

Cry For Me

By Pete Malicki

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Cast

Alicia: A woman in her 20s. Dressed in black.

Scene

I'm Alicia, from Argentina. I moved to Australia when I was nineteen. Thought I'd do the world in alphabetical order but stopped when I realised Austria was next. It might sound funny to you but my proudest achievement is that I have a job.

I know most people have jobs, but most people didn't go through what I went through growing up. It wasn't Argentina, I just didn't have a very nice life. But that's the past.

The first few months I was a cleaner and a fruit picker but the work never lasted. It was hard to get a real job, especially as a foreigner with no skills or experience. Until I came across this ad in the local paper. It looked very much like a joke but I decided to call anyway. A man named Brian answered and after a few minutes I knew it was real. He sounded too legitimate. Brian told me they'd give me a trial and I cried with gratitude. He said it was great how much passion I was already showing.

My first morning came around and I went to a funeral. Some might say this is a bad way to start a career but I'm not a superstitious person. The deceased was an old lady by the name of Ming Chu Smith – an interracial marriage. It was a small procession and I stood near the end of the second row. I didn't know Ming Chu. I wasn't sad about a stranger passing away but there were all these people standing around and not a single one of them was crying. Half of them looked bored. Like they wanted to leave and watch TV. This poor woman. She'd been here for eighty-nine years and no one loved her enough to cry.

Alicia lets out a little snuffle and gets progressively more emotional throughout the next paragraph.

It was so sad. I mean, what's wrong with these people? This poor old lady must deserve at least one good sob. She was someone's mum. Someone's grandma. Maybe when she still had her own teeth she was someone's *lover*. She was certainly kind to animals. A good neighbour. I couldn't imagine how sad I'd be if it was my own darling Nana.

Alicia reaches the climax of her sadness and continues without that emotion.

All of a sudden tears were streaming from my eyes. I let out a noise. The woman next to me let out a snuffle then the woman next to *her* chokes. Before you know it, they're all moaning and weeping and screaming "Why, God?" at the sky.

When the service was over a man came up and gave me a big hug. "Thank you," he said, his eyes red and swollen. "Mum told us on her deathbed that all she wanted was for everyone to cry at her funeral. I'll put in a good word to your boss."

Brian was very happy with the report from Ming Chu's son and I passed the test. Two hundred dollars per funeral, they paid me. Plus a travel and tissue allowance. The work depended on clients but it was up to ten per week, sometimes three or four in one day. Did you know over one hundred and fifty thousand people die *daily*? You'd be surprised how many people hire a crier.

The second funeral was for a middle-aged loner and I think I was really there to make up the numbers. It was hard to feel anything so I thought how sad it was that so few people cared about him after fifty-six years of life. I managed to cry quietly while his three relatives watched on solemnly.

Most of the time I would turn up late to avoid those, “How did you know her?” conversations. It was often difficult to find a reason to cry about dead strangers but I always managed it and the friend or relative who hired Brian’s company would go home happy. Well, not *happy* but... (*waves off her slip of the tongue*) you know.

One day I discovered that being a funeral fluffer had its dangers. They were burying one of the best looking guys I’d ever seen and I started my routine. A snuffle (*sniffles*). A sudden sob (*sobs*). A pretend cough to cover it (*coughs*). The tears start flowing and I wipe my eyes with a wad of tissues. (*begins crying*) I openly cry in deep, pitiful despair as this amazing, beautiful person I didn’t even know or care about is dumped in the earth for good. It’s just so goddamned frigging sad!

Alicia quickly sobers up.

All of a sudden this woman has me by the arm and drags me away from the congregation. “So *you’re* the slut. You have some nerve showing up here.”

“Who are you? I’m just here to pay my respects.”

“*Everyone* knows Rocco’s wife.”

She slaps me when I correct her with “widow.” Turns out Rocco’s sister hated her guts and hired me because she knew her sister-in-law would make a scene and embarrass herself. Unbelievable. The next day I was so rattled I went to the wrong service. Cried like I’d never been sad in my life until I saw the angry texts from Brian asking me where the hell I was. He called and chastised me until I sobbed out an apology. We both laughed at the irony.

Things go smoothly for months after that until a prominent radio commentator dies and a dozen criers are brought in to make it look like he wasn’t reviled by the entire country. I wonder what makes a person hate his fellow man as much as this man did, and how much everyone hated him in turn, and the whole thing makes me cry. The others who came with me haven’t started yet and I think, “Really? These amateurs need their own crier to get them started?”

Before my grief has a chance to affect the people around me, I hear a commotion outside. I try to ignore it but it gets more and more commotiony and I realise it’s protestors. Can you believe it? What kind of sick person would protest at a funeral? Security guards and funeral staff try to get it under control but it continues. People aren’t mourning. They’re too distracted.

I get up and march outside. There’s three rows of angry men and women holding placards and chanting. I scream at them. “He’s dead, you idiots! Do you think he was a bad man because of what he said on the radio? Is that it? Well guess what. He didn’t listen to you when he was alive and he’s certainly ignoring you now. All you’re doing is upsetting his friends and relatives and none of us have done anything wrong. What you’re doing to these poor people makes you no better than he was. Let us mourn in peace.”

A few of them looked down in shame. They didn't go away but they stopped chanting and I went back inside. The lady next to me gave me a big smile and a congratulations. I slapped her and told her to start the bloody waterworks.

The next week I got a call from a hospital in Argentina. My Nana had died. I flew home to say farewell and I was sadder than I imagined a person could be. The funeral was more or less like any other I'd been to in the last year except for one big difference – I couldn't cry. The person I loved most in this world and nothing I thought of could bring even one tear. "Forgive me, Nana. I love you so much I can't bear to spoil our last moments together with unclear eyes." But I didn't believe that.

When I returned, I told Brian I was done. He wrote me a beautiful reference but said he wouldn't give it to me until I did one last job. "But I can't cry," I protested. "I'm sure you can," he said. "I'll pay you even if you don't."

I went and the second the service started I gushed like a broken water main. I could only think of my Nana and how ashamed I was not to have cried. What was wrong with me that I could cry for strangers and not the woman who raised me?

Brian offered me an extra ten percent commission on top of my fee and I kept the job. Every funeral I go to is for Nana and every tear I shed is for her, but I still go home at the end of each day with a string of satisfied clients in my wake. Well, not *my* wake but... (*waves off the slip of the tongue*).

Okay, I'm due to leave for my next appointment so it's time for me to say goodbye. Goodbye, Nana. Thank you for the life you gave me. I love you and I will cry for you again shortly. I will cry for you every day, sometimes three or four times.

Thank you, Nana, and goodbye.