

Save The Last Dance

a novel



Save The Last Dance

a novel



Eric Joseph
Eva Ungar Grudin

HP

Hargrove Press, LLC

© Copyright 2016 Eric Joseph and Eva Ungar Grudin

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the authors.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the authors' imaginations or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Hargrove Press, LLC
Williamstown, Massachusetts
www.hargrovepress.com

Book cover designers, Maureen Nicoll & David Moratto
Author photographer, Sarah Bowman
Interior book design, David Moratto

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016939432

ISBN: Hardcover 978-0-9975049-0-3

ISBN: Paperback 978-0-9975049-1-0

ISBN: Ebook 978-0-9975049-2-7

For Gary Arlen



*Such love may sound fantastical, sure to vaporize
in the light of day, but ... nothing could be further from the truth.
These are love relationships that never ended, not fantasies.*

—Pamela Weintraub,

“Lost Love: Guess Who’s Back?”, *Psychology Today* (July 1, 2006)



From: Adam Wolf <adam.wolf1402@gmail.com>

To: Paul Bishop <Paul.R.Bishop@dewey.com>

March 11, 2014 9:40 pm

Subject: The timeline

Paul,

I know a little about classical music, a little about film, a little about baseball, hockey and I can recite the presidents, in order, in 15 seconds. But I admit there are things I still don't understand. Death, for instance. I would like to get your advice on it. Not Death so much as the State of Being Dead. I'm not afraid of death, you know. I'm afraid of being dead. Incidentally, Paul, I don't happen to believe in transubstantiation.

God forbid my parents are waiting for me on that Golden Shore:

"So I told you, son, you should have gone to med school. But a disc jockey at a 12-watt station? I don't know. Why did I ever bother sending you to college? Now, go get your rest and get cleaned up, son. We're going to dinner with the Karl Marxes. I'm teaching them to speak English. The only trouble around here — the goddamn Trotskyites."

I ask: "Leon Trotsky made it here? How the hell did that happen?"

Paul, I don't feel old. I don't think I look old. I'm not sick. But lately I picture my marker on the far right of the timeline.

One day, when I was 28, alone on a Greyhound, late at night, I couldn't stop thinking about what it really meant to be dead. I couldn't shake the idea of being insensate, of not existing. I had a full-fledged panic attack, Paul — heart racing, sweating. For whatever reason, my mind

reached out to Rick Marsulek, the resident juvenile delinquent from my high school days. My pal. Black leather jacket, complete with the wrench he always carried, in case anyone tried to mess with him. Duck's ass haircut. Angelic face that could darken instantly. In my panic I called out to him, "Rick, help me." He materialized and responded with little prompting.

"Fuck it, Adam, by the time you die, say when you're 70, you'll be okay with the idea. So stop sweating it." It calmed me. The panic dissipated. The advice has followed me all these years, and I learned to push the thoughts of death away. Until now.

Today the announcement for my 50th High School Reunion arrived. Dark thoughts seem to be gathering on the horizon again. But they're not just about being dead. They're about the sensation of being carried along on a conveyor belt. To Waldheim Cemetery. Feels as if life has become all predetermined ritual: the ten pills in the morning, the commute to the station, the commute back home, the same forced pleasantries in between, the six pills before bed. Lights out by 9:00.

I looked at the list of people on that reunion roster and one name jumped off the page. It conjured a time when death and ritual were far away. When we were free and invincible. When my pulse raced at even the mention of her name.

Here's my question, Paul—Do you think there's a way off of the conveyor belt or do you think I should just stay on it and go along en route to Waldheim?

— Adam

From: **Greg Dillon** <g.k.dillon30@comcast.com>

To: **Sarah Ross** <sarahross64@gmail.com>

May 22, 2014 1:17 pm

Subject: 50th REUNION — JUNE 22nd

Sarah, Sarah, Sarah—what's the matter with you that you won't let us see you in Cleveland? We have a blast planned. Party Friday, complete with Genelli's pizza. Dinner dance at the Beachwood Country Club on

Sat. night. A tour of Heights High that morning. Pastrami or corned beef lunch, your choice, at Corky and Lenny's. If only the Indians were playing on Sunday, we'd do that too. Everyone is asking for you. Sherrie, Madeline, Frank, Doug (who still looks good). And, above all, Adam. (Spoke to him last night. He wondered if he could have your email address. Here's his — adamwolf1402@gmail.com)
Everyone's coming. You're the only one letting us down.

xoxo

Greg

From: Sarah Ross <sarahross64@gmail.com>

To: Gabriella Fratelli <gabriella.fratelli@orange.it>

May 22, 2014 7:29 pm

Subject: darling, I am growing older

Cara Gabriella—

I think of you always, my bastion of sanity, and I always wish you were near again.

Gordon pursues me. After these years alone, flattering. Attention, companionship not to be minimized, I suppose. And I count myself lucky for it. But it's not like the days with you when my heart leapt with anticipation of our togetherness.

It's so odd. A lot of folks I see around me, my age, even younger, are ready to close up shop. Already have. I'm working hard to stay in life—my painting, the boutique, and a good time now and again. With nice people like Gordon, who don't need to be wound up in the morning—still fun. It's such a chore, though, to adjust to age. We become invisible—a shock when you lose your looks. You wouldn't know. You're forever young. But one day it happens. You look down and suddenly your dance card is empty. Guys look past, eyes locked on some chick behind you. Just as I was about to open a vein over this fate, the other day a not-bad-looking fellow, younger than I, lured me into one of those lingering eye-to-eye flirtations. Did me good. Remember when I could simply

bat the baby blues and charm my way out of a speeding ticket? Now? Even tears don't work.

Tried botox. Only once. Maybe I told you already. Bruised my right eye. Made the left one droop for weeks. When I first walked into the shop with it, Nicole screamed, thought I'd had a stroke.

My 50th reunion is coming up. I suppose, if botox had agreed with me, I might be going.

My love, my love to you,
Sarah

From: Sarah Ross <sarahross64@gmail.com>
To: Adam Wolf <adam.wolf1402@gmail.com>
May 23, 2014 10:13 am
Subject: hi

hi

From: Adam Wolf <adam.wolf1402@gmail.com>
To: Sarah Ross <sarahross64@gmail.com>
May 23, 2014 11:21 am
Subject:

Hi yourself—I'm sorry to hear that you won't be there next month. I was looking forward to seeing you. How are you?

From: Sarah Ross <sarahross64@gmail.com>
To: Adam Wolf <adam.wolf1402@gmail.com>
May 23, 2014 12:46 am
Subject: why I'm not attending reunion

It's been a while hasn't it? Decades. When was it? 1966? I don't think I would have had the courage to write to you, after all this time, if Greg

hadn't written me saying you'd like to get in touch. He's knocking himself out, isn't he, organizing all those get-togethers. Lucy and Mira too.

Forgive me for not attending the reunion. I wasn't aware you'd be there. But I decided that I couldn't stand just a glimpse of the people I long to know again. That's the fear that keeps me away. (That and the spectacle of Phyllis Mendelson using the occasion to hawk her latest book. What's this one called? "Beauty Tips for the Ugly Duckling"? Or something like that.)

I'm nudging Greg to arrange a meeting next year for just a few of us: you, Greg, Chris, Gail Krasner, and who else? Ah, me. New York City., Cleveland, Fargo — where doesn't matter.

Can I tentatively begin to ask about you?

Your parents? I remember them. Wolf's Drug, Saturday afternoons, chocolate phosphates, sitting on those ratty red naugahyde stools with rough tears. And your father — formal, wearing his drug-store face — good-natured, though. I remember you used to rail about how fake it was. We always giggled that the smiles were really intended for Ruby in her pink apron. And don't you miss jukeboxes? I remember the song we played over and over on the one jukebox at the drug store. Do you?

And of course your mother and her propensity to complain about your father. I found it poignant.

Are you okay? Your present family?

Me? Lots happened/happening. I've been living here in La Jolla for the last twelve years. My friend Nicole and I opened Naughty Niceties in 2010, a French lingerie shop in town. More amusing than lucrative. I'm a widow now. My husband Harold died 4 years ago. No kids. You know, I'm glad I didn't change my name. It felt wrong to disappear from the face of the earth, from people like you who knew me as Sarah Ross.

Adam, if I knew where the cockles of my heart resided, I would say they're warmed by your being on my radar screen again.

From: **Lola Wolf** <lola.wolf1402@gmail.com>

To: **Adam Wolf** <adam.wolf1402@gmail.com>

May 23, 2014 4:14 pm

Subject: Please answer

Adam—I've tried to call you 10 times already and you, for some reason, decided not to pick up. Please don't insult me by not answering. If Her Highness still has you tending court, just wrench yourself away for five minutes so you can get back to me. What if I had an emergency? Adam, could I count on you to answer? I suppose not.

Remember the party at the Dorman's. 8:00. I'll try to call later cause I know you're going to forget. Pick up this time.

Do you have anything decent to wear? Don't forget, no late stuff tonight at the station.

The way you just left this morning, without a look or a goodbye, or a sign of human recognition, made me sad and angry. Always the same story—that goddamn station. Your needs are first and the only thing that seems to matter to you. I know you're in your "turmoil" right now about the reunion. So anxious, insufferable. "Will I look ok? What will they think?? Blah blah." How about giving your wife the same consideration as those people you haven't talked to in 50 years?

Adam, I'm still an attractive woman at age 64, even if you don't think so. I got compliments at the grocery store this morning. "Mrs. Wolf, we think you're the most elegant woman who comes into the store." That's the woman at the check-out! I wore my old coat and hardly any makeup and she still thought I was elegant.

LOLA > ADAM 5/23/14 5:15 pm

They say dress casual, but doesn't mean faded jeans. I got some khaki slacks for you and put them on your bed. 36 x 32, right?

ADAM 5:19 pm

You didn't need to buy me pants. It's 34 x 32. I'm capable of figuring out for myself what to wear.

LOLA 5:24 pm

Everyone from the block will be there. Don't embarrass me dressing like you're still in college. Your pants are always too tight. I know you'd like to think you still have your girlish figure.

From: Adam Wolf <adam.wolf1402@gmail.com>

To: Sarah Ross <sarahross64@gmail.com>

May 23, 2014 5:57 pm

Subject: and back to you

I don't know why, but I feel strangely nervous writing to you.

Sarah, I knew a little about an opening of a watercolor show and of landscape courses you were giving, I've followed you on the internet, so you were in some way already on my "radar screen". Do you ever get back to Cleveland Heights?

My brother David retired from his real estate business, lives in the western suburbs. My mother died back in '97. My father, the World's Foremost Druggist, died in 2003 — managed to screw up his meds and had a stroke. I'm sorry, I don't know whether your parents are alive or not. What I vividly remember were your father's string quartet sessions on Sunday afternoons at your house — among a million other things. How's your sister? Is she still in Cleveland Heights? And you? It must have been difficult when your husband died.

I'm fine—live in Evanston, remarried since the last time we talked in 1979. I have a son 28, Michael, in IT, now in Houston. When he visits we still go to the batting cages. We swing and miss for half an hour and then pizza and sports talk.

I'm now Program Director at WCMQ—95.2 on your dial—boasting dozens of loyal classical music fans throughout Chicagoland. I still host “Your Classical Coffee Mate” (title's not mine). We'd have more listeners if only our signal could be picked up beyond the parking lot. The “on the air” gig is the only part of the job I still enjoy. For an hour every day I get to ad lib. I'm considering basing an entire show on composers whose last names begin with “X”.

I've been here eons. No reason to stay, no reason to leave.

The song you challenged me to remember? *Save the Last Dance for Me*, of course.

Can we stay in touch and talk?

From: **Sarah Ross** <sarahross64@gmail.com>

To: **Adam Wolf** <adam.wolf1402@gmail.com>

May 23, 2014 6:35 pm

Subject: *catching up*

Let's see—what else? Not that long ago I entered into a relationship with a special man, a retired marine biologist. I think he may be a “keeper”.

Esther and Herman still live in Cleveland. I don't think she's ever stepped a foot out of Cuyahoga County. She doesn't think she needs to. I love my sister, but I still can't stand to be near her. All that yakking about the bargains at Beachwood Place, the envelope licking for the Sisterhood.

I'm touched you remember the *Hausmusik*—so old world. Glad you witnessed it. My father and all his immigrant friends lived for those Sundays. He became remarkably civilized when he played his violin. Perhaps that's one reason I was attracted to you, Adam. I loved the way you devoted yourself to the piano. Do you still play?

My father died in 1987. My mother is 95, in a nursing home near Esther and not doing so well. I try to be back in Cleveland at least once a month to see her, but I'm no longer convinced she can distinguish me from her phlebotomist.

I'm touched you've been stalking me on the internet. And yes, I'd love to keep on writing, if that's what you mean by "talking". I need to fill in the gaps slowly. But no phoning. Okay? Can we just stay emailing for now? It's a miraculous way to communicate, isn't it? Easier than letters — instant gratification, not days between. And somehow I'm less shy, less inhibited just writing. Disembodied I feel emboldened, find it more intimate than the phone.

From: Adam Wolf <adam.wolf1402@gmail.com>

To: Sarah Ross <sarahross64@gmail.com>

May 23, 2014 7:03 pm

Subject: Re:catching up

Yes, let's write for now. You know, I've never really carried on a personal email correspondence. My friend Paul, we exchange chapter-length emails once in a while — fantasy film scripts, the escape from the everyday. But this "intimacy" is new. Like you, I'm already discovering the freedom to be myself. So forgive me if I'm awkward. I think I already messed up. My phrasing about following you on the internet was a little inartful, I admit. "Stalking" is too strong a word I think — more like "curiosity", then quiet admiration and interest.

You know, about 10 years ago I was in La Jolla several times. I went there with the station owner. We used to go to the West Coast on business. Unfortunately, or fortunately, we don't take those trips anymore. If I had known you were there, I would have tried to see you.

Tell me more about how you're doing now. Piano? I dropped Schubert, picked up Cole Porter, some Gershwin. It's my palliative, but I guess not so much other people's. So I keep it to myself.

Actually I have a thousand more things I want to tell you — if that's OK. I'll write again tomorrow if I can —

LOLA > ADAM 5/23/14 7:29 pm

What, are you going to make us late again? Is Her Majesty, Queen Amanda, commanding your presence? Can't she just let you do your work and have a life? Why don't you ever stand up to her? Oh, I think I know the answer to that already. I guess I'll go to the Dorman's myself. It's nothing new for me. I'll tell them I have no husband.

From: **Sarah Ross** <sarahross64@gmail.com>

To: **S.Gordon Wilson** <S.Gordon.Wilson@csulb.edu>

May 24, 2014 8:22 am

Subject: *this weekend*

Sorry I couldn't get back to you yesterday. Nicole and I didn't sit down all day. The new line of "amethyst" lace boy shorts and "anthracite" demi-bras brought in a flock of floosies. Do you believe these marketing people? I'd like the job—to invent the irresistible colors du jour. Almost as clever as "Häagen-Daz".

Yes, an afternoon on the new boat would be grand. Sounds relaxing. Believe me, I need that badly right now. How about I pack us a lunch? We can christen (or should I say baptize?) the boat with some Sauvignon Blanc.

From: **S.Gordon.Wilson** <S.Gordon.Wilson@csulb.edu>

To: **Jerome Mahoney** <Jerry.Mahoney2028@verizon.net>

May 24, 2014 10:05 am

Subject: THIS AND THATS

Hi there, Jerry —

Got the new boat! Going to christen her this weekend. Thinking Sarah Ross might like to come along. I invited her and wish you and Mae could come down here and help us celebrate. You and I would have a lot of yucks. Anyway, there'll be a chance to get together this fall. There's a conference up your way.

Heard a good one I think you'll appreciate:

Why don't blondes wear miniskirts in San Francisco?
Their balls show.

Here's another one I can tell you, but wouldn't tell Sarah:

What does a Jew with an erection get when he walks into a wall?
A broken nose.

Your chum,
Gordon

S. Gordon Wilson, PhD.
Founder and Editor of *The Ichthysaurus*
Fellow, American Academy of Underwater Sciences
Professor of Biology, Emeritus
California State University, Long Beach

From: **Sarah Ross** <sarahross64@gmail.com>

To: **Adam Wolf** <adam.wolf1402@gmail.com>

May 24, 2014 9:16 am

Subject:

Oh, the trouble with email is that it has no tone of voice. The “stalking” was a jest. Hyperbole R Us. “I’m touched by your curiosity” is a sappier way of saying it, I suppose. And a thousand and one things, by all means — a thing at a time, and back to you. I look forward to it.

After college? Your life trajectory?

From: **Adam Wolf** <adam.wolf1402@gmail.com>

To: **Sarah Ross** <sarahross64@gmail.com>

May 24, 2014 9:34 am

Subject: hmmm, my life

Trajectory? Mine is sort of like the Challenger spacecraft. Graduated from U of Chicago '68 and the Cleveland Heights Selective Service Board thrust me into a deferment as a VISTA volunteer. The remains of my Command Module came down in Bluefield, West Virginia. What did I do there? Same as anyone in any community action program — sat around contemplating how to connect with the poor. I sold the idea of a radio show to the public station there. Conducted interviews, sang some folk songs — short-lived — I guess too radical and too Jewish for W. Virginia. Careened back to Chicago in '69, stringing together occupational deferments — mainly working in psych hospitals. Auditioned unsuccessfully for radio jobs. First classical try-out I screwed up the German. Tripped on the *Einführung aus dem Serail*. Then '83, had success auditioning for this small classical station as the overnight announcer. The owner's wife, Amanda Schreiber, supervised the audition. Gave me the job and whispered afterward that I was too cute for radio. So here I am, parked in stationary orbit for the past 30 years.

Trajectory? Two marriages. One brief, fling-like. The current one, almost three decades. In neither case am I sure what prompted me to get married. Pretty boring, huh?

From: Sarah Ross <sarahross64@gmail.com>

To: Adam Wolf <adam.wolf1402@gmail.com>

May 24, 2014 1:29 pm

Subject: don't be hard on yourself

Boring? Never to me. Need to know who you are now. Sounds like an adventure—West Virginia, psych hospitals—can't wait for the stories. Radio celebrity to boot. Send an autograph. Make it personal and I can get more for it.

Do you think there are patterns to mistakes we make in relationships? I'm somehow attracted to men, and they to me, unfortunately, who dislike their mothers. That's one of the patterns that repeats. There are others.

From: Adam Wolf <adam.wolf1402@gmail.com>

To: Sarah Ross <sarahross64@gmail.com>

May 24, 2014 1:40 pm

Subject: Re: don't be hard on yourself

That's no pattern. Doesn't every man tell his girlfriend that he doesn't like his mother? What other patterns would you mean? Are they patterns that began with us? Was Sandy Chapman part of your pattern?

From: Sarah Ross <sarahross64@gmail.com>

To: Adam Wolf <adam.wolf1402@gmail.com>

May 24, 2014 1:43 pm

Subject: patterns

My other patterns? People who are hypersensitive. Like you were. Smart and funny. Like you were. Prone to jealousy. Like you were. Maybe so, maybe our relationship has always been my template. Yep.

Now your turn. I ask again—your patterns?

From: Adam Wolf <adam.wolf1402@gmail.com>

To: Sarah Ross <sarahross64@gmail.com>

May 24, 2014 1:46 pm

Subject: Re:patterns

My patterns? I can't think of any. Let me see. Maybe short skirts.

From: Sarah Ross <sarahross64@gmail.com>

To: Adam Wolf <adam.wolf1402@gmail.com>

May 24, 2014 1:56 pm

Subject: Re:Re:patterns

Really? Glad you're so forthcoming. Come on, Wolfie, fess up. Any patterns that have to do with us?

From: Adam Wolf <adam.wolf1402@gmail.com>

To: Sarah Ross <sarahross64@gmail.com>

May 24, 2014 2:03 pm

Subject: Who I've become

A pattern? Okay. I confess. Passivity maybe. But, Sarah, that's not a pattern that started with us, not what I remember. But me? For many years since us, it's been different. Pattern: letting myself be pulled into someone's orbit — then staying put — fearful to disrupt the daily sameness — afraid of being cast off into the cold if I opened my mouth. Could it really be that my last successful relationship was at 15?

Incidentally if I really was the template for all your relationships, how the hell did you wind up with Sandy Chapman after we broke up? (Hey, why did we break up anyway?)

From: Sarah Ross <sarahross64@gmail.com>

To: Adam Wolf <adam.wolf1402@gmail.com>

May 24, 2014 2:19 pm

Subject: breaking up

You mean, how could you ever have broken up with me? Let's see ...

1. Your raging hormones
2. Darlene Cutler's short skirt

and

3. My desperate need to be with you every waking hour, which, I'm sure, would have gotten on anyone's nerves. I never again in my life have been that way. I've learned to keep a distance in my relationships. I've learned not to be dependent. Have suppressed the desire to be fused to anyone. But I recall I felt amputated without you by my side. Perhaps I became too independent after us. I hope it to be different with Gordon. I would like to be less autonomous, less mistrustful and submit to someone who I think would take care of me. Wish me luck.

From: Adam Wolf <adam.wolf1402@gmail.com>

To: Sarah Ross <sarahross64@gmail.com>

May 25, 2014 12:04 pm

Subject: Gordon

You used the word the word "keeper" describing your relationship with Gordon. Sounds like partnership with a future.

Acknowledgements

We're grateful to readers of early drafts of *Save the Last Dance*. Their thoughtful insights helped us shape the final version of the novel. Thank you Sophie Grudin, Chan Lowe, Sandy Weiss Karp, Roselle Chartock, Merrilee Redmond, Audrey Thier, Deborah Rothschild and Paul Miller.

Dean Crawford, Roland Merullo, Peter Sarno and Merle Saferstein generously shared with us their knowledge of the publishing world.

Our sincere thanks to our editor, Meredith Gilbert, not only for her attention to the smallest detail, but also for her understanding that hesitations and recapitulations are vital to a story like this one.

Thanks too to Dr. Randi Gunther and Dr. Nancy Kalish for writing about and understanding the force of first love reignited.

We appreciate the skill and expertise of our designer David Moratto. Special thanks to Maureen Nicoll for creating such an evocative image for the front cover.

We remember fondly Bernice van Sickle, our high school English teacher, who encouraged us to write coherently and creatively.