How a town in Vermont found water it desperately needed and an explanation that was harder to swallow

KATE DALOZ

f the drillers had not overlooked the small pile of rocks that Edith Greene had painstakingly heaped in the center of the field, the people of Montgomery, Vermont, would today be enjoying all the clean, fresh drinking water they could ever want and she, as the dowser who had found it for them, would still be a town hero. Of this Edith is certain.

On the morning in 2004 when Edith first dowsed the field, the weather was blustery and bright. It was April, and though the late northern spring had yet to arrive, the air carried the first raw whiffs of thawing mud and melting snow. Under her boots, the half-frozen earth, still matted with the shorn remains of last summer's cornstalks, gave slightly with each step. If it had been much muddier or the ground more uneven, Edith might not have been able to come out at all. Though she had lost none of her youthful energy, as close to 80 as she was, she had to be careful.

Edith made her way slowly to the center of the field. The wind cut through the seams in her old pink jacket and tossed the steel gray curls escaping from her knitted green tuque. Her cheeks glowed beneath the round plastic frames of her glasses. Thank God it was not colder. You can't dowse with gloves on, and more than once she'd left a job with dangerously frozen fingers.

Like many modern dowsers, Edith never uses a forked divining rod to do any kind of serious work. "Oh, God, they're back to the sticks," she'll say in her rusty-hinge voice at a mention of these. "No one would do it like that anymore." She prefers L-rods, sometimes one, sometimes a pair. Edith makes rods for friends by bending a right angle a third of the way into a length of coat-hanger wire and slipping the short end into a loose-fitting handle of plastic pipe; the sky blue tubing used by maple sugar makers looks especially

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nice, she finds. Her own favorite rods are made of faux-copper wire with molded-plastic handles; she bought them from a New Hampshire dowser who uses the proceeds to fund water-finding missions in the Third World. The L-rods are all of the same design; the handles prevent even the most tightly clenched fist from controlling the wires' motion. In the hands of an amateur, the rods swing wildly, the wires spinning inside the loose handles like an old-fashioned radar transmitter gone berserk. Experienced dowsers steady the rods so that the tips are pointing straight ahead, parallel and still. From this starting position, the wires may cross, or slant in tandem, or swing apart like doors thrown wide by a sudden draft. In every case, the motion alerts the dowser to an invisible presence: underground water, but also sometimes gold, oil, minerals, or what some describe as "earth energies."

Edith was looking for water. She let her wrists sag expertly so that the tips of the wires pointed motionless toward the ground about two feet in front of her. She took a deep, centering breath and stood a little straighter. Then, she mumbled something to herself and went to work.

All morning, Edith watched her rods swing wide, again and again. Something strange—something *big*—was happening below, but she wasn't sure what. Lunchtime had come and gone, and the wind was starting to pick up. There was more to do, but she'd have to come back when she had more energy.

Had Edith finished dowsing the field that day, it's possible that her involvement in Montgomery's water problems would have ended there too. It's possible that rumors of her work would never have reached water officials around the state and left them shaking their heads in wonder. It's also possible that the citizens and leaders of Montgomery might have avoided running headlong into the controversy that started with their desperate search for water but ultimately forced their tight-knit community into a public divide they never wanted, one that forced them to pit the claims of one elderly woman against their own beliefs about the workings of the natural world.

But it was cold, she was tired, and she didn't finish. Edith headed back to her car, but not before leaving a few cryptic markers—reminders to herself, she later said, of the underground water she had sensed but not yet defined. She left a small pile of rocks at the center of the field, and a few dozen yards away, she tied a length of orange surveyors' tape to the end of a low branch.

E dith dowses around 50 wells a year, many for newly built houses. Those moving to rural Vermont from metropolitan areas where summoning fresh water requires nothing more than a twist of a tap are often surprised to realize that they are now solely responsible for providing their household's water. Is clean, plentiful water lying around underground, just waiting to be pumped to the surface?

In Vermont, the answer to this is yes and no: there is ground water almost everywhere; it's the quality and quantity that raise uncertainty. Instead of pooling in lakelike aquifers, Vermont's ground water runs through fissures in its

The Dowser Dilemma



For the members of the selectboard, the answer was obvious: they'd call Edith Greene.

solid bedrock, forming underground streams, some as wide as the bed of a pickup truck, others the width of a pencil eraser. The streams may come together or branch off, following the fractures in the stone, or they may run parallel for miles without ever intersecting. A hole drilled straight down from the surface will slice through a number of these, and water will leak down in rivulets, like those dampening highway road cuts and freezing into beards of ice in winter. Another hole, drilled even a few yards away, could pull water from the same fissures, or some of the same, or none at all.

For no reason other than chance, a well drilled on the north side of a field might produce clear, rich-tasting water, while one on the south side might bring up water that reeks of rotten eggs or leaves rusty streaks on the laundry. The neighbor up the road might lose his water pressure in even the mildest drought, and another family down the road will have tap water the color and flavor of stale tea if there is too much rain. Is it better, then, to drill at the top of this ridge or near that stand of pine? Here behind the garage or there next to the fence line? A wrong choice could mean a lifetime of dribbly, rationed showers and a useless dishwasher.

Well drillers understand better than anyone the trickiness of guessing from the surface what might be happening hundreds of feet underground. They might make some suggestions but no guarantees, except that the drilling fee—typically between \$6,000 and \$8,000—will be collected, even in the rare event the well should come up completely dry. But since any driller with a reputation for repeatedly failing to strike water will quickly

find his business evaporating, it pays to be patient with a client who's hoping to hit upon a sure thing.

If only there were a sure thing. In an era of fiber optics and gene manipulation, it can come as a surprise to realize that the only way to know for sure that there's water under a specific spot is the same as it's always been: dig to find out.

As with the drillers, professional honesty prevents hydrogeologists from ever pinpointing a particular place and promising that the best water is to be found at that spot. To identify likely locales, they can measure subtle changes in the earth's magnetic fields, or look at fluctuations in the direction of radio waves, or record seismic data to calculate the density of underground material. But since the cost for even the simplest of these services starts in the \$10,000 range, and to work with any accuracy requires access to sizable expanses of land, employing a hydrogeologist is well outside the reach of an average homeowner.

Those who want to improve on their own guess or the driller's shrug may find themselves phoning the only affordable second opinion, the sole consultant willing to pinpoint a spot and flag it with a stake, the only person who will, in short, claim to offer a definitive answer to the surprisingly tricky question of where *exactly* to find the best water: the local dowser.

The practice of using a forked branch to locate underground water came to America with English and German settlers, and most histories trace its roots before that to mineral miners in Germany. Dowsing flourishes best in places like Vermont with a rural population and maddeningly unpredictable ground water—with a cultural preference for homegrown expertise and a tolerance for eccentricity.

That the dowser, once summoned, often arrives in the form of an utterly average-looking neighbor, that she'll hand over her rods with a missionary's glee for the curious to try (explaining that dowsing is a learned art—though, as with musical ability, innate talent allows some a level of success that no amount of practice will grant others), that she charges less than \$100 or often nothing at all, and that hiring a dowser is traditionally seen as good common sense in northern Vermont—all these things can allow many otherwise skeptical people to shrug aside the very large questions that dowsing raises.

For instance, when the tips of the dowser's rods fly apart, seemingly of their own accord, what exactly is going on? For Edith, there's no question about what's physically causing the rods to move: she is. Like most modern dowsers, she believes that humans have innate sensory abilities. When a dowser's subconscious senses the presence of water, Edith explains, it sends a tiny jolt to her hand that in turn jars the delicately balanced rod. (Dowsing tools are hypersensitive to the smallest movement; traditional preference for rods cut from certain trees is not based on the species' water-sensing ability but on the springiness and flexibility of the wood.) The rod's sudden movement alerts the dowser—along with her witnesses and clients—to

the presence of the element her body has already sensed.

Though it makes a kind of intuitive sense that the human body might provide a built-in means for locating the water it needs for survival, and though dowsers' descriptions of picking up subtle earth energies seem curiously like hydrogeologists' descriptions of electromagnetic-sensing devices, dowsing has always proven stubbornly resistant to scientific inquiry. No double-blind test has ever shown to lasting satisfaction that dowsing works any better than chance.

Yet, by some estimates, over half the domestic wells drilled in Vermont each year have been located by dowsers. Whether or not it works physically, dowsing certainly works socially.

Even for its adherents, belief in dowsing requires a delicate balance. The many stories—farmers whose wooden Y-rods snapped down with palmlacerating violence; skeptics straining to prevent L-rods from swinging wide over hidden water lines; innumerable dowser-found wells and rediscovered pipelines and even replenished spring-fed ponds—are often followed by the same refrain: "I don't know, but it works!" It is a discussion-ending phrase, signaling that no further analysis is invited. Many rational people who want to believe that dowsing rods work avoid asking questions about *how* it works.

L ike many old New England towns, Montgomery is actually made up of two communities, Montgomery Village and Montgomery Center, separated by about five miles of the Trout River where it cuts through the northernmost reach of the Green Mountains. Surrounded by peaks, the town is isolated and remote, even by the standards of rural Vermont. Car radios sometimes crackle into Québecois French. The ski resort Jay Peak lies just down the road. In a town with a population of 900, Montgomery's Main Street boasts two hotels, two ski/snowboard/bike shops, two antiques stores, and several fine-dining restaurants.

Montgomery's water woes began in 1999, when tests revealed that the Village's water supply contained arsenic. The town's elected officials, the fiveman selectboard, hastily connected the Village to the same well-fed reservoir that supplied the Center's water. But the shallow reservoir couldn't sustain a growing town for long. It quickly needed a backup supply.

In the meeting room of the tiny cottage that the town clerk's office shares with the post office, hydrogeologists unrolled aerial photos, pointing out promising creases in the topography where large stores of water might be collecting deep underground.

One by one their picks failed. Some had too little water to sustain a town. Others turned up completely dry. After every disappointment, the engineers and hydrogeologists proposed the next steps. The selectmen weren't experts; they were bus drivers, mechanics, contractors, and retired military men. For them, town governance was a practically unpaid second job they undertook out of civic duty. Shrugging aside their concerns, they agreed to the plans. Four

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years and seven failed wells later, this was becoming harder and harder to do.

At the post office, at the supermarket, in the pizzeria, townspeople collared the selectmen. Some were losing water pressure; others were wondering how they would pay their utility bills if this expensive goose chase continued. And then it got worse: sheets emerged from the laundry gray and filthy. Tap water spurted out the color of old blood. Worst were the Tuesdays after a long weekend when tourists packed the town's hotels and drained the reservoir down to silty dregs. The next selectboard meeting inevitably brought a stream of angry people brandishing laundry bills and bottled water and demanding reimbursement. As Tosca Smith remembered it later, "For a while there, the selectmen were the enemies of the people."

A few years earlier, Tosca had become the first woman to be elected in half a century to Montgomery's selectboard. Tosca caters weddings in the summer and spends winters cooking for one of the restaurants in town. She is in her mid-40s and has red blonde hair, strong arms, a firm handshake, and a direct gaze. A tattoo peeks over the top of one sock. She has lived in

THEN, WITHOUT warning, a geyser shot upward and smacked the orange surveyor's tape. Tosca jumped back. Water sloshed around their ankles. Montgomery off and on for 16 years, preferring to raise her kids there than in her native New Jersey. It's not hard to imagine her at work simultaneously rattling sauté pans, greeting everyone who walks in the door by name, and dishing up a steady stream of no-nonsense opinions. The selectmen welcomed her, but as the new face in an old-boys' club, she wanted to tread lightly, at least at first.

In the fall of 2003, Tosca took over the water project. She started hear-

ing stories from longtime residents: wells the geologists didn't know about; a farmer with a spring in his barn that had produced 60 gallons a minute of fresh, cold water for decades; an underground river old folks swore flowed beneath the western corner of town.

She also heard their growing frustration: How much longer could this go on? Why keep paying huge sums of money to people failing to do the job? By now it seemed obvious: the methods the engineers and hydrogeologists were using simply were not working. It was time for something else.

On a breezy April morning in 2004, Tosca, another selectman, and Nick Manosh, the driller, climbed into Nick's car to take what they were calling a field trip. They had decided to revisit some town-owned properties the hydrogeologists had rejected. Nick brought along his grizzled, sharply intuitive drill operator, Dean Langley, for a second opinion.

They were in a good mood. The air was warming up, and the late north-

ern Vermont spring looked like it might finally arrive. When they stepped out of the car in a high field above a bend in the river, the air smelled of half-thawed earth. Trees showed the blue and purple hills through their empty branches.

They stood, taking it all in. Then, as Tosca recalled it, the old driller started turning around slowly. He stopped. His face broke into a rare, toothy grin. "Holy shit," he said. "Let's do it here."

A few months earlier, Tosca had suggested this spot to the hydrogeologist. He had barely glanced up before rejecting the idea. Twenty-thousand dollars could buy the fieldwork to definitively rule it out, he offered. The board had declined. Now Tosca was thinking she ought to have made him a personal bet.

A problem remained: in this 18-acre field, how would they find the perfect spot to drill? For Nick and Tosca—and the rest of the selectboard, once consulted—the answer was obvious: they'd call Edith Greene. After years of trying things the scientific way, the citizens of Montgomery were as desperate as they had been when they started, and hundreds of thousands of dollars poorer. What did they have to lose?

No one came to watch Edith work. And so, early the following Wednesday, when the huge drilling rig with "Manosh, B'Gosh!" painted on its flank lumbered into the field, there was no one to explain to the drill operator that Edith's cryptic markers were not her final recommendations. When he scanned for a dowser's usual flagged stakes, his eye was caught by the piece of orange tape tied to a low branch at the field's edge. He went to work.

Tosca didn't arrive until just before noon. It was another blustery day, but a lasting warmth had crept into the air. As she remembered it, when she walked into the field, the rig was already pumping hard. Dean, the old drill operator, stood next to it in his blue coveralls. He was smiling.

"What's going on?" Tosca asked.

"Hold on," he told her. How often she'd hoped for water in just the way she was hoping now, only to have the wells turn up dry. She prepared herself for disappointment.

And then, without warning, a geyser shot upward and smacked the orange surveyor's tape. Tosca jumped back.

Water sloshed around their ankles. "Shit, this is it, girl! Bring me a spackle bucket!" the driller yelled. He struggled to shove a white five-gallon pail under the torrent. It was over 300 gallons a minute, easy, he estimated. Three times as much as they needed.

Tosca whooped with joy. No matter what, this was the best news Montgomery had had in a long time.

When Tosca called to tell Edith, Edith was furious. She wasn't done, she said. Nick's crew should have waited until she'd finished. And worse, if they'd only drilled near the rock pile, they'd surely have triple the water.

Tosca didn't argue. As it was, the town would have plenty.

By that afternoon, the rest of the selectboard, Nick, and even Edith had come out to watch. In the center of the field, a backhoe dug trenches the length of swimming pools, which immediately swelled full. To Tosca, they looked like lakes. Her kids wanted to shed their coats and dive in, and she didn't blame them. Here at last was the water the town had prayed for, clear and cold and abundant.

"We're going to put a plaque up here with your name on it. We'll build a playground and call it the Edith Greene Playground," Tosca told Edith. Even the others had to admit that Edith alone had saved them. Earlier, the drillers had tested a few spots and gotten only two gallons per minute a mere 75 yards from where water was now gushing from the ground; the scientists had rejected the entire area. Edith became an instant hero. Whatever it was she'd done—and no one had any intention of asking for the details—it had worked.

A few months later, Tosca got an early-morning phone call from Jeff Hoffer, the freelance hydrogeologist hired to help Montgomery navigate state water regulations.

"We've got uranium, a *lot* of uranium, in the water," he said. "We've got to test it again."

The word was sinking in. "Uranium?" Tosca asked.

Jeff explained: Uranium occurs naturally in the bedrock of certain places and sometimes shows up in ground water. Its presence here didn't mean there'd been pollution, but drinking the water would put everyone in town at a dangerous risk of cancer.

"The state standard is 30 parts per billion," Jeff told Tosca. "We're at 76."

All that fresh, cold, prayer-answering water that had represented such a victory for her and the drillers and the dowser had turned out to be poison. The euphoria Tosca had felt since April darkened into despair. Despite the last bright days of August, she couldn't leave her house. It was impossible to set foot in town without running into someone who would ask her for news about the well. Now that she had some, she didn't want to share it.

Two days later, at a selectboard meeting, she had no choice. The meeting—open, as always, to the public—was packed. Tosca and the selectboard sat around the long table; the corners of the room were filled with others, leaning against walls and filing cabinets. The town's attorney sat in a swivel chair by the door; behind him, tucked into a corner near an ancient computer, sat Edith Greene.

Tosca broke the news. As she described it later, the meeting exploded. Questions spilled out from every corner. They had been ready for bureaucratic hassles, or even iron or sulphur, but nothing as ominous as uranium. What did that even mean? Were they back where they started? What the hell were they supposed to do about uranium?

Then, from the corner of the room came another voice: Edith's. "I can move it," she said.

The attorney swung around in his chair and stared at her. Everyone stopped talking and looked up. Was the dowser seriously suggesting she could remove uranium from the water? One selectman's shoulders started heaving and he made a choking noise that sounded more and more like laughter as he hurried out of the room. For a few long seconds, no one said anything. Then the attorney smiled slowly and said, "What the hell. Can't hurt."

Grins and shrugs spread around the room. "Go for it," Tosca told Edith. "Why not?" someone else echoed. It was ridiculous, but what did they have to lose?

Edith started to explain her plan, but when no one listened, she excused herself and hurried out, to everyone's relief. Still chuckling, the board turned back to finding a *real* solution. Jeff Hoffer would arrange another water-quality test. They were waterless once again. But, for the first time since hearing about the uranium, Tosca felt something suspiciously like hope.

L ong before finding Montgomery's water, Edith was renowned in the area. She had dowsed many wells to local homeowners' satisfaction, the town attorney among them. There were those who claimed not only that she'd

found water, but that she had performed far more mysterious feats: calculating with surprising accuracy the depth and flow-rate of wells before they were drilled; replenishing dry and paltry supplies by, as she explained it, diverting underground water veins.

She had also, in recent years, gained a reputation for moving radon out of people's houses. Radon is a naturally occurring carcinogenic gas. INTERROGATING EDITH about her methods, or even watching her at work, does not lead to what one might call an explanation.

In certain bedrock types, it can travel through water or up through fractures in the stone and into houses. In the mid-1990s, Vermont homeowners started installing radon detectors in their basements. Around this time, some dowsers professed their ability to sense radon with their rods in much the same way they found water. And some, Edith among them, began to claim that they could even move the radon, putting people out of harm's way.

Interrogating Edith about her methods, or even watching her at work, does not lead to what one might call an explanation. When she encounters radon (which appears, she says, in either an endless band or a floor-toceiling vortex) her rods swing apart as though they've bumped against an invisible wall. After protecting herself by envisioning a healing blue light, she sternly commands the radon to move. Occasionally she plants the tip

of one rod on the ground and strikes its shaft with the other for emphasis: *Move. That. Radon. Over. To. The. Lawn.* When she's done, she straightens up, blinks, and flicks her wrists a few times to settle her rods in their ready position. Nearly always they reveal that the radon has moved precisely where Edith intended.

Edith conducts her dowsing business from a living-room-turned-office in her modest home. The walls are papered with giant roses on a Pepto-Bismol pink background, and her collection of angel figurines fills the mantel. Crowding the room are filing cabinets packed with meticulously labeled folders containing drilling reports and hand-drawn property maps. This is also the headquarters of the Franklin County Dowsers (Edith Greene, founder and president), and whole cabinets are filled with printouts, pamphlets,



The driller didn't understand Edith's markers.

articles, and manuscripts on topics of interest, ranging from local bedrock formations to principles of feng shui to identifying aura fields. Every day, calls come in from people who have heard of Edith through a former client or through her group, asking for help with all kinds of problems. She almost never says no.

Had the selectboard heard her out when she first offered to move the uranium, she would have explained that she planned to do it in the same way she had moved

radon many times before. "They're the same," she maintained. She was partly right—radon is one of the gasses given off when uranium starts to decompose—but even to the people who were willing to believe in her power to move radon, her proposal sounded like trying to put out a fire by blowing away the smoke.

I n late September, Tosca got another early-morning call from Jeff Hoffer. "You will not believe this," she recalls him saying, "but it's gone. I mean, it's 6.0, but basically, it's gone. I don't know what the hell happened."

A wave of excitement was rising in Tosca. Jeff was still talking about the next test they would have to run. There had to be some explanation for the sudden drop from 76 parts per billion to six.

When Tosca called Edith to tell her the news, Edith listened closely. The uranium wasn't completely gone? she asked. Tosca explained that at six parts per billion, the levels were well under state standards, but Edith wasn't satisfied. "I guess I have more work to do," she said before hanging up.

Jeff pulled another sample a few days later. In the early weeks of 2005,

they got the final word—the levels had dropped again, this time to 2.7 parts per billion. The uranium had all but vanished.

No one was entirely sure what to do with this new information. It was good news, the best news imaginable, but still. Giving the dowser credit for finding water was one thing—but making uranium disappear? Somehow that crossed a line.

For many with a newfound interest in dowsing, it can be disappointing to discover that even in Vermont the farmers wielding forked sticks are gone and that most modern dowsers are more New-Agey than old-timey. Some try to maintain a distinction between "dowsing" (using rods to sense a physical, mineral presence) and "divining" (using a pendulum to answer questions), but they seem to be in the minority. For many dowsers, there is simply no line between finding unseen water and interacting with other invisible forces.

Asking Edith about her practice tends to let loose a flood of rambling stories, delivered in her Victrola-quality voice and punctuated with pauses that invite the listener to marvel: computers keeping people awake at night by emitting noxious rays (she recommends affixing a triangular sticker pointing upward, to direct the rays away from the household); shadowy spirits or ETs lurking in corners. On house calls, she often throws in a kind of unrequested general cleaning—checking the living room for radon, removing spirits from the attic—but she also does what she's asked. She finds water for those in desperate need and asks for almost nothing in return. And for this, whatever their personal opinions of her practice, the people she's helped are fiercely loyal.

In February 2005, the state gave Montgomery the go-ahead to use the water they'd waited almost a year for. Tosca remembered the meeting. As a visiting official started to explain the process for final approval, Edith, ever present, asked to speak. "I know the uranium is gone," she told him. "I moved it."

The official was polite. "I am a scientist," he said. "I just patently cannot believe that."

When Edith started to explain, the selectboard chairman cut her off. Edith sat silently through the rest of the meeting. She walked to her car through the sharp cold and made it all the way home before she started to cry.

Tosca was dismayed by her colleagues' increasing rudeness, but even she could not bring herself to believe that Edith—or anyone—had the kind of power Edith claimed. There had to be another explanation.

Maybe there had never been uranium in the water at all. Couldn't the original high figure have been a mistake? The lab gladly retested all the samples and the results came back: Yes, there had been high uranium. And yes, it was now gone.

With no source of pollution nearby, there was only one other possible culprit: the driller.

Nick Manosh takes a never-say-never attitude toward the possibility that,

despite the best efforts of his thorough cleaning and disinfection process, his equipment might have introduced an outside element. But there's no way to know for sure. The pipe used in Montgomery, along with any evidence, has long since been lost to the anonymity of the pile of used pipes in his equipment yard.

The selectmen suddenly found themselves in an awkward position: to believe that the pipe was contaminated was to second-guess the work of a respected local businessman; to blame the lab was to reject double-checked scientific evidence. With no definitive solution to the mystery, opinions came to turn on whichever explanation each individual was willing to accept. And when Edith Greene's name came up, as it invariably did, the question of what was and wasn't possible to believe became still more complicated.

SHE COULD UNDERSTAND how her colleagues flinched at recording a vote that some would surely read as an endorsement of the supernatural. From the start, the selectboard had tried to keep the uranium findings quiet. They'd largely succeeded until a local weekly printed an article with news of Edith's involvement. "What's this I hear about the miracle uranium?" people asked Tosca, chuckling, when they saw her in town. If she—young, female, and a flatlander to boot—was feeling uncomfortable, she could only imagine how agonizing the ribbing must feel to her fellow board members.

And that was before they heard that the story was being swapped among water officials and hydrogeologists all over the state: *Did you hear the one about the old lady and the uranium*? It was one thing for those within the community to laugh at the doings of a local eccentric; now the selectmen began to feel themselves uncomfortably close to the butt of the joke.

A few months earlier, Edith had presented a bill for her work to find the water, calculated at \$20 per hour and totaling \$400. The board unanimously voted to pay it (recorded discreetly in the minutes as "for services"). The board had hired and paid water dowsers in the past—in that simpler, pre-uranium time, Edith had been no different. Now, however, Edith's second \$400 bill, for removing the uranium, loomed over them. Sooner or later they'd have to examine why, exactly, it was so much harder to spend taxpayers' money on Edith's latest "work" than it had been the first time.

Most of the board felt certain that, double-checked results or no, the fault lay with the lab. If there had never been uranium in the water, then Edith had done nothing. What was the point of even discussing it?

Tosca disagreed: Whatever you make of Edith's claims, she did do *some-thing*—Tosca herself had driven by and seen her tramping through the snow on a frigid day, hard at work. "Whether you believe in what she's doing or

not, she didn't just sit in front of the TV. She went out onto that field and worked her *whatever*," Tosca said. "The consensus around that board table was, 'What have we got to lose, go for it,'" Tosca maintained. "If she's a charlatan, send her away, don't say 'Go for it.'" For Tosca, the truth of Edith's claim was utterly beside the point. This was not a matter of belief; it was a matter of principle.

In this, she had the law on her side. In Vermont, an implied contract is binding. The town attorney agreed: no matter how uncomfortable it made them, the board should pay Edith's bill. But on the morning in March when Tosca finally called for a vote, the attorney, whose support she had counted on, missed the meeting.

In Tosca's recollection, the debate didn't last long—everyone already knew where each one stood. There had been no motion to hire Edith, someone argued, therefore it was never official. "Well, we didn't make a motion to hire Manosh or the hydrogeologist either," Tosca retorted. She got no response.

The vote was 3 to 1 against, with a newly elected member abstaining. Even though she had seen it coming, Tosca was furious. Since when had they ever refused to pay someone because of a failed point of order? She could understand how her colleagues flinched at recording a vote that some would surely read as an endorsement of the supernatural. But hiding behind protocol instead of admitting their discomfort was a hypocrisy she couldn't stomach. Tosca stood up. "I'm disgusted and disappointed in all of you," she told them and walked out the door.

It took a few more months of fuming for Tosca to realize that something much more important was at stake than a mere \$400. In terms of money, Edith's fee was trifling. In terms of what the selectmen—upstanding, conservative, churchgoing men—might have to sacrifice in community respect if they paid it, Tosca began to see how it might, in fact, be asking too much. For some of them, paying Edith would call their entire belief system into question. The traditional "I don't know, but it works," allowed them to hire a dowser to find water. But by bringing her other practices into public view, Edith had raised uncomfortable *hows* and *whys;* in doing so, she'd unwittingly broken an unspoken social contract. The selectmen simply couldn't bring themselves to imply, even indirectly, that anything about Edith's unexplainable methods had worked.

Tosca was not so sure. For her, Edith's influence had been essential: "With her positive mental outlook on things, she played a hand in turning the tide," Tosca now says. "If that little lady didn't say 'I can move it,' we would have scrapped that source. We would have spent \$100,000 looking for another site." To Tosca, Edith *is* a hero—even if it is for different reasons than Edith herself believes.

As for Edith, she's still holding out hope for a plaque with her name on it. She's heard a rumor there's manganese in the water. Maybe there's something she can do.