

Soul of the City by Michael Flynn

The blank, grey stone wall was a canvas crying out for art, and Diego Salazar was the artist to rise to the occasion. He set his bag softly against the hard cement sidewalk, the cans within rattling, and studied the building in the harsh glare of the sodium vapor streetlights. He tried to feel how the building felt; the colors that would warm it, the shapes that would soften it. His brother, Jaime, and his friend, Pablo, stood watch at the two corners at the ends of the block, ready to whistle a warning should any cars approach. They fidgeted impatiently, knowing that speed was vital.

But Diego was not to be hurried. Sometime in the dim past he had been told of a famous architect—an Anglo, he could not remember the name—who had been hired to build a house on a certain hill. After several weeks had gone by, the owner had visited the site and found the architect sitting in the shade of a great tree, chewing upon a stem of grass, and admiring the view. Have you not begun upon my house, the builder cried? Have you not even sketched its floor plan? No, the architect has replied, for how can I design a house for this hillside until I know how it feels to be a house on this hillside?

Diego smiled as he remembered the story. That Anglo had understood. Diego liked to think that he and that man were soul brothers. That they would have recognized and understood each other immediately; knowing one another for artists. That, despite the gulf between a wealthy Anglo professional and a poor Dominican street artist, there would have been a bond of *simpatico*.

And yet, there was an urgency about Diego's work. Speed and timing were integral to his art; indeed, a part of it. The City Fathers, for whatever reason, did not approve of color and shape. They walled in the streets with hard, flat towers of granite and steel and glass; and in doing so, they walled in the souls of those who swarmed and tolled within. A breath of free thought, a soaring of the spirit, disturbed them. Why, place a mural before the swarming workers and, who knows? They might pause and admire it and be late for work. And so, artists like Diego worked by stealth, in the small hours of the morning. A half-remembered story nibbled at the corner of his mind.

Suddenly, decision came upon him. He reached into his bag and pulled forth a spray can of bright crimson paint. Quickly, he set to work.

He worked swiftly but carefully; placing his colors and shapes just so; using an old piece of cardboard to mask his edges so the colors would not run together; using an old broom handle to steady his arm for the finer work.

The centerpiece of his creation was a two-word quote from that long-ago story. It cried out: "Repent, Harlequin!" in bold, explosive lettering, block shaped, but coming unraveled at the corners. Words unwilling to be confined by straight lines and angles. Behind the lettering and embracing it with outstretched arms he sketched a jester's face thrown back in laughter, his cap o' bells cocked at a defiant, jaunty angle. The costume was straight pantomime; the motley that had graced a million English country Christmases. A cry from the long-suppressed, carefree heart of Anglo culture; one that belied the joyless facade behind which they had imprisoned themselves. But the face he painted as the faces he knew: Brown skin. Narrow, oriental eyes. Straight, black Indian braids. Somehow, it all harmonized. Somehow it was exactly right.

When he was done, Diego stepped back and considered his work. It was flawed, as such art is flawed. The dictates of speed meant that touch-up was not possible; that minor details went uncorrected. Still, he admitted even to his own critical and seldom-satisfied eye, it was one of his best works. Better than the west support on the Williamsburg Bridge, now sadly sandblasted out of existence. Better even than last year's E-train (which had told a complete story, each car in line continuing the narrative thread). He dubbed his new painting *The Unrepentant Harlequin*. Simple and understated as it was in the garish and colorful vocabulary of his medium, the painting had captured the soul of the City. The clown, in his irrepressible, multi-ethnic gaiety seemed to burst forth from the flat, grey wall of the building, as the spirit of the people would burst from their grey, pin-striped suits, were they only given the chance.'

Hastily now, he stuffed his tools into his canvas bag and sprinted to the corner where Jaime waited. The paint cans clattered as he ran.

“Good, no?” he said to Jaime when he had arrived.

“It is wonderful,” his little brother breathed. “Never have I seen so fine a painting.”

Jaime was ten and easily impressed. Still, Diego's chest swelled with pride at the compliment.

Pablo joined them. “Twenty three minutes,” he said breathless. “A new record.” Pablo was obsessed with numbers. He knew all the odds; he knew all the statistics. He worked in numbers the way Diego worked in spray paint. He paused and surveyed Diego's work. “You didn't finish it,” he said. “Why?”

“What do you mean?”

Pablo pointed. “The lettering. You left it grey.”

Diego looked and saw that, indeed, the lettering was grey, and not the bright, insistent red that he had used. “I don't understand,” he said. And then he understood even less, because, as he watched, the other colors faded slowly and the drab walls of the building emerged, like a mildew growing on a basement wall. Diego's heart faded with the colors.

Last to go were, the jester's eyes and grin; and, as they vanished, they struck Diego not as a laughing affirmation of life, but as that rictus of uncomprehending terror that the joyful have always worn when the life was sucked from them.

They sprinted to the wall and stared at it. It was as barren as the hearts of the City Fathers.

“Mother of God,” said Pablo, crossing himself. “What magic is this?”

Diego knelt and fingered a trace of sooty powder at the foot of the wall. He rubbed it between thumb and fingers. It was gritty and slightly greasy and left a drab stain on his fingertips. The breeze down the canyon-like street caught the powder and it flashed away on the wind.

Diego gritted his teeth. “Not magic,” he said. “Only another blow in the fight between the City and the street artists. They think they have found a way to proof their walls against our colors.” He glanced down at Jaime, who was sniffing and rubbing his eye with a fist, crying for the now-vanished beauty.

“They think they have,” he repeated.

He discovered the reason that very night. Diego was in the kitchenette, cooking supper for Jaime and his mother when he heard the word “graffiti” from the television set in the other room. He quickly turned the gas off on the stove and hurried over to where the tube flickered on Jaime's face.

Mama, who worked nights, had woken and had turned on the evening news as a backdrop to her primping. Diego sat on the floor next to Jaime and watched the screen carefully.

There were two men, both Anglos, standing before a clutch of microphones. The fat, jowly one was talking, while the other, a spare man with a brush cut and laughing eyes, stood a little behind and aside.

“... an end to this vandalism,” the jowly man was saying.

“Could you explain for the folks at home how this chemical works?” asked one of the reporters. Since he worked for the station that Diego was watching, the camera cut quickly to show the reporter's face, looking wise and curious. Diego laughed, because he had once painted such a face on the wall of Black Rock, the NBC building. Only, he had painted the face as a masque, held before yearning cameras and phallic microphones. Behind the masque had been the same face, but with a bored and vapid expression. That work had lasted long enough to be photographed, and had appeared in full color in *City Magazine*. Diego kept a clipping of that picture, the only permanent record of a sadly evanescent art form.

“I believe I'll let Dr. Singer answer that one,” the fat man said.

The second man stepped to the microphones. “Which means that Mr. Cardrick doesn't know the answer.” The reporters laughed at the sally, and even Cardrick chuckled unconvincingly. Diego took an immediate liking to the second man.

“As you all know,” Singer said to the reporters, “nanomachines are built on a molecular scale. Proteins, viruses, and the like are natural, biological nannies. This new machine which my Team and I have developed is called EverKleen™. It is a clear, solar-powered coating that will protect buildings and windows—any reasonably flat

surface—from picking up dirt and grime, thus eliminating the need for and the cost of periodic cleanings; not to mention the dangerous work of window-washers on the skyscrapers. When the nanny is sprayed onto a surface its built-in nanocomputer, Tiny NIM™, memorizes the molecular structure of the substrate. Afterwards, anything applied overtop of it is recognized as foreign matter and the nanny's restrictor enzymes dismantle the molecules. Thus, the dirt or the bird droppings are converted into pure atoms of carbon, oxygen, and what-have-you.”

“You say it destroys dirt,” said a reporter who, being from a competing station, remained invisible and anonymous. (Instead, the director inserted a quick cut of his own man so the viewer would have the impression that was he who had asked the question.) “Does it also recognize graffiti paint and destroy it, as Mr. Cardrick has claimed?”

Singer paused, pursed his lips, and nodded. “Yes.”

“What about people leaning up against the building? Won't your nanny try to take them apart, too? Or at least their clothes?”

“Well, that would discourage loitering, wouldn't it?” said Singer. The reporters laughed again. Seriously though, we did give that considerable thought. Tiny NIM™ has some built-in safeguards. For one thing, the coating doesn't act immediately. Depending on the thickness with which the coating is applied, the foreign material must remain in place anywhere from fifteen minutes to many hours. In fact we can specify the thickness in minutes. Each layer of molecules is fifteen minutes 'thick.' Secondly, the foreign material must not move during that time. No person or animal can remain so perfectly still even for a short time. So, birds are safe; birdshit is not.”

The scene cut away from the press conference to the studio, where the anchor proceeded to tell the viewers what they had just heard. Diego didn't need the summary. He understood perfectly well what had happened. The City had a spray coating that ate art.

His hands clenched into fists. They couldn't do it! They couldn't take the color out of life! He wouldn't let them.

But how could he stop them? They would go through the City, painting over the graffiti or removing it, and spraying the drab,

monotone surfaces with their graffiti eater. Already, one building at least had been treated. Diego realized that now. The building he had tried to paint last night had probably been a test.

“Hah!” his mother said to his back. “You finished now with your spray cans, Diego. You finda job now, eh? You go t'work, like respectable people.”

It was a long-standing argument. He didn't answer back, as he usually did, that he was an artist and artists lead different lives. He had a greater obstacle now than his mother's attempts to shoe-horn him into some clock-punching, shuffling, ass-kissing office. His enemy was Cardrick, the man who owned more buildings than anyone in the City. Cardrick was the enemy, not his mother. Not even, Diego realized suddenly, not even that scientist, Singer. No man with laughter in his eyes could be his enemy.

“It came to him then what he had to do. He leapt to his feet and hurried to the telephone. He called Pablo. Pablo had a cousin who ran a Dominican restaurant on the Lower West Side. Its facade was grimy and scrawled with graffiti of no artistic merit at all. Only names and boasts and obscenities. Pablo's cousin would help.

They made it a public event, as Diego knew they would. There was no way Cardrick could allow such an open challenge to pass unanswered.

The building was new, unfinished and, hence, Diego had reasoned, unsprayed with the new material. Now it sported a giant mural, sprung into life in the small hours of the morning: *The Unrepentant Harlequin* laughed again. This time, the laugh was unabashedly triumphant. Diego had also added a little bit of Singer to the eyes. Not enough to be recognizable, but enough that Singer himself, when he made his appearance, gave a double-take and barely suppressed a grin.

Below the Harlequin, Diego had painted Cardrick. A pasty, joyless face the color of fish bellies, at once greedy and sorrowful, defeated by the laughter of the Harlequin. A comic book balloon emerged from the jester's lips: “Hey, nanny, nanny-o!”

Twice as large as its predecessor, the mural had required the help

of seven other street artists to complete quickly enough to avoid being caught in the act. Yet, despite the committee approach, Diego was unable to detect where each of the artists had worked. They had followed his instructions and sketches perfectly; and he had paid them in what he knew would be the new coin of the demi- world of art.

Diego worked his way to the front of the crowd, where he could see better. He kept his ear open for the comments and scattered remarks that he treasured. His morning-after reviews. "Seems a shame ta paint it over, don't it?" "That Cardrick, he ain't got no sensa humor." "Oh, I think it's rather funny, don't you, dear?" "Damn vandals gotta spray paint everything."

Well, no one loves a critic.

He reached the front of the crowd just as Cardrick began the press conference. Diego glanced at his watch and did some quick mental arithmetic. It would be close. He hoped Cardrick would hurry.

"This act of blatant vandalism," Cardrick humphed into the microphones that had been set up on a temporary platform, "is so obviously a challenge to our program announced last week, of creating a graffiti-free City, that we felt a public response was called for." He waved a hand awkwardly at a small group of men and women dressed in green coveralls labeled "SingerLabs" across the back. They wore goggles and air filters and pressure tanks strapped across their shoulders. "We will paint over this monstrosity," Cardrick continued, "this affront to the sensibilities of the people of our fair City, and prevent forever any future acts of vandalism."

Diego heard his name called. He looked over his shoulder and saw Pablo pushing his way through the crowd. Pablo had Jaime and his cousin, Esteban, in tow. "I thought I would find you here," he said. "Best seat in the house, eh?"

Diego was growing more nervous as the time grew shorter. He cupped his hands about his mouth. "You gonna stan' up ere an' talk, gringo? Or you gonna start painting?"

Cardrick stopped, surprised in mid-sentence. He searched for the source of the interruption and glared at him. Singer, standing to one side, raised his eyebrows and looked at Diego speculatively. Cardrick

waved an arm at the painters. "Go ahead. Paint the damn thing over."

Jaime looked crestfallen. "Diego, why did you do that? It only made them mad, so they ruin your picture."

Singer's crew began spraying over the mural with a white basecoat. When they obliterated the Harlequin's head, a sigh ran through the crowd. "They were going to paint over it anyhow," Diego told Jaime. Pablo, he saw, was biting his lip to keep from laughing.

Singer's people left Cardrick's visage to last. Little by little, they buried the mural under a layer of white until finally only the pasty, hangdog face remained. Singer, Diego realized as he watched Cardrick's scowl deepen, was something of an artist himself.

Finally, the cover-up was complete and Diego checked his watch. He breathed a sigh of relief. It was just in time. Oh, the exquisite agonies of the artist!

Cardrick launched into another speech, the gist of which was that, when the basecoat had dried, the regular coat would be applied; then, after that, the EverKleen™. The crowd began to turn away. Watching paint dry was not a New Yorker's idea of excitement. Diego sighed, watching the white spot where his mural had been.

Esteban was an older man, about forty. He took Diego's band and pumped it vigorously. "I cannot thank you enough," he said, "for the fine job you and your friends did on my restaurant. Never has it looked so bright and clean. And your mural across the facade, your painting of *La Trinitaria* and their struggles against the black invaders—it is the talk of the neighborhood. Already the Haitian gang from across the street has tried to deface it; but their pitiful scrawls have faded, even as you said they would."

"It was the coating that man invented," Diego told him, pointing at Singer. "The one I had you buy."

"It was very expensive," Esteban said. "This Singer hombre charges dearly for his product. And to have it delivered by courier was even more so." Esteban shook his head.

"But it was worth it," Diego reminded him. "You will save in cleaning expenses far more than what you have paid out."

"Yes, as you said. It is not the price, but the cost that matters.

Did you obtain the rebate?"

"Rebate?" Diego was paying Esteban only half a mind.

"Yes. I realize how easy it is to overestimate the amounts needed for a job, but I would hate to see you lose that money."

He spoke to the restaurateur without turning. "Oh, no. I did not want a rebate for the extra material. I wanted the material itself. This 'nanny' of Singer's."

"The material?" Esteban was puzzled. "Whatever for?"

"For my art. To pay my friends for their help. Because one layer of it is fifteen minutes thick," he replied.

Esteban turned in desperation to his cousin. "Pablo, he makes no sense."

Pablo was grinning. "He will."

A shout went up from the dispersing crowd. "The graffiti! It's back!" Heads turned. People stopped.

And indeed, while they stared at the wall, the white basecoat gradually faded and the laughing jester face returned. Repent, Harlequin, shouted the wall. Hey, nanny, nanny-o, the Harlequin replied.

Cardrick turned and saw what was happening and his face turned mottled with surprise and anger. Singer had seen it; too, and, after a moment of pure astonishment, was doing his best not to laugh. Instead, he approached the wall and touched it with an instrument he pulled from his pocket. He touched a few buttons on the face of the instrument, read the results. Then he did laugh, long and hard.

"What is it, Singer?" demanded Cardrick.

"I'm afraid someone has beaten you to it, Mr. Cardrick."

"Beaten me ... What do you mean?"

"I mean someone painted this graffiti, then covered it over with EverKleen™. The nanny now recognizes the paint film as the 'correct' surface and rejects anything applied overtop of it. Including your paint."

"What?!" Cardrick swelled up. "Do you mean to tell me that piece of trash is—"

"Permanent? I think so. It will reject paint remover, certainly. Maybe sandblasting would work. The nanny layer would be dog's

breath to bust through. We made it tough on purpose."

The crowd was laughing now. Some of them were slapping each other on the back. Some were pointing at Cardrick and Singer. Diego saw others run off and come running back with friends. Then they began to applaud. Slowly at first; only a few of them, an arrhythmic patter, like the first drops of a rainstorm. Then others joined in, and others, until it was a thunder in Diego's ears. Diego grinned widely enough to split his face in two.

Repent, Harlequin!

Never!

Jaime was jumping up and down and clapping his hands. "Diego! Aah, Diego," he said. Esteban was staring slack-jawed at the wall, the corners of his mouth twitching up. Pablo looked at Diego over his cousin's head. Diego stretched up his arm and tapped the crystal of his watch. How long?"

Pablo looked at his own watch and held up a handful of fingers. Five more minutes. They waited the time out patiently.

When the Harlequin's left arm began to fade out, the watching crowd let out a groan. It rippled through their ranks like windblown paper down an alleyway. The disappointment was palpable. A patch of something that twinkled like cellophane fell away from the wall. The crowd sighed as the arm faded out.

Ah, but they loosed a cheer when it faded back in.

The new arm, painted beneath a second layer of EverKleen™ thirteen hours thick had its thumb planted firmly against the jester's nose. Its fingers, caught in mid-waggle, danced contempt at the Cardrick-face. A tongue slowly appeared, lolling out from the jester's mouth. The crowd whooped and pointed at the property magnate, who grew steadily more angry.

Esteban leaned over to shout into Diego's ear. "I don't understand," he said. "What did you do?"

"We painted many paintings last night," Diego told him. "And covered each painting with a thick layer of the chemical. Then we painted overtop of it. The 'nanny' waits before it dissolves the material atop it. Depending on how thick it is laid on, it may wait many hours; even days. As each layer dissolves from the actions of

the 'nanny' beneath it, it reveals the next level of painting. That was the tricky part, deciding how many coats of EverKleen™ to use for each layer. I was afraid the mural would start to change before Cardrick tried to cover it up; but the timing worked out very well, I think."

"I helped him calculate the timing," said Pablo. "The bottommost layers are many days thick, while the one on top was only fifteen minutes thick. You see, each layer had to be thinner than the one underneath it, otherwise, several layers of the painting might vanish at once."

"And that would be bad art," finished Diego.

Esteban grinned. "I like it," he said. "But what happens to the paint caught between the layers of the coating? It breaks down, you said; but where does it go?" Diego shook his head. "Each layer of paint except the very first has a layer of EverKleen™ below it and above it. The outer layer of EverKleen™ bonds to the paint beneath it. When that paint dissolves from the inner layer of EverKleen™ it becomes a powder, and the upper layer, having no surface to bond to, simply falls away. What is left of the paint drops to the ground and becomes a pile of soot at the base of the wall."

Esteban smiled. "Have you become a chemist, now?"

"An artist learns how his medium performs. It takes no genius to realize that a coating does not outlast the surface it coats."

Esteban looked back at the mural. "How many layers of the painting are there?"

Diego shook his head. "That would be telling."

"People will come from all over the City to see this painting," Pablo announced, "hoping to be here when it changes again. Perhaps, even the City Fathers will grow to like it; or at least, to like the tourist money it will bring."

"Ah," Esteban sighed. "But you will gain nothing from it, Diego. That is not right."

"I am an artist," Diego told him. "And for me the art itself is sufficient."

The crowd was jostling around them, trying to get a better view, but Diego managed to maintain his place at the front. He leaned on

the police barricade and admired his painting. A glance at his watch told him the next change was not due for several hours. He thought perhaps he would wait for it. Cardrick and Singer were arguing by the platform and Diego could make out some of the words. He heard "warranty" and "antidote." Finally, Cardrick turned in disgust and stalked off, tossing "lawyers" back over his shoulder at the scientist.

Singer watched him go, a twisted smile on his face. Then he turned and stared at the painting. Diego watched him pull a stick of gum from his shirt pocket and shove it into his mouth. After a while he turned away from the painting, and Diego saw the thoughtful look on his face.

Singer called one of his people over, someone named Eamonn, and began talking with him in low, excited tones. Diego heard him say something about "Belusov's Reaction." The skinny, freckled man he was talking to looked at the mural, thought for a moment, and nodded vigorously. He grinned and Singer slapped him on the back and they parted. Singer glanced at his watch and again at the painting.

Somehow, Diego knew without asking what Singer was thinking. Timed paint. Colors that would evaporate and change with subtlety and precision. Diego's heart beat faster. He had painted in space for many years. Now he could paint in time, as well. Painting in time. There was a new art, for you. He longed to express himself in it!

As Singer turned to go, he caught sight of Diego. Their eyes met and locked for a moment. Singer looked from Diego to the painting, then at the way Diego looked at the painting. Then he grunted and shook his head slowly and Diego smiled bashfully back at him.

Slowly a grin spread over Singer's face. He gave Diego a cocky salute and, after a moment, Diego gave him an equally cocky bow. They recognized and understood each other perfectly. Artists always did.

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