed. “What in the world does that mean?”

On her application, Totto had written *Unknown* on the line asking for her father’s name. Nevertheless, the subject of her father still came up in the interview. “I see your last name is Kuroyanagi. Are you related to the violinist?”

“Umm,” she hemmed, but there was no use lying. “Yes. He’s my father.”

“Is he aware that you’re here?”

“No. I knew he would forbid me from applying for such disreputable work if I told him. Oh, when I say ‘disreputable,’ I mean that’s what *he* thinks.”

“Your father wouldn’t approve?”

“He would almost certainly tell me to stay out of this industry, as it is full of liars and people wanting to take advantage of you.”

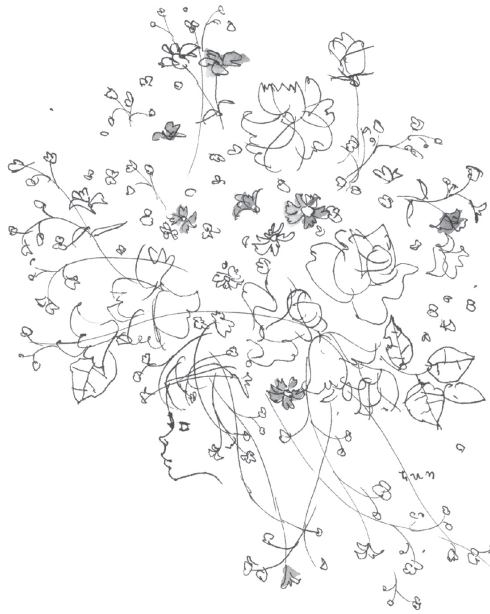
The interviewers howled with laughter at Totto’s every answer. Even she could tell that she had no hope of being accepted now. But the following day, an executive from NHK made a trip all the way to Totto’s house. Upon learning that Totto was not home, he informed Mother that they would be offering her daughter a position. He asked, “Will her father allow it?” and Mother skillfully provided the answer he needed to hear.

Totto could hardly believe it. She promised herself never to forget the joy she felt that day.

Mother seemed to have somehow talked Daddy into it, too. He came up to Totto and said only, “Do your best.”

Chapter Four

Totto Becomes an Actress



A Wind-Up French Doll

The fifth-ever series of entrance tests and interviews for actors vying for a spot in the NHK Tokyo Broadcasting Theater Company wound down in February 1953. Until then a national radio broadcaster, NHK had just stepped into the world of the small screen on the first of that month, and the streets were abuzz with talk of this new media called *television*. The theater company was now in its fifth year, but Totto and her fellow applicants, if successful, would make up the first class of “television actors.”

Of the over six thousand applicants, only seventeen women and eleven men—twenty-eight people in total—proceeded through initial testing to the next phase. The pool of potential talent had been whittled down to one in two hundred. However, this did not mean the twenty-eight-person cohort had secured spots in the troupe. They still needed to complete a three-month training period, after which only a “limited number” would be invited to join the company. They could not relax just yet, particularly since nobody knew how many the “limited number” would be. Still uncertain about their futures, the new trainees embarked on a journey to learn all the skills required to become television and radio actors. To accommodate those who worked other jobs, lessons were held every weeknight from six to nine o’clock, and every Sunday from ten in the morning to three o’clock in the afternoon. Saturday was their only day off.

—

Totto and her cohort gathered on the first day of lessons in the expansive tatami-floored banquet hall of a large hotel across the street from NHK where their classes would be held.

Many of the twenty-eight trainees already had experience performing in films or on stage, though none had any real claim to fame. Some had also studied acting in school. Totto was quite possibly the only one with no

relevant experience at all. She jittered with nerves as the first day of instruction began.

It started with opening speeches by a few men in suits and ties. Next came an administrative staff member who said, “I would now like to introduce Mr. Tatsuo Ooka, who will be teaching storytelling and delivery. He currently works in the literary department at NHK.”

A kind-looking elderly man, Mr. Ooka seemed to share little with the men in suits. He wore a pom-pom hat on his bald head, round tortoiseshell glasses, and a dark brown cardigan. Despite his crooked back and the way he walked with his upper body folded forward, he somehow never toppled over.

Totto took an instant liking to the elder gentleman. Though he was much older than she and a total stranger, his easygoing disposition and apparent indifference about his physical appearance reminded her a little of Mr. Kobayashi, the headmaster of Tomoe Gakuen.

“He will be in charge of your group,” the administrative staff member explained.

Mr. Ooka covered his mouth with the back of his plump hand and smiled shyly, as children often do. “In charge? Oh no, nothing like that. Please think of me more as an errand-runner or assistant. At any rate, it has been quite a journey for all of you to make it to this point, hasn’t it?”

Mr. Ooka had an enigmatic air about him. He spoke elegantly and respectfully, and struck Totto as a rather knowledgeable yet humble man. It would be another forty years before Totto learned that he was a pupil of the great haiku poet Kyoshi Takahama and a master of the genre known as *shaseibun* or “literary sketching,” which finds beauty in simple, direct descriptions of the natural world and ordinary life.

—

Thus, Totto’s days of commuting to the hotel across from NHK began.

Upon arrival at the banquet hall that doubled as their classroom, the students set up their own low tables and seating cushions in preparation for

the instructor's arrival. The tradition of taking off your shoes and sitting on cushions brought back fond memories for Totto of St. Hilda's tatami-matted temple classrooms. She made sure to situate herself in the front for she was certain that if she sat in the back, she would inevitably start chatting with whoever was next to her. This had been true at St. Hilda's as well.

Aside from Mr. Ooka, the cohort's instructors included the head of the NHK drama department, Tadahiko Nakagawa, who taught the fundamentals of line-reading, and Shigetaka Sakuma, who instructed them on basic acting and movement. Mr. Sakuma would later become the director of the television art department at NHK. Phonetics lessons were given by Kotoji Satta, who also taught at the prestigious University of Tokyo and Tokyo University of the Arts, and classes on the business of entertainment were taught by Tomokazu Sakamoto, who would later become the chairman of NHK. Nichigeki Theater's star dancer Yukihiisa Ogino gave the cohort tap dance classes in one of the hotel's hard-floored banquet halls.

Totto did not at first fully appreciate the exceptional caliber of their instructors. But then, about a week into their lessons, she and a friend were walking back to Shinbashi Station when the friend remarked, "I can hardly fathom how much money I would need every month to take individual lessons from each of these teachers!"

Totto's peers in the program had a great deal of knowledge about acting, broadcasting, and the wider field. Hearing them carry on excitedly about their teachers made Totto realize, "Oh my, NHK is quite serious about this program!"

—

One day about a month into the training, Mr. Ooka stopped Totto after class.

"Totto-sama!"

At some point, he had begun to address her as Totto-*sama*. Though more formal and respectful than the commonly-used honorific *-san*, Mr. Ooka used *-sama* with a touch of affection. "You know, your voice and delivery rather remind me of a wind-up French doll."

A wind-up French doll? Totto stared blankly at him, unsure what he meant.

“You’re full of energy, never gloomy, and you speak in a single breath like a clockwork toy doll, stopping only when your mainspring has wound down. That’s what I meant. Perhaps my example was a bit difficult to understand? Hee hee hee.”

Totto had initially taken his reference to an elegant and chic French doll as a compliment, but she didn’t know quite what to make of the wind-up part.

There was something about Mr. Ooka that reminded Totto of a wizard or sage. He tended to say a few words to her and then, while she puzzled over what they meant, vanish as if performing a magic trick. That was his way: presenting Totto with what felt very much like a riddle one moment, disappearing into thin air the next.

Still, Totto was the only student Mr. Ooka addressed using *-sama*. Often during breaks, while Totto regaled her peers with newly-memorized *rakugo* comedy routines or some such trick, she would notice him smiling as he looked on from a distance. She grew to feel that perhaps he was watching over her, and for that she was grateful.

A Strange Voice

“Today, we’re going to have you listen to your own voices,” Mr. Ooka announced with a smile one day close to the end of the three-month training period.

Each of the trainees was to take their turn speaking into a tape recorder, and the entire cohort would then listen to it play back together. It was, of course, a first-time experience for all twenty-eight students.

At the time, NHK had only 866 subscribers nationwide. Even supposing a family of five huddled around every television set, there would still have been no more than four or five thousand total viewers in the entire country, however unfathomable that may seem by today’s standards. Tape recorders

were even more rare and valuable, found only at NHK and a few other broadcasters.

We get to hear our own voices!

Totto and her peers raced across the street from the hotel to Studio 5 inside the NHK building. They had not been back there since their entrance tests when they were asked to sing a song. Today, they would be delivering lines.

Mr. Ooka assigned the women in the group a scene in which a mistress loses her patience with her married lover and pesters him with a barrage of pointed questions.

One by one, the actors walked up to the tape recorder to say their lines. By this point in the training period, it had become customary for Totto to go last in every group activity as some issue or another would invariably arise on her turn. Mr. Ooka knew this and made sure to start with the people he thought could serve as an example to the group.

After everyone had finished, they played back the recordings and squealed with excitement as their voices resounded over the speakers. Finally, Totto's turn came.

“Tetsuko Kuroyanagi.”

Her name echoed throughout the room. But the voice she heard sounded nasal and cloying, while also managing to seem standoffish; she couldn't believe this belonged to her at all. “Excuse me!” Totto yelled so she could be heard on the other side of the glass. “This machine is broken! Please fix it.”

Without missing a beat, the sound mixer replied, “No, the machine isn't broken. That's just your voice.”

This bewildered Totto. “But I know I don't sound this strange! Your machine must be broken.”

Several times she insisted there must be a mechanical malfunction, but the mixer only repeated, “That's your voice.”

Totto could never appear on television sounding like that! It then dawned on her that this was what Mr. Ooka must have meant when he'd called her a "wind-up French doll." She became inconsolable. Right then and there—in front of all her fellow trainees, Mr. Ooka, and the sound mixer—Totto burst into tears.

The mixer spoke up again, this time in a slightly more compassionate tone. "Your actual voice often sounds different from what you're used to hearing, because your ears pick up the sound that resonates in your mouth and head." He kindly replayed the recording to demonstrate the concept, but that only made Totto sob even harder.

"That isn't my voice. I don't sound this unnatural!"

Totto spent the rest of the day weeping. She felt certain that an actor who broke down blubbering at the sound of her own voice would never be chosen for one of the "limited positions" at the company. Soon, she would have to say goodbye to her new friends forever. The thought made her wail harder still.

It had taken no time at all for the cohort of trainees, affectionately named "The Little Eggs," to grow close. With only days before the final hiring announcements, the group made a pact: Should NHK drop any of them, those who had been accepted would strike as one to demand all twenty-eight applicants be hired. "You promise?" "I promise!" they pledged to each other on the final day of their training period before parting ways outside Shinbashi Station.

A few days later, a postcard arrived at Totto's house by express mail notifying her that she had passed! She spent the rest of the day reflecting on how, though it had only been a matter of months since she'd started attending classes at NHK, she had already experienced a great deal. The news delighted her, of course, but she could hardly believe that someone whose wish was to read bedtime stories to her children was about to embark on an adventure in the brand-new world of television broadcasting.

After another three days, seventeen successful applicants reassembled at the hotel. "It's wonderful to see you again!" they cried upon reuniting, but

the joy was short-lived. They were now headed straight into their second training period. This round would last a whole year.

Because of the diffuse manner in which their acceptance notices had come, talks of organizing a strike quickly fizzled out. The guilt of having broken her promise stayed with Totto for many years afterwards. She never did cross paths again with any of the “limited number” of people who did not make the cut.

—

“Totto-sama!”

Strolling down the hallway, Totto heard a familiar voice. It was Mr. Ooka. She turned to see her teacher walking in her direction, his hand covering his mouth as usual.

“Do you know why you were selected?”

The question caught Totto off guard. “I’m quite sure I don’t!”

“Hee hee hee!” Mr. Ooka chuckled. “I was very impressed that you never arrived late or missed a single day of training. Before your group, I worked with several first- and fourth-year cohorts, but you are the first of my students ever to have achieved perfect attendance. Your passion is to be commended. Your test scores, on the other hand, were abysmal. Nevertheless, the examiners vouched for you. ‘This young woman knows next to nothing about acting. She is a blank slate—much like the field of professional television,’ they said. ‘Perhaps she might be able to take in this new medium without being bogged down by any preconceived notions.’ In other words, you are like a fresh sheet of oil-blotting paper. NHK is embarking on a new endeavor, and they thought it might be interesting to start it with at least one young actor who is free of marks of any kind. You are, in a word, colorless and transparent! And that worked in your favor.”

“Colorless and transparent? What could that possibly mean?” Totto wondered, but before she could say a word, Mr. Ooka vanished once again like magic.

So she hadn't impressed them with her acting and performance skills, after all. Totto had certainly not expected to be chosen for her talent or looks, but she had hoped her selection would have at least a little to do with acting...

"Colorless and transparent..."

Still reeling, Totto scanned the hallway for Mr. Ooka. He was long gone.

"Where to, Totto-sama?"

This new year-long training cycle began with Totto in her official perch at the front of the classroom, just as before.

The roster of teachers had become even more impressive, adding names such as actor and director Sugisaku Aoyama, art theory expert Yasaburo Ikeda, and actress and traditional Japanese dancer Midori Nishizaki.

Totto had seen Mr. Aoyama's films before and knew him as the co-founder of the celebrated Haiyuza Theatre Company, which still exists to this day. Once, he referred to Totto as "Troupe Leader," saying that the title suited her. It brought back memories of the actual troupe leader she had met in Suwanotaira as a girl and made her heart skip. Was she really troupe leader material?

Mr. Aoyama sometimes turned on a metronome to time the delivery of lines during acting lessons. The sight of it always made Totto think reflexively of her father's violin lessons. She understood how the device could be helpful in practicing music, but she also wished that she and her fellow trainees could be taught to draw from emotion to act out their lines instead of having a machine dictate their performances.

As part of the new training cycle, Totto began taking private tap dance lessons three times a week from Mr. Ogino after the regularly-scheduled classes. She developed her own method for quickly memorizing the teacher's steps by voicing them out loud in gibberish: "*Chiri-tan-ta-chiri-ta, chiri-ta-chiri-chita.*"

Totto also had the chance to work for a day as an “experimental color television broadcast model.” Delighted at the prospect of being a model, she practically skipped to the NHK research laboratory in Kinuta, Setagaya ward, only to have the right half of her face lathered in purple paint and the left half painted all white. “Please sit still in front of the camera,” the NHK technician directed her. “Can you at least paint my face pink instead of purple?” Totto pleaded. But the technician simply replied, “Today’s color is purple.” Totto had been so excited to model for color television, but in the end, she spent the whole day sitting in front of the camera, looking like a colorful zebra.

In April 1954, at the culmination of their year-long training period, Totto and her peers officially signed with the NHK Tokyo Broadcasting Theater Company as the fifth-year cohort. The young woman who had started out wishing to become a mother with great reading skills had now become an actress.

The new actors’ first job was to provide *gaya-gaya*, an onomatopoeic word used to describe the chatter of a crowd. In essence, they were to perform the background voices in a radio drama. And so Totto and her fellow members filed into a studio to appear on an actual radio broadcast.

The show they’d been assigned to was none other than the extremely popular radio drama series *Kimi no na wa* (Your Name), which aired every Thursday evening at eight-thirty. It ran from 1952 to 1954 and became such a sensation that it would go on to be adapted into a novel, a television series, a film, and a theater play. The story begins on the night of the Great Tokyo Air Raid when strangers Machiko and Haruki meet by chance in Ginza. While it was a well-known fact that whenever eight-thirty on Thursday rolled around, the women’s side of public bathhouses everywhere emptied out, Totto was stunned to learn that the melodrama’s theme song was performed by none other than Miss Futaba Takayanagi, her former voice teacher at Toyo Conservatory of Music.

“Here you go.” Totto and her colleagues were each handed a script, though these had no specific lines for the *gaya-gaya*. They were to come up with their own dialogue.

In the scene, Machiko and Haruki are talking to one another on the street when a nearby pedestrian collapses. Because radio is an audio medium, a sound effect is added to convey that someone has fallen. Then, the actors closest to the microphone—the two playing Machiko and Haruki—react with an “Oh?” and a “What happened?” At this point, the *gaya-gaya* group is meant to gather around and whisper lines such as, “What’s the matter?” and “Is he dead?” and “Should we call an ambulance?” Their job is to make it sound as though someone has really toppled over in the middle of the street.

As this was the group’s first *gaya-gaya* outing, the two lead voice actors joined them for a special rehearsal session. Totto’s cohort stood in a circle about two and a half feet away from “Machiko” and “Haruki.” They waited for the director to give a cue from behind the glass, then piped up with their lines as they each saw fit.

Just then, the director’s voice sounded over the loudspeaker.

“I don’t know who it is, but one of you is really standing out. Let’s do it again, quieter this time.”

They tried once more. Almost immediately, the director cut in over the loudspeaker. “You there, the young lady there in the parachute skirt.” Evidently, he meant Totto. “You. You’re all I can hear.”

Totto had tried to imagine what she would do and say if she happened to see someone faint on the street. Given that the person might be dead for all she knew, she couldn’t very well picture herself whispering, “Are you all right?” She would, of course, shout, “*Are you all right?!*” Which is exactly what she did.

“Okay, you. Let’s have you stand, say...ten feet away from everyone else?”

Totto went from two and a half feet to ten feet away from the main actors and the microphone.

Now she had no choice but to yell, louder than before, “ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?!” She glanced over at the crew behind the glass and saw the sound mixer jump up in his chair, his hands covering his ears.

“Young lady! Please step back even farther...more...all the way to the door. Yes, do it from right there.”

Totto trudged sadly over to the studio door. Her fellow trainees were now over thirty feet away. For the next take, she screamed with all her might. “*ARE YOU ALL RIIIGHT?!?*”

The director disappeared from behind the glass window and stormed into the studio.

“Listen. When a *gaya-gaya* actor’s voice stands out, it makes radio listeners think, ‘Is that person important? Will they reappear later in the story?’ The point is to *not* leave an impression. Your job is to commit to playing a nameless face in a crowd...Young lady, you can go home today. I’ll be sure to fill out your timecard.”

The way timecards functioned was this: Whenever an actor worked in the studio, the director would write down how many hours they had completed, in which studio, and for which program, then pin the timecards to the troupe’s dressing room wall. Every month, the actors signed their timecards and submitted them to personnel in the administration office who would add up their total hours and pay them their salary. Knowing that Totto would not be paid if she went home without putting in any hours, the director kindly filled out her timecard as if she had. For those who may be curious, Totto’s rate back then was a mere fifty-nine yen per hour, low even for the time. This was apparently in consideration of the cost of the professional training that she and her cohort received at NHK.

Totto, however, was more heartbroken about being sent home alone than she was concerned about her pay. She waited on a bench outside the studio for everyone else to finish so that she could at least join them for the walk back to Shinbashi Station. They had made plans to stop by a café for *oshiruko* dessert soup after work.

From that day onward, no matter which studio she went to for work on whichever program, and no matter who the director was, whenever it came

time to record the *gaya-gaya*, Totto was invariably told, “Young lady, you can go home. I’ll fill out your timecard.”

Some days it was worse. She would walk into a studio and be met with, “Oh, you came? You can go home. I’ll fill out your timecard.”

One such day, Totto was sitting outside the studio reading a book as she waited for her group to finish. Suddenly, Mr. Ooka materialized out of nowhere, as was his way, and took a seat next to her on the bench. With his hand covering his mouth, he asked, “Totto-sama, which project are you here for today?”

“I was meant to do *gaya-gaya* for Miss Shizuko Kasagi’s television program, but they told me I could go home and that they would fill out my timecard.”

Gaya-gaya parts for television programs were essentially extras, or passers-by. In this particular scene, star actress and singer Shizuko Kasagi—dubbed the Queen of Boogie in post-war Japan—sang “*Kaimono boogie*” (Shopping Boogie) and danced along a shopping street in a parachute skirt. As a *gaya-gaya* extra, Totto was to stroll past happily without looking the actress’s way, even as she bemoaned her seemingly endless shopping list. But to Totto, the idea of someone singing in the middle of the street was such great fun that she couldn’t help but stare as she passed.

That’s when a voice rained down from the studio’s speakers. “Don’t stare!”

Totto wanted to argue that anyone who saw a woman singing in front of the fishmonger would surely glance her way, at the very least.

“Just glide past her. Glide!”

Apparently, too many things about Totto’s clothing and appearance stood out. She did as she was told, gliding swiftly past the star. But again, the director’s voice cut in from above.

“Not so fast! Television screens are small. Scurry by that quickly and you’ll look like a black shadow moving across the panel.”

“Yes, sir.”

For the next cut, Totto tried walking in slow motion, doing her very best imitation of the mime artist Marcel Marceau.

“You’re not a ninja!”

“Yes, sir.”

“You can go home. I’ll fill out your timecard.”

Mr. Ooka asked no questions and made no attempts to cheer Totto up as she explained what had happened inside the studio. “Hee hee hee,” he chuckled softly, then asked, “And what is it you’re reading?” Totto showed him the cover. He glanced at it, then disappeared.

Since the start of her trainee days, Totto had been told on more occasions than she could count, “That’s enough” or “Don’t stand out!” This also meant that she spent many hours waiting for her peers to finish. At such times, it was always Mr. Ooka who came over to give her a pep talk. “Where to, Totto-sama?” he would call out whenever they passed each other, often several times a day, whether in the hallway, in the elevator, or in front of the restroom. Even after Totto became an official NHK troupe member, Mr. Ooka continued to appear suddenly and ask her, “Where to, Totto-sama?”

Each time she ran into him, Totto felt reassured that someone was looking out for her. To her, Mr. Ooka was like a powerful good luck charm. It was thanks to him that she never lost faith in her abilities, regardless of how severely the directors berated her or how many jobs she was booted off. Totto accepted her situation, telling herself, “I’m still only a newcomer. And besides, I’m simply here to learn how to read to my children.” Perhaps she should have been more worried. In any event, *gaya-gaya* work was incredibly difficult for Totto.

The Tearful Table-Read Room

Totto will never forget the hurt and frustration she felt that day.

She and her group had finished their *gaya-gaya* work and were walking out of Studio 1 when a troupe member four years her senior in the company

stopped her. He played the lead in the radio drama they had just recorded.

“Come with me. I want to talk to you. The table-read room is open,” he said brusquely as he opened the door across from the studio and strode in. This gave Totto a bad feeling, but she couldn’t very well refuse a request from a more senior troupe member.

The room was empty and dim. Totto had assumed they would sit down to talk, but the lead actor just spun around, his eyes flashing angrily behind his glasses, and spat, “The way you say your lines—what language are you speaking? Is it even Japanese?”

Not wanting to show her fear, Totto asked as politely as possible, “Is there something wrong with my Japanese?”

“Everything is wrong with your Japanese! All of it!”

Totto was at a loss for words. She had in fact sensed there was something different about the way she spoke compared to her troupe colleagues. But as far as she was concerned, that was only a matter of speed or volume, and had nothing to do with her Japanese skills.

Directors had, of course, scolded Totto for talking too quickly or too loudly. Like the rest of the troupe, she knew the correct tempo at which they were required to speak for radio programs, but she never managed to get it quite right. Totto’s natural speaking speed was much quicker than most people’s and she had trouble slowing it down. The same went for controlling the volume of her voice. Though the director might ask her to whisper quietly or squeal with excitement, she couldn’t help but recite her lines the way she imagined she might in any given situation.

But this person was saying that her Japanese itself was all wrong.

Totto hung her head in defeat, but her senior continued to kick her down. “Are you trying to copy Meiko Nakamura or something?” he said, referring to a star who had become famous as a child actor before the war. Even Totto, who was not well-acquainted with the world of broadcasting, recognized the name. But she had never heard Meiko-san on the radio, and it would not be until a few years later that she and the actress appeared on television together. Totto hadn’t a clue what the actress’s voice sounded like. Even supposing Totto *had* heard Meiko-san’s voice, she believed that

there was nothing more shameful than imitating another actor. She found herself screaming, “I am not trying to copy her or anyone else!”

Stunned by her reaction, the swaggering senior troupe member seemed to shrink a little.

“Just fix it by tomorrow!” he growled, then violently swung the door open and stomped out of the room.

This was by no means the first time a senior troupe member had given Totto a scolding. But to be accused of copying was an insult she could not tolerate. In her mind, pretending to be someone else was akin to betraying Mr. Kobayashi, headmaster of Tomoe Gakuen, who had said to her, “You’re really a good girl, you know,” as well as her mother, who’d said, “Your honesty is your best attribute.” That day was the first and only time she ever cried after becoming an official member of NHK’s theater company.

Alone in the table-read room, Totto pounded on the concrete wall as she wept. When her fists began to throb, she switched over to kicking a spot lower down the wall. A swell of emotions—sorrow, regret, rage—surged within her, and she felt the need to take it out on something physically to calm herself down.

How much time had passed? The sun had set, the room had grown pitch-black, and there was a chill in the air. Totto’s peers had almost certainly left the studio already, so she could at least slip out of the building without anybody spotting her swollen eyes. “I am not trying to copy anyone!” she insisted once more. Still, her tears would not stop.

Heartbroken about the day’s events, Totto had no way of knowing that NHK had already begun preparing a new big-budget radio drama for children.

Yanbo, Ninbo, Tonbo

“I hear there’s an *audition* coming up...What do you think that means?”

Totto and her peers raced to Studio 2 to find it full not only with other trainees from their class, but also with members of theater companies whose names even Totto recognized, such as Bungakuza, as well as unaffiliated actors who worked as free agents. In a word, the studio teemed with talented people.

“What in the world is going on?”

An audition was being held to cast voice actors for a new radio drama titled *Yanbo, Ninbo, Tonbo*. According to NHK, the new program would be something that adults and children alike could enjoy. They had decided to hold their very first casting call for the occasion. Everyone today is familiar with the English word *audition*, but no one had heard of it at the time.

“Imagine, a program that both adults and children can enjoy together...!”

The show sounded right up Totto’s alley. She had a feeling that her dream of becoming a mother who reads wonderful stories to her children might make her the perfect fit. “It’s almost as if it were made for me!”

—

Yanbo, Ninbo, Tonbo, an inspiring musical adventure, told the tale of three little white monkeys trying to make their way home. The simian brothers are shipped as a gift by the King of India to the Emperor of China, but they escape en route and start making their way back to India and their waiting parents. The program was full of whimsy and included lots of singing. Most radio narratives up to that point had either been set during the war or involved it in some way, as in stories about child protagonists who had lost their families in the conflict, for example. But for this program, NHK had evidently decided to break the mold and create a warm, uplifting show.

While it is customary now for grown women to play the roles of children, back then these characters were all voiced by actual children. NHK even had a dedicated children’s theater group called Tokyo Broadcasting Children’s Theater Company. However, the playwright behind *Yanbo, Ninbo, Tonbo* said that he did not want to see children in the studio

late at night, squeezing in homework between recording sessions. The program also called for many singing scenes, and very few children were able to read sheet music and sing on the spot. That was how NHK came to hold the first large-scale casting call in its history to hire grown-ups to voice child characters.

At the audition, every applicant was given a two-page script and sheet music. A partition stood between them and the judges to ensure a fair assessment would be made on their voices and not their physical appearances. The auditions progressed smoothly, as many of the applicants were experienced actors, but Totto did hear a few people fretting, “What shall I do? I don’t know how to read music...” She sat down and showed them a little of how to read the notes. Who could have imagined that her music school studies would come in handy at a time like this?

“Please read Tonbo’s lines,” one of the judges directed Totto when her turn came. Tonbo was the youngest of the three monkeys, so she did her best to sound like a very little boy.

As the day went on, the other actors were asked to switch between the older Yanbo and Ninbo roles partway through their auditions, but no matter how many times she reprised the reading with different applicants, Totto continued to be asked to play Tonbo. The judges tested out dozens of audition-ees in various pairings and combinations. Once the test readings wrapped up, the actors had nothing to do but wait inside the venue for the results to be announced. After about ten anxiety-ridden minutes, someone walked in holding a sheet of paper.

“Yanbo will be played by Junko Miyauchi of Bungakuza. Ninbo will be played by Sachiko Nishinakama, also of Bungakuza. Tonbo will be played by Tetsuko Kuroyanagi of the NHK Theater Company.”

What? Did they say “Tetsuko Kuroyanagi”?

Totto reflexively stood up. Did they really want her? She couldn’t even manage a simple *gaya-gaya* part or speak Japanese correctly!

Her peers gathered around her, cheering, “Congratulations!” and, “I’m so happy for you!” But to Totto, it all felt so very surreal.

“The three people whose names have just been called, please come this way.”

The new castmates were then introduced to the playwright and composer, but this only made Totto more nervous.

“I do hope they don’t regret this later...What if they send me home in the end, just like always...?” she fretted, too worried and overwhelmed to feel much joy.

“This is the playwright, Mr. Tadasu Iizawa,” a staff member said, referring to a bespectacled man with combed-back hair who looked rather intellectual in his smart suit and tie.

Totto bowed, then said hastily, “I know my Japanese is a bit strange, but I will fix that. And I am not a very good singer, but I will practice. I will try my best not to stand out, and to speak properly, I promise...”

But Mr. Iizawa only smiled, his eyes squinting kindly behind his glasses.

“Please don’t fix a thing. You’ve been chosen precisely for the way you speak, which, by the way, is not at all strange. Promise me that you will not change anything. Stay just the way you are. Your uniqueness is exactly what we need. Don’t worry! Everything will be all right.”

Really? She could stay the way she was?

Upon hearing Mr. Iizawa’s words, Totto felt the clouds that had hung heavy in her heart and mind lift all at once. At long last, after being removed from so many roles and sent home day after day, she had found someone who needed her exactly as she was, quirks and all. The audition came very shortly after the day her senior colleague had screamed at her, “Your Japanese is all wrong!” Had she not met Mr. Iizawa when she did, Totto might not have lasted much longer at NHK.

Mr. Ooka had also attended the auditions, of course. Later, he whispered to Totto, “The moment he heard your voice, the composer Tadashi Hattori said, ‘This is Tonbo! She’s exactly what we’re looking for!’ And that, it seems, was that. Mr. Iizawa also raved about you, saying, ‘What a unique

voice. I've never heard anything quite like it. Her sound is the first of its kind in the Japanese theater and broadcasting scene.' ”

Mr. Ooka filled Totto in on Mr. Iizawa's background as well. He told her that Mr. Iizawa was the world's first journalist to report on the aftermath of the devastating atomic bombs. As the editor-in-chief of *Asahigraph* (also known as *Asahi Picture News*), a weekly pictorial by the publisher of the national *Asahi Newspaper*, he had acquired a set of photographs taken in Hiroshima immediately following the detonation of the atomic bomb and kept them hidden until 1952, the year the U.S.-led Allied Powers' occupation of Japan ended. Then, in the August 6th issue of *Asahigraph*, he finally published the images. For the first time, people all around the globe were able to see the destruction visited upon Hiroshima and appreciate the terror of the atom bomb. That *Asahigraph* issue went through reprint after reprint, which apparently put some strain on the newspaper. The year of the *Yanbo, Ninbo, Tonbo* audition was the same year that Mr. Iizawa, who had until recently been balancing dual careers as a journalist and a playwright, left his position at the pictorial to focus on the theater.

“He is quite modern in his thinking, and while he may appear rather gentle, he also has an unwavering sense of morality and strong conviction in his beliefs,” Mr. Ooka continued. “I am so very pleased that you will be working with him in your debut performance.”

Totto agreed wholeheartedly. Just as she had started to lose confidence in her abilities, Mr. Iizawa had assured her by saying, “Stay just the way you are,” and, “Everything will be all right.” She felt blessed to be working with him.

His encouragement reminded Totto of how Mr. Kobayashi at Tomoe Gakuen had said, “You're really a good girl, you know.” Their words would continue to support her throughout her career.

Work and Marriage

The radio drama *Yanbo, Ninbo, Tonbo* stole the hearts of children all around the country. If *Kimi no na wa* (Your Name) could be called the signature

radio drama for adults, *Yanbo, Ninbo, Tonbo* was without question the signature children's program. Though originally scheduled to run for only six months starting in April 1954, the strong support for the program allowed it to continue until March 1957, a total of three years.

Partway through the show's run, both of the Bungakuza actors who originally co-starred with Totto had to step down; one actor went on tour with her theater company and the other gave birth. Kyoko Satomi and Michiyo Yokoyama, two of Totto's peers in the NHK troupe, took over the roles of Yanbo and Ninbo, respectively.

During the show's first year, however, NHK kept it secret that the actors voicing the three little monkeys were in fact grown-ups. The credits announced at the end of each broadcast went, "Appearing in this program... Yanbo, Ninbo, Tonbo, and the narrator, Teruko Nagaoka."

When asked for the reason behind this decision, the writer Mr. Iizawa said, "I want children to be able to dream. There is no need to reveal how the show is made."

NHK had at first been dead-set against the idea of adults playing children's roles. But Mr. Iizawa held firm, insisting they would always be able to find actresses to voice the young characters. "I refuse to keep children at the studio until late, and I will walk away from the program if you do not cast adults for these roles."

And whatever Mr. Iizawa said, went; it was thanks to him that NHK decided to hold the large-scale audition. Nowadays it is considered standard practice for grown actors to provide voiceovers in movies and anime, and for women to voice the roles of young boys, but at the time, this represented a groundbreaking move in broadcasting.

Not until a full year into the program's run did NHK reveal the truth: "The roles of Yanbo, Ninbo, and Tonbo are voiced not by children, but by three members of the NHK Tokyo Broadcasting Theater Company." Given that the following year would be the Year of the Monkey in the Chinese zodiac, NHK executives thought it the perfect time to leverage the program's breakout success to encourage press coverage. And they were right. Newspapers and magazines flocked to interview Kyoko Satomi as

Yanbo, Michiyo Yokoyama as Ninbo, and Totto as Tonbo. The trio was interviewed together at Hibiya Park and at Ueno Zoo, and a photographer once came all the way to Totto's home in Kitasenzoku to take photographs.

One such feature in Japan's oldest weekly magazine, *Shukan Asahi* (Weekly Asahi), read:

The term "Gokira," a twist on the famous Gojira [Godzilla], has become the talk of the radio industry. It is meant to describe the rising stars of the NHK theater company's goki [fifth-year class] of voice acting students [sic] and refers to three young women in particular. They are each better known by their respective roles as Yanbo, Ninbo, and Tonbo in the show created by Tadasu Iizawa which made them famous.

What makes the Gokira unique is their connection to television broadcasting. Not only must they deliver lines, but they must also sing and dance, all while looking stunning. [...]

These three ladies have been lauded for their refreshing natural talent, though some say they have become a bit too practiced of late. One can only hope they do not lose their natural touch.

They are:

Yanbo Satomi (Nickname: Soyo) — height 5'2" / weight 99 lbs.

Ninbo Yokoyama (Nickname: Yoko) — height 5'3" / weight 103 lbs.

Tonbo Kuroyanagi (Nickname: Chuck) — height 5'2" / weight 99 lbs.

The article noted Totto's nickname as "Chuck," which has its own story. Believe it or not, this nickname had nothing to do with how the chatterbox seemed incapable of zipping her lips, though the word for zipper (*chakku*) is a homophone for "Chuck" in Japanese. As part of Totto's audition for the NHK theater company, she was required to read aloud from a script. The novella she chose, *Kappa* by Ryunosuke Akutagawa, features many mythical water-dwelling *kappa*, one of which is called Chuck. Totto had such great fun repeating "Chuck, Chuck, Chuck, Chuck" that people started calling her by that name.

From a modern perspective, the *Asahi* story's focus on physical appearance and bodyweight seems rather inappropriate, but so went the countless articles of the day that featured Totto and her co-stars.

Around the same time, Totto had just been on her third-ever arranged meeting with a potential marriage partner and was thinking quite seriously about being wed. The man was a neurosurgeon, and Totto had told her parents, "I think I might want to marry him."



Totto was interviewed by numerous publications.

While Totto's father had allowed her to join NHK and work as an actor, the truth was that he seemed to wish she would marry and settle down. It was much more common for women to marry and become housewives than build a career, and Daddy apparently believed this would be the key to their happiness.

As preparations for Totto's marriage moved swiftly along, Mother had overcoats—four of them, in fact—tailored for Totto at her favorite dress shop in Jiyugaoka. “Once you're married, I won't be able to make you any more clothes,” she said. Totto's favorite was the fitted pink coat with the princess line silhouette, a fur collar, and black velvet sleeves.

In the end, however, Totto did not go through with the marriage. Her fiancé was perfectly kind, but she started to think that it would be a shame to marry someone with whom she was not in love.

For a while after she turned down the proposal, every time Totto left the house in her pink coat, Mother would mutter, “Marriage fraudster!”

—

Totto did not have a strong desire to marry per se, but she did still wish to wed and become a mother who read to her children at night. That was her main motivation, and it may have explained why she seemed to have a different attitude toward work than most.

When filming and recording continued late into the night, she would often say, “It's getting late, and I must be going. Have a good evening.” Everyone stared in disbelief.

“I've never heard of a professional actor leaving a job because it's late. Where in the world are you going?”

“I'm tired, so I'm going home to sleep.”

NHK had big plans to promote Totto as their very first television actress, but she seemed to have little desire or interest in playing that role.

Still, thanks to the runaway success of *Yanbo*, *Ninbo*, *Tonbo*, a flood of work offers came in for her. In children's television, Totto voiced the main character Piko the Peanut in the popular NHK puppet program *Chirorin mura to kurumi no ki* (Chirorin Village and the Walnut Tree), which aired from 1956 to 1964. She also hosted the hit science program *Hatena gekijo* (Question Theater), which aired weekly from 1957 to 1961, for a total of 186 episodes. Outside of children's programming, she played the role of Saeko in the beloved family radio drama *Ichhome ichibanchi* (Block One,

House One), which aired for twenty-five minutes Monday through Friday from 1957 to 1964, for over two thousand episodes. Each of these programs went on to become smash successes, and Totto was as busy as a happy bee.

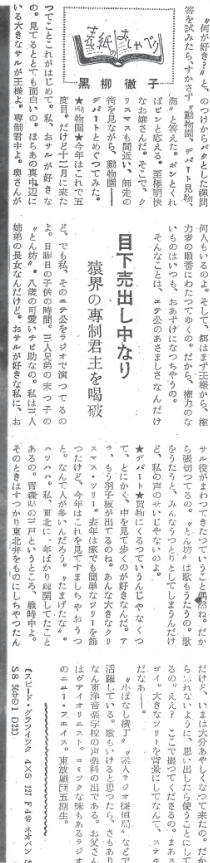
And then, it came.

The call to host the country's most celebrated live music program on New Year's Eve.

“Are You a Girl or a Boy?”

Totto was chosen to host the annual *Kohaku uta gassen* (Red and White Song Battle), a festive national celebration which is broadcast live on television and features the year's most notable singers. An invitation to appear on *Kohaku*, as it is called, is still considered a measure of success and popularity for both new and established artists in Japan. Totto's came less than five full years after she signed with NHK.

Viewers around the nation now tune in for over three hours to watch the end-of-year spectacular, but the first time it aired, on January 3rd, 1951, the program lasted only one hour and featured fourteen singers split evenly between two competing teams—women on the Red Team, men on the White. Red and white are considered to be festive colors in Japan and feature prominently in New Year's decorations. Television had not yet begun, so the singing contest was held in an NHK studio and broadcast live over the radio.

[illegible]

発行所 用印欄 用印法人 ラジオサービスセンター 東京都千代田区内神田2の12 N H K ラジオ新聞会館 電話 (55) 7166-8
日本タ イムス社 編集兼発行人 宋 常 卓 郎 股 替 口 座 番 号 京 京 105415 支 店

As mentioned earlier, NHK made its first foray into television broadcasting in February 1953. That August, a handful of commercial broadcasting stations also made their television debuts. Singing programs proved to be extremely popular with viewers, so when the time came for the fourth *Kohaku*, NHK set out to reserve a large concert hall from which to

simultaneously air the show on TV and radio on New Year's Day. Unfortunately, all of the major venues in Tokyo were booked for other artists' New Year concerts, and NHK was left with no choice but to move the event to New Year's Eve.

By the mid-1950s, the commercial television stations were all scheduling their competing live singing programs on New Year's Eve. Although an appearance on the *Kohaku* stage is a top priority for artists today, the show was not yet viewed as particularly prestigious, and many sought-after singers agreed to appear on multiple such shows on the same night.

—

It was amidst this backdrop that Totto hosted the Ninth Annual *Kohaku uta gassen* in 1958—a rather grand debut for the twenty-five-year-old, who made headlines as the youngest host in the show's history.

Totto worried about her ability to host the program successfully, as there were many popular artists she might know by name but would not recognize in person. There were far fewer televised singing shows available in those days, and her own work schedule was so hectic that she hadn't had much opportunity to really take one in.

Totto squealed with delight, however, when she saw the gold dress that had been made to order for her night of hosting. It had an open neckline, a fitted waist, and a skirt which widened in a balloon silhouette. She had the dress shortened to knee-length so that she could move about easily and run around the stage if necessary.

The live event was to be held at Shinjuku Koma Theater, which had opened its doors the year before and would go on to become Tokyo's entertainment epicenter until its closing in 2008. Other broadcasters were also airing live end-of-year concerts that night, including Nihon TV from Nihon Gekijo (Japan Theater) in Yurakucho, and KR Television (now TBS, or Tokyo Broadcasting System) from Tokyo Takarazuka Theater in Hibiya.

Most of the artists on the *Kohaku* roster were scheduled to appear first on one of the other shows before rushing to Shinjuku Koma Theater.

Beginning in the mid-1950s, as traffic in Tokyo's streets grew increasingly congested, the term *kamikaze taxi* came into use to describe cab drivers who tore through the city, ignoring traffic lights and laws. It became such a trendy term that it would no doubt have been nominated for the buzzword-of-the-year award had such a prize existed then.

Drawing from that term for taxi drivers, artists with head-spinning schedules who flew from venue to venue were often called *kamikaze talents*. Ignoring laws and dismissing traffic lights was dangerous and illegal, of course, so although it is hard to believe now, the artists' cars often received a police escort from Yurakucho or Hibiya across town to Shinjuku's Kabukicho where Koma Theater was located.

How on earth was that possible?—you may well wonder now. At the time, it simply was!

—

The contest began with Totto's official oath of sportsmanship, the recording of which can be found in the NHK Archives today:

“We solemnly swear and agree to play the game with honor and in the spirit of artists, fighting fair and square until we knock out our opponents. December 31st, 1958. Tetsuko Kuroyanagi, speaking on behalf of both teams in the Ninth Annual *Kohaku uta gassen*.”

The White Team led off with Atsuo Okamoto, a popular singer of *enka* ballads, in his seventh *Kohaku* appearance, followed by acclaimed singers who would go on to become household names: Kazuya Kosaka, Haruo Minami, Frank Nagai, Dick Mine, the vocal group Dark Ducks, and Hachiro Kasuga. The final performer, for the second year running, was star *enka* singer Michiya Mihashi. Also making an appearance for the White Team was one of Totto's former classmates at Toyo Conservatory of Music, Koichi Miura.

The Red Team, which Totto led, was made up of the most notable female singers of that time, including now-legendary names such as Utako Matsushima, Izumi Yukimura, Chiemi Eri, Fubuki Koshiji, Peggy Hayama, Noriko Awaya, and Chiyoko Shimakura. The final performer for the Red Team, also for the second year running, was the celebrated singer and cultural icon Hibari Misora.

Twenty-five artists sang for each team on a lavish stage before a live audience. These performances were interspersed with energetic and entertaining cheer battles, all of which a panel of VIP guest judges took into consideration when voting for the winning team. A great deal of this original format can still be found in the modern-day *Kohaku* program. One major difference, however, was that back in these earlier years, there was no formal script and no program director to ensure everything progressed as it should. In part, that meant there was no one to confirm which artists had arrived at the venue and relay that information to the hosts.

From her spot on the stage, Totto could hear the sirens of the escort police cars outside signaling that another artist had come. “We’ve got a female singer!” or “Male singer!” a staff member yelled from the driveway to the stagehands whenever someone new stepped out of a vehicle. The performers nearly all arrived late. It was New Year’s Eve, and the streets were jammed with cars and pedestrians. What with all the chaos of people coming and going, the only characteristic that staff members could quickly make out was whether new arrivals were men or women.

Perhaps this havoc was to blame for a terrible mistake Totto made in the first half of the show. She had meant to introduce the singer Utako Matsushima, but instead said, “Please join me in welcoming Miss Hamako Watanabe!”

Back then, the microphones were fixed on a stand at the center of the stage. As Totto announced the song title, the music started to play and Utako Matsushima made her way to the microphone, reaching it mere seconds before she was to start singing—with no time to correct the error.

“That’s Utako Matsushima!” a crew member hissed at Totto. “Make the correction when she’s done singing!” Following the performance, Totto

scurried over to the microphone and bowed her head. “My sincere apologies. You have just heard the lovely Utako Matsushima!”

Despite the disorder, there were some artists whose names and faces Totto knew. One competitor Totto recognized right away as she appeared in the dimly lit wings was the renowned chanson singer Noriko Awaya. A graduate of Toyo Conservatory of Music, the school both Totto and her mother had attended, Miss Awaya was a close friend of Mother’s who often visited the Kuroyanagi home in Kitasenzoku. She would float into the house without any makeup on, then lay her makeup tools on the table and say, “I must now reveal these eyes to the world!” From there, she would proceed to line her eyelids several times over and apply fake eyelashes. It came as no surprise, then, that her hair and makeup were exquisitely done for that night’s performance. Totto presented her with smooth confidence, “Here is ‘*La vie en rose*,’ performed by Miss Noriko Awaya!”

Totto’s counterpart and host for the White Team was none other than the distinguished NHK announcer Keizo Takahashi. Now in his sixth year as host, Keizo-san was an expert in dealing with the unexpected during live broadcasts and making the worst hiccups barely noticeable. But even he joined Totto in breaking out in a cold sweat when they were informed that no other artists for the Red Team had yet arrived to sing next.

Onstage, young men dressed in costumes fashioned after the historic *Byakkotai* (White Tiger Brigade), a corps of teenage samurai from the nineteenth century, were performing a traditional cheer in support of the White Team. “We need to buy time!” Totto thought in a panic as their performance wrapped up. Noticing a dog had been brought onstage with the samurai group, she cut into Keizo-san’s commentary, walked up to the animal, and pointed her microphone at its nose.

“Tell me. Are you a girl or a boy?”

The dog stared back at her warily.

“If you’re a girl, will you root for the Red Team?”

The hall burst into cheers and laughter. As the applause grew and the audience roared in appreciation, Totto heard someone holler backstage, “We’ve got a woman singer!” She let out a tremendous sigh of relief.

Once the frenzied live broadcast had come to a successful close, the entertainment department director of NHK approached Totto and remarked, “You have no fear, do you? Fancy interviewing a dog!”

Totto would go on to host *Kohaku uta gassen* five more times, most recently in 2015 as the contest celebrated its 66th year. She learned a great deal from this shaky start in 1958, when the Red Team she led took the trophy, and whenever she hosted the event in later years, she always made it a point to welcome and encourage the singers on her team.

When the soon-to-be-superstar Akina Nakamori made her first appearance on the show in 1983, Totto could see how terribly nervous the young woman was onstage and decided she simply must give her some words of comfort. The singer pushed through and finished her song, after which Totto put an arm around her shoulder and said, “Your knees are shaking, are you all right? You did a wonderful job out there. Thank you.” Totto will never forget the bashful smile her gesture brought to the up-and-coming star’s face.

Since Totto knew how much care the performing artists put into their stage costumes, she also began to include a word or two of her own fashion commentary when introducing the singers. One year, she went the extra mile and interviewed the entire Red Team about their costumes before the show, asking if there was anything the singers wished to spotlight.

When introducing the highly-revered singer Chiyoko Shimakura, who would be performing her hit number *Kono yo no hana* (Flowers of This World), Totto said, “Here to regale us with her magnificent hit song from twenty-seven years ago, for the first time on the *Kohaku* stage, I might add—and with this kimono! Take a closer look and you’ll see vignettes of the lives of artisans in the Genroku era depicted in glorious lacquer and gold and silver embroidery—here is Chiyoko Shimakura with ‘*Kono yo no hana.*’ ” As if on cue, the cameraman zoomed in on the elegant embroidery gracing the kimono sleeve.

Totto broke new ground in other ways as well.

“What if we could communicate a message in sign language on the *Kohaku* stage?” she thought. “Then children around the country would be able to see that people with hearing disabilities express themselves using their hands. How wonderful would that be?” Once she’d landed on the idea, she began searching for ways she might incorporate sign language into the event.

A few years earlier, Totto had invited actors from the National Theatre of the Deaf in America to perform in several cities around Japan. She had even joined them onstage, translating American Sign Language into Japanese Sign Language. Ever since that experience, she had been seeking opportunities to share sign language on television programs with much wider reach.

But two conditions needed to be met for Totto to be able to sign onstage. First, the camera would need to capture her in close-up, and second, she would need to be in front of a microphone stand so that her hands were free. Unfortunately, it was not common for both to occur at once.

Nevertheless, during rehearsals for the three-hour live show in 1980, Totto learned she might have one window of opportunity. She then enlisted the help of a member of the Japanese Federation of the Deaf to prepare a few lines of dialogue in sign language. Luckily for Totto, the camera operator who would be filming her was someone she had worked with for years. “Watch me closely, all right?” Totto whispered to him before the broadcast. “I’m going to do it.”

After the iconic singer Masashi Sada finished his song for the White Team, Totto took her position before the microphone stand, placed both hands on her chest, then started to speak and sign simultaneously: “All sorts of people are tuning in tonight from so many corners of the country. I imagine there are some who have left their hometowns, or are living far away from their families, who might be watching this show alone. But here on this stage, we have a grand group of singers performing their hearts out for you. I hope that you will help us root them on until the very end!”

Her message lasted only about thirty seconds. Even so, it was the first time anybody had directly addressed those with hearing disabilities on Japanese television, let alone the most-watched program of the year. Later, Totto heard that NHK received numerous messages from viewers wishing to express how much they appreciated it.

In 2022, Totto appeared on *Kohaku* as a guest judge. And though by that point she had already been in the entertainment business for seventy years, she mistook a glow stick for a microphone, holding it up to her mouth as she started to speak. Thankfully, figure skating gold medalist Yuzuru Hanyu, who sat next to her on the panel of judges, subtly passed her his microphone. That year's host, Sho Sakurai, a popular actor and member of the former boy band Arashi, also kindly added, "I do that all the time!" The crowd roared with joy and appreciation.

The laughter filling the NHK Hall theater made Totto feel warm all over. She sat back and reveled in the wonderful event, forgetting all about her little mistake. *Kohaku uta gassen* helped to nurture her as a performer and entertainer, and she hopes today that the singing contest and live broadcast will continue for years to come.

How to Stay Healthy Until You Die

Totto's work schedule was so incredibly busy that her head spun. A regular on multiple weekly television and radio programs, she had to learn a new script every day, rehearse her lines, then perform them live on air, not to mention squeeze in meetings of one kind or another between commitments. Every night, she worked past the last train and had to rely on taxis to take her home. She counted herself lucky if she was able to catch three hours of sleep in her own bed. But she was young and bounding with energy, and she assumed this was simply how things worked in the entertainment industry.

It was 1959, around the time of the history-making wedding of Crown Prince Akihito and commoner Michiko Shoda, later the Emperor and Empress of Japan. During one live broadcast of a drama series, Totto experienced a sudden ringing in her ears. The screeching grew louder and louder until she could no longer hear her co-stars' lines. The following day, it happened again. Totto called a doctor she knew, the director of a local hospital, and described her condition over the phone.

"Continue to work in this manner and you will die," he warned.

Horried, Totto cleared some time in her schedule and rushed over to the hospital. "You are experiencing extreme fatigue," the doctor explained, "and ought to be hospitalized immediately." Totto raced back to NHK. "I must take a few days off for treatment in the hospital," she informed her program directors. But rearranging her work schedule on such short notice was no easy feat. She was told, "Oh no, you can't do that" and, "You can take a break from the other programs, but please continue this one."

Totto rather liked knowing she was in such high demand. She even joked, "Will NHK go out of business without me?" In the end, she opted not to worry too much about it. How bad could a little ringing in the ears be? Moreover, Totto had never had reason to be concerned about her health as an adult. She continued to work without a break.

It didn't take long at all for her condition to worsen. One morning, she awoke to find several red splotches, each about two inches across, blooming like flowers on her lower legs. She yelled for her mother, who took one look at Totto's legs and lost her usual composure. "Go to the hospital this instant!" Totto recalled the doctor's words: "You will die."

She hurried to the hospital to be examined. Symptoms of overwork and fatigue can evidently present in various forms; in Totto's case, her exhaustion manifested as a ringing in the ears and these bright red flowers. According to the doctor, the thin blood vessels in her legs had weakened from lack of sleep and burst.

"You must take time off work and be treated in the hospital," the doctor urged, "or your condition will not improve."

Totto decided to heed his advice this time and take a one-month leave of absence from work. But what would her directors say? She couldn't even imagine. As she was a regular on multiple programs, Totto did not think they would appreciate her leaving those commitments for a whole month. To her surprise, they all responded, "Your body is your instrument, and we need it to be well. Please rest and focus on your treatments."

While in the hospital, Totto watched an episode of the live television drama series *Otosan no kisetsu* (A Father's Season) and experienced a discomfort she could not quite explain. This was one of her regular shows, on which she played the wife of the cook, portrayed by the charismatic Kiyoshi Atsumi. In this particular episode, a regular customer of the restaurant walked in partway through the show and asked, "Where's your wife today?" to which Totto's "husband" replied, "She's visiting her parents."

Visiting her parents! That short sentence was all it took to explain away Totto's absence. And this was the show for which she had been depriving herself of sleep? Totto could easily envision how, if she died of her present malady, they would simply say, "She went to visit her parents and died there."

She watched another program—one that she had been hosting—which saddened her even more. If only the woman standing in for her had opened with something to the effect of, "Miss Kuroyanagi is taking a little time off to recover from an illness, but she will be back in a month. I will be stepping in until she returns," Totto might have breathed a small sigh of relief from her hospital bed. But the interim host did not so much as mention Totto; she simply began the show with a "Hello."

"I don't believe it! That's it. I am going to get better and go back there to that stage!" Totto declared, more determined than ever to return to work.

The shows on which she appeared were not exactly ruthless, but she realized in the month she spent in the hospital bed that she needed to rid herself of any sentimental attachment to her work, especially on programs that involved large numbers of people.

As her hospital stay neared its end, she asked her doctor, “Is there a way to stay healthy until you die?”

“That’s an interesting question. I’ve never had anybody ask that before. I do believe there is just one way. And that is to live your life doing what you love.”

Oh, that’s easy! Totto started to list all the fun things that came to mind. “I’ll go see a play tomorrow, and then dine at a delicious restaurant the next day. And then I’ll go to the cinema the following day, and to the department store the day after that...”

“Who said anything about playing around all day? When I say do what you love, I mean only take the jobs you truly wish to do. People who can manage that do not get sick. On the other hand, if you work day after day thinking, ‘I hate this, I hate this,’ those negative feelings will manifest into some sort of disease.”

The word *stress* was not used widely then, but the doctor was likely advising Totto to avoid being overburdened by stress. “All right,” she replied.

Ever since that day, Totto has turned down any work she feels she might regret taking on, agreeing only to the jobs she truly wishes to do. Of course, her work in television and stage acting brings her great joy, which is why she has been able to continue both all these years.

At long last, she was released from the hospital. When she reported back to NHK, every program wanted her to return. “Please come back to set immediately,” they said. Not a single program told her, “We don’t have a spot for you anymore.”

Big Brother

It was the early sixties, and Totto’s career was on a roll.

One hit program on which she appeared was called *Boo Foo Woo*. It was the first television show featuring hand-operated puppets and ran for over six years from September 1960 to March 1967. The story, which was also written by *Yanbo, Ninbo, Tonbo*’s Mr. Iizawa, featured three sibling

piglets: Boo the moaner, Foo the tired (*foo* is a sigh in Japanese), and Woo the hard worker. Totto voiced the youngest piglet, Woo.

Another, the weekly half-hour children's program *Mahou no jutan* (Magic Carpet), began airing in April 1961. It utilized then-cutting-edge technology to weave together aerial clips shot from helicopters with studio-filmed scenes. As the show's host, Totto wore an Arabian-inspired character costume and called out "Abracadabra!" while the magic carpet carrying her and a couple of elementary-age children in turbans flew to schools all over Japan. Whenever the "magic carpet" visited a new school, all of its students arranged themselves in the schoolyard to spell out words and messages. The show was a smash hit. Unfortunately, it had to come to an end after three years because the helicopters it used to film were required to cover the 1964 Tokyo Olympics. Even today, middle-aged people who no longer look anything like children occasionally come up to Totto and say, "I once rode on the magic carpet with you!"

Totto also appeared on programs popular among older audiences, including two epoch-making shows that debuted in April 1961. *Yume de aimasho* (See You in Your Dreams), a beloved music variety program, aired every Saturday night at ten o'clock for five years. The comedy drama series *Wakai kisetsu* (The Youthful Years) featured an ensemble cast of young men and women who worked at a cosmetics company in Ginza called Printemps. It aired at eight o'clock on Sunday evenings, the time slot now reserved for NHK's year-long period drama series. Often referred to as "the show with forty-five stars," *Wakai kisetsu* featured superstar acts such as the wildly popular comic jazz band Hajime Hana and the Crazy Cats, as well as Kyu Sakamoto, singer of the world-famous song known as "Sukiyaki" in English.

Both programs aired live, and the cast often received their scripts with no more than two days to memorize their lines and squeeze in a rehearsal before filming. For years, Totto hardly slept a wink on weekends. But being able to work with the many gifted actors who appeared on the shows proved to be an invaluable learning experience.

Totto still remembers the scramble for *Wakai kisetsu* scripts in particular. At some point, it became habitual for an episode's screenplay to be finished only on the day of filming. With no time to print and bind them, the scripts were instead photocopied and handed out to the cast. Unlike today, photocopies at the time printed in a light purple color, smelled like vinegar, and came out sopping wet—so much so that little puddles formed from the moisture droplets that dripped beneath the tables bearing the bundles of copies.

It was in 1960 that Totto first met Kiyoshi Atsumi, on the set of the aforementioned drama series *Otosan no kisetsu* (A Father's Season), a sort of predecessor to the Kenichi Enomoto-starring *Wakai kisetsu*. A talented actor who would soon become a household name in the immensely popular *Tora-san* films, Mr. Atsumi came on board midway through the show as the husband Totto's character would wed through an arranged marriage.

"He was once the troupe leader of a famous theater in Asakusa," a staff member said by way of introduction, referring to a well-known strip-show theater in Asakusa called Furansuza (France Theater). This theater, where Mr. Atsumi began his comedy career, often featured comedy sets between strip performances. Numerous comedians sharpened their skills at Furansuza and later became national stars, including Hachiro Azuma and Keiroku Seki, not to mention the playwright and writer Hisashi Inoue, who was the theater's comedy writer.

"It's nice to meet you. I'm Tetsuko Kuroyanagi," Totto said. The pupils in Mr. Atsumi's beady eyes darted this way and that. "Goodness, what a mean glare!" was Totto's first impression of him. Her new castmate then squared his shoulders and replied, "Hello." He seemed to be wary of every last person in the room.

His voice, however, was lovely. As soon as rehearsals began, he shed his standoffish edge and transformed into the perfect fictional fiancé. No sooner had his scenes ended, however, than the actor crawled immediately back into his shell. "Oh well," Totto thought. They would be seeing each other every week for rehearsals and the live taping whether he liked it or

not, and she assumed somewhat optimistically that they would soon get used to one another.

A few weeks later, Totto said something in a meeting that made Mr. Atsumi shoot up from his chair and yell, “What?! You damn *ama*!”

She had never heard the word before. Without a hint of meanness or irony, she asked, “What do you mean by ‘*ama*’?” She had no way of knowing that it was a derogatory term for women.

Mr. Atsumi sighed in disgust, “Unbelievable. I can’t stand women like you.” He sat back down.

To an actor who had worked his way up in the rowdy theaters of Asakusa, this young woman who attended a missionary girls’ school and then music school before landing herself an exclusive contract with the NHK Theater Company must have appeared quite the sheltered goody two-shoes, a delicate flower who had not known a day of hardship in her life.

He was not yet accustomed to television studios, either. Once, a sound crew member asked him to kindly speak more softly into the microphone so that it wouldn’t break. “Back in Asakusa, the loudest voices always won,” he muttered in frustration. Watching him struggle in a new environment, Totto had an idea. She decided the thing to do was to buy a copy of her favorite book and gift it to him the next chance she had.

“Now, see? Here,” she said, handing him a copy of *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. “There are so many beautiful stories in the world. What do you say you stop screaming at everyone and try reading something like this for a change?”

The actor stared with mistrust at the cover illustration of a blonde boy standing atop a gray planet. Hesitantly, he took the book, gave Totto a gruff “Thanks,” then left.

—

Totto and Mr. Atsumi came to talk about many different things: Asakusa, the movies, NHK, and the Chinese restaurant they all went to together. His stories intrigued Totto deeply. Pretty soon he began to call her *Ojosan*, or

“Little Lady,” and she began to call him *An-chan*, an affectionate variation of “Big Brother.”

Once An-chan decided that Totto could be trusted, he shared many stories with her, such as the following:

“A guy with real skill can talk about nothing onstage for forty or fifty minutes without boring his audience. He’ll perch at the edge of the stage and chat up some old chap in the audience with a ratty newspaper, let’s say, asking him where he came from, whatever. And then he’ll spin that into this bigger and bigger story until—*bam!*—the whole crowd is mesmerized. We all thought that’s what made a good performer, that that’s what we had to do to rake in the cash, and we did everything we could to be him. It’s a little sad, you know? Instead of trying to understand whatever script got handed to us, we immediately started thinking about how we could stand out and make our mark. We performed three shows a day, six or seven over New Year’s. And for the first three days of the year or so, we all play our parts seriously. But then we start messing around, going onstage wearing some old lady wig for every role. And the audience roars with laughter, thinking, ‘This guy’s nuts!’ ”

Totto had never heard of such a thing.

She went on to co-star with An-chan in the hit shows *Yume de aimasho* and *Wakai kisetsu*. And one need not explain the actor’s rise from there. He is the man who became Tora-san, the beloved character in the popular series spanning forty-eight films between 1969 and 1995. The “guy with real skill” he spoke of? It was none other than Kiyoshi Atsumi himself.

Attending Bungakuza

The more experience Totto gained in the world of television, the more programs on which she appeared, the more her conviction began to waver.

The fact that she had not received any proper training as an actor made her feel insecure. While she had never hoped to become an actress, not when she was first accepted by NHK nor during her year-long training period, she had since developed a deep appreciation for the art. Listening to

An-chan's stories made Totto wonder if she, too, needed to make time for some intensive development.

Totto could not blame anyone who thought her an unskilled actor. She seemed unable to break out of "upper-crust young lady" roles and knew she needed to work on that first. As an employee of an organization as large as NHK, she was always told, "That's good, thank you," even when her work had not been up to snuff. Had she been an independent actor, failing to meet a director's standards would have earned her a "Thank you, goodbye." Her current position kept her entirely insulated from such harsh realities.

"I want to hone my skills as an actress and stop feeling so insecure." The desire took firm root in her heart.

Back during her time as an NHK trainee, Totto had seen a performance by the famous theater troupe Bungakuza. Following the show, she wrote in a report, *It was thrilling to see people perform with such vivacious energy right before my very eyes*. Hoping to relive that inspired experience, she decided to see another Bungakuza performance. This show, titled *Nigo* (Mistress), was also written and directed by *Yanbo, Ninbo, and Tonbo's* Tadasu Iizawa.

Moved by the performance, Totto began to follow the work of Bungakuza's leading actress Haruko Sugimura, watching every show she could catch. Having worked with experienced stage actors on television shows before, Totto knew they were often incredibly skilled performers. As she realized during this new dive into theater, the biggest difference was that on stage, they acted with their whole bodies.

"Perhaps I could become a better actor if I joined a theater troupe," Totto thought. She decided to ask the great Haruko Sugimura for advice.

—

"I'm interested in joining Bungakuza," Totto said.

Miss Sugimura replied, "By all means, do! I'll suggest it to the other board members and won't take no for an answer."

Miss Sugimura had a reputation for being very hard on other actresses. Totto, however, felt quite comfortable approaching her casually as Miss Sugimura showed her none of that severity, most likely because she did not consider Totto a real actress. Totto understood this. Still, she couldn't help but let her mind entertain grand ideas as she waited for the official invitation. "Perhaps she will want to cast me in a translated play from overseas!"

But the answer she received did not exactly live up to those expectations.

"I recommended you to the Board of Directors, but there was one person who wouldn't give their approval. They said the troupe would become too chaotic if you joined. But you've come to me at the right time, because Bungakuza has just started a drama institute, and you're very welcome to enroll there."

And so it was that Totto began carving out time in her busy NHK work schedule to commute to the Bungakuza Acting Institute in the Shinanomachi area of Tokyo. One of her classmates, the illustrious actor Toru Emori, was still only eighteen and just starting out in show business. The following January, however, a division within the troupe led to the departure of nearly all of its actors. Many who left joined Gekidan Kumo (Kumo Theatre Company), founded and led by dramatist and translator Tsuneari Fukuda, known for his translations of Shakespeare's oeuvre into Japanese.

With so few actresses left, theater director and Bungakuza head Ichiro Inui asked Totto, "Would you like to stop attending the institute and join the company instead?" But most of the actors with whom Totto had hoped to work had departed, and her numerous television projects were keeping her quite busy—happily, at that. So Totto replied, "If there comes a time when I join a theater troupe, Bungakuza will be my first and only choice." Thereafter, she remained a student at the drama institute and continued to study the craft of acting.

A typical Friday schedule for Totto looked something like this:

10 AM – 2 PM	Bungakuza Acting Institute (Shinanomachi)
2 PM – 4 PM	Recording of <i>Boo Foo Woo</i> at Kokusai Radio Center (Aoyama)
7 PM – 9 PM	Rehearsals for <i>Wakai kisetsu</i> at NHK Headquarters (Tamuracho)
8 PM – 10 PM	Run to simultaneous rehearsals for <i>Maho no jutan</i>
10 PM – 2 AM	Rehearsals for <i>Yume de aimasho</i> at NHK Studio (Hibiya Park)

While her workload had not eased from the breakneck pace her doctor had warned might kill her, Totto believes that the love she had for every project in which she was involved kept her alive.

The same year she began studying at Bungakuza, Totto also started to take on projects outside of NHK. The first of these was a television commercial. Totto did not know if NHK actors were allowed to appear in commercials, so she went to the entertainment department director for approval.

“Would it be all right if I took a television commercial job?”

The director’s head shot up from the papers he was looking through. “They paying dough?” he demanded with a glare.

For some reason, the executives at NHK all called money “dough.” When Totto replied, “Yes, they are,” the director said, “Then do it. People might see you and start watching NHK, too.”

And that was how Totto began to act in commercials, with much less resistance than she had feared.

In Totto's memory, her first encounter with screenwriter Kuniko Mukoda was at TBS Studios, where Totto was recording a radio drama series. Miss Mukoda, who would become one of Japan's most beloved writers of all time, sat on the other side of the glass, penning an overdue script. Totto remembers thinking she looked quite lovely. The writer was starting to garner attention for her screenplay of the TBS radio drama *Morishige no juyaku dokuhon* (Morishige's Executive Handbook), which aired nightly in five-minute time slots from 1962 to 1969.

Right around the time the 1964 Tokyo Olympics were drawing to a close, Totto's friend and actress Haruko Kato, who appeared in many of Miss Mukoda's works, invited Totto to join her on a visit to the writer's apartment. Miss Mukoda lived in an area of Tokyo called Kasumicho, now known as Nishi-Azabu, on the second floor of the three-story Kasumicho Apartments building. Though it was not a large space, it had everything she needed: a desk for her writing, a sofa, and her Siamese cat. Whenever she got peckish, she would whip up a quick meal in the kitchen from whatever she had in the refrigerator. To Totto, who still lived with her parents, Miss Mukoda's lifestyle seemed wonderfully sophisticated and independent.

Totto began to spend all of her spare time at the writer's apartment, which was conveniently situated between Totto's house in Setagaya and the studios she frequented: NHK Studios in Shibuya, TBS Studios in Akasaka, and NET (currently Television Asahi) in Roppongi. More than anything, spending time with her new friend gave her great peace.

The two often sat in the same room and worked on their own projects in silence. Totto might be stretched out reading a script, while Miss Mukoda busily wrote away at some new screenplay, essay, or other piece. A notoriously slow writer, Miss Mukoda liked to justify herself by saying, "Give actors their scripts too soon and they get too much in their heads. It's best to mull over my ideas until the last minute, then write the script in a single sitting." Totto remembers many of her brilliant quips, including, "A woman gets her jobs based on where she lives." The town of Kasumicho was considered a stylish place even then.

Totto found great comfort in her friendship with Miss Mukoda. To this day, Totto believes that she only survived that hectic time in her life because she always had her friend by her side.

After Miss Mukoda passed away at fifty-one in a plane crash, Totto learned that the writer had lost her partner, a photographer, shortly before she met Totto. Totto had wondered why Miss Mukoda had been so generous, telling her, “Feel free to stop by anytime.” As it turns out, the light banter they shared, the everyday conversations they exchanged about the smallest things, had provided a good distraction for the grieving artist. She and Totto never once spoke of their romantic lives or partners.

The Departure Song

The time had come for Totto to leave NHK. She had made up her mind.

She asked a friend, the actress Mitsuko Mori, with whom she had been acquainted since their time on the drama *Otosan no kisetsu*, “Do you know any good managers that I might be able to work with?” To which Miss Mori replied, “Why don’t you join me at mine?” Her suggestion led to Totto’s signing with the Naomi Yoshida Agency, a leader in the entertainment industry which was founded by the renowned talent manager whose name it bore. The agency represented numerous first-rate artists including Miss Mori, who would go on to become one of Japan’s most revered actors.

From there, Totto’s career soared.

The majority of her work shifted to acting on stage, including in a production of *Scarlett*, a musical based on the novel *Gone with the Wind*, which opened at the Imperial Theatre during the New Year holiday in 1970. It was directed and choreographed by Joe Layton, whose work included several hit Broadway musicals such as *No Strings*. Joe was accompanied by his wife, the stage and screen actress Evelyn Russell, who had retired from her own successful career on Broadway because she preferred to assist with her husband’s shows. He deeply respected his wife’s creative opinions, which had great influence on his direction.

Every day, Evelyn sat next to Joe at rehearsals, often with a cigarette in hand, and simply watched. She said not a word and did nothing but pay close attention. Once rehearsals were over and she and her husband had settled in for dinner at a nearby restaurant, she would go through all the faults she'd found that day, from the top of the show to the final scene. Joe jotted down her comments and brought them to rehearsals the following day. Evelyn told Totto that she never cooked. For his part, Joe never went against anything his wife said. Totto hadn't even imagined such a marriage could be possible and found their relationship rather inspiring.

Totto and Evelyn became good friends. One day, Totto confided in her, "I'm thinking of taking some time off," and shared the concerns and insecurities she'd developed. Evelyn replied without hesitation, "Then you should come to New York to study acting. With Mary Tarcai. There's no better teacher on Broadway. She only works with pros."

The prospect of living abroad had intrigued Totto for some time, but it had never so much as occurred to her that she could study acting overseas. She also knew that Evelyn was an extremely busy woman; once she returned to New York, she would likely forget all about Totto. To her surprise, Totto soon received a light blue envelope by airmail containing a letter from the instructor whom Evelyn had recommended.

Dear Tetsuko,

I have never taught an actor from Asia before. However, Evelyn tells me that you are a gifted actress with an interest in studying in New York, and I would gladly take you on as a student. When are you planning to arrive? My classes normally begin in the fall and go until the start of the following summer.

Sincerely,

Mary Tarcai

This letter provided the nudge that Totto needed. A few days after it arrived, she mustered the courage to ask her manager and agency head Miss Yoshida, “I wonder if I could take a year or two off.”

Based solely on the many projects in which she was involved at the time, people may well have thought, “But you’re at the height of your career! Why now?” Some, in fact, expressed that very concern. “What if you come back and there’s no work for you?” But Totto reasoned that if people forgot who she was after only a year or two away, that would be a sign that she lacked what it took to succeed in the industry. Should that happen, she decided, she would give up on entertainment entirely.

To her relief, Miss Yoshida said, “Please, go ahead and take the time off!” She went to great pains to clear Totto’s schedule, which was full for the next few years. Her wonderful manager helped to prepare for Totto’s departure, which they kept a secret between them.

If Totto regretted one thing, it was having to step down from the NHK morning drama series *Mayuko hitori* (Mayuko by Herself) halfway through its 1971–72 run. The broadcaster was aware that Totto would be going to New York in October of 1971 to study, so they agreed to have her appear in only the first six months of the drama. NHK continues to show popular morning drama series in this slot. Nowadays they air every weekday for six months, but back then, such dramas began every April and ran for a whole year.

Mayuko hitori tells the story of Mayuko, a young woman who grew up apart from her parents, as she leaves her hometown in Aomori and moves to Tokyo in search of the mother who abandoned her. Totto was to play the role of Kei Taguchi, the housekeeper of the boarding house where Mayuko stays in Tokyo.

Housekeeper Kei-san has her own backstory. After losing her husband, a sailor, she became the sole provider for her fifth-grade son and elderly mother. She eventually quit her job at a canning factory in Aomori and

came to Tokyo in hopes of earning more money as a housekeeper. Totto was surprised and delighted to hear that Kei-san hailed from the town of Hachinohe in Aomori. Through this role, she thought, she might be able to give back to the prefecture and the people who had welcomed her and her family when they sought refuge there during the war.

Totto knew she would be able to manage the local dialect, which she had spoken those few years as a child. But because she had only played the roles of affluent city girls up to that point, she wanted to experiment with getting into character for Kei-san.

Her first idea was to make Kei-san a woman who did not care much for her appearance—or, rather, a woman who was too busy trying to make ends meet to care much for her appearance.

The best way to represent a harried lifestyle is with disheveled hair. Totto asked the hairdresser at NHK for a short, permed wig that looked as though it had never been properly dried and took to wearing it so deeply that it covered her forehead almost entirely. To this she added glasses with lenses as thick as the bottoms of milk bottles and a touch of blush, more purple than red. From the neck up, she looked every bit the part.

Next came her outfit. Totto asked the stylist to help her find clothes that were slightly outdated, then sew in a lining of cotton “body fat” to fill out the silhouette. The section around the stomach area, pinched between two fingers, was about as thick as a Tokyo phone book. Once in this padded body suit, Totto’s transformation was complete. She stood before the mirror and found not a trace of the real Totto left.

On the first day of shooting, Totto had a little free time after her hair and makeup were done, so she decided to drop by the NHK cafeteria. There she conveniently spotted an open seat next to the director of the show. “Good morning,” she said as she sat next to him, but the director gave her no more than a quick glance and a short nod of acknowledgment before returning to his conversation with actor Ryotaro Sugi—another cast member on *Mayuko hitori*—across the table.

“Hello!” Totto spoke up again. The director looked at her strangely.

That's when it dawned on her. In her current get-up, Totto was unrecognizable. "It's me, Kuroyanagi," she said loudly. The director opened his eyes wide and gasped, "It *is* you!" There is a Japanese phrase, "like a pigeon hit with a peashooter," that is used to describe how dumbfounded a person can look. It captures the expression on his face at that moment perfectly.

"I couldn't tell at all!"

In the two months from the start of shooting to when the initial episode aired, Totto experienced a series of firsts. Whenever she walked around the NHK building in costume, she was treated by one and all as a middle-aged woman who had wandered into the television studio by mistake. She would say hello to someone in the hallway only to be ignored. When she ordered coffee in the cafeteria, the waitress who usually greeted her with a warm smile slammed her cup down without a word. If she was standing in line for the restroom, young women skipped over her and grabbed the next available stall. A slow-moving, seemingly incompetent old woman evidently made people want to cut in line.

All of this saddened Totto deeply. She had become accustomed to stepping into different lives through the roles she played, but she had never before had such a disturbing experience.

Mayuko hitori became the talk of the town. After the program began airing in April, NHK was flooded with phone calls from viewers asking, "When will Miss Kuroyanagi make an appearance?" Her costume had worked! Though NHK had initially agreed to write Kei Taguchi off the show after six months, they now hoped that Totto would stay until the final episode in March of the following year. But Totto knew that if she agreed, she would find herself stuck in Japan the next year with new projects streaming in and quickly filling up her schedule. There was nothing for it; she simply had to leave the country in October, as planned. Totto continued acting out her part on the series until the final days leading up to her departure. On the show, Kei Taguchi also left for America to become a housekeeper for a family in New York.

When Totto shared with her mother that she was planning to study in New York, Mother's eyes lit up. "That's a wonderful idea!" she exclaimed. "There's no better time than now." A kind young woman working at a cake shop in Roppongi said, "Oh, I'll miss seeing you on TV!" Totto had worked nonstop for eighteen years, and she now realized that it had not been in vain. The director who had ignored her in the cafeteria also gave her a warm send-off. "This is an important step for you. I'm sure you'll come back with your head full of interesting ideas."

On the day of her departure in October 1971, Totto's father bade her farewell at the front door of their house. "Take care of yourself." He seemed a bit forlorn.

"Don't work too hard!" Totto's younger sister Mari said, smiling as she waved.

For the previous eighteen years, Totto's life had been scheduled almost down to the minute, starting the very second she opened her eyes in the morning. Not a day came where she woke up and wondered, "Whatever will I do today?" She was incredibly blessed to work on the projects she did, and with wonderful colleagues and friends. But in truth, she had grown tired. Somewhere deep down, she was itching to steep herself in something entirely new. Though her line of work required constant creativity and fresh inspiration, she felt her days had become repetitive and monotonous.

Totto was like a steam train that had been pressing forward for years but now wanted nothing more than to veer off the main rail and onto a side track where it could stay put. To all the others who kept rushing along that main track, it might seem like she was being left behind. And while she knew that stepping away from the action might bring with it loneliness or fear, she also knew that there are some things one can only truly see when at rest.

Totto's manager Miss Yoshida came to see her off at Haneda Airport. After checking in Totto's bags, the two of them sat down for tea in the airport lounge.

Totto recounted, "When I told Miss Hisano Yamaoka about my plans to study abroad, she said, 'Have a wonderful time. We all wish we could go, but our families and other obligations keep us rooted to where we are. You *can* go, and I want you to enjoy every minute of it on my behalf.' And Mother Sawamura said, 'Go, have a ball! Although two years might be a little long.'" Sadako Sawamura was a renowned actress whom Totto considered a mother figure in the entertainment business.

Totto was moved by the generosity of those around her.

"I've realized that everyone who works as an actor wishes they had the freedom to go out and drink in novel things. I'm so grateful to you, Miss Yoshida, for making my selfish wish possible."

Her manager smiled warmly.

As Totto headed up the boarding stairs, the passengers in front and behind her turned and stared longingly at the deck where friends and family members waved farewell.

Goodbyes are sad. Still, there is also something thrilling about new beginnings. Totto remembered a song from long ago:

*Saying goodbye is always sad
But it's a happy thing to get a new start
Farewell, farewell
Say it again and again
Now be jolly, be jolly
It's time to depart*

So the three little monkeys in *Yanbo*, *Ninbo*, *Tonbo* would sing at the end of each adventure as they set off on another new journey. Totto and her two co-stars sang the tune countless times in the recording studio. It was called "The Departure Song."

Postscript

Writing this book, I found myself marveling at life's interesting twists. I started out hoping to become a mother who read bedtime stories to her children, and before I knew it, I was appearing on numerous children's programs. In the end, however, I was never able to read to children of my own.

Nevertheless, through my appointment as Goodwill Ambassador for UNICEF, I have endeavored to inform people around the world about the suffering of children in various countries. When I held a dying, orphaned child in Africa, I hoped that I could at least help them not to feel alone, and that they might find a little comfort in this stranger's arms.

Following my year abroad in New York, I returned to Japan and began hosting a news program while also continuing to appear in television dramas. On one occasion, I played a character who was an alcoholic and was asked by a staff member, "Are you really a drinker?" I do not drink alcohol. But if even the people I saw and worked with every day mistakenly assumed that I did, viewers who watched me playing a person of disrepute in a fictionalized setting might think that same untrustworthy person was hosting the news. That is why I quit playing characters on television and limited my acting to the stage.

One day, while yammering away as I always do, I declared, "I'm going to live to be a hundred!" To which the celebrated actor and radio personality Shoichi Ozawa replied, "That's all well and good, but when you're a hundred, you won't have anyone with whom to reminisce and say, 'Do you remember that time...?' It will be quite lonely." His words made me weep then, and now I find they are all too true.

My “big brother” in show business, Kiyoshi Atsumi, and my “mother” Sadako Sawamura have both passed away. My “big sister” Hisano Yamaoka, with whom I made a solemn vow to live together in a nursing home someday, and the marvelous actress Junko Ikeuchi have also gone before me. Rokusuke Ei, the original lyricist of Kyu Sakamoto’s “Sukiyaki,” once consoled me, “You poor thing. Your show business family is all gone.” Now, even he is gone as well.

At some point, I called An-chan and invited him out to dinner, not knowing he was ill. It was only after leaving several messages on his answering machine that we were finally able to meet. “Why didn’t you return my calls?! Did you take some woman to a hot-springs resort or something?” I teased, much as I always did. He howled with laughter, removed his hat, and wiped the beads of perspiration from his head.

“Little Lady! I haven’t gone anywhere!”

“Liar! You’re always keeping secrets from me!”

Tears of laughter streamed down An-chan’s face as we joked back and forth. I learned later from his wife that his illness had worsened significantly by this juncture, and that at home, he rarely left his bed. And there I was, yapping away as usual, without a care in the world. I’ll never know whether he thought I was clueless and silly, or whether he was simply glad that things were the same as always between us. But whenever I close my eyes, I can still picture the way he laughed and wiped away his sweat.

When Mother Sawamura fell ill, I visited her in the hospital nearly every day. It was around that same time that I received a call from the film director Yoji Yamada, who said, “I have had word that Mr. Atsumi has passed away. They held a quiet memorial and will soon be making a statement to the press. I called thinking that you would want to know before you heard it on the news.” Mr. Yamada had written and directed the classic *Tora-san* films that had made An-chan a superstar. I was grateful for his kindness, but heartbroken over An-chan’s passing.

Recently, I was devastated by the loss of one of my dearest friends, the wonderful actress Yoko Nogiwa. We joined NHK at the same time—she as an announcer and I as a troupe member—and were very close. We shopped

at the same boutiques, took French lessons together, and faxed messages back and forth all the time. Because she lived near Denzuin Temple in the Koishikawa area of Tokyo, she always signed her missives, *From Denzuin*. I signed mine, *From Nogizaka*. I recently met with her daughter, whose hands so resembled her dear mother's that they nearly brought me to tears.

My daily talk show *Tetsuko's Room*, which began airing in 1976, has now entered its forty-eighth year. It feels like nothing short of a miracle that someone who was expelled from school so soon after beginning first grade could continue a program for forty-eight years. On the show, I have interviewed numerous actors who lived through the war and requested them all to recount their experiences for fear that if I didn't ask them when I had the chance, their stories might be lost forever.

Before Ryo Ikebe became a film star, he was a second lieutenant in the army. Once, he and his men were on a transport ship heading south from Shanghai when a submarine attack sunk the vessel, stranding them in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. He and his subordinates, many of whom were older than him, called out to each other as they swam. One of his men said, "Sir, I have your sword!" and raised the saber. Mr. Ikebe recalled, "I had left the saber on the deck when I dove into the water, fearing that it would weigh me down. I cried when I saw him holding it." He added, "Thankfully, nobody could tell, since we were all in the water."

Superstar singer Haruo Minami shared his experience of battling the Soviet troops in Manchukuo shortly before the war ended. A young Soviet soldier was struck by a bullet shot from a pillbox, and after nightfall, as Minami and his comrades lay still in the guard-post, they heard the soldier cry, "Mama, Mama..." The soldier's voice gradually grew fainter and fainter, until at last they heard no more. "I am against any type of war," Mr. Minami said. Coming from him, those words held great power.

When chanson star Noriko Awaya visited a Japanese Air Force base to sing for the soldiers, she was told by a high-ranking officer before her set,

“The men here belong to Special Attack Units and may need to leave in the middle of your performance,” referring to the specialized groups typically used for suicide missions. She began to sing a blues number and the soldiers all sat forward and listened, enraptured. Then, a young man stood up, saluted her, and exited the venue. I will never forget Miss Awaya’s expression when she said, “He smiled wide, saluted me, and then left. I was so choked up that I couldn’t continue to sing.”

My final guest of 2022, in keeping with tradition, was comedy and talk show legend Tamori-san. I said to him, “I wonder what next year has in store for us,” to which he replied, “I think our country is about to enter a new pre-war era.” I pray that his prediction continues to be wrong for years and years to come.

My forty-eight years of hosting *Tetsuko’s Room* have been forty-eight years of listening to these kinds of stories. It is important to me to explain here that one of my motivations for writing this book was to leave behind a record of my own wartime experience.

Very recently, I was invited to become a member of the prestigious Japan Art Academy. It is a truly great honor. I have also received official recognition from the government as a Person of Cultural Merit, in addition to being awarded the Order of the Sacred Treasure for long-term contribution to public service. My daily talk show *Tetsuko’s Room* will be celebrating its fiftieth anniversary in two years, and although I used to say, “Fifty years is my goal!” I am now beginning to hope that I can continue until I turn one hundred. If I reach that age and can still think and speak as I do now, I will probably say to myself, “I wasn’t able to become a mother, but oh well, it was for the best.” And I would mean it.

When that time comes, I will give thanks to my father and mother for providing me the nourishment and support I needed to live a strong and healthy life.

And I will thank, with all of my heart, the people who have understood me over the years.

Now that is something to look forward to!

August 2023
Tetsuko Kuroyanagi

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Illustrations: As with *Totto-chan: The Little Girl at the Window*, all illustrations are the property of artist Chihiro Iwasaki.

The illustrations included in this volume first appeared as follows:

Front Cover: *Tatehiza no shounen* [Boy Sitting with One Knee Raised], 1970;

Back Cover: *Omocha no piano* [Toy Piano]. *Ame no hi no orusuban* [Staying Home Alone on a Rainy Day]. Text by Chihiro Iwasaki, Concept by Yasoo Takeichi. Shikosha, 1968;

Inside Cover: *Hana no sei* [Fairy of Flowers]. *New Japan Women's Association Newspaper*, January 1, 1973. New Japan Women's Association; *Furimuku koinu* [Puppy Turns Around], 1973;

Title Page: *Akai muneatezubon no shoujo* [Girl in Red Overalls]. *Kodomo no Shiawase* [Children's Happiness]. Sodo Bunka, 1971;

Page 4: *Hashiru koinu* [Running Puppy], 1973;

Page 5: *Piano wo hiku shoujo* [Girl Playing Piano]. *Katei no Kyouiku 2 Younenki* [Raising Children 2: Childhood Years]. Shuichi Katsuta, Michio Matsuda, and Masami Yamazumi. Iwanami Shoten, 1966;

Page 6: *Kouya no naka no kyoukai* [Church in the Plains]. Excerpt from "Decembrists' Wives." Poems by Nikolay Nekrasov, Translation by Kohei Tani. Doshinsha, 1968;

Page 7: *Bara to shoujo no yokogao* [Side View of Girl and Rose]. *Kodomo no Shiawase* [Children's Happiness]. Sodo Bunka, January 1968;

Page 9: *Randoseru wo shotte aruku shoujo* [Girl Walking with Backpack], *Katei no Kyouiku 3: Shounenki* [Raising Children 3: Adolescent Years]. Shuichi Katsuta, Michio Matsuda, and Masami Yamazumi. Iwanami Shoten, 1966;

Page 57: *Hiji wo tsuite nesoberu shoujo* [Girl Lying Down with Chin in Hand], 1968;

Page 101: *Churippu to se-ra-fuku no shoujo* [Tulip and Girl in School Uniform]. *Aoi ringo no furusato* [Green Apple Hometown]. Fumi Kuroyanagi. Gakushu Kenkyusha, 1970;

Page 151: *Hana no sei* [Fairy of Flowers]. *New Japan Women's Association Newspaper*, January 1, 1973. New Japan Women's Association.

Illustrations provided courtesy of:

Chihiro Iwasaki Memorial Foundation

Original drawings are on display at:

Chihiro Art Museum Tokyo

4-7-2, Shimo-Shakujii, Nerima-ku, Tokyo 177-0042, Japan

Chihiro Art Museum Azumino

3358-24, Nishihara, Matsukawa-mura Kita-Azumi-gun, Nagano, 399-8501, Japan

<https://chihiro.jp/en/>

Photos:

From author's personal collection (excluding [this page](#)), provided courtesy of KODANSHA LTD.

Songs:

Tokyo Rhapsody: Composed by Masao Koga, Lyrics by Yutaka Kadota
Koran Jogakko no kouka (St. Hilda's School Song): Lyrics by former headteacher of St. Hilda's School Shun Tomita, printed courtesy of KORAN JOGAKKO (St. Hilda's School)

Shupatsu no uta (The Departure Song): Composed by Tadashi Iizawa, Lyrics by Tadashi Hattori

Nijuushou (Duet) [Also known as *Tetsuko no heya no te-ma* (Tetsuko's Room Theme Song)]: Composed by Taku Izumi, Lyrics by Keisuke Yamakawa



About the Author

Born in Tokyo, Tetsuko Kuroyanagi is an actor, television host, and essayist. She graduated from the Toyo Conservatory of Music (currently Tokyo College of Music) vocal arts department and became the first television actress for national broadcaster NHK. Her daily interview television program *Tetsuko's Room* (which began airing in February 1976 on TV Asahi) has run for over 12,000 episodes and continues to break the world record for the longest-running single-host television program. Her bestselling 1981 memoir *Totto-chan: The Little Girl at the Window* (Kodansha) has sold over eight million copies in Japan and twenty-five million copies around the world. Appointed UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador in 1984, she has visited over thirty-nine countries in support of children suffering from starvation, conflict, and disease. Her books include *Totto Channel* (Shincho Bunko), *From Chuck, with Love* (Bunshun Bunko), and *Totto and the Little Tottos* (Kodansha), among others.



Tetsuko Kuroyanagi

Born in Tokyo, Tetsuko Kuroyanagi is an actor, television host, and essayist. She graduated from the Toyo Conservatory of Music (currently Tokyo College of Music) vocal arts department and became the first television actress for national broadcaster NHK. Her daily interview television program *Tetsuko's Room* (which began airing in February 1976 on TV Asahi) has run for over 12,000 episodes and continues to break the world record for the longest-running single-host television program. Her bestselling 1981 memoir *Totto-chan: The Little Girl at the Window* (Kodansha) has sold over eight million copies in Japan and twenty-five million copies around the world. Appointed UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador in 1984, she has visited over thirty-nine countries in support of children suffering from starvation, conflict, and disease.

Photo: Kazuyoshi Shimomura

Cover Illustration: Chihiro Iwasaki

The long-awaited sequel to the bestselling book of all time in Japan is finally here!

Over forty years ago, Japanese pop culture icon Tetsuko Kuroyanagi ended the memoir chronicling her childhood adventures at the unconventional Tomoe Gakuen with that beloved school burning down amidst the bombs of WWII. Now, inspired by contemporary events, she has returned to continue Totto's tale! Beginning with her family's frantic effort to escape Tokyo and the worst of the war, Kuroyanagi details how that little girl persevered through starvation and suffering to become a trailblazing actress, a champion for the deaf and children the world over, and one of the most successful entertainers in Japanese history.



“Ms. Kuroyanagi is distinguished above all by her longevity, but she was also a trailblazing woman in an overwhelmingly male environment.”

—*The New York Times*



KODANSHA

eISBN 978-1-64729-566-0
www.kodansha.us