That rainy day, the Cemetery Manager slid a plain leather suitcase onto his desk. Crystal shivered at the sound of its worn surface scraping against lacquered wood.

"Fill this suitcase with cash, and then I can help you," said the Cemetery Manager.

His large fingers popped the latches and the suitcase opened with a click. Crystal sat up on her chair to see. It was just big enough for her ten year old body to fit within. She imagined herself squeezing inside, and the lid slowly closing...

The Cemetery Manager shut the suitcase, and pity spread across his droopy eyebrows. His voice lowered to a whisper.

"I know it seems hard, but you’re asking a lot. I can’t just put your father in the cemetery, it’s against the rules. I can help, but I need money to pay the right people."

Crystal didn’t know how much money fit in a suitcase, but she took the deal. If she wanted to bury her dad, it would have to be in this cemetery. All the other ones were full.
“Do you promise? Let’s shake on it,” she said. Crystal stood up and stuck out her hand.

The Cemetery Manager went stiff, the way other adults did when Crystal spoke her mind. Crystal started sweating as she looked him in the eye and tried to smile. Her heart beat fast, and a dark haze crept up from the corners of her eyes.

‘Please, gods, spirits, and ancestors, let him shake my hand,’ she prayed, having no one else to count on.

They must have listened: for after a painful pause the Cemetery Manager leaned forward and took her little hand in his. Crystal felt the weight of their promise smother her doubts and sweep the haze away. The world was in focus again. The Cemetery Manager carried the suitcase towards the door. That was Crystal’s cue to go. As she followed him, she felt that she should say something. I owe you one? I appreciate it? I could never, in million years, do this myself, so I am forever in your debt?

The Cemetery Manager held the door open, and light streamed inside. “You’re a good girl, you know that? I’m sure your father would be very happy.”

Crystal’s eyes welled with tears, but she did not cry.

“Thank you, sir,” she said.

“Here, take this,” said the Cemetery Manager. He handed the suitcase to Crystal. “To help you keep track.”

“Thank you.”

#

Crystal walked out the National Cemetery’s gates and into the sun. It had rained in the morning while she walked here from the docks. Drops of water still coated the stone lion standing guard in front of the gate. The droplets dripped down the lion’s fading maw and filled the holes left by years of droplets before
them. Crystal stood amid the puddles, sucking in the sweet, sweet air.

Crystal’s father was a government man. His job had been to make sure that other government men weren’t breaking the law. He was like a detective, always watching those in power and reporting their crimes. But one day, when Crystal’s father was working on a big project, men in black suits came to take him away. They cleaned out his one-story house, leaving only Crystal, who lay crying on the ground, clutching a picture of her father. When Crystal’s grandparents asked the government for an explanation, they were told that he was a ‘traitor to the country.’ After that, the government was silent.

When Crystal’s father died in exile, a hundred miles from his hometown of Taipei, Crystal knew it was from grief. At night, when she tossed and turned, Crystal saw her father’s ghost stagger through the streets, searching for his grave. He would fall and falter but never stop, because his heart longed for home. Crystal needed to bury him. How else could she repay the man who became her teacher, nanny, and best friend after her mother passed away? Her father’s spirit would suffer until she brought him back, and Crystal decided that her father had suffered enough. She was determined to give him a proper burial, in a proper place.

Crystal started down the muddy path back to sea level, struggling to keep the suitcase clean. Expensive SUVs passed her, clambering up the bumpy road with hundreds of horsepower. Crystal stumbled under the weight of the suitcase, barely shielding it from the waves of mud that spewed from beneath their wheels. She trudged home, her ankles caked with brown.

By the time she got home, the suitcase was filthy. Clumps of mud splattered onto the white carpet when she set it in her
room. Crystal wiped and wiped the suitcase with her tiny ten year old hands, but a dark stain remained. The clink-clink of cheap jade came through the doorway as Crystal’s grandmother trod around the mud in her secondhand heels. Bony hands grasped Crystal’s shoulders.

“Crystal darling, please tell us when you leave the house. We’re old, so it’s hard for us to keep track of you. It would be so much easier if you came to live with me and your grandpa instead...”

Crystal shook her head. They had asked for a year, and her answer was still the same. She would stay here, in her father’s house.

Grandma sighed. Her fingers slid off of Crystal’s shoulders. “I know it’s hard, darling. Just...clean the carpet after you’re done.”

Crystal stared at her suitcase until she heard Grandma walk into the kitchen. Grandpa coughed and hacked as they argued for the thousandth time what to do about their stubborn granddaughter. Crystal slammed the door shut. Her grandparents were never happy anymore, only tired. Tired of their unreasonable grandchild. Tired of working to feed another mouth. Tired of the trouble their son-in-law had left behind after his exile. It made Crystal tired just thinking about it. Grownups weren’t supposed to be this useless. She would have to bury her father by herself.

Crystal pulled her piggy bank off the drawer, and spilled its guts into the suitcase.

Not enough.

#

That Friday, Crystal started working at the Surf Shack. The instant the school bell rang, she sprinted past her classmates, running towards the beach while everyone else walked to cram
school. For one mile, her shoes click-clicked on the sidewalk, and her backpack bounced up and down, until concrete gave way to soft sand.

When she burst into the brightly painted hut, the manager gave her water and let her collapse on a chair.

“Get ready girl, it’s a busy afternoon,” he said to her.

Crystal saw the stack of orders by her feet and started pulling off her scratchy uniform. Seagulls squawked and the sea breeze blew in through the window. It tugged at her, as playful as ever.

Crystal’s blistered feet hit the hot sand and she scrambled along the maze of umbrellas and towels, trying to find the woman who ordered the coconut. The wind, stronger out here, pushed her side to side, and the sun stung her eyes, but Crystal kept moving. Every day, she had raced down this beach with her father. Now, she was simply racing by herself.

When the sun had set, Crystal came home, sandy and sunburnt. She crept to her room and emptied her pockets of coins, shells, and sand. The coins went in her suitcase, the shells she placed by her father’s picture, and the sand sprinkled everywhere. It sunk deep into the carpet and filled up her drawers. When she went to bed, a blanket of sand covered her skin, and her mind, and she slept peacefully.

#

For years she worked, and hoarded her money until it spilled out of the suitcase. When Crystal was thirteen she went up the mountain with a wagon and a suitcase full of coins. She fought for every inch up that hill, digging her feet into the dirt and grasping at long roots for handholds. When she saw the cemetery gates, Crystal took one last gulp of air and sprinted to the top, setting her muscles on fire. Sweaty and breathless, she knocked on the Cemetery Manager’s door.
“Sorry, but I only deal in one hundred dollar bills. I’m really very sorry,” said the Cemetery Manager, as he shut the door behind her.

Crystal left through the National Cemetery’s gates, fighting back tears. A single sob emerged, and she kicked the wagon as hard as she could. It rolled slowly. Crystal screamed at the sky.

“How many mountains of coins do I need?!“ she shouted at the lion statue. It didn’t reply.

Crystal stomped to the wagon, and hauled the suitcase out. She staggered towards the sloping entrance, and, with a heart-wrenching shout, hurled her suitcase. The suitcase bounced down the mountain, fat and worthless, until it struck a rock and burst open, sending a wave of coins across the road. Crystal fell to the ground and rubbed her face against the dirt, trying to ease her aching head. She stayed there, cursing everything and everyone except her father. And when she thought of her father, she rose and limped down the hill to pick up her coins.

#

Crystal rushed to her seat as the opening bell rang. History class was wet and uncomfortable, and Crystal’s arms grew damp as her classmates brushed past her in their raincoats and umbrellas. Crystal squirmed in her seat, ready for the teacher to start the lesson. After a long talk with Grandma and Grandpa, Crystal had decided to start studying hard instead of working at the Surf Shack, in hopes of getting a good paying job after graduation. Her grandparents could make sense. Sometimes.

The teacher finished writing on the board and clapped her hands. “Settle down. Now, who can tell the class about tomorrow’s national holiday?”
Crystal’s hand shot up and she blurted out the answer.
“Tomorrow is National Day, the day people in China overthrew the corrupt Qing Dynasty and made a new country.”
“Very good, Crystal,” said the teacher.
Muni, Crystal’s new friend from cram school, grinned and gave Crystal a thumbs-up from the other side of the room.
Crystal grinned back.
“Now class, there’s going to be a funeral service at the National Cemetery tomorrow to thank our country’s fallen heroes. Today we’re going to make cards for the families.”
Crystal’s heart skipped a beat. That was where her father would be resting, soon enough.
“Excuse me teacher? Do regular people get funeral ceremonies when they’re buried there too?”
The teacher laughed. “No Crystal, the National Cemetery is reserved for soldiers and heroes who’ve done a great service to our country. Regular people are buried in normal cemeteries. Or, since it’s so crowded, they get cremated.”
Crystal bit her lip. Her father had served Taiwan with all his might, but he wasn’t a soldier or hero.
“But what if they paid a lot of money, could normal people be buried there too?”
The teacher pursed her lips. “No, they couldn’t. That would be disrespecting the sacrifices of our country’s heroes. And it’s also illegal. Can anyone tell the class what it’s called when you pay a lot of money to do something you’re not supposed to?”
Muni raised her hand and piped up, “Bribery!”
“That’s right Muni, and bribery is illegal. Now start making your cards.”
Muni gave Crystal a thumbs-up from the other side of the room. Crystal didn’t grin back.
Crystal came back from school with an unfinished funeral card. She had worked half-heartedly for the rest of the class, which the teacher deemed ‘disrespectful’, so Crystal would finish it for homework.

“I’m home,” Crystal called through the door.

“Oh, Crystal, welcome back!” said Grandma. “Put your things away and get ready for dinner. Your grandpa is coming back early tonight, so we’re eating together.”

“OK.”

Crystal went to her room and threw the funeral card in the trash. She lit three incense sticks, and stuck them in the holder in front of her father’s picture. Fragrant smoke wafted through the air as she knelt and closed her eyes.

‘Daddy, I hope you have been well,’ she prayed. ‘I started going to cram school, and I’ve been helping Grandma and Grandpa more lately. I’m working very hard to bring you home. I’m going to get good grades, and a good job, and then I can pay for your grave. But...’

But her father would never want her to commit bribery. He spent his whole life catching lawbreakers. Crystal knelt in silence, unsure how to finish her prayer. Stupid teacher. Stupid Muni. They were probably wrong anyways. How could it be illegal to bury someone she loved?

The front door opened, and Grandpa shuffled in, grunting and coughing.

“Crystal! Time for dinner,” called Grandma.

Crystal put out the incense and helped Grandma carry the dishes to the small, round kitchen table. They sat down and ate. Not long into the meal, Grandma cleared her throat.

“Now Crystal, since you’ve been so good lately---”

“Humph, yes not bad,” grunted Grandpa.
“--I wanted to ask you another favor.”


“You know how much trouble it is for Grandpa and I to bounce between this house and ours. We’ve done so for the past three years for your sake, but it’s just become too much. Plus, this dingy old house is starting to fall apart. Grandpa and I were thinking of selling this house, and having you live with us from now on.”

Crystal stared at her rice.

“Since this is your father’s house, we’ll give part of the money to you, and you can use it to buy a real altar for your father. How does that sound? Is that OK with you?

‘Of course not!’ Crystal wanted to say, but Grandma’s proposal made sense. Her father’s spirit had long left this house. Plus, Crystal would need all the money she could get. And it wouldn’t hurt to make her grandparents’ lives a bit easier.

“Can I think about it? I want to talk with Dad first,” Crystal said.

Grandma smiled. “Of course. Take your time.”

After Crystal washed the dishes, she went back to her darkened room. She knelt in front of the half-burnt incense and sighed. Could she actually ask her father about selling the house? No, he never answered back. Crystal would have to decide by herself. But first, the more important question: should Crystal bury her father? Would he even want to come back, if it happened illegally? Crystal brushed a lock of hair back and forth across her lips as she pondered.

But what if he didn’t come back? His ghost would wander the streets of Taipei, growing mean and hungry, eventually preying on the innocent. Crystal shuddered. Her father was a good man, and she didn’t want to stain his soul. It was settled then. Her father only had one hometown, and there were millions of stupid
laws out there. It wouldn’t hurt to break just one. A law that hurt her father was meant to be broken.

‘Don’t worry about a thing, Daddy. I’m going to bring you home.’

#

Ten years after her father’s death, when Crystal turned twenty, she worked in an office at day and cleaned a restaurant at night, but the piles of money in her suitcase were still pitifully small. She no longer mourned her father’s death; her grief was spent. All she wanted now was to give him rest and move on with her life.

When she shuffled out of the restaurant after a late night shift, Crystal saw the man standing alone under a lamp post across the street. He was large and slightly hunched, but he held a bouquet of flowers so gracefully between his fingers. He had come here every week with flowers for as long as Crystal remembered, but she had never talked to him. She wondered who he was mourning.

Just then, the man laid his flowers down on the sidewalk and turned towards Crystal, glaring in her direction. Fearful, Crystal crept away. But she stopped when she saw that he hadn’t moved. The man stared straight ahead at the empty street, razing it with his eyes. Against her better judgment, Crystal joined him.

“Excuse me, what are you looking at?” she asked.

He spoke in a gravelly voice. “I’m reminding myself,” he said. “I lost my father here.”

“Oh. I lost my father too. Not here though, overseas.”

The man’s glare softened as he turned to face her. His defiance became understanding. Dark, trusting eyes locked with hers.
“That must be tough,” he said. “You must miss him very much.”

It really was tough. When Crystal opened her mouth to agree, everything spilled out. About how her daddy was a good man and loved his country, and how he was so sad when the government told him to leave, and why she wanted to bury him in that cemetery, and why she needed to fill a suitcase full of money to do that. At the end, she was in tears. ‘Why?’ she screamed into the quiet night. Why did the government throw her daddy away? Why wouldn’t they let him come back? The questions emerged: painful, but long overdue.

The man comforted her as best he could.

“Sometimes good people are betrayed. They always will be, until things change. But are you willing to put your family, job, and home on the line to make that happen?”

Crystal sniffed and shook her head. She didn’t want to be sent away too.

“I see. Not everyone can make that sacrifice. In that case, I can at least help you fill your suitcase.” He handed Crystal a business card. “Tell them Kelvin sent you.”

Taipei Shipping Corp.
Address: No. XXXX Port of Taipei, Bali District
New Taipei, 249-XX
Phone: 2-XXXX-XXXX
#

The next morning, Crystal called the number on the business card. The company apparently owed Kelvin a favor, and Crystal was told to start working immediately.

Crystal walked to the docks wearing jeans and a t-shirt, and the site manager waved his grimy cap at her.

“You Crystal Shen?”
“Yes sir.”
The manager tossed her a hardhat and jacket. “Nice to meet you Miss Shen, you can call me Xiao. You’ve got some powerful friends, and they told me to show you the ropes. Follow me.”

Crystal learned fast. By the end of the day, Xiao had taught her how to operate the cranes, inspect the merchandise, and sign off on shipments. By the end of the week, she was leading a dock team, doing safety inspections, and talking with upper management. By the end of the month, she had Xiao’s job.

Xiao showed up at his goodbye party wearing sunglasses, a floral shirt, and his grimy cap.

“I’m sure you’ll be a fine site manager Miss Shen. With how quick things are moving, looks like the company really wants you to have the job. As for me, I’ll be in Hawaii, their treat.”

Everyone said their goodbyes, and Crystal sent them to work. She sat in her new office, managing schedules and calling other managers. It was strange having no one on site to report to. But Crystal soon got used to it, and her five figure paycheck. The suitcase filled up fast.

#

When winter came, a black limousine pulled up next to a pile of snow-capped crates. Crystal’s boss walked into her office.

“Good news Crystal. You’re taking Senator Lee out for dinner.”

“Why?”

“The New Year’s full of new regulations. She can help us pass the ones we like.”

“But, why me?”

“She’s also friends with Kelvin. You two will get along.”

“But I’ve never---”

“Don’t worry, you’ll be with Jack. He’s a professional.”

#
Crystal and Jack entered the soaring Azie Grand Café dressed for business. The receptionist guided them from the bustling lobby to a set of double doors on the second floor. Crystal took a deep breath. Jack chuckled and slicked back his hair.

“Just relax and remember your talking points. I’ll make it easy for you.”

The doors opened to reveal a dimly lit dining area full of booths. Sleek ceramic-tile paintings dotted the earth colored walls, and dark hardwood flooring gave the room a cozy feel. Jack and Crystal sat down at their booth, and the talk of the mighty washed over them.

Senator Lee’s heels clicked rapidly as she arrived with her aides. She shot off a few closing notes for them to record before smoothing out her plain blue dress shirt. She smiled at Crystal as she sat down.

“Long time no see, Jack. How are the wife and kids?”

“They’re fantastic. My youngest drew a picture of you for career day. She loves ranting to her class about Auntie Amy.”

“Adorable,” said Senator Lee. “And you must be Crystal! So nice to meet you. Call me Amy, I insist.”

After four hours and ten courses, the dinner came to a close. Senator Lee had agreed to push for looser regulations. Taipei Shipping Corp., she said, would be paying ten billion less in income taxes after the New Year. Jack and Crystal drove away after a successful evening.

Crystal looked down at the receipt. “So we pay for her three hundred dollar meal, and she saves the company billions in taxes? Is this legal?”

“One hundred percent baby. We have to fund her campaign too, of course. Play your cards right, and you’ll have a long career in this industry,” said Jack.
Jack seemed to be telling the truth. For two years, Crystal learned how to take money, for herself and the company. She learned how to find a target and wring it dry of every cent.

Two years came to an end.

#

One Sunday morning, Crystal woke in the master bedroom of her grandparents’ cozy townhouse. The smell of Grandma’s cooking wafted through the house. Crystal put on her bathrobe and went down to eat.

“Good morning Grandma.”

“Oh Crystal, you’re just in time for brunch! Sit down and I’ll get you started.”

Crystal sat down and stared at the slip of paper that Senator Lee had given her. Kelvin’s number danced across the surface, demanding her attention. Crystal had filled her suitcase exactly one week ago, and today she was going to thank Kelvin from the bottom of her heart. She would thank the Cemetery Manager too, the moment she buried her father.

“Crystal?” called Grandma.

“Hm?”

“I just want to say, your grandpa and I have been so impressed with how well you’ve done for our family. I was worried sick when I first saw you in that dingy old house by the port. I thought you would be too much to handle, but I was clearly wrong. You’ve been making more than enough for the three of us, and probably putting the rest in investments or something.”

Crystal nodded her head, though she knew the rest of her pay was tucked neatly in the suitcase under her bed.

“We’ve decided to throw you a little party to celebrate! We’ll invite all the nice boys from around town. It is about
time you start looking at marriage anyhow. I hear the Huang family has a son who was just promoted...”

As Crystal sat in her fluffy bathrobe, eating her Grandma’s eggs and talking about these trivial things, she felt at peace. For the first time in twelve years, Crystal was at peace. Inevitably, breakfast ended. Crystal finished her plate and put it in the sink.

“Thanks Grandma. I’m going to make a call. I have a business meeting in a bit.”

“OK! Come back early, your Grandpa and I want to take you to the opera tonight.”

Crystal went upstairs and put on a yellow dress with a white jacket. She dialed Kelvin’s number and the phone rang three times.

“Hello?” a woman’s voice answered.

“Hello, this is Crystal Shen. Is Kelvin there?”

“Oh, Ms. Shen! This is his secretary speaking. Kelvin is away at the moment, he left his phone in the car. Can I help you with anything?”

“Yes, I wanted to confirm that he would be meeting with me in an hour.”

“Absolutely. He’s just making a quick stop on the way there.”

“Great. Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome Ms. Shen. Have a nice day!”

Crystal hung up the phone and grabbed the gift basket she had prepared: a nice card, a designer watch, and an expensive bottle of wine. She went downstairs and left through the garage, where her company SUV was parked, heading for the Taipei Garden Hotel.

One hour later, Crystal sat across from Kelvin at a sunny table by the panoramic window.
“Thank you so much for seeing me, Kelvin. Thank you for...everything. If I hadn’t met you that night by the restaurant, I might never have filled my suitcase. I wanted to show my appreciation.” She held up the gift basket.

Kelvin smiled, and accepted it. “You’re very welcome. I was moved by your story, and felt I had to help; I rarely see such dedication to family nowadays. Now, I have an offer for you.” Kelvin’s eyes glinted, and he leaned in. “I’ve spent my whole life building an organization to defend the innocent. We’ve fought many evils: criminals, vicious companies...and even the government.”

Crystal felt a chill run down her back.

“But we’re always short on capable people who can carry out a plan. I want you to call me if you ever feel like working for my organization. The pay is substantial. There are risks, but you’d be doing good work.”

Crystal couldn’t believe this was happening. Was Kelvin suggesting she pick up an AK-47 and storm the capitol? Crystal hated the government for exiling her father, but she saw no point in becoming a rebel if she didn’t have to. All she wanted was to bury her father and live a normal life.

Kelvin didn’t wait for her answer. He filled Crystal’s glass, and then his own. “Don’t tell me now. Just think about it. Shall we drink to your success? Cheers.”

#

The next morning, Crystal dragged herself out of bed after a sleepless night. She hadn’t enjoyed the opera one bit; all she could think about was Kelvin’s dangerous offer, and that piece of paper with his phone number on it. Still rubbing the grit out of her eyes, Crystal skimmed the newspaper until one headline screamed out at her. “Government Cemetery Manager Indicted on Bribery Charges: Faces Twenty Years for Illegal Burials”
Crystal jumped and threw open the blinds, holding the paper up to the light. The headline stayed the same. She sprinted for the phone, and locked herself in the study, pacing violently back and forth. Call after call confirmed the news. The world began to spin. Letting the phone fall to the ground, Crystal clutched her head and screamed.

Grandma came running from the kitchen and pounded on the door, begging Crystal to tell her what was wrong. Crystal stayed curled in a ball, as helpless as she was twelve years ago.

#

That evening, Crystal called every other cemetery in Taiwan. Of course, there were no vacancies; she had known that since she was ten. For hours, she knelt before her father’s altar and prayed for guidance. He did not respond. Finally, as the sun rose on the horizon, Crystal made a choice. She crept out of the house, carrying only her suitcase, and went up the mountain one last time.

#

The National Cemetery was covered in police tape. It ringed the gate, and wrapped around the toothless lion statue. The police however, were nowhere to be found. Crystal entered cautiously, and was greeted by a short, egg-headed man. His eyes lit up when he saw her suitcase.

“Ah, you must be Crystal!—please excuse the mess. I heard about you from the previous manager. It’s a shame what happened to him. I know your situation, and I am willing to uphold your deal. Of course, I will take the necessary precautions to ensure our secrecy.”

Crystal took a deep breath and agreed. They spent hours hiding her suitcase and going through the paperwork to cover their tracks. They arranged a time and place to receive her
father’s coffin. The manager assured Crystal, multiple times, that he would do her right.

The next week, Crystal was in jail.

For days, policemen passed her cell, but never spoke. Crystal didn’t care; she knew why she was there. Instead, she thought of her father. Would he have wanted her to fight this hard for his return? For all his years of service, had he ever once questioned the twisted, thankless country that threw him away? Had he been too blinded to ask? Crystal wanted to push these questions away. They were too bitter a reward for twelve years of struggle. Even so, they gnawed at her mind.

Finally, a decorated officer led her to a small room and handcuffed her to the chair.

“Crystal Shen. You’ve been arrested for attempting to illegally purchase government burial grounds for a traitor to the country,” said the Officer. “We found five hundred thousand dollars’ worth of evidence at the cemetery.”

That was half the amount Crystal gave the manager.

“You may not talk to the media. You may not post bail. You may not see your family. Everything you say will be used against you.” The officer placed a folder on the table. “Agree to these conditions, and we’ll make your life easier.”

Crystal stared at the folder she couldn’t reach, while she sat in a chair she couldn’t leave, in front of a man she couldn’t defy. All was shackled but her fury. She grit her teeth and lashed out blindly with her leg. The table toppled, and so did Crystal. Her head slammed against the ground, and blood dampened the tangle of hair that veiled a terrifying world.

The officer knelt by Crystal’s head. “We’re not monsters. Why do you think you’re still alive, after what your father did? Sign the form, and accept your punishment.”
They all seemed to know what her father did, but only Crystal saw the man he was. Despite her doubts, Crystal knew one thing. Her father would not have wanted her to bow to the mighty. ‘Sorry Grandma and Grandpa.’

“I want my phone call,” she said.

The officer sighed. “What a waste of time,” he said. Still, he brought her to the phone booths, and left her amid a row of murmuring orange uniforms. They peeked at her, and then looked down in fear. These were broken men. But Crystal would not break.

Crystal dialed the number that she had seared into her brain. The phone rang three times, and a gravelly voice answered. “Hello? This is Kelvin.”