THE MIRACLE & TRAGEDY OF THE DIONNE QUINTUPLETTS

BY SARAH MILLER
TO SARAH NICOLE,
who has a smile like Marie Dionne’s
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We don’t feel anyone can be fair to both sides and tell the truth.
—THÉRÈSE DIONNE

Children are the riches of the poor.
—PROVERB
PROLOGUE

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In an empty nursery, behind two woven wire fences topped with barbed wire, five nine-year-old girls waited for their father. Five suitcases sat alongside them. Five smiling Shirley Temple dolls were clutched in their arms. Yvonne stared out the window at the yellow brick mansion up the hill. Annette quietly seethed, pretending not to be afraid. Cécile sat in a corner, rocking her doll. Émilie prayed that it was all just a bad dream. Marie tried to tell a silly story, but no one laughed.

At the sound of their father’s footsteps in the hall, all five sisters hugged their Shirley Temples closer to their chests. The moment they dreaded had come.

For the first time in their lives, the Dionne Quintuplets were going home.

Oliva Dionne did not speak as he and his five identical daughters walked through the hospital’s guarded gate, down the road, and through another gate that led to the colossal Georgian house that was to be their new home. He did not lead them up the steps to the grand front door. Instead, he entered through a service door into the kitchen. Yvonne followed first, trying to be brave for her sisters’ sake. Though Yvonne was no more than a few minutes older than Annette, Cécile, Émilie, and Marie, she had acted the part of the little mother since she was a toddler.

For nine years Mr. Dionne had battled with the government to unite
his family under a single roof. Now that his triumphant moment had arrived, the man who had once crawled through a drainpipe to elude hospital guards just so he could glimpse his five famous babies through a window spoke a single sentence.

“The little girls are here,” he told his wife, and continued into the house, leaving his daughters standing in the unfamiliar kitchen with their dolls and suitcases.

“Bonsoir, Mom,” Yvonne, Annette, Cécile, Émilie, and Marie said, greeting their mother in a mixture of French and English.

“Supper will be ready soon,” Mrs. Dionne replied in French, then called for two of her elder daughters. “Show the little girls around the house,” she instructed.

Without a word, “the little girls” followed as their big sisters pointed into one doorway after another. The living room, the den, the sewing room, their father’s office. Redolent of fresh paint and filled with pristine furniture, the house felt new and sterile, more sterile by far than the hospital that had been their home since they were four months old.

Then they reached the dining room. Like everything else in the house, it was big, in this case big enough to seat fourteen—Mr. and Mrs. Dionne, Yvonne, Annette, Cécile, Émilie, Marie, and their seven brothers and sisters, Ernest, Rose-Marie, Thérèse, Daniel, Pauline, Oliva Jr., and Victor. An archway divided the room in half, with a table on each side. “This side is for our family,” the little girls remembered one of their elder sisters saying. “The other side is for your family.”

Not one of the bewildered nine-year-olds knew what to say.
PART ONE

1 IN 57,000,000 BIRTHS

May 28, 1934–March 15, 1935
CHAPTER 1

Quintuplets Born to Farm Wife

*North Bay Nugget*, Monday, May 28, 1934

The knock at the back door roused Douilda Legros from her bed. “Auntie, please hurry and dress and come over,” Oliva Dionne called. “Elzire, she is very sick. Please hurry,” he said again.

Auntie Legros was on her way in minutes. It was only a short drive across the road to the Dionne farm, but it was long enough for Douilda Legros’s worries to reel through her mind. Poor Elzire had never had such a difficult pregnancy. Headaches, dizzy spells, vomiting. Painful legs and feet swollen to twice their normal size. A finger pressed into her skin left a deep dent. Now and then the edges of her vision went black.

Two, perhaps three weeks ago it had become so bad Elzire had finally consented to let her husband, Oliva, consult the doctor in spite of the cost. The doctor had ordered Elzire off her feet entirely, but that was next to impossible on a three-hundred-acre farm with five young children to care for.

And now? The urgency in Oliva’s voice could only mean something worse yet. Perhaps the worst thing of all—the baby, coming too soon.

Auntie Legros let herself in the front door without waking Ernest, Rose-Marie, Thérèse, and Daniel, asleep upstairs, and made her way to the bedroom at the back of the house. Eleven-month-old Pauline slept in a crib at the foot of the big wooden bed where Elzire lay. Her niece’s black eyes peered up out of a pale and puffy face. “Auntie,” she said weakly in French, “I don’t think that I will be able to pull through this time.”
Auntie Legros could hardly contradict her. Even by the light of the kerosene lamp, it was clear that Elzire was ailing badly. The young mother’s legs and feet were so distended, her toes had nearly disappeared. She could neither stand nor walk. There was a bluish cast to her fingernails. Her labor pains had woken her sometime near midnight—mild at first, steadily advancing until there could be no doubt that the baby was insisting on being born.

Nevertheless, Auntie Legros did her best to comfort her niece. “Don’t you worry, my dear. I will stand by you now as I always did before,” she promised. This child would be the fifth Dionne she had helped bring into the world.

Elzire asked for her rosary, and the two women paused to say a prayer to the Blessed Virgin. Elzire kissed the feet of the crucifix and recited aloud the Ave Maria. Both women cried a little. Then Auntie Legros set to work.

Herself a mother of nine, Douilda Legros had been helping deliver her neighbors’ children for eighteen years, sometimes assisting the midwife or doctor, sometimes working alone. In all that time, she’d lost only one baby—a premature infant, born with the umbilical cord around its neck. And now Elzire’s baby was coming two months too early.

_O God, inspire me in my work_, Auntie Legros prayed.

Nothing was prepared. No clothing, no diapers. Elzire should have had most of the summer to sew new baby things and accustom little Pauline to sleeping upstairs with her brothers and sisters. But that could not be helped now. Auntie Legros did what she could. She lit the wood stove and put a pan and a teakettle on to boil. She found a stack of newspapers to spread over the mattress, easing Elzire back and forth as she rearranged the bedding for the birth. Elzire was too weak to move without assistance, but the prayer, to Auntie Legros’s relief, had bolstered her niece’s spirits. Douilda Legros had never before seen Elzire discouraged or fearful, even during the most difficult of her deliveries, when Thérèse had been turned the wrong way.
Just the same, Auntie Legros herself was growing more ill at ease as Elzire’s suffering increased. The prospect of losing another newborn was difficult enough; the memory of that failed premature delivery still haunted her. But to lose Elzire? Though they were not related by blood (Elzire was Douilda’s husband’s niece), Elzire had been like a daughter to her since she was a little girl. Auntie Legros had taken Elzire in after her mother’s long illness and death—until the eleven-year-old was compelled to leave school and return home to help her father care for a houseful of brothers. She had seen Elzire married to Oliva Dionne at sixteen, and watched her become the mother of six children before turning twenty-five. Hardest of all, she had supported Elzire when her fourth baby, two-month-old Leo, died of pneumonia.

After all that, Auntie Legros would take no chances with Elzire’s health. Within an hour of her arrival at the Dionne house, she sent Oliva a mile down the road for Madame Lebel.

To the French Canadians of Corbeil, Ontario, midwife and Madame Lebel were interchangeable terms. A large “weather-beaten” woman with “a heart as big as a washtub,” Madame Lebel had borne eighteen children of her own and delivered her neighbors of at least three hundred more, most of them without a doctor’s assistance. She never expected so much as a penny for her services—something that endeared her more and more each year to the small rural community, now that times were harder than anyone could remember.

Madame Lebel recognized the gravity of the situation at once. Warmth and color were draining from Elzire’s body as the frequency of the pains increased. She ignored Elzire’s requests not to send for the doctor. “Elzire’s pulse is bad,” Madame Lebel told Oliva. “So is her general condition. Get Dr. Dafoe here quick as you can.”

Oliva obeyed instantly.

With her rosary pressed tightly to her heart, Elzire begged Madame Lebel to hurry the baby’s arrival. Though the Dionnes were one of the few families in Corbeil who were not receiving relief payments from the
government, Elzire knew there wasn’t a cent to spare for the doctor. Since the Depression had hit, their savings had “melted away.” Not a day went by that she wasn’t thankful for Oliva’s $4-a-day job as a gravel hauler, but with a $3,000 mortgage on the farm and seven—soon to be eight—mouths to feed, $20 a week stretched barely far enough. Dr. Dafoe’s last visit had spread them tissue-thin; another might cost as much as a week’s wages. Elzire’s lips were white as she formed the request.

Fewer than three miles separated Oliva Dionne from the doctor’s neat brick house in Callander, but it was dark, rocky going, more a rutted lumber trail than a road. Aside from the priest, not another man in the Corbeil parish had the good fortune to own an automobile, but it still might not get him there in time.

When he reached the house with its plaque reading Dr. A. R. Dafoe, Oliva pounded on the door and rang the bell.

Dr. Allan Roy Dafoe himself answered, wearing a pair of pants under his rumpled nightshirt. The doctor was an odd-looking man at any hour of the day—short enough that folks called him “the Little Doc,” with hands so small he had to buy gloves in the children’s department. Yet his head was so large he was rarely able to find a hat that fit properly. And he stuttered. The next day would be his fifty-first birthday.

At first, the doctor could make little sense of Oliva Dionne’s presence on his doorstep. Elzire Dionne was not expected to deliver until late July. Besides, it was something like four o’clock in the morning, and Dafoe had had less than three hours’ sleep. Returning home from a delivery well after midnight, he’d sat up past one to read a detective story.

“My wife is very sick,” Oliva said in English. (The doctor, like most who lived outside the tiny Catholic community of Corbeil, did not speak French.) “I think she soon have a baby. Can you come right away, Doctor?”

“You go on back,” Dafoe told the worried father. “I’ll dress and come along in my own car.”
Oliva had to know how long he would be.
“A few minutes,” Dafoe answered, and shut the door.

If the doctor was short with Oliva, it was not only because of the stutter that obliged him to get straight to the point. Dr. Dafoe had warned the Dionnes about Elzire’s condition, and they had not complied. She ought to have been in bed these last two weeks. No housework, no farm chores. Get a hired girl to take over Elzire’s work, Dafoe instructed Oliva, or else start looking for a new wife. Yet when the doctor visited the Dionne farm the next day, there was Elzire, waddling around the kitchen on feet puffed up like bread dough, aggravating the swelling as well as her blood pressure. The results of the test he’d conducted indicated the beginnings of toxemia—a condition better known today as preeclampsia, guaranteed back then to be fatal to mother and baby if it progressed—but Dr. Dafoe seems not to have bothered to explain all that to the Dionnes. He took it for granted that a doctor’s orders would be obeyed, regardless of whether his patient understood why.

Now that their ignorance had made things worse, they wanted him to hurry. And, of course, he would.

The doctor was already too late. Around ten past four, Elzire’s baby was born.

Between them, Auntie Legros and Madame Lebel had delivered hundreds of babies, but the size of this infant left the two midwives terrifed. Arms barely bigger around than sticks of chalk, and every bit as breakable. Fingers that seemed too tiny to contain bones at all. Bruise-colored skin so thin and tender, it might as well have been cellophane. Lamplight glanced off the shining outline of her delicate ribs. The whole of the baby’s torso fit within Madame Lebel’s palm; a bulbous head the size of a small orange wobbled on a frail neck. Like an insect’s, her head and belly were entirely out of proportion with her long, spindly limbs.
Everything about the tiny little girl looked raw and unfinished, with one startling exception: a beautiful set of long black eyelashes.

She was not breathing.

The midwives rubbed her back and chest and blew into her mouth, desperate to inflate her lungs. Precious seconds ticked by as the two women struggled to make her live without injuring her impossibly fragile body. Suddenly a mewling sound rose from the thin blue lips.

A moment’s exultation, then the realization: a child so small could not live more than a few minutes. Auntie Legros dashed to the kitchen pump for a dipper of water. “Ego te baptizo in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti,” she murmured as she sprinkled the water over the child’s silky dark hair. *I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.* They could do no more than that. The midwives tied off the cord with a length of cotton thread from Elzire’s sewing basket, wrapped the baby in a torn bit of wool blanket warmed before the oven door, and laid her near her mother, certain that death was imminent for one or both of them.

Within minutes, Elzire’s pains returned. But instead of the afterbirth, out came another baby girl, smaller yet than the first. Again Auntie Legros and Madame Lebel persuaded the baby to breathe. Immediately they baptized her, too, and laid her next to her sister, who, miraculously, was also still breathing.

Madame Legros and Auntie Lebel had no time to congratulate themselves before yet another infant’s head began to emerge. Not twins, but triplets! At almost the same moment, Dr. Dafoe arrived. “Good God, woman, put on some more hot water!” he exclaimed as he headed to scrub up in the kitchen basin.

The third baby, delivered by the midwives before the doctor had taken his coat off, was even smaller, even more reluctant to breathe than her sisters. Undaunted, Dr. Dafoe and the two women worked her over until they coaxed her into making that strange but encouraging mewl-
ing. Auntie Legros baptized her, and she joined the widening row of
dark-haired baby girls at the foot of the bed.

By now Elzire was so exhausted, she appeared to be unconscious.
What little of her strength remained, she devoted to pressing her rosary
beads to her heart and praying silently to herself. She desperately needed
rest. But her body had not finished its work.

“My God, there are still more there,” Madame Lebel said to the doctor.
“Gosh!” he exclaimed. Realizing that Elzire had become too weak to
bring yet another child into the world without assistance, Dafoe put “a
little pressure” on her abdomen, and a fourth baby made its way into the
lamplight. “Gosh!” he said again as a fifth followed two minutes later.

Through the transparent walls of the unbroken amniotic sacs, Dafoe
could see arms and legs moving: two more miniature baby girls, these
the smallest of all. In his sleepy state, the scene was “unreal and dream-
like,” he remembered, “but I mechanically went about the business of
looking after the babies.”

Madame Lebel and Auntie Legros were every bit as stunned. Five
babies in a single hour! “We just looked at each other with amazement,”
Auntie Legros recalled of the fifth birth. And the last two were born in
“angel veils”—an uncommon sign of good luck. It was clear from their
size that this pair would need every ounce of luck imaginable.

Quickly, Dr. Dafoe ruptured the sacs and got the last two babies
breathing. Auntie Legros baptized them. (Or perhaps it was the doc-
tor. Maybe both—certainly both remembered doing so.) Madame Lebel
swaddled the infants in napkins and sheets and laid them alongside the
first three. Then a warmed blanket was spread over all five babies.

“Auntie, have I twins, this time?” Elzire asked.

“Yes, my dear,” Madame Lebel answered, “twins and three more.”
She held up her fingers and counted off five daughters—“Cinq fillettes.”

Elzire burst into tears. “What will I do with all them babies?”
she wailed.
Satisfied that the birth was finally over, Auntie Legros ran home for supplies. Into a butcher’s basket went an old woolen blanket, a bottle of olive oil, and some flatirons. When she returned, everything had changed. Elzire had gone into shock. She was cold to the touch. Her fingertips were black, her pulse nearly imperceptible. Frightened, Auntie Legros called the doctor in from the yard.

Dr. Dafoe injected Elzire with pituitary hormone to raise her blood pressure, and ergot solution to slow any internal bleeding. A little color appeared in her face. Her pulse quickened, but not enough to bring her out of danger. For forty-five minutes, Auntie Legros and the doctor worked to keep her from slipping away. When Elzire looked no better, Auntie Legros told Dafoe it was time to send for the priest. Dafoe agreed—he had been thinking the same thing.

Auntie Legros went out to the living room, where Oliva was pacing the floor. “My God, what am I going to do with five babies!” he exclaimed, just as Elzire had done. In the space of an hour his family had doubled, leaving his wife on the verge of death. He felt as though he had been “punched.” The news put Oliva in such a frantic state of nerves, Auntie Legros did not trust him behind the wheel. Instead, it was Dr. Dafoe who left Elzire’s bedside and sped off to Corbeil to alert Father Routhier. There was not much else Dafoe could do for her.

Elzire had watched the doctor’s face and heard his grave tone as he spoke with the midwives in English. She did not need to understand the words to guess what he was telling them. Elzire had never felt so feeble and helpless in all her life. She tried to say Oliva’s name. She wanted to touch her babies once while they were still living. But she was too weak to speak, too weak to lift her hand.
In the time it took Dafoe to return, Elzire had rallied somewhat. He left a prescription for her and instructed the midwives to administer it if she had any more pains. He had done everything he knew how to do. If that was not enough, the priest would be along soon.

“As we did not anticipate his return, I asked Dr. Dafoe what to do with the babies,” Madame Lebel recalled. In all the commotion over Elzire, hardly anyone had given a thought to the five infants at the foot of the bed. Every last one of the “little mites” was still living.

“All we can do is to keep them warm and quiet,” Dafoe answered. “Leave ’em alone, except to give them a few drops of warm water every couple of hours—if they live.”

What about bathing them in warm olive oil? Madame Lebel wondered.

“He told her to please herself,” Auntie Legros remembered, “as he did not think there was much use in her troubling herself a great deal as the babies would all die.” Perhaps the biggest one might have a chance, he conceded, but certainly not the others. No set of quintuplets had ever lived before, and he had no reason to hold out hope for these five. Twenty-six years earlier, Dafoe had assisted at the birth of a set of quadruplets; all four were dead within a week. “However, you can please yourself,” he repeated.

Madame Lebel warmed flatirons on the stove. The midwives positioned two chairs before the open oven door and balanced the basket across the two seats while one at a time they sponged each of the infants with warm olive oil. Careful to preserve the order in which they had been born, Madame Lebel and Auntie Legros arranged the babies in the butcher’s basket from biggest to smallest.

By the time Oliva came in to see his five daughters for the first time, they were back in the basket on the foot of their mother’s bed, with hot flatirons propped near their toes and a big wool blanket draped over the top.
Elzire lay watching as her husband approached on tiptoe, hesitating in the bedroom doorway. His brown-black eyes were red from crying. She knew what kind of tragedy or sorrow it took to bring Oliva Dionne to tears. “Realizing this, near death as I was,” Elzire remembered, “I made up my mind to be as brave as possible. So when Oliva grasped my hand and asked me how I felt I replied: ‘Not too bad.’”

Oliva glanced at the butcher’s basket. Then he took a few steps to the end of the bed. Elzire watched him stare into the basket. She could not guess his feelings. He looked sheepish, embarrassed, bewildered.

“What do you think of . . . of . . .” Elzire stammered. She could not bring herself to say our five babies. It still seemed too much. “. . . of them?” she finished.

Oliva did not take his eyes from the basket. “I don’t know what to think, Elzire,” he answered slowly, “for the unheard of has just happened to us, hasn’t it? But I do know that I never could have imagined any babies so small. Aren’t they the tiniest things to be alive and breathing?”

“They’re still alive and breathing, all five of them?”

“Yes,” Oliva answered, “I’m watching them breathe.”

It was a miracle, she decided. A miracle from on high. That was the only way Elzire could explain it to herself. But already Elzire knew better than to expect anyone else to see it the same way.

“What will people say when they find out about this?” she wondered aloud. Only animals gave birth in such numbers. “They will say we are pigs.”