

1991 D. K. Brown Memorial Fiction Contest First Place Winner

MUDDY, RISING WATERS

By Lisa Bolin Hawkins

“THREE DAYS.” ERVIN JOE NODDED SAGELY. “I read it. They’re prob’ly cuttin your daddy’s toenails or shavin him right here as we speak.”

The heat under the front porch was already crawling down her back, and Kelly Grace wondered if Mama would make breakfast.

“Lord’a mercy, Ervin Joe, hush. It’s a closed casket anyway.”

“Well I don’t see you cryin. ‘Sides, he’s my daddy’s brother and I’ll talk about him if I want. I thought you’d care to hear, what with you gonna be a lady doctor.” He squashed an ant that crawled up his bare foot.

A horsefly buzzed in between the crisscross white slats. “There was no call to drag me under the front porch at seven o’clock in the mornin to tell me that.” Kelly Grace inched out through the access door and Ervin Joe followed, both in time to face the black oxfords, swollen ankles, and worn black hemline of Aunt Lougene.

“Kelly Grace Johnson!” Aunt Lougene whispered emphatically. “What on God’s green earth is wrong with you? Runnin ‘round here like a cracker farm hand! You get in the house and clean up and put on that black dress. People will be comin soon and you can act like a young lady for one day or I’ll see what for.” She didn’t even stop for breath.

“And Ervin Joe Johnson; I like to skin your hide. Get home and put on your Sunday clothes and don’t let me see one specka dirt beneath those nails. You and your daddy and Idalou get back over here and greet folks.” She swatted her son on the back and he took off home, red dirt sticking to his overall bottoms, bare shoulders broad beneath the denim straps.

“That child is slow as Christmas,” Aunt Lougene said. Kelly Grace wanted to call her cousin back. He was the only person with a sensible attitude toward this entire event.

“Well come on, Miss Priss.” Aunt Lougene slowly climbed the porch steps, her black handbag swinging from her arm, handkerchief clutched at the ready.

“Aunt Lougene, I hadn had any breakfast. Should I just get it myself?” Kelly Grace squeezed past her aunt and held open the screen door. Aunt Lougene stopped and narrowed her eyes.

“Well I suppose if a fifteen-year-old girl can’t get her own breakfast, she’s never gonna learn any younger.” She waddled regally into the cool front hall. “But I don’t suppose it’s occurred to you that it’s vulgar to be hungry this mornin. Is your poor mama up yet?”

“I don’t know, ma’am.” Kelly Grace felt too big for her skin, like she was about to crack open and pop out. Her shorts would suddenly strain at the seams and the buttons of her blouse would rattle to the hallway floor.

She watched Aunt Lougene unpin her black straw hat and place it over the wedding album on the table in the front room. Her red hands patted her hair—which looked like it was made of the same stuff as the hat—and dabbed at her forehead with the handkerchief.

“Make yourself comfortable, ma’am. Then if anyone comes before Mama is down, you can thank em and explain she’ll be down directly. That would be a real big help to Mama.”

“Well, now you’re thinkin of someone else for a change,” Aunt Lougene said, settling in a chair by the window.

“Yes ma’am.” Kelly Grace knew that, of all days, this was the day to keep peace, not sass back, but she twisted up at the rude things grownups said to her they’d never say to each other. Even today she would be Brad and Lucy Johnson’s spoiled only child, too smart for a girl and too smart-mouthed, only now she’d be pitied and worse, so would Mama. She’d been brought up so polite she couldn’t speak her anger even in her mind. And she was still hungry, vulgar as it was.

Kelly Grace went to the kitchen, got a big piece of Mrs. Burns’s peach pie and poured a glass of milk, and tiptoed up to her room. She ate and stared at the posters on the walls. “I am probably the only girl in the world so much in love with Paul McCartney,” she thought, munching.

Mama knocked at the door. “Do you need to get into the bathroom before I do, darlin?” she called. Kelly Grace answered through a mouthful of pie, hoping Mama would think she’d been crying.

“No ma’am, I’ve been up awhile. Aunt Lougene’s downstairs, Mama.”

“Dear Lord,” Mama whispered, not knowing it carried through the door. “Well, that’s real nice of her to come so early, darlin. I won’t be long. We should probably go down as soon as we can.”

“Yes ma’am.”

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It occurred to Kelly Grace that the moonshiners Daddy had been after the night he died were probably in the congregation. She scanned the crowd, looking at each face for traces of guilt.

"Are—are you all right, baby? You don't sound yourself."

Kelly Grace was ashamed. "I'll be all right, Mama. I'll be there directly."

Mama padded away toward the bathroom. Kelly Grace knew there were houses with more than one bathroom, but not in Little Stratford. She'd probably never see one. Their bathroom had been jerry-rigged by Granpa from part of the other bedroom and one end of her closet, when this was his house. Daddy's family had settled Little Stratford. Great-Granpa always called it Johnstontown, but "Little Stratford" had stuck.

Kelly Grace went to the closet and examined the seven dresses. Five for school—probably outgrown during the summer; when could she ask Mama about new ones?—one for Sunday—pretty much outgrown and greatly to be mourned, as it had been her cousin Betty Jean's in Amarillo and had little blue flowers and lace and had to be hand washed. And then there was the black dress that had been poor cousin Linda Jean Farrell's "before she passed on herself, the dear child"—actually, poor Linda Jean Farrell was Aunt Lougene's niece, which made her a kissin' cousin, but her clothes had been preserved against a time of need. Kelly Grace had hung the dress out on the line for two days, trying to get the packed-away smell out. She thought she'd get a new dress for the funeral, even if it had

to be black, but Aunt Lougene saw no sense in it and Mama wasn't up to resisting at the time. So she'd just have to go to the funeral smelling like a can of Raid that had been locked in an attic trunk for years.

Whatever funerals poor Linda Jean Farrell had attended had been in winter. Kelly Grace's room was on the southwest side of the house, and the sun and humidity were working already to let her know she'd be miserable all day. Maybe she wouldn't be hungry, after all; she'd just drink a lot of iced tea, or go upstairs, overcome with grief, to lie down, after freeing herself from the high collar and peeling off the long sleeves. Maybe she could lie down in Mama's room; it stayed fairly cool because of the drapes.

She heard Mama's big bedroom door close and slipped into the bathroom to clean up and stuff her shorts and blouse into the dirty clothes. Back in her room, she debated whether to go without stockings, or a slip, or even a bra, because of the heat. She finally put on the hated funeral dress without a bra or stockings, just a half-slip over her panties. Women's clothes were made like onions—she imagined herself in a dim room, Paul McCartney watching from a chaise lounge, while she slipped off the layers, one by one, sometimes turning her back—she wasn't quite sure what she wanted to happen after that. Maybe she'd put on a nightgown and he'd hold her and

kiss the top of her head, smelling like the rough blue suit and shaving lotion Daddy wore to church.

She pulled her strawberry-blonde hair into a large, black-plastic barrette that Aunt Lougene had bought at the five-and-dime after Kelly Grace refused to wear a hat. "I swan, you can't have hair shinin' gold and red in the sun by your own daddy's grave, like some fancy lady," Aunt Lougene had said, but she gave up when Kelly Grace reminded her that Daddy's hair was the same color. "You have got a wicked tongue in your head, young lady," was Aunt Lougene's response. She had puffed up to the house later that day and pressed the barrette into Kelly Grace's hand. "You pull that hair back, Miss Priss," she had said, and when Kelly Grace wrinkled her nose, Aunt Lougene had puffed back down the driveway muttering, "raised in a barn, I swan."

The plain black dress and severe ponytail made an unflattering picture in the full-length mirror. Kelly Grace looked at her pale, freckled face and disappearing eyelashes and brows and decided she might be attending her own funeral. "The password is 'cadaver,'" she whispered, imitating the game show, and looked up to the corner of the mirror. Daddy had given her a picture of Grace Kelly as the young Princess Grace of Monaco.

"When I saw her in *Rear Window* the day before you were born, I knew what my little girl's name would be, if you were a girl," he had said. "I found this in a magazine at Dr. Howard's office and it was worth goin' to the dentist to get it. Course I asked first. Now there's a woman with spunk, and graceful like her name. She was named 'Lisa' in the movie and she risked her life because she believed in Jimmy Stewart." Daddy thought Jimmy Stewart and Henry Fonda and Gary Cooper were the be-all and end-all.

Kelly Grace had been flopped on the bed reading her homework when Daddy came home with the picture. "How come you didn't name me Lisa?" she had asked. "Then the kids at school wouldn't call me 'Kelly Green.'"

Daddy had laughed his deep six-two laugh and reached down to pat her shoulder. "No one in East Texas ever heard of a girl named Lisa. My mama and daddy would have me sent away for namin' a baby that. By the time they figured out Kelly Grace, it was too late." He had chuckled and sat on the bed, sagging the corner down. "You just wait; you'll outshine em all." He stroked her hair. "You'll be a princess, maybe not livin' in a palace like this lady here, but good and smart and beautiful. I'm real proud of my girl."

Kelly Grace stared again at the thin, blackclad nonperson in the mirror. She went to her jewelry box and got the little silver cross on a chain that Daddy gave her last Christmas. "Sterling Silver" it said on the back, and she knew the cost because she'd seen it in Main & Kirk's window in Stratford. She fastened it around her neck and went down the stairs.

AT least it was cooler there. Already the house was full of relatives and folks from town and even some of her schoolmates, looking slicked down or Sunday curled and uncomfortable. Mama, with Aunt Lougene gripping one of her wrists,

was trying to greet people. She looked thin and fragile and gracious in her summer black dress—the county sheriff's wife has a black dress for every season. Mama's white-blonde hair was pulled up beneath a black hat, but she wasn't wearing a veil. "I don't plan to faint from heat stroke and make a spectacle of myself," she'd said.

Aunt Lougene gestured for Kelly Grace to come over and pulled her sleeve to make her bend down.

"You take that necklace off," she hissed. "It ain't proper mournin'."

Mama must have overheard because she excused herself and turned toward them. "Why Lougene, honey, Bradford gave that necklace to Kelly Grace as a Christmas present, and it is a cross, as you can see. I understand it's not traditional, but I think it's lovely of Kelly Grace to wear it. She's worn it every day since she got it. Her daddy would be so pleased to see it today." Mama put her arm around Kelly Grace, simultaneously releasing them both from Aunt Lougene, and stepped away.

"Did you get something to eat, darlin'?" Mama whispered. Kelly Grace noticed that her eyes were red-rimmed and she had on more make-up than usual, and no cologne. She smelled faintly of witch hazel, the kind she put on cotton pads on her eyelids when they were puffy. "There's plenty of food in the kitchen if you'll be careful of your clothes."

"I'm okay, Mama."

Mama patted the back of her hand across her forehead. "It must already be 80 degrees in here. We should have started earlier." She brightened artificially and turned toward her sister. "Alice, honey, can you believe this is my little Kelly Grace? Aunt Alice drove almost all night to get here from Amarillo, darlin'."

Aunt Alice was a darker version of Mama, like a lustrous brown bird made of platinum wire, with the same gray-green-blue eyes and, in this sea of only-to-funerals black, a stylish navy-blue dress. Kelly Grace remembered her from a visit to West Texas year-before-last. They hugged. "I'm so sorry about your daddy, Kelly Grace. You're mama's got a big girl to depend on now. And doesn't she have lovely hair, Lucinda?"

"It's just like Bradford's," Mama said, dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief.

"Well she's goin' to be a beauty, Lucy." Kelly Grace was remembering how much she liked Aunt Alice. "She's got our eyes, though, and is built delicate like the Ballous. This one'll never reach six-two!"

Mama laughed her gentle laugh, and everyone nearby looked sideways at her. Kelly Grace wished she had Daddy's gun—as though Mama, who had lost the most, couldn't laugh today. Mama seemed not to notice. "She's smart like Bradford, Alice. She gets straight A's in school."

The house fell silent as Granma Johnson entered, swathed in black, on the arm of Aunt Lougene's husband, Uncle Duck. His name was Duane Ervin, but no one had called him that since his wedding. Kelly Grace had forgotten how much like Daddy he looked and walked and talked. He had plain brown hair and was a little out of shape, but then Daddy had kept

himself fit so he'd be strong enough to deal with any criminals that came to Fasher County. Uncle Duck just ran the International Harvester store next to his house.

Granma went to Mama and collapsed, crying, in her arms, which set Mama off, and Uncle Duck had to unwind Granma off of Mama and steer her to a sofa, hastily vacated by Aunt Edna and Uncle Jim Bob Turner. Aunt Alice put her arms around Mama. Idalou and Ervin Joe chose that moment to enter, in somber Sunday best, followed by Aunt Edna's daughter Lora Eileen, who was eighteen and, as Granma had said on happier occasions, "always looked like she just stepped out of a bandbox." She lived up to her reputation now.

"She must of gone clear to Fullview to get that special," Ervin Joe whispered to Kelly Grace, who was trying not to show the envy she felt. If black and mourning and summer could be combined successfully, Lora Eileen had done it. Her shiny brown hair was pulled up underneath a black hat with a tiny dotted veil, perched at a slight tilt. Her dress draped and defined her in black, and she even had sheer black stockings and black pumps with tall, pointed heels. Obviously she'd never sweat a drop in her life.

"You'd think she was the widow," Ervin Joe said, earning a poke in the ribs from Kelly Grace, and Idalou said, "Your mama's gonna have puckers in the floor from those heels; have to steam-iron em out."

"Hello, little ones," Lora Eileen said as she swept past to greet Mama. "You do look mournful, Kelly, dear." Lora Eileen always called her younger cousins "little ones," which they hated, and never called anyone by more than one name, so it took a while to figure out who she meant. Kelly Grace detested her and emulated almost everything she did.

The buzz of conversation grew louder until finally Reverend Stegall came to say all was ready. The group hushed as Mama, Kelly Grace, and Granma Johnson were led to the minister's car; the others followed in their own cars. The service was to be held at the funeral home instead of the church, because the funeral chapel was air conditioned and could hold more people.

Kelly Grace was proud as she sat next to Mama in a family pew and saw the people coming in—everyone in Little Stratford. Even Old Willie, who Daddy had put in jail for being drunk most winter nights, looked slicked down and respectful. And people from miles around, from all over the county, and Daddy's two deputies in their tan uniforms, standing attention at either end of the closed, gray-metal casket with its spray of roses and carnations on top. Kelly Grace thought fleetingly that this would be the day to rob every place in the county, since everyone was at the funeral, including the police. Flowers were everywhere—in baskets and vases and on wreaths set on black wire stands, some with banners across them and words in glitter, like "Nieces and Nephews" and "Wimmer Family." Daddy had jumped in the creek and saved Timmy Wimmer from drowning years ago, during the big flood.

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She ignored Reverend Stegall's eulogy as she scanned the crowd, looking at each face for traces of guilt. Daddy had surprised a still up in the pine woods back of Shady Mill, and chased the men through the rainy night, across the old iron-ore strip mine in the slippery mud, and fallen in some hole—an old well or bore hole or something. It had rained hard for two days and he was stuck as the waters rose and finally drowned him. Almost every man in the county had joined the search parties when Sheriff Johnson didn't come home, and they found him on the third day and took him to the funeral parlor, not thinking it proper to take the body home in its condition. It had taken ten men and a backhoe to get him out.

No one in the funeral home looked guilty to Kelly Grace, but Reverend Stegall sure was making them look sad. Sniffing and dabbing eyes and outright sobbing were before and behind and on either side of her. She sat dry-eyed, waiting for Daddy to come striding through the doors at the back of the funeral chapel and tell everyone to cheer up, but he didn't. The organist started "Beyond the Sunset," the coffin was wheeled away toward a side door where the hearse waited, and they all filed out.

The heat was like walking into a wall. Mr. Landow, the undertaker, was whispering to his employees to hurry and get the flowers to the cemetery. "I'll carry y'all over to the cemetery now, Miz Johnson," Reverend Stegall told Mama, and so they all drove out to the graveyard. Mama remembered as they rode to thank the preacher for his lovely eulogy, that it was just what she had hoped he would say. Kelly Grace doubted that Mama had heard much of it. Granma just sat with her face flushed and her handkerchief a soggy wad. Kelly Grace offered hers, as she had not used it. "Why child, how thoughtful," Granma said. "You're sure you won't need it?" Kelly Grace shook her head. "You don't expect em to pass on afore you," Granma whispered.

"No ma'am," Kelly Grace said, and took Granma's hand.

They were among the first at the cemetery and Kelly Grace suspected that some were dawdling in the air-conditioned funeral home. Anyhow, it sure was taking a long time. Mr. Landow had covered the red dirt by the grave with plastic grass. The gravediggers were across the cemetery, dressed in coveralls, smoking and waiting to fill in the grave. There was a tent with rows of chairs for the family, but there wasn't a breeze in it, so when Ervin Joe and Idalou got there, Kelly Grace went to stand under a tree with them. Daddy's coffin sat by the open grave.

"That box is too small to hold Daddy," Kelly Grace said.

"I reckon so," Idalou said.

"Maybe he shrank," Ervin Joe said, his face working with suppressed laughter and shame.

"Ervin Joe Johnson, you have no decency," Idalou said, but Kelly Grace thought it was a pretty good joke, all things considered.

"Well, I guess he had time to get used to bein in a red dirt hole," Kelly Grace said.

Idalou stared. "You two are not goin to heaven for talkin like that."

"Good." Ervin Joe said. "Then we won't have to spend any more time with the likes of you."

Idalou flounced off with ten-year-old dignity and Kelly Grace pulled her sticky dress away from her chest, afraid it would cling. "Ervin Joe, I sure do wish I was down at Walgreen's, drinkin a chocolate milkshake, wearin regular clothes."

"This ain't really happenin to you, is it, Kelly Grace?" Ervin Joe asked.

"I dunno. Mama's actin one way and feelin another way. Grownups—cept your mama and my Aunt Alice—are actin like our whole family died. They all liked Daddy, though. I wish he was here to see all these people show their respects. I think it makes Mama real proud. You're actin real. But that red dirt and stupid gray box aren't real. Sure as hell not real."

Ervin Joe was impressed by the swearing. "I think they're about to start. I'll see you at the house."

Kelly Grace went into the stifling tent to sit by Mama; everyone who was not close kin stood around the foot of the grave. Reverend Stegall read about dust and resurrection from the Bible, and Kelly Grace fingered the cross around her neck. Then he said a prayer for the soul of Bradford Austin Johnson and the safekeeping of his final resting place until the trumpet should sound to call forth the righteous. "Amen," everyone said, with the fervor of parched throats and humidity-sticky hairspray and wringing-wet armpits.

The deputies and Uncle Duck and some grown cousins lowered the coffin into the muddy red hole. Reverend Stegall reached beneath the plastic grass for a handful of damp dirt, like dark red Play-Doh, and gave it to Mama, who stood to receive it and gently dropped it into the grave. Kelly Grace stood too, but before Reverend Stegall could hand her any mud—the mud that right now had settled at the bottom of Daddy's lungs and had become part of him before he could become part of it—she reached up and unclasped the chain that held the cross around her neck. Stooping at the edge of the grave—Mama put a hand on her shoulder—Kelly Grace dropped the cross and chain into the flowers that covered the coffin, up near the head and centered, as though Daddy wore the chain now.

Kelly Grace stood and Mama put an arm around her. As they walked toward the waiting cars, Kelly Grace glimpsed Aunt Lougene whispering furiously to Uncle Duck and looking at Kelly Grace. Never had Kelly Grace been so tempted to try the obscene gesture that her cousin John Ray Wood had explained in graphic detail at the last family reunion, but she knew that would humiliate Mama. She turned away hastily and climbed into Reverend Stegall's car.

BACK at the house, people drank iced tea and balanced plates of food dished up by some ladies from church. Shirlene Mapes's mother asked Kelly Grace if she didn't want something to eat, but Kelly Grace accepted only a glass of iced tea. Mrs. Mapes looked satisfied. People were fanning themselves with the program from the memorial service, like it was some piece of trash paper, and Kelly Grace couldn't find hers; she must

have left it at the funeral home. It was so hot she felt light-headed. Mama was holding Mrs. Price's hand with both her own—Mr. Price owned the backhoe—and trying not to cry as Mrs. Price sniffled.

People started leaving, first acquaintances, then co-workers and friends, and then most of the family—even Uncle Duck had to get back to the IH. Everyone stopped and spoke to Mama, and Kelly Grace was angry at them all for making Mama smile and say comforting words to them, when she was the one who needed a miracle, who didn't need anyone to expect graciousness or strength or anything but Daddy, walking through the door, setting his hat and gun on the high shelf in the hall closet, calling her "sugarplum" and "darlin."

Aunt Alice was listening to Mama, and Ervin Joe and Idalou were eating pie, when Aunt Lougene came up behind Kelly Grace, creaking the floorboards and generating heat.

"That was quite a Hollywood show you put on with your little necklace, Miss Priss. The Catholics would have been downright proud. And you sure got the attention of all concerned."

Kelly Grace didn't notice how quiet the room was as she turned to face Aunt Lougene, whose mouth was set in a smug, disapproving line.

Kelly Grace reached up and began unzipping poor Linda Jean Farrell's black dress. "You're so kind to notice everything I do, Aunt Lougene." Zip—zip. Kelly Grace pulled the black cloth away from her damp chest and pulled her arms out of the sleeves. Idalou gasped. "You seem to have advice on everything." She pushed the dress to her waist and wiggled it past her hips; it slid down to the floor. Kelly Grace kicked it over to Aunt Lougene's feet. She didn't know who was staring harder, Aunt Lougene or Ervin Joe. Kelly Grace reached up, trembling, and freed her hair from the black-plastic barrette, breaking the clasp and loosing a frizzy flood of red-gold. "Go bury these with poor Linda Jean Farrell." She kicked off her shoes toward the pitiful black pile. "And the next time you try to tell me what's proper, I'll walk naked down Main Street at noon and dance in front of your house until someone comes along with a better idea. Now leave my mother alone."

Kelly Grace turned her back on the three open mouths of the Johnsons. Mama and Aunt Alice sat, pale and staring, on the couch. Kelly Grace walked slowly, head high, barefoot and bare-breasted, up the stairs to her room, where her pictures of Paul McCartney and Princess Grace waited. She was able to close the door before the first, hot tears hit her collarbones. ☒



A studious Mormon named Joan
Thought sacrament talks were a drone;
When the leaders up front
For some ZZZs would hunt
She'd pull out and read her *Sunstone*.

COLLEEN THOMAS