

A Balloon Across the Ocean

I was standing with my balloon, attached to it a note card with my name and address. All of the kids were gathered around the librarian at my childhood library, counting down for us to release our balloons into the sky hoping that the person finding it would send a postcard back to us. 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. I let my balloon go with all of my hopes that it would travel across the ocean and I would get a postcard from a place far, far away. I let my balloon go when the librarian told us to. I watched it go... right into a tree where it popped along with my hopes of getting a postcard from someone far, far away.

My hopes were not lost because a while later, our teacher told us about a pen pal program and we could sign up. There were no balloons involved. I was all in on this idea. Living in Wisconsin, I was matched with a pen pal in a place far, far away. Iowa. We exchanged letters back-and-forth through the mail. Yes, the United States Postal Service. There was no email or texting back then. Eventually, we stopped writing to each other. I'm not sure why. Maybe because we got busy with summer vacation and signing up for everything through our recreation department and library programs.

Then the most exciting opportunity was presented by my teacher. We could sign up for an international pen pal program and get a pen pal from a different country! I truly could get a letter from a place even further away than Iowa. My first letter arrived in an envelope that looked different than any envelope I had ever seen, and it had a stamp on it that said "Air Mail". I could hardly wait to open it to read what was inside. It began a friendship started in childhood that has lasted over 45 years with a person whom I did not meet in person until I was 30 years old. We made arrangements to meet in Paris. When we saw one another for the first time, we actually were wearing similar outfits. Fast forward a few more years and I was honored to be invited to her wedding. I was able to meet the people in her life that I read about in her letters over so many years. I was able to experience customs of her country. However, I was horrified to be handed a pair of scissors and told to cut a piece out of her wedding veil. That was more traumatizing than my balloon popping in a tree. I learned of the tradition of doing this in Denmark, along with cutting the toes of the socks off of the groom. The only word in Danish I remember is skal. You said it while holding your glass, taking a drink and toasting the wedding couple. This is probably why it's the only word I remember in Danish. We all said it a lot at her wedding.

As communication technology has changed, we still write letters, send each other birthday and holiday cards, and send each other postcards (no balloons attached) from our travels. We met again in Spain and then the ultimate happened. We would be seeing one another in person for the fourth time in life over the course of nearly approaching 50 years. My friend was planning her dream trip to the United States with her family. This was her first time coming to the United States. And then complete confusion ensued when she told me she would be going to South Dakota first. OK, let's talk real talk here. When you hear that someone from another country is coming to the United States for the very first time, you would never think the place they want to go to is South Dakota. Yes, it borders Iowa. Well, I did find the real reason and one day I want to meet this person.

When she arrived in Wisconsin, my friend and her family were able to meet my family and friends, the people she had read about over decades of our letter writing. She was able to see some of the places I had written to her about over the years. She even was able to meet the United States president. Ok, it was in the exhibit hall at the Wisconsin State Fair and I wasn't sure if I should tell them it was an impersonator or just hope we did not run into the Elvis impersonator. She wanted to experience one of the most iconic American experiences... Going to a baseball game. The Brewers were not in town and I had to make the ultimate sacrifice, completely in the name of friendship, and take her and her family into enemy territory... Wrigley Field, the home of the Cubs. After the game, it was time to say goodbye to my friend who nearly five decades ago we began what has become a lifelong friendship separated by an ocean, but close enough to have shared our joys, tears, love of our family and friends, and adventures to meet new people from different countries. I know this childhood friendship inspired me to venture to 29 countries and counting. I said goodbye to her in a parking lot in Chicago, hugging her and her family. I had tears in my eyes. Those tears could be because I was saying goodbye to a dear friend who I knew it would be sometime before we would see each other again, or, maybe because the Cubs won. Until we meet again my friend...