

I trusted you.
I've worn glasses since I was two.

MINNIE RIPERTON SAVED MY LIFE

Luis Alfaro

THE summer that we graduated from Berendo Junior High School was the year that Minnie Riperton saved my life.

My brother and I were supposed to go to Belmont High School in our Pico-Union neighborhood, but because of overcrowding, we were told we were going to be bused. Almost all the poor Mexican kids in our downtown barrio who were bused were sent to Grant High School in the Valley.

The Valley? Well, there's a valley that we come from, with grapes and peaches and cherries to pick and sell. But this one was very different. This valley is where the rich kids live. The kids who have staircases inside their houses. Staircases that lead to lots of bedrooms without bunk beds that you have to share with your little brother. Houses with manicured lawns that don't have my dad's Orange Monte Carlo sitting on cinder blocks waiting for someone to change the rims, the muffler, the whatever.

Busing? We protested, but my parents thought it might be a good idea for us to meet other kinds of people. Other kinds of people? What other kinds of people can there be in the world? There's the rich and the poor, huh? One time we went to my dad's boss's house in Beverly Hills because he let us pick avocados off his tree. My mom and my sister waited in the car, while my dad, my brother, and I climbed the big trees in the front yard on a street called Camden. I'll never forget how sad and poor and dark we looked next to the boss and his wife. But my dad didn't care, we got some free avocados.

My mom and dad are farm workers. Well, not anymore, but always, if you know what I mean. Even after they moved to downtown L.A. from the

Central Valley, my Dad would still pull over the station wagon at the sight of a cherry grove, a grape field, or an avocado tree. That's the way they used to live before they came here from Mexico.

But not us. My dad embarrasses us. We got too many Marvin Gaye albums inside us. We've started talking *Soul Train* dialects, and my brother is already walking like Antonio Fargas on *Toma*.

We were really scared about busing. We had never been around people who were not like us. You know, people like us. People who shopped at the open-air mall on Crenshaw near Stocker. People who bought Simplicity patterns from the Newberry's at Pico and Western. People who bought small bags of popcorn from the Midtown Sears and later went roller-skating at the rink across the street. People who bought Spicy Cajun from the first Church's Fried Chicken in Inglewood on the way home from the race track. People who brought home live pigs from the Farmer John's factory in Vernon for victorious post-soccer parties. You know, people like us.

That summer we went downtown and bought Superfly outfits for the first day of high school and first impressions. With both our parents working, we spent our weekends cashing in Coke bottles and watching triple features at the Tower, the State, and the Orpheum theaters downtown. Raised on *Superfly*, *Shaft*, and a diet of Bruce Lee movies, I was hooked on ultraviolent, sexy Pam Grier/Tamara Dobson spectacles like *Cleopatra Jones* and *Coffy*. These were the people I knew. At Berendo Junior High we were a minority. Surrounded by African-American neighborhoods on all sides, we took the number twenty-six bus down Pico to Vermont.

My brother joined the 18th Street Gang just so he could talk back and show everyone that we couldn't be pushed around. I studied and concentrated on winning Highlander workbooks with my conformity. I joined the gifted programs, and my best friend was a six-foot-five seventh-grader named Clarence who later became the drag queen Vaginal Creme Davis, lead singer of a Menudo-type singing group called Cholita. People sometimes pushed around Clarence and me and our other friend, Paul Lee, for being smart, but mostly they left us nonthreatening kids alone.

At lunchtime, we had noon dances in the gym. This was the greatest moment of junior high school for me. The only time in the day when I got lost in the magic of being American. Being far away from my father's soccer cleats, domino games in the backyard, and that *Espanol* we had to speak in the house. *Afuera de la casa*, we spoke a kind of English that belonged only to us. And that's when I heard it. At the noon dances. A song. One of those songs that stays inside you and wraps itself around your soul. Later, after school we'd go to the factory and make carburetors for extra money to feed our family, but I remembered the cover of that album. A woman, beautiful with *piel de canela*, sitting next to a lion that's reclining. She's got on an angelic white dress and baby's breath in her hair. A big puffy afro sits on top of her head like a dangerous storm cloud.

And her name, Minnie. Like something sweet. Something American. And she's singing about coming inside her love. And I don't get it really, because I'm just a seventh-grader, who wishes he could play tetherball on the playground. But I hear her hold that note. A long high birdsong that reaches to the clouds. *Come inside my love*. I understand that note like I understand how to roller-skate without trying, like how to float in the deep section of the Red Shield pool without drowning.

Late on Sunday nights, there's a show that I listen to on K-Day from the small portable radio that I sleep with on the upper bunk. A woman named Nancy Wilson sings a song and she also holds one of those notes, and a connection starts for me. That note sounds like a wail that Lola Beltran or Lucha Villa or even Edie Gorme on the Blue album of Mexican standards would moan. A song about missing a home, a piece of land, a man. They call it The Blues on K-Day, but in my neighborhood we call them *Rancheras* or *Corridos*. Songs about love and loss, working the land and missing home. How come I know that feeling and I ain't even lived yet? I mean really lived. Fallen in love or kissed someone on the lips or gotten dumped or had the government repossess something of mine. How can you know the soul of soul music, Mr. Al Green asks, even before he became a preacher? And when Miss Nancy Wilson asks me to Guess Who She Saw Today, I think about Lydia Mendoza asking me to Jurame, to swear it. That love, that land, that feeling.

The very next day I join the Columbia House Record Club without my *Ama's* permission, and I order twelve new albums, all for one penny! Plus, I get to sample a new record every month. It sounds so good. I get Mr. Barry White, who can't get enough of my love; the Three Degrees, who wonder when they will see me again; Shirley Brown, who gives me the 411, Woman to Woman; Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes, who tell me all about their Bad Luck; and even Love Unlimited, who say they belong to me. I get hit by my *Apa*, and good, for joining the Columbia House Record Club and forging his signature, but it's worth it. Thanks to all those records, every day that I get ready for high school, I feel like I know who I am, more and more.

When the busing letter finally came, my *Ama* and my *Apa* were really mad. My brother and I were not going to the Valley after all. We were going to go to Wilson High School in El Sereno, in the northeast part of Los Angeles. *Cabrones*, my father shouted. How could they send us to a Mexican school in East L.A.? What was the point of busing anyway?

My brother and I were excited. We never really went to school with a bunch of Mexicans. We joined gangs just to get noticed. Now all we would had to do was be ourselves. The first day of school, we got off the bus and a sea of brown swept over us. In our silk shirts and platform shoes, we looked like two pimps on our way to urban training camp. This was east L.A. Kids in corduroy pants from Miller's Outpost and Wallabee shoes from Kenny's. We bought our duds from Main Street and Broadway in downtown. The kids laughed at us, and we spent the first week hanging out under the bleachers on the football field till we could get to the mall and dress like everybody else.

I met my first friend in gym class. He liked Donna Summer's *Four Seasons of Love*. I thought it was just okay. Every heard of Millie Jackson, I asked?

Nah, do you like Aerosmith?

Arrow-what?

After that, the only way to make friends at Wilson was to keep soul music inside my soul. Instead, I had to listen to the Eagles and Queen and

Alice Cooper and Boston. The closest we got to soul music was Joni Mitchell's *Blue* album, which I played religiously because it sounded like something Minnie Riperton would have recorded had she not died.

Minnie Riperton died, and I started to grow up.

My *Ama* and my *Apa* were worried about how come I liked the blues so much. They didn't let me listen to the blues in the house, but they let me go to gospel concerts. Gospel was God's blues. I went to see the Clark Sisters and Shirley Caesar, and later my mom dropped me off at a church on Adams so that I could see Sweet Honey in the Rock. Shouters, all of them, who spoke about hard times, but this time they spoke it to the Lord.

The same week that Minnie Riperton died, Pee Wee Crayton was in a car accident. Pee Wee was one of those old-time blue singers. A shouter.

One Saturday I told my *Ama* I was going to the movies with my friend from South Central and she drove me to the bus stop on Vermont and Venice. I took that bus to a place called the New Mint Saloon on Vermont and 89th. My brother lent me his fake ID, and I dressed older in a velvet blazer à la Richard Roundtree. It was a benefit for Pee Wee Crayton. A lineup of some of the best of the old school. Blues singers I had just heard of, but couldn't even find their records.

I had never been in a bar before. The smoke and the smell of the liquor made me feel like I was going to some place dangerous and adult. I was in the world of knowing. I drank a tonic on the rocks that tasted like bad water with bubbles, but I didn't care, I was in the middle of someplace powerful and important.

I sat next to a couple at a little table with a red round candle in the middle. They looked at me funny, but I didn't care. I could feel the soul inside of my soul coming out, just like Mr. Al Green said. I was the only Mexican in there, in fact I was the whitest person, but nobody said anything. I was where I needed to be.

As the night went on, I heard the best of the best. An amazing soulful man named Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson blew his horn. Harmonica Fats blew his, too. Barbara Lynn played a slide guitar, I had never seen a woman do

that, and sang her biggest hit, "You'll Lose A Good Thing." Linda Hopkins shouted through "All of Me" and then everything went quiet. It was almost like one of those important moments at church right before you pray.

From the back of the bar, a big, heavy, heavy man made his way through the audience. He was on crutches and he was helped along by two older men in sharp pinstripe suits. When he finally made his way to the stage and sat on a chair, he clutched his harmonica and the microphone like those Sunday morning preachers on local TV. His name was Big Joe Turner, and he made everybody Flip, Flop, and Fly. You couldn't do anything but stand and do the *Soul Train* lineup in the little space in front of you. He shouted pure joy, pure soul, pure blues, and the New Mint Saloon was blown away by his tornado. I was taken to someplace beyond Vermont Boulevard. I was back in the Central Valley with my Grandma picking grapes off the vine. I was in Tijuana feeding the pigs in the backyard. I was watching my dad play soccer. I was watching my mom curling her hair like Elizabeth Taylor in *Butterfield 8*. I was in the world of my people. A world of simple pleasure, of being poor, of downtown streetcorners. Buying pizza slices from the counter at Woolworth's on Broadway. I was sitting in the last row of the number twenty-six bus running down Pico. I was free. I was a queer Mexican boy from the barrio, but I was also one of the *Soul Train* dancers. I was one of the Three Degrees. I was one of Harold Melvin's Bluenotes. I was the guy in Bloodstone who sang the falsetto in "Natural High." I was one of the Stylistics. I was one of Freda Payne's backup singers on "Band of Gold." I was Minnie Riperton's Perfect Angel. I reached in and pulled that note on *Loving you is easy because you're beautiful*. And I held it as long as I could. Until I grew up.

Minnie Riperton saved my life.

JOSEPH SPEAKS TO GERICAULT IN THE (AFTER THEODORE GERICAULT'S *PORTRAIT*)

michael datcher

search the length of your eyes
to find how you judge me. crucified
up
side
down
on your iris. inverted hologram
captured in your acrylic
embrace.

this is how you like me.
still
as the hangman's poplar tree
when the kicking has ceased.
silent.
a mute victim of french
imagination. i make the fatal
segue from subject to object.

you know me not.

i am more than santo domingo
mythologies
exoticized in oil.

the things you sketch into my eyes. bequeath
the borrowed blues