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Engel: Pen Pals

PEN PALS

Lydia Engel

The letters from Sally come the most frequently. She usually jots down a note on postcards, or those folding note cards that you close with a gold sticker. Sometimes she sends a little item that she found at the antique store she works at. Once she sent me an old, crisp handkerchief, bordered with lilacs. She says it's like the ones she used to have. It's a print on the fabric, not embroidered. My favorite items are the three pressed leaves, each sent individually wrapped in wax paper. They're small beech leaves, now appearing gold, as the veins are all that remain. Within the veins, there is an embroidered butterfly. The butterfly is a different color on each leaf. They are incredibly fragile. I keep meaning to put them in a picture frame to display, but it has been over a year now, and I still haven't gotten around to it. I still haven't gotten around to sending a letter back either. Every note says she knows I

must be very busy, but she is thinking of me, and praying for me often.

The letters from Linda come on special occasions, usually holidays. Usually they arrive in the form of a cute, themed card, the expensive Hallmark ones. Once, she sent me a care package for Halloween. There were two small candle holders, a clear green one, and a small, orange, smiling jack-o'-lantern. She sent me socks, too. The first time she gave me socks, it was maybe 10 years ago for Christmas. They were red knee-highs with a black buckle printed on them, like Santa's belly. I don't have them anymore. They're long outgrown. Her notes don't say much, but I know what she means. She sent an old picture of the two of us, back when she wore her hair dark; dyed, but dark. We're not posed. It's a candid of me painting her face at the 175th Anniversary Barbeque we had at church in 2013. It's still special.

I've received two notes from John and



Elle. They call me “Lyddy.” When I see them in person, we talk for hours. Even before I initially left for school I was seeing less and less of them. They have their own grandchildren, the youngest two years older than me, but they all live far away. John and Elle just moved into a nursing home. It’s the nice one, and I know how to get there, but I don’t have their new address. Their notes are short but contain gifts and love. They send me unexpected grocery money that feeds me for two weeks. I keep the letter in case I don’t get another one.

Jane and Mike send me cards and an occasional package for my birthday. They retired to South Carolina in 2015, so that has been the standard for longer than the rest. I used to go out for breakfast with Jane on my birthday every year, just the two of us. I haven’t been to either of our favorite spots—Heidelberg or Crazy Otto’s—since they moved. Now I might get sent a plush,

stuffed turtle or some fudge from my favorite gift store in their new home. It’s a real beach town, with a constant rotation of retirees and tourists. I wish the local seafood and ice cream from the creamery could be shipped to me instead. The card is always the expensive kind, \$3.50 plus. It’s signed “from Jane and Mike,” but it’s all in Jane’s handwriting. Jane always texts me on my “birthday-eve,” so I know she remembered and didn’t have to be reminded by Facebook.

Anne’s writing looks as if she wrote it on another piece of paper and quickly pressed the second to it before the ink dried. Her cursive is shaky, with a telling crook halfway up every letter. I can pick out her handwriting from a pile of 100s. Anne has many grandchildren, but says she is still lonely. She sometimes sends me paper bookmarks stuffed into the envelopes. On holidays—Christmas, Easter, and the start of Lent—she sends me the free devotionals the church leaves in the

narthex. On Easter every year, she used to give me a chocolate cross, but it wouldn't do well in the mail. On my birthday, she sends me a letter on the same notecards she uses the rest of the year, but squeezed into the envelope with the paper bookmark, is the same number of dollars as my age. Throughout the year, she saves her quarters and puts them in old film canisters she has piled away over the years. She sends me these too. She wants me to have enough to wash my clothes at school, and not have to drive all the way home just to use the washer and dryer. She buys me baking supplies too, flour and sugar. She wants me to be able to take care of myself; start building a home, even if I will only be staying someplace for a year or so. She lives down the street from my childhood home now. I've stopped by twice. Anne started writing notes and cards for me, at least on holidays when I was 7. She used to hand them to me, now they're mailed. She still signs every letter:

"Jesus loves you, and so do I. Love Anne."

George and Sylvia send me very few notes, but they send me lots of food. They have a knack for hospitality even when I'm not visiting their home. They send me chips, pasta, cookies, and crackers. They send me grocery money, too. It feeds me for a week. They always give more than I feel comfortable taking from them. They give more than they need to, more than they should. I give them love back. Their mail is a combined effort. Sylvia writes the note, but I know all the extra snacks are from George. He can't resist a good chocolate or bag of popcorn himself. At

coffee hour, he grazes the buffet, taking two of everything—one for himself, one to give away. When visiting for card night, it's a great honor to be offered a piece of chocolate from the countless samplers he receives each year for Christmas. Sylvia is a firm believer in "The way to a man's heart is through his stomach." I can hear her laugh and say, "especially George's." Sylvia's handwriting is faint on the paper but signed with love.

Cookies come from the Captain. He's a big giver. He would send me galumpkis, lasagna, ziti, fried chicken, goulash, and biscuits with sausage if he could, but the Post Office won't take them. He would drive the hour and a half to deliver dinner himself if it wouldn't get cold on the way. He settles for cookies—usually blueberry scones, but sometimes they are lemon cranberry. There is rarely a note, but I've had his cooking too many times to not know it when I see it, or taste it, rather. The Captain likes to feed people. He frequently takes it upon himself to cook for the whole congregation. On any given Sunday, we'll walk down the gray carpeted stairs into the large room used for Coffee Hour each week, to see and smell enough delicious lunch for everyone. He is one of the few people who always remembers my food allergies, putting something aside he knows I can eat, buying special desserts so I don't feel left out. The Captain is incredibly generous with—and incredibly proud of—his cooking. Whenever I get a box or plate of treats, I know he's proud of me too.

Doris sends me cookies as well, except she sends me chocolate-chip. I like her cookies better. She makes the thick kind

with a small diameter that easily fits in the palm of your hand. She always sends a note, but they make me sad. She seems eternally surprised that she, “a grumpy old lady,” is loved by not just me, but my whole family. Before either of us left my hometown, I’d give her a hug every time I saw her. She is so warm. Her letters are warm, too, always telling me stories about when I was young in the church. She tells me how blessed she feels to know me and my family. She tells me about the first time she and her husband Ron heard me sing at just 4 years old. “He came home and said, ‘those girls can carry a tune better than half our choir!’” She hasn’t sent me any cookies since Ron died last year. I’ve only seen her once since the funeral. She only lives 20 minutes from my new house. I visited her there months ago but haven’t heard from her at all since. Doris is closer to her daughter there. I know she started attending a different church from me, but then the Pandemic hit. I don’t know what she’s doing now. I want to drive over and see.

I take out a set of blue, marbled patterned notecards that Sally bought me when I was 12. They’re the folding kind she sometimes sends, with the gold stickers to seal them. I uncap a pen but put it to my mouth instead of the paper. I don’t know who to write first, nor what to say. How can I express how grateful I am in 24 square inches? After staring at the blank notecard, I begin to write.

*“Hi,
Thank you for all your notes! It means a lot to me that you haven’t forgotten about me yet. I’m pretty busy here between classes*

and working. I have some friends. I’m going to a church here, but it doesn’t feel like home. I’m thinking of you too.

*With Love,
Lydia”*

I fold it up and put it in a box of other notes that should be mailed but probably never will be.

“Thank you for the grocery money! It helped a lot. I’m missing home a lot, but I’m enjoying school too.

*With Love,
Lydia”*

“Glad you’re thinking of me! I shared the cookies with my friends (even though I didn’t want to). They reminded me of home. I’m hoping to visit soon!

*With Love,
Lydia.”*

“Thank you for all the prayers and notes. They always seem to come when I need them the most. I really needed it this week.

*With Love,
Lydia”*

Lately, the letters have slowed. I know it’s mostly because of that box full of unaddressed, unstamped responses, but I’m scared of the day they’ll completely stop. I don’t want to be forgotten; I hope they don’t think I’ve forgotten them. Maybe they’ve lost my address.

What if they’re gone? Gone, gone? Who will write to me? What will I do when there are no more letters for me to write but never send?