

February 1994

Dear Scott and Ian,

I promised myself that I would write this letter within five years of Neil's death. I've been wanting to tell you something about your father - a sister's eye view - because I can guess that Neil may not have talked about himself much.

Neil was the most versatile and talented person I've ever met, and I was very proud of him. As a sister just 15 months younger and a year behind in school, I could observe a little bit although I was never his confidante. I felt he had such promise and could be anything in the world he wanted. He won every award and honor that was available.

The first was in sixth grade: the American Legion Award for Good Citizenship for the most promising boy and girl, chosen by their teachers and fellow students, and it was a notable award. In eighth grade he was chosen to lead the Safety Patrol made up of 7th and 8th graders who acted as crossing guards and generally kept an eye on behavior around the play areas. The younger classes looked up to them and actually obeyed them. Also in eighth grade Neil won the part of Little John in the Robin Hood production. He had grown very tall in 7th grade and made quite a handsome figure. I gave your Mom a picture of Neil in that costume.

In high school he was pitcher of the baseball team and was chosen captain in the senior year. As a freshman and sophomore he was elected representative to the student council by his classmates, and then president of his junior class. I might add that Neil had much competition in his class: there were a good number of outstanding boys and girls in that Class of '47. After extensive campaigning along with a loyal support group, he was elected president of the Student Council for his senior year. Also, of course, he was in the Honor Society.

You know that as a youngster of 8 or 9, Neil became interested in the accordion and magic tricks, and he carried those interests further than most would dare to. With his magic and/or when he got his 120-base accordion, he would entertain in school assemblies and in talent shows, which he usually won. His magic tricks were always great entertainment everywhere: he would perform at men's clubs, parties and other groups around town.

Academically, he always made the honor rolls but had so many other interests he didn't apply himself to the books too seriously.

At Penn State he naturally took an interest in the student government and was elected head of it as a senior. As such, he got to know the president of the college, Milton Eisenhower, who was quite a contact. Neil was also manager of Penn State's champion soccer team, which traveled to Iran to play against that champion team in 1951. Did he ever tell you about that trip? He signed up with the AFROTC which just started up on his campus in his last year, and came out a 2nd Lt. I guess you know he spent his years in the Air Force in the Secret Service.

So when he got out of the service he had a recommendation from Milton Eisenhower, whose brother was then President of the U.S., for Harvard Business School. He joined IBM in Texas; met Ross Perot there and turned down a chance to go into business with him. He was grabbed by Merrill Lynch for their new data processing division, and as you know became manager of that division when the manager was killed crossing the street.

But there is another reason all this stands out in my mind. When Neil came home for lunch in 6th grade and told us about his winning the Good Citizenship award, our stepmother said to him that if they knew what he was really like, they never would have given it to him. And that is the way it was each time he came home with some other achievement: Gladys always told him that he never deserved it and if they really knew him he would never have gotten it. She pooh-poohed everything, complained mightily about making a costume or bothering with uniforms, and I was so resentful that she never gave him credit. I admired Neil for being able to shrug off Gladys' words and not letting them bother him, but I surely didn't know the extent her words did hurt him. In later years I mentioned that first incident to him, and he told me that he hadn't realized that anyone else had noticed and that it had been a very traumatic experience.

The onslaught of words was daily, constant.
 Gladys never missed an opportunity to tell a story that made him look a fool. I often wondered why she was so hard on Neil when his accomplishments and talent certainly deserved to be recognized. I thought of one incident shortly after she came to our house and she cooked dinner for us (Grandma or the maid usually did). I don't remember what the dish was, but when she put it on the table, 9-year-old Neil looked it over and exclaimed, "Do I have to eat that stuff?" Tears came to Gladys' eyes and Neil was sent from the table, but I believe she punished Neil for that forever after.

Our Dad probably didn't know anything about what was going on, but he himself would acknowledge everything with hardly more than a grunt. Oscar, who often said he wished he could be more articulate, should have been very proud of a son who was very articulate and unafraid of appearing in front of people to give a speech, campaign for office, and perform and entertain. But he also would not give Neil credit, saying with contempt that everything came too easy for Neil - he didn't have to work for it. I believe Neil wanted his father's approval, but it was never forthcoming.

I had to get this off my chest. Perhaps it might help you to understand your father a bit more. I don't know what your thoughts or memories are, but I hope that you don't mind that I have done this. I miss Neil - I could not have predicted the extent of his withdrawal. I wish he could have been allowed to really believe he deserved everything that he accomplished.

I feel proud that he has two such fine sons. I'm looking forward to seeing you at the wedding.

Love,

Louise,

When I told Gladys that Neil was transferred to the hospital and was expected to die soon, she just shrugged and said, "Well, he never did take care of himself." I could not bring myself to visit her after that.

I hope you don't mind this letter - it's only my version of Neil's early years.

Love,
Martha