This book brings together four novellas united by the theme of family. Demonstrating Natalia Ginzburg’s expertise ‘at detailing the ebb and flow of irritation and affection which makes up the pattern of all relationships’ (Literary Review), we see that the author’s scalpel is as cold and sharp as ever, while her characters – in all their appalling humanity – are treated humanely and sympathetically.

‘Valentino’ and ‘Sagittarius’ explore the strengths, tensions, and treacheries within the family. In the characters of Valentino, the favourite son who exploits and betrays the family’s love, and his sister who tells the story, Ginzburg defines with great delicacy two individuals and two types. In ‘Sagittarius’, another girl tells the story of her mother who, disappointed and frustrated with her lot, looks for herself in social aspirations and in the acquisition of a boutique.

‘Family’ centres on Carmine Donati, an architect and author, his broken marriage, his relations with the translator Irina and with the children. And finally ‘Borghesia’ concerns a widow living alone, but close enough to her brother-in-law and her young daughter and son-in-law to watch the neighbourhood, the neighbourhood cats, and her own creatures – as her crisis stalks her...

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NATALIA GINZBURG

Four Novellas

Translated from the Italian by
Avril Bardoni and Beryl Stockman

PALADIN
GRAFTON BOOKS
A Division of the Collins Publishing Group

LONDON GLASGOW
TORONTO SYDNEY AUCKLAND
I LIVED with my father, mother and brother in a small rented apartment in the middle of town. Life was not easy and finding the rent money was always a problem. My father was a retired school-teacher and my mother gave piano lessons; we had to help my sister who was married to a commercial traveller and had three children and a pitifully inadequate income, and we also had to support my student brother who my father believed was destined to become a man of consequence. I attended a teacher-training college and in my spare time helped the caretaker's children with their homework. The caretaker had relatives who lived in the country and she paid in kind with a supply of chestnuts, apples and potatoes.

My brother was studying medicine and the expenses were never-ending: microscope, books, fees . . . My father believed that he was destined to become a man of consequence. There was little enough reason to believe this, but he believed it all the same and had done ever since Valentino was a small boy and perhaps found it difficult to break the habit. My father spent his days in the kitchen, dreaming and muttering to himself, fantasizing about the future when Valentino would be a famous doctor and attend medical congresses in the great capitals and discover new drugs and new diseases. Valentino himself seemed devoid of any ambition to become a man of consequence; in the house, he usually spent his time playing with a kitten or making toys for the caretaker's children out of scraps of old material stuffed with sawdust, fashioning cats and dogs and monsters too, with big heads and long, lumpy
bodies. Or he would don his skiing outfit and admire himself in the mirror; not that he went skiing very often, for he was lazy and hated the cold, but he had persuaded my mother to make him an outfit all in black with a great white woollen balaclava; he thought himself no end of a fine fellow in these clothes and would strut about in front of the mirror first with a scarf thrown about his neck and then without and would go out on to the balcony so that the caretaker's children could see him.

Many times he had become engaged and then broken it off and my mother had had to clean the dining-room specially and dress for the occasion. It had happened so often already that when he announced that he was getting married within the month nobody believed him, and my mother cleaned the dining-room wearily and put on the grey silk dress reserved for her pupils' examinations at the Conservatory and for meeting Valentino's prospective brides.

We were expecting a girl like all the others he had promised to marry and then dropped after a couple of weeks, and by this time we thought we knew the type that appealed to him: teenagers wearing jaunty little berets and still studying at high-school. They were usually very shy and we never felt threatened by them, partly because we knew he would drop them and partly because they looked just like my mother's piano pupils.

So when he turned up with his new fiancée we were amazed to the point of speechlessness. She was quite unlike anything we had ever imagined. She was wearing a longish sable coat and flat rubber-soled shoes and was short and fat. From behind tortoise-shell glasses she regarded us with hard, round eyes. Her nose was shiny and she had a moustache. On her head she wore a black hat squashed down on one side and the hair not covered by the hat was black streaked with grey, crimped and untidy. She was at least ten years older than Valentino.

Valentino talked non-stop because we were incapable of speech. He talked about a hundred things all at once, about the cat and the caretaker's children and his microscope. He wanted to take his fiancée to his room at once to show her the microscope but my mother objected because the room had not been tidied. And his fiancée said that she had seen plenty of microscopes anyway. So Valentino went to find the cat and brought it to her. He had tied a ribbon with a bell around its neck to make it look pretty, but the cat was so frightened by the bell that it raced up the curtain and clung there, hissing and glaring at us, its fur all on end and its eyes gleaming ferociously and my mother began to moan with apprehension lest her curtain should be ruined.

Valentino's fiancée lit a cigarette and began to talk. The tone of her voice was that of a person used to giving orders and everything she said was like a command. She told us that she loved Valentino and had every confidence in him; she was confident that he would give up playing with the cat and making toys. And she said that she had a great deal of money so they could marry without having to wait for Valentino to start earning. She was alone and had no ties since both her parents were dead and she was answerable to no one.

All at once my mother started to cry. It was an awkward moment and nobody knew quite what to do. There was absolutely no emotion behind my mother's tears except grief and shock; I sensed this and felt sure that the others sensed it too. My father patted her knee and made little clicking noises with his tongue as if comforting a child. Valentino's fiancée suddenly became very red in the face and she went over to my mother; her eyes gleamed, alarmed and imperious at the same time, and I realized that she intended to marry Valentino come what may. 'Oh dear, Mother's crying,' said Valentino, 'but Mother does tend to get emotional.' — 'Yes,' said my mother, and she dried her eyes, patted her hair and drew herself up. 'I'm not very strong at the moment and tears come easily. This news has taken me rather by surprise; but Valentino has always done whatever he wanted to do.' My mother had had a genteel education; her behaviour was always correct and she had great self-control.

Valentino's fiancée told us that she and Valentino were
going to buy furniture for the sitting-room that very day. Nothing else needed to be bought as her house already contained all that they would need. And Valentino sketched a plan, for my mother's benefit, of the house in which his fiancée had lived since her childhood and in which they would now live together: it had three floors and a garden and was in a neighbourhood where all the houses were detached and each had its own garden.

For a little while after they had gone we all sat silently looking at each other. Then my mother told me to go and fetch my sister, and I went.

My sister lived in a top-floor flat on the outskirts of town. All day long she typed addresses for a firm that paid her so much for each addressed envelope. She had constant toothache and kept a scarf wrapped round her face. I told her that our mother wanted to see her and she asked why but I wouldn't tell her. Intensely curious, she picked up the youngest child and came with me.

My sister had never believed that Valentino was destined to become a man of consequence. She couldn't stand him and pulled a face every time his name was mentioned, remembering all the money my father spent on his education while she was forced to type addresses. Because of this, my mother had never told her about the skiing outfit and whenever my sister came to our house one of us had to rush to his room and make sure that these clothes and any other new things that he had bought for himself were out of sight.

It was not easy to explain to my sister Clara the turn that events had taken. That a woman had appeared with lashings of money and a moustache who was willing to pay for the privilege of marrying Valentino and that he had agreed; that he had left all the teenagers in berets behind him and was now shopping in town for sitting-room furniture with a woman who wore a sable coat. His drawers were still full of photographs of the teenage girls and the letters they had written him. And after his marriage to the bespectacled and moustachioed woman he would still manage somehow to slip away from time to time to meet the teenagers in berets and would spend a little money on their amusements; only a little, because he was basically mean when it came to spending on others the money he regarded as his own.

Clara sat and listened to my father and mother and shrugged her shoulders. Her toothache was very bad and addresses were waiting to be typed; she also had the washing to do and her children's socks to mend. Why had we dragged her out and made her come all this way and forced her to waste a whole afternoon? She wasn't the slightest bit interested in Valentino, in what he did or whom he married; the woman was doubtless mad because only a mad woman could seriously want to marry Valentino; or she was a whore who had found her dupe and the fur coat was probably fake — Father and Mother had no idea about furs. My mother insisted that the fur was genuine, that the woman was certainly respectable and that her manners and bearing were those of a lady, and she was not mad; only ugly, as ugly as sin. And at the memory of that ugliness my mother covered her face with her hands and started to cry again. But my father said that that was not the main consideration; and he was about to launch into a long speech about what was the main consideration but my mother interrupted him. My mother always interrupted his speeches, leaving him choking on a half-finished sentence, puffing with frustration.

There was a sudden clamour in the hall: Valentino was back. He had found Clara's little boy there and was greeting him boisterously, swinging him high over his head and then down to the floor, then up and down again while the baby screamed with laughter. For a moment Clara seemed to enjoy the laughter of her child, but her face soon darkened with the emotions of spite and bitterness that the sight of Valentino invariably aroused in her.

Valentino started to describe the furniture they had bought for the sitting-room. It was Empire style. He told us how
much it had cost, quoting sums that to us seemed enormous; he rubbed his hands together hard and tossed the figures gleefully around our little living-room. He took out a cigarette and lit it; he had a gold lighter—a present from Maddalena, his fiancée.

He was oblivious of the uneasy silence which gripped the rest of us. My mother avoided looking at him. My sister had picked up her little boy and was pulling on his gloves. Since the appearance of the gold cigarette lighter, her lips had been compressed into a grim smile which she now concealed behind her scarf as she left, carrying her child. As she passed through the door, the word ‘Pig!’ filtered through the scarf.

The word had been uttered very softly, but Valentino heard it. He started after Clara, intending to follow her downstairs and ask her why she had called him a pig and my mother held him back with difficulty. ‘Why did she say that?’ Valentino asked my mother. ‘Why did the wretched woman call me a pig? Because I’m getting married? Is that why I’m a pig? What’s she thinking about, the old hog?’

My mother smoothed the pleats in her dress, sighed and said nothing; my father refilled his pipe with fingers that trembled. He struck a match against the sole of his shoe to light his pipe but Valentino, noticing this, went up to him holding out his cigarette lighter. My father glanced at Valentino’s hand proffering the light, then he suddenly pushed the hand away, threw down his pipe and left the room. A moment later he reappeared in the doorway, puffing and gesticulating as if about to launch into a speech; but then he thought better of it and turned away without a word, slamming the door behind him.

Valentino stood as if transfixed. ‘But why?’ he asked my mother. ‘Why is he angry? What’s the matter with them? What have I done wrong?’

‘That woman is as ugly as sin,’ said my mother quietly. ‘She’s grotesque, Valentino. And since she boasts about being so wealthy, everyone will assume that you are marrying her for her money. That’s what we think too, Valentino, because

we cannot believe that you are in love with her, you who always used to chase the pretty girls, none of whom was ever pretty enough for you. Nothing like this has ever happened in our family before; not one of us has ever done anything just for money.’

Valentino said we hadn’t understood anything at all. His fiancée wasn’t ugly, at least he didn’t find her ugly, and wasn’t his opinion the only one that really mattered? She had lovely black eyes and the bearing of a lady, apart from which she was intelligent, extremely intelligent and very cultured. He was bored with all those pretty little girls with nothing to talk about, while with Maddalena he could talk about books and a hundred other things. He wasn’t marrying her for her money; he was no pig. Deeply offended all of a sudden, he went and shut himself in his room.

In the days that followed he continued to sulk and to act the part of a man marrying in the teeth of family opposition. He was solemn, dignified, rather pale and spoke to none of us. He never showed us the presents that he received from his fiancée but every day he had something new: on his wrist he sported a gold watch with a second hand and a white leather strap, he carried a crocodile-skin wallet and had a new tie every day.

My father said he would go to have a talk with Valentino’s fiancée, but my mother was opposed to this, partly because my father had a weak heart and was supposed to avoid any excitement, partly because she thought his arguments would be completely ineffectual. My father never said anything sensible; perhaps what he meant to say was sensible enough, but he never managed to express what he meant, getting bogged down in empty words, digressions and childhood memories, stumbling and gesticulating. So at home he was never allowed to finish what he was saying because we were always too impatient, and he would hark back wistfully to his teaching days when he could talk as much as he wanted and nobody humiliated him.

My father had always been very diffident in his dealings with Valentino; he had never dared to reproach him even when
he failed his examinations, and he had never ceased to believe that he would one day become a man of consequence. Now, however, this belief had apparently deserted him; he looked unhappy and seemed to have aged overnight. He no longer liked to stay alone in the kitchen, saying that it was airless and made him feel claustrophobic and he took to sitting outside the bar downstairs sipping vermouth; or sometimes he walked down to the river to watch the anglers, and returned puffing and muttering to himself.

So, seeing that it was the only thing that would set his mind at rest, my mother agreed to his going to see Valentino's fiancée. My father put on his best clothes and his best hat, too, and his gloves; and my mother and I stood on the balcony watching him go. And as we did so, a faint hope stirred within us that things would be sorted out for the best; we didn't know how this would come about nor even what we were hoping for precisely, and we certainly couldn't imagine what my father would find to say, but that afternoon was the most peaceful we had known for a long time. My father returned late looking very tired; he wanted to go straight to bed and my mother helped him to undress, questioning him while she did so; but this time it was he who was reluctant to talk. When he was in bed, with his eyes closed and his face ashen, he said: 'She's a good woman. I feel sorry for her.' And after a pause: 'I saw the house. A beautiful house, extremely elegant. The kind of elegance that is simply beyond the experience of people like you and me.' He was silent for a minute, then: 'Anyway, I'll soon be dead and buried.'

The wedding took place at the end of the month. My father wrote to one of his brothers asking for a loan, because we had to be well turned out so that we should not disgrace Valentino. For the first time in many years, my mother had a hat made for her: a tall, complicated creation with a bow and a little veiling. And she unearthed her old fox fur that had one eye missing; by arranging the tail carefully over the head she could hide this defect, and the hat had been so expensive that my mother was determined not to spend any more on this wed-

ding. I had a new dress of pale blue wool trimmed with velvet, and around my neck I too had a little fox-fur, a tiny one that my aunt Giuseppina had given me for my ninth birthday. The most expensive item of all was the suit for Valentino, navy blue with a chalk stripe. He and my mother had gone together to choose it, and he had stopped sulking and was happy and said he had dreamed all his life of possessing a navy blue suit with a chalk stripe.

Clara announced that she had no intention of coming to the wedding because she wanted nothing to do with Valentino's disgraceful goings-on and had no money to waste; and Valentino told me to tell her to stay at home by all means as he would be happier if she spared him the sight of her ugly face on his wedding day. And Clara retorted that the bride's face was uglier than hers; she had only seen it in photographs but that was enough. But Clara did turn up in church after all, with her husband and eldest daughter; and they had taken pains to dress nicely and my sister had had her hair curled.

During the whole of the ceremony my mother held my hand and clutched it ever more tightly. During the exchange of rings she bent towards me and whispered that she couldn't bear to watch. The bride was in black and had on the same fur coat that she always wore and our caretaker who had been keen to come was disappointed because she had expected a veil and orange-blossom. She told us later that the wedding wasn't nearly as splendid as she had hoped after hearing all the rumours about Valentino marrying such a rich woman. Apart from the caretaker and the woman from the paper-shop on the corner, there was no one there that we knew; the church was full of Maddalena's acquaintances, well-dressed women in furs and jewels.

Afterwards we went to the house and were served with refreshments. Without even the caretaker and the woman from the paper-shop there, we felt utterly lost, my parents and I and Clara and Clara's husband. We huddled in a group close to the wall and Valentino came over to us for a moment to tell us not to stick together in a group like that; but we still
stuck together. The garden and the ground-floor rooms of the house were crowded with all the people who had been in church; and Valentino moved easily among these people, speaking and being spoken to; he was very happy with his navy blue suit with a chalk stripe and took the ladies by the arm and led them to the buffet. The house was extremely elegant, as my father had said, and it was difficult to imagine that this was now Valentino's home.

Then the guests left and Valentino and his wife drove off in the car; they were to spend a three months honeymoon on the Riviera. We went home. Very excited by all the food she had eaten from the buffet and all the strange new things that she had seen, Clara's little girl jumped and skipped, chattering non-stop about how she had run round the garden and been frightened by a dog and how she had then gone into the kitchen and seen a tall cook all dressed in light blue, grinding coffee. But as soon as we were indoors our first thought was of the money that we owed to my father's brother. We were all tired and cross and my mother went to Valentino's room and sat on the unmade bed and had a little cry. But she soon started to tidy up the room and then put the mattress in mothballs, covered the furniture with dust-sheets and closed the shutters.

There seemed to be nothing to do now that Valentino had gone: no more clothes to brush or iron or spot with spirit. We seldom spoke about him for I was preparing for my exams and my mother spent much of her time with Clara, one of whose children was poorly. And my father took to wandering about the town because the solitary kitchen had become distasteful to him now; he sought out some of his old colleagues and attempted to indulge his taste for long speeches with them, but always ended up by saying that he might as well not bother as he would soon be dead anyway and he didn't mind dying since life had had precious little to offer. Occasionally the caretaker would come up to our flat bringing a little fruit in return for my help with her children's homework, and she invariably asked after Valentino and said how lucky we were that Valentino had married such a rich woman because she would set him up in a practice as soon as he qualified and they could sleep easy now that he was provided for; and if his wife was no beauty so much the better because at least one could be reasonably certain that she would never be unfaithful.

Summer drew to a close and Valentino wrote to say that they would not be back for a while yet; they were swimming and sailing and had planned a trip to the Dolomites. They were having a good holiday and wanted to enjoy it for as long as possible because once they returned to town they would have to work really hard. He had to prepare for his exams and his wife always had a heap of things to attend to: she had to see to the administration of her farmland and then there was charity work and suchlike.

It was already late September when he walked in through the door one morning. We were happy to see him, so happy that it no longer seemed important whom he had married. Here he was, sitting in the kitchen once more with his curly head and white teeth and deeply-cleft chin and big hands. He stroked the cat and said that he would like to take it away with him: there were mice in the cellar of the house and the cat would learn to kill and eat them instead of being afraid of them as he was at present. He stayed a while and had to have some of my mother's home-made tomato sauce on bread because their cook couldn't make it like this. He took the cat with him in a basket but brought it back a few days later; they had put it in the cellar to kill the mice but the mice were so big and the cat was so frightened of them that he had miaowed all night long and kept the cook awake.

The winter was a hard one for us: Clara's little boy was constantly unwell; he had, it seemed, something seriously wrong with his lungs and the doctor prescribed a substantial, nourishing diet. And we also had the continual worry of the debt towards my father's brother which we were trying to repay a little at a time. So, although we no longer had to support Valentino, it was still a struggle to make ends meet. Valentino knew nothing of our troubles; we rarely saw him as
he was preparing for his exams; he visited us from time to time with his wife and my mother would receive them in the living-room; she would smooth her dress and there would be long silences; my mother would sit very erect in the armchair, her pretty, pale, fragile-looking face framed in white hair that was as smooth and soft as silk; and there would be long silences broken from time to time by her kind, tired voice.

I did the shopping every morning at a market some distance away because this meant a little saving on the purchases. I thoroughly enjoyed my morning walk, particularly on the way there with the empty shopping-basket; the open air, cool and fresh, made me forget all the troubles at home and my thoughts would turn instead to the questions that normally occupy a young girl’s mind, wondering if I should ever get married and when and to whom. I really had no idea whom I could marry because young men never came to our house; some had come from time to time when Valentino was still at home, but not now. And the idea that I might marry seemed never to have crossed my parents’ minds; they always spoke as if they expected me to stay with them for ever and looked forward to the time when I should be selected for a teaching post and would be bringing in some money. There were times when I was amazed at my parents for their never considering the possibility that I might wish to get married, or even have a new dress or go out with the other girls on Sunday afternoons; but although their attitude amazed me, I did not resent it in the slightest, for my emotions at that time were neither profound nor melancholic and I was confident that sooner or later things would improve for me.

One day as I was returning from the market with my basket, I saw Valentino’s wife; she was in a car and was driving herself. She stopped and offered me a lift. She told me that she got up at seven every morning, had a cold shower and went off to attend to her agricultural interests: she had a property some eighteen kilometres outside town. Valentino, meanwhile, stayed in bed and she asked me if he had always been as lazy as this. I told her about Clara’s child who was sick and her expression became very serious and she said that she had known nothing about this: Valentino had only mentioned it in passing as a matter of no great importance and my mother had said nothing at all about it. ‘You all treat me as a complete outsider,’ she said. ‘Your mother can’t stand the sight of me — as I realized the first time I came to your house. It never even occurs to you that I could help when you have problems. And to think that people I don’t even know come to me for help and I always do everything I can for them.’ She was very angry and I could think of nothing to say; we were outside our flat by now and I asked her, rather timidly, if she would like to come in but she said she preferred not to visit us because of my mother’s dislike for her.

But that very day she went to see Clara; and she hauled Valentino — who hadn’t been to see his sister for some time, ever since she had called him a pig — along with her. The first thing that Maddalena did on arriving was to open wide the windows, saying that the place smelt dreadful. And she said that Valentino’s couldn’t-care-less attitude towards his family was disgraceful, while she who had no family of her own found herself getting emotionally involved with the problems of perfect strangers and would willingly go miles out of her way to be of help. She sent Valentino off to fetch her own doctor and he said that the child should be in hospital and she said that she would pay all the expenses. Clara packed the child’s suitcase in a state of alarm and bewilderment while Maddalena bullied and scolded her, making her more confused than ever.

But once the child was in hospital we all felt a great sense of relief. Clara wondered what she could do to repay Maddalena. She consulted my mother and together they bought a big box of chocolates which Clara took to Maddalena; but Maddalena told her that she was an idiot to spend money on chocolates when she had so much to worry about, and what foolishness was this about repayment. She said that none of us had any idea about money: there were my parents, struggling to make ends meet and sending me off to a market miles away in order to
save a few lire when it would have been so much simpler had they asked her to help; and here was Valentino who didn’t give a snap of his fingers but was always buying himself new clothes and prancing about in front of the mirror and making a fool of himself. She said that from now on she would make us a monthly allowance and would provide us with fresh vegetables every day so that I would no longer have to trail across town to the market, because her own farm yielded more vegetables than she could use and they simply rotted in the kitchen. And Clara came to beg us to accept the money; she said that after all the sacrifices we had made for Valentino it was only right that his wife should give us a bit of help. So once a month Maddalena’s steward arrived with the money in an envelope, and every two or three days a case of vegetables would be left for us at the caretaker’s flat and I no longer had to get up so early to go to the market.

My father died at the end of the winter. My mother and I had gone to the hospital to visit Clara’s little boy, so my father was all alone when he died. We found him already dead when we got home; he had lain down on the bed and had dissolved some of his tablets in a glass of milk, presumably because he had felt unwell, but hadn’t drunk the mixture. In the drawer of his bedside table we found a letter addressed to Valentino which he must have written some days before, a long letter in which he apologized for having always believed that Valentino would become a man of consequence; there was, indeed, no necessity for him to become a man of consequence, it would be enough if he became a man at all, because at present he was merely a child. Valentino and Maddalena came and Valentino cried; and Maddalena, for the first time, was sweet to my mother, showing great tact and kindness; she phoned her steward and asked him to see to all the funeral arrangements and stayed with my mother all night and throughout the following day. When she had left, I remarked on her kindness but my mother said that even when she was kind she couldn’t bear her and shuddered every time she saw her beside Valentino; and she said that she was sure that this was the cause of my father’s death, his grief at Valentino’s having married for money.

Maddalena had a baby in the summer and I believed that this would soften my mother’s heart and that she would become fond of the child; I fancied I could see a tiny dimple in the baby’s chin and that he looked like Valentino. But my mother denied that there was even a shadow of a dimple; she was very sad and depressed and kept thinking about my father and regretting that she had not shown him more affection; she had never had the patience to let him finish what he was saying but always shut him up and humiliated him. Only now did she realize that my father was the best thing that had ever happened to her in her life; she had no complaints about Clara and me, but still we didn’t keep her company as much as we should; and Valentino had married that woman just for her money. She gradually ceased to give piano lessons because she had arthritis and a great deal of pain in her hands; and anyway, the money in the envelope that the steward delivered each month was sufficient for the two of us. When the steward came I always received him alone in the dining-room; my mother stayed in the kitchen with the door shut and never allowed me to mention the envelope; yet this was the money that fed us every day.

Maddalena came to ask me if I would like to spend August with them near the sea. I should have loved to accept but felt I should not leave my mother alone, so I refused. Maddalena told me that I was a fool and a stay-at-home and could rest assured that I should never find a husband. I told her that I didn’t care if I never found a husband; but it was untrue, and August was a long, dreary month. Every evening I took my mother out for a breath of cool, fresh air and we would walk through the tree-lined roads or beside the river with her long, slender hand, now deformed by arthritis, resting on my arm and a yearning in my heart to be able to stride out alone and speak to someone who was not my mother. Then she began
to keep her bed all day because her back ached, too, and she complained ceaselessly about it. I begged Clara to come as often as possible but she always had stacks of addresses to type for the company that employed her. She had sent the children away to the countryside for a holiday, including the one who had been so ill but had now recovered; all week long she typed away furiously at her addresses and on Sunday she visited her children. So I was alone in the house when my mother died on the Sunday of the mid-August holiday. All through the night she had complained of the ache in her bones; she was delirious and thirsty and got cross with me for being slow to bring her glasses of water and to plump up her pillows. In the morning I fetched the doctor and he said that there was no hope. I sent off a telegram to Valentino and another to Clara in the country but by the time they arrived my mother was already dead.

I had loved her very much. I would have given anything now to be able to repeat those evening walks that had bored me at the time, with her long, slender, deformed hand resting on my arm. And I felt guilty for not having shown her more affection. I remembered the times when I stood on the balcony eating cherries and heard her calling me but didn’t turn round and let her call and call while I hung over the railing and pretended not to hear. I hated the courtyard now, and the balcony and the four empty rooms of the flat; and yet I wanted nothing and had no desire to leave the place.

But Maddalena came and asked me to go and live with them. She was very sweet to me, just as she had been to my mother when my father died: full of kindness and caresses and not at all authoritarian. She said I was free to do as I liked but it was hardly sensible to stay in the flat alone when there were so many rooms in her house where I could get on quietly with my studies and when I felt sad they would be there to cheer me up.

So I left the house in which I had grown up and which was so familiar to me that I could hardly conceive of living anywhere else. As I was tidying the rooms before I left, I discovered in a trunk all the letters and photographs sent to Valentino by the teenage girls he used to date, and Clara and I spent an afternoon reading the letters and laughing over them before we burnt them all on the gas stove. I left the cat with the caretaker, and when I saw him again a few months later he had learnt to kill mice and had grown into a big, strong, self-possessed animal, not in the least bit like the wild, timid kitten who had raced up the curtain in fright.

In Maddalena’s house I had a room with a big, pale blue carpet. I loved the carpet, and every morning when I woke up the sight of it gladdened my eyes and when I walked on it with bare feet it felt warm and soft. I should have liked to stay in bed for a little while in the morning, but I remembered that Maddalena despised late risers and I could, indeed, hear her ringing the bell furiously and giving orders for the day in her imperious voice. Then she went out in her fur coat and hat squashed to one side, yelled again at the cook and the nurserymaid, climbed into the car and slammed the door.

I went to fetch the baby and dandled him for a while in my arms. I had grown very fond of the child and hoped that he was growing fond of me too. Valentino came down to breakfast yawning and unshaven; when I asked him if he intended to sit for his exams he changed the subject. The steward Bugliari, the same man who used to bring the envelope to the flat when my mother was alive, soon arrived; and a cousin of Maddalena’s whom they called Kit would come too. Valentino would play cards with them, but as soon as Maddalena’s car was heard in the drive the cards would be hastily hidden because Maddalena didn’t like Valentino to waste his time at cards. Maddalena always arrived tired and dishevelled, her voice husky from shouting at the farm workers, and she would start to argue with the steward, pulling out files and ledgers and discussing business at some length. I was constantly amazed that she neither asked after her child nor went to see him: the baby hardly seemed to matter to her; when the nurserymaid brought him to her she would cuddle him for a moment and while the moment lasted her face became young, gentle and maternal, but then she would sniff the baby’s neck.