Opening extract from

# Krindlekrax

Written by

**Philip Ridley**

Published by

**Penguin Books Ltd**

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

# — 1 —

It was the day for choosing a hero.

All the week before, Ruskin Splinter's school – St George's – had been casting its end-of-year play and only the role of hero remained. Ruskin wanted to play this part more than anything. 'I was born to be a hero,' he had told his teacher, Mr Lace. 'Don't you think so?'

'I'm not sure,' Mr Lace had replied, sucking a pencil. 'We'll decide next Monday.'

And now it was the day for deciding.

As soon as Ruskin woke up he stared at the photographs of famous actors that were stuck on his walls (Ruskin wanted to be a famous actor when he grew up) and started rehearsing lines from the play.

'I am brave and wise and wonderful,' Ruskin said, getting dressed and going to the bathroom to clean his teeth.

He looked at his reflection in the mirror above the sink.

'What a hero you are!' he said to himself, the toothpaste frothing in his mouth.

Ruskin was eleven years old, extremely thin, with a

bush of frizzy red hair. He wore green shorts that showed off his knobbly knees, green (lace-up) shoes that were too big for him ('You'll grow into them!' his mum had told him), a striped (green and white) T-shirt that made his arms look like twigs, and glasses with lenses so thick his eyes appeared the size of saucers.

When Ruskin had cleaned his teeth, he looked out of the bathroom window.



'Good morning, Lizard Street,' he said in his squeaky whisper of a voice.

Ruskin always said good morning to the Street. He loved the dark brick of the houses, the cracked pavements, and the cobbled road with its bumps and holes.

At the other end of Lizard Street, Ruskin could see his school, St George's. The school had turrets and was surrounded by iron railings with spikes on top. The school was so old that Ruskin's mum, Wendy, had gone there when she was a girl.

'One day,' Ruskin said, 'I'll be the hero of Lizard Street.'

## — 2 —

Ruskin washed his face and hands, then went downstairs to the kitchen. His mum was sitting at the table – an electric toaster on one side of her, an electric kettle on the other – pouring endless cups of tea.

'Kiss,' Wendy said when she saw Ruskin.

Ruskin kissed her cheek.

'Tea?' she asked.

'Yes please,' Ruskin replied.

'Toast?'

'Yes please.'

Every morning Wendy said 'Kiss', followed by 'Tea?' then 'Toast?', and every morning Ruskin kissed his mum's cheek and said 'Yes please' to both questions.

Ruskin's mum was very small, extremely thin, with a

bush of frizzy red hair. She wore a green nightdress that showed off her knobbly knees, fluffy green slippers that made her feet look too big, a green dressing gown that made her arms look like twigs, and glasses with lenses so thick her eyes appeared the size of saucers.

'It's another hot day,' Wendy sighed, pouring Ruskin his tea. 'We haven't had any rain for weeks now. I've never known a summer like it. Poor Mr Lace's window boxes are withering away. It's so hot my glasses keep steaming up, polly-wolly-doodle-all-the-day.'

Whenever Wendy got flustered, she said 'Polly-wolly-doodle-all-the-day'. Once, for example, she had no bread to make toast, and really panicked. She ran round the house crying, 'No toast with our tea, polly-wolly-doodle-all-the-day! What shall we do? Toastless tea, polly-wolly-doodle-all-the-day.'

It was left to Ruskin to go to Mrs Walnut's shop and buy a loaf.

Since then, Ruskin's house has always been well stocked with bread (and teabags, because that's *another* thing Wendy can't live without). Some of the bread turns green and mouldy and has to be thrown away, but at least they are never without their buttery slices of toast and marmalade, or toast and baked beans, or toast and scrambled eggs (or poached eggs or fried eggs).

Ruskin looked at his mum as she prepared his breakfast.

'If you're so hot,' Ruskin told her, 'you should take your slippers off.'

Wendy looked at Ruskin, shocked.

'Take my slippers off!' she gasped, spreading marmalade on his toast. 'Don't be silly. I wouldn't feel dressed without my slippers on. What if we had a visitor and I opened the door in my bare feet? They'd see my toenails and the soles of my feet. Oh, what a thought, Ruskin. It makes me say "polly-wolly-

doodle-all-the-day" just thinking of it.'

'But we never have any visitors,' Ruskin remarked. 'No one *ever* knocks on our door.'

Wendy put fresh slices of bread into the toaster. 'What about Sparkey?' she asked.

'I'm not friends with Sparkey any more,' Ruskin replied. 'You know that.'

'Oh, it's too early for arguments,' Wendy muttered. 'Just eat your toast.'

Ruskin nibbled his toast, mumbling, 'I am brave and wise and wonderful and handsome and tall and covered in muscles, with a voice like thunder –'

'Excuse me,' Wendy interrupted, 'but what's that you're twittering on about?'

'It's the hero's speech,' Ruskin explained. 'From the play we're doing at school. I've been telling you about it for weeks. Remember?'

'Er . . . no.'

'Mr Lace found the play buried in his back garden. Remember?'

'Er . . . no.'

'But . . . it's all I've been talking about. Every breakfast. Every teatime.'

'Well, why don't you tell me again and see if it rings any bells.'

Ruskin took a deep breath and began, 'The play's about a village that's being pestered by a dragon. The dragon lives in a cave and every night it comes out and digs up the pathways and burns the farmers' vegetables and cracks planks of wood. Until, one night, a boy does battle with the dragon and throws a golden penny into its mouth and –' Ruskin was just about to add that the village in the story was supposed to have been on the same site as Lizard Street is now – that's why the street is called Lizard Street in the first place and why the pub

at the end of the street is called The Dragon and the Golden Penny – but he didn't have a chance, because his mum interrupted again.

'And *you* want to play the *hero*?' she asked.

'That's right,' Ruskin replied.

'Let me hear the speech again.'

Ruskin took a sip of tea, coughed to clear the crumbs of toast from his throat, then began, 'I am brave and wise and wonderful and handsome and tall and covered in muscles, with a voice like thunder –'

'I don't want to interrupt again,' Wendy said, interrupting again, 'but can I just say something?'

'If you have to,' Ruskin said irritably.

'Well, I'm not sure you're perfectly suited for the part, dear.'

'What do you mean?'

'Just listen to what you're saying,' Wendy told him, biting into her slice of toast. 'I mean, I'm sure you are brave and wise and wonderful. But I'm not sure you can pass for the other things.'

'Be specific, Mum!' Ruskin demanded.

'*Specifically* then,' Wendy said, 'you are *not* handsome, you are *not* tall, you are *not* covered in muscles, and you have *not* got a voice like thunder. In fact, your voice is such a squeaky whisper that even *I* find it hard to hear you sometimes.'

At that moment, Ruskin's dad, Winston, came down for breakfast.

Wendy said, 'Kiss.'

Winston kissed her cheek.

'Tea?' Wendy asked.

'Yes please,' Winston responded, sighing.

'Toast?'

'Yes please,' he replied, sitting at the table.

Winston was small, extremely thin, with balding

frizzy red hair. He wore pyjama bottoms (green and white striped) with holes showing off his knobbly knees, woolly socks (green) that made his feet look furry, a sleeveless vest that made his arms look like twigs, and glasses with lenses so thick his eyes appeared the size of saucers.

Wendy put some more bread in the toaster and poured Winston a cup of tea. Then she told him about the part Ruskin wanted in the school play.

'What does the hero look like?' Winston asked.

'Handsome,' Wendy informed him.

'But Ruskin's not handsome,' Winston said. 'He's the silliest-looking boy in Lizard Street.'

'And tall,' Wendy informed him.

'But Ruskin's not tall,' Winston said. 'He's the smallest boy in Lizard Street.'

'And covered in muscles.'

'But Ruskin hasn't got any muscles anywhere,' Winston said.

'And with a voice like thunder,' Wendy finished.

'But Ruskin's voice is just a squeaky whisper,' Winston remarked. Then, looking at his son, he continued, 'You can't possibly play the hero. People will laugh at you.'

The toast popped out of the toaster.

Wendy put some more bread in, then buttered the toast.

'But I *want* to be a hero,' Ruskin said.

'We all might *want* to be heroes,' Winston said, 'but we're all *not*. You know my motto: "Don't interfere". Heroes have to do a lot of interfering.'

'You know your trouble,' Ruskin said, pointing at his dad. 'Low self-image!'

Suddenly there was a loud crash!

The kitchen window smashed!

A football landed on the table, right in the middle of the toast.

SSCRUNCH!!



# — 3 —

Wendy screamed and hid behind the refrigerator.

Winston screamed and hid behind the gas cooker. 'It's not my fault!' he cried. 'It's not my fault!'

Winston was always saying 'It's not my fault.' For example, a couple of days ago when Wendy complained about how hot it was, Winston said, 'It's not my fault.' And when Ruskin said he didn't have any school-friends, when a light bulb fused, when Wendy broke a cup, when a car backfired, when a dog started barking, to these and many other things, Winston's immediate and only response was, 'It's not my fault.'

Ruskin stood on the chair, staring at the ball.

It looked like an ostrich egg in a nest of toast.

'Who said it *was* your fault?' Ruskin told his dad. 'It's Elvis's ball again, that's all.'

Winston said, 'That's the third time Elvis has broken one of our kitchen windows.'

'Not to mention all my ruined toast,' Wendy said. Then she added, 'Polly-wolly-doodle-all-the-day.'

Most people on Lizard Street were afraid of Elvis Cave. He was very tall and very strong, and always wore the clothes of an American footballer: huge padded shoulders, tight trousers and shiny black helmet with a visor. Also, his voice was so deep (for an eleven-year-old) that sometimes, when he shouted, it made the teeth in Ruskin's head vibrate.

Elvis and Ruskin were in the same class at school. Once, when they were both as small as each other, they had been friends. There had been three of them in fact: Ruskin, Elvis and Sparkey Walnut. But then Elvis became tall and big and started scaring people. He stopped being friends with Ruskin. Sparkey, who was scared, followed Elvis, and Ruskin was left without a friend. Except for Corky, the school caretaker.

There was a knocking at the front door.

'It's not my fault,' Winston gasped.

'Polly-wolly-doodle-all-the-day,' Wendy gasped.

The knocking got louder.

'G-g-give him his ball back,' Winston said.

'But you *shouldn't* give it back to him,' Ruskin insisted, stamping his foot. 'Elvis is *always* breaking our windows and we can't afford new ones. Look! Most of our kitchen windows have been replaced with newspaper. And it's not just ours. It's everyone's on Lizard Street! And no one ever says anything or complains because Elvis is tall and strong and they're all afraid of him. And they're afraid of what his mum and dad will say. Elvis even breaks windows when he sleepwalks.'

Elvis had been caught sleepwalking several times, bouncing his ball. The ball made a distinctive, liquid sound when it bounced that can only be described as 'Da-boinggg'!

The knocking at the door grew louder.

Elvis called through the letterbox, 'If you don't give me my ball back, I'll knock your door down, you silly bunch of Splinters!'

'It's not my fault,' Winston gasped.

'Polly-wolly-doodle-all-the-day,' Wendy gasped.

Ruskin picked the ball up, jumped off the chair and opened the street door.