Tekakwitha, The Native Saint

We don't know much about the boy. Maybe he was everyone else's last choice. Could be. Not much of a warrior, maybe his parents set him up with this girl, or there'd never have been a marriage at all.

The girl wore some scars from the smallpox that rampaged through her village. Her Huron father and Mohawk mother both died, as did a host of others. The truth?--the girl, Tekakwitha, was forever sickly thereafter. She couldn't have been a doll, but her adoptive father was the village headman.

Truth is, no one knows about the boy her adoptive parents wanted her to marry, but lots of people know lots about Tekakwitha, in part because she refused to marry the kid, whoever he was. Flat refused. She was only seventeen, but her age was no big deal because other Mohawk girls quite regularly got married even younger. Her parents were distraught and angry when she wouldn't give the kid the corn stew traditionally considered her consent to the marriage. Wouldn't feed him because she wasn't going to marry him. She was not going to marry anyone. Period. Full stop.

Gutsy, even a little feminist for a 17th century Native American in the wild forests of New York. But in refusing the poor kid's hand, she also determined she would be, thereafter, a Roman Catholic, and listen to the teachings of the Black Robes. Her birth mother had been Catholic before her, but within the longhouse where she lived, her Christianity didn't go over well.

No matter. What Tekakwitha lacked in strength she made up for in resolve, eventually leaving her village for a convent outside of Montreal, along with other Native women scorned for taking on the faith of white men in black robes.

She was baptized on Easter Sunday, 1676, and, thereafter, in a typical white man's way, given a far less Native name--Catharine. People claim she was known to sleep on thorns and deliberately taint her food to make it taste horrible, self-mortification rituals as much medieval Catholic as traditionally Mohican.
She'd been sickly for her entire life, often wore a blanket over her head to cover the smallpox scars. Just four years after her baptism, she died. Those attending her death--and this is important--claimed that as her spirit rose, those thick scars across her face vanished in the radiance of her spirit’s rising to eternity.

What on earth has all of this has to do with Siouxland?

Listen. There are good reasons to go to Marty, South Dakota, the Yankton Reservation. There's the gorgeous Missouri valley stepladder on your way, and the historic town of Greenwood, with its old Presbyterian church. There's a hilltop treaty monument, and, somewhere hovering over the place, the ghost of the Headman Struck by the Ree, who as a newborn, people say, was held by Lewis and Clark, who wrapped him in an American flag when the Corps of Discovery camped right there on the river.

By all means, stop at St. Paul's Church in Marty--you can't miss it. When you walk around the grounds, stop at the statue of the Indian girl with an unpronounceable name. You can call her Catharine, if that's easier. Step inside the church. Two more likenesses grace the gorgeous old cathedral.

You don't have to be Catholic. Maybe it helps a little, but this young woman is worth noting, the first and only, Vatican-declared Native American woman saint.

Call it a road trip. Call it a pilgrimage. Whether you believe any of her story is up to you. But if you get out to Marty sometime, promise me you'll stand there for a while, inside or out, and look into the girl's clean and beautified face.

It surely promises a blessing.