The Haunted Desk

On the first day of October, Mrs. Mercer told the class not to touch the desk in the back corner of the classroom.

It was an old wooden desk with a hinged lid and black metal legs. Every other desk in the room had a smooth gray top. This one was scratched and darkened with age, and it faced the wall instead of the board. Initials were etched into its wooden surface.

No one sat there. No books were stacked on it.

Mrs. Mercer explained that some old furniture had recently been pulled from storage to be discarded. She had saved the desk because she thought it might be a valuable antique. It probably dated back to the 1950s, around the time the school first opened.

By the end of the week, most of the class had stopped noticing it.

Eli had not.

He sat close enough to see the narrow gap beneath its lid and make out the carved initials: **S.S. + M.J.** Sometimes, while Mrs. Mercer was teaching, he caught himself staring at that dark gap.

Once, he thought he heard something rattle inside. He went back to his work, telling himself he had heard wrong. The second time, he began to wonder what was in there.

On Thursday, Mrs. Mercer sent Eli back to the classroom for a box of markers while the rest of the class finished an activity in the library. He found the markers beside her computer.

Before leaving, he took a curious glance toward the wooden desk in the back corner. With no one else around, he could finally take a closer look.

Eli carried the markers as he made his way between the rows of desks. A few steps from the wooden desk, he heard a soft scraping sound beneath its lid and stopped. Eli felt his shoulders tighten, and he held his breath. The classroom clock seemed louder than before. Somewhere in the hallway, a custodian's cart squeaked, making him glance toward the door.

He could still leave, but he wanted to know what was inside.

After a moment, he set down the markers and reached for the lid. It resisted at first, then opened with a dry wooden creak. Inside lay a short yellow pencil and a folded scrap of paper. Nothing else was inside besides a thin layer of dust.

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Eli unfolded the paper. Five words had been pressed into it so hard that he could feel their ridges on the back.

Now you can hear me



Suddenly, the entire desk rattled.

Eli dropped the lid, the note still in his hand. The sound cracked through the empty classroom. He stuffed the note into his hoodie pocket, grabbed the markers, and hurried out.

At lunch, Eli showed the note to his friends Maya and Jonah. Jonah thought someone was playing a joke on him. Maya suggested the paper might have been in the desk for years, forgotten in storage.

Eli kept turning it over. The paper was soft and yellow at the edges, with faint blue lines on one side, as though it had been torn from an old notebook. That could explain the note. It did not explain the scraping sound—or the tapping he had heard after picking it up.

By the end of lunch, curiosity had overcome their uneasiness. They decided to write back. Maya took out a pen and printed a question beneath the message.

Who are you?

After the final bell, Eli returned to the classroom while his friends waited near the door. He lifted the wooden lid. The little pencil lay where he had first seen it.

He placed the paper beside it and quietly closed the desk.

The next morning, Eli reached the classroom before most of the other students. Inside the desk, he found the paper folded into a small square.

Their question was still there. Beneath it, in narrow, uneven handwriting, was a name.

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He showed Maya and Jonah before class. None of them recognized the handwriting. Jonah still suspected a prank, but he no longer seemed quite so certain.

During a break between classes, they argued about what to do. Telling Mrs. Mercer seemed sensible until Eli imagined explaining why he had opened the desk—and why they had continued leaving messages inside it.

By the end of the day, they had decided to ask one more question.

What do you want?

They left the paper beside the pencil after the final bell.

The following morning, Eli opened the desk and unfolded the reply.



The words *I want to be free* changed the way they thought about Sydney Scott. Until then, they had been trying to imagine who might be writing the replies. Now they began to wonder whether the writer was alive at all.

This time, they left two questions.

Are you alive? How can we set you free?

They left plenty of space beneath the questions. The next morning, however, the only reply was a short line of words and initials.



The writing grew fainter across the page. By the final word, the pencil marks were barely visible.

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Maya noticed the initials first. **M.J.** was carved into the desktop beside **S.S.** Sydney Scott. The name explained one set of initials, but they still had no idea who the other person was—or what any of it had to do with a ring.

They left the paper inside, hoping Sydney would explain. Each morning for the rest of the week, Eli checked it. Nothing more appeared.

On Monday afternoon, he stayed behind after class and lifted the lid. For a moment, he stood looking at the little yellow pencil.

“Are you done answering our questions?” he asked.

The pencil rolled toward him and struck the inside wall of the compartment.

Eli slammed the lid shut.

The football field stood behind the school. Its old wooden bleachers had been replaced years earlier by aluminum stands built on new supports. Along the fence, a low strip of the original concrete foundation remained, cracked and half-hidden by weeds.

The friends knew the field well. They had played there, watched games there, and gathered beneath the stands while waiting for friends. It had never seemed frightening.

That changed after dark.

They went on Friday evening, telling their families they were meeting to walk around the school track. Each brought a flashlight. Beneath a low, cloudy sky, the field lay empty.

Wind whistled between the rows of seats. Somewhere above them, a loose piece of metal clanged against the frame.

They searched beneath the stands, sweeping their flashlight beams over metal supports, weeds, bottle caps, and flattened drink cartons. Every few minutes, one of them stopped to listen.

Each time, another sound followed.

A scrape.

A soft footstep.

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Once, a slow creak traveled along the seats overhead. Jonah raised his flashlight, searching the rows.

No one was there.

After nearly an hour, they were cold and tired. Maya had dirt on both knees, and Eli's flashlight had begun to dim. They had found nothing resembling a ring.

Then a candy wrapper skittered across the ground and caught against Eli's shoe. He picked it up—a bright, empty Skittles packet.

Candy.

He looked back along the path the wrapper had taken. Near the fence, weeds bent over the remains of the old bleachers' foundation. Eli brushed them aside, exposing a rough stretch of concrete. A narrow crack opened along its upper edge and ran deep into the block.



He crouched and aimed his fading flashlight into the gap. Something glinted inside.

Maya knelt beside him and held her brighter light steady. A thin curve of gold was wedged deep between the worn edges of the concrete, where it could have remained unnoticed from the time when the original bleachers still stood above it.

Eli eased a twig into the crack. The object shifted, then slipped free and landed in the dirt.

It was a ring.

The ring rested in Maya's palm, catching the beam of her flashlight. It was a gold ring with a clear stone in the center and smaller stones on either side.

Even beneath the dirt, it looked expensive.

Eli lifted it carefully and turned it beneath the light. Two initials were engraved inside.

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M.J.

The same initials carved into the desk. The same ones Sydney had written on the paper.

Before Eli could speak, a sharp knock sounded against the metal seats above them.

All three flinched.

Another knock followed, farther along the row. Then another, moving steadily toward the stairs.

Like footsteps.

Jonah swept his flashlight across the seats, but the beam revealed nothing.

They slipped the ring into Maya's zipped jacket pocket and hurried out from beneath the stands, staying close together until they reached the lights beside the school.

On Saturday morning, they went to the town library. The librarian helped them search old newspaper records for Sydney Scott. They did not mention the desk.

The first useful result was a brief article naming Sydney as a player on their school's football team. The second was an engagement announcement.

A photograph showed two smiling high school seniors standing beside a fence. The boy had dark hair falling across his forehead. The girl wore a ring on her left hand.

Beneath the photograph were their names.

Sydney Scott and Marla Jones.

Maya pointed to Marla's name.

M.J.

They continued searching. In a newspaper dated several weeks after the engagement announcement, they found a report about a car accident on the night of the homecoming game. Sydney had died when his car struck a tree on a wet road. Marla, who had been riding beside

him, had survived.

Eli read the short article twice.

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Until that moment, Sydney had been a name on a scrap of paper, someone hidden behind a handful of strange replies. Now he was a boy who had played football, smiled for photographs, and planned a future.

The librarian helped them find a school yearbook from the same year. In one photograph, students sat in rows of wooden desks with hinged lids.

Desks like the one at the back of Mrs. Mercer's classroom.

Eli closed the book gently.

Finding Marla took longer.

An article about the town's community garden mentioned a longtime volunteer named Marla Bennett. Farther down the page, it gave her maiden name—Jones—and noted that she had attended their school.

With help from their parents, the friends contacted her and arranged a visit. They explained that they had found a ring they thought might belong to her.

Marla lived in a small white house with flowerpots beside the steps. She was an elderly woman now, with silver hair and a soft cardigan buttoned at her throat. She welcomed the three friends and Eli's mother with a curious smile.

Then Maya opened her hand.

Marla's smile faded. She steadied herself against the doorframe, her eyes fixed on the ring.

For a moment, nobody spoke.

Inside, they gathered around the kitchen table. Maya placed the ring in front of her. Marla let her fingers rest beside it before finally lifting it toward the light.

She turned the band and found the initials.

"My ring," she whispered.

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She had taken the ring off during the homecoming game. It had felt loose that evening, and she had been afraid it would slip from her finger while she clapped. She remembered tucking it into her coat pocket.

Later, as the evening grew colder, she had pulled her gloves from the same pocket. The ring

must have come out with them and slipped through a gap between the wooden seats, falling unnoticed to the ground below.

She had discovered it was missing just before Sydney drove her home. He had saved for months to buy it, and she could not bear to tell him she had already lost it.

Marla rubbed one thumb against the gold band.

For years, she had thought about their last conversation: Sydney talking about the game, her own short answers, the little secret she had kept from him. He had noticed she was upset and asked whether something was wrong.

She had told him no.

She had meant to explain the next morning. Instead, she had awakened in a hospital.

A tear slipped down her cheek. She wished she had told him the truth while she still had the chance.

Eli wanted to explain that Sydney had sent them. He wanted to show her the paper and tell her about the pencil moving inside the desk. But before he could find the words, Marla lifted the ring toward the light and began telling them about Sydney.

She remembered his terrible singing voice and how he used to wait outside her classroom carrying both their books. Once she began, the stories came more easily. Soon she was smiling through her tears.

Before they left, she slipped the ring onto a finger where it fit securely. At the door, she held Maya's hand between both of hers and thanked them for bringing it back.

On Monday morning, the friends arrived early and found the classroom empty. Eli lifted the wooden lid while Maya took out a fresh piece of paper. Together, they chose the words.

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We gave Marla the ring.

After a moment, Maya added another sentence.

She told us how much she loved you.

They folded the note and placed it beside the pencil. Eli lowered the lid gently.

Then they waited.

There was no answer the next morning, or the morning after that.

By Friday, the note still contained no reply. The friends checked once more before going home. Jonah held the lid while Eli unfolded the paper.

Their words were the only ones on the page.

Eli studied the pencil, half expecting it to roll toward him again. It remained still.

Maya thought Sydney's silence might mean he was finally free. Returning the ring, Jonah suggested, had been the last thing he needed their help to do.

Eli hoped they were right.

He folded the note, placed it beside the pencil, and gently lowered the lid.

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Name: _____ **Date:** _____

The Haunted Desk — Reading & Thinking

Answer in complete sentences. Use details from the story to support your answers.

1. Why did Mrs. Mercer keep the old desk? Give two details that distinguish it from the other desks in the classroom.

   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

2. How do Maya and Jonah explain the first note? How does the reply signed “Sydney Scott” affect Jonah’s opinion?

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   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

3. How do the initials carved into the desk become more meaningful as the story unfolds? Explain at least two connections the friends make.

   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

4. How does each part of Sydney’s message—“Ring bleachers MJ candy”—help the friends with their search?

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   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

5. Why is it important that the ring is found in the original bleachers’ foundation rather than in the newer stands?

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   _____
   _____
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Name: _____ **Date:** _____

6. How does learning about Sydney at the library change the way Eli thinks about him? Support your answer with details from the story.

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   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

7. Explain how Marla lost the ring and why she did not tell Sydney that it was missing.

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   _____
   _____
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8. Choose two sounds from the search beneath the bleachers. Explain how the author uses them to build suspense.

   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

9. How do Marla's feelings change during the friends' visit? Explain what the ring means to her beyond its value as jewelry.

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   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

10. Do you think Sydney is finally free? Use two details from the ending to support your interpretation. Why does the story leave room for uncertainty?

    _____
    _____
    _____
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