

# Will

Olimpia De Girolamo

Novel

Italian



*It's night, it's raining outside. Elena is woken by the doorbell. At the door are two police officers who take her to the station: she must identify a body she knows all too well. A mother, a father, a son and a police investigation that soon becomes an exploration of each character's conscience: how do you talk about grief?*

*"Maybe hoping and imagining something else is just hallucination, seeing something that isn't there. Yet imagination is connected to reality because we create with our eyes. So even Giacomo is a child of my imagination, my projections, my hope. I would like to go back and apologise for having been so fragile. I would like to apologise for not having understood sooner. For having never understood. Except I cannot and I go on and I'm here. I'm still a line for him to hold on to, and I look after myself so this rope does not fray, so he can always cling on when he needs to."*

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Olimpia De Girolamo was born in Naples on 6 September 1975. A philosophy graduate and specialist in the languages of stage and screen, she has lived in Switzerland since 2002, where she teaches Italian and works in theatre as a writer, actor and teacher. She is the co-artistic director of Agorà Teatro in Magliaso, a space for education and performance that she built in her garden in 2005. De Girolamo's monologue *La Mar* won the Fersen Prize (Milan) and was a finalist in the Women and Theatre Prize (Rome). In 2021, she won the Opennet Prize at Solothurn Literature Days with the short story *The First Step: The Assault of the Past*, which became the novel *All the Things That We Used to Be*, published in 2022 by Gabriele Capelli Editore.

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Excerpt translated by Ruth Clarke

The streetlights reflected on the wet pavement. It was raining. At four in the morning, the doorbell rang, startling Elena from sleep. She was dreaming about her mother and father on a long-ago trip to the seaside. The car was in the middle of the beach and there she was, as a child, wondering how it had made it onto the wet sand at the water's edge, when the sound of the bell reached her. She got out of bed, feet bare and hair ruffled. She had been living alone for years now, since she and Arturo had divorced. As soon as he'd turned 16, their son, Giacomo, had decided to move in with his father, and she'd had to embrace the sense of loneliness and failure that came from being a bother to her son as well as her husband. There were two of them on the doorstep. Raindrops had gathered on their shoulders and their felt caps. The moment they saw her, they removed their hats and introduced themselves. She could not register the words, just stared as they tumbled through the air, evanescent, Christmas lights in the distance. She stood, motionless, like a dog in agony.

They asked to come in, told her to put something on, that she had to go with them, there was no need to take her car, they would be bringing her home.

Elena walked back into the dark, stubbing her toe on the corner of the hallway cabinet, the one she had inherited from her mother, dark wood, antique mahogany, where she would put the keys when she came in so as not to have to turn the whole apartment upside down looking for them the next day. Whimpering in pain, she went into her bedroom. She picked up her phone and saw the missed calls from Arturo - ten of them. She put on the burgundy jumper she had thrown over the chair, and her usual jeans. She tied her shoes and then, before closing the door, grabbed the coat with a hood, because it was cold and raining outside, they'd said.

Only when she was in the car did she realise that she had not brought the handbag with her documents in. Or her keys. She was just clutching her phone. The ten missed calls flashed on the screen. Outside, the street faded into the pouring rain. The opaque glass reflected her tired face, her hair standing on end.

The car stopped. They walked down a long corridor with neon lights. The walls were a pale yellow, with occasional patches of new paint, perhaps covering up a hole or some other mark. Suddenly they stopped in front of a brown lacquered door. It must

have been repainted recently, there was still a faint smell of varnish. They entered the room and left her outside. The neon above her head buzzed, as if it were about to burn out. The flickering light made her right eyelid twitch. She was still, suspended, the way a person might be when picked up in the middle of the night to be driven who knows where or for what reason. The door opened. Arturo emerged. She watched him like watching a shadow cast on the wall by a body that wasn't in the room. A ghost.

The blow folded her in two. It wasn't a punch or a kick, it was the news that travelled straight from her ears to her stomach and was tearing her open, splitting her in two. She crumpled to the floor without a word, the air spilling from her chest. They tried to pick her up, get her back into her chair. Elena couldn't remember how to sit or stand. Her body felt limp and lost, like those wooden puppets with connected joints, that if you press a button under the base, the body collapses into a twisted and misshapen heap. Elena was misshapen now, in the chill of unimaginable words talking about perhaps and as yet unknown.

The next part happened elsewhere. They had to get back in the car and walk through the basement corridors of another building. They showed her a clear plastic bag containing red Jordan shoes, an Octopus sweatshirt, and a few other small things, most noticeable among them the silver chain with a G. She couldn't take anything away, it would be needed in the investigation. While they showed her the bag of what was left of her son, Elena, leaning on Arturo's arm, had to identify the lifeless body on the marble slab as eighteen-year-old Giacomo. She hadn't seen him naked since he was in middle school.

"That's not my son", she said, but no one heard. "That's not my son, that's not my son!" she screamed, and Arturo put a hand over her mouth to silence her.

"Signora, you have to identify him. Without identification, we can't get on with the investigation. You have to identify him. Signora, do you recognise him or not? Is this Giacomo or not? Signora? Signora?"

Elena studied every inch of this child, the muscles of his abdomen, deflated now with no more air, his bloated face, one eye bulging out and the other swollen shut. Below the ribs on the right side were round, black marks. She thought of the halos she used to draw with him when he was little. They would dab watercolours onto Fabriano paper with a sponge, making prints that looked like blurred flower heads.

The wrists were marked with a red line, and the fingers were bruised. Elena cast her eyes over all her naked son, even the large

sex of a young man, no longer a boy's. The hair, the muscular thighs, the broad shoulders. He was handsome, eighteen-year-old Giacomo, he was athletic. He swam like a fish and was regional champion. He also did freediving, he was preparing for a special test so he could explore the seabed. Even now, perhaps, he was just practising apnea, that's why he wasn't breathing. Her gaze lingered on his upper lip. There was a deep cut, his teeth were visible. She looked at his feet. Giacomo had a dark, round mole on the bottom of his left foot. Maybe if that hadn't been there, then...

There it was, the mole.