

**SOLEM
SHORTS**

FOREST OF FOLLY

MATTHEW SOLEM

SOLEM SHORTS: FOREST OF FOLLY

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One day four boys met to play in a nearby wood. There was Glutton, Fearful, Gullible, and Reasonable. The boys were good friends and had a wonderful day of exploring planned.

A ways into a friendly game of tag, Glutton found himself hungry. Not wanting to miss out on any of the action, he decided to forage in his present location. To his delight, he quickly found a patch of mushrooms growing at the base of a mighty oak.

The other boys noticed Glutton had stopped playing and went over to investigate. They found him plucking a particularly plump mushroom from the soil.

“What are you doing?” Reasonable asked.

“Isn’t it obvious,” Glutton replied. “I’m hungry. I’m going to eat this mushroom.”

“What if it’s poisonous?” Fearful quickly cried.

“Oh, you worry too much, Fearful,” came Glutton’s reply.

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“I think Fearful is right,” Reasonable said. “That mushroom could be poisonous. Why not search a bit more? We can probably find some berries. I think I saw a patch earlier.”

“Gahh,” Glutton scoffed. “I’m hungry now and I already went to the trouble of finding these. Stop trying to dissuade me.” With that, he gobbled up the mushroom as quick as he could. After swallowing, he let out a sigh of satisfaction. “See, they’re just fine. Why don’t you come have some too? They’re delicious!”

Glutton got down on all fours and started to pick more mushrooms from the patch, gobbling them down. After a moment of consideration, Gullible started going over to join him. Fearful and Reasonable stayed put.

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Gullible had just managed to pick his first mushroom when suddenly Glutton's fervent munching stopped. He stood up, twisting to look at his friends, a panicked look on his face. He choked for a moment, grasping at his neck, before he went still, falling to the ground with a loud thump.

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“I was right to have been afraid!” Fearful cried.

“I’m glad I didn’t eat mine,” Gullible said, throwing his mushroom to the ground.

Reasonable checked on his large friend and sadly declared him dead. “Well, I suppose we should head home and tell his mother what’s happened.”

The others nodded in agreement. They all looked around, trying to get their bearings.

“Oh no!” Fearful quickly cried. “We were having so much fun in our game that we lost our way! How will we get home?”

“Surly we’ll die out here too!” Gullible added.

Reasonable looked for a moment longer, then said, “We may be lost, but if we use our wits, we’ll make it home yet. See there?” he asked, pointing to a spot through the trees. “That’s a path. It’s not one I’m familiar with, but if we follow it, we might find someone to help us.”

Fearful and Gullible stopped their crying and looked where he had pointed. “We’re not lost yet!” they cried.

The trio found their way to the path and started down it, choosing their direction by the position of the sun at Reasonable’s suggestion.

A while passed with them walking until at last, they came upon a clearing with a quaint house. The path continued, but they decided to stop and see if anyone was home.

Reasonable and Gullible walked up to the door with Fearful hanging behind. Gullible knocked three times.

“Just one minute!” came the reply of a crackled female voice.

While they were waiting, there was the sound of gulping liquid, then a flash of light escaped through the windows and through the cracks in the door. Fearful jumped back at the sight, Reasonable took a considered step back, and Gullible stayed at the door.

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A moment later the door was opened by a smiling young woman in fair clothes. “What are three children doing out alone in the middle of this wood?” she asked with a voice as sweet as syrup.

“We were playing, but in our fun, we became lost,” Gullible quickly explained, enamored with the sweet woman. “Would you be able to help us?”

“Oh, poor children, of course! The path you came on continues to a fork that leads to three towns. What is the name of yours?”

“Hilltown,” came Gullible’s reply.

“Hilltown is one of the three and only a short distance from the fork,” the young woman said, smiling. “Your journey will easily be complete before sundown. Oh, but you must be hungry! And thirsty too. You must come in and rest for a while before you continue.”

Gullible smiled. “Yes! We are quite hungry. A rest would be very nice indeed.” He started to walk through the door, but Reasonable caught him and held him back.

“Kind woman, before we come in, would it be alright if I asked some questions?”

Her mouth smiled, though her eyes did not. “Oh, of course dear! What would you like to know?”

“When we first knocked, I heard the crackled voice of an old crone. Are you the only one who lives in this cottage?”

“Why of course I am! When I first answered, my voice was crackled because my throat was bone dry. I don’t make much conversation out here living alone, so I hadn’t noticed. What else would you like to know?”

“After you told us to wait, we heard a strange gulping noise, then there was a flash of light. What was that?”

“Well, my throat was dry, so naturally, I drank a glass of water. And the flash? That was me starting a fire for my oven so I might make you a pie and

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heat some water for tea. I try to be a good host,” she slyly replied with a warm smile.

“Thank you for your reply. Before we come in, we need to discuss how long we might stay so we can make our curfew. Pardon us for a moment.”

The fair woman nodded with a slight smile.

Reasonable gathered Gullible and Fearful a couple paces back to talk. “I think we should be glad to have this woman’s advice and make haste,” he said quickly. “I fear she is lying to us and is in fact a witch.”

Fearful’s eyes grew wide. “I was afraid the whole time! I knew I was right to be,” he said, eyes darting.

Gullible’s mind was on the woman’s soft features, warm voice, and the prospect of tea and a hot meal. He shook his head. “The woman’s explanations of the oddities make sense. Anyway, it would be rude to refuse her kindness. I’m staying and I won’t be swayed.” With that, Gullible turned and walked up to the woman. “My friends need to be off for home, but I would like to stay and rest a while.”

The woman looked at Fearful and Reasonable with a furrowed brow, but happy to have even one accept her offer, she quickly led Gullible inside.

“Safe travels!” she exclaimed, shutting the door.

Fearful was eager to get on, but Reasonable held him back. “We best see what becomes of our friend,” he insisted.

And so, the two of them hid in a bush by the kitchen window and peered inside.

They could clearly see their friend at the kitchen table, a large grin on his face as he watched the young woman prepare his tea.

She presently brought it to him, and he drank it quickly. The young woman looked on eagerly as he drank.

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Not long passed and Gullible started to nod off. The young woman gave a wicked grin and said a magic word. Her potion was reversed and with a flash of light, she turned into an old hag of a witch. She rubbed her hands together with delight, opened her large oven, and tossed Gullible into the pan waiting inside.



Reasonable and Fearful quickly ran from their position at the window and continued on the path just as fast as they could. They kept running for nearly an hour until finally Fearful's legs gave out from exhaustion. He was already quite skinny and frail, and the events of the day had worn him out terribly.

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Reasonable stopped, concerned for his friend. “We must get you something to eat and drink quickly, or I fear I’ll finish this journey alone!” he exclaimed.

Fearful offered no response and simply lay on the path, huffing from exertion.

Reasonable ran off to find something to eat and quickly found a patch of wild blueberries. *If only Glutton would have waited to find some of these! They are abundant in this wood,* he thought, shaking his head.

Reasonable hurried back and offered them to Fearful, but he refused them. “You must eat these berries!” Reasonable insisted. “They will return your strength and quench your thirst.”

Weakly, Fearful replied, “You mean to kill me! I saw what happened to Glutton. The food in this wood is poisoned!”

“Don’t be ridiculous! I have eaten these berries my whole life! If you do not eat them, you will surely die.” Reasonable then put the berries in front of Fearful’s lips, but he recoiled from them with all his remaining strength and died.

Reasonable looked on his poor friend with pity, shed a tear, then continued on the path all alone.

The shadows were just beginning to lengthen when he arrived home. He quickly told his friend’s parents what had become of them to their great sorrow and returned home for much needed rest.

His mother, Grace, prepared him a soothing meal of steaming shepherd’s pie and listened to his woes, comforting him all the way. His father, Truth, commended him on his wise decisions and for trying his best to help his poor friends.

After dinner, his parents tucked him in for a much-needed rest. With the lessons learned from the careful instruction of his parents and his harrowing

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day in the woods, he lived a happy and prosperous life, having many children and earning the respect and love of his neighbors.

THE END

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Matthew Solem grew up in Fargo, North Dakota. He lives there with his wife. He is not a New York Times best-selling author (yet). He probably did something important once. Matt has been featured by more than one media outlet including his grandmother's local newspaper (she wrote the article). He enjoys water sports, snow skiing, table tennis, photography, and writing (duh). Matt's other books and new releases can be found at: <https://solemauthor.com/>