

They called her Babe. But not because she was beautiful. Far from it. And it wasn't because she was sweet or innocent or childlike. They called her Babe because she was as strong as an ox—Paul Bunyan's blue ox, to be exact. Since she could beat any man to a pulp in the small lumber camp of Centner's Mill, folks smiled respectful-like when they called her Babe. They gave her a wide berth, too, not because her gigantic frame required it, but because no one wanted to risk crossing Babe. And Lord help the soul who said she was hardy breeding stock.

There's a kind of self-confidence, maybe even arrogance, that comes when you're big. You can hide all sorts of things—even your age. Babe was the kind of woman who hid her age well. She could have been twenty-five. She could have been forty-five. No one had the courage to ask. And it hardly mattered. Nearly six-feet-ten and over three hundred fifty pounds, she could be as old or as young as she wanted to be. She had arms like forged steel and a face of serene strength that comes when you know no one is going to bother you—ever. Babe could have told the men of the camp she was the Queen of Egypt and not one man would have broken a smile. More likely they'd bow, ask after Marc Anthony and get out of her way.

Her real name was Fern Killingsworth. She arrived one fall day in 1911 at the West Coast Lumber Company, Western Washington Division, Centner's Mill office, to apply for a job. My father was superintendent of all operations. I was seven years old and playing in my father's office. Since my mother had died that summer, my father had to drag me to work every day. Even at seven, I knew I was a bother to him. Even at seven, I knew my life was about to change when the door flew open, bringing in a chilly breeze and a rustling of dead leaves. I looked up from the floor under my father's huge desk, where I'd fashioned a small neighborhood for my dolls.

My father didn't look up. He couldn't have or else he wouldn't have barked, "Close the door, damn it! There goes all the heat!"

I'd never seen such a large person. The entire doorjamb was filled with this stranger, wrapped in a huge overcoat, with a muffler that must have been a mile long going from around the shoulders, up and around the head to anchor a large felt hat, back around the neck and then down to the knees, where it swayed in the breeze.

The door closed and my father finally looked up. I inched back closer to his chair and clutched my favorite doll to my chest, as though we were going to need each other's protection.

The gloved hands unwrapped the muffler, and slowly we watched the giant before us emerge. The gloves came off next—the hands were large, white and even sort of elegant. Then the hat—the hair was thick and plaited into neat, organized spirals. Then the coat. The giant's body was thick and sturdy like a cedar. Not fat, not unfit, but strong and reliable.

I inched even farther back. The giant spoke. She offered her hand to my father. "I come about the job. Name's Fern Killingsworth. Folks call me Babe and I come about the job." Her voice was deep, growly, mannish.

I couldn't see my father's face, but I could tell by his voice that he was awestruck—just like me and my dolls. "Which job?" he asked. That still makes me laugh. My father was hardly ever confused, or if he was, no one knew it but him. There were no other women in the camp and only two jobs posted: Cook team and mule skinner. I guess my father thought he'd found his mule skinner.

Instead of answering, the giant put the ad from the Aberdeen Daily World down on his desk and pointed to the words "cook team."

"Miss Killingsworth, come spring we sign on a hundred men, maybe more. That's why we're looking for a cook team. Too much work for just one woman. The ad asks for a couple. You know, a man and his wife."

"I'll work harder'n three men and their wives," she answered. I dared a peek from behind my father's chair. She was staring straight down at me and I ducked back fast, hitting my head on the drawer. I knew I looked as strange to her as she did to me.

My father stood up. He was far from the tallest or strongest man in the camp. Babe towered over him. Then he said what must have been a very brave thing. He said, "We had a single woman here cooking once and it didn't work out. Too many men away from the city too long. If you know what I mean."

Again I peeked up. She had a wide face with cheekbones like ledges, huge black eyes, a straight, gallant nose and large, square front teeth framed by full lips. Everything about her was larger than life. I couldn't take my eyes off her as she spoke down to my father.

"You really think men bother . . . me?" She stepped back to let her size sink in. Then she added without the trace of a smile, "If you know what I mean."

My father waited before replying. She could probably do the work of six men, but I was crossing my fingers he would make her leave. You see, I was hoping our new cook would be more like my mother, whom I missed like anything. I was praying for a warm, kind, small Chinese woman. Someone who could sing me to sleep, laugh me awake, teach me the things I wanted to know, and who would make my father's meanness go away. I wanted my mother back. Not this giant intruder taking up half the office. I tugged on my father's pant leg and whispered, "Father . . ."

He ignored me and I ignored him ignoring me and said louder, "Father . . ."

"Cordelia, I told you, you can only play here if you let me do my work," he said, shaking my small grip off his pant leg.

It was hardly the attention I was looking for. I looked up at the giant, terrified.

"You keep your child under your desk?" she asked. "Not at school?"

My father always stiffened when someone questioned him about me, especially since my mother had died. But before he could speak, she added, "I write, cipher some. Speak some German, some French, Chinook Jargon, too."

"I don't need a scholar. I need a cook," he said, probably wondering how he was going to get this person out of his office without wrecking anything.

It was then the alarm in the mill went off.

It's funny how some things you immediately just know. The alarm was the same one that sounded every morning, every noon and every evening, bringing workers to the mill or telling them when to eat or when to quit. But, like we all had a clock inside our heads, everyone in Centner's Mill knew it wasn't any of those times. Someone the horn blasted more loudly, more urgently, when it did for an emergency - that first long blast, followed by six shorter ones.

I froze. The last time the alarm had wailed like that was when my mother had fallen into the river early that summer. She'd gotten herself all tangled in her long skirts; the current had pulled her under a jam of logs, and she'd drowned.

My father was out of the office like lightening. I wondered if he was remembering that horrible June day like I was. The woman followed him. I didn't know why. Maybe it was something all folks who'd spent time in a lumber mill just automatically did. I was alone in the office. I grabbed up my favorite doll, Gert, and went to the window. I know I was shaking because I remember telling Gert to quit shaking, that everything was going to be okay, there was nothing to be scared of. The alarm goes off all the time, I told her, even for slivers, bee stings, little cuts and such.

I watched my father run into the mill, followed by the giant stranger. My breath fogged the window. Dogs barked over the shouting and finally someone turned the alarm off and it was suddenly deathly quiet. the door to the office flew open with a gust of wind, as though granting me permission to run and see for myself what had gone wrong.

The large metal doors were wide open by the time I got there. I was so small that it was easy for me to weave my way through the men standing about. I can still feel Gert close against my chest as I walked. Why I brought her, I don't know.

I heard a scream. I don't think I'd ever heard a real scream before. Crying, even wailing, but never an all-out scream. This was a man's scream. Monty McGuire's scream. All I could see was half of him. I crept closer. Some peeler logs must have jammed on the conveyor overhead and, before anyone could pull a switch, a load had fallen onto Monty. Two men were holding on to his arms, maybe to pull him out, and he was screaming for them not to. Then others were starting to pull the smaller logs off - three and four men to a log. My father was shouting orders to pull a block and tackle rigging over, throw chains around those logs, you here, you there!

Poor Monty. He was screaming that he couldn't feel his legs. Then, in all the confusion, the strange giant woman walked out of the crowd.

She stood watching the men struggling with the logs that pinned Monty down. As they teamed and counter, "One, two, three - lift." as they grunted, and as the wind blew through the mill, the giant walked closer to the heap. I'll never know if it was her calm expression in that horrible moment or whether it was her size that made the men stop and look up. She seemed to be studying the pile of logs, like they were just a giant's game of pickup sticks. Then she pointed for two men to take that end, two to take the other end of the top log. They protested, said that that might make the rest of the pile crash down on Monty. She said no. She *knew*. Then she said, "You there - when I say 'Clear,' pull him out. Then you four men take that log and jam it in when he's clear."

My father tried pulling her back, but it was like she never felt him on her arm. She approached the log on Monty's legs, lay down next to it, pulled her skirts up to free her legs and put her huge feet under the crushing log. First her face blushed, then it turned bright red as she pressed her legs up under the log. Slowly, slowly it started to rise. She herself screamed as though that brought her strength. Then she fell silent, took a deep breath, and closed her eyes so tight that tears squeezed out. And then with a sound that echoed through the mill and will echo in me forever, she screamed, "Clear!"

In one swift move, Monty was pulled free and the other log was jammed in while she held that crushing log up with the strength of her two legs. When the new log was shoved in Monty's place, to keep the whole pile steady, she bent her knees and brought the log down slowly, carefully, until it rested on the pile. Then she rolled almost gracefully to her side and stood up. Like it had all been a circus act, only the strongman was named Fern Killingsworth, known as Babe.

She dusted herself off, adjusted her skirt, and then looked at my father, who stood as speechless as the rest of us.

"I am also strong," she stated.

"Come into the office and we'll fill out the papers," my father replied, smiling for the first time, I think, since my mother had died four months earlier. He arranged for the crushed man's aid, then led the way out of the mill.

Monty McGuire was one of my favorites and I quickly ran over to him as they loaded him on the first-aid board.

"You okay, Monty?" I asked, taking his cold, shaking hand.

"Who was that woman?" he asked weakly.

"She's come to cook. Can't you walk?"

"Sure I can. I'm just tired. You run off after your daddy, Cordy."

They put a blanket over him, but he was still shaking. The usually sweet smell from the shavings in the mill was now mixed with the smell of sweat and fear. Maybe I was smelling blood, I don't know. He was bleeding badly, for I saw the blood soak into the gray wool blanket.

they had brought a truck around and quickly loaded him in. I watched them take him away. He never came back. No use for halfies in a lumber camp. Harry, the mill foreman, noticed I was standing alone with only my doll for comfort. The giant and my father had disappeared into his office and I was still shaking. Harry picked me up and told me my doll was looking a little blue and wasn't I foolish for bringing her outside without a coat? I nodded yes and he carried us both back toward the office.

"Never seen anything like it in my whole entire life," he said. I knew what he was talking about. "That woman. Song as a ox, she is."

“That’s her name,” I informed him importantly. “Her name is Babe.”

“Well then, I’d say she’s got herself a fittin’ name. Yessir, a real fittin’ name.”