

## WEEK2

### Section 1

#### #1: Opening sequence (first three paragraphs)

##### Strengths:

- Your sensory details work well to create atmosphere — the rain-soaked sleeves and varnish smell help readers imagine the scene clearly.
- The short sentences ("Low, distracted.") create good rhythm and tension.

**Lack of scene-setting context** → Your opening drops readers directly into the action without establishing who Sam is or why this meeting matters. Whilst immediate action can be engaging, your piece would benefit from a brief sentence explaining Sam's emotional state or his reason for visiting. The line "He wiped his hand on his jeans, hesitated, and knocked twice" shows physical action but doesn't tell us what Sam is feeling or thinking. Consider adding internal thought or emotion to help readers connect with Sam from the very first moment.

*Exemplar: The rain had already soaked the sleeves of Sam's coat by the time he reached the pier — ten years of avoiding this place, and now his hands wouldn't stop shaking.*

#### #2: Flashback sequence ("Ten years earlier")

##### Strengths:

- The dialogue between younger Sam and Eli reveals their contrasting personalities naturally through conversation.
- The compass symbolism is introduced in a meaningful way that connects to the present timeline.

**Abrupt transition between timelines** → Your shift from present to past happens too suddenly with just the phrase "Ten years earlier." Readers need a smoother bridge between these moments. The flashback starts immediately with "The two of them, younger, sunburned" but there's no trigger in the present scene that naturally leads our minds backward. The cracked compass could serve as this trigger, but your writing doesn't pause long enough on it. Adding a sentence where Sam remembers the day Eli gave it to him would make the flashback feel less jarring and more purposeful.

*Exemplar: Sam ran his thumb over the crack in the compass, and suddenly he was seventeen again, balanced on the old dock with salt wind in his hair.*

#### #3: Closing paragraphs (final four paragraphs)

##### Strengths:

- The ambiguous ending with "maybe tomorrow" and the door left ajar suggests possibility without forcing a neat resolution.

**Unclear emotional resolution** → Your ending leaves readers uncertain about what has actually changed between Sam and Eli. Whilst ambiguity can be powerful, your piece doesn't give enough hints about whether this meeting has moved their relationship forward or if everything remains broken. The line "Eli didn't answer. He only nodded once" could mean many things, but your writing provides no context clues. Readers need at least a small signal — perhaps through Sam's final thought or a subtle change in Eli's expression — to understand whether this encounter brought them closer or confirmed their distance.

**Exemplar:** *Eli didn't answer. He only nodded once, almost imperceptibly, and returned to the sandpaper — but this time, Sam noticed, his movements seemed less tense, less guarded.*

■ Your piece creates a moody atmosphere and uses symbolism effectively, but the emotional core needs strengthening. The relationship between Sam and Eli feels important, yet readers don't fully grasp what broke them apart or what reconciliation might look like. Your dialogue is sharp and realistic, but adding more internal thought would help us understand the characters' feelings beneath their careful words. Additionally, your transitions between present and past need smoothing to guide readers more gently through the timeline shifts. Consider expanding the moments where Sam or Eli react internally to what's being said — their thoughts don't need to be long, just clear enough to show us their hearts alongside their words.

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**Score: 42/50**

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## Section 2

"The Glass Compass"

The rain had already soaked the sleeves of Sam's coat by the time he reached the pier. He wiped his hand on his jeans, hesitated, and knocked twice on the cabin door.

Inside, the rhythmic scrape of sandpaper stopped.

"Come in," came a voice. Low, distracted.

He pushed the door open. The room ~~smelled~~ [smelt] of varnish and salt. Eli stood over a half-built model ship, its tiny rigging hanging loose like nerve endings.

Sam gave a small, nervous laugh. "Still making things smaller than they need to be, huh?"

Eli didn't look up. "Still showing up late."

Sam set something down on the table between them [—] a glass compass, cracked through the north point.

Eli's eyes flickered to it. His hand froze mid-motion. "You kept it."

"You gave it to me," Sam said. "For-" He stopped. "Yeah. I did."

They stood there, silence thick as varnish drying. Outside, gulls screamed and the tide thumped against the posts.

Ten years earlier

The two of them, younger, sunburned, balanced on the old dock, tossing pebbles into the water. Eli held up the compass, sunlight scattering through it.

"It always points north," he said. "Even if you don't."

Sam snorted. "What does that even mean?"

"You'll get it when you stop running from everything."

"Or maybe," Sam said, "you'll get it when you stop chasing control."

Eli smiled, small and secretive. "Maybe."

They both laughed. The sound carried over the water like something alive.

Back in the cabin, Sam ran his thumb over the crack in the compass.

"So, the paper said you're opening a whole museum now."

Eli shrugged. "Someone has to remember things."

"Right," Sam said. "Because forgetting's a crime."

Eli turned then, eyes sharp. "Some things were crimes."

Sam looked down, pretending to study the ship's hull. "You always did like your sentences tidy."

Eli picked up the sandpaper again, slow and deliberate. "And you always liked to leave before the ending."

A pause. Rain hissed against the window.

Sam said quietly, "I didn't come to argue."

"Then why are you here?"

"To give this back," Sam said, pushing the compass closer. "You'll keep it safer than I ever did."

Eli looked at the object for a long time. Finally, he said, "It's cracked."

"Yeah."

"Still points north?"

"I guess that depends on who's holding it."

Eli brushed his thumb across the fracture. A small laugh escaped him — quick, unguarded, gone almost as soon as it came.

Sam gave a ghost of a smile. "And you're still measuring the wind."

Eli's mouth twitched — not quite a smile, not quite not. He set the compass beside the ship, slightly askew.

They stood in silence, listening to the rain soften against the cabin roof.

"Maybe tomorrow," Sam said, more to himself than anyone else.

Eli didn't answer. He only nodded once, almost imperceptibly, and returned to the sandpaper.

Outside, the tide shifted. The pier glistened wet in the ~~rain-light~~ [rain-light], and the door remained slightly ajar.

## WEEK 3

### Section 1

**#1: "The photograph slid from the attic box and landed face-up on the floor. Mara almost ignored it. She was looking for old Christmas decorations, not memories. Not memories of a family that abandoned her. But something stopped her."**

#### Strengths:

- Your opening creates immediate interest by showing rather than telling, using physical action to draw readers into the scene.
- The short, punchy sentences build tension effectively and mirror Mara's hesitation.

**Fragmented thought pattern** → Your use of "Not memories of a family that abandoned her" as a separate sentence creates an awkward break in the narrative flow. While this technique can emphasise emotion, here it feels disconnected from the surrounding sentences. The repetition of "not memories" also makes the passage feel choppy rather than building emotional weight. Consider integrating this thought more smoothly into the paragraph so the revelation about her abandoned family feels more natural within Mara's internal dialogue.

**Exemplar:** *She was looking for old Christmas decorations, not the painful memories of a family who had abandoned her; but something stopped her.*

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**#2: "A family of three, a man, a woman, and a boy, posed on a cracked porch. The woman's hand rested lightly on the boy's shoulder. He clutched a small toy soldier, paint chipped and arms stiff. They all smiled, but their eyes carried something else; hesitation, maybe fear, maybe loss."**

#### Strengths:

- Your descriptive details paint a clear picture of the photograph, allowing readers to visualise the scene alongside Mara.
- The observation about their eyes "carrying something else" adds depth and mystery to the family portrait.

**Punctuation error with semicolon** → You've used a semicolon incorrectly in "but their eyes carried something else; hesitation, maybe fear, maybe loss." A semicolon should connect two complete sentences, but "hesitation, maybe fear, maybe loss" isn't a complete thought on its own. This creates a grammatical break that interrupts your otherwise smooth description. Using a colon or dash would properly introduce the list of emotions you're describing and maintain the contemplative mood of the moment.

**Exemplar:** *They all smiled, but their eyes carried something else: hesitation, maybe fear, maybe loss.*

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**#3: "That evening, the house smelled of smoke and dinner. Daniel left the toy soldier on the floor, forgotten for a moment. Elise noticed but didn't pick it up. She knew it belonged somewhere else, but she didn't know where. The house grew quiet, the kind of quiet that holds its breath. Far away a heartbeat stopped."**

**Strengths:**

- Your atmospheric writing creates an eerie mood that hints at the tragedy to come without stating it directly.
- The final line "Far away a heartbeat stopped" is haunting and memorable.

**Unclear connection between events** → The paragraph jumps between several moments—dinner time, the forgotten toy soldier, Elise's mysterious knowledge, the quiet house, and finally the stopped heartbeat—without clear links showing how these events relate to one another. Your readers might struggle to understand why Elise thinks the soldier "belonged somewhere else" or how the stopped heartbeat connects to the scene you've just described. This lack of clarity weakens the emotional impact of what should be a powerful, foreboding moment. The paragraph needs stronger transitions or additional context to help readers follow the thread of meaning you're weaving.

**Exemplar:** *That evening, the house smelled of smoke and dinner. When Daniel left the toy soldier on the floor, Elise noticed but didn't pick it up—something about it felt wrong, as though it belonged to another time entirely. The house grew quiet, the kind of quiet that holds its breath, and somewhere far away, a heartbeat stopped.*

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■ Your piece shows a strong grasp of atmosphere and mystery, particularly in how you've structured the dual timeline to create intrigue. The connection between past and present through the photograph and toy soldier is engaging, and your ending brings emotional closure to Mara's journey. However, your writing would benefit from smoother transitions between ideas and scenes. Several paragraphs jump from one thought to another without clear bridges, which can confuse readers about how events connect. Additionally, pay closer attention to your punctuation, especially when introducing lists or additional information—using the correct punctuation mark helps your sentences flow more naturally. To strengthen your piece, focus on the middle section set in 1963. This part feels rushed compared to the detailed attention you give to Mara's discovery. Spend more time developing what happens to the Harper family and why the toy soldier matters, so readers can fully understand the weight of Mara's discovery at the end. Also, reconsider the line "Far away a heartbeat stopped"—whilst poetic, it's vague and leaves readers uncertain about whose heart stopped and why this matters to your story.

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**Overall Score: 42/50**

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## Section 2

### The Photograph

Summer 2024, Lonely Street (Mara Harper's House.[.])

The photograph slid from the attic box and landed face-up on the floor.

Mara almost ignored it. She was looking for old Christmas decorations, not memories. Not memories of a family that abandoned her. [—not memories of a family that abandoned her.]

But something stopped her.

**#1** A family of three, a man, a woman, and a boy, posed on a cracked porch. The woman's hand rested lightly on the boy's shoulder. He clutched a small toy soldier, paint chipped and arms stiff. They all smiled, but their eyes carried something else; [—] hesitation, maybe fear, maybe loss.

Mara's breath caught.

The woman looked exactly like her. Not similar but identical. An exact copy. Same blue eyes, same faint scar above her eyebrow, same uncertain smile.

On the back, in fading ink:

Summer 1963 — 8 Forgotten Street (The Harper's House.[.])

Her fingers trembled. The Harper House had burnt down long before she was born.

She set the photograph down carefully, half afraid to touch it again.

Summer 1963, 8 Forgotten Street (The Harper's House.[.])

**#2** The porch creaked under the weight of the sun.

Elise Harper straightened her dress and adjusted the camera. "One more picture, everyone. Make it count."

Daniel wrapped an arm around their son, Jonathan. The boy hugged his toy soldier tightly, eyes darting to the trees at the edge of the yard.

Jonathan grinned at his mother. "I'm ready, Mom."

Elise pressed the shutter. Click.

The world seemed to pause.

Then Jonathan's gaze flicked towards the woods. Something shimmered at the edge of the clearing, pale and sudden. He blinked. Gone.

"Don't wander too far," Elise said, her voice soft but tense.

He nodded, but his fingers stayed tight around the soldier.

**#3** That evening, the house smelled of smoke and dinner. Daniel left the toy soldier on the floor, forgotten for a moment. Elise noticed but didn't pick it up. She knew it belonged somewhere else, but she didn't know where.

The house grew quiet, the kind of quiet that holds its breath. Far away a heartbeat stopped.

Present

Mara traced the edges of the photograph, curling as if it had a pulse of its own.

She looked towards the empty fireplace below, remembering the smell of smoke, the news reports, the family that once was.

Carefully, she folded the photo and slid it back into the box.

She stayed in the attic a little longer, letting the air settle, listening to the house breathe.

Then she noticed a small shape tucked behind the floorboards—a chipped toy soldier, half-hidden under dust.

Mara crouched and picked it up. The paint was worn, the arms loose, but she could still make out the tiny uniform.

Her chest tightened. She didn't know why it mattered so much. She didn't even know what she was hoping for.

But for the first time, the photograph made sense in a way words never could. She felt hope. She felt at home. And for the first time she felt loved.

She held the soldier in her hand, the photograph in her lap, and let herself sit there, letting the years fold together, one quiet heartbeat at a time.