

THE DAY
the
World
WENT
LOKI

The title is presented in a stylized, hand-drawn font. The words "THE DAY" are at the top in a blocky, outlined font. Below them, "the" is written in a smaller, lowercase script. "World" is the largest word, written in a bubbly, outlined font. "WENT" is below "World" in a blocky, outlined font. The word "LOKI" is at the bottom, rendered in a large, bold, serif font with a metallic, 3D appearance. The letter 'O' is replaced by a crown with flames on either side. The 'L' has a small, spiky object on its top left, and the 'i' has a small circular detail on its top right. The entire title is set against a grey, multi-pointed starburst background.

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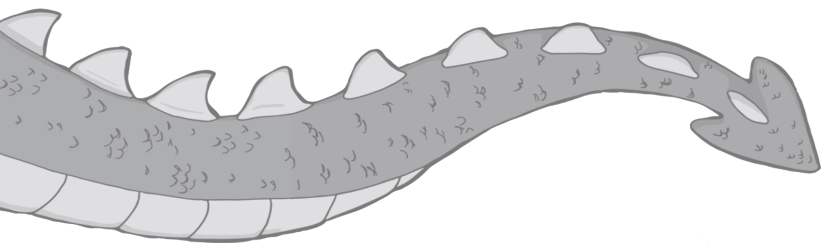
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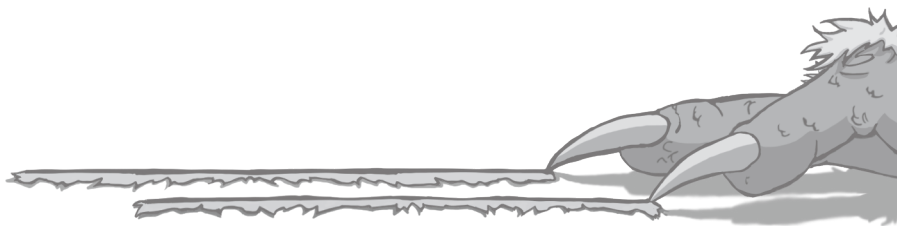
Robert J. Harris



Kelpies



*To my sons, Matthew, Rob and Jamie.
They never got into this much trouble.*





1. BAD LUCK AND WORSE LUCK



Neither of the boys strolling home from Madras High School in St Andrews had any idea that this was just about the last normal day of their lives. Greg McBride had something else on his mind.

“A maths test *tomorrow!*” he exploded. “How’s that for bad luck?” He swung an angry fist through the empty air. “But then bad luck is all I ever get.”

His younger brother Lewis made an absent-minded humming noise as he braced himself for more complaints. It was a long walk down Lamond Drive, but it seemed twice as long when Greg was on one of his rants.

“Some folk get hit singles, star in films, run big companies, but not me. Oh no, I never get that kind of luck.”

“It’s not luck,” Lewis murmured.

“Huh?” Greg grunted. He hadn’t expected Lewis to say anything. He usually didn’t until his older brother had quite finished. “What are you mumbling about?”

“Maybe it’s not just luck,” Lewis said. He wished heartily that he hadn’t opened his mouth, but now he had no choice but to tough it out. “Maybe they’re successful because they work hard.”

Greg shook his head. “If all it took was hard work, then everybody who worked hard would be rich. But they’re not, are they?”

“I suppose not.”

“You suppose not,” Greg echoed mockingly. “That’s your trouble, Lewis. You don’t think things through. I mean, what chance have I got living here? St Andrews isn’t exactly the centre of the universe, is it? It’s not even the centre of Fife.”

A large shadow passed over them as their enormous friend Arthur “the Chiz” Chisholm came loping by. “Guys,” he rumbled by way of greeting.

The Chiz had pulled on his favourite red beanie with one hand so that it lay squint across the crown of his head like a UFO that had crash landed on a mountain peak.

“Hi, Chiz,” the brothers responded as their friend’s long strides carried him swiftly past them.

“Hey, Chiz, do you want to kick a ball around?” Greg called after him.

Kicking a ball around with the Chiz mostly involved searching for the ball after he’d booted it thirty metres

through the air in the wrong direction. Still, it was better than studying for a test.

Chiz glanced back over his shoulder. "Home... work... test tomorrow," he answered. Every word sounded like an echo in a coal mine.

He loped off and left Greg grimacing. "Even Chiz'll probably pass," he said. "You'd think they'd hang a big sign up to remind you a test is coming. I mean, what is the point of mentioning it weeks ago, in the middle of class when nobody's paying any attention, then never talking about it again until the day before? How is anybody supposed to remember something like that?"

There was a merciful thirty seconds of silence as they held their noses while passing Canny Dan's Snack Van. As soon as they were clear of the stench of grease, pickled onion and charred black pudding, Greg resumed.

"I'll bet Mrs Witherspoon kept this test a secret just to trip me up. She's always had it in for me."

"You mean because you never do any work."

"No, it's something more personal than that. She'd hang me up and use me for target practice if she thought she'd get away with it."

"You could still get a good four or five hours of studying in tonight," Lewis pointed out. "That might be enough."

“Is that right?” Greg answered with undisguised sarcasm. “You think it’s that easy to study, like you can just sit down and do it? Have you learned nothing? You have to plan it in advance, draw up a timetable, or you might as well not bother.”

“So you’re not going to bother?”

“I didn’t say that, I was just making a point. For your benefit, I might add.”

At the corner of Largo Road he pulled up short as Lindsay Jensen popped up in front of him, as though out of thin air.

“Hi, Greg!” she beamed, like she hadn’t seen him in years.

Her corn-coloured hair was tied in a ponytail with a pink ribbon. Behind her gold-rimmed glasses her eyes shone like sapphires, at least that’s how they looked to Lewis.

“Oh hi, Lindsay,” Greg responded distractedly. He was peering around from side to side, trying to figure out where she could have sprung from. She had an unsettling knack for ambushes.

Lewis cleared his throat. “Hello, Lindsay. That’s a really pretty necklace you’re wearing.” He sighed when he realised that she hadn’t even heard him. She was too busy watching Greg scratch his head.

“I hear your dad’s gone away on a trip,” Lindsay said.

“He’s in Wales,” said Greg, not meeting her gaze.

“Building a golf course,” Lewis added, unnoticed.

Lindsay was in Lewis’ class at school, but she only had eyes for his brother. Greg was a year older, taller, thought himself much better looking, and was definitely a lot louder.

“Greg, do you fancy going to that new 3D film tonight?” Lindsay asked breathlessly. “You know, the one about the dancing robots and the polar bear. It looks magic.”

“I’ve got a big test tomorrow,” Greg muttered, trying to manoeuvre around her. Lindsay moved expertly to block him.

“I could help you study, Greg,” she offered sweetly.

“Lewis is helping me,” Greg told her flatly. He grabbed Lewis by the arm and accelerated past her, dragging his brother behind him. Once they were across the street he asked out of the side of his mouth, “Is she gone?”

“Yes, she’s gone,” Lewis admitted glumly. “She’s headed off into town with some of her pals.”

“She must be a Japanese ninja or something,” mused Greg. “That’s the only way she could sneak up on us like that.”

“Actually, I think Jensen is a Norwegian name.”

“Norwegians don’t sneak, Lewis, they ski. Everybody

knows that. And that reminds me, where did you sneak off to at break time?"

"I ran down to the library to get a couple of books Mr Calvert said he'd look out for me."

"More books? What are you doing? Building a castle out of them?"

"They're about time. It's for my school project."

"Time?" snorted Greg. "That's just what I need – more time."

He snatched a book that was sticking out of the top of Lewis' bag and squinted at the faded letters on the cover. "*The Folklore Of Time* by Lucas Oberon Key," he read out. "Maybe there are some tips in this."

"Give that back," said Lewis. He made a grab for the book but Greg whipped it away. "Mr Calvert says it's very rare."

"Mr Calvert says, Mr Calvert says," Greg echoed mockingly. "If I had a pound for every time I've heard you say that, I could buy the school and close it down."

Lewis shoved his fists into his pockets and trudged on with his head down.

"Hmm... it says here the ancient Egyptians had ten days of the week," said Greg, "and that in parts of Africa they have three, four or five days."

Lewis kept up a tight-lipped, silent protest as Greg flicked haphazardly through the old book.

As soon as they turned the corner into Bannock Street the Larkins' dog started barking its head off behind their two-metre high garden fence. The dog had got loose more times than anybody could count, even though the Larkins had done everything to keep it from escaping, short of putting up a guard tower and searchlights.

"Did you know that in 1752 they dropped eleven days from the calendar in England," Greg laughed, "and people rioted in the streets because they wanted their days back?"

"I know," Lewis burst out. "They were changing over from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar. That's part of my project, remember?"

"I know how they felt," said Greg. "I'd give a lot for just one extra day." He turned the page and a huge grin spread across his face. "Say, here's something *really* interesting."

Whatever he was about to say, the words died on his lips and both boys froze in terror when they saw what was parked in the driveway of their house.

Aunt Vivien's car.

Numbly Greg closed the book and handed it back. "Lewis," he said, "I want you to take this book and beat me to death with it."



2. BANQUET OF THE DOOMED



Lewis pushed the book back into his bag. “If you think I’m going in there by myself,” he said, “you’re off your head.”

The boys could not have been more shocked if they’d come home to find Godzilla sitting on the roof, picking his teeth with the TV aerial.

There was no mistaking that bright green Morris Minor, a make of car most scientists were agreed had been extinct since the late Triassic. The purple dice hanging over the dashboard and the toy nodding dog scowling from the rear window were proof that it could only belong to Aunt Vivien.

They stood a while longer in silent terror, then eventually Greg said, “You go in first.”

“Why me?” Lewis’ voice was almost a shriek.

“You’re smaller. It’ll be easier for you to slip past her. I’ll be right behind you.”

With a fatalistic shake of the head Lewis squared his shoulders and walked up the front path. Greg followed

a couple of paces behind. By the time they reached the door, Lewis had twisted the straps of his bag so tightly around his fingers that they had turned white.

“Go on,” Greg urged. “Look, if we can make it upstairs, we can take turns hiding in the bathroom.”

Lewis reached out and took a tentative grip on the doorknob. He turned it slowly, then pushed the door open and made a mad dash for the stairs.

Aunt Vivien was waiting in the hallway and he ran headlong into an embrace that could have suffocated a rhino.

“Boys!” warbled Aunt Vivien in a voice that sent a cold shiver down their spines. “I’ve been waiting for you to get home!”

With a mammoth effort Lewis struggled free and staggered back, colliding with Greg who had come to a stunned halt just inside the doorway.

There she was, Aunt Vivien, large as life and about as welcome as a plague of midgies, teetering on a pair of high-heeled shoes. Her bosom heaved with emotion beneath a tent-like dress so garishly floral it almost made their eyes scream with pain. Her red-dyed hair was piled high upon her head like something constructed by the pharaohs.

“Come and have a hug, Greg!” she commanded with a falsetto warmth that didn’t mask the cold steel

beneath. It was hard to tell if she was smiling under all that make-up.

Her open arms were about as inviting as the gaping jaws of a crocodile. Even in her stiletto heels she was still shorter than Greg, but she seemed to fill the space around her like a balloon inflating out of control. She took a purposeful step towards him.

Greg stood paralysed for a moment, trying to control his panic. Then all at once he started to sneeze.

The sneeze arrested Aunt Vivien in mid-step. Her painted mouth formed a horrified O and she retreated a pace, groping for a handkerchief to cover her nose and mouth.

Much as he resented his brother's escape, Lewis couldn't help but admire his quick thinking. Aunt Vivien hated any sort of illness and from the look on her face you'd have thought Greg was carrying the Black Death into the house.

As they trooped into the living room, Aunt Vivien pointed a finger at Greg. "Greg, I can fix you a remedy that will knock those germs right out of you."

Greg blanched at the threat. He didn't doubt for a moment that she could concoct a brew that would flush the marrow out of his bones.

"I'll be all right," he assured her. He sneezed again to be on the safe side. "Just let me get a sandwich."

He headed for the kitchen, making sure to keep the sofa between himself and Aunt Vivien as extra insurance against her unwanted attentions.

“I don’t think you’ll want to spoil your appetite,” she warned. She raised her pencilled eyebrows meaningfully as she spoke. “I have a treat in store for you.”

Lewis felt his stomach lurch as he followed Greg into the kitchen.

Even from behind Mum had the dejected appearance of a prisoner of war being subjected to forced labour. Her light brown hair was tied back in a tight, efficient bun and she was wearing the “practical” blue and white striped apron she only wore when she was doing something truly tragic like cleaning out the rubbish bins. She turned from the sink to greet Greg and Lewis as they walked in.

“Hello, boys. Did you have a good day at school?”

She summoned a fragile smile in an unconvincing pretence of normality. But the kitchen was not normal. It had been invaded by something that would blight their lives and their digestion for weeks to come, and there was no way to escape its malignant influence.

Only one thing about Aunt Vivien’s visits inspired more outright fear than the lady herself – her cookbook. There it squatted on the kitchen counter like an

enormous, leering toad, its ancient cover a hundred mottled shades of brown.

Once, perhaps, it had been an ordinary cookbook, such as you might find in any happy kitchen, but that must have been centuries ago, back when the whole world was a more innocent place. Since then it had been stained and befouled with every manner of spice, sauce and condiment. Fragments of ill-smelling herbs were trapped between the ragged pages, all of which were scrawled with helpful hints in Aunt Vivien's spidery hand. Some of the recipes had been borrowed from the savage tribes of Borneo and the Amazon jungles, while others were best suited to the minutes of a war crimes tribunal.

Lewis wrenched his eyes away from the book and said, "School was okay, Mum. You know."

Mum was washing something sticky and unsightly from a wooden spoon. Whatever it was, it was stubborn and that did not bode well.

"Your mother and I have come up with something a little special for tea," Aunt Vivien announced.

"Vivien says it's going to be a real treat," Mum said, glancing uneasily at the unfamiliar jars Aunt Vivien had piled up in front of the blender. She might as well have been announcing an incoming missile strike.

"I ate a big lunch," Greg blurted out, futilely.

“Nonsense!” Aunt Vivien declared. “Feed a cold, starve a fever! After a couple of healthy meals I’ll have him fit as a fiddle.”

She fixed a piercing glare on Greg, as though daring him to disagree.

“You two had better change and get cleaned up,” Mum said. “Lewis, I’ve put Vivien in your room, so you have to double up with Greg. I’ve already moved some of your things.”

Lewis sighed resignedly and slouched off upstairs after Greg. He risked a peek into his room as he passed and almost wept. A tower of luggage loomed over a wasteland of pink lace and delicate but tasteless ornaments, mostly statuettes of smug cats and simpering shepherdesses. Aunt Vivien had even gone so far as to bring her beloved Persian rug with its dizzying pattern of yellow and orange circles and triangles.

With a groan Lewis trailed despondently into the next room, where Greg was changing out of his school uniform while a song by his favourite metal band Rawkestra was blaring from the iPod. A rolled-up sleeping bag lay on the floor under the window where Lewis would be sleeping tonight.

Greg reached under the bed and plucked out two cans of cola. He tossed one to Lewis who caught it deftly. It was a gesture of solidarity in the face of

disaster. They popped their cans in unison and drank as they got changed.

Lewis appreciated the effort Mum had put into tidying Greg's room so that he had some space to store his stuff, but he wished she had moved his computer in here. He'd been counting on finishing his current game of Spellshooter tonight before working on the files for his school project. He briefly considered sneaking into his room while Aunt Vivien was in the kitchen, but quickly dropped the idea. Aunt Vivien didn't tolerate her private space being intruded on, and she always knew. Maybe those prissy little shepherdesses kept a lookout for her, like guard dogs.

"Mum looks like she's spent the day being prodded in the back with a bayonet," said Lewis. "Why do you think she lets Aunt Vivien walk all over her like that? She doesn't act that way with Dad, let alone you and me."

"She used to be a nurse," Greg explained with a shrug. "She's obliged to take care of people, even Aunt Vivien."

"Remember the last time she cooked us a meal?" Lewis recalled gloomily.

"I remember liver, butter beans, spinach and some kind of sauce made out of gooseberries," Greg answered with a shudder. He cocked his head to one side in thought.

“Maybe I could work this cold up into something serious. I’d let you catch it,” he added generously.

“Thanks for the offer,” said Lewis, “but you can’t trick your way out of Aunt Vivien. You might as well try to stop a tsunami by spitting at it.”

“Hurry up, boys! We’re just serving up!”

Aunt Vivien’s cry shook them like an air-raid siren.

The boys headed downstairs to the dining room, dragging their feet as if they were encased in three tons of cement. The table had been laid with the best cutlery and there were paper napkins decorated with pictures of rabbits. As the boys sat down, Greg picked up his napkin and said, “Is it just me or do these rabbits look scared?”

Their eyes turned apprehensively as the kitchen door swung open with the creaking menace of the entrance to a crypt. A cloud of vegetable odours wafted out. Lewis half expected the wallpaper to peel off and slip to the floor, begging for mercy.

Aunt Vivien emerged in ghastly splendour with a glass casserole dish wrapped in a potholder in her upraised hands, looking for all the world like a pagan priestess presenting a sacrifice to some bloodthirsty god. Mum followed woodenly behind like she was in the grip of a voodoo spell.

“Just you wait, boys, we’ve a few more things still to

bring out of the kitchen,” Aunt Vivien informed them ominously.

Greg and Lewis looked at each other aghast. If either of them had the nerve to turn and bolt for the door, the other would surely follow. As it was, they were as much prisoners as their mother.

“It’s called Chicken Columbayo,” Aunt Vivien announced proudly, setting the dish down in the centre of the table.

Inside, oddly shaped pieces of vegetable and blackened shreds of what had once been meat floated in a thick green liquid. A shower of white flakes had been liberally sprinkled over the surface. If they were lucky, it was only coconut.

Further dishes were laid out before them like forensic evidence from a toxic waste disaster. From previous experience they recognised Aunt Vivien’s kidney beans in resin syrup and the notorious peppered potatoes, one nibble of which would have a professional fire-eater diving for the water jug.

“Adele has done a wonderful job, with just a teeny bit of supervision,” Aunt Vivien confided as she commenced filling their plates with a generous helping from each dish.

“Well, it’s mostly your work, Vivien,” Mum said. “All I did was help.” It was a weak stab at establishing her innocence.

Dinner commenced in a solemn silence, which Aunt Vivien took it upon herself to shatter brutally. It was her habit throughout any meal to keep up an unstoppable stream of gossip about people no one else had ever heard of or would ever wish to meet, and she did this while simultaneously gobbling up huge portions without pausing for breath.

Lewis tried to shut his ears to her talk of cousin this and Mrs So-and-so from somewhere or other. He poked a timid fork at his plate and speared what he believed to be a piece of chicken. Only DNA testing could establish it for sure. Slowly, fearfully, he raised it to his lips.



Later, laid out full length on the bed, Greg was so pale he could have been taken for a corpse if not for the groans issuing from his trembling lips. Lewis leaned out of the open window, heedless of the danger of falling. If he was going to throw up, he only hoped it would happen while the Larkins' dog was running past. That would pay it back for the time it had bowled him off his bike.

“What did she say that dessert was called again?” Greg asked without lifting his head.

“Scandinavian Ice Surprise,” Lewis answered distantly.

“It was like eating cellophane. Come away from that window! You’re not going to puke.”

“I will if I’m lucky.”

“That’s it!” Greg exclaimed, sitting up abruptly. “That’s what I was going to tell you before we spotted Aunt Vivien’s car!”

“That feels like an awful long time ago,” Lewis moaned.

Greg swung his legs over the bedside and stood up. “Stop malingering,” he said, seizing Lewis by the collar and turning him around. “You can’t let one bad meal finish you off.”

“Up until a few seconds ago you were no picture of health yourself,” Lewis accused.

“That was before I remembered my idea. I think I may have found a way around that test.”

“You’re not going to sleep with a pyramid under your bed again, are you? That didn’t work last time.”

“That was a valid experiment. No, this time you’ve given me the answer.” He jabbed Lewis in the chest with his finger.

“Hey, I only suggested you study.”

“Yes, you did, but I’m willing to overlook that.”

He pulled a book from the pile Lewis had set neatly on the desk, knocking the rest of them to the floor. It was *The Folklore of Time* by Lucas Oberon Key. His

eyes agleam with excitement, he flicked through it then flourished the open book triumphantly under Lewis' nose.

“Just take a look at *this!*”

