

Tempurpedia

The first time he tried to strangle me, it was the middle of the night. I woke up to a hot grip around my neck, looked up the strained extension of his arms, and saw that both his teeth and eyes were clenched shut. Drool dropped and pooled in the corner of my eye. I slapped him as hard as I could on the side of his head, I hit his ear with the hardest part of my palm, then brought my knee up and got him between the legs.

“What was the dream?” I asked him, lying on our backs in bed, after he apologized profusely, then explained he’d a bad dream.

“There was this bat,” he said.

“Like a flying bat with wings?”

“Yeah, a bat, but it was big as a dog and it couldn’t fly. It kept hold of my leg, wouldn’t let go of me. I had to kill it.”

“Strangle it.”

“I’ve never even walked in my sleep. As far as I know. Right?”

And this: As far as he knew was the thing. The: You don’t know what you don’t know of it. It happened again soon after that. He’d had too much to drink. He passed out on the bed, and I’d just come in from a cigarette. I was looking out our double door windows. Out onto the East Bay lights. He came up from behind me. Choked me with one arm and held my waist with the other. I pushed off the glass hard and made myself into deadweight. We fell back onto the bed, and he let go of me. And there we were on our backs again. That time he outright denied that it happened. Claimed that I dreamed it, that I’d just woken up from a bad dream. So first because

of his dream, then mine, the strangling. I didn't fight him. I told him to go sleep on the couch. Well first I told him to go fuck himself. When he was gone, I google searched: 'Killed wife in his sleep'. The Wikipedia entry had it as: Homicidal somnambulism. I read each of the cases listed in Wikipedia. Most were actually not that interesting. Just seemed like the stupid lies of desperate men. But there were two cases that caught my attention. The first was a guy who killed his wife with a claw hammer—he'd actually used the hammer earlier that day to fix their bed. He claimed to have started killing her while asleep, but then finished when he woke up to stop the screams. The screams she was screaming because he was claw-hammering her in the head to death. The other case was a devoted husband who'd strangled his wife of almost forty years in their camper van because he'd been having a nightmare about a boy racer—whatever that is.

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In the glass balcony double door reflection, my face is the dark translucent mask of the Oakland night. The clouds are the color of the city. Somewhere between pink and orange. There are two TVs in our room. My husband Anton says TV makes you lazy and stupid, two of them doubly so. But it's my room now and I like to watch two at once. Usually I keep one or both of them muted. The TV on the left has on it a wide-eyed news correspondent. A neat, middle-aged, amorphous stack of suit, teeth and hair. He's referencing a virtual screen to his left and above him, which plays live footage of the aftermath of a car wreck on the freeway. On the screen to my right is the terrified face of a drowning woman deep underwater, looking toward but not at the camera. Her mouth makes an 'O', and I remember something. I wince, then scratch and itch

where a small sweat breaks at the top of my forehead.

When I was seven, I asked the woman I'd been told to call mom where I came from. Who my parents were. The woman didn't answer the question. Or I don't remember what she said. She brought me to a room full of someone else's stuffed animals. She told me to name them. They needed new names because they'd been someone else's. A hot patch of light came in on my right cheek. I put my hand on my cheek to block the heat. When she left, I felt all of their beady, marbled, buttoned eyes staring at me, waiting for their names. I turned them all around, made them face the wall. The woman I never called mom but Nancy, she never told me where I came from. She did tell me I was Indian. I asked her what she meant, and she said, "You know," and made her mouth into an 'O', then cupped her hand, and tapped it against her mouth while making a high pitched whooping sound. I did know, but I didn't know where from what she meant. I never did name those animals.

I get up and turn off the tvs. Pain shoots up to my shoulders from my lower back. I sit on the edge of the bed and it jostles me, causing a few more tremors of pain. I think about the pills—the rattle they make coming out of the bottle, the way they softly tumble into my hand then settle. I get them out of my nightstand, pour two pills out and walk to the bathroom. At the sink, I turn the water on, let it run, then turn it off. It's enough to have them in my hand. On some days I carry them all over the house with me—hold and resist them. It isn't just that I like to get high. I do. But there is pain. On some nights I feel the voltage spread from my back all the way down to my toes. I seize, but I want to let spill my limbs, or curl up into a ball and weep, but

I can't, and I freeze and can't release even a whimper. The pills mute the pain's acuity, pad the claws, release my body from its constant bracing of itself from itself. They help. I even like the word for them: Oxycodone. The word is a shape that fits over my pain like a hood.

Out on the balcony I smoke my sixth cigarette of the day. I like to follow the lines of the streets to their ends through the microchip labyrinth of the city night. I like to follow the blip of a single car as long as I can—give it a reason for being out there. I like that people can be dots—neutral dots of moving light in a grid. I've always wished the human form was less specific, less body and face based. I would never have had to think about my face, or if it was pretty. I wouldn't have had to consider when the amount I was eating would need to be cut back because of old age and the slowing down of my metabolism. I wouldn't have gotten into the mess of thinking about how brown I am, or am not, and why that might be good or bad, enough, not enough, too much? I would never have wondered how I am or am not an Indian person, a real or not real enough Native American Indian person on the still bad but better side of the millennium.

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Anton had been nice. Polite, with rectangular, intelligent eyes, even warm and gentle seeming. Even funny. I'd never gotten so much attention as I did in the California Indian history class we met in at Cal. The class was full of guilt ridden white guys who wanted to save me from a history they were just finding out about. Back then I wore my hair long, wore Indian jewelry,

and was unambiguously brown because I made a point to be out in the sun in order to be more brown and not be mistaken as white. The teacher asked me the first day of class if I was Native. I didn't think it was fair to ask in front of everyone like that. And I didn't want to have to explain not knowing what tribe I was from. I shook my head yes, then bent down low to my desk. I drew a cluster of crosses and waited for the subject to change.

“All of life and human relations have become so incomprehensibly complex that, when you think about it, it becomes terrifying and your heart stands still,” he'd said to me after class. I couldn't decide if he was being pretentious, or if he was hitting on me. I guess it was both. I let him sit with it for a second, gathered my stuff, then said,

“Is that yours?”

“Chekov,” he said.

“Heart stands still is my Indian name,” I joked. It was a bad joke. But he laughed, and I forgave him for quoting Chekov. We went for coffee, then spent an hour in a used bookstore together—apart. This was why I liked him right away. That we could be together on opposite ends of the bookstore—me in fiction and him in history. That took something. That kind of independence. I couldn't have known that we—being together, apart—would end up meaning something so different.

The summer after we graduated, while driving back to my apartment on Telegraph, I was broadsided by a couple of kids on a joy ride. My left femur shaft was fractured, and I herniated my spinal disc. Anton had been there for me after the accident in a way no one had ever been there for me.

We got married in court shortly after the accident, and spent five years living in separate

states while he finished medical school in Connecticut. His parents died, one after the other a year apart, the year before we graduated and left us their house in the Oakland hills. At first he visited every other weekend, then once a month. By the time he moved back, after getting a position as a pediatrician at Kaiser in Oakland, it was like we hardly knew each other.

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On the bed there's a full glass of red wine. I sit next to it and briefly worry it will spill, then remember the tempurpedic. The mattress had been delivered earlier that day. The mattress delivery guy was a real troll. Old as hell too for a mattress delivery guy. "Shall we break her in," he'd joked. I did him the favor of pretending not to have heard him. When he was gone I fell back onto the mattress. The soft slow sinking, the landing's effect—felt narcotic. I fell asleep without meaning to and slept a perfect, dreamless sleep.

The whole room hardens, fills-in, when the light dimmer switch goes all the way up. I don't confirm his arrival by picking my head up from the stare I'd worked myself into.

"What's going on?" He says.

I don't move. Going on? What had been going on? The only thing going on were the lights too bright in a room I preferred stay dim and without him in it. I pick my head up, focus my eyes on his reflection, watch him eye the glass of wine with casual disdain, then open the closet to hang up his jacket. He hadn't been paying attention to the commercial where the overly happy, interracial couple jumps up and down on the tempurpedic mattress, inches from a glass of

red wine. The way they smiled at each other like they believed in something bigger than themselves—bigger than buoyancy. “Don’t wake the one you love,” the line at end of commercial read.

“I just mean, what have you been doing, what have you been up to?” Anton says.

I laugh, still not looking at him but through the reflection on the glass balcony double doors. He is a ghost who scares easy. I know what I’ll do. I stand up, but still don’t turn around.

“Kateri,” he says with vague concern.

When he says my name I hear it. Normally I don’t notice my name. My namesake, first and middle, is the only thing my real mom left me. Kateri Tekakwitha. Kateri had recently been canonized by the Catholic Church. The first and probably only ever Native American Saint. The lily of the Mohawks. Disfigured by the smallpox that killed her parents when she was 4. She lived a devout life of suffering and illness, then died when she was 24. I’m not Catholic, but when I found out about the canonization, I went straight down to the Fruitvale and bought a Saint Kateri votive candle. I put her in the bathroom and kept her lit at night. This was right after the first time he tried to strangle me. Maybe I was unhinged, or fragile, or already broken, but Saint Kateri, or, the votive candle, or a voice in my head, spoke to me one night while I took a bath.

“Sister, he’s weak. Thin. Even flimsy. But he’s dangerous, because he doesn’t know that he is. He acts like he thinks he’s big. Acts. There’s where the damage gets done. Just like all those men that came before. They’ll eat up the whole world if you let them.”

“Anton, dangerous?” I said, then laughed and waited for her to respond, but heard only the echoing din of my laughter against the tile walls. I watched the flame through the red and blue glass—the burning image of a haloed Indian woman with braids holding a wooden cross.

“Kateri?” Anton says again, this time already with no patience left. I stand up, turn around and flash him a smile. He flinches. I have him. I put one foot on the lip between the box mattress and the tempurpedic, then launch myself up as high as I can in the air. I tuck my knees in and grab them. I cannonball. This time he yells my name. Scolds me with it. I land on my knees a foot from the glass of wine—which does not but slightly tremble.

“Your face,” I say, laughing.

“Jesus Christ, what are you on?” Anton says.

I sit up, pick up the glass of wine, and down the whole thing.

“Let’s talk another time. You’re clearly in a state,” he says.

I notice that I want him to do something. I want to push him further, or bring him with me, further down.

“Oh stop acting like you have it so fucking together. I’m clear as a bell. Or is it sound as a bell? Or is it clear as the sound of a—”

“Okay, you wanna talk, let’s talk, let’s talk about recent credit card transactions. Let’s talk about the mattress. I get these alerts on my phone for big purchases. I got one this afternoon. Let’s talk about the two thousand dollar mattress you just had your fun on at my expense.”

“So I’ve had some wine, and yes, painkillers, I take painkillers for pain, because I’m in pain. And what are you on? Your own goddamn... because you make the money—”

“You know I never bring up money.”

“You don’t bring up anything.”

“I brought up the mattress, not because of money, but because we didn’t talk about it, and, more importantly, if you haven’t noticed, I’m not currently sleeping in our bed, so for you

to replace it is.... I don't know what it is, but it's wrong."

"I'll tell you what I've noticed, what I've noticed is that I'm not getting strangled by you anymore. In your supposed sleep."

"Okay. That's fair. But you know that was just—"

"Just what?"

"A fluke."

"And when you were drunk?"

"That never happened. I remember that night. You woke me up in the middle of the night claiming I'd done it again. You had a bad dream. It happened once."

"You're insane."

Anton makes the sound: pfft, and I immediately make the same sound back at him, I pfft his pfft, and he walks out of the room. I listen to him go downstairs and open up the cupboard, pour himself a drink, then turn the TV on way louder than necessary. I hear her in my head, Kateri Tekakwitha.

"See," she says. "Weak."

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The next morning I go to my doctor, tell him I need a 3 month supply, that I'm going on an extended cruise to Alaska.

"I want to see them melt," I say.

"What?"

“The glaciers.”

“Interesting,” he says without looking at me. He’s answering an email. The doctor is Anton’s friend.

“Not that I don’t believe them,” I say.

“Uh-huh,” he says.

“I just want to see, like when someone tells you there’s a fire and you go out to find a good place to watch the smoke.”

“Okay, you should be all set. You can pick it up in an hour,” he says, and finally looks at me, but only for a moment, and like he’s looking through me. When the door closes I put a whole box of latex gloves in my purse.

Anton is on his way out for work as I pull in. He smiles and waves from his car as he drives off. The smile means something. So does the wave. And he never takes mornings off.

I go inside and walk carefully through the house. When I get to our room, I see what he’s done. The tempurpedic mattress is gone, and the old one is back. A few stray tears falls down my face. I slap them like their bugs. I haven’t cried since the accident. Since I saw Anton walk into that hospital room. The thought of it, the memory of him, how much I needed him then makes me sweat and itch at the top of my forehead. I slap my forehead and the hit relieves the itch.

In the kitchen, I pull open the knife drawer and pick out the biggest one. It isn’t the first time I’ve taken this particular knife out.

Upstairs, with two pills in one hand and a coffee mug full of red wine in the other, I study my face in the bathroom mirror. Or is it me? The weak, flimsy, dangerous one?

I swallow the pills with the wine, then turn on both TVs. I try to lay down on the bed, but it feels too unstable. I watch the TVs from the floor, but my eyes don't see what's on the screens. My eyes land somewhere between between them, see nothing. I get up to get the candle and bring her to my nightstand and light her. I turn my back to her, pick up the remotes, there are two of them of course, and turn off the tvs.

“He wasn't dreaming. You were the bat who couldn't fly. He thinks of you like that, a blood sucking parasite. They've thought of us this way for too long. We're survivors of long term strangulation. Something needs to be done,” Kateri says.

I get up, turn around, and pick up the knife. I put my wine down, then get on the bed. I grip the knife with both hands on the handle, raise it, then stab, over and over, hard, too many times to count—until I'm out of breath. I stare at the cotton guts spilled out all over the bed. I gather the puffs of cotton into one hand, put the knife down, and feel the small slits I made with my other hand. I stick my fingers in, and pull a slit open, then stuff the cotton back into the bed. I stare at the closet for what feels like twenty minutes.

I'm already in the closet with the knife, waiting, when I realize I went in too soon. He won't be home for another hour. But I can't leave now. I won't come back in if I leave. I sit down, cross my legs, put the knife in front of me, then cross my arms over my chest, and let my head hang down. I feel heavy. I set an alarm on my phone. I need a nap. Just a few winks. I'll wake up just before he gets home. I'll leap out at him when he goes to hang up his jacket. I'll plunge the knife into his chest, no his neck, no right into the middle of his face. I'll push him back onto that old bed, let him die there. When they come, I'll claim to suffer from night terrors. Homicidal somnambulism. Another tragic case. I'll make it to the Wikipedia page. I'll claim he

beat me. Had strangled me. I'll hide the lie in truth. Or I'll leave the country. No, I'll hide in plain sight, somewhere nearby, I'll pull out as much cash as I can from our account, live in hotels and motels in and around Oakland. I'll buy an RV, live on the sides of highways in and around the Southwest. I'll find my mother. I'll get better. The pain will go away. I'll stop with the pills and the drinking. I'll find love. Hope. Home. Something. I'll find something and they won't find me.

I wake up to Anton throwing his coat on top of me. He'd never not hung it up before. He'd never just thrown it in like this. I sit with his jacket on top of me, his smell, a mix of sweat and his eczema medicated-cream. He turns on the tv. The bed squeaks as he sits on it. Where does he think I am? Had he even thought about it? I come out from under the jacket, feel for the knife, and slide the blade between my fingers. It's too late. But I can't come out now. What would I say? I wrap up the knife with his jacket and put it in the back-bottom of the closet. I'll walk out like it's nothing. Normal. Like anything else I've ever done. What could he accuse me of? I step out of the closet, and turn to close it behind me like I've just walked through the front door of our house. Remote in hand, he looks at me, accidentally points the remote at me. I turn to leave and see him in my periphery—a blurred streak of confoundment. I figure out where I'm going as I walk out the front door.

Outside the theater a movie poster catches my attention: the bright green stem of a rose with thorns and no rose in the shot, rises against a black background with the name Roseline in red lettering at the bottom.

The movie is about a female truck driver. There's hardly any talking in the movie, but the shots are beautiful. The woman in the movie drives up the 101 from L.A. She stops at an orange grove at some point. The moon is bright. She eats an orange, sleeps outside, underneath the tree she picked the orange from. The next morning she stops at a truck stop and is attacked in the bathroom by an adolescent boy who looks like he's either a crazed meth addict, or a hungry vampire. She gets bitten on the shoulder during her escape. Hours later she puts her hand on her shoulder, indicating a new pain. A single thorn emerges from the bite wound, and then countless thorns rise through her skin from everywhere on her body but her face and head. She bleeds out of the newly made holes. I can't stand the sight of the woman bleeding through her clothes, still driving her truck, the thorns, so I walk out, and go to the bathroom, wash my hands, then come out and walk up to the ticket stub ripper, with that wastebasket of torn stubs behind him. I tell him not to be alarmed, but to go get the manager, inform him there's a situation in the bathroom, a young woman doing drugs.

"She's shooting up," I say. And it works. He goes off, and leaves his wastebasket of flexible alibis for me to choose from. I move my hand in, scoop a solid sample and walk out.

When I get home I see that he's not on the couch. My wine is upstairs under the bed, and the pills are in the bathroom up there. I go to where he keeps his whiskey and pour myself a triple, then fall asleep on the couch, glass in hand.

The next morning, after he goes to work, I hire a guy to change the locks on the front and back doors, then call the mattress guy and tell him to bring the tempurpedic back.

It won't keep him out for long. I don't need any certain amount of time. What I need him

is for him to call the police, or a locksmith, have to explain himself. I need him to have to do something to get in. The message is weak. But maybe it isn't. He might leave, at first thinking he came to the wrong house, then realizing in a bigger way that it really is the wrong house, and that I'm actually not at all for him, and that he really should leave, part ways with me there and then, allow the changing of the locks to mean more than some stupid thing I did because I'm so fucked up.

I hear the doorbell ring. One time with a long pause and then countless times in a row. I set the Saint Kateri votive candle on my nightstand and light it. She makes a quiet dance of shadow on the wall. He is pounding on the door. Screaming my name. Let me in. Kateri. Let me in. Kateri. Kateri!

I hear my name. I listen to my name. I think of my mom. The real mom I never knew. Will maybe never know. She could be thinking of me. She cared enough to name me. I only care enough to stay. Lock him out. I don't know what will happen. I hope nothing. I hope everything. I stand at the end of the bed, spread my arms wide, and fall. The fall doesn't stop when I land. The fall lasts forever. The mattress takes me in. I am held in the mold my body makes, that the mattress makes of me. I float, weightless, in tempurpedia. I'm on the moon.