

A watercolor illustration of a two-story house with a yellowish-brown facade and a blue sky background. On the left, three silhouettes of people are climbing a long ladder that reaches the roof. In the foreground, a large black dog sits on the grass, looking towards the viewer. A smaller, brown and white dog is running towards the left, and a grey and white cat is sitting on the grass, looking towards the right. The house has a window on the upper floor and a window on the lower floor. A trash can and some papers are visible near the base of the house.

# You Can't Iron A Wrinkled Birthday Suit

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## Operation Wonder Woman

**S**ilhouetted against the denim sky, two women ascended a ladder behind the yellow brick McClellan building, Pine Crossing's defunct five-and-dime store. The third woman, meant to be steadying the ladder, threw up in a forsythia bush. She assigned her queasiness to the hour—four in the morning—and the garish green view through her night-vision goggles.

With ease, the three-part extension ladder reached the parapet of the second-story roof. Seventy-something Grace, clad in a black spandex outfit, her Tide-white hair stuffed under an ancient black bathing cap, went first. The most athletic of the three women, she scampered up the ladder like a spider in a hurry, her grandson's paintball gun bungee-corded to her backpack, her fanny pack bulging with paintballs.

As she climbed, Grace reflected on the moment. How exactly had she gotten here? Wacky ideas were the trio's forte, Grace realized, but this caper was off the charts. Hazel, now wiping her mouth at the bottom of the ladder, had been one of her more creative physical education students in high school. Hazel had married the day after graduation, then vanished for many years into Grace's mental file labeled "former students."

Recently retired from New Jersey to Pine Crossing, North Carolina, Grace had been passing a Humane Society Adopt-A-Thon at the local pet supply store one day when she stopped in her tracks. There was something familiar about the woman returning a kitten to its crate. *What was her name? Hazel? Yes, Hazel.*

In the conversation that had followed, Grace discovered that Hazel, now a

widow, was also a recent émigré from New Jersey. The friend with Hazel that day, Gus, was her newly rediscovered college friend, a transplant from New England.

Now living in the downtown home she'd inherited from her parents, Hazel insisted Grace and Gus come to dinner that evening, and the rest, as they say, became wonder woman history.

In Grace's mind, Hazel was an ordinary woman with a middle-class upbringing and outlook, but now and then, she became a radical mastermind—this morning being a case in point. Hazel's support for Bruce, her significant other, was unqualified. As board member and pro-bono counsel for the Historical Prevention Society, he wanted with all his heart and mind to save the McClellan building. Therefore, so did Hazel; and therefore, here they were on this ladder.

Looking down at Gus, Grace smiled to herself—Gus was a good friend. Not quite sixty, Gus still worked part-time as a vet tech, so she didn't have as much free time, but she showed up for every plot and plan, kvetching, just like now.

"Let's move it," Gus said, groaning as she tested the second rung. She, too, wondered how she got here. Time and sleep were precious commodities and this wasn't on her to-do list. Nevertheless, friends were friends. Hazel had helped her rescue countless animals from euthanasia and listened to her conundrums over the years. And even though there'd been that hiatus while Hazel was married and raising her kids, college friendships have a special glue. Gus smiled as she recalled the day her cart collided with Hazel's in the Pine Crossing supermarket a dozen years ago. Her interest in "straightening out" the offending party stilled, becoming tears of joy when she realized Hazel was the errant shopping cart driver.

Sighing, Gus struggled up the ladder. Her over-fifty-and-a-few-extra-pounds body and her mismatched black ensemble suggested an adventuresome tortoise. She mumbled into the cool spring air, "This is what friends do, it's only two stories, it's what friends do." She wondered about Hazel, but knew better than to look down until she was standing on the roof.

On the ground, brusquely wiping her mouth, Hazel collected her dignity

and stepped on the bottom rung as if it were the first step to the gallows. Dubbed their “fearless leader” because this was her idea, she shifted her backpack to support the sling chair on her shoulder. Closing her eyes, she hoisted her XXL body upward, tilting the ladder.

“EEEEK!” Gus screamed as softly as she could, “I almost slipped!”

“Sorry,” Hazel mouthed. Then in frustration, she yelled, “You’re supposed to hang on!”

“Sheesh! Hush you two! Pay attention!” The admonition floated down from Grace, now standing on the roof. Hands on her knees, she caught her breath and pushed her packs and paintball gun aside so Gus could plop over the wall. Shaking, Gus did just that, using the wall as leverage to lurch to her feet.

Hazel muttered, “I think I can, I think I can,” into her bosom with each step on the ladder. Without warning, her mind overloaded with images of her derriere as viewed from the ground. *What if there are pictures, TV news?* Sweating in her night-vision goggles, Hazel focused her eyes on one rung at a time. She reached the top and froze.

“Hazel! *Look at me!*” Gus commanded as she and Grace hauled her over the wall, losing the sling chair, which landed in a small tree at the base of the building.

“Why did you two let me talk you into this?” Hazel wailed, righting herself and shedding her packs to bury her face in her hands. “You know I hate heights. What if this mission fails? And what about the media? All I could imagine on that ladder was my huge butt attached to wobbly, stretch-marked thighs.” Hazel howled through her fingers.

Grace rolled her eyes and walked away to inspect their rooftop domain.

Trying to reassure Hazel, Gus exclaimed, “So, what . . . *I’m* a bathing beauty? *This* is a fabulous ensemble? So chic, yet so comfortable,” she continued, yanking the crotch of her cut-off leotards below her knees. Next, she grabbed the spare tire around her belly, flapping it toward Hazel. “And *this* is my six-pack abs!” Into it now, Gus danced around, wagging her butt cheeks and flapping her underarm wings. “I’m a *real* sex queen if you’re into flab, cellulite, and blue veins.”

Gus waggled on until Hazel finally sniffed “okay okay” and pulled a tissue from the folds in her clothing. “How about some gum?”

“Sure,” Gus replied as Hazel fished in her fanny pack.

Grace appeared a beat later, her hands full of five-gallon plastic buckets she'd scavenged near the front of the building.

“Look what I found,” she sang out. “Seats and a latrine! There's lots of stuff over there, and the roof seems solid to me. Who said there were holes in it?” Grace distributed the pails upside down with one in the middle for a table. She placed the last bucket, right side up, between the chimney and the air vent and stood back to admire her handiwork, spanking her hands together. *That's done.*

Hazel handed Gus a piece of gum and inhaled through her teeth, squinting doubtfully at the pail by the chimney. Gus grimaced as if she had just sucked a lemon or worse. *Latrine indeed*, Gus thought. *I'd explode first.*

“Where's my chair?” Hazel asked, looking around as she handed Grace the gum.

“It fell when we dragged you off the ladder,” Grace explained, deadpan. “It's in a treetop. We couldn't save both the chair *and* your pack of coffee and scones.”

“I took a swipe at the chair,” Gus consoled, “but I missed.”

“Well,” was all Hazel said, so the women tested the pails and chewed their gum.

“Look yonder,” Gus said, pulling off her goggles. “First light. It must be around six. Let's reconnoiter. What's the plan, Hazel?”

“In a minute,” Hazel replied, pushing up from her pail. She walked to the wall and looked down at her chair in the tree, locking into a morbid fascination with the height, wondering if she'd survive a fall, what her injuries might be, what it would feel like.

“Looks way higher from up here than from down there,” Hazel said as Grace and Gus flanked her. Hazel stepped away from the wall. “I can't believe I climbed that ladder.”

“It's just two stories,” Gus answered, raising her gaze to neighboring rooftops, most of which were similar to this one. “If there was a fire, you'd be the first to jump.”

“Shut your mouth, Augusta Roberts,” Hazel admonished, shuddering as she took a last look at the ground. “Besides, this is the floor of the *third* story!”

Regaining their seats, the women assessed their situation. They had plenty of supplies: coffee, water, granola bars, sandwiches, fold-n-stow straw hats, sunscreen, and charged cell phones.

“Okay. *Now*, Hazel, what’s the plan?” Gus asked.

“You know the plan,” was Hazel’s retort.

“Let’s go over it again; make sure we’re all on the same page,” Grace soothed, her goggles draped over her shoulder.

“Okay,” Hazel sighed, placing her goggles on top of her head. She straightened her back and replied in exaggerated official-ese, “You have already been informed that my beloved significant other, Mr. Bruce D. Winston, pro-bono counsel for the Historical Preservation Society, acquired back-channel information that the Lewis and Son Devoted Demolition crew, employed by the United Fundamental Church, will arrive at this site between oh eight hundred and oh nine thirty with intent to demolish said building. Place of interment, the landfill.

“Now, we also know that The Historical Preservation Society versus The United Fundamental Church is the first case on the docket today in court. Court convenes at ten hundred and adjourns at twelve thirty sharp.” Hazel pointed to the north toward the courthouse. “A verdict is expected at that time. If the verdict favors Bruce—I mean, the Society—it would be good for the building to be standing, yes? And that is why we are here. To prevent the demolition until the hearing adjourns.”

“Okay, so we hold the fort no matter what, until reinforcements from Bruce materialize,” Gus confirmed like a true soldier.

“A-plus!” Hazel clapped, sitting down hard enough to push her pail into the asphalt, stopping its wobble. “To answer your question about the roof, Grace, someone from the church said the roof’s disrepair is so extensive that replacement costs would be more than the building’s assessed value.”

“Why am I thinking *Alamo defended by three blue hairs?*” Gus got up and rummaged in Hazel’s pack. “Coffee anyone?”

Over coffee served by Gus and crumbled scones from Hazel’s fanny pack,

the women watched the light brighten this misty spring morning. The shadows of nearby branches, stirred by a gentle breeze, seemed to finger and play with the litter on the rooftop. For a few minutes, this odd beauty in motion soothed their spirits until Hazel broke the spell by shrieking, "The *ladder!* We forgot to pull up the ladder!"

Making enough noise for a small machine shop, the women levered, yanked, and slid the ladder up and over, laying it along the wall. Puffing and red-faced, they returned to their pails.

"As to *how* we hold the fort," Gus began, "I'm guessing we'll stick to being undiscovered until the last minute, letting the wrecking ball or backhoe make the first move?"

"Yes," Hazel replied. "It's vital that they don't know we're here until the last safe instant. Once they know we're here, they will focus on getting us off the roof. The less time they have for that, the better. But if we wait too long, we may tumble down with the building. The hard part will be keeping them occupied until court is over."

"We can handle that," Grace said, leaning forward, elbows on her knees, face cupped in her hands.

"Yeah, but . . ." Gus answered, swallowing some coffee, "while they try to get us down, what if they hose or foam us, or whatever they do now, maybe net us?"

"Stop it, Gus," Grace commanded. "No matter what they do, someone has to get up here and physically remove us, even if they shoot us with tranquilizer darts from a helicopter."

"Okay, okay," Gus conceded, "so we hold them off, we get home, and we've accomplished what? I mean, yes, the building will stand, but what then?"

Grace stood, pushing Hazel, who was half risen and wholly irritated, back on her pail. "Gus, I know you think this building is just a bunch of yellow bricks laid in a two-story rectangle," she chided.

"You bet I do, Grace. There're thousands of old five-and-dimes all over the country." Gus got up and began pacing. "Don't be hollering at me, either of you, for what I think. If I weren't your crazy friend, I'd be asleep in my bed with my cat for a hat. A cold Corgi nose would wake me, and I'd begin my day like a

sensible person with coffee and the paper.” Gus stopped and looked at Hazel. “And today I’d be taking the dogs to the groomer instead of my neighbor Irene having to do it. I don’t think she can handle all five dogs at once, and I *don’t* want to end up with a pissed-off, used-to-be-my-friend neighbor.”

“*Aha!*” Hazel said triumphantly. “*That’s* what’s eating you. The dogs!” She crossed her fingers in her pocket and said, “Irene will be okay. I told her to leave my Lady Labrador and just take the Poms, so she’s just got four dogs.”

“Thanks, Haze. I feel way better knowing she’s only taking four. You *know* Shear Charisma’s too close to the highway if, God forbid, one of them slips a leash.” Gus sat with a resigned thump on her pail, adding, “Geez, it’s already getting hot. What time is it?”

“Gus, your animals have you too well-trained,” Hazel said.

“Gang, it’s seven oh two on a fine, spring morning,” Grace said at last, throwing her hands up. She was in no mood for their bickering right now. Sitting again on her pail, she picked up her coffee and lapsed into thought.

A few moments slipped past as the women sipped coffee. The sun was well above the horizon, over-warming their backs.

“Look,” Gus spoke up, conciliating, “I know my history. This building is Pine Crossing’s civil rights symbol. Our sit-in occurred the week after the first one in Greensboro. I even looked up our date, which I couldn’t find, but Greensboro’s was February 1, 1960, so our sit-in was around the eighth. Their lunch counter’s in a museum, while ours is moldering downstairs. That’s not right.”

Gus went on, “I’ve been in protest marches and sit-ins since the sixties. I’m sorry if I act like a turkey, but I need a really good reason for being hot and upsetting all my fifty-something joints. I swore off doing this after Seabrook in the eighties, when I was scorched on all sides from the sun above and its reflection off the parking lot. We have a similar sun situation here, gang, and I’m not convinced that if we succeed, it’ll make a difference. Can the Historical Society afford to buy the building? What is its planned use? This seems like an exercise in futility to me.”

Hazel leaned over and patted Gus’s hand. “This is hard for me too, Gus. The main thing is, *if and only if*, the court rules in favor of the Historical



Preservation Society, we are gaining time to get money together and wrest, excuse me, buy this building from the church. The church has made it clear they intend to demolish the McClellan and create yet *another* park, period." Hazel's face was a study in disdain. "The building could be a museum, artists' studios, or a collection of small shops. I hate the thought, but a well-designed parking garage would be more practical than a park!"

Grace emerged from her rumination. "Think. How cool would it be if this old store were restored to its original state? Our collective childhood memories would be resurrected, and our kids and grandkids could experience what we talk about. Remember the sheer sensual pleasure of the fans chuff-chuffing over head, the popcorn smell, the feel and sound of hardwood under foot, especially bare feet? Do you think that angle would attract support?"

"Yeah, it might," Hazel said, smoothing her hair. "How about being able to play with the toys? And touching the grownup things too, garter belts and girdles? No plastic wrap! I bought my first bra in a five-and-dime and I examined all the others too. I was fascinated by the different sizes and shapes."

"Yeah, I couldn't imagine how someone would wear those *huge* D cups," Gus said, her eyes sparkling in recollection. "Even better, it was okay to play a 45 rpm record before we bought it. And they had the best grilled cheese sandwiches and rootbeer floats."

"Good lord, Gus," Hazel exclaimed, looking at her chest. "Doubt I'll ever wear a D cup again! We had it good in those days."

Grace looked at her watch. It was now eight thirty. "Yeah, I love the old days and I'd support a restoration of the five-and-dime, but we've got to do today right first. Let's move everything over by the chimney where it won't be seen. That's where any scrap of shade will be too."

"Incoming!" Hazel screamed, a decibel or two above the staccato of diesel engines, squealing brakes, and grinding gears. "What time is it?"

"Showtime," Gus shot back, putting on her sweatband. Grace duck-walked to the wall, while Gus and Hazel half knelt, half crawled in the soft, grainy asphalt.

The trucks and yellow crane stopped and took their places on the side where the ladder had been. The women held their breath. Could the men see

the sling chair? They scuttled closer to the wall and, like three large Meerkats, popped up for a look, disappearing even faster.

Gus and Hazel, their attitude changing from excitement to impatience after fifteen minutes, leaned against the wall and communicated by mime and exaggerated facial expressions. Grace checked on the men every three minutes, frustrated with the seemingly endless posturing, pointing, crotch-scratching, and coffee-drinking taking place on the ground. "What's happening now?" Hazel whined, shifting her position yet again.

"Some of the men are leaving. Maybe they need more coffee or forgot something," Grace replied, irritation in her tone.

"You made a fine butt-print," Gus whispered to Hazel, who had turned and got on her hands and knees.

"Ouch! This feels like kneeling on grits!" Hazel sat back down.

"Daddy, when're we gonna *beee* there?" Grace chortled, glancing at her friends.

Gus flipped Grace the bird. Her fanny was stuck on the roof, her feet straight out in front of her. Hazel was now similarly positioned. Two beached whales came to Gus's mind, but she kept quiet and the women waited.

At nine thirty, there was a new noise. While Gus and Hazel struggled to stand, Grace looked over the parapet and saw the reason for the noise. The crane was running, and its boom with a ball at the cable's end swung toward the building. Stark reality swept over them.

"Stop!" Hazel yelled, standing toes to the wall.

Gus shoved two fingers in her mouth and whistled the loudest whistle in her repertoire.

Grace had the paintball gun loaded. She took aim and shot toward the crane's windshield. "Damn! I missed the entire cab! Damn! Damn!"

"You hit the tracks, though," Hazel said, pointing at the red blotch.

"I hope he sees us!" Gus yelled, waving at the men, her triceps flapping like semaphore flags.