

Alice Hatcher

Cash Redemption

The young girl pulled the piece of candy from the lint lining her pocket, weighed it in her palm, and imagined its slow dissolution into a sugary crescent. She considered saving it for another day, but its wrapper had begun to tear, and she had been hungry for a long time. As she tucked its wrapper beneath a pile of towels on a steel shelf, her aunt pivoted on her platform sandals, glanced at a blister weeping beneath her ankle, and winced.

“What’d you just put into that mouth of yours?” The aunt adjusted a bra strap pressed into a faded rose tattoo and fixed the girl in a hard stare. “You look at me when I’m talking to you, missy.”

The girl wiped away a film of red syrup coating her lip. “A piece of candy.” She drew her pale arms to her sides and rocked on the soles of her oversized tennis shoes.

Her aunt rested her hand on her hip. “I’m not paying for anything you grab off the shelves. I already got you that slush drink.”

“I got a piece of candy from the bowl at the bank when I went with mama. The lady at the counter told me I could take one.”

“Let me see the wrapper. Better be a Dum-Dum sucker, or I’m going to put a second crack in your ass.”

From beneath the towel on the shelf, the girl took the wrapper and handed it to her aunt.

“Where’s the damn stick? Don’t make me look for it.”

“I said they were candies in a bowl.” The girl tugged at the threads of a ragged butterfly stitched across the front of her shirt. “They weren’t suckers.”

“You’re coming real close, girl. I don’t have to tell you twice that I’m not going to take any lip. You won’t be sitting down on that skinny ass for a week.” The aunt crushed the wrapper and dropped it to the bottom of her shopping cart. “And what are you doing putting it under towels? You think you can go sticking things wherever you damn please?” The aunt lifted her hand and

angled it towards the girl's face.

The girl drew her shoulders inward and trained her eyes on the scuffed tiles and a black streak left by an errant shopping cart wheel, expecting a blow that never came. When she looked up, her aunt's face had softened, and her hand had returned to her waist.

The girl looked over her shoulder. A middle-aged man was walking down the aisle with a spool of red tickets nestled in the crook of his arm. With his soft blond hair and silken shirt, he possessed a luminescence at odds with the flickering fluorescent ceiling lights; the corner of his mouth twitched sharply, though, when the aunt lifted her hand again to adjust the alligator clip nested in her hair.

He averted his eyes from the swell of the aunt's breasts. "Sorry to interrupt you ladies. I just want to make sure you've had a chance to buy a raffle ticket. If you haven't heard the announcement on the loudspeakers, you still have ten minutes before the drawing."

The aunt appraised the broad sweep of the man's shoulders. "Don't know about any raffle, but you can interest me in just about anything." She drummed her plastic fingernails on the bar of her shopping cart.

The man cleared his throat. "I'm selling tickets for the raffle in the jewelry department." He glanced at the young girl's wide blue eyes and the ashen circles beneath them. "For five dollars, you can have a chance to win a necklace by DaVinci Gold. The store's not too crowded, so your odds are good."

"How much you say you'll give me a ticket for?"

"The tickets are five dollars each. For everyone."

"Five dollars? You running this raffle?"

"On behalf of DaVinci Gold. If you're interested—"

"Goes without saying I am." The aunt stepped closer to the man. "I'm feeling lucky."

The man stiffened for an instant and turned to the girl. "Your mother must be lucky to have such a beautiful daughter."

"She's not my mother. She's my aunt. Mama's at work right now."

"Well, you look like you're related."

The girl's expression hardened. "Why wouldn't we? We're family. We live together because my aunt lost her job. I sleep on the couch, now. Mama said it's only for a while."

The aunt leaned toward the girl. "You show some respect. Don't be bothering this nice man with your foolish stories." She turned back to the man. "Get me one of them tickets."

She reached into her purse and pushed aside a plastic baggie full of change, wadded tissues and a pack of Pall Malls to find a roll of bills bound by a rubber band.

“That’s the money mama gave us for shopping.” The girl started scraping her thumbnail against her bottom teeth.

The aunt straightened her shoulders. “We are shopping. We’re buying something from this man. And my odds are good. You heard him, girl.”

“What are we going to tell mama if we don’t win?”

The man took a step backward. “If this is a bad time—”

“I got all the time you want, and it’s never a bad time.” The aunt peeled two five-dollar bills from the roll. “Give me two tickets. It’s one thing after the other to make sure this little lady has a good time. Always worrying. She’ll have wrinkles before she’s eight.”

“I suppose you could double your chances.” The man looked at the girl. “You’re too young to collect the prize, but maybe you can hold one of your aunt’s tickets.” He tore two tickets from the coil and ripped each in half. “You’ll need to hang onto your stub, now. If I call the number on it, you’ll be the winner.”

The girl regarded the bright half-moons of the man’s fingernails and the red stone in his class ring, scowled, and with her thumb smudged the number stamped on her stub.

The aunt sucked air between her front teeth. “This little lady’s been in a real mood.” She placed her palm on top of the girl’s head and ran her dirty fingers through her niece’s hair. “You know how little ones get.”

“All too well.” The man averted his eyes from a burn mark on the aunt’s inner arm.

The aunt drew her hand from the girl’s head and stroked a tarnished bracelet encircling her wrist. “Been a while since I won a contest.”

“Well, it’s not really a contest. It’s a raffle. You don’t have to do anything but show up.”

“And we just doubled our chances,” the aunt said, resting her fingers on her collarbone.

“They’re not exactly doubled, but I guess for all practical purposes—” The man trailed off and turned to the girl. “If your number is called, give your ticket to your aunt, and she can collect a necklace.”

“You just said it’s my number.”

“I might have spoken too fast there. You’re just a little bit too young to win the raffle. Besides, your aunt might not want you to wear grown-up jewelry.”

“But she’ll be lying if she uses my ticket to get a necklace.”

“Looks like we have a little lawyer here.” The man pressed his lips into a tight smile.

“We don’t like lawyers.” The girl clutched the ticket in her fist. “They cheated mama.”

The man glanced at the ramen noodles and diet drink powders scattered across the bottom of the aunt's shopping cart. "I should let you two get back to your shopping. The drawing's in ten minutes. Good luck."

When he turned the corner at the end of the aisle, the aunt gripped the girl's chin in her hand and pressed the tip of her index finger into the girl's cheek. "You don't need to be telling nobody our business. He doesn't need to know who I am and who has a job, and you don't need to be sassing strangers."

The girl twisted to free herself, and the aunt's fingernail cut into her skin. At the sight of beading blood, the aunt drew her hand to her side. The girl touched her face and began crying silently.

"You're going to hold this against me, aren't you?" The aunt looked over her shoulder and turned back to the girl. "You're acting up every minute and blaming me whenever you get the chance." She pounded her fist on the handle of her cart. "You got to get yourself together. You're not going to ruin this one for me."

The aunt pulled a tissue from her purse, spit into its crumpled folds and dragged it down the side of the girl's face. "We got just ten minutes to find everything your mama asked for." She pushed the tissue back into her purse and started rubbing her ticket between her finger and thumb.

A moment later, the girl paused to study a rack hung with pink purses and satin ballet shoes, plastic bracelets and rhinestone barrettes. She wiped her eyes, drew a tube of lip gloss from a bin and studied a decal of a princess on its cap.

"That's not on our list today, young lady."

"How much did mama give you?"

The aunt glanced into her purse and began to perspire. "You just keep walking. We're going to be late, now. You still got that ticket?"

"In my pocket." The girl crossed her legs at the knees.

"Why you standing like that?"

"I have to go to the bathroom."

"You can't hold it a while?"

The girl took a deep breath and nodded. In mincing steps, she followed her aunt to the jewelry department, where dozens of people were leaning on carts or clutching plastic bags distended by antacid bottles and soda cans. Before a glass display case, the man with the tickets was locking the castor wheels beneath a podium.

"Good afternoon, ladies and gentleman." He positioned himself behind the podium. "As I've already told many of you, I represent DaVinci Gold, this store's supplier of quality gold jewelry. If you're standing here, you probably know we're holding a storewide raffle today." He patted a

cardboard box resting on the display case. “You might even have bought one of the tickets in this box. If so, you’re in the right place. In just minutes, we’ll be raffling off a piece of jewelry in this store’s stock.”

The girl rocked on her heels and studied an elderly woman standing near the aunt’s cart. She considered the thick diabetes socks rising from the woman’s shoes and the patches of thinning yellow hair on the woman’s scalp. The woman’s mouth moved silently, as if she were taking small gulps of air. A middle-aged man stood beside her, clutching a paper pharmacy bag.

“We should go,” the woman said. “Your father’s outside waiting for us.”

“Dad isn’t here, Mom.”

Fear and confusion twisted the woman’s expression. “We need to get my medicine and find your father before he leaves without us.”

“I already filled your prescription, Mom.”

The girl narrowed her eyes on the red ticket pinched in the elderly woman’s trembling hand, clutched the bars of her aunt’s cart, and started crossing and uncrossing her legs. “What’s wrong with that lady?” she whispered, peering up at her aunt.

“You just be quiet.” The aunt bit her thumbnail and turned back to the podium.

The man surveyed the small crowd. “Are there any questions?”

A man in a baseball cap lifted two squat fingers. “Why you guys handing out necklaces?”

“Excellent question, sir. I’ll give you two words. Market research.” He reached behind the podium and drew out a leather case. “This case contains three of this season’s best-selling pieces. DaVinci is always coming out with new designs, so we can only keep stocking one of these items in the fall. We’re looking for your feedback on all three pieces, ladies and gentlemen. And then we’re going to make room for new inventory by giving one away.”

“So, you’re unloading overstock?”

“We have a cynic in the audience, folks.” The man at the podium smiled. “I’ll tell you what we’re doing. We’re trying to get your valuable feedback so our design teams can continue to provide our customers with the best in fine jewelry. In return, we’re offering you a rare chance to take one of these pieces home. Sounds like a deal to me.”

He opened the case and tilted it toward his audience. Three gold chains rested on a bed of black velvet. The girl strained to rise on her toes and pressed her knees together.

“First, we have a masterfully crafted men’s pendant chain.” The man

drew a chain of interlocking squares from the case. “Durable enough for the man who plays sports or likes to work around the house.” He jerked the chain taut. “Like all our pieces, it’s guaranteed twenty-percent gold in content. Believe me, if you go online, you’ll find pieces identical in appearance selling for over three times its price.” He returned the chain to the case. “Our second piece, a gorgeous rope necklace, is perfect for pendants or elegant on its own.” Then, he dangled a short strand from his finger. “Finally, we have a stunning tennis bracelet studded with fifty-five crystals designed to refract light in a dazzling array of colors.”

As he lifted the bracelet, the girl noticed a stain spreading across the elderly woman’s pants. “That lady had an accident,” she whispered, tugging on her aunt’s shorts.

The aunt brushed away the girl’s hand. “You be quiet and leave my shorts be. I can barely hear what the man’s saying.”

The man at the podium held up the leather case again. “Before we find out who gets to take one of these beautiful pieces home, I’m going to ask a simple question. Who would choose the men’s chain if they won?” Hands slowly rose, one by one.

The girl looked at the damp spreading between the woman’s legs and bit her bottom lip.

At the podium, the man uncapped a fountain pen and jotted something on a notepad. “Interesting. Most of you would choose the men’s pendant necklace, even though most of you are women. Maybe you ladies were thinking of a gift for that someone special, but I don’t think us men are that special.” The aunt laughed loudly, and the man glanced in her direction. “Does anyone want to explain why the men’s pendant is so popular?”

“It’s got the most gold,” someone shouted.

“You’re absolutely right. Judged by weight, it’s the most valuable piece.” The man stepped around the podium. “This is a good moment to talk about the other reason I’m here today. Gold is a stable commodity in an unstable world.” He paused, and several people nodded. “Diamonds might be forever, but gold is universal. But that doesn’t mean its price on the global market doesn’t fluctuate. Right now, its value is higher than it’s been in a long time. DaVinci wants to give you a chance to take advantage of this historical moment by trading your old gold for new currency.”

The elderly woman looked around the room and paused to study the young girl pressing her bony knees together. “You must be Jack’s daughter. You look just like him.”

The girl withdrew behind her aunt’s broad hips.

“Don’t be bothering people,” the aunt said.

“It’s the lady who wet herself.”

“You stay hushed, now.”

“Why isn’t the man picking a ticket?”

“He’s going to pick it in a minute. Something wrong with you? You’re all jumpy.”

“I have to go to the bathroom. And the lady’s smell’s making me sick.”

“The man’s about to call my number. You just hold tight.”

The girl curled her fingers through the bars of the cart and counted beneath her breath.

“Let’s face the facts,” the man said. “It can be time-consuming to find a reliable buyer for gold. DaVinci is happy to appraise any damaged jewelry, or jewelry that’s just a little tarnished by memories of that not-so-special ex. We’ve all got them, folks.”

The aunt fingered a small dent on her bracelet.

“We’ll offer the best price for anything from earring hooks to old rings. Our word is gold. If you want anything appraised, I’ll be happy to give you an estimate after the raffle. Trade jewelry for cash. It’s that easy.”

The girl looked up at her aunt. “He said the raffle would be in ten minutes.”

The man glanced in the girl’s direction, and the aunt dragged her teeth over her lip.

“Well, you’ve all been patient, and you’ll be happy to know it’s time for our drawing.” He drew a single ticket from the box, paused, and waved the ticket in the air. “This morning’s lucky number is twenty-nine, folks. If you’re holding a stub with the number twenty-nine, it’s time to claim your new necklace, compliments of DaVinci Gold.”

The aunt tore her stub into quarters and let the pieces flutter to the floor. “Wish he hadn’t wasted our time with dumb speeches. Now we’re going have to catch the later bus.”

The crowd began to disperse, and the man looked at the ticket in his hand. “Would everyone check their ticket stubs for the number twenty-nine?”

The girl scraped the face of her ticket stub with her fingernail.

“Why you always picking at things?” the aunt asked. “You’re too late, now, if you’re trying to change your numbers.”

The girl slipped the stub into her pocket. “I wasn’t going to cheat. I just want to know what he meant. When he said we didn’t really double our odds.”

The man addressed the dwindling crowd. “Looks like we have a winner, ladies and gentlemen, ready to claim her prize.”

The elderly woman, leaning on her son’s arm, advanced in small steps toward the display case. The few people milling before the podium

glanced at her pants and backed away from her. At the podium, the woman trembled with indecision.

“You get to choose one, mother,” her son said.

“Your father doesn’t want me spending money.”

“It’s your necklace, mother. You just won a raffle.”

“I don’t like any of them.”

“We’ll take the rope necklace,” the son said.

He fastened a clasp behind his mother’s neck. She trailed two trembling fingers over the gold resting on her mottled skin.

“She doesn’t even want it,” the girl blurted.

“You mind your manners, lady. We’re not done here. We got to have something to show for your mama’s money.”

The aunt drummed her fingers on the shopping cart. When the son led his mother away, she adjusted her alligator clip and approached the podium. The man was shaking red tickets from the raffle box into a trashcan full of broken hangers and foam cups. He looked up as the aunt and young girl approached.

“I want an appraisal.” The aunt tugged at the bracelet around her wrist. It slipped from her grasp and fell to the floor with a hollow clang. “Just like the man who gave it to me, always trying to get away.”

The man watched her inner-thigh muscles ripple as she crouched down and then struggled to regain balance on her platform sandals. He cleared his throat, took the bracelet from her hand and placed it on a digital scale. “I was hoping you’d win. Or your niece.”

The aunt stroked the top of the girl’s head. “She’s my precious little girl.”

Numbers flickered upon the scale’s digital display.

“That’s the price we can offer today, minus four dollars in service fees.”

“It’s definitely tarnished, so I might as well get rid of the damn thing.”

“You can always polish it up if—”

“It’s from an ex is what I meant. Time to send it to the curb, like the deadbeat who gave it to me. Maybe this little one can pick up a few things while we’re here. How’s that sound, sweetie?”

The girl shrugged her shoulders and bit her bottom lip.

The man handed the aunt a gold-plated pen. “I’ll just need you to fill out this form before I issue the coupon. You can redeem it for cash at any register.”

“The address is temporary, as the little lady told you, but I got my own cell. How about you copy my phone number right off the form for yourself. Give it a try sometime.” The aunt placed the pen on the glass

counter. "My writing clear enough for you?"

He glanced at a line of scrawled numbers. "Maybe I'll copy that down."

"Maybe? Shouldn't take too much thought." The aunt ran her fingers through the girl's hair. "Looks like I got to get some things to cheer this one up. She's been causing trouble all day. You got kids?"

"A boy and two girls."

"Take it you're not married. Any woman would make a man like you wear a ring."

"I'm sort of separated from their mother right now."

"Sort of separated. Lots of people are sort of separated these days."

"Things aren't always clear."

"Long as those numbers are clear."

The man took in the bleached hair brushing the aunt's shoulders and extended a coupon. "Why don't I just hang onto the form, and you can take this."

The aunt squinted at the coupon. "Good for cash redemption." She stepped backwards and wobbled on her shoes. "You got my number. I assume you know what to do with it."

The man nodded and zipped up his leather case.

Toward the front of the store, the aunt stopped beside a rack of jewelry and a bin of pink compacts. "Get yourself some lip gloss or clip-on earrings. Time you started looking nice."

The girl inhaled sharply. "I need to go to the bathroom."

"You need something that's going to get that awful pout off your face before we walk out of here. You never know who we'll run into in that parking lot."

At the register, the girl placed a tube of strawberry lip gloss and a tin bangle on a dirty conveyor belt, beside a can of drink powder. The aunt pushed the coupon toward the cashier.

"Your total comes to \$7.42." The cashier slipped the coupon into the register drawer.

"You count that coupon?"

"It's \$7.42 after the cash redemption."

Her aunt shook her head and pulled a few bills from her roll of singles. "At least your mama's going to get her change tonight. She'll be happy about that."

The girl shifted from one foot to the other and started humming.

The aunt slid her arm through the loops of a plastic grocery bag and looked around. "The bathroom here's at the back of the store. It'd be easier to hit McDonald's across the parking lot."

The niece nodded and followed her aunt past a stack of gumball

machines and through a set of smudged doors. In the parking lot, a shifting breeze swept fast-food wrappers across faded yellow lines. The aunt was shading her eyes, looking for McDonald's, when she saw the man standing beside an SUV with tinted windows.

She stepped into the aisle beside his car. "You got a sweet ride."

The man looked up from a set of keys and tensed. "It's just a company car."

"Just a company car? Looks like a nice enough ride to me."

He glanced at the callused hand splayed across his hood and the scars on the aunt's arm. "Well, it was nice meeting you."

"You got my number. You and me should get some drinks some time."

The man took a deep breath and turned to the aunt. "I've got to be honest. My situation really isn't clear right now. I've been busy with my kids, and—"

"I get that. That little girl keeps me busy. But I got her some nice things with the cash redemption. Maybe she'll get herself in a better mood."

The man looked at the thick coat of gloss covering the girl's lips and the tin bracelet around her wrist. "I'm glad I could help you out a little."

The aunt pushed a strand of hair from her face. "What do you mean by that?"

"Excuse me?"

"What do you mean by 'help me out a little'?"

"I just meant I'm glad I could help your niece get a little something."

"I think I can take care of my niece."

"I really just meant—"

"And I didn't ask you for nothing." The aunt considered the man's tie clip and soft leather shoes and dug her fingernails into her palm. "Seems like I'm the one giving you things. My last ten dollars. The bracelet I got from a guy who wasn't afraid to look a woman in the eye."

"I just meant I gave you a good deal. That's all."

"So, you helped me out with some spare change? Like you're running some kind of charity. Or pawn shop. That what this is?" The aunt lifted her plastic bag. "Charity?"

"I'm sorry if I offended you." The man gripped his leather case. "I just wanted to help."

The aunt scratched her naked wrist. "You didn't help a damn thing. You don't know nothing about my niece, and you sure as hell don't know nothing about me."

"I hope you don't feel like I misled you in any way. I don't think I did."

The man opened the door to his SUV and froze. The girl was squatting between the back of the SUV and the rear tire of a paint-stripped Buick,

with her underwear tangled around one of her ankles. She lifted her bony haunches and let golden urine stream between her legs. It pooled between her tennis shoes and trailed across the pavement, glittering and washing over bits of litter and making its way toward the man's feet. When the girl emptied her bladder, she rose to her feet and yanked up her shorts. The man pressed his forearm to his mouth and took a step backward. The aunt smacked the side of the SUV with her palm and then grabbed the girl.

"This is how you act in public?" She shook the girl by the shoulders. "I should smack you senseless, but you've already lost your brains." She gripped the girl's chin. "You look me in the eye when I'm talking to you."

The girl struggled from her aunt's grip and stepped backward. "You didn't give him your last ten dollars. That was mama's money."

The aunt lowered her head into her callused palm, and her shoulders began to shake. Then she slumped against the side of the Buick, tore the alligator clip from her hair and threw it to the pavement. When she looked up, her hair was standing stiffly from her head, and her bra strap had slid down her shoulder. She looked up at the sun and shuddered.

The man looked at the dark circles beneath the girl's eyes. "Is there someone I can call?"

"You said our odds were good," the girl said. "You lied and took my mama's money."

The girl turned away from the man and picked her aunt's shopping bag off the pavement. The aunt watched her for a moment, pushed herself upright and picked her alligator clip off the ground. She started crying, quietly at first, and then howled from the back of her throat. She finally caught her breath, threw her arms around the girl's narrow shoulders and rocked from side to side. She didn't let go of the girl, even after the man had backed through a puddle of urine and driven out of the parking lot in a polished company car with black tinted windows, leaving behind a trail of litter, a cloud of exhaust, and a strangely sweet perfume. ❖

