

Fabulous at Fifty
a novel by
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3.6

He told himself not to ask what she thought of *The Scion*. He told himself not to while walking to the Red Hen, while being seated at a quiet table by the plate glass window, while ordering a martini for himself (he wanted to be drunk, or at least reckless for the rest of this date), while she ordered a glass of Cabernet, and while listening to the waiter's melodramatic presentation of tonight's specials. During each conversational pause Hugh implored himself: *Don't ask her.*

Alone with the menus, Sue gave hers a glance, put it aside, and said, "Aren't you going to ask me what I thought of the movie?"

"You didn't like it," Hugh said. "What are you having?" He meant to be pleasant by changing the subject but immediately realized he sounded dismissive.

"How do you know I didn't like it?"

"We film curators know these things." Where was this insufferable tone of superiority coming from? Superciliousness was a typical flaw of his kind; usually he was careful to remove every trace of it.

"Curator? That's what you are? Not a film critic?" Sue's teasing smile appeared. This mannerism of hers, a look of suppressed laughter, had become irritating, no longer a turn on. What the hell was so amusing about calling himself a curator?

"Well I guess I'm a film programmer and a grant-giver. But part of my mission"—holy shit, did he just claim to have a mission?—"is to organize events and program films around a

theme or a . . .” He stopped abruptly. Sue was nodding encouragingly. Her lips—she had painted them a nearly purple red, a brilliant contrast against her porcelain skin—parted slightly as if preparing to drink him in. “What did you think of the movie?” he said.

Sue frowned. “What? Oh. You switched subjects. Well, I did admire it. It’s very well done.”

“That doesn’t sound like you enjoyed it.”

“Well, I know men don’t like if women volunteer criticism . . .” She shook off that thought. “You’re not that kind of man. You want to hear my frank opinion, right?”

“Right.”

“I thought it was too long and too preachy.”

“Preachy?” Hugh couldn’t keep shock out of his tone.

“No?” she asked with gentle curiosity, apparently open to hearing that she was wrong. She was utterly self-possessed, he noticed for the one-hundredth time, very different from most people, especially New Yorkers, who even when insisting on their point of view had a nervous energy that belied a lack of confidence. Most people Hugh knew, himself included, wanted to impress and persuade. Sue, like another woman he had loved, seemed to have a rare and true self-belief. Like Amy, Sue was able to not share his love for a work of art but feel the disagreement said nothing about her feelings for him, that other people’s opinions were incidental to the substance of their character. In short, she was the opposite of a critic.

“I guess,” Hugh said slowly, reluctant to argue now that he felt Sue was a superior person, that it was small-minded of him to contradict her, “I believe the one thing *The Scion* is not, is preachy.”

Sue nodded, interested by this. “Hmm,” she said. “Well, I don’t know, it just seemed to me the movie’s about the fact that racism and the legacy of slavery are terrible. You know, it’s like a lot of Holocaust movies. You’re supposed to feel awful about it, and of course I do. Genocide, slavery, racism are evil, but if I’m being told what is good and what is evil, aren’t I being preached to?”

“I think it’s about a lot more than just that racism is bad,” Hugh said and went on to explain he thought *The Scion* detailed how racism is inevitably internalized by its victims, which makes racists feel justified and so contributes to more racism, a vicious cycle. By the time he was done two things had occurred. Their drinks were nearly gone and the waiter had reappeared to get their order.

“I’d like the salmon, with the sauce on the side,” Sue said. “And to start, the mixed salad without the buttermilk dressing, just oil and vinegar on the side.”

“Of course,” the waiter said. “We have a balsamic vinaigrette that’s superb—”

“I’m the only human on the face of the earth who doesn’t like balsamic vinaigrette,” Sue interrupted. “Just oil and red wine vinegar on the side will be lovely. Thanks.” After the waiter took Hugh’s order, she said, “Sorry to be fussy about food. We women are all controlling when it comes to food.”

“Well, the society we men created has left you little choice but to be neurotic about it.”

“And all these years I’ve been blaming my mother.” She winked. “Anyway, I’m sure you’re right that *The Scion* isn’t preachy but I guess all political movies feel preachy to me. Maybe it’s because they’re predictable. Is it news that slavery and racism are evil? Or, in Holocaust movies, that the Nazis were monsters? If I agree with a political movie’s point then I’m bored, and if I don’t I’m irritated, so it takes me out of the story and the characters. And it’s

really characters that I love. That's why all these cartoonish action movies bore me too. I'm not even especially interested in visuals. For me, *All About Eve* trumps *Days of Heaven* any day."

"*All About Eve*," Hugh repeated, startled she had inadvertently chosen as her example a favorite of Amy's. He guessed she'd prepared this speech because of his work, knowing that a casual remark about her taste in movies wouldn't wash. That was charming but he couldn't agree less with her assessment of what made a film great. "I love *All About Eve* too," he said. "But it doesn't make use of the particular strength of movies and so it's kind of an outlier to me. Really a filmed play. Which is fine but not true filmmaking."

"Right, but I don't care about what's true filmmaking. *All About Eve* is the kind of movie I really enjoy. I can understand in my head that I'm wrong, but that doesn't change how I feel while I'm watching. And I've learned—to my sorrow—that it's not good for me to lie about my feelings." Her chin trembled, and she took a sip of Cabernet, appearing to wait for her interior distress to resolve while she carefully replaced her glass and leaned back.

He guessed that the sadness she referred to was recent. Under normal circumstances he would have assumed her speech was a test of his willingness to accept that she would have her own opinions, including on the subject of his expertise, and he might have gone on to reflect that their dispute was like a clichéd meet-cute scene in a romantic comedy, hostility at the start implying underlying passion. Instead, these thoughts were preempted by a vivid recollection from thirty-three years before. It was his third date with Amy, a Middlebury film club night. They had seen *All About Eve*, the first time for both. After, over greasy pizza and caustic Chianti, Amy told him it was the best movie she had ever seen. He berated her because . . . *it wasn't true filmmaking*. Almost word for word the same conversation. And what had his

eventual bride-to-be and love of his life replied? “I don’t give a shit if, by academic criteria, it’s true filmmaking, I still liked it better than any other movie I ever saw.”

“You’re right,” Hugh said to his current companion, not shaking off the memory of pony-tailed, makeup-free Amy in a cardinal-red sweatshirt instead placing that image side by side with Sue—hair blown-out, perfect makeup, elegantly dressed—fascinated that they were twins in taste and reasoning. “Only a fool would argue with what someone truly and deeply enjoys.”

Sue’s trembling chin and apprehensive eyes quieted. She smiled to herself and said, “Thank you.” Had some man bullied her about her taste? Was her self-possession a victim’s mask?

“But enough about the movie,” Hugh said. “Let’s talk about me. What did you think of my interview? I ask because I wasn’t happy with it. I was flatfooted. Really didn’t get at what I wanted to. So . . . any notes, any pointers?”

“The interview was interesting,” Sue said. “I liked him. He seemed level-headed about his movie.”

“Yeah, he was fine. It was me. I was kind of . . . boring, wasn’t I?”

Sue made a funny face. “Are you asking for my professional opinion?” Hugh must have displayed his confusion at this because she added, “You Googled me, right? It’s de rigueur for a first date.”

“Guilty. But what I found was that you worked in development for New York Presbyterian.”

“Used to,” she said. “I’m leaving, or I’ve left really, just cleaning up my desk and handing off to the new hire. But, yes, I worked in their development department.” She paused for Hugh to acknowledge something he couldn’t. “That means fundraising, mostly through

events.” She laughed into his puzzlement. “You didn’t think I was inventing new surgical procedures?”

“No. But fundraising through events . . .” Hugh trailed off as he realized: “Events.”

“Right. We have monthly events with big donors where we interview doctors, especially our department heads. And before that I booked guests for the *Bill Braxton Hour*,” she added, referring to a late-night talk show on serious topics for PBS. “Anyway, I have a lot of experience preparing the questioner for interviews. What I’ve learned is that the best way to conduct an interview is to be contradictory. Not argumentative. You can be friendly, but the more an interviewer challenges what his guest is saying the better the result. You were soft-balling Cartwright and, like most people, he’s better when someone’s throwing at his head. Also, with a black filmmaker, it can look a little condescending to have an older white guy trying so hard to be nice.”

The last sentence was the one that hit Hugh on his noggin. He immediately realized she was right. He would have challenged a white filmmaker about why he had turned his back on independent and original filmmaking and agreed to direct a big-budget studio sci-fi popcorn flick. Why was he so disappointed by his own masterpiece? Instead of pretending Lincoln was merely being modest, Hugh should have investigated that disgust.

But he didn’t want to confess to Sue that she had hit the nail—and him—on the head. Instead he asked about her use of a pitching metaphor, “Are you a baseball fan?”

“Guilty. I’m in love with Derek Jeter.”

Hugh tried to smile. It felt more like a wince, but he convinced himself that he had successfully concealed his utter dismay at learning she was a Yankee fan.

Sue laughed, a genuine laugh, with easy surprise and delight.

“What?”

“You’re a Mets fan.”

“Is that so funny?”

“It’s who you are. When you love something you’re serious about it. I’m a dilettante. I go where the action is. Or the excitement anyway.”

“Or the wins,” Hugh mumbled.

“Now don’t tell me you’re in love with losing,” Sue said. “Being loyal to a team is sweet. Relishing defeat is neurotic.”

Their starters arrived. Hugh spread his napkin over his lap to catch the blood from the several wounds Sue had inflicted. He peered at the delicious-looking browned gnocchi with mushrooms that had been presented to him and instead finished his martini. He had lost his appetite. He felt a bizarre and silly frustration. He’d felt a flash of gladness about Sue’s fandom—he missed going to games with Ginnie and Ray, who well into their teens were happy to accompany Pop a few times a season—but she loved the team he hated most! Truly, it would be better if she were repulsed by the game.

Hugh decided they were incompatible. Even if he looked past the fact that she didn’t like the movie he was proudest of being associated with, and that she didn’t think much of him as an interviewer, there was her unforgivable contempt for his hapless Mets. The evening ought to be judged a disaster, but most shocking of all was that staring at his full plate, for which he had no appetite, all he could think about was when he might kiss her. That was the bargain he made with himself: he would kiss her and let the kiss decide if despite their being wrong for each other they could be content.

He supposed he would have to attempt it in the cab they would share when they stopped at her place to drop her. A first kiss with the driver looking on? No, better to get out with her, say he would walk home—she had mentioned she lived off Houston Street, which made that plausible—and kiss her on the street. A friendly peck on the cheek and a hug that lingered a moment or two longer than friendliness. He decided against a second martini and forced his knotted stomach to accept a few morsels of food.

He tried other topics and managed to avoid stepping on another land mine. Her account of growing up in New Jersey at last solved the puzzle of why Sue (five-nine, long straight black hair and slim hiped) and her mother (four-eleven and squat, with frizzled orange hair, perhaps once bright red) looked so different. She was adopted. “From an agency that actually guaranteed to give my parents a red-headed Jewish baby, can you believe it? ‘Pitch black!’ Ma used to say about my hair. ‘You’re a gypsy baby. I stole you from gypsies.’”

Hugh, familiar with the abrasions of a sharp-tongued mother, asked, “Did she really think that was a funny thing to say to her adopted daughter?”

Sue nodded. “My mother thinks she’s a great wit.” She smiled to herself, a wry slight upturn of her lips, and that was when Hugh understood the look that had so attracted him. Her slyness wasn’t restraining mockery or signaling private amusement. It was resignation to her fate. Sue added, “Mom has a great heart. Not a mean streak in sight, but she’s horrendously tactless. Took me a decade of therapy to get it: she really doesn’t mean to hurt you when she steps on your toes, she just has poor impulse control. Anything that pops into her head which sounds funny to her, and that’s usually something embarrassing or politically incorrect, she has to say it. Loudly. Someone must have convinced her that jokes are harmless.”

“Actually they’re deadly,” Hugh said.

“Yep.” Sue cocked her head and looked at him gratefully as she confessed: “Made being a pimply, self-conscious, gawky, introverted teenager a total nightmare.”

He certainly was going to kiss her. They talked about her soon-to-end job and her plans for the future, and they laughed together, hard, at something so minor Hugh couldn't remember what it was a few minutes later. The belly laugh was a relief, left him with the realization of how clenched his muscles had been all evening. He never did recover his appetite. They both left their entrees half-eaten and passed on dessert. It was late anyway. A three-hour movie, a forty-five-minute Q&A, and a two-hour dinner had pushed them well past midnight.

“This was great. I really had a good time,” Hugh said once he'd paid for the cab and they were standing in front of her building. He meant it with all his heart while also knowing it was a lie, he felt an utter failure as her date.

She said, “Yeah, really fun. Anytime. You know me,” she added, returning to their private joke: “I love movies.”

And without warning Hugh dove at her.

The Kiss: A Leap of Faith

It was a plunge, not slowing down as he approached those full lips in the amber cast of a street lamp. He landed hard on her soft mouth. Maybe it was the impact, he told himself at 1:00 a.m., eating an entire box of Stoned Wheat Thins. Maybe it was that he immediately withdrew, he decided at 1:45 while finishing off a chocolate Flying Saucer, so that the entire kiss consisted of a mash of lips and sudden retreat. Maybe the suddenness was what provoked her mouth to twist into a shocked, appalled expression, he thought at 2:00, her nose scrunching up, her brow contracting, as if, in kissing her, he had instead emitted a smelly fart.

He was still replaying his clumsiness at 2:15, imagining a graceful approach, a soft beginning, parting, then going in again, longer, deeper, a great first kiss of a romantic movie.

He knew how to do it.

He had done it a few times now that he had some experience dating, including with women who had failed to smite his heart. And Sue's lips were perfect for kissing. He would definitely do it right the next time, he vowed while opening the freezer to grab a second Flying Saucer at 2:30.