

The River Trader

“Grab on Claudio. What are you doing? We can’t lose it.” I am straining to be heard above the deafening roar of the engine. But he just gawks at me. His eyes are wide and his face is pale.

Claudio is only seven and small for his age. Some might even call him scrawny. But there are no excuses out here. Our family depends on us. I glare at him as he hesitates. His knuckles are white from gripping the hook. The passenger boat churns up the water as it carves its way down the Amazon to Belém. Our canoe feels fragile, like a toy. We will be left behind if he does not act soon.

I grip the oars and steer our craft even closer to the ferry. At last, Claudio launches into action. He throws the hook out and catches the speeding craft. As the rope goes tight, we lurch forward. I have no control any more and we whip dangerously close to the engine. The end of our little canoe disappears into the dark water. Water reaches Claudio’s waist. His thin shorts are sodden and the water froths and swirls around him. I try to avoid his big brown eyes which look helplessly at me. We both know that the propellers are not far away. Instead, I concentrate on what I have to do. I pull the rope firmly, passing one hand over the other, hauling us closer and closer to safety. Finally, we can reach the metal railings. I tie the canoe securely, its nose rising high out of the river. Then, we clamber on to the lower deck, laughing to shake off our recent terror.

A sea of multi-coloured hammocks awaits us. The passengers are cocooned inside like caterpillars. They chat or play cards: anything to fill the days that it will take to get where they are going. There are no roads around here so these boats are the only way.

“Açaí, cacao fruit, bananas,” I shout, displaying my kaleidoscope of rainforest treats for them to admire and hopefully buy.

We sell a little. People are glad for something to do. We might have sold more but we have been spotted. A stern-looking crewman is heading our way. We can’t hang around. I shove the notes deep into my pocket and with a jerk of my head, signal to Claudio that it’s time to go. We dart back to our canoe, jump back on board and release the rope. The river snatches us and the ferry leaves



us behind as it charges onwards to where the Amazon empties into the sea. I grin to Claudio He has passed his first test and before long will be an old-hand at this job. But the job is not yet complete. Every minute we were on the ferry took us further and further from home. Our tiny house, perched on stilts in the forest, is now a long way upstream. We will have to paddle against the current to get back. Unless we can hitch a ride on a boat travelling the other way, it will be a long, exhausting journey before we can collapse into our own hammocks. I finger the few notes again: at least we will eat tomorrow.

INFERENCE FOCUS

1. How is the narrator speaking in the first sentence? How do you know?
2. How can we tell Claudio is afraid at the start of the story?
3. How can we tell that the narrator is experienced at river trading?
4. What is the mood on the boat?
5. How can we tell that the river traders may not be allowed on the boats?

VIPERS QUESTIONS

V

What does the word *scrawny* suggest about Claudio?

E

How has the writer made the passenger boat sound large?

V

Which word is closest in meaning to 'wet'?

R

What are the children selling?

E

Find an example of a simile. What is the effect of this?