

*Hazel*

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David Huddle

# Hazel

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*Hazel.*

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*dedication or epigraph*

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*Hazel*



# GOLDEN GLOVES

*1957 — Burlington, Vermont*



WHEN FELTON ASKED HER TO GO TO THE GOLDEN GLOVES, Hazel asked him to tell her more. She was fifteen. She'd never heard of Golden Gloves and didn't know what they were. When he explained, she was mildly interested and said yes. He'd asked her as if they were pals and did things like that together all the time. But of course they weren't and they didn't.

Hazel wouldn't have allowed herself to think so at the time, but she could hardly bear most of the people around her. Or for that matter most aspects of her life. She thought the misery she felt all the time was her fault. Felton's invitation was the first evidence she'd had that somebody her age might want to do something with her.

Felton walked to her house. When she heard his heavy steps on the porch, she came out to meet him. Hazel knew her mother was watching from the side window. Which made her happy. It was starting. She was going to have her own life. Nothing her mother could do about it. While they walked, Felton told her about the fighters they would see.

He was the only person she knew who paid any attention to the Golden Gloves. Kids at school were ignorant like she was. Her father had nodded when she told him where she was going. He probably knew it was boxing matches. Her Uncle Freddy might

have known. He was a veteran and a hard-drinker who hung around with other hard drinkers in town.

Maybe her Uncle Freddy would be there, they'd see each other, and it would be embarrassing. No big deal. She was out of the house and walking downtown in the twilight with a boy who was taller than her father and who probably weighed twice as much as she did. The air smelled like popcorn. Felton was telling her about *The Star Spangled Banner* and the girl who would sing it.

The Lefebvre family ran the Golden Gloves here in town. They fascinated Felton; she could tell by his excitement as he told her about them. They rented Memorial Auditorium, they assigned which fighters fought which, they hired the referees, a Lefebvre wife sold tickets, Lefebvre children and grandchildren handed out programs at the doors.

Lefebvres owned the boxing ring, and Lefebvres set it up for the matches. And of course Lefebvres selected the person who got to sing the national anthem, though rumor was that the Lefebvres had squabbled over the choice. For the last ten years Tressie Lefebvre had sung it, but there was a young cousin who was thought to be a better singer.

Hazel can hardly believe that she has remembered so much about the Lefebvre family. She'd thought she wasn't really listening to Felton as he went on and on with his explaining. She's pretty sure she was bored in the same way she usually was in school. Jack Lefebvre had taken over the matches from his grandfather Henry, but who cared?

Felton Wadhams cared and as he talked, Hazel figured out that he'd stored up all this information but never had anyone to tell it to. While the Lefebvre legend was spilling out of him, she wondered if she was just his victim or if maybe he had enough of a crush on her to want to tell her about something that was important to him.

When they turned onto South Union Street, they saw crowds of people pressing toward the auditorium doors. It shocked Hazel

to see so much commotion and energy generated by an event she knew nothing about. And they were only six blocks from her house. “This way,” Felton said, stepping ahead and leading her past the crowd and around to a side door.

She could have sworn he wanted to take her hand to help her follow him. She thought she felt his fingers brush the back of her hand. She understood he wanted her to witness this special treatment the Lefebvres gave him. He was proud of himself. She thought that was all right. If he had touched her hand, she’d have probably let him take it.

At the side door Felton showed his tickets to a man with a cigarette in his mouth. The man nodded and Felton led her upstairs. Up on the main floor it was crowded and loud, a little bit crazy. She was glad for Felton’s bulk. She got behind him and kept close. It amused her that she didn’t mind following him. He kept glancing back to check on her.

At the door into the gym a kid she recognized from school handed her a program. Chip Lefevbre—that was his name. A junior. He hardly looked at her. He had no idea she knew about his family controlling the Golden Gloves. Her family didn’t control anything. Felton Wadhams made her feel safer in this crowd than her mother or father would have.

They were six rows up from the boxing ring. Felton told her he didn’t want to sit any closer because sometimes when a punch landed, blood flew out of fighter’s face and splashed on people who sat ringside. “I don’t mind sweat,” Felton told her, “but somebody’s blood on my shirt freaks me out.” He grinned at her when he said these things.

Where they sat she could see maybe a thousand people. Hazel was excited. This was fine with her. If she hadn’t followed Felton Wadhams into that crowd of riled-up boxing fans, she might have spent her whole life never feeling this way. Like she was part of something huge she couldn’t control. Whatever happened next she was eager to see it.

She knew she had a grin on her face, and her eyes couldn't get enough of watching all those people milling in the aisles and around the boxing ring. Tough old ladies with shriveled-up husbands, men wearing jackets and ties, guys with tattoos who wore wife-beaters, tattooed young women with hair-dos and outfits like she'd never seen before.

When every seat was taken the noise was so loud that Felton stopped trying to talk to her, but he leaned a little bit toward her. Hazel surprised herself by leaning slightly his way. When their elbows touched, she was startled but she didn't move away from him. Shouting kids ran up the staircases and through the aisles like they had no parents.

When the announcer introduced the singer for the national anthem, it wasn't Tressie Lefebvre—it was Gina Lefebvre. Felton gave Hazel a look of mock astonishment that made her laugh out loud. Gina Lefebvre appeared to be maybe fourteen, very slender with long, straight black hair, a pale face, and a touch of lipstick. She looked scared.

Hazel saw Gina's hand tremble when she took the microphone from the announcer. This girl was going to butcher the national anthem. Hazel felt embarrassed for her. She thought the cruelty of changing singers would be worse for Gina than it was for Tressie. When Gina finally lifted the microphone to her face, the crowd went still.

People around her stood up dutifully. Felton and Hazel also stood. She felt herself cringing when the first notes of Gina's quavery, childish voice wafted through the auditorium. She couldn't imagine how she or anyone else could endure the minutes it would take for the child to finish the song. A huge, soft groan arose from the crowd.

The announcer leaned toward Gina and whispered. Gina stopped singing and raised the microphone closer. She'd gotten only as far as "can you see." Now she started over. Hazel wanted to scream. When she glanced at Felton she saw he'd closed his eyes.

Then she saw that Gina had closed her eyes, too—as if Felton had sent her a sign.

At “dawn’s early light,” the voice filling the building suddenly became that of a grown woman. The girl’s rich, gliding alto made Hazel shiver. She saw that Gina’s eyes weren’t merely closed, she was squinching them shut so tightly her whole face was contorted. As if she were facing a firing squad that was about to execute her.

No singer herself, Hazel sensed that her mouth was shaping the words of the national anthem as Gina sang them. When she glanced up at Felton, she saw that his mouth was also moving—and that a tear was leaking out of his eye. A big guy like him! She felt queasy at the thought of weeping at Gina’s song. She willed herself not to do so.

All around them people began shouting and clapping while Gina triumphantly sounded, “and the home . . .” The noise became so thunderous that Hazel never heard the final words of the song. She was filled with a peculiar emotion she thought must be patriotism. Gina lowered the mic, opened her eyes, and smiled as if she’d just won a contest.

Along with the crowd Hazel and Felton settled back into their seats. People fluttered their programs, chattered, and laughed in a way that made her think of a flock of gulls landing at North Beach on the lake. “There you have it,” said Felton as if he were responsible for Gina’s grand success. Hazel didn’t mind. He’d brought her here.

The announcer’s amplified voice overrode all the noise in the building, but Hazel could make out only some of what he said. First it was stupid thank-yous with a lot of names, then it was introductions of the judges and the referee. Felton wasn’t interested either. He was using the program to show her which matches were most important.

Having had no previous experience of being somewhere with a boy or a young man, whichever Felton was, Hazel became aware

that her attention was wandering. But she was intensely aware of the intensity of his voice and the proximity of their bodies, and she liked the way he pronounced the name of his favorite fighter, Ace Lucas.

She couldn't focus on the actual information he was trying to convey to her. She laughed aloud when he demonstrated the difference between a jab and a hook, punching his fist forward for the jab and swinging it sideways and around for the hook. He kept coming back to the topic of Ace Lucas. "He can take a punch," he told Hazel in a low raspy voice.

That was the moment she felt shocked by her intimacy with Felton. His face was so close to hers she could smell his breath! She was suddenly aware of how profoundly different his body was from hers and how he really could hurt somebody with his fists. Her face went hot, and she was so uncomfortable she almost stood up and left the building.

That was when Felton caught her eye and gave her that half smile of his. She was pretty sure she understood him. There was no threat in his face. His half smile meant he wanted her to be his pal. He wasn't asking for love or sex. She felt sure he was every bit as innocent and lonely as she was. Neither of them had anybody to talk to.

She sat in her woozy reverie, now and then murmuring or just making a humming noise in her chest in response to Felton's chatter. Who knew he had so much to say? He seemed to be trying to tell her everything that had passed through his brain. He was talking about throwing the shot put for the track team when the first boxing match began.

These were teenage boys with their shorts pulled up almost to their chests. A redhead and a boy with black hair that kept falling over his eyes. They waved their huge boxing gloves in front of each other's faces as if they really meant no harm. They stepped toward and away from each other, bending their upper bodies this way and that.

Hazel felt sorry for them—they looked so scared and childish. They could have been Gina Lefebvre’s classmates. They weren’t trying very hard to hit each other with their gloves, but they both seemed intent on avoiding their opponent’s blows. Voices rose from the crowd. A woman shouted, “Hit him, Carl! Knock the stuffing out of him!”

The bell rang. The fighters turned away from each other and quickly took their seats on stools their handlers set into opposite corners of the ring. They leaned back against the ring posts and let their arms dangle as if they were exhausted. So far as Hazel could tell, neither of them had landed a blow on the other. Felton was grinning.

A stocky woman from the front row stood and walked behind the corner of the black-haired boy. His handlers stood aside while she spoke to him. Hazel couldn’t hear her, but from the way her head moved, she knew the woman was egging him on. “It can only be his mother,” Felton said. “So that’s Carl?” Hazel asked, and Felton nodded.

When the bell rang the redhead stepped forward as he had in the first round, but Carl ran toward him in a crouch and threw a roundhouse blow that struck the boy in the ribs, made him groan, and drop his hands. Then Carl punched him in the face, straight on and very hard. The red-head fell backward and lay on his side, unmoving. His nose bled.

The violence of what Hazel had seen seemed to have occurred within her own body, slightly above her solar plexus. She had to struggle to bring air into her chest. In a panic she looked at Felton, whose face was flushed. He was leaning forward, concentrating on the ring, as if he meant to go down there to see if the boy was all right.

The crowd bellowed and writhed, but when the handlers summoned a doctor to the side of the fallen boy, most people stopped shouting and clapping and sat down. A man swabbed blood off the redhead’s face. When the doctor waved something

under his nose, the boy moved his arms and legs. People applauded. The handlers helped him up.

While Carl pranced around the ring with his hands over his head, the announcer proclaimed his victory, and the red-head's assistants helped him down out of the ring. Hazel stood quietly beside Felton. She was aware of noise, movement, and even the wild mix of smells in the air. Down in the ring Carl's mother stood, her face shiny with tears.

Hazel thought herself a fool for not having anticipated that she'd see fighters trying to harm each other. She wondered if Felton should have warned her, because certainly he knew what happened down in that ring. What he couldn't know was how little experience she had. Until now she hadn't realized how much her parents had protected her.

She figured she'd never forget Carl's rushing toward that red-haired kid, knocking him down, then the gush of blood from the boy's face. Those moments kept playing in her mind even after Felton signaled to her that it was time for them to sit down. But she wasn't horrified. If something like that happened again, she thought she was ready for it.

Fresh fighters arrived in the ring. They bounced on their feet and punched the air in front them. Unlike Carl and the red-head, these two wore short shiny bathrobes. One was tall and skinny, the other a solid-looking fellow whose face Hazel vaguely remembered from the hallways at school. She wondered if their mothers were in the crowd.

She became aware of Felton studying her face. She turned to him. He wasn't smiling, but his face was open to her. Actually, she realized, she'd never really taken a good look at him before. His eyes were a little too close together, but his cheeks were rosy. "Are you all right?" he asked. She grinned at him. "I have no idea," she said.

Felton knew not to ask more questions, and he seemed to have passed through his phase of extreme chattiness. He did,

however, sit closer to her than he had before. Their shoulders touched occasionally during the matches that followed. If that hadn't been case, she might have asked him to walk her home. The touching made her want to stay.

Hazel watched the fighting only when the crowd became excited. Mostly she let her eyes sweep the auditorium looking for the highly animated people who sat in every section. She wished Carl's mother would return so that she could study her more carefully. Felton gave his attention to the fights, which licensed her to do as she pleased.

Then Felton nudged her and nodded toward the entrance for the fighters at the far end of the auditorium. Over there, some people were moiling around and chanting. Felton said, "He's in the building!" It took her a moment to understand he meant Ace Lucas. The chant she'd been hearing was "Ace! Ace! Ace!" Felton's face was that of a happy child.

She almost laughed at him, but she didn't. He'd been waiting for Ace all this while—Ace was the whole point of this evening, including her part in it. She was suddenly able to relax. Felton's tension had affected her, and now they were both free. Free to do what she didn't know, but Hazel shocked herself by applauding like a cheerleader.

She excused herself to go to the ladies room, which was a little like venturing into a dangerous neighborhood and finding her way out again. Strange people stared at her and not in a friendly way. She worried that she wouldn't be able to find her way back, but she did. And when she sat down beside Felton, she relished how safe she felt.

Back in her seat Hazel let her mind journey to her room at home, not merely the bed, which she now recognized as a source of deep comfort to her, but also her dresser-top with its knick-knacks arranged just so, her clothes in her closet, the little rug beside the bed that spared her feet from the cold floor, the chair where her pajamas waited for her.

Jolted from her reverie by a swell of noise and everyone around her suddenly standing up, she saw Felton looking down at her with a quizzical expression. The crowd thundered, "ACE! ACE! ACE!" When Hazel stood and rose on tip-toe to catch a glimpse of the ring, there stood Ace in crimson trunks, his face shining up toward the lights.

Her first thought was that he looked a little silly. He was skipping around the ring, his taped hands raised over his head as if he'd already won the fight. He wasn't the strapping young fellow she'd expected. His skin was pale, his legs were thin, and though his shoulders and arms were heavily muscled, he was sunken-chested and he had a belly.

Ace's eyes were slitted and his face was a flesh-colored mask. She thought he was at least thirty-five, maybe even forty years old. When the crowd stopped shouting his name, he dropped his hands and went to stand with his corner men. That was when Hazel realized he'd been keeping his belly sucked in as he pranced around with his arms raised.

She glanced up at Felton, who grinned at her, shook his head, and shouted above the noise, "I know, I know!" She appreciated his having discerned her disappointment, but she also took him to mean that she would soon see the truth of Ace Lucas. Throughout the evening Felton had risen in her opinion. She didn't think he'd be wrong about Ace.

When the bell rang, Ace swaggered out to meet his opponent, a stocky young fellow representing a boxing club in Newburgh, New York. The referee signaled the fighters to touch gloves at the center of the ring. Then the ref stepped back, and so did the opponent, but Ace instantly lunged forward with a punch aimed at his opponent's head.

The crowd roared, Felton along with them. Evidently they'd been expecting Ace's signature move. Hazel had been shocked by the obvious dirtiness of the punch, whereas all around her people were laughing gleefully. The opponent had mostly dodged the

blow, though it had scraped his cheek and his ear. He seemed bemused by Ace's foul play.

Felton leaned down toward her and said, "Sometimes that's all he has to do to win the fight." Hazel tried to smile, but all she could manage was a nod. In the ring, Ace doggedly stepped forward, always leading with his right foot and feinting with his gloves and body. Now and then he lunged toward the other fighter with a powerful punch.

The opponent, however, was light on his feet and easily dodged Ace's crude punches, meanwhile landing dart-like blows all over Ace's face. The opponent's strategy was to avoid whatever Ace threw at him, meanwhile punishing Ace with his sharp jabs. Even Hazel could see that the opponent was learning Ace's methods and that he'd soon make a move.

Hazel became aware of Felton moving his body. At first she thought something must be wrong with him—these were whole-body gyrations he was making, as if he might be in gastric distress or something worse, like a kidney stone or a collapsed lung. But when she glanced at his face she saw that he was completely focused on the two men in the ring.

The bell rang to end the round. Ace stood still for a beat until his opponent dropped his gloves and turned toward his corner. The punch Ace threw had his whole weight behind it. Had it struck the target Ace had in mind, it would have dropped the fellow to the mat, but his reflexes saved him. He raised an arm to deflect the blow from his chin.

The referee immediately stepped in front of Ace and pushed him back toward his corner—then stood right in front of him shaking his finger in Ace's face and shouting at him. Ace sat on his stool and stared back at the referee. He looked like a pouting fourth-grader. The handlers spoke to the referee, pleading with him not to stop the fight.

Hazel entered a state of consciousness she'd never experienced. One track of her thinking was that Ace was an utterly

unscrupulous fighter—and that Felton and most of the people around her admired him for that. And though she wasn't ready to admire Ace, she did finally understand his appeal. Like the Lefebvres, he was a local phenomenon.

They were of this town in a way that she and Felton and their parents and their friends would never be. Not quite criminals or outlaws, their families had lived right here while riding forward on some current of time that went back at least a century. They were throwbacks who came from bootleggers, squatters, poachers, petty swindlers.

Hazel kept trying one word and another, but nothing was quite right for a person like Ace Lucas. The other track of her thinking had to do with Felton and the twisting and bending of his torso, all the while holding his arms tightly folded in front of him as if he was trying to keep himself in check. And he never stopped watching the fight.

But all his gyrating had ceased the instant the ref stepped in front of Ace and pushed him back to his corner. Felton kept his eyes on the ring, but his body stopped moving. And now that the bell had rung again and the fighters had started circling each other, dodging, feinting, jabbing, and punching, Felton had again begun to writhe in his seat.

She knew he'd be embarrassed if he noticed her watching him, so she did it surreptitiously. But he was so intent on the fight that he might not have noticed if she'd stood up and yelled, "Stop that!" The idea made her snort quietly. That's when she realized Felton's body here beside her was invisibly linked to Ace's body down in the ring.

So it was a weird and involuntary empathy working on him. The trance he was in was so powerful that he probably wasn't even aware of what his body was doing. Hazel was fifteen years old. What was she supposed to make of this squirming boy? Was this a young man thing? Was it a boxing thing? She shook her head in a kind of wonderment.

The swelling of the crowd noise made Hazel look back to the fight. The spectacle down there made no sense, but she couldn't look away. Ace had dropped his gloved hands to his sides, and he stood in one place, slightly bouncing from one foot to the other. His opponent struck him again and again, landing jabs on Ace's face, chest, and belly.

Ace was bleeding—the word that came to Hazel was *magnificently*. Bright lights shone on the red streams from his nose, his mouth, the cuts on his face. She realized the opponent wasn't hitting Ace all that hard. Ace seemed to be taunting the man, trying to egg him on. Finally the opponent stopped jabbing. He stood and stared at the ref.

As if he'd just regained consciousness, the ref raised his hands to call the fight over and directed the boxers back to their corners. The crowd booed mightily, though Hazel was relieved to see that Felton kept his mouth shut. He continued staring down toward the ring. So she faced him and wondered how long it would take him to notice her.

She hoped he could explain to her what she'd just witnessed. She shivered with the thought that maybe it had been a kind of religious experience. She'd always hated the crucifixion story, because of its crazy violence. She couldn't place herself anywhere in it, not as Jesus or a soldier or somebody in the crowd or God or Pontius Pilate.

But she'd seen Ace Lucas punished and bleeding, and though the sight of it had pained her, she'd nevertheless kept watching until the ref put a stop to it. Finally Felton looked down at her. His face was bathed in sweat, and he seemed startled to find her there beside him. She met his eyes and made her expression as neutral as she could.

She could see Felton trying to come back to himself and to understand who she was and why she would be standing here staring at him. He had the dazed expression of an astronaut newly returned from outer space. He blinked and tried putting on a

grin, but his mouth seemed to have lost the skill. Then she saw it coming back to him, who she was.

“Are you all right?” he asked. His voice was raspy and much louder than it needed to be. Irrked though she was because he’d so completely put her out of his consciousness, she couldn’t help feeling a little sorry for him. “I was starting to ask you the same question,” she said. “So do you think this will be Ace’s last fight?”

Felton glanced down at the ring, then back at Hazel. Now she saw that he’d gotten his wits back. “Wasn’t that something, though?” His voice bespoke pride and affection. The boy might have been speaking of an older brother who’d accomplished something amazing. Just then a cluster of loud-talking people started up the aisle beside them.

When she saw Felton’s eyes look over her head, Hazel turned to see what was going on. This group of very excited people included both men and women moving up the steps. At the center was someone with a towel over his head. It took her a moment to understand this was Ace Lucas leaving the ring, and these noisy citizens were his entourage.

“Why’s he going out this way?” she asked. “Don’t the fighters go out over there?” she pointed to the door where the boxers entered and exited. “And why are all his people acting like he won the fight?” Now she was the disoriented one. She felt like she’d entered the *Star Wars* bar where all the customers were monsters who spoke English.

Felton couldn’t keep from watching the dozen or so people accompanying their fighter up the steps that led out to the lobby. Ace’s face wasn’t visible to Hazel, but she thought maybe Felton had gotten a glimpse of it. A part of her wanted to see the cuts and bruises inflicted on him, but the thought shamed her. Felton finally turned to her.

“I think they’re going to parade him through the lobby,” he told her. “I don’t know why.” His voice was soft, and his expression was puzzled, but she was exasperated with him. He’d

brought her here, and now he wasn't helping her. "Why did he just stand there and let that guy beat him up?!" In her voice she heard a shrillness she could hardly bear.

Felton sat down in spite of everybody in the whole building moving toward the exits. "He's done that before." He stared up at Hazel with a stunned face. "Nobody really knows why he does it. Maybe just to show that nobody can knock him out." Felton shook his head. "It just seems to come over him. And you saw how everybody goes crazy."

Felton suddenly stopped meeting her eyes and turned his face away. "He wins fights when he wants to." His voice was petulant now. As if she shouldn't be asking him these questions. Then he said something else too softly for her to hear, so she cocked her head. He shouted out into the nearly empty auditorium, "Ace does what he decides to do!"

While she stared down at him, Felton bowed his head. This view let her consider what must have been his anger over having to explain Ace Lucas to her. Maybe he'd never tried to put it into words before. Now he fidgeted, put his arms around himself, jittered his knees. Was he about to start squirming in his seat again? She looked away from him.

Gradually she sensed him wanting her to sit beside him again. The auditorium was nearly empty. If she just waited, Felton would stand up, and he'd probably walk her home. If not, she knew the way. In her mind she was already putting on her pajamas, shivering in that way she sometimes did just before she got under the covers.

## JOHN ROBERT'S PROJECT

My Aunt Hazel Hicks claimed that she did not collect photographs of any kind and certainly not photographs of herself. Initially I believed her. She was a proud and, as my parents liked to say, voraciously articulate, person, who worked for the Vermont Department of Education in the office of Legislative Reports for more than half a century. She was entirely without vanity. Whenever she encountered a photograph of herself, her response was to laugh. I know this because in her later years, when I became aware of what an unusual life she had led, I began assembling documents that would testify to her achievements and her singularity.

My project amused her—she told me that she'd accomplished nothing she would consider an achievement and the only way she was singular was in the number of people who couldn't stand her. As it turned out, I did find several letters of complaint in her file in Montpelier, a couple of which I showed her. The letters interested her so much that she wanted to discuss them with me. She had clear memories of the people who had written them, and (true to her personality as I had come to know it) she spoke of them with grim respect.

"It's the ones who didn't have the nerve to put their words on paper but who liked to run their mouths in public meetings—they're the ones I'd have fired if I'd had my way." But it was the photographs of her that always brought forth her laughter. She'd say, "Would you hire this person to clean your septic tank?" and "What in the world does she think she's doing?" and "Would you look at that face?" I once told her that the way she responded to those pictures made me think that if she saw a movie of her life, she'd say it was a comedy. That made her guffaw.

"People would pay money not to see that movie, John Robert. But what else do you think it might have been? What do you

think the movie of your life would be?” And that was the kind of person my Aunt Hazel was. She could turn your own words back on you in such a way that you’d lose sleep thinking about who you thought you were as opposed to who you really were. In my opinion, with Aunt Hazel, there wasn’t any difference or slippage. She was exactly who she thought she was. Few people ever got to know her, and fewer still understood her, which was, she told me, exactly how she wanted it. “I had a great deal of freedom,” she told me.