

Fabulous at Fifty
a novel by
Rafael Yglesias



3.8

He was reading over a reply to Sue's mulligan email that he had composed and not yet sent when Leslie called and poured gasoline on his real estate fire. She said things were so frantic in her office yesterday she hadn't had a calm half-hour to tell him that Stein had come up to two hundred thousand and made it clear that was his final offer, good until the end of the month. She recommended Hugh say yes: it was close enough to their goal of two-fifty, and she knew for a fact that Stein had three other tenants willing to vacate their leases for less and didn't need Hugh to proceed; if Hugh stuck it out for the nineteen months remaining on his lease he would get nothing.

Hugh was silent. Two hundred thousand was three times more than he had ever saved outside of his IRA, but when all was said and done it didn't sound like that much. Not for a lifetime of work, not for giving up his family home and all of its treasured memories.

"Well," Leslie said when he at last confessed to these thoughts, "it's not nothing, which, to be honest, is what you're probably legally entitled to. And if you use the two hundred for a down payment and break your IRA to get a mortgage, you can look for a bachelor pad in a hot neighborhood. Wait until Judy hears about this. I know you guys haven't gotten together in a while, but now she'll definitely want to snag you, preferably before you get too busy with your move." She laughed gaily. "Which, by the way, will be ninety days after you agree to terms."

“Jesus, I just told the kids this might happen but nothing was certain,” Hugh said, despair overwhelming him. “And they were devastated. Ginnie in particular. She started in with all sorts of questions and wild statements, that her new boyfriend was seconding, about tenants’ rights. And the only reason I didn’t get an earful from Ray was because he’s too hungover.”

“Tenants’ rights? Which ones?”

“I couldn’t follow it. They’re too smart for me. I’ll never explain to their satisfaction why this is the best choice.”

“Poor Ginnie. Poor Ray. Poor you. You all have a right to be upset, it’s your home.”

He wanted to say what Amy would in this situation—Yes, it’s our home but we’ll make another, or something brave like that—but he felt his voice would break, or worse he’d sob. He was sick of being this shaky, his emotions always surfacing. All he could manage safely was a sigh.

“Listen,” Leslie said. “Gui’s away until Sunday night and the boys have play dates. I can do a brunch tomorrow at noon. I haven’t seen Ginnie in almost a year and I haven’t seen Ray since before my summer vacation. Invite me along and we’ll explain it together. I can answer any questions they have.”

Hugh calculated quickly this was a safe plan: he knew Ginnie was showing off Ethan to friends this afternoon and tonight but not tomorrow. “Oh, God, that would be great. Thank you.”

“My pleasure. A sad pleasure, but I’ll be so happy to see Ginnie and Ray. Tomorrow, it’s a date. By the way, speaking of money, I keep forgetting to ask you. What in God’s name did you finally say to Francine about her offer to make you a kept man?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?! Didn’t she propose weeks ago? Don’t you see her every week at tennis? How can you get away with nothing?”

“We’re WASPs. She said I didn’t have to respond so I haven’t. She knows that means I’m declining but don’t want to rub it in.”

“Wow,” Leslie said. “And what did Karen say when you told her you turned down the Foundation’s biggest donor?”

“Leslie, I’m a goy. I didn’t tell Karen and you can bet Francine didn’t either.”

“Huh. Guess that makes sense. So, what about Judy? She’s back from her travels and the girls are with their father this weekend, so the coast is clear.”

“Well, Judy’s very nice but I don’t think I’m going to pursue her.”

“You’re . . . not?”

“I just don’t feel there’s real chemistry there. You know? She’s smart and kind and lovely but . . .you know.”

“Huh,” Leslie said. There was a silence Hugh didn’t want to fill. After it had gone on for several awkward seconds, she said, “Okay. So when are you going to tell her?”

“Tell her?” Hugh’s turn to be startled. “I mean, we haven’t . . .” He stopped himself before he applied the embarrassing standard that since they hadn’t had sexual intercourse a break-up wasn’t required. He tried a course correction. “Really? I should go out of my way to reject her? If I don’t call, isn’t that clear enough?”

“Oh God,” Leslie moaned. “You men.”

“Okay, I’ll call her if you think—”

“Do what you want,” Leslie snapped. “It’s certainly none of my business. I just think—”
She clammed up.

“You just think?”

She sighed, as if reluctant to fault him, although she managed to anyway: “A *mensch* would call. And, WASP or no, you’re a real *mensch*.”

But I’m not a man. I’m a widower. “I’ll call,” he said, a reflex to mollify her. But after a moment’s reflection he decided she had a point. He needed to clean up his act. He wasn’t being clear with any of these women; worse, he wasn’t even thinking through the possible ramifications. He hadn’t given much thought to whether or not he should inform Karen about Francine’s odd marriage proposal, or walker-in-residence offer to be more precise. It might have a consequence. Francine had never brought it up again, as he’d guessed she wouldn’t, but ever since a chilly breeze had whistled through their weekly tennis doubles. After their victories she no longer offered him a ride in her sedan, even when she was heading to the Foundation for the monthly board meeting. The few minutes devoted to conversation on court were no longer about what filmmaker he was interviewing next at his Directors Series screenings, or any other comment directed his way. Instead, she chatted with their opponents about the day’s headlines. And when she departed, instead of her ironing board hug and air kiss, she stood several feet away, nodded curtly, and said, “Good playing as always, Hugh. See you next week,” which he understood to mean he would never again be invited to her mansion for dinner.

So. He was about to lose his home. He had gotten himself into an awkward situation with an important donor without keeping his boss in the loop. His daughter was in love with an old man. His son was on the road to academic ruin. And he had offended Leslie with how he had treated her friend.

He wanted to keep his promise to call Judy, but he couldn't concentrate on how to assuage her and Leslie's about-to-be-broken heart (surely it was somehow shared) until he'd sent his reply to Sue.

He reread the draft of his email:

Dear Sue: I'm relieved you weren't put off by my clumsy kiss. My fault. I was rushing things. How about we go slow? And while we're going slow, are you free tonight? For yet another movie? Nancy Meyers has a new middle-aged romantic comedy out. It's playing every fifteen minutes at Regal Union Square. I'd be drummed out of the cineaste corps if anyone knew I willingly went to see it, but if you'll promise not to rat on me, we can have popcorn and the guilty pleasure of a trashy movie.

Without thinking he typed *Love*, the signoff he used with Ray, Ginnie, and even Leslie.

He quickly changed that to: xoxo Hugh

He stared at the x's and o's, struggled to remember which represented a hug and which a kiss. Either way, they were excessive.

He deleted the two hugs and two kisses, leaving merely: H.

But the H. was too stark.

He deleted it and typed: *Affectionately*, Hugh.

What was he, her maiden aunt? He deleted *Affectionately* so hard he also erased part of his email. He retyped the missing words and added: x o H.

He stared at his compromise until he concluded this appeared restrained without being stiff.

He hit send.

He waited.

“Dad?” Ginnie, voice wet with anguish, called plaintively from the other side of his bedroom door.

Hugh hurried to open it. As soon as she could slip through Ginnie banged into his arms, face disappearing as he clasped her tight.

She was saying something but their embrace muffled her.

Meanwhile he was talking at her buried hair: “I’m sorry I yelled at Ethan. He’s terrific. I was upset—”

Ginnie’s face—or rather, a squeezed-together mush that desperation had made of it—appeared again. “You can’t. You can’t!” She shook her head, or tried to since he didn’t let go. He didn’t want to, wanted to hold her this tight for as long as she would let him. “You can’t, you can’t do it.”

“I have to. Look, I’m not a real estate lawyer, but Leslie is, a great one, and tomorrow at noon we’re going to have brunch. You and Ethan will come and I’ll make Ray come, and she’ll explain? Okay?”

“If Stein is selling, can’t you buy our apartment? I’ll help pay, I’m making actual money these days, and Ray can get a student loan so you’ll have more money. And what about Grandma and Grandpa? They’ll help you. If mom were alive, they would help for sure, and they love you, I’m sure they’d be happy to help you.”

“They need their money. And you need yours. And Ray’s not paying for his college education. Look, Manhattan’s gone insane. It’s becoming a home only for the very rich. I just don’t have enough to buy or rent anything larger than a studio in the Village.”

Hugh had never thought of himself as an inadequate breadwinner for his children, but this admission felt like a damning judgment of the choices he had made. He had wanted a quiet, satisfying career. Had he been a selfish fool? True, he couldn't have saved Amy's life with any amount of money. But the apartment was different. If he had fulfilled his father's wish, gone into banking or law, he could at least have saved his children's home, preserved their memories of growing up in the hearth of Amy's love.

"This isn't because of Ray, is it? Just tell me this isn't about crazy Ray."

"Ray? You mean to stop him from moving in?"

Ginnie nodded. "I know you can't bear to say no to him."

"I say no to him all the time."

"No, you don't. You don't say no to me, either. You're too nice to us. I'm not complaining. But it isn't good for us. Just tell Ray to stay at Brown."

"I already questioned his decision."

"Daddy!" She actually stamped her foot. "Not question, for God's sakes. Tell him. Order him."

"Order him?"

"You know what? I'll order him." She turned on her heel and walked out.

"Don't!" Hugh called, but she ignored him and turned the hallway corner, heading for her brother's bedroom.

She was right. Not that he never said no to his offspring; that his no's could be safely ignored. Although Amy had never raised her voice to her children she was the one whose disapproval stuck, who could frighten them into obeying merely by looking disappointed.

Hugh thought he ought to pursue Ginnie, stop her from turning this into a sibling rift that would leave them both bereft. But he heard, or thought he did, a ping from his iBook announcing he had a new email. From Sue?

He hoped, he hoped and hurried to his desk.

Yes! An email from sly Sue. A great email. A message that lifted his spirits into exhilaration and excitement.

H: Trashy romantic movie is a great idea for tonight. Tell me which showing and I'll meet you at the Union Square Regal. And slow is good. Slow is great. Also ripping off each other's clothes works too... xo S