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 sive when frustrated and unable to understand or reach me, I
 turned more and more to my father, his ideas and his books.
 Soon the other children ceased to interest me. Those of my
 own age did not relish intellectual exploration; the older
 ones rejected me because I was much younger and more
 advanced in studies. This was to continue for years. Without
 understanding why, I was conscious of a weight upon me
 and of constant loneliness.

At this time in my story, when I was three years old,
 something happened inside and outside me that I remember
 vividly with all its particular circumstances as if it stood out
 sharply against the grey background of half-forgotten mem-
 ories. Along with my Baptism, this experience was to be the
 source of my whole spiritual life.

We had had several days of *sirocco*. It was not a rare
 occurrence but always a trying one. This strong, burning
 wind from the Sahara desert carries northward thousands of
 tons of red, finely ground sand into the open plains. Even
 the Arabs were rarely seen outside when it blew, and then
 only wrapped tightly in their *burnouses*, which were often
 blown from them, as were their roofs and their sheep. No
 schools, no stores, no bars were open. If someone touched a
 piece of metal or even wood outside the house, his skin
 would remain on the object. Even with drawn curtains,
 locked shutters and windows framed in cotton or wool,
 everything in our rooms was still covered or filled with
 sand. We ate it, breathed it, were powdered or whipped by

it. We had the choice of being steamed inside or roasted outside.

Suddenly the wind abated in the afternoon. Even the forgotten silence felt cool. People went out of their homes immediately to breathe freely and to assess the wind's mischief around them. Our maid took me out in the evening. She sat me on a small mat, enjoining me to remain there. This I did, too tired to disobey.

Suddenly the sky over me and in some way around me, as I was on a small hillock, was all afire. The glory of the sunset was perhaps reflected in the myriads of particles of powdery sand still floating in the air. It was like an immense, feathery flame all scarlet from one pole to the other, with touches of crimson and, on one side, of deep purple. I was caught in limitless beauty and radiant, singing splendor. And at the same time, with a cry of wonder in my heart, I *knew* that all this beauty was created, I knew GOD. This was the word that my parents had hidden from me. I had nothing to name him: God, Dieu, Allah or Yahweh, as he is named by human lips, but my heart knew that *all was from him* and him alone and that he was such that I could address him and enter into relationship with him through prayer. I made my first act of adoration.

This does appear dramatic. It was. And after more than sixty years, it is still in me. Not once could I dismiss this experience, whatever my intellectual doubts might have been in the following years. This act of adoration was not to be isolated. I began then a life of prayer. I tried to say something of it to my father, but he did not understand at all. If only I had known the noun, God. It was probably better that he did not understand, though I found myself more alone than ever, with an essential part of myself and my life incommunicable and unshared for many years. But I held to it because I sensed that it was infinitely precious.

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Everything afterward is just confused memories: markets under the lattice roofs that sheltered the sheep, the baskets of figs and oranges or the earthen jars with patches of light and shade, our walks in the evening with a tame chameleon on our shoulders to rid us of bothersome insects, and the nights when I knelt down near my bed. I had never seen anybody kneel down in worship, but there was an instinct telling me to do so and, in the morning, to offer the day to the unnamed One who had created me and all beauty, all goodness, all being in the universe.

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I don't know if it was because I was unsatisfactory in obedience or in health that the following year it was decided to send me to France for some time. God prepared me for the journey.

It was Sunday. I was bored and in search of new ways of entertaining myself. Mother wanted to chat with a friend and handed me a big book. She may have said: "Take this and be quiet. There are lots of nice pictures there." I sat on the thick, rust-colored carpet and examined the book. I can still see it clearly. It was a very fat book, though what looked big at that age would perhaps not seem so now. It was only a catalogue of some Parisian stores, the "Samaritaine" or "Galeries la Fayette", with a thousand items listed and illustrated. They could be mailed to you if you sent the money. I did not know that, but I liked the variety of the small pictures showing dresses, bottles of perfume, hats, lamps, pieces of furniture, clocks. And there, in the right-hand corner of one page, I saw three crosses of different designs, each one with a tiny man on it and some numbers underneath. I had never seen a crucifix, only sometimes a cross, which had no meaning for me, on top of a building called a "church", which was for "the meetings of superstitious people". But while I was silently looking at these strange pictures, I suddenly *knew*: this man on the cross had been killed, and it was for all

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men, women and children. It was for me. He was a man, but he was also the Son of the God whom I was already adoring as Creator and loving, universal presence. He was God. I would not have formulated this in one sentence as I do now, but all this was gathered in one insight and clearly formed even with words in my mind, contrary to my first "sunset" religious experience, which had been purely intuitive. It is very difficult to explain, because this complex theology was taught to me in a moment and looked perfectly simple and as evident as a first principle, given as absolute truth. It also looked perfectly normal.

My Baptism was bearing fruit in circumstances when the usual transmission of faith was impossible. My mind would one day be so filled with atheistic propaganda that I would be unable to believe in Christ intellectually; but, deeper than the thoughts of men, the thoughts of the Spirit had been imprinted in me. Even if I could not understand it or accept it logically, I was obliged to acknowledge that Jesus was the Son of God and was God, Man and Savior. I could not even have an existential doubt about it. I have always known it in all certitude, though limitedly, and been conscious that God himself was the only source of this knowledge.

Hope also took on a new dimension in me, and my heart opened to the love of the crucified Lord. I kissed the picture of the bigger crucifix (hardly three centimeters long) and tore it off swiftly, taking care not to be heard. Then I searched for a hiding place. I still had a baby toy, a small shaker, which had not been discarded when I began to walk because it was silver. I inserted the bit of paper into it through a slit. This was my prize, my treasure, my secret icon! It was never to be discovered. The paper was fortunately quite strong, but the day came when it was finally worn out from being so often taken out of its hiding place

by loving fingers, contemplated with wondering eyes and
↓ kissed by a small child's lips.

All this did not prevent me from being a trouble to my inexperienced parents. They may also have expressed a concern about my health to Aunt Jeanne (I will say "Tante Jeanne", as we called her), who proposed to take me with her for one year. This was gratefully accepted, and off I went with a lady friend, crying for my father but consoled by the thought of being for a long time on the ocean in a big boat. A huge teddy bear and a small silver shaker accompanied me.

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