1999 Third Place Personal Narrative

Kirtrine’s Basement

“Sister Lopez?” I looked down the winding staircase into the murky depths of my neighbor’s unfinished basement. “Sister Lopez, can I talk to you?”

The only sound was the steady hum of the sewing machine, so I quietly took the stairs two at a time. I was twelve years old—polite and refined, but not overly patient. My mother, a wonderful but slightly overzealous Mormon Relief Society president, had sent me with a Homemaking invitation to give to the ever-elusive, inactive Sister Lopez.

Sister Lopez was sitting at a large table, feeding canvas into a huge sewing machine. The only light in the room was the leftover sun that managed to squeeze through the window well. It illuminated her hair which fell to her shoulders like blackberry satin. I watched her look up at me with only mild curiosity. “Hello.”

“Hello... I wanted to give you this.”

“Thanks. Why don’t you sit down?” Her face was so flawless, so unreal. She looked like a woman in one of my mother’s catalogues—Lands End, maybe, or J Crew.

I took a folding chair from its resting place on a cement wall. “How are you, Sister Lopez?” I asked. It was all I had ever been taught to ask an adult.

Sister Lopez laughed the most sincere laugh I had ever heard. I suppose it was the laugh of a jubilant woman, but at the time I wasn’t familiar enough with laughter to tell. “Call me Kirtrine.”

“Kirtrine.” I liked the way the word sounded on my lips.

“And the real question is,” she continued, “how are you?”

To say the least I was startled. “Me? I’m fine.” As if anyone needed to ask how I was; it was perfectly apparent to any semi-competent onlooker. I was almost thirteen, with matted brown hair, awkward, angular glasses, and an uncomfortable weight gain where hips should have been. A pubescent nightmare, I had acne like
the “before” picture on a skin care infomercial and crooked teeth, surely the envy of every jack o’ lantern. How was I? I was a mess.

“Tell me about school,” she prodded, though it sounded like anything but prodding. “Any cute guys?”

I sat there, on a cold, hard folding chair, surrounded by bolts of colorful cloth. I opened up like I never had before in that room: I cried with the ice blue chiffon, I laughed with the tomato red flannel. I was as pristine as crisp white linen; I was as sophisticated as black velvet. I was everything, and I told it all to Kirtrine.

After three hours, I felt great. I also felt unmistakable fear, knowing my mother would wonder as to my whereabouts. I couldn’t explain to her about Kirtrine’s basement. Why did I love it there? I loved being treated like an adult. I loved feeling accepted. I loved the lighthearted way Kirtrine spoke. Her attitude? Devil may care. I couldn’t even think of telling that to Mom, whose motto was something like “Cleanliness is next to Godliness.” I wanted something Mom couldn’t give me, some feeling I just couldn’t articulate. But I knew one thing: no way could I ever go back.

“It was fun to talk to you,” Kirtrine told me as I left. “You should come back sometime,”

She didn’t have to tell me twice. I did go back, and more than once. I was never so happy as when I spent the afternoon in Kirtrine’s basement, listening to her fantastic stories or making up ones of my own. I enjoyed hearing of her escapades-- her crazy friends from high school, her pregnancy at age seventeen, her failure to graduate and her premature marriage. I soaked it all up like a Slurpee slides through a straw.

“When I was your age,” she told me one drizzly afternoon, “I met my first boyfriend at my best friend’s birthday party. He was gorgeous: eyes like hot chocolate, thick brown hair. Excellent kisser.” It was the first time an adult had told me about her past, much less about her true love’s kissing ability. It was difficult to believe that only weeks earlier I had heard enough “when I was your age” stories to last a lifetime.

Soon I was making up excuses to see Kirtrine-- I’d say I needed to borrow a cup of sugar, or a bag of chocolate chips. I was out of stamps, it didn’t matter--as long as it got me inside. Once I even interviewed her for a Home-Economics project on sewing, which would have been fine--except that I didn’t take Home-Economics.
My mother never said anything when I left; I figured she didn’t really care. Sometimes when I’d leave my mother was making dinner for a sick neighbor or organizing some Relief Society function. I always felt guilty for not helping her, but, as I slipped out the door I convinced myself that it wasn’t because I loved my mother less. I just loved Kirtrine more. My mom loved the ward more.

One night, in our basement, my mother and I organized canned apples and peaches according to the dates labeled neatly on the back. It was food storage season, time to make sure we had our year’s supply.

“Mom, tell me about your first date.”

“You’re too young to date.” Something about the intensity of her gaze on the emergency water bottles told me she wasn’t really listening.

“I know, I just wondered what yours was like.” I traced my initials into the dust on a jar of apricots.

“I’ll tell you when you’re older.” She peered inside a cardboard carton to make sure we had enough mandarin oranges that we wouldn’t get scurvy, should a crisis arise.

The box was full. “Mom, why not now?”

“Because,” she said, ending the conversation. “Help me move these green beans, okay?”

On a windy almost-evening, I came home from yet another talk with Kirtrine, feeling happy and accepted, which is all a twelve-and-a-half year old girl really needs. I thrust open the front door to find my mother surrounded by pieces of fabric. “What are you doing?” I asked.

Mom lifted her concerned face. “Making blankets for the humanitarian shelter. They’re in desperate need.”

“Did you get the material from Kirtrine?”

My mother raised a brow. “Kirtrine isn’t the only one with fabric.”

I was instantly shamed. I picked up the pieces of colored cotton and fingered the thick woolen batting.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.” She paused. “I love you too, you know.” The bright light from the halogen lamp hit her face. I could see her furrowed eyebrows, the crease in her forehead, the way her red hair was slowly fading to auburn.

“I know.” The colors swam through my wet gaze.
“Here,” she handed me a pair of scissors. “Help sew, and we’ll talk. No matter how much time you spend with Kirtrine, I’d still like a chance to talk to you.”

“You don’t always act like it.” Remembering how much my mother hated accusations, I amended the statement. “I mean, I feel like you don’t always act like it.”

“Maybe I don’t. Sometimes it’s hard for me to find time just to talk. I have responsibility. But you’re my responsibility, too. You’re my daughter.”

And it was almost like Kirtrine’s basement, with all those colors combining to make a rainbow. Only instead of a sliver of sunlight, we were both engulfed in the light of an energy-efficient halogen lamp.