

The Third Bear
by Jeff Vandermeer

It made its home in the deep forest near the village of Grommin, and all anyone ever saw of it, before the end, no one really thought of it as a bear, even though the name had stuck, changed by repetition.

The Third Bear came to the forest in mid-summer, and soon most anyone who used the forest trail, day or night, had bits of skin sticking to the saddle. A cobbler gone but for a shredded, bloodied hat. A few of the richest vintners were

The village elder, a man named Horley, held a meeting to decide what to do. It was the end of summer but the winters had always been hard scabble and tough winters, but it was also two hundred years old. It had survived the centuries.

"I can't bring my goods to market," one farmer said, rising in shadow from beneath the thatch. "I can't bring my

Horley laughed, said, "It's worse than that. We can't bring in food from the other side. Not for sure. Not with the

Horley had a sudden vision from months ahead, of winter, of ice gravelly with frozen blood. It made him shiver.

"What about those of us who live outside the village?" another farmer asked. "We need the pasture for grazing

Horley understood the problem; he had been one of those farmers, once. The village had a wall of thick forest

"You may have to pretend it is a time of war and live in the village and go out with a guard," Horley said.

"Is it the witch woman doing this?" Clem the blacksmith asked.

"No," Horley said. "I don't think it's the witch woman."

What Clem and some of the others thought of as a "witch woman," Horley thought of as a crazy person with

"Why did it come?" a woman asked. "Why us?"

No one could answer, least of all Horley. As Horley stared at all of those hopeful, scared, troubled faces,

Clem was the village's strongest man, and after the meeting he volunteered to fight the beast. He had arms

"I'll go, and I'll go willingly," he told Horley. "I've not met the beast I couldn't best. I'll squeeze the 'a' out of

Horley looked into Clem's eyes and could not see even a speck of fear there. This worried Horley.

"Be careful, Clem," Horley said. And, in a whisper, as he hugged the man: "Instruct your son in anything

Fitted in chain mail, leathers, and a metal helmet, carrying an old sword some knight had once left in Grommin, the Third Bear had already been killed or defeated.

"Fools," Horley's wife Rebecca said as they watched the celebration with their two young sons.

Rebecca was younger than Horley by ten years and had come from a village far beyond the forest. Horley

"Perhaps, but it's the happiest anyone's been for a month," Horley said. "Let them have these moments."

"All I can think of is that he's taking one of our best horses out into danger," Rebecca said.

"Would you rather he took a nag?" Horley said, but absent-mindedly. His thoughts were elsewhere.

The vision of winter would not leave him. Each time, it came back to Horley with greater strength, until he

Clem left the path almost immediately, wandered through the underbrush to the heart of the forest, where

Clem had spent so much time beating things into shape that he had not developed a sense of fear, for he

He wandered for some time in the deep growth, where the soft loam of moss muffled the sound of his path.

Eventually, in his circling, meandering trek, Clem came upon a hill with a cave inside. From within the cave

