

October 2021

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Recommended Citation

Pavis, Jenna L. () "Not Now, Not Ever. Not on my Watch," *The Mercury*. Year 2021, Article 37.
Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury/vol2021/iss1/37>

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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.

Not Now, Not Ever. Not On My Watch

JENNA L. PAVIS

Twelve years after stepping foot in Mabel I. Wilson elementary school, I had finally come to terms with my own version of success. Or, at the very least, my conscious mind convinced me I had. To be fair, this concept was very visually appealing to the naked eye. Picture-perfect marks on paper, a lengthy list of all-state accolades for musician-ship, scholarships to competitive colleges, and a congenial disposition for added measure. The kind of person who effortlessly controls their existence without fault. This was the beautiful costume I squeezed myself into each morning, even though its miniscule size was impossible for any human to model. When the costume ripped, it didn't just split into two seamless pieces. It was torn, severed, and devoured by the fangs of fear and failure.

The attack came in late May, the point in spring where anticipation blooms with the wild Lady Slippers in the Maine forests. Around the corner from Mabel I. Wilson, my 18-year-old self could be found in the gym-turned-band room, the heart and soul of Greely High School. I spent many an afternoon there, hunched over a composition, eyebrows furrowed in determination and focus. That day was no different. A fortnight away from graduation, I was chasing my most familiar vision of success: the award. For a cheap plastic trophy that would later gather dust on my top shelf, it certainly had become the Holy Grail of my musical journey. With blue Nikes tapping incessantly on the tile floor, I pursued my pipe dream of a flawless performance. As soon as one of my fingers slipped off the saxophone or a sour note ensued, I stopped, shook my head in frustration, and started over. *It doesn't have to be perfect*, a tiny voice would whisper tentatively, but it was drowned out by all noise. The truth was, it did have to be perfect, and that expectation was the catalyst for the explosion to come.

Deeply engaged in my quest for perfection, I barely noticed a distant figure squeeze through the entrance to my left. It wasn't until a glimpse of bright red caught my eye that I looked up, startled, to find my dad in his courier uniform. It was almost like watching an old friend from your high school years saunter into your workplace thirty years after graduation. The person and the circumstance do not fit, yet they somehow connect two threads of your past and your present.

Only this unexpected encounter would not be joyful or pleasant.

Surprised yet blissfully unaware, I laid my instrument down atop the piano.

“Oh, hey, what are you doing here? I’m working on the piece for that competition in a couple weeks,” I said, still in full rehearsal mode. “Did Mike let you out early today or something?”

No reply. It wasn’t until I began gathering my music that the dreaded knowledge was spoken into existence.

“I know,” he answered coarsely. “I know what happened in math. Your teacher knows, too. He emailed me this afternoon.”

Just hearing the disappointment in his voice was like a knife to the abdomen. Nothing more needed to be said in order to make the situation abundantly clear. But I couldn’t stand idly by as my reputation was flushed down the toilet. Not now, not ever. Not on my watch.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I replied, trying to sound nonchalant but struggling to keep my voice steady. As the long silence delayed the inevitable uproar to come, I kept my hands busy with the all-consuming task of organizing sheet music. Here’s page two of the Tableaux de Provence; oh, and page five of the Glazunov Concerto should be sorted into the orange binder, and the penultimate page of –

“Jenna,” my dad interrupted, his deep voice wavering. “No more pretending. Pack up your things and we’re getting out of here.”

The tone of his voice was enough to make me go into some kind of hypoglycemic shock that I watched my best friend experience back in sixth grade. I could manage only gasps of air and viewed my blurred surroundings as if I were hanging upside-down from the tire swing in my grandparents’ backyard. All I remember from the car ride home was sending a sparse text to friends, making up some excuse why I wouldn’t be able to meet them at “Toot’s” for ice cream. They surely could never know what had become of me. Not now, not ever. Not on my watch.

Cut to the next scene. You’ll find the protagonist receded deep into the corner of the family love seat, with her parents positioned diagonally across from her on the couch. The mother periodically crosses and uncrosses her legs, struggling to find a position that will help her comprehend the situation at hand. The father fiddles with his Fitbit, as if he were trying to –

“What in the world possessed you to do such a thing?” Mama whispered, and with her question brought the sobering reminder that we weren’t filming a movie. “Cheating on an exam? That’s not you, that’s *never* been you! I thought we taught you better than that.”

Throughout this emotionally squeamish inquiry, I could not bring myself to answer with anything other than “I don’t know” in a tiny voice and recoil deeper into the arm of the love seat. The truth was, I really didn’t know at the time. I had no idea what had driven me to take such extreme measures, measures that not only put my college scholarships in jeopardy, but that which were the anthesis of my core beliefs. When I googled the answers to that exam, secured within the confines of a private classroom, I recall consciously eliminating all feelings of remorse and guilt. The process itself was almost robotic. Stress, anxiety, and severe depression were the impulsive forces that controlled my motives for the day, as they had every day for the entire school year. “Do whatever it takes,” the three serpents would whisper convincingly in my ear. “Failure will *never* breed success. You don’t want that, do you?” No. Not now, not ever. Not on my watch.

That statement, “Not now, not ever. Not on my watch,” could perhaps be the international anthem for one who is “driven by a fear of failure quite as much as a desire for success,” as stated by J.K. Rowling in her Harvard graduation speech. It wasn’t until several years later that I fully understood how fear of failure had driven me to a breaking point. The fear of failure and an unhealthy desire for success are as close together and as far apart as love and hate. They both breed surface-level stories of success, but one at a much greater price than the other. I experienced the poverty that ensues after paying a pretty penny for the fear of failure.

The wrinkled exam may have had a fake 99 scribbled on the front page, but it was done so at the expense of my teacher’s trust, my permanent record, and my dignity. That begs the question, does a high two-digit number automatically equate to success? An otherwise celebratory moment in my life had been warped into a disarray of confusion and disappointment, all in the name of perfection and by extension, this thing we call “success.” In the lifespan of my eighteen years on the planet, my greatest fear had been realized: failure itself. During a desperate attempt to achieve success, I had tarnished my reputation and thrown away any chance of a perfect cadence to conclude the symphony of high school.

I had a counselor tell me that those few months would never define my entire secondary school career, for it was merely a wrinkle in time. As comforting a sentiment as it was, I could never escape the mistakes of my past during those final moments. Descending down the risers to the glorious accompaniment of my classmates’ cheers, I wondered what my math teacher was thinking as I received the superior musicianship prize. Was I worthy? Stress, anxiety and depression

hissed that I didn't even come close. My epic failure was the only proof I needed to answer that question. For double digits atop a sheet of paper that no longer exists, it certainly wasn't worth it.

It's too bad that it took eight whole years for me to come to this consensus. Tracing it all back, I vividly recall the first time I obtained a 'partially meets' instead of my usual 'exceeds' on a fifth-grade math exam. During the car ride home, my distraught 11-year-old self contested that it wasn't good enough, in spite of my mother's efforts to convince me otherwise. Right then and there, the dangerous concept of perfect entered my mind, and with it, a skewed idea of what success really meant. It festered like an open wound, growing year by year until it reached a breaking point on that fateful June afternoon. Finally, the healing process could begin.

Not surprisingly, it turns out that the three serpents of stress, anxiety, and depression were mistaken. Failure, from the Latin *fallere* meaning "to deceive," *does* breed success, or at least leads you down the right path. A perpetual fear of failure manifests itself in deception. Not only had my disturbing actions deceived beloved teachers and parents, but they had also succeeded in deceiving me. Fear of failure made me avoid what is objectively not a failure, which would have been an 80 on the exam. In a quest to evade the tale of fake failure that I spun in my own mind, I had succeeded in actually failing by committing an act of deception itself. In the end, deception could not outwit honesty, leaving my broken spirit to pick up the pieces and come to terms with the true meaning of success.

Looking back, there will always be an ugly smudge of black ink that envelops the final notes of high school's festive postlude. I'll never hear the sweet sounds of those pitches, nor will I know the closure of a happy ending. But with this failure, my greatest fear had come to pass. I was free, in a sense, to alter my course and entertain my organic, inarguable desires without giving destructive ambition a foothold. Perhaps now I can perform a piece all the way through without stopping when a sour note ensues, or I can be proud of myself when I see an 85 atop an exam. However tedious the journey may be, I can be sure that an untarnished, "perfect" cadence awaits me at the end. For now, forever, and always on my watch.