

Strength & GRACE

WRITTEN by *Jen Boulden, Guest Editor*
 PHOTOGRAPHY Provided by: *Jen Boulden*

On February 13th, my grandmother passed away. She taught me how to ride when I was three. She also unwittingly taught me how to be a tough yet dignified woman, a combination of qualities I think many horsewomen share.

Hen - as we called her because her riding school chicks always followed her around like a mother hen - was certainly not your typical grandmother. She took me on my first foxhunt** at the age of eleven in the countryside of Pennsylvania. She found me an able pony mount, and dressed me to the nines. Then as the early morning mist lifted and the huntsman's bugle sounded, she turned to me with a mischievous glimmer in her eye and said, "Grab mane!"

All I remember from that point on is what I can only identify as a true high. It was euphoric...galloping across the countryside, just my little fire pistol mount and me - jumping anything that came into the path set by the hounds - including stonewalls and ditches and streams. My God, I was in love. I was in love with the spirit of the horses, the leather and sweat, the adrenaline... and my grandmother. (I didn't see her until later that afternoon, bourbon in hand, but of course.)

Today I compete as an eventer. Eventers are known in the equestrian world as the "crazy ones" because in the cross-country phase we jump things that don't fall down - like out in the hunt fields. Each time I get suited up to compete and put on my emergency medical armband and flak jacket, I am reminded that these obstacles

are notoriously dangerous because if the horse knocks the jump hard enough they summersault their twelve thousand pound bodies, sometimes right on top of you. The thing is, I don't care. Hen taught me that life is for living - boldly.

When she passed on a few months ago, I knew it was going to happen. My mother called to ask me if she should spend the night at the nursing home with her. I told her that indeed, she should - without telling her that this was Hen's last night in her body that had served her so well - taking her across New Zealand and Ireland for years on horseback well into her late sixties.

The next morning I had a jump lesson on Lou-Girl, my Montucky mount. (I found Lou in my "backyard" after many months of looking. She's a failed barrel racer, but has succeeded as my savior.) As I warmed up for the lesson, I prepped myself for the voicemail I'd receive when I got off of my horse.

I had an amazing lesson; Lou was in perfect form. She popped those four legs of hers up and over the technical course of four-foot fences, and helped to obscure all of my gaffes with her natural athleticism.

A few days later I was speaking at the memorial service. Hen asked that only my mother and I do so when going over "final arrangements" with my mother a few weeks prior to Parkinson's taking her away. Hen was in no way saccharine (again, typical horsewoman), and so I wanted to respect her ethos, strength, and grace. It came to me the day before the service what I would say...I would tell stories of our fox hunt, of our debaucherous card games where she'd school me and make me pay up, how she'd take us to the river to ride bareback through the water and then lunch on the banks,



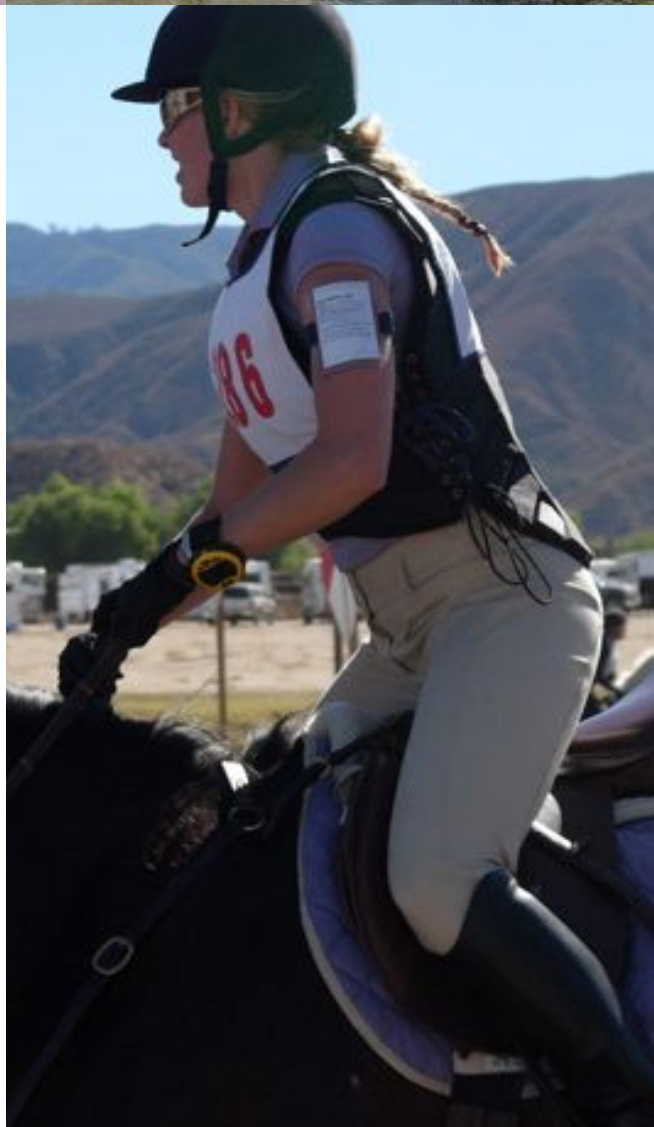
Jen at three years old taking her first ride with her grandmother Hen



Jen on a California trail with Lou



Jen Boulden and Lou
 Photo Credit: Amy Bernard



Currently, Jen participates in numerous equestrian events



Cross-Country Jumping
Photo Credit: David Ramsey

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how she played the harmonica in her chaps and then hustled up to put on pantyhose and dinner; how she'd take me down to her barn at night to roost in the hay loft amongst the bats and whinnying horses... and how she instilled a deep, life-changing love of horses (and, ahem, cocktails) in me. I also spontaneously remembered a Native-American poem I had in my will to be read at my funeral, and without any thought knew it would be exactly what Hen would want.

As we drove to the 17th century church built with stone and horsehair-insulated walls that guarded the needlepoint kneeling bench that Hen stitched for my grandfather over thirty years ago, our car was full of nervous chatter from this family of now five. My mom was in the front passenger seat, clinging to an aged envelope. I said, "Mom, I assume I will speak before you do, and maybe we should coordinate. What's in the envelope?" Understandably she was distracted – about to lay her mother's bones to rest – but I pressed on with the intuition that my horse actually instilled in me.

She finally said, "Its just something Hen wanted me to read. A poem." I then took my journal from my handbag, and said, "Mom, please listen to me...does the poem begin like this?" ...
...Do not stand at my grave and weep? This silenced the nervous chatter in the car.

And in the church, at the pulpit, my mother continued with a strength and grace I've yet to experience as she read the poem that both my grandmother and I independently chose....

I am not there. I do not sleep.
I am a thousand winds that blow.
I am the diamond glints on snow.
I am the sunlight on ripened grain.
I am the gentle autumn rain.
When you awaken in the morning's hush
I am the swift uplifting rush
Of quiet birds in circled flight.
I am the soft stars that shine at night.
Do not stand at my grave and cry;
I am not there. I did not die.

My fellow horse lovers and curios - horses are raw nature, raw emotion. They reflect back what you want to see, and some things you don't – but should face. Horses lean into pressure, as we need to lean into our fears. Horses are therapeutic mirrors of self.

I miss my grandmother, Hen. But because of my connection with horses and the powerful natural world, I am happy she is free. Free to be with the birds circling in flight, and free to ride roughshod over the fallen trees and scraggy crags of life – but to now do so with strength and grace – once again.**

**The foxhunt was what they call a "drag hunt" whereby they drag a fox scent through the fields the night before for the hounds to follow, hence saving the sweet fox from what would have been a very stressful day.

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