

*Fabulous at Fifty*  
a novel by  
Rafael Yglesias



### 3.5

Hugh found out his son was actively pursuing the idea of transferring to NYU through the mail. First, an envelope appeared addressed to Ray labeled APPLICATION. Hugh informed Ray of it via email, asking whether he should forward it. He received no immediate reply, raising a hope that his boy's irritating penchant for ignoring paperwork would for once work in Dad's favor. However the next day an NYU envelope addressed to Hugh appeared. It was an application for a loan based on financial need, requiring Hugh to fill out an income and net worth statement. Hugh texted his son to ask what was going on.

Ignore that. It's a mistake.

Hugh was relieved. For five minutes. Then he realized the mistake might refer solely to the application for financial need. Finally he texted Ray:

Have you applied for a transfer to  
NYU?

Ray replied:

I told u I was.

Hugh stared at the message, appalled that so momentous a decision had been made without meaningful consultation. Indeed Ray had told him, but Hugh hadn't believed him, had thought the impulse to leave Brown was a spasm of Ray's broken heart. He decided not to call Ray and have it out. Unfortunately, at the same instant he made that vow, his finger pressed the

phone icon and he was dialing Ray. His son answered after the fourth ring with the enthusiastic greeting: “Yeah.”

“It’s your dad.”

“Yeah.” Ray’s voice had been emptied of all feeling other than hopelessness. “You can throw it out. I’m getting a student loan, that’s what they were supposed to send. I’m coming home this weekend so just leave all my mail in my room.”

“Why are you coming home this weekend?”

“It’s Mike’s birthday,” Ray said, referring to one of his closest high school chums. He added, “I gotta go. Bye,” and the connection cut off before Hugh had a chance to say Ginnie was going to be home this weekend as well, for a mysterious job interview. And she was bringing a new boyfriend, someone named Ethan Harrington, equally mysterious, no detail provided except that he “made documentaries,” which Hugh knew all too well meant that he was broke. Or a trust-fund baby. Or both. In any case, that she was serious about a filmmaker both flattered and made him nervous—for reasons he couldn’t immediately identify and didn’t wish to investigate. Although he suspected he would have to eventually; this young man was a serious development. For the past three months Ginnie’s biweekly calls—chock full of excruciating details about her disappointing dating life, exciting details about the success of her new blog for the *Washington Post*, and exhaustive details about her hunt to replace the apartment she would lose in four months—had waned, then stopped altogether. This past month Hugh had had to place a weekend call and interrogate her as if he were her grandmother. With little success. Other than a half-choked, half-thrilled blurting of “I’m seeing someone I really like,” there had been little discussion of how she felt about Ethan, which meant—Hugh knew from previous experience—that she felt a lot.

Although Hugh doted on his children he wished they hadn't picked this weekend to descend on him. He had a date with Sue for Friday—beautiful, elegant Sue whose sly mouth he could vividly imagine kissing—and he had a secret wish, a keen hope, almost entirely hidden from himself, that Friday evening would extend into Saturday and perhaps a Sunday brunch. Not so much *The Lost Weekend* as a *Weekend Found*. He had emailed Sue the morning after Kyle's new works showing, asking if she would like to see the director's cut of *The Scion*, a longer version of what she might have seen in a theater last year, followed by a Q&A with director Lincoln Cartwright, the Q's supplied by Hugh. Hugh calculated this would show himself off to greatest advantage, although he pretended otherwise, adding to his email invitation that he would make up for the dull evening by taking her to a good dinner. Sue accepted with the witty response "Of COURSE I'm interested! One, I never saw it and second, as you may have heard, I'm that rare person who likes movies!" She had remembered his mother-in-law's reason why they should date; Hugh had stuck in her mind these past two years. Another hopeful sign was that when he called Kyle to ask him whether he'd had any luck with the gallery owners, fully expecting him to demand Sue's phone number, his Lothario of a buddy didn't mention Sue at all. He did comment that the tall gallery owner was pursuing him, presumably as an artist, so slighting her, whatever his motive, had been the right career move.

Friday evening Hugh put on his Armani suit. He was glad neither Ginnie nor Ray had arrived early enough to see that he was dressing up, and he hoped to return home too late for them to notice his sartorial splendor.

Sue noticed. As he guided her to two seats reserved for them, she said, "Nice! You're ready for your close-up." She was elegantly dressed, shedding a camel hair coat to reveal a black jacket, a rope of pearls, a pale pink blouse, and a taut gray skirt.

“As are you,” he said and excused himself to briefly introduce the movie. He had made welcoming remarks prior to a screening countless times, and having Sue in the audience didn’t make him nervous. On the contrary, glancing her way he was inspired by the lively interest of her edge-of-the-seat posture and glistening eyes. Her presence encouraged him to call *The Scion* “a landmark achievement in American filmmaking,” praise he had wholeheartedly believed before the release of the movie but lately doubted, unwillingly influenced by the mixed notices it had received. Gazing at Sue’s trusting eyes renewed his original enthusiasm. Reviewers had been critical, he decided as he settled next to her, because the movie didn’t end with sentimental optimism, no feeling of triumph over racism, instead insisting that the wounds of slavery still bled.

“I’m excited,” Sue whispered as the lights went down.

So was he to be beside her. But while the movie played he was reminded of showing the early cut to Hilda shortly before he broke up with her. That memory troubled him. He hoped she had found someone, she had so sweet and generous a heart. He had no discreet way of finding out: at tennis Francine never mentioned Hilda, and presumably her proposal to Hugh meant she’d never been told about the relationship. Hugh had come to feel he’d mistreated Hilda. Certainly he’d been careless of their passion. Sitting next to Sue, which had him as excited and jumpy as a teenager in love, he wondered whether he had made a mistake in assuming the pleasure of his time with Hilda had been merely a byproduct of its clandestine circumstance. After nearly two years of wandering in a passionless desert, he was chastened to realize that opportunities for genuine connection were few and far between, that being in love wasn’t simply a matter of will.

During the first hour, as the movie's imagery progressed from the lush colors of plantation life to the jazzy, washed out, nearly black and white of Baltimore's ghetto, his anxiety about possibly blowing it with Sue made it impossible to sit still. Toward the end he excused himself to go to the bathroom, but really it was to be free of her alluring and familiar scent—he couldn't place from where—and to stop himself from looking at her profile instead of the screen. She had caught him at it once. She misunderstood, thank God, and whispered, "Everything okay?" He had an urge to blurt out "You're beautiful," which was something he felt in general rather than could see in the darkness.

He watched the last ten minutes standing in the back beside the director, chilled once again by the film's shattering scene of the "passing" narrator initiated into the Ku Klux Klan, the final indelible image of his eyes shutting as a white hood, like a hangman's blinder, was lowered over his numbed and yet still agonized face. Lincoln Cartwright had arrived shortly before the last sequence began, accompanied by a very skinny blond who looked like a model. He had warned Hugh about his late arrival, that he didn't feel up to watching "the damn thing again," as if the movie were a rebuke, not his masterpiece.

Of course he had moved on, as all artists do, was absorbed with editing *The New People*, a studio-financed, \$250-million so-called tent-pole, a sci-fi saga about a teenage girl kidnapped by a barren alien race to help them breed. The story sounded absurd to Hugh—especially when he learned the detail that the aliens were reptiles—but the buzz was good, so Hugh utterly believed the introduction he made to deafening applause: "Please welcome one of the premier filmmakers of the world, Lincoln Cartwright."

He glanced out at Sue while Josh strode up to join him in the chairs placed on the stage. Checking on the object of his infatuation chilled his heart: she looked skeptical. In fact, she

frowned. What had happened? She hadn't liked the movie? Okay, the story was sad and yes, some scenes bordered on melodramatic, but not to have any admiration for this ambitious, often magnificent work on race, the central dilemma of American life? Could he be in love with a woman—hell, could he date a woman—with taste that shallow?

Maybe it was her sour expression but he did a poor job with the interview, listless on his own part and sometimes defensive on Lincoln's. He was relieved to open up the floor to questions, especially because the audience gushed at Lincoln. But the writer-director claimed to be disappointed by *The Scion*. "All I see are its flaws, its compromises."

"Compromises?" Hugh challenged instead of interpreting Josh's self-criticism as modesty, as he realized later he should have done. "I think it's remarkably uncompromising. What compromises did you make?" he asked, a second mistake because Josh then wallowed in complaints about studio interference. But the audience evidently wasn't convinced by the auteur's low assessment of his own achievement. After Hugh said in conclusion, "Well, my guess is that everyone here disagrees—we are not disappointed by your great film," they stood and clapped long and enthusiastically—all except for Sue. Instead, she turned her back to gather her coat. Hers was a shapely backside, but at that moment Hugh didn't appreciate it.