



TA-NA-E-KA

Mary Whitebird

As my birthday drew closer, I had awful nightmares about it. I was reaching the age at which all Kaw Indians had to participate in Ta-Na-E-Ka. Well, not all Kaws. Many of the younger families on the reservation were beginning to give up the old customs. But my grandfather, Amos Deer Leg, was devoted to tradition. He still wore handmade beaded moccasins instead of shoes, and kept his iron gray hair in tight braids. He could speak English, but he spoke it only with white men. With his family he used a Sioux dialect.

*Rustic Landscape*, 1927. Carlo Carra. Private Collection.

Grandfather was one of the last living Indians (he died in 1953 when he was eighty-one) who actually fought against the U.S. Cavalry.<sup>1</sup> Not only did he fight, he was wounded in a skirmish at Rose Creek—a famous encounter in which the celebrated Kaw chief Flat Nose lost his life. At the time, my grandfather was only eleven years old.

Eleven was a magic word among the Kaws. It was the time of Ta-Na-E-Ka, the “flowering of adulthood.” It was the age, my grandfather informed us hundreds of times, “when a boy could prove himself to be a warrior and a girl took the first steps to womanhood.”

“I don’t want to be a warrior,” my cousin, Roger Deer Leg, confided to me. “I’m going to become an accountant.”

“None of the other tribes make girls go through the endurance ritual,” I complained to my mother.

“It won’t be as bad as you think, Mary,” my mother said, ignoring my protests. “Once you’ve gone through it, you’ll certainly never forget it. You’ll be proud.”

I even complained to my teacher, Mrs. Richardson, feeling that, as a white woman, she would side with me.

She didn’t. “All of us have rituals of one kind or another,” Mrs. Richardson said. “And look at it this way: how many girls have the opportunity to compete on equal terms with boys? Don’t look down on your heritage.”

Heritage, indeed! I had no intention of living on a reservation for the rest of my life. I was a good student. I loved school. My fantasies were about knights in armor and fair ladies in flowing gowns being saved from

dragons. It never once occurred to me that being Indian was exciting.

But I’ve always thought that the Kaw were the originators of the women’s liberation movement.<sup>2</sup> No other Indian tribe—and I’ve spent half a lifetime researching the subject—treated women more “equally” than the Kaw. Unlike most of the subtribes of the Sioux Nation, the Kaw allowed men and women to eat together. And hundreds of years before we were “acculturated,”<sup>3</sup> a Kaw woman had the right to refuse a prospective husband even if her father arranged the match.

The wisest women (generally wisdom was equated with age) often sat in tribal councils. Furthermore, most Kaw legends revolve around “Good Woman,” a kind of supersquaw, a Joan of Arc<sup>4</sup> of the high plains. Good Woman led Kaw warriors into battle after battle from which they always seemed to emerge victorious.

And girls as well as boys were required to undergo Ta-Na-E-Ka.

The actual ceremony varied from tribe to tribe, but since the

GUIDED READING

Why was eleven a magic word among the Kaws?

GUIDED READING

What do most Kaw legends revolve around?

GUIDED READING

How did Mrs. Richardson suggest looking at Ta-Na-E-Ka?

words for everyday use

**skir • mlsh** (skər' mish) *n.*, minor fight in war. *My brother got hurt in a skirmish during WWII.*

**her • i • tage** (her' ə tij) *n.*, something that is passed on to an heir; tradition. *Wearing our hair in braids is a tradition in my heritage.*

**equate** (ē kwāt') *v.*, make equal. *People sometimes equate a doctor with a healer.*

Indians' life on the plains was dedicated to survival, Ta-Na-E-Ka was a test of survival.

"Endurance is the loftiest virtue of the Indian," my grandfather explained. "To survive, we must endure. When I was a boy, Ta-Na-E-Ka was more than the mere symbol it is now. We were painted white with the juice of a sacred herb and sent naked into the wilderness without so much as a knife. We couldn't return until the white had worn off. It wouldn't wash off. It took almost eighteen days, and during that time we had to stay alive, trapping food, eating insects and roots and berries, and watching out for enemies. And we did have enemies—both the white soldiers and the Omaha's warriors, who were always trying to capture Kaw boys and girls undergoing their endurance test. It was an exciting time."

**GUIDED READING**  
How long was Ta-Na-E-Ka in Grandfather's boyhood, and what had to be done?

"What happened if you couldn't make it?" Roger asked. He was born only three days after I was, and we were being trained for Ta-Na-E-Ka together. I was happy to know he was frightened too.

"Many didn't return," Grandfather said. "Only the strongest and shrewdest. Mothers were

**GUIDED READING**  
When Grandfather was a boy, which participants returned?

not allowed to weep over those who didn't return. If a Kaw couldn't survive, he or she wasn't worth weeping over. It was our way."

"What a lot of hooley," Roger whispered. "I'd give anything to get out of it."

"I don't see how we have any choice," I replied.

Roger gave my arm a little squeeze. "Well, it's only five days."

Five days! Maybe it was better than being painted white and sent out naked for eighteen days. But not much better.

**GUIDED READING**  
How long was Ta-Na-E-Ka for Mary and Roger, and what had to be done?

We were to be sent, barefoot and in bathing suits, into the woods. Even our very traditional parents put their foot down when Grandfather suggested we go naked. For five days we'd have to live off the land, keeping warm as best we could, getting food where we could. It was May, but on the northernmost reaches of the Missouri River the days were still chilly and the nights were fiercely cold.

Grandfather was in charge of the month's training for Ta-Na-E-Ka. One day he caught a grasshopper and demonstrated how to pull its legs and wings off in one flick of the fingers and how to swallow it.

I felt sick, and Roger turned green. "It's a darn good thing it's 1947," I told Roger teasingly. "You'd make a terrible warrior." Roger just grimaced.

I knew one thing. This particular Kaw Indian girl wasn't going to swallow a grasshopper, no matter how hungry she got. And then I had an idea. Why hadn't I thought

5. **Omaha.** North American Plains Indians who migrated from the Ohio valley to the Missouri and Mississippi River valleys and finally settled in Iowa

**words for everyday use**

**vir • tue** (vər' chū) *n.*, particular strength or moral excellence. *A virtue my dad has is honesty, because he never lies.*  
**sa • cred** (sā' krəd) *adj.*, highly valued, important. *Saffron is a sacred type of spice and it is highly valued.*  
**shrewd** (shrūd') *adj.*, clever, having a high degree of common sense. *Jill, who solved the hardest riddle, is one of the shrewdest people I know.*



of it before? It would have saved nights of bad dreams about squooshy grasshoppers.

I headed straight for my teacher's house. "Mrs. Richardson," I said, "would you lend me five dollars?"

"Five dollars!" she exclaimed. "What for?"

"You remember the ceremony I talked about?"

"Ta-Na-E-Ka. Of course. Your parents have written me and asked me to excuse you from school so you can participate in it."

"Well, I need some things for the ceremony," I replied, in a half-truth. "I don't want to ask my parents for the money."

**GUIDED READING**  
How does Mary reply when Mrs. Richardson asks what she needs the five dollars for?

"It's not a crime to borrow money, Mary. But how can you pay it back?"

"I'll baby-sit for you ten times."

"That's more than fair," she said, going to her purse and handing me a crisp new five-dollar bill. I'd never had that much money at once.

"I'm happy to know the money's going to be put to a good use," Mrs. Richardson said.

A few days later, the ritual began with a long speech from my grandfather about how we had reached the age of decision, how we now had to fend for ourselves and prove that we could survive the most horrendous of ordeals. All the friends and relatives who had gathered at our house for dinner made jokes about their own Ta-Na-E-Ka experiences. They all advised us to fill up now, since for the next five days we'd be gorging ourselves on crickets. Neither Roger nor I was very hungry. "I'll probably laugh about this when I'm an accountant," Roger said, trembling.

"Are you trembling?" I asked.

"What do you think?"

"I'm happy to know boys tremble too," I said.

At six the next morning we kissed our parents and went off to the woods. "Which side do you want?" Roger asked. According to the rules, Roger and I would stake out "territories" in separate areas of the woods, and we weren't to communicate during the entire ordeal.

**GUIDED READING**  
What couldn't Roger and Mary do during their Ta-Na-E-Ka?

"I'll go toward the river, if it's okay with you," I said.

"Sure," Roger answered. "What difference does it make?"

To me, it made a lot of difference. There was a marina a few miles up the river and there were boats moored there. At least, I hoped so. I

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figured that a boat was a better place to sleep than under a pile of leaves.

"Why do you keep holding your head?" Roger asked.

"Oh, nothing. Just nervous," I told him. Actually, I was afraid I'd

**words  
for  
everyday  
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**fend** (fend') v., provide for, support. *Now that the baby bird can fly, it will have to fend for itself.*  
**or • deal** (or del') n., severe test or trial. *Training camp is one of many ordeals a soldier must go through to become an officer.*

lose the five-dollar bill, which I had tucked into my hair with a bobby pin. As we came to a fork in the trail, Roger shook my hand.

"Good luck, Mary."

"N'ko-n'ta," I said. It was the Kaw word for courage.

The sun was shining and it was warm, but my bare feet began to hurt immediately. I spied one of the berry bushes Grandfather had told us about. "You're lucky," he had said. "The berries are ripe in the spring, and they are delicious and nourishing." They were orange and fat and I popped one into my mouth.

Argh! I spat it out. It was awful and bitter, and even grasshoppers were probably better tasting, although I never intended to find out.

I sat down to rest my feet. A rabbit hopped out from under the berry bush. He nuzzled the berry I'd spat out and ate it. He picked another one and ate that too. He liked them. He looked at me, twitching his nose. I watched a redheaded woodpecker bore into an elm tree and I caught a glimpse of a civet cat<sup>6</sup>

waddling through some twigs. All of a sudden I realized I was no longer

frightened. Ta-Na-E-Ka might be more fun than I'd anticipated. I got up and headed toward the marina.

**GUIDED READING**  
What did Mary realize as she watched a rabbit, a redheaded woodpecker, and a civet cat?

"Not one boat," I said to myself dejectedly. But the restaurant on the shore, "Ernie's Riverside," was open. I walked in, feeling silly in my bathing suit. The man at the counter was big and tough-looking. He wore a sweat shirt with the words "Fort Sheridan, 1944," and he had only three fingers on one of his hands. He asked me what I wanted.

"A hamburger and a milk shake," I said, holding the five-dollar bill in my hand so he'd know I had money.

"That's a pretty heavy breakfast, honey," he murmured.

"That's what I always have for breakfast," I lied.

"Forty-five cents," he said, bringing me the food. (Back in 1947, hamburgers were twenty-five cents and milk shakes were twenty cents.) "Delicious," I thought. "Better'n grasshoppers—and Grandfather never once mentioned that I couldn't eat hamburgers."

While I was eating, I had a grand idea. Why not sleep in the restaurant? I went to the ladies' room and made sure the window was unlocked. Then I went back outside and played along the riverbank, watching the water birds and trying to identify each one. I planned to look for a beaver dam the next day.

The restaurant closed at sunset, and I watched the three-fingered man drive away. Then I climbed in the unlocked window. There was a night light on, so I didn't turn on any lights. But there was a radio on the

**GUIDED READING**  
Why did Mary make sure the ladies' room window was unlocked?

6. civet cat. Small spotted skunk of western North America

**words for everyday use**

**an • tic • i • pate** (an tī' sō pāt) *v.*, look forward to, expect. *I've anticipated the coming of my birthday, and it's finally here.*

**de • ject • ed** (dī jek' tād) *adj.*, be cast down in spirits, depressed. *Brett looked at the crowd of dejected people after he missed the touchdown pass. dejectedly, adv.*

counter. I turned it on to a music program. It was warm in the restaurant, and I was hungry. I helped myself to a glass of milk and a piece of pie, intending to keep a list of what I'd eaten, so I could leave money. I also planned to get up early, sneak out through the window, and head for the woods before the three-fingered man returned. I turned off the radio, wrapped myself in the man's apron, and, in spite of the hardness of the floor, fell asleep.

"What the heck are you doing here, kid?"

It was the man's voice.

It was morning. I'd overslept. I was scared.

"Hold it, kid. I just wanna know what you're doing here. You lost? You must be from the reservation. Your folks must be worried sick about you. Do they have a phone?"

"Yes, yes," I answered. "But don't call them."

I was shivering. The man, who told me his name was Ernie, made me a cup of hot chocolate while I explained about Ta-Na-E-Ka.

"Darndest thing I ever heard," he said, when I was through. "Lived next to the reservation all of my life and this is the first I've heard of Ta-Na-whatever-you-call-it." He looked at me, all goosebumps in my bathing suit. "Pretty silly thing to do to a kid," he muttered.

That was just what I'd been thinking for months, but when Ernie said it, I became angry. "No, it isn't silly. It's a custom of the Kaw. We've been doing this for hundreds of years. My mother and my grandfather and everybody in my

GUIDED READING

What did Mary take from the restaurant after it was closed for the night?

GUIDED READING

How does Mary feel after she puts on a loose sweater?

family went through this ceremony. It's why the Kaw are great warriors."

"Okay, great warrior," Ernie chuckled, "suit yourself. And, if you want to stick around, it's okay with me." Ernie went to the broom closet and tossed me a bundle. "That's the lost-and-found closet," he said. "Stuff people left on boats. Maybe there's something to keep you warm."

The sweater fitted loosely, but it felt good. I felt good. And I'd found a new friend. Most important, I was surviving Ta-Na-E-Ka.

My grandfather had said the experience would be filled with adventure, and I was having my fill. And Grandfather had never said we couldn't accept hospitality.

I stayed at Ernie's Riverside for the entire period. In the mornings I went into the woods and watched the animals and picked flowers for each of the tables in Ernie's. I had never felt better. I was up early enough to watch the sun rise on the Missouri, and I went to bed after it set. I ate everything I wanted—insisting that Ernie take all my money for the food. "I'll keep this in trust<sup>7</sup> for you, Mary," Ernie promised, "in case you are ever desperate for five dollars."

I was sorry when the five days were over. I'd enjoyed every

7. in trust. Money that is held for future use

words  
for  
everyday  
use

hos • pl • ta • il • ty (hās pā tā' lā tē) *n.*, generous and pleasant treatment or reception. *The hospitality of my friend's mom was generous and friendly.*

minute with Ernie. He taught me how to make western omelets and to make Chili Ernie Style (still one of my favorite dishes). And I told Ernie all about the legends of the Kaw. I hadn't realized I knew so much about my people.

But Ta-Na-E-Ka was over, and as I approached my house at about nine-thirty in the evening, I became nervous all over again. What if Grandfather asked me about the berries and the grasshoppers? And my feet were hardly cut. I hadn't lost a pound and my hair was combed.

"They'll be so happy to see me,"

**GUIDED READING**  
What does Mary hope as she nears the door of her home?

AND I TOLD ERNIE  
ALL ABOUT THE  
LEGENDS OF THE KAW.  
I HADN'T REALIZED I  
KNEW SO MUCH  
ABOUT MY PEOPLE.

I told myself hopefully, "that they won't ask too many questions."

I opened the door. My grandfather was in the front room. He was wearing the ceremonial beaded deerskin shirt which had belonged to his grandfather. "N'g'da'ma," he said. "Welcome back."

**words  
for  
everyday  
use**

**un • sight • ly** (un sīt' lē) *adj.*, not pleasing to see. *The dog's broken leg was unsightly.*

**hos • til • ity** (hō sīt' lē tē) *n.*, strong feeling of ill will toward something. *Because I lost my sister's favorite ring, she looks at me with hostility.*

**au • da • ci • ty** (ō de' sē tē) *n.*, excessive boldness and pride. *Kari had the audacity to ask her parents for money even though she was in debt to them.*

I embraced my parents warmly, letting go only when I saw my cousin Roger sprawled on the couch. His eyes were red and swollen. He'd lost weight. His feet were an unsightly mass of blood and blisters, and he was moaning: "I made it, see. I made it. I'm a warrior. A warrior."

My grandfather looked at me strangely. I was clean, obviously well-fed, and radiantly healthy. My parents got the message. My uncle and aunt gazed at me with hostility.

**GUIDED READING**  
How does Mary's grandfather look at her when she comes inside? How do Mary's uncle and aunt look at her?

Finally my grandfather asked, "What did you eat to keep you so well?"

I sucked in my breath and blurted out the truth: "Hamburgers and milk shakes."

"Hamburgers!" my grandfather growled. "Milk shakes!" Roger moaned.

"You didn't say we *had* to eat grasshoppers," I said sheepishly.

"Tell us about your Ta-Na-E-Ka," my grandfather commanded.

I told them everything, from borrowing the five dollars, to Ernie's kindness, to observing the beaver.

"That's not what I trained you for," my grandfather said sadly.

I stood up. "Grandfather, I learned that Ta-Na-E-Ka is important. I didn't think so during training. I was scared stiff of it. I handled it my way. And I learned I had nothing to be afraid of. There's no reason in 1947 to eat grasshoppers when you can eat a hamburger."

I was inwardly shocked at my own audacity. But I liked it. "Grandfather, I'll

**GUIDED READING**  
What is Mary's reaction after she tells her grandfather what she learned about Ta-Na-E-Ka?



bet you never ate one of those rotten berries yourself.”

Grandfather laughed! He laughed aloud! My mother and father and aunt and uncle were all dumbfounded. Grandfather never laughed. Never.

“Those berries—they are terrible,” Grandfather admitted. “I could never swallow them. I found a dead deer on the first day of my Ta-Na-E-Ka—shot by a soldier, probably—and he kept my belly full for the entire period of the test!”

Grandfather stopped laughing. “We should send you out again,” he said.

I looked at Roger. “You’re pretty smart, Mary,” Roger groaned. “I’d never have thought of what you did.”

“Accountants just have to be good at arithmetic,” I said comfortingly. “I’m terrible at arithmetic.”

Roger tried to smile, but couldn’t. My grandfather called me to him. “You should have done what your cousin did. But I think you are more alert to what is happening to our people today than we are. I think you would have passed the test under any circumstances, in any time. Somehow, you know how to exist in a world that wasn’t made for Indians. I don’t think you’re going to have any trouble surviving.”

Grandfather wasn’t entirely right. But I’ll tell about that another time.

**GUIDED READING**  
What does Grandfather think about Mary's Ta-Na-E-Ka and her chances for surviving?

## Respond to the SELECTION

Imagine you participated in a rite of passage like Ta-Na-E-Ka when you turned eleven and describe what would have happened.

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# Investigate,

# and Imagine

## Recall: GATHERING FACTS

- 1a. What are Mary's fantasies about?
- 2a. What is Mary's reaction when Ernie says Ta-Na-E-Ka is a "pretty silly thing to do to a kid"?
- 3a. How did Grandfather easily endure the entire period of his Ta-Na-E-Ka test?

## → Interpret: FINDING MEANING

- 1b. What is she probably looking for in these fantasies?
- 2b. Why does she react this way when she herself had been thinking the same thing for months?
- 3b. What is similar about Mary's and Grandfather's experiences of Ta-Na-E-Ka?

## Analyze: TAKING THINGS APART

- 4a. Examine the events in the story that show Mary's careful honesty about money. Then examine the events that show her being dishonest about other matters—for example, her half-truths, lies, and sneaking actions. Rank the seriousness of her deceptions on a scale of one (least serious) to ten (most serious).

## → Synthesize: BRINGING THINGS TOGETHER

- 4b. What are the main causes for Mary's dishonest behavior? Why doesn't she feel guilty or uncomfortable about it?

## Evaluate: MAKING JUDGMENTS

- 5a. How effective is the author in creating a believable plot? How strong of a person does Mary seem to you, and why? To what extent, if any, did her making friends with Ernie impress Grandfather?

## → Extend: CONNECTING IDEAS

- 5b. Tests of endurance occur throughout life in all cultures. What strategies and attitudes from the story would you choose to apply to the tests you will face? Why do you think these strategies might work in more than one situation?

## Understanding

**DIALOGUE.** Dialogue is conversation involving two or more people or characters. In fiction, dialogue is enclosed in quotation marks (" "). Through dialogue, a reader learns a lot about the characters. What did you learn about Grandfather and his beliefs from what he says? What did you learn about Ernie and his beliefs? about Mary and her beliefs?

## Literature

**PLOT.** A plot is a series of events related to a central conflict, or struggle. A plot usually involves the introduction of a conflict, its development, and its eventual resolution. Look again at the

