May 28, 1934

If I don't write this down this very minute, or as much of it as possible, I will forget half of it, or something will happen—one of them will die—and everything I might have written will be changed by that, instead of the way it feels now.

The doctor has just left and everyone else seems to have more or less forgotten about me. Marie-Jeanne asked him if he'd drop me off back in Callander, but before he could answer, I asked if I could stay and the doctor nodded curtly, then headed out to his car. Now Marie-Jeanne and Mme. Legros are busying themselves heating chicken broth on the stove for Mme. Dionne, who is finally starting to stir again. M. Dionne has gone to find the parish priest. He tore off in his own truck, the door slapping closed behind him as if the house itself had done something wrong. Poor M. Dionne. He had been pacing the front porch, back and forth, back and forth, until the doctor finally asked him to step back inside and told him about the babies. His expression made him look like a face from the funnies, stretched wide and delirious with disbelief.

While the midwives were looking after Mme. Dionne, I fetched my pencil and scribble book from my bag and took my seat again beside the chairs at the open stove. I've tried to draw the babies entwined in their box surrounded by all the bricks and flatirons we heated on the fire, then wrapped in rough blankets. I know I haven't quite captured them, but it doesn't matter. I just want something to remember this night, no matter what happens.

IT WAS MOTHER'S idea that Marie-Jeanne Lebel, the local midwife, should come to fetch me, no matter the hour, the next time she was called out. Of course that ended up being in the middle of the night. And naturally it was Mother, not me, who had already decided midwifery might be a reasonable career for me to consider—always in demand, a respectable job for a woman, particularly a bilingual one like me. Mme. Lebel worked mostly with the French families.

"Even those who can't pay with money will find some other way to keep you clothed and fed," Mother liked to remind me. "Scribbles, drawings, and books won't put food on the table."

Mme. Lebel stopped by our place on her way home from church yesterday and asked if I was truly up for attending a birth with her. Mother answered yes on my behalf. The truth is, I really had very little idea what was in store, and if I'd known I would never in a million years have agreed to this. Mme. Lebel said there was a lady a few blocks away whose baby was likely to come at any minute, and that she'd stop by for me later that day or night. I should be showered and dressed in clean clothes. Not my best clothes, mind, but something clean.

So I was ready, reluctantly, when the midwife rapped at the door sometime past midnight. A small man I didn't know was waiting in a battered farm truck at the curb and looked rigid with anxiety. Mme. Lebel said tersely that the lady in our neighborhood had delivered that evening—it had happened too fast for her to call me—but that a Frenchwoman in the nearby hamlet of Corbeil had gone into labor two months early and there would likely be complications.

“Two months is too premature,” she clucked. “The baby may not survive.”

Mme. Lebel has a deep voice that sounds like an engine running in low gear and she smells like peppermints. “Call me Marie-Jeanne,” she growled, after I mumbled something about hoping I could be of use. The man in the truck was gripping the steering wheel like a life ring, his face in darkness, the streetlight illuminating his hands, brown and callused from the fields, the nails black and jagged. Marie-Jeanne waited until we were seated in the truck before introducing him as M. Oliva Dionne, and he mumbled a terse *bonsoir* as he steered out of town, his foot heavy on the pedal.

“M. Dionne and his wife, Elzire, already have five children,” Marie-Jeanne murmured, her voice flat. “The youngest is just under a year.”

Fifteen minutes later, M. Dionne pulled up in front of a small farmhouse tucked in the rocky pasture that runs along the Corbeil-Callander road. A feeble light glowed softly from the windows, but the moon was high and bright, revealing a sagging porch and a short flight of steps leading up to the door. Faces, those of the other children, I presumed, were pressed against the glass of a window on the upper floor. One gave a cautious wave as we hurried into the house.

Elzire Dionne was on her back, clutching the frame of a thin wooden bed in a ground-floor room off the kitchen when we arrived, bellowing in pain. Two oil lamps flickered weakly, the flames seeming to shudder with each cry from the bed. M. Dionne hurried to her side, his eyes wild, and his wife clamped a plump hand around his rough fingers. Marie-Jeanne bustled in and shooed him away, ordering him to head upstairs and to keep the other children from worrying about their mother. Little waifs, all of them—they'd crept down the narrow stairs when we arrived looking like a pack of scarecrows, their mismatched nightclothes swaying off their bones.

Another lady was in the room, seated beside Mme. Dionne, rosary beads clicking through her fingers. Marie-Jeanne spoke with her in French and introduced her to me as Mme. Legros, related in some way to the woman giving birth. Mme. Legros didn't look up or acknowledge me, just continued murmuring in rapid French to Mme. Dionne.

"You can get more water on to boil," Marie-Jeanne told me, joining Mme. Legros. I ducked back into the kitchen, grateful to be away from the sounds Mme. Dionne was making, her face furrowed. "And get the clean towels from my bag," the midwife barked after me.

After a minute or two, Marie-Jeanne came into the kitchen, where I was trying to fill a cast-iron pot with a pump at the sink. "Call M. Dionne back downstairs," she told me gravely. "He must go for the doctor."

Inside the farmhouse, the air was chill and dark. There were no electric lights and the moon was no help, having slipped behind the tall barn. The only warmth came from the kitchen stove, but it was scarcely enough to reach the adjoining room. Spring comes slowly to our corner of Ontario, especially out on these farms, the homesteads little more than blunt boxes surrounded by sprawling fields, marsh, and forest. Here, even in May, the wind racing over Lake Nipissing can still have ice on its breath and leave frost on the windows.

M. Dionne roared off in his truck, wheels spinning in the gravel. The groaning from Mme. Dionne grew even louder, her breath coming in grunts and pants. I poked my head into the room off the kitchen to see what more I could do. One oil lamp glowed sadly on a wooden dresser beside the bed. The other had been set on a spindly chair at the foot of the bed, where Marie-Jeanne now hovered, planting her big hands on the flailing shins of Mme. Dionne and talking to her sternly about breathing and pushing.

I could scarcely look at Mme. Dionne. Her lids were crimped shut as if her eyeballs might have already popped out and rolled away, and her brown hair was plastered to her skull like she'd come in from a storm. I stepped forward to try to wipe her brow, but her head was whipping back and forth so violently she looked like something possessed, hardly human—just mounds of oily flesh, juddering in pain. Mme. Legros was now kneeling by Mme. Dionne's pillow, her head bowed, pulling the string of beads through her fingers and reciting the Lord's Prayer. It seemed to me at that moment that Mme. Dionne probably needed something a little stronger than the word of God, but this was not the place to say it.

"Push, push, push," Marie-Jeanne was commanding Mme. Dionne, who let loose with a bone-chilling howl as the baby arrived, the room filling with an animal smell. I'd always liked babies, or thought I did, so sweet in their prams or cooing in their mothers' arms. But this baby was like nothing I'd ever seen—no bigger than the rats our cat Moriarty used to catch and leave on the kitchen mat to terrorize Mother.

Its eyes were closed and swollen, giving it a reptilian look but with incongruous, long lashes. Its head was enormous, almost equal in size to the rest of its body, which was slick with what looked like kerosene in the dim light. Marie-Jeanne called for me to bring her a towel, and I scurried over.

"A little girl, Mme. Dionne," murmured Marie-Jeanne. Then she bid me crouch close beside her and set the little creature into the towel in my hands, hardly big enough to fill them, then pulled her scissors from a tray and snipped the cord. My sloshing stomach felt like its contents might lurch at any minute into my throat, but the panic of the moment kept my hands steady. The tiny thing was kicking feebly but made no sound. You could see that its face, even in the long, dancing shadows, was turning a deep, mottled blue. I feel worse than terrible for thinking it, let alone writing it down here, but I did not at that moment think of this scrap of life as precious or miraculous: it was grotesque and frightening and I wanted nothing more than to set it down and run.

Marie-Jeanne stood and took the baby from me and walked swiftly to the kitchen, throwing open the door to the woodstove and thrusting the tiny body toward the heat. For a moment, I feared her intention was to hurl the little thing into the flames, which is horrifying and serves only to explain my state of shock. But holding it facedown in the hot breath of the stove, she gently massaged its back, then turned it over, put her mouth over its lips, and blew. Just then Mme. Dionne starting lowing again, a deep, sorrowing sound I could feel, physically, like a blow. Marie-Jeanne thrust the baby into my arms and went back to Mme. Dionne. The little creature was so tiny it seemed I could have cupped it in my palms, like a butterfly. Cupped *her*. Then she moved and started mewing in my hands, and I couldn't help but think of her as a hairless kitten, not a human child. Mme. Legros hurried over and took the baby from me gently and settled it into an apple crate that she set before the open door of the oven.

Back at the foot of Mme. Dionne's bed, Marie-Jeanne ducked her head between the splayed legs and cried out, "Twins, Mme. Dionne! Push-push-push!"

Mme. Dionne's scream would have curdled the milk for miles around, but push she did and a second baby slid from her, this one even smaller than the first. Mme. Legros hustled back to the bedside and took Mme. Dionne's hands in hers, dipped her head, and started in on a fresh round of prayers.

Marie-Jeanne beckoned me over the same way she had before, and together we gently patted down the tiny thing, snipped the cord, and massaged its back just as we had the first, then she told me to settle the second beside her sister in front of the oven.

Suddenly the kitchen door yawned open again. It was M. Dionne returning with Dr. Allan Dafoe, the same doctor who brought me into the world seventeen years ago. He is as stout as ever, his round wire glasses nestled into the eye sockets of his large, round head and his toothbrush mustache tightly groomed, as if his nose were growing a slim beard of its own.

He strode swiftly to the bed in the adjoining room to examine Mme. Dionne, then returned briskly to the kitchen to wash his hands with water I'd set to cool beside the stove. Compared with his oversize head, the doctor's hands looked like those of a child, small and delicate—well suited to this work, I presumed. I hovered in the doorway, uncertain where I could be useful.

"Another is coming," he said brusquely. He spoke in English, but the two women clearly took his meaning because a look passed between them: alarm, tinged with horror. Sure enough, Mme. Dionne gave another piercing cry, and before Dr. Dafoe could relieve Marie-Jeanne of her position at the foot of the bed, a third baby arrived. This one was no more than a scrap of skin stretched tight over bones so tiny you'd think it was a chick just hatched and still slick. When we lived in Ottawa, I knew twin boys several grades below me in school, but I'm not sure it had ever occurred to me that three was possible, or spent a moment thinking about what it would be like for a woman to push out one child after another. By now Mme. Dionne looked like she was ready to give up altogether, she was so weak after the third little baby emerged. Her face and lips were bloodless, and her fingers reaching weakly for Mme. Legros were turning black at the tips.

I retreated as much as I could after the doctor arrived. I busied myself in the kitchen, closing my ears to the wails from the bed and trying not to peep constantly at the little things under the blanket. I boiled pot after pot of water and washed up what I could, even as there were more exclamations of astonishment and prayer from the room next door. Because the night was far from over.

There were five frail babies settled in the apple crate by the time dawn started creeping across the fields. *Five*. Mme. Dionne, by the end of it, was barely clinging to life, collapsing into a troubled sleep after the last little snippet arrived. Mme. Legros stayed by her side while Dr. Dafoe stepped away to speak with M. Dionne. He opened the door that led to the porch and bid M. Dionne enter, explaining in slow, simple English, as if to a child, the events of the past few hours. Neither man paid any attention to me working at the sink.

"Cinq?" M. Dionne said. *"Five?"* He is a small, reedy man, and the news seemed to shrink him still further. He looked fearfully at the apple crate but didn't step closer. "I have five already," he breathed. "What will people say?"

Dr. Dafoe put a hand on his shoulder. “The babies will not live—it’s too soon for them. They’re too weak. And Mrs. Dionne is in grave danger.” He spoke so softly I couldn’t catch his next words. M. Dionne looked up, aghast. “I will go for the priest,” he said, then added, “Can I first please see my wife?”

Dr. Dafoe stood aside and beckoned Marie-Jeanne and Mme. Legros to step into the kitchen as I slipped back into my seat by the stove.

“Your first priority must be attending to Mrs. Dionne,” he said gravely. “There is no chance the babies will survive more than a few hours. Make them as comfortable as you can, and if one is thriving more than another, you must focus on the one that is strong. We cannot save them all. I will go now for supplies and nursing assistance for the mother. Remember, your first obligation must be saving the life of Mrs. Dionne for the sake of the five children she has already.” He paused and glanced around the dim room. “Indeed, any more would be too much of a burden.”

Then he turned to the apple crate on the wooden chair by the stove and seemed to notice me for the first time. I saw his eyes dart over the left side of my face, where, in the flickering shadows, my birthmark would have made my face look even more lopsided and distorted than in daylight.

“Emma Trimpany,” the doctor said, and he closed his eyes as if to keep from staring, pushing at his eyelids with his stubby fingers, exhausted. When he looked up again, he was careful to fix his gaze over my right shoulder. “What on earth are you doing here, Emma?”

Marie-Jeanne answered for me, taking a moment to sort out the English words. “She was joining me with M. Dionne when he picked me up in Callander earlier. Emma is considering to become a midwife." She gave me a weak smile. "Possibly she is having a second thought."

Dr. Dafoe took a step closer to the crate, sinking onto one knee so that he could peer beneath the blanket we'd tented over the basket and the open door of the stove. He shook his head as if he was only now processing the events of the long night. "My word," he breathed, finally. "My word. Five babies. Five girls, born alive. It's unprecedented."

He stood and took several glass droppers from his black bag and set them by the kettles on the stove. "If they wake, give them a drop or two of warm water." He was addressing Marie-Jeanne, who nodded, but he turned his stern gaze my way, as if it fell to me to make sure she understood. "Warm, mind, not scalding. Keep the irons and stones hot, but well wrapped, and replace this blanket regularly, with a hot one, draped over the back of the chair, to try to keep the heat contained. We shall do what we can, but—" He shrugged. "I'll go straight to the Red Cross outpost and be back as soon as I can." He left, closing the door quietly behind him.

The frogs have finally finished croaking in the fields behind the farmhouse, as if they know it's time they settled down and let the birds take over. I should be tired, too, but I'm not. I have stayed by the stove, sitting beside those tiny bodies, thinking, perhaps, that I'd see my first life leave the world within hours of seeing a first life arrive. An alarming thought, but also, I think, a suitable punishment. How I recoiled from these little things at first! I feel I've let myself down in some important way, or let down the person my mother is hoping I might one day become. Sitting here through the night, watching them sleep, bidding them goodbye if it comes to that—this is the only way I can think of to make it up to them.

I ducked my head to peer under the blanket just now. They are sleeping and still, so it's possible to see the five of them as humans in miniature. Their similarity to one another is eerie, even with nothing but their tiny heads poking out of their blankets. All of them have black hair and long, dark eyelashes, too thick, it seems, for their sunken cheeks. The longer I watched them, the more I could see that each one of them has something distinct, something to tell her apart from her sisters. I took out my scribble book in the hopes of capturing them. The one that came first has one eyelid bigger than the other. The second has a tiny crinkle in the upper cusp of her right ear. The third has the smallest nose, and the fourth has the most hair, which seems to curl in the opposite direction from that of her sisters. The fifth and last—she has nothing that looks markedly different, but she is the only one with any wriggle in her.

No one has bothered to give them names. Mme. Dionne has managed to swallow a few sips of broth, and M. Dionne has not yet returned. I set down my sketch and lowered my chin to the edge of the crate, close enough that I could hear, faintly, the feeble breaths of these tiny girls. I wrapped my arms around the sides of the box and dangled my fingers over the edges, hoping the babies might sense my hands and face hovering above them. *I'm here,* I whispered under my breath. *At this very moment, I'm here. And so are you.*

May 28, 1934 (*UPI Archives*)

FIVE BABY GIRLS BORN TO CANADA FARMER'S WIFE

NORTH BAY, Ontario—In a rude farm house five miles from here a country doctor fought tonight to keep the spark of life in five tiny baby girls. The quintuplets were born today to Mrs. Oliva Dionne, 25 years of age, who has five other living children.

Neighbor women, acting as midwives, helped the family physician, Dr. Dafoe, at the accouchement.

The doctor confirmed birth of the quintuplets tonight. He had little hope all of them will live.

Total weight of the quintuplets was thirteen pounds six ounces. The first baby girl born weighed three pounds four ounces. The combined weight of the last two was only two pounds four ounces. Dr. Dafoe said so far as he knows the quintuplets are a Canadian record. He had heard of quadruplets, but never of quintuplets until today.

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May 28, 1934

Did my parents worry when they woke this morning to find me gone? I didn't ask. I assume the news must have scurried its way to every lane, porch, and scullery before Mother even had the opportunity to overcook Father's breakfast. I expect they've pieced two and two together. There's no telephone here or I would have tried to reach Father at the post office, but the day has galloped by and there's been no time. I'm only now getting a moment to jot some of it down.

The Red Cross nurse from the outpost in Bonfield, Marie Clouthier, had arrived by the time Dr. Dafoe returned mid-morning. Marie-Jeanne was still with Mme. Dionne, and I was doing everything in my power not to nod off. Dr. Dafoe was, I think, astonished to see all the babies alive.

"Have they cried much?" he asked Nurse Clouthier, who blinked at him blankly, then murmured in French to Marie-Jeanne. The midwife merely shrugged and gestured at me with her chin.

"Surprisingly, they are noisy quite a lot," Marie-Jeanne growled in her low voice, her accent thick. "But it is this young lady who has watched over them all the night." She said it kindly. "Emma, they have been crying, all of them? Or just some?"

I had stayed most of the night beside their box, one hand still draped over the edge. Nurse Clouthier, when she'd arrived, had taken over the dispensing of water to the babies and had gingerly rubbed each of them down with oil and placed them back in the basket. She scarcely acknowledged me in my chair, which I shuffled aside while she was tending to the babies, and after a while it was almost as if she didn't know I was there. This is something I've managed to pull off my whole life, to make myself invisible and unremarkable—no mean task with a crimson stain covering half my face. People meeting me for the first time tend to let their eyes glance off me the instant they process what they're seeing, and this has always worked to my advantage. Even Dr. Dafoe, who'd been the one to console my mother at the time of my delivery, so distressed was she by my appearance, seemed to do a double take when he registered my position by the stove this morning. As if he'd forgotten he'd noticed me there the night before.

"Emma," he murmured. "It was very good of you to help out. How are they?"

"All of them have wriggled from time to time," I said. "They're all breathing and making sounds. Not so much crying as whimpering."

Nurse Clouthier had other calls to make in the French homes of East Ferris Township, but she promised to be back. Dr. Dafoe left soon after, saying he was going to return with a nurse—a bilingual one this time—from the new nursing school at St. Joseph's Hospital in North Bay.

Marie-Jeanne and I remained at the farmhouse all day, as did Mme. Legros. By midafternoon, Mme. Dionne was improving somewhat, enough to take in some more broth and a cup of tea, but the babies were growing more and more quiet. There must have been too many women in the farmhouse for M. Dionne. He stayed outside, tending to the farm or conferring with his brothers and father on the porch, running his bony hand through hair made wild from the habit and rubbing at his eyes as if trying to wake from a dream.

Other family members, several with the other Dionne children in tow, kept coming by and rapping at the door, and we'd redirect them back outside. All day long we watched people pulling up to the farmhouse in their cars and carriages, sending eddies of dust and flies into the kitchen. I managed to doze off in my chair by the fire while Nurse Clouthier and Mme. Legros were bustling about the kitchen and shooing visitors away.

At some point late in the day, M. Dionne burst in with a photographer from the *North Bay Nugget*. The man's eyes bulged out of his head when he saw the tiny girls in the crate by the oven, but he swiftly got to work and convinced Mme. Legros to lift the tiny things from their warm cocoon onto the pillow beside Mme. Dionne. Maybe it was wrong to do it, but Mme. Dionne rallied somewhat when she had her little girls around her, their heads the size of early summer apples. Had Dr. Dafoe been there, I don't think those babies would have been moved, but I suppose M. Dionne was thinking, as we all were, that this might be the only record of his wife with five live babies, all at once. How sad. Even putting those words down in print makes me feel sick with dread.

It was dusk when Nurse Yvonne Leroux—or Ivy, as she's insisting I call her—arrived. I'll never forget the moment she stepped through the front door carrying a black bag and wearing her white uniform. The farmhouse has low ceilings, and the shadows licking up the whitewashed walls must have made the kitchen and the adjoining parlor look that much shabbier.

Even in that light, Ivy shone. Her dark hair, parted in the center, was styled in a twist at the top of her neck, a crisp white nurse's cap perched on the crown of her head. I put her at three, maybe four years older than me, in her early twenties at most, but she has the poise and comportment of a grown woman, whereas I, a good half foot smaller, still feel like I'll never fill out the frame I've been given. She has high cheekbones, a creamy complexion, large brown eyes, and a long nose, which seems to twitch to the right whenever she is trying to hold back a smile, which wasn't very often today. She told me that the message she'd received from Sister Felicitas at St. Joseph's was that a Frenchwoman from a farming family had had a difficult birth and was fighting to survive. No one had bothered to mention anything about five babies. Perhaps Dr. Dafoe assumed they'd be dead by the time the nurse could reach us. She's a brand-new nurse, Ivy. Her class is the first to graduate from the new school at St. Joe's, and this is her first assignment.

The babies were back in the box by the fire when she arrived. I'd been given the task of reheating the bricks and stones for the basket. I'd rigged up some twine across the stove so I could drape the other blankets over top, creating a snug, warm cocoon around the basket and the stove together.

Ivy went first to the room next door and spent several minutes with Mme. Dionne, who was sleeping peacefully after the excitement of the photograph. I heard her exchange a few words with Mme. Legros, then exclaim, *"Cinq!"* before she hurried back into the kitchen.

She came forward and extended a firm hand, introducing herself as Ivy, first in French, then in English. It was the first time someone other than Marie-Jeanne and Dr. Dafoe had actually spoken to me directly, let alone looked at me without faltering.

"Pleased to meet you," I mumbled and told her my name. I was trying to think how to explain what I was doing at the farmhouse, but Ivy was already gesturing at the covered basket. "May I?"

I nodded and lifted off the blanket. Ivy's eyes widened ever so slightly.

"Gosh," she breathed and bent down to peer at them more closely, her hands rising instinctively as if to reach inside, then dropping again to her sides. All the babies were sleeping. The bigger girls were snuggled tightly together in the upper right corner of the box. The third had been placed in the bottom right corner and was curled at the feet of her big sister. The tiniest ones were back to back, their chins tucked toward their scrawny chests. I'd been watching them through the night and most of the day. I still found them astonishing, but less grotesque than they'd seemed last night.

Finally Ivy straightened up and indicated that I could place the blanket back over top. She must have seen the anxiety in my eyes as I lifted them to meet her gaze.

"You're doing an excellent job," she said. "You must be exhausted."

Then she did something unexpected—she lifted her hand and placed it on my right cheek, the good one, and gently turned my face to the light of the oil lamp, studying my left side intently but not unkindly.

"*Nevus flammeus,*" she murmured in the manner of a student dredging up something memorized. "Port-wine stain." Then she must have noticed my face blushing on the right side to match the left, because she stroked the cheek she was touching and said: "Makes you special, doesn't it." Then she grinned so that I saw for the first time that while her front teeth were perfectly straight, the teeth farther back were small and slightly crooked, making her look like she might know a thing or two about mischief. I couldn't help but return her smile.

She turned back to the basket and its blankets, her eyes roving over my cords and sheets. It must have looked, I realized, like a child's play fort. She nodded, appraisingly, then set about making a few adjustments.

"What we're aiming for is as little change in temperature as possible," she explained. "The front door to the kitchen must remain closed, when we can see to it, and we'll put this to use right away," she added, taking a ceramic hot-water crock from her bag.

"I'm sure you're tired," she said, turning to give me her full attention, "but can you stay a bit longer?"

Marie-Jeanne caught a lift home with Dr. Dafoe after his last visit of the day and promised she'd stop in on my parents and let them know my whereabouts. Ivy and I took turns dozing fitfully while the other watched the babies and checked in on Mme. Dionne. M. Dionne had come inside after dusk, the day's work done, but seemed to still be buzzing in bursts of nervous energy. Sometimes he stood absolutely still, only to dart off in a blur for another corner of the little house like a lizard, or a ghost. We wouldn't see him for a while, then he'd slip down the stairs and we'd find him at Mme. Dionne's bedside muttering softly to her in French while both Ivy and I were with the babies in the kitchen. The rest of his brood, it seems, have been dispatched to stay with aunts and uncles elsewhere in the hamlet.

At one point, long after night had fallen, he asked permission to see the babies, which struck me as strange, because they were his children, after all. I watched his face as he stood over them—he looks older than his years, a workingman's face, heavy-lidded, weathered by seasons of hard labor out-of-doors.

Even his earlobes seemed to be sagging away from his skull. As he gazed at his daughters, his twitching features didn't so much soften as grow still. I could tell, these tiny creatures were provoking in him something closer to amazement than affection. And it's true, they are so tiny and strange. The largest, according to a set of scales Ivy had brought, now weighed just 3 pounds, while the smallest weighed just 1.8.

"Will they live?" he asked Ivy. It was impossible to read his expression. She looked at him steadily and said in a firm voice that it was too soon to say.

Ivy is fast asleep now with her head cradled in her arms on the kitchen table, her knot of hair loose on her white throat. Mme. Dionne is snoring, deep in sleep at last. And so, too, are the babies—asleep and alive. I will put away my pen now, but I will let Ivy rest and keep watch a little longer on my own.

May 29, 1934

NEITHER IVY NOR I managed more than a few hours' sleep, straining to listen to the faint cries from the babies over the thrumming of toads in the fields and the surprised warbles of whip-poor-wills hunting in the high grass. M. Dionne swept silently downstairs at dawn, nodded at us through the doorway, then turned to sit with the mountain of rumpled sheets and nightgown that was Mme. Dionne. After a few minutes, he stood from his wife's bed and clumped into the kitchen, his boots leaving a trail of dried mud on the pine-plank floor.

"I'm going to bring Father Routhier again," he said in French. Ivy was stooped over the pump at the sink, filling the kettle, and I looked up to see M. Dionne watching her. His eyes drifted wearily upward as she straightened to standing. He's a funny-looking man: compact and wiry with protruding eyes and large, irregular ears that look to have been an afterthought, inexpertly attached to his head. "The babies will be christened today, just in case," he said, and he headed out to his truck.

"He didn't even stop to look at them," I whispered. Ivy made a face and put the kettle on the stove.

If anything, the babies seemed even smaller that morning. Dr. Dafoe arrived bearing blankets, clothes, and diapers that were far too large and once again shook his round head at the sight of the tiny things.

"I've organized for breast milk to be shipped from Chicago and Toronto on the evening train. In the meantime we will make do with a mix of boiled water, cow's milk, and corn syrup."

Ivy and Dr. Dafoe mixed these ingredients according to a formula the doctor had devised. The air in the kitchen was thick and warm from the fire we'd been steadily feeding with wood through the night. By midmorning, you could already feel that the day had plenty more heat in store, but we couldn't open the windows and door for any length of time without inviting in the flies, mosquitoes, dust, and curious faces of neighbors and children.

Once the milk had cooled, Ivy lifted the babies out of their nest one by one, holding each in the crook of her arm while Dr. Dafoe filled the dropper from the pot on the stove. Tired to the point of collapse, I took out my scribble book and tried to capture Ivy giving this mixture to one of the little ones, but either because I was too weary or because the proportions, in life, were so out of scale with normal, my drawing was terrible. We laughed over it afterward, Ivy and I: she brandishing a dropper the size of a sword, the tin of syrup as big as a grain silo, the babies, by contrast, small blossoms on a bend in a branch.

Midmorning, all the babies were asleep again and we were sweltering with them, the heat making me dozy. To keep ourselves from drifting off, Ivy and I told each other about ourselves. She is of French stock, her family having lived in the area for generations, and the youngest of five, with two brothers and two sisters. Her mother has passed on now, and Ivy had been living in the hospital dormitory at St. Joe's for the past three years while she completed her nursing degree in North Bay. Her father, who works at the only mill left in town, moved to Callander after her mother died. All the other millworkers, like almost everyone else in these parts, are on government relief, particularly after the Payette Mill burned down in '32. The J. B. Smith Mill was supposed to reopen next month, but it, too, went up in a blaze just last week, the flames leaping so high we could see them from our front lawn.

"I'm very lucky to have been given this assignment directly out of school," Ivy said earnestly. She says she plans to work as long as she can and is in no rush to get married. "Married couples can't qualify for relief, if they need it," she said. I didn't know that.

I myself have no intention of marrying. Boys have never shown much of an interest in me—my horrible birthmark—so I've never imagined my future might include a husband and children, a white clapboard house plunked alongside a stretch of pasture, cows that need milking, chickens to be plucked. That's why Mother worries. And it's no doubt why she spoke with Marie-Jeanne Lebel about taking me on as an apprentice. But I didn't say that to Ivy.

"What does your father do?" she asked.

"He's the Callander postmaster now. He worked for many years as a classics professor at Carleton University, which is where he met my mother. She's French, from Hull. Father lost his position at the university a few years ago and, through some family connections, managed to secure the position in Callander when the post office was rebuilt after the fire of 'thirty-two."

Ivy nodded. I can imagine what she was thinking. A government job is a rarity in these hard times. She would know that we're getting along better than most.

"No brothers or sisters?" she asked.

I shook my head. "I think they made a point of being careful after they had me," I said, pointing at my cheek. I've never said anything like that before, but Ivy had made a point of commenting on my birthmark. She had held my face in her hand.

"Nonsense," she said, then set me the task of bleaching and boiling all the cotton diapers Dr. Dafoe had brought that morning.

I didn't hear anyone coming up the porch steps, so I started at the sound of a loud rap at the door.

Ivy pulled it ajar, the back of her hand already abutted against her hip so as to give these latest lookie-loos a piece of her tongue for barging all the way up onto the porch. But they weren't locals—they were two city men who'd arrived in a fancy car. They were carrying big cameras on stilts and said they'd driven all the way from Sault Sainte Marie and Montreal to film the babies for the newsreels.

Ivy was firm. "M. Dionne is not presently at home," she said.

The men started in with a long list of protests and explanations, and one slid his toe past the doorjamb. Ivy lifted a finger to her lips and crunched her eyebrows together at them, nudging the man’s polished leather shoe back over the threshold with a tap of her own foot.

“Shhhhh!” she hushed. “You will wake Mme. Dionne, and you’ll rouse the babies. They are very, very frail.”

The men retreated to the yard, and we watched them through the window to see what they’d do. They leaned on the hood of their four-seater and struck up conversations with the steady stream of curious folks stopping by. After a few minutes, Dr. Dafoe pulled up in his sleek green car, and both men got busy behind their big cameras and started asking him questions.

Ivy had drawn the muslin over the kitchen window to keep people from peering in, but she’d cracked the sash in the hope of getting a bit of a breeze. Now she stood with her ear to the gap to hear what Dr. Dafoe was saying.

No need, as it turned out. Seconds later the door was swinging open again, and Dr. Dafoe was leading the men into the kitchen.

“Of course, of course,” he was saying. “A true miracle of creation, all identical. They are unlikely to all be alive tomorrow, so it’s important to have a record.”

If that was all true, it was a bold move waltzing in with the motion picture men without checking first with Ivy. What if one of the babies had died while Dr. Dafoe was out? What if the newsreels showed just four babies or three?

Ivy was angry, I could tell, but she waited for the men to set up their cameras, then lifted the blankets off the box.

Just then, M. Dionne burst through the front door and all hell broke loose.

“Get out, get out!” he started screaming in English, then in French for good measure. One of the cameramen swung his huge contraption around and tried to film M. Dionne grabbing his colleague by the collar of his shirt. I thought M. Dionne was going to kick the camera right over.

Dr. Dafoe cleared his throat and urged all three men back outside with a sweep of his arm, shutting the door behind him. I could hear him attempting to say something to one of the newsreel men, but they were busy trying to film M. Dionne, who had shouted a stream of obscenities and dashed back into his truck, saying he was going for the police. He spun out onto the road in a cloud of dust, and the cameramen, incredibly, hopped in their big car and started after him, one of the men trying to maneuver his big camera out the passenger-side window!

Dr. Dafoe stood on the porch watching, taking out a little bag of tobacco, packing his pipe, then lighting it. The kerfuffle had woken the babies, first the little ones, then the bigger ones, which is a funny way to describe them when they are *all* so small. Their cries were so soft, like robin chicks piping for their mother to return with a worm. Dr. Dafoe must have heard it all the same, because after a few puffs he tapped the bowl on the rail, pocketed his pipe, and came back indoors.

I lasted until just after two or three in the afternoon, when the Red Cross nurse, Marie Clouthier, returned, bringing with her another nurse and an orderly, both English, plus two ounces of breast milk that Sister Felicitas had managed to drum up at St. Joseph's Hospital. There was not enough to go around, so Dr. Dafoe insisted it be given to the three smallest. By then the priest had returned with M. Dionne and they were praying with Mme. Dionne in the next room, deciding on names for the babies.

At one point M. Dionne drifted into the kitchen and told Ivy he'd be happy to run her home in his truck if she needed some rest. She demurred, saying she wasn't feeling tired, which couldn't have been true. She'd been on her feet most of the night.

I'd been at the Dionne farmhouse nearly twenty-four hours longer than Ivy, of course, and I was exhausted. But I didn't say so, and M. Dionne did not turn my way to repeat his offer. I certainly wasn't looking to go anywhere with M. Dionne. He was a different man now than he'd seemed the night he and Marie-Jeanne had picked me up after midnight. Less than two days ago, I realized. It seemed a lifetime. He appeared calmer now that his wife showed signs of recovery, gliding quietly through the house, fixing Dr. Dafoe and the nurses with long, glowering looks and muttering in French under his breath.

Dr. Dafoe, it seemed, spoke no French or at least had chosen not to speak a word of it since his arrival on the night of the birth. Even M. and Mme. Dionne he addressed in English, which M. Dionne clearly understood. Ivy and I slipped easily between French and English, and stuck with English when Dr. Dafoe appeared. Now, with more personnel from the hospital crowded into the main floor of the farmhouse, the balance had tipped to English.

M. Dionne went back to his wife's bedside, and Dr. Dafoe started packing his black bag at the kitchen table. I touched his sleeve. "Can you drop me at my home?" I asked, and he blinked his small eyes behind his glasses and bobbed his head by way of assent. As I was following Dr. Dafoe out the door, Ivy called my name. The other women didn't look up. "Emma—you'll come back, won't you?" She smiled her crooked smile. "Come back and rescue me as soon as you can."

May 30, 1934

I RODE MY bicycle back out to the Dionne farmhouse this morning, unprepared for the mob of people milling around the edges of the yard like so many clucking chickens—a steady stream of bicycles, cars, and trucks coming and going. The *North Bay Nugget* had run the picture taken yesterday on page one. Now, hemming the Dionne property were at least three dozen men, women, and children, and not a single person I knew from Callander.

An older man I recognized as M. Dionne senior, the babies' grandfather, was pacing the yard, spiking the air with a pitchfork and looking every bit like a bandy-legged devil roused from bed, his cottony hair standing up in a thick clump at the back. He was thundering at people to move on, but everyone was staying put, hectoring him with questions. Newspapermen clearly made up at least half of the crowd, bowler hats pushed back on their heads, some with pencils behind their ears and notebooks in their breast pockets. Others had cameras hanging heavy around their necks, their shirtsleeves rolled up in the heat. After a short while, the door to the farmhouse opened and Ivy stepped out onto the porch.

"Emma," she called. She had one hand pulling the door closed behind her as heads craned to see inside, but she beckoned with her free hand. "Come on in," she said.

The air in the farmhouse was even closer than yesterday. There was a heavyset girl I didn't know working at the sink and another woman at the bedside of Mme. Dionne, who was sitting up somewhat, a bit of color returning to her plump cheeks. Ivy looked tired, but still lovely, I thought, wisps of hair curling out of her bun in the thick, damp warmth of the room.

On the floor of the kitchen, pushed against the far wall, sat a stout wooden box with two round knobs on the lid. It looked like a deep crib or coffin—roughly three feet high and two feet deep with glass set into its top. When I peeped under the blanket of the crate by the fire and saw only two babies inside, I gasped, my fingers flying to my lips. I swung around to face Ivy, but she shook her head and smiled wearily.

She gestured at the big wooden box.

"It came from Chicago early this morning," she said, pulling me toward it and pointing to the thermometer set into its side. "It's an incubator to keep them warm and safe from germs. It's ancient—runs on kerosene instead of electricity." Through the square pane of glass I could see the three little ones, curled around one another like puppies, sleeping soundly.

"They are doing okay now, but you missed the excitement earlier."

She told me the littlest ones had turned blue and their hearts had stopped, but Dr. Dafoe, luckily, had been there when it happened and prescribed some drops of rum, retrieved from a cabinet in the adjoining room. Now Ivy and the other nurses were resorting to rum every time the fragile breathing of one of the babies showed signs of slowing to a standstill. You could see the strain in the faces of the women. The girl at the sink, Claudette, had been brought in from a nearby farm to help with the washing, and the young woman with Mme. Dionne was another sister or cousin, tasked with plumping pillows, spooning the patient her *potage,* joining in prayers, and doing whatever else was needed to ensure the patient remained in bed.

"She's christened the babies," Ivy whispered, smiling her sideways smile. "Do you want to meet them properly? You'll like this."

We went back to the box by the stove, and Ivy slowly lifted the blanket aside. "Madame named this one Yvonne for me," she said, pointing to one of the largest, her face lighting up as she said it. "And the other bigger one here is Annette."

She then walked over to the incubator and pressed a finger against the glass lid. “This here is Cécile and next to her, Marie, supposedly for Nurse Clouthier, but my guess is more likely the Holy Mother. The smallest—” Ivy looked up to watch my face. “The smallest I believe she named for you. This is Émilie. That could be a variation of Emma, don’t you think?”

I looked up at Ivy, then leaned closer to peer again through the warped glass. Émilie! They were still little more than wrinkled wads of skin, but after I’d spent so many hours watching them struggle for life, they’d filled my dreams the previous night.

“They are little fighters, they are,” Ivy murmured. She’d drifted back to the box and was swiftly removing one of the blanketed hot-water crocks and replacing it with a new one from the stove. “Keep it up, girls,” she whispered and adjusted their makeshift tents to cover them again.

Every few hours, we lift them out one by one and rub them gently with oil as if they’re clad in the finest tissue, our touch as light as air, and give them a few drops of breast milk from an eyedropper.

M. Dionne had vanished to the stables at the back of the property, but Ivy told me he’d spent almost an hour with Mme. Dionne and the priest that morning, arguing about all of the people in the house and what the medical bills would be. She’d eventually been forced to tell him that Madame needed to rest, and he had gone off in a huff.

Sometime in the afternoon there was a soft knock at the door, and it was a relief to open it and admit a sip of fresh air into our sweltering cave. Ivy had little Cécile in the crook of her elbow and was giving her some milk, and Nurse Clouthier had gone back to Bonfield, so I was the one to greet the visitors, opening the door by a slim crack and slipping into the breeze on the porch.

On the doorstep was possibly the most striking man I'd seen outside of a magazine or film. In his midthirties, I'd wager, perhaps older, he wore a white shirt that looked crisp and starched, despite the strength of the sun. He had thick black hair and a smooth complexion, tanned as if he'd spent the spring somewhere sunnier than Northern Ontario. His eyes were a warm brown, and when he spoke it was in a soft, measured tone. Everyone else who'd been disturbing us all day and yesterday had rapped too loudly or spoken in booming voices that were unsettling for the babies. This man knew better.

But he, too, I noticed next, had a camera slung over his shoulder, tucked almost out of sight behind his elbow.

"No photographers," I said and was about to step back inside.

"Fred Davis," he said quickly. "Please, miss. I'm a photographer from the *Star.* We've driven all the way here today with the equipment ordered by the specialist, in Toronto."

I could feel his soft eyes taking in my birthmark, and, to his credit, he didn't glance away.

"We have the tub, feeding tubes, the clothes, blankets, and I don't know what else." He stopped, waiting for me to find my voice. "Everything we've brought is for the quintuplets."

Quintuplets! I had never heard the word. It sounded like something from Greek mythology, but I realized he was talking about the babies.

At the bottom of the rickety steps that led up to the porch stood two other men, both in their telltale bowler hats, and with them a woman, petite and pretty, in the white dress and cap of a nurse. At that very moment, Dr. Dafoe emerged from the curious crowd on the edge of the yard, his black bag in hand, pipe pursed in his lips.

He removed it as he approached the steps. “Davis?” he asked and looked from one man to another. The men at the foot of the stairs thrust out their hands, and Davis, quicker than you could blink, swung his camera to his face, pointed it at the doctor with the reporters, and started to click and wind, click and wind. The petite nurse smiled and bobbed her blond head, extending a graceful gloved hand of her own.

The men, after conferring with the doctor, headed back to their car. Dr. Dafoe gestured toward the senior M. Dionne, who was hovering nearby, and spoke with him briefly, apparently clarifying that these city men should be permitted access to the house. The junior M. Dionne, the babies’ father, was nowhere to be seen. I ducked indoors again, intending to tell Ivy about the handsome photographer from the *Toronto Star,* but to my surprise, Mr. Davis swiftly slipped in after me, shutting the door gently behind him.

Ivy had Cécile back in the wooden incubator again, so none of the babies were in sight. I watched Fred Davis blink as he took in the drab kitchen, his eyes adjusting to the dim room, roving over the sheeting we’d rigged around the stove, the clutter of equipment we’d tried our best to organize on the tables and shelving. Then his gaze came to rest on Ivy. She had turned away from the incubator, her cheeks flushed, her forehead creased with worry. She started when she saw the man behind me.

“Oh,” she said. “Hello.”

“Ma’am,” said Fred Davis. His eyes, which a moment earlier had been bobbing like a brook over everything in our makeshift nursery, now came to a halt on Ivy, as if snagged. He, too, was at a loss for words, finally managing, "It's my great pleasure."

Just then Dr. Dafoe stepped into the kitchen and beckoned Mr. Davis back outside with a wave of his undersize hands. Mr. Davis along with the younger reporter from the *Star* managed to wrestle their crates up onto the porch under the supervision of the older man, Mr. Keith Munro, also related to the newspaper in some way, who stood in the dusty yard barking out commands from behind a bushy, white mustache. The little blond nurse, named Jean Blewett, turned out to be a proper nurse who'd graduated from a college in Toronto. She busied herself ferrying smaller packets and boxes from the crates to the kitchen. Only when the men were done did she step primly into the next room to introduce herself to Mme. Dionne, Mr. Davis right at her heels. I hadn't even noticed him taking up his camera again, but he managed to pop off a few photos of Nurse Blewett and Mme. Dionne, using a flashbulb because the light was so dull. This greatly upset Mme. Dionne, who I presume had never seen a flashbulb before—nor had I—and she started fussing and speaking in rapid French to the new nurse, whose blue eyes blinked. She couldn't understand a word.

Claudette, the hired girl, must have gone to the stables for M. Dionne, because he burst into the farmhouse and started hollering at the photographer and reporters to hightail it off his property. Ivy told me he had been angry that morning with how the newspapers had written about him yesterday. This was the first time we'd seen him truly livid, spluttering with rage in a mix of languages, those strange, long earlobes of his—indecent somehow—quivering in indignation. Maybe I should have more sympathy for M. Dionne. His house is overrun with strangers, his other children dispersed among the homes of family and friends. No one in that part of the world has money to feed an extra mouth, let alone five—he must be looking at all this equipment and the nurses and be worried sick about what the bill will come to, let alone how he'll support a family now doubled in size. But he really scared me then, shouting like a madman in front of the babies and his wife, now sobbing in her bed. Dr. Dafoe was angry too. I could see it. The doctor isn't an easy man to read, but he, too, is likely feeling the growing interest in the little babies and the burden of keeping them alive.

"Mr. Dionne," he said tartly. "A word." And the two men stepped out into the evening.

I waited until all our city guests were gone before pressing Ivy about Mr. Davis. "But had you *met* him before?" I was watching her face. "Mr. Davis seemed like he already knew you, and you him."

Ivy was busy sorting through the parcels and boxes, a seemingly endless number of cotton diapers, tiny bonnets, blankets, petticoats, shirts, safety pins, nursing bottles, tubes, and more. The idea of our minuscule charges ever being hale enough to need shirts and petticoats seemed laughable, but it gave us hope just fingering the tiny things, so clean and white in the gloom of the farmhouse.

"Ah, no, but I think I'd *like* to know him already, if you know what I mean," she said, her impish smile tucking neatly into her left cheek. "It's high time this job came with a few perks, wouldn't you say, Em?"

June 1, 1934 (*North Bay Nugget*)

OLIVA DIONNE SIGNS HANDSOME CONTRACT TO EXHIBIT FAMILY AT CHICAGO

"They are improving steadily. That doesn't guarantee anything. Two of the babies nearly passed last night, but this morning I felt more optimistic than at any time since their birth."

In this way Dr. A. R. Dafoe expressed the condition of the quintuplets born last Monday morning to Mr. and Mrs. Oliva Dionne, Corbeil.

The babies are now being fed on nothing but human milk and this morning 18 ounces arrived from the Sick Children's Hospital, Toronto.

Rev. D. Routhier, Corbeil parish priest, announced this morning that a contract with the Tour Bureau, Chicago, at a meeting in Orillia yesterday, to exhibit the family at the World's Fair, had been signed by Oliva Dionne, the father of the quintuplets. Father Routhier accompanied Dionne to Orillia.

The contract stipulates that the attending physician must first declare the mother and children ready to travel. It specifies that if nothing happens to the children and it is not too late for the fair, the Tour Bureau will provide special transportations for the entire family, including the grandfather, doctor, nurse, and assume all cost of the trip to Chicago, including salaries of the attendants. The contract will provide $250 weekly during the time of the exhibit, including expenses, and 20% of all receipts. Father Routhier of Corbeil Parish will be entitled to 7% of the earnings.

Until such time as the family can be moved, Dionne is to receive $100 weekly.

GOVERNMENT TAKE HAND

A true Canadian atmosphere was thrown on the situation today when the Ontario government stepped in and offered to make arrangements for all services, working with the Children's Aid Society.

Told of the contract Dionne had signed, Dr. Dafoe was glad to hear that the family would get some much-needed money, but said it would be unwise to move the babies within three months, adding "their condition and progress govern the entire matter."

"I was delighted," stated Dr. Dafoe, "when I read the interest the Ontario Government were taking and they are helping in every way possible."

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