

## 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

ribbons for the class to see, “you’ll go straight to heaven, no questions asked.”

That seemed unlikely. The nun made it sound as if a scapular were the spiritual equivalent of a Monopoly “Get out of jail free” card, and I’d be let in even if I had lied and stolen to my heart’s content. Why would God set the bar so low?

Besides, even as a child, I wasn’t positive heaven existed, and if it did, I wasn’t sure I wanted to go to there, a boring place if Christmas cards were to be believed, where angels sat on clouds and plucked harps. Still, what did I have to lose? A scapular offered me a way to hedge my bets. An insurance policy complete with the opportunity to see my mom in the hereafter and, possibly, for me to convince God to let my never-baptized father in as well.

Yet if an eternal afterlife were all my scapular offered, I probably would’ve lost interest. There were other reasons why it got my attention. Death was far off, and plenty more scary things were happening in the here and now. For a child like me, who could transform herself into a galloping horse, it didn’t take much for me to convince myself a talisman with the power to get me into heaven couldn’t hurt here on earth.

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By day, I was the oldest sister of three, soon to be four, my mother’s “first born,” the carefree kid who raced to Lagatelli’s general store after school to stock up on Bazooka Bubble Gum and wax candy lips, and then rushed home to lick cake batter from my mother’s Mixmaster beaters and play hopscotch and jump rope with my friends. But the instant I crawled into bed, I was transformed into a frenzied creature careening down a rabbit hole of terror. My mother said I was afraid of the dark, but that didn’t capture half of it. No sooner had she switched off the light than the blackness tripped a mental switch in my brain. I lost all sense of proportion as snippets of overheard conversation or recently viewed TV episodes became fodder for obsessive nighttime thoughts and nightmares.

It worked like this: I’d be on the landing after school, listening to my mother on the phone.

“Did you see that article in the *Journal News* about that boy who swallowed his tongue?” I overheard her say. “I didn’t think such a thing possible.”

Later, after my mom had kissed me good night, the tongue-swallowing boy came back to haunt me. For the next several months, I’d lie in bed, convinced if I fell asleep, I’d swallow mine. I could only get the notion out of my head if I went downstairs and crawled into bed with my parents.

There was a Gregor Samsa quality to the anecdotes that fed my obsessions. Most involved a child protagonist threatened with death or a debilitating physical transformation. Once, it was a *Little Rascals* episode where a bad guy tied Spanky to a log and threatened to cut off his head with a buzz saw. Another time, it was my father’s story about a girl who was blinded after a cobra spit poison into her eye during a snake-charming show at Radio City Music Hall. The year I turned eleven, I became obsessed with disfiguration. What if my face froze like my mom’s bridge partner’s or all my hair fell out like my Canadian uncle’s had back in Alberta? The encyclopedia confirmed Bell’s palsy and alopecia were real conditions, and could my scapular save me from horrors like these?

My mother knew little about my fears. I shared few details. I knew what I dreaded was totally irrational. Comic even. For one three-month period, I was afraid someone would hypnotize me if I let myself fall asleep. But then, the cold reptilian terror of nightmares rarely translates into words. You have to be there exiled in the dark, heart pounding, toughing it out until you can bear it no more.

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By the time fifth grade rolled around, my scapular was filthy.

“Those strings are practically black,” my mother said, eyeing the grungy ribbons drooping from my sleeves. “You should let me wash it. People are going to think you don’t change your underwear, and you’re not going to die while it’s in the washing machine.”

My mother had a point. Just yesterday, on the cafeteria line, Debbie Hahn had stared at a wayward ribbon. But I wasn’t sure about the not dying part. The whole deal with a scapular was you were supposed to keep it on, and for the past year and a half, I’d worn it even in the bathtub. Removing it now felt like tempting God to strike me dead while my scapular was whirling around in spin

cycle. Weirder stuff had happened. Boys had swallowed their tongues.

“Please,” my mother reached out her hand, her green eyes imploring me.

I handed over my scapular, and after I watched it disappear into the maw of the machine, I stood there with my hand on the vibrating lid.

“Here it is,” my mother said, a half hour later, dumping a pile of damp clothes on top of the machine and untangling my scapular’s ribbons from a pair of my father’s underpants.

A few weeks later, my whole family was eating dinner around the kitchen table.

“I have an idea for a present you might want for Christmas,” my mother said, while she cut my one-year-old brother’s pork chop into tiny pieces. “There’s a different kind of scapular with a medal on a chain. It won’t get dirty; it’s cheap, too, so it would make a good stocking stuffer. What do you think?”

“But how do you know the new kind works?”

I saw my mother and father exchange glances.

“It’s been church sanctioned since the turn of the century,” my mother answered. “Dad could drive you over to the religious store in Paramus.”

My mother must have been worried about more than hygiene if she’d convinced my dad to drive me to a religious store. It couldn’t have been easy. Recently, my father had offered to isolate a consecrated communion host back in his lab to prove to me it couldn’t contain any traces of flesh or blood. I took a pass on that offer, but the following Saturday found him chauffeuring my mom and me across the New York line to the Garden State Mall in New Jersey. In the 1960s, small shops with Catholic religious paraphernalia, the twentieth-century version of Chaucer’s Pardoner, were sandwiched in among all the Gimbels, Sears, and Robert Hall stores in suburban shopping centers. While my mother and I rooted through the merchandise, my father paced outside on the sidewalk, sneaking glances through the plate-glass window.

My new scapular etched with an image of a huge beating heart in the middle of Christ’s chest proved to be an upgrade, but every couple of months, the clasp that secured the oval medal to the chain wore down. When that happened, I panicked my scapular might fall apart,

so my dad had to drive me back to the religious store for a replacement. Eventually, he even ventured inside, and I’d see him moving up the aisles staring into the bins of holy cards, religious medals, and piles of rosaries while I paid at the cash register.

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Every night, I vowed to let my mother sleep, and every morning, I was ashamed I couldn’t do it. Not to bother her was my most fervent wish. Sometimes, I toughed it out until 3:00 a.m. before the fear of swallowing my tongue or having my head cut off by a runaway buzz saw grew impossible to bear. When that moment of no return arrived, as it always did around 12:00, 1:00, or 2:00 a.m., I crept downstairs and crawled into my parents’ bed.

The problem was my parents’ double bed was too narrow for the three of us, which meant my mother had to go upstairs and sleep in my room whenever I arrived on the scene. This nightly game of musical beds had been going on ever since I learned to crawl out of my crib, and by the time I got my new scapular, my mother was running out of patience.

On the night everything changed, I was lying upstairs in my bedroom petrified. I wasn’t crazy. I knew my fears were ridiculous, but that didn’t change anything. What I perceived might not be real, but like those illusionary highway mirages that pop up on extended car trips, there they were glistening on the blacktop anyway. Tonight, the image that kept unspooling before me was Vincent Price in the horror movie *The Fly*, emerging from his atom-scrambling machine as an insect with a tiny human head. I knew I’d be fine if I could make it until morning, but dawn was hours away, and in the meantime, the only way to turn off my mental atom-scrambling machine was to lie down next to another human being.

I got up. Our one-and-a-half-story house was small for five people, but it felt like a mansion as I waded through the darkness. Down the stairs I crept, sliding my hand along the pine banister. It was so quiet I heard the swish of my nightgown against my ankles. I hurried through the living room and turned down a short hall. I paused for a minute outside my parents’ bedroom, listening to my father’s measured breathing. Then I plunged in, lifting the covers on my mother’s side as I tried to melt into

the tiny space between her body and the perimeter of the mattress.

My mother woke up immediately.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. As if she didn’t know.

My father rolled over and covered his head with a pillow.

“I’m scared,” I said.

“What are you afraid of now?”

My mother’s hair was ringed with a halo of pink sponge curlers, and there was an edge to her voice I’d never heard before.

“I’m afraid I’m going to turn into a fly,” I whispered.

“For heaven’s sake,” my mother said. She pulled herself up to half sitting, her head propped up on the headboard. “You saw that movie ages ago. How can you still be thinking about it?”

My mother was talking too loudly as if she didn’t care if my brother in the next room woke up, and once again, I felt ashamed of what a pain in the neck I’d turned out to be.

“If this craziness doesn’t stop,” my mother said, enunciating every word like a drumbeat, “I’m going to have to take you to a psychiatrist.”

Then she got out of bed and swept out of the room, leaving behind the scent of Pond’s Cold Cream.

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After school the following afternoon, I made a beeline for *Dr. Spock’s Baby and Child Care*. Dr. Spock had been my go-to expert ever since I’d learned to read. I really didn’t know what a psychiatrist was. I’d only seen them depicted in cartoons where a bearded German-accented man barked out furious commands like the worst kind of gym teacher to a poor soul lying on a couch. On the rare occasion I’d overheard grownups discussing the topic, they didn’t mince words, peppering their exchanges with the harsh, judgmental 1960s parlance: *headshrinker*, *crazy person*, *lunatic*, *nutcase*, *off your rocker*, *stark raving mad*, and *ready for the loony bin*. Back then, mental illness carried such a stigma that being taken to a psychiatrist sounded like the opening act for a life of drooling in a padded cell.

My mother had no idea how much she upset me. I can see now that what she said was just one of those empty threats parents toss out in the heat of the moment and then promptly forget. Here I was on the cusp of puberty, and my

one-year-old brother was still getting up for a bottle. She probably figured she’d never get a good night’s sleep again. Even more, my obsessive behavior must have worried her, and she had no idea what to do.

If my mom wouldn’t help me, I hoped Dr. Spock might. He was whom I turned to when Sandra Conklin showed up in fifth grade with breasts or a girl in my class mentioned that people with different religions shouldn’t get married. I trusted him completely. Today, though, as I paged through the book’s “Getting Help” section, Dr. Spock wasn’t his usual jaunty “you know more than you think you do” self. He seemed to imply a psychiatrist could be the doctor of choice for some children, and perhaps these kids weren’t that different from me. I read until the letters on the page blurred together, and then I returned the book to the shelf.

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So the months of relentless terror kept on. My mother’s words seared. I was mortified. More unsettling than the threat I might require a psychiatrist was the realization I could no longer wake her. I was no better than a baby or a pest, and I vowed never to bother her again.

Perhaps my mother did me a favor by cutting me adrift, but I felt abandoned. How was I to get through the night all by myself? Down the stairs I crept to use the bathroom, to get a drink, to walk three times around the dining room table. Anything to avoid lying in bed in the dark. Mostly, it was a lonely vigil. Once, I passed my sleepwalking sister on the landing, and another time, my dad, on his own nighttime errand. As we passed one another, he whispered, “Wee Willie Winkie runs through the town, / Upstairs and downstairs in his nightgown.”

Often, I paused at the threshold of my parents’ bedroom to watch my mom breathe and sleep. Then it was back upstairs to wait for the cobra to strike until I fell asleep for an hour or two only to be jerked awake by the force of my fist wedged under my chin, a surefire method I had devised to deflect buzz saws. I looked out the window, nervously sliding my scapular’s medal back and forth across its chain. I read *David Copperfield*. I slept some more.

A few weeks into my new nocturnal routine, I hatched what I believed provided a watertight litmus test for insanity. Almost all kids, I reasoned, were afraid of the dark, so

someone like me couldn’t be crazy if the only time she was terrified was in the night. However, it would be a bad sign if my obsessions ever bled into my daytime life—if say, I couldn’t concentrate on a work sheet in math class because I was consumed with being sucked into quicksand like a cow in a story I’d read. Since nothing like that had ever happened, I figured I was in the clear.

One morning, Mr. Hall, the other fifth-grade teacher, stopped me in the hall.

“Don’t you ever sleep?” he asked in a barking voice. “You’ve got black circles under your eyes.”

Maybe I was exhausted, but at least I wasn’t crazy.

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My new scapular had proved so unassuming, I forgot about being unmasked. Every day before school, I tucked the chain into my shirt, but inevitably, it worked its way out. Still, there were so many gold crosses or stars of David around the necks of other girls, no one gave it a second glance. Even Debbie Hahn didn’t question me about the religious iconography on the oval medal. I became complacent.

On the final class of my fifth-grade gymnastics unit, my body seized the instant I walked into PE. I was hopeless at tumbling, and the sight of several classmates laying down tumbling mats along the entire length of the gym floor made my palms sweat and my stomach rumble. When they finished, the young, pretty gym teacher blew her whistle.

“Line up everybody.” The teacher clapped her hands as thirty kids scrambled to form a scraggily single-file queue.

After the bodies had settled, I was heartened to find myself smack in the middle. Whatever the teacher had in mind was bound to be embarrassing, so it was best to go neither first nor last.

“What I want,” the teacher announced after she’d sounded her whistle several more times, “is for each of you to carry out a series of forward rolls starting at one end of the gym and finishing down at the other.”

I gazed down the sea of mats that stretched from one basketball hoop to the other. Even a single somersault was a reach for me.

“Remember your safety rules,” the teacher continued. “Keep at least three feet between you and the student in

front of you. Also, just for today, you girls who are wearing necklaces please take them off, and hand them to me. I promise I’ll keep them safe.”

My hand involuntarily reached for my heart. All around me, girls like Diane Schuck and Debbie Hahn unfastened their 14-karat gold crosses, heart charms, and birthstones. I considered ducking into the hall and hanging out in the girls’ room, but too many kids were clustered by the exit. What was I going to do? If I kept my scapular on, the teacher would notice and confiscate it the minute I turned upside down. If I took it off, I’d break its spell and who knew what grisly death God might have planned for me out there on the tumbling mats.

I got out of line and stood next to the gym teacher.

“I can’t take off my necklace,” I told her just as the first kids somersaulted down the length of the mats.

“Why not?” she asked, glancing down at the tangle of crosses, hearts and gems draped across her hand. “It’s for your own safety, and you’ll only have to take it off for a minute or two.”

“It’s against my religion,” I said softly. I could feel my face flush beet red.

“I’m not sure I understand,” she answered.

By now, the room was quiet. Everyone stared at me, and I imagined my mother urging me: Please don’t make a Sarah Bernhardt spectacle.

I sank to my knees.

“I can’t take it off,” I said, looking imploringly up at the teacher. “If I die without this necklace on, I might not go to heaven.”

The gym teacher stared at me, her eyes round with wonder. Then, two boys at the rear of the line started wrestling. She waved her free hand and said, “Well, if it’s that important, I guess you can keep it on.”

Back in class, I expected weeks of teasing, but instead, I was proclaimed a champion for religious freedom. On my way to the girls’ room, I overheard a boy in the hallway defending me.

“Well, what was she supposed to do?” he said to his friend, “I mean if it’s part of her religion.”

If he only knew how little religious conviction had to do with it.

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My life settled into a familiar trajectory. Lucid days. Fearful nights. Like a baby who'd refused to sleep through the night, I'd been left to cry it out, and howl I did. It felt like a harsh fate, but what choice did I have? Too proud to bother my mother, I couldn't risk being dragged to a psychiatrist. Eventually, exhaustion won out, and to my delight, my fears quieted down. I began to sleep for longer stretches until one morning, my mother had to shake me awake.

I was no longer the same. I was changing. Dr. Spock agreed. After school, I pored over his chapter on puberty. I wasn't really one girl, he seemed to be saying, but a series of evolving girls that nested inside me like a collection of Russian dolls, and I could feel a new one bursting out.

When I'd first put on the scapular, I was the girl in the third-grade picture who half believed she could be transformed into a fly. Children have so little control over their lives. Perhaps my devotion to my scapular had been an attempt to gain power over the terrors of life and death. Now, I was growing into a cynical teenager who didn't believe in magic. New preoccupations absorbed me, like thinking about boys and sex and my appearance. I spent a lot of time in my room staring in the mirror, and after school, I read Dr. Spock's section on adolescence to make sure I was developing normally.

There was no definitive Sarah Bernhardt moment when I stopped wearing my scapular forever. Giving it up turned out to be surprisingly anticlimactic. Right after I started sleeping through the night, I left it for longer periods on my nightstand or on the edge of the bathtub after I washed my hair. I wasn't nervous at all. If anything, I felt relieved as if I were laying down a great burden.

My mother must have noticed what was going on, and my father had to have been overjoyed when his trips to the religious store came to an end. But neither of them ever again mentioned my necklace or taking me to a psychiatrist. Eventually, I lost track of my scapular completely.

One Saturday in high school, I was cleaning out my jewelry box when I felt something solid lodged deep in the velvet lining. What could it be, I wondered, as I worked my index finger into the frayed seam and pulled out a grimy object attached to a tarnished chain. At first, I didn't recognize the significance of the necklace spread out in my palm. When I realized it was my scapular, I felt lucky. How often does a lost object return to you?

"Hey, do you remember this?" I asked, passing the scapular to my mother after she came into my room with a pile of clean laundry.

My mother put the clothes on my bed, dangled the scapular from her thumb and forefinger, and swung the chain back and forth.

"You know you never needed this old thing," she laughed. "You come from long-lived people; you'll probably live forever."

It was my fervent hope, but I knew my mother was lying. What she was saying was one of those soothing platitudes adults offer up.

My mother continued to swing the chain back and forth like she was pretending to hypnotize me. Wasn't a fear of being hypnotized one of my obsessive terrors back in my scapular-wearing days? Maybe my scapular looked like a prize from a Cracker Jack box, but I'd once worn it next to my heart.

**Marilyn Martin's** previous work has appeared in *Third Coast*, *Gulf Coast*, *Chautauqua*, *New Madrid*, *Southern Indiana Review*, and elsewhere. One of her pieces was named a Notable Essay in *Best American Essays 2016*.

## IAN WING

*Riverbed at Nisene Marks, 2017*  
Watercolor and gouache, 4.5 x 4.5 in



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