

Relics

by Lori Romero

Theresa Esposito woke to the smell of pignoli cookies baking. The sweet scent made her stomach rumble. She was ten-years-old today. And she felt ten. Her hair, her ears, her eyes, her toes -- everything felt ten. Theresa went to the door frame and stood next to the pencil slash that marked her nine-year-old height. She was certain her mom would draw a new mark high above the old one.

Theresa knelt quickly and said her prayers. God bless Grandpa Joe, Grandma Rosella, Mom, and Maria... She prayed to St. Anne and St. Jude that her mom had remembered the red 8-speed bicycle she pointed out every time they passed the hardware store window.

In the kitchen, two cookies sat on the plate her uncle brought back from Rome. The cookies hid Pope Paul's face, but she could still see the gold crucifix in his raised hand. Next to the plate was a package with a bright red bow. Her head hurt, like the nine-year-old Theresa was trying to crawl back inside. Her mom wouldn't be able to buy two gifts, so this was it. No bike.

She opened the wrapping and the box, and pulled out a pair of pajamas. They had ugly flowers and felt scratchy, and were a size too big so she could grow into them. They smelled like the coat her grandma wore to Church.

In the box was something else. "A scapular," her mom said, "blessed by the Pope himself, can you believe that?" Two thick squares of woven wool were connected by a brown ribbon. She showed Theresa the correct way to wear it under her clothes: the front piece rested on her chest, while the other hung down her back. One side of one of the woolen segments was embroidered with the words, * * *Whoever dies wearing this scapular shall not suffer eternal fire.* * * Her mom took her hand, "It's special, Theresa, because inside are the bones of saints."

As soon as she could get away, Theresa flew to the backyard shed with her mother's pinking shears. The other kids might have bikes, but she held the bones of saints in her hand.

She wondered what saints' bones looked like — did they glow in the dark like the stars on her sister's bedroom ceiling? She was sure they were as white as her Easter shoes.

The small size of the squares troubled her. They were about one index finger tall and about one pinky finger length across. How could something this small hold bones? Maybe the bones were like the dinosaurs her father brought with him on one of his few visits. When soaked in water, the tiny dinosaurs grew to ten times their original size. She filled a watering can just in case.

The pinking shears bit into the wool, leaving tiny ant-like shavings on the ground. A piece of wax fell out of the opening. Theresa searched the inside of the scapular for the saints' bones. She even turned the cloth inside out, to no avail. She got down on her hands and knees, and examined the ground in case they fell out with the wax. Nothing. She carefully studied the wax — it was the same pale, lusterless kind used for the candles in Church. Maybe the bones were inside the wax. She scratched the wax with her fingernail. Finally, in tears, Theresa broke the wax in half.

As the wind clicked the shed door back and forth, sounding like a baseball card stuck between the spokes of a wheel, Theresa wished she was far away, wished she was seven or eight instead of ten. She placed the broken wax back in the cloth pocket and, with a needle and thread taken from her mom's dresser, sewed the scapular closed — leaving a small, jagged scar no one would ever see.

