

BURGERS ANATOLY

Bruce Brooks

THE LETTER TELLING me I had won the contest was written in Russian, on thick cream paper, in an ink that could have been some of that fancy dark coffee that you can't see through, even to the bottom of those tiny cups they serve it in. *Very fancy.*

I knew it was Russian right away. I recognized some of the letters from the writing on the piece of fish barrel my late husband Herb found on a beach at Chappaquiddick four years ago (we went just to see The Bridge, but it was a real zero so we took a stroll and found this barrel lid with funny writing which a fisherman in the town told us said the equivalent of *wordfish*—the first *S* letter had been chipped off—and what the man then said about Russian fishing ships I will *not* repeat).

Just to make sure, I took the letter over to the hutch where I kept the piece of barrel, and I found that although the letter did not actually contain the word *wordfish*, it *did* have several of the same funny letters in it. So there you are—Russian.

The message of the letter was about fifteen lines, full of parentheses, quotation marks, and underlinings. It was written in a *dandy* old script. The signature especially dazzled me: all the lines and curls and dots of the letters had been twisted into a strange shape that I thought at first represented a poppyseed danish (there were *lots* of dots). I decided a moment later, though, that it was a butterfly. I mean people *do* seem to be attracted to the name Butterfly sometimes; but come on—*Madame Poppyseed Danish?* A butterfly it had to be.

Naturally, I did not know what on earth the letter meant. I checked the envelope to make sure it was addressed to me. It was. The same elegant coffee script spelled out my name and address in perfect *English!* This miffed the dickens out of me—why hadn't the silly person gone ahead and written the *letter* in perfect English? What was he trying to prove?

Whatever his point was, I doubted it would be worth the misery of a visit to nasty Mr. Muskaivitch down the hall. Mr. Muskaivitch would gladly translate the letter for me; but to get him through those fifteen lines I would have to spend an hour sipping bitter tea and tapping my foot enthusiastically

to balalaika records. I made the mistake of taking the fish barrel lid down to his apartment two years ago, just after Herb died, because I was lonely one evening and thought seeking a second opinion on the matter of translation was an innocent sort of social encounter for a new widow . . . but it was terrible, with all the balalaikas and so many cups of tea that my teeth chattered from caffeine, which made Mr. Muskaivitch insist on turning up the blasting heat in his stuffy old apartment. “Wordfish?” he kept saying, “What is this wordfish? You want to know fish, I tell you sturgeon. In Caspian Sea is great sturgeon . . .” I fell asleep in spite of the caffeine, and woke up to find him kneeling on the floor in front of me, trying to look up my dress and still prattling softly all the while about precious fish eggs.

So, this Russian letter miffed me and I had no way to solve it. In my frustration I said “Foo!” and gave it a good stiff wag, as if it were the ear of the bad person who wrote it. This was a pointless thing to do, but it turned out to be important, because after the wag a folded piece of white note paper fluttered out. I picked it up. It was typewritten, in English, on the letterhead of the Chumley Caper Company.

Dear Mrs. Applewhite:

Congratulations! It is my pleasure to inform you that your essay “What the Caper Means to Me” has won first prize in our promotional contest. As agreed to in the contest regulations stated on the entry form, which you signed (binding), we are free to use your message in our spring advertising campaign. Millions will read your inspiring words!

As an added thrill, of course, you will enjoy our premier prize—the details of which Mr. Kaminov himself will tell you in a Genuine Handwritten Note enclosed in this envelope (as agreed to per contest regulations).

Thank you so much for your interest in capers. We hope that you will enjoy the great emigré. Our heartiest congratulations!

Sincerely,

Peter T. Chumley, President

I still didn’t understand the Russian letter of course. But I *did* understand that I had won another contest, and I was glad. I could not remember the specific contest, or its regulations, or its prize, and my essay “What the Caper Means to Me” was a total blank—but such details hardly matter once the prize is on the way, right?

You see, I enter *many* contests, I mean a *lot*, and I can’t be bothered anymore to keep them all straight. I used to worry about knowing everything, at every step, during the first year after Herb died, when I discovered what nice things contests could do for a widow’s life. I worked like a madwoman that year to enter 46 contests, and I kept a little notebook with a page for each entry, noting the sponsor, the deadline, the rules, the title or description of my submission, and, of course, the prize. I made columns

with a wooden ruler and checked off all the items as I sent or received them. It was very therapeutic.

But I outgrew the notebook as I got better. The contests sort of took over. The time I used to spend keeping my records in order I now spent writing more essays, more jingles, more slogans. Last year I entered 230 contests. I won 144 of them. I can hardly take time to fret about drawing straight lines in a notebook with *that* kind of volume.

Instead, I have developed a special sixth sense that keeps me constantly aware, in the back of my mind, of what prizes are coming to me. This is very important. Forget the prizes and you might as well skip the contests and spend the postage money on Geritol. I have learned by experience that companies sometimes “forget” to send a prize if you don’t remind them—after a grace period has passed, of course—that they owe you. I lost a set of bone-handled pickle forks that way, and the pick of a litter sired by a famous television dog star. Now, though, I am protected by my special awareness. I do not have to try, to force myself to review a mental catalog of prizes outstanding; the expectation is simply *there*, and it tickles me in a tiny way until the prize arrives.

At the time of the Chumley letter, I was expecting several other things: a platter with a portrait of Dr. Martin Luther King and Lyndon B. Johnson, a dictionary of Irish slang, a ticket for a trip to Daytona Beach, Florida, and an undetermined amount of Janitor-In-A-Drum, to start off a “lifetime supply” I had won by giving an official name (*Baby Pea*) to the color of the cleanser’s container.

To this list I added “one great emigré.” I had no idea what an emigré was, but of course I was happy that I had won a *great* one. Quality counts in all things.

So, my curiosity about the Russian letter from this Mr. Kaminov (some foreign caper expert serving as an honorary contest judge?) vanished as my prize anticipation clicked on. But, even so, my special anticipation did not prepare me for what happened only one week later.

First, the doorbell rang early in the evening. I finished the sentence I was writing in my 50-word essay “Why I Believe in Saccharin” for the annual Sweet Stuff Company contest, and hopped up to see who it was. I thought it might be the Janitor-In-A-Drum. Instead, it was a butler in a tuxedo.

“Pimstoke,” he said, with a crisp little bow. The hall light pinged off his mother-of-pearl shirt studs. “Here about the ambience.”

“Oh,” I said. I thought he meant some new kind of bug he had been sent by the superintendent to exterminate. “Are you sure you have the right apartment? They just sprayed here last month, and I only had a few silverfish.”

He stared at me with his chilly blue eyes—they looked like menthol cough drops that would never dissolve. Then he blinked slowly. “Quite certain indeed,” he said, very bored and superior, not even sneaking a look at the number on the door to make sure. “May I enter the premises?”

I shrugged and stood aside. "Be my guest."

Then like magic he zipped right past me straight into the middle of the living room, where he stopped in a snap and stood looking around. He looked quickly, and then did a slow double take over each object, clucking his tongue and shaking his head. I was about to tie his cutaway tails together or something—I mean, clucking your tongue at somebody's nice living room!—when he suddenly slipped into motion again. With his knees bent and his eyes narrowed he darted everywhere around the room like something between a spy and an interior decorator—studying every object carefully but quickly, peeking behind frames on the walls, tapping the wood of my furniture, even sniffing the inside of the Pittsburgh Steeler helmet I won two years ago by writing a fight song to the tune of *Jesus Loves the Little Children* ("On on on you mighty Steelers/ Show your mettle strong and bright . . ."; you might notice the pun on *mettle* and *metal*, as in Steel(ers)—I have found that a good pun will win you almost any decent word contest). The man finally came to a halt in front of two large dark prints that hang on the wall above my digital sundial/barometer.

"Ghastly," he said with a shudder, pointing to the prints with his chin.

It was too much to take from even the cheekiest exterminator.

"I'll have you know that those are original prints numbered from a limited edition of fifteen thousand, by the very famous American artist Leroy Neiman. He painted them during a brownout in Manhattan last summer, and I won them by compiling the best list of 'Ten Ways to Save Energy in the Average Kitchen.' *That*," I said, pointing with my chin, "is the East Side, and *that* is the West Side. There was supposed to be a third one, of Harlem, but it was withheld because of racial overtones."

"To speak of *any* sort of 'tone' with regard to these mindless smears is an act of hopeless critical *naïveté*," he said, with a sniff. "They will have to be evacuated, along with the rest of this bric-a-brac."

I growled, but before I could tell him to evacuate himself, this Pimstoke clapped his hands three times, dry clear pops, and immediately half a dozen big blond men burst into the room. They all wore knee boots with baggy pants tucked into the tops, and coarse shirts with blousing sleeves buttoned tightly at the wrist. Stuffed under their arms or hugged against their chests were all sorts of oddly shaped packages, crackling in brown paper wrappings. The fellows all grinned at me, very happy indeed, and nodded very fast, the way foreigners do. Pimstoke stood on an ottoman unwrapped by one of them, and barked commands in a foreign language, snapping his fingers, pointing here and there. The men whirled, grinned, whisked, hoisted. The air was full of big pale hands grasping my prizes, and stiff striding legs bearing them away. Out of the brown paper wrappings came spindly antiques to replace my vanished treasures. I could not keep track of things; when I tried to sink into my Ethan Allen armchair, I found myself teetering on top of an ancient iron typewriter perched on a rickety table. I leaned

against a wall, dazed. Across the room, I thought I saw some of the blond men bustling something like a coffin into the kitchen. Pimstoke ignored me and barked on. My head spun. It was awful.

Then all of a sudden it was over. Pimstoke shut up and clapped his hands three times—pop pop pop—and the room cleared. The big men, with their grinning and grunting, the brown paper with its crackling, the foreign orders—all gone. Only Pimstoke remained. He stood for a moment, looking around; then he flitted softly all over the room again only this time it was a different room, flicking at specks of dust, moving this or that thing half an inch, studying the effect a piece of furniture made angled against a wall and adjusting it to a nicety. I leaned on my wall and watched him. Once, during a scan of the scene around my part of the room, his eyes noticed me and snapped up in peeved surprise—but then he recognized me and made an expression that dismissed me as a necessary eyesore in his pretty little place.

Pimstoke's last adjustment was the removal of the glass case containing my moon rock (I won it in my essay "Why I Want My Tax Dollars Spent on Apollo XII") into the bedroom, and the substitution of a wooden music stand with a small lamp attached to it. On this stand he carefully laid a book, which he opened to a particular page. Then he pulled a flannel cutlery case from his pocket, looked at me carefully but impersonally, and selected a pair of lady's spectacles from about ten pairs in the case. These he placed on top of the open book. They looked a lot like my real reading glasses; I guess Pimstoke was pretty good at whatever he thought he was doing.

Then he switched on the little lamp, took a last look around, and left.

For a few minutes I just leaned. My eyes drifted over the strange furniture, and came to rest on two dingy paintings of people hunting bears in deep snow. The blond men had put them in the places of my Neimans. I blinked. I felt like a visitor to a small, quiet museum in a foreign land.

I finally thought that perhaps a cup of hot consommé might boost my spirits. On my way to the kitchen, however, I remembered the coffin that the men had hauled in there, and turned back with a shiver. I decided maybe I would settle for some sherry. Pimstoke had left my split-leaf philodendron—I bought it, the only thing in the room I hadn't won, wouldn't you know. Behind it I kept a special bottle of bad old sherry.

There were some thick cut-crystal glasses on a tray with a decanter full of clear liquid, but I ignored them. I did not want to touch anything left by Pimstoke and the men. So I sat on the floor beside the bookstand, and sipped my sherry straight from the bottle.

After my fourth swallow, the doorbell rang.

This time I knew it was *not* my Janitor-In-A-Drum, or my Martin Luther King plate, or my ticket to Daytona. I knew perfectly well who it was: Pimstoke. He had come back on second thought to replace my philodendron. I stood up flushed with the sherry and walked over and jerked open the door with a snarl.

But it was not Pimstoke who stood there this time. This time, it was the Count of Monte Cristo.

Well, he *looked* like the Count of Monte Cristo, with his claret velvet cape, his signet ring the size of a watch, his wavy black hair with a streak of white in the widow's peak. He was a tall man; I stared up into his dark brown eyes, and he met my gawk with a steady look of kind amusement. Then he swept down into a bow that would have won points at a gymnastics meet. The hallway seemed to swirl with black coattails and red velvet. I blinked, bedazzled. I still hadn't spoken, when he took my hand, faintly brushed it with his lips, and said:

"Anatoly Kaminov. I am enchanted, *Prinzessa*."

Not many men could get away with claiming they were enchanted by me in my mauve pants suit with cheap sherry on my breath. But not many men speak in voices that ripple like the best parts of Mr. Muskaivitch's balalaika music, with every letter sounding like a plucked string; not many men can kiss an old woman's hand and communicate only a respectful esteem; and certainly not many men can look perfectly dressed in a claret velvet cape. I blushed, smiled like a goof, and probably would have tried a curtsy if I had had some skirts to swing.

"Thank you very much," I said. "May I take your wrap?"

He made another little bow and twirled out of his cape, dropping it on my arm as he strode past me into the apartment. I nearly buckled—the thing was as thick and heavy as a theatre curtain. I unloaded it onto one of Pimstoke's spindly chairs, and the joints creaked.

"Ah," said Mr. Kaminov, looking around the room. "A delightful *salon*, my dear hostess. An engaging, an endearing, a finally *resonant* place. I see that you are a very careful woman, crafting for yourself a quite personal beauty from the raw material of the bailiwick. Yes. Lovely. I admire the way the fruitwood—Yugoslav apple, is it not?—of those chairs courses against the horizontal rigidity of that slashing mahogany table. The balance is adventuresome! The room almost *hums* with the surging ghosts of ancient xylem at *contretemps*!"

"I think what you hear is the hot water heater next door."

He seemed not to hear me as he looked around and suddenly noticed the dingy hunting pictures in place of my Neimans. "But wait!" he gasped, stepping over to them. "Wait! My gracious . . . is it possible? No! But . . . yes! Most certainly yes! My dear woman—you *are* quite the assiduous aesthete. Where on earth did you find two original Barizinovs from the 'Bear Period'?"

Where on earth? I almost told him I found them as cubs and they just grew up. But I didn't. There was something very sincere about his enthusiasm, in spite of all the fancy words. So I just said, "I'm glad you like the room."

“Like!” he said, laughing warmly. “Ha! ‘Like’ indeed! ‘Like’ is far too pale a word, *Prinzessa*, far too . . . but oh! What . . . what is this?”

He had spotted the bookstand, and all of the dandy speechiness left him for a second as he stared and flushed and slipped into the chair next to the open book. I thought he had forgotten me, and he probably had. He did not move for perhaps a minute—just sat there reading the book. Then, very tenderly, as if he were lifting a rattle from a sleeping infant’s chest, he removed the spectacles that were in his way. I just watched. His face was full of a happiness simple enough for a child; all of a sudden I found myself thinking that he was a pretty dear man.

After a while he looked up, his eyes full.

“A thoughtful display, *Prinzessa*,” he said quietly. He looked back to the book. “The first Berlin edition of *How Mimetic the Moth*. I haven’t seen one of these for . . . it must be thirty years. I thought all of them but the six I used to own had been destroyed, if not by the Nazis, then by the Communists. There were only four hundred! My wife—*qu’elle soit élevée aux anges*—and I helped Kurzmeier to print and bind and pack them, though he didn’t like that a bit. ‘You are the novelist,’ he kept saying, ‘you are the artist! Leave the inky tasks to a mundane old printer!’ Mundane printer indeed. Those of us penning our angry little pretentious prose in the emigré community knew him for what he was: a courageous and visionary publisher. Ah,” he looked up again with a small smile, “Ah. I am sentimental, *Prinzessa*. Perhaps too I sound like a bit of quickly scribbled platitude in a bad nineteenth-century novel. But this little display of yours resonates deeply. And the passage to which you have opened the book! Did I disturb you in the very act of reading as I came? So perfectly prophetic! Here is the scene in which my poor lovestruck Pietr wins the heart of his Jessica by clumsily preparing an omelette while she rests during that spring snowstorm on the steppes . . .”

He looked up at me and for a moment did not smile. “Ah. How complicated I have grown.”

Then he stood stepped over to where I stood, and took my hands. His touch was delicate. I tried to mumble something about thirst, nodding toward the decanter, but he went on, in a soft voice that made my cheeks tingle.

“Now, instead of snowstorms it is a contest, eh? And instead of two broken eggs in a bit of burned butter, it is *Capers Kaminov*.” Who knew what he was talking about? All I knew was I was starting to feel like his Jessica on those wild steppes. I gaped and kept stammering in a whisper about drinks but he squeezed my hands and I shut up. We just looked at each other for a moment. I could hardly take it, he was so strong with feeling.

Then he broke into a smile, bobbed an eyebrow up and down, and said: “But of course! The contest! The prize! Here I stand rhapsodizing selfishly, and all the while you are patiently awaiting the presentation of your culinary kudos! I have much work to do, *Prinzessa*. Come! To the kitchen!”

To the kitchen. I didn't want to go within ten feet of the kitchen. But Mr. Kaminov was laughing and gabbing about his delicacy and the "ardours of assemblage" and so on, and he didn't hear my protests. I kept seeing that coffin. But the next thing you know he had me swung through the door, and there it was. He saw it too and did not seem at all surprised. He also took it right in stride that my kitchen was now crammed to the crannies with strange cannisters. Pimstoke's boys had given it the old switcheroo just like the living room. There were weird wooden containers and dark spice bottles and odd foreign pots arranged on the counters and tables. I saw nothing of my own; but I did not bother to look around and find out where they had stuck my stuff. By this point I was content to let events unfold in front of me without much analysis or interference. I think I had come to a realization, forced on me by the peculiar power of this whole night. Winning contests involved certain responsibilities I had never really taken into account—it's a two-way deal: the company agrees to give you something, and by the same token you agree to accept it. Now I was just plain accepting whatever it would turn out to be.

Mr. Kaminov was excited. He rubbed his hands together, hummed, mumbled in satisfaction as he checked the ingredients in the cannisters. He found a red and white dotted swiss apron somewhere, and put it on. Then he pulled a wooden picture frame and a piece of parchment out of a thin attaché case leaning against a table leg. He spread the parchment on the table and took out a fancy fountain pen.

"My dear hostess. Your essay has won the fine contest sponsored by the patron company of the arts, and you are about to savor your lovely prize. It is my honor to prepare it for you, in the same spirit of creativity and aesthetic accumulation that was evinced through your critical exegesis. For a momento, and, perhaps, for a reference, I offer this original recipe."

With that, he signed the parchment with the same coffee colored butterfly sign I had seen on the Russian letter. At the top of the recipe he wrote "*To the Prinzessa.*" Then he slipped it into the picture frame, which was exactly the right size, and hung it on the wall above the stove. There was a new nail in just the spot he wanted. Good old Pimstoke.

Here is what the recipe says. I include the whole thing, because it pretty accurately describes just what Mr. Kaminov did for the next twenty minutes. I didn't help him at all; I just peeked over his shoulder and read this thing while he twirled around going *ta ta tah ya tah ya tah* tunefully just like a balalaika, cooking the whole thing up precisely, even looking pretty cute in his dotted swiss. Here it is:

Capers Kaminov

Ingredients (ce qu'il faut):

Seven ounces of water
Three grams of deer-hoof gelatin
The whites of eight quail eggs
Twenty Tunisian shallots
Ninety marinated capers
Seventy soupcons of Czechoslovakian garlic
One silver filigree porringer, engraved on the inside
lip with the rubric "AK," full to the crossbar of
the A with hummingbird saliva
A granoblastic pinch of nutmeg—from Spain *con amore*
A susurration of bay leaf
A freshly-vittled, marginally clean, hopelessly confused
Gypsy swain, separated inexplicably from his family
and kept in an empty pantry

Execution (*ce qu'il faut faire*):

1. *Caper, shallot. Spices of my life, fires of my lips. Ca. Per. Shal. Lot. My tongue trips tantalizingly toothward, trailing in titillation through the tasty twin trochees. My caper, my shallot.*
2. *Mull the aqua pura, then render it oleaginous by infusing the ground deer toenails—or, as this ingredient is called by certain wry Lapps capable, as not many are, of humor, "poor man's venison."*
3. *Whip the egg whites with a fine vigor (or with a good stiff whisk). Dot them into the broth like a frothy archipelago, and cap each island with capers. Add the minutiae of garlic; then add the princely Majorcan spice unfavored in those countries whose peoples are essentially barbaric in nature, according to the reductive but probably acute ethnic formula espoused by the rheumatic, libidinous, mad, and finally dead Swiss social historian Gaston LeFebvre.*
4. *Tilt at a graceful angle the porringer with its salivary quintessence, and slice into the hot broth with the cool mercury knife of steady viscous drool. (Catch a glimpse of your face in the upturned porringer bottom—according to ancient muscovite legend, the man who sees himself through the spittle of the tiny trochilidae will be blessed with long and pertinacious life!)*
5. *Rub two bay leaves together an inch above the surface of the broth. If you cannot hear their tacky sibilance, then you are simmering the stuff too boisterously.*
6. *As the goop begins to get goopy, trot out the Gypsy (dazed, stubbly, rubbing red eyes in the white luminescence of your sparkling middle-class kitchen). Stand him near the stove. Incline his head over the broth. Then, using the formal second-person plural, tell*

him in Romany that his wife fornicates with his brother while his children watch. Now, this will NOT cause him to gasp angrily with a sharp intake of breath, as is usual with the fricative-happy peoples of western Europe; rather, it will evoke a contemptuous labial expulsion, an unworried "PLAH!" over the surface of the broth. The expelled breath will be redolent of the brown onions and caraway seed that is the Gypsy staple, and the whiff of this combo is all that is needed to perfect the by now turgescient stew.

Well, that's it. The high point of the whole operation, of course, was the use of the gypsy. Mr. K. performed this step of his operation as neatly as he did any of the others: after rubbing the bay leaves together and listening carefully to hear their noise above the boil, he stepped with great assurance over to the coffin, which was standing on its end upright. He opened the lid like a door, reached in, and pulled a blinking, brightly-dressed gypsy man out of it with no more surprise than if he had looked into a mustard jar and found mustard. Holding the man's wrist lightly, he pulled him over to the stove, pushed his head gently over the stew, and whispered something to him. Sure enough, the man smirked, shrugged, and said "PLAH!" Mr. Kaminov smiled at me and immediately whisked the poor fellow back into the coffin. I thought that the guy hadn't even had time to get an idea of where he was before he was shut back in, but—I was a little surprised at this—he showed absolutely no curiosity, and made no effort to open the coffin though the door was obviously not locked.

There was something else that was peculiar about the gypsy—something, I mean, besides the dirty red bandanna tied over his hair, the stained leather pants flapping on his legs, the bushy black moustache, and the three gold rings in his left ear. I didn't really take the time to analyze my feeling but I definitely felt in a sort of intuition that I had seen the gypsy before somewhere. I didn't puzzle it out, though, because Mr. Kaminov commanded my attention by pouring his thick pudding stuff into a large souffle dish.

I sniffed. "It smells wonderful!" I said, and meant it. I could hardly believe myself, but the fact is that I was suddenly *very* hungry. I couldn't wait to eat a plateful of *Capers Kaminov*, bird spit and all.

Mr. Kaminov nodded a bit smugly, and held the dish up for me to see. Then, just as I was about to suggest that we rustle up a couple of spoons and do it justice, he very calmly opened the kitchen window and threw the entire thing right out.

"Ah," he sighed happily, dusting his hands. "*Ars longa vita brevis est.*"

I screamed.

Several things happened at once in response to my shriek: the coffin lid popped open and the gypsy sprang into the room, glaring; the kitchen door swung quietly and Pimstoke slipped smoothly in along one wall; and Mr. Kaminov drew back from me with a hand to his chest like a duke in a bad historical movie. He gaped at me, horrified and full of wonder.

"*Dratchni kokailivosh,*" the gypsy snarled at Pimstoke.

Pimstoke ignored him, but said to Mr. K., "Is something amiss, sir? Shall I remove the subject from the premises until you make your withdrawal?"

Mr. Kaminov ignored *him*, but said to me, "Why on earth did you ululate so?"

I said nothing. Slowly, Pimstoke and the gypsy turned their heads until they were staring at me too. Everyone was waiting for me to answer. I did.

"I *ululated,*" I said, "because I'm *confused*. I'm *disoriented*. I'm *ignored*. And most of all I'm *hungry*! I mean, here I am, I won a prize, right?, and my apartment is invaded by foreigners who move all of my furniture and hide all of my treasures, okay?, and then this foreigner out of one of those fat romance novels swirls onto the scene and trifles with my affections and then hauls me into the *kitchen*, for crying out loud, where instead of chatting with me over a pleasant bit of cooking he gets all arty and has to whip up this crazy Shallot Supremo or whatever which requires *gypsy* breath, but which nevertheless leaves me *starving*. Then he throws it out the window without giving me so much as a *taste*. Who are you people? Why do you torture me? Why didn't you give me any of the nice dish you made for me? It was supposed to be my *prize!*"

Now, during this little tirade of mine Mr. Kaminov had stared at me with more and more wonder on his face. As I ticked off my points, he seemed to tick them off, too, and I could see that every one of them confused him as much as they confused me, only in a different way. Toward the end of my speech he turned and stared at Pimstoke. But when I asked my last question—why he hadn't given me any of the dish—he snapped back to me for the moment.

"One does not *eat* the *Capers Kaminov,*" he said scornfully. "One does not subject such a masterpiece to *peristalsis*, or other such crude digestive mechanics. The very idea! One prepares the dish purely for the transcendental aesthetic bliss that is the very heart of life, the apotheosis of sensibility. *Eat!*" he said, shaking his head in disbelief, "Plah!"

"*Plah?*" yelled a new voice beside me. I turned; it was the gypsy. "Now you steal my line? '*Plah?*' You hold nice lady's hand? You steal trifle and treasure? You throw dinner out window? And then, this '*Plah?*' Sir, you are villian! You mistreat widow lady friend! You must make amend or give to me satisfaction!"

With that the gypsy pulled off his bandanna, tore the moustache off his lip, and bowed to me briskly.

"*Mr. Muskaivitch!*" I gasped.

"Please to call Dmitri," he said with another bow.

"Wait—you mean to say you *know* this person?" Mr. Kaminov cried. I thought I heard Pimstoke clear his throat.

"Yes," I said. "He lives down the hall. He's Russian."

"I see," said Mr. Kaminov. "*Well, Pimstoke?*"

Pimstoke cleared his throat again. He was standing stiff with his back against the wall just inside the kitchen door, looking like a piece of Victorian moulding. "You see, Mr. Kaminov . . ."

"Down the *hall?*" Mr. Kaminov interrupted incredulously, looking at me.

"I have that honor," said Mr. Muskaivitch, bowing to me again.

Pimstoke cleared his throat more forcefully and Mr. Kaminov turned back to him. "I am afraid that is true, Mr. Kaminov. Down the hall. Very near. Perhaps a bit *too* conveniently near, it seems—one was tempted too much by the ease of coincidence, with unfortunate results. Though I daresay that if this . . . *subject* were blessed with an even rudimentary sense either of manners or imagination we could have made it through our evening's performance without sacrificing our ruse. But, alas for manners," he sighed looking coldly at me.

"Never mind her manners," snapped Mr. Kaminov. "There is some explaining to be done about our gypsy."

Pimstoke sighed again, dutifully. "Very well sir. If you insist."

"I do."

"Very well. Shortly before our engagement this evening Milos, our regular gypsy, resigned."

"Resigned!"

"Yes, sir. He said that he feared the onset of acute claustrophobia from the repetitive confinement in the cabinet"—here he nodded at the coffin—"and admitted as well that he frankly missed his wife and children in Pennsylvania."

"Pennsylvania?" said Mr. Kaminov. "You told me he was from *Transylvania*, and spoke nothing but *Romany!*"

Pimstoke gave a little cough into his fist. "Perhaps my elocution was a trifle misleading during my recitation of Milos's *curriculum vitae*, sir."

"It was a good deal more than a trifle, I assure you, if what I perceive is indeed true. Continue."

"Very well, sir. As I was saying—Milos resigned, leaving us suddenly without a gypsy for the three remaining engagements on our tour."

"Tour?" I said. "What is this, a circus?"

Mr. Kaminov winced. Pimstoke twitched one corner of his mouth half an inch, which for him was probably a guffaw. "Shall I continue, sir?" he said.

"Yes," sighed Mr. Kaminov.

"Most intriguing story, but very boring. Come and hear *balalaikas*," said Mr. Muskaivitch, plucking at my sleeve. I ignored him.

"So," said Pimstoke. "Milos's desertion left us without a critical ingredient, if I may be allowed my little wordplay, in your performance, sir. It has long been established that the gypsy motif effects the keenest fascination for the audiences of lower wit. While the gentry find more intricate interest in the so-called hummingbird saliva, the more common subjects could not be

expected to maintain a satisfactory span of attention if the gypsy stroke were subtracted from the composition. Therefore—having judged this subject to be among this commoner lot . . .”

“Watch it, Pimstoke,” Mr. K. snapped.

“. . . I had to face the fact that we had a cabinet to fill with less than an hour to go before occupation of the target premises.”

“Happy to be of services,” grinned Mr. Muskaivitch. Mr. Kaminov and Pimstoke looked at him distastefully.

“Yes,” sighed Pimstoke, with a shake of his head, “I’m afraid so. Through the most beguiling of coincidences, I happened upon this gentleman in the hallway of this building. He was at the moment of our proximate passage mumbling—albeit tunelessly—a vulgar chorus from one of the *Zigeunerlieder*, in plain Romany. I addressed him and through a series of questions verified not only that he spoke Russian and a smidgeon of Romany, but also that he was willing—indeed, eager—to perform any duty that would gain him entry into the apartment of the ‘nice lady widow,’ though I confess that his motives in this desire were and still are an *utter* mystery to me.”

“Just nice visit,” whined Mr. Muskaivitch with a pout. I brushed his hand off my sleeve.

“So,” said Mr. Kaminov, glaring alternately at Pimstoke and Mr. Muskaivitch. “So. You taught him his lines—or line—and dressed him . . .”

“Rather difficult, that, as Milos made off with his costume.”

“. . . packed him into the cabinet, and carted him in here moments before I arrived.”

“Exactly, sir. And had he not breached his simplest of instructions and obruded himself into your *finale* as a crude response to this subject’s foolish scream . . .”

“Yes, yes, enough, enough,” sighed Mr. Kaminov. He shook his head at Mr. Muskaivitch, who by now was at the sink, sticking his fingers curiously into the *Capers Kaminov* pot and licking them loudly. We all watched him for several moments, until he sensed our eyes and looked around, dropping the pot in embarrassment. Pimstoke clucked his tongue.

“I apologize for the lapse in judgment, sir,” he said quietly. “Now, if that is all, I will resume my supervision of . . .”

“Just a moment!” boomed Mr. Kaminov, and Pimstoke dropped his hand from the door and stood stiffly. “Just a moment. Possibly a very long moment for you, Pimstoke. I have some uncomfortable inquiries to make of you. For in her recitation of perfectly valid woes a few minutes ago, this lady unwittingly revealed several curious ignorances that do not fit with my conception of what she was supposed to be, and what my presence here was supposed to betoken. I suspect that all discrepancies point to you, and I want to know all. First, she indicated clearly that tonight’s festivities came as a surprise to her; yet I wrote her a detailed personal explanation of what she was to expect, and made you responsible for conveying the letter. Now, did you mislay or suppress . . .”

“But that letter was in *Russian!*” I said.

Pimstoke coughed into his fist. Mr. Kaminov looked at me, puzzled.

“So you *did* receive it?”

“Sure, I got it. But a fat lot of *good* it did me!”

Mr. Muskaivitch whimpered. “Dear nice lady, why you did not come to *me* for nice translation and music?”

Mr. K. waved him silent, and stared at me. “Do you mean to tell me . . . that you do not read Russian?”

I snorted out a sarcastic little laugh. “Pardon me for being so inexcusably ignorant, but *yes*, that’s *exactly* what I mean to tell you. Hard as it may be for you three fellows to believe, there’s a whole *country* out there that doesn’t read Russian!”

Mr. Kaminov took this in, staring at me blankly. Then he slowly turned to look at Pimstoke, but I could see that a little of his fire was gone—the news that I didn’t speak Russian was so surprising that shock replaced some of the anger he had been working on. He spoke to me again while looking at the butler.

“Pardon me, my dear hostess. There has apparently been some . . . deception. Has there not, Pimstoke? I . . . you see, *Prin . . . Madame*, I arrived here this evening under the belief that you were an accomplished scholar of Russian literature, who had won an evening with your humble servant by writing a superb essay on my first six novels.”

“*What?*”

“That is correct, is it not, Pimstoke? The first six? Did you not tell me exactly that? I believe the title of the essay was ‘Self to Self: the *Doppelgänger* Motif and Negative Capability in the Early Fiction of Anatoly Kaminov,’ wasn’t it, Pimstoke? One of eight prizewinning Kaminov studies in a contest conducted by a major American publisher collecting material for an anthology? Yes?”

Pimstoke did not move, so I answered.

“As a matter of fact, the contest was put on by the Chumley Caper Company and I won this . . . *performance* with a piece entitled ‘What the Caper Means to Me.’”

Mr. Kaminov gaped. “What the Caper . . .” he mumbled. He was really knocked out of the sky now. His mouth moved and his forehead knotted up.

Pimstoke cleared his throat again. “If I may, sir . . .”

“Comely Caper Company . . .”

“Actually sir, the name is Chumley, Chumley Caper Company. The capers you used this evening were Chumley capers. That, of course, is requisite.”

“Prizewinning essays . . .”

“Yes sir, eight of them.”

“Eminent scholars . . .”

“Ah, well, on that point sir, I fear I must offer a correction. In fact, the lion’s share of the prizewinners have been elderly women of no particular intelligence with nothing better to do than enter ludicrous contests . . .”

“Caper company . . .”

“That’s right sir, the Chumley Caper Company. Sponsors of the essay contest, the prize of which was a romantic evening with a suave foreign author, who would winsomely prepare a terribly fancy favorite dish made, incidentally, with capers . . .”

“. . . my recondite chats with these women, my intense exegesis of my work . . .”

“Pearls before swine sir, if I may use an old metaphor. I’m afraid none of them knew a *leitmotif* from a table lamp. Let me explain. It’s really rather simple, though I’m afraid that the simplicity of the truth will throw into rather ornate relief the misconception under which you have been laboring. But that, as they say, is show business.”

Mr. K. was standing with his arms limp at his sides, his shoulders rounded, his neck slack. He stared at Pimstoke and listened without a twitch.

“It began a bit less than a year ago. You may recall an interview which you gave to *Paris-Match*, an interview that was picked up by a stringer in Paris who worked for one of those publication companies whose magazines cover a wide spectrum of the mindless page-flipping populace of this country. The article was translated, edited and reprinted with a handsome photo of you in one of the publisher’s more idiotic women’s magazines. These are silly things read mostly by eager females like this person; they contain romantic stories, gossip, misleading profiles (such as the story on you), and various household hints.”

Mr. Kaminov sputtered a protest. “But I recall that interview for the Paris reporter! It was highly literary, too forbiddingly erudite for such a magazine as you describe.”

Pimstoke cocked an eyebrow and held up his hand. “Ah, but sir, you reckon without the adroitness of the American editors, who could take a report of casualties on the Autobahn and make it seem an exotic Old German folk tale of high love and redemption. In any case, the article focused on the more superficial of your utterances, one of which was the revelation that your favorite ‘dish’ was a concoction made with—capers.”

“Capers,” Mr. Kaminov repeated rather stupidly.

“Exactly. This reference somehow came to the attention of an executive at the Chumley Caper Company. The ability of these Americans to root up any little thing that might be used to advantage is truly astonishing! In this case, I, as your major domo, received a proposal from the executive that was aimed at pulling the caper trade out of what I gather was a recent slump, through a new advertising promotion. The promotion that the man proposed was one in which testimonial essays would be solicited over a prize offer of the remarkable evening of foreign attention that I mentioned before—and that you, in fact, have given to five of the contest winners.”

Mr. Kaminov was quite horrified, and stood with his hands fluttering and his face going from dark pink to soapy white. “I . . . I . . . I . . .”

“Naturally I was well aware of your profound opposition to things commercial, and frankly I thought the whole idea was inconceivably stupid. I wrote the caper magnate that your services were not available. He wrote back insistently. I replied again in the negative. He telephoned, and followed the calls up with flattering offers.” Here Pimstoke sighed. “I’m afraid, sir, that he quite wore me down with his intrigues and his propositions. One of his ideas was that you could be included in his designs *in camera obscura* as it were, if you believed that you were participating in a stipendary search for literary scholarship relative to your work, and that your culinary performances were special little humanizing bestowals on otherwise abstracted scholars who, because of their concentration on your *oeuvre*, were generally deprived of such social pleasantries.”

“But . . . you mean . . . all those lovely essay titles . . . ‘Laughing With Both I’s Open: A Study of Kaminov’s First-Person Irony’ . . . ‘Kaminov, the Picaresque Identity’ . . . ‘Necktie Symbolism in the Novels *En Passant* and *Prolepsis in Montenegro*’ . . .”

“Ah, writers is it?” said Mr. Muskaivitch. “I tell you writers. In Russia was great Count Tolstoy . . .”

“Alas, sir, all of the titles were entirely fictive. In fact, they were of my own invention . . . and not without a certain cleverness, if I may say so. I was aided in my composition of them by your own occasional complaints about aspects of your work that had been overlooked by critics and scholars. In any case, with my assistance Mr. Chumley designed a series of advertisements and placed them in the low-minded homebody magazines, where persons such as this subject could ogle your elegant countenance above the legend ‘*Let me show you the exotic secrets of capers . . .*’”

Mr. Kaminov groaned. After a moment, he asked in a small voice, “Do you mean then that the collection of these essays, *Kaminov: Prospectives on a Modern Master*, is . . . will not appear in print?”

“I fear not, sir.”

“But these women . . . they all had such appropriate surroundings, so many trappings of the studious Russophile, the first editions of my early works . . .”

“Oh, you *horrid* deceiver,” I hissed at Pimstoke.

He flicked his eyes at me and twitched the corner of his mouth upward. “I am terribly sorry to disillusion you abruptly, sir, but in fact the articles to which you refer are stage properties deposited in the target residences shortly before your arrival. While you believed that I and the crew were merely bringing in the dazzling kitchen paraphernalia, the truth is that we were strewing things Russian around so as to imply the personae you expected in your hostesses.”

“I do not believe you!” gasped Mr. Kaminov.

“That is, of course, your prerogative. However, to verify my revelation, you need only take a look at the living room of this apartment in”—and here

Pimstoke glanced at a watch pulled partway out of his vest pocket—“exactly eleven minutes. At that time, believing that your evening has gone smoothly and that you have departed, the crew will attack the task of restoring this person’s gewgaws to their former tackiness. The objects you no doubt admired upon entry will be packed off and redistributed for our next engagement.”

“But those Nicholas II chairs . . .”

“Fakes.”

“. . . the Barizinovs!”

“Painted, with a modicum of imitative talent, by the commercial artist who sketches the scenes of Mediterranean vegetation for the labels of Chumley Caper bottles.”

“The copy of *How Mimetic the Moth!*”

“Checked out of the public library—the only such withdrawal in 21 years, I’m afraid—in Brooklyn, where a former librarian must have had an eye for emigré obscurities. Oh, it’s no good trying to resist, sir; everything is illusory.”

Pimstoke stood stiffly, staring straight ahead, but with a new sort of silent superiority. Mr. Kaminov shook his head and tried to speak. Mr. Muskaivitch had returned to the sink to pick at the pot with a spoon he had discovered in a drawer.

“How much, Pimstoke?” I said.

He glanced at me. “I *beg* your pardon?” he said haughtily, as if he hoped I would change my mind about addressing him.

“How much did the company pay you for this trick?”

He shifted his gaze back to the air in front of his face, and made no move to answer.

“Yes,” said Mr. Kaminov. “How much . . . how much made you do this?”

“I received half of the stipend originally offered for your services alone.”

“Get out,” I said.

“I *beg* your . . .”

“Get out! Get out of my apartment!”

He smirked. “You can hardly hope to evict . . .”

“Mr. Muskaivitch,” I said, snapping my fingers.

“Hmm?” he said, dropping the pan and spoon into the sink and rushing over, wiping his hand on his shirt.

“Do you want to do me a favor?”

“I have that honor,” he said, bowing.

“Then remove this man from my apartment.” I pointed at Pimstoke.

“He has offended you?”

“Horribly.”

“Then he shall select his seconds and to meet me at . . .”

“Just get him *out!*” I yelled, stamping my foot. Mr. Muskaivitch jumped and made a dash for Pimstoke, but the butler was too quick and slipped out

the door ahead of him. I heard Mr. Muskaivitch cursing him in Russian as they ran through the living room and out into the hallway of the building.

Mr. Kaminov and I just stood there while the kitchen door swung itself down to stillness. Then he slumped silently back against the window sill and looked at the floor.

"I'm really sorry," I said.

He shrugged.

"But you know, it really doesn't make any difference—the evening was charming and the *Capers Kaminov* was terrific!"

He snorted sardonically. "Hah. Some terrific. You are even still *hungry*. You—no one—can be satiated by my little tricks with 'aesthetic bliss.' Oh . . ." He dropped his face into his hands and moaned.

I rubbed my hands together and walked over to the Frigidaire. "Well," I said cheerily, "nothing in the world is easier to correct than hunger. Look," I said, pulling open the box, "we've got some tuna-noodle casserole leftovers, a jar of Harriet Tomkin's green tomato relish that she is so proud of but which frankly leaves my tongue curled, and—what's this?—oh, baked beans. There are two bagels. A stick of oleo. Half a pitcher of orange juice."

I looked at him expectantly, but he only moaned more deeply.

"I know what you mean," I said, nodding. "Leftovers are just not very exciting, certainly not worthy of a great emigré . . ."

He made a gallant effort to respond to my compliment, and said, "Nor worthy of a great essayist. I'm certain that your composition, within the limitations of the assigned theme, was a work of admirable inventiveness and exactitude."

"Thanks!" I said. "Sure! This is still a celebration of what a smarty I am. I am a *prizewinner*, after all, and you are a *prize*. We have to treat ourselves with the proper respect and style, even if nobody else has the class to do so." I opened the crisper. "Hey—how about some burgers?"

"*Burgers?*" he said, making a funny puzzled face as he tried the word.

"Sure! Look, I've got two pounds of fresh ground chuck. And the best burger recipe in New York. My husband, late husband, his name was Herb, demanded that I make him these burgers three nights a week. Believe me, they satisfy."

"Fine," he said, getting a little pitiful again. He waved his hand meekly in my direction. "Go ahead. Make them. I'm certain they will be lovely." He slumped back and started to withdraw into his misery.

"All right, but you can't just sit there taking it easy."

He looked up grumpily. "I can't?"

"No! You have to help me."

"Help? With . . . *burgers?*"

"That's what's on the menu."

"But . . . I've never even *eaten* anything called a 'burger,' much less prepared one."

“Well, then you’ll have to display admirable inventiveness and exactitude within the limitations of the assigned tasks. Here, put on your apron. Where did those goons stick my seasonings? Ah, good, here they are. Okay. Take this chopping board and this knife, and dice these onions.”

“Dice? Do you mean *mince*?”

“No, I mean *dice*. Mince is too small—bigger, like this. There you go. That’s good. Keep it up.”

He cut for a minute while I unwrapped the meat and dumped it into a bowl. I snuck a look at him—he was feeling a little better, concentrating on getting the onions just right. After a minute he spoke.

“Excuse me, but you mentioned that a recipe exists for this preparation?”

“Yes indeed. It was handed down to me by my mother-law.”

“Do you think that I might be allowed to peruse it? I believe my . . . piecework would be smoother if I was able to apprehend exactly how it was to be integrated into the whole process.”

“Sure thing.” I found my recipe box and pulled out the ancient card on which Herb’s mother had written the recipe. It was yellow with age, and the ink that had been blue 45 years ago was a thin gray now. I hadn’t used the recipe for 44-plus of those years, of course—it’s not a complicated dish, and I memorized it after the first week of my marriage.

“Here,” I said, propping it in front of Mr. Kaminov. He read it eagerly.

Burgers

Take these things:

2 lbs ground chuck
1/2 cup of seasoned bread crumbs
2 onions
1 egg
salt and pepper

Do this:

- 1. Mix everything up.*
- 2. Make patties.*
- 3. Broil them.*

“Ah,” he said, nodding rapidly. “Good, thank you. Excellent. I feel much better knowing that I am responsible for the main element of seasoning, as I believe you call it. Fine. Here—how do these onions look?”

“Great. I think we’re all set. Here we go, we dump them in here, see, and add the crumbs, good. Then we crack an egg, ooh I always feel a little creepy mixing eggs and meat, you know? Anyway, then a pinch or two of salt and some pepper, and *voila*.”

“Yes. I see. *Voila* indeed.” He stared at my hands as I started to make the first patty. “Excuse me,” he said, “but I wonder . . .”

“Yes?”

“Do you think I might be able to compose a few of those?”

“Sure,” I said, “do them all.” I stepped away from the bowl. He nodded, frowned in concentration, held his hands above the bowl, rubbing his fingers together.

“Right,” he said, nodding. Then he plunged in. Five minutes later we had six perfect patties.

I arranged them on a broiler pan, with Mr. Kaminov looking over my shoulder to make sure the shape of his patties was not damaged in the transfer from the counter top. When I carried the pan to the oven, he turned away, as if he couldn’t bear to see his handiwork put to the flame. I knew how he felt—I took a pottery class in night school just after Herb died, but I had to quit because I wouldn’t let the teacher stick any of my ashtrays and pencil holders into the kiln.

I had just closed the oven door when Mr. Kaminov spoke.

“Excuse me again,” he said. I looked up, and saw him holding a bottle of Tabasco sauce and peering at it with a sly smile.

“Yes?”

“I . . . I seem to be an incorrigible tamperer, but . . . Well, I wonder how it would be . . . do you think perhaps we ought to see how the . . . *burgers* might taste with a dash of this curious compound on them?”

“Good idea!” I said. I opened the oven and slid the shelf out a way. “But make it a small dash.”

Muttering “Tabasco, Tabasco” under his breath, he carefully dotted the sauce onto each patty. He held the bottle as if it were a fountain pen, but he got exactly one drop in the center of each burger.

We waited a few minutes. He was a little nervous. When the burgers came out he got tremendously excited, and when we actually sat down and tasted them he was ecstatic. I had poured us some sherry, and he kept raising his glass to toast our success: “*Prinzessa*, I give you—the *burger!*”

He ate four of them, without buns.

When we had finished, he sat frowning a little, staring at the fork he pushed nervously through the juice on his plate. I didn’t know what was the matter but I wasn’t going to ask. Finally he said:

“*Prinzessa*. A question.”

“Yes? You’d like another burger?”

“No, no,” he said seriously, shaking his head. “I’d like to know something.”

“Shoot,” I said, pouring more sherry.

“Very well. I am wondering . . . I mean . . . well, do you think that perhaps the customary excellence of these burgers—and I do not doubt, coming as they do from a great family legacy, that they are *always* delectable—that the

customary excellence might, in this preparation tonight, have been . . . well, if not *improved* then perhaps *augmented*. . .”

“Yes?”

“. . . by the touch of sauce that we added at my instigation?”

He glanced at me seriously, and then looked down at his fork. I smiled. He looked up again, and watched me as I went over to the counter and got the recipe card. I gestured for his pen, and he awkwardly pulled it out and uncapped it for me hastily. As he watched, I drew an arrow pointing between steps 2 and 3 in the recipe, and beside the arrow I wrote:

2a. Shake a drop of Tabasco onto each patty.

Then at the top of the recipe I added a word to the title, so that the whole card was now headed:

Burgers Anatoly

“Sign it,” I said, handing him the pen. He looked at me, took the pen, looked at the card. He looked back at me and I nodded. Then he circled the pen in the air above the card a couple of times, getting a rhythm going, and then swirled it through the butterfly signature in the top corner. I took the card, waved it dry, and stuck it in the frame over part of the *Capers Kaminov* recipe.

When I turned back, he had stood up.

“I ought to go,” he said. “I am most grateful . . .”

“So am I,” I said. “My burgers will never be the same.”

He nodded, shrugged, and grinned. We walked out through the living room (where, sure enough, all of my furniture was back in place) and opened the door. After he put on his cape, he took my hand and looked at me. His face was clear and kind and pure, like he had been over his old book. He made a small bow and said something in Russian.

“That reminds me!” I said, withdrawing my hand from his. “Wait a sec!”

I ran over to my hutch, and found the barrel lid. I ran back to the door and held it out to him.

“You ought to have a souvenir too,” I said.

He took the piece of wood lightly in both hands, wrinkled his forehead, and read through the letters. He mumbled a couple of Russian syllables, looked up at me, and then translated it aloud.

“Word . . . *wordfish*. Hah!” He chuckled. “Yes! I thank you, *Prinzessa*. I will hang this outside the door of my study, like the shingle of an attorney.” He smiled at the board again, and then tucked it under his cape. He took my hand and brushed the back of it with his lips, bowed again, and with a last kind look, swirled away down the dim corridor.

The next day I received my dictionary of Irish slang, and my platter with the portraits of Martin Luther King and Lyndon B. Johnson.