

Fabulous at Fifty
a novel by
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A week later Stein countered: he would pay Hugh one hundred and fifty thousand to move within ninety days. Reporting this on the phone, Leslie skipped over inquiring if Hugh was willing to agree to the lower offer, immediately proceeding to: “It’ll take another couple of rounds before I get him up to two-fifty, but this is good news, really good news. He’s agreed in principle, now we’re just haggling. You’re going to make a nice piece of change, enough to put a down payment on a townhouse.”

“Where? On Staten Island?”

Leslie chuckled. “A fixer upper on Prospect Park? It’s beautiful there. Really.” Hugh sighed, and Leslie’s no-nonsense work voice softened to maternal solicitation: “Honey, no matter how you look at it, you can’t stay where you are. At least this way you get some money out of it to help you make a new home. A better home.” She softened more, whispering kindness into criticism: “Let’s face it, your place is a little run down. You haven’t done anything to it since you and Amy moved in. And it’s more than you need. This whole neighborhood’s become impossible. It’s all investment bankers and NYU students. Everyone has too much money and too little body fat.”

“Are *you* going to move?”

“I’m thinking about it. At these prices, it no longer makes sense to stay. For sure we have to consider doing it once the boys finish college. We won’t need the space.”

“Like me,” Hugh said, stating the obvious.

“Like you, honey. I’m sorry. I know how hard all this is.”

He said nothing because he was sure if he attempted to speak his voice would break.

“Oh!” Leslie changed subjects. “Judy told me about Sam showing up with mono. Hilarious. I mean, not hilarious for your date, or poor Sam, although Judy says he seems happy as a clam lying in bed watching TV, being waited on hand and foot.” Leslie chuckled. “And I guess it’s going to delay your”—she hesitated, then finished brightly—“your next date!”

She knows Judy and I haven’t consummated. She’s not only living vicariously through me, she’s enjoying it. Suddenly Leslie’s natural curiosity about his dating life, no matter how well-meaning, offended him. He didn’t want to be her entertainment. And her taking pleasure in his dating life was disloyal to her dead friend. Until now he had appreciated Leslie’s desire that he move on as generous; abruptly, it struck him as callous. The force of this revelation was nauseating. Revulsion for his closest female friend, the most reliable friend of both genders, was so intense he ended the call immediately, blurting out that Ray had just texted him, he needed to reply.

His lie had truth in it. Ray had fired off a message at seven a.m., an unusually early hour for him.

coming home today.
ok take Acela w/yr Amex?

Sure, Hugh typed, agreeing via text to pay for the more expensive train despite his money worries. U ok? he asked, the first time he had imitated his children by abbreviating “you.”

ok u free 4 dinner @6?

Ray's reply was simultaneously reassuring and not. An appointment for a father-son meal? Something was wrong. Something had been wrong with Ray for years. What was no mystery—his mother had died—but how exactly things were continuing to go wrong for him wasn't clear. Except that his grades were headed the wrong way. The once A student was barely passing most of his college courses. At least he was in love, more than ever, practically living with the dignified, kind, and lively Mai, who sometimes seemed to be the only force on earth capable of preventing him from spinning off the globe in a rage at the world's stupidities, especially George Bush's wars. Before returning to Providence in August there had been a mumbled mention, quickly retracted as premature, of renting a place off-campus with Mai in the spring. Maybe that was why he was coming in, to reopen that possibility. Hugh resisted the temptation to text the question of whether Mai was also coming into town. He hoped so. He had grown accustomed to her being in the apartment, was comforted by the company of a near daughter-in-law. Or maybe while Ray came to New York Mai was going from Providence to Connecticut to inform her mother. Mai's father had passed away when she was fifteen, a point of emotional convergence for the young couple, Hugh assumed. From what he knew, Mai's widowed mother was a church-goer and might object to their living together while they finished college.

As had Leslie. "Aren't they too young?" she had said last week when Hugh mentioned the prospect. "It's like a junior marriage." Another strike against her: she was always fretting, always saw the downside.

Wait. Was that true? Hugh caught himself from spiraling deeper into utter disgust with his friend. Leslie was an encouraging person, he had to admit. *Falsely* encouraging . . .

“Hugh!” Francine snapped. He turned around and woke to where he was: playing doubles. Since hanging up on Leslie he had been wandering through his day like a ghost, preoccupied by dread that his son was in desperate trouble. “I’m serving to the Ad court,” Francine said, which meant he was standing on the wrong side. They were playing against Francine’s decorator, Brian, and his long time live-in boyfriend. With these two men, matches were usually close and Hugh and Francine usually won. Today they were getting blown out, and Hugh was the culprit. Continuing the day’s overanxious, distracted play, he proceeded to hit a volley into the net, losing set number two.

“What’s wrong, Hugh?” Francine whispered with genuine concern as they walked off the court. Solicitude about tennis from Francine was unexpected. The other thankfully few times they had lost, she had been cross, with him and herself.

“Sorry, sorry,” he said breathlessly. “My mind’s elsewhere.”

“I have to go to a board meeting at the Foundation. I’ll give you a lift,” she said and turned away to congratulate their opponents, not giving Hugh a chance to decline. He didn’t enjoy the prospect of being scolded at greater length, and the subway would be much quicker than her limousine, but after their showers he let her shepherd him into the BMW sedan. As soon as her driver nudged away from the curb and into halting traffic, she demanded, “What’s worrying you so today?”

Not wanting to mention his newfound discomfort with Leslie, or his anxiety about Ray, he told her about the situation with his apartment and the offer Leslie had organized.

“But this is good news!” she said. “You told me a year ago you were going to be in trouble when your lease was up. This way you’ll have some money to find a new place.”

“But I have to move.”

She turned her regal profile to study him face to face. She surveyed him thoughtfully for a long, uncomfortable moment. At last she nodded with understanding. “Your home,” she said.

He nodded. She asked no more questions, offered no encouragement, proffered no advice. Sometimes it was good to be with his tribe.

They traveled forty minutes—covering only fifteen blocks—before she spoke again: “Hugh, please don’t feel you have to answer right away—or ever—but there’s something I want you to consider. That is . . .” Francine uncharacteristically looked flustered, uncertain how to continue. “This has crossed my mind before, several times in fact,” she said and paused to clear her throat with a demure cough. “It would make a lot of sense in my life, and would be a pleasure, at least for me, if you and I married.” She added with a wry smile: “Of course I mean solely for companionship.” She peered out the Beemer’s tinted window and confessed: “I’m tired of traveling alone. Figuring out which gay man will humor me by accompanying me to events. Besides, they’re not readily available these days. They all have husbands now,” she said lightly. Her tone quickly darkened again: “I’ve tried to get used to going alone but really that’s no fun.” She paused for a reaction from Hugh. He was astonished, speechless, but his shock did

not discourage her. “I can easily manage providing you with a no-interest loan to buy a new home for yourself and your children,” she continued. “You can sleep there if you like. When I’m hosting late or for whatever reason, I will fix up a room for you at my place. Decorate it anyway you like. I wouldn’t mind at all if you stayed with me all the time, as a matter of fact. Either way, you’d be able to have a home of your own to give to your children someday.”

Hugh’s face must have retained its look of astonishment because Francine, when she looked at him directly, blanched and added: “You understand I don’t mean anything romantic.”

“Of course not!” Hugh blurted out.

“You don’t have to be so vehement,” she teased.

“I wasn’t!”

“Of course I know you would still be . . . active. You’re a young, vigorous man. You’d be completely free to satisfy those needs with anyone you like. At your place,” she added. “Anyway, you don’t have to answer now. Or ever.” She looked out the BMW’s tinted window, giving him the back of her head. “They used to call it a marriage of convenience when a wealthy widow married a younger gay man. Of course you’re not gay and there’s no longer any social requirement for a woman in my position to have a husband.” She turned back, her chin up, and looked down the length of her aquiline nose, her usual command restored. “But the more I think about it, considering that I enjoy your companionship and that’s all I want out of a relationship, and considering how comfortable I can make things for you, this really would, in the best sense, be a marriage of convenience for both of us.”

