

# Hopeless

Tommaso Soldini

Novel

Italian



*Hopeless* narrates the vicissitudes of an investigative journalist, Michele Incassa, who finds himself chasing the shadow of the wife who had unexpectedly rejected him in a club for swingers suspended between dream and reality. In parallel, reconstructing an incident reported in the news leads the protagonist to “ask fiction to tell the truth.” In this ambitious novel, riddled with linguistic invention, Tommaso Soldini challenges his readers by dismantling all the clichés we define as “reality”. In its irreverence and hopeless humanity, the novel cannot fail to stir up emotions.

*“While his mind went over these thoughts, even though he was in public, even though it was by no means polite, Miché couldn’t resist the temptation and took a piss.”*

## Title

L'inguaribile

## Publisher

Marcos y Marcos, Milan

## Publication date

January 2020

## Pages

320

## ISBN

978-88-7168-930-2

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## Author

Tommaso Soldini was born in Lugano in 1976. After studying in Switzerland, he moved to New York for a year and in 2003, shortly before the Iran conflict escalated, participated in the largest anti-war demonstration of our history. Ever since, the theme of violence has been haunting him: it is at the heart of *L'inguaribile*, together with that of desire. Today he teaches Italian in Bellinzona and has published several books of fiction, non-fiction and poetry.

Photo: Yvonne Böhler

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Excerpt translated by Clarissa Botsford

June 14, 2024

### 1. *The bedtime story*

They'd always boasted they were different from all the others. They weren't this, they weren't that, they didn't behave that way. It must be admitted that, at least in the choice of when and how to announce they wanted a divorce, that is, the end of their life together, Gemma had been truly original.

Husband and wife were calmly reading a story to their daughters, acting two parts as they often did, while the girls, clutching their soft toys, struggled between different states of consciousness. Sleep, half-sleep, wakefulness.

Iphigenia's legs were up in the air, kicking with all her might against the slats of her younger sister Veronica's bed, hoping to disturb her gradual descent into the depths. Her efforts were such that, not only did she fail to achieve her aim – Veronica loved the extra-cuddly feeling of having her back stroked, which lulled her to sleep – but she was also unable to abandon herself completely to the story, though this was undoubtedly her favourite moment of the day. With one ear, Iphigenia listened to the melodic cadences of the words; with the other, she strained towards the upper bunk, convinced she would be able to pick up every sigh of irritation. She was so sure of the signals that she no longer distinguished between pleasure and pain, and was thus able to fall asleep. Both girls had found peace.

That evening, in the dimly-lit room, Michele and Gemma were reading *The Canterville Ghost*, persuaded as they were that the strange story would teach their offspring a moral or two. But when they got to the point when Virginia came across the insomniac ghost in the Tapestry Chamber, Gemma introduced a variant:

"Oh, Mr. Ghost – I mean Sir Simon, are you hungry? I have a sandwich in my case. Would you like it?"

"No, thank you, I never eat anything now; but it is very kind of you, all the same, and you are much nicer than

the rest of your horrid, rude, vulgar, dishonest family."

"Stop!" cried Virginia, stamping her foot, "it is you who are rude, and horrid, and vulgar, and as for dishonesty, you know you stole the best years of my life."

Michele was stunned by the variation, but failed to realize immediately that it involved him: Gemma might have been testing his improvisation skills, after all. He dived back into the story, searching for a way to return to the original text.

"Even if I'd wanted to, I couldn't have ruined the best years of your life, which are still to come," he said, not without a certain pleasure at his presence of spirit.

But he was flabbergasted when he heard,

"And are you really so sure you'll be a part of it?"

He had never thought about it, it was true. He'd never imagined that the two of them could live differently. He opened his eyes wide, looking for anything that resembled reality, a Cheshire Cat, or something like that. Gemma, instead, continued with her ploy.

"Since I saw you steal the paints out of my box to try and furbish up that ridiculous blood-stain in the library, I came to the conclusion ..." She took a deep breath and went on, her eyes almost closed. "... that I would continue without you."

"Virginia, what are you saying?" Michele spluttered.

"I never told on you, though I was very much annoyed, and it was most ridiculous, the whole thing, our marriage."

Michele felt himself blanch. His wife was confronting him in front of the girls, at the most intimate moment of the day, when every emotional reaction was supposed to be kept at bay. Luckily, neither Iphigenia nor Virginia appeared to have noticed the transformations, which may have been why Gemma had suggested a story they'd never read before. With a great effort, he managed to pretend nothing had happened and go back to reading his part.

"Well, really," said the Ghost, rather meekly, "what was I to do? It is a very difficult thing to get real blood nowadays, and, as your brother began it all with his Paragon Detergent, I certainly saw no reason why I should not have your paints."

"My paints!" Gemma said, enunciating the words clearly.

"Mine. My most important possessions. Have you never

noticed? Who gave you permission to imagine they were yours? No-bo-." The last syllable plummeted to the floor.

"Please don't go, Miss Virginia," He tried once again to warn his wife that he was no longer enjoying the joke, if he ever had. "That's enough now. Stop this nonsense." "My mind has never been clearer, dear Ghost. In fact, prepare yourself, because amongst the ruins and curiosities, I finally know whither my words are heading." "Whither?"

"Divorce, dear Ghost. So, rise, go forth, and find another place to sleep. It may not be what you deserve, but it is your fate."

"Mama?" Virginia piped up from the top bunk, "Are the ghost and Virginia married?"

"No, darling. Not any longer. Go to sleep now."

Michele leaped up, half unable to believe what had just happened, half worse. He went to the kitchen and poured himself a glass of wine, which he downed in four slow sips. He didn't know what to do; a corner of his conscience dredged up a few episodes firmly wedged in the past: that time he had laid claim to something brilliant she had said, stating in front of a group of friends, who had come together to celebrate some occasion or other, that she couldn't have thought of it all on her own. She even needed help to set up the ironing board in the sitting room. At the end of the evening, driving home in the canary-yellow Renault she had wanted so badly, Michele had apologized for having perhaps been a little over-euphoric. The damage is done, had been her response. At times like these, she was able to look at you sideways without even turning her head.

Or again, he remembered that morning when Iphigenia had been stirring maccheroni into boiling water, her mother looking on, eyes popping with anxiety. "Do you want her to burn herself so that you can say you warned her?" he'd sneered, thinking as usual he was being funny. Only that time he'd realized, as if he'd been struck by a bolt of lightning, that when you laugh on your own, maybe. Pearls of cold sweat gathered on his forehead, like in those cheap thrillers, written to be read lying down. He deserved evil, this evil, maybe. He felt an impulse to grab some of his things and leave. But he didn't want

to abandon the house until his wife had explained unequivocally what. He waited for her; the virus of hope glued to his eyes. When she arrived, tall and regal in her loose cotton clothes, he understood that. She hardly spoke to him; her nose indicated the front door as if it were saying I'm tired, go away, let's save ourselves a whole load of pain for nothing. *Click* went the door as he left.

He slept in the car a few nights, even though he knew she wouldn't change her mind, as if there were a kind of ritual etched in the air to be enacted. A code of behaviour handed down to every new divorcee, insisting they plunge themselves into desperation. He had to extract the booster seats from the seat belts, stow them in the boot, and clumsily search for a position that was not too far from comfortable. He christened it piggy-foetal. He had found a propitious moment to go to his wardrobe and get the old loden coat that Gemma had passed down to him from her father, which he'd always refused to wear. It would have made a great blanket if that June 14, 2024, a date he would never forget, had been as cold and seedy as he seemed to have hoped. He felt a certain stubborn satisfaction when he realized it would be that vile, degenerate, rotten-green overcoat's swan song.

The first night, spent in the car park under his daughters' bedroom window, was one uninhibited wail after another. Iphigenia's dark eyes stared up at him out of his chest, accusing, understanding, and, the worst sensation of all, coddling him. His firstborn's passionate intelligence made him feel inadequate as a father and, as a man, much worse than how his soon-to-be-ex-wife had just described him. As a girl she was able to sleep a thousand times in cars no bigger than this one, on the edge of a forest of fir trees at the top of a mountain pass, a few yards from the beach, in a guarded car-park in the Province of Ordeaux, in front of the bookshop in Errara, her bare legs ready to shock any sales assistant with a clue about child-psychology.<sup>1</sup> He would finally be able to devote himself to a life of his own. This was what his nose, leaning on the door, seemed to suggest, as did the condensation that veiled the glass of Chardonnay, and his half-closed, muted

eyes. He had even clicked his tongue in a burst of pleasure that was more for show than for real, or at least that was what he had hoped.

Now Veronica, too, appeared in his troubled attempts at abandoning himself to the obliviousness of sleep. With her newly-cut hair, she looked askance at him, as if she'd always expected this. Papa, the spirit said as he shrugged the loden coat off and folded it up into a pillow, it's the best thing that could have happened to you, one day you'll realize. I'll always be there, don't worry, I'll learn how to wait and wait for you, more than you've ever done for yourself.<sup>2</sup>

He didn't know whether to take his shoes off or keep them on, conscious, as it were, of the pettiness of the expression, whether to scrape together a little dignity even in that situation, or let himself go completely, maybe even puking all over himself. He took one off calmly, trying to follow to the letter the imaginary instructions he was reading in the text-book for the defenestrated; he levered the other off with his free foot, adhering to a less chic school of thought. He regretted it every time one of those ghostly visits dragged him back to reality. His body went into spasms, his foot battered the car door.

The second and third night, he parked close to the lake, hoping that the gently lapping waves would increase his pain by a hundred-fold. He stared at the lights in the casino, in the hotels where he imagined other blessed existences, worlds apart from his; he breathed in the air that filtered from the crack he'd left in the window. Hurting himself would only be a temporary solution, and yet there was a certain fascination to it. Like that friend of his who had sliced his arm for a long-haired girl who spoke Romansch. Horror soon turned into comprehension in his mind as he saw the guy come down the stairs of their student lodgings in his short-sleeved Iron Maiden T-shirt, with the suppressed smile of someone who has just relished the sound of skin split open by a jack-knife.

He spent the next few days at some friends' house, under the firing squad of their subtly piercing commiseration. A couple with a hobby room, which could be turned into a guest room when needed, given the French-double sofa bed, or into a *refugium peccatorum* when one of them

had had to creep in past bedtime, or had refused to give the other a foot massage during the Thursday night TV show. Thanks to his presence, proof that there is always a silver lining, they would salvage enough of their stifled complicity to keep their relationship going a little longer. At times, being forced to live with someone else's desperation brings out the best in us, Michele thought, imagining he'd hit the bulls-eye, at least in this case.

"You can stay as long as you like", his friend said, blatantly holding the steel-plated door of the apartment open.

"Thanks, Dan," he answered, without forsaking his taste for Hollywood-style name mangling. In his suitcase he only had the necessary minimum to survive a few days, time to digest the setback, wake from the nightmare, find somewhere to stay.

<sup>1</sup> Whenever Gemma and Michele went into a bookshop, they would take two different paths: he would go to contemporary literature and non-fiction and she would head for the children's section. Michele shopped by touch and always checked p. 96, which was the year his favourite author had died; Gemma used the Munari Protocol, which meant reading the title, smiling, and looking for beauty in the book.

<sup>2</sup> Michele and his two daughters once launched themselves down a field with a 33 percent gradient in a borrowed bob sleigh. A protuberance in the ground overturned the sleigh and it was his youngest daughter's arm that stopped him from sliding further down the hill. Her father didn't realize any damage had been done until the next day. After urging one another not to exaggerate, the bluish colour of the little limb crashed them back to reality. Gemma had laughed, these things happen she'd said, looking up into the air.