The Writing on the Wall

GRAFFITI CULTURE
CRUMBLES INTO THE VIOLENCE
IT ONCE ESCAPED

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THE WRITING ON THE WALL: GRAFFITI CULTURE CRUMBLES INTO THE VIOLENCE IT ONCE ESCAPED

They called themselves "writers" because writing is exactly what they did. For the last 30 years, the graffiti culture in New York City has been maintained and elevated by countless teen spirits—you know, the kids and big kids (some of them now well into their 30s, 40s, 50s even) who, with magic markers and spray paint, illegally project their street aliases onto mailboxes, skyscrapers, garbage trucks and roll-down storefront riot gates, not to mention the interiors and exteriors of subway cars.

Graffiti writing in New York City has not been a profession without honor. I know this to be true because my "tag" made waves on the outsides and insides of subway cars at least ten years before the appearance of my first major byline in print. There was an honor system that guided this subculture of spraying—rules and codes and elders that this society of die-hard aerosolics stood by, for the most part. There was even a system of semi-organized warfare. If you weren't getting along with a fellow writer; if two writers were endlessly crossing out each other's handiwork and there was no cease-fire in sight, a fair, man-to-man fistfight (a.k.a. the "fair one") would be arranged. There were no squared rings or boxing gloves involved, but each writer would show up with multiple homeboys, who served as referees and muscle-flexing diplomats, just in case things got ugly in the schoolyard.

When a 19-year-old writer, Timothy "Spek" Falzone, was shot and killed last July, allegedly by a rival writer, 20-year-old Ricky "Foke" Mouzon, it shook the graffiti world. The headline in the *New York Post* may have read "DEADLY 'TAG' GAME," but Spek's passing meant so much more to us writers. In the 30 years of baseball-bat-swinging and knuckle-busting that graffiti's brawls have produced, Falzone's murder is a first: never before was a writer killed at the hands of another writer because of a writing-related controversy. The die-hards wondered: "Well, whatever happened to the "fair one"? Then, the day after Sept. 11, just a few months after Spek's murder, I wondered if the fair one meant anything to anyone anywhere.

In New York's graffiti world, writing "kings" come into power in a few ways: some by way of innovative lettering styles and advanced painting techniques; others through sheer quantity, by "bombing" (stylized signatures and quickly done bubble-letter forms called "throw ups" which they plastered anywhere and everywhere); and still others by way of brute physical force (most writers are like daytime soap-opera gossips who thirst for the dramatic, and a great brawl can amount to even greater publicity for both winner and loser). Your average writer believes that the mightiest king wields the genius strokes of Pablo Picasso and the bloody thrusts of Julius Caesar. In the mid-1990s up through the dawn of the new millennium, the Bronx was Timothy "Spek" Falzone's personal Roman Empire; his graffiti dominated all surfaces, he kicked serious ass (literally) and he was on the verge of artistically evolving far beyond his "mad bomber" status. But 30 years of pre-arranged jousts could not save the young African-American father of one from the ancient savagery of modern man.

GETTING UP

When The New York Times, in 1971, wrote about the mysterious name "Taki 183" that had begun to appear everywhere in Manhattan, there was already a

revolution going on. Street gangs had been a part of New York's makeup for decades, and in the 1970s, gangs with names like the Savage Skulls, the Tomahawks, the Black Spades and the Savage Nomads owned the streets of Brownsville, Brooklyn and the South Bronx; these organizations would often use graffiti to mark their territory in order to keep their enemies at bay, as if to say, "*This is Savage Skulls turf! Watch your back, Turbans!*"

Demetrius was a jobless, gangless Greek lad from Washington Heights who, in the summer of 1970, created work for himself by writing his nickname on local ice cream trucks ("Taki" is a traditional Greek diminutive for Demetrius; 183 represented the street he lived on). Taki wasn't the first writer with a street number to back him up, mind you ("Julio 204" had become known for his markings at least two years prior) but it was when Taki scored a gig as a messenger that his celebrity elevated beyond the confines of Mr. Softee's route. Lampposts, park benches, elevators in office buildings, subway trains—Taki bombed it all as he quietly weaved through Manhattan making deliveries.

Taki's notoriety opened some sleepy young eyes. His fame helped kids to understand that the masses would hear you if you screamed loud enough. His wide-reaching celebrity meant that you would be recognized in your neighborhood as somebody—as an independent somebody, who had no obligation to no stinking gang. Taki let kids know that it was possible to stand alone and not get hassled, that you could be daring and original. Taki 183 was his own publicly traded corporation, and cats with itchy spraying fingers wanted stock. Skill and artistic ability had nothing to do with the early works of Taki and his pen pals. Their simplistic writings were more about saying, "Hello, I was here" than about making artistic statements or crafting breakthrough painting techniques—that would change within a matter of months. Taki 183 personified the art of getting up (writing, in as many places as possible) as a way of getting over.

To be a graffiti writer in the early 1970s was to be different, and the warlords understood this. That's why writers could wander onto Tomahawk land and not get hassled: "Foreign" writers were in your stretch of 'hood to "get up"—okay, maybe also to shoplift spray paint from a few hardware stores, or to

"borrow" that rich purple ink that most supermarkets use to create window displays. Gang members and writers were two completely different beasts. You were either one or the other, and never both. Spek, on the other hand, was a writer and a member of the notorious Crips street gang; it was this blurring of boundaries that most likely lead to his death.

STYLE KINGS

New York City was a fiscal mess back in the mid-1970s, and Mayor John Lindsay knew he was losing his war on subway graffiti. By 1973, the write-your-nickname-on-the-side-of-a-train game was just as popular as shooting playground hoops. Every kid had a Magic Marker and the city could not afford to scrub or paint over the ever-proliferating streaks of color. The only real obstacles that writers faced were the omnipresent mega-wattage of the third rail (the steel pipeline pumped with electrical current), the Transit Authority's newly formed "vandal squad" (wrist slaps or maybe station cleanup were the punishments juveniles faced) and an increasing shortage of space (because the names were on windows, on doors, where advertisements for Ringling Brothers were supposed to be, even on ceilings). The letter-forms had no choice but to get bigger, bolder, more complex. Writers realized that trains were like moving canvases, that the vast system of tunnels and raised platforms were really galleries, museums, roving commercials even: *Everyone takes the train, man! Dig?*

Competition from participants hailing from far-off places like Coney Island, Brooklyn, and Jamaica, Queens, would help push the form from simply "I was here" to: I am here, and I'm leaving this behind to show you that I have style; that I am a style master... That I was the first ever to paint a cloud above my "piece" (shorthand for masterpiece)... That I am King, and my style will influence all you toys (shorthand for novices).

And while New York's graffiti may have appeared as nothing more than crude chicken scratches when caught by an untrained eye, the truth wasn't so elementary. Flavorful signatures with squiggles and other elaborations ("tags")

would pave the way for block- and bubble-shaped letters; by 1973, these forms would sprout arrows and sharp edges. Soon enough, the goal was to create words that read like abstract puzzles. “Wildstyle” was the term coined by writers—letters hidden behind a color-coated camouflage of funk. Only those in the know could figure it out, but I assure you, if you knew what to look for, you’d find it, plain as day.

One of the golden rules of writing from 1972 on out was, yes, a piece has every right to overtake spaces occupied by tags—it was OK to go over a tag with a multi-colored piece, or even a throw-up. But if a writer was to go over another writer’s piece with a tag, or cross another writer’s piece out deliberately—

as opposed to occupational hazards like the odd close nick or an accidental drip that runs onto the next man’s masterpiece—then a cross-out war that would eventually lead to a fair fight was in order.

In the 1970s, my hands were too small to clutch a can of Jungle Green Krylon, so the “fair one” wasn’t even an issue. My parents sported afros in those days. Africa and pride; culture, freedom, and determination: these are some of the earliest ideas I was presented with. This is how we lived. I was lucky to be raised that way, because in spite of the crazy neighborhood that we called home, dad the filmmaker and mom the painter made sure I that I understood early on who I was and where I came from. That I was somebody.

Graffiti has been one of the greatest motivating factors in my life. Writing was good to me, especially since I was more court jester than king. It prepared me for the writing I do now. When the time came for me to switch gears and to grow up, I was prepared: Instead of trying to get my name up on every train, I aimed to get my name up in as many magazines as possible. Hey, I’m not alone: New York City writers of all ages have often gone on to make their marks on society in more socially accepted ways, from designing motorcycles (“Haze”) and jeanswear (“Futura”), to mounting well-received exhibitions of graffiti art throughout Europe (“Quik”). Writing gave a lot of us direction. It gave us options—hope, if you will.

And hope was something we needed, once crack cocaine was declared president for life in the ’hood in the mid-1980s. When I was coming up and Spek was but a shorty, crackheads were our real-time zombies; some neighborhoods were dimmer than Transylvania. Fourteen-year-old boys from broken homes were clocking $1,500 on a slow day selling crack, and some of the most beautiful black and Puerto Rican girls from your local housing project were willing to perform oral sex in pissy elevators—*sans* condom—for five dollars and bag of Wise potato chips.

Crack culture was destructive, selfish. And I suppose as a movement, graffiti, to those who didn’t understand it, was also destructive and selfish. But

it was my way out: Nearly all the kids on my block who were my age or older were either too busy making money or too busy spending money on suicide. Who had time to toss a football? Writing gave me a new identity. A makeover. You could be off in a dark subway tunnel somewhere far from home, hanging out with other like-minded white, Asian, Latino and whatever kids, being creative. Taxpayers didn't appreciate our art, true, but there was no other game this fun in town. For me, and I imagine for Spek, the adrenaline rush that went along with being where you don't belong, being some Warholian supervillain, was intense.

BOMBING THE CITY

Timothy Falzone, born on Feb. 12, 1982, wasn't as lucky as I have been: his father was in and out of jail, which would eventually lead to the breakup of his parents' marriage. Timothy was probably just learning to walk when crack cocaine hit its stride in the inner city. When I heard that it was Falzone's cross-out war with 20 year-old semi-gang-banger Ricky "Foke" Mouzon that caused the well-known new-school writer to cross over to the other side, my stomach fell. I'd seen Spek's tags and throw-ups up and about Manhattan for ages, but it was a trip through the Bronx three years ago that made me understand that he

was serious about his graf. With Spek, no two throw-ups ever looked the same, which was beyond rare. Because throw-ups were supposed to be cookie-cut, same thing every time, blazing in your face like McDonald's golden arches. So you'd remember and recognize who was who, who was boss. Love him or hate him, you had to respect the kid for that.

The only thing I'd actually heard about Spek was that he was never known to back down from a fight, and that he had superior "knuckle game"; that he was quick to shit-talk because of his incredible gift of jab. He was the Ali of "the fair one," undefeated. He whipped writers twice his size. After his death, I needed to know more. I wondered how this could have happened. I wondered if the fair one had become a dead issue for new-school New York writers.

Falzone began his writing career in 1993—a time when painted subway cars were long gone. The MTA had finally won its war on graffiti through a combination of new trains, improved cleaning methods and relentless effort to remove any markings. The last painted car rolled off of the J line in May 1989, into the permanent obscurity of a trainyard. The new generation of sprayers were forced to make their fame on streets and on the rooftops that hugged the elevated train lines. With the trains gone, writers from generations past moved on: to family life and real-world jobs; to become military men, civilians, lawyers; to land long jail sentences because the crack game was the pro sport with a never-ending draft.

In the '90s, a few die-hard old-schoolers would paint from time to time on "permission" walls scattered throughout the five boroughs, but the connection between accomplished writing pioneers and budding young bucks—the practice of apprenticeship, and the access it offered to history and protocol—was smashed to bits. Writing was one of the most social anti-social activities around, and early-'80s graf enthusiasts would go to a specific bench on a specific platform in the Bronx (149th Street and Grand Concourse, known as "The Writer's Bench") to talk shop with other inkheads and to snap photographs of the trains before and after the doors opened. The photographs were like baseball cards that writers would trade. The trains created an intimacy that the

writing community will never again experience. After all, there are millions of walls in New York to paint, as opposed to the 20 or so storage yards that the trains snoozed in at night. The odds of a toy's chance meeting with a legend painting a legal wall in 1993 were slim. Besides, some new dudes could care less about what's already been done. Their time to shine is in the present; Spek wasn't about to let anyone stop him from getting get his shines on.

Still, Spek didn't begin his writing career totally uninformed; in fact, he had a mainline to writers who did know their history. Maybe he should have known better. Fellow Bronx native "Jee," best friends with Spek from age 13, happened to be the younger brother of one of the world's most famous active writers, "Cope 2." Cope, 10 years Jee's senior, was happy to show his little man the ropes. In the Bronx, being Cope's little brother was like being one of the Jacksons, and Jee was looking to score his brother's Michael Jackson–sized majesty.

Writing "crews" developed during the 1970s as the gang movement was fading, pushed out in part by hip-hop culture. Two writers usually came up with a funky name (say, "The Death Squad"). Those two founders would then dub themselves "prez" and "vice prez," and four like-minded friends would come along for the ride. The six guys would make a name for themselves as prolific bombers, piecers, fighters. By the late 1980s, Cope had made his crew, "Kings Destroy," the talk of the Bronx. Jee understood that there is a great crew behind every great writer. BTV—"Big Time Vandals"—was Jee and Spek's answer to KD.

"At first, Big Time Vandals was just me and some kid from the neighborhood. But I didn't really love the name, so I gave it to Spek," says Jee, now a hulking 20-year-old Nuyorican with tribal tattoos, from the living room of the Bronx apartment he and Cope share. "So a week or two later, Spek comes up to me like, 'I changed it! I changed it!' So I said, 'All right, what did you change it to?' And he said, 'Bomb The City!' Spek, BTC's de facto commander-in-chief, was serious about his bombing. And he took no shit. "Ever since junior high school," Jee explains, "If you even looked at Timmy wrong, he would be like, 'Yo, what are you looking at?' And he'd punch you in the face. His father and mother taught him that. His parents were kinda ghetto," he says numbly. Jee, Cope and other folks who loved Timmy, like Cristina Betancourt, the 19-year old mother of Spek's year-old daughter, Alizaya, swear that the slain writer was a sweet and loving individual who was grossly misunderstood. But they can understand why those who didn't know Timmy, the sensitive animal-lover, would think him a beast.

"At one time, he was crossing a lot of people out," says Cope, who is at least 100 pounds heavier than Jee, and who sports one of Spek's throw-ups tattooed on his right arm. "See, Spek didn't give a fuck about graffiti rules. He don't care if he had a tag or a throw-up. If you went over his shit with a piece, he's going over you." Cope, a world-class diplomat, found himself catching a lot of flak because of the actions of his protege. "Practically everybody he went over, I knew, and knew for many years," Cope says. "So people felt that I should try to have some control over this kid."

At one point, Cope says, it seemed like every writer in the Bronx was out to get Spek. But he wasn't just your average writer during the last years of his life: Spek, with the encouragement of his younger brother Jermell, became a Crip. New York City in general is currently experiencing a gang renaissance, and rogue, loosely-organized Crips and Bloods sets—groups with 30 years of history in the greater Los Angeles area but no real strong roots inside of the five boroughs—are running wild.

"These days, you've got guys in certain neighborhoods who are like Spek—they're kinda affiliated with gangs and they write. Whereas in the past, most writers I knew weren't affiliated with gangs," says "Wane," an acclaimed veteran Bronx writer. "So when Spek got killed, it shook a lot of people. I think everybody was on stand-still for a minute. People thought about it: Is this shit really worth it? Here's a guy who's writing graffiti, and he gets shot? That shit wasn't supposed to happen."

"It started because of little gossip," Jee says of the behind-the-scenes talk that later sparked the Spek/Foke conflict. "Then Foke started going over Spek." Timothy Falzone wouldn't go out like that; there was no way he was going to let a little-known writer like Foke disrespect him. "Spek seen [Foke] in his neighborhood one day by chance," Jee says. "He was with a couple of kids from our

crew, so they robbed Foke, beat his ass." Foke took his beating like a man; his ego was probably the most bruised after the thrashing.

But there's nothing fair about getting jumped and robbed by a mob. There's no real way to justify Spek's call to pounce on Foke. Spek was dead wrong. Still, even the code of the streets couldn't justify his death. And Spek didn't think twice, because he was regularly beating people up. "Then one day, like four months later," Jee adds, his voice now growing hoarse, "Spek was chillin' in front of his building, and they came out and shot him."

AFTERMATH

Due to an unspecified violent infraction that occurred during his incarceration, Ricky Mouzon now spends his days locked behind the prison bars of a maximum security unit on Queens' infamous Riker's Island, where he awaits trial. He will be shipped off to one of upstate New York's many stone-faced correctional facilities to serve out his hard time if the murder rap sticks. Although I wrote several letters to Mr. Mouzon, hoping to secure an interview, he did not respond. Some say that Foke didn't actually do the killing himself, that one of his crack-dealing cronies who had little patience or sympathy for bull-headed, weaponless graffiti writers was the culprit. Foke, they say, just wanted to scare Spek—roll up with his strapping buddies to show Spek Falzone that things could go down this way if he didn't rethink his actions. But when Spek turned to walk away after letting his detractors know that he was true to his reputation and ready to fight, somebody wound up shooting him in the back of the head.

Life hasn't been easy for single mom Cristina Betancourt in the months since Spek, her live-in boyfriend, was gunned down on DeKalb Avenue—the street they both grew up on, that Betancourt still calls home. When I visit her on a warm spring day, as pre-teensters rip up and down the block playing mid-hide-and-go-seek, Betancourt, a comely Latina who beams both the look of innocence and of innocence lost, tries hard to understand the ramifications of grown-up foul play.

"Look at what happened to Timmy," she says, eyes watery. "And they want to keep on doing graffiti? They want to keep on fighting over graffiti?" We're about 100 feet away from the place where Spek was shot dead; two women with babies and strollers stand in that very spot as we're speaking. "It's not the same. I'm not used to walking around the block without him," she says. "I don't want to live here no more. Every time I walk on DeKalb, I just see that spot where he was laying at." Betancourt says that she's looking forward to getting an Associate's degree, and then going on to more schooling—to the promise of a better quality of life. "We were supposed to leave—Timmy, me and the baby," she explains. "We were supposed to go move to Pennsylvania. We were going to raise Alizaya over there."

Just then, Spek's younger brother Jermell happens to walk by. He, too, is reluctant to talk. "Ain't nothin' much to say about it," Jermell says while flexing a thug's half-smile. A fully-pledged member of the Crips, he's familiar with the boomerang system of justice that heads on corners subscribe to. "Shit like that happens. But what goes around comes around, you know?" His boss is the streets, and he's currently on the block and on the clock. Meanwhile, the Falzone clan is more scattered than ever: Momma Sarena Falzone fell victim to a brain aneurysm a few months before Spek's murder and, in the days since the passing of his mother and older brother, Jermell says that he doesn't stay in touch with his father, Timmy Sr.

"Timmy was a good nigga," he says of his brother, "but I always thought graffiti was bullshit. I used to tell him that. I was like, 'How could you be fighting over writing on the walls?' I can see if he's fighting for money and shit." Fighting for money, and his life, is what Jermell Falzone does every day. "I don't really got nothing to lose, tell you the truth. I've felt that way since my mom died—when both of them left," he says. "There ain't really nothin' to live for. I was trying to get me a record deal. That's the only thing that I'm trying to do right now. With that, "Mel," as his friends call him, steps back into the street.

"The day of his funeral, I just broke out in tears," says "Noke," a 21-year-old original member of Bomb The City as he rides in the passenger seat of my brown, rusted 1989 Chevy Blazer. "I tried to stop crying. I couldn't believe it. It pissed me off inside. It hurts a lot; makes me want to kill the person, you know? You take my friend's life over something like that. Graffiti? You're supposed to fight the fair one. Or go over their shit. Now, people want to take things to a different level by killing people? People can't be known for graf, so they want to be known for something else—'Oh, I killed that famous person.' Or 'Oh, I cut his face.' It's not about writing anymore. People want to get quick fame."

New York will always be a cutthroat, thirsty place for some and a plentiful oasis for others. The summer of 2002 had its share of particularly hot and sticky runs; weather commentators talked of drought warnings daily. And the fall of 2001 drained us dry in a very different way. Osama Bin Laden cut through the face of this city, for sure, and found quick fame. I never used to think that forest fires blazed in concrete jungles, that mass jumbles of black and gray and cold steel could melt down into faceless blobs with such ease. Now I do my best to conserve water because I can see the smoke from the blue flames in the corners of my eyes. I wonder, still: Will Jermell live to be old and free? Will gangs and crack-cocaine violence rise again? Will Cristina and Alizaya find a better life? Will the World Trade Center's rocket sized-antenna prick the atmosphere once again? Is New York's civilized graffiti culture on the brink of self-destruction? Did the fair one ever exist in anyone's world?

Timothy "Spek" Falzone