

Fabulous at Fifty
a novel by
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Stage Three

3.1

Over the next year a newly resolved Hugh, although determined to keep himself aloof from female invasions of his decision-making, became a dating machine.

First he went through the list offered a year before by friends. Almost all the women were still available. Rachel Abramson, the violinist and music teacher, met him for coffee while in town from New Haven, escorting her prodigy son to a rehearsal at Lincoln Center for some sort of young person's showcase that she mentioned by initials as if it were as well known as the Super Bowl. She was small and pretty, her features delicate, her voice soft and mellifluous, but the content of her speech was obsessive and grim. She couldn't get off the subject of her son's talent and prospects, not even to talk about her daughter beyond commenting, "She's very bright in her academics but not a musician," in a tone of deep and permanent disapproval. She sent Hugh an email ten minutes after they parted saying she would be back in town for the actual performance and staying for the weekend with family if he was free. He wrote back that unfortunately he would be in DC visiting his daughter. He thought that a pointed reply.

Katherine Tolson, the TV critic, was big boned and voluptuous, her face perfectly round, her smile a friendly dawning, and she was funny about being someone who "sits all day and watches soaps."

“Soaps?” Hugh asked. “But this is the new Golden Age of TV, right?”

“It’s great, just great,” she admitted. “Although it was better when everyone looked down on TV. Nobody used to pay any attention to my reviews. Now, no matter what, half my readers hate me and think I’ve committed a crime against culture. But it’s thrilling to have all this terrific work to see. I’m sorry about what’s happening in your world,” she added and looked at him with genuine pity.

He asked what she meant.

“Well, movies are a dying form, right?” she said in the same cheerful, friendly tone as she plunged a dagger in his heart. “They used to be at the center of the cultural conversation,” she said, still beaming at him as if she were delivering good tidings. “And now only teenagers are excited about them and that’s because they’ll soon be video games.”

She looked surprised when Hugh declined to walk back to her place and watch her screener of the pilot of a new show called *Friday Night Lights*.

Of the actresses, two were no longer available, but Patricia Murphy, the one Hugh admired for her many roles in indie films and Scorsese pictures as tormented, self-destructive, tough, and fearless working-class women, was glad to meet late one afternoon at the West Bank Café, across the street from Playwright’s Horizons, where she was in rehearsal, playing the lead as an alcoholic mother in a new comedy by Jonathan Reynolds. “I’m going to have to eat now,” she apologized, “because we just did a tech and we’re doing our first preview tonight.” She ordered a kale salad, explaining she was vegan. “Like everybody these days. I’m a cliché, a cliché, a cliché, a cliché,” she said, each one in a lower and lower register, a remarkable feat of vocal control. He was

startled by her speech in general. She had no trace of the flawless New Jersey, New York, or Philly accents of her movie roles, instead had the notes of a patrician New Englander.

She had all sorts of “neurotic tics,” as she put it. Fear of flying, fear of elevators, fear, she said laughing, “of loud toilets.” You know, the New York tenement Niagara Falls flush?” She apologized for having no makeup on. In fact, she was gorgeous. Her face sculpted, her deep-blue eyes full of feeling, her thick brunette hair framing her face perfectly. She was intelligent and high-strung, not a tough Mafia girlfriend. “Men are always disappointed,” she said with disarming charm, “when they discover I’m not the woman they see on screen.” “They’re crazy,” Hugh said, but he didn’t follow up. Without the Jersey accent he just wasn’t turned on. He was a man after all.

That being the case, more and more names and email addresses were fed into his dating data bank by friends, or friends of friends. Hugh soon learned not to assume that the accompanying details describing the woman were accurate or in accord with his taste. The Internet often proved the given facts to be less intriguing than others that had gone unmentioned, and no woman presented the same face to him that she showed to her friends. Nor did he rule that face in or out based on the images available online: sheepish, name-tagged grins at reunions and work-related conferences, the whimsy or glamour of a Facebook self-portrait. It wasn’t only that he learned he couldn’t judge a book by its cover. He also discovered that what Nature had given women outwardly—a noble forehead, worried eyes, a cheerful mouth, a weak chin—was often transformed by the animating spirit within to the opposite effect. A generous mouth turned down in

persistent resentment, hard features softened with kindness, intelligent brow trivialized by tedious conversation, dull eyes glowing with sympathy.

Meredith Wilkinson was an example of a misleading package and resume. Tall and angular, with short severe silver hair, imposing high forehead, long nose, solemn mouth; a full professor of microbiology at Columbia, one of the fifty most important woman scientists in the U.S., according to *Discover* magazine: all of this pointed to a formal, intellectually cool personality. But her soul was mischievous; her conversation consisted largely of gossip about the sexual misdeeds of her colleagues. Their drinks date, arranged by Peter's wife, Debby, extended into a meal at the bar, then a brisk winter walk that turned into an ironic snowball skirmish in Riverside Park after Hugh commented that he would kill himself if he saw one more romantic comedy in which the couple made snow angels. After she nailed him with an ice ball that sent a chilling river down his neck, she invited him up to her nearby apartment for hot chocolate. Instead of offering a warming beverage, immediately on stepping into her foyer and giggling all the way she pushed him into her bedroom and at the mattress until he was prone. She stripped in front of a sweeping view of the Hudson, pausing as she shed each item to exclaim, "I'm getting naked!" until sweater, jeans, bra, and panties were gone and she announced: "I'm naked!" She jumped him while he was untangling from a shirt. She pecked his belly playfully, then rose suddenly to bury her face in his neck. She nipped him and he yelped, briefly wondering what it was about him that made women want to bite? He forgot that inquiry when she lay across his lap and said, "I'm a bad, bad girl," and wiggled her buttocks invitingly.

At first Hugh stared, understanding and yet not.

She wiggled again. “Spank your bad girl, please!”

Hugh applied his hand once, a pat, more reassurance than punishment.

“Harder!” she barked.

Hugh had never spanked anyone, in earnest or as theater. He whacked her with a quarter of his strength. She squeaked and shuddered as if he had struck hard. That led to some confusion as to what was and was not pleasurable. She showed off a scientist’s dispassion then, sitting up to explain earnestly that she was “wired to enjoy impact play. You should spank me hard, and pinch my nipples”; and she illustrated by taking hold of each one between thumb and index finger and squeezing until they almost disappeared. He winced at the sight. She grinned and reassured, “If you do it too hard my safe word is ‘Pineapple.’ That means you should stop. But you’re so gentle I’ll bet you I never use it.” She promptly resumed her position across his lap, adult voice escalating to a girl’s squeak: “I’m sorry I interrupted you, sir!”

Hugh didn’t enjoy administering the spanking. He couldn’t imagine how a hand striking flesh could be pleasurable for the striker. But that wasn’t the attraction, he realized after her pale skin turned pink and he found himself flipping her over to share his astonishingly vigorous reaction to the sight.

After they both climaxed, and blushing himself, he had to nod yes when she said, “See? It’s fun, right?” She was fun. And educational. When he asked about her work and he confessed he had no basic knowledge of the immune system, to his delight she mapped on his belly the lymphatic network and the crucial interaction between antigens and antibodies. For ten stunning minutes he understood this marvel of the human body. Unfortunately the following day he couldn’t remember anything of her explanation. He

liked everything about her and, puzzlingly, once she was out of sight didn't miss her. It was obvious she also didn't miss him as she flew off every other week to conferences, or was bunkered in her lab, or caring for her two teenage children, whose custody she shared with her ex. They tried a few naughty emails and calls, but those were pale compared to their robust in-the-flesh meetings, and soon all contact, except body to body, ceased. They "hooked up," as Ray would have put it, once every few weeks for a friendly evening of bowling and spanking or ice skating and spanking, until spring blossoms changed their once a month meet-ups to roller-blading and spanking or Mets games and spanking.

During one of those intervals Hugh had a non-dating evening out with another woman who surprised him with the private side of her personality. One day at tennis Francine said a friend had punked out at the last minute on going with her to the *Grey Gardens* musical that night. She didn't want the ticket to be wasted, wondered if Hugh had been a fan of the original documentary and might be interested? After the show he accepted her invitation to join her at Esca, although he was worried about what in the world they would talk about during a one-on-one dinner. But it was easy. Francine was delightfully lively, and about a subject no one else was, the death of a spouse.

"I'm sure you miss Amy terribly but I don't miss sharing my bed when it comes to getting a good night's sleep. I had no idea how sleep-deprived I was. I was able to stop taking three medications after Jerrold passed: Ambien, which I took every night after he'd wake me with his three a.m. trip to the loo; Wellbutrin, when it turned out my depression was just lack of REM; and Tagamet, of all things. Did you know not sleeping gives you heartburn? But best of all, absolutely the best thing: if I want to go without

makeup all weekend at the beach house, I do. He's not there, looking at me as if he's contemplating how much a divorce will cost him."

Then she pivoted to him, asking what it was like to be single at his age. "My God, they must be crawling all over you. I'm a feminist but honestly my gender just loves making themselves miserable by entangling themselves in relationships. Even the lesbians drive each other crazy."

Encouraged by her openness, and reassured that Hilda had never carried out her threat, Hugh told her frankly of his other encounters, going so far as to say, "Really, honestly, Francine, I'm beginning to think I don't have another love in me, certainly not a satisfying love like I had with Amy. I mean, one a lifetime, that's plenty. Why be greedy?"

She was touched and sympathetic but also laughed off his romantic despair in a way that helped him feel it could easily pass. "That's exactly why I'm thrilled to be single," she said. "Can't stomach the thought of having to take care of—no offense—another fully grown baby boy. And I've certainly had my fill of making an idiot of myself over men. If you keep dating, forgive them, Hugh, they know not what they do."

The whole night out was so diverting, so blissfully free of dating's anxieties and self-consciousness, that he agreed a month later to be a last minute replacement again, this time to the pre-opening party of the Neo Rauch exhibit at the Met. He found the paintings to be, well, very German, and afterwards they went to dinner with ancient friends of hers who had both worked in finance. That turned out to be the stiff, humorless evening he had feared the first would be.

Undaunted, at least once a week Hugh accepted other recommendations from friends. By the end of the summer of 2007, Leslie had moved down her list to Judy Kaplan, whom she claimed was a spiritual cousin of Amy's. "They both love to read. Judy's a writer too and like Amy, Judy doesn't try to publish. I wish she would. I really, really like her poems. Also like Amy, she's got great legs. I'd kill for her skinny thighs. She's also a no-nonsense mom like Amy, not a pushover like me. You'll see. You'll feel like you've known her all your life."

He did feel immediately at home with Judy and she did have shapely legs, but during their three lively dates of non-stop conversation Hugh decided she was a spiritual cousin of Leslie's, not Amy's. Like Leslie, she supervised her three children's movements—son already at college, fraternal twin daughters in their junior year of high school—as if they were constantly at risk of attack from Al Qaeda. Like Leslie, she was moved by the plight of anyone in need and urgently wished to help. Like Leslie, she touched Hugh on the arm with maternal sympathy every time the subject of Amy came up. And like Leslie, she was as absorbed by his real-estate crisis as if she were a co-signatory on the lease. Leslie had been fitfully negotiating with his landlord for months. Recently, the back and forth had heated up as Stein got close to having enough vacant apartments to allow him to convert the building from a rental to a condo and cash out. Hugh's could put him over the top, and Leslie's latest proposal was that Stein offer Hugh a quarter of a million to move within ninety days, thereby vacating the remainder of his lease and forfeiting his technical right to renew it. Threatening that otherwise Hugh would renew was a bluff, since a new lease could go up to a market rate he wouldn't be able to afford. Leslie had other bluffs up her sleeve, like filing an injunction with the

city claiming tenant protections for Hugh, the logic of which he didn't really follow; but he understood these moves would spell trouble for Stein, whose plan to make a killing would be stalled for years.

“So this morning Leslie told me the latest,” Judy said while spreading a blanket over grass planted on the landscaped pier off the Esplanade. “If Stein pays you to move you'll buy a place?” This was their fourth date, their first since her son had moved back uptown to Columbia to start his sophomore year. Her daughters were at their father's house in Woodstock, she'd mentioned, which led Hugh to assume she had arranged this brunch as foreplay. They had yet to have sex, or kiss beyond hello and goodbye. He felt sure their lovemaking would be decisive for both of them. Short of introducing their children to each other, no other pothole loomed. They agreed about politics, all cultural events they had attended, spicy food, and had discovered they shared an addiction to watching the sun set over the Hudson.

“I don't know if I can buy anywhere I'd want to live in New York. I can't afford this view, that's for sure.” Hugh gestured at the restless river and New Jersey's unevenly developed shore beyond.

“How about in a hip and cool gentrifying neighborhood? With Stein's cash and a mortgage? Leslie says your credit is good.”

“Well,” Hugh said as he helped unpack the food, “I can't afford even a gentrifying 'hood in Manhattan. We're talking—shudder—Brooklyn.”

“What about the upper Upper West Side? Anyway, Brooklyn's where it's at now. And in Brooklyn maybe you can get a townhouse.”

“Maybe in Greenpoint. I definitely can’t afford to stay in Manhattan. I need at least two bedrooms. Ray’s got another year of college after this one, and even when he leaves I want him and Ginnie to visit. As it is, with two bedrooms I’m going to have to sleep on the couch when they’re both home for the holidays.”

“Make Ray sleep on the couch,” Judy said.

“You’re a sexist.”

“Okay, make Ginnie sleep on the couch. But not you. You’ll throw your back out.”

“Is Leslie telling you all my secrets? How did you know my back kills me when I sleep on the couch?”

“Leslie didn’t say a word. At our age who doesn’t have a bad back?” She grinned. She had warm brown eyes, like Leslie, and Leslie’s comforting cheerful manner. “And knees that creak! We’ll be lucky if we can get up from this blanket.” She laughed coquettishly, selling decrepitude as a come-on. She was sexy in her nurturing way. Again, like Leslie. He had had this perverse thought before and had it again now, that making love to Judy would be a nearly perfect stand-in for making love to Leslie—which made it all the more puzzling that he had come to brunch without enthusiasm, dutiful about its purpose. But now, as the moment of truth drew near, he was eager to get to her apartment.

While they munched bagels, ignored salad, and relished rugelach and coffee, Judy audited his finances and disagreed with his assessment of his prospects for buying a place. Leslie had not informed her about his back but evidently she had disclosed his salary; that didn’t bother him, although he thought it ought to. Judy insisted, as had

Leslie, that the smart play was to hock everything and break his IRA to buy an apartment. Maybe they were right, that with Stein's exit money he could afford someplace decent in Brooklyn or the very Upper West Side. But he felt only heartbreak at the prospect of moving out of his home with Amy and terror at going deeper into debt to live someplace strange. He fell silent and clenched his jaw. That sent shooting pains up to his right ear, then down his neck, somehow managing to lodge finally in his shoulder. His nocturnal teeth-grinding had worsened. The guard his dentist had given him was visually disgusting and unusable if he wanted to sleep. He had been warned, after shattering a two thousand dollar crown, that many more expensive dental procedures loomed if he didn't stop grinding while he slept, so catching himself doing it during the day was disheartening. He turned away from Judy and dug a finger into his rigid, sore jaw hinge. Loosening it unlocked an overwhelming urge to sob, the prospect of abruptly falling into a depthless sadness that he had hoped was over for him and anyway seemed foolish when provoked by real estate instead of the death of a loved one. He focused on neatening up, putting bagels and accouterments away. He felt Judy's eyes on him during this struggle for calm and cleanliness.

"Maybe it'll be good for you," she said. Feeling under control, he paused to look at her. She smiled encouragingly, urging a shy child to meet his new classmates. "A new chapter."

But a new chapter had already been written, a whole new book. Why the fuck should there be another new anything? He finished packing up their picnic. As he turned to her he raised a bright smile, which made his cheeks ache and shooting pains radiate from his right jaw. She took his hand and patted it consolingly. Enraged, he wanted to

yank it free. *How dare she!* he thought. And then, *How dare she what?* His anger vanished as quickly as it had arrived. Without it he felt false, unthinkingly progressing to a lovemaking about which he was so unenthusiastic he had to pretend it would be approximate to sleeping with Leslie, who persisted in seeming to be the only living woman he loved, no matter how many times he pushed that daydream out of his mind. She kept popping back in as the ideal choice, though he wasn't sure he wanted to bed her, given it would require at least the death of her husband and perhaps something more impossible, Hugh growing hair like Guillermo's or a more decisive personality.

In the elevator of her building Judy fished out her keys. Once in the hallway she walked ahead to her door. Following behind, he felt like a dutiful sexless husband, carrying the red plastic picnic case, back aching from sitting on the grass, calculating that if they made love right away, even taking into account a sufficiently polite post-coital hug, he might be able to get away with turning on the Mets game to catch the final innings. Of course he was recording it at home so . . .

"Honey!" Judy exclaimed, because her front door, before she could unlock it, had been jerked open from the inside by a tall, skinny, disheveled young man. "Are you okay? What are you doing here?"

"I texted. Didn't you get it? The Columbia nurse kicked me out of the dorm." The young man's hair was matted all along his temples, and he was in a T-shirt and sweat pants. He was deathly pale. "I have mono," he said, rheumy eyes settling on Hugh. Judy's son took in the strange older man, the picnic basket, and finally his mother, hair blown out, wearing makeup on a Sunday. "The kissing disease," he explained.

Judy hugged her boy and glanced back, apology wrinkling her kind face. After a brief introduction, Hugh excused himself and went home, happy to watch the Mets lose.