

Revolution by Rachel Swabey

“You’ve chopped my head off.” Russell frowned and for a moment I held my breath, forgetting we were in public. But, as if on cue, a red-cheeked dog walker nodded at us he strode past. A few yards on a couple sat on a bench, giggling and nudging each other, still in that giddy phase where everything the other person does is charming. An industrial lawn mower roared towards us and away, towards us and away. We were just a normal happy couple here, out and about, showing our best selves to the world.

Russell laughed and put his arm around me firmly, resting his other hand on my belly. “You were just keen to get this little one in the picture, weren’t you?” he said, looking at me indulgently. “Here, let me have a go.” He grabbed the phone and held it out, gripping my shoulder, squashing me towards him. He took the picture before I was ready, then looked at it and laughed. “Oh wow, Eve, look at the state of you! You look hideous.” Heat crept up the back of my neck. He showed me the photo; it wasn’t flattering. “One more,” he said. “Try and look like an actual human woman this time. Here, I’ll lift it up a bit so we can’t see your double chin.”

I don’t know whether it was chopping off Russel’s head that made me think of the French Revolution or the smell of cut grass, or the peculiar combination of shame, anger and dread rising within me, but at that moment, it was as though a decade melted away and I’m suddenly sat next to Claire Jones in Miss Lightfoot’s GCSE History class.

Miss Lightfoot is small and neat, with mousey brown hair cut into an angular bob and a keen wit that cuts through even the most obnoxious teenage nonsense. She’s like a comedian that no one dares heckle and I think she’s wonderful. Underneath her blouse on her left shoulder blade, poking out from behind her vest, there’s a tattoo of what looks like an octopus. She has loads of holes all the way up her ears, too. I wonder whether she goes out at the weekend wearing loads of piercings, ditches the silk blouse and sensible shoes and shows off her tattoo, or whether these things are just a hangover from a former life.

The other thing you can see under her blouse is her nipples as she never wears a bra. So, based on what we could make out underneath her clothing, Claire and I gave her the nickname Octotits. Or at least it started as a nickname; the character soon took on a life of its own. When we were bored at break time, we would draw little cartoons of Octotits and her adventures. The name soon came to represent a strange conflation of the real Miss Lightfoot and a sort of imaginary superhero alter ego. Whenever we had a dilemma, we would jokingly ask: what would Octotits do?

The mower hums on the school field, throwing up a sweet, sharp scent that drifts into the open window, cutting through the heavy musk of teenage boys' socks and Impulse body spray. Claire nudges me and passes a note. *Look at Justin – he can't stop looking at Octotits's nips!* I grin and glance over at Justin. He's positioned himself at the front of the class, something he's not known for doing in other lessons. He does, indeed, look transfixed. I wonder if Miss Lightfoot realises how obsessed the boys in her class are with her breasts. She must have a mirror. She must know she has big nipples and that they're clearly visible under most of her clothes. I scribble down, *I'm not surprised – it looks as though they're looking back at him!!!* and slip the note to Claire who reads it and snorts, loudly. Silence falls and everyone turns to look at us.

"Something you'd like to share with the group?" asks Miss Lightfoot pointedly. Claire and I dart each other a look and shake our heads.

"They're passing notes, Miss," sneers Sally Wilson and my cheeks start to burn.

Miss Lightfoot starts walking towards us. "Is that true, girls?"

We both shift uncomfortably. "No, Miss," we say in unison.

"Give it to me." She holds out her hand. I can sense Claire hesitating, debating whether to deny it, but she must decide it's not worth it because she hands it over. My palms are sweating. I stare at the desk while Miss Lightfoot reads the note.

"Both of you stay behind after class. Meanwhile, Eve come down the front where I can keep an eye on you. Swap seats with Justin." I wonder if she picked Justin because she doesn't want him staring at her knockers, but I don't dare look up to see what her expression is. I gather my stuff and shuffle to my new seat. As I pass Justin he looks at me as though I've somehow betrayed him. *If only he knew*, I think.

“Eve?” Russell’s voice broke through my reverie. “I said what do you think of this one? For Instagram?” He flashed the screen in front of me. A happy couple grinned out, although my cheeks looked a little flushed and my neck was at an odd angle where he squeezed me into the frame. It wasn’t worth arguing about, though. Russell seemed pleased.

“Sure.”

“You don’t mind if I post as you, do you? I’ll just put ‘hashtag summer’, ‘hashtag walk’, ‘hashtag pregnant’ or something.”

“Yeah, whatever. I’m just going to sit down for a minute, catch my breath.” He grunted, stabbing away at the phone while I walked to the bench. I sat heavily and looked over at Russell. There’s something about the act of hunching over a mobile phone that makes even the most impressive-looking man seem faintly ridiculous. The notion he could be cowed by something so small. And Russell was an impressive-looking man – strong and chiselled, clothes always immaculately cut, shoes always polished. I always felt a bit dishevelled next to him, like his sharpness blunted me.

I can still remember the moment I first saw him – that paralyzing smile from across the bar that made my stomach lurch. I felt as though I was literally falling. I had assumed that would be it, then: happily ever after.

I had been with Claire Jones that night too. We were both in town on holiday from our respective universities. As always, as soon as we saw each other the months apart had disappeared and we picked up where we left off, like one continuous note passed back and forth under the desk.

It’s been over a year now since we last spoke. I wonder what she’s up to. If only I was on Facebook, I might have some idea, but Russell doesn’t want me to get an account. He says it’s addictive and that they’re just data mining to sell you stuff, that Instagram is safer. I don’t really see the point of Instagram, though, it seems a bit superficial.

I’m sure he’s right, I just feel a bit disconnected sometimes, especially without Claire. We always talked everything through together and, in the talking, things fell into place. Without our chats, I find it hard to know what I think any more. I go round and round, ideas whirling about with

nothing to bounce off. Sometimes I sit and stare at the mirror, trying to will my thoughts to order themselves, but her face always did give me a better reflection of myself than my own.

I guess once Russell came along, I thought he would be there for me in the same way she had been. He wanted to be, I think, which is why he never liked Claire; he thought he should be the one I confided in. And he was so patient in the beginning I started to think he might be right. But he gets frustrated with me these days if I'm indecisive, and he doesn't like it if I'm unhappy but I don't know why, so I stopped telling him, even though it seems like I feel that way more and more.

I shouldn't have let things slide with Claire. It just got too hard to deal with Russell's sulking whenever I saw her or spent too long chatting on the phone or laughed too much. I started to make excuses to cut our conversations short and cancelling arrangements at the last minute. I stopped talking about Russell, too. It felt disloyal. Then I stopped calling at all. Claire kept asking was I okay? Why didn't I want to go out any more? Once she asked me outright if it was because of Russell – did he hate her? Of course not, I lied. Was he hurting me? Of course not. I was just busy.

She got fed up in the end, which part of me understands completely. But there's another part that had hated her ever since for giving up on me. It was as though it was a test and she had failed. If we had really been such good friends, she would have kept trying, I told myself. I missed her so much.

After class, Claire comes and sits with me while everyone files smugly past. The door swings shut muffling their chatter and Miss Lightfoot looks at us.

"So explain 'Octotits' to me." It's hard to tell from her face if she's amused or furious.

"Well it's an affectionate nickname, Miss," Claire starts brightly. "It's a sort of compliment, really..."

I can see Miss Lightfoot is getting impatient. "It's because of your tattoo, Miss," I interrupt, "the octopus. And because you, y'know... because you choose to..." I can't say it.

"Because I don't wear a bra?"

"Yes."

"I see." I chew on my bottom lip as Miss Lightfoot digests that information. The sound of laughter echoing through the hall outside does nothing to break the tension in the room. "It's not actually an octopus, you know."

"Oh."

"It's Medusa. Do you know who she is?" We both look at her blankly. "You should look her up. Very interesting figure from Greek mythology. Tragic story, really, but I see her as something of a feminist icon, so I had her done with a whiff of Frida Kahlo about her. I'd show you now, but I'd probably be arrested..."

She trails off, as though she suddenly remembers why we're here. "Look girls, I don't care what you want to call me behind my back. I'm sure I've been called much worse than Octotits." She smiles and Claire and I giggle nervously. "But I do want to know that you're paying attention in class. We can learn a lot about life from this history stuff, you know." She looks at us for a moment, then sighs. We must still be looking a bit blank. I desperately don't want her to be disappointed in me.

"How do you mean, Miss?" I blurt out. "I mean, all due respect, but I'm not sure what all this chopping people's heads off has got to do with a schoolgirl from Croydon."

"It's about power, Eve," she says softly. "Everything is. Like us, right now. Wouldn't you rather be out on the field sunning yourselves at this moment in time?" We both nod. "Okay, so what keeps you in this classroom?"

"You kept us behind, Miss." I said.

"Yes, and why did you do as you were told?"

"Because you're the teacher?"

"Exactly. There is a power dynamic at work here. I am a teacher, you are pupils, so the power structure dictates you should do as I say. In pre-Revolutionary France, Louis XIV was supposedly in charge. But the people realised that their shared purpose and the sheer strength of their numbers gave them a type of power too."

"Are you saying we should have a revolution and chop your head off, Miss?" asks Claire.

Miss Lightfoot smiles. "I'm not saying you *should*, no. But knowing you *could*, knowing you have power, realising there's always another way to look at things, another way for things to be...well, it's not going to come up in the exam, but it's important, that's for sure."

"...a quick cuppa at that cafe over there while I get on RightMove, then we can pop into the estate agents on the corner and speak to their mortgage advisor." Russell had it all planned out: our afternoon, the rest of our lives, everything. We were going to get a new place, away from the 'riff raff', like the scrappy kids next door or Mrs Peterson upstairs who sings to herself.

I liked Mrs Peterson's singing; it was like a companion. I had told him I liked our flat, that I didn't want to move, but he said I was being silly and started talking about catchment areas. Had he always dismissed my feelings like that? Had he always put me down? Had I always had such little power in our relationship or had I been giving it up gradually, a sliver at a time?

As we entered the cafe, he put his hand on the small of my back, steering me past the tables. Three cake stands sat on the polished silver counter: carrot cake, coffee and walnut, and a lonely-looking slice of red velvet. He saw me looking and laughed.

"Don't even think about it; you're not feeding that junk to my baby!" He gave the barrista, a conciliatory look and rolled his eyes. "She'll have a decaf tea," he said.

"Let them eat cake," I said before I could stop myself. I felt like I was falling again, except it wasn't a nice feeling this time. I couldn't tell if it was the baby moving or my stomach churning, but it felt like my insides were moving, like a basket of snakes. I thought I might be sick.

"Sorry?"

"Nothing. Just popping to the loo," I muttered, smiling weakly then cutting through the cafe to the toilets.

In the cubicle, I sat on the toilet and sighed deeply. I got out my phone and scrolled through my contacts until I found her: Claire Jones. I stared at her name for a while, not sure why I had even looked for it. Then, before I could talk myself out of it, I started writing a text.

Hey stranger, how are you?! Look, I know it's been a long time and I know that's my fault, but if you can forgive me, could we get a coffee sometime? I've got myself in a bit of a pickle. I

didn't know whether to contact you, thought you might not want to know, and I understand if you don't, but I miss you and I just thought, What Would Octotits Do? S x

My thumb hung over the send button, poised like a guillotine.