

Old Foot

“Keep your eyes peeled for The Matriarch,’ the park ranger said. “She’s out there somewhere in the forest, watching us I bet.”

I turned towards the voice and took in his weathered skin, scruffy beard and the mischievous glint in his eye. I was small for my age and fed up of being treated like a gullible little girl. It was enough of a pain having to tag along with my parents and little brother on this trip. I’d rather have stayed in Jo’burg and hung out with my friends than come here to The Cape to the middle of nowhere where trees were the only entertainment. Wilderness stretched in either direction: forest-clad hills sweeping to the horizon and down towards the coast.

“The Matriarch,” I said, a sceptical eyebrow raised in a way I hoped gave an air of grown-up cynicism. “What sort of bogeyman is that then?”

“Ahhh a city girl? Not from round here are you?”

I shook my head, conceding the point but inwardly congratulating myself for his assessment of me.

“Some people call her Oupoot which means Old Foot, though she’s got another twenty years left in her yet they reckon. She’s the last of her kind: a solitary bush elephant hiding out in the forest now that all her herd are gone. No one’s actually seen her but there are photos from camera traps we’ve got out there.” He gazed wistfully out across the landscape and the weathered skin suddenly struck me as almost like the hide of an elephant.

“Isn’t an elephant a bit big to stay hidden?”

He chuckled and I bristled at being laughed at. “It’s a vast forest and she’s had years of practice. The cape elephants had no choice but to retreat into the trees when the Europeans first arrived and set about hunting them to near extinction. Somehow they adapted and settled into a life as bush elephants. Now there’s only one left. Poor old girl.”

I feigned disinterest but my curiosity was piqued and as we drove on, I scanned the bush wondering where the mysterious reclusive creature could be.

At the lodge, my parents busied themselves unpacking whilst my brother scampered from room to room opening every cupboard and drawer, exclaiming at everything he found. I was alone at last and drifted out into the sticky air. The sun was low in the sky, setting it on fire with shades of orange and pink. A cacophony of chirps, pips and trills sung through the trees. The forest was alive



and as noisy as any city street.

I ventured under the canopy where darkness was spreading like ink. Branches broke under my feet and sent birds flying into the sky. I paused to watch them go, and as I stood fixed, another branch cracked up ahead. There was something there. The foliage shifted; the leaves quivered. I peered into the undergrowth, straining to make sense of the tangle of trees and bushes. A shape loomed large and piece by piece I put it together: a sloping back, a long swaying trunk, curved tusks. Was this Old Foot? Then as my eyes watched, the sloping back melted until it was no more than a leaning tree trunk, the trunk became a swinging vine, the tusks nothing but broken branches. My mind was playing tricks on me. And yet, as I turned back to the light of the lodge, I felt sure that I saw two gleaming pinpricks in the darkness, like a lonely pair of eyes watching me go.

INFERENCE FOCUS

1. Find and copy a group of words which show that the narrator is irritated by the ranger's response to her confusion.
2. Find and copy a group of words which suggest that the ranger dreams of seeing the elephant.
3. How does the narrator's brother feel about the trip? How do you know?
4. How does the narrator's attitude to the trip change over the course of the story?
5. How old do you think the narrator is? Give justification from the text.

VIPERS QUESTIONS

R

Where do the narrator and her family live?

V

What does gullible mean?

V

What does reclusive mean?

E

In the story, the narrator is keen to portray herself in a way which does not always match her thoughts and feelings. Give an example of how this is shown.

P

What do you think will happen next?