



Excerpt: The Funeral Cryer

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Great Great Grandma was dead.

She had been 106 years old. The whole village was touched by an eerie atmosphere of relief – it seemed as if everyone had been tacitly waiting for this moment to arrive. She had been Great Great Grandma to everyone in the village – she seemed to have lived forever and she would never die. I felt a tint of surreptitious excitement and a shameful buzz in my chest since I would earn some money from her epic death.

A young woman wearing a white linen gown approached me in the crammed kitchen.

She read Great Great Grandma’s obituary to me while I was dabbing powder on my cheeks. Several village chefs and their helpers were preparing food amid much shouting and chopping. I could hardly move, as I was surrounded by stacks of large cardboard boxes with ‘Fragile: Porcelain’ printed on them.

‘Can you really make everyone cry?’

‘Yes.’

‘Sorry, but I’m a little worried – if people aren’t sad enough, my uncle will be mad at me.’
She did sound a little worried.

‘Don’t worry. You’ll see lots of tears.’

I took a careful look at myself in the mirror. My face was pale, my eyebrows were painted long and my lips were bright red – the traditional image for a funeral cryer. My bun was neat and high, and there were some strands of hair along my temples and beside my ears to cover my wrinkles. Finally, I pinned a white fabric flower carefully in my hair.

The courtyard was spacious but neglected, with weeds squeezing through the gaps between the chipped stone slabs. The guests were mostly sitting on small stools and benches. Some people were chatting, some were staring at their phones, and some were cracking sunflower seeds. There was no sorrow or grief in the air yet. When someone died at such an old age, there would be a sense of detachment for the funeral goers. It was something along the lines of *Oh I wish I could live for so long*, so self-pity overwhelmed the mourning.

A trumpet sounded, the typical musical instrument for funerals in the – fast, high-pitched, squeaky and noisy, sounding like a wolf howling in a gale. Soon, there was some slow and clunky recorded music, still loud, but it quietened the crowd – it might not be for the music, since a coffin was being carried into the courtyard. It was a redwood coffin with some carved patterns painted on top, wrapped in red silk ribbons. It looked like an enlarged gift-box, except nobody would want to open it and keep the contents.

I watched as the pall bearers slowly placed the coffin at the front of the courtyard on a slightly raised area, which had been decorated as a stage. The stage was a sea of colour, unlike normal funeral decorations, which mainly consisted of white and yellow chrysanthemums and roses. This was a celebratory funeral for longevity featuring bright red, which meant joy and blessings – but you still had to cry.