

## **REFLECTION**

### **Broken Beads**

**By Guillermo de Carndonagh**

In a valley bound coal town the air hazy with the fumes and smoke of the smothering culm. The man sat by the window in the late evening sun. In his hands were a small tool, the end of a coil of jeweler's wire and a string of broken beads. A grimace crossed his face as he struggled to coil the wire in just the right way. Hands old and knurled no longer obeyed as they had when he was young. He learned to repair the beads as a young man, as he worked to fix this string he remembered.

The two young veteran's faces and wrists still black from their third shift trick in the foundry stood in the back of the church looking for the aunts they had stopped to give a ride. A loose conspiracy of cousins, uncles and brothers insured that most mornings these women did not have to walk home from morning Mass. They had just pulled up out side and raced up the fifty steps, afraid that they were late. As their eyes adjusted to the gloom they could see the two ladies in shawls kneeling with their rosaries on the left side of the church. The new young priest was finishing the Mass with some slapdash movements that annoyed both veterans even though they were not particularly devout.

Then something strange, the priest came down from the altar heading for the women, as the two veterans strode down the aisle towards the group. The priest grabbed the women's rosaries braking them in the process and talking in a loud voice. Immediately he found himself grabbed under the arms and carried up the aisle and out the front door of the church to the lip of the porch. There, he was given two options; he wisely selected the least dramatic and least dangerous and reentered the church to apologize to the shocked and silent women.

The ride home was unaccustomedly silent and uninterrupted. No stops were made at this bakery or that delicatessen, nor was there any soft chatter in the dialect of Calabria from the back seat. Instead of being sent off to wash, while food was prepared, the veterans were left to fend for themselves in the kitchen. The two ladies went into the front room and sat down, first silently, but after a time they began keening in the manner of a wake. Before the veterans could decide what to do, the diminutive monsignor walked in the door and went straight to the front of the house where the wailing ceased, replaced by a muffled conversation in dialect. In a short time the cleric emerged with the broken rosaries and told them to take the broken beads to the jeweler down the block and to send him the bill.

Still filled with the energy of their anger and glad to be free of the emotion charged atmosphere of the house they ran down the alley to the back door of the shop. It was too early for the shop to be open, but they knew the old man came early and worked in the back room. The craftsman responded to their banging on the door and recognizing them let them in, asking what could be so important so early in the day. Their words fell out in angry spurts, liberally decorated with blasphemies and obscenities in four languages. The old craftsman pushed his yarmulke back with his hand and led them into the workroom. As they cooled a little, he took a tool and some wire and showed them how to make a loop and turn. Then he sat them down and under his supervision they repaired the broken beads. When they asked him for a bill he told them; "I am an old man who will soon have to face Adonai, I would not dare to charge for the repair of something holy to him." The old craftsman then said to them that they diminished the righteousness of their anger by their blasphemy.

After this incident the two veterans stopped attending Mass but oddly, regularly spent time fixing some relatives broken rosary or medal using tools and materials the old jeweler obtained for them. A few years later, when the two old women died, within a week of each other, the two veterans were given their rosaries, being told by an elder daughter that, that had been their wish.

The rosary sat unused on the man's dresser for many years until one night he could not sleep, and absently picked it up, and slowly the old prayers came, and then the tears and the healing began. Since that long night the beads have seen constant use and both they and the man have had a few repairs. He goes to Mass again, not in the renewed neighborhood church of the confrontation, but across town where the Mass of his youth is offered and he can pray his beads in peace. Where he can pray in peace, on beads that the prayerful of his family have used for over one hundred years.