

Where I'm From

Lou Chafin



I'm from acorns and an oak tree,
with a creaky swing and dusty feet.
I'm from tall weeds and cool woods,
with a secret council circle.

I'm from Peter Pan wall paper and bunk beds,
iron grates that melt crayons into rainbow colors,
and flannel night gowns.

I'm from hot bread without butter and homemade ice cream,
strawberry baskets, canned green beans,
tomatoes and biscuits, Saturday offerings from my father.

I'm from "Family Hold Back" in case there wasn't enough,
church dinners with stomachs too full.

I'm from sings, Bible School, rehearsed Christmas verses,
and matching homemade gingham dresses with monogrammed letters.

I'm from ukulele accompaniment and three-part harmony.

I'm from cat-eye glasses and Dr. Seuss,
and red wool snow pants and mittens.

I'm from Sarah Jane and Sara Lee,
and I am my sister's equal.

Always and Forever, Luther

Lou Chafin

The paper printed nothing about his passing. I heard the words at the end of an 11:30 newscast as I was drifting off to sleep. And I cried in my pillow. Gone was that clear, sweet voice that softened the edges of a hard day as I slipped a CD into the player to ease back and listen to “Suddenly” on my drive home. He was Luther Vandross, an unlikely name for a black singer from the sixties. His sound could be smooth and jazzy or rock and roll savvy. While fixing dinner or typing at the computer, I could move to the heavy beat of “Power of Love” or sway to the smooth, silky rhythms of “A House Is Not A Home”. Long before the wedding standard “Here and Now” sealed his stardom in the seventies, he was a legend in the Detroit music studios as a backup singer to many of Motown’s greatest. He was rooted in that place and his songs reflected that.

My daughters knew the passion I felt for his singing. Two Christmases ago, after days of whispers and winks to each other and tempting me with words such as “You won’t believe what you’re getting for Christmas,” they placed in my hand a small box and watched my expression with anticipation as I lifted the lid. The smile on my face changed to delight as I jumped up and down calling in a giddy, high-pitched voice, “I’m going to see Luther. I’m going to see Luther! How did you get this? How did you know?”

I will never forget that night he performed. I was seated in the middle of a sea of adoring older women who screamed “L-u-t-h-e-r” as he stepped out of the shadows. My heart beat wildly as he moved forward in white tails crooning “I Don’t Wanna Be A Fool”. I wanted to remember every second of every beautiful minute that he wooed me with his sensual sweetness. I closed my eyes trying to squeeze in every note of every song in my memory. Then as quickly as he moved into the spotlight, he was gone.

His stroke last year put an end to his performing. I never heard anything after that. His passing came as no surprise, but it hurt all the same. I had come to think of him as a friend who could make my spirits soar and whose music I associated with memorable times of my life. Dear Luther, I will remember you “Now and Forever”.



Mrs. Yedlosky

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“Miss Stevens, please pick up the African maps and bring them to my desk.” These words rang in my head as I pictured quirky Mrs. Yedlosky facing the tall windows with faded shades pulled halfway and looking out at the trees and underbrush beneath as if in a trance.

She was the seventh and eighth grade geography teacher residing across the hall from 7A, my homeroom. I remember walking into her dark and quiet room the first day, floorboards creaking from years of shuffling Oxfords like the shoes my two older sisters had worn. The walls were lined with rolled maps ready to be snapped down at a second's notice. Well-worn geography books and atlases, not thumbed through enough, were stored neatly on the low shelves until ready to be plucked for an assignment. We took our seats in desks that were etched and scratched with spiral notebooks and pencils gripped by long-ago hands that doodled anxiously in anticipation of the next bell.

Mrs. Yedlosky appeared old to me. Her skin was wrinkled, and her lips showed too much lipstick. Her dyed auburn hair was rolled into a French twist. She sported a dumpy figure under what I thought of as “old lady” clothes. A ruffled blouse that was too large for her frame would be tucked into a waist-banded broom stick skirt too small for the bulge around her midsection. I would soon discover that her wardrobe was not always so matronly but could be quite dramatic at times. On occasions she would come dressed in brightly colored costumes, complete with earrings, necklaces, and bracelets to take us reluctantly, at first, to parts unknown. Her costumes could represent the Netherlands complete with wooden shoes and apron. Another time she might wear a tribal dress and headwear. She looked rather comical in these, as if she were ready to sing in an opera.



Nothing stood out about her voice or manner of speaking except that she would address boys as “Mr.” and girls as “Miss” somebody. I think, secretly, it was easier for her to remember our last names than to memorize first names, especially if there were other sets of family members who had walked these halls. During the summer months, she would travel abroad and return with such things as wooden masks and walking sticks, evidence of her journeys.

Of all the people she met and the places she traveled, I remember her stories about the African continent the best. On these occasions, she would walk between the rows of seats like a chief carrying a ceremonial stick and retelling tales of her meetings with the notorious African ruler Idi Amin Dada and traversing the Congo. The wooden masks and artifacts placed along the tops of bookshelves added to the Tarzan mystique.

I did not find it so amazing at the time. However, now when I look back at the time she spent trekking and collecting, I am wonderstruck. Her generosity with stories and tokens of her travels gave many of us the first chance to see something wonderful beyond ourselves.