For Reese, for Randall in heaven, for Betsy, Helen, Carol and you too Patti-Cake,

April 21.

This is one letter from Dad for everybody so you all get the same words. Sister Mary Agatha visits and says she will copy this and mail it to each of you. She’ll have to pray it up to heaven for you, Randy, but if anybody can, it’s her.

Your mother is strapped into her wheelchair this morning, and her head lists left. Her chapped lips are parted, but she doesn’t speak. Her eyes search the room, the cabinets, the carpet, they scrutinize Carmella. I guess I spelled that right. I wish she weren’t here – Carmella. I promised Mom I’d always take care of her. It’s my job, and Carmella gets it in her head to do things as she pleases –– anyway, she frightens Mom by showing up fast and talking too loud. Stupid woman. No amount of yelling makes my poor girl understand. She’s not deaf. She’s gone. Just gone. Her mind is gone, but I don’t think her feeling is. I think she feels that it is me, and she feels safe, but that woman makes her nervous. I can’t lift your Mom, though, and Carmella is strong as a linebacker. Looks like one too. My legs are weak. I can’t change Mom’s diapers. I can’t cook for us any longer. Too long. Not much longer. It has already been a long, long time since she left me. Her eyes are still clear, but they don’t know what they see. That’s the first thing I noticed sixty years ago, those aquamarine eyes, like jewels.

April 22.

Her hair is clean today, thanks to Carmella, although they both complained about it. All Mom can do is make sounds. Desperate gasps for meaning. She means she’s miserable. And the water is too hot or too cold, but all I can do is hold her hand and say hopeless things, like “It’s OK, darling. You look beautiful with your hair fixed.” What kind of horse shit is that? It’s not OK. None of it is OK.

My girl is stunning, even now. That part is true. Those languid eyelids, and her high cheekbones, the whiteness of her wavy hair. She’s vanishingly thin, but even naked when the long creases in her arms and belly and withered legs show, she ravishes me. Her wrists and hands were long and narrow, graceful as a swallow. Forgive me for talking about us naked, but she was the most beautiful woman I ever saw wearing nothing but skin. Soft as a baby and strong as a woman. Our body is one body and has been for decades. Our children, you, all of you, came from our body. I sit some days and just hold her hand, and it feels like the oxygen flows between us. I breathe because she breathes, or she breathes because I breathe. I’ll get tears on the paper.

April 23.

I had to take a break. My hand cramped. Carmella is back from the store. She helps me cheat. She brings Mama Vanilla milkshakes from McDonald’s and your Mama will suck them through a straw. She won’t swallow mashed-up meatloaf and peas, shoves it in her cheek till we have to dig it out with our fingers. So the helper and I eat the meatloaf, but we give Mama her ice cream and she dips her nose in the phony whipped cream and looks happy. Who cares if all she eats is ice cream? What? Diabetes? Obesity? Tooth Decay? Happiness. She deserves a dollop of happiness. One lousy dollop of happiness on top the cheap soft serve ice cream.

April 24.

You are all so talented. Who knew a country doctor who made no money giving all his time to sick people and leaving his wife to handle life could have such accomplished children. An engineer, a poet, two nurses, and a classical scholar? Your families are impressive and if I could remember all my grandchildren’s names and whereabouts I’d list them. And Patti Cake. I have known for years that Rebecca is your love and I regret that I didn’t tell you that was fine with me because she does love you and because maybe I had a lot to learn. But I’m glad you and she know love. Your mother and I know love.

April 25

Mom is silent today. She doesn’t want to eat anything. It hurts her to move. She doesn’t know whether anyone is here or not. I’m glad all of you came around over Labor Day weekend because I think she knew you were here, even if she couldn’t tell you she recognized you. I wanted to believe that. I want you to believe it.

April 30

I lost track of time. Cleaned my rifle this morning. Deer season is coming soon.

May 1

This letter lies here on the table and I don’t finish it. I’ve been outside. We’re having one of those warm spells that fools the pussy willows and the forsythia. No problem because damnable weeds that they are, late frost won’t kill them. Your mother used to love them. Don’t know where the cows went. Carmella keeps saying that I sold them last year but I would never have done that. Next to my beautiful girl I loved them more than anything. You kids are ahead of the cows too of course but you’re never here.

Mom hasn’t eaten for a while. She’s not up yet this morning. She’s breathing and Carmella swabs her gums with morphine. Birds used to fly into our picture window, cardinals and something with chartreuse breast feathers. It made me sick. Something so random and out of place as a big wall of glass and the unsuspecting birds never knew what hit them. I couldn’t help them when they fell to the ground. I put seed and water near the lady cardinal. I could see her heart pounding in her chest, but she didn’t eat it. When I went back, she was stiff. I left her there in the dirt. That’s nature’s way. Something will carry her off. By putting that window there, I did enough messing with nature.

May 5

Time goes so fast. I’m tired. Tired. Mom is in bed totally quiet tonight. That’s good. There’s nobody but me at home now. Her breathing changed, first rapid, then nothing. She sat up for a second and looked at me, then she laid back down and closed her eyes. It’s almost dawn and I don’t have much time. I’m going outside to breathe her in. I’ve left Carmella instructions if she can follow them. She’ll find me behind the barn. I think I’m too heavy for anything to carry away.

You babies were our greatest gifts. I’m anxious to see your Mom healthy and to meet baby Randall again.

Love, Pop (and for you girls) Daddy