

Wasted Angels

Grampa once told me that by the time he was twenty he'd pretty much done everything that there was to do. He said it was a big mistake, that it made for a boring life. "Don't blow all your chips before dark," he said as we sat on his broken-down front porch drinking cans of Pabst. He leaned back against the house — his wooden chair on two legs — and pulled two more beers from a chipped, metal cooler. I sat on a pile of old lumber and pinched termites between my thumb and finger and listened.

"A guy oughta take things slow. Hell, I thought I'd be dead by twenty, and so I tried doing everything 'fore that. But that's the shit about life, when you're a kid you got all this energy and no brains, and when you're old, you got just the opposite, so you sit around for forty or fifty years remember'n how you screwed up."

Grampa's smart, ain't no doubt about that, he talks from experience, but he never knew Butch Nelson or anything about the Wasted Angels. The Wasted Angels wasn't really a gang, at least not to me. We were just some guys hanging out and doing stuff. When you hang-out like that for a while, you figure you ought to ban together, you know, get a name and all that crap. So that's what we did. We didn't wear colors or rumble or junk like that though, we just hung out.

Butch Nelson was kind of our leader. He came up with the name, and he'd set up our weekends which consisted of drinking beer and trying to score girls. The only members of the Angels, besides Butch, were Jon Peters, Billy Hill and me. Peters and Hill were afraid to do some of the stuff that I'd do, but they were funny and crazy, so we let them hang with us. Of course we were all second to Butch though.

We didn't know if Butch was his real name, or a name he gave himself to sound tough, but whatever it was, Butch fit his name perfectly. He had lots of hair — something all of us desperately wanted. Hair grew on his legs and chest, and he was the only kid I knew who could grow a real beard. We all tried, but he could really grow

something thick and full. He dropped out of the ninth grade after failing twice, mostly because he'd never show up to classes. Some guy laughed at him once because of him being a drop-out. Butch pulled the guy's jacket up over his head like in a hockey fight and only stopped pounding on him when some other guys came over to see what was going on. Butch had beat the kid pretty bad, so we bolted out of there. Later Peters heard the guy had had to go to the hospital and stay overnight. "Good," was all Butch said when we told him.

I stayed in school for the girls. I could not have cared less about books, but where else could I get access to so many girls? Butch knew the score, and Peters, Hill and me would get girls for him too. During the week, we'd spend the school days trying to find girls who wanted to get drunk with us on the weekend. Butch had no trouble buying cigarettes and beer so we'd sort of trade — we'd get the girls and he'd get the merchandise. There were a lot of girls, when we told them about the beer and cigarettes, who would come out with us. The best nights were when we could get four girls. Usually we could only find two or three and only a couple guys would get any action. The others would just have to sit and chill. Me, Hill, and Peters would take turns doing this. Since Butch got us the beer, he never had to sit out.

Occasionally one of us would go with one of these girls for a few weeks, but only if they would go all the way. Most of the girls who drank with us would lay out on a blanket and open-mouth kiss. Some would even let you feel them up, but there were only a few that would do more than that. Butch seemed to always get the hot girls. Most times I'd be wrestling to feel up my girl, when right next to me, Butch would be scoring. I guess it was hard to say no to Butch. He was one of those guys who just got what he wanted. I didn't exactly think him dangerous then, but I knew that Butch was one of those guys who'd do anything to win. He had balls enough to take anything one more step. Like if a guy wanted to fist-fight, Butch would bring a bat, if the guy had a chain, Butch would pull a knife. As far as I knew, it never went more than a knife. Most

guys don't want to knife-fight, and they'd back down then, and Butch would, in our minds, be the winner. I think he knew that guys wouldn't go as far as he would, but I also think he would have gone farther if he had too.

One week last spring, when the nights were starting to warm up enough that we could get girls to stay outside with us instead of sneaking into basements, Butch told us to get four girls and meet him at the dam that Saturday night. He said he'd get some shit, and we'd have a little party. We found a couple of girls who said they'd bring two of their friends from another school. The one girl, Brenda, had drunk with us before but wouldn't give nothing but kisses, so we weren't all that excited about her. Brenda's friend was Jess. Jess had broken up with some jock after the football season, and most of the guys in the school were afraid to date her. She hadn't ever been with us before, but we figured if she dated the same guy for four months, she had to have given it to him or else he would have dumped her.

Peters had a car. A big old Buick with like one hundred and fifty thousand miles on it. The fumes would kill you at a red light, but the radio was loud, and you could sit four across both benches. The trunk was so big, Peters once did a girl back there. He said it was like being in a king-sized bed, only bouncier.

We picked up Brenda and Jess at the corner of Brenda's street. Her dad was a real asshole, and there was no way we were pulling into her driveway. Brenda sat up front with Peters and Hill while Jess got in the back with me. The music was so loud that no one could talk, but we all rocked our heads with the beat. Brenda yelled out directions to the place where we were supposed to get the other girls. They were waiting, and both of them got in the back seat with me and Jess. Jess was sitting so close to me then that our thighs rubbed together.

It took us about thirty minutes to get to the dam, and then we had to hike down to the spot below where we knew Butch would be waiting. He had three twelves and a carton of Camels sitting on an old dirty blanket. He was using one of the twelves as a

seat and smoking a cigarette when we showed up. Brenda introduced her friends as Bobbie and Dawn. Butch stood up and said, "Hey," and we all awkwardly stood there for a few seconds while deciding who we were going to sit by. We always let Butch lead since he supplied the stuff, and he eventually looked right at Jess and asked her if she wanted a beer. She took one and sat down beside him. That broke the tension, and the rest of us grabbed a beer and sat down on the blanket. Brenda didn't smoke, but the other three girls did, and we lit cigarettes for them.

After two or three beers, we started pairing off and getting into the meat of the evening. Butch already had Jess lying on her side, and Peters was making a good play for Dawn who laughed at all his jokes. Trying to impress the girls, I had smoked too many cigarettes and felt a little sick to my stomach, so I let Hill work Bobbie, and I settled for Brenda. Knowing how she was, I figured she'd be happy just sitting back-to-back and milking a few beers until the others were ready to go.

Even though Brenda wouldn't give a guy nothing, she was a pretty cool girl. She didn't act like she was better than us like a lot of the girls did. She'd talk to us in the halls and even stuck up for us sometimes. Once she even wrote an article in the school paper about how we weren't a real gang, but just some guys who liked to hang out together. I really thought that was all right.

I grabbed four beers and motioned for Brenda to sit back-to-back with me. We leaned against each other, and I popped open two of the cans. I gave one to Brenda, and I sucked down about half the other can without even breathing. I had that nicotine taste in my mouth, and, even though it never worked, I was trying to wash it out. The back of our heads touched as we looked out into our own dark areas.

Butch had found this spot the summer before, and we all agreed it was a great place to mess around. The parking lot was far enough away that even if some cops saw our car and got suspicious, they'd never climb down into the woods to find us. There was a trail leading all the way down to the bottom of the dam, and sometimes old guys

with fishing poles and booze would climb down and light lanterns, but the trail was about fifty yards from our spot, and they usually never paid us no mind. The area was dark, but the flood lights on top of the dam threw a dim glow on the blanket--not so bright that you could really see, but bright enough that you didn't need flashlights. Off the blanket though, the poplar trees and thorny undergrowth were thick enough that it was pitch black. Usually, if you thought your girl was going to let you have some, you'd try to get her a little off the blanket where it was darker and more private.

The water of Lake George fell about two hundred feet from the dam gates till it landed in this little stream at the bottom. It was weird how that huge lake could spill with so much force, but then turn into this puny little stream full of big rocks. Butch used to say that if that dam ever broke when we were messing around on our blanket, we'd all be done for. More than anything else, I think that's why he liked the spot, the possible danger, like doing a girl on top of a volcano, never knowing if it might just start spewing lava all over the place and burn the shit out of you.

Sitting with our backs touching, leaning into each other for support, Brenda and me could hear the water falling from the dam gates, the crickets chirping from the woods, and the other three couples messing around. It was kind of sexy being like that actually. I mean, for the first time since I knew what sex was, I was happy just to be mellow with a girl. There was something tender about leaning into each other. Instead of fighting for progress, working my hands and trying to be sneaky, I could relax and be happy. I remember thinking about how girls always said in those stupid teen magazines that they liked the holding stuff better than the actual sex. That night, I almost understood.

Peters and Hill were kissing their girls, and, when their jaws got tired, they'd take a break and drink beer. Neither of them was going to get anything more off these girls, and they both knew it. But Butch and Jess had rolled off the blanket and into the shadows of the woods. Brenda and me could hear them wrestling around, but we

couldn't really see anything. "You think she'll admit that she's been messing with him when we get back to school?"

"Usually she pretends like she was too drunk to know what happened."

"What about you, are you too drunk?"

"I usually tell her that I was."

We sat quietly for a few minutes and listened as the wrestling in the shadows got more active. "Stop it," Jess said in a whisper, but we all heard.

"Come on, you know you want it."

"Stop, Butch, please stop." Jess's voice was louder now, as if checking that we were still there.

I heard a hard slap of skin against skin. There was no way of knowing who hit who, but the slap was followed by more wrestling and Butch giggling. Jess must have been trying to stand up, because I could hear Butch telling her something about getting tackled or pinned, about liking it rough. There were a few more slapping sounds, and, by now, Peters and Hill had stopped kissing their girls and were looking into the darkness.

When we heard the ripping of fabric, Peters, Hill and me knew something was going wrong in those shadows, but we also knew Butch, and we weren't about to question him. When Brenda realized that none of us guys were going to do anything about Jess, she stood up. "Jess, you all right?"

"Mind your own business, bitch." Butch's voice shot from the darkness.

It was weird to hear his voice but not see his face. It really made you think that maybe Butch wasn't all that tough. Without the hair and man's body, with just the voice, he sounded a lot like me.

Brenda staggered into the darkness where the voice had come from. "What the fuck did you say to me?"

"Fuck off, you cunt." Butch must have pushed her because I heard her gasp, and then I saw her fall back out of the shadows and onto the blanket. I couldn't really tell, but I think her head bounced off the ground when she fell. Brenda was not used to drinking all the time, and she was pretty wasted. She got right up, like a wrestler climbing back into the ring, and stumbled back to get Jess. Only this time, when she came back onto the blanket, she was holding her eye and crying. "You fuck'n bastard, let her go, you fuck'n bastard."

I tried to console Brenda, but she was getting out of control and making a lot of noise.

"Take those bitches home and then come back for this one. I'll be done with her by then." Butch wasn't making a suggestion. His voice was now as hairy as his legs, and I knew my early thought about Butch being a lot like me was wrong, dead wrong.

"Fuck that, I ain't going, till Jess goes, you bastard," Brenda yelled back over toward him. "Let her go, Butch, or I'll start screaming even louder."

For about twenty seconds the only sounds were the water and the crickets, and then Jess came hurtling toward us. Her T-shirt was ripped down the front, her jeans were undone, and she was pretty messed up looking. She fell forward into Hill.

"Take all the fucks home to their little daddies."

Butch did not emerge from the shadows, and Brenda and me basically carried Jess up to the car. It was hard to tell just what about Jess's behavior was booze and what was whatever happened in those shadows, but she was walking dead. Her head flipped around, and she didn't talk, she just kind of moaned and sobbed. She hurled twice on the way to the car. Peters and Hill and their girls walked in front of us, and Hill helped me get Jess into the backseat. When everyone was in the car. I gave Peters and Hill the two beers I had in my coat pocket. "Drop them off and come on back and get me, all right."

"Ain't you coming with us?"

"No, I guess Butch needs someone to calm him down."

The Buick pulled away, and everything quieted. I heard the slow chirping of crickets and the low roar of water rushing from Lake George through the gates and falling. The stars were out, and Butch was on his back looking at them when I made it back to the blanket. He popped a can of beer and poured it into his mouth. Some of it missed and trickled down either side of his face and onto the blanket. I took two more beers from the cooler. I handed one to Butch and then sat down beside him. My stomach was feeling a little better. I lit a cigarette, and, for a long time, Butch and me just sat there and stared up at the sky.

"You think anyone lives out there?" Butch didn't look at me.

"Yeah. Probably. I mean there's got to be more than this."

"Sometimes I think it'd be cool to go out there, you know, like *Star Wars* or something."

The blanket was getting damp from the night air. I moved over and sat on one of the crushed cardboard containers that the beer had come in. From that angle I could see that Butch's jeans were unhitched. I wanted to ask him about Jess, but I knew he wouldn't tell me anything.

"You know, if I was out there exploring, I wouldn't just bring back rocks and shit, I'd bring back fuck'n aliens."

I stood up and started toward the overlook. "I gotta piss."

"Yeah, me too."

It had become somewhat of a tradition for us to pee off the overlook. The overlook was a cement platform with an iron railing around its three edge sides to keep little kids from falling off. You could stand on the platform and see the water fall from the dam into the stream. We always hopped the guardrail, stood on the edge, and watched our pee drop all the way down onto the big rocks which littered the stream.

The floodlights on the dam lit the area, and you could see your pee start to sparkle about halfway down. Butch stood beside me.

"What happened to that girl?" he asked.

"Which one?"

"The one you got for me."

"She left with Peters and Hill."

"Shit. She was fine."

I zipped up and stood there until Butch hitched his pants. We leaned against the outside of the railing and lit cigarettes.

"Did you get anything off yours?"

"No, we just sat around and talked."

"That sucks. You know those girls want to screw around, but they're told to deny it. You know, it's all psychological. They just play with your head. They can't just lay out and spread. Shit, they need to feel like you made them do it. See, that way they ain't got to feel guilty about getting some."

I pinched the butt of my cigarette and flicked it out into the night. With my eyes, I followed the small amber light down till I couldn't see it anymore and then, I looked at Butch. He had a beer in his jacket pocket which he pulled out and opened.

"You want some of this?"

"I'll get one back at the blanket."

Butch tilted his head back and guzzled as much of the beer as he could. He brought the can away from his mouth, took a big breath of air, and then downed the rest of the can. He crushed the empty can with his hand and tossed it. Standing straight up, he belched loudly. He was drunk. I straightened up and put my hand on his back. He looked at me like he needed me to touch him, like he needed a friend. For a split second I saw my grampa's face, then I pushed Butch off the overlook. He didn't scream or anything. Just that belch and then the crickets and the water. I didn't even

hear him hit the rocks. One minute there were two people standing there, and then it was only me, alone.

I looked down, but there wasn't anything to see. Leaning back against the rail, I smoked another cigarette before I climbed back and walked to the blanket. I loaded my jacket pockets with beers and took a fresh pack of smokes from the carton. Leaving everything else, I hiked up to the parking lot.

I had smoked two cigarettes and downed one of the beers before the Buick pulled up.

"Where's Butch?" Peters asked when I got in the back seat.

"I couldn't find him. He must have been pissed about that Jess girl and gone off on his own. You get those girls home?"

"You got any more beer?"

"Yeah."

I never told anybody what happened at the overlook and nobody, other than Peters and Hill, seemed to notice that Butch was gone. Me, Peters and Hill drove around a couple nights looking for him, but after that Peters started saying he heard Butch joined the Marines, and Hill didn't really seem to care.

Without Butch, it wasn't so easy to get beer, and, when Peters' Buick broke down, the three of us just kind of stopped hanging out together. I ended up dating Brenda a few more times, but nothing really happened between us. She asked me about Butch once, but I told her I didn't hang with him anymore, and she dropped it. Jess came back to school on that Monday like nothing had happened. We all just went on.

I haven't graduated yet, but if I take summer school, I'm supposed to get my diploma in the fall. Sometimes I still go see Grampa, and we sit on his porch and drink Pabst. He's sixty-eight and has a bad hip from this knife fight he got into when he was

a kid. I help him get from his chair to the toilet and back when I'm there, otherwise it would take him all day.