

Pen Pals  
published in *Straight* on May 26, 1991

“Bailey, Virginia. First Row. Third Seat. Barker, Tricia. First row. Fourth seat.”

Tricia silently groaned as she moved to her assigned seat. *So this year wasn't going to be much different*, she mused. It was only third period, and this was the second class in which she was forced to sit behind Virginia Bailey. Why did teachers have to have such predictable seating charts?

As luck would have it, Virginia's ally, John Castro, drew the seat right next to Tricia. No sooner had John taken his seat than the two started their incessant gossiping.

Memories of last year came flooding back. For four periods, Tricia had listened to Virginia's threats and questionable exploits. Tricia looked at her furtively. Virginia was pretty with her long blonde hair, clear blue eyes, and soft complexion. But her pent-up anger was predominant.

“Please take out a pen and a piece of paper,” Mrs. Patterson directed once everyone had been seated.

Tricia opened her binder.

“What if you don't have one?” Virginia asked with mock innocence. “Didn't think we'd need one the first day.”

Tricia's heart stopped. In her pencil pouch were twenty pens with Scripture verses on them. This summer her Sunday school class had decided to meet needs while witnessing, hence the pens, since every student needed one at one time or another. At the time Tricia had embraced the idea. Being moderately shy, she had

always balked at sharing her faith. This seemed such an easy way out. Just slip someone a pen and then slip out of the picture. But in her visions, the person had always been some withdrawn loner in need of a friend, not Virginia.

Somehow Tricia managed to extract a pen from the case and hand it to Virginia, verse-side down. Hesitantly she heard herself say, "I have a pen you can have."

Virginia turned to look at her in disbelief.

"I don't need your stupid pen," she said disgustedly. She looked at John with a can-you-believe-this look, and took a pencil from him.

Tricia slowly retracted the pen and prayed for the earth to swallow her up. The rest of the day went better since her last three classes were without Virginia.

That night while in her room organizing her notebook, she saw the pens. For a long time she toyed with the idea of conveniently leaving them at home. But she knew it was a cop-out.

"Okay, Lord," she prayed quietly. "You win. But give me the strength and courage to handle this situation." She paused and smiled slightly. "Better yet, please let Virginia remember her own pen tomorrow."

But Virginia didn't. For a week, Virginia vocalized her plight, much to the teacher's dismay and Virginia's delight. And for a week, Tricia gritted her teeth and offered her a pen. The response was always the same. For a while, Mrs. Patterson accepted her work in pencil, but finally she put her foot down.

"Virginia, I've given you time to secure a pen. I will not longer accept your work in pencil." She addressed the class. "Does anyone have a pen Virginia can use?"

“I do,” Tricia answered.

“Thank you, Tricia. Virginia, I suggest you take it.”

Virginia turned around with dramatic indignation and begrudgingly took the pen—a red one. Tricia held her breath and waited for Virginia to read the inscription and say something crude. But no comment came. *Maybe she hasn't read it yet*, thought Tricia. She spent an uneasy forty-five minutes until the bell finally rang.

She went home that day feeling rather proud of herself but still apprehensive about Virginia's reaction. The next day, as usual, Virginia entered spouting off a list of recent accomplishments before plopping in her seat. Tricia waited. Nothing.

“Please take out a pen and some paper,” directed Mrs. Patterson.

“I don't have a pen,” Virginia responded.

Tricia's mouth dropped. *What?* she thought. *How could she have lost that pen already?* Before Mrs. Patterson could respond, Tricia said, “I have another one she can use,” and Virginia spun around with her hand extended. Without a word of thanks she took the bright yellow pen and turned back around. Again Tricia cringed, waiting for Virginia's reaction. Again nothing.

This pattern continued for the rest of the week. Despite the fact that Tricia would give her a pen every day, Virginia would always claim she needed one. Finally, Tricia started leaving one at the top of her desk and Virginia would invariably pick it up. By the end of the third week, Virginia had depleted Tricia's supply, and at Sunday school she had to ask for more.

“My, you must be busy,” Mr. Morton, her teacher, said proudly. “Take as many as you like.”

Tricia blushed, mumbled a quick “yes” and “thank you,” and grabbed a handful. She didn’t have the heart to tell him that they were all going to the same person.

Monday brought the same scenario. But at lunch, as Tricia walked toward her locker to deposit her books, she heard her name called.

“Hey! Barker!”

Tricia jumped, not used to being addressed by her last name. She turned around to see Virginia standing by the drinking fountain. Tricia shivered slightly, wondering if Virginia had finally taken offense to the verses. She tried to calm herself.

“Yes?” she answered.

“Come ‘ere,” Virginia responded, motioning with her head.

Heart still pounding, Tricia approached her. “Uh huh?”

“Got any more of those pens?” she asked.

Tricia stared at her in disbelief, stifling an urge to ask her not only where the pen she just gave her was, but where the last thirty were. Instead she nodded. “Sure.”

She opened her binder, unzipped the pouch, and pulled out three pens. “Here you go,” she said as she handed them to her and turned to leave.

Virginia looked at them quickly then called after her.

“I already have these!”

Tricia stopped and turned around. “What?” she asked.

Virginia looked straight at her. "I said," she said slowly, "I already got these. What else do you have?"

"Uh," Tricia stammered. "Uh, well. Why don't you look?" she offered and held her binder open.

As Virginia intently read each pen before taking or discarding it, Tricia pieced the puzzle together. *Virginia hadn't lost all those pens, she realized. She was just collecting them to read.*

"You're missing one," she said.

"What?" Tricia asked again. "One what?"

"One of your pens," Virginia replied. "You had one that said, 'Let not your heart be troubled' or something like that. It was the first one you gave me, but I lost it. Do you have any more of those?"

Tricia felt somewhat embarrassed. She hadn't bothered to read any of them. Quickly she fumbled through the pouch.

"There aren't any in there," Virginia said impatiently. "I already checked."

"Uh, I'm sorry," Tricia stuttered. "I could get one for you, but it might take a week."

Virginia's face furrowed as she thought about the offer. "A week, huh?" She paused. "Well, okay. Though I'm kind of in a hurry to know how to do that."

"Do what?" asked Tricia. The whole situation had caught her off guard.

"Not be troubled!" Virginia repeated impatiently.

"Sorry," apologized Tricia. She caught her breath and prayed silently before continuing.

“Say Virginia,” she began, scarcely able to hear her own voice over the pounding of her heart. “Would you like the entire book that all those sayings come from? I could have that to you by tomorrow.”

Virginia pursed her lips and thought a moment. “Tomorrow, huh? Okay. But I still want that pen.”

“Sure,” Tricia agreed.

“Okay,” Virginia agreed and Tricia watched as Virginia walked off without so much as a thank you. She could give Virginia one of her Bibles and put a marker at the verses written on the pens. With Virginia gone, Tricia finally relaxed. She didn’t know how Virginia would react when she handed her a Bible tomorrow, but that was tomorrow’s worry, not today’s. At any rate, God seemed to have everything very much under His control and the seeds were planted. Tricia stopped, thought about it, and then corrected herself. *Make that pens!*