

A Shadow Life

Leta McCurry

There's something about a closet that makes a skeleton terribly restless. – John Barrymore.

The kerosene lamp burned low in the silence. Mattie Hawkins was the only one fully awake in the deep hours of the night. She stared at the plain pine coffin holding the remains of her husband as flickering shadows, like ghosts on the prowl, moved softly among the small group keeping wake. In that raw box lay her life and Laney's, snatched away as suddenly and surely as if they had been picked up by a tornado and blown to kingdom come.

How could God let this happen—in an instant—with no time to prepare? Could she have done anything to change it?

Only two days ago—the morning had started like any other except it was Calvin's birthday. About mid-morning, Mattie stopped working the iron pump handle and leaned against the kitchen counter to catch her breath. She took a tin dipper from its nail on the wall, filled it with the cool water she had drawn from the pump, and drank deeply. Patting the sweat from her face with the bottom of her apron, she smiled at her five-year-old daughter, Laney Belle, playing with homemade A-B-C blocks under the kitchen table.

"Whatcha doin', dumplin'?"

"I spelled cat, Mama. See?" Laney patted the blocks lined up on the raw pine floor.

"You sure did," Mattie said. "You're so smart."

"And pretty," Laney giggled. "Daddy says I'm pretty just like my mama."

I might be pretty to look at on the outside, but I'm ugly on the inside, Mattie thought. How come her neighbor women had a dozen babies one right after another and she could barely produce one?

Laney was the only living child from Mattie's five pregnancies over the last five years. The others were either lost early or stillborn. There wouldn't be any more babies either. Doc Crouch had taken Mattie's husband, Calvin, aside and made sure he understood that getting his wife with child again would likely mean her death.

Tears sprang to Mattie's eyes as she watched her daughter. Her arms ached for babies. Sometimes her breasts felt full and heavy like they did when she was in a family way, but she knew it had to be her imagination.

And it wasn't just babies she missed. She missed the warm coupling with her husband. Mattie understood why Calvin didn't hug, kiss, and cuddle her like he used to. It was just too hard for him to

start something she couldn't finish. Calvin loved her, but she sometimes wondered where her husband found relief for his needs. Best not think about that.

"Hey, dumplin', you know what today is?" Mattie hung the cup back on the nail.

Laney's big blue eyes got even bigger. "Is it my birthday?"

"No. You just had your birthday in April, on the second—remember? But it's Daddy's birthday and we're going to make his favorite molasses layer cake."

"Is it a surprise?" Laney scrambled out from under the table, scattering blocks every which way.

"Can I help?"

"It is a surprise, and you know I can't make that cake without your help." Mattie opened the doors to the bottom shelf of the Hoosier cabinet shoved against the wall and pulled out big containers of flour and sugar. "Laney, run out to the henhouse and get me two eggs. Can you do that?"

"Okay, Mama." The little girl dashed out the door, gawky arms and legs flying.

Mattie put butter and baking soda on the table and began rummaging in the top shelf of the cabinet. Frowning, she laid her index finger across her lips and tried to think. Now where did she put the molasses? Oh, fiddlesticks! Calvin used the last of it on his flapjacks a few days ago.

"Did I do good, Mama?" Laney carefully laid the eggs on the table.

"You done wonderful, honey, but you know what? We have to walk to town for molasses."

Just what she needed—a mile walk to town and back. It was so hot just about every living thing was hunkered down somewhere in whatever shade that could be found. Well, nothing for it but just to get it done.

"Put on your shoes and socks, Laney."

"Do I have to? Can't I go barefoot?"

"Its hotter'n blue blazes out there. You need your shoes. And hurry or we won't get back in time to make Daddy's cake."

While Laney went for her shoes, Mattie took off her apron, pulled on a slat bonnet and tied a bow under her chin. The underarms of her dress were dark with sweat, but no use putting on a fresh one. She'd be wet and sticky again before she got to town anyway.

The buildings on the edge of town, shimmering and dancing in the heat, looked much more than a mile away, but Mattie mopped her forehead with her hanky every few minutes and trudged on.

The heat didn't seem to bother Laney. Where did the child get all that energy? Mattie was encouraged by the sight of her daughter hopping and skipping ahead, her fine blonde hair as soft and white as a summer cloud, her rugged little body toasted nut brown from playing in the sun. But, still, a

constant prayer always hovered in Mattie's mind. Lord, don't let my girl grow up weak and sickly like me and my mama before me.

Just as Laney was the only child of Mattie's many pregnancies, Mattie was the only surviving child of her mother's many miscarriages and stillbirths. Mattie had been a sickly child and caught everything that came along. She missed so much school she was unable to keep up and stopped going in the third grade. Mattie watched Laney closely for any sign of illness or weakness and fret herself into a panic if Laney even had the sniffles. So far, thank the Lord, Laney was as wiry as a wild pony and as hardy as a desert cactus.

It was already plain Laney was going to be a beauty with her big eyes... a blue so pale they sometimes looked gray like ice frozen on the lake, her impish dimples, and blonde hair that was still cotton white but starting to show streaks of a light shimmering gold. She wouldn't have any trouble getting a husband when the time came. Not like her mother. Most girls married at fourteen or fifteen, but Mattie was an old maid of twenty-four when she met Calvin.

It wasn't because she was ugly that men hadn't come courting. Her mirror showed she was pretty in a pale, sparrow-like way. It was because she rarely left the house after dropping out of school and really didn't know any of the local boys.

Then one day Calvin drove into the yard, asking directions to Opal Satler's boarding house. He was a young widower whose wife and baby had died in childbirth and he had come to take a job at the Menard Farmers & Merchants Bank, owned by a cousin. Six months later Calvin and Mattie married.

"Can I have a penny candy, Mama?" Laney turned and waited for Mattie to catch up.

Mattie's stomach muscles clenched so hard it felt like she had swallowed a rock. How to explain to a five-year old that times were so hard every penny was precious? President Roosevelt could talk all he wanted about times getting better, but he hadn't paid a visit to the Texas Hill Country lately. Calvin was one of the lucky ones to have his bank teller job but, still, it was barely enough to scrape by. And it didn't bear thinking about how much they owed Doc Crouch for Mattie's constant sickness.

Mattie sighed. "I don't see how we can buy candy today, dumplin'."

"Then can we go see Daddy?"

"Well, maybe, if he's not busy. We'll see."

Mattie pulled Laney to the side of the dirt road as she heard a car approaching from behind. An older black Ford sped past, sending a blanket of fine dust swirling in its wake. Mattie choked and coughed deeply. She leaned forward, placed her hands on her knees, and focused on breathing.

"Lord-a-mercy!" she gasped. "Old Man Fallows is sure in an all-fired hurry today!"

"Did we get Daddy a present?"

“I made him a new shirt out of them flour sacks I’ve been savin’.” Mattie coughed and spit, then took Laney’s hand as the child skipped along beside her. “It can be from the both of us since you ...”

The frantic honking of a car horn and the screams of people and horses shattered the quiet afternoon like an exploding cannon ball. An eerie moment of complete silence followed, then shouting, and Mattie could see people running. A cold, dark, dread squeezed Mattie’s chest. Calvin. Calvin! Wheezing and gasping, she clutched Laney’s hand and broke into a run. Don’t think about breathing. Get to Calvin.

The black Ford was perched at a crazy angle, its front end poking skyward from the top of the shattered frame of a farm wagon. A man in overalls lay sprawled in the street, moaning, his leg at a funny angle. Mattie recognized a local farmer, Roscoe Spranger.

Off to the side, Old Man Fallows sat in the dirt, his face buried in his hands, his shoulders jerking like he was being slammed in the back with a sledgehammer.

One horse, making a noise that made Mattie sick to her stomach, lay bleeding and covered by the splintered boards. Behind the horse a big pile of what looked like bloody rags leaked a dark liquid onto the sand. A woman’s bonnet lay in the dust and a man’s arm stuck out from the rag pile. The arm was covered by a yellow-and-blue plaid shirt sleeve, just like the fabric Mattie had used to make a new shirt for Calvin only a month ago.

Mattie stared at the arm in a stupor, barely aware of someone grabbing Laney and carrying her away. There was a gunshot and the struggling horse’s head flopped to the ground. Mattie fought for air, her lungs sounding like honking geese, as white-hot terror seared her chest.

She tried to scream Calvin’s name as she threw herself at the bloody rags in the wreckage. Grabbing the hand as she fell into blackness, she realized with horror it wasn’t attached to anything. The hand was falling with her into the void.

Then she felt someone holding her and something cold and wet on her face. Sheriff Doggett was propping her up, his arms tight around her.

“Here, Mattie, drink some water.” Mattie recognized the voice of Elsa Kroger from the general store. Mattie swallowed obediently and cautiously tested her breathing, relieved when at least some flow of air found her lungs.

“Laney,” Mattie croaked.

“Laney’s okay. Near scared to death, but Otto sweet-talked her and took her to the store for a soda pop and some candy.”

Mattie didn’t want to speak his name. If she didn’t say it, everything would be all right. He would be behind his teller’s cage, working like he always was. “Calvin?”

Mattie saw Sheriff Doggett’s chin quiver for a second. “Calvin and Old Granny Halvern. Both of them.”

Carter Bagley, the banker, knelt in front of Mattie. “It’s my fault, Mattie.” He was shaking like a dog climbing out of a cold creek and his voice was hoarse. “Granny Halvern was in the bank and she had a weak spell. I asked Calvin to walk her over to the general store so one of the Kroger boys could take her home...” Carter choked and bowed his head.

“That old fool, Fallows, come roaring into town too fast. He spooked Spranger’s horse,” Sheriff Doggett said. “Calvin and Granny were just crossing the street. The horse and wagon ran over them, then the car ran right up on it all. I’m so sorry, Mattie.”

Sorry.

Sorry wasn’t what she needed. She needed her husband to rise up whole again out of that ugly pine box. She needed her life back. She needed the words for her little girl when she came home in the morning. Words to tell Laney there wouldn’t be any more Daddy for piggyback rides, wading in the creek, reading fairy tales and singing Laney’s favorite song, “Ragtime Cowboy Joe,” at the top of their lungs.

Who was going to give her words for that?

Thank you for reading this sample chapter of

A SHADOW LIFE

I truly appreciate your interest and hope you enjoyed the beginning of this story. You’ll find more information at:

<http://www.letamccurry.com>

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B01LZQ50TS/>

What others are saying about A Shadow Life:

By [Janice Clark](#) on September 3, 2016

This book is an adrenaline rush, with one crisis after another. Run, Laney. Run and hide, and just when you think you're safe, it will start all over again. I read it in one night, didn't want to put it down. McCurry writes strong, determined women who overcome circumstances to rise to the top, while hiding their vulnerability from the world.

By [Amazon Customer](#) on September 3, 2016

Leta McCurry is my favorite new author! I absolutely loved her first novel, “High Cotton Country” and she

didn't lose any momentum in this new one.

She sure knows how to pull the emotions out of her readers. I have cried more than once, felt heartbroken, heartsick, worried and fretted over Mattie and Laniey's plight; anger and sick to my stomach regarding Harley's treatment of them; gratitude, and yes, love for Mavis for helping them; sexual tension and already remorse for where Ruby Jo's heading....and that is only the beginning. It only gets better from there!

For the first time ever, I found myself "talking" to her characters as if I was actually there. That is how real her characters feel.

By [Amazon Customer](#) on February 13, 2017

Story lines intersect in unexpected ways reminding us of the proverbial adage 6 degrees of separation. The characters, nice or naughty, are rich with depth. To those familiar with the geographical territory one can find themselves carried directly into the scene. For unfamiliar's, you will see it in your mind's eye with the vibrant, descript scenes as they play out. A great read and looking forward to the next!

Also check out:

HIGH COTTON COUNTRY

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B00R3M59MC/>

What others are saying about HIGH COTTON COUNTRY

By [Melissa A. Sanchez](#) on February 19, 2017

I held my breath, an all-embracing read! In a fight for her life Cazzie Rae Randall has been dealt a raw deal at every turn. I was like a moth to a flame, when I thought it couldn't get any worse..... I was wrong. This is a read I would love to see come to life in a movie. Thank you to the Author Leta McCurry for this tremendous read.

By [LSA](#) on February 8, 2017

As all have stated, this is a wonderful example of what women's lit is all about. McCurry's crafting excels from beginning to end, shining with a variety of deep characters, vivid and flowing scenes, topped off with stunning prose. This woman's journey is worth reading and highly recommend

By [Kelly Hartog](#) on April 20, 2015

Leta McCurry creates real, powerful, three dimensional characters. From the minor ones like Hink Bolton to the major players including Bama Tapp and the incomparable Nine, McCurry knows how to draw you in and have you holding your breath throughout the entire book. Her characters leap off the page and the emotions she generates stay with you long after the final page.