

I'm suffocating. The visible skin on my body turns a bluish hue. Blood flow slows in my veins. My throat constricts, lungs screaming for air but getting none. The mask of interwoven strings over my skin only tightens. It can't be happening. All I can do is wait. Suppressing a cry, the strings finally snap. Underneath, my pale flesh returns to the light. Slowly, my tight-lipped smile dips into a frown. Never has the mask I put on failed. My internally crafted personalities catered to my situation. Like an item of clothing I slip into, a barrier between me and the real world. Work me is diligent, hardworking, and always kind to the customer. An employee who almost never causes any problems. A busy bee slaving away. Sure, over the years I'd been late and occasionally clumsy. But we all have our moments. So never in the many scenarios of my anxiety-induced brain, did I consider sitting here right now. In an ideal world, it was for a promotion. Unfortunately, fantasies don't always come true. "I'm sorry, Raine. I truly didn't want to have to give you this notice. It's just...you've been consistently late since you started." My boss pauses, a pitying look crossing his wrinkled face. "I can't make exceptions. You know better than anyone." No, I didn't know. My fists clench in my lap, nails digging into my flesh. I had seen him bend the rules plenty of times. Turning a blind eye to the new hire who always wrote the wrong orders, or the woman who snapped at customers. It wasn't fair, end of story.

"Please give me one more chance. I promise you won't regret it," I plead with a pathetic whine in my voice. He sighs, tapping his temple as if considering it. My boss's thick brow furrows as he gazes intensely at his shoe. I shove down any flicker of hope inside me. We both knew he wasn't going to change his mind. "My decision is final Raine. Your termination date is next Tuesday." There's no point in arguing anymore. Admitting defeat, I rise from the worn leather chair. "I won't be showing up. Send whatever payment you have or don't." Storming towards the door, I fight the urge to slam it. As it closes behind me, I hold back a sob in my throat. The

truth is, I love this place. Every day being surrounded by people with different backgrounds, personalities, you learn so much. Yet I can't break down without my boss hearing me. As much as I want to deny it, he has valid reasons for letting me go. It's just that this was my chance to prove to myself I could handle responsibility. Instead, I was late every day, mixed up orders, and froze when it became overwhelming. The only person to blame is me. Internally, I say goodbye to the dirty tables, the pancake light fixture from the 1980s, the slippery floor tiles, and my stained Joe's Diner apron, which I hang with the rest. For a moment, my fingers linger on the fabric for too long. Forcing myself to pull away, I make quick strides towards the door. The quicker I rip off this band-aid, the better.

Outside, the cool night air provides a refreshing relief. Leaves somersault at my feet, dancing across the cracked pavement. The weight of what just happened sinks me to the ground. Tears threaten to break free, and I let them. An ugly cry escapes from my throat, a release from caging my emotions. Disgusting snot drips from my nose, my face likely turning red and splotchy. The only remains of my work persona are faded red marks. I stroke my skin, mourning the version of myself that is now gone. This only proves I **just** need to try harder. Because with sheer effort, I can take control of my life. Colleagues, friends, and family make it appear easy. It's so easy to be organised. It's so easy not to freeze at a task. It's so easy not to procrastinate. It's so easy not to overshare. It's so easy to do everything I can't do. So easy...

So easy...

So easy...

The Google search bar waits for me to type my search. How to be productive? No. How to get your life together? That's not right either. I slam the laptop shut.

Ghost hops onto the marble counter and lies on top of the device. Her black fur blends into the darkness. The only indicator she's here is her piercing yellow eyes. The clock on the screen shows it's already midnight. Ever since I got home, I fell down the rabbit hole of research. Reading Reddit forums and advice columns, everything was just the same cliché message. "Go out for a walk and enjoy nature," one guru psychologist suggested. "Clean up your space for a clean mind," a TED talk spoke of. In fact, that was the last thing I needed to hear. At my feet, there are crumbs scattered on the floor beneath the chair. Old takeout containers from the local Chinese restaurant rest beside my arms. Sitting in the corner is a pile of laundry, still unfolded and waiting to be put away. A mix of clean and dirty clothes. As I look around my messy apartment, I feel even more hopeless than I did when I left Joe's Diner. "What am I going to do, Ghost?" I ask quietly, scratching gently behind my cat's ear. She mews in response before sauntering away. "Really helpful," I call out to her, realizing the absurdity of getting mad at a cat for not being able to solve my problems.

Feeling desperate, I pull out my phone and turn to my last resort – social media. As the app opens with a burst of sound, I jump in my seat and quickly turn down the volume. I move towards the search bar and type in my last hope. "How to take control of my life?" Within seconds, thousands of videos pop up. I quickly skim through a few videos, hearing nothing but the same old advice. But then, I stumble upon a profile that gives me a glimmer of hope. The profile's hashtag reads "young and confused," which immediately catches my attention. The screen shows a young girl with ocean-deep blue hair and dark eyeliner. She begins her video by saying, "If you're watching this, you probably feel just as lost as I did. I was stuck in that mindset for a long time. But I've created a step-by-step plan to take control of your life. These daily practices really helped me, and I hope they do the same for you." And there it was – the moment I had been longing for. It was almost too

easy. Her plan was like others I had seen before – wake up early, go for a run, and mindful journaling. Yet, the more I listen to her, the more I relate to what she has gone through. That someone else feels so utterly lost. Clinging barely to any happiness they have. So, for once, I don't dread tomorrow. I feel ready for it.

Sunlight gently warms my skin, and I welcome its touch. As I look down, I watch as a new mask forms over my skin. The golden threads weave together, shaping my new productive mask. I long to be like the girls I envy, and with this new personality, everything will be *perfect*. Beside me on my dresser, I review the plan I have laid out for myself.

Step one: play favourite pick-me-up song. Normally, I struggle with making decisions, but this one is easy. I sing along with Aretha Franklin belting out, "What you want? Baby, I got it!" I shimmy around, extending an imaginary microphone to Ghost. She looks at me with pure annoyance and swats it away.

Step two: make bed. I lay on a wrinkled blue sheet and tuck it tightly in the corners. To add some extra warmth to fight the autumn chill, I layer a comforter on top. For the finishing touches, I add decorative pillows. Proudly, I step back and admire my work. As mundane as these tasks seem, I know it will be worth it. This version of Raine will not mess up. This version of Raine will prove herself *worthy*.

Number three: make a healthy breakfast. Hopefully, "healthy" counts as the few stray eggs left in a carton. My empty fridge helplessly declares it's grocery shopping day. Ghost mews at her cat dish, clearly agreeing. Setting them on the counter, I triple check the expiration date. One too many times, I've eaten spoiled food. Bending down, I rummage in the cabinet below the countertop. Inside, I find the

frying pan hidden behind dirty pots. Turning a blind eye at the neglected dishes, I set the pan onto the stove. Turning it on, flames lick at my face as it lights. Slowly, I crack an egg hard against the pan. The white and yellow insides ooze out landing with a sizzle.

Checking the time, I decide it would be more efficient to occupy myself as I wait. As I scan the apartment, my eyes land on my dusty bookshelf. The old picture frames are covered in dust bunnies, arranged in a nonsensical zigzag pattern. Using my thumb, I swipe away a layer of dust. Revealed underneath is a photo of my parents and me. I see a younger version of myself with wild auburn curls, rosy cheeks, bright, naive eyes. What would she think if she knew all her dreams had been for nothing? That her older self would do anything to escape right now. Suddenly, I'm jolted out of my thoughts by a loud, beeping sound echoing through the apartment. I smell smoke and realize it's coming from the kitchen. The eggs. Panicking, I rush over and turn down the knob on the stove. Ghost scratches at my leg with equal panic. Ignoring her, I move the pan off the burner and open the lid, revealing charred and blackened eggs. This can't be happening. Everything was going perfectly until now. But then it hits me – the suffocating feeling, the tightening around my throat. The beautiful strings making up my mask, are black and fraying. "No, no, no," I mutter to myself, pacing back and forth. I need to fix this. My plan can still work. I reach into my pocket and pull out a crinkled list. Step four: go for a walk. Maybe it will fix whatever is going on with my mask. Everything needs to be fine.

As I walk through the bustling streets, sweat clings to my skin and the blazing sun blinds my eyes. People hurry past me, each with their own destination in mind. Friends walk by on their way to lunch, a grandmother and grandchild head towards the park, and a distracted teenager, takes up the whole sidewalk. The air is thick with the distinct smell of garbage and cigarettes, and the constant honking of cars

adds to the chaos. It doesn't matter that we're all going to the same place, to some, it's a race to see who can get there faster.

Despite being surrounded by so many people, I've never felt so incredibly alone. That it's just me and my breaking mask, heading in a direction I can't even name. I feel like a lost boat at sea, destined to sink. This list was my last salvation, my only hope. But now, I find myself back at square one, trudging through the heat with aching legs. I plop down on a bench, not caring that it's smeared with bird poop. I rest my head against the wood and admire the people walking by. They all seem to have a destination as they walk, a goal they're trying to reach. Meanwhile, I'm stuck in the same miserable hole, I've always been in. Anyone would have predicted the straight A student would get into her dream schools. Instead, I found myself working at a diner only to get fired six months later. It was all my fault. If only I had just tried harder on the list, in school, at my job. I have no one to blame for my life but me. I press helplessly at the mask that is now squeezing again. "You can't leave me," I whisper, holding in a scream. But this time, it burns. Like hot metal stoking a fire, it pokes harder, and I'm certain I will crumple from the pressure. Why was it happening now? Had I not done everything right? Fingers stroking the now blackened string, I feel so tired. From constantly trying to fix everything, I think I've just done more harm. What was I even doing?

I have no clue where I'm going. My skin doesn't feel like my own. It's raw and bare, the true Raine finally on the outside. After so many years of cocooning myself in, I've never questioned if it helps. Was the mask just a coping mechanism to hide from my problems? Stuck in my mystified thoughts, I'm broken from them as a crunch sounds beneath my foot. Glancing down, a muddied paper sticks to my shoe. I notice a community board, busy with advertisements, job opportunities, and products for sale. A tab left behind, its mate now stuck to my foot. Prying it off, bold

letters catch my eye. Women's Support Group. Meets: Wednesday at 2 o'clock. Where: Trinkets and Tea: 125 Maple St E. Have you always felt that you're the problem, the one who needs fixing? What if you don't? Instead, come to a safe space, and it might just help you discover who you are...

What if I *don't* need fixing? That can't be true, because my imperfections are things that with time I can rid myself of. Because I'm the problem. Yes, I'm the prob... no... what this poster is saying can't be true...or is it? The wave of today's events sinks over me, and I'm even more shattered. A lost sailor drowning desperately to search for that light in the fog. Maybe my light is a world without pretending everything's fine. My mind can't help but imagine a reality where all the "broken" parts of me don't need to be fixed.

Triple-checking the address on my phone, the Trinkets and Tea sign sways over me. My hand grips the doorknob in contemplation. Was this a mistake? A seedling of doubt begins to mutter in my ear. You shouldn't go; it tells me. It's hard not to ignore it, especially when those lies are all I've known. Opening the door, I force myself to enter and welcome the chatter of women.

Because...

I'm not Productive Raine.

I'm not Work Raine.

I'm just Raine. Who doesn't need fixing and just wants to find herself.