

A U S T I N   S M I T H

## The Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

**O**N THE NINETEENTH SUNDAY in Ordinary Time, in Our Lady Consoler of Farmers in Black Earth, Illinois, in the lull during Mass when the wicker collection baskets were being reached down the pews on their long poles, and the aging choir was singing tremulously the hymn “O Jesus, I Have Promised,” and people were distractedly peering into their wallets and purses and watching sidelong to see what their neighbors were putting in, and Father Jeffries had closed his eyes as if to listen more deeply to the music but really to take a brief nap, while all this was going on, the Christ above the altar began to come alive. It was a boy who first noticed a finger move, then the hands beginning to clench into fists as if to hold the stakes driven through them, which began to gleam like hammered iron. The boy mumbled something and gestured, but his father, who was stingy when it came to church donations, which he believed went right into Father Jeffries’ sizable belly, and who had been thumbing through his wallet in search of something smaller than a ten, tapped the boy on the back of the head to shush him. But other children had begun to notice as well, along with an old woman in a wheelchair, who had suffered a stroke some months before and could say nothing, could only stare as the wooden statue, too poorly executed and sloppily painted ever to have elicited any religious feeling in her, became imbued with all the qualities of living, suffering flesh. By the time the last purse was clamped closed, the last wallet tucked away, the last basket withdrawn like a disappointing fishing catch, his head had begun to loll from side to side. The man who made known to the whole congregation what was happening above them was a dentist. He could only stand up and point as the priest shuffled forward to receive the gifts. Turning to see what the dentist was pointing at, the priest turned pale and stumbled backward down the altar steps, crossing himself vaguely. The globs of red paint that before had been like drops of cold wax on the

side of a candle began to run as blood now. From his crown of thorns—that had turned real too, the thorns bluer and sharper than the artist had cared to render them—and from his hands and feet and side dripped real blood. It fell onto the yellow carpet of the altar (later, despite best efforts at preservation, the stains would slowly fade and disappear). He was growing more animated, writhing and moving his lips, which were bitten and bleeding and chapped. Those in the first few pews heard him mumbling in a language they described later as beautiful and terrible. When experts later played recordings of Aramaic for these witnesses, they listened attentively but said it hadn't sounded like that at all. It sounded, they said, like the almost senseless language of a child crying out for mother. But there were few who had remained in the front pews. Most had retreated to the back of the church, still staring, but from a distance, as one might flee from and then, from a place of safety, look back at a wounded and dangerous animal. The priest was simply gone. Most assumed that he had gone to call the diocese or whomever to let them know that the Christ in Our Lady Consoler of Farmers had come to life, but it was learned later that he had locked himself in the parish house. Some concerned parishioners found him hours later, cowering in an upstairs closet. Slowly, before the eyes of the congregation, the statue completed its transubstantiation from wood into flesh. The wooden loincloth turned into a fragment of coarse, bloodstained linen. The wooden stakes became bright, burnished iron. But the cross, wood then and wood now, did not change, unless it turned a little greener, more splintery. As if to punctuate this transformation, he raised his head. His hair had become shorter but was still long enough to fall over his eyes, which were not blue but a rich brown, the pupils large and full of a light that seemed to have no outside source. If you have seen a picture of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux as a little girl, you will have some idea of what his eyes were like. In spite of his obvious pain, the eyes were calm, indifferent. He beheld them all without seeming to see them. By now the church was packed, as word had spread through the town and even nonchurchgoers left their Sunday lawn care to see the spectacle, though no one would come closer than halfway up the aisle. Though they were midwestern Catholics and not given to apocalyptic talk, many were praying and begging forgiveness for various sins, as if he might hear them and mentally check their names off, but he showed no sign of even noticing the crowd. The original statue had shown him in a moment of exhausted triumph, perhaps when he was harrowing hell, but before their eyes it had become an actual crucifixion, something most had tried and all had failed to truly imagine. They could see where the bones in his palms had shattered and splayed out through the bloody skin like strands of fiberglass. Purple entrails were visible along his side where he'd been cut. Most couldn't bear to look and turned away or went outside and blew big breaths and ran their hands through their hair. A bottle of whiskey appeared and was passed around like something medically necessary, people who didn't normally drink taking greedy, gulping pulls. Outside in the gravel lot that had long ago overflowed with cars, a small group had gathered. Of course

one man had taken charge and was talking loudly and convincingly about how something had to be done, though what it was he didn't say. Someone suggested they take him down from there, drive the stakes right back out of the wood and dress his wounds like he was any victim come stumbling into the town in need of assistance. But this was loudly objected to. What were they going to do, bring him to Pearl County Memorial Hospital? Medevac him to Monroe? Trying to lighten up what had become a very intense situation, someone asked what would happen if he didn't have health insurance. Another man shouted something about potential danger. How could they be certain this was Christ and not the devil? Had he done anything yet to convince them that he should be saved? What if he was like a trapped animal who, once let go, would terrorize the town? By this point, the crowd in the lot had grown larger than the crowd in the church, and Christ had more or less been left alone, though there were still a few, women mostly, who knelt near the rear of the church, weeping soundlessly and crossing themselves continuously. The kids had been driven out but kept slinking back to catch a peek, hitting and clawing each other for a better view. One rolled an old worm-eaten apple at the foot of the cross, as if to tempt him to come down. Meanwhile, the group outside was making little progress in coming to a decision. What had been a general discussion had broken off into little factions that argued one against another and threw up their hands. In frustration a man with a surprisingly high voice shouted out over all the commotion that pretty soon the Vatican and the media and the doomsday freaks would start showing up and, shortly after that, the army. The church would be cordoned off with police tape. No one would be allowed within a mile of it. So if they were were going to do something themselves they better do it now before the whole thing was taken out of their hands, and it was this comment that seemed to open the way for another man to say what so many apparently had been thinking. He said, in a quiet voice that grew increasingly stronger and more sure of itself, that he figured that most everyone present was either a farmer or a hunter or both, and therefore knew that whenever something is suffering, be it an old dog or a poorly shot deer, the merciful thing to do was to put it down. And because no one could deny that in that church a creature was suffering, he figured they ought to do the only decent thing, and here his voice trailed off under a general uproar, though whether people were screaming in assent or disbelief was difficult to tell. It was decided that a vote be taken: *yea* to take him down, *nay* to put him down. The nays were deafening. Almost immediately a man appeared with a thirty-aught-six. He must have had it in his truck. Now the question was, who was going to shoot him? Someone suggested the priest should do it, since he stood the best chance of coming out of it unmarred by sin, but he was nowhere to be found. And then, after a moment of total silence in which everyone present felt acutely their own cowardice and fear when it came to being the one to kill the son of God, the man whose idea it had been stepped forward and took the gun. The church filled again to watch. The man stood in the open doorway and took aim at him who stared

down the aisle directly at him, his brown eyes bright with love and understanding. The man (whose name I will not utter here, but who still lives in Black Earth and now has a street and a school named after him) would say later that Christ seemed to be giving him the permission and the strength to pull the trigger and put a bullet plumb in the center of his bloody forehead. At once his quickened limbs grew heavy, and he sank upon the stakes so that they groaned in the wood, and then all was silent, the gun smoke whirling blue out of the barrel's mouth like spirit. It was finished. They knew better than to cheer, though there were pats on the back and whispers of, "We had to. It was the only way. It was just he was suffering so." And then everyone filed out of the church and went to brunch.