“Chhhhh…Chhh…chhhhhh,” was the only sound you could hear above the gentle humming of a refrigerator car running idly a few tracks over. The old paint-splattered Vans made no noise on the large rock gravel beneath them. Hogwash or Hogger, both his tagging names, but also just about everything he said was a load of shit, was standing next to a large red boxcar with a spray can in each hand. He was outlining the letters of his name with his right hand and going back at the same time with his left hand and filling them in. I stood watching for a few seconds and then quickly found an empty spot on a nearby boxcar. It was night time and we were both in very dark clothes. It was exceptionally quiet and I quickly became high and spacey from the overspray the can was giving off. When the paint gets into your brain, in a matter of a few minutes it makes you incredibly slow and stupid. It took a while but I finished my outline and began filling in my piece. I looked over my shoulder occasionally to see if anyone was coming and often checked underneath the train to see if there were any legs on the other side coming towards me.

I had painted this train yard several times and had become very comfortable and a bit overconfident as to how safe it actually was. The cool part about painting trains is that they are sort of like a moving canvas. You can paint something in your hometown and see it two days later halfway across the state. Sometimes you will even see a piece you painted two years earlier, with the same little imperfections and fuckups that only you notice. I looked up and noticed Hogwash had just finished painting his piece and was walking towards me. In the dim light of the full moon that was out, I could vaguely see what he had done but it looked pretty clean and flashy. He walked up behind me and said, “Nice letters, you should try to put a little fade at the tops of them.”

“Yeah, I was thinking that but I’m not really sure what colors to use.”
“Try this light blue color.” He then handed me a can of Orchard Dolphin Blue which was a perfect color to fade with the Brilliant Blue can of Painters Touch I was using.

“Thanks.”

“No problem I was done with that can anyways,” he said and walked off to paint another piece. He painted at about twice the speed as me and always a lot better. I met Hogger through a good friend of mine and got into tagging because of him. He was really good at tagging and could paint incredible and elaborate works of art using only aerosol cans. Hogger had been teaching me for a few months now and was sort of bringing me up. I had only been into tagging for a little while and he was the best writer in town, so I latched on to him and began learning the ropes. He was an arrogant person and was known as the best “self proclaimed” writer in town. It was actually true though, and the shitty part was that he knew it and wouldn’t let you forget it. As I have come to find about many writers, most are their own biggest fan.

I finished fading the two colors together and was just about to finish my outline when I heard a faint whistle off in the distance. Hogger began whistling and yelling. By the time I looked up, two cops were on either side of me holding big flashlights and yelling at me to put down the cans and get down on my knees. I was pretty much fucked by this time and decided to give in willingly and cooperate. Hogger had already vanished like a shadow into the night and was nowhere to be seen. I set the cans by my backpack and slowly walked toward the police.

The one who did most of the talking was tall and thick. He had a short mustache and a freshly trimmed crew cut. It was hard to see anything else with the light pointed in my eyes. When he got close he looked me right in the eyes and asked, “So you think you’re an artist, huh?”

“Uh…I guess,” was all I could say. I was having trouble seeing straight from all the paint that had accumulated in my brain.

“Do you think it’s okay to be out here painting these trains?”

“No I know it’s against the law.”

He went on questioning and eventually took the light out of my direct eyesight. I could now see that his name was Williams. His partner’s name was Floyd. The whole time all I could think was how close I was to finishing. If I could only make a few more lines it would at least be mostly done. I mean I had the outline done already. I just had a couple of finishing touches to put on it to add some flare to my piece. If only I would’ve had two more minutes before these fuckers showed up.

“You know you’re trespassing and you’re committing a crime by just being here don’t you?” Williams asked smugly.

“Yeah, it won’t happen again,” I replied, but it was a complete lie. What I was really thinking was, “man, do these guys ever stop with the questions. Just give me the damn ticket already and let me be on my way.”
“Man, I swear, kids like you make me sick. Tagging all over things that aren’t yours and treating the legal system like it’s a big joke. It’s pathetic.” While Williams continued lecturing me, Floyd was copying down my ID and writing out a ticket. He then handed me the finished ticket on a clip board and told me to sign it. “Sign here on the line. All it means is that you agree to show at your court date a month from today,” said Floyd and then never spoke to me again.

I signed it and they began to escort me off the premises. Williams was complaining the whole time while Floyd walked silently. Floyd would occasionally reply with a simple “uh huh.” I walked quietly in front of them saying nothing. They took my backpack as evidence and all seven cans that were inside. I told them I had walked there and waited for them to drive off. I eventually walked over to my car which I parked a couple blocks away. I really wanted to go back and finish the piece but they had taken my paint. I couldn’t stand the thought of leaving a half finished piece on the side of a boxcar, but there was nothing I could do about it. I had given Hogger a ride to the train yard but he was nowhere to be found so I drove home.

I went over to Hoggers house the next day and told him what happened. He replied, “No way! That sucks, man. It happens to everyone sooner or later. I’ve been caught up a couple times.”

“Yeah I know. I’m pretty fucking pissed off though. It makes me wanna go out and break something. You’re lucky you got away. I figured it would be better for us both if I just gave up. And I was high as shit on paint.”

“Heh, yeah,” he replied. He continued sketching on a piece of binder paper.

“Well I think I’m over this shit for a while. At least for a week or two, I gotta clear my head.”

“I think that most people stop for a least a little while after getting caught up. Well, that or they go out and hit up anything they see.” He replied and chuckled.

We had become pretty good friends over that period of time but the only thing we had in common was the painting, which he still did every day, so we just kinda stopped hanging out. I wasn’t really over it at first. I would occasionally go out and paint under a bridge or catch a tag here or there at the old wall behind the apple orchards, but after the months of court dates and the many months after that of payments to the court, the whole idea of tagging started to seem pointless. It is exhilarating running across a freeway at three in the morning to catch a tag on an overpass, or catching a tag on a parking meter in broad daylight while waiting for the bus. Even more satisfying is the fact that you are sticking it to the man while doing it, but the truth of the matter is that the law wins every time.

I was on the other side of the law for a good while, and to this day I still do several things that aren’t considered legal, but from what I have learned it does not pay in the long run to break the law, no matter how fun or exciting it might be.
Graffiti is a form of destruction while at the same time a creation of something artistic and original. Many positive outlets exist for artistic expression that may not be as exciting as tagging on a train in the middle of the night, but are definitely less risky and can have a more positive effect on the community. The skills learned through tagging can be used to paint murals and to paint a positive portrait of the community and its members. Taggers should be encouraged to attend art school so that they can learn positive and beneficial ways to use their artistic talents. Cities should encourage legal painting walls where those interested can come to show off their talents in a safe, legal and supervised way. Those who do graffiti should not necessarily be punished but should be encouraged to pursue a more positive and beneficial means of using their talent. Graffiti artists are not necessarily bad people who intend to do harm to others and their property, most are just misguided and don’t know that there are positive outlets for their talent.