

KATE KINNEY

Eight of Cups

THE SEVENTH DAY OF THE JULY HEAT WAVE, a Friday, I drove Maggie and Patrick out to Nassau County to spend a month with their father, the narcissistic sociopath, or the sociopathic narcissist (at least according to me, the armchair psychologist). Temperatures had been hovering in the high 90s the entire week, reaching over 100 some days with the urban heat index. The city was implementing rolling brownouts to avoid a complete blackout. The central air in my co-op apartment in Queens remained just cool enough to be barely tolerable if you stayed extremely still.

Eighteen years ago, when I was pregnant with Úna, my first child, I used to sit for hours in a cool bath on steamy weekend afternoons during the summer brownouts, reading, daydreaming, and listening to the car horns, trucks, voices, and music filtering up to the open window from six stories below. The summer before

that, just six months before we married, Dan and I had wound our way back from Manhattan to Brooklyn during the 2003 blackout, joining the throngs walking over the Williamsburg bridge. On Bedford Avenue, the bodegas gave out free ice cream; bars, lit with candles, offered half-priced cocktails over melting ice cubes and lukewarm beers for a dollar. It was like a carnival, that first night.

Dan remarried a few years ago and moved from Queens to an exclusive area of Nassau County. Úna lives with me full-time and no longer speaks to him. Maggie and Patrick, at 16 and 14, still like their father, I think – at least they don't complain about him.

"The only good thing about Locust Valley is all the references to pirates," I told my friend Annie a few months after Dan and Pamela moved.

"Pirates? Where the hell do you get that from?"

"The Gold Coast! Even Patrick's new soccer team is called that."

"Maeve, the Gold Coast isn't named after pirates. It's because of the Gilded Age and all the money they have."

Stupidly, I had mixed up terms in my head: The Barbary Coast, the Golden Age of Pirates. And, of course, the North Shore would not have been a safe harbour for outlaw pirates in the 1700s, dominated as it was by royalist settlers.¹ Although pirates of the earliest colonial years had been privateers working for various imperial powers, by the 18th century, that livelihood had dried up and pirates were individuals living outside the law, on the fringes of society.²

The wealth of pirates was hard-won and easily lost. It left durable marks in the form of shipwrecks, lost limbs and

appendages, and public hangings once apprehended. In contrast, the truly wealthy maintain a façade of ease that obscures their brutality and theft. They don't get hanged. They build mansions. The more effortless wealth looks, the more violence and oppression tend to be behind it. Inherited, intergenerational affluence wraps itself around the myth of earned good fortune.

Locust Valley was a smooth crest of Botox, the wrinkles ironed out with paralyzing poison. The old-fashioned Italian ice purveyor and impeccably restored pizza parlor in the center of the village were perfect replicas of old-fashioned village mainstays. Its year-round quaintness reminded me of summers in Hyannis, where I'd spent a few turbulent years of my adolescence. The 12-month residents weathered Cape Cod's bleak winters with drag races, fights, booze, and heroin. By the summer, though, Main Street's underbelly was swept away with an infusion of summer police and the perennial reopening of taffy shoppes, custard stands, and jewelry stores.

The fact that the North Shore of Long Island reminded me of the Cape surely contributed to my confusion about the pirates. Cape Cod and coastal New England have a long history of piracy. There is even a pirate museum in Provincetown that displays the remains of the *Whydah*, a British slaving vessel and the last conquest of outlaw pirate Samuel Bellamy.

After gaining its cargo of kidnapped souls from west Africa, the *Whydah* sailed to the Caribbean, where it exchanged enslaved people for gold, sugar, rum, and other valuables. On its way back to England, it was intercepted by Bellamy's crew. The *Whydah* became Bellamy's main pirate vessel, and he soon commandeered a fleet of ships flying under the Jolly Roger.³ According to local

lore, Bellamy was heading back to the Cape to see the woman he loved (a witch, an adulteress, an unwed mother, or the incarcerated perpetrator of an infanticide, depending on the source) when the Whydah wrecked.⁴ Or, perhaps, he needed to offload his wealth and knew places to store it in New England. In any case, the Whydah went down in a storm near Wellfleet. Bellamy and most of his men drowned.⁵

I didn't really care that Dan had moved to Locust Valley until he petitioned our court-appointed parent coordinator to have Úna, Maggie, and Patrick attend school out there. Our custody agreement clearly stated that the kids were to remain in their current schools and that neither one of us could relocate more than 10 miles from the neighbourhood in Queens where we'd moved shortly after Úna's birth and had lived ever since.

"You remind me of Donald Trump," the coordinator said to Dan during what turned out to be our first and last meeting.

Naïvely, I initially assumed she was insulting him, but it quickly became clear that she was smitten with Dan, who is a lawyer himself and presents as charming, intelligent, confident, handsome, and funny. I am certain that somewhere there is a painting of him rotting in an attic that shows his true self, which I imagine looks something like Gríma Wormtongue from *The Two Towers*.

I had brought a copy of our contract and printouts of the only driving routes to Locust Valley: It was between 15 and 19 miles via car.

"Actually," Dan said, "it's only nine miles as the crow flies."

"I'm not a crow."

"Are you sure?"

The parent coordinator laughed. I shot her a death glare.

“Alright,” she said. “Let’s keep it civil you two.”

“Look,” Dan continued. “I’ve already bought the house. We have a 30-year mortgage. We’ve been living there for three months. She should have brought this up sooner if she cared that much.”

“Okay,” the coordinator said. “First off, how have you all worked out who does the driving back and forth so far?”

“I don’t mind driving the kids on their days with him, but he _”

Dan interrupted me. “There’s no way I’m driving them to school in Queens from Locust Valley for the next five years. The traffic is unbearable. She doesn’t mind driving them, fine. If they stay in school in Queens, though, it will interfere with my parental rights.”

“But you chose to move away!” I said.

“Because the city is a cesspool.” He looked at the coordinator.

“The schools in Locust Valley, hands down, no contest, 100% better than any public schools in the city. Why are we even debating this? It’s settled as far as I’m concerned.”

I wasn’t surprised when the coordinator sided with Dan. At the time, Maggie and Patrick were in middle school, so she claimed that the clause about them not changing schools would be null soon because they would have to switch for high school. New York City’s high school choice program, a misguided attempt to enact equity in the vastly unequal public high schools, required every student to apply for specific programs, even in their zoned schools. The chaotic result spilled high schoolers onto buses and subways at 6am, heading to all points of the five boroughs.

Úna, as a ninth grader, would stay in her current high school in Astoria. Dan refused to drive her, and the commute from Locust Valley via Long Island Railroad would be untenable, so she would live with me full-time during the week. We'd keep half-week splits for Maggie and Patrick. I'd drive them to and from Locust Valley on my custody days when they had school. If I wasn't able to work that out, then Dan would take Maggie and Patrick full-time during the week.

I had little choice but to agree. While there was a provision in our contract to petition the court if one of us disagreed with the parent coordinator, it would have been a lost cause. Dan, as a lawyer, would represent himself and pay nothing. I would spend at least \$2,000 for my lawyer to write a motion that the judge would certainly strike down. Judges in the overburdened NYC family courts rarely go against the recommendations of their child advocates, despite the fact that these hastily granted appointments lack due diligence and have little oversight.

I asked my department chair at Queensborough Community College, where I was an assistant professor, for three-hour classes that met once per week. I loaded up my work schedule for Wednesday through Friday, when Maggie and Patrick were with Dan. I would be damned if I gave him any more time than was required.

It is true that the high school in Locust Valley that Maggie and Patrick now attend has an abundance of wealth, which funds athletic programs and extracurriculars that even the better equipped NYC public schools can't compete with. It is not true that those qualities make it a better school. Better is a relative term. How you define it speaks to your value system, not to any intrinsic meaning.

As de Saussure articulated over 100 years ago, a word's "content is really fixed only by the concurrence of everything that exists outside it."⁶ When Dan said "better" and the parent coordinator agreed, they were operating on assumptions that this term meant whiter and richer.

"Mom!" Patrick shot up in the back seat while we were stopped at a traffic light on Glen Cove Avenue. "Look!"

Maggie and I peered through the front window of my car. There was a bald eagle chasing a pigeon across the sky. The pigeon was flying as fast as it could, but the eagle was gaining on it, its wingspan slicing through the air with powerful strokes. Despite the smaller bird's effort, it didn't stand a chance.

The car behind me laid on its horn. "Mom," Maggie said, irritated. "It's green. Go!"

I took a right onto Cedar Swamp Road. The Lexus SUV behind me passed aggressively, laying on its horn.

"Do you usually see bald eagles around here?"

"No, never."

"I think the heat has the predators confused," Patrick offered. "Like all the shark attacks because the water's so warm." Already that summer there had been several shark bitings from Cupsogue to Breezy Point. The most recent one, at Beach 59 in Rockaway, had sent a woman around my age to the hospital.

"Too bad the pigeon wasn't a crow," I said. "Crows flock together and gather strength in numbers to fight back against threats."

Maggie pondered that a moment. "Would you say they use a murder to prevent a murder?" she asked, trying to suppress a smile.

FOR ALL MY TALK OF PIRATES, I am hardly someone who lives outside the law. For 18 years, I have been getting my kids where they need to be: usually on time, mostly clean, and more or less prepared. But I miss the reckless person I used to be, before I married a psychopath with a law degree and then spent the next six years either pregnant or lactating.

The children had cemented me. They needed me to be steady, so I was steady. Every major decision I have made for the past two decades has been not what I wanted but rather what was better for them: the tenure-track job at a community college rather than making a go of it as a freelance writer, the co-op apartment in a residential area of Queens rather than renting in Brooklyn.

And yet, despite my efforts at stability, I was on the brink of another failed relationship. I used to think that Jack and I would get married, but the past two years had been a slow decline. Lately, I'd been getting angry at him for rarely taking the trip to Queens to see me, even though that was not exactly fair. I had tacitly agreed to the parameters of our relationship in the beginning: I would leave the city when the kids were with Dan and drive to Jack. The first few years, I couldn't wait for those weekends. Crossing the Tappan Zee Bridge, I felt my worries melt away. Jack, and his quirky Catskills town, seemed to present a simpler way to live. It wasn't his fault that I had changed my mind.

Earlier that day, my friend Gerry, my college boyfriend and the first man I'd loved, had sent me a text asking for help with a writing project. In response, I'd called Jack to cancel my weekend trip upstate with an excuse that I was helping Úna write scholarship essays for her upcoming semester at college.

"Maybe I can come there," he said. "Let me just see what I

can rearrange in my schedule.” He was a contractor and made much of his income in the early summer from people sprucing up their Airbnb rentals and landlords who catered to college students repairing their party-damaged properties for the next batch of undergrads.

“Oh, no, that’s okay. My summer course starts Monday and I need to prep.”

“Okay, honey. You sure?”

“Yeah. I mean, it’s just that I’ll be busy all weekend, so it seems pointless.”

“I get it. It’s alright. I’ll see you next weekend then?”

“Sure.”

“Well, I miss you.”

“Me too.”

“I’ll call you later. Love you.”

A few hours after dropping Maggie and Patrick off, I sat barefoot in a lawn chair on Gerry’s roof in Brooklyn. We shared a bottle of sharp, warm chianti and watched the sunset in companionable silence. The air was swollen with humidity, and heat lightning flickered behind fast-moving, tempestuous clouds. Weather reports predicted that the high temperatures would break in the next day or two, warning of a terrific storm and flash flooding.

“A memoir, huh?” I asked, picking up the thread of conversation from a few minutes before. That was the writing project he wanted help with.

“Yeah. I just want to get everything down before I get too old and forget it.”

“You know, you’re the only person I know who I think

actually should write a memoir. And now's the time for you. People will be interested."

"Maybe. I just don't know how to start."

"Just write first. Get it all down. You could even try to use some of those voice-to-text apps – there's some pretty good ones out now."

When this man had loved me, nearly 30 years ago, I was beautiful, selfish, and unreliable. He was charismatic, convincing, brilliant, talented. He could have become a cult leader. Instead, he had a well-publicized, critically acclaimed show in a major museum.

Celebrities had started to offer him commissions and vacations. I was deliriously happy for him. He had lived for himself and succeeded. I couldn't believe he was choosing to spend one of his few free nights with me, someone whose life was not only unremarkable, but who had tried to waylay him on his journey. Although I'd loved him fiercely, I'd also made him miserable.

We were not much older than Úna when we met. We fell into our relationship quickly, heavily – madly, unthinkingly, as the young do. His unconventionality thrilled me, while my own disorderliness frightened me. His creativity blossomed in anarchy. In contrast, my wildness erupted from some internal lack that I've always sought to rein in.

In ways that mortify me when I recall them, I tried to manipulate Gerry's affections to fulfill my desire for stability. I didn't care that it would be at the expense of his happiness. I was like a Lyme-disease infected tick, sucking and drinking my fill while poisoning the host. He wanted to travel the country hopping

on and off freight trains. His unfettered plans made me love him, but at the same time, I wanted to make a home with him that had nothing to do with freight trains.

Three years in, I woke up one night to him shouting in his sleep. He was sitting straight up in bed, eyes trance-like, holding a pillow above his head, yelling, “You’re suffocating me!”

A few years after we broke up, we ran into each other again in Williamsburg. Both of us, like many of our friends, had wound up in Brooklyn. We fell back into romance for a second, but I couldn’t imagine doing the song and dance that would have been required to keep his attention, and he had schemes and dreams far beyond my wish for moderate success and good times, financial stability and home ownership. Nonetheless, over the decades, we had remained tethered.

“You know what we should do?” he said. “Let’s go out to Rockaway for a swim.” Aside from the shark attacks and the looming thunderstorm, there were hurricanes in the Caribbean causing rip tide advisories. A few days ago, a 15-year-old boy, seeking relief from the heat with his friends, had drowned. Just that morning, I had admonished Úna, a lifeguard and former competitive swimmer, for going out in the water after dark with her friends when they had all been drinking.

“Sure, why not,” I replied.

I WADED INTO THE SEA, and a wave knocked me off my feet. I somersaulted in the wake and practiced the ocean skills learned during my childhood in the cold Atlantic of New England. Do not fight the undertow. Do not panic. Accept the chaos of the surf. It is temporary. The next round, I dove under before the waves broke

and swam out beyond the breakers. I floated on my back and looked at the stars. The dark sea with its flashing waves matched the black sky with its stars and blinking airplanes flying to and from JFK. In the salt water, I was weightless, ageless, invincible.

The trouble with Jack started shortly after the COVID lockdown. Two weeks in, his father died in isolation at the hospital, surrounded by exhausted, overtaxed medical staff encased in protective gear. Jack was devastated. There was no pattern for mourning. His father's body was interred without ceremony, a memorial scheduled for the following year.

A few weeks later, Úna fled Dan's home after several days of fighting. Dan told her to take her chaos elsewhere. Pamela told her she was going to drive her to a mental institution and leave her there. Within a week after I picked her up, they had turned her bedroom into a home office. Úna was traumatized, 14 years old, angry, hurt. She needed everything I had to give.

The next few months, I still drove upstate every other weekend, but now I brought Úna, with her moodiness and rage. Jack suddenly seemed to have all these arbitrary rules that only applied to her. He complained about her staying upstairs in the guest room all day, but when she came down, he criticized her, and she, in turn, lashed out at me.

After a few months of this, Jack had what he later told me was a nervous breakdown, but I can't define what I witnessed as such. In my eyes, he was just acting like a spoiled, selfish man. He found another woman, one without all the burdens I carried, who had all the time in the world for him. Soon, however, this woman became rather frighteningly obsessed with him, which drove him back to me within a couple months.

I received him, but I never forgave him. I also never forgave myself for not prioritizing Úna, who did not want to spend her weekends in a small town in upstate New York, in the house of yet another adult man who despised her.

The problem was that I still desperately wanted to be in a relationship. I couldn't even fathom dating again. Rather than end the liaison, I was letting it dwindle. I think I wanted Jack to jump in valiantly, save me from killing it, rescue me from drowning, prove his love in outrageous, enthusiastic, demonstrative ways. He wouldn't. Much like the only way he wanted to make love was to turn over sleepily in the morning, fondle my breasts for a few minutes, test my wetness with a finger, then push in with a few lackadaisical thrusts.

I wanted security, but I didn't want to fuck the same way once every two weeks for the rest of my life. I wanted commitment, but I didn't want a man who was only steadfast during uncloudy days, whose affections strayed during times of turbulence and struggle. I was just too cowardly to let go.

“HEY,” GERRY GLIDED OVER. “We’re drifting. We should go back in – the current is strong.” Coincidentally, Gerry and I had both lived in and frequented many of the same places through separate itinerant coastal childhoods: Portsmouth, Newburyport, New Bedford, Cape Cod, Providence, Boston. We swam back in, sideways against the current, standing and wading through the flotsam towards the shore.

Although we had stayed in touch over the years, I hadn't seen Gerry naked in more than two decades. The right side of his body, from shoulder to calf, was tattooed in a black triangular pattern; in

the moonlight, he looked half-man, half-devil. He picked up his clothes and draped the rough blanket we had brought across his shoulders. I scooped up my summer dress and sandals and followed, both of us walking naked across the sand.

“I’m looking for a spot – it’s through the grass.” We walked through the maze of sea grass, which stood at least two feet taller than both of us. I swatted at flies that I couldn’t see. I heard them as they buzzed against my ears and felt their fat, hard bodies slam into my skin. The darkness engulfed me. When Gerry turned back to check that I was still behind him, I could see a portion of shoulder lit briefly by the moon, a flash of teeth, the white wetness of an eye.

I felt breathless, disconnected with reality. I wondered, briefly, if I had actually drowned out there, left my body in the black water churning with phosphorescence and been reborn into someone both familiar and foreign.

Soon, we arrived at a brief clearing in the middle of the grass, a circular patch illuminated by the moon. Gerry smoothed the blanket down in the sand, then laid back on it, head nestled on his arms. I lay down next to him.

I turned slightly on my side towards him and placed a hand on his stomach. His skin looked supple, glowing, the moonlight smoothing away the years. He turned towards me and smiled.

“You look the same,” he said.

I moved my hand down to lightly stroke his penis, which immediately twitched and hardened. “You feel the same.”

He leaned in and we kissed. My skin felt swollen and hot. Gerry moved his hand down my thigh, then pulled back.

“Maevie,” he said, alarmed. “You’re covered in hives.”

I quickly pulled away and sat up on the blanket.

“Show me your arms.”

I held them out; they were suddenly popping all over with red welts.

He scanned my face. “Your eyes are swollen.”

I took a deep breath. “I’m wheezing. Fuck.” My voice came out thick and phlegmy.

“I have Benadryl in the Jeep.”

We hurriedly dressed and raced back to the parking lot. He started the car and impatiently rifled through his glove compartment until he found the Benadryl. I dry-swallowed three.

We careened out of the parking lot and sped onto Beach Channel Drive, right into a speed trap. Immediately, the police car lit up and pulled up on Gerry’s bumper.

“Shit, I think I just keep going,” he said.

“Are you crazy? This isn’t *Thelma and Louise*, pull over!”

“Shit,” he said again, pulling over. “I might have a federal warrant.”

“Jesus fucking Christ,” I said. “Why?” I picked up my purse and got out my wallet.

“I’ll tell you later. It’s stupid.”

“Give him this,” I handed him a Police Benevolent Association card. Annie’s husband, a detective, gave me one every year. “And tell him I’m severely allergic to peanuts and having a reaction.”

“Are you?”

“No! I mean, not to peanuts. Please, I’d be dead already.”

The police officer approached Gerry’s Jeep warily, flashlight out, hand on his holstered gun.

“License and registration.”

Gerry held out his license and the PBA card. “Can we sort this later, officer? She’s having an allergic reaction.”

“Peanuts,” I said. I put my palm on my chest and took a deep, laborious breath. The cop trained his flashlight on me, observed my swollen eyes and hives.

“Christ,” the cop said, handing Gerry back his license and the PBA card. “Stay behind me – I’ll escort you to St. Johns.” He hurried back to his car and pulled out. When Gerry pulled behind him, he put the sirens on, and we followed.

At the entrance to the hospital, Gerry took a right into the emergency room cul-du-sac. The cop car whooped twice and continued on.

“Did that really fucking happen?” Gerry said, pulling over behind a parked ambulance.

“I think so,” I replied. “What the fuck?”

We both started laughing.

“Gerry,” I said. “I’m okay. Look.” I showed him my arms. The welts, still red and angry, were going down. I breathed in and out without my lungs whistling. “The Benadryl is working. I’m going to be fine. I just had a reaction to the fly bites. It happened once when I was a kid.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. Can you just drive me home?”

“If you say so.”

“Just take the Van Wyck to the Cross Island.”

Gerry pulled out from the hospital.

“And go the speed limit! What’s your warrant about?”

“Some bullshit from years ago. A few of us tried to board one

of those party boats, like a cruise to nowhere, from a dinghy. We were all arrested, and the charges dropped, I thought, but my lawyer told me just this week that there might be a bench warrant because of federal charges, maritime law, some shit like that. Maybe not. It's dumb. He'll work it out."

"You're wanted for piracy?" I asked, incredulous. "Do you know I'm obsessed with pirates?"

"Yeah whatever."

"And now you're famous. The dread pirate artist, Gerry Keough."

He laughed.

"If this was your memoir," I continued, "We'd have gotten onto an inflatable raft, overtaken a yacht, and sailed to Key West. We'd be drinking mojitos right now. But instead, it's mine. And rather than us having fun hooking up on the beach, I had an allergic reaction and almost got you arrested."

My phone started buzzing. It was Jack. I silenced it and almost immediately it dinged with a message. "Honey, you okay?"

"Yeah, just tired," I typed. "I'll call you tomorrow."

I saw the three dots come up, then vanish, then come up again as he decided, four hours away, two as the crow flies, what to write. Ultimately, he didn't write anything and just left me on read, which, according to Maggie and Úna, is a supreme insult.

"Where do you go from here?" Gerry asked.

I shook my head. "I really don't know. I feel like I'm at a crossroads, you know? Like I don't regret the children, they're wonderful, but I just feel like I didn't live the life I thought I would."

"No, I mean, which exit off the Cross Island?"

“Jesus, I’m an idiot. 27N, then a left off the ramp.”

Gerry drove his Jeep slowly through the maze of buildings and tree-lined streets that comprise my residential Queens neighbourhood, finally pulling in front of my building, which looks exactly like every other mid-century brick tower around it. He put the car in park.

“I never would’ve pictured you living in a place like this.”

“It’s a compromise. Maybe I’ll move when Maggie and Patrick are out of school.”

Gerry lightly drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. I felt my eyelids, almost completely back to normal now, getting heavy from the Benadryl. I yawned.

“Alright,” Gerry turned towards me and opened his arms. “Gimme a squeeze.” We embraced, then I hopped out of his car.

When I was walking under the awning to my building, he yelled my name. I turned back around.

“When I write my memoir,” he called out through his open window, “I’ll make it so that we fuck on the yacht we steal and drink mojitos.”

Endnotes

¹ Tiedemann, Joseph S. “Communities in the Midst of the American Revolution: Queens County, New York, 1774-1775.” *Journal of Social History* 18, no. 1 (1984): 57–78. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3786962>.

² Kuhn, Gabriel. *Life Under the Jolly Roger: Reflections on Golden Age Piracy*. PM Press, Oakland. 2020.

³ “Whydah Galley History and Our Mission | Whydah Pirate Museum, MA.” Whydah Pirate Museum, www.discoverpirates.com/whydah-gally-history.

- ⁴ Schubert, Sara. "Piracy, Riches, and Social Equality: The Wreck of the Whydah off Cape Cod" *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* Volume 34, No. 1 (Winter 2006).
- ⁵ Davis-Marks, Isis. "Six Skeletons Found in Wreck of 18th-Century Pirate Ship Sunk off Cape Cod." *Smithsonian Magazine*, 12 Feb. 2021, www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/scholars-discover-six-skeletons-whydah-pirate-ship-180977011.
- ⁶ De Saussure, Ferdinand. "Chapter IV: Linguistic Value." *Course in General Linguistics*. Macat Library eBooks, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781912281732>.