

## A Letter to the Handlan's, shortly after Cinde's Death

With this letter, I want to convey to you the joy and the love that two people shared for each other for more than 30 years. I hope for all of you that this vision of our life together might replace whatever images of the last three months you hold especially if those things cause you pain, hurt, or despair. What follows is our truth.



In company with our friends, I often tell the story of the great compassion Cinde had for my mom. Cinde loved her for who she was - one of the kindest humans ever made. When Mom got sick, Cinde took her to the bathroom, cleaned her messes and bathed her 85 year old frail body, something her son couldn't do. More recently, Cinde provided what was essentially hospice care for my dying sister. Your mom also had great compassion for Kelly and Brian - it hurt her deeply to witness what had happened to them. She never hesitated to comfort me in my grief surrounding their tragic situations. One of my lasting memories is Cinde hugging Kelly tightly in the street next to a park in Hamilton.

Back when she could, Cinde loved to ski. The day of our marriage in Breckinridge, we skied under a brilliant sun on a radiant day. One of the many great days of our lives. We laughed about our skiing adventures - freezing our tushes off in New Hampshire, the time my brother John had to guide her off a black diamond cliff in Montana, skiing the Eiger In Germany. Beautiful, happy times soaked in good memories.

We both loved fine houses. In some ways, I wanted to repay your mother for following me around in my careers with the best house we could barely afford. Our housing dreams probably started at Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, Alabama. We walked hand-in-hand around the base jealously admiring the mini-mansions assigned to Colonels. "One day, we'll be living in one of those." We bought our dream home in Spokane, way beyond our means, a masterpiece perched high on a hill overlooking the golf course. We closed on the house the day before Christmas and sat together on the bare wooden floor that night in the empty, darkened house, lit some candles and ate some cold pizza, all the time bewildered by our incredible luck. Although she hated the location, Cinde adored our first house in Oklahoma City. We had so much fun finding homes in all the places we lived. For me, home was always where Cinde was.

When I retired, we had to decide where to live. Cinde was drawn to the *idea* of Montana. She spoke of the time she was driving alone in our car, following my U-Haul truck carrying my Mom's belongings from Billings to Helena. She was awestruck by nature's beauty unfolding in front of her: snow-capped mountains in the distance beyond green grass plains at their footsteps. She told me she envisioned Native American warriors galloping their horses beside her car, long hair flowing in the wind, free and one with nature. She was hooked. The magic she felt from this vision was conveyed in her favorite movie, *Dances With Wolves*. We've watched that show dozens of times. She was able to live out her idealization when we were cast as extras in the *Yellowstone* series. Her excitement and anticipation about our participation was palpable. We had so much fun going to the sets and hoping to see ourselves in the final product. And

we were - see the screenshot below. Side by side, an adventure in our own backyard. This was only six months ago.

I don't think Cinde ever truly appreciated how gorgeous she was. You know she would NEVER be caught in public without her hair and makeup in place. She protested when the doctors and nurses said she had to minimize her look prior to surgery. When we were out and about, it was not uncommon for her to attract the attention of every male in the place - the bartender in Newport, the Navy guy at the war college - on and on. Women, too. She was an iconic beauty, hard to take your eyes off her. I hope Cinde told you that among the scores of passengers on our plane, she was the one invited into the cockpit of a C-17 for takeoff by the all male crew. She downplayed her beauty but I know it was a source of happiness for her, part of her sense of self worth. I count myself lucky that she stooped to the likes of me. She was always beautiful to me, right up to the last time I saw her only weeks ago.

There are so many more stories to tell about our happiness together but here's one that's more contemporary. During our recent struggles, we knew we needed an escape plan. We all know the last few months have been terrible—no sugarcoating that. In a conversation shortly before the 11th, I suggested we would go to Vilamoura, Portugal, lease an apartment for six months on the coast, play golf, go to the beach, dine out regularly, and use that as our base of operations to travel to Paris, Berlin, Greece, etc. Then maybe we would come back to the States. She sounded truly excited about this idea (she'd already told me she didn't want to live in the Bitterroot anymore). I asked her to research Vilamoura - I hope she did. I really believed we would recover together and build a happy next chapter together. Maybe this was wishful thinking. I don't know. What I do know is that we were trying to find a way out of the trouble we were in and we were trying to do it together. The divorce process muddled our efforts but it was really a sideshow to me, a distant second place to our ongoing reconciliation. It has been a confusing time and we were struggling. But not for one second did I stop loving Cinde. And I never gave up hope that we could repair our relationship and still have our happily ever after. Cinde was the love of my life.

I think Cinde was more comfortable expressing some of the negative aspects of her life to the people around her. But here is what we said to each other in private: she could not live without me and me without her. We were destined to sail to our final shore together, that I would be a rock for her in her coming physical challenges, that she would care for me just like she had done for my family members. I never doubted that. She knew of my deep commitment to her because I told her that so, so many times before. We knew there was nobody out there who could replace what we had. That we were meant to be together. That we truly loved each other. You may not have heard these words from Cinde, but they are gospel.

I could go on and on but please consider substituting this vision of our life together and love for each other for whatever less optimistic one you might have. I don't want any of you to carry anger or despair into the days and weeks ahead. I want Cinde's memory to be a blessing for all of us. I think she would want that, too. She loved us all.

Your Mom and I were happy together almost always. We were in love. Your Mom knew she was loved by me. Through this incredible pain, I will try to remember this as well to help me heal. I will love and miss Cinde through all of my days. As I fumble my way through this, I do hope it brings you some measure of solace and understanding. That's what I hope for you all and for me. I wish you all peace.