



Jersey

DEVIL

**DEVIL
PRESS**

Press

**Issue Twenty-One,
June 2011**

JERSEY DEVIL PRESS

June 2011, Issue 21

ISSN 2152-2162

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Editor's Note: Simple Tricks and Nonsense

Destiny's a tricky thing. Alternately unavoidable and completely in your own hands, depending on who you ask. And sometimes it's both. The only constant seems to be that a whole lot of things are going to happen – good, bad and ugly – and you're going to have to figure out how to handle them. Whether that's through belief in a higher power or flipping the bird at a cold, unfeeling universe, whether it's fighting or falling to your knees, destiny is, ultimately, all in how the individual handles it.

This month's stories are all about facing that destiny, in one way or another. We start with J. David Bell's "A Chimaera Story With Four Morals," a tale about a father and son and a march toward the inevitable. Next are two tales about playing with the strange and unfortunate hands Fate dealt: "Literary Ops," by K. Marvin Bruce, and "The Swell Foop," by Mindela Ruby. After that, it's "The Six," by Ainslie Hogarth, about a massive turd wrenching one man's life irrevocably. And, finally, we close with "The Stupidest Thing I Ever Heard," by Kimberly Steele, a story about how maybe destiny isn't quite so destined after all.

– Eirik Gumeny

A Chimaera Story with Four Morals

J. David Bell

Kevin kept his Chimaera in the backyard, staked to the turf to prevent it from singeing the picket fence. Each of its triune parts screamed danger: its frontal lion's head a fusion of fangs and fire, its midsection all crimped goat horns and spiked eye flanges, its whiplash snake tail streaming venom like confetti. You had to wear protective gear to approach it. When they'd bought it from the GenetiPet store three years ago on Kevin's eighth birthday, it was little more than a cub, tiny fleshbumps on rump and thorax the only intimation of the horrors to come. A new iteration of the recombinant critter GenetiPet had cooked up years before, the Chimaera 5000 had turned out far more lethal than anyone dared imagine, more lethal, even, than the discontinued Manticores that had stung their owners with scorpion tails and munched their legs with rancid cherub faces. As then, there were exposés, lawsuits, recalls. But Kevin begged his father to let him keep his pet, and in the end, being an indulgent parent, the man gave in.

For really, Kevin's Chimaera was a gentle beast, prone to pawing for shanks of horseflesh, pleased to let its owner, clad in his flame-retardant jumpsuit and balanced atop a stepladder, scratch behind its mane and fondle its horns. On the rare occasion Kevin was allowed to take it, muzzled and hooded and tail-tied, on excursions to the park, other children migrated over, their own Rocs and Griffins and Kelpies forgotten as they stroked the monster's fur where silky leonine gold met bristly caprine gray. It made a deep noise in its twin throats like a steam shovel, its amber forward eyes squeezed shut. Kevin wished then he could reach up and give its neck a hug to show it was specially his very own, but it was fully six feet at the shoulder and so the best he could do was tickle its belly and watch it squirm with pleasure.

Then the war came. Rockets sizzled through the sky, boomed underfoot. Kevin's Chimaera jugged and howled through the night, covering its lion eyes with its front paws in a gesture almost human. Kevin's mother was killed when the hospital was hit by a Think Bomb and disintegrated. Soon the street was a vacant lot of rubble and ash. Kevin and his father set out for the west, where, rumor had it, oases remained. Before they left, an argument ensued.

"We can't take that thing with us," Kevin's father insisted. "We've got nothing to feed it, nowhere to keep it. It'll make us a target to anyone who's watching."

"Please, dad!" Kevin begged. "I'll take care of Benjy, I promise! He'll eat anything, birds, snails, frogs! He won't be any trouble at all!"

"Son," the man said sadly, "I'm not sure there are any birds, snails, or frogs left."

"But he'll die!" Kevin whined. "If we leave him alone he'll die!"

"Son," the father tried again, but then another thought struck him. "All right," he said. "Maybe he'll even turn out to be useful."

"He will, daddy, he will!" Kevin beamed. Turning to caress his pet's throat, he didn't see his father's look, didn't dream what use his father had in mind.

They started west, traveling by night. Their meager store they carried in a sort of hammock they'd made of a laundry bag and slung over the creature's back. During the day they slept beneath bridges, then in woodlots, then in barns, the Chimaera muzzled and hooded, leashed and tail-tied, heaped with branches or straw. Though there was in truth little for it to eat, a bird here, a snake there, it didn't complain, even when the rumbling of its vast empty stomach kept the man up with memories of how his lost wife used to snore.

Each night they crept steadily in the direction they saw the sun set. But there was nothing there, only scorched fields and burned-out shells of buildings and the constant whine of missiles overhead and concussions in the gut of the earth. As the days passed and their food dwindled, the father began to eye the Chimaera greedily (as, he thought, it did him). By now the beast's ribs showed like barrel staves and its straggly mane drooped to the ground as it panted along beside them. In a week at best, he judged, it would be gone – gone, or well-fed with its human consorts. The deed would have to be done soon.

He fashioned a skewer from a walking stick. He scouted the beast's flanks for the most vulnerable spot. He wished there were a way to anesthetize it, both to ease its passing and to ensure that once struck it would not return the blow. Watching it, though, it occurred to him that physical weakness coupled with doltish devotion would probably take care of that. The real issue was what to tell Kevin, whether to tell Kevin.

In the end he decided to come clean – sort of.

"Benjy is dying, Kevin," he announced one gray dawn, the Chimaera lying beside their campfire drawing shallow, labored breaths. "He won't last much longer. It's not right for him to suffer so."

Kevin looked at his father in the firelight, his young face registering grief at the assertion but no awareness of the implication.

"Back home," his father continued, "we'd have called it 'putting him to sleep.' It means when an animal gets too old or too tired or too sick to care for, we help him."

"Help him?" Kevin's eyes were wide.

"Help him to die."

All at once, as is the way with children, Kevin connected the sharpened stake and the Chimaera's shrunken sides and his father's grimace, and he flung himself on his pet, hugging its sallow hide, burying his face in its belly. He would not be moved,

and the man let him cry. It was harder, he thought, for a child on the verge of manhood than for a child still a perfect child. The boy could no longer harbor any illusions.

That day, once Kevin had cried himself to sleep, the man finished the job. The animal never protested, never flinched. Whether too exhausted or too faithful to retaliate, it lay on its side, one front paw held feebly in the air, while he drove the stake home.

Children learn about the real world through fantasy, the man reminded himself as he twisted his weapon deep into the creature's paunch. And therein, perhaps, lay the problem. For a child's sake a man may keep up the chimera of hope. There comes a time, however, when boy turns man, and knows there is none.

J. DAVID BELL is the author of *Framing Monsters* (2005), a study of science fiction and fantasy film. His own speculative fiction appears in such periodicals as *Niteblade*, *Rotten Leaves Magazine*, *Cover of Darkness*, and *Farspace 2*. He blogs at bellsyells.blogspot.com.

Literary Ops

K. Marvin Bruce

The Roman legion storms our house at breakfast. In a beautifully executed phalanx maneuver, they advance like tin soldiers, the early morning sun glinting off the high sheen of their polished helmets and immaculate shields. They do not appear to be in a good mood.

Looking out through the lacy curtains, past our indoor windowsill herb garden, my wife wipes her mouth and asks, "What are you going to do about them?" She is still sleepy and looks irresistible in her oversized flannel pajamas with her yellow hair carelessly falling across her face like a tattered wedding veil. She looks like she could still be eighteen. She turns back to her toast, lightly buttered. She doesn't have to be at work until ten.

"Shakespeare always seems to work well on Romans," I comment off-handedly, trying to keep my mind on the fact that I need to catch the 7:30 train if I'm to be on time. "And it doesn't even have to be *Julius Caesar*. I've actually found them to be partial to *Macbeth*." I notice that they appear agitated, and soon the neighbors will begin to complain. I squeeze one last spoonful of juice from my grapefruit half, drain my coffee mug, and head to the bookshelves.

"They're erecting a siege engine," Cat casually observes.

Our edition of Shakespeare contains all of his plays. It is a bit awkward since the book has to be so large, but I've read *Macbeth* more than once, so the darkened edges on those pages provide an instant bookmark. Index finger in place, I stroll to the front door and open onto a well-ordered crowd with hatred in their bloodshot eyes. Discipline. Always discipline with the Romans. The sky is as clear as a mountain lake and the sun ripples across their lances causing bright fireflies of light to dance between their Corinthian

horsetails. They look up and fall silent when they see the great tome in my hands. Diction is important with Romans, no slurring of words or unnecessary rushing. The sharp tip of a spear under the fourth rib will always remind you of that.

Once they've gone, I glance at my watch. "Why do they always seem to come at breakfast time?" I complain, exasperated. Cat just yawns so luxuriantly that I want to pick her up and take her back to bed, but in these days of mandatory dual incomes, that is just not feasible.

My 8:30 history class is seldom full. Those students brave enough to register for the course usually stumble in at about 9:00 and glare at me as if I were somehow responsible for the timing of the earth's rotation. Most of them recall their lackadaisical high school history teachers who failed to make an impression on minds hopelessly fixated on sex and peer pressure. College calms them down just a bit. College is a lot like high school these days, only with beer.

The Renaissance, my 10:30, is my favorite class. The rebirth of human culture is a flower of rare beauty that I hold before my cynical eyes whenever university politics get too thick. Many of my colleagues ride this gravy train for the lazy man's way to a non-challenging career. I have always loved my subject. Maybe a little too much. I daydream during committee meetings. The Dean glowers at me. What has been is more interesting than right now. Hell, anything would be more interesting than right now. I wish the hordes would come during these dull sessions.

Back home I wait for Cat to arrive. She keeps conventional hours, but only reappears at dinner-time. I do the cooking, always with a book in one hand. I hear the front door and my heart gives a little flutter. She is pissed off about work, but somehow that look only makes her pixie face more attractive. Like a child trying hard to be serious. A glass of sweet Chíncha Valley Tabernero Borgoña and the weariness of free enterprise begins to melt away. Seeing the

Romans put me in the mood for something Italian. Tagliatelle with pesto, a crusty loaf of Italian bread and zucchini on the side. Simple but impressively green.

“Remember your response the first time?” I ask in a playful banter, shoving the commercial blues further and further behind her.

A smile parts her innocent lips. “The real estate agent sure forgot to mention that little feature,” she adds.

“You sure were distressed when you saw Napoleon the first time! That was before we discovered the French love McGonagall. Lately I’ve noticed they tend to come during breakfast. I might have to start getting up a little earlier so I’m ready for class on time.”

“Maybe we should keep a list by the door so if they ever come and you’re not here, I’ll know what to read to them.” She doesn’t look worried, just a little pensive. Her blonde hair is pulled back now, looking very professional.

“That’s not a bad idea. It has been trial and error up ‘til now, but we’ve got a pretty good idea of who likes what.”

“Some people say they always use the Bible, as if that has all the answers. They’ve obviously never been invaded by an angry Mongolian horde at six a.m.” Her smile parts the clouds.

“Who’d’ve thought they’d’ve been such fans of Kafka? The Bible would likely get you killed in that situation. Some groups like only Beowulf, others T. S. Eliot. You just need to get to know your invaders before you start reading to them.”

“I remember how you swore like a sailor the first time they made you late for work,” she laughs. She takes another sip of Chilean wine. She’s glowing now.

“We’d just moved in then. That was Tutmoses III, the Egyptian Empire, if I recall correctly.”

“What was it that conquered them?” She’s getting happier by the second.

“Milliken. The only modern writer who’s ever had a calming effect on an invasion. Funny, most of them only dissipate with readings from the nineteenth century or earlier.”

The neighbors sometimes complain, but their threats and exasperation fail to impress conquerors. They are stubbornly single-minded. I always say people should read more anyway.

The cheap wine and cheery conversation lead to wonderful results at bedtime. After a bottle of Borgoña we sleep like the profoundly dead.

Morning is too early in the day for my liking. Waking up after a bottle of wine is like being kissed by Aphrodite while being slapped by Dionysus. In the shower I wonder who will trample our lawn this morning. It is growing muddy from constant use, especially now that it is raining. Cat looks so cozy in bed, snug as a child, but she will rouse herself to eat with me; it is our morning ritual. We take turns watching out the window. I always begin my day with black coffee and grapefruit. Start a day bitter and sour and it should end sweet.

I glance at the clock as Cat yawns. The rain has never stopped them before. It is nearly time for the train. I hate to leave Cat to deal with them herself, but I can’t miss another 8:30 class. She smiles groggily and tells me she’s a big girl; she can handle Attila if she has to.

“After all, I handled you last night,” she teases.

The whole way down the block I glance nervously over my shoulder. I worry about her. I need to compile that list. If she’s watching, I can’t see her with the mist over the window.

Students crowd around after class to ask questions or complain, and I am slalomed to my next classroom and don’t have the opportunity to call Cat. To make sure she’s okay. She should be at work by now anyway.

When I arrive in our neighborhood from the train, breathless from jogging along the damp pavement with briefcase in hand, I see no signs of disaster. No fires or broken windows or bloody stains. Inside the books are all on their shelves. Did they not arrive today? I pull out the saucepans and try to concoct a special dinner. Cat smiles when she comes in.

“No invaders!” she announces. “Maybe they’ve stopped at last!”

It has been such a constant part of each day for so long that we marvel at our luck. They’ve never burst in after 7 p.m. In anxious astonishment we take each bite in nervous anticipation. The big hand nears the top. We glance out into the twilight. Nothing.

Cat is so happy she dances right there in the dining room. Spinning around in a joyous swoop she grabs my hand and pulls me up the stairs before the dishes are done. I have to admit that despite the rain, this has been a glorious day. It is getting more glorious by the second.

An enraged shout interrupts our celebration. “Damn it!” I roar, pulling on an ill-fitting bathrobe and sprinting to the window.

“Who is it, sweetie?” she asks, dejected, from the bed.

I squint into the darkening evening. “Assyrians, I think.”

“We’ve never had Assyrians before...”

She’s right. Awkwardly I fumble down the stairs into the library. Where do we begin with Assyrians? I rule out the authors we’ve previously used. They never work twice. The men outside have arms like Burmese pythons, fierce, braided beards and scaled armor. I begin with Dante but they grow only louder and more annoyed. The din is almost unendurable as they construct siege engines and prepare flaming arrows. The Hittites once tried to catapult a diseased donkey onto the roof. A swift solution would behoove me as I pull out books by the handful and begin reading to watch the effect. These dogs of war take to no literature I’d expect: Shelley, followed by Wollstonecraft, Millay, Hawthorne, and

Melville – I’ve always believed Melville could stop anyone. The Assyrians rage on. Lights are flipping on in neighbors’ houses. By chance I grab Lovecraft, a writer who never enjoyed success in his lifetime. Although he doesn’t stop them, the din dies down a bit. Radcliffe has the same results. Finally my weary mind latches onto Poe. I solemnly begin “The Raven” and the Assyrians vanish.

Cat is no longer in the mood when I finally trudge back upstairs. I head to the study and start typing up the list for the front door. Instead of Jehovah’s Witnesses or Mormons, my list includes Assyrians, Mughals, and Parthians. And a list of the best literature ever composed.

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The Swell Foop

Mindela Ruby

Thanks to my pygmy bladder, I wake before sunrise and stumble to the bathroom where, under sixty fresh watts of a light bulb bummed off my neighbor, a sluggish, inch-long cockroach hunkers in the sink.

“Vamoose!” I tell it and sit to do my business. Instead of pushing the toilet handle, I mind Ma’s water conservation byword: *Flush down the brown/ Let the yellow mellow*. The reassurance of sour piss – the piddling extent of my family legacy. I pull up my shot-elastic briefs.

The stink that irked me as a pre-teen was the loose wino turd in Ma’s undies. Hippie Bob, her precious husband, never changed her dooked BVDs or helped lift her off the floor. He’d step over her prostrated body and say he’s the only one in the family with self-respect. According to him, we were trashy losers who ought to kiss his ass.

Kick his ass is what we should have done. I flush and look at the cockroach. It hasn’t moved and doesn’t skedaddle when I tap his shell. Aren’t these pesks supposed to be indestructible? This one’s a limp-antenna goner. I flip his pellet body over, not on purpose, into some basin muck. Stuck in mire – familiar feeling. This roach deserves a proper burial. Least I can do for a fellow inhabitant of earth.

Beneath the purple sky outdoors, alley cats screech a fucky-fighty duet as I kneel in the plant bed near the lobby door. Waterlogged and missing a leg, the insect waits on a square of toilet paper on the sidewalk. I dig a grave with a teaspoon I’ve brought out. Goosebumps smear down my bare legs as I sing a line of a song by The Damned:

*No living thing has lasted here
Yet we shall both survive...*

Or “shall” we survive? I wonder. A car slants out of the dark and comes alongside the curb. Oakland Police have a knack for showing up unwanted.

Daryl Prettyman, a night patrolman who booked me on a Drunk and Disorderly last year, opens his window. His ears ride so low they’re on his neck, not his head.

“Everything alright, ma’am?” his drab soldier voice says over the dogged thrum of his motor.

I scratch my behind. This chauvinist let the lunkhead I was carousing with off the hook last year and arrested just me.

“What’re you up to?” he says.

“Burying a dead pet.”

“At this hour?” he says, as if the sanctioned pet burial portion of night has passed. He glances around for a beloved feline or gerbil and doesn’t notice the deceased waiting on the sidewalk to take its dirtnap. “You have permission to place remains in this yard?”

“Yes, sir,” I lie, feeling jurisdictional eyes considering me. I spade a thorny berry shoot with the spoon.

Prettyman’s arm drapes down the cruiser door.

“How ‘bout you stop that?”

“Who’s it bothering?” I lick my knuckles and taste blood.

“Bacon-brain.”

The car door opens, and out steps “Oakland’s finest” in full regalia. As if my current fate wasn’t demoralizing enough to begin with.

“Now, see,” he says, fingering his puppety ear, “it bothers *me* when a citizen disses the police force.”

“Sorry.” I wriggle into a squat, ligaments burning.

Pretty Badge peers around for a critter or incriminating evidence to bust me for.

"It's my job to keep my beat safe."

"What's everyone's fixation on staying safe?" I mutter. My bestest friend, who called me out on some recent nasty sexcapades, is a big safety advocate. She believes I'm endangering myself. I can't say she's wrong for wanting no part in it. Oh, how I miss her company, though.

"You better go indoors," the cop says.

Above the East Bay hills, first dawn gleams, the color of just-forged steel, as if this new day might hammer itself out less tarnished than previous ones.

When I stab a chokehold of dandelion, the spoon handle buckles into candy cane shape.

"You ever see that TV magician that bent spoons with the power of his mind?" I say.

"Don't think I have."

"My step-dad, the expert spirit-crusher, claimed it was a trick."

Pretty's face holds its official blank expression.

"No magic here." I fling the spoon away. It gyres through the air, strikes the police car fender and plonks to the asphalt.

"Step forward, ma'am," the officer says.

I know from experience that stern-voiced cops expect to be obeyed. But no giddy-up's in me. My knees are stiff as padlocks. I'm rooted to the ground.

"That was accidental," I say.

His hand twitches near his gun belt.

"You've been instructed to stand."

Though Daryl probably won't shoot, he might be gunning to put hurt on me, more than I'm prepared to bear. I limp out of the flower bed, arms POW high. The surrender pose excites me. But my right foot's pins and needles, frozen like a clubfoot. I have to stomp feeling back into it.

"Miss?" Pretty says.

Wagging my boot victoriously, I notice a paper scrap wedged in its cleats.

"My bug!" I pluck out the shred and turn it over in my hands. Search and rescue's hopeless. The cucaracha is a smear at best, and I'm woe-is-mea-culpa crushed, too. The small things in life are what break us.

My arms flail like let-loose water hoses. Pretty vises me in a body lock. I hang half naked in his police custody arms, cursing, "Fucker! Ass-wipe!"

His service revolver is holstered inches from my face. I've never touched a real-life pistol. Soon as I do, he tackles me to the pavement, locks my wrists into metal cuffs, frisks me from the waist up, and, before the thrill of that wears off, hoists me by the sweater with excessive force into the backseat of his car.

Thick wire mesh separates the front seat from the back. The Gestapo dispatches a radio report I decipher only "10-50" out of. I rub my snotty palms on the plastic seat cover, look out the window and wonder if my sick neighbor is watching me get in trouble out here. I hope she's sleeping and missing all this.

"Five-O," I say, "What you got on me?"

He re-clips the mike to its mount and twists around. "Say what?"

"Say wuh?"

"Ma'am, what's your beef?"

"You wrecked my attempt at a good deed!"

"What's your name?"

"Park."

"Park what?"

"Born Under a Dark Star Park. MacArthur Park."

He turns and starts the car.

Eventually I'll have to tell him my full name, Dickinson Park. "Did someone from my building call the cops?" I say. "Or was you showing up my crummy luck? I wasn't trying anything funny with the weapon."

The cop turns again with a searching glance I feel the need to explain away.

"It's just that my whole groove's gone bust in one swell foop."

"Fell swoop?" he says.

"Not even that fast. My life's been going steadily downhill for months."

"Happens to the best of us."

There's this about cops: you can bare your heart, and they sit you out and protect and serve. With my undies clumped in my butt crack, the plastic seat's perforations are scratching my exposed buns.

"Getting busted doesn't help, you know."

The police radio fuzzes on and fizzles off. "Simmer down," he says.

The sash of sunrise widens. I sigh.

"Got a right to know what you're charging me with."

"314, probably."

"What-what-four?"

"Misdemeanor lewd exposure."

I rub my knees together. He thinks this is lewd?

"Animal carcass violation," he mumbles. "Another possibility."

I bat tears off my cheek and think of more lyrics from "Wait for the Blackout":

The darkness holds a power that you won't find in the day

"Probably transfer you from the stationhouse to the psych facility in San Leandro," the cop says.

"John George? Please, no. I'd rather cool my heels in the slammer than go the heebie-jeebie bin again."

"A clinician should evaluate you. You could be a danger to yourself."

Not this old story again.

"I'm no psycho! Swear on my mother's grave."

He smiles, not knowing Ma's still alive and kicking.

"Alright, then," he says.

I smile back. There might be a way out of getting arrested.

"You know how cops put the moves on girls sometimes?"

"No, I do not."

"Sure, you do. It's common knowledge that copsicles use the badge and their vested authority to get girls to do them." I lean on the screen and blow on Pretty's neck. "Some girls are up for a little copophilia if it keeps 'em out of trouble."

"I stopped listening five minutes ago," he says, shoving his gear-shifter. My building drops from sight.

"Rear entrance, some playful spanky-spank," I say. "You can get it here, Daryl baby."

He brakes so hard my forehead bonks the screen.

"Keep it zipped," he says.

I slide back on the seat and snort down more snot as we drive past the boarded-shut grocery I used to buy Doritos and cigarettes at, before Mom and Pop got deported. "You're on duty; I get it," I say. "Rules and regs, respecting my rights. I was just foolin' with ya. Onward to the clink."

My cuffed hands pull my sweater over my thighs.

"Can I get a blanket at the station? And this time can you not call my parents? Don't want my ma paying for bail or my step-dad blow-hardening advice. I'd rather freezate at Boy George than take more wrong-rub from him."

We pass renovated buildings a century old, full of nice clean men, outside my shady little orbit. No cockroaches, no disappointment.

"If you change your mind, pull over here." I point to a massive stucco house with white shutters, circa 1930. "'Cause you're the man. And I'm just a half-naked skank with bound hands and a juicy --"

“Shut that filthy mouth!” He stops the car, throws off his seatbelt, throws his door open, throws my door open, and throws me to the curb. He unlocks my nippers and throws them down near me.

“I thought you were carting me to the loony farm?” I say.

“Don’t want to deal with you.”

I rub my wrists. “What if I wanna deal with you?”

“Go home.”

He slams my door shut. I crawl to his shoes.

“Drag me half-undressed blocks from home and abandon me? Police brutality!” I grab his legs to pull myself up, one hand accidentally slithering over his wiener.

He pulls his gun. This time I’m not so sure he won’t shoot.

“Easy,” I say, backing away. It’s one thing to act smutty, another to get capped for it. I flap my arms like a moth. “See? I’m flying home, like you said.”

He gets in his car and is off to harass other small fry in the ‘hood, leaving me across the street from the wall I smashed my toe on three weeks ago, when my ex-friend Bridgit got mad about my fiendish sex antics and dumped me off without a toodle-oooh. I hear a garbage truck clanging down the block.

On this side of the street is a strip of grass all springy green from the recent rains. I lie down and let dew penetrate my sweater. At the sidewalk’s edge my fingers hook onto something hard and cold. I pull it toward my face.

Handcuffs. The discombobulated po-po forgot that he threw them down. I flip to my stomach and inhale the brawny sweetness of the ground through the unlatched loop of one handcuff ring.

“Too bright out here,” I say through the bracelet, thinking of “Wait for the Blackout.” I hum a few notes and lay my head down. Under this grass live relatives of my cockroach: worms, earwigs, millipedes.

“Can’t even get myself arrested,” I tell them, conspiratorially.

But there's no indication they hear.

MINDELA RUBY has been a nanny, motel maid, tutor and punk radio deejay. She currently works as a community college professor. Some of her recent fiction has appeared in Boundoff, The Medulla Review, Emprise Review, The Binnacle and Literary Mama.

The Six

Ainslie Hogarth

On the night Robert died I discovered that someone had left an enormous shit in the toilet. Monstrously large. Like some slimy, prehistoric specimen. An early cobra: *cobrus stinkitus*. Wrapped around itself at the ends, coiled with evenly spaced segments to fill the whole bowl or terrarium, or wherever one might find something as large and menacing and off-putting as what I'd found. I stared at it between my fingers which had quickly made their way over my face, a temporary buffer to protect some of my more delicate, sensitive, open bits, from what lay stinking and sweating and soaking in the bowl before me.

Then the phone rang and within a few minutes I would learn that Robert had been bisected in a basement two blocks away. Chopped in half with a pair of clownishly large hedge clippers by a deranged neighbour. The problem with deranged neighbours is that you never know when you've grossly offended one. And it turns out that that's exactly what Robert had done.

Robert had never had a problem with The Deranged Neighbour before. Of course, we'd always called him The Deranged Neighbour, so we must have been given a clue at some point as to his unstable mental condition. I suppose we both just forgot about it; Robert had been living next to the man for so long now. So long, in fact, that The Deranged Neighbour had grown to learn where Robert kept a spare key, tucked under a lawn gnome in the garden. He knew that Robert sat quietly and watched television in his white chair most evenings. He knew that he could easily sneak up on Robert, what with his hearing being so weak these days and the volume on the television cranked so high. He gagged Robert with a wad of wool sock and some duct tape, then

dragged him back to his garage where he kept the hedge clippers he usually employed to trim his magnolia tree.

Afterwards The Deranged Neighbour felt much better about the gross offense. He even forgave Robert's top half. And then turned himself in to the police and told them all about it.

The offense in question is best represented by a pert, pink magnolia tree. The same pert, pink magnolia tree which stands in both Robert's and The Deranged Neighbour's yard. No one would ever suspect a magnolia tree of symbolizing a violent murder. Magnolias are benign little fellows, like lovely old ponies. Things to be taken care of and enjoyed, valuable inasmuch as you can love them.

You see, two months ago, Robert planted in his yard the same pert, pink magnolia tree that The Deranged Neighbour had planted the summer before. Neither Robert nor I realized it, but The Deranged Neighbour was quite offended by this act which Robert considered both a sincere form of flattery and a nice way to brighten up the neighbourhood. Their parallel trees. The best of friends, standing next to each other, interlocking their roots and branches like elbows on shoulders, leaning on one another for support. Robert had even told me that they reminded him of us. A picture of he and I on his front lawn. He said he loved to see their shadow at night, emblazoned by the street lights, splashed all over his bedroom wall.

The Deranged Neighbour had a very different interpretation of the trees. Utter disrespect is what he felt. A despicable display of inconsiderate rudeness, like graffiti all over his blue vinyl siding, Robert shamelessly holding the spray paint can. The shadow he saw on his own wall at night made him sick to his stomach with rage. After a few years people would never know who planted their sweet magnolia first, who rudely copied whom. All of the agonizing hours The Deranged Neighbour spent deciding whether or not to plant a graceful little magnolia in his yard, let its buxom pink flowers explode with bloom all over his lawn for him to pick

up, graze his thumbs against, wet his fingers in the rot where it fell from the flower, would have been a waste. And that glorious moment, the moment he treasured above all of the other moments which made up his life, when he finally decided, yes, yes, yes, I'll place that delicate little creature in my garden, a great weight lifted from his shoulders. A decision made, something was going to happen. The first thing he'd changed in twenty-five years. He gazed at his new tree all summer, his heart beating heavily, his eyes bloated with fat old man tears, the ones that flow thickly like paint, or water from rusty taps, mottled and heavy with underuse. He would wipe them away quick with a gardening-gloved hand. A swipe of dark dirt left along his cheekbone. Apparently he wore those same gloves when he chopped Robert in half.

And this enormous shit was birthed at exactly the same time that Robert was split open. But I didn't know that yet, or any of those previous details at all really. I wouldn't know anything until I spoke with Robert myself, which would happen soon enough.

And at this point, all I wanted to know was which one. Which disgusting, inconsiderate rube left that filth in the toilet? This shit, like a thick, muscular serpent waiting patiently in the toilet bowl, ready to strike at your eyes when you flick on the light and lean in for a peek.

Who left this shit?

My floor contained three small apartments: one bedroom, one kitchen, one little square of a room connecting the other rooms to a front door. We all shared a bathroom at the end of the hall: one toilet, one shower, two sinks. The landlord called us The Three Sixes. The tenants below us, The Three Fives, below them The Three Fours and so on to the basement, which the landlord occupied entirely.

6A: Anna Floss. A willowy woman with thin, white fingers and edgeless limbs. Every morning she quilted herself in shawls and scarves and made her way slowly down the steps to get a newspaper and a black coffee from the stand at the corner. She

gripped the banister with both hands, one white knuckled along it and the other one steadying her wrist. She was very, very frail and her every movement wiggled just slightly. An involuntary dance that I used to watch my own mother perform on a nightly basis. The dance of too much to drink. Small movements seem to occur as the drunk loses balance, twitches, perhaps the body's increasingly obvious attempts at achieving equilibrium, movements microscopic in the non-inebriated who can usually stand quite easily. I think that for Anna Floss, gin was only part of the problem. The other problem was that she hadn't eaten a real meal in forty years, just enough to keep herself alive I guessed. I don't think that she could be capable of producing such a monstrous crap. At least not yet. Perhaps after many years of extensive therapy, which she probably didn't have time for anymore.

6B: Albert Magunty. Albert Magunty was from somewhere up North and he told me once that he used to wear a nylon mask to work. He said that at the end of the night, when he was finally allowed to pull it off, his face was all the wrinkled wet of oversaturated bath skin. He had long, depressed scars running down his face. Tiny valleys. Tracks along which blood and sweat could neatly follow. Because he bled a lot at work and sweat all the time, being as big and as fat as you can be without suffering from mobility problems. He had a large black moustache that hung hard and still like plastic action figure capes from the round nostrils of his heaped, leathery nose. His hands were always all over his face whether he was mashing an itch or rubbing sleep from his puffy eyes or stroking his burnt toast chin. I asked him once where he got all of his scars and he told me that his father was a butcher. I decided to leave the subject alone after that. Albert Magunty. Certainly a character capable of labouring through a shit like the one that had assaulted my eyes. I could see his burly asshole conditioning a specimen such as the one that would eventually occupy a fishbowl in my bedroom. Albert Magunty. My prime suspect.

6C: Adele Fitler. Me. And there are two unfortunate things about my name. Firstly, the obvious: that when you say it out loud it sounds exactly like Adolf Hitler. The second unfortunate thing about the name is that I'm a man. And Adele happens to be a girl's name. Adele Fitler was my mother's name and the name of her mother before that and her mother before that and her mother before that. Naming a *boy* Adele Fitler brought a new dynamic to the hell of the name. My mother wanted a daughter and my father ran away before he could talk any sense into her. Also, he likely didn't care what she called me. He had run away from the both of us at the exact same time, because I was still just a little parasite in a plush, pink terrarium.

Yes, I admit, I took the pooh from the toilet. I fetched a plastic bag from my room and grabbed it up from the cold water which had preserved it for a then unknowable amount of time. At first I had no intention of doing such a thing. I walked into the bathroom and felt the same kind of repulsion that you or any other reasonable person would feel upon discovering another person's waste hiding in the bowl. I was furious, glared in the direction of the other Sixes under wads of furrowed, angry brow. So rotten. So disrespectful. I had a mind to call the landlord, have him type up an authoritative looking document on his computer. A sign that said, "Please FLUSH!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!" with *that* many exclamation points. I was certainly that many exclamation points mad. I left the evidence where it was and returned to my room to get my camera. Someone had to capture the crime on film, otherwise there might not have ever been a crime at all.

When I entered my apartment the phone had already been ringing. I picked it up expecting Robert because Robert was my best and only friend. Only it wasn't Robert, it was Robert's brother, his belly all full of the details of Robert's murder, which he had partially digested then regurgitated for me over the phone.

Magnolia tree.

Neighbour.

Hedge clippers.
A couple of hours ago.
Confession to the police.
Body found in two.

Top and bottom crammed into washing machine and dryer respectively.

I'm so sorry, Adele.

I hung up the phone and looked towards the bathroom. In my mind there was no possible chance that these two events – Robert's brutal death and the enormous, serpentine shit in the toilet – were unrelated. How could they be?

Now this is where things get a little odd. And I'll admit that. Like I said, when I first saw the excrement I was as repulsed as anyone else would be. Probably even more so. I was as repulsed as your grandmother would be, to find something so heinous lurking in the place where I brushed my teeth and got naked and cleaned myself. Though taking a shit and cleaning oneself are both private rituals, there should really be separate places to do them. One day when I move into a big house I'll have a separate room for each of my private rituals, specially designed somehow to perfectly accommodate them. But that will probably never happen because I'm an old man now and it's very likely I'll die here, on the sixth floor with the other Sixes.

Anyway, I fetched a plastic bag and scooped the shit out of the toilet gingerly, careful not to break it or bruise it or leave an impression of my hands in it. Then I put it in a fishbowl with a little bit of its own water and waited for it to give me a sign.

The smell was unbearable. Truly. As soon as I could prove that Mr. Magunty had laid this egg I would give him a pamphlet on colon health. I didn't want either of the lonely Sixes to die before me. I could only bear to be the first. I found a box of painter's masks beneath the sink, put one on, and sprayed it see-through with a deodorizing spray. At the time I had no idea what those fumes could do to the minds of lonely people. I've since been told.

A few nights passed. I thought about Robert and the magnolia tree that he died for. I dreamed of being sucked into the pink folds of its blossoms, devoured by a world that was loud with beauty and smelly and hot and wet and pink to brown and too ripe. I tried to claw my way out but couldn't. I was being sucked down, towards the nucleus, the place from which all of the petals exploded and expanded and dripped rotted to the ground. I woke up in the middle of the night from this dream and looked over at the fishbowl. There was something new inside. A little note, sticking out from the turd. I walked over, stuck my hand in the fishbowl and retrieved it.

Hello Adele. It's me, Robert.

Then I think I fainted because when I woke up, it was morning and I was lying on the floor with my mouth wide open beneath my painter's mask. I still had the partially stained note in my hand. I read it again:

Hello Adele. It's me, Robert.

I looked up, it seemed as though the turd had excreted yet another note while I'd slept.

Adele, you can hear me? Oh thank god. Am I alive? Oh Adele it's good to see your beautiful face my friend. I'm not sure where I am. I can't move. No one could hear me. Am I in the hospital?

I burst out laughing. Had I gone insane? Is that what was happening here? I sniffed the new note and it reeked. That smell was real, no question about it. My brain couldn't possibly have manufactured an odour such as that. Talking to a shit in a fishbowl. This was going to happen. I laughed more. I couldn't stop. I laughed and I laughed until my laughter turned into tears and I could barely breath I was crying so hard. I placed both hands on either side of the fishbowl and looked at Robert. My reflection manipulated by distortions of cheap glass.

"H-hello, Robert." I couldn't believe it. A fresh peal of laughter, a loud sniff, I was speaking to my friend the pile of shit. Robert, who had recently been worked out of Mr. Magunty's

asshole, with great effort I'm sure, judging by the length and particularly the width of him. The smell, my god. I took a second to fill my painter's mask with more deodorizing spray. It made me feel nice and lightheaded and ready to take on the task of conversing with my old friend, the enormous turd. Like drinking a martini in a bar with a pal.

"Hello, Robert. I don't know what to tell you, friend. You're very ill I think. Something strange has happened. You've been murdered and now it seems you've become something else all together. You were murdered, Robert, killed by a psychotic over a magnolia tree, do you understand? I thought I had lost you forever."

Another note forced its way out:

And now I'm back?

"It seems that way."

For the next hour I spoke to Robert about what he remembered from the night of the murder, a mountain range of shit smeared notes beginning to fill my bedroom. I spoke to Robert about his magnolia and his brother and the thought of filling the long hours without him. Periodically I would have to spray more deodorizer in the room and into my mask. Now I had Robert with me forever. I could keep him here and speak to him and wouldn't have to live life without him. I began to get hungry so I brought Robert to the kitchen where I could heat up a can of baked beans on the stove.

Robert squirted up a note and before I reached for it I thought for the first time about the sanitary concerns of acquiring such a roommate. Of course I would accommodate him, but it would take some getting used to. I plucked the note and read it:

Adele, you must tell me now. What is wrong with me, what have I become? I know I'm not in hospital. I see that much. Tell me.

I turned my back to him and shoved a thumb and four fingers into my eye sockets, pinching back tears. No, no, no this

will never do. A few moments passed while I squeezed my face tighter and tighter.

“Are you happy right now, Robert?” I suddenly asked, spinning towards him on the balls of my feet, refreshed from a good, painful pinch.

A note popped out quickly:

What am I Adele.

“Are you comfortable?”

Said the note:

I won't speak to you until you tell me what I am.

And he didn't. I made my beans, I tried to reason with him. If he was happy and comfortable, who cares what he was? Why couldn't he be happy with this new existence? I was careful not to divulge exactly what that existence was however. No response. As long as we were together, what difference did it make? I wouldn't care if we were two mice in a wall, two boils on a chin. Or two soft, pink magnolia petals doomed to overripe and fall heavy to the ground. I pleaded through mouthfuls of sticky brown beans, no response. I sat and stared at him, cried and begged, shook the fishbowl, no response, no response, no response. I slept and woke to no note in the morning for three nights. Finally I cracked. Living with a turd in a fishbowl that I knew was Robert but who wasn't speaking to me was worse than living without Robert at all.

“This is all very odd to me too, Robert, do you understand? I didn't plan this or conjure it, it just fell into my lap. Or, not lap really. Into my toilet. Right now I'm talking to a turd, Robert. You've become a turd. I discovered you in my toilet the day that you died and you were the most impressive thing I'd ever seen. Well, not at first, but as soon as I knew what you were. You're the mightiest turd, Robert. Mightier as a turd than as a man, this I promise you. The king of turds, do you realize that? I staggered when I first saw you, truly I did. You might even be proud of yourself if you saw because I think as far as turds go, you're the most striking turd I've ever laid eyes on. And I used to clean up at

that stadium, Robert, you remember that. Mightier and more handsome than any I've seen, that's the truth."

No response. No movement. No acknowledgement on his part that he had heard anything I'd said. Then suddenly, he began to quiver and stir and a little note forced its way out once again.

The first in three days:

Grab a mirror Adele, I want to see myself.

"Why, Robert? Why do you have to see yourself? What difference does it make?"

No response. He knew how to press the button. I couldn't have him quiet.

So I walked to my nightstand, pulled a small hand mirror out of the drawer and returned to the dresser that Robert was on top of. I placed a doily beneath him to make him look a bit neater before I held the mirror up to what might have been his face. It's odd, the turd began to take on the qualities of a man's face, or at least, I'd begun to force the qualities onto it. Two little seeds became eyes and a poorly chewed section of what might be creamed corn bubbled out for a nose. He seemed to speak or excrete notes that is, between segments, so I suppose that those segments could be his mouths. Nothing wrong with a man having a few mouths is there?

A little quiver and another note shot out, this time a bit faster.

"You seem to be getting the hang of this," I said to him encouragingly. I plucked the note out and read it.

Flush me Adele. I can't live like this. Look at me. I'm a turd in a fishbowl. This isn't a life, heavens no.

A frown pulled at my face. I couldn't help it. I could understand of course what he was saying, but how could I possibly flush my dearest friend? How could I lose him again?

"Robert," I said, "how could I? You're asking me to kill you, don't you realize that? You're asking me to end your life. I'll be so lonesome without you, Robert. I'll be so very alone."

A tiny struggle, another note.

Please Adele. If I was ever any friend to you at all, you'll flush me.

I sucked in another breath of deodorizer and began to cry.

And I sat there and I cried until Anna Floss tapped gently on my door and whispered through a crack, her tiny voice tickling my ear, asking me if I was okay.

"Yes!" I replied loudly. "Leave me alone, Anna!"

And once I knew she was gone I made my way to the bathroom and performed a very private ritual with my very dearest friend Robert.

AINSLIE HOGARTH is a very recent graduate from an MA in Creative Writing program at the University of Auckland, where she completed the first draft of her first novel. She enjoys day old macaroni and writing very short biographies about herself.

The Stupidest Thing I've Ever Heard

Kimberly Steele

Autumn Rose was as tough as nails. She was rich, thin and gorgeous. Her thick, styled blond hair fell over her shoulders as she walked with confidence. Her family was rich, thin and gorgeous (save the baby, who was rich, chubby and gorgeous). Autumn had worked hard for all of it and took nothing for granted. That was why, on her day off, she was on the way to Palmer and Associates, the law office she worked at. She was a paralegal and needed to do lunch with her husband, who also worked for Mr. Palmer, as a lawyer. They needed to discuss once again the final details of their plans to adopt the newest member of their family from Thailand. It was going to cost an arm and a leg but the only thing the Rose family cared about was holding that precious baby!

Autumn knocked timidly on the office door, overly aware of her frumpy clothes and fighting back tears of shame the same way she did every time she had to go through this humiliation. Wasn't it bad enough that she needed to live off the worksweat of others, did they have to drag her down here to wait for hours at their dingy, depressing office to be interrogated every three months? Was it just for their own kicks? How many people who got state benefits had to drag themselves down so often to get what they needed for their families, she wondered. And how many of the cheaters who abused the system called in on their government sponsored iPhones and renewed their benefits with some sort of dignity? Dignity they didn't even deserve. She fought the anger that welled up in her; it immersed the shame but was hardly going to do her any favors when she went into her interview.

"So, you need to continue health coverage for all three of your children, yes? Dana, thirteen, Robert, eleven and Sara, three? Is that correct?"

"Yes," Autumn replied feebly. She wanted to tell this droning, vapid woman that her children were real people who lived and breathed and not just meaningless names and numbers on her paper. Her kids were going to be better than she was. They were already more attractive. They had thick red hair instead of her own thin, mousy brown. The one gift their father had given them. They all had the same bright blue eyes, this gift from her, though hers were world weary and not so bright anymore.

"And you are currently still receiving food stamps for all three children, as well as housing allowance and your daycare is paid for as well? Am I neglecting any other benefits you're receiving?"

"No, ma'am," Autumn mumbled. She had the sudden, hysterical urge to tell this woman that Sara still called her brother "Rowbert" and the little boy loved it because it was also how she said "robot" and he wanted to be a robot. Instead she crossed her legs self-consciously and waited for the next question.

"And still no luck reaching the father to collect child support?" her eyes skimmed across the most deeply personal details of Autumn's life as if the fact that she did this activity every day made the pain of her clients immaterial.

Autumn uncrossed her legs nervously. *Do not cry*, she demanded of herself. You have never before cried in front of these people and you never will.

"It's kind of hard to, you know, collect money when you can't find someone. He left us years ago and he don't want to be found. We're still trying, though."

Autumn crossed and uncrossed her legs in a misguided attempt to collect her thoughts and promptly burst into tears. She hugged her husband. She hugged Dr. McGuffey. She was so happy she literally pictured herself hugging people who were not even in the room.

"I am? I really, seriously am? You're positive? You're super positive that I am pregnant without any doubt whatsoever?"

“With twins,” said the doctor, smiling almost as wide as the couple themselves. He had been doing his best to help them become pregnant for the past two years and every time it failed he had watched their hope dwindle that much more. If this last treatment had not been successful, they would not have been able to afford any more tries.

He liked both of them, but especially spunky, vibrant Autumn. She reminded him of his own daughter in both physical appearance and attitude. Dark features that belied kind hearts and energy to spare. This would be their first child, and the fact that it would also be their second was a miracle in its own right. They had always wanted more than one child, but had resigned themselves to the knowledge that they would be desperately lucky just to have one. Two was beyond their wildest dreams at this point.

“Two healthy babies, all the tests confirm it!”

Autumn almost slapped the doctor in the face at that point.

“Who the *hell* do you think you are, telling me that I should murder my child before he is even born?” More than anything else in the world, she longed to see her husband. He was away in Afghanistan and probably wouldn’t be back until his son was born. It wasn’t fair that she had to go through this all alone. She had known that he was going to be away when she had married him, but not that it was going to be this hard.

Dr. Jones held up a hand that was intended to be calming but just came off as amused and placating.

“Don’t talk like that, Mrs. Leigh. I know you haven’t had a lot of time to process this, but you would have to be a saint to sign on for this ride if you had any idea what it was really going to be like. Constant doctor appointments, always going crazy over all the medicines and procedures you’d have to handle...”

“I know it’s a shock to find out that your child is going to be born severely mentally and physically incapacitated,” he continued, intentionally using blunt language to make a point to the silly, emotional woman in front of him. “But you simply cannot

compare my recommendation to murder! If you love your child, as I know you do, then this is the only way to spare it from a terrible life! And you'll be sparing yourself many miserable years of wishing that you were a normal parent and could stop worrying about your child!"

Autumn stood and smoothed her cheery but tasteful maternity shirt over the prominent bump that was her son. She spoke calmly, hoping that the idiot spawn in front of her would understand that her calm demeanor only meant she was concentrating too hard on sending death rays into his brain to shout.

"Listen to me you self important, condescending *prick*. My baby is not an *it*, *his* name is Geoffrey. He will be born and raising him does not qualify me for sainthood, it makes me a mother. *All* parents worry about their children all the time, I'll just be worrying about different things. Do not ever so much as think that you know what it takes to make me crazy, you have no idea who I am.

"My son will not have a terrible life and it's not for you to decide what is terrible, *doctor*. I'm not some hysterical pregnant lady with no idea of what she is getting into, I'm just completely disgusted by your lack of compassion and saddened because you have no idea what it means to love. I will not be returning here ever again and if you *dare* say one more word to me I'll slap your ugly, smug face into next week!"

Autumn's fiery red hair bounced merrily as she spoke, as if to emphasize the importance of her words. She looked at the man across the table from her and laughed. The two of them had been laughing so much throughout the night that people were actually beginning to stare a little bit.

"How did we even get on this topic?" Connor laughed, unconsciously mirroring Autumn's head bob. He found that his hands had stopped their nervous fiddling quite a while ago.

"I read a book," she said. "But don't change the topic. Did you or did you not just reveal the depth of your nerditude by

telling me, on our first date, mind you, that you believe people will someday travel in time?"

He laughed again. "Don't say it like that! You're making me sound silly on purpose!"

"I think you're doing a pretty good job of making yourself sound silly, my dear."

"Okay, listen. There is no doubt in the realm of science that such a thing is possible. Not probable, but *possible*. Time is a human construct; what we label as time is really a fluid thing. I'm only saying that's it's possible and I think it's interesting to speculate about whether or not we achieve it in the future."

Autumn tried to keep a sober face.

"I'll grant you that the possibility exists to accomplish time travel, but I can tell you beyond a shadow of a doubt that humanity will not achieve it before the world ends."

Autumn's smug look was adorable and she knew it. She would never admit that she knew it, but she did.

He was smiling. "Okay then, wise counselor, tell me how you know this alleged fact..."

"It's simple deduction!" she said, happy to be engaged in such a conversation even though she teased him mercilessly for showing his nerd card so quickly. "The nature of time travel is such that if we achieved it in the future we would have the ability now because of the very reason the act of time travel is possible: time is fluid. So, since our current world does not have the ability to travel in time it will never happen. Because if time is fluid rather than linear the whole future has already happened!"

"Not necessarily. Maybe they have strict regulations so that humans aren't informed that time travel has been achieved until a certain point in our humanly constructed, linear timeline?"

"I find that highly unlikely, due to the human tendency to break the rules as much as possible, but say for the sake of argument that it's true. Even if you don't strictly believe that squashing a butterfly in Asia will wreak havoc all over the world

and change all of history, certainly a big thing would. And since I think we both know that humanity is a bunch of clumsy oafs, we can deduce that *lots* of big things would be done, over and over, and history would be changing left and right! How could we not, somehow, become aware of this at some point? Or at least have some kind of inkling..."

Connor laughed for what must have been the hundredth time that night.

"One second I'm an Olympic athlete and the next I'm a hobo on a street corner begging for change? One second we're on this date and the next I'm on the first voyage to make Mars an inhabitable planet for earthlings?"

"Exactly! And *that* is the stupidest thing I've ever heard!"

KIMBERLY STEELE was born and raised in Oregon, but currently calls Issaquah, Washington, home. She loves traveling the globe, comedy, psychology and of course, writing. At eight years old she caused a commotion when she wrote in an assignment that she accidentally saw her (male) teacher naked and has never looked back since.