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## The Fallen

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## **Abstract**

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Click, click," echoed the sound of the button in Sister Justine's hand, as she stood with her back to the altar facing the kneeling children. "One click means that you should rise with your hands together," she explained. "Two clicks means kneel and pray. Remember, Bishop Day will be here and everybody will be watching you. You want to show them how good the children of St. Ambrose are, don't you?"

## **Cover Page Footnote**

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# The Fallen

By Mark Lobene

"Click, click," echoed the sound of the button in Sister Justine's hand, as she stood with her back to the altar facing the kneeling children. "One click means that you should rise with your hands together," she explained. "Two clicks means kneel and pray. Remember, Bishop Day will be here and everybody will be watching you. You want to show them how good the children of St. Ambrose are, don't you?"

The children nodded in serious approval. This was the last practice before the day of their first Communion. Nervous, some whispered to each other while others simply sat before the altar mesmerized by the huge bronze crucifix mounted upon an ebony cross. The spikes driven into Christ's hands were tarnished silver contrast with the bronze patina. The crucifix was one of the few objects that remained from the old St. Ambrose which had burned down five years earlier. After that had happened, the priests had gone from door to door and received pledges towards building the new church. Some old residents spoke only Italian, yet they pledged as much as they could to Father O'Brien. When the church was rebuilt, Bishop Day had attended the dedication ceremony and the same crucifix that had looked on it all, was once more the center of attention.

"Let's go through it again, for the last

time. If you do it correctly," stated Sister Justine, "I will give you all a holy picture for your missals." The children's eyes widened and they went through the practice eagerly.

Michael skipped home, the wind blowing his dark hair back. He ran upstairs to his bedroom to change clothes and, while glancing out of his window to see who was playing baseball, placed the holy picture down next to his prayerbook.

"Michael, can you come down here for a minute?" his father called from the basement. Michael bounded down the stairs and found his father seated before a table covered with all sorts of things. "I've been sorting out the junk down here. I came across this old souvenir and wondered if you wanted it," he said. A small crucifix fashioned out of light-colored wood, a brass Christ was mounted on it. A crack ran along the middle of its torso, its sharp edges exposing the hollow body.

"It's broken. What happened to it?" Michael asked.

"Well," his father hesitated "it was given to me by a lady in France when I was over there during the war."

"You had a girlfriend there? I thought you always were with Mommy."

"No, no, it wasn't like that. She wasn't my girlfriend. Just some woman whose son was sick. I used to give her oranges for the boy. Remember Uncle Jack Wolf? You know, we went to see him last year."

"The one who sells candles like the ones he gave us?"

"Right. We were in the Army together then, and we both gave her our oranges. Her boy had dark hair, just like yours, except he was younger. She gave Uncle Jack and me a gift because she wanted to thank us for helping her."

"Did she give Uncle Jack a crucifix too?"

"No, uh, he got something else. I know it's broken, but I thought you might want it anyway. Otherwise, I'll throw it away."

"Oh no, don't throw it away." Michael held the crucifix in his hands. "I want it. I'll put it in my bedroom."

"Daddy, what happened in Germany in World War II?" asked Michael, looking through his social studies book.

"Is that what they teach you in the sixth grade? I didn't learn about World War I until eighth grade."

"Frank, it's the new way. That's why they hired Mr. Hawkins to come to Rochester," Mrs. Rossini commented. She stood at the sink peeling potatoes. She had dark hair and brown eyes like Michael.

"Aw, what do you Sicilians know about new ways?" he joked. "You still believe Palermo is the prettiest city in the world. I'll tell him about World War II. Don't worry, your son won't flunk." Michael's father explained the causes of the war to him, and told him that he had



seen Germany before he had left Europe. "I'll never forget it. I had just left France and still had your crucifix in my duffel bag. It must have been broken by one of the German porters who threw my bag on the train. I decided to keep it anyway, so now you have it."

"Time to eat," Michael's mother announced, "clear the table." They sat down to eat and Michael noticed that his father had become grayer.

In the sixth grade, he had begun studying the *New Testament* in religion class. His teacher, Mrs. Pasqua, had explained that sin is a state of mind, whether expressed in actions or not. Later, after class, Michael approached her. "Mrs. Pasqua, you said that if you think something and don't do it, it's still a sin?"

"If it's a bad thought," she answered. "Why?"

"Sometimes I get real mad at my parents and wish I could hit them. Sometimes they make me so angry."

"When that happens, you have to ask Jesus to help you understand your parents. Try to control your temper, because it's a sin to think evil thoughts."

Father McLoughlin was a tall man with curly brown hair and glasses, a Catholic evangelist who traveled the country conducting missions. He had not led an easy life, and the priest told

his life story as a lesson to the faithful. He preached to the children of the public schools in the afternoon, after their regular classes. "I want you to all make a pledge to say at least three Hail Marys and two Our Fathers each night before you go to sleep at night," he said. "Remember, that's a pledge to be kept after I leave here. Every night, kneel down and say your prayers for yourself, your family, and for me. I'll give a rosary to each of you who promise to do that."

The boys and girls crowded around his desk. The priest asked each of them if they were going to keep the promise, then handed them their rosaries.

"Father, I'm going to say six Hail Marys and six Our Fathers for the rest of my life, I promise," Michael declared.

"I'll be back next year," the priest smiled. "Come and tell me how you've done then."

Michael knelt before his bed underneath the crucifix his father had given him, as he had done every night for the past few months. After reciting the prayers he had promised Father McLoughlin, he said an Act of Contrition... "and I wished that my father were dead and," he intoned. He ran his fingernails down the side of his face from hairline to jaw, causing the blood to run in tiny rivulets on to his nails and face. "I'm sorry, I'm really sorry. I'll never get mad at my parents again. I'll never wish bad thoughts about Sue again. Please

forgive me," he whispered, as he leaned upon the scarlet bedspread. By morning scabs had formed and Michael reached up to touch them, savoring their significance.

"What happened to your face?" his father inquired.

"I fell into the bushes playing football."

"Try and be more careful so you don't get hurt."

"I've got to stop drawing blood," Michael thought. Sometimes I feel like I'm wearing a crown of thorns."

Michael spotted Tony in front of the high school. "Hi, what's happening?" he shouted. Tony just nodded and kept on walking. What's eating him, Michael thought. Just because I've got some new friends doesn't mean we can't still be friends. I haven't changed that much, he thought, as he felt his upper lip for the first hairs of a moustache. Then he felt the sides of his face. "I'm lucky I don't have scars," he mumbled. "How stupid I was!"

When Michael entered the house after school, the evening paper was on the counter. The headlines read *Nixon Bombs Cambodia*. Underneath was a picture of a child running from his burning house, his mother aflame behind him. "They're still bombing children. What kind of a war is this?"

"Who said a war is nice? You've got a lot to learn," his father declared looking up from *Newsweek*.

# My Suit, My Life

By Bob Muhnckel

1  
So there is no place safe  
from this sharp-edged  
pebble resting behind my eyes.  
What then?

If I could, I would  
bring suit against my life,  
and trail behind the lawyers  
into court; my life handcuffed  
to the bailiff who  
stands around waiting to begin.

2  
By afternoon proceedings  
are in disarray. My life stands,  
shouting that I  
should be convicted for having

lived it; I plead not guilty,  
claiming this suit as my first  
attempt to live my life.

"I have never lived you before!  
Always some pale stranger  
walked in front of me, creating my life;  
before I could catch up,  
I was one step behind."

The court, never  
having had this sort  
of thing done before,  
waits and watches while  
yellow dogs in from the street,  
run yelping at justice, scattering  
papers, briefcases and spectators  
high in the air.

"I wouldn't bomb innocent people."

"The only innocent are the dead," his father stated.

"What kind of a God would let such things happen?"

"I said the same thing when I was young. When you're old like me, you'll understand."

"I'll never understand," Michael said. He glanced at the article about the tortures used on the Vietnamese. Shaking his head, he went upstairs to his room. The crucifix was still on the wall, but Michael had hung an *End the War Now* poster next to it.

"Haven't you seen the photos of the children burning alive? We drop napalm on people!" he shouted to his geometry teacher, Mr. Vaca.

"So what are you going to do, go to Canada?" Mr. Vaca shouted back.

Michael had seen *Life* pictures of the tiger cages and the burned bodies in the hospitals. Mrs. Von Zychler made a collage of them and posted it on her bulletin board. She taught Western civilization during third period where they spent several days discussing atheism in class. "The gods can either take away evil from the world and will not, or being willing to do so cannot; or they

neither can nor will, or lastly, they are both willing and able. If they have the will to remove evil and cannot, then they are not omnipotent. If they can but will not, then they are not benevolent. If they are neither willing nor able, then they are neither benevolent nor omnipotent. Lastly, if they are both willing and able to annihilate evil, how does it exist?" Miss Von Zychler read from Epicurus. "Your assignment for next week is to write a four-page critique of this statement."

"Why is it a sin to think of sex?" he asked Jeff.

"Because the Church doesn't want anyone to have any fun," Jeff responded. "I've never understood how you can still believe in that stuff. Face it! Everyone does what he wants and usually gets away with it."

"I'm sick and tired of feeling guilty every time I look at a girl. Anything to do with sex is a sin. That's all the priests talk about."

"Yeah, then after bombing children Nixon has an audience with the Pope," answered Jeff.

"You boys will have to be quieter or leave," the librarian warned. They turned back to their reading.

Spring arrived and Michael stopped going to church regularly. The war continued and Michael continued to talk and read as much as he could about the Vietnam war and, most of all, the anti-war protesters here. He lay in his room thinking, then went downstairs to get the mail. He raced upstairs with the latest *Newsweek* in hand. Vietnam, again, he thought. The magazine had photos of the burned, maimed children in Saigon hospitals. "15,000! 15,000 children burned!" he screamed. He looked upward at the crucifix.

"No more. No more killing. What kind of a God are you?" he demanded as he fell to his knees. I'm not guilty. I'm not. No more wars. No God would let people suffer like this," he sobbed into his pillow, "because there is no God."

After dinner, Michael climbed slowly to his room. He gazed at the crucifix upon the wall.

"No more," he whispered as he reached up, "it's over." Holding the crucifix in his hand, he felt the crack more than he had ever felt it before. He walked down to the basement and there, in the large cardboard box which contained the other momentos of his childhood, he placed the crucifix.