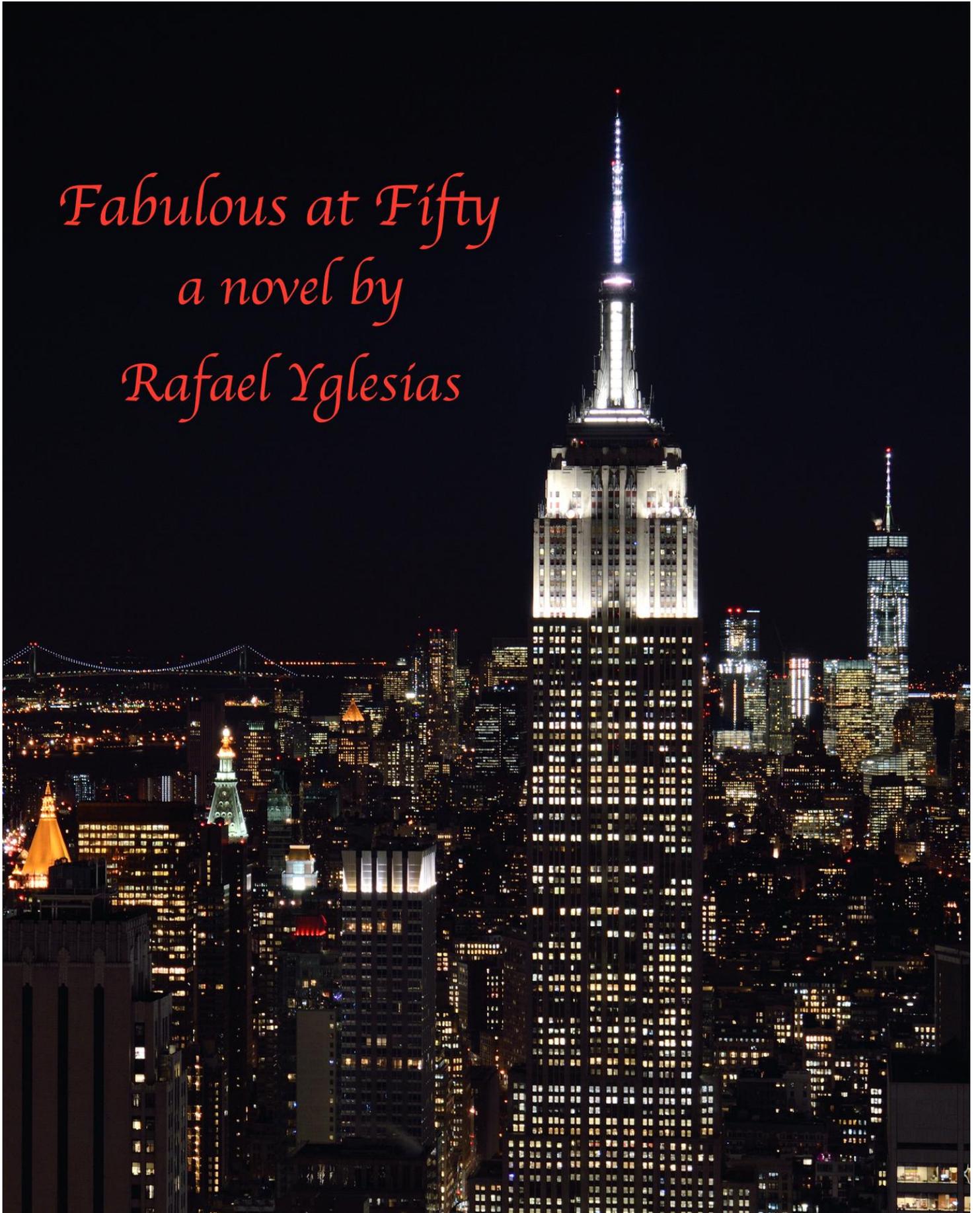


Fabulous at Fifty
a novel by
Rafael Yglesias



3.3

Hugh noticed immediately on his son's arrival that Ray's eyes were thoroughly bloodshot but dismissed any suspicion of hangover. The puffiness of Ray's lids indicated not hedonism but sorrow.

Hugh waited to ask, instead opening his arms. Ray settled into the embrace, resting his head on his father's shoulder. His belly was full of college flab but his arms retained the steel of high school wrestling. "What's wrong?" Hugh whispered.

"Mai dumped me." Ray's chest heaved and he swallowed a sob. Hugh put a hand on the back of his son's springy mass of hair, as dense as his mother's, but thicker, curlier. That was too much comforting for Ray's comfort. He extricated himself, turning away and walking to the kitchen. Hugh couldn't see if tears were falling.

"Dumped you?" Hugh said. Mai had seemed crazy about Ray: her exquisite amber eyes followed him wherever he went, and she laughed with delight at his witticisms and listened reverently when he railed against American imperialism.

Ray opened the refrigerator violently enough for bottles and cans to rattle. "You want a beer?" he called out, then said in disgust: "There is no beer."

"You know I don't like beer."

"I do!" Ray cried out piteously.

"Sorry," Hugh said and he was. "We'll go to the Knickerbocker." He thought: *Ray's belly doesn't need meat and beer. But he doesn't need being dumped either. What*

other comforts could Hugh offer? He had an impossible, childish wish that Amy would appear and take over. Wasn't healing heartbreak a mother's job?

"When?" Ray asked. He didn't come out of the kitchen. Was he weeping in there?

"It's five-forty-five," Hugh said. "A little early for dinner."

"I'm hungry." Ray appeared with his right hand buried in a box of Stoned Wheat Thins.

"Let's go now then," Hugh said before Ray could stuff his face with crackers.

Walking to the restaurant, as if there were a male ordinance against emotional conversation on a public sidewalk, they discussed the haplessness of the Mets. Once inside, a beer foaming in front of Ray, a Chivas gleaming at Hugh, father said to son, "I'm really surprised Mai broke up with you."

"Me too," Ray said and drained a third of his draft in one swallow. "I said we should get married."

Hugh was confused. "She broke up with you and you proposed?"

Ray shook his head. "Other way around. But I didn't propose. I said we should get married and have children and she broke up with me."

"I don't understand."

"I don't either," Ray said. "I mean, I do. She wants to finish college, get a law degree, all that, okay. But then why not say 'No, it's too soon?'"

Hugh waited for more. Ray took another long pull. He suppressed a belch, sighed, and fell into a deep silence. "So," Hugh said, "you talked about getting married

in general, Mai said she didn't want to until she was done with her education and then she broke up with you?"

"Yep." Ray raised the menu, obscuring his face.

Hugh tapped the menu. "I don't understand."

"Look, Dad, I don't want to talk about it. She broke up with me. Whatever bullshit people say, when they break up with you it means they don't want to be with you anymore. So fuck her." The angry words brought up tears, and Ray ducked for cover behind his menu again.

After ordering, Hugh restored their conversation to the male comfort of baseball complaints. Once dinner was cleared and dessert arrived, he watched Ray consume a slice of cheesecake that would likely add another inner tube to his stomach and only then attempted an oblique return to the subject of the breakup by asking, "You here until Sunday?"

"I'm going back Tuesday."

Hugh waited for more. "Tuesday?"

"Yeah, I have stuff to do Monday."

"Stuff to do in the city?"

"Yeah." Cheesecake gone, Ray scraped the plate with his fork, then sucked the tines.

"What stuff?"

Ray sighed, looked down, then met his father's eyes to deliver this bombshell: "I want to transfer to NYU in the spring if it's not too late, or next fall if it is."

"NYU?" Hugh repeated, stunned. "Because you broke up with Mai?"

“And other things.”

“What other things?” Hugh sounded irritated and angry to himself. He sounded . . . like his own mother.

“I hate Brown. I hate living in Providence. I want to be in New York. My friends are here. You’re here.” Ray lowered his eyes to his empty plate and kept them focused there.

Hugh’s chest constricted, his eyes burned. He would love Ray to be closer to home, but Amy—not a mute ghost this time but a public address broadcast loud in his head—asked a question he immediately relayed to her baby: “Is NYU really the right school for you?”

“No,” Ray said in a tone of disgust.

Hugh was baffled. “Then why—”

“Because *no* college is right for me.”

“That’s horseshit!” Hugh snapped, his father’s favorite reply of contempt. Ray blanched. “Sorry,” Hugh said. “But how can you know that all colleges are wrong for you?”

“Because I don’t like college,” Ray said. “It’s a waste of money.”

“Well, it’s my money.”

“You’re not a rich man,” Ray said. “And I don’t want to go into debt for a worthless degree.”

“What? Why are you talking about anyone going into debt?”

“I’m not letting you pay for any more of my going to college. It’s a terrible waste and anyway I’m getting nothing out of it.”

“Slow down. First of all, don’t worry about the money, the money is not an issue.”

“It *is* an issue. A month ago you told us Stein may be selling the building and you might have to move. Not until your lease runs out, but still, that’s what? Less than two years?”

“I can afford a new rental and your tuition,” Hugh said, deciding this wasn’t the moment to inform him—and Ginnie later tonight, since information like this had to be delivered as simultaneously as possible—that moving out might happen a lot sooner. Or that after moving, Hugh planned to buy a place and would be saddled with a mortgage.

“You’re going to pay market rate in Manhattan? You’ll be broke.”

“I have savings. In fact, I’ll have enough to pay off your BA and a graduate degree loan.” That was an exaggeration—and a rash one. The understanding with Ginnie and Ray was that they would pay for graduate school. Ginnie hadn’t gone and it wouldn’t be fair to her if he paid for Ray’s. Fair? he argued with himself. Ginnie didn’t want to go. Anyway Ray would eventually get a job and pay off his own loan for graduate school. Francine’s startling and bizarre proposal came back into his mind, as it had every half-hour since she made it, but now, for the first time, as the perfect salve for his failings as a solo parent: he and his motherless children would be set for life. Then he was beset again by his main worry, that he was guilty of having encouraged her proposal by twice agreeing to be her escort. Considering his bad behavior with Hilda, he could seem quite the conniver. But really he had accepted Francine’s invitations innocently . . .

“I’m sorry,” he said to Ray. “I was distracted. What did you say?”

“I’m not going to graduate school, Dad. For Chrissakes I can’t stand the crap now. Not gonna volunteer for years of more bullshit. All of this is a waste of time.”

Hugh reverted to snapping. “How do you know that?” Ray looked startled and hurt, but Hugh couldn’t stop the flow of now Amy-like irritation: “You don’t know what you’ll want to be in five years. A doctor, a lawyer—you’d make a great historian, or a political science professor—for that you need graduate degrees.”

Ray’s brows, at rest quizzical like his mother’s, met in a line of shock: “Historian?! Poli sci professor? I’d rather blow my brains out than be an academic. And I have no interest in being a doctor. Not after seeing what Mom went through.”

Hugh was taken aback. Did Ray feel his mom hadn’t gotten the best treatment? Hugh knew any probing there would find the entrance sealed.

Meanwhile Ray added to his rant: “But the one thing I’m not doing is going to graduate school to become a scumbag.”

“Scumbag?” Hugh stammered. “Who comes out of graduate school a scumbag?”

“Law school graduates.”

“Ah.”

Ray stood up. “You paid, right?”

“All lawyers aren’t scumbags,” Hugh protested.

“They are if they’re any good at it,” Ray said. “Come on. Let’s go home.”

Exiting the restaurant Hugh put a soothing arm around his son. Ray accepted walking like that, as if he were ten and still used to snuggling in public with his father. During the stroll back to their building they were quiet, allowing Hugh to analyze his son’s vehemence about graduate school and arrive at a deduction he was eager to verify.

Unlocking the front door, Hugh asked: “Mai wants to become a lawyer, right?”

Ray brushed past him, in a hurry to get to his room. “Exactly,” he said and he shut the door behind him.