

Eva Werner

The Tanaeka ritual

5 My name is John. I am thirteen years old and I live with my family in Kaw City, northern Oklahoma. I go to the local school and I like playing football with my friends in my free time. I guess you could say I am an ordinary American boy ... only that I am not really American. Or more American than most other boys. I'm a Native American, a Kaw. I belong to the federally recognized Native American tribe which is nowadays officially known as the Kaw Nation.

10 My grandfather used to be one of the first men in the tribe. He was keen on tradition and told us children a lot about the time of the old Native Americans. "The first Kaw people lived on a small island which was created long before the main part of the earth," he had told us. "After some time the island became too small for all the Kaws, so fathers had to drown their children in the water. The Kaw mothers were very sad and asked Wakanda, the Great Spirit, for more
15 space to live. The women's prayers were answered when beavers and turtles were sent down to enlarge the island from the floor of the great waters. That is how the earth was created," my grandfather had explained in Sioux, our own language. He could speak English but he spoke it only when people were around who did not understand Sioux. With the family he only used
20 Sioux, and that's how I learned it, too.

There is a ceremony in my culture, which turns a boy into a man. My grandfather told me that our tribe had followed that tradition for many hundreds of years. "John, you will soon be old enough for Tanaeka," he told me one morning. "I think it is time for you to learn everything you need to know to take part in it." "What is Tanaeka?", my little sister asked. "It is the time
25 for Native American boys and girls to show that they aren't children anymore," he answered. "John will have to prove that he is a good warrior and can look after himself." – "But how can he prove that?", Emma asked. "We don't go hunting anymore, there are no more fights between the tribes and we buy our food from the supermarket." "It's a tradition, stupid," said my older brother Peter. "Don't worry, John," he turned towards me. "I did it as well, do you
30 remember? And I survived!" He gave me a wink with his left eye, so that grandfather could not see it. But the old man was busy talking to Emma. "The tradition of Tanaeka says that the young warrior or the young squaw has to survive in the wilds without any help for six days." "Six days?", Emma protested. "But that is a long time! Where is John going to sleep? Can we bring him food?"

35 "Emma, it's an endurance ritual¹. You have to prove that you can survive without all these things!" Peter explained. "He's right," grandfather agreed. "When I was a little boy, I was painted with the white juice of wild herbs. I didn't wear anything but the white color on my body and I was only allowed to return to the reservation once the white had gone. I was lucky,
40 because it rained a lot, so the white color was gone after thirteen days, but my father said he had been out there for eighteen days." "What did you eat?", Emma wanted to know. "Nature provides us with lots of food, if only we know where to find it. I fed on wild berries and hunted

rabbits. On the unlucky days I ate grasshoppers and beetles ... not very delicious, but nutritious.” “Yuck!”, was Emma’s reaction to that rather poor diet and I could understand her. Even though the rules were not that strict anymore, the thought of having to go through Tanaeka gave me a sick feeling in my stomach.

My lessons started in the afternoon. I was shown which plants and berries were edible and how to hunt rabbits. I was taught to defend myself against poisonous snakes and which were the safest places to sleep. I had to take Tanaeka at the end of July, so the nights would not be too cold. Children in our times did not have to undergo the ritual naked anymore, but without a pullover or a blanket, I was still facing chilly nights.

The next day, my grandfather taught me how to light a fire. This was very important, not only to keep me warm, but also if I didn’t want to eat the rabbits raw. I was a good boy and paid attention to everything he told me, but honestly speaking, I didn’t believe that I would ever be able to catch a rabbit or swallow anything as disgusting as a beetle. With each day of lessons that went by, I became more and more aware of the fact that I was facing my worst nightmare. Grandfather even showed me how to make paint from plants, sand and water, so that I could disguise myself in the woods, “in case you come across a white man and need to hide from him,” he explained. “Yes, sure,” I thought. This was the twenty-first century. Even if I came across a white person in the reservation – which was very unlikely to happen – he surely would not try to kill me. “Just tell him you have to undergo this stupid old ritual and he’ll feel so much pity for you, he’ll even want to adopt you,” Peter joked one evening, when we were sitting around the fire, having dinner.

As the day of Tanaeka came closer, I became more and more worried. I did not sleep anymore and started to feel sick. Even my mother felt pity for me and talked to my grandfather, but he insisted that the ritual had to be followed. The evening before Tanaeka, Peter asked me to help him feed the horses. I just wanted my peace, but something in his eyes made me go with him after all. Silently we went over to the horses. We gave them fresh water and oats along with some fresh apples, which they munched eagerly. We watched them without talking for a while until Peter suddenly said, imitating my grandfather’s voice: “So, tomorrow is your big day, my son! Remember that I told you everything there is to know about Tanaeka.” The perfect imitation made me laugh. Then Peter went on in his own voice: “It’s about time you got to know the secret of the Tanaeka of the 21st century ...”

When I left the next morning it was rainy and cold. My mother and Emma looked even more miserable than I did. Only Peter did not seem to be worried about me at all. Two hours later I knew why. The evening before he had told me to hide in the little cave where we used to play as young boys. I thought that was a good idea, so I walked straight to the place near the river. I had given up hope that I would be able to find some dry wood to light a fire like grandfather had shown me, but at least it would be dry in the cave. When I had finally reached the cave I couldn’t believe my eyes: there was lots of dry wood inside. But that was not the only thing I found. Peter had put a sleeping bag, some bread and tinned food, a little frying pan and lots

of other useful kitchen tools and food into the cave. It looked as if he had spent his whole pocket-money on the material, which would keep me going for at least a week. What can I tell you? I'd never loved my brother more than in that moment in the cave. I quite enjoyed my time in the cave. It was great to be alone for some time. I made plans for my future,
90 went for long walks once the weather was better and I even found some of the tasty wild berries my grandfather had shown me. They made a perfect dessert to the baked beans Peter had left me in cans. I also made sure not to eat too much, because I knew my grandfather would see that I had tricked him if I ate too well.

95 After the six days were over I left the cave and walked home again. My grandfather was so happy and proud when he embraced me, that I even had a bad conscience. For Emma I was a hero and when the evening came I offered Peter to help him with the horses again. When I thanked him and promised to pay him back all the money he had spent on the food, he told me that he had done the same when he had done his own Tanaeka. "Do you remember that
100 I asked you for your pocket money at the time?", he asked me. Right, I had completely forgotten that I had lent him money some years ago. "I never paid it back to you, so I guess we're quits now, aren't we?", he laughed. It was only years later that Emma got to know about the secret, the evening before her own Tanaeka. My grandfather and the rest of the family never found out.

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¹ endurance ritual = Reifeprüfung, Härteprüfung

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