

TEENAC

WE'RE IN THE LEXUS, HEADED UPTOWN. IT'S NIGHT and the lights along the Henry Hudson flicker across the faces of the three teenage boys, showing baby-smooth skin. They're smoking Newports. Their heads chuck back and forth inside North Face jackets to Tupac bumping on the sound system: *Ain't nothin' but a gangsta party*— ■ They've started their "rills," runs, early because it's Friday and they've already gotten a lot of beeps from custies. That's customers. ■ At 87th and West End, we pull up. There are seven, eight kids on

GAN

the corner, all stamping their feet in the cold, waiting for chronic. "Hydroponically grown, ill weed," says Chi, the long-legged boy lounging in the front seat.

A.Z. and Pete hop out of the car. Doors slam. "Yo, what up?" you can hear A.Z. yell at Kundah. Kundah, their associate, was supposed to keep the custies inside somewhere, out of sight. "Not on the fucking corner, yo?"

A.Z. and Kundah are up in each other's faces now, shouting, index fingers jabbing at the air.

"You was twenty minutes late!"

"Nah, nah, it ain't like that."

Pete gets back in. "That is so amateurish," he says, rolling his eyes behind glasses; looks younger than 17.

A.Z. returns a couple of minutes later. He's 16, a jock. "It's all good," he says.

The custies are tramping down the street with their \$50 and \$100 bags of marijuana.

"Drive, Pops," A.Z. tells the chauffeur, a middle-aged African-American man in a ski cap.

"BEING WHO I AM, WITH THE CONNECTIONS I HAVE," SAYS A.Z., "WHY SHOULD I WATCH OTHER PEOPLE TAKE THESE KIDS' MONEY WHEN I CAN DO IT MYSELF?"

"We gotta change cars."

ON THE WAY TO THE "BASE," THE LUXURY CAR service in Harlem they rent from by the hour, Pete says: "We only fuck with private-school kids, the kids who can afford what we do." Pete himself is a private-school student. His godfather is a billionaire whose name appears regularly in the *Wall Street Journal*.

"We sell to Dalton, Trinity, Horace Mann, Spence, Chapin, Columbia Prep, mad girls from Brearley," he goes on. "Basically, every school you can name."

A.Z.'s got rolling papers on his legs; he's fixing up a "cone," a filtered joint of chronic. They say their "shit is so strong, if you've never smoked it you can start hallucinating."

"We got all the butter custies," says A.Z. Including, they say, the daughter of the owner of a media conglomerate; an Academy Award-winning actor's son; a former child star ("He's been having ecstasy parties since he was 14 years old"); the daughter of a celebrated painter; the painter himself . . .

"If only you saw my Filofax," A.Z. says.

"That's why we're so successful," offers Pete. "That's our clientele."

"I'm an opportunist," says A.Z. His mother is a high-level executive at one of the biggest companies in the world.

"Being who I am, with the connections that I have, why should I watch other people take these kids' money when I can do it myself?"

Chi warns: "Teddy, teddy—" Cops. An R.M.P. rolls by.

They turn the Tupac way down.

"Maintain . . ."

UNLIKE THE LEGIONS OF HIP-HOP FANS POURING INTO THE MALLS in search of hoodlum chic, these boys aren't playing gangsters. They *are* gangsters, of a kind. They belong to "crews."

Many of the names in this story have been changed.

Crews are "groups of friends doing business together," explains one insider. While crews have been around for more than a decade, the involvement of very wealthy kids is a recent development. New York's newest crews are made up of "kids in butter condos who grew up next door to kids in projects," says a crew member who comes from a well-off family. "Their point of view is all spread with each other. It's all about making money."

Crews today are made up of the richest of the rich and the poorest of the poor: white, African-American, Asian-American, and Latino kids all working together. Part of what crews do is just hang out, but their different backgrounds provide business synergies. "We've got our connects; they've got their connects," another rich kid says.

There are more than twenty in New York, of varying head counts (from 10 to 150) and levels of criminal activity—from graffiti to robbery to drug

dealing to assault. Crews have names like BFS (Blunts Forties Sex), BAF (Blunts and Forties), WKN (Who's King Now), OTR (On the Run), DNC (Double-Nine Crew), HFL (Homies for Life). Most crew members' parents have no idea what their kids are up to. "My parents think I'm a deliveryman," one crew member told me. That changed when, during the reporting for this story, a warrant went out for his arrest for stealing jewelry from another kid's apartment. His parents hired a well-known Manhattan defense attorney.

Being in a crew confers status in worlds beyond high school. Later on the same night, Pete and A.Z. breezed in ahead of everyone waiting in line to get into the Bowery Bar. "Every VIP at every club knows us," says Pete. "When promoters throw parties, they make sure we're on their lists. They know what we do."

"Superstar kids know who we are," he says, smiling. "People like us are gonna be the people other people look up to."

"SOMEHOW, WE BECAME LIKE MOVIE STARS," SAYS MR. STEAM. He's taken his name from the slang for being high, "steamed." Mr. Steam is 18 and a senior at a Manhattan private school. He's also one of the founders of DNC.

"We're like *gods* to kids," he says.

DNC, however, is considered a less "real" crew, because it's small and its members only mug, burglarize, and con other teenagers instead of dealing them drugs.

We're standing on the corner of 99th and Broadway—DNC territory—waiting for our "boomer"; that's a car that pumps the hip-hop till the walls shudder with the beat. Most crews rent boomers by the hour from the same outfit in Harlem (it's \$30 an hour for most cars, \$45 for the bullet-proof Benz or Pops's Lex).

There are five kids here: two girls and three boys, all wearing bright-red or -yellow North Face jackets.

"Socially, people look at what crews you're down with," says Mr. Steam. "It's what makes you popular."

"When somebody wants to be down with you," says Cruise—he's Dominican, from the Bronx, 19—"they'll be like, 'Can I hang out with you, can I go bombing with you?'" Writing graffiti together.

"You know how lucky you are to be with us?" Hershey asks me. She's 16. "Ohmigod. Some kids would pay."

Hershey and Ali—the two girls—are drunk and want some candy. Meaning candy. They run into a deli to make a selection.

"Yo, your candy's *wack*," Ali tells the salesman. They decide not to make a purchase.

The girls run outside. They shake down their jacket sleeves, and out fall packs of Rolos, SweeTarts, Now-&-Later. . . .

"Aren't we good?" asks Ali.

What Ali and Hershey really like to do is rack clothes from department stores. They estimate their draw in the tens of thousands of dollars. "We like really expensive things, like everything Tommy Hilfiger, Polo, Nautica. Have you ever been to the second floor of Bloomingdale's, like Nicole Miller and all that stuff?" says Ali.

Their friend, a budding videographer, filmed them ripping off Macy's. Later, they let me watch the tape: It's two cute, "fly" girls out for a day of shopping—stuffing items in their backpacks as lighthearted music plays. Then they're shown modeling everything in a stairwell of the store, ripping out security tags.

Ali's father is a multimillionaire, an entrepreneur. Hershey's dad is an entertainer, and one of her relatives was the confidante of a First Lady.

They're throwing candy wrappers on the ground.

"Yo, get in the car," says Mr. Steam.

THE LAND ROVER'S HERE. THE kids are going uptown to buy pot from the "weed spot." This is how DNC—and crews like it—like to chill: get driven around in cars like this one (we have a different chauffeur tonight, a young guy from Senegal), smoke blunts, drink "forties" (40-ounce beers).

And listen to music. This is Mobb Deep:

Having cash is highly addictive

Especially when you used to having money to live with

"I drained \$3,000 from a kid's ATM card once," Wham-Wham's saying. He's 20, Haitian, poor.

"Best thing I ever got off a kid was a laptop, Macintosh," Cruise says.

It's time for some stories about slaving.

"Tell about Morton!" squeals Hershey.

Morton was a "slave": a kid who wants to be down with you so bad, he—or she—will give you anything, his clothes, drugs, his parents' money, sex.

"This kid Morton," Cruise begins, "his parents worked in television. He'd buy us ounces of smoke. We used to get mad booted"—high—"and we'd be like, 'I'm hungry, man,' and he'd take us to the best expensive restaurants. We'd order lobster for no reason, just to have it on the plate. He would

whip out the credit cards. He had mad money. But he didn't know what to do with it, so we'd take it, yo."

"We tell 'em, 'We're not gonna steal from you. We like you.' We brainwash them. Literally," says Mr. Steam.

"Morton was a shook one"—afraid—says Wham-Wham. Wham-Wham has the voice of a midnight D.J. and has told me, "I'm a scary guy."

"All the rich kids are too afraid to tell their parents about us," he says. "So we go after the rich kids."

"Go after the rich kids," says Mr. Steam.

Mr. Steam's father is rich, the owner of a New York institution that many affluent New Yorkers swear by. Wham-Wham never had a lot. He and Mr. Steam grew up blocks away from each other and have known each other since they were small. They used to hang out at Burger King together; now they do other things.

"Ohmigod, stealing travelers' checks!" says Cruise.

"CC scams!" Mr. Steam hisses appreciatively. "There was this girl we used to hang out with. We all went to Jersey and reamed her fucking credit card, man. We showed up with like

Ralph Lauren, Banana Republic jackets, Nintendo spray-paint sneakers—fucking, the whole wardrobe. Everybody dressed dip for *months*."

"You know those *Kids* kids?" says Hershey. "We know them." Literally. "And they're our slaves, too."

Mr. Steam names one of the actors in *Kids*, Larry Clark's 1995 movie about New York teenagers that managed to shock with scenes of drug use and unprotected sex.

"Let it be known," Mr. Steam laughs. "I was his fucking *master*. I used to make him kiss my feet in front of everybody in class."

"I used to make him cook for me. Steaks," says Cruise.

THE LAND ROVER STOPS AT 139th Street. They all tumble out at the weed spot, a corner bathed in yellow light.

"Keepin' it real," says Wham-Wham, exchanging a laugh with a drunken homeless man who wanders by and admires the car.

"Keeping it real is being yourself," Mr. Steam explains.

The kids buy a small bag of "shwag," inferior dope. They get back in the car. Out the window you can see Ali swaying back and forth, flirting with some guys on the corner.

"She's acting like a ghetto bitch," says Hershey.

"Yo, get in the fucking car!" shouts Mr. Steam, leaning out the door.

Ali slides onto the front seat.

"Would you please not do that the next time we're on this street?" Mr. Steam says sharply. "Yo, this street is so *hot*—Full of cops."

We take off. The blunt starts to blaze and is passed around. The kids share it with the driver.

But these crew members usually don't share the things they steal. "Hell, no," says Mr. Steam. "It's like BFS says—Born for Self."

"We know a lot of kids who have to do what they do," says Cruise.

"We do it 'cause it's fun," says Mr. Steam, smiling. His eyes are getting puffy; he's getting steamed.

The driver spins slowly around and around Harlem, gliding through streets that look emptied as if by war. Ali's eyes are closed.

And what ever happens to a kid like Morton?

"Morton's still around," says Cruise. "I do feel bad about him. He was a little loony. His sister is a very-big-time drug addict.

"He still calls me. We talk about life.

"I'm one of the closest friends he has."

FOUR KIDS FROM BAF ASK TO MEET AT BENIHANA, WHICH THEY call "the BAF temple." It seems like an odd choice, until you watch them watching the chef preparing the food. Their eyes light up; they're transfixed by the sizzling chopping show, the shrimp tail landing in the apron pocket. They pretend it's Hershey's birthday—she's chilling here tonight, too—and the waiter brings her pineapple in the shell and a candle. They look like kids. Everyone in the restaurant sings.

BAF's a mostly middle-class, Irish crew of public-school students from the East Side, in the sixties. They're a mid-level crew in terms of numbers, respect, and level of crime.

Their fame comes largely from their leader, the wiry, rock-star-ish 2Drunk, who has his own public-access TV show, *Temple of Intoxication*, which broadcasts on Channel 69 Monday nights at 12:30 A.M. The Manhattan Neighborhood Network moved the show from its earlier 7 P.M. time slot because the language was considered too raw. It features fights—bloody beatings on deserted city streets at night—and there's some ironic fascination throughout with urination.

2Drunk is the producer, cameraman, and director. "The reason for the show is because I can't write graffiti anymore,"

he says. "It brings too many problems to me, my family, and my girl: envy, beef. So now this show is the way I give my crew fame and express the things we do."

For crews at all levels, the "things they do" include graffiti. *Crew* was originally a graffiti word, meaning groups of graffiti writers who went out "bombing" together, spreading

their names. Crew members protected one another from the police and from other crews trying to cause "beef"—fights—by crossing out their work. In the eighties, *crew* came to mean a cocaine ring, or even just a group of friends. The crews of the nineties still advertise their existence through graffiti, a language other kids read the way fans read publications like *Star*.

"Graffiti's on everything," says True, another BAF member, who's one of the most famous graffiti writers in the city. "All you have to do is look around you. We do it on mailboxes, walls, the subway, telephones. It's not the big pieces"—from *masterpieces*—"like before. Giuliani's been cracking down.

"If you don't write graffiti, people look at you like you're a Herb." A nerd.

True is blond and small for his age—18—but somehow has the used feeling of an old man. He wears a hooded sweatshirt, aviator glasses. "Sometimes I get so angry and I just go out bombing. I can't even remember where I go and do it." He's been homeless since he was 16.

"It's like saying, 'I'm here.' It's a rush. It's power. What's in your mind comes out on the walls, and what's in your heart.

"It's dangerous," True adds. "Look."

He pulls back his short hair—there's a thick scar where he was gouged with a broken bottle.

He looks up; he keeps watching for the table chef to put more food on his plate.

"Now all these preppy rich kids want to write graffiti," True says.

"You know A.Z.?" He manages a smile.

"He used to be my slave. He wanted to be down so bad.

"So I robbed him.

"He wasn't my real friend," says True.

AFTER DINNER, THE KIDS SAY they're going to a "free crib." That can be a hotel room rented by a Herb or a slave; a house party with no parents; or just any apartment where someone's home alone.

"We got kicked out of this house party one time," says Pink, another BAF member, "because my friend kissed his tag on this \$7,000 painting. I don't know who painted it, but I saw him do it and I said, 'Oh, shit.'

"But then we said, 'Fuck that, we're not getting kicked out of some house of graff

groupies. Whoever comes out of this place is getting beat up.' We beat up so many kids who came out of that place . . ."

In the cab, on the way to the free crib, Ellen tells me, "We don't know whether we're going to take advantage of this girl yet. . . ." Whether they're going to rob her, steal whatever they can from her apartment.

Ellen is Pink's girlfriend. She's sharp-eyed; a chain-smoker; beautiful. Hard-looking; 16. She goes to a Manhattan private school. Her dad is one of the most respected people in journalism.

In the course of the cab ride, Ellen sucks a cigarette down and says this:

"When I was 13, I started taking people to my advantage. They'd take mad money out on their cash cards and buy me drugs. I used to be a crazy Buddha-head drug addict. I smoked nine blunts a day. I have done everything—Special K, ecstasy, yayo . . ." Coke.

"When I was 13, I did acid every day for two months. My parents found out; they confronted me when I was tripping on acid. I blew up my own spot!"—revealed herself. "Why do I do drugs?" I yelled at them. "It's your fault!"

Ellen gives a nervous laugh.

"My stepfather fucked up my whole life. . . . I started ho-ing it up."

"ALL THE RICH KIDS ARE TOO AFRAID TO TELL THEIR PARENTS ABOUT US," SAYS WHAM-WHAM, A MEMBER OF DOUBLE NINE CREW. "SO WE GO AFTER THE RICH KIDS."

THE DOORMAN, DRESSED LIKE A LATIN AMERICAN dictator, cocks his finger at the kids by way of greeting as they pass into the lobby of a high-rise on the Upper East Side.

The elevator opens on the seventeenth floor. The kids' Gore-Tex jackets make a swishing sound as we move down the hallway—Ellen, Pink, 2Drunk, Hershey, and now Mr. Steam has joined us. Dr. D. has also come; he's an African-American kid

who's down with a "realer" crew. Everybody communicates by beeper.

A pretty blonde girl opens the door. She could be Sandra Dee—but her hair is streaked, and there are dark circles under her eyes, as if she's been crying. Makeup smudges.

She's clearly shocked to see all the kids, but she attempts a smile. "Hi."

"Hi."

She lets them in.

The girl says her parents have been in Europe for two weeks. There isn't anyone staying with her. A maid comes in every day and cooks and cleans.

In the kitchen, there are newspapers on the floor covered with pellets of dog poo. They've got a Jack Russell.

"Hey, can we 86 the dog?" asks Mr. Steam.

The girl scoops up Benji obediently and takes him into another room.

The kids walk slowly around the apartment, a three-bedroom with a view and a lot of silver in the dining-room cabinet.

"She's a new girl—" Ellen whispers.

Hershey says, "From Florida. She, like, trusts everybody and is really naïve—"

The girl's bedroom is decorated with *Sesame Street* paraphernalia. "Yo, what's this?" Hershey says, grabbing a Big Bird doll sprawled on the girl's bed.

"That's Big Bird," the girl says softly, watching from the door.

The kids give each other a look.

Big Bird gets thrown around the room. Big Bird is made to rap-dance. (Mr. Steam's put on some music, loud.) Laughing,

Hershey starts going at Big Bird's eyes with a nail file.

"What are you doing to Big Bird?!" the girl finally explodes.

Hershey throws the doll at the girl and bounces back on the bed.

The kids are on the girl's bed, flipping channels. On public access, there's an interview being conducted with an admitted gang-banger. "Gang-banging is rape," says Hershey.

"Not if the girl wants it," Dr. D. says.

Some of the kids are sitting on the floor, smoking Newports. The girl runs to get an ashtray. Mr. Steam is hip-hop-dancing.

The girl's crouched down in a wicker chair, watching. She's not sure what's going to happen.

You can see how it would occur: She's alone and there are six kids in her apartment. She doesn't know them very well, but they're very popular at her school, a Manhattan private

school—they're famous, even.

Suppose these kids decide to turn this evening into her very own *Clockwork Orange*—"wilding" through the place, ripping off electronics, her parents' clothing (things some of them say they've done before), maybe all that silver . . .

If she called the police, she might have to ask herself later, what would everybody think of her?

Would these kids come and get her, beat her up?

How would she explain it all to her parents?

They find her *Buns of Steel* video and put it on. "Yo, you watch this?" asks one of the boys.

"No," she shakes her head.

The Lycra woman on the video is sticking out her rear end, doing stretching exercises. Mr. Steam imitates her, making farting noises. Pink stands up and imitates Mr. Steam. They're all laughing now, ignoring the girl.

She looks like she's about to cry again and leaves the room.

Ellen goes to find her. Ellen comes back and says, "You have to go."

"Why?"

"Yo, you have to go!"

There's some murmuring between Hershey and Ellen. The girl does not reappear.

Everyone's very quiet on the elevator ride down.

"It was her second time. He didn't use a condom," Hershey whispers once we're outside and away from the boys.

It happened a few nights ago. The guy was in his late twenties; the girl met him when she was out at the Tunnel with Ellen. She got drunk; she brought him back to her apartment. "He hasn't even called her."

We walk along silently in the cold.

Hershey shrugs. "She needs to get on with her life."

We keep walking.

Hershey seems to feel the need to say something else. "I just want to tell her—don't trust anybody."

AS I WATCHED THESE KIDS, I KEPT WONDERING WHAT KIND OF adults they would become. That night with Pete and A.Z., I asked them where they saw themselves down the road.

"In a couple of years," said Pete, "I start off some ill, ill cartel. Gonna have a legal job. I'll just have another way of laun-

dering money." He added that he got 1520 on his SATs and plans to go to Columbia.

"What we're doing's actually very good business experience," said A.Z.

Pete said, "I'm not just some Jamaican guy. I'm not going to do this for the rest of my life.

"The real money is to go legit. Do the button-downs and corduroys. Catch your action on the mainstream. I laugh at people who make a couple hundred dollars a week.

"These other kids you been talking to," he said with a sigh, "they're just not on our level."

"Back in the days—" laughed A.Z.

"Back in the days!" said Pete.

Which meant, essentially, the last couple of years. And then they were off talking about how large they've lived—having slaves rent helicopters to fly them out to parties in the Hamptons, hiring \$750-an-hour escorts, "Miss Centerfold that don't have no job no more." They told me that some

of their fellow crew members have girlfriends who are models. (Later, they introduced me to one of them. She does print ads for a top women's designer.)

"We've had kids spend \$10,000 on us in one *weekend*," said A.Z., blinking meaningfully to make sure I'd gotten it.

"We're players," said Pete.

"Niggaz," A.Z. said, winking. "Write that with two z's."

"THEY'RE WILDING," PABLO SAYS OF PETE AND A.Z., SHAKING HIS head. "They haven't learned yet."

Pablo's the biggest pot dealer in the city for the private-school market. He says he used to live large, like Pete and A.Z. do, but now he's got goals, and he's saving his money.

We're in the bulletproof Benz, doing rills. With Pablo, it feels more like a job. Chi's here. Pops is driving. They don't say much, driving around and around—the music, as always, booming. East Side, West Side, midtown, downtown, we meet up with custies and they give Pablo "the pound." That's the handshake exchanging money and drugs. Pablo's selling chronic, \$50, \$100 bags he keeps in a Tupperware container in his backpack. He carries a small scale around; he carefully weighs out product in the car. It's clear he's honest.

Pablo's tall and mellow, 20, good-looking. His family is poor—Colombian immigrants—and he says he helps support them. He's one of the founders of BFS (Born for Self).

Tonight, in about three hours, I watch him collect \$800—cash, of course. Pablo says that's slow. He says he can make \$5,000 to \$6,000 a week selling pot. But with school—he's going to college on Long Island—he's had to cut back to make time for studying. Later tonight, he says, he has to write a paper on the rights of handicapped people.

Pablo says he would like to be a writer.

Along Park Avenue, it looks like a *New Yorker* cover—dressed-up rich folks with umbrellas getting into cabs, walking their dogs. Kids emerge from the shadows and give Pablo the pound; hop in the Benz for a moment, give him the pound. Then they go back inside their townhouses, their landmark buildings.

At Park in the 90s, a boy who looks like Ferris Bueller approaches the car with wild eyes—his dad and little sister have come back from somewhere just as he's coming over. "I'm caught," he whispers, dry-mouthed. Still, through the window of the car, he gives Pablo the pound. "Thanks, B."

The boy's father, a short, bespectacled man in a windbreaker, squints quizzically from the lighted entryway of their apartment building, watching.

The boy runs back toward his father. The pot is on him somewhere.

"It's all good," says Chi. "He'll just say he was saying hello to some friends."

"All these kids are my friends," Pablo says in his slow, manly way. "I like every single one of them."

LATER THAT NIGHT, PABLO AND Chi take me to Ruby Falls, on Bleecker and Bowery, a meeting place for Manhattan's harder crews (the club burned down in late November). Ruby Falls has no sign. But somehow its underground cachet has regis-

tered on the radar screens of the "tighties"—white, uptight people. There are about 30 people waiting outside to be allowed to enter. "Twenty dollars for tighties," laughs Chi, sailing through the door.

The club's dark inside, lit only by a thronged, curving bar and reflected disco-ball light; the hip-hop's blasting so loud it seems like we're in one big, room-size boomer. The floor is filled with boys, young men, in their Antarctic gear, their goatees and hoop earrings; they're smoking Newports, shouting to be heard above the noise, talking business—chilling. Girls, young women, who look as if they've spent all day getting ready to come here, are "jocking" the boys (as the boys like to say), fly girls making eyes.

Chi's standing in the middle of the club with Duanne, a pot supplier; they're talking over something, nodding. Pablo and his girl—she's lithe and pretty and goes to an Ivy League school—are having a moment aside. She looks at Pablo as if he were the center of the world. Pablo looks a little tense; RFC and BFS have had beef in the past, though now "they're making money together," another BFS member tells me. "They used to want to kill each other."

I keep my hand on my gun 'cause they got me on the run—

RFC has its own table. Fifteen, twenty members fill the length of a long banquette, all looking hard and saying nothing. Unaccountably, the Picasso-faced actress, Rossy De Palma, from Almodóvar's movies sits with them; she's perched on top of the banquette, moving her head to the beat. . . . "It's not polite to stare," an RFC member tells me.

Ain't nothin' but a gangsta party—

RFC is one of the two or three "realer" crews in the city. "Everyone else you talk to is gonna give you this slaving shit," one member says. "Those motherfuckers aren't real. Not one of these other ones is like us. They'll be faking the funk forever."

RFC territory is downtown, the Village, but their members come from all boroughs. One of the reasons the Village is so heavily patrolled by police now, an RFC member claims, is that between 1991—when the crew started—and 1993, "we ran the Village. Every single night, 100 to 150 of us were racking from stores, taking coats. Beating people

"ALL THESE RICH KIDS," SAYS SEEK, "TRYING TO GET INTO THE GHETTO LIFESTYLE, BROUGHT US INTO THEIR HOMES TO IMPRESS US, TO SHOW OFF TO THEIR FRIENDS."

up, cracking forties over people's heads. The Village is on lockdown pretty much because of us."

They used to convene outside the McDonald's at Sixth Avenue and West 3rd Street—so many "D," deep, that one Halloween, they say, they got a ticket for "parading without a license."

"The real motherfuckers pull out a razor and start cutting motherfuckers," says one member. "RFC cut a girl."

Biggie, one of RFC's leaders, sits at the end of their long table. He's big; wearing sweatpants and a hooded sweatshirt. Biggie doesn't like to discuss any of his crew's alleged activities but simply wants to say that there is more to all this than I may be hearing.

"We're a brotherhood," he says. He looks at me intently. His voice is considered, deep. "We're family."

"Talk to our public speaker," says Biggie. "He would do better."

Biggie motions for Manny.

Manny comes: He's a short white guy with tousled blond hair, 20. Interestingly, his "stilo," style, isn't to talk or dress like a hip-hop kid. And it works. "These guys don't really like white people," Manny says, shrugging. RFC likes him.

The letters for their crew come not just from Running from Cops but from the night, "back in the days," five years ago, when Manny stole 50 cans of spray paint and splattered all five boroughs with his graffiti tags, never stopping until he was famous—for Racking Fifty Cans. Now he's a student at an exclusive art school.

The candlelight from the table illuminates Manny's face. He says, "Whatever you do with all this, make it profound."

Julian plops down on the banquette. He's a white private-school student, 16, wearing a ski cap, funny, funky. He's the biggest pot dealer for private-school kids in the Village.

"We the mans," he says.

Bitches get ready for the throw-down, this shit's about to go down.

A fight breaks out in a corner of the club. Suddenly, Biggie springs from his seat. His huge body leaps over the table; RFC heads follow him in a wave. Cries of young men erupt, the sounds of struggle.

"A CREW IS A PLACE WHERE YOU DON'T HEAR ALL THE NOISE. There's a bond," says Seek.

He's sitting in an empty pizza restaurant near the Douglass Projects, where he grew up. Not far from the place known as Rock City Park at 98th Street, where CM, the Criminal Minded, started.

That was the early eighties. Seek was in elementary school then. As he got older, CM became hard-core, a nationally known crew, given "shout-outs" in rap songs.

In the years since, Seek says, he's seen 60 percent of his fellow crew members go to jail, "30 percent with problems you wouldn't believe, and the other 10 percent—okay, not locked up, shot up." He's one of the leaders; the crew is struggling to stay alive. They've made peace with RFC, despite beefs, because if not, "the city would be at war."

"You have to write this down," says Seek, all the things that make kids turn to the streets: poverty, miserable schools, lack of encouragement, no jobs. "Me and my boys did what we had to do because we had nowhere else to go." And then Seek went to jail.

"I served three years for selling crack."

When he came home in 1994, he says, "everything was different."

"These rich kids brought in a whole different image. You started to see all this wannabe shit. These kids with Mommy and Daddy from well-off families trying to get into the ghetto type of lifestyle.

"All these rich kids coming in trying to be like us—they created their own world. They brought us to their homes to impress us, show off to their friends.

"They brought people into their homes they knew was criminals." Seek makes a face. "I never understood that. Why put your family in that position?"

"We took everything we saw. Anytime we wanted, we would rob them.

"These kids don't belong. They play at it. It offends me.

"We're living it every day. Coming outside worried about shoot-outs. What you have to worry about when you step out on Park Avenue?" He almost laughs. "These kids never lived through seeing their family members on crack.

"I could scheme every single one of them. I've beaten a lot of them up.

"Let them have their little crews. Let them make their money. They don't need it."

He shakes his head. "Back in the day, we were making good money . . .

"I spent it. All. Spent it all on living."

Seek has one more thing to say before he goes. He regrets not his crimes but that he didn't save his money. "If we knew then what we know now, we'd all be rich."

I ask him whether he still commits crimes.

There's a long pause. "If I had \$50,000 today, I'd put it into a Laundromat."