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Literary Material
Marked in 20 Word Groups

She Wants Out

Part I

It's a hot, still summer day in Sioux City, and downtown is deserted. The streets look like a movie set ¹ for a film about an all-American town, long after the cast and crew have left. I count more empty ² storefronts than people. A car creeps slowly down the avenue, its windows rolled up. This isn't at all how I ³ pictured gang territory.

Sioux City rises out of the flat prairie, surrounded by cornfields and cow pastures, but its rural ⁴ appearance is deceiving. According to Ashley Paul, 16, who until recently belonged to the West Side Locals, it's home to ⁵ more than five major gangs, which fight one another over turf and pride. National statistics show that gang activity is ⁶ declining in large urban areas but rising in small cities and towns. "There's nothing for most of us here," says ⁷ Ashley. "The gangs give us something to feel proud of." In a place where unemployment is high and even the ⁸ FM radio stations sound distant and full of static, it's easy to see why gang life is appealing to

⁹ girls like Ashley. "It made me feel cool," she says. "It made me feel like I was part of something ¹⁰ special."

Ashley and I are sitting on the narrow front porch of her house. Ashley wears no makeup, and her ¹¹ shiny black hair reaches down to the middle of her back. Dressed in jean shorts, sneakers, and a plaid shirt ¹² over a white tank, she leans her chair back against the porch railing as she talks quietly about her years ¹³ with the Locals. She keeps an eye on the road, checking out some guys who are standing on the corner. ¹⁴ She's so calm, watchful, and well spoken that she seems older. I expect it's because she grew up so fast. ¹⁵ "I began stealing cars when I was 9," Ashley says slowly. By the time she was 14, she was in ¹⁶ juvenile detention.

The Locals have been part of Ashley's life for as long as she can remember. Her older brothers, ¹⁷ John, now 22, and Travis, 18, both ran with the gang. "They never actually said, 'We want you to ¹⁸ join,'" Ashley says. "But they would always tell me how great it was, and how they all drank and partied ¹⁹ together. They made sure I knew I was missing out on something," she says, with a barely audible laugh.

Ashley's ²⁰ brothers were especially important to her because when she was about 4 years old, her mom, Ronda, a member of ²¹ the Sioux tribe, took off for a reservation in Nebraska to kick a drug habit. Her dad wasn't around. Her ²² mom came back when Ashley was 8, but by then Ashley and her brothers and sisters were stuck in the ²³ foster care system. Ashley didn't get along with her foster mom. "I

started running away all the time," says Ashley. ²⁴ Her brothers and many of her cousins were her world, and they were Locals. "When I started hanging out with ²⁵ a gang, when I was 9, it just seemed like where I belonged."

Ashley didn't officially become a Local until ²⁶ she was 12. Her brothers thought she was too young. They prepped her for gang life anyway, though, by teaching ²⁷ her to fight and steal cars before she could even see over the steering wheel. "I was nervous the first ²⁸ time I stole one," she says, smiling slightly. "But then I got an adrenaline rush, like, Yeah, I can't believe ²⁹ I'm really doing this. It was exciting. You have a moment of anxiety. You think about getting caught. But now ³⁰ you've got this car and you think, I can do whatever I want with it, because it's just a stolen ³¹ car."

Ashley was usually with Travis and one or two gang members. Sometimes they would race other Locals on the ³² flat, straight highways around Sioux City. "It was fun. We would make bets for \$20, or a bottle of ³³ whiskey, about who could pull ahead first," Ashley says. Most of the time, though, they would drive the cars to ³⁴ a chop shop in Omaha, 100 miles away. They would make 3- to \$500 a car and ³⁵ then take a cab home.

"I had to give half the money to John, because he gave me the address ³⁶ of the chop shop," she says. The rest she would split with whoever came along. "It

was too much money ³⁷ for us to handle," she says. "I spent it all on candy and junk food and beer. I would get ³⁸ drunk to celebrate."

Ashley's decision to finally join the Locals was an easy one. "I think it's because so many ³⁹ of the members were Native American, and she was in a white foster home," says her mom, Ronda, an outgoing ⁴⁰ woman with a big, warm smile. "She needed to fit in."

Ashley says she wanted to be like the Local ⁴¹ girls. "I learned off them. They would be like, 'Don't smoke cigarettes, they're bad for you,' although they all did. ⁴² They would look out for me at parties. They would tell me, 'If you get a buzz, that's when you ⁴³ quit drinking, because guys will take advantage of you.'" And the 20 or so girls who make up a third ⁴⁴ of the Locals' membership were like celebrities. "They had boyfriends, they had money. A lot of them had brand new ⁴⁵ cars," Ashley says.