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This is it. After months and months and years of buildup, it is *here*, The Moment We've All Been Waiting For. My fingers dance up the keys for the last, grand arpeggio before the finale, but my finger slips—

and my favorite part falls flat. I wonder if I manage to hide my cringe.

*The 35th major mistake of the night, folks! (Or... day. Whatever.)*

This piece is a train wreck.

My piano teacher, Tanya, showed me this song in 8th grade. I think she knew my music tastes better than I did. I was a quiet, awkward, and confused middle schooler, uncomfortable in my own skin. George Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" is loud and bold, jazzy and confident. It screams, "*I am a force of nature!*", and I loved it instantly. It was everything I wished to be.

The more I played it, the more I loved it. It was way above my skill level, but who cared? I would spend the rest of my life learning this song if I had to. It was *epic*. All 17-odd minutes, all 514 measures of it were pure perfection. Rhapsody was joy and determination and anxiety and love and triumph embodied in sound.

I was obsessed. By junior year, I was spending hours and hours behind the piano (much to my siblings' dismay). The obnoxious ticking of the metronome was my constant through the whirlwind of IB homework and extracurriculars, pushing me to higher speeds and greater accuracy. Everything else lost its importance, because Rhapsody *had to be perfect*, and the ticking of the metronome may as well have been the ticking of the clock as time ran out.

I've always been a bit of a perfectionist. In middle school, my narrative short story assignment turned into an 80-page novella. An A- grade gets me more on edge than I'd like to admit. I am, in the words of my 16-year-old brother, "such a try-hard". But with Rhapsody, my perfectionism was multiplied by a thousand. I thought of it constantly. I stopped going to cross country because it took away from my precious practice time. I'd curse myself for every mistake and over analyze every practice session. It got borderline unhealthy, but I didn't notice or care. All I knew was that *I could not fail*.

But... What constitutes failure? Is failure a single imperfection, or can success be reached even with mistakes?

Maybe this piece was a train wreck, but I had to keep going, because it wasn't over yet. I was so close to the end! After all this time, all the hours filled with frustration yet also joy, the grand finale was finally here. I couldn't help smiling as I crescendoed through that last, proud chord.

Despite my relief at finishing, I was so conflicted after my final performance. Had I succeeded, or had I failed? I messed up in so many ways. I caved to my nerves, and it showed, from the moment my fingers slipped on the first chord to when I *played the wrong freaking pedal* (God, how embarrassing) to that last, botched arpeggio. By my traditional definitions, that was a gross failure.

So, maybe I failed in every possible way... or maybe, my perfectionism was toxic. Maybe, in spite of all the mistakes (or because of them?), I succeeded just by reaching the end. "Rhapsody in Blue" is many things: loud, chaotic, joyful, sad, anxious, and bold. But if I had to describe it in one word, I'd say *triumphant*, because playing that final *sfz* B ♭ major chord taught me that the best success comes from just enjoying the experience. Success comes from being bold enough to dare to try, and no number of mistakes made along the way can take that from me.