

Boys Don't Read

by

Nicola Cinquetti

English translation by Vanessa Di Stefano

Giunti Editore is a member of IBBY Italia
Reading to grow freely

Support IBBY Italia, children's books, reading and the
right to become readers.
www.ibbyitalia.it

The quotes in this volume from Moby Dick are taken from
Moby Dick or The Whale by Herman Melville
© 2009 Gutenberg Project EBook #2701
(<https://www.istat.it/en/files/2010/09/Moby-Dick-Or-the-Whale-by-Herman-Melville.html>)

Graphic design of the series: Clara Battello Text: Nicola
Cinquetti
Page layout: Sara Storari Editorial: Veronica Fantini
Cover illustration: Michele Bruttomesso

www.giunti.it

© 2019 Giunti Editore S.p.A.
Via Bolognese 165 – 50139 Florence – Italia Piazza Virgilio 4
– 20123 Milan – Italy
ISBN 9788809891913
1st digital edition: September 2019

They sit next to each other, in a circle, without saying a single word. They're about to do something very serious, judging by the look on their faces, even if they seem torn: something attracts them but something also repels them.

"Are you ready?" one of them asks, the youngest.

They answer with a nod: they're ready.

"Well then, let's begin."

CHAPTER I

AN INFALLIBLE METHOD

“Boys don’t read,” the headmaster said, resting his arms on the sturdy armrests of his velvet armchair.

The teacher, Dante Dindoli, on the other side of the desk, knits his eyebrows.

“That’s a good one! And why do you say that?”

“That’s the way the boys in the 5th grade, class F, are. They don’t read books at all. Ever. They hate reading. Or rather, theirs is not really a hatred, but a kind of allergy. If a teacher picks up a book and simply says: ‘This is a nice book, I’m sure you’ll like it’, they feel a shudder of nausea flow through their veins and spread all over their body, right down to the last capillary. And really, how can you blame them? If you feel sick, you feel sick. There are those who can’t eat cheese, those who can’t stand strawberries, those erupt in red spots for merely touching a single peanut... Of course, we can’t say that the boys in the other classes read a lot, but in your new class, Mr Dindoli, the boys don’t read anything, ever, and there is nothing to be done. On the other hand, the girls are true devourers of books, they’re skilled and passionate, if that’s any consolation. There’s one in particular that...”

“I’m so sorry if I interrupt you, Headmaster,” the teacher says, “I don’t want to sound presumptuous, but if things are as you say, then I really am the ideal teacher for this class as I specialized in Reading Education, I’ve written numerous articles on How to turn children who don’t want to read into excellent readers, and I have developed an infallible method that has been studied in several European countries. There is even a school in Liechtenstein...”

“Interesting, interesting,” the headmaster comments, “but it won’t do any good. The boys in 5F don’t read and never will read, and you can’t do anything about it. But the girls...”

“I’m sorry if I interrupt you again, Headmaster, but the child who is able to resist my method is yet to exist. I understand you being dubious, but I really think that in the end you’ll have to change your mind: I’ll surprise you, you’ll see!”

The headmaster shakes his head and grimaces slightly. In the eyes of Mr Dindoli, on the other hand, the light of certainty shines.

It’s ten in the morning and Alessandro, known as Dribbling, gets out of bed and grabs his mobile phone. They call him that because he’s a big fan of football. He sleeps hugging a leather ball signed ‘CR7’ and dreams of being a footballer when he grows up. To begin with, he has stuck a tattoo of a shark with its mouth wide open to his right calf. A fake tattoo, of course, one of those stuck on with water that start to fade after three days. But he bought ten of them, all identical, and every three days he sticks on a new one.

See you in the park in an hour for a last game?

He sends the message and runs to the bathroom, meanwhile seven mobile phones in seven different parts of the city emit seven different beeps at the same time.

The seven recipients have just woken up and have not yet fully opened their eyes to the day. Most of them are in the kitchen, in front of a cup of milk and chocolate powder overflowing with cornflakes, and they’re complaining because there is nothing in the fridge, just milk, butter, jams, fruit juices, yoghurt, yoghurt + cereals, spreadable cheese...in short, nothing. One is sitting on the toilet, trying to go up another level in a game where an ape must build a pyramid. Another is still snuggled in bed, but he can be forgiven because this September morning, buffeted by gusts of wind, it is the last morning of the holidays. His mother woke him up a short while ago with the most macabre of sentences.

“Come on, Ugo, you have to finish your holiday homework.”

“Finish? But I haven’t even started it yet!”

Mr Dindoli's apartment is located on the third floor of a condominium in Via dei Rusteghi. A back road with little traffic and a bar. The teacher quickly climbs the stairs and yanks open his front door, giving two sharp swipes of his feet on the doormat. There is a smell of putrid water and dead sea coming from the turtle aquarium, but the teacher doesn't even smell it: he turns on the lights and runs into the studio to look for textbooks about teaching reading.

He's certain he'll find them straight away, because the books are arranged in alphabetical order in his large bookcase: at the top left is the shelf for arithmetic books; on the other side, at the bottom right, that for the zoology books. The same order is also followed within the shelves themselves, so that the Liechtenstein tourist guide is located between the guides for Libya and Lithuania. The last corner, at the bottom right, is occupied by a zoology treatise on zebus.

Mr Dante loves to do things methodically.

He glances at the arithmetic books, to check that everything is in order, and reads the first title: Zebras, living in stripes. He punches the bookcase, exasperated, and a cloud of dust rises. He breathes deeply a couple of times to regain his calm, but it makes him sneeze, because of the dust. Bad. The search has started badly. He moves across, to the letter R, where the shelf dedicated to reading is located. The shelf is there, marked by the scrawled handwritten label, but the books are not there. More punches, more clouds of dust, more sneezing.

Mr Dindoli loves to do things methodically, but he's not very tidy.

The search continues for two hours and fifty-nine minutes, with no results. At the stroke of the third hour the teacher feels his head spinning and he can no longer stay on his feet. He sits on the ground with his knees trembling, and then he realizes that instead of a leg of the desk, which broke a few months ago, there is a stack of books, the first of which is entitled: Reading education: a matter of method. Found them.

In the middle of the Colombe park, a large park full of paths and flowerbeds without a blade of grass, there is a small football field. It is here that the eight boys from 5F have met, as usual. Only the Hungarian is missing, who said he'd be a bit late, but the others are all there: Arturo, the 'Moor', Felipito, Amelio, Dribbling, Leonardo and Paolon.

Dribbling is raring to go.

"Can't we start anyway?"

"He said he'd be right here," replied Arturo.

"But can't we start anyway?"

"Warm up a little bit."

Dribbling gets off the bench and goes into the middle of the field. The ball is not the one signed 'CR7', because that one, which is sacred and untouchable, never comes out of his room. The ball is one of those plastic ones, white with black pentagons, and since it is very light, it flies away here and there, buffeted by the wind. It doesn't matter: Dribbling begins to dribble and manages sixty kicks before the ball falls to the ground.

"Szia!" cries Ugo, who everyone has called 'the Hungarian' since he took a vacation in Budapest and learned to say 'hello' in that language. "I have great news!"

"Tell us later!" shouts Dribbling from the field. "Come and play!"

"What news?" Arturo asks instead.

"I met the Headmaster."

At a nod from Arturo, everyone gathers around the newcomer, including Dribbling, who grumbles a bit. Soft, round and easy-going, Arturo doesn't really look like a leader, but he's the one who knows more than the others how to make himself heard by the group of boys.

"Tell us everything."

"I met him just now on the road leading to the school. He recognized me and said: 'I spoke to your new teacher this morning. He's a tough guy. He's convinced that he'll be able to make you read

so many great books and that he'll make you become avid readers. He says he's got a foolproof method. Good luck!"

It's hard-hitting news. Paolon has a cough attack.

"Should we burn this new teacher right away, or cook him slowly over a low heat?" asked the Hungarian.

"Slowly, like a rabbit," replied Arturo.

Everyone agreed. The wind whistles between the plants in the park and messes up the hair that none of them has combed this morning. It is certainly not the best day of the year, this day of September that takes away all the summer holidays, but the news has given them a breath of joy.

"So? Shall we split into teams?" puffs Dribbling, "or should we sit on the benches and read a book?"

CHAPTER 2

ALL TOO EASY

At eight o'clock on Wednesday, September 12, the children of the elementary school Massimo D'Azeglio wait in the school yard for the headmaster, who, from the top of the steps will give the opening speech for the beginning of the new school year. The twenty students from 5F have gathered slightly apart from the others, close to the cypresses. They observe the group of teachers with great curiosity, and have no difficulty in recognizing their new teacher, because he is the only male.

"Pah! He looks just like a rabbit!" laughs the Hungarian.

Mr Dindoli, in fact, has slightly longer ears than other human beings, a sharp face and two prominent incisors.

"Yes" confirms the Moor. "Bugs Bunny's brother."

"We'll cook him through and through, that rabbit" murmurs Arturo. The newcomer is also at the centre of the attention of his colleagues, who shake his hand and welcome him.

"Pleasure, Dindoli" he repeats moving his head up and down.

"Are you the one who thinks he can turn the boys of 5F into readers?" asks the teacher called Iris with a mischievous smile.

"Exactly!" the teacher replies irritably.

"And since you are so informed, dear colleague, you will also know that I invented an infallible method that has aroused much interest in various European countries, for example in Liechtenstein, and that I have published several articles on the importance of books in the age of the develop..bla bla bla bla bla..."

Iris keeps that unpleasant little smile and doesn't listen to a single word her colleague is spouting, but simply studies the features of his face.

"He really is ugly!" she thinks to herself.

The headmaster appears at 8:05. He welcomes the 1st grade students and their parents, greets all the others and introduces the new teacher, who shakes his hand with a bow. After that, the Headmaster himself reads out the names of the students, class by class, in alphabetical order, from 1A to 5F. Once called, the students enter the school accompanied by their teachers.

Gradually the yard empties out. Last to leave, the 5F boys line up behind their new teacher and silently climb the stairs to the second floor, where their classroom is located.

“First of all we’ll introduce ourselves” begins Mr Dindoli with his voice catching a little on the emotion. “My name is Dante Dindoli, but you will simply call me Mr Dante, or teacher. Even if I don’t like the word ‘teacher’, because a teacher is one who teaches, while I always prefer to learn, especially from my students. That’s why I feel more like a student than a teacher. A student of my students, if you will permit me the play on words. And now we’ll have the rollcall, because I am anxious to meet you.”

Sitting in front of Dante, the twenty students of 5F look like little angels fallen from the sky onto the school desks: motionless, attentive and silent. Their attention, however, is not on the words of their teacher, but on that sort of tattoo he has on his left forearm. It looks like Dribbling’s one – the wide open mouth of a shark – but the design is not clear and the children are doubtful: what is it? A constellation? A chain? Or just a squiggle?

“This certainly is a very well-behaved class,” the teacher thinks. “It’s going to be too easy!”

Everyone is present for the rollcall.

“Wonderful. Regular attendance is the basis for any school success. Now let’s talk about books and reading.”

Here we go. While a smile spreads over Dante’s elongated face, a sense of nausea spreads among the eight boys in the class, even if the worst hit of all is undoubtedly Paolo, known as Paolon, a tall and

robust boy who looks like a 9th grade student. He's as big as he is sensitive and delicate, though. And in fact, he turns as white as an aspirin and breaks out in beads of sweat.

"They told me that books are not very popular in this class," the teacher says, who has not noticed anything.

"Or rather, that part of the class, and I'm referring to the male part, has never read a book. But I don't think there really are children who don't like to read. Reading is like daily bread: everyone likes it, they can't help but like it. Unless..."

"Can I go to the toilet?" asks Paolon, who, without waiting for the answer rushes to the door, throwing the desk to one side. The teacher is surprised.

"What's going on?" he asks the class.

In response, a horrible howl from the hallway shakes the classroom.

"He's better now," says Arturo. "He threw up all the bread he ate this morning."

When he returns, a couple of minutes later, Paolon appears even thinner. He's still deadly pale, but he stands up without trembling and has a ghost of a smile on his face. The crisis seems over.

"We were talking about books," continues the teacher "and the pleasure of reading."

The tone of his voice is now slightly irritated: it is clear that he did not appreciate the interruption caused by Paolon's malaise.

"I was telling you that in my opinion the pleasure of reading is a natural pleasure, that every human being has from infancy, like the pleasure that drives a child to suck milk ..."

"Can I go to the window?" Paolon asks again, who once more looks as pale as death. "I need air."

"What can I say? Go to the window!", the teacher snaps, now visibly annoyed.

With a bit of commotion, the boy sticks his face out through the window, gasping like a shipwrecked man escaped from the sea's maelstrom.

"So... to resume my earlier reasoning, we can say that if a child

does not like reading it is only because he has not been educated as he should have been. By this I don't mean to speak ill of the teachers who preceded me, but I mean that there can't be a single human being who is genuinely allergic to books and to..."

A new howl interrupts the teacher's speech. And a cascade of white, pasty liquid pours out the window and ends up in the yard. From the floor below come squawks and laughter: they witnessed the white cascade and they think it was a pigeon with diarrhoea.

"Sorry," Paolon stutters when the worst is over. "It's the milk I drank this morning."

"Enough!" declares Mr Dante Dindoli. "Today is not the right time to talk about books. Nevermind, we'll resume this conversation another time. Now let's see how you're doing in arithmetic."

Sounds like a threat. The teacher opens his leather bag and takes out a book with a lovely colourful cover showing the black and white striped muzzle of a zebra. He bites his lips, swallows a few bad words, then announces:

"Change of plan. Let's talk about zoology."

"It's going to be all too easy," comments Arturo, as he walks home, trampling on the first dry leaves. Next to him is Leonardo, silent and thoughtful. His real name is Luciano, but his companions call him Leonardo, like Leonardo da Vinci, because they consider him a genius. His fame comes from the first grade, when he fixed the porter's lodge intercom at school. Skinny and pale, his hair long and straight to his shoulders, he always looks a little elusive. His friends are really fond of him, also because he doesn't like to show off and doesn't give himself airs. He's just a little touchy, like all geniuses.

Once, in second grade, the teacher teased him in front the class because he had put his shirt on inside out, with the seams on the outside. He didn't say anything, but he caught a bug and pulled off its legs. He kept the legs in order to observe them under a microscope; the bug, instead, he took to the cafeteria and put it in the teacher's soup, who ate it without grimacing.

“I’m not sure it’s going be so easy,” answers Leonardo. “Have you seen how he gets annoyed over nothing? He’s not a meek man, our rabbit. In fact, he seems a bit aggressive to me.”

“Do you think he’s not like a rabbit?”

“Rabbits are not such docile animals. My aunt had a rabbit and a cat. When the rabbit got angry, it was the cat that had to run away, even if it was bigger and bulkier.”

“It’s true,” concludes Arturo. “Rabbits roar too.”

CHAPTER 3

MO-TI-VA-TI-ON

“Please go ahead, Dindoli, you have the floor,” the headmaster says. All the teachers are seated around a long oval table in the school’s meeting room.

“Show us your famous method, but try to be concise, please: at three o’clock I have an appointment with the people from Avio-Stop about the pigeon problem”.

“Ok, I’ll be brief,” begins the teacher. “My method is simple and based on a fundamental concept: neither stick nor carrot.”

The teachers smile and look at each other knowingly: they too have nicknamed their new colleague “Rabbit”, and the fact that he is using the word “carrot” amuses them very much.

“Let me explain better,” the teacher continues. “Perhaps you think that to educate our students in reading one must use the stick: if you don’t read, I’ll give you bad grades, reports, punishments ...”

The teachers are protesting now.

“What nonsense are you talking about?” cries Bianca Albinoni di Torrebianca, who is the oldest and most respected of the teachers. It seems she was the headmaster’s own teacher, when he was a very shy child who wore a black apron with a white collar. “These barbaric methods have not been used in our school for centuries!”

“All right, all right, all the better,” Dante says, defensively. “Some, however, might think that it is still useful to use the carrot instead of the stick: if you read this book, I’ll tell you how good you are, I’ll give you a good grade and you’ll get a good report. But if you think about it, there’s not such a difference between a stick and a carrot, between a punishment and a prize, because...”

“The pigeons, Dindoli, at three o’clock I have an appointment with the pigeon people. Try to make it brief.”

Mr Dindoli does not like to be interrupted. Despite this, he

forces himself to smile and nod his head.

“I was saying that between a pigeon and... sorry, I mean between a stick and a carrot there is not much difference, because they are still two forms of blackmail: ‘If you don’t do this, the stick... If you do it, the carrot...’. And we all know that blackmail never pays off, because...”

“The pigeons, Dindoli, remember the pigeons.”

“Sure, sure, but if you keep interrupting me, how can I develop my reasoning fully?”

“In fact, it’s precisely the fullness of your reasoning that worries me.”

The teachers burst out laughing, while Dante’s face turns red.

“All right,” sighs the teacher. “Let’s just skip all the premises and get right to the point.”

“That’s it, well done.”

“I say we must focus on the mo-ti-va-ti-on!”

He spelt out the last word with the vibrant voice of a preacher. And now he looks at his colleagues with a proud smile, as if he was expecting an applause.

“Well done Dindoli!” exclaims Bianca. “He’s discovered that if we pour water into a pan and we put the pan on the hob, then the water gets hot!”

The teachers laugh heartily, while poor Dante looks around lost, as if he hasn’t understood anything.

“Good!” says the headmaster, raising his voice. “Let’s thank Mr Dindoli for the reflection he has given us and let’s also close our meeting”.

“But why?” protests the teacher. “If I haven’t even started to illustrate the concept of mo-ti-va-t...”

“The pigeons, Dindoli, I have to run to my meeting with those who will free us of the pigeons!” the headmaster repeats before opening the door. “Isn’t that also a good mo-ti-va-ti-on?”

CHAPTER 4

GOOD, ACTUALLY, BAD

It is one minute past 8am, and the students of the 5F are already in their places, waiting for their teacher.

“Do you know how to catch a rabbit?” the Moor asks Dribbling.

They call him ‘the Moor’ to shorten the name Moreno, but he also has dark hair and a dark complexion. He specialises in jokes, which usually only make him laugh.

“Let’s hear it” Dribbling snorts, without raising his eyes from his phone where he is watching the video of the best ten goals of all time.

“Hide and make the noise of a carrot!”

At the word ‘carrot’, while the Moor starts laughing shamelessly, Mr Dindoli appears, entering the classroom with a decisive step and a Marine captain’s cap on his head. The students stand up as a sign of greeting, staring at that strange blue headgear in bewilderment.

“What is this?” whispers the Moor, who has just recovered from laughing. “A tuna commercial?”

The teacher sits down and allows the students to do the same, then he opens his leather briefcase and takes out a book. He looks at it closely, to make sure it’s the right one, and then, with an energetic gesture, he slams it in the middle of the desk.

It’s a very big book. The teacher sends a menacing glance at Paolon, who immediately lowers his gaze.

“If anybody feels sick, say so now, pack your bags and go home. Today I won’t tolerate interruptions!”

Paolon gives a nod of acquiescence. He is certain he can resist, also because he did not eat either bread or milk this morning, to avoid feeling sick. Just a little tea with rusks and a few spoons of sugar.

What's more, he took one of those herbal pills that his mother gives him for car sickness before setting off. As bitter as a lemon.

"See this book?" What a question.

"You certainly haven't read it, but maybe some of you have heard of it. Maybe. By accident. Who knows?"

Arturo turns to Leonardo and asks him:

"Is he being ironic?"

"Let's hear him out."

"The title of the book is an English name, or rather an American name, because the story is set in America, even if America is only the starting point of an adventurous journey that will lead the protagonists to go around the world from sea to sea, from ocean to ocean, to hunt for..."

"I've read it."

It was Maddalena, a small girl with straight, dark hair and a fringe that descends like a curtain over her blue eyes, who spoke. The teacher stares at her with a sympathetic smile.

"Blessed child, I'm not talking about Geron..."

"Moby Dick."

The teacher jerks backwards, like a swordsman who takes a hit.

"Well done! It is Moby Dick! Did you say you've read it? Yes, it's true, there are good abridgements for children."

"No," replied Maddalena. "I've read the complete book. Also in French."

After a first moment of uncertainty, the teacher relaxes and smiles sympathetically again.

"In French? Blessed child, why are you making these things up? Moby Dick is a book written in English by an American writer named Melville, who was born..."

"Obviously I read it in English first," the girl points out, without getting ruffled. "As well as in Italian, the translation by Cesare Pavese. But then I also read it in French, because I was interested in the translation by Jean Giono, whose great story *L'homme qui plantait des arbres* I read in third grade."

Dante looks up at the class. None of her classmates appear surprised, as if Maddalena had said something completely normal.

“And... let’s see... has anyone else read this book?” All the other girls raise their hands, even if they make it clear that they only read it in Italian.

The teacher swallows. He takes his cap off and wipes his sweaty forehead.

“Ok. In terms of the girls, we’re fine: I don’t think they need to be stimulated to read. After all, I knew that my mission in this class was the boys and their refusal to read books. Unless I now find out that you made fun of me, and that the boys have read this novel in five different languages including Aramaic and Uzbek. Because at this point nothing would surprise me.”

So saying, he grabs the book and shows it to the boys.

“So? Have you read Moby Dick?”

“Never heard of it,” the boys respond in chorus.

“Good, actually, bad” comments the teacher, who lets slip a sigh of relief.

“Don’t worry, teacher, we’ve never read anything,” reiterates Arturo.

“Good, actually, bad. So look at it properly, this book that I hold in my right hand, with its 576 pages, look at it closely, because within a month you will all read it, from the first to the last page!” After a pause of silence, during which only the gurgling of Paolon’s stomach can be heard, the boys abandon themselves to uncontrollable laughter, which ends up infecting their classmates as well. Everyone is laughing, even the plastic skeleton that stands upright in a corner of the classroom, waiting for the human body science lessons. But he always laughs.

“What’s so funny?” screams Mr Dindoli. “Enough, now, stop it! Stop it!”

And since they don’t stop, he slams the book back on the desk, with such a strong bang that two pigeons flee from the windowsill.

“You think I’m joking or a fool, but I assure you I’m very serious and I know what I’m saying! Because mine is a scientific,

scien-ti-fic method, and its results are 100% guaranteed, and certainly urchins like you won't be able to escape the power of science!"

The teacher had shouted as loud as he was able, mistreating his vocal cords, and a shrill, choked voice had come out, like that of a turkey.

The laughter of the class, however, dies out. Now only the skeleton laughs, in silence. And even Mr Dindoli remains silent, who shakes his head for a long time, as if he were sorry and repentant.

"This is not good," he thinks to himself. "It's not good, you're too tense, you're too short-tempered. You shouldn't have lost your patience, you shouldn't have shouted, you won't achieve anything with that tone..."

The fact is that the mo-ti-va-zio-ne method is also called the DEC method, because it is based on three basic ingredients: Desire, Enthusiasm and Curiosity. These are the three buttons that the teacher must press, so that the students feel like reading.

Once again, however, the teacher realizes that he has been crushed by a negative mood, so it would be completely useless, now, to continue talking about books and reading.

"Geometry. Let's see how you're doing in arithmetic." And he pulls a book out of his bag about highland gazelles.

CHAPTER 5

ESPIONAGE

“Do you know what a lightening bolt on the sea does?” the Moor asks his seven friends, some sitting on a bench and some on the park’s fence.

“It whales!” he himself answers before anyone can guess the reply.

The only one who starts laughing, besides the Moor himself, is Amelio.

“Why are you laughing so hard?” Arturo asks. “Did you understand it properly?”

“What?”

“The joke.”

“No.”

It’s four o’clock in the afternoon and the boys had gathered again to reflect on the morning’s events.

“The war has begun,” giggles the Hungarian.

“Yeah,” says Arturo. “The enemy has shown us the weapon with which he wants to crush us: a book of 576 pages. Or maybe it’s better to say the bait with which he wants to catch us.”

“He’s not very intelligent, our teacher,” observes the Moor, “but we must acknowledge that he puts a great deal of effort into this issue of reading. He doesn’t understand much, but he tries very hard.”

“It’s better that way,” concludes the Hungarian. “It’s will be a longer, more fun war.”

“Teams!” cries Dribbling. “Let’s split into teams, I want to play!”

The teams are soon formed, four against four, and on the small, shabby field the game begins. Everyone is chasing the ball, everyone is kicking it, nobody thinks about school, books, Mr Dindoli anymore, until, suddenly, Arturo stops the ball with his hands and

shouts:

“Look over there!”

Everyone turns around and sees Mr Dindoli walking along the path, through the park, reading a book. It’s a really strange scene: usually people walk looking at their mobile phones, texting or calling, certainly not with their heads bent over a book.

“He doesn’t have that absurd cap on anymore,” observes Felipito.

“Of course, it was all sweaty,” says the Moor.

“Sweaty?”

“The hat. It was all sweaty.”

“How do you know?”

“It was a... sweaty hat.”

The Moor laughs so much it hurts, but only he laughs.

“Sweaty, understand? On... Dante. On...Dante.”

“It’s not that we’re not laughing because we don’t get it,” explains the Hungarian. “We’re not laughing because your joke sucks.”

“I haven’t understood a thing,” whispers Amelio.

As if he were struck by the students’ stares, Mr Dindoli stops and looks around.

“Down!” orders Arturo. “Hide!”

In a flash the boys throw themselves to the ground and crawl like marines under the small hedge that edges the field. The teacher does not move. He continues to look around suspiciously, like a hare smelling the presence of a hunter.

“Why are we hiding?” questions Amelio.

“Because now we’re going to follow him without being seen,” replies Arturo. “Maybe we’ll discover something interesting.”

“What about the game?” Dribbling protests.

“End of first half.”

Finally, the teacher sets off again, resuming reading the book.

“Paolon! Come here!” orders Arturo. “Pull your hat down so it covers your face a little... Good! Paolon goes ahead first, and we line up behind him!”

The tailing can begin.

Seen in this way, in a straight line behind Paolon, the boys of 5F look like Snow White and the seven dwarfs.

At number 6 of Via dei Rusteghi the teacher raises his head, turns around and goes back, to the door of number 4.

This sudden turnaround endangers the boys, who find him practically in front of them, but he doesn't realize it, because now he is totally intent on finding the right key, among the many that make up a jingling bunch. When he finds it, and disappears into the entrance of the condominium, the boys run to read the names next to the bells and find a "Dindoli Dante" in a handwritten scrawl.

"Good," comments Arturo. "Now we know where he lives."

"Isn't that your uncle's bar?" Felipito asks Amelio, pointing to the Da Franco bar across the street.

"It is! It's Uncle Franco's!" confirms Amelio, who looks all around with a slightly disorientated air.

"Perfect!" says Arturo. "We'll set up a spying system. The bar will be our operations centre."

"Can't we just go back and play now?" Dribbling asks, without anybody listening.

"To begin with," suggests Leonardo, "we could look for the recycling calendar for this area. Especially for paper. Because maybe we can find something interesting amongst the papers the teacher throws out..."

"Genius!" cries Arturo. "Amelio will be tasked with rummaging through the teacher's recycled paper bin and taking anything that may be useful to us."

Amelio can't believe his ears: such an important task entrusted to him!

The others can't believe their ears either: such an important task entrusted to him?

"Are you kidding me?" asks the Hungarian.

The fact is that Amelio, this boy with curls and the candid face of an angel, is not considered the smartest in the group.

"Why not? It's a job he can do very well," says Arturo.

Arturo is a good leader, able to give confidence even to the weakest.

“So, Amelio, do you understand what you have to do?”

“Of course. When the the recycled paper is due to be collected, I have to come here, ring the bell...”

“What do you mean, ring the bell?”

“The teacher’s doorbell, to tell him I have come to collect his recycled paper.”

Poor Arturo, he’s upset.

“Forget it,” he says, dejected.

Amelio is also upset: he understood that they had taken the job away from him, but he didn’t understand why.

Luckily, Felipito is there.

“I’ll do the job with Amelio, and if I find anything interesting I’ll photograph it, so there’s no need to take it away.”

His name is José Manuel Felipe, but they call him Felipito because he is small in stature, the smallest of all. He is a quiet and precise boy, who knows how to use the computer and various electronic devices extremely well.

“If you go too, then it’s all sorted” says Arturo.

Everyone agrees, including Amelio, who is smiling once more.

“So? Shall we go finish this game?”

CHAPTER 6
IN MATHEMATICS
THERE ARE NO PROBLEMS

The teacher is in a good mood this morning. Before starting the lesson, he goes around the desks with a bag offering tamarind sweets. Only Leonardo refuses them, all the others accept. Paolon takes three.

After a few minutes, the Moor circulates another bag, which passes secretly from counter to counter: one after the other, the terrible tamarind sweets are spat out. When he receives the bag back, the Moor holds the pen and writes on a sheet of paper:

PROBLEM

There are 20 students in a class. The teacher offers each of them a tamarind sweet, but one student refuses it and another takes three. After having tasted them, all the students spit the sweets into a bag: how many sweets are there in the bag at the end?

Satisfied with the work, he balls the paper up and throws it at Amelio's desk, who opens it and reads it thoughtfully.

"What's that paper?" asks the teacher.

"Oh, nothing," says Amelio.

"Bring it here."

Amelio goes to deliver the paper and returns immediately to his place. The teacher reads it and raises his eyes to the class.

Immediately, all the students pretend to chew the candy they don't have in their mouths. Everyone except Leonardo.

"Calm down, you have to stay calm," orders Dante to himself. "Today you must be positive and smiling, no matter what. And after all, apart from the nonsense of sweets spat out, what does it say on this paper? Isn't a student who invents a maths problem to be appreciated?"

"Amelio!" calls the teacher again. "Come to the board and

solve the problem.”

Amelio leaves his chair for the second time, downcast, and goes to get a piece of chalk.

The teacher rereads the problem and the student sets out the solution.

20 sweets
– 1 sweet
+ 3 sweets

= 22 sweets

“Good!” approves the teacher. “Well done! Go back to your seat!”

Amelio can’t believe what he’s heard: he’s never been complimented after a maths exercise in his entire school life. In fact, he has never received a compliment before.

“It’s wrong!” whispers Felipito, turning to Leonardo. “It’s not + 3, but + 2, because...”

“Obviously” answers Leonardo.

“Good!” repeats the teacher. “I’d say there are no problems with maths.”

The students exchange questionable glances, but nobody wants to raise their hand to say that there is a mistake, because nobody wants to erase the smile from Amelio’s face, so they don’t move and just keep quiet.

The teacher takes his mobile phone out of his leather briefcase, touches it several times and finally places it on Moby Dick, the great book that is still lying in the middle of the desk waiting for someone to read it.

“Sahlence puhleese!” Mr Dindoli says, who also knows a few words of English.

The class listens: a gloomy and whining sound comes out of the mobile phone, which provokes some laughter.

“Do you want to hear it again?”

Without waiting for an answer, the teacher starts the audio again.

“What is it?”

“It sounds like a train when it arrives at a station and has to brake,” replies the Hungarian, but the teacher shakes his head.

“I’ll give you a clue. It’s the sound of an animal.”

Hearing these words, the children turn to Paolon, who is the number one animal expert.

“It’s the sound of a whale. A humpback whale, probably”.

After a moment of surprise, the teacher leaps to his feet like a fan when the opponent’s net swells.

“You guessed it! Tonight’s contestant guessed it!

A hundred million! You’ve won a hundred million!”

That’s what he says, with the triumphant tone of TV presenters.

“You know, teacher,” intervenes Felipito, “Paolon can make the sounds of all the animals.”

“It is! It’s true!” his classmates confirm. “He’s really good!”

“He could let us hear some,” suggests Felipito.

“Yes!” shout his classmates. And then in chorus:

“Pao-lon! Pao-lon! Pao-lon! Pao-lon!”

The lesson has taken an unexpected turn. Mr Dindoli had planned to start with the song of whales and then talk about the life of cetaceans in order to stimulate in the boys the desire to read the book on the desk. But the mo-ti-va-zio-ne manuals explain that it is always important to accept the students’ proposals, even if they have nothing to do with the planned lesson. The important thing is that the sacred fire of enthusiasm is lit: once lit, everything is possible.

“Come on, Paolo, what sound are you going to make for us?”

“The turkey!” the boys shout out. “We want the turkey!” The cry of the

turkey, in fact, is Paolon's speciality.

"Come on, Paolo, let's hear this turkey."

Paolon doesn't seem very convinced, but he realizes he can't back down. So he takes a breath and shouts:

"Gobble-keee turk turk turk keee-gobble-gobble!"

His classmates let out a festive cry that echoes throughout the building, then turn to the teacher to see his reaction.

The teacher smiles. He appreciated the imitation, even if he is a little surprised, because he thought that the sound of a turkey was similar to that of a chicken.

"Another one! Another one!" the students ask.

Thrilled by his previous success, Paolon doesn't need persuading and lines up a series of sounds: camel, elephant, baboon, seal...

"Now I'll give you one," announces Mr Dindoli. "And you'll have to guess what animal it is."

"Yeeessss!" the students shout in chorus. "Dan-te! Dan-te! Dan-te! Dan-te!"

The teacher's face has turned as red as a rooster's crest. He's serious, concentrated, but he can't hide an emotional and happy smile. He looks like a child in front of his birthday cake candles.

"Hoo-hoo! Hoo-hoo!" the teacher lets out, making a funnel out of his hands around his mouth. "Hoo-hoo! Hoo-hoo!"

Then he asks:

"What is it?"

"I know" cries the Hungarian, anticipating his companions.

"A wolf."

"Wrong" chuckles the teacher. "It's not a wolf."

"An owl" says then Maddalena. "The hoot of an owl."

"You guessed it!" exclaims the teacher. "But you can't say 'hoot': 'hoot' is a verb that indicates the sound of thunder, as in the poem..."

"Of course you say 'hoot'" says Maddalena calmly. "The verb 'hoot' [bubolare] comes from 'bubo', which in Latin means 'owl'. [Bubolare], on the other hand, with two b's, indicates the sound of thunder or a rough sea, as in the poem by Giovanni Pascoli."

Mr Dindoli blushes, then strives to smile and says:

“Didn’t I tell you that I’m just a student, a student of my students?”

This is followed by a moment of silence, interrupted by a hoarse and repeated noise. “Coo roo-c’too-coo! Coo roo-c’too-coo!”

The master raises his head towards Paolon.

“Was that the cry of a pigeon? Well, I have to say, it’s the worst imitation you’ve done.”

“But I didn’t do it!”

“You didn’t do it? Then who did? Do we have another imitator in the class?”

“It’s not an imitation, teacher,” explains Felipito. “It was an actual pigeon.”

In fact, there are two pigeons on the windowsill. One tall and one short.

“Cooing,” the teacher hastens to say to get out of the embarrassment, “the noise that pigeons make is called cooing.”

He seems very sure, this time, but he also glances at Maddalena, in the fear that the student will catch him in a mistake again.

It doesn’t happen. Maddalena keeps quiet.

“It was the short one who made the noise,” says the Moor.

“How do you know?”

“The short coo.”

Then the bell rings. The teacher picks up his things and puts them in his bag. The only thing left on the desk is the famous book.

Mr Dindoli looks happy. Tired, but happy. After all, it was a good lesson, full of stimuli and moments of interest. A very mo-ti-va-tion lesson. As soon as he goes out of the classroom, the Moor gets up and goes to throw the bag with the terrible tamarind sweets into the wastepaper basket.

Twenty-one, of course.

CHAPTER 7

READING WITHOUT READING

“You won’t believe me, but the class participated a great deal in the lesson, indeed, with enthusiasm, and the boys were no less interested than the girls. A little stimulation was enough – I made them listen to the song of a whale – and they responded really well, with very intelligent and original comments and contributions.”

It’s three o’clock in the afternoon, and the teacher is once more meeting with his superior.

“I have no difficulty in believing you, Mr Dindoli,” replied the headmaster, “because I never said that the boys in your class were stupid. On the contrary. They are alert, active, quick, sparkling, intuitive, ingenious and smart. Despite this, they don’t read books. And they never will. That’s all.”

The teacher fidgets edgily in his chair. He runs a hand through his hair, stretches his lips and widens his nostrils.

“You must excuse me, Headmaster, if I may make an observation, but I think that you should have more confidence in your students and your teachers, especially in the teachers who work with method and science.”

“No need to reproach me, Mr Dindoli, I always have a lot of confidence in my students and my teachers, even in those who think they are scientists, but here it is not a question of confidence, confidence has nothing to do with it, because you can’t sow a stone and hope that a flower will blossom”.

“We’ll see,” sighs the teacher as he gets out of his chair.

“There’s a book on my desk in my classroom. An important book, available to those who want to read it. I guarantee you that within a few days that book will be borrowed by a boy in the class, who will read it in all in one go and pass it on to another, who will read it in one go and pass it on to another, and so on, because reading is contagious, and then they will want another book, and yet another and...”

“You read too many fairy tales, Mr Dindoli.”

In the days that follow, the teacher uses all his imagination to propose original, fun and stimulating lessons to the class.

For example:

He shows an old film about whaling, where you can see some sailors armed with harpoons aboard an unsteady boat, engaging in a furious struggle with a giant whale in a sea of blood.

He takes his class to the Museum of Natural Sciences, where the whole skeleton of a sperm whale is exhibited.

He invites an old sailor to the school, who has spent his life in the northern seas hunting tuna and cetaceans, and has a thousand adventures to tell.

He organises a video call with a scientist from the University of Bristol, who is considered one of the leading experts in marine biology.

And the examples could go on.

“Dindoli wouldn’t be such a bad teacher, if he were not so fixated on this issue of books,” observes Arturo, who is sitting on a panda-shaped spring rocking chair.

“We have to acknowledge that he’s committed,” says Felipito from the top of a slide in the shape of an elephant.

“Szia!” the Hungarian greets everyone, coming to sit on a wooden seesaw with Paolon. “Who are you talking about?”

“About the teacher” Felipito answers. “We were saying he’s not that bad.”

“Bah!” the Hungarian snorts, while he rises because Paolon, on the other side of the seesaw, is too heavy for him.

“Sometimes I think he deserves a little satisfaction,” Arturo ventures.

“Are you kidding?”

“Have you heard the other teachers? Have you seen how they treat our teacher? Because, aside from anything else, Mr Dindoli is

still our teacher!”

“Pah!” the Hungarian retorts, not appreciating the sentimental note he caught in Arturo’s words.

“Every time they meet him, they have a dig at him: ‘So, Dante, have your students finished reading the Divine Comedy?’ Which are such unpleasant jokes that not even the Moor...”

Arturo stops because he sees the Moor arriving, together with Leonardo, Dribbling and Amelio. Everybody’s here now.

The newcomers sit on the swings, and the discussion continues.

Dribbling: “Who were you talking about?” The Hungarian: “Mr Dindondan.” The Moor: “He’s not a bad teacher.”

Felipito: “He puts a lot of effort into it.” The Hungarian: “Bah!”

Amelio: “But how do you push yourself on a swing?”

Arturo: “He deserves some satisfaction.”

Paolon: “Which would be what?”

Arturo: “He wants to show the teachers and the Headmaster that he can get us to read.”

Dribbling: “So what?”

Arturo: “We could make him happy.”

If Napoleon Bonaparte, during the battle of Austerlitz, a step away from victory, had commanded his soldiers to retreat, they would have looked at him with less astonished eyes.

The Hungarian: “Have you lost your mind this morning? Did you put it in the milk with your cornflakes?”

The Moor: “You mean you think we should start reading that boo...”

Paolon: “Bleeeeh!”

The Hungarian: “Will you stop talking nonsense? Can you see how sick it makes him feel?”

Leonardo: “I don’t think it’s rubbish. Arturo is right, Mr Dindoli deserves satisfaction, even if I don’t think any of us will ever read a single line of that book. We just have to find a way to read it... without reading it.”

Arturo: “Reading without reading: that’s the problem.”

Amelio: "Can someone push me?"

CHAPTER 8

READING TEST

On Saturday mornings, the recycling waste collectors collect the paper left by the citizens on their doorstep. For this reason, every Friday evening Amelio and Felipito go to the Da Franco bar and sit at the table next to the window. From that position, in fact, they can spy on the entrance to apartment building number 4. Uncle Franco offers them two Chinottis and a basket of chips every time, and if they want they can have more.

Tonight there are three glasses with straws, because the Moor came to see his companions and stayed, attracted by the Chinotto and chips. The previous sittings, to tell the truth, gave poor results: nothing interesting was found among the paper inspected, apart from the receipt of a book purchased online, with the teacher's mobile phone number and e-mail. For the rest, milk cartons, boxes of pasta and biscuits, boxes of medicines for headaches, a leaflet advertising a Japanese sword course, bread bags... stuff like that.

"These sittings don't seem very useful to me" the Moor grumbles, having emptied the basket of chips with a single handful. "I'm afraid it was a stupid idea."

With a gesture of the hand, Felipito silences him, because the teacher has come out of the door to deposit a box.

As soon as he goes back in, the boys leave the bar, cross the street and pick up the box. There is not a soul in sight. They go back to the bar through a service door, at the back, and close themselves in a small room that serves as a pantry. They overturn the contents on the table and begin their inspection: cartons of milk, boxes of pasta and biscuits, boxes of medicines for headaches, bags of bread, an application form for a Japanese sword course and a pack of written sheets.

"These look interesting," says Felipito, who starts to examine

them carefully.

They are school sheets: notes of lessons, plans, programmes and reports on the students, almost all written on the computer. The dates are those of last year, and many sheets have the Alessandro Volta Institute header.

“It must be the school where he used to teach,” smiles the Moor.

“Look at this” says Felipito, showing a handwritten paper with messy handwriting that is still a bit childish.

I regret ~~am sorry~~ to report that today, during the first hour of class, the following happened: after having reprimanded the student B.C. several times, who continued to play with his mobile phone during the explanation, I ~~ordered~~ asked him to hand it over to me, as provided for in the school regulations; since the student refused, I decided tried to seize it from him, but I was attacked by the ~~student~~ owner, who rammed drove his entire dental arch into my left forearm, leaving me with ~~an indelible~~ a deep mark. I therefore ask that the student B.C. be punished in a merciless an exemplary manner, so that he can reflect on his ~~shameful~~ intolerable lack of respect.

The boys burst out laughing.

“That’s what it was!”

“After all, it’s a cheap way to get a tattoo,” commented the Moor. “Painful, but cheap!”

Felipito takes a picture of the paper and puts it back in the box. Amelio takes another piece of paper, reads it and shakes his head.

“Old stuff. You can throw it away.”

“What is it?”

“An entry test. A horrible grammar test. Like the one he made us do: subject, predicate, direct object... what horrible words!”

Felipito takes the sheet from his hand and studies it carefully. Then he lights up.

“It’s the same test he gave us!” The paper passes into the hands of the Moor.

“It’s exactly the same! Too bad we didn’t find it earlier, that would have been a real coup! See if there are any more tests!”

Felipito runs through the papers one by one, without finding anything interesting, but when he gets to the last sheet he rejoices.

“Here we go. We got the wild card!”

ALESSANDRO VOLTA INSTITUTE
CLASS 5A
READING THE NOVEL “MOBY DICK”
TEST

1. *What is the name of the inn where the protagonist, before embarking, stays in the company of a stranger?*
2. *What’s the name of the stranger?*
3. *What’s the name of the whaling ship they board?*
4. *At one point, the sailors see “a vast pulpy mass, furlongs in length and breadth” on the surface of the sea. What is it?*
5. *Approximately how much does one of the largest sperm whales weigh, according to the calculation given in Chapter 53 of the book?*
6. *What is the name of the perfumed and precious essence found in the guts of a sick whale?*
7. *What animal steals Captain Ahab’s hat?*
8. *What is the last word in the book?*

“We’ve made a really good catch tonight!” Felipito says again.

Then he photographs the page and puts it back in the box, which they will soon put back in its place without anyone noticing anything.

CHAPTER 9

WHO TOOK IT?

They are gathered at the Piccolo Lago, a corner of the Colombe park with four long curved benches arranged in a circle around a small round pond. After receiving the photos from Felipito, they met in this somewhat hidden place and discussed at length Arturo's proposal, who would like to use this secret information to gratify Mr Dindoli.

"We just have to memorize the eight answers," Arturo claims.

"What if he doesn't ask us those questions?" asks the Hungarian, who is the least convinced of all. "If he asks us others? Can you imagine what a bummer that would be?"

"It's unlikely," replies Arturo. "He always seems to use the same tests."

"And anyway," adds Felipito, "even if he finds out, nothing terrible will happen. After all, our intentions are good: we just want to make him happy."

"All right," the Hungarian snaps. "Let's make Mr Dindo happy!"

"One second" Paolon interrupts. "We have the questions, but where do we find the answers?"

"You can always search the Internet," suggests Felipito.

"There is a simpler and faster way," smiles Arturo. "Ask Maddalena."

That's exactly what they'll do, and Maddalena will give them all the answers without asking for anything in return.

Like a child who one morning realizes that the letter he had written to Santa Claus and laid on the fireplace has disappeared, so Mr Dindoli, entering the classroom, realizes that the book is no longer on the desk and feels like the happiest man on the planet.

"Who took it?" he asks with his heart in turmoil.

Arturo: "Me. I took it yesterday and I'm almost done."

Leonardo: "Then he'll give it to me."

The Hungarian: "I borrowed it from the library. Then I'll pass it to Paolon, who has already booked it."

The Moor: "I bought it at the bookshop."

Dribbling: "I ordered it on the Internet."

Felipito: "I downloaded the e-book."

The only one left out is Amelio.

"I..." he stammers with the expression of someone striving to remember a poem learned by heart. "I had it given to me for my birthday."

"Best wishes!" the teacher says.

"For what?"

"For your birthday!"

"Thank you. But that's in six months."

The teacher, who is beside himself with joy, doesn't really take in Amelio's words. He shrugs as if to say that he did not understand but that it's ok, and launches into a long speech.

"I can't hide the fact that it's quite a demanding book. At the beginning you will find it a bit hard, but you will then see that, slowly, you will feel the effort less and less, because the book will pull you into its pages, more and more, until you no longer distinguish reality from fantasy, and you will lose all notion of time and space. And then the hours will run as fast as minutes, and your room will become the hold of the whaling ship launched into the adventure, the curtains of the windows will be the sails inflated by the wind, and the goldfish, that little goldfish that swims in the glass bowl, will turn into the elusive whale, and you will no longer want to eat or drink, because the only desire you have will be to devour the pages of the book, one after the other, down to the last page, the last line, the last word. And at this point, when you close the book, you will feel a great satisfaction, but at the same time – be warned – you will begin to feel a sense of emptiness, loss, a sudden melancholy, like when at the end of a trip you have to leave your companions with whom you have enjoyed some unrepeatable experiences. But your suffering will not last long,

because after this book you will want to read another one immediately, and another one, and so on, and the passion for books will accompany you until the end of your life.”

Dante folds his head down over his chest and joins his hands together like a priest. And then from the class there comes applause, at first shy, then more and more thunderous, and a stadium-style chorus begun by Dribbling also rises.

Dindolin dindolin dindolin
Dindolin dindolin din don dan
Dindolin dindolin din don dan
Dindolin din don dan!

The class is in full euphoria when the teacher Serenella pops her head round the door of the classroom. She knocked several times before she came in, but no one heard her.

“Is this allowed?” she asks politely. “It sounded like a party, and I wondered what was going on.” Serenella is the most beloved teacher of the school. There is no one who does not love her, because of that smile that is so sweet, and that goodness that illuminates her face.

“Mr Dante gave us a beautiful speech about books and reading” explains Felipito.

“Really? Oh, I’m not surprised! Your teacher is a true book enthusiast, and I am sure that he will be able to make all of you passionate about it too.”

She says it without irony, because she, Serenella, is different from her colleagues.

Dante stands straight behind the desk, as if petrified, but slowly begins to lean towards Serenella, and stops only a moment before losing his balance. Now he looks like the tower of Pisa, although the tower is as white as the moon, while he has become as red as a beetroot.

“Enjoy your reading, then!” exclaims Serenella. When the classroom door closes, their teacher stands straight again and looks at

his students once more. Not everyone is present, actually, because Paolon ran out at the beginning of the long speech, covering his mouth with one hand. But the teacher hadn't noticed.

“How sweet it is” Mr Dindoli thinks, at the height of happiness.
“How sweet the taste of victory is!”

CHAPTER 10

CALL ME ISMAEL

“It’s early to talk of victory, Dondoli.”

“Of course, Headmaster, it’s always better to be cautious, but allow me to say that this is really a great victory, since this morning even the final student told me that he has finished reading the book.”

“Have I understood correctly? You’re telling me the boys in 5F have read Moby Dick?”

“That’s right.”

“All of them? Even the big one that looks like a ninth grader?”

“He’s read it twice.”

“Sorry, Mr Dindoli... ha ha ha ha... apologies for laughing... ha ha ha... but I just can’t stop myself... ha ha ha...”

“Honestly and respectfully, I don’t see what’s funny about that.”

“The fact is, Dindoli, that you are an excellent teacher, because you put commitment and passion into your work, but let me tell you that in all my years of experience I have never found a person as naive as you. Do not be offended, because ingenuity is a sign of purity and sincerity, and in this sense it should be appreciated. But when it’s too much, it’s too much! I’m sorry to be frank, but when it’s too much, it becomes foolish!”

The teacher’s face burns. It has been happening a lot to him lately.

“Do you know what I’ll tell you, Headmaster? On Wednesday morning, I’ll do a class test. I’m going to ask the boys questions to see if they really have read the book or if they have tricked me, as you’re suggesting. I don’t like to do these things, I don’t like to subject my students to these interrogations on the books they have read, because I rely on mo-ti-va-ti-on and I prefer to discuss and reflect on the meanings of books and stories, but since you believe that I am a fool, I

invite you to come Wednesday morning to my class, because I want you to realize in person that the boys of 5F, all of them, have read Moby Dick in full, without skipping a single page, a single line, a single word. And if at the end of the test you want to apologize to me, I'll accept it!"

"I will come very willingly, Mr Dindoli. And if I need to apologise, I will do so without any problem. But it won't be necessary."

There is some concern among the children as they walk along the road leading to the school on Wednesday morning.

They have found out that the headmaster will sit in on the test, and this makes them nervous, even if they know all the answers and know that they are correct, because Maddalena never makes a mistake. They're not sure, however, that the master will ask those questions. And, above all, they fear what Amelio may do.

Arturo spent an entire afternoon helping him to fix the answers in his head, and it seems that in the end he succeeded. But no one feels confident.

"Come on, one more time" insists Arturo in front of the school gates.

Amelio takes a breath and starts:

"One: The Whaler's Inn. Two... I don't remember."

"What do you mean you don't remember?"

"I don't remember! It's a name like Qui Quo Que, but I can't remember!"

"Queequeg!" states Arturo. The stranger is called Queequeg. Again! From the beginning!"

"One: The Whaler's Inn. Two: Queequeg. Three: Pequod. Four: The Great Inkwell."

"Squid! Not Inkwell!"

"Ok, Squid. Five: ninety tons. Six: ambergris. Seven: a black hawk. Eight: orphan!"

He learned the answers this way, in numerical order, because

it was too complicated to associate them with the questions.

“Let’s hope all goes well,” sighs Arthur.

The headmaster is sitting by the window, on a chair that is bigger than the others, which was brought into the classroom for the occasion. Mr Dindoli is wearing a jacket and tie and stands still in front of the desk, in the middle of which Moby Dick once again dominates.

The students are sitting in their places.

“Let’s get started” announces the teacher, who is as serious as a court judge. “Here, Headmaster, I took the liberty of making you a copy of the questions and answers.”

“Thank you,” replies the headmaster. “I know the answers anyway: sometimes I read the odd book too.”

There’s tension between the two adults. And there’s tension among the children, too. High tension.

“Tell me Arturo,” the teacher starts, “what is the name of the inn where the protagonist, before embarking, stays in the company of a stranger?”

The boys breathe a sigh of relief: the first question corresponds to the one on the list.

“The Whaler’s Inn.”

“Exactly.”

The teacher turns towards the headmaster with a satisfied smile, but he remains impassive.

“And tell me, Felipe, what is this stranger’s name?”

“Queequeg.”

“Exactly.”

“And now I’d like to know from Luciano what the whaling ship they board is called?”

“Pequod.”

“Exactly.”

“Now let’s hear from Amelio.”

Shivers in the classroom.

“Listen to me, Amelio, which animal steals Captain Ahab’s hat?”

They could have done without this: the teacher has jumped to the penultimate question and it's highly unlikely that Amelio has noticed.

"I know!" cries Arturo in an attempt to save the situation.

"Put your hand down," orders the teacher. "The question is for Amelio and I want to hear the answer from him."

An icy silence falls. Everyone is looking at Amelio, who has closed his eyes and seems to be deep in concentration.

"Four..." whispers in an imperceptible voice.

"What? Speak up!"

"...The Great Inkwell!"

The girls burst out laughing, and the headmaster also smiles, while the teacher patiently tells the student that perhaps he has got a bit confused.

"I'll ask you another: what is the name of the perfumed and precious essence found in the guts of a sick whale?"

"Ninety tons!" replies Amelio, sure of himself.

More female laughter. The teacher, on the other hand, is frowning. He reads and rereads the paper he holds in his hand and tries to focus on a thought, or rather a suspicion. The same as that which is written on the headmaster's face.

"I would also like to ask a very easy question," says the latter.

"Please, go ahead," the teacher stammers.

"Very easy: what's the name of the main character in the book?"

"Moby Dick!" the boys scream in chorus.

"Yes, in a way you're right. But I want to know what the narrator's name is, the one who tells the whole story in the first person."

The girls exchange knowing looks, nodding their heads, some raise their hand, but the headmaster points out that the question is addressed to the boys.

"So? Does anyone know? Shame. But I can formulate the question differently and ask: how does the book begin? The first two words, I want to know what the first two words of the book are."

Nothing, nobody says anything.

"Think about it. These are very famous words." Amelio raises his hand.

"Come on, let's hear it!"

"Ambergris."

"No. That is the answer to the earlier question."

"A black hawk!"

"No. That is the answer to the question before that."

"Orphan!"

"No. That is the answer to the last question, number eight."

The silence becomes abyssal. You'd hear a pigeon cooing if there was one.

"Call me Ishmael'," exclaims the headmaster.

No one breathes.

"Call me Ishmael'," he repeats, shaking his head.

No one breathes.

Then Amelio's voice:

"Excuse me, Mr. Ishmael, but perhaps you had better tell us how the book begins!"

Mr Dindoli collapses on the chair. The headmaster turns to him and says:

"I'm afraid these students haven't even opened the book. The only thing they opened, probably, is your leather bag, from which they took the sheet with the questions and answers. I'm sorry to tell you, Dindoli, but I had no doubt that it would end like this: the boys don't read."

He leaves the classroom without saying goodbye, closing the door behind him with a bang.

Mr Dindoli breathes deeply, trying to contain an explosion of anger.

Bang!

He hits the desk with a punch that makes the book jump.

Bang!

Another punch, another jump.

The boys don't have the courage to look him in the face: they

check the laces of their shoes, fiddle with their hands or pretend to write something.

It is Maddalena instead that finds the courage to speak.

“Look on the bright side, Mr Dante: they’ve just been trying to make you happy.”

“Thank you. I’m as happy as an Easter egg!”

“I mean it. They wanted to make you look good in front of the Headmaster.”

“Thank you. I look wonderful!”

“They didn’t have bad intentions, they wanted to do something good for you.”

“Something good? Go through my bag and steal my papers? Does that seem good to you?”

“I know, there are also negative aspects, but you always have to look for the positive side of things, as Pollyanna says. Do you know her? Have you read the book? You know The Glad Game?”

The boys hang on Maddalena’s words like stockfish: well done Maddalena, thank you Maddalena, Saint Maddalena!

They would like to tell the teacher that their classmate is right, that things were as she says and that no one has ever searched inside his leather briefcase. But they realize it’s better to keep quiet.

“That’s enough!” the teacher explodes. “You be quiet, too!”

He gets up and goes to the window to get some air. He takes very deep breaths, like he’s running out of oxygen. Or as if he is about to explode again.

Bang!

“Aaaaaarrrrrgh!”

It really is bad day.

It just so happened that the teacher punched the windowsill right where the company Avio-Stop had planted the anti-pigeon pins.

His right forearm is now pierced like his left one.

CHAPTER II

PLAN B

The headmaster turns a sheet of paper full of numbers over and over: this is the bill that the company Avio-Stop presented to him after the installation of the anti-pigeon fixtures. It's a lot more than the estimate they'd given him. They justified themselves by saying that they had encountered unforeseen difficulties due to the poor state of conservation of the windowsills etcetera etcetera, and in short, the total expenditure increased and the headmaster is irritated.

Knock-knock.

"Come in."

"May I have a word?"

"Come in, Mr Dindoli. If you've come to admit your defeat, I'll gladly listen," the headmaster says without shifting his gaze from the sheet of paper he's holding in his hand.

"Defeat? What kind of educator would I be if I gave up at the first hurdle? You know well that the first gift of a teacher is patience, this ancient peasant virtue that every day becomes rarer: sowing and watering, and trusting in the miracle of growth. Of course, the reading test wasn't thrilling, but I don't want to give up, and I'm sure that in the end I'll kill two birds with one stone: I'm going to develop a passion for reading in my students and demonstrate the value of my scientific method".

"Speaking of pigeons," the headmaster interrupts him.

"I wanted to warn you that I had pins planted on the windowsills."

"Yes, I've noticed," the teacher sighs, who lifts his forearm to show it to his boss.

"Look at that! Looks like a child's bite mark!"

"Oh, sorry, I got the wrong arm" the teacher corrects, and raises his right arm.

“Look at that! It looks like you’ve got two identical tattoos!
And tell me, did the pins break?”

“No, they didn’t.”

“That’s something at least! I was advised to have plastic ones that cost less, but I chose steel ones, and now that you’ve tested them I can say that I made the right choice, even if they’ve presented me with a painful bill!”

“You did well, but I got hurt.”

“So, Dindoli, what were you saying? You were admitting your defeat, it seems to me.”

“Not at all! On the contrary, I was explaining to you that a teacher must always keep in mind that he may face disappointments and failures. And that is why a scientific method must include a Plan B. And if the key word of Plan A was mo-ti-va-ti-on, then the one that sums up this alternative plan is instead...”

Knock-knock.

“Come in.”

“Forgive me, Headmaster,” squeaks Iris, taking a quick look at Dante “I wanted to talk to you about that alarm that ... But what have you done to your arm, Dante?”

“An accident with the anti-pigeon pins.”

“Really? You look like you’ve been bitten!”

“Then you’re talking about my left arm! That’s a bite mark, yes. But it’s an old scar.”

“For sure they look like two identical tattoos.”

“Do I give you the impression that I’m someone who defaces his skin with tattoos?”

“I’d say definitely not. Headmaster, as I was saying, this morning I heard the alarm, and since it seemed to be the fire alarm I went out into the yard with the whole class, but the caretakers told me that no alarm had gone off and so I came to ask you what happened.”

“It wasn’t an alarm. It was Mr Dindoli crying in pain.”

“Oh!”

A mischievous smile played in the teacher’s eyes, as if she could already taste the pleasure of recounting everything to her

colleagues, friends, relatives and acquaintances. And in fact, she leaves quickly.

“You were explaining to me, Dindoli, that you admit your defeat...” the headmaster resumes.

“If you would listen to me when I speak, I wouldn’t have to repeat for the third time that I don’t feel defeated at all. Rather, I want to move on to Plan B of my scientific method. A plan based on the dynamics of pro-vo-ca-ti-on. Because it is a matter of provoking the students into a reaction of pride, on the basis of the known formula: ‘If you want him to do something, you have to tell him he is not capable of doing it.’ You see?”

Even if he had listened carefully, the headmaster wouldn’t have understood much; but since he didn’t listen to a single word, he didn’t understand anything at all.

“Do you get my point?”

“Of course, Dindoli, go ahead.”

“I will go to my students pretending to be disappointed and discouraged: I will tell them that I no longer believe in their abilities, that they are good-for-nothings, and that reading is too demanding an activity for their tiny brains, and in that way, relying on pride...”

Knock-knock.

“Co...”

Before the headmaster manages to complete the word, Bianca Albinoni di Torrebianca energetically enters the office. The headmaster snaps up, like a schoolboy in front of his teacher.

“Am I disturbing you?”

“Not at all. Mr Dindoli was telling me that he must give up and admit defeat...”

Dante goes completely red, partly because of his anger and partly because of the embarrassment he feels under Bianca’s gaze, who is studying him.

“Tell me, does it seem decent to show up at school full of tattoos?”

“They’re not tattoos,” stammers Dante. “A pigeon bit me here and a child pierced me here.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Forget it,” the headmaster says. “He is going through a difficult time.”

The teacher takes one last look at her colleague, then turns to the headmaster.

“I’ve come to ask you for an explanation. This morning I heard the alarm and since it seemed to be that for earthquakes we all dove under our desks, but the caretakers told me that no alarm sounded.

“It wasn’t an alarm, in fact: it was only Mr Dindoli’s scream when he hurt his forearm. As I told you, he’s going through a difficult time.”

“What is going on?” complains the teacher. “In my day, teachers didn’t get tattoos or howl like Zulus!”

She leaves indignantly, while the headmaster, with the tone of one who wants to end a conversation that has lasted too long, says:

“All right, Mr Dindoli, I’m glad you admitted your defeat. And now I have to say goodbye because I have to call the pigeon people: they may be made of steel, but it’s so expensive...”

When he leaves the office, Dante walks like a robot. Eyes fixed in the void, rigid back, mechanical movements. It was so absurd, what happened in there! Everybody talking, nobody listening! Naturally you get upset, especially if you are sensitive. Naturally you feel misunderstood and alone. Especially alone.

“Hello, Dante,” says Serenella as she trots along the hallway with a pack of exercise books in her arms. “I just left a 50-cent credit in the machine. You can get yourself a coffee if you like.”

CHAPTER 12

DANTE LOVES SERENELLA

Mr Dindoli believes the test sheet was taken out of his leather briefcase. He doesn't suspect that the boys of his class are going through the papers in his recycling bin. In fact he continues to throw away sheets that he would never let anyone read, like this one, handwritten with blue ink:

~~Dear My Dear~~ Dearest Serenella,

I am writing you this letter because through writing I can express what I would find very difficult to say in words. Perhaps because shyness prevents me from remaining calm and sure of myself when I am face to face with people, especially if they are people I care about very much. When I write, instead, in ~~the solitude of my room~~, I can say calmly and without fear what I feel and what I think.

First of all I want to thank you for the coffee you ~~kindly~~ offered me at the machine, at a time when I really needed something warm and sweet to give me strength. But I want to give you even greater thanks for the kindness that you have shown towards me and for the smile with which you have spoken to me and always speak to me. Let me tell you: your smile is like a gondola that slides through the water in the morning light, and leaves a song of joy behind it.

I allow myself to say these things to you because I know that you are a sensitive and intelligent person who will appreciate the sincerity of my words and intentions. I'd like one day to chat with you, maybe sitting at a table, in front of a coffee (~~this time it's on me~~).

I'd like to talk to you about my passion for books and tell you about the last novel I read. It's called "Call It Sleep". The author's name is Roth. Have you read it? Do you know it? It's one of those books you read that you never want to end.

Now I will finish, wishing you a good day and hoping with all my heart that this is only the beginning of an open dialogue and a nice

friendship.

Dante

It is clear that it is a draft copy, but the boys understand that Dante never delivered the final copy to Serenella, otherwise he would not have written this second letter.

My Dear ~~Dear~~ ~~Dearest~~ Dear Serenella,

This isn't the first letter I've written to you. The previous attempts, however, ended up in the bin, because every time I reread what I had written I felt dissatisfied: there was always a gap between what I would like say and what the ink put down on paper. I'm going to try again, trying to tell you something simpler and clearer. See: I'd like to ~~go out~~ chat with you sometime. Discuss the project I'm trying to set up, the challenge, let's call it that, I have given my class. No one believes that I will succeed in transforming those eight stubborn no-readers into eight keen readers, but I believe in my method and I know that I just have to be patient and continue to work in faith, because patience and faith are the fundamental qualities of a teacher.

Sometimes I wonder why boys don't read, or rather why they read less than females. And I think that has something to do with feelings. Stories, good stories, allow the reader to immerse himself in the deep sea of feelings, and this frightens them: because males are not used to swimming inside themselves, and they fear drowning.

But I don't know if I can explain. Again, it seems to me that this speech of mine is just a collection of thoughts that have been mixed up and confused, and again I am tempted to grasp this sheet and throw it in the t...

"Did he mean in the toilet?" Amelio asks.

"In the trash," Felipito states. "If he'd flushed it down the toilet, we wouldn't have found it."

"But why does he write these letters to her if he then throws them away? Isn't that wasted effort?"

“Even trying to make us read books is a wasted effort: our teacher spends his life wasting effort.”

“Hey! There’s another one here!”

And Felipito also reads the third letter out loud.

~~My dear~~ Dear Serenella,

I’m writing to thank you for the coffee you kindly offered me. Now I owe you and I would like to return the favour, so please know that at the first opportunity I will offer you a coffee or a cappuccino or a tea. Provided that the machine at school is working, because lately, as you may have noticed, it is often faulty or out of order. In that case we could go to a coffee shop: there is one in front of the school, where they make excellent wholemeal brioches, and there is another one on the corner of the street, where they make a cappuccino with a white heart on top.

There, that heart would be able to tell you all that I would never have the courage to confess to you, either verbally or in writing. And even if I were to complete this letter, I would not be able to deliver it to you, because shyness would prevent me from doing so.

Of course, I could send it to you by post or entrust it to a travelling pigeon, but I don’t know your address and the pigeons haven’t landed on our school since those damn fixtures have been placed.

And now I know that this sheet, too, will end up like the others: I will make a paper ball out of it and throw it into the t..

As usual, Felipito photographs the letters and shares them with his friends, before crumpling them again and putting them back in their place.

“How about writing on the school wall: ‘DANTE LOVES SERENELLA?’” the Hungarian asks. “I have a can of red spray paint at home.”

They are sitting on the benches at the Piccolo Lago and they are letting their imagination run wild about Dindoli’s secret letters.

“Or make a banner, like at the stadium” proposes Dribbling.

“And then hang it from the tail of a plane,” adds the Moor.

“But what does that speech about boys are not being able to swim mean?” questions Amelio. “I didn’t get it.”

“I can swim,” boasts the Hungarian. “Breaststroke and butterfly.”

“I’m learning,” says the Moor. “At the moment I swim a bit like a caterpillar”

The discussion is interrupted here, because in the alley at the end of the park Maddalena appears, walking a poodle.

The boys call out to her with shouts and whistles, and she comes up smiling.

“Do you know a writer named Roth?” the Hungarian asks.

“Roth? Which Roth? Philip Roth, Joseph Roth or Henry Roth?”

No one can answer that. Shame. For once they could have made a good impression by proving they knew the name of a writer...

“The one who wrote ‘Call me sleep!’” cries Amelio, with the momentum of a centre forward who scores from a penalty.

“Call it sleep” Maddalena corrects him.

Amelio lowers his eyes, like someone who just missed a penalty.

“I know him, sure,” continues the girl. “He’s probably the least famous of the three Roths, but that book is a real masterpiece. It should be read in its original language to appreciate its nuances and linguistic richness...”

Her classmates stare at her spellbound. Not because of the words she says – which they don’t even listen to – but because of the beauty that shines through her blue eyes and her whole person.

The poodle barks a couple of times: he’s fed up. Maddalena goes away giving them one last smile, that smile is like a gondola that slides through the water in the morning light, and leaves a song of joy behind it.

CHAPTER 13

PEARLS BEFORE SWINE

“I was wrong. It’s hard to admit, but I was wrong.”

Mr Dindoli has a different expression from usual: he appears bitter, discouraged, defeated.

The class listens to him in silence.

“When I started teaching in this class, I was sure that I would be able to instill a passion for reading in the boys, even though everyone told me that I was naive, a fool, an idiot. I can honestly say that I have nothing to reproach myself for, because I did my utmost. The only mistake I made was to believe in you and your abilities. And now, very sadly, I too must surrender and acknowledge that there is no hope for you. I don’t blame you. It’s not your fault, after all, if you’re incapable, good-for-nothing, ignorant. One can see that your intellectual resources are so limited that they cannot bear the cultural weight of a book. One can see that your brains are so small that they can’t aspire to the noble activity of reading. That’s the way you are and you must accept it, we must all accept it, because there is nothing to be done: if I did not succeed, if my scientific method also failed, then yours is really a desperate case. Well, so be it. One can live without reading. I can’t believe it’s a pleasant life, but one can live without books. A lot of people do it, and so will you. But I repeat, it is not your fault: if someone doesn’t have wings, we can’t ask him to fly.”

In speaking the last words, the teacher raises his voice and loads his words with meaning.

“I’ve finished. Any questions?” No questions.

Dante takes back the book from the desk and puts it in his bag.

“I’ll take this home: it’s always a mistake to put pearls before swine!”

He leaves the classroom before the bell rings, leaving the class stunned and speechless. Then comes back a moment later to throw a

final significant stare at Leonardo.

“And there are also those who have wings, but don’t know how fly. Like chickens.”

When the bell rings, the girls leave in a hurry. They’re grumbling, because this whole thing about boys not reading is starting to get annoying. The boys, on the other hand, have remained in their seats. They’re all turned towards Leonardo, who went a little red when the teacher made that speech about chickens.

“So?” Arturo asks him, “has he really given up?”

“I don’t think so” answers Leonardo. “I think it’s just a tactic.”

He has his classmates’ full attention. Even Dribbling, who was consulting the ratings on Fantacalcio, puts away his mobile phone to listen to his friend, intrigued by the word ‘tactic’.

“Since he couldn’t get us to read using gentle ways, he has decided to change his strategy. He wants to hit our pride to provoke our reaction: he hopes that we’ll get angry, and that we’ll start reading the book to show him that we are not really stupid”.

“So?” Arturo asks him, “what should we do?”

“An own goal. We’ve got to make him score an own goal.” No one understands. Dribbling pricks up his ears.

“I mean we have to make his words backfire on him.”

“How?”

“He humiliates us? We’ll be humiliated. He offends us? We’ll be offended. He hurts us? We’ll be the wounded, the dying, the dead.”

“I get it,” says Arturo. “So now we’re going to do this: we’re going to go home and tell our parents what the teacher told us, maybe exaggerating a bit. Then we’ll say that we feel depressed, disheartened and discouraged, and that we don’t to go to school anymore because we’ll never learn anything, since according to Mr Dindoli we’re just incapable, good-for-nothing and ignorant!”

“And then what?” asks Felipito.

“That’s it, we won’t have to do anything else,” Leonardo says again, “because our parents will be alarmed, they’ll put on their

superhero cloaks and take up their weapons and move into action. And then they'll be the ones to stab and slowly spit-roast this rabbit!"

"Hello?"

"Good evening, Dindoli, it's the Headmaster here."

"Good evening."

"What have you done?"

"Excuse me?"

"In your class, what did you say to the students?"

"Well, I just put Plan B into action, the one I tried to explain to you."

"But do you realize the bomb you've set off? I've been receiving visits and phone calls from parents all day, and the calmest of them wants to shoot you.

"I don't understand..."

"You don't understand? You know that big, fat boy who looks like he's a ninth grader?"

"Paolo."

"His mother told me he doesn't eat anything anymore, just a couple of burgers for breakfast, and he's already lost at least half a kilo..."

"Oh! It's not going to hurt him! What does that have to do with me?"

"And the other one, the one who always comes to school in his black and white striped shirt?"

"Alessandro. But they call him Dribbling."

"He's deflated his ball, put away his football shoes and spends his days combing his sister's dolls."

"Yes, but I...?"

"Then there's the one that everyone thinks is a little Leonardo da Vinci."

"Luciano."

"He said that you called him chicken, and he was so upset that he has stopped talking: the only sounds he makes are cock-a-doodle-

do.”

“You’re kidding me, Headmaster.”

“Shut up and let me continue, because I haven’t finished.

There’s also the other one, the one that is not exactly the smartest in the class.”

“Amelio.”

“It seems you described him as incapable, a good-for-nothing and an ignorant, and since even before receiving these compliments the boy did not feel like a genius, he has entered a state of depression so severe that he only cries and cries, and the only things he eats are the tears that flow down his cheeks.”

“I’m sorry. I’m really sorry. But all I wanted to do was to stimulate their...”

“Save your breath, Mr Dindoli, you’ll need it to defend yourself in court, since the parents want to report you!”

“I’m speechless.”

“Better that way. You’ve already said too much. And now listen to me carefully, because I will tell you what to do, and you will do exactly what I will tell you: you will go to class and write an apology letter to the parents in each students’ diary, where you will say you are mortified, devastated and repentant, admit that you were wrong and beg for forgiveness. Then you will do the same with the boys, you will apologize, grovel, wash their feet and do everything necessary to remedy the mess you have made. Do we understand each other?”

“I think so.”

“Goodbye!”

When he puts the phone down, the teacher goes to the window. Air, he needs air. A lump has formed between his throat and chest, which suffocates him and makes him desperately want to cry.

It’s not the fear of parental protest that makes him sad. Nor is it the embarrassment of having to apologize to half the world: what makes him feel bad is the thought of the suffering he himself inflicted on his students; the thought of those children who had been entrusted to him so that he could take care of them and help them grow, and

who have now lost all faith in themselves and no longer eat, no longer laugh, no longer live. Because of him.

“Poor creatures!” sighs the teacher. “Sometimes they seem capable of conquering the world, but it’s just armour they put on to hide their fragility! Poor creatures! What right did I have to hurt their sensitivity, their purity, their innocence? It takes so little to upset the delicate heart of a child: one word too much, one wrong sentence...”

Air, the teacher needs air. Also because his house is always imbued with that nauseous smell of putrid water and dead sea: the fact is that every now and then he should change the water for the turtles, but never finds the time, because he is too busy with reading and work. He opens the window and breathes deeply, while two tear drops form on his eyelashes.

It’s night and the stars are up there.

Down here, however, there are two children who, with a furtive air, lift a box full of paper and take it away.

The teacher jolts: he recognizes the box and he seems to recognize the two creatures too.

He doesn’t waste time. He puts on a hooded sweatshirt with dark glasses, even if it’s evening.

He rushes down the stairs and then, coming out of the door, he hides against the walls of the houses and moves in the shadow like a thief.

Now he’s behind the window of the little room in the bar and can peek inside without being seen, because he’s in the dark, but inside there’s light.

All eight of them are there. They met at the Da Franco bar for the usual collection of paper, but rather than sifting through the teacher’s papers, they are in fits of laughter.

They heard their parents calling the headmaster and protesting, threatening, cursing. And they learned that the headmaster was very upset, and promised to give the rabbit a real dressing down.

The window is closed and the voices don’t make it out, but even if he can’t hear anything, the teacher has understood everything

there is to understand: his students have hoodwinked him and are celebrating the victory.

There is also a tray full of food on the table, and Paolon is the quickest of all to put sandwiches, savoury snacks and chips into his mouth.

“I’d say he’s better”, Mr Dindoli murmured to himself.
“They’ve all recovered very quickly.”

CHAPTER 14

JAPANESE SWORD

It's Friday again. Since that awful evening, which began with a phone call from the headmaster and ended bitterly in front of the bar room window, Dante has not shown up at school: he went to bed with a bit of a fever and many thoughts, and remained there for an entire week, until this morning.

Now he's better. He climbs the stairs of the school with a very decisive step and enters his classroom.

"Girls out!" he thunders immediately.

"Excuse me, teacher?"

"I want to be alone with your classmates, so please go out into the yard and don't move from there."

"What if someone asks what we're doing in the yard?" asks a student.

"Say that your teacher has ordered you to research lizards or ants or whatever you want." The teacher's tone is very hard, so the girls get up and leave. After all, it's a beautiful day and it's not a bad idea spending it outdoors.

When the last student leaves the classroom, the teacher locks the door. Then he opens the bag, takes the famous book and puts it back in the middle of the desk with a bang.

"You! Bring me the map!"

"The map... which map?"

"The one hanging on the wall. Political Europe."

The Hungarian obeys, removes the map from the wall and delivers it to the teacher.

Boys are stunned.

Mr Dindoli spreads the map on the desk and carefully rolls it

up around the pole. Then fastens it securely with strips of adhesive tape and holds it with two hands as if it were a stick, or rather a sword.

“What is this game?” Amelio asks into the general silence.

Here Dante raises his weapon and begins to walk between the desks with the dancing pace of a samurai, and then someone remembers that among the teacher’s papers there had also been a flyer for a Japanese sword course.

Suddenly, with a terrifying scream, the samurai drops his sword over Paolon’s head, stopping one centimetre from his scalp.

The boys don’t know whether to laugh or cry.

“You think you’re smart and can fool me any time, any way you want. But I was born before you and I have read a few more books than you. And in addition I’m taller and stronger, and above all I’m armed.”

He has an acidic, nasty voice.

“The method has failed, science has failed. So all I can do is renounce all theory and turn to my sword. Because the time for good manners is over, the time for dialogue and reason is over, and now I just have to release the desire to beat you which pounds at my chest. Have you understood?”

“I haven’t understood anything,” whispers Amelio.

“I’ll make you read this book!” the teacher howls, twirling his sword. “And if someone still refuses, I’ll make them eat it!”

A stomach rumbles. The teacher looks around and notices that Paolon’s cheeks are bulging. The boy raises his hand and points to the door of the classroom. His eyes are bright, begging for mercy. But the teacher doesn’t take pity on him: he kicks the basket and pushes it near the student’s desk.

“No one’s leaving today! If you have to empty your mouth, do it here!”

He doesn’t just empty his cheeks, but also his entire stomach.

The air’s getting more and more revolting.

“You! Come here!” and points his sword at Felipito. “Take the book and put it in on your desk.”

Felipito obeys.

“Now open it and start reading. Two words at a time!”

Felipito swallows and attacks.

“Call me Ishmael.”

“Stop!” screams the teacher. “Repeat all together!” Nothing. Nobody says anything.

“Are you deaf? I said, repeat it!”

Silence.

The teacher stiffens. He lowers his head, points his sword to the ground and remains thinking for a few seconds. Then he lets out an inhumane scream, turns around, raises his sword, and with a sudden blow he detaches the head of the plastic skeleton, which flies to the ground and rolls across the floor.

“Is the message clear? Or do you want me to repeat it with someone else’s head?”

“Call me Ishmael,” whispers someone from the class.

“Have you lost your voice?” Dante shouts, and swipes the sword down on Leonardo’s desk. A blow so sharp it would have cut the desk in half, if the sword had been made of steel.

“Louder! Louder!”

“Call me Ishmael.”

“What? I can’t hear you!”

“Call me Ishmael.”

“How pathetic you all are! What did you eat this morning?”

“Baby food,” replies Amelio.

The teacher pierces him with a stare.

“Organic apple,” Amelio says proudly. A few seconds pass, then the man sighs.

“Let’s move on.”

Felipito starts reading again.

“A few years ago...”

“Two words! I said two words at a time! You can count to two, can’t you?” and slams his sword on the desk.

“A few...”

“All together!”

“A few...”

“What? I can’t hear you!”

“A few...”

“I can’t hear you!” What did you eat this morning?”

“Organic apple baby food.”

It seems that Mr Dindoli’s patience has run out: he advances threateningly towards Amelio, holding his sword high, but he stumbles into the skull and ends up on the floor. It would have been funny if it hadn’t been so dramatic. The teacher gets up furious, scoops up the skull, puts his fingers into the orbits and hurls it at Amelio.

The aim is wrong.

The skull ends up near Dribbling, who blocks it on the fly with a nice save.

“Go ahead with the reading!”

It goes on like this for four hours, until the last bell. Four hours to read chapter one.

“We’ve read one, there’s still a hundred thirty-four to go,” says the teacher. “But my time is over, because now I’m most certainly going to be kicked out of the school, since I’ve forced eight helpless little puppies to read a few pages of an old novel. I’m going to leave satisfied, however, because in the end I managed it, to win my challenge. Of course, if I could have gotten you to read the whole book, my victory would have been complete. But sometimes you just have to be content, especially when you have in front of you certain blockheaded fools. And now, go on home and tell your parents the tortures you have suffered and the offenses you have received. And say hello to them from me!”

CHAPTER 15

SELFIE VIDEO

They're not happy. They don't want the story to end like this, with the teacher and his arrogance winning. That's why they have gathered at the Da Franco bar: to come up with an idea that would allow them to reverse the result of the challenge. All eight of them are there. They have joined two tables and sit at their sighting post, in front of a dark bottle.

"Some alone..." says the Moor, lifting the full glass.

The others look at him without understanding.

"What?" Dribbling grumbles.

"Some in pairs..." continues the Moor. "Some in threes, some in fours, some in fives, some in sixes, some in sevens and... chi-notto!"

The joke is unsuccessful, because no one wants to joke, and so the Moor empties his glass in one gulp and fills it again. Then their eyes are turned to beyond the window, because Mr Dindoli had come out on the street with the box of papers in his arms.

"Strange" observes Felipito, when the man places the box on the ground. "He didn't put it in the usual place, but a little further."

The teacher returns to the building, and the boys let a few minutes pass. In the meantime, they concentrate on the Chinotto.

"I'll go this time," says Arturo in a decisive tone. "Will you come with me, Leonardo?"

The two cross the road with light steps, under the watchful eye of their companions. The neighbourhood is deserted, there's no man, there's no dog, and there's no cat. There's only the moon which is coming from behind the rooftops, round and slow like a turtle. They bend over to take the box, but when they lift it, they have the first surprise: the box is light, actually, very light.

"There's something wrong..." murmurs Leonardo.

They put it on the ground and open it: there is only one sheet

of paper in there, a handwritten note. Arturo takes it and reads it in the light of the lamp:

Weather forecast: rain and sudden showers.

Instinctively, the two boys look upwards, and in that instant a violent downpour hits them and soaks them from head to toe.

“That’s disgusting! Eeewwwww!” cries Arturo, while up there, on the third floor of the building, a window closes with a squeak. “That’s disgusting! What is it?”

The two of them leave the danger zone quickly and cross the road again. They stop in front of the door of the bar, where they find the other boys who witnessed the scene and have come out in a hurry.

“That’s why he put the box further out,” exclaims Felipito. “He placed it right under his window!”

“Can you smell that stink, too?” said the Hungarian.

“It’s this disgusting stuff he poured all over us,” says Arturo.

“What is it?”

“Maybe it’s better not to know,” replies Arturo, who keeps sniffing his dripping hands and arms.

“It smells like putrid water and dead sea...”

“He will pay for this, that lagomorph subspecies!” Leonardo hisses, who is as wet as an octopus and brims anger from every pore. “He’ll pay for it! He who laughs last, laughs loudest!”

“Do you have something in mind?” Arturo asks him.

Leonardo reflects for a few seconds and then asks a question in turn:

“Do we have the teacher’s e-mail address?”

The next morning Mr Dindoli sits in front of the computer screen, in the solitude of his house, and finds a new e-mail message. It comes from a certain Cultural Association for the Promotion of Books and Reading. It sounds serious. That’s why, when he sees the message: “The sender has requested a return receipt. Send?”, the teacher

confidently clicks on “Yes.”

Then he reads the message.

Dear Mr Dante Dindoli,

We are pleased to announce that our Cultural Association for the Promotion of Books and Reading has chosen you as a testimonial for the next advertising campaign. You are an important person. We know the value of your studies and the effectiveness of the methods with which you instill a passion for books in young people. For this reason we would be honoured if you would accept our proposal and agree to shoot a small video, a promotional spot that can stimulate the desire to read in young people.

In the hope that you will say yes, we await your response and offer you our greetings and congratulations.

*The President of the Association
Dr. Mario Leggopoco*

The letter is well written, with all the right expressions and without errors. It looks authentic. Yet there is something suspicious, starting with the surname of the President of the Association, which means ‘I read little’. The teacher is not convinced, he smells a rat. But then his mobile phone rings.

“Mr Dindoli?”

“Yes.”

“It’s the Headmaster. Good morning.”

“Good morning. I knew you’d call me.”

“You knew? And why do you say that?”

“Yesterday’s events, of course. The boys must have told you that...”

“Sure, sure, the boys have told me everything. It wasn’t easy for them to endure all those hours, but in the end they were really happy. Because the most demanding things, those that require effort, are those that give the most satisfaction. Their parents also asked me to thank you, and to tell you that you have worked a real miracle with their children, because no one believed that they would ever read!”

“Are you serious?”

“I am most serious, Mr Dindoli. And very pleased with you. But that’s not why I called you.”

“That’s not why?”

“The fact is, something has happened that makes me even more proud of you and your work.”

“Are you serious?”

“This morning I got a call from Dr. Mario Leggopoco, whom I’ve known since college. He told me that you have been chosen as a testimonial for the next advertising campaign for the Cultural Association for the Promotion of Books and Reading. That’s why I called you: to congratulate you, because it’s a very prestigious recognition, which does honour to you and to our school.”

“Are you s...”

“Good day, Mr Dindoli, and congratulations again!”

The teacher is confused and dazed, but the doubts of before have been dispelled: there is no deception, it’s all true.

Without wasting any more time, he goes back to the keyboard and sends his reply to the Cultural Association: an affirmative reply.

On their part, they don’t keep him waiting: a few minutes pass, and the teacher receives a new e-mail.

Dear Mr Dante Dindoli,

Thank you for accepting our proposal.

We write below the instructions that you must follow for the production of the video. In order not to disturb you too much, in fact, we ask you to quickly produce a short “selfie video” and send it to us.

We thank you once again and offer you our esteem and cordiality.

The President of the Association

Dr. Mario Leggopoco

INSTRUCTIONS:

Get an important book, for example Moby Dick.

Get in front of your mobile phone and start recording.

Say the following words out loud:

I DON'T READ BOOKS: I DEVOUR THEM!

Start eating the pages of the book, for real, without pretence, as if they were salad leaves. If you want, you can add a bit of salt.

Send the video to: jmf@gulp.it

The teacher is again gripped with doubt: everything seems so strange to him! This business of eating the book with salt like a salad is really suspicious! So what? The headmaster, the phone call?

His mobile phone rings again.

“Hello?”

“Is that you, Dante?”

His heart leaps. The voice is hers: the sweet and unmistakable voice of..

“Serenella, it’s Serenella.”

“Yes, I recognise your voice.”

“I just met our Headmaster and he gave me the good news!”

“He called me too.”

“I thought: I absolutely must call him and congratulate him.

I’m so proud of you!”

“Are you serious?”

“So you’re going to make a video! I can’t wait to see it! It’s going to be wonderful, for sure!”

“I’ll do my best.”

“I’m sure of it. So, good luck, Dante, and think of me sometimes.”

“Sometimes? But I think about you all the...”

Serenella had already put the phone down. And so Dante bends forward, puts his hands on the ground and throws his legs up high: now he walks with his legs sticking up, like a circus acrobat, and goes back and forth throughout the house, singing, laughing and whistling. When he falls to the ground, because his arms can no longer hold him up, he jumps up and runs to get his Moby Dick out of

his leather briefcase. Then he goes to put on his best jacket and tie, he combs his hair with a little gel, goes to the kitchen to get the salt and prepares his mobile phone for the video.

CHAPTER 16

HE WHO LAUGHS LAST

They're all gathered at Felipito's house, in the basement. Staring at the laptop, open at the email inbox. Some bite their nails, some nibble their knuckles. They're nervous. And there's also a tap that drips: plop plop plop.

Felipito is seated in front of the computer, with his hands ready to move across the keyboard, but the mind that schemed the whole plan is that of Leonardo.

"Do we have the teacher's e-mail address?" Leonardo had asked Arturo. And since they had the e-mail address – it had jumped out of the magic paper box – and they also had a mobile phone number, the plan was set in motion.

Leonardo prepared the two letters of the phantom Cultural Association and the instructions for the video selfie. Then he asked Paolon:

"Can you only imitate the sounds of animals or can you also imitate the voices of humans?"

"Humans, too."

"Try the Headmaster's voice." It was perfect.

"What about Serenella's?" Even better.

During the two phone calls to Mr Dindoli, conducted on speaker phone in Felipito's basement, Leonardo suggested to Paolon the words to be said, writing them on the computer in the moment. Paolon read them well, first with the warm and calm voice of the headmaster, then with the clear and sweet voice of Serenella.

Plop plop plop. There's still that leaky faucet. Those drops that fall and say that time flows slowly and never comes back.

"But how long is it taking him?"

“Maybe he ate a leaf.”
“A leaf? Wasn’t he supposed to eat paper?”
“It’s a figure of speech, Amelio!”
“Ah!”
“Let’s give him time. You’ll see, it’ll come.”
“What if the teacher has discovered that there is no Cultural Association for the Promotion of the Book?”
“You’ll see, it’ll come.”
“And that there is no Dr. Mario Leggopoco? Did we really have to call him that?”
“It was the Moor’s idea.”
“But did we really have to call him that?”
“You’ll see, it’ll come.”
It’s Leonardo who keeps repeating “you’ll see, it’ll come”, even if he is also biting his nails and knuckles.

*You have one new message.
Sent by: Dante Dindoli.*

The e-mail has arrived.
Felipito opens it: there is a video attached.
Silence in the room.
The show begins.

In the background there’s a bookcase full of books. And an aquarium with turtles. In the foreground, sitting on a chair, is Dante Dindoli. Blue jacket, white shirt, pink tie. He smiles and holds a book, or rather the book, in his hand. He shows the cover, underlining the title with a finger, then says clearly:

I DON'T READ BOOKS: I DEVOUR THEM!

That’s when he puts a napkin around his neck. This is his idea, it wasn’t in the instructions. He takes a small bottle of salt and sprinkles some grains between the pages, as if he were seasoning a salad. And now, tuck in! He opens the book at the first page and rips it

with his teeth. Then he begins to chew it, slowly, very slowly, like a ruminant. It doesn't look very tasty. The master's face turns red, green and yellow, but he keeps smiling. The first attempt at swallowing fails, and so does the second. Third time, it goes down. You can hear the dark rumbling of his stomach, while the teacher's face goes white. But the video ends here.

Applause.

Shouts of victory.

"We made you eat your book!"

And they can't stop laughing.

Felipito raises his head towards his classmates and catches his breath. It was hard, but he did it. He got to the end. Towards the final pages his throat dried up and he could not see us anymore, because there was no more light. Then a streetlight came on.

Nobody says anything, they're all stunned.

The park keeper approaches and calls out to them.

"Go on, boys, we have to close! You haven't moved all day."

They have difficulty standing up.

"What is this book like, that you've been reading?" the caretaker asks.

Nothing, no one answers him.

"Can I at least know what it's called?"

"A stupid title."

"Such as?"

"Boys don't read."

"And who wrote it?"

"Dante Dindoli."

"Never heard of him."

"He was our teacher. Now he teaches in a school in Liechtenstein..."

"Do you really like reading books?"

"This is the first one we've read in our entire lives."

"The first? And are you going to read any more?" The boys exchange quick glances.

"You never know. It's not that sad, reading."

Table of Contents

Chapter 1	An infallible method
Chapter 2	All too easy
Chapter 3	Mo-ti-va-ti-on
Chapter 4	Good, actually, bad
Chapter 5	Espionage
Chapter 6	In mathematics there are no problems
Chapter 7	Reading without reading
Chapter 8	Reading test
Chapter 9	Who took it?
Chapter 10	Call me Ishmael
Chapter 11	Plan B
Chapter 12	Dante loves Serenella
Chapter 13	Pearls before swine
Chapter 14	Japanese sword
Chapter 15	Selfie video
Chapter 16	He who laughs last