

# *Sketch*

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*Volume 25, Number 2*

1959

*Article 5*

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## The Letter

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# The Letter

Martha Elder

## **Abstract**

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# The Letter

**K**ATRINKA trudged into our room at International House and indifferently kicked her shoes under the dresser. She was a pretty girl with high cheekbones and delicate features. But now heavy eyelids drooped over her tired eyes and wisps of blond hair slipped out of her usually-neat chignon. "Was so hot at the store today."

"Kate, you shouldn't have to work alone in that hot little room. Can't you ask Mr. Lothrop to move the files somewhere else?" If I could only talk to him for her; he's just taking advantage of her because she doesn't speak English well. An honor student in chemistry and freedom fighter in the Hungarian revolt — and no choice but to file bills in a department store. I wish she could get the job in that laboratory.

Kate was staring at the mirror as she took the pins out of her hair and let it fall to her shoulders. "I just could not. He gets angry if I ask for anything. He think he is very kind to let me work for him." She pulled the brush through her long hair and stared. It was something more than the job this time. "Margo?" She turned and let the brush fall to the dresser. "Today I receive a letter from the sister of my husband. She says my husband is out of Communist prison. She says I must write some papers so he can come to America."

So that was it. Kate's soft brown eyes couldn't decide. They smiled a far-off, unbelieving smile. She had been sure she would never see him again. He had escaped. "I wanted him to come when I went to Vienna . . . but he was afraid." Her eyes quickly narrowed. Would it be just like it was before? He had promised it wouldn't; but he always promised. She looked at me for the answer. What to tell her? Let him come here to make life miserable for her again? Leave him in . . .

"Kate. Margo. You're both home. I am happy to see you." It was Rosario standing in the doorway with a large pile of music in the crook of her arm. "I came to put these away and get the concerto. I will practice until supper." She shuffled through the drawer full of sheet music.

"Charo, Kate received a letter from her husband's sister today."

The fiery Argentine shoved the drawer closed and whirled around. She eyed Kate intently. "What does he want now?"

"Please, Charo." Kate pleaded with her eyes more than her voice. She never knew quite how to handle this unpredictable Charo. She looked at me and was silent.

I took the cue. "Kate's husband has escaped from the Communist prison in Hungary, and his sister writes that if Eva will act as his sponsor, perhaps he can come to this country."

"Kate! You must not do it! He is no good!"

Kate sat down on the bed and folded and unfolded the letter in her hand. "Please, Charo."

"But, Kate. You don't have enough money now. You spend all to send him clothes and cigarettes. He does not even thank you, but only asks for more and more."

"He needs much," Kate replied quietly.

Rosario planted herself squarely in front of Kate to continue her argument but then let her shoulders drop. "Oh, I know why you send these things," she went on more slowly. "But you have said you were not happy with him. He would not treat you better in this country than he did in Hungary. You want to finish college, don't you?"

"Sure, I want. But. . ."

"Then you must save your money. It will cost much to bring your husband here."

"But Charo. His sister say he cannot get out of Hungary unless I help. He will be captured again."

"I only want you to be happy. You are a very foolish girl if you do what his sister asks." She grabbed the music and rushed out of the room.

"She is very nice, but she does not understand. She not

know how it is at home. I must buy." Kate bit her lip and looked at the letter again.

"Do you *want* him to come?"

"I love him, Margo, but. . ." She hesitated. "Always when I am with him I am crying." Kate didn't talk much about her past, but I sensed that now she wanted a listener. She spoke slowly and labored over each word. "Charo is right. He is not good. One time he, he. . ." She took a deep breath.

"Don't tell me if you don't want to."

"No, I want to tell you. But you must know that I married too young. I did not know. It was not his fault. We were very happy at first, but one day. . . a girl came to see my husband. I said, 'My husband is not at home.' She looked very surprised. She said, 'Mr. Nagy is married?'" Kate sighed with the effort of such a long explanation.

"Did you find out who she was?"

"No, I did not know her and I did not know what she wanted. She was a nice girl; very beautiful. I asked her to come in to wait. She did not want to, but I said he come home soon. When my husband get home he was very angry and would not talk to me. Except then he look at me hard and said, 'She will stay with us for supper.' Please understand, Margo. My husband get angry very easily."

"I understand."

Kate folded the envelope into a narrow tube and twisted it around her finger. She continued even more quietly and slowly. "After supper, I wash the dishes and they . . . they went into our bedroom." Her voice had fallen to a whisper. "Oh, Margo, it was terrible for me. When she went away, my husband cried. He said he would never do it again; he promised."

She got up wearily, walked to the window seat, and ran her finger around and around one of the small panes. There was nothing I could say. I wanted desperately to let her know how much I admired her courage. I wanted to tell her the right thing to do. Could anyone be asked to go through that again? I wanted to say something — something that would help. But I knew our silence, too, was communication.

Kate always listened to Charo and me. She was used to being told that it was silly to spend all her money on an ungrateful, no-good husband. But always she knew she "must buy" — he needed so much, and the past had nothing to do with it.

But bring him to America? This seemed like too much. She traced the window pane, and I knew she was thinking of it, too. When she finally turned around, she brushed the hair back from her face, and smiled the gentle smile which always said that, if I really knew what it was like, I would approve, too. Her explanation was simple — "I must write a letter to my husband."

— *Martha Elder, S. Sr.*

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## *Dark Leaf*

FALL IN Tennessee is the smell of dark tobacco being fired for market.

The smoke of the sawdust burning on the earthen barn floor drifts upward through the tiers of dark leaves, absorbing the rich sweetness of the tobacco before slipping out through the eaves to join the smoke of other barns.

It is as if a million cob pipes have joined to make a smooth sensual aroma that is all about and nowhere, an aroma that congregates to be visible as a blue haze in the quiet low places in the late afternoon. It is the smell of tobacco and burning hickory, and at the start of the firing time the hickory is predominant, but as the days move on, the tobacco smell moves in, and as the firing time ends, the hickory is gone and the tobacco is the victor.

The farmer sniffs and notes the progress and is content — the hunter smells it and the hunt is made better — the hiker pauses to appreciate and is rejuvenated.

Fall in Tennessee is not turning leaves or possum dogs sounding down the hollow, or the sudden cool solidity of the air — it is this smell — a fragrance that makes the old men nostalgic and the young men glad for the falls to come.

— *William Kershner, S. Jr.*