

Biters Among Kings

by

Deanna Ong

* *Editor's note: Characters' names have been changed to protect their privacy.*

Adrian Fusco* runs his fingers along the concrete wall, carefully tracing the blood-red outline of the letters that sharply contrasts with the decaying background. He smiles softly, but his eyes are blankly fixed on the work of graffiti before him. Approximately ten feet in length is the word *abuelo*—"grandfather" in Spanish. Adjacent to this is a large white skull, which symbolizes rebirth as well as protection from death for Latinos. Three years ago, Fusco's grandfather passed away after a long and hard battle with lymphoma. He remembers nearly every detail of the day his grandfather died, even the exact time it took him to drive from downtown Los Angeles to reach the hospital in Downey—48 agonizing minutes. He recalls gripping his hands so tightly at the funeral that his knuckles turned white. He wanted to hurt somebody or himself. Instead, he created this piece. Graffiti, commonly referred to as "graff" by many artists, has always been one of Fusco's chief outlets, and he felt this would be a meaningful way to mourn his loss. Two years after its completion, however, the city took note of the graffiti and promptly painted over it, enraging Fusco. He understands why they did it, but says the problem is they'll never understand why *he* did it.

He had cried while spray painting each of the letters and felt a weight lift off his shoulders upon finishing the piece. To accept the erasure of the graffiti would be to insult the honor of his grandfather. The moment he found out it had been painted over, Fusco immediately loaded his backpack with a number of Krylon spray paint cans, waited for night to come and re-created it. To this day, "*abuelo*" is vivid on an otherwise drab stretch of city wall off of Mission Road in Los Angeles. As cars and buses and people stream by on the street level, the graff sits among abandoned pages of *The Los Angeles Times* and empty In-N-Out paper bags overlooking the road. Fusco frequently drives out of his way to ride down this street so that he can see "*abuelo*" and remember his grandfather.

"This graff means a lot to me," says Fusco. "It reminds me of a loved one who will never be forgotten. Ever."

A reserved young man with a self-described "poetic soul," Fusco, 27, likes working with his hands and taking his creativity to the streets. He says he only wears plain t-shirts or band shirts—he doesn't want to be a walking advertisement for name brands. He has a stout, muscular build and a five-inch scar on the side of his face, the result of a near-fatal car accident several years ago. His sneakers are worn from years of wear and tear, and he always sports jeans and a leather bracelet that his *abuelo* gave him. Hazel eyes, fair complexion, a soft smile. He used to wear a ponytail, prompting his buddies to teasingly nickname him "Jon Seda," the actor who plays Chris Perez's character in the film "Selena."

Fusco has been a graffiti artist since his freshman year in high school 12 years ago. During his peak, he was a part of STK, a tightly-knit graffiti crew made up of taggers from Lincoln Heights, Downey and Eagle Rock, all neighborhoods of the greater Los Angeles area.

Fusco is now a Computer Engineering student at California State University, Los Angeles, but says that graffiti continues to allow him to express his creativity and point of view by using the urban landscape as his canvas.

While thousands of others who drive down Mission Road probably dismiss “*abuelo*” as an act of vandalism, or misinterpret it as gang-related, or neglect to notice it at all, Fusco looks upon it intently every time as if it were his first time surveying his work, despite gazing at it in hundreds of instances over the past three years. He usually only views it from the street or sidewalk, but today he stands quietly vis-à-vis the piece.

“People don’t really know what graff means for us [graff artists],” Fusco says. “What you see on the wall is only half the story.”

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Since the 80’s, L.A.’s seemingly endless sprawl of freeways, bridges, buildings and other city infrastructure has played host to the work of thousands of graffiti artists or “writers.” According to Fusco, graffiti and street art as a whole were more purposeful and respectable then and in the 90’s compared to now. He attributes this to an ever-increasing number of “biters,” or youngsters who pose as writers when they only have a superficial understanding of the culture.

“Basically, biters are kids who don’t know what the hell graff is,” Fusco explains. “They copycat what they think is cool, mark shit up like they own the city.”

Every writer starts off as a biter though—it’s inevitable for emerging artists to adopt established techniques before they can begin to define their own sense of style. Accomplished and respected writers are often called “kings” by their peers, and have mastered the fundamentals of graffiti and focus on developing innovative approaches to the art form. To say that a graffiti artist must be either a biter or a king, however, would be a false dichotomy. No matter how experienced a graffiti artist is, there is always room for learning and improvement. And, no matter how inexperienced an artist is in the beginning, he has the potential to reach the ranks of seasoned writers. This notion of the meshing of veterans and amateurs, of biters among kings, has been and continues to blaze the path and evolution of contemporary street graffiti.

Fusco identifies the most with the Chicano-style of graffiti, which has very particular traits and iconography. The skull that Fusco painted in “*abuelo*” became distinctly Chicano-style about three decades ago, when graffiti culture ignited in L.A. Also, the tendency to tag the letter “E” in the form of a backward figure “3” was originally developed by Chicano gangs, but is now one of the most prevalent techniques of mainstream graffiti in the world. Another element is the Old English font, a font that is typically featured on diplomas and other official documents. Because of its aura of authority and strength, Old English is popular among many Chicano-style artists. For Fusco, writing in stylized fonts allows him to experiment with lines, shading, flow and other technicalities. It’s also a way for him to exhibit his own aesthetic; at the moment, this means honing his current interest in cubic graffiti, a style that features exaggerated, jagged angles, making a piece look almost three-dimensional.

Graffiti, however, is considered vandalism and illegal by California law. In the fiscal year 2007-2008 alone, there were over 600,000 incidents of it in L.A., according to the L.A. Office of Community Beautification (OCB), and those were just the ones reported. Through city programs and community-based initiatives such as the OCB, over 31 million square feet of tagging were removed that year. In additional efforts to crack down on the practice, California law prohibits the sale of aerosol paint cans to minors and may prosecute or fine parents for their children’s

tagging. The City of Los Angeles also has the right to cite an individual for not removing graffiti from his or her property within a specified amount of time.

While the law sees graffiti as a defacement of public and private property; however, writers hold it in a different regard.

"I personally do think graffiti belongs in the streets, on trains, walls or gates, or whatever," Fusco says. "You're not limited to space."

Like Fusco, most writers are aware of the city's ban on graffiti and the potential consequences of tagging. Complex letterings can only be produced when there is an ample amount of time under the radar of police and watchful civilians. Fusco requires at least 20 minutes for a decent piece, one that is complete with shading, block lettering and a customized color palette. If he's pressed for time, he opts to tag instead by using a single can of spray paint to quickly write a word. He can tag "STK" in about three seconds.

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"Give me a word. Any word," Fusco says politely to me.

He sounds like a magician, except he's wearing a black bandana over half of his face and coolly shaking a can of Montana 94 Planet Blue, his favorite color in his favorite brand, ready to write.

"I'm not sure," I say a bit hesitantly. We're standing in a dusty parking lot behind an office park in Downey in front of a brick wall filled with cracks and soot and old bubble gum. It's broad daylight on a Saturday afternoon, and there are families and truck loaders less than half a block away, but Fusco has been "practice-tagging" here ever since high school and assures me that the coast is clear. Grinning after my response, Fusco straightens out his Dead Kennedys t-shirt and proceeds to beautifully tag "I'm Not Sure" onto the wall.

"The most important thing to keep in mind is flow," Fusco explains. "You need to time your motions just right. You can't really hesitate 'cause it'll show in your lines." His voice is slightly muffled by his bandana, but his tone is patient and he clearly knows his stuff. Instead of tagging the letter "E" Chicano style, Fusco writes the character in its traditional lower-case form and extends the end of the letter into a stylized arrow. Popularly known as "wildstyle," the stylized arrow is a technique that originated in the streets of New York City but can now be found in virtually every major metropolis.

It's best to not rely on a sole can of spray paint when doing a job; you never know when it might run out or choke. Some writers wear masks, but Fusco personally prefers bandannas for their simplicity and efficiency. If he's doing a larger job, such as lettering, he usually wears a backpack that's filled with at least three or four cans of spray paint. Fusco packs in even more if he plans on using a more complex color scheme or creating color patches. Krylon is normally his brand of choice, but Montana 94 and Ironlak work well for larger pieces. With those two, the lines are thicker, the colors bolder and the paint much more resistant to the effects of sun and rain.

Most writers strive to convey a unique aesthetic in their work and consider it an art form, according to Fusco. For many artists, graffiti serves as an outlet from marginalizing circumstances or as a defiant response to the institutionalization of art, say, in a museum. The most common purpose of graffiti, though, is to exhibit a writer's identity and his affiliation with a crew, his gang or his neighborhood. It can also be a means for expressing serious political

statements, or for allowing a writer to make tangible what was a passing idea in his mind. Like any other form of art, graffiti can be inspired by an infinite amount of things.

"My current influences are very eclectic," Fusco says. "It can be the patterns in a design I see, or the people in my life. It could be a good Zeppelin song, or just the feeling I get from rocking another piece!"

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Born and raised in L.A. County, Fusco lived in the city of Bell Gardens until the age of ten, then moved to Downey with his younger sister Isabel and their parents, and has lived there ever since. As a teenager, he attended Bell High School where Brian Matias*, a classmate, noticed Fusco sketching in his notebook one day.

"He said, 'Hey man, have you ever done a locker rocker?'" Fusco recalls. "I've been hooked on tagging and writing ever since."

That was back in freshman year, when Fusco's graffiti career started. Very soon, idle doodling in class became more deliberate and elaborate etchings on public property. School grounds were the most accessible canvas and, within hours of meeting Matias, who would later become a fellow crewmember of STK, Fusco began tagging hallway lockers with images of cars, girls and cartoon characters. He would often finish each tag with his signature, "Page," which Matias had given him in honor of Fusco's habit of drawing in the pages of his notebook. Matias, now 28, remembers that Fusco was a quiet kid who would crack jokes every once in a while, but mostly keep to himself. But his shy nature didn't matter. Fusco could draw, and Matias knew it.

"Adrian has good flow from drawing quickly and in pitch-black circumstances," he says. "You can't learn that on a computer ... which is what a lot of kids are doing nowadays."

Once Fusco became a sophomore, his graffiti playground quickly transcended the boundaries of campus and opened up onto the streets. Along with three other Bell High boys, Matias and Fusco formed STK, or "Sworn To Kill," and began tagging and writing up the neighborhood as biters. As a form of initiation into the crew, each member had to "paint in the heavens," or write on a piece of public property that was difficult to reach. The more dangerous a potential canvas was in terms of physical safety, or getting caught by police, the greater the prestige a writer would earn by taking it on. This is a typical way for a biter to gain respect as well as to establish his crew in a neighborhood. To show that a writer was affiliated with a particular crew, painting in the heavens had two requirements: the writer's signature and the name of his or her crew. The practice is gang-like, but not quite there.

When Fusco was 16, he climbed to the top of a billboard off of the 710 Freeway while his crewmembers kept on the lookout below. As quickly and skillfully as he could, he tagged "Page" and "STK" onto the back of the board. Up until that moment, Fusco says that he had never felt such a rush or sense of pride in his life. He affirms that the name of the crew is harmless. As untested young taggers, he and the rest of STK didn't want to further fuel their lack of experience with a weak-sounding name. They never "killed" anyone and they never engaged in any illegal activity besides graffiti. STK wasn't a gang; it was a band of brothers, a family with members that sought to express their inner creativity and were bound by this common goal.

By junior year Fusco was an expert in the Old English font and would write on trains, overpasses and bridges. He would often stay over at Matias's apartment and work on his sketches on a plain drawing pad, staying up all night to map out ideas. STK would then scope out a potential space in the city, wait for the streets to empty out in the early morning hours and then

write together while keeping watch for one another. They would typically incorporate a clown character into their pieces and this icon soon became somewhat of a mascot for the crew.

"Every kid has, or should have, a way to let his mind free," Fusco says. "For me, it was bombing the walls of L.A. with graffiti and repping my crew."

STK continued to be active after its members graduated high school, but its stamina was brought to an abrupt halt with the loss of one of its members, Mario Saavedra*, who died in a car accident. Saavedra was the "little kid brother" of STK, and his passing hit the other four members hard. It was clear that the crew would never be the same without him. After Saavedra's death, STK's graffiti activity began to dwindle. At the time, Fusco was 20 and in his second year at Cerritos College, studying to become a network technician. Largely due to his friend's fatal accident, however, Fusco withdrew from social activities, lost interest in school and eventually dropped out of college.

While he is still best friends with the other crew members, Fusco has been bombing L.A. much less, maybe once or twice every few months. He says that a lot of writers begin to fade once they start a family, fall into gang life or engage in another commitment. But he doesn't see himself ever completely leaving the graffiti scene. His priority now, though, is completing his Computer Engineering degree at CSULA and pursuing a career in the field.

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When darkness came, he felt the nervous exhilaration of utter solitude as he gazed up at the blank stretch of city wall. Tonight, exactly one month after Saavedra's death, Fusco was going to pay tribute to his past crewmember through the art form that brought them together.

With five cans of Krylon spray paint in his backpack and a black bandana covering half his face, Fusco breathed in the still, crisp and chilly air. Then, from ground level, he began to climb the chaparral hill up toward his canvas.

Meanwhile, the streets glistened from the evening's rain and the reflection of lights from shops that lined Soto Street. Save for a handful of cars that whirred by only every once in a while, Fusco was alone. As the slope became steeper, he drilled his shoes even deeper into the dirt, balancing his body weight, refusing to use his hands to climb.

No flashlight. That would practically be inviting cops to see him. No spotters either. Fusco would usually have at least one other person with him to keep on the lookout, but tonight's project was personal, and he wanted to accomplish it on his own.

He had a mental blueprint of what to do even before he hit the platform overlooking Soto Street. Any experienced graffiti artist knows better than to have a golden, cop-less opportunity without having a plan of what to do with it. He had experimented with color schemes, length, width and style weeks before this night, etching out ideas for the piece while sitting up in bed into the early morning hours. Producing a graff was like getting a tattoo—you'd want to think it through beforehand, so that when the image is at last imprinted, you wouldn't have a tinge of regret.

Fusco took one sweeping look around, making sure that no one else was there. He unzipped his backpack, then worked quickly, systematically. The piece's outline was established first in rich, velvet black. Each letter was then carefully filled in with vivid hues of green and blue.

Those were his favorite colors, Fusco reminded himself.

About half an hour later, Fusco finished. He carefully wrapped each Ironlak bottle in an old t-shirt to avoid making unnecessary noise and returned them to his backpack. Taking yet another panoramic view of the area, Fusco scurried down through the chaparral and took two seconds to survey his work from the sidewalk. Two seconds was all he could really afford.

Fusco walked briskly down three blocks to his car—he didn't want to park too close to the location. He was also careful not to run or look suspicious in any way as he made it to his Toyota, tears welling up in his eyes.

Overlooking the city streets now was a thirteen-foot piece that said "Brother." This graff was for Saavedra, on the street where he and Fusco used to smoke pot and tag and watch out for one another. This graff would preserve those memories and Saavedra's spirit. This graff will be something every single passing person and car will see, but will only know half the story of.

"Rest in peace, brother. This graff was for you," Fusco said to himself quietly as he drove down the dark and empty street, unafraid now to accelerate and let his engine roar.



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