

*Unimaginable, A Portrait of Natalia Ginzburg*

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# UNIMAGINABLE, A PORTRAIT OF NATALIA GINZBURG

## PART ONE

- 5 EYES, SHARP AND BLACK  
15 A WEB OF SECRETS EVERYWHERE  
28 CRAZY CAGE  
39 SHE READ EVERYTHING FROM A YOUNG AGE  
50 GOD DOESN'T EXIST  
66 HISTORY HAS INEXORABLE DEMANDS  
77 THE SPECIFIC DIRECTION OF TRUTH  
88 EVEN WHEN YOU SMILE  
101 GREEN SKY AT NIGHT  
115 YOU KNOW THAT I'M FROM PIZZOLI, RIGHT?  
133 BE BRAVE

## PART TWO

- 148 FEAR EMPTINESS THEN  
164 WE HELD HER UP BY HER ARMS, PAVESE AND I  
169 I SHOT HIM BETWEEN THE EYES  
179 YOU HAVE TO READ "THE SNOWS OF KILIMANJARO"  
193 I BELIEVE I WRITE BETTER BECAUSE I LOVE YOU  
206 BOTH JEWISH AND CATHOLIC  
217 THE WHIRLWIND  
230 DON'T GOSSIP ABOUT ME  
245 A ROLLING STONE GATHERS NO MOSS  
255 ANNE FRANK YES AND PRIMO LEVI NOW  
265 SUFFERING MAKES FANTASY LAZY AND WEAK  
275 PUT THE SEA THROUGH A FUNNEL

**PART THREE**

- 290 PEOPLE IN CRISIS  
303 WHEN GINZBURG SAYS 'I BELIEVE'  
310 IN MY FATHER'S HOUSE  
320 NATALIA HAS GREAT HOLD IN THE MARKET  
328 WHERE IS MY HAT  
344 ADJUST OUR EYES TO SO MUCH DARKNESS  
357 BLACK SMOKE OF ANGER  
365 THE HOUSE IN ORDER, THE HEART IN DISORDER  
378 SUCCESS MEANS NOTHING

**PART FOUR**

- 393 IN THE FOG  
407 A TOUGH AND STRONG WRITER  
416 THE PESSIMISM OF THE DEFEATED  
428 CRUMBS ON BREAD  
439 THE FOREST BECOMES A HIGHWAY  
446 SOMETHING THAT IS PURE  
456 LOOK FOR ME AGAIN, EVEN IF YOU'VE ALREADY FOUND ME  
463 ENDANGERED SPECIES  
471 END GAME

# PART ONE

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**EYES, SHARP AND BLACK**

At some point, in the mid-eighties I found myself climbing a large, dark stairway in a historic Roman palazzo, seventeenth century Palazzo Naro, number 3, Piazza Campo Marzio, right near the Pantheon. Eighty or so steps, and then another twenty-two, splitting and becoming narrower, twice, before I got to the top floor where Natalia Ginzburg lived. I had not accomplished much in my first thirty years. She, on the other hand, by my age had three children, published a handful of stories, a beautiful poem, a novel, and translated Vercors' *Le Silence de la mer* (*The Silence of the Sea*, 1941) and Marcel Proust's *Du côté de chez Swann* (*Swann's Way*). When I got to the top of the stairs, I was surprised to see a copper plaque on the door, with a single line that read "Gabriele e Natalia Baldini." Gabriele Baldini was Natalia's second husband, who died in 1969. He taught English Literature at the university in Rome, where I had also studied. But in people's minds, as in mine, Natalia was eternally the widow of Leone Ginzburg, man of his country, a Great Spirit—to use the terminology I might have used then, a period in which, emerging from being a hippy flower child, I was practicing yoga and studying Gandhi. Leone Ginzburg had been—alongside Giulio Einaudi—founder and the "brain" of a publishing house that shaped my generation, as it had shaped generations before mine, at least from the postwar period on. This was, for me, almost more important than his having sacrificed his life to change the world. I had subscription with Einaudi Publishers and I would periodically acquire books from a salesperson, who was my age, and who came to my house. We would page together through the white catalogue listing all the new titles, and we'd discuss books from the backlist. I had vast interests—literature and anthropology, from

poetry to folklore, from magic to history of religion, from fable to psychology. I felt nourished by everything on that catalogue and I'd get emotional just looking at the titles, overwhelmed with my desire to possess all the books.

And yet there I was standing before Natalia Baldini's front door—a Natalia who was happy to follow her husband's name, a Natalia who seemed suddenly domestic and common. I must have wavered. Not merely because my impassioned brand of feminism was offended, but because the plaque on the door didn't match the image that I had, that everyone had, of her. She was part of the history—when Leone Ginzburg, Giulio Einaudi, and Cesare Pavese were making Einaudi into a great publishing house, a unique entity existing both during and against Fascism, she was there.

She had become “La Ginzburg,” author of *Lessico familiare*<sup>1</sup> (*Family Lexicon*), a literary work of mythic proportions. She was a powerful editor, a position inaccessible it seemed to every other female creature. She was an unrecognized but successful playwright. She was a columnist-warrior in major Italian newspapers and her positions often surprised us, irritated us, and made us fall in love. Like her fellow intellectual pirate Pier Paolo Pasolini, she knew how to rattle the rebel spirits of the post '68 generation. She was austere and sad; she rarely smiled. She dressed monastically, in dark clothes, low heeled manly shoes. She wore her hair short, unstyled, as if she cut it herself and couldn't care less about how it looked. She didn't wear a trace of makeup, no mascara, eye-shadow, lipstick, nothing. A secular nun. She was awe inspiring, for what she represented, for what she'd done.

I was seventeen years old when an article of hers in *La Stampa*<sup>2</sup> convinced me to read *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and that novel comforted me—in the midst of the neo-avant-garde's

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1. citation

2. *Family Lexicon*, McPhee translation

commandeering of Art and of the Novel—reassured me that I could go on writing with an aim to comprehension. “The novel is one of the things in the world that are both useless and totally necessary,” she wrote in the article about Gabriel García Márquez. She was always rather peremptory when she wrote in newspapers. It was a way of avoiding text massacre, analyzing books to death, crushing them with expectations, obliterating a novel’s promise of enchantment. It was a way of not pissing on readers, which is a reference to a Carmelo Bene theatrical event in which an actor peed on an Argentine ambassador who was guilty of nothing more than being bourgeois.

I had been summoned to discuss a manuscript that I had given her to read, the chaotic draft of a novel. It was a portrait of a woman who was very different from her, the story of a choice between the tempest of erotic-sentimental desire and writing. But in my manuscript writing was experience as waste and dissipation. It was all organized in a meta historical universe around the perennial Circe figure—the Circe of the Odyssey, a contemporary seductress—somewhat bohemian, a bit of a hippie. I don’t remember why I had thought I should ask Natalia Ginzburg to read that particular draft. I was depending somehow on the fact of her being a woman—for what purpose, I’m not sure. I didn’t know how little she appreciated seeing frailty mirrored in a woman’s confusion.

She herself came to open the door. She was wearing a grey pleated skirt and a shapeless blue cardigan. She was slight, a little taller than me. She invited me to sit down in the living room on a chair adjacent to a blue couch. She settled onto the couch near the arm rest. In order to look at me she had to turn her head; her short hair was starting to turn grey. The manuscript sat on the coffee table in front of her. I recognized the light blue folder in which I’d collected the pages of my draft. She looked at me hard, studying me, her eyes were very dark and very penetrating. “Eyes sharp and black, feminine,” was how Cesare Garboli described them. Cesare Garboli had been a great friend to

her in her adult life, and wrote the introduction to *Mai devi domandarmi*<sup>3</sup> (“you must never ask me”).

“I didn’t understand this book,” she said. “Since I didn’t understand it, I don’t like it. But since I didn’t understand it I can’t judge it.” She lifted it from the coffee table and handed it back to me. I don’t have the slightest idea what I managed to babble in response to her. I sensed that she didn’t say anything just to say it, out of politeness, or anything like that. She was terribly sincere. And this made the whole event irremediable and bitter for me. I remember confusedly the sensation that I was supposed to console her for having to hurt my feelings. But she seemed to like me.

Every so often, odd vocalizing would emerge from another room, accessed via a wooden staircase built against the far wall. There was a stair lift mounted onto the stair case. The situation was vaguely surreal. For some reason I decided it was a bird. At times, the sounds sharpened into actual crying. Natalia didn’t react or offer any explanation. She continued to watch me with that intense stare, with curiosity and, yes, perhaps sympathy—for my youth, or maybe for whatever was incomprehensible and fleeting that she saw in me as an aspiring writer. In hindsight, I have the impression I had kindled something of the past for her, perhaps I reminded her of someone or something. And she felt somewhat sadistic, almost secretly satisfied that she had crushed my dreams. I was hurt by such harshness, and later, out in the hallway, I collapsed onto the landing and wept.

I was equally shocked some time later, when I received a note from Natalia, written on Camera dei Deputati (Chamber of Deputies) letterhead—in 1983, she held a seat in Parliament. I have a precise date, stamped on the envelope: March 7, 1987. She had taken the trouble to send me praise, in an affectionate tone, her handwriting big and leggy, for a story that I had published in the

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3. citation



newspaper *Corriere della Sera* a few days earlier. She said she'd liked my story a great deal, so much so that she'd cut it out to keep it.

Naturally, I kept her note too. And now that I want to write about her, I have it here before me, alongside a photograph of her as a young woman. It's a little out of focus. I'd been given by Oreste Molina, the mythical production director of Einaudi Publishing, since the war. He'd taken the picture around 1947. Natalia is thirty years old and laughing, her teeth showing. She is wearing a white shirt and her short black hair is windblown. When I went to visit Molina in his apartment in Turin, when I was just starting my research, he spread out all the old photos he'd taken of Italo Calvino, Pavese, Ginzburg. His memory went in and out, but those photos brought the past alive, and, his wife watching over us protectively, he looked at them and reconstructed a history of those distant times as if they were a wonderful fairy tale. He told me, for example, that since he knew how to drive a car, Natalia was always wanting to take drives—so girlish. He'd take her around Turin and the outskirts in his Fiat Topolino. “Yes, Calvino was there too, but she preferred when I drove, because Calvino wasn't that great behind the wheel.”<sup>4</sup> They took outings, went to visit friends. Pavese came along too sometimes.”

Molina was born in 1925. He started working at the publishing house when he was fifteen years old and did typography, then he started correcting manuscripts, in the end he was officially employed in 1945. “I was the junior in the company. They were on the first floor and I had an office downstairs.” He remembered Natalia as a quiet woman, “serene in the face of anything, in the face of all that she had suffered.” He showed me a postcard Pavese had sent him, one he treasured especially. And he gave me the picture of Natalia as a present.

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4. citation

In the last years of her life, Natalia and I would see each other occasionally. I was working with a new publishing house that Giulio Einaudi had taken an interest in. This was in the period after he'd lost control of his own company. When he was in Rome, Einaudi liked to meet with us. We were a handful of young writers, poets, and intellectuals to whom he occasionally gave advice—no, not really advice, he'd give his opinion, on a new cover or an idea for an imprint. He'd put on a teasing voice. Described as “nasal voice, whiney, shy, and silly” by Nat in one of her signature four-adjective series, in the article “*Memoria contra memoria*”<sup>5</sup> (memory against memory), which depicts the early years of Einaudi Publishing. Pavese was the one who called her Nat, and sometimes Natasha. With apparent distraction, Einaudi would pet the cover of the book he was looking at with his gnarled hands, bat his limpid, pale-blue eyes, and then express approval or explain briefly the reason he'd reject the cover or find it confusing. He'd lean back in his chair and swivel this way and that. He was a very handsome man, even at seventy, eighty years old. When my *Circe* novel was finally published, he said — perhaps only to be gallant — that he would have liked to publish it and I was ashamed to tell him how Ginzburg had rejected it. We'd go out to dinner together and sometimes Natalia came along, but rarely, because she had a regular bedtime. She never spoke at dinner. She'd watched Giulio, who was instead very happy to talk. She seemed to hang on his words. He'd often asked her opinion, “Isn't that true Natalia?” And she'd answer yes, or she'd answer no. Nothing more, though she looked at him with affection, as one looks at a son that one loves despite everything. And she just smiled, enjoying herself. Then she'd doze off, wake up, follow everything being said without missing a beat, as if those short naps, instead of isolating her, allowed her to perceive things more deeply.

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5. *Paragone*, February 1989

One day, in February of 1989, she called to tell me that I had to read a book she liked very much. She had in fact translated it from French, and contributed an introduction. It was *Non mi dimenticare* (*Helmenkalastaja*, “don’t forget me”) by the Finnish writer Sirius Talja. I told her that I’d be happy to read it. Then she asked a favor. Her words exactly, “I wonder if you could do me a favor.” She had a lovely voice that didn’t age; it was a serious voice with a music that lit up and flickered and that I can still hear. The author was coming to Italy to present the book. Natalia was to interview the author in public, in French. “I don’t speak French well; I was hoping you could interview her,” she said. “Actually, I was hoping you could introduce her too? I’ll just say a couple of things. I am not a good public speaker.” Surely my French was worse than hers, I protested. I had not translated Proust. “That’s not important,” she said, “prepare something. Something simple. The book is beautiful.” It was a very hard book. It had been published in Italy by Bollati Boringhieri. It was the autobiographical story of a child during the second world war: “Her mother left her at an orphanage perhaps out of exhaustion, or survival, or because she had a hard heart, was selfish, lacked affection. We don’t know” wrote Natalia in the preface. We don’t know — as the author Sirius Talja never knew — because her mother, after putting her in an orphanage, disappeared entirely from her life. She “never recovered from this wound.” Natalia had a very personal involvement in this story, I observed obliquely, while we were discussing it over the phone. But *why* was something I was only able to put into focus years later, as my research for this biography progressed.

We did the event together, and at a certain point Natalia took over the microphone and spoke perfect French. I’ve always wondered why she had thought of me and insisted I should be the one to keep her company at this event, given all the other young writers and reviewers who she would have been able to bring on who would have been smarter, better at French. I asked myself what she had

intuited about me, why she knew that the desperate childhood depicted in this book would have drawn me in and that I was the right person to appreciate it. She was not the sort to offer explanations. I believe she followed her infallible instinct. In his *Frammenti di memoria*<sup>6</sup> (fragments of memory), Giulio Einaudi said of her: “she has mysterious antennae that are attuned to a huge portion of people’s deepest feelings.” and he wrote that in his *Frammenti di memoria*. Perhaps she had seen a compulsive little habit I used to have, and it frightened her. When I was thinking I used to wrap a lock of hair around my index finger. It was a kind of tic. There was one day that Einaudi saw me doing it, and he almost attacked me. “Stop that” he said, a silly glitter in his eyes, “don’t do that anymore,” or anything like that. It was disconcerting. I asked him why it bothered him so much. “It’s a suicide gesture. Cesare Pavese used to do it all the time.”

Pavese was an author I had loved for his poems in *Verrà la morte e avrà tuoi occhi* (“Death Will Come and Have Your Eyes”),<sup>7</sup> for his three stories in *La bella estate* (*The Fine Summer*) and most of all for his journal, *Il mestiere di vivere* (the business of living).<sup>8</sup> Yet in my chaotic youth, I identified more with the women he fell in love with than I did with him. They were seductresses in spite of themselves, cruel without wanting to be or even knowing they were; always falling in love with men who didn’t love them back, capricious, unhappy. Had Natalia seen all of this in my *Circe*? Was this the hateful specter that my challenging book had triggered for her? She had been very close to Pavese. Pavese had helped her to get back on her feet after Leone’s death. When she was at loose ends, he gave her an important role in the publishing house, he supported her and pushed her. She had written so many memorable words about Pavese, perhaps the most beautiful and profound

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6. citation

7. citation Brock

8. citation

words that were ever written about him—where, among other things, she recalls the way he used to twist his hair. She had been so struck by in fact, that she gave the gesture to several of her characters in order to signal distress. Nini, for example, in *La strada che va in città* (*The Road to the City*)<sup>9</sup> and Tommasino in *Le voci della sera* (*Voices in the Evening*)<sup>10</sup>. Though she didn't associate the habit with suicide explicitly as Giulio Einaudi had with me. But after that I am very careful about not doing it. I might do it spontaneously every now and then but stop when I realize what I'm doing.

Another Einaudi memory brings me back again to Natalia Ginzburg. October 8, 1991: Natalia had died during the night. I went to see her. Again, I climbed the wide dark staircase of Palazzo Naro. I crossed the living room. This time I would mount the interior staircase, with the closed door at the top whence I'd heard cries like that of a bird, years earlier. By now I had learned that it was how her disabled daughter Susanna expressed herself. Susanna had been born on September 3, 1954, from Natalia's second marriage. Natalia was very tied to her daughter and constantly preoccupied for her. She was also sure she could understand those scattered sounds of hers. The door was open. Susanna had been taken away. Natalia was arranged in the middle of a big bed. Corpses scare me and I didn't look at her long. She seemed incredibly small, though she had been a tall woman. She almost disappeared into that big bed. Her lovely, sad childhood story came to mine. The story is called "La madre" (the mother) and in it she describes the body of the protagonist, arranged on the bed in exactly the same way after she had taken her own life: "She was small, a small, dead, doll."

I don't remember who was there. Friends who spoke amongst themselves, though I wouldn't have known who to say. At a certain point Giulio asked if I would leave with him, whether I could

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9. *The Road to the City*, transl. [Frances Frenaye](#) (1949)

10. *Voices in the Evening*, transl. D.M.Low (1963)

take him home. He didn't live far, in Piazza Paganica, just ten minutes away on foot. I had a diary, where I wrote everything down, and where I recorded this. He had noticed another thing I did that reminded him of Pavese. I would press my fingers down hard on the pages of books, when the paper was old and spongy. It was an almost erotic gesture. It was startling, maybe even a little frightening, to learn from Einaudi that Pavese and I shared this second mania. We walked slowly, in silence, and I thought of what he'd said more than of Natalia's death.

When I turned to look at him, he had tears in his blue eyes. He was legendarily cold man; I think he'd barely ever cried in his life.