

**TLC Showcase**  
**Kate Belcher**



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## Introduction

My first reaction when I got my report from The Literary Consultancy was disappointment. The rational part of me knew *Somnia*, my children's novel, needed work. I knew it wasn't done, that's why I chose to send it in. But a tiny bit of me still hoped my reader would say 'Wow! Best thing I've ever read', and I'd stick that quote on the cover of my multi-million selling first edition.

Even though my report was very positive, that's not what it said. It pointed out major flaws that would take a lot of re-writing to fix, like the fact that my book fell awkwardly halfway between comedy and drama. It took me a little while, some poutine and an obscenely large glass of red wine before I could bring myself to read it a second time.

I wanted to dismiss it, to find some reason to reject the advice given. I even Googled my reader's name, to check his credentials (which were, of course, impressive). The truth is, I didn't need someone to say how perfect my book was (and my mum does that for me anyway, free of charge). I needed someone to point out the flaws I couldn't see. The report was insightful, helpful and encouraging. Once I'd read it a second time, then a third time, making notes, I started to get quite excited. I waited a couple of weeks before I started the re-write, filling a whole notepad with ideas, problems and solutions.

I'm still not there yet, two drafts later. But I'm much closer. I sent my manuscript to an agent, who sent me back her own critique and advice, and invited me to resubmit my next draft.

I don't think TLC on its own can make someone a writer. I read everything on writing I could get my hands on. I took classes, showed my work to friends and got their advice. I re-wrote, re-wrote and re-wrote again. I cut most of the characters, both the subplots and countless scenes. In the end, I don't think the book I have now has a word in common with the first draft. One minute I thought it was ready to be published; the next I wanted to take a hammer to my computer. That's when I sent it to TLC.

I'll be sending my novel to The Literary Consultancy again before I send it back to the agent. They told me what I needed to hear, not what I wanted to hear. I'm very grateful for that, and I'm looking forward to hearing what they say next.

## Introduction to *Meat*

I wrote this piece as an exercise to help with a scene in my children's novel *Somnia* (which I have just finished redrafting). I wanted to remember how it had felt to be nine or ten. Thinking back on it, I seemed to spend an awful lot of time fighting with my sister. I also remembered being accused of putting some meat in a vegetarian's food at school (I was innocent, I promise!). I wanted to make the scene emotionally charged, so chose the setting of a grandmother's funeral. I was trying to capture the feelings of sisterly competitiveness and spite and love mingled, as well as petty, often misdirected attempts to redress perceived wrongs. I wrote the first couple of drafts, then put the piece away for over a month before coming back to work on it again, by which time I was able to see it anew, and edit it more comprehensively.

# Meat

By Kate Belcher

'I don't know how you can do it.' Sara's mouth is pulled into a sneer.

I pause, Coke half-way to my mouth, and feel the fizz of the bubbles bursting against my skin; like fairies spitting. I hate her in these moods.

'Do what?'

'Eat meat, today of all days. You just saw her corpse, and now you're eating corpse. Doesn't it make you want to throw up? I'd throw up.'

I glance down at the ham peeking out of the sandwich. It is much pinker than the grey-white of Gramma's skin.

Sara thinks she's special, because she's a vegetarian. She thinks she's special because she's older. She's just annoying, and stupid. She's so stupid she doesn't even realize how stupid she is.

I must have thumped my glass down hard on the table, because Mum twists around, and the glare etched on her mascara-streaked face shuts my mouth.

'Not today,' she says.

'Gramma wasn't vegetarian,' I mutter to Sara, as soon as Mum turns back to Auntie Lou. Sara crosses her arms across her chest and puts hands on her shoulders, like Gramma's were, and rolls her eyes up into her head, but Mum can't see.

Gramma didn't look like that. She was wearing her blue dress, like she wore on my birthday, when we went to the fair. She looked all wrong though, so still and stern; like a bad grandmother, not my Gramma.

I drop my eyes back to my food and poke at a folded slice of ham with my knife. It flips open with a quiet slap.

She's right. Gramma's meat now. A lump; like something hanging in a butcher's shop. She's not her. She can't smile. Can't share candy floss, or ride the horseys, blue dress fluttering behind her pony.

It's wrong, it's all wrong. Sara is grinning. She takes a bite of her egg sandwich. Swears pile up in my head, and I want to claw into my sister with them; want to slice into her with hurt, pay her back, make her know how mean she is.

She puts the sandwich down, and stands up, sliding out of her chair. She whispers in Mum's ear as she passes, and Mum stops her for a Moment, squeezing Sara in a big hug. Sara stares over Mum's shoulder at me, a smug grin plastered on her face. Mum releases her, and she trots off to the bathroom.

I sit on my side of the table, ignored.

Sara's sandwich perches on her plate, one perfect semi-circle bitten out of it. I look down at the ham in my own.

She thinks she's so good, just because she doesn't eat meat. But she's not. She didn't even cry when the coffin thumped into the ground, and they started to shovel dirt on Gramma. She just looked down into the hole, face blank, like she was watching the news on TV.

I snatch the sandwich from her plate, then peer down the table. Auntie Lou pats Mum on the back; Dad sips a beer and stares at the wall. No one is watching.

I tug a sliver of ham from my piece, and gently pry up the top half of Sara's sandwich. Mayonnaise sticks the egg in lumps to the white bread. I flap the meat down into the ooze of the filling, and shove down the top slice. The egg bulges out of the sides, but you can't see the pink of the ham, not from any side.

I replace Sara's sandwich just as she left it. Then I sit back, pick up a slice of cucumber, and crunch into it, with satisfaction. Sara walks back from the washroom, and I hide my smile behind my hand. Her face is a little red, and she swallows hard as she slides back into her seat.

I sit on my hands to keep from fidgeting as she picks up her food, positioning it in front of her mouth, lining it up.

She's looking over at the family photos on the mantelpiece, not even glancing at her sandwich as she bites into it. Her jaw slides as she chews, and her throat bobs as she swallows. I watch as she takes another bite, gleeful excitement dancing in me.

She doesn't even know.

For all her stupid speeches, she can't even tell when she's eating meat. She swallows again and takes a sip of her Coke. I lean back in my chair, biting my lip, wishing I could tell her, just to see the look on her face. She doesn't even know. She's not going to be sick at all. She lied about that. She keeps chewing.

Sara makes a choking sound, and I feel a rush of dread.

She's tasted the ham.

I am in so much trouble. Mum is going to kill me for this. She's always standing up for Sara and her stupid vegetarian stuff. I brace myself for the yelling. I wish I hadn't done it. I wish I could take it back. It was a dumb idea; a really, really dumb idea.

But she doesn't look up at me, doesn't put the sandwich down, just holds it, shaking gently. A thread of spittle slides from her lip to her plate. It shimmers gently before snapping, and I realize what's happening.

Sara's sobbing, silently. Tears are chasing each other down her face, and clustering on her chin. Her nose is running, and she's turned puffy and pink, like sunburn.

'Sara?'

'She...'

 Sara spits a bit of the bread out as she says it, then wipes her mouth and chin with her sleeve.

'I wish she was here. Why can't she be here? It's just stupid.'

Her voice is rising, and Mum is turning around. Her sandwich is starting to flap open in her hand. I see a flash of pink.

I jump up, and dash around to her side of the table, putting myself between Mum and her. I wrap my arms around her, and rock her gently. My chest grows wet as Sara leans against it. I feel Mum lay a kiss on the back of my head, before she talks to Auntie Lou again, in the hushed voice she's been using all day.

Sara drops the sandwich on her plate, and I check. You can't see the ham. I exhale, staring at the marks her teeth left on the bread; slightly crooked still, even with the braces.

Sara pulls away, the cool of air suddenly between us. She wipes her face on the back of her hand, snuffling.

'I'm sorry,' she says. 'I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have said those things; about eating Gramma's corpse. I'm sorry. I don't know why I said it. I didn't mean it.'

She is gazing up at me now, red-rimmed eyes and sticky face making her look younger, like someone in a year below me. There's a bit of soggy bread on her chin. I wipe it off, and she smiles.

'Thank you.'

I feel the cold rush of guilt then, looking at her blotchy face. Something inside me feels hollow at the sight of her tears. I shouldn't have done that, shouldn't have tricked her. There's a twist in my stomach, a horrible sickening lurch, and I've got to get to the bathroom.

I shove Sara back, catching her goldfish stare as she almost topples off her seat, and I run, my hand over my mouth, but my guts are heaving and my mouth is full, lumps shoving between my fingers until I'm choking on the vomit, spluttering pieces onto the floor.

I get to the washroom, and slam the door closed. I drop to my knees and it all comes up in a painful convulsion of my stomach, splattering the toilet with a rush of colour. Footsteps follow my path across the room outside, then voices raised in concern. Another heave of food comes out of my mouth, leaving me drained, stomach aching, hands flat on the floor, staring into the mess of the water and the stink of it all.

Sara knocks on the door behind me, and calls my name, but I can't look away from the white of the bowl, and the pink piece of meat stuck to it.

I think I'm going to be sick again.

## About the Writer

**Kate Belcher** is a British expat, ex-museum curator and ex-clown living in Toronto. She came second in the 2010 Toronto Star Short Story Contest, out of 1,800 entries, and was long-listed for the 2011 CBC Literary Awards. A number of her other short stories and flash fiction pieces have also been published.



She is currently finishing her children's novel *Somnia*, about a boy and girl who accidentally open a gate between the real world and the world of dreams, unleashing a nightmare invasion. She has also recently completed the first draft of an apocalyptic YA book, tentatively titled *Haven*.

Some of her work can be found online, including her prize-winning short story '[The Devil and the Diner](http://www.thestar.com/entertainment/books/article/807715-the-devil-and-the-diner)' (<http://www.thestar.com/entertainment/books/article/807715-the-devil-and-the-diner>) and her flash fiction piece '[Circus](http://www.flashquake.org/archive/vol9iss4/editorial/circus.html)' (<http://www.flashquake.org/archive/vol9iss4/editorial/circus.html>).