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Eulogy

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Relics--Fiction

— Bridget Donnelly

The folks round here still talk of the day Mary Sue Ellen Pittimore killed herself by jumpin off the new bridge cross Muddy Crick. They still don't know why she did it, but they all got speculations. What they do know though, is that Mary Sue Ellen couldn't swim if her life depended on it, but seein as how there was only six inches of water in the crick at the time, Mary Sue Ellen didn't have no cause for learnin to swim anyhow. So, most folks here in Plowman County think Mary Sue Ellen Pittimore died from hittin bottom, but Mrs. Polk says she read it in *READER'S DIGEST* that a person could drown in just a teaspoon of water. "Imagine that," Mrs. Polk says to the Ladies Guild, "just a teaspoon of water!" So, there's other folks here in Plowman County think Mary Sue Ellen just plain drowned — and in only six inches of water! Either way, drownin or hittin bottom, Mary Sue Ellen Pittimore killed herself by jumpin off the new bridge cross Muddy Crick and they still don't know why she did it.

It's goin on eight years now since Mary Sue Ellen killed herself by jumin off the new bridge. Folks call it the new bridge cause it's new, compared to the old one. The government of Plowman County came and checked the old bridge cross the crick and said the wood was so rotten on the thing that it was goin to fall in any day. "It'll be the death of one of you yet," some government man with a big stomach had said. So, on down the crick a ways, the government of Plowman County built us a new bridge. They even gave us steel reinforcin, and did it ever shine! Folks round here stood for days admirin that shiny new bridge with the steel reinforcin, but nobody would go cross it. They all kept right on usin the rotten old bridge, even though it was goin to be the death of one of them yet. I guess steel reinforcin just don't make no difference to folks round here. That's what Mary Sue Ellen used to say anyhow, but she was different.

Most folks here in Plowman County didn't take too kindly to Mary Sue Ellen Pittimore. She wasn't homely or nothin, but folks just didn't take to her, like they didn't take to that new bridge. I don't know why, but when folks round here don't want to take to somethin, they don't have no reason for it, but they just plain don't take to it. But Mary Sue Ellen wasn't homely and she wasn't hateful neither. She was always real nice to us younger girls when we was at school. At recess, stead of sittin with the older girls and talkin bout boys and all, she would show us pictures out of the magazines she used to carry around. They were pictures of city life with pretty women in bright colored dresses and men in real silk shirts. She would read to us out of her books too. They weren't library books, but books she ordered from somewhere other than Plowman County. The books talked a lot bout women and goin places and all and I didn't understand none of it, none of us did. She used to talk bout how she was goin away from Plowman County and the folks round here. "They're all stuck," she would say, "stuck, and thick as mud, too!" We didn't understand that none either, but we admired Mary Sue Ellen Pittimore anyway. Folks said she was different, but I admired her.

So, it's goin on eight years now since Mary Sue Ellen Pittimore killed herself by jumpin off the new bridge cross Muddy Crick and the folks round here still talk of the day.

It was hot that day, hot, hot. Nothin moved, not in town or down by the crick. Not a breeze moved leaf or blade of grass. It was hot and nothin moved. Even the mud in Muddy Crick was layin so thick that the water stood right on top of it and was clear. That right there tells you it was no ordinary day. Folks call it Muddy Crick cause that's what it is — muddy and when the water in Muddy Crick is runnin clear, it's no ordinary day. The only other time the crick ran clear was back a few years when a hard winter came to Plowman County. It was cold that winter, so cold that the ground was froze solid and the mud was brick. When the day warmed up just enough for the water in the crick to thaw, but not enough to thaw the frozen mud, Muddy Crick ran clear. For one whole day Muddy Crick ran clear, the next brought back the mud, soft and oozin and Muddy Crick was muddier than ever. But the day Mary Sue Ellen Pittimore killed herself was hot and Muddy Crick ran clear.

Young Tom Wirley from over to Newcomberry was down to the crick that afternoon huntin squirrels. "Yah, it was hot, real hot, but that's the best time. They don't move much when it's hot and a sittin squirrel's an easy shot." Folks round here still stand with their mouths hangin open whenever Young Tom Wirley tells how he saw Mary Sue Ellen fallin. He didn't see her jump, but he saw her fallin and to folks round here, that's almost as good as seein her hit bottom. "She came flyin off that bridge like a dazed dove. I tell you, it was a perfect flight! I was aimin at this squirrel sittin real pretty like in this elm cross the crick and Mary Sue Ellen fell right into my line of fire. I seen her fallin through the sight on my twelve gauge. If I hadn't knowd it was Mary Sue Ellen Pittimore, I mighten of just taken a shot at her. My hand got a little fidgety like it does when you got an open shot like that, but I knowd it was Mary Sue Ellen and anyhow, they didn't find no holes in her!" Young Tom Wirley went for Sheriff Thompson after he'd seen Mary Sue Ellen just layin real still in Muddy Crick. "When I seen that Mary Sue Ellen wasn't in there for a swim, I went and fetched my squirrel and went direct to fetch the sheriff."

Somehow, somewhere tween the time Young Tom Wirley fetched Sheriff Thompson and Sheriff Thompson fetched Doc Reddin and the three of them got out to Muddy Crick, somehow, folks had already got the news and had gathered out to the new bridge. They were all just standin there with their mouths hangin open, starin at Mary Sue Ellen Pittimore layin face down, in the mud, in Muddy Crick. Sheriff Thompson, bein sheriff and all, was keepin folks back. "Don't want you folks destroyin no evidence," he said, so he kept em back. Doc Reddin went into the crick and fetched the body, he bein the Doc and all, and laid Mary Sue Ellen up on the bank of Muddy Crick. The folks all just stared with open mouths at Mary Sue Ellen and the mud all over the front of her. Sheriff Thompson just looked at Mary Sue Ellen, "Damn kids." Doc Reddin just sat down and looked at his boots, "Damn mud." Somehow, folks seemed to forget that it was so burnin hot and the spot where Doc Reddin had fetched Mary Sue Ellen out of Muddy Crick was all stirred up now and it wasn't clear no more.

Seemed like everyone in Plowman County turned out for Mary Sue Ellen Pittimore's funeral. The graveyard is just on the other side of Muddy Crick and you could



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just see a line of folks all in black movin cross the old bridge, comin to see Mary Sue Ellen put in the ground. Folks still talk of the day they buried Mary Sue Ellen Pittimore. It was black that day, black, black. It was fixin to storm real bad and the clouds were black, black as Muddy Crick. The folks were all sayin that if it started to rain, the rain would be like the crick water — black. It looked like it was twilight, dark as it was, and the graves were all shadowy and you couldn't see no writin on the stones, but it was only early noon. The folks were all black too. They all had their very best black on, black shoes, black hats, black goves and the women had their black veils on over their faces and their faces looked black. Everythin was black, cept for the pretty flowers they all carried in their hands, bright, colorful, pretty flowers for Mary Sue Ellen Pittimore.

All the folks gathered round where they had Mary Sue Ellen laid. She was in the box with the lid shut, layin next to the black hole they had dug for her and the folks were all gathered round. The Reverend Whitset came with Mrs. Pittimore, seein as how he was the Reverend and all and seein as how Mrs. Pittimore didn't have no next of kin cept for Mary Sue Ellen who was layin in the box. So, the Reverend came with Mrs. Pittimore lamentin all the way and they joined the other folks gathered round Mary Sue Ellen and the black hole. The Reverend looked up at the sky, black as it was, cleared his throat and opened his black, worn, leather Bible. The folks all looked to the Reverend, and in the loud voice he usually saves for preachin and prayin, he began eulogizin Mary Sue Ellen Pittimore. The women began to cry and Mrs. Pittimore let out a long, loud sob and the Reverend's chest grew bigger and he eulogized even louder, like she could hear him, layin there in her box. I never heard a eulogy as long as the one for Mary Sue Ellen Pittimore and when the Reverend finally finished, he checked his watch and nodded his head. Then the Reverend started prayin, "Lord, show mercy on your child, Mary Sue Ellen Pittimore, and forgive her of her sin and," he cut it short seein as how it was fixin to rain and all, "Amen." Reverend Whitset closed his black, worn, leather Bible and the folks all lowered their eyes. He stepped right up next to Mary Sue Ellen's box and looked at it like he was lookin at Mary Sue Ellen herself, like he was the good Lord and passin judgement on her, then, he quick looked down into the black hole they had dug. Mrs. Pittimore came and stood next to the Reverend and she looked down into the black hole too, but seein that hole they had dug for her Mary Sue Ellen made her start up cryin again. So, Mrs. Polk and Reverend Whitset, seein as how he was the Reverend and all and how she was president of the Ladies Guild, they took Mrs. Pittimore away from the box and the hole and from Mary Sue Ellen.

One by one, all the folks went by Mary Sue Ellen in the box. And when they did, they just couldn't help but to look down into that deep, black hole they had dug and their mouths would fall open, just a little. Then, they put their bright colored flowers on top of poor Mary Sue Ellen Pittimore and walked away real slow and sad. The wind was pickin up and the clouds got blacker and the line of folks moved faster by the box. Young Tom Wirley went by and Sheriff Thompson and the Doc and even the government man with the big stomach, all the folks went by Mary Sue Ellen and her box and the deep, black hole they had dug for her.

The folks hurried back cross the old bridge, cross Muddy Crick and the line of black disappeared on the other side. The government man with the big stomach followed the rest of the folks and went right on cross that old, rotten bridge, forgettin how it would be the death of him, and he didn't even glance at the new one with the steel reinforcin not fifty yards downstream. Folks here in Plowman County still talk of that black day, eight years ago, when they put Mary Sue Ellen Pittimore into the ground.

I was the last to cross Muddy Crick that day eight years ago. I had her magazines so I stayed to give them back to her. I found them the day they found her. They were both in the crick and seein as how there was only six inches of water, they weren't hard to find. I knew they'd be there, in the mud. So, I stayed, and instead of puttin flowers on top of Mary Sue Ellen, I put her magazines with the grand pictures and grand ideas and the pages flipped in the wind. I remember standin on the old and lookin back at the box and the hole and thinkin how funny it was that, after all that black, Mary Sue Ellen's box was bright with flowers. The wind had blown some of the flowers to the ground and their color made the hole look sort of pretty. I never did understand why folks came to funerals as black as they could and brought flowers. Anyway, the men with the shovels would be comin soon to put the box and Mary Sue Ellen into the hole they had dug and she would be covered with dirt, not flowers. I looked for a minute downstream at the new bridge. Funny how the folks didn't take much to that new thing. Only a few strangers to Plowman County and Mary Sue Ellen Pittimore ever used that bridge. Guess folks will just keep on usin the old one till it can't stand no more and falls into Muddy Crick once and for all, just like Mary Sue Ellen.

It began to rain as I was standin on the old bridge, not a mean, heavy rain like the black sky promised, but a soft, gentle rain and it was clear. The folks were probably disappointed, but the rain was clear, like the crick was, the day Mary Sue Ellen Pittimore went and killed herself by jumpin off the new bridge cross Muddy Crick. ■

