

FIRST PRIZE
Feeding Time
by Jeremiah Cook

It will be here soon. The last rays of sun start to vanish behind the trees at the edge of the cemetery. I step out of the shadow to linger in the light. The heat difference between the two is stark in October. Mr. Johnson still kneels at his daughter's grave. He can't be here when the creature arrived, or I'll have an extra hole to dig tomorrow.

He looks up at me as I lingered by the old oak, near the fence. His expression says it all. Why aren't you leaving me to grieve in peace? People look at me and see a gravedigger, but my true purpose is keeping them safe from what lurks in the woods.

Conversation isn't my strong suit, but I walk over to him. "Terribly sorry, but the cemetery is closing now."

Anger flashes across his features, but Mr. Johnson gets up. He dusts the fresh dirt and grass from his pants and walks off down the path to the exit. He's lucky he won't see what comes next. There's no stopping the beast. I can only satiate it for a little while, and fresh meat works the best. When I'm sure Mr. Johnson is out of sight, I sink my spade in the grave I finished filling in only three hours before.

The digging goes quickly because I know what's coming. There isn't time to lollygag. There isn't even time for a smoke break, though god knows I need one. I quit the habit at my wife's behest last March, but this is the one night a month I cheat. The sun's still up, but I am deep in the shade now. Autumn's cold winds cut through my thin jacket.

The situation used to be a lot worse than feeding it a corpse on occasion. Native Americans told tales about it penetrating their villages and absconding with whole families. They tried to warn the English settlers about the predator, but their warnings got misinterpreted as threats, and as often happened back then, it led to bloodshed. That only drew the thing closer to the settlers. After a few years of losing their kin, they took the Native Americans' advice and started giving it offerings to keep it from growing too ravenous.

My shovel reaches the coffin. I made sure not to bury the Johnson girl too deep. This is my thirteenth year of feeding the fiend, not my first rodeo. I even worked out a deal with the local mortuary so that they don't fully embalm the folks sent up here. My predecessor tried feeding the thing a poisoned corpse once, and that's why he's my predecessor. The sheriff never did find all the parts of him.

The smell of rot hits my nose as I reveal the deceased to the world again. The poor woman passed in a car accident a week ago. Nothing so heinous as dying young, except maybe the creature. I haul her out of the grave as gently as I can manage. Then I look away as I remove her clothing. This part always makes me sick, but when the thing left ruined pieces of fabric strewn about the forest, people asked too many questions. My body shakes from the increasing cold.

Just as I toss the clothes back into the pit, dirt I'd piled outside falls back in. It's the first indication that the beast's approaching. The last rays of sunlight are extinguished beyond the

horizon, leaving the cemetery in darkness. I look up, but there's no sign of the moon or stars. Weatherman said a storm would be rolling in tonight. Looks like it's nearly here.

Trees crash in the distance, and I decide to fill the grave back in after the body's been taken. I look to the edge of the forest, where the trees tower over the graves, and hear more sounds of foliage being trampled. No more time to wait. I hightail it down the path to my truck. Once inside, I lock the doors and roll up the windows.

My breath fogs up the glass as I monitor the situation. The body is still visible, but I try not to let my eyes focus on it. She's dead, and I'm sure she'll suffer no pain, but the guilt of offering someone's physical remains up for food never goes away.

The thing steps out of the forest.

It's bone-white, standing nearly as tall as the old oak tree. I know it will change into a rust-like color after it feeds. My predecessor hypothesized that was due to the blood it absorbs while eating. The thing reaches out a skeletal hand toward the body but hesitates. Its yellow eyes roll up to lock on me. My hand wanders over to the loaded gun on my passenger seat. I know it won't save me--hundreds have tried shooting it at one time or another. But if the thing decides it wants fresher meat, I won't go out meekly.

Our eyes remain locked, and I avoid letting my gaze drift down to its jagged teeth. Moments seem to stretch into hours. Every ounce of my survival instinct begs me to turn the truck on and floor it, but I resist. In the silence, I can hear ragged breathing outside. The thing's fingers tighten around the body, and it turns around.

When it disappears back into the forest, I let my panic manifest in great gulps of air. It's been years since it noticed me.

The shooting pain in my arm worries me. It might be a heart attack. The creature won't be content unless it's fed regularly.

I haven't trained a replacement yet.

First Prize Jeremiah Dylan Cook, "Feeding Time"

Jeremiah Dylan Cook, author of "Feeding Time," is currently finishing up his Master's in Popular Fiction at Seton Hill University. Before attending Seton Hill, he won the Mario Mezzacappa Memorial Award for Outstanding Achievement in Poetry and Prose while attending St. John's University. He writes short horror fiction and fantasy novels. You can learn more about him at his website, www.jeremiahdylancook.com.