



## Get Ready to Read!

# The *Medicine Bag*

### Meet Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve



Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve (snā'vē) was born in South Dakota in 1933. Sneve, a member of the Rosebud Sioux tribe, grew up on the Rosebud Reservation. She went to college and became a writer, teacher, and school counselor. Sneve's goal as a writer is to teach others about her culture. She wants people to have a real picture of American Indian life. "The Medicine Bag" was first published in 1975.

### What You Know

Think about a gift that you treasure because someone special gave it to you. What does it mean to you?

### Reason to Read

As you read, think about why the two main characters in the story have different feelings toward the same object.

### Background Info

*Sioux* is the name for groups of Native Americans also called *Lakota*, *Nakota*, and *Dakota*. They speak their own language and have a unique culture. They originally farmed, hunted, and fished in the forests and lakes of the north-central part of what is now the United States. Today they make up one of the largest Native American groups in the country.

A large number of Sioux live on reservations in Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Montana. In the United States, an Indian reservation is land that is owned by the federal government, but is managed by Native American groups who live on the land. Native American groups make some of their own laws. There are about 300 Indian reservations in the United States.

## Word Power

**procession** (prə sesh'ən) *n.* a march; people moving forward in an orderly way; p. 115  
The parade included a *procession* of the winning basketball team.

**fatigue** (fə tēg') *n.* weakness or tiredness; p. 115  
The *fatigue* I felt was so strong that I decided to take a nap.

**reluctantly** (ri luk'tənt lē) *adv.* with hesitation; unwillingly; p. 116  
I *reluctantly* ate the four-alarm chili that Joe had made.

**descendants** (di sen'dənts) *n.* people related to a person who lived in the past; p. 116  
I am one of the *descendants* of a famous explorer.

**sheepishly** (shē'pish lē) *adv.* in an embarrassed way; shyly; p. 116  
My sister *sheepishly* admitted that she wanted to sit next to me during the scary movie.

**discomfort** (dis kum'fərt) *n.* the state of being uncomfortable; a bother; p. 117  
It is quite a *discomfort* to sit at this desk all day without taking a break.

**sacred** (sā'krid) *adj.* holy; worthy of great respect; p. 121  
The ground where they buried the soldiers is *sacred*.

**Answer the following questions that contain the new words above.  
Write your answers in the spaces provided.**

1. If I *reluctantly* accept an invitation, do I want to go or not want to go?

\_\_\_\_\_

2. Is the hot sun a *discomfort* because I like the heat or I do not like the heat?

\_\_\_\_\_

3. Does a *procession* include one person or several people? \_\_\_\_\_

4. Would *fatigue* cause someone to want to rest or run in a race? \_\_\_\_\_

5. Are the *descendants* of a man younger or older than him? \_\_\_\_\_

6. In a *sacred* place, should one be respectful or disrespectful? \_\_\_\_\_

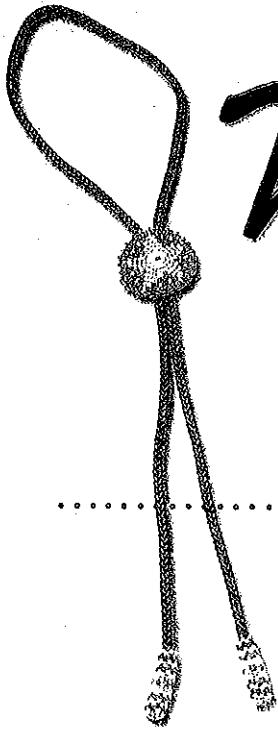
7. Are people who act *sheepishly* usually confident or shy? \_\_\_\_\_

Adapted from

The

# Medicine Bag

Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve



## Reading Skill

### Identifying Assumptions

Reread the highlighted sentences. What assumptions does the narrator make about his friends and their ideas about Indians?

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My kid sister Cheryl and I always bragged about our Sioux grandpa, Joe Iron Shell. Maybe we exaggerated and made Grandpa and the reservation sound glamorous, but when we'd return home to Iowa after our yearly summer visit to Grandpa we always had some exciting tale to tell.

We never showed our friends Grandpa's picture. Our friends would have laughed at the picture, because Grandpa wasn't tall like TV Indians. His hair wasn't in braids, but hung in stringy, gray strands on his neck and he was old. He was our great-grandfather, and he didn't live in a tipi, but all by himself on the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota. So when Grandpa came to visit us, I was so ashamed and embarrassed I could've died.

There are a lot of yippy poodles and other fancy little dogs in our neighborhood. They usually barked singly at the mailman from the safety of their own yards. Now it sounded as if a whole pack of mutts were barking together in one place.

I got up and walked to the curb to see what the commotion was. About a block away I saw a crowd of little kids yelling, with the dogs yipping and growling around someone who was walking down the middle of the street.

I watched the group as it slowly came closer and saw that in the center of the strange **procession** was a man wearing a tall black hat. I felt cold and hot at the same time as I recognized the man. "Oh, no!" I whispered. "It's Grandpa!"

I stood on the curb, unable to move even though I wanted to run and hide. The kids ran to the curb where they watched me and the old man.

"Grandpa," I said and felt pretty dumb when my voice cracked. I reached for his beat-up old tin suitcase, which was tied shut with a rope. But he set it down right in the street and shook my hand.

"*Hau, Takoza*, Grandchild," he greeted me formally in Sioux.

"Hi," I muttered with my head down. I tried to pull my hand away when I felt his bony hand trembling, and looked up to see **fatigue** in his face. I felt like crying. I couldn't think of anything to say so I picked up Grandpa's suitcase, took his arm, and guided him up the driveway to our house.

Mom was standing on the steps. I don't know how long she'd been watching, but her hand was over her mouth and she looked as if she couldn't believe what she saw. Then she ran to us.

"Grandpa," she gasped. "How in the world did you get here?"

She checked her move to embrace Grandpa and I remembered that such a display of affection is improper to the Sioux and would embarrass him.

"*Hau, Marie*," he said as he shook Mom's hand. She smiled and took his other arm.

Cheryl came bursting out of the house. She was all smiles and was so obviously glad to see Grandpa that I was ashamed of how I felt.

### Word Power

**procession** (prə sesh'ən) *n.* a march; people moving forward in an orderly way

**fatigue** (fə tēg') *n.* weakness or tiredness

### Reading Skill

**Question** Reread the highlighted sentences. What is the **best** question to ask while reading to understand how the narrator feels about his grandfather's arrival? Check the correct response.

- Why does the narrator keep his head down?
- How far did his grandfather travel?
- Does his grandfather speak English?

### Connect to the Text

Reread the boxed paragraph. Think about a time when you were glad to see someone. How did you act toward him or her?

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## Reading Skill

**Question** Reread the sentences highlighted in green. What is the **best** question to ask while reading to get the most information from the passage? Check the correct response.

- Why does the narrator remove his grandfather's boots?
- What is Grandpa wearing that might be important?
- Why is the narrator undressing his grandfather?

## English Coach

*Heat exhaustion* is a medical condition that makes people sick. Based on its name, what do you think causes this condition?

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"Grandpa!" she yelled happily. "You came to see us!"

Grandpa smiled and Mom and I let go of him as he stretched out his arms to my ten-year-old sister, who was still young enough to be hugged.

"*Wicnca!*, little girl," he greeted her and then collapsed.

He had fainted. Mom and I carried him into her sewing room, where we had a spare bed.

"Shouldn't we call the doctor, Mom?"

"Yes," she agreed with a sigh.

I **reluctantly** moved to the bed. I knew Grandpa wouldn't want to have Mom undress him, but I didn't want to, either. When I loosened his tie and opened his shirt collar, I felt a small leather pouch that hung around his neck. I left it alone and moved to remove his boots.

I put the boots on the floor and saw why they fit so tight. Each one was stuffed with money. I looked at the bills that lined the boots and started to ask about them, but Grandpa's eyes were closed again.

Mom came back with a basin of water. "The doctor thinks Grandpa is suffering from heat exhaustion," she explained as she bathed Grandpa's face. Mom gave a big sigh, "*Oh binb*, Martin. How do you suppose he got here?"

We found out after the doctor's visit. Grandpa was angrily sitting up in bed while Mom tried to feed him some soup.

Grandpa relaxed, and between sips of soup he told us of his journey. Soon after our visit to him Grandpa decided that he would like to see where his only living **descendants** lived. Besides, he admitted **sheepishly**, he was lonesome after we left.

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### Word Power

**reluctantly** (ri luk' tǎnt lē) *adv.* with hesitation; unwillingly

**descendants** (di sen' dǎnts) *n.* people related to a person who lived in the past

**sheepishly** (shē' pish lē) *adv.* in an embarrassed way; shyly

I knew everybody felt as guilty as I did—especially Mom. Mom was all Grandpa had left. So even after she married my dad, who's a white man and teaches in the college in our city, and after Cheryl and I were born, Mom made sure that every summer we spent a week with Grandpa.

I never thought that Grandpa would be lonely after our visits, and none of us noticed how old and weak he had become. But Grandpa knew and so he came to us. He had ridden on buses for two and a half days. When he arrived in the city, tired and stiff from sitting for so long, he set out, walking, to find us.

I knew everybody felt as bad as I did. Yet I was proud of this 86-year-old man, who had never been away from the reservation, having the courage to travel so far alone.

"You found the money in my boots?" he asked Mom.

"Martin did," she answered, and roused herself to scold.

"Grandpa, you shouldn't have carried so much money. What if someone had stolen it from you?"

Grandpa laughed. "I would've known if anyone tried to take the boots off my feet. The money is what I've saved for a long time—a hundred dollars—for my funeral. But you take it now to buy groceries so that I won't be a burden to you while I am here."

"That won't be necessary, Grandpa," Dad said. "We are honored to have you with us and you will never be a burden. I am only sorry that we never thought to bring you home with us this summer and spare you the **discomfort** of a long trip."

Grandpa was pleased. "Thank you," he answered. "But do not feel bad that you didn't bring me with you for I would not have come then. It was not time." To Grandpa and the Sioux, he once told me, a thing would be done when it was the right time to do it and that's the way it was.

## Reading Skill

### Identifying

### Assumptions

Reread the highlighted sentences.

Why does Martin assume his mother feels guilty?

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## Connect to the Text

Reread the boxed sentence.

Have you ever gone on a trip away from your home? Was it a good or bad experience? Why?

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## Word Power

**discomfort** (dis kum'fərt) *n.* the state of being uncomfortable; a bother

### Literary Element

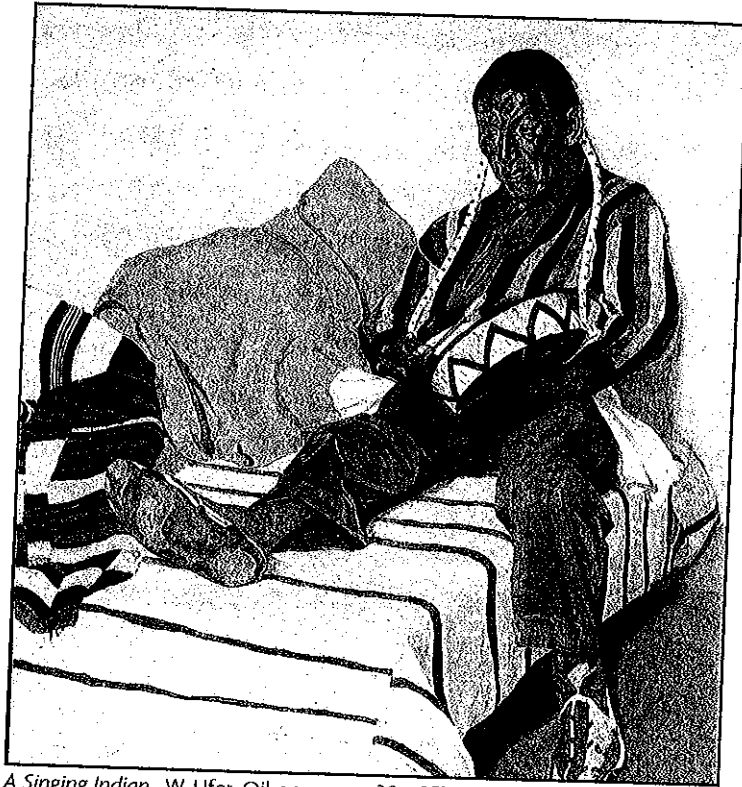
**Theme** Reread the highlighted sentences. The theme of the story is that people should accept their culture and keep it alive. Do you think Martin is ready to accept the fact that he is a Sioux? Why or why not?

“Also,” Grandpa went on, looking at me, “I have come because it is soon time for Martin to have the medicine bag.”

We all knew what that meant. Grandpa thought he was going to die and he had to follow the tradition of his family to pass the medicine bag, along with its history, to the oldest male child.

“Even though the boy,” he said still looking at me, “bears a white man’s name, the medicine bag will be his.”

I didn’t know what to say. I had the same hot and cold feeling that I had when I first saw Grandpa in the street. The medicine bag was the dirty leather pouch I had found around his neck. “I could never wear such a thing,” I almost said aloud. I thought of having my friends see it in gym class, at the swimming pool, and could imagine the smart things they would say. But I just swallowed hard and took a step toward the bed. I knew I would have to take it.



*A Singing Indian.* W. Ufer. Oil on canvas, 30 x 25¼ in.

**What items in this painting represent the man’s Native American background? What details about Grandpa reveal his background as a Sioux?**

But Grandpa was tired. "Not now, Martin," he said, waving his hand in dismissal, "it is not time. Now I will sleep."

So that's how Grandpa came to be with us for two months. My friends kept asking to come see the old man, but I put them off. I told myself that I didn't want them laughing at Grandpa. But even as I made excuses I knew it wasn't Grandpa that I was afraid they'd laugh at.

Finally, one day after school, my friends came home with me because nothing I said stopped them. "We're going to see the great Indian of Bell View Drive," said Hank, who was supposed to be my best friend.

When we got to my house Grandpa was sitting on the patio. He had on his red shirt, but today he also wore a fringed leather vest that was decorated with beads. Instead of his usual cowboy boots he had beaded moccasins on his feet that stuck out of his black trousers. Of course, he had his old black hat on—he was seldom without it.

I stared just as my friends did and I heard one of them murmur, "Wow!"

Grandpa looked up and when his eyes met mine they twinkled as if he were laughing inside. He nodded to me and my face got all hot. I could tell that he had known all along I was afraid he'd embarrass me in front of my friends.

"*Hau, boksilas*, boys," he greeted and held out his hand.

"You look fine, Grandpa," I said as the guys sat on the lawn chairs or on the patio floor.

"*Hanb*, yes," he agreed. "When I woke up this morning it seemed the right time to dress in the good clothes. I knew that my grandson would be bringing his friends."

## Connect to the Text

Reread the boxed sentences. Martin thinks that he will be embarrassed by bringing his friends to meet his grandfather. Can you understand how he feels? What would you do if you were in this situation?

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## Reading Skill Identifying

**Assumptions** Reread the highlighted paragraph. Why does Grandpa assume that Martin is afraid of being embarrassed by him? Check the correct response.

- Martin tells Grandpa that he doesn't want to wear the medicine bag.
- Martin feels badly about the money he found in Grandpa's shoes.
- Martin has not invited his friends over to meet Grandpa.



## Reading Skill

**Question** Reread the highlighted sentences. What is the **best** question to ask while reading to understand the relationship between Grandpa and Martin's friends? Check the correct response.

- Does Grandpa impress Martin's friends?
- Does Grandpa say any words in Sioux?
- Why do Martin's friends have to leave?

## Background Info

In Sioux tradition, a boy would become a man by going on a journey called a vision quest. His quest would show him his purpose in life. Many cultures have ceremonies to celebrate a child becoming an adult.

Grandpa did most of the talking while my friends were there. I was so proud of him and amazed at how respectfully quiet my buddies were. Mom had to chase them home at supper time. As they left they shook Grandpa's hand again and said to me:

"Martin, he's really great!"

"Can we come back?"

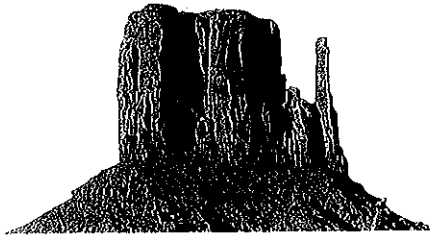
But after they left, Mom said, "No more visitors for a while, Martin. Grandpa won't admit it, but his strength hasn't returned."

That evening Grandpa called me to his room before he went to sleep. "Tomorrow," he said, "when you come home, it will be time to give you the medicine bag."

I felt a hard squeeze from where my heart is supposed to be and was scared, but I answered, "OK, Grandpa."

All night I had weird dreams about thunder and lightning on a high hill. From a distance I heard the slow beat of a drum. When I woke up in the morning I felt as if I hadn't slept at all. At school it seemed as if the day would never end and, when it finally did, I ran home.

Grandpa was in his room, sitting on the bed. "My father in his early manhood," Grandpa began, "made a vision quest to find a spirit guide for his life. You cannot understand how it was in that time, when the great Teton Sioux were first made to stay on the reservation. There was a strong need for guidance from *Wakantanka*, the Great Spirit. But too many of the young men were filled with despair and hatred. But my father held to the old ways.



**Did You Know?**

A *butte* (būt) is an isolated, flat-topped land formation. It is a hill that has been worn down by the wind and rain.

“He carefully prepared for his quest with a purifying bath and then he went alone to a high butte top to fast and pray. After

three days he received his **sacred** dream—in which he found the white man’s iron. He did not understand his vision of finding something belonging to

the white people, for in that time they were the enemy. When he came down from the butte to cleanse himself at the stream below, he found the remains of a campfire and the broken shell of an iron kettle. This was a sign which reinforced his dream. He took a piece of the iron for his medicine bag, which he had made of elk skin years before.

“He returned to his village, where he told his dream to the wise old men of the tribe. They gave him the name *Iron Shell*, but they did not understand the meaning of the dream. This first Iron Shell kept the piece of iron with him at all times and believed it gave him protection from the evils of those unhappy days.

“Then a terrible thing happened to Iron Shell. He and several other young men were taken from their homes by the soldiers and sent far away to a white man’s boarding school. One day it was his turn to work in the school’s blacksmith shop. As he walked into the place he knew that his medicine had brought him there to learn and work with the white man’s iron.

“Iron Shell became a blacksmith and worked at the trade when he returned to the reservation. All of his life he treasured the medicine bag. When he was old, and I was a man, he gave it to me, for no one made the vision quest any more.”

**Comprehension Check**

Reread the boxed passage. What does Grandpa’s father put in his medicine bag?

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**Literary Element**

**Theme** Reread the highlighted sentences. What does the medicine bag mean to Grandpa?

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**Word Power**

**sacred** (sā’ krid) *adj.* holy; worthy of great respect

## English Coach

*Sage* is a plant that has sweet-smelling leaves. The Sioux think the plant is sacred because of its healing powers. *Sage* can also mean "wise." Underline another word on this page with more than one meaning. Write the word and its definitions below.

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## Connect to the Text

Reread the boxed paragraph. If you were Martin, how would you feel about wearing the medicine bag? Would you be proud? Why or why not?

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Grandpa quit talking and I stared in disbelief as he covered his face with his hands. His shoulders were shaking with quiet sobs and I looked away until he began to speak again.

"I kept the bag until my son, your mother's father, was a man and had to leave us to fight in the war across the ocean. I gave him the bag, for I believed it would protect him in battle, but he did not take it with him. He was afraid that he would lose it. He died in a faraway place."

Again Grandpa was still and I felt his grief around me.

"My son," he went on after clearing his throat, "had only a daughter and it is not proper for her to know of these things."

He unbuttoned his shirt, pulled out the leather pouch, and lifted it over his head.

"In the bag," he said as he opened it and removed two objects, "is the broken shell of the iron kettle, a pebble from the butte, and a piece of the sacred sage."

"After the bag is yours you must put a piece of prairie sage within and never open it again until you pass it on to your son." He replaced the pebble and the piece of iron, and tied the bag.

I closed my eyes and waited for him to slip it over my head. But he spoke.

"No, you need not wear it." He placed the soft leather bag in my right hand and closed my other hand over it. "It would not be right to wear it in this time and place where no one will understand. Put it safely away until you are again on the reservation. Wear it then, when you replace the sacred sage."

"Go," he said, "I will sleep now."

"Thank you, Grandpa," I said softly and left with the bag in my hands.

That night Mom and Dad took Grandpa to the hospital. Two weeks later I stood alone on the lonely prairie of the reservation and put the sacred sage in my medicine bag.



*Boy on Edge of Chasm*, 1993 (detail). Kam Mak. Oil on panels, 14 x 10½ in. Collection of the artist.

**What is the attitude of the boy in this painting? How is he like Martin at the end of the story?**

## Literary Element

**Theme** Reread the highlighted sentence. When Martin visits the reservation, he does what Grandpa told him to do and puts the sage in the bag. What does this say about Martin?

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## Respond to Literature

### The *Medicine Bag*

#### **A** Comprehension Check

Answer the following questions in the spaces provided.

1. Why does Grandpa come to visit Martin's family?

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2. How do Cheryl and Martin react when they see their grandfather?

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3. What does Grandpa want Martin to do with the medicine bag?

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#### **B** Reading Skills

Answer the following questions in the spaces provided.

1. **Question** What question can you ask yourself while reading that would help you understand Martin's attitude toward his grandfather?

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2. **Identifying Assumptions** What assumptions does Martin make about how his family feels when Grandpa says he is lonesome?

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3. **Identifying Assumptions** How does Martin assume his friends will respond toward Grandpa? Is he right? How do his friends react to Grandpa?

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## Respond to Literature

### **C** Word Power

Complete each sentence below, using one of the words in the box.

procession    fatigue    reluctantly    descendants  
sheepishly    discomfort    sacred

1. Many people come to pay their respects to the site because they believe it is \_\_\_\_\_.
2. After running in the marathon race, \_\_\_\_\_ took over my body and I slept for nine hours.
3. The school band marched in the \_\_\_\_\_ down Elm Street.
4. It was such a \_\_\_\_\_ to sit in the car for five hours.
5. My sister \_\_\_\_\_ took the medicine, which tasted awful.
6. There are people who claim to be \_\_\_\_\_ of George Washington living in the United States today.
7. When I asked my brother if he had seen my backpack, he \_\_\_\_\_ admitted that he took it.

## D Literary Element: Theme

Read the passage below from "The Medicine Bag." As you read, think about what the sentences reveal about the theme of the story that people should respect their culture and try to preserve it. Then answer the questions that follow.

I closed my eyes and waited for him to slip it over my head.<sup>1</sup> But he spoke.<sup>2</sup>

"No, you need not wear it."<sup>3</sup> He placed the soft leather bag in my right hand and closed my other hand over it.<sup>4</sup> "It would not be right to wear it in this time and place where no one will understand."<sup>5</sup> Put it safely away until you are again on the reservation.<sup>6</sup> Wear it then, when you replace the sacred sage."<sup>7</sup>

1. How do sentences 1–5 show that Grandpa knows life is different away from the reservation?

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2. How do sentences 6–7 show that Grandpa expects Martin to carry on the tradition of wearing the medicine bag?

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## Respond to Literature

### **E** Journal Entry

Imagine that you are Martin. You keep a journal in which you write about things that have happened and how you feel. Write journal entries describing the day Grandpa gave you the medicine bag and the day you put the sacred sage in the medicine bag.

*Tuesday:*

*Grandpa asked me to see him today. He wanted to give me the medicine bag. I ran home from school. When I entered Grandpa's room, \_\_\_\_\_*

\_\_\_\_\_

*I felt \_\_\_\_\_*

\_\_\_\_\_

*Saturday:*

*It has been two weeks since Grandpa died. Today, we traveled to the reservation. When we got there, \_\_\_\_\_*

\_\_\_\_\_

*I felt \_\_\_\_\_*

\_\_\_\_\_



## Assessment

Fill in the circle next to each correct answer.

1. Where does Grandpa live?
  - A. on a reservation
  - B. in a big city
  - C. in a hospital
  - D. in a village
2. Why does Grandpa assume that he will be a burden on his family?
  - A. He thinks he is going to die in their house.
  - B. He knows they will have to take care of him.
  - C. He thinks his old ways will embarrass them.
  - D. He thinks that Martin will have to give up his room.
3. What is the **best** question to ask while reading to understand what happens after Grandpa gives Martin the medicine bag?
  - A. What is inside the bag?
  - B. When does Grandpa die?
  - C. What does Martin do after Grandpa dies?
  - D. How does Martin act around his friends?
4. What does the theme of "The Medicine Bag" reveal to us?
  - A. Old things have no value.
  - B. Things always change for the better.
  - C. We should be proud of our culture.
  - D. Life is too short.
5. If you had taken a long, difficult trip, what would you feel?
  - A. fatigue
  - B. sacred
  - C. sheepishly
  - D. procession

# Wrap-up

## Compare and Contrast

**Theme** is an important literary element in “The Treasure of Lemon Brown” and “The Medicine Bag.” Although the themes in these two short stories are different, they both are about boys learning an important lesson about what is truly valuable in a person’s life. Think about the themes in both stories. Think about what the characters value most. Finally, think about how these values influence the characters and their relationships with others.

In the left and right columns below, write the themes of “The Treasure of Lemon Brown” and “The Medicine Bag.” In the middle column, explain what the themes have in common. An example has been provided.

“The Treasure of Lemon Brown”	Alike	“The Medicine Bag”
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Both themes show that how a person lives and what a person respects are the most valuable “treasure” that a person owns.</li> </ul>	