The Manger

In the summer of 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. Time had passed, now the hotel had outlived its popularity. Guests came so rarely it was as if the hotel didn’t exist anymore or no one could see its door. Time moved slow. The manager, like the hotel, was very old. He had reached the age when very little was concerning to him. I would watch him out the window sometimes as he sat alone or walked through the gardens. The ballroom was once the prize of the hotel. Now forever unoccupied, it was older, and the wear could be seen; still the room had an elegance to it with woodwork that spiraled up each wall and a chandelier that hung in the center of the room. 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.

That summer we received a call asking to see the hotel. I knew it was the man who had called when he walked in. He wore an attractive bluish suit with and a tie with little pieces of color. His hair was short, and his face was roughly shaved like he’d been hurried. “I am looking for Maria.” 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 first. For a while after I couldn’t tell what he was looking at. He paced the room and changed directions often as if deep in thought. He agreed to the price and left a small deposit. I asked what he planned to do. He told me that it was an art show, “I would like to commission a painting, do you think you could put me in contact with an artist,” he asked as he began to walk out the door. He turned back quickly and I told him I would.

For the rest of day I thought of what I would do. I sat 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 received a letter the next day.

*Dear Maria,*

*I need a cattle iron. Please find me one and bring it when we meet.*

When the man returned a week later, he was dressed in a black suit. I think I liked that I couldn’t place who he was. “This is what I would like to do,” I said and handed him an oversized sketch. He started pacing again and the side of his face twitched. I showed him the iron. It was old, rusted metal bent into a star.

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 roll it into a muffled lull. Time hung in the air just like a haze. For the next weeks I couldn’t focus.

When he returned the air was especially dry. The sun hung low and made everything fuzzy. He appeared happy, but maybe it just seemed that way. When people began to arrive I didn’t know if I should watch or just wait in the hot lobby. “Where can I heat up this brand,” he asked. I trusted him and I looked until I found a small fire pit and placed it outside the door to the 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 center of the wall surrounded by web of others. 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. I entered the ballroom quietly and sat in the back. No one spoke and all eyes were on the front. He brought out a cow hide and slowly laid it across a table. The light of the chandelier danced the room. The brand sizzled as he pressed it. The stink of the burning leather hung in the air. I sat and the sun began to set.