

# Finding the Flexibility to Survive

Brighton Earley - Berkeley, California

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Every Friday night the cashier at the Chevron gas station food mart on Eagle Rock Boulevard and Avenue 40 offers us a discount on all the leftover apples and bananas. To ensure the best selection possible, my mother and I pile into our 20-year-old car and pull up to the food mart at 5 p.m. on the dot, ready to get our share of slightly overripe fruits.

Before the times of the Chevron food mart, there were the times of the calculator. My mother would carefully prop it up in the cart's child seat and frown as she entered each price. Since the first days of the calculator's appearance, the worry lines in my mother's face have only grown deeper. Today, they are a permanent fixture.

Chevron shopping started like this: One day my mother suddenly realized that she had maxed out almost every credit card, and we needed groceries for the week. The only credit card she hadn't maxed out was the Chevron card and the station on Eagle Rock Boulevard has a pretty big mart attached to it.

Since our first visit there, I've learned to believe in flexibility. In my life, it has become necessary to bend the idea of grocery shopping. My mother and I can no longer shop at real grocery stores, but we still get the necessities.

Grocery shopping at Chevron has its drawbacks. The worst is when we have so many items that it takes the checker what seems like hours to ring up everything. A line of anxious customers forms behind us. It's that line that hurts the most — the way they look at us. My mother never notices — or maybe she pretends not to.

I never need to be asked to help the checker bag all the items. No one wants to get out of there faster than I do. I'm embarrassed to shop there, and I'm deathly afraid of running into someone I know. I once expressed my fear of being seen shopping at Chevron to my mother and her eyes shone with disappointment. I know that I hurt her feelings when I try to evade our weekly shopping trips.

And that is why I hold on to the idea of flexibility so tightly. I believe that being flexible keeps me going — keeps me from being ashamed of the way my family is different from other families. Whenever I feel the heat rise to my face, I remind myself that grocery shopping at a gas station is just a twist on the normal kind of grocery shopping. I remind myself that we won't always have to shop at Chevron — that just because at this point in my life I am struggling does not mean that I will always struggle. My belief in flexibility helps me get through the difficult times because I know that no matter what happens, my mother and I will always figure out a way to survive.

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