

KATURIAN. No.

TUPOLSKI. It isn't illegal, you read *The Libertad*.

KATURIAN. I know. Nor if you have a story published in it. I know.

TUPOLSKI. It has your theme. *(Pause.)* Did they give you themes, *The Libertad*? Like, "Write a story about a pony," or, "Write a story about some little kid who gets totally fucked up." Did they do that?

KATURIAN. They just gave a word-count thing. The maximum words.

TUPOLSKI. It was a theme of your own choosing?

KATURIAN. It was a theme of my own choosing. *(Tupolski hands Katurian the story.)*

TUPOLSKI. Read it to me.

KATURIAN. The whole of it?

TUPOLSKI. The whole of it. Standing. *(Katurian stands.)*

KATURIAN. This feels like school, somehow.

TUPOLSKI. Mm. Except at school they didn't execute you at the end. *(Pause.)* Unless you went to a really fucking tough school. *(Pause, then Katurian reads the story, enjoying his own words, its details and its twists.)*

KATURIAN. *(Pause.)* Um, "Once upon a time in a tiny cobbled-streeted town on the banks of a fast-flowing river, there lived a little boy who did not get along with the other children of the town; they picked on and bullied him because he was poor and his parents were drunkards and his clothes were rags and he walked around barefoot. The little boy, however, was of a happy and dreamy disposition, and he did not mind the taunts and the beatings and the unending solitude. He knew that he was kind-hearted and full of love and that someday someone somewhere would see this love inside him and repay him in kind. Then, one night, as he sat nursing his newest bruises at the foot of the wooden bridge that crossed the river and led out of town, he heard the approach of a horse and cart along the dark, cobbled street, and as it neared he saw that its driver was dressed in the darkest of robes, the black hood of which bathed his craggy face in shadow and sent a shiver of fear through the little boy's body. Putting his fear aside, the boy took out the small sandwich that was to be his supper that night and, just as the cart was about to pass onto and over the bridge, he offered it up to the hooded driver to see if he would like some. The cart stopped, the driver nodded, got down and sat beside the little boy for a while, sharing the sandwich and discussing this and that. The driver asked the boy why he was barefoot and ragged and all

alone, and as the boy told the driver of his poor, hard life, he eyed the back of the driver's cart; it was piled high with small, empty animal cages, all foul-smelling and dirt-lined, and just as the boy was about to ask what kind of animals it was had been inside them, the driver stood up and announced that he had to be on his way. "But before I go," the driver whispered, "because you have been so kindly to an old weary traveller in offering half of your already meagre portions, I would like to give you something now, the worth of which today you may not realise, but one day, when you are a little older, perhaps, I think you will truly value and thank me for. Now close your eyes." And so the little boy did what he was told and closed his eyes, and from a secret inner pocket of his robes the driver pulled out a long, sharp and shiny meat cleaver, raised it high in the air and brought it scything down onto the boy's right foot, severing all five of his muddy little toes. And as the little boy sat there in gaping silent shock, staring blankly off into the distance at nothing in particular, the driver gathered up his bloody toes, tossed them away to the gaggle of rats that had begun to gather in the gutters, got back onto his cart, and quietly rode on over the bridge, leaving the boy, the rats, the river and the darkening town of Hamelin far behind him." *(Looks at Tupolski for any response, giving him back the story, sitting back down.)* Of Hamelin, see?

TUPOLSKI. Of Hamelin.

KATURIAN. Do you get it? The little boy is the little crippled boy who can't keep up when the Pied Piper comes back to take all the children away. That's how he was crippled.

TUPOLSKI. I know that.

KATURIAN. It's a twist.

TUPOLSKI. I know it's a twist.

KATURIAN. It's the children he was after.

TUPOLSKI. It's the children who was after?

KATURIAN. It's the children the Pied Piper was after. To begin with. My idea was he *brought* the rats. He *brought* the rats. He knew the townspeople wouldn't pay. It was the children he was after in the first place.

TUPOLSKI. *(Nods. Pause.)* This reminds me. *(Goes to the filing cabinet, takes out a metal box the size of a biscuit tin, then sits back down with it, placing it on the table between them.)*

KATURIAN. What? Oh, "This reminds you." When it hasn't reminded you of anything. *(Tupolski stares at him.)* What's in the box? *(Sound of a man screaming hideously a few rooms away. Katurian stands,*