

they are so light that they may be hoisted should I overland from one river to the next.

canoe is long enough for two men, I propel it single paddle, first one side and then the other, face forwards in their canoes and see clearly what I do the same yet still prefer the pull of the we do in memory, back to where I started. I fancy ference between an old world and a new.

the Oost Rivier, I may let the tide take me down range Eylandt, which is a larger island than any, or any I saw on my travels. On the shore lie dertrack that in the summer heave with clouds tiful small rivers running into the marshes, with rowned kings of the water with the beavers me.

ry paddle on for days. I catch fish and travel as reach the far end of the island where it breaks and beaches. Then I walk down to the open o be not a man but a part of nature, as is a star, s for joy out in the bay. Far away round our t, while here I stand on the new. Waves rush pull back, marbled with sand and foam.

Chapter 2

The Isle of Ely, upon the Great Level.

The 20th day of July, 1649.

Wind from the west, the sky overcast.

It is a month before the dog days when the high summer comes to an end and Sirius shines bright in the sky. I have been on the Great Level for two months now and I am beginning to get the measure of the place. Its contours are no longer strange to my eyes. The town of Ely falls away into green fields after five minutes' walk. Herds of cattle now surround the town, brought across the causeway to the island to fatten on the summer grass. Before the autumn rains set in they will be on the move again, driven down to London and the slaughterhouses of the market there.

The woman I lodge with is no more than civil. Mrs Suckling is her name. She takes my money with ill grace and never speaks of the war, though a rough print of General Cromwell hangs inside the door. I stay with her some evenings and begin in a halting way to speak English. She sits in a high-backed chair and smooths down her linen pinafore with short hard sweeps, as if it stood for me, and I were a small boy, poor at grammar, in need of correction. Other times I stay in my room with my books and my figures from the day's work, or meet Van Hooghthen in his lodgings to talk and smoke a pipe.

I do not go to cathedral services in Ely, though I am told that every person should attend. I dislike the curiosity of the people, and

I walk quickly, and fear to be attacked. In the daytime children follow me along the streets, darting in and out of passages and doorways and trying insults.

'Boer.'

'Hey, Mr Herring.'

Bold as crows, boys in gowns run out from the school building by the cathedral, and pull at my sleeve.

'Made of cheese?'

'Go away, stranger.'

'Yes, back to where you came from.'

I smile to show I wish them no harm, and walk on like a deaf man. If I commanded the language better I might tell them that the place I come from is not so unlike this one, flat and circumscribed by water. But I do not try to speak to them. I smile over their heads and continue on my way. Later I hear their words again, and surprise myself with the thought that, despite such taunts, I am happy to have left my home in search of adventure and fortune.

Soon I notice that I am not alone in my cowl of silence. There are others as quiet as I am; men and women who hide their faces and go hunched about their business. These are they who sided with the King and now they are the debris of war, abandoned by its retreat. Here are young men discharged from the King's army with half a limb; traders who supplied the losers; widows and children without support beyond a reluctant parish. They are not wanted and are now called traitors. Most people here were Cromwell's from the start.

Yet though victorious, Ely is not a place of ease or laughter. The warts have left the town in want. Taverns are closed, at least to the street, and there never was much other entertainment, I fancy. Perhaps a fair will come in, but now all I see are the pedlars, clad in cast-offs. Some sell ribbons and pins, scissors and needles. Others tout vials of medicine, cordials, scorpions from the east, potions of all sorts. Above the bed where I sleep, a dry bunch of herbs hangs suspended. Does it ward off spirits or stop my aches as it gathers dust?

This is the time of the ague, too. From the standing water of the meres bad air rises up and brings the shivering sickness into town. Some say the ague sits in the air, others that it is heated by the sun, others still that it is brought by spirits who come at night. When the fever rises, people dose themselves with an infusion made from poppy seeds. Whether this has any effect I cannot say, only that Mrs Suckling

lives in great fear of the ague, and with good reason, for I have seen it carry off children in a few days from the first sweats. It is a haunting disease; once it enters, there is no getting rid of it. It comes back with no warning, making prisoners of its victims.

To a man who knows Amsterdam and Leiden, this is a miserable poor place, with scarce a hook to be seen in the few good houses that I have been in. Yet, to my surprise, the meres and bogs supply a multitude of foodstuffs and other goods. Stacks of peat stand in the yards by the jetties, taken from the islands that emerge from the water in the summer, friable and easy to cut. Alongside them lie bundles of reeds, the best for baskets and matting, the rest for thatch. The fensmen are now landing many thousands of eels, that are carted in wooden barrels to London for sale, alive in water and tangled together like the hair of the Medusa. These eels are mysterious creatures, with wide lips and roving eyes. It is said they come from across the ocean and return there in the winter.

Then, a few days ago, great flocks of geese were driven in from the islands to be plucked by the townswomen whose employment this is. I watched a woman at her task, the goose trapped neck first between her chapped calves. In a few minutes she pulled out its feathers, working both sides of the bird from breast to tail, and then released it, pink and naked, leaving by her feet a pile of feather and down. The bloody tail feathers are cleaned, cut and sold for quills. The lightest down plumps up pillows and mattresses. All day the air is filled with feather fragments that float through the narrow streets and settle on my clothes. Five times a year, I am told, the geese are brought to be plucked, five times returned to their island homes.

The people of Ely Isle like to stay upon their upland. They mistrust outsiders, not just foreigners such as I am, but all those from other places, especially their neighbours, the fensmen, who live out on the meres, and come to Ely only to trade. Though they are close as to miles, the fensmen are spoken of with lowered voices. I have seen townspeople cross themselves in the manner of the old religion when the fensmen pass. Witches are said to be common amongst them, and many, I heard an old man say, still practise the pagan religion that long ago held sway across these islands. Upon my enquiring what this might be he said that the fensmen make offerings to various gods.

and declared that no traveller who wishes to return ventures into that treacherous place. Wraiths and spirits live out on the mores also, he added. At night their fires burn and the fensmen pass through them without harm.

The world beyond the Great Level arrives slowly, carried by chapmen who hawk their goods in the streets and bring sheets of printed paper with the news. London news is also told abroad by the carters who go back and forth with eels, goose down and quills. London, I am told by one of them, is a place of felons and dissolute persons. War is again in the air, the struggle between the royal cause and those who want no king. Ireland declares for kings, and the old religion, and rebels against the republic. One day, as I walk up Fore Hill towards the cathedral, I chance on a detachment of soldiers fifty strong on horseback.

The sound of hooves on the flagstones rings loud off the sides of the buildings. A thickset man rides at the head of the group. His long leather coat is spotted with grease and a heavy helmet jogs his knee. I stand in the entrance to a mean shop and measure him with my eyes. He is of middle height and age. With little presence on a horse, he slouches in the saddle and holds his head poorly. He has no air of either modesty or grandeur. Sparse grey hair falls about his shoulders, through which his scalp is pink and visible. Even from a distance I see that he has a growth between his chin and lip that draws the eye to it as to a sore, and others over his lips and brows.

I turn to a native of the place who stands by me.

'Sir, do you know this man?'

'What is it to you?' he asks and considers me keenly, as if I might be the agent of a foreign power. 'Though I know myself to be a stranger here, it is unpleasant to be brought up close to the disdain of one man for another, where war begins, and might begin at any time.'

A young man turns to me as if to suggest without words an acceptance of my presence in this place, and says with kindness in his voice, 'It is General Cromwell, come to raise troops for new wars abroad. He once lived here, in St Mary's Street, so I know the look of him, though not every man does, or wishes to.'

So this is General Cromwell, who commands the army and was principal among those who killed the King. Many here were his supporters; but war has dulled their admiration and their joy at victory. Few run forward to thank him, or kiss his hand. No one cheers or

presses close to his horse. General Cromwell does not have a face to love, or even a face to be afraid of.

The horsemen halt at the cathedral door and several foot soldiers come up. A table is called for and set on trestles. Cromwell does not dismount, but carries on towards his old house. Like the man of property he is, he has come to make sure it is in order before he leaves these shores.

Though at first reluctant, a few young men now begin to press up to the table. The harsh weather of the last winter has taken its toll. Food is scarce and most of those who push forward look ragged and poor. I watch one of them, urged on by his companions. As he approaches the table he stands up a little straighter, throws back his shoulders and tips up his chin. Looking at him, I see myself, two months before, advancing in that London room towards Mr Vennynden, my maps and drawings in one hand.

The boy signs, and is gestured to one side. Others come up. One man jumps down from a passing cart and approaches, as if possessed of a sudden whim to leave his life and take another without a thought. The helmets of the soldiers glint behind the trestle; the horses sweat in the summer heat and stamp on the cobbles. They dip their heads and flick their tails to drive away the gathering flies. Swords poke out from the soldiers' long leather coats. The sight excites those who are watching.

Someone shouts for General Cromwell, and more men press forward. Even I, a Dutchman with no notion of the past histories of these islands, feel that what has brought them here, besides hunger, is more than the hatreds that fester from the last wars and now burst out again. In this ruined place people long for something to happen. Men are restless creatures, and tired of standing at street corners, hungry and casting about for work. They chafe at inactivity. The horses, the arrival of General Cromwell, a sense of the danger that is to come: all this stirs the crowd like a sudden squall over a field of corn.

A young man, little more than a child, breaks out of a group, approaches the table and leans over it. A soldier holds out an old quill, but the boy seems to turn away. Then, right there, one of the soldiers comes up, pulls his hands behind his back, pushes his head down and marches him off. Though the boy screams and calls out no one runs forward to help, and I stand there, immobile like the rest.

I look round, but General Cromwell has not returned. The men next to me have already gone. Quickly, the whole crowd breaks up and disperses. I walk away not wanting to encounter a soldier. This is how an army is built, how young men go unsuspecting to war, and the people of this town, after years of fighting, do nothing to stop it.

Later, Van Hooghten, who has been here long enough to know, tells me that many are turning against Parliament. People are sullen. They do not speak out, but look to their own safety. Under the cloak of darkness rich men flee, he says, some to the colonies of Virginia and Maryland, where the planters wish to proclaim Prince Charles their king.

The Prince has got clean away to The Hague, and waits for destiny to pick him out. His court grows daily. In ones and twos men of ambition loyal to the late King arrive there, and bring money, which they lend to the Prince in the hope of future reward. It is said this court is a racketing place, built upon all possible licentiousness. The more such tales are told here, the more the Dutch are reviled by sober men. Van Hooghten's demand for vigilance now begins to gather sense. We are doubly spied-on and disliked, as improvers and as Dutchmen. I am the most careful of men, yet our purpose is now well known. Worse than this, I believe that my travelling box, which contains my instruments and contracts, is opened when I am out. The woman Suckling denies it, the girl who works for her being, she affirms, a drudge who would never give herself the trouble of disturbing a gentleman's effects. I do not believe her; say nothing and plan to move my lodging as soon as I can find another. We continue our conversations in the evening and I begin to feel the words of the language separate from the general noise and sound one after another plain and clear.

As word of our work gets out, some dozen of the Ely Islanders come forward to offer us their services. Some say they know the mers, others that they worked on the embankments that were destroyed and so can be useful to us. Van Hooghten refuses every offer. None of the people native to this place are to be trusted, he says, as their conduct in the late war plainly shows. Discretion demands that we find our workmen from outside.

When at last we have the men we need, come from Holland and skilled in the arts of triangulation and drawing, it is past midsummer.

The days henceforward are shorter and the tides higher. We must quickly map the islands and the watercourses before the rains come and the summer landscape sinks underwater.

I take great pleasure in making maps and charts and know that the creator himself is my guide. When he created the earth, it was without form and covered all over with water, just as this land is in winter. On the second day of the world, he made the firmament that is heaven, and divided the waters with it, so that half the water lay under the firmament and half whirled beyond. It is beautiful to know that, drawn on a map, nature takes the shape and outline that only heaven sees. When he makes a map, a geographer lifts the surface of the earth, as an anatomist might lift the skin off a skull, and pegs it out flat. It gives me joy to think that I will do it.

Chapter 5

The Great Level.

Autumn 1649.

Fine warm weather.

That autumn, while it is still warm, we find each other often. You sometimes come over the fen on foot, sometimes in your coracle across the water. I might be at the start of my day's work, or you might arrive halfway through as I sit across a stump with my feet over the water; the willow leaves trailing in the current and my mind with them, when suddenly there you are. So we begin a sort of courtship, in which words and flesh take equal parts.

On the fen and under the sky we are alone. We might be the first two people in the world, except that Adam knew Eve, who was fashioned from himself, whereas you are everything that is strange to me. I do not guess when you will find me, or how you do so, or what you will say when we meet. At first I ask you little, fearing that you will take flight at any question, though everything about you excites my curiosity and interest. You seem to have come complete across the fen, and though I wonder, I know that you are a part of this world, and do not belong in mine. It is I who have come here to the Great Level and I approach you with a reserve and diffidence that are familiar to me, careful to remain at a distance. At the same time I am recording and noting, as my habit is, and determine to understand you as a geographer does the shifting land, with patience and by study.

I say your name when we first meet and then over and over as we lie together – Eliza, Eliza, Eliza. I trace your outlines until the surface of you in a manner gets under my own and I am not sure, lying on the grass, where we begin and end or that there is any division between

ourselves, the water and the pale sky. On the inside of your broad wrist I can see and feel the veins that run beneath your skin. It comes to me that your body and my own, with their caves and hills, declivities and safe places, are part of the earth. This feeling fills me with a tenderness so that I want to hold you close and feel the soft hair on your arms stand at my passing touch. Our being together comes to be nothing strange, and concerns no other living being.

Lying with you my most secret self opens out and I begin to talk of notions that I have long kept close for fear of ridicule. Strange as it is, it seems that you, a woman from this rude place, can better understand what lies in my heart than any man of genius I have met. One day I say that I am sure we are present to God and approved by him in our nakedness. You do not scorn me or call me blasphemous, or tell me I am mistaken, but simply laugh, rich and strong, as if the subject is absurd, so that I soon come to think that having made this beauty, the creator loves it still.

Another time I explain my fancy that this east part of the nation of England was surely once joined to Holland. Great forests covered everything, scored through by rivers that flowed to the north perhaps, or to the south, but did not end, as all these rivers now do, in tangled meanderings and mud. Men walked freely over what is now the sea and mingled with one another in the time when there were no nations. So it was that these people used the same language. How long ago it was I cannot guess, but I am sure these two lands were only parted when cut in two by some huge storm or sea-surge that brought this island into existence and made the coasts of Holland too.

As the weeks pass you tell me something of your people and how you live together on islands in the meres; how if two people quarrel they will part company, one staying, the other travelling to a different part of the fen to join others there. This, you say easily, is quite a frequent occurrence, and ask if the same happens amongst those I live with. I deny this, but later see that it is indeed so, and only the way we describe such an event is different. We prefer to call a separation in a family something else, an opportunity for advancement, or a need to trade; but its effects are the same.

One evening you point out to me dots of light in the gloom. They get brighter as darkness gathers, and then they vanish. It is my uncle, you say, with some other men. They are catching eels that make their way down the rivers and out to sea, lifting the eel traps and sliding

the eels into buckets of water. One man holds up the lantern, the other raises the traps and empties them. When the lights disappear it is because they have put them down in the bottom of their coracles while they return the traps to the water:

As the weeks pass I stop wondering about your appearance in my life or why I keep it a secret. It is simply that a light has begun to shine where there was none before. Everything about you fills me with happiness. I leave Mrs Suckling in Ely and take lodgings in a damp farmhouse that sits above the old river in the south of the island. The two rooms have a charm to me, though they are nothing more than a bedroom and a parlour, furnished scantily with a wooden bed and chairs, a table and hooks on the walls for my clothes. The farmer seems more interested in the money I give him than in my person. Secure on the island, where his two dozen cattle graze the rich grass and feed well on hay through the winter, he knows my business but keeps that knowledge to himself.

The whole landscape, that soon will begin to change, now comes to seem magical. When I wake in the morning and fold the shutters open, the dark horizon and the sky meet in an opal glow where the sun will come up. I rise very early, eager to get out, tense with desire. My movements have quickened, charged with vitality even as I am measuring and writing, full of the task.

In the first weeks of autumn I begin to assemble the map. Van Hooghten joins his own drawings to it and together we sketch upon it the course of the two cuts that will carry the water to the sea. They will be magnificent structures, such as have scarce been attempted in Holland even, and never before seen in these lands. Each will be a hundred feet wide and be bounded with fine broad banks to serve as both bulwarks and bridle paths.

The first cut will be made to the east of the River Ouse, with a high embankment on its eastern side, marched by the western bank of the old river which will rise to meet it. It is simple when I draw it upon fine linen paper. The new river slices straight through meadows, meres and marshes. The old river winds close by, as a slow old man walks maziily by a nimble youth.

As the weeks go on and the autumn advances Van Hooghten and I both shift our place of operations to the town of King's Lynn that lies on the furthest edge of the Great Level, closest to the open sea.

Towards the sea the whole landscape becomes indistinct. It cannot with any certainty be mapped and is scarcely traversed. There are no permanent islands here, no certain channels. Everything shifts and changes with the seasons, the years and the tides. Salt and sweet water run up against one another, rivers turn to estuary, islands to salt marsh, peat to mud.

In the marshes, where there might be a boundary, but is none, the two elements are fused. The land is water-soaked and the water carries its heavy load of silt. Yet we know that it is the water, not the land, that we must tame. Water is subtle; it must be drawn out from the land, never forced, but offered new channels and insinuated into a clean division of liquid and solid. As I make a map which turns the infinity of meres and streams, rills and islands into two elements only, rivers and dry land, that is my task.

In Holland we have for hundreds of years coaxed land from the sea, or joined new land to that we have already reclaimed, but this place is far stranger. Here the fens people make islands, not to add to dry land, but to float upon the water. There are hundreds of these islands now in the meres, or it may be thousands in such an extensive landscape. They are hidden by ramparts of reeds that grow too high for any man, even standing in a boat, to see over them. Now I begin to see many of these islands in the course of my mapping, and examine their foundations. This task I undertake with a degree of fear, knowing that behind the reeds the fensmen place their houses and draw up their coracles out of sight.

One afternoon when you find me at this work, I ask you about the islands.

'It is plain, Eliza, that your people make these islands. How is it done?'

'Over years, for we do not command the water,' you say. 'We do not cut the land. We make an island not by draining, but by an opposite sort of work.'

'Tell me.'

'The first thing is, to call upon the water.'

You tell me how you entice the passing water to give up its cargo of sediment and leaves. The first year there is a ragged accumulation of sticks and vegetation against the willow stakes. In the second year it thickens up. In the third, mud begins to stick and by the fourth the sediments start to harden. Then, once a kind of rampart has made

itself, the fensmen capture silt and vegetable matter to build the interior. At any time they may have one or two near grown, several in their infancy of sticks and mud, and several halfway fixed. Sometimes an island is overwhelmed in floods and swept away, but, tended by the fensmen at its birth, it grows to permanence with reed beds and willows of its own. One plant offers a home to another; birds, insects and the smaller creatures likewise.

My own labour continues until the rains come, and the rivers and banks that I have been mapping disappear. The waters rise, and begin to bury the summer islands. I can see the grass waving underwater if I peer over the side of my coracle as I paddle along. In these last weeks before winter I am full of the wonder and delight of you. In my imagination I see the great lust and joy of God as he made the world out of himself. When everything was dark God's spirit moved about over the face of the waters, hovering to and fro, deciding. There was then, in those first moments, nothing that God could not do, or make, and the first thing God did was to shout yes. 'Yes,' he shouted. 'Let there be light.' And his shout was so powerful and lusty that light appeared, and darkness with it, and then he pushed the light to one side, the dark to the other and called one the day, the other night.

I now give my attention to the beginning of the world. Out on the fen, with nothing but the mere about me, I imagine God's joy, the way the spirit of creation rushed up through him when he had made the light and the darkness. Of course he went on; he could not resist, especially when he had made that most beautiful thing, the sun. With a huge roar he separated the waters too, half above the firmament and half below, the waters above whirling beyond the planets in a great spiral of snow and ice that we see as the blackness there.

That was the work of the first day, the evening and the morning. But he didn't stop; life possessed him and gave him the whole strength of the universe. With a great lunge he gathered up the shining waters and made the dry land appear, rising up in mountain ranges and islands, deserts and volcanoes; and he dipped his bucket into the oceans he had made and flung the water across the earth. Lakes collected themselves, emptying out into rivers, and he plunged his hands again into the warm earth that he had created, the loam full

of insects, the roots of plants streaming out from the tips of his fingers, pushing down and up until great forests grew, the branches opening out one from the other, everything multiplying together and ceaselessly.

But now he was aflame with the power of creation and it poured from him, so he pulled out clay from the land to make all the living creatures. They grew from his hands and ran scuttering and pattering and galloping over the new meadows and up the trunks even as the bark formed and the fruit ripened. Seeing his creation God didn't stop; no, he shouted his joy so that the heavens rang with it, and the stars shook, and it bounced off the lid of the firmament and ran off into the void beyond. In this way all the sounds of heaven and earth came into being.

And in the third and fourth days this lust grew stronger and the forms God created were more extravagant: sea monsters; and lions with shaking manes; golden like the reed beds here; and great whales on and on, the colours of his creations getting more beautiful and unlikely. In one burst he made the peacock and its shimmering tail that brushed the ground as it walked its uppity step, and rose high and trembling with desire; in another great waterfalls issued from his hands and he threw them down precipices and into lakes so that spray filled the air and danced in the sun with every colour he had ever wrought.

But neither the tiniest shrew nor the leathery rhinoceros was enough; nothing could appease the urge to make more. He wanted noise and heat, the crack of lightning and the roar of forest fires. He started the earth spinning and the winds following on, and he piled great clouds up and up with flinging arabesques of his hands and he scooped down to make tiny spores and seed heads, mushrooms that came up whole in the dark, and perhaps he might have stopped there, but he did not. On the sixth day he made a man, and gave him a name, the first name ever given, for God himself did not have a name, or anything attached to him, since he was the creator.

East of Eden God conjured a garden for Adam to walk in and planted it with all the most beautiful and fertile trees and plants he had created, and, as a last burst of creation, God added Eve. And this, I think as I go about my measuring and plumbing for depth, was the creation of the world.

PART THREE

God's lust for invention waned after that. He was tired, and sat back and watched everything that he had made. He threw Adam and Eve out of the garden and set them to wander across Eden and into the world and have children, but still man disappointed him. Then God went back to the beginning, to water. Water was God's great love, the first thing, the dry land only a second thought. So when he decided to rid the world of the evil of man it was water God turned to. In his rage he opened the floodgates of heaven and let the fountains of the deep pour over the earth. He made it rain unceasingly until all the earth was covered in water, men and children and women whirled away in the flood until only a few were left. Just in time he repented and ordered a ship made, men and animals saved, a voyage and a settling on Mount Ararat.

But that was much later. I feel now as God did on the evening of the first day when he put down his strength and saw the sun he had just made set for the first time. The spark of his creation has got into me and I feel the mires spill over with the same joy that God felt. The whole universe streams towards me. I have the sensation when I see you that I am looking as an astronomer does when the stars in all their majesty are suddenly brighter and seem to come down and touch him and draw him up.

This is your gift to me, and God's to the world. This I see as I have never seen before, that we were not made to be the lords of creation, but a part of it, together with the stars that come close to us as we lie together. The life of all the things under the firmament surges through us then; we are filled up and replenished and time itself is stopped.