

Last Night at The Breakers

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In Loving Memory of Katherine Marguerite Miller, 1979–2005.

In the waning hours of 2004, my sister Katherine and I decided to don gowns and swing by The Breakers for a cocktail. In our dented station wagon, we had clattered past this historic Palm Beach island landmark beneath the floating limbs of banyan trees for sixteen years. As pre-teens, French quizzes, field hockey, and Pelican/Flamingo rivalries preoccupied us. We didn't blink at the Belvedere towers or the rubico tennis courts that dusted ghostly players with smudges of shimmering green. The gilded-age grandeur of the royal palm drive and sculpted sea-nymph fountain struck me more after I left the island, when I studied art history at Columbia and traveled to Italy during my junior year. The hotel's fountains, façades, ballrooms and courtyards were modeled on Florentine, Roman, and Genovese renaissance treasures, including the Boboli Gardens, the Villa Medici and Palazzo Carrega. Many of these structures had been featured in Edith Wharton's 1904 tome, *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*, which served as an influence to The Breakers' New York City architects, Schultze & Weaver.

Rebuilt in 1926 after a series of fires, The Breakers rose up like a spectral stage set from the short stories of F. Scott

Fitzgerald—here, bright young things vacationed, played golf and polo, got engaged under striped cabanas, sporting “diamonds as big as the Ritz.” My sister and I both fancied ourselves Josephine and Basil aficionados, who were living an unfulfilled version of *This Side of Paradise*. Between our collection of faux-Valentino gowns, and our assorted experience of country clubs, Cole Porter, and “Oggsford,” we liked to believe we could drop our feather boas with the best of them.

There had always been a stigma in our family about going anywhere on New Year’s Eve. My uncle had scared us when we were children: *No one in her right mind goes out on New Year’s Eve after 4 p.m.; all the crazies are on the road*. Theo called it the prime night of the year for car accidents and drunk driving, but he lived in the Farmington Valley of Connecticut, where the roads were long and empty and kids hotwired cars and sped into the blue mists of the basin and around the perimeter of dairy farms. We lived in South Florida, on an island populated by grannies, English equestrians, and ex-Manhattanites who employed chauffeurs. No one had to drive more than a mile to get to a party, and the small group of young people who trickled back from boarding school and college at the holidays preferred simply to topple out of their loggias onto the beach. Why get lost in the alligator alleys of Lake Worth in search of a dive that wouldn’t card under 21, when your parents stocked a bar the size of The Frick?

As the sun set on New Year’s Eve, Katherine pulled out the Yellow Pages and started phoning. We learned that while most of the restaurants on Worth Avenue were reservation-only, the Tapestry Bar at The Breakers Hotel was open to anyone that night. We hadn’t been to the hotel for more than a decade, not since Katherine had won the Kiwanis Club prize in ninth grade and was given lunch by ladies with fruit-sized brooches and pastel suits, along with a wooden plaque for the highest cumulative average in her class. The dress code was cocktail, however, and

the shops had closed early. There was no time to dash out to find a gown in the mark-down rack at Loehmann's—a slip constellated with sequins and straps and bangles, in tangerine silk or heliotrope georgette, with a slit up the side and a rip around the zipper. We'd buy the dresses for \$29.99 and then ask Yia Yia, our Greek grandmother and the mystical seamstress who could mend anything, to make us runway-presentable in two hours or less. (Yia Yia had lived with us since 1988, when my parents moved from New York City to Florida). This feat of transformation had worked dozens of times before, for teenage boys, high school balls and hasty weddings, but New Year's Eve on the mausoleum of Palm Beach island didn't really seem worth the effort. So we ravaged our closets for outfits that could pass for "this year," instead.

"How about this one?" Katherine held up a black-velvet gown, which rippled to the floor. It gathered over the right shoulder, Athena-style, and bunched again around the hip under a diamond-shaped patch sewn with silver beads.

"That's too nice for me. You put it on," I urged her.

Katherine slipped the dress over her head with difficulty—it pinched her under the arms and around the waist. Her scalp glistened as she worked the heavy fabric down to her shins, where she unrolled the long hem like a mermaid's tail. I proffered a pair of two-inch patent-leather heels, and she stood up to a graceful five-foot-seven, her honeycomb of curls falling into the "V" of her back.

"Ow," she said, as she plucked the elasticine that clung to her middle and twisted from side to side. "No more late-night pizzas this term. I've put on a freshman 15."

I stared for a moment, noticing how Katherine's look had changed since the last time I had seen her, around Easter time, while she was still working at the Mar-a-Largo tennis club and doing personal training and hip-hop dance several times a week. Her eyelids drooped, as if she had pulled a series of all-nighters. Her golden skin tone had yellowed

with the Iowa winter. I kissed away her self-criticism with a noisy smack on the cheek, and we swirled each other around like dancing partners. She needed help getting out of the gown, so we flipped it upside-down and yanked until she was free.

"I'm wearing something looser," she decided, and went rummaging through the closet again. "Now you try one on." Katherine handed me a ruby gown flecked with gold. One-hundred-percent synthetic, it scratched like sandpaper.

"I don't think it will fit," I protested, aware that in America, my size was virtually non-existent at a zero, but Katherine insisted it was my color.

"You're the only one who can wear red," she said, though the gown had always been hers. The framed photo on the table in the foyer showed Katherine gleaming on the arm of her tennis player hunk-of-an-ex-boyfriend, Stephan, while wearing the very same dress.

The gown drooped on me. I attempted to hide my coat-rack of a collarbone under a cardigan, a fashion faux-pas that Katherine simply wouldn't allow.

"You can wear a scarf," Katherine conceded, as she slipped into a lace Lycra number with "a little extra stretch."

In the end, we settled on two dresses Katherine had worn in boarding school, at Choate's "First Hurrah" and "Last Hurrah." While it was true that our wardrobes had undergone five or six incarnations in the course of a dozen years, and we always picked off the chic pieces for more current events in D.C., Toronto and London—the cities that dictated our fashions now—there was an air of shabbiness in the velvet, floor-length gown with a ripped hem and the vermilion tunic that was bald around the waist, in the band where all the scintilla had fallen off. These had been abandoned on the closet rods in the Palm Beach house, even while photos and memories insisted upon a one-time glamour. As we arranged our trousseau that night—Katherine in off-the-shoulder burgundy lace and gold slippers, and me, in airy turquoise satin and a chiffon scarf—

it was hard to shake the sense that we wore costumes rather than clothes, designer threads that pretended an existence beyond the penury of our stunted lives and student loans.

It was four years since the millennium, three and a half since the summer our father suddenly left to live with his mistress on Jupiter Island. As a new year rolled in, and we felt we had little to celebrate, my mother, sisters, brother and I entered avoidance mode. Over the holidays, we settled into the watermelon wedge cushions on the sofa in front of the TV, uncorked the fizzy apple cider and watched romantic comedies.

Even in avoidance, we had our moments. If this last night of the Floridian December were mild enough, as it had been in 2003, we might be lured by the whistle and soft pop of fireworks to take a midnight walk along the street and down the hill to the Intercoastal Waterway in our flip-flops. On the path, we squinted to see tiny tadpoles of light drizzle down behind the palms of a mansion along the lake.

“We don’t care a fig for millionaire hoopla!” we said to ourselves as we spied through the bougainvillea vines, looking for celebrities.

My siblings always held that we cultivated values in place of riches—we had education, a droll sense of humor, and roots in an ancient civilization. We were half-Greek, after all, and reminded ourselves that we descended from a distinguished clan of ambassadors, judges, doctors, and great cooks from the ancient mountain idyll of Arcadia in the Peloponnese. As we four stretched on tiptoes for a view into these bejeweled lives behind the shrubbery, we eventually got tired of holding our breath to see nothing but the back of a marquis tent and a flood-lit chink of pool. Turning from the post-bellum colonials that jutted their swelled chests over the water, we reversed our sober steps home to begin 2004.

In the first minutes of the New Year, we had a ritual of naming the disappointments of the last year and casting

them out, past the hedges and the palms and the docks, to the electric flat line of West Palm Beach, a city that had always seemed to us—in its lack of character, culture, and meaningful work—nothing more than a tropical version of the Wasteland. We hovered by the bank long enough to see the legendary hammerheads drift out from the sea wall and lumber into darker waters. Pompano fish fled from the sharks, surging through the waves in arcs: silver dollars flipped in the air by a giant, unseen hand. This small change was our good luck charm for 2004, and so far, it had kept the harm away.

In 2004, Katherine aimed to gain admission to medical school; Andrew decided to quit his job—he felt pushed around, overworked, a think-tank mole in Washington. Penny determined to put her singing group, the Caledonias, on the map at her college in Kingston, Ontario, and I promised to draft my doctoral thesis in Oxford.

We wended home to the dolphin-gray Bermuda on El Dorado Lane and snuck into the kitchen for a nightcap. By this hour, Yia Yia had crept out from my bedroom off the garage and into the sofa-bed with the sagging middle in the living room, and was already asleep under a sheet, while my mother lay ensconced in a dozen once-white, now jaundiced pillows in the master suite at the other end of the house. At the start of 2004, the pain of my father's leaving was one year nearer to her, and to all of us. The sound of tropical rain poured out from a cassette player on her rose dresser, and candles smelling of magnolia and honeysuckle burned in glass jars on the nightstand.

Telemachus, Katherine's half-German shepherd, stood up in his crate when we crossed the checkerboard marble into the kitchen. When he started to bark, my grandmother bolted up and flapped her arms at the dog,

"Shoopee, Shoopee!"

It was only a minute or two before she spotted the crack of light under the door and hobbled into the kitchen to flap

her arms at us—we had broken the seal on the bottle of Baileys I picked up in the duty-free shop at Heathrow, and were gulping down shots.

"It's five o'clock in the morning," Yia Yia gasped, pointing with exasperation to the clock on the wall, which actually read *one twenty-five*. "Get to bed!"

She was still wearing her duster from the previous day, spotted with grease and spaghetti sauce, and was already reaching for her apron in the pantry closet to start preparing the feast for St. Basil's Day.

"*You* get to bed, Yia Yia," Penny said with a giggle. "It's only one o'clock."

My grandmother glared at us with her watery coffee eyes before she shuffled to the counter, and disrobed the long arm of bread that had been rising under a cloth.

Yia Yia's insomnia was our punishment. We had no power to reason against her conviction that dawn was about to break—she would work by the dark window in the kitchen for the rest of the night, baking the Vasilopita, rolling the Loukoumathes and seasoning the lamb, for our New Year's lunch tomorrow. Defeated, we dispersed—Telly stood up and started to hurl himself against the crate as Andrew, Penny and Katherine skated across the checkerboard marble to their rooms. I exited through the garage to my room—the maid's room that had never housed a maid—changed into my pajamas, brushed my teeth, and skulked back into the hallway; Yia Yia was rinsing the leg of lamb in the sink. Her shoulders were narrow but strong; even in her late eighties, she hauled in the five gallon water jugs from the car, stacked them and filled the cooler in the refrigerator, pulled the weeds from the backyard and fished the bloated toads out of the pool with a twelve-foot pole and a little net.

I could have watched my grandmother for hours while she acted from a script all inside her head and her fingers. She needed no cookbook, no measuring cups or spoons,

no assistance. When she caught me staring, however, she sent me back to my bed with Greek invective.

Xaseis tov kaipo sou, Nikoletta, she said. "You are losing your time."

Kali Nuxta, I said when she saw me. "Good night." *S'ayapw, Yia Yia*, "I love you," I crooned. This phrase of agape was my compulsion ever since I had been a little girl and fearful that the grandmother who picked me up from school on Madison and 75th Street, patterned my candy-cane rimmed skirts for ice-skating and my iolet and pastel purple dress for graduation, and brought me cookies with powdered sugar and a cup of chamomile tea with honey while I was writing stories, would take her last breath in the middle of the night, before I had the chance to hold her little frame one last time.

"S'AYapw," I said again, more firmly this time.

Then *m'ayapas*, you don't love me, she said. This phrase was her unfailing answer, when, in staying up late or missing dinner or spending too much money on a gift for her, I, in some small but symbolic way, let her down.

I reached my hands around Yia Yia's bony neck, smoothed down the pearly hair around the clams of her ears, and gave her a quick kiss on the lips before I slipped into the garage and closed the door to my room.

* * *

One year later, on the edge of 2005, we had something to toast. Katherine was about to begin her second semester as an osteopathic physician in training at Des Moines University: She was progressing on the path it took her four years of living at home and scrimping to reach.

All decked out in our resuscitated silk and lace, we stood on the Indian carpet swirled with the colors of the Greek flag next to the grand piano that Yia Yia had bought for us with twenty years of saved social-security checks.

We called out to my mother who was sitting on the sofa watching Jennifer Lopez and Richard Gere waltz across the screen in *Shall We Dance*. Telemachus grumbled at her feet.

“Can you take a photo of us?”

My mother darted us a sideways glance.

“What are you supposed to be?” she asked, still not getting up, but chuckling from her cushions. “Raggedy Kewpies?”

An hour later, as we sat on the high stools at the Tapestry bar in The Breakers and sipped amarettos, Katherine and I turned over the comment. The raggedy part we accepted, but we couldn’t stomach being called Kewpies.

“What do you think mom meant by ‘Kewpies’? That we are like dolls, or that we are like children? Is she trying to say that we should be acting our age?” Katherine was 25 when she said this, and I had just turned 30.

“I think she’s hinting we need new clothes. We are falling behind the times.”

Katherine rolled her eyes. “I try,” she said. There isn’t a lot to choose from in Des Moines. You have London, at least.”

I had London but couldn’t afford it. Pounds were slipping through my fingers. The exchange rate had devalued the American dollar, which meant my funding was nearly halved at the start of the academic year.

“It’s a back-handed way of saying I ought to be married,” I admitted, downcast.

“I didn’t say that.” My little sister hooked her long, lacy arm in mine.

Katherine straightened up and swept a stray piece of fringe out of my eyes. For a moment, we sat face to face. She had my mother’s eyes, blue, flecked by cocoa and olive, like the tesserae of an ancient mosaic that had mostly faded, except for a few bright pieces upon which the imagination constructed the whole picture.

"Katherine? Are you wearing eye shadow?"

"Yeah, a little."

"What color?"

"Gold."

"Let me see."

Katherine closed her eyes. The gold powder was sheer. Beneath it her skin shone a feverish maroon; her lashes formed Venus flytraps with spidery veins stenciled on the lids.

"Did you hurt yourself somewhere?"

"Huh?" Katherine blinked. She was focused on a winged loveseat and a pair of empty snifters a few feet away. A tall bald man in a tux swept the bench with his tails. While we sat in a stupor, he strolled out "Summertime" on the baby grand in the corner.

"Never mind," I said. "You just seem a little tired tonight."

"At least you've met a Greek boy," Katherine said, finally, waking up from her dream.

"I don't think a boy who already has a girlfriend counts."

"Then there might be someone else around the corner. Yia Yia has hope for you."

"Yia Yia has hope for you, too," I said, parroting before I could think.

"No, she doesn't. And she doesn't have to tell me there's no one for me. I already know."

* * *

I'd hit an impasse with Katherine. My sister had made this claim once before, in the spring: She knew her romantic destiny, and Yia Yia was coded into the cosmic conspiracy that rendered her eternally single at age 25. Logically, I didn't buy it: Unlike the rest of us, Katherine always had a boyfriend, while she waded on a train of interested parties. At Choate, there had been Matt, my brother's best friend; at Berkeley's summer crash course in Ancient Greek, there had been Californian Danny; and in Florida, there had been Stephan, the Catholic home-schooled tennis coach. At the

University of Virginia, Katherine told my sister Penny, during one spring semester, there had been too many kisses to count.

About seven months before our night out at The Breakers, when I was home for a quick visit, we drove down to Fort Lauderdale to check out a new Greek restaurant where the waiters were rumored to dance on tables. The feeling of that night in May 2004 was something like our evening at The Breakers, only brighter and breezier; you could subtract half-a-year from the shabbiness of our clothes, the mileage in the car, the bites from the dog, and the family arguments, which wearied us. We played Katherine's '90s alternative music on the way down—some Robyn, Erasure, and Mint Royale—the songs that, two years before, had filled a room in Oxford with discoing graduate students from Berlin, Tel Aviv, Mumbai, and Christ Church, New Zealand—and got a table outside, on the canal. We dolled ourselves up in shirts that clung like leotards, and lanky trousers with millennium flares, strappy sandals, shawls and cardigans made of net material. Our waiter wasn't Greek, and when I opened my mouth to correct his pronunciation of *mezedes*, *keftedes*, and *skordalia*, Katherine sweetly crushed my toes under the table.

Over the course of two hours, the place never filled up, and no waiters sprung on the counter to do the *rembetiko*. We couldn't find anything authentic but the Metaxa ouzo at the bar, and we sent back our Italian dressing, in order to improvise "Greek"—oil and vinegar, which we spiced up with some pepper, in the absence of oregano, and a twist of lemon from the slices on our plates. Katherine was forced to take out Lactaid pills for the feta, which was made of cow's milk rather than sheep. She was lactose intolerant.

"Well, we're not in Cyprus," she said. (In July 2003, we had gone to Limassol for a friend's wedding to practice our Greek and to taste *afelia* and *halloumi*). "Fort Lauderdale does its best."

A zephyr played with the kryptonite tea light in the center of our table; it almost died and then revived. At the other tables the tea lights also flickered. The gauzy night sky and the dotting of the candles gave the gurgling isthmus an island-feel. If we squinted away the flatness of the view, we could pretend we were on a trellis on a Mediterranean cliffside, scooping up the fallen stars with our shawls.

"I did everything I could," Katherine said. "I can't miss another year. The applications weren't early but they made it by the deadline. Now I need to wait."

Earlier that month, Katherine had been waitlisted at five osteopathic medicine programs, one near Pittsburgh, and one near San Francisco close to Alcatraz, and one on Long Island; one in Des Moines, and one in Tampa.

"Well, strike out Tampa," I said, pushing the fake feta back on my plate. "You don't want to stay in Florida, under any circumstances."

"I'll stay in Florida if I have to. If that's what it takes to be a doctor, I'll stay."

I thought of the triangle my sister occupied at home, the buffer she provided between my mother and grandmother. She was the errand girl, my mother's crutch, my grandmother's *koukla* ("doll"). Her life outside the house was limited to baccalaureate biology classes, a pro shop that she ran for twenty-five hours a week, and the confidences of an ex-boyfriend who scourged her with the fact that my father's behavior in leaving his family was thoroughly unacceptable to him.

"You can be a doctor anywhere," I said.

"Just one place would be enough," Katherine said.

I looked down at the remains of my Greek coffee—earth-colored, and cracked with lines.

"Hey, do you know I can read coffee grinds? James showed me how to do it when we were at Monastiraki, under the Acropolis. It's like palm reading, but with the sediment at the bottom of a cup."

Katherine extended her cup. She was still looking out for Stephan, over her shoulder, who was unmissable at a Germanic 6 foot 4, with his blond forest of Apfelkorn curls. I humored her, knowing full well he didn't intend to come.

"See anything?" Katherine peeked over our shawls into the bar again at the waiters and other taverna tables, as if maybe Stephan were here but hadn't seen us through the reticulated chair backs, white cloths, and wine glasses in the empty restaurant.

"We need to turn the cup over first, and you have to ask it, or me, a question."

"All right, what part of the country do you see me in, one year from now?"

There was tar at the bottom of the cup, but I peered into the rivulets and banks; the branches, hedges and leaves had printed themselves as if in woodblock on the ceramic.

Katherine leaned in expectantly.

"So?"

How to read this tangle, I wondered, this lump of dregs. I waited a moment for the pattern to stick and settle, and then held the cup in front of the disc of candle light, which gave the rim an aureole without illuminating the contents. As I squinted at the small specks of white between black, my interpretative powers took hold.

"Ok, here's a reading for one year from now, May 2005 . . . I see constellations," I said, "or a place with brilliant skyline."

"Hmmm." Katherine purred. "I didn't apply to any program in a place with a skyline."

"A city?" I asked.

"Maybe San Francisco, though the buildings there are short—row houses and shops." Although I had not been to San Francisco at that point, I didn't square Katherine's description of it with the image in the grinds.

"What about the Golden Gate Bridge?"

Katherine leaned in for a view.

"Or it could be a plain, and those pin-pricks might be prairie lights? You know how in the middle of nowhere, you can see the stars."

"Can you really see something, Colie? Please tell me there's a city in there."

I was about to say it might be an ocean with phosphorescent waves, or alligator eyes, which glow like red marbles beneath the moss of a bayou, but the skyline image kept nagging me. I could see little windows, steel girders and harmonica rooftops, the missing teeth of the apartment complexes Henry James once called "an upturned comb."

"Maybe it's the view of New York City from Long Island."

"That's possible, I suppose," Katherine said.

It was near midnight when Katherine tied the string on her wrap, and I gave up my shawl in exchange for a less romantic cardigan. We wove our way through the restaurant, where chair-legs were mounted above the tables like masts, and table linens had been tucked up like sails; a fleet of bread baskets had never been served. In the car, Katherine put her key in the ignition and switched on the ceiling light, as she rummaged for her phone. She checked for messages and asked me blankly whether I thought she should call Stephan about seeing a movie tonight.

"He's with his cousin," she said, the receiver pressed tightly to her ear, "and wants to know if we'd like to go to *Troy*. There's a late night showing in Lake Worth—starts at 1 o'clock."

"Troy?" I asked, "as in the epic by Homer?"

"Yeah," Katherine replied, "It has Brad Pitt in it, but it's supposed to be terrible." As she kept listening, she found the follow-up message. "Oh, they decided not to go. Something about Mass tomorrow, and listening to jazz records. Guess they stayed in tonight, hung out with Stephan's grandfather. He's getting old."

Katherine switched the ignition in the car, and the dashboard lit up; the engine droned. It was past midnight, and we had more than an hour's drive back to Palm Beach

before us. While there would still be cars on the road—the partiers retreating from Miami Beach, and lorries swaying in the slow lane—we had tipped into the hours of emptiness, when it would be hard to find reinforcements if we needed them, or gas stations that were open. Suddenly, I was angry with Stephan for suggesting that he might ever have met Katherine out here, on the canals, in this South Florida backwater, so late at night. What kind of twisted dead romance was this anyway?

“Katherine,” I said, as I realized we had stalled in the parking lot, while my sister changed CDs. “Isn’t it time to let go of Stephan? I mean, he’s totally unreliable. I thought you broke up a year ago so you could meet new people.”

“We aren’t together,” she emphasized, as if that fact excused her efforts.

“Then why are you waiting for him? He doesn’t seem to have any problem standing you up. He’s always doing this.”

“Not always,” she said, and I squirmed. “Don’t you think there’s a better match for you out there, that you will meet other guys in medical school?”

“There isn’t going to be anyone for me,” Katherine said, looking ahead and clutching the gear in reverse.

I had never heard my sister pronounce anything like this before. She was the one who’d told Penny and me to test the field when we had been disappointed by men. She always insisted there were other, bigger fish in the sea—for us, and for herself.

With her jaw set like one of Picasso’s blue ladies, Katherine pulled out a CD jacket. The voice of Anna Vissi, Greek pop gorgon, rumbled in the speakers; the bass shook the Nissan, boomed irreverence along the Fort Lauderdale highway. The beat conjured the grapevine step and breaking plates. The refrain *e zoe eivai thora* (“life is a gift”) piped in from Ibiza’s dance cosmos.

“That’s ridiculous,” I said, wishing suddenly that I were the one in the driver’s seat. “Of course there will be someone else. There has always been someone else for you.”

"Not anymore," Katherine said, with stony authority.

"You are 25," I said. "You've barely been out in the world. If you don't get into medical school this year, you can reapply next. This is only your first shot. You have time."

"If I don't get in this year," Katherine shook her head definitively, "then I am not going."

"But you can't give up."

"I'm not giving up. It is just now or never for me."

"What's all this 'never' business?" I was getting hoarse. "You never say never."

"I'm *never* getting married because there is no one out there for me." Her eyes were on the road now, but the beams that had been on for a second switched off. The lantern of the moon had risen over the canals, which were so low with water, they gave the impression of graves yawning to be filled. A lone blue heron cackled from the swamp.

Our throats had gotten dry, and our conversation petered out. The billboards receded, and four lanes narrowed into two. Lights from the Marriotts and luxury hi-rises trailed the Intercoastal like oil-spills, and the yachts huddled in the marinas. When we arrived home, we retired with our heels in our hands, to opposite wings of the house. I wanted to shake Katherine from her attitude. I believed her bitterness was just a mood, not recognizing her foresight.

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"I don't think Mom understands how much time we've lost," I said, realizing as we swiveled around in our chairs like kids in the Tapestry Bar at The Breakers on New Year's Eve, that, as we entered 2005, it would be five years since our father had left.

"You could have been in D.C. with Andrew and taking classes at night for medical school. You could have gone to San Francisco and worked as a personal trainer. You

could have come to England with me, and we could have travelled— ”

Katherine's jaw went slack.

“With no money?” She shook her head. “There was nothing I could do.”

With her wan cheeks and stream of copper-blond hair, Katherine resembled the forlorn women of the pre-Raphaelite posters she collected—a Mariana, Ophelia, or Lady of Shalott, framed forever in a moment of disappointment and longing. Katherine had always been the daughter to defend Mom, to tell me *we* were the ones who needed to be more understanding of Mom's slowness in initiating a divorce, but Katherine didn't seem to have the energy to argue tonight.

“No,” she blurted. I hadn't asked a question, but, strangely, Katherine already had an answer. She frowned, and set down her drink. Then she leaned towards my ear, “Do you think there's something strange about these chairs, Colie?”

I hadn't noticed anything, but that they were small-backed and bamboo. Katherine had shifted herself a couple of times and reclined against one of the hard arms. We slid off and repositioned ourselves on a cushioned settee shaped like a shell, and sat deep in the center of the scallop. Katherine took another listless sip of the amaretto before putting it down again.

“You don't think this has any milk in it, do you?”

When Katherine handed me her drink, I noticed the crystal where she had been holding the glass was slippery and wet. *Sweat?* I brushed the thought away. The room wasn't hot in the least.

“Maybe the bartender swirled in some cream for a cocktail,” I said. Katherine grimaced. I took Katherine's glass back to the bar and asked for a new one, neat.

“Thanks,” Katherine said. She had gone pale and was rubbing her stomach but stopped when she saw me watching her.

"Are you feeling all right?" I asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine," she said, with a frown. "I just remembered that I left my Lactaid pills at home."

We must have sat in the scallop for a long time without talking because I can still remember the woof of the carpet—an interlocking ruby, gold, emerald and sapphire weave, with clubs, spades, hearts, diamonds and dreidels—a card-game with a metaphysical twist. After a few minutes of silence, Katherine slumped and rested her head on my shoulder. Every so often she would murmur something about Mom, Yia Yia, or Telly, disconnectedly—less than a conversation, these members of the family churned in the whirlpool of Katherine's thoughts and worries as she drifted off to sleep. It was funny that we could be left there undisturbed for so long, but by eleven o'clock the great room had been deserted, our only company the chandeliers, the sea of silk lamps, and the tall, faded figures of the fifteenth-century tapestries for which the bar had been named, rippling against the walls.

In my mind's eye, it is at this moment that the scenes that hung between the stone pillars behind our sofa begin to brighten. Although the images of the actual tapestries are impossible to reconstruct, in my memory, it is the Unicorn Tapestries I see.

In the first panel, the hunt begins in a Brocéliande of forest and royal garden. Princes and their varlets weave through the mille-fleur of plants, trees, shrubs and flowers, a pageant of flora. The men are skirted, striped, and plumed in rich threads of cochineal, chartreuse, rose, gold, ivory, and peacock-blue. Prancing hounds are collared and chained with fine-toothed silver loops. Tilting their spears over their shoulders, the party sets out to ambush the unicorn. In the second panel, the unicorn, moon-white with a curling mane, tail and beard, is encircled by the scheming entourage of twelve men. As the creature kneels and dips its enchanted horn in a stream to purify the water,

the animals of the wood—the lion and lioness, the wolf, the civet and the hyena—gather so that they may drink. Unaware of the encroaching hunters, the unicorn leaps from the stream, only to meet with the sharp tips of spears. In the fourth panel, the unicorn defends itself, goring a greyhound and kicking the face of a hunter. As hounds spring and the bugles blow, the unicorn vaults over the stream, and chaos ensues. Calm is momentarily restored in the fifth tapestry—a fragment of a larger scene, in which a maiden standing in a garden lush with oak and holly trees, lifts the velvet folds of her blood-red dress, presumably to let the unicorn rest in her lap. This is the legendary lure of the virgin, for she serves to entrap the unicorn, which has been wounded by the lances of the hunters and is streaked with stigmata. Meanwhile, a hunter with horn and spear waits above the fence, in the boughs of the holly tree.

In the seven tapestries that form this series, it is the sixth and the most tragic of the panels that unfurls over our heads on the brink of the New Year.

This panel, titled “The Unicorn is Killed and Brought to the Castle” by art historians, contains a cartoon of scenes taking place at different times. In the upper left-hand corner, in the dense foliage of the garden where no maiden is to be seen, the unicorn is impaled by hunters as hounds tear into its milky back, now punctured as if by nails. Just feet away, in the leafy foreground, the same characters progress to the center of the panel wearing their finery. Accompanied by more fellows and hounds, the hunters lead a high-stepping caramel palfrey to a king and his wimpled queen. The queen averts her eyes as one of the hunters, bearing an adze, points to the body of the unicorn slung lifeless over the horse. The corpse rests in the place where the saddle should be.

The hunter’s finger traces a gash on the side of the mythical beast: it still bleeds. The unicorn’s head bobs beneath a wreath of oak and bramble; its slender horn, no

longer angled at a diagonal, spirals heavenward, like the plank of a cross, or the pinnacle of a church. Between sword-hilts and boot cuffs and dog snouts, the long neck of the unicorn dangles; its hooves curve, almost hand-like, as if it could pinch the cowslip and carnation growing in tufts below; the lids are closed; the lashes droop and lips are slack; the mouth is open and teeth are singled out, parted an inch from an orange spray of Chinese lantern flowers. A castle and citadel, a crowd of observers, loom in the upper right, some behind bars in a turret. In the distance, two faintly stenciled swans fan their wings in the moat.

In the seventh panel, "The Unicorn in Captivity," the one that cannot be verified as a member of the same series, the unicorn has been restored to the garden but enclosed in a circular fence beneath a pomegranate tree. Here, the mythical animal is alive again, though just a tapestry ago it was dead. For this reason, many scholars interpret the series as a reenactment of the birth and betrayal of Christ and the resurrection.

Of the more than one hundred varieties of flowers and greenery that appear in the tapestries, many support the symbolism of the seasons, especially the winter solstice, the birth of Christ, and the death of Christ, interspersed with more pagan references to the two-faced Janus, the river Styx, the passage of souls and the Kingdom of Hades. The sixth and most intricate panel, "The Unicorn is Killed and Brought to the Castle," has been said to illustrate the yule tide, the transition from the shorter to the longer days of winter, Christmas revels and weddings, new year saturnalia, as well as burials and impending death. This was the very week, in 2004, that Katherine and I were rounding out at The Breakers.

The original set of tapestries hangs in the The Cloisters in New York, a part of the Metropolitan Museum of Art located on the Upper West Side. As children, we lived seven blocks from the Met's main museum on the Upper East Side, and we knew the medieval collections of both sites well.

On Sunday afternoons in the colder months, we used to visit what we called King Arthur's wing with its knights in armor, ladies in hennins, wine-dark brocades, cabled oak crucifixes and beribboned, angel-crossed Christmas tree; in the summers, we studied the mummies in glass cases at the permanent Egyptian pharaohs exhibit, organs embalmed in jars with jackal-heads, petrified peas, withered fingers and papery skins, infestations of turquoise scarabs.

On the last night of 2004, at the Tapestry Bar, I looked above at the fabrics rippling against the wall, the taut faces, pinched limbs, and shifting eyes of the hunters, the knowing looks of the lords and ladies, and the awe of their minions. I may have seen a unicorn, the way that one thinks one has seen a phantom—afterward, it is never a sure thing, never a solid memory, never fully retracable. In its white magic and forbidden occult, the creature of the past cannot be summoned. So, it haunts.

I may have seen a unicorn, or it may have been, as our carefree adolescence in Palm Beach turned out to be, mere mirage. At the time, I brushed aside the apparition of New York, a fairytale childhood from which we had become estranged, and despaired of our unsympathetic surroundings in Palm Beach. I wanted to think the island with its Italianate copycats wasn't us, but just a place we suffered in—a purgatory we would strive our way out of. We were, to my view, too self-aware to be ornaments to a resort, figures in the tropiscape.

Alas, we knew even then that self-awareness wins not wealth. We were, according to our driver's licenses and address, Floridian, and according to the decimal point in our bank accounts, church mice hiding in the shadow of a gilt cathedral. I was a graduate student, laden with loans; Katherine had taken on the same burden that fall. Although she had made it to medical school, her eternal double, some vestige of other years, would continue running the pro-shop at Donald Trump's tennis club until, by grace, she got in.

* * *

Around quarter to twelve, the sound of horns and rattles began escaping from the ballroom down the hall. A tall tanned septuagenarian, wearing a gown overlaid with silver ostrich feathers, fluttered past us and out through the French doors to the courtyard to smoke. "That's the lady from Kiwanis!" Katherine exclaimed. We wandered down the hall to "the Powder Room," which was buzzing with more glitzy philanthropists who were repinning their scarves over strapless gowns and puckering at the mirror. On our way back to the bar, we noticed that the door to the ballroom was unguarded. With so many guests rushing out to freshen up before the midnight corybantic, no one would notice us slipping in and taking two vacant chairs at one of the \$2,000 per ticket tables.

Strings and ribbons curlicued the air—they hung from the hundreds of balloons that undulated along the ceiling, in streamers that festooned the bandstand, and smiled across the portafinestra, in the tendrils of translucent orchids that dripped like candle wax from the tables. In this jungle of decoration, Katherine and I felt invisible—we crouched to watch the dancers, a few of whom we recognized with a jolt, from our middle-school days.

"There's Blair McCracken," Katherine said, pointing to a slight blonde with a toothy smile and a stiff white-and-black bow in her hair, a matching bow on the tail of her dress. "She's married, now," Katherine sighed.

"Isn't that Phoebe Kemble," I asked, "and her sister Celery?" brunettes who were now both blond, too. "And Alex Cooper, and Liddy; look she hasn't grown—not since fifth grade."

Katherine shivered. "Do you think they'll recognize us?"

I glanced at my sister, who didn't look quite herself tonight, with her dress hugging the few extra inches she had gained around the waist, and the angelic angles of her face now cherubic.

"No, Katy," I said. "It's been a dozen years since you went to school with any of these people. They don't live on the island anymore." I noticed a flash of panic in my sister's eyes, and rubbed her arm. "Neither do you. You got out just in time."

"Yes I did," Katherine said, as if she couldn't believe it yet herself, as if her ghost was still working at Mar-a-Largo in a tennis tutu, studying for the third retake of her MCAT exams behind the cash register.

"Just think how different 2005 is going to be. You are becoming a doctor now." I put my hand on Katherine's back, gathered up a handful of her curls, silvery in the dark, and let them drop like a bunch of grapes behind her ear. "You're a Greek goddess, Kaphri!"

With a whistle and a drum-roll, the band started its countdown. I held my breath: We had finally reached the last seconds of 2004. My sister and I turned away from the giant round table strewn with frosted wine glasses, fingerling flutes and Moët bottles—these weren't for us. Too timid to stand and be seen, we hunched over the parquet in our stolen seats and watched the Gucci shoes clack, the Mary McFadden beaded hems sweep by. At the stroke of twelve, something popped—corks flew across the room, the lights went up for a second on the highlighted heads of our former classmates, the baby faces of their husbands, the oily crowns of their fathers, the lustrous necks of mothers with new facelifts, and the diamond teeth of grandmas' dainty tiaras, then went down again, as the dancers flooded the floor. We might have been there for ten minutes, or an hour; it didn't matter in the end how long we were there, because no one we knew ever saw us, and no stranger or old classmate said as much as "hello." It is as if we had never walked into the Mediterranean ballroom on the night all of Palm Beach came out to ring in 2005, as if we had never lounged beneath the medieval tapestries, with beveled glasses of amaretto in our hands, because

in recounting this scene, there is no one around now with whom I can confirm it. My mother, grandmother, and Penny stayed at home, for a New Year's that probably felt quieter without Andrew, Katherine, and me. The members of the half-empty house went to sleep early that night.

When we left the ballroom, we waited a long time outside the hotel in the breeze until the valet finally brought our scratched-up, ten-year-old Nissan to the circle around the fountain. The clog of Porsches and Ferraris we followed along the half-mile drive to the exit is the closest I have ever seen to a traffic jam on sleepy Palm Beach island. When we put our key in the door at El Dorado lane, and cracked it open, Telemachus barked and Yia Yia loomed in the foyer in her golden duster dress and apron, wiping the flour from her hands. She gave the once-over to our outfits (she hadn't seen us when we left earlier), then threw her arms up in disgust. *Shaklamathes*, she said, *Ola Shaklamathes*. Foolishness, all foolishness. Then under her breath, *Fandasaste Korichas mou*. "You are dreaming, my girls," as she waved us off to bed.