The Hungry Gods Go to the Self-Checkout

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Marion wanted the two percent. Not the one percent, which she says tastes of nothing, and not the homo, which she says is for people with somewhere to be. The four-litre jug of two percent, from the back of the cooler where the dates are later, and could I please not come home with bananas.

I had the milk in my hand at 10:31. I know because I checked, the way you check when you are retired and somebody has told you a thing will take ten minutes.

Valley Fresh on Fraser Highway has two cashiers on a Saturday morning, and both of them had lines back into the cereal. It also has six self-checkout machines in a horseshoe by the door, and one man looking after all six. His tag said HAND. He stood in the middle of the horseshoe with a little tablet on a lanyard, his hands folded in front of him, the way an usher stands.

Machines one, three, four and five had people at them doing a week's shopping. Machine two had a paper sign taped over its screen. The sixth had a woman with a cart.

There is one line for all six. It starts at the end of the horseshoe, and you go to whichever machine comes free. I got in it. I was the line.

She had shallots, loose, none bagged. She had a leek longer than her forearm. She had a paper bag of trail mix from the bulk bins with the twist tie held in her teeth. She had a live basil plant in a plastic pot, water still running out of the bottom of it, and a coupon pressed flat against the cart handle under her thumb.

"I don't use the cashiers," she told me, though I hadn't asked. "They rush you."

She put the basil on the scale first.

The machine said, "Please select item." She found Basil under Herbs, and it charged her for a bunch of cut basil at $2.49. She told it that wasn't right. It was a plant. Plants were $5.99, but they were on sale this week for $3.99, and she wanted the sale.

Hand came over. He did not hurry, exactly. He arrived. He tapped his tablet twice and the screen said LIVING HERB, POTTED, $3.99, and the woman said "Thank you" in the voice of someone who has been proven right by an institution.

Then the basil dripped, and got lighter, and the scale noticed.

"Item removed from bagging area," said the machine. "Please return item."

"I didn't remove anything," she told it.

"It's the water," said Hand. He had a paper towel from somewhere, I didn't see where, and he set the pot on it and tapped once, and the machine accepted the basil as it now was.

At machine four, the back panel was open. A young fellow knelt on the floor with a laptop balanced on his knee and a grey cable running up into the machine's insides. His tag said

CHAOS-WEAVER, and under that, IT SUPPORT – REGIONAL. He was typing with great happiness.

"Pushing an update," he said, to nobody. "Won't affect anything."

Machine four began speaking French.

The man at machine four, who had been doing fine, stopped doing fine. He held up a bag of frozen peas as if the machine might see it better from closer. "Article inattendu dans la zone d'ensachage," it told him, warmly.

Hand went to machine four. Two taps. English. Hand came back to the woman, who had laid her shallots on the scale one at a time, so that every new shallot was, to the machine, a surprise.

I will say this for her: she knew her codes. She typed them from memory, fast, the way my mother used to dial the church office. The trouble was the leek. The machine would not believe the leek weighed what it weighed. It charged her for it, then took it back, then charged her for it twice. Hand laid his palm flat on the glass of the scale for a second, the way you'd settle a horse, and after that the machine believed him.

"Oh, come on," I said, to the second charge, before he'd fixed it.

"Right?" said the teenager behind me, who was holding a single energy drink, and for a while after that we were a team.

By then the line was me, the teenager, a young mother with a baby in the cart seat, and a man in a hi-vis vest holding a bag of ice that was becoming less of a bag of ice. I had started keeping score. Not on paper. But I have played a lot of crib with

my brother-in-law, and you get so you count without wanting to. The woman was up on the shallots. The machine was up on the leek until Hand evened it. The trail mix was still to come and I did not like her chances with the twist tie.

Machine two, which had nobody at it, said, "Approval needed."

Hand approved it. I don't know what he approved.

At 10:40 a stock boy came out of the back with a stack of hand baskets and a fresh roll of receipt paper and set them down at the end of the horseshoe. A little after that, machine six ran out of paper. Hand put the new roll in without looking at it. By the front doors stood a man in a navy fleece with a radio clipped to the zipper. His tag said ALL-SEEING, and under that, LOSS PREVENTION. He gave the stock boy a nod, and the stock boy went back where he'd come from.

Then the coupon.

She laid it on the scanner face down, then face up, then face down again. It was forty cents off a yogurt. It had expired in 2009. It had been folded so many times that the folds were most of it.

"It doesn't say it expires," she said.

It did. It said so in the corner. I could read it from where I stood, and I am not supposed to drive at night.

Hand looked at the coupon for some time. Then he looked into her cart, where there was, in fact, a yogurt. Then he looked down the line, which went past the flowers now. He tapped once. The machine said, "Coupon accepted," and the woman turned and looked at me the way you look at a witness.

I no longer knew whose side I was on. The jug had started to sweat in my hand.

That was when the bulk-foods fellow came up, in his green apron, on his break. His tag said CONSCIENCE-KEEPER. He had one of the clear bags from the bulk aisle, properly tied, and in the bottom corner of it was a single gummy bear. Red.

"I ate one," he told Hand. "When I was filling the bin. This is the same kind."

He did not cut in. He went to the back of the line, behind the man with the ice, and when machine three came free the man with the ice waved him ahead, and so did the rest of us. I'm not sure why I did that. Only then did he go.

He put the gummy bear on the scale. The scale did not register it. A gummy bear is below what a scale cares about. Hand came over and keyed in a weight himself, and the machine thought about that and said $0.02.

The bulk-foods fellow got out a nickel.

Hand told him, kindly, that with cash it would round down to nothing. We don't have pennies anymore. Two cents in cash is zero.

The bulk-foods fellow put the nickel away and got out his debit card. He paid two cents by tap. The machine asked if he would like to round up his purchase to support the food bank, and he said yes, and it rounded him up to a dollar, and he looked relieved, as though that settled the bear and one or two other things besides. When he stepped away, machine three said, "Approval needed," and kept saying it.

The woman was bagging her leek now. It did not fit any bag. She tried several. Machine four had moved on from French to a voice I didn't know, which thanked everyone for shopping at a store in Mississauga.

"Oh, that's an old config," said the Chaos-Weaver, delighted, and typed faster.

The store manager came down from the office then. He was an older man in a white shirt and a plain tie, and his tag said ALLFATHER, and under that, STORE MANAGER. People stepped out of his way without being asked. He did not speak to the woman, or to the bulk-foods fellow, or to the young man on the floor with the laptop. He walked into the middle of the horseshoe, and Hand held out the tablet, and the manager pressed one thing on it.

Five of the machines went dark, and came back, and said nothing at all. The sixth held the woman's order through it, because Hand had his other palm flat on the side of it. Machine four's screen still thanked everyone for shopping in Mississauga. It just didn't say so out loud.

It was very quiet. The baby, who had been crying, stopped to see what had happened.

"Thank you, Hand," the manager said, and went back up to the office.

The Chaos-Weaver closed the panel on machine four. He looked a little sorry, the way a boy looks when the game gets called for darkness.

The woman paid. It took her three tries to choose between debit and credit, and on the third try she chose cash and then

had none, and then chose debit. She left with the leek over her shoulder like a rifle and the basil held out in front of her, still dripping. She said “Have a good one” to Hand, and he said “You too,” and I believe he meant it.

It was 10:58.

I stepped up to machine six. I put the milk on the scanner barcode down, then barcode up. I turned it the way you turn a jug. I held it a bit higher. I held it a bit lower. I wiped the barcode on my sleeve and tried again.

The machine looked at my milk and had nothing to say about it.

Behind me, the line was waiting. Hand tucked his tablet under his arm and started over, not hurrying.

“Please see attendant,” said the machine.