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Author Bio

Jenna Pavis grew up in the rural town of North Yarmouth, Maine, where she spent eighteen years gallivanting in the woods, picking blueberries in her backyard, and jamming out to jazz and 1960s hits. She's been a passionate saxophonist, tea hugger, competitive golfer, crossword enthusiast, and feline fanatic. Jenna has given musical performances worldwide, notably in New York City, Washington, D.C., Vienna, Berlin, and Prague. She maintains that writing informs her creativity for music and vice versa. Jenna prefers to write in the middle of the afternoon outside on a picnic blanket, with Simon and Garfunkel playing in the background.

Crooked Initials and the Absence of a Second Ride

JENNA L. PAVIS

Amidst the tranquil air of the mountain region, he found himself trotting aimlessly along the footprint-laden path leading to the fairgrounds. A rectangular shadow danced above his crooked hairline, and Francis tilted his head upwards to meet its familiar gaze. *Glenwood Springs County Fair: Always in September*, the gold banner read in faded red and blue cursive lettering. Tacked onto a wooden post that supported the left side of the banner was an oval sign, with *Autumn 1902* printed in bold black penmanship. The sign was tinged yellow with age, except for a thick slab of white paint that brought the four-digit year to life. Masked beneath the numerous coats of paint were undoubtedly faded numerals that commemorated years past.

The carnival was in town, meaning that everyone and their uncle contributed to the dead grass that endured the torture of a thousand shoes. Wincing as the soles of his feet collided painfully with a sharp rock, Francis cursed at the holes in his four-year-old brown loafers before halting abruptly. In front of him loomed Ms. Evelyn Brewster, the wealthy biddy who never left the house without her pink parasol in hand. She gave him a withering look, even though he had managed to avoid the collision at the expense of the half-melted gum-balls in his pocket. Sizing up his greasy brown hair and torn overalls, she huffed a persnickety “harrumph” before gathering her petticoat and sauntering off towards the baking tent, nose in air. The layers of skirt were gradually unveiled like a stage curtain to reveal his impatient family on the other side.

“Francis, c’mon! We only have an hour ‘til eight to get everything in!”

The high-pitched voice of his brother Eddie pierced through the crowd as several people swiveled their heads. Their mother Mollie lurked close behind, her bright red hair matched only by that of their sister Annabelle at her side. Catching Francis mid-scowl, she frowned.

“You are to take your brother on the rides, no arguments,” she ordered, her thick Irish accent tinged with a harsh undertone. “We’ll meet you by carousel at eight o’clock sharp.”

Casting her a fervent look much like the one Ms. Evelyn gave him, Francis watched his mother turn abruptly on her heels with

Annabelle in tow. His sister's braids swished as she turned to marvel at a game stand packed with china dolls and fluffy teddy bears before Mollie grabbed her hand, mother and daughter disappearing into the House of Mirrors.

Glowering at the pair of them, Francis couldn't help but feel betrayed. He knew his mother had grown tired of having pity on him, but to force him to attend the fair? It was the cruelest punishment she could've ever given. When the annual carnival came to town, he and Gordy had always been the first to sprint out of the schoolhouse when the teacher let them out early for bracelet night. During a magical evening free of homework and filled with ample opportunity for mischief-making, Gordy had always channeled Francis' inner daredevil. "Don't be such a wuss, *Franny*," Gordy would jeer good-naturedly, jabbing him lightly on the shoulder. "I reckon even Janice Brewster is man enough to ride the roller coaster, but *you* -"

"Seriously, Francis, *wake up!*" whined Eddie, instantly eradicating Gordy's crooked grin from Francis' thoughts. He had been oblivious to their journey across the crowded grounds, and in his haste had bumped into a rather menacing-looking fellow with a coonskin cap.

"Watch where you're going, you filthy rascals," the man growled, flicking the ashes of his pipe onto Francis' discolored white shirt. Francis swore he could hear the coward mutter, "get some decent clothes while you're at it," but he had become too overwhelmed by the sight in front of him to pick a fight.

Eddie had secured a spot near the front of the line for a ride on the Ferris wheel, which was so ancient even their parents had grown up riding it. Almost immediately, Francis stiffened with anger. The carnival had been a cruel and unusual punishment, but this was crossing the line.

"Absolutely not, you little -" he started to roar in disbelief, but Eddie's pudgy hand had already grabbed his arm and dragged him kicking and screaming towards the open entrance.

"All aboard," grunted the conductor, who looked unphased by Francis' less than pleasant reaction to his monotonous announcement. "This is *our* ride," was the incessant cry repeating in Francis' head as he plopped down on the faded yellow seat and watched the conductor take a swig of moonshine. Eddie's chubby hands quivered with unbridled excitement as he dropped two quarters into a rusty tin can, though the enormous pupils beneath his furrowed eyebrows kept darting back and forth between the conductor and Francis. Averting his brother's infant eyes, Francis only sank silently into the abyss of the poorly upholstered cushion, too drained for protesting. By this time,

the conductor had blindly disposed of his empty whiskey jug onto the foot of an innocent bystander and disappeared into the dilapidated shed. Francis observed with disgust as the dimwit staggered to and fro, attempting to use his entire body weight to move the lever forward like a trapped miner hurling himself against caved-in boulders. All in vain.

“What is it you called him again, France? A babbling buffoon, was it? You sure have a thing for words, you do. What a nerd.” Gordy’s voice suddenly propelled itself to the forefront of Francis’ mind, just as the lever wheezed a deafening *creak* and the Ferris wheel lurched into motion. Eddie raised his beefy arms to catch the wispy September breeze, but receded the right hand suddenly to protect his broad-brimmed bowl cap from the wind’s grasp. Deep in a state of delightful oblivion, Eddie was unaware of the pained expression that played across his brother’s face, masked by the identical shadows of the rotating carts.

Faintly aware of Eddie’s gleeful squeals and the crotchety groans from the Ferris wheel’s rusted interior, Francis was no longer engaged with the many distractions that vied for his attention. Clutching the bar in front of him helplessly, a wave of panic rose in his stomach as forbidden images from one year prior came flooding back like a psychedelic time warp. With horror, he watched Eddie’s childlike face become distorted into a combination of two-dimensional shapes before finally taking the form of a teenage boy, who was sporting a perfect toothless grin with black smudges scattered over his pale freckled cheeks.

“Scared?” Gordy teased with a devious tone in his voice. “Betcha won’t ride a second time without me. Betcha don’t even got the guts to mark your territory.” Conjuring a pocketknife from his torn overalls like a magician, Gordy dangled the worn camouflaged handle in front of Francis’ ocean eyes, as if he were tantalizing a hungry hound dog with a slab of steak.

“C’mon, we can do it together when that ol’ washed up conductor stops the ride for a spell. Oh, don’t be chicken, France!” Seeing the shocked expression on Francis’ face, Gordy scrutinized him with a combination of disdain and amusement.

“C’mon, this’ll be our only chance! You know I gotta get up at dawn to help my old man out at the mines.” He scowled suddenly at this last remark, using the knife’s blade to dig the encrusted dirt out of his jagged fingernails. “This ain’t like that sappy Janice and Bart, marking their *love* on the cherry tree. Oh Bart, you’re just the *bee’s knees!*” he exclaimed in a highpitched voice, imitating Ms. Evelyn Brewster’s prissy granddaughter by batting his eyelashes and clasping his hands together admiringly. Reverting back to his sarcastic personality, he shook his head disgustedly. his head disgustedly.

“No, Francis. This ain’t no cherry tree. This is personal property, and you ain’t never broken no rules in your life, Mr. Perfect,” he jeered, knowing this would be the best way to cajole Francis into submission. “And we’re best friends, ain’t we? You’d do it for me, right?” For added effect, Gordy widened his eyes pleadingly so that he resembled a disheveled Oliver Twist begging for food, jiggling the pocketknife dangerously over the edge of the cart.

Just as Francis was beginning to think he was more neurotic than the drunken conductor, a ghostly hand reached straight through his torso to rescue the knife from a deadly descent.

“All right, doofus, you win,” the conceding voice of a pale-faced boy snapped, snatching the worn camouflaged handle with a newfound assertion. Sizing up his scrawny build and the rearmost tuft of hair standing at attention, Francis froze in disbelief. An innocent, more vivacious version of his former self was grinding the pocketknife’s dull blade into the aged wood of the latched door. His tongue graced the corners of his mouth, which was held slightly ajar in concentration. Accompanied by Gordy’s outbursts of encouragement, Francis watched himself masterfully remove the blade from the wood and lean back to admire his handiwork.

“Look at *you*,” Gordy exclaimed with a hint of shock, slapping ghost Francis on the small of his back a little harder than he intended. “Never thought you’d do it in a million years, bud. Golly, I was kinda expecting you to go all altar-boy over it, you know what I mean?” He paused suddenly and began to whack Francis continually on the back, attempting to dislodge a piece of bubble gum that had gotten stuck in his throat, no thanks to Gordy’s attempt at physical praise. Watching Gordy perform the Heimlich maneuver on his green-faced self, Francis could still feel the discomfort of the sticky gumball juxtaposed with the fear of imminent demise.

The suspended cart, positioned at the very zenith of the Ferris wheel’s cycle, began to sway dangerously as the boys rocked to and fro. With the tranquil mountains hovering quietly in the background, Francis couldn’t help thinking that the scene made for quite the evening portrait.

Several couples beneath them had leaned out of their carts to glare reproachfully or shake their fists, obviously under the impression that Gordy and Francis were engaging in some kind of tomfoolery to intentionally ruin their romantic evening. With one last heave, Gordy finally managed to send the dull pink gum shooting out of Francis’ mouth and, presumably, onto the head of the young woman in the cart below, who squealed in disgust. A panting Francis dropped to the ground with such force that it was a miracle the rickety cart didn’t collapse in on itself. A saving grace, perhaps, that he was scrawny and weak after all.

“C’mon, Francis, you’re all right,” Gordy was repeating

nonchalantly, continuing to slap Francis on the back, although his touch was noticeably lighter this time. He juxtaposed this consolation with frequent jeers at the conductor, who had emerged from the dilapidated shed and was demanding to know what was going on above him.

“Nothing, sir, nothing at all,” Gordy shouted, with a tone of disgust in his voice as if using “sir” when addressing the conductor was akin to Lifebuoy soap in his mouth. “We’re all set up here now, just you never mind. Don’t touch that lever!” Crouching back down to Francis’ contorted body, he whispered in an undertone, “Over my dead body will the slug bring us to the ground without letting me carve my initials into this old piece of junk.”

In spite of the fortuitous scene that was unfolding, Gordy’s retorts and the conductor’s drunken cries were mere white noise to Francis. Teary-eyed from lack of oxygen, he was running his forefinger over the fuzzy ‘FEB’ that his steady hand had etched only moments ago. Minutes ago, even, before his life was cast before him in an almost humorous fashion. How ironic if the headlines of the *Glenwood Gazette* had read, “Carnival Catastrophe: Spring Gulch Standout Student Tragically Chokes on Chewing Gum atop Ferris Wheel.” Gordy would have been the sole witness to such an odd tragedy, which involved the gumballs that their teacher admonished them for chewing in class. Maybe the giddy grin would disappear from Gordy’s face for a year or two, but he would ultimately find some way to reconcile the event.

“Well, you see, Francis had a way with words, he did. Smartest kid in our class. I reckon he was lined up for a scholarship or two. But by God, did the boy, rest in peace, have little common sense! I mean, folks, who in their right mind chews gum on a junky old carnival ride?”

The ‘FEB’ somehow grew fuzzier with this thought, and Francis had to squeeze his eyes tighter to distinguish the initials from one another. Salty tears continued to cloud his vision, and he compensated for this by drawing his face even closer to the splintered wood. The second outstretched pinky finger of the ‘F’ had receded and shot down the spine, curving inward to the right until it formed a recognizable ‘G.’ The ‘E’ took a cue and completely severed its longest limb to create a misshapen ‘F.’ It was the ‘B’ that took the longest to transform, its middle bone slowly disintegrating until a ‘D’ was faintly visible. When Francis delicately pressed his palm against the poorly crafted trio of initials, he swore he watched the mountains tremble with evil anticipation. He could feel the ‘GFD’ growing dangerously warm now, as if it was going to burst into flames at a moment’s notice. The deep marks in the door would somehow be devoured, rising from the ashes of the wood as if they –

A delicate hand graced his shoulder, filled with such tenderness

that Francis let out an audible gasp that sounded more like a squeak. Swiveling his head around so quickly that he cricked his neck, Francis prepared to give the most convincing performance of his life. Struck with a burst of adrenaline, he struggled to piece together the conglomeration of sentences that swirled menacingly in his mind.

“Gordy, the shift at the mines . . . you know, Mrs. Ainsley really wants everyone to be present for the reading quiz tomorrow . . . or, hell, we’re really overdue for a fishing day at the creek . . . no matter what the weather may be . . .”

Before he could repair these broken phrases, Francis’ brain finally caught up to the reality that his eyes had known all along. The chubby hand upon his overall strap was beginning to look oddly familiar, as was the broad-brimmed bowl cap that Gordy used to make fun of.

“Francis? Francis? Shh, it’s okay. It’s okay. We’ll get you down from here, I promise. I’m so sorry, so sorry. . .” Eddie trailed off in a whisper, breaking the frightened gaze he had maintained with his older brother for the entire episode. He cautiously poked his head over the cart to address the conductor, who was sputtering drunken cries of anguish from below.

“We’re all set up here, just you never mind. You can touch the lever now! Bring us back to ground level,” he bellowed, casting panicked glances in Francis’ direction.

Still in shock, Francis found himself in fetal position on the floor of the rickety cart, tear-stricken face glued to a pattern on the chestnut door. With his throat still burning from the screams he conjured, Francis was careful to avoid any splinters as he allowed his palms to push his body into an upright position. More aware this time, he allowed his trembling forefinger to trace the indentations of the familiar initials before him. It was like a blind person reading their childhood diary in Braille for the first time.

FEB & GFD, 9/15/1901. A permanent testament to their friendship. An unremovable stain on the ancient wooden door, unless it was set on fire.

Before Francis could reconcile the stark reality of the vision or even that the flustered warning he had given ghost Gordy was all for naught, the peaks of the mountain landscape caught his eye. Still, unmoving, cloaked in the cape of a silent killer who had escaped conviction. Silhouetted against the crooked lettering of Gordy’s initials, it was a cruel and unusual metaphor that turned Francis’ subdued screams into uncontrollable sobs. Images he had expelled from his consciousness had allowed themselves to gain a foothold during the most vulnerable moment in his existence. The explosion that shook the foundation of the schoolhouse. He was still there, studying.

The pieces of chalk that fell to the floor in succession, breaking their ranks to roam about the classroom floor. The impending doom he felt when a cloud of fire and ash rose menacingly from the direction of the mine. Gordy's empty desk. The newspaper article that his parents poured over for hours at the kitchen table, heads in hands, coffee mugs overflowing into the wee hours of the morning. Hidden in the depths of the broom closet, he managed to read it ten times over when his parents had finally succumbed to sleep.

Glenwood Springs, Colo., September 16, 1901 -- A frightful gas explosion occurred at 5:30 o'clock this evening in the coal mine of the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company at Spring Gulch, probably resulting in the instant death of all the miners at the time engaged in work, an estimate of one hundred men.

The concussion of the explosion was terrific, and the entire entry was badly caved in. Three men were rescued from near the entry soon after the explosion, but they were so frightfully mangled as to be unrecognizable.

The telephone line to Spring Gulch is out of order and a messenger was dispatched to the office of the Pocahontas mine, 8 miles distant, where telephone connection was had with Glenwood.

A special Midland train was ordered and all doctors in Glenwood Springs were at once sent to the scene of the accident. No definite information has yet been received here as to the number of men killed, but it is supposed that the men at this mine work until 6 o'clock except those who do contract work, and in that event it is thought that almost one hundred men must have been in the mine at the time of the explosion. There is not one chance in a thousand for many of them to escape with their lives.

At the hour, the following are known to have been killed: John Anders, 56; George Cassenger, 45; Peter Deldora, 51, and son, Gordon Frederick Deldora, 13; David Caller, 38; P.G. Pickerton, 62; and an unknown Italian man.¹

For someone who claimed to have never set eyes on the article, Francis had an uncanny ability to quote it word-for-word in between sobs. He was shaking more violently than ever now, rescued from the urge to thrust himself from the cart by Eddie's beefy arms locked tightly around his waist. "It should've been *you* on that front page, in that fake-sounding death-by-gumball story," was the guilty cry pounding on his temples. "Sure, it would've been sad. But at least your mother would've had a body to bury, instead of hearing it be blown to bits from the distance."

Nauseated by the sudden lurch of the Ferris wheel's descent, Francis squeezed his eyes tighter and tighter until Gordy's crooked grin flashed before him once again.

“Betcha won’t ride a second time without me. Betcha don’t even got the guts to mark your territory.” In an unprecedented turn of events, Francis had been man enough to mark his territory. Their territory. But Gordy’s first inkling, he realized, was hauntingly unwavering in its truth. He would never be able to ride a second time without the owner of the crooked initials.

1. Adapted from “Hundred Men are Killed by Gas Explosion in Mine,” Atlanta Constitution (Atlanta, GA), September 17, 1901.