

# Words on the Wind

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## *Fiction*

Mary Lu Harms never forgot the way her words took flight on that long-ago day in 1980. Her name and address, written in her eight-year-old penciled block letters, soared heavenward, one among the specks of bobbing colors dotting the April sky above the elementary school. She released her blue balloon with a hope and a dream and a prayer for a pen pal. Her eyes remained trained upon that bobbling speck of blue against the shifting hues of the afternoon sky until it disappeared from sight, blown along on a Kansas spring wind.

None of Mary Lu's classmates seemed overly concerned as the days and weeks passed and not one single child received a letter from a far-off land. But Mary Lu held out hope, and each day as she stepped off the school bus at the end of the long laneway, she eagerly opened the mailbox. She knew that somewhere there had to be another little girl just like her who loved words and wanted to exchange them. She never doubted that her balloon would make it to the right hands.

School had ended and wheat harvest was in full swing on the farm when an envelope arrived with Mary Lu's name written in perfectly spaced letters. She was trembling with anticipation as she read the return address of Chicago, Illinois. Inside, she met a nine-year-old named Aubrey Rose Somerset who lived in that distant city.

"I found your balloon when we went on vacation," Aubrey Rose explained. "We stopped to have a picnic, and there it was!"

Mary Lu poured over the letter written on thick stationery the color of cream, her eyes devouring every detail.

"Isn't Aubrey Rose a beautiful name?" she gushed to her family over dinner. "She goes by her first and middle name, just like I do. And she takes piano lessons and riding lessons and loves to

read. She goes to a school with nuns but doesn't live there like some of the girls."

"Sounds like a rich brat," said her older brother Bob.

"Probably a snob," her sister Karen added.

Mary Lu glowered. "Aubrey Rose doesn't have any brothers or sisters."

"Kids," her father said in that tone. He leaned closer to the radio to listen to the markets.

Mary Lu turned to her mother. "Mama, can I use some of your pretty paper to write back?"

"Your tablet paper will do just fine," Mama replied. "Now hush up and finish your dinner."

Mary Lu was disappointed, but she could imagine she was writing on pretty stationery. She sat down after dinner and filled two full pages with details about her life on the farm in the Kansas Flint Hills, her cats and dog, her family, and especially, about her love of books and writing. She had two flower stickers she'd saved from a sheet she'd won in the library reading contest. They were beautiful, and she'd kept them in her treasure box for a year. Now, she unselfishly adorned her letter with them as a gift for Aubrey Rose.

The next letter from Chicago came with decorated with hand-drawn musical notes and accompanied by a school picture. Mary Lu stared in awe at the shy smile and green eyes shining out from behind a pair of dark-framed glasses, the pale face framed by a mane of wavy, chestnut brown hair. This was the face of her new pen friend, the girl who wrote of books and music and walks in the park. Aubrey Rose was real, she existed in that distant land of Chicago, and she had so much more in common with Mary Lu than any of her family or classmates in her rural school. Mary Lu felt a rush of sheer joy as she sat down with her tablet and replied. She enclosed her school picture from the year before, no longer embarrassed by her own glasses, shy smile, or the smattering of

freckles across her nose and cheeks. Aubrey Rose was a kindred spirit, of that there was no doubt, and glasses and freckles were of no consequence among true friends.

The letters flew regularly, back and forth between rural Kansas and Chicago. Mary Lu accepted extra chores around the house and farm to pay for stamps, counting every job as worth it to be able to write to her best friend. Each time she deposited a letter in the large, white mailbox at the end of the laneway and raised the red flag, she felt just as she had when she'd released her blue balloon into the sky. She imagined her words flying across the miles to land in Aubrey Rose's hands, right where they were meant to be. Whenever she held one of her friend's letters, Mary Lu felt the miles those words had crossed just to make it to her, their rightful destination.

The years passed in letters and small gifts, with Christmas and birthday phone calls placed and received on the black rotary phone in the Kansas farmhouse. They called each other Lulu and Rosie, although no one else was allowed such familiarity, and rued the fact they lived so far apart. They wrote of favorite classes and books, the challenges of growing up, and dreams for the future. Aubrey Rose left for performing arts school, and Mary Lu, encouraged by her best friend, spent her senior year applying for the scholarships that allowed her to attend Kansas State University as the first in her family to go to college.

Still, their letters flew across the miles between Manhattan, Kansas, and New York. They told of new friends, challenging classes, first loves, broken hearts, and soon, plans following graduation. Aubrey Rose's first solo concerts were acclaimed, and they carried her across the country and around the world to places from which she sent bright postcards. Mary Lu wrote of her graduate studies in English, her first short novel, her first teaching job, and her engagement. They met in person for the first time when Aubrey Rose came to be maid of honor at Mary Lu's wedding. They had been writing for eighteen years.

Another twenty years would pass, full of stories of work and travel and children, before they saw each other in person again. Aubrey Rose's letter came from her New York apartment following

her European spring tour. "Bad news, Lulu," she wrote. "It's cancer."

Mary Lu had packed and was at the airport before Don was even home from work. He urged her to go, and their teenage children texted their love to Aunt Rosie. Mary Lu was in the cab from the airport before she realized she hadn't even told Aubrey Rose she was coming, but when her friend came to the door, she saw no surprise on that beloved face. They wrapped each other in a tight embrace and stood at the threshold and wept.

That night, Aubrey Rose brought out the boxes of letters, and they sat on the balcony, sipping tea and reliving the friendship of a lifetime.

"What luck it was I found your balloon," said Aubrey Rose. She took her friend's hand.

"It wasn't luck. It was destiny."

"If these treatments don't work..."

"They'll work."

"But if they don't, promise me you'll keep sending your words out to the world, just like you always sent them to me. I know you're busy teaching and with your family, but don't stop writing. Promise?"

Mary Lu smiled through her tears. "I promise."

Aubrey Rose squeezed her hand. "I have an idea." She stepped inside to the bouquet of flowers Don and the kids had sent, complete with a blue balloon. She slipped the balloon free and pulled Mary Lu's first collection of poetry from her shelf. She leafed through it and tore out a page, a poem entitled "Words on the Wind," dedicated by the poet to her.

"Let share our story with someone else, Lulu," she said.

"What a beautiful idea, Rosie," Mary Lu agreed.

They each signed their name on the page, then slipped it inside a plastic baggie and attached it to the balloon. They held the balloon between them and stood silently on the balcony.

"To my forever friend," Mary Lu said at last.

"Across the miles and years."

"And even across eternity," Aubrey Rose whispered.

"Even there."

Together, they let the balloon fly. It rose and

tripped across the first dusky threads of the evening sky. They watched it soar, dodging buildings and wires and all manner of obstacles until it disappeared into the distance, carrying their words of a lifelong friendship on the wind.