

## IAN WING

*Kitty in the Yard*, 2017  
Watercolor and gouache, 6 x 6 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## MARILYN MARTIN

# The Scapular

A childhood object  
becomes a talisman

In my third-grade class picture, I am smiling, my dark hair swept up in a barrette. In the background, posters of Richard Nixon and John Kennedy are stapled to the bulletin board below the words “Who will be the next president?” In my best dress with its crisp Peter Pan collar, I blend in so well with the other kids that even eagle-eyed Debbie Hahn, who taps me on the shoulder, has no idea what’s under my picture-day finery.

“Your slip strap is showing,” Debbie whispers, seconds before the photographer snaps the shot.

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When I look at that grade-school picture, I, now a middle-aged, agnostic woman, can only shake my head in disbelief. Was I ever this child who refused to go anywhere without her scapular? Because what Debbie Hahn imagined was my slip strap was really a ribbon attached to a Catholic devotional item I wore nonstop between the ages of nine and thirteen.

No one in my family would have encouraged the wearing of one. Certainly not my nonbelieving, scientist father who didn’t even come from a Catholic background and whose typical response to most theological mysteries was “what a lot of crap.” Nor from my Catholic mother, who dragged me to Sunday Mass but discouraged what she called my “Sarah Bernhardt tendencies.”

Most likely a white ribbon scapular was among the religious paraphernalia—snow-white gloves, white rosary, white missal, housed in a white patent leather purse—awarded by the nun who prepared us public school Catholics for confirmation. My first scapular, I do recall, consisted of a pair of one-by-two-inch laminated paper rectangles adorned with somber religious images of the Virgin Mary and held together by a couple of narrow white ribbons. In theory, the ribbons were supposed to rest snugly on your shoulders to allow the first rectangle to nestle in the vicinity of your heart, while the other rectangle dropped down to the middle of your back. In my case, I was so tiny the ribbons were forever falling out of my sleeves while the front rectangle dangled below my belly button and the rear one flapped against my sacrum. I didn’t care.

“If you die wearing this scapular,” the nun said, unwrapping the cellophane package and unfurling the scapular’s