

# Revolving

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(Title and theme provided by Katie Duncan on my Facebook page)

My pen: loaded.

Ink-spattered bodies

Groaning.

Poisoned by my prose;

Posed

By my artful hand.

Trying to escape my truth,

Gasping

As it closes in.

A blind corridor

No mercy.

Feel my agony

As it ricochets around.

I was in the Headmaster's office. He was making me a 'nice cup of tea' and speaking ridiculously gently. Missing Chemistry for this meeting, I was intent on spinning the encounter out for as long as I could.

There had been a power shift, the fact almost audible in the air around me. My aura was crackling...or something. I felt like I could have shattered lightbulbs in there! I was definitely making him nervous.

I was beyond proud of myself. And also, rather scared...

I find, when adults are edgy like that, it's best to just keep quiet and not tip the balance too soon. I wasn't expecting the sugar hit from the tea to be quite as intense, but then who doesn't need a pick-me-up in the afternoon? I checked out the school trophy cabinet when my specs cleared from the steam.

There was a knock at the door.

"Ah." said Mr. McKenna, rising from his seat behind the large desk. To my surprise, my father was standing in the corridor. "Glad you could make it at such short notice, Mr...?"

"Graves." said Dad. (I use my Mother's surname).

"Graves!" said Mr. McKenna, with mock-joviality "Of course! Come in, come in!"

Dad sat in the chair beside me: "So...what's this all about...Mr. *McKenna* is it...?"

"Yes. Well, I just thought you'd like to read a poem Russell left on his desk the other day...in English," said Mr. McKenna.

So *that's* where it went, I thought.

"A poem...?" said my Dad, looking confused. "I left work early for a poetry reading...?"

I winced inwardly for Mr. McKenna.

"Well, the management team and I thought it was important, given the current climate..." said Mr. McKenna

"The *climate*" repeated my Dad.

"Yes."

Dad frowned. "What *climate* would that be, exactly?"

"Maybe you should read it" said Mr. McKenna

“Maybe you should *answer my question*” said my Dad.

Mr. McKenna shifted in his seat, and there was a faint buzzing from somewhere near the window. My tea had gone cold.

“It’s the subject matter: it’s...delicate” said Mr. McKenna, at last.

“Oh?”

“Yes.” Mr McKenna slid the piece of paper over to my Dad, who took it without his eyes leaving the Headmaster’s face.

“Pornographic, is it?” asked my Dad.

“Just *read* it!” I sighed. “Tell us how many mixed metaphors you’ve found, denounce it as ‘school boy emotional crap’ and let’s move on, eh?! I’m missing Chemistry. You know, where I’ll learn to blow up the school *properly*?”

It was Mr. McKenna’s turn to wince.

Dad gave me one of his icy stares.

“Yes: I’m such a disappointment.” I rolled my eyes. “Mr. McKenna, there is no need to bring my Father in again. As you can see: he’ll be no help in making me less prone to violent thoughts, vengeful tendencies or antisocial rhetoric. He’s troubled too, probably needs counselling – definitely needs an attitude adjustment...”

“Russell! That’s quite enough!” said my Dad, in a tight voice.

“I agree, Russell; that’s not very helpful at this juncture...” came my Headmaster’s reply.

The glassware in the cabinet was positively *vibrating* it seemed. I turned and left, balance still tipped to me.

Mum was not too enamoured with the decibel levels emanating from my room, but I think she realised Dad was to blame. The whole place stank of bleach, and that was always her chemical of choice when it came to him. I think he made her want to obliterate things; eradicate his germs from everything. Unfortunately, mum and I were both permanently infected. His influence was literally in the walls around that house.

Eventually, mum thumped at my door until I opened it and just pulled me into a hug. I love that: the no-talk-needed communication she does. I never feel unlovable with my chin resting on her shoulder.

I took in the close-up grey hairs and the shampoo wafts mingling with her perfume. So many memories swirled around, and I closed my eyes to try and shake them. Instead, I felt the tears begin to rise. I wished I could curl up beside my mother the way I had in primary school, watch endless movies, and just continue to feel safe.

I tightened my grip around her back and sighed. She patted my shoulder and began telling me how proud of me she was, and how no-one should ever be allowed to make me feel bad about myself, not even my father.

I wish I could play her voice back as readily as I can the critics in my head.

I suggested pizza and a movie, and she smiled and agreed.

Fargle turned it all into smut the next day:

“Hey! Henderson! Saw you snogging your mum last night, up the back of the cinema!” His band of henchmen sniggered, and a few girls’ heads turned in our direction, too.

I kept walking.

“I’m talking to you, Russell! It’s not very polite to ignore me, you Mother F\*\*\*\*\* bastard!” There was a general intake of breath from onlookers.

“Oh, I’m sorry, old chap. You were being *so* gentlemanly I hadn’t realised it was *you* talking, Garble” I shouldn’t have taken the bait, but it felt good to.

“It’s FARGLE” he said, drawing himself up to his full height.

“Is it?” I said, smiling. “Y’know, Freud would have been *very* interested in your oedipal fixations, Garble. You do *know* that you can spend time with your Mother in your teens *without* it being in any way sexual, yeah?”

“Yeah, I do. *I’m* not the one snogging my mum in the back row!” he laughed.

“And neither am I, Garble. We were eating popcorn like everyone else. *And* we were in the row *in front of you*, as well you know as you spent the whole movie trying to hit us with *your* snacks...”

“To break you up! God, I don’t want to see you all over your *own* Mother, it’s sick! Get yourself a *proper* girlfriend!”

“What...like *you* have with young Marshall here?!” I said, pointing to Fargle’s right hand man.  
“He was YOUR date last night, wasn’t he?”

“Shut up, Henderson!” said Marshall.

“Ooo, touchy! Think I hit a nerve there” I smirked.

“I’ll hit more than that, you sicko! I’ll -”

“*Mr. Fargle!*” came the voice of the headmaster behind us “kindly desist from raising your hands to others, and be on your way...”

I was back in Mr. McKenna’s office a few minutes later. Again: the kettle on to boil, the pristine glass of the cabinet reflecting the tidy desk and my pensive face. I didn’t feel powerful that time, however. There was a giant void before me. I had lain down and was only peeking over the brim, but it swirled dizzily and dismally and somehow, however terrifying it might be to leap, it seemed to promise I’d be safe once I was in there. My deodorant was struggling to cope.

Mr. McKenna was full of purpose. It must have been the imminent arrival of my father that was making him skittish before. Understandable...

He put a tea in front of both our chairs, and settled with a creak and his hands behind his head.

“I’ve been thinking...” he began. I always find this to be an ominous opening. “You’ve been having a hard time with Fargle and his cronies recently, haven’t you? And it is obvious from your poetry that you have a lot of pent up emotions about that...” Mr. McKenna sat forward and became more animated, with appropriate hand movements “I was wondering if we could somehow channel that energy, get others on board, and turn this into a force for good!”

“By...?” I asked.

“Focussing on bullying in the school magazine this month. What do you think?”

“Sounds good?”

“It’s a big deal. There is so much written on it in the press, so many lives that get ruined by it...I was thinking, we could have a chat to the Form teachers and Guidance staff, really get everyone on board”

“We?” I said

“Yes! I want you to get on the editorial team, gather together any other writers you know about, shake our publication up. Y’know, a few mixed metaphors aside, I can see you have a real talent

for writing” Mr. McKenna smiled, and it was hard not to do likewise. “Plus, it’ll look great on your CV...”

“I’ll give it a go” I said.

“That’s the spirit!”

I had the sneaking suspicion this move would not make me seem less of a target, however.

Dad was indifferent when he heard of my new role (which wasn’t much of a shock) but Mum was really proud of me. She has always said I should get more of my writing out into the world, and collaborate with others. Our school paper is hardly a global sensation, but I do know that a few of our local journalists started out penning articles in their schooldays.

The sixth years on *McKenna’s Penners* (or the MKP, as everyone referred to it) were a little taken aback with a fourth year joining their ranks, but thankful for the help. There had apparently been a readership slump, and Mr. McKenna had taken it pretty hard. I must admit, I hadn’t deemed the school newspaper worth my 50p since first year.

I hadn’t been aware that there was such a thing as ‘Anti-bullying Week’ or that it was only a month away! As ours was a fortnightly paper, the first week that I collaborated with the editors saw me putting together a competition where pupils in first to third year were invited to submit appropriately themed posters. The grand prize was a couple of free tickets to the circus (James Ketchings’ mother had connections. He wouldn’t elaborate.)

There was a flurry of entries; and the usually boring expanse of grey-brick wall in the foyer of the school was suddenly festooned with coloured pen slogans and figures, advocating a person’s right to their own thoughts, style and property.

There was a great cheering when the winner was announced in the following whole-school assembly, and a general ripple of excited chatter when the fourth to sixth year competition was revealed by Mr. McKenna: a poetry contest!

Unfortunately, as I worked on the paper, I wasn’t officially allowed to enter; but I did polish up the poem I had left in my English class earlier in the month, and was given the go ahead to publish it. I got some good feedback, and some inevitable flack as well...

“So Henderson, you’ve become all *literary* now, have you?” came Fargle’s sneering tones from behind me, as I climbed the stairs to Maths. “How lovely.” His sarcasm was threatening to drip on my heels.

“I’m so glad you read my work!” I said, as cheerfully as I could muster “I love that you think of my piece as *literature*. Such high praise, and I’m always *so* grateful for my fans”

A few younger pupils chuckled as they passed us. Fargle just grunted, shouldered me out of the way, and headed towards the science rooms. He was alone, I realised. No Marshall skittering in his wake, or any of his usual entourage. He also had a slight limp.

The poetry came in faster than the posters, and there was a wall of words appearing where the colours and pictures had been the week before. Three of us volunteered to help Mr. McKenna sift through all the entries and keep narrowing down the shortlists. Eventually we had a clear winner, and a pretty good runner up; the only problem being that the winning poem had been submitted anonymously.

“Gah!” exclaimed our Headmaster, pinching the bridge of his nose “how typical is that?! We decide on a victor at *long last* and he (or she) is too noble to disclose their name!”

“Could it be a teacher?” ventured James, also looking tired.

“I doubt any of the staff would want to compete for a copy of next year’s *Writers’ and Artists’ Yearbook*, but I suppose it’s a possibility...?” said Mr McKenna “I know a few have had writerly ambitions in the past...”

“Who?!” my colleagues and I chorused.

“Never you mind!” chuckled Mr. McKenna.

It was decided that we would publish the first two lines of the winning poem in the MKP, and then ask for the poet to come and recite the next line to the Headmaster in private to claim the prize. In the meantime, we presented Sam Helderman with the second prize of a £10 Waterstones voucher at the next assembly. She was absolutely delighted!

A week passed, and nobody came to chat with Mr. McKenna. He began to wonder if he had done Sam out of an honour, and a member of staff *had* written the piece. He assured the editorial team that he had talked to everyone in the staffroom and made it clear that he wanted anyone who knew anything to come to him, but they had all been as baffled as us. It didn’t sit right with any of us, the competition idea was supposed to be a straight forward one.

The guidance staff had reported that they had been having more chats with pupils about bullying, both on a one-to-one and class basis, and they’d been seeing a marked improvement in known ‘offenders’ across the school. I had also noticed that there seemed to be less fights in the playground, and with our ‘rival’ school down the road. Fargle continued to keep a low profile: scowling when he saw me, but refraining from saying anything. I almost missed him.

I left the pokey music room, that we used for our newspaper office, late that Friday; and hurried along the corridor hoping to catch the 4.15 bus to my Father's house. We were all due to go and visit my Grandmother (she likes seeing us together, even though it is as awkward as hell for me and Mum). As I rounded the corner of the small courtyard that is a shortcut to the bus-stop, I almost fell over a crumpled figure who was slouched against the wall.

“What the...? Fargle?!” I exclaimed.

His head lolled back, and he opened an incredibly bloodshot eye, but didn't seem to recognise me. His nose was bloodied, appearing squint somehow, and his right cheek was ballooning as I looked at it. I whipped my head around, alarmed, but we seemed to be alone.

“What the hell happened?! Who did this to you?” I asked, bending to assess his damage further. It looked as though at least two of his limbs were in a bad way, too.

Fargle just slumped a bit further, and a tear ran down his cheek.

I considered my options. Should I phone for an ambulance or try and flag down a taxi at the rank down the road? Could he (and *should* he) be moved? I rang James and asked him to stay on the line while he ran to see if Mr. McKenna was still in the school. He didn't ask any questions, just took off at speed. I could hear the squeak of his trainers as they pounded the corridors. My voice must have sounded as frantic as I felt.

I was infinitely thankful when I heard the Headmaster being hailed as he was heading to his car!

The drive to A&E was very unpleasant for me, but I tried to put my squeamish leanings aside and think about poor Fargle. He kept drifting in and out of consciousness on the backseat. We were all thankful that he didn't start throwing up until we reached the hospital.

Mr. McKenna got Fargle a stack of the obligatory paper bowls, and I took the opportunity to escape and phone Mum to make my apologies. She told me I was a hero, and that she'd smooth things over with Granny. I felt awful leaving her, but I needed to know that Fargle would be ok.

I think the fact that Fargle was grossing out everyone in the waiting room helped him get seen sooner. Poor Mr McKenna was turning pretty green himself, as he had been trying to help Fargle stay upright so he didn't choke, and getting far closer to the 'action' than he'd wanted. I wondered if there was some Headteacher award James and I could nominate him for. I was pretty sure I'd heard of one...

Mr. McKenna rifled Fargle's pockets and found his phone, but was unable to get into it to tell his parents where he was. It was decided that Mr. McKenna would head back to the school, get the contact information, then call Fargle's house with the ward and injury details before dropping

James back home. I elected to hang about drinking bad coffee until the doctors had finished examining Fargle. It was stupid, but I felt responsible for him.

It was another hour before I was allowed in to see him. None of his relatives had turned up, and it was pitch black outside. I knew the police had been informed, and I wondered whether I would have to give a statement about how I found him. I wondered, too, what I was supposed to say to Fargle now. Would he even want to talk to me?

I pushed open the heavy ward door and scanned the beds for him. He was at the far end, staring at the wall, tucked into white sheets which served to emphasise his purple cheekbone. I nodded in his direction and he gave me a lopsided grin.

“I’m going to fire my surgeon” he stage-whispered “I only asked for botox”

“I heard they fixed your nose as a freebie” I said “you’ll look like Ben Affleck soon”

Fargle laughed, then looked me right in the eyes “did you see him?”

“Who hit you? No!” I replied

“Shit. I thought maybe I had a witness this time” sighed Fargle.

“They’ve attacked you before? Who was it, Fargle? This can’t go on!”

“I know” he breathed “This was way worse than he’s ever hurt me before. ‘Understated violence wrapped up in rage’”

I blinked. “So it was *you* who...?”

“Yeah.”

“When are the police due to see you?” I asked, deciding to deal with news of his poetic flair later, “you’ve got to tell them. This *can’t* be allowed to continue”

“Why do you care?” he snapped back at me, suddenly “not like we were ever *friends*”

“Call me Mother Theresa” I slung back, “or just human. You scared me out there, man!” I said, pointing to the corridor “you were really beaten! You’ve pushed me around and messed with my head and been a complete tosser...but that was a serious beating!”

“Yeah. Well. Maybe I deserved it” mumbled Fargle,

“Not even *you* deserve that” I tried to catch his good eye “who was it, Fargle?”

Fargle was holding back tears, but he held my gaze defiantly. “It was Ray” he whispered “he’s on leave and came to pick me up. I was late, and he had stuff to do. I gave him some cheek so

he...he has anger issues. He only just escaped going to the Big House when he had a fight in a bar last summer. I don't want him to get kicked out of the army..."

"F\*\*k that!" I said, a bit too loudly, as an old lady two beds down tutted and shook her head at me before returning to her book. I lowered my voice, "he's an asshole! I remember him at school, he has a real cruel streak, Fargle. You're not like that, you're mostly talk and a bad attitude. He *enjoys* inflicting pain."

"He's just had it rough" mumbled Fargle "our Dad is a bastard"

"So's mine" I said "but I don't choose his path"

"You've got a lovely mum though. One who cares about you. Do you see mine here? Did she even call to see how I was?" said Fargle.

I looked at him, and a few more pieces slid into place. I then heard myself blurt something I never thought I'd say: "You should come out with us sometime, get a burger and a movie. I promise we won't kiss in front of you. Much. Mum also likes to cook, she'd love to have you over. She's awesome at getting to the heart of any problem you may have and offering some wisdom. You don't have to be angry all the time, or resentful, or expect to have hard knocks. Some people like you despite your guard being up. Don't tell anybody, but I've actually missed you these last few weeks." Fargle was smiling, so I asked him "why haven't your cronies been around you lately?"

"I told them all to back off and give me some space. I needed to breathe, you know? They tell me anything to stop me picking at them. I was thinking about the posters and poems and shit and I kind of set us all free. I'm toxic when Ray's about to come back. They don't need that, they need to go hang with proper friends, not a bully like me"

"Wow, my Fargle is finally becoming a man" I said, putting my hands to my heart and feigning a proud expression.

Fargle pulled a face and then winced as it twisted his sore cheek "Look, I am sharing secrets with you and feeling grateful to you, but if you piss me off I'll still lamp you with my good fist and this fleeting bromance will be OVER" he said, scowling as best he could.

"Yeah, yeah" I said, settling myself on the end of his bed for the rest of the visiting hour.

As I headed to the vending machines at the night entrance to the infirmary, having (metaphorically) tucked Fargle in for the evening, I noticed the security guard dashing towards the revolving glass doors. A man in hospital robes was tapping and miming, perfectly trapped, suspended between two worlds.

I watched the panic spread across the face of the encapsulated man, and wondered which part of this scene unnerved him the most: that he almost got free, that he would be made to return...or was it the fact he had just realised that where he now found himself was indeed that elusive neutral ground, and yet it still held no comfort?

Fargle's poem had been haunting me over the tinny music of the lift and through the noise of others' conversations and many TVs turned down low. I could not remember it all, but even before I was sure who it was about, the sense of the poet's powerlessness against the flow of life had screamed up from the page. Watching those doors, the void was clear to me again; the one that I had surveyed in the Headmaster's office:

*And not evolving*

*Just revolving,*

*Shooting blindly in the dark;*

*A random bottle*

*Spun full throttle:*

*Fate extinguishing luck's spark.*

My phone rang, it was Mum. I took a step backwards and breathed out.

"How's my hero?" she asked, "have you eaten yet?"

THE END

[3,887 words]

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