

TA-NA-E-KA

Based on the story by Mary Whitebird



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As my Ta-Na-E-Ka birthday neared, I had bad dreams. I was reaching the age when Kaw Indians take part in Ta-Na-E-Ka. Well, not all Kaws. But my grandfather stuck to the old ways. He was one of the last living Indians who'd fought the U.S. Army. (He died in 1953, when he was eighty-one.) At age eleven, he was wounded at Rose Creek.

Eleven was a magic word among the Kaws. It was the time of Ta-Na-E-Ka, the coming-of-age time. At eleven a boy could prove himself a warrior. A girl took the first steps to womanhood. **A B**

"I don't want to be a warrior," my cousin Roger told me. "I'm going to become an accountant."¹

"It won't be as bad as you think, Mary," my mother said. "Once you've gone through it, you'll never forget it. You'll be proud."

I even talked to my teacher, Mrs. Richardson, a white woman. I thought she would side with me. She didn't.

1. **accountant** (UH KOWN TUHNT): someone who checks to be sure financial records are correct.

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A HERE'S HOW

Literary Focus

Right away the author is talking about her eleventh birthday and taking steps toward womanhood. I think that information may be part of the story's message, or **theme**.

B READ AND DISCUSS

Comprehension

How does "Eleven" connect to Ta-Na-E-Ka?

A HERE'S HOW

Reading Focus

I know that characters' comments can help **find the theme** of a story. What Mrs. Richardson says about rituals and roots may be important later on.

B HERE'S HOW

Vocabulary

My teacher says that *refuse* means to "turn down" or "decline." This would mean that a Kaw woman could turn down, or *refuse*, a marriage offer.

C READ AND DISCUSS

Comprehension

How does women's liberation connect to Kaw history and traditions?

D YOUR TURN

Literary Focus

Mary says that things have changed a lot since her Grandfather's days. Do you think this is part of the story's **theme**? Why or why not?

"All of us have rituals,"² she said. "Don't look down on your roots."³ **A**

20 Roots! I did not plan to keep living on a reservation.⁴ But I've always thought that the Kaw started women's liberation.⁵ Some other subtribes of the Sioux Nation required men and women to eat separately. But the Kaw men and women ate together. A Kaw woman could refuse a marriage offer. **B** The wisest women often joined in leadership. Also, "Good Woman," a superhero, is the star of most Kaw stories. And girls as well as boys go through Ta-Na-E-Ka. **C** The ritual tests how well a person can get along alone.

30 My grandfather told us that in the past, children were painted white and sent out alone. They had to stay until the paint wore off, about eighteen days. They lived on food they found or caught. They faced enemies: white soldiers and other Indians.

In 1947, Roger and I had it a little easier. We went to the woods for five days. We weren't painted white. We got to wear swimming suits. **D** We did have to find our own food and face the cold. Grandfather taught us how to eat a grasshopper.

I had my own ideas about food. I borrowed five dollars from Mrs. Richardson. I would baby-sit to pay her back.

Roger and I went to the woods together. But we had to stay in separate parts. We couldn't be in touch with each other.

40 I chose to be near the river. I wanted to sleep in a boat, but I didn't find one.

I tasted a bitter berry I found. I spit it out and a rabbit ate it. Then, I found a place that sold food. I ordered a hamburger and milkshake. I spent forty-five cents of my five dollars.

While I was eating, I had a grand idea. I could sleep here. I unlocked a window in the ladies' room and returned that night. The room was warm. I helped myself to milk and pie. I'd leave money for the food. I planned to get out early before the owner returned.

- 2. **rituals** (RIH CHOO UHLZ): traditions, ceremonies.
- 3. **roots**: ancestors and their culture and history.
- 4. **reservation**: land set aside for use by American Indians.
- 5. **women's liberation**: the struggle for equality between men and women.



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“What are you doing here, kid?”

50 It was a man’s voice.

It was morning. I’d overslept. **E** I was scared.

“Hold it, kid. You lost? You must be from the reservation. Your folks must be worried sick about you. Do they have a phone?” Ernie, the owner, asked.

“Yes,” I answered. “But don’t call them.” I shook with cold.

The man made me hot chocolate. I told him why I was on my own.

“I’ve lived by the reservation all my life. I never heard of this test before. Pretty silly thing to do to a kid,” he said.

60 I’d thought that for months. But when he said it, I got angry. “It isn’t silly. Kaws have done this for hundreds of years. All my family went through this test. It’s why the Kaw are great warriors.”

“OK, great warrior,” he laughed. “You can stay if you want.” **F** He tossed me clothes that people had left on boats. “Find something to keep you warm.”

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

70 I stayed at Ernie’s for five days. Mornings I went into the woods. I watched the animals and picked flowers. I’d never felt better. **G** I watched the sun rise on the Missouri.⁶ I ate everything I wanted. I paid Ernie all my money for food. **H**

“I’ll keep this in trust⁷ for you, Mary,” Ernie said. “Someday you may need five dollars.”

I enjoyed every minute with Ernie. He taught me to cook, and I told him Kaw stories.

6. **the Missouri** (MIH ZUH REE): U.S. river.

7. **in trust**: safe.

E YOUR TURN

Vocabulary

Look at the two smaller words within *overslept* (“over” and “slept”). Use your knowledge of these words to guess the definition of *overslept*. You can use a dictionary for help.

F READ AND DISCUSS

Comprehension

Knowing what we do about Grandfather, what might he think of Mary’s plan?

G HERE’S HOW

Language Coach

Adjectives that compare two things are called **comparatives**. Adjectives that compare three or more things are **superlatives**. I know that *better* is the comparative form of the adjective *good*. The superlative form is the word *best*.

H YOUR TURN

Reading Focus

Part of the author’s message is to stress the importance of growing up and surviving. Underline things Mary says or does in lines 60–71 that may help you **find the theme**.

A HERE'S HOW

Literary Focus

Mary's grandfather is very traditional, while she is more modern. I think this is important to the story's **theme**.

B READ AND DISCUSS

Comprehension

How do things look for Mary and Roger?

C YOUR TURN

Vocabulary

Remember that Mary spat out the only berry she tried to eat. Knowing this, what do you think *rotten* means?

D READ AND DISCUSS

Comprehension

How have things wrapped up for Mary and Grandfather?

But Ta-Na-E-Ka was over. As I neared home, I worried. My feet were hardly cut. I hadn't lost a pound. My hair was combed.

My grandfather met me wearing his grandfather's beaded deerskin shirt. "Welcome back," he said in Kaw. **A**

80 I hugged my parents. Then I saw Roger stretched out on the couch. His eyes were red. He'd lost weight. His feet were bloody and sore.

"I made it. I'm a warrior," Roger said.

My grandfather saw I was clean, well fed, and healthy. **B** Finally he asked, "What did you eat to keep you so well?"

"Hamburgers and milkshakes."

"Hamburgers!" my grandfather shouted.

"Milkshakes!" Roger said.

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

90 "Tell us all about your Ta-Na-E-Ka," my grandfather ordered.

I told them the whole story.

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

"Grandfather, I learned that Ta-Na-E-Ka is important. I handled it my way. And I learned I had nothing to fear. There's no reason in 1947 to eat grasshoppers. Grandfather, I'll bet you never ate one of those rotten berries." **C**

Grandfather laughed aloud! Grandfather never laughed. Never.

100 "Those berries are terrible," Grandfather said. "I found a dead deer on the first day of my Ta-Na-E-Ka. The deer kept my belly full." Grandfather stopped laughing. "We should send you out again," he said.

Grandfather called me to him. "You should have done what your cousin did. But you know more about what is happening to our people today than I do. You would have passed the test in any time. You can make do in a world that wasn't made for Indians. I don't think you'll have trouble getting along."

110 Grandfather wasn't entirely right. But I'll tell about that another time. **D**