There’s never a line at Checkout Counter #3.

It was my son who first noticed this—he’s a perceptive 7-year-old, and while I’m usually in a rush to find the shortest line and get back out to our car as quickly as possible, he takes time to look around and notice things. He was the one who noticed that no one stood in line at the third check-out counter, even when the other lines were four to five families deep. It was as though we couldn’t even see that empty line—our eyes passed over it altogether.

“There’s no line there, mom.” He said. He had been what some might call “a handful,” during our entire visit to Hornbachers that day, asking for bags of Halloween candy and putting overpriced matchbox cars into the shopping cart when my attention was elsewhere. But he noted this observation quietly, almost reverently, and I think that’s why I paid attention.

“Where, honey?” I asked. He pointed, and sure enough, there was Counter Three, completely devoid of customers. I looked again to be sure the line was open. Behind the counter was a tall, spindly old man, his hair sparse and white, his eyes cast down at his shoes. My stomach lurched, but his odd appearance was not enough to deter me. I had faced down grumpy cashiers many a time. I took William’s hand and with determination pushed our grocery cart toward Counter Three.

The man looked up. The florescent lights illuminated his deeply sunken eye sockets. His eyes rolled, and he met my gaze. “Yessss, he said. Always the customers with the children....”

“Excuse me?” I leaned toward him, unsure of what I had just heard. That’s when I smelled it—the stench of sour milk, rotting vegetables, and rancid deli meat rolling toward me in waves. I backed away and turned to my son, trying to hide my disgust. “Ok, let’s get these groceries unloaded” I said with a bit of false cheer. But William was staring at the checker with undisguised horror.

“NO MOM, NO.” William was loud. He began pushing the cart back and forth in a frenzy, bumping it into the candy and magazine display. He made low guttural noises, like a sick cat. He shook his blond head from side to side.

“William, stop that,” I insisted. “Now is definitely NOT the time to misbehave” I screech-whispered in his ear.

The cashier was leaning back on his heels, his arms crossed, taking us in. An odd half-smile crossed his lips. “AH AH AHAAAAHHH” he rasped. “Let me tell you what happens at Hornbacher’s to the naughty children!” William, despite himself, leaned closer, wrinkling his nose at the smell. “Look there, young man,” rasped the cashier. He pointed at two small metal doors in the wall in front of his checkout line. “Do you see that CONVEYOR BELT?” his eyes took on a mad gleam.

“Um hmm.” William nodded, staring at the small opening. “It takes groceries outside to the cars.”

“That’s what we WANT you to believe” rasped the man. “But no. No! In fact, that belt sucks bad children inside, and drops them down a cold, dark shoot to the HORNBACHER DUNGEON.” He threw his head
back in a silent roar, eye’s rolling to white. “Right now, deep below us, all of the badly behaved children who shopped here today are locked in a cell, full of expired rotting groceries! They stay there ALL DAY, until we release them to their parents at closing time. One more peep, young man, AND IT’S THE DUNGEON FOR YOU!” His musty smell wafted toward us.

William gasped in terror and slid back toward me. I grabbed his hand, and abandoning the grocery cart, we headed in quickstep for the automatic sliding glass doors. I was shaken. William was shaking. We rushed to the car and locked ourselves inside.

We would live to shop again another day, but never never would we return to Checkout Counter #3. And every time we pass the conveyor belt at the front of the Hornbachers store, both of us swear that we can hear the far-off groans of little children coming from deep below us.

THE END.