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ON TARGET

Todd Richardson

I thought I saw a dead baby in a Wal-Mart shopping cart once. Its arms and legs were splayed asymmetrically, and things on sale—Cool Ranch Doritos, Mountain Dew, Tylenol PM—surrounded the body like a chalk outline. The baby had only a diaper on, and nothing, not even a plastic bag, prevented its spectral flesh from sagging into the cart's wire bottom. The woman whose cart contained the corpse—I don't want to presume she was the dead baby's mother—was digging through a box of five-dollar DVDs as I stared at this child, looking for a shallow breath, an eye twitch, something, any sign of life.

It was a harrowing sight, and I wanted to tell my friends about the maybe-dead-baby, but that meant confessing I was in Wal-Mart, and people like me shouldn't be in Wal-Mart. We know better. Wal-Mart is evil: its products are made in sweatshops, then shipped to the U.S. to be stocked and sold by exploited Americans who would be working at conscientious, locally-owned businesses if such businesses had not been exterminated by Wal-Mart's aggressive pricing. I'm an educated member of the American middle class, and I have a responsibility to act rightly and to shop at Target.

Just yesterday, I was in Wal-Mart's express checkout—I needed some trash bags, and I was in a hurry—when, at the edge of my vision, I saw a friend walk in the store. To avoid eye contact with him, I pulled my head low and directed my attention to the impulse items, congratulating myself on how little the candy bars, phone cards, and lint rollers tempted my sophisticated sensibilities. Of course if I were in Target, the point-of-purchase exchange would have been different; I would have taken the schwag seriously. Andy Warhol said the great thing about America is “the richest consumer buys essentially the same products as the poorest... a Coke is a Coke and no amount of money can get you a better Coke than the one the bum on the corner is drinking.” The quote makes me think Warhol really

was a fool. A Coca-Cola from Target, I swear, tastes better than a Coca-Cola from Wal-Mart. Along with whatever usefulness a product promises, when it's purchased at Target, it provides something else, a little slice of a color-coordinated, clean edged life—Wal-Mart sells products, but Target sells Target.

Melissa and I recently moved to Columbia, Missouri, Sam Walton's hometown, and, on our first visit, we were aghast to see so many Wal-Marts but no Targets. We seriously reconsidered the move as a Target-less life isn't worth living. Where would we find tasteful shower curtains at affordable prices? Furniture that is both stylish and practical? Jersey bedding in fun colors? We could always go to Target.com for these things, but then where would we go when we are feeling blue? Melissa and I often spend our evenings ambling through Target, chronicling all the things we'll buy with our next paycheck. The store has been the engine of our economically stylish lives for so long that, when we walk through Target, we aren't contemplating the people we might be—that's what we do at Pottery Barn—we're reminding ourselves who we are.

Becoming full-time Wal-Mart shoppers was out of the question as it would put us in too-close-quarters with people below our station. Behind the high-sounding rhetoric of social justice that people like me use to denounce Wal-Mart resides deep hatred and fear of the lower class. I'm not talking about the poor. As much as Americans would like to believe otherwise, class is more complicated than comparing paychecks—Wal-Mart shoppers and Target shoppers are equally susceptible to bankruptcy. Class, especially in this instance, is a product of taste: Target shoppers work towards cultural superiority whereas Wal-Mart shoppers work on securing financial security. It's worth pointing out that both classes stand in opposition to the ruling class, that elite group of people who control everyone's cultural and financial fate and who think it's cute that I think there's a difference between Wal-Mart shoppers and Target shoppers.

A number of locals consoled us that there is, indeed, a Target in town: "It's in the mall," they said, yet, driving around, we'd

seen every mall and no Target. It wasn't until we were leaving, waiting to turn onto the interstate while thinking of the other mid-sized, Midwest cities with numerous Targets we might move to, that we spied a Target truck heading into Columbia.

"Follow that truck!" I demanded, and even if Melissa laughed at my absurd request, she did what I asked and I was glad. When the light turned green, Melissa did a U-turn, and we sped off after our Moses. It was a tricky pursuit as the truck had already ducked down a rather innocuous looking side street, one of those service roads you use to get to hard-to-get-to motels. It didn't look promising. We suspected the truck, like us, might be lost. When we turned the corner, we were so fixated on catching the truck that we almost didn't see it. There it was, tucked away on the backside of the Columbia Mall, impossible to see from any main street. I think Melissa and I were holding hands, and I swear the Talking Heads' "This Must Be the Place" was on the radio.

"Credit or Debit?" The fifteen-year-old cashier startled me with his question. I was so deep in my invisibility I did not realize he had already scanned the trash bags, and I was holding up the line. All he needed to know was what I intended to do with the card in my hand and our transaction would be complete.

"Credit," I answered. "But these, too." I added a tin of Altoids to the total, thinking they might make my breach in line etiquette seem more meaningful. While I furtively scanned the store to make sure my friend hadn't seen me, the cashier ran the Altoids over the electric eye, pressed a button, and gave me a vacant but pointed look to let me know it was my turn. It took less than a minute for me to slide my card through the black box, receive approval, sign the screen, collect my receipt, scurry past the blue-vested greeter and exit the store.

Once outside, however, I did not feel the relief I thought I would feel at having put Wal-Mart behind me. Instead, I felt a deep melancholy. As I walked back to my car, I empathized, more deeply than they could possibly comprehend, with the lost

souls lost in that Wal-Mart world, those tacky masses who had given up hope to save a few cents; I even empathized with that woman I once saw, the one with the dead baby in her cart. Target gives my life meaning, gives me a sense of purpose, but Wal-Mart gives them nothing but low prices. It's so sad, I thought, that they don't have anything to believe in.