

### The Nameless

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A question often asked on internet genealogy help lists, such as RootsWeb's Quebec-Research, is the meaning of the French word *ondoyement*. A baptism record, or sometimes a burial record, may report that a baby at birth, or even an adult, had been "*ondoyé*" by a lay person (or, indeed, by a priest who did not, however, perform the additional ceremonies at that time.<sup>1</sup>) Anyone can baptize, even non-Catholics, by using ordinary water sprinkled on the recipient while these words are said: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, in the name of the Son, and in the name of the Holy Spirit."

When it was possible, the individual was then taken to a priest for the formal baptismal rites, including the application of holy oils on the five senses; the renouncing of Satan and all his pomp and works by the godparents in the name of the child; the placing of salt on the infant's tongue and a white cloth on the body, *etc.*; and, of course, the naming of the child, always after a saint and often after one or both of the godparents. The event was then recorded in the official register for future reference. Often the baptismal record states that the official ceremony was performed *sous condition*, in case the original and most-often valid baptism had not been conducted in proper fashion or with the necessary intent. If, however, a baby died and was to be buried from the Church because of having received only this emergency baptism, no first name was recorded. Thus, there are thousands of examples of babies identified at their burials as a son or daughter, or even simply as *anonyme* or *un enfant*, a child, of named individuals but with no specific saint's first name given to the deceased.<sup>2</sup>

The word *ondoyer* (to baptize under such conditions) is one I learned early in life because one of my sisters, who was born before I was and whom I never knew, received this emergency baptism. On September 20, 1933, my unnamed sister was born at 2:00 a.m. and died within seven hours. When I was old enough to understand, my parents and siblings told me her story, often as we looked at the black and white photographs in the old albums.

Dr. Glemet and Nurse Ouimet attended the birth at our home on Beecher Street in Detroit. My sister Carmen, older than I by thirteen years, recalled that the baby was very blue at birth, but by the time she was laid in her tiny casket, her coloring was fine. She was beautiful, Carmen said. The loss plunged my mother into a depression that was relieved only when she was shown a curl cut from the baby's hair. Today, that curl is in one of the surviving photo albums. It can still be seen and touched, a tangible reminder of my unknown, nameless sister. The cause of her death is also unknown. My mother never fully recovered from her loss. Tears would well in her eyes at any mention of this deceased child. In my imagination, though, this sister became my companion all the years of my growing up, and I commemorate her with this poem:

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<sup>1</sup> Registers of Nôtre-Dame de Montréal, in the margin: B Paschal *Sauvage*; The same day the tenth of May of the year seventeen hundred four, the ceremonies of baptism were solemnly administered by me, the undersigned priest, to a *Sauvage Panis* about fourteen years of age, residing in the service of *Monsieur dela Descouverte*, officer in the troops. The said *Sauvage* had been *ondoïé* [*sic*, given lay or emergency baptism] by me myself [*moi même*] the seventh of April of the previous year because of the danger of death he was in. The name of Pascal which was given to him then has been conserved. His godfather was *Pierre dela Descouverte*. The godmother *Marie de Beaulieux*, daughter of deceased *Mr de Beaulieux*, who signed with me. [signed] *Marie beaulieux Meriel Prêtre* [priest]

<sup>2</sup> Many examples of this phenomenon can be seen in the burials summarized by Gail Moreau-DesHarnais from the registers of Ste. Anne de Detroit in this and other issues of MHH.

*Nameless*

Our father spilled one  
thin stream of ordinary water  
to baptize you before breath ceased  
moments after birth.

No name survives  
to fill my breath with sound  
of you, my officially unhallowed  
sister. Yet often I was told

your spirit lives to guide me  
in the night, in all the frights  
and perils of my life:  
a silent guardian angel,

ethereal, existing  
in my mind and in one  
thin curl of hair  
clipped moments after death:

a talisman that calmed  
our mother's grief  
and fostered my belief  
in powers that console

although no name survives

My sister was buried at Holy Cross Cemetery on September 23, 1933, in Grave no. 922, Lot no. 386, Section P, burial number 30368. Dill Brothers (on Bagley) was the undertaker. A sad photo shows my siblings —Carmen, Madeleine, and Lou— standing next to the plain, wooden marker inscribed simply Baby Boivin, September 20, 1933, a monument now gone for many years. Holy Cross Cemetery is located on Dix, near Patton Park in Detroit. I cannot recall visiting my sister's grave, but Mom would often have a haunted look on her face as she stared across Dix when we were at the park or driving past the area. My father would never tell me the name he might have given his daughter. Years after Dad's death (and after I had written the above), my brother, Lou, told me he believes Dad wanted to name her Helene, but she will always be a nameless, comforting spirit to me.