

# *THE MANGER*

Short Story 1

*Stamper, Liam C*

In my third year of attending college in San Antonio I worked in a hotel called The Manger. It was three stories of high ceilings and wrapped around a quiet corner. When it was built it was an extravagant part of the city. It once housed the wealthiest people from all over, but now the hotel had outlived its popularity and rarely had guests. My job was slow - I changed towels and gave directions. Most of the time I was left alone to think or read. The manager, like the hotel, was very old. He had reached the age when little was concerning to him, most of the time he would sit alone or walk through the gardens.

The ballroom was once the prize of the hotel. Now it was rarely occupied, it was older, and the ware could be seen; still the room had an elegance to it with woodwork that spiraled up each wall and a giant chandelier that hung in the center of the room. That chandelier was the center piece. All of it branched off like a tree from one round spiral in every direction. When the lights were turned down it would glow like stars clustered in the sky.

I knew it was him that had rented it when he walked in. He wore an attractive bluish suit with a tie that contained gold. His hair was short, and his face was roughly shaved. He was too young and seemed too focused to be a guest at the hotel. His accent told me he was from New York or so I thought. "I am looking for Maria."

"You must be the man who called about our ballroom, follow me please."

He spent the next couple minutes walking about the ballroom. It was empty, the tables and chairs were stored away with no need for them. He examined the walls and the woodwork, then for a

while I couldn't tell what he was looking at, he paced the room changing directions often as if deep in thought.

"This will be perfect." He said and smiled. He left a small deposit, and I inquired out of curiosity what he planned to do. "We are having an art show of sorts. I am looking to commission a painting do you think you could put me in contact with artist," he said as he began to walk out the door.

"I could do it, I am a painter" I saw him quickly look back, with eyes that told me he was intrigued.

"It doesn't matter to me. Bring me a design next week and we will talk."

I couldn't sit the rest of the day. I searched for a paper and pencil and sketched until it got dark. It was hot and I propped the door open to feel the air move. No other guests came in or out. I realized I hadn't asked what sort of painting he wanted. I received a letter from him the next day.

*Dear Maria,*

*I forgot to mention, I need a cattle iron - the brand can be in any shape. Please find me one and bring it when we meet.*

I went to class and told the story to the painters I knew and showed them my design. When the man returned a week later, he was dressed in a black suit and looked just as scruff as before. I think I liked him but maybe it was just that he had given me this chance to paint. "This is what I would like to do," I said and handed him the oversized sketch.

"Alright. That should be fine," with only a glance he had agreed. He started pacing again and the side of his face twitched. I handed him the iron. "This is good, thank you."

For two weeks I painted slowly, desperate not to make a mistake. The summer was hot, and I spent most of the time with the doors to the balcony in my apartment open. The city was loud,

but the heat seemed to suck up the noise and rolled it into a muffled lull. Time went quickly as my deadline approached.

On the day when he returned the air was especially dry. The sun hung low and made the cement appear fuzzy out of the corner of my eye. He appeared happy, but maybe it just seemed that way because I was. I didn't know if I was to watch the show or just wait in the hot lobby. "Where can I heat up this brand," he asked. It was the first time it dawned on me that he intended to use the brand. I was slow to answer, and he looked at me all the while as if it was a normal question. "Just a minute I will go look." Eventually I found a small barbeque pit and placed it outside the door to the hotel kitchen. He moved my painting while I was gone, and I saw a glimpse into the ballroom as a door swung closed. It hung in the very center of the room surrounded by web of others. A cowhide hung on the opposite wall.

I sat in the lobby behind the desk and watched people enter. The day only got hotter as time passed. Eventually the man passed me with the brand glowing red hot from the heat. I heard a sizzle follow as he pressed it against the cowhide. I could smell the stink of the burning leather. I sat in my chair and the sun began to set. One by one I watched the people trickled out of the ballroom. He was the last one to emerge. "Thank you, Maria," he smiled and left me a check.



I based this story off an account my grandmother gave me of working in a hotel during her time at St. Edwards. The Manger is based off the Merger Hotel in San Antonio. Above is a picture of it from 1865.