The Balancing Act
Nancy J. Crowe

Alice rolls her chair back and approaches the counter, remembering to smile. The woman is about Alice's age, but she is dressed in a tasteful Shetland sweater and wool skirt. She is Linda Danby, city desk intern, says the voucher.

All is silent in the office as Alice counts the money into the well-manicured hand. Should she speak to Linda? She wants to ask her what it's like to do something you're trained for, something you love. But Linda thanks her and clicks out the door in her leather pumps before Alice can get a word out.

"These college kids get high-and-mightier every year," sniffs Caroline, sorting the morning's mail into painfully precise stacks.

The phone rings, yanking Alice back to her desk. "Cashiers' office. This is Alice," she intones. It's Charlie Davis again, calling with a problem on one of his routes.

"Just a minute—I'll let you talk to Georgia about that." Smiling apologetically, Alice holds out the phone to her supervisor.

Georgia frowns, her gnarled fingers grasping on the phone. "Yes, can I help you? ... All right, let me look it up." She sets the receiver on the desk with a clunk, and stalks through the back room into the vault.

One of the pressmen comes in to get change for the cigarette machine. "Well, don't you three ladies make a picture of loveliness today," he says, smiling at Georgia, back on the phone now; at Caroline at her desk; and at Alice hovering in the middle of the room.

"Good morning, Howie," Alice waits on him, grateful for a friendly face.

"That a new dress, Alice?" he asks.

"It sure is," she says, dropping the silver into his ink-stained hands. She doesn't tell him it was on special at Target.

It's nine forty-five. If she doesn't finish ringing up those checks soon, she'll have Georgia and half the circulation department down her throat. Back to the register.

Amount—enter. OK. CTY CRC. Operator B. No, it's not an error correction. Double print. The machine coughs and sputters rhythmically, printing the information in purplish-blue dots on the check and ticket. Alice is amazed at how pale and worn her hands look under the fluorescent lights. No wonder the plants dry up so fast in here, she thinks.
Caroline cackles over a letter apparently intended for the editor. It’s from the state prison, a complaint. The inmate probably meant to say he had found maggots in his food, but he wrote that he had found magnets in his food. Caroline and Alice laugh so loud that the security guard peers around the corner to see that they are all right and maybe get in on the joke. Georgia just shakes her head, not even looking up from the bank statements spread out on her desk. After 31 years here, Alice thinks, Georgia couldn’t possibly find anything to laugh at.

She hastily rings up the rest of her checks, then sits down at her desk to run a tape.

Unbind the batches of checks, run them, make sure they balance, bind them up again, and pick up the next batch. The tape spurting from Alice’s adding machine grows longer and longer, coiling like a dead snake at her feet.

It must be awful to be locked up, she thinks as her fingers tap-dance over the keys.

Some people call this the cashiers’ cage, even though the cashiers can get out if they need to.

It’s still an accurate name, Alice decides. We are behind the counter, they are in front of it, and they come in here so that we can perform for them.

Georgia wordlessly thunks a stack of her own rubber-banded checks onto Alice’s desk. Alice carries them into the back room and runs them, batch by batch, through the endorsing machine. She has to stand and wait for every check to flip through, while the knocking rattle drowns out Caroline’s ex-husband woes. Alice doesn’t mind that a bit. After working in a beauty shop for only five months, all of the stories sound alike.

The idea of working anywhere longer than that is still foreign to Alice. She had dropped out of college in the middle of her sophomore year, seeing no reason to stay. She had sat through classes every day and crammed right before finals, and then it was lost. The ideas dissipated into some scribbled paragraphs in a blue book, notes she would throw away, and textbooks she would post signs all over the dorm to sell. Having thus cleared her mind three times, she enrolled in beauty school, then worked at The Hair Affair until she and the job wore each other out.

She had waited tables, taken money at a Shell station, and boxed french fries at Hardee’s before turning herself over to Baxter Temporaries. They tested her and found that her skills were strongest in language, which was no surprise. She had always had the “gift of gab,”
and she composed long letters while she was at college. Therefore, she was surprised when the agency sent her to work in the cashier’s office of the daily newspaper. The new mother she was filling in for never returned, so the company conveniently adopted Alice.

I’ve been here fourteen months, Alice muses, putting another batch of checks together. She has lost touch with Baxter and their talk of word processing and data entry jobs. She hasn’t written anything longer than a thank-you note in years, and she is often shocked by the sound of her own voice.

Alice returns to her desk with the branded checks just as the door swooshes open. Linda is back.

“Can I get change for the parking meter?” she asks, holding a dollar bill between two fingers.

“Sure.” Alice goes to the petty cash drawer and picks up some coins. “Here you go.”

“Thanks.” Linda’s cheeks are pink, and she leans forward a little, smiling at Alice. “I’m so excited. Mr. Wilson just told me to go down to the State House and cover . . .” She stops, frowning, examining the coins in her hand as if they are fool’s gold. “You gave me ninety-five cents.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Alice’s face flushes a moist red as she grabs for another nickel, feeling two pairs of eyes burn holes in her back. “They haven’t taught me how to count yet,” she says, grinning.

The corners of Linda’s mouth turn up just slightly. “Thanks.” She is gone.

Damn.

“Alice, I’ve told you before. Count the money into their hand before you take theirs,” Caroline says flatly.

“I know. I’m sorry.” Alice sits back down, every limb going limp. “I see a bunch of tickets on your shelf up there,” Georgia says. “Don’t you think you better ring ‘em up?” Her eyes glitter like rough green crystal behind her glasses.

“I haven’t finished the bank tape yet.”

“No, no. The bank tape goes last.”

Alice fetches the tickets and rushes them through the register, her neck muscles taut. It can’t be long now, she tells herself. Another few hours, and the day would be thrust behind her. Another few weeks, and the season would change; the birds would begin to fly south, and if she had any energy left, she might fly, too.

Two o’clock. All three of them must stop and balance their cash drawers, hopefully a statement to the rest of the world that nothing
given away hadn’t been taken back.

Alice is eight dollars and seventy-one cents short. Caroline is a dollar over.

“Gonna have to start knockin’ heads around here,” growls Georgia.

Alice calmly re-checks the figures on her balance sheet. This happens nearly every day. She used to be terribly ashamed when she didn’t balance. Later, she had to struggle to show the slightest bit of concern.

Today the deficiency disturbs her. She runs the tape again and again, always coming up with the same amount. Usually, it’s a silly mistake that has thrown her off, and she corrects it and balances.

I can’t have lost anything, Alice thinks, her heart pounding as she re-counts her wrapped money. I just can’t have. With all I’ve done, what could I have overlooked?

“I guess you better write up a special ticket,” Georgia sighs at four o’clock, after Caroline has balanced and all of them have searched for the missing figure.

Alice pulls out her receipt pad and writes, “Operator B was $8.71 short on today’s business.”

She takes the slip of paper to the register to make a permanent record of it, like her school transcript and her resume. Tears spring to her eyes as the machine dutifully prints out the information.