*ATAR is stressful* she decides falling back into the soft clutches of her bed. Anyone doing ATAR thinks about ATAR a*ll* the time. *Have I done this well enough? Will I pass this test? What will I do if I fail?* Even on a lazy Sunday morning she is thinking about ATAR. *What happens if I do fail?* If she thinks about it logically she knows there are more than one option available, but the only thought running through her brain is, *what happens if I fail?* The ATAR pathway is sold to the unsuspecting teenage audience as the be all end all of university entrance.

She should be relaxing, it’s a Sunday after all, but instead of taking in the warm golden rays streaming through the gap in her outrageously pink curtains she is worried. She had a test on Friday and she’s worried. *If I don’t pass this test my mark will drop below 50%.* One test stands between her and passing the course. She’s worried, stressed to the point she feels like crying. And she has, in the past, just sat on her bed and cried. But that was at the start and she’d like to think she’d grown better at dealing with stress.

*I knew it would be hard*, she thinks remembering the start of her ATAR journey. She moved from a small school to a bigger school, with different teachers, teaching styles and teaching standards. It was hard to adapt, she constantly felt like an idiot when a teacher said something like ‘you would’ve probably learnt this in year nine’ and she knew she hadn’t. She found herself trying to catch up while trying to keep on track at the same time. *Thank god I wasn’t alone!* Her friends were in the same boat, feeling under pressure to catch up to their classmates.

If there is anyone who tells you they haven’t had a breakdown, they either have extremely good stress management skills or they are lying. She remembers coming home after her very first lot of exams. She knew she’d done badly at one exam in particular and the weight of her failure sat heavy in her stomach. She couldn’t sleep that night and eventually she broke. Silent tears streamed down her face as she sat in the pitch black darkness of her bedroom at two in the morning like some strange nocturnal creature. *What will they think? What if they’re mad? What if they think I’m not trying hard enough?* Their anger she could handle, she could handle them yelling at her, taking away her phone, her computer. But feeling their disappointment? No way! No child wants to be a disappointment to their parents. Parent want what’s best for their child. They want to see them succeed and be happy. Who would want to tell their parents they’re not?

She thought differently now. Instead of keeping her self-loathing to herself she tells the people that matter to her, because she knows they won’t judge her, they won’t think she’d stupid, they won’t yell at her to try harder. They wouldn’t be disappointed at her but with her. She knew that they wanted her to succeed and they were there when she didn’t, with kind encouraging words, ‘You know what you have to work on now’ or ‘It’s only worth 2% of your entire year’ or something as simple as ‘you will do fine’. She knows they are there for her. *And thank god they are,* she thinks silently musing over her memories.

still gets the overwhelming feeling of dread as she walks in and out of a test. There is still that moment when her heartbeat misses a beat as the teacher collect her paper, all she could think was *I did so badly!* And let’s not forget the moment when the test papers are being handed back and she reaches out with shaky hands and a fake watery smile. *This is the test isn’t it? The one that will drop my mark. I’ve failed haven’t I? I think I’ve failed.* And then she turns it over. It’s a pass and a relieved rush of air leaves her lungs and the weight on her chest is lifted. There’s room for improvement, she knows that, and now she knows exactly what do to improve her mark. And she can talk to her teacher, she can go to tutoring, to revision seminars and the like. *I can improve, I will improve.*

She found a way to deal with stress to. She knows now that when she’s trying to finish san assignment and she gets stuck, instead of stressing out about completely failing she takes a break. Not a long one, half an hour at the most. And she does something she knows will relax her, something she knows she will enjoy. Her favourite, playing the piano. She plays a song she knows she can play reasonably well, something that will change the negative thoughts clouding her mind. She gets lost in the black and white keys under her fingertips. And at the end of her break she goes back to her work with a positive outlook because if she can play a song well on the piano what’s topping her from doing a great job on this assignment?

*I feel like relaxing today*; she thinks as she walks down the hallway. She is going to take a break from her studies today because she has learnt she needs ‘me’ time. She is going to spend at least three hours not stressing over school because it will still be there in three hours’ time. Unfortunately. *I wish I could just magically make myself know everything I need to know for these exams!* She smiles pulling out the chair for the piano, taking a seat of the plush red cushion. *I think I’ll play Mayday Parade today;* she decides before placing her finger on the keys. She takes a deep breath forgetting every single piece of school work and begins to play.