Waiting for the Call

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My mother, Marjorie Kerrick Taylor, grew up in western Kentucky during the Depression. She had come to believe, by the time she graduated from high school in 1939, that she was going to live and die on the backside of nowhere. She was the baby of six children and the only one left at home. Home was a small farm and tiny house that one of Marjorie’s grown brothers had bought so his parents would have a place to live. The farm was located in a section of Daviess County so remote that they could hear a car go by a mile away.

Marjorie’s life careened between great highs and terrible lows. She was born in March. “You’re just like March weather,” her mama used to say, “cloudy one minute, sunny the next.” When she felt good, she felt better than anybody (in fact, she just plain sparkled), and when she was low the depths were blacker than a moonless night. She spent a lot of her time that first year after high school reading poetry, walking in the woods, and praying. The record provided in letters reveals that she busied herself doing household work, washing clothes in washtubs, cooking on the wood-burning stove, and helping her mama raise chickens.

No doubt she spent some of that year in pure despair. Two years earlier she had had to drop out of high school because she had begun having
seizures. Epilepsy was poorly understood then and highly stigmatized. Her treatment included surgery to remove cysts from her ovaries on the peculiar theory that they caused the seizures. Eventually, the seizures abated, probably more from sheer luck than anything the doctors tried, and she returned to school.

That senior year had been a time of possibility and intellectual awakening, but with graduation the possibilities seemed to dwindle and then disappear. By the time summer had given way to fall, she believed her life was pretty well over. If she married at all, and there were no great prospects in sight, she would marry some farm boy and go on much as she was going. She loved to draw and paint and was more than commonly good at it. She dreamed of studying art. Her almost but not quite possible dream was to attend a school of interior design—art with a purpose.

Mother loved literature, music, and art and had a romantic streak as wide as a barn. In the stories she spun about their courtship, my father was the one man who quickened her pulse from the first day she saw him in her high school senior English class. They fell in love through a series of achingly sweet and earnest letters exchanged between January and May of 1941, after he had left the farm to attend a small Baptist college in Missouri. By Valentine’s Day, Mother was shipping a box of homemade candies to my father, and he was sending his new love the college catalogue and his assurances that he was praying that it might be God’s will that she join him at college in the coming year.

My parents married in June of 1942. In their early years, they were college students with barely enough money to get by themselves let alone support a family. Mother dreamed of devoting herself full time to homemaking and children, but first she had to get through school. By 1946, Daddy was enrolled full time as a graduate student at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, and he was also pastoring a little church over in Richmond, Kentucky. Mother was finishing up her bachelor’s degree through a series of correspondence courses and working the switchboard at a hospital downtown.

In a diary from that time, she marked each entry B, M, or H, tracking her mood: Blue, Medium, or Happy. Sometimes she added a plus or minus to these letters. During the winter, there were many Blue days. She hated her hospital job. To her mind, the workplace was a vicious pit, full
of crude, malicious, spiteful colleagues. Her squeamishness about vulgar
language and coarse talk became a source of merriment for several of her
coworkers. The more she objected, the more they took pleasure in trying
to shock her.

They pounced eagerly on her mistakes. Frequently she reported that
her boss had bawled her out or that a coworker observed that all preach-
ers and their wives were cranks. It was not unusual for her to come home
in tears. “The work was terrible today,” one entry reported. “I came
home and cried from rebellion and despair. What a comfort sweet little
old Eldred is to me.”

While work rankled, she delighted in her young husband. Yet he
sometimes grew impatient with her moodiness and complaints. When a
string of Happy days followed a stretch of Blue ones, she grew philo-
sophical and wrote as if from the vantage point of a decades-long rela-
tionship. “All in all this has been another grand day for us. Always after
the deep valleys are behind, the sunlight seems richer and mellower than
it has ever been before. I guess that explains why a true companionship
grows richer with the years.”

When she was Blue, she tried to cheer herself up and berated herself
for not being a better wife. “Came home from work and I was blue about
our little apartment, my having to work, and our low ‹nances. But I tried
not to let Eldred know about the latter. Poor little old boy! He has a cow-
ard for a wife!”

She exhorted herself to better behavior. “I threw a tantrum at lunch
today because I have to work. From here on I’m going to see how little
griping I can do and how cheerful I can be. If you can’t do what you like,
Marjorie, how about liking what you have to do? Remember that,
whiner!” But her resolutions were impossible to keep. That night she
scrawled the following addendum: “[A coworker] made fun of me
tonight. The detestable bag!”

The weather wove through her narrative as both a metaphor and a
source of her moods: “Today was a typical rainy, dark, gloomy Louisville
day. The weather was quite warm but the dampness made it unpleasant.
Eldred and I were both blue as Indigo this morning. We felt we should
sell the car, quit the church and Seminary and go to the farm. However,
about noon the clouds all lifted and we are happy once more.”
Marjorie wanted to leave the job that plagued her and devote herself to what she saw as her real work: taking care of the house and Eldred and starting a family. Many of the seminary wives were pushing strollers around campus, others were announcing pregnancies, and that spring her best friend adopted a two-year-old boy. She confided in her journal, “Eldred and I made a pretty definite decision.” A few days later, “We decided we had better take out hospital insurance.”

When Marjorie quit her hospital job, B and M disappeared from her journal, replaced with H and H+ and sometimes even H++++++. She loved being at home taking care of the house. She also exulted in the return of spring, which brought with it a lift in her spirits. “This place out here is just like Paradise,” she wrote of her once too small seminary apartment. “It seems that since quitting work I have awakened from a terrible nightmare to find everything beautiful and safe once more.”

It is interesting to see how explicitly she linked home and safety versus work and danger. “It has been wonderful,” she wrote, “to be here at home and not have to go anywhere! We went to the grocery, poultry house (for necks and backs for soup) and to the fruit market. We had fried chicken and fruit salad and then laid down and talked awhile after lunch. Eldred studied and went to Greek and Theology. I worked off a hard history lesson this afternoon and Eldred is finishing up his Hebrew exegesis to hand in in the morning.” She was happy fixing my father’s meals, sharing life by his side, and enjoying the natural beauty of the seminary campus. Like many other women in those post–World War II years, she looked forward to the baby that she hoped would come before too much longer.

At last, she got pregnant. By now she had finished college and a master’s degree at the seminary, and Eldred had graduated from the seminary as well. She was so happy. They had a small house. This was married life at last, as she believed it was supposed to be lived. They held a party for some close friends and announced that a baby was due May 17, 1948. She and my father fixed up the baby’s room. Her mother crocheted a baby blanket.

But the story ended in sorrow. The baby girl was stillborn after four grueling days of labor. Our boxes of family photos contained multiple copies of a glossy 8 × 10 of the dead baby, lying in silent perfection in her
tiny satin-lined casket. Marilyn. The name, Mother explained to us, meant “bitter.”

How strange to have a perfectly formed baby sister who had had to die so that my sister and I could be born, I used to think. Mother had explained how one among thousands of eggs and millions of sperm joined to make the unique person that I was. What an amazing stroke of good fortune, I marveled when I was in the third grade, that the sperm and egg that made me had found one another, that I was an I. It was like winning the lottery, only even more unlikely. Or else it was the work of a directive God, calling my sister and me into being in the shadow of that loss. If Marilyn had lived, the timing of Jeannie’s and my conceptions would have changed, and Marilyn (who would have had a different name, one that was a blessing instead of a curse) would have had a different sister, maybe named Jackie but not me.

Marjorie, still weak from the long ordeal, believed only another baby could assuage her sorrow. Ignoring the doctor’s advice, she planned another pregnancy.

Eleven months later she gave birth to her second daughter, my sister Jeannie. The baby of her family, Mother had had no younger siblings to help care for. But she loved children dearly and had been teaching four and five year olds in Sunday School since before college. Her new baby, conceived one night after Prayer Meeting, had long, beautiful fingers and toes. In fact, she was long all over. She was a beautiful baby.

But when Mother held her in her arms to cuddle her Jeannie stiffened and pushed away. To Mother’s profound disappointment, her baby was not a cuddler. She was a pretty baby, a smart baby, a good baby, but she was a baby that often as not, when her mother picked her up, pushed against her mama’s chest like she wanted to be put down again. She had a weak, almost polite, little cry. She sucked so lackadaisically that Mother began to worry that Jeannie might starve to death. She supplemented breast-feedings with bottles just to be on the safe side. She hoped there was nothing wrong with this baby, who had kicked so gently in her womb and now moved her long, long legs and arms almost dreamily, like a long-necked ballerina doing stretches and warm-ups for a ballet.

She felt deliriously happy and yet anxious and uneasy at the same time. She wasn’t certain she really knew how to take care of a baby; they
looked so awfully fragile. She checked little Jeannie again and again as she lay sleeping in her bassinet to make sure she was really breathing.

Jeannie was a quiet little baby, with an alert look in her big bright eyes, but she often looked faintly worried. She walked and talked early. Her first sentence was an expression of sorrow at her Daddy’s absence. By the time she was born, my parents had moved their little family back to Owensboro, where Daddy served as the associational missionary. His work sometimes took him on the road, and Jeannie missed him terribly when he was gone. There was no doubt about it. She was Daddy’s girl.

By the time I was born, in 1951, Mother was bound and determined to have a baby she could cuddle with. Fortunately, she got one. From the first time she picked me up, she could see that I loved to snuggle, that I wanted to be as close to her as she wanted to be to me. At last she had the one who loved her back, the one who really understood her, the one she hoped would be just like her, only braver and better.

One afternoon, when I was about five, I stood in the doorway of Mother’s bedroom and watched as she got ready for my father’s return. She was wearing a Sunday dress and pumps with two-and-a-half-inch heels. She clipped a pair of gold-plated earrings to her ears and dabbed Tabu behind each ear and on each wrist. How beautiful she is, I thought, as I admired the ample curve of her breast and the way the two-inch-wide patent leather belt cinched her pretty waist. My own cheerful five-year-old chest swelled with love for her. My father had been on the road two weeks. Even at home, he worked such long hours that he was a near stranger. I knew I was supposed to love both of my parents, but my father, though fascinating, was remote. I felt a stab of guilt at how desperately I loved my mother and how much more of a stranger my father seemed. “I love you and Daddy both the same,” I said bravely as I stood there at the threshold of their bedroom, because I believed I really ought to love them equally and, in the moment of doubting that I did, I felt I really must assert it. “But I just know you a lot better.” “I know you do, honey,” Mother said absently, as she blotted her bright red lipstick and checked her makeup in the big cherry-framed mirror. She wasn’t thinking too much about whether my filial love was measured out in equal quantities. She was thinking about the big love of her life coming home to transform her from married mom into cherished sweetheart. When he
was home and not working, she made sure we all knew it was a celebration.

Mother loved language, and she resolved that we would, too. She read to us all through childhood. When she read me stories, I grew impatient. I wanted to read them back to her, I wanted to be the one with the speaking part, and I would bang on the book and holler and try to pull it away from her. But when she read verses from Mother Goose, and later poems from *101 Famous Poems*, I was all hers. I loved those magic rhymes and sure-footed rhythms. “The highwayman came riding, riding, riding / The highwayman came riding / Up to the old inn door.” You could hear the horse gallop.

She had a fine sense of the absurd and a quick wit. I remember a lot of laughter at the dinner table, usually instigated by Mother or Jeannie or me and often erupting just as Daddy was trying to get us to bow our heads so he could ask the blessing. We shared her love of wordplay and smart-mouthed remarks.

I was a tomboy growing up, just as she had been. We both thought Jo was the only character in *Little Women* worth emulating. Like her, we liked to climb trees and act out dramas, we whistled and strode about, we couldn’t hide our true feelings, and we scribbled poems and plays.

When I was seven, Mother bought us the game Anagrams. Mother and I played every chance we got. When Daddy was late for supper, we would run into the living room and grab the anagrams. No one else in (or out of) the family liked this game as we did. We loved to touch the cool wooden tiles and study the letters, thinking about how we might recombine them. “That old bird is going to fly over here to me and become a bride,” we might say as we gleefully captured the other’s word.

Until she died, Mother found it hard to imagine that I wasn’t, in almost every respect, a carbon copy of her. When I turned out to be different, she never failed to be surprised. Food was a case in point. She was always certain that anyone she loved would want to eat exactly what she wanted to eat exactly when she wanted to eat it. She expressed love for all of us by dropping uninvited morsels onto our plates that she herself was enjoying. She did this with a little pleased smile because it made her happy to be sharing something so delicious. She liked her fried eggs hard and peppered within an inch of their lives. I liked mine soft and with no
pepper. This over-easy, unpeppered egg seemed so wrong to her that she continued sliding eggs with rock-hard yolks, crusty whites, and heavy layers of black pepper onto my plate for as long as she could stand and flip a spatula. She laced her vegetables with as much bacon grease as possible. After my gallbladder was removed and I had to limit fats, she responded to my protests about bacon grease as if I had insulted both her cooking and her character.

One of Jeannie’s last memories of Mother centers on a Chinese dinner they shared. Weak and shaky, Mother could not hold the fork without her hand trembling, but with her shaking fork she still managed to transfer most of the little miniature corn from the stir-fry onto Jeannie’s plate. Jeannie doesn’t especially like baby corn, but for Mother this was a special treat, a food so exotic as to be almost unimaginable. Each time she found one, she quiveringly transported it over to Jeannie’s plate and deposited it there with a little happy smile, like a mama bird triumphantly dropping a choice worm into her baby’s gaping beak. By that time, Jeannie knew better than to send that baby corn back. She just said thank you and ate it.

Mother never thought I uttered an uninteresting word. She listened to me so attentively that sometimes she would interrupt a conversation she was having with someone else in order to answer me over in the next room. But if I came out with something that was wildly different from what she thought or felt, she would calmly contradict me. If she said I was happy or sad or worried, there was no use saying I wasn’t because she figured she knew me better than I knew myself. After all, didn’t I come right out of her body? She knew me even before I was an I.

Indeed, we were alike in many ways. But there was in her an insecurity and a tempestuousness that were not present in me. Something in her made me feel, even as a small child, protective. “I know you’ll miss me,” I told her as I climbed out of the car on my first day of school, “but don’t worry about a thing. And don’t cry. I’ll be fine.”