

Fabulous at Fifty
a novel by
Rafael Yglesias



3.7

Hugh was woken by the laughter of his daughter's lover. A soft laugh. The chuckle of a man who knows he is loved. Hugh heard immediate confirmation in how Ginnie answered: words tripping over each other, eager to share intimacies—the way she talked to her best friend, or how she used to confide in her daddy when she was little. Okay, he was feeling sorry for himself. Ginnie still offered him her ideas and feelings with a glad trust. Or did until a month ago, when she met . . .

Did she tell me his name? Hugh wondered, hearing the strange baritone gently interrupt Ginnie's aria. On cue, Ginnie answered by raising her voice with excitement, loud enough for him to hear, "Oh, Ethan! You're so . . ." then dropping it so he couldn't hear the rest. He glanced at the clock. 8:37. Two hours later than his usual rising. But he hadn't fallen asleep until 4:00, digesting the Flying Saucers. That brought back with a stab the memory of Sue's wince at his kiss. He groaned.

Must have been a loud complaint because Ginnie called out: "Dad? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Just getting up," he shouted at his door.

Reluctant to meet Ethan, he stalled by waking up his Blackberry. There were four junk emails and a reminder from Melissa that she had left a packet of DVDs with his doorman, screeners from last minute applicants to the festival. (Of course Joe had handed them to Hugh on his way in. Melissa often sent pointless reminders like this; sometimes she seemed to be

inventing reasons to be in touch.) Then commonplace irritations and possible sons-in-law were driven from his mind, and his heart skipped one whole beat: there was an email from Sue!

Dear Hugh: Thank you for last night and for tolerating Grumpy Me. I thought about THE SCION for an hour before I fell asleep and woke up thinking about it so I must have liked it more than I realized. And sorry I was startled by your kiss. May I have a mulligan? xo Sue

Hugh hated golf. For starters, he was hopeless at the game. And it was all his mother talked about, her one true love. He particularly loathed the coinage of mulligan for do-over; its wink at cheating without penalty symbolized for Hugh the smug incompetence of country club privilege. But he was thrilled by Sue's usage. The promise of a kissing do-over propelled him out of bed to shower, shave, and make for the kitchen table with appropriate enthusiasm to greet this new paragon of Ginnie's.

He wanted to be as welcoming as possible. He did not take lightly that she had brought Ethan home. And it was a good omen that as Hugh approached the kitchen he overheard Ethan's resonant voice deliver an opinion he shared: "*An Inconvenient Truth*'s message is really important for the world, but its structure is deeply flawed. It's both a movie by Al Gore and a movie about Al Gore. It needs to be one or the other, take a position."

Hugh quickened his pace to meet this clever young fellow. He entered the kitchen eagerly but froze when he discovered that Ginnie was gazing adoringly at a bald, middle-aged man. Ethan had to be at least forty. Worse, this geezer wasn't dressed his age; he was outfitted like a teen geek attending a computer summer camp: T-shirt, shorts, and black socks with retro Keds sneakers.

“Hey, sleepyhead,” Ginnie greeted Hugh. She gestured proudly at the goofy old fart and confirmed the nightmare: “This is Ethan Harrington.”

Ethan rose to shake Hugh’s hand. Yes, he seemed about forty: maybe as young as thirty-five, perhaps as old as forty-five. Either possibility appalled Hugh, dismayed as he was that his baby girl was dating someone in a different decade of life from herself. Dating? Hell, she was in love. He could see as much when she moved her gaze from Ethan to her daddy: her eyes glistened with pride at her romantic victory.

At least Ethan’s eyes, framed by power-nerd thick black frames, lowered with shame—as they should. “Pleasure to meet you, Mr. Reynolds,” he told the floor. “I’m a fan,” he added with a sigh, as if it were a confession. “Never miss your festival. Best in the country. You don’t always have the so-called hot films, but you always have the most challenging and fun to talk about.” He glanced up at Hugh and smiled shyly, apparently hoping he had pleased.

Hugh was horrified. His daughter was dating her father! Or as close an approximation of her father as possible without the resemblance being disgusting. Ethan not only looked a little like Hugh when Hugh was a young father, he introduced himself the way Hugh usually did, instantly forthcoming with his admiration for the work of others.

Hugh thanked Ethan, who proceeded to prove he wasn’t bullshitting about attending the Foundation’s film festivals, or at least that he had done his homework. He talked in detail about specific films and themes going back four years, remembering selections even Hugh had forgotten. Hugh quickly deflected the praise and asked about Ethan’s work.

“I’m just completing my first full-length doc. Doing the final edit tomorrow so I can submit it to Toronto.”

He was forty and just finishing his first film? “It’s tough raising money these days,” Hugh said. “How long did it take you?”

“Not long. Raised the lion’s share thanks to a rich uncle. A couple college buddies who run a hedge fund supplied the rest.” He grinned, and the effect on Hugh was unpleasant; it looked like the smirk of a man granted a mulligan.

“His short is brilliant,” Ginnie gushed. “*Saying Goodbye?*” she added as if Hugh ought to know it. God, she was smitten. Of all people his daughter knew that thousands of documentaries were submitted to Hugh each year, and he never looked at the shorts because they didn’t fit into any of his programs. “It’s about a twenty-one-year-old weight-lifter, an Olympic bronze medal winner,” Ginnie said, “who very consciously used the Oregon law to end his life—he was terminal—and said goodbye to everyone, had a lovely party in fact, and then did it.”

“It’s a laugh riot,” Ethan said.

“I heard good things,” Hugh lied to be polite. “But I didn’t get a chance to see it.”

“No one saw it,” Ethan said with a sheepish grin.

Hugh began to suspect Ethan was a man who had taken plenty of mulligans. He checked on that deduction: “So is documentary filmmaking a relatively recent interest?”

Ethan nodded. “Yep. Until thirty I couldn’t make up my mind what I wanted to do: Peace Corps, intern for a congressman, law school. Then I gave up being respectable. Dropped out in my second year to try improv comedy. God! Improv. I was stubborn about giving that up. Couldn’t admit to myself I just wasn’t funny.”

“You’re hilarious!” Ginnie declared. She told her father, “You should see his imitation of W. It’s brilliant.”

Ethan nodded patiently at Ginnie's adoration, already accustomed to basking in that sun. "So then I got an MFA in documentary filmmaking at NYU—embarrassing to be a student approaching forty—and finally got serious about my career."

He's serious, Hugh thought sourly, *until he takes another mulligan and moves on to medical school or performance art*. If he had met Ethan in any other context Hugh wouldn't have disapproved of his peripatetic identity, but he hoped someday to be a grandfather and he was old-fashioned enough to want Ginnie to marry someone who wouldn't decide to give up being a dad when that proved tiresome.

Hugh was saved from further discussion of Ethan's career by Ray's appearance. It startled everyone into silence. They collectively stared at Ray as he passed them without a hello, head down, aiming for the refrigerator. He was naked except for plaid boxers, providing a view of chubby breasts, an enormous belly and thick hairy thighs. He took out a Gatorade and proceeded to chug-a-lug it.

More than half of the yellow goop was gone when Ray finally paused and looked their way, as if only now discovering their existence. His eyes were half-closed and winced shut for a long beat before half opening. "Hangover?" his sister called out with a giggle.

Ray peered at Ethan. "Who are you?" he demanded so hoarsely it was more growl than spoken word.

"This is Ethan!" Ginnie said.

Ethan waved limply and said in a whisper, "Hi," as if trying to spare Ray's ears.

"When did you get home?" Ginnie fairly shouted.

While Hugh was binging on Flying Saucers at three in the morning, Ray's door had been shut. He had wrongly assumed his son was already in bed. "The sun was coming up," Ray said.

“Nice to meet you,” he mumbled to Ethan. “I’m going back to sleep,” he added and shuffled toward the hall.

“What are you doing home?” Ginnie asked his love handles and broad back.

“I’m transferring to NYU,” he mumbled as he continued to shuffle out.

“What!” Ginnie screeched. Ray shook his head at the cacophony, a bull in pain. She followed her brother and continued in a loud volume, “That wasn’t a joke?” She turned to Hugh. “He texted me he was transferring but I thought he had to be kidding.”

Meanwhile Ray had bent over, hands on knees. Hugh worried he was about to vomit. He rose and went close in a vague desire to help somehow. He noticed his son’s back had a large brown mole a few inches below his left shoulder blade. When was Ray’s last dermatological appointment? Ray had inherited Hugh’s fair skin and needed to be checked once a year. Hugh realized with horror he had forgotten to nag him into an appointment last year. And the year before?

“Ray,” Ginnie said. “Why are you transferring to NYU?”

“I don’t like Providence. I want the purgatory of home. Goodnight,” he said and took a step into the hall before his sister stopped him cold.

“Mom didn’t want you to go to NYU!” Ginnie cried out, almost a yelp.

Ray turned to tell Ginnie angrily: “You’re wrong. Mom didn’t want me to go to Columbia. We didn’t talk about NYU.” Hugh could see Ray’s eyes now. They were out of *The Omen*, the eyes of Satan’s son: blood red framing black pupils.

“She didn’t want you to go to college in New York City. She wanted you to have the experience of living somewhere else.”

“Neither did I,” Hugh piped up.

Ginnie and Ray weren't interested in what he had thought. Ethan, however, nodded politely and inquired: "Same reason?"

Ray growled: "I've had the incredibly fucking broadening experience of life in Providence during winter so now I want to come home."

"Come home? Here?"

"Yeah. I like my room, the room I grew up in, the room I've lived in since I was born."

"You're going to live here with Dad?"

Ray shouted back: "I'm not gonna live in a tiny dorm three blocks from a three-bedroom apartment I grew up in!"

"You can't," Hugh said, raising his voice too. "You can't live here with me."

"What!" Ray took a step at his father, eyes bloody, his belly thrust forward like a battering ram.

"Good for you, Dad," Ginnie said. "Don't let him."

"What do you mean?" Ray demanded.

"You can't go home again," Ethan mumbled to no one.

Hugh took a moment to glare at the intruder before he turned to his children and made the announcement. He had hoped for a calmer time but Ray had forced his hand. "I'm probably going to have to move."

"What!" Ginnie shrieked.

"Not this year," Ray corrected him. "Our lease isn't up until next year."

"No," Hugh said. "By spring at the latest. I haven't had a chance to tell you but since Stein is selling the building I'm going to be moving out sooner."

"What? Why?" Ginnie said. "Who is he selling it to?"

“Selling or developing it into a condo, it’s unclear, but anyway I’m—or Leslie, actually—has been negotiating for me to get some dough if I leave early. If Stein offers enough I’ll move as early as this winter.”

“This winter!” Ginnie exclaimed. “What do you mean it isn’t clear whether Stein is selling or developing it? And anyway, why do you have to give up your lease?”

“You know,” Ethan said, “tenants have rights beyond just their lease.”

Ray waved a hand and groaned, turning away. “I’m going to sleep.” This time he disappeared into the hall without a protest from his sister.

“Tenants have rights beyond just their lease,” Ethan repeated. “Do you know a good real estate lawyer?”

“Shut up,” Hugh said. “This is none of your business.”

“Dad!” Ginnie shouted. He waited for her to continue objecting: to his moving out, to his rudeness with her new love. Instead she shouted “Dad!” again, her features scrunched up in the way that always preceded tears. Before they could arrive she covered her face and ran from the room. Ethan followed in a hurry.

Hugh sat alone in one of the cane chairs Amy had bought for their kitchen table. The seat was sagging, had needed repair for at least a year. He sat still, contemplating the wreckage of his family. He felt himself estranged from the worn chair, the gouged oak floors, the scuffed white walls. He could no longer reside in his past and he couldn’t bear to contemplate the future. For several eternal seconds he stared into the abyss and then he thought: *How long before it doesn’t look desperate to ask Sue for a second date?*