

Graffiti

a story

by

H. Steven Ackley

Marcos felt a bit uneasy about the whole thing. He might get caught and have to go back to the juvenile hall. But if he was to recement his relationship with Lupito and the rest of the gang, he knew he had to go through with it. He had never tagged a freeway sign before.

His sister, Sandra, played on a beige carpet which had been mottled by spilt beverages. An eclectic circle of toys surrounded her: Tinkers, Legos, broken crayons, some body parts from a blonde Barbie. T.V. light danced on her frozen child's stare like the reflection from an arc welder.

"What you thinking?"

"Nothing." She sat up and turned her attention to the television. A moment went by. "When you were locked up. . . did anybody try to screw you?"

"Hey, you shouldn't talk like that. What are you, eight? If Mama heard you say that she'd kick your ass. You know I ain't lyin'."

"She don't care. We saw it on *Oprah* while you was in the hall. They were talkin' about how even with teenagers they was rapin' each other and stuff, jus' like in the big prisons."

"Yeah, well nobody raped me." He got up and stretched. "Oprah's full of shit."

Sitting at the kitchen table, smoking a joint, Marcos heard his mother's footsteps on the stairs outside. He casually wetted his finger and snubbed the cherry. He listened to her struggle with her keys. Finally, the door opened and a small, frazzled woman in her thirties came in, embracing two bags of groceries.

"Thanks for the help, asshole. There's some more stuff in the car -- go get it."

Marcos leaned back in his chair, stretched, and looked out of the window, onto the street below. "What 'd you buy me?"

"Jus' go! And then park the car when you're done -- behind the building, not in the street." As he walked past her she added, "And I don't want you smokin' that shit in here anymore. I already warned you. What d'you think's goin' to happen to your little sister, huh, asshole? She's going to end up like you -- in jail."

After Marcos brought up the rest of the bags and parked the car, he came back to the apartment to find his mother and sister putting away the food. Sitting on the table, next to the bags were three big prayer candles in red glass, each with a picture of the Holy Virgin outlined by yellow rays of light. Marcos picked one up.

"What did you buy these for?" he asked.

His sister answered, "They're supposed to go in our bedrooms and in the livingroom."

"What for?"

"For protection, stupid."

"Sandra, be quiet," her mother interrupted. "Don't talk to your brother like that. Your brother is a Catholic. He knows why we honor the Virgin." She gave Marcos a stern look. "Unless he's forgotten *that* too."

"Yeah, whatever. Anyway, I'm leaving."

"No you're not! You stay here and eat dinner. Tomorrow we're goin' down to school, to register you for classes."

"I already told you, I ain't goin' back to no fuckin' school."

Marcos' mother slapped him hard in the face. "You watch your mouth around your sister! You ain't talkin' to your friends here!" She tried to slap him again, but he caught her by her wrist. His sister began to beat on his leg, "Let go of Mama, Marcos! You asshole! You *pendejo!*"

"You see what you're teaching her!"

"Don't hit me."

She pulled to get her hand free. Finally, he let go. She straightened up and said, "If you don't go to school, you ain't livin' here! Your P.O. said you gotta go to school. If you don't want to go, I don't care, but you can get the hell out of my house."

He had already started for the door. "Whatever. I'll catch you later."

He walked down the street to the corner of Story Road where there was a 7-11. He got some quarters and began to play one of the games. A half hour later, at about eleven p.m., Lupito drove up in a chartreuse, chopped Volkswagon bug with smoked glass on the side and in the rear.

Marcos had never seen the car before. He walked out to meet Lupito. "Hey, *esse*, what's up? Where 'd you get the ride?" Marcos stood in front of the car, taking in the details.

Lupito poked his head out. "Hey. I got it about a month ago." Marcos went around to the side where they exchanged an elaborate handshake. "What the fuck's happening, anyway, *esse*?"

"Aw nothin' much. It's good to be out, that's all. "

"Yeah? How's your old lady and your little sister?"

"The same."

"Still givin' you shit, huh?"

Marcos paused, thinking for a moment about his mother. "She's alright. I jus' got to get a place of my own . . . or at least my own ride. Anyway, what the fuck are we gonna do?"

"Hang on a second while I go inside and get something to drink."

Lupito got out of his car. He was a big flabby kid with bushy eyebrows. His pants were baggy and had about three inches of drag at the bottom. As he scuffled his way into the 7-11 Marcos noticed a new tattoo on the back of his neck. The tattoo was self-inflicted, probably done by dipping the end of a guitar string in ink and scratching the skin. The tattoo was a cross with beams of light emanating from it. *What an asshole,* Marcos thought. *Lupito probably let his girlfriend do it. The thing looks like shit.*

They got in the car and headed towards the freeway. As the bright green bug zipped along in the fast lane, Marcos' mind went back to his mother and those big red prayer candles she'd bought at the store.

"Why do Mexicans paint the Virgin on everything? I mean I see it on murals, the rear windows of cars . . . tattoos. But none of the people I know hardly go to church. I mean like even my mother, she bought these stupid candles, but she don't go to church, except like maybe once a year, like midnight mass or something. I was jus' wondering about that, ya know."

Lupito took a long hit off a joint and handed it to Marcos. He spoke in a halted voice, trying to retain his smoke. "I don't know man, but there's *something* to it." He paused and then exhaled; his chest went lax. "Last year my uncle took my grandmother and us to see the Virgin in Watsonville."

"Huh? What the fuck are you talkin' about?" Marcos looked at him incredulously.

"In Watsonville, at Pinto Lake Park!"

Marcos still looked mystified. He took a hit off the joint.

"Man, don't you watch the news? Last year the Virgin appeared in the bark of a tree at Pinto Lake Park in Watsonville. I saw it. "

"What d'you mean she appeared in the bark of a tree?"

"The outline of the virgin appeared in the bark of a tree -- it was like a big knothole . . . people came from all over to see it!"

"Shit." Marcos laughed and took another big drag.

"Hey, quit hogging the joint!" Lupito demanded. Marcos handed it over. "You can say what you want, but there was something supernatural about it. I saw the thing, *esse* ."

The little car went up the offramp by city college, took a side street and pulled into a gravel parking lot behind a discount furniture store.

"What are we stopping here for, *esse* ?" asked Marcos.

"I'm gonna show you the new tag."

"There's a new tag?"

"Yeah, Valasquez came up with it. Some kids were stealing our old one. This one's a lot harder to do. Someone has to teach it to you for you to do it right. Watch me."

Lupito took a paint can from behind his seat, quickly got out. went to the wall and painted the word *Rex* on the side of the furniture store. Marcos watched him carefully. The word was made almost like the old symbol for a pharmacy except that there was an 'e' in the middle. Lupito quickly got back in the car.

"What the fuck is *Rex* supposed to mean?"

"It means everything that a southsider touches he wrecks. *Wrecks* and *Rex* sound the same. It's a fuckin' homonym, *esse*. "

Marcos looked pissed., "A *what* ?"

"A *homonym* -- don't you know shit?" Lupito smiled. "I'm jus' kidding. The only reason I know is because Valasquez told us. . . It's like a word that sounds the same but is spelled different."

"How does he know?"

"Valasquez took classes at San Jose State. He knows that kind of shit."

As the two sat there, Lupito explained further about how to make the tag. When Marcos felt pretty sure he could do it, he got out and tried. The first one was a bit crude, but then he did it again about three or four times in rapid succession until it looked identical to Lupito's.

A few minutes later they were standing on a pedestrian crossing from where a freeway sign was hung. Marcos' task was to climb over a flimsy seven and a half foot chainlink fence, get down onto a small metal platform which protruded from the base of the sign and do the tag. Simple. It was one in the morning, the traffic was almost nothing.

As Marcos went over the top of the fence, a childlike kind of remorse came over him. He was sixteen and he wondered about how different things would be if his dad were still alive. Would he be doin' this kind of shit, or would he be in school *making his parents proud*? At this point it was all a bunch of crap and he knew it. *Nobody cared what the fuck happened to him and so why should he?* As he was thinking this, something else flashed into his mind -- those candles! Why had his mom bought those stupid candles? It was almost as if she thought *they* were gonna save them somehow -- a kind of protection she couldn't supply. . . *that only a father could supply* .

He sprayed the word *Rex*. It looked good -- better than the ones he had done on the back of the furniture store.

"Alright *esse*, let's go." Lupito said, looking about nervously.

"Yeah, o.k., but we're driving around to take a look. This mother fucker's to the core."

Marcos lifted himself up onto the fence, but immediately realized that he had left the can down on the platform. When he transferred his weight from the fence back to the platform his foot hit a spot wet with dew and he lost hold and went bouncing down onto the platform and, from there, into the air which led to the freeway below.

As Marcos landed in the southbound fast lane, his body went numb. He couldn't speak, or think, or feel any kind of fear or passion. The only thing left to him were his eyes. Eyes which saw the word: *Rex*. Eyes which, in their last gleaming, tried to understand.

END