

1st Prize, Carolina Woman 2020 Writing Contest



A Tale of Two Tumbles
By Ashley Memory



“I was black and blue for a while. But I knew how to fall.” – Stuntwoman Hazel Hash Warp, speaking in 2005 at age 91 to the Bozeman Daily Chronicle.

Seventy-two years after the world first saw my third cousin Hazel Hash Warp dive headfirst down the steps of Tara in the premiere of the movie *Gone with the Wind*, my legs suddenly crumpled. It was a Saturday in June 2011, and I was crossing the parking lot to Food Lion in Pittsboro, North Carolina.

More than ten years into multiple sclerosis, then at age 44, I had fallen before. The nerves in my legs don’t respond properly to the signals in my brain, and my left leg doesn’t always lift high enough to clear steps, rugs, and other obstacles, which causes me to stumble and sometimes fall. But this tumble was different. Out of nowhere, my legs just gave way, and my knees hit the asphalt. *BAM!* At that moment, I thought of Hazel.

“I WAS A GO-GETTER. I TOOK ANYTHING I COULD GET.”

We never met. Born on November 11, 1914, Hazel was the niece of my great-grandfather Albert “Hobson” Hash. She grew up in the wild and open country of Sweet Grass County, Montana.

A self-described “runt,” about my size at just over 5 feet tall, Hazel grew up riding horses. Bareback. Sometimes even two at a time. Standing. She dropped out of school to work as a trick rider in California and once there, she caught the attention of the director of *Gone with the Wind*.

"CLARK TOLD ME I WAS GOING TO BREAK MY NECK. I HAVEN'T YET."

I've watched Scarlett O'Hara's infamous tumble countless times. It's Scene 56 on the second disc of the 70th Anniversary Commemorative Edition on DVD. “Maybe you'll have an accident,” snarls Clark to Vivien, speaking of Scarlett's unborn child, and then we see the back of Scarlett's head – which is now the head of my cousin in a dark-brown wig. When Hazel pummels Clark with her fists, she appears to lose balance and dives headfirst over the red-carpeted stairs. Then she rolls, head over heels, not once, but twice, before landing on her back at the bottom of the staircase. It was melodramatic, yes. Overdone, certainly. Even a touch comical. But it remains an unbelievable stunt.

Clark Gable liked Hazel. Vivien Leigh did, too. The woman who witnessed my fall tilted her head in contempt. She exuded an air of Havarti cheese and crackers, and the need to breeze off to something far more important than me. She may have also thought I was drunk or drugged. How dare I occupy even a tiny wedge of her peripheral vision?

I didn't expect to be rescued, as Rhett swept away Scarlett, but I would have welcomed anything. A flicker of a smile. Even just a crinkle around the eyes.

I'M A GO-GETTER. I TAKE ANY WORDS I CAN GET.

I never learned to tumble. I seek my thrill in words. I'm a go-getter of words. I fling myself headlong into the adventure of writing. The stunt, for me, is to flick a word like *tangle* into the air and watch it twine into a sentence, a story, a poem: *a tangle of thistle and clover*. To look up a word like *fall* and learn it comes from the Old English *fallan*, that it's Germanic in origin, related to the Dutch *vallen*, and partly from Old Norse *fall*, which means *downfall*, or *sin*. I know M.S. isn't a sin. But falling brings shame.

I WAS BLACK AND BLUE FOR A WHILE.

I was sore for a few days. And I was scared. After my fall, I realized that my miracle of a medicine – a drug called Tysabri – wasn't a silver bullet. This could happen again. But are we ever the same after a fall? When I rose, I entered a new world. A world where, for the first time in my life, I knew how it felt to be on my knees, struggling to get to my feet while another person walked so callously away.

BUT I KNEW.

Hazel lived until August 26, 2008, longer than nearly anyone from the movie. After my fall, I started to reimagine the Hazel I knew from her interview. Surely the 91-year-old wisecracking crone once trembled herself. Especially before plunging down that staircase. Of course her heart twisted as she sucked in that last breath. As she closed her eyes, she saw the snow-capped Crazy Mountains of Harlowton, Montana. She may have even tasted the bitterroot-tinged butter made from the milk of her family's cows. Had she sat under the stars with a hometown boy and considered giving her career up for him? Maybe, maybe not. I don't know how you learn to fall,

even by practicing. Like Hazel and me, you just do what comes naturally, throw your hands out first, let your arms take the shock of the blow, and then you try to roll onto the soft parts of your body. And you pray. *Please God. Please, please, please. Help me learn....*

HOW TO FALL.

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