

THE SALT LINE

The Salt Line

A Novel of the Fen Country

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*For the people of the low parishes, who kept the
ledgers dry.*

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Prologue



THE WATER CAME UP the way it always had, which is to say slowly, and then all at once, and then as though it had never been anywhere else.

Ellen Rye was eleven the summer the Ouse turned back on itself. She remembered it as a smell before a sight — the iron-and-cut-grass smell of a river out of its bed, drifting up the lane an hour before anybody saw the shine of it under the hedge. Her mother had been counting jars in the pantry. Her father had been at the pumping station and would stay there four days.

What Ellen remembered most clearly, and what she would be asked about again and again in the years afterward, was the quiet. Not silence. The village had never been silent. But the ordinary noises had gone somewhere — the tractor two fields over, the rooks, the seven o'clock train that you could set a kettle by — and in their place there was a sound like a held breath, spread thin across four hundred acres.



Thirty-one years later she came back with a theodolite in the boot of a hired car and a contract from an agency that had not existed when the water came.

They wanted the old line surveyed. That was the phrase in the letter: *the old line*, as though there were only one, as though everyone agreed where it had run. Ellen had read the letter three times in the car park of a service station outside Peterborough and had understood, somewhere around the third reading, that she was being hired for what she knew rather than for what she could measure.

ONE

The Low Parishes



THE ROAD INTO FENWICK Sluice ran along the top of a bank, and from the top of the bank you could see the whole of what had been the parish laid out below like something spilled.

Ellen drove it at twenty miles an hour with the window down. Reeds on the left, standing in water that had been a rugby pitch. Reeds on the right. And ahead, where the road bent, the tower of St Aidan's with a heron on it, entirely at ease, as though a church were a normal place for a heron to conduct its business.

She parked at the gate of the old churchyard and sat for a while with her hands on the wheel.

"You'll be the surveyor," said a voice at the window.

The man was seventy or thereabouts, in a coat that had been expensive in about 1985, and he had come up the bank without her hearing him, which said something about the bank or about her.

“Ellen Rye.”

“I know who you are.” He put out a hand. “Tom Barsby. I was churchwarden. I’m still churchwarden, technically, though there’s a limit to what a churchwarden can do about a church with a heron on it.”

She got out of the car. Up close he had the fen face — weathered in horizontal bands, as though the wind had come at him level for fifty years, which it had.

“They’ve sent you for the line,” he said. It was not a question.

“They’ve sent me to survey the flood extent of ’ninety-four and produce a defensible boundary. Yes.”

“Defensible.” Barsby said the word the way you would hold up something wet. “That’s a lawyer’s word.”

“It’s an insurance word.”

“Worse.” He turned and looked out over the reeds, and Ellen looked with him, because it was the sort of view that obliged you. “You know what they’ll do with it. Your line. Everything one side gets rebuilt and everything the other side gets bought out at nineteen ninety-four prices.”

“That’s not my decision.”

“No,” Barsby agreed, pleasantly. “It’s just your line.”



The village hall had a new roof and the same floor, and the floor still had the marks where the trestle tables had stood for four days in August while the Women’s Institute ran what the county council later described, in a report, as *an unstructured but effective relief operation*.

Ellen set up in the corner under the window. She laid out the survey sheets, the tablet, the two GPS units, and last of all, from a document tube that had travelled with her through five house

moves and one divorce, a roll of cartridge paper going soft at the edges.

She unrolled it and put a stone on each corner.

It was a map of Fenwick Sluice drawn in coloured pencil by a child. The scale was wrong in three places and right, remarkably, everywhere else. Every house was numbered. Beside each number, in a round eleven-year-old hand, was a date and a time and a depth: *No. 14 — 12 Aug, 6.40 a.m. — 2 ft 3 in at back step.*

Two hundred and six entries. Ellen had made them because her father had told her, on the first morning, that somebody ought to be writing it down, and then had gone to the pumping station and stayed there.

Nobody else had written it down. That was the thing she had spent thirty years not quite believing. The council's gauge had failed at 4 a.m. on the twelfth. The Environment Agency's records began at the flood defence, two miles downstream. Between those two facts there was a hole four hundred acres wide, and in the hole there was a child's map with a stone on each corner.

Two

What the Gauge Missed



SURVEYING IS MOSTLY ARITHMETIC performed outdoors in bad weather, and Ellen had chosen it for that reason.

She worked east from the church for three days. The method was unglamorous: establish a control point, shoot the levels, walk, repeat. Where the 1994 line had left a mark — a tide-stain on brick, a change in the mortar, a hedge that had died and been replaced by a different hedge — she recorded it and photographed it and moved on.

By the Thursday she had forty-one hard points, which was forty-one more than the agency had expected and thirty fewer than she needed.

The difficulty with historic flood extents is that the evidence degrades in precisely the places where the flooding

was most severe. Where the water stood longest, the fabric that would record it has most often been replaced.

— *Institute of Surveyors*, Guidance Note 11

She read that on the Thursday evening in the pub with a pint going flat beside her, and laughed, because Guidance Note 11 had been written by a man who had never met Tom Barsby.

Barsby remembered everything. Barsby remembered it in a form no surveyor could use and no lawyer could dismiss.

“Number 40,” he said, on the Friday, standing in a field. “Bill Anstey’s. Water came in the front and not the back, because the front was a step down. It sat at the second stair for a night and a day and Bill sat on the fourth stair with the dog.”

“How high is a stair?”

“Seven and a half inches,” said Barsby, “in that house.”

Ellen wrote it down. Then she took out the child’s map and found No. 40 and read: *No. 40 — 12 Aug, 9 a.m. — 1 ft 4 in inside front door.*

Two independent records, thirty-one years apart, agreeing to within an inch and a half.

She stood in the field a moment longer than she needed to.



That night she spread the map on the bed in the pub’s one letting room and did something she had been putting off since Peterborough. She began to transfer it.

Each of the two hundred and six entries became a point with a national grid reference and an uncertainty. The uncertainty was the hard part. An eleven-year-old with a tape measure and a bicycle is not a calibrated instrument. But she was a consistent one — Ellen could see her own method emerging from the numbers, the same three questions asked at every door, the

same rounding to the nearest inch, the same stubborn refusal to guess where she had not looked.

By two in the morning she had a scatter of two hundred and six dots on a screen and, threaded through them, a line.

It did not match the line in the agency's brief. It was north of it by between forty and two hundred metres for most of its length, and where it diverged most, it diverged around the houses on Mill Drove — the eleven houses that the brief had classified, on the basis of the failed gauge and a 1996 desk study, as having been outside the flood.

Ellen looked at that for a long time.

Then she opened her laptop and wrote to the agency, and deleted it, and wrote it again shorter, and sent it: *The brief's baseline appears to rest on a gauge that failed four hours before peak. I have contemporaneous depth records for 206 properties. Please advise whether you want the survey I was contracted for or the survey the evidence supports.*

THREE

Mill Drove



THE REPLY CAME ON Monday and said neither of the things she had asked about.

It said that the agency valued her diligence, that the baseline had been agreed with stakeholders in a process concluded in 2019, and that any material revision would require the reopening of that process. It said that she should complete the survey as scoped. It was signed by someone whose job title contained the word *assurance*.

Ellen read it twice and then walked out to Mill Drove.

Eleven houses, in a row, facing south across what the map called Long Fen and everyone else called the Wash Field. Six of them lived in. Three of them boarded. Two of them, at the far end, simply gone — a rectangle of harder ground where a footprint had been, and a lilac still flowering out of what had been somebody's back garden.

She knocked at the first one and a woman of about her own age opened the door with a tea towel over her shoulder.

"I'm Ellen Rye. I'm surveying the—"

"You're Ellen Rye," the woman said. "You did the map."



Her name was Priya Anstey; she had married Bill's son and had been in the house nineteen years. She made tea and put the pot on the table between them and did not sit down.

"They came in 2019," she said. "The stakeholder thing. Two evenings in the village hall in February. Eleven of us on this row and four came, because it was February and because nobody told us it was about us." She folded the tea towel and unfolded it. "They had a map on the wall with a red line and the line went along the back of these gardens. Somebody asked what the line meant and the man said it was indicative."

"Indicative."

"That was the word." Priya looked at her. "It means the roof grant. If you're inside the line you're in the scheme and if you're outside it you're not, and if you're not, you're also not insurable, and if you're not insurable you can't sell, and if you can't sell you can't leave. Bill's dad sat on the fourth stair with the dog for a night and a day and thirty years later a man in the village hall says indicative and my house is worth what somebody will pay in cash."

Ellen turned her cup around on the table.

"How high is a stair?" she said. "In this house."

Priya blinked. "Seven and a half inches. Why?"

"Because I have a note in a child's handwriting that says the water in your father-in-law's house stood at one foot four inside the front door at nine in the morning on the twelfth of August,

and I have Tom Barsby saying it sat at the second stair. And your house is eleven inches lower than his."

There was a silence of a particular quality.

"So we were in it," Priya said.

"You were a foot and a half into it," said Ellen. "You were never outside the line. There was no line. There was a gauge that stopped at four in the morning and a desk study in 1996 and then twenty-three years of people copying each other."

Priya sat down at last.

"Can you prove it?"

Ellen thought about the roll of cartridge paper with a stone on each corner, and about the word *defensible*, and about the fact that the only surviving instrument of record for four hundred acres on the worst day in the parish's history had been an eleven-year-old girl on a bicycle who had been told that somebody ought to be writing it down.

"I can," she said. "That's the problem. Proving it is easy. Getting it entered is the part that takes a lawyer."

Epilogue



THE INQUIRY SAT FOR eleven days in a hotel conference suite in Ely with a view of the car park.

Ellen gave evidence on the fourth day. She was asked about her methodology, her control points, her uncertainty budget, and — for two and a half hours, by a barrister who was very good at his job — about whether a child's coloured-pencil map could properly be described as data.

She said that it could. She said that data is a record made by a method, that the method here was three questions asked at two hundred and six doors and a tape measure held against a step, and that the method had been applied more consistently over four days in August 1994 than the desk study of 1996 had been applied over four hundred acres.

The barrister asked whether she accepted that she had a personal connection to the material.

"I made it," Ellen said. "That is the connection. If I had not made it, there would be nothing at all."



The report came out in the following spring and used the phrase *the Rye survey* forty times, which Ellen minded more than she expected to.

Mill Drove went into the scheme. The two houses at the far end stayed gone, because nothing in a report brings a house back, but the lilac was still there and Priya Anstey had a roof grant and a buyer, and did not, in the end, sell.

Tom Barsby died in the November, before the report, having given evidence on the seventh day in the coat from 1985. Asked by the same barrister how he could be certain of a depth measured thirty-one years earlier, he had said: "Because I was on the fourth stair, and I have thought about it every day since, and you have thought about it since March."

The cartridge paper is in the county record office now, flattened between boards, catalogued under a number. Ellen went once to look at it and found that they had put a small typed card beside it.

The card says: *Flood record, Fenwick Sluice, August 1994. Compiled by E. Rye, aged 11. Sole contemporaneous record of depths within the parish.*

She had wanted it to say something else, though she could not have said what, and she stood in the reading room for a while with her hands behind her back, being forty-two and eleven at the same time, until the archivist asked if she needed anything and she said no, thank you, she had found what she came for.

Acknowledgments



The parish of Fenwick Sluice is invented, but the hole in the record is not.

I am grateful to the drainage board archivists who let me read minute books in a cold room, to the two retired surveyors who explained uncertainty budgets to me twice, and to the woman in a village hall in Lincolnshire who told me that the word she remembered from the meeting was *indicative*.

Any errors of hydrology are mine. The errors of process are, unfortunately, on record.