



# Global Short Story Competition December 2013

Winner : Johanna Bergstrom  
The Bitch Next Door

Highly Recommended : Ann Hebert  
The Letter

# The Bitch Next Door

## Johanna Bergstrom

She couldn't believe them. They were both acting as if nothing had happened.

Kaisa stared at her neighbours. Jaana was sipping her tea, calmly, baby asleep in her arms. The white winter sunlight fell through the living room window and onto the child's small, troll-like face, still puffy from the birth only ten days ago.

Marcus had been babbling on about the baby ever since Kaisa had arrived, and she was now feeling anxious. Did they not realise the real reason for her visit? Had they hoped she wouldn't dare to bring the matter up?

Straightening her back, Kaisa leaned forward and placed her cup and saucer on the coffee table. Her heart began to beat slightly faster and she licked her lips.

“Jaana, Marcus.”

Marcus stopped talking. He looked at Jaana, then Kaisa, his eyes widening a little, then he looked down and said nothing. He suddenly reminded Kaisa of one of those androids from science fiction films; it was as if someone had flicked the 'Off' switch on the back of Marcus' neck and all the power had just drained out of him, leaving his robot head and limbs hanging limply, his lifeless gaze directed at a spot on the carpet.



Kaisa forced herself to carry on. She must do this.

“Jaana? Please? I’ve come to talk about what happened yesterday.”

Jaana sat still, the saucer and cup in one hand. Nobody said a word. The baby slept.

The day before, Saturday, everything had seemed normal. At 3pm the boys had gone off to football practice with Tuomas, like they did every week. Thank goodness they hadn’t been home, Kaisa had said to Tuomas later. They had been spared from witnessing the horrid event.

In whispered tones, while the boys took their bath, Kaisa had told Tuomas everything she had seen, but as usual her husband had been useless.

“Well, call the police then,” he had said eventually, frustrated, after they had discussed the matter for more than an hour after dinner. Tuomas had side glanced at the TV, wanting to watch the ice hockey.

She had wrung her hands. “But they’re friends. Well, neighbours, anyway. Maybe I should talk to them first? It seems so harsh, just calling the police, doesn’t it? Social services could get involved, you know.”

Tuomas had sighed. “I’m sure you’re not the only one who saw it. Plus you said you saw Marcus dealing with it. Let someone else get involved for a change.”



Kaisa had frowned. "I don't think Marcus actually dealt with the matter, as such. All he did was dump the poor thing somewhere." Earlier, she had stared at her neighbour's house through the crack in the bedroom curtains, watching as Marcus had carried the small bundle wrapped in a black rubbish bag from the back garden into their yellow Volvo out front. Then he had driven away and come back an hour later, without the bag, looking even sadder than usual.

"What if next time is too late? She might do something else she regrets." Kaisa had insisted. "I'll talk to them. Tomorrow." Jaana had looked at Tuomas, and Tuomas had opened his mouth then shut it again. Then he had picked up the remote and switched on the TV.

Now the baby made a mewling sound, bringing Jaana back from her thoughts. His little mouth pursed and then opened, like a fish. He was waking up hungry.

Jaana was still holding the cup and saucer in her right hand, but her left hand was moving, stroking the baby's hair, adjusting him in her arms.

Kaisa found she was holding her breath. What should she do?

"Jaana..." she tried again, but was interrupted by the baby opening his eyes and letting out a cry, much louder than before.



Jaana came to life, and with her, Marcus too. She leaned forward and put the saucer down. Then she gathered the baby and his blanket, and herself, and rose slowly from the sofa. Marcus stood up and hovered just behind his wife, nervously tucking his long greasy hair behind his ears.

“I need to feed him,” Jaana said in her harsh foreign accent, looking at Kaisa calmly. She took a step towards the bedroom. “Thanks so much for coming, Kaisa. We’ll see you soon.”

Kaisa knew she had to act. She stepped forward and blocked Jaana’s exit.

“Jaana. Please stop!” Kaisa’s voice rose and her heart was beating so fast now that her hands trembled. “You must deal with this. It could be too late next time. You could do something horrible that you might regret.” Kaisa’s eyes fell on the baby.

Jaana froze. Her wide, rosy cheeks flushed bright red, her vacant, drowsy brown eyes coming to life, narrowing and focusing on Kaisa. Her mouth turned into an almost-snarl as she pulled her baby fiercely to her chest. Then she spat her words out at Kaisa, one by one.

“Get. Out. You. Bitch!”

Kaisa reeled back at the venom and the force of the words.



“What?” She took a few steps back and Jaana followed her, crowding her, forcing her towards the hallway and the front door. All the while Jaana clutched the baby close to her chest.

“I said,” Jaana growled, “Get out!” Her voice began to rise. “Get out, get out, get out, get out! Out! Now!” Her voice was coming out in threatening screeches through clenched teeth, impotent anger barely contained. The baby cried.

Kaisa suddenly felt very frightened. Jaana was a woman who clearly could not control her anger. She might do something bad, like she had done yesterday. Kaisa stumbled back to the front door, and with Jaana advancing at her, baby in arms, she quickly grabbed her jacket and scrabbled at the door handle.

“That’s right, you interfering housewife bitch!” Jaana’s face had flushed bright red. “Don’t ever come back!”

The last thing Kaisa saw, before she ran out, were Jaana’s devil-like features in the doorway and Marcus’s feeble form behind her, pleading for his wife to calm down.

“I told you,” Tuomas said later that evening. Kaisa had been on hot coals all day, waiting for him to come home, so she could tell him. Tuomas shook his head angrily, as his wife prepared dinner.

“What did you tell her, dad?” Luukas wandered in and opened the fridge.



Kaisa quickly shut the fridge door before her youngest son could reach in and grab anything. “No snacking before dinner”, she said. Luukas had got a note back from the school nurse again. He was too heavy. Not obese or anything, but carrying more weight than a boy of his age should. She had to monitor his diet.

“What did you tell her, dad?” Luukas insisted, flopping down onto a kitchen chair.

“None of your business,” Tuomas said, turning back to his newspaper.

“Is it to do with the dead dog?” Luukas asked.

Kaisa slammed a saucepan onto the stove and turned to glare at Tuomas.

Later that evening, Kaisa sat in front of the computer, typing away. “Can you read this email before I send it?” She called out to Tuomas.

Tuomas came into the office, frowning. “I really think you should leave it, Kaisa.”

“Leave it? Am I the only sane person around here?”

“I just think...”

“You heard your own son, Tuomas. What kind of an example are we setting here?” Kaisa turned back to the computer. “She called me a bitch, but I guess that’s fine too,” she muttered.



She felt Tuomas standing there, behind her, and the hairs on the back of her neck prickled as she waited for his reaction. Then she heard his footsteps as he left the room.

The police called around Jaana's house about noon on Monday. Marcus wasn't home; Kaisa had seen him go off to work in the morning. She sat in her kitchen, her Venetian blinds turned to a halfway position that allowed her to see out, but no one could see in. She watched as Jaana, baby in arms, opened the door to the police, then later to the animal protection people.

Both times Jaana cried when they came, and neither the officers nor the APR men hung around for long.

It was early January, when Kaisa's doorbell rang. Leena Petterinen had come to borrow a cup of flour and Kaisa invited her in for a coffee.

"She's depressed, you know, that Polish girl next door."

"Who's that?" Kaisa asked, pouring Leena a coffee, but her hand jerked and she spilled some into the saucer.

"Jaana, the Polish girl next door to you." Leena watched as Kaisa gave her a clean saucer, then took the coffee filled one herself and put a napkin under the cup to soak up the liquid. "That whole dog incident must have been the start of it all," Leena continued, picking up one of the left over Christmas gingerbread hearts Kaisa had put out on a plate.



Kaisa watched as Leena took a careful bite. The older woman had new false teeth and her gums were sore.

“Ah yes,” Kaisa said. “Jaana. Next door.” She took a gingerbread heart from the plate, but laid it on a clean red paper napkin next to her saucer and looked out of the window towards Jaana’s house. “Well, it could be just post natal depression, you know. It’s quite common.”

Leena Petterinen cackled. “She beat the poor animal to death with a chair! How depressed can she be?” Leena spoke with her mouth full, the gingerbread making her words sound mushy. She took a loud slurp of coffee and continued to chew, her thick glasses reflecting the light from the window, the pearl earrings in her wrinkled, stretched earlobes moving up and down as her jaw worked.

“Actually,” Kaisa said quietly, “She kicked him.”

“What?”

“Jaana. The dog. She kicked the dog down the stairs. She never beat it up with a chair.”

“Well, anyway,” said Leena. “The woman’s clearly mad. On pills now. Anti-depressants I suppose you call them. My sister in law was at the pharmacy, said she recognised the brand name on the box when Jaana bought them. That poor little baby. I’d be more worried about his welfare, if I were the doctor.”



Kaisa pursed her lips. Then she put her hands on the table. “You know, that dog went for the baby.”

“What?”

“The dog. It tried to bite the baby. It went into the child’s room, jumped into the cot and went at him, viciously.”

Leena stopped chewing, digesting this new piece of information. “Oh,” she said finally. “Oh, I see. Well, that changes things.”

Kaisa nodded. It did.



# Highly Commended

## The Letter

### Ann Hebert

The whiff of decaying paper, dry and dusty, hit her as soon as she pulled open the drawer and found, carefully tucked behind the underwear, the small, buff-coloured envelope. She took it out and then, feeling unaccountably guilty, she pushed back the tangled grey mass of washed-out bras and frayed knickers, closed the drawer, and went on with the task of clearing out her mother's things. She opened the wardrobe releasing odours of mothballs and stale perfume and gazed tearfully at the rows of dowdy dresses, cheap jackets and countless pairs of brown slacks, so different from her own expensive, fashionable outfits, and then resolutely stuffed them into a black bin bag before her emotions got the better of her. Next, the drawers, one by one, their contents tipped into the waiting bags, no time to think, no time to sit and weep as she quickly swept up the reminders of her mother's safe existence.

'You could do with a cup of tea, love. Have a break from that, no good upsetting yourself you know'.

Polly smiled at her father hunched forlornly in the doorway and felt a mixture of compassion and anger at the reversal in their roles. When did he become the needy child and she the consoler, the self-sacrificing organizer of his life?



She thought of the new client she had booked in this weekend and what he would think of his inevitable phone calls every time he lost a sock, ran out of milk, or just because he was lonely.

'Nearly done' she smiled at him, 'you go down and put the kettle on and I'll join you in a minute'. He turned obediently and shuffled down the stairs.

She waited until he had gone to bed then took out the letter and gazed at the bold, confident writing on the envelope. Holding it up to the meagre light of her bedside lamp she read,

**Dear Amanda,**

**I know this is awkward and I understand if you tear this up and I never hear from you again, but this is so difficult for me too. I am writing to let you know that my father, Sir Hugh Pennington, died last week and left me a letter explaining the circumstances of my birth.**

**I knew I had been adopted, of course, but was never told who my real mother was, only that she had died not long after I was born. In the letter my father confessed that it was a lie to protect his family from any scandal arising out of his affair with you, who at that time worked as a prostitute and with whom he had a child, myself. He gave me your name and asked that I tell you that he had loved you deeply and had continued to do so until the day he died.**



**I am not asking for a reconciliation, I have no wish to disturb your life, or mine, just a promise that you will never reveal the circumstances of my birth to anyone. Like my father I am a well respected member of the government and I beg you – as your son – to keep this a secret.**

**With fond regards,**

**David Pennington**

With fond regards! How could this man write so cruelly to the woman who had given him life, a man who accused his mother, their conformist, respectable mother, who had never worn make-up or coloured her hair, who had been a devoted vicar's wife for heaven's sake, of having been a prostitute! Polly sank back on her pillows trying to imagine her mother as Amanda, a high class call girl, beautiful, self-confident - and pregnant, and finally let the tears flow down her face as she mourned the loss of someone who she realised she had never really known.

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She had broken the number one rule of an escort, never get involved with your client. Amanda knew that of course, and with the others the idea was laughable. They came and went, paid handsomely for her services, and there had never been a problem, although the politicians were the worst, mostly testosterone junkies she thought.



But this one had been different, Hugh Pennington, a minor somebody in the Cabinet who had first appeared at her door, smiling sweetly, unsure what to do. She remembered so vividly how she had prepared for that night as she did with every new client, the ritualised applying of make-up, revelling in the sensual caress of her expensive negligee, smoothing down the silk sheets. She remembered opening the door and smiling sweetly at him as he said her name, 'Amanda?'

All he wanted to do was talk, he said. They had sat in her Kensington flat, he had refused the champagne, asked if she had tea, and told her how lonely he was. A week later he booked another session, then another and soon, at his insistence she stopped taking clients and left every evening free for him. Another few years and she could have gone on the pill or had a legal abortion, but she loved him deeply and he had promised he would stand by her. That is until his wife got wind of their affair, had started making life difficult and he had trotted back to her like a little lamb. She couldn't have children he'd said and was willing to adopt the baby and bring it up as their own.

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Polly stared out of the kitchen window not seeing the unkempt sweep of the vicarage lawn strewn with rotting apples but just the churning contents of her mind as she tried to imagine her mother as the beautiful and seductive Amanda. 'What's up love?' queried her father, 'that salmon won't cook itself you know, you've been staring at it for the last twenty minutes'.



She turned and looked at her father, suddenly aware of his shrunken, defeated appearance as if his body was quietly collapsing from the inside. She couldn't help comparing his whole life to that of a salmon, battling his way through the currents of his routine existence only to spawn in one brief moment of happiness, if he had felt happiness at her birth, and then rot slowly to death 'Oh, sorry! I was just wondering whether we could get another batch of chutney out of the last of the apples', she said quickly. 'No point' he muttered peevishly, 'only me now and I've always hated the stuff, gives me reflux.'

The visitors' room at the Belleview Nursing Home was suffocatingly warm and there was an overpowering smell of cabbage mixed with what Polly hoped was only the astringent aroma of polish. She sat awkwardly in the high backed, high seated chair uncomfortably aware of her youth and how out of place she looked in her four inch heels and tight skirt among the grey, sagging bodies around her as she waited for her aunt to settle herself opposite and begin her story.

'You mustn't blame her Polly, it was a long time ago, just after the war. Not much opportunity for women then, no more factory jobs, and besides your mum wanted more than that. She was very pretty then and somehow got herself involved with, well, you know. She never felt shame mind you, she was proud of her success in attracting the rich and powerful, she felt she was a part of their set I suppose. Paid handsomely for "easing their frustrations" she said.



No one knew of course, never questioned where she got the money for her expensive flat and smart clothes and I suppose after the disruption of war it was easier to just reinvent yourself and be whoever you wanted to be, if you had the nerve. But she was a good sister to me and we never lost touch, and she would have been a good mother too if they had let her keep the baby.'

Polly leaned forward and squeezed her hand gently, consolingly, and waited for her to continue.

'Her life fell apart after she let the little chap go, she never forgave herself for giving him up like that you see, but you have to understand the times. A woman in your mother's position had little power against the Pennington's of this world. Well, after the shock of losing both Hugh and the baby she gave up the work, sold her flat and for two years refused to see anyone. I suppose you would call it depression now and treat it with pills and therapists, but the word hadn't been invented then. But being Amanda she tackled it her own way. She created a new life for herself, new name, new identity, the perfect vicar's wife, and devoted herself to you'.

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She switched on the TV and sat back smiling at the familiar image of the foreign secretary appearing on the screen. There was a close resemblance, she could see that, and she toyed with the idea of contacting him, of returning his letters informing him of her existence and of their mother's recent death.



She even thought of thanking him for she finally felt a kinship and a closeness to her mother that she had never felt when she was alive. But what would be the point? And besides, in her line of work it would be too risky to get involved, but she made a note that on no account would he figure among her client list. No, for now that letter would stay in her underwear drawer, carefully hidden behind the sex toys and silk teddies, just in case she needed them.





## Global Short Story Competition

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