



Chapter I

My mother loved to travel. She would go from Spain to England, from London to Paris, from Paris to Berlin—from there to Christiania;¹ then she would come home to kiss me and set off again for Holland, the country in which she was born. She would send my nurse clothes for her and cakes for me. She would write to one of my aunts, “Look after little Sarah, I’ll be back in a month.” A month later she would write to another sister, “Go and see the child at her nurse’s, I’ll be back in two weeks.”

My mother was nineteen, I was three. One of my aunts was seventeen, the other twenty. Another was fifteen and the eldest was twenty-eight. But she lived in Martinique and already had six children. My grandmother was blind. My grandfather was dead. My father had been in China for two years—why, I have no idea. My young aunts would promise to come and see me, but rarely kept their word.

My nurse was a native of Brittany and lived near Quimperlé in a little white house with a low thatched roof, on which grew wild stocks. This was the first flower to delight my childish eyes, and I have loved ever since this flower petalled with the setting sun, its leaves thickset and gloomy. Brittany is far away, even in our era of high-speed travel, but at that time it was at the end of the world. Happily my nurse was, it seems, a good woman, and since her child was dead, I was all she had left to love. But she loved in the way that poor people love—when she had the time.

One day, when the hired hand was sick, she had gone to the fields to help with the potato harvest. The sodden soil was rotting the potatoes so the work was urgent. She entrusted me to the care of her husband, who was stretched out on his Breton bed, riven by lumbago. The good woman had set me in my high chair. She had made sure to peg in place the narrow tray that held me in, and on this she had put some little things for me to play with. As she was leaving she threw a faggot on the fire and said to me in Breton (until the age of four I understood only Breton), “You’ll be good Milk Blossom?” (This was the only name I answered to at that time.) As soon as she was gone, I

strained to pull out the wooden peg so carefully put in place by my poor nurse. When I eventually succeeded, I pushed away the little rampart, thinking, foolishly, to spring onto the floor. Instead I fell into the gaily crackling fire. The cries of Nurse's husband, who was unable to move, brought the neighbors. I was thrown, smoking all over, into a pail of fresh milk.

My aunts were notified and they alerted my mother. For four days this peaceful spot was plowed up by a succession of carriages. My aunts arrived from everywhere. My panic-stricken mother rushed from Brussels with Baron Larrey² and one of his friends, a young up-and-coming doctor and an intern. I was told afterward that my mother's despair could not have been more painful or charming. Dear Baron Larrey! I often saw him after this and I was destined to meet him again later in life. He delighted me with his story of the love of these good people for "Milkblossom," and he couldn't help laughing at so much butter. There was butter everywhere he said—on couches, on sideboards, on tables, and hanging in skins from hooks. All the neighbors had brought butter to make poultices for "Milkblossom." Mama, ravishingly beautiful—Madonna-like with her golden hair and eyes fringed with lashes long enough to cast shadows on her cheeks when she lowered her eyelids—gave money to everybody. She would have given her golden hair, her childlike feet, her very life, to save this child about whom she had been so little concerned only a week before. Yet she was just as sincere in her despair and her love as she had been in her unconscious forgetfulness.

Baron Larrey went back to Paris, leaving my mother, my aunt Rosine, and the intern with me. Six weeks later, Mama triumphantly took my nurse, her husband, and me back to the good city of Paris, where she installed us at Neuilly on the banks of the Seine. Apparently I hadn't a single scar—nothing except an excessively rosy complexion. My mother, happy and confident, set off on her travels again, once more leaving me to the care of my aunts. Two years passed by in this little garden at Neuilly, which was full of horrible crowded dahlias, colored like balls of yarn. My aunts never came. Mama sent money, candy, and toys.

Nurse's husband died, and she married the concierge at 65 rue de Provence. Not knowing where to find Mama, and not knowing how to write, my nurse took me to her new location without notifying anybody. I was delighted by the move. I was five years old, and I remember that day as though it were yesterday. Nurse's lodgings were located just above the carriage entrance-way and the bull's-eye window was framed by the heavy monumental gateway. From the outside I found this great gateway handsome, and I clapped my hands when I saw it. It was dusk,

around five o'clock on a November day. I was put in my little bed and must have gone to sleep, for my memories of the day stop there.

The next day, however, I was overwhelmed by tremendous sorrow: the little room in which I slept was windowless. I began to cry. I escaped from my nurse's grasp as she dressed me and ran into the adjoining room to the round window. I pressed my obstinate little forehead against the glass and began to howl with rage because I could see no more trees, boxwood border, or falling leaves. Nothing except stone . . . cold, grey, ugly stone and windowpanes opposite. "I want to go away! I don't want to stay here! It's dark! It's nasty! I want to see the ceiling of the street!" I sobbed. My poor nurse took me in her arms, wrapped me in a blanket, and took me down into the courtyard: "Lift your head, Milkblossom, and look! There it is! The ceiling of the street!" It consoled me a little to see that there was sky in this ugly place, but sadness had taken hold of my whole soul. I no longer ate, I grew pale and anemic, and I would certainly have died of consumption if it had not been for a real *coup de théâtre*.

One day, while I was playing in the courtyard with Titine, a little girl who lived on the second floor—I cannot recall either her face or her real name—I saw Nurse's husband crossing the courtyard with two ladies, one of whom was very elegant. I only saw them from behind, but my heart missed a beat when I heard the voice of the elegant woman. My poor little body started to shake convulsively.

"There are windows that look out onto the courtyard?" she asked.

"Yes, Madame, those four there." And he pointed out four open windows on the first floor. The lady turned round to look.

I cried out in joy as one who had been delivered, "Aunt Rosine! Aunt Rosine!" I threw myself at the skirt of the pretty visitor. I buried my face in her furs, stamped, sobbed, laughed, and ripped her long lace sleeves.

She took me in her arms and tried to calm me. As she questioned the concierge she stammered to her friend, "I don't understand it at all! It's little Sarah, my sister Youle's daughter."

My cries had attracted attention. Windows opened. My aunt decided to take refuge in the lodge while she heard the explanation. My poor nurse told her all that had happened—the death of her husband, her second marriage. What she said to excuse herself I don't remember.

I clung to my aunt who smelled so good . . . so good, and I didn't want her to leave ever again. She promised to come for me the next day, but I didn't want to stay in the dark any longer. I wanted to leave at once, at once, with my nurse. My aunt gently stroked my hair and spoke to her friend in a language that I did not understand. She tried

in vain to make me understand something or other . . . but I wanted to leave with her at once. Gentle, tender, cajoling, but without true affection, she said sweet things to me, stroked me with her gloved hand, smoothed down my ruffled dress, and made a thousand other playful, charming, cold gestures. She left, taken off by her friend, after emptying the contents of her little purse into Nurse's palm.

My poor nurse was in tears, and taking me in her arms, she opened the window saying, "Don't cry any more Milk Blossom. Look at your pretty aunt. She'll come back. You'll be able to go with her." And big tears rolled down her beautiful round calm face. But all I could see was the unalterable black hole behind me. In a fit of despair I hurled myself toward my aunt who was about to climb into the carriage—and then nothing . . . darkness . . . darkness . . . a distant roar of distant voices, all very distant.

I had escaped from poor Nana. I had smashed onto the pavement at my aunt's feet. I had broken my arm in two places and my left kneecap. I did not wake up until some hours later in a large sweetly scented bed in the center of a large bedroom with two beautiful windows—a delight for me for one could see "the ceiling of the street." My mother, hastily summoned, came to look after me.

I came to know my family, my aunts, my cousins. My little head could not understand why so many people now loved me at once, when I had spent so many days and nights loved by one person alone. I stayed here two years recovering from this terrible fall, poor in health, my bones weak and brittle. I was carried almost everywhere I went.

I pass over these two years of my life which have left only a confused memory of cuddling and drowsiness.