

## Where Are You *Really* From—Liesl Ulrich-Verderber

“No, where are you *really* from?”

Before coming to Harvard I had never encountered this question. But with the name Liesl Ulrich-Verderber—the strange hyphenation of my parent’s last names—I guess it was bound to happen.

The conversation goes like this:

“Hi, I’m Liesl Ulrich-Verderber.”

“Oh, that’s an interesting name! Where are you from?”

“Northern Vermont!”

At this point they look at me quizzical, as if my response failed to fit the image of me they constructed in our two seconds of acquaintance. So they try a different tact:

“Oh, where are your parents from?”

“Central Illinois!”

This answer tends to be inadequate too, and so they ask the big question:

“NO, where are you *really* from!?”

This idea of “really from-ness” confuses me. I know people want to hear the harrowing story of my life in some exotic European hamlet and how I visit grandmamma in the home country.

In reality though, my “home country” is a town in central Illinois, and visiting my family there is usually filled with rowdy basketball games, yelling about who broke the farm equipment, and the occasional goat wrangling.

In any case, *where* I am from does not define me. *Who* I am from defines me.

The stories of the quirky, wacky, inspiring characters that make up our family trees say much more about us and where we are from than any list of countries we could prattle off.

So, where am I *really* from?

I am from the Ulrich’s, a race of brilliant, fiercely independent, mildly insane and rather impulsive humans who don’t give a damn if people like them. People like my grandpa Ed who built a 40-acre lake just because he could. Or my second-cousins the “Ulrich boys” who were known to lift entire cars with their bare hands to change a tire. And my Great Uncle Eugene who once traded clothes with a scarecrow because “Weeell, that damn scarecrow was dressed better than I was.” I often see a bit of this nearly insane, impulsive, independent, “I could give a damn” attitude in myself. Whether I’m deciding to haul a couch up four flights of Lowell stairs just to prove I can, compulsively obsessing over my glue ratio on a model for my architecture studio, or impulsively deciding to take my little sister on a wild adventure to England. I know these are just the mild forms of Ulrich-ness that will only continue to intensify with age and as my Ulrich jowls set in.

I am also from the Verderbers, a tribe of hilarious, loving, outrageously competitive, and long-winded storytellers who really give a damn if everyone likes them. People like my

Aunts Barb and Katie, who had a hoola-hooping competition at my grandfather's funeral as a celebration of his life (this was much to the confusion of the foreign exchange student staying with us at the time). Or my uncle Bob who is so competitive that at 65, he still keeps up with my cousins in cutthroat basketball games to 100 in 105 degree heat. Or my Grandma Betty, who, on normal occasions is the kindest and most easy going woman you will ever meet, but who turns into an unbelievable stickler for rules whenever the game of Scrabble is introduced. Luckily I have avoided this wrath as my terrible spelling skills (an Ulrich trait) have blackballed me from participating. I love that I got some of that Verderber "nice gene" and I'm sure it is what makes me tolerable to other humans. But, if you find me rambling on about some story, or notice that I am taking a game of *Cards Against Humanity* a bit too seriously, know that I am just channeling my inner Verderber.

So that is where I am from: I am not from a place, I am from people. And I know you all are too.

We are all the weird collages of the characters in our lives and their stories. Some of my most meaningful connections with people come from learning their family stories. So, if you are feeling particularly chatty sometime, come sidle up to me in the dhall and tell me about the people you are from: tell me how your grandparents met, how you have a crazy inventor uncle, or how your family took a road-trip across the country with 4 dogs and a sick kid. These stories are where we are *really* from, so we should talk about them.