

Goods

Matthew Baker

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When my brother and I were children, our mother would take us to stores. My brother was a small blackhaired bucktoothed child who kept his hands clenched into fists. I was a small whitehaired bucktoothed child who kept his hands tucked into his underarms. We liked scowling. The game would begin when we entered the store. When we entered a store, we would choose things. My brother might choose a baseball. I might choose an umbrella. We would take them from their displays. As our mother led us through the store—loading cartons of eggs into our cart, boxes of tampons, bottles of pills—my brother would carry the baseball and I would carry the umbrella. We weren't hoping our mother would buy us the baseball and the umbrella. Our mother couldn't buy us the baseball and the umbrella. We knew that. That was the game. During our time in the store we would carry the baseball and the umbrella, and we would use them, like they were ours.

My brother would sniff the baseball. My brother would spit onto the baseball. My brother would pretend to pitch the baseball through an elderly shopper's legs.

Meanwhile I would twirl the umbrella over my shoulder.

When we exited the store, we would leave our things there.

My brother and I liked when our mother took us to stores. We liked when our mother took us to stores because my brother and I didn't own many things. We didn't own a baseball. We didn't own an umbrella. But when we were within a store's walls, we could own a

baseball and an umbrella. As customers of a store—as people who had the potential to buy any object within the store’s walls—we were given ownership, temporarily, of any object within that store. We could carry the objects with us wherever we wanted. They were ours.

My brother would kick his sneakers into our cart—clods of dirt scattering across the store’s floor—and yank rubber waders over his jeans and his socks.

I would wear unusual hats meant for the colorblind and the blind.

Once we owned skateboards.

Once we owned backpacks.

Once we owned calculators. My brother and I didn’t like calculators—even if our mother could have bought us calculators, we wouldn’t have wanted our mother to buy us calculators. We thought calculators were boring. But we had never owned calculators, so we carried calculators through a store, once—adding things, subtracting things, multiplying things until the calculators’ displays were maxed at nines—because we felt that that was an experience we needed to have. Felt that if we ever were to understand children who owned calculators, we ourselves would have to have owned calculators. Felt that if we ever were to understand anything about our country, first we would have to understand children who owned calculators.

My brother and I owned few things, when we weren’t within a store’s walls. In our neighborhood we were chased by children who owned calculators. The children would tackle us. The children would pin us against dumpsters. The children would use their calculators to tally our imaginary crimes.

Our mother would shout at us, when we came home with split lips and bloody noses, like we had given them to each other. Our mother would sing while she scrubbed crusted yolk and crusted syrup from our plates, would use a wrist to tuck stray curls of hair behind her ear again, her hands dripping soapy water. Our mother would snore on the

couch, an arm dangling onto the floor, fingernails glittering against the gray of the carpet. Our mother owned what nobody wanted: a job frying chicken, an apartment above a video store, a heart that didn't like beating.

Once a fortuneteller had visited our school. The fortuneteller had told my brother and I that someday we would be hip-hop superstars. The fortuneteller hadn't been paid to visit our school—the fortuneteller had been trespassing. My brother and I hated hip-hop. We didn't know what we would become.

What we became were orphans. It didn't matter if your heart was defective—what you were born with didn't come with a warranty. Our mother owned a television. My brother and I were watching a television program with our mother. People we'd never met had been paid to have their laughs recorded—their laughs were replayed, again and again, during the television program. Our mother laughed with them. Then our mother's heart stopped working.

My brother and I were older now. My brother was a spindly blackhaired bucktoothed youth who kept his sneakers heel-to-heel. I was a spindly whitehaired bucktoothed youth who kept his sneakers toe-to-toe. We liked blinking. They told us the name of the orphanage where they were taking us. Blink, blink, blink, was what we said.

My brother and I owned a few shirts, a few pairs of yellowed underwear, a jar of pencils whose bodies we had gnawed with our teeth. We took them with us. The youths at the orphanage said we weren't actual orphans because of our father. The youths at the orphanage didn't own calculators. A youth named Henri with reddish eyebrows and brownish hair lived at the orphanage. Henri sat on his cot, legs folded together, hands folded together, eyes closed. Henri's from Pittsburg, said the other youths. Henri's from Wichita. Henri's from Norfolk. Nobody knew where Henri was from. Henri never moved. Henri never spoke. Nobody knew if Henri ate. The others said Henri wasn't an orphan. Said Henri had

traveled to the orphanage in a trance. Said Henri's parents were alive. Said someday Henri would emerge from his trance, and would speak the truth to us, and then would leave the orphanage.

Because Henri never moved, Henri was useful. My brother and I hid our jar of pencils between Henri's legs, so nobody could take it. My brother and I owned the jar of pencils, but at the orphanage that was meaningless. Ownership is a belief, and without authorities to propagate a belief, the belief disappears. Beyond the orphanage's walls, officers and judges and jailers propagated a belief in ownership. Within the orphanage's walls, the belief wasn't propagated. The orphanage was understaffed. Youths took whatever they wanted, whenever they wanted—like the orphanage was a store, where you could own whatever you could carry.

A minivan came to the orphanage. Our grandparents had come for us. We hadn't known about grandparents. When my brother and I lifted Henri's sweatshirt, our jar of pencils wasn't between Henri's legs. My brother slapped Henri's face. I pinched Henri's arm. We wanted Henri to speak the truth to us.

Our grandparents' minivan smelled of toffees and mildew.

Our grandparents were as gaunt and as bony as we were.

Our grandparents had hated our mother, they said, but that didn't mean they hated us.

My brother's sneakers were heel-to-heel on the minivan's floor. My brother's hands were clenched into fists. My sneakers were toe-to-toe on the minivan's floor. My hands were tucked into my underarms. Our grandparents' radio sang hiphop.

My brother and I took a vow to invent our own language, so that those who overheard us couldn't understand us.

My brother and I took a vow to visit the prison where our father was kept, so that we could ask our father a few questions.

My brother and I took a vow to dig our mother's body from its grave, and to steal our mother's body, and to burn our mother's body to ashes, so that we could sprinkle the ashes in the stores where our mother had taken us.

Our grandparents lived in a neighborhood where all of the houses were alike, like the houses had been manufactured in a factory. Our grandparents' house had yellow shutters, flower boxes, a basketball hoop cemented into the driveway. All of the houses had yellow shutters, flower boxes, basketball hoops cemented into their driveways. Our grandparents ate cereal with milk. Once a week our grandparents took us to a church where priests and choristers propagated a belief in a being who had created our universe. They said that what the being had created was good. They said that what we had created was bad. The church had yellow shutters.

At our grandparents' house my brother and I owned things, but we didn't like being there.

My brother and I went to stores.

Once stores had been the size of houses, but now stores were the size of neighborhoods. Leafy ferns grew along the stores' walkways. Fountains hoarded copper and nickel coins the fountains couldn't spend. Adults exercised together, walking the stores' walkways in sweatsuits and sweatbands. My brother and I spent whole days in the stores—playing videogames where the videogames were sold, napping on futons where the futons were sold, eating uneaten sandwiches we found on paper plates in the stores' sunny plazas. We stalked the stores' employees. We watered the stores' ferns, if the ferns hadn't been watered. We met other youths who preferred stores to their homes: Ana, a fatcheeked snub-nosed youth who squirted her cardigans with the stores' perfumes; Lucas, whose cheeks had been tattooed with the symbols of various currencies—~~W~~, C, ~~N~~, K, ~~Q~~, G, ¥, ₣, \$—and who typed his manifestos on the stores' computers; Gom and Benj, who played the stores'

guitars and who read the stores' comics and who once threw a kegger in a store's changing rooms.

Sometimes our grandparents would come to the stores—to buy themselves things, to buy us things. If our grandparents saw us, where my brother and I were standing in the wind of a row of pivoting fans, our grandparents would say hello.

We saw them at stores as often as we saw them at home.

Our grandparents kept their cupboards stocked with jars of jam, boxes of cookies, sacks of grapefruits and oranges, but my brother and I preferred what we ate at stores.

Our grandparents bought us paisley shirts, flannel shirts, brandname sweatshirts, but my brother and I didn't wear them. We wore the same thing from our closets day after day—black jeans, black sweatshirts—then changed into the stores' clothing once we were at the stores.

At our grandparents' house we owned things, but at the stores we could own anything. If our grandparents bought us a paisley shirt, then we owned a paisley shirt—but at the stores we owned *all paisley shirts*. If our grandparents bought us the newest album by a certain band, then we owned that newest album by that certain band—but at the stores we owned *all albums by that band*. Owned *all albums by any band*. Owned *multiple copies of every album*. Perhaps that, more than anything, was why we preferred the stores: at the stores, my brother and I were unaffected by loss. We felt nothing, when something broke, because a hundred replacements were waiting, always, to replace what had been broken.

Once my brother and I took shovels from our grandparents' garage and rode a bus into the city, through the billboards, to the graveyard where our mother was buried. We carried our shovels through the graveyard, reading the names on the graves, searching for the name of our mother. Water dripped from the trees. Pigeons cooed at other pigeons along the graveyard's pathways. Headlights led taillights through the streets beyond the grave-

yard's fences. Our mother's name wasn't there. Our mother wasn't buried where our mother was buried. We sat on somebody's grave. A whiskery skinsagging beggar came into the graveyard carrying a camouflage backpack. The beggar was shouting at something imaginary. The beggar was peeling the white from his fingernails with a knife. I'm going to destroy myself, the beggar shouted. You use me, you abuse me, you make me feel so cheap, the beggar shouted. I'm capitalism, I'm a market, the beggar shouted. The beggar stopped for a while and convulsed under a tree. Blink, said my brother. Blink, I said. The beggar kept coming. The beggar stopped where we were sitting. The beggar's fingers were twitching. The beggar's nostrils were twitching. The beggar asked us what we wanted. We told the beggar we wanted our mother's body. The beggar told us that someday my brother and I would be supereminent physicists. Supereminent? my brother said. Physicists? I said. The beggar shouted the names of planets at us. The beggar shouted the names of chemicals at us. The beggar asked us for money. A droopeyed baldheaded beggar came into the graveyard carrying a polkadotted umbrella. I thought I lost you, said the beggar with the polkadotted umbrella. I was talking to my daughters, said the beggar with the camouflage backpack. I'm everywhere. You can't lose me. The beggars bowed to us. The beggars trudged arm-in-arm together toward the graveyard's gate. The beggar with the camouflage backpack shouted at the beggar with the polkadotted umbrella. This is my graveyard. This is my graveyard, and those are my streets, and the bridges and the undersides of the bridges and the empty alleyways, all of them, all of them, those are mine. The beggar with the polkadotted umbrella hushed the beggar with the camouflage backpack. The beggars crossed the street. My brother and I rode a bus to our grandparents' neighborhood.

My brother briefly was bedridden with the flu.

I was suspended from school, briefly, for dissecting a fetal pig in the biology lab.

(I wasn't taking biology.)

We kept stalking the stores' employees.

Even with love, we preferred what we found in stores.

My brother had a crush on a plump mustached cashier who wore plastic watches with different superheroes on their faces and whose nametag said Ramon Vilkitsky III.

We would follow him through the stores' walkways (as Ramon Vilkitsky III unknotted his uniform's tie), through the stores' entryway (as Ramon Vilkitsky III zipped himself into his jacket), through the trucks and the minivans and the sedans in the stores' potted lots (weaving through the cars, my brother's hands clenched into fists, my hands tucked into my underarms, as Ramon Vilkitsky III shook his keys from his jacket), and stand and stare as Ramon Vilkitsky III lowered himself into a bumperless sedan and sputtered away from us.

When Ramon Vilkitsky III was working, my brother and I would watch him from within racks of sweaters.

My crush was on a lipringed buzzheaded shelfstocker who wore fishnet stockings with her uniform and whose nametag's name had been scribbled black. She caught my brother and I watching her from within a display of umbrellas. She had been pricetagging plastic clocks. Why are you following me, she said. Because I love you, I said. He loves me too? she said. I said, He loves somebody named Ramon.

She said that she was dating somebody but that when she was working didn't count. She pricetagged my brother's face. She told me to meet her in a changing room.

In the changing room she made me feel like not a person but a thing.

We never kissed, when we would meet in the changing rooms.

She would unzip her uniform's shorts. She would peel her fishnet stockings to her knees. She would spit in my hair. She would face away from me, toward the mirror, so that she could watch herself pounding me.

What's your name, I said.

Don't ask me that, she said.

I knew about sex now, but I still didn't know about kissing.

Beyond the stores' walls, bankers and cashiers propagated a belief that money wasn't meaningless. Teachers and provosts propagated a belief that grades weren't meaningless. Advertisers and fashionistas propagated a belief that skirt meant woman, that tie meant man.

Once our grandparents drove my brother and I to the prison where our father was kept. Our grandparents said our father was a monster. They had warned our mother, they said, but our mother had ignored them. Now they were warning us. The prison's lot was like the stores' lots—trucks and minivans and sedans. My brother and I whispered about Ramon. Our grandparents muttered about our father. In the prison we sat in an empty room. When you visited a prisoner you could have a contact visit or a noncontact visit. My brother and I wanted a contact visit. We couldn't have it. A few days earlier our father had been caught under his cot with a hammer chipping a tunnel through the floor. Our father was restricted to noncontact visits for a year. His tunnel had been cemented. His tunnel hadn't been a tunnel even. His tunnel had been a hole. It hadn't been able to fit anything more than our father's head—that's how far our father had gotten. A noncontact visit meant we would meet our father face-to-face but separated by a pane of glass. They brought him into an empty room connected to our empty room. Our father was a freckly grayhaired bucktoothed adult with child-sized hands. He wore an orange jumpsuit that said he didn't own it. It said the prison owned it. It said the prison owned him. Our father put a black telephone to his face. My brother and I put black telephones to our faces. Our grandparents sat on chairs behind us muttering about our father. Our father stared at us. Don't you have anything to say? he said. Blink, we said. This is it, here I am, this is what

made you, here's the other half of your genes, he said. Blink, we said. If your mother were alive she wouldn't want you to be here, he said. Blink, we said. Aren't you going to say anything? he said. My brother was nudging me to say something. I was pinching my brother to say something. More nudging. More pinching. We said something. We asked our father why he did what he did. You mean the tunnel? he said. Before that, we said. The same reason anybody in here or anybody out there do what they do, did what they did, he said. I wanted money. More things. Better things. Different things. More nudging. More pinching. We asked him what it was like in there. Not what I wanted, he said. Here I can't have anything. I buy some magazines from my friend—they take them away from me. I buy some pills from my friend—they take them away from me. I buy a hammer from my friend—they take it away from me. Here nobody can have anything. All those empty rooms, it makes you anxious, jittery, demented, you understand? More nudging. More pinching. We asked him what we should know. You should know that your great-grandfather had a heart attack, and your great-uncle had a heart attack, and your uncle had a heart attack, so you'll probably have heart attacks, I'll probably have a heart attack, he said. You should know that your great-uncle suffered from pyromania, and your uncle suffered from pyromania, so you'll probably suffer from pyromania, he said. You should know that your great-grandmother was bilingual, so you may be bilingual, he said. We told him we weren't bilingual. They came for our father, but our father kept talking. They made our father stand, but our father kept talking. You should know that you have different fathers, he said, and that I'm neither of those fathers. And isn't that how it is, for all of us? Aren't mothers always the same, but fathers are always changing, are always different moment to moment? Even now, even here, can't you see it happening? he said, and then they took him away and our grandparents drove us home.

My brother was hospitalized briefly with appendicitis.

I served on a jury, briefly, for a kidnapping trial.

(Guilty, the jury said.)

After that my brother and I began sneaking things into stores. We never talked about doing it, but we did it anyway. The next time we went to the stores, we took our grandparents' bathrobes. The bathrobes smelled of sour breath and burnt coffee. The bathrobes were stiff with years of dried bathwater and dried sweat. We carried the bathrobes into a store. We found where the store's bathrobes were sold. We hung our grandparents' bathrobes there with the others. Then we went and napped on the store's futons.

The next time we took our grandparents' doormat.

The next time we took paintings from our grandparents' hallways, took hangers from our grandparents' closets, took spatulas and ladles and whisks from our grandparents' kitchen.

We took price tags from other things, stuck them onto our grandparents'.

We didn't know why we were doing it.

Ramon Vilkitsky III kissed my brother under the stores' glittering chandeliers.

My crush was fired, but I found other employees to love—for every crush the stores fired, the stores hired a new employee to replace her.

Where our grandparents' sofa had stood, the floor was marked with scuffs. Where our grandparents' coats had hung, our grandparents' knobs were empty. Where our grandparents' paintings had hung, the wallpaper was brighter, in squares, where it hadn't been bleached by the sun. Our grandparents might have been upset about their missing things, but our grandparents' brains had broken years before. Our grandparents wandered their house, arguing about things that hadn't happened, rearranging their cans of pears.

What do we do? my brother said. I don't know, I said. My brother and I were older now. My brother was a bulky blackhaired bucktoothed adult who kept plastic glasses in his hair.

I was a bulky whitehaired bucktoothed adult who kept plastic glasses on his face. We liked tugging our earlobes. We'll take them with us, my brother said. We can't take them with us, I said.

We didn't live in our grandparents' house anymore—we lived in the stores. Once stores had been the size of neighborhoods, but now stores were the size of cities. Lightpoles lit the stores' avenues. Monorails hummed from station to station. Flags fluttered from the balconies of the stores' hotels. Others, now, were playing our game. We lived together, in the stores, never leaving, marking the change of the seasons by the changing decorations. When snowflakes and reindeer were hung from the stores' ceilings, Ramon Vilkitsky III and my brother celebrated their anniversary. Ramon Vilkitsky III and my brother had been married in the stores, in a sunny plaza, wearing the stores' tuxedos.

Once my brother and I were aboard one of the stores' yachts, where the yachts were sold, when an employee began shouting at us from the floor. We were wearing the stores' newest swimsuits, reading a pile of the stores' newest magazines. Hey, you, the employee shouted, his brownish hair trembling, his reddish beard bobbing with each of the words he shouted. Blink, my brother said. Blink, I said. Come down from there, the employee shouted. Onepiece swimsuits were fashionable that season. My brother's swimsuit was white with black stripes. My swimsuit was black with white stripes. We stood on the floor with the employee among the stores' yachts. The employee stared at our swimsuits. The employee was muttering something into his headset. The employee stopped muttering. We tugged our earlobes. I know you, the employee said. Do you remember me? the employee said. We lived together at the orphanage, the employee said. Blink, we said. Blink, blink, blink, we said. Henri? we said. Yes, it's me, I'm afraid, Henri said, and I'd like to say that I'm sorry, because once I stole something from you. I would have these visions, sometimes for days, sometimes for weeks, and once, between visions, I felt someone doing

something to my body, which wasn't unusual, because the others at the orphanage were often doing things to me—knotting my arms together, greasing my hair with butter, carrying me around from floor to floor—but when I peeked, it was you, both of you, putting something between my legs. And I felt like it was an offering, like you were my first followers, because in those days I dreamed of becoming a prophet, of starting a new religion, or a new sect of an old religion, or a new order of an old sect of an old religion, so while you and the others at the orphanage slept, I took the pencils, and I hid the pencils, and I prayed to them sometimes, but what happened was that later, after the visions had stopped, and wouldn't come, and wouldn't come, and my dreams of becoming a prophet had become nightmares of becoming a nobody, a nothing, a nameless commonplace employee, which is what I have become, but, anyway, what happened was that later, as I was eating cereal with the other orphans, spooning it into my mouth, feeling queasy, feeling depressed, obsessing over my nightmares, one of the other orphans found the pencils where I had hidden them, and the orphans began talking about you, the two of you, and how you had been looking for the pencils, but hadn't found them, and that's when I understood that it hadn't been an offering, what you had given me—understood that I had stolen your pencils from you. And then I felt even more queasy, and felt even more depressed, because I hadn't meant to steal from you, and I was sorry that I had, but I couldn't tell you that, because you didn't live at the orphanage anymore. But don't you think that's why my visions were taken from me? Because I had become dishonest? Because I had taken what wasn't mine?

Blink, we said.

So anyway I'm sorry, and although I carried the pencils with me for years and years, hoping to find you, I don't have the pencils anymore, they were lost in a fire, Henri said. My brother's hands were clenched into fists. My hands were tucked into my underarms.

Somewhere the stores' monorail was beeping. My brother and I brought Henri onto the yacht. We told Henri we had all of the pencils, now, that we could want. We told Henri it was better to be a nobody than a somebody. We asked Henri if he had ever seen either of us in his visions. Henri gripped the yacht's rail. Henri's wrists were marked with nicks and cuts. Henri's undereyes were puffy. Once, yes, one of the last visions I ever had, Henri said. I saw that one day you would become notorious revolutionaries—that you would be executed for treason, but that after your deaths the people would sing your names, would carry flags of your faces—that you would be remembered as much for your good as for your bad. And were we buried with our mother? we said. Yes, Henri said. And were you part of our revolution? we said. Yes, yes, yes, Henri said, I was carrying one of your flags. And my brother and I stood on the yacht with Henri and watched people moving through the stores: watched people carrying blankets into unzipped tents, where the stores' tents were sold; watched people emerging from the stores' bathrooms, wiping their faces with the stores' towels; watched people visiting the unsold hamsters, the unsold parrots; watched people kicking balls along the stores' avenues; watched people stepping into pairs of the stores' newest boots. And from where we stood it was impossible to tell the stores' shoppers from the stores' tenants. We almost could feel the stores' walls expanding. Could feel the world beyond them shrinking. Could feel it disappearing more and more.

About The Author

Matthew Baker is author of the story collection *Hybrid Creatures* and the children's novel *If You Find This*. He was born in Michigan.

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