

Christmas with Ed Sullivan

(Continued)

GEORGE ZAHARIAS



Dear Ed,
Babe Didrikson and I were married two days before Christmas in 1938. We decided to drive to Pueblo, Colo., to spend Christmas with my folks, then continue on to Beaumont, Tex., to visit Babe's parents on New Year's.

Seventy-five miles past Amarillo, Tex., we ran into a heavy snowstorm. I frequently had to rock the car back and forth to get free of the drifts which piled up before us. The snow covered the windshield faster than the wipers could clean it off, and I was forced to drive with my head sticking out of the side window. In no time at all, my hair and eyebrows were matted with snow. I remember Babe looking at me and laughing. "When I was a little girl," she said, "I often dreamed of riding with Santa Claus. Now, not only am I riding with him, I'm married to him."

The next drift I swerved to avoid was the one that did it. The transmission broke under the strain. I got out to look for help, but there wasn't a sign of life to be seen. We might just as well have been stuck on the North Pole.

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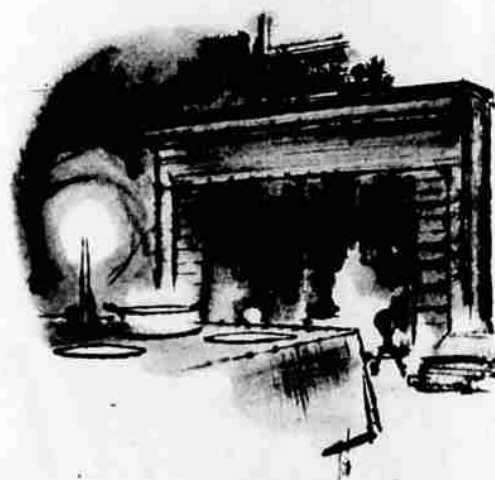
I cut through the storm for about a quarter of a mile and spotted the dark shadow of a house set well back from the road. When I returned to the car, Babe peeked at me from deep within a blanket. Anxiety filled her eyes. I told her about my lucky discovery, and we set out for the house. As we made our way slowly and laboriously toward it, Babe's spirits perked up. She suggested facetiously that we get her golf clubs out of the car and convert them into snowshoes and ski poles.

When we reached the house—a long time later—nearly blinded by snow, we knocked loudly but there was no answer. We tried the door and it opened. We walked cautiously into a nicely furnished living room equipped (hallelujah!) with a fireplace and plenty of logs. But no owners.

I built a fire, and Babe and I settled down to wait for our hosts' return, wondering how they would react to finding us there. The warmth of the fire made us very drowsy, and before we knew it both of us had dozed off.

It was close to 9 p.m. when I awoke. I had slept for three hours. The fire had gone out, and the little house was pitch dark. I heard Babe stir on the sofa. "You must be starved," she said. "Let's see what I can round up to eat."

"First," I replied, "I'd better get the fire going."



The electricity doesn't seem to be working."

We poked around the kitchen by match light. The refrigerator was empty, but Babe found three cans of pork and beans and held them up triumphantly. "I guess they wouldn't mind if we helped ourselves to these," she said.

As Babe prepared to cook our Christmas Eve dinner in the fireplace, I went outside. The storm had eased somewhat, and I walked to the car to get a suitcase. When I returned, I was greeted by a delicious aroma and a magnificent sight. Babe had moved the kitchen table in front of the fireplace and had decorated it with a red tablecloth, dishes, silverware and, most welcome of all, a steaming bowl of pork and beans. A candle was burning in the center. "Merry Christmas, honey," she said.

At daybreak, the distant rattle of snowplows awakened us. An hour later the plows were at the house and, behind them, in their car, were our overdue hosts, the Bowens.

"My wife and I," Mr. Bowen said, "hoped you'd be here when we saw your abandoned car. We're so glad that you made yourselves at home."

Babe would frequently talk about our first Christmas together in the years that followed. Her eyes always became bright with the memory. She remembered it particularly that last Christmas of her life, 19 years later.

Babe was in the hospital in Galveston, Tex.—her strong athletic body wasted by cancer. The morning before Christmas, she called me to her side and said she would like to spend Christmas out of the hospital. She mentioned our friends, the Bowens, then of Fort Worth, and asked me to phone them and see if it would be all right for us to visit them. I turned to the doctor standing near the door. He shrugged his shoulders as if to say, "Why not?"

Late that afternoon, the Bowens arrived in Galveston in their private plane, and we lifted Babe on board for the trip to Fort Worth. I could see that she was in terrible pain, and I wondered if I had acted wisely in granting her request.

All through Christmas Day, Babe talked and joked as if she hadn't a care in the world. When Bertha Bowen called us to Christmas dinner, we saw a table piled high with every Christmas delicacy imaginable, and there in the place of honor—the very center of the table—flanked by the turkey on one side and the sweet potatoes on the other, stood a bowl of pork and beans.

—George Zaharias

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