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ATLANTIS SHORT STORY CONTEST

WINNING STORY

Facing Façades

By Katarina Graah-Hagelbäck

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Facing Façades

I have always enjoyed looking at façades, both in real life and in paintings. Just as Marcel Proust was enthralled by a piece of brick wall in a painting by Vermeer, the buildings and façades rendered by certain painters sometimes move me more than their portraits of human faces. In fact, I often think of façades as a kind of faces, and find that some painters capture them in a way that makes them laden with all the life lived both inside and outside of those walls.

The porous veins of bricks, the texture of wood, the grain of stone, and even of mortar – they all touch a chord within me. Façades made by those materials seem to have absorbed into their core the breath of all the human and non-human animals, all the weather conditions, and of course all the dirt and pollution that they have been exposed to. In my capacity as historian, I am inevitably fascinated by the changes wrought by time, and hence by the various layers deposited over the years on buildings or elsewhere. To my mind, streaks of dirt or patches of lichen, along with all kinds of cracks and fissures, make a surface come alive. I usually find immaculate walls – just as flawless faces – quite boring.

On my way home from an after-work session with a bunch of colleagues at the faculty, some five years ago, I strolled through a part of town where I had not set foot for some time. I stopped for a minute or two in front of a house whose brick façade I had admired ever since I was a student. It was a sturdy but at the same time graceful and finely wrought old house that must once have sheltered nineteenth-century tenants. While still dreamily absorbed by the deeply moving pinkish-orange and terracotta shades of the bricks, I turned a corner and was abruptly confronted with a very different wall – a wall entirely covered by a painting.

For me, graffiti or so-called street or urban art, however skilfully executed, has always introduced something alien and demeaning to materials that should be left to live and evolve at the hands of everyday wear and tear. It is, I think, mainly the garishness, the sheer chromatic brutality, of much graffiti and street art that makes my hackles rise or simply prevents me from taking it in.

This painting, however, was something else. It was huge, invasive, yet characterised by a subtly titillating tenderness and a mild intensity that went beyond what I usually associated with street art. Most of the wall, which belonged to an old warehouse, was covered by a big black panther's head, in semi-profile. Right behind the panther, and facing outward from the painting, was a girl with long black and unkempt hair. It was a conventionally beautiful, big-eyed girl, and her thin arms encircled the neck of the panther in a gesture redolent of trust and affection. A bit like the beast and the beauty. There was also, it seemed to me, a measure of possessiveness in the girl's attitude, perhaps even superciliousness: see how safe and comfortable I am with this wild animal, whose soul and character reflect mine – independent, fearless, powerful. As for the colours, apart from the black head of the panther and the flowing black hair of the girl, they struck me as unwontedly muted for a graffiti painting: light blue, olive green, a touch of pink and a splash of apricot.

Stopped short in my tracks, I was captivated, almost against my will. Although this wall had been taken over, encroached on, I was not, for once, upset about the shamelessness of such a take-over, but instead found myself reflecting on the fascinating interaction between the wall and the painting. Whoever painted it had obviously taken into consideration the irregularities and the time-honoured wounds of the wall and incorporated them into the painting, so that, for example, the curve of the cheek of the girl corresponded to a crack in the wall. I was suddenly and

unexpectedly curious to learn who made the painting, and looked for a signature. There seemed to be none, however.

“Do you like it?”

I had not noticed the young man sitting huddled by the wall, beneath the painting. But on being addressed by him I realised that he must have been observing me for some time, observing me scrutinising the painting. He was shabby, covered in layers of nondescript clothing, and with skin that reminded me of hazel praline, my favourite sweet. From his appearance, I deduced that the man was homeless, perhaps a beggar. He wore a cap with a visor, but what I saw of his face seemed pleasant, with sharp yet shapely features, and it sported a friendly smile.

“Yes,” I said. “Normally, street art doesn’t appeal to me. But this painting is different.”

“Would you like to know who painted it?” the man asked.

“I have tried to locate a signature, but to no avail. Do you have any idea who it was?”

“Yes, I do.”

The young man made a pause, and for a second or two I thought that he wanted me to pay for his information. But I was wrong. He volunteered information without any hint of expectations of monetary gain.

“She looks a little bit like the girl in the painting.”

“A she, is it?” Here I could feel my eyebrows rising. “I didn’t expect that. For some reason I assumed it was a man.”

“Most people do. I was here when she painted it.”

“How interesting. How long did it take?”

“Oh, a day and a half, if I remember correctly. The best part of a weekend.”

“Indeed? So, do tell me, who is the woman behind the work?”

“Maria. She is Italian. And a doctoral student.”

“An unusual combination. Graffiti artist and doctoral student. She must be quite something.”

“She’s versatile, I guess.” He smiled, slightly cocking his head.

“Do you know if there are other wall paintings by her hand in the city?” I wondered.

“A few, I think. She also makes paintings that she donates to different charities who sell them at a good price and then give the money to . . . well, to people like me, among others.”

Perhaps this was my cue. At least that is how I chose to react, promptly extracting a banknote, which happened to be a ten-pound note, from my jacket pocket, where I usually kept a few notes crumpled up. I handed it to the man, thanked him for an interesting conversation and hurried off after a smile and a last quick glance at the panther.

Later in the week, I found an unofficial-looking envelope in my pigeon hole at the university. It contained a picture postcard in black and white featuring a panther seated on a hill overlooking a plain. I turned the card over with a flicker of curiosity somewhere in the pit of my stomach. It said, “Thanks for the ten-pound note”. No signature. For a few minutes I was mightily puzzled, till I remembered the beggar, though I could not for the life of me understand how he had figured out my last name, let alone my work address.

I mulled over whether I should impart what had happened to Lisa, my wife, and eventually decided to do so. I had to share this with someone, and though my colleagues at the history department would most assuredly be willing to discuss the art of graffiti with me, they would probably be less interested in the accompanying incident. Besides, my nickname at the department being “the Panther”, they might well just pull my leg about the whole thing. The nickname was the result of my once, at a silly faculty Christmas party, having happened to say that if I was ever turned into an animal, I would like to be a panther. The fact that my hair used to be a silky jet black, before age gradually mixed in a good measure of grey and it became more of an unobtrusive pepper-and-salt kind of concoction, as well as the fact that I was tall and reasonably fit for my age, had no doubt further contributed to sealing the nickname. It had, unfortunately, leaked, so that I sometimes intercepted comments made by my students about me where they used the nickname in question.

Lisa was immediately keen to hear all the details about my strange experience. She even insisted on seeing the painting, and was quite taken by it, although she found the face of the girl a bit too sweet, almost cloyingly so, she claimed. I agreed, to a degree. Yet to my mind the girl possessed something special. Perhaps it was the wildness of the hair that merged with the black fur of the panther that communicated an intensity that it was hard to guard against.

Things were hectic at work at that time and although I passed the wall painting once a month or so on my way home from an after-work session with colleagues in that part of the city, it had lost some of its magic and I did not think about it in between those occasions. Not till one day when I happened to pass it again and was struck by a remarkable change: what used to be a lustrous black – the fur of the panther, the hair of the girl – was now grey! Not discoloured as an effect of rain and wind but actually painted a muddy charcoal grey with, in parts, streaks of

whitish grey. It was as if both the animal and the girl had aged dismally in the course of a few months. On top of this change, there was a disfiguring slash of bright red right across the girl's face, like a gash from a knife. She no longer looked conventionally beautiful but rather frightening.

I felt very ill at ease and instead of going straight home I stopped at a café and had a lonely coffee while I tried to digest what I had seen. It was a kind of vandalism, but not just any kind of vandalism, since the person who had performed the act had not simply splashed paint all over the work but had actually in a sense kept to its spirit by merely changing the colouring and then, of course, adding the red gash, which was done quite cleverly.

Then, one evening when Lisa came home from the gallery, she asked me out of the blue:

“How was Maria today?”

“Maria? What Maria?”

“Your student.”

“Do I have a student called Maria and that you are interested in?”

“Come on, Peter.”

“Sorry, darling, you have lost me completely.”

That is how everything was finally elucidated – that is, everything to do with the drastic change of the wall painting. Lisa had found out that Maria, the street artist, was a doctoral student at the history department, where I worked. I knew there was a doctoral student called Maria, a bright and pleasant-looking young woman that sometimes made her voice heard during seminars and usually had interesting, relevant things to say. I had never taken any particular

notice of her, however, and had no idea that she was an artist parallel to her doctoral studies. Yet my wife had drawn haywire conclusions about me and Maria being lovers, and about the panther in the painting being actually a symbolic representation of me. In a fit of furious jealousy and bitterness, Lisa, who was a bit of an artist herself, had proceeded to vent her feelings by altering and to some extent disfiguring the painting, by giving the girl her own greying hair and making sure that the panther appeared his age.

I took her in my arms, telling her that I loved her, her greying hair, her incipient wrinkles, and everything about her, except perhaps her inability to trust my love and her tendency to act impulsively on her unfounded suspicions. I suggested that she close her gallery and instead start to devote herself wholeheartedly and full time to her own painting, and perhaps even become a graffiti artist, since she had demonstrated an unexpected ability to climb ladders and indulge in big-scale painting. Lisa was still too upset to be able to smile at my suggestion. She burrowed into my woolly sweater as if ashamed to show her face and stayed like that for several minutes, while I stroked her back and fought an inappropriate impulse to giggle at the thought of her acrobatics by the warehouse wall.

Although I mourned the loss of the original wall painting, I told myself that Maria, who was young and by all accounts vigorous, would go on to produce many fascinating works, whether mural or not. Painting on façades was, I presumed, done by persons not as hung up on durability and constancy as I was.

Or as I thought that I was... Three years later Maria and I were married and had a little son called Giovanni. It turned out that the connection between my nickname and the painted panther was not purely coincidental, as Maria told me after she had at one point joined the after-work

bunch. Jokingly, she confessed that she had for some time had a crush on me, from a distance. I was dumbfounded, and, even if this is a bit shameful to admit, flattered, in view of the age difference. I ended up letting her arms encircle the panther in real life as well. And Maria, to whom facades are not faces but simply empty, impassive surfaces that need vitalising, will no doubt go on painting on every legally available surface, when time allows.

These days I tend to look closer at human faces than at façades, in paintings but above all in real life, marvelling at the perfect oval of my son's still unmarked face and at the hazel praline of Maria's exquisite, silken cheeks and her heart-rendingly shapely, slightly masculine nose that reminds me of the beggar she once impersonated (yes, the young man I talked to when I first discovered Maria's wall painting was actually Maria herself in disguise, which of course explained the card I had received in my pigeon hole).

Faces change over time, gradually, or sometimes abruptly – be they human or those of buildings. Though I am unlikely to live long enough to see wrinkles on my son's countenance, with luck I will one day see the carvings made on Maria's features by time's chisel. I usually avoid looking at my own face in the mirror, however, ever since I received a portrait of myself painted by Lisa and where I appear disfigured by a jagged red slash across the whole left side of the face. The portrait was accompanied by a card, saying “Was your old face, the face I loved for so many years, just a façade?”