

## Section 1:

**#1: "The swings creaked in the wind, slow and uncertain, whispering secrets to no one. Rusted chains caught the faintest scraps of light as the sky dimmed from gold to gray."**

### Strengths:

- Your opening creates a strong sense of atmosphere through sensory details like the creaking sound and visual imagery of fading light.
- The personification of the swings "whispering secrets" effectively establishes the playground as a character with its own story.

**Weakness: Vague Emotional Foundation** → Whilst your opening establishes mood well, it doesn't give readers enough grounding in why this playground matters specifically. The emotional weight feels decorative rather than earned because we haven't yet connected the setting to Mara's personal history. You introduce the playground's decay beautifully, but the significance remains unclear until the second paragraph. Consider hinting earlier at Mara's relationship with this place—perhaps through a small detail that shows this isn't just any playground but *her* playground.

**Exemplar:** *The swings creaked in the wind—the same swings that had once held her and her brother's weight a hundred times—slow and uncertain now, whispering secrets to no one.*

**#2: "The merry-go-round stood still, its paint peeling in tired curls. She nudged it with her foot; it turned once, groaning, and the red horse's eye—just a chip of black paint—seemed to stare back."**

### Strengths:

- The detail of the "red horse's eye" being "just a chip of black paint" shows excellent observational writing and makes the scene feel authentic.
- Your use of the word "groaning" brings the merry-go-round to life and reinforces the decay theme.

**Weakness: Underdeveloped Memory Connection** → You mention "For a moment, she could almost hear him laughing," but this memory feels rushed and disconnected from the detailed description that comes before it. The reference to "him" appears suddenly without enough emotional build-up. Your writing would be stronger if you showed more clearly how looking at the horse triggers this specific memory. What about the horse or the movement reminds her of her brother? Right now, the memory feels added on rather than naturally arising from the moment.

**Exemplar:** *She nudged it with her foot; it turned once, groaning, and the red horse's eye—just a chip of black paint—seemed to stare back with the same wild look her brother used to get when he'd dare her to spin faster, faster, until the world blurred.*

**#3: "Her shoe traced circles in the dirt, erasing faint footprints that had long since faded."**

### Strengths:

- This action shows rather than tells us about Mara's contemplative mood and works well as a quiet moment.
- The image of erasing already-faded footprints reinforces your theme about loss and the passage of time.

**Weakness: Repetitive Symbolic Actions** → Throughout your piece, Mara performs several small, gentle actions—nudging the merry-go-round, swinging slowly, tracing circles, giving a final push—but these actions all communicate similar feelings of hesitancy and sadness. Whilst each individual action works well, together they create a pattern that makes the piece feel somewhat static. Your writing would benefit from varying Mara's interactions with the playground to show different aspects of her grief or memories. Perhaps one moment could show her lingering attachment, another her anger or frustration, rather than only gentle melancholy.

**Exemplar:** *Her shoe dug into the dirt, carving deeper lines than she meant to, scattering the faint footprints that had long since faded.*

■ Your piece demonstrates strong atmospheric writing and sensory description, particularly in how you've portrayed the abandoned playground's decay. However, your content could be deepened by exploring Mara's emotional journey more explicitly. Right now, the piece is heavy on mood but light on emotional progression—Mara enters sad and leaves sad, with little change or realisation between. Consider what Mara discovers or understands by the end that she didn't know at the beginning. Additionally, your writing relies quite heavily on the playground's physical details to carry meaning. Whilst the setting is vivid, pushing yourself to show more of Mara's internal thoughts or small actions that reveal her character would add substance. For example, in the paragraph where she sits on the swing, you could show her hesitating before sitting, or remembering how she used to leap onto the seat—these small additions would give us more insight into who she was versus who she is now.

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**Overall Score: 41/50**

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### Section 2:

#### #1 An Empty Playground at Dusk

The swings creaked in the wind, slow and uncertain, whispering secrets to no one. Rusted chains caught the faintest scraps of light as the sky dimmed from gold to ~~gray~~ [grey]. Shadows from the climbing frame stretched across the cracked rubber mat, long and thin as old memories.

#2 Mara let the gate rattle shut behind her. Once, she'd burst through it laughing, racing her brother to the slide. Now she moved as if the air were heavier here, thick with the ghosts of after-school shouts and scraped knees.

The merry-go-round stood still, its paint peeling in tired curls. She nudged it with her foot; it turned once, groaning, and the red horse's eye—just a chip of black paint—seemed to stare back. For a moment, she could almost hear him laughing, daring her to make it spin faster.

**#3** She sat on a swing. The seat was cold, the chains stiff with rust. Pushing off gently, she swung once, twice, the motion small and uneven. The sound filled the silence that used to be noise: sneakers thudding, voices calling, the clink of metal against sky.

Her shoe traced circles in the dirt, erasing faint footprints that had long since faded.

The wind picked up. The swings shivered, as if remembering, too.

When she finally stood, she gave her swing a final push. It drifted forward, then back, slower each time, until it stopped completely—facing the way she had come.