

## **Mourning Cove**

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The sandstone buildings are slowly illuminated as the sun begins to rise in the East, and a group of mourners begins to carry a long and narrow, covered wooden box down to the shore. The base of the village does not extend down to the sea, to account for the rising and lowering of the tides, so the mourners will have to lower the casket down before making the trip themselves along another carved out staircase along the face of the cliff facing the warm ocean. While the group make their way down, the casket at the bottom will be emptied, and the body placed onto a small wooden boat, narrow and just long enough for the body, carved with art depicting the life of the man who was about to be sent out in it. At the end of it all, they would watch the morning arrive as the boat is ignited and sent to drift into the sea, eventually releasing the body into the water to return to nature once more. Such is a weekly occurrence in the Mourning Cove.

My name is Cerys Soki. I am Mourning Cove's only historian, in charge of answering questions from those that come by- although most of the time, it's just directing families to where the body needs to be. The Mourning Cove used to be an area of great cultural significance- the stairs through the center of town are very wide, stretching out 30 meters all the way down to the plaza, then narrowing to 10 meters as you descend towards the sea, as the stairs down aren't big enough for a crowd- and the sea has enough bodies, although I'll talk about that more later. Mourning Cove nowadays is only a shell of its former self, a crumbling town of sandstone homes, carved out of a mountain. Although the town itself is a sight to behold, and the view is beautiful, not many people come to visit due to the many memories the town holds for

them. Around 34 years ago was the last “major” year for the ceremonies. To preserve the legacy of this town, I’m performing my duty as historian today and recording the end of the Mourning Cove.

The Mourning Cove started out simply as a set of sandstone mountains and a cliff leading to the ocean. There are a few small sandstone mountains opposite the cliff, forming a nice wall around the town- not enough to completely block it in, but enough to funnel the foot traffic in and out through a main gate of sorts. Down at the bottom of the cliff was a large cove, around 50 meters across. At first, this was simply a beautiful place to set up homes- and so the people of our island did. However, that plan came at the cost of many lives, as accidents while mining out the staircase down the cliff were common- around 17 times total, to be specific. Only a couple other deaths occurred while making the homes and mining sandstone from the hills.

At the end of it all, when the stairs were constructed, it was deigned by the Captain that we should have a proper burial ceremony for the ones who died to make this possible- and no one was going to object to that, as we were only around 300 people strong when we arrived. Everyone was friends with someone who had died making these homes. Our methods for the ceremony were, at the time, fairly primitive. I was only nine years old at the time, so I can’t say I remember much of the ceremony itself, but I do remember that we did not have the complex boats we do now. Most of the village did not go down to see the ceremony- myself included- because the bodies had become bloated and grotesque. Past the sandstone mountains guarding the new town was a forest, and a couple trees were cut down to make simple rafts. The rafts were completed before the ceremony, and once it commenced the men who had pulled the bodies from

the cove before were in charge of carrying the rafts down the dangerous staircase and splitting up the bodies across the two platforms. Once the rafts were loaded, they were guided through the cove and pushed out to sea, never to be seen again.

Although the ground on the other side of the mountains was sand, just a short distance away was a forest with dirt. A cemetery could have been constructed, but given the state of the bodies, it seemed like the best idea was to let them float over the ocean and find their own way to nature, rather than subject the living to the horrors of what had become of their relatives' bodies. None of us realized at the time how pivotal this decision was. After the ceremony, nobody really wanted to go fishing from that cove anymore- the reason the stairs down were built, initially-, and so hunting land game continued to be our main source of food. Eventually small boats were built and launched from much further down the coast, but no one dared to dock their boat in the cove. Over time, people moved on and members of the tribe left to go join other tribes or settle their own towns. We had all arrived here together, but it was finally time for us to continue spreading across the island, as the other tribes had already begun to do.

Around three years later, the next death for the tribe was knocking. The man was bedridden, and asked that he be buried in the ceremony as those that died before him had. The cemetery had still not been set up, as no one who had stayed in the town or migrated over had been thought to be at risk of dying. We were relatively prosperous, and just never thought to prepare for the inevitable future. The area we planned to have it was known, but fences were going to be put up to make sure the hunters didn't accidentally trample over the graves during a hunt. But the man did not want to be the one who caused us to have to build a graveyard- or

perhaps, he just wanted to be with his fellow tribesmen in death, too. A local artist named Jordan was put to work, and he started designing what would be our “death boats”, or more formally known as ceremonial vessels. The boat was narrow, had no seats, and was carved as deep as possible without breaking through the other side of the tree trunk being used, in order to keep the body from getting knocked out of the boat by the waves. Images were carved out on the sides to represent the work the man had done for the town- with an entire side dedicated to the staircase leading down to the cove.

The ceremony was held, the small boat was pushed off into the ocean, and many members came back to the town to say a farewell- although most stayed at the top of the cliff, rather than descend to the cove. We thought this was it, and we would need to build a cemetery for the next one- but instead, people started putting in requests to have their bodies sent off in the same ceremonial style. To better prepare for this, the town’s main walkway was changed from a rough path to a wide and long staircase, and a meeting place was established in the center of town in order to better welcome mourners. A lift was created to make the trip down to the water safer, and hostels started being built in order to give the families somewhere to stay the night.

And thus, more ceremonies were held. While this was going on, other tribes were warned of where to dock their boat should they bring one to our town, so as to prevent people blocking the cove or its surrounding area. Over the next couple of years I watched as the burial numbers slowly ramped up. By the time I was 19, we were having two burials a week. The tradition had spread from just our culture to the other tribes, and it came to be seen as the honorable thing to do. Unfortunately, more people taking in the culture meant more funerals, and that quickly

became the norm in the town, which became known as the Mourning Cove for all the dead it ferried.

It seemed that it wasn't just our island that had heard of the ceremonies, though. While I was studying up on the early history of the ceremonies in order to become the town's historian, I saw a few vultures flying overhead. Over the coming days their numbers grew and they made a ghastly sight of the ceremonies. In response, a new measure was implemented. The boats were now going to be lit on fire as they were guided out into the sea, in order to prevent vultures from feeding on the bodies in front of the family. However, the body could not be exposed to the family while this was happening, either, so ceremonial blankets soon came into demand. Carving into the boat remained, but it was a less emphasized art- more time was put into the covering, draping the deceased from head to toe in a wool blanket so that the family would not see the remains being charred before the boat sank below the waves, as it was always destined to.

The ceremonies aside though, the Mourning Cove wasn't a particularly great place to live. The sandstone ground made it impossible to grow any plants, the usage of the cove for ceremonies meant regular water had to be gathered further down the coast by the fishing boats, and the lack of shade meant that the hot sun scorched the village during midday- and the houses being made from bricks of sandstone didn't help us keep cool. In the end, many either sought to live a life with less discomfort, or stuck around until they were sent off in the ceremony themselves. Most of the people who had stuck around were already very old and didn't want to move again, so they spent their last years here.

That recap brings us up to today. Even though I'm only 53 years old, I've witnessed the birth and death of a culture, and a town. The buildings themselves have held up remarkably well- being made out of sandstone, they've avoided being torn down by the elements, for the most part. A brick being chipped isn't uncommon, but the buildings themselves are still safe and usable. The stairs downward have become fairly worn, however, and had to be "recut" twice, although we haven't lost someone to the cliff again aside from people who have slipped on the stairs.

The ceremonies have become far less common than they used to be. The opening of this record described what had and would go to happen this morning, however, such ceremonies are now the exception rather than the norm. The man brought down today had been one of the last living members of the tribe who wasn't a kid when the ceremony started. The rest of the members living here are a mix of kids who grew up here, those who moved here willingly, and a woman who was banished from her original town after she sabotaged multiple boats, and settled here as her next choice. We number 26, in total. That said, the ones who were truly invested were those who made the original journey as adults- the ones who are already dead and gone on the ceremony. Most of the kids barely remember the trip to this island or where we came from, now. Our only association with the ceremony came either from hearing men fall to their death, or seeing the adults of our tribe wishing to honor the men who fell to their death and be with them in death. However, we don't have that ambition anymore- the only ones still here who remember the dead now can only remember the terror they struck into us as they fell.

And that is the history of the “ceremony” of the Mourning Cove. That said, the history of the ceremony is almost like the history of the town itself. Given how awful the location turned out to be for most, it was only ever kept alive by the culture that was cultivated by those we lost, and the Captain’s insistence that the dead be sent off without forcing everyone to see what had become of the tribe members we had lost. A twist of fortune brought Mourning Cove its only real chance at staying populated, and now that all those that once worshiped the ceremony are gone, those of us who still live here will likely be the last, until people forget the tragedies that occurred here and start using the cove as something other than a funeral dock.

But that is purely speculative, the possible future for Mourning Cove, but not a guarantee. As the town’s historian, I’ve both been told a lot of the history, and seen much of it with my own eyes. I’ve lived here and kept watch over the cove and its funerals for decades, recording everything that happened so that we may remember those who passed, as well as remember why we do this. Once I started recording the funerals at 19, before I officially became the town historian, I would go up to the mourners and ask if they would like to record the deceased’s information. Their name, age, current hometown, what killed them. But I also asked if they would tell me why they wished to have their funeral in the ceremony. With age comes wisdom, and I know now that asking grieving families that, no matter how tactfully I tried to do it, was... less than appropriate. Nonetheless, It did yield interesting results.

I found that, for some families, the ceremony was participated in either because they knew someone who died excavating the staircase, or they wished to show respect for the men who died building the towns, as it was not just our town where casualties from town building

occured. Some had more obscure reasons- a friend who died in a hunting accident that they wanted to give an honorable funeral to, for example. But almost everyone I've asked who came to see the funerals before they died, and wished to arrange one for themselves, would say they wanted to have an honorable funeral. No matter what tribe or town they hailed from, it seemed as though everyone wanted to know that when they died, they would be given a significant goodbye, rather than being left to rot in the ocean or thrown into a pit and forgotten.

In the end, it seems that the culture of Mourning Cove and the ceremony turned into something much bigger than itself. From a simple makeshift funeral for those who died mining sandstone and fell to a gruesome death, it turned into an elaborate and honorific funeral to make sure everyone who died on this island was properly repaid for the work they did in life, in the only way we could. New funeral ceremonies are rising on other parts of the island, and with no connection to the elaborate ceremonies or why we conducted them, nobody is interested anymore. While the culture of the Mourning Cove will slowly fade away as we all die or move away, I hope that by recording the history of this seaside town and what caused it to become known as the home of funerals, someone may in the future remember us and what we did, just as we remember those we send out from the cove. In the meantime, I'm approaching death myself, and I can tell that there's no more history to write for the Mourning Cove. It will slowly fade away like a candle flickering out in the night. In the meantime, I'm going to go tour the other towns, and see if I can't pass on the history of the Mourning Cove.