

"That"

By T.D. Smith

A short story

*Dedicated to Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman,*

*on the day of their release of the Good Omens show on Amazon Prime, 5/31/2019*

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That thing was at it again.

Clevercoinage was an ancient and terrifying beast. He stood seven feet tall at full height. With twelve, sprawling, writhing tentacles, each with a sharp, intimidating spike on its end, thick, green scaly skin with a sheath of viscous slime coating it, distortedly long and skinny sharp teeth, and glowing, yellow, reptilian eyes atop spindly green stalks, he was a horrifying creature that would cause even adults with the stoutest of constitutions to evacuate their bowels whilst fleeing in trepidation.

He had a taste for children, his favorite snack.

Throughout the long ages, Clevercoinage had survived by devouring countless juvenile innocents. Consuming the bodies and life essences of one or two children each few hundred years was enough to sustain him over the centuries. Occasionally, however, Clevercoinage's monstrous tummy would rumble, and he would have an especially robust craving for the life forces of the youth.

This was one such occasion.

Clevercoinage's gaping, horrendous monster mouth dripped with cascading saliva as he sat in the sewer drain staring outward on that gray morn at dawn, watching the house he had been staking out for the last fortnight. His eyes were on Kevin, his new prey, whom he was stalking, fixing to eat.

He watched him now, waiting for the boy to exit the house to check the mail. He knew good and well when little Kevin did so every day. No cars were in the driveway, and he had not seen any adults come or go in several days; it was near the holidays and Clevercoinage was certain Kevin had been left behind, all alone accidentally. Perfect. The sly monster's lips curled up in a drooling grin as he anticipated the appearance of his soon-to-be morsel. He stared in excited expectation, looking on from the drainage ditch, a tiny, narrow, square-shaped hole between the sidewalk's cement curb and the asphalt of the road, awaiting Kevin's daily appearance.

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Kevin twisted the doorknob of his parents' house's front door, turned it, and pushed the door open. He stepped out onto the front deck, walked down its short flight of several steps, and made his way across the front lawn by way of the brick-step path, and to the mailbox.

As he trod along, he looked up and grimaced. It was a bright, sunny day with a crisp, clear, blue sky. Not a single cloud soared aloft today, and it was warm, but not too warm, with a gentle,

comfortable, downright agreeable cool breeze. Just the kind of weather that was great for getting out and about and doing fun things outdoors and enjoying the company and camaraderie of one's fellow human.

Kevin *hated* this weather.

With a sneer, he clenched his fists and looked upward, his whole body shaking. He stood transfixed there for a second, looking upward at the disgustingly beautiful sky, quaking. After a few minutes he stopped, letting out an exasperated, slightly fatigued pant. He continued to the mailbox, opened the rusty, squeaking metal box, and emptied its enveloped contents into his hands, before closing it back up.

Turning, young Kevin made his way back up the brick path, producing a red rubber ball from his pocket, which he bounced on each red brick steppingstone as he went. Presently, out of nowhere clouds appeared, swirled together, and the sky grew dark. A howling wind picked up, and sheets of rain began pelting down all around. Kevin smiled. That was better.

Kevin stepped closer and closer to his door, but before returning inside, he let the rain pour over him, the tempest plastering and soaking him. He loved the horrible weather, and all the havoc and destruction it could bring. How exciting!

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"Uh-oh, he's getting away!" Clevercoinage thought. He scrambled with every bit of speed he had and could manageably muster in the cramped sewer space he occupied, pulling and writhing himself upwards with all his might, trying his very best to get his body out of that tiny window into the sewer. He had managed to get about half his slimy, green, scaly head out and was working on his torso, when he heard a rushing, liquid-like sound. He glanced up.

"Oh no," the unfortunate monster spoke.

The rainwater was gushing towards him in a great, rapid flood, having come to a confluence from the road, into the gutter, and down the lane, finally ready to pour into the sewer via the entryway's space which Clevercoinage's body currently took up. The rainwater hit Clevercoinage with surprising force, knocking him back into the hole, off the solid cement landing upon which he had been standing, and slippity-sliding back downward into the cold, dark sewer, where he landed in a pile of disgusting muck with a thud.

The poor monster scrambled swiftly yet clumsily back up the narrow tunnel, back to his viewing port, now that the rainwaters had receded to a steady, yet remarkably smaller, trickling crawl, and moved to position himself back where he had been before.

"I hope I'm not too late! He might be back safely inside his home by now," Clevercoinage thought silently, "hopefully I haven't wasted another full day!"

No sooner had he stuck his eyestalks out of the dark sewer hole, than a bright red ball made of rubber hit Clevercoinage square between the eyes with a THUNK! Alarmed, he slipped and slid and thudded down to the sewer's bottom again, sprawling out on the encrusted concrete catwalk that lay just beside a subterranean river of excrement and refuse.

Again, the monster scrambled, and again, juttred his head out of the dark square to do reconnaissance on the boy, with the goal of luring him in.

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“Oh drat,” Kevin exclaimed, “I’ve dropped my ball!” He had. In all the excitement and delight in the furious monsoon, which would be quite un-preferential weather to most, his bouncy ball had slipped right out of his hand, rolled across the lawn, and being caught by the floodwaters, gone straight down the ditch and into the sewer. “Maybe I can fetch it.”

Leaning down, looking into the gaping, grim darkness, Kevin squinted.

Two bright, yellow, reptilian eyes glowed back at him.

“Hello, little boy,” the monster said, in a small, squeaky, disguised voice, “have you lost something? Is this yours?”

Clevercoinage held up the ball, reaching the red rubber toy out to Kevin with one of his wriggling, suction-cupped appendages.

Kevin did not appear to be shocked, or surprised, or scared in any way whatsoever. He merely looked at Clevercoinage. Not just *looked*, Clevercoinage noticed, but downright *scowled*. Clevercoinage was taken slightly aback by this. The boy was definitely staring at him, looking down upon him with not a scared or anxious look, but a completely disapproving, annoyed one.

“My name is Clevercoinage,” the beast in the sewer began.

A disgruntled “psshhh” followed by a rapid roll of the eyes, then,

“Piss off!” Kevin yelled, before grabbing his ball out of a completely dismayed Clevercoinage’s tentacle and delivering a roundhouse kick to the monster’s unsuspecting head.

Once more, Clevercoinage was delivered to the bottom of the sewer floor in a crumpled, stunned heap. When he returned once more to the surface and peered out, Kevin was gone, having returned inside to his home. The clouds had parted and the sun returned, too, the weather returning to what was an otherwise warm, bright, and pleasant day.

Clevercoinage peered at the large, front bay window of the home. He could see Kevin’s silhouette inside moving about. The monster found himself steaming, his blood temperature rising steadily in stress and anger.

“I’ll fix him!” Clevercoinage snarled to himself as he slid out of the sewer drain. “If he’s not afraid now, he *will* be!” The creature writhed and twisted, stepping his way towards the boy’s house.

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CLINK!

Two teacups, each gripped by tiny, fuzzy, rounded hands, clacked together with a shrill, ceramic-sounding tap. Moments ago, the stuffed animals had lain on the floor unanimated and very much unalive, until Kevin had concentrated, shaken, muttered some unrepeatable, wicked words, and wiggled

his fingers. Then, they had sprung to life and gone about the house fetching this and that, a tablecloth, a teapot, etc., making the dining room ready for tea.

“Most agreeable tea, Mr. Bunny,” a short, stout, brown fluffy bear with buttons for eyes declared.

“Very much so, indeed, and thank you, Dr. Bear!” the blue, plush, stuffed rabbit, who also had button eyes, replied to his comrade, as they sat around a tiny table in tiny chairs, conversing and drinking tea. “The cake is quite quaint, if I do say so myself! I love the little frosted curls at its edges! Simply dashing touch, dear!”

The cake in the center of the table was rather impressive. It was chocolate and covered in white frosting with elaborate, intricate frosting swirls and floral designs. It appeared as beautiful as it did delectable.

“Why, I’m humbled, Mr. Bunny! Thank you so very much! I did work so very hard on it.”

“I wish I could see it,” Mr. Hog, a tiny, pink, plastic-bean filled pig spoke, whose face was missing any kind of button eyes whatsoever, addressing his friends.

“Kevin, won’t you cut us a slice of it?” Dr. Bear inquired to the young boy who was dressed in a black t-shirt and black jean shorts on the opposite side of the table from him.

“Why, yes, of course, friend!” Kevin said, smiling.

The boy raised his sterling silver cake server and moved to cut into the lustrous, pristine cake.

“BLAAAAHHHHHHH!!!!!!”

With a loud, metallic, rattle, the grate to the air conditioning vent in the floor behind the table flew off and clattered across the dining room floor. Clevercoinage leapt up from its depths and screamed, wriggling and flailing his tentacled arms all about.

“AAAAHHHHH!!!” cried Dr. Bear.

“OH GOODNESS!!!!!!” exclaimed Mr. Bunny.

“GOOD HEAVENS! HELP ME! I CAN’T SEE IT, BUT I’M TERRIFIED!!!!!!” bellowed Mr. Hog.

All three of the stuffed animals sprang from their places at the table and fled. Mr. Bunny and Dr. Bear ran out of the dining room and into the den, where they ducked and took cover under the sofa. Mr. Hog, unable to see where he was going, ran as fast as he could and smacked head-first into the dining room wall, falling onto his back. He leapt up quick as he could, brushed himself off, and then ran once again smack dab into the wall. He repeated this several times, screaming all the while, until Kevin walked over to him, held him still, and touched his face where eyes would normally be. The bear instantly gained two black button eyes. He grinned widely, then ran and joined his friends under the sofa in the den.

Kevin turned, and unimpressed, unperturbed, and utterly unruffled, simply stood with his fists resting on his hips and elbows jutting out, looking defiantly upward at Clevercoinage.

Clevercoinage hissed.

“You’re miiiiine!”

THWACK!

Clevercoinage’s eyes darted over to the dining room wall just behind him, to the source of the sudden clamor. He saw the silver cake server’s sharp pointy side sticking into the wall, and the rest of the utensil swinging back and forth with a quiver, its handle jutting outwards. How had it done that? Kevin hadn’t touched it and there was no one else in the room with them! Whatever. Time to get scary.

Clevercoinage howled, wiggled his tentacles this way and that, and swung his multi-segmented, suction cupped tongue all about, stepping toward Kevin.

Suddenly, Clevercoinage noticed he was hovering in the air. Kevin was smiling, his brow furrowed maniacally. With an abrupt flick of his wrist, Clevercoinage was cast backward toward the wall, which separated, revealing the outside of the house. The poor monster was flung outward and away from the house, and straight into the upper canopy of a tree! He collided with a branch with a snapping sound, and for a moment he was unsure whether it was wood or his bones which had done the snapping. Letting out a weary, hurt grunt, followed by a frustrated murmur involving something about being foiled by a child again, Clevercoinage’s muscles finally relaxed and his body went flaccid and he lost consciousness.

Kevin smiled satisfactorily, and bringing his hands together, the wall retreated closed again. Calling his stuffed animal friends, they re-joined him in fellowship at the table.

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Several hours later Clevercoinage awoke with a headache. He gingerly made his way down from the tree, and slunk off into his dark, dingy underground lair in the sewer. After nursing his headache with an icepack and bottle of ibuprofen, it was back to the drawing board for him. The ancient beast pondered and schemed, trying desperately to conceive of a new angle.

“Aha, of course!” Clevercoinage finally declared to no one at all except himself and a pack of sewer rats who went crawling by at a quick clip.

Clevercoinage waited until nightfall, then he made his move. Entering some pipework, the monster inched along, slinking and slithering upward, striking out on his third attempt to abduct his meal, and salivating as he thought about it.

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The sky was a dark mess of swirling clouds. The waves were tall, intense, and choppy. They crashed down on the deck of the tugboat, rocking it and its crew violently. The captain didn’t know if he and his crew would make it out of this one alive; they had been caught up in the storm far away from shore and drug way off course. As a dark grayish green cascade of cresting foam came raining down on him, knocking him to his knees and nearly sweeping him off the boat before his first mate grabbed him by the ankles as he dangled off the side of the deck before hoisting him back aboard, the miserable sailors’ outlook was certainly looking quite grim, indeed.

Then things went from bad to worse as the wretched behemoth rose from out of the depths. Kevin, mighty, enormous, and formidable came up out of the water and towered over the boat. He stood there menacingly, sneering at the men, striking fear into their hearts, before bringing a great arm down and smashing the boat, plunging it under the foamy waters and casting several of its occupants into the murky sea.

The captain barely managed to hold onto one of the masts and stay aboard in the assault; his grip was slipping, and he was barely clutching the pole as the ship reemerged from the submarine depths. Glancing off the bow, he saw several of his crewmen, including his first officer who moments ago had rescued him, flailing helplessly in the briny deep drink, calling for help.

“Man overboard! Man overboard!” the captain screamed, flinging several life-preservers into the oddly warm, frothy water. His men seized the circular tubes and clung to them.

They had almost hauled all the men back onto the boat, when KA-SPLOOSH!!! There was a great splash followed by a sucking sound from the water directly underneath the great cascade, from which billowed warm water, whose silvery spigot jutted out of the ivory wall. Another, larger, green, scaly monster, hideous and terrifying, loomed over them. It stared at Kevin maliciously, as if it had a grudge. Kevin frowned back at it with equal intensity. The men gawked, dropping everything they were doing to gaze steadily upward at the impending showdown between the two great beasts, both in awe and terror at the surreal figures high above them.

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Kevin stood, frowning. This guy, again, really? Now he had interrupted his bubble bath, and playtime with his hitherto inanimate action figures, whom he had made come alive so he could play sea monster. How infuriating!

Rising, then standing and walking across the water and stepping out of the tub he had magically expanded to twice its normal width prior to his opponent’s appearance, Kevin descended onto the bathroom floor. His towel gently glided through the air, propelling itself from the peg protruding from the wall beside the bathroom door, and wrapped itself around him, tying itself off tightly around his waist. Then, with another slight flick of his wrist, Kevin remotely opened the bath drain, which with incredible, uncanny force, sucked down both the pesky Clevercoinage and the boat and sailors along with the all the bathwater. Down the drain both the green, scaly monster and the screaming seamen went as they swirled around and around and were sucked downward into the sewer’s depths.

At the last possible moment, Clevercoinage reached up and struggled against the powerful suction, holding fast and prying himself upward to catch one last glance of the boy, with the pipedream of making one last desperate pass. He caught a glimpse of the lad’s back as he traipsed away to his room to get dressed, the small, white, fluffy dog at his heels.

“Come on, Chippi!” Kevin called out to his canine.

Clevercoinage grinned evilly. That was it! Letting go, he allowed himself to fall voluntarily, sliding down and round and round wildly, back down into the sewer, eventually slamming onto the concrete once more. He pondered, not even minding that he had been stymied again, and hardly noticing the sailors chugging down the foul river on their plastic tugboat, or its air horn that sounded shrilly, echoing

off the sewer walls as they made their way off to new adventures. He was too absorbed with his new scheme. He knew what his next move was. He had only to wait a few more hours and do it in the darkest hours of the night.

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Clevercoinage cautiously tiptoed through the night, taking special care not to make a sound. He stepped on a loose board in the floor that made a loud, groaning, creaking sound. Pausing briefly and listening, his heart racing, he stood completely still, making sure nothing in the dark house stirred. After a few moments wherein he heard no rousing noises, the great beast continued onward, inching his way to the young boy's bedroom.

At length he reached the living room. The television sat buzzing on its stand, still on and chattering, and some late-night news program was playing. Two newscasters, a man with red hair, a mustache, and a blue suit was talking, telling of some misfortunate event involving a plane crash. A woman with bright, brown eyes, bleach blonde hair, and sporting a light tan business suit and skirt sat to his left, commenting here and there on the story and providing additional details on the nature of the burns, wounds, and general scathing of the victims.

"That'd odd, the TV still being on," Clevercoinage considered in his mind, then he shrugged. "Oh well!" then onward and forward the night fiend silently marched.

Entering the room, Clevercoinage reached out and grasped him, clamping his jaws shut to avoid any outburst with a tentacle wrapped around the tiny beast's snout, and hustling carefully and quietly, Clevercoinage bore the quadruped away in his arms.

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Gloom, doom, and despair! Fire and brimstone rained down from the heavens and miserable humans, with broken spirits and humbled hearts, stood before him groveling, begging, offering him puny, worthless trinkets, their wealth, their property, their first-born, as tribute.

Bah!

These things were *worthless* to him, the conquering master of the universe! Kevin reached forth with one hand and vaporized all his sycophantic, would-be subjects with a bright, powerful electric arc, in one fell swoop. He smiled, the skeletons reflecting in his eye, then laughed maniacally, raising his head in defiance and cackling to the stars.

Then, a canine whimpering came to him through the abyss.

Kevin awoke with a start, gasping. He reached over in the black of night, stretching out a palm to feel for Chippi. His hand met only indented, warm, blankets, where the small, white pooch had previously sat perched on his bed for the night.

Kevin sat up, alarmed, reaching out, calling, and searching for his beloved pet. He did not come when he was called. Then, listening intently in the velvety nighttime, Kevin heard it. A shrill, high-pitched whimper. He stayed quiet, trying to locate the seemingly far off whine. He heard it again. He determined that it was coming from the basement.

The explanation, the only logical one, dawned on Kevin. He instantly went from scared and alarmed to fuming, feeling slighted, bamboozled. His eyebrows bent downwards, and so did his lips curl in a profound, condemning frown. He clenched his fists, his eyelids clutched together tightly, and his body shook with anger.

After a short fit, Kevin jumped out of bed and sped away, out of his bedroom and through the house's hallways, bounding down the staircase that led into his basement. This was the last straw. That alleged "monster" was going to get it. He now faced the full fury of Kevin's wrath.

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Clevercoinage was salivating again, absolutely jubilated and eagerly awaiting Kevin's arrival. When the boy met him there in the wide, unfinished, damp, and chilly basement with its cold gray cement floor, Clevercoinage flung forth all his tentacles, teeth, tongue, and angrily convulsing expressions, in as much of an angry array as he could muster.

"Your dog is minnnne!" Clevercoinage announced spookily. "Unless you give yourself up, Kevin, he will perish and be my meal!!!!!"

The monster gesticulated with a twisting, tentaclelike appendage, indicating upward. Kevin's eyes rose with Clevercoinage's gesturing and saw it: Chippi, his beloved, small, fluffy dog stuck to the ceiling, whimpering in distress, caught in what seemed to be some kind of deep red, gelatinous substance that reeked, probably upchucked from the bowels of the revolting green leviathan standing before him threateningly.

Kevin gritted his teeth firmly, grinding them together. He shut his eyes forcefully and tightened his fists together. He shook profusely and more profoundly and angrily than any other time that day, or any day prior. He gurgled what was a growing and profoundly rigorous growl, and teetered back and forth, rocking on his heels.

The entire house began to shake, affected by some dark power manifested in and manipulated by Kevin. The red, jellylike substance, which had hardened and was harboring its canine captive, fractured and broke apart, dropping the white, shaggy dog downward, depositing him on the basement floor. The dog rose to its paws, shaking debris out of his fur briefly, then joining his master at his side.

Both the dog and the boy stood quivering in fury now, glaring angrily at the ancient beast. Kevin's pupils began to glow bright and red, like flames. His hellhound's eyes did the same, burning out brightly in the creepy darkness of the basement. The two of them stepped forward toward Clevercoinage, who, being knocked onto his back by the buckling of the very ground beneath him, squirmed and clambered backwards, backing up until his body banged against the basement wall behind him.

"P-please, have *mercy!*" Clevercoinage begged.

This only maddened Kevin all the more, causing his eyes to burn brighter, and veritable hell flames to ignite and burn all about him, encompassing his body in a pulsating aura, mirrored at his side by his vicious dog comrade's miniature flames.

At once, with a hissing sound, Kevin's sign emblazoned itself on his forehead, painting its likeness in bold, crisp, fiery numbers. Clevercoinage read them, and comprehending their significance, his eyes widened, and he gasped.

"Th-th-three sixes?!?!? Th-that means, y-you're the- "

"Yep." Kevin acknowledged.

"But, but you are just a *kid*. You were abandoned! Your parents left you all at home, accidentally," Clevercoinage reasoned.

"No." Kevin corrected, shaking his head. "My parents didn't leave me. I made them go away. Look."

Kevin waved a diabolical hand, and a closet across the basement floor popped open, revealing a red haired man with a mustache clad in a bright blue suit and a woman wearing a light tan suit jacket and skirt, semi-standing inside, their heads slumped and their vacant, wide eyes emblazoned with television-like static, black and white and producing a hissing sound, like that of a television with no signal.

Alarmed, Clevercoinage whipped his head away from the scene of the two bodies in the closet and focused again on Kevin and his dog. The boy and his companion inched closer and closer to him, and with each small, silent step, Clevercoinage could feel his imminent doom growing nearer and nearer. Finally, cracking under the pressure and altogether abandoning his self-imposed mission suddenly, Clevercoinage shrieked in horror, turned and fled out of there.

Bursting forth from the basement door, showing great agility in bounding across the basement floor and ascending the staircase adjacent to the house's lower outer wall, Clevercoinage reached the outdoors and absconded away from that property, leaping over the backyard fence, and continuing onward, through the neighbor's yard and on into the night, until he disappeared from sight, never to return. He howled and bellowed fearfully all the time he ran. He did not stop or look back until about an hour's time and distance covered therein had transpired, and he was sure the boy and his dog had not followed him.

In the basement, Kevin smiled deeply and satisfactorily. Both he and his dog relaxed, and both their flames and glowing red eyes dissipated and disappeared. After closing the exit door to the basement and bolting it once more, they retreated upstairs to repose peacefully for the remainder of the night.

Conversely, Clevercoinage sat up that night awake in some remote forest miles away for some time. In the morning he fled further, watching the red morning sun rise as he went, shuddering as he looked at it, recalling a certain red rubber ball. Traversing hill and dale, he beheld the long, winding, flowering countryside with its abundant life unfolding before him as he went. Eventually, he found a suitable hollow full of greenery and enough plant life to satisfactorily sustain him for the rest of his life. He settled there. It was there and then that the ancient, most terrifying of serpent-like monsters took his vow of veganism and promised never to eat another child as long as he lived, which was several hundred centuries into the future.

The End.