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As If

Written by Blake Morrison

Published by Granta Books

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AS *If*

BLAKE MORRISON

GRANTA

Granta Publications, 12 Addison Avenue, London W11 4QR

First published in Great Britain by Granta Books 1997
Previous paperback edition published by Granta Books 1998
This edition with afterword published by Granta Books 2011

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

ISBN 978 1 84708 417 0

Typeset in Janson by M Rules
Printed in the UK by CPI Bookmarque, Croydon CR0 4TD

For the children

. . . from this instant,
There's nothing serious in mortality.
All is but toys, renown and grace is dead,
The wine of life is drawn . . .

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Macbeth*

But never did Henry, as he thought he did,
end anyone and hacks her body up
and hide the pieces, where they may be found.
He knows: he went over everyone, & nobody's missing.
Often he reckons, in the dawn, them up.
Nobody is ever missing.

JOHN BERRYMAN, "Dream Song 29"

CONTENTS

1	*The Children's Crusade*	1
2	*Court*	25
3	*15:42:32*	44
4	*The Walk*	60
5	*Experts*	82
6	*Home*	102
7	*Lies, Tears*	120
8	*Weekend*	140
9	*Beatings*	159
10	*Sex Marks*	180
11	*No Defence*	207
12	*As If*	233
Afterword		245
Acknowledgements		262

1

The Children's Crusade

Woe to the land that's governed by a child.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Richard III*

"As if this were the start of a dangerous adventure, the small boy puts his hand in the bigger boy's, and they follow a third boy through the square . . ."

When did I first hear the story of the Children's Crusade? Was it at home, in bed, from my mother, an anthology of classic legends perched in her hands? Was it at primary school, under the big window where we'd gather to hear The Famous Five or Dr Dolittle? At Sunday School, between singing "Onward Christian Soldiers" and receiving stars (gold and silver milk-bottle tops) for biblical knowhow? Did I pick up Henry Treece's *The Children's Crusade*, published in 1958, a novel for under-twelves, at some raffle or jumble sale? Or was it later, at big school, in a history lesson on the Middle Ages, something chalked up on the board, "read pp. 154–7 of your primer and describe in your own words the meaning of

the Children's Crusade"? I don't know. I can't recall. But the story has stayed.

As if this were the start of a dangerous adventure, the small boy puts his hand in the bigger boy's, and they follow a third boy through the square. Stephen sees them coming. They're not the first children to approach but they move more purposefully than the others, threading through the adults to where he stands in the cathedral's midday shade. The sight of them cheers him – like a star, an omen, a sign his mission will succeed. Blond-haired, twelve or so, in a plain brown shepherd's smock, he stands on his straw-bale, by the cathedral of Saint-Denis, and raises his two hands, palm upwards, like the saviour in the stained-glass windows. The trio come forward, then sit on the ground in front of him and stare.

He takes a letter from his pocket, and unfolds it. It was given him by Jesus, he says – in the sheepfold, three nights ago. He reads the letter aloud: "Dear Stephen, I have chosen you to lead a crusade of children to the Holy Land. You must leave your work and abandon your home. Gather followers as quickly as you can, for time is short. Your pilgrimage must leave from Vendôme in two months. Have faith. Take strength. I will not appear to you again – see, I am gone already, as you read. But I will sit at your right shoulder and guide you safely to Palestine. Trust in God, our father. You must begin at once."

Stephen explains to the children: Christendom is in danger from the Infidel. They must take the cross and go on a long journey together, the sea will dry up before them, they will pass through the waves like Moses and recapture the Holy Sepulchre, Islam will be vanquished under their sword. It is

hard work, preaching. Stephen's voice is like a stone cast down the side of a ravine. He waits for other stones to be caught in its wake, an army of stones cascading. Seeing the trio at his feet, other children have gathered now, a dozen, two dozen, more. They sit wide-eyed while he asks them to step up and pledge their troth. He begs them to have faith. No movement yet. Undaunted, he talks on.

The first to come forward is a boy his age, brightly dressed, like a jester. Pierre, he says he's called. He gives his hand, then takes out a wooden whistle and starts to play. The music seems to help. Stephen tosses his words into the air, and the pipe leaps up to pitch them further off. More converts. In dribs and drabs at first, brothers and sisters, two by two, into Stephen's ark. Then whole families, flocking. A priest watches suspiciously from the vestry window. Time, Stephen thinks, to move on. Already they are thirty, and by the time they reach the outskirts they have gathered twenty more.

At every village, he follows the same routine. By the church or pump, Stephen finds a place to stand, a step or bale or stool, something to raise him above the crowd. Then he casts the words of God, each time a little smoother, more persuasive, and Pierre pipes up to pitch them further off. Curious, spellbound, the children come. Sometimes adults come as well. They too are entranced. Didn't Christ himself appear in this way, out of the blue? Let the children have the fun of it while it lasts. Even a priest mutters approval: "These children are a reproach: they march to recover the Holy Land while we slumber." Some parents are less convinced. They stand at the edge, trying to wrest their children from the other children. One hard-faced apothecary drags his daughter off by the hair. Later, as the marchers leave town, she steps from behind a tree to join them. She has a small canvas bag, with provisions.

It is as much as anyone brings. Some come with nothing at all.

That first night, camped by the roadside, Stephen tries to talk to Pierre: he has plans, proposals, ideas to share. But Pierre's not one for words. He listens awhile, and for a reply gets out his pipe, its notes rising like stars to soothe the marchers off to sleep. Sweet May warmth, a late-darkening sky. Some children have blankets to lie on, others only the daisied grass. Next day the route goes north: Beauvais, Amiens, Abbeville, St-Omer. At Calais, they spend a day by the sea, over a thousand of them now, the little ones thinking these must be the waves they'll walk through, even the big ones not grasping how far they have still to go. Another week. Their route curls west, then south: Dieppe, Rouen, Elbeuf, Lisieux, Alençon, Bonnétable. Word goes ahead of them now. At the edge of one village, they are barred by fathers bearing scythes. Stephen turns away, across the fields, where a dozen village children wait to join them. Everywhere it's the same. At their head, Stephen seems to grow taller, blonder. He has his own pulpit now. A carpenter's boy knocked it up for him, a little dais to stand on, a lectern to read from, two supporting rails. Six of the bigger lads, hulking farmhands, make it their job to transport it between towns, bearing it on their shoulders like a coffin.

At Mortemer, as Stephen mounts the pulpit, an old priest steps forward to denounce him.

"You, boy," he shouts, "the false prophet, who are you to speak for God? Every word you say is blasphemy. Go back to your homes, children: do not listen to him. It is the Devil talking."

The priest brandishes a crucifix. Cross-legged, the children giggle. Stephen answers back.

"Is the church so corrupt it cannot hear God's word? I have

no tricks, no magic, no secret powers to make these children follow me. Only God."

"You claim to serve God, but you are wrong. In God's order, parents command, priests preach, knights crusade, and children obey. You are turning the world upside down. When children rule adults, Satan smiles."

This time, rather than speaking, Stephen slips his smock from his shoulders and shows his back to the crowd. Gasps, murmurs. The skin across the spine is striped with purple. A long pause, then Stephen turns:

"Other priests have spoken like you. Some have gone further, as you see. But no lash or whip can stop this mission. These children hear the Lord speaking through me. That is why they come."

And still they come, in thousands now, and tens of thousands. They spread like locusts across the plain, more and more and more of them. Leprosy, some call it – a festering plague. But Stephen speaks of water in the desert, and triumphal swelling progress: raindrop, runnel, rivulet, river, sea. Skirting Cloyes, his home and birthplace, the marchers reach Vendôme. Thousands more are waiting. Will those with special skills please make themselves known to him, Stephen asks, and they do: this one is the daughter of a cook, that one the son of a doctor – they will come in useful. Later he preaches to the multitude, reminding them of miracles: Daniel in the Lion's Den, the Voice from the Burning Bush, David and Goliath, the Parting of the Red Sea. A young priest says prayers. Local shopkeepers donate food: oranges, melons, bread, cakes, honey, wine. The mayor has given a donkey-cart, and volunteers are painting it sky-blue. A pipe band strikes up, led by Pierre. There are thirty thousand children, of all ages and sizes: fat and thin, toddling and lanky; the dark, the fair,

and the ginger-freckled; a few who are blind, some who are deaf, and many with missing front teeth. They fall in behind. The great journey begins.

At the head of the march a boy in a borrowed surplice carries a cross, made of bronze. Flanking him, two other boys bear gold-tasselled banners that snake in the wind. Just behind, in the heaven-blue donkey cart, under a canopy improvised from grain-sacks, elevated yet safe from sunstroke, sits Stephen. Many walk barefoot. A song goes up, and another, along the miles: Latin hymns at first, then marching rhymes, later ballads and harvest love-spoons picked up from older siblings. Four and eight abreast, the procession stretches back a mile. Too excited still for tiredness, young children run beside Stephen's cart, touching the dusty wheels and bright-blue boards, eager to be close to their leader. He waves and smiles, and sometimes pulls the smallest up beside him, to ride a mile and rest those aching limbs,

They stop that evening in a grassy hollow by a wood. It looks too small to accommodate thirty thousand marchers, but they manage it, or Christ does on their behalf, a miracle. More miracles are wrought with supper, the spit-roast of a single roe-deer captured in the woods sufficient to feed them all. Afterwards, as dark comes on, the grassy hollow echoes with the crying of infants: mama, mama, mama. Older children try to calm them with lullabies:

> Sleep, little ones, sleep.
> Your father's in the mountains.
> Your mother's weaving baskets.
> The valley's full of lilies.
> The horse is eating lemon-leaves.
> Sleep, little ones, sleep.

Next morning, the children rise like mist from the fields, marching while half-asleep. Important to keep the pace up, while the weather's kind and legs are not too weary. Twenty miles a day, preferably thirty. Day on day, step after step, ditto, ditto, ditto. Deeper south, the little water they have runs out but Stephen, casting spells from his canopy, replenishes trickling becks and dried-up wells. No shortage of food, either. Old women in lonely villages, hearing the rustle of the army through the corn, come forth with trays of sweetmeats. A ram is found, its horns caught in a thicket. Flocks of geese flying north to cooler weather are brought down in hundreds by slingstones. In the mountains a snow shower meets them, with flakes that seem to taste of more than water. South of Lyons, they turn the corner of a sunken road and find a baker's cart on its side, its axle broken, bread spilling on the grass – neither baker nor horse is to be seen, but the loaves are still warm. Next day, by the Rhône, some boys rush back excitedly, saying they've dammed a shoal of fish, and would the girls prepare a grill. Manna from heaven. Loaves and fishes. Daily miracles.

But the days are long. How much longer? A group of peasants in the fields, getting wind of the coming army, drop their scythes and run across, clamouring for locks of Stephen's hair. Where are they going? they ask the children. To God, they're told, and in return are asked: How far to the sea? Three days, maybe four, they say, pointing to the horizon. Somewhere along the way a dog, a retriever, has attached itself to the march, and now it's hoisted up with Stephen, resting its head on the prow of the cart, black snout pointing ahead. Next morning, the dog seems excited, its damp nose sniffing something. Others do, too – salt in the air, a freshness. Then a wide gleam in the distance, not heat haze over vineyards but a

sharp sliver of silver. Houses grow more numerous, clotting towards land's end. The children can see sails now, out in the bay, and then masts, unmoving, in the harbour. Finally, at sunset, the town square of Marseilles. The little army is fed and watered, spends the night curled up in doorways, then at dawn moves to the harbour, for the miracle. On his donkey-cart, Stephen stands like Moses, like Canute, raising his arm to the waves. Through the water lies the new Canaan. The sea is going to part for him, for everyone, a miracle.

Here the story peters out, on the brink, triumph just a walk between the waves away. What happened after that? More triumphs. More onward-marching Christian soldiers. So I thought then, or think I must have thought then, in the days of *as if*, when most things seemed possible – Santa Claus, the tooth-fairy, the Easter bunny, witches, ghosts, the virgin birth, heaven, God. Back then, the Children's Crusade felt like something out of the Bible, with a bit of Enid Blyton thrown in. Children, it seemed to be saying – if they're brave, determined, trusting – can have the most amazing adventures. And beat the baddies as well.

I see myself listening, wide-eyed, an open book. It was a tale of Innocence, appropriate for the time, childhood, or my childhood, the late 1950s and early 1960s. We were innocent then, or wanted to be – even the adults who'd had (and were trying to unlearn) the experience of war. The world was all right. We crusaders were going to make it even better. Or so it seemed, from where I was, in a small village surrounded by gentle hills. I lived in a sort of biblical haze. My parents – GPs – were healers. Tillers of the fields moved beyond the window, with their sheepdogs. The Jersey cow had a golden calf. The larder

ran with silverfish, like the Sea of Galilee. *As if* lay all around me. It wasn't hard to believe in the Children's Crusade.

But perhaps, even then, I grasped there must be more to the story – could sense it had been edited down. Children can be credulous, and I was more credulous than most, but there were things about Stephen that didn't ring quite true. A story about a twelve-year-old set in 1212: it seemed too neat, numerologically, to be convincing. There were myths of frogs, birds, fish and dog packs travelling to the Holy Land: I knew *they* couldn't be true – did this belong with them? I imagine myself curled up in the window behind the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, getting older and more distrustful. Was the Crusade like all the other *as if*s, a lie told by parents? I saw a film at this time (saw it being filmed, in fact, on a nearby farm): *Whistle Down the Wind*, with Alan Bates and Hayley Mills, about a group of children who find a man in their barn and take him for Jesus Christ. One of these children, a boy, isn't fooled: he knows the man's not Jesus. I liked this boy. I too was becoming suspicious. I'd begun to sense a world beyond Sunday school and U-certificates. Adolescence had started, my arms and legs sprouting hair like Esau's. I was moving on – from birds' eggs and Dinky cars to girls and Tamla Motown. The 1960s were also moving on, from Innocence to Experience. Every age has its own story, or rewrites the same story; every Age, too. I see myself getting the atlas out and – jaded, disbelieving – following the child Crusaders down through France. I play the film back, reviewing it through narrowed eyes.

Vendôme, the day of the great departure. Here are the parents, brave and tearful, waving their children goodbye. And

there's the donkey-cart, its wheels spoking up dust, with Stephen enthroned like a little emperor. The plain smock has gone: he has decked himself out in silk – also, in the process, refurbishing the cart with cushions and rugs. Beside the cart, with its stilled, revolving wheels, little children run excitedly, eager to be close to their leader. Stephen quickly tires of this – the relentless staring obeisance distracts him from his prayers, he says – and he asks his deputies, Jacques and Julien, a strapping pair of twins, to shoo the children off. The twins oblige, raising their stakes, biffing and prodding any intruders – a little blood, some tears, best set the right example from the start. Later, in the interests of security, curtains are drawn around the cart, and only those with permits allowed in its vicinity: the flag-bearer, the two deputies, the three bodyguards, the four "sons of . . ." (chef, doctor, magician, pedicurist), and Pierre, the joker with the flute. Strictly no girls up front: the Crusade is a voyage to God; females on voyages bring bad luck.

By dusk on the first day, the procession is straggling back over the horizon, the little ones not keeping up. Three days, and already several thousand, bored, tired or losing faith, are heading home. Others – teen thieves, con-boys and baby-whores – joined up in Vendôme only for the prospect of roadside trade and now, disheartened by the lack of it, slip off to passing towns. Each day a little harder, each day a little hotter. No wells or streams to drink from, no vineyards to raid grapes from, only dust and endless roads. The little ones ask for bread, but mostly there is none to break. Now even older kids fall by the wayside, resting then dying there. Every procession leaves rubbish in its wake, and this one is littered with small corpses. Before they reach the mountains, ten thousand of the thirty thousand die.

In need of new recruits, Stephen stops off in towns to preach. Not easy: with the children at his side so lame and sick, sermons of milk and honey aren't enough. He has to perform: to display his martyr's scars (the purple weals painted on his back), and work the egg and scarf tricks learned from the magician's son (there had been a rabbit, earlier, but that had had to be eaten). Even then, the would-be recruits can be reluctant: they want to know what's in it for them. These southerners don't have the Faith. No one likes dragooning, but ways are found to rope in volunteers.

South and further south, worse and worse. In Lyons, an incident. Stephen and his henchmen visit the cathedral, to pray for help, and are given food by a young priest. Afterwards, a gold chalice is found to be missing. Four riders are despatched after the marchers, to secure its return. Stephen protests his innocence: a messiah, a man of God, surely they're not accusing him, or any of his followers . . . Unimpressed, the horsemen dismount and search the cart, under the cushions, all bags and knapsacks. Nothing. The four horsemen are angry – apoplectic. Stephen, they warn, has not heard the last of this. Once they've safely gone, Pierre pipes up from behind a boulder. He has a bag over his shoulder, and a gleam from inside it catches the light. He climbs beside Stephen, on the cart.

The journey continues. Step after sore step, dried-up source after dried-up source. From Lyons, word has passed ahead: in every town, the crusaders are greeted by closed blinds and empty streets. Only the priests will speak to them: they denounce Stephen as a leper, a locust, a louse. Lice are indeed a problem, and other vermin. Hard to sleep at night for the high whiff in the heat and the scuttle of rats. Grapes shrivel on the vine. There has been no hotter summer for a

century. It is only God testing our mettle, says Stephen, from the shade. While his troops grow weaker, he looks bigger, stronger, less like twelve than fifteen. Good for the hormones, being a messiah. At night girls are escorted to his donkey-cart, some as young as ten. Strange screams in the darkness. The dwindling young cry for their parents. The older ones despair of reaching the sea.

But they do reach it, late one evening, a lift of spirits, hopes burnished by the low red sun. Weeks and weeks of walking towards this moment. They throw themselves in the waves, to wash away the dust of all those miles. To quench their thirsts, too, some of them: they are inland children, innocent of the bitter taste of sea. Grilled fish for supper and the sleep of the blessed. Next day, in the harbour, Stephen stands on his donkey cart, for the miracle. He raises his arms and bids it come. A pause, a delay, a wait for God to get His act together. Nothing. Stephen opens his hands and holds them palm-upward to the sky. The sea abides, unparted. Surprise, surprise, no miracle. A last try. He wades in, up to his thighs. The sea laps about him, unreacting. Empty-handed, Stephen turns to face his troops. Some are for lynching him there and then. Others begin mapping the journey home. The annalists have their pens poised: "thus deceived and confused, the children began to return; and those who had been earlier wont to traverse the lands in happy throngs, always singing to the heavens, now returned one at a time, the boys silent and hungry, the girls deflowered, fools in everyone's eyes".

So the story goes, the revisionist version. A Massacre of Innocents. Despair instead of faith. Not trust and goodness, but manipulation and evil. Disillusion, failure and death.

Children – *big* children – as devils, rather than angels. The *Lord of the Flies* view. A story for our century, or the end of it: religious cults, false messiahs, infants dying of disease and starvation, a long march ending in catastrophe. All of which makes it easier to believe.

The Crusade, in this version, has lost its magic – is short on hope and conviction. Disenchantment: something that happened to me at a certain age, in my teens; something that happened to the Age, too. The state seems widespread now, in the 1990s. You don't have to grow up to feel cynical. You don't even have to be a teenager. *As if*, my children say, as I used to say at their age, but the phrase doesn't mean what it did. We'll be sitting round the television together, *The Nine O'Clock News* on, with its cries of pain from other countries (Bosnia, Somalia, Rwanda), and every two minutes or so my son (who's twelve) will be there with his four letters, his two blunt words, coming down like a brick against anything that's wishful or implausible. Hopes are high that a peace agreement can be reached next week. *As if*. American scientists believe a new drug may provide a significant breakthrough in the treatment of cancer. *As if*. The England manager today named the squad which he is confident will bring home the next World Cup. *As if*. The trope used to be enlarging, wondrous, a means of seeing beyond our noses, an escape from the prison house of fact. *As if*: it was the sound the swing made as it scythed us upward through the air, the whisper of dreams and lovely promises. Much virtue in *as if*. Now, in kids' mouths, it means the opposite. Earthbound scepticism and diminution: tell me about it, dream on, get real. Not hope but the extinction of hope. *As if*: not a candle to light us to bed, but a chopper to chop off our heads.

As if. Doubt is addictive. Doubt is catching. I've doubts even about the doubting version of the Children's Crusade.

Maybe the story itself is a fantasy. But when I look it up in reference books, there it is, documented from fifty or more thirteenth-century sources. Stephen, it seems, wasn't the only boy visionary that year. From Cologne, between Easter and Whitsun, a twelve-year-old called Nicholas led another Crusade, his route taking him over the Alps, the expedition then breaking into different groups to reach Marseilles, Genoa, Pisa, Brindisi and Rome. Most histories of the Crusades carry a paragraph or two. Like the stories of Christ and Robin Hood, this one seems to have a basis in fact.

But the accounts vary. The interpretations are infinite. There are as many versions of the Crusade as there are sources. And even where there's agreement about the narrative, there are questions still to resolve. Motivation, for instance. What were the parents doing, letting their children go off? If they'd wanted to stop them, surely they could have, easily? So why did they consent? Innocence says they, too, had faith in Stephen's mission; experience that they found him useful. Times were hard, circa 1212: large families, poor harvests. A third of children died before they reached two, but that still left a nest of hungry mouths to feed. What to do? What had always been done. Abandonment – taking a child or two to the forest, or city, and leaving them there. "Exposure", as it was known – the nicest kind of infanticide, since it didn't always lead to death. The tradition went back to ancient times. Every language has a word for such children, or the lucky ones, the survivors: foundling, *enfant trouvé*, *gettatello*, *expósito*. Every culture has its legends of them: Oedipus, Romulus and Remus, Moses in his creel. Hence the allure of Stephen, salve to the adult conscience. Just when you thought you'd have to dump, strangle or sell your child, a Godsend, the Crusade.

And the children? Why were they so enthusiastic to go?

Did they hate the life they had? Was their Crusading a kind of mass hysteria? And how could they have walked so far? In those days, children had to grow up fast. Even so, a journey of such a distance: can we really be talking four-, six-, eight-, ten- and twelve-year-olds here? I'm perplexed. It doesn't feel right. I dig around, without success. Then a friend gives me an article, by a Dutch academic, Peter Raedts, published in the *Journal of Medieval History*. Raedts points out that the word used in contemporary accounts of the Crusade was *pueri*, which can mean children, but also meant, more generally, youngish persons (anything from seven to twenty-eight), and, more loosely still, farmhands, labourers, dependants, servants, and younger sons not due to inherit. In some mouths, *puer* seems to have been (as "puerile" is) a derogatory term, a put-down, more to do with social status than with age – much as US white Southerners once used "boy" to refer to blacks. The sources also say that some of the *pueri* were married, and that *pastores*, *mulieres*, *homines* and *pauperes* also joined in the march. It's only later, less reliable accounts that speak of twelve-year-olds. So the "children", it seems, were young people, most of them unemployed and without prospects. Stephen himself would have been twenty or so – an idealist or ideologue, an ascetic who hated the system and promised a better life overseas. His followers were the no-hopers of the feudal economy, a mob of disgruntled teenagers with nothing to lose, their Crusade a yobbos' outing to the Med.

The more I look at it, the less about children the Children's Crusade seems to be. The Crusaders themselves were adult, more or less. The chroniclers of the Crusade were also adult, but liked to leave adults out of the picture, as if absolving them of responsibility for what went on. Maybe that's why the

tale seems modern, familiar, a story the present Age is also fond of, a story of kids being in control – or rather out of control, beyond all supervision. When adults talk about children these days, they seem to picture themselves as Gulliver among the Lilliputians, roped down by little people. We're powerless. Our hands are tied. The little sods ignore everything we say to them. There's nothing we can do.

But isn't this the most implausible story of all? For look how adults crowd the frame. Watch for their prints. Unmask them between the lines and in the margins. See them put their thumbs on the scales. Admit, when the verdict's passed, the inadmissible evidence. Listen again: to a story about grown-ups.

After his failure to part the waves, Stephen sits disconsolate on a capstan. He hadn't wanted this. He never planned to go it alone. Though he feels to have been singled out, as God's Elect, he knows he can't succeed without help. Many times along the march, he has prayed for some adult to intervene, to offer help and guidance, to share the burden. But the adults, if not actively hostile, have been indifferent. Now the Crusade has reached the sea, the dead end of Europe, and he's stuck in this rotting harbour, the tattered army sullen and mutinous at his back.

Enter two merchants, Hugh the Iron and William the Pig. Sitting down next to Stephen, among the ropes and corks and fishing nets, they introduce themselves, tell him they know about his mission and offer to sail the Crusaders to Palestine, free of charge. *As if*. Even Stephen is suspicious. Whoever heard of merchants doing something for nothing? But The Iron and The Pig have the next life to think of, and sins to

atone for in this. Hands folded like monks' hands, they beg Stephen to let them perform this humble service for God. He accepts their offer. They shake on it. He goes off to face his gang.

In a quayside bar, there has been an earlier meeting: the Iron, the Pig, and Pierre. The jester, drunk, offguard, has been boasting of his exploits on the road – the sex, the drink, the scams. He mentions the gold chalice, acquired in Lyon, and they ask to see it: he flashes it at them, a million-franc gleam from his bag. Impressed, they buy him a drink and ask what he wants for the chalice. Its price is a thousand boarding cards to Palestine, he says, free passage for the Crusaders. They frown and hesitate and shake their heads: ships come expensive. But all right. Plus a thousand francs for him, says Pierre, upping the stakes. Five hundred, they say. Eight hundred. Seven. Seven fifty. Done. They shake hands on it, and go their separate ways. Afterwards, The Iron and The Pig talk to an Arab merchant: a Saracen, a Moslem, a cousin of the caliph, a trader in cattle and figs. He has seven ships leaving tomorrow, with room below decks for extra cargo. They have a proposal for him. Suppose . . . He listens. They haggle. A deal is struck. They hand him money – no, *he* hands *them* money. Why? Shhh. The Iron and the Pig come out smiling, several thousand francs the richer, and still with the chalice to sell.

Back on the quay, Stephen addresses his troops. A wave of enthusiasm. One thousand crusaders embark on seven ships. From the quayside, a pipe band – Pierre at its head – serenades them off. On board, Stephen offers up thanks to God: "Our faith in Him endures as a rock. It is for Him we must retake the Holy Sepulchre. We cannot fail with God watching over us. He will wipe away every tear from our eyes, and death

shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain, for the former things have passed away."

The picture fades. The seas go dark. The pilgrims sleep in the cattle-hold. Mouldy bread and sips of water. In bad weather off Sardinia, two ships capsize, all crew and passengers drowned. Five ships sail on, and reach their haven, with half the cargo still alive. Dhows sail from the harbour to greet them: a welcome party of Saracens. Where have they been? What delayed them? Are they all here? Hugh the Iron and William the Pig promised seven ships, not five. And so many corpses below deck. The caliph may make trouble: when he buys a thousand slaves, he expects a thousand slaves. "Slaves? Is this not Palestine?" Stephen asks. Laughter from the beards. No, this is Bougie, Algeria.

The slave-market in Bougie, some days later. Blinding sun and camel shit. Lot 29, the caliph's Christians – the Christians the caliph has chosen not to keep, fewer than he'd hoped, but a bargain all the same. Bids are invited. Merchants, like doctors, walk among the *pueri*, in search of fat and muscle. The *pueri*, feeling fingers prod at their flesh, wonder if they will serve *at* dinner tables, or *on* them, as supper. The horror, either way. Frying-pan to fire. They'd like to settle with Stephen – if it weren't for these chains.

But Stephen isn't there. Though chained and guarded, he is spending the day with the governor of Egypt, Al-Adil, who is here in Bougie on business, and has heard about Stephen's mission. Al-Adil is joined by his son, Al-Kamil, a student of philosophy and French. Over sherbet and mint tea, they question the prisoner. Haggard and beatific, Stephen speaks of his faith, and describes his followers as "peace-loving pilgrims" – no word about a Crusade, or Palestine, or recapturing the Holy Sepulchre. Father and son are impressed, and make him

an offer: a place in their palace as a tutor. And his disciples, Stephen asks, thirty thousand once, three hundred now, what of them? They reassure him: they have funds; they have merchant friends in need of workers; suitable arrangements will be made. Stephen accepts the offer, and returns, under guard, to bring his followers happy tidings. One day, when the time is right, they'll join forces in Palestine to take the Sepulchre. Till then they'll work as tutors and gardeners. Does he not mean as slaves? No, guarantees have been made – it will not be slavery. At least, he says, they'll have a bed and food now. At least they'll be doing useful work. At least they can stay true to their God.

Years pass. A long darkness. Gulls mew like the newborn. Back in Marseilles, the old man mending nets looks to the horizon and wonders: whatever happened to those young Crusaders? The town doctor on his evening stroll, the women leaving the shore with bundles of driftwood: all have heard rumours of catastrophe – can they be true? Parents from the north have made the long journey, wanting to know. But there is no one to ask. Hugh the Iron and William the Pig are long dead, whether stabbed in a brawl or hanged for treason no one seems sure. There is nothing firm to tell. There are only rumours. Then a priest disembarks from the East. He has a beard now, and a bald spot, but was once a Crusader – one of the *pueri*. He tells the tale: the voyage, the welcome committee in Bougie, the selling into slavery, as arranged by The Iron and The Pig. And then the dispersal to all parts of Islam. In Baghdad, he says, eighteen of the Crusaders became martyrs, executed for refusing to worship Mahomet. Others, like him, were luckier: they earned no money, were underfed, depised and mistreated, but were allowed to keep their Christian faith. And Stephen? No word of Stephen. That

rumour of him going to work for the governor of Egypt? No truth in it, as far as he knows. The priest has heard another story but keeps it to himself. People crowd round, asking for details, but he will not tell.

Runs it through his head, though, constantly. And later, grown old in a Spanish monastery, sets it down, on parchment (the source now lost, but its spirit recuperable). The slave-market at Bougie. High sun. Blinding light. Lot 29, the caliph's Christians: sold to assorted bidders, to be collected in the morning, after prayers. The angry disciples round on Stephen. To have gone through hell and high water for this.

"What is it I've always told you to have," he asks, "even in adversity?"

"Faith."

"Right. And what is it you have now?"

Silence.

Then a voice. "Enough, that's what we've had, enough."

They demand to see Christ's letter, hand-delivered all those months ago when Stephen was a simple shepherd's boy. He will not show it, and crosses his arms over his chest. Though it's hard for them, in chains, they strip his clothes and find the letter sewn in the lining of his smock. It is torn and faded – also blank. Stephen, disbelieving, asks to see it: blank, blank, blank. He swears there was writing on it, Christ's signature. It must have faded in the salt or sun. Faith, they must have faith, he says. They move towards him, move in on him, as far as they can move, in chains. They've had enough. His time's up. And yet they hesitate. Suppose he is God's Chosen, and they kill him, what punishment will follow? Will they not roast in hell? They stare, not knowing what to do. Have Faith, Stephen says, see what tomorrow brings. They back off. Then one – a boy, dark-haired, the youngest of the party – picks up

a stone and hurls it at Stephen's head. Stephen falls, gets up again. Another stone, and another. Have faith, he cries from the ground, God is testing our faith, the last trial, then freedom. *As if*. The stones rain harder. Then chains, and a blade from somewhere, and all the anger of months and years released at Stephen's head.

In February 1993, in Liverpool, two ten-year-old boys abducted a two-year-old called James Bulger from a shopping centre, walked with him for two and a half miles to a railway line and there, as darkness fell, with bricks and an iron bar, battered him to death. Some deaths are emblematic, tipping the scales, and little James's death – green fruit shaken from the bough, an ear of grain sown back in the earth – seemed like the murder of hope: the unthinkable thought of, the undoable done. If child-killings are the worst killings, then a child child-killing must be worse than worst, a new superlative in horror. In that spring of cold fear, it was as if there'd been a breach in nature: the tides frozen; stars nailed to the sky; the moon weeping far from sight. Those nameless boys had killed not just a child but the idea of childhood, all its happy first associations. No good could grow up from the earth. Ten-year-olds were looked at with a new suspicion, and toddlers kept on tight reins.

It was the video footage from a security camera, jumpy and poignant as a cine film, that made the case famous. The little boy could be seen at loose among shoppers, then following two older boys, then disappearing with them – the beginning of the long march to his death. Since then, there've been other killings by children. In France, as the Bulger trial opened, three boys, one of them only ten, kicked and beat a tramp to

death. In Norway, a five-year-old girl was battered and left to die in the snow by three boys of six. In Chicago, two boys aged ten and eleven dropped a five-year-old boy fourteen storeys to his death, after he'd refused to give them sweets. There weren't public trials in those cases; the killers weren't treated as adults in an adult court: only the Bulger case has that distinction. But many papers have carried reports of child depravity: "Boys aged 10 and 11 are charged with rape", "Boy, 13, accused of killing 85-year-old woman", "Boy, 8, attempts armed robbery", "Boy, 13, denies rape in sandpit", "Boy, 12, beats pensioner with iron bar", "Boy burglar, 6, batters baby to death". It's the age of Bad Boys. And we're the Frankensteins who made them. From the spring of 1993 can be dated this new horror, of the monsters to whom we've given birth – dwarf killers, noon shadows of men complete.

In the autumn of that year, nine months after the killing, the boys accused of murdering James Bulger appeared in court in Preston. An American magazine invited me to go and write about the case; I said yes, like a shot. Friends found my enthusiasm difficult to understand; my wife did, too. I remember standing with her on the doorstep of our house, the night before the trial, waiting to go to Euston station. My bag was packed with shirts, trousers, razors, useful addresses, and copies of two books by Rousseau – *Émile*, his theory of childhood, and the *Confessions*, his story of him. It was a Sunday night, Hallowe'en, and the air was full of smoke from Guy Fawkes bonfires set off early. Our three children, black cloaks and scare-masks over their jeans and trainers, were tricking-and-treating down the street. The murder trial would be gruelling: why was I so keen on going, Kathy wanted to know? I think she suspected me of running away from work, or our children, or home, or her. None of which was true, or

admissible. But what was the reason? I couldn't explain. I stood there holding her hand and twizzling her wedding ring between my finger and thumb, rotating it below the knuckle, as if to tighten a screw, or loosen it maybe, turning us back to a time before she wore it, before marriage and babies, back to childhood, before we met. Then the minicab was there, a kiss, a hug, a faraway shout to the kids, and off I went through the smoky night, like a man escaping the fire that will consume his house and family, guilty, lonely, exultant to be free.

I stayed in Preston for a month, coming back at weekends. I found the experience disturbing, even traumatic, but once my article was published, I thought – knowing the rhythms of journalism, and how quickly an assignment can be set aside – I would be able to forget it. The world moved on: war in Bosnia, peace in Bosnia, mad cow disease, the beginning and end of an IRA ceasefire, Fred and Rosemary West, Dunblane. The world moved on, but I didn't. I was still stuck in Preston, with the sights and sounds of that long month: the faces of the boys as their taped confessions were played over the public address system; the Bulger relations sitting in a row; the barristers, judge, jury, witnesses, psychiatrists, policemen, social workers, journalists and court ushers; the man with the slurpy geiger rod who used to search us as we entered court. I couldn't get rid of all this. I began to wonder if I wanted to. It was as if something important had happened there that still hadn't been faced or explained.

In truth, my difficulties started the moment the trial did, though I couldn't admit it at the time. I'd gone there expecting an answer to the question that everyone wanted answering: Why? What made two ten-year-old boys kill an innocent child? But murder trials are about Where and When and Who and How, not Why, and even during the case I

found myself having to look for answers elsewhere – outside the court, not inside it. Increasingly, trying to answer Why seemed to require some leap of empathy, or speculation: from the churningly gruesome facts of the case into more general thoughts about what it is to be a child – and a parent. All roads lead inward, to the imagination. Perhaps that's why the Bulger case was and is so haunting, to me and a million others: it may have happened out there, at a safe distance, but it goes on happening here, in our hearts and minds.

Stephen, in his sky-blue donkey-cart, is as far from Bootle Strand shopping centre as the year 1212 is from 1993. Yet the Children's Crusade and the killing of James Bulger do have elements in common. Innocence and the loss of innocence. Faith and the betrayal of faith. Abduction: the blind leading the blind. A long walk. A desperate conclusion. The problem of allocating blame. The difficulty in interpreting the behaviour of the participants. Narrative multiplicity – how to decide which of several conflicting versions is true? Above all, there's the inadmissible but unmistakable presence of adults. Both these stories seem to have children as their subject. But really they're stories about grown-ups.