

My Boogie Man

by Mary Lane

Boogie Men weren't supposed to be so mopey. Or at least that's what I'd heard. David wasn't exactly the typical Boogie Man and I don't suppose I was the typical scare, either. He sat cross-legged on the floor of my closet, underneath what was left of my hanging clothes, folding shirts that fell off the hangers.

"You don't have to do that," I said, taking a few dresses to my suitcase.

"I know. I want to. There's not much left around the room to pick at." He gestured to the empty walls with his claw and went back to busy work with the tiny things. "About time you cleaned this closet out. You're disgusting." His fur hung in his eyes.

I smiled. Everything in my drawers and all my knick-knacks were packed in boxes, ready to go to college with me. I would leave with my mom first thing in the morning. David wouldn't be coming.

"Do you want me to give the fur around your eyes a trim before bed tonight? You don't know what your next Scare will be like. He or she might not want to trim your hair."

He didn't answer.

"They certainly won't be as charming as I am."

He picked up a Pringle from under a loose sock. "Or as gross. It's a miracle I've stayed in your closet as long as I have." He said it to be funny, but his voice caught at the end. He dropped the Pringle, turned, and burrowed into the closet with his back to me.

We'd both done well to avoid crying before today and I couldn't stand to see him like this. I crawled on my hands and knees to the closet. "David, come out of there. I...I don't like this any more than you do. But you can't come to college with me. I'll have a roommate and," I took a breath, steeling myself, "this is best for both of us."

No reply.

"We can't have any real future together. You're not allowed to walk around in public and I don't want to stay inside for the rest of my

life. People will wonder why I don't have friends over — because I'll make friends. I totally will. And what if..."

The air stood empty between us for a moment

"What if what?"

"What if...I don't know...what if another *human* actually wants to date me?"

He snarled.

"Do you have any idea what it's like? Enjoying the company of your Boogie Man more than other people? I have no friends. None. This is my chance to make them. To change myself."

I started to cry. He came out and crouched next to me, wrapping his hairy arms around my shoulders. He tucked my head under his chin and I inhaled. I never minded his smell. Kind of like a clean cat.

"These human friends — I get that you need them," he said. "But you won't like them as much as you like me."

I nodded. "That's part of the problem. I'll never want to hang out with anyone else if you follow me everywhere. If you're always there, I'll choose you. We've talked about this..." And we had. There wasn't anything else to say. We sat there in silence a few more minutes.

"Don't forget the book you hide under your mattress and think I don't know about," he said.

I smiled into his arm. "What book?"

"Exactly."

We got up and packed the rest of my room without saying another word. We stole glances at each other here and there, but they didn't last long.

After we finished packing I trimmed the hair on his face, the scissors grazing the area around his eyes. I held the fur in my fingers, careful not to cut too close or break his skin. He bled. Most people didn't know that about Boogie Men. They bled.

He took a shower to get all the loose hair off while I vacuumed the carpet. He came back into my room, toweling the fur on his chest, and smelled like soap.

I looked at the clock. "Mom will be home soon. You better get back in the closet."

He watched me with sad eyes. "I'll miss you."

I wanted to say it back. But that would hurt and then I'd start crying and then he'd start crying and that's all we needed — a crying girl and her Boogie Man. "I'll see you later tonight."

That evening, I crawled into bed and pulled the covers down next to me, staring into the closet shadows. "You coming? One last time?" I tried to smile.

He bumped around in there and came out. "I'll never forget my first night here. I did a *great* job scaring you."

I made a noise in the back of my throat. "I was way too old to be scared of the Boogie Man. Don't know what your agency was thinking."

"I know. And you were my first scare. I was just a stupid kid, myself." He laughed and crawled into bed behind me, nestling under the covers.

The memory played back in my mind. I'd come home after volleyball practice and heard a bumping in my closet followed by a series of *oofs* and grumbles. Instead of being scared like any normal girl, I decided to just take care of it, myself. My mom was still at work so I grabbed the baseball bat she kept behind the front door and beat on the closet, trying to sound as tough as I could.

"Whoever is in there — I have a gun and called the police. My mom will be home any second now (she wouldn't). If you leave now, I'll let you walk out of here. You perve," I added for emphasis.

Nothing happened.

"I'll give you to the count of three and then start shooting. One, two -"

A muffled voice came from behind the door. "Don't shoot! Don't shoot!" he said. "This is my first time. It's a little harder than I thought it would be. And what did I just stick my claw in?"

Claw? I opened the closet and saw his furry feet jutting out from under a pile of clothes. Curious, I lowered the bat and took a wary step into the closet, shifting a row of dresses over on the rack. He

sat there - this lumbering creature — repulsed by a red, gooey substance now stuck in his hair.

I gasped.

He offered me his claw. His eyebrows gathered together in question.

“Um...probably a fruit roll-up that fell out of my pants.”

He moved his clawed hand in and out of a fist, stretching the goo.

“You ate half of it and put it in your jeans?”

“Yes. Now,” I raised the bat again, “What are you?”

“I’m...well...I’m your Boogie Man.”

We stared at each other.

“Boo?”

I giggled.

Now with him here, the night before we would leave each other, tears streamed down my face. “You were meant to be my Boogie Man.”

He put his face into my hair and positioned his body behind mine. I hugged his arm, putting his claw against my heart, and wiped the wet off my cheek.

When the sun came through the window in the morning and hit my face, I didn't feel him beside me and knew he'd gone. The light filled my room. Too bright, but it warmed my skin. Tears filled my eyes and fell softly down my cheeks. My mother called my name from down the hall.

“Be out in a minute,” I said, still weeping. “I’m not quite ready.”

Longing hit me in the chest and I clutched the pillow he slept on last night, inhaling his scent.

Clean cat and soap.

