

5 “WELL, boys, we’ve spent the past two years together. Very soon the bell will ring and it’ll be time to say good-bye.”

I’ve handed the reports out. Martinelli’s passed. He could hardly believe his eyes when he saw his marks. This morning, his mother carefully combed his hair, making him wear a new tie that looks like an enormous white butterfly.

10 Crippa has also got through – that tall, 13 year- old with hairy legs who is forever falling asleep and who’ll continue to fall asleep next year also.

The only one to have failed is Antonelli, a boy who has spent the whole year carving his surname on the desk with a penknife; but he’s so slow that he got only as far as Anton. Next year, under a new teacher, he’ll get round to writing elli.

15 Manili used to be a small boy whose new smock reached his toes. Now, it barely covers his knees. Spadoni used to tell tales when he came into my class two years ago; now, he would be ashamed to do so.

20 When the bell rings, you’ll go away, boys, and we’ll never see each other again because I’m leaving teaching and moving to another city. I open the drawer to hand back everything I’ve confiscated during this year: Giordani’s water pistol, Spadoni’s caps, Manili’s top and Danieli’s five very common Swiss stamps, which he believes to be of great value.

The street must be full of relatives. You can hear the buzz of voices. Spadoni’s grandmother must be there, an old lady who says “thank you, thank you, sir” and tries to kiss my hand each time she sees me.

25 Giordani’s father must be there, too, a sturdy, little man who greets me even when he’s a hundred metres away. At the beginning of the year, whenever I told him that his son wasn’t working, he’d grab the boy by the ear and drag him home. But this morning, Giordani is happy because he’s passed and, for the first time in nine months, his father won’t pull his ears.

30 “Be good and carry on working hard, because your teachers at high school will be far more strict. I’ll always remember you. Everything I’ve taught you has come from the heart. Don’t forget this.”

Martinelli, his eyes brimming with tears, comes towards me. All the others follow, crowding around my desk.

“I confiscated your top, Manili; your Swiss stamps, Danieli; Giordani, I’m sorry that everyday your father pulled your ears because of me.”

- 5     Giordani’s eyes begin to fill up with tears, too. “It doesn’t matter, sir. I’ve got a corn there now.” He comes near to let me feel it.

“Me, too,” says Spadoni, drawing close. It isn’t true, of course; it’s just that he, too, wants to be patted before going.

They all press around my desk.

- 10    Each one of them has something to show me, an excuse to come close; a painful finger, a burn, a scar under his hair.

“It was me, sir,” sobs Martinelli, “who put the lizard in your drawer.”

“I,” says Spadoni, “used to make that trumpeting noise at the back of the classroom.”

“Do it now, Spadoni,” he asked.

- 15    And Spadoni, puffing out his tear-marked cheeks, makes that mysterious noise. I hadn’t been able to make out all year who was responsible for it.

“Well done, Spadoni,” I say, and I stroke his hair.

“Me, too. I know how to do it, too.”

“Me, too, sir.”

- 20    “Go on then, all of you do it.”

And so, squeezed tightly against me like younger brothers, they puff out their cheeks in all seriousness and make a trumpeting noise, a noise of farewell.

Just then, the bell rings, its ringing coming up from the courtyard, spreading through the corridors and going into all the classes.

- 25    Martinelli leaps up, hugs and kisses me on the cheek, leaving it covered with toffee marks. They hold on to my hands, my jacket. Danieli puts the Swiss stamps into my pocket and Spadoni, the caps.

The bell is still ringing and the other classes are already on their way.

“This is it, boys. We must go. ”

5 I should make them walk in a line, but it’s impossible. We practically run, all the boys around me. But as soon as we reach the street, the boys disappear, as though into thin air. Their mothers, fathers, grandmothers and elder sisters have all taken them away and I am left standing on the threshold alone, dishevelled and with a button missing from my jacket. Who could have taken it? And my cheek is still dirty with toffee marks.

10 Good-bye, school. When, after a long time I come back, I’ll find other teachers who won’t know me. What excuse will I find to go back to the old classroom, to open that drawer where Martinelli had put the lizard?

15 But I have been able to hang on to something: Danieli’s Swiss stamps and Spadoni’s caps; and Martinelli has been able to keep something, too, for it can only have been him who tore the button off my jacket. As soon as I get home, if there’s one thing I’ll regret doing, it’ll be having to wash the toffee marks off my cheek.