

The Boogeyman

By Jeani Rector

The scent of pine cleaner was there; faint, but still detectible. Since the recent cleaning, the dust bunnies had not yet had time to gather again. The wooden floor was smooth and bare, except for an occasional sock or two.

There was no boogeyman under the bed.

At least, not now.

Kenny Willis took his head out from under the bed and then got off his knees to stand erect. He was not quite four feet tall, and he wore his blue jammies that had pictures of footballs all over. He would be going into third grade next fall, and he was proud of the fact that he was a big boy. But there were still some things that even a big kid couldn't take chances about.

So next he had to check the closet.

Carefully he felt the cold brass doorknob and gripped it tightly. Kenny pulled and the closet door slowly swung open. He held his breath for a moment as he peeked inside. The closet was almost worse than under the bed, because the hanging clothes resembled silhouettes of people. And it was dark, crowded, and hard to see past everything. A boogeyman could easily hide inside a closet.

So Kenny took extra time and special care to ensure that nothing was lurking inside the dark depths of his closet.

Finally satisfied that he was really alone in his room, Kenny was ready for bed.

But sleep was long in coming. He had too many memories to think about; yet the memories revolved around a focal point of which he was unsure. Every night, Kenny lay awake for a long while, trying to remember the part he had forgotten. It was like a blind spot; he could see everywhere except exactly where he wanted to see.

He only knew that one day a while back, something had happened to him. Something bad. But he couldn't pinpoint exactly what that something was.

Kenny remembered things that led up to the bad event. He remembered his father shouting at his mother in the kitchen. He remembered his mother crying.

But most of all, the bad event taught him that there was a boogeyman in the world. The boogeyman had been trying to get him.

And that was all Kenny could remember. So he didn't know if the boogeyman was still after him or not.

That's why he always checked his room before he went to sleep. He needed to always keep watch for the boogeyman. Just in case.

Finally Kenny drifted off to sleep, and dreamed the same dream he had so often these nights. He was back in the kitchen that awful time when his father was screaming at his mother. He could see his mother crying and cowering against the sink. Kenny was standing in the doorway of the kitchen, watching and feeling both fear and dread.

But the dream suddenly changed to something he hadn't done before. He could see himself running from the boogeyman. He was outside, and it was night. Kenny was running for the woods at the edge

of his yard. He felt absolute terror, because somehow he knew, he just knew, that if the boogeyman caught him, he would die a horrible death. Kenny was running for his life.

And then there was red...lots of the color red...and then Kenny woke up at this point just as he did every time he had this dream.

It was now that the night terrors came. Every time Kenny woke from the dream, he felt frightened and vulnerable. He was all alone in his room, or was he? Had the boogeyman managed to sneak in while he was sleeping?

Too afraid to get up and turn on the light, Kenny was immobile. He lay, sweating and shaking, underneath the covers that were drawn up over his chin to his nose. He strained his ears to listen to any noise that could be something taking a breath, a footstep; any sound that could mean the presence of the boogeyman right there in his dark room.

He heard a creak as the house settled in its foundation. He heard a branch scratch against his window in the night breeze. He heard the heating system kick on. But he didn't hear the boogeyman.

And Kenny lay in his bed, his mind filled with fear and foreboding, until in the way that only children can do, he managed to drift back into sleep.

When the morning sun shined through his window, Kenny's first thought was that oh no! His mother forgot to wake him and now he'd be late for school. But then he remembered that it was summer vacation, so he relaxed. Leisurely he decided to sleep late, but then suddenly got out of bed because he smelled bacon frying.

His mom only worked part time so she was able to make breakfast in the morning. Later on in the day, she'd drop him off at the neighbor's house before she'd go on to her job at a dentist's office. His mom didn't have to work on anything gross like people's mouths; she just kept the books and typed up the invoices.

His dad worked full time, so he was gone every weekday by the time Kenny woke up, even on school days.

Kenny left his bedroom without bothering to check under his bed or to look into his closet, because everyone knew that the boogeyman only came out at night. Mornings, especially sunny ones like this, were entirely safe.

When he climbed down the stairs and reached the kitchen, Kenny asked, "Is the bacon cooked the way I like it?"

"Well good morning to you too, young man," his mother smiled. "Have I ever let you down about the bacon?"

Kenny liked the way his mother was always so cheerful in the morning. Most of the time his dad was cheerful too...except for that night in the kitchen...but today was not the day to think about that time. And today was certainly not the time to think the bad thing that happened. Not that he could remember exactly what the bad thing was, anyway.

No. Today was sunny, there was no boogeyman, and there was crisp bacon for breakfast. There was no bad thing today.

When the time arrived for Kenny to be dropped off at the neighbor's house, Kenny was still in a good mood. Not that he enjoyed being babysat by old Mrs. Taylor; she was a busybody that always seemed overly interested in any neighborhood gossip. Often Mrs. Taylor would press him for news about his family. And then Mrs. Taylor had the nerve to make him swear to never tell his mother that she asked so many questions.

“How are you today, little boy?” Mrs. Taylor asked Kenny after his mother had driven off. For one thing, Kenny certainly didn’t consider himself a little boy. For another thing, Kenny knew what the next question would be, and sure enough, Mrs. Taylor asked, “And how are your parents doing? Are they getting along with each other these days?”

Kenny, of course, would answer the same way every time. “Good. Everybody’s good.”

But this time, Mrs. Taylor didn’t follow the script. “What’s your mom going to do about your father’s brother?”

“What?” Kenny wasn’t sure he had heard right. “What brother?”

“You know,” Mrs. Taylor said. “Your uncle.”

“I don’t have an uncle.”

Mrs. Taylor raised her eyebrows but said nothing more.

Later, when Kenny’s mom came to pick him up, he was full of questions. As she began bustling around in the kitchen to prepare dinner, he asked, “Do I have an uncle?”

His mother stopped in her tracks. “I’m surprised that you’re asking,” she said slowly.

“Well, Mrs. Taylor says so.”

“Oh that old busy-body,” Mrs. Willis said. “God, I wish she’d butt out of everything. It’s not enough that I pay her good money to watch you. She has to have a daily soap opera report, too.”

Kenny figured he hadn’t heard an answer to his question. “Well, do I have an uncle?”

His mother looked at him for a moment. “You really don’t remember, do you?”

“Remember about what?”

Mrs. Willis ignored that and said, “Yes, your father has a brother, so you have an uncle. But Uncle Johnny made some mistakes in his life. So he’s been away paying for those mistakes.”

“How much did his mistakes cost?” asked Kenny.

His mother laughed. “Just a couple of years out of his life. That’s what your dad and I were fighting about that night you saw him yelling at me in the kitchen. I don’t want your father’s brother anywhere near us. Hey, why don’t you help me make these hamburgers? Go get the buns out of the freezer.”

Kenny could tell that the subject of his uncle was closed.

He sat at the kitchen table, waiting for dinner. After a few minutes, his mother sat with him. “Let’s wait until your father gets home before we start to eat,” she said.

And so they waited. And waited.

After about a half an hour, Mrs. Willis rose from her chair and wordlessly began serving him his dinner. She sat across from him and ate silently.

Kenny’s father didn’t come home for dinner, nor was he home when Kenny got ready for bed. His mother came in Kenny’s room to tuck him into bed, and she seemed tense and distracted. She turned off the lamp that was always perched on Kenny’s bed stand.

Kenny didn’t want her to leave. He knew that once he was alone in his bedroom again, the night terrors would begin. And it was something he couldn’t share with his mother, especially since she seemed so worried about his dad. Kenny felt he needed to keep his fears to himself.

As soon as his mother closed his bedroom door, Kenny reached to turn the lamp at his bedside back on. He began the ritual all over again. First he crawled out of bed and then got down on his knees. He leaned over and checked underneath his bed for the boogeyman. The scent of pine smelled fainter this time and the dust bunnies were already beginning to congregate once again. But the floor under the bed contained no boogeyman.

Next, of course, was the closet. Kenny hated checking the closet because that would be the most logical place for a boogeyman to hide. Odds were if there were a boogeyman in his bedroom, it'd be hiding in the closet.

He was always afraid to check the closet. Wouldn't it be horrible to open the door and meet the boogeyman face to face? Why, it would stop his heart.

But the only other alternative would be to not check the closet. If he didn't check the closet, then the result of that could be that the boogeyman might creep out at night to grab him while he slept.

So Kenny stood up, and then hesitatingly made his way towards the closet. For seemingly the millionth time, he carefully felt the cold brass doorknob and gripped it tightly. Kenny pulled and the closet door slowly swung open. He held his breath for a moment as he peeked into the closet.

And then his insides turned to ice and he was unable to take a breath. He felt a warm stream of urine wet his blue football jammies, and he could hear a loud thumping in his ears that he didn't realize was his own heartbeat.

The boogeyman was crouched low in the corner of his closet.

The boogeyman had come for Kenny Willis.

And the boogeyman was red.

Kenny turned to try to run. He tried to scream but he was so terrified that no noise came out of his mouth. In his complete terror, he stumbled and fell. Finally he opened his mouth and screamed as loud as he could. He was immobile with fear, lying on the floor, shrieking.

He could hear his mother thudding up the stairs, running.

And she threw his bedroom door open, and ran to pick Kenny up off the floor.

"My God Kenny," she cried, "what's wrong? What's the matter?"

She looked almost as frightened as he was.

"The boogeyman's here," Kenny sobbed in her arms. "We gotta get out of here before he gets us."

"The boogeyman? What boogeyman? Kenny, there's no such thing as a boogeyman. You've been dreaming."

"No!" Kenny sobbed. "It's true! He's in my closet!"

"Kenny, there is no boogeyman. Calm down."

"I told you! The boogeyman's in my closet!"

"I'll look in your closet and show you that there's nothing there."

Mrs. Willis got up and walked to the closet. Kenny had left the closet door slightly ajar. She took the doorknob in her hand and pulled it completely open.

The boogeyman was still there, crouched in the corner and drenched in blood.

Kenny shrieked at the top of his lungs. His mother had gone into the closet and was touching the boogeyman, shaking him.

Kenny heard her tell the boogeyman, "Wake up! Oh my God, wake up!"

But then his mother rushed out of the closet. She ran to pick Kenny up, leaving the closet door open. She carried Kenny, as he continued to shriek with fright, out of the bedroom and down the stairs.

She put him on the downstairs living room couch. "Baby it's okay," she told her son. "I need to phone an ambulance. I need to get some help. Please Kenny, listen to me. Stop crying. Nothing can hurt you while I'm here with you. Here, come into the kitchen with me so I can use the phone."

She took Kenny with her as she went into the kitchen. She picked up the phone, but then put it back down. “Kenny,” she said slowly, “we need to go next door to Mrs. Taylor’s house and use her phone. Ours is broken.”

Kenny had seen enough television to know what that meant. “Somebody cut our phone line, didn’t they?”

Ignoring that, Mrs. Willis said, “We’re going next door to see Mrs. Taylor.”

But then the lights went out.

“Mom, I can’t see!” cried Kenny. “The boogeyman is going to get me!”

“Kenny, be quiet,” his mom said and Kenny noticed that she sounded funny. He could tell from her tone that something else was wrong besides the phone lines.

“What?” he asked, but then suddenly he heard it too.

He could hear breathing and then footsteps, and it was not his mother, who was standing still and listening.

The boogeyman was in the kitchen.

He was coming to get them both.

He couldn’t see in the kitchen that was as dark as a tomb. He could hear and almost feel that something had grabbed his mother, yanking her away when just a second ago she had been right at his side.

“Kenny!” his mother screamed. “Run! Go out the back door and run!”

“Mom!” he shrieked. He was rooted in place.

Kenny could hear a shuffling and some sort of struggle. But he still couldn’t see anything in that dark kitchen. Then he heard his mother again, “Do it, Kenny! Run!”

Suddenly Kenny heard a loud, ear-shattering BOOM. It was the loudest sound he had ever heard in his whole life. It was so loud that it almost deafened him.

The sound pushed Kenny into action.

He turned around and raced for the kitchen door, fumbling as he unlocked it. When it finally opened, Kenny burst through it and took flight. He headed for the woods on the outside of his family’s property.

It was just like that horrible dream he had so often. He was running for the woods. He was running for his life.

And the boogeyman was chasing him, in hot pursuit right behind him. Kenny could hear pounding feet and panting breath. The boogeyman was close behind; so close!

Kenny leaned forward, his knees pumping, his breath wheezing, his lungs beginning to hurt. He was too afraid to look back to see who was chasing him. And he was afraid that he could lose ground if he hesitated and looked behind him. If only he could reach the tree line! In his dream, he had found safety in the trees. He could hide in the underbrush in the darkness of the night.

He made it!

Kenny reached the woods.

Instinctively he knew that his small stature would be a benefit for hiding. He ducked into the dense underbrush, and started to run in a zigzag pattern, doing his best to draw himself in and somehow become even smaller than he already was.

Then, in the way that small boys do, he found a little dark hovel underneath a log. It was almost as good as hiding under a bed. Maybe better. Kenny hoped it was better.

He crouched under the rough bark of the fallen tree, and tried to weld himself into the large hole in the ground that some animal had dug. Kenny tried to calm his rapid breathing and also his rapid heartbeat.

He shut his eyes as though that act would shut out the world. He strained his ears to listen. And he heard the boogeyman. Kenny could hear branches snapping and the limbs of bushes being shoved aside. But the sounds seemed random. Maybe the boogeyman couldn't tell where he was hiding.

Could it be that the boogeyman was not all-seeing and all-knowing?

Was that too much to hope for?

And then Kenny froze, because the boogeyman spoke.

"Kenny!" the voice called. "Kenny! Come out!"

Kenny froze in confusion, because the voice was that of his father.

"Kenny!" his father called again. "Where are you? Come out! I'm not going to hurt you."

What should he do? Kenny felt the panic of indecision. What should he do? Was the voice really that of his father, or was the boogeyman playing tricks on him? Could the boogeyman pretend he was Kenny's father?

"Kenny, I'm not playing games now. Come out, and that's an order!"

A lifetime of obeying his parents won control. Kenny's indecisiveness left him. His father was calling. He would go to his father. It was simple; it was how life worked.

Kenny crawled out from his little cubby-hole under the log. "Dad, I'm over here."

"Come here, Son."

And Kenny went to his father.

When he got close, Kenny saw that his father was covered in blood. Here was the red in the woods that he had seen in the dream. His father was covered with blood.

Whose blood?

Mr. Willis took his son's hand to lead him through the forest and back towards home. "Thank God you're safe," he told Kenny.

"Dad, what happened?" Kenny asked as the two stepped carefully through the dense underbrush until they found the trail. "Dad, why are you all bloody?"

"It doesn't matter," his father answered. "The police are at our house. Everything's all over now. It's all over."

"Dad," Kenny said, "I'm a big boy now. You can tell me the truth. What happened?"

Mr. Willis sighed as he walked next to his son. "My brother just got out of prison. He came here. He's crazy; he thinks I'm the reason he went to prison because I testified against him. You don't remember what he did to you one night last year, do you? No, I suppose you don't."

Kenny's father went on, "My brother came today to rob us and then steal our car. He beat me up. I think he thought I was dead. I've got a pretty bad cut on my head and that's why there's blood all over my shirt. I must have been unconscious for quite awhile. Anyway, my brother dumped me in your closet, thinking he had killed me. But he was wrong, because as you can see, I'm still alive."

"Is Mom okay? Was that my uncle in the kitchen who grabbed her?"

"Yes Son," Mr. Willis conceded as the two continued to walk towards home. "I managed to get out of the closet. I think I have a broken arm because it hurts real bad and I can't move it. Plus I already told you that I must have been knocked out. But I woke up in time to stop my brother from hurting your mother. I came down the stairs just as my brother was trying to hit your mother. She's okay now, but my brother isn't quite okay, so that's why the cops are at our house."

“I thought you were the boogeyman in my closet,” Kenny said.

“No Son. I’m no boogeyman. But your uncle is about as close to a boogeyman as anyone could be.”

“So there really was a boogeyman.”

“Yes Son, I suppose in a way, there was. But the boogeyman is dead. I took off his head with my shotgun.”

“But Dad,” Kenny said, “nobody can ever kill a boogeyman. He’ll be back in my closet again one of these nights.”