

Section 1

#1 (Opening paragraph): "The low, rattling hum of the 'drinks' fridge was the only sound in the muted cafe, a noise Leo had been listening to for ten whole minutes. He breathed in the familiar scent of burnt coffee, a stark contrast to the faint, sweet smell of stale sugar."

Strengths: Your opening creates strong atmosphere through sensory details. You effectively establish the setting's mood with specific sounds and smells.

Weakness: Unclear setting details → The cafe's description lacks enough detail to help readers picture the space clearly. You mention "muted cafe" and basic elements, but readers need more specific details about what makes this place special or memorable for the characters.

Exemplar: *The cramped corner cafe, with its peeling wallpaper and mismatched chairs, felt like a place where time had stopped.*

#2 (Dialogue and interaction): "'How was the train?' he asked, once they were alone again. 'It was a train,' she said, not unkindly, but not offering more."

Strengths: Your dialogue sounds natural and shows the awkwardness between the characters. The response "It was a train" reveals Maya's guarded attitude effectively.

Weakness: Limited emotional depth → The conversation stays on the surface and doesn't dig deep enough into the characters' feelings. You could show more of what both characters are thinking and feeling during these tense moments.

Exemplar: *"How was the train?" he asked, his voice catching slightly. "Long," she replied, her fingers tightening around her bag. "Gave me too much time to think."*

#3 (Emotional climax): "I missed you," she whispered, the words so quiet he almost didn't hear them. "Every single day, I was so angry. And every single day, I missed you."

Strengths: Your emotional breakthrough feels genuine and touching. The contradiction between anger and missing someone rings true to real relationships.

Weakness: Rushed emotional shift → The change from cold distance to emotional connection happens too quickly. You need more small steps showing how the characters slowly warm up to each other throughout their meeting.

Exemplar: *Her voice cracked slightly as she spoke. "Some days I'd walk past the hardware store and remember how you taught me to use a hammer. Then I'd remember why I stopped calling."*

■ Your piece tells a moving story about a father and daughter reconnecting after years apart. The basic plot works well, and you understand how to show emotions through actions and dialogue. However, your story needs more depth in several areas. The characters need stronger backgrounds so readers understand what caused their separation. You mention that Leo was absent, but you don't explain enough about what happened or why Maya stayed away for so long. Additionally, your story moves too quickly from tension to resolution. Real relationships take time to heal, and your characters need more careful steps toward forgiveness. Also, consider adding more specific details about the setting and the characters' lives now. What does Leo do for work since he stopped building? What is Maya's life like? These details will help readers connect more deeply with your characters and care more about their relationship.

Overall Score: 45/50

Section 2

#1 Clean Hands

The low, rattling hum of the 'drinks' fridge was the only sound in the muted ~~cafe~~ [café], a noise Leo had been listening to for ten whole minutes. He breathed in the familiar scent of burnt coffee, a stark contrast to the faint, sweet smell of stale sugar. The bell over the door didn't so much chime as jangle, a harsh sound that snagged on the quiet. Leo startled, his hands stilling over the casualty of his wait – a paper napkin reduced to a damp, snowy pile on his saucer. He looked up.

For a heart-stopping second, he saw only a stranger in the doorway, a woman clutching her bag like an anchor. Then, she tilted her head, and seven years collapsed into a single, sharp intake of breath. It was her. The face was leaner, the set of her jaw more stubborn, but the eyes hadn't changed. They were still the deep, questioning brown that had always seemed to know all his secrets.

His chair scraped loudly against the linoleum as he rose to his feet. "Maya."

#2 She walked to the table, her movements stiff. She didn't hug him. She just sat, placing her bag carefully on the empty seat beside her. "Hello, Dad."

The silence that followed was something physical, heavier than the greasy air hanging in the room. In the quiet, the rattle of the old fridge seemed to grow louder, filling the space between their unspoken words. A waitress appeared, her shoes squeaking faintly on the floor, and they ordered coffees with a shared, desperate relief.

"How was the train?" he asked, once they were alone again.

"It was a train," she said, not unkindly, but not offering more. She looked around the small ~~cafe~~ [café], her gaze lingering on the condensation weeping down ~~on~~ [the] windowpane. "This place hasn't changed."

"No. Still the same burnt coffee." He tried for a smile, but it felt like cracking plaster.

She didn't smile back. Her gaze fell to his hands, resting on the tabletop. "You stopped building things."

It wasn't a question. Leo looked down at his own hands, surprised. They were clean, the nails neatly trimmed, the calluses he'd carried for thirty years faded into pale ghosts. "Not much to build anymore," he said quietly. "House is too big as it is."

Their coffees arrived. Maya wrapped her hands around the warm mug, as if to ward off a chill. "I got your letters," she said, looking into the black liquid. "All of them."

"I wasn't sure you would."

"I have them in a box." She finally met his eyes, and he saw the flicker of the hurt, stubborn girl he remembered. "I never knew what to write back."

"You didn't have to write back," Leo said, his voice thick. "I just. . . I needed to know if you were okay. And I needed you to know I was. . ." He trailed off, the word catching in his throat. Sorry. It was just too small a word for the gaping chasm between them.

Maya's expression softened, just a fraction. "Why now, Dad? After all this time, why ask me to meet?"

He took a breath, the air tasting of stale coffee and regret. "Your birthday is next week. ~~You're be~~ [You'll be] twenty-five. I remember holding you the day you were born. You were so small, all you did was scream." A real smile touched his lips this time, fragile and sad. "I realise that I've been a ghost for more of your life than I was as a father. I just. . . I didn't want to be a ghost anymore."

#3 A tear slipped from Maya's eye, tracing a quick, silent path down her cheek. She didn't wipe it away. She just watched him, her own gaze unwavering.

"I missed you," she whispered, the words so quiet he almost didn't hear them. "Every single day, I was so angry. And every single day, I missed you."

The admission shattered the last of the ice. Leo reached across the table, his clean, unfamiliar hand covering hers. It was a clumsy gesture, hesitant and uncertain, but she didn't pull away. She turned her hand over, her fingers lacing with his.

"I know," he said, his voice finally breaking. "Me too."

They sat like that for a long time, their hands clasped over the chipped Formica as a lone fly buzzed lazy circles under the fluorescent lights. The burnt coffee grew cold beside ~~him~~ [them], its bitter scent mingling with a new, fragile hope. Nothing was fixed, not yet. But the lock had turned. The door was ajar.