Crackers

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An old man ejaculates into a jelly jar and rushes to set up a card table outside the general store where, sparingly, he divvies up his shimmering elixir onto Triscuits and offers them, free of charge, to any female pedestrians who happen by.

So what?

It’s not like some guy somewhere isn’t wiring someone’s testicles to a six-volt Eveready or cooking up a batch of botulism on a Bunsen burner or burying his girlfriend’s colicky baby behind the 7-Eleven. But none of these things are happening in East Kingsboro, and if they are, the secret’s well kept and the perpetrator isn’t your father.

If the man outside the general store is your father and you’re his 30-year-old daughter, you’re sure to get a long-distance phone call that goes something like this: “I’m really sorry to be bothering you, but the situation has gotten out of hand.” While the neighbor describes the incident outside the store as delicately as possible, you must refrain from saying the situation seems too much in hand. “We tried to talk to your mother, but she’s at her wit’s end. I hate to say it, but sooner or later, someone’s going to call the cops. You know how much we all respect your father. But none of us understand what’s happening to him. We don’t know what to do.” The long-distance pause hums with genuine concern. “Well, we just thought you should know.”

Buried politely in that “We thought you should know” is the plea, Please do something. Please get your ass on the next available flight. Get up here and do something.

And shouldn’t that phone call be enough to send you running for your Samsonite? Especially if you add it to the phone calls—progressing from evasive to cryptic to frantic—that have trickled in from your mother over the last six months.

“I’m a little worried about your father,” she says in January. “He’s not sleeping well and he’s hitting the cognac pretty hard. I’ve taken up cross-country skiing.”

In March, she says, “The cat has disappeared,” and “I’m keeping a pair of skis under my bed”—in case she needs to make a cross-country run for her life, one has to assume.

The news in April isn’t much better. “He hasn’t slept a wink in almost a month and he hasn’t stopped talking in over a week. In the ten years since we came up here, I’ve seen some sorry cases of cabin fever, but I swear to God, I’ve never seen anything like this.” Is there a plea for help behind all of this? If so, why doesn’t she come right out and say it? And would it make any difference?
“Thank God, the snow is melting,” she says in May, but it’s hard to hear any relief in her voice. “He spends his days out by the henhouse, talking old Chanticleer’s head off—one old cock to another, I guess.” You can’t help but cringe when old women talk that way—or wonder what could drive her to this uncharacteristic breach of etiquette.

The truth starts to emerge by June. “Your father has been trying to—how can I say this?—urge a new diet on me. Not to mention a new beauty lotion. He says it’s for my own good. He says it’ll keep me young forever.” She says, “I’m keeping a packed suitcase in the trunk of my car.”

By July, the man is spreading semen on crackers with a rusty butter knife just off the village square.

It’s not that the East Kingsborians have no stomach for eccentricity. They’ve managed to absorb more than a few less-than-conventional painters, poets, and philosophers into their quaint and hilly midst over the last few centuries. But the line has to be drawn somewhere. That’s probably the question they’re struggling with when they pick up the phone to call the daughter.

But what dilemma is the daughter struggling with? Can it simply be: to go or not to go?

The East Kingsborites may not understand this reticence, but how could they? The old man and his wife have only lived there for ten years of retirement. It’s not as if they grew up there, raised their daughter there, played out their lives on the village square.

Maybe the good-hearted villagers chalk up this refusal to fly to the rescue as a case of embarrassment or shame. Maybe you could make them understand a little better if you said, *Sit back, close your eyes, picture this, preferably through the side window of a ’57 Chevy:* a bridge spun of silver thread swaying over a broad muddy river, barges lined up at the wharves behind the distillery, a tree-lined avenue that winds downtown to the Palace Theater, where a pair of blue-carpeted stairways cascade down from the mezzanine like strings of sapphires.

You could try telling them how a family of three, scrubbed to a sheen and decked out in their Sunday best, shuffles past the lobby’s WPA murals of muscled laborers and oversized cogwheels and belching smokestacks, into the towering darkness of the theater itself. Layered donuts of lavender light dot the walls, but still it’s too dark to admire the high domed ceiling.

They’ve barely sat down, the purple velvet curtain is only now being drawn from the silver screen, when the daughter—a lanky six- or seven-year-old with stringy hair and an overbite—asks her father, belatedly, for a treat from the concession stand. He grumbles beneath his breath as he digs for change in the pockets of his seersucker suit.

He asks her, “What are you going to get?” and she answers, “Jujubes.”

Apparently satisfied with her choice, he presses the coins into her hand and urges her to hurry or she’ll miss the cartoon.
The MGM lion has just started to roar when the girl thumps back into her seat again and fumbles with the cardboard box.

The man says, “What have you got there?”

The girl rattles the box and says, “Good & Plenty.”

Before the roar and the rattle have faded away, the man shoots up from his seat, a geyser of seersucker and starch, jams his straw fedora on his head and grabs the girl by her arm, sending a hail of Art-Deco-colored candy onto the sticky floor. “Get your things, Corinne,” he says to his wife. “We’re leaving.”

The woman, stooping instinctively to clean up the mess, sputters, “Why?”

“Because she lied,” the man says. “She told me Jujubes and then she shows up with Good & Plenty.”

Corinne tries to grab her husband’s arm, tries to speak in soothing tones. “She’s just a kid, Arthur. Kids change their minds. She didn’t mean any harm.” She smiles at her daughter, but the child’s face is unresponsive, rigid with fear or awe or both. “Go on, Sophia, tell Daddy you didn’t mean any harm.”

But the man’s voice has already risen to a level that drowns out the antics of the mice that flash across the screen behind his head. “I will not tolerate dishonesty,” he shouts. “I will not reward deceit.”

The point is, if you were Sophia, you could try to tell this to the East Kingsburghers, and hope they could see it as sort of a prelude to their refrain: We don’t know what’s happening to him/We don’t know what to do. But maybe it’s not enough. Maybe you’ll have to throw in a story about Sophia coming home from junior high, visions of quarterbacks dancing in her head, only to find her father standing at the top of the stairs, huge and stony as the Colossus of Rhodes, but too wily to sail a ship beneath.

“I’d like you to come into the bathroom,” he says.

“What did I do?”

He points at the towel rack over the bathtub. “Is your towel folded neatly into thirds? Are the corners of your washcloth aligned? Is the Cannon tag hidden from view? Is there anything even remotely rectilinear about this arrangement?”

There’s no denying the crumpled mess on the towel rack.

“You can forget the football game. Forget all your plans for the next two weeks,” he says. “Is that understood?”

Is that understood? The villagers might find the whole anecdote ludicrous or beyond belief. But you can’t provide them any grim accounts of sexual abuse or physical abuse because nothing like that ever happened. So what are you left with to appeal to the sympathy of the desperate neighbors? How can you make them understand why you won’t come when your father so obviously needs some help?
If all else fails, bring out the books and the string. Here’s how the story goes:

Arthur shoves the coffee table out of the way and stretches a length of string across the living room floor. All the nine-year-old Sophia has to do is balance two volumes of the World Book Encyclopedia on her head as she walks the line.

“Keep your heels on the string,” Arthur says. “Head up, shoulders back. I don’t see what’s so hard about this.”

Arthur complains to his wife, “The child galumphs around like Quasimodo. Why does her left shoulder hang down that way? Why is she always dragging her leg? What’s wrong with her, Corinne?” Arthur is an accountant and therefore acutely sensitive to unbalanced books. But he’s also a lover of the arts and a sculptor himself, so maybe it’s his sense of aesthetics that’s offended by Sophia’s lack of symmetry.

Corinne takes Sophia to be examined by a doctor. The doctor can’t find a spinal deformity or any other physical defect that would account for the child’s awkward limping gait.

On the way out of the clinic, Corinne whispers to the nurse, “He did it. Her father turned her into a cripple.”

The nurse doesn’t hear or pretends not to hear. She lays a hand on Sophia’s drooping shoulder and speaks close to her ear. “If you wanna stand up straight and tall, honey, just pretend you’re holding a quarter between your butt-cheeks. That’s what I always do.”

It must be a hundred degrees inside the ’57 Chevy, but Corinne leaves the windows rolled up, as if she’s afraid someone might hear her crying. She doesn’t understand what’s happening to Arthur. She doesn’t know what to do.

Well, you could tell these three little tales to the justly concerned citizens of East Kingsboro, but what good would it do? How can you capture the torment of a thousand needle pricks in three measly drops of blood? How can you make them see the neat pattern of rage against deceit, disorder, and imperfection?

Do you end up revealing too much of yourself while Arthur remains a mystery? No matter how you tell them, all your stories end up sounding like childish, self-pitying excuses for refusing to help your father when he needs it the most.

Not to mention that all this tripping down memory lane will do nothing to change the present course of events. Arthur has taken the battle to the streets now—although somewhere along the twisted way, the war has taken on a missionary zeal. The rage has been transformed into selfless generosity. If he can’t stamp out deceit, disorder, and imperfection in the world around him, if he
can’t serve up truth and beauty on a Ritz—at least, with his elixir, he can offer up youth and beauty on a Triscuit.

Three weeks after the cracker incident, Corinne calls to say she’s staying with her sister in Pennsylvania. She says, “I tried to tell your father he’d gone too far. I told him he’s got to see a doctor, he’s got to get some help.” She’s trying to laugh through her tears. “He threw me out of the house in the middle of the night, Sophia. And you probably thought I was nuts to keep that packed suitcase in the trunk of my car.”

This might be a good time to say, *What can I do to help, Mom?* But what you really want to say is: *I have my own life now, my own family. I don’t want to deal with this anymore. Hell, I don’t know if I can. I just want to bury my head in the sand, Mom, until all of this goes away.*

The question behind all of this seems to be: *Am I my father’s keeper?* But you don’t have to say it. Corinne understands this much already. She just doesn’t have any answers.

Unfortunately, the King’s County Police do. Two weeks after Corinne is evicted, Arthur is flagging down traffic with his box of crackers outside the D.A.R. meeting hall. He’s arrested for disorderly conduct and transported thirty miles north to the county jail near Lake Namphipókak.

The jig is pretty much up now, isn’t it? There’s a new urgency in the neighbor’s voice that drowns out the note of apology. There’s no time for tales of Jujubes and washcloths and cripples anymore.

Nor is there time to tell the neighbor how Arthur would pull Sophia up onto his lap, carefully open the slick pages of the huge book and say, in reverent tones, “This is Da Vinci, this is Michelangelo, this is Rembrandt, Renoir, Degas, Van Gogh, Toulouse-Lautrec, this is Picasso.”

Now you’re too busy packing your bag, rushing to the airport, emptying your pockets onto the conveyor belt to tell anyone about the lazy Sunday mornings when Sophia lounged on the footstool of Arthur’s chair as he read to her quatrains from the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*.

You can’t send a telegram to the King’s County Courthouse, saying: **HE BOUGHT EXTRA COPIES OF HIS BOOKS SO THAT I COULD PLAY LADY MACBETH TO HIS MACBETH AND MIRANDA TO HIS PROSPERO STOP HE TRIED AS BEST HE KNEW HOW TO SHOW ME TRUTH AND ORDER AND PERFECTION STOP WHATEVER YOU’RE PLANNING TO DO WITH HIM . . . STOP.**

You’re the only one who has to know why you finally climb onto that plane. No one else really cares.

Behind a veil of fog, the sun rises over Lake Namphipókak like a silver dollar, like the flip of the celestial coin. By the time the chill of the late August night
burns off, the clerks and bailiffs and stenographers are already filing past your rental car and into the two-story wood-framed courthouse.

The courtroom seems alarmingly crowded when you finally walk in and take a seat near the back. But the room itself is nearly bare of the trappings of government, almost puritanical, preferably Quakerish, in its simplicity.

The lake breeze drifting through the open windows, the soft buzz of the northern villagers’ gossip lend an air of informality to this place that threatens to lull you into a sense of peace and security.

No one seems to notice when the defendant is led into the courtroom. His hands are manacled. The white stubble on his unshaven cheeks glistens in the morning light. The seersucker suit gave way, years before, to tattersall shirts and khaki pants, and these are uncharacteristically crumpled, but the bound hands grip the brim of a stylish straw fedora. If Corinne were there, she’d say, *Always the dandy—you’ve got to give him that.*

The bailiff removes the handcuffs and Arthur takes his place at the long, polished table that sits sideways between the bench and the gallery. At first, he sits up straight in his chair, his silvery chin held high, almost regally, as if he’s not the prisoner at all but the judge himself. But the effort at stillness is too much to bear, and before long, he starts rocking, tapping his feet, his fingers dancing to a relentless tune that no one else can hear.

When the bailiff calls, “Hear ye, hear ye,” you ought to stand up, at least until the real judge is seated, but it’s too hard to take your eyes off Arthur’s face.

His eyes are rimmed in red as if the fire behind them, maybe the fire of the Old Testament prophets, has scorched the flesh. His gaze flits around the room, never resting, consuming everything in its path.

Docket numbers are called. The prosecutor and the public defender and the stenographer are huddled in front of the judge’s bench, mumbling in low voices. There aren’t any trials this morning. These are only arraignments, and the air of informality prevails.

Even the villagers are growing bored and threatening to resume their gossip, until Arthur lifts his long thin arm and points to the back of the room. “Sophia’s here.” The villagers are too busy turning their heads to see the alteration in Arthur’s face, to see the transforming light of his smile.

“That’s my daughter,” he says, in a voice that silences the entire courtroom. “That’s my Sophia.”

Arthur has half-risen from his chair and the public defender has to rush over to the table to restrain him before the bailiff can take matters into his own hands.

The judge says, “I thought you just informed me, Mr. Cooper, that you were unable to locate any members of the immediate family.”
Public Defender Cooper says, “It’s news to me, Your Honor,” as he continues to nudge Arthur back into his seat.

But Arthur won’t stop fidgeting or smiling, and he won’t be silenced either. “Tell them,” he calls to his daughter across the packed courtroom. “Tell them I’m right.”

What is Sophia supposed to say? Maybe Arthur should’ve called out, Remember Aunt Lenore. Surely, those three words would’ve conjured up that one-Sunday-a-month ritual: packing up a bag of fresh oranges, a box of homemade cookies, driving out to the house beside the municipal golf course where Lenore lived with six or seven dogs and Uncle Leonard. The dogs had wandered in off the greens. They were always wandering in off the greens. They couldn’t be turned away.

If you were Sophia, you’d remember how, that one Sunday, Arthur and Corinne had gone outside with Uncle Leonard, feigning a sincere interest in the in-ground sprinkler system on the ninth hole, how the screen door had barely slammed before they’d lit their cigarettes. There was no one left in the house but Sophia and Lenore—Sophia with her nearsighted squint and barely budding breasts, Lenore with her too-big smile, her bright red lipstick soaring beyond the outlines of her lips, her bulging eyes, her eyebrows that arched in a state of perpetual astonishment.

Aunt Lenore said, “You look a little pale, Sophie. Are you thirsty?”

When Sophia nodded, Lenore ushered her into the kitchen, settled her at the table and poured her a tumblerful of Mogen David.

The aunt said, “Drink up, dear. There’s nothing like a little grape juice to put the color back in your cheeks.”

It wasn’t until the family had gone home again, after Sophia had surrendered to an irresistible nap, that she told Arthur what had happened. She found him out in the garage. He was chiseling the head of a ram from a stone he’d found beside the river. It was his Sunday habit to create things of beauty.

Arthur said, “No one’s ever let Lenore in on the secret that she’s completely crackers.” With a tap of his mallet, he dislodged a perfect triangle of rock from the corner of the ram’s eye. “Leonard keeps a pretty good eye on her. I guess he figures, after all those years beside the wide-open golf greens, locking her up in a hospital would kill her.” He ran his palm across the ram’s flawless brow. “If you ask me, it’d kill just about anyone.”

Sophia brushed her bangs forward to cover the spray of pimples on her forehead. She said, “How come she never figured it out herself?”

“Maybe it’s not that easy to see,” Arthur said, “if it’s happening to you.”

Sophia said, “You’d tell me if you saw I was going crazy, wouldn’t you?”
Arthur laid down his hammer and chisel and held out his dusty hand. “I promise to tell you, if you promise to tell me.”

They shook on the deal. He pulled Sophia onto the sawhorse beside him, and they sat beneath the bare bulb in the garage for a while, studying the swirling horns and flaring nostrils of the ram that Arthur was setting free from the river stone.

He said, “You’ve got school tomorrow. You better get ready for bed.”

She slid down reluctantly from the sawhorse and dragged her feet through the chiseled dust to the door. She’d barely passed out of the circle of light when Arthur called her back.

“I’d like to tack an addendum onto our contract,” he said. “I promise I’ll never let anyone lock you up if you’ll promise to do the same for me.”

If Arthur had said, Remember Aunt Lenore, and if you were Sophia, you would’ve remembered that day and those promises. Sophia wouldn’t even need him to say it. Who could forget something like that?

But Arthur didn’t say, Remember Aunt Lenore. He said, “Tell them I’m right.”

And now all the eyes of the courtroom are upon you, waiting to hear your answer. So why don’t you tell them? Maybe he is right. Didn’t the ancients enjoin us against spilling the seed on the ground? He’s only suggesting the consumption of the seed of life. What possible harm can it do? What crime has he committed? Tell them the truth: Maybe he was right all along. Maybe he was right about everything.

Arthur can’t seem to hold his red-rimmed too-wide eyes on your face. They race from you to the judge to the open windows and back again, but it’s hard to tell if he’s waiting hopefully or if your answer has ceased to matter or if it ever mattered.

It’s the judge who breaks the silence. “Are you the defendant’s daughter?”

You manage to nod.

The judge says, “If I release him into your custody, can you provide any assurance that he’ll seek psychiatric care?”

Arthur, this old man who is your father, is still smiling, and, in all your life, you’ve never seen his face so free from anger and pain.

You say, “I cannot, Your Honor.”

“Then it’s the order of this court,” the judge says, “that the defendant be held in the State Hospital at Mount Delano for observation and treatment for a period not to exceed ninety days.” The gavel falls. Next case.

That’s what you would do, isn’t it? What else could anyone do?