**The Letter** by Katie Köster

*Heidelberg, summer 1942. Living room of a middle-class house. A husband and wife sit close to one another on their couch, talking in hushed voices.*

THE HUSBAND: We can’t leave, it’s too suspicious. The party is already checking on us enough to make sure that I’m producing enough ammunition.

THE WIFE: And if we stay?

THE HUSBAND: And if we stay. And if we stay what? I’ll be drafted? You know they won’t draft an amputee.

*An image of the letter is projected onto the back wall of the stage*.

THE WIFE: You know what. You’ve read the letter. The Beckers got the same a few weeks back. What business do the doctors have examining perfectly healthy children? Anna and Charlotte both got chicken pox when they were two. Are we to believe, now, that Anna has died of the pox? That is what the doctor says of her. Died of the pox.

THE HUSBAND: Maybe there was a mistake. Maybe she died of influenza and the nurse sent the wrong letter.

THE WIFE: Our daughter’s only friend – the only one who could speak with her – is dead.

THE HUSBAND *shushing his wife*: There are ears other than our own in this house.

*Pause. The Husband and Wife look towards the audience as though they have heard something come from there. From this point forward, if there is a loud noise in the audience, the actors are to react to it, as though it is a noise in their own house.*

THE WIFE: Ulla can’t hear us from here! Good lord, look at you, afraid of speaking in your own house.

THE HUSBAND: You know damn well why.

THE WIFE: You can’t be serious. We have enough to worry about with Charlotte after this letter, don’t you begin worrying about Ulla. She’s a good girl.

THE HUSBAND: That’s not it. I don’t want them to worry. I don’t want them to know what’s going on until we do.

THE WIFE: Fine then. What *is* going on?

THE HUSBAND: I don’t know. We still have a life here. We have a chance. We’re not being bombed.

THE WIFE: Not today.

THE HUSBAND: No, not today. We still have our jobs, nice things to do, places to go. We can go to the movies, would that make you feel better?

THE WIFE *angrily*: Would going to the movies save Charlotte? What good is taking me – or our daughters – to the movies? Charlotte can’t hear a word they’re saying, and if we try to explain it to her, she’s as good as dead. The movies. It’s as though the Third Reich thinks that it can fill our empty stomachs with words. Come now.

THE HUSBAND *quietly*: Careful. If Ulla hears you, she’ll start asking questions.

THE WIFE: The girl should ask questions! She should know. They both should. How can we protect our girls if they don’t know the dangers they face, if they don’t know what they need to do to protect themselves?

*The Husband nods in recognition.*

THE WIFE *yells*: Ulla, dear, come down here please!

*The Husband looks at her, throws his hands in the air.*

THE FIRST DAUGHTER *walks on stage*: Yes, mother?

THE WIFE: Where were you that you came so quickly?

THE FIRST DAUGHTER: The kitchen.

*Silence. The Husband and Wife look at one another, terrified.*

THE FIRST DAUGHTER: Is it true that Anna is dead?

THE HUSBAND *to wife*: You see? Now what are we to do?

THE WIFE: We leave. This is our only option.

THE FIRST DAUGHTER *solemnly*: So it is true. What, then, of Charlotte?

THE HUSBAND: Ulla, go fetch your sister. *Waits until daughter leaves.* We do not leave. We send Charlotte away.

THE WIFE: How? How do we send her on her own? If she signs to anyone, if she opens her mouth to try to speak, if she doesn’t respond because her back is turned, the Gestapo is everywhere. Government agents are everywhere. They’ll take her if someone isn’t there to protect her.

THE HUSBAND: So you go with her. One of us must be here or we’ll all be implicated.

THE WIFE: What do we tell the children?

*The First and Second Daughter enter the room.*

THE HUSBAND: Fine then, the truth. They’re old enough, and they need to know if we’re to protect them.

*Ulla is signing, interpreting for Charlotte what their father is saying. When any character is signing, their words are projected on the back wall of the stage so that the audience can understand.*

THE HUSBAND *to the First Daughter*: Stop that!

THE FIRST DAUGHTER *signing*: No! You just said you were going to tell us the truth. It’s not fair to hide everything from Charlotte just because you can. It’s not her fault.

THE WIFE *hesitatingly, signing*: She’s right.

THE HUSBAND *signing*: Fine. You want to know, you have every right. Charlotte, we’ve just received a letter requesting that we bring you to the doctors at the university for a physical examination. They do not care to see Ulla. Do you know why?

THE SECOND DAUGHTER *signing*: Because I’m deaf? They wanted to see Anna. Is the Führer giving us hearing aids? I read about those at school.

THE HUSBAND *to wife, not signing*: My god, school. She can’t go to school now that we’ve gotten the letter.

THE SECOND DAUGHTER *signing*: What are you saying, papa?

*The Husband turns his face away.*

THE WIFE *signing*: Sweetheart, Anna went to the doctor three weeks ago, and you haven’t seen her since, right?

THE SECOND DAUGHTER *signing*: No, she hasn’t been at school. But you know she had to go to the doctor. Maybe it’s just taking a while for them to get the hearing aids. Anna has small ears.

THE WIFE *signing*: Anna went to the doctor, yes. Frau Becker told me that she received a letter telling her than Anna came down with the chicken pox.

THE SECOND DAUGHTER *signing*: That’s impossible; we both got the chicken pox seven years ago. It must be something else. Could I go visit her? If she’s sick, she might like to have a friend.

*The Second Daughter points to the door at the back of the theatre (through the audience) as though that is their front door and she wants to go. The Husband shuffles uncomfortably. The First Daughter looks at her feet. The Second Daughter begins to look around to collect her things to go for a visit.*

THE WIFE *signing*: Lotte, we know she couldn’t have gotten chicken pox. The letter that Frau Becker received – it says that Anna has died. Do you know what this means?

*The Second Daughter clasps her hand over her mouth and begins to sob silently.*

THE WIFE *signing*: Lotte, do you know why the doctor wants to see you?

*The First Daughter wraps her arm around the Second’s shoulders.*

THE SECOND DAUGHTER *signing angrily:* That’s not true! No! It’s not true.

*Pause.*

THE SECOND DAUGHTER *signing*: Are they going to kill me, Mutti? I didn’t do anything wrong – Anna didn’t do anything wrong.

THE FIRST DAUGHTER *signing*: You’re not going to the doctor, Charlotte.

THE WIFE *signing*: No. You’re not going. Your father and I haven’t discussed exactly what we’re going to do or how, but you and I are going to go away for a while.

THE HUSBAND *signing*: Charlotte, go pack a small suitcase, nothing obvious. You may have to leave most of your clothes here, but you and your mother can buy a few clothes wherever you go. There’s not much to buy for clothes here, but maybe they’ll have nice clothes for you somewhere else.

*The Second Daughter, still sobbing, nods and slowly leaves the room.*

THE FIRST DAUGHTER: I want to go, too! Can’t we all just go? It’s not just the Jews and people like Lotte, you know. Carina told me just the other day that her father, a German – a party member! – was taken away and they don’t know to where. All he did was ask why the rations had been cut so much. Who’s to say that won’t happen to you, papa?

*The Husband sits pensively, looks at the audience as though through a window, stands up, and walks to the edge of the stage, talking as though to the audience.*

THE HUSBAND: But I’ve done nothing.

THE WIFE: And Charlotte has? That wasn’t her doing, that was God’s. There’s no sense to the party anymore. They promised us prosperity and instead they’re killing the children they begged us to have, whether it’s on the front of this ridiculous war or in the hospitals. What are we saving by staying? Our house? Our things? None of this matters if even one of us is lost. We can still save ourselves. We’re German; we can travel, can’t we? Our country is being bombed to bits, who is to say that Heidelberg isn’t next?

THE HUSBAND: We’re not leaving.