

1.

His first idol was Andrew Jackson. He knew the vertical dart between the brows, the jutting chin, the narrow mouth; he knew the windblown coif that perched atop the great man's forehead like a bird's nest on a lonesome crag. Jackson's face was fixed in a somewhat neutral expression and T. spent long hours trying to decide if it suggested idle speculation or a slight annoyance.

Running his fingers over the faded gray lithograph he imagined the once-president, a moment before the portraitist captured his aspect, being taken aback by a gently unpleasant sight: a horse dropping slow, deliberate pats in front of a government building, for instance, or a manservant picking his nose. But his opinion of Jackson was not diminished by this vision; rather he admired the great man for his composure in the face of the trivial. No passing insult could compel him to emote.

Jackson's grave and finely etched countenance came to him in moments of anxiety and calmed his heart. And from Jackson he moved on to Hamilton, whose face was fraught with nobility and feminine grace despite a nose that was far from small. Hamilton had a homosexual way about him that lent an air of refinement to the ten-dollar bill. Jackson, on the more valuable twenty, nonetheless became a ruffian by comparison; Jackson was a more primitive version of the American statesman, a rudimentary model waiting to be superseded by gayer men with cleaner fingernails.

When he finally learned that Hamilton had, in fact, predeceased Jackson he was still not dissuaded in this. History often stumbled.

His allegiance to Hamilton lasted for several months. At times he found himself ranking the girls in his class on a scale of one to ten in terms of their resemblance to the former soldier of the Republic. None came close, he lamented; still he saw a trace of Hamilton's light eyes in the plump face of Becky Spivak and his well-turned mouth on Gina Grosz, a victim of rosacea.

He needed a trace of the venerable and the upright close to him, in the grainy and familiar everyday. If he could detect an edge of arrogant pride in a skinny girl at a swim meet, say, jiggling a bare foot in the bleachers as she stared coolly at the other swimmers, he was pleased; he was reminded of the potential for all shackled beasts to break from

their bonds and rise, their ragged wings beating, into the stratosphere. He clung to a vision of forward motion, the breath of hope that could lift individuals into posterity. He told himself every day of this latent capacity for eminence among humans, to the untrained eye so often hard to see. Rise, my sister! Rise, my brother! Soar.

Great institutions and the tall columns and white soaring domes that stood for them—these seemed to him the crowning achievement of his kind. Authority inspired him, resting along the eye-lines and in the closed mouths of the long-deceased statesmen. The bills themselves he preferred soft and worn, for when they were freshly pressed they seemed nearly counterfeit. He kept the proceeds from his paper route under his pillow and would touch them before he went to sleep and check for them first thing in the morning when he awoke, sliding a hand between the cool mattress and the weight of his head.

His mother knew the currency was sacrosanct and after she changed the sheets would replace the pile of bills with care precisely where she had found it. He was six when he started hiding the stash there at night, and at first there had been misunderstandings; once she left the cash on a bookshelf, open to the elements. Upon its discovery T. was horrified. The bills were naked as babes.

Their confrontation ended in bitter tears and his father was summoned.

“I get to keep it under there. I get to keep it right there! She tried to put it out there by itself! She can’t take it!”

“But honey,” said his mother, “I’m not trying...”

“Angela, let the boy keep his money wherever he likes.”

As a younger boy, when his allowance was a mere five a week—a single Lincoln, deformed giant with heavy brows and long ears, or five Washingtons with their sly sideways glance—he had a habit of secreting coins on his person, a thick and powerful quarter lodged under his tongue or discreet dimes tucked into the cheek pouches. He never swallowed and he never choked.

“Such a dirty habit,” said his mother regularly. “Do you realize how many strangers have touched those coins? Bacteria!”

He did not dignify this with a response.

Many times she tried to engage him in more serious discussions, for clearly his fascination with the coin of the realm struck her as unhealthy—though not, strictly speaking, un-American. Both she and his father had extolled the virtues of financial institutions since he first started sucking on nickels, but it was only around his eighth birthday,

during a brief early flirtation with Grover Cleveland, that he saw for the first time there might be a percentage in it for him.

She broached the subject in the kitchen, leaning across the table to inspect a stack of pennies beside his cereal bowl as he spooned up puffed wheat, then sitting back to cock her neat, honey-blond head and smile at him.

Beside her his father sat gazing absently out the window, twirling a toothpick between thumb and index finger.

“I just wonder, sweetie, why you feel the need to have the money with you all the time. On your *person*. I mean no one’s going to steal it from you, T., if you put it away somewhere. You could keep it all in a piggybank, or something.”

“A piggybank? Are you kidding me?”

“*What, T.?*”

“Talk about sitting ducks.”

“No one’s going to break in, T. We have a security system! So it’s just your father and me. Don’t you know you can trust us? Why would I steal from my own little boy?”

“It’s *money*,” said T.

“I would never steal from you, honey. Neither would your daddy.”

“That’s right, T. I’ve got way richer guys than you to steal from.”

T. fixed on his father a stern and unwavering eye.

“Just kidding, son.”

“How about this: your dad can open a savings account just for you, at the bank. How about that, T.? Your money will be perfectly safe there.”

“What if I put all my savings in the bank and a robber comes in?”

His father placed the toothpick carefully on the beige tabletop and reached over to grasp him firmly by the shoulder.

“Banks are insured against theft, buddy. It’s called the FDIC. So Bonnie and Clyde or not, you’re guaranteed to get your money back. The one damn thing the feds are good for, by God.”

“David! *Language.*”

His father rolled his eyes.

“Well...” He eyed them both sidelong. “Maybe if you put some in there for me and it doesn’t all get stolen? Then *maybe* I’ll put mine in too.”

They exchanged knowing glances that said: such sweet and see-through attempts at extortion! But they did not have the last laugh, for in subsequent weeks T. made several appearances at his mother’s book club meetings, hosted in the sitting room, where the ladies sipped

daintily at rose hip tea leaving their freshly bought copies of *Brideshead Revisited* uncracked upon the coffee table. When he was called upon to return a greeting from one of them—"Well T.! Aren't you a big man now!"—he would carefully, with a few gagging head pokes like a cat vomiting, open his mouth and rain a wet spew of coins into his cupped hands.

Soon afterward his father made a modest deposit in his name. The account grew steadily as he tucked away the proceeds from lemonade stands, pet-sitting assignments, driveway car washes, charity walkathons, and occasionally the lowball resale of items appropriated from neighbors or relatives who had incurred his displeasure. His father tolerated his commercial dealings; his mother was more suspicious.

"You told Mrs. Hitchens you were doing a March for Hunger," she said once. "She told me after Mass. She said she pledged twenty cents a mile."

"Hitchens, Hitchens..." he mused, stalling.

"It was either a March for Hunger or it wasn't."

"It was definitely a March for Hunger."

"She said you billed her for ten dollars. Fifty miles, T.?"

"It was over a period of several days."

"When did you walk fifty miles?"

"Over, you know. A period of several days. There was a bunch of us from school. We did laps on the track."

"Hmm."

"Well, we kind of counted gym class. For a couple of weeks. Double-tasking made it more efficient."

"I see. And how much money did you raise, T.?"

"Like a hundred forty."

"All of you, T.? Or just you?"

"Just me."

"For hunger, T.? Who's so hungry suddenly?"

"Children, Mom. OK? In Africa. Just for one example. What is this, now you don't like giving to the needy? You're supposed to be a Catholic!"

"So you're telling me that all one-hundred and forty dollars went to a group that helps starving children? That's what you're telling me?"

"All the funds went to children. Yes. They did."