

Section 1

#1: Opening Paragraph

Strengths: Your opening effectively establishes atmosphere through sensory details like "dust motes danced" and "lavender and old wood," which immediately draw readers into the setting. The crooked photograph serves as a strong focal point that creates visual interest and hints at deeper emotional disorder in the household.

Underdeveloped Character Response: → Your character Ellie straightens the photograph, but you don't explore what this action means to her emotionally. Simply stating "let her fingers linger on the glass" tells us she pauses, but not why this moment matters. You could deepen this by showing her internal thoughts or physical reactions—does her hand tremble? Does she remember a specific conversation with Jamie about the photograph? Adding these layers would help readers understand Ellie's emotional state more fully.

Exemplar: *"She reached up, straightened the frame, and pressed her palm flat against the glass, feeling the coolness seep into her skin—the closest she could come to touching Jamie's face again."*

#2: Flashback Section ("Three Years Earlier")

Strengths: Your dialogue feels natural and captures Jamie's youthful enthusiasm convincingly. The detail of Ellie "still sulking from a fight" adds realistic sibling tension that makes their relationship believable.

Rushed Pacing of the Tragedy: → The storm and Jamie's death happen too quickly in just two sentences: "That night, the storm came. Trees bent like dancers in agony. Jamie had gone out to fetch Max, who'd bolted at the thunder. He never made it back." This crucial moment deserves more space to breathe. You've compressed what should be the emotional heart of your story into a brief summary. Expanding this section would allow readers to feel the weight of the loss rather than simply being told about it.

Exemplar: *"That night, the storm came. Rain hammered the windows like fists demanding entry. Ellie had been in her room when she heard the back door slam—Jamie, calling for Max through the howling wind. She'd pulled her blanket tighter, certain he'd return in minutes, soaked and sheepish. But minutes became an hour, then two. When her parents finally found him at dawn, he was curled beneath the old oak tree, Max pressed against his chest, both of them still."*

#3: Jamie's Room Scene and Photograph Discovery

Strengths: The detail of Jamie's handwriting—"Best day ever. El smiled"—is genuinely moving and provides a powerful emotional revelation. Your choice to have Ellie discover this message only now creates effective dramatic tension.

Unclear Supernatural Element: → The flickering light at the end feels disconnected from the rest of your narrative. You haven't prepared readers for anything supernatural or mystical, so this moment seems to come from nowhere. If you want to suggest Jamie's presence, you need to plant subtle hints earlier—perhaps Ellie notices small things throughout the house that feel like more than coincidence, or you could establish that she doesn't believe in such things, making the light flicker more meaningful as something that challenges her worldview.

Exemplar: *"As she turned to leave, the hallway light flickered. Just once. She paused, remembering how Jamie used to flick the switches on and off to annoy her, and for the first time in three years, the memory made her smile rather than ache."*

■ Your piece demonstrates strong foundational storytelling with genuine emotional moments, particularly Jamie's note on the photograph. However, you need to develop your scenes more fully rather than rushing through important events. The storm sequence, which should be your story's emotional centre, happens too quickly for readers to feel its impact. Additionally, your opening paragraph in Jamie's room simply lists objects ("his books stacked neatly, his shoes still by the door") without connecting them to memories or emotions—these details could trigger specific recollections that would deepen Ellie's grief. Also, consider cutting the supernatural ending unless you weave hints of it throughout the earlier sections, as it currently feels inconsistent with the realistic tone you've established elsewhere.

Score: 43/50

Section 2:

The photograph had always hung crookedly in the hallway. A boy, no older than ten, grinning with a gap-toothed smile, his arm slung around a golden retriever. Behind them, a sunlit field blurred into memory.

Ellie paused beneath it, suitcase in hand. The house was quiet now—too quiet. Dust motes danced in the morning light, and the air smelled faintly of lavender and old wood. She reached up, straightened the frame, and let her fingers linger on the glass.

The dog had died first. Then the boy—her brother, Jamie—three summers ago. The photograph was taken the day before everything changed.

#1 Three Years Earlier

Jamie had begged her to come outside. "Just one photo, El! Mum says we'll frame it."

She'd rolled her eyes, still sulking from a fight. But something in his voice—hopeful, urgent—had tugged at her. So she'd grabbed the camera, snapped the shot, and watched him race off with Max, the dog, barking behind him.

That night, the storm came. Trees bent like dancers in agony. Jamie had gone out to fetch Max, who'd bolted at the thunder. He never made it back.

#2 Present Day

Ellie stepped into Jamie's room. It was untouched—his books stacked neatly, his shoes still by the door. She sat on the edge of the bed and pulled out the photograph from her bag. The same one from the hallway, but this copy was faded, edges curled.

She flipped it over. On the back, in Jamie's messy scrawl: "Best day ever. El smiled."

She hadn't known he'd written that.

Her breath caught.

In the weeks before the storm, Jamie had grown quieter. He'd asked strange questions—"Do you think memories can live in pictures?" "If something bad happens, will you remember the good stuff?"

She'd brushed him off. "You're being weird."

But now, she wondered. Had he known? Had he felt something coming?

#3 Ellie closed her eyes.

She was back in the field. Jamie was laughing, Max chasing butterflies. The sun was warm, and her heart was light. She raised the camera, and this time, she didn't rush. She let the moment breathe.

Click.

The house would be sold tomorrow. But the photograph—Jamie's photograph—would come with her.

She placed it gently in her suitcase, nestled between her sketchbook and a half-written letter.

As she turned to leave, the hallway light flickered. Just once.

She smiled.