

Fabulous at Fifty
a novel by
Rafael Yglesias



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“So did your children end up killing each other?” Sue asked while they were queued up for popcorn. He was delighted she had agreed to share his movie theater poison. Amy had always taken the first handful, leaving the rest to him, but none of the women he had dated since her death were willing to brave even a small fistful of calories. That slim Sue had said “Of course!” when asked if she would share a bucket added to the lengthening list of her virtues.

Hugh told her there had been raised voices but only one angry outburst, from Ray. “You’re not Mom!” he had yelled, followed by the front door banging hard. That had brought Hugh into the hallway to watch Ginnie walk back to her room, passing by with a fierce scowl to hide her grief.

“I get why they’re upset, of course,” Sue said. “But sooner or later, you were going to have to move. Most parents move from where they raised their kids. My parents did.”

“Yeah, but God, I felt useless,” Hugh admitted after they settled into their seats. “A complete failure.”

“You’re a good father.”

“Thank you. But how do you know? Maybe I kept them in a closet and beat them.”

She grinned and said, “Yeah, you’re the abusive father to a T.”

“How do you know I’m not?”

“First, I know from Denise that your in-laws think you’re a great parent. And in-laws have to be the toughest judges. Second, I know from how your children talk to you. They tell you their feelings. Their actual feelings. That means they trust your love.”

For Hugh there was no deeper cut than a woman’s criticism and no comfort warmer than her reassurance. He didn’t say thank you because he feared he would choke up. This was the kind of consolation he missed from Amy. “Well, my daughter thinks I’m a terrible father.”

“No, she doesn’t,” Sue said, then changed the subject. “Were you serious that you would be drummed out of your profession if they knew you were seeing a Nancy Meyers movie? Didn’t they like *Something’s Gotta Give*? I thought it was hilarious. Trashy fun. But fun.”

He explained that his colleagues’ hatred for a Nancy Meyers movie was more than snobbery. It was a symptom of their despair that nowadays studio movies were a relentless stream of commercial banality and repetition: almost without exception sequels about cartoon characters, genre horror or pat romantic comedies. During the 1970s, he explained, his film-loving generation’s formative years, there had been a golden age of studio-financed movies that would now be considered indie films: stories about human beings whose lives weren’t wrapped up into pretty bows.

“Like what?” she asked.

“*Five Easy Pieces*, *The Conversation*, *Nashville* . . .”

“*Nashville* I remember,” she interrupted. “The other two I don’t think I saw.”

“I have them on DVD. It would be a pleasure to show them to you.”

She leaned over, rubbing her shoulder against his as if she were a purring cat. The lights were coming down for the start of previews but he could still see her sly, inviting smile. “Are you inviting me up to your place to show me your DVD collection?”

Soon after the movie began Hugh wished they could retire to his couch and watch just about anything else, but Sue didn’t seem restless. Besides, Ray and Ginnie were crowding his place with unstable emotion; adding Sue was unlikely to calm them. And he didn’t really mind staying until the end. There was always something Hugh could find in a movie to think about with pleasure. He became fascinated at the ways in which the picture was a lifeless construction, even for a rom-com formula. He decided it was because the writer and director had had the ambition to be smarter than the genre without abandoning its conventions altogether. Ironically, that was how the commercially successful made their biggest bombs.

He mused aloud about this to Sue as they left the Regal and she took his arm and leaned on his shoulder, the way Amy used to when it was cold. It wasn’t cold. On the contrary, the fall evening had more of a summer night’s baked breeze.

“How about we don’t eat out, and go to my place?” Sue said. “I can whip up something simple. Omelet with smoked salmon and a salad? I’ll open a good white wine. Brunch for dinner. That okay?”

“Great idea,” Hugh said. He knew where this was heading. His only question: would they be tearing off their clothes before she cracked eggs?

That excitement was quelled by Sue’s reaction when her doorman came out from behind a black marble podium that her converted loft building had plopped in the center of the black marble lobby, otherwise bare but for two Mies van der Rohe Barcelona

chairs. He offered Sue a hand-delivered letter—no postage, no sender’s name, only her name in a scrawl that was twice as large as it needed to be. She stared at the envelope for a long moment without reaching for it while the doorman said in an ominous tone: “He dropped it off a couple hours ago.”

At this information Sue finally accepted the envelope. She shoved it into her purse without looking, crumpling it in the process. For her this was a violent gesture, unlike the usual elegant deliberation of everything else she did.

They rode up to the eighth floor in what Hugh supposed from the large size—it could have accommodated a small car—to have been an industrial elevator when this was a factory building. Sue remained silent and pensive, staring down as if they were strangers.

Her apartment was an efficient one-bedroom. There was a dazzling stainless steel and granite counter kitchen open to the dining and living space, with a small powder room on one side. In the bedroom suite there was an immense bathroom, almost as big as the bedroom, with separate shower and a Jacuzzi tub the size of a kiddie pool.

Sue gave him the tour briskly, walking quickly in and out of the bedroom, so no opportunity for clothes being torn off presented itself. The mood had changed for Hugh as well: Sue had told him she’d paid two million for her loft. He was busy reflecting in despair that he would never be able to afford this comparatively small place, at best three-fifths the size of his.

He also noticed that unlike many of the other womanly domains he had invaded as a middle-aged dater, this one had no mess of children, or any memory of their mess. The immaculate nap of the furniture’s beige fabrics, the clean white walls, the unscarred

oak floor spoke of a life free from the affectionate destruction of kids. When she opened the refrigerator to fetch a bottle of California chardonnay and take out a packet of smoked salmon and a half-dozen eggs, he noticed that everything in her gleaming Sub Zero was meticulously organized: fruit, vegetables, cheeses, cold cuts, all assigned to their own bins. Next to four neatly lined-up low fat yogurts was an open baking soda container. No mess, no waste, no odor.

Hugh wondered if childless Sue could stand sharing a place with his children, who, although presumably grown up, still left towels on the bathroom floor and unwrapped cheese in the fridge.

Sue hurriedly poured him a glass of white almost to the rim. “I need to run to the ladies room before I start our modest dinner,” she said. Then she did something odd: she took her purse with her.

The letter. She wants to read it immediately, in private. So I have a rival. An ex? It better not be a plea for her to take him back.

He guessed from how eager she was to read the letter that her response to a proposed reconciliation with its author would be yes. He took two long gulps of chardonnay, draining half his glass while wandering through her living area. He was struck by its formality. There were coasters for the glass coffee table. And the couch was bravely white—like Hilda’s, another childless woman. He rubbed its pristine surface. Suede? Something soft and stainable. He took another sip of wine, already feeling tipsy on his empty stomach, and found he had developed a hatred for the man who dropped off the letter. And for the prematurely balding young doorman who gave it to her. Guilt by association: the guy could have thrown it in the trash.

He sank onto her couch. How could fate be this cruel? After grieving for a year, and wandering for another in a delightful but confusing garden of women, he had found the perfect flower and she had already been picked? By a jerk, obviously, if he had dumped this elegant, witty woman. The guy had to be an asshole. And that was bad news: assholes were especially hard to defeat.

After a good fifteen minutes, Sue came out changed in dress and manner. She'd discarded her tailored pants and high heels for blue jeans and a gray zippered cashmere sweatshirt. Her graceful movements were restored, walking as if she were gliding, her posture perfect without being stiff. And her sly smile had returned. All bad signs, Hugh thought. Whatever was in the letter had restored her confidence. Also a discouraging sign was that she had dressed down, cashmere or no, from dating attire ready to be torn off in passion into comfort clothes to cook for a friend.

Indeed, she didn't join him with a glass of wine on the couch. Instead she moved straight to the kitchen, fetching a mixing bowl and frying pan, calling out, "Do you want toast with your omelet and salad? Don't have bagels. I've got whole wheat, if that's okay?"

Hugh couldn't contain his curiosity. He rose with a groan—back sore from serving to Kyle yesterday—and approached the granite counter that visually divided the kitchen and living areas. Being nosy at all was the opposite of his nature and what he did next was worse, outright rudeness. "I hope that letter didn't have bad news," he said, his cheeks flushing, no doubt because he was being something he despised, a phony. She obviously wasn't upset now.

“Letter?” She wasn’t an actress. She tried to fake ignorance of what he meant but when their eyes met, she looked away guiltily.

Hugh chided himself to stop this disgraceful interrogation, which he was sure would backfire. But he pressed on: “You seemed upset when your doorman handed you that letter.”

“Oh. That letter.” Her pretense of recollection was lame. “That was work stuff.” She cracked an egg and emptied it into the bowl. While she cracked another she added, “You know, H.R. exit papers I have to sign. Roll over my IRA. That junk.”

She didn’t want to tell the truth about the letter. Really bad sign. Hugh grabbed the chardonnay and refilled his glass without asking if she wanted any. Jealousy had made him a barbarian. He watched her make their meal in a gloomy silence she didn’t break.

At the table she asked if Amy had liked to cook? Or did he? Once she established that neither did, she asked if it had been awhile since he had a home-cooked meal. “Not that this is a meal,” she said.

He took his first taste. He said truthfully, “It’s delicious. But I’ve had plenty of home-cooked meals. My friends have the widower over for dinner at least once a week.”

“Don’t call yourself that,” she said with a disapproving frown. “You don’t seem like a widower to me. You’re in the prime of life.”

“You can be a widower at twenty-one.”

“Yes, but you know. It sounds old. You’re not old. You’re a sexy man.”

Hugh chuckled skeptically.

“You are. You’re fit. You’re comfortable in your body. It’s sexy.”

He laughed. He didn't want to, but he laughed.

“You find being called sexy funny?”

“That's not why I'm laughing. You're the sexy one, dear.”

“Don't call me dear.” Again she frowned with disgust. “Makes me sound like a widow.”

Hugh was confused. Were they flirting? Or squabbling? Or both? Was she bucking him up about his attractiveness because she was about to explain she was taken? Seeking safer ground, he returned to the neutral subject of the movie. “It was terrible,” Sue admitted after Hugh finished picking it apart, “but I love love. So any romantic movie, even a terrible one, keeps my interest.” By then dinner was done and it was nearly eleven—time to rip off clothes or go home.

He rose to clear their plates. She said, “Leave them.” She emptied the bottle of wine into his glass, his fourth. “This'll have to be your dessert. I don't have anything sweet. Except for me.” Her sly smile reappeared. “Retire to the couch?” she asked as she took her glass and moved into the living area, picking up a fancy remote control that she pointed at nothing, and yet somehow jazz began to play, softly, from many directions. Hugh scanned her walls and spotted white speakers embedded near the ceiling in all four corners of the room.

“Surround sound?” he asked.

“Something sound.” She unzipped her cashmere sweatshirt, revealing a purple V-neck T-shirt that he immediately looked up from because it revealed too much impressive cleavage to glance at casually. “I hired a man and he installed everything, TV, hooked up my iTunes into my stereo. He fixed up this idiot-proof remote.” She placed the device

on the coffee table and relaxed onto the couch, leaning back, one arm stretched out. “Join me,” she said. He couldn’t help but observe from her pose that Sue was well-endowed: buoyantly, perhaps suspiciously so for a fifty-year-old woman.

As Hugh lowered himself beside her he noticed there was no position he could take that wouldn’t place them almost in each other’s arms. Indeed, once he was seated and turned her way, her face loomed and he went in for a kiss, realizing as he did: *This is my mulligan!*

Once again his lips refused to follow orders. They touched hers fearfully, tentatively. When he tried to compensate, he pressed too hard. He pulled away—she kept her eyes closed, waiting while he took a breath to reset for another kiss—and went in for a mulligan of his mulligan. But nothing improved on the third try. His lips touched hers as if they were scalding hot, withdrawing immediately, briefly touching again, withdrawing again: pecking, not kissing. He stopped. This time she opened her baffled eyes, confusion on her face as well at how uncomfortable it was.

“You kiss so softly,” he said, trying to keep complaint out of his tone.

“That’s you,” she said. “You’re doing that.”

“Well, I’ll cut that out.” He charged ahead and pressed harder. But her mouth didn’t seem to welcome him, or fit, or some other problem he couldn’t identify. It was maddening. He thought her elegant, beautiful, smart—everything he wanted. He stopped again.

This time she immediately leaned back, turning him gently while she lay all the way down. They ended up lying face up, side by side on her long, soft couch. She rested

her head in the crook of his left shoulder and abruptly they were an old married couple, snuggling in bed after sex or before sleeping. Comforting. Not passionate.

“Mmm,” she said. “This is cozy.”

“Yes,” he agreed. But he wasn’t comforted.

She murmured, “This is so nice,” thus discouraging Hugh from disturbing her position.

“It is,” Hugh agreed again, although nice was the last word he would use to describe his situation. He was turned on just enough to feel restless while she clearly didn’t want him to move.

“Mmm,” she said and nestled deeper. He could no longer be sure the delicious tingling on his neck was caused only by her breath. Were her soft lips when she whispered also lightly kissing him?

And then she stretched her arm across his chest, fingers hooking onto the far side of his torso. She couldn’t know this was the position that most nights Amy had lain in for five minutes or so before she whispered “Goodnight” and turned away to be fetal for sleeping. Those ten minutes before full sleep hadn’t been a sexy position with Amy, but Sue’s variant stirred him below. He wasn’t sure how obvious his excitement was, but he daren’t sit up and didn’t want to. And he certainly didn’t want to disturb the brilliance of this embrace for another clumsy kiss.

She lowered her head to speak, moving her lips clear of tickling him. Perhaps it was the analysand position that encouraged her to confess: “I lied about the letter.”

Hugh’s heart pounded, no doubt into her ear, since it was placed directly over his heart like a stethoscope. “I figured.”

“Silly of me to be embarrassed. The letter was from my ex-”—she laughed softly—“‘boyfriend’ I guess is the right word, although I’m way too old to have a boyfriend. We never lived together. Half the week . . . more than that, five days a week Mike would stay over at my place. We broke up four months ago, just before I moved. Moving here, all this is supposed to be a new start.” She nestled into his neck. Her message seemed unmistakable: Hugh could be a new start too.

“He wants you back,” Hugh said, heart still thumping. It was embarrassing that he couldn’t hide his yearning.

“That’s not what he claims,” she said. “He wants to quote, talk about what happened, unquote. That we haven’t been clear. He says mature people are clear about breakups. Says we need closure.” She mocked the word by elongating the first syllable and turning the *s* into an aristocratic *z*.

Hugh cleared his throat, thinking that might muffle the sound of his heart. This prompted her to lift from his chest and shift away, so they were lying side by side, hardly touching, not a result he wanted. They truly had become patients on a couch, talking instead of acting on their feelings. “Sounds like an excuse to get you back,” Hugh heard himself say confidently. But that wasn’t what he truly thought; he was probing to find out if she was tempted by the possibility. It was embarrassing that he couldn’t shake his jealousy and fear of this man whom she had already discarded. *Am I insane? Did I expect a woman my age to have no past?*

But is it her past?

“Mike dumped me,” she said to the ceiling. “So I doubt he wants me back.”

“He dumped you?” Hugh’s incredulity was genuine. He straightened, leaned on his elbow, and looked down at her. “You’re kidding.”

Her chin wrinkled ruefully. “He found someone younger.” She rolled her eyes. “Mike said she was ‘more available, more loving,’ but she was also seventeen years younger, so that means perky tits and no wrinkles.”

Hugh glanced down and couldn’t resist: “Yours look plenty perky.”

“Push up bras . . . they’re a miracle.” She grinned with enough pride to suggest she might be their inventor. Then she seemed to hear herself and laughed. “This is a weird conversation.”

“It’s a great conversation.”

They settled into a long silence, gazing into each other’s eyes without charm or restraint, a relaxed and profound exchange. Normally this pose would lead to a kiss but Hugh had developed a phobia that his clumsiness would break the spell. She seemed content to wait as long as he liked. Her gray eyes were a beautiful stormy sea in which he was happy to ride the swells and sudden calms forever. The crow’s feet she had been at pains to eliminate—at this distance makeup couldn’t conceal them—added to their cleverness, her sly wisdom. He felt an impulse that he feared would soon prove overpowering to say “I love you,” which was absurd of course. Mostly to avoid that gaffe he said, “He’s an idiot.”

“Who?” she said, a very good sign that she had forgotten the subject.

“Your boyfriend.”

“Thank you,” she whispered. “And thank you for going slow. I’m not on the rebound. Mike and I are done. As far as I’m concerned. But it’s hard, you know. Hard to trust again.”

He nodded. “I know,” he said. But then it occurred to him that he didn’t know. He had trusted Amy and that had been wise, had kept him safe and sound. He knew and shared her feelings still: Amy would be worried about Ginnie and her new “fella” and angry at Ray for throwing away Brown; she would lament at having to move, leaving neighbors and store-keepers she knew, routines that comforted. “I have to get back,” he said, easing up and off the couch. When he glanced at Sue he caught—or wished for—a surprised and disappointed expression on her face; but the lights were low and he didn’t trust his perceptions. “I’ve got the big brunch explaining to my children why I have to abandon their home,” he explained.

“Of course,” she said, rising to see him off. She fetched his windbreaker from the closet. “Your cloak, sir?” she said with a mischievous smile, holding it for him. She guided him into his sleeves and when he turned to say goodnight she immediately rose on tiptoe and kissed him on the lips. Lightly and briefly, but her touch left a cool tingling of pleasure all the way home and erased, at least for the remainder of that uneasy night, the memory of all their disappointing kisses.