

## A CHECKOUT GAME AND A FIRST WIN

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Illustration by Olexa Hewryk

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*By Leila Darabi*

Earlier this month, a Coop member posted a missed connection on Reddit after finishing a shift:

*Using a throwaway acct here, but was on my shift at the coop on Sunday morning (9:30-12:30) and got relieved by a really cute guy named Matt at around noon," the post read. "I would've stayed and chatted more but I was heading to see a movie... - Don't know if you're single, but if you are and you see this, would love to get a drink sometime!"*

The post describes a brief exchange, the kind that happens often at the Coop and usually ends there.

A few weeks earlier, in February, a different moment at checkout turned into a story. For more than a decade, Coop member Simma Reingold has been asking shoppers in her line to guess the total cost of their groceries before the first item is scanned. “I play a game with folks that come in, and I tend to start with: Do you want to play a game today?” Reingold said.

Most people agree to take a guess.

“I probably play with maybe 70 to 80% of the people that come to my checkout line,” she estimated. “I tell them that today is a special day, and if they want to guess how much money all of the items in their cart come out to be, and they get within \$1 [of the correct amount], that the Coop will cover their bill for the day,” she explained. By “the Coop,” Reingold means herself—she’ll cover the grocery cost out of pocket.

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People respond in different ways. Some guess right away. Others keep a running estimate as items are scanned. Some talk through their reasoning, item by item.

“People love to justify why they know or don’t know how much is in their basket. They love to tell you, ‘I buy this every week, and I never buy these, and this just raised in price.’” She elaborated, “It always leads to such a good conversation. Sometimes it’s like a cute thing across a couple to see how they estimate differently.”

Reingold has been more hesitant to play the game as the cost of groceries has

surged. “There can be this depressing thing of, like, oh, my groceries cost this much. And I don’t really want to draw attention to that,” she said. “But I’ve still been playing it, because it is so much fun.” Reingold has been asking shoppers to play the game since 2013. Over time, the number of attempts has added up, but the outcome has remained the same: “People don’t get close. I had never had a close call before,” she said.

That changed in February, when Tamu Favorite, a playwright and performer, agreed to try. As the items were scanned, Favorite made an initial guess, then revised it. “She first said it was going to be \$165... and then she was like, ‘No! \$160.’ I just had divine intervention.” There are no limits on how often someone can adjust their guess. What matters is where they land at the end. As the total approached that number, Reingold realized that, for the first time, she might actually have to pay for someone’s groceries.

“We were checking out, we were getting close... and she got within \$1 [I asked myself] am I actually going to honor this?” Reingold said. She said the answer was clear. “We didn’t shake hands, but we made an agreement,” she said. The total came to \$160.68 and Reingold gladly paid. Favorite reacted with disbelief.



Simma Reingold on the left and Tamu Favorite on the right just after Favorite's correct guess. Courtesy of Simma Reingold.

"When she realized she won, she's like: *No seriously?* And I'm like: *Yeah, seriously.* And she's like: *You can't do this!* And I'm like: *Of course I'm going to do this! This is the game!*," Reingold recounted. "I just knew it was going to bring me so much joy that someone finally won. And obviously bring her so much joy," she said.

The interaction drew in other people shopping and working checkout that day. "I think I tend to have a lot of engagement with my customers," observed Reingold. "So, the people doing checkout near me, we all get into a conversation together... It's kind of like when you're on a subway car and everyone starts talking."

“SHE TEXTED ME, AND SHE WAS LIKE, ‘SOMEONE WON MY GAME.’ AND I WAS JUST LIKE: ‘NO WAY!’ I COULDN’T BELIEVE IT,” SHE SAID. “IT’S KIND OF LIKE WINNING THE LOTTERY, RIGHT?”

Coop staff member Gillian Chi, a buyer and receiving coordinator, described the moment in an email: “Apparently they both cried with joy,” she wrote. “I personally found it to be a particularly special and moving story, something I could only imagine ever happening at the Coop.”

“It was this moment of celebration,” recalled Reingold. “I think both of us were just so smiley... It completely changed the trajectory of my day.” For the rest of her shift, despite having just shelled out \$160, Reingold continued to ask shoppers if they wanted to play the game. She had a similar reaction from friends as news of the first-ever correct guess traveled. “I started texting my friends, like: ‘Guess what? I’m at the Coop and someone won,’ and everyone freaked out,” she said.

Ashley Ellefson, a Coop member and friend of Reingold’s, said she had known about the practice for years. “She’s always played this game honestly since I’ve known her, over 10 years, and I’m always like, ‘Are you *really* going to pay for someone’s groceries?’” Ellefson recalled, sharing that she was thrilled to learn that someone had finally won. “She texted me, and she was like, ‘Someone won my game.’ And I was just like: ‘No way!’ I couldn’t believe it,” she said. “It’s kind of like winning the lottery, right? It’s both surprising and exciting.”

Ellefson said the interaction reflects what she loves about interactions between Coop members, and what she loves about Reingold: “Simma loves talking to people. She’s big on community... She’s always talking to people at the Coop,” she said.

Ellefson described taking a similar approach to her own shifts as a walker. “I always have an opening line: I ask them, ‘How is it going and what’s it like inside the Coop to-

day?’ But then I also like to ask people if they bought anything interesting,” she said. Those questions often lead to longer exchanges. “You meet some really interesting people. Today I met a dad and his daughter, and we were talking about how the Coop used to have daycare. I met a woman who was a nutritionist. You just get all these different conversations,” she said.

She also gets great recommendations for new items to try. “That’s how I learned when Harry’s Berries come to the Coop. And I learned about this Blondie brownie thing in the frozen aisle,” she said. Reingold similarly described discovering new Coop products through her guess-the-total game and conversations during her shift. “That’s my favorite part of checkout... I would have never found things otherwise,” she said. She also cited vegetable umami Yandu, a savory cooking sauce, as a favorite item she discovered through one of those conversations.

As Reingold put it, each checkout conversation is “kind of like this magical New York moment.”

“At the end of the day, that’s what the Coop is about—being able to have conversations with people,” she said, noting that those moments can feel less common as political tensions divide members. Some members who recognize her now try to end up in her line when checking out, she said. Whether they do is mostly a matter of luck.

*Leila Darabi joined the Gazette as a reporter in 2016. She posts photos of the food she makes with Coop ingredients on Instagram (@persian\_ish).*