

# Mother: The Beautiful Mountain Girl from Gunnison



- Jeffrey E. Hansen, Ph.D.

## Beginnings in Gunnison



My Mother just turned ninety-three this November and I want to honor her story. She has lived a long and remarkable life, and she is still going strong. Still laughing. Still wise. Still moving through the world with that quiet strength she learned on a very rugged ranch in Gunnison Colorado.

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Mother was born in 1932 in Gunnison Colorado and her parents were rugged immigrants from Switzerland. They came to America sometime before the First World War. Grandpa Vouga eventually went back to Switzerland when the war broke out because he was required to serve. Switzerland remained neutral so he did not fight in the trenches, but he still had to serve his country. As best as I understand it he returned to Colorado after the war ended and I do not think the entire family came to Gunnison until that post war period.



When they settled in Colorado the conditions were unbelievably rough. The ranch house had dirt floors and a dirt roof and no plumbing. Winters could fall to fifty degrees below zero. Snow would bury the house, and wind would sweep across the high country with a force that chilled you to the bones. My Mother was the youngest of three children. Her sister Marguerite was more than a decade older, and her brother Ernie was somewhere around ten years older.



## Growing up on the Ranch



Being so much younger than her siblings, she did not have friends close by. While other children spent their afternoons riding bikes with neighborhood kids or gathering for games after school, her world was shaped by long stretches of solitude. Her closest companions were the animals on the ranch, and she formed bonds with them that were just as real and meaningful to her young heart

as any childhood friendship could have been.

She dressed up the chickens, and they followed her everywhere, an unexpected little parade that made sense only in the imagination of a child who longed for company. She dressed the dogs too, talked to them, confided in them, and treated them as if they understood every word. And in her mind, they did. They were her friends, the ones who listened without judgment and stayed close without ever leaving her side.

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Most children grow up surrounded by peers, learning social rules through recess friendships and schoolyard conversations. Mother grew up instead surrounded by livestock and silence. The wide-open spaces became her playground, and the quiet sounds of ranch life became her constant background. In those years she learned to be content with her own company, to create her own world when the outside world felt far away.



That early solitude shaped her spirit and her character. It taught her resilience, patience, and an inner gentleness that came from observing life rather than rushing through it. She learned to listen more than she spoke, to care deeply for creatures most people overlooked, and to find comfort in the simple presence of another living being. That unique beginning did not make her withdrawn; it made her compassionate. It formed in her a tender strength that she carried throughout her life, one that allowed her to love people in a way that made them feel seen, valued, and safe.

## College and Early Marriage



Eventually she went to Gunnison for school which was about an hour from the ranch. She played in the band and later went to Colorado State College where she met my dad. Soon they were married and in no time, they had children. My older brother Ken arrived first and then the twins.

In those early years she was raising three children in a Quonset hut which is basically a tin can cut in half. Storms in Fort Collins would blow the roof off that place. Life was hard but she made the best of it.



When my twin brother Gregg and I were born the doctor confidently said she was not having twins. But Mother knew better. She had already bought two sets of clothes for the babies and she was right.



## Veterinary Practice and Hard Work

As life moved along and my dad graduated from veterinary school things changed again. He was very driven and graduated at the top of his veterinary class. While he pushed forward in his work Mother was completely committed to running the business side of his veterinary practice.





I remember her sitting at the dining table before computers were common with piles of receipts and billing statements in front of her. She managed everything by hand with diligence and remarkable attention to detail. She worked late into the evenings making sure the practice stayed healthy and organized. My dad was fortunate to have such a gifted partner.

## Athletic Spirit and Independence

Mother was also never afraid to work outside the home. She worked in a ski shop for a time and took on other jobs whenever needed. She was an avid skier for many years and in her prime she became a skilled tennis player. She played tennis for a long stretch of her adult life. Always active. Always moving. Always athletic. That was simply part of her nature.

## My Parents Go Their Separate Ways

After almost twenty years of marriage my parents eventually went their separate ways. It was a long marriage with a difficult ending.



Sometime later Mother met Stu, and they gradually became close. Stu was quiet and stoic, but he had the biggest Texas sized heart imaginable. At first, I did not know what to make of him but over time I grew incredibly fond of him. Mother chose wisely because he was so good to her. They were married for more than four decades and had a beautiful life together until his passing about six or seven years ago. Losing him was a hard blow but she carried that loss with the same quiet courage she learned early in life.

## Lunch stops and covert laundry

During our high school years, the home of Mother and Stu became the regular pit stop before gymnastics. Gregg and I would swing by for one of Mother's famously delicious lunches and then race up to practice. By the time we were at UC Berkeley and coming home on breaks nothing had changed. We still found our way to that kitchen, and we still found a way to slip our laundry into the wash without Stu noticing. I am not sure he ever approved of two college boys sneaking in dirty socks like a covert special ops mission, but we did it anyway.

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Mother also managed to get us hopelessly addicted to her soap operas. We started arranging our college classes to make sure we could land at her table in time to eat lunch and watch the daily drama unfold. I still laugh thinking about how two reasonably intelligent college students planned their academic schedules around soap operas laundry drop offs and Mother's sandwiches. That little routine has become one of my fondest memories of those years.

## Loved by Friends and Family



There were some who especially experienced her as a second mother during those early years in California. We always had children in and out of the house, and Mother



instinctively gathered them under her wing. Over time, that circle grew into an extended family of sons she never set out to adopt but somehow did by the sheer force of her love. Across the decades, the list of those she embraced includes Chris Wright, Ross Tessein, Jon Patterson, Mark Greene, Nicholas Vargas, and others whose names would lengthen this list further. Many of them practically lived with us in those years, and Mother treated them as her own, without ever needing to say it out loud.



When we later moved to Switzerland in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Mother's heart simply widened again. She welcomed new students, expatriates, and lonely souls into our home just as easily as she had welcomed children in the Lovelace house. Among them was Mohamed, who fled the Middle East in 1969 and found himself painfully alone. Mother welcomed him to our table and into our lives. To this day, Mohamed remains my closest friend overseas, my longest-standing friend, and truly my brother.

And back at home, through all the decades, Chris Wright has remained the brother to my own soul on this side of the Atlantic. What began as childhood friendship became a lifelong bond, just as it did with Mohamed abroad. In many ways, those two men embody the deepest fruit of Mother's love across continents, cultures, and generations.



To name them is already to leave many out, because Mother's heart never had borders. It simply kept widening through each season of life, welcoming new souls and forming bonds that have endured for decades. Each name represents another life touched, another story of belonging, another chapter in the legacy of love she offered so freely.

## Gregg's Gift



After Stu passed away, she moved into a condo where she could care for herself more easily. It felt like a necessary transition at the time, something that would allow her to maintain her independence while still being surrounded by comfort and familiarity. Yet it also marked a new chapter of life, and everyone wanted that chapter to feel peaceful and secure for her.

My twin brother Gregg immediately stepped in with that deep sense of loyalty and protectiveness that was so

much a part of him. He wanted her home to be more than comfortable; he wanted it to be beautiful. Using his extraordinary skill as a contractor, he remodeled the entire condo from top to bottom. He selected colors, textures, finishes, and architectural details with a level of intentionality that reflected his heart for her. He poured himself into that project, and in a very real way, he poured his love into every inch of that space.

She ended up living in a stunning home with pendant lighting and cabinetry from Italy, and every time she pointed to something special in the house, it always came back to Gregg. It was his way of honoring her, blessing her, and making sure she felt treasured in this season of life. She often told people that living there felt like being surrounded by a personal gift he crafted just for her.

Gregg had his little touches too, those small and thoughtful gestures that were so uniquely him. He kept the pendant lights on at night so that if she happened to get up in the middle of the darkness, she would see their gentle glow and think of him. After Gregg passed away, she continued that ritual. She would keep the pendant lights on just to remind her of him, and in a quiet way it made her feel closer to him, as if the light he left behind still lingered in her home and in her heart.



All those little touches were signatures of who Gregg was, his devotion, his care, his tenderness, and his desire to protect the people he loved. When Gregg passed away two years ago, those lights became something more than décor. They became a reminder of his presence, his workmanship, and his heart. And the memory of that gift, given at such a meaningful time in her life, remains forever etched in her heart.

## A New Chapter in Nevada



As Mother now prepares to move away from the state, she has called home for more than half a century, my brother Ken and my stepsister Karen, who I consider fully and completely my sister, have lovingly stepped up to help her transition. Ken has shepherded her with exceptional care and attention, taking on responsibilities quietly and faithfully, and never once making it about himself. He has overseen her new home in Nevada, a place that is not only comfortable but absolutely spectacular, and it is clear that

every detail was chosen with her well-being in mind. His devotion in this season has been a profound gift to her and to all of us.

Karen and Chris have likewise been unfailingly supportive, watching over her with such tenderness and care. And even after Chris' passing Karen has helped Mother navigate decisions and manage daily life, not out of obligation but out of a genuine, heartfelt love. She has been a devoted and loving daughter figure to her, one who has stepped into that role with grace and humility. I am deeply grateful for the ways she cares for Mother and for the steady presence she provides. Their compassion has given me comfort as well, knowing she is surrounded by people who adore her.



I would also be remiss not to mention my cousin Izer, who lives near Mother in Walnut Creek. The connection they have formed over these past years has been something truly beautiful to watch. They get together, garden side by side, go places, and genuinely enjoy one another in a way that feels nourishing to both of them. Izer has always been so special to me personally, and it brings me great joy to see the friendship and tenderness she and Mother share. In her own way, Izer has been a quiet guardian and a companion for her.

## The Heart of it All

Mother is, in every way, a living picture of strength and kindness woven together. Her life has not been without hardship, yet she has carried each season with a quiet courage that often went unnoticed because she never drew attention to herself. She has met life with a mixture of gentleness and grit, a rare combination that allowed her to endure difficulty without ever becoming hardened by it.

She has lived generously and loved deeply. Her heart has always been open, both to her family and to all those who found themselves drawn to her home, her warmth, and her spirit. She has given more than she ever asked in return, and she has done so with a grace that has touched countless lives. When people speak of kindness, when they speak of steadfastness, when they speak of love that does not falter, they are in many ways describing her.



If anyone ever wonders what a life of love truly looks like, they need only look at Mother. Quiet, steady, strong, and always faithful, she has been a gentle force of goodness to everyone who has known her. As she steps into this new chapter surrounded by the love and care of those who cherish her, all of us are keenly aware of what a gift she has been in our lives. And it feels right to honor her now, not with loud praise, but with the same kind of heartfelt devotion and gratitude that she has shown to each of us for so many years.