

Amigurumi
By Amy Thatcher

Adult Category
Word Count: 3000

In Arashiyama province in Kyoto, Japan near the bamboo forest lives an aging couple, Sakura and her husband Tatsuki. They happily live in a small village and love their neighbors as family because they have no children of their own. The villagers call Sakura a familiar auntie, while Tatsuki is known more formally as suki-san. They own a shop full of handmade souvenirs picked up from the forest floor or recycled items left behind by tourists. Above the shop, up the winding backstairs, is a cozy apartment where they live and are often found on the covered balcony watching the evening sunset eating soup for dinner.

In the mornings Sakura slowly meanders along the bamboo trailways hoping to find objects left in the forest from the previous day. On sunny days with blue skies and white fluffy clouds she travels deep into the forest before having to take a break. But after storms plague the mountain, Sakura's joints ache and her shuffle becomes pronounced. She gets tired easily and frequently sits on a bench or on the ground with her back against a bamboo tree. While resting she whispers under her breath, "Mother, Mother, dear and kind, hide not what I want to find." After saying this a couple of times, she rubs her hands together to wake up the bamboo shoots and any forest spirits lying within them. She then closes her eyes to listen to the forest.

This morning, Sakura rests on a bench and listens to the bamboo shoots tell a story about a young snow monkey gone missing. The forest describes a monkey tribe swinging from branch to branch or looking under the ferns close to the ground. Sakura even thinks she hears a reverberating mother's voice wailing faintly on the wind. She waits in anticipation for the rest of the story, but the bamboo stops abruptly, startled by visitors coming up the path.

It's a group of teenagers. How can Sakura tell? The footsteps shuffle somewhat drunkenly along the path. They shove each other and say, "I just can't believe." They use a guttural voice to say, "what the hell man? Why did she do that? Man, just shrug it off." As they

come around the corner, Sakura decides to be mischievous and holds herself very still. She closes her eyes and she hunches over to reduce the movement of her chest as each breath comes slower than the last.

The first couple that stroll around the bend is a boy and girl. The boy has dark hair and a nice smile. He is trying to walk and keep one of his hands in the girls' back pocket. The girl has glittery lotion and garish red lipstick. She coquettishly looks into his eyes while being led forward. They are both enamored in quiet conversation and neither notices the elderly Sakura. A group of boys are next, and it was their discussion that was the loudest of the bunch. They knock each other about as they meander up the trail. They notice Sakura, they know she is strange and pretend to ignore her as much as possible. But one boy holds back from his friends and says he's going to wait for Himari.

Bringing up the rear is a girl with black hair and purple peek-a-boo tips. She is wearing pink sweats under her uniform skirt and stops next to Sakura. "Isamu" she says with a wink, "sit next to this old lady statue and I'll take your picture. It'll be a cute fill-in for the yearbook." Isamu rolls his eyes, as if to say, really Himari? This is not a statue. Himari pushes Isamu in Sakura's direction and Isamu shrugs as if giving up the fight and sits down next to Sakura. He leans his arm across her shoulder, making a goofy grin for the camera. "One, two, three, smile!" In an instant, Sakura opens her eyes, puckers her lips and lands a big kiss on Isamu's cheek right as the camera flashes. "What! Oh, that's gross!" Isamu wipes his cheek. Giggling Sakura says "Ahh, I couldn't help it! Kissing the visitor is my favorite trick and it gives me good luck!" The girl looks down at her camera and says, "Wait until Meimei sees this, she's going to love it." And runs up the path to show her friend. Sakura stops laughing but shows a toothy grin, "you were lucky, more than once I have accidentally kissed the visitor on the lips," she muses. Isamu

having recovered from being caught off guard, says in a mocking way, “Auntie, thank you for your kindness. I hope I have added a little happiness to your day. Now, please excuse me, I must delete a picture from my girlfriend’s camera.” Before he leaves, he gives her one formal bow and runs away.

Sakura suddenly realizes that it’s cold and secures the thread bare wrap of her hanten tighter before she whispers, “Mother, Mother, dear and kind, hide not what I want to find.” She rubs her hands together and as if to answer her the bamboo bend to reveal a hidden pathway. Sakura knows where the path leads, she whispers, “arigato” and slowly makes her way to the secret shrine of the yokai Yama-Uba or Mountain Witch.

When Sakura reaches the shrine, she kneels to pray to Yama-Uba. As she is praying, she notices a broken piece of bamboo crushed into the leaves underneath some ferns. Upon closer examination she sees blood spots along the edge where there’s a leaf joint and flower buds. “Hmm.. a very strange gift from Yama-Uba, imbued with sacred blood? I wonder what she wants me to make,” she murmurs, “perhaps a nice walking stick will sell for a high price.” She lifts it from the forest floor and she sees more blood. She looks a bit sad and solemnly says “Mother, Mother dear and kind, hide not what I want to find” and walks a short distance up a winding path. At the end she finds a young dead snow monkey. It is considered a curse to touch such a fallen thing, but Sakura rubs her hands together to let the spirits know the lost monkey has been found. She then slowly goes back to the village, deep in thought.

When she returns from the forest, Sakura finds that Tatsuki has already opened the store. “You’re late,” he grumbles. “Earlier I had to shoo some delinquents from the shop. Those kids always scare away the customers with their antics.” He looks Sakura up and down, “What did you find in the forest today? Don’t tell me it’s another stick, geez, that Yama-Uba is really

helping us out. Put it on the pile out back and we can use it for firewood.” Sakura goes up to Tatsuki and gives him a light kiss on the cheek. “Don’t worry about those kids. I played my kiss prank on one and scared them away. Kill them with kindness, you know my motto.” Tatsuki laughed, “Yes, many of our problems have been killed with kindness.”

After a moment of silent reflection. Tatsuki gets up, goes to the corner of the store, and picks up his violin. He tunes it for a couple of minutes and then begins to play Vivaldi’s The Four Seasons, to brighten the mood and entice customers’ curiosity to enter the store. Meanwhile, Sakura takes her newly found walking stick to a table near the back of the room and begins to whittle the section with blood on it. Eventually in the evening a crochet hook appears from amidst the wood shavings. She falls asleep with it in her hands and dreams of dancing snow monkeys.

When Sakura wakes the next morning, she puts on layer upon layer of clothing. It snowed during the night, and she is curious about new gifts from Yama-Uba. As she meanders through the shop to go out the front door, she drops the bamboo crochet hook into her pocket. I wish I could have left it as a walking stick, she thinks, I need more support.

As she walks through the village to the bamboo forest, a movement from beside a building catches her eye. She squints into the sun and notices a boy in a school uniform, black beanie and open, grey, full-length coat. She thinks, where have I seen that figure before? Sakura lifts a hand to shield her eyes. The figure retreats into a shadow where she can see more clearly and realizes it’s the boy she kissed yesterday. Hmm, what was his name? Oh yes, Isamu. He acts as if he wants to come over and say something but instead looks down and brushes the snow with his boot. Well, she thinks, I’ll have to play another trick on him. So, she takes out the crochet hook from her pocket and covertly drops it in the snow. As she bends down to pick it up,

she clutches her back, starts to cry loudly and puts a pained look on her face. She hears Isamu run over to help and as they are both bent over, her face suddenly changes to an imp-like expression. Sakura hip checks Isamu and pulls upward on his closest leg. Isamu loses his balance and topples onto his back into the snow. Sakura, laughing, sits on Isamu's stomach. "You've got to be kidding me!" Isamu says. He struggles to rise but can't. "I thought you were dying over here and instead..ugh." Sakura replies, "if I am dead or alive lurking around corners is no way to help an old lady. Now providing a nice seat from which to rest is very kind and proper." After some smiling, she finds her crochet hook in the snow and slowly rises to her feet and says, "come let's walk and you can tell me what you want."

Isamu brushes the snow from his coat and tentatively follows Sakura. "I found something in the forest yesterday and wanted to give it to you, but you disappeared and I couldn't find where you had gone. Now I'm not sure you deserve anything considering all the tricks you've played on me." Isamu put his hand deep in his pocket and pulls out two balls of yarn. The first is grey like storm clouds about to burst with rain. The second is a deep pink, almost fleshy crimson color, reminding Sakura of a runny nose from the cold. It was then that Sakura realized the crochet hook, ensconced in her pocket, began to resonate like a violin string. She goes to grab the yarn, but he suddenly pulls it away. "Not so fast. What are you going to do with it?" Sakura looks at the yarn, it is made with bamboo fibers giving off a shiny sheen in the sun, she feels the crochet hook again and a picture emerges in her mind. "Yama-Uba says, amigurumi are the best things to make with this kind of yarn." Isamu asks, "What is amigurumi?" Sakura winks, snatches the yarn out of Isamu's hand, and tells him to find out at the shop tomorrow. She then turns around towards her home. "Wait, aren't you going to go into the forest?" The snow crunches beneath Sakura's feet as she goes towards the shop, "No, I have

what I need from Yama-Uba today, arigato.” Then as if remembering her manners Sakura turns around and gives Isamu a departing bow. He returns the gesture and gives a slight wave goodbye.

When she walks through the front door, Tatsuki is busy sweeping the floor and asks for her help opening the shop, but Sakura doesn't hear him. Instead, she goes to the back of the room and begins her project amidst the wood shaving mess from yesterday. She starts a magic circle and increases the stitches with each round, at a certain point, she decreases the stitches until a small hole remains. She stuffs the hole with bamboo shavings and fabric pieces of her worn out haten to create a lumpy round ball. Then she stabs the ball with a needle multiple times to felt it up. Smiling she thinks, I'll give them all nice fuzzy bellies. She then adds grey arms, legs, and a pink heart shaped face. When the last stitch is made and the ends are weaved in, she sets it on the table and has a miniature snow monkey. She then makes another. By the end of the day, Sakura has finished six amigurumi snow monkeys. She puts them in the shop window for the people passing by to see.

“There seems to be an evening lull in customers, Tatsuki, my dear, play that one dancing song. I'm sure something lively will bring them in.” Tatsuki closes his eyes and starts to play a waltz on his violin. Just then a madam walks past in a beautiful kimono. It starts to rain and she comes into the shop to dry off and listen to the music. When the madam looks at the front window, she notices the snow monkeys dancing. Thinking it's a mechanical mechanism inside the amigurumi, it's not startling, but more of a curiosity. She asks Sakura how much the dancing monkey's cost. Sakura looks over at the window and to her amazement, she sees dancing where she once saw limp and floppy monkeys. “I...I don't know. I've never quite seen this before.” Mesmerized by the dance, she forgets there are other people in the room. “Well, no matter the

cost, I want to buy them all,” the madam says. This brings Sakura out of her revelry. “Tatsuki, come see this it’s amazing.” So Tatsuki plays the last note on his violin and sets it down. The moment the music stops playing, the monkeys stop dancing.

The madam picks up a monkey and shakes it. “What? What’s wrong with this thing! Why won’t it work? I don’t want to buy it now, piece of junk!” She throws it at the display window where it lifelessly falls to the floor. She then stomps out of the store. Tatsuki walks to Sakura, “what did you want to show me my dear?” Sakura, tries to explain that the monkeys were dancing a waltz a minute ago. “Maybe it was just a trick of the light, or perhaps you need a nice dinner. Crocheting all day will give you low blood sugar, you know.” Sakura reluctantly agreed. They both went upstairs to prepare a meal.

As Sakura worked in the kitchen, she started to hum a childhood tune. Little did she know the snow monkeys were animated again. This time they weren’t dancing. Instead, one monkey would bow and pretend to fall and then a second monkey would pounce on the first as if to sit. Then a third monkey would sit next to the second monkey and catch a kiss on the cheek. The fourth, fifth and sixth monkeys would play dead as if killed by kindness. The scene repeatedly replayed itself, as Sakura’s song lightened her mood.

Tatsuki said, “Sakura, I know that song. I’ll go downstairs and grab my violin.” Tatsuki started to make his way to the corner of the store but stopped when he saw the monkey antics in the window. Tatsuki rubbed his eyes, not believing what he was seeing, “Sakura! Sakura, come quickly you’ve got to see this!” Sakura made her way down the stairs as quickly as she could but saw nothing. Tatsuki tried to explain what he saw, “the monkeys weren’t dancing they were playing a game of some kind it looked like one of your tricks.” Sakura picked up a monkey and looking at Tatsuki she said, “I believe you, even if it sounds impossible.”

The next day Sakura took her morning walk to the Bamboo forest. She said her silent prayer to Yama-Uba at the forest shrine but came back empty handed. In the afternoon, Sakura started to doze off into a nap and Tatsuki sat behind the register reading a book.

When suddenly, the snow monkeys stood up in the display window and started fighting. One monkey took a roundhouse kick to the head, another was punched in the nose. The yarn began ripping and stuffing was flying everywhere. Sakura and Tatsuki went to the window to try and stop the damage, but it was too late. All the monkeys, except for one, were lying in a heap of scrap yarn, fabric and wood shavings. The sole survivor monkey grinning and doing a champions dance.

Sakura looked at Tatsuki and then around at the empty shop. She picked up the dancing monkey and went outside. Near the store entrance Isamu was whistling a marching tune. Sakura said, "Look Isamu, the monkey is alive." Isamu stopped whistling and walked to Sakura, "huh, looks dead to me. Is this what you call amigurumi?" Sakura looked down at the monkey in her hand, it had stopped moving. "Yes," she said, "and I think Yama-Uba would want you to have it." Isamu seemed surprised, "are you sure auntie? Thank you." He took the monkey and stuffed it into his coat pocket and jauntily sauntered away.

When Sakura returned to the shop, she could tell that Tatsuki was angry, "What did you do that for, we could've made a fortune. A magical monkey doesn't come by every day." "Isamu has the heart of a champion," she sighed "and his song was a winner. I guess it's time to make more amigurumi."

Since then, Sakura has made all kinds of amigurumi with her magical bamboo crochet hook. Her favorite animals to make are the ones she meets in the forest, turtle doves, foxes, mice

and, of course, the occasional snow monkey. But although the animals seem magical, none of them have ever danced to music, at least not that Sakura or Tatsuki have ever seen.