



STITCHES

A SHORT STORY

Sheryl Sato

Stitches: A Short Story

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Stitches

Night after night Amelia sat, rocking and knitting. She created garments of all types, sometimes brightly coloured, sometimes ombre or creeping greys and browns. Early on, I had been both fascinated and repulsed at those gnarled fingers clacking away. Amelia had appeared at the side door with a handwritten letter from her previous employer. The lady of the house vouched for "Amelia's many skills where necessary."

It had taken me some time to realize that Amelia's talents were not of the housecleaning or cooking variety. She was snail-like when attempting household tasks, slow to fold my husband's work shirts or attend to the baby, quick to burn the custard. I was able to excuse Amelia from many of these tasks once I realized her uncanny ability to perceive the truth. This took the form of whispered asides about the plantation staff. Once I realized every piece of information Amelia had provided me had proven truthful, I soon turned to her for advice in everything. In the evenings we sat quietly together, knitting and mending. She sat closest to the fire, moving her lips silently as she knit. When asked what she could possibly do with all she steadily produced, she only smiled her wizened grin.

One afternoon when I was marketing I saw Amelia with a young girl, exchanging a red knit scarf for a few coins. The girl hurriedly put the scarf in her basket and curtsied slightly to the old woman. I shrank back into the shadows when the girl's harried gaze landed on me. That afternoon I asked Amelia if we were paying her enough. She replied that most often her payment was gratification for having delivered what was required.

We received word that our neighbour's wife had been mauled by a bear, indeed that little was left of her throat in the violent encounter. The men carried guns to the gravesite. Fear of the animal's return ran high amongst the women, who clutched their children close. As the first fistfuls of dirt were dropped into the grave, a young woman stepped forward, dropping a fabric-wrapped bundle. I looked down, releasing my handful of dirt as the parcel fell, and saw the end of a red scarf mingle with the soil. It landed, draped over the pine coffin. I looked up. The widower put an arm around the girl and led her away. The girl's eyes were awash with tears but her mouth curved upwards.

Amelia's knitting continued each evening, starting earlier and earlier in the day until she began to neglect her other duties. My husband shouted at the old woman for burning the bread. He berated me for hiring her and came close to striking me. She humbled herself, ingratiatingly begging forgiveness until he relented.

We buried many people from the village who had been attacked. Many of my husband's drinking companions were lost to the strange attacks. The wounds sustained varied from legs to hands to heads. No creature was so sporadic. Villagers became suspicious of each other, avoiding eye contact, barring their doors early in the evenings and whispering about the devil come to wreak vengeance on the godless.

My husband's temper grew shorter and he kept up a gruff exterior as his friends were extinguished one by one. He bought rounds at the pub despite the fact the larder was almost empty. He spent every night drinking away what little we had to buy milk for the baby. I barred the door night after night to his intoxicated shouting and wheedling.

Amelia ventured out to the market more often and I frequently slipped out behind her to see if she had news from the servants' ears which would not reach my own. She almost always made a trade, a knitted garment for some whispered words or a few coins. I ensured she never saw me watching her. I felt an irrational fear in the evenings at home when she captured my eyes with her knowing gaze.

One evening as Amelia sat clattering her needles, listening to my husband drunkenly singing his way back from the pub, she looked slyly at me and asked if I might require her assistance.

"I do not see what can be done," I retorted, "considering you are too feeble to help me keep him out." She chortled and continued to mutter quietly under her breath. The next morning she presented me with a pair of mittens. I inspected the mittens - they were cleverly made with a flap that peeled back to expose the fingertips, with a string so the pair would not be separated.

Every day after Amelia asked me if I had given them to my husband. I always responded "not yet." She would nod sagely, murmuring "You will know when it's time." The worst night came with the first snow of the year. My husband took an axe to the door. I helped him to bed again after growing weary of listening to him repeatedly and despondently beg for forgiveness.

I sent my husband to work the next morning with the new mittens. A knock came at the door before lunch. The long-faced foreman informed me there had been an accident. I grabbed my shawl and raced to the factory. A circle of men surrounded my husband. He was lying facedown on the ground, the mittens' string wrapped securely around his neck. I screamed and fainted.

I returned home, dazed, after making arrangements for the wake. Amelia was rocking and knitting by the fire as usual. She looked at me out of the corner of her eye. I stood over her, enraged.

"It isn't what I wanted!" I shrieked.

"Isn't it?" she asked, pulling back the curtain to reveal my lover waiting faithfully outside by the maple tree, as he had every Thursday evening for years. I backed away in horror, shaking my head.

People came and went, murmuring condolences and bringing buns and tarts and pies. Each evening when the house was quiet and empty at last, I sat in the parlour with the old woman. I watched, mesmerized, as she knit. Several days later, she presented me with an elegant jacket of red. I thanked her and hung the garment carefully in the closet.

I hired a new maid. I told Amelia my grief and exhaustion had overwhelmed me and the girl would only be temporary.

Every evening while the old woman watched as I walked to the closet, took out the jacket, stroked the fine wool and replaced it. One evening while I stroked the jacket, I spoke to the old woman, asking her what I needed to do to ease my grief. "You must walk by water," she replied simply. I thanked her and we went about our days in a new rhythm.

Some time after my husband's passing, I told the old woman I wanted to take her for a drive to show her a cottage nearby. I was considering purchasing it for her so she could stay there on the weekends. Although she protested, I insisted that we make a picnic of it.

Off we went to explore the little cottage. It was chilly and as Amelia had not brought a wrap, I handed her a coat from the back of the car. I pointed out the picturesque backyard, which looked out over the river. We wandered down near the edge. When the old woman lost her footing near the edge, I shoved her all the way in. She shrieked, floundering. Amelia began to sink, and reached into her pockets. She pulled out several large rocks and threw them away. She reached in and found more rocks, and more, and more. The old woman struggled to stay afloat, fixing me with her eyes and begging for help.

"This is the fate you created for me," I told her. "My new maid dyed the red jacket."

I ate by the riverside, confirming no more bubbles rose. Upon my return home I rang the agent and told him I was no longer interested in purchasing the property. There were no further attacks in the village.



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Sheryl Sato lives in Surrey, B.C. with her family. She enjoys reading, gardening, playing the piano and crafting. Her favourite books are classics and short horror stories. Sheryl is currently working on several writing projects in different genres.

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