

HIGH COTTON COUNTRY

Leta McCurry

Your task is not to seek love, but to seek and find

all the barriers within yourself

that you have built against it.

– RUMI

CHAPTER 1 - LLANO RIVER BRIDGE

Mason County, Texas - September 1938

Big John Clifford was so focused on his miseries he paid little attention as his old 1928 Model A Ford truck coughed and spit its way across the Llano River Bridge. But, about half a mile beyond the bridge he was startled out of his fretful thoughts by a sight so unexpected he instinctively slammed down the brake, jerked the steering wheel toward the shoulder of the road and almost skidded into a ditch. He sat there while the old truck shuddered and jerked on its creaky springs.

The last thing Big John needed was one more aggravation to pester his day, but there she was, big as life.

It wasn't enough that Clara, his lady friend of ten years, decided she had waited long enough for him to get the hitchin' itch and was now walkin' out with the local feed store owner. Or that, to show her where the cow ate the cabbage, Big John up and took a job diggin' postholes starting the next morning at the Double K Ranch way up by Zenith. Big John hated diggin' postholes.

It wasn't enough that it felt more like July than September with the scrubby landscape of the Texas hill country hunkered down under the humidity like dumplings under the lid of a cast iron pot of boiling chicken gravy. Or that, hovering over the tops of the low hills to the southwest, black clouds looked so angry and tortured Big John thought he could hear them moan. There was going to be billy jack to pay, no doubt about it. Tornadoes mostly hit in the spring, but they could ravage the countryside any time, and Big John knew a twister cloud when he saw one.

If all that wasn't enough to just jimmy-jam a saint, there was a woman walking along the opposite shoulder of the road in the same direction Big John had just traveled. What in the world was she doing way out here? Why was she pulling a child's battered red wagon holding a little boy and a baby in nothing but a yellowed diaper? Big John maneuvered the truck into a safer position on the side of the road. He pulled a bandana out of his hip pocket, removed his Stetson and mopped away the salty sweat that trickled down his face. He plunked his Stetson back on, sighed deeply and hauled himself out of the truck. His mama had raised him not to meddle in other people's business, but he had also

been taught to be neighborly and mindful of women folk in particular. He felt obligated to offer whatever help might be needed.

The woman didn't stop walking or look up. A slat sun bonnet hid most of her face so he had a chance to study her briefly. He noticed her homemade flour-sacking dress was clean but threadbare. It and her cotton stockings were so saturated with sweat they clung to her bony back and thin legs. The boy, shirtless and barefoot and wearing striped bib overalls, was sitting on a pile of tow sacks, his shoulders seared an angry red by the sun. Big John guessed the boy to be about three. Tipping his hat to the woman, he said,

"Afternoon, ma'am."

He spoke clearly but softly, hoping to assure her of his good intentions. The woman stopped and raised her head slightly, enough for him to glimpse under her bonnet. Perspiration beaded on her forehead and upper lip and her face was flushed crimson with the heat. He could see nothing but her face and hands because the bonnet covered her hair and her high-necked, long-sleeved dress hung inches above dusty, scuffed shoes with run-down heels. Her hands were chapped, the cuticles ragged, and her face was haggard.

Big John was accustomed to seeing hill country women used up fast by a life of hard work, never enough of anything, and one still-sucking child slung on one hip and another in the belly. They married at fourteen or fifteen. Young'uns come one after another into late middle age. They seldom had a chance to even raise their heads from the time they said "I do" until they were lowered, worn and wasted, into their graves. So Big John was not surprised to realize this woman was much younger than she first appeared to be. She said nothing, just stared down the road.

"Ma'am," Big John began then hesitated, not sure how to proceed. He couldn't flat out ask what in tarnation she was doing out here in the middle of nowhere with two young'uns in the smothering heat of the day. She must've walked some five miles or more because there was nowhere she could have come from between where she stood and the outskirts of the town of Zenith. "Ma'am," he forged ahead, "can I give you a ride? I'm on my way to Zenith and I have plenty of room to put you and the young'uns up front. We could put the wagon in the back." He held back on offering to take her someplace back down Highway 87 in the direction he had just traveled.

She was so silent and unmoving he thought maybe she was a deaf-mute. Then she said in a voice that sounded like mice walking on dry corn husks, "Not going back to Zenith."

"But, ma'am, there ain't much between here and Fredicksburg except Cherry Springs and it's shut up tight this time of day." He knew she couldn't walk far enough or fast enough to gain any shelter he could think of before nightfall. Besides, it was doubtful she had enough strength to go another mile pulling the wagon in this heat. He suspected she was hungry, the boy too, but he had nothing to offer them. A clap of thunder caused him to look up at the darkening sky. "Ma'am, that's a bad storm about to bust loose any minute. We're in for some hard rain, maybe a twister."

"Storm won't hurt us," she replied so softly Big John leaned forward to hear. She recoiled from him as if cringing from some anticipated punishment.

John instantly stepped back. "Ma'am, I think we might make Zenith before the worst of the storm and they's plenty of folks would share a cellar with us."

“No, thank you.” She glanced at him and he noticed her eyes were an unusual color, not brown, not gold, but more like a thick stream of dark Karo syrup poured out against a window full of bright sunshine, speckled with a darker gold. *Will you just look at that? I'll bet she was some filly before hill country life got a good hold on her.* Embarrassed by his frivolous thoughts about this strange woman, Big John shuffled his boots in the gravel and turned to follow her gaze back down Highway 87. What in tarnation did she see? He didn't see anything. He squinted and stared until his eyes started to water but there was still nothing in any direction but scrubby mesquite and a few prickly pear cactus. There hadn't even been a vehicle on the road besides his for the last hour or more.

“Ma'am.” Big John knew he was begging. “Please, I'd be more'n happy to take you and the young'uns back to town.” He wanted to insist, to persuade her somehow, but being a simple man, he didn't know how.

“No, thank you kindly.” She walked away, pulling the wagon behind her. There wasn't anything else to say, at least nothing Big John could think of that didn't sound meddlesome.

“Well then, afternoon to you, Ma'am.” Big John tipped his hat again. He climbed into the truck and drove slowly away. He carried on a silent argument with himself for about a mile then stopped the truck in the middle of the road and sat in total puzzlement. A peculiar cold feeling twisted itself into a knot right behind his big Lone Star belt buckle. *Hell and damnation! Something ain't right.* He had to help her whether she wanted it or not, but how? It was unthinkable that he could just pick her up and put her in the truck although he could easily do so physically.

“Wimmin!” Big John snorted aloud, viciously jerking the steering wheel to turn the truck around. No matter how, it had to be done one way or another. He was going to help this strange, haunting woman and he was sure her man would thank him for it.

He didn't see her. The silvery steel web of the bridge loomed ahead and he knew she couldn't have walked any farther. Maybe she decided to go down and cool herself at the water's edge. Big John stopped the truck in the middle of the bridge and strode to the rail. He saw her about fifty yards up the rocky river bank.

The boy was still sitting in the wagon holding the baby, but the woman was walking along the edge of the water dragging the tow sacks behind her. The sacks were tied together with clothesline and there was about two feet of slack between them. The water was shallow where she was walking but Big John knew the river dropped off into a deep and dangerous pool a few feet away. He was about to shout a warning, but her next action was so odd, he hesitated in pure bewilderment. She stooped over, picked up a large rock, put it in one of the sacks, walked a few feet picked up another rock and put it in the same sack. He could tell one sack was heavy and the other empty by the way she dragged them.

Now, what in tarnation is she doing? She dropped the sacks on the ground and walked over to the children. She lifted the baby out of the little boy's arms then grasped the boy's hand to help him out of the wagon. As they walked toward the sacks, Big John was seized by unspeakable dread. A chill rippled through his body and the hair on the back of his neck stood on end.

He stared in open-mouthed disbelief as the woman placed the baby in the empty sack attached by the clothesline to the one containing the rocks. John tried to shout but he was paralyzed by the

horror he suspected was playing out before his eyes. He bunched his muscles to spring into a run but his feet were rooted to the pavement. Imprisoned in the agonizing immobility of shock, he watched as she bent over and put the clothesline around her neck. When she straightened the two sacks dangled from her scrawny shoulders, one on each side of her body. As she reached for the boy's hand, a skinny finger of lightening jabbed the earth a mile away. The sudden flash and rumble of thunder rocked the bridge under Big John's feet, jolting him into action.

"Ma'am!" he shouted. He was certain she heard him, but she did not look in his direction. "Lady!" he screamed at the top of his lungs as he lunged toward the end of the bridge. Running, he kept his eyes glued to what she was doing and bellowed his frustration at his inability to stop what he saw. She firmly held the boy's hand as she waded into deeper and deeper water. Big John could not hear his own screams but the hysterical shrieking of the boy and the alarmed wailing of the infant joining together in a chorus of pure, raw terror seared his soul. He saw the boy twisting and struggling to escape his mother's hand. But the woman held him firmly and when he lost his footing, she continued to drag him toward the deep pool.

"Oh, God! Oh, Lordy! Lady, please!" Big John shrieked as he bolted around the end of the bridge. His feet hit the loose rocks and, losing his balance, he tumbled head over heels down the steep incline toward the river's edge. His Stetson flew off and his jeans ripped. Big John had the strange sensation of both being in his body as it hurtled down the embankment and, at the same time, out of it, standing a distance off, watching himself in slow motion as he kept his eyes glued to the woman wading deeper and deeper into the river, dragging the wailing boy behind her. The two sacks were already under water. Now, instead of one unending shriek, the boy's screams were jerky as he struggled to keep his head above water. The sound empowered John with stamina and speed he didn't know still existed in his old body.

What seemed like an eternity was only minutes. The woman was already in water up to her chest as John drew near along the bank. The boy was being towed face down, under water except for his feet which were thrashing wildly, his screams now gurgled into silence. As Big John splashed into the river, lunging for the boy's feet, he thought for a microsecond about his new Pedro Martinez boots, for which he had frugally saved for three years and which he was wearing for the very first time. Then the muddy bottom dropped from beneath him and he was in over his head. Opening his eyes and diving deeper, he frantically thrashed about, trying to see, until his lungs roared for air.

Big John surfaced, gulped air, and dove again, reaching for depth. A shadowy apparition rose up to meet him from the murk. The darkening sky was turning the pool into a watery blackness with rapidly diminishing visibility so it took a moment for him to recognize the woman's bonnet. It rode giddily on the current, the ties undulating behind like two snakes dancing in silent, bizarre unison. Big John back-paddled, attempting to elude the bonnet, but it relentlessly pursued him. It swirled against his head and he closed his eyes as the clammy fabric clasped his face, sucking greedily against his nose and mouth. In a panic, he tore the bonnet away to a sight that would haunt him all the rest of his days.

Her face was only inches from his but her body faded into the darkness so her head appeared suspended, bodiless. Wispy hair, now loose, fanned out around her face like silken threads floating on the current. Big John could not have been more terrorized if her actual decapitated head had floated

up to meet him, but it was her eyes that froze his heart. They were open and they were not dead eyes. They were living, knowing eyes, and she was *looking* at him. Her mouth was wide open and he realized she was drawing water into her lungs and drowning even as he watched. He reached for her but she faded into the murk. A few strands of her hair slipped through his fingers then she was gone. Big John dove into the depths again and again, finally surfacing for the last time. He floundered, bone weary and nerve raw, struggling to crawl to the river's edge. He sat in the shallow water, gulping great breaths of air to fill his screaming lungs.

Lightning fried the sky overhead, followed by thunder that rattled the teeth of ground hogs in their holes. A gust of wind picked up his Stetson from near the bridge and sailed it through the air then skipped it along the surface of the water until it stopped skipping and floated off downstream. Big John stared blankly at the toes of his boots sticking up from the water with not a single thought about Pedro Martinez or the cost of his footwear, now soggy and discolored. He was not aware of the thunder nor did he see the lightning. He was seeing an old-young face with a spray of freckles across the nose, loose silken hair floating like a spider web in the current and wide-open weary eyes looking at him.

Big John Clifford, who had not shed a tear in more than fifty years, threw his head back and howled his rage at his impotency against her determination, and he wept.

He was there later in the day when the sacks holding the infant and the rocks were found at the bottom of the deep, murky pool. And he watched again the next day when, in the early afternoon, the woman's body was snagged by grappling hooks and brought to the surface by sheriff's deputies dragging the river about a mile downstream.

The body of the boy was never found.

Thank you for reading this sample chapter of
HIGH COTTON COUNTRY

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/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 Rea 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.

[5.0 out of 5 stars](#) [McCurry's Excellent Debut](#)

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.

Also check out new book:
A SHADOW LIFE

<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 Laney'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!