

Fabulous at Fifty
a novel by
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3.10

Hugh watched Leslie hug his children with equal enthusiasm, squeezing Ginnie and then Ray as tight as she could, swaying a little from side to side. “Oh! It’s so good to see you!” she exclaimed twice. As she pulled away from Ray he saw tears brimming in her eyes. He turned away so his wouldn’t overflow.

As soon as they settled in a booth she interrogated them as ruthlessly as if they were her children. She asked Ginnie and Ethan about how they’d met, smiling and nodding enthusiastically at the details, declaring it to be “so romantic!” On the phone with Hugh yesterday she’d said, “Starting a career at forty! Not ideal marriage material,” but she gave no hint of her qualms. Then she probed Ray’s plan to transfer to NYU, expressing her skepticism through practical questions about losing touch with the friends and professors he had at Brown, remembering he’d enjoyed being on Brown’s debate team and asking whether he could get on to NYU’s squad this late? Ray argued that because his mother’s death almost immediately preceded his going to Brown, a fresh start at a new school was better for him. He became intensely irritated when she pressed her point, suggesting he could treat Brown as a fresh start, but just when he seemed on the verge of biting her head off, she defanged him. “I don’t blame you for wanting to go to college in New York,” she said. “It’s the greatest city on earth.” This gave her an opportunity to pivot to the reason for the brunch. “But you won’t be able to be roommates with your daddy.”

At which point she changed her tone, talking to them as adults, explaining in even greater detail than she’d given Hugh the byzantine laws about renting. Ethan inserted

himself into the conversation, citing a friend who had successfully fended off eviction from his late parents' rent-controlled apartment for over a decade, after which the thwarted landlord sold the apartment to his friend for a song. Leslie dismissed Ethan coolly, saying his friend's situation didn't apply to Hugh's, a sharp contrast from the warmth and patience in her voice as she moved on to answer Ray's questions about why tying up Stein in the courts wouldn't succeed in stalling him for much longer than a year.

It took a good hour to wade through the byzantine legalities and logic of her negotiations with Stein. Ginnie was completely silent during all of it—because she was too sad, Hugh assumed. But once the men surrendered, she spoke up with great energy. “Okay, Leslie, I get that Dad has to take Stein's offer, thanks for explaining it so well, I totally understand now, but I still think it's a mistake for Dad to take the money and run. I think we should ask Stein to let the two hundred be a down payment and we'll buy the apartment.”

“Buy?” Leslie asked, confused. “How?”

“I can help pay the mortgage and I asked Grandma and Grandpa this morning—”

“What?” Hugh said. “What are you talking about? You called Ruth and Bernie?”

He was astounded she could even conceive of being this high-handed and interfering.

“And they said”—Ginnie charged ahead—“they could give Daddy a no-interest loan of a million dollars, which is our inheritance anyway, and we'll inherit the apartment someday so it's all the same.” She turned to Ray. “Right? You agree, right?”

“That's a great idea, sis,” Ray said. “And you won't even need to pay my tuition, Pops. Right, Leslie? If Dad's got a humongous mortgage then I'd qualify for student aid.”

“I don’t know about that,” Leslie mumbled.

“Out of the question,” Hugh said. His heart was pounding. “Forget it. I’m not borrowing money from your inheritance—”

“Grandpa said it was a great idea!” Ginnie said. “He thinks maybe it’ll be a way of sheltering the gains from taxes, since Manhattan real estate is sure to keep going up and up. He’s going to talk to his accountant tomorrow.”

“Makes so much sense,” Ethan said. “You’re brilliant. Isn’t she brilliant?” he asked Leslie.

“She’s perfect,” Leslie said.

“Grandma said—” Ginnie laughed. “You’ll love this, Daddy. Grandma said they could sleep over in my bedroom when they go to theater in NY. ‘Your father won’t mind,’ she said. ‘We’re very quiet.’”

Leslie laughed. Ray grinned. Ethan opened his arms as if everything was solved.

“Honey!” Hugh slapped the table firmly enough to silence her, wipe away Ray’s smile and cut short Leslie’s chuckles. “I am not borrowing money from anyone other than a bank. Period. And I’m certainly not borrowing from my children’s inheritance.”

Ray lowered his head. Ginnie looked sheepish. But not Leslie. “Well, you’re not really borrowing from their inheritance,” she said, putting a hand on his wrist and patting it. “You’ll be repaying the loan. And since you’re going to leave your estate to Ginnie and Ray, they’ll end up with both their grandparents’ money and the apartment.”

Hugh leaned close and said in a low voice, “You’re not taking their side?”

“Side?” Leslie faced him squarely. “There are no sides, Hughie. This is just about what’s the best move financially. And also emotionally. You don’t want to leave your home, do you?”

“Oh come on, Leslie, there are a million things wrong with this plan. I don’t want to be mixed up in Ruth and Bernie’s savings. Ruth’s so fit, she could live to be a hundred. She may need that money, and anyway what happens if I get—” He hesitated. Sue had reawakened his belief in the possibility that someday he would have a mate. He glanced at the kids, who seemed to be absorbed talking to each other, but he still cut himself off. “You know,” he said, to avoid being more explicit. “And I don’t want Ray paying for his college education. Do you?”

“Of course not! Ray’s not paying for his college with loans. That’s out of the question. But with Stein’s two-hundred K and even a no-interest loan from Ruth and Bernie you can still pay for Ray to finish. And you’re wrong about being tied up with Ruth and Bernie’s finances. It’s a loan. If you start doing better you can refinance with a bank and pay them back. Or sell the apartment. Let’s just think about it, sweetie, okay? As an option.” She raised a hand to his cheek, to sooth the anguish written on his face.

He intercepted her hand and pushed it away. “Honey, there’s nothing for us to think about.”

He heard Ray clear his throat. Loudly.

Ethan, suppressing a smirk, was looking away. Ginnie was staring at her father and Leslie. Ray studied his plate. “Ginnie’s idea should be explored,” Leslie said in a business-like, wrapping-up tone. “You should consult with your accountant. And your friend Peter. He’s an investment guy, isn’t he?”

Hugh stared at his coffee cup.

“I have to go back to Hell,” Ray announced, nudging Ginnie to let him out of the booth. “I mean Providence.”

Hugh stood while Leslie slid out, opening her arms to Ray. He hugged her, saying, “Thanks for explaining the situation and helping out Dad.”

To put some distance between himself and the embarrassing display he had just put on for his children, Hugh walked Ray outside. “You need money for a cab?” he asked, reaching for his wallet.

“I’ll take the subway,” Ray said. They hugged goodbye and he whispered, “You need a wife, Dad.” He pulled away and looked deeply into Hugh’s mortified face. “A real wife.”